

CHAPTER XXII

THE ITALIAN CITIES AND THE RENAISSANCE

I. THE ITALIAN DESPOTS

217. Machiavelli's advice to despots. (From *The Prince*.)

Unreliable character of the *condottiere* and their mercenary troops.

No one better understood the Italian despot and the peculiarities of his position than did Machiavelli. The following passages are from *The Prince*, his little handbook for despots.

That prince who founds the duration of his government upon his mercenary forces will never be firm or secure; for they are divided, ambitious, undisciplined, unfaithful; insolent to their friends, abject to their enemies, without fear of God or faith to men; so the ruin of that person who trusts to them is no longer protracted than the attempt is deferred. In time of peace they plunder you, in time of war they desert you; and the reason is because it is not love nor any principle of honor that keeps them in the field, but only their pay, and that is not a consideration strong enough to prevail with them to die for you. Whilst you have no service to employ them in, they are excellent soldiers; but tell them of an engagement and they will either disband before, or run away during the battle. . . .

The great officers of these mercenaries [i.e. the *condottiere*] are either men of great courage, or otherwise; if the first, you can never be safe, for they always aspire to make themselves great, either by supplanting you who are their master, or by oppressing other people whom you desire to have protected. On the other hand, if the commanders be not courageous, you are still ruined. If it should be urged that all generals will do the same, whether mercenaries or others, I would answer, that all war is managed either by a prince or a

republic. The prince ought to go in person, and perform the office of general himself; the republic should depute some one of her choice citizens, who may be changed if he carries himself ill; if he behaves himself well he may be continued, but so straitened and circumscribed by his commission that he may not transgress. . . .

Of the danger of mercenary forces we have an ancient example in the Carthaginians, who, after the end of their first war with the Romans, had like to have been ruined and overrun by their own mercenaries, though their own citizens commanded them. [In modern times] upon the death of Duke Filippo,<sup>1</sup> the Milanese employed Francesco Sforza against the Venetians, and Francesco, having worsted the enemy at Caravaggio, joined himself with them, with design to have mastered his masters. Francesco's father was formerly in the service of Joan, queen of Naples, and on a sudden marched away from her with his army and left her utterly destitute, so that she was constrained to throw herself under the protection of the king of Aragon.

Though both the Venetians and Florentines have lately enlarged their dominion by employing these forces, and their generals have rather advanced than enslaved them, I answer that the Florentines may impute it to their good fortune, because, of such of their generals as they might rationally have feared, some had no victories to encourage them, others were obstructed, and others turned their ambition another way.

It now remains for us to see in what manner a prince ought to comport himself with his subjects and friends; and because many have written of this subject before, it may perhaps seem arrogant in me to do so, especially considering that in my discourse I shall deviate from the opinion of other men. But my intention being to write for the benefit and advantage of him who understands, I thought it more convenient to respect the essential verity than the imagination of the thing (and many have framed imaginary commonwealths and governments to themselves which never were

<sup>1</sup> The last of the Visconti.

Example of Sforza making himself master of Milan.

On such things as render princes worthy of blame or applause.

seen nor had any real existence), since the present manner of living is so different from the way that ought to be taken, that he who neglects what *is* done to follow what *ought to be* done will sooner learn how to ruin than how to preserve himself; for a tender man, and one that desires to be honest in everything, must needs run a great hazard among so many of a contrary principle. Wherefore it is necessary for a prince who wishes to subsist, to harden himself, and learn to be good or otherwise according to the exigence of his affairs.

Laying aside, therefore, all imaginary notions of a prince, and discoursing of nothing but what is actually true, I say that all men when they are spoken of, and especially princes, who are in a higher and more eminent station, are remarkable for some quality or other that makes them either honorable or contemptible. Hence it is that some are counted liberal, others miserable; . . . some munificent, others rapacious; some cruel, others merciful; some faithless, others precise; one poor-spirited and effeminate, another fierce and ambitious; one courteous, another haughty; one modest, another impure; one sincere, another cunning; one rugged and morose, another accessible and easy; one grave, another giddy; one devout, another an atheist.

No man, I am sure, will deny but that it would be an admirable thing and highly to be commended to have a prince endowed with all the good qualities aforesaid; but because it is impossible to have, much less to exercise, them all by reason of the frailty and grossness of our nature, it is convenient that he be so well instructed as to know how to avoid the scandal of those vices which may deprive him of his state, and be very cautious of the rest, though their consequence be not so pernicious, so that where they are unavoidable he need trouble himself the less.

He is not to concern himself if he incur the infamy of those vices without which his dominion cannot be preserved; for if we consider things impartially, we shall find some things are virtuous in appearance, and yet, if pursued, would bring certain destruction, while others are seemingly bad, which, if followed by a prince, procure his peace and security.

To come now to the other qualities proposed, I say that every prince should desire to be esteemed merciful rather than cruel, but with great caution that his mercy be not abused. Cæsar Borgia was counted cruel, yet that cruelty reduced Romagna, united it, settled it in peace, and rendered it faithful; so that if well considered he will appear much more merciful than the Florentines, who, rather than be thought cruel, suffered Pistoja to be destroyed. A prince, therefore, is not to regard the scandal of being cruel, if thereby he keeps his subjects in their allegiance and united, seeing that by some few examples of justice you may be more merciful than they who, by an universal exercise of pity, permit several disorders to follow, which occasion rapine and murder; and the reason is, because that exorbitant mercy has an ill effect upon the whole body of the people, whereas particular executions extend only to particular persons.

But among all princes a new prince has the hardest task to avoid the scandal of being cruel, by reason of the newness of his government, and the dangers which attend it. . . . Nevertheless, he is not to be too credulous of reports, too hasty in his motions, nor create fears and jealousies of himself, but so to temper his administration with prudence and humanity that neither too much confidence may make him careless, nor too much diffidence intolerable.

And from hence arises a new question, Whether it be better to be beloved than feared, or feared than beloved? It is answered, both would be convenient, but because that is hard to attain, it is better and more secure, if one must be wanting, to be feared rather than beloved; for, in general, men are ungrateful, inconstant, hypocritical, fearful of danger, and covetous of gain. Whilst they receive any benefit by you, and the danger is at a distance, they are absolutely yours; their blood, their estates, their lives, and their children, as I said before, are all at your service. But when mischief is at hand, and you have present need of their help, they make no scruple to revolt; and that prince who leaves himself naked of other preparations, and relies wholly upon their professions, is sure to be ruined; for amity contracted

Whether it is best for a prince to be beloved or feared.

by price, and not by the greatness and generosity of the mind, may seem a good pennyworth, yet when you have occasion to make use of it, you will find it of no account.

Moreover, men do with less remorse offend against those who desire to be beloved than against those who are ambitious of being feared, and the reason is because love is fastened only by a ligament of obligation, which the ill-nature of mankind breaks upon every occasion that is presented to his profit; but fear depends upon an apprehension of punishment, which is never to be dispelled.

Yet a prince is to inspire fear in such sort that, if he gains not his subjects' love, he may eschew their hatred; for to be feared and not hated are compatible enough, and he may be always in that condition if he offers no violence to their estates, nor attempts anything upon the honor of their wives, and also, when he has occasion to take away any man's life, if he takes his time when the cause is manifest, and he has good matter for his justification. But above all things he is to have a care of intrenching upon their estates, for men do sooner forget the death of their father than the loss of their patrimony; besides, occasions of confiscation never fail, and he that once gives way to that humor of rapine shall never want temptation to ruin his neighbor. But, on the contrary, provocations to bloodshed are more rare, and do sooner evaporate; but when a prince is at the head of his army, and has a multitude of soldiers to govern, then it is absolutely necessary not to value the epithet of cruel, for without that no army can be kept in unity, nor in the disposition for any great act.

## II. HUMANISM

Dante was not a humanist in the later sense of the term, but he clearly appreciated the distinction and worth of the ancient writers. The following passage from the *Divine Comedy* is his poetic conception of the fate of the famous pagans who lived worthily. He is

218. Dante and the great writers of Greece and Rome. (From the *Divine Comedy*.)

passing through limbo, the uppermost region of hell, with Virgil for his guide. As they proceed he sees a fire that conquered a hemisphere of darkness.<sup>1</sup>

We were still a little distant from it, yet not so far that I could not partially discern that honorable folk possessed that place. "O thou that honorest both science and art, these, who are they, that have such honor that from the condition of the others it sets them apart?" And he to me, "The honorable fame of them which resounds above in thy life wins grace in heaven that so advances them." At this a voice was heard by me, "Honor the loftiest Poet! his shade returns that was departed." When the voice had ceased and was quiet, I saw four great shades coming to us: they had a semblance neither sad nor glad. The good Master [Virgil] began to say, "Look at him with that sword in hand who cometh before the three, even as lord. He is Homer, the sovereign poet; the next who comes is Horace, the satirist; Ovid is the third, and the last is Lucan. Since each shares with me the name that the solitary voice sounded, they do me honor, and in that do well."

Thus I saw assembled the fair school of that Lord of the loftiest song which above the others as an eagle flies. After they had discoursed somewhat together, they turned to me with sign of salutation; and my Master smiled thereat. And far more of honor yet they did me, for they made me of their band, so that I was the sixth amid so much wit. Thus we went on as far as the light, speaking things concerning which silence is becoming, even as was speech there where I was.

We came to the foot of a noble castle, seven times circled by high walls, defended roundabout by a fair streamlet. This we passed as if hard ground; through seven gates I entered with these sages; we came to a meadow of fresh verdure. People were there with eyes slow and grave, of great authority in their looks; they spake seldom and with

<sup>1</sup> I follow Professor Norton's prose version here.

soft voices. Thus we drew apart, on one side, into a place open, luminous, and high, so that they all could be seen. There opposite upon the green enamel were shown to me the great spirits, whom to have seen I inwardly exalt myself.

I saw Electra with many companions, among whom I knew Hector and Æneas, Cæsar in armor, with his falcon eyes; I saw Camilla and Penthesilea on the other side, and I saw the King Latinus, who was seated with Lavinia, his daughter. I saw that Brutus who drove out Tarquin; Lucretia, Julia, Marcia, and Cornelia; and alone, apart, I saw the Saladin. When I raised my brow a little more, I saw the Master of those who know, seated amid the philosophic family; all regard him, all do him honor. Here I saw both Socrates and Plato, who before the others stand nearest to him; Democritus, who ascribes the world to chance; Diogenes, Anaxagoras, and Thales, Empedocles, Heraclitus, and Zeno; and I saw the good collector of the qualities, Dioscorides, I mean; and I saw Orpheus, Tully, and Linus, and moral Seneca, Euclid the geometer, and Ptolemy, Hippocrates, Avicenna, Galen, and Averroës, who made the great comment. I cannot report of all in full, because the long theme so drives me that many times speech comes short of fact.

219. Dante's  
defense of  
Italian.  
(From the  
*Convito*.)

Dante, however, was a sturdy defender of Italian against those who despised their mother tongue and gave preference to other languages. In explaining why he employed Italian in writing his *Banquet (Convito)* he bursts forth:

To the perpetual shame and abasement of the evil men of Italy who commend the mother tongue of other nations and depreciate their own, I say that their action proceeds from five abominable causes: the first is blindness of discretion; the second, mischievous self-justification; the third, greed of vainglory; the fourth, an invention of envy; the fifth and last, littleness of soul, that is, cowardice. And

each one of these grave faults has a great following, for few are those who are free from them. . . .

There are many who would rather be thought masters than be such; and to avoid the opposite — that is, to be held not to be such — they always cast blame on the material they work on, or upon the instrument; as the clumsy smith blames the iron given to him, and the bad harpist blames the harp, thinking to cast the blame of the bad blade and of the bad music upon the iron and upon the harp, and to lift it from themselves. Thus there are some, — and not a few, — who desire that men may hold them to be orators; and to excuse themselves for not speaking, or for speaking badly, they accuse or throw blame on the material, that is, their own mother tongue, and praise that of other lands, which they are not required to employ. And he who wishes to see wherefore this iron is to be blamed, let him look at the work which good artificers make of it, and he will understand the malice of those who, in casting blame upon it, think thereby to excuse themselves. Against such as these Cicero exclaims in the beginning of his book, which he names *De Finibus*, because in his time they blamed the Roman Latin and praised the Greek grammar. And thus I say, for like reasons, that these men vilify the Italian tongue, and glorify that of Provence. . . .

There are many who, by describing certain things in some other language, and by praising that language, deem themselves to be more worthy of admiration than if they described them in their own. And undoubtedly to learn well a foreign tongue is deserving of some praise for intellect; but it is a blamable thing to applaud that language beyond truth, to glorify oneself for such an acquisition. . . . Wherefore many, on account of this baseness of soul, depreciate their native tongue, and applaud that of others; and such as these are the abominable wicked men of Italy who hold this precious mother tongue in vile contempt, which if it be vile in any case is so only inasmuch as it sounds in the evil mouth of these adulterers, under whose guidance go those blind men of whom I spoke in the first argument.

220. Dante's  
sad life.  
(From the  
*Convito*.)

Dante excuses himself for a certain obscurity which he has introduced into his *Banquet*, with the hope of giving it some dignity in the eyes of the many Italians who had seen him during his wanderings, and perhaps had formed a low estimate of him.

Alas! would that it might have pleased the Dispenser of the Universe that the cause of my excuse might never have been, that others might neither have sinned against me, nor I have suffered punishment unjustly; the punishment, I say, of exile and poverty! Since it was the pleasure of the citizens of the most beautiful and the most famous daughter of Rome, Florence, to cast me out from her most sweet bosom (wherein I was born and nourished even to the height of my life, and in which, with her good will, I desire with all my heart to repose my weary soul, and to end the time which is given to me), I have gone through almost all the land in which this language lives — a pilgrim, almost a mendicant — showing forth against my will the wound of Fortune, with which the ruined man is often unjustly reproached.

Truly I have been a ship without a sail and without a rudder, borne to divers ports and lands and shores by the dry wind which blows from grievous poverty; and I have appeared vile in the eyes of many, who perhaps through some report may have imaged me in other form. In the sight of whom not only my person became vile, but my work was held to be of less value, both that already done and that which remained still to do.

Petrarch well knew how to describe himself and his aspirations. He writes thus to posterity:

221. Pe-  
trarch's de-  
scription of  
himself.  
(From his  
*Letter to Pos-  
terity*.)

Greeting. — It is possible that some word of me may have come to you, though even this is doubtful, since an insignificant and obscure name will scarcely penetrate far in either time or space. If, however, you should have heard of me, you may desire to know what manner of man

I was, or what was the outcome of my labors, especially those of which some description or, at any rate, the bare titles may have reached you.

To begin with myself, then: the utterances of men concerning me will differ widely, since in passing judgment almost every one is influenced not so much by truth as by preference, and good and evil report alike know no bounds. I was, in truth, a poor mortal like yourself, neither very exalted in my origin, nor, on the other hand, of the most humble birth, but belonging, as Augustus Cæsar says of himself, to an ancient family. As to my disposition, I was not naturally perverse or wanting in modesty, however the contagion of evil associations may have corrupted me.

My youth was gone before I realized it; I was carried away by the strength of manhood; but a riper age brought me to my senses and taught me by experience the truth I had long before read in books, that youth and pleasure are vanity, — nay, that the Author of all ages and times permits us miserable mortals, puffed up with emptiness, thus to wander about, until finally, coming to a tardy consciousness of our sins, we shall learn to know ourselves.

In my prime I was blessed with a quick and active body, although not exceptionally strong; and while I do not lay claim to remarkable personal beauty, I was comely enough in my best days. I was possessed of a clear complexion, between light and dark, lively eyes, and for long years a keen vision, which however deserted me, contrary to my hopes, after I reached my sixtieth birthday, and forced me, to my great annoyance, to resort to glasses. Although I had previously enjoyed perfect health, old age brought with it the usual array of discomforts.

My parents were honorable folk, Florentine in their origin, of medium fortune, or, I may as well admit it, in a condition verging upon poverty. They had been expelled from their native city, and consequently I was born in exile, at Arezzo, in the year 1304 of this latter age, which begins with Christ's birth, July the 20th, on a Monday, at dawn. . . . In my familiar associations with kings and princes, and in my

friendship with noble personages, my good fortune has been such as to excite envy. But it is the cruel fate of those who are growing old that they can commonly only weep for friends who have passed away. The greatest kings of this age have loved and courted me. They may know why; I certainly do not. With some of them I was on such terms that they seemed in a certain sense my guests rather than I theirs; their lofty position in no way embarrassing me, but, on the contrary, bringing with it many advantages. I fled, however, from many of those to whom I was greatly attached; and such was my innate longing for liberty, that I studiously avoided those whose very name seemed incompatible with the freedom that I loved.

I possessed a well-balanced rather than a keen intellect, — one prone to all kinds of good and wholesome study, but especially inclined to moral philosophy and the art of poetry. The latter, indeed, I neglected as time went on, and took delight in sacred literature. Finding in that a hidden sweetness which I had once esteemed but lightly, I came to regard the works of the poets as only amenities.

Among the many subjects which interested me, I dwelt especially upon antiquity, for our own age has always repelled me, so that, had it not been for the love of those dear to me, I should have preferred to have been born in any other period than our own. In order to forget my own time, I have constantly striven to place myself in spirit in other ages, and consequently I delighted in history. The conflicting statements troubled me, but when in doubt I accepted what appeared most probable, or yielded to the authority of the writer.

In one of the most sprightly of his letters, Petrarch confesses that he is afflicted with a mania for writing, a disease which, perhaps through his example, has spread so widely that every one is writing verses and talking of the muses.

It is after all but a poor consolation to have companions in misery. I should prefer to be ill by myself. Now I am

222. Petrarch's reputation as a literary critic. (From a letter of his.)

involved in other's ill fortune as well as in my own, and am hardly given time to take breath. For every day letters and poems from every corner of our land come showering down upon my devoted head. Nor does this satisfy my foreign friends. I am overwhelmed by floods of missives, no longer from France alone, but from Greece, from Germany, from England. I am unable to judge even my own work, and yet I am called upon to be the universal critic of others.

Were I to answer the requests in detail, I should be the busiest of mortals. If I condemn the composition, I am a jealous carper at the good work of others; if I say a good word for the thing, it is attributed to a mendacious desire to be agreeable; if I keep silence altogether, it is because I am a rude, pert fellow. They are afraid, I infer, that my disease will not make way with me promptly enough. Between their goading and my own madness I shall doubtless gratify their wishes.

But all this would be nothing if, incredible as it may seem, this subtle poison had not just now begun to show its effects in the Roman curia itself [at Avignon]. What do you think the lawyers and doctors are up to? Justinian and Æsculapius have palled upon them. The sick and the litigious cry in vain for their help, for they are deafened by the thunder of Homer's and Virgil's names, and wander oblivious in the woody valleys of Cirrha, by the purling waters of the Aonian fountain. But it is hardly necessary to speak of these lesser prodigies. Even carpenters, fullers, and plowmen leave the implements of their calling to talk of Apollo and the Muses. I cannot say how far the plague, which lately was confined to a few, has now spread.

Petrarch's enthusiasm for the classical authors, especially Cicero, whom he admired most ardently, is shown in the following letter.

Your copy of Cicero has been in my possession four years and more. There is a good reason, though, for so long a delay;

223. Petrarch copies a work of Cicero's. (From one of his letters.)

namely, the great scarcity of copyists who understand such work. It is a state of affairs that has resulted in an incredible loss to scholarship. Books that by their nature are a little hard to understand are no longer multiplied, and have ceased to be generally intelligible, and so have sunk into utter neglect, and in the end have perished. This age of ours consequently has let fall, bit by bit, some of the richest and sweetest fruits that the tree of knowledge has yielded; has thrown away the results of the vigils and labors of the most illustrious men of genius,—things of more value, I am almost tempted to say, than anything else in the whole world. . . .

But I must return to your Cicero. I could not do without it, and the incompetence of the copyists would not let me possess it. What was left for me but to rely upon my own resources, and press these weary fingers and this worn and ragged pen into the service? The plan that I followed was this. I want you to know it, in case you should ever have to grapple with a similar task. Not a single word did I read except as I wrote. But how is that, I hear some one say; did you write without knowing what it was that you were writing? Ah! but from the very first it was enough for me to know that it was a work of Tullius, and an extremely rare one too. And then as soon as I was fairly started, I found at every step so much sweetness and charm, and felt so strong a desire to advance, that the only difficulty which I experienced in reading and writing at the same time came from the fact that my pen could not cover the ground so rapidly as I wanted it to, whereas my expectation had been rather that it would outstrip my eyes, and that my ardor for writing would be chilled by the slowness of my reading.

So the pen held back the eye, and the eye drove on the pen, and I covered page after page, delighting in my task, and committing many and many a passage to memory as I wrote. For just in proportion as the writing is slower than the reading does the passage make a deep impression and cling to the mind.

Vespasiano, a Florentine bookseller who died in 1498, gives us some very interesting accounts of his distinguished patrons in his *Lives of Illustrious Men*.

Owing to the jubilee of 1450 a great quantity of money came in by this means to the apostolic see, and with this the pope commenced building in many places, and sent for Greek and Latin books, wherever he was able to find them, without regard to price. He gathered together a large band of writers, the best that he could find, and kept them in constant employment. He also summoned a number of learned men, both for the purpose of composing new works and of translating such existing works as were not already translated, giving them most abundant provision for their needs meanwhile; and when the works were translated and brought to him, he gave them large sums of money, in order that they should do more willingly that which they undertook to do.

He made great provision for the needs of learned men. He gathered together great numbers of books upon every subject, both Greek and Latin, to the number of five thousand volumes. So at his death it was found by inventory that never since the time of Ptolemy had half that number of books of every kind been brought together. All books he caused to be copied, without regard to what it cost him, and there were few places where his Holiness had not copiers at work. When he could not procure a book for himself in any way, he had it copied.

After he had assembled at Rome, as I said above, many learned men at large salaries, he wrote to Florence to Messer Giannozzo Manetti, that he should come to Rome to translate and compose for him. And when Manetti left Florence and came to Rome, the pope, as was his custom, received him with honor, and assigned to him, in addition to his income as secretary, six hundred ducats, urging him to attempt the translation of the books of the Bible and of Aristotle, and to complete the book already commenced by him, *Contra Judæos et gentes*; a wonderful work, if it had been completed, but he carried it only to the tenth book. Moreover he translated

224. Founding of the Vatican Library by Nicholas V. (From Vespasiano's *Lives of Illustrious Men*.)