CHAPTER XIII

THE BADIA AND DANTE

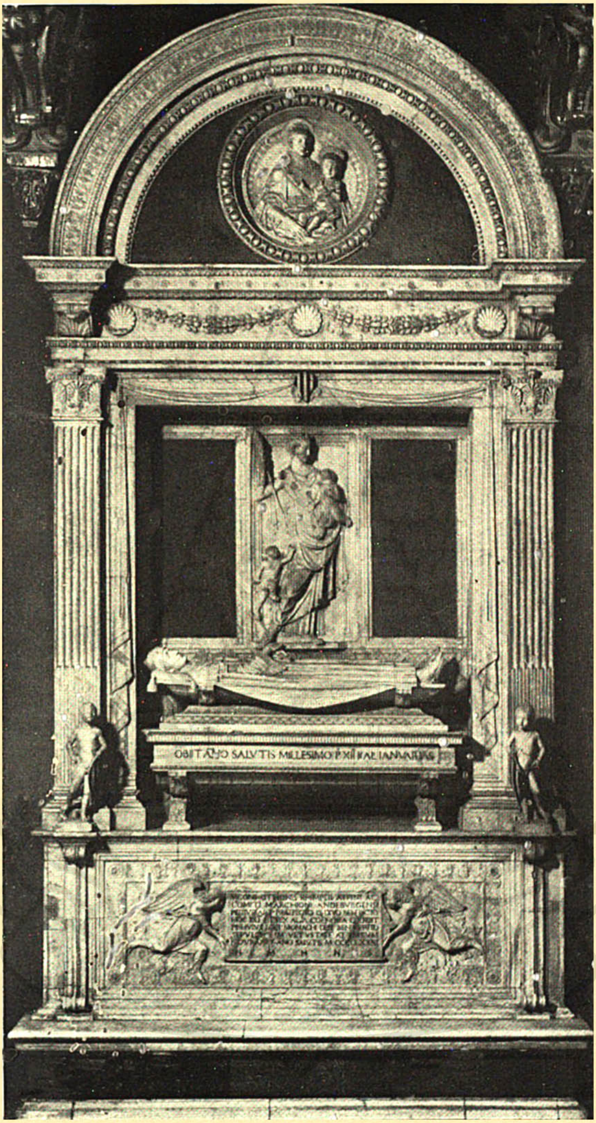
Filippino Lippi—Buffalmacco—Mino da Fiesole—The Dante quarter—Dante and Beatrice—Monna Tessa—Gemma Donati—Dante in exile—Dante memorials in Florence—The Torre della Castagna—The Borgo degli Albizzi and the old palaces—S. Ambrogio—Mino's tabernacle—Wayside masterpieces—S. Egidio.

OPPOSITE the Bargello is a church with a very beautiful doorway designed by Benedetto da Rovezzano. This church is known as the Badia, and its delicate spire is a joy in the landscape from every point of vantage. The Badia is very ancient, but the restorers have been busy and little of Arnolfo's thirteenth-century work is left. It is chiefly famous now for its Filippino Lippi and two tombs by Mino da Fiesole, but historically it is interesting as being the burial-place of the chief Florentine families in the Middle Ages and as being the scene of Boccaccio's lectures on Dante in 1373. The Filippino altar-piece, which represents S. Bernard's Vision of the Virgin (a subject we shall see treated very beautifully by Fra Bartolommeo at the Uffizi) is one of the most perfect and charming pictures by this artist: very grave and real and sweet, and the saint's hands exquisitely painted. The figure praying in the right-hand corner is the patron, Piero di Francesco del Pugliese, who commissioned this picture for the church of La Campora, outside the Porta Romana, where it was honoured until 1529, when Clement

VII's troops advancing, it was brought here for safety and has here remained.

Close by—in the same chapel—is a little door which the sacristan will open, disclosing a portion of Arnolfo's building with perishing frescoes which are attributed to Buffalmacco, an artist as to whose reality much scepticism prevails. They are not in themselves of much interest, although the sacristan's eagerness should not be discouraged; but Buffalmacco being Boccaccio's, Sacchetti's, Vasari's (and, later, Anatole France's) amusing hero, it is pleasant to look at his work and think of his freakishness. Buffalmacco (if he ever existed) was one of the earlier painters, flourishing between 1311 and 1350, and was a pupil of Andrea Tafi. This simple man he plagued very divertingly, once frightening him clean out of his house by fixing little lighted candles to the backs of beetles and steering them into Tafi's bedroom at night. Tafi was terrified, but on being told by Buffalmacco (who was a lazy rascal) that these devils were merely showing their objection to early rising, he became calm again, and agreed to lie in bed to a reasonable hour. Cupidity, however, conquering, he again ordered his pupil to be up betimes, when the beetles again re-appeared and continued to do so until the order was revoked.

The sculptor Mino da Fiesole, whom we shall shortly see again, at the Bargello, in portrait busts and Madonna reliefs, is at his best here, in the superb monument to Count Ugo, who founded, with his mother, the Benedictine Abbey of which the Badia is the relic. Here all Mino's sweet thoughts, gaiety and charm are apparent, together with the perfection of radiant workmanship. The quiet dignity of the recumbent figure is no less masterly than the group above it. Note the impulsive urgency of the splendid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MONUMENT TO COUNT UGO
BY MINO DA FIESOLE (IN THE BADIA)

Charity, with her two babies, and the quiet beauty of the Madonna and Child above all, while the proportions and delicate patterns of the tomb still remain to excite pleasure and admiration even when seen in the photograph. There are many beautiful tombs in Florence, but none more joyously accomplished than this. The tomb of Carlo Marsuppini in S. Croce by Desiderio da Settignano, which awaits us, was undoubtedly the parent of the Ugo, Mino following his master very closely; but his charm was his own. According to Vasari, the Ugo tomb was considered to be Mino's finest achievement, and he deliberately made the Madonna and Child as like the types of his beloved Desiderio as he could. It was finished in 1481, and Mino died in 1484, from a chill following over-exertion in moving heavy stones. Mino also has here a monument to Bernardo Giugni, a famous gonfalonier in the time of Cosimo de' Medici, marked by the same distinction, but not quite so memorable. The Ugo is his masterpiece.

The carved wooden ceiling, which is a very wonderful piece of work and of the deepest and most glorious hue, should not be forgotten; but nothing is easier than to overlook ceilings.

The cloisters are small, but they atone for that—if it is a fault—by having a loggia. From the loggia the top of the noble tower of the Palazzo Vecchio is seen to perfection. Upon the upper walls is a series of frescoes illustrating the life of S. Benedict which must have been very gay and spirited once but are now faded.

The Badia may be said to be the heart of the Dante quarter. Dante must often have been in the church before it was restored as we now see it, and a quotation from the "Divine Comedy" is on its façade. The Via Dante and the Piazza Donati are close by, and in the Via Dante are many reminders of the poet besides his alleged birthplace. Elsewhere in the city we find incised quotations from his poem; but the Baptistery—his "beautiful San Giovanni" —is the only building in the city proper now remaining in which Dante would feel at home could he return to it, and where we can feel assured of sharing his presence. The same pavement is there on which his feet once stood, and on the same mosaic of Christ above the altar would his eyes have fallen. When Dante was exiled in 1302 the cathedral had been in progress only for six or eight years; but it is known that he took the deepest interest in its construction, and we have seen the stone marking the place where he sat, watching the builders. The façade of the Badia of Fiesole and the church of S. Miniato can also remember Dante; no others.

Here, however, we are on that ground which is richest in personal associations with him and his, for in spite of rebuilding and certain modern changes the air is heavy with antiquity in these narrow streets and passages where the poet had his childhood and youth. The son of a lawyer named Alighieri, Dante was born in 1265, but whether or not in this Casa Dante is an open question, and it was in the Baptistery that he received the name of Durante, afterwards abbreviated to Dante—Durante meaning enduring, and Dante giving. Those who have read the "Vita Nuova," either in the original or in Rossetti's translation, may be surprised to learn that the boy was only nine when he first met his Beatrice, who was seven, and for ever passed into bondage to her. Who Beatrice was is again a mystery, but it has been agreed to consider her in real life a daughter of Folco Portinari, a wealthy Florentine and the founder of the hospital of S. Maria Nuova, one of whose descendants commissioned Hugo van der Goes to paint the great triptych in the Uffizi. Folco's tomb is in S. Egidio, the hospital church, while in the passage to the cloisters is a stone figure of Monna Tessa (of whom we are about to see a coloured bust in the Bargello), who was not only Beatrice's nurse (if Beatrice were truly of the Portinari) but the instigator, it is said, of Folco's deed of charity.

Of Dante's rapt adoration of his lady, the "Vita Nuova" tells. According to that strangest monument of devotion it was not until another nine years had passed that he had speech of her; and then Beatrice, meeting him in the street, saluted him as she passed him with such ineffable courtesy and grace that he was lifted into a seventh heaven of devotion and set upon the writing of his book. The two seem to have had no closer intercourse: Beatrice shone distantly like a star and her lover worshipped her with increasing loyalty and fervour, overlaying the idea of her, as one might say, with gold and radiance, very much as we shall see Fra Angelico adding glory to the Madonna and Saints in his pictures, and with a similar intensity of ecstasy. Then one day Beatrice married, and not long afterwards, being always very fragile, she died, at the age of twenty-three. The fact that she was no longer on earth hardly affected her poet, whose worship of her had always so little of a physical character; and she continued to dominate his thoughts.

In 1293, however, Dante married, one Gemma Donati of the powerful Guelph family of that name, of which Corso Donati was the turbulent head; and by her he had many children. For Gemma, however, he seems to have had no affection; and when in 1301 he left Florence, never to return, he left his wife for ever too. In 1289 Dante had been present at the battle of Campaldino, fighting with the Guelphs against the Ghibellines, and on settling down in

Florence and taking to politics it was as a Guelph, or rather as one of that branch of the Guelph party which had become White—the Bianchi—as opposed to the other party which was Black—the Neri. The feuds between these divisions took the place of those between the Guelphs and Ghibellines, since Florence was never happy without internal strife, and it cannot have added to Dante's home comfort that his wife was related to Corso Donati, who led the Neri and swaggered in his bullying way about the city with proprietary, intolerant airs that must have been infuriating to a man with Dante's stern sense of right and justice. It was Corso who brought about Dante's exile; but he himself survived only six years, and was then killed, by his own wish, on his way to execution, rather than be humiliated in the city in which he had swayed. Dante, whose genius devised a more lasting form of reprisal than any personal encounter could be, has depicted him in the "Purgatorio" as on the road to Hell.

But this is going too fast. In 1300, when Dante was thirty-five, he was sufficiently important to be made one of the six priors of the city, and in that capacity was called upon to quell a Neri and Bianchi disturbance. It is characteristic of him that he was a party to the banishment of the leaders of both factions, among whom was his closest friend Guido Cavalcanti the poet, who was one of the Bianchi. Whether it was because of Guido's illness in his exile, or from what motive, we shall not know; but the sentence was lightened in the case of this Bianco, a circumstance which did not add to Dante's chances when the Neri, having plotted successfully with Charles of Valois, captured supreme power in Florence. This was in the year 1301, Dante being absent from that city on an embassy to Rome to obtain help for the Bianchi. He never came back; for the Neri plans succeeded; the Neri, assumed control; and in January, 1302, he was formally fined and banished. The nominal charge against him was of misappropriating funds while a prior; but that was merely a matter of form. His real offence was in being one of the Bianchi, an enemy of the Neri, and a man of parts.

In the rest of Dante's life Florence had no part, except in his thoughts. How he viewed her the "Divine Comedy" tells us, and that he longed to return we also know. The chance was indeed once offered, but under the impossible condition that he should do public penance in the Baptistery for his offence. This he refused. He wandered here and there, and settled finally in Ravenna, where he died in 1321. The "Divine Comedy" anticipating printing by so many years—the invention did not reach Florence until 1471—Dante could not make much popular way as a poet before that time; but to his genius certain Florentines were earlier no strangers, not only by perusing MS. copies of his great work, which by its richness in Florentine allusions excited an interest apart altogether from that created by its beauty, but by public lectures on the poem, delivered in the churches by order of the Signoria. The first Dante professor to be appointed was Giovanni Boccaccio, the author of the "Decameron," who was born in 1313, eight years before Dante's death, and became an enthusiast upon the poet. The picture in the Duomo was placed there in 1465. Then came printing to Florence and Dante passed quickly into his countrymen's thoughts and language.

Michelangelo, who was born in time—1475—to enjoy in Lorenzo the Magnificent's house the new and precious advantage of printed books, became as a boy a profound student of the poet, and when later an appeal was made from Florence to the Pope to sanction the removal of Dante's bones to Florence, Michelangelo was among the signatories. But it was not done. His death-mask from Ravenna is in the Bargello: a few of his bones and their coffin are still in Ravenna, in the monastery of Classe, piously preserved in a room filled with Dante relics and literature; his tomb is elsewhere at Ravenna, a shrine visited by thousands every year.

Ever since has Dante's fame been growing, so that only the Bible has led to more literature; and to-day Florence is more proud of him than any of her sons, except perhaps Michelangelo. We have seen one or two reminders of him already; more are here where we stand. We have seen the picture in honour of him which the Republic set up in the cathedral; his head on a beautiful inlaid door in the Palazzo Vecchio, the building where his sentence of banishment was devised and carried, to be followed by death sentence thrice repeated (burning alive, to be exact); and we have seen the head-quarters of the Florentine Dante society in the guild house at Or San Michele. We have still to see his statue opposite S. Croce, another fresco head in S. Maria Novella, certain holograph relics at the library at S. Lorenzo, and his head again by his friend Giotto, in the Bargello, where he would have been confined while waiting for death had he been captured.

Dante's house has been rebuilt, very recently, and next it is a newer building still, with a long inscription in Italian upon it, to the effect that the residence of Bella and Bellincione Alighieri stood hereabouts, and in that abode was Dante born. The Commune of Florence, it goes on to say, having secured possession of the site, "built this edifice on the remains of the ancestral house as fresh evidence of the public veneration of the divine poet". The Torre della Castagna, across the way, has an inscription in Italian, which may be translated thus: "This Tower, the so-called Tower of the Chestnut, is the solitary remnant of the head-quarters from which the Priors of the Arts governed Florence, before the power and glory of the Florentine Commune procured the erection of the Palace of the Signoria"

Few persons in the real city of Florence, it may be said confidently, live in a house built for them ; but hereabouts none at all. In fact, it is the exception anywhere near the centre of the city to live in a house built less than three centuries ago. Palaces abound, cut up into offices, flats, rooms, and even cinema theatres. The telegraph office in the Via del Proconsolo is a palace commissioned by the Strozzi but never completed : hence its name, Nonfinito ; next it is the superb Palazzo Quaratesi, which Brunelleschi designed, now the head-quarters of a score of firms and an Ecclesiastical School whence sounds of sacred song continually emerge.

Since we have Mino da Fiesole in our minds and are on the subject of old palaces let us walk from the Dante quarter in a straight line from the Corso, that very busy street of small shops, across the Via del Proconsolo and down the Borgo degli Albizzi to S. Ambrogio, where Mino was buried. This Borgo is a street of palaces and an excellent one in which to reflect upon the strange habit which wealthy Florentines then indulged of setting their mansions within a few feet of those opposite. Houses—or rather fortresses—that must have cost fortunes and have been occupied by families of wealth and splendour were erected so close to their *vis-à-vis* that two carts could not pass abreast between them. Side by side contiguity one can understand, but not this other adjacence. Every ground floor window is barred like a gaol. These bars tell us something of the perils of life in Florence in the great days of faction ambition; while the thickness of the walls and solidity of construction tell us something too of the integrity of the Florentine builders. These ancient palaces, one feels, whatever may happen to them, can never fall to ruin. Such stones as are placed one upon the other in the Pitti and the Strozzi and the Riccardi nothing can displace. It is an odd thought that several Florentine palaces and villas built before Columbus sailed for America are now occupied by rich Americans, some of them draw possibly much of their income from the manufacture of steel girders for sky-scrapers. These ancient streets with their stern and sombre palaces specially touched the imagination of Dickens when he was in Florence in 1844, but in his "Pictures from Italy" he gave the city only fugitive mention. The old prison, which then adjoined the Palazzo Vecchio, and in which the prisoners could be seen, also moved him.

The Borgo degli Albizzi, as I have said, is crowded with Palazzi. No. 24—and there is something very incongruous in palaces having numbers at all—is memorable in history as being one of the homes of the Pazzi family who organized the conspiracy against the Medici in 1478, as I have related in the second chapter, and failed so completely. Donatello designed the coat of arms here. The palace at No. 18 belonged to the Altoviti. No. 12 is the Palazzo Albizzi, the residence of one of the most powerful of the Florentine families, whose allies were all about them in this quarter, as it was wise to be.

As a change from picture galleries, I can think of nothing more delightful than to wander about these ancient streets, and, wherever a courtyard or garden shines penetrate to it; stopping now and again to enjoy the vista, the red Duomo, or Giotto's tower, so often mounting into the sky at one end, or an indigo Apennine at the other. Standing in the middle of the Via Ricasoli, for example, one has sight of both.

At the Piazza S. Pietro we see one of the old towers of Florence, of which there were once so many, into which the women and children might retreat in times of great danger, and here too is a series of arches which fruit and vegetable shops make gay.

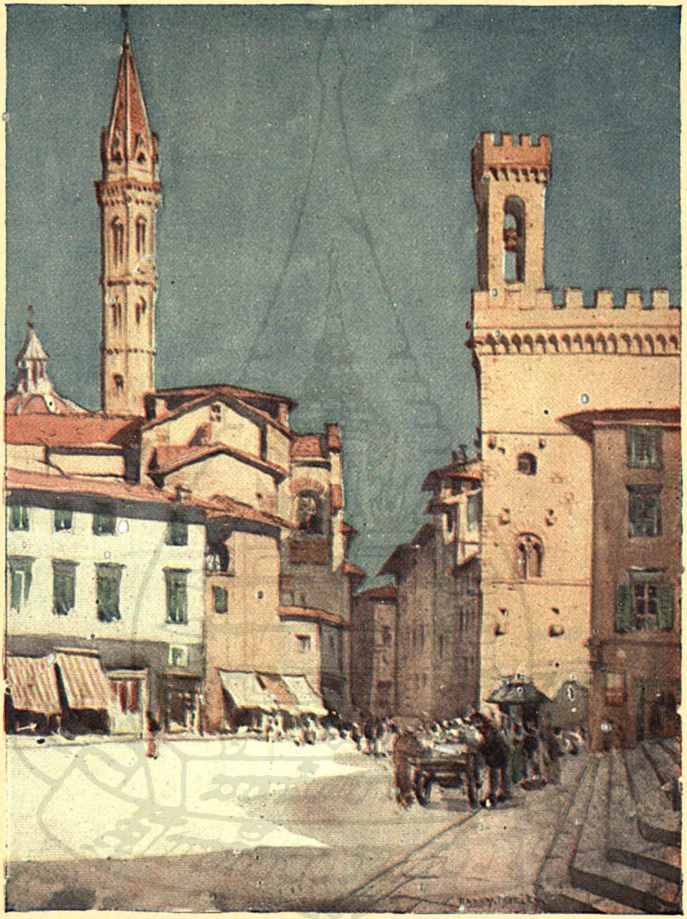
The next Piazza is that of S. Ambrogio. This church is interesting not only for doing its work in a poor quarter—one has the feeling at once that it is a right church in the right place—but as containing, as I have said, the grave of Mino da Fiesole: Mino de' Poppi detto da Fiesole, as the floor tablet has it. Over the altar of Mino's little chapel is a large tabernacle from his hand, in which the gayest little Boy gives the benediction, own brother to that one by Desiderio at S. Lorenzo. The tabernacle must be one of the master's finest works, and beneath it is a relief in which a priest pours something—perhaps the very blood of Christ which is kept here—from one chalice to another held by a kneeling woman, surrounded by other kneeling women, which is a marvel of flowing beauty and life. The lines of it are peculiarly lovely.

On the wall of the same little chapel is a fresco by Cosimo Rosselli which must once have been a delight, representing a procession of Corpus Christi—this chapel being dedicated to the miracle of the Sacrament—and it contains, according to Vasari, a speaking likeness of Pico della Mirandola. Other graves in the church are those of Cronaca, the architect of the Palazzo Vecchio's great Council Room, a friend of Savonarola and Rosselli's nephew by marriage; and Verrocchio, the sculptor, whose beautiful work we are now to see in the Bargello. It is said that

Lorenzo di Credi also lies here, and Albertinelli, who gave up the brush for innkeeping.

Opposite the church, on a house at the corner of the Borgo S. Croce and the Via de' Macci, is a della Robbia saint—one of many such mural works of art in Florence. Thus, at the corner of the Via Cavour and the Via de' Pucci, opposite the Riccardi palace, is a beautiful Madonna and Child by Donatello. In the Via Zannetti, which leads out of the Via Cerretani, is a very pretty example by Mino, a few houses on the right. These are sculpture. And everywhere in the older streets you may see shrines built into the walls: there is even one in the prison in the Via dell' Agnolo, once the convent of the Murate, where Catherine de' Medici was imprisoned as a girl; but many of them are covered with glass which has been allowed to become black.

A word or two on S. Egidio, the church of the great hospital of S. Maria Nuova, might round off this chapter, since it was Folco Portinari, Beatrice's father, who founded it. The hospital stands in a rather forlorn square a few steps from the Duomo, down the Via dell' Orivolo and then the first to the left; and it extends right through to the Via degli Alfani in cloisters and ramifications. The façade is in a state of decay, old frescoes peeling off it, but one picture has been enclosed for protection—a gay and busy scene of the consecration of the church by Pope Martin V. Within, it is a church of the poor, notable for its general florid comfort (comparatively) and Folco's gothic tomb. In the chancel is a pretty little tabernacle by Mino, which used to have a bronze door by Ghiberti, but has it no longer, and a very fine della Robbia Madonna and Child, probably by Andrea. Behind a grille, upstairs, sit the hospital nurses. In the adjoining cloisters—one of the



THE BADIA AND THE BARGELLO FROM THE PIAZZA S. FIRENZE high roads to the hospital proper—is the ancient statue of old Monna Tessa, Beatrice's nurse, and, in a niche, a pretty symbolical painting of Charity by that curious painter Giovanni di San Giovânni. It was in the hospital that the famous Van der Goes triptych used to hang.

A tablet on a house opposite S. Egidio, a little to the right, states that it was there that Ghiberti made the Baptistery gates which Michelangelo considered fit to be the portals of Paradise.