SAVONAROLA AND THE FLORENTINE REVIVAL

Portrait of Girolamo Savonarola by Alessandro Bonvicino (1498-1554)

The conviction that those movements in history known to us as revivals are not mere sporadic outbreaks, but are governed and regulated by laws which lie deep in humanity, will readily impress itself upon the student of history. Some of these laws we have attempted to decipher. First we recognize a law of identity which, reveals the underlying similarity of all such movements, which shows how they are correlated the one with the other, which declares their common origin, and the identity of the hopes and emotions which they evoke. But along with this identity of cause and effect there exists a law of variety, which, within this prescribed circle, permits of those modifications which come through environment, through locality, through nationality, and through those changes which come over men's minds in the changing centuries, and in the progress of humanity. History, we see, never repeats itself. It uses the same alphabet, but it breaks up the type after each impression, and with the old letters writes ever something new. Thus, while the underlying laws which called it into being are the same, each great movement stands out vividly from all others, it has its own distinguishing features, its own outstanding characteristics both in relation to the appeal which it makes and the effect it produces.

The underlying law of identity in the causes which gave rise to the revival which we are about to consider will emerge as we proceed; "but the fact of diversity will become immediately apparent by contrasting for a moment the saint of Assisi with the monk of Florence. It would be difficult to find a single point of contact between those two men, except in their common hatred of iniquity, and their passionate and unflinching devotion to Jesus Christ. In all else – in temperament, in character, in mental equipment, in intellectual outlook, in the lives they lived and in the deaths they died – they offer the most startling contrast. The life of the saint of Assisi was like one of those radiant days of spring, beginning in cloud and trailing mist, but breaking at last into sunny splendor, and calling all things to song and. gladness; continuing thus through the short day, and closing in a great tranquility of light – all the hills steeped in purple – all the land steeped in peace. The life of the reformer of Florence was like a turbulent day in autumn, beginning with blinks of sunshine through tattered mist, then darkening down in trouble and tempest, with intermittent gleams here and there through torn and startled cloud, but closing in at last with leap of lightning and roar of thunder – the day dying in conflagration

amid the raging of the elements, and the fear of men. Nature abhors these startling contrasts, and so does human history, and we seem to need them for the education of our minds, that we may be taught to recognize the deep and awesome things, of life.

The differences are no less wide when we turn from the leaders to the conditions under which they did their work, and to the times in which they lived. During the two centuries and a half which intervene, profound changes had taken place in Europe. We saw at the end of the twelfth century human society just emerging from the darkness of the Middle Ages. These were the days of papal absolutism, when the human mind was imprisoned, when man's will was fettered, when his imagination was haunted by superstition, and when the thought of the dissolution of the visible universe gave a terrible sanction to the threats of the priesthood.

Now, much of the old conditions of life had broken up. During the interval the feudal system had risen to its prime and had disappeared. The disintegrating process which followed the dismemberment of the Empire under Charlemagne had been arrested; 3 new movements towards centralization had sprung up; and the influence of the Crusades, which, by weakening the influence of the nobles, elevated that of the middle classes, began to be felt. Out of the chaos, nations were arising conscious of a vigorous, national life; kings were extending their authority, and were gathering around them courts and armies; and a gradual process of consolidation was in process which was to map out Europe into modern geographical and national divisions. At the same time commerce was largely on the increase; towns and cities, receiving royal charters, were growing in wealth and in importance; a new life was breaking over Europe, the old order was changing, giving place to new.

No less profound were the changes coming over the human mind. In the history of human thought no period, perhaps, is of intenser interest than that with which we are now dealing. Italy, at this time, was blazing with the light and glory of the Renaissance. The human mind had thrown off the gloom and depression which had so long overshadowed it; instead of the haunting fear of death men became possessed by the joy of life; they awoke to find the world a beautiful place, and life a gladsome and radiant experience, it was like that day in spring of which Wordsworth sings, when secretly through all the earth there moves the quickening pulse of life, when the sap moves at the roots, and gives to all living things the promise of the festive pomp of midsummer. So through men's hearts there passed a thrill which woke them to newness of life, which called them forth to see, with undimmed eyes, the splendor of the world. In literature, in painting, in sculpture, in all the branches of human activity, new doors were being burst open, and through them pressed an eager throng curious after discovery, impatient at delay, and intensely eager to possess the treasures which lay beyond. The monasteries of the West were ransacked for ancient manuscripts; scholars revived the philosophies of ancient Greece and Rome; painters and sculptors sought to revive the lost beauties of classic art, architects vied with each other in building those stately cathedrals and monasteries which arc the glory of Italy, and princes rivalled each other in their patronage and recognition of genius. Two events gave an immense impetus to the movement. Ten years before Savonarola saw the light, the first printing press was put up, and the world entered upon its era of the diffusion of knowledge. When Savonarola was one year old, Constantinople, which had so long withstood the assault of the Turks, at length succumbed. The result was the scattering through Europe of the scholars of the Byzantine Empire, who, taking their books and manuscripts with them, carried their scholarship to the different courts of Europe, and immensely quickened the intellectual movement wherever they settled.

Of all this seething, intellectual life, Italy was the center. Francis, the precursor of the Renaissance, saw but little of that stream, which at first made its way with gentlest movement, but which, widening out, swept on with exultant rush for full three hundred years.

The progress of the Renaissance in Italy is marked out into three distinct periods. Through the first, which lasted from 1250 to 1400, known in art as the Gothic period, progress was slow and laborious. During the Dark Ages knowledge had been buried in the monasteries, and the traditions of art had been lost. Through painful effort these had to be regained, but men brought to their efforts the most eager resolve, and the most intense joy

of heart. Through this period the religious idea still dominated the mind and efforts of the artist; their subjects were solely biblical, or were restricted to the lives of the saints. The second period, which stretches from 1400 to 1500, is known as the Early Renaissance. During this period, Art, while remaining religious in subject, began to widen its outlook; greater technical excellence was attained, and the ascetic ideal began to disappear before the growing opulence of life. The period from 1500 to 1600 is termed the High Renaissance. It was during this period that the Arts, throwing themselves into all the joy and abandon of the world, reached their dazzling heights of splendor; when the religious idea was thrown aside, and men reveled in the beauty of the physical universe, and in the intoxication of the senses.

When now we- compare the external conditions of Italy in the period with which we are dealing, with those which existed in the days of Francis, we perceive that the most momentous changes have taken place; a new era has arrived; the modern world has emerged.

Vast though the change be, then, which separate the two movements under Francis and Savonarola, and which give them their distinctiveness, we have only to look beneath the surface to discover the identity of the laws which brought them into being. The revival under Francis was preceded by a long period of reaction and of spiritual indifference, when evil flaunted itself in the streets and derided the good, when the Church itself had become corrupt, and when all sections of society had become infected by the prevailing skepticism, when even the godly had begun to faint and fear, and cried out day and night for a Deliverer. A close examination of the condition of life at the middle of the fifteenth century discloses an identical condition of affairs within the Church and without. The wave of religious emotion awakened in Europe through the preaching of Francis and his followers produced effects of the most far-reaching importance. As we have seen, it initiated a movement which overlapped the boundaries of its early history; it not only awakened a new religious enthusiasm, and brought men back to the simplicity of the evangelic faith, but it helped to emancipate the human mind, it gave the first shock to the power of the priestly class, it opened the door to art and learning, and set agoing the first hesitating efforts toward religious freedom. This movement was to obtain a new impetus from the hand of Savonarola, but meanwhile the religious side of it had spent itself, and the student of religions history of the middle of the fifteenth century has to survey a period of almost unparalleled iniquity. Over Italy a profound change of manners had taken place.

The ancient simplicity of life disappeared as wealth increased; culture took the place of piety, habits of life became more and more luxurious, dress more costly, entertainments more lavish, worldliness more pronounced. Along with this outward refinement there arose a decay of morals; the standard of rectitude began to oscillate; the sanctities of home began to be invaded; language, while becoming more polite, became charged with double meanings, and in the midst of elegant courtesies men looked for concealed impurities. Beneath the outward polish, too, there began to grow, with startling rapidity, that cruelty which all men possess, and which only the fear of God imprisons; in the decay of faith these evil instincts, no longer chained, began to prowl abroad. Men could no longer be trusted; beneath the velvet tunic peeped the dagger, and in the sparkling cup men expected the deadly poison. Murder and incest, lust and cruelty, haunted alike the palaces of the great and the hovels of the poor. Italy was full of bravos and cut-throats, who, before they struck down their victims from behind in the quiet street, did not think it incongruous first to visit the cathedral and, kneeling down, ask God's protection.

Such was the condition of society in the middle of the fifteenth century. What now was the condition of the Church? How did the religion of Jesus Christ fare in those days of cruelty and corruption? Alas! The story is a terrible one. Hardly before in all its history, perhaps, had the Church sunk so low as it did during the latter half of the fifteenth century. For long the popes had contemptuously thrown aside the pretense of piety; they were not only privately vicious, they were openly and blasphemously wicked. They scandalized Europe by their luxury, their avarice, their unblushing nepotism, and their crimes. Before the cupidity of Paul II, the cruelty of Sixtus rv, the unnatural passions of Alexander VI, and the infidelities of Julius II, the whole head reels, and the whole heart grows faint. They had become, indeed, Italian princes, intent upon the establishing of the fortunes

of their families and unnatural offspring, using the authority of the Church to ruin neighboring states, and not pausing even at murder itself to accomplish their ends. No better illustration, perhaps, could be given of papal morals than what is known as the Pazzi conspiracy, which occurred as Savonarola began his career. This conspiracy, by which a brother of Lorenzo the Magnificent lost his life, and which aimed at the murder of Lorenzo as well, was planned at Rome; the chief agent was the Pope's nephew, the murderer himself an archbishop. The place chosen for the murder was the Cathedral of Florence, the time selected by the murderers was the celebration of the Mass, the moment chosen to strike was that in which the Host is elevated, and while a layman could not be found to do the deed because of the sacredness of the time and place, no difficulty was found in securing the service of a priest. When the deed was done, though bill half done, no condemnation of the murder proceeded from the Vatican, but a Bull of excommunication was hurled at those who had put the murderers to death. This act of barest justice was denounced as a crime which would meet with the most dreadful punishments both here and hereafter.

With this example shown to them, it is not to be expected that the rank and file of the clergy would exhibit habits of earnest piety, or that the age, which saw these excesses, would be one of spiritual earnestness. The condition of spiritual life has been summed up by Machiavelli. 'To the church and priests of Rome,' he says, 'we Italians owe this obligation – that we have become void of religion and corrupt.' Machiavelli can hardly be claimed as a Christian moralist, and when such as he were shocked, little more need be added to illustrate the fact that cither the Christian Church must be reformed or perish.

Here, then, we have a repetition of the conditions which we have already met with preceding the revival under Francis of Assisi. In that dissolute age, as in the other, there must have been many devout souls praying for better tidings, for some mighty tide to arise which would cleanse the Church from its intolerable woes, and bring back to wearied hearts the joys of salvation. In that wicked age there was needed a voice to speak for righteousness, to condemn the sins which were defiling the Church, to warn men that the axe was laid at the root of the tree, and to call them everywhere to repent. That voice at length was heard; it was the voice of Savonarola, and we turn now to listen to its thunders, and to trace his brief and tragic history.

EARLY LIFE

Savonarola was born in Ferrara on September 21, 1452. He was the third of seven children, his parents being of good family, Italy, at this time, was broken up into small and independent states, ruled over by tyrants who were engaged in constant strife, and who vied with each other in their pomp of circumstance and love of display. This internecine conflict proved ultimately the ruin of the country. It destroyed its commerce, weakened its powers of resistance, and made it an easy prey to the armies of Europe. Ferrara, at this time, however, was at its gayest; Borso d'Este, its Marquess, was famed throughout Europe for the dazzling luxury of his court, and for the splendor of his festivities; Popes and prelates, princes and nobles, were his constant guests, and the city was plunged in a ceaseless round of gaieties.

In the midst of all this outward pomp a young lad, lonely and dejected, walked the streets torn by emotions he could not quell, and by longings he could not name. To him, unlike other youths, the path of pleasure, and the gay excesses of sin, had no attraction; he had nothing of that gay abandon of character which made Francis, even in his unregenerate days, the leader of every frolic, and the admired of all his companions. From his youth upward, Savonarola felt the call of God upon him, the hand of destiny weighed heavily upon his soul, and he could not shake it off. While others deplored the prevailing wickedness and then abandoned themselves to it, or made only feeble efforts to restrain it, this lonely youth spent hours before the altar, his heart torn by strange and conflicting emotions, his long vigils ever ending with the pathetic cry: 'Lord, make known to me the path my soul should tread.' To that young and lonely soul there had come the agony of the world's lost condition, the shame and corruption of the Church, and men's heedless rejection of Christ and of His salvation; and with the consciousness of these things there carne the bitter call to separate himself, to become a voice for God in the

midst of a crooked and perverse generation; to agonize and give himself for others, that the terrible sickness of the world might be healed.

The plan of forsaking the world and devoting himself to a religious life early presented itself to him, and hearing a sermon by an Augustinian friar, his destiny, he tells us, was settled by a. single word. This one word he never forgot, though, regarding it, he kept throughout his life a mysterious silence, refusing to reveal it even to his dearest friends. On the 24th of April 1475 he secretly left his home, fled to Bologna, and there entered the Dominican Monastery. He was impelled to take this step, he declares, by the impossibility of any longer tolerating the gross corruption of the world, and by seeing vice exalted, and virtue degraded, throughout Italy. From his retreat he wrote a noble letter to his father, entreating him to forgive his flight, and to send him his blessing. 'Never since I was born,' he says, have I suffered such bitter mental torments as at the moment when I abandoned my own father to make the sacrifice of my body to Jesus Christ, and to surrender my will into the hands of those I have never seen. You complain of the secrecy of my departure. In truth I suffered such grief and agony of heart when I left you, that, if I had betrayed myself, I verily believe that my heart would have broken, and I should have changed my purpose. In mercy, then, most loving father, dry your tears, and add not to my pain and sorrow.' Thus the step was taken, not with the dramatic intensity which characterized the abandonment of the world by Francis, but after a like prolonged agony, with the same consciousness of a call from God, and with a like realization of the awful condition of sin of the world around him. The differences between the two men arc differences of temperament, but the Spirit of God, moving in their hearts, awoke them to the same agony of repentance, the same consciousness of a burden imposed upon them by God, the same sense of the world's awful need, the same consecration of themselves to Jesus Christ and to His cause. Differing much in outward temperament they were united in their spiritual experiences; they stand together in that great roll of great men who hear the Voice and obey it, and who give up everything for the sake of Christ.

Savonarola studying in the Dominican Monastery

In the monastery of Bologna, to which Savonarola had fled, he remained for seven years. During this period he gained fame for his extraordinary piety and religious zeal His learning and his remarkable mental gifts were early recognized, and immediately on his entering the monastery he was given the instruction of the novices. Through these silent years, however, a great change was taking place in his mind as well as in his character, for here, by prolonged and intense study of the Scriptures, he was laying the foundation of that tremendous power which he afterwards revealed. The Scriptures, at this time, were practically unopened; all knowledge of them was denied to the common people through the scarcity of the manuscripts, and through the wide-spread illiteracy. Even when they were openly read their meaning was obscured by excessive allegorizing; they were overlaid with the subtleties of the schoolmen, or the refinements of Greek philosophy. For long Savonarola's own mind was clogged by his training, but gradually he shook himself free and brought to the study of the Word of God a flaming imagination, an almost oriental delight in imagery, and, above all, a faith which flamed at white heat. More and more he began to realize that it was the messages of this Book, with their startling images, with their awful denunciations of sin, with their exalted and throbbing pity, which alone could break up the corruption which abounded, and bring back to earth the peace of God, and the recognition of the sovereignty of Jesus Christ. So he pored over them day and night until it was declared that he knew the Scriptures by heart from beginning to end. While residing in the monastery, Savonarola wrote a canzone entitled 'De Ruina Ecclesie' which reveals the agitated state of his heart, and the direction in which, even at this time, his thoughts were tending. In this poem he represents the Church as a pure maiden, and asks her where the ancient purity, the learning and love, the ancient doctors of the law, and the saints who once inhabited her courts have gone. And she replies that when contamination entered she fled, and showing the wounds upon her beautiful body, she reveals her terrible sufferings at the hands of those who claim to be her friends. When the youthful poet asks, Who has brought these tidings to pass? she answers, referring to Rome, A false, proud harlot. Then cries the poet in burning wrath, O God, Lady, alas I would that I could break those spreading wings!

For a while he was sent to his own town, Ferrara, to preach. He was now twenty-nine years of age, and fearful lest he might awaken his dormant affections, he lived in complete retirement. His preaching did not prove extraordinarily effective; Savonarola had not yet come to his own, his mind was still groping, the mantle had not as yet descended upon him.

This same year – 1481 – war broke out in Ferrara, largely fomented by the cupidity of the Pope, who, when peace was concluded on terms which he regarded as humiliating to himself, died of rage. On the outbreak of the war, Savonarola was sent to Florence, which he entered for the first time, and there took up his residence at the famous monastery of St. Mark's. Nowhere in Italy, perhaps, was there a retreat which offered so satisfying a home to one of the temperament of Savonarola as this monastery. Given over to the Dominican Friars in 1436, it was rebuilt on a. lavish scale at the command and at the expense of Cosimo de Medici. The valuable collection of Niccolo Niceoli, the greatest manuscript collector of his day, found there a home, and St. Mark's became the first public library established in Italy. Not only was the monastery famous, therefore, for its learning, it was no less venerated for its traditional piety. Here the saintly Antonine had lived, one of those characters, as; it has been truly said, who are the true glories of the human race; who, amid all the spiritual degradation of the times, kept his heart pure from all offences, and offered in daily life to the eyes of the people an illustration of the beauty of holiness. Though dead for over twenty years, his name was kept in grateful remembrance, and his spirit of saintliness seemed still to give an odor of sanctity to the monastery itself. One other name lives in the hearts of all who have visited St. Mark's: it is the name of Fra Angelico, the saint of artists, who never took his brush in hand without prayer, who never painted the Cross without tears. Here, in the quiet cloisters, and in the narrow cells, with quiet eyes and heart unencumbered of the world, he wrought, covering the cold walls with warm and living color, and making the monastery for all time the home of saintliness in art. Here one dwells in the company of angels and saints, of the 'bright seraphim in burning row,' but ever and changelessly in the company of the Savior whom Angelico adored with all the fervor of his pure and saintly heart. For as you enter, He meets you; in the cloister He greets you from the Cross; He welcomes you as the pilgrim Christ as you pass from the cloisters into the cool Refectory; His pierced hand is stretched ant

to you as you enter the narrow cells; here He is born, here He does His mighty works, here He wrestles and prays in the olive shade, here He bears the bitter Cross; and here, majestic over death, He bursts its bonds, and rises into deathless life. Yes! here, as nowhere else in all the world, Jesus lives; He is everywhere, He meets you at every corner, the monastery vibrates with His presence, and He is ever gracious, ever the pitiful One, with hands stretched forth to heal and save. And these first days in Florence were to Savonarola amongst the happiest of his life; he saw the soft beauty of the Tuscan hills, he felt the charm of this city of renown, and in the monastery itself was there not all that his heart longed for – learning, and piety, and peace! But these days were few; they were but the quiet before the tempest, the stillness which precedes the storm.

THE PROPHET

Up to this time Savonarola had shown no sign of those transcendent gifts which have made his name famous in history. Some curiosity was felt on his entrance into Florence, but it was aroused on the ground of his piety, not on account of big power as a preacher. Shortly after his arrival he was appointed Lenten preacher at the Church of San Lorenzo. The church was crowded at first, but his preaching failed to attract. His rough accent and his uncouth gestures displeased the fickle Florentines, who were much as the Athenians of old. The congregations rapidly thinned until they bad almost entirely disappeared. Meanwhile, the sorrow and anguish which, from earliest days, had gnawed at Savonarola's heart on account of the state of the Church, were not abated but increased. And good reason had he, and all who loved and served the Christ, for such anguish. At the death of Sixtus IV, which happened at this time – 1484 – it was hoped that a successor would be found who would free the Church from her calamities, and save her from her woes. But in Innocent VIII the papal chair received one who made even the infamous character of Sixtus appear excusable. No longer disguising the character of his life, he openly acknowledged his offspring as his sons. 'He was not only a parent, and a dissolute parent, but so lenient to all descriptions of vice, that the Roman court became the headquarters of vice and scandalous living. All men were revolted by actions, equally threatening to religion and dishonoring to humanity, nor was it possible to foresee to what fate Italy might be doomed, under the deepening misrule of the Papacy.'

Deeply the woes of the Church, and the sorrows of Christ's people, burned into the heart of this lonely monk. He fasted and prayed, he cried aloud to God day and night, he pored over the Scriptures, and in its startling prophecies heard the note of coming doom. On a sudden, like a meteor from heaven, he burst upon his hearers at Brescia, where he had been sent to preach. At last he had found his message; at last those enormous powers, lying so long dormant, blazed into fierce and inextinguishable flame. In the Apocalypse, amid the flaming images of the prophet evangelist, his imagination awoke, his message came to him, the fire of the prophet descended upon him. He applied the terror of the Book of Revelation to the events transpiring around them; with awful voice he prophesied the coming doom; fathers would see their children massacred in the streets – for the day of the Lord was at hand, the cup of iniquity was full, the patience of the most High God was exhausted. The effect of these sermons upon his hearers was overwhelming: men already heard the tramp of the avenging host, and saw the flaming sword of the angel of destruction. As the burning words of the preacher poured forth, their faces blanched, their lips trembled, their eyes were glazed with terror.

Soon the fame of this preacher began to be noised abroad; his name became known through Italy; devout souls, who were waiting for the light, heard with gladness of a mighty voice raised in fearless condemnation of sin, and to Savonarola himself there came the consciousness of an. authentic message given him of God which he must needs deliver to his day and generation.

For some time he remained in Lombardy, preaching from place to place until, at length, in the summer of 1489, he received the ominous message which summoned him back to Florence – a summons which was issued, strange to say, by desire of Lorenzo de Medici himself. Savonarola instantly obeyed; but, even as he went, a heavy presage of coming woes burdened his heart. Near Bologna his strength suddenly failed him, and he sank

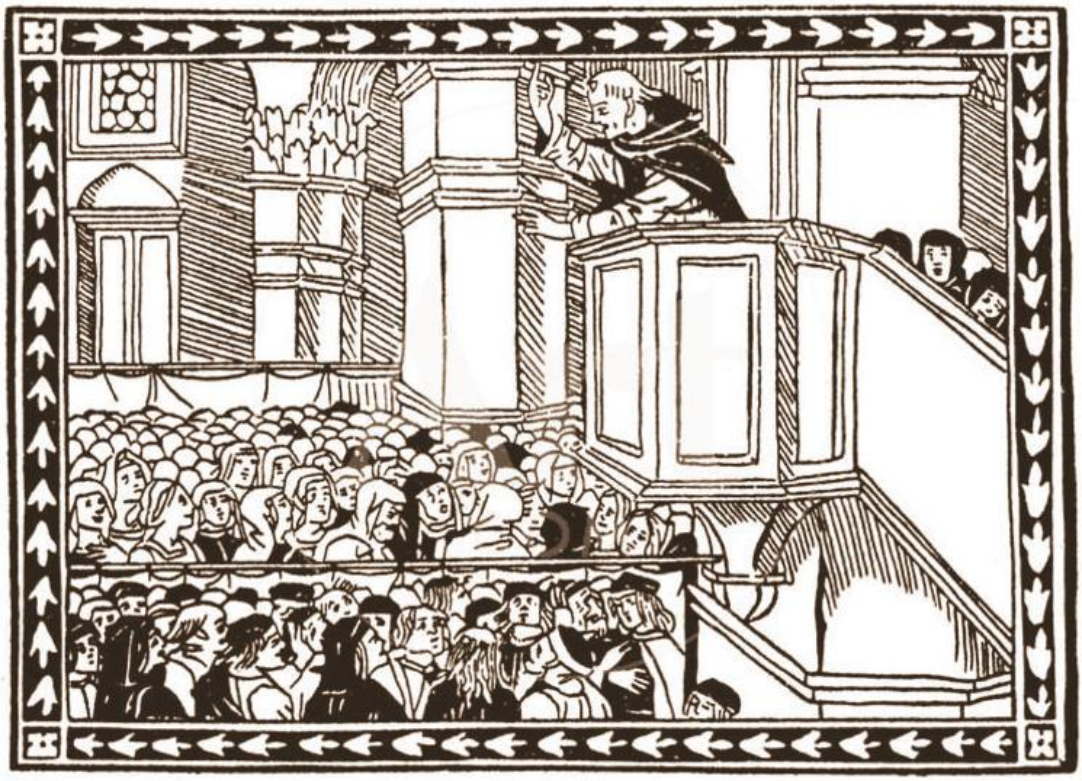
upon the ground unable to proceed. Overwrought in body and in mind, it is not surprising that to his excited brain there should have appeared visions warning him of the dangers which confronted him, or that strange voices should have been heard by him calling him to faithfulness and courage. Weak and ill, he entered the gates of that city with which his name was to be forever associated, and passing through its streets once more, entered St. Mark's, which was to be his home until the end or his short and troubled life.

It will be necessary for us to pause here for a moment to survey the Florence of that day. The famous city was at the very height of its glory; it was the city of light, not only of Italy, but of the whole of Europe. For here the Renaissance had borne its most glorious fruits. Only two hundred years had elapsed since, in the first dawn of the new spirit, Cimabue's Madonna had been carried through the streets, and amid the waving of banners and rejoicing of the populace, had been deposited in the Cathedral. From that day until the hour when Savonarola passed through her gates, her history had been one of effort and glorious attainment. From being a town of mean streets, without a single great building of which its citizens might be proud, it passed into a city of architectural splendors, the home of poetry, literature, and art. For, in days gone by, had not the immortal Dante paced her streets dreaming of Beatrice? had not Niccolo Pisano wrought out his matchless beauty the imaginations of his fertile brain, and Ghiberti produced those marvelous gates which Michael Angelo pronounced as worthy to be the gates of paradise? Everywhere were noble buildings, churches, and palaces, and amidst them all, like a rose of dawn, her glorious Duomo. And in the realm of art what names of the mighty dead were inscribed upon her roll of honor! Giotto, the friend of Dante, and the liberator of painting from Byzantine conventions; Orcagna, whose shrine of the Madonna in San Michele is still one of the wonders of the city; the youthful Masaccio, master of his craft, who at the early age of thirty, leaving the city for Rome, perished miserably on the way; Fra Angelico, whose heart was set on heavenly love, and Fra Lippi, who, notwithstanding his monkish dress, loved too much the things of earth. But great as these names were which adorned its past, they paled in presence of the mighty men who then, walked the streets of Florence. Never, perhaps, at any single time in the world's history, has there been a greater galaxy of genius than that which was gathered in this Italian city during the closing years of the fifteenth century. Benozzo Gozzoli, Andrea Verrocchio, Cosimo Rosselli, and the Pollajuolo were still alive; Botticelli, Ghirlandaio, Filippino Lippi, Leonardo da Vinci, and Luca Signorelli were in their prime; Michael Angelo, and Fra Bartolommeo were entering into manhood; Raphael and Andrea del Sarto were just about to take up the brush, and already were beginning to enter into the spirit of the age. Scholars and poets, goldsmiths and sculptors, painters and designers, thronged the city streets, for it was the golden age of the Renaissance, and, with the Renaissance, a new spirit had entered into the world. With a recovery at the Greek manuscripts, there had come a recovery of the Greek spirit; humanism had entered into the world and was challenging for supremacy the ascetic ideal. The cry on every lip was, 'Let us enjoy life; open our heart to its seductions, our eyes to its beauty. Why mourn? Why lament? Let us be happy while we may.' And so men flung restraint aside, and in joyous abandon stretched forth greedy hands to pluck the pleasures of the world.

In Florence there was one name which, above all others, expresses the spirit of the Renaissance at its best, This name is that of Lorenzo de' Medici, known as the Magnificent, himself a scholar and poet, the patron of scholarship and poetry, of music and art, of refinement and culture. Around his court gathered all the great and blithe spirits of the age; his wealth, the brilliance of his gifts, the courtesy of his manner, his generous patronage of the arts, his zeal for scholarship, his love of splendor and of gaiety made his name famous throughout the world. Florence was not at this time more wicked as a city, perhaps, than any other city of Italy; nor was Lorenzo an evil man. He was in this respect, if not a model to his age, at least in advance of it. But he represented to Savonarola a spirit of evil; he exhibited, in his own personality, that abandonment to the world which to the intense and ascetic spirit of the eager reformer seemed to lie at the very root of the age's spiritual declension. So in these two men were summed up those two forces, humanism and asceticism, which in the years to come were to enter into conflict for the possession of the souls of men. From the eventful moment when Savonarola entered the gates of Florence that conflict was begun.

SAVONAROLA AS PREACHER

On taking up his residence at St. Mark's, Savonarola was appointed, as before, to give instruction, and there in the cloisters, beside a damask rose bush, which has been regrafted down to our own day, he began his expositions of the Apocalypse. At first only the friars attended, but soon the general public clamored for entrance, and the lectures took on more and more the character of sermons. Urged to enter the pulpit, he hesitated long before the way seemed open to him. At length his decision was made, and on the 1st of August 1489 he occupied the pulpit of St. Mark. Then began those sermons which shook Florence to its center, and which have made his name immortal. He wasted no time, and he did not beat the air; he struck at the vices of Florence; he contrasted its outward culture with its hidden crime and sensuality; he dragged into light the scandalous sins which were done of them in secret who occupied high place in civic life; nor did he fail to lash out against the impurities of the Church, or contrast its glaring immoralities with the splendor of its ceremonial, and the sumptuousness of its ritual. At last, in that land given over to licentiousness and crime, righteousness had found a voice. Here at last was a man of God, fearless, incorruptible. Here, once more; appeared the prophet, confronting the vicious of his age with unflinching courage, crying aloud in voice resonant with indignation, passionate with pleading, 'Repent! Repent! for the day of vengeance is at hand.'



Savonarola preaching at St. Mark's

The year following his settlement in Florence, Savonarola was made prior of St. Mark's. It was customary for the newly-elected Prior to pay homage to the head of the house of the Medici in recognition of the indebtedness of the monastery to the generosity of their patron. Savonarola, however, took no notice of this custom. The surprised monks took occasion to expostulate with their Prior; they pointed out the value to the monastery of Lorenzo's good-will, and recommended bowing to the powers that be. 'Is it God or Lorenzo de' Medici that has made me Prior? asked Savonarola. 'God,' they replied. 'Then shall I render thanks to God alone' replied the intrepid monk. Lorenzo took no notice of this slight, and in visiting the monastery on one occasion, sought to appease the Prior by placing a number of gold coins in the alms chest. Savonarola instantly gave them to the poor. Next, an influential deputation waited upon him, warning him to modify his tone, and declaring that they came of their own good-will, in the interest of the Prior, and for the public good. 'You say

that you are come of your own accord,' replied Savonarola, 'I say that you are not. Go, make answer to Lorenzo: "Let him repent of his sins."' Harsh as this may seem to be, it is clear that no man can do the work of reformation in evil times who tampers with conscience, or has fear in his heart for the great ones of the earth. Lorenzo, with all his qualities, represented to Savonarola's mind the sum of all the evils then afflicting Italy and Florence. To bend to him, to deviate from his course, even by a hairsbreadth, was to weaken the defenses of his own soul, and tamper with the most solemn dictates of his conscience. Nor can one fail to admire the noble constancy, the fearless demeanor of this lonely monk. Arrayed against him were all the forces of the world. It was easy for Lorenzo to make advances, but the only platform on which this man of God could meet him was that decreed by all the heroic prophets of old; 'Let him first repent of his sins.'

Shortly after, Lorenzo was taken suddenly ill. Feeling the shadows of death gathering around him, terror seized his soul. He desired absolution, but had no faith in the sincerity of the priesthood – they were all his minions. Suddenly he recalled the name of Savonarola, and instantly dispatched a messenger for him, declaring as he did so, 'I know no honest friar save this one.' What actually happened at this famous interview can now never be known. The evidence of those actually present, or of those who relate the incident, differs. According to one report Savonarola refused absolution, unless Lorenzo would promise to restore to Florence her liberties, but a more credible account declares that to Lorenzo, now in deepest penitence, Savonarola spoke kind and comforting words.

Meanwhile Savonarola was attracting ever larger and larger congregations, and his fame was swiftly spreading throughout Italy. So large was the concourse gathered to hear him that he had to transfer himself to the Cathedral, Here, day after day, the population of Florence thronged to see and hear him. Many were drawn by curiosity, but even the most superficial became awed as they listened to the burning words of the preacher. The crowds thronged and pressed each other so close that there was hardly room to breathe; they built seats against the walls in the form of an amphitheater, and still the space was insufficient. And how is it possible at this date to describe the preacher? the deep, resonant voice, the flash of his deep-set, penetrating eyes, the impassioned gestures, the marvelous flow of his oratory as, swept along with the fiery vehemence of his great soul, he discoursed to men of the eternal verities, of the awful facts of death and judgment to come? First he would begin in measured and tranquil tones, taking up the subject, turning it quietly round, suggesting some scholarly exposition, advancing some interpretation, dealing with it casually, critically, suggestively; then, suddenly, often without warning, he would change; the meditative style "was flung aside as the mantle of the prophet fell upon him; fire flashed from his eyes, the thunder came into his voice; now in passionate entreaty, now in scorching indignation, the sentences rushed out, never halting, never losing intensity or volume, but growing and growing until his voice became as the voice of God Himself, and all the building rocked and swayed as if it moved to the mighty passion of his words. And what of the hearers? They were as clay in his hands. Tears gushed from their eyes, they beat their breasts, they cried unto God for mercy, the church echoed and re-echoed with their sobs, Those who report his sermons suddenly break off and add: 'Here was I so overcome with weeping that I could not go on.' Pico della Mirandola, one of the most learned men of the day, says that the mere sound of Savonarola's voice was as the clap of doom; a cold shiver ran through the marrow of his bones, the hairs of his head stood on end as he listened. Another tells that these sermons caused such terror, alarm, such sobbing and tears, that everyone passed through the streets without speaking, more dead than alive.

From the first a deep vein of prophecy mixed itself with the friar's preaching; but as the dangers which were now menacing Italy increased, this prophetic note became more prominent, and his prophecies more detailed. They were all summed up, however, in the three famous propositions:

i. That the Church would be renewed in their time,
ii. That before this renovation God would strike Italy with a fearful chastisement,
iii. That these things would happen shortly.

These threats of coming ill profoundly moved the city, for even the most callous could not dull their ears to the mutterings of the storm; but they also gave great offence to those in high position, so much so that Savonarola tells us that he began to reflect whether or no he should leave out of his exhortations all mention of coming events. ‘I remember,’ he says, ‘when preaching in the Duomo, I determined to leave out all mention of them, and never to recur to the subject again. God is my witness how I watched and prayed the whole of Saturday and throughout the night; but all other ways, all doctrines save this were denied me. Towards break of dawn, being weary and dejected by my long vigil, I heard, as I prayed, a voice saying unto me: "Fool, dost thou not see that it is God’s will thou shouldst continue in the same path?" Wherefore I preached that day a terrible sermon.’ In this sermon, portions of which are still extant, we gain some knowledge of the fearlessness with which this solitary monk attacked the abuses of the day, and those who had entrenched themselves in them. His most vehement condemnation is reserved for the clergy, who, with all the semblance of piety, are ‘ravening wolves, who enter into widows’ houses in greed of gain, and who rob the poor. Fathers make sacrifice to this false idol, urging their sons to enter the ecclesiastical life, in order to obtain benefices and prebends [stipends for church service]; and thus ye hear it said: "Blessed the house that owns a fat cure." But I say unto ye, A time shall come when rather it will be said: Woe to that house; and ye will feel the edge of the sword upon you. . . . In these days there is no grace, no gift of the Holy Spirit that may not be bought and sold. . . . Bethink ye well, O rich, for affliction shall smite ye. This city shall no more be called Florence, but a den of thieves, of turpitude and bloodshed. Then shall ye all be poverty-stricken, all wretched, and your name, O priests, shall be changed into a terror. I sought no longer to speak in Thy name, Lord; but Thou hast overpowered me, hast conquered me, Thy word has become like a fire within me, consuming the very marrow of my bones. Therefore am 1 derided and despised of the people. But I cry unto the Lord day and night, and I say unto ye: Know that unheard-of times are at hand.’

Not content with condemning these sins in others, Savonarola attacked them in his own convent. Notwithstanding the terrible curse which St. Dominic had pronounced against the holding of property, the convent of St. Mark’s had become a wealthy fraternity. Savonarola began by reviving the old rule. He sold its possessions, reduced expenses by clothing the monks in coarse garments, forbade all superfluities, and brought back poverty to its ancient home. Instead of driving men away, this drew to the Convent of St. Mark’s many of the finest spirits of the day; members of the noblest families in Florence sought admission, nor did any find the burden too heavy, for the strictest, the most unselfish, the most humble and devout was their beloved Prior, Savonarola himself. But these days of quiet and prayer were to be ruthlessly invaded by the momentous trials which were now at hand.

SAVONAROLA AS TRIBUNE

The unrest in Italy, instigated and kept alive by the cupidity of the popes and the tyrants of the various cities, broke out at last into open conflict, and began that series of disasters which devastated the land, and ruined her civilization. At his death Lorenzo was succeeded by his son Piero, a weak and dissolute youth incapable of government. Affairs within the city were at their worst when the alarming news was brought that Charles VIII of France had crossed the frontier and was descending into Italy. While Italy, broken up as she was into many separate kingdoms, had remained weak, the other kingdoms lying around her had slowly consolidated their forces, and were beginning to regard their rich but distracted neighbor as offering a convenient prey. On the pretext, then, of asserting his rights to the kingdom of Naples, Charles, instigated by Ludovico of Milan, gathered his army together and marched into Italy. The policy pursued by Lorenzo had been that of friendship with the French, but this line of policy had been abandoned by the foolish Piero in favor of support to the King of Naples. The news, therefore, of the approach of Charles, threw the city, and Piero himself, into the deepest alarm. So intense was the anxiety that the magistrates sent for Savonarola, entreating him to allay the anger of the people. Savonarola obeyed, but not without reiterating his note of warning that the sword of God was upon

the land, that dire ills were to fall upon Italy. Dragged thus into public affairs against his will, Savonarola appears now as the tribune of the people, the one hope of Florence in the hour of her despair.

Meanwhile, Piero de' Medici, filled with terror, recalling how his father had averted disaster by appearing in his own person at the court of Naples, sought, by imitating the act, a like success. Possessing, however, neither the courage nor the dignity of his father, he cast himself as a suppliant at the feet of Charles, who extracted from him the most degrading terms. So enraged were the Florentines that Piero had to flee the city, and when Charles marched in at the head of his troops, the utmost disorder prevailed. Again it was to the Dominican monk that Florence had to look for safety. 'I spoke to the king,' he says, 'as not one of you would have dared to have spoken, and by the grace of God he was appeased. I said things which you yourselves would not have endured, yet he heard them patiently.' Another instance of the many in history in which the tyrant stands helpless before the man of God. Through the influence and courage of Savonarola a treaty was signed, and Charles left the city.

Florence was now virtually in the hands of Savonarola: He was the one strong man within her gates, the one man whose character was unimpeachable, the one man whose unselfishness the people implicitly believed.

So circumstances gathered together to force him into the realm of political interference, so dangerous because of the fickle affections of men, still more dangerous to the preacher since it arouses the hostile passions of the selfish and the unworthy. Savonarola was not ignorant of the dangers which assailed him through the new position which circumstances had forced upon him, but he took upon himself the burden in the name of God. Right gladly would he have escaped from it and retreated into the peace of the cloister. 'I have entered into a vast sea,' he says: 'and with great desire I long for the haven, and I see no way to return. Oh, my sweet haven, shall I ever find thee more? Oh, my heart, how hast thou suffered thyself to be taken away from so sweet a haven? Oh, my soul, look where thou art; surely we are in the midst of a deep sea, and the winds are adverse on every side. ... I would be at peace and speak no more, but I cannot, for the word of the Lord is as fire in my heart! His word, if I utter it not forth, burns my marrow and my bones. Well, then, Lord, if Thou wilt that I navigate this deep sea, Thy will be done.' It was with this heavy burden upon him, conscious of the dangers that beset his path, but driven by the sense of a divine call, that Savonarola entered that career which was to end in bitterness and in death.

Having responded to the call which came to him from without, and to which he seemed to be driven from within, Savonarola, with characteristic courage, set himself to the task of saving Florence from the dangers which beset her from within and from without. From the first his ideal was to make her a city of God, a city where Jesus Christ would be adored, where He would in all its public and private acts, be acknowledged king. Amid the gross licentiousness at the age, against the worldliness and impiety of other cities, and especially of Rome, that city or harlots, that modern Babylon, as he called her, Florence was to rise pure and unspotted, a new Jerusalem, a pattern for the nations, A great council was formed, a new republic arose from the ashes of the old, but the ruler of Florence was Savonarola, and the place from which he governed was the pulpit. Here, day after day, through times of crisis and danger, he asserted and reasserted those principles for which he was ready to lay down his life. And that ideal which he longed for, that city made clean and prepared as a bride of Christ,

seemed actually to become a reality. The most startling changes in the manners of the people took place. 'On the days when the Prior of St. Mark preached,' says Milman, 'the streets were almost a desert; houses, schools, and shops were closed. No obscene songs were heard in the streets, but low or loud chants of lauds, psalms, or spiritual songs. Vast sums were paid in restitution of old debts, or wrongful gains. The dress of men became more sober, that of women modest and quiet. . . . Nor were the converts only of the lowly and uneducated. Men of the highest fame, in erudition, in arts, in letters, became amongst the most devoted of his disciples; names which in their own day were glorious, and some of which have descended to our own.'

Not content with reforming the lives and manners of the elders, Savonarola sought to influence the youth and children of the city. These he invited to the Cathedral to hear sermons addressed especially to them. They responded in such numbers that he was bound to restrict the attendance to those between the ages of ten and twenty. The youth he enrolled in a sacred militia who bound themselves to observe the following rules:

i. To observe the commandments of God and His Church,
ii. To attend with constancy the sacraments of penance and the Eucharist.
iii. The renunciation of all public spectacles and worldly pleasures,
iv. To recognize the greatest simplicity in manners, conduct, and dress.

On the day of the Carnival in 1496, which in previous times was an orgy of drunkenness and debauchery, in which all sense of decency and restraint was thrown to the winds, a procession of children took place; clad in white, they went through the streets singing their hymns, and making a collection for the poor. Of the change which this effected, Savonarola himself makes mention. 'Thou knowest,' he says, 'that many sins were committed in carnival, and now even children go to confession; and this carnival hath been like unto Lent, the which must surely be the work of heaven.'

Wonderful as the change wrought by Savonarola's preaching upon the people of Florence was, it is not to be conceived that the rigid rales which he enacted could be aught but galling to a large section of the community. In some the love of the world was banished, in others it was curbed, in others it lived as strong as ever, and only waited opportunity for outbreak. The populace began to divide itself into new sections according to their love or hatred of the new doctrines. There were the Piagnone, loyal adherents of the Prior's; the Tiepidi, who were lukewarm; the Arrabbiati, who opposed, and the Compagnacci, who hated Savonarola and all his works, who looked back to the old and dissolute days with longing, and vowed to revenge themselves on him who had curbed their joys. Hushed for a time, owing to the ascendency of the Prior in the councils of Florence, and his popularity with the people, these unruly spirits hid themselves, nursing their wrath. Gradually, however, as the first wave of his popularity spent itself, as popular fears subsided, and new dangers arose to assail this champion of righteousness, these evil and antagonistic spirits began to assert themselves; faint murmurs gave place to open discontent, to fierce denunciation, and to an implacable hate which could find no satisfaction save in the destruction of that victim whose voice was a daily accusation of their misdeeds.

SAVONAROLA AND THE POPE

From those enemies who were menacing him from within in his own city, we have to turn now to a more terrible enemy who was menacing him from without. In the papal chair at Rome sat one whom the world unites to execrate, Alexander VI, bearing the infamous name of Borgia. He was of Spanish birth, and by favor and astonishing capacity for intrigue, had at last reached the papal chair. 'One of his strongest passions,' says Villari, 'was an insatiable greed for gold, and he accordingly formed intimate relations with Moors, Turks, Jews, regardless of all the prejudices and customs of his age. In this way he was able to accumulate the immense fortune that served to raise him to the Papacy. Addicted to license and sensuality, he was always the slave of some woman. At the time of his election he was the lover of the notorious Vannozza, by whom he had several children. This woman's mother was said to have been his former mistress, just as he was afterwards

accused of a shameful connection with his own and Vannozza's daughter, Lucrezia, known to all the world as the cause of the many scandals and sanguinary jealousies by which the name of Borgia became a disgrace to humanity. Such was the character of the man now raised to the papal chair.'

To such a man, the life lived by the Prior of St. Mark was a direct challenge. Licentious Rome could not exist with a regenerate Florence. Either the one or the other must fall, and Alexander prepared himself for the fight. It was not for the first time in history that the organized head of the Church should regard a preacher of righteousness as its most dangerous enemy; nor was it for the first time that the Church should set in motion its machinery for the silencing of the voice which condemned the iniquities of the age. Nor, indeed, in this case could Alexander help himself. From the pulpit of St. Mark, there thundered through Italy the accusations of this monk, who hurled the most bitter maledictions against his sins, and who, with awful voice, foretold the disasters which were about to be poured out upon the land on account of these iniquities. All the sorrows of the times, the sickness in men's hearts, the misery that was abounding, he traces, step by step, up through the iniquitous lives lived by the clergy to the feet of the Pope himself. Here was the heart of the cancer, here the source of all the age's woes, here repentance must begin, let the occupant of Peter's throne repent in sackcloth and in ashes.

Reports of these sermons were sent to Rome. Alexander could neither close his ears to them, nor hinder the public movement which they were beginning to set in motion. He must, at all costs, silence this voice. At first he tried flattery, and then a bribe. So little did he understand the character of the man he was dealing with that he actually sent him the offer of a cardinal's hat. This roused Savonarola to intense 'indignation. 'I will have no hat but that of a martyr' he cried, 'red in my own blood.'

Finding blandishments unavailing, Alexander had recourse to wiles to bring Savonarola to Rome where quickly he would be silenced. In July 1495 he was courteously invited to go thither, but Savonarola excused himself. In September came another summons, less laudatory and more peremptory in tone; in the following year the glove was thrown aside, the mask put off, and the knife unsheathed. If obedience to the Pope's command were not observed, Florence would be laid under interdict. But Florence was too independent a city to be lightly moved, and Savonarola, still the idol of the great mass of the people, continued his sermons.

The next move made by the wily Alexander was the appointment of a theological commission to inquire into the orthodoxy of the friar. All, with one exception, condemned him as guilty of heresy, schism, and disobedience to the Holy See. It was not until May of the following year, however – 1498 – that the long-threatened bull was launched against him. It contained three charges:

1. The refusal to obey the summons to Rome.
2. The teaching of heretical and perverse doctrines.
3. The refusal to unite St. Mark with the Tuscan and Roman provinces.

Savonarola had long expected this dread hour to arrive: he had prepared himself and his hearers for it, and when it did arrive, it found him "collected" and undismayed. In letters addressed to the Pope, he denied the impeachment of heresy; and defended his action in declining to visit Rome. For some time, also, he desisted from preaching, contenting himself with holding conferences in St. Mark's. Soon, however, his partisans began to clamor for his voice. In January of 1498 was elected a Signory made up mainly of his partisans, and entreaties addressed to him to resume his preaching became more and more insistent. At length, on Septuagesima Sunday, in the Cathedral of Santa Maria dei Fiori, he resumed his ministry, and began a series of sermons on Exodus. He at once addressed himself to his resistance to the Pope, and we hear in his words the first rumble of that thunder which broke out finally at the Reformation.

> 'I lay down this axiom," he says; 'there is no man that may not deceive himself. The Pope himself may err. You are mad if you say that the Pope cannot err! How many wicked Popes have there been who have erred: if they have not erred, should we do as they have done, should we be saved? You say that the Pope may err as a man, but not as

Pope. But I say that the Pope may err in his processes and his sentences. How many constitutions have Popes issued, annulled by other Popes; how many opinions of Popes are contrary to those of other Popes? He may err by false persuasions; he may err by malice and against his conscience. We ought, indeed, in this case to leave the judgment to God and charitably suppose that he has been deceived.'

He declined to seek absolution at the hands of Alexander. Why should he seek absolution?

I should think myself guilty of mortal sin if I should seek absolution,' he says. 'Our doctrine has enforced good living, much fervor, and perpetual prayer, yet we are the excommunicated, they the blessed. Yet their doctrine leads to all evil doings – to waste in eating and drinking, to avarice, to concubinage, to the sale of benefices, to many lies, and to all wickedness. Christ! On which side wilt thou be? – on that of truth or lies? of the excommunicated or the blessed? The answer of Christ may be expected. . . . The Lord will be with the excommunicated, the devil with the blessed.'

These sermons, reported to the Pope, roused him to fury. Briefs were instantly forwarded to Florence full of threats; the city was menaced with interdict unless it yielded up the insolent priest, and so fierce was the passion of the Pope that only with the utmost difficulty could the ambassador secure a brief delay in the launching of the dread interdict. The Signory of Florence sought to appease his wrath; they reminded him of the blameless life lived by their friar, of the changed life of the city, of all that Florence had benefited through his untiring and unselfish labors. But the Pope would not be appeased; it was not the majesty of the Church which he was defending, it was his own scandalous life. By a religious mind the appeal of the Signory would have been met with an instant response; in the case of Alexander it only added fuel to the flame. It was the accusing voice, not the recalcitrant monk, which aroused his fury.

At this juncture Savonarola boldly appealed to the whole of Christendom. He wrote letters to the great sovereigns of Europe calling upon them to convene a council to depose the Pope. He claimed that the wickedness of Alexander made his possession of the holy office a scandal to the faithful; that he had bought his preferment by sacrilegious simony; that he was himself an atheist, and was guilty of such monstrous vices as to make the whole Christian world shudder. One of these letters was intercepted and shown to the Pope. After this there could be no truce or mercy. It was the last act.

CLOSING Days

The net which now was closing around the life of Savonarola began to be closer drawn. Within the city his enemies grew in power; the Signory began to waver, and the crowd, ever fickle, were at that state of excitement in which a trifle would suffice to arouse their passions or win them either way. In addition to these circumstances, Savonarola's popularity was menaced by an outbreak of plague in the city; the times were bad, and famine was rife. At such times the judgment of the populace is warped; sullen and revengeful, they seek some victim upon whom they can vent their wrath. For long, too, a feud had existed between the rival Orders of the Dominicans and Franciscans, and in the heated passions of the hour this feud broke out afresh. The whole city was in that state in which a trifle was enough to feed the flame of passion, and make it leap into conflagration; when even peaceable men lost their accustomed quietude and gave way to anger and excitement. The jealous hatred, which had so long separated the two Orders, was blown into fiercest flame by an offer of the Franciscans to submit their differences to the judgment of God. Such ordeals were not unknown, and that demanded was a trial by fire. Savonarola personally rejected the proposal, but he could not allay the excitement or curb the passions of his followers. Champions on either side were found. On April 7, 1498, the ordeal was appointed to take place. A huge pile was erected on the Piazza forty yards long, and through this, when set on fire, each champion was to pass. On the day appointed a huge and excited crowd gathered to see the ordeal; the wildest passions were let loose; men expected the miraculous to happen. But the ordeal never took place.

At first the Franciscans objected to the follower of Savonarola entering the flames wearing his sacerdotal robes, next to his bearing in his hands the Host; so prolonged were these altercations that the day waned, and a downpour of rain falling, the Signory declared that no ordeal would take place. The Franciscans quickly disappeared, but Savonarola, who bore in his hands the Host, had to make a more dignified retreat. The passions of the mob, however, had been worked up to their utmost tension, and, now balked of their desires, the whole force of their wrath was levelled against Savonarola. In frenzied rage they pursued him; hurling out imprecations they threatened his life, and he was saved from being trampled to death only by the devotion of his followers, and by the popular reverence for the Host. When the gates of the monastery swung to that night, the power of the friar was broken, the die had been cast, nothing but his blood could now slake the ferocious passions of his enemies.

With the morning came a meeting of the Signory, and an instant decision to arrest the friar. Instantly a rush was made by the crowd to the convent, but the devoted friends of Savonarola were not so easily to be overwhelmed, and for long they held it against his enemies. Warning after warning reached them from the Signory, threatening them with the utmost penalties if they persisted in the defense, and at length an order was issued for the apprehension of Savonarola and several of his more prominent supporters. Even then escape might have been effected, but Savonarola refused to avail himself of it. In a quiet and affecting speech he bade farewell to his disciples, and then, permitting his hands to be bound, he walked forth into the piazza. His appearance was the signal of a frenzied outburst of hate; only with difficulty could the soldiery prevent him from being torn to pieces. As he went, the mob, who but a few weeks before hailed him as the Savior of Florence, now hurled at him the most insulting epithets. In mockery they adapted to him the words of Scripture; striking him from behind, they shouted, ‘Prophesy who it was that smote thee! ‘

When news of these events reached Rome, Alexander burst out into a paroxysm of delight. Brief after brief was sent to Florence. He congratulated the Signory on their justice; he absolved everyone, even those guilty of homicide, who were concerned in his arrest; he congratulated the Franciscans on their success in unmasking the impostor; and he offered a plenary indulgence to all the followers of Savonarola who would return to the true faith as embodied by himself.

The remaining acts of this pitiful tragedy are only too well known to need recording. The examination of the prisoners was begun the following day, and continued during ten days more. While this examination proceeded, Savonarola was submitted to excruciating torture. Possessed of a singularly delicate and sensitive frame, he broke down under the terrible agony of the torture applied to him; no sooner was the torture withdrawn than he revoked what he had confessed. For a month Savonarola lay in prison, and then, a new Signory having been appointed, permission was asked of the Pope to proceed to capital punishment. Alexander was eager to glut his passions by having him sent to Rome where he himself would preside at the spectacle; but the Florentines, while thanking his holiness for his ‘divine virtue and immense goodness,’ represented to him the absolute necessity of disabusing the public mind by having the deed committed in Florence itself. Yielding to their importunities, the Pope sent as his representatives two legates who entered Florence amid the enthusiastic acclamations of the populace. ‘It is the frate’s deception,’ they said to each other, ‘that has brought upon us all our misfortunes. Let him he burned, and our troubles will cease.’ So ‘Death to the friar!’ was the cry with which the legates were received, who smilingly replied, ‘He shall die without fail.’ Indeed letters had already been received from Rome demanding the friar’s death, even if he be another John the Baptist.’

Of the confession which under excruciating torture Savonarola made, and which he was forced to sign, little need be made. Its character can be gauged by the report sent to the Pope by his own legates, from which we quote:

> ‘He has been guilty of crimes so enormous that it does not seem right to make them known at present. He confessed, moreover, to have been the cause of sedition among the citizens, of scarcity of provisions, and thereby

of deaths among the poor, and also of the slaughter of many citizens of rank. He declared, also that he had abused the Sacraments of the Church. . . . He has confessed also that by letters and messages, he has sought to incite many Christian princes to a schism against your Holiness. Moreover to such a pitch of wickedness did this friar, or rather this nefarious monster, proceed, that all his appearance of goodness was but a pretense, and a. cloak for ambition, and for his desire to attain to worldly glory. He has been wont to turn to the crucifix and say to our Lord, "If I lie. Thou liest." In a word such is the enormity of his crimes that the hand shrinks from writing them and the mind from thinking of them.'

Amid the infamous documents which stand in human history to reveal the depths to which human nature may sink, there are few to equal this.

Along with Savonarola, Fra Domenico, and Fra Silvestro, two of his most faithful friends and supporters, were condemned to death. On the evening of the 22nd of May the news was brought to them that on the morrow they would suffer the penalty of the law. According to custom, a certain Nicolini was appointed to pass the night with the person condemned in order to encourage him. Entering the friar's cell he said, 'I come not to urge resignation on one who has converted a whole people to virtue.' After spending a long time in prayer, Savonarola laid his head on Nicolini's lap, and peacefully slept. And as he slept the weariness and pain seemed to slip from his face, and he was seen to smile as if it were his bridal morn.

When he and his companions were led forth on that fatal morning which opened one of the dark days in the history of the world, the Piazza della Signora was crowded with spectators. Here, in this splendid square, is found an epitome of all the city's turbulent history, of its splendid past and sordid present, o£ all the city's glory and of all its shame. Here the Duke of Athens was expelled from Florence, here the Ciompi rose against the Ghibellines, and in later times Alessandro de' Medici made himself Duke; underneath the Loggia de' Lanzi, where Cellini's lovely Perseus stands, and Donatello's Judith, the laws were proclaimed; and there, in the open space, the children made their bonfire of vanities, and Jesus Christ was proclaimed King of Florence. But another king sat triumphant over this tribunal, and out of the city gates, with bowed heads, had long since departed Love, and Justice, and Truth.

The appearance of the three monks was greeted with execrations from the crowd. 'On the marble terrace of the Palazzo were three tribunals – one near the door for the Bishop, who was to perform the ceremony of degradation; another for the Papal Commissioners, who were to pronounce them heretics and schismatics and deliver them over to the secular arm; and a third for the Gonfaloniere, and the Eight who were to pronounce the sentence of death.' Standing in front of the Bishop the religious habit of the three monies was stripped off. 'I separate yon,' said the Bishop, 'from the Church militant, and from the Church triumphant.' 'Not from the Church triumphant,' said Savonarola, with a loud voice; 'that is beyond thy power.' As the prisoners were led forward to the gibbet it was noted with awe that it had the form of a cross, Like his Divine Master, as he approached the place of execution Savonarola was assailed with coarse jests and curses, but on the outskirts of the crowd were men and women whom he had saved from sin, who were faithful to him, and to whom this terrible act was as the last clap of doom. 'The Lord hath suffered as much for me,' he said, as the noose was placed around his neck. A moment more and the deed was done, and that voice which had swayed the city was forever still.

Thus died Savonarola, 'firm, calm, without the least acknowledgment of guilt, with no word of remonstrance against the cruelty of his enemies, at peace with himself, in perfect charity with all' No sooner were his ashes thrown into the Arno than the people began to wake to the enormity of their crime. Gradually, as their fury subsided, the true lineaments of the man they had so brutally done to death appeared. They saw that the forces of hell had triumphed, and that they had been its agents. Almost instantly he became a saint. The Church even proposed to canonize him whom they had so foully condemned as a corrupter of the people. Thousands who, during his life, had remained obdurate, were brought to repentance through his death. But the death of

Savonarola marks the downfall of Florence. Her glory had already departed, and the ills which her prophet had warned her must surely take place, came rushing with devastating swiftness upon her. ‘Florence, as Dean Milman says, ‘fell to the Grand Dukes of the House of the Medici, than whom no more odious or crafty tyrants ever trampled on the liberties or outraged the moral sense of man,’

THE MOVEMENT AND THE MAN

Turning now to survey the movement itself, we are at once cognizant of the differences which it presents when compared with that initiated under Francis of Assisi. These differences seem such as to characterize the Franciscan movement as purely a religious one, while the spiritual character of that under Savonarola seems to be dimmed, if not largely destroyed, by the interference of its leader in secular affairs. This, however, is only partly true. The words of St. Paul, that ‘no man that warreth entangleth himself in secular affairs,’ cannot be applied to mean that there are no circumstances in which a religious man may not intervene in times of strife or danger. The rule is one that admits of exception under exceptional circumstances, and the question is not so much whether it would have been better for Savonarola to have stood apart from the political strife of the city,

as whether it was possible for him to stand apart. Being what he was, occupying the position of authority which he did, suddenly confronted by imminent dangers which he alone could avert, appealed to by every section in the city, conscious of the danger and anxious to avoid it, but urged onward by an inner impulse which seemed to him divine, which at last drove him with such certainty that resistance seemed to be impious, we are confronted with just that combination of circumstances which silences all criticism save that of the intemperate, the prejudiced, or the misinformed. Inasmuch as he suffered from the popular fury which makes its hero an idol one day, and burns him the next, he suffered as the greatest have done, and as his Master Himself.

Nor is there much to he made of the charge brought against Savonarola that he was blinded by his fanaticism, and deluded by his prophecies. Doubtless he was often carried away beyond the bounds of reason, and often failed to distinguish the thin dividing line between the man who speaks for God in condemning present iniquity, and the man who seeks to give his words a terrifying sanction by forecasting the future. The point to remember, however, is that it was not because his prophecies were unfulfilled that he was hated, but because they were unwelcome. In these days his claim to prophesy was not considered impious; if he had prophesied smooth things, he would never have been hated. The reason he was hated was that he spoke the truth about men's sins, and made the future black with their overthrow. It has been the fashion from the beginning to silence such men by means of the stake and the gibbet, and Savonarola's was only another name added to a long noble list.

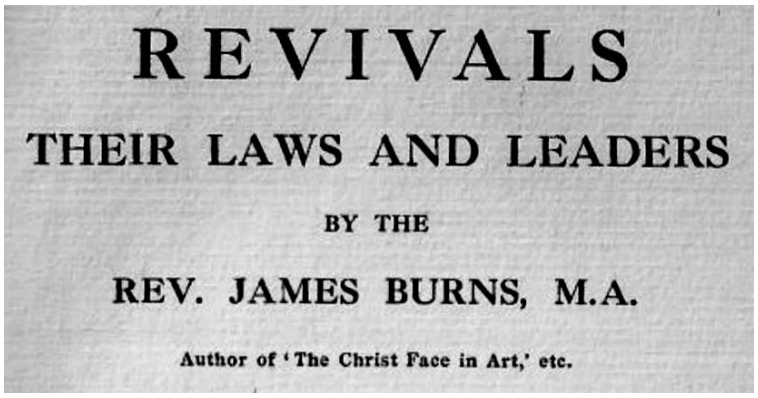
It is just possible, too, that the tragedy of the great Prior's death may dim for us the real glory, and the vast influence, of his life. It is a common error to think that, with the leader violently put to death amid popular fury, the cause is likewise extinguished. Men thought so around the Cross; the death of the Founder was to them synonymous with the extinction of the heresy. But the Truth once spoken, evil once unmasked, righteousness once set in motion, the consequent activity can no more be arrested than the sweep of a tidal wave, or the coming of the dawn. The voice of Savonarola – sounding through Europe, condemning abuses, holding up in the glare of the day the sins done in secret, fearlessly tearing the mask from the lives of those who claimed sanctity because of their holy office, while their lives were a profanity and a sham, preaching to men repentance, and that the kingdom of God was at hand – was not raised in vain. It hurried on, and made possible the crisis. It forced men to reconsider claims which before they had accepted without question; it was the herald of the Reformation. As with all others who have suffered at the hands of evil men, his death did more for the cause of righteousness than his life. After the dementia passes, the world wakes to the truth; and to the bitterness of being mistaken, there is added the rage at being fooled. So remorse sets in, and with it rage against those by whom they have been deluded. At Savonarola's death men turned to look at the claims of Pope and priest with a new light in their eyes, and with something in their hearts which boded ill for all hypocrisies in the days to come. He was thus the herald of a new movement, the John the Baptist of the Reformation, 'When Savonarola, degraded and unfrocked, ended his life on the gallows, his cause seemed irretrievably lost, and his enemies triumphed. Nevertheless, he died a conqueror, and he died for the noblest cause for which a man can give his life – for the spread of God's kingdom on earth. The future belonged to him, and he to the Church.' So writes Dr. Sehnitzer, and we may make his words our own.

The more immediate result of the friar's life, however, is to be found in Florence, in that city for which he gave his life. That he awakened a genuine revival of spiritual religion, a revival which did not pass with his life, but grew and deepened in thousands of hearts, is not for a moment to be doubted. He not only influenced for good the lives of unknown citizens, but he profoundly affected the lives of some of the greatest men of the day. Sandro Botticelli, Fra Bartolommeo, and others gave up painting for love of him; the two Robbias and Lorenzo di Credi entered the Church through the effect of his preaching upon them; some of the greatest scholars of the day sat at his feet; Michael Angelo, to the day of his death, pored over his sermons and drew inspiration from them; while to the monastery of St. Mark the friar had drawn men from all the noblest families of the city. Nor was his influence confined to those of maturer years, since his love for the children produced in their lives the most wonderful change. 'Words fail me,' says a contemporary writer, Cinozzi, 'when I try to set forth the

change, the wonderful, stupendous, and almost incredible conversion, of so many thousands of boys of every condition of life. What they were, how deeply plunged in every kind of vice, everyone knows who has lived in the city. Their dress bespoke both pride and a shameless lack of modesty, so that Florence had become another Sodom, a thing horrible to think of; they were gamblers, blasphemers, and given up to every kind of vice. But under the influence of the friar's preaching they became entirely changed, laid aside their vain and unbecoming modes in dress, desisted from the vices of which I have spoken, and became so fervent as to be an example to all Florence. In their faces there shone the radiance of divine grace, so that by their means a great work was achieved.'

Of Savonarola's character little need be said. No one doubted the noble sincerity of the man. Even in his own church he was regarded with the deepest veneration by such saints as Philip Neri, and Catherine de' Ricci, and by Benedict XIV, was deemed worthy of canonization. Through the darkness of these dark days, in which it was his sorrowful lot to have been cast, his character shines in undimmed splendor. He bore on his heart the sorrows and the sins of men. He sought nothing for himself; his days and nights he spent in prayer and in laborious study of the Word of God. Here discovered the Bible and in this respect also was a precursor of the Reformation. As a preacher he has never been surpassed, perhaps has never been equaled, in the history of the Christian pulpit. The visitor to the Duomo today, as he walks the marble floor of its vast solitude, and listens to the echo of his footsteps, recalls those days, when, crowded to its utmost extent, and filled with a vast sea of faces intently gazing upon the preacher, its walls echoed with that deep and resonant voice which sounded to many as the voice of doom, and which, in its notes of passionate entreaty, brought thousands of hardened sinners to the Cross. Never before, perhaps, never since, have there been heard eloquence so sustained, earnestness so intense, passion for righteousness so concentrated, as were heard in those days, when, from the pulpit in the Duomo, Savonarola ruled Florence in the name of His Master, Jesus Christ. He died amid the execrations of those he tried to save. He died a martyr's death after having been delivered into the hands of evil men. And now, when persecutors and persecuted long have gone, and the dust of controversy has passed away, we look again upon his face, and, remembering all that he was, all that he did, all that he suffered, we bow our heads, and say: 'Truly this was a great and noble man.'

SAVONAROLA AND THE FLORENTINE REVIVAL IS CHAPTER III OF


REVIVALS

THEIR LAWS AND LEADERS

BY THE

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