

The Death of Cesare

The Town of Viana, Navarre, March 12 1507

“My lord! My lord Cesare! Wake up! The enemy are at the gates ...”

With these words, Cesare Borgia was summoned from sleep in the early dawn light. Not usually a man to dream, this particular night had been an exception. He had fallen into bed long after midnight, having given final instructions to his captains for the disposition of the army of his brother-in-law the King of Navarre, who had entrusted to him the siege of the castle of Viana, then held by the forces of the King’s unruly subject Louis de Beaumont. Though the castle was an immensely strong place, he had good intelligence that their food supplies were running low, and he was certain that he would soon bring the siege to an end. And then the world would see that he, Cesare Borgia, Duke of Valentinois, was far from finished, as all his enemies assumed. With this thought bringing a smile to his lips, he had fallen instantly into sleep, as was his habit.

Sometime in those few hours, his restless mind had decided of its own accord to review his life. Images came and went – his investiture as Bishop of Pamplona at the tender age of fifteen, amid a swirl of pomp and incense; the childhood games he had played with his brothers Joffre and Juan, who he had loved but with whom he had competed so fiercely; the exultation of battle, in scenes that swirled and flashed and faded before his half-conscious mind could comprehend them. And then he saw the big, bluff figure of his father the Pope, smiling and charming, angry and belligerent, and in the last moments before he woke, his face grimacing in pain as the illness that had killed him – and almost killed Cesare – began to grip his frame. He had died while Cesare himself was locked in delirium, but in his mind’s eye he saw his father’s corpse fading, disappearing to the sound of heavenly trumpets.

But the trumpets were real, he realised as his servant’s agitated shaking dragged him back to consciousness. In a moment, his dreams were banished and he was fully awake, another gift of nature that allowed him to dispense with the bleary half aware state between sleep and life that afflicted others.

“All right, Pedro, all right. I’m awake now, for the love of God! You can leave off shaking me and tell me what has happened.”

“They say that there is a rebel army about to attack the town, my lord. Capitán Ramirez has sounded the alarm, that’s why all the trumpets and bells ...”

Ramirez was an idiot, he thought to himself. No doubt he was panicking. Cesare hauled himself out of bed, and began pulling on the clothes that the boy handed to him. A steel cuirass came next, the straps pulled tight by a shaking Pedro. His scabbarded sword was propped in one corner, and he grabbed it as he strode out of the little house that served as his lodgings and into the pandemonium of the street. Citizens and soldiers alike were streaming past, the soldiers purposeful, the citizens terrified.

“Get my horse, Pedro,” he shouted above the noise, “and bring her around here. Now!”

As the servant went off at a run to the stable down the street, Luis Ramirez, the captain who was responsible for the watch this night, emerged from the crowd. Seeing Cesare, his face lost its frown – an expression that was habitual in a man who had been promoted, at the King’s behest, well beyond his ability – as he realised that he could surrender the burden of command to his superior. Cesare waited, hands on hips, impatience written on his face.

“Well, Luis, what has happened? Why have you raised the alarm?”

Ramirez bobbed his head, breathless.

“De Beaumont, excellency. He has relieved the Castillo!”

Cesare frowned. How could that be? He had an army of more than ten thousand men under his command, investing the castle as tight as could be. Louis de Beaumont could not possibly have relieved the fortress overnight.

“Talk sense, Ramirez! Has the damned Count found a way to fly armies over the walls and into the Castillo? For surely he would have had to use such miraculous means to slip past our army.”

“No, no, excellency. The Castillo is still occupied – but the Count has sent in a wagon train load of supplies ...”

“How? Where were our soldiers when all this was happening?”

Ramirez looked miserable.

“I, I do not know, excellency. The wagons were accompanied by a strong escort, and the attempt was made in the dead of night. Our sentries should have detected them, but did not.”

A tide of fury began to rise in him. The siege was almost done, Beaumont’s garrison on the verge of surrender, and they had been given a reprieve by some stupid lazy sentries asleep at their posts. They would pay for that with their lives.

“And this escort? How many are they, that they should cause such commotion? Some thousands strong, are they?”

“We do not know how many.” Ramirez quailed before his commander’s anger, apparent in the cold glare that belied the even tone of the words. “On their way from the castle, they encountered a troop of our men coming into the town, reinforcements from Pamplona. When they told me what had happened, I raised the alarm.”

Pedro, his page, was coming down the street, leading a big black horse, restive and stamping its dissatisfaction at being dragged from the stable at this early hour. The lad had also had the presence of mind to bring Cesare’s battle-helmet, a finely made piece of armour topped by a flamboyant red plume.

“You are a fool, Ramirez.” He swung up into the saddle and, grasping the reins, sawed at the horse’s bit to turn it around in the direction of the nearest gate. “Clearly I will have to go myself and see what is happening. Get as many mounted troops together as you can and follow me without delay. With luck we will catch these bastards and make them pay for their insolence!”

Horse and rider clattered off down the street, the ringing of the iron-shod hooves on the cobblestones echoing off the walls of the houses on each side. Startled soldiers and townsfolk had to jump hastily aside to make way for their grim-faced general, flattening themselves into doorways and against limestone walls. Cesare paid them no heed, his mind busy calculating. He came to the Puerta del Sol, whose great wooden gates stood open, with none of the accustomed sentries anywhere in sight. Too late, he saw that the passage was half-blocked by a wagon, abandoned no doubt by some countryman fleeing in panic from the supposed enemy army out there somewhere. He wrenched the reins to force the horse to one side, but the unexpected command caused the beast to stumble, and with a frightened whinny it fell heavily on its side, throwing Cesare in the process, and winding him. He got unsteadily to his feet, jumping clear of the thrashing hooves. Fortunately, the horse didn’t seem to be injured, and with a curse Cesare dragged it to its feet, trembling and snorting. Cesare was an excellent horseman, and usually he took great care with his horses, but this morning he had neither the time nor patience to coax it into compliance. Instead, he climbed back into the saddle and applied his spurs with a savage kick into the beast’s sides. Thus encouraged, the horse bolted forward.

In the short time left to him, Cesare was to regret having startled his mount to such an extent that its instinct to run overwhelmed its intelligence. For having begun, it soon decided that it was not going to stop, no matter how furiously Cesare pulled at the reins and shouted curses in the ears that were pinned back in fear. Suddenly the first rays of the sun blasted over the mountains to the east, momentarily blinding him. When the dazzle cleared, he saw, just a few hundred yards ahead of him, a party of mounted soldiers, perhaps ten of them. The rearguard, perhaps, of the Count of Beaumont’s raiding party. Hearing the hooves behind them, they turned, and before he knew it, Cesare was among them, his horse charging full tilt and by now barely under his control. Instinct took over, and his sword came out of his scabbard. He crashed into them, the sword describing two

deadly arcs, left and right, that felled two of the enemy in single blows. And then he was through them, the horse careering on. But it was at last beginning to tire, the rush of adrenalin dissipating in its veins, and as he gradually brought it under control, Cesare suddenly realised what a predicament he was in.

For ahead of him was the main body of de Beaumont's troops, who had turned at the sound of the clash behind them, and were waiting on a low ridge. Fifty or so mounted soldiers, Cesare's experienced eye estimated, under a banner that flapped lazily in the small breeze. Under that banner sat a tall, imperious figure who could only be Louis de Beaumont himself, the rebellious baron who Cesare had promised King Juan he would bring to heel. Behind him, the rearguard troop that his wild passage had so disrupted was regrouping and preparing to charge up the road towards him. Far behind them, no doubt, were Ramirez and his own soldiers, but there was little likelihood that they would get here in time to rescue him. To the south was open country, and if he fled in that direction he would be caught easily. So there was nowhere for him to go except north, towards a low range of hills pierced by narrow arroyos. There at least he might have a chance of finding some cover, a ravine perhaps, where his enemies' advantage in numbers might be neutered. It was a slight chance, but it was the only one he had, and so without hesitation he hauled his horse's head around once more, and applying his spurs gathered her into a gallop.

Of course, out here in the open Cesare's intention was immediately obvious to the Count as he sat up on his ridge, and in a few moments a dozen riders had detached themselves and settled into galloping course parallel with his own. Cesare hunkered grimly into his saddle, his eyes searching the hills ahead for some opening. There, over a little to his left, was a cleft, marked at its foot by a stand of scrubby trees that were probably watered by a stream debouching out of the hills. For lack of a better alternative, he set his horse's head in that direction. Glancing to his right, he could see the little party of enemy riders closing steadily with him: they, too, had seen the opening ahead, and had guessed his intentions. Well, Cesare thought, there was nothing left now except to ride.

He soon became oblivious to everything except the thunder of his horse's hooves and the breeze on his face. His unconscious instincts took control of the horse, and the rest of his mind, freed of such mundane tasks, began to roam over the meteor that had been his career and the life which now hung in the balance, as though returning to the dream that had disturbed his sleep last night. It was fitting in some ways that his life should have come full circle back here to Navarre, for his first official position was as Bishop of Pamplona, though he himself was at the time but a boy of fifteen, and living in Rome. Two years later, his father, the redoubtable Rodrigo Borgia, became Pope Alexander VI, and Cesare was elevated to the Archbishopric of Valencia. A year after that, he was elected as a Cardinal, a Prince of the Church. The Pope had been so determined that he, Cesare, despite his frequently expressed antipathy to any such course. It was his brothers, Juan and Joffre, who were to follow secular careers. Juan was the favoured one, the boy who was to become a soldier and leader of the Papal armies. His father overlooked the poor judgement and bad tempered arrogance that made Juan such a terrible leader of men, investing him as Captain General of the Papal Armies, to his ultimate cost. When they fished Juan's body out of the Tiber, stabbed to death by unknown assailants who had, strangely, thrown him into the river without relieving his corpse of jewels or money, his father had been distraught. The gossips – to whom Cesare had never given credence – said Juan's death was his doing, but the truth was that the Captain-General had made so many enemies that you could have filled the Pantheon with them.

As for poor Joffre – nothing had gone right for him, except his marriage to the delightful Sancia, daughter of the Aragonese King of Naples. A weakling, Pope Alexander called him. He had no interest in politics or anything very much, except the pursuit of pleasure. He had, Cesare thought wryly, all the characteristics required to be a successful Cardinal: it should have been Joffre who Alexander forced into the church, not him. Well, he had prevailed on the old man in the end. Juan's catastrophic defeat at Soriano demonstrated once and for all how unsuited his brother was for military command, and it was just a matter of time before the Pope allowed him to renounce his holy vows, and become a soldier. Exchanging the crimson robes of a Cardinal for the dignities of a Dukedom – Valentinois, land and title provided by the King of France as the price of a Papal annulment – he set out to prove himself as great a soldier as his brother had been a failure, with the Romagna, that great swathe of lands that lay north-east of the Papal States as his theatre of operations. Rich yet unruly, a patchwork of city states under the sway of petty tyrants, mostly *condottieri* or the children of *condottieri*, the Romagna had always posed a threat to the peace of the church and of the whole north Italian peninsula. Here he would create a kingdom for himself and prove himself not just as a soldier, but as a great ruler.

And it had almost worked. As his horse laboured onwards towards that narrow ravine and, hopefully, an escape route, Cesare thought about that audacious bid to build a new state in Italy. Just five years, that was all he had had in the end. At first, he was unstoppable. City after city fell to his military genius – Urbino, Imola, Forlì, Rimini, Faenza, Spoleto, Camerino, Bologna. And he was popular: the people of the Romagna, tired of the depredations of petty warlords, were soon won over by his rule, which he had tried to make just and fair. There had been threats, of course, but time and again he had outwitted his enemies and escaped, to continue on his inexorable course. Everything went as he, Cesare, had planned it – everything except, as he had remarked to his friend-enemy the Florentine emissary Niccolò Machiavelli, what had actually happened: the untimely death of his father, Pope Alexander VI. That he had not foreseen, for though the Pope was a man of large appetites, he was in good health. Yet both father and son had fallen ill on the same day, after attending a banquet at the villa of Cardinal Corneto, outside Rome. Outside Rome, and therefore moderately safe from the summer pestilence that was, that year, the city's scourge. Six days after he first felt the symptoms, the Pope was dead, and Cesare in the throes of a fever so severe that he was completely insensible to the manoeuvres that began immediately his father's pulse had faded.

He had tried to hold back the tide. But without his father's authority, and so weak he could barely sit up in bed to issue orders, the jackals soon closed in, and his empire disintegrated before his helpless eyes. The tyrants he had so recently expelled returned to their possessions, and without Cesare's leadership his armies were unable to stop them. The College of Cardinals, irredeemably split into factions, elected the old and feeble Cardinal of Siena, Francesco Piccolomini, to become Pope Pius III. Sure enough, he soon passed away, and the worst possible result came out of the next Conclave – the election of his father's oldest and bitterest enemy, Giuliano della Rovere, who took the name Julius II. Even so, Cesare at first thought that he could come to an accommodation with the new Pope – he was, after all, a proven general and capable leader, and he could not believe that Julius would want to allow the Romagna to fall back into its chaotic state. But the della Rovere Pope was wily: at first he was friendly, but soon Cesare found himself imprisoned in the Vatican. In the end he had no alternative but to surrender his last remaining fortresses, in exchange for a passage to Naples, and freedom. There, Gonzalo de Cordoba, the great Spanish captain, welcomed him and in short order placed him in command of an army destined for a campaign of conquest in Tuscany. Cesare could still remember his excitement at this development – to be in command of an army again! He would rebuild his fortunes from that base and – who knew? – perhaps one day he would be master of the Romagna again.

But more treachery awaited him – the Pope convinced King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella that he should once more be arrested, a command that Gonzalo, with whom he had become on friendly terms, executed with great reluctance. Cesare remembered to this day the hot fury with which he had reproached the Spanish commander, words he regretted afterwards. Shipped to Spain and imprisoned again, it seemed that all his good fortune had left him. For nearly two years he had languished in confinement in various prisons – yet he had never given up hope. When it seemed that Gonzalo de Cordoba was playing King Ferdinand false, the King almost appointed him to head an army to displace the Great Captain. But that came to nothing. Eventually, with the help of a local lord who he had befriended, Cesare at last escaped from the Castle of La Mota, and after some adventures managed to make his way to the court of his brother-in-law the King of Navarre, at Pamplona. He had nothing to offer except his sword, which King Juan gratefully accepted, and appointed him to his present command. He was leading an army again, and from here he would, he knew, build a new career, a new place in the world, for he was Cesare Borgia, and no mere mercenary captain.

That is, he would build a new career if he could get out of his present trouble. While the waking part of his mind had been sunk in reverie, the rest of it was focused entirely on the race to the potential safety of the ravine that was opening up ahead of him. The thunder of his pursuers' horses was louder now, and glancing to his right he saw that they were closing fast: making calculations, he was sure, though, that he would get to the mouth of the ravine first. He was gambling that the sides of the arroyo wouldn't be too steep, and that, abandoning his horse, he would be able to scramble up and out, to await the rescue force that must inevitably be coming after him. It wasn't an unreasonable bet – the hills here were low and gently sloped.

At last he was among the little stand of trees that marked the entrance to the ravine. His horse, almost exhausted, wanted to slow to a walk, but he dug his spurs in, forcing her onwards and through the trees, the ravine rose on each side, much more steeply than he had expected. Then, as his pursuers burst through the stand of trees behind him, he realised that he had made a terrible mistake. For this particular ravine was walled about with steep, unscaleable cliffs. There was no way out.

He turned the horse to face his enemies. The end, he knew, was now inevitable. He was trapped in this place. It was possible that his own troops might turn up and rescue him, but with that fool Ramirez leading them he was not sanguine. Well, if he was to die, he was going to die in a fashion that would make them talk of him for generations. Standing in his saddle, he drew his sword with a rasp and thrust it into the air.

“Well, you carrion, what are you waiting for? I am Borgia! Kill me if you dare!”

His defiance seemed for a moment to daunt his adversaries, just a dozen of them, though he could see more emerging from the trees. They looked at each other, uncertain: they were afraid of his very name, Cesare thought, laughing. But then they seemed by common consent to decide to attack. He settled back into his saddle and calmly awaited their onslaught.

The sun was approaching its zenith when his Majesty King Juan III of Navarre rode slowly into the same narrow ravine, accompanied by half a dozen of his retinue, soldiers and servants. All about them were the signs of the passage of violence – splashes of blood on the rocks, already dried in the sun to a rusty brown colour, bushes trampled by horses, here and there scraps of clothing torn off by the thorns as their owners pressed on in search of their quarry, brought at last to bay up against the cliff face of the northern wall of the canyon. Dead men lay everywhere: the King counted at seven corpses before he came to the only one he cared about, the eighth. Unlike the others, this body was naked, stripped of every item of clothing and jewellery, bereft of armour and sword, and left lying on its back. King Juan dismounted, and dropped to his knees beside the dead man.

“Oh my Cesare, what have they done to you?”

His voice was soft and filled with emotion, for like so many others before him, he had been charmed by Cesare Borgia, the brother-in-law of whom he had seen little over the years of his greatness, but who had in a short time proven to be a godsend in his own little battle to preserve intact his kingdom. The handsome, bearded face on which he gazed was unmarked – the devils had left that alone, at least – and the bold eyes gazed furiously towards the heavens. Yet despite the violence done to the rest of his body, which was covered in dried blood from literally dozens of wounds, his expression in death seemed almost calm now that the furious energy of his life was finally stilled. Gently, he reached over and closed the staring eyes, and then stood, looking around at the retainers who were standing obsequiously around him.

“Why is he still here? Why has he not been taken back to Viana?” The King’s voice was harsh as he glared at them. “This was a man of courage and honour – he deserves better than to lie here in the sun just as he fell.”

“We did not know what to do, Majesty. What your wishes might be.”

King Juan looked at the speaker: Ramirez, the captain that he had insisted that Borgia promote, over his protests. Well, from what he had heard, poor Cesare had been right: the man was a booby. He sighed.

“Well now you do know my wishes, Capitán Ramirez. Cover his body, and get a party organised to carry him back to the cathedral in Viana. We will inter him there and build a monument by which to remember him. Move!”

The unfortunate Ramirez unslung his own cloak from his shoulders and draped it over the dead body, snapping commands to the nearest soldiers to collect some brush to make a hurdle on which the body could be carried back to the town. The King, looking around again at the carnage that this one man had inflicted before they finally cut him down, remounted his horse and led the way back down the arroyo.

Thus ended the life of Cesare Borgia, Duke of Valentinois and would-be King of the Romagna. He was just thirty-two years old.