CHAPTER XII

"AËRIAL FIESOLE"

Andrea del Sarto—Fiesole sights—The Villa Palmieri and the "Decameron"—Botticini's picture in the National Gallery—S. Francesco—The Roman amphitheatre—The Etruscan museum—A sculptor's walk—The Badia di Fiesole—Brunelleschi again—Giovanni di San Giovanni.

AFTER all these pictures, how about a little climbing? From so many windows in Florence, along so many streets, from so many loggias and towers, and perhaps, above all, from the Piazzale di Michelangelo, Fiesole is to be seen on her hill, with the beautiful campanile of her church in the dip between the two eminences, that very soon one comes to feel that this surely is the promised land. Florence lies so low, and the delectable mountain is so near and so alluring. But I am not sure that to dream of Fiesole as desirable, and to murmur its beautiful syllables, is not best.

> Let me sit
> Here by the window with your hand in mine,
> And look a half-hour forth on Fiesole

—that was Andrea's way and not an unwise one. For Fiesole at nearer view can easily disappoint. It is beautifully set on its hill and it has a fascinating past; but the journey thither on foot is very wearisome, by the electric tram vexatious and noisy, and in a horse-drawn carriage expensive and cruel; and when you are there you become

once more a tourist without alleviation and are pestered by beggars, and by nice little girls who ought to know better, whose peculiar importunacy it is to thrust flowers into the hand or buttonhole without any denial. What should have been a mountain retreat from the city has become a kind of Devil's Dyke. But if one is resolute, and, defying all, walks up to the little monastery of S. Francesco at the very top of the hill, one may rest almost undisturbed, with Florence in the valley below, and gardens and vineyards undulating beneath, and a monk or two ascending or descending the steps, and three or four picture-postcard hawkers gambling in a corner, and lizards on the wall. 'Here it is good to be in the late afternoon, when the light is mellowing; and if you want tea there is a little loggia a few yards down this narrow steep path where it may be found. How many beautiful villas in which one could be happy sunning oneself among the lizards lie between this point and Florence! Who, sitting here, can fail to think that?

In walking to Fiesole one follows the high walls of the Villa Palmieri, which is now very private American property, but is famous for ever as standing on the site of the first refuge of Boccaccio's young people when they fled from plague-stricken Florence in 1348 and told tales for ten halcyon days. It is now generally agreed that if Boccaccio had any particular house in his mind it was this. It used to be thought that the Villa Poggio Gherardo, Mrs. Ross's beautiful home on the way to Settignano, was the first refuge, and the Villa Palmieri the second, but the latest researches have it that the Palmieri was the first and the Podere della Fonte, or Villa di Boccaccio, as it is called, near Camerata, a little village below S. Domenico, the other. The Villa Palmieri has another and somewhat different historical association, for

it was there that Queen Victoria resided for a while in 1888. But the most interesting thing of all about it is the circumstance that it was the home of Matteo Palmieri, the poet, and Botticelli's friend and fellow-speculator on the riddle of life. Palmieri was the author of a remarkable poem called "La Città della Vita" (The City of Life) which developed a scheme of theology that had many attractions to Botticelli's curious mind. The poem was banned by Rome, although not until after its author's death. In our National Gallery is a picture which used to be considered Botticelli's—No. 1126, "The Assumption of the Virgin"—especially as it is mentioned with some particularity by Vasari, together with the circumstance that the poet and painter devised it in collaboration, in which the poem is translated into pigment. As to the theology, I say nothing, nor as to its new ascription to Botticini; but the picture has a greater interest for us in that it contains a view of Florence with its wall of towers around it in about 1475. The exact spot where the painter sat has been identified by Miss Stokes in "Six Months in the Apennines". On the left immediately below the painter's vantage-ground is the Mugnone, with a bridge over it. On the bank in front is the Villa Palmieri, and on the picture's extreme left is the Badia of Fiesole.

On leaving S. Domenico, if still bent on walking, one should keep straight on and not follow the tram lines to the right. This is the old and terribly steep road which Lorenzo the Magnificent and his friends Politian and Pico della Mirandola had to travel whenever they visited the Medici villa, just under Fiesole, with its drive lined with cypresses. Here must have been great talk and much conviviality.

Once at Fiesole, by whatever means you reach it, do not

FIESOLE FROM THE HILL UNDER THE MONASTERY

neglect to climb the monastery steps to the very top. It is a day of climbing, and a hundred or more steps either way mean nothing now. For here is a gentle little church with swift, silent monks in it, and a few flowers in bowls, and a religious picture by that strange Piero di Cosimo whose heart was with the gods in exile; and the view of Monte Ceceri, on the other side of Fiesole, seen through the cypresses here, which could not be better in disposition had Benozzo Gozzoli himself arranged them, is very striking and memorable.

Fiesole's darling son is Mino the sculptor—the "Raphael of the chisel"—whose radiant Madonnas and children and delicate tombs may be seen here and there all over Florence. The piazza is named after him; he is celebrated on a marble slab outside the museum, where all the famous names of the vicinity may be read too; and in the church is one of his most charming groups and finest heads. They are in a little chapel on the right of the choir. The head is that of Bishop Salutati, humorous, wise, and benign, and the group represents the adoration of a merry little Christ by a merry little S. John and others. As for the church itself, it is severe and cool, with such stone columns in it as must last for ever.

But the main interest of Fiesole to most people is not the cypress-covered hill of S. Francesco; not the view from the summit; not the straw mementoes; not the Mino relief in the church; but the Roman arena. The excavators have made of this a very complete place. One can stand at the top of the steps and reconstruct it all—the audience, the performance, the performers. A very little time spent on building would be needed to restore the amphitheatre to its original form. Beyond it are baths, and in a hollow the remains of a temple with the

altar where it ever was; and then one walks a little farther and is on the ancient Etruscan wall, built when Fiesole was an Etruscan fortified hill city. So do the centuries fall away here! But everywhere, among the ancient Roman stones so massive and exact, and the Etruscan stones, are the wild flowers which Luca Signorelli painted in that picture in the Uffizi which I love so much.

After the amphitheatre one visits the Museum—with the same ticket—a little building filled with trophies of the spade. There is nothing very wonderful—nothing to compare with the treasures of the Archæological Museum in Florence—but it is well worth a visit.

On leaving the Museum on the last occasion that I was there—in April—I walked to Settignano. The road for a while is between houses, for Fiesole stretches a long way farther than one suspects, very high, looking over the valley of the Mugnone; and then after a period between pine trees and grape-hyacinths one turns to the right and begins to descend. Until Poggio del Castello, a noble villa, on an isolated eminence, the descent is very gradual, with views of Florence round the shoulder of Monte Ceceri; but afterwards the road winds, to ease the fall, and the wayfarer turns off into the woods and tumbles down the hill by a dry water-course, amid crags and stones, to the beginnings of civilization again, at the Via di Desiderio da Settignano, a sculptor who stands to his native town in precisely the same relation as Mino to his.

Settignano is a mere village, with villas all about it, and the thing to remember there is not only that Desiderio was born there but that Michelangelo's foster-mother was the wife of a local stone-cutter—stone-cutting at that time being the staple industry. On the way back to Florence in the tram, one passes on the right a gateway sur-

mounted by statues of the poets, the Villa Poggio Gherardo, of which I have spoken earlier in the chapter. There is no villa with a nobler mien than this.

That is one walk from Fiesole. Another is even more a sculptors' way: for it would include Maiano too, where Benedetto was born. The road is by way of the tram lines to that acute angle just below Fiesole when they turn back to S. Domenico, and so straight on down the hill.

But if one is returning to Florence direct after leaving Fiesole it is well to walk down the precipitous paths to S. Domenico, and before again taking the tram visit the Badia overlooking the valley of the Mugnone. This is done by turning to the right just opposite the church of S. Domenico, which has little interest structurally but is famous as being the chapel of the monastery where Fra Angelico was once a monk. The Badia (Abbey) di Fiesole, as it now is, was built on the site of an older monastery, by Cosimo Pater. Here Marsilio Ficino's Platonic Academy used to meet, in the loggia and in the little temple which one gains from the cloisters, and here Pico della Mirandola composed his curious gloss on Genesis.

The dilapidated marble façade of the church and its rugged stone-work are exceedingly ancient,—dating in fact from the eleventh century; the new building is by Brunelleschi and to my mind is one of his most beautiful works, its lovely proportions and cool, unfretted white spaces communicating even more pleasure than the Pazzi chapel itself. The decoration has been kept simple and severe, and the colour is just the grey *pietra serena* of Fiesole, of which the lovely arches are made, all most exquisitely chiselled, and the pure white of the walls and ceilings. This church was a favourite with the Medici, and the youthful Giovanni, the son of Lorenzo the

Magnificent, received his cardinal's hat here in 1492, at the age of sixteen. He afterwards became Pope Leo X. How many of the boys, now in the school—for the monastery has become a Jesuit school—will, one wonders, rise to similar eminence.

In the beautiful cloisters we have the same colour scheme as in the church, and here again Brunelleschi's miraculous genius for proportion is to be found. Here and there are foliations and other exquisite tracery by pupils of Desiderio da Settignano. The refectory has a high-spirited fresco by that artist whose room in the Uffizi is so carefully avoided by discreet chaperons—Giovanni di San Giovanni—representing Christ eating at a table, his ministrants being a crowd of little roguish angels and cherubim, one of whom (on the right) is in despair at having broken a plate. In the entrance lobby is a lavabo by Mino da Fiesole, with two little boys of the whitest and softest marble on it, which is worth study.

And now we will return to the heart of Florence once more.