

The following is an excerpt from *Celebrated Crimes: The Borgias*, by Alexandre Dumas. *The Borgias* is a history of Roderigo Borgia's corrupt rise to power, purchasing the office of pope and assuming the name of Alexander VI. During his eleven-year reign, he and his family were responsible for countless acts of murder, theft, and betrayal; today the name of Borgia has become almost synonymous with poisoning one's guests. The complete text of this work is available for purchase from Rogue Publishing at www.roguepublishing.com.

On the 8th of April, 1492, in a bedroom of the Carneggi Palace, about three miles from Florence, were three men grouped about a bed whereon a fourth lay dying.

The first of these three men, sitting at the foot of the bed, and half hidden, that he might conceal his tears, in the gold-brocaded curtains, was Ermolao Barbaro, author of the treatise *On Celibacy*, and of *Studies in Pliny*: the year before, when he was at Rome in the capacity of ambassador of the Florentine republic, he had been appointed Patriarch of Aquileia by Innocent VIII.

The second, who was kneeling and holding one hand of the dying man between his own, was Angelo Poliziano, the Catullus of the fifteenth century, a classic of the lighter sort, who in his Latin verses might have been mistaken for a poet of the Augustan age.

The third, who was standing up and leaning against one of the twisted columns of the bed-head, following with profound sadness the progress of the malady which he read in the face of his departing friend, was the famous Pico della Mirandola, who at the age of twenty could speak twenty-two languages, and who had offered to reply in each of these languages to any seven hundred questions that might be put to him by the twenty most learned men in the whole world, if they could be assembled at Florence.

The man on the bed was Lorenzo the Magnificent, who at the beginning of the year had been attacked by a severe and deep-seated fever, to which was added the gout, a hereditary ailment in his family. He had found at last that the draughts containing dissolved pearls which the quack doctor, Leoni di Spoleto, prescribed for him (as if he desired to adapt his remedies rather to the richness of his patient than to his necessities) were useless and unavailing, and so he had come to understand that he must part from those gentle-tongued women of his, those sweet-voiced poets, his palaces and their rich hangings; therefore he had summoned to give him absolution for his sins—in a man of less high place they might perhaps have been called crimes—the Dominican, Girolamo Francesco Savonarola.

It was not, however, without an inward fear, against which the praises of his friends availed nothing, that the pleasure-seeker and usurper awaited that severe and gloomy preacher by whose words all Florence was stirred, and on whose pardon henceforth depended all his hope for another world. Indeed, Savonarola was one of those men of stone, coming, like the statue of the *Commandante*, to knock at the door of a Don Giovanni, and in the midst of

feast and orgy to announce that it is even now the moment to begin to think of Heaven. He had been born at Ferrara, whither his family, one of the most illustrious of Padua, had been called by Niccolo, Marchese d'Este, and at the age of twenty-three, summoned by an irresistible vocation, had fled from his father's house, and had taken the vows in the cloister of Dominican monks at Florence. There, where he was appointed by his superiors to give lessons in philosophy, the young novice had from the first to battle against the defects of a voice that was both harsh and weak, a defective pronunciation, and above all, the depression of his physical powers, exhausted as they were by too severe abstinence.

Savonarola from that time condemned himself to the most absolute seclusion, and disappeared in the depths of his convent, as if the slab of his tomb had already fallen over him. There, kneeling on the flags, praying unceasingly before a wooden crucifix, fevered by vigils and penances, he soon passed out of contemplation into ecstasy, and began to feel in himself that inward prophetic impulse which summoned him to preach the reformation of the Church.

Nevertheless, the reformation of Savonarola, more reverential than Luther's, which followed about five-and-twenty years later, respected the thing while attacking the man, and had as its aim the altering of teaching that was human, not faith that was of God. He did not work, like the German monk, by reasoning, but by enthusiasm. With him logic always gave way before inspiration: he was not a theologian, but a prophet. Yet, although hitherto he had bowed his head before the authority of the Church, he had already raised it against the temporal power. To him religion and liberty appeared as two virgins equally sacred; so that, in his view, Lorenzo in subjugating the one was as culpable as Pope Innocent VIII in dishonoring the other. The result of this was that, so long as Lorenzo lived in riches, happiness, and magnificence, Savonarola had never been willing, whatever entreaties were made, to sanction by his presence a power which he considered illegitimate. But Lorenzo on his deathbed sent for him, and that was another matter. The austere preacher set forth at once, bareheaded and barefoot, hoping to save not only the soul of the dying man but also the liberty of the republic.

Lorenzo, as we have said, was awaiting the arrival of Savonarola with an impatience mixed with uneasiness; so that, when he heard the sound of his steps, his pale face took a yet more deathlike tinge, while at the same time he raised himself on his elbow and ordered his three friends to go away. They obeyed at once, and scarcely had they left by one door than the curtain of the other was raised, and the monk, pale, immovable, solemn, appeared on the threshold. When he perceived him, Lorenzo dei Medici, reading in his marble brow the inflexibility of a statue, fell back on his bed, breathing a sigh so profound that one might have supposed it was his last.

The monk glanced around the room as though to assure himself that he was really alone with the dying man; then he advanced with a slow and solemn

step towards the bed. Lorenzo watched his approach with terror; then, when he was close beside him, he cried—

“O my father, I have been a very great sinner!”

“The mercy of God is infinite,” replied the monk; “and I come into your presence laden with the divine mercy.”

“You believe, then, that God will forgive my sins?” cried the dying man, renewing his hope as he heard from the lips of the monk such unexpected words.

“Your sins and also your crimes, God will forgive them all,” replied Savonarola. “God will forgive your vanities, your adulterous pleasures, your obscene festivals; so much for your sins. God will forgive you for promising two thousand florins reward to the man who should bring you the head of Dietisalvi, Nerone Nigi, Angelo Antinori, Niccolo Soderini, and twice the money if they were handed over alive; God will forgive you for dooming to the scaffold or the gibbet the son of Papi Orlandi, Francesco de Brisighella, Bernardo Nardi, Jacopo Frescobaldi, Amoretto Baldovinetti, Pietro Balducci, Bernardo di Bandino, Francesco Frescobaldi, and more than three hundred others whose names were none the less dear to Florence because they were less renowned; so much for your crimes.” And at each of these names which Savonarola pronounced slowly, his eyes fixed on the dying man, he replied with a groan which proved the monk’s memory to be only too true. Then at last, when he had finished, Lorenzo asked in a doubtful tone—

“Then do you believe, my father, that God will forgive me everything, both my sins and my crimes?”

“Everything,” said Savonarola, “but on three conditions.”

“What are they?” asked the dying man.

“The first,” said Savonarola, “is that you feel a complete faith in the power and the mercy of God.”

“My father,” replied Lorenzo eagerly, “I feel this faith in the very depths of my heart.”

“The second,” said Savonarola, “is that you give back the property of others which you have unjustly confiscated and kept.”

“My father, shall I have time?” asked the dying man.

“God will give it to you,” replied the monk.

Lorenzo shut his eyes, as though to reflect more at his ease; then, after a moment’s silence, he replied—

“Yes, my father, I will do it.”

“The third,” resumed Savonarola, “is that you restore to the republic her ancient independence and her former liberty.”

Lorenzo sat up on his bed, shaken by a convulsive movement, and questioned with his eyes the eyes of the Dominican, as though he would find out if he had deceived himself and not heard aright. Savonarola repeated the same words.

“Never! never!” exclaimed Lorenzo, falling back on his bed and shaking his head—“never!”

The monk, without replying a single word, made a step to withdraw.

“My father, my father,” said the dying man, “do not leave me thus: have pity on me!”

“Have pity on Florence,” said the monk.

“But, my father,” cried Lorenzo, “Florence is free, Florence is happy.”

“Florence is a slave, Florence is poor,” cried Savonarola, “poor in genius, poor in money, and poor in courage; poor in genius, because after you, Lorenzo, will come your son Piero; poor in money, because from the funds of the republic you have kept up the magnificence of your family and the credit of your business houses; poor in courage, because you have robbed the rightful magistrates of the authority which was constitutionally theirs, and diverted the citizens from the double path of military and civil life, wherein, before they were enervated by your luxuries, they had displayed the virtues of the ancients; and therefore, when the day shall dawn which is not far distant,” continued the monk, his eyes fixed and glowing as if he were reading in the future, “whereon the barbarians shall descend from the mountains, the walls of our towns, like those of Jericho, shall fall at the blast of their trumpets.”

“And do you desire that I should yield up on my deathbed the power that has made the glory of my whole life?” cried Lorenzo dei Medici.

“It is not I who desire it; it is the Lord,” replied Savonarola coldly.

“Impossible, impossible!” murmured Lorenzo.

“Very well; then die as you have lived!” cried the monk, “in the midst of your courtiers and flatterers; let them ruin your soul as they have ruined your body!” And at these words, the austere Dominican, without listening to the cries of the dying man, left the room as he had entered it, with face and step unaltered; far above human things he seemed to soar, a spirit already detached from the earth.

At the cry which broke from Lorenzo dei Medici when he saw him disappear, Ermolao, Poliziano, and Pico della Mirandola, who had heard all, returned into the room, and found their friend convulsively clutching in his arms a magnificent crucifix which he had just taken down from the bed-head. In vain did they try to reassure him with friendly words. Lorenzo the Magnificent only replied with sobs; and one hour after the scene which we have just related, his lips clinging to the feet of the Christ, he breathed his last in the arms of these three men, of whom the most fortunate—though all three were young—was not destined to survive him by more than two years. “Since his death was to bring about many calamities,” says Niccolo Macchiavelli, “it was the will of Heaven to show this by omens only too certain: the dome of the church of Santa Reparata was struck by lightning, and Roderigo Borgia was elected pope.”