CLASSICS TO GO

THE LIFE OF CESARE BORGIA

RAFAEL SABATINI

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PREFACE

This is no Chronicle of Saints. Nor yet is it a History of Devils. It is a record of certain very human, strenuous men in a very human, strenuous age; a lustful, flamboyant age; an age red with blood and pale with passion at white-heat; an age of steel and velvet, of vivid colour, dazzling light and impenetrable shadow; an age of swift movement, pitiless violence and high endeavour, of sharp antitheses and amazing contrasts.

To judge it from the standpoint of this calm, deliberate, and correct century—as we conceive our own to be—is for sedate middle-age to judge from its own standpoint the reckless, hot, passionate, lustful humours of youth, of youth that errs grievously and achieves greatly.

So to judge that epoch collectively is manifestly wrong, a hopeless procedure if it be our aim to understand it and to be in sympathy with it, as it becomes broad-minded age to be tolerantly in sympathy with the youth whose follies it perceives. Life is an ephemeral business, and we waste too much of it in judging where it would beseem us better to accept, that we ourselves may come to be accepted by such future ages as may pursue the study of us.

But if it be wrong to judge a past epoch collectively by the standards of our own time, how much more is it not wrong to single out individuals for judgement by those same standards, after detaching them for the purpose from the environment in which they had their being? How false must be the conception of them thus obtained! We view the individuals so selected through a microscope of modern focus. They appear monstrous and abnormal, and we straight-way assume them to be monsters and

abnormalities, never considering that the fault is in the adjustment of the instrument through which we inspect them, and that until that is corrected others of that same past age, if similarly viewed, must appear similarly distorted.

Hence it follows that some study of an age must ever prelude and accompany the study of its individuals, if comprehension is to wait upon our labours. To proceed otherwise is to judge an individual Hottentot or South Sea Islander by the code of manners that obtains in Belgravia or Mayfair.

Mind being the seat of the soul, and literature being the expression of the mind, literature, it follows, is the soul of an age, the surviving and immortal part of it; and in the literature of the Cinquecento you shall behold for the looking the ardent, unmoral, naïve soul of this Renaissance that was sprawling in its lusty, naked infancy and bellowing hungrily for the pap of knowledge, and for other things. You shall infer something of the passionate mettle of this infant: his tempestuous mirth, his fierce rages, his simplicity, his naïveté, his inquisitiveness, his cunning, his deceit, his cruelty, his love of sunshine and bright gewgaws.

To realize him as he was, you need but to bethink you that this was the age in which the Decamerone of Giovanni Boccaccio, the Facetiae of Poggio, the Satires of Filelfo, and the Hermaphroditus of Panormitano afforded reading-matter to both sexes. This was the age in which the learned and erudite Lorenzo Valla—of whom more anon—wrote his famous indictment of virginity, condemning it as against nature with arguments of a most insidious logic. This was the age in which Casa, Archbishop of Benevento, wrote a most singular work of erotic philosophy, which, coming from a churchman’s pen, will leave you cold with horror should you chance to turn its pages. This was the age of the Discovery of Man; the pagan age which stripped Christ of

His divinity to bestow it upon Plato, so that Marsilio Ficino actually burnt an altar-lamp before an image of the Greek by whose teachings—in common with so many scholars of his day—he sought to inform himself.

It was an age that had become unable to discriminate between the merits of the Saints of the Church and the Harlots of the Town. Therefore it honoured both alike, extolled the carnal merits of the one in much the same terms as were employed to extol the spiritual merits of the other. Thus when a famous Roman courtesan departed this life in the year 1511, at the early age of twenty-six, she was accorded a splendid funeral and an imposing tomb in the Chapel Santa Gregoria with a tablet bearing the following inscription:

"IMPERIA CORTISANA ROMANA QUAE DIGNA TANTO NOMINE, RARAE INTER MORTALES FORMAE SPECIMEN DEDIT."

It was, in short, an age so universally immoral as scarcely to be termed immoral, since immorality may be defined as a departure from the morals that obtain a given time and in a given place. So that whilst from our own standpoint the Cinquecento, taken collectively, is an age of grossest licence and immorality, from the standpoint of the Cinquecento itself few of its individuals might with justice be branded immoral.

For the rest, it was an epoch of reaction from the Age of Chivalry: an epoch of unbounded luxury, of the cult and worship of the beautiful externally; an epoch that set no store by any inward virtue, by truth or honour; an epoch that laid it down as a maxim that no inconvenient engagement should be kept if opportunity offered to evade it.

The history of the Cinquecento is a history developed in broken pledges, trusts dishonoured and basest treacheries,

as you shall come to conclude before you have read far in the story that is here to be set down.

In a profligate age what can you look for but profligates? Is it just, is it reasonable, or is it even honest to take a man or a family from such an environment, for judgement by the canons of a later epoch? Yet is it not the method that has been most frequently adopted in dealing with the vast subject of the Borgias?

To avoid the dangers that must wait upon that error, the history of that House shall here be taken up with the elevation of Calixtus III to the Papal Throne; and the reign of the four Popes immediately preceding Roderigo Borgia—who reigned as Alexander VI—shall briefly be surveyed that a standard may be set by which to judge the man and the family that form the real subject of this work.

The history of this amazing Pope Alexander is yet to be written. No attempt has been made to exhaust it here. Yet of necessity he bulks large in these pages; for the history of his dazzling, meteoric son is so closely interwoven with his own that it is impossible to present the one without dealing at considerable length with the other.

The sources from which the history of the House of Borgia has been culled are not to be examined in a preface. They are too numerous, and they require too minute and individual a consideration that their precise value and degree of credibility may be ascertained. Abundantly shall such examination be made in the course of this history, and in a measure as the need arises to cite evidence for one side or for the other shall that evidence be sifted.

Never, perhaps, has anything more true been written of the Borgias and their history than the matter contained in the following lines of Rawdon Brown in his Ragguagli sulla Vita e sulle Opere di Marino Sanuto: “It seems to me that history has made use of the House of Borgia as of a canvas

upon which to depict the turpitudes of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.”

Materials for the work were very ready to the hand; and although they do not signally differ from the materials out of which the histories of half a dozen Popes of the same epoch might be compiled, they are far more abundant in the case of the Borgia Pope, for the excellent reason that the Borgia Pope detaches from the background of the Renaissance far more than any of his compeers by virtue of his importance as a political force.

In this was reason to spare for his being libelled and lampooned even beyond the usual extravagant wont. Slanders concerning him and his son Cesare were readily circulated, and they will generally be found to spring from those States which had most cause for jealousy and resentment of the Borgia might—Venice, Florence, and Milan, amongst others.

No rancour is so bitter as political rancour—save, perhaps, religious rancour, which we shall also trace; no warfare more unscrupulous or more prone to use the insidious weapons of slander than political warfare. Of this such striking instances abound in our own time that there can scarce be the need to labour the point. And from the form taken by such slanders as are circulated in our own sedate and moderate epoch may be conceived what might be said by political opponents in a fierce age that knew no pudency and no restraint. All this in its proper place shall be more closely examined.

For many of the charges brought against the House of Borgia some testimony exists; for many others—and these are the more lurid, sensational, and appalling covering as they do rape and murder, adultery, incest, and the sin of the Cities of the Plain—no single grain of real evidence is forthcoming. Indeed, at this time of day evidence is no longer called for where the sins of the Borgias are

concerned. Oft-reiterated assertion has usurped the place of evidence—for a lie sufficiently repeated comes to be credited by its very utterer. And meanwhile the calumny has sped from tongue to tongue, from pen to pen, gathering matter as it goes. The world absorbs the stories; it devours them greedily so they be sensational, and writers well aware of this have been pandering to that morbid appetite for some centuries now with this subject of the Borgias. A salted, piquant tale of vice, a ghastly story of moral turpitude and physical corruption, a hair-raising narrative of horrors and abominations—these are the stock-in-trade of the sensation-monger. With the authenticity of the matters he retails such a one has no concern. “Se non é vero é ben trovato,” is his motto, and in his heart the sensation-monger —of whatsoever age—rather hopes the thing be true. He will certainly make his public so believe it; for to discredit it would be to lose nine-tenths of its sensational value. So he trims and adjusts his wares, adds a touch or two of colour and what else he accounts necessary to heighten their air of authenticity, to dissemble any peeping spuriousness.

A form of hypnosis accompanies your study of the subject —a suggestion that what is so positively and repeatedly stated must of necessity be true, must of necessity have been proved by irrefutable evidence at some time or other. So much you take for granted—for matters which began their existence perhaps as tentative hypotheses have imperceptibly developed into established facts.

Occasionally it happens that we find some such sentence as the following summing up this deed or that one in the Borgia histories: “A deal of mystery remains to be cleared up, but the Verdict of History assigns the guilt to Cesare Borgia.”

Behold how easy it is to dispense with evidence. So that your tale be well-salted and well-spiced, a fico for evidence! If it hangs not overwell together in places, if there be

contradictions, lacunae, or openings for doubt, fling the Verdict of History into the gap, and so strike any questioner into silence.

So far have matters gone in this connection that who undertakes to set down to-day the history of Cesare Borgia, with intent to do just and honest work, must find it impossible to tell a plain and straightforward tale—to present him not as a villain of melodrama, not a monster, ludicrous, grotesque, impossible, but as human being, a cold, relentless egotist, it is true, using men for his own ends, terrible and even treacherous in his reprisals, swift as a panther and as cruel where his anger was aroused, yet with certain elements of greatness: a splendid soldier, an unrivalled administrator, a man pre-eminently just, if merciless in that same justice.

To present Cesare Borgia thus in a plain straightforward tale at this time of day, would be to provoke the scorn and derision of those who have made his acquaintance in the pages of that eminent German scholar, Ferdinand Gregorovius, and of some other writers not quite so eminent yet eminent enough to serve serious consideration. Hence has it been necessary to examine at close quarters the findings of these great ones, and to present certain criticisms of those same findings. The author is overwhelmingly conscious of the invidious quality of that task; but he is no less conscious of its inevitability if this tale is to be told at all.

Whilst the actual sources of historical evidence shall be examined in the course of this narrative, it may be well to examine at this stage the sources of the popular conceptions of the Borgias, since there will be no occasion later to allude to them.

Without entering here into a dissertation upon the historical romance, it may be said that in proper hands it has been and should continue to be one of the most valued

and valuable expressions of the literary art. To render and maintain it so, however, it is necessary that certain well-defined limits should be set upon the licence which its writers are to enjoy; it is necessary that the work should be honest work; that preparation for it should be made by a sound, painstaking study of the period to be represented, to the end that a true impression may first be formed and then conveyed. Thus, considering how much more far-reaching is the novel than any other form of literature, the good results that must wait upon such endeavours are beyond question. The neglect of them—the distortion of character to suit the romancer's ends, the like distortion of historical facts, the gross anachronisms arising out of a lack of study, have done much to bring the historical romance into disrepute. Many writers frankly make no pretence—leastways none that can be discerned—of aiming at historical precision; others, however, invest their work with a spurious scholarliness, go the length of citing authorities to support the point of view which they have taken, and which they lay before you as the fruit of strenuous lucubrations.

These are the dangerous ones, and of this type is Victor Hugo's famous tragedy Lucrezia Borgia, a work to which perhaps more than to any other (not excepting Les Borgias in Crimes Célèbres of Alexandre Dumas) is due the popular conception that prevails to-day of Cesare Borgia's sister.

It is questionable whether anything has ever flowed from a distinguished pen in which so many licences have been taken with the history of individuals and of an epoch; in which there is so rich a crop of crude, transpontine absurdities and flagrant, impossible anachronisms. Victor Hugo was a writer of rare gifts, a fertile romancer and a great poet, and it may be unjust to censure him for having taken the fullest advantages of the licences conceded to both. But it would be difficult to censure him too harshly for having—in his Lucrezia Borgia—struck a pose of

scholarliness, for having pretended and maintained that his work was honest work founded upon the study of historical evidences. With that piece of charlatanism he deceived the great mass of the unlettered of France and of all Europe into believing that in his tragedy he presented the true Lucrezia Borgia.

“If you do not believe me,” he declared, “read Tommaso Tommasi, read the Diary of Burchard.”

Read, then, that Diary, extending over a period of twenty-three years, from 1483 to 1506, of the Master of Ceremonies of the Vatican (which largely contributes the groundwork of the present history), and the one conclusion to which you will be forced is that Victor Hugo himself had never read it, else he would have hesitated to bid you refer to a work which does not support a single line that he has written.

As for Tommaso Tommasi—oh, the danger of a little learning! Into what quagmires does it not lead those who flaunt it to impress you!

Tommasi’s place among historians is on precisely the same plane as Alexandre Dumas’s. His Vita di Cesare Borgia is on the same historical level as Les Borgias, much of which it supplied. Like Crimes Célèbres, Tommasi’s book is invested with a certain air of being a narrative of sober fact; but like Crimes Célèbres, it is none the less a work of fiction.

This Tommaso Tommasi, whose real name was Gregorio Leti—and it is under this that such works of his as are reprinted are published nowadays—was a most prolific author of the seventeenth century, who, having turned Calvinist, vented in his writings a mordacious hatred of the Papacy and of the religion from which he had seceded. His Life of Cesare Borgia was published in 1670. It enjoyed a considerable vogue, was translated into French, and has been the chief source from which many writers of fiction and

some writers of “fact” have drawn for subsequent work to carry forward the ceaseless defamation of the Borgias.

History should be as inexorable as Divine Justice. Before we admit facts, not only should we call for evidence and analyse it when it is forthcoming, but the very sources of such evidence should be examined, that, as far as possible, we may ascertain what degree of credit they deserve. In the study of the history of the Borgias, we repeat, there has been too much acceptance without question, too much taking for granted of matters whose incredibility frequently touches and occasionally oversteps the confines of the impossible.

One man knew Cesare Borgia better, perhaps, than did any other contemporary, of the many who have left more or less valuable records; for the mind of that man was the acutest of its age, one of the acutest Italy and the world have ever known. That man was Niccolô Macchiavelli, Secretary of State to the Signory of Florence. He owed no benefits to Cesare; he was the ambassador of a power that was ever inimical to the Borgias; so that it is not to be dreamt that his judgement suffered from any bias in Cesare’s favour. Yet he accounted Cesare Borgia—as we shall see—the incarnation of an ideal conqueror and ruler; he took Cesare Borgia as the model for his famous work The Prince, written as a grammar of statecraft for the instruction in the art of government of that weakling Giuliano de’Medici.

Macchiavelli pronounces upon Cesare Borgia the following verdict:

“If all the actions of the duke are taken into consideration, it will be seen how great were the foundations he had laid to future power. Upon these I do not think it superfluous to discourse, because I should not know what better precept to lay before a new prince than the example of his actions; and if success did not wait upon what dispositions he had made,

that was through no fault of his own, but the result of an extraordinary and extreme malignity of fortune.”

In its proper place shall be considered what else Macchiavelli had to say of Cesare Borgia and what to report of events that he witnessed connected with Cesare Borgia’s career.

Meanwhile, the above summary of Macchiavelli’s judgement is put forward as a justification for the writing of this book, which has for scope to present to you the Cesare Borgia who served as the model for The Prince.

Before doing so, however, there is the rise of the House of Borgia to be traced, and in the first two of the four books into which this history will be divided it is Alexander VI, rather than his son, who will hold the centre of the stage.

If the author has a mercy to crave of his critics, it is that they will not impute it to him that he has set out with the express aim of “whitewashing”—as the term goes—the family of Borgia. To whitewash is to overlay, to mask the original fabric under a superadded surface. Too much superadding has there been here already. By your leave, all shall be stripped away. The grime shall be removed and the foulness of inference, of surmise, of deliberate and cold-blooded malice, with which centuries of scribblers, idle, fantastic, sensational, or venal, have coated the substance of known facts.

But the grime shall be preserved and analysed side by side with the actual substance, that you may judge if out of zeal to remove the former any of the latter shall have been included in the scraping.

The author expresses his indebtedness to the following works which, amongst others, have been studied for the purposes of the present history:

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BOOK I. THE HOUSE OF THE BULL

“Borgia stirps: BOS: atque Ceres transcendit Olympo,
Cantabat nomen saecula cuncta suum.”

Michele Ferno

CHAPTER I.

THE RISE OF THE HOUSE OF BORGIA

Although the House of Borgia, which gave to the Church of Rome two popes and at least one saint,(1) is to be traced back to the eleventh century, claiming as it does to have its source in the Kings of Aragon, we shall take up its history for our purposes with the birth at the city of Xativa, in the kingdom of Valencia, on December 30, 1378, of Alonso de Borja, the son of Don Juan Domingo de Borja and his wife Doña Francisca.

1 St. Francisco Borgia, S.J.—great-grandson of Pope Alexander VI, born at Gandia, in Spain, in 1510.

To this Don Alonso de Borja is due the rise of his family to its stupendous eminence. An able, upright, vigorous-minded man, he became a Professor and Doctor of Jurisprudence at the University of Lerida, and afterwards served Alfonso I of Aragon, King of Naples and the Two Sicilies, in the capacity of secretary. This office he filled with the distinction that was to be expected from one so peculiarly fitted for it by the character of the studies he had pursued.

He was made Bishop of Valencia, created Cardinal in 1444, and finally—in 1455—ascended the throne of St. Peter as Calixtus III, an old man, enfeebled in body, but with his extraordinary vigour of mind all unimpaired.

Calixtus proved himself as much a nepotist as many another Pope before and since. This needs not to be dilated upon here; suffice it that in February of 1456 he gave the scarlet hat of Cardinal-Deacon of San Niccoló, in Carcere Tulliano, to his nephew Don Roderigo de Lanzol y Borja.

Born in 1431 at Xativa, the son of Juana de Borja (sister of Calixtus) and her husband Don Jofrè de Lanzol, Roderigo

was in his twenty-fifth year at the time of his being raised to the purple, and in the following year he was further created Vice-Chancellor of Holy Church with an annual stipend of eight thousand florins. Like his uncle he had studied jurisprudence—at the University of Bologna—and mentally and physically he was extraordinarily endowed.

From the pen-portraits left of him by Gasparino of Verona, and Girolamo Porzio, we know him for a tall, handsome man with black eyes and full lips, elegant, courtly, joyous, and choicely eloquent, of such health and vigour and endurance that he was insensible to any fatigue. Giasone Maino of Milan refers to his “elegant appearance, serene brow, royal glance, a countenance that at once expresses generosity and majesty, and the genial and heroic air with which his whole personality is invested.” To a similar description of him Gasparino adds that “all women upon whom he so much as casts his eyes he moves to love him; attracting them as the lodestone attracts iron;” which is, it must be admitted, a most undesirable reputation in a churchman.

A modern historian(1) who uses little restraint when writing of Roderigo Borgia says of him that “he was a man of neither much energy nor determined will,” and further that “the firmness and energy wanting to his character were, however, often replaced by the constancy of his evil passions, by which he was almost blinded.” How the constancy of evil passions can replace firmness and energy as factors of worldly success is not readily discernible, particularly if their possessor is blinded by them. The historical worth of the stricture may safely be left to be measured by its logical value. For the rest, to say that Roderigo Borgia was wanting in energy and in will is to say something to which his whole career gives the loud and derisive lie, as will—to some extent at least—be seen in the course of this work.

1 Pasquale Villari in his Machiavelli i suoi Tempi

His honours as Cardinal-Deacon and Vice-Chancellor of the Holy See he owed to his uncle; but that he maintained and constantly improved his position—and he a foreigner, be it remembered—under the reigns of the four succeeding Popes—Pius II, Paul II, Sixtus IV, and Innocent VIII—until finally, six-and-twenty years after the death of Calixtus III, he ascended, himself, the Papal Throne, can be due only to the unconquerable energy and stupendous talents which have placed him where he stands in history—one of the greatest forces, for good or ill, that ever occupied St. Peter's Chair.

Say of him that he was ambitious, worldly, greedy of power, and a prey to carnal lusts. All these he was. But for very sanity's sake do not let it be said that he was wanting either in energy or in will, for he was energy and will incarnate.

Consider that with Calixtus III's assumption of the Tiara Rome became the Spaniard's happy hunting-ground, and that into the Eternal City streamed in their hundreds the Catalan adventurers—priests, clerks, captains of fortune, and others—who came to seek advancement at the hands of a Catalan Pope. This Spanish invasion Rome resented. She grew restive under it.

Roderigo's elder brother, Don Pedro Luis de Lanzol y Borja, was made Gonfalonier of the Church, Castellan of all pontifical fortresses and Governor of the Patrimony of St. Peter, with the title of Duke of Spoleto and, later, Prefect of Rome, to the displacement of an Orsini from that office. Calixtus invested this nephew with all temporal power that it was in the Church's privilege to bestow, to the end that he might use it as a basis to overset the petty tyrannies of Romagna, and to establish a feudal claim on the Kingdom of Naples.

Here already we see more than a hint of that Borgia ambition which was to become a byword, and the first

attempt of this family to found a dynasty for itself and a State that should endure beyond the transient tenure of the Pontificate, an aim that was later to be carried into actual—if ephemeral—fulfilment by Cesare Borgia.

The Italians watched this growth of Spanish power with jealous, angry eyes. The mighty House of Orsini, angered by the supplanting of one of its members in the Prefecture of Rome, kept its resentment warm, and waited. When in August of 1458 Calixtus III lay dying, the Orsini seized the chance: they incited the city to ready insurgence, and with fire and sword they drove the Spaniards out.

Don Pedro Luis made haste to depart, contrived to avoid the Orsini, who had made him their special quarry, and getting a boat slipped down the Tiber to Civita Vecchia, where he died suddenly some six weeks later, thereby considerably increasing the wealth of Roderigo, his brother and his heir.

Roderigo's cousin, Don Luis Juan, Cardinal-Presbyter of Santi Quattro Coronati, another member of the family who owed his advancement to his uncle Calixtus, thought it also expedient to withdraw from that zone of danger to men of his nationality and name.

Roderigo de Lanzol y Borja alone remained—leastways, the only prominent member of his house—boldly to face the enmity of the majority of the Sacred College, which had looked with grim disfavour upon his uncle's nepotism. Unintimidated, he entered the Conclave for the election of a successor to Calixtus, and there the chance which so often prefers to bestow its favours upon him who knows how to profit by them, gave him the opportunity to establish himself as firmly as ever at the Vatican, and further to advance his interests.

It fell out that when the scrutiny was taken, two cardinals stood well in votes—the brilliant, cultured Enea Silvio

Bartolomeo de’ Piccolomini, Cardinal of Siena, and the French Cardinal d’Estouteville—though neither had attained the minimum majority demanded. Of these two, the lead in number of votes lay with the Cardinal of Siena, and his election therefore might be completed by Accession—that is, by the voices of such cardinals as had not originally voted for him—until the minimum majority, which must exceed two-thirds, should be made up.

The Cardinal Vice-Chancellor Roderigo de Lanzol y Borja led this accession, with the result that the Cardinal of Siena became Pontiff—as Pius II—and was naturally enough disposed to advance the interests of the man who had been instrumental in helping him to that eminence. Thus, his position at the Vatican, in the very face of all hostility, became stronger and more prominent than ever.

A letter written two years later from the Baths at Petriolo by Pius II to Roderigo when the latter was in Siena—whither he had been sent by his Holiness to superintend the building of the Cathedral and the Episcopal and Piccolomini palaces—is frequently cited by way of establishing the young prelate’s dissolute ways. It is a letter at once stern and affectionate, and it certainly leaves no doubt as to what manner of man was the Cardinal Vice-Chancellor in his private life, and to what manner of unecciesiastical pursuits he inclined. It is difficult to discover in it any grounds upon which an apologist may build.

“BELOVED SON,

“When four days ago, in the gardens of Giovanni de Bichis, were assembled several women of Siena addicted to worldly vanity, your worthiness, as we have learnt, little remembering the office which you fill, was entertained by them from the seventeenth to the twenty-second hour. For companion you had one of your colleagues, one whom his years if not the honour of the Holy See should have reminded of his duty. From what we have heard, dancing

was unrestrainedly indulged, and not one of love's attractions was absent, whilst your behaviour was no different from that which might have been looked for in any worldly youth. Touching what happened there, modesty imposes silence. Not only the circumstance itself, but the very name of it is unworthy in one of your rank. The husbands, parents, brothers, and relations of these young women were excluded, in order that your amusements should be the more unbridled. You with a few servants undertook to direct and lead those dances. It is said that nothing is now talked of in Siena but your frivolity. Certain it is that here at the baths, where the concourse of ecclesiastics and laity is great, you are the topic of the day. Our displeasure is unutterable, since all this reflects dishonourably upon the sacerdotal estate and office. It will be said of us that we are enriched and promoted not to the end that we may lead blameless lives, but that we may procure the means to indulge our pleasures. Hence the contempt of us entertained by temporal princes and powers and the daily sarcasms of the laity. Hence also the reproof of our own mode of life when we attempt to reprove others. The very Vicar of Christ is involved in this contempt, since he appears to countenance such things. You, beloved son, have charge of the Bishopric of Valencia, the first of Spain; you are also Vice-Chancellor of the Church; and what renders your conduct still more blameworthy is that you are among the cardinals, with the Pope, one of the counsellors of the Holy See. We submit it to your own judgement whether it becomes your dignity to court young women, to send fruit and wine to her you love, and to have no thought for anything but pleasure. We are censured on your account; the blessed memory of your uncle Calixtus is vituperated, since in the judgement of many he was wrong to have conferred so many honours upon you. If you seek excuses in your youth, you are no longer so young that you cannot understand what duties are imposed upon you by your

dignity. A cardinal should be irreproachable, a model of moral conduct to all. And what just cause have we for resentment when temporal princes bestow upon us titles that are little honourable, dispute with us our possessions, and attempt to bend us to their will? In truth it is we who inflict these wounds upon ourselves, and it is we who occasion ourselves these troubles, undermining more and more each day by our deeds the authority of the Church. Our guerdon is shame in this world and condign punishment in the next. May your prudence therefore set a restraint upon these vanities and keep you mindful of your dignity, and prevent that you be known for a gallant among married and unmarried women. But should similar facts recur, we shall be compelled to signify that they have happened against our will and to our sorrow, and our censure must be attended by your shame. We have always loved you, and we have held you worthy of our favour as a man of upright and honest nature. Act therefore in such a manner that we may maintain such an opinion of you, and nothing can better conduce to this than that you should lead a well-ordered life. Your age, which is such as still to promise improvement, admits that we should admonish you paternally."

"PETRIOLO, June 11, 1460."

Such a letter is calculated to shock us in our modern notions of a churchman. To us this conduct on the part of a prelate is scandalous beyond words; that it was scandalous even then is obvious from the Pontiff's letter; but that it was scandalous in an infinitely lesser degree is no less obvious from the very fact that the Pontiff wrote that letter (and in such terms) instead of incontinently unfrocking the offender.

In considering Roderigo's conduct, you are to consider—as has been urged already—the age in which he lived. You are to remember that it was an age in which the passions and the emotions wore no such masks as they wear to-day, but went naked and knew no shame of their nudity; an age in

which personal modesty was as little studied as hypocrisy, and in which men, wore their vices as openly as their virtues.

No amount of simple statement can convey an adequate notion of the corrupt state of the clergy at the time. To form any just appreciation of this, it is necessary to take a peep at some of the documents that have survived—such a document, for instance, as that Bull of this Pope Pius II which forbade priests from plying the trades of keeping taverns, gaming-houses, and brothels.

Ponder also that under his successor, Sixtus IV, the tax levied upon the courtesans of Rome enriched the pontifical coffers to the extent of some 20,000 ducats yearly. Ponder further that when the vicar of the libidinous Innocent VIII published in 1490 an edict against the universal concubinage practised by the clergy, forbidding its continuation under pain of excommunication, all that it earned him was the severe censure of the Holy Father, who disagreed with the measure and who straightway repealed and cancelled the edict.(1)

1 See Burchard's Diarium, Thuasne Edition, Vol. II. p.442 et seq.

All this being considered, and man being admittedly a creature of his environment, can we still pretend to horror at this Roderigo and at the fact that being the man he was—prelate though he might be—handsome, brilliant, courted, in the full vigour of youth, and a voluptuary by nature, he should have succumbed to the temptations by which he was surrounded?

One factor only could have caused him to use more restraint—the good example of his peers. That example he most certainly had not.

Virtue is a comparative estate, when all is said; and before we can find that Roderigo was vile, that he deserves unqualified condemnation for his conduct, we must

ascertain that he was more or less exceptional in his licence, that he was less scrupulous than his fellows. Do we find that? To find the contrary we do not need to go beyond the matter which provoked that letter from the Pontiff. For we see that he was not even alone, as an ecclesiastic, in the adventure; that he had for associate on that amorous frolic one Giacopo Ammanati, Cardinal-Presbyter of San Crisogno, Roderigo's senior and an ordained priest, which—without seeking to make undue capital out of the circumstance—we may mention that Roderigo was not. He was a Cardinal-Deacon, be it remembered.(1) We know that the very Pontiff who admonished these young prelates, though now admittedly a man of saintly ways, had been a very pretty fellow himself in his lusty young days in Siena; we know that Roderigo's uncle—the Calixtus to whom Pius II refers in that letter as of "blessed memory"—had at least one acknowledged son.(2) We know that Piero and Girolamo Riario, though styled by Pope Sixtus IV his "nephews," were generally recognized to be his sons.(3) And we know that the numerous bastards of Innocent VIII—Roderigo's immediate precursor on the Pontifical Throne—were openly acknowledged by their father. We know, in short, that it was the universal custom of the clergy to forget its vows of celibacy, and to circumvent them by dispensing with the outward form and sacrament of marriage; and we have it on the word of Pius II himself, that "if there are good reasons for enjoining the celibacy of the clergy, there are better and stronger for enjoining them to marry."

1 He was not ordained priest until 1471, after the election of Sixtus IV.

2 Don Francisco de Borja, born at Valencia in 1441.

3 Macchiavelli, Istorie Fiorentine.

What more is there to say? If we must be scandalized, let us be scandalized by the times rather than by the man. Upon what reasonable grounds can we demand that he should be different from his fellows; and if we find him no

different, what right or reason have we for picking him out and rendering him the object of unparalleled obloquy?

If we are to deal justly with Roderigo Borgia, we must admit that, in so far as his concessions to his lusts are concerned, he was a typical churchman of his day; neither more nor less—as will presently grow abundantly clear.

It may be objected by some that had such been the case the Pope would not have written him such a letter as is here cited. But consider a moment the close relations existing between them. Roderigo was the nephew of the late Pope; in a great measure Pius II owed his election, as we have seen, to Roderigo's action in the Conclave. That his interest in him apart from that was paternal and affectionate is shown in every line of that letter. And consider further that Roderigo's companion is shown by that letter to be equally guilty in so far as the acts themselves are to be weighed, guilty in a greater degree when we remember his seniority and his actual priesthood. Yet to Cardinal Ammanati the Pope wrote no such admonition. Is not that sufficient proof that his admonition of Roderigo was dictated purely by his personal affection for him?

In this same year 1460 was born to Cardinal Roderigo a son—Don Pedro Luis de Borja—by a spinster (mulier soluta) unnamed. This son was publicly acknowledged and cared for by the cardinal.

Seven years later—in 1467—he became the father of a daughter—Girolama de Borja—by a spinster, whose name again does not transpire. Like Pedro Luis she too was openly acknowledged by Cardinal Roderigo. It was widely believed that this child's mother was Madonna Giovanna de' Catanei, who soon became quite openly the cardinal's mistress, and was maintained by him in such state as might have become a maîtresse en titre. But, as we shall see later, the fact of that maternity of Girolama is doubtful in the extreme. It was

never established, and it is difficult to understand why not if it were the fact.

Meanwhile Paul II—Pietro Barbo, Cardinal of Venice—had succeeded Pius II in 1464, and in 1471 the latter was in his turn succeeded by the formidable Sixtus IV—Cardinal Francesco Maria della Rovere—a Franciscan of the lowest origin, who by his energy and talents had become general of his order and had afterwards been raised to the dignity of the purple.

It was Cardinal Roderigo de Lanzol y Borja who, in his official capacity of Archdeacon of Holy Church, performed the ceremony of coronation and placed the triple crown on the head of Pope Sixtus. It is probable that this was his last official act as Archdeacon, for in that same year 1471, at the age of forty, he was ordained priest and consecrated Bishop of Albano.

CHAPTER II.

THE REIGNS OF SIXTUS IV AND INNOCENT VIII

The rule of Sixtus was as vigorous as it was scandalous. To say—as has been said—that with his succession to St. Peter's Chair came for the Church a still sadder time than that which had preceded it, is not altogether true. Politically, at least, Sixtus did much to strengthen the position of the Holy See and of the Pontificate. He was not long in giving the Roman factions a taste of his stern quality. If he employed unscrupulous means, he employed them against unscrupulous men—on the sound principle of similia similibus curantur—and to some extent they were justified by the ends in view.

He found the temporal throne of the Pontiffs tottering when he ascended it. Stefano Porcaro and his distinguished following already in 1453 had attempted the overthrow of the pontifical authority, inspired, no doubt, by the attacks that had been levelled against it by the erudite and daring Lorenzo Valla.

This Valla was the distinguished translator of Homer, Herodotus, and Thucydides, who more than any one of his epoch advanced the movement of Greek and Latin learning, which, whilst it had the effect of arresting the development of Italian literature, enriched Europe by opening up to it the sources of ancient erudition, of philosophy, poetry, and literary taste. Towards the year 1435 he drifted to the court of Alfonso of Aragon, whose secretary he ultimately became. Some years later he attacked the Temporal Power and urged the secularization of the States of the Church. "Ut Papa," he wrote, "tantum Vicarius Christi sit, et non etiam Coesari." In his De falso credita et ementita Constantini

Donatione, he showed that the decretals of the Donation of Constantine, upon which rests the Pope's claim to the Pontifical States, was an impudent forgery, that Constantine had never had the power to give, nor had given, Rome to the Popes, and that they had no right to govern there. He backed up this terrible indictment by a round attack upon the clergy, its general corruption and its practices of simony; and as a result he fell into the hands of the Inquisition. There it might have gone very ill with him but that King Alfonso rescued him from the clutches of that dread priestly tribunal.

Meanwhile, he had fired his petard. If a pretext had been wanting to warrant the taking up of arms against the Papacy, that pretext Valla had afforded. Never was the temporal power of the Church in such danger, and ultimately it must inevitably have succumbed but for the coming of so strong and unscrupulous a man as Sixtus IV to stamp out the patrician factions that were heading the hostile movement.

His election, it is generally admitted, was simoniacal; and by simony he raised the funds necessary for his campaign to reestablish and support the papal authority. This simony of his, says Dr. Jacob Burckhardt, "grew to unheard-of proportions, and extended from the appointment of cardinals down to the sale of the smallest benefice."

Had he employed these means of raising funds for none but the purpose of putting down the assailants of the Pontificate, a measure of justification (political if not ecclesiastical) might be argued in his favour. Unfortunately, having discovered these ready sources of revenue, he continued to exploit them for purposes far less easy to condone.

As a nepotist Sixtus was almost unsurpassed in the history of the Papacy. Four of his nephews and their aggrandizement were the particular objects of his

attentions, and two of these—as we have already said—Piero and Girolamo Riario, were universally recognized to be his sons.

Piero, who was a simple friar of twenty-six years of age at the time that his father became Pope, was given the Archbishopric of Florence, made Patriarch of Constantinople, and created Cardinal to the title of San Sisto, with a revenue of 60,000 crowns.

We have it on the word of Cardinal Ammanati(1)—the same gentleman who, with Roderigo de Lanzol y Borja made so scandalously merry in de Bichis' garden at Siena—that Cardinal Riario's luxury "exceeded all that had been displayed by our forefathers or that can even be imagined by our descendants"; and Macchiavelli tells us(2) that "although of very low origin and mean rearing, no sooner had he obtained the scarlet hat than he displayed a pride and ambition so vast that the Pontificate seemed too small for him, and he gave a feast in Rome which would have appeared extraordinary even for a king, the expense exceeding 20,000 florins."

1 In a letter to Francesco Gonzaga.

2 Istorie Florentine.

Knowing so much, it is not difficult to understand that in one year or less he should have dissipated 200,000 florins, and found himself in debt to the extent of a further 60,000.

In 1473, Sixtus being at the time all but at war with Florence, this Cardinal Riario visited Venice and Milan. In the latter State he was planning with Duke Galeazzo Maria that the latter should become King of Lombardy, and then assist him with money and troops to master Rome and ascend the Papal Throne—which, it appears, Sixtus was quite willing to yield to him—thus putting the Papacy on a hereditary basis like any other secular State.

It is as well, perhaps, that he should have died on his return to Rome in January of 1474—worn out by his

excesses and debaucheries, say some; of poison administered by the Venetians, say others—leaving a mass of debts, contracted in his transactions with the World, the Flesh, and the Devil, to be cleared up by the Vicar of Christ.

His brother Girolamo, meanwhile, had married Caterina Sforza, a natural daughter of Duke Galeazzo Maria. She brought him as her dowry the City of Imola, and in addition to this he received from his Holiness the City of Forli, to which end the Ordelaffi were dispossessed of it. Here again we have a papal attempt to found a family dynasty, and an attempt that might have been carried further under circumstances more propitious and had not Death come to check their schemes.

The only one of the four “nephews” of Sixtus—and to this one was imputed no nearer kinship—who was destined to make any lasting mark in history was Giuliano della Rovere. He was raised by his uncle to the purple with the title of San Pietro in Vincoli, and thirty-two years later he was to become Pope (as Julius II). Of him we shall hear much in the course of this story.

Under the pontificate of Sixtus IV the position and influence of Cardinal Roderigo were greatly increased, for once again the Spanish Cardinal had made the most of his opportunities. As at the election of Pius II, so at the election of Sixtus IV it was Cardinal Roderigo who led the act of accession which gave the new Pope his tiara, and for this act Roderigo—in common with the Cardinals Orsini and Gonzaga who acceded with him—was richly rewarded and advanced, receiving as his immediate guerdon the wealthy Abbey of Subiaco.

At about this time, 1470, must have begun the relations between Cardinal Roderigo and Giovanna Catanei, or Vannozza Catanei, as she is styled in contemporary documents—Vannozza being a corruption or abbreviation of Giovannozza, an affectionate form of Giovanna.