

to dither, and in the end this lack of policy miraculously paid off. In 1711 the Emperor Joseph I died, and this was followed by a lull in the War of the Spanish Succession and the empire's territorial ambitions. Two years later Cosimo III's son and heir Ferdinando died, but the expected riots did not materialise; by now the population was too cowed and dispirited even to take to the streets.

Cosimo III's reign tottered on, and by 1720 it had lasted for fifty years. The English traveller Edward Wright described Cosimo III in the same year:

His Highness was about eighty years old: his state of health was then such as would not allow his going abroad; but whilst he could do that, he visited five or six churches every day. I was told he had a machine in his own apartment, whereon were fix'd little images in silver, of every saint in the calendar. The machine was made to turn so as still to present in front the Saint of the day; before which he continually perform'd his offices. His hours of eating and going to bed were very early, as was likewise his hour of rising.

By now Cosimo's religious obsessions made him easy prey to his narrow-minded advisers, most of whom were priests. All naked statues were removed from the streets and galleries, on the grounds that they were 'an incitement to fornication', and even Michelangelo's *David*, the great symbol of Florence, was hidden beneath tarpaulin. Cosimo III rarely ventured beyond the precincts of the Pitti Palace; though when he did, crowds of curious citizens gathered in sullen silence to catch a glimpse of their detested ruler. In September 1723 he was overcome by a curious fit of trembling whilst sitting at his desk, and this spasmodic affliction lasted for two hours, leaving him drained and filled with foreboding. By October Cosimo III was on his deathbed; and daily he prayed, beseeching God to forgive him for his sins – though he still managed to sign a decree further raising the ruined grand duchy's income tax. On 31 October, at the age of eighty-one, he finally died – bringing to an end the longest and most ruinous Medici reign.

## Finale

THERE BEING NO alternative heir, in 1723 Cosimo III's second son became Grand Duke Gian Gastone. He was now fifty-two years old, and it appeared that he would be the last of the Medici line, for all his father's exhortations to produce a male heir had proved in vain.

In the years following his marriage to the redoubtable Princess Anna Maria Francesca of Saxe-Lauenburg, Gian Gastone had been forced to remain in residence at her forbidding castle in Bohemia, as his wife refused even to contemplate moving to Florence. She had got it into her head that the Medici were in the habit of poisoning their wives. According to contemporary reports, Anna Maria Francesca was wont to stride about the chilly halls of her castle in her coarse leather hunting gear and riding boots, berating her hapless husband. When she went hunting wild boar in the woods, he would stand at the window, gazing out over the smoking hovels of Reichstadt; and as the rain coursed down the distorting mullioned widows, so tears of self-pity would course down his chubby cheeks. He took to gambling with his paramour, the Italian groom Giuliano Dami, and his companions, losing heavily as they cheated him. To pay off his debts he would surreptitiously pilfer his wife's unworn jewellery and pawn it on his increasingly frequent trips to Prague. Here he took his pleasures: 'Setting forth in disguise, he would join the ribald company of lackeys and tatterdemalion wretches that lolled about half-drunk in low haunts and taverns of the town . . . In these resorts he grew accustomed to wallow and debauch, smoking tobacco and chewing long peppers with bread and cumin-seed, in order to drink more strictly in German fashion.'

By this stage Cosimo III had become exasperated; he needed his son and heir back in Florence. When he heard that Gian Gastone's wife refused

to accompany him to Italy, he embarked on a scheme to coerce her from her castle. In 1707 Cosimo III contacted Pope Clement XI, who despatched the Archbishop of Prague to Reichstadt, where he sternly reminded the princess that it was her duty as a wife to accompany her husband to Florence. The princess built herself up into a towering rage, finally describing to the archbishop in the most coarse and intimate manner why there was no point in her accompanying her husband, because he was 'absolutely impotent'.

In 1708 Gian Gastone returned home, leaving his wife behind. They would never set eyes on each other again, and Princess Anna Maria Francesca of Saxe-Lauenburg would remain living alone on her remote Bohemian estates for the rest of her life. Until well into middle age she continued to be an enthusiastic hunter, but in old age she became increasingly headstrong and reclusive; she would die in 1741 at the age of seventy. Other branches of her family would go on to produce kings of Prussia, as well as kings and queens of England; but as her direct line came to an end, so did that of the Medici.

Gian Gastone took up residence in Tuscany, accompanied by his favourite Giuliano Dami, who looked after his domestic arrangements. Gian Gastone's extreme sensitivity meant that he still experienced a great need for extended periods of solitude; at night he would sit alone for hours on end, drinking and gazing up at the moon. Otherwise he spent much of his time moving from Medici villa to Medici villa, to avoid coming into contact with members of his family. He detested his father's religiosity, and he disliked his sister-in-law, Princess Violante (his older brother Ferdinando's widow), because she would lecture him on the need to reform his ways. Later, his loving sister Anna Maria Luisa de' Medici, electress palatine, returned to Florence after the death of her syphilitic German husband; but Gian Gastone now disliked her intensely, blaming her for his disastrous marriage. (As electress palatine, she had cast her eye over the German courts for Cosimo III, eventually recommending Princess Anna Maria Francesca of Saxe-Lauenburg.) In this way, the heir to the grand duchy skulked in Florence, living in trepidation of the day when his father would die and he would be faced with the responsibilities of rule.

The renowned French traveller Guyot de Merville, who resided in Florence during this period, remarked of Gian Gastone and 'his singular

apathy. He carries this so far that it is even said he never opens a letter, to avoid having to answer it. This course of life might bring him to a very advanced age, did he not suffer from asthma and aggravate his infirmity by the quantity of potent cordials he consumes. Some fear he will predecease his father, which would not be surprising.' But this was not to be.

By the time Cosimo III died in 1723, Gian Gastone had become a vast physical wreck. In many ways he had aged far beyond his fifty-two years; yet his bloated frame retained an oddly youthful chubbiness. He would often spend days on end in bed, and such was his constantly befuddled state that it sometimes appeared as if he was prematurely senile. Giuliano Dami had collected a group of hangers-on to entertain him; these were usually good-looking young men from impoverished Florentine families, and became known as the *Ruspanti* – after the *ruspi* (coins) they were paid, although the word also has connotations of scavenging, or chickens scratching about a yard – and the avarice of these hangers-on overcame all moral restraint. Gian Gastone would lie in his vast bed, with two or more of his *Ruspanti* tucked in beside him, whilst their colleagues enacted lewd impromptu fancy-dress dramas, encouraged by Giuliano Dami. Gian Gastone would bellow obscenities at them, encouraging them to fornicate with each other in the most promiscuous fashion, and then fall asleep with his small, thick-lipped mouth sagging open over his bulbous double chins.

To the surprise of all, the new Grand Duke Gian Gastone began his reign with a burst of energy; he even took his duties seriously. Well aware of how his father's long reign had blighted the grand duchy, he did his best to set things right by instituting a number of reforms. Public executions were discontinued, the power of the clergy was drastically reduced, and anti-Semitic laws were repealed. In an attempt to restart the stagnant economy, taxes were heavily reduced for labourers, artisans and other craftsmen, while beggars were rounded up and put to useful public work. The University of Pisa was permitted to extend its curriculum beyond moribund Aristotelianism, and teaching was even permitted from the works of Galileo, many of which still remained banned by the Church.

Inevitably it took some years for all these reforms to be put into place, but gradually Florence began to return to a semblance of its former liveliness. Gian Gastone's scandalous private life had long since become public knowledge, but this was now regarded with a certain amused toler-

ance. He was better than his sanctimonious father; at least there were no longer spies seeking out irreligious behaviour. After his own fashion, the new grand duke achieved a measure of popularity: he was doing his best.

Unfortunately, Gian Gastone's best was not good enough. Gradually he sank back into his old slothful ways, and the stream of reforms began to peter out. Tuscany remained impoverished enough for the visiting French writer Montesquieu to remark: 'There is no town where men live with less luxury than in Florence.' Yet paradoxically he also noted: 'There is a very gentle rule in Florence. Nobody knows, or is conscious, of the prince and his court. For that very reason, this little country has the air of being a great one.'

The lack of awareness of the prince and his court was hardly surprising, for Gian Gastone now frequently took to his bed for weeks on end. His daily routine was hardly public: he would wake in mid-afternoon, and there followed a brief period when his councillors might attempt to visit him on official business. Usually Giuliano Dami was given orders to have them turned away at the palace entrance, but sometimes one would manage to bribe his way in through a side-entrance. The ensuing audience was liable to be brief, and at cross purposes, until Gian Gastone managed to find his handbell amongst the bedclothes and ring for Giuliano to escort the official from the premises. At five o'clock a lengthy dinner was served, and this would be followed by 'entertainments' performed by the *Ruspanti*, while the grand duke lay back on his pillows belching and bellowing ribaldries. A hearty supper would be served at around two in the morning; the grand duke would dress for supper by adorning himself with a long muslin cravat, which soon became besmirched with spillings, dribblings and clouds of snuff that he insisted upon taking – and sneezing – between courses. After this, Gian Gastone would sometimes ask for the shutters to be opened, and would order all to leave; he would then contemplate the moon as it bathed the rooftops, towers and cathedral dome of Florence in its pale ethereal light. The crash of a bottle rolling from his bed onto the floor around dawn signified to his attendants outside the door that he had fallen asleep.

In an effort to make Gian Gastone put in some public appearances, his sister-in-law Princess Violante organised a number of formal banquets,

at which the grand duke was expected to preside. Her aim was to wean Gian Gastone from his *Ruspanti* and introduce him to civilised society. Princess Violante's witty and charming circle of aristocratic friends would watch cautiously, their fans fluttering, as the grand duke was assisted to his chair at the head of the table. Unfortunately, his sensitivity at being in such company would drive him to consume vast quantities of wine, whereupon he would become so 'relaxed' that he began behaving as he would amongst the *Ruspanti*. His wig askew, he would bellow enthusiastic obscenities, which fortunately remained for the most part incomprehensible. The end of Princess Violante's social experiments came on the occasion when, halfway through the meal, the grand duke copiously brought up into his napkin the previous half of the meal he had just consumed, and then proceeded to wipe his mouth with the flowing curls of his periwig, oblivious to the scraping of chairs and flurry of departing ladies.

When Gian Gastone retired all but permanently to his bed, not surprisingly word eventually began to spread through Florence that he was in fact dead. To put an end to these rumours, his sister Anna Maria Luisa, electress palatine, insisted that he make a public appearance at the 1729 St John the Baptist's Day horseraces, which took place at the Prato Gate. Having fortified his nerves sufficiently for him to face his subjects, Gian Gastone was loaded with difficulty into a coach in the yard of the Palazzo Pitti. This then set off across the large piazza in front of the palace, with the whale-like mass of the grand duke rolling from side to side inside. The effect on the passenger's stomach was perhaps inevitable, and the assembled curious citizens watched as the coach proceeded down the road, with the grand duke occasionally poking his head from the window to vomit into the street. By the time the coach reached the western gate, Gian Gastone had recovered somewhat; after taking the place of honour in the stand, he was soon enjoying the races, bellowing jovial obscenities at the cream of Florentine society seated around him. Finally he fell into a deep slumber and had to be carried back to the Pitti Palace on a litter – so that those in the streets who watched him pass were able to see for themselves that their groaning, prostrate grand duke was not dead, just unconscious.

It was by now quite evident that there could be no male Medici heir. But who would lay claim to the grand duchy of Tuscany? This was a

potentially dangerous state of affairs, and the European powers recognised it as such. Following the War of the Spanish Succession, the thrones of Europe that fell vacant without an incontestable heir were now being distributed on a more or less even-handed basis amongst the two great continental powers, the Bourbons of France and the Habsburgs of Austria. In 1731 an international conference was held in Vienna to decide upon who should succeed as Grand Duke of Tuscany when Gian Gastone died, an event that seemed imminent according to diplomatic reports. The conference was attended by representatives from England, Holland, Spain and Savoy; Gian Gastone himself was neither invited nor consulted. Eventually the powers that be decided that the fifteen-year-old Spanish-born Don Carlos of Bourbon should inherit the grand duchy, and should take up residence there as soon as possible, so as to ensure a smooth succession. This was ratified by the Treaty of Vienna.

The ensuing rule of Tuscany had now to all intents and purposes been taken out of Gian Gastone's hands, although for the sake of appearances he was appointed guardian to the young Don Carlos, and was asked to sign a document confirming this. Gian Gastone appeared quite content, and on signing the document he remarked lightly: 'I have just got an heir by the stroke of a pen. And yet I could not get such a thing in thirty-four years of marriage.'

In 1732 Don Carlos arrived in Tuscany, accompanied by 6,000 Spanish troops, who led him into Florence unopposed. The young Spanish prince was cheered through the streets by the citizens of Florence, who appeared relieved that there would be no war of succession; most of all they appeared pleased to have a leader whom they could celebrate. (Ironically, this was a tradition that had originally been encouraged amongst the republican citizens of Florence by the Medici.) Don Carlos was also welcomed by Gian Gastone, who presented his heir with a little velvet-upholstered carriage pulled by two white donkeys, and a gold embroidered parasol to protect him from the sun. Here was the ultimate token of the famous Medici generosity: an absurd child's toy for driving about the Boboli Gardens. Don Carlos was no longer a child – by now the teenage prince was a keen hunter – but he accepted this inappropriate and somehow demeaning gift with good grace.

However, the problem of the Tuscan succession was not yet over, for

events in Europe would now intervene. Not all dynastic successions were to be so easily arranged, and the continent was soon once again on the brink of catastrophe. In 1733 the King of Poland died, precipitating the War of the Polish Succession, whereupon the French and the Spanish tore up the Treaty of Vienna and moved into conflict with Austria. Fortunately the war was quickly brought to an end, and this time the ruling powers signed the Treaty of Turin, which resulted in another round of the musical chairs of royal succession. The young Don Carlos now became King of Naples, and his younger brother Francis of Lorraine succeeded him as heir to the grand duchy of Tuscany. Francis of Lorraine was betrothed to Maria Theresa, heiress of the Habsburg throne, so Tuscany now passed from Spanish into Austrian hands. As a result, in 1737 Don Carlos and his 6,000 Spanish troops marched out of Tuscany, and later in the year Florence was occupied by 6,000 Austrian troops, commanded by the Prince de Craon, the representative of Francis of Lorraine.

Gian Gastone was irritated by this change of arrangements, for he had developed a sentimental attachment to Don Carlos; but there was nothing Gian Gastone could do about the change, other than sign another decree of succession as dictated by the Treaty of Turin. The Prince de Craon wrote to Francis of Lorraine describing Gian Gastone: 'I found this prince in a condition worthy of pity. He could not leave his bed. His beard was long, his sheets and linen very dirty, without ruffles. His sight was dim and enfeebled, his voice low and obstructed. Altogether, he had the air of a man with not a month to live.' One can all but smell the scene: not for nothing was the air of Gian Gastone's bedchamber invariably suffused with a heavy pall of incense at this stage of his life.

The citizens of Florence for their part were also upset by the heavy-handed appointment of Francis of Lorraine; and they took against his Austrian troops, referring to them disdainfully as 'Lorrainers'. The new occupying forces were very different from the tactful Spaniards, and soon began taking an active role in the city's affairs, with 'Lorrainers' displacing Florentines in key posts of the administration. Token occupation by a foreign power had now become a deeply resented fact, and when the French scholar Charles de Bosse visited Florence in 1739, he recorded: 'The Tuscans would give two-thirds of their property to have the Medici back, the other third to get rid of the Lorrainers. They hate them.' Public holidays

that celebrated the Medici were now banned, a move that struck at the very heart of all that Florence held dear: its unique history, achievements and tradition. These public holidays had marked the birthday of Cosimo *Pater Patriae*, Giulio de' Medici's ascension as Pope Clement VII, and the election by the Signoria of Cosimo I, the first Grand Duke of Tuscany. The Austrian troops occupied the Fortezza da Basso, and the guns defending Florence were transferred to the battlements overlooking the city.

Gian Gastone was now virtually the last survivor of the Medici line. His sister-in-law Princess Violante had died, but his elder sister Anna Maria Luisa, electress palatine, continued to live on in her own apartments at the Palazzo Pitti. By this time she was in her seventies: an aristocratic old lady who insisted on maintaining the Medici dignity. Although Gian Gastone had forbidden her to enter his apartments, she took to visiting him regardless, whereupon forceful lectures were delivered to the recumbent grand duke, pointing out the error of his ways. Gian Gastone was taking a long time to die, but there was no denying (even to himself) that he was dying. Anna Maria Luisa finally managed to persuade her brother to embrace the faith which all his life he had rejected. The enfeebled, bloated figure of the grand duke held a crucifix before his wispily bearded, grey-skinned face and sighed: '*Sic transit gloria mundi*' ('Thus passeth the glories of this world'), and on 9 July 1737, after an ignominious reign that had lasted thirteen years, he died. He might have left Tuscany better than he had found it after the tyranny of Cosimo III, but his impotence, in all senses, had cost the grand duchy its independence. Thus passed the last of the Medici rulers of Florence.

When Gian Gastone died, Francis of Lorraine was away in the Balkans campaigning against the Turks; as a mark of courtesy, the Prince de Craon offered Anna Maria Luisa the post of regent until Francis of Lorraine returned. This would have been a purely token title, with the Prince de Craon and his appointed men holding all semblance of real power. Anna Maria Luisa proudly declined the post.

For the next six years she continued to live in the Palazzo Pitti; although she had no power, she was still in possession of the Medici fortune and very conscious of her role as the last of a long and glorious line. In her old age she was rarely seen; she left the Palazzo Pitti only to attend church, or for an occasional brief excursion on a summer evening,

when she would be driven through the streets in her eight-horse carriage, with her personal guard in attendance. The British diplomatic representative, Sir Horace Mann, reported: 'In the latter part of her life she was the reverse of that good-humoured sloven, her brother. Then, indeed, she never so far lost her dignity as even to smile . . . The furniture of her bedchamber was all of silver: tables, chairs, stools and screens.' This allegedly struck those who saw it as more 'singular . . . than handsome'. When rare visitors called at the Pitti Palace to see her, Anna Maria Luisa, electress palatine, would receive them standing beneath a large black canopy; the last of the Medici lived out her days a stiff and haughty grande dame.

Late in 1742 she developed a slight fever, which left her very frail; and in February 1743 Anna Maria Luisa finally died. Sir Horace Mann wrote: 'The common people are convinced she went off in a hurricane of wind; a most violent one began this morning and lasted for about two hours, and now the sun shines as bright as ever, this is proof . . . Nothing can destroy this opinion which all people think they have been eyewitness to. All the town is in tears, many with great reason, for the loss of her.'

After her death, it was discovered that Anna Maria Luisa had made a will disposing of all the Medici 'galleries, paintings, statues, libraries, jewels and other precious things', stating that 'for the benefit of the people and for the inducement of the curiosity of foreigners, nothing shall be alienated or taken away from the capital or from the territories of the grand duchy'. The Medici treasures and their cultural heritage would remain for ever in Florence, the city which had in so many ways contributed to them, and had in so many ways already paid for them.