The World's Great Classics, Volume 57

Hawthorne Julian

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Author: Hawthorne Julian

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HISTORY OF FLORENCE

FROM THE EARLIEST TIMES TO THE DEATH OF LORENZO THE MAGNIFICENT

BY

NICCOLO MACHIAVELLI

WITH A SPECIAL INTRODUCTION BY

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NICCOLO MACHIAVELLI.

Photogravure from the original painting by Brunzoni.

will be said hereafter) and partly to the new ideas which it embodies regarding the treatment of historical subjects. It was the fruit of Machiavelli's later years and of his mature opinions—written at a later date than the "Prince" or the "Discourses on Livy." As it represents a well-marked stage in the author's career, it can best be approached from the side of its biographical setting.

Bismarck, when an old man, said jestingly, "Two things in life have given me special pleasure, politics and wine." With Machiavelli one observes a sharp alternation between the grosser, more shameful pleasures and a strenuous political activity. Or, rather, if we were seeking to compare him with a great statesman of recent times, we should more fitly think of Mirabeau than of Bismarck. The Italian and the Frenchman are alike in their fondness for political theorizing, and also for practical politics. They differ in that Machiavelli had a much longer experience of affairs than Mirabeau, and did not suffer dissipation to ruin his health.

The year 1494 proved as critical a time in the history of Italy as 1492 had been in the history of Europe and of America. It was then that Charles VIII of France crossed the Alps with the design of conquering Naples. His project failed, but he brought the element of foreign influence into Italian politics, and thereby caused that ruin of the peninsula which was effected in the course of the next generation. Machiavelli became a clerk in the Florentine Chancery just at the moment when the lilies of France began to wave over the plains of Italy. He was then twenty-five years old.

The nature of Machiavelli's early education is reflected in several features of his written work. He was not ignorant, neither was he a scholar according to the standards of scholarship in the later Renaissance. Whether he knew Greek well is a question which has been hotly debated, but it seems more likely that he did not. This point, though it may appear rather a minor one, is far from being so. During the Renaissance much native genius exhausted itself upon the minute study and slavish imitation of classical texts. Had Machiavelli learned Greek thoroughly he might have grown infatuated like so many others, and have edited Euripides instead of writing the "History of Florence." He had a good grasp