

When The Pawnshop Sign Held Sway

By CARROLL EVERETT

THE MAN in threadbare coat who opens the door of a dingy pawnshop and lays a piece of cheap jewelry on the counter pays little attention to the three balls, creaking in the wind above the entrance.

He sees nothing in the three balls but a pawnshop sign, indicating that money may be borrowed within. It makes no difference to him whether they are gilded in goldleaf, or stained and rusted by the elements. He would be wildly surprised if you were to tell him that they once belonged to the coat of arms of a reigning house in mediaeval Italy.

The three gilded balls is a symbol of which has come down the centuries from the days when the famous Medici family practically ruled Florence in the thirteenth century. The Medicis had remarkable business instincts. Besides owning a large number of banks, they held a monopoly of the loan business of that part of Italy.

The coat of arms of the family was a shield on which were blazoned six balls. Later, as the loan business spread to other parts of the world and passed from the control of the Medicis, three of the balls and the shield were dropped, while the remaining three still served as a symbol of the loan business.

No other house in Mediaeval Europe had a more remarkable career than that of the Medici. Bankers by profession, and without any military tradition, they nevertheless established themselves as the practical despots of Florence. The sway of their influence extended through several centuries.

The foundation of their success was commercial, and they gained their foothold by the liberal spirit in which they devoted their enormous wealth to public projects. Back of their apparent philanthropy, however, was a far-seeing policy. When the poor were unable to pay their taxes and the city was pressing them too hard, Cosmo de Medici came forward and paid.

Naturally, when Cosmo suggested to these persons who were indebted to him that he would like to take a hand in the government, they all agreed that they would like to have him do so. In this manner, Cosmo founded the influence and prestige of his family. He became in fact the uncrowned king of Florence.

The most famous member of the family was Lorenzo, surnamed the "magnificent." He was a grandson of Cosmo, and in addition to operating loan shops and banks in France, England, the Levant, and other countries of minor importance, he became virtual head of the Florence state, and what he said was law. He caused himself to be surrounded by five or six individuals who, theoretically, had something to say as to the government of the city, but as a matter of fact possessed no power and were content to draw their salaries from Lorenzo.

Before his accession, and while his father, Pietro, was intriguing in order that things should run smoothly for him, Lorenzo married Clarice Orsini, a member of one of the greatest families of Italy. Lorenzo seems not to have any great enthusiasm for the marriage, for his notice thereof is curiously cold:

"I, Lorenzo, took for wife, Clarice, daughter of the Lord Jacopo, or rather, she was given to me." He really

fancied a certain black-eyed Lucrezia Donati, whom he had seen at a tournament, but Lorenzo's father had other arrangements in mind, since he knew that it would be a fine political stroke for his son to marry an Orsini. The possessions of the Orsini spread from the sea to the Appenines on the north of Rome and then turned southward until they touched the estates of their hereditary enemies, the Colonna, in the mountains east of the capital. The house was famous for its numerous cardinals and gay gentlemen.

In 1478 the conspiracy of the Pazzi family came near to putting an end to the Medici. Lorenzo's brother, Giuliano, was assassinated, and Lorenzo himself was obliged to take refuge in one of the Orsini castles until the excitement had died down. Then at the right moment he returned to Florence and succeeded in obtaining a firmer hold on the state than he had ever had before.

Lorenzo now instituted such a government as Florence had never known. He trod in the footsteps of his grandfather and won the favour of the lower classes, thereby making absolute his own power. And to win the favour of the intellectuals, the struggling authors and artists, he encouraged the literature and the arts, employed learned men to collect choice books and antiquities for him from every part of the known world, established printing presses in his dominions, founded academies for the study of the classics, and filled his gardens with a collection of remains of ancient art. He himself wrote a number of poems and dramatic compositions and could converse in Greek and Latin as well as he could in Italian.

When Lorenzo's munificence and conciliatory manners had gained for him the affections of the higher and the devotion of the lower classes, he lost no time in utilizing his popularity. While the city and Italy were ringing from his praises, he quietly took from Florence all forms of constitutional independence which he and his predecessors had permitted to exist.

Some few Florentines, alarmed by the progress of the voluptuous refinement which was smothering every spark of personal independence, tried to stem the current of corruption by an ascetic severity of morals, which gained for them the name of "piagioni," or weepers. Foremost among them was the Dominican friar, Girolamo Savonarola, whose eloquent appeal to the people in favour of a popular government and a life of asceticism threatened for a time to overthrow the Medici. But after Lorenzo's death a reaction against the monk's preaching set in and he was burned at the stake.

Lorenzo's name is associated with all forms of loveliness, yet his physical appearance was singularly unlovely. He was above middle height and strongly built, but his face was extremely plain, the nose flat and spreading, the chin sharp, the complexion sallow and the eyes weak. His movements were exaggerated and ungainly, his voice harsh, and he totally lacked a sense of smell.

Unlike most of his predecessors, Lorenzo died in bed—of the gout, a most commonplace end for such an unusual statesman.

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Checks in payment for these prizes will be sent forward to the parties named.

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