

The Tale of Lord Jack: A Ghost, a Monk and a Skull

In the cave behind the waterfall, the Seventeenth Lord sat with his head in his hands. His remaining white hairs lay dank upon his scalp and his half-soaked tail-coat trailed over the edge of the wooden chair. A large cup lay on the floor of the cave, and sunbeams played through the cascades of water, illuminating roof, walls and the lord himself with dappled spots. This, he thought, was what came of being the last in the line. He was dying, and his secrets would perish with him. No interfering clergyman or monocle'd, persistent scholar would get their hands on them. They were not ready; inevitably, as had always happened before, they would misunderstand. Better for them to remain blest in their ignorance. He would bury his secrets deep in the rock, would seal them in an iron casket, and would leave no clues as to their whereabouts. All his other manuscripts would be cast into the fire. Only his poetry would remain, and that was all lies. A line here, a metre there... no-one would be able to pin it down and make it sing. Neither in their heads, nor in their minds, had they the tongues for that. His wife's shrill, in-bred, aristocratic voice, seven years back:

I am leaving you, Jack, since all you care for, are your study and the scrolls which are your constant companions and your eternal curse. I will be neither.

And he had let her go. She was the progeny of generations of a limited range of breeding, of procreation based on nothing but the fixed lines of property, a repeated consecration, held always between the same, dark configuration of bedposts. Not that over the years the ancestors hadn't spawned their share of barn foxes. As far as Lord Jack was concerned, the lords should have stepped aside long ago, and let the bastards rule! The offspring of servants and tinkers possessed iron souls and given the chance, easily would destroy the lacklustre parchment of any vain aristocrat. No wonder the French had beheaded most of theirs! And the rest had fled, to perish, slowly spinning in some misty Bourbon ballroom by the Rhine or the Danube or the blue, blue coast. He did not exclude himself from this law, indeed, during these last seven years, Lord William Michael Jacobus de Ruthyn, 17th Earl of The Lake, known to most as simply, Lord Jack, had taken the etiolation of the spirit to its final, its logical, its scientific, conclusion.

During those years he had grown old, and some said, mad. He had dismissed the last of the servants, some months earlier, and so now, he lived completely alone in the old Hall. In a manner of speaking. There was the grand pianola, which occasionally he would hear tinkling in the night, its keys and wires blown like reeds by the breeze which rose off the surface of the lake and seeped through the rotting panes. Sometimes, he had listened to that strange, discordant music and had imagined himself transported on the shoulders of hooded demons to places where the geography of his being would swell with deserts and seas and mountains. But always, just as he had been about to cross over the edge of the horizon, the music had ended and he had been left with this chair, this goblet, this casket. He could no longer remember how many rooms there were in the Hall. He thought that perhaps, among them, there might exist windowless chambers that appeared only with the full moon's rising and then vanished again as it fell. Now, only the dead walked the halls of Simnel Manor. Lord Jack, therefore, had felt it more comfortable to dwell in the summer-house on the island in the lake, rather than in the Hall itself. And retreating from the cave, he had made his way - it had been, he had known, his last journey - slowly, painfully, back to the forest dwelling.

Ah, the Simnel Estates! Rumoured to have been founded by Lambert Simnel, the real Lambert Simnel, not the imposter who had tried to be king in the time of Henry VII. For it is known to those who are awake that the imposter had been an imposter, twice over. In return for his complete and eternal silence on this delicate and somewhat confusing matter, so the

story went, Henry Tudor had granted the real Lambert a knighthood and had returned the estate in full to the family. For long before the arrival of the Tudors, before even the Wars of the Roses and the battles of Agincourt and Crécy, the Simnels had ruled in these parts as lords of the manor. Simnel Hall had been built on three acres, and Sir Lambert himself had married one Anne Gooding of Gotham, she whose likeness, face, bodice and white arms, now was layered in cracked oil over the mantelpiece of the great house, the painting, a veritable window into the past (should one be needed), and it is known that she had birthed some twenty infants, seven of them, dead. Now, three hundred years later, the family tree had passed as though through a false mirror, so that at the summit of this upside-down oak, this Breughel hell-tree, the last of the line lay dying in the bedchamber of the dark summer-house of the estate, which, like its master the mansion, had fallen gradually into ruin and become a dark, dank place of gritstone and whispers, of curtains, laden with the centuries and walls heaving to the rhythm of the music of the dead.

For this, had he destroyed his friendships, his marriages and any other dalliances he might have had, for this, had he bankrupted himself so that now he could no longer afford to live in the place which had been the seat of his ancestors at the heart of the fields that rolled back to the time of the old arse-burned rex, Edward II. Yet Jack had never really left the dark womb of Simnel Hall. Even when he had travelled thousands of miles, to the western fringe of Cathay and the coconut fronds of Cochin, to the sweltering sands of the blue-faced riders and the ice palaces of the White Sea where the fishes grew to be the size of hayricks, the Seventeenth Lord of Simnel Manor had held the English forest within his heart. It was the oldest wood in the land, and the Great Conqueror was said to have hunted wild boar in its green depths. Once, it had covered more than half the county, but over the years, many of its oak and elm had been cut down to build the carracks, galleons, ships of the line and men-o'-war which at last had succeeded in driving the pirates of Barbary back from the mouth of the Thames and from the old, white ports along the English Channel and thus had set the nation's spirit off on the voyage, the long crescendo of Empire. But the forest's old, pagan spirit had been broken and with this desecration, its countless, horned goats had escaped from its dark clearings and run into servitude. And like so many itinerant Englishmen, after all his travels, Lord Jack had been enticed back to the heart of the wood, to the pellucid lake and to the island at the lake's centre. To the black stone and glass of his earliest dreams. And after his lady had left the manor, he had come to spend much of his time here, in the lake house, his hair and beard growing long and tousled, and here had he consorted with the Lords of the Marches, the boggarts and the bogles and the rulers of the bogs, here, to the sound of backwards Cavalier ballads, had he ridden wild with lycanthropic witches and here had he rolled with thick-headed peasant-women over the moss, lichen and wormwort of the stinking green woods into the dark, deep pools which the common folk called fitties and lins. And Lord Jack had swum, cock-to-rump, with many a village lass, telling them that he loved them above all else in the cosmos, the universe which within that five-mile radius of the countryside was so very broad and deep and black and showing them, through the naked, festal darkness of a watery coupling, the grey horse-and-trap carrying a pair of runaway lovers that galloped at the bottom of every pond. Lies, all. But clever lies, howling dog falsehoods that had arisen over the centuries as a means of wedding human beings to the land which they must needs reap and sow, the quiet earth in which after a life of labour they respectfully laid down to rest, their coned, shrouded heads together turned towards the setting sun in a psalm of obedient, open-mouthed oblivion.

And her golden hair was hanging down her back...

Eastwards. Once, Lord Jack had journeyed east, across the lands of seven empires and twenty rivers, and eventually had ended up among the Kafirs of Khurasan. He had travelled under various false names: Jacques, Jacopo, Iakob, Yaqub, Israel, and had moved only during the dead of night and even then, he had been in heavy disguise. Twice, he had made himself up as a woman; his names then had been Roshanak, Ruqa, Laila, Zita, Zafarana and Zoolaykha, and on one of these occasions, as Ruqa, in the Caspian city of Astrakhan, he had been mistaken for a lost courtesan and accordingly had been stolen. Kidnapped. He had been taught to dance and sing and to play the oud, and had performed surprisingly well, considering that he had never before so much as cradled the belly of the instrument in his lap and certainly had never sung in tune, though in his liquored youth among the bawdy, stinking daughters of the parish, he had been somewhat of a tavern aficionado of the drunken leap-and-twirl known as the *Horn of the Miller's Wife*. He'd never been any good at hymns, psalms, carols, the panoply and trappings of the English Church. His voice had been considered too husky, plum-sodden even, and he had found that this was a quality which was intensely attractive to men, much in the manner of the haoma-drinking Scythians, those women who swirled around the known world, draped exotically upon Bactrian double-humps, who were extremely difficult to catch and whose voices were pitched tantalisingly low. They were like perfumes in a magic lantern show, it was as though they had stepped from an arcade of distorting mirrors. One moment, as you looked, they were there, a long caravan moving slowly across the thorny, glimmering surface of the scrub desert, then as you bent down to adjust your padded, woollen chugha, you glanced up, and they had vanished as completely as the old Nestorians. Not so much a mi'raj, since those tended to occur only during the depths of the night, as a simple trick. A sleight of hand, a turn of the head, a whirl of the tsanrai's long, black hair. That such legerdemain should happen, was hardly surprising in such a place, in that land where the mountains grew rough and brown like great mounds of snuff, and where a smile caught at the Mughal court would linger like demon's breath in the air. The land of Roh, the borderland, the hooded Mountains of Hazrat Suleiman, King of the Jinns.

Her travels had taken her from the cháguans of Yinchuan, where she encountered a posse of female imams, to the fair palaces of Zayn Z'al Barr, from the sleeping, golden Yenesei forests and the lemon groves of Palermo to the black ramparts of the Qafqaz 2. And everywhere she went, she gathered unto herself, stories, tales, long and short, poems that ran on for thirty days without stopping, songs that began on the third verse and went round and round, repeating with slight variations, music whose Chaldean cadences approximated those of desert cathedrals. And Roshanak aka Ruqa aka Zoolaykha aka Zafarana aka Laila let all this noise, light and movement flow into her and into her memories and thus, the way she remembered was through dance – a dance of her body upon the perfectly smooth marble floors of countless shehrs and also a dance of the fingers upon the strings of the oud aka the 'ud. Or at least, through the flight of her plectrum, that of a nightingale's wing across the face of the rose 3. Her chorea was referred to as 'muscle dancing' and her fingers trilled with such skill across the gut strings of the oud that onlookers would comment that she must have learned this technique from the fashionable ghost of the great Ziryab himself. Only when the Khivan merchant who had plucked her off the teeming street took her to bed, did he discover his mistake, as a consequence of which the unfrocked lord was flung into the cellar while his captors decided what to do with him. His owner pondered the many delicious and intricate options available, and for his part, since Lord Jack would gain no bodily release that night (it was so late, even the clockwise whores of the street-corners had gone to bed), he decided that he would have sport of a different kind. He began to sing, in Russian bass, the tale of the unfortunate fate which had befallen him. At which point our noble lord seems to have

attracted help from a passing itinerant thief who once had been a luminary of the Old Khanqah of Baghdad and who, while standing in the street outside the cellar, had become quite captivated by his plangent song. Utilising his voluminous and pharmacopoeic knowledge of poisons and sleeping draughts, this wise felon successfully slipped various substances into the guest-house and thence into the wine and thus quickly drugged the portly and unrequited merchant and so enabled the now disgraced, rather ruffled courtesan to slink away, to make his/her escape (again, in the depths of a swirling summer's night) through the old Roman tunnels which ran beneath the city walls and which now teemed with lunatic, singing peacocks who knew only one word:

Mor! Mor! Mor!

Some two years after setting off from the gleaming shores of England, and after undergoing several similarly transgendered adventures, our lord was led by the manuscript to the high peaks of the Land of Light, known variously as the Kingdom of the Kafirs, the Dukedom of the Shagari and the Land of the Dards. But first, the scroll (for it was the scroll that was held taut, there on that summer's day, some hundred-and-twenty years later, behind the clear, sleek body of the waterfall and there, in the old house by the lake, behind the ageing, parchment lids of Aircraftman Archibald Enoch McPherson 4. And he, our soon-to-be titleless Lord of the Manor, was poring over the same manuscript which had possessed him, as might a phantom, say, a black hooded monk or a sulphurous scriptorial Benedictine, or better still, a naked, golden-coiffed, cream-skinned maiden of the lake, have taken hold of his soul and this ancient and over the years, crumpled, piece of bullskin had led him to the tops of igneous mountains and into the candlelit bellies of khanqahs where he had partaken of strange, glowing liquids which had changed his body and turned his mind.

It was winter, and the mountains of north-western Ladakh were covered with snow. Even the lower slopes, which normally would have escaped all but the lightest of falls, were blanketed with a thick mass of white and it was so cold that the twigs of the trees, the bushes, the boulders had come to resemble djinns, frozen in mid-movement. As Lord Jack climbed slowly up the mountain, each step was measured yet uncertain and since his boots were quite inadequate for the conditions, their English leather was soaked through and their soles slipped over the glittering crystals that had formed during the morning as the top layer of the snow had partially melted in the sun. Yes, it is like the Alps and yet it is different, he thought, as he paused beneath the branches of a tree. He bent over and leaned forwards, palms pressed down against the fronts of his thighs.

His breath swirled into the sunlight. In spite of the exertion of climbing thousands of feet from the villages that were scattered around the foot of the mountain, and notwithstanding the four layers of wool and fur swathed around his body, Jack was beginning to tremble, he could feel the cold yawn through his bones. Yes, that was it, this was the difference between the Alps of Europe and the Hindoo Kush of Kafiristan. Or was it Baltistan? Up in these northern parts, were so many little abodes of the Kafir, black, red, yellow... Sometimes, he got confused, the air here was so thin, one could almost forgive a man for half losing his mind. There was no doubt about it, here, the peaks were higher, the land, more desolate, the air, thinner. No Hannibal, Porus, Ashoka or Kanishka had ever hauled elephants over these ranges. There were no dancing herders, or fat cows with bells and udders, no pretty, flower-bedecked houses. Here, absolute reality seemed very close. And through his flying-fox fur gloves, he could feel the immensity of the cold. After all, was that not what he had come here in search of – reality? He had left his homeland, his beloved, green, mother country, and had

dressed in the clothes of a woman of the Orient and eventually had arrived at the foot of this mountain which the locals called, Mount Kaf, and had begun his ascent, without guide or map (for these regions remained largely uncharted; no intrepid British Agent yet had wandered this way; the tribes tended to be hostile, the environment extreme, if not for Cambridge mystics then at least for the otherwise adventurous pioneers of empire; nonetheless, politically neither the land nor its inhabitants were devoid of importance - far from it - and indeed, to Lord Jack, to Bibi Zoolaika, the multifarious strategies of the British Empire were akin to the tactics of a great, pink anthill, in other words, they were based largely on the blind acceptance of lies and dissimulation so that the absence of any British agents in the mountains was by no means a guarantee that some were not working undercover and using secret, freshly-drawn charts). But England itself had grown too effete, too civilised. It had become infested with tea-rooms and string quartets. Life in Albion had become a genteel prison and one could spend one's entire life, trapped within the delicate brocades of a four-posted bed or penning elegant letters in sunlit morning rooms to barely required men of the cloth. Croquet and tennis. Parasols, spinning down the river. No wonder so many chose the colonies. Yet for Jack, to be a ruler of dark, wiry men or a rider of musk women was hardly a worthy aim. He had no desire to supplant one form of tyranny with another. He had no wish to build palaces and prisons and tawayafon ki sarzameen. Territories for whores. In one form or another, like the Lands of the Courtesans, those things always would turn at length to dust. Even if men like Paine and Danton had had their way, he thought, there would still be gilded beds and spire'd cathedrals. The mounds would be drawn in different colours, they would have other names, but it was the story of history itself: Saturnalia into Christmas; Eostre into Easter; Lent into Ramadhan; Tabernacles, all. Beneath the gilt, behind the pretty songs and the words in Kufic stone, it was all just the scratching of ants, the spawning of fish, the turning of rats' tails, segment-by-segment, across mud. And he had seen some strange things, in his time. Even at home, at Simnel Manor.

It had happened only once, years earlier, deep in a midsummer's night, when he had been still a young man. In the old bedchamber, he had been standing in his nightshirt before the painting of a Benedictine monk. Yet already, by that time, his mind had grown old as he had watched his father and then his mother, die, respectively, of consumption and typhoid. Already he had lived alone in the old manor for some years, prior to this night. Well, there were the servants, but most of those would leave every evening for their homes in the villages. Only the old butler would remain, and he slept in the empty servants' block, which had been built at the other end of the Manor. He could be summoned by means of a single, brass bell attached to a taut string which ran the length of the Hall, but Jack had never deigned to call the old man so late in the night. Breathing heavily and covered in a cold sweat, he forgot the reason why he had awoken. He wondered whether he might be catching the fever which was raging throughout the county, but the sweat was cold, not hot, and he had been dreaming, just before, though frustratingly, he found that he was unable to recall the content of his dream.

When he awoke, he found that already he had stepped down from his bed. He had neglected to don either dressing-gown or slippers, and since he must have torn off his night-cap while dreaming, his pate, too was bare. Nonetheless, in spite of the sweat soaked into the linen of his nightgown, gradually Jack began to warm up. It was late June, the nights were short as they could be, and the temperature had not fallen for three consecutive days.

Outside his window, the trees were laden with dark leaves, and as he swung open the casement, he could almost hear the tinkling of the stream as it flowed through the forest. The

night birds were singing in that peculiar, stilted manner of theirs, and from the lawns, the undergrowth and the ornamental pond, came the creeping, seething sound of legs and fur and scales. As a boy, sometimes he had crept through the side-door of the Manor, and in his bare feet had run to the edge of the pond, had leaned over the stone wall and had gazed at the gleaming, crescent moon reflected from its surface. He had felt the softness of earth and grass beneath his feet, punctuated by the sharp edges of half-buried stones. Then, as Jack-the-Boy, he would wander through the woods, feeling no fear, even as he would leap across the remains of the old, dried-up castle moat which the servants called Hagberry Pot after the cherry tree that grew from its base and which they insisted was the rooming-place of the devil. He would wander until at last he would come to the island in the lake, and to the deserted summer-house. Not tonight though.

He sighed, and moved into the circular antechamber where every morning and every night, he would perform his ablutions. The painting hung on the wall opposite his dressing stand. It was about two feet long and eighteen inches wide, and its frame, which looked as old as the painting itself, was of plain, blackened wood. Jack was never certain whether the colour was original, or a product of time, but he suspected the former, since even though the frame was chipped in places, the colour of the wood underneath was the same as that on the surface.

The picture was of a Benedictine monk. He had been told that there once had stood a monastery of that Order on the site of Simnel Manor, so possibly this was one of the early abbots, but he knew also that there was something wrong about the painting. While the early attire of the Benedictine Order had been white, for both scapular, carapace and cowl, this monk, in common with all the others of his Order over many centuries, wore only black. He looked around forty, had the tonsure of a life-professed friar, and his brown eyes had been staring out for centuries on the same scene in the ante-chamber. Indeed, the painting was almost certainly older than the house. Jack shivered at the thought of this strange monk, gazing down the years at the naked forms of the lords and ladies as they prepared their toilet, or as they dressed for masqued balls or glittering, Dionysiac parties. Or perhaps the monk had watched, unmoved, as, with a modulated joy, their conjoined bodies had turned to liquid in the dutiful act of perpetuating the family tree. Surely, this monk had seen more flesh in death than he could possibly have seen in life! Jack wondered whether that was why his thin lips curled upwards at their ends, rendering to his visage the aspect of a man engaged perpetually in some great private irony. It might be merely the chemical nature of the various pigments as they aged and turned upon one another. Or perhaps, Jack thought, it is simply the knowing smile of the long-dead.

Yet this night, he was unable to pull himself away from the painting. By the milky light that now streamed through his bedroom window, he became aware of the rising moon and he could hear the regular pendulation of the brass clock on the mantelpiece, but really, these things seemed to fade into the deep background as he became enthralled by the visage of the friar. The man's nose was long and thin, but not excessively so, and it was bent slightly at the bridge. His eyes were dark brown and in spite of the age of the painting, they glistened as though they were alive. It is a simple trick, Jack thought, to paint the eyes so that they appear to follow one around the room. But it wasn't like the Mona Lisa, there was no hint of playfulness or light. It was as though he was staring right through Jack, as though the monk, who, in true mediaeval style, had remained quite anonymous, even now, hundreds of years after his death, could see the flesh, the bones, the soul, of Lord Jack Ruthyn. And while, with time's passage, Jack fell steadily closer to decrepitude, the sage Benedictine would never get even a single day older. Perhaps that was why, over the generations, so many of his family

had gone mad, he thought. And perhaps, now I, too am insane. His neck seemed inordinately slender and there was just the hint of a dimple in the smooth, ripe apple-flesh of the monk's chin. Jack had always imagined that in those days monks had washed only very seldom, and then only in freezing river-water. Cleanliness was devilment! Just like the Kafirs of the High Mountains about whom he had read but whom he had not yet seen. He caught the monk's eyes again. No, this monk was not like that, at all. His skin had been scourged, the hairs raised to their ends, the blood drawn. The room smelt musty. He should have flung open the window, should have let in some air. Finally, he stepped backwards from the image. He had never liked turning his back on the picture, at least not once he had become fixed by the monk's eyes. He seemed to have lived with this image all his life. He had never dared to remove the painting, or to turn it to the wall. That was the problem with this ancient house, built on the monastery ruins. Every inch held some secret, some unseen thing that was tangible only in the mind. Even if he'd had the money, the structure could not have been changed, any more than history itself could have been altered. Past and future, both, he thought, and he shivered.

He had backed right up against the far wall of the circular chamber. He had never really been able to get his bearings in this room, despite the fact that he had washed here, countless times, right from his boyhood till now, at his age of thirty-six. Or was it thirty-seven? He was losing count. The shadows of the trees flitted across the stone and plaster, moved like dark liquid over the furniture; the wash-stand, the card-table, the iron bath with its dog's legs; and then Jack remembered that there had been no breeze outside to blow the leaves and branches about so, and he rubbed his eyes and straightened-up, and yet still the shadows spun around the room which he now saw was not circular at all, but oval, the shape of a mouth, or a skull vault. He did not dare to look at the painting, yet it hovered in the darkness on the edge of his vision. The antechamber had grown darker than before, the light shed from his diminutive bedside candle hardly enough to complement the starlight. Perhaps the candle has burned down, he thought. Perhaps I have been here, in this oval chamber with this ancient monk, for longer than I had imagined. He had no timepiece, and the clock on his bedroom dresser was not visible from where he stood. Yet even assuming that the moon had set or else fallen behind a cloud, the murk was out of proportion. Between Jack and the painting of the monk, the darkness was so intense, that even when he plucked up his courage and raised his gaze and in spite of the moonlight, he could no longer make out the eyes, the features, of the Benedictine, but merely the slightest hint of a face, a jowl, light-coloured skin which had felt the touch of neither woman nor devil and that smile that had spanned seven centuries or more. The darkness swirled between Lord Jack and the monk and as it passed he felt it almost as a solid entity. At first, it was accompanied by a roaring noise that seemed to come from far away. This had never happened before, not even in dream. And he had dreamt enough of this room; even when he had been thousands of miles away in the wilds of the Hindu Kush or by the dust villages of Sicily, the antechamber with its Benedictine abbot had remained the nexus of his reveries, had woken him from the soft, sleeping embraces of maidens, wives and whores, alike. And sweat would be pouring from his skin, and he would be screaming into the night which sometimes had been warm, sometimes frozen, but which for Lord Jack, always had been filled with intangible terror. Yet now, as the black form grew to some ten feet in height and acquired the cone shape of a Mediaeval hat, Lord Jack felt no fear. He felt neither hot nor cold, the room no longer smelt musty or sweet or dank, he no longer sensed the touch of linen against his skin and his mouth and tongue were neither parched nor wet. It were as though he, too had assumed the nature of a shade, or a spirit. It were as though he were slipping into the world of the monk, the world of his own ancestors. He wondered whether he might be dead, and not know it. The cone was slowing, and he almost fancied that

close to its summit he could make out two red eyes. The roaring had given way to a strange music coming from somewhere behind the figure, or perhaps from within its substance. It was an intensely melancholy sound, one which he had heard only twice before in his life. Then, from the centre of the shape, he saw a pair of arms reach out towards him. Jack took a step forwards. Then another. Then he stopped. The fingers were white, the bones, slender. Slowly, Lord Jack extended both his arms and stretched his fingers until he was touching the shadowy hands of the now static figure.

He felt a coldness envelope his body. It was not the chill of a winter's night nor that of a Russian lake on Epiphany. Yet, it turned every cell in his body instantly into an icicle so that at once he was brought to a point at which movement, even that of shivering, was impossible. And yes, he saw that his every breath was turning white in the air of the antechamber. But this was a mental coldness that stilled even his thoughts and the indefinable seeds which produced those thoughts, so that as the dark figure enticed him out of his chambers and down the winding stairwell that led to the lower floors, Jack felt that no longer was his being a taper that would burn its length in seventy years, perhaps less, but some very dim crystal that stretched back across many centuries, beyond England, beyond Rome, beyond Alexander, and which might even have had its root in the lands around that great river of Egypt which they called the Nile.

The figure, which now seemed almost cuboidal, did not walk as such, yet neither did it float, and Jack was unable accurately to define its mode of motion. He felt dissociated from what was happening, indeed he had a sense of profundity and bewilderment. And he felt that he was moving with the spectre along the darkly familiar corridors of Simnel Hall. Granted, when he glanced down, his bare feet were touching the stone flags, though his body was in such a state of rigor that the floor felt warm like the hard, sun-baked earth of Sicilia, like the shores of Lagu Pergusa, on which once he had run with his love. Her name had been Nilla and he used to joke with her that though her eyes were brown, she'd been named in irony after the sky. Odd, that he had forgotten all about her, till that moment. On a whim, he had nicknamed her, Zoolaykha, and they had lived for six months in a tiny massaria close to the water's edge in the wilds of Trapani. Ah! The cassata! The Spaghetti! Wondrous! And the taste of Nilla-Zoolaykha's cus-cus had been exquisite! Soft, hot, its substance yielding, its vegetal, granular substance, just right, beneath the lips, the tongue. He'd found her in a cave and later, the whole episode, which had lasted for many months, possibly even across the span of four seasons, had come to seem like a dream so that he had begun to wonder whether in truth she had been a siren or a sea-nymph. And she did sing beautifully strange, nasal songs that seemed of ancient provenance so that as he had listened, the sun beating down all around and the bracing smell of the lake sending him off balance, he'd thought that they must surely have been the very canzuni of sea and wind that had been suffered by Odysseus, himself. But no, he remembered, she had been a rejected woman, the ex-mistress of a Beat-Head who had run away from her village who had taken to inhabiting the secret places of the triangular island. Sometimes she would be in the dusty interior where the temperature rose to levels reminiscent of India whereas at other times she would be found (by those that knew) in one of the grotte which lined parts of the coast, particularly that facing the turquoise Tyrrhenian Sea. She always seemed to be able to find food, either by fishing or borrowing in kind from previous acquaintances. Then, one morning, he'd woken up, and she'd been gone. He sighed, there in the darkness, and his breath formed the almond shape of a liuto, and the liuto hung in the air for an instant before dissolving into the darkness. And it was very dark down here, and he no longer recognised the walls of the passageways along which they were travelling. They must have moved very fast, to get from the antechamber in the South Wing

of the Hall to these tunnels, which, since they had no windows, he was sure must lie beneath the surface of the earth.

At length, they came to a fork. They took the left-hand route, then reached a place where the tunnel divided into three, and they took the right-hand passage, and after a short time, this, too divided into four, and they took the second left, and then they came to another fork, and went right again, and after that he lost count. Sicilia. It had been only a few years earlier and yet now it seemed like an age had passed between them, Nilla and he. Time is behaving in very strange ways tonight, he thought, and then the thought began to behave in an even stranger manner and it became Zoolayka-Nilla and she was flesh-and-blood and she danced before him and then he saw that his hand was being held, not by the dark monk but by his love of seven seasons earlier and that it was she who was leading him through the belly of the earth, towards some unknown destination. And even as she led him, she was smiling and speaking without moving her lips. Yet it was not words that she spoke, but notes, musical notes, the sounds of strings being plucked, and her voice was like that of a hoopoe bird and then he saw that her feet were pacing out the markings of a seven-sided chamber which had no walls and that the chorea she was spinning was the old dance of the spider women, the dance of the tarantati. The musk of her breath was warm upon his neck. Yet her hand was so cold! He closed his eyes and tried to identify the other scent. Was it alyssum? Perhaps it was the sea air, since from above and all around, he thought he heard the sound of water. He attempted to speak to her, but was unable to emit even the slightest whisper. The voice of the woman was deep and thick like sweet treacle, like the honeyed waters of paradise.

A man who has never felt love is like ice

Serpents' wine is life to serpents

As the last note died away, Jack found himself alone in a small room. If it were possible, the darkness here was even more intense than it had been in the tunnel. Nilla-Zoolaykha was gone. Or at least, he could no longer feel the touch of her hand. He extended his arms, but could not reach any walls. Yet he knew that it was a small chamber, because his breath made no echo and because the air was very still. There was a roughness beneath his feet and he felt less cold than before. Slowly, his eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, and he began to make out vague shapes. A table, a chair and a flat, stone roof. The floor was hard-packed earth, the walls and roof were solid stone and the nature of his thoughts had returned to something resembling normality. Like the room itself, the geometry of the table was that of a cube and it did not seem to possess any legs, but sat solidly on the floor. When he felt sure that he would not bump into anything, he stepped gingerly towards the table and chair. He pushed back the chair and sat down. Then he saw that the table was more like a large sea-chest and that by his knees there was a catch and a bolt. He bent down and slid the bolt. Lifted the catch. Then, using both arms, he lifted the lid. It was not as heavy as he had thought it would be, and it flew open suddenly so that he lost his grip and tumbled backwards against the hard spine of the chair, while the lid swung noisily in the opposite direction. A thick cloud of dust rose into the air, but it did not smell musty as he had expected, but rather, bore the aroma of roses. Regaining his balance, Jack rubbed his eyes and peered into the box.

The room was dark and windowless, and he was surprised that he was able to see anything at all. It felt as though he was far beneath the lowest foundations of Simnel Hall. But then, he thought, on this night I have travelled through the song of the monk to some other place, of which as yet I know nothing. The box was empty, save for a single scroll, bound by a single,

red ribbon. He had to stand up to reach the bottom of the casket, and as he reached down, at one point his body was so positioned that in spite of the fact that he had caught hold of the upper edge of the box, Jack felt he might overbalance and tumble in. He undid the ribbon and let it fall to the ground. Clutching the scroll in his left hand, he stretched up and slowly brought the lid of the chest back down. Carefully, he unfurled the scroll. He had thought that it might be very ancient and that it might simply crumble as it was unwound. Yet he saw now that it was made, not of paper, but of wizened, flattened leaves. He brought it to his nose, and sniffed, but it smelled of nothing. At length, he laid it upon the closed lid of the box. The leaves were covered in writing of some sort, which Jack was unable to decode. From somewhere far above, again Jack thought he heard the sound of running water, but whenever he tried to listen, the sound vanished and became nothing more than the rush and pulse of blood in his own ears. After poring over the scroll for some time, he decided that he would bring it back with him to Simnel Hall. It would be easier to read by the light of a candle. Then he realised that the chamber had no door.

He woke, naked and covered in sweat. His bedsheets had been thrown off, and these and his linen bedclothes lay in a heap on the floor. Once his breathing had slowed, he clung to the bedpost nearest his head, and drew himself up to a sitting position. His body felt stiff, every muscle ached as though he had been wrestling with a new lover. Yet Lord Jack had had no lover, not even a lady of the night, for some two years or more. There was no breeze, no sign of a scroll and it was still dark outside. The room was stiflingly hot. The soles of his feet burned as though all through the hours of darkness, he had been dancing on bare boards. Once, Lord Jack had had the reputation of being a good prancer, and on another summer's night, long ago, he had spun the sarabande for hours in bare feet on hot, dark sand. But that had been in Sicilia, not England. Moonlight shone through the window, yet the moon must have risen to a level somewhat above the line of the eaves, so that from where he was sitting, Jack could not make out its form. He stepped onto the bed stool and from there, onto the floor and still, in bare feet, he went over to the window, turned the latch and pushed it open. The hinges had grown stiff. Jack expected a gush of air, but none came. The night outside was as still as that within his bedchamber. Still as the grave, he thought. Then he remembered. The dream, parts of which had recurred every night for the past thirty years. Sometimes, it would be just the faintest hint of a shadow or a whisper from the corner of the room. Sometimes, he would dream a whole song. And yet, in neither dream nor reality had he been able to decipher the words on the scroll, nor to locate the whereabouts of the deep chamber. In the moonlight, his fingers seemed pale as those of a skeleton. But tonight, he had touched the hand of the monk and had circled and spun with the phantom. Tonight, he had opened the box and had read the scroll, even though, like a child or an animal, he did not know the meaning of what he had read. Nilla, Zoolaykha. He had had many women, he even had loved a few, yet never in his life had he paraded with a lady of that name. But in the dream within the dream, and in the memory that lay within both, he had twirled and spun by the edge of a Sicilian lake with a woman whose name was Nilla-Zoolayka and for nine months they had been lovers.

He glanced behind him. Lying on the floor in the far corner of the room was an object, shaped like half-a-globe. The cut sphere gleamed white in the moonlight. He went over and picked it up. It was warm to the touch. It had no handles, and at first, Jack thought that it was a goblet. He cupped it in the palm of one hand, and spun it round so that it caught the light. Its outer surface was quite smooth, polished even, but the inside was coursed with tortuous lines that resembled rivers, and its surface was irregular, so that in his fancy, the portions between the rivers became rounded peaks, gentle hillocks and shallow valleys. He brought

the object to his face. It exuded the scent of cedar oil. It is a map of some sort, he thought. A strange world, this, where the plan is on the inside.

He was certain that the cone of darkness which had followed him all his life and which from one swollen belly to the next, had shadowed the troubled line of his ancestors, all the way back to the First Lord, the pathetic, the elegant, the real, Lambert Simnel, was none other than the spirit of the Benedictine abbot. But tonight he had learned that the abbot, the vault of whose skull he was holding in his right hand, had been a woman.

Lord Jack had wanted to climb beyond his ancestors, to escape from the monk and the antechamber and the rusting metal of the casements, he had longed to reach beyond past and future and to touch something else. Exactly what form that might have taken, he had never been certain. During the years subsequent upon the dream of the scroll, he had followed the cartogram of the skull, he had travelled along the paths of its winding daryas, its broad valleys and its deep gorges and he had climbed its hills and mountains. He had even passed through the caldera at the very crown of Mongibello. And yet, eventually, Lord Jack had found that its plan matched that of a certain, as yet barely mapped, region in the high peaks of the Hindoo Kush mountain range, somewhat to the east of the old satrapy of Khoorasan, and to the north-west of the Land of the Five Rivers. He had thought that here, perhaps, he might find the meaning of the words on the scroll. Here, perhaps, he might hear that music which had been the words of his lover.

While in the khanqahs of Khoorasan, he had seen and heard things which had seemed beyond belief. Certainly, they defied the comforting laws of logic and rationality that had been embraced by the luminaries of the age. They derived from a different rationale, from older, wilder forms of thought. Like dance and music, they could be tamed and clothed with learning, yet they could never fully be understood. And this desire had drawn him all over the world, from the forgotten, Old Yunani bandit lands of Calabria and Sicilia to the wastes of Kafiristan and Ladakh, the border places where Russians, Chinese, Tibetans, Indians and Persians all played out their games and their wars, and where isolated tribes whose gods long before had turned to demons and whose devils had become farishtas held within their bodies blood that had remained undiluted since the time of Alexander or perhaps even from the time of the Hebrews, since they had bred, not with other humans, but with sacred goats to produce a race of horned shamans.

The sun's strength, here on this mountainside in the northern mountains, was deceptive and the air carried no heat. Jack had travelled for seven days and six nights to reach this peak which was on no map, neither that of the British Resident in Hunza nor that of the Russian Namestnik in Dushanbe. Ah yes, the Imperial House of Russia had designs on these southerly emirates. One after another, they had taken over those of the Steppes, and now they were poised to descend into the belly of the Oxus. Soon, the clear waters of the Amoo Darya would flow with reflections of the faces of lovers, left behind forever in the ballrooms of Muscovy. Lord Jack was sure that the greyish-blue river which had witnessed the passage of the armies of countless generals and emperors, prophets and chieftains, would soon be witness to yet another would-be conqueror.

His eyes were streaming. He took out a silk kerchief – the last of his luxuries – and wiped the skin of his cheeks. The sun here was a liar, a killer. It was a quite different sun from that of Hindoostan, or even that of England. It was as though it derived its very light from the substance of these mountains, from the black rock and the white snow. In the old days, men

had imagined that the earth was the centre of the universe, and that they had sat at the heart that lay betwixt earth and heaven. His grandfather, even, had never thought of questioning the wisdom which he had received from his father's fathers. Most of the peasants on his estate still thought the same way. Their imaginings were trammelled by fear. But now, thought Jack, the sons of the sons are learning that we are simply lumps of flesh in a cold, dark sea without end or beginning. And gradually, this knowledge will seep downwards, skeins of this new, dead alchemy will run through the earth of men's brains and will take hold, and then no-one will know anything. Some feared this change; the clergy, the prince bishops of the First Estate, the superstitious old women who clutched their beads to their breasts as drowning sailors grasp twine. But Jack did not fear it; there was no point worrying about knowledge; it was men that scared him. They breathed the foul air of their cities which were not cities of light but dens of darkness, of swirling, coughing djinns and the knock-knock of skeleton whores parading on the cobbles. The vomit of pin-swallowing women. Murky engines, slime rivers. Soldiers, marching off to war, their grins, their skins, spanning horizons. Hyacinths, violets, primroses, all withering on window-sills. The morning skies, burning red. This was not enlightenment.

He had got his breath back. Or perhaps it was his anger. Jack wasn't sure, but either way, he no longer felt cold and tired. It was the morning, he was among the highest peaks in the world and he was the only human being for miles around, the only living thing that was not hidden beneath snow. He began to walk, he no longer minded the dampness of his boots, he was no more bothered by the sharp cold than he might have been, by a light breeze on the skin of his cheeks. The air was pure - thin, yes, but all the richer for that. This was what it must have been like on the first day, thought Jack. This is how Adam must have felt, on the day after he was expelled from Eden. The myth was wrong. Adam, the first prophet, the old mud being, had not been miserable; he had been ecstatic. He had flown, he had laughed, he had danced the spinning dances of the old Jews. Somewhere, thought Jack, we have lost the movement, we have ground slowly to a halt, we have become like a dead body forever in thrall to the bishop of the skies. The weight of civilisation, of towering edifices and factory machines and heaving choirs of uncastrated boys, all of this has pressed down upon us and has stopped us from whirling, has dulled our finger-tips and clouded our eyes so that no longer are we capable of forming the notes of that first, brutal music. We sit, en masse, an audience of topped and tailed pretenders, pretending to laugh, sing, jig and reel, exchanging wondrous pigs and pretty bobbins, we are swell quack doctors, hot pea men, knights of the manner, yes, he thought, on my travels I have been all of these things, and all the while, we do nothing.

Now he was almost running up the slope. Several thousand feet still lay between him and the pyramidal summit, although it might have been more; as with deep water, he knew, proportions at this height, on such a scale, could well be deceptive. Yet the power he felt coursing through his body was not a lie. One by one, the veils were falling away. Here, the smell of blood, finally, had faded. His feet were slipping on the snow, which grew ever more tightly-packed, the higher he climbed, but Lord Jack no longer noticed, he was smiling into the sun, in his ears the sound of a double string on wood, plucked by a woman's finger, and all he could see was the place where the sides of the mountain came together, the point where stone fell into sky. The moment when everything became nothing. The time before the first letter of a poem. Aleph. A. Breath.

Just before the final incline, the slope that led to the summit, Jack noticed, to his left, perched amidst the snow, a dark structure that looked like a wooden chair. As he drew closer, he saw that the scale was wrong, that it was far too large to be a chair, that it was more like a frame

of some sort. He gazed up at the summit, and then glanced again towards the object, and decided that really there would be no loss in making a short detour – it could not have been more than one hundred yards at the most – to investigate the structure. Yet once he had started towards it, it became obvious that in fact the distance was more than twice what he had thought. When he was within thirty yards of it, he began to make out music. Yet at first, he was not sure, he imagined that it might simply be the light wind sifting through deficiencies in the wood. After all, at this height, it would most likely be worn half away. But the sounds were too structured, too melodic, to be simply random noise.

It was some twenty feet high, and had been cut in the shape of a huge cone. The outgrowths of its base spanned some thirty feet across and it was clear to Jack that this sculpture had been hewn from a single tree. Yet the branches were not as they would have been in life. It was obvious that the tree was long-dead. Its bark was hard as stone and black as coal and it bore neither buds, nor twigs. It were as though an ancient oak had been uprooted from somewhere much lower down the slopes, brought here, cut up and then reconstructed in a different form. The tree rose to a sharp point, not unlike that of the mountain. The branches had been forced over into the shapes of recurrent ovals and at the enclosed centre formed thus, lay a large, white boulder. Perhaps, thought Jack, it is a shrine of some sort, raised here to protect the people of the valleys from the gods of sky, snow and wind. He drew his arms around his ribs. The breeze was starting to get up, so that in spite of the sunshine, Jack again became aware of the fact that his body was freezing. He turned away. The summit would take another five minutes, and then he would head down again towards the villages. Then he stopped. He had forgotten something. He had become almost oblivious to its sound, but now he realised that all along the noise he had been hearing as he had climbed up the mountain had been coming from the tree, and that it had been music.

He pushed and squeezed his way through the dark, dry branches until he was standing by the boulder, gazing outwards. From here, the high hemisphere was criss-crossed by curving black lines, some gnarled with age, others, almost dead straight. The branches wound around him in repeating arcs, and for a moment, Jack felt as though he were standing at the centre of a merry-go-round, watching the horses whirl past and the steam rise from the funnel, feeling the pulse and thrust of huge pistons from within the mechanism, sensing through the soles of his feet the regular thrum of metal and through his brain, the stink of grease. The horses spun faster and faster, until they became a blur, until the world outside darkened and the sky grew black. Then he saw that thick clouds had gathered around the mountain's summit. He felt dizzy and held onto the boulder for support. It was a little too big to allow him to wrap his arms around with the tips of his fingers touching. Its surface was rough, like gritstone, as though it had been assaulted for so long by the extremes of weather that predominated in this part of the world that it had become hardened like the mountain itself. And yet, this rock was of a quite different stone from any he had seen hereabouts.

There was no air up here, the guides had told him. At these heights, strong men – especially Farangi and the sepoys or servants whom they brought with them – had sometimes collapsed and died on the spot. At other times, saudagurs travelling southwards from Yarkand and the other domains of Imperial Russia on their way to the markets of Kashmir had had visions of wandering Englishmen, clad in big hats and white duck shooting-jackets. He had refused to accept a guide; he had not wished to emulate the Imperial adventurers who had travelled all over the world, 'discovering' this and that, always with the help of native guides. The question being, that if the lands had been truly virgin, if no man or woman had set foot on their sacred surfaces, then how was it that the sherpas, the tribesmen, the blue-eyed monks,

the Kafirs, or whoever, had been wandering around these places for centuries? No, Lord William Michael Jacobus de Ruthyn was not clambering up deserted mountains for Queen and Country; not even the smooth-skinned miniature portraits of the young English regina would have induced him to engage his mind and body in the service of her State; he was in search of neither victory nor glory. It was something else he sought, and he felt it here, close to the mountain-top. He had lived in a local village for months, had acclimatised himself, had drunk the water and liquor and had bathed off the backs of boulders in the mountain rivers. He had eaten the meat and unleavened bread which the villagers had offered, and had clapped his hands in matched rhythm at their celebrations. He had done everything, except take a woman to bed. He was not so foolish. He had heard once of a British soldier, a non-commissioned officer, who had come from the ranks of the East India Company, who had been stationed in an outpost down close to the tribal valleys that lay somewhat to the south of here. This man, quite ignorant of the customs and mores of the locals, had taken a fancy to one of the young women of the local tribe – Waziri, possibly, or Mohmand, Ghilzai or Shinwari, Jack could no longer remember exactly to which tribe she had belonged – when once he had watched as she had carried some bundles of clothing down to the river that had flowed near her village.

One night, so the story went, half-drunk on Navy rum (though Jack had never managed to ascertain just how the soldier had managed to get hold of a bottle of the stuff, up here, some nine hundred miles or so from the nearest coastline), he had crept down and accosted the girl, had taunted her and dallied with her, and most likely on account of his drunken-ness, had fail to notice a group of tribesmen sidling down the hillside towards the river's edge. Jack was aware that among the Pushtoons, that even to glance at a woman might lead to punishment, even if the man were of the same tribe or even the same sub-tribe. For a Farangi to lay hold of a maiden of the village was unheard of, and was likely to lead to the severest of punishments, for both the girl and the man.

Jack shuddered as he recalled the rest of the tale. The wind really was building up to something, and the mass of clouds was growing darker by the minute. He leaned against the boulder, and was surprised at the warmth that seemed to emanate from the stone, even through the several, thick layers of his clothes. He remembered. The writs of Great Moghul and Empress of Victory, alike held no weight at all in these parts. Both Ladakh and Gilgit lay outside of empire. Soldier and girl were captured, and held separately. The trial by village elders was brief. Still in darkness, the girl was taken back down to the river's edge, made to kneel, her burqa pulled up and off her body, and her throat slit with a single sweep of the qurban knife. Helped by two other men, her eldest brother dragged her still-quivering body into the river, where the thick streams of her blood mingled like snakes with the clear, mountain water. As dawn rose, having completed the decapitation and having allowed the mountain waters to take her body, they buried her head, with its staring eyes, beneath a juniper tree, then lit a fire and slowly burned her burqa. The soldier was stripped naked and marched into the scrublands, the semi-desert wilderness that lay between the villages and the Land of the Kafirs to the west. There, in the darkness, the men stoked a bonfire until the flames rose twelve, fifteen feet into the air. Then they beat it down till it was little more than a burning, white-hot hump in the darkness. Then they placed a griddle-iron on the fire and allowed it to heat up until the metal glowed red on both sides. They did not make him kneel, but forced him to stand facing them. Using the same qurban blade with which they had ended the life of the young woman, they slit the soldier's throat, quickly and cleanly, but also powerfully, so that with this single stroke, the soldier, too was decapitated. Before his head had hit the ground (making a sound not unlike that of a watermelon) and with the trunk of his

body still standing, two men carrying large pincers brought the red-hot griddle-plate, placed it on the stump of his neck and then leapt aside. Immediately, the man's hands shot up to clutch the burning plate, and silently his headless body began to run, his feet following a strange, zig-zagging path through the rocks and scrub, while in the loosed head the eyelids fluttered like the fringes of a Spanish fan and the mouth opened and closed like that of a dying fish. Seven minutes later, the eyes stared, half-closed and unblinking, as dawn crept over the mountain's shoulder.

He recalled that he had been told this gruesome tale one night in a Delhi brothel by an old soldier named Sikander Beg 6. The odd thing was, he remembered that as the soldier had shuffled off into the summer darkness to the sound of a single rubab, the brothel had grown suddenly intensely hot as though Jack had consumed ten glasses of rum or gin or best Scotch whisky all at once, and he had had to undo the collar of his shirt and tear off his neckerchief, though when he had glanced around, he'd seen that no-one else seemed to have noticed the rapid change in temperature. In the years he had spent wandering the earth, he'd often dreamt of the old soldier, and in his dream, as the man drew away, Jack could see around the cone of his neck, the jagged line of a scar.

The rock was definitely warm, Jack thought, as he huddled up closer, drawing his cloak around himself. The old tale had related to Pushtoon tribesmen, and recently he had been staying in a village of Kafirs, which was quite a different thing. Nonetheless, he had preferred to remain careful. His aim had been to reach the summit, but now, as the clouds began to whirl around him, and the snow to fleck across the outer surface of the tree, Jack was no longer certain whether or not he would make it. This rock was so warm. The music had never ceased, and now grew louder as the wind got up. It was as though the air around the mountain was blowing through hundreds of strings, causing them to vibrate and eliciting an ethereal, almost angelic sound such as he had never before heard. Then two things struck him. Firstly, the snow did not penetrate the outer branches of the tree. No matter how wild it got, in here by the boulder, Jack was safe. And secondly, like the heat, the music, too was issuing from the rock. He was convinced of it. His body still trembled with cold, yet there seemed to be some kind of balance being attained between the amount of warmth he was losing to the wind and that which flowed into him from the surface of the stone. Still clutching the sides of the boulder, he went down on his haunches. He knew that in this position, he would not freeze, that he would be able to sit here for as long as it took for the storm to pass.

Lord Jack had never reached the summit. He smiled, now as he watched the waterfall cascade onto the glistening stones of the pool below. He had never got inside of the mountain. There had been some rumours of caves, but he had never managed to find any. The maps had been inaccurate, or perhaps the land had altered since they had been drawn. Here, in the forest, he had his own secret place, and here he would hide his manuscripts, in his Estate, behind a waterfall, in a cavern, under rocks and stones, in a box within a box within a box. Whatever power he'd had would reside in this place till Doomsday, or till some great earthquake disgorged its contents. It was his penance. Or perhaps, his arrogance. His poetry, his memories, held too much within. Like the white boulder up on the mountain, sitting in its deep cone of power through all of Vishnu's aeons, like the warmth and the music it had exuded, Lord Jack was not meant for this world of smoking chimneys and thrusting pistons, this civilisation of gunpowder. He was the last in the line.

He rubbed the tips of his fingers over the scar that looped around his neck, and then, gathering up his shovel, proceeded to bury the box, deep in the ground. Then he rolled a large

boulder across the front of the cave, and taking care not to get his clothes wet, one last time, he made his way back to the summer-house.

1: Cylinder phonograph Number 786, labelled, 'A Strunchion' and recorded in 1895 onto a carnauba wax cylinder by a crone from Laughton, Lindsey. Lyrics reprinted here, courtesy of the Indestructible Record Company. It turned out that the old woman, who was named Athalia Peters, once had been a dancer and singer in a travelling musical and magical show, 'Mi Ma Yin: The Strangest Magical Show on Earth! Incorporating the Magnificent and Legerdemonic Conjuring Acts of Penetration, Levitation and Teleportation!', with the stage-name, Mizelli Ocean and that she had gained some renown and indeed, infamy, around the time of the Crimean War, when it is said that she was bedded by seven aristocrats, including the Earl of Horselydown. There was also a rumour, possibly put about in neighbouring villages, that she had posed for obscene daguerrotypes in a disreputable London studio. After her death, in 1903, some fifty such photographs were discovered, secreted in a metal trunk. In these images, the woman is dressed (or rather, undressed) as a 'Princess of the Egyptians' and indeed, while this was obviously rampant male fantasy, at the same time, her real name, Sinfaï Lautari Wenman, was in fact of Roma provenance and it is clear from the photographs that her complexion was considerably darker than that of her Lincolnshire neighbours.

After the 'Mi Ma Yin' Show fell into bankruptcy, she had fallen on hard times and eventually had ended up in a workhouse in the town of Brigg. Fortunately, a banker from Lincoln named Joseph Kale had taken a shine to her and had set her up as his mistress in a small cottage in Laughton village. By the time this recording was made, he had long since passed on into the great vault of the sky, and she was living, quite alone, with neither kith nor kin, and with only her songs, her memories and her magic to keep her company. She kept herself to herself and in consequence of all this, with the added peculiarity of her singing right through the night, she had been dubbed by village wags, a witch. Please note that the author attempted to post some of the daguerrotypes, which, by modern standards are not unattractive and only lightly obscene, on the web, but found that every time they were uploaded, within hours mysteriously someone had taken them down again.

*Penn'd the temeskoe rye to the Romany chi,
As the choon was dicking prey lende dui
Rinkeney tawni, Romany rawni,
Mook man choom teero gudlo mui a)*

This song was also reputed to have been heard during a séance, held during the winter of 1968 CE in the small and dusty village of Pilham, in Lindsey, when the medium, a certain Mrs E. A. Claxby, sang these very words while supposedly possessed by the spirit of one 'Mrs Burrows'. It is reported that around the same time, the Misses Claxby once conferred in a strange, harsh, Mittel-European tongue with the spirit of a long-deceased lunatic whom she named, 'Frederick the Nit'.

*a) Said the youthful earl to the Gypsy girl,
As the moon was casting its silver shine:
Brown little lady, Egyptian lady,
Let me kiss those sweet lips of thine.*

2: In an apocryphal codicil of the 'Book of Sydrac', presented, it is said, by Thadhuri of Antioch, there is an account of the following encounter between Frederick II of Sicily and Ibn Sab'in, in which the latter says, "You are not Frederick and I am not Sydrac." Since Sydrac was one of the sons of Hazrat Nu, it is obvious that Ibn Sab'in was not he, but what of Frederick? The original text has been lost and as so often is the case in such matters, we have only this intriguing fragment, which like the canonical Book of Sydrac, down to the present day must have passed through at least seven languages: Hebrew, Greek, Latin, Arabic, Latin (again) and Sicilian. Oh, and English.

3: "It would be allowable to omit several conceits unbecoming in European dress".

4: Since the Seventeenth Lord was travelling in the form of a woman, it seems that the scribe who penned these manuscripts took the measured, but irrevocable, liberty of referring to him in the opposite gender, thus following in the esteemed tradition first established by the Khulasat-ul-Ansab and from which, whether or not

their authors are aware of it, all genealogical abstracts are derived. It should be stated that this assertion with regards to the convention in general and Lord Jack's journeys in particular, was disputed by the Ghilzais, the one-time conquerors simultaneously of Delhi and Iran who carried their horses on their backs as do snails, their shells. This alternative hypothesis is recorded in the jewel-studded Khurpan of Bayazid a), a heretical and somewhat obscene work of which only a handful of copies now exist (though unfortunately none are documented in either the Library of Congress, the British Library or the Islamic Index), but these canonical texts do not include the cryptic Manuscript of Light which is rumoured to be held somewhere in the ancient and venerable city of Herat, capital of the old satrapy of Aria 2. The hypothesis recorded therein runs something like this:

One morning, in late spring, Bakhtunnasar was partaking of a stroll in the lower regions of the beautiful Paridaeza, the hanging baghichay for which, even then, his native city was famed – and justly so. The garden had seven levels, and each level consisted of four equal sections, divided by rivers. One afternoon (though to defer to the diurnal in this manner when referring to Paradise is at best inaccurate, at worst, blasphemous), while wandering through the first, the outermost, ring of firdaus, behind a giant mulberry bush, Bayazid encountered a woman, dressed in the couture – a pair of black boots, a burgundy jomah, a white headscarf wrapped around a pot-shaped hat and a large nose-bangle - of a Mizrahi noblewoman from beyond the Sambatyon River, from the area around the Pashtun city of Peshawar. She had eyes, the colour of ripe hazelnuts and her hair, which had been swept beneath her hat, was blacker than the night ocean. Her skin was burnt-olive and was soft as rose petals.

Who are you? Bazid asked.

I am Latifa, the daughter of the daughter of the daughter of the daughter, back fifteen times, of Sado, who was the son of the son of the son, back fifteen times, of Qais, who was the son of the son of the son, back fifty times, of Talut of the Tribe of Baniyamin, King of the Jews. During the great exile which followed the reign of Sidqiyya, a number of tribes were sent to the frontier province of Sogdiana. Over the course of the centuries, as the dynasties rose and fell, many more came and as we wandered, we planted our names like flowers, like musical notes, all over the land, so that across Bactria and Kaspapuros even the smallest hamlet bears the imprimatur of Hazrat Suleiman, peace, love and song be upon him. We belong to neither the Desi, nor the Paradesi branch of Jewry, we are not Saturday oil-pressers, yet together with our names, Yusufzai, Sadozai, Asgeri, Naftali, we bore with us, our rubabs, and through our music, songs and the movements of our hands, our bodies, we covered the mountains and valleys, the vanished seas and fecund orchards, with nothing but beauty and light.

a): It should be stated here that Bayazid, or Bazid, penned works which might be described as poorly-characterised but highly-colourful vignettes, their viridescence being not unlike the tasteful glimmer which to this day emanates from the ear-ring of Ahmed Shah Abdali, the Pearl of Pearls, the first King of Afghanistan and Caesar of the Empire of Light. They were exotic, enticing and powerful, like the scent of a fake courtesan with a real tambourine. Furthermore, there are a number of codices written in Middle Persian which appear to have been created not by Bayazid at all, but by an impostor, to whom, with the reader's permission, we shall refer as the Pseudo-Bayazid.

5: The nightgown was a lightweight banyan inherited from an ancestor who had gone off for ten good years to administer plantations in the State of Virginia. Originally, it had been a deep green, but now, with age, its colour more resembled the honeyed tones of very old white wine.

6: It may be that this, 'Mr Alexander' was none other than an entheogenic hallucination of the Wandering Magyra, Csomo de Koros, who would have been travelling around these tribal areas at around the same time as Lord Jack Ruthyn, but who, at least at this stage, unlike the young lord, tended to adopt heavy disguise. Perhaps Lord Jack found the idea somewhat appealing and one might postulate, or rather speculate, as did Dr A. H. Francke, PhD, that this attraction may have resulted in his later behaviour in that regard.