



## C H A P T E R 27

WE HAVE LIVED IN A FLORENTINE VILLA BEFORE WE CAME HERE TO THE Villa di Quarto. [Editor's note: written in 1904.] This was twelve years ago. This was the Villa Viviani and was pleasantly and commandingly located on a hill overlooking Florence and the great valley. The year spent in the Villa Viviani was something of a contrast to the five months which we have now spent in the Villa di Quarto. Among my old notebooks I find some account of that pleasantly remembered year and will introduce a few of them here.

When we were passing through Florence in the spring of 1892 on our way to Germany, the diseased-world's bathhouse, we began making arrangements for a villa, and friends of ours completed them after we were gone. When we got back three or four months later everything was ready, even to the servants and the dinner. It takes but a sentence to state that, but it makes a lazy person tired to think of the planning and work and trouble that lie concealed in it. For it is less trouble and more satisfaction to bury two families than to select and equip a home for one.

The situation of the villa was perfect. It was three miles from Florence, on the side of a hill. It looked down upon olive trees and **vineyards**; to the right, beyond some hills, was Fiesole; nearby was the

impressive mass of the Ross castle, its walls and towers rich with the weather stains of forgotten centuries; in the distant plain lay Florence, pink and gray and brown, with the high **dome** of the **cathedral** ruling over its center, and the right by the smaller dome of the Palazzo Vecchio; all around was the ring of high hills, snowed white with countless villas. After nine months of familiarity with this view I still think, as I thought in the beginning, that this is the fairest picture on our planet, the most wonderful to look upon, the most satisfying to the eye and the spirit.

September 26, 1892. Arrived in Florence. Got my head shaved. This was a mistake. Moved to the villa in the afternoon, some of the trunks brought up in the evening by the “contadino”—if that is his title. He is the man who lives on the farm and takes care of it for the owner. The contadino is middle-aged and like the rest of the farmers—that is to say, brown, handsome, good-natured, courteous and entirely independent without making any offensive show of it. He charged too much for the trunks, I was told. My informant explained that this was customary.

September 27. The rest of the trunks brought up this morning. He charged too much again but I was told that this was also customary. It is all right, then. I do not wish to do violence to the customs. Hired carriage, horses and a coachman. The carriage has seen better days and weighs thirty tons. The horses are weak and object to the carriage; they stop and turn around every now and then and examine it with surprise and suspicion. This causes delay. But it entertains the people along the road. They came out and stood around with their hands in their pockets and discussed the matter with one another. I was told they said that a forty-ton carriage was not the thing for horses like these—what they needed was a cart.

The villa is a two-story house. It is not an old house—from an Italian standpoint, I mean. No doubt there has always been a nice dwelling on this spot since a thousand years B.C., but this present one is said to be only two hundred years old. Outside, it is a plain square building like a box and is painted a light yellow. The garden about the

house is stocked with flowers and lemon bushes in great stone containers; there are several tall trees—stately pines—also trees of kinds not familiar to me; roses overflow the retaining walls.

The house is like a fort for strength. The main walls—of brick—are about three feet thick; the walls of the rooms, also of brick, are nearly the same thickness. The ceilings of the rooms on the ground floor are more than twenty feet high; those of the upper floors are also higher than necessary. I have several times tried to count the rooms in the house but the lack of regularity puzzles me. There seem to be twenty-eight.

The curious feature of the house is the **salon**. This is a big empty space which occupies the center of the house; all the rest of the house is built around it; it extends up through both stories and the sense of its vastness strikes you the moment you step into it and cast your eyes around and up. There are five couches distributed along its walls; they make little or no show, though their length all together is fifty-seven feet. A piano in it is a lost object. We have tried to reduce the sense of desert space and emptiness with tables and things but they have a defeated look and do not do any good. Whatever stands or moves under that high ceiling is dwarfed.

But I am forgetting to state what it is about that room that is so curious—which is, that it is not really vast but only seems so. It is deceiving. Measured by the eye it is sixty feet square and sixty high; but I have been using the measuring line and find it to be but forty feet square and forty high. These are the correct figures; and what is interestingly strange is that the place continues to look as big now as it did before I measured it.

The villa has a roomy look, a spacious look; and when the sunshine is pouring in and lighting up the bright colors of the shiny floors and walls and ceilings there is a large and friendly suggestion of welcome, but I do not know that I have ever seen a continental dwelling which quite met the American standard of a home in all the details. There is a trick about the American house that is like the deep-lying untranslatable expressions of a foreign language—a trick uncatchable by the stranger, and indescribable; and that trick, that indescribable

something, whatever it is, is just the something that gives the home-look and the home-feeling to an American house and makes it the most satisfying shelter yet invented by men—and women—particularly women. The American house is rich in soft and varied colors that please and rest the eye, and in surfaces that are smooth and pleasant to the touch, in forms that are shapely and graceful, in objects without number which compel interest and cover nakedness; and the night has even a higher charm than the day, there, for the lights do really give light instead of merely trying and failing; and under their veiled and colored glow all the comfort and charm of the place is at best and loveliest. But when night shuts down on the continental home there is no gas or electricity to fight it, but only ugly lamps of incomparable poverty in the matter of effectiveness.

September 29. I seem able to forget everything except that I have had my head shaved. The main difficulty is the flies. They like it up there better than anywhere else; on account of the view, I suppose. It seems to me that I have never seen any flies before that had shoes like these. They walk over my head all the time and cause me torture. It is their park, their club, their summer resort. They have garden parties there and all sorts of wild doings. And they fear nothing. All flies are daring but these are more daring than those of other nationalities. These cannot be scared away by any device.

October 1. Finding that the coachman was taking his meals in the kitchen, I reorganized the contract to include his **board**, at thirty francs a month. That is what it would cost him up above us in the village and I think I can feed him for two hundred and save thirty out of it. Saving thirty is better than not saving anything.

October 6. I find myself at a disadvantage here. Four persons in the house speak Italian and nothing else, one person speaks German and nothing else, the rest of the talk is in the French, English and improper languages. I am equipped with but the merest bit of skill in these tongues, if I except one or two. Angelo speaks French—a French he invented himself; a French which no one can understand. He prefers it to his native Italian. He loves to talk it; loves to listen to

himself; to him it is music; he will not let it alone. It makes no difference what language he is addressed in, his reply is in French, his peculiar French, which sounds like pushing coal down a slide. I know a few Italian words and several phrases, and along at first I used to keep them bright and fresh by sharpening them on Angelo; but he partly couldn't understand them and partly didn't want to, so I have been obliged to remove them from the market for the present. But this is not permanent. I am practicing. I am preparing. Some day I shall be ready for him, and not in French but in his native tongue.

October 27. The first month is finished. We agree that life at a Florentine villa is an ideal existence. The weather is divine, the outside aspects lovely, the days and nights restful; being away from the rest of the world is as restful and satisfactory as a dream. There is no house-keeping to do, no plans to make, no marketing to watch over—all these things do themselves, apparently. One is aware that somebody is attending to them, just as one is aware that the world is being turned over and the sun moved around according to plan, but that is all; one does not feel personally concerned or in any way responsible. Yet there is no head, no chief boss; each servant minds his or her own department, requiring no watching over and having none. There is no noise or quarreling or confusion—upstairs. I don't know what goes on below. Late in the afternoons friends come out from the city and drink tea in the open air and tell what is happening in the world; and when the great sun sinks down upon Florence and the daily wonder begins, they hold their breaths and look. It is not a time for talk.