



THE SCARLET CITY

A Novel of
16th-Century
Italy

HELLA S.
HAASSE

Author of
In A Dark Wood Wandering

THE SCARLET CITY

A Novel of 16th-Century Italy



HELLA S. HAASSE

Translated by Anita Miller

ACADEMY CHICAGO PUBLISHERS
1990
OUR 15TH YEAR



THE SCARLET CITY

A Novel of
16th-Century
Italy

Academy Chicago Publishers
213 West Institute Place
Chicago, Illinois 60610

De Scharlaken Stad

Copyright 1952 by Hella S. Haasse

English Translation: Copyright © 1990 by Anita Miller

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form
without the express written permission of the publisher.

The publisher thanks Mary Dennis for her helpful research.

Printed and bound in the U.S.A.

Printed on acid-free paper

First Edition

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Haasse, Hella S., 1918–

[Scharlaken stad. English]

The scarlet city / by Hella S. Haasse : translation by Anita
Miller. — 1st ed.

p. cm.

Translation of: De scharlaken stad.

ISBN 918-0-29133-372-6

1. Italy—History—1492–1559—Fiction. I. Title.

PT5838.H45S3613 1990

839.3'1364—dc20

90-39547
CIP

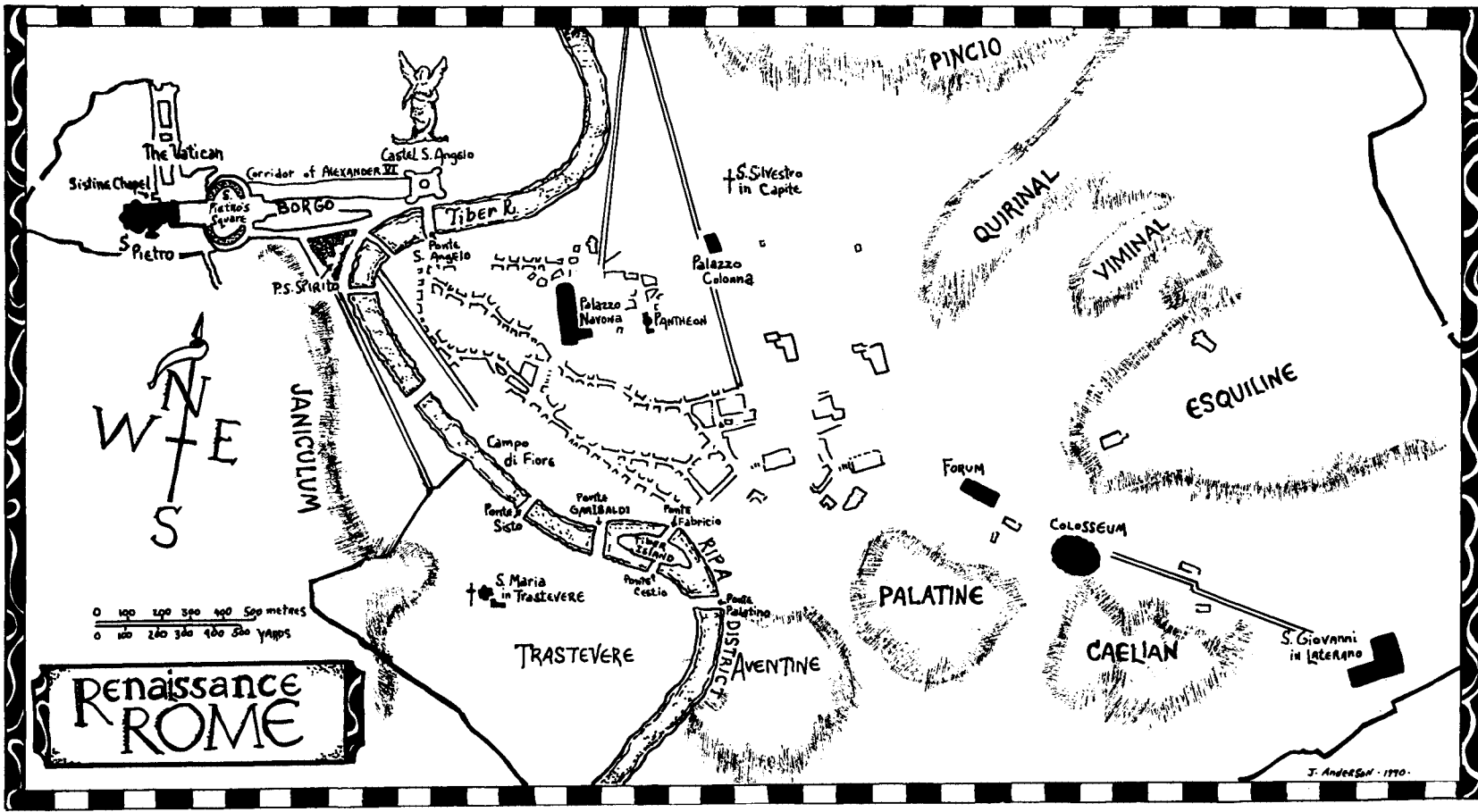


THE SCARLET CITY

A Novel of
16th-Century
Italy

CONTENTS

Introduction.....	ix
Chronology: The Italian Wars	xi
I. Giovanni Borgia.....	17
II. Pietro Aretino and Giovanni Borgia.....	41
III. Michelangelo Buonarroti.....	49
IV. Vittoria Colonna	63
V. Niccolò Machiavelli to Francesco Guicciardini.....	87
VI. Giovanni Borgia.....	97
VII. Vittoria Colonna	131
VIII. Francesco Guicciardini to Niccolò Machiavelli	143
IX. Giovanni Borgia.....	151
X. Pietro Aretino and Giovanni Borgia.....	203
XI. Tullia d'Aragona	217
XII. Vittoria Colonna	233
XIII. Giovanni Borgia.....	251
XIV. Niccolò Machiavelli and Francesco Guicciardini.....	269
XV. Tullia d'Aragona	279
XVI. Giovanni Borgia.....	295
XVII. Francesco Guicciardini and Niccolò Machiavelli	311
XVIII. Michelangelo Buonarroti.....	325
XIX. Giovanni Borgia.....	335
XX. Vittoria Colonna	351
XXI. Giovanni Borgia.....	365



Renaissance ROME

0 100 200 300 400 500 metres
0 100 200 300 400 500 yards

J. Anderson - 1990

INTRODUCTION

This book is set against the background of the protracted and somewhat complex conflict known as the Italian Wars, which began roughly in 1495 and ended, more or less, after the Sack of Rome in 1527. The antagonists were chiefly Francis I of France, who inherited the war to establish France in Italy from his two predecessors, Charles VIII and Louis XII, and, on the other side, the Emperor Charles V of Spain and the Holy Roman Empire, who wished to establish his own power base in Italy. Swiss and German mercenaries fought under the Emperor's banner along with Spanish soldiers. Between these two were the Italians themselves; the popes attempted to palliate both the French and the Emperor, an impossible task. Powerful Italian families threw their lot in with one or the other: Cesare Borgia was a partisan of the French and was made a duke by Francis I; the Colonna family fought for the Emperor. Italian city-states like Florence, Venice, Genoa, Milan, were at the mercy sometimes of the French, sometimes of the Imperial forces. Intrigue abounded, in which the popes took a hand.

The protagonist of this labyrinthine story, Giovanni Borgia, a mysterious figure known in history as the *infans Romanus*, or child of Rome, was born in 1497. We meet him first in Rome in 1525: he had been fighting for the French and was captured by the Imperial forces at the Battle of Pavia; he was rescued from the Imperials by a friendly prelate who remembered Cesare Borgia and taken to Rome, where he has been awarded the office of speechwriter in the Vatican: he is not sure who pulled the strings for him.

But as he stands at his writing desk in the Chancellery of Pope Clement VII, Giovanni confides his past only to paper: he cannot talk to anyone in Rome because he trusts no one. His only release is to write down everything that has happened to him. And he

Introduction

does not do this chronologically: his mind travels over his past in a sort of circular movement: he is searching for his identity. He does not know who he is. As a child he believed he was the son of Cesare Borgia by an unknown woman, but over the years he has come to doubt this. He is in a kind of maze, and he recalls his life as a maze. Before he joined the French army, he had been living in the court of the French King Francis I where he had met Luisa, Cesare's daughter by his marriage to the French noblewoman Charlotte d'Albret: when he first came to France, Giovanni took Luisa to be his half-sister. Cesare, who had died in 1507, had then been dead for ten years.

From recent experiences, his mind moves to his earliest memories: his visits to Pope Alexander VI whom he took for his grandfather; the fearful time after Alexander's death in 1503 when Cesare was fighting for his life against a legion of enemies. . . .

So the drama of Giovanni's search for his identity is played out against the violent background of the Italian Wars: Italy and indeed Western Europe are in the throes of the birth of national consciousness and religious upheaval as they emerge from the feudal Catholic stasis of the Middle Ages. We meet not only Giovanni but other memorable characters: Vittoria Colonna and her husband, the Emperor's brilliant general, the Marquis of Pescara; the tormented artist Michelangelo; the Italian patriot Machiavelli who is involved in desperate intrigue to free the country of the Emperor; Lucrezia Borgia and her unpredictable husband, the Duke of Ferrara. And the scurrilous writer Pietro Aretino and the courtesan Tullia d'Aragona. Each of these characters has his/her own story, each struggles with a private quest for fulfilment.

The book can be read as a puzzle, dominated by the mystery of the *infans Romanus*. Hella Haasse has broken chronological time into time as it is called up by memory: the narrative circles and circles in a sort of widening pool, until the story is revealed.

—Anita Miller
Chicago, Illinois
June, 1990

CHRONOLOGY: THE ITALIAN WARS

[Events occurring in *The Scarlet City* are bracketed.]

- 1492: Election of Alexander VI, Borgia Pope. His daughter Lucrezia marries first husband, Giovanni Sforza.
- 1494: Charles VIII of France invades Italy.
- 1495: Charles VIII seizes Naples, but is forced to retreat by a coalition consisting of Spain, the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian, Pope Alexander VI and the city-states of Venice and Milan.
- [1497: Birth of Giovanni Borgia.
Lucrezia's marriage is annulled. Her second husband is Alfonso of Aragon, illegitimate son of Alfonso II of Naples.]
- [1498: Cesare Borgia, made a cardinal at age 17, resigns after the death of his brother the Duke of Gandia. Becomes papal legate to the court of Louis XII with whom he makes an alliance.]
- 1499: Louis XII of France invades Milan, after first working out agreements with Ferdinand V of Spain and Pope Alexander VI whose son Cesare is made Duke of Valentinois by Louis. [Cesare marries Charlotte d'Albret of the French court. Begins to attack and conquer cities of the Romagna (territory northeast of Rome).]
- [1500: Cesare Borgia conquers cities of the Romagna, one by one in the name of his father the Pope. Arranges murder of Lucrezia's second husband Alfonso.]
- 1501: The French successfully occupy Naples, but disagreements flare between French and Spaniards. [Cesare Borgia is made Duke of the Romagna by his father Alexander VI. Lucrezia marries for the third time to Alfonso d'Este.]

Chronology

- 1502: Spain and France are in open warfare. [Cesare lures chief enemies to castle of Senigallia where he has them strangled.]
- [1503: Death of Pope Alexander VI. Succeeded by Pius III who also dies in this year and is succeeded by Julius II, a Della Rovere pope and enemy of the Borgias. Cesare is arrested but escapes and flees. Louis XII too has turned against him.]
- 1504–1505: Temporary peace ensues when Louis XII signs the Treaty of Blois, pledging Naples to Spain and keeping Milan and Genoa for France. [Lucrezia's third husband Alfonso becomes Duke of Ferrara.]
- [1506: Cesare Borgia finds refuge at the court of the King of Navarre. Meets Niccolò Machiavelli, who uses him as the model for the ideal ruler in *The Prince*.]
- [1507: Cesare dies in battle fighting for the King of Navarre.]
- 1508: War begins again in Italy when Pope Julius II makes an alliance with France, Spain and the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I against Venice.
- 1509: The French conquer Venice.
- 1510: Pope Julius II makes peace with Venice and begins martial action to expel the French from Italy.
- 1512: The Swiss enter the conflict on the side of Spain and the Emperor. They storm Milan, defeat the French and return Sforza to the throne.
- 1513: The Swiss rout the French at Novara and take over Lombardy. Death of Pope Julius II; his successor is Leo X, a Medici pope.
- 1515: Francis I of France, successor to Louis XII, defeats the Swiss at Marignano.

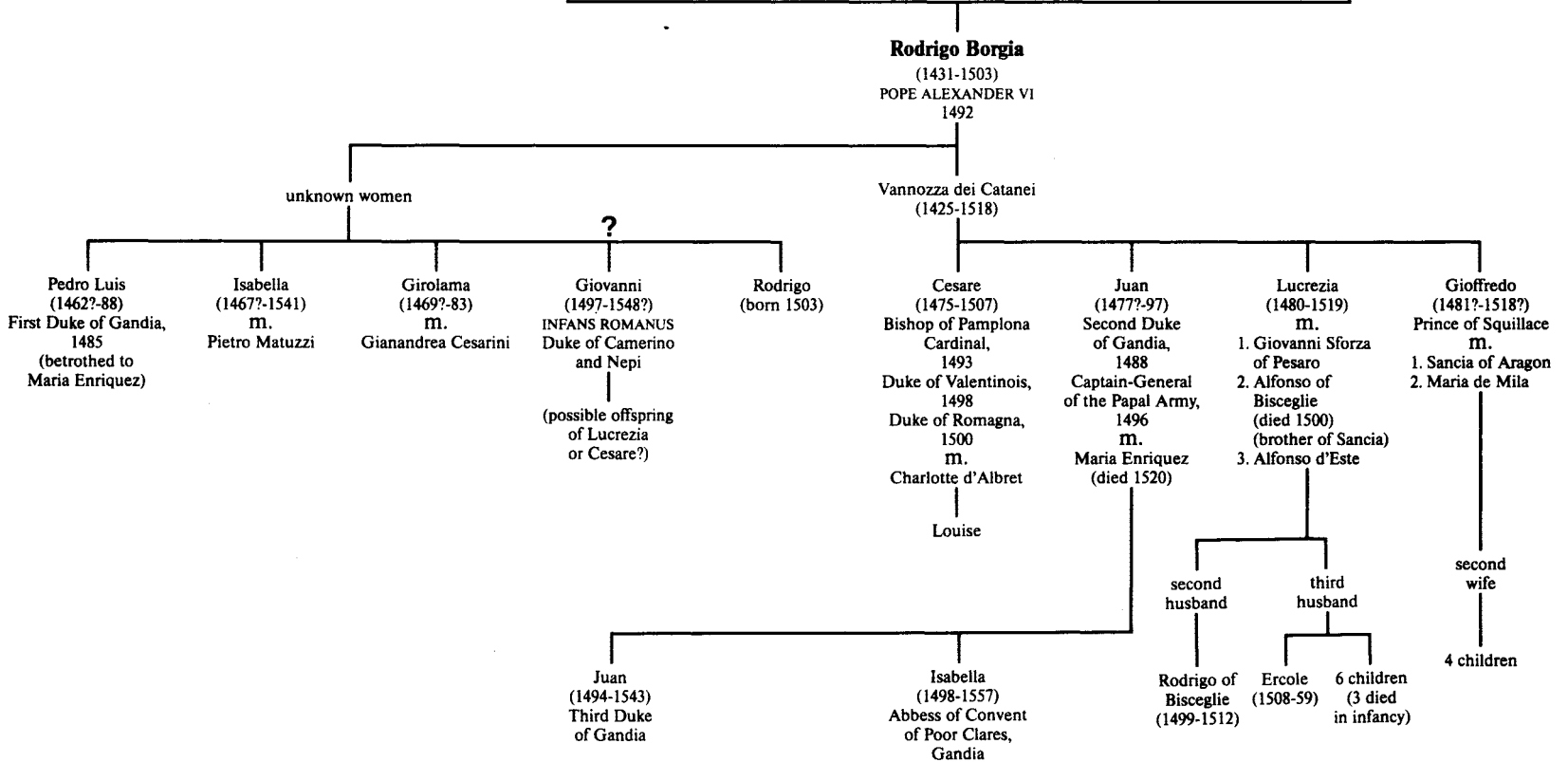
Chronology

- [1517: Giovanni Borgia goes to the court of Francis I in France.]
- 1519: Death of Emperor Maximilian I. His grandson Charles V, King of Spain, is elected Emperor, defeating Francis I of France and Henry VIII of England for this throne. Strong enmity exists between Charles and Francis. [Death of Lucrezia Borgia.]
- 1521: Hostilities between Francis I and Charles V break out afresh in Italy. Death of Pope Leo X; he is succeeded by Adrian VI.
- 1522: Francis I is defeated by Imperial forces at La Biococca.
- 1523: Death of Adrian VI, succeeded by Clement VII, Medici pope.
- [1524: Francesco Guicciardini is made President of the Romagna.]
- 1525: Francis I is defeated, this time disastrously, by the Imperial forces under the Marquis of Pescara, at Pavia. The French King is taken prisoner there and sent to Madrid. [Giovanni Borgia, who has been fighting for the French there, is also captured by the Imperials, but is rescued by Cardinal Aleandro who takes him to Rome where he becomes a speechwriter in the Vatican.] Death of the Marquis of Pescara.
- 1526: Francis I's mother, Louise of Savoy, becomes Regent of France during her son's imprisonment in Spain. To win his freedom, Francis signs the Treaty of Madrid, ceding victory to Charles V. But immediately upon his release, Francis repudiates the Treaty and signs the League of Cognac against the Emperor with Pope Clement VII, Henry VIII of England and the city-states of Venice and Florence.

Chronology

- 1527: The Emperor punishes the Pope for the League of Cognac by sending an army of mutinous German mercenaries and Spaniards under Charles de Bourbon, an enemy of Francis I, against him. In May of 1527 Rome is sacked for a full week by this army, and the Pope is trapped in the Castel Sant'Angelo. Francis captures Genoa and is advancing to Rome to release the Pope when Clement submits to Charles V to win his freedom. Charles had disavowed the sacking but he takes advantage of the Pope's plight to extort money and concessions from him. [Guicciardini loses office and retires to write history. Death of Niccolò Machiavelli.]
- 1529: The Treaty of Cambrai is signed with France. Francis gives up all claims to Italian territory. The Peace of Barcelona is signed, between the Emperor and Pope Clement: this confirms Charles's position in Italy.
- 1530: Charles V is crowned Emperor by the Pope at Bologna.
- [1534: Death of Clement VII. He is succeeded by Paul III, a Farnese pope.]

THE FAMILY OF THE BORGIA POPE, ALEXANDER VI



I.

Giovanni Borgia

1525



Borgia am I; two, perhaps three times a Borgia. To others, my lineage is a riddle; to me, it's a secret—no, more than a secret—a source of torment. In Italy, for a quarter of a century, no name has had a more evil sound than Borgia; if I didn't already know this, I would discover it anew every day. Anyone who wants to curse wholeheartedly says Borgia! Anyone who wants to sum up the wretchedness of these times, the corruption in Rome, the decline of Italy, spits out his bitterness: Borgia! Deceit, decadence, fornication, black arts, murder and manslaughter, incest: Borgia! Quarrels and dissension, endless discord among towns and principalities, invasions by rapacious foreigners in North and South, hatred, avarice, failure, hunger, disaster, pestilence and approaching doom: Borgia! To grasp fully all the connotations of the word Borgia, I had to come back to Italy.

God knows that in France—at least during the last years of my stay there—I was proud of my name. If the court secretly slandered me and my lineage behind my back, I wasn't aware of it. The King was well-disposed toward me: after all, I was considered to be a protege of the House of Este of Ferrara, and in those days France had no better friend and ally in Italy than Alfonso d'Este, Lucrezia's husband.

Equally important to me was the good will of another blood relative: Luisa—or Louise as she was called there—Cesare's daughter by his French marriage. Since I still believed then that

The Scarlet City

Cesare was *my* father too, I set great value on the influence of this woman whom I thought was my half-sister.

Luisa was four or five years younger than I; we shared the same mixed feelings toward our lineage. On the one hand, pride, inborn Spanish pride in the fact that we both belonged to a race that had dared to challenge kings and emperors; but on the other hand, a secret gnawing doubt, a sense of shame which neither she nor I could put into words and which we both tried to hide behind a great show of arrogant self-confidence. This was easier for me than for Luisa, because she was cursed outwardly as well: sickly, thin, her face disfigured by scars . . . living proof of the truth of the rumors circulating about Cesare before his marriage to Charlotte d'Albret. By now everyone knows that he suffered from the illness that the Italians call the French disease—a high price to pay, in my opinion, for the pleasures of love. He poisoned Luisa's blood with it—and, they say, the blood of most of his bastards. I suppose I should consider myself fortunate that I've been spared physical infirmities. My suffering is invisible: my soul has been poisoned.

So in France I could—in spite of certain earlier events—still maintain my self-respect. When I came to the court of Francis I, Cesare had been dead for more than ten years. People seldom talked about the last period of his life in Navarre, and never—in my presence—his inglorious end. If his name came up, it was usually in connection with current Italian politics: compared to my other countrymen who supported the French cause, Cesare appeared in a favorable light: he, at least, had shown himself to be *hardi homme*—a man of courage.

At those times I was always struck at how strongly his name, his personality, still held the imagination. Even then Cesare was more than a memory; he was a legend. In him good and evil had assumed dimensions that went beyond the powers of human judgment. In speech and in writing he was always referred to by his French titles; it was not forgotten either that his escutcheon bore the lilies of Valois and that his daughter Luisa was married to one of the greatest lords of the kingdom.

All this tempered any possible negative connotations of the Borgia name. In addition, I had been presented at the French court by Alfonso d'Este himself, and further, I wasn't officially

called Borgia, but Duke of Nepi and Camerino. An imposing title, but a hollow one, nothing more than a string of names, because the possessions and the rights that went with them had been taken from me when Julius the Borgia-hater became pope; he returned the territories to the former owners—the Varano and the Colonna. For my fine titles, worthy of a prince of the blood, I have Pope Alexander to thank, the father of Cesare and Lucrezia. As the bastard of the illegitimate son of a former vicar of Christ on earth, I could in a certain sense consider myself to be a member of a dynasty.

In my first years at the French court, I lived in the customary style. I had a permanent place among other young nobles in the King's retinue. I held an honorary post and received an annuity. But the office and the salary were purely symbolic. Most of my companions served the King for the honor of it; they had solid backgrounds: money, castles, lands—and they bore ancient illustrious French names—their escutcheons were unblemished. I was poor, a foreigner. I had no fortune, no income beyond the handful of ducats doled out to me each year in the King's name, and gifts sent by Lucrezia. After her death in 1519, I received nothing more from Ferrara.

I kept a horse, a valet and a groom; beyond that all I possessed was a trunk with clothes, books and a few valuables. I rode in the royal hunt, sat at the banquet tables, indulged in my share of diplomatic intrigue and amorous adventure, like everybody else. In the halls and parks of Chaumont, Poissy, Chambord and Fontainebleau, life whirled past in a kind of happy intoxication. It was all a game—we knew that. We played against each other with courtly flourishes: move, countermove, attack and retreat . . . as much in love affairs as in the unending struggle for rank and precedence in the King's good graces. But all this was carried on with ceremonious restraint; the intrigues and maneuvers were like the movements in a ballet, executed with compliments and bows and well-chosen words. To be deeply serious or openly passionate was considered tasteless. At first my mixed Spanish and Italian blood played me false; eventually I managed to adapt.

I never forgot that the world extended beyond palace walls and the borders of a royal park. How could I? I carried the memory of my youth, of the early years with Cesare in the Romagna and

The Scarlet City

at the Castel Sant'Angelo, of isolation in the Castle of Bari and the long period of wandering after that. I remembered events and faces—at night, especially. My childhood passed before me—a furious cavalcade lit by torches; most of it was lost in blood-red smoke, but sometimes a glaring light played upon an image that I recognized: the angel Michael on the Citadel of Rome silhouetted against an angry sunset . . . a series of flags hanging from the ledge outside the great hall of the Castle of Camerino . . . a landscape filled with heaps of rubble, scorched black and still smoking, seen from the window of a palanquin . . . hollow-eyed heads on pikes, grinning above a city gate . . .

Faces of the men and women of Cesare's retinue: his mother, Madonna Vannoza, stout, faded, with a shadowed upper lip, but regal in bearing and gesture; the shy, quick-tempered Gioffredo, his youngest brother, who was comfortable only with children and animals; his fortress-builder and engineer Messer Leonardo da Vinci, that man with the penetrating eyes, who could use a lead marker to create landscapes and figures from mildewed blotches on a damp wall; Micheletto, Cesare's advisor and right hand; Agapito, his secretary—and finally, the children, my playmates: Camilla, Carlotta and of course Rodrigo, the confidant and bosom friend of my youth.

I was five or six years old then. I knew that we were in danger, but the how and the why were beyond me. Much later it all became clear to me. In the silence of the night, in antechambers and alcoves of French royal palaces, lying sleepless next to tossing, snoring French nobles with whom I had to share a bed, I had plenty of time to connect the facts I had learned over the years with my memories—the shreds and fragments of what I had heard and seen as a child.



There are reasons why I want to write all this down here: the adventures of my youth, my life in the French court and the experiences which I've had since then and still have every day. A man who feels himself threatened and spied upon from all sides, who knows that he can't confide in anyone and that there's no

security anywhere, has to keep his own counsel. To speak one's thoughts, even to whisper them, is out of the question. The Vatican galleries are as crowded as the streets on market day; the walls have eyes and ears here and anyway, only fools, prisoners or madmen talk to themselves out loud. My writing doesn't attract any attention; it looks to be part of my work. Nearly every day I stand at a desk in the papal library, covering sheet after sheet with words: drafting letters and speeches to oblige the lesser diplomats of His Holiness Clement VII. Papal scribe: a curious occupation for one who was brought up as a nobleman, who has fought for France in Navarre and before Pavia.

They probably think here that I aspire to the purple—or at least to a red hat. Considering my lineage, anything is possible, I suppose. Of course there's nobody in the court of Rome who would dream of asking me openly what my intentions are. No one dares—at this stage—to show himself either for or against me. My name creates space, a no-man's-land between me and the others. *Borgia*—it's like the warning sign on the door of a plague-stricken house. They keep their distance; I still can't quite tell why. All I have are my suspicions, because whatever might be planned against me remains cloaked in darkness for the moment. I'm left in peace because they think I'm in the good graces of His Holiness's favorites. But I know perfectly well that I have to make good use of this quiet time, this respite. Uncertainty makes one vulnerable . . . Now, first of all, I have to find out why people are avoiding me. The poison is hidden in the name: Borgia. They don't know who I am, what I want, what connections I have, what friends and relatives I protect, what enemies I can hurt. They know less than I do, and what do I know myself?

I'm not certain of the exact day and year of my birth, any more than I know who my father and mother were. There must be records of my birth in Ferrara, but I haven't seen them. I'm roughly twenty-eight years old, my name is Giovanni Borgia, or—to employ the Spanish title which is mine by right—Don Juan de Borja y Llancol. When I was still a child, I thought Cesare was my father, probably because no one said he wasn't, and because I lived in his immediate entourage with two of his other bastard children, Camilla and Carlotta. Later, Lucrezia's son Rodrigo

The Scarlet City

joined us; we knew that Cesare had taken pity on him because Alfonso d'Este refused to have the boy at his court in Ferrara; he didn't want to be reminded of his wife's previous marriage.

Cesare took the four of us everywhere with him; we had a secure place in his retinue with the women appointed to look after us. I spent the first years of my life in palanquins and coaches, in tents, in halls of newly captured or hastily abandoned castles in the Romagna. I no longer remember names. Later I heard about Imola and Forli, Cesena, Senigallia—I've probably been there, too.

I remember Camerino only because when Cesare took possession of it, I played a role in the solemn ceremony that was performed there. The previous owners of the castle and estates, the Lords Varano, had been murdered or driven away by Cesare; Pope Alexander issued a bull that made me, the male heir of the Borgia family, Duke of Camerino. At the same time, I received also the castle and lands of neighboring Nepi, which had belonged to the Colonna family—almost half of the Romagna. At that time I was scarcely—if at all—aware of the great honor which had befallen me.

I sat in front of Cesare on his horse; surrounded by soldiers, we rode through the steep and narrow streets of the town. Cesare's standard was flying from the damaged tower of the castle. *Duca! Duca!* the people cried, packed together in the alleyways and on the roofs of the houses. Cesare's armored hand lay on my knee.

In a gloomy hall filled with armed men he held me under the armpits and lifted me up high.

"Behold the new Lord of Camerino, the first Duke, by the grace of Pope Alexander!"

He pushed a heavy ring, too wide for it, onto my finger, and told me to make a fist. So for the first—and up to now the last—time in my life, with Cesare's seal which was also mine, I sealed official documents as Duke of Camerino. Coins were struck with my head on them. When I was in France I still had one of those coins, a silver carline with the legend: *Joannes Bor. Dux Camerini*. But I seem to have lost it somewhere.

In the following year, Pope Alexander—whom I took to be my grandfather—died. With him went Cesare's power in the Romagna and also my dukedom, forever.



When I came back to Rome two months ago, I didn't recognize the Vatican. The rooms where Pope Clement usually lived were unfamiliar to me. When I went looking for the Borgia apartments, I found only closed doors. The section of the palace where Alexander had lived and where Cesare had spent time now and then, is no longer used. I've heard that no one has entered there since the days of Pope Julius. I haven't requested admittance yet—if only to avoid giving away a long-cherished, secret desire.

Sometimes, standing in the Belvedere court, I look up at the open galleries which circle the outsides of the apartments. The ground floor rooms belonged to Alexander; the floor above was fitted out for Cesare. Whenever he put up at the Vatican for a while, Rodrigo and I lived in a house in the Ponte quarter where two Spanish cardinals looked after us as our guardians.

Of our many visits to the Vatican—Alexander couldn't seem to see enough of us when we were in his neighborhood—all I remember are the papal apartments.

In a room with brightly painted walls which sparkled with gilt and sky-blue enamel, was a fat old man leaning comfortably back against the cushions of a state chair. He permitted us to kiss the ring on his forefinger, and his hand, which was broad, soft and always very warm. Then he bent forward and squeezed us against him, breathing heavily with emotion; his velvet cape smelled of stale incense and musk.

"Are you here again, my boys, my fine, handsome boys, my falcons, my cubs . . . You, Rodrigo, from my beautiful Lucrezia, and you, Giovanni, Giannino *mio*, my little dukes; I'll make you rich and powerful, you'll rule Italy like kings, Borgia kings!"

He kissed us and petted us, put his hand in blessing on our heads, groped in a dish of preserved fruit next to him and scattered sweets over us. Sometimes he threw a ducat, a jewel or something similar between us and watched us romp and scuffle for it. With applause and shouts he urged us on until Rodrigo and I, excited, overheated, paying no attention to our surroundings, rolled through the chamber, dragging carpets with us, knocking over candlesticks. Those present—shadows in the background, prelates, nobles, a handful of servants—smiled and clapped, echoing Alexander's childlike pleasure in our rough-

The Scarlet City

housing. But Cesare, who usually came with us on our visits to his father, didn't look at us or give any sign of enjoyment.

Now, after all these years, I know that his unwavering dark look was not for us, but for Alexander. Whenever I think of Cesare, I see him with that expression on his face—a look at once mocking, contemptuous and wryly amused: the sourly indulgent smile of one whose patience has been tested for all too long a time.

These visits to the Vatican must have taken place in the last months before Alexander's death—that would have been in the summer of 1503. I was about six years old then. The summonses calling us to the papal palace which usually came every day from Alexander or Cesare, suddenly stopped. After that our guardians the cardinals barely showed themselves in the house in the Ponte, cool and dark as a tomb, where Rodrigo and I were believed safe from the fevers which rose from the marshes in August.

Finally our nurses came, crying, wailing, repeating rumors about poison: Pope Alexander dying, Cesare seriously ill, the Vatican in an uproar, Rome a place where those who support Borgia will go down to perdition . . . The servants' agitation spread to us too. While the doors were being bolted, shutters nailed over the ground floor windows, Rodrigo and I crept away to crouch in deadly terror inside the darkness of the bedcurtains, listening to sounds inside and outside the house: muffled voices close by or resounding in the distant galleries; quick footsteps beneath us, above us; chests and pieces of furniture being dragged over the floor; horses snorting in the courtyard.

When the curtains were suddenly thrust roughly apart, we expected to see the dreaded assassin. But by the light of the candles which the women hurried to hold high, we saw Don Michelle Corolla, called Micheletto, Cesare's captain, friend and confidant, the head of his bodyguard, his constant companion and frequent deputy: a Venetian with such dark skin and eyes that he was always taken for a Spaniard. We had learned to respect him; he seemed to us to be a part of Cesare himself, as inseparable from him as his shadow, but a shadow of flesh and blood, a replica, a creature emanating from Cesare, obeying his unspoken will.

The chamber was full of people, servingmen and women taking down tapestries from the walls, throwing linen and silver into

chests; from the open door came the tumult of armed men striding through corridors and across landings.

Surrounded by Micheletto's men, we hurried on horseback through an unfamiliar nocturnal Rome. The newly risen moon shone yellow and swollen through the shimmering haze of heat which, day and night, hangs over the town in August. With a clatter of hooves, creaking and bumping of wagons, with cries, curses and a great hubbub, the procession squeezed through a labyrinth of narrow streets. Black clouds of dust swirled high behind us between houses and churches and the steep, windowless walls of palaces.

Later, I woke in a strange bed. Rows of Borgia bulls in parallel lines, climbed the stiff shiny cloth of the bedcurtains. Next to me, as usual, Rodrigo slept peacefully. I turned my head toward the light. By an open window, in the cool dawn breeze, stood Cesare's mother, Madonna Vannozza. I called her by the name which we sometimes heard Cesare use: *matrema*, little mother. She came to me, her black garments rustling, so quickly and angrily that it seemed as though she had been waiting for me to wake.

"Be still, you'll wake Rodrigo. Lie down."

She pushed me ungently back onto the pillows. I could never understand why she loved Rodrigo and not me.

"Is there danger, *matrema*?"

"Yes, danger to *Borgias*," she said, stressing the last word.

She stood half-turned away, looking at me over her shoulder while she tucked stray wisps of hair under her kerchief. Her eyelids were swollen, there were deep lines at the corners of her mouth. What I remember most clearly about Vannozza are her eyes and mouth: the sparks in her black pupils, alternately glowing and dying, the shadows on either side of her broad fleshy upper lip with its faint moustache, which gave her face a look of bitter pride. Her harsh, probing stare frightened me.

She always treated me roughly, resentfully. She spoke to me only if it were unavoidable, and then with perceptible antipathy. This attitude of hers, for which I can now easily find an explanation, filled me then with anxiety and insecurity. Of all the time

The Scarlet City

which I spent in Vannoza's company, that early morning hour of the day after Alexander's death remains the most vivid in my memory. Silent and unmoving, she stood with her back to me at the open window, while the sun rose in the hazy sky and the bells of Rome pealed, alternately and together. The daylight brought the heat; a faint swampy smell rose from the town. From a distance came a sound that I could not identify. It must have been going on since I woke, but I had not been conscious of it earlier. Not the sound of the sea or the wind, which rises and falls; this was a continuous rustling murmur like falling rain or the splashing of a brook.

"What is that outside, *matrema?*"

Even before Vannoza replied, I sensed that there was a connection between the distant noise and her air of motionless, tense listening.

"Shouting and screaming in San Pietro's square. They must have come from Rome by the thousands last night when they heard the news."

"Why are they shouting, *matrema?*"

"You don't remember much of what you're told. What did Fra Baccio say in the story when the stranger asked him when Rome was at its most cheerful? —When a pope dies."

"Where are we now?"

"In my house in the Borgo. Be quiet now, lie down. Don't let me hear from you again."

The harshness of her voice frightened me more than her severity. I broke into a sweat. I did not dare to stir, or to push aside the covers. Rodrigo was sleeping and I felt that the woman at the window was aware of my every movement, although she did not look at me.

The bed in which I lay was her bed; I was suddenly certain of this. I recognized the scent which rose from the pillows as Vannoza's, but mixed with another, stale smell, fleeting but still persistent: an odor from the past, an odor of musk and incense, a strange faint animal smell, both exciting and repulsive. The linen was clean, aired in the sunlight and stored with perfume, but neither fresh air nor all the oils of Araby could dispel from its folds that scent of dead lust. Without knowing why, I felt oppressed to the point of suffocation in that bed. I sank slowly

into mattress and bolster as into treacherous quicksand; under the brocade coverlet, I lay bewitched, condemned to immobility.

Wherever I looked, above me, before me and on both sides of me, I saw, in an endless procession on the bedcurtains, gleaming gold on a scarlet background, the Borgia bulls climbing toward a hidden goal.



I am describing these events as they arise in my memory and as I experienced them as a child, when I could not understand the reasons behind them—although much that was important must have been discussed by the adults around me. When, as a young man, I wandered about Naples, and later before I left for France, when I stayed for a short while with Lucrezia in Ferrara, I heard things. I know now why Micheletto rushed us headlong to the Borgo. The chests carried by packhorses and mules on that nocturnal procession contained, apart from our possessions, gold, silver and valuables from the pontifical treasury, taken from the Vatican at Cesare's command by Micheletto with a dagger in his fist, as soon as it was known that Alexander was dead.

Cesare himself, weakened by poison or an intestinal illness—no one knew the truth—took action from his bed to forestall popular uprisings and attacks by the Colonna, the Orsini and other lords whom he had driven out of the Romagna. His soldiers took over the Borgo, which was fortified. I remember that Gioffredo, Cesare's youngest brother, and his wife Sancia of Aragon, that man-crazed, unpredictable shrew, had fled from their palace on the other side of the Tiber to Vannozza's house, in deadly terror of the vengeful crowds which raged and threatened before their door day and night.

We didn't see sun, moon or stars in those days. Behind closed window shutters and bolted doors, we awaited the outcome of Cesare's negotiations with the Spanish and French envoys, and with the College of Cardinals. Vannozza, her vigilant eyes upon us, told her rosary quickly and loudly; Sancia started quarrels or sat yawning. Gioffredo bit his nails in silence. Rodrigo, Camilla, Carlotta and I amused ourselves as well as we could, throwing a ball or playing with Sancia's lapdog in the stifling, darkened

The Scarlet City

chambers. Visitors were incessantly announced and admitted: messengers from Cesare in the Vatican, Micheletto, the Spanish cardinals. Over our heads disputes raged, accusations, arguments, bursts of fury. We heard it as we played, without listening to it. All that I remember is the account of Alexander's deathbed and burial, probably because particular details made an impression on me: the blue-black swollen body, already decaying, which no one wanted to touch and which had been dragged by the feet to San Pietro's where it was forced into the coffin with blows of the fist; the black dog—Alexander's soul or the Devil in disguise?—which roamed restlessly through the basilica as long as the corpse remained above ground.

At the beginning of September, we left Rome in an endless procession: armed men—on foot, on horseback—protected the column of wagons and the sedan chair carried by halberdiers, in which Cesare, too weak to ride, lay hidden behind black curtains. We were on our way to the Castle of Nepi, which was still my property and thus a haven for Cesare.

We didn't stay at Nepi long. Before the chests were unpacked, they were tied once again on the backs of the pack animals. That return to Rome was sheer flight; even at the time I realized that. The vindictive barons followed us to Rome. For safety's sake, Cesare put up at the palaces of friendly cardinals, sometimes here, sometimes there. We children scarcely had time to get used to the strange beds, had hardly learned to find our way through the series of unfamiliar rooms, before the signal was given once more for departure. To our questions, Vannozza gave the surly, off-hand response that our lives would be in danger from the Colonna, the Orsini, Varano and other Borgia-haters if we stayed in that particular place an instant longer.

I remember this time of confusion and uncertainty as being endless, but in reality it lasted only a few weeks. One morning we were awakened before sunrise, wrapped in cloaks and brought outside. This time no sedan chair was waiting. Horsemen carried us before them on their saddles. In the glimmer of torchlight I saw Cesare mounting; he had to be supported by grooms. We went through Rome at a quick trot. The rider who held me shouted something at a comrade over my head. I heard, "Ostia . . . ships . . . sea. . ." But before I could grasp the significance of

these words, an uproar broke out in the troop. The battle cry of the Orsini reverberated between the houses; fighting was already at fever pitch in the vanguard.

It didn't last long. Our column dashed back at full speed by another route, this time over the Tiber Bridge into the Borgo, where the Vatican buildings and the basilica rose darkly against the sky tinted yellow by the dawn. There were threatening shouts behind us—life or death!—and the pounding of horses' hooves, while we pushed our way into a forecourt of the papal palace. I was pulled from the horse, half-carried, half-dragged between armed men rushing forward shoulder to shoulder through galleries and halls where the frightened screams of Carlotta and Camilla raised infinite echoes.

Suddenly we found ourselves under an open sky. I almost cried out when, accidentally, I was held away over a parapet; I looked down on the roofs of Rome. But after I had been swung around on the shoulder of the man who was carrying me, I saw, at the end of a narrow uncovered passage, the outlines of the Castel Sant'Angelo and the angel on its highest battlement glittering in the sunlight. I realized that we were fleeing through the corridor which connects the Vatican with the Castel.

I know now that Cesare thought he would be safe there, inaccessible to his enemies, under the protection of Pope Pius, Alexander's successor, a timid sick old man who—out of self-interest, incidentally—spread his mantle over us Borgia. In actuality, Cesare sat in the Angel Castle like a mouse in a trap. We hadn't been there five days when Pius died . . . following an operation, it was said. With his going, Cesare lost his last base of support; now all he had to depend on were his own cunning and sagacity. Of what followed, Cesare's bitter struggle for self-preservation, I was—then, at any rate—unaware.

The apartments in the Castel Sant'Angelo where we lived with Vannozza were low-ceilinged, dark and chilly, situated around a semicircular garden. On roof cornices and doors, and on the walls of the well in the garden, Alexander Borgia's arms were painted: crossed keys crowned with the papal tiara and the Borgia bull. We played there every day amid the symbols of Borgia power. It scarcely occurred to us that this power had been destroyed. We seldom saw Cesare. He remained secluded in the section of the

The Scarlet City

fortress where he had taken up residence, writing letters, receiving trusted friends, negotiating with messengers sent from the Vatican and foreign countries.

Vannozza sat sullenly for hours, not speaking, at a window overlooking the garden. Now she would pray, now she would rub the beads of her rosary between thumb and forefinger. She was often overcome by fits of rage and despair; she called us to her and punished even the most minor infraction with blows and kicks, or she cried, lamenting, for help to a long series of saints, ordering us to pray too. Sometimes she burst into complaints; then she chose to heap pity on Rodrigo, her pet: my boy, my child, *duchetto mio*, what will become of you? Your father is murdered, your relatives are our enemies, your mother can't take you in, our family is going down in ruins, our power is broken, we're lost.

At other times she allowed herself to be carried away by less comprehensible feelings. Her eyes closed, her head thrown back, rocking back and forth as though she were in pain, she whispered accusations, entreaties, curses . . . these toneless whispers had nothing to do with us. When she behaved like that, she was truly alarming. We didn't understand the sense of what she was muttering; her words were as enigmatic as the words of a sybil. Later, much later, I remembered this oracular talk and realized that it wasn't gibberish. I could have been spared much uncertainty and doubt if I had been able to forget Vannozza's dark mumbling. When we lived in Bari, in the formal elegant court of our foster mother Isabella, my youth was disturbed by the suspicions roused by the courtiers' behavior: odd glances, stray words picked up by chance, conversations quickly broken off when I approached . . . I asked Rodrigo then what he thought Vannozza had been saying. But Rodrigo couldn't remember anything about our stay in the Castel Sant'Angelo. That's understandable: he was two years younger than I.

Our sojourn in the Castle of Rome was suddenly interrupted. That didn't upset us; we had become quite accustomed to unannounced journeys and house-movings. We were brought to take leave of Cesare. He was lying on a couch, his legs crossed. I looked at him with curiosity. I hadn't seen him since we had come to the Castel Sant'Angelo. In his eyes, his face, his behavior, I sought an explanation of Vannozza's mysterious complaints. Peeling, raw

patches—the result of his recent illness—stood out sharply against his sallow skin, already disfigured by old scars. He had grown thin; at intervals a restless light flickered in his eyes. I found this odd: an unwavering, lackluster dark stare had always been characteristic of Cesare. I believe that others had noticed this too.

It didn't surprise me to hear it said later that Cesare had the evil eye. Many—and especially those who had reason to fear him—must have believed that with that stare he could read their most secret thoughts and feelings.

When I saw Cesare for the last time in his murky apartment in the Angel Castle, that magic power seemed to have left his eyes. As always, he had perfect control over his body and the expression on his face. He lay on his side, propped up on his left elbow, letting a perfumed ball roll back and forth—an habitual gesture—on the palm of his hand. Behind him two prelates from his retinue sat at a table playing cards. We stayed only a short while; I no longer remember what was said. Vannozza wailed softly and whispered into his ear; but when she tried to embrace him, he thrust her away. He raised his hand in farewell, his eyes resting for a moment, absent, indifferent, filled with secret disquiet, first on Rodrigo, then on me. "Take them away now," he said finally, with a shrug.

That night we left the Castel Sant'Angelo by a secret door; our departure had to remain hidden from Cesare's enemies in the Vatican. The two little girls remained behind in Rome under Vannozza's care, but Rodrigo and I travelled quickly, with our guardians the cardinals, southward to Naples.



I ask myself who is that man with the insolent face who roams about the Chancellery for a while every day and then chooses apparently to dawdle near my reading desk? He's there now too, extravagantly decked out, like an actor, and literally drenched in musk. He might superficially be taken for a nobleman, but his face, posture and manner give him away. A newly rich flunky, an artist, a favorite, or even Ganymede to a powerful man here at the court? It's obvious that he considers himself a man of great consequence. He walks back and forth like a strutting peacock,

The Scarlet City

poisoning the air with his perfume. He knows everyone, greeting people left and right; he has a really adroit and rather amusing way of indicating, with a nod, a gesture, a bow, how high—or low—a value he sets on the person in question. A conceited comedian and undoubtedly an adventurer. He betrays himself by the way in which, obsequious, humble, with a thousand and one bows, he approaches the dignitaries who pass through here on the way to the audience chamber of His Holiness.

Yesterday the most powerful man in the court, Monsignore Schomberg, the Archbishop of Capua, visited the Chancellery with his retinue. On these occasions anyone who has the opportunity comes forward and salutes. My friend in the peacock blue literally flung himself at Monsignore's feet, pouring forth a bewilderingly eloquent stream of flattery and praise; after that he proceeded to act as though he belonged to the august company.

Whatever he might be—parasite, buffoon, adventurer—it's obvious that some people find it in their interest to cultivate him as a friend. Glances and comments are exchanged as soon as he turns his back, but if I'm not mistaken, everyone is actually afraid of him. I'd like to know who he is. He's different from the others. In that respect we're alike, he and I. With this difference: that *he's* a familiar figure at court. No one can allow himself the luxury of snubbing him. What concerns *me* is that in the two months of my stay here I haven't held a conversation with anyone beyond strictly necessary exchanges. I must admit that I've consciously kept my distance. It's not in my nature to rush into intimacies. I feel that my comings and goings are being closely watched—but again, I don't know by whom and why, although I have my suspicions.

Before I came to Rome I tried of course to get a feeling for the current situation and relationships at court and to find out the names of the most influential people. I thought that that kind of knowledge would be useful to me. But as it happened the opposite was true. The French court is structured on unvarying principles: everyone has a fixed place there and belongs to a clearly defined circle. The rules of the game are complicated, but they're always strictly maintained, under all circumstances. Here, I feel as though I were living inside a chameleon. Things are continually changing: titles, benefices, appointments, new parties, come and

go with mysterious rapidity. One must adjust constantly: he who was powerful yesterday appears today to be out of favor, and vice versa. And there's no way of predicting which way the wind will blow.

The papal household is a tangled mass of functionaries, spiritual and secular, all with their own retinues, relatives, friends, favorites, servants and hangers-on. I have gradually learned to recognize the most important cardinals; the Monsignori, numerous as they are, at least distinguish themselves from the multitude. But the rest: prelates, lords-in-waiting, secretaries, masters of ceremony, valets, officers of the watch and other people with more or less clearly defined duties . . . From sunup to sunset they all swarm through the Vatican's series of rooms. Half of Rome seems to have free access here.

They say it's busier here than ever, not so much because of the Holy Year—one consequence of the Battle of Pavia is that far fewer pilgrims have been coming to Rome from the provinces—but because of the continual arrival of legations. A day doesn't pass without meetings with ambassadors from Venice, Milan, Florence, Ferrara. Official and unofficial representatives of France and Spain are trusted guests. The events at Pavia have caused great confusion, because nobody knows where they stand now. The defeat of the French was completely unexpected here. It seems that Pope Clement was half-dead from fear. No wonder, if the truth is that this time he had counted upon a victory for King Francis without leaving himself a loophole.

It's beginning to be realized in Rome that the Emperor holds Italy in his power. The defenses of cities and principalities are in a sad state, according to reports from the ambassadors who are continually arriving and departing. The Imperial troops have suffered few losses and have not yet been disbanded. Who would dare to deny that this is an extremely dangerous situation? The Emperor has given repeated assurances that he has only the best intentions, that he wants peace and nothing but peace. As far as I can judge, there's no one in Rome naïve enough to believe these pronouncements. It's being said openly that the Emperor plans to come to Italy to teach His Holiness a lesson. It may be true that the Emperor received the news of the victory at Pavia with humility and prayers of thanksgiving. But his thoughts, his deep-

The Scarlet City

est desires, are known to no living soul. All princes are ambitious and as a general rule a prince doesn't become more self-effacing after a victory. Anyway, one thing is certain: his advisors and more especially his agents here in Rome are trying to spur him to further action. At the moment a joke is circulating about the Pope: His Holiness, they say, must now rely for the first time upon the authority conferred through papal dignity.

On the subject of the spiritual prestige which His Holiness should possess as God's representative, I prefer to be silent. I'm not qualified to judge matters of faith. Every day wiser men than I take it upon themselves to speak and write about these things. Apparently the Pope wishes to be considered a temporal authority—only as such, then, should he be judged. Clement has neither troops nor money; no one supports him with enthusiasm. It's difficult to believe that only three years ago the selection of this Pope was greeted with shouts of joy. The Ecclesiastic State is lacerated by party strife: Rome, more than any other city, is polluted with the evil of political dissension.

At the court, two conflicting points of view are embodied in His Holiness's two most influential advisors—the real rulers here: on the one hand, the Datary Giberti, a childhood friend and favorite of the Pope, an avowed partisan of France, and on the other, the Archbishop of Capua—a Fleming or German named Schomberg—who exerts his influence on the side of the Emperor. The Pope stands between them: he turns first to one, then to the other. This waffling and wavering seems to have infected His Holiness's entire entourage. Add to this, mutual distrust, fear of treachery, general insecurity. The situation is discussed incessantly: meetings, conferences and audiences follow one after another, but it all comes to nothing.

Still, there must be capable and sharp-witted men enough in Rome. Left and right I hear gloomy predictions from insiders, or from those who pretend to be insiders. In this court I have yet to find one man whom I would wish to follow, one group which I would be willing to join. I'm following a wait-and-see policy. On this turbulent sea, fraught with currents and cross-currents, I'm an inexperienced helmsman. I must know more, see more and hear more, before I risk deciding on a course. Anyone like me,