

SAN MINIATO

Le Fonti alle Fate (Sources at Fairies¹)

In this novel, written with the help of an old chronicler, a curious legend goes back to medieval history: there is no obligation to read it, and much less to believe it.

When the lower Arno Valley was a squalling and marshy region and, as Martial tells, nourished few slaves wandering during the day in the countryside with the sound of their chains, even more on, toward the town of Empoli, few and miserable shepherd villages languished in the misery of a servitude that tightened the heart.

Christianity came and then the slavery, although it did not disappear, greatly diminished in this region; the faithful could freely gather to hear the Mass and to perform the other offices of piety; several small churches dedicated to the first martyrs and saints arose in all the Arno Valley and, around them, houses where people began to live with greater serenity and with less misery were built.

The first of these villages was San Genesio, situated at the foot of a series of fertile hills between the Arno and the Elsa rivers; it soon became a parish church town that also oversaw another small hamlet later raised over another series of green hills silently overlooking the Arno Valley; this small hamlet was named San Miniato.

Otto I went down from Germany and proceeded to conquer many fiefs; willing to leave in the heart of Tuscany a strong place to witness the power of the Empire before his departure, he gave San Miniato towers and fortresses and superimposed thus an imperial feud to an ecclesiastical possession, reducing San Genesio in an undeserved darkness.

In the castle of San Miniato locals and Longobards lived in forced friendship by plundering and subduing the nearby neighbors until the Florentine guelfs opposed this slow invasion and forced the inhabitants of San Miniato into smaller boundaries; when later Frederick I “Barbarossa” passed, San Miniato recaptured the lost castles, but had to undergo the imperial vicars who settled in order to make justice, in their own way, to the ancient rights.

Thus San Miniato municipality was born; it had an important part in the medieval history because it provoked and fomented many small wars, where lords and peasants, now friends now enemies, solved their quarrels with alabardos and knife shots.

There lived in the Castle of this town, along with many others that history remembers, the family of the Mangiadori and that of the Pallaleons, both of Germanic blood, who could not find peace between them because every day, for the blame of a Mangiadori or for The blame of a Pallaleon, they gave birth to motives of rivalry and discord. When the most powerful Pallaleons reclaimed the rights of justice, the Mangiadori had the worst and had to leave San Miniato to escape as exiles in the nearby municipality of Fucecchio (and Montaione), in the time when the ambitious Castruccio set off toward a singular but transient magnitude.

¹Source at the Fairies is an ancient water source, already existing at the time of the Etruscans, which is on the north-east side of the City of San Miniato. Although not used for public supplying, the source still produces abundant water.

The Castracani certainly had them on his side in the war against the Florentines because, as it is read in the stories, it seems that the Mangiadori were the ones who, though strangers, managed with secret intelligence to get him into Fucecchio. The residents in the Castle of Fucecchio had opposed in vain desperate defense; the burning fires on the fortress did not help them to save the castle in a request for help. Castruccio by then settled as a lord, and with rewards and heavy taxes enlisted men and accumulated supplies to continue the war against Florence.

Meanwhile, he also organized raids in the territory of San Miniato, and bloody struggles emerged, for the Sanminiatesi intended to defend their land.

We were in August of 1320; Castruccio had no wheat because the river Arno, flooding in the winter the fields of fucecchiese lands, had destroyed the seeds; there was nothing else to do but resupply in that of San Miniato; too uncomfortable and distant would have been to make the stocks in the Lucca lands, even though that Guelfa territory had met his demands.

One night, fifty armed men were put up by Castruccio at the orders of a young man from the Mangiadori family, already skilled in the weapons, and sent to raid the surroundings of San Miniato.

The task was welcomed by the young warrior, who could thus revenge the outrage inflicted on him with the exile. Towards midnight he departed with the decision in the heart, rather than plundering some wheat, to do harm and disorder against of the Pallaleons and to kill with his sword anyone who opposed him.

Few and slow waters flowed into Arno and it was easy to pass to the other shore; he divided his own into groups led by the most daring, through the dark and silent countryside and he came down to the castle of San Miniato without encountering any obstacle. But as he stood at the foot of the hill, he heard the bells inside the castle of San Miniato calling for the imminent danger; the noise of armed people was already heard in the valley that descended precipitously on the plane between the two spurs of San Martino and Pieve. He then set off to gather the scattered soldiers and moved against the defenders determined to the massacre.

The fight happened and was tremendous; screams of excitement and lamentations of wounded fill the valley; in the confusion of the moment they struck one another, defenders and offenders. Giancarlo Pallaleoni, descended from San Miniato to the head of his soldiers in the darkness of the night, struck shots wherever he could see people move; Alamanno Mangiadori recognized him by the voice and moved against him decisively. And they hit each other until both of them, exhausted and injured, fell to the ground, wrapped in a deadly hug. And so they remained; meanwhile the battle shifted and not long after the two squads, without their leaders, dispersed.

Castruccio's soldiers had already taken off to the shore of the Arno, when those of Pallaleoni, after having searched in vain the other opponents, returned to the Castle. The two chiefs were missing. Every group believed that one had been captured from the other side, and the sad news was brought to San Miniato and to Fucecchio. The two opponents were lying instead on the ground, bleeding and without force, either to offend or to help; Giancarlo had a thigh crossed by the sword of Alamanno, Alamanno groaned for a serious chest injury. The light of day came; no help came;

Giancarlo more proud of Alamanno had the strength to take the sword out of his thigh and to crawl with a bandage the wound from which no more blood came out; he lifted himself up and tried to lift Alamanno, who abandoned himself exhausted in his arms; Giancarlo dragged him up the hill, but for a short time, that his forces were missing, and he called for help. He was tormented by a terrible thirst caused by so much blood lost. And the water was not far away, he could hear the sound of a small stream and the impossibility of reaching it gave him even greater spasm. If no noticed them, they would have died before evening. Suddenly a noise of people serching came to his ear; then he renewed his calls, and two blond girls, both beautiful as two angels, approached him.

- Oh! Blessed Fairies - he exclaimed in his language - God sends you; help us because we die-. Those were Aloisa and Matelda, two twin daughters of Ghio of the Portigiani who lived in a modest house in the middle of the hill. His uncle Antonio, the father of that Marcovaldo who, for humility and example of St. Francis, remained deacon in all his life, at the death of Ghio entrusted the twin sisters outside the walls to one man of the countryside, and there they grew up in serenity and flourishing health. They helped the two wounded men to get up and to drag to the source; putting their hands as a cup, the girls gave to the men the water that saved them and stayed there until they came to aid.

Giancarlo and Alamanno reconciled, and, returning to their health, took them into marriage; Giancarlo married Aloisa, Alamanno Matelda. And from these two weddings a lot of children were born. The story says that Giancarlo had nine children Giancarlo from Aloisa and eleven Alamanno from Matelda. The families of the Mangiadori and Pallaleoni became thus the most powerful families of the commune. These events on the mouth of the people took legendary proportions; the sources, at which the first facts took place, were then called "The Sources at Fairies" and today they still have that name. In the waters of these sources, the brides who had no children after marriage had come to refresh; it is said that many of these brides, after having drunk that water, had had little children. It is told of a Ciccioni bride who after drinking this water had three children at one birth. And when San Miniato, fallen in decadence, passed to the Florentines, being those even more willing to the beliefs, the power of those waters was even more believed. During the whole year, and especially in the summer season, it was not a day that some couples, who did not yet have the consolation of the offspring, also came from distant districts to quench their thirst with the fresh and crystalline water of the "Sources at the Fairies".

The plague of infertile weddings had found its best medicine in those sources.

Six centuries and more have passed since those times in which San Miniato, the destination of emperors and desired possessed of popes, wrote his story and, perhaps, the most interesting story between those of Tuscan towns. The famous spring still lives today; under two old and ruined arches, covered with mosses and ivy, fresh and light water wires still gush from two sources with a faint but argentinean voice; all around, during summer robust acacia trees and prosperous cypresses provide a desired shade that retreats and makes you happy.

From this shade the valley of the Arno, that stretches at your feet as a unique city, can be enjoyed; where previously there was silence and warfare, now the artisan's work plays and long chimneys smoke, revealing life.

At "Sources at Fairies", in the mid-day hours you will still find, hidden among the rising birches, couple of lovers saying so many things. But moms do not want these promising walks; the waters may have increased their taumaturgical power, perhaps they have lost every scruple, because with these walks sometimes children could be born without weddings.