CHAPTER XXI

THE PIAZZA VITTORIO EMMANUELE TO S. TRINITA

A city of trams — The old market — The figure of Abundance — An evening resort — A hall of variety — Florentines of to-day — The war with Turkey — Homecoming heroes — Restaurants — The new market — The bronze boar — A fifteenth century palace — Old Florentine life reconstructed — Where changes are few — S. Trinità — Ghirlandaio again — S. Francis — The Strozzi palace — Clarice de' Medici.

FLORENCE is not simple to the stranger. Like all very old cities built fortuitously it is difficult to learn: the points of the compass are elusive; the streets are so narrow that the sky is no constant guide; the names of the streets are often not there; the policemen have no high standard of helpfulness. There are trams, it is true—too many and too noisy, and too near the pavement—but the names of their outward destinations, from the centre, too rarely correspond to any point of interest that one is desiring. Hence one has many embarrassments and even annoyances. Yet I daresay this is best: an orderly Florence is unthinkable. Since, however, the trams that are returning to the centre nearly all go to the Duomo, either passing it or stopping there, the tram becomes one's best friend and the Duomo one's starting point for most excursions.

Supposing ourselves to be there once more, let us quickly get through the horrid necessity, which confronts one in all ancient Italian cities, of seeing the Piazza Vittorio Em-

manuele. In an earlier chapter we left the Baptistery and walked along the Via Calzaioli. Again starting from the Baptistery let us take the Via dell' Arcivescovado, which is parallel with the Via Calzaioli, on the right of it, and again walk straight forward. We shall come almost at once to the great modern square.

No Italian city or town is complete without a Piazza Vittorio Emmanuele and a statue of that monarch. In Florence the sturdy king bestrides his horse here. Italy being so old and Vittorio Emmanuele so new, it follows in most cases that the square or street named after him supplants an older one, and if the Italians had any memory or imaginative interest in history they would see to it that the old name was not wholly obliterated. In Florence, in order to honour the first king of United Italy, much grave violence was done to antiquity, for a very picturesque quarter had to be cleared away for the huge brasseries, stores and hotels which make up the west side; which in their turn marked the site of the old market where Donatello and Brunelleschi and all the later artists of the great days did their shopping and met to exchange ideals and banter; and that market in its turn marked the site of the Roman forum.

One of the features of the old market was the charming Loggia di Pesce; another, Foggini's figure of Abundance, surmounting a column, which we saw in the museum of ancient city relics in the monastery of S. Marco, where one confronts her on a level instead of looking up at her in mid-sky.

In talking to elderly persons who can remember the Florence of many years ago I find that nothing so distresses them as the loss of the old quarter for the making of this new spacious piazza; and probably nothing can so delight

the younger Florentines as its possession, for, having nothing to do in the evenings, they do it chiefly in the Piazza Vittorio Emmanuele. Chairs and tables spring up like mushrooms in the roadway, among which too few waiters distribute those very inexpensive refreshments which seem to be purchased rather for the right to the seat that they confer than for any stimulation. It is extraordinary to the eyes of the thriftless English, who are never so happy as when they are overpaying Italian and other caterers in their own country, to notice how long these wiser folk will occupy a table on an expenditure of a few pence.

I do not mean that there are no theatres in Florence. There are several, and one or two are very good; and the young men can do without them: curious old theatres mostly, and all apparently built for the comedies of Goldoni. There are cinema theatres too, at prices which would delight the English public addicted to those insidious entertainments, but horrify English managers; and the Teatro Salvini at the back of the Palazzo Vecchio is occasionally transformed into a Folies Bergères (as it is called), where one indifferent singer after another casually renders two songs to an audience who regards her with apathy, or very frankly expresses contempt and converses without ceasing. The only sign of interest which one observes is the murmur which follows anything a little off the beaten track—a sound that might equally be encouragement or disapproval. But a really pretty woman entering a box moves them. Then they employ every note in the gamut; and curiously enough the pretty woman in the box is usually as cool under the fusillade as a professional and hardened sister would be. A strange music hall, this, to the English eye, where the orchestra smokes, and no numbers are put up, and every one talks, and no one seems

to appreciate anything but a daring dress, and the intervals seem to be hours long. But the Florentines do not mind, for they have not the English thirst for entertainment and escape; they carry their entertainment with them and do not wish to escape—going to such places only because their friends may be there.

Sitting here and watching their ironical negligence of the stage and their interest in each other's company; their animated talk and rapid decisions as to the merits and charms of a performer; the comfort of their attitudes and carelessness (although never quite slovenliness) in dress; one seems to realize the nation better than anywhere. The old fighting passion may have gone; but much of the quickness, the shrewdness and the humour remains, together with the determination of each man to have if possible his own way and, whether possible or not, his own say.

Seeing them in great numbers one quickly learns and steadily corroborates the fact that the Florentines are not beautiful. A pretty woman or a handsome man is a rarity; but a dull-looking man or woman is equally rare. They are shrewd, philosophic, cynical, and very ready for laughter. They look contented also: Florence, clearly is the best place to be born in, to live in, and to die in. Let all the world come to Florence, by all means, and spend its money there; but don't ask Florence to go to the world. Don't in fact ask Florence to do anything very much.

Civilization and modern conditions have done the Florentines no good. Their destiny was to live in a walled city in turbulent days, when the foe came against it, or tyranny threatened from within and had to be resisted. They were then Florentines and everything mattered. To-day they are Italians and nothing matters very much. Moreover, it must be galling to have somewhere in the recesses

of their consciousness the knowledge that their famous city, built and cemented with their ancestors' blood, is now only a museum.

Judging by the shops the principal industry of Florence is drawn linen work. Along the Arno every other window is full of table centres, d'oyleys, bed covers and lace. The intervening shops deal in tortoiseshell or antiquities. It is foolish to attempt to teach other nations their business, although much time on foreign journeys is occupied in the wish to do so; but I can inform the Florentine shopkeepers that I, for one, should be more likely to enter their formidable premises and traffic with them if they would exhibit, instead of carefully concealing, the price of every article in the window. I refer, of course, to the shops where new articles are sold. One would not expect the antiquity dealers of the Via de' Fossi, which is a museum in itself, to do so.

The restaurants of Florence are those of a city where the natives are thrifty and the visitors dine in hotels. There is one expensive high-class house, in the Via Tornabuoni—Doney e Nipoti or Doney et Neveux—where the cooking is Franco-Italian, and the Chianti and wines are dear beyond belief, and the venerable waiters move with a deliberation which can drive a hungry man—and one is always hungry in this fine Tuscan air—to despair. But it is more interesting to go to the huge Gambrinus in the Piazza Vittorio Emmanuele. One curious Florentine habit is quickly discovered and resented by the stranger who frequents a restaurant, and that is the system of changing waiters from one set of tables to another; so that whereas in London and Paris the wise diner is true to a corner because it carries the same service with it, in Florence he must follow the service. But if the restaurants have odd ways, and a

limited range of dishes and those not very interesting, they make up for it by being astonishingly quick. Things are cooked almost miraculously.

The Florentines eat little. But greediness is not an Italian fault. No greedy people would have a five-syllabled word for waiter.

Continuing along the Via dell' Arcivescovado, which after the Piazza becomes the Via Celimana, we come to that very beautiful structure the Mercato Nuovo, which, however, is not so wonderfully new, having been built as long ago as 1547-1551. Its columns and arched roof are exquisitely proportioned. As a market it seems to be a poor affair, the chief commodity being straw hats, linen, and flowers, either cut or in pots—very unworthy of a city called Firenze. For the principal food market one has to go to the Via d'Ariento, near S. Lorenzo, and this is, I think, well worth doing early in the morning. Lovers of Hans Andersen go to the Mercato Nuovo to see the famous bronze boar (or "metal pig," as it was called in the translation on which I was brought up) that stands here, on whose back the little street boy had such adventures. The boar himself was the work of Pietro Tacca (1586-1650), a copy from an ancient Greek marble original, now in the Uffizi in one of the corridors; but the pedestal with its collection of creeping things is modern. For the original one you must go to the Museo of San Marco, where in a little cloister you will find it—a bronze fountain covered with frogs and toads and other creatures, one of the frogs being as worn by the fingerings of little Florentines as is the big toe of St. Peter in the Vatican by the kisses of the devout. I should guess this frog to have enjoyed a luck-bearing reputation, to account for such polish. Whether or not, I caressed it myself, to be on the safe side.

The Florentines who stand in the market niches are Bernardo Cennini, a goldsmith and one of Ghiberti's assistants, who introduced printing into Florence in 1471 and began with an edition of Virgil; Giovanni Villani, who was the city's first serious historian, beginning in 1300 and continuing till his death in 1348; and Michele Lando, the wool-carder, who on July 22nd, 1378, at the head of a mob, overturned the power of the Signory.

By continuing straight on we should come to that crowded and fussy little street which crosses the river by the Ponte Vecchio and eventually becomes the Roman way; but let us instead turn to the right this side of the market, down the Via Porta Rossa, because here is the Palazzo Davanzati, which has a profound interest to lovers of the Florentine past in that it has been restored exactly to its ancient state when Pope Eugenius IV lodged here, and has been filled with fourteenth and fifteenth century furniture. In those days it was the home of the Davizza family. The Davanzati bought it late in the sixteenth century and retained it until 1838. In 1904 it was bought by Professor Elia Volpi, who restored its ancient conditions and presented it to the city as a permanent monument of the past.

Here we see a mediaeval Florentine palace precisely as it was when its Florentine owner lived his uncomfortable life there. For say what one may, there is no question that life must have been uncomfortable. In early and late summer, when the weather was fine and warm, these stone floors and continuous draughts may have been solacing; but in winter and early spring, when Florentine weather can be so bitterly hostile, what then? That there was a big fire we know by the smoky condition of Michelozzo's charming frieze on the chimney piece; but the room—I

refer to that on the first floor—is so vast that this fire can have done little for any one but an immediate *vis-à-vis*; and the room, moreover, was between the open world on the one side, and the open court (now roofed in with glass) on the other, with such additional opportunities for draughts as the four trap-doors in the floor offered. It was through these traps that the stone cannon-balls still stacked in the window seats were dropped, or a few gallons of boiling oil poured, whenever the city or a faction of it turned against the householder. Not comfortable, you see, at least not in our northern sense of the word, although to the hardy frugal Florentine it may have seemed a haven of luxury.

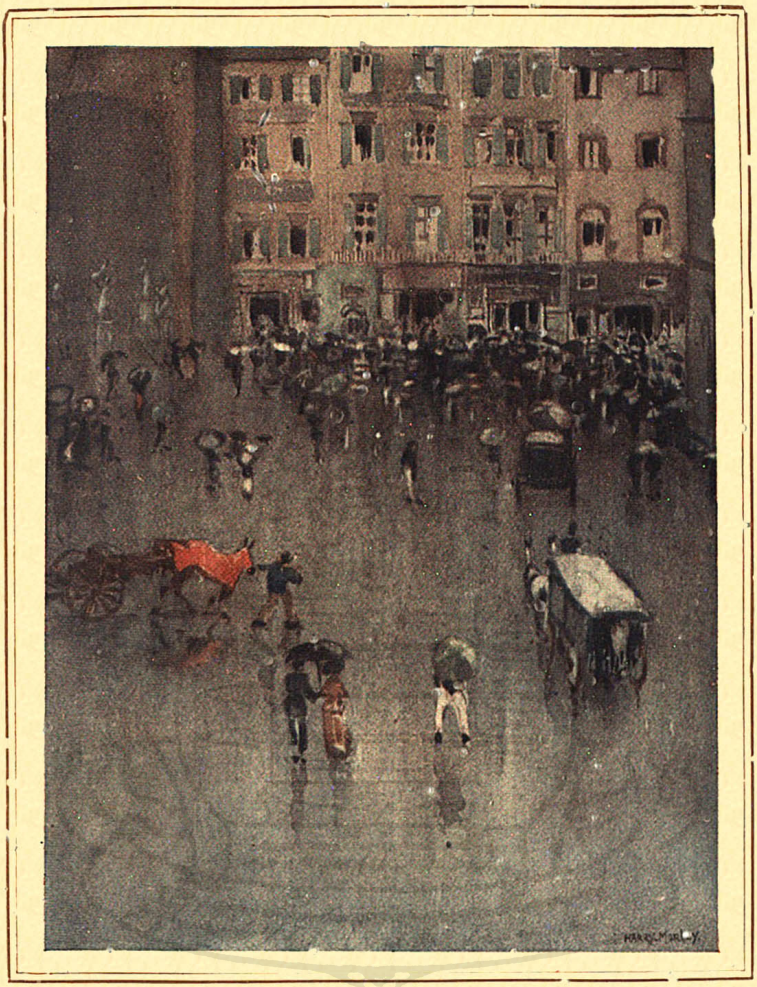
The furniture of the salon is simple and sparse and very hard. A bust here, a picture there, a coloured plate, a crucifix, and a Madonna and Child in a niche: that was all the decoration save tapestry. An hour glass, a pepper mill, a compass, an inkstand, stand for utility, and quaint and twisted musical instruments and a backgammon board for beguilement.

In the *salle-à-manger* adjoining is less light, and here also is a symbol of Florentine unrest in the shape of a hole in the wall (beneath the niche which holds the Madonna and Child) through which the advancing foe, who had successfully avoided the cannon balls and the oil, might be prodded with lances, or even fired at. The next room is the kitchen, curiously far from the well, the opening to which is in the salon, and then a bedroom (with some guns in it) and smaller rooms gained from the central court.

The rest of the building is the same—a series of self-contained flats, but all dipping for water from the same shaft and all depending anxiously upon the success of the first floor with invaders. At the top is a beautiful loggia with Florence beneath it.

The odd thing to remember is that for the poor of Florence, who now inhabit houses of the same age as the Davanzati palace, the conditions are almost as they were in the fifteenth century. A few changes have come in, but hardly any. Myriads of the tenements have no water laid on: it must still be pulled up in buckets exactly as here. Indeed you may often see the top floor at work in this way; and there is a row of houses on the left of the road to the Certosa, a little way out of Florence, with a most elaborate network of bucket ropes over many gardens to one well. Similarly one sees the occupants of the higher floors drawing vegetables and bread in baskets from the street and lowering the money for them. The postman delivers letters in this way, too. Again, one of the survivals of the Davanzati to which the custodian draws attention is the rain-water pipe, like a long bamboo, down the wall of the court; but one has but to walk along the Via Lambertesca, between the Uffizi and the Via Por S. Maria, and peer into the alleys, to see that these pipes are common enough yet.

In fact, directly one leaves the big streets Florence is still fifteenth century. Less colour in the costumes, and a few anachronisms, such as gas or electric light, posters, newspapers, cigarettes and bicycles, which dart like dragon flies (every Florentine cyclist being a trick cyclist); but for the rest there is no change. The business of life has not altered; the same food is eaten, the same vessels contain it, the same fire cooks it, the same red wine is made from the same grapes in the same vineyards, the same language (almost) is spoken. The babies are christened at the same font, the parents visit the same churches. Similarly the handicrafts can have altered little. The coppersmith, the blacksmith, the cobbler, the woodcarver



THE PIAZZA DELLA SIGNORIA ON A WET FRIDAY AFTERNOON

the goldsmiths in their yellow smocks, must be just as they were, and certainly the cellars and caverns under the big houses in which they work have not changed. The fishermen in the Arno, the gravel diggers beside it, the drivers of oxen, none have altered. Where the change is, is among the better-to-do, the rich and in the government. For no longer is a man afraid to talk freely of politics; no longer does he shudder as he passes the Bargello; no longer is the name of Medici on his lips. Everything else is practically as it was.

The Via Porta Rossa runs to the Piazza S. Trinità, the church of S. Trinità being our destination. For here are some interesting frescoes. First, however, let us look at the sculpture: a very beautiful altar by Benedetto da Rovezzano in the fifth chapel of the right aisle; a monument by Luca della Robbia in the second chapel on the left of the altar to one of the archbishops of Fiesole, once in S. Pancrazio (which is now a tobacco factory) in the Via della Spada and brought here for the safe keeping—a beautiful example of Luca's genius, not only as a modeller but also as a very treasury of pretty thoughts, for the border of flowers and leaves is beyond praise delightful. The best green in Florence (after Nature's, which is seen through so many doorways and which splashes over so many white walls and mingles with gay fruits in so many shops) is here.

In the fifth chapel of the left aisle is a Magdalen carved in wood by Desiderio da Settignano and finished by Benedetto da Majano; while S. Trinità now possesses, but shows only on Good Friday, the very crucifix from S. Miniato which bowed down and blessed S. Gualberto. The porphyry tombs of the Sassetti, in the chapel of that family, the second on the right of the altar by Giuliano di Sangallo, are magnificent.

It is in the Sassetti chapel that we find the Ghirlandaio frescoes of scenes in the life of S. Francis which bring so many strangers to this church. The painting which depicts S. Francis receiving the charter from the Emperor Honorius is interesting both for its history and its painting; for it contains a valuable record of what the Palazzo Vecchio and Loggia de' Lanzi were like in 1485, and also many portraits: among them Lorenzo the Magnificent, on the extreme right holding out his hand; Poliziano, tutor of the Medici boys, coming first up the stairs; and on the extreme left very probably Verrocchio, one of Ghirlandaio's favourite painters. We find old Florence again in the very attractive picture of the resuscitation of the nice little girl in violet, a daughter of the Spini family, who fell from a window of the Spini palace (as we see in the distance on the left, this being one of the old synchronized scenes) and was brought to life by S. Francis, who chanced to be flying by. The scene is intensely local: just outside the church, looking along what is now the Piazza S. Trinità and the old Trinità bridge. The Spini palace is still there, but is now called the Ferroni, and it accommodates no longer Florentine aristocrats but consuls and bank clerks. Among the portraits in the fresco are noble friends of the Spini family—Albrizzi, Acciaioli, Strozzi and so forth. The little girl is very quaint and perfectly ready to take up once more the threads of her life. How long she lived this second time and what became of her I have not been able to discover. Her tiny sister, behind the bier, is even quainter. On the left is a little group of the comely Florentine ladies in whom Ghirlandaio so delighted, tall and serene, with a few youths among them.

It is interesting to note that Ghirlandaio in his S. Trinita frescoes and Benedetto da Maiano in his S. Croce pulpit

reliefs chose exactly the same scenes in the life of S. Francis: interesting because when Ghirlandaio was painting frescoes at San Gimignano in 1475, Benedetto was at work on the altar for the same church of S. Fina, and they were friends. Where Ghirlandaio and Giotto, also in S. Croce, also coincide in choice of subject some interesting comparisons may be made, all to the advantage of Giotto in spiritual feeling and unsophisticated charm, but by no means to Ghirlandaio's detriment as a fascinating historian in colour. In the scene of the death of S. Francis we find Ghirlandaio and Giotto again on the same ground, and here it is probable that the later painter went to the earlier for inspiration; for he has followed Giotto in the fine thought that makes one of the attendant brothers glance up as though at the saint's ascending spirit. It is remarkable how, with every picture that one sees, Giotto's completeness of equipment as a religious painter becomes more marked. His hand may have been ignorant of many masterly devices for which the time was not ripe; but his head and heart knew all.

There has recently been placed on the altar here—brought from the Accademia—Ghirlandaio's Adoration of the Shepherds, painted in 1485, when the artist was thirty-six. It is essentially pleasant: a religious picture on the sunny side. The Child is the soul of babyish content, equally amused with its thumb and the homage it is receiving. Close by is a goldfinch unafraid; in the distance is a citied valley, with a river winding in it; and down a neighbouring hill, on the top of which the shepherds feed their flocks, comes the imposing procession of the Magi. Joseph is more than commonly perplexed, and the disparity between his own and his wife's age, which the old masters agreed to make considerable, is more considerable than usual.

The patriarchs in the spandrels of the choir are by Ghirlandaio's master, Alessio Baldovinetti, of whom I said something in the chapter on S. Maria Novella. They once more testify to this painter's charm and brilliance. Almost more than that of any other does one regret the scarcity of his work. It was fitting that he should have painted the choir, for his name-saint, S. Alessio, guards the façade of the church.

The column opposite the church came from the baths of Caracalla and was set up by Cosimo I, upon the attainment of his life-long ambition of a grand-dukeship and a crown. The figure at the top is Justice.

S. Trinità is a good starting-point for the leisurely examination of the older and narrower streets, an occupation which so many visitors to Florence prefer to the study of picture galleries and churches. And perhaps rightly. In no city can they carry on their researches with such ease, for Florence is incurious about them. Either the Florentines are too much engrossed in their own affairs or the peering foreigner has become too familiar an object to merit notice, but one may drift about even in the narrowest alleys beside the Arno, east and west, and attract few eyes. And the city here is at its most romantic: between the Piazza S. Trinità and the Via Por S. Maria, all about the Borgo SS. Apostoli.

We have just been discussing Benedetto da Maiano, the sculptor. If we turn to the left on leaving S. Trinità, instead of losing ourselves in the little streets, we are in the Via Tornabuoni, where the best shops are and American is the prevailing language. We shall soon come, on the right, to an example of Benedetto's work as an architect, for the first draft of the famous Palazzo Strozzi, the four-square fortress-home which Filippo Strozzi began for himself

in 1489, was his. Benedetto continued the work until his death in 1507, when Cronaca, who built the great hall in the Palazzo Vecchio, took it over and added the famous cornice. The iron lantern and other smithwork were by Lorenzo the Magnificent's sardonic friend, "Il Caparra," of the Sign of the Burning Books, of whom I wrote in the chapter on the Medici palace.

The first mistress of the Strozzi palace was Clarice Strozzi, née Clarice de' Medici, the daughter of Piero, son of Lorenzo the Magnificent. She was born in 1493 and married Filippo Strozzi the younger in 1508, during the family's second period of exile. They then lived at Rome, but were allowed to return to Florence in 1510. Clarice's chief title to fame is her proud outburst when she turned Ippolito and Alessandro out of the Medici palace. She died in 1528 and was buried in S. Maria Novella. The unfortunate Filippo met his end nine years later in the Bobolifortezza, which his money had helped to build and in which he was imprisoned for his share in a conspiracy against Cosimo I. Cosimo confiscated the palace and all Strozzi's other possessions, but later made some restitution. To-day the family occupy the upper part of their famous imperishable home, and beneath there is an exhibition of pictures and antiquities for sale. No private individual, whatever his wealth or ambition, will probably ever again succeed in building a house half so strong or noble as this.