

# An Old Venetian Friend

BY W. D. HOWELLS



I met first in the office of my predecessor who was holding my place and enjoying my pay, for no fault of his, during the pleasure of the Austrian government while I waited three months for its permission to act as American consul at Venice. I was probably myself to blame for the delay by having reported myself as a journalist to the Austrian police, who then held Venice in a paternal embrace and may have had their misgivings as to what I might be going to write, or might already have written about the political situation in the last years of the Austrian domination in the Lombardo-Venetian kingdom, when the patriotic feeling of the Italians was at the hottest; but in any case I had to wait.

In those days of the Demonstration, as the Venetians called their passive resistance, you knew men's opinions by the cut of their beards, and I might have inferred from a mustache worn with neither whiskers nor imperial that the gentleman whom the acting consul introduced in English was of a temperamental abeyance in his thinking, no doubt for good reasons. At the same time I perceived that he was not English when he said he was glad of my acquaintance, but I was very content to have him Italian, and we began somehow to be friends at once. We presently began to be companions, to be almost comrades, though he was then about fifty-six and I was still twenty-four years of age. His mustache was quite gray, and his gray hair was thinning toward baldness; his eyes were blue and kind, and his friendly face was of a comely fullness and a ripe bloom; when we stood up to shake hands we were of that equal height which short men like other men to be of. It is now many years since I saw him last and many more since I then saw him first, but if I should be so

happy as to meet him in some other life, I should know as far as I could see him that it was Pastorelli.

That was not really his name, but I call him so because I propose to be very frank with some details of our friendship, and I think his memory has a right to the privacy of a pseudonym. The traits which endeared him to me were not his alone, but were the traits of the whole lovable Latin race, which, in spite of literary tradition, I found kind and simple if not always sincere. We began going about together at once, and I did not mind his largely seeking my company because I knew that he wished to practise his English with me. It was already very fair English, for he had lived several years in England, mostly at Liverpool, which he pronounced *Liverpull*, with a fine trill of the middle *r* and a strong stress of the last syllable. I do not know why he had chosen Liverpool for his English sojourn, but I think he valued it largely because he had got there a copy of Webster's Unabridged Dictionary, which, if he did not find one of the finest books in our language, he owned that he liked to read better than any other. In fact, I think myself that it is very good reading, though I should not put it above Shakespeare or the Bible. I read Shakespeare more than the Bible, but it was apparently from an interest in my peculiarities as a Protestant that he said one day, "You read the Bible?" and I was forced to own how little, and he did not follow up the question. Possibly he meant to follow it up with others in satisfaction of a scruple against his intimacy with a heretic, for Pastorelli was not only of a tempered patriotism, but was a better Catholic than some younger friends of mine, though these were good enough Catholics, too, in strenuously denying anything like Protestantism.

He was not a Venetian of Venice, but of the province, and his "country" as he

translated his *patria* and pronounced *cauntree*, was a small city not far from Padua. He had continued there in the profession of an apothecary until he saved enough to retire upon and now he had come to pass his winters in Venice, though he always went back to his town for the summer. Just what degree of civil condition he was of I could not say, but apparently he was as much in good society as he wished; and he was always promising to have me go with him to the Countess N——'s, whose house he mostly frequented. I never actually went, and I have preferred to believe this was because my Italian was never facile enough to justify him in presenting me there, with the hope of my enjoyment. If this was the case, I do not blame him, for at some Italian houses which I was free of I found myself as uncomfortable as I must have made others.

I have often wondered since what the Countess N—— was like, whether young and gay, or austere illustrious, putting her guests to a proof of their merit in rank or riches by her own quality of *grande dame*; but I am afraid I shall never know. I believe my friend's origin was middle class, but his savings were handsome enough to justify his admission to the house of a countess, though this would not have been so difficult in Venice as we might suppose. If this is largely conjectural, I knew that long before Pastorelli had bought a title from the Pope; for he told me his reception at the Vatican had cost him sixty scudi to the different servants who came to remind him of their services, and he gave me the impression that he thought his title not worth the money it had cost.

What I still like most in his memory is that it is sweet with a modest good sense, and that however quaint he was he was never absurd; if he was canny he never was stingy, as I had duly reason to know. My acquaintance with him advanced rapidly to a friendship, which seemed to pass entirely to me from my predecessor. He was, in fact, merely one of the consul's pupils, for by the terms of his office our generous government allowed the consul to trade, and he justly construed this leave as per-

mission to teach English. He had \$750 a year, but I, when I came into his place at last, had \$1,500, with office rent, and the consular regulations forbade me to trade; so that if I had wished to keep his pupils I could not have done so. I ought to be ashamed to own that in those proud days of my youth I was ashamed of his teaching one of the waiters at the Caffè Florian: a gentle creature, intelligent and self-respectful, who, though he took my tip for the cup he brought me, accepted the two soldi amounting to one cent with a smile of meek dignity lingering with me yet. Now I hope I should not be ashamed of teaching him myself, though I am not sure; I am still very proud; and even before I got my *exequatur*, or permission to act from the Austrian government, I had decided to remove our national eagle to a worthier perch than the casement of a simple, though decent, lodging in the Frezzeria, and I had the advice and guidance of my Pastorelli in the search for an apartment. His good-will was greater than his taste in the matter, and he led me to many places which I was obliged to reject — some, for instance, because I must have passed through the kitchen or the bedroom to reach the parlor, which I meant for my office, and some because they were otherwise below the consular dignity. Such as these I pronounced too shabby, and Pastorelli caught at the word so that presently, whatever the fact might be, he stared about the rooms and then turned to me with a flare of his inquiring eyes and the suggestion: "Too shabby! Hah, too shabby!"

In the end, when I was really, as well as officially, consul, I did not choose as wisely or as fitly as I could now wish; but before this I had proof that my friend was ready to serve me in a way where he was better fitted than in helping me house my eagle. I had received my *exequatur*, but was one day counting up my resources and wondering whether they would last till I could draw my first quarter's salary, when Pastorelli mastered the situation from his imperfect English and then shouted with a sort of generous indignation, "I will give you all the money you want!"

He meant that he would lend me the

money, but he would not let me explain the difference. "Listen!" he hurried on to say. "Tell me how much, and I will go to the Countess N——'s and get it out of my strong-box," and I cannot say now whether I was more touched by his generosity or charmed by the literary quality of the fact that he was keeping his money at the house of his friend in the fashion dear and sacred to how many tales of Latin life. I liked the fact all the better because there was a tang of miserly suspicion in it, far from him personally, but proper to a race and age when the capitalist would not trust his savings to a bank, even after there were banks to trust them to. I perceived that the usage must still have been commoner than I had imagined, and the fact was the more precious to me because it was more a national than a personal effect with him. I would have liked to ask him all about it, and make him feel my pleasure in it; but of course that was not feasible, and I only tried to disclaim any stress of anxiety in owning that I would like to borrow fifty florins. He said nothing, as if he had not quite understood, but he did not let the day pass without coming to me again. Then, holding and withholding something in his left hand and waving his right forefinger before his face for the Italian emphasis of negation, he said, as before: "Listen! Between friends there is no interest," and he may have studied an English correctness in his phrasing. "Here are twelve Austrian sovereigns, which I have taken out of my strong-box at the Countess N——'s. When you wish to return the money do not bring it in florins, but go to a money-changer's and buy twelve Austrian sovereigns and pay it back to me in them."

Then he opened his left hand and put the coins, very yellow and thin and broad, one after another, into my palm, which they entirely covered. I was richly aware that they were such broad-pieces as abounded in old ballads, and they were almost as thin as leaves, like the coinage of fairy gold. I asked what they were, and he explained that they were an issue of money that had not been in circulation for a hundred years. He preferred to keep his savings in them, and said that I could always get them

at a money-changer's; there was no hurry; keep them as long as I liked.

I was able to return them sooner than I expected, but it might well have been later, for in those days American consuls at Venice had difficulties in cashing their drafts, which were not owing to doubt of our national solvency, but to a disability which a former consul (long before my immediate predecessor in the rapid succession of former consuls) had put us under. He had overdrawn his account at his banker's and had left town without making the banker good, and the banker had then obliged all American consuls to wait till the money came from London before cashing their drafts on our government. I submitted helplessly to conditions which I felt an indignity till I happened to mention them one day to a banker of the good Hebrew brotherhood of Blumenthals, who said that I must not stand that; their house would cash my drafts at sight; and after this I went to them, not without some regret at parting with the Brothers Schielin, whom I could not, after all, blame so much.

But this was when I had long repaid the loan, though never the kindness, of my friend in Austrian sovereigns, which it is pleasant to remember I bought of a money-changer on the Rialto bridge. Pastorelli was staying on into the summer at Venice later than his wont was, I believe, and we saw each other well-nigh every day, especially at the cafés which we frequented together. These were not the glittering cafés under the arcades of the Piazza San Marco, but those which every *campo* possessed one of as unfailingly as a church and a pharmacy—a very staid and self-respectful café with a modest spread of chairs and tables in front of it, and an aging Youth (they called the waiter *Youth*, or *Giovinotto*, in Venice) who brought us a basket of cakes after pouring our little cups of black coffee. We always somehow chose the sponge-cake drops which the Venetians call lady-mouths and we lady-fingers, to dip into our coffee, and to this day I always taste that gentle past in their flavor, with the relish of our friendship. I think we did not talk much, but our talk was always in English, though I ought now to have been

qualifying myself as rapidly as possibly for an evening at the Countess N——'s, if indeed it was my want of Italian which disqualified me.

It was well that Pastorelli was staying on in town, for with the summer heat I fell into a low fever of some sort, as he discovered one day when he came to see me at my rooms, perhaps because he missed me at our cafés. I suggested a doctor, but he said, "If a doctor finds out you are a consul he will keep you in bed six months," and from his skill as a pharmacist in the past he prescribed for me himself and brought me the medicine at once from the apothecary in the *campo* where I lived. It must have been a nauseous draught, but when I took it without too much wincing he stooped over and kissed me on the forehead in reward of my courage. I duly recovered and still live to tell the tale, in spite of the mosquitoes which swarmed upon me so at night that I had to wear a hood of netting over my head and gloves on my hands to save myself from them. I could indeed have drugged them by burning the pastilles used in Venice, but then I must have shared their partial suffocation.

It was a peculiarity of my friend's study of English that the only English books which he seemed to have read besides Webster's Unabridged Dictionary were some little tales and sketches which an Italian had written in our language with the daring opportunity peculiar to the Latin races. One of these stories was an Eastern romance where the heroine was always spoken of as "a beautiful she-slave"; but I had not the heart to note the grotesquery to Pastorelli, who for all colloquial uses had such a good vocabulary. Our talk was mostly personal, and we had perhaps pretty well worn out our wonted topics when he went away early in September for the *villeggiatura* at his *cauntree*. By the time he came back to Venice I had been married, and though my American wife welcomed him with the hospitable intelligence inspired by my talk of him in my letters to her, we could not fall into our old familiarity. The strangeness may have been heightened by his finding me no longer in my rooms in the *campo* where we had last met, for I had now

taken an apartment on the Grand Canal; but he soon came again, bringing his son, a nice boy, in his last school years, with him, and then he came with the Italian regularity to call upon us. Long after our mutual strangeness passed he wished us to come and visit him in his town where he was going to pass the summer. Our visit seemed to be an ideal which he had formed from his acquaintance with English life, and we imagined how at every point he tried to make it like a visit at an English country-house. He lived in a pretty villa among orchards and gardens on, or as nearly on, the terms of an English country gentleman as he could, and the points of his failure, as we recognized them from our knowledge of English fiction rather than English fact, were sweeter to us than an unbroken success could have been. A maiden sister lived with him as his housekeeper, and was probably charged with the fulfilment of his ideal; but the very first morning after our arrival, when he came to our room, he found that she had not sent up our breakfast. He seized a very sharp-voiced little hand-bell which he had provided for our convenience, and rang it fiercely, and then, still ringing it, he ran to the door and called out, "Anita! Anita!" The kind soul came flying with the boiled eggs he had ordered for us; but whether it was he or she who had imagined bringing them chilled icy cold we never knew. In other points the table was a Venetian version of the English fare which he imperfectly remembered, and we famished on the feast provided for us. We plotted how we might go for a walk and buy a few cakes at a shop, but it was part of Pastorelli's hospitality never to leave us unaccompanied. At our last midday dinner the chief dish was a stew of calves' brains which the Venetians are fond of, but we dissembled our loathing as we best could, building hopefully upon whatever dessert should follow. This came, a deep platter of beautiful strawberries, and we had all but hailed it with applause when our kind host caught up a carafe of the inky wine of Conegliano, which the Venetians drink, or then drank, and drenched the fruit with it. Then indeed we despaired, but when we escaped the same afternoon with our

lives, we ordered such a supper at the Caffè Pedrocchi in Padua as had never been ordered for two persons before.

This seems very ungracious in the telling, but I could not give a just impression of how far Pastorelli's hospitality came short of his English ideal without it. There was nothing wanting to his kind intention and every moment of our stay was graced by some touch of it. Even his afternoon nap was not taken without the just defense which he made of his habit: "If I sleep, I sleep to myself; if I do not sleep, to whom do I not sleep?"

It was evident in several ways that he was one of the chief men of his town. He was, in fact, the *podestà* or mayor of the place, and though he was of a temporizing patriotism it was clear that in spite of a beard cut to a mustache alone he was no *Austriacante* in any unworthy sense. Once in our walks he stopped abruptly and ran shouting violently toward a house with closed shutters, something we did not understand till he explained that if the householder kept his dwelling shut in that way, as if it were unoccupied, he was tacitly inviting the Austrian military to billet upon him as many troops as it would hold. He did not desist from his outcry till a frightened-looking woman came to a window, and after a moment ran about within, opening the whole house to the day. Then he walked off with us on his errand of showing what he called his Possessions, in lordlier terms than he might have used for his property if he had had his Unabridged Dictionary by him. They were several thrifty farms with good cottages on them, and he let me stop and talk with the tenants who seemed on friendly terms with him. Neither he nor they seemed to expect I should find it strange when, on being questioned about their living, one of them should say that he had meat at Christmas, but no other time in the year. In fact, I am not sure that I found it strange myself; it was long yet before I rebelled against the economical terms of this unjust world as cruelly provisional, to call them no worse. My friend was the owner of these broad acres and those broad-pieces in his strong-box at the Countess N——'s because he had started

in life with advantages which these peasants had not enjoyed, and I might then have ascribed the difference to their demerit if I had come to think of it.

Pastorelli no longer visited us so often in Venice partly because he was there less and less. He was habituated to seeing us at Casa Falier, and it was after longer intervals that he called at the Palazzo Giustiniani when we crossed the Grand Canal to another apartment. When we crossed the Atlantic there was an interval of many years, well-nigh twenty of them, in which at first we exchanged letters and so kept the forms of our friendship for a while, and then, through my fault rather than his, let them lapse and we heard no more from each other than if we were both dead. Then once again I was in Venice, and when I asked about Pastorelli, no one could tell me of him, and I accepted a tacit theory of my own that he was no longer living. He must have been already in his sixties when we parted, and now he would at least be eighty, if he had, very improbably, still survived to that age. Now I am myself eighty, but then I was fifty-six, and I did not see how Pastorelli could have lived so long. I let the days go, and kept the thought of him down, as I recognize, with a consciousness more and more guilty. "Yes," I decided, "he must be eighty; he must be dead," and I felt very sorry; but, as I asked myself, "What could I do?" I am making this confession, which I find painful, because I would not have the reader think too well of me; I cannot think at all well of myself in the retrospect, and yet I believe there is something to be said for me because, suddenly, I could bear no longer this Tito Melema-like behavior of mine, and wrote to Pastorelli at his *cauntree*. I said that we were to be in Venice only a few days more, passing smoothly over the fact that we had already been there several weeks; I begged him to come to see us that my family might all see him; and I got back an answer in his dear old, familiar angular hand as quickly as the mail could bring it. "I have taken a bad cold," he began in English, and then he went on to say in Italian that he was old, and could not conveniently leave home, but I was young, and a great traveler, and I



could easily come with my family to see him. In my shame and despair I could only write to him again and protest the impossibility of going to him; we were leaving Venice in a few days, and I entreated him to come at least to Padua where we could have half an hour together in the wait which my train would make there. I explained and excused and defended myself for not having written to him sooner, as I have been wishing to do now; but I got no answer to my letter, and at Padua I could only waste the little long half-hour in the vain hope that somehow before the train started the vision of Pastorelli would yet appear to me; and if it had been his phantasm, the ghost I had imagined him, I should have been abjectly grateful, though it had come only to reproach me, and then abandon me to my remorse.

My punishment was not to be more than I could bear. The next morning one of the children was not well enough to let us continue our journey, and with a wild rapture, a sense of the divine mercy which I could not exaggerate, I took the first train back to Padua, and at Padua I took the swiftest *timonella* (which was the likeness of an American buggy) I could find, and drove away through the sweet-smelling hay-fields to the *cauntree* of my dear old friend. Perhaps the reader may think I am overdoing all this, and that after twenty years I might not have felt myself guilty of such an enormity in having tried to ignore the debt of love I owed him, as if it were something like a money debt that might be outlawed. But I do not think so, and I cling to the sense of my meanness with the humiliation that seems a sort of atonement. When the driver, who was also the owner, of my *timonella* found his way to my friend's home and drove rattling over the cobblestones into the court, I looked up, and there in the gallery was the son whom I remembered a comely boy and now saw a handsome young gentleman looking down and "Oh, Signor Howells!" he shouted, and called to his father somewhere indoors that I was there, and came running to help me dismount. By that time Pastorelli himself had come to welcome me and my unheeded explanations.

It seemed enough for him that I was there, expectedly or unexpectedly, but he did not embrace me, as if that would not have been in keeping with the ideal of a retired English gentleman which he was otherwise imperfectly realizing in his deep-brimmed straw hat and summer linen suit. He did not look so very much older than when I saw him last, though he was grayer, and he had visibly to work back into the past before he could get on the old terms with me. We walked out into his garden, and paced its parallelogram, while he made me observe his beautiful house, which was not the villa I remembered, but visibly, if not confessedly, the finest house in his town; he must have gone deep into the strong-box which he used to keep at the Countess N——'s to buy it: fifty thousand francs, he said. He asked me all about myself, and said that I must be very rich to be traveling over Europe with my family as I was doing. He asked me if I had breakfasted, and I said, "Yes, at Pedrocchi's in Padua"; but from time to time he recurred to the question, always breaking from his Italian with the entreaty in English of "Hah! Have a beefsteak, have a beefsteak!" He led me up into his library, and there he took down a map, and had me show him just how I had come from America, in the voyage which I had first made through one of our great lakes and down one of our great rivers from Toronto to the Straits of Belle Isle, and so across the sea to *Liverpull*, as he still called it. He preferred to speak Italian, but from time to time, when he forgot that I had breakfasted, he recurred hospitably to "Hah! Have a beefsteak, have a beefsteak!" Again he recurred to the fact that I was now living by authorship, and mainly by writing romances, as he called them, but since I still denied myself the beefsteak, which I do not think he could have given me, he had up bottles of every kind of wine which he made from the grapes on his Possessions, and then, when we had talked out, he called in his son, who came with his gentle young wife, and made them listen to his proud version of my wondrous tale. He showed them how I had sailed from fifteen hundred miles inland before I reached the sea, and told

them that I gained forty thousand francs a year by writing romances. He had me tell them about my family, and then presently, somehow, the young father and mother brought out the photograph of the little child they had lost and showed it with trembling lips and swimming eyes. My dear old friend would not, or could not, look at them; he kept staring straight forward as if they were not there; but when they had gone away he said that the poor little mother was the daughter of one of the most historical houses of Venice; and if he was proud of this I do not blame him. The old apothecary who had made himself the first citizen of his *cauntree* would naturally, such being human nature, feel this his greatest distinction. I could only love him the more for his pride in it, and I wish I could think now of our friendship with as great reason to respect myself as him. I know it was his romantic interest in my language which first drew him to me, but that was an eccentricity which had its appeal to me through my own like affection for all Latin peoples. I liked being a bit of his poetry, a color of the enthusiasm which endeared Webster's Unabridged Dictionary to him, but I hope my pleasure in this has not had an undue effect in my memories of him. I knew very little about him except what I knew of him in our intercourse, though I was aware of a certain reluctance from him in some of my *italianissimi* friends which I think derived from the cut of his beard rather than any unpatriotic quality of what was at worst his discreet opportunism in the

political situation. I believe he was a better Catholic than most Venetians, but his charity was a mantle that covered all my sins of heresy; he may have learned in *Liverpull* a greater toleration even than seemed to prevail among all the Venetians I knew and that allowed me to flatter myself that several clergymen of my acquaintance were also my friends. But Pastorelli was my friend above all, except a friend nearer my own age who was still more constantly my companion, and with whom I exchanged our language in a more equal use of English and Italian. Pastorelli wished always to speak English, and this suited my indolent humor, when the obligation to speak Italian with almost every one else was stressful.

If we should somehow meet somewhere in those dateless and placeless eternities which it seems less and less fond to trust in as the little left of time goes by, I shall know him as far as I can see him, and I shall see him in the figure and fashion of the earlier eighteenth-sixties, and I shall confidently hail him in the language of our Unabridged Dictionary with the hope that its resources will enable me to excuse, if not justify, my demerits and defects to him. I cannot hope that his purged vision will fail to pierce the mixed motives which had so nearly lost me our last earthly meeting, but I am sure he will forgive them all, and will keep me in the kindness which never ceased on earth to make me feel him unsurpassed among the friends of my over-friended life.

## March

BY E. B. DEWING

APRIL the whole world knows for spring,  
 And the trees bud  
 And the birds sing.  
 But a secret shared is a secret lost,  
 Give me the laden winds  
 And the ground still oozing frost.