

Athos Carrara

Francesco Ferrucci



L'Eroe di Gavinana



Athos Carrara  
**Francesco Ferrucci (1950)**  
**The Gavinana Hero (1957)**  
English translation

PREFACE

Athos Carrara (Montepulciano 1904-Pontedera 1991) first of five children, with much regret, he must give up his studies at the technical school of Siena to give his contribution to the family's economic commitments, seen that the head of the family, alone, is no longer able to maintain the budget having to pay the rate of his youngest son, who attends the seminary. In the early 1930s he is employed at Chianti Ruffino, but he soon leaves the job to move to Florence attracted by the most beautiful city in the world, upgraded by the presence of artists and men of culture and Church. Even his girlfriend, Ida, attends the city, enrolled at the French Institute of Grenoble, where she takes a degree in French language. The life of the future wedded couple goes on peacefully until they get married in 1935: Ida works for the publisher house Vallecchi as proofreader and gives French lessons; French is the most spoken foreign language, that moment, and it will remain so for quite a long time. Athos drives around the whole region by car, a "Topolino", that he has bought with a loan, as "vendor" of books by different catholic publishing houses. Because of his profession and his passion for culture he meets authors and editorial contributors of national fame. The best chance is to be present when they schedule to release "Il Frontespizio", a periodical of literary and artistic culture which was run by Professor Piero Bargellini. In fact, the future mayor of Florence will take a liking for him and will encourage him to his future writing career. It's during one of these meetings that Athos, whose participation is just "auditory", shows up carrying a paper roll under his arm and when the meeting is over he introduces himself with: " Pardon me, this evening I'd like to show you something of mine! "The bystanders show signs of bewilderment, surely of no interest and it's Bargellini who breaks the cold atmosphere: " Good! Shows us!" Athos unwraps the paper and he pulls out an outstanding "Chianti Ruffino". The atmosphere changes into a pleasant and unusual courtesy (even because the participants can't always find the square of the circle) and once again Bargellini reproached him with: "Good, but bring us something really yours, next time..." That's when author Athos Carrara's career began.

"Francesco Ferrucci" and "The Gavinana Hero" : one book, two novels about the same character and his historical event.

We aren't to know the reason why the author committed twice, even if in different ways, keeping faithful to history, to "Ferruccio's" event. Surely, in the mid 1950s he was asked by the publishing house AVE of Rome to write a novel to be published on the periodical "Il Vittorioso"; he has replied with "The Gavinana Hero", a fully new writing of "Ferruccio's" feats enriched with life scenes during the siege of Florence, that doesn't give up moments of celebration like the "fancy dress soccer" and the "new wine" historically happened and to underline the presence of great and famous characters in art and literature fields as well as civic life and history.

If "Francesco Ferrucci" is almost a "divertissement" (but faithful to the historical events of the main character) "The Gavinana Hero" offers a complete different picture, where the main character plays in a historical social and political reality, where the city of Florence is surrounded by the strong troops of Emperor Charles V: two stories that show the vivacity of an author able to write about "Ferruccio's" historical event with totally different features that the reader will get surprised to notice such feature.

Edited by Giuseppe Carrara

## FRANCESCO FERRUCCI (1950)

Preface by Giuseppe Carrara and...not just him!

On Easter day this year (2023) during the late evening news Channel 1 runs a "special" entitled "My human friend", where "the dog" is "the friend". During the show one of the guests expresses himself with this sentence: "ending up being street fellows". Today, assessing dogs as "human friends" and "street fellows" is a point of view that, surely, not a small audience has agreed with, but at the end of 1940s dogs weren't seen much, wandering around, and who owned one kept it rigorously on the leash and with the muzzle on, seen that dogs on the loose were easy prey for the "dog catcher", a figure that didn't arouse wonder in daily life. In this context it's comprehensible that a story, though based on a respectable character like Francesco Ferrucci, with the preponderant presence of a hound (\*) as "human friend" hasn't had the result they were hoping for and has been left in a drawer. Today, according to the latin locution "mutatis mutandis" ( that, joking, we translated into "change your underwear" ) that is to say "in due time", the meeting of "Ferruccio" with a "hound" as "street fellow", can be gladly accepted, comforted by the quality of the narration about which, professor Piero Bargellini, friend and mentor of the author, expressed his judgement when he was submitted the beginning of the story. So, let's go to meet "Marco", that only "lacks of human speech" and let's invite it to introduce itself: "Excuse me if I stretch a little bit, but I have been buried for more than seventy years and now I need to put myself together... Well, here I am! My name is "Marco", a "hound" (\*) a perfect breed to go hunting and, if I may say so myself, I'm really good at it, and my master never fails to praise me for what I feel it's my natural gift. I had been living an enviable life, but one day...that day...they knock at the door and I am quickly in alert ready for any possible situation, strangers by the

door back then, were a constant danger even though criminals don't knock at the door. My master, Messer Alberigo, cautiously opens the door, but then he fastly leaves it wide open and let in a person followed by others who have strange tools in their hands. He welcomes the man, so I go back to lie down, but I try to pay attention to the words, that they exchange in a low voice, expressing astonishment and sorrow. At the and my master turns to me and tells me that we have to leave and never come back: our house will be torn down after being specifically requested by Messer Michelangelo. I jump up, I shake my head because I think I haven't quite understood, how can such a good man as Michelangelo Buonarroti demand that! And ...Sorry... Thinking about that day, I still get a knot in my throat and I can't go on".

(\*) The Italian hound is a dog selected during Middle Ages from the bloodhound race, with special ability of stalling birds. A hunting dog of probable Italian origin is cited for the first time in the works of Brunetto Latini and Alberto Magno. Dante, in his famous sonnet "sonar braccetti" cites it, too: in fact, "bracchetto" in this case means "hunting dog" or even "barking dog", with a generic meaning, not just a hunter like many people might think. (from Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia)

Firenze, 25 settembre 1949  
Carissimo Carrara.  
Ho partecato per la Valle d'Aosta, giudice del Brevio Saint-Vincent, ma prima ti voglio ringraziare del simpaticissimo tuo articolo.  
Al mio ritorno spero di poterli vedere per parlare del Fornoccio.  
Tanti auguri anche per la famiglia.  
Cordialmente tuo  
Piero.  
R 1/10  
Breve del capofila  
di sopra

- Firenze, 25 settembre 1949  
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 sto partendo per la Valle d'Aosta,  
 giudice del Premio Saint-Vincent, ma prima ti voglio ringraziare del  
 simpaticissimo tuo articolo.  
 . Al mio ritorno spero di poterti vedere per parlare del Ferruccio.  
 . Tanti auguri anche per la  
 famiglia  
 .  
 Cordialmente tuo  
 . Piero  
 .  
 (appuntato in calce alla lettera l' invio di "tre capitoli")  
 .  
 .  
 Florence, September 25th 1949  
 .  
 Dearest Carrara, I'm leaving for Valle D'Aosta, judge at the Saint Vincent  
 Award, but first I want to thank you for your very pleasant article. When I  
 come back I hope to see you to talk about Ferruccio.  
 Best wishes to you and your family  
 .  
 Sincerely yours, Piero  
 .  
 (in the footnote it's indicated the submission of " three chapters of essay" to  
 Professor Bargellini )
- .

## THE HOUSE IS DEMOLISHED

“It's a nice dog” said the man who entered the house first, followed by others, carrying picks and maces. I anxiously looked at my master and I saw that he was as worried as I was. I got ready for defence and didn't pay attention to the praise that I was given. That was a praise that everyone gave me, although I would have preferred to be praised for the reason that best suits a hound: for the fact that I was a strong, good hunter. My master, whose name was Alberigo de' Cecchetti, young and brave, back then, hadn't been cheerful and carefree, lately, like he used to be, and we seldom went out hunting. People were talking about a French, Prince Philibert D'Orange, leader of an army of Spanish soldiers, who was moving closer to Florence to take freedom away from the Republic. Florentines were getting ready to protect their freedom; even at our home, situated half way from the beautiful hill of San Miniato on the left bank of the Arno river, young men were gathering and talking about the incoming of the war. “It's really a beautiful dog, what's its name?” the man who supervised the ones with the picks and maces, repeated, maybe to gain my sympathy, because I kept on growling and showing my teeth, something that I rarely did, because I liked to show that I was civil and well mannered. “His name is Marco” replied my master and added: “Marco is a name of freedom”. What he meant was, that it had the name of the convent of San Marco in Florence, where the echoes of the preaching of Fra' Girolamo Savonarola had been coming from. During his life Fra' Girolamo Savonarola invited citizens to fight for freedom, which is one of God's greatest gifts. “I like its white and brown, short-haired shiny coat”. I had stopped growling because I gathered that there was a sort of connection between my master and that man, but I couldn't understand if the ones who arrived last were friends or enemies. “Have a sit” said messer Alberigo turning to the man and his workers, but no one accepted the invitation. “I'm very sorry”, said the headman, “But we have received orders to tear this house down: messer Michelangelo Buonarroti demands it and the Defence of the Republic claims it. Michelangelo was a citizen of Florence, famous all over the world for his sculptures and his paintings, some of the most beautiful of all times; and for his architecture, as claimed, who had seen his churches, his buildings, and his plan of Saint Peter's Cathedral, that was supposed to be built in Rome. Gonfalonier Francesco Carducci and the “Consiglio degli Ottanta”(the Council of the Eighty) were in charge of the Republic, they all had agreed to call the great architect and had said to him: “The Republic is in danger: leave statues and paintings aside and start drawing projects of fortresses and have them built. We nominate you as member of the “Nove”(The Nine): the commanders of the Militia, and General Commissioner in charge of the fortifications.” I already knew Michelangelo, because when we had met him my master had pointed him out at his friends: “That is the great Michelangelo, the beautiful glory of Florence around the world, after Dante and Giotto had died”. He was a fifty-five year old handsome man, a bit hunched, a thoughtful look, with a nice grey beard and piercing eyes. Back then, I used to go to wag my tail around him, but as he looked at me I felt subjugated by his intelligence, so I would leave. Although his mature age, Michelangelo accepted the job, he gave up sculpting statues and painting those beautiful colourful frescoes on white walls, and began to design and build fortresses; and all the population honoured him with emotion. Yet, I didn't understand why such a great, generous man could have given orders to destroy our house: our beautiful house, which was almost a villa, that didn't have anything less, compared to the others, that embellished those magnificent hills of Florence. I anxiously looked at my master and I waited for him to give me permission to show those men what they deserved if they had been lying about that genius, who couldn't hurt anyone. Messer Alberigo, instead, cried out: “We have to leave. This house could turn out to be useful to the enemies as an

observation point. All the houses, all the villas and all the churches in the surroundings of Florence, that could be useful to the invaders will be torn down. We will leave a gap around the city and around the fortresses to ease up our defence". He had a lump in his throat, but his lips remained firm. Movers were waiting outside with their wagons: as they began packing, the men with the picks had already started to work. The sun was going down and we saw the long shadow of a man returning from San Miniato. As he came closer everyone bowed at him and he stopped. He asked to see the owner of the house, he put his hand on messer Alberigo's shoulder and said: " You are paying dearly to defend Florence, but not enough if compared to those who give their life: I wish for you to be able to take this chance, in the future". He pat me, then walked away bent and pensive. He had paid the price by giving up his art, much more worth than a house, and was offering his life after he had donated all his money to the Republic: his name was Michelangelo Buonarroti.

## **FROM FLORENCE TO CASENTINO**

We went to live in Florence in a house in the neighborhood of Santa Croce, not far from the house of the Alighieri family, and messer Alberigo took me to the hill of San Miniato every day, to look at the fortifications and the artillery positions that rose under messer Michelangelo's guidance, where once houses and villas stood. Every time we returned home messer Alberigo was in a bad mood and sometimes he took it upon me even though I wasn't to blame; then he felt bad about it, he grabbed my muzzle with his hands and said to me: "We can't sit back here doing nothing while all the citizens are getting ready to fight to defend the freedom of the Republic". I agreed with him, regardless of all, but I could only yelp in response meaning: "Let's just do something". I was willing to follow him and defend him: dogs are not as smart as men, but the affection that we feel for them makes us understand and act like no man would. One evening, messer Alberigo said to me, like if he had understood my exhortation: "Tomorrow we are leaving for Casentino. The enemy has taken Valdarno, but the way to Casentino is clear. It will be a long journey for the both of us, I will be riding my horse and you will be following me. I barked with happiness and put my muzzle on his knees to show him my gratitude: the trust he had shown to let me go with him was big and I hoped to be up to it. We left the following day at dawn and we got out on the road to Casentino from San Salvi.

It was a chilly autumn morning and the birds announced the coming of winter flying silently and fast through the olive trees and the vineyards. I easily breathed the air and I didn't find it too hard to keep up with the trot of the horse. Messer Alberigo was carrying his sword: it had a silver hilt, adorned with chisel carving. We went up on the Pratomagno mountains and down in the beautiful valley of Casentino, where Dante had once been wounded, while he, too, was fighting for his land. I was tired after trotting for so long, but I could only settle for keeping my mouth open with my tongue hanging out, because for dogs, this is basically the only remedy against heat and sweat perspiration, that rarely happens through our body skin. On the second day, at dusk, we arrived at a property, in the view of the castle of Poppi, that was surrounded by woods uphill that gradually led down to the Arno river. A fat farmer came to meet us, at first he looked at us with suspicion, but after he had found out that messer Alberigo was a friend of his master's, his small eyes, lost in that fat skin, glowed with joy. "Messer Francesco Ferrucci.." he said holding the halter of the horse to help my master dismount "..is not home yet, but he won't be late. He'll be happy to see you". "Is he well?" messer Alberigo asked. " He is very well, thanks Heaven. What a man, he is! Our lands are run across by armed gangs of foreign soldiers who come to steal the fruits of our labour, but just the name of messer Francesco makes them want to run for the hills: he chases after them until they have returned all the stolen goods; he is our saviour."

## **A PAINFUL PARTING**

I overcame my falling asleep and my weariness to listen to the two men talking, that sounded very important. Messer Alberigo was describing the fortifications that had been built around the city walls of Florence to prepare the defence against the siege by the soldiers of the Spanish emperor, Charles V. Messer Francesco Ferrucci was listening, frowning, pursing his lips, suddenly he exclaimed: "And you, why are you here?" My master blushed for the sudden rage, thinking that his friend was scolding him, but he remained calm and replied: "I came here to call you." Ferrucci, better yet, "Ferruccio", as his farmer nicknamed him and like his soldiers will call him later, stood up and began to walk around the room before he answered. Finally he said: "I haven't been wasting my time: I have my company ready, it just has to be done faster than planned. We are leaving tomorrow and you are coming with us. We will be at the service of captain Malatesta Baglioni of Perugia, who has been the Chief of Defence of our city, and you", turning to his farmer, "take care of this dog." The farmer took me and led me to the stable. I lie down on the hay and fell asleep in no time, dreaming of war ventures beside Messer Alberigo and Messer Francesco, who, with my help, were chasing away the besiegers and they rescued the Florentine Republic and made it strong again. I was woken up before dawn by the sound of hooves and loud voices: I yawned with my mouth wide open and suddenly I realized that I hadn't been eating for many hours. Nobody paid attention to me; there were many armed strangers around, busy taking care of their horses. So I sneaked out looking for my master, who was among young farmers armed with pikes and swords; he barely pat me. I felt sad for the lack of consideration that he had for me and with my ears down I went searching for some food all by myself. It was not easy to find it with all those people, that were devouring large amounts of bread and roasted meat. Ferruccio was getting ready to leave with many knights and infantrymen: infantries were new formations of soldiers who walked, and were equal to the knights in worth and fighting skills. I went back and forth from messer Alberigo to Ferruccio and I wondered why nobody cared for me: it seemed like they had forgotten about my dream and my share for victory. I, then, began to growl and yelp to make them notice my presence, but with my biggest surprise and grief, captain Ferruccio called his farmer and said to him: "Lock this dog in the house and make sure you take care of it until we come back."

## **THE ESCAPE**

I had decided to run away to reach my master who I was sure would have forgiven me for that disobedience. I was aware that men fought more dangerously than us; we do it for aversion or jealousy: we only have teeth, men, instead, have swords, pikes, halberds with sharpen blades or points, and now that they have learnt to use gunpowder from the chinese, and have learnt to make fire guns, they have invented the culverin, which is a steel tube with snake shapes or other ornaments on the head, placed on two wheels: it's a pipe that spits out fire balls on the enemy, that can even bore a fortress wall. Infantrymen have the arquebus, a much smaller culverin, less decorated, that is placed on a trestle and is shot by holding it on a shoulder. It's true that we are not protected by the helmet, by the armour and by the steel greaves, but rarely we kill each other. I felt that my master was going to give me a nice wellcome and I was waiting for the right moment to run away, but that fat farmer was doing his job too severely and he kept me tied to a thick chain. I overcame the boredom of that slavery spending my time like all prisoners do, thinking of taking back my freedom and I decided to try and move to pity my guardian by refusing to eat. The guardian didn't notice that, at first, but then, being afraid that I might pass out, he



started to pat me and make silly faces to encourage me to eat, and I am not saying that I didn't feel like doing that, but the more I saw that I was getting somewhere, the more I persisted with my fast. Finally it happened, when I couldn't take it any longer, day after day, hour after hour: the guardian tried to unchain me to give me some liberty in the house, with the door locked. I was determined to do anything so I jumped off the window from the first floor. I probably had lost a lot of weight, because it felt like flying and I didn't get hurt, at all. That poor man that had me in custody called me desperately, but I didn't have the time to explain to him why I couldn't obey: I didn't find it hard to see my way clear and I began my run to Pratomagno. I didn't slow down until I was very far from the farm and I was sure not to be reached. I slowed down to regain my strength and I had to admit, with big regret, that I had gotten weaker during all those fast days; moreover, I wasn't carrying the saddlebag that men use to take supplies along. But I didn't get dismayed, I hadn't forgotten to be a great hunter and I just felt sorry to find myself in need to devour the prey that I had caught; a mistake that I had never made in my honorable career as a hound, that has the duty to bring the prey to the master still intact. Pratomagno didn't lack in game and didn't lack in cool water springs. I found snow on the top in which I sank when I walked in it, so I had to slow down my pace again. Soon I went back into the open and I arrived on the road of San Salvi. At that point I got a bit scared because I had never attended the city alone and, before I entered, I wandered about and I ended up crossing the door of San Gallo on the side of Fiesole. It seemed to me that the citizens were looking at me with suspicion and I believed that the reason for it was my being dirty and in a bad shape; with this doubt in my mind I feared that neither messer Alberigo would have given me a warm welcome. Now that I had reached his house I didn't have the courage to show up at his door, so I wandered all day long, tired and hungry. The city had had quite a big change after only a few months. The large variety of rich merchandise and commodities was no longer displayed like it used to, and the citizens were walking fast and silent. Many were the soldiers and the captains, each one of them had his own ensign that distinguished him from the other companies. I hoped I'd recognize Francesco Ferrucci's ensigns, but I didn't. At night I lay down on my master's doorstep, not daring to whine or yelp to get his attention. I stayed just for one night, in vain, because the door remained inexorably shut: it looked like a deserted house. I continued with my pilgrimage through the city streets choosing to move closer to the soldiers: I couldn't ask any questions, but I wasn't forbidden to listen. I was able to do that easily avoiding to get too close, something that would have been dangerous for me, due to the pitiful conditions I was, looking like a tramp. "What news do we have from Empoli?" I heard someone asking a soldier. He was a soldier covered all over with dust, because of the long journey; he was eating so I stared at him with the languid eyes of a famished dog, yet trying not to be noticed. "...until that important city, that clears the way to Pisa and to the sea.." the soldier answered between mouthfulls "...we'll have Ferruccio as Republic Commissioner, we'll have nothing to fear. Ferruccio turned it in an impregnable city, even women could line up on those dreadful walls to defend it." This way I gathered that Ferrucci was Commissioner in Empoli after he had been in Prato, and I figured that, messer Alberigo, must be with him; however, I didn't know the way to get there. I feared I would have never found him and, in the meanwhile, I waited for the soldier to move away, and went to lick the crumbs from the ground.

## **FERRUCCIO'S KNIGHT**

Life became very hard in a city that was preparing to resist a besiege; food was no longer delivered from the country, because the enemy's barricades outside the city walls didn't allow it. The citizens were saving on food, and animals were the first to suffer from the lacking of it: you can imagine how a dog that, apparently didn't belong to anyone, could

survive: it was seen as a useless food taker, so it had to be killed. For as much as I tried to make the soldiers understand that I wanted to be helpful they didn't comprehend my generous intentions, and they were pointing their halberds at me forcing me to leave. Reluctantly, I had almost made up my mind to go back to Casentino, when I saw the soldier that earlier had spoken about Empoli and Ferruccio. He was still covered in dust up to his long curly hair, that was coming out of his helmet, although he was riding his horse, a beautiful bay horse, proud and fair. He was surrounded by a big crowd of people who didn't let me get close to him, but the distance didn't prevent my sharp hearing from catching his words of praise for the wisdom and the worth of that great captain, who was in charge of the lower Valdarno, as General Commissioner, in Empoli. The emperor was sending his German Lansquenets, who were foot soldiers armed with pikes; and his Spanish "Bisogni", infantry men, as well; they had given them the nickname "Bisogno" ( need ), because they robbed and stole everything from poor people, like one does when in need of everything, and demands it with arrogance. The emperor, precisely, was sending them where Ferruccio protected the lands, to take possession of their supplies, or to trouble the trade of the Florentine Republic, between Florence and the sea. But, they learned to get to know Francesco Ferrucci and his young captains better: They always retreated in the worst conditions, after they had returned all they had taken from the defenders and had released many of the prisoners. In the town of Castelfiorentino, half way between Empoli and Siena, a few young nobles from Florence had arrived. They were against the Republic and in favor of the Emperor, and they had convinced those nice villagers to change in favor of the Spanish Emperor. Ferruccio grieved when he found out; his eyes were with tears because he was valiant and faithful and betrayals hurt him very much. But he didn't waste any time crying, he planned the reconquest of Castelfiorentino in no time. He sent young captain Jacopo Bichi and his old friend d'Arsoli with the best infantry men and soldiers; and the beautiful town of Castelfiorentino saw the soldiers of the Republic back on those victorious roads. The betrayers, who couldn't run away in time were taken prisoners, while those who had been sent to jail by them were released, like Vico Machiavelli: son of the great Nicolò, who had died in Florence two years earlier, and had served the Republic both as Secretary of State, and with his very important writings. I listened to those wonderful stories with strong emotion and I was consumed with desire to know about messer Alberigo; but, how could that soldier understand the meaning of my yelp? We can't use words and men need words to communicate. I thought I'd treasure the greatest virtue of a dog: patience. I said to myself not to lose sight of that soldier, thinking that he would have gone back to Empoli after his mission. I have to admit I had to play smarter not to lose his trace during those three days that he spent in Florence; not exposing my self to the danger of being caught. The thought that a human being has the right to eat seldom crossed my mind. I got used to put up with hunger that kept me company in my big solitude. I stopped to look at myself in the water puddles, when I drank. I was afraid I could mistake myself with another dog, better yet, with the skeleton of a dog that somebody had dressed with its skin to keep it together. My knight was received at Palazzo dei Signori where he stayed for many hours. I waited for him while I was hiding behind a column of Loggia de' Lanzi and watched the flow of nobles, villagers, soldiers and friars. After the Republic had been put under the protection of Christ the Lord, religious brought their contribution of faith and their support of hope. I was moved when I saw the union of all the citizens to protect their freedom and I didn't doubt that they would have defended it, even because, far from Florence, in places like the main entrance of the Republic, Francesco Ferrucci and messer Alberigo were there to protect it. At dusk of the third day, my good knight, whom I became attached to, even though he hadn't noticed me, yet, went out of Florence from Porta di San Frediano and I followed him with my heart full of hope, although my poor legs could only hold the memory of their lost agility.

## THE AMBUSH ON THE WAY TO EMPOLI

The weather was nice and our walk was pleasant, the places that we came across were beautiful. I felt no longer hungry and I sensed that I had regained the strength that I used to have: I didn't realize that I had gone to a longer distance and I had ended up farther ahead of the horse. I sniffed the air like a hound is used to doing when it's in the country, game hunting; then, in a dense reed, on the Arno river bank, very close to the road, I smelled a strong odor of a man that hasn't been taking his clothes off for a very long time and his skin becomes greasy and dirty. It's the typical smell of the soldier that, during a war campaign doesn't have the chance and the comfort to undress and wash. I stopped and I saw a Spanish soldier lying down on the ground, between the reed and the side of the road, and I recognized him from the description that my knight had given back in Florence; he looked dead, but he was alive and kicking, instead; so much alive that he stared at me. But that stink couldn't come from just one person, I took a better glance and I noticed three more Spanish soldiers in the reed, they were standing, though, in a shooting position. I didn't find it hard to understand the intention of those soldiers, they knew how generous Ferruccio's men were and they knew that my knight would have stopped to rescue the wounded man, and the others would have assaulted him and killed him. I was determined to risk my miserable life to save the much more important one of Ferruccio's messenger, but I couldn't assault those four armed men all alone, so I figured I had to go back and warn the knight. I began to bark and whine in front of the horse that started to rear refusing to go on, but the soldier encouraged it and threatened me with his sword. The horse had already figured out what the man still couldn't understand: when it comes to danger, it's unbelievable how animals are more prepared than men, to understand the situation and maybe it's because we are wicker and defenceless. Seen that I had failed in the attempt to stop the horse, I decided to thwart the ambush with the hope to make it on time, still willing to risk my life. I turned around trotting before the horse head, far enough not to be reached by the soldier's angry sword. Fifty metres from the point of attack I broke away and ran barking furiously at the edge of the reed. The knight finally comprehended that I was his ally and gave orders for defence. The three Spanish soldiers came out of the reed and moved to the road; the man who pretended to be wounded got up and joined them. My knight had the advantage to fight mounting his horse and I saw him storming on the team. The four waved and spreaded, and one of the attackers fell on the ground with a wound on his waste: I bit the calf of one of the soldiers and I didn't let go although I felt the blood running from a wound on my right shoulder. When the knight turned around to get ready for the next attack, two of the Spanish soldiers ran away; two, for one was on the ground, injured, and the other was held by my teeth, until the knight ordered me to open up my jaws, and said to the Spanish man: "Take care of your wounded fellow." Then he turned to me and asked me, as I would have been able to answer: "Who sent you here, my good defender?" Because, I couldn't do that, he gave himself a very wise answer: "You were surely sent by Heaven and I thank God for His kindness." He dressed the wound on my shoulder and said: "You got away with it pretty well: it's not that bad and you will recover in a few days. Your skin is stronger than ours and you'll soon get well." He didn't want me to walk so he put me on his saddle. He explained to me that we were in the territory of Lastra a Signa, from where the Spaniards had been chased away by Ferruccio, and they were wandering around insane trying to do some damage. We arrived in Empoli in the evening, after nothing else really peculiar had happened to us, and my lack of speech didn't allow me to tell my companion that I was in search of my master, messer Alberigo de' Cecchetti. I was put to rest in a room where a woman of the town made a shelter for me and gave me a bowl of soup and a bowl of water. I was exhausted and perhaps I was running a fever;

and in my restless sleep I heard the noise of weapons and soldiers coming from the streets.

## THE CONQUEST OF SAN MINIATO

Later, I heard, that the person I had saved from the ambush of the Spanish men at Lastra a Signa was captain Giuliano Frescobaldi, one of the youngest captains of Ferruccio's army. When I met him the first time in Florence and I was waiting to eat his crumbs, he had changed into the clothes of a simple soldier and ate in public to better look like one: (nobles have different customs, they wouldn't munch on a piece of bread on the street in the presence of other people). Believing he was a simple soldier, no one would have spied on him, on his mission to deliver the orders that, through him, Ferruccio had asked the government of the Republic: the "Consiglio dei Dieci" (the Council of the Ten). After the young man had left me with that nice family to be cured, he went to Ferruccio to tell him that the Consiglio dei Dieci had approved his war plans. When he stood before him he said: "Lord General Commissioner, the Lords of the Council thank you for the major work that you are doing for the Republic; the freedom hopes of the Florentines lie in the hands of two men: in Captain General's, Malatesta Baglioni, who is defending the besieged city; and in yours, that are protecting the whole territory of the Republic. Your fortifications in the territory of Empoli, your victories over the Spaniards at Castelfiorentino and at Lastra a Signa fill the heart of all the population with pride and hope, especially the most humble ones, that see you as the saviour of their lives, their family, their honour and their work. The Lords of the Council allow you to siege the town of San Miniato, where the imperial army is threatening the way to Pisa: they have faith in your wisdom and courage." Ferruccio thanked him and didn't mind the praises: he had the simple and generous soul of a soldier, he didn't go to war for the glory, he did it to give back freedom to his home; he ordered to call back young captain Vichi and old captain Arsoli, war expert soldiers; and he demanded to be preparing for the sortie that same night. San Miniato is a beautiful town located on the back of a steep hill, not to be mistaken with the hill of San Miniato, the one just outside the door to San Niccolò in Florence, fortified by Michelangelo Buonarroti. They arranged the artillery, consisted by four falconets: small, rudimental, siege cannons, to be used to break down the walls, and by culverins; the cavalry with pikes and halberds, and the infantry with arquebuses, and all sorts of weapons and devices to climb up the walls: hoes, shovels and ropes. San Miniato is just ten kilometres from Empoli and its hill was reached and surrounded by Francesco Ferrucci's army at the end of that night. The same morning of the sortie, when he ordered to attack, Ferruccio was armed as a simple soldier and he moved first, ahead of his men, ignoring the balls that whistled, the arrows, the big rocks and whatever the besieged were furiously throwing at the attackers. The exemple given by the General Commissioner thrilled his men, who threw themselves against the bastions of the well protected fortress and triumphant broke into the streets of San Miniato capturing the imperial soldiers that hadn't been able to run away in time. People locked themselves up in their houses, frightened, thinking to be experiencing again what had happened when the "Bisogni" and the "Lanzi" of the emperor arrived; they had broken into their homes and had plundered the citizens, then they had killed who was resisting. Back then, there was a war code in force by the army of the, so called, mercenaries, who were individuals that served occasional rulers in return of merchandise or rewards, which consisted in money and in having the right to rob all the possessions to the people of the territories that they conquered: it was like the victory price that those poor people, who most of the time didn't even join the war, had to pay. Ferruccio warned his soldiers, even the ones who had switched sides to earn a salary: "Who doesn't give respect to men and women, commits robberies or hurts any citizen, dishonors his ensign, and doesn't deserve

to live, will be hung immediately!" His soldiers knew that he was very generous and when they were short on food and money, he gave up his portion to share it with others, rather than let any of his men suffer; however, he didn't allow discussions about discipline: he was relentless. For this reason, they respected his orders, and the citizens of San Miniato were so happy and touched that they offered food and presents spontaneously, but Ferruccio wanted all that to be paid for. He also paid for the one-hundred oxen that he gathered after that campaign and that he was able to let in Florence while the city was besieged, so that, during Easter time, the people could celebrate with more abundance and hope the great Solemnity of God.

## **THE CHOICE OF DANGER**

My wound was not as deep as the old ones that were inflicted on me by boars during hunting trips and it healed in a few days. In the meanwhile I was taken prisoner again. Actually I couldn't complain of how that nice family was treating me, and when I looked at myself in the water of the bowl, I noticed that my bones were beginning to regain the smooth and strong muscles. Yet, I hadn't gone to that town to live a comfortable life, I wanted to be with messer Alberigo and the commander Francesco Ferrucci and share with them the difficulties and the dangers of the war. Instead, I hadn't heard about messer Alberigo, yet, and I had lost my new friend, the noble Giuliano Frescobaldi, who never came back. I became melancholic and I risked to lose weight, again. My good guardian was sad about it; she held my muzzle in her gentle hands or she patted my back and asked me: "What's the matter with you, my friend? Do you need anything? Don't we treat you right?" as usual I could only communicate with my barking and moaning, that only a master learns to translate with time; that's another reason why we bond with our owner: for the consolation we get to be understood by that great lord of the world called man. That nice maid, instead, didn't comprehend me and she was sad because she cared for me. She didn't understand that I wanted to be called Marco, after all that time that no one had been calling my name, because I was a stranger to all those nice people. We need kindness, too, and there's nothing sweeter than being called by our name. Because I couldn't explain myself in a better convincing way, I moved away from her hands and went to whine by the window or by the door. She shook her head but she didn't set me free, because she had received an order, as well, that she had to obey. Finally one day she heard that captain Frescobaldi had been nominated Commissioner of San Miniato by Ferruccio, and he would have never come back to Empoli, so she entrusted me to a farmer, that should take me to him; she had explained in a letter, that I would have died of melancholy, otherwise. And that was true. That good man tied me with a little rope and he hit the road on foot. It wasn't a long journey, but rather annoying for me; as a habit of country people, the man walked in no hurry and made a stop at every homestead where his friends lived. They invited him in for a glass of wine, to talk about the war that made them fear they were working in vain, in case a group of scoundrels dressed as soldiers arrived, armed, to collect all the harvest and the cattle. However, all the pain in the world has an ending, and so did mine. Commissioner Frescobaldi took me in with much affection and never stopped praising my recover. I was free to wander around San Miniato not being afraid to be stabbed by a pike; the Commissioner had informed the citizens that I belonged to him and everybody respected me and offered me treats, that I politely refused, as the well trained dog of the Commissioner, ought to do. But I couldn't either be happy of that life that I didn't wish, because it was too different from the ones of messer Alberigo and messer Francesco, who were on the fields. But, where? Maybe messer Alberigo was still in San Miniato: with that hope, I never stopped looking for him until I had met every living soul and had checked out every corner of that town. As I had almost lost my slightest

hopes, I began to think about leaving, again. I had heard that Ferruccio was preparing to siege the city of Volterra, well protected on top of the mountain by the clay flounces and its massive walls. Volterra dominated the whole territory of Maremma and the Florentine Republic wouldn't have had a free way to Rome by the sea side, until it had been conquered. It was a difficult and risky task and everybody in San Miniato was saying that the salvation of Florence and of the Republic depended upon its success. But they all had faith in Ferruccio, in this bold hero, who, with few forces at his command, was always able to win against the strong army of the Emperor of Spain, who was allied with other powerful Italian and European armies. I had begun to figure out what direction Volterra was, following the path of the carriers of supplies, who came back and forth from San Miniato to the fields where Ferruccio was, in Val d'Era, by the hill of Peccioli. And I hurt finding myself caught in the middle between the desire to run away and the remorse of leaving messer Giuliano, who had arranged a bed for me next to his bedroom. The strongest bond that I had with messer Alberigo led me to commit that ungrateful gesture, and one night, instead of finding my comfortable way to the dog house in the Commissioner's palace, I chose to take the uncomfortable and dangerous one to Volterra.

## **THE SIEGE IN VOLTERRA**

We arrived at the field in the dead of the night, we hadn't had bad encounters with any predator or enemy. It wasn't the first time that those wagons carried a dog to keep watch during the ride and the sentinels didn't forbid me to enter. The soldiers were asleep, equipped and armed, to be ready at the trumpet wake up call. The captains were guarding, it didn't take me long before I recognized Ferruccio, who was speaking with his bravest and most trusting men, gathered around him: he was an acute planner, and experience had taught him that, when he had fought in the past, leading other captains, battles can be lost because little details have been overlooked. "Wars.." he said "...are won or lost for provisions", that is to say, by making sure the soldiers have plenty of supplies, even food; so he was ordering that, for the attack in Volterra, each soldier had enough bread for a couple of days. "It's going to be tough and we are not sure that we'll make it through in just two days, and a hungry soldier is as worth as a wounded one". I listened to him with admiration and I didn't want to disturb him, but I could no longer hold my heart and I went to lie down at his feet staring at his eyes. I wanted him to recognize me, but it took him a while before he lay his eyes on me. He glanced at me, carelessly and didn't recognize me. So I got up and started to move my head affectionately on his legs, but he said to a soldier: "Take this dog away!" I began to yelp desperately, so then he grabbed my head with his strong hands, he looked at me and called me: "Marco!" I can't describe the sweetness that I felt in that moment: my heart was light and my strength weakened for the big emotion and my legs almost failed on me. I don't know if human beings can ever feel a deeper affection and gratitude, but if they do, they are very lucky. In that moment I would have done anything to show Ferruccio my gratitude because he had recognized me. There was nothing better I could do but put my paws over his chest, he held them in his hands and said: "Good Marco of mine, how did you find me? You want to know about messer Alberigo and I would give you some good news if I had some, but I'd be lying: he was taken prisoner, wounded by the Spaniards in Montaione, near Castelfiorentino and I have little hope he's still alive. I wasn't there that time." he concluded, sadly, meaning that he would have given his life to save him from prison. In fact, he loved his fellow soldiers and this brave commander had fondly cried more than once when he had lost one of them. Maybe Ferruccio didn't realize that I comprehended his words very well, and he thought to be speaking to himself rather than me and when he saw me suddenly collapsing on the ground for the deep pain, he said: "Poor dog, it looks like it understood." He called a

soldier and told him to take care of me. All night long I did nothing but cry, although my sorrow was lightened by the hope to find him alive and the happiness of being with Francesco Ferruccio. The soldiers were up before dawn, ready to depart, and it's nice to watch a whole military camp get ready to go, when the light is unclear, at the very first twilight, it's the time that recalls the hunting trips. The knights were leading, fair and handsome in their steel armor, on their horses. They were protected by steel, too, with their long pikes which had wonderful arabesque, ornamental elements; and the artillery, with the new cannons received in support from Pisa. Foot-soldiers were following with their culverins, their swords, and their "rotella", that were round, dished shields, used to provide protection during combat. Last, were the wagons with the peasants, the "marraioli": miners (foot-men engaged to dig trenches and tunnels, to level the soil and so on: destroyers) and there were workers who carried gun powder and bullets, shovels and picks, and all the necessary to siege the fortified city. The severe and organized march lasted all day. I never lost sight of Ferruccio's horse, a young, bold, beautiful white horse, with whom I would have liked to measure up, in the old days, during a fox or a bore hunting trip. We arrived down the flounces of the city of Volterra in the late afternoon and we were tired. The soldiers were hoping that the General Commissioner would order to stop, but Ferruccio had his plan in mind, so he gave orders to begin the difficult uphill to the fortress, instead. With a different captain the troopers would have refused to do that, but with Ferruccio it was impossible: he was able to convey his bravery and strength into their veins. Ferruccio's soldiers arrived almost unexpectedly to the bastions of the fortress and they started the siege before the enemies had the time to prevent that violent action. I was into the fray, on alert, with my nerves and tense muscles, to run fast where I found it useful.

## **THE CONQUEST OF THE CITY**

The citadel and the fortress that protects the city of Volterra had walls, towers and massive bastions like I had never seen before. Yet, it was conquered in less than an hour. The first to enter were the infantrymen, who managed to steal the saddles from the horses of the enemy, before the knights could mount them to rush for defence. The soldiers exulted for the victory and the Florentines, who had been held prisoners, joined them after they had been released. They cheered because they hoped to refuel and rest after such a long struggle, but their Commander, though as tired and in need of rest as the others, considered that it wasn't time to take a break, yet. The citadel had been conquered, but the city was still in the hands of the emperor and, during battle you can't stop half way to give the enemy time to plan a strategy. He shouted to his soldiers: "I'll give you half an hour to refuel, then we'll give battle to conquer the city: the Florentine Republic is expecting to be saved by our own sacrifice." A murmur of disappointment spread among those soldiers who were too exhausted, but it was like a breeze that soon fades and before half an hour had passed, the troops were ready for the new siege that led them to fight from street to street; from house to house, where the most powerful and numbered opponents of the Republic concealed. Ferruccio, with a sincere aching heart replied: "Soldiers, I regret the necessity to take you to fight before I can grant you the rest that you deserve, but soon your grief will belong to the enemy and you will be able to rest." The soldiers were charmed by that generous heart and, as soon as the door, that led to the city, was opened and the trumpets gave the war signal, they threw themselves inside with their waving flags. But the city had been fortified and entrenched, and the interior walls of the houses had been drilled to move more easily where there was a bigger need, avoiding getting out on the street. The struggle was infuriating and many were killed or wounded, both on one side and on the other: the Florentines were besieged from every corner and they didn't seem to have a way out. They were too tired and reduced in number, a bad feeling of mistrust was

finding its way in: they were losing hope for victory. That is when I saw the action of Ferruccio that I will never forget: he was wearing a simple sallet, which is a helmet without a crest. He took it off and threw it on the ground to be able to move more easily, although he was more exposed to danger. He battled on the front line among the foot soldiers, holding a "rotella" and his sword: "Shall I conquer Volterra all by myself?" he shouted, to encourage the skeptics. Bullets of all sorts were falling everywhere around him and I was hit on the shoulder by a rock, that made me yelp, while I was trying to be helpful biting the calves of the enemies when they moved closer to Ferruccio. I looked up and saw that, from the roofs, tiles, rocks and bullets of all kinds were falling on our men. I saw that Ferruccio was exposed to danger even on that side, so I slipped through a door, went up a stair and I ended up on a roof. I was running the risk to be thrown down on the street like if I were a bullet, myself, but I didn't have time to think about it, and I started to bite furiously the people who were about to throw rocks, making them scream for the pain: their hands let go on the grip and the rocks remained on the roof. Ferruccio's courage lifted the spirit of the soldiers and all the bastions were destroyed, all the trenches were crossed over, all the houses were emptied, one by one. The soldiers were so worn out that they fell asleep, looking dead, right where they were standing, and the city recently occupied would have remained out of watchmen if Ferruccio, who was always provident, hadn't kept a cavalry unit from Corsica at rest. They were our allies and were assigned to guard the city through that night. I was very thirsty and went looking for a fountain. There, I met a wounded man who was uselessly crawling to reach to the water: I thought about the thirst of all the injured people, then. During hunting trips, messer Alberigo had taught me how to fill up a little skin and bring it to him. As I had drunk plenty of water and felt much better, I went in search of those containers that usually soldiers take along, I held it firmly with my teeth and I filled it up, I brought it to the wounded man who never stopped thanking me. Then I kept doing the same with the others until my mind went blank and I fainted, failing to know where I was.

### **MESSER ALBERIGO'S SWORD**

I woke up with a clear memory of messer Alberigo and the battle, as if my master had been part of it. I was lying under the arch of a house and I was looking around with the big hope to see him appear. I sighted nothing but a Spanish soldier leaning against the wall, resting in death deep sleep. I thought I had been dreaming, but the memory of Alberigo didn't vanish like dreams do when we wake up: as I sniffed the air I convinced myself that, that recollection came from the dead body. I stretched my legs after I had slept uncomfortably on the pavement, not yet recovered from the effort of the battle, and, curious, I went closer to that soldier. The memory of messer Alberigo came from the sword that the man had managed to put back in his sheath before he died: I sniffed it and with a wince of emotion, I recognized my master's unforgotten odor: it was messer Alberigo's sword. It felt like going back to those old days, when I spent my time by his side in our beautiful house on the Florentine hill, but it wasn't the right time to hurt with memories and suddenly I had the sad doubt in my mind that messer Alberigo must have been killed. That soldier could no longer tell me how he got the sword, but I couldn't be satisfied with that encounter and that memory. A secret hope encouraged me to action so I engaged in taking off the sword from his waste with my teeth. Afterwards, I made sure to sniff the dead body carefully: for a dog, each individual has his own body odor, and once it is imprinted on the memory, it's impossible to mistake it, even through the years, unless that memory is forgotten. The odor of the Spanish soldier had to be the common thread to track down messer Alberigo, or at least, the place of his encounter with the enemy. I grabbed the sword with my teeth, I looked down and happened to notice a messenger of Ferruccio,



horse back riding, ensuring the citizens their lives, and their assets if they weren't engaging in betraying the Republic and the people of Volterra opened up their windows and welcomed him like a saviour. I sniffed very carefully every step that the Spanish soldier had taken and it was a very difficult task, because we all know how many random steps a soldier takes when he is on a battlefield. However, my patience of a hunter gave me a big hand, and right before the sun had gone half way down I was downtown, on a dusty road that led farther to the sea. I met familiar and unfamiliar army squads that looked at me curiously for the sword that I was holding with my teeth and they were always unpleasant encounters, because each one of them might have turned into an unexpected or dangerous situation. Soldiers don't usually stop to chat and they ended up laughing and applauding, most of the times. I walked all day long without feeling tired, or hungry: I felt often thirsty, but I was confident to find a water fountain, so I wasn't worried. In the evening, the mistral started to blow from the sea. It's a very strong western wind that troubled my way, finding pleasure taking away the odor that I was following, from my nostrils. I didn't lose my hopes and kept marching through that green countryside, scattered with towns and cottages, until I reached the valley not too distant from the sea. The nightfall followed, but the anxiety for the search stopped me from looking for a shelter somewhere. I walked under the stars light, tramping because of the long distance that I had gone. Keeping tracks of the Spanish soldier I found myself in the lower reed of a marsh and my challenge got harder, there, because water is the biggest obstacle for our smell, much bigger than the hostile wind. I was afraid I would lose track while my legs were already drowning into the muddy ground, where the marsh begins. And my feeling was right, because after a while I was in the water, up to my chest and I lost every contact that I had with my memory: my smell failed. At this point a hound would give up, however I had to find my master, and the thought that men use boats to cross the water made me figure out that the soldier must have gone off a boat. What could I do? I didn't have a choice, I swam across the marsh with my head up high to keep the sword out of the water. Confident, at first, I soon realized that I had relied on my strength for too long and I felt like I was losing my senses as the previous night; it was a much more uncomfortable and dangerous situation and I desperately fought not to pass out.

## **THE BRILLIANT VICTORY**

It was spring time, not a very sunny spring and the water was still cold. I began to have very painful cramps in my legs for my weakness and the cold; that sudden pain kept me awake and saved me. I stretched my muscles to fight the cramps and while I was making those moves I touched the bottom which meant that I was heading to shore, as I hoped. Suddenly, I had to admit that I was wrong, because it was just an islet, a dry part of land where I lay down exhausted and absolutely incapacitated to swim any more. I stayed for a few hours going from sleeping to waking up, unable, as I was, to rest for the cramps that didn't seem to stop. As dawn cleared the sky, I got up on my sore legs that didn't want to hold me, I glanced at the shore that wasn't too far, I jumped into the water and from that moment on my mind has no recollection. I'm pretty sure that when I reached the shore I fell down weakened, a farmer picked me up, in his arms, and I used my last energy to prevent him from taking the sword off my mouth. When I regained consciousness, something, that seemed to be a miracle, happened: it was obviously the reward for my hope and affection; I was lying on a bed and messer Alberigo, next to me was tenderly patting me. I can't describe the joy inside of me; everything that had happened felt like a bad dream, that was over, now. Messer Alberigo was overjoyed as I was. He kept robbing me and asking me questions that I could only answer with my look. That farmer had taken me to my master, who was lying ill in his house, just for the peculiarity of the sword, unaware that he had

brought him back his companion and his sword. Messer Alberigo had escaped from the imperial army before they could cross the marsh and had asked that man for shelter to cure a very bad high fever, that was devastating him. We stayed in that house for about a month during which we received several news from Volterra, not all of them were good and pleasant. Ferruccio had fortified the town, knowing that Prince d'Orleans, who was the leader of the imperial army, couldn't afford to lose that important territory. In fact, the Prince didn't esitate to send him the most unscrupulous and vicious army leader, Fabrizio Maramaldo, who recruited men of all sorts and from everywhere, and convinced them with the promise to let them committ murders, devastate and sack the conquered territories. Maramaldo besieged the surroundings of Volterra and Ferruccio regretted not to have a thousand soldiers more, with whom he would have easily gotten rid of him: he didn't have them, so he had to accept the fact that he could only respond to his attacks; and so he did, amazingly, several times, always defeating him. When messer Alberigo heard about all that, he wanted to get off the bed and run to join Ferruccio, needless to say that I felt the same way, but his temperature was going down too slowly and he was hardly regaining his strength. Maramaldo ordered a moat to be digged all around the city to put mines in, and when he was joined by the great Spanish army, commanded by Marquis of Vasto, he called for the final attack. Ferruccio's men were ready to sostain that huge assault, one against onehundred. The attack began on June 13<sup>th</sup> and for the whole day, the imperial troopers were never able to set foot in Volterra. The valiant defender, who used to battle among his men as a simple infantryman, was wounded on his knee and on his waste by some rocks. I trembled when I heard the news, thinking that, if I had been there like the day of the siege, maybe those rocks wouldn't have reached Ferruccio, who, though, wasn't dismayed by those injuries and, inabled to walk, demanded to be carried around on a chair. His exemple multiplied the passion of the soldiers, who ran out of gun powder and fought with all the weapons they could find, they even used scrap-iron, that they secured into barrels, that they left to roll and break on the heads of the enemies. Finally the enemies lost their hope in victory and retired, but they found out that Ferruccio was wounded and feverish, too. They prepared for a new attack that they launched with much larger forces, while Ferruccio's were reduced. On June 21<sup>st</sup> Ferruccio went back to the battlefield defending on his chair, while he was still running a fever. The battle wasn't less violent than the previous one; in the evening, the Spanish trumpeters called to the final retreat. Ferruccio's men rang the bells for the big joy, while the troops of Maramaldo and Marquis of Vasto shamefully disappeared in the country. Ferruccio, in those conditions, and with just a handful of heros to defend the freedom of a nation, had succeded in one of the most dazzling victories in the history of our country. Messer Alberigo was really disappointed because he hadn't been able to be with Ferruccio on that glorious day and, though he hadn't completly recovered, he decided to leave, with my big happiness and joy.

## **ON THE WAY TO GLORY**

We took the road along the sea, very cautiously, because Fabrizio Maramaldo was still around with his soldiers and we know what would have happened if they mistook messer Alberigo for a fugitive: we wouldn't have survived. Our journey was slow, because messer Alberigo no longer had a horse and his pace was the one of a man not yet recovered. Messer Alberigo was really impatient to get there and he suffered for it. But, not far away from Cecina we were surprised to find out that Ferruccio was descending along the river with his army, after he had left two new Commissioners and part of his bravest and most experienced soldiers to protect Volterra. We didn't know the reason for the transfer, but there's no doubt that it was in the best interest of the nation, as Ferruccio confirmed, during our encounter, after we had gone beyond that beautiful town in Maremma. It was a

rather emotional encounter and I was given my share of praise, but I didn't pay too much attention to it, because I was busy rejoicing for their happiness. "Things are not going well in Florence" Ferruccio said, bitterly, "A besiege has its consequences and in Florence people are starving and dying of disease: that Malatesta Baglioni keeps on putting off the attack and he lets himself tear apart by hunger and boredom, inside the city, avoiding to fight." As I heard them speaking of sickness, I took a better glance at Ferruccio and I noticed that he had changed a lot after such a short time: he seemed feverish, however, he wasn't thinking about himself, he was thinking about following orders. "Those of the Signoria have ordered me to go to Pisa to gather men and money." He said nothing else, but he sounded like he wanted to conclude: "And I obey, as usual, because I am a trusting soldier of the Republic and I must obey until I die." He ordered to be given a horse to messer Alberigo and together, we marched to Pisa, through marshlands, that contributed to worsen Ferruccio's health, while messer Alberigo, who hadn't any injury, resisted. In the rich city of Pisa, the soldiers were hoping to be able to get even with the severe discipline that they had to put up with in Empoli, San Miniato and Volterra: in a time when all the soldiers engaged in robberies, they weren't allowed to do so and a few of them, who had joined from other armies, were unsatisfied. When they entered Pisa, that after several battles against Florence had become its friend, Ferruccio gave the same strict orders, in fact, not to hurt a single citizen. While he was staying in the quarters in the church of Santa Caterina and we were there with him, he was informed that the soldiers from Corsica had rebelled and they intended to go plunder. Like a thunder, he grabbed his sword, even though he was tired, had a fever, and was unarmored, he jumped in front of the rebelling soldiers. "Who dares disobey?" he shouted with such a terrible expression that no one spoke, but he ordered that all the men of his army received a double salary to keep them quiet: he never asked anything for himself. He had to stay in Pisa long enough to wait for the monetary help coming from France that was needed to recruit new men. From Pisa he was going up the hills of the Serchio river and the Arno river, and run to Florence, to catch the enemy from behind and break off the circle of the besiegers from the outside, seen that Malatesta Baglioni couldn't, or better yet, wasn't willing to try and do it from the inside. The Consiglio dei Signori informed him that, at that point, Florence and the territory of the Republic could be saved only by him: the Florentines were trusting in his bravery. Ferruccio was impatient, but his doctors saw that if he had left in those conditions, he wouldn't have been able to walk for long and they obliged him to take a break. It was a sad pause for all of us. Ferruccio accepted the fact with the hope to regain some strength, but he didn't lie in bed, because of too many matters that worried his generous soul: one of the biggest concerns was the lacking of money, that wasn't getting there. The sudden decision to leave was taken after he was given the news, terrible like a hurricane, that Malatesta Baglioni had informed of his intention: he was going to leave the whole city in the hands of the enemy, so that Prince d'Orange wouldn't be part of the siege. He had left some of the troops in the area and, leading his army, he was marching in help of Fabrizio Maramaldo, who had sworn to take big revenge on Ferruccio and his victory. They were approaching Francesco Ferruccio, the one and only invincible defender of the miserable Florentine Republic. Ferruccio counted his soldiers: three thousand foot soldiers and five hundred knights, divided into twenty five units or ensigns. He was going to face an army five times bigger than his, consisting of Germans, Spaniards, Italians, even Swiss and Albanians. He stated, with great emphasis: "Yes, it's a big risk, a tremendous risk, but you will be able to survive this as well, and if you won't be able to, you'll have to. Victory is crucial, and our rewards will be huge, rich and worthy." The army left from Porta a Lucca, he was shivering for the fever and told Alberigo what kind of reward he would expect, he said: "I'm going to die for my country!" and he was glowing: it was the light of victory.

## THE UNSWERVING FAITH

It was the evening of July 31st 1530. It was very hot during the day and we were more comfortable travelling at night. Ferruccio intended to reach Pistoia marching through the beautiful and wealthy Valdinievole, to avoid crossing the mountains: from Pistoia, then, the road to Florence was going to be easier. The Republic of Lucca was befriended with Florence and Ferruccio was counting on its help, however, the citizens of Lucca closed the door of the city in front of the soldiers face. This broke Ferruccio's heart, after all he was sacrificing his life for the freedom of his country and just asking free people for a bit of trust and some provisions. He could have obtained that with military actions, but he preferred to avoid any sort of war if not necessary for his purpose, so he encouraged his soldiers with the promise that they were going to receive a warmer welcome, further ahead. Instead, even in the town of Pescia, food and access were denied. "The soldiers are hungry and they don't want to proceed" said the captains angry at those people for their selfishness, in those hard war times, and they wanted to go and punish the hostile town, but Ferruccio shook his head: "We shall find other ways, the soldiers haven't been skipping a meal, yet, and they have been payed so far." Once again his giving heart was right and the army began marching to Pistoia. News from there weren't reassuring: they were talking about a large army coming in our direction. At one point, one of the knights galloped away and his figure was getting lost in the dust of the road: I was hit by nature and ran after the fugitive barking furiously. We inherited that instinct from our ancestors: we enjoy chasing every moving soul and bark strongly at them. Our ancestors used to live in the forests before they became friends with men, and they hunted down the game, barking to scare the prey to leave it defenceless. We still have this feeling and sometimes it hits with no reason. I furiously ran after the fugitive, barking at him and it didn't take me long before I reached him. The horse reared and almost threw down the knight, who was helplessly spurring it, shouting and cursing. Messer Alberigo arrived after a while, panting. He recognized and interrogated his fellow soldier: "Bravotto! Why did you do that?" The knight arrogantly answered: "Do I belong to your ensign?". Messer Alberigo saw that he couldn't waste any more time, he drew his sword, so that the knight calmed down his anger and said: "We have a life of poverty with Ferruccio!" "What about you?", my master replied with a lump in his throat because of his vile friend. "I wanted to swicht to Maramaldo's side, where soldiers are allowed to rob and get rich!" "You wretch! And where is Maramaldo, now?" "He is surrounding us with a strong army." "How do you know that?" The knight looked down to avoid admitting to be a traitor in contact with the enemy. Messer Alberigo ordered him to go back. "Do you think that Ferruccio will have me hung?" Bravotto asked him. "You'd deserve it!" My master answered, bitterly. Instead, Ferruccio let him go, after he had taken his armor and his horse: he left him wearing his clothes and his shame. And he decided to change direction to reach the implacable opposing troops from behind. The plan consisted in going up the Appennino by Pistoia to cross it, and end up on the valley: a legendary and heroic task, considering our situation: we had no supplies and only a few army troops left for Ferruccio. Moreover, although he had written to the Dieci del Consiglio that day, saying that he had recovered, to reassure the Florentine population and to give them hope, his conditions got worse and he was horseriding with a big effort: we can imagine how hard it was for him to take that decision to go up the mountain. As it couldn't be worse than that, on the Appennino we found a thick fog that eventually turned into a pouring rain and when we arrived in San Marcello Pistoiese we were tired, hungry and wet to the bone; not hopeless, though. Ferruccio conveyed to the soldiers his strong will and his invincible faith, that they treasured more than any other honour for duty and sacrifice.

## LAST DEFENDER OF FREEDOM

We stopped in San Marcello to rest and rearrange, waiting for the rain to quit, that, in fact, didn't last too long, it wasn't the season of the long lasting rains. The sun came out and we went into a field. The sun always puts people in a good mood, but it wasn't like it, that day. I, too, felt a big anxiety inside and I started whining to warn my master that we were in great danger, but messer Alberigo ordered me to keep quiet. I obeyed him, sadly and I couldn't find rest until I saw Ferruccio standing on the stirrups of his horse, foreseeing the coming of a terrible storm. That's what I wanted: the General Commissioner to be aware of the danger. The rain had stopped us in San Marcello, but, that day, we must reach the town of Gavinana, which was rather close, two kilometers farther up, from where we were going to descend to Florence, to bring freedom and salvation. Ferruccio was observing the woods and the top of the mountains that he, as a sensitive warrior, felt risky and dangerous. We saw the villagers running up the mountains and we heard strange noises that weren't just game or water flows. A frightened woman shouted that the Spaniards were there, a boy spoke about Germans, an old man mentioned Maramaldo and after a while we heard the warning bell ring of Gavinana. Ferruccio, still standing up on his horse, with his pursed lips, looked like the picture of freedom, ready for extreme defence. A man, holding two girls in his arms, shouted: "Prince Philibert d'Orange is in Gavinana with his army!" Ferruccio was petrified: the soldiers were looking at him anxiously. He murmured: "Hoy Malatesta, you traitor!" his mind quickly pictured the tragedy of his beloved city. Using the excuse to avoid the siege, sacking and devastation, Malatesta Baglioni, the unfaithful defender of the Republic had made an agreement with Prince d'Orange, assuring him that the besieged Florentines wouldn't have fought him. Prince d'Orange was free, now, to go with his powerful army to fight against Ferruccio and his heroic, but small, handful of soldiers, after he had sent Fabrizio Maramaldo, captain of misfortune, to spy on him. "Hoy, Malatesta, you traitor!" Ferruccio realized that the mountains were swarming with enemies, who were greeding for his death, aware that the freedom of Florence and Italy would have ended with him. However, that brave, final defender of freedom for his nation, didn't surrender. He looked at the soldiers that silently were waiting for his final words: he was nearly able to count them all with a glance, and moving his eyes he saw that they all, knights and foot soldiers, could fit in the perimeter of those fields. Yet, they were fighting against the world strongest military force; no human eyes would have been able to count those soldiers all at once. The famous and acclaimed Prince d'Orange, lieutenant general of Emperor Charles V was their leader, surrounded by captains from different nations, of different nature, with a common unfeeling for freedom. Maramaldo was there, too; he had declared once, that he would have never forgiven Ferruccio for his victories. In that remarkable moment, Francesco Ferrucci felt the responsibility of his action and in his heart he hugged all his soldiers, before death embraced him. He wasn't talking about rewards, any more, but glory. I remember exactly the words that he said to them, one by one: "My dearest, bravest, fellow soldiers. The salvation or the defeat of Florence is up to you, it's in your hands. Follow me everywhere I go and remember, that generous souls choose to die with honour and live in eternal glory, rather than live dishonoured and die shamefully with no praise." He divided the troops in three groups: the vanguard, the middleguard and the rearguard. He was in the vanguard on his beautiful white horse and his unsheathed sword. He was still running a fever, but now, everything had disappeared and just one vision was left: the extreme, desperate effort to give Florence the freedom that he was still hoping for. Messer Alberigo was riding by Ferruccio's side, like his shadow, and I gathered that he wanted to win or die next to him; or even die for him. I was walking beside them not to be outdone and I was sniffing the air to baffle in time possible plots.

## THE HERO DIES AS A WINNER

We entered Gavinana from Porta Papina, that faces the town of San Marcello, while d'Orange was arriving from the opposite direction: from Porta Piovana. The battle bursted immediately, furious and dreadful, after the call of the trumpeters of the two parties that encouraged to fight. Shortly, the small town was invaded: they were everywhere, on each single stone. The soldiers of the Spanish emperor were thrilled by the presence of their young, fascinating leader, Prince d'Orange, who was pushing forward into the battle riding his beautiful arabian horse and they were aiming for victory to show him to be worthy of him. Ferruccio was encouraging his soldiers to fight desperately. He had dismounted his horse and was fighting on the front line, using his sword, like a foot soldier. Messer Alberigo was consistently keeping an eye on him and, at one point he jumped in front of him to protect him from being hit, but Ferruccio showed him his disappointment and ordered him to step back. I wanted to be part of the fight, but Spaniards and Germans were wearing iron from head to toe and there was nothing much for me to do: my sharp teeth were my only weapon. I thought I'd rescue the injured: I provided them with water for their overheated bodies, and licked their wounds to clean them. I never let Ferruccio and Messer Alberigo out of my sight, suddenly I saw that the Commander was clutching a magnificent leather belt, enriched by gold and gemstones. A soldier had taken it off from Prince d'Orange, who was killed by two arquebus shots. At that point we were close to victory, that would have been ours if that betrayer Maramaldo hadn't been lying in wait with his army of mercenary troops, who had been waiting to sack Gavinana since they engaged in the siege, at the last moment. Orange's soldiers, impressed and disoriented by the death of their general, ran away and they were chased after by Ferruccio's men, yet, sure of their victory. I noticed that Ferruccio was pale on his face and was bleeding from different parts of his body, he was cautious and he restrained the enthusiasm of the battlers. He ordered to enclose in infantry square formation preparing for the extreme defence. He hadn't met Maramaldo, yet, and he had no doubts that he was very close. Perhaps, Fabrizio Maramaldo wasn't really sure to beat Francesco Ferrucci, neither in those desperate conditions, even though he had more wounds than men and he was more dead than alive. Maramaldo feared his greatest enemy until the very last moment and he didn't have the courage to face him, till he saw him lying on the ground, dying, and he confronted him to commit that vile action, that will stain his name for ever. He sent one of his captains to talk to him and exhort him to surrender, but the hero had already decided, and answered: "I want to die." Maramaldo's soldiers, the infantry and the Lans, that had been left behind as reserves, fell on that last heroic squad of defenders of freedom, that were fearlessly expecting the attack and that never surrendered to anything, but death. I saw Ferruccio fall down after he had been riddled with wounds; he was carried to a small lodge of a house in Gavinana. I followed those men and I was a witness of the action that makes a man go down to our level, or even lower: Maramaldo leaned over Ferruccio with evil eyes. Ferruccio, instead, dying, was looking at him with serene, good eyes of a soldier, who bears no grudge and fights for just a holy reason, not to kill or to take revenge. As the dying man saw that Maramaldo was going to stab him with a dagger, said to him, having pity on him: "Coward! You are killing a dead man!" Maramaldo, blinded by his low emotions, not even in that great moment, comprehended the boldness of his adversary, who wasn't suffering for himself, but for the extreme villainess that a soldier was committing, killing a defenseless man. He didn't understand and he killed him with his dagger. It was the evening of August 3<sup>rd</sup> and from that moment, Ferruccio was born to real life, that will make him great through the years. The hero dies as a winner, and the winning vile ceases to exist. Ferruccio was buried with his soldiers in a grave by the wall of the

church of Gavinana. I found messer Alberigo wounded and bleeding to death outside Porta Pinciana. I was able to make a soldier understand to take him to a house in the near Pian del Malarme, where we are still living, dearly taken care by these good people, who are crying for the loss of the freedom of the Republic, but they know that the sacrifice of fair people is not useless and will bear fruits that will ripen slowly, but they will be rich and beneficial.

Athos Carrara

## **THE GAVINANA HERO (1957) .**

In the mid 1950s publisher AVE of Rome, that publishes several periodicals of the Italian Catholic Association and which the author has been working with for many years ( yet in '44 he's published the biography of "Gemma Galgani" and "Simone", a novel for children, that had already been released in episodes on "L'Aspirante"), requests a full story to be published, as a serial, on the periodical "Il Vittorioso". Athos starts working on "The Gavinana Hero". He considers to go back to Francesco Ferrucci with a new effort and a different setting from the previous "Francesco Ferrucci". Adding the figure of a young boy, Marco, and his horse, Kherim, he easily develops the historic event of the siege of Florence by the troops of Emperor Charles V with documented historical truth and... adventure. Athos replies to the request of the editor, who urges him to receive the book, highlighting his intention of focusing on "Ferruccio's" historic event. This version of "The Gavinana Hero" is taken from the original work, in some parts different, however, from the one published on "Il Vittorioso", as if it were a "revised edition": for instance some sentences hadn't been printed, but mainly what concerns the chapter "The charm of a man", that describes the character of Ferrucci from his youth to the moment he is nominated War Commissioner by the "Council of the Ten", the rulers of the city of Florence that time.

### **A BOY AND A HORSE**

Marco was running in the rain. He was a handsome fifteen-year-old boy, with blond curly hair falling over his shoulders. His Venetian mother had given him blue eyes while he had inherited the confidence of mind and agility from his Florentine father. Venice and Florence, the two proud Republics were allied and helped each other to progress in trades and arts. Marco loved them both and he wished to see them united like his mother and father. But he was running after a sudden throbbing love, now: he was running, carrying a soft, wool blanket under his arm. He went down the shore of the Arno river and jumped into the water up to his knees. It was the beginning of September 1529 and those autumn light showers couldn't hinder the crossing of the Arno river, yet. He went up the north shore and ran into the country, then down a hill, and panting, he reached the pen where a young and beautiful Arabian horse was grazing. "Kherim!" The beautiful animal looked up and neighed. The rain was making its coat shine: it was black all over, but white from the knees to the hooves. Its dark and wise eyes were expressing a surprised joy, as if they were asking: "Why are you here, my dearest friend?". Marco covered its back with the blanket, grabbed the halter and they went down the hill together, the horse protected by the rain and the boy bare headed, careless of the water trickles that blurred his vision. The storm, that had come from Vallombrosa, was heading west to Florence; in Rosano the sun was shining again, still high over the hills of Incontro and St. Minjato. Marco had led Kherim under the porch of the castle to shelter from the rain, and now he was letting it loose to repeat the game of every night. Careless of the wet grass, he lay down on the ground while the horse hit him sweetly with its muzzle making him roll forward until it found the bag that Marco was hiding under his clothes: once Kherim had found the bag it stopped and gently neighed, showing that it was waiting with satisfaction. Marco opened the bag, full of sugar. He had received Kherim as a gift from his father, who had bought it in an Arabian village at the foot of Mount Kherim and had given the horse the name of that mountain: the highest of that region. Marco's father belonged to the Florentine Guild of the Wool Trades and travelled east on Venetian fast ships to trade the fabulous wealth of those countries with the treasures of Italian ingenuity. He had come back from one of those travels with Kherim: one of the best breed of desert horses, the most beautiful in the world, that soon became Marco's inseparable friend. Kherim devoured the sugar with much greed, and as the food had put in its veins an irresistible urge of moving, it started



neighing and pawing around the boy. Marco looked at the sky: the day was slowly ending and there was just the time for a ride along the grassy Arno river bank, following the flow to Figline. With a jump, he was on the back of the horse, that suddenly began to trot, neighing with joy. The enchanting surroundings suggested a joyful impulse of riding; but the workers who were coming back from their fields with their tools, had a serious look that evening, that couldn't be justified by the weariness of the labour. Marco would have never realized that, if an old farmer hadn't waved at him to stop: "Go back home, Marco. We don't have good news from Figline and you might have bad encounters on the way". Marco pursed his lips and, turning his head, he changed the leading direction to Kherim: they proceeded on the way to Rosano with sadness, that soon was followed by joy, like daylight is followed by night.

## **THE EVENING AT THE CASTLE**

At home Marco saw some horses in the courtyard: he didn't need the help of daylight to realize that they were exhausted. Up, in the castle, his mother had laid the table, where a few knights were sitting; they seemed to be more interested in their need of whispering, exchanging their opinions, rather than being attracted by the food. Although Marco entered the room silently, one of them noticed his presence, turned around and greeted him: "Marco, how strong have you become!" "Not as strong as you are, Messer Bernardo", Marco answered taking a bow, happy to be in the company of his father's friends, of whom Bernardo da Castiglione, was the most authoritative. "You will get much stronger, boy. Florence needs resolute men". In that moment the mother walked into the room carrying a roasted turkey platter. "My brave knights," she said with a lovely smile, "Give me the honour to accept a friendly meal". They wanted Marco to sit at the table, and this is what the boy read in his mother's eyes: "Your behaviour on behalf of your long gone father be worthy of him: hard times are ahead of us". Marco thought of Kherim, not really knowing weather he was thinking of it to offer and ask for protection, and also to apologize for having left it alone in the stable, contrary to the usual, when he left it only after he had kept it company during the watering and supper. Kherim, with the respect for its noble breed, drank nothing but running water and ate hay nowhere but in a clean manger, showing great appreciation for the company of its friend during these important evening rituals. Marco sat next to a young knight, Leonardo Bartolini, who said to him, as he wanted, while speaking, to print in his mind a decision that had already been made: "We are willing to do anything, we'll give up our goods, our lives, but not our freedom". Marco felt a new sensation, as if he were drinking a corporous wine that warmed up his veins, but didn't make him tipsy: instead, it turned him strongly calm, as never before: it was as, all of a sudden, the boy's delicate body was gaining the strength of a whole new man. "What's new?" He asked Messer Leonardo. The boy's calm voice caught the attention of Bernardo da Castiglione, who answered: "We met in Figline with Prince d'Orange, who is the leader of the imperial army. We were requested to be there and we expected to be given honourable proposals, but when we were demanded to surrender the Republic we had just one answer: "Florence won't surrender, its ashes will". Marco's mother was looking at those men, who were mostly merchants like her husband, and were talking like soldiers, as if they were born wearing helmet and armour, and as if they had won the one hundred battles of Giovanni delle Bande Nere, the last one of the great Florentine and Italian captains, who had died the previous year fighting against the same imperial army of Charles V: as if they held in their ears and in their heart the powerful word of Fra' Girolamo Savonarola. She felt on those men's side, for life and death, like her Venice was the only ally left of the great Florentine Republic; together they were fighting against a wide empire, that extended from Spain to the Polen borders; it already possessed big part of Italy, after it had defeated Florence's strongest ally: French François I d'Orleans. Angelica was a

practical and smart woman and she didn't deny the gravity of the situation, but she was Venetian, and she had seen, several times, the strength of will winning over weapons, even if they're more powerful and numerous, so she shouted with determination: "We have no time to lose, maybe we've already wasted too much." On the other side of the table Lorenzo Martelli raised his head: he was one of the Defence Commissioners and with a strange big voice, that came out of his slender body, which was obviously made of aged wood, said: "Our Governor, General Michelangelo Buonarroti, has well armed our fortresses and has made them impregnable. He has also fortified the territory of the Republic all the way to the city of Pisa. We have built war machines following Leonardo da Vinci's designs". Monna Angelica was pervaded by a thrill of emotion when hearing those great names, that were enough to make Florence big in the world, but her gumption made her repeat: "Time is running out". The knights reckoned her caring imperative and were moved: they silently got up, they kissed the woman's hand, gentle and strong, they shook Marco's young hand, and it didn't take long before they could hear the horses trotting on the road to Florence. Silence fell over the castle of Rosano, but there was something in the air warning that it wasn't going to be the same silence of night rest, that refreshes humans and animals after their labours.

## **THE NIGHT ATTACK**

The hours of deepest sleep, between midnight and dawn, are considered to be the best time for night storms; and the furious barking of a dog, in the distance, that faded with a moan, must have woken up nobody but the only two people living in the castle, if no one stopped the march of the attackers. Monna Angelica was the first one to jump out of bed, and Marco, who had been tossing and turning all night, joined her quickly. Marco was a good bowhunter and had learned to use the dagger and the spear, but he hadn't used fire weapons yet, although there were two culverins in the castle and a stock of saltpeter powder. Marco wanted to run out in the dark, but his mother stopped him: "It's too late to run away and a boy and a woman alone can't fight against an undoubtedly big, unknown enemy" said she, trying to point out her last words with an indulgent smile. Marco mumbled a muffled word: "Kherim!" Monna Angelica had a moment of dismay: how could she hold the boy? "They won't be able to force the door of the stable and, everybody else must be up by now" she said not too convinced. They heard a strong pike bang by the solid door of the room followed by voices speaking a bad Italian: "Open up!" Marco, who was less convinced than his mother and by her words, and was about to go down from the window to go and help Kherim, stopped, anguished: how could he leave her mother alone? He tried to speak with a deep voice: "What do you want?" "Food and men for the imperial army". They answered from the other side of the door in the same bad Italian. Marco suddenly felt like a soldier and replied with big authority: "You'll get more than that if you don't leave!" On the other side they sneered and started to hit the door over again with pikes and poles. Marco took the loaded arquebus and, remembering the million times he had shot with his youthful imagination, was able to aim the door and shoot. The noise in the room was such, that it sounded like the whole castle was about to break down. The consequence was what he hoped for: a deep silence fell over the other side of the door, of people who are frightened and caught off guard, and the voices that they heard were the fields workers' who had given the alarm and were coming in defence. Marco got excited and wanted to go out and fight with them, but at that point Monna Angelica believed it to be the right moment to open the door; the body of a wounded man, who was holding onto the door, fell down at her feet: "Help me, I am injured on a side." "Donato!" Marco was cold blooded: that was his young stableman, and he thought he had been reached by his arquebus shot. "Kherim..." "Kherim?" Donato didn't speak any longer, he had lost too much blood. Monna Angelica lay him down on a carpet on the floor and asked Marco to

take his clothes off, but the boy didn't reply because he had already run off. While others were approaching to assist the wounded man, Monna Angelica could hear her son's call getting farther away and more desperate every moment: "Kherim, Kherim!" It was the first time that the imperial troops had gone so far, beyond their field, and had caught off guard the villagers of a territory so close to Florence, that was so busy and quiet. It could have been a sign of their bravery or their need to search for supplies (didn't Italians, in fact, call *Bisogni* - "need" - the Spanish soldiers who belonged to the imperial army and always seemed to be yearning for food and goods? ): it was a clear call, anyway. After searching for several hours a townsman found Marco five miles from the castle, lying on the meadow, sobbing, with his mouth mixed with grass and dirt.

## **THE RAVAGED LAND**

Figline was a populated village, twenty miles south on the upper valley of the Arno river, that Marco knew well and where he had no doubts he would have found Kherim among the emperor's troops. He was, therefore, devastated by the pain of his loss and discouraged by the thought that such a noble animal was at the service of the enemy. Monna Angelica spied on Marco's every single move, and she could guess his thoughts. "Don't act imprudently, wait for your father to come back" she said while stroking his hair, trying to keep her voice firm, aware that something terrible was about to happen, sooner than the longed return. Marco raised his head and his eyes encountered with his mother's: words weren't needed when they were having such focused conversations, but he was a defenceless young boy, he would have been an easy prey for those men who fought for no ideals, except for money and robbery. She managed to stop him with the words that came straight from her heart: " If Florence accepts the assault and doesn't send its army against d'Orange, we'll soon face the imperial troops, and do you want to leave your mother alone?" Marco stayed at home at last, but his heart was trembling because of the impossibility to be with his mother and run to free Kherim at the same time. He restlessly wandered through the hills on both sides of the Arno river and he observed the line of the horizon from all angles, keeping his ears alerted by the slightest noise. People caught by fear of the incoming storm were building barricades in their houses and stables, wondering why they weren't receiving proper orders from Florence. Florentines were proud of the defence works that Michelangelo had accomplished; of their wealth, and of the food that they had: they felt strong and didn't fear the coming of the enemy. They let people in the country provide the best they could to their own defence, choosing to remain united to defend the city, sure that defending the city meant freedom for the whole territory of the Republic. Marco had a sudden idea and because he believed it to be very important, he ran home with his heart in his mouth: "Mother, let's get ready to leave; we still have time to reach Venice". A mother couldn't ask for more: to be safe with her son. However, when she married a Florentine she got married to Florence as well, and her son was born in Florence. She kissed him on the forehead, she held him close and said to him: "Venice is here". She knew that the danger of a war is really serious for a woman and a young boy: war is a monster that hates kindness and loves to destroy it. With a lump in her throat she confirmed with a whisper: "Your father will not be ashamed of us!" Marco saw that she faked a sweet smile to hide the pain. His mother understood that he wasn't leaving for Venice with her, he was going back for Florence and Kherim, instead; he had made the suggestion to save his mother. Florentines hadn't experienced the sack of Rome that had happened two years earlier and didn't know the power of destruction of the Spanish *Bisogni* and German *Lansquenets*. They appeared like an army of biblical grasshoppers on the top of the hill in Chianti and on the upper Valdarno, they spread through the town of Rosano, one of the richest and most beautiful of the valley, and they left it deserted; they emptied barns and stables and left the houses with shutters wide open like the arms of cadavers

and dying people; they destroyed their vineyards. Those who deceived to be able to resist were killed, those who had run away were now cautiously and helplessly looking for their beloved ones in the woods and along the riverbanks. Loyal Donato was calling the names of Monna Angelica and Marco, in vain, from his bed of pain, in a room of the castle, after he had escaped death once again: his voice was getting lost in the emptiness of the ravaged rooms.

### **THE MARCH OF THE PRISONERS**

Prince Philibert D'Orange strangely looked like Marco: he was, like him, tall, blond with blue eyes. He would have appeared of a rare beauty if a scar on his left cheek, caused by a shot of arquebus during the sack of Rome, had not disfigured him, and his face hadn't turned ragious too easily for the impulse of the fury. He was close to Marco's age. He, too, had to run away from his country when he was very young, and had experienced imprisonment: at the age of twenty-seven, now, he was the commander of the imperial army as General Commander. He was riding at the head of his troops: being close to Florence made him enthusiastic and tense. The march was even too smooth considering the prey, that after Rome, was one of the most longed for in the world. In Rome, he alone was the commander of light cavalry, in Florence, his ability to be a supreme leader would have given him fame and glory over the years. He feared to find an unpleasant surprise on that clear way and felt anxious not to be able to estimate the danger. His captains, who were marching with their banners, watched him and reckoned his anxiety, but they couldn't guess the cause. As his new riding creature, the most beautiful ever seen, suddenly swerved, reared and nearly dropped him dragging him into a furious run, they ordered the troops to stop and gave the alarm, as if a sudden attack had ocured. But the horse, that appeared to have perceived a serious danger, stopped all of a sudden among a company of "bisogni", who were dragging a group of young land workers, taken prisoners in Rosano, that they wanted to use to dig trenches around Florence. "Kherim!" It was the sweet and sad voice of one of those young men to bring the animal to its senses. The General Commander, pale for the rage and the shame, moved his sword in circle over the boy's face, but the resemblance and his gentle features caught his attention: "You're not a land worker, are you?" He shouted: "Who are you?" "Marco Soderini, Florentine" "Are you related to Tommaso Soderini, ambassador of the Republic?" "I'm his nephew" Prince d'Orange felt just about embarassed to see that nice proud boy tied with ropes like the other countrymen. "How did you end up like this?" Marco thought that question to be useless and kept staring at D'Orange with no answer. "You'll be a good hostage" said the Prince, irritated, and he spurred the horse, but it remained still. D'Orange understood: "Is it yours?" he asked the boy "It's mine, sir" Marco answered, blushing with pride. "It was yours!" In that moment, the Prince could have made a gesture worthy of a true knight, but war hardens the most generous hearts, and Prince d'Orange was just a warrior on the winner's side. He spurred the animal more energetically, that started to move. The soldiers strongly pulled the ropes of the prisoners to let them forget about their fatigue and the anxiety for freedom.

### **THE CONCERT OF WAR**

The ancient castles were defended from the assaults of the enemy becoming islands surrounded by a moat; Florence, which was much more than a castle, had his defence only on one side and where the Arno river could not surround it, the Terzolle, the Mugnone and the Affrico weren't enough to make it into an impregnable island. Florentines found the remedy of the dry ditch, breaking down all the villas, all the churches around the city, all

the houses that could keep the enemy hidden from view; Michelangelo, old by then, was given the sad job of having to supervise the destruction, where treasures of art and faith stood, and he stopped just in front of a masterpiece by the painter friend Andrea del Sarto, a "Dinner" that the painter had recently painted in the refectory of the convent of San Salvi: that wall remained standing. D'Orange stopped his army at the outer edge of that deserted moat and waited for the arrival of the artillery to test the strength of the other side, well equipped with walls and fortresses: even the bell tower of the church of San Miniato, which, from that height, was the most vulnerable to the shots of the guns and culverins, was covered with wool bales, where the round balls of time could bounce without doing damage. Florentines had engaged Malatesta Baglioni as Commander of Defence, a mercenary captain from Perugia who had gained the fame of good leader in the pay of the Venetians and that held a "heroic beauty", as they meant it back then: handsome body and quick decisions, not always mixed with real virtue and patriotism. General Governor of all the forces of Florence on horseback and on foot, as his title was, Malatesta Baglioni understood the bizarre spirit of Florentines and took them on the hill of San Miniato to greet the enemy with musicians in the lead. Then all the cannons of the city and those of the outer defenses fired a hail of shots on the enemy's camp to alert them that Florence was ready to receive the attackers with dignity. Marco had fallen asleep, exhausted, on the bottom of a trench. His young age and his condition of hostage would have deserved some respect, but no one thought of it because the grandeur of the defences of the Florentines had shocked D'Orange who wanted to make it as strong, in no time, although it was impossible because of the lack of means and military architects as worthy as Michelangelo. Everyone had to work, even the captains, to dig trenches and erect barricades, therefore all houses were torn down to use their material: Marco was not spared, and for compensation he was given a bit of bread and some mistreatment. The fiercest man against him was one of those long-haired soldiers: one of those mercenaries who wore their hair long in order to mask the lack of their ears: he was a Frenchman who had fought with Francoise I and he had his ears cut in punishment for treason. That French soldier didn't spare the boy ill treatment: but he spared him bread. From day to day Marco was losing strength and will: he no longer thought to flee, he hardly cared to see Kherim again, that was treated much better than him; with an emotional pain, he was surprised to be thinking more rarely about his mother, of whom he had not known the fate, and of his father still away. He didn't recognize himself, he thought he had become a different boy, much different from the previous one, that would have felt horrified by him. Suffered violence, slavery, long labours and long fasts can weaken even the noblest souls and take away the power of redemption: you can no longer think, you just want to rest. The furious bombardment of the Florentines did not have the power to wake Marco up from his heavy sleep, nor the stone that hit him on his temple released the sleep forgetfulness. The damages of a bombardment with the use of firearms couldn't be irreparable, in the beginning, though the victims weren't that many, but there was such a confusion, that if Malatesta had wanted to take the opportunity, perhaps he could have solved the war in favor of the besieged. In the confusion and the fuss raised by the balls, by men and horses in search for shelter, the long-haired French happened to fall next to Marco, he saw him and exclaimed, "Oh my!, he's hurt." A sudden wave of emotion invaded the traitor of his homeland, as if that injury had torn his heart apart and had uncovered the seed of love that no hatred can stifle altogether. The soldier picked up his daily victim and started running through the trench, then crossed it and ran again in the open, while the balls went on howling around him, as if they wanted to persuade him to desist from a crazy idea.

## THE DEATH WAIL

Florentine youngsters had seen that their schools had been opened, like nothing had happened, and they had to get down the rampart, where they enjoyed distinguishing the red crosses on the chests of the emperor's soldiers from the white crosses drawn on their fathers and older brothers' chests; they had to get down that way to go to school. At home they took charcoals, on the streets they picked up limestones, and they wrote on the walls, thinking of their home land and of all the sacrifices that the siege had imposed on everyone, even on young people. "Poor, but free", "Florence will revive stronger after scourged" were the words that everybody murmured. They saw men cut their curls and grow a beard, throw away their hood, wear a military armour: they saw the bald knights join the city army ruled by Niccolò Capponi, relative of that Pier Capponi, who had shut the mouth of that misshapen and haughty Charles VIII a few years earlier, and commanded by the weary Roman leader Stefano Colonna. They saw Andrea del Sarto painting while wearing his dagger and Benvenuto Cellini chiselling his exquisite figures keeping his elbow on his arquebus. At night there was a torch lit up on every window and the whole city turned into a beautiful illumination: it wasn't a celebration light, it was a war trick to avoid night surprises, although it gave the citizens the idea of a feast and gave the young fellows the chance to hang out on the streets for a longer time. Women grasped the prayer as their powerful weapon: during the day they went about their daily chores holding the rosary crown in their hands, at night they crowded in the churches praying Jesus Christ, who was proclaimed the one and only King by the people of Florence. It was a city that was firmly expecting an attack from the enemies, and they had moved forward towards the enemies to provoke them with the sound of the music band. When the music of the instruments was over and the deafening noise of the cannons and culverins stopped, the Florentines stood on the rampart and on the wall, remaining on the alert, ready for a move. However, the land remained deserted on both sides of the river. As the day had almost set without any further changes a soldier was seen entering the desert zone by the uncertain sunset light. He seemed to be carrying a boy on his arms like as if he wanted to hand him over. The sentinels gave the alarm signal on that side of the wall. The soldiers pointed the arquebuses; there came an old man who had dragged a young boy by hand to teach him, still a child, how a man could die in defence of his homeland's freedom, if he were shot. "Don't shoot" cried out the old man. "Let him get closer". "It's a set up" an excited foreign soldier, who was the mercenary of a Corse captain, replied. "Let's not save spies". The man had reached the bank of the Arno river and was searching for the right place to climb up, but he seemed to be wounded or that the fatigue would win him over, so he sat down on the river bank, watching out everywhere with his restless eyes, like an animal that is aware of being hunted and that is now in the wide open. The boy that he was still holding didn't show any sign of life. "I know the tactic" the mercenary said. The enemy got up and went back into the deep river carrying the boy on his arms. It looked like he had gained some strength, but a shot echoed in the valley, the man went down on his knees, giving a last glance at the wall of surprise, anguish and entreaty. He rolled over and disappeared into the muddy water. He was able to hold the boy above the water for a while longer, then even the boy's body rolled over and disappeared.

## THE FAILED SURPRISE

On the night between November 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup>, San Martino's Eve, it was raining heavily. The rain and the wind put out the torches on the window sills and the chants along the streets: it was "New Wine Festival", cheerfully celebrated every year. However, the siege without the assaults that the Florentines had been expecting each day in vain, had not misled them, and rather than the rain, it was vigilance that made them less merry and more on the alert. Prince d'Orange had been awaiting that particular night to launch his attack, hoping that the night-time surprise, in the pouring rain and the "caresses" of good wine, would help him win easily and take over the city. The attack was launched silently along the walls of the southern river bank. The soldiers laid ladders against the ramparts, feeling certain that the sentinels, having found shelter from the rain, would be sound asleep working off from the effects of wine. It was the wrong prediction. The first Lansquenet, with his irsute head had not yet reached the first rampart when the alarm had already crossed the city from its foundations and almost miraculously all the bridges, all the doors, all the access ways were swarming with armed soldiers. The artillery went immediately into action, with each blow opening a breakthrough among the assailants who, before morning, were completely routed: the defeat among the assailants was such that, even in Paris, news had it that Prince D'Orange had fallen off his mount and was obliged to run away on foot among his retreating soldiers, covered with mud and shame. The old man who fifteen days earlier had nearly lost his life in the attempt to hinder the murder of the soldier who held a boy in his arms, was going up from San Niccolò, unrecognizable due to the rain and the fatigue: he had pursued the enemy up to his trenches and was coming back dishearted by the order that, even this time, Malatesta had given him to retreat into the fortifications. "Why should we stop while we are winning?" He could not explain that to himself. Then, the incident of the day before popped into his mind: "You son of a bitch!" he had told the mercenary after the arquebus shot, and clasped him by the throat. The soldier was strong and managed to extract the dagger: in that moment the old man saw, down the river, the body of the young lad getting back to surface, he let go his grasp and, at his age, descended the walls with a rope. He saved the boy's life and his own. That lad who was with him on the walls was his grandson, the son of a son of his, who had died in the riot of 1527 against the De' Medicis' slavery from which the free Republic was re-established. The little boy was called Dante, an important name, that he carried with much confidence. Now, Dante had found in Marco, once saved, a bigger brother. Marco's health improved day by day and he returned to his usual life in the home of old Strozzi, a relative of that Filippo Strozzi who had accompanied the De' Medici into exile to spare them from people's rage and to make a noble gesture. Marco described his mother to Dante: "A beautiful, kind lady". Dante answered: "There are many..." But he, who did have a mother, beautiful and kind, fancied Marco's mother like his own and promised to go and look for her. Monna Angelica was a refrain that kept on running restlessly from mind to lips. Monna Angelica and Kherim. Marco used to say: "A unique horse, in the world, you can't go wrong". It was dawn and the boys were not sleeping yet. Dante's mother came back from church where she had been praying all night. They were thinking about old Strozzi who had left home at the very first alarm and had not returned. The street was lively and it was impossible to distinguish an old man's footsteps. However, Marco recognized distinctly a neighing sound and jumped out of bed. "Kherim!" Dante's mother held him back "What's the matter with you?" They heard old Strozzi's voice: "Dante, come and see what I've got for you!" The boy ran down the stairs, his mother held back Marco who was heavily breathing: "Don't move...". She stroked his hair as to compensate for the disappointment he would have certainly suffered.

## HEROIC SOCCER

Santa Croce, the most beautiful church in the world, built by the Franciscan friars is the Pantheon of the Italian glories; it was a tasty morsel almost put on the imperials' lips. It can be said that the Spaniards, allied with them, could easily take possession of it if they were allowed to. The carnival of 1530 found the church of Santa Croce still free and the besiegers uncertain whether to attack, although in those months their army was tripled by numbers and power. The Florentines, numerically much less, had managed to intimidate the army of the most powerful empire of the world. One of the besiegers, a noble Spanish captain, wrote: "I had heard that these Florentines have skills when handling pen, brushes, chisel and merchandise, but I see they are more skilled with arquebuses and weapons in war". So they resigned themselves to starve them out, hoping they would be unable to bear the weight of the weapons and would be languishing at the crossroads of the streets: at every freezing winter dawn they expected to find defenceless doors and walls not protected by the soldiers. Their astonishment must have been great when, looking at the coveted roof of Santa Croce, they saw it crawling with boys and musicians. Florentines had chosen Piazza Santa Croce that year for their soccer game, which for many years was one of their most beautiful carnival festivities. They had chosen it precisely because closest to the enemies and had sent their musicians on the roof of the church to challenge and humiliate them. The imperials replied with the booming voice of the cannon and a cannon shot fell into the square, but the game continued and the musicians gave breath to more joyful notes. The Spanish cannon, discouraged, fell silent. On the roof of Santa Croce there was also Dante Strozzi: his great friend Marco Soderini was not there. The horse that old Strozzi had found wandering during the night of the battle was really Kherim, and not Dante but its rightful owner Marco took it. As soon as he recovered, Marco made himself and Kherim available to the republican militia, at the service of Ludovico Machiavelli, son of the great Niccolò, brave and pleasant young man. Captain Ludovico used the intelligent and brave boy for risky missions: he used him to send the orders of Freedom and Peace issued by the "Ten", who together with the "Nine" of the Militia formed the popular government. They were orders to the Campaign Commissioners, who represented the government in the territories still free: Prato, Signa, Empoli, Volterra, Pisa, Livorno. These cities had to furnish Florence with food, weapons and ammunition, and with all that was needed to support the siege, though the enemy left increasingly narrow gaps around the city and hung those who were caught letting in any help. Marco entered and got out of the cities with an unusual security for a sixteen-year-old boy, knowing when to catch the right moment and the best place, but he was betrayed by Kherim: the Lansquenets who were crossing the river on the southern side recognized the horse and toyed with the hope of capturing it and bringing it back to their captain who would have certainly given them a great reward. Marco was galloping towards Prato. He had an order of the "Ten" for Commissioner Francesco Ferrucci, who he did not know personally, but was anxious to meet, because of all the good things that old Strozzi, good judge of people, had said about him. He had passed the imperial encirclement and thought to be out of danger. Kherim had a light gallop as if the ground had the power to bounce it back up: riding it was a unique pleasure. Marco could not enjoy that pleasure because he was obsessed by a thought: he had to find his mother. Every woman he met was a new hope and a stronger disappointment. As if suddenly a strong wind had begun to whistle, he heard screaming in an incomprehensible language like when the wind shakes the plants. Marco leaned over the animal's neck and spurred it, but felt an acute pain on his left side and his strength failed. He knew he was going to fall so he stopped the horse. A swarm of people surrounded him and choked him with breaths that recalled the lowest class dive.



## **THE GALLOP OF SALVATION**

Sitting on the side of the road, Marco couldn't figure out what had happened. The spear blow on his left side was less serious than he had feared. It had caused a cut in the muscle that made him suffer but it wasn't dangerous; the compression of his hand on the hip was enough to prevent the blood from coming out. They had not killed him, they had not stolen the precious document, they hadn't looked for money, either; perhaps the enemy was short of horses and had sent those looters to hoard them. Kherim! Again Kherim was lost and perhaps forever. This thought was more painful than the wound and Marco, an intrepid young man, cried. It was not time for tears if he wanted to prevent those much more bitter tears of defeat. Marco got up: the dusty white road was deserted; deserted and long. Walking was always a risky adventure, which the inhabitants gladly avoided. Long and deserted towards Prato, long and deserted towards Florence. Longer for who felt tearing his side apart just trying to move one step. Marco remembered the face of his mother in prayer and confused it with the Virgin's. He walked towards Prato, one hand on the sore side, the other one on the jerkin that hid a bag of sugar, inside which there were the orders of the "Ten" for Francesco Ferrucci. He didn't get very far, maybe three miles, maybe just two. Sweaty, tired and thirsty, he sat again on the side of the road and lay down on the injured side. The pressure of the ground relieved the pain. He thought to rest up and get his strength back. But his eyes closed slowly, perhaps he had lost too much blood, he was losing his strength. The boy felt a strange gentleness, sweeter than the one that is a prelude to sleep, and in that sweetness he saw the image of his mother or of the Virgin, again, smiling and encouraging him, then he heard a gallop approaching. The gallop became more distinct and closer, closer and closer. Suddenly it stops and the horse is there. Marco sees nothing, feels the warm breath of the horse on his body, the horse rubs him, neighs in greeting. Marco makes an effort, regains consciousness, and shouts: "Kherim!" The horse is back next to him, its mantle has turned grey because of the mix of dust and sweat. It's found the sugar bag, has ripped it with its teeth, and it's eagerly eating. Anxiety immediately replaces happiness: the letter of the "Ten"! It's a moment. Marco sees it on the ground in the dust, Kherim, a wise horse, had regularly excluded it from its meal. Tiredness magically disappeared, Marco was now crying with joy, clutching the horse's head on his chest. He mounted the horse, spurred it towards Prato, and the feelings of pain, joy, apprehension and hope, mixed up. It was a gallop of will and love that wanted to overcome a deadly fatigue and an army deployed to battle.

## **CHARM OF A MAN**

The letter of the "Ten" said: "We nominate you Campaign General Commissioner of the territory of Empoli, with full power of peace and war, and with the task of strengthening that land and sending provisions and livestock, firewood and ammunition to Florence. You will leave Tommaso Soderini in charge of the town of Prato and its countryside." Francesco Ferrucci raised his head from the sheet and looked at the young man who had delivered it to him. With the little strength left in his heart more than in his body, biting the bullet, Marco looked at that extraordinary man, tall, young looking, although he was in his forties and showed on his gaunt face the misery recently suffered in the captivity of Naples, fighting with the Black Bands; his haughty gaze and his eyes seemed to penetrate the bottom of the soul. Marco felt that the man spread a fascination of self confidence and a severe kindness that made anyone wish to stay near him: it seemed like Florence would have never been harmed when he was there. Ferrucci asked him: " Boy, are you in pain? What's wrong with you?". Marco turned pale and did not have the strength to answer. "Take care of him and report to me", he heard. It was a masculine voice, a command voice. He felt that they were taking him away, he wanted Kherim to go with him, but the words died in his mind now attacked by the mists that numbed his consciousness kept

awake for too long. "Marco, son of mine!" The voice of his mother again, the face of his mother or of the Virgin Mary again, leaning over his face, his mother's kisses again, like when he was a child. "Marco, don't you recognize me?" Marco stared at her, the mists of consciousness slowly cleared up. A man's voice shook him: "How is the boy?". It was not Ferrucci's voice and yet it was a familiar voice, similar to his father's. But where was he? Was he back in Rosano? Was the war a dream? Marco moved his arms, lifted them up, touched her mother's face, he recognized her, "Mom!" They hugged each other, they cried together for a long time, then he heard the same man's voice: "You're a brave boy." It was his uncle Tommaso Soderini, his father's older brother, the new General Commissioner of Prato. "I've been looking for you for a long time," said the mother, caressing her son, "Have you suffered much?" Marco knew that his uncle was an ambassador of the Republic, and couldn't imagine to find him so close to Florence, he couldn't have informed him that his mother was missing, either, but here he had found them miraculously reunited. The mother's face was like a flower shaken by a storm that finally opens up to the warmth of the first ray of sunshine. "My son, you will recover soon, we'll be together." "We will be together," Tommaso Soderini confirmed. Marco asked, "Kherim?" "It hasn't left you," said his uncle laughing. "It's a beautiful beast: your father knows how to choose." The thought of his father being far darkened that moment of joy, but his uncle had no doubts: "He is a man who will always manage each situation just fine." Marco recovered in a few days. In Prato, the war was still the distant sparrow hawk, that periodically raids in search for food, clutching young men to strengthen the army and lightening barns, stables and cellars. Working life went on fairly peaceful and living there felt like a gift from heaven. Francesco Ferrucci came to greet Tommaso Soderini and wanted to see Marco. In his presence Marco felt again the strange charm of the first time. "Florence is sending me to Empoli", he told Tommaso Soderini. "Prato is well protected; you have nothing to fear". He said to Marco: "Florence won't die as long as it will bring up young people like you". He was wearing an armour, he looked like an impregnable city. He shook Marco's hand; Marco bowed his head, and Ferrucci's steps kept on pounding in his heart mixing up with his heartbeat.

## **THE FIRST VICTORY**

They had just arrived and the boy had already taken a glance at the room, at the merchandise and at the trader, who remained seated by his stand chatting with a man sitting beside him: another merchant. "Can we go?" He asked his father. He had gone there reluctantly, and he was already bored because the sun was shining and he could hear the cheerful voices of the guys outside. The father gave the boy a bad look and the son quieted down. Finally the man said goodbye to Raffaello Girolami, it was then that he noticed the other two waiting. "Here comes our Niccolò Antonio with his son: come closer!" Father and son moved to the stand: "What's your name?" the merchant asked the boy. The boy didn't answer and looked at his father, like he wanted to say to him: "You brought me here, you speak up!" "Francesco Mariotto" said the father with pride. "How old is he?" "He was born here in Florence on August 14<sup>th</sup> 1489, that is to say, fourteen years ago. "And would you like to make a merchant out of him?". "I would like to make a man out of him and I consider merchandising done in respect of God's law, an excellent way to become free men". "Leave him to me and I'll see to make him a man". That man knew his business and knew how to deal with people, but maybe he didn't know much about kids because he thought he had found a good pupil, however he had made a big mistake, betrayed by that restless face so willing to get moving. The grumpy boy got into it, but his own way, and he knew how to do business better than everyone else only when he wanted to. Because he had to run his errands to the furthest places of the city, he set up gangs of boys and gave to each of them a banner that was like a flag: he left to run some errands and never came

back. One night he arrived with his clothes all torn apart and his face lit up with joy. The poor merchant opened his arms, like he did in those moments of doubts and dismay. "What did you do kid?" Ferrucci answered him with big enthusiasm: "We won!" "You won?..Who?....What? Raffaello Girolami knew how to fight different wars, shooting trade deals and golden florins, he wasn't into weapons. "We conquered the flag of Santa Croce and knocked out the enemies". "The flag of Santa Croce? What's happened to you?". The boy explained to him that he had led the guys from Badia to the victory against Santa Croce and some of them were wounded. "I'm wounded, too" he said proudly, and raised his left arm to show his bleeding clothes. It was his first victory, but that was enough for Raffaello Girolami who had his friend Niccolò come over. "He's a good kid" he told him "But if he stays here he will get me in trouble: I'm very sorry to tell you, but he is not cut out to be a trader". Sir Niccolò who belonged to Florence's middle class, that part of the population that held the balance and the power of the Republic, had to take back his son to avoid to cause more trouble to his big family and took him to the country, somewhere in Casentino, around Bibbiena, where he owned some land. Francesco was thrilled with joy because the punishment set him free. To show his parents how sorry he was for being so keen on battles, which had caused so much pain to his master, he brought some books with him saying that he really wanted to start studying. Those books were however vulgar writings, translations in the Italian language of the VI century, of Greek and Latin masterpieces that narrated the adventures of antique leaders. They were wonderful adventure books, adventures that he dreamt of imitating. They were books made to light up, rather than put down, the fire in that big, strong, generous boy; a boy who always ran where there was need to do justice and to put things back in the right order. Francesco used to read standing, or after he had climbed the highest rock: he read until the sun, that shined on the open pages, blurred his vision and mixed up the letters. So he used to half-close his book and his eyes, and his imagination carried the warriors of Alexander the Great and Caesar along Pratomagno and Mount Penna which he found behind and ahead of him, on the other side of the valley where the Arno still holds the freshness of the springs. He read and wrote, he took notes: he practiced in reading while thinking of weapons. He kept a sword, as it was also the practice among young boys, who still felt like being knights, although they were hearing about great deeds of foot-soldiers called infantry. He didn't skip a day of sword training, not satisfied, he managed to provide a long lance that he surprisingly handled with skill. There weren't any Caesar's legions in Casentino, however they weren't short of soldiers, nevertheless foreign soldiers mixed with ours who joined the army of mercenaries, fascinated by war deeds, glory, profit and greed. It was neither a time of peace nor of war. There was a big war going on between two nations: the French with their King Francis I and the Spaniards with their Emperor Charles V and under these circumstances everyone was in war. Little battles between cities and between towns bursted all of a sudden, for no reason, and someone lived out of these small but often cruel wars, being at service of who asked for help or who paid better. Mercenaries recruited soldiers everywhere, who spoke different languages leading consequently to a large variety of generous and rogue souls, of heroes, with robbers and thieves. We can say that each farmer had a "Bisogno" standing next to him every moment he dug in the ground (Spanish soldiers were called "Bisogni" because they were meant for seizing ) or a "Lanzo" (Lanzi or Lansquenets were German soldiers) who, watching him, warned him not to expect to enjoy the fruits of his labor: soldiers lived out of what they found on the area. There had been glorious mercenaries leaders like Erasmo di Gattamelata di Narni, like that young Giovanni De' Medici that Francesco will get to know better later; meanwhile the brave and generous boy closely watched the soldiers around him, he took the chance to let them teach him the art of war, but couldn't bear that they committed persecutions. Master Niccolò Antonio, his father, worried about the fights in

which the son was more often involved, with bigger consequences than back in the city, thought to walk in the opposite direction with the illusion to take him away from the war influences that the wall of Florence seemed to have given him.

## **THE WAITING TIME**

That trip away from Florence and back didn't bring the results that the good Niccolò hoped for: Francesco was still his main concern, but at the same time he was his secret pride because he was the wildest but also the most generous of his children. One night, while the family had almost finished eating their dinner by the lantern light, they heard a modulated whistle coming from the road outside. No one paid attention to it except for Francesco who silently got up and ran down the stairs as fast as he could. A big young man, who had the smell and the look of the country approached him as he reached the door of the building. "Is it you?" he asked. "Giovanni demands you". He was a young peasant who had been enlisted by Giovanni de' Medici. Giovanni had begun to build infantry units to lead at random where there was a war to fight in defence of a nation's independence. His units became glorious and famous. They were called "Bande Nere"(black flags), because when his relative Pope Leone X died, Giovanni ordered to hoist the mourning flags. "What's up?" Ferruccio asked. "We're going fighting to Urbino: you'll be the Captain". Young Francesco felt a hot flush on his face for the emotion, but being a tough boy he had the power of strength: he was the boss of himself. If he followed his nature he would disappoint his family, but for such a big decision he remembered his duty to obedience. "When are we leaving?" he asked. "Tomorrow morning, before dawn. If you accept you will have to come with me". Ferruccio pursed his thin lips. He was excited by the proposal, but he didn't like the sudden invitation that escluded every other person's needs; for everyone has the right to have the time to think over what he has to do and to gather his things. "I can't come with you" he harshly said. The messenger of De' Medici didn't expect that answer so he turned ironical: "We should have given you the time to fix your hair, then". Francesco felt the blood running up to his temples, but he let go. "I should have received notice earlier: the reason is not of your business". The peasant saw no anger from Ferruccio, in the dark, neither he caught it by the sound of his voice. He said: "You are already speaking like a captain, but you don't have any courage". Ferruccio hit him on the chin and let him run away. "When you want to fight I will be ready". The man got up and left in the night without looking back. Francesco sadly shook his head and went back upstairs: he swallowed a knot of bitter saliva thinking of the chance that he had missed. He was the son of a "state employee", a citizen who served the country, who found more convenient to lead the children to the same direction: he was the Mayor and his son had to become an authority as well, after failing to become a trader. For Francesco had grown into a man, he became Mayor of several territories that were under the domination of Florence: Larciano, Campi Bisenzio, Radda in Chianti. As an authority he just had to run the area, the military tasks were left to the War Councilors, but inside Ferruccio's skin there was a warrior rather than a Mayor. This was often an advantage, because he could take care of the situation when the army wasn't around, like he did in Radda in 1526 when he found out that the country was invaded by sackers from Siena, who stole the harvest, the cattle and even the clothings that the farmers were wearing. Ferruccio didn't waste any time, instead of asking the councilours to send military troops, he created his own. He armed his citizens: the invaders from Siena got to know him well, for they were forced to leave at night shameful for going home empty handed with their broken bones. However, those skirmishes were like a water drop in the mouth of a thirsty man: they made him hotter, more willing to serve his homeland not as a Mayor, but as a soldier. He was born to walk, not to stay seated; to fight, not to dispute. He longed for Giovanni delle bande nere and he envied him because he gained a victory after another. So he rejoiced with hope

when he found out that Giovanbattista Soderini, Head Commissioner of Florence army, strict but right man, as Ferruccio liked, was leaving for Naples with the “Bande Nere” and the French to take the city away from the Spaniards. He had known Soderini for a long time and he was debating whether to write him to ask for an exoneration from his office so that he could join him to war. He was doubting because he was a faithful servant of the Republic and he didn't want to fail to obey. The announcement that the messenger of the “Ten” had brought calmed down his anxiety. He had come from Florence and as he dismounted from the horse he asked to be received by him. Ferruccio let him introduce himself and the young knight gave him an envelope. It was the request of Soderini to join him in the venture of Naples, and if he accepted it, there was a discharge order, by the “Ten”, from his duties as a Mayor. At 36 years of age, Francesco Ferrucci, born soldier, but kept away from weapons, because of obedience and needs for his country, until he was old enough, could now achieve his old dream to wear an armour and a helmet.

### **THE VENTURE OF NAPLES**

On a stormy night Giovanbattista Soderini moved his camp from beneath the walls of Naples and retired to the city of Aversa. His head was bandaged and his right hand was tied up to his neck with a gauze that hung on his chest over his armour: a cutting blow had uncovered the bone on his forehead and cut off two of his fingers. He rode holding the reins with his left hand. By his side, Ferruccio, who had never left him during that brave but sad venture, proceeded thoughtful and silent. The “Bande Nere” had been the pride of all the troops of the French leader Lautrec; things had gone wrong not because of those brave Italians that the pestilence and the war had reduced to a third. After bearing for many months the uncertainty of the proud and hesitating French man, who also died of pestilence, they decided to raise the siege to avoid the fall, and they tried to hide the retreat with the help of the night and the storm. Soderini, yet aged and worn out for the fatigue and the fights of his long military career, considered Ferruccio like a son. He bent down close to his ear to make himself clear in the rain shower and the howl of the wind, and told him: “If Prince D'Orange doesn't notice our move before daylight, we will reach the borders of Aversa in time”. However, the Commander of the Spanish imperial army, attacked in Naples, was provided with spies and before dawn let the fugitives gather and count up, annoyed by the rain and the fever, the Spanish knights broke into their lines and won, despite of their brave defence. Ferruccio defended Soderini with extreme courage, but they were overwhelmed by the huge number and they were held prisoners. They were taken to Naples where Soderini died after a short time. Although Ferruccio was shut in with prisoners who had the plague, he was never contaminated. Because he was afraid to end up in much worse misery, he remembered being an authority, so he wisely managed to deal with his conquerors and he redeemed himself paying three hundred and fifty ducats. He returned to Florence and first he went to see his family who lived in Colle Val d'Elsa then, where his father was the Mayor. But he couldn't stay inactive for long.

## **FERRUCCI NOMINATED WAR COUNCELOR**

Florence had driven away the De'Medici, become too powerful and consequently despotic, it proclaimed itself a free Republic, gaining the rivalry not only of the emperor, but of the authorities, the Italian confederations and the submitted lands that were fighting for their independence. Ferrucci was sent to Prato, then to Empoli, not as a Mayor this time, but as a War Councilor. Empoli was the town that ruled over the southern part of the Arno and the road to Pisa. The Germans joined with the Spaniards had sacked the city of Rome and had reached the city of Florence, led by Prince Philibert D'Orange, to restore the rule of De'Medici. Florence needed to have free access to the sea, from where they received supplies, so they counted on the possession and the friendship of Pisa, Empoli and Volterra. People of Empoli welcomed Ferruccio, because they knew him as a tough, but brave and fair man. Under him the soldiers kept discipline and didn't molest the citizens: they got their provisions, as accustomed, with measure and no overpowering; that was rare, back those days. Under his power the city received a new arrangement of strict defence. He soon called all the men of age and held this speech: "The troops of the German "Lanzi" and of the Spanish "Bisogni" are besieging Florence and they will push as far as here to cut off our way to the sea. If they will get into Empoli the city will be sacked: you cannot hope for pity. But we will make it impregnable". The people, submitted by his will, started to destroy, with their own hands, the villages that stretched for a few kilometres out of the wall to avoid that the enemies would settle there with their artillery. The wall was reinforced and the War Councilor calmed them down with these words: "The city can be defended by women with reels and spindles, now." He had Amico d'Arsoli as a lieutenant, a bold young man, who was the head of the infantry, and whom he trusted. He said to him: "Wars are lost or won because of food". He meant that weapons weren't enough, because soldiers need nourishment. For it was such a hard and uncertain war, Ferruccio made sure they had stock rooms filled with supplies, not only infantrymen with arquebuses, artillerymen with culverins and falconets, and knights with quick lances. "You will be going out with your knights, often" he told Amico. "Everytime an informer will give us directions about the way supplies run through, you'll go to hinder the delivery or you'll take them. We will fight this war feeding our soldiers and starving the enemies. Amico d'Arsoli was very brave, not leaving a chance to fight the enemies, always defeating and chasing after them all the way out of Florence, in Val d'Elsa beyond Castelfiorentino or Volterra. It looked like Ferruccio didn't want to expose himself, he was impatient instead, but he obeyed to the "Ten" who ordered him not to put his precious life in danger during those campaigns. He then, wrote to them with a bitter attitude: " I don't think I'm a man who wants to be locked up"

## THE OTHER MOTHER

A group of girls was singing, coming back into the walls of Prato after being in the country to deck their hair with flowers. It was May and young people's cheerfulness bloomed in spring over all the troubles that the war caused like in spring flowers bloom from the rocks of a ruined building: the perennial triumph of youth. A young knight passed the group. The very young knight must have been very tired and worried because he didn't keep his ears open to those chants and didn't look up to respond to the girls greetings. "He's young Soderini", one of them said, suspending the song. "He's coming from Florence and maybe he has bad news", another girl observed. That was a cloud over their joy, but it didn't last long. The knight disappeared at their gaze and they resumed singing. Marco reached the residence of his uncle, the Commissioner, and entrusted Kherim to a groom, and before greeting his mother he asked to be introduced to the Commissioner. Tommaso Soderini kissed him on the dusty forehead and took the envelope that Marco delivered to him. He looked at Marco with a painful surprise in the eyes. "It's an order to leave the town of Prato, as it has already happened to Pistoia", he said with a quite voice, and yet full of sadness. "Things are going bad in Florence, or ...". He did not finish his thought, that Marco knew very well because he shared the same fear. The boy's mind went back to Ferrucci and his face lit up with new hope. In the palace Marco slept in a bedroom next to his mother's. Before going to bed, he joined his mother to say the evening prayers together. Monna Angelica saw a great pain in her son's eyes. "Florence is not lost yet", she told him to reassure him. With a lump in his throat, Marco replied: "The best ones die; Ludovico Machiavelli and Ottaviano Signorelli died in battle. Andreuolo Niccolini, our relative Luigi Soderini, Bernardo da Castiglione are dead and Niccolò Guicciardini was seriously injured. Why do the best men die?". "Because they are the most generous", his mother observed, knowing not to be telling the whole truth of her thought. Marco grasped the sentence that he had been waiting for, hugged his mother, gave a clear look at her face, "I won't come to Florence with you, I'll go with Ferrucci!" The mother wanted to hold him, but she made a big effort and held on to the last hope: "Your uncle will decide the matter. You're only sixteen years old. "Marco knew that other young boys his own age were with Ferrucci and that same evening, perhaps the last one they would spend in Prato, he wanted the opinion of his uncle who tried in vain to convince him to follow him to Florence: "We need more fortitude resisting in a besieged city than freely going through its countryside. Florence, now, must win the fight against discouragement and needs courageous young people to be a support to the less powerful souls". Marco begged him: "Even Ferrucci needs brave young people who are able to defeat the siege to receive orders and send aids to the besieged city". Tommaso Soderini wanted to save the mother's son, but he felt that the voice of the other mother, the homeland's, was stronger and it would have been unfair and perhaps impossible to ignore it. "God bless you, son", he told him. The next morning Tommaso Soderini and her sister-in-law were ready to leave Prato with the army to go back to Florence through Fiesole, a territory that wasn't well guarded by the enemy, yet; and Marco received his mother's blessing before holding Kherim's reins heading to Signa and Empoli.

## THE WIND THAT DOESN'T LET YOU REST

Pisa was the far western gate of Florence to the sea, Empoli was the open road to Pisa and the center of supplies, that flowed from the rich countryside that surrounded it. Along this way the Arno river was the only oxygen channel to the city, sunk by the burden of the siege which had been lasting for more than six months. Lost Empoli, Florence would have lost his breath and hope, and it had sent there Francesco Ferrucci, a man whose family name did not reveal any past nobility and belonged to the middle class that has always been and will always be the reserve of the best energies of every nation. As a boy he practiced the sword to defend other boys, as a young man he practiced the polearm to protect women's honour even against powerful men like Jacopo de' Medici. He was not a mercenary; he had gone from the merchant's counter to the militia for the sake of Florence. And Florence, in time of greatest need, had not found a more reliable man to whom entrust the more difficult task: to defend the way of salvation. Ferrucci in Empoli had the same need as Michelangelo in Florence: he had to raze around the city to "clean it up" from possible danger. Marco arrived in Empoli leading one of those painful processions that war disseminates, poor people with nothing, but their own soul, after their houses had been destroyed and all their goods had been lost: wheat had become a common good, the oxen were already on the way to Florence, where starving people could hear the bellows in the distance, while being at the point of slowly fainting. For Marco it was a lucky arrival: before he was recognized, he saw Ferrucci at work. In less than two hours, the refugees had been relaxing and resting in the best houses of the city, by the best families, and all had been paid for what they had lost: a soldier had used violence to a defenceless family and had paid with his life the serious felony of unfair brutality. Ferrucci tightened his thin lips. That meant that he had a strong will, against which any force would have been destroyed. His lips opened up with a smile when he found out that two young blooming soldiers, seventeen and eighteen years old, had fought with honour beyond the suburb of Pontorme to impede the raids of the cattle heading to Florence. For he had nothing to witness his inner satisfaction he gave them some gold coins as if they were medals. Marco was tired, Kherim was nervous. The march from Prato to Empoli had not been an easy task: they had to avoid ambushes from every side of the road, by regular and irregular soldiers; they had to look for unusual roads, hide in the reeds, pretend they were taking different directions. Ferrucci looked at Marco, he halfclosed his eyes: memories and images of a life crossed his mind, but there was no time to hesitate: "Well, boy. You'll carry a dispatch to the "Ten"." It was nightfall, and the exhausted men, the animals and even the objects, tormented by the wind of war, were yearning for some rest. Marco did not dare open his mouth, he had to travel at night, it was time to go. He waited for the dispatch, he led Kherim beyond the walls, they were again in the open country. Kherim reluctantly trotted, Marco unsuccessfully called it, caressed it, and prodded it: it seemed like Kherim had lost the memory of its far country, where horses like it walk through the desert for days and nights without showing fatigue



## RESCUING ANGEL

Kherim turned its head and neighed. Marco looked at the horse restlessly: did the horse feel trouble coming? In front of them the one hundred oxen and the sacks of saltpetre, that Ferrucci had sent with an escort of fifty armed men were marching to Florence. The Councelor didn't expect everything to arrive in perfect conditions: he knew that, that open way to the sea and freedom were a pain in the heart for Prince D'Orange, who had it guarded by his cut-throat. Marco had the order to avoid the battle not to compromise his mandate: he had to hide, go through ways that climb up the hills on the sides of the Arno; he must not pay attention to the cries and calls, that might be hiding traps. Kherim seemed to remind him to leave the road to Pisa. Marco obeyed Kherim and Ferrucci, but as he was going to wade the Pesa, over Montelupo, the horse was still anxious: Marco was heading back down to Signa when Kherim refused to go on. Hunger pangs suddenly enlightened the boy: Kherim demanded its sugar ration! Hardship caused by a war could be bared if only giving up sugar weren't included: animals are almost as determined as men when it comes of habits, and Kherim didn't ask to rest, it wanted sugar. Marco, who was hungry, tired, with his heart on the edge at each noise, found the strength to hug it and smile to the horse: "My friend, it's the middle of the night; I'm afraid we will have to resign ourselves to have no share in a gain: Florence is worth more than a loaf of bread, a bed or a handful of sugar". It was an elevated speech, too elevated for a horse, even of a noble breed, so Kherim put its foot down and refused to obey for the first time. Marco urged and spurred it in vain: uselessly the kindness of the boy turned into harshness and anger: Kherim mutinyed, like squads of soldiers did when they didn't receive their pay regularly. With mutineers there are two solutions: the first is the use of persuasion, the second is the use of violence. With Kherim, the first choice didn't work out, but the second was repugnant to the young boy's heart: he would have had to kill Kherim, or leave it to its destiny, to go on walking. There was a farm not too far from there, that looked like it had fallen asleep. Each farm could nourish a beating heart for friendship or hide a false heart of treason for having become the temporary advance home of the enemy. Marco headed to the farm which was neither asleep, nor silent: a carnival noise was coming from inside. Marco knocked at the door, and knocked again many times, untill a thin, crooked man went to answer the door. "How many are you?" He asked the boy. "I'm alone with my horse; I need sugar, do you have any? ". "Come on in" said the man "Tie the animal to that ring", he pointed lifting the lantern that he was holding. Marco went into the room that the man showed him and began to feel breathless: around a big table, still laid, ten or twelve soldiers were about to slouch on the floor singing with their hoarse voices. On the table there were left overs of a generous dinner and among those left overs two girls, with ashen faces for the exhaustion and the fear, were standing showing attempts of dance moves. The scene spoke for itself. The soldiers, who were Spanish, had killed an ox, maybe one of those heading to Florence; they had occupied the farm, they had been served, they got drunk and now they were forcing the two girls to dance: the girls remained on the table like it was their last refuge and kept on dancing hung by the fear and the hope that the tiredness would end up winning over the nonsense of the soldiers. "Ola young man, drink to Florence's last breath." The other soldiers broke out into a big laughter. Marco had tears in his eyes and sorrow in his heart, but the brightness of his soul supported him: "Before I drink, dear friends, I'd like to tell you that I have a greedy horse outside that is yearning for some sugar: it is a horse of a noble breed, and as you demand ducats, it asks for sugar." The Spaniards were having fun and just the word "ducat" increased their joy. "Our noble friend is right: sugar for the steed and ducats for us! Hey, you of the house, bring sugar to the horse". The crooked man had perhaps understood that the boy was different from the soldiers, so he ran to find some sugar. Marco continued more bravely: "Noble knights, let

these two kind young donzels feed the noble horse, with their delicate hands. Come and see!" The men moved slowly and the girls understood the boy's intention, so they jumped off the table, avoiding the soldiers; they grabbed the sugar, reached the front door and saw the horse. The Spaniards, out in the fresh night air seemed to regain strength, and they stood by the entrance with suspicion, keeping their hands on their swords. Their unsureness was enough: a minute later Marco was running away with the two girls on Kherim's back. Bent over the horse's neck, he was making the horse devour the sugar to make it increase the distance from the house. The two girls, astonished, thought that an angel had come to rescue them.

## **MESSAGE FROM THE FORTIFIED CITY**

Marco was able to reach Florence from the door of San Gallo before daylight. The two young girls had relatives in the area of San Marco, that wasn't far, so Marco took them there. The raids of the enemy out in the country had caused a constant flowing of survivors into the friendly wall of the city, defying D'Orange and his troops. If Florence suffered, the besiegers were uncomfortable: the soldiers of D'Orange had reached the number of thirty thousand, a number out of the ordinary back then, and they couldn't be either well equipped, or well paid. Those were unhappy, rebel soldiers and d'Orange was in a big hurry to take possession of that treasure, unique in the world, and not to damage it with a direct attack: he wanted to take it still intact, not caring to find the streets full of lying or walking skeletons, for this reason he wished to avoid that the city received the slightest help from the countryside. Instead, more hungry men were sent from the countryside to increase the fatigue of the citizens, who, however, didn't dare to reject the new arrived because they were their flesh and blood. The one hundred oxen sent from Ferrucci arrived in Florence half the number: ten of the escorts had died. It was a great success, after all, that if it wasn't enough to satisfy the appetite of the people, it had the power to give them back trust and hope. Marco brought the dispatch to the "Ten". Ferrucci's letter said: "Your Lordship must know that I have fortified the city of Empoli so well that its defence can be assigned to the women with the reels that they use to spin the wool. Depots are well furnished with supplies. If Your Lordship is satisfied with my work send the money to pay the soldiers and to recruit some more from the countryside". Ferrucci reassured them about the city of Empoli, but didn't mention the war situation, that he expected to be long and tough. Empoli was free, not its territory, from Castelfiorentino to San Miniato, Montopoli and the surrounding hills that overlook the road of Pontedera and Pisa. The "Ten" sent Marco back with good promises, but empty handed. The boy understood that Ferrucci had to count on his own strength, with no great expectations to receive help. He was very tired and led Kherim to Soderini's house where he didn't find his uncle, but was able to hug his mother, who made him sit at the table and fed him an old slice of stale bread and some salted fish. A few months earlier she would have fed him well cooked, succulent meals. Had city life changed that much? Even his mother looked thinner and tired. In his heart, Marco judged the gravity of that symptom: we were in Soderini's house, one of the wealthiest of the city. Monna Angelica always quick in reading her son's mind, pointed out to the boy a corner, slightly lighted, of the large dining room: Marco saw a few women cuddled up on the floor, eating in silence, who had run away from the table as soon as he got there. "We have to help each other as much as we can" the mother explained. Marco understood and was grateful to his mother. He knew so much about war now, that, with painful astonishment he asked his mother, as if she had the power to answer: "Why can't Malatesta Baglioni stop it with the "incamiciate" ("jacketed") and try to end the siege? Is he waiting to lead to war a bunch of bones held by an armour?" People of Florence called "incamiciate" the missions sent at night, during which they wore a white

shirt over their armour to recognize each other in the dark. They went to molest the enemy and aid the transit of the supplies, even though, usually, they were just little fights, that didn't cause big consequences. The mother nodded: obviously she agreed with Marco and many others about Malatesta, whose name was an ill omen. She took Marco by the hand, like she did when he was a child, and led him to his bedroom. "I'll take care of Kherim" she said "Rest and don't worry about it". She kissed him on his forehead with much kindness. Marco slept until sunset, said good-bye to his mother and spoke in one of Kherim's ears: "Be good, don't ask for sugar; can't you see they don't have enough for the children? You'll have some when we get there". Kherim looked very understanding, the sentries let the boy go in: they called him the blond Arab, he looked one whole with his horse. A soldier shouted out loud: "Give Ferrucci our regards from Florence". Marco felt that it wasn't just a simple greeting, it was a warm request.

## THE REBELLION OF THE ETRUSCANS

In San Miniato, in those days, the severe castle, where the bizarre Emperor Frederick II had imprisoned the faithful Pier della Vigna three hundred years earlier, was still up. People were proud of it for the imperial power that it represented and that hadn't died in their soul, yet. Ferrucci conquered it with a night ambush, rather than with strength, and began again the work of fortification and provisioning for a long resistance in San Miniato. He sent Francesco della Brocca, Corsican, with five companies, to fight against Castelfiorentino; and Amico da Venafro, with fifty horses and four ensigns to fight against Montopoli. The two bold young captains returned triumphant with a big quantity of wheat and cattle that they took from the enemies: the way to Pisa and to independence was now safe and free from danger. The way to Maremma, the free land of colts and heifers, of wheat and saltpetre had remained open to Florence with Volterra as impregnable sentinel. Florence had sent Commissioner Bartolo Tebaldi to Volterra. He was a pretty gentle person, who was watched by the people with the eye of a leopard that spies the moves of its guardian and tries to guess when it's the best time to attack and get rid of him. Volterra boasted a much older nobility than Florence and owned incomparable documents into the Etruscan cinerary urns along with beautiful sculptures that could be compared with Greek and Roman art, for its columns, the wonderfully painted vases, for its branches and gold, even for the ornamental jewelery of the Etruscan women. It was a culture that went back for several centuries before the Christians. It had been a Roman territory since the first century before Christ and it became independent in the XII century. Volterra had no intention of being anybody's faithful servant, neither of the most powerful emperor in the world nor of a Republic that had the richest culture and was the most anxious for freedom. Inside an angry soul that feels compelled to a loyalty that it doesn't believe in, voices of rebellion find their influence; everyone can take advantage of it, even if it can cause trouble to whom has listened to it. Marco was the leader of a slender group of young knights, who were following him on a mission to Volterra. He was carrying a message for Commissioner Tebaldi, who received orders from the "Ten" through Ferrucci, the Chief Commissioner of Florence Army. Francesco Ferrucci asked Tebaldi to have a planned action to free the area of Valdera, between Peccioli and Spedaletto, from some gangs that had been hanging around there, lately. Kherim's beauty and the young look of the knights encouraged the men in Terrazzano to give up their work in the fields and the women to wave at them, but it was just temporary sympathy, that had no time to go deep in their heart. (???) A young man from Certaldo, Stefano, belonged to the group: he knew very well the area that they had to go to. When they arrived in Certaldo they headed to San Gimignano, however, through paths and second roads. They reached Pancole, first, then Santo Pietro and finally they made it to Cellole after walking into the woods. In Cellole it

was easy to realize whether there was danger on the way to Volterra. The knights along with their horses rested for a while. Marco took the chance to go into the church of Cellole: the dark and the cold froze the sweat of the young boy, who went closer to the altar, he kneeled and prayed with the words of the psalm: "His faithfulness will be your shield and rampart. You will not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day, nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness, nor the plague that destroys at midday." From Cellole to Volterra the road winds along attractive and cultivated fields (???) As they were heading uphill to Volterra, ten miles away from the city, they were stopped by an old man that time: the heart of old people is more experienced and ready, in other words it's younger as far as understanding and helping. "If you don't mind my asking, where are you going, my friends?" Marco stopped and saw that the man's face was as fair as the one of a child. "It's not hard to guess where we are heading" he answered. "You'd better go back". Marco and his friends waited for the rest of the speech. "Alessandro Vitelli, a Florentin rebel, convinced the people to rise against the authorities, and Commmissioner Tebaldi retired with his troops into the city fortress, where he is now besieged and prisoner; he won't last long. The people of Volterra are waving the gonfalon of their free city". Marco drew his sword: "If you're lying, you're dead!" The old man had a sad smile on his face. He was one of those old wise men born on Italian ground, like there will be others to come. "If telling the truth were enough to gain a long life, I would have a long time ahead of me!" Marco felt ashamed of his behaviour and understood that the old man was telling the truth. He turned his head to his friends and questioned them with the look of his face, but they were all too young to make such a big decision.

## ON THE WAY TO VOLTERRA

It would have been a good campaign. Their enthusiasm would have encouraged those young men to get to Volterra. They couldn't perceive the stiff fortress that faced the sea on the west side, but they could see the thin tower of Palazzo dei Priori, with the thick wall sorrounded by its towers. It would have been nice to risk their life to join the besieged, but some of the peasants who were passing by with their load of fugitives, confirmed the old man's warning: "Don't go there to get killed, go back." Marco was the leader of the brigade, and though he was the youngest and the boldest, he understood that it was their duty to inform Ferrucci as soon as possible. They went back rightaway. Francesco Ferrucci had just seen the soldiers come back from the town of La Lastra, half way between Empoli and Florence, where they had been sent for help. The town had surrendered to the Germans and the Spaniards before the backup troops got there. The free way to the sea had a painful narrowing. That news made Ferrucci purse his lips up to his blood: he kept Marco with him and sent young Captain Amico da Venafro to Florence with half of his horses, to take orders and ask for reinforcements. The orders were clear: leave Empoli, win Volterra back. Pisa promised to send reinforcements. Ferrucci gathered his troops, he counted his soldiers. They were two thousand infantrymen, including the five ensigns of noble infantry, led by Niccolò Strozzi, Niccolò di Sassoferrato, Francesco Verucola, Sandrino Monaldi, Balordo da Borgo. The knights were one hundred and fifty, led by Amico d'Arcoli. He didn't have artillery, not many firearms, poor ammunitions. He didn't let the soldiers get hold of the food supplies, which he gave to Andrea Giugni leaving him in charge of the city as Commissioner. He also left him with a large escort of men, although he believed that Empoli could make it on its own. He met with his War Council and said to the captains: "If we loose Volterra, we will loose half of Florence, as well. We won't stop untill we win Volterra back." He knew the old city, which the Etruscans had built on the back of the highest mountain of the region, and on the cliffs of tuff and clay, that were steep and smoothe like the face of the Dolomites. "They assure me your worth and

devotion to your homeland and its freedom". He was a man of few words and his commanders understood that it was going to be one of those actions that put their life at risk, like venturing out to a stormy sea on a tree trunk. Marco said goodbye to the family who gave him hospitality and who didn't have any men left. They had lost the head of the family fighting for Florence's independence, under Ferrucci's ensign; there was a woman of the same age of his mother and three children, the oldest was almost as old as Marco: Ferrucci had rejected him so he could be with his family and take the place of his father. Even though he never had enough money to pay the soldiers, Ferrucci had given a bagful to the family to help them start from new. Monna Cecilia was really fond of Marco, who she felt like he was her fourth child, so letting him go was very painful. She gave him a loaf of bread, that was something precious, and provided him with sugar for Kherim. She told him that she was going to pray for him everyday and then she sadly added: "...And for ourselves!". Ferruccio (as the people and the soldiers called him in Tuscan dialect) was leaving and, although he left them with the fortifications, it looked like they were left bare, without a soul. Women would have promptly defended them with their reels if Ferrucci ordered them to: that's why the woman added: "I'll pray for ourselves, for our sake, now that we feel more lonely and unsure".

## **THE FIRST BATTLE AGAINST THE IMPERIAL EAGLE**

At dawn on April 26<sup>th</sup> 1530 Ferrucci's army marched on the forty miles that go across the hills from Empoli to Volterra. Marco rode close to Ferrucci and read his mind through his bright, blue, little eyes. The boy almost wanted to turn into him, but he didn't dare talk to him, not even to ask him a question that had been concerning him for a long time and made him feel sad. The infantrymen kept their own pace, that nobody can ever guess whether it's easy or it's hobbled and that, the habit of marching uphill, turned into a wavy move; the horses had to keep up with that pace and bit their bridle. It looked like a peaceful march, though long and tough. After leaving Montopoli, just before going down the Era valley, the army, showing the first signs of exhaustion, was going to finally rest. Marco noticed a cloud of dust on their right, it was small like one of those, that suddenly appear in the blue sky and announce a storm. "Look, sir!" Marco felt the need to alert the Commissioner, but Ferrucci smiled at him with his tight lips. That was the sign that the storm was expected and accepted. The imperial eagle was watching the moves of his worst enemy and Ferrucci could see it fly around everywhere. D'Orange had sent the Marquise of Gonzaga to fight against, with fast and wild troops: the first break of the day turned into a violent and fierce battle. An hour later Ferrucci was back on his way to Volterra and his soldiers, turning back, saw the line of dust running away. At midday they met other troops, but the banners that they were carrying showed that they were allies: they were the reinforcements coming from Pisa, led by Camillo da Piombino. They had no artillery, either, and few arquebuses. The united platoons arrived in Volterra in the evening, they were very tired. Knights and horses, infantrymen and pioneers, trumpeters and ensign heralds, escorts and cooks had only one wish: eat and go to sleep. Marco wasn't so tired: that intimate bond that he had with the heart of his leader kept him awake and on alert. It seemed to him that Ferrucci had a live volcano inside, that let people read through his thoughts: he wanted to attack the besieged city that night. The imperial eagle, of which Ferrucci always knew the moves, had hurried, as smart as a bird of prey, to help the rebels in Volterra: infantrymen and knights had been sent there, commanded by the Florentine rebel Taddeo Guiducci. One night of rest would have compromised everything. Ferrucci hugged his troops with a look: they had just started to relax their tense bodies, and look for a good place on the ground where to sleep. "Captains, knights, soldiers, you all!" Ferrucci's voice covered the buzz of the soldiers and shut it off. "If we stop here tonight it

will be the end of us and our Republic. No one here wants to die and take the blame for it. We will be able to rest safely, in a few hours, in the housing of the defeated enemies". The soldiers changed their attitude and arranged to put back together the marching units. The sky suddenly turned dark, as though the sun had gone down all of a sudden. A few thick rain drops left their round prints on the dust, announcing a storm.

## **THE RECONQUEST OF VOLTERRA**

The rain began to pour down, the dust turned into a clayish mud tightening the foot like in a vise. Every step toward the top of the impregnable hill was a new effort of will, a victory over the heaviness of the path and the limbs. The inhabitants of Volterra had received new, modern artillery weapons by Andrea Doria, who had given Genoa the primacy in the Mediterranean sea and had put the fleet and his mind at the service of Emperor Charles V. The cannons had been put on three lines of bastions and pointed at the fortress where the Florentines led by Tebaldi continued to resist. When they learnt of the arrival of the Florentines led by Ferrucci, the inhabitants of Volterra turned the guns against them and they would have slaughtered them if Ferrucci had not been the man-at-arms he was. He ordered the knights to keep away and the infantrymen to penetrate the first houses and reach the roofs. Roof by roof and even room by room inside the houses breaking the walls, his soldiers swooped on the ramparts and during fierce fights, that lasted all night, they routed them all, one after the other. Once they reached the citadel, they entered the fortress with the lightning still striking the sky, covered with mud and blood. Tebaldi hugged Ferrucci and showed him what had remained for the garrison and what he could offer to his men: a few bread loaves and a bottle of vinegary wine. The soldiers fell on the ground, exhausted. If they couldn't satisfy their hunger, at least they hoped to satisfy their sleep intoxication, and some of them fell deeply asleep. Ferrucci had the main military virtue, he could have a clear evaluation of the events. The inhabitants of Volterra were astonished by the promptness of his action, they hadn't been defeated: they would have been able to rest and regain strength for a new attack within a few hours. Ferrucci's voice thundered in the vaults of the fortress: "Soldiers, necessity is still forcing you to fight without resting, but soon their sorrows will be your rest". Captain Niccolò Strozzi echoed his words, the others kept silent. The torches reverberated faces looking exhausted and upset. Ferrucci had his lips contracted, he would have broken a sharp sword with his teeth, and crushed a wall with his hands. He repeated the invitation, somebody got up remaining on the ground in a sitting position, strange whining sounds came from some of their mouths in sign of approval and ended in a lament. Ferrucci looked at Commissioner Tebaldi and his garrison. Tebaldi did not seem willing to follow him in a night-time adventure, in the rain and in the wind, not being able to foresee the outcome. He had just survived a nightmare, his mind couldn't bear living another one. Ferrucci looked at young Niccolò Strozzi, who immediately understood. He saw that Ferrucci had lost the armet, he took off his own and gave it to him: "I'll go with you". It was as if a lightning had struck the ground and had dispelled sleep, fatigue, fears, rebellions. The soldiers threw themselves outside, they followed Ferrucci, who in that moment, perhaps to send an order, asked about Marco Soderini, but nobody could give him news of the boy and his horse.

## THE BEST REWARD

At noon of April 27<sup>th</sup>, just over a day after the departure of the army from Empoli, the last hundred infantrymen, like the last hundred claw marks of the imperial claw having to guarantee the tempting prey of Volterra, surrendered to Ferrucci with Captain Giambattista Borghese inside the church of Sant'Agostino where they had taken refuge. Even the rebel Commissioner Taddeo Guiducci had surrendered, and those who were able to get out of the wall were fleeing to San Gimignano. Ferrucci assembled his soldiers: their effort had been too great for that energy to be contained and, to prevent them from misbehaving with the inhabitants, he ordered them to pursue the fugitives up to a certain point. Taddeo Guiducci found himself face to face with Ferrucci, Florentine to Florentine, soldier to soldier. He was the first to talk, "I know what awaits me". Ferrucci would have choked him with his own hands, for as much as the great tumult of pain and anger were in his generous soul. He pushed him toward the window and said, "Look". The road was scattered with victims and wounded begging for help. The rain formed a reddish stream at the centre, even the houses looked like wounded human body parts, with uprooted shutters and ripped off roofs. Guiducci lowered his head and collapsed on himself. Ferrucci suddenly felt a deep compassion for a man defeated by his own pride before he was beaten by weapons, and whose pride had abandoned him, now leaving him with a sad legacy: shame and sorrow: "I wish I hadn't done that", he said, his voice was choked, his words seemed sincere. "I'll let you live, try to live better your life!". Like someone who has fallen into the desert and has no more hopes, then revives at the sudden appearance of a distant caravan, Guiducci raised his head still unbelieving and yet animated by a great hope: "Will you let me live?". Ferrucci, perhaps, for he could not devote anymore time to him and maybe, because he was caught by the emotion, left him and went to write to the "Ten": "Volterra is regained. I am sending Taddeo Guiducci under good cover. I promised to have his life spared and if my work in favour of the country deserves a reward, I just ask to be able to keep my word, and ask for Guiducci not to be punished with the death penalty". Meanwhile, it was time to restore a city that the terrible cyclone had devastated and Ferrucci went to work with the usual tenacity. It was necessary to bury the dead, to treat the wounded, to provide soldiers and inhabitants with supplies; the fortress and the walls with saltpetre, gunpowder and ammunitions; to reinforce the army with new men, to build back Volterra and make it impregnable. No one could think that the imperial eagle was definitely gone. Ferrucci commanded to look for Marco Soderini everywhere, among dead and living people. The man who hadn't had the time to start his own family and whose childhood only had memories of his sisters, that had become nuns, had grown fond of the boy like he were a younger brother or a son. He was looking for him with no hidden affliction.

## THE LOYAL FRIEND

The survivors of the imperial army fleeing to San Gimignano, pursued by Ferrucci's soldiers, experienced, in the bitterness of defeat, the relief of being alive, and with that mutability typical of soldiers, they resumed joking and bantering each other. There was a certain Gogo, a poor guy from Apennines that the Spaniards had taken along, and that had become famous among them for having the most incredible appetite, never satisfied, and for his untidy armor. Covered with mud and in the worse shape, Gogo was now riding for the first time, after he had been walking hundreds of miles, and he was riding a beautiful animal. The Spaniards revered him mocking him, and Gogo strutted pretending to be the Chief Captain for a day. "Who gave you that beast, D'Orange?". "Certainly not, the Emperor gave it to me!" "I won it in battle!", Gogo answered, always speaking as if he had

a mouthful of food, "And so Volterra is redeemed," the soldiers laughed, "Tell us how you did it" they encouraged him, "It was Ferrucci's horse, I unsaddled it and took it!". The soldiers were laughing and in the meantime they were envying the good fortune of their fellow fugitive, not suspecting that the noble beast was suddenly recovering from his astonishment. Rearing up and bucking, the horse hurled the clumsy rider into the mud, and rushed off into a sudden gallop. Kherim did not hear the big laughs of those stragglers; it ran randomly with its ears pinned, until it felt it was out of danger and stopped on the bare top of a clay hill to sniff the air in search of direction. Perhaps, the favourable wind blowing from Volterra carried sound of echos or scents, so the horse decided to take the road to the city. The sentinels could not stop it and they did not want to shoot it, some soldiers recognized it: "Kherim!". Other soldiers tried to capture it unsuccessfully: Kherim was walking with his head held high, pricked ears and vibrant nostrils. It felt that the person he was looking for was very close, and this undeterminable perceived proximity irritated it, until it heard a voice: "Kherim!". The animal stopped, raised its beautiful restless eyes and moved down its head. It saw Donato, the young man who had been its groom, leaning against the wall of a house. Kherim neighed cheerfully, but Donato did not move, and pointed to a direction: "There!". Kherim took a few steps in the direction indicated and found itself in front of a low, massive door. Donato encouraged the beast waving his hand until Kherim understood, or maybe it had heard some noises coming from inside, so it started trying to open the door with its paw. Some soldiers went by; they were collecting the wounded, but Donato did not want to be rescued: he pointed the horse and the door: "There, in there!". The intrigued soldiers went by the horse, they called and a small voice coming from inside replied. They were able to force the door with their weapons and the help of hatchets and poles. "Marco Soderini!" one of the soldiers said immediately, "Run and inform Ferrucci", he told a companion. Marco came out of a basement where he had been thrown and locked in. Kherim showed its joy kissing the boy on his face and hands in its own fashion. The soldiers collected Donato, Marco recognized him. "Donato!". "Your mother..", Donato said whispering, "..sent me here secretly to follow you. That terrible night you were encircled by the Spaniards and before they could reach you with their weapons I grabbed you and I threw you in the first door I found that was open, then I locked it and I was injured. I don't know anything else. Forgive me if I have hurt you... ". He said nothing else and collapsed, smiling, dying beautifully as a faithful and generous friend.

## **FABRIZIO MARAMALDO**

Prince D'Orange ordered Fabrizio Maramaldo, who was in Villamagna, to dislodge Ferrucci from Volterra and punish him severely. Fabrizio Maramaldo was a rather short man, his face was burnt by the sun and altered by small scars that made him look rather suspicious. He came from an ancient Neapolitan family, but had left Naples as a young boy and had lived in the midst of wars as a mercenary leader, gaining the reputation of being stubborn and violent. With his three thousand soldiers, he had travelled to Italy several times at the service of one prince after another, striking fear into those who paid him as well as those who found themselves fighting against him. He had passed through Rome, where he had received free accommodation for himself and all his soldiers, for fear of blackmail and reprisals. D'Orange thought he was the right man to teach Ferrucci the lesson he deserved, and did not doubt that it would not be long before Ferrucci dangled in the wind hanging as a traitor from the ramparts in Volterra. For the action to be faster and safer, D'Orange sent Marquis Del Vasto with two thousand infantrymen and three hundred knights in aid of Fabrizio Maramaldo. In turn, the "Ten", now distrusted of Malatesta Baglioni's skill and loyalty, left the freedom of Florence in the hands of Ferrucci. Volterra, the city of San Lino, second Pope and first successor of Saint Peter to the papacy and



martyrdom, seemed to have become the dramatic living table on which the great empire and the small and indomitable Republic cast the dice of the final match. Fabrizio Maramaldo had a lot of scores to settle with Ferrucci, who had beaten him in various clashes in Valdelsa, while Maramaldo was helping D'Orange in Siena. He wanted to do things with great effort and, to better attack the city, he built, outside the door of San Francesco, that leads to Pisa, a bastion to use to launch the assault, like a catapult. Marquis del Vasto did the same thing from the side facing Florence. Ferrucci had a similar one built inside the doors. The Florentine soldiers who wanted to make fun of the small captain's haughtiness were repeating his name by twisting and despising it: "Maramaldo, Maramaus, Marameo...". Ferrucci mocked the rival in a different way and, despite the fact that Maramaldo had copied D'Orange promising to hang who entered or got out of the city, sent Gherardo della Gherardesca and Annibale Bichi, two twentyfiveyear old young men, with one hundred horses to Vada, to get supplies of saltpetre. He didn't choose to send Marco Soderini, that he was saving for other ventures. One hundred horses had left, one hundred horses came back with their sacks of saltpetre, which would have soon become firing powder to feed cannons, culverins and arquebuses.

## **THE FALL OF EMPOLI**

A young man of Marco's age appeared before Marco, who could barely recognize him: the young man had been walking, running and hiding in dangerous places, from Empoli to Volterra. Monna Cecilia's older son put his arms around Marco's neck: "You tell Ferruccio; he alone can save us!". Marco took the boy to the General Commissioner who read the news on the boy's face as soon as he found out that he had come from Empoli, and the boy's informations had already come to his attention. "Andrea Giugni has betrayed us: he has delivered us to the Spaniards and the Germans without letting us fight". Ferrucci lowered his head. It was a hard blow: after Prato, Empoli. He seemed to be struggling and suffering, trying to open a way to freedom through a current of betrayal, which was immediately restored after he had passed by and had destroyed him. Empoli, that women could have defended, could not defend itself from the traitor: "You can still save us, hurry up!". Ferrucci raised his head and looked at the young man who still had the desperate invocation look on his face: "Not immediately, but if death does not find me first, you will be set free, tell your fellow citizens". Ferrucci had him refreshed and a horse was given to him. He did not give him any money knowing well that certain actions are not paid with money. Marco stayed with his friend all day and said good-bye to him in the evening outside the Florentine door. The following day Ferrucci called Marco and asked him if he could speak Spanish. "Fairly well," Marco answered. Beside Ferrucci was Captain Sperone del Borgo. Ferrucci said to them: "Volterra is a city that, while an outrageous number of soldiers can trust to defend from the walls, it can easily collapse behind their shoulders because of a single mine. It is almost certain that Maramaldo and Del Vasto will use these means. You will get dressed like residents, you will go to the enemy's camp and you'll try to find out the place chosen to be mined". That same evening Marco and Sperone climbed down a rope secured to a merlon of the walls and the following night they returned with the precious information that Ferrucci wanted: the mine, almost in the heart of the city, was at an advanced stage of preparation. Ferrucci had neither intention of getting weak during the siege, as Malatesta Baglioni was letting the Florentines get weak, nor being taken by surprise by the enemy. His plans were big, much bigger than the resources available. The Government of the Republic was requesting men and money for help, instead of sending them to him, and the citizens in Volterra were rescuing the Florentines, donating all their gold and their goods for the freedom of Florence. But Ferrucci's desire was like tempered steel at his country's love flame, and his hope was even tighter to his

plan to save Florence. Although in possession of the "wind city", he felt that his breath was strangled and wanted to widen his lungs in Volterra: freeing the city from the besiegers, now more than three times greater in terms of number and firepower than the defenders. He ordered a large and deep trench to be dug around the walls at night and he had barrels full of stones and oilfilled boilers placed on the walls. It was the morning of June 21<sup>st</sup>. Fabrizio Maramaldo and Marquis Del Vasto, each noticing those preparatory activities from their positions, had already begun to cannonade the walls on June 12<sup>th</sup> and had assaulted the city three times until 11:00 o'clock at night, losing four hundred men without achieving any results. On the morning of June 21<sup>st</sup> Ferrucci had assembled his troops in the church of Sant'Agostino to hear mass. The soldiers attended it, gathered and devoted, feeling that the day would be very promising.

## **VICTORY DAY**

When mass was over Francesco Ferrucci assembled the captains at the table and spoke to them: "Everyone choose twenty five among the most trusted infantrymen: we will make a sortie to test the enemy. Then, we will act according to their reactions: I am confident that the siege will end today". The sortie, with Ferrucci and all the captains ahead, surprised the enemy whose losses were serious. Ferrucci lost the young and bold Captain Camillo da Piombino, struck by an arquebus shot. Fabrizio Maramaldo, who did not expect so much courage, resorted to the superiority of fire: the cannons. He started to mortar the walls, which somewhere lost their merlons, collapsed, crumbled: those who had built them meant to prevent access to men, not to heavy cannon balls, which did not exist at that time. Ferrucci withdrew his troops inside the walls and prepared to receive the attack. Marquis Del Vasto moved first with two Spanish ensigns, and his soldiers ended up, unexpectedly, falling in the moat, under the avalanche of rocks thrown from the walls, along with the barrels. Fabrizio Maramaldo massed his infantrymen at the door of San Francesco defended by Morgante da Castiglione. Francesco Ferrucci was riding through the city on his horse from one bastion to the other, ordering, exhorting, providing and helping. The enemy fire increased intensity, the battle was like a fire that a sinister wind carried and started: new Spanish infantries of Marquis Del Vasto attacked the walls along a large area from east to west. The walls were crossed in more than one point, Morgante da Castiglione retreated in front of the violence of Maramaldo's troops, the cannon cleared the field among the defenders, but Ferrucci's presence gave them heart, it gave the soldiers the confidence for victory. However, when they saw Ferrucci falling off his horse, passing out on the ground, everything felt like it had come to an end. The news spread quickly through the soldiers, who looked at each other uncertain, on the point of surrendering. Ferrucci got up, he could barely stand: a stone thrown by a cannon shot had paralyzed one of his knees. He was clenching his jaws for the pain, but his willpower forced him to open his mouth: "Come on, my soldiers; Victory is ours!". He could not mount his horse, he couldn't walk, so he was carried on a chair. Marco had followed him, step by step, riding Kherim. It seemed like it was time to make his old dream come true, now. He spoke to Kherim with tenderness, gave it a generous portion of sugar, he stood in front of Ferrucci, and to make himself heard in the roar of the battle, he cried out: "Messer Commissioner, you can ride Kherim without gripping with your knees, it understands many things, try it". Ferrucci had the sword in his hand, a frowny face and sparkling eyes; his armet was ripped out, it was a terrible scene to look at. He was a man who was fighting against two powerful overwhelming enemies: the imperial army and his pain. If anyone happened to be there, before him, in that moment might have risked his life. Ferrucci, however, seemed to be dazzled by the courage of the young man, he looked at the horse and said, "Let's try!". Marco glowed with joy and as he walked by an image of the Virgin

Mary, he joined his hands in prayer and stammered: "Thank you!". He had been wishing to offer Kherim to Ferrucci since the days they were back in Prato, but he had been keeping that desire in his heart, believing it to be too daring. The long awaited moment had finally come and it couldn't have been nicer: Marco was now certain of the victory. And he was not wrong. Kherim gave Ferrucci a new life: his men counterattacked everywhere, they repelled Spaniards and Germans from walls and doors, they chased them for a long stretch, spreading dismay and seizing their artillery and their equipment. It was nightfall, over the new ruins of the miserable city there was also a great hope: Fabrizio Maramaldo was dispersing his troops on the hills of Pisa and Marquis del Vasto was heading to Florence.

## **A HOLIDAY AND A FAREWELL**

The family had prepared a gala dinner the best they could, given the circumstances. They were celebrating Luigia's twenty first birthday along with her engagement with Sandrino Monaldi, one of Ferrucci's young captains. It was the Salviati family, from Florence. Deprived of all goods by the Spaniards, thrown out of their villa on the Chianti hills, they had found shelter in Volterra, where they had suffered other vexations during the rebellion. Marco lived in Volterra as a guest of the family and was invited to the banquet. Luigia had a youth glow and looked beautiful in her rich and charming clothes, typical of Florentine early sixteenth-century; and Sandrino Monaldi carried his captain ensign with graceful and self-assuring skill. The wounds of the last battle, that the city had suffered, had been healed and they never heard of the besiegers again. It felt like war was far away from the city and a compelling joy shone through the face of each one of them. Only Marco couldn't share that joy. He knew things that neither the others, nor Captain Sandrino Monaldi knew. Ferrucci hadn't informed Florence about his knee injury, which still tormented him much, and the "Ten" had given him orders to fortify Volterra; to supply it with provisions and ammunition; to reach Pisa to free the territory from the rest of the armed bands threatening its security. Ferrucci had readily accepted the order that met his daring plans and was preparing to carry it out. "Marco, don't you like me getting married?". It was Luigia's sweet voice, and Marco blushed slightly and replied smiling: "Oh, I like it very much, but I think we will separate". Luigia couldn't grasp the real meaning of those words, but she felt a sincere emotion and spoke like an older sister: "We'll be visiting each other, don't you think?". Sandrino Monaldi wanted to compliment him: "If Marco gives us this honour, he is Ferrucci's favourite and he will go far". It may have sounded like those words concealed a little jealousy, but they were frank like young Monaldi's spirit. The joyful lunch was nearly over, when one of Ferrucci's buglers arrived: "Captain Monaldi, Messer Commissioner wishes to see you". Sandrino got up and kissed Luigia's hand: "He doesn't like to wait, but I don't doubt that I'll be back here, soon". He apologized to the guests, saying that he would come back in no time. He found the other captains that Ferrucci had mustered. Ferrucci looked at them, he said to Monaldi: "I'm sorry for you, but other concerns are lying ahead for us", then he addressed them: "We cannot afford to be idle while the Republic is in danger and the country is suffering. Each one of you must get his company ready to leave and wait for new orders. We'll leave Volterra, now well stocked and fortified, under the command of Giovambattista Gondi". Gondi, who was present, noticed that Ferrucci was unusually speaking while sitting and expressed everyone's doubt: "Isn't it too soon for your knee? I reluctantly agree to remain, and I hope, however, to deserve the confidence of the Republic, but I think that you still need rest". Ferrucci thought of Kherim's help and turned his gaze to look for Marco, who was not there. He said: "It's not time to rest", he dismissed the captains, allowing Sandrino Monaldi to return to Salviati's home, not to continue a pleasant interrupted conversation, but to announce the farewell.

## LET'S GO TO DIE

At two o'clock in the morning, on July 15<sup>th</sup> the army of Ferrucci left Volterra and headed down to the sea. They weren't more than two thousand men between foot soldiers and knights, and again this time, they were neither well nourished, nor well protected by fire weapons, however, they were well provided with what mercenary troops lacked of: they were fighting for their homeland and its freedom. Ferrucci was riding on Kherim's back. Marco was next to him riding a beautiful bay horse. Kherim behaved very well, but Ferrucci felt anxious: the rough road and the dark of the night didn't make him feel better. The Chief Commissioner had been silent like never before, so his thoughts were going far: join the troops of Giampaolo da Ceri in Pisa, take the road to the mountain of Pistoia, win back Pistoia and Prato, take D'Orange by surprise and stop the siege in Florence. He had the duty to do what Malatesta Baglioni hadn't been able or hadn't been willing to do for a long time, with the city troops: the independence of Florence and the life of the Republic depended upon his name and his courage, now. He had been thinking over this for a long time: the "Ten" had said that to him, giving him powers that no men in Florence had never had before; he even had permission to negotiate with the enemy in the name of the Republic if he believed he needed to do so. In Florence "despicable situations look delicious", they had written to him, to draw an eloquent picture of the food situation, moreover, in May there had been an outbreak of plague, that might spread again any time soon, because the nourishment conditions of the population had worsened. Francesco Ferrucci was reading about all this inside his soul as if it was a living, burning book, so he decided to hurry up as fast as he could. The following day the army marched over Livorno, where they were welcomed and furnished with food and ammunition and where it would have felt natural to take a day off, but even though Ferrucci was in need of taking a break more than anyone else, he didn't allow it, so on the morning of the 17<sup>th</sup> they arrived in Pisa where they didn't find any housing, and they had to settle down into the beautiful church of Santa Caterina. Francesco Ferrucci felt that the journey had been the road to pain. Kherim's docility, made it easier by Marco's presence, couldn't stop the fever from clutching at Ferrucci's throat and try to choke down his will. In Pisa, Ferrucci must surrender to the pressure of Giovanbattista Gondi, who had come to visit him and had him checked up by the doctors that strictly ordered him to rest. They tried to convince him suggesting that it was "in the best interest of the Republic". But days went by: they were terrible days for Ferrucci's soul. Marco watched him with filial piety, he couldn't help informing the Commissioner of the incoming news or letting higher authorities do the same. Prince D'Orange had guessed his plans and had sent against him the defeated enemies, who were held by a particular bad spirit of revenge: Pirro Colonna, Alessandro Vitelli, Piermaria de' Rossi and Fabrizio Maramaldo. Days went by, but the fever was still running, even though it had gone down a little. Marco worried about Ferrucci, who seemed slimmer and exhausted for being forced in bed rather than for the illness, and he was trying to find the secret of the fire inside of him that was eating him alive. Two long weeks had passed and painful news about Florence were arriving, one after another. Ferrucci never meant to separate from his soldiers: he got up, called Goro da Montebenichi, who was the closest captain and said to him: "Let's go". "Where are we going?" asked Montebenichi, perplexed. Ferrucci had put on just his coat of mail and his head was uncovered because he couldn't hold up his armour. He looked at his loyal captain, like if he were telling him a secret, and said: "Let's go to die!". Marco heard those words and kept them in his heart.

## THE MARCH TO GAVINANA

Pisa was left well supplied with organized fortifications provided with artillery. Ferrucci and Da Ceri were in command of four thousand men with three hundred horses and a number of "smerigli", that were little field guns, along with the majority of foot soldiers equipped with arquebuses. They also had sixty carved bombards to use against cavalry, ammunition, powder and diggers with hoes and ladders. Ferrucci found out that Fabrizio Maramaldo had left San Gimignano where he was hiding with his men after the defeat of Volterra. He wanted to beat him to the punch. It was August 2<sup>nd</sup> in the evening, the army started to march at nightfall. Marco was happy to see that Ferrucci, once again, had chosen to ride Kherim, among the others that had been offered to him, because it was safer and more beautiful. But it was a joy covered with sadness. Ferrucci's words sounded prophetic, and that nightly march to unknown places, propitious for ambushes, against the enemy of whom they didn't know the power but they knew the desire of getting rid of such a dreadful opponent, were growing inside of him with a painful echo. Fabrizio Maramaldo was getting down to Altopascio to join Alessandro Vitelli's troops. In Empoli the road was well guarded by the imperial army, in Pistoia and in Prato they were waiting for Ferrucci with artillery, cavalry and infantry ready to obstruct his way to Florence. Prince D'Orange had enough with the besiege that had turned into a matter of honour for the people in Florence who resisted, but that was a shame for him, and he wanted for it to stop: he knew that in order to do so, he had to kill Ferrucci and he followed his moves every step he took. Ferrucci had taken the road to Lucca and Pescia, because he thought it was the safest, although the longest. The city of Lucca, however, didn't want to turn against the emperor, so after receiving notice, it didn't open its doors. Ferrucci felt the enemies get closer and went on, hoping to provide the troops with food in Pescia, but that town was on Orange's side and acted hostile. D'Orange had found out that Ferrucci had taken the road to the mountains of Pistoia, so he sent Fabrizio Maramaldo, Pirro Colonna and Alessandro Vitelli on the three sides to fight against. Ferrucci had reached Prunetta and wanted to get down to Montale to go around Pistoia. His troops were tired, the fever tormented him, but the thought of his homeland being in danger didn't give him a break. The guides, sold out to the emperor, led him to the town of San Marcello, that was on Orange's side and it was well fortified. Ferrucci attacked it and conquered it and finally he let his soldiers rest, for the first time, in a camp out of their own town, that eventually was named " the Iron Field" by the natives. Prince d'Orange had arranged about a thousand people from the mountains, led by Bracciolini, to keep close behind him. But all those military forces weren't enough to keep the Prince calm, so he decided to leave the camp and go up against Ferrucci with eight thousand foot soldiers and one thousand and five hundred knights. He reached Pistoia, he went up onto the tower of the cathedral to take a clear look at the battlefield and then proceeded his march. The following day, August 4<sup>th</sup>, Ferrucci woke up his team very early in the morning. It had rained during the night, the soldiers were still as much tired as they were wet. Marco had slept not too far from the Commissioner and he was one of the first to be standing next to him. Ferrucci might seem on his way to recover, to others, but Marco had learnt to read through the stiffness of his face, and he saw the pain held up by a strong, deep hope. "Why did you come?" Ferrucci's sudden question didn't surprise Marco, who answered him with a smile that meant: "What else could I do?" Ferrucci regretted exposing a boy to death, however the presence of that pure soul comforted him, and at that point he couldn't let him go back without leaving him in a smaller danger. "Don't get involved in our business" he advised him. And suddenly gave order to start marching. They were heading for Gavinana, the friendly town, in the middle of chestnut trees, that stood above a few kilometres from the hostile town of San Marcello.

## THE REAL WINNER

They hadn't started to march yet, when they heard the bells of Gavinana ring differently from the way they ring them for the morning mass: they were desperately raising the alarm. Someone suggested Ferrucci avoiding Gavinana and reaching for the mountains: Ferrucci's response was to speed up the march to Gavinana. He couldn't wait to fight: his biggest hope was Florence's independence, although he felt that it might cost his life. Vitelli and Bracciolini had attacked the town on one side before he arrived in Gavinana, and forced them to leave behind Giampaolo da Ceri with his soldiers, for defence. While Ferrucci was entering Gavinana from the west side of the town, Maramaldo was entering from the opposite side, with his heart full of anger and his soldiers willing to take revenge after the last defeat. They fought against each other in the town square. Ferrucci dismounted his horse, saw Marco, pointed Kherim and shouted: "Go away!" Marco hesitated a while, he left Kherim with someone who would keep the horse ready if there was need, and remained with Ferrucci. On his feet and rotating his sword, Ferrucci urged to assault. Beyond the wall, his cavalry was fighting against D'Orange's cavalry. The battle spread from the square to the narrow streets and all around the town: ten thousand men, some of the best troops of the empire, couldn't handle the violence of a much smaller army that was also provided with much less firepower, although they were backed up by mercenary troops yearning for revenge. The situation was alternating, none of the fighters would give up, no one would go on: the pride of the imperial power couldn't break down the stress for freedom of a population. In Florence, both sides were waiting for the news with the same anxiety, and when they heard that Prince D'Orange had died, killed by two shots of arquebus, and his troops were heading to Pistoia, Florentines gathered in the streets singing praises of Ferrucci, the saviour of the Republic. When Prince D'Orange saw that his cavalry was in confusion, he courageously took the lead of the fighters and lost his life. His soldiers, astonished and scared, ran away, when they saw his horse wandering about without its reins. Ferrucci received his belt. Meanwhile, after he had been fighting endlessly for many hours, he had managed to push Fabrizio Maramaldo outside the door. At that point Ferrucci let himself catch his breath for a moment and leaned on his pike; the picture in front of him was daunting; he was covered in blood, that was spilling out from one hundred wounds, and was surrounded by an army of dead people from both parties. There was only Giampaolo da Ceri beside him, who hadn't been much lucky during the battle and had to retreat into the town. He didn't see Marco, who had wounds on his body that were destined to the Commissioner, so that he had gone to hide behind his figure not to be seen. Ferrucci's chest was wheezing for the difficulty of breathing, but his eyes were glowing: D'Orange had left the field around Florence bare; it wouldn't matter if he died now. His plan had succeeded. He could see the Florentines get out of the doors and go down the walls, and win easily over the few imperial soldiers left there to guard the field. Two thousand imperial Lansquenets had been kept as reserves, under the chestnut trees, a few kilometres away from the town. They didn't panic when their general died, and they went back downtown before the night fell over the Florentines' victory. They had to fight against dead and dying bodies, so Maramaldo, Alessandro Vitelli and the other imperial captains found, with the Lans, the strength to start fighting again. Ferrucci, at that point, could only respond with his body and he agreed to that; he only refused the idea of surrender, so he went to fight with the few soldiers that he had left, while his cavalry, too far to be called back, was chasing after the retreating enemy, certain of the victory. He was caught while he was dying, leaning against the church wall. Fabrizio Maramaldo, the defeated, who was putting the winner in somebody else's hands, couldn't resist the temptation to stab him in the throat with his dagger. He didn't have the time to avoid Ferrucci looking at him sadly and saying to him: "Coward, you are killing a dead man".

## FREEDOM DOES NOT DIE

Ferrucci was buried where he fell, outside of the church. Marco found shelter in a house, where, for three days they took care of his wounds with much love, but they couldn't cure the wound in his soul: his great friend had died and he hadn't passed away with him. He didn't know that he wasn't supposed to die, just because Ferrucci had died. The last Republic of Florence had died with Ferrucci, because D'Orange, before leaving the field with his troops had made a deal with Malatesta, the traitor, who was able to prevent that the enthusiasm of the Florentines turned into victory. Ferrucci had died for freedom, betrayed even after he had passed out; the last beat of his great heart hadn't been able to put an end to what the traitors were expecting. But the yearning for freedom that Ferrucci had imparted with his strong spirit of sacrifice kept beating in Marco's heart and in the heart of the bravest and boldest youngsters. Marco must live because he had received the order from Ferrucci to pass down that longing. Marco had paid his early tribute, too. He had lost Kherim, his best friend from adolescence. Kherim had died while chasing after the retreating enemies, it was the best in its generosity. Marco found Florence occupied by the imperial troops of Charles V, that had received it after a siege of ten months; he made it easily through the door of S. Piero Gattolino, that Malatesta had it guarded by his loyal soldiers of Perugia. They were commanded by Gonzaga, victorious but inglorious. Marco found his mother, sadly older. He found out that his father had been arrested in Ancona, after landing from the east, and they needed to sell all their goods to pay the ransom. The remains of D'Orange, brave prince, but not lucky because he had died serving the oppression, were taken to his far homeland. Malatesta Baglioni died two years later on his land, worn out by the remorse of his betrayal. Marco survived, he set his father free, and regained with his intelligence and his good manners, the good position that his father had in public life, and that he deserved for he had inherited a nobleness of soul. He lived to teach his children and the new generations the love for his homeland, for freedom, that turned into love for Italy, that led to the Risorgimento and to the national unity, and will lead to the greatest unity of populations that Christian Rome arranges and Florence supports with the old passion of the people that had chosen Christ the Lord.

Athos Carrara