

# ON HOLIDAY IN FLORENCE

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## I

### *The Streets in Florence on Christmas Eve.*

LATE in the afternoon of Christmas Eve the streets were crowded with shoppers and, as the hour of closing drew nearer, the narrow sidewalks and roadways became almost impassable. The cracking of whips, so like pistol shots as to be startling, and sharp cries of "Gwoop! Gw-oop!" gave notice that a driver was trying to make way through the crowd, and the New York subway conductor's warning of "Step lively, lady!" seemed appropriate to the foot passenger finding refuge from an advancing automobile beneath the head of an all too spirited horse. Even the most expert cyclists of the world (and they all live in Florence) were forced to dismount, and thread their way from roadway to pavement and pavement to roadway as opportunity offered.

In a narrow street leading from one main thoroughfare to another there was comparative quiet. In an angle of two walls sat a chestnut vendor, his charcoal fire glowing in the shadow. He was neighbored by a seller of sugared doughnuts. *Venti centissimi, signora, venti.* On the curbstone, opposite to the doughnut man, stood a balloon seller. Immense balloons beautifully coloured in soft blues, greens, reds and yellows, catching here and there the light of the charcoal fire, floated at the top of his striped pole.

Hand-carts chose this quieter way, and for skill their drivers come very close to the cyclists. There is a by-law in Florence which obliges everything with wheels to show a light after nightfall. Nothing so extravagant as an oil lamp is required. A square of paper is twisted into a cone, a bit of candle put inside and, behold, the regulation is complied with. This cone with the lighted candle inside is held in the left hand of the cart pusher or the cyclist; and why the paper does not catch fire as soon as the cart or wheel is in motion, it is hard to say. The effect of these soft moving lights in a dark street, with the great cliffs of houses rising on each side, is really beautiful.

On this particular evening a boy stood in the recess formed by two projecting windows of a brilliantly lighted toy shop. He

seemed to be ten or eleven years of age. His cap was of brown paper, and fashioned like a cook's. His long blue cotton blouse was gathered into a leather belt, and on his feet were shoes with wooden soles. His face proclaimed him a descendant of one of Donatello's singing boys—oval, fine browed, large eyed. At the moment those eyes were fixed upon the wonders before him. He stood in a trance of wonder. One light from the shop lit his face from above, and a warmed light streamed up from below. It came from the paper cone held drooping from his hand. "Look out, little push-cart boy!" The flame had caught the paper shield. In an instant he crushed the flame beneath his shoe. The light of wonder was extinguished in the same moment. He was back in a world of push-carts and duty.

In mangled Italian he was asked if his hand had been scorched. He held it out uninjured, and it seemed a ridiculously small hand to be earning its living. He turned to the smart blue hand-cart which stood by the curbstone. It was evidently new, and on the front in red letters was painted "Riccardo Robustino." The boy was persuaded back to the window, and asked his opinion as to which was the most desirable object there displayed. Having made his choice, he was invited to go in and purchase it. But there was a difficulty. After a struggle with words, the strangers understood that it was not permitted to leave a cart unattended. Then was seen a Justice of an Overseas Supreme Court standing between and firmly grasping the shafts of the vehicle belonging to Riccardo Robustino while the boy, with more than one backward look, disappeared through the shop doorway. It was a great occasion, a wonderful place. He took off the paper cap as he entered, and made a bow to the salesman who approached.

The purchase took time, but presently the shopper reappeared. His choice had wavered. The mechanical alligator had given way to a deadly pistol displayed with pride and joy. Its mechanism was shown. But the ammunition? "*Non ha?*" "*No, signora.*" Then followed a stream of words and lightning gestures. What could it be? Perhaps the funds provided had not been sufficient. What a painful pleasure to possess the weapon and nothing wherewith to produce an ear-splitting bang! Then the wife of the Justice, placing her hand upon Mr. Robustino's property, stood ready to defy any or all of the Florentine police force while the two remaining members of the party accompanied the boy into the shop. There followed slow Berlitz school conversation. Ammunition, it seemed, must be bought elsewhere. So, out again, three bows from Donatello—"Grazie, Signora; grazie Signorina; grazie,

*Signori.*" Away he went with his push-cart and his pistol; and with the hope that Riccardo Robustino would not call his young man too strictly to account for time lost, the wanderers came out into the great Piazza where Cellini's "Perseus" still bears witness to the genius of his villainous creator, and where the flames of Savonarola's martyrdom once lit the dark walls of the grand Palazzo Vecchio.

## II

*The Pensione Chiara.*

The domestic staff of the Pensione Chiara worked longer and harder than any English staff ever dreamed of. A very old Signora Chiara, now unable to take part in the active duties of the house, took her seat in the morning upon a carved chest in the hall. Here she marked the guests who came and went and, if they could speak Italian, answered their many questions. If the poor ignorant foreigners knew not the beautiful language, she would summon the pale secretary (a German) from the tiny office close by. Within sight also was the passage leading to the kitchen, down which the supplies for the day must pass before her eyes, and woe to the porter who thought to conceal limp lettuce beneath the fresh or soft chestnuts below the firm layers! The maids also must go that way to their work upstairs. Even the proud Giovanni, in charge of the dining room, felt that eye upon him, and forbore while in its radius to use his coat pockets in place of the silver-basket. In the afternoon the Signora transferred herself to the office where, crowded together, sat the maids of the house engaged in mending bed and table linen. Every hem, darn and seam was inspected by her, and giggles or whispered words were frowned upon. But these girls had their regular holidays, were well fed, and decidedly contented with their lot.

Signora Chiara had been a famous cook in her day, and it was upon the reputation created by her that the establishment still flourished. Besides a gift for cooking, she was possessed of a swift and flaring rage. It was told that once, when bending over the fire, watching the progress of a dish which was her especial pride, and waiting for the precise moment when certain spices should be added, there occurred in Florence an earthquake, slight but sufficient to loosen a brick in the chimney above. This brick descended upon the bent head of the Signora. She thought it came from the hand of her underling Maria, who had been reproved by her that morning. Poor Maria! The ladle proved a ready instrument of chastisement; fierce words and blows fell upon her, until the descent

of more bricks and a bit of the ceiling bore testimony to her innocence. But the days of such activities were over, and only an occasional flash of her dark eyes told of a fire subdued but not extinguished.

Her daughter Fede and the secretary conducted the main business of the house. When they had pacified guests, who had written to engage rooms on the sunny side looking on the river, and found themselves looking north across a street so narrow that a study of Italian household life was always possible, it was their task to convince tourists who had stipulated for nothing higher than the second storey, that the attic had really advantages unknown to the other floors. The view of distant hills (if one would but step up on a trunk to perceive it) and then the remoteness from noise! No mention was made of the fact that at five-thirty each morning another Pippa passed down the corridor singing of hills dew-pearled and snails on thorns. The secretary invariably promised that soon, in a few days, a "most beautiful room deeper down" would be available, and his voice was so sad and the smile of Fede so delightful, that it would be a hardened traveller indeed who turned away from the delights of the attic or the north rooms.

There was a cook. A fearsome, bearded creature, visible in emergencies such as when Fede was abroad marketing and tourists besieged the unhappy secretary for information. He knew no more of Florence than could be seen from the windows and the opera house round the corner. "When", asked the tourists, "does the train start for Pisa? What tram for Fiesole? Where is the American consul? Where the post office?" Then was summoned the cook. There ensued what seemed to be a violent quarrel, threatening gestures, voices rising higher and higher. The tourists would shrink back into the hall, the cook would finally wrench a map from the wall and thrusting it under the secretary's nose would pour forth words at two hundred a minute. Then sudden calm, translation by the secretary, a coin for the cook, and departure of the guests.

There was Julianna, young, rosy and flirtatious, who served the first floor and who picked up useful phrases in all the languages of Europe. There was Bianca who served the second floor. Heavy of foot and clumsy though powerful of arm, timid, polite, and with no English save "tea" and "water". I had a mascot, an iridescent china duck, the friend of my journeys. Unpacked, if for an only one-night sojourn, and ready in the morning to greet me from a French, Belgian, Italian or Austrian bureau. Always a cheerful bird, and with a philosophic eye. One day, on entering my room,

Bianca met me. Tears rolled down her cheeks, words flowed in a wild torrent from her lips to the accompaniment of eloquent despairing gestures. No clumsiness, no heaviness now. She was tragedy itself. She swept me to the alcove which held the bed and the book shelves from which the duck had looked down. With a magnificent gesture, the truth was laid before me. The iridescent mascot was no more. I did my best to console Bianca, searching for Italian phrases of cheer; striving to remember the pious sentiments uttered by the father, the mother, the banker and the schoolmaster in *Il Cuore*. She retired at last, and I noticed that thereafter the horse-shoe breakfast buns on my tray were what Eaton's catalogue would describe as "out size", and the honey dish was filled to the brim.

Poor Bianca! On our return from Siena, later in the year, she told the story of the last few weeks. Her mother was dead after great suffering, and the three little sisters must now look to Bianca to care for them. She was child-like herself in her griefs and joys. A bag of tarts or a cream cake from Georgio's shop made a *fiesta*, and a few chocolates were good for a beaming smile. She was a loveable human creature. True, my spirits, raised to great height by an evening at the opera, were dashed at midnight by the discovery that the hot water bottle placed in the bed by Bianca at ten o'clock had not had its top entirely screwed down. How cold, how soggy, how perilous seemed that bed—little to choose between it and the palette upon which we had seen *La Bohème* expire to music an hour before.

There was another member of the staff, Ludovico, remarkable for the fact that he alone seemed to escape the vigilant eye of Signora Chiara. His duty was to carry up the breakfast trays to the corridors, to answer the door bell, to wear a green baize apron, to take up baskets of wood and pine cones for the bedroom fires, great cones with sweet smelling resin ready to bubble out at the first touch of flame. The wood was paid for by the basket, but Ludovico had a communistic mind. If fuel were required by No. 18 and the occupant of No. 16 should by good chance be abroad, why go to the cellar? Some day, no doubt, No. 16's basket would be quite empty, and perhaps No. 14's would be full and so all would right itself.

But his real occupation was leaning out of a window. Coming across the Piazza, one could see Ludovico surveying the world from a third storey window; coming home by the river from the galleries, perhaps one got a friendly wave from the second floor; and looking across from the other side of the river often have I

seen a dark head resting on the sill of my own sunny window, a glimpse of green showing where the baize apron served to soften the rigour of the stone. But usually he appeared with his body thrust far outward, and it was a source of wonder how the small part of him which remained inside was able to preserve his balance.

He slept in a sort of cupboard close to the front door in order to let in late comers, and anyone less suited for that duty it would be impossible to find. Two of us came home on Christmas Eve after midnight Mass at the Duomo, to find the door locked and all in darkness. There is something final about a closed outer door in Florence. It has no handle, or perhaps it is that the handle is immovable. There is nothing to rattle, nothing to express the feelings upon. Close inside slumbered Ludovico. The Seven Sleepers were nothing to him. We found at last a bell sunk in the ornamentation of the stone doorway. Long ere Ludovico woke, Signora Chiara, her daughter Fede, the German secretary and half our fellow guests knew of our desire to enter. For the bell, when pressed, rang and went on ringing. It was dreadful. Whatever it is that makes bells stop ringing, was not operating. We could hear the sound echoing through the living rooms, the bedrooms and the long stairways of the Pensione Chiara.

There were others living in the old Pensione, and none more imposing than the husband of Signora Chiara—faultlessly dressed, and with the manners of a duke. He alone seemed to have no duties. The family were proud of him; somehow one had the impression that he was looked upon as a desirable luxury, in something the same light as the motor car, a possession which lent glory to the establishment and an air of prosperity to the household.

### III

#### *A Stroll.*

A little before ten o'clock this morning I stepped from the doorway of the Pensione Chiara out into the sunshine of the Piazza Mentana. The sky was the sky of Italian picture post-cards, and the Arno the golden arrow of Mrs. Browning. Even the three black-shirted Fascisti on the steps of the Fascist headquarters on the other side of the square seemed content to sit in the sun, and bargain for sweetmeats from the tray of the old man who had come across from the river wall to supply their demands. It was hard to decide which way to go—by the river to watch the boatmen scooping up sand from the bottom of the Arno into their shallow boats; to admire once more the strangeness of the Ponte Vecchio

and the beauty of the Santa Trinita bridge; or to cross our square diagonally, and be at once in the network of narrow streets which lead by half a dozen ways to the great Piazza Signoria.

There were errands to be done. A book for the library, a call at the British Institute, a letter to register at the post office, a visit to the bar—yes—how strange it sounds—to the bar. The words *The Bar* were there over the door, and just inside was a slot machine; you put in five or ten lire and might get out five hundred; but then, on the other hand, you might not. A call at the bar for the purpose of getting an egg nog and a little sweet bun with a long name. A very stimulating egg nog was there concocted. It was called a *sabione*. On occasions I thought it was perhaps a trifle too stimulating, but it was the only kind of egg nog I knew how to ask for. However, it was an excellent tonic to take before an interview with the Countess Leopardi, the better-days lady in charge of the late Herbert Trench's library which he left to the British Institute of Florence. She was a frosty lady, but thawable, after a season.

At eleven-fifteen was due a visit to the Signore and Signora Berlitz, the heads of one of the most remarkable and well-known families in the world. They have representatives in almost every continental town, and in Florence occupy one floor of an old palace. The great rooms are now divided into cell-like apartments, and there all day long the Berlitzes receive the crowds who call upon them. How patient are the Berlitzes! They sit at a table spread with pane, latte, carne, buttire, formagio, aranci, vino rosso and vino bianco. They are provided with coltelli, forchetti, cuchiaio and everything necessary, yet they seem to have little appetite. The feast remains the same and undiminished from one visit to another. Perhaps this is not surprising. The constant intrusion of strangers into the family circle, the questions asked, the comments made, must be fatiguing in the extreme to Mrs. Berlitz and her husband. "The eyes of Signore Berlitz are black. Signora Berlitz has a dress of yellow. Little Signorina Berlitz has a red book which is on a green table behind the white pencil-box. She is seated on a brown chair. The door is open, the window is shut". Such scraps of information, volunteered with long pauses between the words, must become wearisome at last to this hospitable and unhappy family.

But it is now only a little after ten. The river, as usual, won the day, so I sauntered on by the stock exchange which occupies the space where the wool-makers used to spread their wool to dry when the wool-makers formed one of the most powerful of the

guilds in Florence, and I think built the lovely thanksgiving church of Or San Michele. Set in the river wall opposite the exchange is a tablet recalling that here Charles Capello, Venetian Ambassador, during the siege of Florence in 1530, had his horse buried in its rich harness; a Latin verse testifies to the good services which this horse had rendered, and the affection felt for him by his master. On by the blind woman who sits all day with her two children under the arches of the overhead gallery connecting the Uffizi gallery with the old bridge, and past the statue to Piero Capponi, the Florentine citizen who made his famous retort to Charles VIII of France then on his way to fight the kingdom of Naples. Charles made certain outrageous demands upon his hosts the Florentines, and remarked that if his requests were not complied with immediately "We will sound our trumpets". "Then" said Capponi "we will ring our bells." And Charles knew that at the first stroke of the bell in the tower of the Palazzo Vecchio every Florentine citizen would cry "Ah! the old cow moos", then spring for his weapons, and before a dozen strokes were sounded the narrow streets would be humming with armed and angry men keen to defend their liberties, while from high windows of Palaces and easily barricaded houses all sorts of missiles would fall upon his soldiers quartered in a dozen different parts of the town. So he had a second thought about his trumpets, and turned the matter off with a feeble joke.

Well, leaving the brave Capponi looking out over the river, and turning into Por San Maria leading from the old goldsmith's bridge to the hat and flower market, I became one of a dense crowd. A crowd in a Florentine street does not necessarily mean a great number of persons, but this was a very dense crowd, and through the hum of it came a sound which seemed familiar. Not the words, but the sounds—joyous, holiday, cock o' the walk, youthful. Then snatches of song. Then what was evidently a speech of two minutes or so, followed by cheers.

"*Studenti?*" said I to a grinning boy.

"*Si, signorina, si*", (observe the reward of association with the family Berlitz).

The steps of a silk shop gave a point of vantage. A boat-shaped crimson felt hat on the head of a wild youth near the steps was decorated with child's set of kitchen utensils, tiny frying pans, kettles and so on. All the hats were gay, and long brilliant scarves took the place of neckties. One youth, his green velvet cap, adorned with a long slender feather, resting on a mass of curls and one lock hanging over his forehead, might have been the gay young



Juliano di Medici beloved of Florence, mourned for his tragic death, and fearfully revenged nearly five hundred years ago. Down this street he must have come a hundred times with his brother Lorenzo and their blithe companions.

A pair of proudly stepping horses, their liveried driver no less well fed and proud, slackened their pace. The students swarmed round the horses, and brought them to a standstill. An elderly couple in the carriage looked at first bewildered; the leading student swept off his green velvet cap in a graceful bow, and made a one-minute speech to the old gentleman. The old gentleman smiled, the old lady smiled, something passed from the pocket of the old gentleman to the hand of the youth. A high voice demanded of the world at large "What's the matter with this good Signore? With this good Signora?" or words to that effect, and a chorus proceeded to assure all within Por San Maria and far beyond it that "He's all right; she's all right." Amid cheers the carriage went its way.

At this point I found that I was not going to the post-office, nor to the library, nor to the shoe mender, nor to the Berlitzes. I would go where the students went, and lean against door posts in the sun, and so pass the hours sensibly and think upon other like scenes in a more frosty clime.

Along came a motor car. It was surrounded, the door opened, the green cap and feather swept earthwards and the speech began. A scowl, a curse, a string of words never heard in the Berlitz circle. Foolish man! Students sat on the top of his car, filled the running boards, one head crowding close to another, all apparently eager to look upon a strange yet displeasing creature. One boy slid into the car and sat beside the infuriated and helpless passenger. I think he tried to pat his hand. Then, with one accord, all eyes were turned from him as though in pain and disgust—a sight too shocking to be endured. But at this moment the tallest student on the top of the car sighted four policemen turning a near-by corner. In another moment there was nothing more remarkable than a motor standing at its driver's pleasure, with a clear way before it. Along the sides of the street were little groups of strangely dressed young men who seemed to be in pain. They were groaning. But no policeman would arrest or interfere with a man for groaning. If one man of the party were in pain, what more natural than that his companions should suffer from the same cause as he and also be in pain, and, if in pain, why not moan or groan? All groaned, and the car proceeded stationward.

An errand boy, dressed in a long blue linen coat, who had been standing close by for the last fifteen minutes, now decided to proceed upon his business, which was the conveying of six dinners in six covered plates, the bottom one resting in his clasped hands and the top one steadied by his chin. His joy in the spectacle was so extreme that I regretted the necessity for his departure. In fact we all moved on, for the students were now headed for Via Tournabuoni. Into this we turned by the Strozzi Palace, and down this wider thoroughfare they proceeded singing, dancing, making speeches at shop doors to those within or to onlookers, and gathering contributions.

Up the street and in the middle of it, by reason of the crowded side paths, came four girls. They were probably Americans, prettily dressed, pretty themselves and evidently quite engaged with their own affairs. In another moment there was a rush, the boys joined hands, the tourist maidens were surrounded with a wide circle of dancing singing Italian youths. Round and round, singing evidently an Italian version of *Ring a ring a rosy*, sped the students; more and more bewildered looked the girls. Then, at what seemed the same instant, each man let go the man next him, low bows were swept to the astonished travellers, and the crowd took its way to the office of Thomas Cook and Company, there to invite further contributions towards the charity for which, it seems, the students of the Florentine university thus exert themselves once a year.

The youth of Florence seem to come naturally by their merry-making. From the time of Lorenzo the Magnificent and his tournament, and that of Giuliano still more splendid, there are long accounts given in the books of the feasting and dancing and music with which marriages were celebrated and guests entertained; almost any event served as an occasion for rejoicing and merry-making.