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, Frà Domenico Buonvicini, filled the pulpit of St Lorenzo. For the last time the carnival was again kept with strange religious festivities, and some 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.

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 his too zealous disciple Frà Domenico accepted the challenge. And, when the Franciscan declared that he would enter the fire with Savonarola aIone, Frà Domenico protested his willingness to enter it with any one in defence of his master’s cause. As Savonarola resolutely declined the trial, the Franciscan deputed a convert, one Giuliano dei Rondinelli, to go through the ordeal with Frà Domenico. There were long preliminary disputes. Savonarola, perceiving that a trap was being laid for him, discountenanced the “ experiment ” until 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 destruc­

tion.

On the 7th of April 1498 an immense throng gathered in the

Piazza della Signoria to enjoy the barbarous sight. Two thick banks of combustibles 40 yds. 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. The Dominicans from one side, the Franciscans from the other, marched in solemn pro­cession to the Loggia dei Lanzi, which had been divided by a hoarding into two separate compartments. The Dominicans were led by Savonarola carrying the host, which he reverently deposited on an altar prepared in his portion of the loggia. The magistrates signalled to the two champions to advance. Frà Domenico stepped forward, but neither Rondinelli nor Frà Francesco appeared. The Franciscans began to urge fantastic objections, and, when Savonarola insisted that his champion should bear the host, they cried out against the sacrilege of exposing the Redeemer’s body to the flames. All was turmoil and confusion, the crowd frantic. And, although Rondinelli had not come, the signory sent angry messages to ask why the Dominicans delayed the trial. It was now late in the day, and a storm shower gave the authorities a pretext for declaring that heaven was against the ordeal. The Franciscans slipped away unobserved, but Savonarola raising the host attempted to lead his monks across the piazza in the same solemn order as before. On this the popular fury burst forth. Defrauded of their bloody diversion, the people were wild with rage. Frà Girolamo’s power was suddenly at an end. Neither he nor his brethren would have lived to reach St Mark’s but for the devoted help of Salviati and his men. Against the real culprits, the Franciscans, no anger was felt; the zealous prior, the prophet and lawgiver of Florence, was made the popular scapegoat. Notwithstanding the anguish that must have filled his heart, the fallen man preserved his dignity and calm. Mounting his own pulpit in St Mark’s he quietly related the events of the day to the faithful assembled in the church, and then withdrew to his cell, while the mob on the square outside was clamouring for his blood.

The next morning, the signory having decreed the prior’s banishment, Francesco Valori and other leading Piagnoni hurried to him to concert measures for his safety. Meanwhile the government decided on his arrest, and no sooner was this made public than the populace rushed to the attack of the convent. The doors of St Mark’s were hastily secured, and Savonarola discovered that his adherents had secretly prepared arms and munitions and were ready to stand a siege The signory sent to order all laymen to quit the cloister, and a special summons to VaIori. After some hesitation the latter obeyed, hoping by his influence to rally all the Piagnoní to the rescue. But he was murdered in the street, and his palace sacked by the mob. The monks and their few remaining friends made a most desperate defence. In vain Savonarola besought them to lay down their arms. When the church was finally stormed Savona­rola was seen praying at the altar, and Frà Domenico, armed with an enormous candlestick, guarding him from the blows of the mob. A few disciples dragged their beloved master to the inner library and urged him to escape by the window. He hesitated, seemed about to consent, when a cowardly monk, one Malatesta Sacramoro, cried out that the shepherd should lay down his life for his flock. Thereupon Savonarola turned, bade farewell to the brethren, and, accompanied by the faithful Domenico, quietly surrendered to his enemies. Later, betrayed by the same Malatesta, Frà Silvestro was also seized. The prisoners were conveyed to the Palazzo Vecchio, and Savonarola was lodged in the tower cell which had once harboured Cosimo de’ Medici.

Now came an exultant brief from the pope. His well-beloved Florentines were true sons of the church, but must crown their good deeds by despatching the criminals to Rome. Sforza was equally rejoiced by the news, and the only potentate who could have perhaps saved Savonarola’s life, Charles of France, had died on the day of the ordeal by fire. Thus another of the friar’s prophecies was verified, and its fulfilment cost him his sole protector. The signory refused to send their prisoners to Rome,