CHAPTER X

THE UFFIZI: BOTTICELLI

A painter apart—Sandro Filipepi—Artists' names—Piero de' Medici—"The adoration of the Magi"—The "Judith" pictures—Lucrezia Tornabuoni, Lorenzo and Giuliano's mother—The Tournaments—The "Birth of Venus" and the "Primavera"—Simonetta—A new star—Sacred pictures—Savonarola and "The Calumny"—The National Gallery—Botticelli's old age and death.

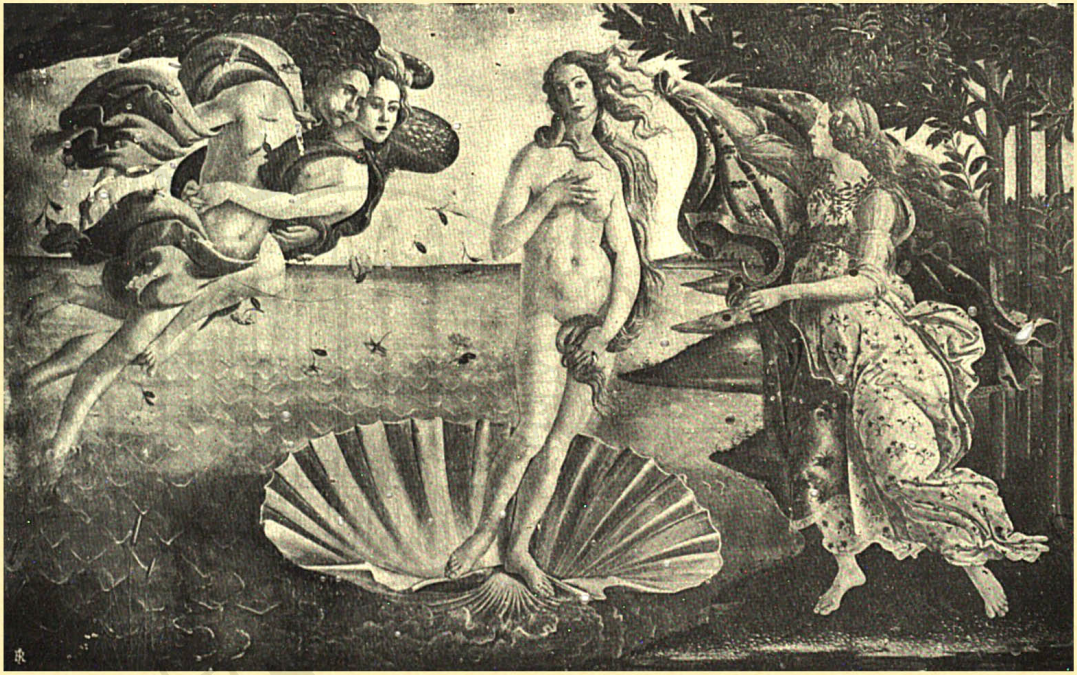
IN this fifth room and the next we find Botticelli, and such is the position held by this painter in the affection of visitors to Florence, and such the wealth of works from his hand that the Uffizi possesses, that I feel that a single chapter may well be devoted to his genius, more particularly as many of his pictures were so closely associated with Piero de' Medici and Lorenzo de' Medici. We see Botticelli here at his most varied.

Among the great Florentine masters Botticelli stands apart by reason not only of the sensitive wistful delicacy of his work, but the profound interest of his personality. He is not essentially more beautiful than his friend Filippino Lippi or Lippo Lippi, his master, occasionally could be; but he is always deeper. One feels that he too felt the emotion that his characters display; he did not merely paint, he thought and suffered. Hence his work is dramatic. Again Botticelli had far wider sympathies than most of his contemporaries. He was a friend of the Medici,

a neo-Platonist, a student of theology with the poet Palmieri, an illustrator of Dante, and a devoted follower of Savonarola. Of the part that women played in his life we know nothing: in fact we know less of him intimately than of almost any of the great painters; but this we may guess, that he was never a happy man. His work falls naturally into divisions corresponding to his early devotion to Piero de' Medici and his wife Lucrezia Tornabuoni, in whose house for a while he lived; to his interest in their sons Lorenzo and Giuliano; and finally to his belief in Savonarola. Sublime he never is; comforting he never is; but he is everything else. One can never forget in his presence the tragedy that attends the too earnest seeker after beauty: not "all is vanity" does Botticelli say, but "all is transitory"

Botticelli, as we now call him, was the son of Mariano Filipepi and was born in Florence in 1447. According to one account he was called Sandro di Botticelli because he was apprenticed to a goldsmith of that name; according to another his brother Antonio, a goldsmith, was known as Botticello (which means a little barrel), and Sandro being with him was called Sandro di Botticello. Whatever the cause, the fact remains that the name of Filipepi is rarely used.

And here a word as to the capriciousness of the nomenclature of artists. We know some by their Christian names; some by their surnames; some by their nicknames; some by the names of their towns, and some by the names of their masters. Tommaso Bigordi, a goldsmith, was so clever in designing a pretty garland for women's hair that he was called Ghirlandaio, the garland-maker, and his painter son Domenico is therefore known for ever as Domenico Ghirlandaio. Paolo Doni, a painter of battle



THE BIRTH OF VENUS

FROM THE PAINTING BY BOTTICELLI IN THE UFFIZI

scenes, was so fond of birds that he was known as Uccello (a bird) and now has no other name; Pietro Vannucci coming from Perugia was called Perugino; Agnolo di Francesco di Migliore happened to be a tailor with a genius of a son, Andrea; that genius is therefore Andrea of the Tailor—del Sarto—for all time. And so forth.

To return to Botticelli. In 1447, when he was born, Fra Angelico was sixty; and Masaccio had been dead for some years. At the age of twelve the boy was placed with Fra Lippo Lippi, then a man of a little more than fifty, to learn painting. That Lippo was his master one may see continually, but particularly by comparison of his head-dresses with almost any of Botticelli's. Both were minutely careful in this detail. But where Lippo was beautifully obvious, Sandro was beautifully analytical: he was also, as I have said, much more interesting and dramatic.

Botticelli's best patron was Piero de' Medici, who took him into his house, much as his son Lorenzo was to take Michelangelo into his, and made him one of the family. For Piero, Botticelli always had affection and respect, and when he painted his "Fortitude" as one of the Pollaiuoli's series of the Virtues for the Mercatanzia (of which several are in Room V here), he made the figure symbolize Piero's life and character—or so it is possible, if one wishes, to believe. But it should be understood that almost nothing is known about Botticelli and the origin of his pictures. At Piero's request Botticelli painted the "Adoration of the Magi" (No. 882) which was to hang in S. Maria Novella as an offering of gratitude for Piero's escape from the conspiracy of Luca Pitti in 1466. Piero had but just succeeded to Cosimo when Pitti, considering him merely an invalid, struck his blow. By virtue largely of the young Lorenzo's address the attack miscarried: hence the presence of

Lorenzo in the picture, on the extreme left, with a sword. Piero himself in scarlet kneels in the middle; Giuliano, his second son, doomed to an early death by assassination, is kneeling on his right. The picture is not only a sacred painting but (like the Gozzoli fresco at the Riccardi palace) an exaltation of the Medici family. The dead Cosimo is at the Child's feet; the dead Giovanni, Piero's brother, stands close to the kneeling Giuliano. Among the other persons represented are collateral Medici and certain of their friends.

It is by some accepted that the figure in yellow, on the extreme right, looking out of this picture, is Botticelli himself. But for a portrait of the painter of more authenticity we must go to the Carmine, where, in the Brancacci chapel, we shall see a fresco by Botticelli's friend Filippino Lippi representing the Crucifixion of S. Peter, in which our painter is depicted on the right, looking on at the scene—a rather coarse heavy face, with a large mouth and long hair. He wears a purple cap and red cloak. Vasari tells us that Botticelli, although so profoundly thoughtful and melancholy in his work, was extravagant, pleasure-loving, and given to practical jokes. Part at least of this might be gathered from observation of Filippino Lippi's portrait of him. According to Vasari it was No. 1286 which brought Botticelli his invitation to Rome from Sixtus IV to decorate the Sixtine Chapel. But that was several years later and much was to happen in the interval.

The two little "Judith" pictures (Nos. 1487 and 1488) were painted for Piero de' Medici and had their place in the Medici palace. In 1494, when Piero di Lorenzo de' Medici was banished from Florence and the palace looted, they were stolen and lost sight of; but during the reign

THE LOGGIA DE' LANZI, THE DUOMO, AND THE PALAZZO VECCHIO
FROM THE PORTICO OF THE UFFIZI

of Francis I they reappeared and were presented to his wife Bianca Capella and once more placed with the Medici treasures. No. 1156, the Judith walking springily along, sword in hand, having slain the tyrant, is one of the masterpieces of paint. Everything about it is radiant, superb, and unforgettable.

One other picture which the young painter made for his patron—or in this case his patroness, Lucrezia Tornabuoni, Piero's wife—is the "Madonna of the Magnificat," No. 1609, with its beautiful children and sweet Madonna, its lovely landscape but not too attractive Child. The two boys are Lorenzo, on the left, and Giuliano, in yellow. One of their sisters leans over them. Here perhaps, the boys, in Botticelli's way, are typified rather than portrayed. Although this picture came so early in his career, Botticelli never excelled its richness, beauty, and depth of feeling, or its liquid delicacy of treatment. Lucrezia Tornabuoni, for whom he painted it, was a very remarkable woman, not only a good mother to her children and a good wife to Piero, but a poet and exemplar. She survived Piero by thirteen years and her son Giuliano by five. Botticelli painted her portrait, which is now in Berlin.

Read Pater on this work: "For with Botticelli she too, although she holds in her hands the 'Desire of all nations,' is one of those who are neither for Jehovah nor for His enemies; and her choice is on her face. The white light on it is cast up hard and cheerless from below, as when snow lies upon the ground, and the children look up with surprise at the strange whiteness of the ceiling. Her trouble is in the very caress of the mysterious child, whose gaze is always far from her, and who has already that sweet look of devotion which men have never been able altogether to love, and which still makes the born saint

an object almost of suspicion to his earthly brethren. Once, indeed, he guides her hand to transcribe in a book the words of her exaltation, the 'Ave,' and the 'Magnificat,' and the 'Gaude Maria,' and the young angels, glad to rouse her for a moment from her devotion, are eager to hold the ink-horn and to support the book. But the pen almost drops from her hand, and the high cold words have no meaning for her, and her true children are those others among whom, in her rude home, the intolerable honour came to her, with that look of wistful inquiry on their irregular faces which you see in startled animals—gipsy children, such as those who, in Apennine villages, still hold out their long brown arms to beg of you, with their thick black hair nicely combed, and fair white linen on their sunburnt throats."

The picture's frame is that which was made for it four hundred and fifty years ago: by whom, I cannot say, but it was the custom at that time for the painter himself to be responsible also for the frame.

These pictures are the principal work of Botticelli's first period, which coincides with the five years of Piero's rule and the period of mourning for him.

He next appears in what many of his admirers find his most fascinating mood, as a joyous allegorist, the picture of Venus rising from the sea in the sixth room, the "Primavera," and the "Mars and Venus" in our National Gallery, belonging to this epoch. But in order to understand them we must again go to history. Piero was succeeded in 1469 by his son Lorenzo the Magnificent, who continued his father's friendship for the young painter, now twenty-two years of age. In 1474 Lorenzo devised for his brother Giuliano a tournament in the Piazza of S. Croce very like that which Piero had given for Lorenzo

on the occasion of his betrothal in 1469; and Botticelli was commissioned by Lorenzo to make pictures commemorating the event. Verrocchio again helped with the costumes; Lucrezia Donati again was Queen of the Tournament; but the Queen of Beauty was the sixteen-year-old bride of Marco Vespucci—the lovely Simonetta Cattaneo, a lady greatly beloved by all and a close friend both of Giuliano and Lorenzo.

The praises of Lorenzo's tournament had been sung by Luca Pulci: Giuliano's were sung by Poliziano, under the title "La Giostra di Giuliano de' Medici," and it is this poem which Botticelli may be said to have illustrated, for both poet and artist employ the same imagery. Thus Poliziano, or Politian (of whom we shall hear more in the chapter on S. Marco) compares Simonetta to Venus, and in stanzas 100 and 101 speaks of her birth, describing her blown to earth over the sea by the breath of the Zephyrs, and welcomed there by the Hours, one of whom offers her a robe. This, Botticelli translates into exquisite tempera with a wealth of pretty thoughts. The cornflowers and daisies on the Hour's dress are alone a perennial joy.

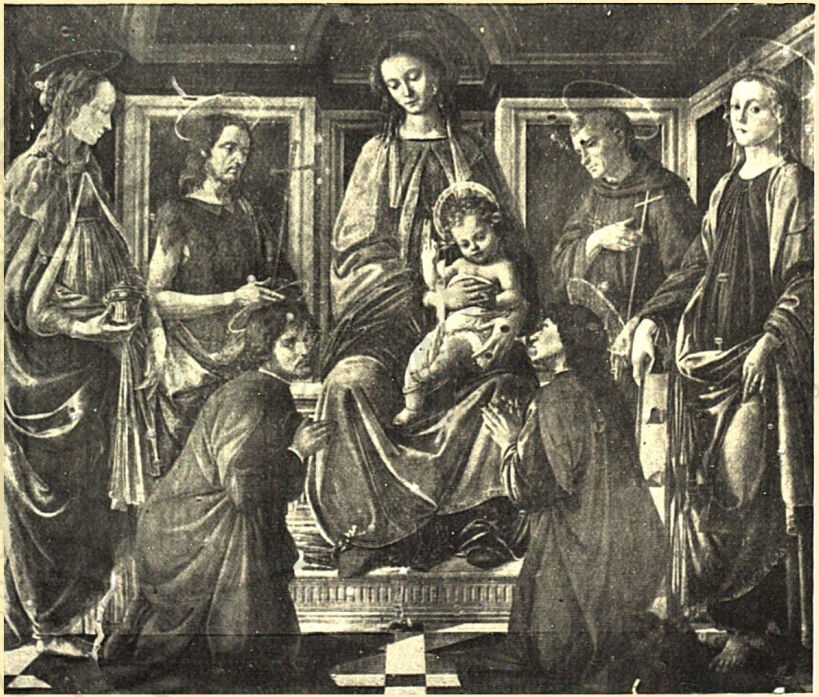
Simonetta as Venus has some of the wistfulness of the Madonnas; and not without reason does Botticelli give her this expression, for her days were very short. In the "Primavera" we find Simonetta again, but we do not see her first. We see first that slender upright commanding figure, all flowers and youth and conquest, in her lovely floral dress, advancing over the grass like thistle-down. Never before in painting had anything been done at once so distinguished and joyous and pagan as this. For a kindred emotion one had to go to Greek sculpture, but Botticelli, while his grace and joy are Hellenic, was

intensely modern too: the problems of the Renaissance, the tragedy of Christianity, equally cloud his brow.

The symbolism of the "Primavera" is interesting. Glorious Spring is returning to earth—in the presence of Venus—once more to make all glad, and with her her attendants to dance and sing, and the Zephyrs to bring the soft breezes; and by Spring Botticelli meant the reign of Lorenzo, whose tournament motto was "Le temps revient". Simonetta is again the central figure, and never did Botticelli paint more exquisitely than here. Her bosom is the prettiest in Florence; the lining of her robe over her right arm has such green and blue and gold as never were seen elsewhere; her golden sandals are delicate as gossamer. Over her head a little cupid hovers, directing his arrow at Mercury, on the extreme left, beside the three Graces.

In Mercury, who is touching the trees with his caduceus and bidding them burgeon, some see Giuliano de' Medici, who was not yet betrothed. But when the picture was painted both Giuliano and Simonetta were dead: Simonetta first, of consumption, in 1476, and Giuliano, by stabbing, in 1478. Lorenzo, who was at Pisa during Simonetta's illness, detailed his own physician for her care. On hearing of her death he walked out into the night and noticed for the first time a brilliant star. "See," he said, "either the soul of that most gentle lady hath been transferred into that new star or else hath it been joined together thereunto." Of Giuliano's end we have read in Chapter II, and it was Botticelli, whose destinies were so closely bound up with the Medici, who was commissioned to paint portraits of the murderous Pazzi to be displayed outside the Palazzo Vecchio.

The "Primavera" is not wearing too well: one sees that



VIRGIN AND CHILD ENTHRONED WITH SAINTS

FROM THE PAINTING BY BOTTICELLI IN THE UFFIZI

at once. Being in tempera it cannot be cleaned, and a dulness is overlaying it; but nothing can deprive the figure of Spring of her joy and movement, a floating type of conquering beauty and youth. The most wonderful thing about this wonderful picture is that it should have been painted when it was: that, suddenly out of a solid phalanx of Madonnas should have stepped these radiant creatures of the joyous earth, earthy and joyful. And not only that they should have so surprisingly and suddenly emerged, but that after all these years this figure of Spring should still be the finest of her kind. That is the miracle! Luca Signorelli's flowers in No. 502 at the Uffizi remain the best, but Botticelli's are very thoughtful and before the grass turned black they must have been very lovely; the exquisite drawing of the irises in the right-hand corner can still be traced, although the colour has gone. The effect now is rather like a Chinese painting.

A third picture in what may be called the tournament period is found by some in the "Venus and Mars," No. 915, in our National Gallery. Here Giuliano would be Mars, and Venus either one woman in particular whom Florence wished him to marry, or all women, typified by one, trying to lure him from other pre-occupations, such as hunting. To make her Simonetta is to go too far; for she is not like the Simonetta of the other pictures, and Simonetta was but recently married and a very model of fair repute. In No. 916 in our National Gallery is a "Venus with Cupids" (which might be by Botticelli and might be by that interesting painter of whom Mr. Berenson has written so attractively as Amico di Sandro), in which Politian's description of Venus, in his poem, is again closely followed.

After the tournament pictures we come to Botticelli's career to the Sixtine Chapel frescoes, and on his return to

Florence to other frescoes, including that lovely one at the Villa Lemmi (then the Villa Tornabuoni) which is now on the staircase of the Louvre. These are followed by at least two more Medici pictures—the portrait of Piero di Lorenzo de' Medici, in the fifth room, No. 1484, the sad-faced youth with the medal; and, borrowed from the Pitti, the "Pallas subduing the Centaur," painted to commemorate Lorenzo de' Medici's successful diplomatic mission to the King of Naples in 1480, to bring about the end of the war with Sixtus IV, the prime instigator of the Pazzi Conspiracy and the bitter enemy of Lorenzo in particular—whose only fault, as he drily expressed it, had been to "escape being murdered in the Cathedral"—and of all Tuscany in general. Botticelli here makes the centaur typify war and oppression, while the beautiful figure which is taming and subduing him by reason represents Pallas, or the arts of peace, here identifiable with Lorenzo by the laurel wreath and the pattern of her robe, which is composed of his private crest of diamond rings intertwined.

The latter part of Botticelli's life was spent under the influence of Savonarola and in despair at the wickedness of the world and its treatment of that prophet. His pictures became wholly religious, but it was religion without joy. Never capable of disguising the sorrow that underlies all human happiness—or, as I think of it in looking at his work, the sense of transience—Botticelli, as age came upon him, was more than ever depressed. One has the feeling that he was persuaded that only through devotion and self-negation could peace of mind be gained, and yet for himself could find none. The sceptic was too strong in him. Savonarola's eloquence could not make him serene, however much he may have come beneath its spell. It but served to increase his melancholy. Hence these wistful, despondent

Madonnas, all so conscious of the tragedy before their Child; hence these troubled angels and shadowed saints

Savonarola was hanged and burned in 1498, and Botticelli paid a last tribute to his friend in the picture in the fifth room called "The Calumny". Under the pretence of merely illustrating a passage in Lucian, who was one of his favourite authors, Botticelli has represented the campaign against the great reformer. The hall represents Florence; the judge (with the ears of an ass) the Signoria and the Pope. Into these ears Ignorance and Suspicion are whispering. Calumny, with Envy at her side and tended by Fraud and Deception, holds a torch in one hand and with the other drags her victim, who personifies (but with no attempt at a likeness) Savonarola. Behind are the figures of Remorse, cloaked and miserable, and Truth, naked and unafraid. The statues in the niches ironically represent abstract virtues. Everything in the decoration of the palace points to enlightenment and content; and beyond is the calmest and greenest of seas.

One more picture was Botticelli to paint, and this also was to the glory of Savonarola. By good fortune it belongs to the English people and is No. 1034 in the National Gallery. It has upon it a Greek inscription in the painter's own hand which runs in English as follows: "This picture I, Alessandro, painted at the end of the year 1500, in the troubles of Italy, in the half-time after the time during the fulfilment of the eleventh of St. John, in the second woe of the Apocalypse, in the loosing of the devil for three years and a half. Afterwards he shall be confined, and we shall see him trodden down, as in this picture". The loosing of the devil was the three years and a half after Savonarola's execution on May 23rd, 1498, when Florence was mad with reaction from the severity of his discipline. S. John says,

'I will give power unto my two witnesses, and they shall prophesy"; the painter makes three, Savonarola having two comrades with him. The picture was intended to hearten the followers of Savonarola and bring promise of ultimate triumph.

After the death of Savonarola, Botticelli became both poor and infirm. He had saved no money and all his friends were dead—Piero de' Medici, Lorenzo, Giuliano, Lucrezia, Simonetta, Filippino Lippi, and Savonarola. He hobbled about on crutches for a while, a pensioner of the Medici family, and dying at the age of seventy-eight was buried in Ognissanti, but without a tombstone, for fear of desecration by the enemies of Savonarola's adherents.

Such is the outline of Botticelli's life. We will now look at such of the pictures in Rooms V and VI as have not been mentioned. High among these is No. 1607, the very typical circular picture—a shape which has come to be intimately associated with this painter, "The Madonna of the Pomegranate," one of his most beautiful works, and possibly yet another designed for Lucrezia Tornabuoni, for the curl on the forehead of the boy to the left of the Madonna—who is more than usually troubled—is very like that for which Giuliano de' Medici was famous. This is a very lovely work although its colour is a little depressed.

Another glory of Room VI is the "Annunciation," reproduced in this book. The picture is a work that may perhaps not wholly please at first, the cause largely being the vermilion on the floor, but in the end it conquers. The hands are among the most beautiful in existence, and the landscape, with its one tree and its fairy architecture, is a continual delight. Among "Annunciations," as among pictures, it stands very high. It has more of sophistication

THE ANNUNCIATION

FROM THE PAINTING BY BOTTICELLI IN THE UFFIZI

than most: the Virgin not only recognizes the honour, but the doom, which the painter himself foreshadows in the predella, where Christ is seen rising from the grave. No Botti-Fra Angelico's simple radiance here, and none of Fra Filippo Lippi's glorified matter-of-fact. Here is tragedy. The painting of the Virgin's head-dress is again marvellous.

Next the "Annunciation" on the left of the entrance from Room V is, to my eyes, one of Botticelli's most attractive works: No. 1601, just the Madonna and Child again, in a niche, with roses climbing behind them: the Madonna one of his youngest, and more placid and simple than most, with more than a hint of the Verrocchio type in her face.

Finally, there is the great "Coronation of the Virgin," with four saints, which used to be in the Accademia—a work of surpassing serenity and loveliness.