CHAPTER XVIII

THE SS. ANNUNZIATA AND THE SPEDALE DEGLI INNOCENTI

Andrea del Sarto again—Franciabigio outraged—Alessio Baldovinetti—Piero de' Medici's church—An Easter Sunday congregation—Andrea's "Madonna del Sacco"—"The Statue and the Bust"—Henri IV—The Spedale degli Innocenti—Andrea della Robbia—Domenico Ghirlandaio—Cosimo I and the Etruscans—Bronzes and tapestries—Perugino's triptych—S. Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi—"Very sacred human dust"

FROM S. Marco it is an easy step, along the Via Sapienza, to the Piazza dell' Annunziata, where one finds the church of that name, the Palazzo Riccardi-Mannelli, and opposite it, gay with the famous della Robbia reliefs of swaddled children, the Spedale degli Innocenti.

First the church, which is notable for possessing in its courtyard Andrea del Sarto's finest frescoes. This series, of which he was the chief painter, with his friend Franciabigio again as his principal ally, depict scenes in the life of the Virgin and S. Filippo. The scene of the Birth of the Virgin has been called the triumph of fresco painting, and certainly it is very gay and life-like in that medium. The whole picture is very charming and easy, with the pleasantest colouring imaginable and pretty details, such as the washing of the baby and the boy warming his hands, while of the two women in the foreground, that on the left, facing the spectator, is a portrait of Andrea's wife, Lucrezia. In the Arrival of the Magi we find Andrea himself, the

figure second from the right-hand side, pointing; while next to him, on the left, is his friend Jacopo Sansovino. The "Dead Man Restored to Life by S. Filippo" is Andrea's next best. Franciabigio did the scene of the Marriage of the Virgin, which contains another of his well-drawn boys on the steps. The injury to this fresco—the disfigurement of Mary's face—was the work of the painter himself, in a rage that the monks should have inspected it before it was ready. Vasari is interesting on this work. He draws attention to it as illustrating "Joseph's great faith in taking her, his face expressing as much fear as joy" He also says that the blow which the man is giving Joseph was part of the marriage ceremony at that time in Florence.

Franciabigio, in spite of his action in the matter of this fresco, seems to have been a very sweet-natured man, who painted rather to be able to provide for his poor relations than from any stronger inner impulse, and when he saw some works by Raphael gave up altogether, as Verrocchio gave up after Leonardo matured. Franciabigio was a few years older than Andrea, but died at the same age. Possibly it was through watching his friend's domestic troubles that he remained single, remarking that he who takes a wife endures strife. His most charming work is that "Madonna of the Well" in the Uffizi, which is reproduced in this volume. Franciabigio's master was Mariotto Albertinelli, who had learned from Cosimo Rosselli, the teacher of Piero di Cosimo, Andrea's master—another illustration of the interdependence of Florentine artists.

One of the most attractive works in the courtyard must once have been the "Adoration of the Shepherds" by Alessio Baldovinetti, at the left of the entrance to the church. It is badly damaged and the colour has gone, but one can see

that the valley landscape, when it was painted, was a dream of gaiety and happiness.

The particular treasure of the church is the extremely ornate chapel of the Virgin, containing a picture of the Virgin displayed once a year on the Feast of the Annunciation, March 25th, in the painting of which the Virgin herself took part, descending from heaven for that purpose. The artist thus divinely assisted was Pietro Cavallini, a pupil of Giotto. The silver shrine for the picture was designed by Michelozzo and was a beautiful thing before the canopy and all the distressing accessories were added. It was made at the order of Piero de' Medici, who was as fond of this church as his father Cosimo was of S. Lorenzo. Michelozzo only designed it; the sculpture was done by Pagno di Lapo Portigiani, whose Madonna is over the tomb of Pope John by Donatello and Michelozzo in the Baptistery.

Among the altar-pieces are two by Perugino; but of Florentine altar-pieces one can say little or nothing in a book of reasonable dimensions. There are so many and they are for the most part so difficult to see. Now and then one arrests the eye and holds it; but for the most part they go unstudied. The rotunda of the choir is interesting, for here we meet again Alberti, who completed it from designs by Michelozzo. It does not seem to fit the church from within, and even less so from without, but it is a fine structure. The seventeenth-century painting of the dome is almost impressive.

But one can forget and forgive all the church's gaudiness and floridity when the choir is in good voice and the strings play Palestrina as they did one Easter Sunday. The Annunziata is famous for its music, and on the great occasions people crowd there as nowhere else. One is accustomed to seeing vicarious worship in Italy; but never

was there so vicarious a congregation as on this particular occasion which I recall, and indeed if it had not been for the sight of the busy celebrants at the altar one would not have known that worshipping was in progress at all. The culmination of detachment came when a family of Siamese or Burmese children, in native dress, entered. A positive hum went round, and not an eye but was fixed on the little Orientals. When, however, the organ was for a while superseded and the violas and violins quivered under the plangent melody of Palestrina, our roving attention was fixed and held.

I am not sure that the Andrea in the cloisters is not the best of all his work. It is very simple and wholly beautiful, and in spite of years of ravage the colouring is still wonderful, perhaps indeed better for the hand of Time. It is called the "Madonna del Sacco" (grain sack), and fills the lunette over the door leading from the church. The Madonna—Andrea's favourite type, with the eyes set widely in the flat brow over the little trustful nose—has her Son, older than usual, sprawling on her knee. Her robes are ample and rich; a cloak of green is over her pretty head. By her sits S. Joseph, on the sack, reading with very long sight. That is all; but one does not forget it.

For the rest the cloisters are a huddle of memorial slabs and indifferent frescoes. In the middle is a well with nice iron work. The second cloisters, which it is not easy to enter, have a gaunt John the Baptist in terra-cotta by Michelozzo.

On leaving the church, our natural destination is the Spedale, on the left, but one should pause a moment in the doorway of the courtyard (if the beggars who are always there do not make it too difficult) to look down the Via de' Servi running straight away to the cathedral, which,

with its great red warm dome, closes the street. The statue in the middle of the piazza is that of the Grand Duke Ferdinand by Giovanni da Bologna, cast from metal taken from the Italians' ancient enemies the Turks, while the fountains are by Tacca, Giovanni's pupil, who made the bronze boar at the Mercato Nuovo. "The Synthetical Guide Book," from which I have already quoted, warns its readers not to overlook "the puzzling bees" at the back of Ferdinand's statue. "Try to count them," it adds. (I accepted the challenge and found one hundred and one.) The bees have reference to Ferdinand's emblem—a swarm of these insects, with the words "Majestate tantum". The statue, by the way, is interesting for two other reasons than its subject. First, it is that to which Browning's poem, "The Statue and the Bust," refers, and which, according to the poet, was set here at Ferdinand's command to gaze adoringly for ever at the della Robbia bust of the lady whom he loved in vain. But the bust no longer is visible, if ever it was. John of Douay (as Gian Bologna was also called)—

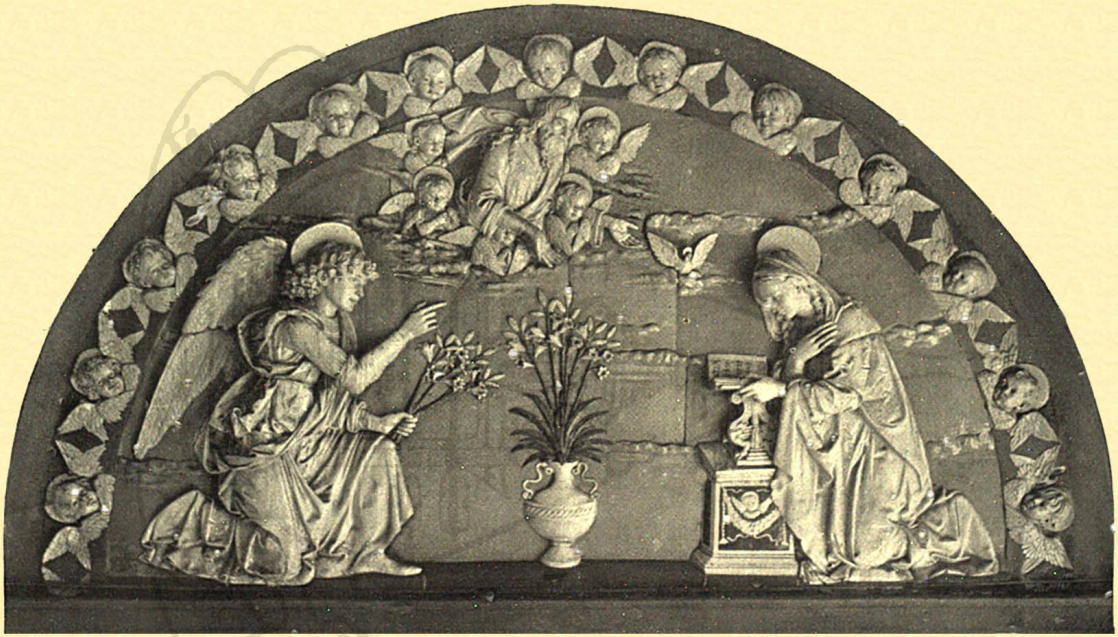
> John of Douay shall effect my plan,
> Set me on horseback here aloft,
> Alive, as the crafty sculptor can,
> In the very square I have crossed so oft:
> That men may admire, when future suns
> Shall touch the eyes to a purpose soft,
> While the mouth and the brow stay brave in bronze—
> Admire and say, "when he was alive
> How he would take his pleasure once!"

The other point of interest is that when Maria de' Medici, Ferdinand's niece, wished to erect a statue of Henri IV (her late husband) at the Pont Neuf in Paris she asked to borrow Gian Bologna. But the sculptor was too old to go and, therefore only a bronze cast of this same horse was offered. In the end Tacca completed both statues,

and Henry IV was set up in 1614 (after having fallen overboard on the voyage from Leghorn to Havre). The present statue at the Pont Neuf is, however, a modern substitute.

The façade of the Spedale degli Innocenti, or children's hospital, when first seen by the visitor evokes perhaps the quickest and happiest cry of recognition in all Florence by reason of its row of della Robbia babies, each in its blue circle, reproductions of which have gone all over the world. These are thought to be by Andrea, Luca's nephew, and were added long after the building was completed. Luca probably helped him. The hospital was begun by Brunelleschi at the cost of old Giovanni de' Medici, Cosimo's father, but the Guild of the Silk Weavers, for whom Luca made the exquisite coat of arms on Or San Michele, took it over and finished it. Andrea not only modelled the babies outside but the beautiful Annunciation (of which I give a reproduction on the opposite page) in the court: one of his best works. The photograph will show how full of pretty thoughts it is, but in colour it is more charming still and the green of the lily stalks is not the least delightful circumstance. Not only among works of sculpture but among Annunciations this relief holds a very high place. Few of the artists devised a scene in which the great news was brought more engagingly, in sweeter surroundings, or received more simply.

The door of the chapel close by leads to another work of art equally adapted to its situation—Ghirlandaio's Adoration of the Magi: one of the perfect pictures for children. We have seen Ghirlandaio's Adoration of the Shepherds at the Uffizi: that is its own brother. It has the sweetest, mildest little Mother, and in addition



THE ANNUNCIATION

FROM THE LUNETTE BY LUCA OR ANDREA DELLA ROBBIA IN THE SPEDALE DEGLI INNOCENTI

to the elderly Magi two tiny little saintlings adore too. In the distance is an enchanted landscape about a fairy estuary.

This hospital is a very busy one, and the authorities are glad to show it to visitors who really take an interest in such work. Rich Italians carry on a fine rivalry in generosity to such institutions. Bologna, for instance, could probably give lessons in thoughtful charity to the whole world.

The building opposite the hospital has a loggia which is notable for a series of four arches, like those of the Mercato Nuovo, and in summer for the flowers that hang down from the little balconies. A pretty building. Before turning to the right under the last of the arches of the hospital loggia, which opens on the Via della Colonna and from the piazza always frames such a charming picture of houses and mountains, it is well, with so much of Andrea del Sarto's work warm in one's memory, to take a few steps up the Via Gino Capponi (which also always frames an Apennine vista under its arch) to No. 24, and see Andrea's house, on the right, marked with a tablet.

In the Via della Colonna we find, at No. 26 on the left, the Palazzo Crocetta, which is now a Museum of Antiquities, and for its Etruscan exhibits is of the greatest historical value and interest to visitors to Tuscany, such as ourselves. For here you may see what civilization was like centuries before Christ and Rome. The beginnings of the Etruscan people are indistinct, but about 1000 B.C. has been agreed to as the dawn of their era. Etruria comprised Tuscany, Perugia, and Rome itself. Florence has no remains, but Fiesole was a fortified Etruscan town, and many traces of its original builders may be seen there, together with Etruscan relics in the little museum. For the best reconstructions

of an Etruscan city one must go to Volterra, where so many of the treasures in the present building were found.

The Etruscans in their heyday were the most powerful people in the world, but after the fifth century their supremacy gradually disappeared, the Gauls on the one side and the Romans on the other wearing them down. All our knowledge of them comes through the spade. Excavations at Volterra and elsewhere have revealed some thousands of inscriptions which have been in part deciphered; but nothing has thrown so much light on this accomplished people as their habit of providing the ashes of their dead with everything likely to be needed for the next world, whose requirements fortunately so exactly tallied with those of this that a complete system of domestic civilization can be deduced. In arts and sciences they were most enviably advanced, as a visit to the British Museum will show in a moment. But it is to this Florentine Museum of Antiquities that all students of Etruria must go. The garden contains a number of the tombs themselves, rebuilt and refurnished exactly as they were found; while on the ground floor is the amazing collection of articles which the tombs yielded. The grave has preserved them for us, not quite so perfectly as the volcanic dust of Vesuvius preserved the domestic appliances of Pompeii, but very nearly so. Jewels, vessels, weapons, ornaments—many of them of a beauty never since reproduced—are to be seen in profusion, now gathered together for study only a short distance from the districts in which centuries ago they were made and used for actual life.

Upstairs we find relics of an older civilization still, the Egyptian, and a few rooms of works of art, all found in Etruscan soil, the property of the Pierpont Morgans and George Saltings of that ancient day, who had collected

them exactly as we do now. Certain of the statues are world-famous. Here, for example, in Sala IX, is the bronze Minerva which was found near Arezzo in 1554 by Cosimo's workmen. Here is the Chimæra, also from Arezzo in 1554, which Cellini restored for Cosimo and tells us about in his Autobiography. Here is the superb Orator from Lake Trasimene, another of Cosimo's discoveries.

In Sala X look at the bronze situla in an isolated glass case, of such a peacock blue as only centuries could give it. Upstairs in Sala XVI are many more Greek and Roman bronzes, among which I noticed a faun with two pipes as being especially good; while the little room leading from it has some fine life-size heads, including a noble one of a horse, and the famous Idolino on its elaborate pedestal—a full-length Greek bronze from the earth of Pesaro, where it was found in 1530.

The top floor used to be given to tapestries; but the finest, or at any rate most interesting, series—that depicting the court of France under Catherine de' Medici, with portraits: very sumptuous and gay examples of Flemish work—is now in one of the long corridors in the Uffizi. Under the new arrangement the top floor here is also Etruscan.

The trouble at Florence is that one wants the days to be ten times as long in order that one may see its wonderful possessions properly. Here is this dry-looking archæological museum, with antipathetic custodians at the door who refuse to get change: nothing could be more unpromising than they or their building; and yet you find yourself instantly among countless vestiges of a past people who had risen to power and crumbled again before Christ was born—but at a time when man was so vastly more sensitive to beauty than he now is

that every appliance for daily life was the work of an artist. Well, a collection like this demands days and days of patient examination, and one has only a few hours. Were I Joshua—had I his curious gift—it is to Florence I would straightway fare. The sun should stand still there: no rock more motionless.

Continuing along the Via della Colonna, we come, on the right, at No. 8, to the convent of S. Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi, which is now a barracks, but keeps sacred one room in which Perugino painted a crucifixion, his masterpiece in fresco. The work is in three panels, of which that on the left, representing the Virgin and S. Bernard, is the most beautiful. Indeed there is no more beautiful light in any picture we shall see, and the Virgin's melancholy face is inexpressibly sweet. Perugino is represented at the Uffizi and Pitti and in various Florentine churches; but here he is at his best. Vasari tells us that Pietro Vannucci, called Perugino because he worked chiefly in Perugia, made much money and was very fond of it; also that he liked his young wife to wear light head-dresses both out of doors and in the house, and often dressed her himself. His master was Verrocchio and his best pupil Raphael.

S. Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi, a member of the same family that plotted against the Medici and owned the sacred flints, was born in 1566, and, says Miss Dunbar,[1] "showed extraordinary piety from a very tender age" When only a child herself she used to teach small children, and she daily carried lunch to the prisoners. Her real name was Catherine, but becoming a nun she called herself Mary Magdalene. In an illness in which she was given up for dead, she lay on her bed for forty days, during

[1] In "A Dictionary of Saintly Women".

which she saw continual visions, and then recovered. Like S. Catherine of Bologna she embroidered well and painted miraculously, and she once healed a leprosy by licking it. She died in 1607.

The old English Cemetery, as it is usually called—the Protestant Cemetery, as it should be called—is an oval garden of death in the Piazza Donatello, at the end of the Via di Pinti and the Via Alfieri, rising up from the boulevard that surrounds the northern half of Florence. (The new Protestant Cemetery is outside the city on the road to the Certosa.) I noticed, as I walked beneath the cypresses, the grave of Arthur Hugh Clough, the poet of "Dipsychus," who died here in Florence on November 13th, 1861; of Walter Savage Landor, that old lion (born January 30th, 1775; died September 17th, 1864), of whom I shall say much more in a later chapter; of his son Arnold, who was born in 1818 and died in 1871; and of Mrs. Holman Hunt, who died in 1866. But the most famous grave is that of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, who lies beneath a massive tomb that bears only the initials E.B.B. and the date 1861. "Italy," wrote James Thomson, the poet of "The City of Dreadful Night," on hearing of Mrs. Browning's death,

> "Italy, you hold in trust
> Very sacred human dust."