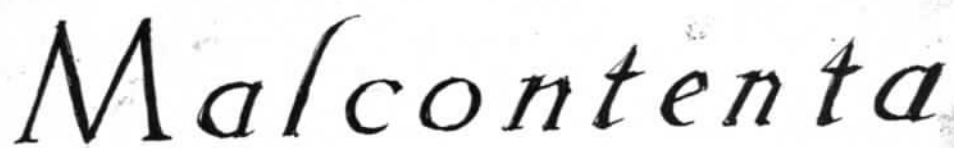


# Malcontenta

A. C. Landsberg

# AN HISTORIC ITALIAN VILLA

## MALCONTENTA—I
### VENICE
The Residence of
MR. A. C. LANDSBERG

*The famous villa on the Brenta, designed by Palladio about 1555 for the Foscari, is one of the loveliest prototypes of the Palladian style subsequently introduced to England by Inigo Jones and Lord Burlington. It has only recently been rescued from ruin.*

TO most English travellers, accustomed in their own country to seventeenth-century buildings by Inigo Jones, Wren, Kent, and the Adam brothers, Malcontenta looks strangely familiar. It generally comes as something of a surprise to them to discover that it was built as early as 1555. The fact is that Andrea Palladio created that style whose classical and golden simplicity and admirably solid construction have, with but little interruption for over three centuries, been an emulated, though unsurpassed, ideal in England, Russia and America. The south, or garden, façade in particular (Fig. 1) often reminds English visitors of the work of Robert Adam, whose buildings have so much of the elegance and distinction, though not the force, of those of his prototype. So familiar for centuries has this type of country house (a cube with portico attached) been that the fact that it did not always exist, and that Palladio first conceived it, is often forgotten. Cliff-like and isolated, the old pleasure-house stands on the opposite bank of the Brenta to that along which the Padua-Fusina road runs, having been built to be approached by water. Silvery with age, weather-worn, but gravely beautiful, the building is an impressive four-square block from which projects a great Ionic loggia flanked by flights of steps, mirrored in the unruffled canal with such clearness that the actual building does not appear to be more solid than does its reflection.

Though the Brenta is to-day poverty-stricken and deserted, this old waterway was once lively with gondolas, with carved and gilded barges, and with water-traffic of every kind. Indeed, in pre-railway days travellers more often embarked for Venice from Fusina than from Mestre, so that it is not surprising that a great number of people have celebrated the Brenta's many beauties, both natural and architectural. Henry III of France and of Poland, on his departure from Venice, was entertained at Malcontenta by the Foscari. A few years later Montaigne, in his travel journal, referred to this king's journey. In the "Merchant of Venice" Shakespeare mentioned Fusina and wrote a glamorous passage about the Brenta. Here Bonifazio Veronese and Pozzoferato found subjects for many of their pictures, and, much later, Canaletto and Longhi too. The Arundels, during their Venetian embassy, rented a house for the summer at Strà, and Sir Henry Wotton and other travellers mention these country houses with enthusiasm. By the middle of the seventeenth century, besides the Foscari, who had owned land hereabouts since the twelfth century, most of the great Venetian families had acquired villas on the banks of the Brenta. It is hereabouts that, almost imperceptibly, the great plain of Lombardy begins to merge into the Adriatic. So near to the

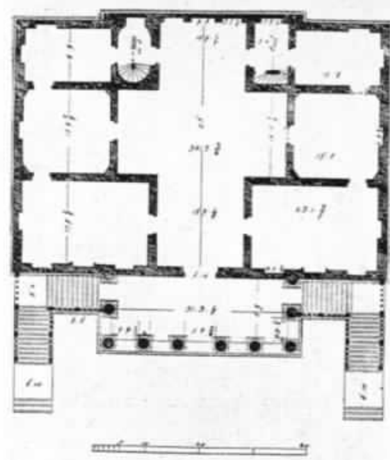
1.—THE SOUTH FRONT, RECALLING AN ADAM FACADE
The sole surviving chimney is interesting in view of the shifts of English Palladian architects to devise "correct" chimneys

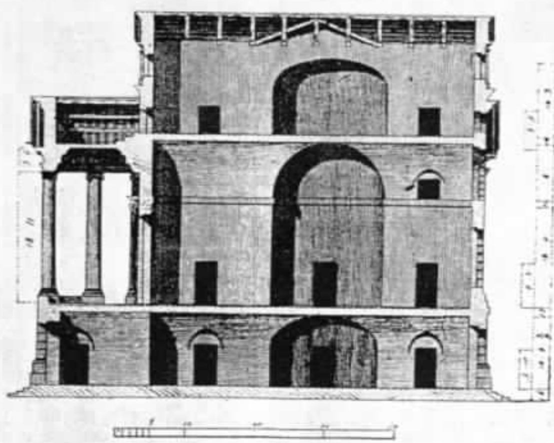
2.—FROM THE BRENTA: THE PORTICO AND NORTH FRONT

sea, in fact, is Malcontenta, that, during stormy weather, the house is often surrounded by seagulls, as if its walls were the cliffs of an island.

The whole house is built of brick faced with *marmorino*—that remarkable mixture of powdered sea-shell and pounded fragments of the whitest marble mixed with travertine lime, to which a shiny surface is given by flattening it with a hot iron while it is still wet. This *marmorino* is self-coloured, and is therefore never painted. In its original state it is usually white. The pedestals and bases of the columns are of stone, but some of the dressings—notably those of the great entrance door, and the main cornice—are of terra cotta, as are also the beautiful Ionic capitals. All the external steps and their balustrades (of which only traces remain), and also the balusters in the top-floor windows, are of *pietra d'Istria*, which much resembles Portland stone when the latter has been exposed to the air for long enough to be bleached to whiteness. Altogether Malcontenta is to-day the colour of an old tree-trunk or of much-weathered stone, lightest on the garden (south) side, and darkly tarnished on the north (or portico) side.

The villa is roughly a cube cut into half horizontally and resting on a pedestal or base (the ground floor) that is half as high as itself. To the height of this base, flanking flights of steps lead to the Ionic portico, that is clapped on to the middle of its north elevation. On its entablature is the inscription "Nicolaus et Aloysius Foscari Federici filii." Originally, as can be seen in Costa's and Coronelli's engravings (as well as in Palladio's own woodcut), an ornate stone shield carved with the Foscari arms used to hang from the piece of iron that still projects from the centre of the pediment. Above this main pediment is a group of three windows, united by a smaller pediment into a single dormer that, together with the other dormer above the corresponding south pediment, gives light to the fine, barn-like hall on the top floor. On the south elevation (Fig. 1) there are three windows in the centre of the first floor and three more above them at mezzanine level; these





3 AND 4.—MAIN FLOOR PLAN, AND SECTION, FROM SCAMOZZI'S EDITION OF PALLADIO

are so clustered together as to count as a single unit for lighting the great central hall which rises through one and a half storeys. The semicircular top of this group of windows conforms to the vaulted interior of the great room (or *sala*) and " bites into " the pediment.

On this side, too, is the only chimney out of the original four that survives. This is a distinguished-looking, characteristically Venetian specimen, interesting in view of the shifts resorted to by English Palladians to devise suitable chimneys. In the window openings, wooden frames with mullions and transoms, such as, no doubt, they originally contained, have been replaced. Considerations of expediency have precluded any thought of re-glazing with the original leaded *rulli* (round panes like the bottoms of bottles), except on the ground floor, where this form of glazing imposes itself because it combines, better than any other, with the square-meshed iron bars with which all the windows here are defended.

5.—" LA MALCONTENTA." A figure in one of the frescoed rooms, discovered by the late Queen of Italy. Said to be the lady after whom the villa is named

The floors of the *piano nobile* (or first floor) are of *pavimento Veneziano* (a dark sort of cement made of powdered brick and lime, into which, before it had hardened, very small pieces of marble are pressed with heavy rollers). When dry, it is beeswaxed and kept highly polished. The other two storeys have plain, brown Venetian brick floors, which are also kept waxed.

The general impression given by Malcontenta, within and without, is one of rich simplicity. Everything about it is reduced to its simplest form, with no superfluity of ornament or even of moulding or cornice. Though of generous proportions and of supreme elegance, the house is not ostentatious. Dignified and imposing, it exactly fitted the purpose for which it was built, which was not so much to serve as the summer residence of a proud and powerful family as to be a place to visit at harvest-time for purposes of relaxation and utility.

When acquired by the present owner in 1925 the house was in a semi-ruined condition, and there was hardly a tree within sight of it. Both inside and out of it whole flights of stairs, notably the external western one, were missing. The roof was in urgent need of repair. Many of the frescoes that decorated the interior were hidden under whitewash. A former owner had begun to uncover a little of the painting on the walls in a few of the rooms some five years previously, but the work had been discontinued. The house had been used as a military hospital during the Great War. In 1848 it had been occupied by Austrian troops, who were lodged there while blockading and besieging Venice. In the years between these two wars and since the last one, the house had been used for storing

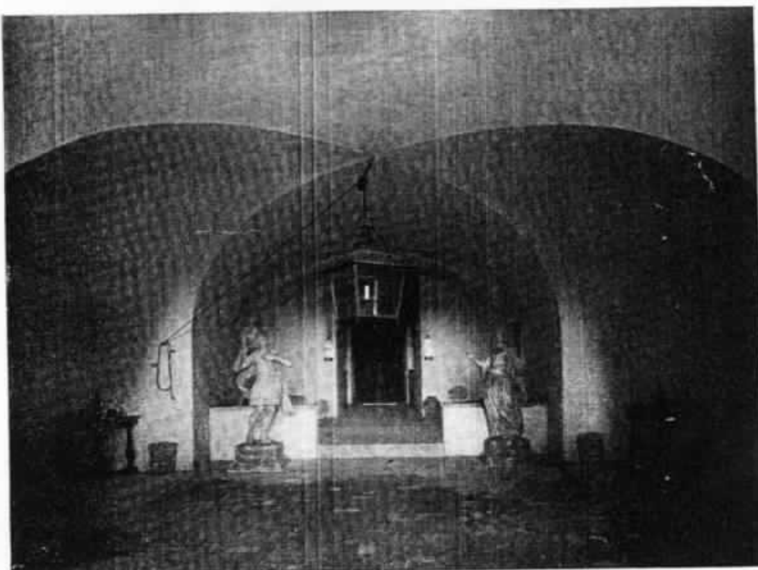
grain, breeding silk-worms, chopping wood, and even as a wheelwright and blacksmith's shop. There were holes in several of the ceilings, that had been cut to make it possible for sacks to be hoisted from storey to storey. The house was teeming with all the animal life of the country: birds, bats, field-mice, lizards, etc., to say nothing of white owls' nests in most of the chimneys. In those of the window and door spaces that had not been walled up there was not a pane of glass nor a piece of wood; only one of the doors had escaped being burned by the soldiers and peasants, and that only because it was bricked up on both sides. This door, an internal one, with its original white paint and roughly marbled panels, has served as a model for most of the new ones.

The villa, of which the style arose from the ruins of Greece and Rome like a phœnix from its ashes, had in its turn itself become a romantic ruin, reminiscent of Pannini, and of some of the beautiful and surprisingly "modern" frescoes that decorate its own walls.

The greater part of its formerly extensive outbuildings, which included a chapel and a long, two-storeyed *foresteria* or guest-house, were seventeenth and eighteenth century additions. Down to their very foundations all these buildings have vanished and, except for Costa's (1750) and Coronelli's (1690) engravings, would be completely forgotten. Most of them were probably pulled down in or shortly before 1840. Fortunately, what remains is the whole house as originally designed by Palladio, as can be seen in the plan (Fig. 3) in the edition of his book published during the architect's lifetime in 1570.

Within the portico, over the villa's main entrance—an immense door that is framed in delicate, Roman-looking mouldings and ornaments of terra cotta—is a contemporary shield commemorating the visit of Henry III in 1574. Elected King of Poland a year or so previously, he had succeeded to the throne of France on the death of his brother, Charles IX. Several contemporary records of his visit mention the King's admiration of the pillared portico, then such a new and original feature in domestic architecture. His Majesty also admired the great trees that at that time surrounded the house.

It is probable that the villa was built on the site of a previous one, on land that, as early as the twelfth century, had been acquired by the Foscari from the neighbouring monastery of St. Illario. It was "erected to the order of the two brothers Nicolas and Aloise Foscari, the sons of Federico," as is proclaimed by the inscription on the portico's



6.—THE LOWER HALL BENEATH THE PORTICO TERRACE

7.—THE CENTRAL HALL, OR *SALA*, WITH ONLY PARTLY UNCOVERED FRESCOES

frieze. These brothers were the great-great-grandsons of that famous Doge, Francesco Foscari, who was at the head of the Venetian Republic during the culminating years of its power and prosperity. It was this Doge who, together with his only son Antonio, was to become one of Byron's heroes in his tragedy of "The Two Foscari." The villa remained in possession of this same family until a few years before the end of the republic, when the last known member of this branch was appointed Venetian Ambassador to St. Petersburg. At that Court, by his gambling and extravagance, the great Foscari fortune was finally dissipated. It is impossible not to quote Osbert Sitwell, who, in his "Winters of Content," writes so beautifully: "Then the name disappears in that curious mist which, as though it were an exhalation from their own canals, seems suddenly to swallow, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, after a thousand years of wealth and celebrity, these great Venetian dynasties."

The romantic but rather disquieting name of Malcontenta is said to be derived from an unhappy lady of the Foscari family who is traditionally supposed to have been imprisoned here for years for having disgraced her proud family by her indiscreet behaviour in Venice. But, more probably, it was rather the place that gave the lady—if she ever existed—this name, for there are documents dating from the early thirteenth century, in which the land hereabouts is already referred to as "Malcontenta"—possibly because the *malcontenti* (outlaws, escaped prisoners, etc.) in still earlier times here found refuge in an island of solid ground in the midst of what was at that time largely marsh.

8.—A ROMANTIC BATHROOM

In a reception-room opening out of the *sala* is a figure reputed to be La Malcontenta herself. Standing on the same level as the spectator, against a dark curtain in a painted doorway, as if to receive her guests, is an opulent lady in the dress of her period (Fig. 5). Round-faced and fair, she is a slightly forbidding figure, owing to the fact that she is raised on very high pattens which are hidden by her long, opal-coloured dress of shot-silk. Her late Majesty, the Queen Marguerita of Italy, while still Princess of Piedmont, once visited this palace and with her own hands removed portions of the whitewash, so discovering this typical figure of a Venetian dame.

9.—AN INGENIOUSLY CONTRIVED BED BENEATH THE STAIRCASE TO THE ROOF

The main entry to the villa was originally from the portico in the *sala*, which traverses the whole house, and which is the most striking characteristic of most Venetian palaces and villas. The hall at Malcontenta was, in many ways, an innovation: it is cruciform, entered from one end, and has masonry vaults that are very much loftier than are those of the two flanking apartments. Hitherto most Venetian halls had had low-beamed ceilings and been entered from the side. The windows, six in number, all face south, and are massed in two tiers (of which the higher group is shaped to fit into the arch of the vault), so that altogether they almost form a single window with masonry transoms occupying the whole of the southern end of the hall.

Impressive as the exterior is, immediately one enters this hall, so flooded with light, one realises, unmistakably, that the building is not only a dwelling but also a work of art. Palladio in his book tells us that this hall is exactly half as high as it is long. On an almost geometrically symmetrical ground-plan, which is as simple as it is subtle, Palladio divided the great cube formed by the villa's outer walls into various-sized rooms, of which each one is equally well proportioned. Writing of this central hall, Robert Byron in his "Road to Oxiana" exclaims: "Its proportions are an architectural pæan!"

Such a comparative detail as the painted decoration, fine as it is even in its present, only fragmentarily revealed, condition, contributes but little to the

impression produced, for much of this work is, unfortunately, still concealed beneath the thick coats of whitewash under which all the decorations of the villa (except those of the two smallest rooms and of an ante-chamber that leads to one of them) were concealed some time towards the middle of the last century. The strictly architectural elements of Malcontenta are so well combined that it could, if necessary, dispense with any ornamentations. There is not a single actual moulding inside the house, except for those on a fine early sixteenth century hooded fireplace in the former kitchen on the ground floor (which possibly was not originally made for its present position), and the very big bolection-moulded fireplaces of Verona marble that are in the two north reception-rooms. All the other fireplaces in the house are of *pietra d'Istria*, flush with the wall, and very simple. Whatever columns, cornices and pediments appear to exist in the house belong only to that same painted world of make-believe (*trompe l'œil*) as the figures, still-life, landscapes and all the other conceits with which the villa is decorated.

The interior consists of three main storeys, the ground plans of which necessarily correspond to one another. On each is a cross-shaped, central hall which runs through the whole depth of the house from north to south, flanked on each side by a suite of three rooms. These are barrel-vaulted in masonry on the ground and first floors. On the top floor, the tile-covered brick roof rests on an open construction of beams and rafters, and the flanking rooms, as well as the central hall, has been left without plaster ceilings. On the ground floor, under the terrace of the portico, there is a lower entrance hall (Fig. 6) and additional rooms that are to-day the kitchen, servants' hall, etc. All of the rooms on both lower floors are vaulted. The two smallest rooms, east and west of the southern end on the first floor, are divided in their height into mezzanines, so as to avoid a loftiness that would be out of proportion to their length and breadth.

There are also two small inner staircases, of which the one is spiral and leads the whole way from the ground floor to the top floor, and the other only from the first floor to a mezzanine ante-room to a bedroom.

Most of the decoration on the "*piano nobile*" (first floor) consists of harmoniously grouped figures in a splendid architectural setting. Palladio in his book tells us that the decorations of the great hall are frescoes by Messer Battista Venetiano (Zelotti). These he rightly describes as "*eccellentissime pitture.*" Unfortunately, they are to-day (1937) still largely hidden under whitewash; but enough has already been uncovered to show that they consist of about forty tall Corinthian columns *en trompe l'œil* and other architectural devices that were most probably designed by Palladio himself. These divide the walls into spaces, some of which are filled with painted panoplies of Roman armour and other such military trophies, piled on the ground or suspended from masks. Among the remaining intercolumnar spaces there are four painted as niches in which are represented great gilt statues of the Seasons. Lastly, above the doors—of which there are three on each side of the hall—are great allegorical figures, much over life-size, representing Astronomy, Harmony, Painting, Architecture, History, and the Art of War, this last a seated but alertly watchful figure of Bellona wearing a helmet, with a spear in her hand. In the lofty simplicity of their conception and in the fine swing of their drawing there is in these figures a distant—but distinct—echo of the grandeur and power of Michelangelo's Sybils; but in their delicate colour and airiness (all the frescoes in the house are executed in a clear and shadowless scale of iridescent tints) there is also a more painter-like quality of pure light that is unmistakably Venetian.

On the vaulted ceiling there are other fine secondary allegorical reclining figures and scenes, busts of emperors, and *amorini* at play. Most of the principal elements of this decoration were, doubtless, meant to be suggestive of Peace, of Prosperity and, in particular, of Hospitality. They represent such subjects as the humble shepherds Baucis and Philemon, unknowingly entertaining, with the best that they have to offer, Jupiter himself (who is disguised as a beggar). At the apex of the crossing of the vaults is shown Astrea prostrating herself before Jove on her return to Olympus. She is pointing to some mortals who, thanks to his divine clemency, are happily amusing themselves. These frescoes were almost all of them described in detail by Ridolfi in his "Meraviglie dell'Arte," published in 1648. Even in their present half-revealed, faded and battered state they give an impression of calm splendour. They are still untouched by that baroque mannerism and agitation that was so soon to replace their Renaissance serenity.

A. C. Landsberg.

# GROUSE AND VENISON

GROUSE and venison are both fare which does not admit of very great variation in cooking. Grouse, to take the choicer first, is even less elastic in preparation than the latter, young birds being best when roasted and old birds only fit to eat in a stew or pudding, where long subjection to the gentle heat of the oven or pot renders them eatable at last. To take the roast bird first, it does not seem likely that we shall depart from the plain and simple, for nothing could be more exquisite in its way. The Scots, no doubt, still pour melted butter over their roast grouse, in spite of Professor Saintsbury's disapproval, and I expect that he disapproved equally of cranberry or rowan jelly, or even pickled peaches. But their fashion of boiling the livers for ten minutes, pounding them with butter, salt and cayenne, and spreading this mixture on pieces of toast which were put under each bird during the last few minutes of roasting—this could have nothing but approbation. Another Scots fashion is to wrap each bird in slices of fat bacon and sprigs of heather: but this I have never tasted. We shall, however, most certainly avoid the custom of a famous London club, which stuffs, or used to stuff, its grouse (and partridges too, I believe) with bananas mashed with plenty of black pepper, some salt, and lemon juice. Two such alien companions could with difficulty be imagined!

Young grouse can very happily be spatchcocked and either grilled or—which nowadays may be more difficult—"planked" in the oven, a sprinkling of salt, pepper, and a little finely chopped shallot contributing well to the final flavours. A young bird goes well into a *salmis*, too, but let it be freshly made, and not a mere excuse for warming up a cold bird or two for luncheon. As for cold grouse, this sauce may be found useful. Mix the yolks of two raw eggs with a spoonful of salad oil, very smooth. Then add three spoonfuls of vinegar, one of sugar and three of finely chopped parsley, green onion (or chives) and a little shallot. Season with pepper and salt, and pour this over the carved grouse just before serving. Soyer gives a good recipe for grouse pie, but I have no room for it; only to remind you that old birds can be absolutely admirable in a pudding with large gobbets of beef steak, a few mushrooms, and a slight dash of Harvey's sauce in the stock: cook them as long as you like, but follow Mrs. Beeton's advice and remove the lower parts of the back, to avoid bitterness. The beef will be marvellously impregnated with grouse by the time the pudding is done.

Venison is so often merely roasted that we might well begin with a recipe for hashing it when cold: for cold venison is almost more difficult to dispose of than anything else! Make a gravy with the bones and trimmings of the cold haunch, season with pepper and salt, strain it, and thicken it with a little flour kneaded with butter. Add a glass of port, a tablespoonful of mushroom ketchup and the same of red currant jelly. Heat thin slices of the venison in this, and serve with sippets of fried bread or toast. (Cold mutton, by the way, can be revivified in the same way.) But there are other ways for this dark and fragrant-fleshed beast than roasting. In Scotland (where they ought to know) they cook collops of venison, cutting slices from the haunch, neck or loin, frying them, and serving them masked with a sauce made thus: after making a thick brown gravy from the trimmings and bones, strain it, boil it in a small saucepan, and add a squeeze of lemon or orange juice, a small glass of claret, salt and pepper to taste, a suspicion of cayenne and a trifle of nutmeg. Venison may be grilled, too, whether loin chops or a steak from the leg, and with this may be served a simple sauce made of equal amounts of melted butter, red wine and red currant jelly. You can also make a kind of meat cake with finely minced raw venison, seasoning it with the juice of blanched onions, chopped parsley, salt, pepper and nutmeg, and binding it with a beaten egg. These cakes, flattened and floured, are fried in butter and then finished in the oven.

Some time ago I was asked by a house at a famous public school for a recipe for the sort of venison pasty Robin Hood used to eat. It was difficult to be authentic, and I forget for the moment what was the recipe I sent, but this one is as good as any. "Cut the meat," says my mentor, "in pieces the size of an egg. Chop two or three onions small into a stewpan with half a pound of fresh butter, and draw them down, but take care they do not burn. Place the pieces of meat in the stewpan, add half a pint of port wine and some good stock, a bouquet of herbs, and a little allspice, pepper, mace and salt. Stew till tender. When cold, make the pasty, strain in the gravy, and bake it in the usual way." But it is not only in England and Scotland that venison is to be had, and in France a *civet de chevreuil* is a dish for the gods, for the deer's meat lends itself as well as the hare's to jugging. Before I end, let me give this interesting dish from the middle of France, *Cotelettes de chevreuil à la Solognote*. Trim and flatten the cutlets and stiffen them quickly in a frying-pan in two spoonfuls of olive oil and half an ounce of butter. Then continue to cook them for about twelve minutes, being careful to turn them two or three times. When they are done, arrange them on *croûtons* of bread fried in butter, and serve separately a purée of celery, and a Poivrade sauce. And, very last of all, let me remind you that all these purées are excellent to serve with venison: celeriac, celery, chestnut, lentils, onion.

Ambrose Heath.