

Baudolino

Umberto Eco

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BAUDOLINO

*Translated from the Italian by
William Weaver*

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A C E G I K J H F D B

1. Baudolino tries his hand at writing

Rattisbon Anno ~~Domini~~ Domini mense decembri mclv Cronicle of Baudolino of the fammily of Aulario.

I Baudolino son of ~~Galiaudo~~ Gagliaudo of the Aulari with a head that looks like a lion halleluia gratias to the Allmighty may he forgive me

ego habeo facto the greatest stealing of my life, I mean from the cabbinet of the Bishop Oto I have stollen many pages that may belong to the Impperial Chancellor and I have scraped clean almost all of them excepting where the writing would not come off et now I have much parch-mint to write down what I want which is my own story even if I don't know to write Latin.

if they find out the pages are gone God knows the Hell they will raze et may be theyll think it was some spy of the Roman bishops who hate the Emperer Fredericus

but may be nobody cares in the chancellery they write and write even when theres no need and whoever finds them (these pages) ~~can shove them up his~~ ... wont do anything about them

ncipit prologus de duabus civilitatibus historiae AD mcxliiii conscript saepe multumque volvendo mecum de rerum temporalium motu ancipitq

these lines were allready here before and I couldnt scratch them away so I leave them

if they find these pages now Ive writen on them not even a chancelor will understand them because this lingua here is what they talk at la Frescheta but noboddy knows to write it down

but even if its a langwadge noboddy understands they can tell right away its me because everyboddy says we Frescheta people talk a lingua no Kristian ever heard so I have to hide these pages well

Jesù writing is hard work all my fingers ake allready

my father Galiaudo always use to say I must have a gift of Santa maria of Roboreto because since I was a little pup if someboddy say just ~~quinkue~~ five V words I could do their talk right off whether they came from Terdona or from Gavi and even from Mediolanum where they talk stranger than dogs, anyway even when I met the first Alamanni in my life who were laying siege seige seege to Terdona, all Toische and nasty and they say rousz and Myn got, before the day was over I was saying rousz and Myn got too and they woiud would say to me Kint go find us a pretty Frouwe and we'll do fiki fiki even if she doesn't wan to just tell us where she is and we'll grab her fast

whats a Frouwe I said and they said a womman a feemale du verstan and with theiur hands they made like big tits because in this siege we were kinmd of scarce on women, the ones in Terdona are in the town and when we enter just leave it to us but the wommen outside the town don't show their faces and then they set to cursing with

words that gave even me goosebumps

lousy shitty Hunns, you needn't think I'm going to tell you where the Frouws are, I'm no informer, keep jerking off

mamma mia, they like to killed me

kill or necabant, now I'm writing Latin almost, not that I understand Latin even if I learned to read from a Latin librum and when they talk Latin to me, I understand but its the writing I don't know how you write the words

Goddamm I never know if it's equus or equum and I always get it wrong while for us a horse is always a chivaus and I never get it wrong because nobody writes Horse in fact they dont write anything because they dont know how to read

but that day things went all right and the germanns didn't harm a hair of my head because just then some milites arrived yelling come on come on we're attacking again and then Hell broke loose and I couldnt think with the cavalry going this way and the foot soldeiers going that way with their banners and trumpets blowing and wooden towers tall as the trees of Burmia moving like carts with bowmen and fundibulari on them and others carrying ladders and all these arrows raining down on them like hail and the others flinging stones with a kind of big Spooone and they whistled over my head like the iaculi that the Derthonesi threw from the walls, what an uproar!

and I hidd myself for a good two hours under a bush saying sancta virgine help me then everything calmed down and some men ran by me speaking like people from Pavia and yelling they'd killed so many Derthonesi that it looked like a lake of Blood and they were very happy because now the Derthonesi would find out what it meant to side with the Mediolanenses

since those alamanns with the Frouwe business were coming back, may be not so many, because the Derthonesi hadnt exakly been idle I said to myself I better cleer out

so I walked and walked and got home when it was almost day and told the whole story to my father Galiaudo who said you big booby getting mixed up with seiges and the like one of these days you'll get a pike up your ass that stuff is all for the lords and masters so let them stew in their own juice because we have the cows to worry about and we're serious folk forget about Frederick, first he comes then he goes then he comes back and it adds up to fuckall

anyway Terdona didnt fall because they never got the fort. And it went on right up to the end of my story when the Allamanns cut off the water and so instead of drinking their own piss they told Frederick they were his men, he let them come out but first he burned the city and then chopped it to pieces like what the men of Pavia did because they're dead set against the Derthonesi here non est like the Alamans who all love one another and are as close as my crossed fingers but here at Gamondio if we see someone from Bergolio it makes our balls spin

but now back to my storey of when I was in the Frescheta woods there specially when theres real fog when you cant see the tip of your nose and things appear all of a sudden and you dont see them coming then I have visions like that time when I saw the unicorn and the other time when I saw Saint Baudolino who spoke to me and said sonofawhore youre going to Hell because the unicorn story goes like this everybody knows that to hunt a unicorn you have to put a girl whose still a virgin at the foot of a tree and the animal smells the virgin smell and comes and puts his head in her lap so I took Bergolio's Nena who had come with her father to buy my fathers cow and I said

to her come into the woods with me and we'll hunt the unicorn then I put her under the Tree because I was sure she was a virgin and I said to her sit still like this and spread your legs to make room for the animal's head and she asked spread like this and I said there right there and I touched her and she began making some noises like a nanny goat dropping a kid and I lost my head and had something like a napocalips and afterwards she wasn't pure like a lily any more and she said o my god now how will we make the unicorn come and just then I heard a voice from Heaven said that the unicorn qui tollis peccata mundis was me and I started jumping around the bushes and crying hip hee fr fr because I was happier than a real unicorn because I had put my horn in the virgin's lap and this was why Saint Baudolino had called me son et setera but then he forgave me and I caught site of him other times but only if there is plenty of fog or if it isn't bright like to scorch everything.

but when I told my father Galiaudo that I saw Saint Baudolino he hit me on the back thirty times with a stick saying O Lord this had to happen to me, a son who sees things and can't even milk a cow either I bust his head with my stick or I give him to one of those men who visit the fairs making an African monkey dance and my sainted mother shouted at me good for nothing your the worst all what have I done to make the Lord give me a son who sees saints and my father Galiaudo said it's not true he sees saints he's a worse liar than Judas and he makes things up to get out of working

I am telling this story because if I don't you wouldn't understand what happened that evening with the fog so thick you could cut it with a knife and it was already April but in our Parts there's fog even in August and if you're not from those Parts you get lost between Burmia and Frescheta especially if there isn't a saint to take you by the bridle and there I was heading for home when I saw right in front of me a baron on a horse all covered with iron

it was the baron covered with iron not the horse and with a sword he looked like the King of Arragon

and I like to die Mamma mia you want to bet this really is Saint Baudolino whose here to take me to Hell but he said Kleine kint Bitte and I caught on that he was an Alaman lord lost in the wood because of the fog and he couldn't find his friends and it was almost night and he showed me a Coin and I had never seen Money before and he was happy I could answer in his language and in Diutsch I said to him if you keep straight you'll end in the swamp sure as sunshine

maybe I shouldn't have said sunshine with that fog you could cut with a Knife but he understood all the same

and then I said I know the Germanes come from a country where it's always Spring and maybe the seeders of Lebanon grow there but here in the Palea there's fog and in this fog there are some bastards roaming around who are still the grandsons of the grandsons of the Ayrabics who fought against Charlemain and they're a bad bunch and when they see a stranger they hit him in the face with a club and they steal even the hair on his head ergo if you come to my father's hut you'll find a bowl of hot broth and some straw to sleep on in the stable then tomorrow morning at daybreak I'll show you the road specially if you have that Coin gratias benedicite we're poor folk but honest

so I took him to my father Galiaudo who started yelling you damn fool what's got into your head you told my name to a stranger whose with those people there's no

telling maybe hes even a vassal of the marquis of Monferrato and hes going to ask me for a tithe de fructibus and de hay and leguminibus or a tax on the cattle now we are ruined and he was about to reach for his stick

I told him the Gentleman was an Alaman et non from Mon Ferrato and he said all the worse but when I told him about the Coin he calmed down because the Marengo people have heads hard as a bulls but sly as a horse and he understood that he could make something out of this and he said to me you speak all laangwidges so say these things to him

Item: we are poor folk but honest
Ive already told him that

all the same its better to repeat it and item thanks for the Coin. But theres also the matter of the hay for the horse item besides the hot soup I can add a piece of cheese and some bread and a jug of the good stuff item he can sleep where you sleep by the fire and tonight you go to the stable item show me the Coin and I want a Genovine solido and then fiat like one of the family because for us Marengo folk the guest is sacred

the Gentleman said haha you are smart you Marincum folk but a negotio est un negotio I will give you two of these Coins and you wont ask for a Genovine solido because with a Genovine solido I can kauf your house and all your stock but take this and be quiet because youre still making a profit my father kept quiet and took the two Coins that the Gentleman dropped on the table because the Marengo folks heads are hard but sly and he ate like a wolf (the gentleman) or rather like two (wolves) then while my father and my mother went off to sleep after breaking their backs all day while I was out in the Frescheta the herre said this wine is good I'll drink a bit more here by the fire so mine kint tell me how it is that you speak my langwidge so well

ad petitionem tuam frater Ysingrine carissime primos libros
chronicae meae missur

ne humante pravitate

heres another place I couldnt scrape off

now to go back to my story of that Alaman lord who wanted to know how it was that I spoke his lingua and I told him that I have the gift of tongues like the Apossles and the gift of Vision like the Madalenes because I walk in the wood and I see Saint Baudolino riding a unicorn milk-colored like his twisted Horn just where horses have what for us would be a Nose

but a horse doesn't have a Nose other wise underneath there would be a beard like that Gentleman had who had a fine beard the color of a copper pan where as the other Alamans I had seen had yellow hair even in their ears

and he said well well you see what you would call a unicorn and maybe you mean the Monokeros but where did you learn that there are unicorns in this world and I told him I had read it in a book that the Frescheta hermit had and with his eyes so wide he looked like an owl he said What You know how to read too

Lordamercy I said now Ill tell you the Story

so the story went like this there was a holy hermit near Bosco who every so often the people took him a fat hen or a hare and he would pray over a written book and when people go by he hits his chest with a Stone but I say its a clod id est all dirt so he doesnt hurt himself so much anyway that morning we took him two eggs and while he was reading I said to myself one for you and one for me like good Christians if only he doesnt see me but I don't know how he managed but he caught me by the Neck and I said to him diviserunt vestimenta mea and he started laughing and said you know something youre a smart puerulus come here every day and Ill teach you to read

so he taught me my written Letters to the tune of raps on my head. only later when we were friends he began saying what a handsome sturdy youth you are with a Lions head but show me how strong your arms are and whats your chest like let me touch here where the Legs begin to see if your sound then I figured out where he was heading and I hit him with my knee on the balls I mean the Testicules and he bent double saying Godamighty Im going to tell the Marengo people your possessed by the devil so theyll burn you alive and I say all right but first I will tell how I saw you at night sticking it in the belly of a Whitch. And then we'll see who they think is possessed and then he said no wait I was just joking and wanted to see if you had the fear of God lets say no more about it come tomorrow and I'll start teaching you to write because reading is one thing that costs nothing you just have to look and move your lips but if you write in a book you need paper and ink and the inkwell that alba pratalia arabat et nigrum semen seminabat because he always spoke Latin

and I said to him when you learn to read then you learn everything you didnt know before. But when you write you write only what you know allready so patientia Im better off not knowing how to write because the ass is the ass

when I told this to the Alaman gentleman he laughed like a Lunnatic and said Goot Kint those hermits are allesammt Sodomiten but tell me tell me what else you saw in the wood but thinking he was one of those that wanted to take Terdona like the troops of Federicus Imperator I said to myself Id better satisfy him and maybe hell give me another Coin and I told him that two nights before Saint Baudolino had appeared to me and said that the Emperor makes a victory at Terdona because Fridericus was the one and only lord of all Longobardia including Frescheta

then the gentleman said you Kint have been sent by Heaven would you like to come to the imperial Camp and say what Saint Baudolino said and I said that if he wanted I would say also that Saint Baudolino said that Saints Peterandpaul would come to the siege and lead the imperial troops and he said Ach wie Wunderbar for me just Peter by himself would be enough

Kint come with me and your fortune is made

illico or almost illico anyway the next morning that gentleman says to my father that hes going to take me with him to a place where I will learn to read and write and may be Ill become a Ministerial

my father Galiaudo didnt know what this meant but he understood that he would be getting rid of one who ate more than he was worth and he wouldnt suffer any more when I went roming. But he thought that may be this gentleman one of those men who go to the fairs and the marketplaces with a Monky and may be he would lay his hands

on me and he didnt like that idea but that gentleman said he was a grand comes palatinus and among the Alamans there werent any Sodomiten

what are these sodomiten my father asked and I explained theyre kypioni shit he said kypioni are everywhere but when the Gentleman pulled out another five Coins after the two of the night before then he forgot everything and said son go then and maybe this is a piece of luck for you and may be for us too since one way or another these Alamans are always around our partts and this means you can come and see us now and then and I said I swear I will and I was ready to leave but I still felt a lump in my throat because I saw my mother crying like I was going off to die

et so we left and the Gentleman told me to take him to where the Castrum of the imperials was and I said thats easy you just follow the sun that is go where it comes from

and as we were going and could already see the tents a company of horsemen arrived all decked out and when they see us they fall on their knees and lower their pikes and their banners and raise their swords why what can this be I asked myself and they started yelling ~~Chaiser~~ Kaisar here and Keiser there and Sanctissimus Rex and they kissed that gentlemans hand and my jaw almost fell off because my mouth was open so wide like an oven because it was only then I understood the gentleman with the red beard was the emperor Fridericus in flesh and blood and I had been telling him madeup stories all night like he was any old asshole

now he'll have them cut off my head I say to myself but still I cost him VII coins and if hed wanted to cut my head off he would of done it last night gratis et amoredei

et he said dont be afraid of anything its all right Im bearing news of a great Vision little puer tell us all the vision you had in the wood and I drop down like I had the falling sickness and my eyes open wide and theres foam on my mouth and I yell I saw I saw and I tell the whole storey of Saint Baudolino who made the prophecy to me and they all praise ~~Dominnus~~ Domine Deus and say Miraculo miraculo gottstehmirbei

and with them there were also the messengers of Terdona who hadnt yet decided whether to surrender but when they heard me they lay flat on the ground and said if even the saints were against them then they better surrender because it couldnt go on anyway

et then I saw the Derthonesi who were all coming out of the City men women and children et vetuli too and they were crying while the alamans carried them away like they were beecie that is berbices and sheep everywhere and the people of Pavia who cheered and entered Turtona like lunnatics with faggots and hammers and clubs and picks because tearing a city down to the ground was enough to make them come

et towards evening I saw on the hill a great smoke and Terdona or Derthona was just about gone and this is how war is as my father Galiaudo says its an ugly animal war is

but better them than us

et in the evening the Emperor comes back all happy to the Tabernacula and gives me a slap on the cheek like my father never did and then he calls a gentleman who turned out to be the good canon Rahewinus and tells him he wants me to learn to write and the abacus and even gramar which then I didnt know what it was but now slowly I learn and my father Galiaudo never immagined such a thing

what a great thing to be a man of learning and who would ever have thought it

*gratis agimus ~~domini~~ dominus I mean thanks to the Lord
all the same writing a story makes you sweat even in winter also Im afraid
because the lamp has gone out and as the man said my thumb akes*

2. Baudolino meets Niketas Choniates

"What's this?" Niketas asked, after he had turned the parchment over in his hands and tried to read a few lines.

"It's my first attempt at writing," Baudolino answered, "and ever since I wrote it—I was fourteen, I think, and was still a boy of the woods—I've carried it with me like an amulet. After I had filled many other parchments, sometimes day by day, I felt I was alive only because in the evening I could tell what had happened to me in the morning. Then I was content with those monthly ledgers, a few lines, to remind me of the main events. And I said to myself, when I was further on in years—now, for example—on the basis of these notes I would compose the *Gesta Baudolini*. So in the course of my journeys I carried with me the story of my life. But in the escape from the kingdom of Prester John..."

"Prester John? Never heard of him."

"I'll tell you more about him—maybe even too much. But as I was saying: During the escape I lost these pages. It was like losing life itself."

"You will tell me what you remember. I receive scraps of events, fragments of actions, and I extract a story from them, woven by a design of Providence. In saving my life you have given me what little future remains to me and I will repay you by giving you back the past you have lost..."

"But maybe my story has no meaning."

"There are no stories without a meaning. And I am one of those men who can find it even where others fail to see it. Afterwards the story becomes the book of the living, like a blaring trumpet that raises from the tomb those who have been dust for centuries.... Still it takes time, you have to consider the events, arrange them in order, find the connections, even the least visible ones. But we have nothing else to do; your Genoese friends say we must wait until the fury of those dogs has calmed down."

Niketas Choniates, former court orator, supreme judge of the empire, judge of the Veil, logthete of secrets or—as the Latins would have said—chancellor of the basileus of Byzantium as well as historian of many Comneni and Angelus emperors, regarded with curiosity the man facing him. Baudolino had told him that the two of them had met at Gallipoli, in the days of the emperor Frederick, but if Baudolino had been there, he had been surrounded by many other ministerials, whereas Niketas, who was negotiating in the name of the basileus, had been far more visible. Was Baudolino lying? No matter: it was he who had saved Niketas from the fury of the invaders, brought him to a safe place, reunited him with his family, and was now promising to take him out of Constantinople....

Niketas observed his rescuer. In appearance now he seemed not so much a Christian as a Saracen. Face burned by the sun, a livid scar that ran the length of his cheek, a crown of still-tawny hair, which gave him a leonine demeanor. Niketas would soon be even more amazed to learn that this man was over sixty years old. His hands were thick, when he held them clasped on his lap the gnarled knuckles were striking.

Peasant's hands, made more for the spade than the sword.

And yet he spoke fluent Greek, not spitting saliva the way foreigners usually did, and Niketas had, only briefly, heard him address some of the other invaders in a hirsute language of their own, which sounded swift and harsh; this was a man who could use it offensively. For that matter Baudolino had told him the night before that he possessed a gift: he had only to hear two people speaking any language and in no time he was able to speak as they did. A singular gift, which Niketas had believed granted only to the apostles.

Living at court—and at *that* court—had taught Niketas to evaluate people with calm distrust. What struck him about Baudolino was that, whatever the man said, he would glance furtively at his interlocutor, as if warning him not to take him seriously. A tic admissible in anyone, except perhaps in one from whom you are expecting a truthful account, to be translated into history. But Niketas was curious by nature. He loved to listen to the stories of others, and not only concerning things unknown to him. Even things he had seen with his own eyes, when someone recounted them to him, seemed to unfold from another point of view, as if he were standing on the top of one of those mountains in ikons, and could see the stones as the apostles on the mountains saw them, and not as the faithful observer did, from below. Besides, he liked questioning the Latins, so different from the Greeks, firstly because of their totally new languages, each different from the other.

Niketas and Baudolino were seated opposite each other, in the little chamber of a tower, with double windows on three sides. One side revealed the Golden Horn and the Pera shore opposite, with the tower of Galata emerging from its procession of hamlets and hovels, from the second pair they could see the canal of the port debouching into the Strait of Saint George, and finally the third pair faced west, and from it all Constantinople should have been visible. But on this morning the delicate color of the sky was darkened by the thick smoke of the palaces and basilicas consumed by the fire.

It was the third fire to strike the city in the last nine months: the first had destroyed storehouses and the stores of the court, from the Blachernae palace to the walls of Constantine, the second had devoured all the warehouses of the Venetians, the Amalfitan merchants, the Pisans and the Jews, from Perama almost to the shore, sparing only this Genoese quarter almost at the foot of the Acropolis, and now the third fire was raging on all sides.

Down below, there was a veritable river of flame, arches were crashing to the ground, palaces were collapsing, columns were shattered, the fiery globes that rose from the heart of that conflagration consumed the more distant houses, then the flames that had capriciously fed that inferno returned to devour whatever they had previously spared. Above, dense clouds rose, still ruddy at their lower edge with the reflection of the fires, but of a different color, whether through a trick of the rising sun's rays or because of the nature of the spices, the lumber, or other burning material that engendered them. Further, depending on the direction of the wind, from different points in the city, aromas arrived, of nutmeg, cinnamon, pepper, and saffron, mustard or ginger—the world's most beautiful city was burning, yes, but like a brazier of scented condiments.

Baudolino had his back to the third window, and he seemed a dark shadow haloed by the double glow of the day and of the fire. Niketas half-listened to him, while at the same time his mind returned to the events of the previous days.

By now, on this morning of Wednesday, 14th of April of the year of Our Lord 1204—or six thousand seven hundred and twelve since the beginning of the world, as the date was usually calculated in Byzantium—for two days the barbarians had definitively been in possession of Constantinople. The Byzantine army, so glittering with its armor and shields and helmets when on parade, and the imperial guard of English and Danish mercenaries, armed with their awful two-edged hatchets, who until Friday had fought bravely and held off the enemy, on Friday gave way, when the enemy finally breached the walls. The victory was so sudden that the victors themselves paused, timorous, towards evening, expecting a counterattack, and to keep the defenders at bay, set the new fire. But on Tuesday morning the whole city realized that, during the night, the usurper Alexius Ducas Murzuphlus had fled inland. The citizens, now orphaned and defeated, cursed that thief of thrones whom they had fêted till the night before, just as they had flattered him when he had strangled his predecessor, and now did not know what to do. (Cowards, cowards, cowards, how shameful, Niketas lamented at the scandal of that surrender.) They had gathered in a great procession, with the patriarch and priests of every rank in ritual garb, the monks blathering about mercy, ready to sell themselves to the new potentates as they had always sold themselves to the old ones, holding up crosses and images of Our Lord, their shouts and cries loud as they moved towards the conquerors, hoping to mollify them.

What folly! To hope for mercy from those barbarians, who had no need to wait for the enemy to surrender before doing what they had been dreaming of for months: destroying the most extensive, most populous, richest, noblest city in the world, and dividing the spoils. The immense weeping procession was facing unbelievers of enraged mien, swords still red with blood, stamping horses. As if the procession had never existed, the sack began.

Dear Christ, Our Lord! What horrors and tribulations we suffered! But how and why had not the roar of the sea, the dimming or total obscuring of the sun, the moon's red halo, the movements of the stars, forewarned us of this final disaster? Thus Niketas cried, on Tuesday evening, moving with bewildered steps in what had been the capital of the last Romans, on the one hand seeking to avoid the infidel hordes, and on the other finding his path blocked by ever-new fires, in despair because he could not take the street to his house, fearing meanwhile some of that rabble might be threatening his family.

Finally, towards night, not daring to cross the gardens and the open spaces between Saint Sophia and the Hippodrome, he had run to the temple, seeing the great doors open, and never supposing that the barbarians' fury would come to profane even that place.

But just as he entered, he went white with horror. That vast space was sown with corpses, among which enemy horsemen, foul drunk, were wheeling their mounts. In the distance the rabble was shattering with clubs the silver, gold-edged gate of the tribune. The splendid gate had been bound with ropes to uproot it so it could be

dragged off by a team of mules. One drunken band was cursing and prodding the animals, but their hoofs slipped on the polished floor. The soldiers, first with the flat of their swords, then with the tips, incited the poor animals, who in their fear loosed volleys of dung; some mules fell to the ground, breaking their legs, so that the whole area around the pulpit was a gruel of blood and feces.

Groups of that vanguard of the Antichrist were stubbornly attacking the altars. Niketas saw some of them rip open a tabernacle, seize the chalices, fling to the ground the sacred Hosts, using their daggers to pry loose the gems that adorned the cup, hiding them in their clothes, then throwing the chalice into a general pile, to be melted down. Snickering, some took from their saddlebags flasks filled with wine, poured it into the sacred vessel and drank, mimicking the celebrant's actions. Worse still, on the main altar, now stripped, a half-naked prostitute, drunk on liquor, danced with bare feet on the table of the Eucharist, parodying the sacred rites, while the men laughed and urged her to remove the last of her clothing; she gradually undressed, dancing before the altar the ancient and lewd dance of the cordax, until finally she threw herself, with a weary belch, on the seat of the Patriarch.

Weeping at what he saw, Niketas hurried towards the back of the temple, to the monument the pious populace called the Sweating Column—which, in fact, produced a mystical and continuous transpiration—but it was not for mystical reasons that Niketas wanted to reach it. Halfway there, he found his path blocked by two enormous invaders—to him they seemed giants—who were shouting at him in an imperious tone. It was not necessary to know their language to understand that his courtier's dress had led them to presume he was laden with gold, or else could tell them where gold was hidden. At that moment Niketas felt he was doomed because, as he had already seen in his breathless race through the streets of the invaded city, it was not enough to show that you were carrying only a few coins, or to deny having a treasure hidden somewhere: dishonored nobles, weeping old gentlemen, dispossessed possessors were tortured to make them reveal where they had hidden their wealth, and killed if, now having none, they were unable to reveal it, and left on the ground when they did reveal it, after having undergone so many and such terrible tortures that, in any event, they died while their tormentors lifted a stone, broke through a fake wall, knocked down a false ceiling, and rummaged with rapacious hands amid precious vessels, soft silks and velvets, stroking furs, sifting gems and jewels through their fingers, sniffing pots and sacks of rare spices.

So Niketas saw himself dead, mourned the family he had lost, and asked God Almighty to forgive him his sins. And it was at that moment that into Saint Sophia came Baudolino.

He appeared as handsome as Saladin, on a bedecked horse, a great red cross on his chest, sword drawn, shouting "Gods belly! By the Virgin! 'sdeath! Filthy blasphemers, simonist pigs! Is this any way to treat the things of Our Lord?" and then he flattened all those profaners red-crossed like himself, but with the difference that he was enraged, not drunk. Reaching the whore sprawled on the patriarchal seat, he bent over, grabbed her by the hair, and began dragging her in the mules' dung, shouting at her horrible things about the mother who had borne her. Around him, all those whom he intended to punish were either so drunk or so intent on removing gems from every object holding any that they were unaware of what he was doing.

Doing it, he arrived at the two giants who were about to torture Niketas. He looked at the wretched man pleading for mercy, let go of the prostitute's hair, and, as she fell, now lamed, to the ground, said, in excellent Greek: "By all twelve of the Magi! Why, you are Master Niketas, minister of the basileus! What can I do for you?"

"Brother in Christ, whoever you may be," Niketas cried, "free me from these Latin barbarians who want me dead, save my body and you will save my soul!" Of this exchange of Oriental vocalism, the two Latin pilgrims had understood little and they sought an explanation from Baudolino, who seemed one of their company, expressing themselves in Provençal. And in excellent Provençal, Baudolino shouted that this man was the prisoner of Count Baudoin of Flanders, at whose command he was seeking him, and *per arcana imperii* that two miserable sergeants like themselves would never understand. The two were stunned for a moment, then decided that arguing would only be a waste of time when they could seek other treasures without any effort, and they went off towards the main altar.

Niketas did not bend to kiss the feet of his savior. He was already on the ground, and too distraught to behave with the dignity his rank required. "O my good lord, thank you for your aid. This means that not all Latins are wild beasts with faces distorted by hatred! Not even the Saracens acted this way when they reconquered Jerusalem, when Saladin was content with a handful of coins to guarantee the safety of the inhabitants. How shameful for all Christendom, brothers against armed brothers, pilgrims who were to recover the Holy Sepulcher but have allowed themselves to be halted by greed and envy, and are destroying the Roman empire! O Constantinople, Constantinople! Mother of churches, princess of religion, guide of perfect opinions, nurse of all learning, now you have drunk from the hand of God the cup of fury, and burned in a fire far greater than that which burned the Pentapolis! What envious and implacable demons have poured down on you the intemperance of their intoxication, what mad and odious Suitors have lighted your nuptial torch? O mother, once clad in gold and imperial purple, now befouled and haggard. And robbed of your children, like birds imprisoned in a cage, we cannot find the way to leave this city that was ours, nor the strength to remain here, but instead, sealed within many errors, we roam like vagrant stars!"

"Master Niketas," Baudolino said, "I have been told that you Greeks talk too much and about everything, but I didn't believe it went this far. At the moment, the question is how to move our ass out of here. I can offer you safety in the Genoese quarter, but you have to tell me the fastest and most secure route to the Neorion, because this cross on my chest protects me but not you. The people here have all lost their reason; if they see me with a Greek prisoner they'll think he has some value and they'll take him away from me."

"I know a good way, but it doesn't follow the streets," Niketas said, "and you'd have to leave your horse behind...."

"So be it," Baudolino said, with an indifference that amazed Niketas, who did not yet know at what a cheap price Baudolino had acquired his charger.

Niketas, helped to his feet, took Baudolino by the hand and furtively approached the Sweating Column. He looked around, surveyed the vast temple; the pilgrims, seen in the distance, were moving like ants, bent on dilapidation, paying no attention to the two of them. At the column he knelt and thrust his fingers into a somewhat loose

crevice in a slab of the pavement. "Help me," he said to Baudolino. "If we both try, we may be able to do it." And indeed after some effort the slab was raised, disclosing a dark opening. "There are some steps," Niketas said. "I'll go first because I know where to set my feet. Then you close the stone over your head."

"Then what do we do?"

"We climb down," Niketas said. "Then we'll find a niche, and in it are some torches and a flint."

"What a fine city this Constantinople is, so full of surprises," Baudolino remarked as he descended the winding stair. "Too bad these pigs will not leave a stone upon a stone."

"These pigs?" Niketas asked. "But aren't you one of them?"

"Me?" Baudolino was amazed. "Not me. If it's this clothing you refer to, I borrowed it. When they entered the city I was already inside the walls. But—where are the torches?"

"Don't worry. Just a few more steps. Who are you? What's your name?"

"Baudolino of Alessandria—not the city in Egypt, but the one they now call Caesarea, or maybe they don't even call it that and it's been burned down like Constantinople. I'm from up in the mountains, in the north, near Mediolanum. You know it?"

"I know about Mediolanum. Once its walls were destroyed by the king of the Alamans. Later our basileus gave them some money to help rebuild them."

"Indeed, I was with the emperor of the Alamans before he died. You met him when he was crossing the Propontis, almost fifteen years ago."

"Frederick. Old Copper Beard. A great and most noble prince, clement and merciful. He would never have done what these..."

"When he conquered a city, he wasn't so tenderhearted."

Finally they were at the foot of the steps. Niketas found the torches, and the two men, holding them high above their heads, proceeded down a long passage, until Baudolino saw the very belly of Constantinople, where, almost directly beneath the greatest church in the world, another basilica extended, unseen, a forest of columns stretching infinitely into the darkness like so many trees of a lacustrine wood, rising from the waters. Basilica or abbatial church, completely upside down, because even the light, which gently licked capitals that faded into the shadows of the very high vaults, came not from rose windows or vitrages, but from the watery pavement, which reflected the moving flames of the visitors.

"The city is pierced by cisterns," Niketas said. "The gardens of Constantinople are not a gift of nature but an effect of art. You see? Now the water comes only up to our knees because almost all of it has been used to put out the fires. If the conquerors destroy the aqueducts, then everyone will die of thirst. Usually you can't move on foot here; you need a boat."

"Does this passage arrive at the port?"

"No, it stops well before; but I know other passages and stairs that connect it with other cisterns and other tunnels, so that even if we can't reach the Neorion we can walk underground to the Proosphorion. However," he added, in anguish, as if he were just remembering another errand, "I can't come with you. I will show you the way, but then I have to turn back. I have to save my family, who are hiding in a little church behind

Saint Irene. You know"—he seemed to be apologizing—"my palace was destroyed in the second fire, the one in August."

"Master Niketas, you're mad. First, you bring me down here, making me abandon my horse, when—even without you—I could have reached the Neorion through the streets. Second, you believe you can reach your family before being stopped by another pair of sergeants like those I found you with. Even if you succeeded, then what would you do? Sooner or later someone will root you out, and if you do collect your family and set off, where will you go?"

"I have friends in Selymbria," Niketas said, puzzled.

"I don't know where that is, but to reach it you first have to get out of the city. Listen to me: you're no good to your family. On the other hand, where I will take you, we'll find some friends, Genoese who decide which way the wind blows in this city. They're used to dealing with Saracens, Jews, monks, the imperial guard, Persian merchants, and now with these Latin pilgrims. They're smart people; you tell them where your family is and tomorrow they'll bring them to where we are. I don't know how they'll do it, but do it they will. They would do it in any case for me, since I'm an old friend, and for the love of God, but all the same they're Genoese, and if you give them a little present, so much the better. Then we'll stay there till things calm down. A sack normally doesn't last more than a few days. You can trust me, I've seen plenty of them. Afterwards, you can go to Selymbria or wherever you like."

Deeply moved, Niketas thanked him. And as they resumed their way, he asked why Baudolino was in the city if he wasn't a pilgrim.

"I arrived when the Latins had already landed on the opposite shore, with some other people ... who are no longer with us. We came from very far away."

"Why didn't you leave the city? You would have had time."

Baudolino hesitated before answering. "Because ... because I had to stay here in order to understand something."

"Have you understood it?"

"Unfortunately, yes. But only today."

"Another question: why are you devoting yourself so to me?"

"What else should a good Christian do? But, actually, you're right. I could have freed you from that pair and then let you go off on your own, and instead here I am, sticking to you like a leech. You see, Master Niketas, I know that you are a writer of stories, just as Bishop Otto of Freising was. But when I knew Bishop Otto, I was only a boy and I had no story, I wanted to know only the stories of others. Now I might have a story of my own, though I've lost everything I had written down about my past and, what's more, when I try to recall it, my thoughts become all confused. It's not that I don't remember the facts, but I'm not able to give them a meaning. After everything that's happened to me today I have to talk to somebody, or else I'll go crazy."

"What happened to you today?" Niketas asked, plowing ahead in the water. He was younger than Baudolino, but his life as a scholar and courtier had made him fat, lazy, and weak.

"I killed a man. It was the man who almost fifteen years ago assassinated my adoptive father, the best of kings, the emperor Frederick."

"But Frederick drowned, in Cilicia!"

"So everyone believed. But he was assassinated. Master Niketas, you saw me

wield my sword in anger this evening in Saint Sophia, but I must tell you that in all my life I had never shed anyone's blood. I am a man of peace. This time I had to kill: I was the only one who could render justice."

"You will tell it all to me. But first tell me how you arrived so providentially in Saint Sophia to save my life."

"As the pilgrims were beginning their sack of the city, I was entering a dark place. When I came out, it was nearly nightfall, an hour ago, and I found myself near the Hippodrome. I was almost trampled to death by a crowd of Greeks in flight, screaming. I ducked into the doorway of a half-burned house, to let the crowd pass, and when they had gone by I saw the pilgrims pursuing them. I realized what was happening, and in an instant this great truth flashed into my mind: that I was, true, a Latin and not a Greek, but, before these infuriated Latins could realize that, there would no longer be any difference between me and a dead Greek. No, it cannot be, I said to myself, that these men will want to destroy the great city of Christendom now that they have finally conquered it.... I reflected that when their ancestors entered Jerusalem at the time of Godfrey of Bouillon, and the city became theirs, they killed everybody: women, children, domestic animals, and it was thanks only to a mistake that they did not also burn down the Holy Sepulcher. True, they were Christians entering a city of infidels, and even on my own journey I had seen Christians massacre each other for a word. Everyone knows how for years our priests have been quarreling with your priests over the question of *Filioque*. And finally, it's simple: when a warrior enters a city, all religion is irrelevant."

"What did you do then?"

"I left the doorway and, sticking close to the walls, I reached the Hippodrome. There I saw beauty wither and become dire. You know? After I arrived in the city, I used to go over there to gaze at the statue of that maiden, the one with the shapely feet, arms like snow, and red lips that smile, and those breasts, and the robe and the hair that danced so in the wind that when you saw her from a distance you couldn't believe she was made of bronze: she seemed living flesh...."

"The statue of Helen of Troy. But what happened?"

"In the space of a few seconds I saw the column on which she stood bend like a tree sawed at the root, and fall to the ground in a great cloud of dust, the body shattered, the head a few steps from me, and only then did I realize how big that statue was. The head—you couldn't have embraced it with both arms, and it was staring at me sideways, like a person lying down, with the nose horizontal and the lips vertical, which, forgive me the expression, looked like those lips women have between their legs; and the pupils had fallen out of the eyes, and she seemed suddenly to have gone blind, Holy God, like this one here!" And he leaped backwards, splashing in all directions, because in the water the torch had suddenly illuminated a stone head, the size of ten human heads, which was propping up a column, and this head was also reclining, the mouth even more vulvular, half-open, with many snakes like curls on the head, and a mortiferous pallor of old ivory.

Niketas smiled: "That has been here for centuries. These are Medusa heads, from I don't know where, and they're used by builders as plinths. It doesn't take much to scare you...."

"I don't scare. The fact is: I've seen this face before. Somewhere else."