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Simon & Schuster Paperbacks
NEW YORK LONDON TORONTO SYDNEY

SIMON & SCHUSTER PAPERBACKS
A Division of Simon & Schuster, Inc.
1230 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10020

First Simon & Schuster trade paperbacks edition May 2009

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Designed by Paul Dippolito
Maps by Paul J. Pugliese

Manufactured in the United States of America

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

The Library of Congress has Cataloged the hardcover as follows:

Unger, Miles.
Magnifico : the brilliant life and violent times of Lorenzo de' Medici / Miles J. Unger.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
1. Medici, Lorenzo de', 1449–1492. 2. Florence (Italy)—History—1421–1737.
3. Statesmen—Italy—Florence—Biography. 4. Intellectuals—Italy—
Florence—Biography. 5. Florence (Italy)—Biography. I. Title.

DG737.9.U54 2008
945'.51105092—dc22
[B] 2007027669

ISBN-13: 978-0-7432-5434-2
ISBN-10: 0-7432-5434-1
ISBN-13: 978-0-7432-5435-9 (pbk)
ISBN-10: 0-7432-5435-X (pbk)

In memory of my mother, Bernate,
whose adventurous spirit lies behind this book

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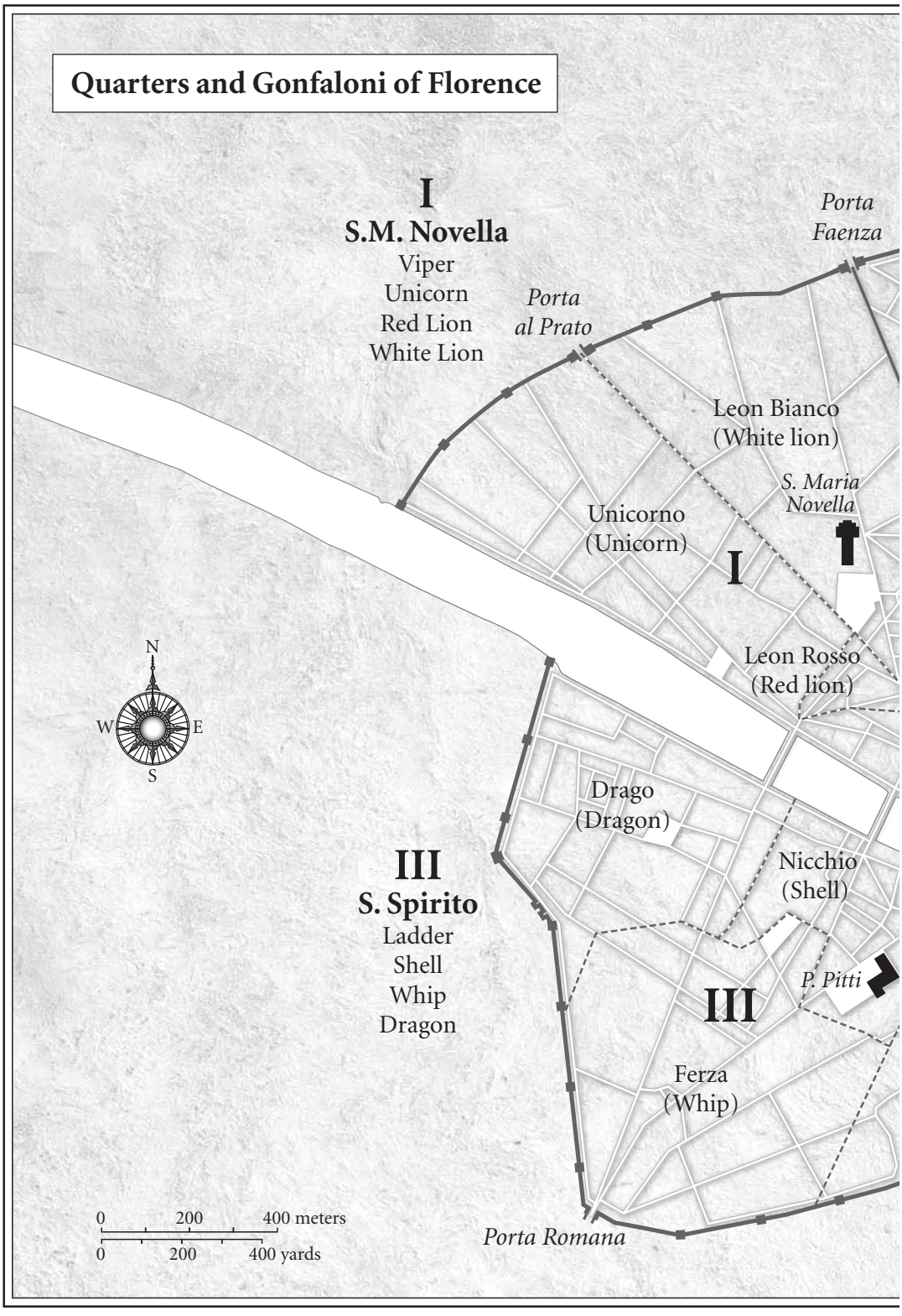
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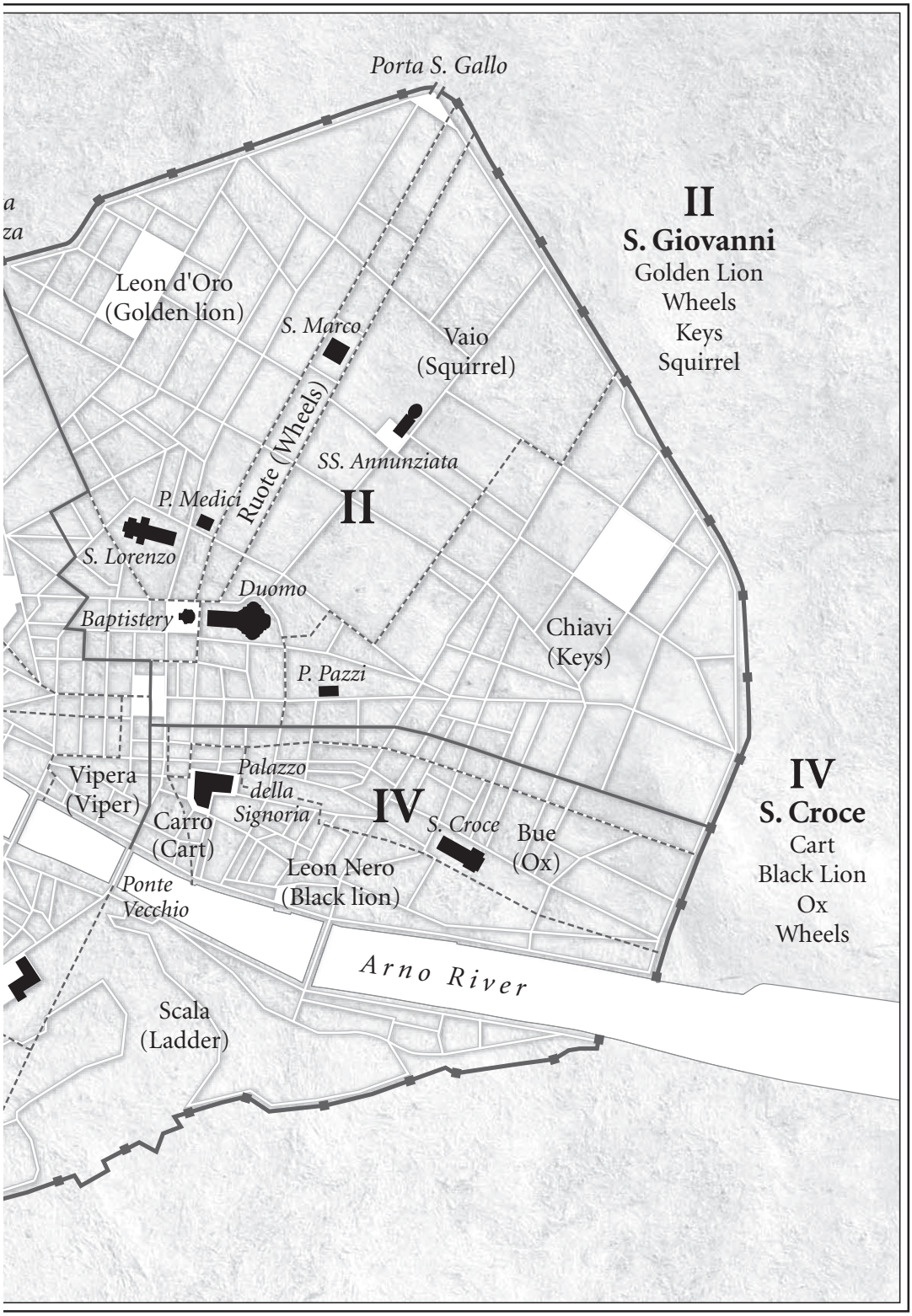

MAP BY PAUL J. PUGLIESE

The Medici Villa at Careggi (Miles Unger)

I. THE ROAD FROM CAREGGI

"[I]t is necessary now for you to be a man and not a boy; be so in words, deeds and manners."

—PIERO DE' MEDICI TO LORENZO, MAY 11, 1465

LATE ON THE MORNING OF AUGUST 27, 1466, A SMALL group of horsemen left the Medici villa at Careggi and turned onto the road to Florence. It was a journey of three miles from the villa to the city walls along a meandering path that descended through the hills that rise above Florence to the north. Dark cypresses and hedges of fragrant laurel lined the road, providing welcome shade in the summer heat. Through the trees the riders could catch from time to time a glimpse of the Arno River flashing silver in the sun.

On any other day this would have been a relaxing journey of an hour or so, the heavy August air encouraging a leisurely pace, the beauties of the Tuscan countryside inspiring laughter and conversation among the young men. "There is in my opinion no region more sweet or pleasing in Italy or in any other part of Europe than that wherein Florence is placed," wrote a Venetian visitor, "for Florence is situated in a plain surrounded on all sides by hills and mountains. . . . And the hills are fertile, cultivated, pleasant, all bearing beautiful and sumptuous palaces built at great expense and boasting all manner of fine features: gardens, woods, fountains, fish ponds, pools and much else besides, with views that resemble paintings."

But today, the mood was somber. The men peered nervously from side to side, fingering the pommels of their swords. Gnarled olive trees, ancient and silver-leaved, hugged terraces cut into the slopes, and parallel rows of vines glistening with purple grapes gave the hills a tidy geometry worthy of a fresco by Fra Angelico.

Taking the lead was a young man who rode with the easy grace of a born horseman. His appearance was distinctive, though not at first glance

particularly attractive. Above an athletic frame, bony and long-limbed, was a rough-hewn face. His nose, which was flattened and turned to the side as if it had once been broken, gave him something of the look of a street brawler, and the prominent jaw that caused his lower lip to jut out pugnaciously did nothing to soften this impression. Beneath heavy brows peered black, piercing eyes more suggestive of animal cunning than refined intelligence. Dark hair, parted in the middle, hung down to his shoulders, providing a stern frame to the irregular features. Even a close friend, Niccolò Valori, was forced to admit that "nature had been a stepmother to him with regard to his personal appearance. [N]onetheless," continued Valori, "when it came to the inner man she truly acted as a kindly mother. . . . [A]lthough his face was not handsome it was full of such dignity as to command respect."*

This homely face belonged to Lorenzo, the seventeen-year-old son and heir of Piero de' Medici. Since the death of Lorenzo's grandfather Cosimo, two years earlier, Piero had taken over the far-flung Medici banking empire, a position that made him one of the richest men in Europe. But it was not wealth alone that made the Medici name famous throughout Europe. The Medici, though they possessed no titles, were regarded by those unfamiliar with the intricacies of local politics as kings in all but name of the independent Florentine Republic, which, though small compared with the great states of Europe, dazzled the civilized world through the brilliance of her art and the vitality of her intellectual life.† Not many generations removed from their peasant origins, the Medici spent lavishly on beautifying their city in the expectation that at least some of its glamour would rub off on its first family.

It was Cosimo who had parlayed his apparently inexhaustible fortune

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* Lorenzo's homeliness was proverbial among Florentines. When Machiavelli was describing to a friend an encounter with a particularly hideous prostitute, he could think of no better insult than to compare her appearance to that of Lorenzo de' Medici.

† Florence's population reached a peak of nearly 100,000 in the middle of the fourteenth century, but after the Black Death of 1348 was reduced to less than half that. In the fifteenth century, her population probably never reached 50,000. The fields and open spaces that remained inside the city walls throughout Lorenzo's lifetime testify to the fact that it took centuries for the population to recover.

into a position of unprecedented authority in the state. On his tombstone in the family church of San Lorenzo were the words *Pater Patriae* ("Father of His Country"), bestowed on him by a grateful public for his wise stewardship and generous patronage of the city's civic and religious institutions. Cosimo had dominated the councils of government through the force of his personality and his willingness to open his own coffers when the state was short of cash. Florentines, like modern-day Americans, had a healthy respect for money and seemed to feel that those who showed a talent for amassing it must possess other, less visible virtues. Cosimo rarely held high political office, happy to let others enjoy the pomp of life in the *Palazzo della Signoria* as long as important decisions were left in his hands.* For a time the gratitude Florentines felt toward Cosimo earned for his son Piero the allegiance of a majority of the citizens, and, until recent troubles, it had been generally assumed that this crucial position as the leading figure in the *reggimento*—the regime that really ran Florence, whoever temporarily occupied the government palace—would one day pass to the young man now guiding his small band along the road to Florence.

On this August morning, however, the fate of the Medici and their government seemed to teeter on a knife's edge. The ancient constitution of the republic, in which the governing of the state had been shared widely among the city's wealthy and middle-class citizens, had been undermined by this single family's rise to prominence.† The heavy-handed tactics they used to win and to wield power had stirred up resentment as once proud families saw themselves reduced to little more than servants of the Medici court.

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* This seat of the Florentine government went by many names. The *Palazzo* (Palace) *della Signoria* refers to the capital's role as home to the city's highest governing body, the *Signoria* (lordship), a council of eight men who, along with their leader, the *Gonfaloniere di Giustizia* (Standard-Bearer of Justice), constituted the chief executive of the state. These men, elected on a bimonthly basis, were also referred to as the Priors; hence the capital also went by the name the Palace of the Priors. Florentines also often referred to the building simply as the Palazzo Vecchio, the Old Palace.

† Though Florentine democracy was more restrictive than ours in the sense that it denied the franchise to many of its inhabitants—including the unskilled laborers who made up a majority of the population—in some ways it was more inclusive. Those with full

(*Continued*)

But now a group of rich and influential men saw an opportunity to strike back. The various factions that normally made Florentine politics a lively affair had been secretly arming themselves for months. Rumors of foreign armies on the march—a different one for each side in the contest—increased the general paranoia until it seemed as if the smallest incident might touch off a general conflagration.

On one side were the Medici loyalists, the Party of the Plain (named for the site of the Medici palace on low-lying land on the north bank of the Arno), who favored the current system, which they claimed had brought decades of peace and prosperity. On the other was the Party of the Hill, centered on Luca Pitti's palace on the high ground to the south, who pointed out that Medici ascendance had been purchased at the expense of the people's traditional liberty. The most visible figures in the rebellion were former members of Cosimo's inner circle whose democratic zeal, not much in evidence in recent years, was rekindled by the humiliating prospect of having to take orders from his son. Few of them, in fact, had sterling reformist credentials. Most had connived with Cosimo in his systematic undermining of republican institutions, but now they adopted as their own the slogan "*Popolo e Libertà!*" (the "People and Liberty!").

Discontent with the despotic tendencies of the government was not the only factor precipitating the current crisis. The perceived weakness of the fifty-year-old Piero contributed to a general sense that the regime was not

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citizenship, including many artisans and shopkeepers, were actually expected to participate in their own government, sitting on some of the many committees and assemblies that met in the Palace of the Priors. Florentines were not content to vote once every two years and allow their elected representatives to make decisions for them. Even when a citizen was not serving in elected office, he could be certain that among his friends and neighbors were many in a position to affect his life for good or ill. One peculiarity of the political system that had evolved in the Middle Ages was its reliance on election to office by lot. Periodic "scrutinies" were used to determine all those citizens eligible for office. These names were then placed in purses and drawn at random when an office needed to be filled. Terms for the most important offices were made deliberately brief so that no one could accumulate too much power—for the *Signoria*, the chief executive, only two months. It was a system that guaranteed that each citizen would hold many offices during his lifetime. The Medici controlled the system largely by screening the names of those entered into the electoral purses and removing those they deemed untrustworthy. (See Note on the Government of Florence for further discussion, also Chapters V and IX.)

only corrupt but, perhaps even worse, adrift. Even before Cosimo's death in 1464 the influential Agnolo Acciaiuoli, now one of the leaders of the Hill, complained that Cosimo and Piero had become "cold men, whom illness and old age have reduced to such cowardice that they avoid anything that might cause them trouble or worry." The citizens of Florence, said the uncharitable Niccolò Machiavelli some years later, "did not have much confidence in [Cosimo's] son Piero, for notwithstanding that he was a good man, nonetheless, they judged that . . . he was too infirm and new in the state."

Even many of Piero's supporters shared that gloomy assessment. From his youth, Piero (known to history as *il Gottoso,* the Gouty) had been plagued by the family ailment that rendered him for long periods a virtual prisoner in his own house. It was a disease that affected not only his body but his temper. The architect Filarete wrote in his biographical sketch of the Medici leader, "those who have [gout] are usually rather acid and sharp in their manner," but that while "few can bear its pains . . . [Piero] bears it with all the patience he can." Piero also lacked his father's common touch, the earthy humor that endeared Cosimo to the city's humbler elements. (Once when a petitioner, hoping to reform the sagging morals of the city, begged Cosimo to pass a law prohibiting priests from gambling, the practical Cosimo replied, "First stop them from using loaded dice.") Piero, by contrast, was an aesthete and connoisseur who liked nothing better than to retire to his study, where he could gaze at his fine collection of antique busts, ancient manuscripts, and rare gemstones.

Citizens complained that policy was hatched in the privacy of the Medici palace on the Via Larga, rather than in open debate at the Palace of the Priors, as the sickly Piero was often forced to meet with his trusted lieutenants over dinner in his house or in his bedchamber. Such a reserved and quiet man was unlikely to appeal to the pragmatic merchants of Florence, who approached politics in much the same lively spirit as they entered the city's marketplaces, eager to buy and sell, to argue and cajole, to win an advantage if possible but in any case to strike deals and shake hands at the conclusion of a bargain hard driven but mutually beneficial. In both the Palace of the Priors and in the *Mercato Vecchio* (the Old Market in the heart of the city), relations of trust built on face-to-face encounters were more important than abstract ideology. Piero was an intensely pri-

vate man in a world that valued above all the lively give-and-take of the street corner.

The best contemporary portrait of Piero is the fine marble bust by Mino da Fiesole.* The sculpture reveals a handsome man with the cropped hair of an ancient Roman patrician and alert, thoughtful eyes. But there is something in the pugnacious thrust of his chin, a feature passed down to his oldest son, that suggests an inner strength his contemporaries little suspected.

A more engaging portrait emerges in Piero's private letters that reveal a conscientious man deeply attached to his family and continually fretting over their uncertain future. He was a loving and devoted husband to Lucrezia Tornabuoni, a descendant of one of Florence's most ancient families, and their correspondence reveals an unusually close bond. "[E]very day seems a year until I return for your and my consolation," wrote Lucrezia from Rome to Piero, while Piero confessed that he awaited her arrival "with infinite longing."

Piero was also a devoted, if sometimes overbearing, father, particularly with his oldest son, who could not leave town without being pursued by letters filled with unsolicited advice and constructive criticism. Piero's letters alternately exhibit pride in his son's precocious ability and an almost neurotic need to interfere in the smallest details of his conduct. "You will have received my letter of the 4th," he wrote to Lorenzo in Milan, "telling you what conduct to pursue, all of which remember; in a word, it is necessary now for you to be a man and not a boy; be so in words, deeds and manners." For the most part Lorenzo took his father's nagging in good humor, though occasionally his exasperation shows through, as when he responded to yet another request for information, "I wrote to you two days ago, and for this reason I have little to say."

The leaders of the current revolt were all prominent figures of the *reggimento* who viewed Cosimo's death as an opportunity to satisfy their own ambition. Those like Agnolo Acciaiuoli, who had suffered exile with Cosimo when he ran afoul of the then ruling Albizzi family and shared in

* Now in the Bargello Museum in Florence.

his triumphant return in 1434, felt that after thirty years of loyal service to the Medici cause their time had come. "Piero was dismayed when he saw the number and quality of the citizens who were against him," wrote Machiavelli some sixty years after the events in his *Florentine Histories,* "and after consulting with his friends, he decided that he too would make a list of his friends. And having given the care of this enterprise to some of his most trusted men, he found such variety and instability in the minds of the citizens that many of those listed as against him were also listed in his favor."

Machiavelli's account captures something of the confusion of those days as once trusted friends were suspected of secret treachery. Considering the formidable array of figures now agitating for change, a betting man might have thought twice before wagering a few *soldi* on the Medici cause. They included such prominent and respected citizens as Luca Pitti, who, at least in his own mind, was Cosimo's logical successor; the gifted orator Niccolò Soderini; Agnolo Acciaiuoli, a scholar and a friend of Cosimo's whose thoughtful views carried great weight with his fellow citizens; and Dietisalvi Neroni, a shrewd political operator who had been a fixture within the highest circles of the *reggimento.*

In secret nighttime meetings in the city's sacred buildings—the Party of the Plain favoring the monastery La Crocetta, while their adversaries favored the equally pious La Pietà—men began to look to their own defense, each suspecting the other of plotting the overthrow of the constitutional government. In a typically Florentine mixture of the sacred and profane, fervent prayers to the Virgin were often followed by calls to riot and mayhem.

By most measures the Medici were ill prepared for the coming contest. Piero's poor health had thrust Lorenzo into a position of responsibility at an age when his companions were still completing their studies or were apprenticed in the family business. He had already served as his father's envoy on crucial diplomatic missions, including the wedding of a king's son and an audience with the newly elected pope. A few weeks earlier he had returned from a trip abroad to introduce himself to Ferrante, King of Naples, "with whom I spoke," he wrote his father, "and who offered me many fine compliments, which I wait to tell you in person." The importance for the Medici of such contacts with the great lords of Europe is sug-

gested by Piero's hunger for news of the meeting. Lorenzo's tutor and traveling companion, Gentile Becchi, wrote an enthusiastic report of Lorenzo's performance before the king. Referring to this account, Piero confessed, "Three times I read this for my happiness and pleasure." Consorting with royalty provided this family of bankers much-needed prestige, though such social climbing if too vigorously pursued could also arouse the jealousy of their peers who believed that they were thus being left behind.*

The looming crisis would demand of Lorenzo a set of skills different from those he had recently practiced in the courts of great lords. The retiring Piero needed Lorenzo to act as the public face of the regime, the charismatic center of an otherwise colorless bureaucracy. As preparations were made for the coming battle, it was often to Lorenzo, rather than the ailing Piero, that men turned to pledge their loyalty. Marco Parenti, a cloth merchant of moderate means whose memoirs provide an eyewitness account of the events of these months, tells how the countryside was armed in the days leading up to the August crisis. "Thus it was arranged," he wrote,

> that there were 2000 Bolognese horsemen loyal to the duke of Milan. These were secretly ordered to be held in readiness for Piero; the Serristori, lords with a great following in the Val d'Arno, arranged with Lorenzo, son of Piero, a great fishing expedition on the Arno and many great feasts where were gathered peasants and their leaders, who, wishing to show themselves faithful servants of Piero, met amongst themselves and pledged themselves to Lorenzo. These pledges were accepted with much show as if it had not already been planned, though many were kept in the dark, to send them a few days hence in arms to Florence in support of Piero. And so it was

* Thus, for instance, the Medici were proud to display the *fleurs de lis*, granted to them by the French king, on their coat of arms, while others jockeyed for knighthoods and foreign titles of nobility. It is typical of Florentine ambivalence toward such feudal titles that while knights were given a special prominence in the city's festivals and ceremonies, anyone stigmatized with the label "magnate" was excluded from participation in the city's government. Suspicion of the hereditary aristocracy stemmed from the centuries of violence committed by the native nobility.

arranged in other places, with other peasants and men who, when called on, would quickly appear in arms.

The fact that those bending their knees were often rude peasants and their lord a banker's son gives to the proceedings a distinctly Florentine flavor, but it is clear that Lorenzo had already begun to take on some of the trappings of a feudal prince.

Lorenzo's prominence, however, was actually a sign of weakness in the Medici camp. Florentines regarded youth as an unfortunate condition, believing that these *giovanni*—a term attached to all young men, including those in their twenties who had yet to assume the steadying yoke of marriage—were, like the entire female sex, essentially irrational and in thrall to their baser instincts. So far Lorenzo had given little indication that he was any better than his peers, having acquired a well-earned reputation for fast living. For the leaders of the Hill a trial of strength now, when the father was crippled and his heir not yet mature, was to their advantage. Jacopo Acciaiuoli, son of Agnolo, who had attended the meeting of King Ferrante and Lorenzo, reported to his father, "And returning to the arrival of Lorenzo, many fathers spend to get their sons known who would do better to spend so that they were not known." Beneath the spiteful jab there is a more substantive message—that neither the ailing father nor his awkward son would put up much of a fight. The next few days would put this judgment to the test.

Indeed there was nothing in the biography of either Piero or Lorenzo to strike fear in an opponent. "[Piero] did not, to be sure, possess the wisdom and virtues of his father," commented the historian Francesco Guicciardini (1483–1540), usually a fair judge of men, "but he was a good-natured and very clement man." A kind heart, however, was not necessarily an advantage in the cutthroat world of Florentine politics; in the centuries of bloody strife that marred the history of the City of the Baptist, men of saintly disposition were notable by their absence.

Despite the rising tension, August 27 dawned in an atmosphere of deceptive calm. Elections for the new *Signoria* were scheduled for the following day, and Florentine citizens, the great majority of whom wished only to go

about their daily lives undisturbed by the quarrels of their masters, were cautiously optimistic that the leaders of the opposing factions had pulled back from the precipice. Only the day before, Piero and his family had left Florence for their villa at Careggi, something he would never have contemplated had he believed a confrontation imminent. In a crisis anyone who found himself outside city walls could quickly be marginalized. It was just such a blunder that, thirty years earlier, almost cost Cosimo his life. Taking advantage of his temporary absence from the city, the government, led at the time by the Albizzi family, decided to move against their too-powerful rival. Upon returning to Florence, Cosimo had been arrested, threatened with execution, and ultimately sent into exile. The lesson could hardly have been lost on his son that leaving the city at a time of strife was a recipe for disaster.

Curiously, it was Dietisalvi Neroni, one of the leaders of the Hill, who had persuaded the Medici leader to take this vacation, promising that he, too, would retire to his villa, thus lessening the chances of a violent clash breaking out between their armed supporters. It was an apparently statesmanlike gesture that would allow the democratic process to go forward without interference.

Piero's agreement suggests a misplaced confidence that the situation was moving in his direction, and there were in fact indications that the fortunes of the Medici party, which had reached a low ebb in the winter, were on the rebound. But the decisive factor may simply have been the poor state of his health; a few days earlier a flare-up of gout had confined him to his bed, making it almost impossible to conduct any serious business. Thus when Neroni held out an olive branch, Piero was only too happy grasp it.

Piero had failed to take the measure of Neroni, whose powers of dissimulation were apparently so highly developed that he was able to maintain cordial relations with the man whose destruction he plotted. Piero, not necessarily an astute judge of men at the best of times and now distracted by the pain in his joints, allowed himself to be taken in by Neroni's conciliatory gestures. "[I]n order to better conceal his intent," explains Machiavelli, "[Neroni] visited Piero often, reasoned with him about the unity of the city, and advised him." Though Piero was aware that his one-time colleague had at least flirted with the opposition, Neroni was able to

convince him that he was a man of goodwill who could act as a moderating influence on his fellow reformers.

Machiavelli portrays Neroni as an unprincipled schemer who set out to destroy his old friend in order to further his own career, but with him, as with all the leaders of the revolt of 1466, it is difficult to disentangle motives of self-interest from genuine idealism. Neroni does seem to have possessed some republican instincts, though it is uncertain if these were born of principle or sprang from a practical calculation that he could rise further as a champion of the people than as a Medici lackey. As *Gonfaloniere di Giustizia* (the Standard-Bearer of Justice, the head of state) in 1454 he was already an advocate of democratic reform, winning, according to one contemporary source "great goodwill among the people." And in 1465 he had written to the duke of Milan that "the citizenry would like greater liberty and a broader government, as is customary in republican cities like ours."

For the most part, however, Neroni prospered as a loyal servant of the Medici regime. It is unclear when ideological differences combined with frustrated ambition to turn him against his former allies, but as early as 1463 the ambassador from Milan reported to his boss that "Cosimo and his men have no greater or more ambitious enemy than Dietisalvi [Neroni]." In spite of these warnings, at the time of Cosimo's death in 1464 Neroni was still one of Piero's closest advisors.

Neroni's first line of attack, recounts Machiavelli, was to engineer Piero's financial collapse. He describes how Piero had turned to Neroni for advice following Cosimo's death, but "[s]ince his own ambition was more compelling to him than his love for Piero or the old benefits received from Cosimo," Neroni encouraged Piero to pursue policies "under which his ruin was hidden." These policies included calling in many of the loans granted by Cosimo—often on easy terms and made for political rather than financial reasons—a move that caused a string of bankruptcies and added to the growing list of Piero's enemies.

Despite his rival's best efforts, however, Piero weathered the financial crisis, and by 1466 Neroni was growing impatient with half-measures. Guicciardini gives to Neroni the decisive role in the attempted coup: "[It was] caused in large part by the ambition of *messer* Dietisalvi di Nerone. . . . He was very astute, very rich, and highly esteemed; but not

content with the great status and reputation he enjoyed, he got together with *messer* Agnolo Acciaiuoli, also a man of great authority, and planned to depose Piero di Cosimo."

While Piero and his family headed to Careggi, Neroni and his confederates prepared to seize the government by force.

For generations, Careggi, with its fields and quiet country lanes, had served the Medici household as a refuge from the cares of the city. Cosimo had purchased for the philosopher Marsilio Ficino a modest farm close by at Montevecchio so that his friend would have the leisure to complete his life's work, the translation of Plato from Greek to Latin. "Yesterday I went to my estate at Careggi," Cosimo once wrote to Ficino, "but for the sake of cultivating my mind and not the estate. Come to us, Marsilio, as soon as possible. Bring with you Plato's book on *The Highest Good.* . . . I want nothing more wholeheartedly than to know which way leads most surely to happiness." Lorenzo, too, enjoyed the philosopher's company, and later in life would convene at Careggi those informal gatherings of scholars and poets that historians dignified with the somewhat misleading label "the Platonic Academy," finding the country air a suitable stimulus to deep thought.

Today, however, the villa at Careggi could provide no escape from the troubles of the city. The family had barely begun to settle in when the peace of the morning was shattered by the arrival of a horseman at the gates.* The messenger, his horse lathered from hours of hard riding, his clothes and skin blackened with dust, announced that he had come from Giovanni Bentivoglio, lord of Bologna, with an urgent message for the master of the house.

The messenger's point of origin was sufficient to set off alarm bells. The ancient university town of Bologna was strategically placed near the passes through the Apennines to keep a watchful eye on anyone coming from the tumultuous Romagna; from here, an army descending on Tuscany from the north would easily be spotted. Bentivoglio was but one of many

* Contemporary accounts differ as to when Piero and his family arrived in Careggi; one suggests that they had just arrived that day, though this appears unlikely. It is more probable that they had arrived a day earlier.

trusted allies of the Medici scattered throughout Italy and beyond who kept their eyes and ears open for any scrap of information that might be useful to their friends in Florence.

This morning's letter brought news that Bentivoglio's spies in the village of Fiumalbo had observed eight hundred cavalry and infantry under the banner of Borso d'Este, Duke of Modena and Marquis of Ferrara, setting out in the direction of Florence. To the startled Piero, their objective was clear—to join with the Medici's enemies in the city and topple them from power.

Though Bentivoglio's message has not survived, its contents are summarized by a letter written that same day by Nicodemo Tranchedini, the Milanese ambassador to Florence. In it he informs his master, Galeazzo Maria Sforza, Duke of Milan, that Piero had "received letters from the regime in Bologna, from D. Johane Bentivogli," and that soldiers of the marquis of Ferrara were "already on the move to come here on the invitation of Piero's enemies, with horse and riders of Bartholomeo Colione."

For months the leaders of the Hill had been in close communication with Borso d'Este, a northern Italian lord whose schemes for self-aggrandizement were predicated on a change of government in Florence. In November 1465, the Milanese ambassador had reported to his employer that Borso's agent, *Messer* Jacopo Trotti, "every day meets *M.* Luca, *M.* Angelo [Agnolo Acciaiuoli] and *M.* Dietisalvi [Neroni]." Given the fact that Piero was kept well informed of these machinations by Tranchedini, it is remarkable that he allowed himself to be lured from the city at this critical time.

If the motives of the Florentine rebels were a mixture of idealism and self-interest, those of Borso d'Este were unambiguous. Described by Pope Pius II in his memoirs as a "man of fine physique and more than average height with beautiful hair and a pleasing countenance," Borso d'Este was also "eloquent and garrulous and listened to himself talking as if he pleased himself more than his hearers." In his inflated self-regard he was little different from any number of petty princes who sold their military services to the highest bidder, nor did his taste for costly jewelry, his arrogance, and deceitfulness—other qualities noted by Pius—set him apart from his peers.

Technically a vassal of the pope, Borso was always looking for ways to expand his family's territories at the expense of his neighbors. An important

step in his campaign was the removal of the Medici, who were closely linked with his chief rival in the north, the powerful Sforza family of Milan. In June his representative in Florence had contacted Luca Pitti to suggest that "Piero be removed from the city." It took almost two months of negotiation, but by late August the leaders of the Hill had decided to team up with the mercenary adventurer, inviting "the marquis of Ferrara [to] come with his troops toward the city and, when Piero was dead, to come armed in the piazza and make the *Signoria* establish a state in accordance with their will."

Piero had grossly underestimated his enemies' resolve, but he now moved swiftly to correct the situation. First he dashed off an urgent letter to Sforza, asking him to send his troops, some 1,500 of whom were stationed in Imola in Romagna, about fifty miles to the north, to intercept those of d'Este. Desperately seeking friends closer to home, Piero dictated a second letter to the leaders of the neighboring town of Arezzo, pleading that "upon receiving this you send me as many armed men as you can . . . and direct them here to me."

Even more important was the task of mobilizing the pro-Medici forces within the city. Foreign armies could throw their considerable weight behind one faction or another, but victory and defeat would be determined largely inside the city walls. Here the rebels had a great advantage. Piero, in so much pain from gout that he could travel only by litter, would not arrive back in the city for hours, time the rebels could use to prepare the battlefield and set the terms of the engagement.

So it was that Lorenzo found himself this August morning hurrying back to Florence, accompanied only by a few companions as young and inexperienced as himself. It was Lorenzo's mission to ride out ahead of the main party and to raise the Medici banner in Florence, ensuring as well that the gates remained in friendly hands long enough to permit Piero's safe return. As the head of the household made his slow, painful way to Florence, the fate of the Medici regime would rest in the hands of a seventeen-year-old boy.

From the moment he left the fortified compound of Careggi, Lorenzo was on his guard. The countryside through which he passed was as familiar to him as the streets near the family palace in the city, the rolling hills and

game-filled copses, destination of many a hunting expedition, a constant source of delight. Today, however, the landscape he loved felt menacing. Every low stone wall and ramshackle farmhouse provided a place of concealment, every patch of shade an opportunity for ambush.

Nothing disturbed the heavy air as the horsemen picked their way cautiously down the winding road. Tiny lizards darted through the underbrush, while hawks circled high overhead. Having completed most of the journey without incident, and with the walls of the city looming before him, Lorenzo brought his small group to a halt. Ahead lay a tiny hamlet known as Sant' Antonio (or Sant'Ambrogio) del Vescovo. Little more than a few buildings shimmering in the summer heat, there was nothing ominous in the rustic scene. But Lorenzo had reason to be wary. The village took its name from the archbishop (*vescovo*) of Florence, whose summer residence was attached to a small chapel there. The reigning archbishop of Florence was Giovanni Neroni, Dietisalvi's brother. (His sacerdotal office could have provided little comfort: a bishop's robes in Renaissance Italy were more often the costume of a political intriguer with a dagger in his belt than those of an unworldly man of God.) With Neroni's recent treachery in mind, Lorenzo knew that to pass through the hamlet, his usual route from the villa to the city, he would have to place himself squarely in the lion's den.

It was at this moment Lorenzo signaled to one of his party to remain some distance behind while he and the rest of his companions spurred their horses into motion and continued along the road to Florence. As the riders passed between the first of the buildings, armed men rushed out from behind walls and doorways, surrounding the riders, the points of their halberds glinting menacingly in the sun. Horses reared as Lorenzo and his companions unsheathed their swords. In the shadows men cocked crossbows. In the commotion apparently no one noticed the lone figure who turned his horse around and sped back along the road in the direction they had come.

The ambush at Sant'Antonio del Vescovo remains one of the more mysterious episodes in the annals of Florentine history. It is a puzzle that must be assembled from bits and pieces, the missing portions filled in with sound conjecture, since no contemporary report gives more than a brief, tantalizing mention. The most detailed account is that of Niccolò Valori, who included it in his biography of Lorenzo, written some thirty years later. But even this narrative raises as many questions as it answers:

> [I]t was through the sound judgment of Lorenzo, though still young, that the life of Piero his father was saved; learning that awaiting him as he returned from Careggi were many conspirators who planned to kill him, [Lorenzo] sent word to those who were carrying [Piero] by litter (unable, sick as he was with gout, to travel any other way) not to continue by the usual route, but through a secret and secure way return to the city. [Lorenzo], meanwhile, riding along the usual path, let it be known that his father was right behind him; and having thus deceived the plotters, both were saved.

Francesco Guicciardini supplies some additional information, including the precise spot where the ambush took place. "[W]hen Piero went off to Careggi," he wrote, "his enemies decided to murder him on his return. Armed men were placed in Sant'Ambrogio [sic] del Vescovo, which Piero usually passed on his way back to the city. They could avail themselves of that place because the archbishop of Florence was *messer* Dietisalvi's brother." Interestingly, Guicciardini ignores Lorenzo's role in the drama, attributing their escape simply to "the good fortune of Piero and of the Medici."*

Lorenzo himself never offered a full retelling of the day's events, though it is possible that Valori's version is based on Lorenzo's recollections. References to the ambush must be teased from his own cryptic comments or from the equally oblique remarks of his friends. Lorenzo's silence can be explained by his reluctance to talk about, or even admit the existence of, the many attempts made on his life. In 1477, when his life again appeared under

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* Despite considerable contemporary evidence, some historians have tended to downplay or contradict the official version of what happened on August 27, 1466. The main disagreement comes over whether, as the Medici contended, the Hill precipitated the crisis by calling on Borso d'Este's troops and attempting to seize Piero at Sant'Antonio del Vescovo, or, as their opponents claimed, the whole event was staged by the partisans of the Plain in order to crush the reform movement. A contemporary account of the plot is given by one Iacopo di Niccolò di Cocco Donati, a member of the *Signoria* that August, who declared that the conspirators "had arranged to assassinate [Piero] at Careggi" (Phillips, p. 246). (It is Donati's account, incidentally, that supplies the crucial detail that Piero had gone to his villa as part of an arrangement with Neroni.) Donati's report offers crucial confirmation of the Medici version. Another contemporary account bolstering the Medici position comes from the diary of the apothecary Luca Landucci, a man whose testimony is all the more credible because he had no political ax to grind (see

threat from invisible assassins, he dismissed a warning from the Milanese ambassador: "and thanks to God, though I have been told by many: 'watch yourself!,' I have found none of these plots to be true, except one, at the time of Niccolò Soderini." Thus the traumatic events of 1466 appear in Lorenzo's correspondence only at the moment when an even more dangerous conspiracy was taking shape, and largely to make light of current threats. From this same period comes another suggestive letter, written by Lorenzo's friend and tutor Gentile Becchi. Urging him to take the rumors of threats on his life seriously, he warns Lorenzo not to heed the counsel of "new Dietisalvis who will advise you to go to your villa like your father."

Given Lorenzo's own reticence, the ambush at Sant'Antonio del Vescovo must forever retain an element of mystery. Even Valori's account contains many puzzling features. Why did those who confronted Lorenzo fail to take him into custody? Why did they accept Lorenzo's assertion that his father was just around the corner, without at least holding him as a hostage? From Lorenzo's few remarks it is clear that he felt his life had been in danger along the road from Careggi to Florence, but Valori's narrative

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Landucci, *A Florentine Diary,* p. 8). Also significant are the letters of the Milanese ambassador, who confirms the movements of Borso d'Este's army, and Piero's panicky call for troops to his friends and neighbors. The confession of Dietisalvi's brother, Francesco (two versions of which are reproduced in Nicolai Rubinstein's "La Confessione di Francesco Neroni e la congiura anti-Medicea del 1466," Archivio Storico Italiano, 126, 1968), offers important testimony on the coordination between the leaders of the Hill and Borso d'Este. Francesco's confession also confirms the basic outlines of the plot, though it differs on some of the details. The memoirs of Benedetto Dei also tend to support the Medici account (see his *Cronica,* especially 23v and 24r). For the other side see Marco Parenti's *Ricordi Storici*. Parenti, though an ardent adherent of the Hill, had no access to the inner circle that planned the coup. His belief that the accusations against the leaders of his party were false was based on hope rather than fact. Lorenzo's own later recollections are significant, if frustratingly vague. The subsequent behavior of the leaders of the Hill shows the plot to kill Piero to be thoroughly consistent with their characters. It is suggestive that the two great Florentine historians, Machiavelli and Guicciardini, writing within a few decades of the events, largely accepted the Medici version. Rubinstein is no doubt correct when he says, "Fear was probably the decisive element in the final crisis" (*The Government of Florence Under the Medici,* p. 184). Both sides had built up foreign armies just outside Florentine territory, each believing it needed to act to forestall an invasion by the other. Under the circumstances, the pressure to steal the march on one's opponents was great.

does not end in a violent clash. Instead, according to his friend's retelling, Lorenzo manages to confound his enemies not through martial valor but through quick thinking and his powers of persuasion.

One might be tempted to dismiss the tale were it not for the fact that it conforms perfectly with what we know of Lorenzo's character. The confrontation at Sant'Antonio may provide the first instance when Lorenzo was able to deflect the knives of his enemies using only his native wit, but it will not be the last. Time and again he showed a remarkable ability to talk his way out of tight situations. With his back to the wall, and his life hanging in the balance, Lorenzo was at his most convincing. A gift he was to display throughout his life—and one that would be crucial to his statecraft, allowing him to appeal to people from all walks of life—was to suit his language to the moment, effortlessly trading Latin epigrams with scholars or obscenities with laborers in a tavern. This earthier vocabulary would have served him well on this occasion, but his powers of persuasion would have done little good without the confusion and missteps that tend to unravel even the best-laid plans.

From the perspective provided by centuries in which scholars have been able to sift the evidence at leisure, the fact that Lorenzo was allowed to proceed unmolested seems an improbable bit of good fortune. But this view distorts the true situation. Lorenzo's native wit no doubt played a part, but so did the natural perplexity of those who had been instructed to seize his father, the lord of Florence, and now had to make a snap decision with no instructions from their commanders. After a brief conversation, in which Lorenzo no doubt adopted a tone of light banter meant to put them at their ease, they let him go, having been convinced that soon enough the main prize would fall into their laps.

While they waited in vain for Piero to arrive, Lorenzo and the rest of his party made a dash for the city walls. As soon as he passed through the wide arch of the Porta Faenza, Lorenzo could breathe a little easier.* This was

* The road from Careggi would have led him to either the Porta San Gallo or the Porta Faenza, just to the west. The Porta Faenza, however, was the natural point of entry for anyone coming from Sant'Antonio del Vescovo. The Porta Faenza has long since been torn down, along with much of the fourteenth-century wall that once girded Florence to the north, but the Porta San Gallo still stands, now forming the centerpiece of a busy traffic circle.

Medici country—the neighborhoods in the northwest corner of the city that in earlier centuries had mustered for war under the ancient banner of the Golden Lion. Familiar faces greeted him at every turn, local wine merchants, grocers, fishmongers, and stonemasons, with a fierce attachment to the few blocks where they were born and an equally fierce loyalty to the powerful family that lived among them. In his poem, "Il Simposio," Lorenzo left a description of this neighborhood and its people that reflects an easy familiarity between the humble folks and the lord of the city:

> *I was approaching town along the road*
> *that leads into the portal of Faenza,*
> *when I observed such throngs proceeding through*
> *the streets, that I won't even dare to guess*
> *how many men made up the retinue.*
> *The names of many I could easily say:*
> *I knew a number of them personally . . .*
> *There's one I saw among those myriads,*
> *with whom I'd been close friends for many years,*
> *as I had known him since we'd both been lads . . .*

"Above all else stick together with your neighbors and kinsmen," advised the Florentine patrician Gino Capponi, "assist your friends both within and without the city." For decades Lorenzo's forebears had acted upon this Florentine wisdom, knowing that men not masonry form the strongest bulwark in times of civic unrest. From the moment of his birth, seventeen years earlier, Lorenzo's father had been preparing his son for just such a crisis, weaving around him an intricate web of mutual obligation, nurturing those relationships of benefactor and supplicant, patron and client, through which power was wielded in Florentine politics. In moments of upheaval, Lorenzo's ability to draw on those relationships, to command the loyalty of his fellow citizens—above all of neighbors, friends, and kinsmen, bound together both by interest and by affection—would be vital to his family's survival.

The Baptistery of San Giovanni, Florence (Miles Unger)

II. FAMILY PORTRAIT

"Such was our greatness that it used to be said, 'Thou art like one of the Medici,' and every man feared us; even now when a citizen does an injury to another or abuses him, they say, 'If he did thus to a Medici what would happen?' Our family is still powerful in the State by reason of many friends and much riches, please God preserve it all to us. And to-day, thank God, we number about fifty men."

—FILIGNO DI CONTE DE' MEDICI, 1373

LORENZO WAS BORN ON JANUARY 1, 1449,* AT A TIME when the Medici, led by his grandfather Cosimo, stood securely at the summit of Florentine politics. The birth of a male heir to Cosimo's elder son, Piero, the first such birth to the family since their seizure of power fifteen years earlier, opened the prospect, comforting to some and troubling to others, of a true dynastic succession.

His entrance onto the public stage took place on the fifth day following his birth with his baptism in the shrine of San Giovanni. Here in the most ancient and sacred building in the city, into which generations of Florentines had poured their wealth and lavished their artistic talent, Lorenzo made what was, in effect, his political debut. From this moment on he would be in the public eye, a member of the community of Florentine citizens and the wider community of Christian believers, but also set apart, bound to a singular destiny.

Accompanying the proud father from the family home to the Baptistery of San Giovanni on that cold January morning were some of the most distinguished men in Florence. The archbishop of Florence himself, the saintly Antoninus—a close friend of Cosimo's—would stand godfather to

* According to the Florentine calendar Lorenzo was born in 1448; Florentines began the new year on March 25, the Feast of the Annunciation.

the child and preside over the ceremony, aided in his sacred duties by Benedetto Schiattesi, prior of the Medicean church of San Lorenzo. This arrangement echoed in ecclesiastical terms the family's political stature in the city; the archbishop represented the entire Christian community of the republic, while the prior of San Lorenzo embodied the Medici's special relationship with the neighborhood in which they resided and that formed the most reliable base of their support.

The attendance of the distinguished clerics honored the family, but it also reminded the citizens how completely Medici money had penetrated the fabric of the city. Both men were Medici clients. Even Antoninus, a man widely revered for his holiness (he was later canonized by the pope), was on the Medici payroll; for many years as the prior of the monastery of San Marco he was the beneficiary of Cosimo's largesse. When he complained that men "are mean in giving alms and prefer to spend on chapels, superfluous ornaments and ecclesiastical pomp rather than on support of the poor," was it a subtle dig at his friend who was filling the city with buildings emblazoned with the Medici arms? As for Schiattesi, his debt to the Medici was even more overt. The church of San Lorenzo, located a block to the west of the Medici palace on the Via Larga, was so dependent on Medici patronage that it often seemed to be little more than an annex of the family residence. Families allied with the Medici—the Martelli, the Ginori, the della Stufa, and, until their disgrace, the Dietisalvi Neroni—all built chapels in San Lorenzo in a typically Florentine synergy of politics and religion. Also typically Florentine was the way the Medici used the church to enhance their own prestige through artistic patronage. By hiring Brunelleschi to design the old sacristy (where Cosimo's father, Giovanni di Bicci, was buried) and Donatello to provide the sculptural decoration, they were transforming their local church into a monument to rival the cathedral itself.

Representing the secular authority on this happy occasion was the entire outgoing *Signoria* (on which Piero had just served) and the *Accoppiatori,* the members of a special commission whose behind-the-scenes meddling with the electoral rolls was vital to maintaining the *reggimento.* Agnolo Acciaiuoli, the outgoing *Gonfaloniere di Giustizia* and still very much one of Cosimo's men, was there to pay his respects, and with him were many leading figures in the regime.

Also standing godfather (by proxy) to young Lorenzo was Federico da

Montefeltro, ruler of Urbino. Years later Federico would play a far more sinister part in Lorenzo's life, but on this occasion the prominence of his representatives at the ceremony was a signal to the Medici's compatriots that the family could boast powerful friends abroad. The prestige gained by the Medici through their association with kings, popes, counts, and other members of the feudal nobility was crucial to enhancing their standing with their own citizens. As an astute political observer later remarked about Lorenzo, "the reputation of the said Mag.co Lorenzo and the esteem that is accorded him from the powers of Italy and the Lords from abroad; not having this, he would not have a reputation in his own land."

Lorenzo's baptism was the first public presentation of the Medici heir to the people of Florence. That there was political calculation involved even in this most sacred rite is indicated by its careful timing: Piero had extended the customary three days between birth and baptism to await a more propitious alignment of the stars, taking advantage of the calendar to associate Lorenzo's baptism with the Feast of the Epiphany. In a clever if fortuitous bit of stagecraft, he managed to tie the ritual to the day on the sacred calendar most closely identified with the family's power and prestige. For generations the Medici had been associated with the celebrations dedicated to the Magi. Every few years magnificent processions, paid for largely from Medici funds, paraded through the city, concluding at the Medicean convent of San Marco, where a holy crèche was housed. Even the usually unostentatious Cosimo felt obliged to participate, marching through the city dressed up in a magnificent cloak of fur or gold brocade.*

It is easy to understand why the Medici were attracted to this particular scriptural tale. The Magi are among the few figures of wealth and power in the Bible who have no difficulty in attaining the heavenly kingdom. No doubt Cosimo and his sons, whose fortune was built on the still suspect business of money-lending, hoped that some of their sanctity would rub off on them. Depictions of the Magi were a staple of Medici iconography. A modest version of the scene by Benozzo Gozzoli adorned Cosimo's private cell in the monastery of San Marco, and a more magnificent version would soon cover the walls of the family's private chapel in the new palace

* The Medici palace was situated toward the end of the journey on the Via Larga. In later years viewing stands were set up outside the palace.

on the Via Larga. Lorenzo in particular came to be associated with the glamour of the Magi; many of his earliest portraits are found in paintings of the subject, including masterpieces not only by Gozzoli but by Sandro Botticelli.* As a young man Lorenzo was enrolled in the Confraternity of the Magi, the religious brotherhood that staged the processions that attracted admiring crowds from around Europe and helped give Florence its well-earned reputation for splendid pageantry.

Lorenzo was born to rule. This fact alone set him apart from his grandfather and father, both of whom entered the world at a time when the Medici were a somewhat obscure clan on the margins of Florence's governing oligarchy. Lorenzo's first biographer, Niccolò Valori, wrote of his friend, "Thus, while still only a youth, he merited not only his title of *Magnifico* but Magnanimous also." From the beginning Lorenzo possessed the kind of glamour the jealous merchants of Florence were reluctant to concede to any fellow citizen. By contrast, at the time of Cosimo's birth in 1389 his father, Giovanni di Bicci de' Medici, had yet to amass the fortune upon which the future greatness of his family would rest. Piero was raised to manhood as merely the elder son of a prosperous banker, and one, moreover, whose family name still carried the stigma of past indiscretions.† Lorenzo was the first of the Medici born, so to speak, to the purple, and this awareness of an almost imperial destiny shaped his sense of himself and the attitudes of those around him.

The house to which the swaddled infant was brought following the baptism was an unremarkable building on the Via Larga known as the *casa vecchia,* or old house. To such unpretentious city dwellings Florentines attached the term *palazzo* (palace), but few possessed the grandeur we associate with the word. A century earlier even immensely wealthy banking clans like the Bardi or Peruzzi had been content to live in modest houses, often knit

* Lorenzo is the dark-haired young man on the right of Botticelli's *Adoration of the Magi* (now in the Uffizi Gallery), a row or two in front of the artist himself.

† In fact the Medici had a none-too-savory reputation for violence and political unreliability. A distant relative, Salvestro de' Medici, had been among the leaders of the *Ciompi* uprising, which made all the Medici suspect in the eyes of the ruling oligarchy. See the *Chronicles of the Tumult of the Ciompi* (reprinted in the Monash Publications in History) for further details on Salvestro de' Medici's role in the disturbances.

together haphazardly from pre-existing structures. Then wealth was still suspect (particularly wealth associated with usury) and humility was regarded as the cardinal Christian virtue. The *casa vecchia* was a relic of those earlier times, a sensible burgher's home with few pretensions. It reflected the self-effacing character of its original owner, Giovanni di Bicci, a man who shunned the spotlight and whose reluctance to become embroiled in politics was such that on his deathbed he advised his sons, "Be chary of frequenting the Palace [of the *Signoria*]; rather wait to be summoned, and then be obedient, and not puffed up with pride at receiving many votes"—advice the politically ambitious Cosimo was not inclined to heed.

Cosimo was a far different man. He possessed a much more expansive view of the world and of his place in it, participating as both a patron and gifted amateur scholar in the humanist revival that was making Florence the intellectual capital of Europe, pursuits his father would no doubt have considered a waste of time.

Nowhere was this generational change more evident than in his own home. At the time of Lorenzo's birth, Cosimo was in the midst of building a grand new edifice to accommodate his growing family. Begun five years earlier, it was, according to Giorgio Vasari, "the first palace which was built in [Florence] on modern lines," that is, incorporating the classical architectural forms championed by Brunelleschi. One indication of its ambitious scale is that more than twenty buildings were razed to make room for the new structure, an inconvenience to neighbors justified, as was usual in similar circumstances, on the grounds that the new structure would be an improvement over the squalid tenements it replaced.

As the residence of Florence's most prominent citizen, the new palace rising next door to the *casa vecchia* at the corner of the Via Gori and the Via Larga would set a model for those that followed.* In Cosimo's *palazzo* one can sense the driving ambition that characterized men of the Renaissance. The magnificence that has come to be associated with Florence in

* The Medici palace has, over the centuries, come to symbolize the life of the cultured gentleman, a perfect blend of wealth, learning, and art. One can find echoes in the nineteenth-century mansions in Newport and, more surprisingly, in civic buildings like the main branch of the Boston Public Library, where the rich man's home has now been converted into the people's palace. The choice makes sense when one recalls that Cosimo established the first public library in Europe at his favorite monastery of San Marco.

the age of Lorenzo is attributable largely to a moral transformation in which ostentatious display went from being condemned as a vice to being praised as a virtue. A century earlier an anonymous Florentine merchant, more afraid of drawing the unwanted attentions of the tax collector than he was interested in living well, had declared, "Spending a lot and making a big impression are in themselves . . . dangerous." But only a few decades later attitudes had changed when humanist Leonardo Bruni wrote that wealth was not to be despised, for it "affords an opportunity for the exercise of virtue." Money if honestly come by was nothing to be ashamed of. Wisely expended for the common good it could be a creative force, the source of justifiable pride.

Contemporaries used the word *magnificienza* to denote the brilliance and generosity expected of a great man. Nowhere in the world was the thirst for wealth and honor as intense and as productive as in Florence, where families were driven to ever greater displays of wealth and taste by a competitive political and cultural climate. The Florentine expatriate Leon Battista Alberti observed in his book *On the Family,* "everyone [in Florence] seems bred to the cultivation of profit. Every discussion seems to concern economic wisdom, every thought turns to acquisition, and every art is expended to obtain great riches." In contrast to much of the rest of Europe, where feudal hierarchies were fixed by law and hallowed by custom, in Florence social and political status were as fluid as the ups and downs of the business cycle. Nothing did more to secure a precarious perch atop the social heap than building a sumptuous palace on a major thoroughfare.*

By the end of the fifteenth century, every neighborhood boasted at least one imposing residence of a proud, domineering family. Benedetto Dei, writing in the 1470s, noted over thirty fine palaces built over the last half-century. The Palace of the Priors was still the largest secular building in the city (surpassed only by the cathedral), but numerous private residences were nearly as impressive, as if to demonstrate their refusal to be overawed

* Often such projects could actually have the opposite of their intended effect. Giovanni Rucellai, for one, spent so much on his building projects, including his famous palace designed by Leon Battista Alberti, that he almost destroyed the family fortune. Still, Rucellai may have gotten his money's worth, since his name is still best known for the palace that bears his name.

by the might of the duly elected government. With their rough-hewn facades and fortresslike appearance, these private residences possessed all the visual authority of civic monuments and suggested a justifiable skepticism in the ability of the elected officials to protect their lives and property. If the Medici led the way, the Pitti, Pazzi, Rucellai, Strozzi, and many others were nipping at their heels.* Nothing so clearly illustrates the weakness of the government of Florence in relation to its principal families as this craggy cityscape bristling with the strongholds of the great and powerful.

For Cosimo, drawing up his plans before the new building boom had gotten fully underway, the construction of the new palace would put some distance between the Medici and their rivals, and give permanent and prominent form to the Medici presence in the district of the Golden Lion in the northwest corner of the city. Other great clans had long been identified with particular districts: the Albizzi with the *gonfalone* of the *Chiavi* (Keys) in the northeast corner of the city; the Bardi concentrated in the Ladder across the river; the Rinuccini in the Ox near Santa Croce; the Strozzi in the *gonfalone* of Red Lion to the west of the New Market.†

The first Medici arrived in Florence among the anonymous crowds of rural folk attracted to the city during the commercial boom that followed in the wake of the Crusades. This violent clash between Christian Europe and the Islamic East had the unanticipated effect of stimulating trade between the two civilizations, much of which flowed into the great Italian seaports and along the highways of the peninsula to markets in western and northern Europe. Florence was but one of many Italian cities to grow prosperous from the trade in spices, rare silks, and other exotic luxuries from the fabled Orient. Many a peasant, hearing tales of easy money,

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* Many architectural historians trace the origins of the Renaissance *palazzo* to that built by Niccolò da Uzzano (designed by the artist Lorenzo di Bicci) in the 1420s. Though modest by later standards, with its spacious interior courtyard it was an advance over the formless private dwellings of the Middle Ages.

† By the fifteenth century the older divisions of the city—into sixteen *gonfaloni* and, later, into sixths—had been superseded for administrative purposes largely by a division into quarters, each identified with a major shrine: that of San Giovanni (the Baptistery); Sta. Maria Novella; Sta. Croce; and, in the Oltrarno, the district on the south bank of the river, Sto. Spirito. The Medici *gonfalone* of the Golden Lion fell within San Giovanni.

abandoned his plow to seek his fortune in the city, the ancestors of Cosimo, Piero, and Lorenzo among them.*

The obscurity of the branch of the family to which Lorenzo belonged is indicated by its itinerant nature. Originally they had been associated with the more ancient neighborhood near the Old Market and the parish church of San Tommaso, but in making the move a few blocks to the north, outside the circuit of the old, twelfth-century walls, Giovanni di Bicci was venturing into territory already well populated by his kinsmen. Indeed, by the fourteenth century the Medici were among the most prominent families of their quarter, leaders of the popular faction who were battling the magnates for control of the city. One of the earliest mentions of the Medici comes in the fourteenth-century chronicle of Giovanni Villani. "[T]he *popolani* of the quarter of San Giovanni," he records, "having chosen as their leaders the Medici and the Rondinelli and *Messer* Ugo della Stufa, judge, and the *popolani* of the borgo of San Lorenzo, along with the butchers and with the other artisans, assembled without the permission of the Commune in numbers totalling 1000 men . . . saying that the *grandi* were about to launch an attack." This contemporary account reveals not only the Medici's long-standing connection with the parish of San Lorenzo but also their well-earned reputation as populist rabble-rousers.

Giovanni's move may have been motivated by a desire to forge closer links with those more prominent branches of the extended Medici clan. Loyalty to family was the bedrock of social life in Florence; in a corrupt and violent world, consanguinity was the best—though by no means a foolproof—guarantee that one's interests would be looked after. Cosimo's rise to power, for instance, was aided by the efforts not only of his brother Lorenzo but of his cousin Averardo, while Tommaso Soderini's support of Piero in the crisis of 1466 was due in part to the fact that he was married to Dianora, sister of Piero's wife, Lucrezia Tornabuoni.† A distant ancestor of

* During their years in power, many a propagandist sought a more distinguished genealogy for the family, but none is convincing. In one colorful history, the red balls of the Medici escutcheon derive from the dents put in the shield of a knightly forebear by a giant he slew in mortal combat.

† Piero's cousin Pierfrancesco de' Medici's ambiguous role in the same conflict could have been predicted by consulting his family tree; he was caught between loyalty to his blood relatives and his father-in-law, Agnolo Acciaiuoli.

Lorenzo, Filigno di Conte de' Medici, captured the tenor of Florentine life when he wrote in his *Ricordi* of 1373: "Such was our greatness that it used to be said, 'Thou art like one of the Medici,' and every man feared us; even now when a citizen does an injury to another or abuses him, they say, 'If he did thus to a Medici what would happen?' Our family is still powerful in the State by reason of many friends and much riches, please God preserve it all to us. And to-day, thank God, we number about fifty men."

One of the simplest explanations for the Medici ascendance was their fertility. The tax roll of 1427 reveals that the Medici, with thirty-one tax-paying households, were among the most prolific, though falling far short of the Strozzi (fifty-four) and the Bardi (sixty). In short, there was strength in numbers. At home the infant Lorenzo was surrounded by a large and growing family. In addition to his mother and father, Lorenzo had two older sisters, Bianca, born in 1445, and Lucrezia (known as Nannina), born in 1447. But in this profoundly patriarchal society it was the male children who guaranteed the survival of the family. As teenagers the girls would be married off to form alliances with other prominent families—Bianca married into the ancient Pazzi clan and Lucrezia into the Rucellai—while the boys were expected to carry on the family name and fortune. Thus, from the start the Medici invested most of their hopes and dreams in young Lorenzo.

To his grown sons, Piero and Giovanni, Cosimo was a formidable figure, but, as their correspondence shows, relations were marked by affection and mutual respect. With his family, as with the republic over which he presided, Cosimo eschewed the harsh methods of the tyrant and was repaid with love and devotion. Piero later recorded that on his deathbed Cosimo told him "he would make no will . . . seeing that we were always united in true love, amity, and esteem." The success of the Medici can be ascribed in large part to the way each member of the family worked toward a common goal, demonstrating a unity of purpose not always present among ruling dynasties, where jealousy and competition are more common than fraternal affection.

As paterfamilias Cosimo presided over a large household, which included siblings, cousins, aunts, and uncles, all under one roof or within a stone's throw of the main residence on the Via Larga. In his tax declaration of 1457 he claimed fourteen dependents, including his nephew Pierfrancesco (son of his brother, Lorenzo, who had died in 1440) and his

family, and those of his two sons, Piero and Giovanni. In addition he listed four household slaves.* Even if, like most Florentine taxpayers, Cosimo exaggerated the number of his dependents, it is clear that blood relatives were only part of a far larger group that relied on Cosimo's support. "There are fifty mouths to feed in our family, including the villas and Florence," Cosimo reported on his tax return of 1458, "and we also employ forty-one retainers, amounting to more than 400 florins a year."

Among those on Cosimo's payroll were not only simple household servants and humble artisans, but also numerous visiting dignitaries, scholars, philosophers, poets, and artists whose names have since become famous. One of the least appreciative of the Medici houseguests was the painter Filippo Lippi. "So much a slave was he to this [amorous] appetite," wrote Giorgio Vasari of the Carmelite monk turned painter, "that when he was in this humor he gave little or no attention to the works that he had undertaken; wherefore on one occasion Cosimo de' Medici, having commissioned him to paint a picture, shut him up in his own house, in order that he might not go out and waste his time." The strategy backfired, however, when Lippi managed to escape from the palace with a rope he fashioned out of his bedsheets. When Cosimo finally tracked down the restless monk, he agreed to give him the run of the house, concluding that "the virtues of rare minds were celestial beings, not slavish hacks."

The Medici home, particularly before the completion of the new palace, must have been in a constant uproar, with visiting ambassadors passing in the hallways artists in their paint-covered smocks and scholars of genius as well as common workers and peasants begging favors from Florence's most powerful citizen. The noted humanist Francesco Filelfo,

* For Cosimo's funeral in 1464, Piero provided mourning clothes for four female slaves, named Chateruccia, Cristina, Catrina, and Zita. Cosimo fathered an illegitimate son, Lorenzo's uncle Carlo, by one of his female slaves; it is not known if she was one of these four. Slaves in Florence were usually women employed as domestic servants—though there are records of slaves being used in the building industries—and a large percentage of babies in foundling hospitals were the children of slaves and (presumably) the master of the house. Many of these children, however, were acknowledged by their fathers, like Lorenzo's uncle Carlo. Most slaves were of Middle Eastern or Slavic origin, shipped from Alexandria or other ports on Venetian ships to serve in the houses of rich Italian merchants. Few in number compared with the tens of thousands of impoverished workers, they remained economically insignificant. Unlike ancient Athens, Renaissance Florence was not built on the labor of slaves.

complaining of Cosimo's favoritism toward the equally distinguished Carlo Marsuppini and Niccolò Niccoli, declared peevishly, "If I do not frequent your house, as they do daily, that is because I am busy."

Much to the chagrin of elected officials, a great deal of the government's business was conducted around the Medici dinner table, where Cosimo met informally with foreign ambassadors and leading men of the regime. The peculiar combination of public and private space in the Medici palace could prove disconcerting to visiting foreign dignitaries. "Cosimo de' Medici," recalled the ambassador from Ferrara,

> was giving an audience to certain ambassadors from the city of Lucca. The audience was taking place at his house, as was customary, and they were deep in conversation when a young boy, his grandson [Lorenzo?], came to him with some reeds and a small knife and begged him to make him a whistle. Cosimo, breaking off the conversation, attended to the boy, fashioning a whistle, and telling him to run off and play. The ambassadors, very indignant, turned to Cosimo saying: "But certainly, *misser* Cosimo, we cannot help but marvel at your behavior, that having come to you on behalf of our communes to treat of such great affairs, you would leave us to attend to a little boy." Cosimo, laughing, embraced them, saying; "O my brothers, are you not also fathers? Do you not know the love one has for one's sons and grandsons. You marveled that I made him the whistle: it is well that he did not ask me to play it, for that I also would have done."

This was an enormously stimulating environment for a young boy. Lorenzo's outlook on life was shaped not only by the luxury of his immediate surroundings but also by the rich, contrasting textures of Florentine life.*

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* Luxury in the fifteenth century meant something rather different from what it does today. In an age before machine production, items like clothing—even for a family as wealthy as the Medici—were scarce and precious commodities. Garments were sumptuously produced, with intricate patterns picked out in gold and silver thread, fur lining, and colors created from dyes derived from products halfway around the world. But the Medici possessed fewer items than even an average middle-class family today. In 1456 Piero made an inventory of Lucrezia's clothing and listed only thirteen garments. Presumably she possessed additional garments too ordinary and inexpensive to be listed, but this is far from the closetfuls of designer clothing any modern socialite would possess. Clothes were expected to last for years and were mended rather than discarded.

Unlike the aristocracy of other eras, the rich in Florence were not cut off from their less fortunate compatriots. Their shops were located on the same blocks as crowded tenements of rubble and brick. Every day they rubbed shoulders on the narrow streets with lowly wool carders in their soiled rags and wooden shoes; they did business in the same shops and prayed in the same churches. Of course Florence was no paradise in which distinctions between rich and poor had magically disappeared. The contempt of the former for the latter was as great in fifteenth-century Florence as in any other age. But the complex mixture of hostility, misunderstanding, and recrimination, as well as mutual dependence, that marked the relations between the classes was enriched by continual intercourse. Even as a young boy Lorenzo was familiar with the striking contrast between the comfort of his own circumstances and the squalid conditions endured by many of his neighbors, something that aroused his pity however little it affected his sense of his own superiority. The common touch he exhibited throughout his life was a product both of his omnivorous tastes and of the easy familiarity with all types he picked up as a child of the city.

Like many of those city-born and city-bred, the various members of the Medici family all yearned for the tranquillity of the countryside. In this, as in so much else, they were typical Florentines. Every citizen who could afford it owned a farm outside the city walls, and even rich merchants were not too proud to work the land with their own hands. Today in Florence, vineyards and olive groves are still within a few minutes' walk of the city center. In the fifteenth century the margin between town and country was even narrower, with fields and orchards filling out the more sparsely populated neighborhoods within the city walls and, just beyond, hillsides dotted with elegant villas and modest farms.

Lorenzo was from his earliest days shuttled back and forth among the many country residences his family possessed. The descriptions of the labor and planning involved will strike a familiar chord with anyone who has had to pack up a house for a summer vacation. "This evening I received your letter saying you have decided that we are to go to Careggi," Lucrezia wrote to her husband, perhaps betraying some slight irritation with Piero's sudden change of plans. "I must see how we can clean and

scour and do all the needful things, and get in the necessary provisions. . . . I wanted one of the sheets without hem-stitching from the antechamber, but you have sent me one from the bed in our room. I am sending you this back, together with Cosimo's squirrel-lined tunic which you asked for. . . . The sheet you are sending should be put in the bag in which I am sending you various things."

Family letters are filled with such homely detail—a missing pair of scissors to be sent to Cosimo or a fur-lined cloak for Piero, who apparently failed to prepare for the cold and damp of Venice. Lucrezia and her mother-in-law, Contessina, are kept busy looking after their husbands and children, sending capons, barrels of oil, wheels of cheese, dried fruit, and special delicacies after them on their various journeys so that one imagines the roads of Tuscany crowded with mules whose only job is to keep the bellies of the Medici men well filled. For all their wealth and power, the Medici women were frugal housekeepers, impatient with waste and anxious to get all they can out of a yard of cloth or barrel of flour. The family's many farms not only served to stock the larders of the palace in the city but also were businesses that they hoped to turn to profit. A letter from Contessina to Giovanni, for example, reminds him to check up on the manager of their estates at Careggi, who had been commissioned to sell fifty-three pounds of goat cheese to some local pot-makers. While the men hobnobbed with dukes and cardinals and attended to affairs of state, the women continued to display the practical good sense and work ethic of their industrious and more modest forebears.

Closest to the city was the villa at Careggi, where Cosimo could often be found puttering about the garden or pruning his vines as he sought relief from the cares of politics. A day's ride to the north brought the family to the villas of Cafaggiolo or Trebbio in the Medici's ancestral homeland of the Mugello. The estate at Cafaggiolo was so extensive that, according to Lorenzo's friend the poet Angelo Poliziano there was nothing that Cosimo could see from its high tower that did not belong to him.* Trebbio was favored as a hunting lodge, and young Lorenzo soon became addicted to the excitement of the chase, a sport that inspired some of his best poetry.

* By the time Lorenzo sold the estate, in 1486, it comprised sixty-seven separate farms.

Few of these villas could be described as luxurious. They were referred to in the Medici tax returns simply as "fortified houses," and the phrase comes closer to the mark than any notion of a villa based on examples like Hadrian's estate at Tivoli. Contemporary pictures show the high towers and beetling crenellations that reveal their function as refuges in times of unrest, a holdover from the tumultuous Middle Ages.* In one letter, the manager of the estate, Francesco Fronsini, noted that some candles sent from Venice "seem too good for Cafaggiolo," a clear indication that then, as now, the standards for country living were more relaxed than those for the city. All the Medici men, from Cosimo to Lorenzo, followed the advice of such Roman writers on country life as Cato, Cicero, and Virgil, and worked the land with their own hands.

Lorenzo spent many of his happiest hours in the fields and forests of Cafaggiolo and Trebbio. His many letters to the managers of his estates show a detailed and firsthand knowledge of animal husbandry, farming, and, especially, the breeding and care of horses, for which he developed a lifelong passion. He enjoyed fishing as a relaxing pastime, but hunting and hawking stimulated his competitive spirit. Sights and sounds absorbed in the fields and forests fill his poetry, whose evocations of country life are every bit as precise as the landscapes of Gozzoli, Ghirlandaio, and Fra Angelico. This description of a rural sunrise comes from his poem "The Partridge Hunt":

The wolf retreated to its wilderness.
The fox retreated to its den,
For there was now a chance it might be seen,
Now that the moon had come and gone again.
The busy peasant woman had already
Allowed the sheep and pigs to leave their pens.
Crystalline, clear, and chilly was the air:
the morning would be fair,
When I was roused by jingling bells and by
The calling of the dogs and similar sounds.

* See the series of paintings of the Medici villas made in the 1590s by Giusto Utens. They are now housed in Florence's Museo di Firenze Com'Era.

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But the attractions of the countryside were, ultimately, merely a respite from more serious work that could be done only in the city. As the Florentine statesman and military leader Gino di Neri Capponi wrote in a poetic homily to his sons, "Honor does not reside in the woods . . . / Worthy men are made in the city, nor indeed can he be called a man / whose measure is not taken there."

It was from the heart of the city that Cosimo and his two sons managed the vast and profitable Medici bank. The Medici firm maintained a table on the Via Porta Rossa in the vicinity of the New Market, where businessmen could deposit their coin or redeem bills of exchange. But this business represented only a small portion of a much larger and more varied operation encompassing both small manufacturing establishments (silk and woolen shops in Florence) and international trading cartels. The Medici bank maintained branches in Rome (usually the most profitable because the pope's finances were handled largely by the Medici bank there), Naples, Milan, Venice, Bruges, Avignon, Geneva, London, and other centers of trade and finance.

Management of this vast business empire was conducted largely out of the family home. Four large rooms on the ground floor of the new palace—into which the family moved probably sometime in 1458—served as counting house and office space for scores of secretaries, clerks, and assistants. As in most Florentine *palazzi,* the ground floor was a semi-public space, but in the Medici palace it also included accommodations for both Cosimo and Piero, who had difficulty negotiating the stairs to the main living quarters above.*

The new palace must have been a pleasant change for the nine-year-old boy after the cramped, crowded quarters of the old house. Not least of the attractions were an airy courtyard and a garden, the latter filled with exotic fruit trees. With indulgent, often distracted parents, the spacious and bustling palace offered plenty of opportunities for undiscovered mischief. It was, perhaps, a little too commodious for a family used to living one on top of another. Some years later, after the death of his younger son,

* Visitors to the palace report that father and son often traveled about the house in chairs borne aloft by servants.

the aged Cosimo was heard to lament, "Too large a house for too small a family!"

The palace as it exists today differs significantly from the one Lorenzo knew. First of all, it was considerably smaller in the fifteenth century, seven bays of windows having been added in the seventeenth century by the Riccardi family, who evidently found it too cramped for their needs. A loggia opened out onto the busy street, making the building less forbidding than it now seems. During Lorenzo's lifetime this arcade was always crowded with petitioners, visitors, and even tourists armed with letters of introduction. The Milanese envoy Niccolò de' Carissimi da Parma, visiting the master of the house in 1459, complained that he was "obliged to leave because of the multitude who arrived wishing to see the aforesaid magnificent Cosimo."

Even more deceptive is the austere interior we see today. Walking through its largely empty rooms and corridors one gets little hint of its former opulence. It was Piero who took the lead in furnishing the new family home with paintings, sculptures, and decorative objects, a collection to which Lorenzo continued to add after his father's death. Gone is Piero's private study, whose walls were covered floor to ceiling in elaborate patterns of inlaid wood and whose collection of objets d'art so impressed visitors, including the architect Filarete, who has left us a vivid description of the master at his ease:

> He has himself carried into a studio. . . . When he arrives, he looks at his books. They seem like nothing but solid pieces of gold. . . . Sometimes he reads one or the other or has them read. He has so many different kinds that not one day but more than a month would be required to see and understand their dignity. . . . He has effigies and portraits of all the emperors and noble men who have ever lived made in gold, silver, bronze, jewels, marble, or other materials. . . . Another day he looks at his jewels and precious stones. He has a marvelous quantity of them of great value and cut in different ways. He takes pleasure and delight in looking at them and in talking about the virtue and value of those he has. Another day [he looks] at vases of gold, silver, and other materials made nobly and at great

> expense and brought from different places. He delights greatly in these, praising their dignity and the mastery of their fabricators. Then another day [he looks at] other noble things that have come from different parts of the world, various strange arms for offense and defense.

It is impossible to overestimate the impact such an environment had on the formation of Lorenzo's tastes and his character. Even among Florentines, accustomed to being surrounded by works of art and architecture of the highest quality, his circumstances were unique. The immense Medici fortune was harnessed to acquire work from the greatest artists and artisans of Europe; from their branches in northern Europe employees were told to be on the lookout for the finest tapestries and the latest works in oil by masters like Jan van Eyck;* agents in Rome and southern Italy sought out antiquities, and scholars on the Medici payroll rummaged through the monastic libraries of Europe seeking lost works by the ancients. Galeazzo Maria Sforza, who as son of the duke of Milan was a youth not easily impressed, was awed by the Medici's fabled treasures. "[T]he aforesaid count," noted his chief counselor,

> together with the company, went on a tour of this palace, and especially of its noblest parts, such as some studies, little chapels, living rooms, bedchambers and gardens, all of which are constructed with admirable skill, embellished on every side with gold and fine marbles, with carvings and sculptures in relief, with pictures and inlays done in perspective by the most accomplished and perfect of masters, down to the benches and all the floors of the house; tapestries and household ornaments of gold and silk; silverware and bookcases that are endless and innumerable; then the vaults or rather ceilings of the chambers and salons, which are for the most part

* Oil painting, invented in northern Europe, was still a little-known medium in Italy. The importation of masterpieces in oil by van Eyck and Rogier van der Weyden, by the Medici and their employees, stimulated the growth of this new medium in Italy, leading to the masterpieces of Leonardo and Raphael.

> done in fine gold with diverse and various forms; then a garden all created of the most beautiful polished marbles with various plants, which seems a thing not natural but painted.

Sforza's visit highlights an important function of the palace: it was an essential tool of Medici statecraft. As private citizens, Cosimo, Piero, and Lorenzo possessed none of the titles needed to impress those with whom they negotiated on behalf of the republic. But by building this grand residence and furnishing it with famous works of ancient and modern art they showed that they belonged in the company of the greatest feudal lords.* So successful was this strategy that close acquaintance with the Medici lifestyle could foster a not altogether unintended sense of cultural inferiority. On a later visit Galeazzo Maria Sforza admitted its collections far outshone his own, and when his brother, Lodovico, lured Leonardo da Vinci away from Florence it was partly in an attempt to redress the cultural deficit.

Ordinary Florentines alternated between feelings of pride and resentment at the opulent lifestyle of their leading family. The treasures of the palace were celebrated in verse and song, one anonymous poet declaring "nothing in the world [is] more an earthly paradise than this." But it could also be a tempting target for those who believed the government had been hijacked by private interest; during one politically tense moment, the family awoke to find the threshold of the palace smeared with blood.

For the most part, however, the public understood that the honor of the city was tied to the honor paid to its leading family. Florentines were painfully aware of their lack of pedigree and took every opportunity to demonstrate that, despite the absence of hereditary nobility, they were men of refinement. The pageantry of Florentine life was in large part an expression of cultural insecurity, and the Medici palace was a key element in this self-promotion. It is a notable trend in Florentine history—one that helps explain Medici success in subverting the city's republican

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* When the Emperor Frederick toured Florence in 1452 he made sure to visit Cosimo's palace. This was almost certainly the *casa vecchia,* an indication that even before the move to the new house the Medici collections were renowned throughout Europe.