

*Chapter IV*

SIENA IN THE FOURTEENTH CENTURY

SIENA had no great history, political or military. In the twelfth, thirteenth and fourteenth centuries she was able to extend her territory wisely, without much bloodshed. Except for some local victories, and her triumphant success at Monteperti, and her defeat of Perugia in her campaign for the conquest of Cortona, she could boast of no great feat of arms. Her Chronicles are certainly full of struggles and battles, but almost all of these were in internal warfare, of no great importance. When she went to war with Florence she always got the worst of it, and as her ally she was always subservient. Siena was never a warlike city, in the strict sense of the word, her only great victory being Monteperti, her only great leader Provenzan Salvani; but she did not know how to exploit her victory, and Provenzan Salvani was defeated and died too soon.

Nor did Siena excel in diplomacy. When the Ghibelline League was formed among the Italian cities, she was incapable of directing it; she paid very dearly for any help she got from the Emperor, and as an ally of the Pope, or of Giovanna of Naples, or of Florence or Milan, she never counted for much. Needing an outlet to the sea, she bought the port of Talamone, of which she had great hopes, but which profited her very little.

It is easy to say that the cause of this restricted external power lay in the instability of her governments, in the sectarian spirit of the parties or 'Monti', in the splitting up of political forces, and so on; but these were immediate and superficial causes and not always decisive. If we trace, for example, the internal political development of Siena, from the middle of the thirteenth century to the end of the fourteenth century, we find six principal governments—not so many, after all, in a century and a half of republi-

can life. Of these, the Twenty-four ruled the city for thirty years, the Thirty-six for ten years, and the Fifteen for eight years. The Nine, who came after, ruled Siena from 1293 to 1355, that is for sixty-three years, and were followed by the Twelve who lasted till 1369, and the Reformers who ruled the republic till 1385. Moreover, if we consider the Constitutions of the city in their various editions and modifications, we find a progressive development. The grave quarrels among the citizens, the numerous revolts and the ferocious hatred between certain families, that sometimes led even the 'Monti' to side with one or the other, and caused serious disturbances to city life—all these might lead one to suppose that the history of Siena shows nothing but anarchical confusion, without any unifying and directing spirit, but this would be to pay too much attention to details and to lose sight of the general political development of the Sieneſe people. The Statutes surviving today were often modified but never annulled by the parties that followed one another to power, and a clear conception of popular government can be seen in the documents that have remained.

The fact that Siena never dominated Tuscany and played no prominent part in the events of Italy or Europe in the Middle Ages, is due to the somewhat effeminate, sensual character of the Sieneſe people, incapable of pursuing political designs with tenacity or resolution. The 'Oriental' characteristics of Sieneſe art, which modern critics like to trace back to Byzantium or Persia, derive for the most part from the Sieneſe temperament of those centuries: ardent, dreamy, vain, as Dante truly said, refined and voluptuous, and quite incapable of submitting to discipline.

The Sieneſe were not given to self-sacrifice for the community. They wanted to be great, but not at the cost of too much suffering. In their eyes present enjoyment was worth more than remote conquest, and glory easily won in their own city more precious to them than the hard-won glory of vast enterprises. However, when Siena was in danger and their independence threatened, they struck back as one man, even against the Emperor himself, and showed courage, fortitude and daring; but only perhaps because these occasions called for comparatively brief effort and strain. Unlike the Florentines, they lacked the desire to dominate



St Catherine's vision of Christ, by Bernardino Fungai. Siena, San Domenico. XVth century

others, and therefore did not feel the necessity for the strength that proceeds from union and concord. It was difficult for them to gather together the necessary energy to realise an ideal. We have an example of their inconsistency in what remains of their great Cathedral. If we contemplate those outer arches, worthy to support the roof of heaven, they seem the creation of a race of Titans; if we imagine the present Cathedral as merely the transept of the Cathedral that was planned, and let our fancy dwell on the great aisles that were to be built, we are lost in the immensity of the construction.

But to reduce the immeasurable to harmony, and the colossal to artistic proportions—that is a sublime dream, or the intoxication of pride. Therefore the great ideal was never realised. If the Sieneſe had matched their conception with determination we should have today the great Cathedral of their dream. The Florentines, with their innate sense of harmony, avoided the colossal, and would never have planned a Cathedral of such gigantic proportions—or, if they had done so, then they would have completed it, in the teeth of economic bankruptcy, technical difficulties, the plague itself. The imaginative Sieneſe lacked their quality of perseverance.

We find in Siena the ideal of a paternal state, which tries to pacify internal quarrels and provide for the welfare of its citizens and their tranquil prosperity. Perhaps for this reason, when the Sieneſe People's Party took over power from the nobles, they never destroyed the powerful families of the city or countryside, as did the Florentines, and although they excluded them from the government they did not prevent them from wielding some political power through the 'Monte dei Gentiluomini'. Characteristic of this paternal state were the continual efforts it made to reconcile hostile families, even begging foreign diplomats and bishops to use their good offices in an attempt to effect a lasting peace between the Salimbeni and the Tolomei, or other enemy houses, for the good of the city as a whole, and to avoid bloodshed or repression.

The Sieneſe wanted prosperity and peace, and when they had both the Chroniclers themselves recorded the fact with satisfaction: 'The city was in great peace and tranquillity, and everyone

attended to his own business, and so they all loved each other like brothers'.

With this peculiar character, half practical, half idealist, now indulging in fantastic dreams, now attempting practical solutions, the Sieneſe showed a ſtrange mixture of ſelf-indulgence and aſceticism. Loving pomp but admiring poverty, they amasſed enormous wealth, created maſterpieces of art, and roſe to great religious heights. In the city, while the factions attacked and ouſted each other, trade flouriſhed with Africa, Aſia and Northern Europe, and through trade the Sieneſe came into contact with Oriental and French civilisations that aroſed in them an awareness of their own creative faculties, and ſet them painting pictures in which, as in their religion, they expreſſed the genius of their race. Painting and religion are, as it were, the two oppoſite extremes of the creative world, but in the Sieneſe ſoul ſenſuality and other-worldlineſs could live in harmony. In their paintings rich, fleſhy, velvety colours acquired an almoſt ſpiritual tranſparence, while their moſt ethereal viſions appeared in warm colours and ſtriking relief. The painting of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries in Siena was profoundly religious, and the Sieneſe myſtics at times ſpoke an almoſt fleſhly language.

During St Catherine's life the glorious period of Siena's history had already gone by. It is certainly not true, as Langton-Douglas asserts, that 'with the fall of the Twenty-four began the period of Siena's decadence', or, as Zdekauer maintained, that the decline of the Commune began in the laſt twenty years of the thirteenth century. If that were ſo, we ſhould have its decline before its greatness. The thirty years (1240-1270) of the rule of the Twenty-four were certainly vital years; the city nobles took over the power from the feudal nobility, the people began to take part in the government, the city ſucceſſfully defended its independence againſt the Florentines, and triumphed at Monteperti, wealth was accumulated, and the city was enlarged and made more beautiful. This period, however, was one of growth, not of maturity.

The grave defeat of Colle Val d'Elsa, only nine years after the exultant victory of Monteperti, revealed the weakness of Sieneſe Ghibellinism, adopted not in faith but for material advantage. The Twenty-four did not represent the people, and their fall

initiated the people's riſe to power. The Thirty-ſix who followed, a very mediocre government, represented the Guelph party, which accorded well with Sieneſe intereſts becauſe it ſtood for nationalism and popular democracy. But this was a government of transition, like thoſe of the Fifteen, the Eighteen, and the Six. Siena achieved greatness only during the rule of the Nine, which laſted for ſixty-three years. Under this government the city enjoyed a long period of proſperity and glory. Painting, which until then had been a reflection of the Byzantine ſchool or a development of French illumination, now became original, and with the work of Duccio, Simone Martini, Lippo Memmi and the Lorenzetti, rivalled that of Florence.

In architecture elegance and ſtrength were mingled, and the numerous public and private palaces gave the city a new look of power and wealth. New churches were built, others reſtored and embellished. Hoſpitals were endowed, charity increaſed, trade was intensified and produced great wealth, while the bankers drew large profits and the countryside proſpered. There was great activity in the city and ſurrounding country. Buſineſs flouriſhed for everyone. Between 1309 and 1310 the Constitution was proclaimed. This was at the ſame time a Statute, a body of laws, and a ſurvey of the public and private life of the citizens. In 1321 was ſtarted the 'Studio Generale', or University, which was ſoon to boaſt of famous doctors, lawyers and rhetoricians. In 1327, as far as we can judge, was held the firſt cenſus of the citizens. The Nine maintained the alliance with Florence, which ensured the ſafety of the State, took up arms againſt the claims of Duke Carlo of Calabria, and prevented the Duke of Athens from taking poſſeſſion of Siena; they guarded their frontiers jealouſly and enlarged their territory, ſubduing communes and fiefs and purchasing lands and caſtles. Under their rule Siena acquired more breathing ſpace, and its citizens proſpered becauſe the city was rich, wiſely adminiſtered and ruled, and becauſe within its walls men worked and loved, and created maſterpieces of art.

But every ſtate, however fortunate, muſt decline. Towards 1338 Siena had reached the higheſt peak of her proſperity. In 1339 ſhe was ſtruck by a famine as well as 'ſickneſs and calamity'; from 1341 to 1345 the bankruptcy of the Florentine bankers involved many Sieneſe merchants in their fall; in 1345 Siena was

placed under a Papal Interdict. Industries began to languish, trade dwindled, the banks were closed, or barely struggling along. The power of the 'Arti', or Guilds, grew less, and with the worsening of economic conditions, internal political control got slack and foreign political enterprise shrank. The government, consisting of rich merchants, the 'fat' bourgeoisie, was losing wealth and therefore losing support. In 1348 came the plague, a very severe blow for the city and the government. From 1342 onwards the Sienese countryside had been devastated by companies of mercenaries to whom the Republic had to pay 13,324 gold florins, besides expenses of victualling and compensation, which amounted to many more thousands of florins. In this way the leaders lost command of the situation, and the parties in opposition gathered strength. The Nine understood none of the new economic, social and political problems that had arisen. They could have taken into the government representatives of the 'middle bourgeoisie', and by so doing saved themselves; instead, faithful to their Statutes, they kept out of all high office not only the nobles, but all who had University education: doctors, notaries, lawyers, judges—and did not notice that the middle classes were acquiring the same power which had been theirs in 1288 and were now the representatives of the people. They should have prevented the union between the nobles and the 'middle' bourgeoisie, but they did not do so. Every day the people's distrust of the Nine grew, until it became political hatred; and their fear of losing power led the Nine to resort to repressive measures. The Emperor Charles of Luxembourg, on his way through Italy to be crowned in Rome, was receiving money, gifts and acts of submission from the cities that owed allegiance to the Empire. The Nine dispatched Ambassadors to him at Pisa to place the Republic at his disposal, hoping to find in him a defender of their government. The Sienese people disliked this gesture and national feeling was shocked. The Nine were accused of abuse of their power.

Accusations and general hatred of the Nine increased until suddenly the nobles and middle classes, with the intention of ridding themselves of the government, appealed to the Emperor. When on March 23rd, 1355, Charles halted in Siena, the nobles and people hailed him as an ally and pitilessly set about overthrowing the Nine and all their followers.

It was a wretched end for a government under whose rule the city had been wealthy and glorious for more than half a century, and meant the collapse of a Party that had numbered some excellent and hard-working men, and that had ruled generously for the good of all. The 'middle' bourgeoisie was now the strongest party, and set up a government of its own representatives only: the Twelve, Rulers and Administrators of the Republic. The nobles were given certain important charges, but excluded from the government. The Twelve were mostly small traders, without much administrative experience, without lofty ideals or political science, quite unprepared to resolve the grave problems which immediately arose. They suppressed the rebellious cities of Grosseto, Montalcino, Montepulciano and Massa in long and ruinous warfare. They were inept and cowardly when confronted with the ravages made by the numerous Companies of Fortune, preferring to buy these off with hundreds of thousands of florins that the city had to find by means of costly loans. Under their bad administration the economic condition of the Republic grew steadily worse; they did not know how to maintain public order, or rise above petty party interest. Ignorant as they were of economics, nevertheless they could have consolidated their position if they had generously provided for the well-being of the whole city. Their failure was due to their lack of clear ideas and lofty aims, and their use of abject means to attain their ends. They were always more interested in striking down their personal enemies than in working for the good of the state.

Unable to forget party resentments, by the law of August 7th, 1355, they obliged the Sienese to hold an armed review every six months to mortify the Nine. Every year they were solemnly to commemorate their glorious victory over them, to humiliate them further. Moreover, the names of the Nine were erased from the public Statutes. The Twelve did not see that their enemies, although defeated politically, and so discredited that for the time being they had no chance of returning to power, nevertheless represented a force which, even if it could not work openly, was succeeding by underground methods in causing them great vexation, conspiring with all their old and new enemies and hampering their action. Ignoring all this, the Twelve went on passing repressive laws. Woe to whoever 'directly or indirectly'

spoke ill of the Twelve; woe to whoever doubted the justice of their actions or grumbled; the punishments were often ferocious. It may be said that at this period one half of the city lived to spy on the other half; hence a sense of malaise all over the city, with rancour and hatred increasing from day to day.

Such conditions were ideal for the rise to power of the lower classes, the 'popolo minuto', or People's Party. The nobles, who had enjoyed some privileges under the Twelve, were now also discontented, because they were excluded from the Supreme Magistracy, and treated with suspicion and distrust by the Rulers. They were determined to get power back into their hands, and when on September 2nd, 1368, the nobles demanded the Palace in order to take over the government themselves, the cowardly Twelve, seeing themselves detested by all, offered no resistance. So, 'without drawing a sword', the nobles returned to power with the intention of reforming the government, and the Twelve, who had lived without honour, died in infamy.

The nobles did indeed reform the government, and admitted three representative of the Nine to a share in their Magistracy of thirteen Consuls. They took over office on the 6th September, but they lasted for only eighteen days, and were overthrown by a combination of opposing forces, the Twelve, the 'popolo minuto', the Salimbeni and the Malatesta.

From this revolt arose the Council of Reformers, consisting of one hundred and twenty-four members, representing the Nine, the Twelve and the 'popolo minuto'. This was the first important political success of the People's Party. In October the Emperor Charles IV, passing through Siena, gave his sanction to the new government. But the 'popolo minuto', rapidly becoming aware of its own strength, decided to take over the whole government. On the 11th of December, with 'great clamour and tumult', and with the aid of the Malatesta, it swept away the Reformers and formed its own Council of one hundred and fifty Reformers, with a Magistracy of fifteen Defenders of the People. To placate hatreds and antipathies, a few days later it gave places in the Magistracy to four followers of the Twelve and three followers of the Nine. This did not please the Twelve, however, who disliked sharing power with their sworn enemies the Nine. The nobles also were rancorous because they were eliminated from

the government, and many of them were exiled. The Salimbeni and Malatesta were as ambitious and avaricious as ever. On the 22nd of December, 1368, the Emperor arrived in Siena on his return from Rome. The Salimbeni and the Twelve then conspired with him to overthrow the Reformers. Siena was very agitated and full of rumours and suspicion. Finally, on the 18th of January, 1369, the Twelve, the Salimbeni and the Imperial troops attacked the Palace and drove out the Nine. This was the first step in their scheme to take over the whole government, and the Reformers and the 'popolo minuto' understood that the insurrection aimed at their own overthrow also. They raised the cry: 'The Emperor wants to conquer Siena for himself and loot it!' and roused the populace against him. The poor Emperor was there almost by chance, and they could easily have bought him off. Their real foes were the Twelve and all the other enemies of the popular party, and against these they had perforce to fight, and win. At this juncture the state identified itself with the People's Party, for patriotic reasons, and for the defence of social and political institutions. The foreigner was supported by the adversaries of the people. It was a political, social and economic struggle. For this reason, as soon as the Reformers clanged the great bell of the city to call the people to arms, the whole populace arose at once, fighting with courage and tenacity—and against them even the well-armed Imperial cavalry, with the forces of the Salimbeni and the Twelve, were of no avail. The people were fighting for their own social victory, and for their liberty, and their enthusiasm increased their strength. They rushed upon the Imperial troops, struck down their standard, defeated them and pursued them in all directions. The Emperor, who was trying to put heart into his cavalry, was at last forced to withdraw, and took refuge in the houses of the Salimbeni, where he was besieged and almost starved. He was obliged to acknowledge in a golden Bull the Council of Reformers of the 'popolo minuto', and in exchange for this 'many horses and other property of his were restored to him', and he was granted a loan of some thousands of gold florins. For an Emperor who was skilled in diplomacy and had made of Bohemia a homogeneous and wealthy nation, this defeat must have been very galling.

Probably he did not understand the new warlike attitude of the Sienese people, and their determination—due to their knowledge

that in defending the Reformers they were defending themselves. He had known a Siena of partisans, split in opposing factions, who hated each other bitterly, so that it had been enough to support one of them with arms to ensure its victory. But now things had changed. All the citizens had the right to vote, followers of the 'popolo minuto', of the Twelve, or of the Nine. Every Siennese man could and should go to his own Company and elect, by secret ballot, two or three Reformers. Moreover, those elected must have been Siennese citizens for at least twenty-five years, and this gave a national character to the election. So that the 'popolo minuto' might preserve its own supremacy, the Reformers could only be chosen from the popular party, but they became representatives of the whole city because they were elected by other 'Monti' besides their own.

When the Emperor left Siena, although the People had triumphed and the Nine were acclaimed and honoured, peace and calm were not restored. The Salimbeni and the Twelve hoped to avenge their defeat, and caused the government endless trouble. The Reformers tried to consolidate their rule and at the same time to soften their adversaries' mood with just decrees and laws.

The names of the Twelve and Nine stood for unforgettable divisions, and the very sound of them aroused rancour, hatred and vindictiveness. So these names were abolished, and it was forbidden to cry: 'Death to the People!' 'Death to the Nine!' 'Death to the Twelve!' The nobles were invited to return to the city, and to take some public offices. Rebels and impenitent agitators were severely punished. These indicated excellent intentions on the part of the Reformers, who were for the most part honest men and loyal to the Republic, that they wished to see peaceful, hardworking, wealthy and renowned. They knew when to be severe and when to be benevolent, and were admired for being less partisan than any of the preceding governments. But their generous, just and enlightened conception of government did not conciliate their opponents or establish peace. In August 1370 there was a particularly bloody revolt in the city, which resulted in the Twelve losing their four places in the Magistracy, while their followers were heavily fined and forbidden to bear arms. The population, however, remained very agitated, and riots and street fighting took place continually.

The Reformers did their best to govern the Republic. They stood out against the Salimbeni and the nobles, made wise provisions during the great famine of 1370, survived a dangerous strike in 1371, fought the Twelve, and withstood the plots, conspiracies, disorders, revolts and riots which so often afflicted the city. They also resisted the Companies of Fortune, either energetically in battle, or by cleverly buying their services, or by paying thousands of gold florins to their Captains, to bribe them to leave the territory of the Republic, or not to set foot in it. They made useful treaties and alliance with other cities and states. But in spite of being discreet politicians, able diplomats and honest rulers of Siena, they had not the exceptional qualities needed to calm all grudging personal jealousies and local hatreds; nor were they able to unite all the citizens around the central ideal of the greatness of the Republic. The spirit of faction was kept alive and fomented by the Florentines, so that the Reformers still met with tenacious opposition. So the nobles, the Twelve, the Nine and the Florentines combined against the Reformers, who after the first years of mild rule found themselves faced with such numerous enemies that they had recourse to repressive measures, which were sometimes bloody and cruel. They would condemn to death on mere suspicion, and to imprisonment or torture for a trifling offence. The finances of the city meanwhile deteriorated, the cost of living rose, and the desire for peace became more insistent. So finally the Reformers, after thirteen years of well-intentioned government which had given the city some good social and political laws, were overthrown on March 22nd, 1385, by their own People's Party. This was a bad thing for Siena, says the Chronicler: 'And I who write this, who am not a follower of the Reformers, judged this to be ill done, because in this way much harm and ruin were caused to the city of Siena—for altogether four thousand good artisan citizens were expelled from the city, and not even the sixth part of them ever returned'.

In the midst of such uncertainties, fears, hatreds, struggles and slaughter, one can understand how a woman like Catherine gathered around her a crowd of admirers and disciples, and how in her company men found the charm of peace, while all around was unrest and war.