

# FLORENCE: THE CITY OF MEMORIES

E. M. POMEROY

MANY readers among the English-speaking peoples of the world, who day by day followed the progress of the war in Italy, sometimes gave at least a passing thought to the historic centres of the past which have become the historic scenes of the present. For a moment or so the war was forgotten, and some centre of art or religion which captured the imagination in the past again stood out clear in all its ancient glory. To the writer such a centre was Florence or, as the Italians write it, *Firenze*, which means the City of Flowers. It was indeed the City of Flowers when visited during Easter week some years ago, when war clouds seemed far distant. Almost every person met on the street was wearing lilies-of-the-valley; and never to-be-forgotten were the rose-covered garden walls on the road to Fiesole. Yet even more to the traveller than the City of Flowers did it become *The City of Memories*.

Memory transformed the humblest city street into holy ground. Perhaps, one mused, from this street, while standing on these very stones, the nine-year-old Dante caught his first glimpse of Beatrice. Perchance he was walking here when, in his mind, were crystallizing some of the imperishable lines of his *Vita Nuova*. Certain it is that he gazed with tear-dimmed eyes upon the hills of Fiesole and the beautiful valley of the Arno, as he left his native city to pass into exile—never to return!

Then one's thoughts turned to that ardent reformer and fiery orator, Savonarola, who lived a hundred years later. This was the city he loved. It was in these squares, in some of these buildings perhaps, that he made his great speeches, attacking bitterly the leaders of both Church and State, while exhorting the people to strive for a purer political and religious life. What cruelty existed in those early days of the City of Flowers! The cell where he was imprisoned for forty days can still be seen,—only a recess in the wall five feet wide and eight feet long, near the top of the tower of the Palazzo Vecchio, with one small hole for a window. Torture was added continually. A bronze tablet now marks the spot where the martyr was burned.

The famous Baptistery Doors, which Michael Angelo called The Doors of Paradise, brought memories of the young goldsmith, Ghiberti. He was only twenty-five when, as the result of a competition, he began the task of making the North

doors. He toiled for twenty-one years before they were completed. The following year he was commissioned to make two more doors for the south side. These he finished after twenty-seven years' work. He was then seventy-four,—a life-time making four bronze doors! What a contrast to the modern way of erecting a sky-scraper within a few months, and turning out hundreds of machine-made doors a day. But there was eternal beauty in the four doors which constituted the life-work of Ghiberti.

Donatello, we were told, must have assisted in the construction of these doors, and memories of all that we had read or had been told about the *man* came to us as we wandered from museum to gallery and thence to the churches where much of his work was to be seen. How we wished that we might have seen him at work in his own studio,—that we might have seen for ourselves the basket suspended from the ceiling in which he kept his money, so that the students might help themselves! As we looked upon his statue, St. George, we felt it was no wonder that upon its completion, thrilled with the joy of creation, Donatello tapped St. George upon the shoulder saying, "Speak."

And the great master, Michael Angelo, had looked upon that same statue. Recalling Donatello's salutation when he gazed upon the finished work of his hands and brain, he, Michael Angelo, gave the command, "March."

To know that one stood where Michael Angelo once stood, that one walked on the pavement where his feet had trod, would alone make Florence a memory-haunted city. It was in Florence that Michael Angelo attended school; his home was in a little village three miles away. He was thirteen when he persuaded his father to apprentice him to the famous goldsmith and artist, Ghirlandaio. The following year he met that famous patron of the arts, Lorenzo de Medici, known to history as Lorenzo the Magnificent. So impressed was Lorenzo by the ability of the lad, that he took him to live in his home as one of his family. Henceforth the life of Angelo was intimately connected with the Medici family.

In none of his work was this more clearly revealed than by the monuments in the Medici Chapel to the two unworthy descendants of Lorenzo. They were erected at a time when Florence was torn by strife and disorder. On the one tomb were the figures, Twilight and Dawn; and on the other tomb, the figures Day and Night. On the face of the waking woman, Dawn, at that time Night

was a woman asleep, so life-like that when the poet Strozzi saw her, he wrote:

The Night, which thou dost see in such sweet guise  
 To sleep, was by an angel hewn  
 From this rock, and though she sleeps she lives.  
 Arouse her, if thou believ'st it not, and she will speak to thee.

And Michael Angelo replied for his beloved Night in the following lines:

Dear to me is sleep and dearer to be of stone,  
 While injury and shame endure;  
 To see not, to feel not, is happiness for me,  
 So wake me not; alas! speak low.

One's heart was particularly touched when gazing upon the Master's last piece of sculpture, the *Pieta*. After his death it had been brought from Rome and placed in the Duomo, and not above his own tomb as he had intended. The artist had suffered total blindness before it was completed, and in his last dark years he would get some one to lead him to his work so that he might feel it all, both the finished and the unfinished parts. How real it all seemed in Florence!

The city's many associations with celebrated English writers make Florence seem more friendly and intimate to the English-speaking travellers. It was there about three hundred years ago that John Milton visited Galileo. At that time the famous astronomer was living in a world of total darkness, and one could not help but dream about their visit,—the blind astronomer and the poet who was destined to suffer the same affliction! It was the poet's visit to Vallombrosa which gave him the following lines in *Paradise Lost*.

Thick as autumnal leaves that strew the brooks  
 In Vallombrosa where the Etrurian shades,  
 High over-arched, embower.

A walk in the Cascine, the beautiful woods that skirt the Arno, brought memories of another great English poet who found inspiration and peace in the City of Flowers. It was in these woods that Shelley wrote his "Ode to the West Wind," and, although a balmy spring wind was blowing, with memory came the lines:

O Wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being,  
 Thou, from whose unseen presence the leaves dead  
 Are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter, fleeing,  
 .....  
 Scatter, as from an unextinguished hearth  
 Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!  
 Be through my lips to unawakened earth

The trumpet of a prophecy! O, Wind,  
 If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?

At almost every turn, whether looking at the statues of Michael Angelo, the frescoes of Giotto, the adorable bambinos of Lucia della Robbia; at pictures by Andrea del Sarto, by Fra Lippo Lippi, or at any of the "Old Pictures in Florence;" whether in a cathedral, in a picture gallery, or walking leisurely along the street, we were reminded of the two English poets whose happy life together was spent in the City of Flowers,—Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

If houses could speak, what a host of happy stories Casa Guidi could tell. Some would surely centre around Flush, the little dog that accompanied his mistress to Florence. There would be very tender stories about the young son whose merry childish prattle gladdened the hearts of his father and frail mother. Many interesting stories would be told about the friends who gathered there, particularly about that stormy petrel of English Literature, Walter Savage Landor, who was a frequent visitor in their home. In Casa Guidi Elizabeth Barrett Browning passed away. But she enjoyed many happy years within its walls,—thanks to the courage and devotion of Robert Browning!

A tablet on the house stated that it had been the home of Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and that her verse had made a golden ring to link England and Florence,—*placed there by grateful Florence*. For many years the work of both poets has been a link between Florence and their many grateful readers on this side of the Atlantic. Now that Peace has returned, they may again visit the City of Flowers and find it as of old *The City of Memories*.