

OUR LITTLE  
FLORENTINE  
COUSIN OF LONG AGO



JULIA DARROW COWLES

This edition published 2026  
by Living Book Press  
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ISBN: 978-1-76183-049-5 (hardcover)  
978-1-76183-044-0 (softcover)

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# Our Little Florentine Cousin of Long Ago

*by*

ANNA CONSTANCE WINLOW





FILIPPO

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## A Secret Errand on the Ponte Vecchio

In the very early morning of the thirteenth day of March, 1478—or as the Florentines would have it, 1477, for they did not reckon their New Year's Day until March twenty-fifth—a handsome boy was standing irresolutely on the Old Bridge of Florence. His curling hair, of a length just to sweep his shoulders, was caught by the breeze and blown first across his face and then to his back. The same breeze parted his dark velvet cloak to show its lining of gay *oricello* silk, a lovely reddish color for which his city was noted, and the sky-blue *sajo* or tunic underneath. The boy shivered a trifle, but still hesitated.

Filippo had reached his destination, and, decidedly, he was afraid.

He had ridden down from the Fiesolan hills at more than his usual reckless speed, and left his horse, as he often did, at the hostel near the San Gallo gate. That was all that had been ordinary. For the rest, he could hardly remember ever having come into Fiorenza (the old Tuscan spelling for Florence) so early. It seemed that the only persons yet stirring were various *contadini* (peasants) who had driven their carts or trudged on foot into the city to sell their produce. They were already fighting for the best places in the Mercato Vecchio, the central and most important market, as Filippo had seen

as he passed, and also right here in the smaller market at the head of the bridge he was on.

In fact, he had almost been trodden underfoot by a plunging mule when a small peasant boy had twitched its tail. He had just leaped aside in time when the over-tried animal kicked out and sent flying a whole stall of cheeses, apples, and early spring vegetables. It wasn't a thing like that which could frighten Filippo.

On the contrary, he had turned on the boy in a twinkling and given him so sound a cuff that the latter tumbled headfirst into a basket of parsley and herbs, and in getting up crashed first into a sack of artichokes and then against a pannier of eggs not yet unloaded from another mule. What a confusion! The broken eggs had oozed forth in a stream, the vegetables rolled about, the market folk screamed and gesticulated. Impish children had darted in and out among the stalls and carts, slyly stealing this and that tasty morsel. Donkeys had brayed, babies cried, a dog barked loudly. A crowd of men and women in bright costumes had hemmed in Filippo with threatening faces and doubled fists.

It had never occurred to him to pity the poor mistreated animal that was the cause of all the trouble. No, he simply hadn't been going to let himself be made a fool of by an imp of a ragged boy. He had laughed in the faces of the older contadini, stuck his arms akimbo, and with a kick to a rolling onion at his feet, pushed a way clear for himself to the bridge. Despite angry mutters, no one had ventured to attack him.

Giving a toss of the head and a snap of the fingers back at the market folk, he had thus swaggered on to the narrow passage of the Ponte Vecchio (Old Bridge), lined on either



THE OVER-TIRED ANIMAL KICKED OUT.

side by oddly shaped little houses, most of them with shops on the ground floor. This was the most picturesque of the several bridges spanning the river to Oltr' Arno, the section of the city lying south of the Arno. The morning light was dim, and after the open market square, it seemed positively dark between the buildings. Here Filippo stood, his face paling a little, his hand trembling a bit as he drew together his warm cloak.

After standing for five minutes or more before a certain barred door without, however, touching the knocker, he ran a few steps forward. In its middle, for the space of a house or two, the bridge was open to the river. Filippo leaned on the parapet gazing down at the rushing water, which was high and dangerous at this season. Away from the shelter of the houses, the cold breeze could play with him unopposed, and did so. It caught his cloak and set it to billowing like a flag. Then before he knew it, up went his cap from his head and, whirling in the air, slowly settled on the surface of the Arno.

"*Diavolo!*" exclaimed Filippo ruefully. He peered down after it, and could make it out near one bank. "Hie there!" he called out. "Hie there!" He had spied some fishermen drawing in their nets. "Hie, get my cap, and here's a *denaro* for you when I come down." He drew a coin from his *scarsella* and held it between thumb and finger.

The fishermen seemed too far off to hear. Just then an unkempt barefooted urchin darted out from under the bridge, threw himself boldly into the river, and swam the short distance to the cap, which he carried in his teeth back to shore. He needed all his limbs not to be carried on by the current.

"Good!" shouted Filippo as he saw the boy struggle up to the bank. "Bring it here, and here's a fine *soldo* for you."

“Like fun!” screamed back the other. “I can get six *soldi* for this easy in the Mercato.”

“I’ll give you six, you thief. Come up here, or I’ll break your bones!”

The boy, dripping with water, moved out of sight. Filippo waited for him to appear on the bridge. He waited long before he realized that the little sinner had preferred to give him the slip and slink away to sell or wear the fine velvet cap elsewhere. A bad Easter to the impudent rascal!

Filippo was very angry. How cold the wind was! He moved back between the shops and looked at one fixedly. It, like all the others, was still shuttered and locked. All were as silent as night. His eye wandered up and down reading the signs; they were mostly those of the incomparable artist-jewelers and goldsmiths for which the bridge was already becoming famed.

Only this one sign, with its strange marks that were neither Latin nor Greek, for Filippo knew both, nor good Tuscan Italian, interested him.

Should he do it after all?

It was not that Filippo did not know what the shop was nor who kept it. The shop was supposed to be that of a pharmacist, but everyone knew, or at least so it was said, that its keeper did many strange things that had nothing to do with the compounding of medicines. Filippo knew the man well enough. He had been in his shop, even, but always in the full light of day and with his father. The man was a client of Filippo’s father, who was a prominent notary or family lawyer of Florence; lawyers can’t always choose their clients, thought Filippo.

“Hang it!” he murmured to himself, “it’s too early. Not a church bell has rung yet. To all purposes it’s still night—the devil’s own time. Anything could happen inside there. Witchcraft—brrr! Why in goodness’s name didn’t I stay in bed a while longer?”

But Filippo considered it even earlier than it was. He had idled away quite half an hour on the bridge, and now there came a deep harmonious peal followed by others. The church towers of Florence were calling to prayer.

Almost instantly there was an answering stir throughout the City of Flowers. On either side of Filippo, shutters were thrown open, windows and doors unlocked. The lights before the holy pictures on the fronts of some of the houses seemed to grow dimmer. Tradesmen and their wives came out, hesitated on their doorsills to say an Ave Maria. Soon the narrow but well paved streets and handsome *piazze* or squares were fast filling with color and life.

Should he go inside? This one shop had still remained as dark and quiet as the grave. In a burst of resolution, Filippo seized the metal knocker wrought in the form of a bird’s head, and clanged it loudly. There was no answer. His quick temper flaring up, Filippo’s cheeks burned. He clanged more loudly still, and gave a kick at the stout oaken door. Fear or no fear, he was not going to be rebuffed.

After a time, in which Filippo kept up a continual clang, clang, clang, a head with a long sharp nose and a white night-cap appeared at an upper window. Bah, Maestro Bartolommeo Piccino was hardly terrifying in this guise.

“Let me in,” demanded Filippo. “I want to buy something of you.”

“Who is it?”

“Filippo de’ Nerli, son of Ser Guido.” (Maestro was a Florentine title for doctors, etc.; Ser a title for notaries).

“The son of my esteemed lawyer is always welcome,” said Maestro Bartolommeo in an humble manner. “But it might be a little early, just a little early, my excellent young friend.”

“Early or not, I want to see you!” Between the loss of his cap and the action of the street boy who found it, with Bartolommeo’s unctuous voice and the chill of the March morning, Filippo’s patience was quite at an end.

“Certainly, oh, certainly then, certainly, assuredly,” agreed the figure at the window with conciliatory haste. “I will be right down, my young friend; do you but have the goodness to wait until I am fittingly gowned.”

The head disappeared, the window closed—and Filippo’s fear came back. Why was the Maestro so willing to see him? Was it merely on his father’s account? He remembered only too clearly all their housekeeper, Monna Nannina, had told him about this man’s magic-working. Of course his queer doings might be done only to impose on the ignorant, still... How uncanny that sign was above the door! Filippo recalled the interior of the shop—dark, odd-smelling, filled with mysterious objects hung with cobwebs and covered with dust.

How he wished he were not here! Only his pride held him to the spot.

He gave an involuntary start as the iron-hinged door grated open.

“Welcome. Step in,” said the long-nosed man, now clad in a skull-cap and a long black gown. “But how pale you

are, my young friend. Surely nothing has happened to that worthy gentleman, your father?"

"No," answered Filippo in a hollow voice, as he followed his questioner inside and heard with a gasp the door shut behind him.

"The cold. Doubtless it's the cold. You must drink a few drops of wine. I shall bring you a glass instantly."

"Oh, I couldn't! I couldn't! I am quite all right, with many thanks!" Filippo saw himself poisoned, bewitched, transformed into some mythical animal. In this new alarm, he took courage to clutch Bartolommeo's arm so that the latter could not leave. The arm felt thin and bony under the wide sleeve.

"I must get this over with," thought Filippo, and forced himself to face the long nose and loose yellow skin of the pharmacist. The shop was lit only by a lantern which had been hung on a hook in the ceiling. The light formed peculiar lines and hollows on the old man's visage and gave an unearthly glint to his deep-set eyes. Even at that he was easier to look at than the room—with its flitting shadows, its heavy odors, its rows of mysterious jars and vials.

In a voice he could not make quite steady, Filippo began. "I don't know whether you'll have what I want, Maestro Bartolommeo. You see I want..."

His voice grew more confident as he described what he desired and what he proposed doing with it. To his considerable relief Piccino laughed. Somehow it made the old fellow more human, that laugh.

"I get what you want, ha, ha, ha," chuckled Bartolommeo. "Boys are still boys, I see. Ha! ha!" He began to recite

an adventure of his school days long ago, seating himself as he did so on the edge of his counter.

By degrees Filippo discerned a stool standing near the wall and let himself down upon it. He told the pharmacist something about his teacher and his fellow students. The Maestro replied again with other tales, most exciting ones, of a man who, so Bartolommeo said, had found the Philosopher's Stone and could understand all learning and change brass and iron to purest gold. Nobody could guess how he had managed so well, until one night, puff! he disappeared in a little whiff of smoke, and folks knew then that he had sold his soul to the devil.

"Do you know as much as he did?" questioned Filippo suspiciously.

"No, no, my young friend. I know a little of this and a little of that, it may be, but the devil has never come along with a bargain for my soul."

Filippo found himself beginning to like the pharmacist famously. "Tell me more," he urged. "How much do you really know? People say that you are an alchemist yourself and can change all metals to gold and that you have filled up a whole room with gold already. They say also that you can bring back the dead and concoct charms."

Old Bartolommeo's eyes glowed. "As for charms and magic—" He waved his hand. "Charms and magic are not for a poor man like me, a good son of Holy Church. Enough if I discover the great secret—and by San Giovanni, I believe I have my finger nearly upon it!" He had grown very excited. "Gold! Gold! Oh, for the day when I shall draw my wand out of my retort into which nothing has gone save base metals, and find it capped with gold!"

“And will that be soon?” asked Filippo eagerly, carried away by the other’s fervor.

“I work and study on the problem day and night. What do I care about compounding drugs and keeping the common people in awe of me by a little harmless mystery! It will be I, I, Bartolommeo Piccino, who will conquer the secret of transmuting metals!” His voice rose triumphantly, then sank. “*Cristo*, I must succeed! I must!”

Filippo started to ask many questions about the process the alchemist was following, for he knew something himself, from reading, of the ancient practice of alchemy. Doubtless Maestro Bartolommeo would have resented the questions from an older person, but he enjoyed talking quite frankly to this handsome and independent boy. When he thought he had said enough, “Come,” he suggested, “and I will show you my workroom.”

Filippo followed up a dark and winding stair to an upper room, which, however, was itself lit by two small windows in the roof. To the back was a furnace, now cold. From the ceiling hung various kettles and retorts; a table was cluttered with bottles, pieces of metal, little heaps of loose chemicals, and other things. A Latin manuscript, brown with age, richly bound in leather, was open on a stand. Above it was a stump of a candle, some of the grease of which had fallen on the leaves. In one corner of the room was a large object shrouded by a piece of cloth.

Filippo’s active mind was fascinated. Making himself at once at home, he burrowed around, inquiring about everything.

The old alchemist had long ago lost the last trace of his too-humble manner toward the son of that important man,



FILIPPO STARTED BACK WITH A CRY.

the notary Guido de' Nerli. He spoke charmingly as equal to equal, and Filippo quite forgot the long nose, the yellow wrinkled skin, and the bent back. For Filippo was in his element. He was reading off scraps of Latin from the parchment pages, studying each object, prying into every nook.

Chalked on the table was an algebraic formula, and Filippo began to study this intently.

"Stay! stay!" smiled Maestro Bartolommeo, showing his teeth broken by age, "that is getting too close to the knowledge for which I have spent my life. Come, instead, over here and see my manikin—I promise you he won't bite!"

Filippo turned, then started back with a cry. The curtain had been lifted, showing a strange grinning figure, inky black but shining with a dullish glow.

Filippo, backed against the door, began with feverish haste to say an Ave Maria. Bartolommeo laughed. "Tut, tut, it's not alive," he chuckled. "You're only looking at the 'watchman' I've made myself to stand guard over my treasures when I'm out. Just a thing of wood and paint, my friend—but I don't tell that to everyone."

To reassure his visitor, Bartolommeo shook the manikin, then held it up by a horn of its head.

Although Filippo had a lively imagination, he was far from being a coward. Seeing that nothing happened, he forced himself to approach, and finally to touch the puppet.

"It's a treasure, Bartolommeo!" he exclaimed, fear and pleasure mingling in his tone, "How I wish I had my sketching materials with me so that I could draw it... But are you sure it is not—that is—that there's no witchcraft about it?"

## II

*A Sheep on Two Legs*

Beautiful Fiorenza had awakened to a rather sober Friday morning, for it was the last week but one in *Quaresima*, that is, Lent. When Filippo left the alchemist's, the city clocks were pointing to a bit after twelve. This was still pleasantly early, for twelve o'clock Florentine time was only eight A.M. of our time. The Florentines counted each new day as beginning at what is our eight o'clock of the previous evening, which they called twenty-four o'clock; our nine P.M. was one o'clock for them, and so on to their twenty-four o'clock.

Leaving the Ponte Vecchio, Filippo hurried the few steps to the little nearby Church of the Holy Apostles. This church was so old that tradition claimed that it had been founded by the great Emperor Charlemagne himself. After mass, Filippo returned through the fruit and vegetable market at the head of the bridge. His eyes were sparkling with fun. "I have loads of time," he thought, pulling out some of the walnuts Bartolommeo had given him and cracking them in his palm.

The little market was now crowded with purchasers as well as sellers. Filippo saw a group of boys tossing coins under an empty stall. A pretty peasant girl with two long braids of black hair over her gaily colored dress and mantle,

moved about like a flower herself, calling out: "Flowers for sale; flowers for holy *Gesu*" (Jesus).

Filippo debated whether or not to buy a bunch of wild anemones and iris to lay before the shrine of his patron saint or of the Holy Madonna, but he forgot the impulse as he noticed that a story-teller had seated himself on one of the stone benches. He tried to catch some of what was being told. The crowd around was laughing so heartily that he could not hear a word. "They don't mind making merry in Passion-tide," thought Filippo. He looked around for the flower girl, and found her gone.

"Oh, well," said Filippo to himself, and was about to turn into a narrow street leading to the middle of town. His way was blocked by a procession of barefoot white-clad pilgrims, bearing a cross and sacred banners. Crossing himself and bending his knee, Filippo turned off to the side in the direction of the Palazzo Vecchio. He was so busy planning how he would use the contents of the little parcel he carried under his cloak, he hardly noticed where he went. He laughed silently. It was splendid. Splendid!

Before he knew it he had come upon the splendid *piazza* or square which was the site of the world-famous Palazzo Pubblico or Palazzo Vecchio. This was the chief seat of government, the State House of Florence. At the end of the *ringhiera*, the stone platform before the palace, was the majestic stone lion called Marzocco, the emblem of the Florentine Republic. The whole *piazza*, like all of Florence, was full of triumphs of art and architecture.

Filippo had a sudden inspiration. He walked eagerly around the Palace of the People, looking up at its four stories of mas-

sive stone, the top story, with its open gallery and battlemented roof, projecting like a crown over the rest. From it, in turn, the strong and beautiful tower of the building rose to a height to overlook the whole city. In the arched belfry at its top could be seen the great bell called "The Cow," which when it rang called all citizens to come together. On hearing it ring they said: "*La Vacca muggia*" (The Cow moos).

"Magnificent!" exulted Filippo. "This gives me the very subject for my Latin poem!

"Thou stern and stone-clad guardian of our Freedom!  
Thy tower ever watches o'er our State,  
Lest Treason raise its hydra heads among us  
Or outer foes surprise our open gate.  
"To thee Marzocco's kingly eyes are lifted;  
On thee Fiorenza's Lily lies secure..."

Filippo was scanning the Latin lines as he composed them, his eyes turned up to the coats-of-arms of Florence painted across the Palazzo Vecchio below the projecting top story. There were many of these, each recalling some part of Florentine history. Prominent among them were the white lily on a red field, the red lily on a white field, and the golden lilies on a blue field.—Fiorenza was called the City of the Lily.

"So long as thy proud vigilance endureth  
That long will our sweet Liberty endure..."

continued Filippo. "It begins rather well," he told himself critically; "must be improved, of course." He smiled. He had just remembered that it was commonly said that the "Republic

of Florence “was in truth now ruled by a single man, a man without a title or a crown, but yet the equal of kings, though he signed himself simply: “Lorenzo, Citizen of Florence.”

“*San Michele!*” Filippo exclaimed nearly aloud, “that gives me a title for a pretty essay in Greek or in Latin as my good teacher pleases: ‘What Is the Best Form of Government?’ Plenty of opportunity in that for quoting the ancient authors the master is so fond of, Plato, Virgil, Cicero, and all the rest. I’ll finish my poem first, though. Let me see.

“Thou art in one a bulwark and a beacon... ”

As he thought, Filippo had wandered on to the *serraglio*, where the gentle lions belonging to the city were kept. Since Florence had as one of her symbols a stone lion, she thought it fitting to keep also a big family of live lions. There were altogether about thirty of them in the *serraglio*. Filippo bent down to watch more closely the pretty antics of three half-grown cubs at play. Something gleamed at his feet. He picked it up. It was a ring.

Filippo whistled as he gazed at his hand. It was an exquisite piece of jewelry: a stone cut like a rose and held by two tiny doves. “This is a sad loss for someone,” thought Filippo. “It is perhaps a betrothal ring.” No one was in sight to whom the object was likely to belong; there seemed nothing to do but put it in his pocket.

The clock on the Palazzo Pubblico tower showed there was still over an hour of waiting before Fra Antonio’s sermon would begin in the great Cathedral. Filippo wasn’t at all anxious to hear the sermon, but his father had made him promise that he would. This Brother Antonio de Vergiegli was being much praised for his Lenten preaching this year. “It’ll all be

talk of repenting and so on," mused Filippo uncomfortably. "I wonder why I ever agreed to go!"

Well, there was more than plenty of time yet for a ramble through the beautiful city, with its palaces and towers and churches and gardens all so fresh and smiling in the morning sunshine. No place could be so delightful for a stroll. The streets were narrow, and crisscrossed each other in so many patterns that one was forever coming across spots one did not know. The fronts of the stone houses were full of interest. The knockers of the doors and the projecting iron or bronze holders for torches were graven with figures of animals and flowers. Beside or above the doors were in many cases niches containing images of saints or of the Holy Family, some of them in the beautiful blue and white glazed terra-cotta which the Florentine artist, Luca della Robbia, had invented some years before. Through the gratings of gates could be caught glimpses of gardens with iris-bordered walks, slender cypress trees, and playing fountains.

Every church, big and small—and there were over a hundred in the city—was a treasure-house of art. Filippo could not help lingering a while before each one he passed, thinking of the great masters who had helped to rear and to decorate it. He thought of his own painting studies each time, and wondered whether he would ever do any famous works like these. Some of the churches were in connection with the numerous monasteries and nunneries, set in wide-cloistered gardens, above the walls of which showed the tops of orange and lemon and olive and fig trees and the tendrils of grape vines.

Half as numerous as the churches were the open squares,

almost every one of them with at least a statue or two. Then again Filippo would follow a maze of stone-paved streets, where palaces, as the homes of the important families were called, jostled humble houses, and splendid monuments of architecture and art rose in the midst of little shops. Many of the houses over-hung the street in their upper stories, or were adorned with arcades called *logge*. Filippo even looked with interest at the streets themselves, for he had heard travelers say they were far better than those of most of Europe; not only were they paved and drained, but some of them were even provided with sewers.

But most of all, the colorful, changing crowd caught Filippo's eye. He had stopped before the immense church of Santa Croce, where so many famous Florentines were buried. A throng of worshipers was about the doors, as well as three enterprising beggars and several peddlers loudly crying their wares. There was something suspicious about two of the beggars. They looked on the surface pitiable enough, with their bandages and crutches, but Filippo felt sure that he had surprised a sign and a wink between them. He would have been more ready to feel for them, had he not known that Florence provided very liberally for her poor and unfortunates, who seldom needed to beg.

"Faugh," he said to himself, "these two get six times their share of alms. They push their way over everyone. I pity the third beggar." They had almost knocked the third beggar down.

Filippo resolved on a bit of sport. He approached the two, who were close together now, and held out his closed hands

as if to drop a coin in each cup. Then, instead, in a flash he snatched a *quattrino* from each, and ran off with a laugh.

The trick worked. The beggars sprang so swiftly after him that their rags and sticks went flying to all sides. The “cripples” were as spry as goats. “Come back, thief! Halt, villain!” they shouted.

“That I won’t—for the good of your souls!” laughed Filippo, dodging this way and that to escape them.

“We’ll lambaste your hide for you!” screamed the foremost beggar, a big and stalwart fellow who looked good for his word.

“You will, will you?” taunted Filippo. He turned as he ran, and at the instant the beggar’s hand was on him.

“I’ll show you!” bellowed the fellow, with a vigorous shake of the captive. Filippo gave a quick wriggle, and was free from his grasp. Alas, his cloak was left behind.

It flashed through Filippo’s mind that it was going hard with him to be losing all his clothes on one day. He looked around appealingly at the laughing, bravoing crowd. His look was answered, for in a jiffy his wrap had been recovered, and nearly everyone was joining in the hue and cry to hoot the false beggars from the *piazza*.

Before Filippo joined, he tossed the *denari*, with one of his own, to the third beggar.

He followed the chase only a few steps. In the center of the Piazza Santa Croce some youths had started a game of *calcio*, a play resembling football, and Filippo stayed to watch. It was only a practice game, but the teams were fine and evenly matched, and the ball went sailing through the air for a goal. Filippo shouted enthusiastically. His foot ached