

CARPACCIO.

BY M. EVELYN DAVIS.

“For a tale, to catch
Credulous ears and hold your hearts in chains,
Had only to begin,—‘There lived in Venice.’”
(*Rogers’ “Italy.”*)

PICTORIAL art was born for Italy as a whole during the fourteenth century, but for Venice the date falls about one hundred years later.

As soon as the Republic reached the height of its power, it perpetuated its wars and conquests in painting, and, like the Church, encouraged painting to teach its subjects the glory, history and policy of the State.

Venetian art Ruskin divided into three main epochs:—

1. Vivarini (1400-1480) more or less elementary.
2. Carpaccian (1480-1520) classic, mythic and religious.
3. Tintoret (1520-1600) supremely powerful art, corrupted by taint of death.

“There are certain men who *know* the truths necessary to human life, they do not ‘opine’ them, and nobody’s opinions on any subject are of any consequence opposed to them. Hesiod is one of these, Plato another, Dante another, Carpaccio is another.” (*Fors Clavigera.*) And yet how little is known of this man to whom Ruskin gives such high praise, and to whose work he pays extreme devotion.

Carpaccio is thought to have belonged to a family of ancient Venetian origin called Scarpazza, which name our artist changed early in life to the one by which he is generally known. The date of his birth is conjectured to be 1465, or even earlier, judging from the style of his first dated picture, 1490, when he must have been twenty-five years old. During his youth the Bellini school of art, founded by Jacopo, the father of the more famous Giovanni and Gentile Bellini, held most sway in Venice, and though Carpaccio was afterwards associated with the two brothers, he studied under Lazzaro Bastiani, head of a large “atelier” in Venice, and of whose work there is one example in the National Gallery.

Carpaccio’s first commission was the famous St. Ursula series, begun in 1490, for the Scuola of S. Orsola; from 1502

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onwards he was working for the Scuola degli Schiavoni, and in 1507 he was appointed to assist Giovanni Bellini to complete the decoration of the halls of the Greater Council. Whilst working on the scaffolds in the halls, they were visited by the Marquess of Mantua, husband of Isabella d’Este, whose court painter, Leonbruno, purchased anonymously Carpaccio’s “City of Jerusalem.” Concerning this, the artist wrote a most quaint letter to the Lord of Mantua, printed at length with some interesting accounts of his pictures in Mrs. Oliphant’s *Makers of Venice*.

It had always been maintained that, judging from the Oriental scenes and buildings in his pictures, Carpaccio must, at some time, have paid a visit to the East. Sir Sydney Colvin, however, discovered an old German book of *Travels in the Holy Land*, by Breydenbach, with illustrations by Reuvich, and comparison proves that Carpaccio made great use of these for his own scenes.

Up till the time of his death in 1520, he was fully occupied in executing commissions,

and though so popular an artist, there appears to be no record of where or how he died.

Those who would know the true appearance of Venice and the Venetians during the closing years of the fifteenth and early years of the sixteenth century must carefully study the works of the artists of that period, and above all of Carpaccio. His aim is truth; Zanetti says that "he had truth in his soul," and though it may not appear truthful to represent Simeon in the robes of the Roman Catholic Church, he gives us an absolutely truthful picture of the robes used by the bishops of that day. Historical fact troubled these fifteenth century artists but little, and Carpaccio depicts what he sees, events in all their phases, and individuals in their everyday attitudes and gestures.

The chief figures in every picture are faithful portraits of well-known men and women of the time; the buildings of Venice are drawn exactly as he saw them standing then, and behind them stretches the open country which the Republic was beginning to conquer. Such a background was a distinct innovation and foreshadows the landscape pictures of Giorgione and Titian.

Carpaccio's chief patrons in Venice were the Scuoli or Guilds,
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of which there were five Scuoli Grandi, the lesser ones being of three descriptions:—

1. Natives of a particular country then living in Venice, such as the Albanians.
2. Members of some craft or trade.
3. Devotional members who took their title from a saint selected in fulfilment of a vow. They were managed by a Board of Governors, were allowed the exclusive right to pay devotion to their chosen saint, had their own special standard which they carried in the public processions so much appreciated by the splendour-loving Venetians (and which we may see in Gentile Bellini's pictures), and wore linen gowns varying in colour according to the guild.

The Scuola of St. Ursula was founded in July, 1300; its special duty was the support of female orphans, and the members wore white linen gowns. The Guild existed till 1810, when it was suppressed by order of Napoleon. In 1488, great economies were made by the Scuola in order to secure some canvasses illustrating the life of their patron saint with which to adorn their oratory. Carpaccio was asked to undertake these, and he executed the famous cycle of nine scenes which now hang in the Academy. The legend of St. Ursula runs, that a Christian king of Brittany, by name Maurus, and his wife Daria, had a fair daughter who came into the world wrapped in a hairy mantle, from which she got her name Ursula (little bear). When she grew up, the fame of her virtue spread abroad, and ambassadors were sent from the king of England on behalf of his son Prince Conon, to ask her hand in marriage; Carpaccio's first scene represents the arrival of these ambassadors, with a second part to it, showing the consultation between Ursula and her father as to what answer they should return.

The second scene shows the ambassadors receiving Ursula's decision that she would marry Prince Conon on condition that he and his parents would be baptized, and that he would allow her to go on a pilgrimage to Rome, attended by ten fair maidens of his kingdom, and with each of these a thousand more. The ambassadors return to Britain (third scene), and Prince Conon, Ursula and the maidens take their departure (fourth scene). On arriving at Rome they are met by Pope Cyriacus,
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and there Ursula sees a vision in which she learns of her approaching martyrdom. These last were originally one picture, but are now separated by wooden pilasters. The company then

sets out for Cologne, and the seventh scene shows their arrival in that town. Here they are attacked by Huns, but the leader, struck by Ursula's beauty, offers to spare them if she will marry him. She refuses and they are all slain, (eighth scene). The last picture shows the Apotheosis of the Saint surrounded by her maidens with their palms of martyrdom. This last picture formed the altar-piece in the oratory, the Departure (fourth scene) faced it on the west wall, the three ambassador scenes occupied the north wall with the remainder facing them.

The Dream of St. Ursula.—"Carpaccio has taken much pains to explain to us, as far as he can, the kind of life the princess leads, by completely painting her little bedroom in the light of dawn, so that you can see everything in it. It is lighted by two doubly-arched windows, the arches being painted crimson round their edges, and the capitals of the shafts that bear them, gilded. They are filled at the top with small round panes of glass; but beneath, are open to the blue morning sky, with a low lattice across them; and in the one at the back of the room are set two beautiful white Greek vases with a plant in each, one having rich dark and pointed green leaves, the other crimson flowers, but not of any species known to me, each at the end of a branch like a spray of heath. These flower-pots stand on a shelf which runs all round the room, and beneath the window, at about the height of the elbow, and serves to put things on anywhere; beneath it, down to the floor, the walls are covered with green cloth; but above, are bare and white. The second window is nearly opposite the bed, and in front of it is the Princess's reading table, some two feet and a half square, covered by a red cloth with a white border and dainty fringe; and beside it her seat, not at all like a reading chair in Oxford, but a very small three-legged stool like a music stool, covered with crimson cloth. On the table are a book set up at a slope fittest for reading, and an hour-glass. Under the shelf, near the table, so as to be easily reached by the outstretched arm, is a press full of books. The door of this has been left open, and the books, I am grieved to say, are rather

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in disorder, having been pulled about before the Princess went to bed, and one left standing on its side.

"Opposite this window, on the white wall, is a small shrine or picture (I can't see which, for it is in sharp retiring perspective), with a lamp before it and a silver vessel hung from the lamp, looking like one for holding incense.

"The bed is a broad four-poster, the posts being beautifully wrought golden or gilded rods, variously wreathed and branched, carrying a canopy of warm red. The Princess's shield is at the head of it, and the feet are raised entirely above the floor of the room on a dais which projects at the lower end so as to form a seat, on which the child has laid her crown. Her little blue slippers lie at the side of the bed, her white dog beside them. The coverlid is scarlet, the white sheet folded half-way back over it; the young girl lies straight, bending neither at waist nor knee, the sheet rising and falling over her in a narrow unbroken wave like the shape of the coverlid of the last sleep when the turf scarcely rises. She is some seventeen or eighteen years old, her head is turned towards us on the pillow, the cheek resting on her hand, as if she were thinking, yet utterly calm in sleep, and almost colourless. Her hair is tied with a narrow riband, and divided into two wreaths, which encircle her head like a double crown. The white night-gown hides the arm raised on the pillow, down to the wrist. At the door of the room an angel enters (the little dog, though lying awake, vigilant, takes no notice). He is a very small angel, his head just rises a little above the shelf round the room, and would only reach as high as the Princess's chin if she were standing up. He has

soft grey wings, lustreless; and his dress, of subdued blue, has violet sleeves, open above the elbow, and showing white sleeves below. He comes in without haste, his body, like a mortal one, casting shadow from the light through the door behind, his face perfectly quiet; a palm-branch in his right hand, a scroll in his left.

“So dreams the Princess, with blessed eyes, that need no earthly dawn. It is very pretty of Carpaccio to make her dream out the angel’s dress so particularly, and notice the slashed sleeves; and to dream so little an angel—very nearly a doll angel—bringing her the branch of palm and message. But the lovely characteristic of all is the evident delight of her [p 292]

continual life. Royal power over herself and happiness in her flowers, her books, her sleeping and waking, her prayers, her dreams, her earth, her heaven.” (Ruskin, *Fors Clavigera*, letter XX.)

Four years later Ruskin wrote another letter (LXXI.) about Carpaccio, making some additions to the above and giving the legend.

“He comes to her, ‘in the clear light of morning,’ the Angel of Death. You see it is written in the legend that she had shut close the doors of her chamber.

“They have opened as the angel enters—not one only, but all in the room, all in the house. He enters by one at the foot of her bed; but beyond it is another, open into the passage; out of that another into some luminous hall or street. All the window-shutters are wide open; they are made dark that you may notice them; nay, all the press doors are open! No treasure bars shall hold where *this* angel enters.

“Carpaccio has been intent to mark that he comes in the light of dawn. The blue-green sky glows between the dark leaves of the olive and dianthus in the open window. But its light is low compared to that which enters *behind* the angel, falling full on Ursula’s face, in divine rest. She is not meant, herself, to recognize the angel. He enters under the door over which she has put her little statue of Venus. On the tassel of her pillow is written ‘Infantia.’ At the head of the Princess’s bed is embroidered her shield; but on a dark blue-green space in the cornice above it is another very little and bright shield, it seemed, but with no bearing. . . . It gleams with bright silver edges out of the dark-blue ground—the point of the mortal arrow.” (*Fors Clavigera*.)

Arrival at Cologne. This was the first and most feeble of the series painted in 1490. Capaccio [sic] planned out exactly how much space each scene would occupy, and started on this, the smallest. There used to be a large tomb of one of the Loredan family (the great benefactors of the Scuola of St. Ursula, whose portraits appear constantly in Carpaccio’s pictures) just where this seventh scene came, hence the difference in size.

The town is supposed to be Cologne; in reality it is a fancy town derived from Breydenbach’s book. In the Memling series of St. Ursula, the town is painted as the artist actually saw and knew it.

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Two Venetian galleys, richly ornamented and exactly typical of that epoch, have just come to anchor, and St. Ursula with the Pope, the bishops and maidens crowding behind them are making some arrangement with a boatman. The quay is laid out with turf and gravel paths, and in the foreground stand three armed men; a fourth in crimson wearing a coronet is obviously the king of the Huns. “Probably the most successful feature in the picture is the boy sitting down looking thoroughly tired out.” (Eastlake.) In the background are the pavilions of the Huns outside the city wall; a fair-haired youth on horseback issues directions to a man in armour, a second man is fitting his cross-bow, while a file of soldiers

sallies from an apparently Grecian gateway. The wall-towers filled with watchers, the shadows in the water, the curious and typical Venetian chimney pots such as may be seen in Bellini's pictures of the True Cross, everything is exact, but never obtrusively so. The signature is on a label fastened to a post of the landing stage on which the dog lies.

The scenes from St. Jerome's life, painted by Carpaccio, were executed for the Scuola of the Schiavoni, founded in 1451 by the Dalmatians in Venice, who particularly invoked the aid of St. George, the warrior martyred by Diocletian. Their Chapel and its contents are fully described by Ruskin in *St. Mark's Rest*. St. Jerome is one of the four Latin fathers, and was born in Dalmatia, about 342, of rich parents, who sent him to Rome to study. Here he fell into evil ways, but his innate love of learning conquering, he was able to take up law, in which he became famous. Ten years were spent travelling in the East, four of them as a hermit in a desert of Chalcis. Returning to Rome, St. Jerome preached fiery sermons against the self-indulgence of the age, and three years later went back to Palestine, where he founded a monastery in Bethlehem. Here he died in 420, leaving his famous translation of the Scriptures, with numerous writings, epistles, etc.

He is usually represented dressed as a cardinal with a church in his hand (to signify the support he was able to give the Church), or as an emaciated long-bearded bare-headed man holding a book and a pen, and attended by a lion. The story runs that St. Jerome was able to remove a thorn from this lion's paw, after which it refused to leave the Saint.
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St. Jerome with his Lion. Here we have the actual Venetian monastery of the Knights of St. John of Jerusalem, which we know to be exact, as there still remains an old plan of the buildings. To remind us that the scene is laid actually in Bethlehem, Carpaccio ingeniously introduces some palm trees. The monks flee in terror from their strange visitor who would appear to be enjoying the joke immensely, and various animals, among them a deer and a peacock, also betake themselves to safety. Ruskin thinks that Carpaccio has not given to the monks an appearance of swift motion; others consider that the stiff treatment of the drapery has spoilt the effect of their movements.

The small portion of the oratory which can be seen deserves attention. Over the porch is a fresco of God the Father, while above is a cornice of heads of saints, or perhaps famous Venetians. Above this are scenes from the Scriptures, and a realistic touch is given in the plants which grow on the roof.

Under the projection to the left of the oratory, persons selling religious objects used to erect their stalls. The surroundings may be viewed from an exactly opposite position in the "Death of St. Jerome."

St. Jerome in his Study. This is undated, but was probably finished about 1505. It shows us the saint with brown hair and a youthful mien wearing a close-fitting cap, red cassock, white surplice, and tawny episcopal cape. His study is one of those private oratories so popular and so numerous in Venice, that their number was at length limited by law, lest attendance at Church should be interfered with. "There is nothing to speak of a life of self-denial or arduous devotion to the problems of sin and redemption. It is the ordinary Venetian scholar's life, used for the sake of light and shade."

At the extreme end of the room is an arch containing a cherub in mosaic. In the arch stands an altar with a cupboard below containing an incense boat, cruets and an alb. At service these doors would be closed and the silk curtain, now seen pulled to one side, would form a frontal. On a pedestal stands the Redeemer with the Resurrection banner, and on the altar itself are a bishop's mitre and a pair of brass candlesticks of a shape peculiar to

Venice. In the open cupboard on the left is an octagonal book-stand on which, as well as on the table, are some books. The shelves round the room are [p 295]

occupied by vases and bowls, a statuette of Venus, and of a horse, an astronomical sphere and numerous closed folios; on the wall above, a carved wooden lion's paw holds a candlestick.

The Saint's elbow chair is of wood covered with red cloth, studded with brass nails and with two wooden knobs at the tips of the side-pieces. Such seats were reserved in religious ceremonies for prelates, and on solemn days a silk hanging would be placed on the faldstool, a cushion of gilded leather on the seat and a canopy would be attached to the ornamental head on the back of the chair. The table at which the Saint is working is remarkable, being of a kind well-known in Venice, fastened to a bracket on the wall and supported by a metal tripod. This table as well as the bench on which St. Jerome sits, and the platform occupied by the table are studded along the edges. Ready to his hand are open and closed books, a breviary, an inkstand, a bell and a shell or burnishing "pig" with which to smooth any erasure made on the parchment. Scattered about are books of music, in which the notes may be plainly read, a little placard on the floor bears the artist's name. A dear little dog eagerly awaits the conclusion of his master's task.

Ruskin preferred to call this picture "St. Jerome in his Paradise," maintaining that the saint has passed within the veil, so his folios are closed for he has no need of them; the candlesticks are empty "for they need no candle," the Venus stands for the temptations of this world which he put away from him, and so on (see *St. Mark's Rest*).

St. Jerome may be said to represent the contemplative life, as St. George symbolizes the practical active life of man. Ruskin thinks that the story of St. George has grown out of that of Perseus. According to legend, St. George was born in Cappadocia, and while travelling through Lybia came to a place where a monstrous dragon ravaged the neighbourhood. Finding that the Princess Cleodolinda was about to be sacrificed to it, he attacked the dragon, slew it, dragged it into the city, and as a result of his faith, the king of that land and many of his people were baptized. St. George underwent many tortures at the hand of Diocletian, who only succeeded in killing him by cutting off his head.

In Carpaccio's picture of "St. George slaying the Dragon," [p 296]

we have a splendid figure of the knight in full armour, with a fair face, knitted brow and rippling golden hair, mounted on a brown horse, charging the horrid monster with his spear which pierces right through the head, though the shock shivers it. To the right stands the Princess in an attitude of prayer, while the curious buildings on the left are crowded with anxious spectators. On the ground lie the mangled remains of the dragon's last meal, while all around, lizards, frogs, and snakes may be seen. A follower of Ruskin's has found a meaning for every detail in this picture (*St. Mark's Rest*), but it is sufficient for children to know that the scene may represent the constant warfare against sin, as well as illustrate the legend.

The sixth and last picture set for this term's study is the "Presentation of Christ in the Temple." It was originally painted for a chapel presented to the Church of San Giobbi, by the great Venetian family of Sanudo, and was the subject, in 1660, of a long poem by Boschini (who, we may here note, collected the sayings of Velasquez, during his Italian visits):—

"It does show a religious pageant,

And all should study it with attention,
In fact every movement and attitude.
Be it the effect of skill or teaching,
It can certainly be called a thing divine;
A model from Heaven, to Nature an example.”

Ruskin in his *Guide to the Principal Pictures in Venice*, says: “You have no leave to find fault with anything here. You may measure yourself, outside and in—your religion, your taste, your knowledge of art, your knowledge of men and things—by the quantity of admiration which, honestly, after due time given, you can feel for this picture. You are not required to think the Madonna pretty, or to receive the same religious delight from the conception of the scene which you would rightly receive from Angelico, Lippi, or Perugino.

“This is essentially Venetian, prosaic, matter-of-fact, retaining its supreme commonsense through all enthusiasm. Carpaccio does not want you to think of *his* colour, but of *your* Christ. To whom the Madonna also is subjected—to whom all is subjected: you will not find such another Infant Christ in Venice.”

In this picture the brilliance and richness of colour far surpass the brown-toned St. Ursula series. The scene is laid

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before an altar in a chapel-like niche, which is lined with marble and richly inlaid with mosaic. Simeon is clad in the gorgeous purple and gold robes of the Roman Catholic Church, held by two attendants. The wide border shows exquisite workmanship of feigned embroidery showing scenes from the Old Testament. The venerable head of Simeon is full of rare tenderness and dignity, and the Babe is the most exquisite of Carpaccio’s creations. Mary wears a robe of light crimson with a blue mantle and white veil, and one of her two graceful maidens carries the appointed offering of two turtle doves.

Below are seated three most delightful child musicians; the one on the left is considering what he shall play before placing his flute to his mouth, while the right-hand figure also pauses, bow in hand.

The central figure is the most charming; with his bright light-toned tunic tucked quaintly round him he balances his lute against his knee, and with his dainty baby hand draws sweet music from the strings.

The figures of Mary and her two maidens are portraits of Christina, Agnesina and Maddalena Loredan (Patronesses of the Scuola of St. Ursula), who were first introduced in the Apotheosis of St. Ursula, in the second left-hand row of maiden-martyrs. The little musicians may be compared with the “Putti” in Bellini’s “Madonna and Child Enthroned,” and Cima’s “Virgin Enthroned between six Saints.”

Children always like to see how other artists represented certain scenes, and this term’s pictures may be compared with the St. Ursula series of Memling, the St. Jerome of Dürer, Bellini, Titian, Cima, and Catena (the two latter in the National Gallery), and the St. George of Mantegna.

I have quoted freely from Molmenti’s life of Carpaccio, translated by Mr. R. Cust, from *The Art of Venice*, by M. K. Potter, *Venetian Painters of the Renaissance*, by Berenson, and Karoly’s *Paintings of Venice*. Gowans issue a good many reproductions of Carpaccio’s works in their sixpenny edition of masterpieces, otherwise there appears to be no moderately-priced work dealing exclusively with the master.

[It is not advisable that children should hear or read the description of pictures in this

article. They should look at a reproduction and describe what they see for themselves: but the legends, colouring, etc., will be of use to teachers].