A WANDERER IN FLORENCE

CHAPTER I

THE DUOMO: ITS CONSTRUCTION

The City of the Miracle—The Marble Companions—Twilight and Immensity—Arnolfo di Cambio—Dante's seat—Ruskin's "Shepherd"—Giotto the various—Giotto's fun—The indomitable Brunelleschi—Makers of Florence—The present façade.

ALL visitors to Florence make first for the Duomo. Let us do the same.

The real name of the Duomo is the Cathedral of S. Maria del Fiore, or St. Mary of the Flowers, the flower being the Florentine lily. Florence herself is called the City of Flowers, and that, in the spring and summer, is a happy enough description. But in the winter it fails. A name appropriate to all the seasons would be the City of the Miracle, the miracle being the Renaissance. For though all over Italy traces of the miracle are apparent, Florence was its very home and still can point to the greatest number of its achievements. Giotto (at the beginning of this quickening movement) may at Assisi have been more inspired as a painter: but here is his campanile and here are his S. Maria Novella and S. Croce frescoes. Fra Angelico and Donatello (in the midst of it) were never more

inspired than here, where they worked and died. Michelangelo (at the end of it) may be more surprising in the Vatican; but here are his wonderful Medici tombs. How it came about that between the years 1300 and 1500 Italian soil—and chiefly Tuscan soil—threw up such masters, not only with the will and spirit to do what they did but with the power too, no one will ever be able to explain. But there it is. In the history of the world two centuries were suddenly given mysteriously to the activities of Italian men of humane genius and as suddenly the Divine gift was withdrawn. And to see the very flower of these two centuries it is to Florence we must go.

It is best to enter the Piazza del Duomo from the Via de' Martelli, the Via de' Cerretani, the Via Calzaioli, or the Via Pecori, because then one comes instantly upon the campanile too. The upper windows—so very lovely—may have been visible at the end of the streets, with Brunelleschi's warm dome high in the sky beside them, but that was not to diminish the effect of the first sight of the whole. Duomo and campanile make as fair a couple as ever builders brought together: the immense comfortable church so solidly set upon the earth, and at its side this delicate, slender marble creature, all gaiety and lightness, which as surely springs from roots within the earth. For one cannot be long in Florence, looking at this tower every day and many times a day, both from near and far, without being perfectly certain that it grows—and from a bulb, I think—and was never really built at all, whatever the records may aver.

The interior of the Duomo is so unexpected that one has the feeling of having entered by some extraordinary chance, the wrong building. Outside it was so garish with its coloured marbles, under the southern sky; outside, too one's ears were filled with all the shattering noises in which

Florence is an adept; and then, one step, and behold nothing but vast and silent gloom. This surprise is the more emphatic if one happens already to have been in the Baptistery. For the Baptistery is also coloured, marble without, yet within it is coloured marble and mosaic too: there is no disparity; whereas in the Duomo the walls have a Northern grey and the columns are brown. Austerity and immensity join forces.

When all is said the chief merit of the Duomo is this immensity. Such works of art as it has are not very noticeable, or at any rate do not insist upon being seen, but in its vastness it overpowers. Great as are some of the churches of Florence, I suppose three or four of them could be packed within this one. And mere size with a dim light and a savour of incense is enough: it carries religion. No need for masses and chants or any ceremony whatever: the world is shut out, one is on terms with the infinite. A forest exercises the same spell; among mountains one feels it; but in such a cathedral as the Duomo one feels it perhaps most of all, for it is the work of man, yet touched with mystery and wonder, and the knowledge that man is the author of such a marvel adds to its greatness.

The interior is so dim and strange as to be for a time sheer *terra incognita*, and to see a bat flitting from side to side, as I have often done even in the morning, is to receive no shock. In such a twilight-land there must naturally be bats, one thinks. The darkness is due not to lack of windows, but to time. The windows are there, but they have become opaque. None of the coloured ones in the aisle allows more than a dilution of light through it; there are only the plain, circular ones high up and those rich coloured, circular ones under the dome to do the work. In

A little while, however, one's eyes not only become accustomed to the twilight but are very grateful for it; and beginning to look inquiringly about, as they ever do in this city of beauty, they observe, just inside, an instant reminder of the antiseptic qualities of Italy. For by the first great pillar stands a receptacle for holy water, with a pretty and charming angelic figure upon it, which from its air of newness you would think was a recent gift to the cathedral by a grateful Florentine. It is more than six hundred years old and perhaps was designed by Giotto himself.

The emptiness of the Duomo is another of its charms. Nothing is allowed to impair the vista as you stand by the western entrance: the floor has no chairs; the great columns rise from it in the gloom as if they, too, were rooted. The walls, too, are bare, save for a few tablets.

The history of the building is briefly this. The first cathedral of Florence was the Baptistery, and S. John the Baptist is still the patron saint of the city. Then in 1182 the cathedral was transferred to S. Reparata, which stood on part of the site of the Duomo, and in 1294 the decision to rebuild S. Reparata magnificently was arrived at, and Arnolfo di Cambio was instructed to draw up plans. Arnolfo, whom we see not only on a tablet in the left aisle, in relief, with his plan, but also more than life size, seated beside Brunelleschi on the Palazzo de' Canonici on the south side of the cathedral, facing the door, was then sixty-two and an architect of great reputation. Born in 1232, he had studied under Niccolo Pisano, the sculptor of the famous pulpit at Pisa (now in the museum there), of that in the cathedral in Siena, and of the fountain at Perugia (in all of which Arnolfo probably helped), and the designer of many buildings all over Italy. Arnolfo's own unaided sculpture may be seen at its best in the ciborium in

S. Paolo Fuori le Mura in Rome; but it is chiefly as an architect that he is now known. He had already given Florence her extended walls and some of her most beautiful buildings—the Or San Michele and the Badia—and simultaneously he designed S. Croce and the Palazzo Vecchio. Vasari has it that Arnolfo was assisted on the Duomo by Cimabue; but that is doubtful.

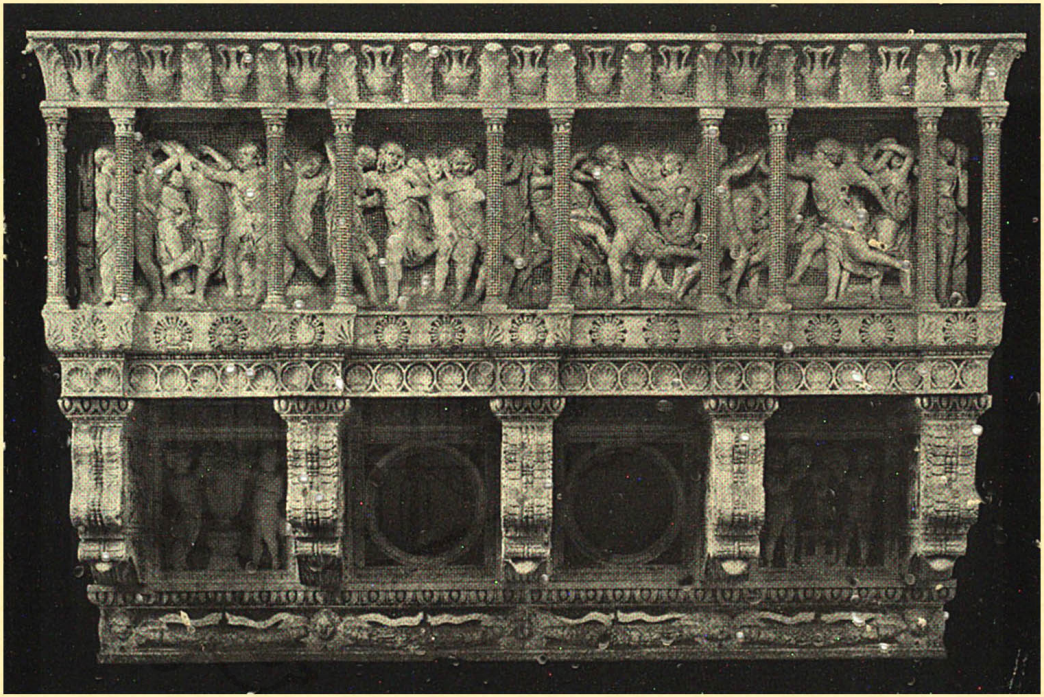
The foundations were consecrated in 1296 and the first stone laid on September 8th, 1298, and no one was more interested in its early progress than a young, grave lawyer who used to sit on a stone seat on the south side and watch the builders, little thinking how soon he was to be driven from Florence for ever. This seat—the Sasso di Dante—was still to be seen when Wordsworth visited Florence in 1837, for he wrote a sonnet in which he tells us that he in reverence sate there too, "and, for a moment, filled that empty Throne". But one can do so no longer, for the place which it occupied has been built over and only a slab in the wall with an inscription (on the house next the Palazzo de' Canonici) marks the site.

Arnolfo died in 1310, and thereupon there seems to have been a cessation or slackening of work, due no doubt to the disturbed state of the city, which was in the throes of costly wars and embroilments. Not until 1332 is there definite news of its progress, by which time the work had passed into the control of the Arte della Lana; but in that year, although Florentine affairs were by no means as flourishing as they should be, and a flood in the Arno had just destroyed three or four of the bridges, a new architect was appointed in the person of the most various and creative man in the history of the Renaissance—none other than Giotto himself, who had already received the

commission to design the campanile which should stand at the cathedral's side.

Giotto was the son of a small farmer at Vespignano, near Florence. He was instructed in art by Cimabue, who discovered him drawing a lamb on a stone while herding sheep, and took him as his pupil. Cimabue, of whom more is said, together with more of Giotto as a painter, in the chapter on the Accademia, had died in 1302, leaving Giotto far beyond all living artists, and Giotto, between the age of fifty and sixty, was now residing in Cimabue's house. He had already painted frescoes in the Bargello (introducing his friend Dante), in S. Maria Novella, S. Croce, and elsewhere in Italy, particularly in the upper and lower churches at Assisi, and at the Madonna dell' Arena chapel at Padua when Dante was staying there during his exile. In those days no man was painter only or architect only; an all-round knowledge of both arts and crafts was desired by every ambitious youth who was attracted by the wish to make beautiful things, and Giotto was a universal master. It was not then surprising that on his settling finally in Florence he should be invited to design a campanile to stand for ever beside the cathedral, or that he should be appointed superintendent of the cathedral works.

Giotto did not live to see even his tower completed—it is the unhappy destiny of architects to die too soon—but he was able during the four years left him to find time for certain accessory decorations, of which more will be said later, and also to paint for S. Trinità the picture which we shall see in the Accademia, together with a few other works, since perished, for the Badia and S. Giorgio. He died in 1336 and was buried in the cathedral, as the tablet, with Benedetto da Maiano's bust of him, tells. He is also to be seen full length, in stone, in a niche at the Uffizi;



A CANTORIA BY DONATELLO

IN THE CATHEDRAL MUSEUM

but the figure is misleading, for if Vasari is to be trusted (and for my part I find it amusing to trust him as much as possible) the master was insignificant in size.

Giotto has suffered, I think, in reputation, from Ruskin, who took him peculiarly under his wing, persistently called him "the Shepherd," and made him appear as something between a Sunday-school superintendent and the Creator. The "Mornings in Florence" and "Giotto and his Works in Padua" so insist upon the artist's holiness and conscious purpose in all he did that his genial worldliness, shrewdness, and humour, as brought out by Dante, Vasari, Sacchetti, and Boccaccio, are utterly excluded. What we see is an intense saint where really was a very robust man. Sacchetti's story of Giotto one day stumbling over a pig that ran between his legs and remarking, "And serve me right; for I've made thousands with the help of pigs' bristles and never once given them even a cup of broth," helps to adjust the balance; while to his friend Dante he made a reply, so witty that the poet could not forego his admiration, in answer to his question how was it that Giotto's pictures were so beautiful and his six children so ugly; but I must leave the reader to hunt it for himself, as these are modest pages. Better still, for its dry humour, was his answer to King Robert of Naples, who had commanded him to that city to paint some Scriptural scenes, and, visiting the artist while he worked, on a very hot day, asked, "Giotto, if I were you I should leave off painting for a while". "Yes," replied Giotto, "if I were you I should."

To Giotto happily we come again and again in this book. Enough at present to say that upon his death in 1336 he was buried, like Arnolfo, in the cathedral, where the tablet to his memory may be studied, and was succeeded as archi-

tect, both of the church and the tower, by his friend and assistant, Andrea Pisano, whose chief title to fame is his Baptistery doors and the carving, which we are soon to examine, of the scenes round the base of the campanile. He, too, died—in 1348—before the tower was finished.

Francesco Talenti was next called in again to superintend both buildings, and not only to superintend but to extend the plans of the cathedral. Arnolfo and Giotto had both worked upon a smaller scale; Talenti determined the present floor dimensions. The revised façade was the work of a committee of artists, among them Giotto's godson and disciple, Taddeo Gaddi, then busy with the Ponte Vecchio, and Andrea Orcagna, whose tabernacle we shall see at Or San Michele. And so the work went on until the main structure was complete in the thirteen-seventies.

Another lengthy interval then came, in which nothing of note in the construction occurred, and the next interesting date is 1418, when a competition for the design for the dome was announced, the work to be given eventually to one Filippo Brunelleschi, then an ambitious and nervously determined man, well known in Florence as an architect, of forty-one. Brunelleschi, who, again according to Vasari, was small, and therefore as different as may be from the figure which is seated on the clergy house opposite the south door of the cathedral, watching his handiwork, was born in 1377, the son of a well-to-do Florentine of good family who wished to make him a notary. The boy, however, wanted to be an artist, and was therefore placed with a goldsmith, which was in those days the natural course. As a youth he attempted everything, being of a pertinacious and inquiring mind, and he was also a great debater and student of Dante; and, taking to sculpture, he was one of those who, as we shall see in a later chapter, competed for the

commission for the Baptistery gates. It was indeed his failure in that competition which decided him to concentrate on architecture. That he was a fine sculptor his competitive design, now preserved in the Bargello, and his Christ crucified in S. Maria Novella, prove; but in leading him to architecture the stars undoubtedly did rightly.

It was in 1403 that the decision giving Ghiberti the Baptistery commission was made, when Brunelleschi was twenty-six and Donatello, destined to be his life-long friend, was seventeen; and when Brunelleschi decided to go to Rome for the study of his new branch of industry, architecture, Donatello went too. There they worked together, copying and measuring everything of beauty, Brunelleschi having always before his mind the problem of how to place a dome upon the cathedral of his native city. But, having a shrewd knowledge of human nature and immense patience, he did not hasten to urge upon the authorities his claims as the heaven-born architect, but contented himself with smaller works, and even assisted his rival Ghiberti with his gates, joining at that task Donatello and Luca della Robbia, and giving lessons in perspective to a youth who was to do more than any man after Giotto to assure the great days of painting and become the exemplar of the finest masters—Masaccio.

It was not until 1419 that Brunelleschi's persistence and belief in his own powers satisfied the controllers of the cathedral works that he might perhaps be as good as his word and was the right man to build the dome; but at last he was able to begin.[1] For the story of his difficulties, told minutely and probably with sufficient accuracy, one

[1] One of Brunelleschi's devices to bring before the authorities an idea of the dome he projected, was of standing an egg on end, as Columbus is famed for doing, fully twenty years before Columbus was born.

must go to Vasari: it is well worth reading, and is a lurid commentary on the suspicions and jealousies of the world. The building of the dome, without scaffolding, occupied fourteen years, Brunelleschi's device embracing two domes, one within the other, tied together with stone for material support and strength. It is because of this inner dome that the impression of its size, from within the cathedral, can disappoint. Meanwhile, in spite of all the wear and tear of the work, the satisfying of incredulous busybodies, and the removal of such an incubus as Ghiberti, who because he was a superb modeller of bronze reliefs was made for a while joint architect with a salary that Brunelleschi felt should either be his own or no one's, the little man found time also to build beautiful churches and cloisters all over Florence. He lived to see his dome finished and the cathedral consecrated by Pope Eugenius IV in 1436, dying ten years later. He was buried in the cathedral, and his adopted son and pupil, Buggiano, made the head of him on the tablet to his memory.

Brunelleschi's lantern, the model of which from his own hand we shall see in the museum of the cathedral, was not placed on the dome until 1462. The copper ball above it was the work of Verrocchio. In 1912 there are still wanting many yards of stone border to the dome.

Of the man himself we know little, except that he was of iron tenacity and lived for his work. Vasari calls him witty, but gives a not good example of his wit. He seems to have been philanthropic and a patron of poor artists, and he grieved deeply at the untimely death of Masaccio who painted him in one of the Carmine frescoes, together with Donatello and other Florentines.

As one walks about Florence, visiting this church and that, and peering into cool cloisters, one's mind is always intent

upon the sculpture or paintings that may be preserved there for the delectation of the eye. The tendency is to think little of the architect who made the buildings where they are treasured. Asked to name the greatest makers of this beautiful Florence, the ordinary visitor would say Michelangelo, Giotto, Raphael, Donatello, the della Robbias, Ghirlandaio, and Andrea del Sarto: all before Brunelleschi, even if he named him at all. But this is wrong. Not even Michelangelo did so much for Florence as he. Michelangelo was no doubt the greatest individualist in the whole history of art, and everything that he did grips the memory in a vice; but Florence without Michelangelo would still be very nearly Florence, whereas Florence without Brunelleschi is unthinkable. No dome to the cathedral, first of all; no S. Lorenzo church or cloisters; no S. Croce cloisters or Pazzi chapel; no Badia of Fiesole. Honour where honour is due. We should be singing the praises of Filippo Brunelleschi in every quarter of the city.

After Brunelleschi the chief architect of the cathedral was Giuliano da Maiano, the artist of the beautiful intarsia woodwork in the sacristy, and the uncle of Benedetto da Maiano who made the S. Croce pulpit.

The present façade is the work of the architect Emilio de Fabris, whose tablet is to be seen on the left wall. It was finished in 1887, five hundred and more years after the abandonment of Arnolfo's original design and three hundred and more years after the destruction of the second façade, begun in 1357 and demolished in 1587. Of Arnolfo's façade the primitive seated statue of Boniface VIII (or John XXII) just inside the cathedral is, with a bishop in one of the sacristies, the only remnant; while of the second façade, for which Donatello and other early Renaissance sculptors worked, the giant S. John the Evangelist, in the left aisle,

is perhaps the most important relic. Other statues in the cathedral were also there, while the central figure—the Madonna with enamel eyes—may be seen in the cathedral museum. Although not great, the group of the Madonna and Child now over the central door of the Duomo has much charm and benignancy.

The present façade, although attractive as a mass of light, is not really good. Its patterns are trivial, its paintings and statues commonplace; and I personally have the feeling that it would have been more fitting had Giotto's marble been supplied rather with a contrast than an imitation. As it is, it is not till Giotto's tower soars above the façade that one can rightly (from the front) appreciate its roseate delicacy, so strong is this rival.