

Bernard André ANCEL

Renaissance Wonders and Humanist Wisdom

**1506: The adventures of a Florentine student
in Alsace, Bruges and Paris**

A novel

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*To Jacqueline, my wife,
and to our family*

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Preface

So what is this young rider doing in the snowy hills of the Vosges? Where is he from? Where is he headed? In this year of Our Lord 1506, Andrea will experience many adventures throughout Alsace, and his journeying, full of unforeseen events, will lead him to Bruges and Paris.

In this period, which represents the height of the Renaissance, important events will mark the course of the story:

The flowering of **artistic talent**, encouraged by powerful patrons such as the Medici family and the Dukes of Burgundy, particularly in Florence and Bruges. Painters can let their imagination roam beyond religious themes and paint wonderful pictures such as 'The Birth of Venus' by Sandro Botticelli or 'The Garden of Earthly Delights' by Hieronymus Bosch. The new fashion of portraits and self-portraits is brilliantly illustrated by artists such as Jan van Eyck or Leonardo da Vinci. In the field of music, a new movement, known as 'polyphonic', is spreading throughout Europe.

The discovery of territories across the Atlantic: starting with the arrival of Christopher Columbus in the Caribbean islands in 1492, the sovereigns of Spain and Portugal will open up new sea routes and share hitherto unknown territories. New techniques in the fields of shipbuilding, navigation and mapmaking are being developed. Since the capture of Byzantium by the Turks in 1453, the Mediterranean has lost its role as a hub for trade routes, mainly controlled by Venice and Genoa. The opening up of new horizons is going to mean profound changes in the distribution of economic power.

At the junction of the major north-south routes between Italy and Flanders, the Rhenish cities have participated actively in the currents making up the Renaissance. The powerful town of Strasbourg, which was one of the first to become a free city under the direct protection of the Holy Roman Empire, completed its gigantic cathedral in the fifteenth century, testifying to the prosperity of its corporations.

Following Strasbourg's example, a group of ten Alsatian towns have formed a union named the 'Decapolis', also under Imperial protection, to provide mutual assistance and resist pressure from the powerful Dukes

of Lorraine, Burgundy and Württemberg, as well as from a multitude of local lords, some of whom have turned brigands after being ruined.

The town of Sélestat, which is a member of the Decapolis, has hosted a Latin school which is distinguished by new educational methods and is forming brains that are 'well shaped' rather than 'well filled'. Its students will contribute to the current of humanist thought, inspired by scholars like Lefèvre d'Etaples and Erasmus of Rotterdam.

In Flanders, the Dauphin Charles of Luxembourg (the future **Charles V**), grandson of Maximilian of Habsburg and Mary of Burgundy¹, is about to receive a fabulous heritage adorned with seventeen crowns²: huge territories in Europe and across the Atlantic will make him the most powerful monarch since Charlemagne. However, his ascension is beset by conspiracies and revolts. From Spain, the sinister Inquisition is extending its tyrannical power over other countries.

Humanists like Erasmus and Thomas More are being followed by many disciples who preach tolerance and pacifism, but their numbers and motivation are not strong enough to stop the many bloody conflicts that have succeeded each other up to the current period.

The launch of the new super-powerful communication tool that is the **Internet** can be considered, 500 years later, as a new revolution in media outreach, following that of the printing press. But will it permit a revival of the humanistic spirit?

Will our young Andrea be able to overcome the many obstacles laid in his way by forgers and fanatics? Will he benefit from the teaching of the Latin School and find the path to success in such a troubled time?

¹ See Annex II: genealogy

² The most important of his titles were: Roman Emperor, King of Germany, Castile, Leon, Granada, Aragon, Navarre, Naples, Sicily, Majorca, Sardinia, Archduke of Austria, Duke of Burgundy, Brabant, Limburg, Luxembourg and Gelderland, ruler of the Burgundian Netherlands. He would reign over the Spanish territories discovered across the Atlantic and be able to affirm: "on my empire, the sun never sets."

Chapter 1 The Green Valley

*Do what you like !
(Fais ce que voudras!)*

Rabelais

A lone rider was climbing the slopes of the Col du Bonhomme in the Vosges mountains. He confided to his horse:

“Just one more effort, Galileo, this mountain stage is hard work but we shall soon be at the top. In any case, this is nothing compared to the Alpine passes that we went over in winter. You remember?”

The brave horse shook his head: this was not a sign of approval but an indication that he wanted to stop! He paused for a few minutes and set out again on the path that never seemed to stop climbing. It was early March, and a cold wind was blowing through the trees, while patches of snow were becoming more and more numerous.

“It’s a good thing we left Plainfaing early. The innkeeper warned us that this stage would be long and tiring!”

Once at the Col, the rider rested again and addressed two woodsmen coming in the opposite direction:

“Good day gentlemen, do you know the Abbey of Pairis, which should be at the bottom of a valley?”

“Of course, it is well known in the area, but it's still a long way off”, said the elder woodsman, who sported a large grey beard.

“In which direction?”, asked the rider, who saw several roads converging at the Col.

“You have to go straight on and descend into the valley in the direction of the village known as La Poutroie and then go up again along the Val d'Orbey. The Abbey is situated just above the village.”

The younger woodsman added “There is a shortcut. You can go to the right and cross another pass which leads to the White Lake. The views are magnificent. Then all you have to do is to go straight down to the monastery. In this way you will save at least ten leagues!”

The bearded man continued:

“My son is right, but the road is not easy and under a lot of snow! If you go that way, do not waste any time, because when evening comes you can hear wolves prowling in the forest which your horse is likely to attract!”

“Very well”, said the rider, “I’ll try that way anyway because I’d like to see that lake!”

And he took the right-hand path after saying goodbye to the woodsmen.

“This path does not scare me”, thought Andrea. “when I think of the great explorers, like the Venetian Marco Polo, the Genoese Christopher Columbus and my compatriot from Florence Amerigo Vespucci. They had to face far greater dangers in their long voyages! No comparison with this little excursion. These tall trees are like an army of halberdiers escorting me. How beautiful is nature! In Florence we have the best architects, ranging from Brunelleschi to Verrocchio, but we must recognise that nature also is a fabulous architect!”

Lost in thought, the rider reflected on his long journey from Italy and his stay at Saint-Die-des-Vosges. Suddenly he laughed:

“What a farce! Do you remember, Galileo, this young man whom you led me to three days ago to enjoy a delicious sauerkraut? His name was Berthold and he was a member of the Canon’s choir. But last Sunday, the priest of his parish who had overindulged in the communion wine before the Office, had a big surprise. Berthold had persuaded his colleagues in the choir to alter the words of a hymn by replacing just two phrases:

Instead of:

Come, brothers, come sing

The day of glory has come!

they sang:

Come, boozers, come sing

The day of toping has come!

In the first chorus, the choir members were unable to stifle a few furtive giggles. In the second, it was the parishioners sitting in the front rows who laughed and in the third, it was practically the whole audience who broke into laughter that echoed through the church. Only a few of

the more devout worshippers pulled a face. The priest remained imperturbable but hastened to bring the service to an end. The story of what had happened quickly ran through the little town, accompanied by a rumour that the parish priest had asked to be transferred to a monastery... in the Alsace vineyards!

One or two stumbles reminded the rider of the reality of his trip. The path became narrow and slippery. It seemed to be going down into a valley but suddenly started to climb again in a series of steep hairpin bends. The horse was showing increasingly obvious signs of fatigue and the rider was obliged to make frequent pauses and sometimes to walk alongside his horse in order to ease its burden.

"This path is a nightmare", thought the rider, "I hope I have made the right decision in coming this way!"

They arrived exhausted at the Col du Calvaire, and in the descent shortly after they discovered a fantastic spectacle: a large shining expanse surrounded by steep cliffs. While the firs drew green shadows on the smooth surface of the lake, the sunshine cast a circle of light that reflected thousands of stars on the surrounding snow.

"Merciful heaven! The young woodsman said that there would be beautiful views, but the reality exceeds my imaginings.", he thought as he dismounted from his horse.

He sat on a rock and pulled a carrot from his pocket, which he gave to his horse:

"No less than you deserve, Galileo. This path is exhausting but the views are worth it! Before going down to the Abbey, which should not be far away now, we can have something to eat!"

He drew from his bag a loaf of bread and a ham on which he nibbled without taking his eyes from the sight of the magnificent landscape of this tranquil lake surrounded by steep cliffs that seemed to defend it like the walls of a fortress. He pulled out sheets of paper on which were scribbled some notes. "Where is the poem Matthias Ringmann gave me during my stay in St-Die? True, he knows the region well, since he was born in Val d'Orbey. Here it is:

*Blessed among all the mountains are the Vosges, my homeland
Here the living water mingles with the beverage of Bacchus*

“Come, I will try to complete it.”

*Glaciers have shaped the stone crucible.
Are you a volcano that spits fire from the earth?
Or a magic mirror that soaks up the sun
And gives it back in white and crimson light.*

After a long moment of contemplation, he decided to resume his journey, leaving his horse to follow the path leading down to the valley. The images of his long journey came back to his mind: Genoa - Col du Grand St Bernard - Basel - St-Die-des-Vosges.” I have accomplished my mission!”, he thought. “Now I am free and I can devote myself to studies, poetry, music ... and visits to beautiful country like this!”

Lost in his musings, he failed to realise that the path was a forest area where patches of snow and ice partially concealed protruding roots and piles of stones. The horse walked with difficulty, avoiding obstacles, when suddenly one of its hooves slipped on a patch of ice. The rider, lost in his dreams, had not seen the danger and fell heavily to the ground. His head hit a rock and he lost consciousness.

When he came to his senses several hours later, he was lying on a bed but could not get up because his head and his right ankle were hurting badly. “Where am I? What has happened?”, he wondered, scrutinising the outline of the dark room where only a candle threw bizarre shadows.

He did not hear someone enter the room quietly until a voice startled him:

“You have certainly been lucky! A peasant, alerted by the neighing of the horse, found you unconscious and brought you here on a *schlitt*³. You are at the Pairis Priory. I am the apothecary brother Gregory and I do the best I can to tend to the sick and wounded of the valley. I am pleased to see that you have regained consciousness, because you seem to have suffered a severe blow to the head.”

³ Large sled used notably in Alsace for transporting timber and other materials.

“This peasant saved my life ... and my horse was wonderful! By the way, where is he?”

“Don’t worry, the farmer who works for the monastery has taken charge and will take good care of him until you are able to leave. Meanwhile, you can stay here until you are fit again.”

“You are most kind and hospitable!”

“This is the rule of our Cistercian order which has spread throughout Europe since its founding by St. Bernard. Do you have other pain?”

The rider tried to get up slowly but was unable to walk. Brother Gregory examined his foot and concluded:

“I do not think you have a fracture but probably a sprained ankle! You should not put your weight on the right foot for a few days. I’ll make you a splint and give you a pair of crutches. Meanwhile, I’ll make you compresses of camphor and mallow leaves to put on your head and your feet in order to heal the wounds. For now, do not move too much and try to sleep; our Abbot will see you when you are rested! We shall bring you something to eat at noon.”

After the departure of the monk, Andrea saw his bag against the bedside table and managed to grab it. He could see that everything was still there, including the purse that his uncle had given him and which contained a large sum, barely drawn on since he began his journey, and bills of exchange that could enable him to draw money from a correspondent of the Medici bank. He nevertheless wondered whether his resources would enable him enrol in a school to prepare entrance to a major University.

“Matthias Ringmann has spoken to me of a Latin School he attended in Sélestat”, he recalled. “This man, who was born in the region, impressed me with his great knowledge of Greek and Latin literature. He reminds me of the professors in Florence!”

“Fortunately, my ankle is not broken”, he thought, “and the monks are hospitable: I can stay here a while, get better and prepare for the rest of my trip!”

He dozed and woke only at the sound of a servant entering the room with a tray.

“Brother Gregory asked me to give you only light meals, which you must eat slowly because of your head injury: here you have vegetable soup, bread, cheese and a jug of water. Once you have received the splint and crutches you can come to the dining hall and share our modest

meals. Lunch in peace and enjoy this delicious Munster cheese from the valley. I shall inform Father Heinrich, who is our Abbot⁴.

A few minutes later, an imposing figure entered the room and spoke with a strong German accent:

“What has happened to you, young man? Are you not afraid to journey all alone, in spite of the cold, the wolves and the brigands? Fortunately, there has been a good side to your misfortune in that you were rescued by the good people who brought you here. But in fact, who are you?”

“My name is Andrea Portinari. “My father worked in the Lorenzo de Medicis⁵ library in Florence before the disaster that befell the city.”

⁴ Heinrich von Toritz Leonberg, originally from the abbey of Maulbronn in Württemberg, was in fact Abbot of Pairis around the 1500s. See, *Bulletins de la Société d'Histoire du Canton de Lapoutroie – Val d'Orbey*, especially the articles by Armand Simon ‘Pairis, 1138-1988’ Bull. No 7 1988, and Lucien Jecker, ‘Pairis et Maulbronn au XV^{ème} siècle’, Bull. No 27, 2008.

⁵ Nicknamed Lorenzo the Magnificent. See ‘Lorenzo the Magnificent’, Ivan Cloulas, Ed. Fayard, Paris 1982



White Lake
(Vosges mountains)

‘Censier’ of Pairis Abbey

(document describing the Abbey’s privileges;
City Archives, Colmar)



Portal of Pairis Abbey



“Donnerwetter! What happened: plague? war?”

“Neither, have you not heard of the monk Savonarola?”

“Vaguely. He is some kind of crazy orator, is he not?”

“You can certainly say that of him! Initially, Lorenzo de Medici was not sufficiently wary of him: he was ill and could not react to the preacher’s increasingly virulent sermons. After the death of Lorenzo in 1492, the monk declared the establishment of a 'Theocratic Government' in Florence and ordered the burning of books and works of art deemed too libertarian. Even the famous painter Botticelli brought several of his works masterpieces to be burned in the public square. This was called the 'Bonfire of the Vanities'!”

“Mein Gott! What a catastrophe! Florentine writers and painters are renowned throughout Europe!”

“My father objected one day to the opening of the Medicis library, but Savonarola’s minions forced entry and stabbed him. Lorenzo's son Piero II had to flee with his family and servants and the prestigious House of the Medicis were scattered. I was eighteen at the time and I and my brothers and sisters, together with my mother, stayed with an uncle in Genoa. Just because of a fanatic, the beautiful city of Florence, whose influence was spread by the prosperity of its banks and textile mills and the creativity of its artists and writers, has fallen into a dark period of obscurantism, betrayal, and destruction.”

“How could the Pope tolerate such a decline?”

“The Florentines began to get tired of Savonarola’s excesses. The monk had started to criticise the corrupt practices of the Borgia Pope. This was fatal for him, as Alexander VI had him condemned as a heretic and he was executed on the same spot where he had set up his stake.”

“And everything is back to normal in your magnificent city?”

“Not really. Florence is still going through a difficult period, with the rebellion of the Port of Pisa, the threats of condottiere Vitelli and the expansionist aims of Cesar Borgia⁶. The Medicis are patiently waiting

⁶ Cesar Borgia, legitimized son of Pope Alexander VI and Captain General of the Papal troops, conquered several fortresses with the help of a Tuscan military engineer named Leonardo da Vinci! The strategic

for calm to be restored to their city before returning to it, but their banking network remains active in several countries.”

“But what brought you here?”

“In Genoa, my Uncle Carlo, who runs a shipyard, allowed us to do some studies: Latin, Greek, French, Spanish, and so on. What fascinated me most was cosmography⁷ and I dreamed of distant unexplored lands whenever a ship arrived in port. The stories of Marco Polo, dictated while a prisoner in Genoa, I found particularly fascinating and we periodically received news of a Genoese navigator in the service of the King of Spain, a man named Christopher Columbus, who in 1492 discovered new lands in the West.”

“Yes, that news spread rapidly. It seems that he has found a new passage to India?”

“That’s what Columbus thought! One day my uncle was visited by a navigator of Florentine origin, Amerigo Vespucci, who had explored these new countries on behalf of the Kings of Spain and Portugal. After three voyages, he came to the conclusion that these lands were not India, but well and truly a new continent. And he described his findings in a pamphlet in Latin which he entitled 'Mundus Novus' and sent in March 1503 to Lorenzo Pietro di Medici. Amerigo looked after the interests of the Medici family from his office in Seville. Passionate about exploration, it was he who organised these trips and reached much further than had Christopher Columbus, who seems to have discovered only certain Caribbean islands.”

“Wunderbar! What use has he made of his discovery?”

“‘Mundus Novus' was published in Augsburg in 1503 and widely distributed throughout Europe. However, some people remain sceptical about the true extent of his discoveries, as contradictory rumours and texts have been spread around, some of them by members of Columbus’s entourage, anxious to preserve his reputation as the discoverer of India. A team of cartographers who met in St-Die-des

skills and trickery of Caesar Borgia inspired a Florentine delegate, Niccolo Machiavelli, in the writing of his work 'The Prince'. Cesare Borgia was exiled to Spain after the death of his father in 1503. See: '*Cesare Borgia*' by Ivan Cloulas, Ed. Tallandier Paris 2005 and 2013.

⁷ The term cosmography was to be replaced by ‘geography’ only in the nineteenth century.