

Excerpt from Leonardo Gori's *Le ossa di Dio* (Rizzoli, 2007)

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The Apes of Livorno

With a terrifying bellow, the beast leaped at the woman who, like everyone else, was running away from the sudden horror. He was a hairy fiend, tall as a man, his dreadful mouth opened wide to display sharp pointed teeth, his black hands like claws. The woman dropped her water jug and screamed, but no one came to her aid, since everyone had already taken refuge in the houses and had even nailed up the shutters. In the small port of Livorno only the sinister beating of drums could be heard, as though someone were escorting a condemned man to the gallows: the soldiers were trying to scare off those hideous beasts, to drive them away from the village or back towards the sea. But there were too many of them, an actual invasion, like ambassadors of the Devil.

The woman fell to her knees, gave up trying to shake off the animal and covered her face. The copper jug rolled down the slope, with a sound that was almost melodious. The enormous ape tore off her garments and ripped her skin, with savage screeches that grew increasingly more strident.

A soldier appeared at the end of the street, his musket slung on his shoulder. He hesitated a moment, faced with the atrocious spectacle. Then he took up the gun and lit the tinder, which quickly burned, causing the shot to fire. The beast was hurled five paces away, uttered two final shrieks, then fell in his own pool of blood. But now the sentinel's life was in danger: he would need several minutes to reload his weapon, and there was almost no more black powder left in the flask made from animal horn that hung from his jacket. The soldier heard the frenzied stampede of the apes and thought it was the end. When he saw them appear at the other end of the narrow street, he dropped the heavy musket, which was now useless, and ran as fast as he could.

There was no longer anyone on the wharf; the apes were running rampant through the streets and the few armed sentinels were unable to stop them. They managed to kill only about a dozen of them, and many of them fell under the clutches of those demons. The beasts darkened the streets like a forgotten human species: no one bothered to count them, but there must have been thousands of them. They seemed driven by a conscious rage and cruelty, since each of them was thinking of his own sins and of God's terrible punishment.

But the apes weren't the only creatures rushing randomly through the streets of Livorno that gray April dawn in the year of Our Lord 1504. A man was also running desperately, and he was neither a soldier, nor from Livorno. He appeared to be a foreigner, and he was not running away from the apes, but rather seemed to be moving in step with them, animated by the same blind fury. Every so often he slipped, thrown off balance by a large codex that he carried under his arm: it was bound together by two heavy wooden panels and covered by a sheepskin. Besides the volume, anyone looking at the man from close by would observe his strange high boots with the turned-down edges, the doublet cinched at the waist, and an unusual red waistcoat in a costly fabric, perhaps satin. Anyone approaching even more closely would notice his light eyes and his sleek, shoulder-length auburn hair. But what was truly strange was that the crazed apes, some of them gigantic, towering over a man, not only did not attack him, but seemed to keep a respectful distance from him.

This foreigner was running from something else, or rather from someone. Other men, disguised as Livornese guards, were scouring the city, the wharf and the nearby shore, skillfully keeping out of the way of the apes' fury. Three of them had their faces and hands covered and were gripping short, effective weapons, which they were careful not to use however. Even when they passed a small boy in the clutches of one of the biggest, most menacing beasts, crying desperately for help, they went straight on their way and left him for dead. The only thing they were searching for was their prey, and they spotted him in a piazza where some apes were running in a circle, around a well, stirred by their inexhaustible fury, like the horrendous witches

of an infernal Sabbath. The man in the red waistcoat caught sight of the armed figures with their faces covered and realized he was done for. All he had with him was a short dagger, while his enemies had sophisticated muskets. There was only a narrow alley that could be used for escape, and he plunged into it in desperation. If his fate was sealed, he had to at least reach his destination and deliver the manuscript, without his pursuers seeing him.

He managed to outdistance them, and finally spotted the house with two little stone devils over windows that were tightly shuttered. It was there that they were expecting him, and perhaps, in the name of Christian charity, they would also hide him and save him from death. He knocked as hard as he could, shouting in a strange tongue that was similar in sound to the melodious Genoese dialect. The door opened just a crack and in the shadows he made out the outline of an old man and then an outstretched hand, gesturing for him to hand over the large codex. He immediately handed him the book and that act sealed his fate, because the door quickly closed again. He pounded with his fists and went on asking for help in that incomprehensible language of his, but to no avail. Only then did the man truly realize that his life was lost: he ran toward the sea, by now driven by instinct alone, just like his travel companions, the apes doomed to eternal damnation. The three men with masked faces caught sight of him again as he ran toward the pier, no longer carrying the volume. They followed him, avoiding the crazed beasts, though never using their weapons. They reached him at the bottom of a slope leading to the dock. The man took off his jacket and tried to take off his boots as well, but his enemies were hard on his heels, so he dove into the sea and began swimming in the cold surf. One of the armed men aimed the musket at him, but was stopped by a commanding gesture from the man who appeared to be the leader: they wanted him alive, he had to tell them whom he had delivered the book to. The third pursuer had already stripped down and dove in with his dagger between his teeth. The fugitive was burdened by his clothing, which pulled him down, while the other man shortened the distance. They struggled desperately in the water, then the pursuer managed to stun him with a blow, grabbed him by the neck and dragged him to shore.

They laid him down on the white stones of the wharf. He no longer appeared to be breathing and the naked pursuer bent over him, but at that instant the foreigner took out his dagger and plunged it into the man's belly. At that point the third armed man lit the musket's fuse, and before the leader could stop him, fired a shot that opened a bloody red trench in the foreigner's corset. To his supreme misfortune, however, the man did not die. They therefore took advantage of this to subject him to the worst torments that could be administered given the means at their disposal: they were artists in that particular field, and before surrendering his soul, the man in the red waistcoat was weak enough to speak.

The two masked men weighted down their companion's body with stones and tossed him into the water. They then took off the clothes that had been stolen from the Livornese guards and, wearing simple tunics, hid in a shelter that had been prepared for some time, bringing the foreigner's body with them. They had an important mission to carry out that night and they had to be very careful, because other hostile foreigners were about in the city.

Livorno experienced a night of terror, but by dawn all was quiet. The apes had been killed or had scattered through the countryside. As the sun rose behind Mount Pisa, the two masked men finally uncovered their faces and quietly made their way out through the city walls. They departed hastily, along secluded roads, heading north.

The Ditch to Divert the Arno

Two covered carriages proceeded slowly down the narrow road along the river, heading toward the Arno's excavation site. The small caravan was preceded and followed by two pairs of armed men on horseback from the special guard of the Palazzo dei Priori. It was required protection, since traveling in the lead carriage was the Chief Secretary of the Republic of Florence: a republic born when liberty flourished against the arrogance of Charles of France and the passivity of Piero de' Medici, who had been banished into exile by the people's revolt some time ago. The Chief Secretary was a very powerful man, since he answered only to the Gonfalonier, the magistrate Piero Soderini. Traveling with him were Ser Durante Rucellai and a young

woman companion, known only by the name of Ginevra. The second carriage carried the servants and personal baggage.

Ser Durante was a gentleman of thirty, tall, blond and very pleasing to look at. He had studied Literature and Medicine in Bologna and Naples, and it was said in the most influential circles of Florence that he aspired to high-level offices in the Republic, maybe even to the position of Gonfalonier. They had been traveling for nearly ten hours and the lovely Ginevra, whose jet-black hair contrasted with her blue eyes and pale complexion, asked if they could rest. The carriages stopped near a small stream flanked by two rows of tall cypresses. A young maidservant got out of the second vehicle holding a large length of green fabric in front of her, ran toward her mistress and helped her step down; then together they climbed down the pebbly shore of the little creek and reached a secluded spot. From the road only an edge of the cloth could be glimpsed, which the handmaid had stretched out between two small trees, as an effective shield.

The men took advantage of the break to walk about a little and stretch their legs, except for the Chief Secretary who remained in the carriage, writing closely in a small notebook bound in red leather. He had urgent affairs of State to take care of, and in that fearsome little scarlet book, he was recording the names of the “Palleschi”, the term the people used (1) to refer to the Medici supporters who were seeking to restore that family’s tyranny. But his pencil also lingered over several names of the heads of the “Piagnoni” or “whiners”, followers of the late Savonarola: men of opposing ideals, yet nearly as dangerous, since their great faith in God exceeded the bounds of fanaticism. During the period when the Dominican friar dictated the law, profane images and worldly books had been burned in the piazzas; the Secretary knew that they would gladly burn him too, subjecting him to the same fate their leader had suffered.

The journey resumed shortly thereafter, and it was already noon when they came in sight of the excavation. Since the border with Pisa was close by, the armed guards readied the flint and shouldered their muskets: raids were frequent from foes especially anxious to disturb the titanic operation that was underway.

The immense worksite did not at all reveal its nature to those arriving on foot or horseback. Seeing it up close, one would have said it was merely an enormous ploughed field, as if the soil were being tilled to plant a vineyard for giants. Since August of the year before, fifty teams of twenty men each had been working at the diggings in four-hour shifts, so that the work was never interrupted. The excavation went on even at night, illuminated by huge oil torches, while two rows of archers and foot soldiers, armed with culverins and halberds, kept watch over the huge trench on both sides. In the center of the digging site, under the command of a master builder, well-trained men maneuvered an enormous machine made of wood and iron. Its metallic parts glinted in the sun, as if made of silver. It resembled a simple crane, though disproportionate in size, but it was mounted on wheels and moved backwards and forwards. A toothed bucket scooped up the earth and crushed stone with a force and effectiveness never before seen, and raising up the load, then dumped it a distance away, with a colossal din. A group of armed guards around the apparatus seemed to be protecting it not only from possible foes, but also from the overly curious gazes of the diggers themselves.

The carriage continued along a winding road, climbed up a gentle hill and finally came to a stop in a tiny clearing, which overlooked a good stretch of the Arno’s plain. The first to alight was the young Durante, who helped Ginevra do the same; but when he offered his arm to the Chief Secretary, the latter refused with a polite smile. His expression did not convey the arrogance of a noble Florentine in the least; he seemed more like a wily commoner, at least at first glance: one of those clever peasants from the hills around the great “villa d’Arno”, Florence. (2) He had short, dark hair, a sunken face with prominent cheekbones, and small, lively eyes. His gaze, even at the most gravely serious or solemn moments, was somewhat mocking, though without a hint of haughtiness or malice.

Niccolò di Bernardo Machiavelli, the Chief Secretary of the Republic of Florence, leaped out of the carriage, landing firmly on his nimble legs. It was he who explained the immense operation to his guests. He stood on the bank and indicated the excavation, which took off from a bend in the Arno and proceeded straight toward the sea. Only viewed from that perspective did the digging reveal its true nature: that of an artificial channel. “It will carry the Arno away from Pisa, but that will not be its only purpose.”

Durante was astounded and admiring. “They plan to take them by thirst” he said in turn to Ginevra, pointing out the slender barrier of land separating the river’s water from the channel under construction. The Secretary smiled again and nodded.

“A city without its water course is dead, Durante, and arrogant Pisa will particularly suffer, until she finally surrenders her weapons and puts an end to this senseless war.”

“But you two have something quite different in mind, don’t you, Ser Niccolò?”

Durante was referring to the extraordinary man who had carefully designed that ambitious and even somewhat insane project, including the revolutionary mobile excavating machine. The Chief Secretary smiled in his unique way, his thin lips stretching across his gaunt, bony face.

“War is by nature temporary, Durante. Peace, or rather the absence of battle, has a longer life. The channel that will divert the Arno’s course from Pisa will be a navigable canal: along its route mills, villages and perhaps new cities will rise. He developed the idea while he was a guest of Doge Contarini: he built canals for the doge, for boats that now connect his villa of Piazzola with Venice. One day Tuscany will be a single principality, upheld by laws and not by despotisms, and the memory of a time when neighboring cities took up arms against one another will even seem ridiculous.”

“A principality such as you imagine” the young man observed, “seems almost like a fairy tale, or even more like wishful thinking.”

“There clearly was a time when a single empire prevailed throughout the world, Durante. And there have even been those who tried to bring it back to life.”

They continued marveling at that evocative scene: the distant echo of the diggers’ voices mingled with the labored creaking of the huge machine as it scooped up the earth and carried it out of the trench, drawn by four pairs of oxen. Then they got back in the carriage and descended to the plain again, finally reaching the shacks that served as quarters for the workers.

(1) The name is derived from the balls, *palle*, on the Medici coat-of-arms; tr.n.

(2) The reference is to Giuseppe Bianchini’s “*Difesa di Dante Alighieri...*, Mdccxv”; tr. n.

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