

TUSCAN CITIES

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Tuscan cities by W. D. Howells

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W. D. HOWELLS

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BY

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*'THE RISE OF SILAS LAPHAM,' 'A MODERN INSTANCE,'
'THE SHADOW OF A DREAM,' ETC.*

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TUSCAN CITIES

A FLORENTINE MOSAIC

I



FROM Turin to Bologna there was snow all the way down; not, of course, the sort of snow we had left on the other side of the Alps, or the snow we remembered in America, but a snow picturesque, spectacular, and no colder or bleaker to the eye from the car-window than the cotton-woolly counterfeit which clothes a landscape of

the theatre. It covered the whole Lombard plain to the depth of several inches, and formed a very pretty

decoration for the naked vines and the trees they festooned. A sky which remained thick and dun throughout the day contributed to the effect of winter, for which, indeed, the Genoese merchant in our carriage said it was now the season.

But the snow grew thinner as the train drew southward, and about Bologna the ground showed through it in patches. Then the night came on, and when we reached Florence at nine o'clock we emerged into an atmosphere which, in comparison with the severity of the transalpine air, could only be called mildly reproachful. For a few days we rejoiced in its concessive softness with some such sense of escape as must come to one who has left moral obligation behind; and then our penalty began. If we walked half a mile away from our hotel, we despaired of getting back, and commonly had ourselves brought home by one of the kindly cab-drivers who had observed our exhaustion. It came finally to our not going away from our hotel to such distances at all. We observed with a mild passivity the vigour of the other guests, who went and came from morning till night, and brought to the *table d'hôte* minds full of the spoil of their day's sight-seeing. We confessed that we had not, perhaps, been out that day, and we accounted for ourselves by saying that we had seen Florence before, a good many years ago, and that we were in no haste, for we were going to stay all winter. We tried to pass it off as well as we could, and a fortnight had gone by before we had darkened the doors of a church or a gallery.

I suppose that all this lassitude was the effect of our

sudden transition from the tonic air of the Swiss mountains ; and I should be surprised if our experience of the rigours of a Florentine December were not considered libellous by many whose experience was different. Nevertheless, I report it ; for the reader may like to trace to it the languid lack of absolute opinion concerning Florence and her phenomena, and the total absence of final wisdom on any point, which I hope he will be able to detect throughout these pages.

II

It was quite three weeks before I began to keep any record of impressions, and I cannot therefore fix the date at which I pushed my search for them beyond the limits of the Piazza Santa Maria Novella, where we were lodged. It is better to own up at once to any sin which one is likely to be found out in, for then one gains at least the credit of candour and courage ; and I will confess here that I had come to Florence with the intention of writing about it. But I rather wonder now why I should have thought of writing of the whole city, when one piazza in it was interesting enough to make a book about. It was in itself not one of the most interesting piazzas of Florence in the ordinary way. I do not know that anything very historical ever happened there ; but that is by no means saying that there did not. There used, under the early Medici and the late grand dukes, to be chariot-races in it, the goals of which are the two obelisks by John of Bologna, set upon the backs of the bronze turtles which the sympathetic observer will fancy gasping under

their weight at either end of the irregular space ; and its wide floor is still unpaved, so that it is a sop of mud in rainy weather, and a whirl of dust in dry. At the end opposite the church is the terminus of the steam tramway running to Prato, and the small engine that drew the trains of two or three horse-cars linked together was perpetually fretting and snuffing about the base of the obelisk there, as if that were a stump and the engine were a boy's dog with intolerable conviction of a woodchuck under it. From time to time the conductor blew a small horn of a feeble, reedy note, like that of the horns which children find in their stockings on Christmas morning ; and then the poor little engine hitched itself to the train, and with an air of hopeless affliction snuffled away toward Prato, and left the woodchuck under the obelisk to escape. The impression of a woodchuck was confirmed by the digging round the obelisk which a gang of workmen kept up all winter ; they laid down water-pipes, and then dug them up again. But when the engine was gone we could give our minds to other sights in the piazza.

III

ONE of these was the passage of troops, infantry or cavalry, who were always going to or from the great railway station behind the church, and who entered it with a gay blare of bugles, extinguished midway of the square, letting the measured tramp of feet or the irregular clank of hoofs make itself heard. This was always thrilling, and we could not get enough of the

brave spectacle. We rejoiced in the parade of Italian military force with even more than native ardour, for we were not taxed to pay for it, and personally the men were beautiful; not large or strong, but regular and refined of face, rank and file alike, in that democracy of good looks which one sees in no other land. They marched with a lounging, swinging step, under a heavy burden of equipment, and with the sort of quiet patience to which the whole nation has been schooled in its advance out of slavish subjection to the van of civilization.

They were not less charming when they came through off duty, the officers in their statuesque cloaks, with the gleam of their swords beneath the folds, striding across the piazza in twos or threes, the common soldiers straggling loosely over its space with the air of peasants let loose amid the wonders of a city, and smoking their long, straw-stemmed Italian cigars, with their eyes all abroad. I do not think they kept up so active a courtship with the nursemaids as the soldiers in the London squares and parks, but there was a friendliness in their relations with the population everywhere that spoke them still citizens of a common country, and not alien to its life in any way. They had leisure just before Epiphany to take a great interest in the preparations the boys were making for the celebration of that feast, with a noise of long, slender trumpets of glass; and I remember the fine behaviour of a corporal in a fatigue-cap, who happened along one day when an orange-vendor and a group of urchins were trying a trumpet, and extorting from it only a few

stertorous crumbs of sound. The corporal put it lightly to his lips, and blew a blast upon it that almost shivered our window-panes, and then walked off with the effect of one who would escape gratitude; the boys looked after him till he was quite out of sight with mute wonder, such as pursues the doer of a noble action.

One evening an officer's funeral passed through the piazza, with a pomp of military mourning; but that was no more effective than the merely civil funeral which we once saw just at twilight. The bearers were in white cowls and robes, and one went at the head of the bier with a large cross. The others carried torches, which sometimes they inverted, swinging forward with a slow processional movement, and chanting monotonously, with the clear dark of the evening light keen and beautiful around them.

At other times we heard the jangle of a small bell, and looking out we saw a priest of Santa Maria, with the Host in his hand and his taper-bearing retinue around him, going to administer the extreme unction to some passing soul in our neighbourhood. Some of the spectators uncovered, but for the most part they seemed not to notice it, and the solemnity had an effect of business which I should be at some loss to make the reader feel. But that is the effect which church ceremonial in Italy has always had to me. I do not say that the Italians are more indifferent to their religion than other people, but that, having kept up its shows, always much the same in the celebration of different faiths,—Etruscan, Hellenic, Hebraic,—so long, they were more tired of them, and