CHAPTER XXIV

THE CARMINE AND SAN MINIATO

The human form divine and waxen — Galileo — Bianca Capella — A faithful Grand Duke — S. Spirito — The Carmine — Masaccio's place in art — Leonardo's summary — The S. Peter frescoes — The Pitti side — *Romola* — A little country walk — The ancient wall — The Piazzale Michelangelo — An evening prospect — S. Miniato — Antonio Rossellino's masterpiece — The story of S. Gualberto — A city of the dead — The reluctant departure.

THE Via Maggio is now our way, but first there is a museum which I think should be visited, if only because it gave Dickens so much pleasure when he was here —the Museo di Storia Naturale, which is open three days a week only and is always free. Many visitors to Florence never even hear of it and one quickly finds that its chief frequenters are the poor. All the better for that. Here not only is the whole animal kingdom spread out before the eye in crowded cases, but the most wonderful collection of wax reproductions of the human form is to be seen. These anatomical models are so numerous and so [illegible] that, since the human body does not change with [illegible]es, a medical student could learn everything from [illegible] the most gentlemanly way possible. But they need a strong stomach. Mine, I confess, quailed before the end.

The hero of the Museum is Galileo, whose tomb at S. Croce we have seen; here are preserved certain of his instruments in a modern, floridly decorated Tribuna named after him. Galileo Galilei (1564-1642) belongs rather to

Pisa, where he was born and where he found the Leaning Tower useful for experiments, and to Rome, where in 1611 he demonstrated his discovery of the telescope; but Florence is proud of him and it was here that he died, under circumstances tragic for an astronomer, for he had become totally blind.

The frescoes in the Tribuna celebrate other Italian scientific triumphs, and in the cases are historic telescopes, astrolabes, binoculars, and other mysteries.

The Via Maggio, which runs from Casa Guidi to the Ponte Trinità and at noon is always full of school-girls, brings us by way of the Via Michelozzo to S. Spirito, but by continuing in it we pass a house of great interest, now No. 26, where once lived the famous Bianca Capella, that beautiful and magnetic Venetian whom some hold to have been so vile and others so much the victim of fate. Bianca Capella was born in 1543, when Francis I, Cosimo I's eldest son, afterwards to play such a part in her life, was two years of age. While he was being brought up in Florence, Bianca was gaining loveliness in her father's palace. When she was seventeen she fell in love with a young Florentine engaged in a bank in Venice, and they were secretly married. Her family were outraged by the *mésalliance* and the young couple had to flee to Florence, where they lived in poverty and hiding, a prize of 2000 ducats being offered by the Capella family to anyone who would kill the husband, while, by way of showing how much in earnest they were, they had his uncle thrown into prison, where he died.

One day the unhappy Bianca was sitting at her window when the young Prince Francis was passing: he looked up, saw her, and was enslaved on the spot. (The portraits of Bianca do not, I must admit, lay emphasis on this story. Titian's I have not seen; but there is one by Bronzino in

our National Gallery—No. 650—and many in Florence.) There was, however, something in Bianca's face to which Francis fell a victim, and he brought about a speedy meeting. At first Bianca repulsed him; but when she found that her husband was unworthy of her, she returned the Prince's affection. (I am telling her story from the pro-Bianca point of view: there are plenty of narrators on the other side.) Meanwhile, Francis's official life going on, he married that archduchess Joanna of Austria for whom the Austrian frescoes in the Palazzo Vecchio were painted; but his heart remained Bianca's and he was more at her house than in his own. At last, Bianca's husband being killed in some fray, she was free from the persecution of her family and ready to occupy the palace which Francis hastened to build for her, here, in the Via Maggio, now cut up into tenements at a few lire a week. The attachment continued unabated when Francis came to the throne, and upon the death of his archduchess in 1578 Bianca and he were almost immediately, but privately, married, she being then thirty-five; and in the next year they were publicly married in the church of S. Lorenzo with every circumstance of pomp; while later in the same year Bianca was crowned.

Francis remained her lover till his death, which was both tragic and suspicious, husband and wife dying within a few hours of each other at the Medici villa of Poggia a Caiano in 1587. Historians have not hesitated to suggest that Francis was poisoned by his wife; but there is no proof. It is indeed quite possible that her life was more full of intrigue, ambition and falsehood, than that of any one about the court at that time; but the Florentines, encouraged by Francis's brother Ferdinand I. who succeeded him, made up their minds that she was a witch, and few

things in the way of disaster happened that were not laid to her charge. Call a woman a witch and everything is possible. Ferdinand not only detested Bianca in life and deplored her fascination for his brother, but when she died he refused to allow her to be buried with the others of the family; hence the Chapel of the Princes at S. Lorenzo lacks one archduchess. Her grave is unknown.

The whole truth we shall never know; but it is as easy to think of Bianca as a harmless woman who both lost and gained through love as to picture her as sinister and scheming. At any rate we know that Francis was devoted to her with a fidelity and persistence for which Grand Dukes have not always been conspicuous.

S. Spirito is one of Brunelleschi's solidest works. Within it resembles the city of Bologna in its vistas of brown and white arches. The effect is severe and splendid; but the church is to be taken rather as architecture than a treasury of art for although each of its eight and thirty chapels has an altar picture and several have fine pieces of sculpture—one a copy of Michelangelo's famous Pietà in Rome—there is nothing of the highest value. It was in this church that I was asked for alms by one of the best-dressed men in Florence; but the Florentine beggars are not importunate: they ask, receive or are denied, and that is the end of it.

The other great church in the Pitti quarter is the Carmine, and here we are on very sacred ground in art—for it was here, as I have had occasion to say more than once in this book, that Masaccio painted those early frescoes which by their innovating boldness turned the Brancacci chapel into an Academy. For all the artists came to study and copy them: among others Michelangelo whose nose was broken by the turbulent Torrigiano, a fellow-student, under this very roof.

Tommaso di Ser Giovanni, or Masaccio, the son of a notary, was born in 1402. His master is not known, but Tommaso Fini or Masolino, born in 1383, is often named. Vasari states that as a youth Masaccio helped Ghiberti with his first Baptistery doors; and if so, the fact is significant. But all that is really known of his early life is that he went to Rome to paint a chapel in S. Clemente. He returned, apparently on hearing that his patron Giovanni de' Medici was in power again. Another friend, Brunelleschi, having built the church of S. Spirito in 1422, Masaccio began to work there in 1423, when he was only twenty-one.

Masaccio's peculiar value in the history of painting is his early combined power of applying the laws of perspective and representing human beings "in the round". Giotto was the first and greatest innovator in painting—the father of real painting; Masaccio was the second. If from Giotto's influence a stream of vigour had flowed such as flowed from Masaccio's, there would have been nothing special to note about Masaccio at all. But the impulse which Giotto gave to art died down; some one had to reinvigorate it, and that some one was Masaccio. In his remarks on painting, Leonardo da Vinci sums up the achievements of the two. They stood out, he says, from the others of their time, by reason of their wish to go to life rather than to pictures. Giotto went to life, his followers went to pictures; and the result was a decline in art until Masaccio, who again went to life.

From the Carmine frescoes came the new painting. It was not that walls henceforth were covered more beautifully or suitably than they had been by Giotto's followers; probably less suitably very often; but that religious symbolism without much relation to actual life gave way to scenes which might credibly have occurred, where men, women

and saints walked and talked much as we do, in similar surroundings, with backgrounds of cities that could be lived in and windows that could open. It was this revolution that Masaccio performed. No doubt if he had not, another would, for it had to come: the new demand was that religion should be reconciled with life.

It is generally supposed that Masaccio had Masolino as his ally in this wonderful series; and a vast amount of ink has been spilt over Masolino's contributions. Indeed the literature of expert art criticism on Florentine pictures alone is of alarming bulk and astonishing in its affirmations and denials. The untutored visitor in the presence of so much scientific variance will be wise to enact the part of the lawyer in the old caricature of the litigants and the cow, who, while they pull, one at the head and the other at the tail, fills his bucket with milk. In other words, the plain duty of the ordinary person is to enjoy the picture.

Without any special knowledge of art one can, by remembering the early date of these frescoes, realize what excitement they must have caused in the studios and how tongues must have clacked in the Old Market. We have but to send our thoughts to the Spanish chapel at S. Maria Novella to realize the technical advance. Masaccio, we see, was peopling a visible world; the Spanish chapel painters were merely allegorizing, as agents of holiness. The Ghirlandaio choir in the same church would yield a similar comparison; but what we have to remember is that Ghirlandaio painted these frescoes in 1490, sixty-two years after Masaccio's death, and Masaccio showed him how.

It is a pity that the light is so poor and that the frescoes have not worn better; but their force and dramatic vigour remain beyond doubt. The upper scene on the left of the

THE MADONNA AND CHILDREN

FROM THE PAINTING BY PERUGINO IN THE PITTI

altar is very powerful: the Roman tax collector has asked Christ for a tribute and Christ bids Peter find the money in the mouth of a fish. Figures, architecture, landscape, all are in right relation; and the drama is moving, without restlessness. This and the S. Peter preaching and distributing alms are perhaps the best, but the most popular undoubtedly is that below it, finished many years after by Filippino Lippi (although there are experts to question this and even substitute his amorous father), in which S. Peter, challenged by Simon Magus, resuscitates a dead boy, just as S. Zenobius used to do in the streets of this city. Certain more modern touches, such as the exquisite Filippino would naturally have thought of, may be seen here: the little girl behind the boy, for instance, who recalls the children in that fresco by the same hand at S. Maria Novella in which S. John resuscitates Drusiana. In this Carmine fresco are many portraits of Filippino's contemporaries, including Botticelli, just as in the scene of the consecration of the Carmine which Masaccio painted in the cloisters, but which has almost perished, he introduced Brancacci, his employer, Brunelleschi, Donatello, some of whose innovating work in stone he was doing in paint, Giovanni de' Medici and Masolino. The scanty remains of this fresco tell us that it must have been fine indeed.

Masaccio died at the early age of twenty-six, having suddenly disappeared from Florence, leaving certain work unfinished. A strange portentous meteor in art.

The Pitti side of the river is less interesting than the other, but it has some very fascinating old and narrow streets, although they are less comfortable for foreigners to wander in than those, for example, about the Borgo SS. Apostoli. They are far dirtier.

From the Pitti end of the Ponte Vecchio one can obtain

a most charming walk. Turn to the left as you leave the bridge, under the arch made by Cosimo's passage, and you are in the Via de' Bardi, the backs of whose houses on the river-side are so beautiful from the Uffizi's central arches, as Mr. Morley's picture shows. At the end of the street is an archway under a large house. Go through this, and you are at the foot of a steep, stone hill. It is really steep, but never mind. Take it easily, and rest half-way where the houses on the left break and give a wonderful view of the city. Still climbing, you come to the best gate of all that is left—a true gate in being an inlet into a fortified city—that of S. Giorgio, high on the Boboli hill by the fort. The S. Giorgio gate has a S. George killing a dragon, in stone, on its outside, and the saint painted within, Donatello's conception of him being followed by the artist. Passing through, you are in the country. The fort and gardens are on one side and villas on the other; and a great hill-side is in front, covered with crops. Do not go on, but turn sharp to the left and follow the splendid city wall, behind which for a long way is the garden of the Villa Karolath, one of the choicest spots in Florence, occasionally tossing its branches over the top. This wall is immense all the way down to the Porta S. Miniato, and two of the old towers are still standing in their places upon it. Botticini's National Gallery picture tells exactly how they looked in their heyday. Ivy hangs over, grass and flowers spring from the ancient stones, and lizards run about. Underneath are olive-trees.

It was, by the way, in the Via de' Bardi that George Eliot's Romola lived, for she was of the Bardi family. The story, it may be remembered, begins on the morning of Lorenzo the Magnificent's death, and ends

after the execution of Savonarola. It is not an inspired romance, and is remarkable almost equally for its psychological omissions and the convenience of its coincidences, but it is an excellent preparation for a first visit in youth to S. Marco and the Palazzo Vecchio, while the presence in its somewhat naïve pages of certain Florentine characters makes it agreeable to those who know something of the city and its history. The painter Piero di Cosimo, for example, is here, straight from Vasari; so also are Cronaca, the architect, Savonarola, Cupparo, the ironsmith, and even Machiavelli; while Bernardo del Nero, the gonfalonier, whose death sentence Savonarola refused to revise, was Romola's godfather.

The Via Guicciardini, which runs from the foot of the Via de' Bardi to the Pitti, is one of the narrowest and busiest Florentine streets, with an undue proportion of fruit shops overflowing to the pavement to give it gay colouring. At No. 24 is a stable with pillars and arches that would hold up a pyramid. But this is no better than most of the old stables of Florence, which are all solid vaulted caverns of immense size and strength.

From the Porta Romana one may do many things—take the tram, for example, for the Certosa of the Val d'Ema, which is only some twenty minutes distant, or make a longer journey to Impruneta, where the della Robbias are. But just now let us walk or ride up the long winding Viale Machiavelli, which curves among the villas behind the Boboli Gardens, to the Piazzale Michelangelo and S. Miniato.

The Piazzale Michelangelo is one of the few modern tributes of Florence to her illustrious makers. The Dante memorial opposite S. Croce is another, together with the preservation of certain buildings with Dante associations in the heart of the city; but, as I have said more

than once, there is no piazza in Florence, and only one new street, named after a Medici. From the Piazzale Michelangelo you not only have a fine panoramic view of the city of this great man—in its principal features not so vastly different from the Florence of his day, although of course larger and with certain modern additions, such as factory chimneys, railway lines, and so forth—but you can see the remains of the fortifications which he constructed in 1529, and which kept the Imperial troops at bay for nearly a year. Just across the river rises S. Croce, where the great man is buried, and beyond, over the red roofs, the dome of the Medici chapel at S. Lorenzo shows us the position of the Biblioteca Laurenziana and the New Sacristy, both built by him. Immediately below us is the church of S. Niccolò, where he is said to have hidden in 1529, when there was a hue and cry for him. In the middle of this spacious plateau is a bronze reproduction of his David, and it is good to see it, from the café behind it, rising head and shoulders above the highest Apennines.

S. Miniato, the church on the hill-top above the Piazzale Michelangelo, deserves many visits. One may not be too greatly attached to marble façades, but this little temple defeats all prejudices by its radiance and perfection, and to its extraordinary charm its situation adds. It crowns the hill, and in the late afternoon—the ideal time to visit it—is full in the eye of the sun, bathed in whose light the green and white façade, with miracles of delicate intarsia, is balm to the eyes instead of being, as marble so often is, dazzling and cold.

On the way up we pass the fine church of S. Salvatore, which Cronaca of the Palazzo Vecchio and Palazzo Strozzi built and Michelangelo admired, and which is now secularized, and pass through the gateway of Michelangelo's

A GIPSY

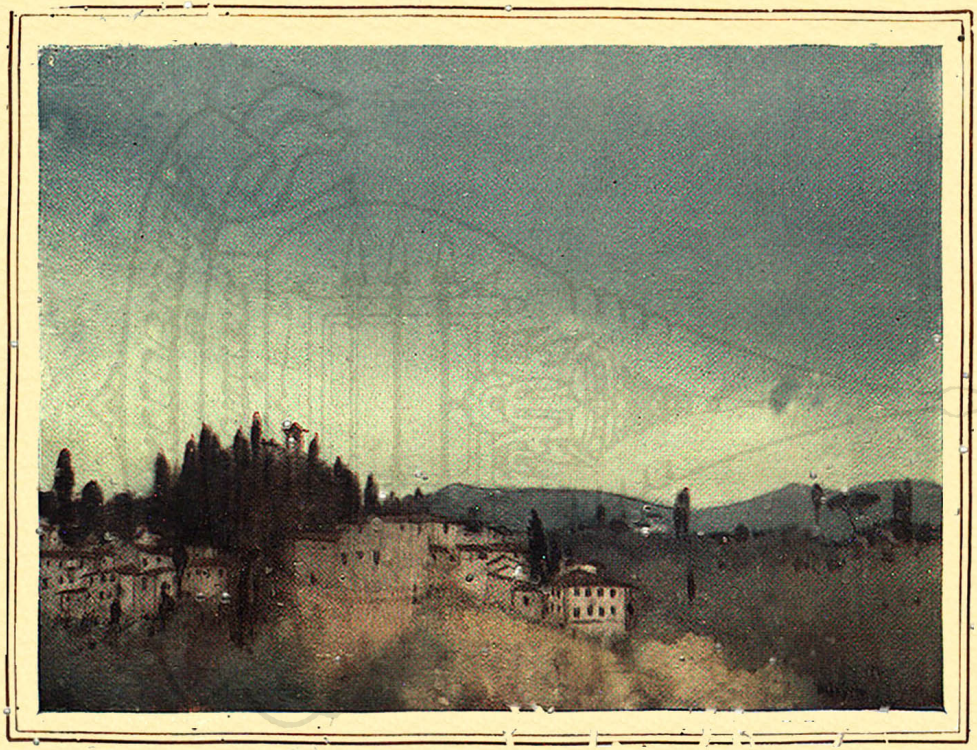
FROM THE PAINTING BY BOCCACCIO BOCCACCINO IN THE PITTI

upper fortifications. S. Miniato is one of the oldest churches of Florence, some of it eleventh century. It has its name from Minias, a Roman soldier who suffered martyrdom at Florence under Decius. Within, one does not feel quite to be in a Christian church, the effect partly of the unusual colouring, all grey, green, and gold and soft light tints as of birds' bosoms; partly of the ceiling, which has the bright hues of a Russian toy; partly of the forest of great gay columns; partly of the lovely and so richly decorated marble screen; and partly of the absence of a transept. The prevailing feeling indeed is gentle gaiety; and in the crypt this is intensified, for it is just a joyful assemblage of dancing arches.

The church as a whole is beautiful and memorable enough; but its details are wonderful too, from the niello pavement, and the translucent marble windows of the apse, to the famous tomb of Cardinal Jacopo of Portugal, and the Luca della Robbia reliefs of the Virtues. This tomb is by Antonio Rossellino. It is not quite of the rank of Mino's in the Badia; but it is a noble and beautiful thing marked in every inch of it by modest and exquisite thought. Vasari says of Antonio that he "practised his art with such grace that he was valued as something more than a man by those who knew him, who well-nigh adored him as a saint"! Facing it is a delightful Annunciation by Alessio Baldovinetti, in which the angel declares the news from a far greater distance than we are accustomed to; and the ceiling is made an abode of gladness by the blue and white figures (designed by Luca della Robbia) of Prudence and Chastity, Moderation and Fortitude, for all of which qualities, it seems, the Cardinal was famous. In short, one cannot be too glad that, since he had to die, death's dart struck down this Portuguese prelate while he was in Rossellino's and Luca's city

No longer is preserved here the miraculous crucifix which, standing in a little chapel in the wood on this spot, bestowed blessing and pardon—by bending towards him—upon S. Giovanni Gualberto, the founder of the Vallombrosan order. The crucifix is now in S. Trinità. The saint was born in 985 of noble stock and assumed naturally the splendour and arrogance of his kind. His brother Hugo being murdered in some affray, Giovanni took upon himself the duty of avenging the crime. One Good Friday he chanced to meet, near this place, the assassin, in so narrow a passage as to preclude any chance of escape; and he was about to kill him when the man fell on his knees and implored mercy by the passion of Christ Who suffered on that very day, adding that Christ had prayed on the cross for His own murderers. Giovanni was so much impressed that he not only forgave the man but offered him his friendship. Entering then the chapel to pray and ask forgiveness of all his sins, he was amazed to see the crucifix bend down as though acquiescing and blessing, and this special mark of favour so wrought upon him that he became a monk, himself shaving his head for that purpose and defying his father's rage, and subsequently founded the Vallombrosan order. He died in 1073.

I have said something of the S. Croce habit and the S. Maria Novella habit; but I think that when all is said the S. Miniato habit is the most important to acquire. There is nothing else like it; and the sense of height is so invigorating too. At all times of the year it is beautiful; but perhaps best in early spring, when the highest mountains still have snow upon them and the neighbouring slopes are covered with tender green and white fruit blossom, and here the violet wistaria blooms and there the sombre crimson of the Judas-tree.



EVENING AT THE PIAZZALE MICHELANGELO—LOOKING WEST

Behind and beside the church is a crowded city of the Florentine dead, reproducing to some extent the city of the Florentine living, in its closely packed habitations—the detached palaces for the rich and the great congeries of cells for the poor—more of which are being built all the time. There is a certain melancholy interest in wandering through these silent streets, peering through the windows and recognizing over the vaults names famous in Florence. One learns quickly how bad modern mortuary architecture and sculpture can be, but I noticed one monument with some sincerity and unaffected grace: that to a charitable Marchesa, a friend of the poor, at the foot of whose pedestal are figures of a girl and baby done simply and well.

Better perhaps to remain on the highest point and look at the city beneath. One should try to be there before sunset and watch the Apennines turning to a deeper and deeper indigo and the city growing dimmer and dimmer in the dusk. Florence is beautiful from every point of vantage, but from none more beautiful than from this eminence. As one reluctantly leaves the church and passes again through Michelangelo's fortification gateway to descend, one has, framed in its portal, a final lovely Apennine scene.