

Chapter 1 A Day of Surprises

On the morning of January 6, 1482, the streets of Paris are crowded. It is the last day of the Christmas season and the people of the capital are ready for a party. There will be singing and dancing, and later a big fire with plenty of food in the Place de Grève. But now the people are hurrying to the Great Hall for the first and most amusing activity of the day. Everyone wants to find a good place to watch a new play. They also want to be able to see the important politicians, college professors, and churchmen in the seats above them.

At noon, the people begin shouting, "The play! The play! We want the play!" And after a few minutes the play begins. The writer of the play, Pierre Gringoire, is listening very carefully. Today the most important people in Paris are hearing his words. The young man dreams that he will be famous, and possibly even rich, by the end of the afternoon.

Suddenly, the actors stop speaking. Every face in the crowd turns to watch the greatest churchman of Paris, a close friend of King Louis XI, arrive in the theater with a group of ten or twelve other important men. When these people are finally sitting down, the play continues. But after a few minutes one of the churchman's guests, a rich Belgian businessman from Ghent, shouts, "Excuse me, good people of Paris, what are we doing here? Today's a day for parties and fun, but I'm not amused. What's this play about? The problems of old politicians and priests. It's boring, don't you agree?"

"My friends," the businessman continues, "it's time to choose your 'Pope* of Fools.' In my country on the sixth of January, we

* Pope: the head of the Roman Catholic Church