The night of Galileo

It was his seventh time getting up that night. The bell of the nearby Sant'Antonio basilica had rung relentlessly each hour, and was now ringing out the last moments of darkness. He began walking to and fro in the dining room in an effort to warm himself and to digest the dinner that still lay heavy in his stomach. “I’ve eaten too much again. Damn it!” he whimpered. “And now, I can’t get to sleep.” He was shedding crocodile tears. He was renowned in all of Padua for his appetite, and word of his table had spread far and wide. Some guests even came from as far afield as Venice – important people, who came to discuss the sciences and ate like horses. When Gregorio Moro came, as he had the previous evening, there was no way out, and they both went at it hell for leather, knocking back glasses of good Contarini red to wash down a generous stewed leg of beef, a pair of plump boiled Padua chickens and a serving of scarlet tongue expertly seasoned by the renowned butcher Abano – not to mention a hefty portion of ravioli in butter with cinnamon, as a starter, and the cook’s legendary pear and sweet-orange tart to round things off in style. “And here I am again, pacing to and fro in the middle of the night because I’ve eaten too much!”

But that was not the only thing that kept him from sleeping on that agitated night. The real reason was what he had seen over the past two months with the contraption that he had been working on since the autumn.

At the outset, it was almost pure curiosity. He had heard of a “tube” made by a Dutch optician which was supposed to make faraway things seem close. When one looked into that tube, one saw little, and everything was blurred, anyway. Nevertheless, the things one saw – which one could admittedly see anyway with the naked eye – did, indeed, look bigger than usual. The first thing he thought of was to make a better tube so as to earn a little money. That’s right, money! The family always needed money, what with his sister, his lazy brother-in-law who was always scrounging, and his daughters. The Republic of Venice did not pay much of a salary to the professors at the University of Padua, and, to make ends meet, he had to do a thousand different things, such as taking in well-off students as boarders or selling inventions that might be of use to the Most Serene Republic. If he worked a bit on this tube, it might bring in a tidy sum. If it could be improved and made more robust, it could prove very useful for the Venetian navy, which was the backbone of the Serenissima’s power. That’s right! Imagine if this magnifying tube allowed Venetian sailors to see the Dalmatian pirates before they, themselves, were seen. That would make the Venetian navy the most powerful of all! If things went according to plan, the invention would fetch a good price. He might even get the salary increase for which he’d been hoping for years. Then, he could breathe easy, lead a more tranquil existence and concentrate on his research without all the constant worrying about the material side of things.

“Damned curiosity! I’ve fallen for it once again, and now I don’t know where to turn. What am I to do?” It was true that he had been gnawed by curiosity ever since he was a small child. He could never resist it. He always had to test and test again what he saw, to experiment, to mull things over in an attempt to understand how and why “things” happened. Of course, the curiosity was also beneficial. Combined with study, it had taught him many things, and made him a renowned and respected professor at the University of Padua, which was one of the most prestigious of the day. Sometimes, though, it betrayed him, and he knew no respite from his burning desire to understand.

Why had he pointed the “magnifying tube” at the Moon again? What he had seen had troubled him in the extreme. It was as if he had seen the devil himself. With his first tube, which made things seem eight times bigger, he had seen mountains, craters, immense arid deserts. He had even seen the shadows of lunar mountains growing longer as the hours passed. All of those things had troubled him, and even made him lose sleep. “It’s definitely not just the stew and the green sauce! Sure, I ate too much last night with Gregorio, but what’s keeping me awake is the fact that I don’t know whether I should speak of what I’ve seen or keep my mouth shut,” he said to himself. How could he tell everyone that, contrary to what philosophers had always said and to what the theologians had been parroting, the Moon was not a quasi-divine object, distant and immutable? How could it be immutable if, like the Earth, it was covered with mountains, seas and deserts, and if the sun’s light moved across it hour by hour and day by day, just as it moved across our planet? And what of the stars that he had seen with his new tube, which magnified things twice as much as the first? There were so many more of them than could be seen with the naked eye! That wasn’t the worst of it – what about the little stars that he’d first noticed alongside Jupiter on the 7th of January? In just a week, he’d seen three of them, then two more and then a further four. Unlike the others, those stars did not stay in the same place. They followed Jupiter! What in God’s name could they be, and how could such a thing be possible if, like everyone claimed, the Earth was at the centre of the universe with all the stars rotating around it? No, he couldn’t speak. No one would believe him. He might even make a bad impression, and, if that happened, he could say “goodbye” to his salary increase! That being said, it wasn’t in his nature to seal his lips for reasons of propriety. He really wasn’t able to. He

continued pacing about the room, wondering what to do and trying to digest that last piece of boiled chicken. The first light of that dawn of 16th January 1610 caught his eye. He stopped in front of the window and watched the sky brighten gradually, that same sky at which he had dared point the tube which had set him on the path to knowledge. “No, I can’t! For years, I have taught – preached, even – that what must prevail is the evidence gleaned from experiments that can be conducted over and over again. Keep my mouth shut? Should I, who have seen the mountains on the Moon and the little stars travelling across the sky alongside Jupiter, deny it all, deny the evidence and keep my mouth shut? How could I have even thought of doing that? I must tell it, and to hell with them if they don’t believe me! I’ll have them look through my tube, too. Then, they’ll believe me and see that the whole thing doesn’t stand up. Yes, I’ll write about it, and I’ll call my book ‘The Sidereal Messenger’. Come hell or high water, everyone must know!”
Having recovered a semblance of calm thanks to his decision, Galileo Galilei entered his laboratory, took some paper and a quill, and wrote the title of his new book.
Man’s conception of the heavens was to change forever.

Leopoldo Benacchio