CHAPTER XX

S. MARIA NOVELLA

The great churches of Florence—A Dominican cathedral—The "Decameron" begins—Domenico Ghirlandaio—Alessio Baldovinetti—The Louvre—The S. Maria Novella frescoes—Giovanni and Lorenzo Tornabuoni—Ruskin implacable—Cimabue's Madonna—Filippino Lippi—Orcagna's "Last Judgment"—The Cloisters of Florence—The Spanish Chapel — S. Dominic triumphant — Giotto at his sweetest — The "Wanderer's" door—The Piazza as an arena.

S. MARIA NOVELLA is usually bracketed with S. Croce as the most interesting Florentine church after the Duomo, but S. Lorenzo has of course to be reckoned with very seriously. I think that for interest I should place S. Maria Novella fifth, including also the Baptistery before it, but architecturally second. Its interior is second in beauty only to S. Croce. S. Croce is its immediate religious rival, for it was because the Dominicans had S. Maria Novella, begun in 1278, that several years later the Franciscans determined to have an equally important church and built S. Croce. The S. Maria Novella architects were brothers of the order, but Talenti, whom we saw at work both on Giotto's tower and Or San Michele, built the campanile, and Leon Battista Alberti the marble façade, many years later. The richest patrons of S. Maria Novella—corresponding to the Medici at S. Lorenzo and the Bardi at S. Croce—were the Rucellai, whose palace, designed also by the wonderful versatile Alberti, we have seen

The interior of S. Maria Novella is very fine and spacious, and it gathers and preserves an exquisite light at all times of the day. Nowhere in Florence is there a finer aisle, with the roof springing so nobly and masterfully from the eight columns on either side. The whole effect, like that of S. Croce, is rather northern, the result of the yellow and brown hues; but whereas S. Croce has a crushing flat roof, this one is all soaring gladness.

The finest view of the interior is from the altar steps looking back to the beautiful circular window over the entrance, a mass of happy colour. In the afternoon the little plain circular windows high up in the aisle shoot shafts of golden light upon the yellow walls. The high altar of inlaid marble is, I think, too bright and too large. The church is more impressive on Good Friday, when over this altar is built a Calvary with the crucifix on the summit and life-size mourners at its foot; while a choir and string orchestra make superbly mournful music.

I like to think that it was within the older S. Maria Novella that those seven mirthful young ladies of Florence remained one morning in 1348, after Mass, to discuss plans of escape from the city during the plague. As here they chatted and plotted, there entered the church three young men; and what simpler than to engage them as companions in their retreat, especially as all three, like all seven of the young women, were accomplished tellers of stories with no fear whatever of Mrs. Grundy? And thus the "Decameron" of Giovanni Boccaccio came about.

S. Maria Novella also resembles S. Croce in its moving groups of sight-seers each in the hands of a guide. These one sees always and hears always: so much so that a reminder has been printed and set up here and there in this church, to the effect that it is primarily the house of God

and for worshippers. But S. Maria Novella has not a tithe of S. Croce's treasures. Having almost no tombs of first importance it has to rely upon its interior beauty and upon its frescoes, and its chief glory, whatever Mr. Ruskin, who hated them, might say, is, for most people, Ghirlandaio's series of scenes in the life of the Virgin and S. John the Baptist. These cover the walls of the choir and for more than four centuries have given delight to Florentines and foreigners. Such was the thoroughness of their painter in his colour mixing (in which the boy Michelangelo assisted him) that, although they have sadly dimmed and require the best morning light, they should endure for centuries longer, a reminder not only of the thoughtful sincere interesting art of Ghirlandaio and of the pious generosity of the Tornabuoni family, who gave them, but also of the costumes and carriage of the Florentine ladies at the end of the fifteenth century when Lorenzo the Magnificent was in his zenith. Domenico Ghirlandaio may not be quite of the highest rank among the makers of Florence; but he comes very near it, and indeed, by reason of being Michelangelo's first instructor, perhaps should stand amid them. But one thing is certain—that without him Florence would be the poorer by many beautiful works.

He was born in 1449, twenty-one years after the death of Masaccio and three before Leonardo, twenty-six before Michelangelo, and thirty-four before Raphael. His full name was Domenico or Tommaso di Currado di Doffo Bigordi, but his father Tommaso Bigordi, a goldsmith, having hit upon a peculiarly attractive way of making garlands for the hair, was known as Ghirlandaio, the garland maker; and time has effaced the Bigordi completely.

The portraits of both Tommaso and Domenico, side by side, occur in the fresco representing Joachim driven from

the Temple: Domenico, who is to be seen second from the extreme right, a little resembles our Charles II. Like his father, and, as we have seen, like most of the artists of Florence, he too became a goldsmith, and his love of the jewels that goldsmiths made may be traced in his pictures; but at an early age he was sent to Alessio Baldovinetti to learn to be a painter. Alessio's work we find all over Florence: a Last Judgment in the Accademia, for example, but that is not a very pleasing thing; a Madonna Enthroned, in the Uffizi; the S. Miniato frescoes; the S. Trinità frescoes; and that extremely charming although faded work in the outer court of SS. Annunziata. For the most delightful picture from his hand, however, one has to go to the Louvre, where there is a Madonna and Child (1300 a), in the early Tuscan room, which has a charm not excelled by any such group that I know. The photographers still call it a Piero della Francesca and the Louvre authorities omit to name it at all; but it is Alessio beyond question. Next it hangs the best Ghirlandaio that I know—the very beautiful Visitation, and, to add to the interest of this room to the returning Florentine wanderer, on the same wall are two far more attractive works by Bastiano Mainardi (Ghirlandaio's brother-in-law and assistant at S. Maria Novella) than any in Florence.

Alessio, who was born in 1427, was an open-handed ingenious man who could not only paint and do mosaic but once made a wonderful clock for Lorenzo. His experiments with colour were disastrous: hence most of his frescoes have perished; but possibly it was through Alessio's mistakes that Ghirlandaio acquired the use of such a lasting medium. Alessio was an independent man who painted from taste and not necessity.

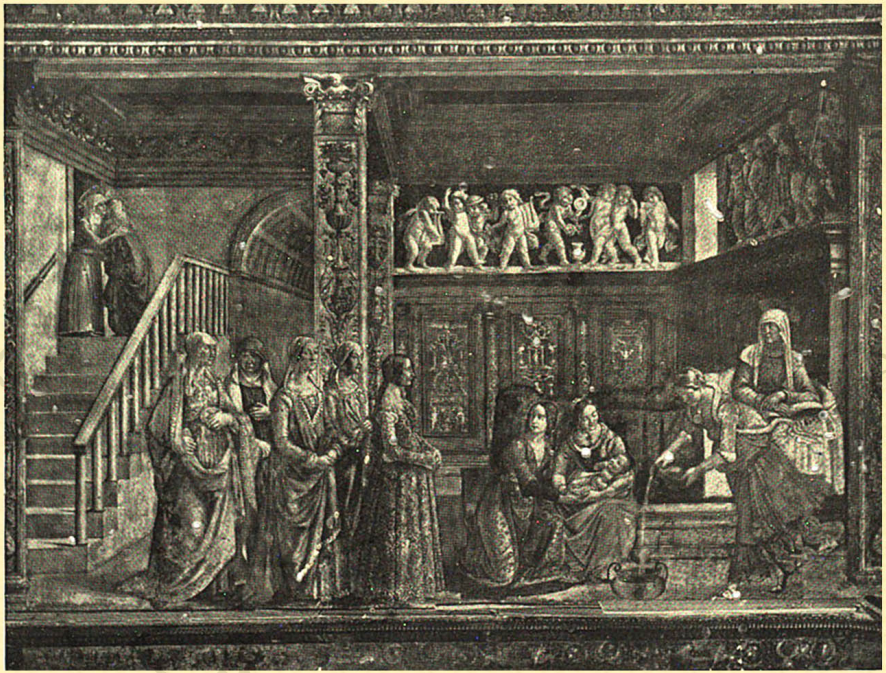
Ghirlandaio's chief influences, however, were Masaccio, at the Carmine, Fra Lippo Lippi, and Verrocchio, who is thought also to have been Baldovinetti's pupil and whose Baptism of Christ, in the Accademia, painted when Ghirlandaio was seventeen, must have given Ghirlandaio the lines for his own treatment of the incident in this church. One has also only to compare Verrocchio's sculptured Madonnas in the Bargello with many of Ghirlandaio's to see the influence again; both were attracted by a similar type of sweet, easy-natured girl.

When he was twenty-six Ghirlandaio went to Rome to paint the Sixtine library, and then to San Gimignano, where he was assisted by Mainardi, who was to remain his most valuable ally in executing the large commissions which were to come to his workshop. His earliest Florentine frescoes are those which we shall see at Ognissanti; the Madonna della Misericordia and the Deposition painted for the Vespucci family and only recently discovered, together with the S. Jerome, in the church, and the Last Supper, in the refectory. By this time Ghirlandaio and Botticelli were in some sort of rivalry, although, so far as I know, friendly enough, and both went to Rome in 1481, together with Perugino, Piero di Cosimo, Cosimo Rosselli, Luca Signorelli and others, at the command of Pope Sixtus IV to decorate the Sixtine chapel, the excommunication of all Florentines which the Pope had decreed after the failure of the Pazzi Conspiracy to destroy the Medici (as we saw in chapter II) having been removed in order to get these excellent workmen to the Holy City. Painting very rapidly the little band had finished their work in six months, and Ghirlandaio was at home again with such an ambition and industry in him that he once expressed the wish that every inch of the walls of Florence

might be covered by his brush—and in those days Florence had walls all round it, with twenty-odd towers in addition to the gates. His next great frescoes were those in the Palazzo Vecchio and S. Trinità. It was in 1485 that he painted his delightful Adoration, at the Accademia, and in 1486 he began his great series at S. Maria Novella, finishing them in 1490, his assistants being his brother David, Benedetto Mainardi, who married Ghirlandaio's sister, and certain apprentices, among them the youthful Michelangelo, who came to the studio in 1488.

The story of the frescoes is this. Ghirlandaio when in Rome had met Giovanni Tornabuoni, a wealthy merchant whose wife had died in childbirth. Her death we have already seen treated in relief by Verrocchio in the Bargello. Ghirlandaio was first asked to beautify in her honour the Minerva at Rome, where she was buried, and this he did. Later when Giovanni Tornabuoni wished to present S. Maria Novella with a handsome benefaction, he induced the Ricci family, who owned this chapel, to allow him to re-decorate it, and engaged Ghirlandaio for the task. This meant first covering the fast fading frescoes by Orcagna, which were already there, and then painting over them. What the Orcagnas were like we cannot know; but the substitute, although probably it had less of curious genius in it was undoubtedly more attractive to the ordinary observer.

The right wall, as one faces the window (whose richness of coloured glass, although so fine in the church as a whole, is here such a privation), is occupied by scenes in the story of the Baptist; the left by the life of the Virgin. The left of the lowest pair on the right wall represents S. Mary and S. Elizabeth, and in it a party of Ghirlandaio's stately Florentine ladies watch the greeting of the two



THE BIRTH OF THE VIRGIN

FROM THE FRESCO BY GHIRLANDAIO IN S. MARIA NOVELLA

saints outside Florence itself, symbolized, rather than portrayed, very near the church in which we stand. The girl in yellow, on the right of the picture, with her handkerchief in her hand and wearing a rich dress, is Giovanna degli Albizzi, who married Lorenzo Tornabuoni at the Villa Lemmi near Florence, that villa from which Botticelli's exquisite fresco, now in the Louvre at the top of the main staircase, in which she again is to be seen, was taken. Her life was a sad one, for her husband was one of those who conspired with Piero di Lorenzo de' Medici for his return some ten years later, and was beheaded. S. Elizabeth is of course the older woman. The companion to this picture represents the angel appearing to S. Zacharias, and here again Ghirlandaio gives us contemporary Florentines, portraits of distinguished Tornabuoni men and certain friends of eminence among them. In the little group low down on the left, for example, are Poliziano and Marsilio Ficino, the Platonist. Above—but seeing is beginning to be difficult—the pair of frescoes represent, on the right, the birth of the Baptist, and on the left, his naming. The birth scene has much beauty, and is as well composed as any, and there is a girl in it of superb grace and nobility; but the birth scene of the Virgin, on the opposite wall, is perhaps the finer and certainly more easily seen. In the naming of the child we find Medici portraits once more, that family being related to the Tornabuoni; and Mr. Davies, in his book on Ghirlandaio, offers the interesting suggestion, which he supports very reasonably, that the painter has made the incident refer to the naming of Lorenzo de' Medici's third son, Giovanni (or John), who afterwards became Pope Leo X. In that case the man on the left, in green, with his hand on his hip, would be Lorenzo himself whom he certainly resembles. Who the

sponsor is is not known. The landscape and architecture are alike charming.

Above these we faintly see that strange Baptism of Christ, so curiously like the Verrocchio in the Accademia, and the Baptist preaching.

The left wall is perhaps the favourite. We begin with Joachim being driven from the Temple, one of the lowest pair; and this has a peculiar interest in giving us a portrait of the painter and his associates—the figure on the extreme right being Benedetto Mainardi; then Domenico Ghirlandaio; then his father; and lastly his brother David. On the opposite side of the picture is the fated Lorenzo Tornabuoni, of whom I have spoken above, the figure farthest from the edge, with his hand on his hip. The companion picture is the most popular of all—the Birth of the Virgin—certainly one of the most charming interiors in Florence. Here again we have portraits—no doubt Tornabuoni ladies—and much pleasant fancy on the part of the painter, who made everything as beautiful as he could, totally unmindful of the probabilities. Ruskin is angry with him for neglecting to show the splashing of the water in the vessel, but it would be quite possible for no splashing to be visible, especially if the pouring had only just begun; but for Ruskin's strictures you must go to "Mornings in Florence," where poor Ghirlandaio gets a lash for every virtue of Giotto. Next—above, on the left—we have the Presentation of the Virgin and on the right her Marriage. The Presentation is considered by Mr. Davies to be almost wholly the work of Ghirlandaio's assistants, while the youthful Michelangelo himself has been credited with the half-naked figure on the steps, although Mr. Davies gives it to Mainardi. Mainardi again is probably the author of the companion scene. The remaining fres-

coes are of less interest and much damaged; but in the window wall one should notice the portraits of Giovanni Tornabuoni and Francesca di Luca Pitti, his wife, kneeling, because this Giovanni was the donor of the frescoes, and his sister Lucrezia was the wife of Piero de' Medici and therefore the mother of Lorenzo the Magnificent, while Francesca Tornabuoni, the poor lady who died in childbirth, was the daughter of that proud Florentine who began the Pitti palace but ended his life in disgrace.

And so we leave this beautiful recess, where pure religious feeling may perhaps be wanting but where the best spirit of the Renaissance is to be found: everything making for harmony and pleasure; and on returning to London the visitor should make a point of seeing the Florentine girl by the same hand in our National Gallery, No. 1230, for she is very typical of his genius.

On the entrance wall of the church is what must once have been a fine Masaccio—"The Trinity"—but it is in very bad condition; while in the Cappella Rucellai in the right transept is what purports to be a Cimabue, very like the one in the Accademia, but with a rather more matured Child in it. Vasari tells us that on its completion this picture was carried in stately procession from the painter's studio to the church, in great rejoicing and blowing of trumpets, the populace being moved not only by religious ecstasy but by pride in an artist who could make such a beautiful and spacious painting, the largest then known. Vasari adds that when Cimabue was at work upon it, Charles of Anjou, visiting Florence, was taken to his studio, to see the wonderful painter, and a number of Florentines entering too, they broke out into such rejoicings that the locality was known ever after as Borgo Allegro, or Joyful Quarter. This would be about 1290. There was a cer-

this fitness in Cimabue painting this Madonna, for it is said that he had his education in the convent which stood here before the present church was begun. But I should add that of Cimabue we know practically nothing, and that most of Vasari's statements have been confuted, while the painter of the S. Maria Novella Madonna is held by some authorities to be Duccio of Siena. So where are we?

The little chapel next the choir on the right is that of Filippo Strozzi the elder who was one of the witnesses of the Pazzi outrage in the Duomo in 1478. This was the Filippo Strozzi who began the Strozzi palace in 1489, father of the Filippo Strozzi who married Lorenzo de' Medici's noble grand-daughter Clarice and came to a tragic end under Cosimo I. Old Filippo's tomb here was designed by Benedetto da Maiano, who made the famous Franciscan pulpit in S. Croce, and was Ghirlandaio's friend and the Strozzi palace's first architect. The beautiful circular relief of the Virgin and Child, with a border of roses and flying worshipping angels all about it, behind the altar, is Benedetto's too, and very lovely and human are both Mother and Child.

The frescoes in this chapel, by Filippino Lippi, are interesting, particularly that one on the left, depicting the Resuscitation of Drusiana by S. John the Evangelist at Rome, in which the group of women and children on the right, with the little dog, is full of life and most naturally done. Above (but almost impossible to see) is S. John in his cauldron of boiling oil between Roman soldiers and the denouncing Emperor, under the banner S.P.Q.R.—a work in which Roman local colour completely excludes religious feeling. Opposite, below, we see S. Philip exorcising a dragon, a very florid scene, and, above, a painfully spirited and realistic representation of the Crucifixion.

The sweetness of the figures of Charity and Faith in monochrome and gold helps, with Benedetto's tondo, to engentle the air.

We then come again to the Choir with Ghirlandaio's urbane Florentine pageant in the guise of sacred history, and pass on to the next chapel, the Cappella Gondi, where that crucifix in wood is to be seen which Brunelleschi carved as a lesson to Donatello, who received it like the gentleman he was. I have told the story in Chapter XV.

The left transept ends in the chapel of the Strozzi family, of which Filippo was the head in his day, and here we find Andrea Orcagna and his brother's fresco of Heaven, the Last Judgment and Hell. It was the two Orcagnas who, according to Vasari, had covered the Choir with those scenes in the life of the Virgin which Ghirlandaio was allowed to paint over, and Vasari adds that the later artist availed himself of many of the ideas of his predecessors. This, however, is not very likely, I think, except perhaps in choice of subject. Orcagna, like Giotto, and later, Michelangelo, was a student of Dante, and the Strozzi chapel frescoes follow the poet's descriptions. In the Last Judgment, Dante himself is to be seen, among the elect, in the attitude of prayer. Petrarch is with him.

The sacristy is by Talenti (of the Campanile) and was added in 1350. Among its treasures once were the three reliquaries painted by Fra Angelico, but they are now at S. Marco. It has still rich vestments, fine woodwork, and a gay and elaborate lavabo by one of the della Robbias, with its wealth of ornament and colour and its charming Madonna and Child with angels.

A little doorway close by used to lead to the cloisters, and a mercenary sacristan was never far distant, only too ready to unlock for a fee what should never have been

locked, and black with fury if he got nothing. But all this has now been done away with, and the entrance to the cloisters is from the Piazza, just to the left of the church, and there is a turnstile and a fee of fifty centimes. At S. Lorenzo the cloisters are free. At the Carmine and the Annunziata the cloisters are free. At S. Croce the charge is a lira and at S. Maria Novella half a lira. To make a charge for the cloisters alone seems to me utterly wicked. Let the Pazzi Chapel at S. Croce and the Spanish Chapel here have fees, if you like; but the cloisters should be open to all. Children should be encouraged to play there.

Since, however, S. Maria Novella imposes a fee we must pay it, and the new arrangement at any rate carries this advantage with it, that one knows what one is expected to pay and can count on entrance.

The cloisters are everywhere interesting to loiter in, but their chief fame is derived from the Spanish Chapel, which gained that name when in 1566 it was put at the disposal of Eleanor of Toledo's suite on the occasion of her marriage to Cosimo I. Nothing Spanish about it otherwise. Both structure and frescoes belong to the fourteenth century. Of these frescoes, which are of historical and human interest rather than artistically beautiful, that one on the right wall as we enter is the most famous. It is a pictorial glorification of the Dominican order triumphant; with a vivid reminder of the origin of the word Dominican in the episode of the wolves (or heretics) being attacked by black and white dogs, the *Canes Domini*, or hounds of the Lord. The "Mornings in Florence" should here be consulted again, for Ruskin made a very thorough and characteristically decisive analysis of these paintings, which, whether one agrees with it or not, is profoundly interesting. Poor old Vasari, who so patiently described them too and named a number

of the originals of the portraits, is now shelved, and from both his artists, Simone Martini and Taddeo Gaddi, has the authorship been taken by modern experts. Some one, however, must have done the work. The Duomo as represented here is not the Duomo of fact, which had not then its dome, but of anticipation.

Opposite, we see a representation of the triumph of the greatest of the Dominicans, after its founder, S. Thomas Aquinas, the author of the "Summa Theologiæ," who died in 1274. The painter shows the Angelic Doctor enthroned amid saints and patriarchs and heavenly attendants, while three powerful heretics grovel at his feet, and beneath are the Sciences and Moral Qualities and certain distinguished men who served them conspicuously, such as Aristotle, the logician, whom S. Thomas Aquinas edited, and Cicero, the rhetorician. In real life Aquinas was so modest and retiring that he would accept no exalted post from the Church, but remained closeted with his books and scholars; and we can conceive what his horror would be could he view this apotheosis. On the ceiling is a quaint rendering of the walking on the water, S. Peter's failure being watched from the ship with the utmost closeness by the other disciples, but attracting no notice whatever from an angler, close by, on the shore. The chapel is desolate and unkempt, and those of us who are not Dominicans are not sorry to leave it and look for the simple sweetness of the Giottos.

These are to be found, with some difficulty, on the walls of the niche where the tomb of the Marchese Ridolfo stands. They are certainly very simple and telling, and I advise every one to open the "Mornings in Florence" and learn how the wilful magical pen deals with them; but it would be a pity to give up Ghirlandaio because Giotto was so different.

as Ruskin wished. Room for both. One scene represents the meeting of S. Joachim and S. Anna outside a mediæval city's walls, and it has some pretty Giottesque touches, such as the man carrying doves to the Temple and the angel uniting the two saints in friendliness; and the other is the Birth of the Virgin, which Ruskin was so pleased to pit against Ghirlandaio's treatment of the same incident. Well, it is given to some of us to see only what we want to see and be blind to the rest; and Ruskin was of these the very king. I agree with him that Ghirlandaio in both his Nativity frescoes thought little of the exhaustion of the mothers; but it is arguable that two such accouchements might with propriety be treated as abnormal—as indeed every painter has treated the birth of Christ, where the Virgin, fully dressed, is receiving the Magi a few moments after. Ruskin, after making his deadly comparisons, concludes thus genially of the Giotto version—"If you can be pleased with this, you can see Florence. But if not, by all means amuse yourself there, if you can find it amusing, as long as you like; you can never see it."

The S. Maria Novella habit is one to be quickly contracted by the visitor to Florence: nearly as important as the S. Croce habit. Both churches are hospitable and, apart from the cloisters, free and eminently suited for dallying in; thus differing from the Duomo, which is dark, and S. Lorenzo, where there are payments to be made and attendants to discourage.

An effort should be made at S. Maria Novella to get into the old cloisters, which are very large and indicate what a vast convent it once was. But there is no certainty. The way is to go through to the Palæstra and hope for the best. Here, as I have said in the second chapter, were lodged Pope Eugenius and his suite, when they came to the

Council of Florence in 1439. These large and beautiful green cloisters are now deserted. Through certain windows on the left one may see chemists at work compounding drugs and perfumes after old Dominican recipes, to be sold at the Farmacia in the Via della Scala close by. The great refectory has been turned into a gymnasium.

The two obelisks, supported by tortoises and surmounted by beautiful lilies, in the Piazza di S. Maria Novella were used as boundaries in the chariot races held here under Cosimo I, and in the collection of old Florentine prints on the top floor of Michelangelo's house you may see representations of these races. The charming loggia opposite S. Maria Novella, with della Robbia decorations, is the Loggia di S. Paolo, a school designed, it is thought, by Brunelleschi, and here, at the right hand end, we see S. Dominic himself in a friendly embrace with S. Francis, a very beautiful group by either Luca or Andrea della Robbia.

In the loggia cabmen now wrangle all day and all night. From it S. Maria Novella is seen under the best conditions, always cheerful and serene; while far behind the church is the huge Apennine where most of the bad weather of Florence seems to be manufactured.