CHAPTER XIX

THE CASCINE AND THE ARNO

Florence's Bois de Boulogne—Shelley—The races—The game of Pallone—SS. Ognissanti—Botticelli and Ghirlandaio—Amerigo Vespucci—The Platonic Academy's garden—Alberti's Palazzo Rucellai—Melancholy decay—Two smiling boys—The Corsini palace—The Trinità bridge—The Borgo San Jacopo from the back—Home fishing—SS. Apostoli—A sensitive river—The Ponte Vecchio—The goldsmiths—S. Stefano.

THE Cascine is the "Bois" of Florence; but it does not compare with the Parisian expanse either in size or attraction. Here the wealthy Florentines drive, the middle classes saunter and ride bicycles, the poor enjoy picnics, and the English take country walks. The further one goes the better it is, and the better also the river, which at the very end of the woods becomes such a stream as the *plein-airistes* love, with pollarded trees on either side. Among the trees of one of these woods early in the nineteenth century, a walking Englishman named Percy Bysshe Shelley wrote his "Ode to the West Wind."

The Cascine is a "Bois" also in having a race-course in it—a small course with everything about it on a little scale, grand stand, betting boxes, and all. And why not?—for after all Florence is quite small in size, however remarkable in character. Here funny little race-meetings are held, beginning on Easter Monday and continuing at intervals until the weather gets too hot. The Florentines pour out in their hundreds and lie about in the long grass among the

THE VIA DE' VAGELLAI FROM THE PIAZZA S. JACOPO TRAFOSSI

wild flowers, and in their fives and tens back their fancies. The system is the pari-mutuel, and here one seems to be more at its mercy even than in France. The odds keep distressingly low; but no one seems to be either elated or depressed, whatever happens. To be at the races is the thing—to walk about and watch the people and enjoy the air. It is the most orderly frugal scene, and the baleful and mysterious power of the racehorse to poison life and landscape, as in England, does not exist here.

To the Cascine also in the spring and autumn several hundred Florentine men come every afternoon to see the game of pallone and risk a few lire on their favourite players. Mr. Ruskin, whose "Mornings in Florence" is still the textbook of the devout, is severe enough upon those visitors who even find it in their hearts to shop and gossip in the city of Giotto. What then would he have said of one who has spent not a few afternoon hours, between four and six, in watching the game of Pallone? I would not call pallone a good game. Compared with cricket, it is nothing; compared with lawn tennis, it is poor; compared with football it is anæmic; yet in an Italian city, after the galleries have closed, on a warm afternoon, it will do, and it will more than do as affording an opportunity of seeing muscular Italian athletes in the pink of condition. The game is played by six professionals: a battitore, who smites the ball, which is served to him very much as in rounders; the spalla, who plays back; and the terzino, who plays forward. The court is sixty or more yards long, on one side being a very high wall and on the other and at each end netting. The implements are the ball, which is hollow and of leather, about half the size of a football, and a cylinder studded with spikes, rather like a huge fir-cone or pine-apple, which is placed over the

wrist and forearm to hit the ball with; and the game is much as in tennis, only there is no central net: merely a line. Each man's ambition, however, is less to defeat the returning power of the foe than to paralyse it by hitting the ball out of reach. It is as though in cricket a batsman were out if he failed to hit three wides.

A good battitore, for instance, can smite the ball right down the sixty yards into the net, above the head of the opposing player who stands awaiting it at the far end. Such a stroke is to the English mind a blot, and it is no uncommon thing, after each side has had a good rally, to see the battitore put every ball into the net in this way and so win the game without his opponents having one return; which is the very negation of sport. During the game every point is marked against the player who scores it; which means that the betting—and of course there is betting—is upon individuals and not upon sides.

The pari-mutuel system is that which is adopted at both the pallone courts in Florence (there is another at the Piazza Beccaria), and the unit used to be two lire. Bets are invited on the winner and the second, and place-money is paid on both. No wonder then that as the game draws to a close the excitement becomes intense; while during its progress feeling runs high too. For how can a young Florentine who has his money on, say, Martini the battitore, withhold criticism when Martini's arm fails and the ball drops comfortably for the terzino Neno to return it out of reach? Such a lapse should not pass unnoticed; nor does it

From the Cascine we may either return to Florence along the banks of the river, or cross the river by the vile iron Ponte Sospeso and enter the city again, on the Pitti side by the imposing Porta S. Frediano. Supposing that

we return by the Lungarno Amerigo Vespucci there is little to notice, beyond costly modern houses of a Portland Place type and the inevitable Garibaldi statue, until, just past the oblique pescaja (or weir), we see across the Piazza Manin the church of All Saints—S. Salvadore d'Ognissanti, which must be visited since it is the burial-place of Botticelli and Amerigo Vespucci, the chapel of the Vespucci family being painted by Ghirlandaio; and since here too lies Botticelli's beautiful Simonetta, who so untimely died. According to Vasari the frescoes of S. Jerome by Ghirlandaio and S. Augustine by Botticelli were done in competition. They were painted, as it happens, elsewhere, but moved here without injury. I think the S. Jerome is the more satisfying, a benevolent old scientific author—a Lord Avebury of the canon—with his implements about him on a tapestry tablecloth, a brass candlestick, his cardinal's hat, and a pair of tortoise-shell eyeglasses handy. S. Augustine is also scientific; astronomical books and instruments surround him too. His tablecloth is linen.

Amerigo Vespucci, whose statue we saw in the Uffizi portico colonnade, was a Florentine by birth who settled in Spain and took to exploration. His discoveries were important, but America is not really among them, for Columbus, whom he knew and supported financially, got there first. By a mistake in the date in his account of his travels, Vespucci's name came to be given to the new continent, and it was then too late to alter it. He became a naturalized Spaniard and died in 1512. Columbus indeed suffers in Florence; for had it not been for Vespucci, America would no doubt be called Columbia; while Brunelleschi anticipated him in the egg trick.

The church is very proud of possessing the robe of S. Francis, which is displayed once a year on October 4th. In

the refectory is a "Last Supper" by Ghirlandaio, not quite so good as that which we saw at S. Marco, but very similar, and, like that, deriving from Castagno's at the Cenacolo di Sant' Apollonia. The predestined Judas is once more on the wrong side of the table.

Returning to the river bank again, we are at once among the hotels and pensions, which continue cheek by jowl right away to the Ponte Vecchio and beyond. In the Piazza Goldoni, where the Ponte alla Carraia springs off, several streets meet, best of them and busiest of them being that Via della Vigna Nuova which one should miss few opportunities of walking along, for here is the palazzo—at No. 20—which Leon Battista Alberti designed for the Rucellai. The Rucellai family's present palace, I may say here, is in the Via della Scala, and by good fortune I found at the door sunning himself a complacent major-domo who, the house being empty of its august owners, allowed me to walk through into the famous garden—the Orti Oricellari—where the Platonic Academy met for a while in Bernardo Rucellai's day. A monument inscribed with their names has been erected among the evergreens. Afterwards the garden was given by Francis I to his beloved Bianca Capella. Its natural beauties are impaired by a gigantic statue of Polyphemus, bigger than any other statue in Florence.

The new Rucellai palace does not compare with the old, which is, I think, the most beautiful of all the private houses of the great day, and is more easily seen too, for there is a little piazza in front of it. The palace, with its lovely design and its plastered windows, is now a rookery, while various industries thrive beneath it. Part of the right side has been knocked away; but even still the proportions are noble. This is a bad quarter for vandalism: for

in the piazza opposite is almost exquisite little loggia, built in 1468, the three lovely arches of which have been filled in and now form the windows of a commercial establishment. I wish the Florentines had enough pride to open up the arches again.

The Rucellai chapel, behind the palace, is in the Via della Spada, and the key must be asked for in the palace stables. It is in a shocking state, and quite in keeping with the traditions of the neighbourhood, while the old church of S. Pancrazio, its neighbour, is now a Government tobacco factory. The Rucellai chapel contains a model of the Holy Sepulchre, at Jerusalem, in marble and intarsia, by the great Alberti—one of the most jewel-like little buildings imaginable. Within it are the faint vestiges of a fresco which the stable-boy calls a Botticelli, and indeed the hands and faces of the angels, such as one can see of them with a farthing dip, do not render the suggestion impossible. On the altar is a terra-cotta Christ which he calls a Donatello, and again he may be right; but fury at a condition of things that can permit such a beautiful place to be so desecrated renders it impossible to be properly appreciative.

Since we are here, instead of returning direct to the river let us go a few yards along this Via della Spada to the left, cross the Via de' Fossi, and so come to the busy Via di Pallazzuolo, on the left of which, past the piazza of S. Paolino, is the little church of S. Francesco de' Vanchetoni. This church is usually locked, but the key is next door, on the right, and it has to be obtained because over the right sacristy door is a boy's head by Rossellino, and over the left a boy's head by Desiderio da Settignano, and each is joyful and perfect.

The Via de' Fossi will bring us again to the Piazza Goldoni and the Arno, and a few yards farther along there

is a palace to be seen, the Corsini, the only palazzo still inhabited by its family to which strangers are admitted—the long low white façade with statues on the top and a large courtyard, on the Lungarno Corsini, just after the Piazza Goldoni. It is not very interesting and belongs to the wrong period, the seventeenth century It is open on fixed days, and free save that one manservant receives the visitor and another conducts him from room to room. There are many pictures, but few of outstanding merit, and the authorship of some of these has been challenged. Thus, the cartoon of Julius II, which is called a Raphael and seems to be the sketch for one of the well-known portraits at the Pitti, Uffizi, or our National Gallery, is held to be not by Raphael at all. Among the pleasantest pictures are a Lippo Lippi Madonna and Child, a Filippino Lippi Madonna and Child with Angels, and a similar group by Botticelli; but one has a feeling that Carlo Dolci and Guido Reni are the true heroes of the house. Guido Reni's Lucrezia Romana, with a dagger which she has already thrust two inches into her bosom, as though it were cheese, is one of the most foolish pictures I ever saw. The Corsini family having given the world a pope, a case of papal vestments is here. It was this Pope who, when Cardinal Corsini, said to Dr. Johnson's friend, Mrs. Piozzi, on meeting her in Florence in 1785, "Well, Madam, you never saw one of us red-legged partridges before, I believe."

There may be more beautiful bridges in the world than at Trinità, but I have seen none. Its curve is so gentle and soft, and its three arches so easy and graceful, that I wonder that whenever new bridges are necessary the authorities do not insist upon the Trinità being copied. The Ponte Vecchio, of course, has a separate interest of its

own, and stands apart, like the Rialto. It is a bridge by chance, one might almost say. But the Trinità is a bridge in intent and supreme at that, the most perfect union of two river banks imaginable. It shows to what depths modern Florence can fall—how little she esteems her past—that the iron bridge by the Cascine should ever have been built. Of all the yellows of the Arno, that of the Trinità stone work is the richest The Arno herself supplies a curious variety of this hue, in which water seems to reach an opacity beyond itself. But the various yellows of Florence—the prevailing colours—are spread out nowhere so favourably as on the Pitti side of the river between the Trinità and the Ponte Vecchio, on the backs of the houses of the Borgo San Jacopo, and just so must this row have looked for four hundred years. Certain of the occupants of these tenements, even on the upper floors, have fishing nets, on pulleys, which they let down at intervals during the day for the minute fish which seem to be as precious to Italian fishermen as sparrows and wrens to Italian gunners. I have spent many hours—if all the minutes were put together—watching the fishermen in boats lowering and raising their nets—also yellow, by the way—but never have I witnessed the capture of even the tiniest minnow

The great palace at the Trinità end of this stretch of yellow buildings—the Frescobaldi—must have been very striking when the loggia was open: the three rows of double arches that are now walled in. From this point, as well as from similar points on the other side of the Ponte Vecchio, one realizes the mischief done by Cosimo I's secret passage across it; for not only does the passage impose a straight line on a bridge that was never intended to have one, but it cuts Florence in two if it were not

for its large central arches one would, from the other bridges or the embankment, see nothing whatever of the further side of the city; but as it is, through these arches one has heavenly vignettes. I have never seen a picture of the Ponte Vecchio before the passage between the Pitti and Uffizi was built; but I assume that until that time it was an ordinary span without any houses, and therefore without its central arches.

We leave the river again for a few minutes about fifty yards along the Lungarno Acciaioli beyond the Trinità and turn up a narrow passage to see the little church of SS. Apostoli, where there is a delightful gay ciborium, all bright colours and happiness, attributed to Andrea della Robbia, with pretty cherubs and pretty angels, and a benignant Christ and flowers and fruit which cannot but chase away gloom and dubiety. Here also is a fine tomb by the sculptor of the elaborate chimney-piece which we saw in the Bargello, Benedetto da Rovezzano, who also designed the church's very beautiful door. Whether or not it is true that SS. Apostoli was built by Charlemagne, it is certainly very old and architecturally of great interest. Vasari says that Brunelleschi acquired from it his inspiration for S. Lorenzo and S. Spirito. To many Florentines its principal importance is its custody of the Pazzi flints for the igniting of the sacred fire which in turn ignites the famous Carro.

Returning again to the embankment, we are quickly at the Ponte Vecchio, where it is pleasant at all times to loiter and observe both the river and the people; while from its central arches one sees the mountains. From no point are the hill of S. Miniato and its stately cypresses more beautiful; but one cannot see the church itself—only the church of S. Niccolò below it, and of course

the bronze "David." In dry weather the Arno is green, in rainy weather yellow. It is so sensitive that one can almost see it respond to the most distant shower; but directly the rain falls and it is fed by a thousand Apennine torrents it foams past this bridge in fury. The Ponte Vecchio was the work, upon a Roman foundation, of Taddeo Gaddi, Giotto's godson, in the middle of the fourteenth century, but the shops are, of course, more recent. The passage between the Pitti and Uffizi was added in 1564. Gaddi, who was a fresco painter first and architect afterwards, was employed because Giotto was absent in Milan, Giotto being the first thought of every one in difficulties at that time. The need, however, was pressing, for a flood in 1333 had destroyed a large part of the Roman bridge. Gaddi builded so well that when, two hundred and more years later, another flood severely damaged three other bridges, the Ponte Vecchio was unharmed. None the less it is not Gaddi's bust but Cellini's that has the post of honour in the centre; but this is, of course, because Cellini was a goldsmith, and it is to goldsmiths that the shops belong. Once it was the butchers' quarter!

I never cross the Ponte Vecchio and, through the windows, see these artificers in their blouses without wondering if any of their boy assistants is the Michelangelo, or Orcagna, or Ghirlandaio, or even Cellini, of the future, since all of those and countless others of the Renaissance masters, began in precisely this way.

The odd thing is that one is on the Ponte Vecchio, from either end, before one knows it to be a bridge at all. A street of sudden steepness is what it seems to be. Not the least charming thing upon it is the masses of groundsel which have established themselves on the pent roof over

the goldsmiths' shops. Every visitor to Florence must have longed to occupy one of these little bridge houses; but I am not aware that any has done so.

One of the oldest streets in Florence must be the Via Girolami, from the Ponte Vecchio to the Uffizi, under an arch. A turning to the left brings one to the Piazza S. Stefano, where the barn-like church of S. Stefano is entered; and close by is the Torre de' Girolami, where S. Zenobius lived. S. Stefano, although it is now so easily overlooked, was of importance in its day, and it was here that Niccolò da Uzzano, the leader of the nobles (whose head by Donatello, coloured wood, we saw at the Bargello), held a meeting to devise means of checking the growing power of the people early in the fifteenth century and was thwarted by old Giovanni de' Medici. From that thwarting proceeded the power of the Medici family and the gloriously endowed Florence that we travel to see.