

## GIROLAMO SAVONAROLA

Girolamo Savonarola, of Italy, was one of the greatest reformers' preachers prophets, politicians and philosophers the world has ever known. His public career as a preacher began the same year that Luther was born; and if the soul of Italy had been as congenial as that of Germany to a Protestant Reformation, he instead of Luther might have been the instrument in bringing about that reformation. As it was, Savonarola was the precursor of the

Protestant Reformation. By his terrific denunciation of the corruptions of the Roman Catholic Church, he prepared all Europe for the Reformation. His life and teachings had a great influence upon Luther, who acknowledged his indebtedness to him, and spoke of him as "a Protestant martyr." Not only was Savonarola the herald of the coming reformation, but he did more than any other man to rescue mankind from the abyss of skepticism and corruption into which the world had been plunged by the example of the most degraded and dissolute church which ever bore the name of Christian. Great as her sins and crimes have been, never before the days of the Spanish Inquisition was the Roman Catholic Church so utterly vile and corrupt as in the fifteenth century, when those monstrous criminals, the Borgias reigned as popes and cardinals.

By his powerful preaching, his profound philosophy, and by the Divine unction resting upon him, Savonarola convinced the masses that religion was not all sham and formalism, and a new day dawned for Christianity and for the world.

Born in Ferrara, Italy, September 14, 1452, Savonarola was the third in a family of seven children — five sons and two daughters. His parents were cultured but worldly people, of moderate circumstances but having great influence at the court of the Duke of Ferrara. His paternal grandfather, who had the training of Girolamo during his earlier years, was an eminent physician at the court of the Duke, and Girolamo's parents intended him to follow the same profession and to become his grandfather's successor. But God had chosen another calling for the youth. From his infancy Girolamo had been quiet and retiring. As a child he was neither pretty nor playful, but serious and subdued. At an early age he became a very diligent student, and he afterwards attained great proficiency in the liberal arts and in philosophy. He was an earnest student of Aristotle but the writings of the great Greek philosopher left the deepest longings of his soul unsatisfied. The philosophy of Plato gave him a little more satisfaction; but it was not until he began to study the writings of the great Christian philosopher Saint Thomas Aquinas that he found real food for his soul. It was doubtless the writings of that celebrated saint which led Savonarola, at a very early age, to yield his whole heart and life to God; and the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas probably continued to influence his life more than any other writings except the Scriptures. He says concerning his visions, "They came to me in earliest youth, but it was only at Brescia that I began to proclaim them. Thence was I sent by the Lord to Florence, which is in the heart of Italy, in order that the reform of Italy might begin". As a boy his devotion and fervor increased as he grew older, and he spent many hours in prayer and fasting. He would kneel in church for hours at a time engaged in prayer. He was very contemplative, and his soul was deeply stirred by the vice and worldliness he saw on every hand. The luxury, splendor, and wealth displayed by the rich and the awful poverty of the poor weighed heavily on his heart. Italy was the prey of petty tyrants and wicked priests, and dukes and popes vied with each other in lewdness, lavishness, and cruelty. These things brought great sorrow to his young soul which was burning for virtue and truth. Some of the rough impassioned verses of his

youth show how deeply his soul was stirred by the evils he saw all around him. Thus, in one of his earliest poems, he speaks of, "Seeing the whole world overset; All virtue and goodness disappeared; Nowhere ? shining light? No one taking shame for his sins."

This profound appreciation of the evils around him made Savonarola a sad and sorrowful youth. He talked little, and kept himself retired and solitary. He loved to be in lonely places, in the open fields, or along the green banks of the river Po, and there wandering, sometimes singing, sometimes weeping, he gave utterance to the strong emotions which boiled in his breast. His great soulful eyes were resplendent, and the color of the heavens, but they were often filled with tears. Prayer was his one great solace, and his tears would often bedew the altar steps, where stretched prostrate for hours at a time, he besought aid from heaven against the vile, corrupt, and dissolute age. At one time, in the midst of his deep musings, there came a brief period, so the historians say, when he fell in love with a young Florentine maiden, and began to take a more cheerful view of things in general; but the affair ended in the maiden scornfully rejecting him, because she belonged to the proud Strozzi family and considered that Savonarola's family was not exalted enough to mate with hers. He resented her arrogance and sought her hand no more. After this little episode of happy delusion, when the magical mist and glamour of love almost blinded him for a time to the evils around him, the mists were dispelled and Savonarola again saw clearly the corruption abounding on every hand. Religious desires again took complete possession of his soul, and his prayers were uttered with daily increasing fervor. Disgusted with the world, disappointed in his personal hopes, finding no one to sympathize with his feelings, and weary with the sight of constant wrongs and evils which he could not remedy, he decided to enter the monastic life.

It was on April 24, 1475, while his relatives were all away celebrating the festival of St George, that Girolamo stole away across the sunny plain to Bolonga, and applied for admittance to the Dominican convent. The fact that his favorite writer, St. Thomas Aquinas, was a Dominican, probably influenced him to enter that order. He did not ask to become a monk, but only to be a drudge and to do the most menial services in the kitchen, garden, and monastery. He was accepted, and, as soon as he reached his cell he wrote an affectionate letter to his home explaining why he entered the monastery, and begging his parents to forgive him and give him their blessing. He had left behind him at home a paper entitled "Contempt of the World," in which he described the condition of things as similar to that of Sodom and Gomorrah. Even at this time he seems to have had a presentiment that, some day, God would use him mightily in calling men to repentance. In the monastery of St. Dominic Savonarola fasted and prayed, and led a silent life, and became increasingly absorbed in spiritual contemplation. His modesty, humility, and obedience surpassed that of all the others. Soon after, he entered the monastery he was made lecturer on philosophy to the convent, which position he held during the remainder of the years that he spent there. During this time his fury and indignation against the sins of the Church increased so much that he longed to denounce them, and did so in a poem on "The Ruin of the Church."

In 1481, after spending seven years in the monastery at Bolonga, (Fra Brother) Girolamo went to the convent of St. Mark's in Florence, the most beautiful and cultured city in Italy, and the city where he was to become famous. The modern world was then just coming into being, and found its best expression in the great Italian Renaissance of which the De Medici, who ruled Florence, were the principal patrons. The Renaissance, or revival of learning, had affected Florence more than any other city. The De Medici had done much to make it a learned and cultured city, and most of the people knew Greek and Latin and could read the classics. Savonarola had high ideas concerning the culture and refinement of Florence, and expected to find the Florentines leading purer and nobler lives than those of other cities; but his hopes were doomed to disappointment. He had yet to learn that only faith in God will save people from sin. Florence was indeed beautiful outwardly, situated as it was in the midst of a rich and verdant valley

blossoming with flowers. But Savonarola soon found that beneath their veneer of learning the people were utterly corrupt, and that they were given over to shows, festivals, worldly display, and entertainments. They were dissolute, selfish, pleasure-loving, and had but little thought about God or spiritual things.

Next year after entering the convent of St Mark's, in Florence, Savonarola was made instructor of the novices, and he was finally raised to the rank of preacher in the monastery. Although the monastery had a splendid library Savonarola came more and more to use the Bible as his text-book. He was filled with a sense of approaching judgment, terror, and the vengeance of God; and when he was sent to preach in the neighboring towns he sometimes gave vent to these feelings. In Brescia, San Geminiano, and Florence he thundered from the pulpit a thousand woes against the wicked, but his sermons made scarcely any impression. The cultured people of Florence took little heed of the Lombard monk, whose accents were harsh and his periods not daintily formed. In the Church of San Lorenzo, where Savonarola first preached in Florence, there were not twenty-five people in the audience. He made a somewhat deeper impression in the remote villages and towns. His preaching had so little effect, however, he decided to give up preaching and to confine himself to teaching the novices; but as God called Moses from the desert where he had retired to feed sheep, so He called Savonarola from the monastery to preach.

In 1482 Savonarola was sent to Reggio d' Emilia, to represent his convent in a Dominican chapter-general held in that place. During the first day, while the monks were discussing dogma, he remained silent. But on the second day, when a question of discipline was brought up, he arose and in powerful accents inveighed against the sins and corruption of the church and the clergy. His soul was at white heat, and he spoke with an eloquence which made a deep impression. Returning to Florence, he found it impossible to refrain from preaching, and he began to deliver sermons at the little church of the Murate convent. His sermons, however, still made but little impression on the pleasure-loving Florentines. Fra Mariano, an Augustinian monk, was preaching to immense crowds in the Great Church of Santo Spirito, and the people preferred him to Savonarola. He never rebuked them for their sins; but entertained them with classical quotations, philosophy, astronomy, and poetry; and the whole city was flocking to hear him. This only strengthened the resolve of Savonarola to denounce the sins and vices of the age. "These verbal eloquencies and ornaments will have to give way to sound doctrine simply preached" said he. In prayer and meditation he waited upon God, and yearned for a direct revelation from Him, and it was vouchsafed to him. One day, while engaged in conversation with a nun, he suddenly beheld in a vision the heavens opened, and all the future calamities of the Church passed before his eyes; and he seemed to hear a voice charging him to announce them to the people. From that moment he was convinced of his Divine mission, and was filled with a new unction and power. His preaching was now with a voice of thunder, and his denunciation of sin so terrific that the people who listened to him sometimes went about the streets half-dazed, bewildered, and speechless. His congregations were often in tears, so that the whole church resounded with their sobs and weeping. Men and women of every age and condition, workmen, poets, philosophers, would burst into passionate tears. Pico della Mirandola tells of a sermon of Savonarola's which "made a cold shiver run down his back, and made his hair stand on end." Savonarola's ardour for prayer, his faith, and his devotion increased day by day. His companion, Fra Sebastiano, of Brescia, says that Savonarola, when engaged in prayer, frequently fell into a trance, and was sometimes so transported by holy fervor that he was obliged to retire to some solitary place. Some of his biographers relate that on Christmas Eve, in the year 1486, Savonarola, while seated in the pulpit, remained immovable for five hours, in an ecstasy, or trance, and that his face seemed illuminated to all in the church, and that this occurred several times afterward. (p80) Savonarola told his friend and biographer, the younger Pico della Mirandola, that on one occasion while meditating

on the text, "Blessed art Thou, O Lord; teach me Thy statutes," he felt his mind illuminated, and all doubts left him, and he felt more certainty of the things that were shown him than a philosopher did of first principles.

In 1484 Savonarola was sent as Lenten preacher to the little republic of San Gimignano. Here he preached with such power that he returned to Florence with greater confidence in his mission. He retained his post of lecturer to the novices of St. Mark's until Lent of 1486, when he was sent to preach in various cities of Lombardy, especially in Brescia. Everywhere he went his denunciations of sin awakened much alarm, and his fame continued to spread over Italy. He remained in Lombardy until January, 1489. In a letter to his mother, describing his meetings in Lombardy, he says, "When I have to depart, men and women shed tears, and hold my words in much esteem." In 1489 he returned to Florence, the Lord revealing to him that great things awaited him there. He began to explain the book of Revelation to the friars, in the garden of St Mark's convent. But his fame had spread through Florence; and laymen begged for admittance to his lectures. His congregations increased daily until he had to preach from the pulpit of the church. The church was thronged for the first service, and many stood or clung to the iron gratings in order to see and hear the preacher. The voice of Savonarola seemed to have an almost superhuman effect, and the audience was raised to a transport of ecstasy. After that service all Florence spoke of Savonarola, and even the most learned flocked to hear him. By Lent of 1491 San Marco Church had become too small to hold the people, and Savonarola removed to the famous Duomo, or cathedral church of Florence, where he remained during the remainder of the eight years which was the (???) he predicted it would be, of his preaching in Florence. The people were so anxious to hear him that they arose in the middle of the night, and waited for hours for the cathedral doors to open. They came along the streets singing and rejoicing and listened to the sermons with such interest that when they were finished the people thought that they had scarcely begun. Savonarola seemed to be swept onwards by a might not his own, and carried his audiences with him. Soon all Florence was at the feet of the great preacher; and Lorenzo de Medici, the corrupt ruler of the city, was greatly alarmed. He tried by flattery and bribery, by threats and persuasion, to induce Savonarola to cease denouncing the sins of the people, and especially his own sins. But Savonarola continued his fearless preaching. Then Lorenzo hired Fra Mariano, the once popular preacher, to denounce Savonarola; but his eloquence and rhetoric had no effect on the people, and after preaching one sermon against Savonarola he ceased his opposition.

When Lorenzo was opposing Savonarola, the fearless preacher predicted that Lorenzo, the Pope, and the King of Naples would all die within a year, and so it came to pass. As Lorenzo de Medici lay dying, he thought of the wrongs he had done, and he was in an agony to obtain pardon. He did not look to his own priestly parasites or to Fra Mariano for consolation; but sent for Savonarola, the only preacher who had dared to oppose him. Savonarola said to the messenger, "I am not the person he wants; we should not agree; and it is not expedient that I should go to him." Lorenzo sent the messenger back, promising to do everything that Savonarola required of him. Savonarola then went to the beautiful villa of Carregi, amid the olive gardens, where Lorenzo lay dying. He was led into the side chamber. "Father," said Lorenzo, "there are three things which drag me back and throw me into despair and I know not if God will ever pardon me for them. These were the sack of Volterra, the robbery of the Monte della Fanciulle, and the massacre of the Pazzi. Savonarola replied, "Lorenzo, be not desponding, for God is merciful and will be merciful to you, if you will do three things I will tell you." "What are these three things?" asked Lorenzo. "The first is that you should have a great and living faith that God can and will pardon you," replied Savonarola. "This is a great thing, and I do believe it," said Lorenzo. "It is also necessary that everything wrongfully acquired should be given back by you, in so far as you can do this and still leave to your children as much as will maintain them as private citizens," continued Savonarola. These words

drove Lorenzo nearly beside himself, but he finally said, "This also will I do." Savonarola then said, "Lastly, it is necessary that freedom, and popular government according to her republican usage, should be restored to Florence." At this Lorenzo turned his back to the wall and was silent; and Savonarola went away without absolving him.

A year and a half after Lorenzo's death, Charles VIII, King of France, invaded Italy, sacked Naples, and then advanced on Florence. Savonarola had long predicted that God would send "a new Cyrus from across the Alps" to punish the people for their sins, and in their extremity the people flocked to the Duomo to hear what Savonarola would say. He urged them to repent of their sins, and went himself to meet the French king and to entreat him to spare Florence. This Charles did very reluctantly, after remaining for some time, and after Savonarola warned him to leave Florence if he did not wish to incur the vengeance of God. For some time the people of Florence debated as to what kind of government they should adopt in the place of that of the De Medici, which was overturned during the French invasion. They could come to no agreement, and then Savonarola deemed it necessary to advise them in his sermons. Through his advice they adopted one of the most advanced and enlightened forms of democratic, or republican, government. A just form of taxation, abolition of torture, laws against usury and gambling, a court of appeal, and abundant provision for the poor, were some of the principal features. The laws and government of the Florentine republic have served as a model to all nations, and have had a mighty influence in shaping the modern world.

The influence of Savonarola in Florence and Italy was now greater than ever. The people of Florence abandoned their vile and worldly books, and read Savonarola's sermons. All prayed, went to church, and the rich gave freely to the poor. Merchants restored ill-gotten gains amounting to many florins. Even the hoodlums, or street gamins, stopped singing ribald songs, and sang hymns instead. All the people forsook the carnivals and vanities in which they had indulged, and made huge bonfires of their masks, wigs, worldly books, obscene pictures, and other things of the kind. The children marched from house to house in procession, singing hymns, and collecting everything they styled vanities. With these a great octangular pyramid was built in the public square, or piazza. It was formed in seven stages, and was 60 feet high and 240 feet in circumference at the base. A bonfire was made of this midst the singing of hymns and pealing of bells. This was in 1497.

But the triumph of Savonarola was short. During his first sermon in Florence, he predicted that he would only preach there eight years. He also foretold his own martyrdom. Although people from all over Italy flocked to Florence to hear him, until the great Duomo itself would not hold the crowds, his fearless sermons aroused the anger of many, and especially of the corrupt pope, cardinals, and priests. He was threatened, excommunicated, and persecuted; and finally, in 1498, by express order of Alexander VI., one of the vilest of popes, he was burned to death in the public square of Florence, the city he loved so well. His last words were, "The Lord hath suffered so much for me." Thus perished one of the world's greatest saints and martyrs. His sermons and books on "Humility," "Prayer," "Love," and other devotional subjects have continued to exert a very wide influence in the world. Although he held to many of the superstitions of the Roman Catholic Church, he was far in advance of the people of his day, and he may almost be regarded as the first great Protestant reformer. He taught that all believers were in the true church, and he continually fed upon the Word of God. The margin of his Bible is covered with notes of ideas which occurred to him while poring over its pages. His sermons are often expositions of the Scriptures from beginning to end, and it was claimed that there was not a text to which he could not turn at a moment's notice. He knew a great portion of the Bible by heart. He spent whole nights in prayer, and while wrapped in a species of ecstasy real visions and revelations seem to have been vouchsafed to him. He foretold many important events, and all his biographers have marveled at the accuracy of his prophecies.

In appearance .Savonarola was of medium height, of dark complexion, and had a high forehead, an aquiline nose, thick lips, and a large mouth. When preaching a Divine light seemed to beam from his eyes and to illuminate his face, his words flowed like a torrent, and he had a voice like thunder. He was very fond of children.