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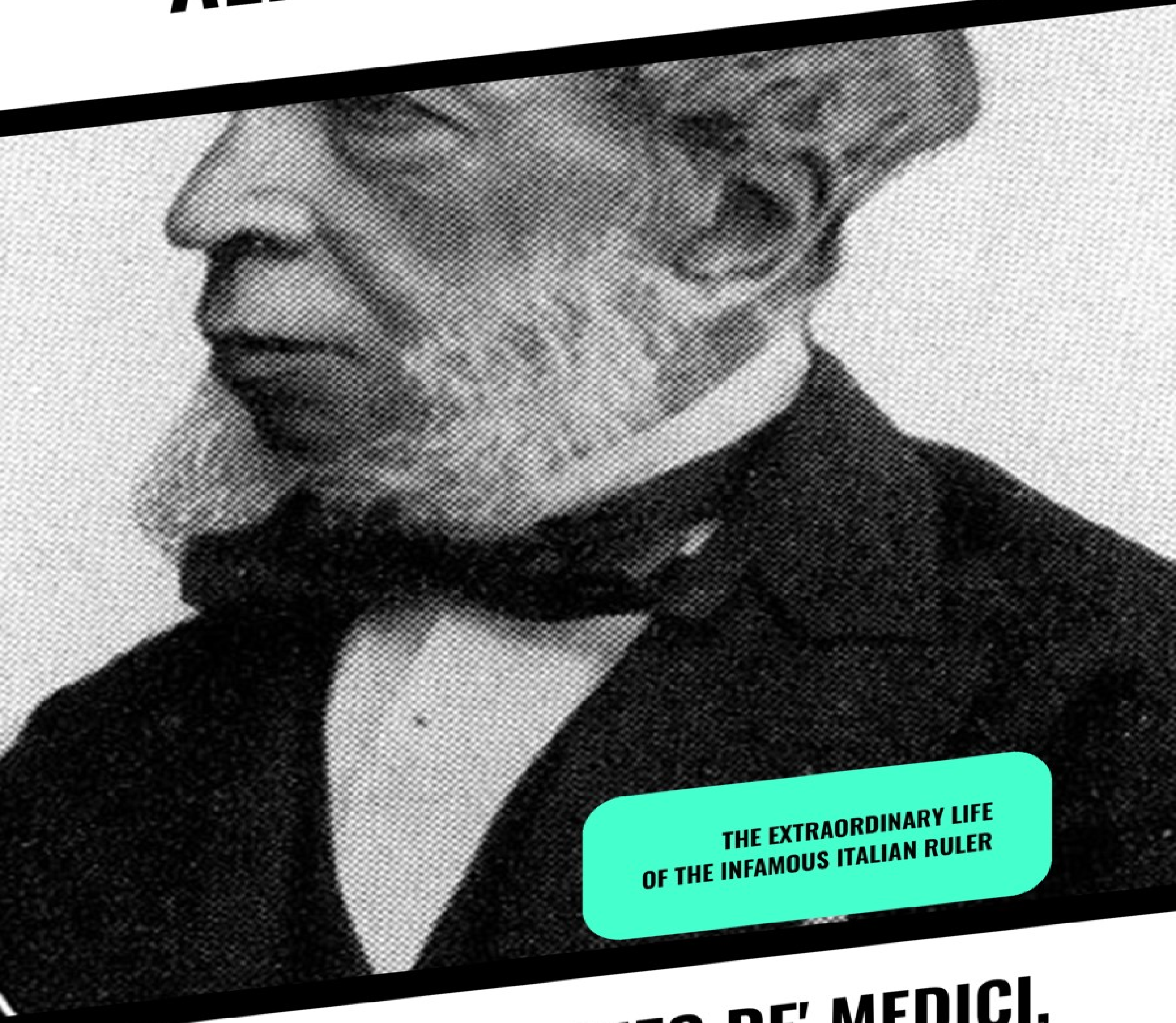

THE EXTRAORDINARY LIFE
OF THE INFAMOUS ITALIAN RULER

LORENZO DE' MEDICI, THE MAGNIFICENT

Alfred von Reumont

Lorenzo de' Medici, the Magnificent

The Extraordinary Life of the Infamous Italian Ruler

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CHAPTER I.

THE HOUSE AND FAMILY OF THE MEDICI—DEVELOPMENT OF THE FLORENTINE DEMOCRACY.

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At the entrance of the Via Larga in Florence there rises to view, at the corner of one of the cross streets leading to the church of San Lorenzo, one of the most magnificent palaces of that rich and beautiful city. The recent enlargement of the passage to the neighbouring cathedral square—the Via de’ Martelli—has exposed to view the southern aspect of the palace, and displays the harmony of its proportions on a side that formerly was not to be seen. The traditions of mediæval life are still manifest in the building, notwithstanding the modification introduced by the large windows on the ground-floor, and by the additional wing that prolongs the façade. Huge blocks of stone, rough-hewn, with deep incisions, lend to the basement of the edifice the appearance of a fortress. They recall to mind the fortified palaces of the ancient nobles who, when transplanted from the country to the town, found themselves associated, willingly or unwillingly, with the burghers, and before long under the control of men who vied with them in the erection of towers and strongholds that overawed their own. The great town-hall was as solid a structure as any castle, even at a time when milder manners had subdued, if not the violence of party spirit, at least the fury of street riots, and had proscribed the towers which once by hundreds dominated the narrow streets, with their heavy iron chains ready for a barricade. The progress of civic life may be traced in other parts of the building—in the bow windows of the upper stories, divided by slender pilasters, in the *renaissance* decoration, and in the Corinthian pillars which ornament the quadrangle of the courtyard. Inscriptions and antiques introduced at a later period adorn the walls of the portico of the courtyard; but the statue of David has disappeared from the centre, and although fountains still exist in the second court—once a garden—the figure of Alessandro de' Medici, yet visible, indicates a century later. Though much altered in modern times, the original plan of the interior, which was regular and commodious, can be traced. Such a design was uncommon in days when the comparatively small area of the houses made a large suite of rooms a matter of rare occurrence, and when generally one story rose above another, with steep stairs and narrow passages into which a scanty supply of light was admitted from courtyards deep as wells.

The house was built by Michelozzo di Bartolommeo, then forty years old, for Cosimo de' Medici, in the first half of the fifteenth century. Filippo Brunelleschi, the greatest architect of modern Italy, had made a design for the palace of the rich and art-loving citizen, who was one of his best friends. It was the plan of a vast building, unenclosed on all sides, and fronting towards the square of San Lorenzo, where stood the church, the restoration of which had been begun by the same artist for Cosimo's father. But cautious, calculating Cosimo, fearing that a house on so magnificent a scale as that designed by Brunelleschi, even if not beyond his means, would exceed the ordinary dimensions of a citizen’s dwelling, and might excite popular jealousy, gave the preference to Michelozzo’s more limited design.[1] Brunelleschi took offence at this neglect of himself, and destroyed his model. Yet Cosimo acted more prudently than did, at a later period, a countryman of his, who began to build from the design of the same master the largest edifice that perhaps a private citizen ever undertook, and who consequently lost much in public estimation and respect.

In the second half of the fourteenth century the Medici had removed into the neighbourhood of San Lorenzo’s church, where their residence occupied the ground adjoining Cosimo’s palace on the north, and remained in the possession of his brother Lorenzo, the founder of the subsequent ducal line.[2] Their original dwelling-place was in the centre of the old town, on the market-place, inside the first wall. Many of the foremost families were once settled here, and even now the lover of history and antiquity will find among the damp stalls of the butcher, fishmonger, and dealer in vegetables, sparse remains of past and, so far as concerns this part of the town, better days. The little church of San Tommaso in this place was in the patronage of the Medici from time immemorial.

The Medici did not belong to the historic families of the city on the Arno. The first trace of them is to be found about the end of the twelfth century in Giambuono, of whose extraction nothing is known. The coat of arms exhibits red balls in a gold field, whose number and arrangement were different at different times, until, under Cosimo’s son, the coat of arms assumed the form which it has ever since retained. From these balls (*palle*) the dependents of the family bore the name of Palleschi. From whence the Medici came, what was the meaning of the coat of arms, no one knew. Genealogical dreams have gone as far back as Perseus and the apples of the Hesperides, whilst modest historians have contented themselves with the time of Charlemagne, and the mountainous land north of Florence, known by the name of Mugello, where the family had always held important possessions, designated as their home.

The only dispute now is whether they descend from a knight who in days of yore received on his shield the blows of a giant's iron flail, or from a physician who chose for his sign, in his small beginnings, three pills or cupping-glasses.

Giambuono's son Chiarissimo sat in the Council of the Commune in 1201, when an alliance was formed with the town of Siena for the purpose of attacking the castle Semifonte in the Elsethal, which lay between the territories of the two towns, and was soon after destroyed. This was the first step towards the extension of territory and the overthrow of the landed aristocracy. The thirteenth century, at the beginning of which the Medici first stand forward in history, was the period in which the community of Florence, after many vicissitudes, received its definitive form. Just at the time of the first attempts of the Florentines to acquire an independent self-government do we meet with the first of that race which three centuries later strove successfully to transform what had become a powerful republic into a monarchy.

The province of Tuscany, divided into two duchies, in the time of the Longobards formed, first under dukes, then under margraves, a part of the Roman Teutonic kingdom, whose dependence on the later powerful emperors, and also on margraves ruling over wide stretches of land to the north of the Apennines, was more nominal than real, yet still existed according to right.

In the summer of 1115, after the death of the great Countess Mathilda—daughter and heiress to the last Margrave Bonifacius, who lived mostly in Lucca—first began the freer movement of the Tuscan Commune. At this time the men who afterwards attained to the lordship over the greater part of the country occupied anything but a prominent position. The great changes in the strength and extent of the imperial power in Italy as it was under the last of the Franconians, under Lothair of Saxony, and the two first Hohenstaufen, necessarily affected the position of these Communes. Their form of government under consuls changed just as their dependence or independence of the imperial authority was affected by the prevailing political condition of the empire. The landed nobility, of Germanic origin for the most part, were supported by Frederic Barbarossa against the Commune of Florence, with which several great families, headed by the Uberti, had engaged in a bloody and protracted feud on account of their claims to an authority which was not compatible with consular government. Henry VI. exercised his imperial rights and privileges in Tuscany still more vigorously than his father had done. His brother Philip, invested with this province as a dukedom, maintained a command such as, perhaps, no other vice-emperor had possessed. In a part of the country claimed by the Popes as the patrimony of Mathilda, Philip's power overcame the Guelfic element which was so much opposed to the 'Imperium,' and which in most of the towns was the predominant principle.

Suddenly, however, all was changed, when the Emperor died in the prime of his manhood, leaving behind him an infant son, three years old, and a distracted kingdom, which never fully resumed its ancient greatness. In the Papal chair, on the other hand, sat one of the most aspiring and successful of the Pontiffs—Innocent III., who at once assumed that authority in the legations which Henry VI. had taken so much pains to put down. The Tuscans, however, were not more disposed to submit patiently to the Papal sovereignty than they had been to that of the Emperor, and this the Pope was not slow to perceive. But while he avoided all direct assertions of sovereign power over the towns, he made use of his influence to form a Tuscan Union, that should be closely allied with the ecclesiastical government at Rome, and firmly opposed to the Imperial authority. In 1198 a Union was formed at San Genesio, which lies at the foot of the hills in the lower valley of the Arno, and within sight of the venerable towers of San Miniato. The negotiators on this occasion were two Cardinals representing the Pope on one side, and on the other deputies elected by the several towns interested. Pisa, which was Ghibelline, alone of the great towns held aloof. The federation was intended to form a bulwark against Imperial encroachments, and all matters of internal administration and municipal government were left untouched. The supremacy of the Papacy was felt to be a lighter yoke than that of the Empire.

It is worthy of remark that this practical protest against Imperial domination should have its starting-point in a spot where the Guelfs, especially the Florentines, were reminded that their liberties depended on the pleasure of the Emperors. For the lofty towers that from the hill of San Miniato look down upon the Val d’Arno, and across the well-watered plain that stretches to the borders of Lucca, formed part of the palace of Barbarossa, and from it his high decrees were sent forth in the name of the Arch-chancellor of the Empire, the Archbishop of Cologne. Here tarried Henry VI. and Frederick II., and here the Vicar of the Empire, under Rudolf of Hapsburg, received the oath of allegiance. At a later period, in March 1355, Charles IV. revived the ancient dignity by stopping at San Miniato both before and after his coronation. The deputies of the place, called from these circumstances San Miniato the German (*al Tedesco*), had gone to Pisa to pay their obeisance to Charles.

Events like those enumerated above were favourable to the territorial extension of the Florentine Commune. Their progress would have been greater, had not an ancient feud among the nobles come to a bloody outbreak in the second decade of the thirteenth century. The effect of this factious contest, which was embittered by religious animosity and the quarrel of Frederic II. with the Pope, was to enfeeble the nobility, and react mischievously on the people. The murder of Messer Buondelmonte de’ Buondelmonti at the entrance of the old bridge in 1215 is celebrated in history and poetry as the presumed origin of the hostile factions of Guelf and

Ghibelline. A stone cross in the small square, called, from the junction of three streets, the Trebbio, commemorates the victory of the orthodox citizens, led by Peter Martyr of Verona, against the Patarian heretics. About 1247 the most violent civil war raged. Although the Ghibelline faction had the upper hand at first, and Frederick of Antioch, the Emperor’s son and Imperial Vicar in Tuscany, drove out the Guelf nobility, the tables were turned when heavy losses overtook Frederick in Lombardy and were followed by his death. The year of Frederick’s death, 1250, marks the victory of the Guelfic cause in Florence, for although their adversaries had a momentary triumph they could not hold out, and the city so famous under the Salieri for its devotion to the Emperor, became the stronghold of the Guelfs. This decisive change, which brought constitutional changes with it, took place towards the end of October 1250, a little before the Emperor’s death.

Up to that time, from the beginning of the twelfth century, the city had been governed by a magistracy consisting of first four and then six consuls, assisted by a council of one hundred good men (*Buonuomini*). From 1207 the administration was entrusted to a foreign knight, learned in the law, and called the Podestà. After the fashion of the Lombard cities, he was elected for six months, then for twelve, and had the assistance of a general council. Encouraged by the factiousness and weakness of the nobility, who had till then been supreme in the place, the citizen class banded together in an organised insurrection, and initiated great political reforms. The town was divided into sixths, (*Sestieri*), each sixth into twenty militia companies (the number being subject to change, under different standard-bearers, or *gonfaloniers*, each of whom had a distinguishing mark). At the head of all, in place of the Ghibelline Podestà, who was done away with, was a captain of the people (*Capitano del Popolo*), assisted by a council of twelve elders, two for every sixth, and six and thirty corporals. At a later period these institutions developed into the small and the great councils. The standard of the people, put into the hands of the captain, was half red, half white, and was subsequently replaced by one bearing a red cross on a white ground. The banner of the Commune, displayed by the Podestà, bore first a white lily on a field of red, then a red lily on white ground. The civic militia were called to arms by the tolling of a bell from the Lion's Tower, which has long disappeared, but stood probably near the palace of the Capitano, on the site of which the palace of the Signoria, now the Palazzo Vecchio, was erected in the sixteenth century. The country districts also received a military organisation. To the Capitano was attributed authority over both the civil and criminal administration, with the co-operation of the elders, but the Podestà subsequently resumed his criminal jurisdiction. The latter also occupied the palace, built originally in 1255 as a council-chamber for the Capitano and his assessors, but much enlarged in the following century. It is still called after the Podestà, and, restored after long neglect to somewhat of its ancient dignity, now looks down in lofty grandeur upon the bustle of modern life going on around its walls.

Though not free from factious disturbance the city continued to prosper for years after the revolt against the nobility. Its commerce was extended and its influence over neighbouring communes strengthened either by treaty or by force of arms. No better witness of this prosperity can be cited than the number of buildings erected for the public good about this time. Besides this, many religious houses arose at the time when the order called the Humiliates were manifesting extraordinary activity. In the year 1252 also was coined the golden florin which, exercising a patent influence on the currency of mediæval and modern times, contributed largely to the influence of Florence among men of commerce, and shadowed forth her subsequent supremacy. As yet the two hostile factions of the city, though coming frequently into jealous collision, dwelt near together. In the summer of 1258 an attempt was made to overthrow the Constitution as settled by the Guelfs, and bind Florence to the Imperial interests, to which Pisa and Siena were already attached. The promoters of this revolution were the family of the Uberti, champions of the Ghibelline cause, in alliance with King Manfred, the Emperor Frederick's son.

It was plain that the triumph of the Imperialists in the South of Italy would be incomplete without the acquisition of Tuscany. The attempt miscarried and the natural consequences ensued. All the great Ghibelline families were sent into exile, and they took refuge for the most part in Siena. The refusal on the part of the conquerors to respect any obligations that had been previously entered into with the banished families led to a war in 1260. On September 4 in that year the Tuscan Guelfs suffered a severe defeat at Montaperti on the Arbia, in view of the walls of Siena, whose inhabitants, assisted by the horsemen of Manfred, were the victors. The effect in Florence was instantaneous. Without waiting for the return of their enemies, the principal Guelf families, patrician and plebeian, at once quitted the city and sought shelter in Lucca. The Guelfs of the dependent towns soon followed this example, and in three days the Ghibellines were installed in Florence, with Giordano of Anglona, a captain of Manfred's, at their head, as the king's vicegerent. Guido Novello, of the race of the Palsgrave of Tuscany, assumed the office of Podestà. The Guelfs were compelled to abandon Lucca and retire to Bologna, leaving the Ghibellines masters of the whole of Tuscany. Affairs continued in this state for six years, when King Manfred overthrew at Benevento the army of Charles of Anjou, Count of Provence, who had been called in by the Pope, and who was assisted by many Tuscan Guelfs.

An attempt at compromise between the two factions and a settlement of the differences of the nobility and the burghers was made by appointing two Knights of the Order of the Virgin Mary to the joint exercise of the office of Podestà. With these *fratres gaudentes* was associated a Council of thirty, selected from the trading classes. The arrangement was made with the consent of Pope Clement IV., and accepted by the threatened Ghibellines as an expedient. It was soon discovered, however, that a real reconciliation was impossible, and that the Pope was pursuing extensive political schemes that were agreeable to no party.

On November 11, nearly nine months after the battle of Benevento, an insurrection against a tax, forced the Ghibellines and Germans to evacuate Florence. The Knights of Mary were replaced by two knights from Orvieto, who were respectively appointed Podestà and Capitano. Again efforts were made at a reconciliation by the recall of the more moderate among the exiles, and by offers of family alliances, but without success.

Charles of Anjou, now King of Sicily and Naples, was striving, like Manfred, to strengthen his influence in Tuscany, and being secretly incited by Guelf leaders he sent a troop of 800 armed men to Florence, under Guy de Montfort, in 1267. The Ghibellines proved irreconcileable, and left the city on the night of Good Friday in that year. Further endeavours at pacification were alike unavailing. The party spirit was too strong, and resisted the authority of Pope Gregory X. in the spring of 1273, as steadily as that of Cardinal Latino Malabranca (a nephew of Pope Nicholas III.), in February 1279. Nor was the influence of the two holders of supreme power of much avail even after the accession of Rudolf of Hapsburg to the throne of Germany had altered the relations between Church and State.

Meanwhile two changes occurred in the internal government of the city of great, if unequal, importance. The first was the vice-regency of foreign princes, who now held in the Commune the position formerly belonging to the chief of the empire, with this difference, that the Commune awarded the dignity to foreign princes on certain conditions, and for a certain number of years. The supremacy of King Manfred was followed in 1267 by that of Charles of Anjou, which the city bore for ten years. The authority of these princes and their representatives was limited. A committee of twelve good men selected from the municipal nobility sat as assessors to the viceroy. Besides this there were both the council-boards already named, to which was now added a third body, the secret council of the Guelf burghers, making together a general or common council. The statutes introduced by the viceroy were sent to the united councils as to a court of general jurisdiction, before they were definitively accepted by the Council of Three Hundred. The limits of the viceroy's authority were not easily fixed. In the first half of the ensuing century, when the city was unable to hold out against the arms of the Ghibellines without the aid of Charles of Anjou, this part of the Constitution was remodelled more than once. The Anjou viceroyalty, in concert with the Guelfs, thoroughly rooted out the suspected Ghibellines. In 1268–69 some three thousand were banished, many of whom went to the south of France. Their goods were sold, and the profits devoted to the interests of the victorious party. A special Commission was appointed to manage the 'capitani di parte Guelfa,' and was assisted by a committee of the Council, composed of nobles and burghers. In the course of years this body acquired almost dictatorial power in the State.

The second fact alluded to above was of far more importance in its social and political bearing than the position of the vice-kings of Tuscany. It was the enfranchisement of the lower class of Florentine citizens. The population of the city was divided into three classes: 1, the feudal nobility; 2, the municipal nobility, or wealthy burgher families; 3, the common people. The influence of the first, who were never very numerous, was based on their landed possessions in the provinces; that of the second on their wealth in money and their trade; while the third class were held in no consideration, and up to the middle of the thirteenth century had no share in the government of the State. When Frederic II. died a democratic spirit manifested itself in union with the Guelfic feeling of opposition to the Imperial authority, and made rapid progress. The old and new nobility united to resist the popular movement; but the people, who had increased in numbers and in substance by the free exercise of their skill in arts, manufactures, and commerce, aspired to a share in the civil government, and made an effort to attain it. The discords of the nobility and the confusion of the government in 1250 gave the people an opportunity of forming an independent body, half political, half military. While the Podestà remained at the head of the administration of justice, the ‘Capitano del Popolo’ was military chief of the third or lower class, who, set on securing their own rights, paid little attention to the quarrels of the factions. After the overthrow of King Manfred and the Ghibelline party the third class advanced a step forward by the definite formation of guilds. The object of the organisation of 1250 was mainly military; the end now in view was to give a more solid form and more popular character to the civil relations. An excellent means for the attainment of this was at hand in the corporations, already large, to which the richest and most respectable members of the third class already belonged.

The industrial and commercial societies, the origin of which is traceable to Roman times, kept pace in development with the Commune of the twelfth century. We shall presently see how, at the end of this century, their influence extended abroad, and at the beginning of the next was felt through their delegates in matters of state. They gave themselves statutes and exercised influence before they assumed that form which erelong enabled them to take the chief share in the executive as well as in the legislative power. They consisted principally of professional men, traders, and the higher class of artisans, and these represented the whole class of lower citizens. There were seven guilds: the lawyers, merchants, money-changers, weavers, silkworkers, doctors and apothecaries, and the furriers. These were the grand guilds which always retained exceptional privileges. Each one had a first and a second delegate or consul elected every four months, and representing severally two quarters of the town. There was a syndic and other officers with jurisdiction over all the members of the guild. They bore arms and banners, and were commanded by a gonfalonier or captain, thus forming a complete society, having its own residence or guild-hall. Supreme over all the seven guilds was a proconsul, whose place was among the highest officers of the Commune, and who was chosen from the first, or lawyer's guild. He superintended the general interests of these incorporated societies, decided questions of competency and the like. The presidents and officers formed a council, called the 'Consiglio delle Capitudini delli Maggiore,' to which were referred the enactments which had previously been laid before the 'Consiglio del Popolo.' There is still in Florence much that wears the stamp of the power of these city liveries of the Middle Ages. The architecture of the guildhalls bears witness to the greatness of the institution which, soon exceeding its original purpose, was blended with the powers of the State. Coats of arms and names of streets and other things give similar testimony. In the course of sixteen years fourteen guilds—called the smaller—were added to the original seven; and, with slight modifications, the same number has been preserved in the same relative position.

It is natural that an institution like this should grow stronger with the increasing strength of the people and the decay of the nobility. In 1279, when Cardinal Latino first extinguished the strife of the leading Guelfs, tormented by continual intestine discords, and then reconciled them to the Ghibellines, a supreme magistracy of fourteen Buonuomini was instituted, consisting of eight Guelfs and six Ghibellines, both nobles and citizens. This harmony lasted but a short time. In 1282, the Sicilian Vespers having given a heavy blow to the house of Anjou, the Ghibelline party raised its head once more, but was again defeated. Hereupon the guilds resolved to take the government into their own hands, and that they were able to do so without serious opposition shows to what a height their power had risen. The new administration was styled ‘The Priors of the Guilds,’ the chief being the Captain of the People, who was called ‘Defender of the Guilds.’ At first three, then six priors were elected from the Grand Guilds—being one for every *sestieri*, or sixth part of the city. The term of office was two months, except for those of the Lawyer Guild, who took part in the administration in any other way. Subsequent changes made the number of priors eight, two for each quarter of the city. The magnates, or *grandi*, as they were called, might belong to the administration if they became members of a guild. This gave a powerful check to the popular tendencies which were already so far advanced. The nobility made no difficulty of entering the guilds; and before long two jealous classes stood face to face and threatened the destruction of the government, by corporations which the people had set up as a defence against the aristocracy.

The reform of 1293, when Guelfism was in the ascendant, was carried by Prior Giano della Bella, a respected popular tribune, who, with the consent of his colleagues, and of the higher magistracy, did the work very thoroughly. It was declared essential to everyone who desired to take part in the administration that he must really practice the art or craft of the guild he belonged to. This declaration was tantamount to an exclusion of the nobles, so tenacious of their dignity, from all civil offices. Stringent orders, called ‘Orders of Justice,’ were issued against the noble class,[3] the execution of which was entrusted to a newly made officer, called the gonfalonier of justice, who, at his pleasure, could summon to his banner, the red cross on the white field, 1,000 or 2,000 of the popular militia. The office of gonfalonier, who, in conjunction with the priors, formed the Signoria, afterwards became the highest in the community. In 1306 the special application of the penal laws against the aristocrats was committed to the ‘esecutore degli ordini di giustizia,’ whose attributes resembled those of a Roman tribune. This new addition to the number of upper magistrates increased the evils arising from a conflict of jurisdiction, and, like the number and frequent changes of the larger council-boards, became a source of confusion and weakness in the State. The age of the gonfalonier was to be not less than forty-five, that of the prior thirty, the term of office two months. The elections to the new Signory were originally left to the retiring members, the president of the guilds, and a number of deputies, summoned from different parts of the town by the priors. But electoral practices were subject to change according to the pleasure of the ruling faction. At the time when the fortune of the family which deprived the city of its freedom was at the highest the whole business of the elections was a mere pretext, as only the names of supporters found their way into the bag, while the drawing by lot depended on commissaries chosen from among the adherents of the actual chief of the State. The Signory held its sittings in the beginning, and for some time after, in the convent (Badia) opposite the palace of the Podestà. Later on, a magnificent palace was erected, worthy of the first magistracy of a large community, and with its prominent tower indicative of a stormy period replete with heroic deeds.

There was vested in the Signory the highest deliberative, legislative, and executive power, spite of many modifications and changes more or less illusory. In connexion with the Signory under the name of Colleges were the gonfaloniers of the militia companies, now sixteen in number, with the Captain of the People, and after 1312 a magistracy of twelve Buonuomini, without whom nothing of importance was decided. The projects of law finally went to the General Council. The exercise of authority thus came into the hands of the people who formed the great guilds—the fat people, as they were called—*popolo grasso*. In course of time, it is true, the latter had to share political power with the smaller guilds; but the nobility was shut out, as well as the common people who paid no taxes nor belonged to any guild. Citizens pronounced guilty of any civil or political offence (*ammoniti*) were excluded from the franchise and from office for life or for a certain period, as were also persons marked in the register as negligent in the payment of dues. This ostracism was a weapon of great power in the hands of the factions during the fourteenth century, by which they kept the road to office clear for their own followers. The Balia was another and effective means to the same end. When a signory or party dreaded any hostile influence they called the people together by means of a great bell. Assembled in the square in front of the palace, the signory came out to them on the tribune, or ringhiera and asked them if they would like to grant power to a certain number of citizens to change the laws and constitution. The square being surrounded by armed men a refusal of this request was not to be expected. The select few, invested thus with discretionary power, nominated a second group to the task of naming citizens eligible for office. The privileges of these *accoppiatori*, as they were called, sometimes lasted for years, so that freedom of election to the magistracy and other offices became illusory in respect to many citizens who were eligible. It will presently be seen what resulted, in the second half of the fourteenth century, from the abuse of the Ammonire and the Balia. When the citizens of Florence reformed their constitution they had a twofold object in view. They wanted first to have the chief power in their own hands, and secondly to prevent internal dissensions by a wide distribution of places among the citizens, which was to be effected by short terms of office and frequent changes. The first of these objects was attained, but the endeavour to accomplish the second was not successful. The rigour of the suspensive laws augmented the opposition of the class who suffered by them, and the Guelf faction shook the city to its very foundations. The quarrel of the Neri and Bianchi, made famous by the greatest poet of the Middle Ages, induced consequences that were fatal to the Liberal and popular party, and restored for a time the nobles to power. But again the lapse of a few years was sufficient to show their weakness. This brought disorder and violence into the town, and led to the recovery of political power by the citizen class at the very moment when the efforts of the Imperialists to reconquer their old position in Italy more than ever demanded strength in the popular element of the governing power.

CHAPTER II.

THE FOURTEENTH CENTURY—RULE OF THE ALBIZZI—GIOVANNO D'AVERARDO DE' MEDICI.

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The sanguinary conflict of Campaldino was fought, in 1289, in the plain on the Arno which is overlooked by Poppi, the principal place in the Tuscan valley of the Casentino, where stood the stronghold of those Counts Guidi, who were the protectors of the Guelf cause when brought to its lowest ebb by the war of the Vespers. Two years after the battle, in 1291, Ardingo de' Medici first sat among the Priors of Florence, and in 1296, when the office was still a new one, he was appointed Gonfalonier, as also was his brother Guccio three years later. Of the last-named there exists a memento, the oldest relating to the family, in the sarcophagus that once held his bones and was immured in the outer wall of the Baptistery. This antique, which is carved in relief with a representation of the chase in Calydon, was placed in the courtyard of the Medici palace, and bears on its modern cover the arms of the family, as well as those of the Guild of Woolstaplers, to which the Medici belonged. Thus, at the end of the thirteenth century we see members of the family in a position of respectable burghers in the enjoyment of civic honours.

Nothing remarkable is heard of them until the middle of the fourteenth century. They formed part, in their numerous branches, of the large family of the people who were increasing more and more their trade and manufactures, and shared on an equal footing in the government of their city.

In the second half of the century two of them became remarkable in different ways, Averardo, called Bicci, son of Salvestro, called Chiarissimo, and Salvestro, son of Alamanno, two cousins in the fourth degree. Of the first we shall speak presently. Salvestro played the chief part in a transaction that shed a lurid light on the history of Florence of that period, but which was the beginning of that influence which ended in the sole supremacy of the Medici.

The heroic age of Florence terminated with the first decade of the fourteenth century. The city, at the head of the Tuscan league, which bound together the Anjous and the Guelfs of Rome and Upper Italy, had manfully resisted Henry of Luxemburg, but succumbed to Louis of Bavaria and the Ghibellines, spite of the aid of foreign auxiliaries. At the same time the rulers from Naples, as well as the foreigners who were appointed to enforce established ordinances, were in a certain measure above the law, and in the exercise of arbitrary power. Fortune smiled on none of their undertakings, nor was the State guided to any better state of things by what the poet of the ‘Divine Comedy’ called ‘the new people and the sudden gains.’ Strength in arms began to decline, and an undue preponderance of material interests to prevail. No period of Florentine history is so poor in men distinguished by arms or policy as that which followed the repulse of Henry VII. Material interests even were not adequately protected. For although the springs of gain had yielded copiously, and still continued partially to flow, the cost of war and the taxes pressed with proportionate weight; and in the third decade of the century began the failures of the great banking houses, from which they did not recover for a long time, if they ever did completely. To this must be added distressing losses occasioned by inundations and epidemics. Confusion in the government, due on the one hand to the resentment of the aristocracy, on the other to the ill-feeling of the lower classes, brought matters at length to a crisis in 1342. A foreign adventurer, closely connected with the house of Anjou, Walter de Brienne, Count of Lecce and Duke of Athens, was enabled by the assistance of the lowest class of artisans, and some adherents of the nobler families, to make himself for a short time absolute master of Florence. The tyranny, indeed, was overthrown in the following year by a union of the upper and lower classes, who were not, however, long in falling out again, to the great detriment of the nobility. On the pretext of purging the Guelf party the system of *Ammonirism*—*i.e.* exclusion from public offices—was put in practice. It was directed against the decaying nobility on the one hand, and on the other against certain suspected persons in the lower classes. In this way, some thirty years after the expulsion of the Duke, the supreme power was vested in an oligarchy, at the head of which was the Captain of the Guelf faction. They had the whole machinery of government under their control, and were mainly supported by a few families of the wealthier burghers.[4] Among these were the Albizzi, who, originally from Arezzo, having acquired great riches and a high position, stood first in the city of Florence.