GREAT MOMENTS OF HUMANITY

12 EVENTS THAT SHAPED HISTORY

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ESCAPE INTO IMMORTALITY

The Discovery of the Pacific Ocean,

25 September 1513

A ship is equipped

On his first return from the discovered America, Columbus had shown a myriad of treasures and curiosities on his triumphal procession through the crowded streets of Seville and Barcelona; red-colored people of a hitherto unknown race, never-before-seen animals, the colorful, screaming parrots, the lumbering tapirs, the then strange plants and fruits that would soon find their home in Europe; the Indian grain, the tobacco and the coconut. All this is curiously marveled at by the cheering crowd, but what excites the royal couple and their advisors most are the few boxes and baskets of gold. It is not much gold that Columbus brings from the new India, a few ornamental things that he has bartered or robbed from the natives, a few small ingots and a few handfuls of loose grains, gold dust more than gold—the whole booty at most sufficient for the minting of a few hundred ducats. But the brilliant fantasist Columbus, who fanatically always believes what he wants to believe, and who was just as gloriously right about his sea route to India, fibs in honest exuberance that this is only a tiny first sample. He has been given reliable news of immense gold mines on these new islands; the precious metal lies very shallow in some fields, under a thin layer of earth. It could easily be dug up with an ordinary spade. Further south, however, there were kingdoms where kings drank from golden vessels and gold was less valuable than lead in Spain. Intoxicated, the eternally money-hungry king hears of this new

Ophir that is his own, nor does one know Columbus enough in his sanguine foolishness to doubt his promises. Immediately, a large fleet is equipped for the second voyage, and now there is no need for recruiters and drummers to hire a crew. The news of the newly discovered Ophir, where gold can be picked up with the bare hand, makes the whole of Spain mad: people flock by the hundreds, by the thousands, to travel to El Dorado, the land of gold.

But what a murky flood it is that greed is now throwing in from all the towns and villages and hamlets. Not only honest noblemen who want to thoroughly gild their coat of arms, not only daring adventurers and brave soldiers, but all the dirt and scum of Spain is flooding into Palos and Cadiz. Branded thieves, highwaymen and tramps seeking more lucrative trades in the gold country, debtors seeking to escape their creditors, husbands seeking to escape their quarrelsome wives, all the desperados and failed existences, the burnt-out and wanted by the Alguacils join the fleet—a madly mixed band of failed existences, determined to finally get rich in one fell swoop, and to do so, determined to commit every act of violence and crime. So madly did they suggest to each other the fantasy of Columbus that in those countries one only had to push the spade into the earth and the golden nuggets would shine out at one, that the wealthy among the emigrants would take servants and mules with them to be able to haul away the precious metal in great masses. Those who do not succeed in being accepted into the expedition force their way in in a different way; without asking much for royal permission, wild adventurers equip ships on their own initiative to get across quickly and to grab gold, gold, gold; in one fell swoop, Spain is freed from all its troubled existences and its most dangerous rabble.

The governor of Española (later San Domingo or Haiti) is horrified to see these uninvited guests flooding the island entrusted to him. From year to year, the ships bring new cargo and ever more unruly fellows. But the arrivals are just as bitterly disappointed, for there is no gold lying loose in the streets here, and not a grain can be extracted from the unfortunate natives whom they attack like beasts. So, these hordes roam and loiter, a terror to the unfortunate Indians, a terror to the governor. In vain, he tries to turn them into colonizers by giving them land, cattle and even human cattle in abundance, namely sixty to seventy natives each as slaves. But both the high-born hidalgos and the former highwaymen have little taste for farming. It is not to grow wheat and herd cattle that they have come over; instead of tending seed and crop, they torment the unfortunate Indians—in a few years, they will have wiped out the entire population—or sit in the taverns. In a short time, most of them are so much in debt that after their goods they have to sell their coat and hat and the last of their shirts and are up to their necks in the hands of merchants and usurers.

It was, therefore, a welcome message for all these failed existences on Española that a well-respected man of this island, the jurist, the "bachiller" Martin Fernández de Enciso, equipped a ship in 1510 to come to the aid of his colony on the terra firma with a new crew. Two famous adventurers, Alonzo de Ojeda and Diego de Nicuesa, had received the privilege from King Ferdinand in 1509 to set up a colony near the Straits of Panama and the coast of Venezuela, which they somewhat hastily named Castilla del Oro, Gold Castile; intoxicated by the sounding name and beguiled by fibs, the worldly ignorant of the law had sunk his entire fortune into this enterprise. But from the newly founded colony in San Sebastian on the Gulf of Urabá comes no

gold, only shrill cries for help. Half of the crew has been worn out in the battles with the natives and the other half is starving. To save the money he has invested, Enciso ventures the rest of his fortune and equips a relief expedition. As soon as they hear the news that Enciso needs soldiers, all the desperados, all the loafers of Española want to seize the opportunity and run away with him. Only away, only to escape the creditors and the vigilance of the strict governor! But the creditors are also on their guard. They realize that their heaviest debtors want to wash out of them forever, and so they urge the governor not to let anyone leave without his special permission. The governor approves their wish. Strict surveillance is put in place; the Enciso ship must stay outside the harbor, government boats patrol and prevent any stranger from smuggling themselves on board. And it is with excessive bitterness that all the desperados, who fear death less than honest work or the debtors' prison, watch Enciso's ship sail full sail into adventure without them.

The man in the crate

With full sails, Enciso's ship steers from Española towards the American mainland, and the outlines of the island have already sunk into the blue horizon. It is a quiet voyage and nothing special is to be noticed at first, except that a mighty bloodhound of special strength—he is a son of the famous bloodhound Becericco and has himself become famous under the name Leoncico—runs restlessly up and down the deck and sniffs around everywhere. Nobody knows who the mighty animal belongs to and how it came on board. Finally, it is noticeable that the dog cannot be moved away from a particularly large crate of provisions that was brought on board the previous day. But behold, this crate unexpectedly opens by itself, and out of it climbs—well-armed with sword and helmet and shield, like

Santiago—the saint of Castile, a man of about thirty-five. It is Vasco Nuñez de Balboa who thus gives the first example of his astonishing boldness and resourcefulness. Born into a noble family in Jerez de los Caballeros, he had sailed to the New World as a simple soldier with Rodrigo de Bastidas and finally, after many odysseys, was stranded with the ship off Española. The governor has tried in vain to make a good colonist out of Nuñez de Balboa; after a few months, he has abandoned his allotted estate and is so bankrupt that he cannot save himself from his creditors. But while the other debtors stare from the beach with clenched fists at the government boats that make it impossible for them to escape onto the ship Encisos, Nuñez de Balboa daringly avoids Diego Columbus' cordon by hiding in an empty provision crate and having his helpers carry him on board, where they are unaware of his brazen ploy in the tumult of his departure. Only when he knows the ship is so far away from the coast that they will not steer back for his sake does the stowaway make himself known. Now he is there.

The "bachiller" Enciso is a man of law and, like legal scholars typically, has little sense of romance. As alcalde, the police chief of the new colony, he does not want to tolerate carousers and dark existences there. He therefore sternly tells Nuñez de Balboa that he has no intention of taking him with him, instead, he will drop him off on the beach at the next island they pass, regardless of whether it is inhabited or uninhabited.

But it did not come to that. While the ship was still heading for Castilia del Oro, it encountered—a miracle at that time, when only a few dozen ships were sailing on these still unknown seas—a heavily manned boat, led by a man whose name would soon echo around the world, Francisco Pizarro. Its occupants come from Enciso's colony of San Sebastian, and at first, they are

thought to be mutineers who have deserted their post on their own authority. But to Enciso's horror, they report: there is no San Sebastian anymore, they themselves are the last of the former colony. The commander Ojeda has made off with a ship, the rest, who only had two brigantines, had to wait until they had died down to seventy people to find room in these two small boats. Of these brigantines, one in turn failed; Pizarro's thirty-four men are the last survivors of the Castilia del Oro. Where to now? According to Pizarro's tales, Enciso's men have little desire to expose themselves to the terrible swamp climate of the abandoned settlement and the poisonous arrows of the natives; returning to Española seems to be their only option. In this perilous moment, Vasco Nuñez de Balboa suddenly steps forward. He explains that he knows the whole coast of Central America from his first journey with Rodrigo de Bastidas, and he remembers that they found a place called Darien on the banks of a gold-bearing river where the natives were friendly. There, and not at this place of misfortune, they should set up the new settlement. Immediately, the whole team declares itself in favor of Nuñez de Balboa. In accordance with his proposal, they set out for Darien on the Isthmus of Panama, where they first carried out the usual slaughter of the natives, and since gold was also found among the looted possessions, the desperados decided to start a settlement here, and then, in pious gratitude, named the new town Santa Maria de la Antigua del Darien.

Dangerous ascent

Soon the colony's unfortunate financier, the "bachiller" Enciso, will sorely regret not having thrown the crate with Nuñez de Balboa inside overboard in time, for after a few weeks this audacious man has all the power in his hands. Raised as a jurist in the notion of discipline and order, Enciso, in his

capacity as alcalde mayor to the currently untraceable governor, tries to govern the colony in favor of of the Spanish crown and ordains his edicts in the appalling Indian hut just as deftly and strictly as if he were sitting in his law office in Seville. In the middle of this wilderness, never before entered by man, he forbids the soldiers to trade gold from the natives, because this is a reservation of the Crown, he tries to impose order and law on this ruthless pack, but out of instinct, the adventurers abide by the man of the sword and revolt against the man of the pen. Soon Balboa is the real master of the colony; Enciso has to flee to save his life, and when Nicuesa, one of the governors of the terra firma appointed by the king, finally arrives to impose order, Balboa does not let him land at all, and the unfortunate Nicuesa, driven out of the land given to him by the king, drowns on the return journey.

Now Nuñez de Balboa, the man from the crate, is master of the colony. But despite his success, he does not feel very at ease. For he has committed open rebellion against the king and has all the less hope of pardon since the appointed governor has met his death through his fault. He knows that Enciso, who has fled, is on his way to Spain with his charges and that sooner or later his rebellion will have to be tried. But after all, Spain is far, and he has plenty of time before a ship has twice crossed the ocean. As clever as he is audacious, he seeks the only means to maintain his usurped power as long as possible. He knows that in those days success justifies any crime and a hefty delivery of gold to the royal crown treasury can appease or delay any criminal proceedings; create gold first, because gold means power! Together with Francisco Pizarro he subjugates and robs the natives of the neighborhood, and amid the usual butchery, he achieves a decisive success. One of the caciques, named Careta,

whom he had attacked malevolently and in gross violation of hospitality, suggests to him, already destined for death, that instead of making enemies of the Indians, he should form an alliance with his tribe, and he offers him his daughter as a pledge of loyalty. Nuñez de Balboa immediately recognizes the importance of having a reliable and powerful friend among the natives; he accepts Careta's offer and, what is even more astonishing, he remains tenderly attached to that Indian girl until his last hour. Together with the cacique Careta, he subdues all the Indians in the neighborhood and acquires such authority among them that finally even the most powerful chief, named Comagre, invites him reverently to his home.

This visit to the powerful chieftain brings the world-historical decision in the life of Vasco Nuñez de Balboa, who until now has been nothing but a desperado and daring rebel against the crown and destined for the gallows or the ax of the Castilian courts. The cacique Comagre receives him in a spacious stone house, which astonishes Vasco Nuñez by its wealth, and without being asked he gives the guest four thousand ounces of gold. But now it is the cacique's turn to be amazed. For as soon as the sons of heaven, the mighty, godlike strangers whom he received with such high reverence, caught sight of the gold their dignity disappears. Like unchained dogs they set upon each other, swords are drawn, fists clenched, they shout, they rage against each other, each wanting his special share of the gold. The cacique watches the raging in amazement and contempt: it is the eternal amazement of all the children of nature at all ends of the earth at the cultured people, to whom a handful of yellow metal seems more precious than all the spiritual and technical achievements of their culture.

Finally, the cacique addresses them, and with a greedily shudder, the Spaniards hear what the interpreter translates for them. How strange, says Comagre, that you should quarrel among yourselves over such trifles, that for the sake of so common a metal you should expose your lives to the gravest inconveniences and dangers. Over there, beyond those high mountains, lies a mighty sea, and all the rivers that flow into it carry gold. A people dwell there who sail in ships with sails and oars like yours, and their kings eat and drink from golden vessels. There you can find this yellow metal as much as you desire. It is a dangerous way, for surely the chiefs will deny you passage. But it is only a few days' journey.

Vasco Nuñez de Balboa feels his heart pierced. Finally, the trace of the legendary gold country has been found, of which they have dreamed for years and years; in all places, in the south and north, his predecessors wanted to spy it, and now it lies only a few days' journey away, if this cacique has reported true. Finally, the existence of that other ocean is also confirmed, to which Columbus, Cabot, Corereal, all the great and famous seafarers, have sought the way in vain: thus, the way around the globe is actually discovered. Whoever first sees this new sea and takes possession of it for his fatherland, his name will never again perish on earth. And Balboa recognizes the deed he must do in order to redeem himself from debt and acquire everlasting honor: to be the first to cross the isthmus to the Mar del Sur, to the southern sea that leads to India, and to conquer the new Ophir for the Spanish crown. With this hour in the house of the cacique Comagre, his fate was decided. From this moment on, the life of this accidental adventurer has a high, supertemporal meaning.

Escape into immortality

There is no greater happiness in a man's destiny than to have discovered his life purpose in the midst of life, in the creative years of manhood. Nuñez de Balboa knows what is at stake for him—miserable death on the scaffold or immortality. First of all, buy peace with the crown, next legitimize and legalize his evil deed, the usurpation of power! Therefore the rebel of yesterday, as the most deliberate subject of all, sends to Pasamonte, the royal treasurer of Española, the fifth of Comagre's, not only the gift of money that legally belongs to the crown but, better experienced in the practices of the world than the scrawny jurist Enciso, he also privately encloses a generous donation of money to the treasurer with the request that he confirm him in his office as captain general of the colony. Pasamonte, the treasurer, has no authority to do this, but for the good gold, he sends Nuñez de Balboa a provisional and in reality, worthless document. At the same time, however, Balboa, who wants to secure himself on all sides, has sent two of his most reliable people to Spain to inform the court of his services to the crown and to report the important message he has lured from the cacique. Vasco Nuñez de Balboa sent word to Seville that he needed only a troop of a thousand men, with which he would undertake to do more for Castile than any Spaniard before him. He undertook to discover the new sea and to win the gold land that Columbus had finally found, promised in vain and which he, Balboa, would conquer.

Everything seems to have turned out well for the lost man, the rebel and desperado. But the next ship from Spain brings bad news. One of his helpers in the rebellion, whom he had sent over to refute the charges of the robbed Enciso at court, reports that the situation is dangerous for him, even life-threatening. The

bruised "bachiller" succeeded in his suit against the robber of his power before the Spanish court and Balboa was sentenced to pay him compensation. The message, however, from the location of the nearby southern sea, which could have saved him, has not yet arrived; in any case, a court person will arrive with the next ship to call Balboa to account for his rebellion and either try him on the spot or return him in chains to Spain. Vasco Nuñez de Balboa understands that he is lost. His condemnation has taken place before they have received his news of the near southern sea and the golden coast. Of course, they will take advantage of it while his head rolls in the sand—someone else will do his deed, the deed he dreamed of doing; he himself has nothing more to hope for from Spain. It is known that he drove the king's rightful governor to his death, that he arbitrarily hounded the Alcalde out of office—he will still have to call the sentence merciful, if it merely imposes prison on him and he does not have to atone for his audacity on the block. He cannot count on powerful friends, for he has no more power himself, and his best advocate, gold, still has too low a voice to secure him mercy. Only one thing can save him now from the punishment for his boldness—even greater boldness. If he discovers the other sea and the new Ophir, even before the legal persons arrive and their henchmen arrest and chain him, he can save himself. Only one form of escape is possible for him here at the end of the inhabited world, the escape into a grandiose deed, the escape into immortality.

So Nuñez de Balboa decided not to wait for the thousand men requested by Spain for the conquest of the unknown ocean, nor the arrival of the court officials. Better to dare the enormity with a few equally determined men! Better to die with honor for one of the most daring adventures of all time than to be dragged disgracefully with bound hands to the scaffold. Nuñez de Balboa

calls the colony together, explains his intention to cross the isthmus without disguising the difficulties and asks who wants to follow him. His courage encourages the others. One hundred and ninety soldiers, almost the entire able-bodied crew of the colony, declare themselves ready. There is not much equipment to get, because these people live in constant war anyway. And on 1 September 1513, to escape the gallows or the dungeon, Nuñez de Balboa, hero and bandit, adventurer and rebel, begins his march to immortality.

Immortal moment

The crossing of the Isthmus of Panama begins in the province of Coyba, the small kingdom of the cacique Careta, whose daughter is Balboa's companion; Nuñez de Balboa, as it turns out later, did not choose the narrowest point and through this ignorance prolonged the dangerous crossing by a few days. But for him, it must have been above all important to have the security of a friendly Indian tribe for supplies or retreat during such a daring push into the unknown. In ten large canoes, the crew crosses from Darien to Coyba, one hundred and ninety soldiers equipped with spears, swords, arquebuses and crossbows, accompanied by a handsome pack of the dreaded bloodhounds. The allied Cacique provided his Indians as pack animals and guides, and as early as September 6th began that glorious march across the Isthmus, which made enormous demands even on the willpower of such daring and tested adventurers. In the suffocating, exhausting equatorial heat, the Spaniards must first cross the lowlands, whose swampy, feverish soil still murdered many thousand centuries later during the construction of the Panama Canal. Right from the first hour, the path into the untrodden must be carved with ax and sword through the poisonous jungle of lianas. As if through an immense green mine,

the first of the troops cleared a narrow tunnel for the others through the thicket, which the army of the conquistador then walked through man after man in an endlessly long line, weapons constantly at hand, always, day and night, senses alert to ward off a sudden attack by the natives. The heat becomes suffocating in the sultry, hazy darkness of the damply arched tree giants over which a pitiless sun burns. Covered in sweat and with thirsty lips, the troops trudge on in their heavy armor, mile after mile; then, suddenly, hurricane-like downpours break out again, in an instant, small streams turn into raging rivers that either have to be waded through or crossed on swaying bridges made of raffia quickly improvised by the Indians. The Spaniards have nothing but a handful of maize for sustenance; tired, hungry, thirsty, surrounded by myriads of stinging, bloodsucking insects, they work their way forward, their clothes torn by thorns and their feet sore, their eyes feverish and their cheeks swollen from buzzing mosquito bites, restless by day, sleepless by night and soon utterly exhausted. After the first week of marching, a large part of the crew could no longer withstand the strain, and Nuñez de Balboa, who knew that the real dangers still awaited them, ordered all those who were ill with fever and sick to stay behind. Only with the most select of his troop does he want to venture on the decisive adventure.

Finally, the terrain begins to ascent. The jungle, which can only unfold its full tropical lushness in the swampy lowlands, becomes lighter. But now that the shadows no longer protect them, the steep equatorial sun glares brightly and sharply down on their heavy armor. Slowly, and only in short stages, the weary men are able to climb step by step up the hills to the mountain range that separates the narrow span between the two seas like a stone spine. Gradually, the view becomes clearer, at night the

air refreshes. After eighteen days of heroic toil, the most arduous difficulty seems to have been overcome; already the crest of the mountain rises before them, from whose summit, according to the Indian guides, one can overlook both oceans, the Atlantic and the as yet unknown and unnamed Pacific. But just now, when the tenacious and treacherous resistance of nature seems finally defeated, a new enemy confronts them, the cacique of that province, to block the passage of the strangers with hundreds of his warriors. Nuñez de Balboa is now well experienced in fighting Indians. It suffices to fire a volley from the arquebuses, and once again the artificial thunder and lightning shows its proven magical power over the natives. Screaming, the terrified flee away, chased by the onrushing Spaniards and the bloodhounds. But instead of rejoicing in the easy victory, Balboa, like all Spanish conquistadors, dishonors it with pitiful cruelty by having a number of defenseless, shackled captives—substitutes for bullfighting and gladiatorial games—torn, shredded and mangled alive by the paddock of hungry bloodhounds. An adverse slaughter disgraces the last night before Nuñez de Balboa's immortal day.

A unique and inexplicable hybrid is exhibited in the character and nature of these Spanish conquistadors. Pious and devout as only Christians have ever been, they invoke God from the most fervent soul and at the same time commit the most shameful inhumanities in history in His name. Capable of the most glorious and heroic feats of courage, of sacrifice, of suffering, they deceive and fight among themselves in the most shameless manner, and yet again, amid their contemptibility, they have a keen sense of honor and a wonderful, truly admirable sense of the historical greatness of their task. The same Nuñez de Balboa who, the night before, had thrown innocent, shackled prisoners

defenselessly before the hounds, and perhaps had stroked with satisfaction the lips of the beasts still dripping with fresh human blood, is precisely aware of the significance of his deed in the history of mankind, and at the decisive moment finds one of those magnificent gestures which remain unforgettable through the ages. He knows that this 25th September will be a day of world history, and with wonderful Spanish pathos this tough, inoffensive adventurer shows how fully he understands the meaning of his supratemporal mission.

Balboa's grand gesture: in the evening, immediately after the bloodbath, one of the natives pointed out a nearby peak to him and announced that from its height one could already see the sea, the unknown Mar del Sur. Balboa immediately issues his orders. He leaves the wounded and exhausted in the plundered village and orders the still marching team—sixty-seven of the former hundred and ninety with whom he started the march in Darien—to climb that mountain. Around ten o'clock in the morning, they are close to the summit. Only a small bare hilltop remains to be climbed, then the view must widen into infinity.

At this moment, Balboa orders the crew to stop. No one is to follow him, for he does not want to share this first view of the unknown ocean with anyone. Alone and only he wants to be and remain for eternity the first Spaniard, the first European, the first Christian who, after having sailed through one of the vast oceans of our universe, the Atlantic, to now also see the other, the still unknown Pacific. Slowly, with a pounding heart, deeply imbued with the significance of the moment, he climbs up, flag in his left hand, sword in his right, a lonely silhouette in the immense circumstance. Slowly he climbs, without hurrying, for the true work is already done. Just a few more steps, fewer and fewer, and really, now that he has reached the summit, an

astounding view opens up before him. Behind the sloping mountains, the hills descending green and wooded, there is a huge, metallic, reflecting disc, the sea; the sea, the new, the unknown, the hitherto only dreamed of and never seen, the legendary sea, sought in vain for years and years by Columbus and all his descendants, whose waves wash America, India and China. And Vasco Nuñez de Balboa looks and looks and looks, proudly and blissfully drinking in the consciousness that his eye is the first of a European to reflect the infinite blue of this sea.

Vasco Nuñez de Balboa gazes long and ecstatically into the distance. Only then does he call his comrades to share his joy, his pride. Restless, excited, gasping and shouting, they climb, climb, run up the hill, stare and marvel and point with enthusiastic gazes. Suddenly, the accompanying Father Andres de Vara intones the 'Te Deum laudamus,' and immediately the noise and shouting stops; all the harsh and rough voices of these soldiers, adventurers and bandits unite in a pious chorale. The Indians watch in amazement as, at a word from the priest, they cut down a tree to erect a cross, in which wood they engrave the initials of the name of the King of Spain. And as this cross rises, it is as if its two wooden arms wanted to embrace both seas, the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, with all their invisible distances.

Amidst the fearful silence, Nuñez de Balboa steps forward and addresses his soldiers. They would be right to thank God for granting them this honor and grace, and to ask Him to continue to help them conquer this sea and all these lands. If they would continue to follow Him faithfully as before, they would return as the richest Spaniards from this new India. Solemnly, he waves the flag to all four winds, to take possession of all the distant lands which these winds pass around, for Spain. Then he calls the scribe, Andres de Valderrabano, to draw up a document

recording this solemn act for all time, Andres de Valderrabano unrolls a parchment, he has dragged it through the jungle in a locked wooden shrine with inkpot and writing quill, and asks all the nobles and knights and soldiers—los Caballeros e Hidalgos y hombres de bien—"who were present at the discovery of the Southern Sea, the Mar del Sur, by the exalted and highly revered Captain Vasco Nuñez de Balboa, Governor of His Highness," to confirm that "it was this Mr. Vasco Nuñez who first saw this sea and showed it to those who followed."

Then the sixty-seven descend from the hill, and with this September 25, 1513, humanity knows about the last, hitherto unknown ocean on earth.

Gold and pearls

Now the certainty is won. You have seen the sea. But now down to its shore, feel the wet tide, touch it, feel it, taste it and amass booty from its beach! The descent takes two days, and in order to figure out the quickest path from the mountains to the sea, Nuñez de Balboa divides his team into individual groups. The third of these groups, led by Alonzo Martin, reached the beach first, and so much were even the simple soldiers of this adventurous troop already imbued with the vanity of fame, with this thirst for immortality, that even the simple man Alonzo Martin immediately had the scribe certify in black and white that he had been the first to wet his foot and his hand in these still nameless waters. Only after he has thus added a dusting of immortality to his little self does he report to Balboa that he has reached the sea, that he has felt its tide with his own hand. Balboa immediately prepares to make a new pathetic gesture. The next day, the calendar day of St. Michael, he appears on the beach, accompanied by only twenty-two companions, to take

possession of the new sea himself, like St. Michael, armed and girded, in a solemn ceremony. He does not immediately step into the tide, but like its lord and master, he waits haughtily, resting under a tree until the rising tide throws its wave right up to him and caresses his feet with its tongue like an obedient dog. Only then does he stand up, throw his shield on his back so that it shines like a mirror in the sun, grasp his sword in one hand, the flag of Castile with the image of the Mother of God in the other, and stride into the water. Only when the waves wash around him up to his hips, when he is completely immersed in these great foreign waters, does Nuñez de Balboa, hitherto a rebel and desperado, now the most loyal servant of his king and triumphant, wave the banner on all sides and call out in a loud voice: "Vivant the high and mighty monarchs Ferdinand and Joan of Castile, Leon and Aragon, in whose name and for the benefit of the royal crown of Castile I take real and corporeal and permanent possession of all these seas and earths and coasts and harbors and islands, and I swear, if any prince or other captain, Christian or heathen of whatsoever creed or estate shall claim any right to these lands and seas, to defend them in the name of the Kings of Castile, whose property they are, now and forever, as long as the world shall last, and until the day of Judgment.“

All the Spaniards repeat the oath, and their words for a moment drown out the loud roar of the tide. Each of them wets his lip with the seawater, and once again the scribe Andres de Valderrabano takes the act of taking possession and concludes his document with the words: "These twenty-two and the scribe Andres de Valderrabano were the first Christians to set foot in the Mar del Sur, and they all tasted the water with their hands and wet their mouths with it to see if it was salt water like that

of the other sea. And when they saw that it was, they gave thanks to God."

The great deed is done. Now there are earthly benefits to be gained from the heroic undertaking. The Spaniards capture or exchange some gold from some of the natives. But a new surprise awaits them in the midst of their triumph. For whole hands full of precious pearls, found lavishly rich on the nearby islands, are brought to them by the Indians, including one called the "Pellegrina," exalted by Cervantes and Lope de Vega because it adorns the royal crown of Spain and England as one of the most beautiful of all pearls. The Spaniards stuff all their pockets, all their sacks, full of these treasures, which here count for little more than shells and sand, and when they greedily ask further, for the most important thing on earth to them, gold, one of the caciques points over to the south, where the line of the mountains blurs softly into the horizon. There, he explains, lies a land of immeasurable treasures, the rulers dined from golden vessels, and great four-legged beasts—it is the lamas the cacique means—hauled the most magnificent loads into the king's treasury. And he gives the name of the land that lies south in the sea and behind the mountains. It sounds like "Birù," melodic and foreign.

Vasco Nuñez de Balboa stares into the distance at the cacique's outstretched hand, where the mountains pale into the sky. The soft, seductive word "Birù" is immediately written in his soul. His heart pounds restlessly. For the second time in his life, he has unexpectedly received great promise. The first message, Comagre's message from the nearby sea, has come true. He has found the beach of pearls and the Mar del Sur, perhaps he will also succeed in the second, the discovery, the conquest of the Inca Empire, the gold country of this earth.

Rarely do the gods grant . . .

Nuñez de Balboa still stares longingly into the distance. Like a golden bell, the word "Birù," "Peru," resonates through his soul. But—painful renunciation!—he must not risk further exploration this time. You can't conquer an empire with two or three dozen tired men. So back to Darien first, and later on, with revived strength, on the now found path to the new Ophir. But this return march was no less arduous. Once again, the Spaniards had to fight their way through the jungle, once again they had to survive the raids of the natives. And it was no longer a war party, but a small group of men sick with fever and staggering with their last strength—Balboa himself was close to death and was carried in a hammock by the Indians—who arrived back in Darien on 19 January 1514 after four months of the most terrible hardships. But one of the greatest deeds in history has been done. Balboa has fulfilled his promise, every participant who ventured with him into the unknown has become rich; his soldiers have brought back treasures from the coast of the Southern Sea as never before. Columbus and the other conquistadors, and all the other colonists, will also receive their share. A fifth is given to the crown, and no one blames the triumphator for letting his dog Leoncico share in the reward for so valiantly ripping the flesh from the unfortunate natives' bodies, like any other warrior, and covering him with five hundred gold pesos. After such a feat, not a single person in the colony disputes his authority as governor. The adventurer and rebel is celebrated like a god, and he can proudly send the news to Spain that he has accomplished the greatest deed for the Castilian crown since Columbus. In a steep ascent, the sun of his fortune has broken through all the clouds that have hitherto weighed on his life. Now it stands at its zenith.

But Balboa's happiness is short-lived. A few months later, on a bright June day, the people of Darien crowd the beach in amazement. A sail has lit up on the horizon, and this alone is like a miracle in this lost corner of the world. But behold, a second appears beside it, a third, a fourth, a fifth, and soon there are ten, no fifteen, no twenty, a whole fleet heading for the harbor. And soon they learn: all this was brought about by Nuñez de Balboa's letter, but not the message of his triumph—that has not yet reached Spain—but that earlier message in which he first passed on the cacique's report of the near southern sea and the gold country and asked for an army of a thousand men to conquer these lands. For this expedition, the Spanish crown did not hesitate to equip such a formidable fleet. But by no means did they think for a moment in Seville and Barcelona to entrust such an important task to such a badly reputed adventurer and rebel as Vasco Nuñez de Balboa. A governor of his own, a rich, noble, highly respected sixty-year-old man, Pedro Arias Davilla, usually called Pedrarias, was sent along to finally establish order in the colony as the king's governor, to practice justice for all offenses committed so far, to find that southern sea and to conquer the promised gold country.

Now an annoying situation arises for Pedrarias. On the one hand, he has been ordered to call the rebel Nuñez de Balboa to account for the earlier chasing away of the governor and, if his guilt is proven, to put him in chains or to justify him; on the other hand, he has been ordered to discover the South Sea. But no sooner does his boat come ashore than he learns that this same Nuñez de Balboa, whom he is to bring to justice, has accomplished the great deed on his own initiative, that this rebel has already celebrated the triumph intended for him and has rendered the Spanish crown the greatest service since the

discovery of America. Of course, he cannot now lay such a man's head on the block like a common criminal; he must greet him politely, congratulate him sincerely. But from this moment on Nuñez de Balboa is lost. Pedrarias will never forgive his rival for having accomplished independently the deed he was sent to do, and which would have secured him eternal fame through the ages. It is true that, in order not to provoke the colonists prematurely, he must disguise his hatred of their hero, the investigation is postponed, and even a false peace is established by Pedrarias betrothing his own daughter, who has remained behind in Spain, to Nuñez de Balboa. But his hatred and jealousy of Balboa are in no way alleviated, but only increased, as now from Spain, where they finally learn Balboa's deed, a decree arrives that retroactively confers the title appropriated to the former rebel, likewise names Balboa an Adelantado, and gives Pedrarias the order to consult with him in every important matter. This country is too small for two governors, one will have to give way, one of the two will perish. Vasco Nuñez de Balboa feels the sword hanging over him, for in Pedrarias' hands lies military power and justice. So for the second time, he attempts the escape he succeeded in so gloriously the first time, the escape into immortality. He asks Pedrarias to allow him to equip an expedition to explore the coast on the southern sea and to conquer further afield. The secret intention of the old rebel, however, is to make himself independent of any control on the other shore of the sea, to build a fleet himself, to become master of his own province and possibly also to conquer the legendary Birù, this Ophir of the New World. Pedrarias surreptitiously agrees. If Balboa perishes in the enterprise, so much the better. If he succeeds in his deed, there will still be time to get rid of the overly ambitious.

Thus Nuñez de Balboa begins his new flight into immortality; his second enterprise is perhaps even more grandiose than the first, even if it has not been given the same fame in history, which always praises only the successful. This time Balboa not only crosses the Isthmus with his crew, but has the wood, the boards, the rigging, the sails, the anchors, the winches for four brigantines dragged over the mountains by thousands of natives. For once he has a fleet over there, he can seize all the coasts, conquer the Pearl Islands and Peru, the legendary Peru. But this time, fate is against the daring man, and he constantly finds new opposition. On the march through the damp jungle, worms eat away at the wood, rotting the boards and making them useless. Without getting discouraged, Balboa has new logs cut down on the Gulf of Panama and fresh boards made. His energy worked wonders—already everything seemed to be successful, the brigantines were built, the first of the Pacific Ocean. Then a tornado storm suddenly sweeps up the rivers in which they lie completed. The finished boats are swept away and shattered in the sea. They have to start over for a third time; and now, at last, two brigantines are completed. Balboa needs only two more, only three more, and he can set out to conquer the land he has dreamed of day and night ever since that cacique pointed to the south with his hand outstretched and he heard the seductive word "Birù" for the first time. A few more brave officers, a good supply of men, and he can set up his empire! Just a few more months, just a little luck to add to the inner audacity, and world history would not have to call Pizarro the conqueror of the Incas, the conqueror of Peru, but Nuñez de Balboa.

But even against his favorites, fate never shows itself too generous. Rarely do the gods grant the mortal more than a single immortal deed.

The downfall

Nuñez de Balboa has prepared his great enterprise with iron energy. But it is precisely this bold success that creates danger for him, for the suspicious eye of Pedrarias watches his subordinate's intentions with alarm. Perhaps news of Balboa's ambitious dreams of rule has come to him through treachery, perhaps he merely jealously fears a second success for the old rebel. In any case, he suddenly sends a very warm letter to Balboa, saying that he would like to return to Acla, a town near Darien, for a meeting before he finally begins his campaign of conquest. Balboa, who hoped to receive further support from Pedrarias' crew, accepted the invitation and returned immediately. At the gates of the town, a small troop of soldiers marches to meet him, apparently to greet him; joyfully he rushes towards them to embrace their leader, his brother in arms from many years ago, his companion in the discovery of the South Seas, his trusted friend Francisco Pizarro.

But Francisco Pizarro lays his hand heavily on his shoulder and declares him a prisoner. Pizarro, too, lusted for immortality, he, too, lusted to conquer the gold country, and perhaps it was not unpleasant for him to know that such a daring front man was out of the way. The governor Pedrarias opens the trial for alleged rebellion, and the court is held quickly and unjustly. A few days later, Vasco Nuñez de Balboa and the most loyal of his companions went to the block; the executioner's sword flashed, and in a second, the eye that had been the first to see both oceans that encompass our earth at the same time was extinguished forever in the rolling head.

THE CONQUEST OF BYZANTIUM

29 May 1453

Realization of the danger

On 5 February 1451, a secret messenger brought the eldest son of Sultan Murad, the twenty-one-year-old Mahomet, the news that his father had died. Without so much as a word to his ministers or advisers, the devious and energetic prince threw himself on the best of his horses, whipped the magnificent thoroughbred the hundred and twenty miles to the Bosporus and immediately crossed to Gallipoli on the European shore. Only there did he reveal the death of his father to those loyal to him, and to be able to defeat any other claim to the throne from the outset, he gathered a select troop and led them to Adrianople, where he was indeed recognized as the ruler of the Ottoman Empire without objection. His very first act as ruler shows Mahomet's terribly ruthless determination. To eliminate in advance any rival of the same blood, he has his underage brother drowned in a bath, and immediately afterwards—this too proves his premeditated cunning and savagery—he sends the murderer of the murdered man whom he hired to do this deed to his death.

The news that this young, fierce and glory-hungry Mahomet has become Sultan of the Turks, instead of the more thoughtful Murad, fills Byzantium with horror. For it is known through a hundred scouts that this ambitious man has vowed to take possession of the former capital of the world, that despite his youth he spends days and nights on strategic deliberations for this plan of his life; at the same time, however, all reports