

Nicholas of Cusa

Biographical novel

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Prologue

"There will be seen on earth an animal species that will unrelentingly fight itself with great losses. It will assign no limits to its malice. There will then arrive a time when it will no longer kill by the thousands, but by the thousands of thousands. It will eliminate the plague and cholera so as to make itself master of its own destruction. It will wrest from Nature her rights over death so as to have more flesh to mangle in its wars, its divisions, and its obsessions. It will ruin its own soul in infernal machines.

O earth! how slow you are in opening to engulf in the deep crevices of your abysses this too-cruel monstrosity! You have tied it with bonds that escape its understanding. You have written your instructions in a language that it cannot understand. You have made innumerable hopes hover over its head. Are you crazy, O earth! to engrave in its heart inaccessible aspirations? Here it is mad with rage. It gnaws its limbs like a fox caught in a trap. It simply cannot understand itself any longer and here it is twirling around in its own chaos as if it were drunk from its own death."

This prophecy of Leonardo da Vinci, written fifteen centuries after the birth of Christ, finally brought my decision to a head. I had to write what I had seen and heard with an ink capable of passing through deluges, earthquakes and unheard-of explosions.

I had in fact described my adventure to several persons at the castle of Milan where Leonardo da Vinci had settled down for a while, but it seemed to me appalling to write it. Must we feed this monster, give it powder for its flames and iron for its cannons? For if you give this beast a single spark of light, it recovers in rage, builds back its flesh, swells like a tumor and makes the whole earth stink. Shouldn't we let it starve to death by depriving it of any hope! Never again repeat the error of Moses, Jesus and Mohammed who came to sow words of hope and in so doing threw it back into its conflagrations, its exterminations and its annihilations.

Fortunately, I have reached the age where the hand no longer has the energy of the pen; I am going to die, carrying with me the marks that the singular philosopher has made in me. It was at the moment when I was going to give up that I was witness to the following event.

That morning, the rain was falling like the prelude to a deluge. With black ink and a very fine pen, master Leonardo was doing some studies on the movement of water, waterspouts, the loops that form in torrents, the spirals seen in storm clouds. He advanced the pen, made dots, made the pen glide, removed it, stood back, repeated the action, caressed the sketch, stained it, slashed it, threw it on the ground and started over again. It was a frenzied fencing match and by evening the floor was strewn with rough drafts and blots on papers abused and sometimes torn.

When exhaustion got the better of him, he huddled on the ground amidst his drawings. I thought he was going to cry, but he took up his lyre and made it resonate with a suffering that tore my heart. And then suddenly he arose like a flame, spread out a small square of parchment on his easel and executed a Vision of the Deluge that was most astonishing. This is what freed me.

One might have said it was a night boiling with inexhaustible whirlwinds sweeping all the earth away in its anger. But such was the magic of the drawing: no one could know if it was about a death or a beginning. The dark mass could just as well represent the mucous membranes of a uterus in the act of making its little one than the final cataclysm of the beast. There was no circle, but everything was circular, there was no angle, but everything was angular, nothing was closed in such a way that it was never possible to distinguish the end from the beginning. It was a chaos full of rage, it was the matrix of a colossal intelligence, no one could determine it in advance.

So then, who could say if the beast was desirable or adorable? Perhaps it was preparing its inner parts for the coming of a marvelous being. Its anger might be divine! Was it necessary, perhaps, that the night become incommensurable for some globules of light finally to happen?

Because the brilliance of the stars is minuscule in comparison with the immensity of the night, because the flowers are scattered here and there on the thin film of an earth of terrifying abysses, because the acts of love are drowned in the horrors of war, it seems as if chaos is winning. But perhaps a trickle of light is worth as much as a torrent of darkness!

Leonardo's composition made me waver. As I was unable to tell if the ark would survive the deluge, his drawing left me wobbling between terror and the sublime. And perhaps it was in that vacillation that humanity would come into being! Hope is a very small doubt in the obviousness of our woes, but a drop of sperm in a woman's womb is just as small.

Leonardo had just made me come to a decision; I too was going to sow my seed, cast my testimony into the chaos of history. The earth has its reasons not to engulf that monster in the abyss, for one never knows if it might not arrive at humanity. I too do not condemn it.

Like Jesus, the Cardinal wanted peace, and he precipitated war, but the war he produced, what will it produce? Uncertainty compels me to relate my adventure.

I said to myself that if one casts a mixture of seeds into the earth, the result depends on the soil. If it is a soil for thistles, it will grow thistles and if it is a soil for lily-of-the-valley, it will grow lily-of-the-valley. Now, this beast, it is perfectly obvious, tramples and crushes the soil that feeds it so much that it only allows thistles to grow. What, then, is the good in sowing! But I forgot that in fact the soil is formed of seed that has grown, that has died and has decomposed. The thistles are preparing, perhaps, a soil capable of welcoming the lily-of-the-valley.

I was witness to a saint who had a vision, which distinguished him from other saints who had apparitions. But who can distinguish the saint in the midst of madmen? Neither one brings peace, certainty or knowledge. On the contrary, both of them precipitate consciousness in the house of shadows.

The Church Victorious

I hate being tossed about in a common carriage. The Cardinal's is so heavy that four horses have to be harnessed to it. He prefers being transported like an ordinary burgher rather than in the manner of a prince of the Church! And to top it all off, he had his common origins engraved on the doors of his uncouth vehicle: two ridiculous red crayfish. His father was just an ordinary boatman. And his son is a Cardinal today! What's the world coming to? As for me, of noble lineage, my father had to take leave of his senses! And because of that accident here I am on the highways of Germany and Austria headed toward the heart of Italy, bumping along without any family title, but with a rather unusual Cardinal. This was in 1450 and the Church was calling us to its grand jubilee.

In this carriage there was neither silk nor cushions, but bookshelves, a desk, and chests overflowing with papers. He dictated to me letters, sermons and treatises. It was not easy to write between Cologne and Rome on muddy highways with quills that nick! Luckily we were finally approaching the cradle of the Empire. Quality wine, a comfortable bed, the papal court, a few cheerful serving-women... Beauty, marble, civilization!

How great was my disappointment on our approach to the famous hills! Through the window, the Cardinal pointed out to me San Lorenzo, Giovanni Latrano and the circular colonnades of San Pietro, but all around, sheep and goats were grazing, gruff and dirty peasants were approaching... There where emperors and senators had erected villas, temples and statues, animals and shepherds trampled manure. Heavens! How I detested the dung and the sheep.

Here at Rome the Lamb had dethroned the mother Wolf. With picks and sledgehammers, workers were demolishing the city of Augustus, crushing the bad marble to make lime, tearing out the better to add to the churches. The aqueducts were in pieces and the citizens were going to get water at the very place where they urinated, the Tiber. Our grotesque carriage splashed mud on the dilapidated buildings; beggars, blind, and lame were shielding their faces from the flying rubble. Rome was no longer a city, but a mudhole.

Shouldn't Christ succeed where Jupiter had failed! "If the circuses are in ruins," Petrarch said, "a thousand martyrs' bones are underneath them." They are extracted like gold, nested in precious reliquaries, exposed to public view. People meditate on death and obtain a remission from Purgatory for 48,000 years. It's a good business and a lucrative trade! Change of perspective, certainly! Reversal of roles, without a doubt! Same game however: bones against bones, flesh against flesh, domination against submission. Both of us knew it, the Cardinal and I, when at last we arrived at Rome.

And the question arose more than ever: why is nothing reasonable in this world?

The life of man is generously selfish, his reason, passionately logical, his God, wildly inordinate, and his action, completely contrary to happiness. It is said that it is sin that has upset everything, but since that day, everything is political: the management of furies with an eye to the least evil. If such is the case, sin is a much greater mystery than the Trinity...

Aside from his dictations, the Cardinal had said almost nothing during the entire journey... No sooner had he been nominated to the cardinalship of Saint Peter-in-Chains than he called me to be his secretary, his principal adviser, I, a reader of Cicero, of Lactantius and Virgil who only puts his nose in the Holy Scripture when commanded to and who prefers the perfumes of women to the incense of churches. I told him of my reservations. He brushed aside my objections: "If I wanted to hear my echo, I would hire a mountain. I want a man capable of telling me what I don't like to hear. I want someone other than myself. Besides, I'm a little tired of myself!" he concluded with so tactful a smile that he lightened up my expression. So I answered "yes", I who from birth have said nothing but "maybe".

We didn't know each other and I was never able to find out the information that led him to choose me. I had met him at Cusa where he said his final goodbye to his aged father after having secretly received his last wishes. The man gave up the ghost in his son's arms. At the end of his brief stay, as he was embracing his sister Claire, I saw his eyes filled with tears. Then he entered a state of meditation from which, my word, he did not come out before Rome. We left with a customary escort of twelve knights and we stayed in austere monasteries rather than in bishops' luxurious residences.

The crowds arrived from everywhere. The people yelled and sang; it was euphoria. Our knights wore themselves out blowing their trumpets in vain. Our heavy carriage no longer made any headway and the horses were beginning to get worked up. The Cardinal began to smile like a child. One might have said that he was himself caught up in the naive enthusiasm sweeping the populace.

One had to be in Rome to realize to what point the great jubilee, which was so worthy of its name, had nothing to do with reason. People were coming to the canonization of Bernadine of Siena, that fool of God, and to the coronation of Frederick III, a fool in his own right and the Cardinal seemed, in his turn, to be taking leave of reason. I didn't yet realize that it was his own festival, too, he who had so intimately participated in the resolution of two schisms, in the peace, in what the jubilee was celebrating.

- My dear Henry, he cheerfully demanded, I want to do the rest of the road on foot.

I was taken aback for a moment.

- But your excellence, I answered, you wouldn't think of it!

- Come, let's take off our coats and hats, our rings and our brooches and go through the crowd like young clerics.

He hadn't finished his sentence when everything distinctive he wore was lying on the bench. His tonsure alone indicated his ecclesiastical status. For my part, I took longer because my finery was less modest. I had trouble removing a silver collar which had become caught in my long hair. He spoke to the head of the escort and we threw ourselves into the crowd without any other accoutrements than our linen robes. And I, untensured, could pass for an ordinary notary!

Thus bare of all distinctions, we were able to clear a path and enter the city at last. The chants, the prayers, the cries, the blowing of buccinas which were rebounding now against the walls and towers took on a resonance that would drive one mad. The men, most of them drunk, danced until they fell on the ground, the women threw flowers and even, at times, some of their clothing in front of the bishops in fancy carriages or princes bearing weapons, the children gave apples or cakes to the horses, the shopkeepers threw pieces of fabric and remnants of ribbon into the crowd.

The Cardinal blithely opened the way. I slipped behind him, fearing every moment that a beggar might touch me.

Yes! The papacy had finally returned to Rome for good and had taken back almost all its powers. But after what an adventure! The pope had left Avignon. His plated galley had paraded on the Tiber. But he had had to break the fervor of Florence by throwing against Tuscany the most bellicose of his cardinals with a pack of Breton and English mercenaries. They put the whole country to fire and the sword. Cities against cities, castes against castes, in Italy they had the habit of skinning the most recalcitrant, of burying them alive, of cooking them over a slow fire. Dante said of Italy that it was "the hostelry of pain". It was rather more the inn of vice. And now it was the pope himself who was shaking up the pot.

Had the pope done the right thing to return to Rome? Since his death, the Romans had been besieging the conclave demanding a pope out of their nobility. They chose a monk from Apulia. The old ascetic took his nomination very seriously. He declared war on simony, luxury, and lust, cursing all the cardinals. This provoked a great schism. Fortunately popes die, and the schism was resolved. Nevertheless, the papacy was not done with Rome.

Scarcely a few years ago, the Colona family, believing that it should inherit the papacy, invaded the Papal States. The Pope Eugene IV had to disguise himself as a Benedictine and leave the city by the Tiber. He reached Florence. And Florence was happy to shelter this lucrative papacy. As a result the Romans, realizing that Florence was profiting from this, demanded the pope's return. So it goes in Italy!

Suddenly I got, square in the face, a big leather ball stuffed with tow! The Cardinal and I were right in the middle of a match of mob football. Some dark and greasy peasants were running toward us. They would have jumped on me if I hadn't

immediately thrown the ball toward one of them. With a great laugh, they tackled him ten to one. A mischievous woman covered in a wolfskin ran by, crying: "To the stake with John Hus's disciples, let's burn the Hussites." These howls made my blood run cold. Eugene, the pope, had sworn to annihilate all of John Hus's disciples to the point of eradicating their memory from the face of the earth. My father detested that pope. One fine morning, he arose from the table, spat on the ground and left for Bohemia to fight on the side of the Hussites. My mother followed him. God, how much madness there is in this world!

Yes, the papacy had returned to Rome. So we celebrate. But we celebrate above all the Church's return to absolute monarchy. There was an extraordinary attempt to place the council above the pope: the collectivity above the king of Catholics. The Cardinal did all he could to legally justify this reversal. But the undertaking failed. The pope is the emperor of the universal empire of Christ.

Ghiberti chiseled for Eugene a tiara of fifteen pounds of gold, emeralds, sapphires and rubies. With the precious metals and rare stones of his other vestments, henceforth it took two strong men to lift the pope from his throne. So let us be jubilant in this jubilee!

I received a strong elbow-jab between the ribs, which enraged me. The Cardinal turned toward me. I reassured him. A woman burst out laughing. In front of me, acrobats accompanied by flutes hoisted themselves one on top of the other, grimacing as they did so. They raised themselves up in this way until those at the summit crashed down on the crowd. An infant vomited on its wet nurse's dress, a vulgar man thrust his hand into a girl's blouse, a boy was preparing to throw a piece of manure... The Church was jubilant!

The Church, it is true, had been able to demonstrate the presence of the Spirit by a miracle no one hoped for any more. The patriarchs of the East had officially entered the bosom of the great Church, Roman of course. On this front even more than on the others, the Cardinal played a decisive role. But without the Turks encircling Constantinople, without the promise of help from the West, without the 19,000 florins and the gifts, I am not certain that the mission of the Cardinal, my master, would have been a success. But never mind, let's celebrate the lovely festival we have here!

I was, perhaps, going to yield to the festival when the Cardinal and I found ourselves so close to a stake that our robes got caught on the faggots. Another stake for the heretics. Memories of moans filled my mind. I could not endure these memories...

I could no longer manage to open my eyes. The Cardinal had to raise me to my feet and guide me. I left the scene, drawn by the hand like a child.

The Cardinal very well knew my weakness, my flaw, that break in the fabric of my childhood that made me pass from a character on top of things to a prostrated child. We entered a halo of relative silence.

He dropped this question:

- Where is the Church?

I opened my eyes. I think he would have wanted to answer, to find an explanation, reassure me, but his mouth stayed mute. As for me, it was a long time ago that I stopped expecting any answers. After a long pause, he answered his own question:

- The true Church is here, in our indignation.

I knew nothing so well as this indignation. But on that day, the jubilee had driven me so far down that it had opened another thing. I awoke to a horrible fact: I was a body of flesh, a soft thing that one could, without very much effort, burn, slice, skin. It was a horrifying sensation. To be a heap of trembling nerves barely covered by a frail inflammable film, to find oneself each morning tied up in this flesh and walking among madmen, torch in hand...

He led me further off, out of the city, on the left bank of the Tiber. The spot was particularly peaceful since all the people had been swallowed up in Rome's convulsing guts. For a moment, I believed that there was only us in the universe and that it was possible to die in peace comforting each other.

We sat down on the grass, spirits in search of peace. Reason doesn't have that much to say when it brutally encounters barbarous humanity. Both of us felt, I believe, to what point human barbarity constitutes the greatest mystery of the cosmos. For my part, I had the impression that the real can be reduced to two things: the violence of life's savage forces and the consternation of human consciousness. Between the two, the imagination supplies the illusions necessary for life. That was civilization, nothing more.

I had confided to the Cardinal that the Catholic faith had never penetrated my mind and that no reason could justify the muteness of Heaven in the face of the horror of the earth. He simply objected: "I like the beginning of perceptiveness better than the superstitions too many people are attached to. True faith grows in the soil of lucidity."

The beauty of the world

Suddenly we heard a girl's laugh. A bird flew away, the horizon widened and we were witnesses of one of the most beautiful scenes it has ever been given me to see. On a half-submerged stone covered with moss and encircled with foam, a very beautiful, barely clothed girl was seated in dazzling light, laughing at I don't know what. It was like a vision.

She appeared so natural that it was impossible that she had seen us. Leaning toward the waters, she began to make circles in them with the stem of a reed. She seemed to belong to a different nature and, in that nature, she was whole. So whole that there was no place in her, it seemed, for timidity, sadness or fear. A pure joy.

The Cardinal looked at the scene as if it were an apparition. Large mysterious tears ran down his cheeks. The girl opened his heart to memories that I was going to know much later.

The adolescent girl was not alone, however. A person I took at first to be a young man was standing on a small wooden wharf next to her and was painting her. We didn't want to disturb anything in the marvelous globule of peace and remained motionless and silent.

The painting was quite far advanced. The effect of perspective and radiance gave the canvas so realistic an appearance that the girl of flesh seemed no more than the shadow of the painted girl. The light on the canvas appeared to have found its true function: to make beautiful. This is how, in the painting, the face and the entire body of the adolescent was reflected in the river as in the purest mirror, while in reality, the cloudy water smudged the child's image.

I could have been touched, but the scene suddenly appeared to me improbable. How was it possible for the painter to have enough purity not to disturb the girl's naturalness in any way? By what miracle could that man remain completely in his art when she was before him, nearly naked, exposed, and innocent? To be sure, woman, it's almost the custom to say it in Florence, is that part of humanity which lends itself best to light. Laurent de Valla maintains this in his *De Voluptate*, but man, for his part, has the property of soiling everything.

It was at this moment that the painter turned around and the girl dived into the river. I wanted to flee, but the Cardinal, wiping his inexplicable tears, took me by the hand and resolutely walked to meet the painter. The girl emerged from the water and put her clothes back on. She looked at me with her two beautiful dark eyes, so mischievous and amused that she seemed on the point of bursting out in laughter. The painter motioned to the maiden that the modeling session was over. She went away running, unable to hold back her giggles.

The painter delicately pulled back her hood. It was a woman in her thirties, and her eyes pierced us like darts.

- Pardon us for disturbing such a work, the Cardinal began. I haven't seen anything so beautiful since my youth. What light, what perspective!

The woman lost nothing of her aplomb. Her meticulously braided hair crowned her face and her long energetic neck gave her even more nobility.

- It is not a question, the Cardinal continued, of a simple play of lines toward a vanishing point; one might say that the width, the height and the depth emerge from the light itself.

- You're right, she replied, perspective is not just geometry, light doesn't just illuminate, it gives matter form...

I had never heard a woman speak in that way. I was captivated by the intensity of her gaze...

- And you, dear Henry, what do you say about it? the Cardinal asked me suddenly. I introduce you to my noble friend Henry of Pomert, he continued, and I am Nicholas Krebs, like him a servant of one of the prelates gathered together for the jubilee.

And he warmly put his hand on my shoulder.

My mind was still astounded and rather than look at the painting, I stared at the woman's eyes.

- How is such beauty possible? I stammered.

- Yes, that's just it, continued the Cardinal, who never missed an opportunity to jump right into the middle of philosophy. How is it possible? If at its origin the world was only a chaos of brute forces, how could the beauty come about? Henry and I were talking about it earlier...

That was not my question. I knew Plato and I knew very well that, logically, beauty presupposes intelligence. Up to a certain point, the mixing of shadows adds to the radiance. On the canvas, the stone's hardness accentuates the delicacy of the girl, and the water's dark depth, her skin's soft clarity. The Greeks had demonstrated better than anyone that beauty of necessity is everywhere at work. But nothing in reality supports this. That is not a question, it is a fact and a scandal.

- You are not an ordinary cleric, sir? the noble lady inquired, clearly seeing that the man before her had nothing of the common about him.

- No! the Cardinal replied, laughing, I am a not very clear cleric...

- Go on, the lady said to him, amused at his play on words. Who are you?

- As a child, I met a wood carver. He was carving a spoon. He made me understand what form is according to Aristotle. But you, Madame, your painting is not static like a spoon, it is living...

That was his way. Never having an opportunity to teach, he made use of the smallest events in order to philosophize. However, he did not get the reaction he expected. The woman was not at all a maiden in need of a tutor.

- Nothing is a static form, the lady answered, nothing in nature is completely straight, nor oblique, nor circular, nor triangular. It is not nature that is wrong to not follow the forms of reason, it is reason that is wrong to want to establish everything, as if Heaven were only a warehouse of sizes, models and laws. What reason holds to be perfect, a triangle, a circle, a line, a law, is much less perfect than nature, which vacillates, vibrates, splutters. Plato, like Aristotle, forgot that light is first of all alive and that it acts like a woman who is bearing a child.

- Madame, you surprise me, the Cardinal replied.

Two small wrinkles twitched at the corner of the painter's eye. The Cardinal stared at her. The two were absorbed one by the other. One might have said it was a reunion... It suddenly became clear to me that the lady had read the Cardinal's treatise *Learned Ignorance*.

I could no longer endure being left behind and set this trap:

- Good, so explain it to me from the beginning because I don't understand anything of what you are saying. You seem to be speaking of the learned ignorance I have read about in a treatise written, if my memory serves me, by a certain jurist born at Cusa who is now a cardinal...

At that the Cardinal did not let me finish...

- So, my dear friend, since you have read this treatise, explain its philosophy to us.

He knew very well that I had too much pride to duck the question, and I had to jump into my own trap. So I undertook to summarize the thesis of the Cardinal in front of me for a lady who doubtless knew it better than I:

- Life is waves and musics, this cardinal asserts, it is a work of art. Now every creator knows that he can never totally know his work, that he can never totally circumscribe his work by reason. In brief, intelligence is always more creative than knowing. This is learned ignorance.

- I like that idea, the lady said. My painting surpasses me, and this is my greatest pleasure... But, tell me, both of you, if I understand correctly, you assert in substance that an idea can never grasp the truth of a work. Thus, to attempt to establish the faith in doctrine is to mislead the mind. So, explain to me what you are doing here in Rome serving prelates who are endlessly elaborating dogmas that they afterwards impose by the sword and the stake.

- Yes, that's right, explain it to us, Mr. Krebs, I insisted, turning toward the Cardinal.

The churchman rested his head between his hands for a moment. When he straightened up, a kind of dark sadness changed the climate of the discussion.

- We do not serve prelates, we harass them like horseflies. But you, Madame, it seems that you have been able to get out of this ecclesiastical grave. Henry, he said, looking me straight in the eyes, you believe in brute original forces without intelligence. So where did beauty come from?

- Mr. Krebs, I replied, cut to the quick, beauty is no more than lace twirling over an inferno. The Church's soldiers rape girls and burn children. I don't know how beauty can gain admittance into such barbarity, but I have noted its precariousness every day of my life. For one drop of life, a universe of darkness.

A very long silence set in. All of my body trembled, because each of the words I had just pronounced carried horrible memories: my father flayed in a public square, my mother beheaded and my youngest sister raped and her throat slit before my eyes. On my knees in her blood, my prayer had no response but other screams. And today, at this hour, the silence was going to demonstrate far better than I that the spirit is mute before the grimacing face of the world.

But this didn't take into account the Cardinal, who continued in a voice hoarse with emotion.

- I did everything to avoid these horrible massacres. I proposed a compromise. Too late, the Iglau pact and the *Compactata* arrived too late... I was disheartened by the monstrosity of my colleagues. But can we simply give way to despair?

The sun was going down and our shadows were lengthening now as far as the river. The artist, named Afra, from the Velseck family of Tyrol but who was called Bella in Italy, invited us for the evening meal. The Cardinal, to my surprise, accepted the invitation. The lady mounted her powerful horse and went off in the direction of her villa. A carriage would come to pick us up.

I learned from a servant that the widow had received as a dowry from her late husband a large property that she managed with a firm hand. She had, for children, only one girl whose name was Catherine, the same one who had just posed for her with such ingenuousness. She intended for her to have a brilliant future, thanks to an impressive dowry that the family set aside for her. But the

child rejected all the suitors, finding them too uncouth, too old, or too fat. A monk from the community of Saint Dominic saw to her education.

Under a masculine pseudonym of course, the lady had composed, "herself and in Latin", the lackey insisted, a treatise on light. Most of the time, her paintings were sent to Flanders, to Christus of the school of Van Eyck, where they were sold at a good price.

The Cardinal had gotten his good mood back:

- How free I feel without my cardinal's get-up and my prelate's duties, he confided. That lady hasn't finished surprising us. One day, the morals will allow such women to inundate the Church. Then perhaps her work will overcome the scandal! That hope opens up my appetite.

- Don't you fear for your celibacy?

He smiled for a moment and then tossed out this sentence, which I would understand much later:

- My heart is already captured...

Then, opening his eyes wide, he turned his face away and rushed off toward a monk, a Carthusian by his habit, who no doubt was going to the jubilee.

- Father Denys, he cried, Wait!

There was a remarkable coincidence here that was going to throw a little more depth still on our strange encounter. The Carthusian, famous for his mystical writings, was taking advantage of the jubilee to meet the prior general and prepare the reform. Nicholas knew him since his youth at Deventer, at the well-known college run by Gerard de Groot's successors. But since his friend entered the Charterhouse of Ruremonde, life rarely gave them any opportunities to meet. They made do with exchanging letters and manuscripts.

The man was affable and welcoming: in no way like the austere cenobites who made Laurent de Valla say that chastity is a crime against nature which spoils man to the point of making him more lecherous than a billy-goat and drier than a stump.

Just then our carriage arrived and the Cardinal, who wanted neither to break off his conversation with the Carthusian nor to refuse the lady's invitation, took it upon himself to invite the monk. He asked him, in a whisper, to say nothing about his identity as Cardinal. The monk didn't seem at all surprised.

The lady's villa was, to be sure, not as large as a castle, but the grounds were well maintained, the architecture pleasing and the interior design, exceptional. I shook, without any success, the Carthusian's hand so that he would abandon for a

moment the prohibition against looking that requires monks never to raise their eyes to a woman or her representation. The signs of God's goodness are so rare that it has always seemed to me stupid to shun them. As for me, even though my status as untoured cleric required me to keep my liaisons secret, I was happy not to have made any vow. I savored my most beautiful memories and didn't hesitate to plan other, even juicier adventures. I knew of no greater consolation, even though illusory, than that of discreetly loving a beautiful lady.

The lady appeared a little somber to me. She had us served some good wines, but the meal was late. The sun grew dark, and two torches were lit. At last she waved, and we could eat.

The Cardinal was in the midst of a conversation with his friend and the lady hardly ate at all. I was dreaming without knowing very well why.

- Yes, to be sure, learned ignorance does prevent us from proving by logic alone that good is fundamental and that it will win out after all is said and done, the Cardinal said, but inner experience allows us to hope it.

- I have read in the *Trismegistus*, the lady replied, that all things, even small things reveal the totality of the universe. That is why a simple flower can teach us the entire universe.

- This is, I believe, what makes our ignorance learned, the Cardinal hastened to answer. There is a resonance between the inner universe and the outer universe, between the depths of the soul and the depths of the world.

- So we are lost then, I brutally retorted, for even today I saw a stake. If all things are a microcosm of the universe, God is a monster.

The monk turned toward me with a shocked look. The Cardinal let him understand that he had urged me to always express myself openly when we were in private.

- I believe, the monk interjected, that it is not possible to end up on this road without first closely examining your own soul. You are shocked by evil, so the good dwells in you.

Suddenly, I was thinking more about the lady than the arguments. So I pulled from my memory an erudite remark that, I hoped, would delight the lady...

- In Venice I read, in a Persian manuscript attributed to Shabistari this magnificent Sufi poem: "What is the nature of the divine eyes and the ineffable lips? Let us think about it! His eyes wound and his mouth intoxicates. If he raises his eyebrows the world collapses and despairs. He sees us tortured between the depth of ourselves which desires and the world which refuses to accept, that is why his mouth trembles with compassion. To keep us living, he makes us dance between the black curls of his hair. At times we despair, at times we hope, at times the fire

rages, at times the river eases. Love is thus: cruel, it delves, benevolent, it fills. The alternation intoxicates us. Ignorance is the beginning, drunkenness, the end." Isn't that, my dear Father Denys, what in substance you are trying to say?

- Henry, the Cardinal exclaimed, what a wonderful thing you found in Venice, at cardinal Bessarion's residence, no doubt. This poem reminds me of one of Meister Eckhart's: "The curl of God's hair is deep and terrible. It is a bottomless spire which puts reason to rout. A bottomless depth reigns there."

Just then, the captain of the family guards entered precipitously, gasping, went up to the lady and, placing one knee on the ground, announced:

- Madame, your daughter Catherine has been abducted. Some men saw her with a gag in her mouth in a coach drawn by four horses and followed by a guard of ten knights. We pursued them, but they escaped us...

- The baron's carriage? the lady asked, with a stricken look.

- Yes, Madame.

It had to do with the baron Leonard of Velseck, chancellor of the duke Sigismund of Tyrol. His name indicated that he was from her own family, but the lady, who trembled to pronounce it, said no more about it. She simply let it be known that the rascal was, without any scruples, chasing after dowries all over Italy.

- Henry, the Cardinal asked me, I want you to accompany the negotiator that the family will name for this business. As soon as I am in possession of my diocese of Brixen, I will take responsibility for getting the duke to correct his chancellor. Madame, I swear it on my honor, we will not abandon you.

The lady was obviously surprised.

- Noble lady, Father Denys said, this man is the Cardinal of Saint Peter-in-Chains. Tomorrow he will receive the charge of the diocese of Brixen in the Tyrol. Sigismund is dependent on him, your daughter will be saved.

The lady looked at him a moment but could not answer. She knew the baron and could scarcely rely on a cardinal without a habit. She retired and we were all distressed.

She was there in the chapel, collapsed on a prie-Dieu. In front of her, her husband's tomb, set into the rock. A heavy scarlet candle flickered on the monument. The noble lady was trying to hold back her sobs. Instinctively, we kneeled in the darkness surrounding the crypt. Who can know what suffering produces in a heart when it embraces it like that? Is it possible for a single moment to openly confront without dying the fate of the human heart in the chaos of the world?

Bella was so absorbed in her prayer that one might have said that she was no longer there. None of us dared to approach her. The Cardinal remained behind. He was so accustomed to night prayer that one might have said he was a very straight statue. Father Denys also stood motionless in the darkness.

I would have so much liked to enter their state. But I was drowning in my memories and my revolt. The pain in my knees had become unbearable and I had to sit down, even as she was suffering in front of me. I was ashamed! At the bottom of my heart despicable fantasies were simmering. I was saving the girl, I was killing the baron, I was returning triumphant and the lady was taking me into her bed. It seemed to me that no corner of my heart had the slightest purity. My soul resembled the original chaos: fury, violence, obscenity.

The state of the world

The Cardinal and I left for the palace of the Holy Apostles where he was to receive new responsibilities and attend the coronation of the Emperor. He was a doctor of canon law, canon of Our Lady of Ober-Wesel, dean of Saint Florin at Coblenz, archdeacon of Brabant, subdeacon of the pope, Cardinal and he was coming to Rome to assume an even heavier responsibility. They had given him the means to accomplish it. Each of these responsibilities was lucrative, both in florins and in properties. I discovered later, at Salzburg, certificates that gave him rights over most of the mines of Austria.

This man was one of the richest princes of the Church. But he spent all this with the missions entrusted him in mind. Nonetheless, his personal budget scarcely exceeded that of a humble pastor. And we were going on foot to meet our escort that was going on horseback to the pontifical palace.

Parentucelli, pope under the name of Nicholas V, was none other than the former secretary of the bishop of Bologna, the most erudite secretary and the keenest of intellect that it had ever been given me to meet. And he had proved it: with the Cardinal and Piccolomini he had avoided a schism. They were called the Three Hercules of the Church.

Piccolomini, from the great family of Siena, absent on that day, was passionate about art and literature. Along with the Cardinal, he was one of the strongest advocates of theories giving the council priority over the pope, but like him, he had been obligated to abandon this. However, he caused somewhat of a scandal, was called an Epicurean, and had composed erotic poems, free-speaking comedies, and even a novel about love.

The Cardinal was not above reproach either. It was said that it was out of self-interest that he had finally argued in favor of the pope and against the council. To believe this was to know neither the man nor his ideas. For the Cardinal, sovereignty is measured by three conditions: first, the authority of the head depends on the consent of the people; second, the degree of sovereignty of the prince is judged by its proximity to the supreme principles which are justice, harmony and unity; thirdly, every sovereign must fill a function ordained by and for the public benefit, for which peace is the first condition. The Cardinal had not at all abandoned the council, he had quite simply demonstrated that the council was no more than a college of private interests, which removed from it all authority.

The three Hercules found themselves today at the head of the Church with the intention of putting back into it some order, intelligence and benevolence. However, the West, united in principle, was tearing itself apart on the battlefields. The Guelphs were undermining the authority of the Emperor, and the

Ghibellines, that of the pope. Power was no more than a matter of rivalry, clans, and vengeance.

The Cardinal didn't take long to learn that the Velseck family was itself split in two in the most despicable way. The clan of the baron Leonard of Velseck, a Ghibelline, had had Bella's husband, a Guelph, assassinated. His widow had taken refuge in Italy thanks to the business relations of his house with prelates of the castle of San Angelo in the Vatican city. She knew how to maneuver. She succeeded in liquidating most of her possessions in exchange for rights to trade with the Italian bishops. But on that day, Catherine served as hostage and everything could turn upside-down.

The lady's commerce across the Austrian passes was substantial enough to attract envy. The interminable wars between French and English brought, particularly in France, such a flood of bandits, soldiers and mercenaries that trade became impossible there. The lady's trade profited from this. Austria, in the hands of the Habsburgs, wanted more than its share: didn't its motto assert, without beating around the bush, that "it was Austria's responsibility to govern the world"? Consequently the Cardinal's mission, as bishop of the Tyrol would not be easy, any more than negotiating with the baron of Velseck, friend of duke Sigismund, prince of Tyrol and nephew of the Emperor Frederick. To be sure, Frederick had finally been won over to the pope's side and he was going to be crowned on this day by Nicholas V, but Sigismund was seeking to free himself from his uncle and increase Tyrol's autonomy vis-a-vis the emperor and the pope.

The opposition of the princes would be that much greater because of their grouping together into nations so as to better combat the emperor and the pope. Since John Hus, the reformer of Prague, no one respected the nobility any longer. My father went as far as saying that every people had the right to independence in regard to the emperor and in regard to the pope. But Joan of Arc, that strange French virgin burned alive less than twenty years ago, went even further; she proclaimed that a nation had its own soul and that it was part of a Christian's salvation to defend it (even against other Christians). Nations were called to become individuals. And so the kings of the nations took pleasure in throwing Guelphs against Ghibellines so that over their heads, pope and emperor would devour each other rather than govern them.

The idea of a national Church, where the nominations and elections would be conducted by the princes, was gaining ground. By the Golden Bull, the emperor grouped his Electors by nation. France and Germany had their royal rights and the princes could collect revenues and enjoy the profits from vacant bishops' seats. The council voted systematically by nation and the conclave almost always did so. In fact, the nations wanted to control all the institutions. And they went further: Pierre Dubois, in his *Treatise on general politics*, proposed that the Nations (the capitalization is his) assume their autonomy and join in a great Society of Nations sharing the spiritual Christian brotherhood and strengthening their unity by crusades in the Holy Land.

The crusade was moreover surely necessary. The Ottoman Turks had crossed the Bosphorus and cut off Constantinople from the granaries of Thrace. They had constructed fortifications around the Golden Horn. Constantinople was so fragile that it had just now submitted to Rome. The West, however, still did nothing. The former Byzantium felt betrayed and was preparing to reject the compromise signed at Rome, hence the importance of sending the legate Isidore to save the Union.

Yes! The Cardinal's task was not going to be easy. There were, to be sure, three great humanists at the head of the Church, but the unity they had fashioned with so much difficulty was fragmenting like a pot in a too-hot oven.

If the princes were tearing Jesus's tunic from the top, it was from the bottom that the threats were coming. In the cities, the shopkeepers and artisans were increasingly joining with the peasantry with an eye to overthrowing the power of the nobles. The peasant revolts came close behind the plague, taking advantage of the void it created. Wat Tyler in England set about exterminating the nobles, the bishops and even the burghers, and opening up the prisons while promoting a government of the rabble for the rabble!

Nicholas V received his friend the Cardinal in his private apartments. He was not wearing his tiara, nor any ornament. The Cardinal walked up to him, holding tightly his heavy iron cross.

- My friend, Parentuccelli began, here we are at the top. Now we must free our Church from its madness. Don't you share my feeling?

- Your holiness, the Cardinal replied, I dared to make a sermon about it many years ago now and they are still criticizing me for it.

- It is appropriate, then, the pope continued, that we entrust you with purging the Church of its ignorance and its barbarism. Consequently, we are naming you legate in all of Germany and Bohemia, with all powers to introduce reform. We are giving you the diocese of Brixen in the heart of Austria. Isn't it necessary to begin by cleaning up the bridge that, from Italy, joins Germany and Flanders? Your duty is to extirpate heresies, enforce observation of the holy canons, and make all the clergy of Austria, Bohemia, and Germany pleasing to God. You have the power and the duty to punish according to your own conscience. And so that no obstacle obstructs your mission, we are suspending all the personal and seigneurial privileges accorded by your predecessor to Sigismund, duke of Tyrol.

For all practical purposes the Cardinal, starting from that day, embodied the papacy in all of Germany and the surrounding kingdoms. The man said nothing, but when he put on his new cope, I felt him sag under the coat's weight. He turned around, however, returned to his friend and begged of him:

- Let us immediately organize a crusade to protect Constantinople. We must not wait for cardinal Isidore's success...

- The walls of Constantinople are impregnable, and Genoa as well as Venice is making sure that the godless are kept at a distance.

- But, the Cardinal dared to point out, I am not speaking of war, but of peace. Genoa and Venice are competing with each other to take Constantinople's place in trade and business with the East...

- My friend, the pope insisted, unify Austria and you will shut the gates of Vienna; the West will be saved and Serbia will become a quicksand in which the Muslims will bog themselves down.

The pope had made his choice: he preferred Venice to Constantinople and he left to the Serbs the task of holding back the Ottoman invasion. He was playing enemies against enemies.

The Cardinal could say nothing; the pope, with a broad smile, denied him any reply. We departed with no more pomp than at our own arrival. We attended neither the canonization of Saint Bernardine of Siena nor the emperor's coronation.

The witches

At Venice, we met Cardinal Bessarion at his residence next to the palace of the patriarchs. The former Eastern father, brought from Constantinople by the Cardinal for the Council of Union, had never returned to his emperor. He had assembled in his library over six hundred Greek manuscripts and some Persian works. The Cardinal wanted to check for himself the quotation from Shabistari I had recited from memory. He congratulated me on my translation.

On the way, he dictated to me in succession a treatise he called *The Profane*, a development concerning the squaring of the circle and some notes on mathematical transmutations. So went life with the Cardinal: no rest and always at the limits of thought.

We reached Wiener-Neustadt and the emperor received us. He recognized the Cardinal's legation, as well as his authority as bishop. He promised, orally, to support him to the extent of his imperial powers. When the Cardinal informed him that Sigismund's chancellor, the baron Leonard of Velseck, was chasing after dowries in Italy, Frederick didn't raise an eyebrow. He took leave of us a few minutes later without having said a word on the subject.

Then we left for Brixen. We now had an escort of thirty knights and ten crossbowmen, all directed by a valorous knight, captain Peter of Erkelenz. The Cardinal didn't want to change his carriage, however. It was enough for him to add the legate's insignia to his family coat-of-arms. On the road, he assumed a lighthearted air and, as if he had guessed what I was daydreaming about, he threw at me this proposition worthy of Plotinus:

- If someone sees a beautiful woman, and if he is one who walks in the spirit, such a man attributes the honor of that beauty to God and turns toward the Light of which this sensible beauty is only a very distant shadow. Isn't that so, Henry!

- Yes, Monsignor, I answered, but didn't you write in your *Learned Ignorance*, and I am quoting you: "And each thing is moved to preserve its being through the natural union of the sexes. For as is known, in nature, the sexes are enfolded in the unity of God..."

Smiling, he turned his eyes away and dove into the landscape which now bristled with snowy peaks. Spring was climbing on the edges of the valley with long green fingers. Across the loose stones, poor people who had harnessed themselves to plows were trying to break up the still-heavy soil while wild-looking girls, half asleep, watched over the sheep. Austria, country of contrasts, was wrapping us in its fur-trimmed coat of snow and stones.

We were approaching Bruneck, in the valley of the Rienz, when it happened. The Cardinal had just dictated to me this sentence: "Every event suffers the effects of the History of the world, every drama is, on a smaller scale, the drama of our world in its entirety."

So here is what happened to us on the outskirts of Bruneck, in the Pusterthal, across from Michaelsburg.

Two women, completely naked and with all their body hair shaved off, were being transported on a movable gibbet. They were suspended from iron hooks that passed through the muscles of their backs. This was what was done to witches so that they wouldn't touch the ground and by this lose the devil's signs, which Jacquier in his *Flagellum* calls elements of proof. This is how Letter VIII of his *La Démonologie* would have it:

"The woman suspected of witchcraft is taken and suspended from the middle of a room, her legs in the shape of a cross. She is watched there and kept without eating, drinking or sleeping for forty-eight hours. She must be examined in detail, for she bears the devil's signs under her hair, her armpits and in her body's most secret parts. In order to comfort her, her familiar spirit will come to penetrate her. It will enter in the form of an insect, a serpent, a rat or a lizard that will be caught so that the proof of the crime will be made."

For that witch's vigil, those generally invited were the Bailiff, the burgomaster, the chairman of the treasurers, the minister of religion, the town council, the Bailiff's prosecutor and, naturally, the executioner. It was he who was charged with catching the animal and sticking it on a board which everyone signed as witnesses afterwards. The two nights were not too difficult for the honorable witnesses; they ate and drank a lot. The town's bordello did a good business on that occasion.

The "proof" was completed. The witches were conducted to duke Sigismund's Officers of justice to be tortured so that they would confess their crimes of witchcraft, after which they would be burned alive. In the land of Tyrol, the power to judge witchcraft, except for heretical witches, was the responsibility of the secular authorities. Business was lucrative because the property of the defendants' families was seized by the Officers. It was said of these trials that they were the best of alchemies since they transformed women's blood into shining gold.

Without even discussing it with the captain of the guard, the Cardinal ordered that they be unhooked immediately, be covered with sheets and brought to the diocese's dungeon where the ecclesiastical court would see to their judgement. Our thirty men at arms had their hands on their swords and our crossbowmen, their fists on their weapons. The captain of the guard gave in with a wide smile it didn't take us long to understand.

When we arrived at Brixen, the bishop's palace, made into a fortress, was already occupied by a bishop appointed by duke Sigismund. Our principal informant hadn't been able to warn us because he himself had been imprisoned. We had to take refuge with our men-at-arms at the castle of Bruneck whose lord belonged to Sigismund's clan. The bishop had taken his charge, as, moreover, his predecessor had done, without waiting for the pope's confirmation.

Without wanting to, our escort had, then, handed the witches over to a bishop belonging to the opposing clan. Furious, the Cardinal had a demand for reinforcements sent to Rome. Sigismund would without a doubt appeal this. The procedure would take several months. For my part, I commanded our captain of the guard to go and buy, that very night, the most pertinent information concerning the witches.

The next day, the Cardinal and I left on muleback for the bishop's palace. The bishop had no choice but to receive us. The Cardinal let the impostor know that he would have to answer for his acts at the conciliar assembly that would be held at the archbishop's palace in Salzburg no later than March 15. Then he asked to be brought before the witches, reminding him that in this matter the papal legate had authority over the bishop. The bishop hesitated to have him conducted there. The Cardinal presented a letter marked with the imperial seal that forced him to give in.

When the Cardinal entered the room where the witches were and saw the assembly of burghers and notables enjoying what they saw just as much as what they tasted, he went into a terrible rage. He took the Bailiff's bronze staff and, striking it on the table, demanded that they immediately leave the premises and go to the cathedral to hear the first sermon of a series that was to last all during Lent. He commanded the executioner to unhook the women and to dress them appropriately until the trial. Then he went to the drawing room where the Judge of the diocesan court was and registered me there as the pope's attorney for this trial.

- If one of these women is ever mistreated, you will have a long time to repent of it before your future bishop whose badge is this, he concluded, showing them his ring.

It was nearly noon when we left the bishop's palace. We hurried to the cathedral where the Cardinal ordered the verger to sound the call. At the end of an hour, the cathedral was full. The Cardinal, without a mitre, scrutinized the congregation with his fiery eyes.

- Dearest faithful ones, like so many Christians at the present time, here you are faced with this fearsome question: Who is your bishop? Each of you must find the answer in himself. Only the Church chooses the bishop. So where is the Church? Surely it is at the bottom of your soul and is developing in all your good thoughts, your good decisions and your good actions. But it is also between you, where it is developing cooperation, harmony, brotherhood. The Church is that life and that love which constantly tends toward peace. However, even if the

Church is in you and between you in the form of a spirit of mutual aid, it needs a body. And its body is so gravely ill, so divided that today you must choose your bishop. You will recognize your bishop by this: he struggles for justice, concord, harmony and peace.

No doubt you will ask me: if the Church is unity, why is it divided? If it is justice, why is it so often unjust?

Here is what I am proposing to you, I am proposing a reconstructed Church. Don't choose force, but flexibility. Choose a Church that does not harden into a particular form, because a particular form always brings with it an opposite form, choose a Church that allows itself to be worked on by those who love it. I am coming among you to try, with you, to reconstruct justice, harmony, peace. You will recognize me by my actions. But, like you, I am of flesh and the good that I want to do will no doubt also produce the evil that I do not want to do.

Tomorrow, I will be before you as attorney for the pope in the trial of two women who must be treated with justice. I am asking the nobles present here to choose one representative, the burghers to choose another, and the peasants to put forward a third. They will be my counselors.

On the fifteenth of March a conciliar assembly will be held at Salzburg where your bishop will be confirmed. However, from today on, I am with you as the Church's legate and every week I will come to preach the Gospel, that is to say, love and justice. I beg of you to open your heart to me.

After all the people had left, the Cardinal prayed for a long time.

For the trial of the witches, Peter, our captain of the guard, brought us a copy of the accusation and several firsthand testimonies. We returned to the bishop's palace where we were conducted to the witches' dungeon.

The women stood huddled in a corner, visibly terrorized by our presence. Both of them were named Marguerite. They were twins and lay servants at the convent of Sonnenburg, the Castle of the Sun, near Bruneck in the luxuriant valley of St. Lorenzen. These servants were nothing but domestics for the choir sisters, an assembly of the Tyrolian nobility's unmarried ladies.

The convent operated several businesses aimed at making life easy for these ladies, said to be very much inclined to spending. One of these businesses was nothing other than a bordello very much patronized by the young aristocrats or burghers who, particularly in Austria, married rather late. It was necessary as well to serve a large number of clerics, lay or ecclesiastical, to whom marriage was forbidden. The convents were much better maintained than the urban whorehouses, good only for the peasantry. The Castle of the Sun was held in especially high esteem. But whoever says bordello says witches, whose function is to make the couplings sterile. This was the twins' work.

Now it happened that the twins' father, a salt merchant, discovered in one of his mines a deposit of copper and tin that was said to be very promising. As a result, it was to the advantage of the abbey's directors to sell the two Marguerites to the ducal magistrates as witches so that they would be brought to justice and their family's property accordingly seized.

The Cardinal approached them, and I requisitioned a bench where he could sit.

- Mesdames, he began, I know your misfortune and I am coming to ask your help for the reform of the Church.

The two women, who looked very much alike, simultaneously turned their astounded faces toward the Cardinal. They knew he was legate and, to start with, couldn't understand why a man of so high an office would be in their prison, and here he was asking for their help, showing a face imbued with kindness...

- The Abbess who directs your convent has betrayed her mission, the Cardinal continued. The Abbey where you were in good faith has neglected its vocation. You were much more victims than culprits. But now things are going to change. The convent will be reformed. Do you want to help me in this mission?

The women could not put their trust in so strange a prelate. It so frequently happened that informers were hired to get the witches to talk. But they had seen the man in a carriage with a legate's insignia, preceded by an escort of knights and heralded with trumpet blasts. They had heard him demand with authority that they be taken off the hooks and reclothed, but in the end they found themselves naked and suspended once again in a hall of the bishop's palace...

- Who are you? one of the Marguerites asked him.

- I am the legate of the pope, the Cardinal answered. I have authority over all of Austria, Bohemia and Germany. I have been named bishop of Brixen, but as you see and as you suffer from it, my nomination is contested. Have no fear, however, I will soon be on the seat that has been entrusted me.

That did nothing to reassure them. Since too long ago in that country, the title of bishop was more a synonym of wolf than of pastor. The Cardinal understood this.

- I am not a simoniac bishop like those you have known, I am a shepherd of the Church of God and I have my children's salvation at heart.

- But, one of the two interrupted, there is no Church of God for us. Don't you know who we are?

The other Marguerite wanted to stop her sister...

- Yes, I do know! the Cardinal said.

- No, you don't know, the woman interrupted while the other was sobbing, her face against the ground. There is no hope for the wretched. As long as we were young and pretty, the men came... And then we were chosen to work the witchcraft. They beat us bloody for each baby born. There were plenty of them, in spite of the plants and the stones applied to the women. Since by some demonic miracle, neither my sister nor I had had any children and we had a port wine birthmark on our bellies, it was we who had to slit the babies' throats and boil them for their grease, which the choir sisters sold for a small fortune to the magicians of Germany and Flanders.

- Ah! God in Heaven! the Cardinal exclaimed. What has become of your Church?

- I am going to tell you, the woman replied, while her sister grabbed her ankles to make her be silent. We invoked the devil and he came. He alone has the power. We made a pact with him. We did masses in his honor. We ate accursed foods, we took belladonna and aconite to enter into trances and go to the infernal regions. We renounced our baptism and made sacrifices to Lucifer. We cursed the Church and it has cursed us.

The Cardinal took the hand of the woman who was crying.

- And you, what do you say about it? he asked her.

She could do nothing but cry even more, moaning and striking her head against the ground.

- Nothing is ever lost, the Cardinal gently continued. Unhappiness has pushed you into these crimes. Sit down and listen to me.

He spoke to them with such consideration that the two Marguerites sat down with their backs against the wall and raised their eyes toward him. They had, despite their age, pleasant faces. The one who did not speak inclined her head; the other confronted the Cardinal's gaze with her steel-gray eyes.

- I have told you everything and you do not condemn us, she sighed.

- Have you ever seen panicking mother rabbits eat their little ones?

They didn't answer, paralyzed with surprise by the Cardinal's friendly tone.

- So, if you already have seen that, you can understand what I am going to tell you. If the hierarchical Church no longer consoles those in misery, where, then, can they go? They no longer have hope. So they institute an anti-religion. The Church sacrifices the Lamb, the anti-Church will sacrifice nursing infants. The Church chants the litanies of the saints, the anti-Church will invoke demons. The Church baptises, the anti-Church will un-baptise. But more terrible yet, those who are in desperate need feel banished from humanity to such a degree that they institute an anti-humanity. Don't you see that you took refuge in that anti-

humanity because there was no place for you in humanity! You have acted like desperate mother rabbits. But now a door is opening, will you take it? Each man and each woman of good will strives toward the maximum of what he can be, taking his knowledge and his circumstances into account. Now I am holding out a hand so that you may enter the Kingdom of human brotherhood.

The two women remained silent.

- Here is what I am proposing to you. Satan will no longer come to disturb you because my friend here will stay up with you tonight and you will no longer be left alone. In this way you will know that we are stronger than Satan. Tomorrow, I will speak in your name. But this very night, I will send a negociator to meet your father. I have rights over the mines of Austria and I intend to make them be respected. To sum it up, by tomorrow they will know that the fortune recently acquired by your father is under my control. Next, I will demonstrate that your misfortunes have drawn you into a heresy for which you must answer to the pope's legate and not to the duke's officers of justice or even to the bishop's court. And as for me, I will not condemn you, but send you to a reformed convent in Salzburg where you will be educated. Then, if you desire it, you will help me.

Without waiting for an answer, the Cardinal left the scene, leaving me alone with the witches.

In the dungeon

I, Henry of Pomert, son of Octavian of Pomert, doctor of the University of Heidelberg, I was chasing the devil away for wretched women rotting in a horribly stinking Austrian dungeon!

That night was one of the most trying of my life. I walked back and forth in the jail for all of an hour while the two women clutched their chains, expecting no doubt that I would hit, humiliate, or rape them. The one who did the talking muttered prayers in the witches' anti-language, which consists of speaking backwards. The other wept, emitting macabre lamentations from time to time...

Unable to take any more of it, I suddenly turned toward them.

- I am going to invoke the devil for you, I told them, exacerbated.

And I recited from memory a formula I had read in the transcript of the trial of Gilles de Rais:

- "Monsignor and master devil, I acknowledge that you are the greatest. From now on, I renounce the others. I promise you that I will do the most evil possible and pay homage to you at the going down of the sun." That is the formula, isn't it? What superstition!

The women stared in terror at a spider climbing on the wall. Removing my shoe, I crushed the insect.

- Here's what I've done to your devil, I exclaimed. Stop whining. It's unbearable.

My whole body shook. I withdrew and took several deep breaths... And then there was a slight resurgence of strength in my mind. I think that above all I didn't want any longer to hear my own anxiety moan in theirs. I decided to launch into preparing my speech for the defense:

- The devil in this affair is no one other than the prince and lord of the canton. (I was speaking out loud). There are dangers of uprisings among the peasants, among the burghers... The princes are worried. It's natural. The Salic law punished witchcraft with a simple fine. The council of Liptine preached tolerance and John of Salisbury maintained: "The best remedy for this sickness is not to lend an ear to this madness produced by too much poverty." But there it is! The princes discovered a good way of making money. Such trials filled their coffers and above all, weakened the burghers and the peasantry by playing them off against each other through the principle of payments for informing...

- But you don't believe in anything then, Sir, the speaking Marguerite replied, as the other one remained in a state of shock, her face against the wall.

I had absolutely no intention to speak to these women whom I considered insane, shackled in their imaginary world. Without even turning around, I continued to walk back and forth, developing my argument until fatigue compelled me to sit down on the bench I had brought for the Cardinal.

I began to feel hungry. I asked the guard to bring me something from the kitchens. He promptly did this. The wine seemed good enough to me. I was eating and drinking when I heard the two women moving. Turning around, I realized that they were hungry. I put a piece of meat on the ground for them, and a large pitcher of water.

Night was wearing on, and I must not sleep. Besides, no place was clean enough for me to lie down on. I had orders to make sure that the witches not fall prey to hallucinations. A miracle would have been needed for that! Fatigue was crushing me and befuddling my mind.

I sat down again on the bench, head between my hands.

It was tragic to have such a good memory in such a place. Not trusting my recollections, I took the initiative. I forced myself to paint Catherine in my imagination as Bella had done on a canvas. But I wasn't Bella. I saw her naked. I saw her lascivious. She came to me, desired me, took me. I yielded. But it was no longer her. It was a little prostitute from a convent I went to during my student years. I placed a sheet over her face for fear of meeting her gaze. I tried to excite her before penetrating her, but she trembled and remained tense. I struck her once and I almost smothered her. I could no longer tolerate her rigidity.

I didn't know that there was a person on the other side of the carnal act. I would have wanted to love, but I made it dirty. I so much wanted not to resemble other men, violent and vulgar. How much care I took to erase all traces of these agitated nights! I returned impeccable: as made up and with hair as curled as if I had been to a wedding...

I got up from my bench and took a few steps. Lifting up the straw, I noticed the end of a parchment stained with blood, but still legible. I managed to read that astounding letter, which I carefully slipped into my purse.

I heard the two women moving. I got up, took the torch to the place where they were, and saw their terrified gaze. I felt as if I were for the first time removing the sheet of ignorance under which I had hid all women's faces. They were two beings of the same species as I: magma of suffering, terror and hope.

I was crazy. Falling on my knees before them, these words came out in spite of myself:

- I am the devil. He is in the bottom of my heart.

Without pity, my memory forced on me all the faces I had hurt, all the girls I had humiliated, all the bodies I had scratched, all the beings I had showered with scorn. Hell is nothing but a stupidly sensitive mirror.

As if beside myself, I began to shout:

- Oh Reason, take me back, tear me away from my memories.

Hearing me, the women went into convulsions, tearing their clothing and striking their heads against the wall. Without thinking, I approached them and, taking their heads in my arms, I said to one as to the other:

- Forgive me.

And I watered their bare heads with my tears. Me! Henry of Pomert, I had gone mad. The one I thought was mute wanted to speak, but what she let come out of her mouth was only a guttural noise, scarcely audible.

The silence covered my memory with its darkneses at last. My mind was no longer able to reason. All grew silent. Nothing felt worthy of leaving the night.

The women grew calm on my chest. My heart had lost all pride and all pretension. I caressed their heads. Today the memory has become a kind of shroud covering all my youth. They really were witches, they had cured me... A little.

The trial

The morning's noises awakened us and we were brought, the witches and I, before the diocesan court, presided over, to my surprise, by the bishop himself, Wiesmeyer, flanked by two ducal magistrates, one of whom was none other than duke Sigismund's chancellor, Leonard of Velseck.

The diocesan court was awaiting the Cardinal, but it was not the Cardinal who entered, but the legate of the pope. Trumpets announced him, two criers proclaimed his titles, a court of several gentlemen came forward and, in accordance with the custom, recalled his exploits at Basel, at Florence, and at Constantinople, taking care that the names of his personal protectors be heard: the emperor Frederick, Albert of Bavaria, the count of Manderschied, the Cardinal Orsini, the Cardinal Bessarion and many others. Our four grooms, costumed for the occasion, carried a sturdy podium equipped with a small throne borrowed from Bruneck Castle. They installed it in front of the members of the diocesan court, who were mute, so dumbstruck by so much boldness that they instinctively stood up.

The Cardinal legate entered in grand pomp followed by two servants holding above the ground the tails of his dress cloak, and by three representatives of the population: one for the nobles, another for the guilds and the last for the peasants. The legate ascended to the podium, took his place before the bishop and the magistrates of the diocesan court, motioned to them to sit down and began thus:

- "Will you kindly read the accusation."

This was contrary to the procedure, for it was forbidden to make the witches aware of the incriminating indictments for fear that the devil would light their minds' way toward a better defense. Wiesmeyer no longer knew what must be done. His magistrate began the reading without even waiting for the sign from his bishop:

- These women have had dealings with the devil, they have sacrificed babies to him, they have tied knots to stop conception, they have presided over black masses, they have participated in numerous witches' sabbaths...

- I have met them, the Cardinal interrupted, and they have in fact confessed to these crimes. Have you anything to say that is likely to enlighten my judgement?

No longer able to contain himself, the baron of Velseck stiffly arose:

- It is up to the civil authority to judge these two women.

- Oh well! the Cardinal answered, in that case what are you doing beside a pretender to the bishop's seat who is not yet appointed, counseling a diocesan court that is not legitimate?

- In Tyrol, the baron took the liberty of saying, all the ecclesiastical rights come under the duke Sigismund who names the bishops himself.

- In sum, the Cardinal countered, you are telling me that here the civil and religious authorities are merged...

- Not merged, but unified. Wiesmeyer is magistrate and bishop, the baron baldly asserted.

- That proposition will be studied at Salzburg. Until then, Sir, you are before a legate whose mission is to reform the Church in Tyrol and in all of Germany. I observe that the reform is more urgently needed here than elsewhere: many souls have gone astray. And the salvation of souls, Sir, concerns me to the highest degree.

- The very eminent scholar Taincture de Tournai maintains that witches are social rebels because they put the established order in danger. Because of this, these two women are, in the State's eyes, criminals, the chancellor counterattacked, convinced that he was competent in law.

- Father de Tournai did make that declaration, Sir baron, as a prelate, it was in Flanders, in one of his great sermons, and he meant by this to launch an initiative for the Church that was also an initiative for mercy, the Cardinal retorted.

- To prevent the effects of marriage hinders the growth of the nation. It is, then, a matter of State, the baron added, still standing, his hand on his sword.

- Do you believe, Sir, in the power of knots in lace threads to hinder generation? the Cardinal asked.

- Didn't Saint Thomas write, Wiesmeyer replied without much ardor, that "...men can, by an operation, castration, or other procedures, prevent a man from accomplishing carnal copulation, so the devil, who is more powerful, will be able to do it with God's permission."

- It seems, as a matter of fact, the Cardinal interrupted, that the two women here are accused, not of having succeeded in convincing the devil, but on the contrary because they failed in the task that others had assigned them. Because of this, they did not objectively do any harm to the State, but have mentally lost their way instead. To be sure, they have, as the indictment says, consented to the order to strangle the newborns. But they did it subject to threats and terror. Be assured that I will make a fuller investigation of this crime and that all the guilty parties will, if necessary, be handed over to the secular arm for their punishment. But until that time, I need their testimony.

- Monsignor the papal legate, Wiesmeyer interceded, with the obvious intention of keeping the hearing from going any further in that direction, you ought to take witchcraft more seriously. Didn't John XXII's Bull *Super illius specula* say, I have it here and I am reading it to you verbatim: "We learn with sorrow of the iniquity of some women, Christians in name only. They deal with death and conspire with hell, for they sacrifice children to demons; they adore them, fabricate and have fabricated images, rings, mirrors and flasks in which they contain the demons; they enquire of them, and obtain answers... Oh sorrow! This plague is taking some unusual developments in the world, it is invading Christ's flock more and more..."

- I have certainly observed, my dear sir, that this plague does indeed run freely in our diocese. I have come precisely to find a cure for it.

- So burn the witches, the baron of Velseck cried.

- Were it necessary, Sir baron, to burn all the sheep who have turned away from the Church among those which your pretender bishop claims to have charge of by the duke's authority, there would not be enough wood in the forests of Tyrol. Burn one witch, and a hundred more will appear, instruct and convert one witch-hunter who works for rewards, and a thousand will disappear, the Cardinal answered back.

There was a great silence.

- Have you anything to add? the Cardinal asked.

At that point, the count of Velseck attempted to display a little erudition which was, in fact, nothing more than old saws:

- You forget that we were speaking about women. Doesn't the noun "woman" come from *fe* which means faith and from *mina* which means less. Are they not, as Sprenger says it so precisely, "the doors of Satan", "the devil's pillows"? Did they not issue from Adam's twisted rib? "Woman," Sprenger writes, "surpasses man in superstition, sensuality, lying, frivolity, and in her desire for vengeance, since she lacks physical force, she seeks an alliance with the devil, and in charms, the means to satisfy her vindictive lechery." Don't you know the danger? These shameless whores who have made acquaintanceships with power at the witches' sabbaths, who have kissed the devil on all his foulest parts, speak so joyously and with such gaiety of his obscene embraces, of the length, the width, and the size of his instruments of nature, that these sordid interrogations cannot pass from their mouths to the chaste ears of clerics without offending them. Obviously, lay judges, stable and deliberate people, married and fathers of families, escape this kind of temptation...

- Leave it at that, dear count, the Cardinal replied, your eloquence says enough about your "stable and deliberate character". A more thorough investigation will tell us whether it is the man or the woman who most resembles the Evil One in

this affair. Until then, so that everyone may be heard, I would like to get the papal attorney's version.

Having forgotten my role in this affair, I remained speechless for a moment. However, this wasn't the first time that I had pled for the defense. 'The witches' misery had revived my indignation. I gave a shake to my spirits weighed down by fatigue, drank a little water, and stood up for an undiplomatic attack:

- By doctrines bordering more on ignorance than on the search for the truth, we arrive at a maximum of stupidity that it makes me ashamed to hear today from the mouth of a person of my sex. We imagine sex with the satanic animal. But that animal is hidden, in fact, in the cupidity of men who boast of their nobility. The lascivious women the baron speaks of do exist, and are indeed in this room, but they cannot be burned, your reverence.

- And why then? the Cardinal asked. He didn't seem interested in negotiation either.

- Because they are, I replied, in the brains of the ignorant, and in order to destroy them, one would need to burn, not these men, but their mentality. The antidote to such an evil can only be a reform of minds. I have carefully studied the trial of Gilles de Rais, burned alive in 1440, and I have closely examined many other trials, among them those of 110 men and women at Queyras in the High Alps who were executed in 1447. And if you would permit me, Monsignor papal legate, I will describe for the count in what way witches are produced here and now.

The Cardinal raised an eyebrow, inviting me in this way to continue, which I did, addressing principally the three representatives of the population.

- It is a machine with two sides. On one side, much cupidity and concupiscence is required. Cupidity brings with it the desire to steal, concupiscence, the desire to soil. Man becomes, then, a veritable predator, I am speaking now of the witch-hunters. On the other side, much wretchedness and despair is required, a despair such that death is not sufficient. To cast oneself into eternal hell becomes the attempt *in extremis* to find a place, at least in the imaginary world.

- Your attorney is going crazy! Velseck cried.

- The witch-hunters, I continued, without even turning toward him, invent the devil's cult themselves, and then, through torture, put this cult in the mouths of women and sometimes of men whose families, however, are not without possessions and this in spite of the papal bull that limits the duration of torture to less than an hour.

- It's because of the gift of taciturnity, answered the second magistrate of the diocesan court. The devil prevents them from speaking and renders them impervious to suffering.

- Demonology tells us, and I am reading the text, Velseck continued, taking up his book: "I am not unaware that there are men of great renown and much learning (he dared to look the Cardinal in the face) who hold these unfortunate women to be less deserving of punishment than of pity, considering that it is by education and prayer, rather than by fire and flames, that it is appropriate to treat them..."

- That's exactly, I continued, what completes and confirms what I have said, Monsignor legate. Right here in the dungeons of the diocese I was able to observe a gallows for the strappado, vices for crushing legs, sulfur shirts for burning the lungs, torches made to penetrate women's private parts, and a black madonna used to finish them off in the most atrocious fashion. No devil could imagine anything worse...

- These instruments are only there to deter, the pretender bishop answered.

- False, I said, I have here a letter addressed to a certain Veronica that I discovered this very night in the dungeon reserved for witches.

I took the letter out of my pocket, and, approaching the people's representatives, I read it to them with difficulty, for the writing was very shaky:

- "Good evening a hundred thousand times, Veronica, my dear daughter. Innocent I have come into prison, innocent I have been tortured, innocent I must die; for whoever enters this prison is bound to become a witch; he is tortured until he confesses it. God have pity on him. I have never renounced God; I would not want to do it; may God who knows it come to my aid. Alas! the executioner came. May God in Heaven have mercy! He put the thumbscrews on me, on my arms and my legs; blood spurted out of my nails and everywhere; I remained four weeks without being able to use my hands, and I still don't use them very well as you can tell from my writing... And I was stark naked, and I was frozen to the bone. Then they tied my hands behind my back, hoisted me up on the ladder and tortured me with the strappado. It seemed to me then that heaven and earth were collapsing; eight times they pulled, eight times they made me fall down. When the executioner led me back into prison, he said to me, "Sir, I beg of you, for the love of God, confess to something, whether it is true or not; for one torture will follow the other."

"Dear child, keep this piece of paper very carefully, for it testifies to my fidelity for the generations to come. My grandchildren will be poor, but they won't be ashamed. It took me several days to write this letter, my hands are so bruised! And then I can't stand up. I beg of you, in the name of the Last Judgement, do not rebel against God. You can boldly swear that I am not a witch, but a martyr who is dying resigned. Good night. Your father who will never see you again." That man died even before his trial, sir Cardinal, and if I had not remained all night with those two women, they would be so broken today that they would say no matter what.

- That man was the worst of witches, the count of Velseck asserted, while the pretender bishop remained silent.

- But continue, I beg you, your description of that machine, that machination in fact to manufacture witches, the Cardinal interrupted, giving me the floor.

- These confessions extracted by so much suffering, the witches sign them with their blood and they are announced in the public square even as the executioner is preparing to set fire to the stake. That is more impressive than one of Saint Bernardine's sermons and becomes more contagious than the plague. It is a sort of advertisement for the devil. The most wretched suddenly believe that they are prey to demons and execute inverted rituals. This is how the crime of witchcraft is created: it is thought up in the bishops' palaces and dramatically promoted by the stakes. There it is, the witch hunt's vicious circle, there you have it, the crime of these crimes. And all the well-off profit from it: the lords get rich, the poor get poor, the men of power see their religion of power raised to the skies and the Gospel, which the nobility is so afraid of, goes up in smoke.

- Stop your stupid plea, one of the magistrates decided. These women don't need your pity. They killed children, they had them boiled...

- In sum, they obeyed the orders of their superiors to the letter, the Cardinal concluded, and for what business?

- Let us stop here, the pretender bishop interrupted, it is sufficient to say that they are witches. On that everyone agrees. Their punishment is provided for by the law. Let's burn them and say no more about it.

- That, the Cardinal answered, amounts to putting a very high price on human conjectures, if by them we burn women and men alive. Leave this judgement to me; it is not in your jurisdiction.

- Never, Velseck cried, as he went to search for an object behind a curtain, the duke of Tyrol will never allow it. And it is Christ himself who will condemn these women.

And he took a monstrance and brought it near the two women.

- Look, he cried, the host is bleeding.

The bread was in fact shot through by a scarlet stripe. The women began to moan as the man approached. In their madness, they would perhaps have killed themselves by striking their heads against the stone wall. I could not stand so much suffering, despair and stupidity. I had never experienced such a feeling since my sister's death. I extended my hand to them...

Strangely, they grew silent, and a moment later Marguerite, the one who never spoke, slowly but distinctly pronounced these words:

- Jesus has redeemed us by his blood.

And she broke down in tears.

- That's true, the other continued, we are saved by the blood of Jesus.

- You are saved, Mesdames, the Cardinal resumed, not because of the count of Velseck's hoax, but because of the hope you maintain in spite of the world's madness.

The Cardinal turned toward the baron and, with an authority that didn't need to raise its voice, he continued thus:

- As for you, Mr. Velseck, take that host you sell away. Do you think that I'm that ignorant! Here are the facts (he addressed the assembly): this story of a bleeding host that holds you in terror and prostration began at Bülow where a church was accidentally burned more than fifty years ago. Three hosts tinted with red were discovered there. Lucrative pilgrimages were quickly organized. Flanders, England, Scotland and Scandinavia acquired their "holy blood" for a small fortune. A happy investment that yields an abundant profit thanks to the pilgrimage business. But what you don't know is that they fabricate these hosts right here, at the Castle of the Sun. (He turned toward the baron). What you pass off as blood, Mr. Velseck, is nothing other than a mold that you cultivate in a cellar of this convent and that you transplant from one host to the other. And that is not the only business you conduct there...

- We're closing the meeting, Wiesmeyer hurriedly demanded.

- No, we aren't closing the meeting, Mr. Wiesmeyer. Not three days ago a lady called Afra of Velseck, better known under the name of Bella, came to Tyrol to pay a substantial dowry for her daughter. Not that she wanted to get her married but, just the opposite, to prevent a horrible union. In this way she got her daughter put in a convent rather than become the prey of the baron who is serving you as a magistrate. This is how the duke's chancellor proceeds in order to capture the most beautiful girls in Italy or France so as to renew his most lucrative bordello, held at the Castle of the Sun. Under my orders, the daughter and the mother are now under my protection at a convent subject to the reform. But do not doubt, Mr. baron, that this is only the beginning of the reform. This bordello enriches you in an even more criminal way. Unable to prevent babies being born, you do business selling their fat, which is thought to be an effective remedy for sexual impotence. Witchcraft is profitable for you to such an extent that you propagate the idea of it through all these unjust trials you hold in Austria. Trials moreover that are highly profitable since you seize all the property of the victims' families. The perversion that men like you have brought into the Church is such that it puts its very existence in danger. But things are going to change, Mr. Velseck, the Church will be reformed. May God forgive you for your crimes! If you don't repent, the Church will, for the sake of peace, have to hold you in its dungeons.

There was a very great silence. The Cardinal turned toward the three representatives of the people.

- So, gentlemen, what is your opinion? the Cardinal demanded.

As one might have expected, not knowing whether it was the duke or the Cardinal who would emerge the victor, no one dared to speak.

- Oh, well! the Cardinal went on, if you have nothing to say...

The peasant got up to speak, but no words came out of his mouth. The man, who was named Gabriel Prack, but who was nicknamed Bull Head because he had such a broad, flat, and bare forehead, remained straight as an oak, searching no doubt for some suitable words to express his thoughts.

- Speak, Mr. Peasants' representative, go on, say it, the Cardinal encouraged.

- The tithe we pay to the convent in grain, vegetables and poultry is costly, Monsignor legate, the peasant ended up saying. We go there to do our forced labor until late at night after our hard day of work. It's not right what they're doing. We pay for prayers, and the convent ladies give us sins, they're stealing from us, Monsignor legate.

- You can sit down, Mr. Prack, your advice makes sense.

The Cardinal gazed out for a moment over the court and then the entire assembly, with a look that I had known only from that man, a look so full of quiet strength, so exempt from hesitation that it commanded respect. Finally he spoke with a voice so gentle that no decent person could do anything but open his mind to it.

- So then, I am passing my sentence, the Cardinal continued. The two ladies here present have been deceived, but by a grace from God have been able to retain enough faith to remain in the Church. I am sentencing them to three years of instruction in a convent deserving of that name, after which they will be free to determine their future. I am postponing until later the judgement of the true culprits who have transformed the convent of Brixen into a place of sin and maker of money. I ask them to acknowledge their wrong, to sincerely repent, to return to the Church of the Gospel and to help me in my reform. Don't you see that if the Church is turned away from its mission, humanity is in peril? If the Church no longer serves to civilize men, who will do it? And if the heart of man returns to the state of a wild beast even as his reason manufactures its iron cannons, what will become of humanity? I am going to Salzburg and I will return as a pastor. This will give you nearly a month to restore some order in the unfaithful convents.

The execution

The road that led us back to the Bruneck castle made long hairpin turns along the mountains. The sun bathed the summits, the snow was melting and the water which ran along the pink cliffs seemed as scarlet as blood. The Cardinal wanted to stop for a moment. We got out of the carriage to take a few steps.

I was worn out and my mind seemed to be tearing against my heart.

- Everything is so black, I confided to the Cardinal.

- Mars and Venus, war and love, we are going from one to the other...

- What do you mean? I asked.

- Harmony is not the absence of struggle, on the contrary it is a struggle that does not aim at crushing the adversary, a struggle that allows the adverse forces in nature and in men to find a third way of surpassing.

- But we have just issued a declaration of war.

- The fear of desire, there is our enemy.

- But, I replied, when Psyche wanted to confront her fear, she lit her lamp in order to see her lover, and he evaporated instantly. Fear seems necessary to preserve the illusion of love, but, I agree, it does pervert it. So how do you combat a perversion?

- There it is, the basis of my anxiety, Henry, how do you combat a perversion? How do you liberate desire from fear? I don't know if it is possible without believing in love! I don't know if it is possible in a belief like yours, where love is only an illusion because the First Principle is only a chaos of forces.

- And Psyche gave birth to her daughter Voluptuousness, I concluded.

This made the Cardinal smile without however opening up on the subject. He just turned his gaze toward the landscape that enveloped us.

The sun was sparkling, the mountains were dazzling, beauty was speaking in favor of love. After all, we had saved the witches. There they were, at the back of the cortege, seated in a cart drawn by an ox and surrounded by archers on alert. Bull Head was leading the animal.

I was getting back in a good mood...

But I barely had had time to notice that the spot was perfect for an ambush when each of the women received a crossbow's arrow directly in the chest. The baron's men, who were standing behind the rocks, immediately took flight on a path protected by enormous stones. Our men could do nothing.

I was paralyzed, and the Cardinal too. Bull Head rushed off in the direction of the baron's knights. He yelled at the top of his lungs, brandishing his bull whip. The twin sisters had collapsed one on top of the other. I raced toward them. Climbing into the ox-cart, I took their heads in my arms, as I had done in the jail. It seemed to me that if I acted in this way, time would return on itself and I could save them. But no one stops time.

Both of them were run straight through. Bull Head, having returned, broke the arrows and with one sharp pull removed the points projecting from their backs. The wounded women let out an awful moan.

- My wife knows what has to be done, he suggested.

The peasant's house was not far off. We went to it. The country people who were there eating their lunch left the house in a hurry, alarmed that a cardinal was entering with two witches. Bull Head had helped me transport the women. I was still holding their heads against my chest. We stretched them out on the table, but I didn't want to let go of my hold, in the vain hope of keeping them alive.

Bull Head's wife took some herbs out of a pot and put them in their wounds. The two sisters uttered horrible moans, then there was silence.

All we heard was the rail of the two women who were gradually being suffocated by the blood in their lungs. We knew that the end of their torment was approaching. The Cardinal, standing next to me, recited the prayer for the dying. He took from his robe a small flask of consecrated oil and anointed the two women with it. The ignorant peasants who were observing the scene through the window murmured in terror. No doubt they were afraid that at any moment the devil would suddenly appear in the women's mouths to take his vengeance on a Cardinal who dared to give the final sacrament to two of Satan's prostitutes.

Each of their respirations was an atrocious pain and I prayed heaven to shorten their suffering. A prayer that was surely useless because nature follows its course, as indifferent to the sufferings of men as it is to those of animals...

The two sisters looked at me. They forgave me. And, at last! it was their final exhalation.

I began to weep like a child. I felt that unhappy and helpless. As for me, I did not forgive. Those who killed my sister I would never forgive.

I brought the two heads close to my face. I hadn't realized how light these two women were. With Bull Head, I carried them to the oxcart. The country folk

were throwing stones at us. The Cardinal told them not to be afraid of anything because the devil never had entered these women.

We continued our way as far as Bruneck castle. It was there that we buried them, in a corner of the cemetery reserved for servants, but on holy ground, within a little fence of stones. I was on my knees on the still soft ground that covered their bodies. I wasn't able to contain my tears.

The reform

In response to the killing of the twins, and given the seditious nature of the crime, the Cardinal declared a ban in all of the diocese for as long as his title was not recognized on Tyrolian soil. Nonetheless, he continued to preach in the Brixen cathedral every Saturday at noon. He insisted on the necessity of a great reform, for he said: "If the Church does not return to its primary mission, barbarism will take back its rights over civilization and men will tear each other apart by wars, cruelty and massacres."

The ban was heavy for the people to bear, but very much more still for the pretender bishop and his pastors, deprived by this of the revenue from religious ceremonies. It was indeed a kind of blockade on the trade in sacraments. But the Cardinal had obtained more. A good number of the princes of the surrounding regions, encouraged by the emperor, prohibited the purchase of Tyrolian merchandise. The Swiss, Austria's natural enemies, went so far as to ask the pope for permission to invade their rebel neighbor. Nicholas V responded by telling them to hold off and await orders.

The conciliar assembly of Salzburg had been convoked on the Cardinal's advice, but by order of the pope. The archbishop presided over the meeting. Before us, bareheaded and in noble's robes, Wiesmayer appeared, accompanied by three canons, the baron of Velseck and another jurist.

Designated to present the plea, I pointed out that Wiesmayer's election not only had not been authorized by the pope, but hadn't even been canonical since it was done under duress. In fact I could establish, thanks to documents and first-hand testimonies, that the canons had been shut up in a tower surrounded by armed men and that their lives were in danger. Velseck asserted that the nomination of the Cardinal by the pope contravened the concordat of the German nation.

I counterattacked immediately:

- You are forgetting, Sir, the recent concordat of Vienna, which recognizes the pope's right to appoint the episcopal sees when the elections are not canonical or even for a reasonable cause, when he judges it preferable that a person of excellence be nominated in order to arrive at a justified end, such as reform for example. Now the pope was correct on those two points. What is more, there was an understanding between the duke and the pope (I have in hand the letter of understanding) that after the death of the bishop, given that two bishops had already been appointed by the duke, the pope himself would make the nomination. The supply of the church of Brixen is the province of the pope in virtue of the concordat with Germany, the common law and a definite understanding with the duke. And if something must be added, let us recall that in order to avoid the scandal of national nominations in Austria, Nicholas V has accorded the emperor

the right to propose his candidates. Now, we have here a letter signed by him, authorizing the Cardinal's nomination. What more can be said? Only that the refusal to comply amounts to a rebellion against the pope, against the emperor and against the word of the duke himself.

Velseck was left without an argument. In order to avoid a dishonor which might precipitate an armed conflict, the Cardinal proposed a compensation in florins permitting the pretender bishop to renounce his goals on his own initiative. What is more, he yielded to a demand specifying that, "The new bishop must entrust the keeping of his forts or his castles to trustworthy men whom he will instruct not to do any damage to the duke, to his lands and to his people." To that clause, Velseck proposed an addition on which I did not want to yield. It read as follows: "After the death or resignation of the Cardinal, the chapter will be free to designate a bishop." This would put the Cardinal's very life in danger. But the archbishop gave in.

A noble knight was charged by the archbishop to explain the understanding to the duke. The latter diligently signed the totality of the clauses without any attempt at alteration except that he added to it "and I order my canons to comply with my new bishop". This prompt obedience of the duke upset me as much as it pleased the Cardinal who saw in the two possessive adjectives (my canons, my bishop) only the habit of a lord.

We did not yet know that Sigismund had hired the cleverest of foxes, Gregory of Heimburg, the same one who, at the time of Basel, had threatened the papacy by counseling the German princes to adopt a separatist policy. That exceptionally adept lawyer sold his services at a very high price to whoever wanted them. And those who wanted them were none other than the national princes demanding the totality of ecclesiastical powers in opposition to the pope and the totality of civil powers in opposition to the emperor. Gregory of Heimburg had so well succeeded in his alliance with the national princes that all of the West was falling into anarchy. In fact, the nations did not have sufficient cohesion to control their counties, with the result that in the countryside, the counts and barons were tearing each other to pieces and in the cities, the burghers were obtaining autocracy. The national princes had no other choice than to channel their bellicose energy into wars of nation against nation. The wars added to the anarchy, creating pillage, famine, wretched poverty and plague. France and Bohemia were all-too-painful examples of this.

Gregory of Heimburg was counseling the duke, but we didn't know it. Despite this, the strange and incomprehensible truce which followed the entente of Salzburg allowed the Cardinal to return to Brixen with all the episcopal and legatary honors due him. In order to do this, the Cardinal wanted to follow the old custom of an entry on muleback. The military escort kept at a distance, on the other hand, the canons, as a sign of allegiance, walked in front declaiming the bull of nomination.

The Cardinal of San Pietro Vincoli, the legate of Austria, Bohemia and Germany was coming to take possession of his charge of bishop of Brixen with the intention of reforming the Church. There was joy. People approached, people ran up. People danced, people sang. The burghers brought gifts of their art, the peasants, poultry and seed. Men came to offer their services and their oath. But no noble other than the lord of Bruneck castle entered the procession.

The Cardinal was walking now in front of his mule. He was an affable man, a renowned diplomat, a respected scholar, an admired humanist. He smiled at the crowd and the crowd smiled back at him. The sun too, for the day was growing heady: the fields, still newly green, waved, the trees in flower shimmered, the mountains with their snowy summits sparkled. It might have been called a conspiracy of glory, as if the Church were about to leave at last its somber night of ignorance, greed and superstition.

He convoked the canons, the deans, the high prebendaries, the abbots, the priests, the doctors and the casuists: in sum, those he considered his militia, intellectual as much as spiritual. He convened them in the cathedral church and he spoke to them, not from up in his pulpit, but walking in the aisle or approaching them with a friendliness that never diminished his authority. According to several, his sermon was worthy of the greatest university masters, but my mind wandered and I could only recall a few bits and pieces of it:

- My very dear colleagues, may your ears be open and hear. God has created the world, but it is the responsibility of the world to "re-form" itself, to return to its source so as to be rebuilt. "But how is this possible?" you will say to me...

The central nave of the church rose particularly high. The light entered softly through the collateral windows and gave his gray hair a captivating appearance.

- On these questions as on so many others, we are, by the divine benevolence, abandoned to uncertainty. Certainty, you see, would make the exercise of humanity impracticable. Uncertainty, on the contrary, gives to finitude its freedom and its power to surpass itself. And yet many fear it, hide from themselves the ignorance proper to reason and invent premature answers which are no more than prejudices and superstitions...

A woman, dressed all in black, had sat down discreetly behind the Cardinal, in the ambulatory. A veil covered her face. She held herself graciously, but was so immobile that one might have mistaken her for one of the statues that adorned the columns of the chevet. The Cardinal, who couldn't see her, went further along in his speech:

- The first reform and the most important of all can only be an intellectual reform. The world must strive for an intelligence of ends. Humanity can only fulfill itself by progressing on the thread of its uncertainties toward an increasingly clear intuition of its obligations. If reason is skillful in the domain of means and techniques, intelligence for its part can and must advance in the direction of a better understanding of ends...

The woman in black turned toward me, but without raising her veil. I perceived nonetheless through the veil the sparkle of her look. She was looking at me. The Cardinal continued:

- Light must enter the world as it enters this cathedral. The age of darkness is at an end...

The woman still sat dignified, elegant and motionless.

- What is reform? the Cardinal asked. Reform consists of exercising our intelligence and our reason in order to soften the present form of our customs and make it capable of peace. We must learn to live in peace...

I felt a shiver pass through the woman. She took a small notebook out of her satin bag and noted something down. The fragment of parchment slid out of her notebook, twirled through the air and fell to the ground. With her foot, she slid it under the prie-Dieu.

- But what should the relationship be between reason and intelligence? What does reason do in regard to the hope for peace and the intuition of harmony?

That last question plunged me into a profound reflection on beauty. Why then is a single beauty never enough? Why does an artist's most beautiful painting lead to another? Why can beauty, which is one, express itself only in multiplicity? Is there on earth or even in the profoundest depths of the mind a face, a form capable of satisfying by itself alone? For my part, I preferred multiplicity.

The woman was no longer there when I emerged from my distraction.

- There now is my program, the Cardinal concluded: since the reform should be accomplished by the exercise of wisdom in whatever is most concrete, it is the responsibility, then, of the locality to specify the practices. For example, at Saint Martin, they recite the passion of Christ to the sound of the big bell at the church; at Hildesheim, they sing the Angelus. All this is good because it corresponds to the best of the customs and habits of the people. You will, then, hold local synods to discuss questions of customs and rituals. You will present your propositions to me, we will discuss them and if I approve them, this will be the practice where you are.

As he continued, he cast a look at me that I will always remember, the look of a man inviting men to be free.

- And you, my friends, come out of the trap of your selfishness, you ought to be more modest than all the others, you should no longer have the best horses, the softest beds, the heartiest pleasures. You should no longer have the most delicate bodies, the most beautiful women and the greatest wealth. You should be loyal to your leader, for if you betray me, the whole diocese will be divided and might fall

into a horrible civil war. You understand that betrayal can lead us to bloodshed. So, if you have doubts, please come and talk to me about them. Don't act alone.

He looked out over the whole assembly.

- Simony must be rooted out, he insisted, we must forgive sins without any monetary compensation, the monasteries should no longer be reserved for the nobility. Progressively, we must eliminate superstitions, magic, incantations, divination, etc. And that can only be done through a vast enterprise of education...

He elaborated several questions of differing degrees of importance: reform of the calendar, polyphonic chant, the opusculum on the articles of faith, etc. He prohibited trade in holy places, ostentatious offerings, all that offends against reserve and simplicity. The money should be turned over to the Ordinaries for their pious works: the building of churches, the maintenance of the poor, education, care of the sick, etc.

There were several questions. The Cardinal answered each one of them attentively. Progressively, the majority of the men present were won over. It was not the first time a prelate had come to announce reform, quite the contrary, this word had been returning to everyone's tongue for quite a while. But this time, these people were encountering a convinced person, supported by a determined pope, in a context that despite many threats gave grounds for hope.

He kept the most influential at the bishop's palace so as to converse with each one, discussing their difficulties, their problems, properties, relations with the families of the nobility or of the bourgeoisie... He listened to their objections, but never flagged in his determination. When they departed, the earth had been moved, the reform, sown and we had, both of us, confidence that no one would dare to betray it.

The betrayal

I had furtively picked up the little piece of parchment belonging to the lady in black. On it was written: "Come to meet me at Ennenberg Abbey, I must talk to you about reforming the noblewomen's convents."

As the Cardinal was busy from early morning until late at night, I didn't think it necessary to bother him with this after all incidental question. I knew all about this, I was simply going to initiate the discussion. In spite of their terrible crimes, as the Cardinal said: "Dialogue remains the best solution since persuasion alone wins souls."

So I decided to go to the convent that the people of the area call even today "the Castle of the Sun". This convent, which resembles more a fort than a monastery, is abundantly surrounded by orchards, vineyards, fields and groves. It occupies the greater part of the Pustenthal, facing Michaelsburg which, on its rock, dominates the Rienz valley. Except for the women abducted for dowries by Velseck, the abbey accepted almost exclusively the daughters of the Austrian nobility. Through ignorance, these poor women, duped and perhaps threatened by the duke, ran some very lucrative but disgraceful businesses less fruitful in enjoyment for them than profitable for their prince. It was a veritable gold mine for a duke aspiring to national autonomy.

The status of cloister assured the nuns a right to tax worthy of their social rank. Their domain covered fertile land that yielded more than what was necessary; what is more they owned almost all of the pasture land of Grunwald. To that were added the other businesses connected with less noble needs which the trial had cited, to the shame of all the region's aristocracy; businesses shut down these days by men-at-arms whom the Cardinal had had posted on the roads leading to the castle.

All along the entrance to the castle, I could not suppress a vague unease, especially when I ordered a guard to go and lend a hand to another, who supposedly had heard some movement...

The woman met that night was called Verena de Suben. She was the abbess of the convent. For greater discretion, she received me in her private apartments. The fireplace in the middle of her luxurious salon was our only illumination and the unicorn undulating on the heavy tapestry, our only witness. She wore a light robe of black silk, a scarf covered her shoulders and lace veiled her countenance, but her hands disclosed a rare grace that the delicacy of her voice would not contradict.

- How pleased I am that you came, Mr. de Pomert, she began.

- I too am honored, I replied.

- I called on you because I know that you are noble and of good family, she continued. You know then how to understand the difficulties of my responsibility and advise me as a friend.

- My father betrayed my family's honor... I objected, in order to cool her down a bit, but I wasn't able to finish my sentence, however...

- Your father, Sir, died courageously for the most just of causes, she continued. The Hussites have a right to Bohemia.

- You are surely the only one to believe that, I asserted.

- Your father is, the lady interrupted, known in all of Tyrol as a martyr for nations aspiring to sovereignty. Should the people be led by foreigners, from Italy if they are popes or from Germany if they are emperors? They say that in France, a maid from the peasantry died for testifying to the existence of the national soul; your father, a knight, did as much...

- If the national soul leads to so much madness and war, it would be better to give it up. Joan of Arc herself wanted to fight the Hussites. Sovereignty is by nature relative and reason should preside over the ties of interdependence between nations. It is there that all the hope for peace is, Madame. Must we sell our honor to arrive at a sovereignty taken over others?

- You are right, Sir, she continued, turning her face away. I didn't know how to keep my abbey within the proper limits. But I can't reform my convent alone, you must protect us from the duke. He demands unreasonable royalties from us and his chancellor, the baron of Velseck forces us to run businesses unworthy of us.

- Our men are already taking care of that, I reminded her.

- I owe the Cardinal so much! she said, uncovering her face.

In all my life I had never seen so beautiful a countenance. Tears were flowing on her cheeks, a mixture of repentance and gratitude, it seemed to me. She had me sit down on a large upholstered chest and continued, almost touching my knees:

- The Cardinal has delivered us from the baron. We have ceased the dishonor he forced on our girls. However, the royalties due the duke have not diminished. What can women do to pay such a ransom? You, a noble heart, know what poverty unworthy of a name is. Here in my convent I must take of noble young women without husbands. Must they, in addition to that, be subjected to other privations and live like peasants?

- But what can I do?

- You must understand us, the lady entreated, we only want reasonable conditions. The Cardinal's reform would impose on us the excesses of a few saints who thought it a good thing to mortify their bodies beyond all reason. You must have read the treatises of Laurent de Valla, you have surely enjoyed Cicero, Lactantius and Virgil. You know then that the salvation of the soul is not in the oppression of the flesh. The Cardinal himself has wisely affirmed this: "Customs change and we have to adapt". Isn't this the function of the local and regional synods? Doesn't the Cardinal support Laurent de Valla? Too much rigor against nature leads to perversion and hypocrisy, haven't you noticed it yourself?

- No doubt, Madame, I interjected, forcing myself not to blush, but I fear that I won't be able to help you.

- You are, Sir, a handsome man, you have wit and nobility, you are a man of the future and a man of reason, be my protector. The lady was now touching my knees. Fire sparkled from her eyes as much as from the hearth, a fire too strong for the season. She was as hot as I was. She removed her scarf, thus exposing a collar opened far too wide for a weak man like me.

- I fear that I don't have the necessary authority, I replied in a voice that was beginning to tremble.

- Who's talking about authority, Sir, be my friend. Come to see me every week. You will give me advice. Directing fifty women to privation is something I can't do alone. Besides, I have to admit it, I feel incapable of restraining my nature...

Did I have to act in Tyrol as I did elsewhere? Run to the bordello! Wouldn't it be better to have a noble mistress and help her in her heavy task? I would love her and that would lessen my sin. If there even was a sin! What was wrong with it? Reason can accept not giving in to gluttony, but all the same we eat three times a day. Subjecting the needs of the flesh to reason need not end in complete deprivation. To restrain nature a little is sufficient, to tie it to consideration for women and to duty. I would console her even as I was helping achieve a reasonable reform. I could ensure that, in the monastery, they stopped the trade in bodies and in witchcraft while accepting reasonable compromises...

Logic, then, opened the door, but when the door was opened, it was all the ocean that would break on us...

On the way back I, the most unbelieving of men, was as much racked by remorse as Peter at the crowing of the cock. The heart is truly the most incoherent part of the body. It wants to take, it gives; it enjoys, it condemns. Who can make sense out of that! Perversion of reason, the heart is an organ that anatomists say is hollow and contradictory: it pulls the blood as much as it pushes it away. No doubt its sole use is to oppress reason in order to exercise it. With time, let us hope, I will manage to subject it to what reason agrees to concede to nature. It is

after all more in keeping with the purpose of sex to unite two people in flesh and feeling than to flow off as a total loss into a rough sheet...

All these reasonings didn't do a thing. I was Henry de Pomert, the noble cleric who aspired like Laurent de Valla to more wisdom in regard to nature, yet I shook like a pious woman in front of a holy water font.

Some time after that torrid evening, I learned that the same night that Verena consorted with me, a choir sister had taken advantage of the breach in the guard to sneak out of the convent. On the back of a powerful charger, she had gone as far as Innsbruck to meet the duke and deliver an important message to him.

Our captain of the guard revealed this fact to me himself, but he never knew that it was I who was the cause of that breach, and the content of that message remained inaccessible to both of us. However, a few days later, messengers from the duke came regularly to the monastery without our being able to stop them and the Cardinal had to make a decision in a quarrel that was going to turn into a drama.

The pendulum

The peasants of Grunwald, with Bull Head as their leader, had lodged a complaint with the duke concerning a pastureland of vast extent. Sigismund had dismissed the demand and had reaffirmed that the pasture in its entirety belonged to the sisters and that no inhabitant should allow his animals to graze there. That year, the season was rather bad and the peasants wanted to fatten their animals before the fall slaughtering. Bull Head appealed Sigismund's decision to the Cardinal. The Cardinal immediately forbade Verena to respond to the duke's invitation, because, as bishop, he was the attorney for the religious and the legitimate authority. However, I had been the cause of a breach in the guard that had allowed Verena to communicate with the duke. And the duke counseled the abbess to put up the firmest of resistances, saying that in case of need, he would furnish her with men-at-arms.

During this period, the Cardinal published throughout his diocese a decree imposing the closure of all the women's abbeys having monastic status in their constitutions. He gave them three months to comply. Verena promised to conform to the decree even as she was imploring the duke to intervene against the bishop's order.

No sooner had the Cardinal left for the diet of Regensburg than Verena published a protest against the reform "reform dictated," she wrote, "by hate and against the autonomy of the monasteries". The duke not only granted the abbey the pastureland, but ordered the Cardinal to explain his intentions concerning the closure, which he perceived as a prohibition of trade and thus an interference with the civil powers. In the tone of his letter, Sigismund regarded the bishop as his chaplain, which made the Cardinal hopping mad. The guard around the convent was doubled and the duke's messengers were made to wait several hours.

Verena used Sigismund against the Cardinal while relying on the strong desire the prince had to preserve his powers over the ecclesiastical world. At least that is how we, the captain of the guard and I, interpreted the events, for it was later that we learned that the duke was connected with Gregory of Heimburg. Verena had moreover won over the duchess to her cause and the latter was busy maintaining her husband's natural fervor in favor of the "independance" of the monasteries, that is to say, of their subjection to the duke.

When the decree of closure took effect for the Castle of the Sun, the sisters wanted to have the document studied by a competent man, by a lay canonist in fact, the baron of Velseck himself. Nonetheless, the visit prescribed by the Cardinal's decree was conducted and well conducted by two Benedictines of Tegernsee, Bernard of Waging and Michael of Natz. The latter reported what we already knew: although more discreetly, the monastery's businesses were

continuing, with the complicity of the duke's messengers, and the choir sisters' lovers, for the price of a few silver coins, easily passed through our guard.

As for me, my irrational remorse was gradually being transformed into rational remorse. But even so, I didn't have the courage to confess.

The Cardinal redoubled his efforts at negotiation. On the pretext that it would be preferable to appoint a noble from the region, he withdrew me from the affair. The provost of Stuttgart, John of Westernach, finally got Verena and her family to decide to resign her functions in return for a decent pension. The provost, in accord with the Cardinal, had reached an agreement with the inhabitants of Bruneck and those of the valley of Ennenberg to pay the abbess an allowance of one hundred Bernese marks and had entrusted the interim direction of the abbey to the dean. But Verena, supported by her sister nuns, retook control of the convent. The Cardinal even had to send men-at-arms to the convent to the dean, who had been imprisoned in a dungeon. To ensure her protection, they brought her to the Poor Clares of Brixen.

On the first of August, the Cardinal demanded Verena's written submission, but the abbess appealed to the pope. The Castle's resistance caused an uprising among the Poor Clares; they now threatened both their abbess and the dean of the Castle of the Sun. The Premonstratensians of Wilten, who were well along the way to achieving the reform, retreated. In all of its rigor, the closure was nowhere accepted, and the Cardinal felt the nobility's anger brewing.

On the 19th of October, 1454, the pope's bull finally arrived. It rejected Verena's appeal and ordered the Cardinal to depose the abbess immediately. The latter appealed to Sigismund who loaned her a powerful guard of crossbowmen as well as three knights with their escort. Our guards had to take up defensive positions.

The Cardinal, still supported by the pope, responded with a sentence of excommunication against Verena. This deprived the abbey of the taxes paid by the peasants for the services of prayer. As the abbey's candles were extinguished in token of eternal damnation, Sigismund appointed Balthazar of Welsberg, with the assignment of looking after the nuns. Welsberg possessed a strong army of nearly two hundred men who extorted the taxes for the castle by force and brutality. Everything seemed to be leading us toward an open war with the nobility.

Long before these events, Bella and Catherine had, as they wished, progressed in their noviciate with the Poor Clares of Brixen, the convent where the dean of the Castle of the Sun was being protected, a rather dilapidated abbey in the heart of the town. It accepted burghers' daughters and peasant girls in the area who had sufficient dowries. Catherine was ready to pronounce her vows, but her mother, feeling that she first must be given time for her soul's wounds to heal, forbade her.

Bella had anticipated neither the Cardinal's intervention, nor her family's mediation: she had directly proposed to the baron of Velseck sufficient for him to

consent to free Catherine. But the adolescent was in such a state of terror and Bella in such a state of poverty that the Cardinal's intervention was necessary for them to be accepted at the Poor Clares' convent without a dowry and under protection.

The noble lady made such an impression at the convent that she was elected abbess even before she had pronounced her vows. A dispensation was granted her by the Cardinal, her bishop. Catherine was barely beginning to leave her cell, but never ventured into the courtyard or the garden. At no time did she want to relate what had happened after her abduction, and no longer aspired to anything but the silence of reclusion.

The Cardinal asked me to accompany him to the convent because he wanted to meet with Bella on the subject of the reform. It was in the garden, amidst the flowers, that this encounter took place, which would undermine my convictions once again.

After he had officially entrusted her with the mission of reforming the convent, Bella wanted to inquire about the way to do it.

- Where to begin? she inquired. The women here know, for the most part, neither how to read nor write. They go to Mass like the Roman women went to the temple, with the aim of adding a little magic to a life that seems very sad to them and heavy.

After several practical instructions I no longer recall (beautiful women have the property of distracting my attention), the Cardinal launched into a parable whose image still haunts me.

- There was in a village, he recounted, a pendulum that regularly but delicately struck a glass bell in which a rare pearl was suspended. The bell resounded so pleasantly that the people of the region were continually singing festive songs. This is the power of music. The glass bell had the exact proportions prescribed by savants to express the harmony of the entire universe. In the cosmos, each part is always a reflection of the whole, but when the proportion between the part and the whole is perfect, the part enables us to hear something of the music of the cosmos itself. That is what meditation is: listening to the resonance of the Cosmos in our own soul. But if the glass bell breaks, how are we going to put ourselves in tune with the whole? Each element begins to wander aimlessly, and it's a catastrophe. The Church has failed. The bell of most men and women is broken. It is through the heart that we must begin.

As simply as that, this history resolved two great enigmas in my mind. First, I didn't understand how the Cardinal could lead the active life of a prelate, which would have exhausted anyone, an intellectual life worthy of the greatest philosophers, and an interior life that seemed uninterrupted. This came, I believe, from his keeping his heart in good condition. The Cardinal had what I didn't have: a united heart. It is also this, I believe, that explained the second enigma: why couldn't I truly love a woman? My heart had been broken and my reason was

out of its natural place; it was no longer anything more than a reason subjected to my contradictions, to my divided heart.

- But how to educate the heart? Bella asked. How to reunify it?

- How did it happen in you? The Cardinal turned the question back on her.

- I was still little, Bella recounted, when I felt my heart for the first time. I was running at full speed, because my brother, out of mischievousness, wanted to put a toad in my dress. He had already stopped for quite a while, but I was running as if I were going to fly away. I felt myself getting lighter and lighter. The mountains became luminous, the trees sparkling, the fields radiant with flowers. My heart, I believe, entered for a moment into resonance with the beauty of the world. That's all, that's the whole story. Later, I tried to regain that moment.

- The pieces of the heart, the Cardinal observed, are like lovers: if we lessen the forces that separate them, they naturally come together again. It is not spiritual grace that is deficient, but there are a million trivialities that keep and maintain the heart's fragmentation. It is sufficient to lessen them. To re-form unity is the true reform.

- But if the heart loves a woman? I asked.

The question came spontaneously out of my mouth. Bella raised her eyebrows as she looked at me, but couldn't stop herself from smiling whereas I couldn't avoid blushing.

- The attraction between the sexes has nothing worthy of scorn about it, the Cardinal responded. But married life achieves harmony only if each heart is unified to begin with.

His smile seemed to conceal a strange secret. Had he known love in the past? Did he carry in secret the memory of a woman?

The Cardinal had to leave us for another matter. He ordered us to prepare a reform plan for the Poor Clares. This plan had to be discussed in detail with all the sisters, the servant sisters just as much as the choir sisters. But he insisted that the community's mission of contemplation be maintained. "For", he said, "faith, even if it is a state of the intelligence, has no effective existence unless the heart is unified. And unity is possible only if one chooses honestly. Indecision breaks the heart."

This being said and the intention to reform clearly proclaimed, the cold war that the duke was waging against the Cardinal didn't cease for all that. On the contrary, it took on uncontrollable proportions.

The Cardinal had made known to the Freundsberg family his intention to buy back the presidial of Steinach and the seignury of Matri. But, at Sigismund's instigation, the family refused. The nobility obviously took the duke's side. The

Cardinal was given a papal bull so as to make his rights respected. Sigismund saw this bull as a second declaration of war. Welsberg's men killed three peasants who refused to pay their taxes to the Castle of the Sun. Bull Head was secretly preparing a peasant revolt.

Sigismund had appealed to a future council in order to gain a little time. Everyone knew that the nobility was ready to rise up and protect its most lucrative ecclesiastical institutions. I don't know if it were the gnawing worry his diocese was giving him, or simply the mountain air, but the Cardinal was increasingly suffering from gout. Despite his pains and the climate of tension pervading all the diocese, he dictated over several nights his *Conjectures on the end of time*, the *Mathematical complements* and a long and magnificent letter to the Abbot of Tegernsee, Gaspard Aindorfeer, which he entitled *The Vision of God*.

The capture of Constantinople

A messenger arrived in haste. He announced that the cardinal Isidore was arriving from Constantinople with tragic news. We had already received by courier news of his mission in which he related the hesitations and pitfalls in the application of the conditions of Union of the Two Churches: that of the East and that of the West.

At the time of the council of Ferrara, the Cardinal had devoted himself body and soul to reconciling the parties. He had been in the pope's delegation to Constantinople. He had learned about their customs, their traditions and their theology. He had brought the emperor and the patriarch back to Italy, he had had discussions with them, he had pinpointed the areas of agreement. It was on his return, on the ship rocked by the winds, that he had, according to his expression, "the intellectual illumination" of learned ignorance.

He believed it was healthy and good for the Church of Rome to be enriched by Greek traditions. A continuous dialogue would be to the two cultures' advantage.. However, the Turks were nearing Constantinople. The patriarchs didn't have much choice. The Latins were showing their strength and making no compromises. The Greeks could not achieve unanimity on such unilateral concessions. Bessarion finally proposed a rather vague formula which awarded the Roman pope a whole list of titles but preserved, without naming them, the patriarchs' rights and privileges. The Greek delegation received 19,000 florins and promises of support against the Turks... The Greeks obviously were going to be hesitant about accepting such a treaty of union.

Through Isidore's intervention, the pope Nicholas V had obliged Constantinople to recognize and proclaim the Union if it wanted help from the West. The legate had successfully accomplished a first step: in the emperor's presence, the Union was proclaimed in the course of a solemn mass celebrated at Saint Sophia. But some Greeks had left the church even before the sermon to signify their indignation and some let it be understood that they preferred Mohammed's turban to the pope's tiara. We feared a rebellion. But the legate Isidore's announcement was going to be much worse.

The legate entered the Cardinal's salon accompanied by a man who called himself Cimabue, a painter at Constantinople. Isidore and Cimabue wore, with no distinction between them, pilgrims' capes, wide-brimmed headgear adorned with a scallop shell, and were leaning on pilgrims' staffs. The Cardinal welcomed them warmly and had food and wine brought to them. They were content with bread and water.

- Constantinople has been conquered...

This was all that Isidore could say, so oppressed was he by emotion. He signaled his companion to continue.

- The Turks surrounded the City, Cimabue started to relate, the siege lasted fifty-two horrible days...

- But on the Pera side, the Cardinal interposed, the Turks couldn't close the siege even so.

Pera was Constantinople's twin city, on the other side of the Golden Horn, connected to the capital by a bridge of stones.

Isidore let these words fall: The Genoese of Pera have betrayed us.

- They were afraid of the 150,000 Turks encircling Constantinople, Cimabue continued. They feared their monstrous bronze cannon that spat out half-ton marble balls, they dreaded their wild yells and their water cannon. Their fleet surrounded the two sides of the triangle...

- But no one can enter the Golden Horn, the Cardinal observed, the enormous chain cannot be broken.

- You're right, Cimabue continued. But that's not taking trickery and treason into account. While Pera was still sleeping, the Turks transported seventy twenty-oared caiques on well-greased wood rollers from the Two Columns Bay to the Golden Horn, passing behind the Genoese city...

The Cardinal grew pale and silent, and as for me, the word "treason" resounded in my head like a blacksmith's hammer on the anvil. Cimabue continued his account:

- The night before the assault, during the evening procession improvised in fervor to bring divine intervention down upon the city, it had rained drops so enormous they might have been calves' eyes. The soil became soft and the monks who were carrying the Virgin grew unsteady on their legs. The enormous monument fell head over heels into the mud. Everyone was filled with anxiety. For weeks, the double rampart was regularly smashed by the monstrous Turkish cannon which was always aimed at the same weak point between the Charisios gate and the Saint Roman gate. Every night, the breaches were filled with bags of stones, bundles of wool, and barrels. But every three hours, the canon reopened the wound. The head of the mercenaries succeeded, and with such skill!, at bursting the Turkish weapon open by sending a ball straight into its maw, already stuffed with powder. It made no difference, Mahomet II, the Grand Turk, melted the bronze of his cannon down to make two smaller ones.

- Even so, Constantinople was a master of Greek fire, flame-throwers and sulfur grenades, I said.

- There was a desperate lack of pitch oil. The munitions were insufficient and the gunpowder weapons were getting scarce. Constantinople had only ballistas, catapults, and bombards. No, Constantinople was praying, for everyone knew that only heaven could do anything. The very night when the Grand Turk was sounding the trumpet for the first assault, the residents of the city had prayed with zeal and ardor at Saint Sophia and some orantes were still singing there. Unable to sleep, the girls of the noble class and the young mothers had assembled at Saint Theodosia church. A number of them had their babies and their children with them.

The painter couldn't hold back his tears and seemed to hesitate about the direction of his account. The Cardinal looked at him with benevolence. The artist could not keep himself from going where, I think, he did not want to.

- Among them was Irene, the most beautiful of the nobles, whom I had begun to paint, Cimabue continued in a hesitant tone, as if he were advancing on a stormy sea. She was seventeen. Her father traded in perfume and she gave off a most delicate bouquet of orange flowers. She was not uninterested in me and, since I was from a good family, nothing prevented me from hoping.

The man was visibly a practitioner of apatheia, the asceticism of tranquillity, but when he pronounced Irene's name, it seemed as if, though there were gentle tears on this side of his face, on the inside blood was flowing from a fissured heart. Even so he was smiling, and a weakening of his voice revealed that the story he was telling was unfailingly supported by an incessant prayer of the heart.

- Irene was at Saint Theodosia, Cimabue continued.

He took a deep breath and was silent for a moment.

Regaining his spirits, the painter went on:

- A Turkish emissary had come before midnight with a final proposition for the emperor: "If you agree to leave the city," the Grand Turk advised, "and hand over the keys to me, I will leave you Morea and we will remain friends." Constantine dismissed him with these words: "The Turk has slashed our fine fur coat. He has caused our house to collapse upon our heads. Being his neighbor is like being neighbor to a raven." The emperor was not defeated, far from it! He had witnessed encouraging signs from heaven: the explosion of the Turkish cannon, a wooden castle burned, and Turkish sappers had been roasted like devils in a tunnel they were trying to make. However, it was from the Saint Roman gate side that the attack was concentrated and the game was still far from over.

Three times the head of the mercenaries, the captain of the knights and a handful of Greek barons had succeeded in repelling the assailants. They had closed the gates on the city side so that the mercenaries, caught between two walls, could neither retreat nor flee. For my part, I knew that it was all over. So I took refuge in Saint Theodosia next to my dear Irene. We didn't hear any of the clamors, the

trumpets, the panpipes, the cymbals and the cries of the dying. In the church glittering with candles and adorned with roses and pomegranate flowers, the grand duke's daughters were singing. Irene and I were in prayer before the altar. We had promised to kill each other rather than be captured.

During this time, the first tide of bashi-bazouks had succeeded in climbing the ladders. There were veritable clusters of the black devils, more than a hundred per ladder. The defense repelled them, and they were thrown backwards. The culverins and the rampart cannons fired. But each time, other ladders and other bashi-bazouks. These devils were armed only with slingshots and knives. Their numbers were such that they filled the trenches with their dead and wounded. We had to send more than thirty of our strongest men with forks in order to free up the trenches. But other waves of bashi-bazouks were arriving. Surprised by the city's resistance, some bashi-bazouks sought to flee, but the chaouchs were waiting for them and slit their throats at the cemetery. Flesh was needed to fill the ditches.

The Turks, however, had other kinds of fill. They had flat carts, barrels, faggots, beams and poles which they piled up, holding them together with corpses, wounded, and bags of earth. Some bridges having thus been made, the Grand Turk sent his furious lions, the Anatolian contingents, heavily armed. These are religious fanatics who want more than all else to kill the "Christian dogs" for the glory of Allah. They are suicidal and not only do they not fear death but they seek it. The resistance began to weaken. Through a breach made in the scarp, over three hundred of them rushed toward the city. The head of our mercenaries and the Genoese welcomed them with blunderbusses; not one survived.

It was then that the Grand Turk sent in his janissaries, his elite army who can pierce a heart with a musket ball or slit a throat with a single thrust of a yatagan before you could yell, "Watch out!". They are like Lucifer's lightning-bolts. This time, our Genoese mercenaries drew back, and some janissaries penetrated the peribolus. It was hand to hand. Many Genoese were killed, and others took flight. The chief of our mercenaries asked for help from the Charisios gate side. In their haste, the soldiers who were securing the Circus portal didn't think to close it again. A number of janissaries came through it and managed to surprise the defenders from the rear. Their numbers and their agility got the better of the strength and courage of our troops. Some janissaries had already succeeded in unfurling Mohammed's standard on the imperial palace.

The chief of our mercenaries was struck by a ball that passed through his coat of mail. He had consented to be shut up between the two walls in order to prevent his soldiers from fleeing, but now he cried out to the emperor to open the gate. The latter refused. The chief yelled and the king consented. It was then that the emperor took off his royal regalia, keeping only his scarlet boots and his weapons, and leaped into the melee. It was no longer an emperor advancing, but a raging warrior charging. He struck out on every side but fell, mowed down. The position was taken.

The Turks got over the rampart. They unlocked door after door from the inside. The massacre and pillage was going to begin. The crowd was running in every direction but most of them went to take refuge in Saint Sophia, praying to God. The church was full to bursting. For more than an hour, through the invaders' vulgar laughs and the victims' desperate cries, they massacred, beheaded, and trampled everything that moved. A Vizier witnessed the carnage and gave the order to stop and to kill only the children and old men. It was then that plunder and desecration were added to massacre. Girls, women, and teenage boys were raped on the altar, they threw the holy relics to the pigs and seized the gold and silver boxes.

The three hundred priests who lived in the basilica's outbuildings put on their most beautiful ornaments. They entered the church singing. They were beheaded one after the other. The children were torn from their mothers and immediately strangled. Cries and tears filled the church. The confusion was such that I lost sight of Irene. I was running on all fours on the ground, the heads were rolling in the hair, I was slipping on blood, it was atrocious. I found myself on the other side of a tiny bronze door that gave access to the foundations. I closed the door behind me; the silence was instantaneous. I had lost Irene.

It was Isidore who continued the account:

- They found Constantine's corpse. His head was brought to the Grand Turk. They placed it on a silver tray mounted in a glass case which forty virgins and forty young boys escorted as far as Asia Minor, Arabia and Persia. Rome had abandoned us. Rome betrayed us.

A leaden silence weighed upon us.

The confession

We were at the Benedictine monastery of Tegernsee on the road to Regensburg. Present with us were the monastery's abbot, Father Denys Rijckel, and Bella. The Cardinal wanted to discuss with them some essential points relating to spiritual progress. Constantinople was no more. Islam threatened. Christendom was being worn away from the inside by the rivalry of powers. When a form of civilization is threatened on every side, its salvation is within, in its ability to pass over to other forms, to adapt without disappearing. The return to inner sources allows an identity, whether it be personal, national, or religious, to pass through time and even be enriched by foreign forms. Such was the idea of reform now. To unite the mind of the East and that of the West in a flexible spirituality able to pass through time and, in doing so, inspire cultures.

For the Cardinal, to multiply the sources of sanctity was a necessity. These could be monasteries, villages, families, persons. Each source must constitute a kind of huge well capable of quenching an entire region's thirst. Each of these sources must learn the mastery of joy and thus be knowledgeable in the art of descending to the bottom of its own "inner cistern to bring living water up from it". Without that water, the Church was lost. Every religion, whatever it might be, has a spiritual existence only because of its deep-sea divers. Religion is nothing other than a psychology of the deepest of depths and an experience of the abyss. In the deepest of depths, all religions touch the same "shadow of unknowing, source of learned ignorance and of hope". It is only on the surface that religions differ, because "for the sage, joy is unfathomable and sadness is as light as flakes of snow." It is not a question of saving "our religion", but of keeping the soul attentive to consciousness thanks to the Gospel.

It was a cold and gloomy evening late in the fall, and we were all five of us in a small drawing room next to the kitchens and a fire was warming us. The glow from the blaze splashed over our faces. Bella had, like a monk, pressed her head into the hood of her cassock. I had hoped for a look; I only got a smile.

Since the tragic encounter with Isidore and Cimabue, the Cardinal ate little and spoke even less. He was entirely within his meditation. The grim news he received from Peter, the captain of our guards, on the subject of the nobles' resistance pushed him even further into silence. If there were a man at the bottom of the cistern, it was surely he. He had asked me many times: "What sins, what deviations are placing the Church in such a precarious state? What is the source of wars? Why must we so often have to begin all over again?" I cited authors, hazarded opinions. He listened to me and dove back down again.

Is there any joy in the deepest of depths? To see his face become so grim, you might well doubt it!

That evening, he didn't say a word, but stared at the fire. One might have said he was looking for answers in the flames. But the flames didn't speak, so the abbot of Tegernsee ventured the first question:

- How does it happen that love for religion, the mother of hope, is the greatest cause of wars?

Father Denys threw a log into the fire, which sent off sparks; the Cardinal, still standing next to the fire, turned his gaze away from the flames for a moment and tried out this response:

- I don't know, but as soon as the Gospel takes a form, a face, a color, that appearance must give way to another; if not, the fire goes out. A form should lead naturally to a reform, but it grows rigid and leads to a contrary, hostile form. For every idea, an opposite idea. It is like a law of our human condition that a long-held habit becomes a second nature for us, is held to be truth and is defended as such, and this can only lead to an antinomic "truth". We take, then, the log for the fire and defend at the price of blood what is only a piece of wood. And the fire goes out.

- The Church of Christ and the cult of Mohammed would then have sinned by dogmatism, both of them, the abbot ventured.

- But without tradition, Father Denys observed, there is only a succession of flames, nothing that brings security.

- Why do we take our ideas for truth, our religions for faith, our laws for society? I put in. Isn't it because we refuse to accept that everything is mortal, including our ideas?

- Nothing can be absolutely mortal, nothing can be absolutely immortal, the Cardinal went on, life is only possible between the absolutes. An idea is not a form permitting one to sculpt a piece of wood, but the fire itself, generator and multiplier of forms. That is why it is necessary to go to the fire's source.

There was a great silence and he continued:

- Look! The source of each flame is neither white nor black, nor visible nor invisible. Let's stop fighting to save our boats, it is movement that gives life. Let us teach how to dive and swim...

- Yes, all that is very good! I exclaimed. But what's going to happen now?

- The Saracens are going to rebuild their strength, the abbot answered, sharpen their weapons and try one more time to swallow up the West.

- And if these supposed dogmatic motives were only a disguise for the search for gold and power? Bella added. The wars of religion do not differ from the others

by their goal perhaps, but simply by their weapons. The dukes have only arrows and swords, the bishop has, besides that, the command of the invisible at his disposal. I believe it is necessary to become poor like Jesus, like Francis of Assisi. Were it empty of all material attraction and every means of blackmail, who would still want to take hold of the Church? The source of a flame is full of possibilities but empty of riches...

These words gripped the Cardinal. He entered a dangerous reverie that seemed to illuminate all his face, as if he had found what he was looking for. Was he going to pass from thought to action? I feared he was.

We went off to chant None and night swept me away in a troubled sleep. What would happen to me if the Cardinal sold all his goods and became a monk?

The next day, Bella was at her breviary, seated beneath a magnificent walnut tree, but at an angle of the inner courtyard where the sun could warm her without obstruction. She was taking advantage of the noon's full rays. She had slipped her hood down on her sturdy shoulders so that her hair could breathe a little of that mild and limpid air which played around the fountain, lifting leaves and dust.

As soon as I looked at that woman, the rest of the universe with its wars and its darknesses evaporated. There was only her. As the Cardinal said: "The center of the world is always where we are", it was there where she was. The rest served as a stage setting, as a decor: a simple frame for that urge to live that she awoke in me. She had the power to call and to raise up every seed that there was in me, in my mind as much as in my body. She made me dangerously alive.

It was she I had to have as mistress because she alone would know how to sustain my soul as well as my body. As opposed to Verena, that woman would never think to betray me... Yet there was the whole tragedy, since, in order to love, one must even so betray a little. The heart is never unanimous and love for one person requires a certain betrayal of others. Isn't, up to a certain point, loving one person in particular cheating universal love! This is why marriage is always no more than a half-fidelity to the woman. That is what is taught and no doubt she believes it. Verena could blithely dupe whomever she wanted, so she could love me, but she knew no limits and no one could trust her. Bella could be forbidden me for the opposite reason. Would she know how to put to sleep just the amount of universal love needed to open her heart to me? People say I am skilled in the art of numbing scruples with pleasant words... Bella will not be that easy...

I wasn't at her level, I knew it and I should have given up even before I entered the garden. But she was there, seated quietly in an intense light and the grace of her slightest movements touched me to the bones.

I sat down at her side, appearing to be absorbed in a holy book. Despite my decision to court her and my experience in the matter, I couldn't get a single word to come out of my mouth. All the courteous phrases that I knew, and they were many, dissolved in insignificance, so much did the lady contrast with them.

However my soul (I have no other words for it) would have nothing to do with my plan. While I was searching for something pleasing to say, Bella aroused in me what until then I had believed to be only a lifeless dust. I had to admit that there exist in this world winds that have power to resurrect corpses and remains that one has, however, taken great care to bury deeply.

My brain was still searching for the words of a gallant snare when my mouth, to my utter amazement, began to tell everything I had done and with what intention I had done it..

It was a blunt confession, without any justification or beating around the bush. All my venomous scepticism, the baseness of my actions and intentions came out of my mouth: my resentment of my father, my cowardice in the face of every danger, including when my sister was raped before my eyes, my lust for honors, my going to bordellos, my appetite for her daughter Catherine, my treacherous liaison with Verena and my intention to possess her, Bella, carnally. All was unveiled, all was resting naked at her feet while tears, coming from I know not where, slid along my grimacing face.

If one were to see me then, they might have said I was an actor who, rather than do the prescribed tirade while firmly holding his plaster mask before his face, was entirely revealed to the light of day: pathetic, spineless, lecherous. There was, it is true, an unctuous and proud Henry still standing in front of her, but this was no longer anything more than a statue. A child had collapsed in tears while revealing without reserve his heart made of rags and wretchedness. The wrapping had burned off; the human matter was there, swarming with vilenesses.

And she was there in front of me, surprised and yet at the same time not a bit in the world disconcerted, beautiful enough to tear the sky, smiling and compassionate like a mother, still more, as if she knew man in his nudity and under the implacable light of day.

- Truly, Henry, she said to me, you move me. So much light today!
I no longer saw her. All my life passed in judgement for a second time. But more brutally still. It was as if my heart were being torn in front of me, emptying itself of its contents in this way. I think that, had Bella scorned me, I would have thrown myself in the well in order to make my heart, this inextricable knot of perversity, disappear from the earth. She doubtless understood this and firmly took my hand.

- My friend, she said to me, it is because the light has entered in you that you have poured out your sins before me. But the light doesn't just accuse, it makes fertile. Winter is done, Henry, springtime is going to begin.

I was dumbstruck, unable to utter a sound. Not only did she not condemn me, but she continued, by her words and by her tone, to calm my soul. She pressed my hand even more strongly and continued.

- Purity is neither in the intention nor in the action. Purity resides in the sincerity of the heart.

- You talk like the Cardinal, I replied, but how do you know that you are not simply inventing what you hope for? You are creating worlds back of this one that explain everything but, alas!, do not exist.

- And you, Henry, how do you know that you aren't inventing the being you fear?

- But how can we know that the universe will end up being good?

Her face was so beautiful... I wanted to step back, but she grasped my hand.

- I am not certain that monastic life suits me, she told me as her eyes lightly touched my still evasive glance. I think I love you, Henry. May God light up our way!

She was offering me what I desired, but against all expectations, I released my hand.

- You're driving me away! she said.

- A man lost in the desert doesn't refuse water, but fears above all else the mirage.

- No! Henry, it's something else. You're rejecting the water. You're refusing forgiveness.

I was undone when the captain of our guards entered the inner courtyard in a mad rush. We had to return quickly to Brixen.

The massacre

On the way, the chief guard explained to us how Verena, supported by her sisters, had regained control of the convent. The dean of the Castle of the Sun had been abducted in the middle of the night during an assault on the Poor Clares' convent by sledgehammer and sword. They had brought her back to the Castle of the Sun, severely flagellated her and chained her without food or water in a dungeon under the latrines, where she was no doubt going to die, carrying with her shameful secrets... A troop of the Cardinal's men succeeded in freeing her. In the meantime a papal bull had arrived in Brixen. The pope rejected Sigismund's appeal and pronounced a sentence of excommunication against the abbess. The duke went into a great rage and ordered that the taxes due the abbey be taken by force.

A strong army had been seen organizing at Innsbruck. At Bruneck, Bull Head didn't intend to let himself be intimidated. The peasants of fighting age had been assembled in the woods, had sharpened their weapons and were ready and waiting for Sigismund's troops. They had set up an ambush below the village, in the valley of Aurino.

When we arrived at Brixen, two barded horses had been made ready for us. They put bronze-plated breastplates on us and we left for the village of Bruneck, followed by the bishopric's small troop and a few knights from Bruneck castle. The objective was to support the peasants, but above all to negotiate and gain time. However, when we arrived at the village on the land cultivated by Bull Head and his friends, on the same spot where the witches had been taken to be treated, a massacre had taken place.

The women, the children and the old men had been bound and shut up in a barn, and it had been set on fire. Nothing was left but ashes and a smell that would make one vomit. The families that yesterday laughed and had fun in the fields were now going off in the wind with the other dusts, blended with them without distinction. We thought we still heard their dying cries, like a song of death, and it broke my heart.

I can't stand death, it puts me into a state of agitation, fever and panic where not a single particle of my mind stays whole. But there, it was even worse. It was my fault, my own great fault. I had gone to bed with Verena, I had betrayed the Cardinal, I hadn't known how to convince him of Sigismund's treacherous nature, of my own treacherous nature, of the treacherous nature of men. I had pulverized my soul's verticality; I was a horizontal man, a flour of a man. So, I myself had set the barn on fire. And the dust of women, of children, of old men was going off in all directions. My eyes were full of it, my hair was full of it...

But death is the great culprit. It is it that makes us criminals.

We see it standing, waiting for us. Wolves show their fangs, epidemics stretch out their jaws, famines widen their abysses. Man hunches over and collapses. He himself becomes a great mouth. Then death arrives from behind, and the dust of charred bodies covers our hair.

What man can avoid rebelling against death whose eternal result is more deaths? Death is a betrayer of life; I was only an auxiliary traitor...

I got down off my horse, and the Cardinal did the same. I had a body when my foot touched the ground, but when I put my hand in the still-warm ashes in the collective pyre of these holy innocents, I no longer had one. I had become a rain, I was raining hot tears on the charred corpses...

The Cardinal wanted to take my hand, but he was shaking. It was as if he were paralyzed. He did, however, look at me. His tears were of blood. He knew that he, he too, was guilty. He knew that to be a man is to be guilty. He knew that he had contributed to the massacre by too much naïveté, by too much trust, by too much goodness. The love of lost causes, that is the essence of evil.

He too was a naked man, a man standing in his ignorance, an ignorance he saw today was criminal. He was a patched-together cross, arms dangling, mouth open. It was the first standing prayer that I saw. Mercy! One might have said he was a mortally wounded warrior shooting his last arrow toward the sky. But the arrow does not return, does not fall back.

That is perhaps the only hope: a howl which never falls back on itself...

- It's my fault, I cried, I betrayed you.

- It's my fault, I didn't listen to you, the Cardinal answered, weeping.

He opened his arms to me, and I fell into his hope.

The Cardinal understood at the same time as I what was going to happen now. Bull Head had no doubt smelled the odor of the fire and he had come... His pain had lit the torch of his vengeance...

We climbed back on our horses and ran to the Castle of the Sun. Our palfreys, large and heavy with their armor, had become waves on the sea. The wind was filled with flames and terror; we arrived at the abbey well before the others. It was too late, what we had feared was before our eyes, once more horrified.

Bull Head had taken his revenge. Everywhere there were bodies of naked men beside the bodies of naked women. Very likely Sigismund's men had come to the convent after the massacre to receive their reward. Some of the servant sisters had been loaned out to them. The wine had freely flowed and the robes had quickly flown off. It was while embracing that most had had their throats cut by the peasants. Blood united them now.

Nevertheless, most of the sisters, Verena among them, had been spared and simply imprisoned in the donjon's cell. The abbess, chained and muzzled, looked at us in a state of shock. The Cardinal released her. She had no wound, but her whole body trembled.

- They are barbarians, she cried, as soon as she understood that none of the Cardinal's men would harm her.

Suddenly perceiving what would follow, for one vengeance leads to another, we returned in haste to our horses and ran to the village.

Too late. On Bruneck's public square, hung from gallows by their wrists, the completely flayed, but still living bodies of Bull Head and twenty-odd peasants were writhing. The reprisals had been merciless. Out of compassion, Peter, the head of our guards, ran them through one after the other with his sword.

The Cardinal got down from his horse, fell to his knees and with his arms extended, cried out through his tears:

- Oh my God! forgive me.

We were slowly returning to Brixen when some of the Cardinal's soldiers came to meet us. They informed us that Sigismund's army was now occupying the bishop's palace and that we were expected at Bruneck castle.

We had been late to all the events, and that is the very essence of ignorance. Man is the one who arrives after the world, who looks at it shocked and without understanding anything. If he could, once and for all, grasp that this delay is his very nature, he would, perhaps, be less dangerous to himself.

Sigismund's troops had surrounded the Poor Clares' convent. Catherine had been led away as a prisoner to the bishop's palace. One might have said that since she posed for her mother as a symbol of Brotherhood, she was like It, ceaselessly held hostage by men who sought only their personal interests.

An ambassador from Sigismund was waiting for us at the Bruneck castle. Sigismund was now demanding Verena's resignation; she was to go to the castle of Villenberg near Innsbruck where her protection would be ensured. He consented, if the Cardinal agreed, to submit to third-party arbitration. He asked the prelate to kindly sign a pact of mutual support. He forgave his bishop for having been the cause of so much bloodshed and kept Catherine with him until the country was safe thanks to the concessions that he, Sigismund, agreed to make.

At the village, the peasants believed that the tragedy came from the witches that the Cardinal had refused to burn. Rumor had it that he had taken pity on the devil. The nobility had humiliated its bishop. He was in fact subject, that day, to the good will of the prince and his barons. The peasants who had believed in him

distrusted him. The burghers, who always went to the strongest, returned to Sigismund.

The Cardinal signed nothing, but made an affirmative gesture to Sigismund's emissary. The latter was satisfied and we were able to get back to the bishop's palace a few days later. Catherine was safe, but she was so upset that her mother, on her return from Tegernsee, couldn't touch her without her beginning to cry out like a panic-stricken animal.

The tour of the villages

The Cardinal decided to go out on muleback from village to village for a tour of the diocese. He wanted to begin at the beginning. "For there is only one way to make the Church, he said, and that is to love and love, like water, runs to the lowest place." He wanted to instruct and be instructed, make his diocese enter him and he his diocese. "The only way to make a cathedral vibrate is from the inside," he said.

Before leaving, he went with his canons to pray in the cathedral. It truly was a beautiful cathedral. The transept between the two square towers was fronted by a magnificent atrium illuminated by two large cloverleaf windows. The wooden vault of the nave, with its dark red beams and its orange-tinted planks, seemed like a fire. This was the place where Catherine prayed; she prostrated herself there like a wounded dove. It was pitiful to see her.

We left for the mountain country on humble mounts without any other escort than three knights who had orders to stay behind us. The Cardinal would have very much liked to have walked in front of the animals like a simple peasant; however, the illness that was thickening his toe and finger joints did not permit him to take such a long trek on foot.

Austria is not a country, it is a monstrous jaw with teeth of rocks and snow, an eerie face with tortured roads between emerald lagoons and shadowy forests, of flaming fields around scattered villages, of mists dispersed by the halberds of titans. To cross it, one had to break a path.

Our animals strained. We felt them shaking. But when they heard a brook toss and turn between the stones, they went toward it with a joy very hard to restrain. This land of rocks seemed to be attempting, in matter, the coincidence of opposites the Cardinal talked about so much: the very high meets the very low, the very mild meets the very harsh, the very white meets the very black. In that enormous jaw open to the sky we often lost our strength, lost the cohesion of our minds, lost the immediate goal of our journey, lost the sense of proportions... Austria was swallowing us whole. We needed to get lost in it, sow in it our sweat, our tears, our labors, our hopes.

I no longer remember the order of events. I don't remember the great sermons in the chapels, the churches or the cathedrals, nor the speeches, nor the instructions.

I simply remember a few small drops of time when the greatness of things seemed to prohibit all mediocrity.

... Near a fountain where some peasants were having their noon meal, after they had asked us for a little bread, there was a magical moment when these uncultured men opened their hearts. The Cardinal left them with this word that, no doubt, they would understand only through the work of centuries:

- God, he said, looks through all the looks of men. By himself, God cannot see his creation since it is temporal. So God looks through our eyes, here in this very moment. Have mercy on God. Make him see what is most beautiful in the world, feed him all that is beautiful in this world. For God, to see is to take and to take is to be. So give being to God, give him body, for God suffers from lack of the world.

... To an old village priest who was cultivating his vegetables behind his hut, he said:

- Every being is the whole of being, all the universe is in each one of its parts, that is why God looks at each being as if he were the whole of creation.

... At a few leagues from this village, while our mules were climbing a very steep path, he stopped and gestured to me to go on beside him. I was particularly sad because I was thinking of Bella who might never forgive me.

- God burns with love for you, for what you really are. All those who don't forgive you don't forgive you because they don't see you. So how do you see yourself, Henry?

I was taken aback and couldn't answer. So, as he continued, he showed me the mountains:

- But what is seeing God but being seen? Look at the mountains, and forgive God.

... While having lunch with a group of women in the middle of a wheat field, after reciting the Angelus and explaining the Our Father, and while some of them were dispersing and others were nursing their babies, at an unexpected moment, but precisely the one when the word would be at one with the glory of the moment, he said:

- Seeing, for God, is to be touched, it is to move, and to move is the Cosmos, it is its way. Seeing never covers all that is created. Your babies look at you with emotion, and you look at them with a feeling that envelops them completely. It is the most divine circle in the world: to see and to be seen. Between the two is the experience of love and not the security of a knowledge.

... On the outskirts of a small town, a group of clerics had much to say about everyone's vices and sins. They wanted the Cardinal to bring a little order and religion... However, the Cardinal did not speak, and the clerics stopped shouting. Then they realized that the Cardinal was looking at the sky. In the bright blue sky, there was a great festival. The Cardinal said to them:

- Man sees what he can see. The one who looks at the creation with indignation will find something to be indignant about; the one who looks at creation with joy will find joy. The face of creation wears the mask that looking puts on it. This is why creation is covered with scars, pains and contradictions. And nature bears everything with patience because it knows that by repeatedly looking, one will surely end up by seeing.

... Very early the next day, we left that city. The sun had barely risen. We might have thought we were surrounded by insurmountable walls, but a shaft of light from the rising sun's side showed us the col we had to take. After the midnight office, I had questioned him about the wall of unknowing, but he hadn't replied, he had simply indicated by a gesture that he was going to think about it. We were walking side by side and he began:

- I spoke of a wall, because the universe is all God, but in a contracted way, and man is the whole universe but on a smaller scale. So, the intelligence has access only to analogies; one sees only the expression, never the source. The intelligence cannot encompass its own source. If we could stop taking our analogies for truths, everything would go better.

- But, I replied, how might God give himself to me, since I know only his shadow?
- By giving yourself to yourself. Accept yourself, Henry, accept yourself with all the love you're capable of... I need to make the Church, make brotherhood. Don't you see that the world doesn't have brotherhood and it is dying from it? So accept yourself completely. Become all that you are, I ask it of you, we owe ourselves to each other. If the world is deprived of you, it goes badly.

- But I am unable to accept myself otherwise than in a woman. I feel as if I need to return from where I came in order to remake myself completely...

He didn't let me finish.

- So enter that love without reservation.

There were immense silences, sunbeams and rains, sufferings and joys, severe looks and joyful looks; Austria truly is the entire universe in a contracted state.

... We were on the return trip, very close to Innsbruck and we were dining with a chaplain from Sigismund's clan. Despite the darkness of draperies and gilt there was, between the libations of wine and the aroma of fowl, a moment of peace.

- Do you want to exercise God's function? the Cardinal asked the chaplain. Here is his function.

And he began this prayer:

- "God of reconciliation, what I understand cannot satisfy me, what I don't understand can't satisfy me, but what I understand without understanding allows me to love. Give us the gift of loving and we will be the Church."

If he had spoken at other times, in other places, in different seasons or in another tone, they would have thrown him into a pit as a madman. But he knew how to sow between the rocks and harvest before the frost. He knew the art of extracting the diamond from the bottom of the darkest mines. He had preached in almost all of the churches, he had debated with the priests and abbots, he had eaten with the peasants most of the time, he had visited the guilds, he had taken an interest in business. The tour had lasted for seven seasons; the plowing was deep, we hoped.

Yet the nobles remained polite, but no more than that. It was a truce rather than support. An incomplete truce moreover, since other uprisings had taken place, nipped in the bud severely by Sigismund's army. People knew what had happened at Bruneck and in several other villages, and yet Sigismund was seen as the one who had known how to put an end to the escalation and who, as a good prince, had negotiated in his bishop's favor at the very moment when he could have crushed him.

The Cardinal took the measure of his strengths and sought reconciliation, but he was wounded and that made the great houses smile. Save for a few families, it was not on this ground that he had made his advances. It was among the inhabitants who had something to gain and little to lose, those who needed hope and the Gospel, that he conquered hearts. He did, however, pacify every potential uprising.

Something had changed; the Cardinal no longer wanted victory, but peace.

During the journey, he had, here and there, gleaned hours to read and take notes. On our return he dictated to me mathematical complements and theological complements.

We were approaching Brixen. Some children came to meet us, running and yelling. The cathedral was nothing more than ruins. The fire had ravaged the roof entirely, and a great number of stones had fallen into the interior of the nave. They had succeeded in getting poor Catherine out of the flames. She wasn't injured, but disappointed to still be in this world.

Our chief of the guards arrived on horseback. He firmly believed that the fire had been lit by Velseck's clan, but it was impossible to find a witness ready to compromise himself. The Cardinal, who wanted more than anything else to safeguard the peace, refused to go any further in the investigation.

We learned that the pope, Parentucelli, had died and been replaced by an old man of 77, Alonso Borgia, from the powerful Borgia family near Saragossa. He was the only candidate who could win over, for a brief time, the Orsinis and the Colonas. He had already sent an army against the Turks. He had arrived at Rome with a great number of Borgias, had entrusted them with the raising of an army for the defense of his patrimony. To other Borgias, he had delegated responsibility for the Curia. He had already elevated to the cardinalate three of his "nephews", who were really his bastards, including a certain Rodrigo whose public immorality was appalling.

The master of princes

I was alone in the episcopal carriage and hoped that it would hold together until Innsbruck. The wheels had been replaced many times, but the axles squeaked and the leather was cracking. The mountain roads have the quality of dislocating the works of man if not the coherence of his mind. Here in Austria time passes more swiftly than elsewhere. For the carriage as for me, appearances were taking a turn for the worse; it could be seen from the wear on the padding and the joints. This poured bitterness into my arteries. The sky, the peaks, the crests, the massifs, the woods, the fields, the lakes, all of the High Adige was sleeping in a deep shade of gray. I used to be thirty, I was fifty.

The bitter is a taste that develops with age. To comfort ourselves, we say to ourselves that in remaining behind the extravagant breakthroughs of Florence and Pisa, we are in a better position to avoid the worst blows. But it is the opposite that occurs. The young, impulsive and enthusiastic man passes in front of us, breaking the shell, seizing the fruit and leaving the bitter to the hesitant philosophers.

We walk behind Cassius, Brutus, Caligula, and Nero, in a trail of blood... Constantinople is no more. One hundred fifteen Roman and Byzantine emperors have passed, of this number fifty-four were assassinated, six were expelled, six were forced to abdicate, five committed suicide, two were struck by lightning and one was buried alive... We walk behind madmen and assassins who have established our civil services, our schools, our churches... Through them a few sages have passed, but they walked slowly, stayed behind, explained the tragedy and drank the bitterness. Socrates was surely right to say that wickedness runs more rapidly than death. In fact, it precipitates it, hastens it, embraces it. Philosophy is the bitter digestion of men of action's undigested rage.

So it was that the Cardinal and I went behind, drinking the blood and drafting the philosophy of our defeat.

Even so, in these first days of summer, the Cardinal wanted to take the initiative. This was the essence of my mission. He had admitted that he no longer knew anything of Sigismund's intentions. He had not succeeded in predicting the blows, was no longer dodging anything, and feared other massacres. We had to make use of the truce. Discover where the next attack would come from. Above all we needed to grasp, beyond the goal pursued by the prince, the measure of his determination.

During the winter, we had been informed that Sigismund was buying, for a very high price, the services of Gregory of Heimburg. The man was dangerous, we knew it, but rational all the same and strategic. No doubt he was seeking to make his prince a man unrivalled in his kingdom, but could he go so far as putting in

danger the balance of forces that, between Italy, Germany, Switzerland and Austria, remained precarious? For lack of unity, it was, however, this balance of forces that closed the door to the Turks.

During the summer, the great Hungarian knight John Hunyadi and his army of crusaders had won a stunning victory under the walls of Belgrade and the Cardinal had organized a procession of thanksgiving. Yet there too, it was only a truce. Everyone knew that the enemy would never give up. Was the Turks' limitless determination going to give Sigismund a sense of proportion? Would Sigismund realize in time that the Turks would arrive from the side of Vienna, and that if he wanted to defend himself and protect the empire, he had to maintain the alliance with the Swiss, the Germans and the Italians? He must not, then, offend the new pope Callistus too much nor the emperor Frederick nor prince Albert. The question was of great importance, not only for peace in Austria, but for the very future of the West.

During our time at university, Gregory had been one of my best friends, so it was normal for the Cardinal to ask me to meet him at Innsbruck with the purpose of gaining time by letting him see that he, the Cardinal, was ready to leave Austria. But that was not the main point of my mission; I was supposed to return as early as possible with the measure of his determination: could the man put in danger, or not, Austria and all the West because he didn't know how to put a limit on the cupidity of his prince?

Gregory received me with his friend and cleric Laurent de Blumeau in one of the most beautiful drawing rooms adjoining the castle chapel. We chatted about this and that, endlessly throwing each other into gaiety by joyful memories that wounded me cruelly... I covered with laughter acts that from now on seemed to me nothing more than despicable. Laurent de Blumeau said nothing and he too laughed when it was appropriate. Every evening, Gregory led Laurent by the hand into apartments that to me remained secret.

Gregory wore shoes of fine leather, an ivory robe embroidered with gold, a heavy chiseled necklace, a hat of fine velvet... De Blumeau too had finery just as beautiful but wore them a little awkwardly and without much pride. I suddenly realized that I no longer wore anything more than a simple cloth tunic, that my hair had lost its color and my shoes were muddy. In my haste, I had even forgotten my family brooch.

They had made a warm room ready for me, with red draperies and a spongy carpet with, in the middle, a thick bed surrounded by a velvet curtain that a servingwoman had just closed with the loveliest of smiles and not without remaining next to the candle for a moment. I was surprised by the indifference this luxury left me in. I felt as if I were a stranger to my own image. I dismissed the servant with a few coins and an air of complicity.

For four days, I had to pretend to be what I had been so that the door would open and Gregory's nature be revealed. We were at the two ends of a large table, and the heavy meal that was supposed to put us to sleep led us gently into

confidentiality. Laurent de Blumeau, seated next to Gregory, remained infinitely discreet and always in agreement with his friend. The night before, I had, furtively, let Gregory and Laurent understand that the Cardinal was planning to withdraw from Austria. Probably that breach was sufficient for more fluidity in the diction. I thought so.

- Your fate touches me, Gregory began. Such a talent in the service of a man, intelligent certainly, but altogether subject to vapors and so stingy that here you are covered with common cloth, without reputation, nor possessions, nor future...

- No other office was offered me and the man is rich and powerful. People even think he is worthy of the Holy See...

- Don't hope for anything in that direction, Gregory retorted. His friend Piccolomini will pass him once again on that terrain. Your prince prefers the Kingdom of God to the world of men.

- You're not wrong, I said to him, hoping thus to oil some loosening locks.

- I might have a much better project for you, he proposed.

- I'm listening, I answered.

- Advising Sigismund, he dared to propose, and not without privileges and prerogatives.

- For what project? I asked.

- Consolidating his kingdom, he replied, shrugging his shoulders.

- Explain that art to me and I will have the talent for it, I promised.

- All one has to do is follow four rules, he started to teach me.

- If I have correctly understood the latest events, the first rule no doubt is to never let a foreign prince gain entrance to the kingdom even in the guise of a pastor. But I don't understand the measure in it all. For rule is one thing, measure is another.

I was taking a very big chance there, but if I didn't go into his workshop, he wouldn't show me its devices. My audacity earned me credit and he opened up a little more.

- Politics has as its basis nothing more than the experience of real men and, as you know, the real man has that quality of always seeking honor and wealth.

- But the virtues! I exclaimed.

- Obviously, Gregory continued, the heroes man talks about are virtuous. That just confirms the thesis, since he draws glory and honor from that image of himself. But whatever the image may be, its driving force is nothing other than the necessity of being above others so as not to find oneself beneath them. From this simple observation the postulate follows that if one allows a foreign prince to enter the kingdom, all the petty nobility and all the big burghers who are sorry to have seen their prince rise over them will join forces with the foreigner. There will be division in the region, rebellion and war.

- But if a second prince turns up, what must be done, how far does one have to go?, I asked him, seeing that he was unsuspecting.

He downed in one swallow a large glass of wine, looked me up and down, and threw this out at me:

- One must never wound a good-sized animal, it will want to take its revenge. The prince must strike with all his strength or not at all.

- That show of force would doubtless encourage the allegiance of the nobles and burghers, but the peasants, the peasant revolts...

He started to laugh, pointed out the service whip in plain sight next to the chimney, and continued:

- The poor are like lambs. You must accustom them to obedience by the rod and the rule of iron, but without spending too much on it. The best thing is to keep them heavily burdened. A cock nearly crushed beneath a bag of sand does not run far. The nobility never submits: it makes agreements. Its alliances go to the strongest, so one must, then, take care to appear that way.

- Isn't that exactly what prevents the Italian princes from holding on to their thrones? I asked.

Laurent poured the wine into Gregory's cup and the wine took its effect, so that our orator gradually began to spill the beans.

- It is the French who say that the Italians know nothing about war. But I, I say that the French understand nothing about politics, for if not, they would never have allowed the Church to be directed by foreigners. Philip the Fair had understood this well, however. If one doesn't want the kingdom to be divided between souls who dream of freedom and bodies bound under servitude, the prince needs to hold the crozier as firmly as the sword. As soon as the bishop stops being the prince's chaplain, the kingdom is on the road to ruin.

- But doesn't the division between the Church and the State lead the great families to greater freedom since they can arrive at a compromise between the two powers?

- There, precisely, is the tragedy. One must never let a kingdom drift toward greater freedoms. A prince who might want to reconquer such a kingdom

couldn't do it without first razing it to the ground. If he doesn't do it, it's the kingdom that will destroy him. No one will be able to forget his dreams of freedom, whatever real benefit the people might receive from their prince. Religion must only serve to postpone the natural thirst for freedom toward an after-life. It is in this that it has value.

- In sum, if I understand correctly, there is no moderation in the application of the first rule.

De Blumeau seemed to sink into himself as he heard my remark. But my conclusion seemed incomprehensible to Gregory. Laurent poured him another large glass of wine.

- The end is not measured, Gregory answered, it is given by nature. Every pack needs a single master, it is the maximum of peace possible for wolves. If one does not submit to this law, the blood flows even more. The end is peace, and peace supposes subjection to one, and only one governance. No sooner does man want to do better than the animal, than he does worse...

Gregory was gradually sinking into drunkenness. He had even caught hold of the hand of Laurent, who was still pouring him wine. I no longer had much time to get him to show his cards.

- And the second rule? I asked.

- The second rule consists of never letting anything new into the kingdom. Nothing is more difficult to maneuver than novelties. The one who introduces them makes enemies of all those whom the old order of things placed in a favorable position, and he will have malcontents as defenders, that is to say, the poor. The poor man, to be sure, doesn't like the stick, but he prefers it to a freedom that would require him to take charge of himself. Accordingly, the one who introduces novelties has for enemies, masters, and for friends, slaves. His fate is sealed.

He ordered another bottle to be opened. The serving maid complied, but nervousness made her spill a few drops on the tablecloth. Gregory struck her brutally. Laurent moved her away. Gregory continued:

- The third rule, he answered, consists of looking good without the burden of being so. Don't you see, dear friend, there is an infinite distance between the real motives for our actions and the virtues with which we array ourselves. A prince who would rule his conduct by the idea he has of men rather than what they are in reality is on the road to ruin. Politics can survive only outside the field of morality. The prince will handle men such as they are but will demand that they behave as he wants them to. He will present himself to them such as they want him to be but will act the way it suits him.

- But, I objected, the prince needs the loyalty of his subjects, and loyalty is only possible in response to an equivalent loyalty.

- What naïveté! The most dangerous thing for a prince is precisely to believe in anyone's fidelity. Fidelity is never more than a provisional agreement. Even if it is necessary to make them believe that you have confidence in a vassal's loyalty, you count only on the fear that you inspire. Men need to believe that they are directed by justice, but know that they are led by force.

- And why? I asked him.

- This reassures the servile vis-a-vis their brothers that they know to be rapacious, Gregory replied without batting an eyelid. Really, how can you trust a good and honest prince when your neighbor is villainous and, if he is not dominated by someone stronger than he is, can devour you? You accept being bitten by the prince because you know that he can cut your neighbor's throat.

- So then, if I understand correctly, I went on, the fourth and final principle can only be the synthesis of the first three: the prince must keep in view only the preservation of his power. To be sure, the prince can and must make his people suffer, but if he wants to stay in power, the evil he does must be circumscribed within a certain limit..

- That reminds me, Gregory responded, of how we were at Heidelberg, in our wine-washed conversations. You said to me, do you remember it?, "A prince dominates a people like a man dominates a woman. He shows her kindness so that she will give in to him, but the stick remains in arm's reach. For even if she loves caresses, she is safe only in the arms of a man able to protect her." And we went to the abbey to find some pretty girls to relieve us.

I was obliged to laugh.

Did I succeed in convincing him?

Enough so that Gregory agreed to let me leave the next day after breakfast.

- So long, Henry, he said to me, closing the carriage door with a broad enigmatic smile.

There was in that smile a point of condescension that was very delicate but sharp as a razor...

On the way back, I had to stop the carriage to vomit. My body felt such a need to purge itself that I thought I was a victim of poisoning. It truly was a question of poisoning, the poisons of the memory. But how can a serpent manage to poison itself with its own venom? For it was there, surely, that my torture was. I had been a serpent, it was my own venom I had gotten from another and on the trip back I was as sick as a dog bitten by a viper!

It surely was me it had been a question of during this trying week. Gregory was, in fact, my spiritual son. It was I who had led him to the highway of princes who fancy themselves local emperors.

I should have been proud of Gregory, and found in him the alliance that would have given me back my nobility and my wealth, but I was vomiting on all fours on the side of a road. I even thought I would faint in a ditch, so much so that the coachman had to come to my aid. Yes, the coachman took me under the arms and I didn't refuse him. If Gregory had seen me soiled this way, covered with mud, flat on my belly in a ditch, picked up by a servant of the third order, he would have had pity on me and lent me his dagger so that I could in all honor scuttle my shame.

In the trap

I hadn't crossed the Brenner Pass when I learned that the Cardinal was detained in the Premonstraterian abbey at Wilten. All the roads leading to it were guarded by Sigismund's men. I ought to have returned to Innsbruck to offer my services to Gregory, which was no doubt what he foresaw. This was probably the meaning of his final smile. He knew that I would find the Cardinal imprisoned in a trap.

Yet the idea of abandoning my friend crossed my mind without even meeting a hook. On the contrary, and to my own surprise, I changed my clothes, put on the most beautiful clerical robe there was in the carriage, rinsed my throat with a little wine, and, on getting down from my vehicle, asked to be brought in to my bishop's presence. They tied my hands behind my back and, not without brutality and derision, pushed me all the way to the Cardinal.

He ordered my liberation with such assurance, and took me in his arms with such a smile, that I thought he was free.

- How happy I am to see you again, Henry, he said as he hugged me.

I learned that the very day I left to meet Gregory, Sigismund invited his bishop to join him in Innsbruck to deal with some important matters. The Cardinal, even as he was heading toward the Tyrolean capital, replied that he could not enter the city because there was an excommunicated person there. The message given him was that the duke had left for Munich and that the baron of Velseck would receive him with orders to settle the matter. One of the duke's advisers was en route and would meet him at Sterzing. Luckily Peter, our captain of the guard, had for a long time been moving his spies all the way up to the northern counties. A woman informed the Cardinal that Sigismund was in fact at Matreil with his partisans, and that they were all disguised as monks. The news was confirmed by our spies' courier and the Cardinal's little convoy took another route.

However, when the Cardinal arrived at Wilten, he found no one to receive him. The baron of Velseck had just left, escorting a duchess who had to go to Munich. At the Premonstraterian abbey, the Cardinal dispatched a courier to Innsbruck, to none other than Perceval, the head of Sigismund's militia. The objective was to solicit an audience with the duke for the next day. Through a messenger the duke replied that, being in the habit of dedicating this day to his mother's memory, he wished to let the Cardinal rest, but would go to meet him at Wilten the day after that. The Cardinal wanted to take the initiative. The next morning, however, four men knocked on the monastery door and asked, in the name of the duke, to be let in.

During this time, Sigismund had assembled two hundred men-at-arms. The captain Perceval, sensing an attack against the Cardinal, slipped away during the

night. No one knew what was going on, but in the morning, Sigismund was wounded in the arm and in the back. The Cardinal resolved to go to Innsbruck. The bishop was ushered in to the great council hall where Perceval, with two coucillors, read him a series of grievances. This took place while Gregory and I were discussing princes and powers in one of the drawing-rooms adjoining the chapel.

The Cardinal did not want to respond right away. He demanded to be heard before the bishops of Trent and of Chur as well as by Albert of Bavaria's counselors. He returned immediately to the Premonstratarians at Wilten. It was the next morning that the four men, captain Perceval and three knights, knocked on the monastery door to be let in in the name of the duke. Sigismund had all the highways occupied. The duke arrived at the monastery around two o' clock, escorted by a powerful troop of armed men. The Cardinal responded to Sigismund with humor, telling him that he was resigned to staying at the monastery on condition that he, Sigismund, come to hear his sermon. He brightened up the meeting so well that the two men drank from the same cup and shared the same loaf. After that the Cardinal invited the duke to the chapel to preach to him, for one brief hour, the mystery of the Holy Trinity.

While the duke appeared to be forcing himself to listen, a man brought him a letter. The duke went out immediately and returned home. After the sermon, Nicholas was asked to go to the bishop's court to give his advice concerning a certain affair that had taken place at Cilly. So he requested a passport from the duke. Perceval promptly brought him one, but a messenger coming from Brixen declared that he was everywhere considered to be a prisoner. It was at that moment that I arrived at the monastery and was joyfully welcomed by the Cardinal.

His happiness has always remained inexplicable to me. The Cardinal had that strange ability to dictate in one sitting a book, a treatise, a sermon or pages worthy of the greatest mathematicians, in contexts of frightening confusion.

I negotiated for the duke's chamberlain to accompany us to Brixen. Which he did. Thanks to spies and after many detours, we were finally approaching the town, safe and sound. A great procession came to meet us. There were people from Bruneck and from all the little villages of the Rienz, others came from Wölkenstein and from the valley of the Grödnertal. I even noticed some dignitaries from the guilds of Bozen and Meran.

Hearing that joy, those exclamations, that euphoric clamor reminded me of Rome and the jubilee, but this time I was part of that joy. I got down from the carriage and got up on horseback behind captain Peter. I let the thrill of the crowd run over my shoulders. It was intoxicating. Truly the Cardinal had succeeded in attracting to himself such a love and devotion that the people formed, from now on, a single body around their bishop. I was proud to be his secretary and his adviser.

The Cardinal ought to have left the carriage, greeted, talked with, and animated this crowd ready to defend him like the arms reflexively protect the head. Yet he remained austere and silent in his carriage. He truly was a man of paradoxes, gay when it was impossible to be so, serious and mute when it was inappropriate to remain that way.

I saw faces weep for joy and not just women; sturdy peasants were entering into hope. From now on, the Cardinal represented a hand extended to protect them from the abuses of the prince...

But in this world, never has a faithful people met a tried and tested chief. When the chief was good, the people abandoned him and when the people were good, the chief abused them. Was it possible that in this place and in this time, a worthy chief might meet a people of merit?

The Cardinal was there, the people were there, but nothing happened. The Cardinal waited to speak until he was in Brixen. The cathedral was nothing more than a blackened ruin. However, the central nave had been cleared so that the Cardinal found a rostrum and the populace, an enclosure. Despite the density of the crowd, the silence was leaden.

- How I wanted to lighten your burden, the Cardinal began. How I longed for the conversion of those who oppress you. But you see me powerless and sad. I love you and your suffering goes straight to my heart. If I could simply bear your yoke... I know very well that you have the courage to fight, but it resulted only in horrible massacres. The time, alas!, is not ripe. One must wait nine months for a child to be born. One cannot hasten its coming. My friends, Jesus came to sow inner freedom, and as long as his seed does not produce its fruit in the majority of human beings, there will not be enough faithfulness, loyalty and perseverance in a people to achieve harmony.

The silence had already been broken. Here and there, rumors and whisperings were heard. Who had set fire to the cathedral? Who was for the Cardinal? Who was against him? However, the prelate continued without weakening:

- Peace depends on the cooperation of men based on harmony and harmony is developed out of love. Now, this love is not at full maturity today. The seed is certainly there, but still fragile! Our enemy is within us: it is the division of hearts. When conscience reaches its maturity in our souls, we will be bound by a love which will surpass emotion, a diligent love, a faithful love. Despots grab us by the pigtail of our own greed and our own fears. So long as we are greedy, they buy us, and so long as we are afraid, they command us. So, I am not among you to attempt a foolhardy act that would lead us to bloodbaths, no, I am with you to participate patiently in your inner ripening...

At the castelet of Andraz

The Cardinal resumed his place in the diocese, but we knew already that he was threatened in his own palace. The duke's spies had bought some servants and even some guards, so it was impossible to know who was with us and who was against us. The Cardinal could be poisoned or stabbed. In addition, the Cardinal's presence was acting like a yeast that was too vigorous for the dough. Some tentative revolts had taken place, and here and there peasants were organizing.

The Cardinal asked for Bella and Catherine. To abandon them was out of the question. Velseck would have taken them hostage again, especially since Catherine was now looked upon as the Cardinal's saint; she didn't eat, she mortified herself in every way and prayed day and night. She was seen in ecstasy in the cathedral, and to have gotten out of the fire unharmed. Rumor circulated that to regain good health, one only had to touch her.

We went back on the road, going down as far as the Klausen gorge. Not feeling sufficiently safe in the craggy castle of Seben, we went back up the Grödnertal and penetrated into the heart of the dolomite massif, at the extreme limit of the diocese, toward the Ampezzo valley, almost in Venetian territory. In the middle of the summer we retreated into the small castle of Andraz, together with what remained to us of trustworthy servants, courriers and men-at-arms.

We were shut up in a rather uncomfortable castle perched so high in the mountains that we were short of breath. The Cardinal had lost everything on every front. His reform, the little he had been able to make of it, was collapsing. His reputation was becoming the laughingstock of the nobility. His failure was having repercussions as far as Rome. He who had been the leader in the reunification of the Church hadn't even been able to keep his footing on the paltry throne of Brixen! Moreover, had he reunified the Church? The East had collapsed under the Turks, and the West was still fighting over the papacy as if it were the emperor's captive concubine. During this time Mahomet was advancing like a crab with steel claws. They would doubtless soon see him from the tops of the towers of Vienna unless he got bogged down in the flesh and the blood of the Serbs. And the Cardinal was beaming with joy!

In fact, I had never seen him so happy. One might have said that his joint pains had flown the coop even while his fingers struggled to turn the pages of his books and he hobbled rather than walked. Epicurus affirms that pain can intoxicate, so I feared that the Cardinal might be drunk.

He was on the terrace conversing with Bella and Catherine. I approached them and, not being able to endure any more of this pious chatter in the midst of such a misfortune, I threw at the Cardinal this question, charged with all my anguish:

- What is there in the world that is so joyful that it makes you lose your sense of reality this way?

- But, my friend, how do you know that these events are such great misfortunes? It's the simple falling of an illusion. And because that illusion is defeated, we just return to reality. We grant too much importance to the power of the hand that sows, and to little to the quality of the seed. So let us return to the seed: the source of the first principle in us which is also the source of the cosmos and all of nature. It is said that this is truth, I agree, but this is unfathomable. It is said that it is goodness, I'd like to believe it, but it is intangible. What I see, on the other hand, what I touch, what seizes me, is that it is beauty. Don't you see the magnificence of the massifs and the mountaintops? Look a little at these two mountain chains that split the ocean of vegetation like giant ships. With their points of ochre rock crowned with white lace, they are getting ready to pick up the sun for the evening feast. Feasts always take place in the evening, Henry, and you want them at high noon. Observe these deep, almost black valleys where all life takes root, the sky so pure and we, floating like sparrowhawks in the middle of this beauty... And we had to weep from just the fact that what we thought was a road is only a morass! The day deepens our appetite and this evening, we will eat and drink all the sap of universal beauty.

- It's a magnificent cross, I grant you that, I objected with a touch of cynicism.

- A redemption, he corrected.

He was between Bella and Catherine, as naturally as if he had been the brother of one and the father of the other. This sight hurt me.

- But I was speaking to you about Gregory of Heimburg, I interrupted. It's war...

- They say that the Chinese have a technique of defense that consists of turning, in a movement of great circular elegance, the aggressor's murderous energy against the aggressor himself... the Cardinal began to answer.

- In the meantime, the duke makes the most of it, I retorted.

- But he can't win, the Cardinal went on. Gregory hit you on the head with a treatise of anti-politics and anti-Christianity: the prince he spoke to you about is the assassin of all that is noble in men and thus of all that there is of the Kingdom in us. Every man is potentially a prince, for it is here that the City of God is.

He led us into a corner of the terrace where it was possible for all four of us to sit down. This time Catherine was close to her mother, but the latter sat almost leaning on the Cardinal. Bella seemed not to take any account of the bitter failure of the prelate she admired so much.

- Follow my reasoning carefully, he continued, looking me straight in the eye, it is a little difficult but of a great importance. When you were at the beginning of your life, there were thousands of possible Henrys before you. A child is an infinity of

possibilities, the future is a sea of virtualities. The future already is in the time and the space that surrounds us, but in the state of potentiality. To make choices, to accomplish actions is to transform the possible into a series of facts. This mountain for example is a fact, a moment of history, this castle is also a fact, a moment in our history. Everything that we perceive, everything visible is the trail of life in the memory of stones, a trail that slowly wears away and fades. Unlike the past which is all of the visible, what is invisible is the substance of the future, the infinitely light seed that will become this or that...

With a gaze full of wonder, he looked all around the horizon. The mountains were in fact magnificent and of such an age that, if we were to subtract the castle where we were, we would no longer have any indicators of our time.

- So, what is space? we asked the Cardinal.

We were all awestruck, the landscape, too powerful in its beauty, seemed to throw out of court in advance any purely geometrical answer about size.

- Materialized space, I mean the mountains and all things, is the memory, the trail of time, the Cardinal answered. Space, apparently empty and transparent, is the whole of possible stories. The divine intellect is presently writing its book in front of us: the visible makes up what is already written, the invisible is the blank page already overflowing with possibilities. The world makes itself and we are participating in it... And we have to lose hope!

The landscape of mountains we were in suddenly appeared to me like a stormy sea: the castle formed our boat and we were going I don't know where. Our eyes, by magic, had succeeded in freezing time in such a way that, for a moment, we savored security because the storm had been immobilized. It was an astonishing spectacle, these waves of stone frozen in their fury. The swells had dashed upwards to the point of tearing the vault of Heaven, then all had been frozen and now the sea was sandstone. I would sincerely have wanted us to be the only living beings in this stopped world.

- The cosmos is only an extraordinary process of spatializing, of the development of a creating seed, the Cardinal continued. In the moment, it is a music; in memory, it is a landscape; for the present, it is a tragedy; in the future, it is an apotheosis. So, and here is the hope I am in, all that the princes think they are crushing moves, widens and expands, for the human heart exists, in such a way that all the princes will soon be submerged and drowned in the Kingdom of justice. There it is, I believe. What the Chinese call the circular law of evil, which ends up creating the good in spite of itself, this is the story of humanity.

- And by what miracle do you know the end? I asked.

- Because the universe is chained to beauty, which lives and multiplies starting from the Source, the inner Home of every soul, including the soul of the cosmos and of nature...

- But death? I objected.

- There is not, in all the universe, an absolute death; there are only displacements and transformations. Every being who disappears here reappears somewhere else. We do not know the lines and connections that join all these states of being, but if they did not exist, the universe would not be one and there would not be this landscape that wraps us in its unified beauty...

- And right there is a magnificent lesson in perspective, Bella continued. The universe is connections and light.

- Because the world is beautiful, the Cardinal concluded, because it is resplendent in proportions that totally astound the soul, the good becomes the obligation of the world...

I remained on the surface of his intuition. I would have liked to have touched the bottom, but I wasn't able.

There were a great number of letters to compose, some destined for the emperor, others for Albert of Bavaria-Munich and for his son John, but most had to go to Rome: Capranica, the members of the Curia and the office had to be advised, as well as the recent pope, Callistus III. Despite this work, the Cardinal had more freedom than usual: he was for all practical purposes prisoner in the county, had only a few books at his disposal for his studies and no populace to edify. He spent his free time with Bella and her daughter. The summer was splendid and the sun, burning hot.

It might have been said that Catherine was rising from her ashes. I heard her laugh at almost every one of the Cardinal's sentences. Her mother had gone back to drawing. Not having what she needed for painting, she made do with quick sketches that she put up on the walls of the dining room so as to be able to look at them from a distance, reflect on them, and go further with her plan for portraying the Church, the Brotherhood of humans.

In all her poses and her movements, Catherine seemed to be the perfect model. Her mother placed her in hollows in the rocks, in stony massifs, in granite crags, on zebra-striped flagstones, in deep dihedrals... A small, still haggard root plunging into the Church's nicks and wounds, that truly was the Church, the Church in spite of the Church.

The Cardinal accompanied them, discussing with them places and postures, plays of light, perspective, the sparkling of the stone, its color, etc. and this annoyed me immensely.

I stayed in my dreary room. Even the idea of accompanying them was unbearable to me. To have to suffer from the spectacle: the Cardinal cheerful and voluble between the two most beautiful women in the land was unbearable. To hear them

chatter, laugh and have fun grated on my ears. A terrible headache kept me from going out. I could no longer stand the light.

The saint

The next day, Catherine had disappeared. We had called out, run along the paths, turned the whole countryside upside down. Three days we looked. No one had seen her. Three days we searched the mountain with torches, no one had heard her. And then, at sunrise, we sat down exhausted next to a well.

- She is not on the mountain, the Cardinal said.

- She's in the village of Andraz! Bella exclaimed after a moment of silence.

It was obvious. During all these days posing, discussing endlessly, floating with the Cardinal and her mother on the summit of the mind's highest mountains, she hadn't stopped talking about the poor, about children, about little ones, about nothings who in the world whisper and work the earth. The Cardinal had recounted to her the lives of the great saints, of those who had melted into the nothing of the world, of those who had espoused the wounds of the earth, of those who had lost themselves in the suffering of men, of those who had peace only in exhausting themselves in the abysses of the world. He had spoken to her about Marguerite Porete and the beguines.

She was no doubt with the poorest in the village of Andraz.

We arrived at Andraz late in the evening. The little village had entered its nocturnal shell. A low wall at the very most protected the town against bandits or armies short of booty; more wasn't necessary because they were all poor. We knew that she was there, probably among the most indigent. It was in the morning that we found her. No, she was not like Jesus at the age of twelve in a temple of hewn stones, instead she was like Jesus at his birth, in the lowest of the low. There was a grotto next to a small marsh, and it was there that the sick, the dying and the poorest of the poor took refuge, those who had no place, those whom the village dogs kept outside the walls. She was there like a flower in a crevice.

We recognized her by her voice. She had burst out laughing and we followed the laugh. The same laugh she had sown at Rome, a little trail of giggles like a fountain on the rocks. She was in the deepest part of the cavern in the middle of a group of children. She was telling them stories. Not true stories, not even tales she had learned, no, stories about nothing, about cats who make hens run, about sheep who are drunk from their mother's milk, about goats who climb on the mountains...

We spent a long time simply hearing her; we didn't want to upset anything. From Bella's eyes ran tears that came from I don't know what blood. What an adventure her daughter had embarked on! The Cardinal had sat down, weighed down by

fatigue. He seemed totally sunk into himself. I don't know how long we remained in a dark corner of the grotto listening to these children's voices.

For one moment I, Henry de Pomert, believed and hoped.

The days passed. Neither the Cardinal nor Bella had tried to remove Catherine from her vocation. But to "give Heaven the means for its function", according to the Cardinal's expression, he asked some reformed sisters from Venetia to come to Andraz to build a small hospital.

The Cardinal was overflowing with energy and seeing that I remained skeptical about "Catherine's beautiful dream", he revealed to me his feeling about this:

- Catherine has made me understand what the Church of the poor was and more than ever I have the desire to protect that Church. It is this that is served by a bishop worthy of that name: to protect in his region the Church that is born from below and wants to grow.

- But the princes have already raped the Church; they have taken it by assault and used it like a whore, for their private interests. A Borgia is on Peter's throne...

- Let's not be discouraged, Henry, our struggle is at its beginning. Now the important thing for us is to free the Church of Austria from Sigismund's domination.

- The battle is lost, I reminded the Cardinal.

- Perhaps, he replied, but the struggle is not finished...

- So be it! But how do we avoid fanaticism ourselves? Religion leads to fanaticism.

- The affirmative Church of necessity becomes fanatical if it is not doubled with a negative Church. If all religions knew as well how to deny themselves as to affirm themselves, there would be less war. Do you see, Henry, why you are as necessary for the Church as Catherine!

The Cardinal began by turning to the doge Francesco Foscari in order to be authorized to recruit a guard of Venetian mercenaries. Cardinal Bessarion facilitated the enterprise. He didn't intend to attack, but simply to intimidate Sigismund a little, to change the balance of power.

The mail arriving from Rome was encouraging. The Cardinal's letters had provoked an explosion of indignation. Dominic Capranica, one of the greatest prelates of Rome, broke down in tears as he heard our messenger's accounts. The pope supported his Cardinal unconditionally. But the emperor's Electors were showing more and more hostility to the papacy. They saw the Borgia family as a rival.

In order to lend more strength to his support, Callistus, by a bull, entrusted the Cardinal with the mission to defend the papacy's interests in relation to princes and prelates. He also made known to the bishop of Chur and the king of Bavaria his desire to come to the Cardinal's aid. In fact the pope's intention was to remove the Cardinal from the scene, to send him on assignment to Bavaria and Germany so that he could seek alliances there and return to Austria only when he could do so in a position of strength and the tensions had calmed down.

Sigismund, on Gregory's advice, had, however, taken the initiative. The prince of Tyrol contested the authenticity of the information the Cardinal was circulating. The prince pushed audacity so far as to pretend that the Cardinal was committing abuses, that he was buying castles and properties, that he was monopolizing mining rights and this, while circulating terrible calumnies going so far as alleging that he had been victim of an assassination attempt on his prince's part.

Far from availing himself of the opportunity the pope was offering him to get away from the diocese, the Cardinal decided to hold his ground. He was thinking of all those who needed a protecting Church.

With the help of Peter, our captain of the guard, and his spies, he accumulated the evidence. A baker from Mühlbach testified before the provost of Illmünster that Sigismund's troops intended to hang the Cardinal, and he even pointed out the tree where it was supposed to be done. The documents were signed and countersigned by officials. But, behind the Cardinal's back, Sigismund bought back all the information.

Nevertheless, the Cardinal succeeded in gathering the documents and in making the evidence stand. In possession of incontrovertible papers and testimonies, of a small army of Venetians, of the support of Albert of Bavaria-Munich and of the pope, he went ahead against Sigismund. He demanded that the prince, in order to establish a lasting peace, surrender to the bishopric the castles of Rodeneck, Gufidaun and Welturn whose proximity was a threat, mutually swear an alliance that the people would make an oath to respect regardless of any order to the contrary. And he briefly recalled the bishopric's former privileges, which he could order to be applied if the duke ever intended doing anything other than ensuring his bishop the freedom to exercise his spiritual ministry in peace.

A discussion on these bases was begun at Innsbruck. The Cardinal wanted in fact to take advantage of the abuse that had been done to him in order to consolidate his power. But the Innsbruck consultation was deferred (doubtless on Gregory's advice). The Cardinal then let it be known that were his demands accepted, he would leave Brixen. However, his intention to name as successor a friend, Simon of Welen, was known.

This, obviously, turned against him. Seeing that the Cardinal was showing signs of fatigue and that he dared to contravene the agreement to let the chapter name the next bishop, Sigismund seized the opportunity to cling to power. He advanced his

troops and showed his strength. The Cardinal didn't want other massacres. He asked the pope to intervene, hoping that Sigismund would accept negotiation rather than having to confront the Swiss army and the disapproval of the emperor.

Sigismund absented himself from his kingdom for a long period so as to force the papal commission to postpone its mission. Finally, thanks to the good offices of the dutchess Eleonore and the bishop of Trent, a meeting with the duke, at Lügen, brought good results: the Cardinal could devote himself to his spiritual mission. Nonetheless, Sigismund remained the master, his armies stayed on alert and a thousand pretexts were invented to hinder the bishop.

At Rome, the measure

Following the death of Callistus, Piccolomini was enthroned in the papacy just as Gregory had predicted. He took the name of Pius II and didn't wait a moment before asking his friend Nicholas to come to Rome in order to give him the charge of vicar general for temporal affairs for, as he said in his missive: "I don't know how I will be able to fulfill the dignity that has been entrusted to me, if you don't return! Instructed by you, I will sail more surely on that tempest-tossed sea..."

Piccolomini gave him complete latitude to govern, administer, and reform the city of Rome and the patrimony of Saint Peter. It was a great honor for the Cardinal and for me a just promotion. Yet a doubt came to me: Piccolomini was particularly attached to the emperor (he had been his secretary); perhaps he simply wanted to avoid the confrontation between Sigismund and the Church! After all, it was supremely important to unify the forces in order to organize a crusade against the Turks. With the Cardinal away, it would be easier to come to an agreement with Sigismund directly by using the emperor's influence. It had to do with an arbitration that would take place in Mantua...

However it may have been, a truce was signed and we left Tyrol, leaving our two prosecutors behind. Bella didn't want to follow us and returned to the Poor Clares with a few strictly observant Fathers in the hope of finishing the reform there. However, she took refuge there as a widow, without intending to take vows.

On the Cardinal's recommendation, Pius II took as apostolic secretary none other than Lorenzo Valla, the author of *De Voluptate*, which maintained the excellence of sensual pleasure and denounced as criminal the institution of Christian virginity. The pope intended to resume the humanist policies of Nicholas V, enrich the Vatican library, promote Roman letters, philosophy, and a more reasonable and open religion.

Piccolomini, from the time when he was the emperor's secretary, took great pleasure in introducing his master to the voluptuous sweetness of the poetry of Cicero and Virgil. It was said that at the court of Frederick where Piccolomini was active, women were praised not just for their devotion. However, it was not for his humanist plan to broaden thought that Piccolomini wanted the Cardinal at his side, but for temporal matters.

Rome was beset with inveterate banditry, epidemics of dysentery, brawls, and fires, all caused, according to the Cardinal, by excessive poverty. Now, in Latium a plain extended along the Tyrrhenian Sea as far as Terracina. Some manuscripts indicated that the area had been fertile and successfully cultivated during the time of the Republic. It had, however, been abandoned by the time of the early Empire. The marshes had reestablished themselves, thickets of willows and alders had regained their place, the inhabitants had left and the bandits had settled there.

The Cardinal's project consisted of draining, irrigating and dividing into lots several of these Pontine marshes so as to permit the most indigent people of Rome to come there and feed themselves by cultivating a piece of ground. To be sure, the brown soil was heavy and clayey, but with the new iron plows and better yokes they could be turned over and allowed to yield abundantly. So it was in the Roman marshes that the Cardinal intended to renew the Church. Customarily, the Church granted to a lord the right to put into cultivation a parcel of brush, woods, marsh, or fallow land in exchange for cash or a portion of the harvest. The peasants of the lord would come to settle in the slowly conquered clearings and thus establish villages on the cleared land. Next the priests would come to collect the tithes, the lord and his warriors, the tallage, the fines and the rents, and the peasants kept the rest. This heaven-and-earth "protection" cost them a lot! The Cardinal's idea was to proceed otherwise and entrust the command of operations directly to foremen chosen from among the best peasants and recognized by them. The Church, with no other intermediary, would allocate to these teams of peasants the right to cultivate.

Such a practice might have gotten him on the wrong side of the nobility of Rome and its vicinity, but this time the Cardinal headed off the attacks and did it so well that he curbed the ardor of the Savellis, the Colonas, and the Anguillaras. He even eased the disputes between the city's administrators. The latter were agreed about "relieving ourselves of the poor wretches by dumping them into an immense marsh swarming with mosquitoes and robbers".

In no time at all the output of the saltworks was regularly collected and the Cardinal had at his disposal considerable funding for his project. In taming the Pontine marshes, he allowed city-dwellers to return to the country to build new villages there. This relieved the city of numerous subjects of tension. A police force answering directly to the Cardinal was organized. Robbers who turned themselves in to the authorities were promised the right to redeem their sins through work and after this redemption the authorization to farm for themselves on the same conditions as the others. To the degree that work gained ground over nature, Rome grew healthier and banditry diminished.

The humidity was painful for the Cardinal whose gout at times gave him attacks that stiffened him. In the morning in particular he seemed paralyzed in his pain and needed help to get into his carriage or onto his horse. The work progressed rapidly nevertheless. All the techniques of construction were applied. Canals were dug and ripped thanks to well-assorted teams and perfectly balanced dumping-shovels. Levers were used, squirrel-wheels, horizontal wheels, and even devices that achieved traction through stamping. But the Cardinal's genius resided in precision. For each task, he calculated the number of men and animals necessary for the work. He utilized the levers with an astonishing exactness in such a way as to economize the energies, distribute the forces. Men, animals, and machines were so well fitted together that they achieved the maximum of work thanks to the best distribution of energies.

We had to let the soil produce its maximum; the maximum was the Cardinal's obsession. The width, the depth, and the slope of the irrigation canals had to be measured with the greatest exactitude so as to make the water level descend just below the usual depth of the roots of the cereals. The soils were studied according to their odor, their density, their texture and above all their weight in dry matter. Enrichments were prescribed: liming, fertilizing, marling, loosening with sand, etc.

The Cardinal neglected nothing. He encouraged the despairing, promoted those who showed talent to supervisory positions, achieved reconciliations. He had meetings to hear people's opinions. But above all, he provided an example, never fearing to put his feet in the mud in order to participate in an especially difficult clearing of land.

The construction sites and the future villages were not organized in large huts as in the past, with the grouping together of clans. No, he preferred small dwellings on separate plots, the back of the huts with home workshops with a fire at their disposal. The plots of land around the villages were divided into unequal radii and distributed according to merit. For each village a chapel, a market, a mill, a pressing shed, a wash house and a forge was constructed. The community came to life and the people began to love their land. For this was surely what had to be born: love of the land. Through that love, the villages had pride and through that pride, they added beauty to the scene.

Of beauty, there was more and more. Here and there, beeches blended their crowns, forming immense bouquets. Around the gorse moors, birches basked in the light of their white flanks. Broom with golden flowers and purplish briars encircled the little islands of cultivated land where patches of oats of such a tender green gave way to patches of wheat more olive in tone. Each village crouched around its chapel was filled to bursting with merry children. Like foam, a certain happiness in living formed from the work's harshness. Beauty, hope and security did much better than the police.

If Bella had been with us, she would have set herself down on a little hill and spread out on her canvas all the colors of the country we were making appear. She would have been our mirror and my joy. She was our lack and my sadness. When I caught sight of a woman at the wash house, her bosom uncovered a bit by the effort of washing, my horse began to run and I had to go and pull stumps or carry stones. With these exercises, the body took on strength and the image of Bella shone even more.

Despite his pains, the Cardinal seemed younger in the Pontine marshes than in Brixen. Both of us were overflowing with energy. Every day, we were on horseback directing the foremen, making calculations for the positioning of levers, the distribution of draft animals, the canalizations. In the evening, we went to dine with the village notables and have discussions with the parish priest and those in charge of the work. The people liked us.

There were times when our limits were exceeded. After an extreme pain, a sort of euphoria took hold of us and there was no longer any contour to our bodies.

To have leaves and overhang the land, to have roots and dive into deep waters, rise in the sap, descend in the light, nourish a small people, be everyone and no one, keep living in eternity, is a little like marrying time, embracing it to the marrow. To belong to a life that desperately tears itself from death, to, for a while, be springtime... As for dying, it's just as well to do it all the way. So then, even as we were measuring everything for the machines we ourselves were going in excess of any measure.

Yet it wasn't just our bodies that were giving themselves. Reason, in the Pontine marshes, had no rest. The Cardinal had various scales brought from Florence that were accurate to the half-grain for the assay balances and to a half-scruple for the steelyards. He had received from cardinal Bessarion water-clocks of a very great exactness.

When a sick person was entrusted to him or to one of our doctors, he weighed the water running from a water-clock during a hundred of his heartbeats. He compared this weight to the weight of the water for a healthy person. He meticulously noted the differences. In this way he classified illnesses according to categories of weight! By a similar reasoning, he sought to classify soils. But it was necessary to dry them first, separate the clays, the sands, the brown humuses and the black humuses, weigh and calculate the proportions: in this way, the contents of the earth were categorized. The weight of the yield per are* was noted for each type of soil. After a few seasons, the most experienced peasants could prescribe the fertilizers to bring to the different categories of soil.

He wanted to verify what weight of soil a plant took for its growth in relation to the weight of the water it absorbed. He had a shrub grow in a precise quantity of earth. He weighed all the water that was given the plant. Then he weighed the plant and the earth separately. He discovered that the plant was composed essentially of water and a few scruples of earth. But one question remained: did the light that the plant received have a weight? Since he found no means sufficiently subtle to weigh light, he supposed that the latter had a very minute weight.

* 1 are = 119.6 square yards

He maintained that water is not an element, as Aristotle had supposed, since its weight for an identical volume varied. No more than water, air could not be an element. He had moreover succeeded in weighing different sorts of air according to their water content. He measured that humidity by comparing the weight of cotton exposed to a damp wind with the same quantity of perfectly dry cotton. Thanks to this stratagem, he amused himself predicting rain and was not mistaken any more often than an old peasant.

In order to analyze the depth of lakes, he invented a system of springs that allowed a lead ball to be released as soon as the weight touched bottom. To know the water's depth, all that was needed was to weigh the water running from a water-

clock between the time when the ball touched the water and the time when the balloon returned to the surface. That was made possible thanks to a table with two columns.

By subjecting the movement of the sun and the movement of the moon to a similar weight experiment, it might be possible to determine their distance from the earth.

Given what he spent for his notebook of weights, I thought I was justified in asking him for some explanations. He had me sit down, poured me a small cup of wine and began:

- Rationally, knowing is nothing other than connecting quantities; reason connects the measurements, it compares them, it establishes mathematical relationships. Everyone can agree about this and do so unanimously. This is the foundation of the sciences. Weight is the most universal measure because it doesn't take quality into account. A painting of great beauty can have the same weight as a very ordinary painting. There cannot, then, be a science of beauty...

- But, I objected, correctly, a weight says almost nothing about a thing. Ten scruples of gold or ten scruples of lead, is still ten scruples...

- You're wrong. Archimedes could distinguish gold from another metal by the weight for the same volume. Volume weights are comparable and will someday allow us to know the elements of matter.

- You have always asked me to be sincere. Can I still be that today? I asked him.

He just smiled. So I continued:

- God is by definition pure quality, like beauty or goodness. Because of this, he has neither weight nor measure, and consequently he completely eludes science. You say that God is accessible not to reason but to intelligence and sensibility like the beautiful and the good. Like the beautiful and the good, God would be an incomparable inner experience. Very well. But how then can we agree about any knowledge regarding God? And if this is not possible, how can a Church be founded?

- That's a superb question! the Cardinal exclaimed. I sincerely believe that learned ignorance alone can found the brotherhood of men and eliminate the wars of religion and ideas. Never will men be able to agree on an affirmative knowledge of God, of the beautiful, of justice, but they can agree about their ignorance. The knowledge of that ignorance, which is also an intelligence and a sensibility, increases with the inner progression and its result is love. And that love is the basis of peace...

The discussion stopped there. The Pontine marshes were calling us. Our horses had been harnessed...

Two men, one much older than the other, a woman and her little daughter had been swallowed up in a quagmire. When we arrived, the four survivors were lying on the ground, exhausted, covered with mud, but alive. The two men were panting, seated with their heads between their knees. The woman was holding her daughter against her breast. The child's face and hair bore no trace of mud; one might have said that a halo had protected her, so luminous she appeared. The child smiled and sought to console her mother. A giant stood next to them, covered with ooze.

A cleric related to us what he had seen. He had been alerted by cries and had rushed to the scene, but someone had preceded him. It was a man with a strong constitution, a merchant dressed in a jersey and Italian trousers. To the cleric's great surprise, he wore a turban on which a badge had been sewn indicating that he held a Venetian passport. The man unrolled his turban, attached it to a tree and, tying the other end around his foot, jumped flat on his stomach into the pool and crawled until he caught the hand of the younger of the two men. The man succeeded in clinging to the giant and in crawling along his back to the edge. The stranger did the same with the woman, who held her child at arm's length. But the procedure was long and the old man sank straight to the bottom. The giant dived, found the unlucky man and, with strength and agility, succeeded in bringing him to the surface, using only his foot, which he rolled around his turban. The unfortunate man was still suffocating, his nose and mouth filled with mud. The stranger freed up the orifices, blew into his mouth with all his might, compressed his chest with two hands and the old man got his breath back.

This stranger was named Bâbâ Hamadani. He traded on his own account and traveled a great deal. He had been in China, had crossed Poland and Prussia, had been in the Holy Land many times and knew most of the Arab countries. He was a native of Hamadan in Persia. He was no doubt a Muslim. Cardinal Bessarion had received him. He had read, at the Venice library, most of the Cardinal's treatises and it was the Cardinal himself that he had come to meet, here in the Pontine marshes.

The union of the Churches

We took the man back to Rome so that he could clean himself. We loaned him some clothing, for he had no baggage. However, he remained silent. We had to wait until his turban was thoroughly washed, thoroughly dried, and thoroughly rolled around his head. It was at this moment that Bâbâ Hamadani, with no beating around the bush, solemnly but with the broadest of smiles asked the Cardinal:

- I wish to participate at your side in the regeneration of the Church of all religions in the marshes of Rome. I want to participate in the brotherhood of men.

The Cardinal froze, at a loss for words. The Persian burst out laughing and the Cardinal remained disconcerted.

Without a doubt, Bâbâ had read the Cardinal's treatise entitled *The Peace of Faith*, where the Cardinal discussed his hope of winning over to the First Principle all the religions. This idea was so noble that one could not help but wish for it, but so impossible that it was difficult to take it seriously. Bâbâ laughed, and yet seemed serious in his intention.

The Cardinal knew the history of Islam fairly well and also some rudiments of the Mazdean foundations of Muslim Persia. He had annotated old translations of the Tradition and the Koran. When he was in Constantinople, he had studied the works of Mohammed with the Dominicans in the suburb of Pera. Yet he wasn't satisfied; he firmly believed that it was possible to agree with the Muslims on the basic principles of all religion. So he was extremely happy to welcome this Persian merchant who seemed wise and educated, at once fascinated by the Cardinal's project and conscious of its excesses.

The man remained discreet, however. With merry laughs, he brushed aside the important questions and urged us to go to the marshes, for there was plenty of work there. What seemed to him to be of the greatest importance was not discussing either the First Principle or religious behaviors, but building happy villages in the Pontine marshes.

He was our companion for several months and he knew how to go about it. A remarkable mathematician, he could, with no paper at all, execute the most difficult calculations required for the utilization of pulleys and winches, the measurement of gradients, the construction of earthworks, etc.

He conversed with the clerics like a friend. With the laborers, he never gave commands, ordered nothing, and didn't even suggest any solutions. Yet he was always at the right place at the right time to get people going, to pull with those who were pulling, to push with those who were pushing, to dig with those who

were digging, to scrape with those who were scraping. He always put rhythm into it. The men sang, the cadence coordinated the effort and the work went on at a good clip. He seemed to experience neither sadness, nor hesitation, nor fatigue.

The country people, the former robbers, the clerics, everyone in fact appreciated this man who spoke little, did a lot, was always smiling and complemented everyone. With him, we felt as if we were enlisting ourselves in new communities just being born. We always end up belonging to a symbol. We were participating in the birth of that unusual and almost immortal soul called "humanity".

Gradually I became aware that what we were doing could be amazing. The villages we were building did not belong to any lord; each man set down his roots there by working on the land. The Cardinal consulted the population before naming a priest. They nearly always chose men more skillful with the plow than with sermons.

The effort, the sweat, the fatigue, the contact with the mass of men and women, and Bella's absence acted on me like a wine. Led by Bâbâ and the Cardinal, I left the promontory on which I had managed to remain since the day my sister died. On that day, the world's madness had forced itself upon me and I had hauled myself up on a post to see things from a higher elevation. I stayed there at a certain height where I could show my rejection and my disdain. I rejected earth, I rejected Heaven. In those days, my post was as fragile as a reed and I swayed on the same semi-altitudes. I said "no" to a land, I said "no" to Heaven. This "no" had become me, and this me was shaking.

All at once, I saw the marsh, I saw the two strange men, one of whom seemed too tall and the other too short, and my reed gave way, and I put my feet on the ground.

It was slowly that I came out of my torpor and I thrust my hands into the warm and spongy earth of the marsh. But it was quickly that I became aware of what Bâbâ taught: one can live close to things only at the expense of one's "self". There is no place in this world for the gluttony of a self distorted by too much dissatisfaction. Either you are on earth without cupidity or envy, or you are greedy and envious, somewhere else, in a little artificial kingdom.

Bâbâ had been living on earth for a long time. He was so happy there that I forgot my fear and my rejection of it. I joined him in this marsh that becomes a quagmire as soon as one puts on weight. I didn't realize it immediately, there was so much to do. In this abasement, being does not exist, it must be made.

After several hours of pulling with all my weight on the thick rope of an enormous hoist, at the moment when the pain in my hands joined the pain in my guts, I smelled the smells, I heard the sounds, I tasted the humidity of the air and suddenly saw the persons who surrounded me. How beautiful they were, these toothless beggars, lacerated with scars, with noses turned sideways from old fractures, with scarlet lips, with mud-covered rags. How good they smelled: a

spicy aroma of cheese melting on a crust of black wheat bread. And how sweet it was, the noise of teeth grinding at the effort, the laughing groaning of the body's giving, the explosion of joy when the stone was set on its base at last. To belong to those who are nothing and out of their nothing make the world is to feel the joy of returning home.

It was in seeing this beauty that I realized that my feet had touched the fertile silt of the beginning of all men. All is beautiful in this place, that's all I can say about it.

The former bandit who was beside me, my companion on the rope, was named Horus (these men do have names). He was fat, he had the eyes of a mule, he smiled rolling his scarlet tongue between his two black teeth, and he seemed more beautiful to me than the angels of the Holy Chapel. He was the most beautiful being I had ever seen. His upper lip was torn by an old wound that went up to the middle of his cheek. His cheekbones were higher than his flattened nose. His black hair looked like a bush. His shoulders were something like a horse, his hands with monstrous fingers gripped the rope as if to strangle it. He smiled at me like a little child, put all his weight into pulling and was jolted every time the stone budged. I had never seen anything as beautiful as this suffering that was breaking loose from the earth.

Bâbâ no doubt noticed that I had entered the world. He saw that I was seeing the earth at last. He laughed heartily.

The Cardinal came to join us. We were, the four of us, on the enormous hoist, and the stone rose like a moon at twilight. Bâbâ made the tiller pivot and we lowered the granite block on its base. The workers all around applauded.

- You really are a brother, the Cardinal said to Horus, your village will be the most beautiful.

Water appeared in the Cardinal's eyes because the smile of Horus touched a newborn's purity.

And I who thought the saints loved the poor out of charity! In reality, the saint is attracted by the poor as man is attracted by the most beautiful of women.

This moment on earth lasted three days. For three days, I knew what it was to live among men. Not only during the day, for at night I went to sleep with them in the stable, with the horses, the cows, the mules. The breath of the animals warmed me. Three nights of Christmas when I laughed at the foolishness, the clowning, the dancing astraddle, the songs, the rhymes, the dirty stories of a little people of beggars. At that altitude, there is neither vertigo nor worry. Death is our close associate, suffering, our companion, and the renewal of strength holds our heads above the marsh like lotuses.

Truly the Gospel is not wrong: It is mud and spittle that opens eyes.

In a consciousness like mine, this doesn't last and I resumed my place on the post with the simple memory of having lived three days on earth. Nevertheless, something had changed. I had stayed for a moment in the country of the very beautiful. I knew that it existed.

The Muslim recited extracts from the Book of Annihilation by Djunayd Baghdadi which repeated: "There is nothing here of me." He knew so many of his country's poems! I remember this one by Said abi-l-Khayr: "Those who limit themselves to appearances are dead even during their lifetimes and the searchers for truth are living even when dead. I went on the mountain, I went in the desert, I searched for God in all the places. I happened to find him sometimes and sometimes did not find him. But now, I have become such that I do not find even my own person. So who then exists in all these particular existences?"

One day I asked Bâbâ why he wore a turban. He answered:

- "The curls in the hair of the Very Great form the strings of my guitar. So I moan like a reed in a marsh." To wrap one's head in God's curl is like having one's head in the light.

- So, if the head must be covered, why must the glans of the male organ be uncovered?

He burst out laughing.

- You should know, my friend, that a good Muslim always removes his turban before honoring a woman.

Bâbâ's heart had found the Cardinal's heart. It was in work that they got to know each other. A mutual trust now bound the two men; the doors of the word were going to open. All three of us were in the laboratory making calculations. The Cardinal was busy keeping the athanor at a constant temperature. I was weighing the same volume of mercury at different degrees of temperature and was dictating the weights to our strange friend when a tear ran down his brown cheek. We asked him spontaneously what he was thinking and he recited a poem from his country:

- "What do you want to do with my torn soul? You who have abandoned me in this misery. Why are you coming now to torment me in my dreams? I contemplate the countryside, I see you. I contemplate the sea, I see you. Everywhere I place my gaze, I perceive your silhouette. So, all you who are broken-hearted, come and assemble. Let us talk to one another. Let us show our griefs. Let us quickly bring scales and compare our sadnesses. The most afflicted will be the first to speak." We must remove the hood of our feelings, such is the deep meaning of circumcision.

The Cardinal and I understood that this amounted to an introduction. We let silence prepare the ground.

- A man is measured, Bâbâ continued, by soaking him in the fullness of his solitude, at a constant temperature, over a long period. What remains is his measure.

And, laughing, he dove back into his work.

But the Cardinal didn't want him to get away. He put his hand on his shoulder and, looking him straight in the eyes, asked him:

- My friend Hamadani, with all my heart I ask you to explain Islam to us.

Bâbâ Hamadani saw that the Cardinal was sincere. The mercury was removed from the oven, and we went into the garden, in the shade of a big olive tree, because the sun was bright.

- Here is my life, Bâbâ began. Islam is the greatest of feelings. It is the feeling of the man who bends down toward the ground, dazzled by the grandeur, the clarity, the unity and the absolute transcendence of God. Islam says "yes" to God and says "no" to what is not God. "Yes", my noblest feeling and the most natural of my feelings consists of letting my heart worship Him whom it cannot know. Conversely, my greatest temptation consists of worshiping what I know. Islam is the worship of God and the love of men. Because of this, Islam begins only after a bath of purity. "The noblest among you is the purest," says the Koran. So long as the heart is not pure, it does not know that worship is its natural state. Impurity consists of worshiping what is not God. God is neither divisible nor definable. Because of this, worship leads to love of the people. It is not I who worship God, it is the people who worship God. Islam is the illumination of a people who bend down before Him whom it cannot know, nor even name. Purity leads to the beginning of the way. In this beginning, God is the Non-Same, the infinitely Other. There are a thousand steps to cover to arrive at the threshold of the door and there are a thousand ways of advancing on that road. On this way, the self is disintegrated in love. So, what is there on the other side of the door? There is the same being as in front of the door since to arrive there, one must have lost all that is not God and won all that is God. If in the beginning, God is the Non-Same, in the end He is the Non-Other. Don't see any contradiction there, for between the two, the road has completely changed. But no one in Islam draws conclusions from the end, for Islam holds to the humility of the beginning. If a man in Islam goes through the door, he will attend to his activities, indistinct from the people, bending down at the same hours on the same soil to pray to the same God. For, what does God do? He makes equal.

- But tell me, the Cardinal asked, why has a religion so similar to Christianity in its foundations become the enemy of Christians?

- It is because, Bâbâ replied, there are only a very few Muslims on the earth and very few Christians. All have gone far from their beginning and gotten lost in dogmas, corollaries, deductions, rituals, inequalities... Those who kill each other are neither Christians nor Muslims. They think they have left the beginning and attained superior knowledge, but in fact they haven't even arrived at the beginning. Those who know the beginning refuse to go away from it since the end is in the beginning. What Mohammed liked about Christianity was its beginning and its end, what he detested about Christianity was its distance from this. Alas! Nearly all Muslims have themselves grown distant from the beginning and the end.

For my part, I had never gotten to the beginning of religion, for I remained scandalized by all that I saw in the world. So I asked Bâbâ:

- Why is it so difficult to arrive at the beginning of religion?

- Everything begins with a rebellion, Henry. Moses, Jesus and Mohammed were unable to accept what they saw around them: this perpetual war commanded by the idolatry of self under the pretense of worshiping a god. So, they withdrew into the desert to wash off this self, this war and this god. It is in the desert and in solitude that all the beginnings of religion are found. It is there that man takes his measure and infallibly discovers that he is the infinitely small of the infinitely great and that consequently all beings form the community of worshipers of the Unfindable. This terrible equality is unbearable for the princes because they depend on their servants, and it is unbearable for the servants because they only have security close to their prince. The measure of man is nothing other than equality, and it is against this stone that Judaism collided, then Christianity and finally Islam.

- You are a sufi then like Shabistari?, I concluded.

- I don't have the honor but I have the intention, Bâbâ replied. Very early, there were among the Arabs, among the Persians and among the Turks, "lovers of wine" who showed indifference to temporal power and to religious power, paying attention only to the state of the heart. For the noblest is the purest and the purest can just as well be a Kurdish shepherd as a scholar in Medina. We are called sufis because in the beginning we wore wool, not wanting to depend on anyone but our peasants. We practice detachment from the worries of the world: this is our chief political action.

- But by what way do you go to God? the Cardinal asked.

- The sufi follows the Way leading to the beginning, then he progresses toward the end that is in the beginning. He begins in the disgust the world's madness inspires in him. He arrives at laughter the day when he no longer even cares about this disgust. It is then that he enters the desert, where the immense solitude of one who has withdrawn is found. Through perseverance in the desert, the sufi discovers his own measure. "Small I am", he says to himself. From there, he enters the first feeling of the measured man: "God is great, it is written, He is the

infinitely Great, He is the desert of which I am the grain of sand." But this feeling does not last. It is the property of worship to refuse to accept time. This is why the sufi practices the recollection of the names of the Nameless, a way of blowing on the coal to rekindle the flame. Next, he reviews his state as a praying man, for the natural state of the heart is prayer. From there, he strives for the preservation, in his heart, of natural prayer: worship.

The Cardinal and I were struck by the extraordinary similarity between Christian withdrawal from the world and its Muslim counterpart, between pure Christianity and pure Islam. Bâbâ, who had traveled more than the Cardinal, understood what we were feeling, but let the Cardinal speak:

- When a face looks at itself in a mirror, the Cardinal began, nothing appears changed on the image and yet all that is on the left is found on the right and all that is on the right is found on the left. Only the midline is perfectly intact. Might it not be the same way for religion! All that is distant from the center, from the beginning, from the origin finds its opposite in the other religion and yet, at the right distance, this opposite appears very similar. Only those who are ignorant of other religions go to war and shed blood. But those who are perfectly blameless, attentive to the source, attentive to the beginning, attentive to the midline are brothers of the same Church.

- But then, I observed, only the mute are part of this Church of all religions!

- You're right, the Cardinal continued, music is probably the only possible language.

And, addressing Bâbâ:

- You, my brother, in speaking to me sincerely, you have truly helped me to grasp even more firmly and deeply the essence of my own religion.

- I didn't come to instruct you, Bâbâ answered. I came, on the contrary, in search of my own religion. Since I have been traveling, I have understood that my religion is necessarily in that of others and that if I rediscover my religion in that of others, I discover it with more purity than in my own. For I am accustomed to my religion and I fall asleep in it. When I discover my religion in that of others, it wakes me up.

The next morning, Bâbâ was no longer there. On the pan of a scales he had left this little Persian poem: "Listen to the reed, the one you hold in your hand. Listen to its moaning. It speaks to you of separation. Since it was cut from the reed-bed, its breath makes all men moan. So I want for friend a heart torn by exile so that I can tell him my pain. I have walked in many worlds, set foot on numerous earths, happy companion of the poorest, each one thought he was my friend, but in my heart no one has searched for my secret..." He had added to the poem these five words: "except for you, my two friends."

I ran to the small library we had had built in the Pontines, for I knew that the Cardinal would be there. He was there in fact. Leaning on his reading table, bathed in the dazzling light entering through the multiple openings of the dome, he was crying. He looked at me for a moment and pulled himself together.

- Come, sit down, my friend.

Which is what I did. I felt, from the swelling and fever of his joints, that he was shaken by a terrible attack of gout.

- Are you suffering? I asked.

- It is my consolation, he replied.

That answer shocked me. He understood this.

- Don't be offended, he said. You know as well as I this solitude that needs to have plasters and poultices put on it. If I have nothing more than suffering for a dressing, what can I do about it? Just as well embrace it. At least it is a presence.

- But you have God!

- My poor Henry, God is not a doll of straw a child presses against her heart in order to go to sleep. He oppresses man with his absence, he passes like a hurricane, he empties the house, but that is not enough, he blows down the walls, pulverizes the ceilings. God is infinite emptiness. There is no more of what you call "god" in me than there is in you. The only difference is that I suffer my desire while you curse it... I beg of you, do not judge me. I need a friend.

- Bâbâ has left...

- I know. And now, there is one more gulf in my heart. They always leave. That's all they have to do, leave. But you, you do not leave me.

In the midst of his laugh, tears flowed, incomprehensible.

- You see, I'm returning to childhood. I'm crying.

His smile did in fact make him look like a child. But as for me, this solitude made me unrelentingly bitter.

- If solitude is inherent in consciousness, why then does the Church discourage marriage? Why add weight to what is already so heavy?, I asked as I moved away.

He wanted to come closer to me, but his joints refused to obey.

- Customs are what they can be, he replied. Other places, other times, other customs... But the love between two beings is another affair. It demands

everything. It must never be fled from, for love comes to widen, enlarge and deepen solitude.

He remained frozen in silence for a moment. He wiped his face, straightened up as well as he could and began:

- I was about 24, my doctorate was finished, but frequently attended Heimeric de Campo's course at the Faculty of Arts of the University of Padua. I had been given the cure of Altrich, with a dispensation, for I was hesitating about ordination. I quickly became friends with Heimeric who fascinated us all with the philosophy of Albert the Great. He was a strange mystic. He said we must dive naked into the abyss. He was constantly bringing us back to the poem by Eckhart: "That one lies peacefully stark naked, without clothing. Who knows his house? Ah, would that he left it! and tell us his form... Become such a child. Leave place, leave time... On the narrow path you will reach the tracks of the desert. Oh my soul, go out! Sink in this bottomless river!" I was, I admit it, intoxicated by his appeals and I knew my first true solitudes, from which laws, rules, customs seem trivial indeed.

- Customs which could be much better adjusted to the nature of men, I observed.

- I grant you that. By too much rigidity, the opposite effect is obtained. But here is what happened. During that same period, Heimeric introduced me to a noble widow who asked me to take charge of the education of her little eleven-year-old daughter. The widow pleased me a great deal and her child was quite simply adorable. She was curious about everything. Every day we went across the fields, we had plans for a herbarium, we made a collection of insects and some nights I went to get her in order to show her the placement of the stars and follow their movement. In a few months, she handled the astrolabe perfectly, made very complex calculations; she seemed to penetrate the greatest mysteries, but had great difficulty reading. We spent many hours at it. Her mother was not insensitive to me, and this drove her away. She fled love. One winter, she entrusted the child to a quite negligent servant, in order to flee I don't know where. The little girl fell seriously ill. Fever led her into nightmares that solitude made worse. I decided to watch over her day and night. She could not endure my leaving her for a moment. I had never encountered anything as beautiful as that child. Reassured by my presence, she went off into this mystery as if into a wood. She observed everything, and was apprehensive about nothing. She described to me in detail the strange animals she saw, the paths, the smells, the colors, the movements, the voices, the singing... She took me with her. She went off with my heart and my pains that she trailed behind her like ribbons. I rocked her, I hugged her, I caressed her face and then, gently, she let herself go, taking me with her. When her mother learned the terrible news, she jumped into a river. My heart closed up over the mother and the child. You see, I do not flee from love, I put up with it as a mother puts up with a baby in her belly...

Big tears spilled out of his eyes.

One month later, I received a letter from Bella. "Dearest Henry, I am here in the greatest of retreats. It is nearly three years now that I have not seen your face. Since then, a sandy wind has never ceased to wear down my old sorrows. I have almost entirely lost the weight of my old love. But I am not light for all that. I am not made for such a desert and my memories have been replaced by desires. Your figure haunts me. One might call it a slender birch stuck between rocks on the edge of a cape. One thinks it fragile, always ready to break at the first wind. Yet it is quite the contrary; its roots have broken the surface of the little religions, the little worships, the tiny beliefs, the dollhouses. Your roots, Henry, have taken hold in the greatest abysses, there where it is no longer possible to differentiate God from Chaos, beauty from anxiety, goodness from anguish. The birch no longer has anything artificial, in its infinite fragility coincides with infinite tenacity. I love you, Henry, do you want to be my husband? I'm over forty, my body and heart are rather worn, but I no longer fear the abysses."

I was stunned and awakened, appalled and cheered, ready to explode. Happy, anxious, I didn't know anymore. In any case, I was torn. On one side the Cardinal, on the other Bella, I no longer knew who to love and who to let down. I loved that woman, but I was afraid of breaking her. My heart froze against itself and resembled a stone.

The humiliation

The Congress of Mantua was a fiasco. Sigismund was in no hurry to get there. He let himself be preceded by the Cardinal, the representatives of the chapter and the emperor's delegates.

Gregory of Heimburg began by making a long address on the honor of the House of Austria and the necessity for organizing a crusade against the Turks, letting it be understood that the duke would participate in this "with the same heart and the same expenditure that he puts, in Austria, toward the salvation of souls". Next, he saluted Pius II's humanism, recalling, in front of everyone, that he was an assiduous reader of the voluptuous Cicero and Virgil. He went so far as to declaim several unseemly verses written by Piccolomini's own hand from the time when he was the emperor's secretary and the accomplice of the Habsburgs. He congratulated him ironically for taking Laurent de Valla as his apostolic secretary...

After this pompous introduction which aimed at nothing other than elevating his master and lowering the pope, he registered himself as a plaintiff. "The bishop of Brixen," he said at one point, "has wounded the honor of the duke of Austria by accusing him, without proof, of making an attempt on his life. He circulated the rumor so as to make him detestable to the people and add to his own glory." Finally he imputed to the Cardinal the misuse of his rights by purchasing noble properties, by starving the abbeys, by supporting rebellious peasants, by casting the ban just about everywhere and by oppressing the chapter.

Sigismund, preceded by a magnificent cortege of knights and noble lords, arrived in grand pomp and was received with honor. The pope wished to treat his person carefully in the hope of cajoling him with a mind to a crusade that surely was necessary, for the Turks had just deposed the last despot of Morea. He had been taken in at Rome with other princes in exile. Bosnia, Wallachia, Moldavia and the Crimea had fallen or were on the point of doing so.

But Gregory aborted any chance of understanding, seeking only to conduct his master to a total disdain for the Holy See. He knew how to transform a local dissension into a question of principles. For him, it was a question of the freedom of princes to dispose of the institutions of their kingdom threatened by a Church that fancied itself an Empire. He repeatedly implied that if the pope so much as dared to contest the authority of the prince over his territory, the latter would appeal his decision to a future Council.

For my part, I soberly outlined the Cardinal's demands relating to the sovereignty of the diocese of Brixen. I had to return the debate to its original proportions. A waste of effort, Gregory dismissed the pope's arbitration with the back of his hand and claimed to be following the convention of Salzburg which attributed to the duke the power to nominate the bishop. "The remainder of the disputes," he

added, "relate to the temporal and because of this are not within the competence of the pope. They come under the emperor."

At this point, Sigismund left Mantua, leaving behind his junior counselors. The latter promptly retreated behind the insufficiency of their power, and it was necessary to refer the matter to the bishop of Trent, the direct representative of the emperor. This put an end to the congress for, obviously, the bishop wished to discuss it with his principal.

This farce was no more than a public humiliation of the papacy, and the Cardinal immediately understood that it was no longer in a position to support him. Pius II had his hands full with the Turks and the princes. As for the emperor, his power was in free fall: he would certainly not risk one bit of the little power that remained to him to defend the Cardinal.

In fact the Cardinal had been abandoned by the pope and by the emperor.

It was in the greatest sadness that we took our place once more in the old apostolic carriage, more dilapidated than ever. For the Cardinal, Mantua had been nothing more than one arrow too many. The heart was hit.

- The writings remain, he blurted out en route, a handful of seed cast in the middle of the desert...

At the Cardinal's request, I had sent to Mainz, to the lawyer Johan Guldenschaiff, copies of several of his treatises. The latter was interested in an invention by Gutenberg, a sort of press which made it possible to produce innumerable copies of the same text. The Cardinal found a great hope in this, for he was more and more convinced that the reform could only be a question of dialogue and education, and thus a question of time. Now, as is known, even if the desert is infertile, it has the property of preserving seed until the next shower, several centuries if necessary!

- As for battles, the Cardinal continued, I haven't known any victories; all my vessels sink straight to the bottom.

- Don't be so pessimistic, you have acted masterfully...

He threw me a weighty look. The Cardinal had no need for my indulgence.

- Let us return to the squaring of the circle, he began, signaling me to write. If the prelates cede all the Church's temporal power to the prince, with what can injustice be fought? The Church was born for this: protect the poor from the greed of the great. But as soon as the Church arms itself for combat, it attracts the greediest within itself. Should it cast all weapons aside, wander and beg, bringing the poor no more than the consolation of a presence? How to fight without weapons and without a position? This question is nothing other than the squaring of the circle applied to politics: the struggle of the mind against the sword.

Because I haven't solved this squaring, I am going away, defeated. Do you want to hear my confession? he asked me.

- I don't...

My two words evaporated in his dark look. He turned his eyes away. Outside, the forest showed neither sky nor clearing. I served him a small glass of his favorite wine.

- In reality, my heart has remained in Cusa where I was born, he said, savoring a gulp of his precious beverage.

The Cardinal liked no wines other than those of his country.

- Nothing transmits a country better than wine... I must have been ten or twelve... A good morning where I was dreaming at the prow of the boat... You know how magnificent the Mosel is in its hairpin bends that go from Trier to Koblenz by gentle vales and vineyards bordered by copses and groves of tall trees: It's something to dream about! It's precisely what my father didn't want... One who is easily distracted is no boatman on so crooked a channel. Seized with anger, my father was once more going to saddle me with his stirrup leather, but I jumped into the water, swam to shore and fled to the count of Manderscheid, a friend of my father's who had complimented me on my memory and my intelligence. The latter convinced my father to send me to study at Deventer where he would pay for my schooling. You see, I left the contemplative life rather early out of the need to combat an injustice of which I was the victim, I believed. My sin is not there, but there is in every story an event that wraps up everything and of which everything is the development: I dived.

The forest was now cross-hatched with meadows and the first peaks of the Adige could be seen standing out in the distance.

- Later, not long after the death of the little girl I tutored, and of her mother, following my ordination, I could no longer endure my solitude. Orsini was apostolic legate in Germany. I was twenty-five, had a doctorate in canon law in my pocket and ambition. The prelate announced a competition concerning a pending affair between the parish priest of Bacharach and the Palatine Elector. My proposition must have pleased him. From among some sixty consultants, he chose my plea and my service. I became his secretary. I had no other desire than to elevate myself, in fact, to flee from myself. At that time, glory belonged to the humanists, to the hunters of Greek or Roman manuscripts. I thought I had found Cicero's *The Republic* in Cologne, in a powdery library where no one ventured. But it was only a commentary on *The Dream of Scipio* by Macrobius. Becoming the laughingstock of everyone, I published an inventory of several manuscripts including twenty of Plautus's comedies. News of the affair went as far as Florence and Poggio himself became interested. In reality, I had nothing at all in hand. My mother died, it was too much, but I continued to flee. An opportunity for glory was given me when the count of Manderscheid, my protector, dean of the chapter

of Trier, was ousted. This gave me the opportunity to defend the count at the Council of Basel. I brought my *De Concordantia*, and made such eloquent pleas in favor of a legitimate council that I gained the favor of all the vultures who were seeking just to nibble a little power from the pope.

- But what's wrong with that? I asked.

- Wrong! I suffer from the evil by which all the Church is contaminated: flight from self.

- You aren't being fair to yourself, I objected. There is no way out from political duty. Good emerges from the world's insanities like a fragile foam. When it happens, it's an accident. The essence of civilization is to try to shelter all these accidents...

- You're confirming my sin. All that is good is just not an accident.

- The facts prove the opposite, I refuted...

- But Henry, as for the facts, you have only a representation of them. The only action that permits us to glimpse the facts is to dive and not to flee.

- But what is diving?

- You're getting closer, Henry, you're getting closer...

And at the end of a very long silence:

- Henry, you are my greatest friend, by your doubt you are helping me to clarify my vision better than all the doctors of the Church. There will be a time when the Church will be soaked in a scepticism as corrosive as yours, and this will be its cure. You are my cure, Henry.

Our horses were beginning to climb the first passes leading to Bolzano. A sort of anxiety was tightening my throat.

- I would like to abandon the struggle, pass the last years of my life in the monastery, at Tegernsee. You would come to visit me with Bella and Catherine...

I didn't answer at all. He had me open a bottle of one of the most biting Austrian wines and we drank a cup of it filled to the brim.

- What a country! he said. Let's go there.

We hadn't arrived at Brixen when Peter, our captain of the guard, came to meet us, informing us that the members of the chapter, joined by some burghers from Brixen, Bruneck and Klausen had, making quite a show of it, run off to Innsbruck to implore the duke to grant protection to the chapter and the towns, insinuating

that the Cardinal was returning to avenge himself. Even the peasants, those who had not followed Bull Head, feared the Cardinal's vengeance.

Sigismund's men hadn't wasted their time. Rumors create perceptions, perceptions create enemies and enemies, everyone knows, are always the ones who start the war. The pope had separated the Cardinal from his diocese and the calumny was not slow in coming. Now the pope was pushing the Cardinal into his diocese, and it would not be long before the trap would spring. The ground was mined. People everywhere believed that the Cardinal was coming to defy the duke.

The Cardinal let it be known that his stay would not be long. He asked the duke to send a representative to Bruneck to conclude a truce. He convoked a synod with an eye to calming the fears, but the ground was no longer anything but a quagmire. The more the Cardinal reassured, the more the people distrusted him. Not only was the anxiety maintained by vicious gossip, but the duke's men-at-arms were already occupying all of the Pusterthal under the pretext of a possible war with Carinthia. A troop of them surrounded the Castle of the Sun as soon as the Cardinal demanded an accounting and the Poor Clares of Brixen were for all practical purposes besieged as soon as he sent an emissary there. Neither I nor the Cardinal were able to get any news of Bella or any other Clare.

We were no longer safe either in Brixen or in Bruneck and all our movements put the Clares and the peasants in danger. We had to retreat. From village to village, we at last took refuge in the castle of Andraz. From there, he dictated to me a letter intended for the chapter of Brixen in which he affirmed his resolve to defend to the end the freedom of his Church. He assembled a small troop at Andraz and we left in the middle of the night, intending to go to the synod of Bruneck. But an ambush awaited us at Mühlbach; several men were wounded and we were forced to retrace our steps. The Cardinal dictated to me a missive addressed to Sigismund in which he threatened, if reconciliation was not achieved before Easter, not to consecrate the holy oils and to turn over to the emperor all the bishop's fiefs.

The threat was too strong. Thinking to break the duke's will, the Cardinal gave himself away. All the nobility and the bourgeoisie were now convinced that he really had returned intending to take vengeance. We were alone against an entire kingdom.

Rumors about Catherine reached us from the village. Some said that she had flown off into the sky, others said that she was living somewhere in the mountains. She appeared sometimes to the dying. They said that she came to those who were expiring and that she brought them such a joy that they were drawn out of their bodies even before their final sigh. She was the hand that God had plunged into the sorrows of the world. The most credible testimonies declared more prosaically that she had left in the direction of Brixen, to visit her mother no doubt, or to become a nun with the Clares.

Our captain of the guard could not affirm anything. Several of our spies had been imprisoned, and the others fell silent. But everything led us to believe that the Clares remained faithful to the reform. With the Friars Minor she had recruited a small defense force composed of sympathizing peasants. For the moment, Sigismund's men were satisfied with starving them through a semi-siege.

The Cardinal remained silent. He left his room only to go to the chapel where he prayed for hours. He asked to be brought a little bread and sank into deep torpors.

One evening, he asked me to come to him. He had had a fire lit. The pains in the joints of his fingers and his feet were only increasing; certain joints were tearing under the pressure of the acidic salts and I had to change his bandages often. He breathed with difficulty, not because his lungs had been bothered by the winter, his respiration was not wheezing, but as if a pain in the heart forced him to take the air in little puffs. Sparks, however, twinkled again in his eyes.

- If the trial is excessive, man cannot confront it. But if he does confront it in spite of everything, the impossible can happen. Faced with the lions, Daniel began to sing the most beautiful of canticles. The impossible is being asked of me. There is no solution to the difficulty in front of me. I have gone over all the possibilities in vain, there is no way out. I must then go to meet this trial, disarmed. It is unlikely that I will get out of it alive. The moment has come then for me to thank you for your services.

I opened my mouth, but no word succeeded in forming in my throat.

- How I love you, Henry, he continued. Fear nothing, you too will have your final moment, and you will know how to confront it. You will see then that it is not courage that keeps you standing in the face of trial, I have no courage, it is necessity, the pure and simple necessity to come to your self. However, your hour has not arrived. So I want you to leave here with Peter. It should be possible for the two of you to get into the Clares' at night. The captain will remain at the convent to direct the defense. You will run away with Bella. You will go to Florence. Get married according to your heart and take care of Catherine.

- But, I replied, I no longer have any family, I cannot marry a noble.

- In Florence, the Cardinal continued, you will find the studio of Andrea Del Verrocchio. That man will help you...

I remained downcast in the face of the Cardinal's smile.

I don't know how I found myself back in my apartments; I have no memory of coming back there. It was late at night or early in the morning, I don't know. I was stretched out on my bed, crushed. Having all that freedom in front of me paralyzed me...

It was in the chapel of the convent itself that the wedding took place. The principal nave rose very high in a bottomless darkness... My heart was leaping for joy...

The Cardinal was shaking my shoulders. It was right in the middle of the night. He seemed very worried, but I stayed in my dream.

Some men had arrived during the night with frightening news. In the presence of fifty-three nobles, Sigismund had declared war on the Cardinal. Five hundred knights and three thousand infantrymen were besieging Bruneck. With the help of neighboring peasants, the inhabitants were defending their town as best they could, but the chapter, frightened, had, without orders from the Cardinal, sent delegates to the duke, at Sterzing.

Even before he had torn me away from my dream, the Cardinal had ordered Peter to go to Sterzing with a letter of concession in which he would leave it up to three of the duke's mandated counselors to negotiate his departure. As soon as I had recovered from my torpor, the Cardinal told me to leave because the siege was imminent. I refused.

The defeat

The day after, in the middle of the night, a messenger announced that the duke and his army were marching toward Andraz. Several nobles had been added to the cavalry and the army had been increased by more than a thousand men. In the morning, a first garrison was surrounding the village. They set fire to a big stack of poles in front of the gate. Our troop of defenders didn't fire a single arrow. The burgomaster and the burghers, without even waiting for the Cardinal's permission, ran out to the duke and presented their submission.

Once Andraz was taken, knights and infantry advanced toward the castle. The Cardinal asked that hostilities be suspended so that he might be led before Sigismund. But the army kept to its instructions and seized the fort, which made no resistance, and the Cardinal's person. We were forced, both of us, to go up into the strongroom of the donjon, where we were imprisoned.

At dawn, we received from a soldier's hand the text of the declaration of war. By the same emissary, the Cardinal reminded the duke that, in virtue of the law of the Empire, one month must pass before the opening of hostilities. No matter, that very afternoon archers fired burning arrows on the castle. A roof caught on fire. The Cardinal agreed to surrender unconditionally. The Castle was turned over to Sigismund. They celebrated, but the duke did not appear.

After two days of a negotiation done in the presence of four soldiers and through the exchange of notes, the Cardinal had to give up to the duke the domain of Taufers and pay a ransom of 10,000 florins. In addition, all the castles in Austria belonging to the Cardinal had to be turned over to their chapter, which, in turn, had to appoint a captain authorized by the duke. As for the deeds to the salt, copper, tin, and magnesite mines, they would simply be submitted to the arbitration of Albert of Austria. And to add to the humiliation, the Cardinal had to lift the ban that weighed upon the duke and his priests and ask the pope for unconditional absolution for Sigismund, the Tyrolean nobles, his court and his troops.

Having lost practically everything, except for our carriage, we were forced to climb into it. An assembly of nobles had gathered to be present at our departure, led by Leonard of Velseck. They had composed for the occasion a most bawdy refrain which they chanted so noisily that our horse departed at a gallop. An escort caught up with us and conducted us as far as Ampezzo, at the foot of the mountains, on the border of Venetia.

From there the Cardinal, before a notary and witnesses, proclaimed the legal nullity of the proceedings which had been extorted from him by force and appealed for the pope's response. He was quite simply furious. However, his

anger against the duke remained superficial in comparison with the one he turned against himself. This lasted for two days or three nights.

He sank into a depression I had never known in him. He no longer ate, no longer slept, and grew deathly pale.

However, he did not remain inactive within himself and after several days, he had emerged. He was pale but calm.

- I am now certain, he told me, that bishops must not hoard money, but distribute their goods to the poor. Bella was perfectly right, I did sin. Thinking to serve the poor, I was simply attracting the covetousness of the rich. I who so much wanted peace, I created war.

Tears were flowing on his cheeks. I had the impression that all of his life was running in reverse before his eyes...

- I was mistaken in the beginning, I have already confessed to you that, but all this blood that has been shed...

For my part, I was bitter and angry and this diffuse anger was about to take on more-than-bitter proportions with Peter's arrival. His face was still blistered from the battle, a gash crossed his cheek, and he didn't say a word. We had to wait an interminable length of time.

Urged by the Cardinal, he made his bleak report:

- To start with, they took it out on the fathers of the strict observance. One died as much from hunger as from thirst, imprisoned for thirteen weeks in a dungeon, he was finished off with a whip. Another was bound and dragged behind a horse as far as Innsbruck. He died on the way. The others were saved at the last minute in the midst of tortures thanks to the conspiring of several burghers who were able to buy their deliverance. Not one renounced the reform.

- And Bella, I interrupted.

He looked away and continued:

- The sisters, too, rejected any compromise. Faced with that resistance, the duke himself came to Brixen to besiege the convent, swearing never to leave the town until after the departure of the sisters-superior and an oath of obedience to the duke from all the community. The sisters were ready to starve to death. After several days, they seized some of them. After binding their hands and feet, they threw them brutally into a wagon to bring them to their judgment in Innsbruck.

- Was Bella one of them?, I insisted.

He began to tremble.

- We attempted an ambush a few leagues north of Varna. While we were fighting, a guard threw a torch in the wagon to persuade us to give up. Two sisters burned in their robes; their cries were horrible. We fled, hoping that the soldiers would extinguish the fire...

The man broke down in tears. I understood that Bella was among the victims.

My heart was instantaneously transformed into stone. I no longer belonged to the animal kingdom, but was part of the minerals. The drama was there in front of me and I, I was as cold as a cape of stone. The messenger's last sentence echoed, but I couldn't manage to decipher the meaning: "She is not dead"...

The wagon went to Innsbruck, then to Kempten and to Pfullendorf where Michtilde, wife of the archduke Albert, took the sisters in and cared for the two wounded ones. But I didn't hear that. Something prevented me from considering her alive, something I wasn't able to admit. I believe that the Cardinal inquired about Catherine. I'm not sure of it. But I knew on that day or the following days that Bella had organized her daughter's flight even before Sigismund's arrival. Rumor had it that she had taken refuge in Brescia.

I was no longer capable of love or of hate. I was an indifferent memory, a sort of slate that retains only the passage of the stylus without ever grasping either the nature or the meaning of the writing. I was the witness.

The rest of the story engraved itself all alone. I would truly have wanted to hate the Cardinal as much as I had hated my father. My first father had sent my mother and my sister to massacre, my second, my beloved to martyrdom. My two fathers were cruel idealists, so good and happy that you couldn't even hold it against them.

I had swallowed the key of my own dungeon, I was living way up in my tower, I watched life go off from carnage to carnage, commanded by a few madmen's hopes. Good intentions, bad intentions, what's the difference! The result is the same.

Summoned by the pope to appear at Siena, Sigismund refused to go there and sent the most famous of his doctors: Laurent de Blumeau. The unfortunate man was thrown into prison, suspected of heresy. Pius II took charge of the administration of the diocese of Brixen. He ordered a knight allied with the Cardinal to raise two flags on the square of Bruneck, the pontifical and the imperial. The duke was excommunicated. Sigismund was supposed to put things back in the state they were before the Cardinal's imprisonment. He refused. Gregory of Heimburg addressed, to Christendom and to the princes, a manifesto against Pius II's proceedings and appealed to a future council to "finally contain the excessive powers of the pope and the invasion of his authority in the kingdoms".

The pope succeeded in forming an alliance with the cities of Venice, of Trent, of Basel, of Kempten, and of Konstanz so as to reduce trade with Tyrol.

Liechtenstein continued to support Bruneck. The Swiss entered the game. Each one wanted his part. Pius II encouraged the Swiss to become "God's avengers".

It was just words. The doge Malipiero offered a mediation which the pope accepted. Several cities in the Empire showed sympathy for the duke. The balance of powers did not herald any winner; only an armistice could settle the matter. In fact, it was a war of attrition that would corrode the pope more than the princes. The religious powers are constructed so as to make themselves visible, they show their emptiness and lose all effectiveness. The sword will eternally beat the religious scarecrows.

At the Vatican

We had returned to Rome. The project of draining the Pontine marshes had been abandoned, the plans for the enterprise had been filed somewhere in the archives of the Vatican library and most of the new villages had been shut down. "It was a wonderful project!", people said to the Cardinal each time they met us in a hall or a corridor. "It was a wonderful project!"-- such was the fatal and annoying sentence they applied to all that the Cardinal had done or tried to do, applicable as much to his philosophical, scientific, and diplomatic works as to his material ones.

The Cardinal was left in his apartments, somewhere in the Leonine city, far enough removed so as not to bother, close enough to keep an eye on. They didn't commission him to do anything, they didn't consult him, they didn't condemn him, they didn't approach him, they simply forgot him and if, inadvertently, they did meet him, they congratulated him for all he had done. It was enough to slightly emphasize the pluperfect "had" and the compliment was filled with arrogance. In this way, stone by stone, they walled up the Cardinal in the most terrible of asylums, that of condescension.

As for me, I had given up, seeing that I was no longer anything but a stone. I was, among the clerics of the Vatican, like a stele in a necropolis. Indeed, few in these places belonged to the living. Some were more mobile than others, they wandered nervously about, but they were not for all that any less dead. They simply transported, at an increased speed, the rumors, the parchments, the decisions, the sanctions, the admonitions that the others, more heathen, hauled along with less eagerness. I too went here and there transporting ink on paper. I hoped to do like the others: penetrate that ink, enter its abstraction, make it my religion, disappear in it completely, become a pure being of rhetoric. But no, I remained at a distance, infinitely alone, excluded from the paper that I moved.

Through an obscure window of my consciousness, I saw the Cardinal, I was the witness of his fall and his exclusion. On one side, all the Vatican's windmills whirled around a single axis: the will to be equal to the princes, to defeat them on their own turf and by their own means. In this way, the more the princes blew on the Vatican, the more the windmills whirled. Through wanting to conform to the powers, one becomes their puppets. On the other side, the Cardinal beckoned us to do differently, to change course, to return to humility. The poor man was quite simply no longer one of the party. They were waiting for his gout or his tophus to finish him off. Already his hands resembled the bare vine shoots of autumn and his whole body was twisted like a vine stock on a ledge become too dizzily steep.

Me, I spun around, already dead, in the mills of the Vatican, for my pain made me as inaccessible to myself as to others. My consciousness was standing behind a woman's face I feared I could not recognize, behind a name I could no longer

pronounce... I swirled in the winds and the vanity behind the papal scene, but I was not part of it.

We were, the Cardinal and I, both of us out of the game. We both watched this strange machine that imitated its enemy. We had done with this sin and it is a terrible sin not to share the sin of everyone. In my solitude I should, then, have crossed the wall, gone to meet it, attempted that unique experience of a solitude meeting a solitude. But I stayed in my bitterness like a burgher in his business.

I hadn't taken off, I hadn't had that recklessness, so why then was I there, on the flagstones of Rome, with both legs broken? I had once again been carried away by one those delirious Icaruses and with him, I had fallen. He was smoothing his feathers and mending his wings, already preparing for another flight. But me, I had only wounds. I had had enough of these birds with too-big dreams. I kept my distance from him.

Besides, why had I approached this bird they were killing with compliments? There are a thousand ways of stoning a man; the Vatican's is just as good as many others. To make words into stones more deadly than cannon balls, it suffices to empty them of all sincerity.

Such a man would, however, have merited confrontation. He would have so much liked his life to have been put in the fire of the liveliest discussions, so that the fat might be melted, the essence grasped. That is all he wanted. He knew that he was in the Church's image, a divine atom that had drowned in the fat of its gold. This is how he judged himself. Had he been put on trial, the Church would have been put on trial. His way of purification would have been the Church's way of purification. But they bowed and scraped before him.

All this cynical and condescending farce hurt the Cardinal intensely. Arthritis made his joints explode. His lungs, his heart, all his organs were increasingly burned, obstructed by the acid salts of a Church he had loved too much. The man bent down around his pain like a wounded soldier. But he did not give up and worked relentlessly. He wanted to return to the essence of the reform: poverty and simplicity.

He tugged at the sleeves of cardinals, bishops, clerics, philosophers, of all who were moving around him: "Stop," he said, "don't you see that I have failed at the very place where you are going? Do you never draw a lesson from it! Don't you want to take a few minutes to think about ends rather than arms?" But they congratulated him for the courage he had shown before the princes and all the nobility, long ago.

Unable to enter into communication with his contemporaries in any way, he ended up dedicating most of his energies to speaking about the world to come, the beings of the future. Hoping that printing would gradually open the floodgates of intelligence, he dictated the fruits of his life to me.

And then one beautiful sunny morning, exhausted, having finally drained his cup, he saw me, there in front of him.

- And you, Henry, what are you doing about your wound? he asked me.

- It is forbidden to speak to stones, I answered.

There are sometimes words that precede thought as if to lead it and encourage it to come. The sentence that came out of my mouth provoked a laugh and this laugh, empty at first, made a breach in my heart. I was ready to hear the Cardinal once again. So I dared to pose my question, for each man's life is a question. Mine, my question, the one that had sculpted all my life, was expressed in few words:

- Why does all that we do produce so much evil and suffering and so little good? I asked.

He knew the flesh and blood of my question. He grasped all of its veins and arteries, since he had been witness to my life and he knew how to read a person better than a book. Deep down, I was asking him why my faithfulness had made me complicit in so many massacres? Wasn't it because the universe is only absurd disorder?

- The question, the Cardinal replied, is not to know if the origin is a chaos or a random play of forces. The question is to verify your hypotheses and for this to go in the opposite direction. You might discover a law perhaps. For example: there where evil prevails, even good creates division. War and great sufferings result from this. Moses, Jesus, Mohammed prove this. Introducing light into darkness is not done without heartbreak. Even if you and I had the purity of Francis of Assisi, we would not have escaped that law. The conflicts would, no doubt, have taken another face, but the misery would have been equal. Conversely, there where good prevails, even evil creates good. The evildoers succeed only in making the good man even better.

- If I understand correctly, I retorted with a certain cynicism, the outer world will be more and more appalling and the inner world, more and more divine. At this rhythm, in five or six centuries, they will die by the millions in all sorts of wars while the saints will touch the Ineffable.

- Now go even further. The world is like all men, it is like you and me. With time, the outer endures with grief and suffering what the inner has not succeeded in resolving. While the outer deteriorates, the inner returns to the source. And then one day, too many sufferings make consciousness light up. So, it's up to you to explain to me, Henry, why you haven't used the places and times that were offered you to become what you are? Why have you refused yourself in spite of the pain? You ask me why evil is, my answer to you is, why isn't there good! Why have you denied yourself the satisfaction of diving into your fears, into your uncertainties, into your pains and into your loves? Tell me, I beg you, why have you abandoned your beloved? By fleeing suffering, one denies oneself happiness.

He had stuck the sword right into the heart.

The Cardinal too was dying, isolated to death. They tried by every means to make an old man of him. To no longer expect anything from someone, to allow, in the kindest possible way, his words to fall into emptiness, and to recall to him only the good he has done-- this is enough to transform the strongest man into a drivelling old fogey. Could a greater torture be imagined for that man of action who continued to rise well before dawn, to pray on his torn knees, to read by candlelight, to lose himself in mathematics, in astronomy, in metaphysics, in an unshakeable will to produce consequences, precisely that, evaluate them in confrontation, get back up on his feet and start again?

The Cardinal could no longer stand the Vatican's air. He took refuge in Orvieto, in gentle Umbria, in the hope of regaining some strength.

Umbria

The softness of the hills and the magnificence of the Lake of Bolsena returned the Cardinal to his inner cloister. He almost never left it. He seemed to cultivate, through the terrible pains of his body and heart, a luminous and happy little corner garden.

It was very early, the sky, still starry, seemed to await the day and the trees sparkled as if to call the dawn. I had looked for the Cardinal and had not found him as I should have in the library, and he wasn't in the oratory or in his room either. I didn't dare to call him for fear of waking up the roosters and alerting the peasants. I advanced into the forest silently so as to listen for the slightest clues. I headed toward the quietest spot, far from the marsh where too many creatures sang, twittered or croaked, toward the heart of the wood where all kept silence and held their breath. For it was in these holes of silence that he liked to sit when his pains became too insistent.

I heard first a child's laugh and then a man's voice. I approached and, to my great surprise, I recognized Cimabue, the painter from Constantinople, accompanied by a child. The Cardinal was with them.

In the middle of the clearing where they were, there was a circular foundation of large gray flagstones, probably the remains of an old Roman tower. With a chalky stone, the Cardinal had drawn his game of boules. Since our latest return to Italy, he practiced almost every morning this activity he had invented. He traced nine concentric circles on which, with eyes shut, he threw a small stone. Next he launched into a kind of arithmetical and symbolic exercise that prepared him, it seemed, for the loftiest metaphysical speculations. Except that there he let the little boy, who appeared to be Cimabue's child, run over the flagstones and go looking for the pebble which, laughing, he immediately placed in his mouth. Which, instead of leading to a discussion on the stages of spiritual life, brought tears of joy to the Cardinal's eyes.

I didn't dare to approach any further and, hidden behind an olive tree, made do with looking and listening. Cimabue remained standing outside the foundation, on the opposite side from the Cardinal, who was seated, leaning against a large cedar.

- Bring me the stone, the Cardinal was asking the child.

The child took the stone out of his mouth, held it out toward the Cardinal, but kept on tottering within the three middle circles. He put the stone back in his mouth and continued to nibble on it.

- Go on, give to the Cardinal, Cimabue insisted.

The child took a step toward the old man, then returned into the inner circles and put the stone back into his mouth. The Cardinal held out his hand; Cimabue encouraged the child.

The child advanced, retreated, circled, but didn't dare approach the prelate. Tears of emotion flowed from the Cardinal's eyes. To excite the child, he pretended to be looking somewhere else and began to scratch the soil with a twig in order to flush out some ants. And presto, the little boy threw the pebble toward the Cardinal. The latter concealed the object for a moment in his hands, covered with bandages, and threw it directly in the center of the nine circles. The child immediately picked up the projectile, put it in his mouth, and threw it back toward the Cardinal. The old man took it and threw it once again into the center of the circles.

The dawn was beginning to light up the forest, and a rooster was heard letting out two or three cock-a doodle-do's. Cimabue had moved away a bit. A mist was floating between the trees. The smell of orange blossoms moved among the colors of the morning, recalling to the painter his beautiful Irene, no doubt.

- Bring, the Cardinal was still asking the child.

The stratagem lasted I don't know how long, but each time, the child came a little closer to the old man. And then suddenly, at the moment when the Cardinal was holding, with some difficulty, an ant between his fingers, the little boy jumped into his arms. After a brief interval, the game continued. The child still did not give the stone, but threw himself with no warning into the prelate's trembling arms. Their hug lasted longer and longer and finally the little one fell asleep on the chest of the old man who drenched him with his tears.

The silence grew so deep that one might have been said it gave resonance to the drops of moisture that appeared on all the vegetation. The light of day, filtered between the mists and the foliage, gave the scene an almost supernatural grace. Cimabue took black chalk and a parchment out of his pouch in order to set down the scene. Not a word, not a sound, the silence was total. The smell of orange blossoms came and went like a woman's gown. The Cardinal, leaning on his tree, had himself fallen asleep while hugging the child. His respiration was wheezy, irregular and so light that one might have believed, at times, that he was leaving us.

I remembered what Cimabue had told me, the day after the terrible news of the collapse of Constantinople. He wanted to purify his art to the point where the Child would be born on a linen canvas. He said that from the beginning someone had been preparing him for this task.

Time was suspended; the painter's motions resembled an infinitely slow dance, like that of shadows as the sun advances. Turning my back on a scene I didn't want to disturb in any way, I slipped alongside an olive tree. As I leaned against it, the silence of so still a morning finally carried me off.

Waking up, I heard the Cardinal in the middle of a conversation:

- You did well to take him with you, he said.

- He wouldn't have survived, Cimabue replied.

- He's such a charming little boy, the Cardinal declared.

- But what memories does he awaken? Cimabue asked, noticing that the Cardinal was touched to his profoundest depths.

- He is the Child, the Cardinal simply answered, keeping his memory, too great for him, to himself.

- But tell me, how can he be the Child?, Cimabue asked, taking the Cardinal's words literally. If the All is the only reality, then each singular being is only an image. And if singular beings are the only reality, then the All is only an image. What fundamentally opposes the spirituals like Meister Eckhart and the nominalists like William of Ockham is surely there. And all your work opens the way to synthesis. So how can this little boy be the Child and this child at the same time?

- A book, for example, the Cardinal replied, includes all the letters of the alphabet and by this contains potentially all possible books. Physically, this child contains, he too, all the elements of the cosmos, but in proportions appropriate to him. A father could spend eternity just with this child and, through his eyes, know everything about the universe and even know everything about the Source that is creating the cosmos every moment.

- So I want to spend eternity with him.

The child must have been starting to wake up, for I heard him babbling. The little boy, who certainly was less than three, began to grumble.

- Come, let's go and have breakfast, the Cardinal suggested... Ouch! he groaned as he got up, for all his joints resisted movement.

Cimabue lifted him and they left the scene. Little by little, the silence surrounded me. The smell of orange blossoms vanished. I stayed under the olive tree a long time, meditating on what I had heard. Bella passed like an aroma of springtime. Perhaps she was the door to my own life.

The Cardinal spent all his time with the little boy. He showed him some illuminations, taught him to trace the big letters he drew on the chapel's flagstones. He laughed, and in his pain, the laughter made tears spurt out. For hours on end, he rocked the child in the sun. When the little one awoke, he went off to play, but always returned like a bird to its nest.

Finally Cimabue went back with the child. The Cardinal had been able to obtain some adoption papers for him, so Cimabue returned to his friend the legate Isidore with a legitimate son who had a promising future.

The end

Following that event, a great rallying of life began to emerge on the Cardinal's face. Men are like wheat. In the autumn, all the energy gathers toward the top, toward the ear, toward the seed. The body dies progressively, illuminating the face. The Cardinal was becoming a gilded sheaf. Every trouble, torment, or abrasion of his life, every pleasure, joy or love of his heart made its wrinkle on his face. This made the Cardinal as beautiful as a child.

He smiled now at all his pain and all his happiness. His face was the shape of a feeling so deep, so wide, so subtle that it could find neither noun nor verb anywhere but in the expression of his face. His face had become the infinitely thin veil of his spirit. The seed was there on the surface ready to fructify, and there was no longer anyone to receive it.

The man wanted to die standing as a soldier of peace. I helped him regain his place in the old wagon that was falling into ruin, and we left for Ancona, with the intention of signing a document that would, he believed, permit the Hussite crisis to be resolved. We had to stop at Todi; the Cardinal was no longer able to get his breath back. He could speak only with great difficulty, but an urgency seemed to drive him.

- The Church will not reform itself, he said as he got out of the wagon. It won't do it because it doesn't take care of little children, it has lost touch with women and babies.

I had to support him all the way to the presbytery.

- So this civilization will go to the end of its contradictions, he continued, with great pain in his speech. This civilization will itself put an end to its days. But no matter! The essential is elsewhere. There is in the depth of depths a point of solitude where no one can go but oneself. It is the root of brotherhood, and there will never be any other. The coincidence of opposites is that the infinity of solitude gets back to the beginning of brotherhood.

- But you're getting tired, I interrupted.

- You will write this in the notebook, he insisted. Do you hear that, Henry! In this depth, being is not (he couldn't get a breath) as long as it has not taken the risk of being itself. Go out of yourself, Henry, for it is wonderfully beautiful outside.

I transported him to the chapel where he wanted to say a mass before going to bed.

- Do you remember what Bella asked us the first time we met her in Rome?

- No, I answered.

- "What are you doing in Rome?" she questioned. She asked this because we were not in our proper place and because Rome is not the proper place for the Church. Do you know my life's question?

- No, I had to admit.

- Where is the Church, where is brotherhood, where is the Child? There is my question.

He took a deep breath that he wasn't able to complete because of the pain passing through him.

- So there it is, I'm there, he continued, panting. I'm knowing beatitude at this moment. Do you know why a man desires a woman?

I didn't dare to answer.

- It is because his beatitude is in his origin...

The Cardinal was not dying, he was being resurrected. As the mass went on, his body staggered but his smile glowed.

Since he had wounded me mortally, I owed him the same compassion. So, at the moment of the consecration, when he came to elevate the chalice, I couldn't prevent myself from murmuring:

- Go, go my father, your little one and her mother await you.

That child passed through his face to such a degree that for a moment his smile lost all its wrinkles, and I thought he was finally going to collapse. But he rallied and continued to the end. It was only on his return to the sacristy, shielded from view, that he turned to me and sank into my arms.

- I'm going.

And he exhaled for the last time.

I felt his body impress itself on me like warm wax and cool little by little like a seal.

The encounter

The pope died three days after the Cardinal, and as a result the burial of his vicar general for temporal affairs, though in compliance with the conventions, passed virtually unnoticed in the shadow, so to speak, of the pope's. It is like that in Rome; there are shadows one no longer pays any attention to today. And yet the shadow, according to my friend Leonardo da Vinci, is the "reverence of light".

For my part, I did not return to Rome. I stayed where I was, at Todi. The Cardinal was no more.

I had to bury that absence, for there is nothing in the world more heavy to bear than a being one has loved and who exudes his eternal absence. I was in the shade of an olive tree not very far from the village. I had in my pocket the little stone which the Cardinal threw to the child... Like a mother cat burying its little one, I dug with my nails. It wasn't hard to dig because it was raining as in the time of Noah. I deposited the stone, put the earth back over it. For a moment, I experienced relief...

The month that followed, every time it rained, and it rained a lot that autumn, I went to the foot of the olive tree. Since it was raining, I didn't need to weep, and moreover a stone does not weep.

A time came when the pain of emptiness became unbearable. I was under the olive tree and was exercising my function as tombstone when it happened. Suddenly a little flower came out of the mud. That hurt so much that I could no longer stand still. I would doubtless have died, but one cannot die before being born, so I burned as if consumed in emptiness.

Each night, I slept in the Cardinal's old wagon in the company of a dog from the village. Through its saturated hair, I found sufficient warmth to survive. Tombstones and dogs have something in common: at the edge of night, when the moon is large, the stone like the dog barks and cries its bitterness. Only dogs hear the howling of stones in cemeteries. Yet that evening, my wail remained stuck in my throat like a fishbone. I was suffocating.

I hitched up the horses, climbed on the wagon and we left, the dog and I, for I don't know where, toward the north. In the north, it is cold, and pain freezes.

A dog has much more instinct at its disposal than does a funerary monument; thus, after exhausting weeks, I once again found myself in Hussite country, there where my father had fought alongside Zizka's disciples. It was the dog who had guided me to this spot, for I didn't even know where this battlefield was. I knew nothing about Bohemia, I knew nothing about the Hussites and I didn't want to know anything about these gregarious movements where a herd tries to become a

nation. I was going nowhere, I was nowhere and I could care less about places, I was looking for cures.

Once night arrived, the dog howled like a wolf, when there was not even the shadow of a moon. It was so cold that the earth smoked, but my pain, rather than freezing, pierced me with a thousand knives. The dog pulled me by the sleeve and led me to the exact spot, behind the very same rock where my life had stopped, frozen in its fear while they were tearing my sister to pieces in front of me. Just at the spot where they had raped her, there was a puddle, not very big, where the pouring rain was making fountains. It was a puddle stirred by a cry trying to tear itself from the soil but falling back into it endlessly, as if restrained by an immense gravity. It might have been said there were fingers in that flesh which wanted to escape and fly away like birds. She was suffocating under that flesh as under a sheet soiled with mud. She was there, under that man, like a tiny daisy crushed by a stone and her blood was spurting out without ever being able to fly away. They were flaying a soul in front of me down to its smallest secret recesses and I stayed frozen in my fear.

The dog tore my sleeve from pulling at me. He succeeded in dragging me so close to the puddle that I could have touched it. He never put his paw in the water and he left me alone in front of it as if in front of a closed door. I was totally paralyzed.

She was a hair's breadth away from me. I heard the moaning of her silence, I saw the terror of her agitation. In that puddle there were wavering shadows, and in this wavering an infinity of terrified faces that might have smiled and given of themselves. One has no idea of what one kills when, by force of stones, one destroys a little packet of seeds, a human fertility, a woman. If he had simply gone on his way, in the place of this hole, there would have been a little house here today, filled with children.

Is it because of this that the universe is so black? Is it possible that in the coal of heaven stars are hidden, buried alive in our fear?

It was a child, a little girl no bigger than a puddle and much more fragile than the water. Blood, simply warm blood propelled by a strange zest for living apart from the mud. One must not tear the envelope. If one tears the envelope, the blood spreads and loses its heat. It's very easy to understand. It's the little difference between a child and a puddle. But he did tear the envelope and I, I died behind the rock even before being born. She moaned, she struggled like a fawn in the jaws of a wolf. He could have simply killed her by driving a good straight and clean sword into her chest, but no, he had to pour in his venom, he had to make her death an absolute denial of what all little girls are.

In vain had I stuck my nails into all the earth around the puddle, torn the mud with my fingers, reduced that soupy ooze to soupy ooze, cut that man to pieces, torn out his guts, broken his bones, spat his marrow in his face... Nothing would give life back to that puddle again. Not my vengeance any more than my

cowardice. I tore that swine of a man with my claws, I exhausted the drive that ought to have pushed me against that monster then. But time doesn't give a damn about latecomers, it runs on its horse and the impulses that arrive too late fall back behind it into their nothingness.

When the "I should have's" have all fallen back into their grave, they leave a pain a thousand times greater but how much more naked and transparent. A pain without teeth that falls like a deluge. Pain loses its stiffness and takes on a wideness and a depth with no relation to the tensions of remorse.

I took a splinter of stone in my right hand, and, as if it were a hammer, I struck my left hand again and again with it until the blood spurted out. That local pain relieved me a little of my infinite suffering. My blood blended with the mud and there was a small lull. But the puddle stayed there, howling under the rain. Thirty years ago she struggled like that in her pain.

Why does Hell exist only for those who still have their heart while all the others sleep in their convictions?

The dog began to howl. The rain stopped for a moment.

A crescent moon appeared in the puddle. My face was in the water's mirror. It was white marble, one might have said. The dog howled a final time. A little breeze caressed the puddle tenderly and I saw her face. My little sister. For a moment, I clearly saw her face, it was the most beautiful face in the world. More beautiful than Catherine's, purer still, and she smiled at me with such a love that it seemed for a moment that all the mud in the world was going to be washed.

- Forgive me, little sister.

It was me howling in the night. I plunged my face in the puddle.

It was raining again in great downpours, it was me collapsing on my sin.

Epilogue

In the morning, the sun was so bright that I wasn't cold at all any more, was burning with fever and as alive as fire. I realized that I was no longer a stone not only because of the heat, but also because of a drive in me that wanted to leap from death to life.

The dog had disappeared. The Cardinal had forcibly given me back to myself.

I went back on the road, this time for Brixen. The wagon failed me on the way, and I did the remainder on horseback. The good animal added to my life. I felt its power and its vigor rising up my spine, lighting up my mind and banishing my fears. A new energy filled my heart.

The Cardinal was right, a wall separated me from Bella. But what was this wall? I was simply afraid that love did not exist beyond the first attraction. I feared that merely looking at her mutilated body would make the enchantment disappear and that I would once again be like a perverted man drowned in the chaos of his passions. There was this terrible doubt that between love and debauchery there was only the distance of an illusion. I might see myself in the man who raped my little sister. And this I feared much more than death.

That day, en route to the Clares of Brixen, I was no longer certain that evil was the first principle. I had a taste for experience and for truth. We'll surely see who I am and what the first principle of being is!

I saw her in the inner courtyard of the cloister. I could see only her profile through some foliage. It was painful to look at. Her eye alone, still sparkling, lit up the purplish shadows of her scars. There was in these shadows an immense sadness. I don't know if it was the effect of the shock, but that spot the color of wine-lees suddenly seemed in the image of the cosmos: a sort of analogy of the night. I was seized with vertigo.

There was something of the sublime in this shadowy face. I remember having found that beauty in the Pontine marshes. The face of Horus, the beauty of life's dark side.

I took the time to look, and I saw. I saw her, she, under her burned cheeks. That eye with its intact eyebrow, her long eyelashes that opened like birds' wings were enough for me.

Someone addressed her and she turned. A miracle -- the other side of her face was impeccable, even more beautiful than in the past, for age had added memory to her natural softness.

When you saw on the uninjured side how the broken side ought to have been, you would, at first, be intensely outraged by the contrast, as if one side offended the other, as if one side denied the other. But after this moment of revolt when light tried to deny shadow, when unhappiness tried to annihilate happiness, I realized that there was something fascinating in such a face. The mutilated, damaged, frightening side gave the other side such a radiance that you couldn't get used to it. The work of opposites renders the world as charming as it is alive.

The universe is made in such a way that if inadvertently you succeed in truly seeing a flower, a little girl, a nondescript frog in a pond, a twinkling star in a window frame, any detail whatever of the immensity, you can no longer endure either ugliness, or death, or meanness. You feel obligated to deny either one or the other. As for me, I denied the existence of flowers and little girls, I looked only at the darkness. Others, on the contrary, only pay attention to the colors of the angels. Both are mistaken. We must look at things as they are, the symmetry of opposites holds the universe in unity and by unity engenders love.

We left for Florence. At the studio of Andrea Del Verrocchio, I found not only assistance, but the titles to a magnificent little hillside property on the south side of the Arno, and also the titles of nobility which the Cardinal had, unbeknownst to me, succeeded in obtaining from my mother's family. He had also deposited with the Medicis a cash dowry in florins permitting Bella to regain her dignity. We were married in the cathedral and the celebration would have been discreet had it not been for our friend, Leonardo da Vinci, who was interested in nothing but inventions.

Da Vinci devoured all that Bella or I said about the Cardinal. He swallowed all the texts I gave him, the treatises, the sermons, the dialogues... He seemed to be looking for him in all the drawings, sketches and paintings that Bella made for him.

Then very early one morning, I heard an exclamation like a great cry, one impossible to know whether it was one of agony, or an intolerable joy. It came from the house's studio. I hurried there. Leonardo, as if transfigured, was dumbfounded by a large painting of the Madonna holding her Child. It was, to tell the truth, the most beautiful painting it had ever been given me to see. The Madonna was none other than Catherine, but the Child I did not recognize at first.

The Madonna was looking at us, the Child was looking at us, and everywhere we were, it seemed to touch us with such an affection that we were certain we were the only objects of their love. This came from the fact that their looks, although distinct, appeared to form a single look.

Bella came running. She looked at da Vinci, and exclaimed:

- What a child you have made, master, for my Madonna!

- I didn't do a thing, da Vinci replied, I happened to glance at your work and there it was, the Child was finished. In a single night!

And then suddenly I recognized the Child. It was Cimabue's orphan.