common hatred to Savonarola. Piero de’ Medici’s fresh attempt to re-enter Florence failed; nevertheless his followers continued their intrigues, and party spirit in­creased in virulence. The citizens were growing weary of the monastic austerities imposed on them, and Alexander foresaw that his revenge was at hand.

A signory openly hostile to Savonarola took office in May, and on Ascension Day his enemies ventured on active insult. His pulpit in the duomo was defiled, an ass’s skin spread over the cushion, and sharp nails fixed in the board on which he would strike his hand. The outrage was discovered and remedied before the service began; and, although the Arrabbiati half filled the church and even sought to attempt his life, Savonarola kept his com­posure and delivered a most impressive sermon. But the incident proved the bitterness and energy of his foes, and the signory, in feigned anxiety for the public peace, be­sought him to suspend his discourses. Shortly afterwards the threatened bull of excommunication was launched against him, and Frà Mariano was in Rome stimulating the pope’s wrath. Savonarola remained undaunted. The sentence was null and void, he said. His mission was divinely inspired ; and Alexander, elected simoniacally and laden with crimes, was no true pope. Nevertheless the reading of the bull in the duomo with the appropriate, terrifying ceremonial made a deep impression on the Florentines. And now, the Arrabbiati signory putting no check on the Compagnacci, the city returned to the wanton licence of Lorenzo’s reign. But in July Savonarola’s friends were again in power and did their best to have his excommunication removed. Meanwhile party strife was stilled by an outbreak of the plague. The prior of St Mark’s used the wisest precautions for the safety of his two hundred and fifty monks, sustained their courage by his own, and sent the younger men to a country retreat out of reach of contagion. During this time Rome was horror-struck by the mysterious murder of the young duke of Gandia, and the bereaved pope mourned his son with the wildest grief. Savonarola addressed to the pontiff a letter of condolence, boldly urging him to bow to the will of Heaven and repent while there was yet time.

The plague ended, Florence was plunged in fresh troubles from Medicean intrigues, and a conspiracy for the restoration of Piero was discovered. Among the five leading citizens concerned in the plot was Bernardo del Nero, a very aged man of lofty talents and position. The gonfalonier, Francesco Valori, used his strongest influence to obtain their condemnation, and all five were put to death. It is said that at least Bernardo del Nero would have been spared had Savonarola raised his voice, but, although refraining from any active part against the prisoners, the prior would not ask mercy for them. This silence proved fatal to his popularity with moderate men, gave new adherents to the Arrabbiati, and whetted the fury of the pope, Sforza, and all potentates well disposed to the Medici faction. He was now interdicted from preaching even in his own convent and again summoned to Rome. As before, the mandate was disobeyed. He refrained from public preaching, but held conferences in St Mark’s with large gatherings of his disciples, and defied the interdict on Christmas Day by publicly celebrating mass and heading a procession through the cloisters.

The year 1498, in which Savonarola was to die a martyr’s death, opened amid seemingly favourable auspices. The Piagnoni were again at the head of the state, and by their request the prior resumed his sermons in the duomo, while his dearest disciple, Fra Domenico Buonvicini, filled the pulpit of St Lorenzo. Scaffoldings had to be erected to accommodate Savonarola’s congregation, and the Arrab­biati could only vent their spite by noisy riots on the

piazza outside the cathedral. For the last time the carnival was again kept with strange religious festivities, and many valuable books and works of art were sacrificed in a second bonfire of “ vanities.” But menacing briefs poured in from Rome; the pope had read one of Savonarola’s recent sermons on Exodus; the city itself was threatened with interdict, and the Florentine ambas­sador could barely obtain a short delay. Now too the Piagnoni quitted office; the new signory was less friendly, and the prior was persuaded by his adherents to retire to St Mark’s. There he continued to preach with unabated zeal; and, since the women of Florence deplored the loss of his teachings, one day in the week was set apart for them. The signory tried to conciliate the pope by relating the wonderful spiritual effects of their preacher’s words, but Alexander was obdurate. The Florentines must either silence the man themselves, or send him to be judged by a Roman tribunal.

Undismayed by personal danger, Savonarola resolved to appeal to all Christendom against the unrighteous pontiff, and despatched letters to the rulers of Europe adjuring them to assemble a council to condemn this antipope. The council of Constance, and the deposition of John XXIII., were satisfactory precedents still remembered by the world. One of these letters being intercepted and sent to Rome by the duke of Milan (it is said) proved fatal to the friar. The papal threats were now too urgent to be disregarded, and the cowed signory entreated Savonarola to put an end to his sermons. He reluctantly obeyed, and concluded his last discourse with the tenderest and most touching farewell. Perhaps he foresaw that he should never again address his flock from the pulpit.

The Government now hoped that Alexander would be appeased and Florence allowed to breathe freely. But although silenced the prophet was doomed, and the folly of his disciples precipitated his fate. A creature of the Arrabbiati, a Franciscan friar named Francesco di Puglia, challenged Savonarola to prove the truth of his doctrines by the ordeal of fire. At first the prior treated the pro­vocation with merited contempt, but unfortunately his too zealous disciple Fra Domenico accepted the challenge. And, when the Franciscan declared that he would enter the fire with Savonarola alone, Fra Domenico protested his willingness to enter it with any one in defence of his master’s cause. So, as Savonarola resolutely declined the trial, the Franciscan deputed a convert, one Giuliano dei Rondinelli, to go through the ordeal with Fra Domenico. There were long preliminary disputes. Savonarola, per­ceiving that a trap was being laid for him, discountenanced the “ experiment ” until over-persuaded by his disciple’s prayers. Perhaps because it was a mere *reductio ad absurdum* of his dearest beliefs, he was strangely perplexed and vacillating with regard to it. With his firm convic­tion of the divinity of his mission he sometimes felt assured of the triumphant issue of the terrible ordeal. Alternately swayed by impassioned zeal and the prompt­ings of reason, his calmer judgment was at last overborne by the fanaticism of his followers. Aided by the signory, which was playing into the hands of Rome, the Arrabbiati and Compagnacci pressed the matter on, and the way was now clear for Savonarola’s destruction.

On the 7th April 1498 an immense throng gathered in the Piazza della Signoria to enjoy the barbarous sight. Two thick banks of combustibles forty yards long, with a narrow space between, had been erected in front of the palace, and five hundred soldiers kept a wide circle clear of the crowd. Some writers aver that the piles were charged with gunpowder. Not only the square but every window, balcony, or housetop commanding a glimpse of it was filled with eager spectators. The Dominicans