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VENICE CONFIDENTIAL

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Bottega Errante Editions

Who can really say what Venice is, a city arisen as a whim from human imagination, even before being an architectural intuition, there, where no one would have ever thought it would have been possible.

It would certainly be more reassuring to imagine that the city emerged from the sea, encrusted with oysters and shells, already shelter to wise cuttlefish and sad murices, than accepting her to be a daughter of the ingenuity of little men. Who at that time were perhaps still unaware of the laws and systems ruling the waters. *Palafitticoli in grande e novissimo stile*¹, as defined by Diego Valeri, who plunged straight and pointed stilts into the mud, like Odysseus into the eye of Polyphemus, managing to free Venice from the yoke of the waters. These little men continued their work fervently and incessantly laying stone up on stone, up to defining banks where they could moor, connecting channels through which they could

1 Pile dwelling constructors in grand and new style. *Palafitticoli* (pile dwelling constructors) has a disparaging connotation.

row, raising churches where they could kneel, and erecting buildings from where they could observe the Lagoon. And from that moment on, the Venetian light penetrated the mullioned windows like it once filtered through the reeds of the marshes.

To release Venice from the legend of being the gateway to the East, handmade by the hands of the little men, you could consult engineering theses and ancient incunabula, question learned archaeologists and skilled builders, reconsider the calculations done by mathematicians and numerologists. But the secret of her birth would inevitably remain so.

It remains, and it is beyond any doubt, that Venice exists and that her mystery may one day be unveiled, perhaps by chance, by a child playing on the shoreline, or by a dustman who, having found a discarded ornament in the rubbish, will be spellbound to observe the world through this improvised kaleidoscope.

But it is neither known how long the city will still dominate the waters before being submerged, nor whose hand will be the last to touch her rocks, nor should it now be of interest. It will happen, of course, and as like all human creations, oblivion will replace splendour. An oblivion that is not hard to define, in a Venice where everything can be bought or sold including salvation.

And if Venice, like any other magical city – and certainly more than any other – still retains an inexplicable allure, it is certain that this fascination permeates every stone, strongly influencing the lives of those who walk and live on them. It goes without saying that you are either willing to accept such a charming spell or more simply, you are destined to succumb to it or, at times, to suffer it. Because Venice is a dream; a dream in which everyone can discover themselves as being different from what they are, thanks to an ancient contract, bartering desires in return for reality, ending up finding ourselves to be different from what we are.

Of course, this does not happen to everyone, most people live in Venice with simple ignorance or, at most, with worshipful and unconscious respect without memory, like the Lotus-eaters in the *Odyssey*. Many of them visit Venice, pick up some tat and return home, turning their backs on the Lagoon like any other place. Others, certainly more sensitive, feel a blurred discomfort, almost a nocturnal malaise similar to restlessness, which they can hardly explain and which surprisingly disappears on return to the mainland.

Even many of those who live in Venice consider the city just a little more than a place to stay; the