WHEN STALIN IN VENICE...

Rodolfo Valentino, Giacomo Casanova, Benito Mussolini, Josif Stalin. Venice is also ‘made up of’ the people who have lived in it. Although the contrary is also true: Venice is an indelible mark in the souls of the people who have made history.

Quella volta che Stalin, a Venezia...

Da Rodolfo Valentino a Giacomo Casanova, da Benito Mussolini a Josif Stalin. Venezia è fatta anche dei personaggi che l’hanno vissuta. Ma è più vero il contrario: è un marchio indelebile rimasto nell’anima degli uomini che hanno fatto la storia.

Il dittatore russo, fu uno degli ultimi campanari dell’isola di San Lazzaro degli Armeni. He arrived in Venice in 1907. The best work be could find, thanks to the help of a circle of anarchic Venetians – who named him Bepi del Giasso (‘giasso’ in Venetian dialect means ‘ice’ – because of his origin – was ringing the bells of the Armenian fathers. He was later sent away and returned to Russia on time for the revolution. That is only one of the numerous stories and legends hidden in the ancient and mysterious, certainly curious, Venetian lagoon. Lost in the mists of time, stories of devils and witches, of damned souls of mermaids donating laces as an award for a love without repentance thus emerge from the waters of the lagoon. Stories of Saints and of simple human beings who ‘live on’ the magic dominating Venice. The waters of the lagoon have witnessed people escaping from the hordes of barbarians, the galleys of the Serenissima Republic, the boats from Byzantium and those of the entire known world. Stories of world-famous characters which have left behind an invisible, yet indelible mark in the places they had visited in the past. Three years later it was the turn of a very young Rodolfo Valentino – student of the nautical institute of the city – to steal a tug boat during the night of the Redentore, to found a gondola and save an English heiress who offered him in exchange a week of love in the Hotel Excelsior in the Venice lagoon. The initiation of the ‘The son of the sheik’ into the pleasures of the flesh took place in the Venice lagoon. The islands of the Venetian territory – behind lace veils and glass transparencies – hide even more mysterious stories like the one of Ida Dalzer, the Russian dictator-to-be. He was one of the last bell-ringers of the island of San Lazzaro degli Armeni, located at the heart of the lagoon. He stowed away in the port of Odessa to escape from tsarist police and arrived in Venice in 1907. The best work he could find, thanks to the help of a circle of anarchic Venetians – who named him Bepi del Giasso (‘giasso’ in Venetian dialect means ‘ice’) because of his...
Giacomo Casanova – pictured here in one of the latest films dedicated to the Venice island of Lido. That was the initiation of the future “son of the sheik”, the heir to all that Casanova had, the vision of a very sweet lady coming out from the fireplace and addressing him gently. Also Casanova encountered a woman in the lagoon for the first time. The last extraordinary story to be told is one which took place behind the walls of the convent island of San Giorgio Maggiore during the winter at the turn of 1800: the only conclavist which ever took place away from Rome. Pio VI – Giovanni Angelo Brasca coming from the Emilia Romagna region – had died during his exile in Valences after the defeat in 1792 and in the end they deported by Napoleon Bonaparte whose role he was to assume. While in the Vaticano, he was the one who had to assist the sick nun from the Cappella Sistina. The Venetian Benedictine Monastery had then be proposed, but consultations on this solution went on for over two months and in the end they saw Barnaba Chiaramonti – from Imoda – ascending the papal throne as Pio VII. A few years later, it was him who was to assist the sick, self-coronation of Napoleon as imperator in the Paris cathedral of Notre Dame.

Alberto Toso Fei, Venetian journalist, descends from one of the ancient glassmaker families of the island of Murano. Passionate researcher of history and of local customs, he wrote three books on the secret, curious and mysterious side of Venice: “Venetian legends and ghost stories”, “Venice-enigma” and “Mysteries of the lagoon and witch tales”, which include the stories that can be read in our magazine. The books are published by Elzeviro and have been translated into various languages. The writer has created an internet site (www.venetianlegends.it) where one can contribute to the discovery and circulation of hidden or unknown legends.