CHAPTER III

THE DUOMO: A CEREMONY AND A MUSEUM

The *Scoppio del Carro*—The Pazzi beneficent—Holy Saturday's programme—April 6th, 1912—The flying *palle*—The nervous pyrotechnist—The influence of moon—A little sister of the Duomo—Donatello's cantoria—Luca della Robbia's cantoria.

IN the last chapter we saw the Pazzi family as very black sheep, although there are plenty of students of Florentine history who hold that any attempt to rid Florence of the Medici was laudable. In this chapter we see them in a kindlier situation as benefactors to the city. For it happened that when Pazzo de' Pazzi, a founder of the house, was in the Holy Land during the First Crusade, it was his proud lot to set the Christian banner on the walls of Jerusalem, and, as a reward, Godfrey of Boulogne gave him some flints from the Holy Sepulchre. These he brought to Florence, and they are now preserved at SS. Apostoli, the little church in the Piazza del Limbo, off the Borgo SS. Apostoli, and every year the flints are used to kindle the fire needed for the right preservation of Easter Day. Gradually the ceremony enlarged until it became a spectacle indeed, which the Pazzi family for centuries controlled. After the Pazzi conspiracy they lost it and the Signoria took it over; but, on being pardoned, the Pazzi again resumed.

The Carro is a car containing explosives, and the Scoppio is its explosion. This car, after being drawn in procession

through the streets by white oxen, is ignited by the sacred fire borne to it by a mechanical dove liberated at the high altar of the Duomo, and with its explosion Easter begins. There is still a Pazzi fund towards the expenses, but a few years ago the city became responsible for the whole proceedings, and the ceremony as it is now given, under civic management, known as the Scoppio del Carro, is that which I saw one Holy Saturday and am about to describe.

First, however, let me state what had happened before the proceedings opened in the Piazza del Duomo. At six o'clock mass began at SS. Apostoli, lasting for more than two hours. At its close the celebrant was handed a plate on which were the sacred flints, and these he struck with a steel in view of the congregation, thus igniting a taper. The candle, in an ancient copper *porta fuoco* surmounted by a dove, was then lighted, and the procession of priests started off for the cathedral with their precious flame, escorted by a civic guard and various standard bearers. Their route was the Piazza del Limbo, along the Borgo SS. Apostoli to the Via Por S. Maria and through the Vaccherecia to the Piazza della Signoria, the Via Condotta, the Via del Proconsolo, to the Duomo, through whose central doors they passed, depositing the sacred burden at the high altar. I should add that anyone on the route in charge of a street shrine had the right to stop the procession in order to take a light from it; while at SS. Apostoli women congregated with tapers and lanterns in the hope of getting these kindled from the sacred flame, in order to wash their babies or cook their food in water heated with the fire.

Meanwhile at seven o'clock the four oxen, which are kept in the Cascine all the year round and do no other work, had been harnessed to the car and had drawn it to

THE CLOISTERS OF S. LORENZO, SHOWING THE WINDOWS OF THE BIBLIOTECA LAURENZIANA

the Piazza del Duomo, which was reached about nine. The oxen were then tethered by the Pisano doors of the Baptistery until needed again.

After some haggling on the night before, I had secured a seat on a balcony facing Ghiberti's first Baptistery doors, for eleven lire, and to this place I went at half-past ten. The piazza was then filling up, and at a quarter to eleven the trams running between the Cathedral and the Baptistery were stopped. In this space was the car. The present one, which dates from 1622, is more like a catafalque, and unless one sees it in motion, with the massive white oxen pulling it, one cannot believe in it as a vehicle at all. It is some thirty feet high, all black, with trumpery coloured-paper festoons (concealing fireworks) upon it: trumpery as only the Roman Catholic Church can contrive. It stood in front of the Duomo some four yards from the Baptistery gates in a line with the Duomo's central doors and the high altar. The doors were open, seats being placed on each side of the aisle the whole distance, and people making a solid avenue. Down this avenue were to come the clergy, and above it was to be stretched the line on which the dove was to travel from the altar, with the Pazzi fire, to ignite the car.

The space in front of the cathedral was cleared at about eleven, and cocked hats and red-striped trousers then became the most noticeable feature. The crowd was jolly and perhaps a little cynical; picture-postcard hawkers made most of the noise, and for some reason or other a forlorn peasant took this opportunity to offer for sale two equally forlorn hedgehogs. Each moment the concourse increased, for it is a fateful day and every one wants to know the issue: because, you see, if the dove runs true, lights the car, and returns, as a good dove should, to the

altar ark, there will be a prosperous vintage and the pyrotechnist who controls the sacred bird's movements will receive his wages. But if the dove runs defectively and there is any hitch, every one is dismayed, for the harvest will be bad and the pyrotechnist will receive nothing. Once he was imprisoned when things went astray—and quite right too—but the Florentines have grown more lenient.

At about a quarter past eleven a procession of clergy emerged from the Duomo and crossed the space to the Baptistery. First, boys and youths in surplices. Then some scarlet hoods, waddling. Then purple hoods, and other colours, a little paunchier, waddling more, and lastly the archbishop, very sumptuous. All having disappeared into the Baptistery, through Ghiberti's second gates, which I never saw opened before, the dove's wire was stretched and fastened, a matter needing much care; and the crowds began to surge. The cocked hats and officers had the space all to themselves, with the car, the firemen, the pyrotechnist and the few privileged and very self-conscious civilians who were allowed inside.

A curious incident, which many years ago might have been magnified into a portent, occurred while the ecclesiastics were in the Baptistery. Some one either bought and liberated several air balloons, or the string holding them was surreptitiously cut; but however it happened, the balls escaped and suddenly the crowd sent up a triumphant yell. At first I could see no reason for it, the Baptistery intervening, but then the balls swam into our ken and steadily floated over the cathedral out of sight amid tremendous satisfaction. And the portent? Well, as they moved against the blue sky they formed themselves into precisely the pattern of the *palle* on the Medici escutcheon. That is all. But think what that would have meant in the

fifteenth century; the nods and frowns it would have occasioned; the dispersal of the Medici, the loss of power, and all the rest of it, that it would have presaged!

At about twenty to twelve the ecclesiastics returned and were swallowed up by the Duomo, and then excitement began to be acute. The pyrotechnist was not free from it; he fussed about nervously; he tested everything again and again; he crawled under the car and out of it; he talked to officials; he inspected and re-inspected. Photographers began to adjust their distances; the detached men in bowlers looked at their watches; the cocked hats drew nearer to the Duomo door. And then we heard a tearing noise. All eyes were turned to the great door, and out rushed the dove emitting a wake of sparks, entered the car and was out again on its homeward journey before one realized what had happened. And then the explosions began, and the bells—silent since Thursday—broke out. How many explosions there were I do not know; but they seemed to go on for ten minutes.

This is a great moment not only for the spectator but for all Florence, for in myriad rooms mothers have been waiting, with their babies on their knees, for the first clang of the belfries, because if a child's eyes are washed then it is unlikely ever to have weak sight, while if a baby takes its first steps to this accompaniment its legs will not be bowed.

At the last explosion the pyrotechnist, now a calm man once more and a proud one, approached the car, the firemen poured water on smouldering parts, and the work of clearing up began. Then came the patient oxen, their horns and hooves gilt, and great masses of flowers on their heads, and red cloths with the lily of Florence on it over their backs—much to be regretted since they obliterated

their beautiful white skins—and slowly the car lumbered off, and, the cocked hats relenting, the crowd poured after it and the Scoppio del Carro was over.

The Duomo has a little sister in the shape of the Museo di Santa Maria del Fiore, or the Museo dell' Opera del Duomo, situated in the Piazza opposite the apse; and we should go there now. This museum, which is at once the smallest and, with the exception of the Natural History Museum, the cheapest of the Florentine museums, for it costs but half a lira, is notable for containing the two cantorie, or singing galleries, made for the cathedral, one by Donatello and one by Luca della Robbia. A cantoria by Donatello we shall soon see in its place in S. Lorenzo; but that, beautiful as it is, cannot compare with this one, with its procession of merry, dancing children, its massiveness and grace, its joyous ebullitions of gold mosaic and blue enamel. Both the cantorie—Donatello's, begun in 1433 and finished in 1439, and Luca's, begun in 1431 and finished in 1438—fulfilled their melodious functions in the Duomo until 1688, when they were ruthlessly cleared away to make room for large wooden balconies to be used in connexion with the nuptials of Ferdinand de' Medici and the Princess Violante of Bavaria. In the year 1688 taste was at a low ebb, and no one thought the deposed cantorie even worth preservation, so that they were broken up and occasionally levied upon for cornices and so forth. The fragments were collected and taken to the Bargello in the middle of the last century, and in 1883 Signor del Moro, the then architect of the Duomo (whose bust is in the courtyard of this museum), reconstructed them to the best of his ability in their present situation. It has to be remembered not only that, with the exception of the figures, the galleries are not as their artists made them,

lacking many beautiful accessories, but that, as Vasari tells us, Donatello deliberately designed his for a dim light. None the less, they remain two of the most delightful works of the Renaissance and two of the rarest treasures of Florence.

The dancing boys behind the small pillars with their gold chequering, the brackets, and the urn of the cornice over the second pair of pillars from the right, are all that remain of Donatello's own handiwork. All else is new and conjectural. It is supposed that bronze heads of lions filled the two circular spaces between the brackets in the middle. But although the loss of the work as a whole is to be regretted, the dancing boys remain, to be for ever an inspiration and a pleasure. The Luca della Robbia cantoria opposite is not quite so triumphant a masterpiece, but from the point of view of suitability it is perhaps better. We can believe that Luca's children hymn the glory of the Lord, as indeed the inscription makes them, whereas Donatello's romp with a gladness that might easily be purely pagan (see opposite page 6). Luca's design is more formal, more conventional; Donatello's is rich and free and fluid with personality. The two end panels of Luca's are supplied in the cantoria by casts; the originals are on the wall below and may be carefully studied. The animation and fervour of these choristers are unforgettable.

It is well, while enjoying Donatello's work, to remember that Prato is only half an hour from Florence, and that there may be seen the open-air pulpit, built on the corner of the cathedral, which Donatello, with Michelozzo, his friend and colleague, made at the same time that the cantoria was in progress, and which in its relief of happy children is very similar, although not, I think, quite so remarkable. It lacks also the peculiarly naturalistic effect

gained in the cantoria by setting the dancing boys behind the pillars, which undoubtedly, as comparison with the Luca shows, assists realism. The row of pillars attracts the eye first and the boys are thus thrown into a background which almost moves.

Although the cantorie dominate the museum they must not be allowed to overshadow all else. A marble relief of the Madonna and Children by Agostino di Duccio (1418-1481) must be sought for: it is No. 77 and the children are the merriest in Florence. Another memorable Madonna and Child is No. 94, by Pagno di Lapo Portigiani (1406-1470), who has interest for us in this place as being one of Donatello's assistants, very possibly on this very cantoria, and almost certainly on the Prato pulpit. Everything here, it must be remembered, has some association with the Duomo and was brought here for careful preservation and that whoever has fifty centimes might take pleasure in seeing it; but the great silver altar is from the Baptistery, and being made for that temple is naturally dedicated to the life of John the Baptist. Although much of it was the work of not the greatest modellers in the second half of the fourteenth century, three masters at least contributed later: Michelozzo adding the statue of the Baptist, Pollaiuolo the side relief depicting his birth, and Verrocchio that of his death, which is considered one of the most remarkable works of this sculptor, whom we are to find so richly represented at the Bargello. Before leaving this room, look for 100[3], an unknown terra-cotta of the Birth of Eve, which is both masterly and amusing, and 110[4], a very lovely intaglio in wood. I might add that among the few paintings, all very early, is a S. Sebastian in whose sacred body I counted no fewer than thirty arrows; which within

my knowledge of pictures of this saint—not inconsiderable—is the record.

The next room is given to models and architectural plans and drawings connected with the cathedral, the most interesting thing being Brunelleschi's own model for the lantern. On the stairs are a series of fine bas-reliefs by Bandinelli and Giovanni dell' Opera from the old choir screen of the Duomo, and downstairs, among many other pieces of sculpture, is a bust of Brunelleschi from a death-mask and several beautiful della Robbia designs for lunettes over doors.