

# CORTONA

*WHAT is charm? And why do some towns possess it in such an outstanding degree? It seems better not to ask, lest the clumsy fingers of analysis brush the bloom off the butterfly wing, and the charm die by being pinned remorselessly to paper. Sufficient surely to be thankful for it. Cortona possesses that elusive quality, and few New Zealanders who have visited it do not carry pleasant memories of that quiet and unhurried little town, perched on its private hill-top, while the busy stream of traffic flows past it in the valley.*

Cortona is not on the way to anywhere and he who visits it must do so of design. But it is a design that is amply repaid. The chief attraction lies not in fine buildings nor in notable pictures, though these are not lacking. It is to be found rather in the town as a whole. Lying within its Etruscan walls, whose mighty blocks of stone testify to the enduring masonry of those ancient builders, it has changed little and grown not at all over many centuries. Indeed before the Roman power was known it was a city of no small renown. As one of the twelve confederate cities of Etruria it was a fortress with few superiors in Italy. But now there are few memories of its famous past except those walls and the antiquities in the Accademia Etrusca's Museum in the Palazzo Pretorio. At the present moment the museum is closed but it is worth more than a moment's attention on account of the fascinating variety of the stone coats of arms let into the outer walls that face on to the Piazza Signorelli, named in memory of the town's most famous son.

Luca Signorelli was born here about 1450, and though his most celebrated



works are the frescoes in Orvieto Cathedral, masterpieces that clearly stamp him as the precursor of Michael Angelo, some fine paintings of his are to be found in Cortona. Some are in the Cathedral, which is but a short way from the Piazza Signorelli, down the Via Casali. The Duomo is a most interesting building. Once Tuscan Romanesque, in the eighteenth century it was turned into a good example of a Renaissance basilica. The inside is cool and fresh, with a pleasant barrel-vaulted nave and fine grey composite columns. Outside, the mixture is more obvious, especially at the main door where it is easy to see how the Renaissance doorway has been inserted into the far more ancient walls. The uncertain marriage of the two styles is there not altogether happy.

The Duomo has a very fine Signorelli, *The Communion of the Apostles*, and in the Baptistery is an *Annunciation* by Fra Angelico, which is typical of that artist's sweetness and charm. The Cathedral also possesses a most interesting Roman Sarcophagus, on which a lively battle is raging between centaurs and men. It is almost the