The Debate (Chapter 9)

By Raul Emerich

From: **Cardano** (*Ascension, tragedy and glory in the Italian Renaissance*)

The epic tale of a mathematician, astrologer and physician from Milan who was arrested by the Inquisition, believed to have found the cure for asthma, and became part of British history

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Prospero and Cardano arranged their schedule so as not to miss a special class with Branda Porro, a renowned professor of Philosophy and Medicine. Some students were saying that he would give a much anticipated and highly praised lecture, "Homer and the Virtue of Ulysses," and indeed the room was full. Branda began, as usual, with an explanatory overview of the subject.

"Thank you for your presence. It is a great honor for me to be here in this honorable college," he slowly began, remembering all the issues he'd talked about in previous years, the debates he'd won and the acclaim he'd received from eminent colleagues.

"As many of you know, Flavius Blondus divided our history into an Ancient Period, when classical writers produced works of great value, and a Middle Period, the *medium aevum*, the age when copyists in monasteries preserved the whole of our knowledge. We thus owe it to the Church of Rome the safeguarding of priceless works," he continued, keenly aware of the constant need to compliment the labors of the Pope. "This college, for instance, holds the manuscript *Blondi Flavi historiaru ab inclinatióne Romanorú Imprerii liber primus*, the first book on the decline of the Roman Empire, the end-time of the Ancient Period of our world." Despite his

interest, Prospero could not help but yawn. He had just gobbled down a meal, as only young people can.

The afternoon classes were called extraordinary, and most often were private, that is, paid for by the students. The curriculum was freely chosen by the professor, and was merely ratified by the rector. The subjects could be repeated every three years, the duration of the school's complete medical training.

"In the earlier period," continued professor Branda, "as its first milestone, we have the great works of Homer: *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. As you know perfectly well, the *Iliad* deals with the Trojan War period. We have discussed this in a previous lecture. Today we will talk about the voyages of a hero called Odysseus by the Greek and Ulysses in Latin.

Before discussing the ethical aspects of the Ulysses' outlook, Branda Porro explained how the hero had been called upon by the gods to fight in the Trojan war – which he did, albeit unwillingly. During his return trip, he faced myriad dangers in the ocean and took ten years to get back home.

Upon arriving, he also had to face the suitors who wished to usurp his throne. Bravely, Ulysses reclaimed his rightful place and resumed his government to the well-being of all. As the professor emphasized, he was the true model of a hero.

"With due respect, sir, I disagree," interjected Cardano, to everyone's amazement. A deep silence fell over the room as the teacher walked determinedly toward the student who had contested him.

Prospero cringed and whispered in a desperate attempt to dissuade his friend:

"Are you crazy? Say it was a misunderstanding, for God's sake!"

The professor came closer and, in a challenging tone, asked:

"Who are you to disagree with me?"

"Hieronymus Cardanus… *carus doctor*," Cardano introduced himself, stumbling somewhat with the words. "Respectfully, sir, I would say that… it's easy to be a hero when the gods are on your side. You may act at will. Happiness is at the service of the hero."

“Is it easy to be a hero, *signor* Cardanus?” asked the professor, turning away from him and facing the other students. “Perhaps you consider yourself a hero, isn’t that so?” Everyone laughed heartily, easing the tension in the air. “Tell me, then, what is it that a hero face with such ease. The sword, perhaps?”

“Pain,” replied Cardano. Despite feeling rather humiliated by the professor’s remark, he somehow regained the strength to pursue the dialogue.

“A fine example, I must admit.” A sense of momentary relief pervaded the room, as eyes turned once again toward Cardano, this time with curiosity. “Indeed, dear student, Homer speaks of pain, perhaps for the first time in recorded history. Are you familiar with this passage? *Odyssey* provides a description of its antidote, capable of assuaging even the suffering of a father who sees his son perish: wine.”

“I must disagree again, professor.” Prospero’s eyes goggled. Had his friend gone berserk?

Another bout of silence settled in. This time, however, everyone was eager to see how the provocation would play out.

Branda Porro had quite clearly lost patience. Turning to Cardano, he spoke in a different tone:

“I am realizing that the student wishes to challenge me, is that correct? Should we set a date?”

The conversation had taken an unexpected turn. Branda’s insinuation put Cardano at a crossroads. It was unseemly for a teacher to challenge a student, so Branda let Cardano decide. If Cardano backed down, he would have to apologize and remain quiet; if he accepted the contest, he risked becoming an object of scorn and ridicule at the university.

“Dear professor Branda Porro, I do indeed challenge you!”

The students were stupefied. Rarely had one of them ever challenged a teacher, and even then the overtone had been friendly, the master giving a favorite pupil the opportunity to expose his rhetorical skills. The buzz increased; some students even identified themselves with Cardano’s audacity.

“Excellent.” Branda smiled, sensing a chance to have some fun and enhance his prestige. “‘Ulysses and Happiness,’ what do you think?” He stared at Cardano, who assented with a slight nod. “And what are we going to wager? Judging by your clothes, I suggest we pledge a pair of old pants…”

General laughter engulfed the room again.

“A horse!” replied Cardano, resolutely.

The students around him, some of whom were about to graduate, now looked with admiration at the young man’s courage.

“Don’t even think about borrowing mine!” whispered Prospero.

“Agreed,” said Branda. “Not the greatest of prizes, to be sure, but well worth an afternoon of rhetoric. After my lecture today, we’ll meet in the rector’s office, with the notary, to register the contest and the chosen date. Now, dear students, let us return to Ulysses.”

Some of these disputations lasted days. Branda, however, deemed that two or three hours would be more than sufficient to amass the bet. He resumed his lecture, careful not to dwell on certain topics that the student might use at their upcoming encounter.

After class, it was agreed that the disputation would take place in the amphitheater, as usually happened, in ten days time, with a healthy horse as the award. An extra afternoon was reserved to continue the debate, if necessary. Three judges were appointed, and the rules carefully drawn out. Among them, one that stated that the competition would be interrupted if the audience manifested in unison its support for one of the contestants. Finally, the theme was chosen: “Ulysses and Heroic Happiness in Homer.” Flyers would be printed to announce the event to all students.

As he was leaving the university, Cardano met with Prospero and Ottaviano, who complimented their friend and colleague for what they had witnessed that afternoon.

“You were daring, or perhaps foolhardy, I cannot tell,” joked Ottaviano.

Before parting, a short, unshaven and very nervous man, who seemed to be around 50, came up and addressed them. His name was Giovanni Stefano Biffi and he wished to speak with *signor* Cardano. He had heard that Cardano might help him learn about his future, as he had three daughters to care for.

"I'm afraid I can't do anything for you," said Cardano, intrigued as to who might have trumpeted the fact that he has a certain gift of clairvoyance.

"I need a word of tranquility," the man begged.

At that moment, Cardano had the distinct impression of having seen him in a dream, alongside Niccolò. He began to shiver uncontrollably, a scene that deeply impressed his two friends.

"Go away, Mr. Stefano Biffi. And prepare your daughters. You will soon be hanged."

The man seemed resigned with the news. He turned away and left without another word. Ottaviano and Prospero went after Cardano, bursting with curiosity, but failed to obtain any further detail.

"I did nothing but observe, my friends. His appearance suggested he was being hunted down. I simply uttered his sentence. You could see he wasn't even shocked by what I said," he continued. "He already imagines what is bound to happen. He will be hanged, certainly."

The two friends were initially impressed, but then broke out laughing, admiring Cardano's ability to disengage himself from an inconvenient situation. They said goodbye and Cardano returned alone to the house of Giovanni Targio, where he now slept in a room with two servants. Prospero was no longer spending the nights there, because his father had since then arranged for him to stay at the Il Falcone inn, the best in Pavia.

Paid inns were also called *hospicium*, because they served the *hospites extraneis gentibus pro lucro* and had spread over the centuries throughout the north of the peninsula. Everyone knew the story of Salio Grosso, *un operatore del settore alberghiero* who had made his fortune in the thirteenth century. His two-story home, with tile ceiling, a conjoint tavern, a well and several holes to

discharge human waste, was an example of successful business. His contract with the *podestà* precluded harboring criminals, exiles and thieves.

Inns were often connected to a tavern, which sold ready-made meals or offered the option to use their fire. According to a deal with the city government, they often had a bell announcing when wine and beer could no longer be sold, and complied with bylaws that banned forbidden games. The penalty for not observing this rule could reach 25 lire.

With regard to students who came from all over Italy and from abroad, there was a love-hate relationship. *Un pó amati, un pó odiati*, as it was said. True, they brought in foreign currency, but sometimes also confusion. Fazio had told Cardano curious stories about Giovanni Gatti's tavern, the last stop where students from Como and Milan could leave their horses before entering Pavia. Brawls, drunken bouts and the expulsion of students who refused to pay became celebrated tales in the region.

The well-known house inns belonging to the Cevolle, Belbelli and Belbellotti, for instance, paid an annual fee to the praetor's office and charged from the guests not only their stay, but also a deposit for goods and the care of their horses. These inns housed many students.

Il Falcone, located on Piazza Grande, in the vicinity of Chiesa di Santa Maria Gualtieri, near the Porta Palazzo, could be considered a special case. It was a sophisticated complex, with conjoint stores, including a tavern, a blacksmith and a barber. From the arms dealer, for example, one could purchase an *asta*, a notorious iron-tipped wooden spear, the weapon of choice of many travelers. Prospero had been booked a room with two beds and a dining room with a tablecloth, napkins and kitchen utensils. This was a luxury that few could afford.

For students without means, who were not lucky enough to find a room like Cardano's, the best option would be the *xenodochium*. The first known *xenodochium* in the region was established by the Lombard king, Desiderius. In Pavia, near the Royal Palace in the eastern part of the city, he provided a charitable outbuilding for the sick, the poor and traveling pilgrims. From the very beginning, that *xenodochium* was managed by the Monastero di Santa Giulia di Brescia.

Cardano was very grateful for not having had to go to a *xenodochium*. Because it housed all kinds of people, he believed he would not have the concentration required to study.

Upon arriving home, he was surprised by the presence of his father, Fazio. After asking for his blessing, he inquired:

"Father, what brings you here?"

"I bring some unpleasant news," he gulped. "Your aunt Margherita died, my son. She was buried yesterday."

Cardano sat down slowly, staring into the distance. He felt a tightness in his chest when he heard his father's words.

"Her end was miserable, full of suffering," continued Fazio. "In the last month, we consulted three doctors from the College of Milan. They all wore beautiful clothes, rode young horses, prepared complicated recipes and charged a fortune. For nothing. It was God's will, my son." He paused briefly. "I cannot stay long because, as you can imagine, your mother is not well. One more thing: we are all wondering how your Law studies are going."

Cardano turned and looked at his father serenely in the eyes.

"I will not study any type of Law, father. Neither Civil nor Canonical. I will study Medicine. I will become a doctor."

"Are you out of your mind?" Fazio struck back in disgust. "Are you willing to relinquish the stipend of one hundred ducats that I am bequeathing? Son, who will support you in the field of medicine? We do not know anyone!"

"I will become a doctor, father."

Fazio sat down again, devastated. Since the birth of the child, he imagined he would continue his work. Now everything seemed to fall apart. He covered his face with his hands and wept, for the first time in his adult life. As he wept, his son stared at him, tenderly. Cardano felt at that moment an affection he had never felt before, perhaps because he was seeing his father bereft of his ever-present austere demeanor.

Fazio wiped his eyes, embarrassed, and hastened to leave. “I must go.” He got up and left. Cardano cringed in the hay bed for a long time and stayed there until dark.

It was the onset of a new cycle of insomnia in his life, which would last for eight nights. During this period, he would roam the city in the moonless darkness, attentive to details that no one else could discern.

In the middle of the night, he would sit down to read. Once, he found a sentence of Seneca that enchanted him: “I will willingly accept my lot, because everything that abets our feelings and our fears is the law of life.” Lucius Seneca, the writer, had lived in Rome ten centuries earlier. He had enjoyed the pleasures of wealth, when he was emperor Nero’s tutor, and bore the bitterness of exile and poverty with resignation. He was a serene mentor to many later generations.

But resignation is not part of the hero’s state of mind, thought Cardano. He turned to the *Odyssey*, apprehensive with the imminent clash with professor Branda. Posters had been affixed in the university and everyone was talking about the impending event. It was, after all, a unique occurrence, a student challenging a teacher.

Ulysses had taken part in the invasion of Troy, recalled Cardano, a necessary feat to conquer Helen, the most beautiful woman in the world, who had been kidnapped. The war ended and Helen returned to Sparta. Ulysses, in turn, longed to go back home. The journey, however, would demand ten years of his life, with many confrontations at sea and in outlying islands. All his companions died along the way, and he was left alone. But there was something in this tale that did not convince Cardano. The hero’s struggle to him seemed futile. These thoughts tormented him and he felt he could not go into a debate with such striking doubts in his mind.

On the eighth night, he was burning with fever and raved like a child. One of signor Cattanei’s servants took care of him, giving him a soup with bread and chicken, and water at all times. It took a long time, but finally his body settled down and he slept deeply.

“Girolamo! Wake up, my boy!” Prospero shook his friend, who wearily opened his eyes. “Aren’t you going to the debate?”

The word “debate” awoke him at once. “What time is it?” His eyes widened.

“It’s lunch time,” said Prospero. “Come on, let’s go quickly, otherwise the humiliation will be greater still. Did you not assume this madness? Well, let’s go face it…”

Cardano washed his face and grabbed his books, and together they made their way to the university on a beautiful autumn afternoon. Arriving there, curious glances seemed to be aimed at them. The amphitheater was already half full. Cardano went up to the bench, on the right corner of the front stage. Branda arrived soon afterward, sure of himself, accompanied by two pupils. The notary, a legal practitioner in charge of formally registering events in the duchy, announced the contest, the rules and the established prize.

The judges were introduced and the dean spoke, noting the importance of such events, which often had repercussions beyond the borders of Lombardy, a fact that brought prestige to the university. Each contestant would remain in one of the corners when he did not have the floor. He could not interrupt his opponent’s address, unless authorized to do so by a judge.

As was customary, each contestant gave a half-hour exposition advocating his point of view and expounding the basic concepts of his arguments. The debate properly ensued, which could last up to two or three days.

“I thank everyone’s presence,” Branda began after the lots had been cast. “In this beautiful afternoon, when many of you might be fishing in the tranquil banks of the canal, I see that the topic ‘Ulysses and Happiness’ has attracted quite a bit of attention.” He gave a sarcastic chuckle as he looked at Cardano, suggesting that the lure of that disputation was actually the morbid pleasure of watching someone be publicly humiliated.

Pointing to the middle of the audience, Branda thanked the presence of a doctor from the College of Milan, who had come especially to observe the challenge.

“As our discussion involves the subject of happiness, it is only natural that we begin by scrutinizing this concept, so worn down by time that its real meaning has lost value. The Stoics used the term ‘indifferent’ to denote everything that contributes neither to happiness nor to unhappiness, such as money, fame and health,” began Branda, in a professorial tone. “For them, happiness derives from virtue, the harmonious disposition, according to Chrysippus, and not from external things. Epicurus also shared this notion, but Aristotle, as you know, went further, defining happiness as virtue in its pure state. No one better than a hero to embody this concept. Not surprisingly, Aristotle was himself the personal tutor of one of the greatest heroes the world has known.”

“Bear in mind that we were still three hundred years before the birth of Christ,” explained Branda, “when Alexander, son of the late king Philip, became the ruler of Macedonia, a region in the northeast of Greece that was stigmatized by the people of Athens. For the Athenians, the Macedonians were an ignorant bunch. Indeed, Philip did not break the mould with regard to his table manners or to his way of dealing with subordinates, but he brought none other than Aristotle to be the teacher of his son. This is evidence that for king Philip the education of his successor was paramount.”

“After a series of astonishing military campaigns,” continued Branda, “Alexander became master of all Greece and was preparing to conquer the East. He needed only to certify himself that this was indeed the will of the gods. So he climbed the mountains to the holy city of Delphi, stood in front of the sanctuary of Apollo, a magnificent temple at the time, and read the words written in gold letters: ‘Know thyself.’ *Nosce te ipsum*.”

“Yes, gentlemen,” emphasized Branda as the audience imbibed his words and motions, “to know one’s self, that is, one’s fears, one’s passions, one’s strength, is the great stride of the virtuous hero, he that will become the model for all of us. This afternoon, we’ll talk about the great hero Ulysses, the greatest of all, greater even than Alexander. Ulysses understood the divine plan and, as the most virtuous of heroes, acted with moral rectitude, enjoying the good fortune that would become our guiding star.”

Branda, a master of rhetoric, with his powerful voice and seductive demeanor, had resorted to the device of telling a captivating tale, thus winning over the audience from the very start before embarking on the subject of the debate.

Cardano, who had a rather squeaky voice, realized that the task of bringing the audience to his side that afternoon would not be easy. Not to mention that his appearance was also somewhat peculiar. In his book, he wrote that he was of average height and had a long, thin neck (*statura mediocris, collo aliquantulum longiore, & tenuoire*), a fallen lower lip, and small, apparently half-opened eyes (*labro inferiore crasso & pendulo, oculis valde parvis*). In addition, he had a slender chest and his beard was split and patchy. His figure was indeed quite distant from the Greek ideal of beauty.

The student began his presentation with reticence, discussing the reasons that had led Ulysses to leave his home. The hero lived comfortably with his wife, Penelope, but did not hesitate to answer the call of the gods and ended up participating in the taking of Troy. He would later have to face innumerable obstacles on his return home. He was smart, no doubt about it, having even devised the ruse of building a huge wooden horse and hiding warriors inside. None of this, however, according to Cardano, was enough to make a man worthy of admiration.

"Is he really virtuous, the man who will not sacrifice himself for his companions? Remember the story of Alexander, to mention the example given by the noble professor: a hero who fought and died for his men. Let us keep in mind that, long before that, an elderly and blind Homer had written the *Iliad*, the first book we know of. He talked about the war of Troy – *Ílion*, in Greek – in which the dauntless Achilles took part, the boy with the sensitive heel. Helen was rescued and the epic return narrated in the *Odyssey* began."

"All the brave warriors who accompanied Ulysses, however, more than three hundred, died on the return trip. I ask myself if Ulysses was really that eager to fight for his men," questioned Cardano, "and return to his homeland, where his wife Penelope awaited. As chance would have it, he remained seven years in one of the islands, in the company of a witch, my fellows, at the home of the nymph

Calypso, daughter of Atlas. In the translation by Livius Andronicus, *apud nimpham Atlantis filiam Calipsonem*. I would not be surprised if he had constituted another family there."

Much of the audience laughed, which was a good sign, thought Cardano.

"Apparently," he completed, "Ulysses felt very much at ease in the role of a traveler who couldn't return. The real hero, gentlemen, was Telemachus, son of Ulysses," ventured Cardano, gaining confidence, "a boy who suffered the sorrows of paternal absence and the daily vision of scroungers who wanted to take his father's place beside his mother. Telemachus, as a young man, went in search of Ulysses, a man who had renounced his family obligations and, for that reason alone, would be worthy of Dante Alighieri's *Inferno*, suffering alongside Diomedes. *En quel fuoco si martira insieme Ulisse e Diomede*, describes the author, in Canto Twenty Six.

"Yes, Telemachus received a sign from the gods to begin his enterprise," explained Cardano, "and felt he had to do it, even if he did not partake of Ulysses' assurance of success. It is much easier to face obstacles when we have all the divine powers on our side, is it not? The grief of a son seeking his father was so profound that Helen succored and nurtured him."

At this point, Cardano felt as if he himself was seeking his father and thus continued his allocution passionately.

"He was unhappy… He was unhappy because of a grievous feeling that gnawed him. But what is happiness anyway, gentlemen? Happiness would be the opposite, the absence of that bitter feeling and also the absence of pain. To be sure, virtue is a central element, as Aristotle said, but the truth is one cannot be happy when one's weighed down by suffering."

Cardano's address left many in the audience puzzled. How could anyone speak against the heroic status of Ulysses? How could pain prevent happiness?

"If you are so well-acquainted with this theme in a work about Ulysses," Branda countered, "please tell the gentlemen gathered here: how many times does the word 'happiness' appear in Homer's book? If you have no idea, I remind you that the word 'wine' appears more than ninety times…"

Cardano did not answer. The *Odyssey* contains more than 12,000 verses. He knew that the word "happiness" appeared a few times, but he did not want to give a wrong answer.

"I'll allow you to choose between three options: ten, twenty or fifty?" inquired Branda.

Cardano remained silent. That was the type of question that excited the audience, but was actually a mere pretense of knowledge. Any student could count certain words for a teacher who wished to dazzle the impressionable, although it was a stratagem that could not be used often, under the penalty of losing its impact.

"Twenty!" hazarded Cardano.

"Not at all; it's only seven!" Branda laughed uproariously, and was soon followed by many who were witnessing the challenge. "I see you're making an effort, m' boy!"

Cardano focused on the next topic of the argument, as Branda paraded from one side of the stage to the other, evincing his charm and verve to the audience. Cardano pondered that he must not fall into the trap set by his teacher, who was playing tricks to make him lose his temper and become irritated. He knew that serious arguments would be raised later on. He must keep his mind calm and cool. So he waited until silence returned to the room and resumed the discussion.

For another hour, they exchanged basic questions and offered counterpoints to the positions of the philosophers of ancient Greece. Cardano managed to balance the dispute. Now he had the floor again. He was more confident and ready to play his trump card.

"Since you have been so keen to discuss details," began Cardano, "I will ask you loudly and clearly, for all to hear: what did Helen give Telemachus to assuage his unhappiness?"

"Wine!" said Branda, without missing a beat and being applauded by some in the audience. "The drink that soothes the pain of seeing one's relatives be killed before one's eyes!"

“Not true,” replied Cardano. “Your limited knowledge of Homer’s work surprises me, professor!”

A profound silence fell over the audience and the doctor of the College of Milan grimaced at this demonstration of student hectoring. Cardano’s arrogance was a very bold move. If he was mistaken, the debate could come to a premature end, making Branda victorious. Cardano would lose the horse he had received as a gift from his father.

“Bring me the manuscript!” commanded the professor. One of his pupils brought the Latin translation by Livius Andronicus and placed it in his hands. The magnificent volume, with beautiful illuminations, was part of the University collection that had been preserved from the last pillage. Branda opened the tome on Book Four, on the scene that takes place in the hollow land of Lacedaemon, with its many ravines, and read aloud the passage in which Helen poured some wine with a powerful anesthetizing effect. Vibrant applause erupted in the room and some students cried out that he was the winner.

Cardano, confident, waited until the babbling subsided and launched his attack:

“You’re perusing the wrong book, professor. That translation is flawed. Why don’t we consult the original Greek?”

“The translation I have in my hands is faithful to the original. I myself have checked many passages and compared them to the original verses. If someone has the book in Greek,” challenged Branda, “let him bring it here and I’ll read aloud to everyone.”

The heedful Prospero rushed to climb on stage, bearing a book that belonged to Cardano, an original Greek version published in Venice. Branda, wasting no time, flipped to Book Four and began reading the passage.

“Then Helen, daughter of Zeus cast into the wine of which they were drinking a drug to quiet all pain and strife, and bring forgetfulness of every ill[1]…” He was suddenly reduced to silence. The professor gazed at the book, unable to believe

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[1] English translation by A. T. Murray.

what was written. He read and reread the Greek text without uttering a word. A sense of deep embarrassment ran through the room. Everyone realized that Branda's flaw had been crucial. Gently, Prospero took the book from the hands of the professor, while Cardano urged someone to reread the passage.

One student came forward and read aloud:

"Then Helen, daughter of Zeus cast into the wine of which they were drinking a drug, a *fármacon*, to quiet all pain and strife, and bring forgetfulness of every ill: *Nepenthès*."

The book was closed and returned to Prospero. There could be no doubt: the wine had been merely the means used to offer the *fármacon*. The word was actually there, written by Homer for all to see.

"*Nepenthès*, the absence of pain and strife. A drug that came from Egypt and had the power to relieve suffering," continued Cardano, now certain of his victory. "'Whoso should drink this down would not in the course of that day let a tear fall down over his cheeks, no, not though his mother and father should lie there dead, or though before his face men should slay with the sword his brother or dear son, and his own eyes beheld it'."[2]

Branda was devastated. Steadfastly, Cardano proceeded to explain the end of the story, with all its connotations:

"Ulysses finally returned home and, upon learning of all the ruckus and rumpus that had taken place in his absence, became choleric. Although one might have expected certain benevolence towards those who tried to exploit the situation," explained Cardano, "a desire for revenge sprouted in his heart."

Disguised as a beggar, Ulysses drew a surprise attack plan with his son Telemachus and carried it out without mercy.

"Liodes knelt at Ulysses' feet," dramatized Cardano, "and, begging for mercy, swore he had plotted no evil with any suitor and had merely acted as a soothsayer at the altar of the oracles. ' It is no small thing to beseech the gods for so disgusting

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[2] Ibid.

men,' said Ulysses, and beheaded him with a sword. When he finally meets his wife, Penelope is suspicious: after all, men are full of wiles.

"However, centuries have passed since the Homer's masterpiece," continued Cardano, deeply moved. "Today, it is we men who nurture feelings of distrust towards women, my friends. Behold, it is witches who threaten us now, furtive sorceresses like the notorious Morgan La Fey in King Arthur's court, in Britannia. Ulysses, then, amidst all the bloodshed in his palace, finally convinces Penelope of his noble intentions. The question is whether he convinces us, readers, that noble intentions are enough. The people of Ithaca, for instance, were outraged by Ulysses' attitude and rightly rebelled."

Branda remained silent. He didn't dare to ask for the floor. The judges signaled that the student could continue. So he did:

"The inhabitants of Ithaca took up arms," concluded Cardano, "but the goddess Pallas Athena spoke to the men of the island: 'Cease this useless bloodshed!' They were all petrified and realized that Ulysses had an ally against whom it was not possible to fight. Peace was then celebrated – by force. Note that although the hero seems intemperate, he is the chosen of the gods. This is the good fortune to which the ancients aspired: heroism that signals the virtue of those who are born to be happy. But the time in which Homer wrote his tale exists no more. Our city has evolved. Nowadays, the virtue of a citizen who respects laws, who is ethical, has become the highest quality that guides us toward happiness. Virtue and ethics, together with the absence of pain; this is happiness for us, not heroism and the luck of being chosen by the gods. Although Ulysses' endeavor is the epitome of the journey towards the unknown, the symbol of the pathway of a hero, Telemachus' pursuit moves us more, being the one with which we can identify, my fellows. None of us is or will ever be Ulysses, but any of us could be Telemachus, a young man still insecure on the threshold of adulthood who receives a calling to go out in search of his father, face the unknown, endure the inclement suffering of life, and acknowledge the sign that it's time to become a man!"

Prospero started clapping, slowly but surely. Little by little, he was joined by more and more people, until the entire audience, in syncopation, was applauding the new winner of the disputation in Pavia. The judges rose, and Branda, once

again, dared not speak to them. He now had two days to deliver on the bet, to everyone's amazement.

Cardano left the university under the admiring gaze of many and the envy of others. He was asked about his previous challenges. Few believed that that was the first time the young student took part in an official public dispute. When he confirmed that that had been his inaugural challenge, one of the third-year students cried out that his was lying, that he had to be more experienced:

"*Te mentiri, esse peritissimum!*"

Cardano would write down in his diary the enigmatic answer he gave: the Sun does not cease to exist because the clouds hide it from view – *nec defiit esse Sol cum obduct est nubes profunda*. He then pulled away from the group that was forming around him and went home.

He did not undress. Instead, he laid down in his clothes and slept soundly.

He dreamt many dreams. He was visited by Niccolò and also by Lucilla, and many images followed one another in quick succession. The walls, the vaulted arches, the deep blue sky, a gentleman asking if he would die soon. His sweat dampened the linen upon which his head lay.

He was awakened three hours later by his friends Prospero and Ottaviano, who planned a *commemoratione* for his victory that afternoon.

"Where will we go?" asked Cardano, still groggy, securing a dagger around his waist.

"No questions allowed!" Ottaviano smiled. "Today, the celebration is on me!"

The three rode on horseback for fifteen minutes within the city walls, until they reached the South Gate, near the students' tavern. On the way, they talked about the events of the day, reliving all its emotions.

Cardano said he had been seized by an unknown force, something akin to what his father had professed, a spirit, or familial demon – *ibi pater… quàm a Dæmone, quem palam familiaren haberese profiteba tur* – that had brought tranquility at right moment and aggressiveness when required.

“Seneca said life is short,” pondered Cardano, “and that we should live it with joy. *Vivamus ergo cùm felicitas!*” He smiled. But then he paused, and a certain sadness overcame him. “I’m just sorry that my father is not teaching classes here at Pavia this year.”

“Why?” Prospero was surprised. “Haven’t you been meeting him for nineteen years now?”

“Last week I wrote about it,” said Cardano.

“About what?” asked Ottaviano.

“*Nulla felicitas sit in his mortalibus, quorum substancia est marcida, inanis, & vacuous*.”

“I’m afraid I don’t fully understand… My dear friend, please translate,” bid Prospero.

“There is no happiness in mortal things, whose substance is evanescent, inane, empty.”

“Philosophy is all very well, but we are now coming to something that is mortal and certainly not inane…” Ottaviano smiled sarcastically. “Let us go inside…”

They entered a somewhat secluded house at the end of the road. Cardano did not suspect what it was. They were welcomed by a woman dressed in red, with long black hair. Very young girls moved about the room. He then realized that his friends had arranged a visit to the house of the region’s most talked-about *madonna*, the Mansio di Giannacarla.

It was not exactly a mansion, even less so in the Latin sense of “abode” or “stopping place,” as the *mansiones* that dotted the Roman roads. Be as it may, Cardano gulped when he saw his two friends commingling easily with everyone. Due to the particular circumstances, he decided it was time to break his longstanding fast from intimate contact with the female body.

After all, Ottaviano never tired of nettling his friend, suspecting that Cardano did not habitually frequent the body of women of ill repute.

“I get it, my dear Cardano. When tension increases, you follow Galen’s counsel, no?” And, making an obscene gesture, he would fall out laughing: “As the master said, let the hand gives free rein to the seed!”

This time, unlike his experience at Castelletto, he was more aware of the situation. He at least chose a girl who reasonably attracted him. They went into the bedroom, but after taking off his clothes, he realized he was in no condition to complete the act. He sat up, turned around, laid down again. He waited a few more minutes and concluded he would not be able to make it. His member remained in a state of utter relaxation. He decided to give two gold coins to the girl, who took them wide-eyedly.

“This is for you not to say anything to anyone about what happened here, understand?”

“Of course, *signore*!” the girl replied gratefully.

“And if perchance your tongue betrays your promise” he said, aggressively, showing the shining dagger, “you can be sure that I’ll stick this blade into your guts, deeply, until I twice grate your vertebrae!”

The girl stood there, as if petrified. Cardano disappeared in seconds, mounted his horse and returned home alone. The next day, when his friends asked why he had left so early, he made it clear he was in no mood to extend the conversation:

“I’m objective…”

Leaves began to fall and snow came. The year 1520 ended with persistent rumors that war was coming and that Pope Leo X would join Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor, to drive the French from Milan. No one knew if the price of the conflict would be worth it for the Lombards.

In Germany, Luther had been pressured to recant his declarations. A large gathering of bishops had been summoned for January, in the city of Worms, to discuss the matter. The professor of Wittenberg seemed unswerving in his conviction that the faithful could read the Bible without the intermediation of a clergyman, so much so that some New Testament passages were already being diffused in German. And moderate voices were already saying that the confrontation would not be as uncomplicated as originally thought.

Cardano prepared to return to Milan, because winter break would soon begin at the university. Festivities would be plain and unostentatious that year. Everyone was saving their money and stocking goods, expecting hard days ahead.

Before leaving Pavia, Cardano met his two friends at the university entrance. The horse he was riding was loaded with two bags full of books, one on each side, and another bag with his clothing. He had sold the horse he'd won in the disputation with Branda Porro, but lost a fair share of the money gambling with dices and cards, his favorite hobby.

He stopped and greeted Ottaviano and Prospero.

"Are you going to spend the holidays in the city?" Cardano asked them. The two nodded, confirming they would not leave Pavia. "My parents sent me a letter saying they might have come over, but with the death of their friend who lived here, the last of the Resti, I will be going to Milan. Furthermore, my mother hates traveling."

"We are on our way to watch a prisoner be executed in the arcades building," said Prospero. "It should be happening about now. Want to come?"

Cardano shrugged. He felt no morbid pleasure in seeing someone writhing for a few seconds before ending up paralyzed and breathless. Even so, he admitted it might be nice to think that it someone else being hanged, not himself or someone from his family. Perhaps that was why such events attracted so many spectators.

They stopped their horses at the building entrance and tied them to iron hoops. When they went in the courtyard, they saw that many people had gathered in the atrium, in spite of being a very cold day. Ottaviano and Cardano remained at the back of the crowd. On the railings of the second floor, a man was standing, with a rope around his neck. As they looked more attentively at the doomed man, they had the feeling that they knew him.

"Ottaviano, isn't he that desperate fellow who sought Girolamo, asking if he was going to die?" suggested Prospero.

"For the love of our Holy Virgin, it is him!" Ottaviano was astonished.

The man looked into Cardano's eyes as he listened to the words of the priest. He showed no apprehension and actually seemed grateful for having known his fate beforehand. Perhaps he had made good use of his remaining time in this life.

"Dear friend," said Prospero, smiling, "if you have any premonition regarding myself, I beg you not to say anything!"

"I'm not a clairvoyant. That guy had made it manifestly clear that he would not last long," Cardano tried to explain himself. "Just by his anguish it was possible to guess that someone was after him."

Ottaviano and Prospero looked at their friend suspiciously. They frowned and shook their head, showing they hadn't swallowed that explanation.

Cardano was suddenly seized by profound sadness as he looked at Prospero, who now seemed distracted as he watched the final preparations for the execution. A black hood was placed over the convict's head as the rope was inspected one last time. Cardano felt they would not have Prospero for much longer, so he sought to keep his features in memory.

A brief cry was heard in the atrium, followed by the dry sound of the outstretched rope holding a corpse in empty space. The body had hardly quivered. The man seemed to have lost consciousness immediately.

"So much the better," thought Cardano.

Translation: Carlos Malferrari