
Mario Anton Orefice



STONE AND WATER
Andrea Palladio in Venice

De Bastiani

LA PIETRA E L'ACQUA

Andrea Palladio in Venezia

A novel by M.A. Orefice

It was an August day in 1580 on the island of San Giorgio Maggiore. Andrea's head was throbbing with pain and the sickly taste of blood filled his mouth. He had fallen from the scaffolding onto a pile of white stones. "I don't want to die, I have to finish the church, the pronaos isn't built, do you hear me, Lord? I will build the pronaos to celebrate you, please, God, help me, don't leave me here in the water, take me to the trees on land, to breath in the resin and grass scented air".

He could see a blurred face through the shadows. It was Antonio, the head mason, and his voice reached him faintly, from afar, asking continuously "Master, where are we? Do you know me?" "Yes, I know you, you're the one with the close set eyes, green pantaloons and effeminate voice, but I can't get the words out, it's cold; damned city, you're taking me away at the wrong time and Antonio can do nothing for me. This is the end for me, seventy two years gone in a moment, with my mouth full of sickly sweet red gel. That's it, Antonio, wet my lips, freshen my brow ... the sun's getting dark, a moment for my memories, then there will be the light from white souls or pitch black, with no voice, no war, no pity, just silence, alone, incommensurable, like the sea surrounding this island. What fun to roll about in the grass, greet the sky from among ears of wheat; this cold stone under my head is lifeless, as my old body will soon be, and you, reader, weren't expecting, were you, to be present at my death, this mysterious death about which millions of words have been written: it's just as absurd as all other deaths, there's nothing left to say, nothing left to do. You want to know who I am, but are you really interested, does it really matter to you?"

"Call somebody, the master is dying" shouts Antonio. Time is almost up for me, I don't know whether I'll be able to tell my story, perhaps the words won't be clear.

"My mother's name was Marta and my father was called Pietro. Ours was a poor family and we lived in Padua, where I was born on 8th November 1508. At 12 years of age I was already working for a certain Bartolomeo, a rogue who paid a pittance and treated his apprentices like slaves. I fled to some relatives in Vicenza and there became an apprentice to a stonemason. One day, through a dusty grey windowpane, I saw her. She had stopped just outside the workshop and was talking to a neighbour. She was beautiful, so beautiful that not one of my works could compete with the light in her dark eyes, the harmony of her body, the sweetness of her long curly hair. We married almost immediately and our darling children were born, Leonida, Marcantonio, Orazio, Silla and Zenobia. It was a joy to play with them at an age when the world was theirs, every fairy tale came true, and for them their daddy became a magician, a giant, a horse. Allegradonna was young and passionate. I was sometimes ashamed that I didn't have the money to surprise her with the gifts that only princes can give.

Up to the age of thirty I was a nobody, a humble provincial stonemason, until I met a friend who changed my life: his name was Giangiorgio and he charged me with the building of a new loggia for his villa. He was my second father, he taught me about architecture. He was also a writer and wanted to standardize the use of the Italian language with works such as

L'Italia liberata dai Goti (Italy freed from the Goths) which he considered a new Iliad. But I'm convinced that this Italy freed from the Goths will fail to leave its mark on people's memories. Like a good father, he baptized me a second time, choosing the name of the goddess who befriended Ulysees. He also became my greatest ally and with him I began to travel, study, learn the art of conversation. I no longer cut stones, but became an architect, invented my own style and met influential people. Alvise, Daniele, Jacopo and Marcantonio were my admirers and friends. They supported the pope, and had revolutionary ideas about this watery city, fighting to change things, unsuccessfully, because the majority sided with Jacopo Sansovino – have you ever heard of him? To my misfortune, I have heard this name often and it has defeated me many times. His success depended on the fact that he was not a local man, he was a 'foresto' as they say in Veneto, a foreigner, who was a friend of Michelangelo – at least that's what they said – and of the Aretino. He had been apprenticed to the best masters in Florence and Rome, the Library you see in St. Mark's Square, and the Fabbriche Nuove, near Rialto, are his and not mine.

Life is a stage, you have to play your part well, and he was a good actor. Architecture is also a stage, we build scenes, and you are now on the stage. Imagine that you can see a man with a long beard, a tricorne on his head and a purple cape buttoned over a long damask robe. He is carrying some papers in his hand, documents about the lagoon; his name is Alvise Cornaro. Alvise shows his documents; he dreams of a theatre on the water, a space in which everyone has their place, just like in the universe, a theatre where there are combats between bears and dogs, wild bulls and men, and a scene where water fills and empties the stage for naval battles, as in ancient Rome. He wants to build his theatre on the water between the Giudecca and the Punta della Dogana, on the velma, a type of muddy lagoon uncovered by the tides. He also dreams of a fountain gushing and sparkling in St. Mark's Square, between the columns of the wharf, a fountain supplied with the water of the Sile or Brenta rivers, then a hill on another velma between San Giorgio Maggiore and St. Mark's. He wants to use earth excavated from the canals and landscape the hill with trees, avenues and a loggia on top, so that a spectator from St. Mark's Square can see the fountain, hill and theatre at a single glance. Speaking of fountains, has it ever occurred to you that when you walk around this city you see only wells, often dry, and no gushing water?; ironic, isn't it, you live practically in water and yet have to take a boat and go miles away to get some.

Another of Alvise's ideas is to surround the city with high walls and a park with entertainment facilities where people can go in summer to escape the humid heat of the canals, or where they can store wood in the event of a siege. I know these thoughts, and my theatre will make its debut here on San Giorgio Maggiore, at the end of the Grand Canal, on the waters that Alvise dreamed of.

The white stones are stained with red, Antonio is watching me. The other workers have arrived and they form a group on the right of the picture, bending over me. Antonio is in the centre and is spreading his arms. My body lies face up among the pale stones, my face turned towards you, my right hand is pointing to the ground. The landscape in the background shows the church covered in scaffolding and a city on the water.

I see only shadows, this is not a triumphant way to go, but then again I came into the world

very humbly. My first commission was the altar for the San Pantalon church, don't laugh, I know the name is funny, but that was it. Sansovino was building his Library and I was in charge of the work for the altar in San Pantalon. I got my own back later with San Francesco della Vigna, an unfinished Sansovino church: my façade did not observe his canons, it was a work of art in itself, a manifesto of my architecture, even if no-one noticed.

"Master, don't die". "They're pathetic, they think that saying such things will help me; I feel my kidneys on fire, my breathing is like that of a dying animal, my hands are trembling, images and words swim around in my mind, which returns to an evening in December 1562. I was on this same island, in the refectory a stone's throw from here. I was sitting with Paolo Caliari, known as the Veronese, at the monks' dining table, observing the picture at the far end of the great hall. The moon shed no light and the room was illuminated by the red glow of torches; the blinding white light of the sun through the large windows did not strike the white walls. The work was nearly done; Paolo had ainted the wedding banquet at Cana. There was nothing humble in the picture; Jesus, in the centre, seemed more like a king, his mother, the Madonna, was sad, the majestic columns on each side of the canvas were Doric and Corinthian, like those I had studied on my trips to Rome. At the banquet no-one seemed to notice Jesus. Only someone looking from a distance, leaning in the doorway of the refectory, would be able to see him first, over there, in the background. Whoever entered the picture to take on the looks of one of the many characters in it, would never notice him and would look elsewhere. Even the steward of the feast was tasting the wine, which had been water, and saying to the bridegroom: "Every man serves the good wine first, then the inferior one when the guests have well drunk; but you have kept the good wine till now." The miracle had taken place right before his eyes, yet he hadn't understood. The characters at the wedding in Cana wore sumptuous clothes, they were watching a lady looking over a balcony, whispering in the ear of their neighbours, and taking no notice of the crowd of busy servants bustling around them; the musicians played a madrigal. While the torches spluttered to an end, I thanked Paolo because my architecture, in love with Rome, triumphed at each side of the banquet: those in power in this city have always refused it and I have lost my battle.

I remember when I came to the Grand Canal for the first time and visited the site of the Library opposite the Doge's palace; Sansovino's style was so very different from mine and I didn't like the city, so unstable, watery and insecure. However, because this republic gave eternal fame and glory to its heroes, I accepted the challenge, and over the years the delusions came as the damp penetrated my bones.

I don't know what else I'll be able to tell you in these last few breaths. Listen to an old man dying, declares the actor in the scene from *Antigone*, prompting my memories of the wooden theatre of the Compagnia degli Accessi, the work on which was finished in February 1565. As I was walking up the ramp of San Pantalon, my head down to observe the checker board of the stone paving, it was icy and it was better to take care, Cosimo Bartoli's greeting gave me a start. Cosimo was the administrator of the Medici's properties in Veneto, he procured good craftsmen, soldiers, precious stones, statues and paintings, gave his princes the news from the city and would certainly have told them about the Teatro degli Accessi that I had just finished, and the show that was to be put on in that period. Cosimo walked on without stopping. He

was to give a reception that evening; in his house, which stood nearby, you could meet Sansovino, of course, Titian, the ambassadors of Rome and Savoy, and other illustrious people. I continued to watch the icy road, what sins I had on my conscience since I had met the Compagnia della Calza degli Accessi; the work was urgent, they were in a hurry to perform a play taken from a story by Aristobulus. One day they said they needed an extra column, the next day they wanted one less, the statues had to be bigger, and what blundering fools the workers they had recommended were. I can still see the amazement on their faces when I answered: "Sirs, to build a theatre for thousands of people is the job of an architect, who knows the rules to make it appear attractive, as creations are appreciated more for their form than their substance." That kept them away for a few days and I could work undisturbed. Federico Zuccari was also at the inauguration; he had made a good job of painting the twelve scenes telling the stories of the King of Jerusalem, seven and a half feet high on all sides. Sadly, he disclosed that we would have to part at the end of the year, as he was going to Florence to take up an appointment to supervise the preparations in honour of Joan of Austria. Step by step I reached Rialto. My plans for a new bridge had not been approved. In the countryside I was free to do what I liked with the villas, but in the city there was an ancient order which could not be changed. Who knows what will become of my churches. The temptation to 'perfect' the work of others is too strong; especially in art and literature everyone declares themselves masters, they correct, improve, alter. Man is like that: he interferes with other people's creations and almost always ruins them. Because a note, word, decoration or centimetre is enough to change the sense of anything.

Can you hear me? Why does no-one hear me, who am I speaking to now? To myself, like a bird caught in the net and abandoned by its companions. I hear only the noise of the water, the white stones are getting colder and colder with these stones I'll build an extraordinary scene, architecture will illuminate the water, the star of the show will be the pronaos of Corinthian columns in front of the church, a triumphal entrance to celebrate the Lord and the party of my friends. Everyone will applaud, from the Punta della Dogana, the boats on the Grand Canal and St. Mark's, but if I die someone will betray me, deleting the pronaos, covering my façade with an array of idols: first two doges and two saints, a bust of the doge Tribuno Memmo who sold this island to the Benedictines, the doge Sebastiano Ziani, a benefactor who left part of his inheritance to the convent. When the terrestrial debts have been paid, it's time for the celestial ones: St. Steven, the first martyr of the Christian faith, who was accused by the Sanhedrin of blaspheming against Moses and God, and stoned to death; St. George, the saint who killed the dragon to save the princess. We all have a dragon devouring us but we are not always successful in killing it; higher up, at each end of the semigables, statues of San Benedetto from Norcia and San Girolamo; finally the ascent to heaven will conclude with angels and the highest point will focus on Christ blessing the land. Amen. The architecture will be in the background; I won't see this betrayal because death will spare me it; perhaps I would be in Vienna now, and not on this bed of stones, if I had only said yes to an Austrian ambassador. Instead I consumed my art in a lost cause, but enough of such thoughts, I want to throw them into the water surrounding me, together with the plans left on paper.

I can't help laughing when I think of certain sermons at certain funerals ... "brothers, we must be happy because he is now in the kingdom of heaven"; what kingdom of heaven? I see no lights, everything is in darkness, there are no angels coming for me, I fall asleep and I will never wake up, no-one will ever pronounce my name again, Allegradonna's smile will never again stir my heart. The first time I met her I fixed a date in the crowded market, I waited until I was next to her, sought her hand and gave her a small wooden ring, while my heart was pounding as if I had just run a race. Our first kiss was in the dark of her cellar, we made love for the first time during a May feast, we carved our names on the bark of a tree. I wish I were in the countryside with you, among the scented rosemary, the perfume of flowers, in the shade of the silver ash, but my body is trapped, stone has pursued me throughout my whole life and now it is crushing me, the columns and bridges collapse; the water has won, I tried in vain to defeat its chaos with my architecture, but differences and instability have had the upper hand over the security of proportions, the revolution of stability has surrendered to the conservatives of movement, I have been able to change nothing, except on the outskirts. A different city would have been created if I had built the Rialto bridge.

It was 1554 when I presented my first plans. I based them on the Tiber bridge at Rimini, the most beautiful of those I had seen. I proposed a massive stone bridge, with five spans and a central colonnade and a frontal decorated with statues. The columns spoke of change, but the city decided to stay as it was, a city of façades, not columns, of empty spaces rather than filled ones, of plaster, not monuments, of water rather than stone. Here beauty accompanies the onset of death, the landscape sparkles, and yet the water-impregnated walls and the rotting poles could disintegrate from one moment to the next, or the houses could be submerged by the sea in a flash; the city resists and wobbles, just like your face reflected in water. There is room for uncertainty, you may chance to wake up without columns: in the middle of the endless plain you won't know where to go.

However, the Senate did not want a road over the water, it required a single stone span, a place full of life, with craftsmen's workshops and shops, a balcony from which to observe the Grand Canal and its palaces, an ornament to be admired and painted, a triumphal arch to honour the passage of the Bucintoro and the procession that follows it.

The panel appointed by the Senate received my plans together with many others, Vasari says that even Michelangelo took part in the contest, but in the end, yet again, Sansovino beat me, although later his plans were abandoned. I thought I had a second chance in 1565, when friends secured commissions for San Giorgio Maggiore and Santa Lucia for me: it seemed that our party would also be able to procure the commission for Rialto, so I redesigned the bridge, enlarging the central loggia. It became a majestic affair with seven columns from which proceeded an arcade to the two smaller loggias at each end. Imagine observing the city from above, the columns of San Giorgio Maggiore would have drawn the eyes to those of Rialto following the line of the Doge's Palace. I could also have rebuilt that palace, creating a perfect triangle: San Giorgio, the Redentore and the Doge's Palace. Fantasies, dear reader, that's all they were, and fantasies they have remained. The magnificent stone bridge, the wonderful invention to be built in the heart of one of the most important and noble cities in Italy, is just a drawing in my Four Books of Architecture.

My heart is leaping like a fish out of water, I can no longer hear the voice of Antonio, who knows if he's still here. In the dark the sparks of a dying fire glow, I feel nostalgic for life, perhaps there's time for a final memory. It was 18th July 1574 and I was coming back from San Nicolò on the Lido. The dark high walls of the calle reminded me of the plates of a press, ready to close, the sun had already gone down on the lagoon. Jacopo was sitting by the window overlooking the Grand Canal, waiting for me; since I moved to Venice his house had become my abode. His long aquiline nose and grey beard showed up at the far end of the study, beyond the bookshelves, pictures, bronze and marble statues, tables strewn with papers, instruments for making mathematical calculations, minerals and precious stones. In his hand he held one of the Ten Books of Architecture by Vitruvius, translated by Daniele Barbaro; the books not only contained my drawings and Daniele's comments, but also quoted Leon Battista Alberti and Euclid, the *Arte de Navegacion* by Pedro de Medina, reflections on the compass and proportions by Dürer, Sebastian Muenster's *Compositio horologiorum* and the *Horoscopo universalis* by Joannes Stabius. When I sat down opposite him, he closed the book and with a smile offered me a glass of light wine. "At San Nicolò on the Lido you have built a magnificent arch to celebrate Henry III's visit, but his majesty will not remember it; his memory will record only the pleasures of the city's most beautiful courtesan", he said, and he was right. It was the talk of the town while awaiting the royal procession, rumour went from mouth to mouth that the king would spend the night in the bed of the poetess Veronica Franco. "Veronica is a woman who makes a man dream", "She starts the love games and never tires", "Hear what her poems say: So sweet and desirable do I become / when I find myself in bed with one / who makes me feel attractive and loved / that my pleasure surpasses all delight / so that the knot which seemed so tight / of the other's love, even tighter becomes". The verses were recited by a woman behind me and good manners made me wait a little before turning round, but in the crowd I was unable to match a face to that voice. "Here's the king", someone shouted, as soon as the bucintoro came into view, followed by a procession of boats, then the echo of the word 'king' was multiplied by thousands of voices. I looked at my wooden triumphal arch, it was an ephemeral thing, once again far from the city centre, and the work of the last few years on the monastery for the Celestia nuns or the arbitration for the Chioggia fortresses would certainly not become history.

The book in Jacopo's hands led us to talk about my trips to Rome: as I stood before the Coliseum, the imperial forum, and the Caracalla baths I had been filled with awe. It was not art that shook my soul, but the greatness of what was not apparent. The surviving monuments inspired scenarios of what had been, the mind tried to reconstruct the unfinished drawing, only to give up in a state of confusion, lost in a labyrinth of possibilities, in dizzy heights, spaces built for Cyclops. Absence, solid as a rock, drew the lines on the drawing paper, a hand guided the line to join together what was lacking. A memory of that greatness is incorporated in all my villas, all my churches; imposing columns, the art of dominion, traces of beauty and harmony transformed into metaphor.

That evening my mind also returned to the empty room downstairs, where my children Leonida and Orazio died in the space of a few months; the elderly doctor had no weapons to use against the disease, their eyes lost all expression, their bodies behaved as if they were unguided. Allegradonna sat with them day and night and as I drew my plans I could hear their sick

breathing, but our love could not stop the stroke of the scythe from severing their young lives. Their funeral took place one winter morning; I never left that room for days, it was a space full of the unspoken words that death always leaves behind. Powerless I had bent over them for a final kiss, just like Antonio is bending over me now. Our foreheads touch, then he goes off in silence and in the dark night the Grand Canal becomes red wine.

The time has come, I board the black boat while the stars powder the turbid waters with reflected light. Small side calle loom up like mute spectators. The gondola slides under a small bridge. Between the houses, all attached to each other, the brief opening up of a campiello, followed immediately by steps and a little boat bobbing in the dark. A window closes. I let myself be carried through the watery city, the oar ploughs the water slowly and silently. I can't see the horizon, just houses and canals that one moment all seem the same, then different; who knows where each one leads. The church of the Redentore appears round and white, shining like a whale, with columns that become gigantic doges, then columns again. I want to escape, but the black boat continues its journey to the church. Around me, among the waves, hundreds of cadavers covered in sores. In the water a mouth screams senseless words and Roman numerals, a lamb is drowning. I'm afraid, my heartbeat is getting louder and louder and slower. I want to escape, Sisyphus pushes a great stone on the church gable, he's been pushing it for centuries and for centuries it's been rolling back. But is Sisyphus happy? And we, are we happy? We are happy when we forget that the stone keeps rolling back, when our imagination takes care of our soul. I enter the church; a woman sitting in the front pews, illuminated by a ray of white light, turns quickly to look at me, then goes back to her prayers. Her face, partially covered by a white veil, is scored with lines, she is ill, perhaps she's there specially to meet me. I look up at the cupola, then along the nave cornice, my eyes descend along a column, seeking the woman in the hope that she will turn round again. In the meantime, someone is waiting on the gondola; a tall thin figure with no face. I go down on my knees and pray. Through my hands joined in prayer before my face I see the sad look of the woman, she seems to be saying "Don't go", but someone is calling me from the boat. Before opening the heavy wooden door, I turn: the kneeling woman is no longer there, her place has been taken by a much prettier woman who is standing between the two rows of pews near the altar. She has dark eyes and a sweet inviting smile. Perhaps the other woman has left by a side door. I run towards the gondola and the scene changes: I'm in campo San Vidal, it's deserted, some of the doors are locked, the Rialto bridge is a towering construction standing on twelve Ionic, Doric and Corinthian columns, the steps are ancient and timeworn, the pattern of the stone moves like water between streams of light and patches of shade. There is a faint light in campo San Vidal, perhaps it's the sunset. The unknown voice calls from the gondola, the bridge suddenly disappears and I'm standing next to the tall thin figure, I can't see its face, the black boat pulls away from the bank.

Andrea woke up in a fright, the sky through the window was turning to blue, thousands of stars disappeared into the dawn on the Grand Canal. Jacopo's house stood in silence as he looked at the books about architecture by his bed. A row of volumes leaned against the Hyperotomachia Poliphili and he thought: "It's a dream". A theatre of images and words took

form in his mind, but one of the scenes escaped him, what had frightened it? He waited for the sun to rise, then dressed and went out into the warm morning air. It was a morning in August 1580 and he was expected for a consultancy. When he stepped off the gondola there was great activity on the island of San Giorgio Maggiore. Labourers and bricklayers were milling about the site around the barrows, near piles of bricks, and over the tangled scaffolding; the sound of their voices drowned by the strokes of chisels on Istria stone. We reach an age when things become confused in our minds. We want to tell a story but are unable to find the words, so we end up talking of other things.

“THIS IS PALLADIO’S SKULL”

The death of Andrea della Gondola, known as Palladio, was mysterious; as with some of his work in Venice, there remains only a trace on paper. We don’t know why, or where death took place, whether in Venice, Vicenza or Maser, or who knows where else.

We have:

- a letter dated 6th July 1580 sent by Pompeo Strozzi to the Gonzaga Court, informing Guglielmo Gonzaga that he had spoken to Palladio about his search for a ‘prefect’ for his buildings;

- a melancholy note of the Accademia Olimpica in Vicenza, which on 25th August 1580, acknowledges the death of the master, regrets not having been able to convene the committee ‘due to the shortness of time’, and approves what was done for the funeral;

- the biography written in 1617 by Paolo Gualdo from Vicenza, from which we learn that Palladio died at the age of 72 and was buried in the Church of S. Corona in Vicenza.

Nothing else has been found up to now, no official record of his death, no will or other document that tells of his demise and indicates where it took place. Something happened between 6th July and 25th August 1580 and as there are no documents, we are free to imagine those events.

People’s deaths suddenly illuminate their lives for an instant, and are often just as quickly forgotten. Death is almost always betrayed, used by others, interpreted, celebrated. It allows those who are still alive to say what they wish, to link their own thoughts and intentions to the labours of the deceased and base their success and work on what was achieved by another. The dead don’t say anything, they should be happy that someone continues to remember them. Few ask whether the deceased would want things to happen in the way that we, the living, consider so right and so much better.

Perhaps Palladio was killed because the Senate thought his architecture was dangerous and wanted to hit the party that supported it (...rumour has it that the pronaos he wanted to build at San Giorgio was considered a political attack, a declaration of war at the heart of St. Mark’s basin, an affair to be dealt with at all costs...). Perhaps he died at home of a heart attack or due to a brain haemorrhage, and Jacopo Contarini, who was away from Venice, found the body of his friend only after some weeks. Ideas for a film or literary subject.

Palladio’s death takes place in the wings, not in the glow of the footlights. It must be sought out and can be glimpsed with difficulty, just like San Giorgio on certain winter mornings. In Venice there was no provost or official who took note of it, in Vicenza the members of the Accademia organized a hurried funeral, Jacopo Contarini, the bosom friend to whom Palladio left part of his drawings, makes no mention of it in his writings. There are only casual circumstances that are incomplete, as many archives have yet to be consulted, but coherent with a life in the wings, in the countryside, never in the heart of the town. That made no ado.

After his death in Venice the betrayals began immediately and continue today with thousands of villas inspired by Palladian canons, celebrations and conventions, but also with these pages, and all the others dormant on the library shelves. We look upon a man who can no longer look at us. Like Narcissus. Like those gentlemen who in 1831, during the exhumation in the church of S. Corona in Vicenza, boasted straight away that they could identify the master:

“Among the adult skulls there was one which for its size, pronounced oval shape from front to back, and wide concave forehead, and the consistency and size of the bones and fine lines of the partly ossified sutures, attracted admiration, and despite the impossibility of proving it, at the sight of the skull almost everyone exclaimed: “This is Palladio’s skull”.

THE HALL OF ANCIENT BOOKS

It is a small room with dark wooden shelving that goes right up to the ceiling. On one side, just beyond a sort of desk, there's Gigi. I can't tell you his real name, he's been there years and everyone calls him Gigi. He has the look of a young priest and wears metal rimmed glasses. He is tall but stoops due to sitting over books and consulting the library files. His expression is like that of someone who hears a language he doesn't understand, but he can produce the book you want in a few seconds.

I'm sitting on one of the benches in the room, facing me is a white-haired man with his portable computer open who appears to be absorbed in his research. I also open my portable computer and straight away the researcher shows me where the plug is. We whisper a few words about the duration of the batteries on a portable. Through the windows I can hear the voices of workers, someone is singing. I open the ancient book, a biography of Andrea Palladio written in the 19th century by an abbot, Antonio Magrini. Its pages are speckled like the skin of an old man. My fingers seem to feel the walls of a sandcastle dried in the sun.

The afternoon soon passes. A hand touches my shoulder, it's my wife who's come to collect me. "I'm coming, just five minutes more". She smiles patiently and moves away. Among the pages I've found about twenty small pieces of squared paper covered in notes. The handwriting is scrawny, like the tracings of an electrocardiogram. Whoever wrote the notes used a fountain pen and black ink. The spaces between the lines are irregular and many of the letters are pushed up against each other, or even missing. I have often gone back to the hall of ancient books to read those pieces of paper. I think they're still there, in that old book with the sandy pages. Ask Gigi.

ANDREA PALLADIO IN VENICE

Andrea was born on 8th November 1508 in Padua, son of a miller, Pietro della Gondola (a portentous surname) and a certain Marta. After being apprenticed to Bartolomeo Cavazza, a stonecutter, he went to Vicenza. There he worked with Giovanni Da Pedemuro and Girolamo Pittoni and enrolled with the Masons and Stonecutters Corporation. He lived an ordinary life, the most significant event in it was his marriage to Allegradonna, who bore him five children: Leonida, Marcantonio, Orazio, Silla and Zenobia. Up to thirty years of age Andrea della Gondola did not seem destined to leave his mark on the history of architecture. The turning point came in 1538 when the literato Giangiorgio Trissino appointed him to build a new loggia at his villa in Cricoli. There was certainly a profound relationship between the two, almost like father and son. Trissino was ambitious and erudite, but lacked artistic talent. He was sixty years old and was committed to a sort of reform of the Italian language that he aimed to standardize with his works. He intended his book *Italy freed from the Goths* to be like a second *Iliad*. Andrea, who had not had the opportunity to study or work with a great master, admired the boundless erudition of his new client.

After this fundamental encounter a new life started for him, with a new name. In fact, Trissino re-named him Palladio, in reference to the Greek goddess Pallas Athene, an ally of Ulysses during his tormented return to Ithaca, and protector of the city of Athens.

Journeys, conversations, studies, new work, lead him to process a successful style: "All over the western world there are hundreds of thousands of dwellings, public buildings and churches with symmetrical façades and semi-columns topped by pediments, that are derived from Andrea Palladio's plans. Of all architects, he has been the one most imitated...", writes Ackerman.

Trissino introduced him to that part of Venetian society closest to the church, in the circle of Daniele Barbaro, Jacopo Contarini, Alvise and Marcantonio Mocenigo. However, the so-called 'Palladian party', supporter of the pope, was not strong enough. For most of the men who counted in the Serenissima Repubblica, Jacopo Sansovino was the best. His real name was Jacopo Tatti and he learnt his art from Andrea Contucci, known as 'the Sansovino' because he was born in Tuscany at Monte San Savino. He is a foreigner, or 'foresta' as the Venetians say, who brings to the lagoon city the spirit of the great Michelangelo, whom he met in 1515, and more generally the atmosphere of Tuscan and Roman architecture. His Venetian works include the Library in St. Mark's Square and the Fabbriche Nuove at Rialto. The Aretino was one of his best friends.

San Francesco della Vigna

In 1554 Andrea lost the competition for the post of 'proto' (director) of the Ufficio del Sal (Salt Department) in Venice, and a year later plans drawn up by Jacopo Sansovino for the Gold Staircase in the Doge's Palace were preferred to his. His plans for the Rialto Bridge and Doge's Palace had no better fortune. The second set of plans for Rialto would be published in the third book of his treatise on architecture and used by Canaletto in his painting *Fantasia palladiana con il Ponte di Rialto* (cover picture).

In the meantime he published two booklets: *Ancient Roman Buildings and Description of*

Roman Churches

In 1555 he received his first Venetian commission: the main altar in the church of San Pantalon in the sestiere of Dorsoduro. 1556 was the year of publication of a translation of the Ten Books of Architecture by Vitruvius, translated and commentated by his friend Daniele Barbaro and illustrated by Andrea Palladio.

Three years later, in 1588, the patriarch Vincenzo Diedo ordered that the drawings and plans of 'messer' Andrea Palladio be used for the façade of the church of San Pietro in Castello. But the sudden death of Diedo prevented Palladio from continuing with the work, which was completed differently by Francesco Smeraldi, known as Seneca.

However, a little later Palladio returned to the Castello sestiere for the façade of San Francesco della Vigna. The church was designed by Jacopo Sansovino, who was relieved of his commission after the death of his friend Vettore Grimani and the doge Andrea Gritti.

Giovanni Grimani, Vettore's brother and great friend of Daniele Barbaro, commissioned Palladio to build the façade. No documents reveal Palladio's state of mind, but we have a few clues. There was a report on the church by a monk, Francesco Giorgi, who was the author of *De armonia mundi totius*. At the request of Andrea Gritti he had written a compendium of esoteric instructions on the harmony and proportions which should be pursued. Palladio read the document and ignored it. He also ignored the architectural decisions made by Sansovino: for the façade he chose Corinthian columns instead of the Doric ones used inside the church. He adopted the solution of a main temple in the centre of the façade and a minor one on each side, without taking into consideration at all coincidence with the internal volumes of the church. In other words, he put up his manifesto and did not bother with an architectural 'dialogue' with Jacopo Sansovino. It was his cry of "I'm here", immediately suffocated by the limited area of the campo which San Francesco della Vigna overlooked.

Speaking of space and Palladio's relationships with the Serenissima, it is interesting to note on the map of Venice the marginal position of San Francesco della Vigna and San Pietro di Castello compared to the town centre. Palladio would always be an artist on the fringes of the city. His art would never make its debut on the Grand Canal or in St. Mark's Square. His Venetian story is that of an underdog to whom work of a certain importance is commissioned, without ever granting him the honour of entering the heart of the city. His friends have not enough clout and he himself must have had a love-hate relationship with Venice and its liquid state, as he was used to the clear air of the countryside and the solidity of the land. However, his supporters procured commissions for many villas: Villa Pisani (1542/1545) at Bagnolo di Lonigo, Vicenza, for Giovanni Pisani and his sons; Villa Pisani (1552) at Montagnana, Padua, for Francesco Pisani; Villa Cornaro (1553) at Piombino Dese, Treviso, for Girolamo Cornaro; Villa Badoer (1556) at Fratta Polesine, Rovigo, for Francesco Badoer; Villa Maser (1557/1558) at Maser, Treviso, for the brothers Daniele and Marcantonio Barbaro; Villa Foscari (1559/1560) at Mire, Venice, for the brothers Niccolò and Alvise Foscari; Villa Mocenigo (1559/1562) at Marocco, Treviso, for Leonardo Mocenigo; Villa Emo (1564/1567) at Fanzolo, Treviso, for the family of the same name.

The Four Books of Architecture

From 1560 Palladio was engaged in Venice on San Francesco della Vigna, as well as on

other sites and projects: the cloisters and vestry of the Convent of Carità (now the seat of the Galleries of the Academy), which houses the spiral staircase described by Goethe as "the most beautiful in the world"; the refectory of the Monastery of San Giorgio Maggiore; the wooden theatre built for the Compagnia degli Accessi in the area of San Simeon Piccolo; the church of Santa Lucia (destroyed in 1860 to make way for the railway station) for which he received a commission in 1564, the year in which his daughter Zenobia married; the church of San Giorgio Maggiore, one of the most discussed and important works of Andrea Palladio in Venice. For San Giorgio, towards the end of 1565 the architect and some of his assistants started building a wooden model, now lost. On 13th March of the following year the first stone was laid. Vasari, who arrived in Venice that year, wrote: "Palladio has started building a new church with such a beautiful design as that reproduced in the model that, if finished, will be a stupendous and extremely beautiful work". But work on the façade began in 1597, many years after his death, with Simone Sorella, and was finished in 1610 with other craftsmen. There are many doubts about whether the façade is a faithful reproduction of the master's intentions. In his nine books on Andrea Palladio's architecture published in Venice in 1762, Tommaso Temanza states that he saw the remains of the wooden model and is in no doubt: the façade lacks the 'Palladian grace'. In the drawings RIBA XIV, 12, and the *Miscellanea Mappe 875b* in the State Archives in Venice, the façade is projected forward with a pronaos delimited by giant Corinthian columns. A triumphant 'visual attraction machine', the idea for which was perhaps influenced by the writings of Alvise Cornaro, who dreamed of a theatre on the water of St. Mark's basin. The imperial portico disappeared, it's not known whether it was the master or later builders who had second thoughts. Observing the façade and comparing it with that of San Francesco della Vigna, we clearly see the line connecting the bases of the semigables and the large plaque under the gable in the place of a semicircular aperture.

The second half of the 60s was a very busy period, so much so that on 18th December 1568 Andrea Palladio turned down the possibility offered to him by the Austrian ambassador Viet vom Domberg to work for the imperial court of Maximilian I in Vienna. His many commissions included the reconstruction of that part of the Monastery of the Nuns of the Celestia that had been destroyed by the fire at the Arsenal in 1569.

Palladio's interests and relationships were by then centred on Venice and in 1570 he moved with his family into the Palazzo Contarini delle Figure, guests of his friend and mentor Jacopo Contarini, a stone's throw from the church of San Samuele and the house of Veronese. He had Domenico de Franceschi print his most important publication: *The Four Books of Architecture*. The first book is dedicated to columns and proportional ratio and the use of Tuscan, Doric, Ionic, Corinthian and composite orders; the second is a compendium of his projects; the third deals with roads, bridges and town squares; the fourth speaks of temples. The treatise, as is written in the preface, would have been extended with further volumes dealing with: 'Theatres, Amphitheatres, Arches, Spas, Aqueducts and, the last one, How to Fortify Cities and on Ports.

In autumn of that year his antagonist Jacopo Sansovino died and this fact allowed Palladio to take on the post of Architect of the Republic.

A Troubled Period

Palladio's private life, of which we know very little, is struck by the tragic death of his daughter Leonida at the beginning of January 1572. He wrote to the Vicenza deputies, who sought him out for work on the Basilica: "...I would not have failed to carry out your orders immediately, but as my eldest child has passed away I find myself unable to work and distressed in my soul as well as my body, also because he has yet to be buried, and so I cannot find the time nor the way to do anything. However, one day this week I will come to Vicenza...". But his suffering is such that he disappears for two months. The Nuncio of Vicenza, who needed to speak to him, but couldn't, reported on 29th February: "I went to messer Andrea Palladio's house and was told that I would have found him at cà Morosini, where he was dining. I went there, but he had left. I searched all over town for him but couldn't find him anywhere".

In March his son Orazio also died. Both sons probably worked with their father or at least had learned the art of drawing from him. To commemorate these deaths Palladio edited an illustrated publication of the Commentaries of Julius Caesar.

Before the end of 1572 there were other family problems: he had to attend to his wife Allegradonna "too close to death", as can be read in a letter. A troubled period, followed by a settled working life. There are records of an inspection of the fortresses of Chioggia and the reconstruction of some of the rooms of the Doge's Palace burned in a fire on 11th May 1574: the commission was also extended to Gianantonio Rusconi and Antonio Da Ponte, who was to be the builder of the Rialto Bridge (again, a portentous surname). He is also put in charge of designing the S. Nicolò loggia and the wooden arch at the Lido, built for a visit by Henry III of Valois, for which the directors were Jacopo Contarini and the doge Alvise Mocenigo.

The Last Years

In the last four years of his Venetian career Palladio received the important commission to build the Redentore Temple. The Senate decided to build the church in a period when Venice was decimated by a terrible plague in 1576. The fact that Alvise Mocenigo was the doge undoubtedly favoured the assignment of this work. However, the 'Palladian party' did not manage to have its own way in selecting the location of the church. The site of Santa Croce, supported by the Clarisse nuns, and the more central one of San Vidal, upheld by Marcantonio Barbaro and the Jesuits, were both rejected. The choice was made of a plot on the Giudecca, which cost 3000 ducats, preferred to the more economical site at San Vidal, on sale for 2500 ducats. The Palladians also lost their battle over the shape of the church: Marcantonio Barbaro supported the circular solution dear to Palladio, but the Senate decided in favour of a rectangular building.

Towards Christmas 1577 another fire broke out at the Doge's Palace and the Great Council Hall was destroyed by the flames. Palladio, together with other professionals, including Antonio da Ponte, provided a consultancy on the cost of converting St. Mark's rectory into a provisional seat for the council. It is interesting to note in a report on the subject that Palladio dwells on the faults of the building, one of which was 'the greater thickness of the top wall compared with the bottom one'. According to some scholars, this criticism shows Palladio's desire to transform and reconstruct one of the city's most central buildings according to the

canons of the ancients

In 1578 his son Silla purchased a family tomb in the Church of S. Corona in Vicenza, which leads us to suppose that his mother Allegradonna had died.

In the last two years of his life in Venice, Palladio began construction of the cloisters, called 'dei Cipressi' at San Giorgio Maggiore and consigned the wooden model for the church of the Zitelle at the Giudecca (the 'Citelle' were a religious institute for poor girls).

He died in August 1580 while working on the construction of the family temple of Villa Barbaro at Maser, the Olimpico Theatre in Vicenza and the cloisters 'dei Cipressi'. We cannot rule out that Andrea della Gondola met his death in Venice.

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My sources of information for this book, and many of the ideas in it, came from the work of various scholars, whom I wish to thank ideally in the following list. In particular, the works of James S. Ackerman, Donata Battilotti, Loredana Olivato, Antonio Foscari, Lionello Puppi and Manfredo Tafuri were of fundamental importance.

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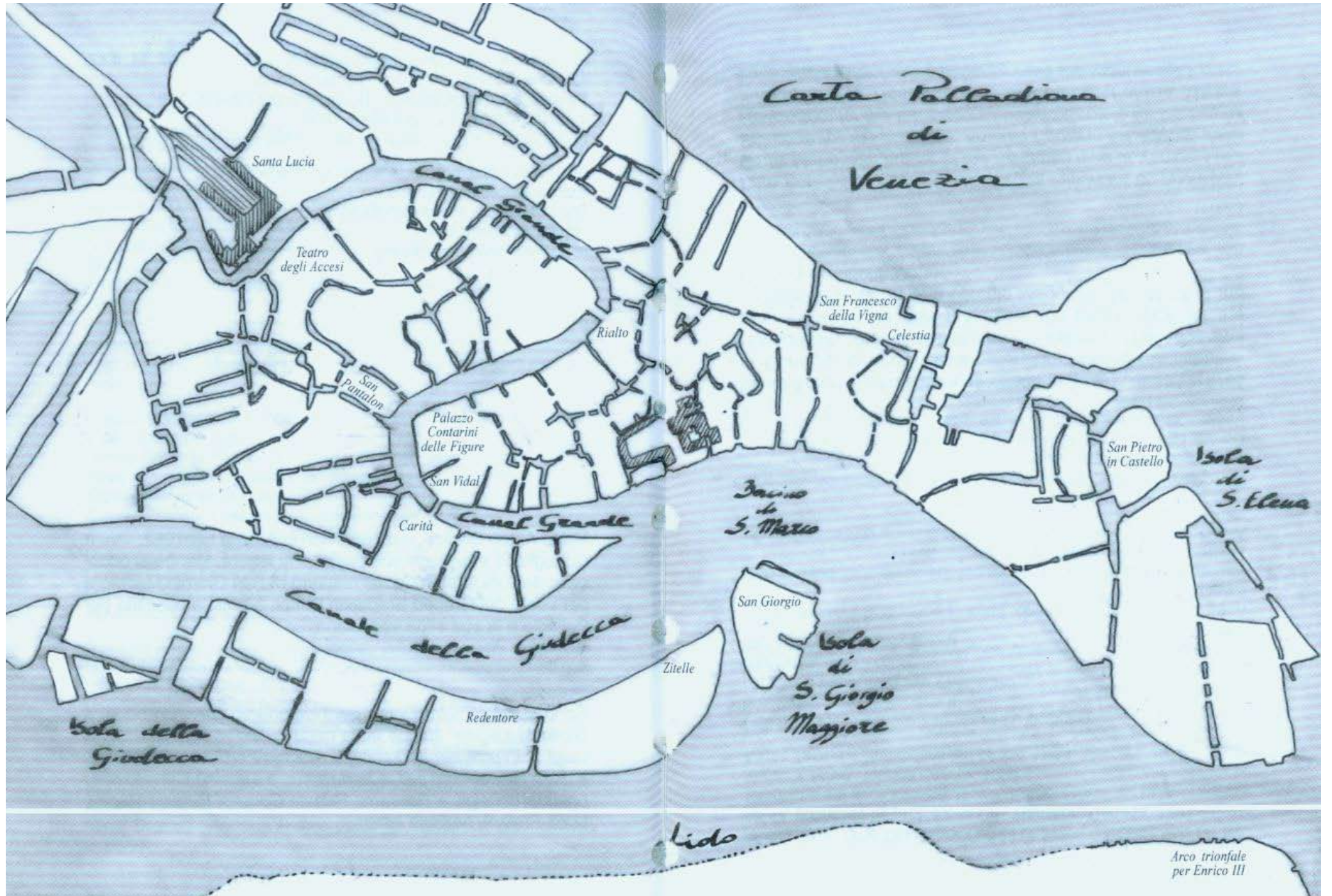
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*Carta Palladiana
di
Venezia*



*Isola della
Giudecca*

Redentore

Zitelle

San Giorgio

*Isola
di
S. Giorgio
Maggiore*

*Basilica
di
S. Marco*

*San Pietro
in Castello*

*Isola
di
S. Elena*

Lido

*Arco trionfale
per Enrico III*