

The Tale of the Juggler: The Haveli, the Dancer and Joseph Stalin

These are the Memoirs of Nisseni, famed inventor of cassata, otherwise known as quas'at, and Lady of the Harem of the City of Women, heroine of Kalt el Nissa, daughter of Ibn Abbad and, to boot, the Great Juggler of Bal'harm and gastronome extraordinaire of Arabic spaghetti, which in some quarters is termed, itria. They have been inscribed in the scripts of several tongues, some obsolescent and others in common usage. Since The Juggler is incapable now of setting down words in ink in this, the material world in which we dwell, wholly as a consequence of the learned doctor existing in large part on the plane of the intellect, in this Year of Our Lord, 853 AH, he has entrusted to the Pupa of San Giuseppe ru Casteddu Nivuru, known at one time as Rujari d'Alì, lutenist extraordinaire and composer of madrigals and murder, and at another time as the scribe, Ibn 'Abd al-Mun'im al-Himyari, the task of compiling this account of his wanderings to the east, before, betwixt and beyond the Land of the Two Rivers 1, 2.

I began as a tree, then I was a goat, then a sufi, then a poet, then a slave and now I am a juggler, a conjuror, a cauculatores, a magician, a magus, a wizard, a warlock, a witch, a jadugaar. While I worked as a Qurlayuni dancing-girl, I went by the name of Zafarana and one day I had occasion to meet the beat-head and nascitu mafiosu, Jacopone Voparedda, who had come out of his womb, a mafiosu and truly the coglionissimo of Sicilia (and that is saying something) and who seemed to take a liking to me and who thus in between his many hunting expeditions in the Madonie mountains, took me as his mistress. During the day, he would come to my chamber and we would recite poetry and indulge in wild, naked dances so that at times we resembled goats fed on witch mushrooms or else the rubbery, niuro eyes of tonna ecstatically ascending through the bloody veils of the isola. I heard that Jacopone was an evil man, a man of blood and violence, a man without honour, a man who would slit the heads off human beings as though they were frogs, a monster who would watch them twitch for ten minutes as he twisted the metal cord around their necks, a swaggering shit who would blow up, shoot, or stab anything that got in his way. In order to assuage their terror, and also from a strange and perverted and vicarious sense of pride, the people gave him many nicknames, so that eventually he came to have a different name in every village. They called him the Big New Boot, the Beast, the Tractor, the Pope, the Lucky One, the Accountant, the Invisible Man, the Big Popper, the Skipper of Skippers, the Iceman, the PVC Beathead, the Man with the Burning Hand, the Little Bird, the Saint of Killers, the Belt 'n' Braces Don, the Old Uncle, the Humble-the-Great, the Wine Jug, Beelzebub, the Snake, the Peasant, the Strangler and many more things besides. And yet, with me, this man who regularly fed the bodies of his victims to the swine of Siqilliya was as tender as a troubadour - he even played the lute and sang most beautifully - and like the carp in the holy lake of Hazrat Ibrahim, he would come swimming through the thick summer noon when called by name and would sing, sometimes like a castrato, sometimes like a cuntastorie and either way, would blindly obey me at every turn! Perhaps, in the midst of his gleaming limousine ruin, I was his sole candle of innocence. But it was not the fake innocence of nuns and priests, those great masturbators of the Lord. For it is known that God keeps His daughters of the convent pristine and hermeneutically sealed between the legs so that on their ascension, He may enjoy them, Himself, so that with His fat dick whose diameter, at the very least, must span several solar systems, He can rip open their bellies and disembowel them, fillet the holy bitches of whatever secret He, along with the rest of male humanity, fears so terribly. It is far more honourable, in my view, to live out one's life as dancing-girl, powerful prostitute or randy

baroness, than to pretend to virtue and chastity, all the while in cold, dark cloisters, rubbing against one's little friend, a cheap figurine of Our Lord of Two Worlds. Poor man died on a cross somewhere on a green hill long ago, only to suffer an even more ignominious fate, namely, to eternally trans-substantiate into a dildo (or perhaps, into some esoteric frottage accoutrement) for sisters, brothers and fathers and mothers superior of the merciless canticle. A great, panting motet. No wonder he always looks so miserable! The holy ghost. So would you, if you had to spend eternity as a blind proctoscope, shoved up the shit-hole of a life-professed Benedictine! No, my innocence was of a different order. It was the innocence of honesty. During those feverish mezzogiorno days, Jacopone and I were virtuous in the way of true human beings. We were like Adam and Eve, before the Fall. Brown wheat and blood poppies.

In the evening, I would rest for a little while and then, on the stroke of midnight I would arise, drink almond wine and begin to dance the tarantella pizzica, the zaar, the stimbali, the jarjabou through the streets of Qurlayun, Kasr Yanni, Salemi and Kalat-al-Fimi, through the towns and villages of mountain and plain, river gorge and bay.

And so swift were my feet upon the stone and dirt, so lithe my movements in the moonlight, entire villages would rise from their beds and follow me along the rugged coast from where the reflections of dark castles grew beneath the water into great *qeelaa'eh* of blue domes and taut spires, through the dense forests of the plateau, all the way to the maha, the hollow cut into the mahie of the dark mountain where once on a day, the old Saracens of the Ma afir tribe had taken refuge and had lived until they had turned into jasmine ³ which had grown up the walls and along the roof and which had been watered by sulphur-rich subterranean streams and where, it is said, even today, deep in the sweet darkness, the cavalieri lie like Sultan Rujari on great slabs of red porphyry. We would pick some of the flowers that surrounded the reclining knights, all the while being careful not to touch even a hair on the heads of any of the sleeping soldiers. And then we would pass between white marble pillars inscribed with the words, *durezza* and *raffinatezza* (though some nights, they would read, *honour* and *shame*) and would dance all the way back through the villages and towns of Siqilliya, ending only as the fierce, fiery dawn broke through the smokey cap of Muncibbeddu. Jacopone never accompanied me on these journeys, he had a wife and family to look after and besides, much of the time, he was too busy roving the hills and orchards, killing, stealing and like some dark, winter god, stamping on the land his complete, Gabeloti control, or else engaging in the *sassaiuola santa*, the holy stoning, of the houses of the marrani, for he was that type of enforcing and entrepreneurial bandit known as a Mafioso, a man of beauty, joy and favours, a mediator of financial innovation and atypical stocks, a gentleman (but not a gentle man) of oranges, lemons and sulphur, a friend of a friend of a friend of a friend of a friend of a friend of a friend. Eight legs, just like a tarantula.

And when one looked at the faces of the reclining cavalieri, one recognised them as belonging to those who had fought against the wolf spiders, the beat-heads, the consiglieri, the *sgarristi*, the *picciotti*, the *uomini d'onore*, the *capifamiglia*, the *capidecina*, the *capiregime*, the *capi crimini*, the *capi di capi re*, the *capo di capi di capi di capi di capi di capi di capi* ... and who therefore had been caused to disappear off the face of the earth, the ones whose bodies had been dissolved in baths of concentrated sulphuric acid, the ones who, unwitnessed, had been abducted from busy streets and cast off cliff-edges into the thick, green darkness of the Nebrodi Mountains, the ones whose cars had been stopped by the barriers of level crossings at particular times and who had been dragged out, kicked to unconsciousness and then slumped over the fine, silver rails. The faces were of those whose

bodies had been chopped into countless pieces and served to the cirnechi dogs of Corleone, Caltanissetta, Catania, Castel Gandolfo and to the pigs of Palermo who wore ties and sat on plush thrones and whose bellies grew large with accumulated pizzo and who made profound and moving speeches worthy of Hollywood or Bollywood or Lollywood or Stromboli or Il Duce about corruption and the N'Drangheta, Camorra, Stidda, Sacra Corona Unita and Our Thing and the need for Our Thing to become Not Our Thing and the honour (yes, the honour) of erecting monuments to those magnificent, excellent cadavers who, when living, had struggled against Our Thing, but all the while these porci and their avvicinati continued to drink heartily of the black Sicilian wine fermented, uva-by-uva, from the blood and bones of the howling, unrequited dead. The mothers, sisters, sons, babies, grandparents, wives, husbands, uncles and aunts all murdered beneath the ecstatic spires of countless Chiese Madri in the shade of the awnings of the caserma, those who fell for the last time amongst the complex and wondrous lemon-grove patterns cast across the centuries like the intricate, irreverent and infinitely malleable plots of folk tales. But the lemon-groves were ghosts; they had been burned and destroyed during the Great Sack of Palermo, Anno Domini, 1959 to Anno Domini, 1963.

And there, beneath Mongibello, that veritable Mountain of Mountains, I, Zafarana the dancing-girl, the slave who had become a juggler of men, of spheres, of truths, I swear I saw the faces of those whom the Beautiful People had killed and though none of these souls had been venerated, beatified or canonised by the Holy Church of Roma Matri, around each one's head was a golden halo and wondrous flowers grew in the light of these haloes. Some of them, I recognised from the television or the 'papers. There, fleetingly, was Cesare Terranova and there, Emanuele Notarbartolo - I recognised him from the bust that had been stolen from Qurlayun - and next, I made out the features of the activists, Pio La Torre, Placido Rizzotto, Giuseppe Impastato and that of Abu Musa the love-poet and Francesca Morvillo, the lover and judge. And all of them were the sons and daughters of Averroes. Yes, and next, Giovanne Falcone and Paolo Borsellino, sainted and twinned like constellations though in real life they had been quite different. For Mongibello was neither Hell, heaven nor a thing of this world, but rather, a place of manifold possibilities. Until those possibilities were realised, the volcano would continue to erupt, year after year it would pour its sulphurous rain down on the heads of all and sundry and its rivers would continue to burst their banks even when all the other rivers on Trinacria had ceased to flow and become dust ghosts. Etna was Jesus in the Temple, Falcone on the beat, Borsellino at the bench, Impastato at the mike. Etna was the revenge of the people and I was the people's dancer. From a place of vipers and hate, I drew the coordinates of other, deeper maps, like Ibn Hamdis, I was a schiavu d'amuri and my people were ah al-hawa. Slaves: The People of Love.

*My blood, good sirs, is common
My heart knows no master
My grandfather was a peasant
But didn't tip his hat to certain folks
He gathered hunger with his hands
But knocked not at the palace door
I know who I am
I bend the knee to no-one*

Sciavu d'amuri, sciavu d'amuri...

One night, a breeze blew through the mountain chamber, causing the ruddy hair on the head of the Chief of the cavalieri to flutter like a horse's mane from beneath his golden crown. One of the hairs touched the hand of a young boy who happened to be standing nearby. There was a clap of thunder and the ringing of a simandron and in a cloud of white dust which billowed over the Arabic drapery, the knight stood up. He was seven feet tall and was clad in green armour and a tunic of the old kind and he had a red beard that was so long, it had grown through the porphyry slab on which he had been lying. Standing erect on the plinth, he spoke in a booming voice that made us tremble and caused the walls of Mongibello to shake, and his words were spoken in several tongues, which perhaps because of the scent of the gelsomino, we found that we could understand.

Who wakes the dead? he thundered.

He glanced down at the boy, who was cowering behind another of the tombs. The fearsome knight reached out his hand and dismounted from the plinth. His every footstep was accompanied by a terrible roaring sound that seemed to issue from the very heart of the mountain.

By touching the hair on my head, you have forfeited your life in the world above and must come with me to the land of the dead. For I am the Cavaliere of Love.

The boy, whose body was so slender, it was akin to the trunk of a ban tree, looked terrified and shook his head, slowly. I stepped between them and held up my right hand.

It is I, good king. Every night, I bring these people to this secret place, that they might partake for a while of the scent of the gelsomino and remove a few of these to their own villages and towns, that a whiff of saintliness and immortality might accompany them, even as my Master, the bandit, Jacopone Voparedda dances across the land, ravaging the orchards and stealing the onza from the bellies of the people. Pray be merciful, good knight, and permit us to leave ere dawn breaks across the shoulder of thy tomb.

The king - for such he was - smiled, yet it was not a smile of innocence and he came towards me and placed his mailed hand upon my shoulder. I felt as though a great stone had been laid upon me and my knees began to buckle.

Either the boy, or else you, must pass with me through the wall of silence to the Land of Maughis whence there is no return.

I looked up at him. His face was scarred, as though from countless battles and at his left side, his tunic was stained with old blood. I felt a moment of panic, but then I looked around at the people.

Go! I commanded them. Go from this Wonderful Mountain. On this sad night, take no flowers and return to your homes. For I must travel with this knight to the Land of Maughis and never again will you be able to find this place under the mountain. Do not let my Master, the vigliaccu, Jacopono Voparedda and his like gather the fruits of the island, guard well your groves and terraces of fragole, citron and peach, your land, your wells, your women and children, or one day, like all cowards, he will come to rule all of you with his iron hand and it will be as though a great pestilence had descended upon your land. Now he is merely a bandit, but then he will be king. *Quannu canta lu chiò, cu'havi patruni tintu, canciari si lu pò*. He will strangle children in their cots, he will set Greek fire upon the good men, he will turn you all into whores and pimps, the world will spin upside-down, lies shall be proclaimed as great truths and together, the angels and San Giuseppuzzu will weep tears of blood and seed. Under Jacopono Voparedda, monks will debauch themselves with milkmaids and the daughters of shepherds, while the nuns of the Antioch hippodrome will swim across the sea and alight upon the Saracen Coast. There, they will appear as beautiful and rich maidens, ready to seduce and marry Christians, the marital act once being consummated, these brides will assume their true form of half-woman, half-snake and will suck the blood of the innocent. Or else, they will transform themselves into carp, which if caught and eaten,

will render the person blind. The land will be barren and the seed will die. If you have a rotten boss, look for a new one when the screech owl sings. For I know him, inside-out, this Don Voparedda! I have swum like a siren through his mind, I have danced like a pirié across every bracca and fathom, every span and cubit of his body and I have heard the tarantata of his soul. For his soul is a woman, and she has been bitten. I am Zafarana the Dancer, and this I prophecy!

Then I turned to the king.

I will go with you, good knight. I will enter the Land of Maughis.

The knight smiled again and as he did so, in that light his face came to resemble hardening tufa. And in his face, again I saw the faces of all the other sleepers ⁴. But this time, I saw that they were alive. They were alive and they, too were smiling. I tasted salt and realised that the warmth on my cheeks came from tears.

Then the king lifted his hand from my shoulder and my body felt as light as air. I seemed to rise on the warm currents that blew through the mountain and then I was in darkness and there was only the sound of my own breath. I was passing through the wall of silence. And yet, in my head, there was a song.

Sciavu d'amuri, sciavu d'amuri...

After a time, the knight seemed to have disappeared. Again, I felt a wave of fear rush through me, but it passed as quickly as it had arrived.

At first, I thought it was coming from a lyre, that instrument of ancient days, but then, as the melody gathered pace, I realised that it was issuing from a lute and that it was being accompanied by the sound of a human voice. Gradually, I found that I was able to see and I saw that I was in an enormous room with eight walls and a single, central pillar that reached almost to the roof but did not join with it and that each of the walls was decorated with a different image of a beast, a chimera that was half-peacock, half-angel and then I realised that the song related the tale of Malik Tawus, the great farishta of light who fell from Heaven's gate. Then I saw the clean-shaven man who was playing the oud and singing the words of the story. He was telling of how, as he was riding a sheep with henna'd horns towards the gates of Paradise, he saw a large, white bird fall from on high and decided that, rather than enter the garden, he would follow the path of the bird and see where it came to rest.

My name is Deacon Yahya, he sang, and I have been here, in this monastery of Beth Zagba ever since I made love to too many beauties. My penance is to sing, day and night, never to talk nor yet to fall silent but always to sing and play this 'ud of Emesa for The Queen of the Night, the Fata Morgana, the King's magical sister, for just as the great king, Iskander was conceived through the intervention of a wizard's seed, so such a deception must lead also to the planting of the Other, the poisoner, the siren, the witch, the juggler. O Malik Jylan! O Great Emperor of Rum! I wish I could return to your city and prostrate myself before your holy altars, but it is too late for me. I must play until Doomsday.

Yet though his song was filled with yearning and sorrow, his voice was mellifluous and the music he played was perhaps the most beauteous I have ever heard and listening to him play and sing thus, I felt myself sink into a trance.

Sciavu d'amuri, sciavu d'amuri...

When I awoke, I was still in the octagonal chamber, but now was standing before a great throne of gold and stucco and from all around came the ringing of thousands of hand-bells. Behind me, a crowd of monks filed in through an archway and sat on long, wooden benches

that had been arranged on both sides of a central aisle. Silence descended as a tall figure entered the room. The figure, whose face I could not see as it was shrouded by a voluminous caul, was dressed in a long, green robe and though he walked, he made no sound. He sat on the throne and raised his head.

I am Maughis, he said. I am the lord of this place. You are the Dancing-Girl of Qurlayun and you violated my sanctuary under Mongibello.

I was...I am... I began, but he cut me short with a sweep of his hand.

I know who you are, he began. You are Zafarana, also known as Sorfarina, dancing-girl and daughter of the grape, erstwhile slave of San Giuseppe. First of all, know, saffron-girl, that I have many names, so many that it would require a serpent's lifetime to recite them all. In various places and at various times, I have been known as Khidr the Green Sufi, Myrddin Wyllt, Robene Hude, Daimonion, Santu Jirjis, Giufà, Guhâ, Nasreddin Hodja and many others. Across the continents, my likeness has been burned in hot wax onto the flanks of sarcophagi and know, too that it was my living image, placed thus in a thousand tombs, from which the art of painting arose. I am the thought present before the scribe pens the majuscule, I am the music that whirls through the composer's head before she sets down the first note. When the time is right, we knights will rise again from the belly of Mongibello, we will rise with the grey attabi cats of forest and mountain and together we will sweep down and set right the land of Siqilliya. But now, in the great alembic of time, I am reduced to being a juggler, a stage-performer, a puppet show entertainer, an acrobat for children, a teller of bizarre tales, my God, almost a clown.

He sighed.

I keep to myself, these days, here in this great mountain fastness.

Mongibello? I enquired, keen to learn of my whereabouts.

But Maughis shook his head.

We are very far from there. Or perhaps not. Just as all rivers are connected and speak – or should I say, sing – to one another, the Nile, the Tigris, the Acesines, the Fiume di Iaci, the Achates, the Cantara the Sindh, the Styx, the Sarasvati, so it is with mountains. The Apennines connect with the Nebrodi, the Madonie, with the Atlas, the Alps, with the Carpathians, the Taurus, with the Caucasus, the Scottish Highlands, with the Appalachians, the Hindu Kush, Karakoram, Kunlun and Tian Shan, with the Pamirs. And then there are the Himalayas... It is simply that very few people understand the words and almost none can pick out the notes which can be played only on certain instruments that have been fashioned from particular trees or cut from certain mines. The monks who were thrown to work in porphyry far beneath the deserts of Nubia discovered a seam of ancient metal, samples of which they managed to smuggle out to three monasteries that had been built on the summits of desolate mountains. Two of those monasteries were destroyed and the sacred metal, melted down and re-fashioned into the breastplates of pupi (yet even these breastplates are impregnable and on the night of the fourteenth moon, they give off a light, so divine it would blind anyone who gazed upon it). This place is the last of the monasteries. It is where all the old men of the mountains come (when they are young) to learn their esoterica. It is where the great virtuosos who play something that is more than simply music, come to find that peculiar quality. It is where the soldiers of the drunken limitaneus of Rum venture during the night when they lose their way exploring the brothels of lands beyond their furthest borders, it is where pirates turn into monks, and monks into brigands, it is where the visions of Mons Porphyrites and Mongibello become solid as silver ships. In any case, distance is immaterial. Everything is dream. See - this daughter cradles her oud as though it were a lover, while that one dreams through her ears, of the flute she lost long ago, in Qasrini...

He sighed deeply, so that I, too felt the passage of time and the loss of life. Then, as though he were hauling himself back from that melancholy place, he seemed to brighten up, his eyes gleamed with a cold fire and his movements became lithe, like those of a young antelope.

Daughter, if you want to be a juggler, you have to learn properly. These - he swept his arm around the chamber - are my adepts. Every year, I send out scores of magicians and conjurors who entertain the people of village and town, alike, with their clever dexterity, but who, under the guise of circus performers, actually cast spells.

Spells, my lord?

Yes – don't you know? Saints-into-beasts, beasts-into-saints. Have you never spoken to a goat who once was a hermit? Abba Poeman roamed naked through the lands of Arabia Deserta, eating only roots and berries and never, ever planting or growing anything and yet he did not feel the desert cold because every night a great lion came and lay down beside him. When they die, such saints leave miraculous dust – see that pillar...

The Lord Maughis pointed to the tall pillar which I first had seen when I had entered the chamber.

A saint named Euthymius lived atop that pillar for three-score years. Before that, he had been a wild holy man who, like Poeman, had lived as a goat. And when he died, he remained there, on the pillar and because of his holiness, no bird would touch his flesh and so the sun turned his remains gradually into a fine, white dust. Once a year, the acolytes here consume a little of the dust and then they, too have visions of the Fata. They say that the sand of a saint drives out demons, but in this case, it seems that the dust walls parted and let her in. I suppose it depends on what you call a demon, he said, absent-mindedly.

The Fata? Who is she?

My turbulent lover.

Maughis the Magus sighed.

She grew bored of this place of dust, music and miracles and she returned to the Outer Isles, leaving behind in her wake, numerous Empusae, on the lands and in the seas.

She is a siren?

Not a siren. The siren, the Mother of all sirens, the comtessa of music and song. She is a bird in the sky and a fish in the ocean. When the fishermen of the ciurma howl the sciarome, they are really singing to the Fata. Why do you think that poor Deacon Yahya has to sing his story till the seventh seal of Eternity is opened?

You cannot reverse the spell, my lord? I asked, tentatively.

I am not all-powerful. Only one has that honour.

The Fata?

No, the Simurgh.

Si murgh? Thirty birds?

Never mind. You will learn all that, in due course.

Can I ask you one more question, my good lord?

I am not good. But anyway... ask away.

Is it true that you are Sikander's father?

Which Sikander? There are millions of Sikanders, Iskanders, Alessandros, Sandros, Sashas, Sandys, Alexanders and millions more, who carry the feminine variants. Huh! Alexander. Everywhere he went, his trail went with him, exploding like Greek fire all over the world. Sandro, figghiu miu! With the knowledge of magic which I gave to him, he was able, after a fashion, to divide himself into two – one, the great, horned emperor, the other, the wandering mystic. Emperor, mystic; a paradox, you might say. For the first and most important power a magician possesses is the power to transform language. Transform words, and you change reality.

And then I noticed that all the while, both Maughis and myself had been conversing simultaneously in many different tongues. I had no idea how I had come to know all of these languages and I had no time to ponder on it, since the lord of jugglers continued with his tale of Alexander.

The first was poisoned by resentful Persian courtiers and thus was inscribed onto the papyrus of history, the second became an invisible presence, a kind of holy imam, who guided other, later, travelling monks, mullahs, shape-shifters – from Yayha Wali of Dimashq, scribe and drinking companion to the Caliph al-Yazid, to Milinda of Pataliputra, to Liu Chih, to Michael Scotus - guided them to the place where it all begins.

And where is that, my lord?

Did you know that once, there were monks who lived inside great trees and others, who dwelt amongst their branches?

I shrugged. I did not know of these monks, though I knew that with monks, hermits, saadhuis, sufis, anything was possible. They would cut off their own balls, squeeze themselves into beehive-shaped cells, become, like Saint Euthymius of Salonica, long-haired mountain-goat grazers and would sip from the drinking-holes of adders and the cloacae of birds if they thought that it might bring them closer to God. Il Cavaliere Maughis made me jump as he shouted,

But you are not King Milinda and I am not the sage, Nagasena. I am a simple conjuror! I do tricks!

And he stood up and began to turn. At first, his turning was slow and measured, but within a few minutes he had begun to accelerate and soon his body had turned to a green blur. And then the blur seemed to lift and swim through the air towards me. The smell of jasmine grew stronger, the air, colder. For a fearful moment, I thought that it might be about to engulf me, but I durst not step back for fear of angering the Lord Maughis and so, though I trembled, I held my ground and peered into the spinning cloud.

And there, in the smoke that swirled around me, as though from the end of a long, dark tunnel, I saw a figure emerge and edge towards me. Yet with every few steps, the figure seemed to assume a different form. At first, he was a man with a pointed beard in the manner of a scholar (or possibly necromancer) and he was carrying a large bundle of manuscripts, scrolls and all manner of papyri and his burden was so heavy, he was stumbling beneath its weight and was barely making any progress. Next, he seemed to transform into a musician, an oud player, and he was standing at the mouth of a great river, preparing to embark on a white ship, then he was a builder, a sculptor of stucco, frescoes and curlicues and he was climbing up a great tower, campanile, minaret, that reached into the sky and which was being painted on canvas, on paper, on papyrus, on parchment, on vellum that came from human skin, a tower that was of a quite different shape from the one in Jubail monastery. And then it were as though towers were going up all over the world, from the city of Pataliputra to Paskapuros to Nishapur to Al-Quds Al-Sharif to Bal'harm to the dark pool of Lindu to the dank cisterns of Cathures. While each one was of a different shape, each seemed to catch the light that was coming from all around, the light and the singing of the Zaboor, the Book of David and it seemed that I recognised the music of the towers as being the original music of Psalm 77. It was the music of stringed instruments, it was music, strung in a minor key, it was a song of melancholy Asaph. Ah, Don Daoud, May Peace Be Upon Him! For each tower was a musical note that began in the innards of a goat and stretched and vibrated across sycamore, lime, walnut and then out through the feather of a white bird that had fallen from jannah at the beginning of time. The note had risen like a fish in the tonnara through the sweat and

sinew of the fingers of the lutenist, one chamber, one mode, to the next, and in the spectacle that I was witnessing, into the oil and stone of the picture that was being painted by the Queen of the Night on the cave wall, before the Night Dancer standing before the canvas in the forest, and within the spirit of the one who had fashioned the instrument, the sane'eh al oud, was the dark face of Ziryab, Abu l-Hasan 'Ali Ibn Nafi', finder of gold, the elegant blackbird and master musician of Baghdad and Cordoba. Yet as they played, his fingers were the fingers of a thousand lutenists. The delicate, effeminate phalanges of Rujari d'Alì, who in his head had seen the Hidden Score that lay at the root of all scores, but who had failed to complete it, his failure driving him ultimately to madness and murder and whose penance it was to cut lutes to a perfect template, all the while never quite managing to fashion the instrument that would sing with an unblemished tone, the strident, intelligent hand of Roger of the Family of Ali who also supposedly had penned the notes of the Hidden Concerto but who had had one lover too many and who before he had been able to promulgate it had been killed near the river one night by the local Beat-Head.

I saw that Ali's music had been taken by one of his disheartened mistresses, she who may have had been its real composer; in this instance, as in others, Stradella may simply have been her muse and scribe who, as always, had taken the entire credit; and sold for a few archaic fiorino d'oro to a blue-handed merchant named Yashish Suleiman Tobia Hallevi who hailed, it is said, from the beauteous and ancient city of Herat in the Land of the North, the Territories of the Sun, and who had given it as a parting gift to a certain Don Riccardo, a knight of Lucera, in Apulia. This was the same good cavaliere whom I had met in the pink palazzo but now it seemed that he was really a magician who had learned his craft from Mikhail, the Great Magus of Melrose and who, consequently was able to be in several places and times at once, in the orderly town of Lucera, in the dust dance villages of the Salento, up in the hills of Caltanissetta, out by the rugged seashore of Trapani, in the dark chamber of the knights that lay beneath Mongibello and maybe elsewhere, too. When the authorities had threatened to deport him to Ifriqiya, Don Riccardo, who for many years after his death would appear to widows, children and village idiots as San Giuseppe of the Black Castle and to singing shepherds and bone-setting hangmen as either Giufà, the Fool or else as a wise goat with golden horns, had caused the music to be trapped in the bodies of the marionettes, of Saint George, Testalonga the Bandit, Giuseppina the Brigandess, Marziale the Murderous Brigand, Charlemagne, Miriante, Bramante, Gano, Angelica, Rinaldo, in Orlando, Ruggero, the Baroness of Carini, Uzeda and Galatea and of all the other pupi that were replicated by the dozen and hauled out every Easter. The golems who were made to dance and sing Christian anthems but who deep in their wood-and-metal madness, really belonged to the sulphur-mines, cotton fields, white mulberry silk-farms and citrus groves of the plains and valleys of Siqilliya and to the long-boat mattanza-men who had been lost at sea, to the howling lakes and illuminated skies, the elm and alder trees of Lindsey, the pine, rowan and rock of Argyll and to the holm-oaks, those original trees that once had covered Sicily, Scotland and England all, in a thick, green cloak and whose seeds had flown across continents and oceans, all the way from the lands of the dancing Kafirs that lay far to the east among the peaks of Kafiristan, Dardistan and Baltistan. And I saw that this was the very source of that music, the music of the tarantella, the maqam, the dastgah, the muwashshahat, the qasideh, I saw that all of them had begun with a clear note played on a single string. And at the centre of this note, there, in the green cloud of Maughis, I saw a man lying in a tomb. A man, barely dead, his body seamed through with the web of a giant, red spider. I saw inside the man's body, as though his skin were made of the thinnest alabaster, and I saw that the fine threads of the spider had wound around his lungs, his heart, his brain and that while his body was cold and still, yet the spider was hard at work, spinning and biting, dissolving his flesh.

And I felt a terrible sadness for this man and for his life, which like so many lives slowly had been strangled in the embrace of the spider dance. And I wanted to learn the techniques of the Great Magus, the Supreme Master, that would enable me to free him from the prison of death, that would allow his soul to rise in the form of a bird and fly towards the mirror of the Simurgh.

The vision faded, and again I was standing before the Lord Maughis, who had slumped on his throne as though the effort of conjuring up the green cloud had exhausted him. His face seemed more lined than before and there were dark shadows under his eyes.

A vague memory of a dream, or else a vague dream of a memory, seemed to hover like a half-forgotten melody, like the figure of Amma Damiana the Solitary, at the edges of my mind, but even on the island of Siqilliya I had been through so many changes, I really had considerable difficulty remembering what, if anything, had gone before. It seemed like another life, or rather, a series of other lives. I could imagine only the future, and even that appeared hazy. Perhaps this is the way it has always been. Though history carries itself in our bones, and in our livers are secreted the dreams of our ancestors, yet really we are ignorant as goats and with every new life, we must start from the beginning, from a place of silence, a region that has no language save perhaps the remembered language of music. And we fail to understand the roots that underpin every single one of the notes played through all the different systems, the multitude of scales, that exist in the universe and thus, we fail to comprehend ourselves and indeed, the undertow of history itself.

As I said, he announced, seeming to revive a little. I am a simple conjuror. This... He tossed a clutch of balls into the air.

... is far easier. Watch, and learn!

And so saying, with a flick of his index finger, Maughis brought forth by unseen hands a great summer feast laid upon long tables. The food smelt appetising and the acolytes swarmed towards it.

This food has within it the dust and sweat of saints. If you partake of even the smallest portion, you will have visions and may begin to gain knowledge of the arcane. You will learn how to create, from seme, soil, metal or wax, a homunculus, a pupa of flesh-and-blood who will do your bidding, play the lute, find lovers for you, calculate the size of all the eleven universes and grow vines that release in the form of vapours, the finest, strongest black wine you have ever tasted.

I bowed before him.

Thank you, my lord, you have been most gracious to this poor dancer.

You are no longer a dancer, you are a juggler!

At this, I found myself on a narrow balcony, close to the top of a building which itself had been constructed on the summit of a mountain whose slopes were almost sheer so that from where I was standing, or rather, teetering, it seemed as though the building had grown from the rock itself. I looked up and saw that above me was the roof and above that, the campanile and then nothing else except the blue sky. Looking up made me feel giddy and I grabbed the balcony rail and steadied myself against the breeze and against the light, which was all-pervasive.

From below me, from the depths of the monastery of Beth Zagba, there came the soothing sound of hymns being sung, old hymns, the first hymns of all, whose notes and words had flowed from the brain of Bardaisan the Gnostic, the throat of Romanos the Melodist and the fingers of Ephrem of Edessa. I closed my eyes and let go of the balcony rail and it was at this

point, perhaps as a result of the exertion of the climb through the thin air of the mountain up Sikander's spiral staircase or perhaps it was some effect of the grains of silver dust hidden in the food which along with the other acolytes I had imbibed earlier, that I began to have the sensation of flying. I felt as though my ankles were lifting off from the stone floor of the balcony, suspended as it was over five hundred feet of air, and that like the large white bird of whom Deacon Yahya had been singing, my bones had become hollow like reeds, my sinews, thinned and stretched like the strings of his oud. I felt the skin of my face taughten and become dry so that against the sheer weight of light, I was becoming almost like an icon, an encaustic image painted in molten wax on a hardened, ancient stone, stone that would be of sufficient venerability to house the perfectly preserved mortal remains of a saint or prophet and that would be capable of cultivating an aroma, sweet with the cadence of death. But I was weightless, my image held only energy, as I swooped over the monastery with its domes and tiny windows and at each corner, three octagonal towers that soared hundreds of feet into the air as though perhaps the builders had been hoping to coax from heaven's plane an angel or two. As I flew, my eyes seemed to open, and despite the air that rushed past my face there was no pain, no fear, it was as though my face was veiled with an invisible skin not unlike the human skin, which I had been told, had been used to cover magical books in the monastery library. For as is well known, if stretched enough, human skin will become translucent, almost invisible. Through the blown glass, I could see now that the books were being studied, that each letter of every word was being exegetised for spells of transformation and transubstantiation, for psalms from the hundred-and-fifty-five that had been written on papyrus scrolls by the sons of Korah, Asaph the Poet and the unknown lamed-composers of Tehillim, but above all, by Hazrat Daoud, great musician of the Temple, who from the sinews and slings of his cradle, had felled a giant and who, as King of the Jews and progenitor of the Zaboar, had fathered the Father of Djinnns, the Singer of Songs, and through his spirit influence, also the original tome of *The Romance of Barlaam and Joasaph*, a book from far beyond the Land of the Two Rivers and far, too from the Land of Milinda and which had been mediated into Latin through the hand of that great scholar, Yahya of Dimashq.

There seemed to be no path or track leading to the monastery, no entrance or exit door. At first, I thought this odd, but then I laughed and thought that if an oud or a tree has no door, other than the sound it makes, the music of its ripening fruit it ripens, then why should a holy place, which after all, is simply an instrument for the wind, the sun, the moon, the stars and the mind and sinews of the unseen, be anything like a house? It should be like a cube, holding everything within itself, all of the histories, the coruscations of the animal spirit, a cube cut while still hot from the tufa of the fire mountain. The roughness of its substance should be a facsimile of creation, its irregularities, like those of the human skull, its structure should mirror the contours of a journey of singular imperfection, a journey that would allow glory to be sung, and there should be, held taut over it, a cloak bearing the interstices of manifold truth. And in the far distance, I could see the glittering sea though I did not know against which coast it washed. Yet I knew that just as the belly of Mongibello was linked with the burning sources of other, far-off mountain-ranges, so this was the sea at the centre of the world, the water into which every river flowed and which connected with, and spoke to, all other oceans. And I thought that perhaps, once I had learned my new trade, that of necromancer, I, too would be able to speak in the tongues of mountain fire and that like Gesù, I, too would be able to raise my voice in the tensed, quarter-tone throat of the raïs, the king of the fishermen, and that swaying thus in the wooden palms of my musciara, I would summon the magical fish into the net, which I, king of the ciurma, with my own, Moorish hands had sewn and pulled into shape as though it were the blooded body of a naked siren queen. Gnazù!

I was myself almost deafened by the sound of the chiesa bell. I opened my eyes. The pumpkin sellers were salting their seeds and the hymns which rose from below seemed to summon the very rocks in a panic dance of eight sides, a tarantella, which was the original dance of the earth and the underworld. And I, too began to sing in the strange and ancient tongue whose lexicon had been lost for too long and it was the sound of a thousand monks, which drew the spirit like milt out through the fissures of the mountain's skull. And the spirit was my story.

So, I thought, now I am a juggler and so I will learn, and perform, all the tricks of that ancient practice. I knew that once I had mastered the magical arts, I would have to leave the dizzying angles of this peaceful place and that once again like the seven Egyptian monks of Disert Uilaig I would have to become a traveller. I had no idea where my travels might take me. I knew only that I would have to follow the music and that just as this balcony was perched on the side of the monastery, the music, as though it were a counterpoint against time's onrushing edge, gradually was growing older and more distant.

1: As has already been stated, this pupa was known variously as Rujari d'Alì, û maritu curnutu assassinu, Roger of the House of Ali, û maritu curnutu ammazzatu, Barbara Strozzi and possibly others as well. It remains unknown to the author of this codex, which, if any, of these various personae represents the true spirit of the pupa. Perhaps - and this is merely supposition - the real inhabitant of the marionette's body was none other than the familiar of the Great Juggler himself. It is said in a number of sources, some more respectable than others, that he could conjure up such familiars from the rocks of the earth, the bellies of the seas and from the flesh of certain trees. It was reported that during the 1930s, in the southern town of Gela, a scholar named Solomon Levi possessed a codex containing previously unknown information relating to the reanimation of the head of Dom Marie-Bernard, but unfortunately, this scholar was turned over by the forces of Cesare Mori to the Nazis and the documents in his house have never been heard of again, though there is a rumour that when, in another part of the island altogether, the Carabinieri unearthed a grutta in which a notorious beat-head had been hiding, they had also discovered, untouched in a secret recess at the rear of the cave, a number of papers belonging to Solomon Levi. It must be borne in mind, however, that this is merely a rumour and that there remains no solid evidence for the existence of any such documents. Furthermore, this information emanated from the spetturi of a police station - both the name of the cop and their place of work shall remain anonymous - well-known locally for fabrication of evidence, the framing of suspects and complicity with the Mafia. A number of suspicious deaths have occurred under the tenure of this supposed police officer, bodies TNT'd on railway-lines to mimic suicide, or thrown off a specific ash-sciaqqah in a deserted part of the Nebrodi Mountains. The juggler sees all. You cannot escape his gaze. All is recorded for use by the twin angels. Nothing is forgotten.

2: At the time of writing, the origin of the madrigal ascribed to Rujari d'Alì remains disputed. The Palermitan archivist, Melanie Desmoulins Alì a), who claims descent from an Angevin nobleman, states that the piece was composed by one of their shared mistresses, the one with the smooth complexion and the tombstone cut in white Pentelic marble, the rectangle sculpted for her on her twenty-seventh birthday, she, the one with the dancing eyes whose name has been eroded by the sun and wind of five centuries. It seems untypical that Dr Filippo De Filippi, the assiduous chronicler of the Duke of Abruzzi's 1909 expedition to the peaks, makes no mention of this song. Perhaps he was too busy sipping English tea.

a) http://www.amazon.co.uk/Snake-Melanie-Desmoulins/dp/1871592828/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1230538637&sr=1-1

3: "Old Saracens never die; they just turn into flowers." (Mazzeo di Lentini, The Book of Lavureddi, Caltanissetta, Sicily, 1235 CE).

4: This is a list of all the faces I saw that night: Giuseppe Letizia, Cesare Terranova, Piersanti Matarella, Gaetano Costa, Rosario di Salvo, Pia La Torre, Al-Buthayri, Giuseppe Impastato, Carlo Alberto Dalla Chiesa, Rocco Chinnisi, Guido Delle Colonne, Claudio Traina, Abu Musa 'Isa ibn 'Abd al-Man'am al-Siqilli, Mino Pecorelli, Antonino Cassarà, Giuseppina Savoca, Emanuele Basile, Boris Giuliano, Giovanni Falcone, Zafarana, the daughter of Benaveth, Agostino Catalano, Paolo Borsellino, Salvatore Feudale, Paolino

Riccobano, Paolo Giacne, Claudio Triana, Michele Reina, Emanuela Loi, Salvatore Asta, 'Abd al-Jabbar ibn Hamdis, Rocco Corica, Giangiaco Ciacco Montalto, Claudio Domino, Francesca Morvillo, Calogero Zuchetto, Stanislao Rampolla del Tindaro, Rosabla Triolo, Antonio Pecoraro, Giuseppe Asta, Giuseppe Russo, Rocco Di Cillo, Vito Schifani, Rinaldo D'Aquino, Pino Cerminara, Abu Hafs 'Umr ibn Husn al-Nahwi al-Siqilli, Mauro Rostagno, Marcella Tassone, Antonio Montinari, Giorgio Ambrosoli, Al-Atrabanishi, Lucia Precenzano, Giuseppe Montana, Anònimo, Giuseppe Fava, Walter Cusina, Vincenzo Li Muli, Mazzeo Di Ricco, Emanuela Loi, Salvatore Sortino, Walter Corsina, 'Uthman ibn 'Abd al-Rahim ibn 'Abd al-Razzaq ibn Ja'far ibn Bashrun, Agostino Catalano, Salvatore Aversa, Giuseppe Insalaco, Vito Schifani, Lenin Mancuso, Natale Mondo, Emanuela Loi, Alberto Giacomelli, Antonio Saetta, Rosario di Salvo, Antonio Scopelliti, Mauro Rostagno, Paolo Giaccone, Gaetano Giordano, Libero Grassi, Giovanni Buonsignore, Roberto Antiocha, Giovanni Bonsignore, Rosa Atria, Guiliano Guazzelli, Leonardo Renda, Miraglia, Pino Puglisi, Abu al-Daw' Siraj ibn Ahmad ibn Raja, Rocco di Cillo, Giacomo Filipello, Vincenzo Li Muli, Piera Aiello, Angelo Rosario Livatino, Antonio Montimari, Emanuela Setti Carraro, Mauro de Mauro, Bernardino Verro, Rosetta Cerminara, Giovanni Spampignato, Ennio Alongi, Giacomo da Lentini... Above the reclining knights, carved deep into the stone, were the words, 'One day, we shall rise again like lions'.