

The Tale of the Whore: The Lovers, the Saints, the Imps and the Faw

As Heer Saleti the Juggler roamed naked through the cool Lincolnshire forest, she knew that the song she was hearing was the naath of Birbir, the ill-fated vizier of Akbar and that it was her body that was singing with light. She approached the old house and entered through the door, which had been left ajar. Far above, anti-aircraft guns pounded the sky with fire and light, while fighters and bombers swarmed crazily among the stars, yet down in the forest, the calm remained unbroken. In the upstairs bedroom of the house, Heer gazed upon the face of Archibald Idris McPherson as he slept and just as, many years earlier she had fallen in love with Lord Jack Ruthyn, so now she found her soul possessed by the airman. She had whispered to him in music as he had patrolled the outer perimeter of the aerodrome, she had caused his bicycle to crash and had drawn his soul to this place and now she woke him and showed him the diaries of Lord Jack, the man who had journeyed to the source, to the high mountains of Baltistan and Ladakh, to the great glaciers where all the rivers and trees begin, to the empty place where there is no sound save that produced by a single string. And before Jack, many others had been swept up in the melody of her breath, jugglers, necromancers, sorcerers, alchemists, poets, monks, Old Master Mikhail of the Long Tomb...

And she knew that he would remember nothing and that the changes would work through his life only very slowly, like the steps at the beginning of a morris dance, but that once she had him, there would be no escape and that at the end, he would return to her and they would soar westwards on the backs of fire angels up into the sky, all the way to Bakkah.

Heer Saleti the Juggler was a daughter of the Faw, the earls of Little Egypt, she had worn golden coins in her hair and had travelled with them all the way from the valley of the great River Sindh. She was a dancer and musician and she sang the songs of Rama in the tongue of the Dom-Lom-Rrom. And when she sang, it was in three voices, and each of the voices ran after the beat, so that it was as though she was swimming on the back of a wave, rising and falling with the sweep of the old ballads whose only accompaniment had been a double-stringed piece of wood cut from a holm-oak high on a mountain. And through telling tales and juggling, she steered clear of the jakhalimos and čovoxano and at the end of her story, she always incanted the phrase which dispelled roaming spirits. She acquired the gift of story-telling one day while she was wandering among the wolds which lie to the north and east of the venerable Roman city of Lincoln (in fact, contrary to popular legend, it was one of Heer's longest tales and not the farishta's curse that froze the infamous imp in his tracks, up in the angel choir of the cathedral of illumination *I*). She came across an old fruit tree that was bereft of leaves even though it was midsummer and with only a withered, black plum hanging from the highest branch. Heer ascended the tree (though she did not remember it, being descended from a mountain goat enabled her to climb with some innate expertise), plucked the fruit and placed it between her lips. Just as she was about to bite into its withered skin, the fruit sang to her:

*I was a fakir of the old country
Black Peter is my name
I wandered naked from gao to gao
And sleek'd my skin with paint
And in this form
I discoursed with Sikander and Milinda*

the bottom of a dried-up well, and the saint was carrying in her hand her own jewelled casket, which promptly began again to fill with fresh, clean water.

But above all, in juggling skills, she knew no equal. From village to village she went and everywhere she juggled, miracles began to happen. Some attributed her power to the Sack Stone upon which she would sleep, while others said she had a familiar, a lycanthrope witch and these folk swore on the Bible that they could hear this beast, known as Black Shuck, perching on the Strangers' Tables and howling under a dead moon. Nonetheless, the Juggler became known as, 'Holy Heer' because of the miracles she performed and on account of her being able to remember the names of all the saints in the world, whether of the Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Nestorian, Jacobite, Sufi or any other path, the awliya, real and imagined, respectable, dubious and heretic and even those who were not yet saints, those currently deemed neither venerable nor blessed but who at some point in the future through some or other intercessionary miracle would come at the very least to be beatified. She only had to glance at an ossuary toe-bone to know the name, the face and even the voice of the saint to whom it belonged. And in commemoration of the Isa of the five pirs who had appeared to her in a dream long ago, Heer planted a sycamore tree which grew to have five trunks and from which she cut wood for Lincolnshire lutes, each one of which she dedicated to Christ.

And during the heat of world war, she led Archie, the airman who had never yet flown and the soon-to-be-beatified-and-already-venerated Margaret, non-commissioned officer and bunker plotter of the Women's Auxiliary Air Force, down into the perimeter air-raid shelter, where like Heer and Ranjha on the island in the Chenab Darya, like Mirza and Sahibanh in the shade of the tree shrine, like Sassi and Punnun in their bustan, like Sohni and Mahiwal in their hermitage, they gazed into each other's eyes and as the bombs fell all around and the bullets smashed through bone, flesh and sheet metal, they discovered that particular, Siqilliyan kind of love that can come only through the proximity of the angel of death. And later, Heer Saleti had led Archibald to her ruined bed-sit where he had almost murdered her, where he had filled her body with his seed and then had released her spirit. And her spirit had begun to roam, as the Fata, the piri, the itinerant kunjeree, and eventually like a bad dream with her bruised, stigmatic neck she had followed him north to Alba and had set up a kota in a disused church by the shore of a great, pearly loch, where the tamashbeens had done their business leaning against the grave-slabs of dead cavalieri 2. And now, many years later, as the summer dawn eased over the tops of the poplar trees and the tousled shore-waters of the lake began to evaporate in the sun's faint light, far beneath the spinney of thorn trees that had grown up around the ruins of the black house, down a tunnel leading from the old cellar, the two lovers, Petrus and Laila danced, hand-in-hand, as though they were the notes of a song, keening upon the edge of the silent darkness as they made their way, one last time, to the waterfall and to the cave where the music had never ended.

1: There were two imps; one was turned to stone but the other was rescued by a witch riding on the west wind and it is this being, in the form of a familiar, which continues to cause mayhem to this day.

2: This has led to a new phrase entering the language, as will be attested by the forthcoming edition of the Oxford English Dictionary (OED). The phrase, which can be found in several regional forms, in Glasgow is known as 'slabbing it' or simply, 'slabbing', though in some high technology quarters, it has been recorded (though not yet incorporated into either Wikipedia or the OED) as 'necro-slabbing'.