THEN and NOW

A Novel

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No one could write a book of this kind out of his head, and I have taken what I wanted where I could find it. My chief source of information has naturally been the works of Machiavelli. I have found much that was to my purpose in Tommasini's biography and something in Villari's, and I have made some use of Woodward's solid Cesar Borgia. *I wish to acknowledge the great debt I owe to Count Carlo Beuf for his lively and accurate life of Caesar, for his kindness in lending me books which otherwise I should never have known about and for his patience in answering the many questions I put to him.*

THEN AND NOW

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Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.

[*ii*]

BIAGIO BUONACCORSI had had a busy day. He was tired, but being a man of methodical habit before going to bed made a note in his diary. It was brief: "The City sent a man to Imola to the Duke." Perhaps because he thought it of no importance he did not mention the man's name: it was Machiavelli. The Duke was Caesar Borgia.

It had been not only a busy day, but a long one, for Biagio had set forth from his house at dawn. With him on a (stout pony) went his nephew, Piero Giacomini, whom Machiavelli had consented to take with him. It happened to be Piero's eighteenth birthday, October 6th, 1502, and so was a fitting day for him to go out into the world for the first time. He was a well-set-up youth, tall for his age and of an agreeable aspect. Under his uncle's guidance, for his mother was a widow, he had received a good education; he could write a good hand and turn a comely phrase not only in Italian, but in Latin. On the advice of Machiavelli, who passionately admired the ancient Ro-

mans, he had acquired more than a cursory knowledge of their history. Machiavelli cherished the conviction that men are always the same and have the same passions, so that when circumstances are similar the same causes must lead to the same effects; and thus, by bearing in mind how the Romans coped with a given situation men of a later day might conduct themselves with prudence and efficiency. It was the wish both of Biagio and his sister that Piero should enter the government service in which Biagio held a modest post under his friend Machiavelli. The mission on which Machiavelli was now going seemed a good opportunity for the boy to learn something of affairs, and Biagio knew that he could not have a better mentor. The matter had been settled on the spur of the moment, for it was only the day before that Machiavelli had been given his letter of credence to the Duke and his safe-conduct. Machiavelli was of an amiable disposition, a friend of his friends, and when Biagio asked him to take Piero with him immediately agreed. But the lad's mother, though she saw that it was a chance that could not be missed, was uneasy. He had never been parted from her before and he was young to go out into a hostile world; he was besides a good boy and she was afraid that Machiavelli would corrupt him, for it was notorious that Machiavelli was a gay fellow and a dissolute. He was, moreover, not in the least ashamed of it and would tell improper stories about his adventures with women of the town and with maidservants at wayside inns which must bring a blush to a virtu-

ous woman's cheek. And what made it worse was that he told them so amusingly that though outraged you could not keep a straight face. Biagio reasoned with her.

"Dear Francesca, now that Niccolò is married he will abandon his loose habits. Marietta, his wife, is a good woman and she loves him. Why should you think him so foolish as to spend money outside for what he can get at home for nothing?"

"A man who likes women as much as Niccolò will never be content with one," said she, "and if she is his wife less than ever."

Biagio thought there was something in what she said, but he was not prepared to admit it. He shrugged his shoulders.

"Piero is eighteen. If he has not lost his innocence already it is quite time he did. Are you a virgin, nephew?"

"Yes," answered Piero with so much candor that anyone might have been forgiven for believing him.

"There is nothing that I do not know about my son. He is incapable of doing anything of which I should disapprove."

"In that case," said Biagio, "there is no reason why you should hesitate to entrust him to a man who can be useful in his career and from whom, if he has sense, he can learn much that will be valuable to him all his life."

Monna Francesca gave her brother a sour look.

"You are infatuated with the man. You're like putty in his hands. And how does he treat you? He makes use

of you; he makes fun of you. Why should he be your superior in the Chancery? Why are you satisfied to be his subordinate?"

Biagio was of about the same age as Machiavelli, who was thirty-three, but because he had married the daughter of Marsilio Ficino, a celebrated scholar patronized by the Medici who then ruled the city, he had entered the government before him. For in those days influence got a man a job as often as merit. Biagio was of the middle size, plump, with a round face, a high colour and an expression of great good nature. He was honest and hard-working, a man without envy who knew his own limitations and was satisfied with his modest position. He liked good living and good company and since he asked for no more than he could have, might be counted a happy man. He was not brilliant, but neither was he stupid. Had he been so, Machiavelli would not have endured his companionship.

"Niccolò has the most brilliant mind of anyone at present in the service of the Signory," he said now.

"Nonsense," snapped Monna Francesca.

(The Signory was the City Council of Florence and, since the expulsion of the Medici eight years before, the chief executive body of the state.)

"He has a knowledge of men and of affairs that men twice his age might envy. Take my word for it, sister, he will go far, and take my word for this too: he is not one to abandon his friends."

"I wouldn't trust him an inch. He'll cast you aside like an old shoe when he has no further use for you."

Biagio laughed.

"Are you so bitter because he never made advances to you, sister? Even with a son of eighteen you must be still attractive to men."

"He knows better than to try his tricks with a decent woman. I know his habits. It's a disgrace that the Signory allows harlots to flaunt themselves in the city to the scandal of respectable people. You like him because he makes you laugh and tells you dirty stories. You're as bad as he is."

"You must remember that no one tells a dirty story better."

"And is that why you think him so wonderfully intelligent?"

Biagio laughed again.

"No, not only. He made a great success of his mission to France and his despatches were masterly; even the members of the Signory who don't like him personally were obliged to admit it."

Madonna Francesca shrugged her shoulders crossly. Meanwhile Piero, like the prudent young man he was, held his peace. He looked forward without enthusiasm to the job in the Chancery, to which his uncle and his mother had destined him, and the idea of going on a journey was very much to his liking. As he had foreseen, his uncle's worldly wisdom triumphed over his mother's

anxious scruples, and so it came to pass that on the following morning Biagio called for him and, Biagio on foot, Piero on his pony, they went the short distance to Machiavelli's house.

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THE HORSES were already at the door, one for Machiavelli and two for the servants he was taking with him. Piero, giving his pony to one of the servants to hold, followed his uncle into the house. Machiavelli was waiting for them with impatience. He greeted them curtly.

"Now let us start," he said.

Marietta was in tears. She was a young woman of no great beauty, but it was not for her beauty that Machiavelli had married her; he had married her, that very year, because it was proper that he should marry, and she was of a reputable family and brought him as good a dowry as a man of his means and position could expect.

"Don't weep, dearest," he said, "you know I shall be gone only a little while."

"But you ought not to go," she sobbed and then, turning to Biagio: "He's not fit to ride so far. He's not well."

"What is the matter with you, Niccolò?" asked Biagio.

"The old trouble. My stomach is out of order once more. It can't be helped."

He took Marietta in his arms.

"Good-bye, my sweet."

"You will write to me often?"

"Often," he smiled.

When he smiled his face lost the sardonic look it generally wore and there was something engaging in him so that you could understand that Marietta loved him. He kissed her and patted her cheek.

"Don't fret, my dear. Biagio will look after you."

Piero, on entering the room, had stood just within the door. No one paid him attention. Though Machiavelli was his uncle's most intimate friend he had seen little of him and had not exchanged more than a few words with him in all his life. Piero took the opportunity to have a good look at the man who would be thenceforth his master. He was of the middle height, but because he was so thin looked somewhat taller than he was. He had a small head, with very black hair cut short; his dark eyes were small and restless, his nose long; and his lips were thin and, when he was not speaking, so tightly closed that his mouth was little more than a sarcastic line. In repose his sallow face wore an expression that was wary, thoughtful, severe and cold. This was evidently not a man you could play pranks with.

Perhaps Machiavelli felt Piero's uneasy stare, for he gave him a quick, questioning glance.

"This is Piero?" he asked Biagio.

"His mother hopes you will look after him and see that he doesn't get into mischief."

Machiavelli gave a thin smile.

"By observing the unfortunate consequences of my errors he will doubtless learn that virtue and industry are the highways to success in this world and happiness in the next."

They set forth. They walked the horses over the cobblestones till they came to the city gate and when they got onto the open road broke into a jog trot. They had a long way to go and it was prudent to spare the horses. Machiavelli and Piero rode together and the two servants behind. All four were armed, for though Florence was at peace with her neighbours, the country was unsettled and you could never be sure that you might not run across marauding soldiers. The safe-conduct the travellers carried would have been of small help to them then. Machiavelli did not speak and Piero, though not by nature shy, was somewhat intimidated by that sharp, set face, a slight frown between the brows, and thought it wise to wait till he was spoken to. The morning, notwithstanding an autumnal chill, was fine, and Piero's spirits were high. It was grand to be setting out on such an adventure and it was hard to keep silent when he was bubbling over with excitement. There were a hundred questions he wanted to ask. But they rode on and on. Soon the sun was bright in the heavens and the warmth of it was pleasant. Machiavelli never said a word. Now and then he raised one hand to indicate that they should walk the horses.

[*iv*]

MACHIAVELLI was busy with his thoughts. It was much against his will that he went on this mission and he had done his best to get someone else sent in his place. For one thing he was far from well and even now as he rode he had an ache in his stomach, and then, having recently married, he did not wish to pain his wife by leaving her. He had promised her that his absence would be short, but in his heart he knew that the days might last into weeks and the weeks into months before he got permission to return. His mission to France had taught him how protracted diplomatic negotiations might be.

But these were the least of his troubles. The state of Italy was desperate. Louis XII, King of France, was the paramount power. He held a large part of the Kingdom of Naples, though insecurely, since the Spaniards who held Sicily and Calabria continually harassed him, but he was in firm possession of Milan and its territories; he was on good terms with Venice and for a consideration had taken the city-states of Florence, Siena and Bologna under his protection. He had an alliance with the Pope, who had granted him a dispensation to put away his barren and scrofulous wife so that he might marry Anne of Brittany, the widow of Charles VIII; and in return the King had created the Pope's son, Caesar Borgia, Duke of Valentinois, given him Charlotte d'Albret, sister to

the King of Navarre, in marriage and promised to supply troops to enable him to recover possession of the lands, lordships and dominions of the Church which she had lost.

Caesar Borgia, known throughout Italy as Il Valentino from the duchy that Louis XII had bestowed upon him, was still well under thirty. His mercenary captains, of whom the most important were Pagolo Orsini, head of the great Roman house, Gian Paolo Baglioni, Lord of Perugia, and Vitellozzo Vitelli, Lord of Citta di Castello, were the best in Italy. He had proved himself a bold and astute commander. By force of arms, treachery and the terror he inspired, he had made himself prince of a considerable state, and Italy rang with his exploits. Taking advantage of a favourable opportunity, he had blackmailed the Florentines into hiring him and his men-at-arms at a large salary for a period of three years; but then, having assured themselves of the protection of King Louis by a further payment in hard cash, they had revoked Caesar's commission and stopped his salary. This enraged him and presently he took his revenge.

In June of the year with which this narrative is concerned, Arezzo, a city subject to Florence, revolted and declared itself independent. Vitellozzo Vitelli, the ablest of Il Valentino's commanders and bitter enemy of the Florentines because they had executed his brother Paolo, and Baglioni, Lord of Perugia, went to the support of the rebellious citizens and defeated the forces of the Republic. Only the citadel held out. The Signory in a panic

sent Piero Soderini to Milan to hasten the expedition of the four hundred lancers King Louis had promised them. Piero Soderini was an influential citizen and as Gonfalonier occupied the position of president of the Republic. They ordered their own troops encamped before Pisa, which they had long been trying to subdue, to advance to the rescue, but before they arrived the citadel fell. At this juncture Il Valentino, who was at Urbino, which he had recently conquered, sent the Signory a peremptory demand for the despatch of an ambassador to confer with him. They sent the Bishop of Volterra, Piero Soderini's brother, and Machiavelli accompanied him as his secretary. The crisis was resolved, for the French king sent a strong force to fulfill his obligation towards Florence, and Caesar Borgia, yielding to the threat, recalled his captains.

But his captains were themselves lords of petty states and they could not but fear that when they had served his purpose he would crush them as ruthlessly as he had crushed other lords of other states. They received information that he had made a secret arrangement with Louis XII by the terms of which the King was to provide a contingent to assist him first in the capture of Bologna and then in the destruction of the captains whose territories it would be convenient for him to incorporate in his own dominions. After some preliminary discussion they met at a place called La Magione, near Perugia, to consider how best to protect themselves. Vitellozzo, who

was ill, was carried to the meeting on a litter. Pagolo Orsini came accompanied by his brother the Cardinal and his nephew the Duke of Gravina. Among others who attended were Ermete Bentivoglio, the son of the Lord of Bologna, two Baglioni from Perugia, the young Oliverotto da Fermo and Antonio da Venafro, the right-hand man of Pandolfo Petrucci, Lord of Siena. Their danger was great and they agreed that for their own safety they must act, but the Duke was a dangerous man and they knew that they must act with prudence. They decided for the present not to break with him openly, but to make preparations in secret and attack only when they were ready. They had in their pay a considerable body of troops, horse and foot, and Vitellozzo's artillery was powerful; they sent emissaries to hire several thousand of the mercenaries that then swarmed in Italy, and at the same time agents to Florence to ask for aid, for the Borgia's ambition was as great a threat to the Republic as to them.

It was not long before Caesar heard of the conspiracy, and on his side he summoned the Signory to provide him with the troops which he declared they had engaged to let him have in case of need and requested them to send him an envoy empowered to treat with him. This was how it came about that Machiavelli was on his way to Imola. He went with misgiving. The Signory had despatched him because he was a man of no official consequence, with no authority to make an agreement, who

could only refer back to Florence and at every step must await his government's instructions. It was invidious to send such an emissary to one who, though a bastard of the Pope, on official documents styled himself Duke of Romagna, Valencia and Urbino, Prince of Andria, Lord of Piombino, Gonfalonier and Captain-General of the Church. Machiavelli's instructions were to inform him that the Signory had refused the conspirators' request for help, but if he made a demand either for men or money to apprise the Signory and await their reply. His business was to temporize, for such was the consistent policy of the Republic. The Signory could always find excellent reasons for doing nothing. If they got into too tight a corner they would untie the strings of their money bags and disburse as small a sum as was acceptable. His business was to allay the impatience of a man unused to procrastination, to make no promises that had substance, to cajole a suspicious man with specious words, (to use craft against craft,) to counter deceit with deceit) and to discover the secrets of a man notorious for his dissimulation.

Although he had but briefly seen him at Urbino, Machiavelli had been deeply impressed by him. He had heard there how the Duke Guidobaldo da Montefeltro, confiding in Caesar Borgia's friendship, had lost his state and barely escaped with his life; and though he recognized that Il Valentino had acted with shocking perfidy he could not but admire the energy and adroit planning

with which he had conducted the enterprise. This was a man of parts, fearless, unscrupulous, ruthless and intelligent, not only a brilliant general but a capable organizer and an astute politician. A sarcastic smile played upon Machiavelli's thin lips and his eyes gleamed, for the prospect of matching his wits with such an antagonist excited him. He began in consequence to feel much better and was no longer conscious of his queasy stomach; he was able indeed to look forward without displeasure to eating a snack at Scarperia, which was about halfway between Florence and Imola, and where he had decided to hire post horses. They had ridden as fast as was reasonable, for he wanted to get to Imola that day, and the horses, carrying not only their riders, but a good deal of baggage as well, could hardly be expected without hurt to themselves to go so far without more rest than he could afford to give them. He proposed to go on with Piero, leaving the two servants to follow next day with his own horse and Piero's pony.

They stopped at the Albergo della Posta, and Machiavelli, dismounting, was glad to stretch his legs. He enquired what food could be prepared without delay and was not dissatisfied when he learned that he could have macaroni, a dish of small birds, sausage from Bologna and a pork chop. He was a good trencherman and he devoured with enjoyment the meal that was set before him. He drank the strong red wine of the country and felt all the better for it. Piero ate as copiously as his mas-