

The Life of Castruccio Castracani

DEAREST ZANOBI AND LUIGI:* to anyone who considers the matter, it appears quite amazing that all of those (or at least the greater part of them) who have achieved outstanding things in this world, and distinguished themselves from among their contemporaries, have been of humble birth, springing from low and obscure circumstances, or else have suffered to an unusual degree from the travails of Fortune; all of them, indeed, have been exposed to wild beasts, or have had such humble fathers that, feeling ashamed of them, they have made themselves out to be sons of

Jupiter or some other god. To list them again would – since many of their names are familiar to everyone – be tedious and undesirable to the reader, so I will omit them as superfluous. I firmly believe that this is the result of the way Fortune, wishing to demonstrate to the world that it is she who makes men great, and not Prudence, begins to show her powers at a time when Prudence can play no part at all, so that Fortune can take the credit for everything.

Castruccio Castracani of Lucca, then, was one of these men; given the times in which he lived and the city in which he was born, his achievements were outstanding, and, just like the others, he sprang from circumstances that were neither favourable nor distinguished, as I intend to show in reflecting on the course of his life. I thought it worthwhile to recall his career to the memory of men, since it seemed to me that I had discovered many things in it, regarding both virtue and Fortune, that are quite

exemplary. And I decided to address it to you two, as you are men who, more than any other of my acquaintances, take delight in the actions of virtue.

So, then, the Castracani family is counted among the noble families of the city of Lucca, although these days it has, following the laws to which all worldly affairs are subject, faded away. Into this family was born a certain Antonio, who, having taken holy orders, was made canon of the church of San Michele in Lucca, and as a mark of respect was called Messer Antonio. He had no close relatives apart from a sister, whom he soon married off to Buonaccorso Cennami; but when Buonaccorso died and she was left a widow, she returned to live with her brother, having decided not to remarry.

Behind the house where he lived, Messer Antonio had a vineyard which could be reached without much difficulty, since it had gardens on every side. It so happened that, one day shortly

after sunrise, Madonna Dianora (this was the name of Messer Antonio's sister) was taking a walk through the vineyard, gathering, as is the custom of women, various herbs to make some of her seasonings, when she heard a rustling noise from under the vine leaves, and, turning round to look in that direction, she heard a sound like someone crying. She went over to where the noise was coming from and uncovered the hands and face of a baby boy who was surrounded by the leaves and seemed to be asking her for help. So, half amazed and half dismayed, filled with compassion and wonder, she picked him up and, when she had taken him home, washed him and, wrapping him in white swaddling-clothes, as is the custom, she presented him to Messer Antonio on his return home. He, in turn, on hearing what had happened and seeing the boy, was no less filled with amazement and pity than the lady had been: they discussed between themselves what they

ought to do, and decided to bring him up, since he was a priest and she had no children. So they took a nurse into their home, and cared for him with as much love as if he had been their own son; and when they had him baptized, they gave him the name Castruccio, after their father.

Castruccio grew more graceful with every year, and in all things he showed intelligence and prudence; and at every age he quickly learnt the things that Messer Antonio taught him. Antonio intended to make him a priest and, in time, hand over his canonry and his other benefices to him, so he trained him up with this aim in view. But in the boy he had found someone with a mind totally lacking in any predisposition for the priesthood; as soon as Castruccio reached the age of fourteen and started to be less in thrall to Messer Antonio, and to be quite unafraid of Madonna Dianora, he laid aside his books dealing with churchly matters and started to occupy himself

with weapons; and now the only thing that he took pleasure in was either handling them, or else running, jumping, wrestling and doing similar exercises with his companions. In all these pursuits he showed the greatest virtue of mind and body, and far surpassed all the other boys of his own age. And if he did chance to pick up a book, the only things he liked reading about were accounts of war or the deeds of outstanding men; and all this gave Messer Antonio immeasurable dismay and distress.

There was in the city of Lucca a nobleman of the Guinigi family, called Messer Francesco, who in wealth and grace and virtue far surpassed all the other people of Lucca. His trade was war, and he had long served as a soldier under the Viscontis of Milan; and as he was a Ghibelline, he was esteemed above all the others who followed that party in Lucca.* While he was in Lucca, where morning and evening he joined the other citizens under the loggia of the

podestà,* which is at the top end of the Piazza di San Michele, the principal square in Lucca, he several times saw Castruccio with the other boys from his district engaged in those exercises I mentioned above; and since it appeared to him that, as well as surpassing them all, Castruccio had a regal authority over them, and that in a certain way they loved and revered him, he became greatly desirous of finding out his identity. When he learnt from the bystanders who the boy was, he was impelled by an even more ardent desire to take him into his service. And one day, having summoned him, he asked him where he would rather live – in the house of a nobleman who would teach him how to ride and handle weapons, or in the house of a priest where he would only ever hear holy offices and masses. Messer Francesco noted how Castruccio's face lit up when he heard horses and weapons being mentioned; but the boy was a little hesitant, and when Messer

Francesco encouraged him to speak, he replied that, if his guardian agreed, he could not think of anything more attractive than the idea of leaving the profession of a priest and taking up that of a soldier. Messer Francesco was greatly pleased by this answer, and just a few days later he managed to get Messer Antonio to hand the boy over to him, impelled above every other consideration by the boy's nature, which led him to conclude that he would be unable to keep him for long in his present state.

So it was that Castruccio went from the house of Messer Antonio Castracani the canon to the house of Messer Francesco Guinigi the *condottiere*;* it is extraordinary to think in what a short time he fully demonstrated all those kinds of virtue and all those dispositions that are necessary in a true nobleman. Firstly, he managed to become an excellent horseman, able to handle the most fiery steed with the greatest dexterity: and in jousts and

tournaments, even though still just a young lad, he distinguished himself more than any of the others – to such an extent, indeed, that in every activity that required strength or skill there was no man who could surpass him. In addition to these accomplishments, his manners demonstrated an inestimable modesty; he was never seen to do a single thing or say a single word which could cause offence, and he was respectful to his elders, modest with his peers and courteous to his inferiors. All this made not only the whole Guinigi family, but the whole city of Lucca love him.

It so happened that, when Castruccio was eighteen years old, the Ghibellines were driven out of Pavia by the Guelphs, and Messer Francesco Guinigi was sent by the Viscontis of Milan to provide assistance to the former. Castruccio went with him, having been put in charge of the whole company. On this expedition, Castruccio gave so much evidence of his

prudence and courage that nobody involved in the enterprise came back from it with as high a reputation as he did, and his name became great and honoured not only in Pavia, but in the whole of Lombardy.

So when he had returned to Lucca, much more highly esteemed than when he had left, he ensured he made as many friends as he could, using every means necessary to win men over to him. But when Messer Francesco Guinigi died, leaving one of his sons, a thirteen-year-old by the name of Pagolo, he also appointed Castruccio to be his son's tutor and to administer his estate; shortly before his death, he summoned Castruccio to him and begged him to agree to bring up his son as devotedly as Castruccio himself had been raised, and to show to the son, Pagolo, the gratitude he had not been able to show to the father, Francesco. So when Messer Francesco Guinigi died and Castruccio was left guardian

and tutor of Pagolo, his reputation and power grew so much that the goodwill he had hitherto enjoyed in Lucca began to turn into envy; indeed, many began to slander him as a man who aroused fear and had a mind inclined to tyranny. Among these men, the foremost was Messer Giorgio degli Opizi, head of the Guelph party. He had hoped, on Messer Francesco's death, to assume the leading position in Lucca; but now Castruccio, who had risen to power thanks to the plaudits which his qualities had earned him, had deprived him of any chance to do so, and for this reason he went around sowing seeds of suspicion with the aim of diminishing his credit. At first Castruccio treated these attempts with scorn, but soon he started to feel anxious, thinking that Messer Giorgio would not rest until he had brought him into disgrace with the viceroy of King Robert of Naples, who would then have him driven out of Lucca.*

At this time, Ugucione della Faggiuola of Arezzo was Lord of Pisa; he had first been chosen by the Pisans to be their general, and had then made himself their ruler. With Ugucione were some citizens of Lucca who had been driven into exile, members of the Ghibelline party; Castruccio was in contact with them, and aimed to restore them to their positions with Ugucione's help, and he also communicated his intentions to his friends inside Lucca, who refused to tolerate the power of the Opizi family. So, having given them instructions on what to do, Castruccio took the precaution of fortifying the Onesti tower and filling it with munitions and with a great deal of supplies so that he would be able, should the case arise, to hold out there for several days. When the night came that he had agreed on with Ugucione, he gave a signal to the latter, who had come down into the plain between Lucca and the mountains with a great company of men; and