AN ITALIAN GOTHIC TALE

THE ELEVENTH SIBYL

ABYSSUS SIBYLLÆ

MICHELE SANVICO

"The very air of Italy is embued with the spirit of ancient mythology"

«Had I never visited Italy I think I should never have understood the word picturesque. The very air of Italy is embued with the spirit of ancient mythology»

ANNA BROWNELL JAMESON, *Diary of an Ennuyée*, 1826

To Silvia, Agnese and Stefano

MICHELE SANVICO

THE ELEVENTH SIBYL

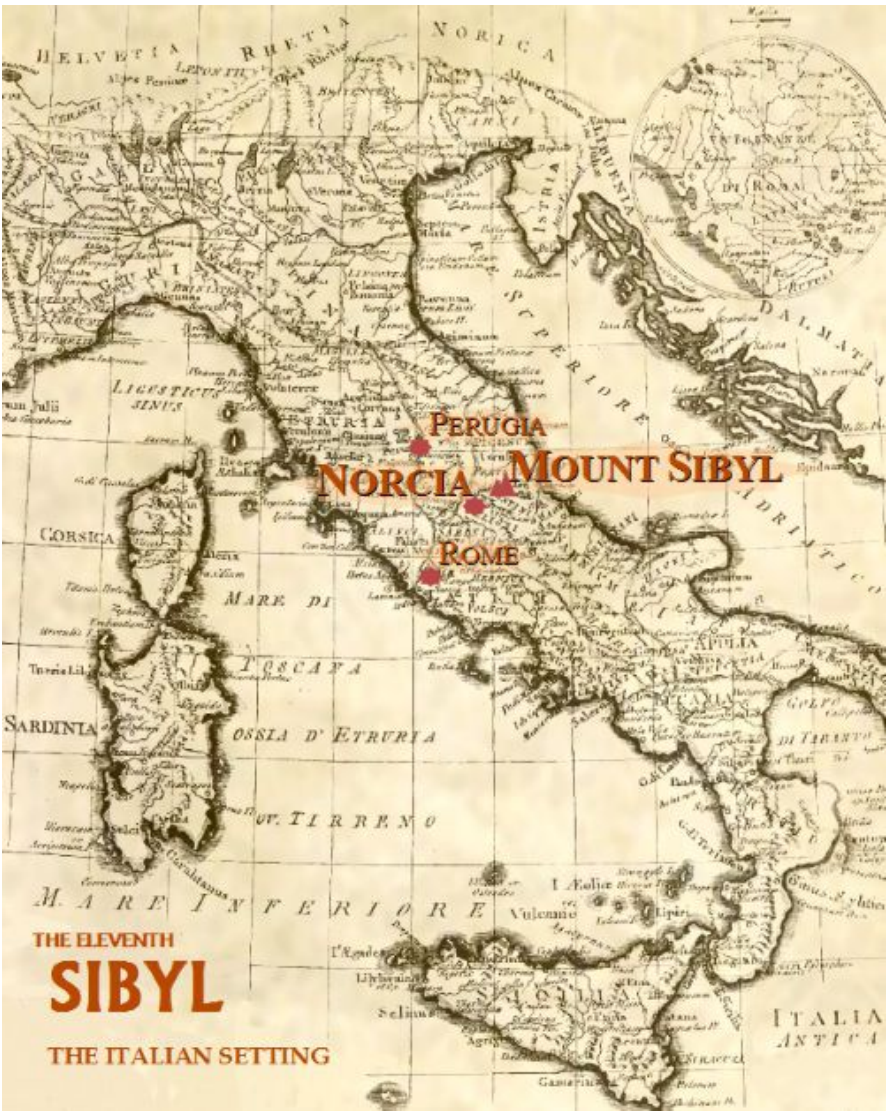
ABYSSUS SIBYLLÆ

An Italian gothic tale

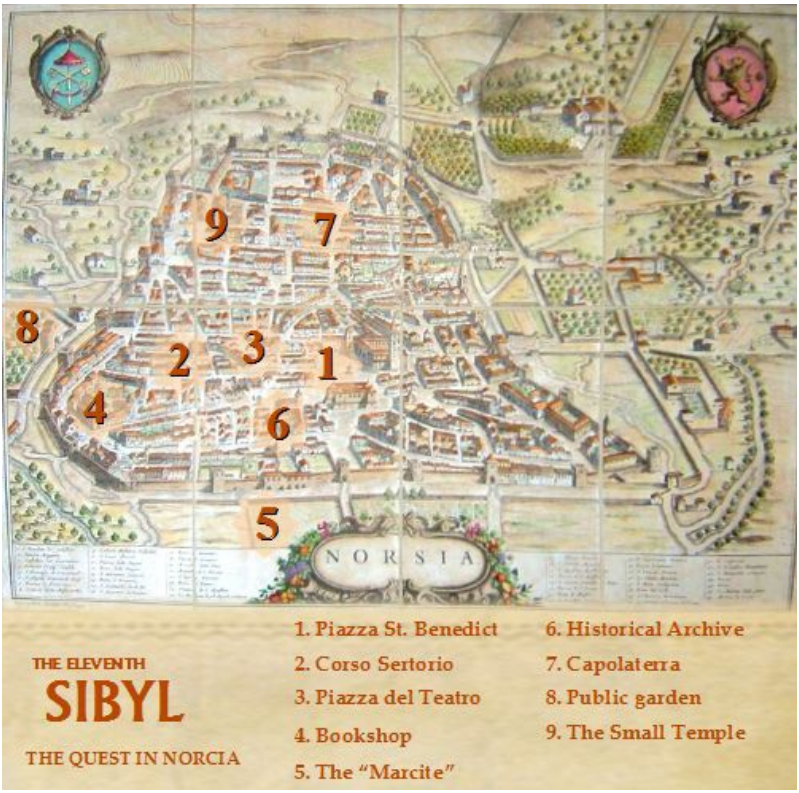
TRANSLATED BY MICHELE SANVICO
REVISED BY SALLY THOMPSON

THE ELEVENTH SIBYL
ABYSSUS SIBYLLÆ

THE SIBYL'S LEGEND
THE ITALIAN SETTING




THE ELEVENTH
SIBYL
THE SIBYL'S CROWN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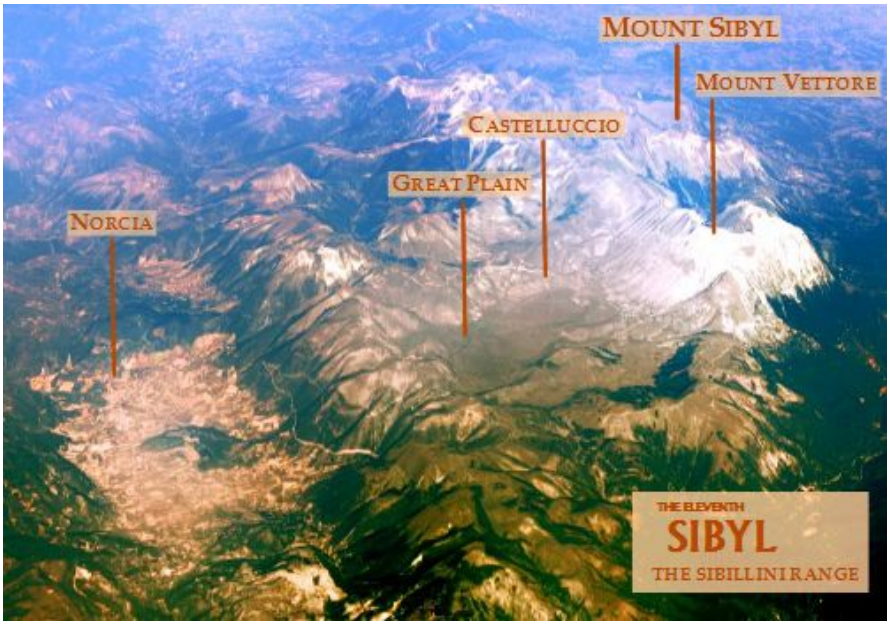
MOUNT SIBYL
MOUNT VETTORE
CASTELLUCCIO
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PROLOGUE

A DREAM IN THE NIGHT

A FULL MOON NIGHT, a night of radiance. A light breeze runs over the vast, sleepy expanse, gently caressing the grass made tender and damp by the fresh, glittering moisture. In the clear air, flooded with brightness pouring down from the glaring satellite, the lifeless plateau shines with light, as if suspended between the dark outline of the mountains, with their quietly sloping sides, and the invisible stars, banished from the sky by the silk-like, silvery brilliance which, since time immemorial, carries men away into the enchanted realms of dreams.

On the great silent plain the boundless dome of the universe obscurely looms. Eerie currents creep down from the desolate regions above, with their gloomy, chilly fingers, drifting over the pale cliffs of stone, as if in reply to a sinister call: a mysterious, elusive appeal, rising suddenly from the secret depths of the barren mountains; a grievous invocation, uttered with an inaudible voice by the nether beings who live their lives — unnoticed — under the surface of the earth, within its unfathomable abysses.

Only the huge, imposing mass of Mount Vettore, crowned with divine refulgence, challenges the nocturnal sky, a cosmic void spangled with distant suns whose brightness utterly disappears under the moon's fierce blaze. Only the rocky bulk of that titanic mountain, hauled with anger onto earth from the womb of a perished sea, stands against the giant chasm above, eternally falling into the motionless darkness of deep space.

Like a gigantic ship emerging in the still silence from the ocean of dreaming grass, and drenched in pure white light, the mountain guards the secret trails and elusive routes through which — as they rapidly ascend the steep slopes of the towering cliffs — the ancient dwellings of mighty divinities can be reached: the deities whose far-reaching rule — extending across the high ridges and dizzy crests drowned in the lifeless, supernatural glare — expands as far as the evil elevation, grim and frightful, of Mount Sibyl.

No sound breaks the glowing spell, the crystal, unaltered sleep of the landscape, now peacefully silent: only, from a distance, a faint glimmer of lights, the passing of faraway voices — an unequivocal sign that sleep to somebody has not yet come, among the houses and alleys of the small village of Castelluccio, in the mild air of the late-night hour.

This is the sight which presents itself to the traveller, upon walking the Pian Grande in the middle of the night, as he hastens along the path with uneasy, alarmed steps; eager to reach friendly shelter, to see faces that are familiar to him — in the malevolent stillness, inebriating and fiendish, cast by the full moon.

And the night is all glaring silence. Standing in the midst of the grassy plain, in the soft moisture, immersed in the earth scents, in the sharp, dazing fragrance of the herbage, in the burning, living beam of the moonlight, I am waiting with troubled uneasiness.

I have reached the end of my long journey, a foolish and uncertain travel in the deceptive realm of dreams, in the frightful and ominous lordship of myth. I have brought to completion my weird search, my unusually eccentrical inquiry, my unwise investigation, of which the consequences shall be unpredictable and ill-omened.

The night protectively enshrouds the open grounds, peaceful, unmoving. Now, I'm mistrusting my very memories; an unreasonable, alarming fear is arising in me that a series of events so uncanny might

actually have never occurred; that a story so extraordinarily queer might have originated in no other territory than in the land enclosed within the visionary, unsubstantial boundaries of my own mind, for long exposed to the evil fascination of a powerful myth.

However, so excessively acute and unceasing has been the grievous, obsessive call which has surged among these mountains, lying in darkness; so highly commanding has been the voice that, with a horrible quivering, has overwhelmed with gloomy wails the echoing ravines between the steep, barren slopes, that I'm now wavering.

Yet I know that no part of the occurrences I have experienced, no portion of what has incredibly taken place, even though unconceivable, is made of the evanescent substance of immaterial dreams. Everything has existed in reality, all facts have actually occurred, the way as future is disclosed by the unreliable likeness of a fallacious vision, in the blurred indistinctness of an illusion — bespeaking the truth, although it may be concealed beyond the shadowy veil of an old fairy tale; a tale forgotten by men, and yet timeless and never vanished.

And my design — to tell that fairy tale, to preserve the memory of its narration, availing myself of vibrating, life-bringing written words shaped into the form of a rescuing, sheltering shield — may help perhaps my soul not to give itself up, relinquishing all hopes, to the insatiable and overmastering power of everyday routine; to the unchallenged jurisdiction of oblivion and neglect; to the frantic and devastating rule of insane madness, which are all unrelentlessy dominating the world.

I come back, in my thoughts, to when all that began, to the recollections of some months past, at the time when I was still ignorant of the mighty force embedded in the myth, and nothing did I know of the silent call that, for centuries, has been rising with furious vitality from the gloomy, secluded mountains of the Italian region of Umbria.

This story commences from the lively heart, charming and elegant, of a distinguished town whose ancient name is renowned in the world.

And the town's name is Norcia.

CHAPTER 1

THE TOWN OF THE SIBYL

THE ACUTE, ALMOST DIZZYING scent lingered in the air with its astounding fragrance. Bottles and jars, in endless sequence — glittering glass entrapping myriad tiny specks of the winter's afternoon sun — were displaying the treasure trove held in their womb, as an alchemic essence: the wrinkled, dark-hued offspring of deep earth, a sort of *homunculus* coveted for long, a lump of the purest soil extract deposited in noble grounds throughout the centuries; the black truffle, the *Tuber Melanosporum*, which men have honoured and raised to the brightest privilege that is ever to be granted among them, the dignity of the banquet and its convivial joy, of bodily food turning into the miracle of taste, a sense which brings divinity close.

And, moreover, amidst the pressing crowd, long garlands were exposed made of sausages presenting a fleshy hue, lighted up too by the slanting beams of the declining sun, as if they were bowels of fanciful animals — hunting trophies hung high above after a pursuit which had ended in dust and the clanging of weapons. And, moreover,

huge fragrant hams, whose excellence was praised by experienced shopkeepers armed with long needles which they used to pierce the red meat, while skilfully brandishing their whetted knives. With tried mastery they cut off thin slices, virtually translucent in the sunset light, travelling a tickling flight from hand to mouth, and finally to the delighted palate, almost inebriated by the voluptuous bliss of the food fading juicily away.

And still — among the insatiable people who were craving for fragrances and flavours, just in front of the graceful and forbearing Castellina, the small castle of Norcia — in the growing shadows of the forthcoming night, looming stacks of cheese wheels appeared enshrouded in their own strong perfume, a luxuriant offspring of a land so harsh and inhospitable, prepared by sheperds whose arms are well trained in the hard labours of highland pasturage; coarse rounded shapes they were, like unburied, weather-beaten stones polished by the passing of centuries, giving out a goaty scent which obtunded the nose with the blooming tones of salty cheese.

The great round square, immersed in the evening darkness and lit by the warm radiance of the bronze-coloured streetlamps — a sight which is altogether Italian — welcomed each and all in its embrace of polished slabstones: the foreigners, busying themselves by the stands overflowing with goods, in search of the most sweet-smelling delicacy containing mushrooms and truffles, among the baskets full to the brim of black and green olives and the sausages piled up in lofty heaps, a product of Norcia's traditional art of butchering; the children, wrapped up in warm clothes, running and screaming in mutual challenge as they left behind small white puffs of breath in the frosty winter air; and St. Benedict, «the man of God who resplended on earth», the holy man «ex provincia Nursiae» who wrote the perfectly shining *Sancta Regula*: his statue standing in the middle of the public square, his right arm raised in a gesture of blessing upon his hometown, and the tokens of knowledge — books, parchment scrolls, a globe — by his feet.

In the evening chill, amidst the voices of the passers-by, the sunlight rapidly dying away, immersed in the fragrant scent of food cooking on the fires glowing in the restaurants and *trattorie* scattered about the dark alleys, ready to serve tasty meals, with my ice-cold, gloved hands tucked in my pockets, I beheld the moving, overwhel-

ming beauty of the round square dressed in shining stones. Norcia, *Nursia* in Latin, the old distinguished town, the honourable city for origin and rank, the haughty ruler of the Apennine, according to Cicero inhabited by «severissimi homines Sabini, flos Italiae ac robur Reipubblicae», the sternest of men, the Sabines, pride of Italy and stronghold of the Roman Republic; the place unfolded all its magical spell before my very eyes.

Already the heavy bronze Tablets found in Gubbio had reported, in the rough, rudimentary script marking the language of ancient Umbria, the word «Naharcos», the name of the people who lived by the banks of the river Nahar, known today as Nera, counting them in a list of inflexible foes against whom to take defensive measures, and to be feared to the utmost. Norcia, lost among high mountain ridges, secluded and far-off, across distances that, of old, were almost impossible to traverse; in the sixteenth century the town was the seat of the *Prefettura della Montagna*, a highland district subject to the Holy See, bearing in its very name a watermark of independence and freedom, as if the city belonged, as a matter of fact, to an unfamiliar geography, a sort of foreign and exotic country, from which only odd, amazing tales, as narrated by daring and venturesome travellers, could reach out to places more civilized and at hand.

At the corner between Piazza St. Benedict and Corso Sertorio, standing in the shadows, beside the fine glistening copperware on display in the adjoining shop, now near to closing time, I gazed at the endless bustle of the crowd of tourists and residents, laden with all sorts of lusciuous delicacies, who thronged the streets heading to the warmth of their homes or to the accommodation they had chosen among the many hotels and lodgings available within the walls encircling the old town.

Cold and hunger both pressing my stomach, I too would soon have left the square towards my hotel, adjiacent to the *Mons Frumentarius*, the ancient public granary; still, I could not divert my eyes from the hurrying people who proceeded swiftly, in anticipation of the good food which Norcia never denies to her enthusiastic worshippers. The bulk of the Castellina loomed over them and their quick steps; but not any longer with the former gracefulness, instead by threatening them with its gloomy, precipitous walled façade, built after the bloody turmoil occurred in 1554, when brutal killings had occurred in town.

Those walls remembered everything: they recounted the tale of Pope Julius II, when the pontiff — «improborum audatia repressa et parricidis supplicio persoluto», having crushed the daring boldness of evildoers and castigated the slayers of their own fathers — had the fortress erected «ad malorum formidinem et bonorum spem» — to the dread of sinners and as a shield to the just. But people just passed quickly, and the voices from the walls got lost in a dying-away whisper, that nobody would hear.

I began to walk along Corso Sertorio; the shops in a long row, provided with charming, floodlit display windows, were shining in the night matching the line of low, well-proportioned buildings that followed one another as far as the gate of Porta Romana. Hog's heads peeped out from the stores, piled up with redolent cheese and sausages that reached as high as the ceiling, cluttered with hooks and pegs; the brute heads, with dumb features, bade visitors come and partake of the lavish banquet which was to take place amid the stoney alleys, while people were still crowding the large and welcoming street dedicated to Sertorius, a native of Norcia, himself a military leader of ancient Rome, whose name and memory are now long forgotten.

And yet, among the chatter and babble of the crowd, the voice of Quintus Sertorius, the general of republican Rome celebrated by Plutarch, rose grievously from the gulf of time: he was alone and betrayed when his strangled cry echoed in 72 B.C., in Roman-conquered Spain, while the sumptuous feast set up by his own comrades-in-arms in his honour was being held — when by treachery a sword was thrust into his living flesh, his hand still holding a cup full of delectable red wine. And as he turned in amazement and tried to stand, his friends clutched his hands tightly and overwhelmed him; then, he was slaughtered in a filthy pool of blood mixed with wine. And that was the moment when his last thought — this is not reported in Plutarch's work, however it must doubtless have been so — ran back to his native mountains, to his Sabine homeland that his eyes would no longer contemplate, as they are being overcome by shadow: no more, here darkness comes.

This illustrious offspring of Norcia was deemed so conspicuous by the great Greek historian, among a few contenders only, as to be worth celebrating in one of his biographical *comparationes* included in his masterwork *Parallel Lives*. Plutarch chose to compare his figure, by

truthfulness and braveness, to that of Eumenes of Cardia, general and chief chancellor of Alexander the Great. And indeed Sertorius had been a learned, eloquent man, and a skilled statesman, who had governed the Hispania Ulterior as a shrewd ruler through the blandishing of the hispanic military and aristocratic powers. Stern with his soldiers and not disliked by the local populace, he was a man of peace inclined to sympathy and continence, yet a master in the art of war. Sertorius was always accompanied by an elegant, white-furred fawn, a rare gift entrusted to him by a god. He used to say, with trained political expertise and a bit of the swindle's cleverness, that the animal attested to the favourable gaze of Diana on him; through the animal, the goddess would provide the Roman general with her precious advice as well as disclose to him visions of things to come.

And the name of Sertorious, most renowned in antiquity after Plutarch, yet now forgotten, a word whose sound recalls to the mind only the name of a street in Norcia, where to stroll agreeably among shop windows fully supplied and suitably lit, just like the ones I was presently walking by; that very voice, the voice of Quintus Sertorius, was now demanding with urgence that someone listen to what it had to say. But no one would.

The world around was moving fast and forgetful in view of the last essential shopping in preparation for the evening meal. I deeply felt — immersed body and soul in the bustling hustle, the cold night air now becoming icy, the quick steps of laggards echoing in the streets — the inner truth and meaning of the words written by Pier Paolo Pasolini, a celebrated Italian author and director: «perhaps men will have to live over their own past, after a forced, unnatural leap to the future and following an oblivion achieved in a sort of frantic, feverish recklessness», And another thought came to my mind from the *Corsair Writings*, that «a new spirit» was born by which «men now possess a single, all-embracing vision of life», a spirit which leaves no room at all for Quintus Sertorius and the living memories of the past. It is a sort of *horror vacui* — the fear of empty space — by which, through a compulsive and almost pleading urge, any single aspect of life is hurled into the whirling processes of product manufacturing, marketing and sales; with houses, and cars, and other goods to be purchased and quickly replaced, while any recollection of past memories, any stratification of human history are to be removed once and

for all, lest they should hinder the motion of the well-balanced market gear which greedily eats up everything, and everything embodies within itself, pervading and consuming the whole world.

Again I lingered to watch the people bending over the benches of the antique dealers under the streetlamps of Piazza Vittorio Veneto, beside the Town Hall Theatre. The charming little square, elegantly dressed and marked by the nineteenth-century façade of the Theatre, was a tidy corner full of grace, neatly outlined among the antiquities on display and the refined, enticing pavilion of the adjoining restaurant, from whose recesses tasty kitchen fragrances that could not pass unheeded were spreading across the street.

With a sense of pleasant amusement, as if in contrast with the fine view offered by the small square, I conjured up the old and humorous character of the *Norcino* — the ancient inhabitant of Norcia proficient in the art of treating pork meat — who in that very Theatre had comically mimicked his own rough trade of castrator and salter of pork meat, and had brought the art of *norcineria* around Europe and its sixteenth-century stages, together with the other characters of the Italian *Commedia dell'Arte*, waving his coarse straw hat and talking his irresistibly funny country idiom.

And another vision too, now uncommonly bizarre, came to my mind: hogs madly running along the streets and alleys of Norcia, swerving here and there stricken by panic and striving to escape from the howling dogs that were emerging with sudden leaps from around a corner, followed by a throng of excited young people, armed with rods and knives, and inflamed with the heat of a cheerful hunt. It was the carnival of Norcia: for three days, in the seventeenth century, it was arousing and shaking the whole town with dancing, singing and the sparkling of general fun — wine flooding in streams and giving reasons for quarrels, riots and raging turmoil; so much so that the local clergy, fearing for the salvation of souls, strived to «divert the crowd from sin during the carnival frenzy» and made all possible exertions to drag them back «to religious devotion».

Nonetheless, in the ice-cold air of the chilling winter evening, among the sulky mountains looming ominously over the town, in the electric light which was trickling wearily from the shops closing one after another, these ghosts — once noisy and merrily rejoicing — passed now in silence across the square, vanishing away into the dark al-

leys that led to the city's upper district, leaving no sign behind of their passage.

The small square with the Theater resumed its neat, elegant allure. Now a few people only still lingered beside the antique stalls; and the glimpse one could get from there of Corso Sertorio showed that presently the street was almost empty, as people were hastening home to dinner.

Not far from the little square, the room I had booked at the hotel facing the old *Mons Frumentarius* was awaiting me. However, I did not feel like leaving the streets, not yet; I was lingering too, looking pointlessly at the old prints, the chipped porcelain dishes and the rust iron keys, worthless jetsam of dusty junk rooms — useless remnants of a lesser past, frozen in neglect and forgetfulness.

In the square's farthest corner, under the light cast by a solitary streetlamp, in an unassuming position, a rickety bench was encumbered with dark shapes in numbers, and stacks of piled objects, that were being put back into large carton boxes one by one by an old man with long grayish hair. I got closer: the stacked shapes were books, piled up in irregular heaps; old, tattered volumes as well as popular editions not available anymore, whose bindings had yielded to time; ragged essays on renowned painters of the past featuring large four-colour prints; old treatises confronting social and political aspects of life once relevant, but now totally forgotten owing to the relentless, neverending progress of human History.

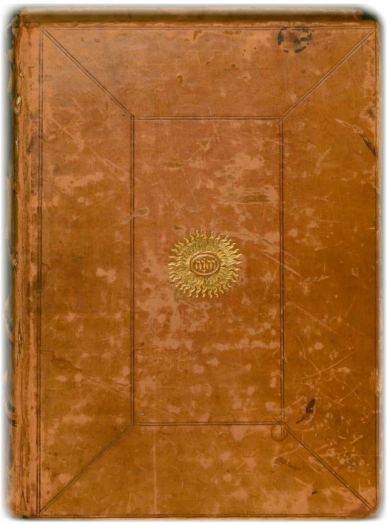
In the empty square nobody lingered any longer. The stalls, enlivened by interested customers up to just a few moments before, appeared now like dark, quiet shadows, and only the old, wordless man with long hair still waited untroubled as he considered my clumsy, uneasy fumbling with the piles of scattered books, in the darkness of the night which was growing colder and colder.

By all means, in a moment I should have gone back to the hotel. But I could not make up my mind; I kept on rummaging haphazardly through the heaped books, without any definite purpose. I should have gone at once, departing from the book stall, take to Corso Sertorio, and leave.

Suddenly my attention was attracted by a huge folio volume; its gorgeous binding in Morocco leather was shining oddly, steadily in the dim light cast by the streetlamp above. I got nearer and took the

heavy book in my hands: the cover, ragged and time-worn, was impressed in gold with a sun in splendour, finely crafted.

To all appearances it was an antique book, a very rare edition; strangely enough it seemed to have been misplaced amidst the other dusty, valueless papers. I raised my eyes with the intention of asking the old bookdealer; but nobody was to be seen. In the gloomy night the square now looked altogether empty, and the old man wasn't in sight. The stars, up above the Town Hall Theatre, were flickering with a chilly quiver, in the still night air.



Cautiously, with reverence, I lifted the valuable book and turned the cover: on the back side, the words «In Monasterio Sublacensi MCCCCLXV typis exscriptus», elegantly written by a long gone hand, stated as if they had declared it aloud that the volume was of extreme rarity: in my very hands one of the oldest printed books in the world was revealing its illustrious lineage, having been impressed in the Benedictine Monastery of St. Scolastica in Subiaco, where since 1464 the first movable-type printing press in Renaissance Italy had been in operation.

A profound silence encompassed me. In the chill of the winter evening the streets of Norcia seemed bare and desolate. The hour was

getting very late, more than I thought just a few moments earlier. I began to browse through the pages of the volume: the old fifteenth-century printed typeface captured my attention with the neat shape of the rounded characters: «Lactantii Firmiani de divinis institutionibus adversus gentes rubricae primi libri incipiunt…». Definitely this was the opening of the *Divinae Institutiones* by Lucius Caecilius Firmianus Lactantius, a Christian author and advisor to Emperor Constantine in the fourth century; his essay on the preservation and glorification of early Christian religion is considered among the very first books to have been printed in the monastery of Subiaco.

I turned the pages, browsing quickly through Lactantius' Latin text and his elaborate reasoning against the errors of the heathens. I was feeling uneasy. The sensation of cold had become almost oppressive. The protracted absence of the bookdealer was spreading on the matter a weird, unnatural hue: I dared not walk away, leaving on the bench for everyone's convenience a book of so rare a nature. Nonetheless, nobody was to be seen nearby.

I grew more and more concerned. A sense of nervousness and unquiet expectation was taking hold of my soul. I felt, with a pressure now unrestrained and intolerable, that I should be gone at once, leaving the small square without any further delay. For the last time, I opened at random the book by Lactantius.

In my distress now unbearable, sinister words, as though eerie and ominous phantoms, stood out abruptly from their ancient grave: «…Sibyllas decem numero fuisse…». «Varro recounts that ten be the Sibyls: *primam*, Persian, mentioned by Nicanor; *secundam*, Libyan, who was recalled by Euripides in the prologue to his play about Lamia; *tertiam*, Delphic, of whom Chrysippus narrated in his work on prophecy; *quartam*, Cimmerian, whose name was quoted by Nævius and Piso...».

I was reading, and a feeling of inarticulate terror was swelling inside me as the obscure catalogue put down by the ancient rethorician pressed on: «…*quintam*, Erythræan Sibyl, referred to by Apollodorus; *sextam* from the island of Samos, of whom Eratosthenes found mention in the old chronicles; *septimam*, Cumæan, who presented her secret books to King Tarquinius Priscus; *octavam*, from Hellespontus, in the region of Troy; *nonam*, Phrygian, who uttered prophecies in Ancyra; *decimam*, Tiburtine, her shrine being seen by the river Aniene».

An unfathomable horror sat upon my heart as the square seemed to reel around me. I gasped, although I could not understand the reason for my being so extraordinarily upset. I felt that something inexplicable, something wicked had come to seize me from a deep chasm in the centuries, emerging from a gloomy, far-away abyss of an unknown past — like a withered, long-fingered hand revealing a message from concealed potencies which are older and heftier than mountains themselves.

The book was still lying in my hands; I gazed in astonishment at the printed letters, outlined neatly against the yellowish page. I could definitely not carry on reading. I was dripping with sweat, though the air was icy and a light, frosty wind had started sweeping the small square.

Then, my eyes were attracted by a thin annotation, drawn in handwriting by the left margin of the page, beside Lactantius' printed text. The fine old script was still legible, despite the ink having faded partially away with time.

And thus stated the unsigned comment: «*Undecimam*, summo in Monte Appennino Sibylla horrifica, immanem specum incolens, ad Benedicti afflictionem civitatis».

The stars whirled above my head. The chilly wind, erupting from the depths of the earth, took hold of me. And the dark mountains lying around Norcia closed up over the boundless, baleful extent of my dread.

CHAPTER 2

THE BEAST WHO LURKS IN THE ABYSS

THE CHILLY MORNING AIR, which descended like a freezing wave from the wooded slopes of Mount Patino, enshrouded in a frosty embrace the stony walls of the town, as it overpowered the sturdy towers sitting in defence of the northern side and broke in, like a foe who fully knows of any devised defences, through the gates of Porta Palatina and Porta San Giovanni. In the darkness of the small hours, the highlands were claiming their unremitting rule over the country by taking hold, with their unrelenting legions, of the streets and alleys in the city's upper district — moving past the ancient walls of the small building known as Tempietto, crossing Via Anicia, pouring out with unrestrained momentum into the Corso Sertorio, and getting at last to Piazza St. Benedict, where the statue of the holy man would be enveloped in icy caresses, the frosty troops dying away amidst the murmuring dampness of the Marcite, in the flatland of St. Scholastica.

I was sitting at a table, outside the café named after Jacopo Barozzi, the Renaissance architect of the Castellina, and resisted the cold,

brisky breeze with a stubborn disposition; the same breeze which had already dispelled, by stifling it altogether, any residual heat in the small cup of fragrant, bronze-coloured coffee, opposing in vain the silent assault of an army so fierce and unyielding.

I was aware that the experience I had gone through the night before, in Piazza del Teatro, had given rise to an excessive and inexplicable disturbance, of which I could not trace the source at all. The blurring of sight, the sinking of limbs and perception, my running away in madness in the starry darkness; all were clear signals of a failing balance of the mind, a disorder that originated in a positively inordinate acuteness, a sort of sensitivity which was far too apt to respond to any vague, shadowy induction, even though shifty and unclear.

Yet, I felt that something had happened. I had been touched and searched through my very soul, in a self so deep and secret I could not imagine I harboured within my person until yesterday; and my whole being had trembled, echoing with old fears, with invisible horrors locked up in secluded, long-forgotten corners, so as to arouse a reaction in me which I myself might as well define, without any fear of overstatement, peculiar and far-fetched.

What hidden feelings could Lactantius — the rethorician, the old Christian author — have stirred in me to cause such an appalling dismay? How could the fairy tale of the ten mythical Sibyls elicit so sharp a resonance in my mind? What sort of power was concealed in the last item of that catalogue — «*Undecimam*», the eleventh — to unleash, all of a sudden, a reaction so unexpectedly upsetting?

«Ad Benedicti afflictionem civitatis», as a plague on St. Benedict's hometown, Norcia: that was the note put down on Lactantius' page by an unknown hand. And presently St. Benedict's hometown was laying in front of me; Norcia as usual, every morning's Norcia, with the great round square standing right behind my cup of coffee; and sure enough, it did not seem the town was suffering from any form of plague.

Like every day in the early morning, people crossed the square to reach their workplaces, stumbling upon acquaintances and friends and waving at them; the clerks would climb the steep stairway, watched over by two mighty lions carved in stone, that led to the charming porticoed terrace of the Town Hall, overlooking the statue of St. Benedict; the shutters of the shops would roll up with a rattling noise, unveiling their stocks of delicious food for the craving of the tourists

who crowded the little town, in those midwinter days, enticed by the yearly fair devoted to the superb, priceless truffle; a damp, milk-white mist, which had been hanging low over the old houses since early morning, was now melting away in the first beams of sunlight, as the latter peeped out over the wooded crests that encircled the city eastward, with the sturdy, dark-hued façade of the Castellina being crowned and enshrouded with a radiant lustre.

However, notwithstanding this semblance so utterly steadfast, so apparently commonplace in its being unremarkably ordinary, something — a potency nameless and unrevealed — persistently throbbed underneath.

As the shroud of misty haze, creeping down slowly from the highlands, imbues every sloping street, every secluded courtyard, and all the secret recesses hidden among the houses and the maze of small passageways, wiping out any of the wrinkles left by time, merging the likeness of the world in a white, endless glare, and crushing the dimensions of any living being to nothing; the same way a veil of silence, within the mere course of a lifetime or two, had been drawn over Norcia. That was an oblivion which was utterly forgetful of the span of facts, accounts and people that, from century to century, on that same stretch of land, had succeeded one after another. It was like the strata of perennial snow, being covered by later snowfalls year after year, to such an extent that a core drill made by a keen scientist would reveal superimposed abysses, deep wells of tight-layered ore, each speaking with its own voice, each narrating its own tale: the pure memory of a bygone world.

That was the force — underneath the town's visible coating consisting of public squares, and streetlamps, and shops, and tasty food, and roaring cars passing along Via Cesare Battisti, and people waving in a hurry and rapidly vanishing away — that was the force which throbbed in the unfathomed pits of the earth, under the square itself, so that present-day Norcia was only the most recent, shallowest layer of a quite older Norcia, rooted firmly to that very land whereon countless generations of men had been dwelling since timeless ages.

More than once the town itself had undergone dramatic changes, driven by enraged and destructive energies; the city's features, hurt and mangled, had been put together again and again following each cycle of destruction, but in different ways altogether; so that the out-

come of the reconstruction process — as if in a jigsaw puzzle, the pieces of which a whimsical child had scattered about uncouthly for mere fun — was an altered city, akin to the former, yet turned each time into something new and outstandingly dissimilar, mutated from its original, ancestral form.

An inhuman beast lived unseen under the ground, awaiting. Beneath the square and the streets and the ancient dwellings of men, the faceless being with gleaming, sightless eyes waited patiently, in a dream. Its dream, the dream of a dark subterranean potency lasted for whole lifetimes of men, looming over them as though heavy, rolling vapours announcing the coming of a storm; until, all of a sudden, the blind, faceless beast awoke, and manifested its cruel abomination across the surface of the earth.

So it had begun, on August, 22nd 1859. Since a few days before, the ground had been shaking faintly, softly, as if to caution, to signal that the inhuman sleep, after long, drowsy years, was now over.

It was one o'clock in the afternoon. In the fields, the peasants were intent on harvesting wheat with their slender scythes; women were following, picking up the stalks left on the ground and arranging the wheat sheaves which would, before sunset, be gathered together and arranged in the shape of crosses, so as to shelter the spikes from rain. A large number of people, however, were to be found in their homes: elderly women and small children, the former busied with the preparation of the evening meal for the exhausted peasants who would return from work at sundown; the clerks in the Town Hall; the shopkeepers, the livestock dealers, the affluent landowners.

Like a tremendous, gigantic mace, the earthquake struck. First, there came the roar. A baleful, fiendish noise, which proceeded from the abysses underneath, growing louder and louder, as though a titan wounded to death implored with fury mercifully to be put down.

Then, the shock arrived. The world began to sway, slowly at first, with a dull oscillating motion, from right to left, and next from left to right, and once again from right to left, as the first thick fragments of plaster were starting to detach from the walls, and frenzied animals, raising loud, terror-stricken calls, were rushing about frantically, as if they were bewildered corpses brought back abruptly to life from the realm of the dead.

And, at last, the surface of the earth surged. The beast screamed with enraged might; like a shroud, its thundering voice covered the horrified wails of the human beings. The world was blown up from the inside; walls opened up; roofs collapsed, madly shaken; wrecked stones, broken shingles, ruined beams of wood were all crashing to the ground, burying and crushing flesh and blood and wreckage, while for long, interminable seconds the shock went on, smashing steadfastly, banging men and earth as a hammer being wielded by the crazy hands of a madman.

Afterwards, all lay still in death, destruction, and silence.

The beast had come and gone. Once again it had drowsed into its dreamful sleep; and many years would elapse before it awakened anew. Damage had been suffered by all houses and public buildings in Norcia, and the town, once more, underwent a drastic change, taking on a new mood and look.

Yet who ever remembered — among the people hurrying hastily across the square, hands tucked into the pockets of their coats to protect them from the morning chill — that dreadful event, that gloomy, ruthless demon who had hurled himself, many years earlier, against those very stones, those very buildings? What memories linger, in each one's heart, in people's awareness, of the ruin of the Town Hall,

the collapse of a major number of buildings, the fall of whole stretches of the town's defensive walls, the destruction of the bell tower beside the church of St. Maria Argentea? How many of the dead people, among the hundred corpses retrieved from the ruined houses, were indeed the forefathers, the ancestors of that very person crossing at that moment the large public square, or of that other one? How many of the victims bore an identical family name to that of any of today's passers-by, amidst the many surnames still present in Norcia by the same kindred, which had been handed down unalterably along the family lineage — maybe, by some strange chance, with a matching christian name as well?

Who was aware, in Norcia, that the skyline itself of the town wherein they walked and worked and had fun and lived — that charming skyline so pleasantly enjoyed by tourists looking for picturesque effects; a skyline which displayed no towering buildings at all, with low, well-proportioned houses having a single storey or two at most, showing buttressed façades and sturdy bearing walls; and the palaces, all looking so massive and warlike, with reinforcing spurs at the base of their masonry — who was aware that all that was an offspring of the deliberate will of men who had passed through hell on earth, and eluded death by a narrow escape? Those men had demanded that the town's reconstruction rules be defined in such a way that never again so huge a death toll should be paid, and so fearsome a destruction be endured.

Now a long line of centuries was pressing before my eyes; an unbroken, never-ending chain through which the earth had quivered beneath the town of Norcia, the timing being marked by a formidable clock, whose insane and unhinged gears ticked frantically in the hidden core of the thickly wooded mountains.

I could see the gears grinding to a halt, and getting stuck under the baleful grasp of a supernatural force in a frosty February of the year 1703, the earth writhing and wailing in anguish. Again, I beheld the ground wrenching furiously on May, 12th 1730, only twenty seven years later, «terremotum infausta die XII maii», and the walls, houses, towers, everything being crushed and shattered down under the giant thrust that dismembered the earth; and, in the ruthless roar, the tall, stately belfry of the Town Hall, «shaken by the earthquake», hurling down onto the square «three huge bronze bells» and then «leaning

crumpled sideways, at risk of imminent collapse». Destruction after destruction, death after death; many years later Norcia would still bear the appearence of «a city never restored from its ruined state, as it still displays at every corner the mournful, hideous scars of the earthquakes».

And looking farther back, I once more saw the ground struggle and writhe, as though it was mourning for the slaughter being brought by the earthquake; it was on December, 1st 1328, and the death toll in Norcia and other smaller villages, Visso, Preci and Cerreto, rose up to five thousand, maybe more; nobody will ever know.

And even farther back, indistinctly perceived through the mists of time, I could see the devastation ravage ancient Norcia, its temples being crushed down, «Nursiae aedes sacra terrae motu disiecta», as Julius Obsequens reports in his very short, quite elusive account in the *Prodigiorum Liber*. It was the year 99 B.C., feebly outlined against the fathomless abysses of time.

Nobody was given any possibility of travelling further back. Yet there remained a sense of amazed, astonished gratitude, belonging to all ages, harboured by the survivors who, in turning to God felling on their knees, their forehead pressed against the untrustworthy, deceitful ground, cried aloud «Lapides tui non nocuerunt michi quia salvum me fecit dextera tua», the ruining stones shall not harm me for Your right hand made me safe. These words were engraved on the reliquary of St. Scolastica preserved in St. Benedict's Cathedral. Also, it remained a relentless stamina, an incoercible endurance which Marcus Cornelius Fronto, an orator of Emperor Hadrian's time, had already described, in his *Principia Histioriae*, as «nursina duritia», or Norcia's resilience: a fierce, uncompromising purpose aimed at reconstruction, the same purpose that, in recent times, when the earthquake struck again on September, 19th 1979, had driven outstanding men like Alberto Novelli, the town mayor in office at the time, to reshape anew the future of their town, once more damaged and disfigured, with a spirit imbued with the fresh momentum originating from a farsighted intuition: to lead the ancient land of St. Benedict towards modern progress and prosperity.

That was underground Norcia, the town that quivered and trembled underneath the visible surface of the public square: a town which had been in existence since remotely distant ages; a town which had

lived, rejoiced, prayed, and endured suffering for innumerable generations of men; a town that had been struck down and then had flourished again, and again, from the wreck of its own buildings, with stubborn, unceasing resolution. Past the ordinary and commonplace life, beyond its visible semblance, Norcia offered itself to the sight of anyone who intended to investigate deeper in a view to catching the ripples of everyday life as well as the bigger, longer waves which utterly encompass us, so that it is hard to perceive them. They are made manifest only to those who have been taught how to conceive the vertiginous depths of inaccessible ravines, the unbroken vertical extension of ages consigned to secluded, forgotten recesses of time, and the endless sequence of unknown human lives; lives of men whose names are now lost amidst the mountain sides, the woody forests and the ploughed fields, in our present times run by nowadays machinery with bowels of rubber and iron rumbles.

I did not know what vibrated under the town, and underneath the neighbouring mountains. But I knew that something unspeakable, something unnoticed by others had echoed within my soul; something that was buried in the abysses of time, had called and spoken to me; and finally, had brushed me with a gelid touch.

And Sibyl was its name.

CHAPTER 3

ROME, THE SIBYLS AND THE GREAT MOTHER

IT WAS ONE of those resplendent Roman mornings in the early springtime, immersed as it was in a sharp, clear light which marked each detail of the time-polished, aristocratic texture of the travertine stones, gleaming from the high façades of the venerable churches, the lofty palaces of the noble families, and the imposing, dignified ruins appearing unexpectedly to the sight of the visitors who used to lazily roam the streets of Rome, flooded with neat, transparent brightness.

Noon was drawing near. An intense scent of cooking was escaping from the restaurant's door; a smell of olive oil, tomato and onion, bespeaking the tasty delicacies which would have been served shortly on that same table, standing aside in the small alley; that very table set with a red-and-white check tablecloth whose colours shone in the splendour of the midday sun.

The water tinkled joyfully in the humble, unimposing fountain, built in the form of a small shrine, which looked towards the district of Borgo Pio, near the Vatican. The ancient masonry gleamed in the fierce light; the charming, oval-shaped basin made of tiburtine stone received the pure sparkling fluid with thoughtful indulgence.

Immersed in the untroubled peacefulness of Piazza del Catalone, I was looking at the few passers-by who were going along the street of Borgo Pio; pedestrians only were allowed, and the muffled sound of walking steps, in the scenery staged by the sixteenth-century building, took on a grave and dignified resonance.

It had been months since I had begun to pursue that blurry, indistinct shadow that had manifested itself to me, for the first time, in a chilly night among the quiet, sleepy houses of Norcia. An alarmed unease and an eager agitation had crept into my life since that very moment; within my soul, I could feel a queer, groundless sense of urgency, which was looming persistently over my mood and temperament, and seemingly was unwilling to forsake me and leave me alone.

I had started a research, a sort of enquiry, an examination in depth: I was perusing documentation, looking for further insight; I was intent on building up fragments of a speculative architecture, portions of vast, complex inferences; I was bringing to life even wider scenarios, wherein each single component assumed, unexpectedly, the role of a key element; but, after a few moments, the whole framework was

inclined to subside into a meaningless, chaotic disturbance of mind and soul.

Necessity had brought me back to Rome. The research I was planning could not be carried out in Norcia; I needed to study, I needed to learn; I had to gain access to books of rare diffusion, hard or impossible to find altogether. Consultation of scientific papers would be compulsory as well: rare, valuable documentation which — I was positively convinced — might provide my search with the key to some vague and still indefinite secrets, so as to relieve me, and eventually set me free, from this oppressive burden that was tormenting me ever since that night; from a feeling of anguish that was gradually, steadily overwhelming my spirit.

In the absence of a deliberate, unequivocal resolution on my part, as though I were a mechanical being pressed forth by an irresistible force shaped and regulated by obscure laws, I therefore entered into the veiled, inscrutable realms which are guarded by the gloomy and terrible lordship of the Sibyls.

Like dreamy apparitions haunting an agitated, foreshadowing vigil; like shadows who, having been summoned from Hades, dared to tread anew, with unsteady pace, the land of the living, a territory which is precluded to them now, but was once familiar and subject to their rule; so the Sibyls come forth again from the abysses of past ages, clothed in their white, virginal robe as they advance in slow procession. Here come the Sibyls, consecrated to the *Magna Mater*: the Great Mother, Cybele, the goddess coronated with a turreted crown, her veiled face carved in black stone, sitting between two lions as a sign of her divine might.

That black stone was the very same night-coloured rock which, in antiquity, had fallen from the sky at dusk, a meteorite moulded in the flames burning through the cosmic space; two hundred and four years before Christ was born, from Pessinus, in distant Phrygia, the Roman conquerors brought the holy stone to their native city, and built a temple for her on the Palatine hill — for Cybele, to whom the wild, primeval nature was sacred; she was life-giving mother to the earth, and was worshipped amidst the precipitous slopes and ravines of the mountains. The Mother Goddess bestowed life and death, and presided over the endless, never-stopping cycle of the seasons.

From the depths of the earth, from beneath the caves consecrated to her worship, the oracles of the Great Mother — the Sibyls — answered the calls raised from the believers, foretelling the unavoidable fate of men. «Sibyl, who speaks mournful words with delirious lips», Plutarch wrote in his *De Pythiae Oraculis*, «by the goddess' force, her spell pierces as far into the future as a thousand years». And, from the caverns, the magical and life-inspiring chant of the consecrated virgins, priestesses and healers — *Sioboulen* as they were called in the Aeolian language of their native Phrygia, which means «those who voice the goddess'mind» — their chant gushed in the rapture of prophecy, in a condition of frantic, voluptuous entrancement.

According to Lactantius' *Divinae Institutiones*, whose pages I had browsed at Norcia in the night, ten were the ancient Sibyls inspired by the divinities.

Great fame was achieved by the Delphic Sibyl, known as the Pythia, the most illustrious oracle in the whole classical world, who vaticinated in the midst of perfumed, hypnotic exhalations. She was inspired by Apollo, the glorious; however, well before that god assumed his divine role in Delphi, the Temple had been dedicated, in a time as early as the Bronze Age, to the underground cult of the Great Mother.

The Cumæan Sibyl was marked, in antiquity, by a comparable fame, in Rome and throughout Italy; she used to pronounce her prophecies from within the «antrum immane», the vast cavern carved in the tufa soil by Lake Avernus, near Naples. Publius Vergilius Maro writes, in his *Æneid*, that «Cumaea Sibylla - horrendas canit ambages antroque remugit - obscuris vera involvens»: terrific riddles she yells, as she sings in her cave, the truth enshrouded in darkness. According to legend, the Cumæan virgin, grasping a handful of sand, demanded of Apollo — who had conceived a craving desire for her — that he should allow her to live for as many years as the uncountable number of grains her hand could accommodate. And the god made her wish come true; but the maiden priestess had forgotten to ask for eternal youth as well, and the innumerable years of her long-lasting life faded out in a withered senescence, up to the time — this is narrated by Publius Ovidius Naso in his *Metamorphoses* — when her decaying body, which had undergone a continual degeneration process for seven centuries, had shrunk to something remarkably minute, her limbs parched and withered, «consumptaque membra senecta»; and Gaius Pe-

tronius Arbiter, in his *Satyricon*, recalls the vision of an old, decrepit Sibyl, reduced to a small, insignificant being held in a phial hanging from the ceiling of her cavern; when asked by some impudent young people, she could only mutter, with a frail voice: «I wish to die».

And besides, there were the other Sibyls: Erythræan, Libyan, Phrygian, Tiburtine... They had never ceased to weave their foreshadowing chant; and the centuries, as they rolled along age after age, were bringing forth a new, regenerated world, in the premonition of the decline of the ancient gods, and the rising of a new light, which radiated from Christ. Now the oracles of the Great Mother, prophetic witnesses of the Incarnation, vaticinated on the coming of the Son of God. Isidore of Seville wrote in his *Etymologiae* that the Sibyls raised chants of praise «in quibus de Deo et Christo et gentibus multa scripsisse manifestissime conprobantur»: the Holy Cross was being announced by the words intoned by the virgin healers, foreshadowing — pagans as they were — the Christian Era.

Yet nothing, nothing at all — in the valuable writings of the classical scholars, in the apologetic works of the Fathers of the Church, in the detailed *Historiae* drafted by the medieval chroniclers — seemed to hint at the existence of an eleventh, «undecima» Sibyl; an additional oracle that would prove actually unknown to the ancient sources themselves; a prophetic, vaticinating virgin who, according to what had been noted down on Lactantius' page, with palpable anxiety, by a nameless hand, might be dwelling «summo in Monte Appennino», amidst the heights of the Apennine ridges, and whose dreadful, appalling attribute was «horrifica».

Once again, I returned in my mind to the small square facing Norcia's Theatre; to that evening, beside the antique stall encumbered with books; they appeared as dark shadows in the cold winter night, awaiting beneath distant, unfamiliar stars, which seemed to have driven out any human presence; I thought of the ancient folio volume, heavy in my hands, burdened with an oppressive secret, perhaps hideous altogether, that an unknown hand had entrusted to a most renowned excerpt, wherein the catalogue of the ten Sibyls belonging to the classical world had been accurately set for the centuries to come.

«*Undecimam*, summo in Monte Appennino Sibylla horrifica, immanem specum incolens, ad Benedicti afflictionem civitatis». Once again, a cold shiver ran through me. Again, I had an eerie, nonsensical

feeling that I was being observed, scrutinised, almost lightly touched. I was aware that it would have been foolish, and unwise, to let all that proceed like this; I needed, once and for all, to get through those unhealthy sensations; I had to probe further, and beyond any hesitation or delay, into the investigation I had just started, without heeding the queer, worrisome patterns which formed unexpected shapes on the outer layer of an apparently undisturbed reality. I should not worry about the future, potential consequences, which it seemed I could foreshadow in advance, on the steadiness and balance of my own mind.

I lifted my eyes: the Borgo Pio district — with its aristocratic palaces glaring with their yellow-orange hue; its small fountain, murmuring quietly amid the splendour of the travertine stone; the neat luminosity cast by the spring sun, now close to its zenith; all that was present to my senses, so that I was brought back among living beings and recalled to actual facts such as the approaching noon, the brisk, invigorating breeze, the fine food and the delectable wine, which were spreading their fragrances on the red-and-white check tablecloth, laid just in front of me.

Should I have renounced? Should I have given up my research? Would I have behaved more befittingly if I had made up my mind and left it all: Cybele and her crown; the cortege of the Sibyls; the classical scholars, whose names were barely known and whose writings were possibly unreliable; the ill omens, clouded in darkness, portended by an enquiry that, all in all, was riveted on forgotten, archaic lore as well as on flimsy, enigmatic allusions to an irrelevant — if not altogether unsubstantial — oracle which would utter prophecies in the vicinity of an out-of-the-way town located amidst the barren mountains of the Italian region of Umbria?

What was the meaning of all this? Who may ever care for an implausible quest, arising from a chimerical daydream and, without fail, ending up in nothing?

Yet I knew it couldn't just be like that. I perceived that something more — a sort of invisible, concealed evidence — was hidden behind the early clues I had uncovered, as scanty as they were. Instinctively, I sensed that not all the story was mere lore, or a simple fairy tale; a tangible reality, weird and bloodcurdling, was veiled underneath the chronicles of old, though entombed under the dusty neglect of centuries; and yet it was still alive.

In the course of my research, I had actually come across a story that appeared to be remarkably odd, according to which, in the early fifteenth century, rumour had it that, amidst the cragged mountains in the vicinity of Norcia, running from the Umbrian hills to the Adriatic sea; among the elevated peaks which formed the great Apennine ridge cutting through Northern Italy down to the southern stretch of the peninsula; in the middle of the mountainous chain traversing the district of Norcia by the eastern side, ascending in the first place to the desert of wind and grass of the Castelluccio Plains, and then to the imposing, awe-striking massiveness of Mount Vettore, crowned with clouds; amid the dizzying cliffs that, heading northwest, lead to Mount Priora and Mount Bove by horrifying, hair-raising airy trails, in the echoing of dreadful abysses and ravines which fall precipitously down to the distant gorge carved by the Tenna River; somewhere in the middle of this frightful, desolate scenery, a rumour had spread that an enchantress, a fairy queen had established her dwelling; and the peasants called her by the name of Sibyl.

Besides, according to this ancient tale, it seemed that the Sibyl had elected a cavern as her residence, placed right on top of one of the peaks which, from crest to crest, linked the range of Mount Bove to the cliffs of Mount Priora. And it was said that this peak, whereon so famed a queen abode, was shaped like a tower bearing a crown, bespeaking the princely lineage of such an illustrious and distinguished dame.

This tale, so strange and unclear, presented a number of remarkable features, which evoked affinities that were perhaps, at all appearences, exceedingly fanciful: the Sibyl; the cavern; and the ravines, sacred to Cybele. Suggestions that were too scant not to rule them out as the mere offspring of a rustic, pastoral lore, whose origin was to be found in a heritage of traditions and beliefs typical of rough, undeveloped human communities, cut off from the vast mankind and general trade due to the interposition of lofty mountains, whose passes, of old, could not be crossed for months throughout the year.

However, not all could be simply dismissed as mere lore. After a more attentive examination, and following a closer scrutiny of the matter, I stumbled upon new, additional fragments; a number of sporadic, dispersed suggestions, found in the old books, about an oracular site — a place, that was located among towering mountains, whe-

reto prominent rulers had chosen to go, in a long-gone past, in search of a response about their own lives and fate.

In his work *The Twelve Caesars*, Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus writes that Vitellius Aulus, the Roman general originating from ancient Sabina, who was saluted Emperor by his legions headquartered in the province of Upper Germany, moved to the elevated peaks of the Apennine range, following the defeat of his foes in 69 A.D., to observe a ritual vigil: «in Appennini quidem iugis etiam pervigilium egit».

And Trebellius Pollio, in his *Vita Divi Claudii*, collected in the *Historia Augusta*, narrates that Emperor Claudius II Gothicus, around the year 265 A.D., journeyed as far as the mountains of the Apennines to question the oracle on his forthcoming fortune, «in Appennino de se consuleret», getting in return baffling and disquieting replies about himself and his descendants.

So, it appeared that something did actually exist. Among the mountains of Norcia; beyond the sheer, jagged precipices that followed one another amidst the lofty peaks shrouded in snow; on the barren mountain-tops beaten by frightful, angry storms; something seemed to have settled, and the recollection of it had crossed the Middle Ages, surviving the oblivion of centuries — sleeping, perhaps, and awaiting.

And the terrifying memory had been recalled, leaping over entire centuries of forgetfulness, by Andrea da Barberino, who had begun to unveil that secret again in his novel *Guerrin Meschino*, written in the year 1410; afterwards, it had been Antoine de La Sale, the French traveller, who in 1421 had ascended Mount Sibyl and attempted to break into the cavern, as he himself narrates in a truly-fascinating, fully-detailed account. These were the sources now I needed to confront: they were the witnesses who, by their narrations, had opened anew the gates of time to the Sibyl, the Apennine Sibyl. To the sight of men, they had uncovered again an abyss of endless horror.

CHAPTER 4

THE WRETCHED KNIGHT

AS FAR BACK AS 1410, when Andrea di Jacopo dé Mengabotti, a poet and storyteller, born in the small village of Barberino di Valdelsa in Tuscany, composed his *Guerrin Meschino* — a chivalric romance consisting of two hundred and ten chapters, which was designed for the entertainement and delectation of the populace gathered in public places — not the slightest mention of the Sibyl was to be found in any written essay or novel. That was a long spell of silence, following the ambiguous, unclear words recorded in the Latin works by Suetonius and Trebellius Pollio, concerning the odd tale which hovered around the lofty peak, stormed by wild and unceasing winds, of Mount Sibyl. At that time, the mountain still rose intact and untouched, well away from the paths being journeyed by shepherds and travellers, among the ridges towering to the north and east of the town of Norcia.

Yet, as it sometimes happens that clouds, bright and fluffy at first, slowly ascend the steep slopes of the Apennine cliffs, almost rolling upwards along the precipices, getting thicker and thicker; until they overcome the rocky crests, and grasp at the vertiginous peaks which face the far horizon; and, still moving skywards, the vapours pile up and finally gather together in dark, tumbling masses, laden with rain

and bursting anger, so that the heart of the traveller is filled with a gloomy sense of dismay, and he hastens his steps onward towards the valley below — with a similar, ascending movement the power of the myth, feebly and gently at the very beginning, lays its mighty hand on an elected place, marking it with a light, shadowy mark.

Initially, it is nothing more than a thin shadow, a diaphanous shield hiding the divinity from the sight of men; but then the time comes when the overwhelming energy of the god, no longer restrained within concealed vaults, is celebrated in its visible, lordly magnificence with sumptuous gifts, in temples where the air is perfumed with the scent of the many sacrificial offerings. Accordingly, the myth of the Apennine Sibyl, sunk into oblivion during the millenarian darkness of the Early Middle Ages, emerges unexpected in the work of Andrea da Barberino; its abrupt, incoercible appearance betokening the unrestrained outburst of a subterranean stream of popular rumours, accounts and hearsay, which long since had been circulating in the woodlands and the countryside: the dispersed remnants of a memory concerning the old gods, once worshipped in such secluded valleys, and never yet forgotten.

The author of *Guerrin Meschino* had almost certainly collected all those rumours, and in his account of the adventures of Guerrino — the son of the King of Durrës in Albania and a young knight, who was seized by the Saracen pirates and sold as a slave; he then joined the Imperial Court in Constantinople, where he achieved honour and renown; he was given the nickname of «Meschino», the Wretched, out of his ardent resolution to never cease seeking, in every corner of the vast and unknown world of the late Roman Empire, his lost family and kindred — in his account of Guerrino's life, the Tuscan storyteller had given in to the fascination of the tales of the Sibyl, and purposefully included a whole section in his romance, where he provides a comprehensive and imaginative representation of the enigmatic oracle hiding among the Apennines.

Thus, following more than a thousand years of silence, in a romance of quest and chivalry, the Sibyl, as if summoned from a kingdom of the dead, had suddenly revealed herself again.

Once more, a shiver of apprehension and fear ran through me; I could not quite grasp, in its full significance, the reason for the Tuscan poet shedding fresh light on a presence which — I felt in my very

heart — it would have been better to leave undisturbed in the gloomy oblivion which had enshrouded her for long centuries. It seemed as if Andrea da Barberino had intended, with a deliberate motion, to revive the shadow of a forgotten pagan priestess, by mentioning her name almost perchance amidst the amazing, fanciful adventures of Guerrino the Wretched, in search of his parents through the Kingdom of Babylon, the Emirate of Egypt, the many monarchies ruling Italy at the time, and then Albania, and Greece, and finally as far as the lands of the Tartars and Persians. What might be the purpose of all this?

I fancied, by an image that came unexepectedly to my mind, that Andrea, the poet, had put down those lines, those chapters about the Sibyl, at night, by the quivering flame of a candle; blending imagination and truth, and weaving altogether hearsay, weird rumours and fairy tales; some of them ghastly, and others — perhaps — being true, first-hand accounts. I fancied he was attempting to resist an urge he perceived as obscure; he wrote, indeed, as if in obedience to a pressing command; and hence he put down a record of all these queer rumours and accounts, in order to preserve them from an oblivion which that being, hidden beneath the mountains, was trying by every means to thwart.

I was sitting in my house, in Rome, only a few steps away from the restaurant, and bustle, of the Borgo Pio district, the warm afternoon light pouring in through the heavy curtains; on my writing desk was resting a modern edition of *Guerrin Meschino*, open at the title-page image, which depicted two valiant knights in the act of riding their horses and wielding their lances, bravely confronting one another. Passing my hand over my face, I was starting to fear that the impression left upon my soul by the investigation I had undertaken might compel me into walking uncommon paths — and perilous indeed. I was aware that the risk of my getting overly involved in the inquiry I had just begun; the hazard connected with a peculiar tendency of my heart to fancifulness and daydreaming, which, since my first entrance into the realm of the Sibyl, was rendered apparent to my very eyes; all these prospects might as well trigger ominous, unpleasant effects; like the one I had indulged in a few moments before, when — by a morbid imaginative disposition — I had fancied Andrea da Barberino during his nights at the writing-desk; his quill pen directed by a Sibyl who had acquired, within my spirit, the character of ubiquitousness and almightiness.

Nonetheless, even to the eyes of the Tuscan storyteller the Sibyl had taken a sinister and dreadful hue. In his *Guerrin Meschino*, Andrea da Barberino writes that among «the cliffs whereon the Sibyl dwells, in the central part of Italy»; up there, where the wind blows fiercely amidst the vertical peaks and the «mountain-tops, whose sharp ridges seem to vanish into the clouds»; between the «sheer precipices» which are so deep as to seem quite bottomless; in the region where the mountains loom over the town of Norcia; an evil danger, a lethal captivation awaited the traveller who dared to venture into that remote area of the Italian Apennine; an area which — six centuries ago — was as much secluded as inaccessible.

It was the very same captivation that had been working in me while I was walking along the old streets of Norcia, among the houses that many times had been shaken into ruins by the earthquakes, and then rebuilt over and over again; under the shadows of overhanging mountains, looming ominously over the city and its inhabitants. Yet how much stronger had this captivation been working in the past ages! Norcia, the town segregated from both the passing of time and

the society of men, a place magically far-off, like Persia or the land of the Tartars, had become the gateway to a subterranean kingdom, where an oracle would unveil to the visitor his individual fate to-come, while enjoying many forbidden pleasures, and an endless bliss.

I continued to read, with growing apprehension, the tale unfolding in the fifth section of Andrea da Barberino's Guerrin Meschino. The young knight Guerrino was firm in his decision to find the «wise, all-knowing» Sibyl, so as to question her about his father's and mother's whereabouts and fate; his hopes were resting on the oracle's foreshadowing power, that had been vividly described to him earlier in the romance.

Yet other men, other valiant knights had journeyed already in search of the magical underground kingdom, prompted by a very different urge. A craving for sinful, lecherous pleasures, for which the price to pay was eternal damnation, had pressed many a knightly adventurer to that barren mountain-top, and as far as the entrance to the Sibyl's cavern.

According to legend, the subterranean kingdom housed, in the bowels of the mountain, resplendent palaces and delightful gardens; and the Sibyl's retinue was made up of the sweetest and fairest young ladies «clad in the most valuable robes, beaming with the colours of gold and the luster of gemstones», «so much so that no human tongue would ever be able to describe the charming and princely details of their attire»; a cortege that awaited their guests to please them «with all the playful enjoyments which can be offered to a human body».

In the account written by Andrea da Barberino, the visitor, after cutting across «the fierce winds blowing from the cavern's mouth», would come upon a sort of labyrinth, made of a multitude of dark, underground passageways: a maze with no visible escape leading outside. «A number of wax candles», together with flint, steel and tinder, formed the essential kit needed in the exploration of that cheerless darkness. By proceeding farther along «a sloping trail which went steeply down», and after passing a spot where a loud, deafening noise was to be heard, «like the roaring of a waterfall dashing from high above», the visitor would come eventually to an iron door, which bore «wrought on it the fiendish, lifelike figure of a demon».

Guerrino «knocked at the door many times»; and the door was opened to him. Beyond, a fairy world awaited: it was the apparition of

a timeless dream; it was a concealed place imbued with a secret, wicked fascination, endowed with the power to enthrall men by casting a spell over their souls and entrapping them in the rocky abysses, «in that confined vault within the mountain», where everything — palaces and gardens — was only the offspring of witchcraft, «for it was impossibile that so many things and beings existed and lived there»; and the final fate could be but eternal and unremitting damnation.

It was in the year of the Lord 824, thus wrote the storyteller Andrea da Barberino, and the Emperor was Charlemagne.

I closed the book, and lay thoughtfully back in my chair. According to that tale, Guerrino had subsequently encountered the Sibyl, escaped her deceitful spells — though he had not failed to notice that «her breasts looked like polished ivory» — and gained at last the exit of the cave; a different outcome, if compared with the many others that had disappeared therein forever. But Guerrino had attained no knowledge of his parents' kindred and whereabouts; and he had thrown himself into new adventures, not to mention his later journey to Rome, as he had determined to ask for the Pope's forgiveness for the sins he might have committed during his stay in that subterranean realm of vice.

The fascination of Andrea da Barberino's narrative was undeniable; however, what connection could be established between a chivalrous romance dating to the fifteenth century — a work drawn up by a minor poet for the recreation and entertainment of the illiterate, unsophisticated populace — and the investigation I was presently carrying out? Why should I commit myself, bestowing my time and energy, to the study of a dusty novel, clumsy as it was, and altogether ponderous and irksome, being nothing more than a disregarded piece of literature?

But it came as quite a surprise to me to find that *Guerrin Meschino* had never sunk into such oblivion which I had too readily assumed. Andrea da Barberino had been the author of several literary works, being mainly translations into his native language of *chansons de geste* and French chivalrous romances, adapted to a middle-class and popular Italian taste: *The Royal House of France*, the *Narbonnais Chronicles*, *Hugo of Auvergne*, the *Aspromonte*, the *History of Ajolfus of Barbicon and Other Valiant Knights* were just the sort of writings that one would expect might get lost in the vast and dust-covered bookshelves accom-

modating all-time, second-rate literature. However, that fate never occurred to his romance *Guerrin Meschino*: Andrea's extravagant, imaginative energy has allowed the novel's renown to cross, as it is, different ages and literary tastes; so much so that countless editions have followed one another in an unbroken chain, until the present day.

And even though the astounding, unbelievable adventures of Guerrino, also known as Meschino, the Wretched, may appear, to our contemporary taste, utterly disconcerting and essentially devoid of any interest; those same adventures have participated, for long, in the cultural identity of an entire nation. In Italy, any mention of Guerrino's name, any reference to his heroic undertakings, would have recalled to mind an extraordinary tale, which was known and familiar to everybody; time and time again people had listened to the story of the young knight Guerrino, in the public squares, at the corners of the streets, in village fairs and open-air markets, during town festivals, and even when the most important religious ceremonies were being held in the nearby church. Andrea da Barberino's romance was staged by actors and storytellers, who knew how to enthrall their youthful audience, speechless and bewitched, by playing the lively, glittering action of the deeds performed by their favourite hero.

All of a sudden, as if in a mirror, I caught a glimpse of my own self, my countenance exhibiting an amused, contemptuous grin; a distinctive mark of the contemporary man, who considers with disdain the token images of past ages; yet being utterly unaware of the fact that his own images, the symbols of the present time, will be very soon looked upon with a corresponding gaze of scorn. What right did I have to smile, with but thinly veiled sarcasm, at the Guerrin Meschino and its ingenuous, enthusiastic followers of centuries ago?

How many Italian emigrants, in the nineteenth century, had boarded a steamer, in Naples or Genoa, bound for the Americas, bringing with them just those two books — the Holy Bible and the *Guerrin Meschino* — read aloud by the very few literate fellow-travellers to the many people, of all ages, who were unable to read, during the endless nights in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, as sleep would not come to these passengers longing for their lost homes and country, on a stark third-class deck? How many poor, barefoot, hungry boys, in poverty-stricken Southern Italy, had eagerly drunk in the astounding account of Guerrino's deeds, sitting in the dust, facing the stage set up on the

street by some strolling troupe of puppeteers — as is reported by Italian writers Giovanni Verga, in his *Don Candeloro*, and Gesualdo Bufalino in *A Fragment of a Puppet-Show*? How many girls had been christened with that name, resounding with so exotic a note — the name of Antinisca, the handsome daughter of the King of Persepolis, whom Guerrino had taken in marriage after he had reconquered her lost kingdom? How many times that tale had been told, and told again — within the rugged stone walls of the farmhouses, beside the great fireplace, during the interminable winter nights — by the elderly members of the family, who recounted and recounted, by heart, of far-away countries and distant people, while the childrens listened intently to their words, with gleaming, wide-open eyes full of joyful amazement?

Hence my haughty grin began to change, turning now into an expression of fresh and concerned recognition: it was clear to me that, up to recent times, the tales of Guerrino the Wretched had partaken in a shared heritage of both popular lore and literary works; a cultural tradition which, unquestionably, was outstandingly widespread in Italy, if we consider that even a popular, weekly sports magazine like the Italian *Guerin Sportivo* had chosen to be named after a humourous variation of the title of Andrea da Barberino's romance. And in the mountains of Norcia, among the rough illiterate shepherds, their full knowledge of the legend of the Sibyl, and their ability to recite whole excerpts from *Guerrin Meschino* by heart, had been for centuries — indeed, up to our very day — a distinguishing trait of their picturesque fame.

Anyway, it was nothing more than a mere chivalrous romance. But was that all? Could it only be a long piece of fanciful literature, depicting strange, distant lands; and foreign nations where people spoke weird, unintelligible languages; and daring feats accomplished by valiant knights, and all sorts of warlike deeds, and the sweetness and bitterness of love? I supposed the answer could be but in the affirmative.

Yet — among the crowding faces and the manifold places staged by Andrea da Barberino in the course of his lengthy, ponderous heroic saga — two images alone, outlined against all the others, prevailed amid such a multifarious host, with the fierce and incoercible strength of the myth: Norcia, the lost town of the Apennines; and the Sibyl, the

oracle, the sinister dweller in the cave sitting on a mountain-top, the prophetess who was enshrouded in a dreadful, fiendish spell.

Sibyl, «Sibylla horrifica». The unknown scholar, who had noted down that gloss on the page of the book written by Lactantius, had probably addressed the same sources of information as the author of *Guerrin Meschino*, thus sharing with Andrea da Barberino a dismay that was akin to his own. «Summo in Monte Appennino», «immanem specum incolens»: dwelling in a vast cavern, on top of a mountain in the midst of the Apennines, the Sibyl was waiting for her darkness to be brightened by a new light; her name spoken once more; her millenary neglect, once again, broken.

CHAPTER 5
A TRAVELLER AND A GENTLEMAN

THE IMPOSING CLIFFS burst abruptly out of the darkness, almost severed by the headlights, which were shining with anger on their twisted, stony likeness. The abysses of rock rose menacingly, as if on the verge of hurling themselves against the vehicle that was advancing, with some reluctance, into the damp narrow gorge; the car pierced the masses of drifting fog which the river Nera — the deity who watched over the antique trails leading through and across the Apennine chain — exhaled at each meander, among the wooded, sinister gloom.

I was going back to Norcia. I had left behind the Umbrian Valley, surrounded by gently sloping hills; the spring of Clitumnus, sacred to the name of Jupiter; and Spoletium, the Roman and Lombard town. I was now entering a realm that was both slippery and elusive; a region of the mind of which, with growing unease, as my investigation proceeded, I could not figure out the true vastness.

The dazzling radiance of the imperial travertine stone, the neat outline of the small fountain in Borgo Pio, the tidy arrangement and the peacefulness of my flat in Rome: I had turned my back on every-

thing, as if in foreboding, and with an increasing sense of concern, that nothing which had belonged to that reasonable, practical world — nothing at all, in that unknown land I was about to thread — would assure me neither shelter nor protection. I felt that I should rely upon very different means and resorts, in dealing with that mysterious, untravelled region whereto the foolish quest I had commenced was leading me, irresistibly albeit by degrees.

The ancient route to Norcia — mentioned by Suetonius in his *De vita Caesarum*, «a Nursia Spoletium euntibus», weaving its way among lofty cliffs drenched with the falling rain and the night damp — ran by the small river, following its swift meanders with sharp, unexpected turns. I was driving my car, and tried to reconsider the latest outcome of the further investigations I had been carrying on in the last days, after having completed my reading of the *Guerrin Meschino*.

In the beginning, I was persuaded that Andrea da Barberino had raised to literary honour a collection of rumours which, dating back to the year 1400, were being exchanged by word of mouth among the shepherds' hovels, up in the highlands; a hearsay that, through the chatter of the peasants, would find its breeding ground in the petty talk of the villagers, until it would become a topic of amusing discussion among the best educated citizens of fifteenth-century Norcia. Indeed, it seemed unreasonable to me that babble of this sort — a queer gibberish about a Sibyl who inhabited a mountain-top, and her magnificent palaces that were concealed deep beneath the ground — might find their way out of the city walls of Norcia, travelling as far as neighbouring Spoletium, without incurring the jeering laughter of a shrewder populace, or even — as the worst occurrence — the legal duress of the Pope's constabulary.

However, I soon arrived at the conclusion that that was not the true story. I realized that those rumours, if rumours they were, had travelled very different routes, and crossed much longer distances; they had found an echo, with their enthralling, obscure power of suggestion, in far-away countries, among men who spoke unknown languages, and paid homage to foreign kings.

On the morning of May, 18th 1420, a gentleman from Provence, Antoine de La Sale, was ascending the slopes of Mount Sibyl, accompanied by a few local peasants; the horses, led by their halters, plodded in a long line, following the steep mountain-side. The party, hea-

ding for the top of the mountain, was determined to reach a very specific point. And that point was the dark, sinister entrance to the cavern of the Sibyl.

Who was Antoine de La Sale? What urge had drawn him as far as those secluded mountains, his feet walking «la creste de ce mont», the rocky ridge of Mount Sibyl, hoping that the wind would not blow too angrily, «que ne fault point qu'il face vent», lest he should be flung into the bottomless ravine below, «si treshideuse de roideur et de parfondeur», in a frightful fall among sheer cliffs as vertical as a wall, «aussi droiz comme un mur», and ultimately ending his life with a terrible death?

During his stay in Campania, in southern Italy, as a member of the retinue of Louis III of Anjou, the nobleman who was engaged in a struggle to win for himself the Kingdom of Naples, Antoine de La Sale — a young courtier, a soldier and a man of letters — had stumbled upon the old tales connected with the obscure legends about the Italian Sibyls; the most celebrated among them being the Cumæan, whose cavern was to be found in the vicinity of Naples, the picturesque city under the volcano. His imagination seized by the fascination of the story, he conceived a strong desire to visit that mountain, known as Mount Sibyl, where rumours held that subterranean chambers existed under the rock; and an enchantress, whose name was not mentioned by the classical authors in their antique catalogues, had there her abode. And this dwelling, unlike that of the other Sibyls — consigned long ago to legendary locations placed in the realm of mythology — could be spotted on a map and easily reached, as it was situated in a far-off section of that mountain ridge called the Apennines, between the small town of Norcia and the Marches of Ancona.

So, on that sunny, luminous morning in May, de La Sale had climbed the Mount Sibyl up to the cavern on the top; and, many years later, the old gentleman would put down a detailed account of that morning. A manuscript containing his report remains today in the Chantilly Library, in France. Its title is *Le Paradis de la Reine Sibylle*, the Paradise of Queen Sibyl: it includes a long narration, addressed by the learned courtier to John of Anjou, Duke of Calabria, whose tutor he was.

What did Antoine de La Sale witness on that mountain? As the gentleman recounts, it had been compulsory for the party to ask for a

special permission issued by the local authorities, since the visit to the underground chambers was forbidden to all. Even Guerrino, in the romance by Andrea da Barberino, had been issued an authorization to climb the Mount Sibyl at Norcia's outpost of Castelluccio, granted by an official in charge of keeping watch over the trails leading to the mountain, as nobody was allowed to reach the cave, any infringement being punished by excommunication from the Church.

In his manuscript, de La Sale writes that, after walking the crest of the mountain — only a few steps wide, open to fearful, treacherous gusts of wind, and flanked by terrifying precipices on both sides — the visitor would get to the «rochier que l'en dit la couronne du mont», the great cliff which is called the mount's crown. This huge crag, a sort of round-shaped crown, some twenty feet high, is to be climbed to gain access to the actual mountain-top. After overcoming this obstruction, by grasping the overhanging rock with bare hands, with no other chance than to commit one's soul to «autre puissance que celle de Dieu», God's blessing and protection, it was possible to reach the most elevated region of the Mount Sibyl: the topmost region, narrow and confined, fully exposed to the elements of air and water, where the entrance to the Sibyl's dreadful cave was to be found.

«Immanem specum incolens», inhabiting a huge cavern, as the sentence written on Lactantius' page said. While I was driving my car in the night, along the road which followed the course of the river Nera, I sensed that the words written by Antoine de La Sale, unlike Andrea da Barberino's literary hyperboles, were marked by the vivid hue of truth; a troublesome truth, which recounted, with trustworthy sincerity, what had happened during that visit, on a long-past morning of May; a truth that de La Sale had recalled to mind many years later, a recollection that had undergone transformation and refinement; nonetheless, the facts he described were deeply wrought in the writer's heart and memory.

In *The Paradise of Queen Sibyl*, de La Sale narrates that in the fourteenth century Pope Urban commanded that the path leading to Mount Sibyl's crown be destroyed; he also had the entrance to the cave sealed — «combler l'entrée» — with rocky debris, so preventing sorcerers and enchanters from gaining access to it. However, when the gentleman arrived on the mountain-top, that morning, he found «l'entrée ouverte»: the cave's mouth was unobstructed, so that it would

have been possible to inspect the dark recesses of the underground chambers, at least of the outermost ones.

De La Sale writes that the entrance to the cave presented itself «en forme d'un escu», shaped as a shield, with a narrow, pointed top and wider at the bottom; a big rock, set below, obstructed the passage. By awkwardly crawling through that opening, feet first, a large square chamber could be reached, which received some light from a small crevice above; from that fissure, the sunbeams were hardly able to creep in. All around that subterranean hall, a number of stony seats appeared to have been carved out of the very rock of the mountain.

Leaving the great chamber, a narrow shaft, in a steep descent, led to the hidden depths of Mount Sibyl: however, anyone who was determined to probe those secret paths, would be compelled to proceed on hands and knees, and backwards, so scanty was the available space.

By the glow of his torchlight, de La Sale was able to inspect the walls of the large square room. The flame shed its light on some carved inscriptions, «qui a tresmale peine se pevent lire», that could be barely worked out, the beam faintly enhancing their shadows on the rocky surface. The gentleman realized that he was looking at antique

monograms and graffiti, cut on the stone walls by former visitors, who had meant to leave a mark of their passage in the cavern.

How many of those knights, whose remaining tokens were at that time only a few indistinct imprints on the damp rock, had crept into that cave with the hope of gaining access to a magical, enchanting underground world; and had never come back again, vanishing forever within the cavern's unknown maze of secret pits and passages? With his fingertips, de La Sale had lightly touched one of those faint inscriptions: «Her Hans Wan Banborg intravit», there a German nobleman had left his mark. Nearby, other carved letters stated the name of «Thomin Le Pons»: maybe a knight, maybe a young squire; no one, among the members of the party then present in the cave with de La Sale, knew anything about the identity of those men, nor could they provide any clue as to the fate that had awaited those ancient visitors across that rapidly-descending shaft, which penetrated deeper and deeper into the heart of the mountain.

That was the point where Antoine de La Sale had stopped; he had dared not proceed beyond that square chamber: a burial vault, adorned with the remnants of unknown, faded-away lives, which are, perhaps, lost forever amidst the ominous revels of that fairy realm; or, possibly, are turned into frail heaps of bones, still dressed with ragged scraps of fine, precious cloth: rotten leftovers, lying among columns of limestone shaped as extravagant, unreal forms, down in the darkness, at the very bottom of vertiginous pits, where only the secretive murmur of subterranean waters breaks, with unconcerned tenderness, the sightless stillness of death.

Yet that earnest, penetrating gentleman, whom an intellectual curiosity had urged up to the pinnacle of a far-off mountain, did not fail to note down in his *Paradise* the extraordinary, unbelievable tales that his companions had told him while toiling up the mountain-side; he wrote an account of what the peasantry had said to him — «ce que les gens du païs… m'en ont dit» — so preserving the astounding narratives that were reported by the few who had entered that cave, and somehow managed to leave it.

They were five young countrymen, who, provided with long ropes and a large supply of candles, had taken their chance and crept into the narrow shaft that rapidly went down into the mountain. For a long while they had followed the uncomfortably small tunnel; but,

when they arrived at a section of the gallery that had collapsed, they were overrun by a mighty, appalling jet of roaring wind which gushed from the broken rock; terror had then seized their souls, and they fled in a panic, leaving behind all their cords and candles, retracing the same route they had followed when getting into the cave.

Other tales reported that, after passing that frightful wind stream, the adventurer, who was so bold as to go further ahead, would stumble upon a bridge, only one foot wide, overhanging a dreadful, fathomless abyss; at the bottom of which the thundering sound of running water echoed horribly in the everlasting night. To walk on that bridge was a challenge to death; a slipped foot, and then a fall in the darkness would ensue, with the torchlight going out while crashing onto the sharp, jagged rocks; a cruel, atrocious fall; and finally the awful ending, in the gelid water at the bottom — his companions still screaming from above — and the ghastly solitude of the subterranean vault.

Nonetheless, that bridge would let a dauntless visitor pass. By venturing onto the suspended arch, «tant vait on plus avant, tant est plus large et moins creux», the bridge would become wider and shallower, and the noise of water would apparently fade away. Exploring further ahead, beyond a long corridor cut in the stone, a new antechamber was to be found, also square-shaped: this was closed, at the farther end, by two doors of glistening metal, which were slammed shut and then flung open again, night and day, in a never-ending, perpetual motion, with savage and unrelenting exertion. The enchanted gate summoned the visitor to get through; but it also pronounced, at the same time, an oath about a hideous death, that would strike anybody who dared to proceed through those deadly doors.

Beyond, only tales of legend survived. Standing on the mountain-top, de La Sale's mates related that many knights, coming from all over Europe, had ventured beyond the magical bridge, and the slamming doors; and that, at the very end, access to the fairy realm was finally granted to the unflinching and the brave, who had not yielded to the dismal threats which were intended to hinder the fainthearted and cowards from passing through.

The local countrymen used to tell the tale of a German gentleman, who, long ago, had crossed the enchanted gate, accompanied by his servant; and, beyond the doors, the tale reported that more rooms,

all of them wonderful, were awaiting the visitors; fine chambers, shining with the lustre of crystal; and a great noise welcomed the guests too, the same as a «murmuremens de gens» — the clamour of a multitude; and that, if anybody dared to send forth a call aloud, an answer would be heard; and that, afterwards, a choice company of ladies and maidens would greet the visiting party with great honour, just like Guerrino the Wretched had been greeted before; and, as a final prize for fearless valiance, the visitors would be admitted to the presence of the Sibyl, rejoicing in the boundless riches and the unholy, forbidden bliss, which, in that underground abode, gladdened everyone's life for a time suspended and eternal, while immortal souls were being consumed by the plunder of sin. According to the tale, it could still be possible, before a full year had elapsed, to escape eternal damnation by fleeing the cavern and its fiendish inhabitants, and weeping bitter tears for the base iniquities committed in lechery and disregard of the One True God, as well as asking for forgiveness from the Holy Father in Rome, the vicar of Christ on earth.

And the peasants also narrated that, time long past, a French knight had arrived in their village, in tears; he was looking for his youngest brother, who, he knew for certain, had come to Italy to ascend the celebrated Mount Sibyl and meet its beautiful queen, in search of those pleasures which precluded salvation in Christ. And, on entering the cave, the knight had come across his brother's name, carved in the rock. So there was no doubt as to the fact his young relative had crept into the cavern; however, nobody would have been able to tell him whether his brother had ever left that cave. Upon this discovery, the German knight burst into tears. He started weeping the loss of his brother's life and soul, with a grievous, heart-breaking wail, also lamenting the dishonour that would fall on his descendants; because his family now listed, among its noble members, a renegade and a betraying defector of the Almighty. So keen was his grief, that the knight, in a fit of anger, had scraped the name of his brother off the stone, so completely that nobody could ever read it anymore. And the name of this knight was the sire of Pacs, or maybe Paques; but none of the local peasants knew anything about his native place, nor what had happened to him after he had left Mount Sibyl to return to his home country.

Such tales de La Sale had collected from the very voices of his companions; and I could easily imagine them, as they were going down the verdant mountain-side, immersed in the afternoon sun, the horses sweaty and exhausted, guided by their bridles; while the enthralling tale was being vividly woven by a number of different storytellers: a first one would fill in the picturesque story with a new chilling element; a second would add another creepy detail; and collectively they would narrate that eerie legend by intertwining their voices, laughing and shivering; possibly because of the sunset's cold wind, which had risen, all of a sudden, over the mountain; or, possibly, because of that cavern — up there — so solitary, which they had just left behind, in the still, silent darkness. A place where for nothing in the world would they dare to spend the night.

Antoine de La Sale had later returned to France; he had never come back to that mountain which, in his youth, had enthralled him with the spell of a picturesque myth, so thoroughly that he had been compelled to venture as far as such a remote territory, inhabited by old, fantastic ghosts.

My mind ran to the gentleman from Provence, and the extraordinary journey he had made to that isolated region of Italy; to spellbound mountains, and secluded highlands, where the lofty, unfriendly peaks, suspended in the translucent air, give way to majestic, elevated plains, held in the unmindful embrace of the wind, in the whisper of the meadows; and, further down, the heights give in to wooded ravines, where the rule of waters is exercised to the highest degree, among the gentle dew and the precipitous creeks rushing into deep

gorges. It was a kingdom of liquid, unspoilt crystal; like the river Nera, whose meanders I was following, as I was driving my car into the night. At every turn of the road, I got closer and closer to Norcia; a fundamental milestone in my private, individual journey towards that myth, which, by its very name — Sibyl — had seized and bewildered men from distant countries, changing their lives forever.

I was still absorbed in my thoughts. While I was reading *The Paradise of Queen Sibyl*, in the Roman district of Borgo Pio, I had been struck by a very specific detail: it was in Naples, during his stay in the Campania region as a member of the retinue of the Duke of Anjou, that Antoine de La Sale had chanced on the legend of the Apennine Sibyl. This fact was actually at variance with my earliest assumption, namely that the rumours and hearsay, which were running amidst the shepherds and peasantry living in the region of Norcia, would never be able to cross the bounds of the city walls and local countryside; too naive, too flimsy was the unbelievable story circulating among the populace about subterranean kingdoms and blissful, lustful delights, which were as unchaste as much as unreal.

But the real story was altogether different. Those rumours, that hearsay had spread far and wide; even in Naples — a city of trade and maritime traffic — the tale of a Sibyl who dwelt in the middle of the Apennine ridge was popular and well-known, so much so that it was considered worth mentioning to a young French traveller looking for the picturesque and the unusual, and apt to dish out a few coins for a nice Italian story, to be reported with artistic inspiration in the melodious accent of the Neapolitan idiom.

And there was more to it. De La Sale had collected several tales of foreign knights and men of rank who, coming from far-off countries, had travelled to Italy and as far as the mountains around Norcia, with the purpose of meeting the illustrious Sibyl, a queen of both fortune and forbidden pleasures; and even Guerrino, as he travelled distant nations and territories in the romance by Andrea da Barberino, had heard of the Sibyl in the African city of Tunis, rather than in Italy.

It was enough to shed a queer, indefinite hue on those rumours and hearsay; it looked as if the unrestrainable potency of that legend were so fierce, that it had gushed out towards remote countries and people, well beyond the narrow range of mere gossip circulating among the local peasants. In my opinion, it clearly appeared that an

unsuspected thrust, whose true essence was still unknown to me, had pushed the myth of the Sibyl across the boundaries of its native territory, liberating it to the sight and scrutiny of men who lived a very long distance from Norcia and its surrounding mountains.

What the nature of such a thrust might have been, and how far the legend of the Sibyl could have travelled across many different nations, I was determined to find out for certain without any further delay.

CHAPTER 6
TANNHÄUSER'S BITTER TEARS

«**OBSCULTA, O FILI**, praecepta magistri, et inclina aurem cordis tui… Ad te ergo nunc mihi sermo dirigitur». Hearken, ye child, to the teaching of a father, and incline the ear of thine heart; to you, whoever you may be, I am now addressing my speech.

My spirit having been replenished with the encouraging, reinforcing words from the *Prologus* to the *Sancta Regula*, the Holy Rule written by St. Benedict, I was ready to steer my eccentric, venturesome investigation in a new direction, thus entering a territory that was utterly weird and unusual. I was about to tread new solitary trails, which would possibly head towards a result that would certainly prove to be quite strange and unpredictable. I was going to establish a number of new, original connections among events, issues and individuals, that, at all appearences, could but lead me astray from the material which was the object of my quest. Furthermore, I would have been able to appreciate the significance of my findings only by looking back over my shoulders, after the completion of a full round of examination, moving deliberately away from that pool of light, encircled by dark-

ness, by which I had marked my early attempts to bestow a meaning upon the myth of the Sibyl.

I was sitting on the steps of the stone staircase which adorned the façade of the Palazzo Comunale, Norcia's Town Hall. At the base of this stately flight, two marble lions, with rippling muscles, seemed to lie in wait for a long-coveted prey, ready to pounce on the tourists who proceeded leisurely and merrily over the polished slabstones of Piazza San Benedetto, in the liquid, shimmering reflex which the finely crafted pavement threw back to the eye: the clever work of ancient stonecutters with a skilful, masterly touch.

The round square was dominated by the statue of St. Bendedict, his hand outstretched in a gesture of benediction, clad in the «cucullam et tunicam», the scapular and long shirt which the *Sancta Regula* imposed on the monk as his prescribed garment, so that he may attain the supreme grade of modesty — «summae humilitatis… culmen attingere» — by climbing the steps of an immaterial ladder leading him to divine perfection; a perfection which would shine through his very heart and figure, «non solum corde monachus sed etiam ipso corpore». Benedict, the holy man: the man of paramount eminence, who loved his God with all his heart, and soul, and steadfastness — «ex toto corde, tota anima, tota virtute» — and was beloved by the Almighty with the same fierceness, as he was bestowed the most glorious grace of being elevated to the summit of wisdom and rectitude — «ad maiora doctrinae virtutumque culmina».

From that square, from the antique Roman walls of his birthplace buried under the modern cathedral, from the ancient Nursia surrounded by lofty mountains, and then from the abbeys in Subiaco and Monte Cassino; through the account of his miracles and his holy life, which Saint Gregory the Great narrated in the second book of his *Dialogues*; and, finally, in the solemn testimony of reverence given in Monte Cassino by the King of Franks and Lombards, Charlemagne, who had asked for a faithful copy of the Holy Rule to be handed over to him to allow reproduction in numberless manuscripted replicas; from those places and deeds and gestures, the unrestrained, groundbreaking beam of Benedictine monasticism had spread across the Carolingian Empire and throughout Europe, as the foundation of the common identity and collective heritage which today is shared by all peoples of the Continent.

Sitting on the Town Hall's steps, I was looking at the busy, heedless people who passed by the statue dedicated to the holy man; they were utterly unaware of the silent call which Benedict, from high above, addressed to them. That centrifugal motion of old, from Norcia to Italy and then to Europe, had rendered the small town lost in the Apennines the focal point of a change, cultural as well as religious, that would mark the history of the Western world for as long as fifteen hundred years. Yet how many of those passers-by, who were crossing the paved square, were aware that the shadow of their illustrious fellow-citizen, projecting onto the finely laid joints of the glistening slabstones, extended across more than ten centuries? Nonetheless, their feet went treading on that shadow in haste — unconcerned, unmindful.

And I had found a different motion, as I continued to follow the thread of indistinct trails, and faintly-shaped clues, weaving my way through my strange investigation; a diverse fluctuation, revealing a course contrary to that prominent spiritual stream which, proceeding from Norcia, had brought a man, and the monastic system he had established, into the forefront of the grand historical framework of European culture. This new oscillation had been altogether centripetal: from Northern Europe, such motion had retraced the same steps of the former — as though it were a sort of swaying pendulum, coming back home with decreasing impulse and intensity — reverting to Norcia, the very town from which that earlier, momentous motion had originated in the first place. And the focal point of the whole oscillation had been the legend of Tannhäuser.

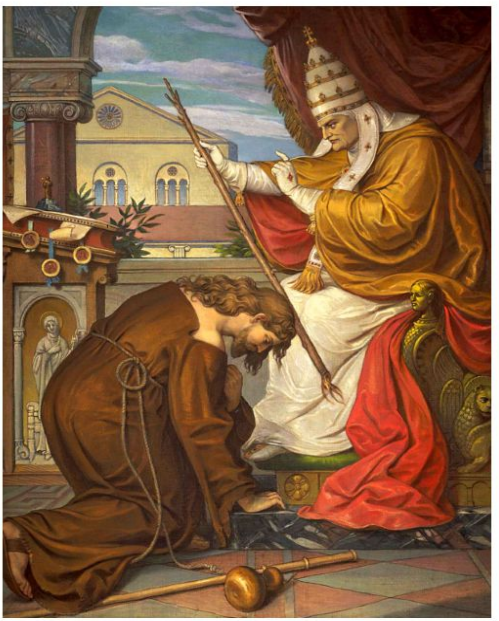
Who on earth was Tannhäuser?

Taking in with a single glance the whole square, as seen from the topmost step of the Town Hall's stairway, I endeavoured to retrace the preliminary outcome of the inquiry I had carried out during the previous days, while I was immersed in the peacefulness of my apartment in the Roman district of Borgo Pio.

The scanty biographical data included only partial information, lacking seemingly any relevance with my quest. Tannhäuser was a German knight and *minnesänger* — a minstrel and a lyric poet — who was born near Salzburg in 1205. Only a few details were known about his life. He had been a courtier of Frederick II in Wien; he had also been the author of a number of poetic works, inspired by the tradition

of courtly love. No doubt he had led a venturesome, dissipated life, as he wandered the royal and princely courts, pursuing his own fortune and pleasures; and there was virtually no certainty on the subject of the date and place of his death.

This was the available historical data, lacking completeness and thoroughly inadequate; besides, at all appearances, it seemed to convey no meaning at all with reference to the subject I was presently considering.



However, a queer, remarkable detail soon aroused my curiosity. Around the year 1430, a strange tale had spread, in German-speaking territories, about the *minnesänger* who had lived two centuries earlier; according to the tale, in the course of his restless wandering, he had chanced upon a mountain, under which the goddess Venus had settled her hidden abode after the coming of Christ into the world. After penetrating the mount, whose name was *Frau Venus Berg* — Mount Venus — Tannhäuser had enjoyed a full year plunged into the wicked, lustful pleasures which the goddess and her charming damsels

used to bestow upon their visitors. When twelve months had elapsed, the German knight, feeling now that he had had enough of all that, and seized by a sense of sudden dislike and repulsion for the lecherous, unholy bliss he had been experiencing in the fairy, underground world, left the mountain, as the fear for the salvation of his immortal soul was growing stronger in him. In shame and regret, he had taken the road to Rome, where he was determined to beseech Pope Urban IV for his pardon and forgiving blessing.

But, as for Tannhäuser, no prospect of pardon could any longer be conceived. According to the legendary tale, the Pope had rejected, with contemptous anger, any avowal of sincere repentance uttered by the wretched soul; instead, he had commanded the knight to leave at once, and get out of his holy sight: his iniquities actually deserved so outright a verdict of disdain and guilt, that the Pope's wooden staff, plated in pure gold, would have had to sprout forth blossoming buds, prior to provide his own consent — the consent of the Vicar of Christ — to forgiveness and pardon; that would be an acquittal to be accorded to a man whose soul was as burdened with sins, and so greatly loathsome, as to rival in baseness the outrageous load which stained the name and memory of the great betrayer, Judas Iscariot.

Tannhäuser — turned down by the Pope and forlorn as he was; seized by a dark, grievous feeling of misery; and petrified by the Eye of God, which was staring at him with an unfriendly, unforgiving glare from the heavens above, and in his own mind had already sentenced him to eternal damnation — had then departed from Rome, heading again to the *Frau Venus Berg*; into that mountain, the wretched knight, his heart oppressed by a desperate anguish that was utterly intolerable to him, would submerge himself again, and this time forever. He would reappear to the sight of the merciless world no more.

Yet the tale goes further: according to legend, three days had not elapsed after Tannhäuser's disconsolate plea to the unmerciful Pope, that verily the gilt wooden staff of the Vicar of Christ got covered with flowers, which blossomed out of the holy crosier's seasoned wood as if by miracle; and, upon seeing such a prodigious wonder, to Pope Urban was revealed in full the hardness of his own heart; so that the Holy Father had immediately sent out his swiftest heralds and most trustworthy messengers, so as to seek him out in whichever coner of the country he might be; and the heralds and messengers left without

delay, and searched the whole country at length, asking all the subjects to the rule of the Church, whether anybody had ever shared his bread with said knight, or possibly exchanged any remarks with him. But it was too late: he had vanished away into nothingness; and no one in the wide world could report that he had ever been seen or met, in his worldly frame.

When — as I was going through the dusty pile of old books which had happened to encumber my studio's desk of late — when I had come across the legend of Tannhäuser for the very first time, my attention had been acutely struck by the patent, unmistakable connections with the mythical subject which made up the connective tissue of the lore I was presently addressing; so much so that I had been forced to postpone the work I was doing at the time, and raise my eyes from the bundles of yellowing papers, leaning back musingly in my chair.

A mountain, and a knight; a subterranean kingdom, full of enchantment, where a goddess and sorceress had established her abode; an unholy stay among unchaste maidens, of gorgeous, divine fairness; the shameful remorse, the feeling of dread for his inexcusable guilt; the ghastly vision of hellfire; the frantic escape from the enthralling spell; the attempt to seek a forgiving blessing from the Pope in Rome. All of them were manifest, bewildering coincidences.

Yielding to a scruple which I found pointless afterwards, I set myself to reading anew the pages of *Guerrin Meschino* and *The Paradise of Queen Sibyl* that dealt with the topic of the escape from the cavern and the subsequent pilgrimage to Rome to beseech the Pope's pardon. In the romance by Andrea da Barberino, Guerrino would journey to Rome and — even though he had been so bold as to enter the place where the Sibyl dwelt, thus breaking a commandment of the Almighty — the Holy Father would not deny him the remission of his sins; indeed he would give his blessing to the knight, addressing him with the words «thou shalt be forgiven by me as well as by Jesus». On the other hand, in the account written by Antoine de La Sale, the German knight would meet a fate alike to that of Tannhäuser's: the Roman Pope would actually refuse to bestow his blessing upon him; and indeed the poor knight, just like an outcast, would be banished from the Holy Father's presence — «comme homme perdu, le chassa de sa presence». Overtaken by a dreary, bottomless despair, he would hide

himself again inside the Sibyl's cave. He would also leave a letter behind, which he entrusted to the shepherds of the highlands. With his last words, he complained about the sternness of the Pope's heart, and his own wretched doom. And the Pope had ordered to bring him back; but he could only ascertain that the knight had abandoned this world. The Roman pontiff bitterly regretted his loss; he had then commanded that the entrance to the Sibyl's cave — «l'entrée de celle cave» — be dismantled, so that no man could ever gain access to it anymore, «n'y peust retourner»; and he had issued a decree which prohibited anyone from entering the cavern.

To my great surprise, it was apparent that a queer, crazy relationship was taking shape between the legend of Tannhäuser and the myth of an Italian Sibyl, who resided amidst the mountains of the Apennines. The sources of both tales seemed to be basically the same; the role played by the *Frau Venus Berg* within the story of Tannhäuser was very much similar to what Mount Sibyl stood for in ancient Italian lore, which assumed that a fairy inhabitant lurked and lived among the mountains that lifted their peaks near the town of Norcia.

Yet how could that be, that a legend rooted in the German-speaking regions of Northern Europe, featuring a thirteenth-century knight as its main character, might entertain any relation with a local Italian tradition, originating in remotely distant places, which were enclosed within a wall of desolate mountains — the Apennines — off the main routes being travelled, at that time, by pilgrims and wayfarers?

Sitting in my studio in Rome, I had spent many days of work, with a view to gaining further insight; I had come to a conclusion, somewhat banal, yet all the same soothingly reassuring: that was — merely — that no link, nor connection of any sort could be established at all, as I said to myself. Indeed, no relation was to be found between the rumours which, many centuries ago, had spread about Tannhäuser, the German gentleman and poet, who allegedly had vanished off the face of the earth to join an underground realm, hidden in the very heart of the *Frau Venus Berg*, a fairy kingdom ruled by a pagan goddess, and live there an endless life; and the other rumours, the ones relating to Mount Sibyl, whose crests would conceal — according to the peasantry — the magnificent abode of an oracle, named after a divine

being that possibly had survived the fall of the classical world, wiped out by the coming of Jesus Christ's shining glory.

Leaning on my chair, the dim glow of a lamp illuminating my desk, I continued my examination of tattered editions published in Germany, as well as my perusal of frayed copies of old scientific journals, whose headings referred to surveys and researches, now totally forgotten, into the lore of the ancient German populations. However, nothing appeared to be found: no link, no correspondence at all was establishing any patent connection between the two different traditions. No written work, be it antique or contemporary, went as far as to assert that the *Frau Venus Berg* were to be located in Italy, and — moreover — that it corresponded exactly, in some insane sort of way, to that very mountain, raising its peak near Norcia, known to everybody by the name of Mount Sibyl.

However, as I proceeded further into my investigation, a dreary weariness, a sort of masked dread, had started to take hold of my heart. I was feeling that my fingers, while unfolding the tattered pages, were getting increasingly damp with a nervous, uneasy perspiration; my eyes ran through the printed lines with a haste that was unusual, as though I feared to stumble, at the very end, upon some kind of unexpected clue: a link, a smooth transition, which could make the two legends akin, by attesting their common nature; a dual essence, as if they were the two opposing sides of the same coin; a declaration — the more striking and unmistakable, because founded on a twofold, convergent evidence — of the possibility, though slight as it might be, of the actual existence, in the real world, of something tangible and intrinsically true; something that might be subject to close inspection, and, in principle, assessed and spotted as a factual presence in a special, unique place. A grim reality, which — had it all been just a tiny part of true facts — I eventually ought to confront with, in real life.

On the verge of a strain that was getting almost unbearable, in an old copy of the *Zeitschrift des Vereins für Volkskunde*, a scientific journal dealing with German lore, published in 1907, I finally found the link, the connecting bond: it was an article reporting on ethnographic topics, signed by a certain Heinrich Dubi, a Swiss scholar who had long been working on Tannhäuser's legend; in his article, he quoted an excerpt from a still older book, whose title was *De nobilitate et rusticitate*,

written around the year 1450 by Felix Hemmerlin, a cleric and essayist born in Zurich.

«Close to the town of Norcia is Mount Sibyl», wrote Hemmerlin, «amidst cliffs riddled with hollows and caverns, which pierce the rock deep into the mountains' hidden core; this mount is commonly known as *Venusberg*, because those subterranean chambers harbour evil beings, fiendish spirits and demons, taking the shape of graceful maidens…».

Great drops of chill sweat suddenly sprang from my forehead: my inquiry had reached a crucial stage, a dreadful, unexpected junction. «Summo in Monte Appennino Sibylla horrifica, immanem specum incolens…». Two unrelated traditions, which originated in places a long distance apart, narrated the very same tale: there was an enchanted mountain; and that mountain, the *Frau Venus Berg*, was exactly, precisely, Mount Sibyl. And it was located in Italy. Near the town of Norcia.

I rose to my feet. From the window of my study, which I had left slightly ajar, a light nocturnal breeze was creeping in.

It wasn't anymore a matter of foolish chatter, a mere question of idle gibberish circulating among illiterate shepherds and drunk peasants, during the cheerful festive evenings held in remote mountain villages — in spite of their having been collected and reported, with polished, literary words, by such poets as Andrea da Barberino, or gentlemen like Antoine de La Sale. Hidden behind those tales, and screened by all that silly, flimsy babble, something true — something as real as it was unconceivable — might conceal itself. Something awful.

One thing, at least, was now apparent: the obscure, uncanny story about the Sibyl had crossed the narrow boundaries marking Norcia's countryside; it had reverberated in the clear air, among the wayfarers and the soldiers of fortune on their way along the ancient roads heading northwards, across the Alps; it had resounded with a sinister, vicious note; until that very tale had come to the attention of scholars and men of letters living in distant lands; a tale which had possibly lured men and adventurers from many different countries, urged by a craving for forbidden pleasures and hidden treasures, and pressed by an eager desire to check firsthand the trustworthiness of so extraordinary and perplexing a narration.

In his *De nobilitate et rusticitate*, Hemmerlin reported of a Swiss traveller, a certain Simplicianus, who had climbed the mountain up to the cave to enjoy the sensual delights that the Sibyl — according to hearsay, she was no less than Venus, the goddess of love — would impart to her guests; and what about Tannhäuser himself, and Guerrino, and the German knight mentioned by Antoine de La Sale, all of them part of a legion of visitors and beseechers, coming from distant and diverse nations, who were looking for tasteful, forbidden pleasures and immoderate riches, or wished to ask the oracle grave and formidable questions, which in no other way would get a response?

I realized that the connection between the two worlds — the German legend of Tannhäuser and the Italian myth of a Sibyl — was so thoroughly intertwined, in a single embrace, with the essence of both, that there was no way at all to sever it.

In the following days, which I spent in further research, this realization had opened, before my very eyes, a passage to a deeper and more thorough understanding. I had finally recognized what I should be looking for; I was determined to track down each and any of the footprints that the legend had stamped — as if on soft, wet mud — on the hystory, culture and traditions of German- and Flemish-speaking people.

I had found out that many scholars, in Northern Europe, had been working at length on this peculiar subject. They regarded Norcia, from far off, as a sort of fairy land, among the mountainous ridges of which dwelt a weird, fascinating secret. In his *Theatrum orbis terrarum*, published in Antwerp in 1572, Abraham Oertel, the Flemish geographer and cartographer, reported that in central Italy is located the Apennine mountain, where a formidable cavern is the abode of some obscure creature known as the Sibyl — «Appenninus mons… in quibus antrum illud horribile est quod Sibyllae cognominant»; he also noted that such a cave and mountain were also renowned in his own northerly land, but with a different name: «hoc antrum nostratibus quoque innotuit, sub nomine Frau Venus Berg». This was the actual name by which the fairy mount was known across the German-speaking regions. The Flemish scholar also provided a description of the magnificent halls and lecherous maidens — «lascivientibus puellis» — which adorned the secret depths of the mountain. And Paul von Merle, who published his *Cosmographia generalis* in Amsterdam in 1605,

wrote of the mighty oracular cavern, the «Sibyllae specus… in Appennino immanis sane et orribilis», with its cortege of voluptuous damsels, residing in a wondrous subterranean palace.

It must be noted that the sinister reputation of Mount Sibyl had spread across the Alps long before the end of the sixteenth century. Already in 1431, a twentysix-year-old Silvio Enea Piccolomini, who would later become Pope Pius II, wrote a letter to his brother Giorgio, wherein he narrated that an astronomer and physician from Saxony, having been informed of a Mount Venus situated in Italy, had asked the Pope-to-be whether he had ever heard of it. At first, the young Piccolomini had not been able to come back with any specific answer; however, that inquiry subsequently had brought to his mind that, in the ancient Duchy of Spoletium, not far from the town of Norcia, there was actually a precipitous cliff and a huge cavern, «praeruptus mons ingentem speluncam», a place where witches and evil spirits gathered together during certain nights — «striges esse, et daemones ac nocturnas umbras» — to unleash the power of black magic.

Yet Piccolomini, a man of faith since his early youth — he would steer the Church, as a Pope, with steadiness and integrity, fully honouring, with the quality of his papacy, his own accession name — remarked in his letter that he had never gained any firsthand knowledge of such matters. «Haec non vidi nec vidisse curavi, nam quod pec-

cato discitur, melius est ignorasse», he said: I have never witnessed facts of that sort, nor have I ever cared to; since what can be apprehended only through sin, it is much safer not to know at all.

The Saxon astronomer was but the forerunner of a long series of foreigners, who, for centuries upon centuries, would set off for Italy, enthralled by the legend of the *Frau Venus Berg*, and would proceed as far as the inhabited, unfriendly region of the Central Apennines; there lay Norcia, the solitary Old Town, surrounded by gloomy mountains, which held in their rocky, contorted bosom, an ancient secret. This secret was being craved after by men living in the wintry lands of Northern Europe, who deeply longed for the Sibyl in their innermost dreams.

Then, one day, a day of the year 1861, the awesome music of a magnificent, entrancing opera resounded in Paris: its title was *Tannhäuser*, and its composer was Richard Wagner. And despite the bad reception, which his work suffered during that premiere on account of the unjustified and utterly biased animosity held by the French *beau monde* towards the German composer, in the following years *Tannhäuser*'s score — so vividly enriched with musical innovations, so strikingly expressive in its dauntless combination of spirituality and voluptuousness — contributed to propagate the uncontrollable voice of that fascinating legend.

And when the ouverture theme rises softly, lifted into the air by the sylvan resonances of the horns and oboes; when the breath of the strings, so melancholically moving at first, then resolute and plentiful, joins the orchestral crescendo, marked by the lofty dignity of the brass section; when the music starts depicting, with daring chords, the cavern on the *Frau Venus Berg* and the enticing captivation of the voluptuous goddess whose kingdom was concealed in the subterranean recesses of the mountain; and when, finally, the wail of the imprisoned knight surges as an earnest, passionate and disheartened call, «O Königin! Göttin, lass' mich ziehn!» — «Oh my Queen, my Goddess, let me depart!» — that was the very moment when the audience, imbued with the spirit of romanticism, yearning for an unattainable love, began to dream of the mount, the cave, and the goddess; and some of them, indeed, would leave their homes and families, and proceed — as travellers, tourists, adventurers and scientists — to Italy and Norcia; they would engage themselves in a search to discover the very

fount of that legendary tale, whose enthralling resonance had begun to echo unrestrained in their souls.

The stone lions, at the bottom of the Town Hall staircase, were still keeping their silent watch, their muscles stiffened in motionless anticipation of an imminent, deadly leap. Norcia, encircling the great round square with its houses and walls, bathed in sunlight, dominated by the dignified, thoughtful figure of St. Benedict, was attending with total unconsciousness to its own daily occupations, and — immersed in the neat, charming purity of its well-proportioned buildings — knew nothing at all about all that. The town did not care in the least for that radial motion which, in times long past, had attracted towards its walled ramparts, from throughout Europe, a host of foreign visitors, so uncommon and out of the ordinary, in search of a dream which was hidden among precipitous ridges, and cliffs stormed by fierce, relentless winds; they were following the footsteps of a thirteenth-century knight, the name of whom would reverberate among the city walls with a dull sound, as an unintelligible word; the very stones of Norcia were completely oblivious to the special and momentous part that the myth, across long, inscrutable centuries of preparation and refinement, had resolved to assign to them.

For the time being, I could not trust any of my feelings. Nonetheless, I sensed that I should try to take on that burden myself: the task of lifting the heavy veil of forgetfulness, and bringing back to mind what lies beneath the broken, unmindful surface of time; a recollection so audaciously profound, and throbbing throughout the centuries with the pulse of innumerable human lives, as to make it possible to cross the abyss which divides our reveries from the nightmarish illusions dreamt of, long ago, by men who have now turned into dust. Such human spirits still demand us, with an earnest entreaty, not to forget; they appeal to our souls, so that we might revive, for the very last time, the dream they had been dreaming in their earthly life.

CHAPTER 7
THE CELEBRATED MOUNT SIBYL

AND, NOW, I was in Norcia again. I had wandered along trails running across steep mountain-sides, flanked by bottomless abysses, where the echo of rushing waters reverberated among the impenetrable thickets — small wooded miniatures as they appeared in the distance — as I followed the toilsome progress of Guerrino the Wretched, who, having stripped himself of all his weapons, ascended the precipitous, uneven slope of the mount to reach the fairy cavern, where he would get a much sought-after response about his parents and kindred. I had joined the party of witty peasants, bridles in hand and humourous talk on their lips, who were proceeding along the grassy track, engaged in an intent conversation with Antoine de La Sale; and I had listened, side by side with the gentleman from Provence — as the horses, snorting now and then, were toiling their way up the slope — to the eery tales that those walking companions were weaving, while giving each other knowing looks, to the benefit of that foreign visitor, whose visage expressed an earnest, concentrated interest. I had beheld Tannhäuser, his chainmail armour glittering in the sun, his

face marked with tears, stooping over the entrance to the dark cave, the wind on the high crest playing with his hair, as he wavered and faltered, with a last thought of regretful hesitation, before plunging anew — and this time for evermore — into the hidden realm of the goddess.

Yet, such visions were only fragments of dreams: they were but fanciful reveries, written by men of letters, which I had been relishing during more than one day of insatiable, frantic scrutiny of old papers, in the seclusion of my study in Rome, when the case of the Sibyl was so thoroughly enthralling my soul that it had allowed for no other disturbances, no other concerns but the reading of literary works and essays; so much so that I had found myself almost compelled to neglect even my basic, everyday needs.

Presently, however, I could not satisfy myself with any additional excuse: following the transfer of my investigation from Rome to Norcia, I would have finally resolved, although with some sort of uneasy reluctancy, to confront the myth in the very land where it belonged; in that region of highlands, where much stronger was the influence it was apt to exert, and more perceptible was the grim fascination pouring out from that legendary lore.

Walking along Via Ugo Foscolo, in the central area of Norcia, I could feel, on my shoulders, as it streamed from across the Corso Sertorio, the chill, uncanny breath which originated from the mountains, covered with shadowy woods, which were looming over the city walls, and crowned, that very day, with dark, rolling clouds, sailing fast over the barren peaks, and barely touching, with icy fingers overloaded with rain, the scanty herbage clinging to the rocky crests.

Past the embracing walls of stone — so warm and sturdy and sheltering — across the expanse of cultivated land, drenched with rain, which, after skirting the Church of the Holy Virgin of Saving Grace, ascended the mountain-side up a sharp slope, marked by the steep, hollow gorge of the Capregna valley; through the sulky woods, oozing with a secret dew, inhabited by invisible, brutish lives, whose presence is only betoken by a sudden rustling, vanished at once; beyond the elevated meadows — the undisputed realm of herds and birds of prey — the antique trails wound their way among the ravines and the bushy thickets, outreaching the bleak ridges of Mount Patino and Mount Poggio di Croce, and opening onto the impressive, aweso-

me view of Mount Vettore and the Pian Grande; and then the tracks would turn northwards, after passing the hamlet of Castelluccio di Norcia, towards the Pian Perduto; from there, they would commence their rapid rise, in the mists and rainstorms, heading to Mount Argentella, and up to vertiginous paths running along the crests, which, by cutting through the dizzy peaks of Palazzo Borghese and Mount Porche, led at last — beyond Vallelunga's Peak, raged by savage winds rampaging with chilly unfriendliness — to the grim, sinister pinnacle of Mount Sibyl.

A sense of dismal confusion, a fear that was both subtle and unjustified, came upon me; as if those trails — resembling an invisible, subterranean streamlet which, emerging from the ground at some points, again thrusts itself under the rocky soil, vanishing from sight once more; and, nevertheless, the running water is capable of establishing a sort of unbroken connection between an unknown spring and a far-off, indifferent mouth — as if those trails might mark out a covert relationship, that would be dreadfully straight, between that hideous mountain and myself, so enabling its divine dweller to cast her dark, ill-omened influence as far as the town of Norcia.

As I proceeded along the street, a light rain falling from the sky with chilly steadiness, I was trying to dispel such unhealthy thoughts: I could not let my spirit yield to impressions that were so balefully vivid as to weaken my grasp over the inquiry I was determined to carry out. I was firm in my resolution not to allow adverse circumstances to prompt myself to put forward cowardly excuses; I did not intend to avow, as Enea Silvio Piccolomini did, «haec non vidi nec vidisse curavi»: I witnessed nothing, and nothing I intend to witness. In my present position, these words, which truly attested to the noble uprightness of Pope Pius II against sin and evil, would rather declare to the world my own faint-heartedness; a sort of feeble, openly visible bid only aimed at shunning any possible new contact with that eerie touch, which, in the Piazza del Teatro, under a night sky, had laid a finger on me.

With the purpose of avoiding lures of that sort, on my arrival in Norcia I had made immediate provision for the purchase of additional documents and material. In fact, I needed further documentation, that could be retrieved only on the spot, in Norcia. My design was to defi-

ne a detailed plan of action, and then get ready for the subsequent steps.

I had carefully taken into consideration — by weighing each single aspect, and all of the prospective issues of the matter — the opportunity to proceed, right away, without any further delay, up to the crest of Mount Sibyl, so as to inspect, straight off and in person, the actual conditions existing on the mountain-top; and, if appropriate, enter without hesitation the oracular cavern.

Yet, for the time being, I preferred to call this thing off. I thought — rather I was absolutely certain of that — that it would be an untimely choice to rush things, and ascend that peak, in the absence of any adequate provisions, lacking both a clear perspective and a definite goal; with the prospect, too, of being perhaps bitterly disappointed by the actual findings on the rocky summit: I may find nothing; or, possibly, I may come across some kind of disenchantment; something troublesome and unsatisfactory; in any case, something that would not live up to my expectations, which I had fancied as I investigated further into the matter.

Or — perhaps — I feared I may actually find some thing real.

I deeply felt I was not yet ready. I realized that the time had not yet come for me to get up there. At the very thought, a horrible dread — the same dread which, that night in Norcia, facing the antique book by Lactantius, had gripped my throat and put a shadow over my eyes, stifling my breath, and casting me into the ghastliness of a mournful, motionless insensibility — took hold of my spirit again, so that I was compelled to postpone, until an unspecified, far-away time in the hazy future, the inescapable moment when I should confront openly with the mighty fury of the myth.

Hence, I had determined to defer my visit to the peak, and rather resolved to commence a search, in the sole bookshop in town, along Via Foscolo, that contained an adequate stock of manifold volumes and papers, with a view to retrieving additional sources of information which might confer a local hue to the framework I had begun to shape up in the course of the early stage of my investigation, during several weeks of in-depth study.

An initial attempt on my part, though timid and irresolute as it was, to gather some firsthand information — by taking advantage of my position as a tourist in Norcia, and being a guest of a hotel situa-

ted in the town centre — from the people whom I chanced to meet and talk to, had utterly failed. I ascertained that my counterparts seemed to know absolutely nothing of the deeds of Guerrino, also known as the Wretched, despite those deeds had been accomplished in their own native land, and had been celebrated throughout the centuries. Neither did the name of Antoine de La Sale awaken in their minds any sort of recollection; not to mention the noun «Tannhäuser», which seemed to have won no fame at all in town. The knight's appellative would only elicit — over and above a customary stare which always proved to be as blank as perplexed — a sort of bewildered expression on their countenance, as if they presumed that, by the utterance of that queer name, I had gone too far, since I had pronounced an inappropriate, and possibly derogatory, word. As a result, I henceforth restrained myself from carrying out any additional, hazardous attempt to engage a conversation on the subject.

So I proceeded with the purchase of several magazines which addressed the topic of the Sibyl dwelling in the Apennines; the authors of such scientific papers were local scholars, who were adept in the legends and lore of Norcia and its territory; and professors at the University of Perugia, who also devoted part of their time to the study of this ancient tradition, in an attempt to revive its once vibrant spirit by applying to the old tales the critical reasoning typical of modern science.

Among the volumes I had bought, there were some used books, including a number of out-of-date publications, no longer available for sale, and old travel guidebooks printed in Norcia and Spoletium in the second half of the twentieth century — much tattered indeed, yet providing on the subject a bounty of information and lots of unexpected details, which cannot be found in the guidebooks currently in stock, as the latter are conceived for the perfunctory, day-trip oriented tourist, looking for a consumer experience of places and food as fast as the travel schedule can afford.

In the lobby of my hotel, a lofty, sixteenth-century building that has served as an inn and posthouse for more than a hundred years, a fine fire mirthfully blazing upon a stone hearth, I was comfortably lounging on a large, bronze leather Chesterfield, with a glass of ruby-red wine sitting on a small glass table, close at hand; and I was about to go through the pile of papers which I had procured earlier that day.

Without delay, I got absorbed in frantic, passionate reading; as soon as I started turning the pages of those withered digests and crumpled, moth-eaten guidebooks, I began to come across a wealth of fresh, additional information, of which I had previoulsly retrieved only scraps and fragments. It was now fuel to the fire of my burning thirst; a thirst craving for each single detail, for any further insight into each relevant circumstance which may help to improve my understanding of the might and reach of the legend of the Sibyl.

Browsing through a small guidebook describing the hiking trails that departed from the elevated plain of Castelluccio, I noticed that the central pages carried an attached drawing or picture of larger size, neatly folded to fit in with the height and width of the booklet. As I opened the guidebook, the inner sheet popped out and unfolded in my hands like an accordion, thus revealing what appeared to me as a collection of old photographs, in colour, depicting gorgeous mountain scenery, lying under blue skies whose brilliant hue had already faded away with time.

A picture abruptly struck upon my very soul. I stared at it with trembling, inexplicable emotion and a sudden feeling of horror, as an uncontrollable tremor expanded through my hands and fingers, making the frayed, withered paper crackle with a hideous noise — as though some sharp, hooked nails were scratching on the wizened skin of a wild animal's carcass; it seemed to me as if my parched throat were suddenly crammed with some sort of dusty filth, given off by the ragged paper, consumed by innumerable years of rest in gloom and dampness.

My eyes went to the caption. In a fine cursive script, it stated: «the celebrated Mount Sibyl».

I put the booklet on the glass table, next to me. The lobby was empty at the time; in the adjoining room, two British tourists were intently planning their tour of a rainy, sullen Norcia, consulting each other in a low tone, and bending over their map, already drenched with rain.

For the very first time, my eyes rested on that mountain. Pictured on that large-size photograph, almost concealed among many other picturesque views of the Apennine, amid a number of images taken in Norcia and Castelluccio, and depicting grassy meadows blowing in the wind, Mount Sibyl was portrayed in pale, lustreless colours; as if

the picture were shot in an old-fashioned black and white: a detail which fostered an unpleasant feeling of distant seclusion, and unconquerable secrecy.

I picked the guidebook up again and beheld that picture with increased, frantically passionate concentration.

The shot was taken from the summit of a ridge: a long crest was visible, a sort of narrow, elongated spur, which proceeded upwards, with a gradual slope, among the scant herbage growing on the mountain-side; deep ravines, plunging straight downward, were to be seen gaping on each side, just beneath the trail which ascended the slope along the edge of the ridge. It was clear that the photographer had intended to take a picture of the mount — the main feature in sight — with a view to catching the impression of mysterious loftiness, as well as of dismal, oppressive culmination of the vista, as though that cliff represented an obstruction hindering the progress towards the upper, heavenly regions of the sky above: the enchanted realm of wind and pure sunlight.

Indeed, Mount Sibyl stood out conspicuously in the middle of the picture, only slightly aside, at the very end of the long perspective marked by the pathway running along the airy ridge; beyond that pa-

thway, the mountain rose abruptly, with the cliff forming a further, imposing, overhanging rock face, exposed altogether to the fury of the elements; and, beneath the very top, there was a ring of solid, barren rock; a sheer wall, rising for a few dozen feet, which encircled the uppermost region of the mount: that was the crown of the Sibyl.

My soul was overcome by a host of blurred visions, and weird, chimerical impressions: I saw the crowned mount, overshadowing in dignity every other peak; its top endowed with the queenly crown; I beheld the hallowed cliff, which the goddess inhabited, reverberating with the raging excitement of a pagan faith, and the unchaste worship accorded to the deity by frantic, inebriated believers; the words written by Publius Ovidius Naso in his *Fasti* suddenly echoed in my mind: «frontem Cybele redimita corona», Cybele, the Great Mother, her forehed wearing the turreted crown; «convocat aeternos ad sua festa deos; convocat et satyros et, rustica numina, nymphas», she summons the immortal gods to her revelling feast; she calls for the satyrs and nymphs and sylvan deities to take part in orgiastic rituals; and the ravines echo with the clashing noise of the cymbals — the «cymbala rauca» mentioned by Sextus Propertius in his *Elegies* — which the goddess herself hits and shakes unceasingly, as a feverish accompaniment to the frenzied dances of the worshippers.

I struggled fiercely to break loose from the grasp of such wild, foolish visions, which — as a gloomy tide breaking onto a desolate seashore, barren and devoid of any human presence, in a night of darkness — grew and swelled within my mind, so much so that they threatened to overcome any form of reasonable thinking, crushing me down and hurling my soul, in the very end, into the soothing, deceptive, death-bringing waters of dreaming, whose rule and jurisdiction wholly pertain to legendary lore.

«Would you like more wine, sir?» The waiter's voice pierced that veil of insanity, shattering its malignant spell. With a gesture of denial, I lifted the glass from the table: it was half full of ruby-red wine, and I took a few small sips.

It was clear that any attempt on my part to draw closer to that mountain — a place lost in a timeless enchantment, which, for ages, had turned the rocky peak into a sort of shrine, a hallowed sanctuary sacred to the cult of a divine oracle — was doomed to failure. I should have adopted a gradual approach, and pursue my way along a road

that was still untrodden, by taking a path which could be described, perhaps, as mystically secretive; a step-by-step progression, which entailed my finding a course among the many enigmas that I would certainly encounter, so as to deepen my understanding, my intelligence of the myth; growing in wisdom and enlightenment, and finally readying myself for the full disclosure of some sort of revelation, which I would attain for certain at the very end of this troublesome, demanding climb.

I again laid the booklet about the hiking trails of Castelluccio on the glass table; this time, I neatly folded the large attached page, and put it carefully back within the guidebook itself.

I needed to change my plans, and to follow a different course in coping with this initial stage of my investigation; I ought to make efforts to steer it towards a new route, lest I was compelled to confront — right away, and with the limited resources I could presently rely on — the overwhelming, godlike potency of the myth.

Being in Norcia at the time, I started asking myself whether I could gain access to additional sources, which might provide me with firsthand information on the Apennine Sibyl and the crowned mountain wherein the rumours said her abode was concealed. As I said before, my preliminary attempts to gain further insight into the matter, by asking the folks I had the chance to stumble upon as a visitor and a tourist, had resulted in nothing. And I was also certain that, even if I questioned people coming from other adjoining territories, such as Umbria and Marche, I would have secured, in any case, only a collection of puzzled looks; so uncompromisingly persevering is that durable endeavour which, over a long span of years, has been stealthily intent on scraping off people's minds any remaining bit of reminiscence, any surviving fragments of memory — the bits and fragments that would tell those people who they were and where they all came from.

This is the actual outcome of a long-lasting attempt, aimed at erasing any awareness in the consumers' minds: an awareness which is a bothersome, unwanted burden, that would encumber the consumer's hand when performing his or her purchase, bringing forth the unwelcomed result of a decreased frequency and effectiveness — may it never happen! — of such gestures.

Since the modern residents of Norcia did not elicit any enthusiasm for the legend of their Sibyl, despite her having contributed to the

fame achieved, throughout the world, by their native town, it was inevitable for me to travel a different road. To get valuable information on the oracle and the uncanny cavern hidden in the abysses of the mountain, I would have to direct my attention to such inhabitants of Norcia, and Italians from other regions, who, in older times, had yielded to the silent, fascinating spell of that fairy tale, and committed part of their lives to the quest for the same answers I was also pursuing with my present inquiry.

And many souls I could have addressed, who had confronted with the mystery of the Sibyl throughout the centuries: in my perusal of the old guidebooks that I had purchased, as I was going haphazardly through the pages, I at once came across an ideal progression of names and faces; some of those people were native of Norcia, such as Fortunato Ciucci, Giovanbattista Lalli, Carlo Renzi; while others were born in other lands, like Flavio Biondo, Battista Spagnoli, Leandro Alberti, Pio Rajna, Cesare Lippi-Boncambi. The list also included some celebrated men of letters — Ludovico Ariosto was one of them — and a few people whose names resounded as foreign in tone, and utterly unknown to me, like Gaston Paris and Fernand Desonay. I would soon have had the chance to make acquaintance with all of them, by calling forth their features, and by engaging myself in profitable conversations with their shadows: I longed to listen to the old tales they would certainly be willing to tell about that eerie cave, placed on the summit of Mount Sibyl's crowned peak.

Accordingly, I resolved to question those ancient citizens of Norcia, and of Italy, who — as they had been less affected by that foolish desecration, with which today's consumer civilization greedily eats up its very self, and the very memory of itself, by replacing it with useless, gratifying loads of cars, sporting events and smartphones — the more had been able to probe into that legend. They were the ones who had been given, in return, the rare, invaluable gift of the dazzling radiance of the myth, as it disclosed itself to their very eyes.

CHAPTER 8
SUBTERRANEAN WATERS

THE UNSEEN WATERS find their way along the hidden routes running beneath the houses and streets, creeping in between the solid rock and the old masonry built in past ages; here, the underground water flows about a massive rock, finely cut, possibly the foundation of a temple, sacred, perhaps, to Norsia, the eponymous goddess of Norcia, buried in the darkness of the ground extending below the town; there, in the gloom, the same water encircles a sculpted fragment of marble, exquisitely carved, definitely a portion of a forgotten public hall, on top of which the vast basements of the seventeenth-century buildings above are now resting.

Proceeding from the mountains which dominate the town with their looming presence; emerging from the woods, drenched with misty, wintry rain; springing up from the founts of the Torbidone, San Martino, Holy Virgin of Capregna and Salicone, the many small creeks disappear into the pervious soil, running through secret passages, which have penetrated into the limestone since time immemorial. From time to time, they rise up again to the clear air and the sight of

men, usually following many years of concealment; all of a sudden, they re-emerge, after long days of heavy rain, in the middle of a grassy meadow, which is now flooded and turned into a marsh by the surfacing waters. Fazio degli Uberti, in his *Dittamondo*, depicts the Torbidone creek with the appropriate words: «for seven years it lies underground in disguise; then, for seven years more, it runs over the grasslands with its rushing, invigorating waters».

Such subterranean streamlets are all hurrying to a special, identical place, as though they craved for a selfsame destination, by dashing hastily beyond the city walls and then mingling their turbulent waters at the point known as Freddara, a place located to the west of the town and at the edge of the Plain of St. Scholastica, where the river Sordo springs from the ground, and the enchanted realm of the Marcite — the Marshes — begins.

Here the crystal substance of water and the green fabric of grass — unlike elements, endowed with dissonant and contrasting qualities — merge gently one into another, in a perpetual and consonant murmur, by which the visitor is entranced, delighted, appeased.

Glittering veils of liquid moisture run over the emerald herbage, gleaming in the sunlight with countless, shimmering specks of light, as if they were precious stones, a bounty forgotten by some distracted dame of the meadows: indeed, a goddess as regal as munificent; tiny rivulets of purest water make their way among the swaying weeds, soaking into the verdant turf that shines with a radiant, dazzling glare, as the soil, wet through, turns into a soft, yielding material, which is like the magical blanket that shelters the slumbers of nymphs; small cascades and miniature eddies combine playfully among the grass, creating little basins of water, which summon to a freshening, solitary ablution; in such places, at dusk, the sylvan gods may possibly be seen, as they discreetly take their ritual bath.

A bygone wisdom still lingers over that grassland and the sodden earth: perhaps it was the Benedictine monks, who, as early as the sixth century, traced out the mesh of grassy plots of land, endlessly flooded by the waters coming down from the mountains, and re-emerging from the ground, to be artfully conveyed into the old canals, the wooden gates of which direct the overabundant springs towards the water meadows, screened by lines of poplar trees. Here is the wet, vivified soil, that fulfills, to the utmost degree, its grand and primor-

dial duty, nurturing the seeds of the pasture grass in the warm bosom of the earth; the ever-running water sheltering the tiny lives from the rage of the frost, which rushes over the plain with jagged fingers during long, dismal winter months. Here the fertile ground, so tenderly guarded, is capable of yielding up to ten crops per year, for the blessing of men and the plentiful feeding of cattle: a gift that is a good omen for prosperity.

As you stroll amid the multifarious fragrances of the herbage, which is being placidly lulled by glistening veils of water, the humming insects darting by your ears, and the gentle warmth of the sun assuaging the damp vapours rising from the wet turf, your refreshed, reinvigorated spirit is inclined to yield to the soothing, appeasing spell which beauty, generously bestowed, happens to cast all around, in its own mysterious ways.

I was sitting, with my books, on a small wooden bridge, beside the ruins of an old mill which was flanked by transparent, ever-running waters. Those guidebooks and miscellaneous papers of old, withered and tattered as they were, had turned out to be an invaluable source of information, as they contained a wealth of data, as well as referenced quotations, which had been edited by men of letters, travellers and scholars, throughout many centuries. My investigation into the legend of the Sibyl would now avail itself of a further impulse, driven by lots of additional suggestions, which might lead my search towards an exciting new course.

Many people, some of them prominent, had taken an interest in the myth of the Apennine Sibyl, whether they were born in Norcia or in the nearby territories, or they had chanced to hear the accounts provided by others, who in turn had got acquainted with the legend through picturesque, multifarious reports, whose trustworthiness was uncertain; indeed, some of them had related that they had ventured as far as the summit of Mount Sibyl, noting down a number of observations marked by a varying degree of accuracy and reliability. For example, that was the case of Luigi Pulci, the fifteenth-century Italian poet, and author of the poem of chivalry *Morgante*, who wrote in his work the words «for I went to the Mountain of the Sibyl».

The *Chronicles of the antique town of Norsia*, by Father Fortunato Ciucci, a monk of the order established by Pope Celestine V, part of the larger Benedictine monastic family, provided a good instance — in

the colourful style of writing in use during the first half of the eighteenth century — of what trials lurked in wait for the daring wayfarer who was so bold as to climb the ghastly cliff, where the Sibyl had her abode. «Many of them», he wrote, «just perished from the manyfold terrors and the crags and ravines which are to be found thither, because that mount is a labyrinth of tangled turns and dreadful caves where no light ever creeps in»; death would also ensue from the ravages caused by «the tempests, hailstorms and thunderbolts», often unleashing their fury upon the mountain-top.

As I was perusing such lines, which I had found in an old guidebook of Norcia, while sitting on the wooden bridge, immersed in the shimmering glare of the crystal-clear waters which were playfully running beneath the old planks, it came back upon my mind, with a sense of concern, the vision of Mount Sibyl, as I had chanced to behold it in the picture that was included in the small, withered guidebook of the hiking trails of Castelluccio: it was easy to see a correspondence between the modern shot and the description provided by Father Ciucci — a man who was born in Norcia, and a learned scholar in local lore and traditions. Definitely he had been a true witness to an actual ascent, possibly achieved in person, up to the top of that mountain, sacred to the pagan oracle.

I went on with my reading, and I was able to retrieve further pieces of information. Among a number of illustrious men, who, in past centuries, had been living in Norcia — though forgotten altogether in our present times — and had confronted with the myth of the Sibyl, even though they had considered it a minor topic, Giovanbattista Lalli had written a few verses, ominously troublesome, and much at variance with the facetious, literary production of this sixteenth-century poet, who had achieved great renown with such compositions as *Aeneid in Mockery*, *Jerusalem Dejected* and the *Saga of the Flies*, all of them parodies of great works, including the ones by Publius Vergilius Maro and Torquato Tasso, and the latter being a satirical writing focused on the queer fondness conceived by Emperor Titus Flavius Domitianus for the world of insects, as reported by the Roman historian Suetonius.

When he had decided to deal with the legend of the Sibyl, however, Lalli had put aside all his sarcasm, and had rather articulated such feelings of anxiety and troubled unease, which he himself had definitely experienced when he had chanced to stand right in front of

the entrance to the cavern; so much so that his writing enfolds the reader in that very smell — so utterly foul, a sort of stench arising from dead, corrupted things — which seemed to ooze from within the dark, gaping void, infecting with icy fingers the visitor standing on the mountain-top: «there the vast cave of the Sibyl opens its hideous, gloomy jaws, where no sunbeam is ever let in, nor the wholesome clean air, as a dismal dread beclouds the ghastly gate».

There was one thing I had to take for granted: during the seventeenth century, when Lalli was putting down his work, the cavern was fully accessible, and anyone could take upon himself the risk of entering, even though it appeared that not so many people had been tempted into probing the hidden meanders which unfolded in the hollow heart of the mountain. Furthermore, as early as two centuries before, as attested by *Guerrin Meschino* and *The Paradise of Queen Sibyl*, it appeared that the hideous void was accessible, as reported by other writers, who did not omit to relate those feelings of foreboding and disquiet which seized any visitor, by and large, when facing that unsafe and malevolent place.

Flavio Biondo was a prominent Renaissance humanist, born in Forlì, near Bologna, in 1392. He served several Popes — including Pius II Piccolomini — and fostered, with his key historical essays, a general revival of the archeological interest about ancient Rome and her ruined monuments, lying shattered in the ground. In his work *De Italia illustrata*, he wrote that «in Nursinorum agro», in the countryside of Norcia, among the lofty peaks of the Apennine ridge and in the vicinity of a small hamlet called St. Mary in Gallo, a huge cave stood, «est caverna ingens Sibyllae vulgo appellata», which the peasants named after the Sibyl. This is an early testimony to the fact that, amidst those mountains, not far from Norcia, in a secluded region located near the village which in our present time is called Montegallo, underneath the very peak of Mount Sibyl, a large caven existed, which the populace alleged to be the abode and shelter of the pagan prophetess.

In 1510, Nicolò Peranzoni, a poet and scholar, published *De laudibus Piceni sive Marchiae Anconitanae libellus*, where he noted that the countryside, which is surmounted by the crowned mountain, was inclined to suffer the wicked, unholy fascination which leaked from the cavern of the Sibyl, «propter cavernam Sibyllae vulgo famigeratam quae […] in Appennini iugo esse fertur».

And I also found further excerpts, additional quotations. The tattered guidebooks I had purchased, their pages withered with time, retained the very remnants of an artistic society, an Italian-speaking literary setting, which — bewitched and enticed by an imagined Sibyl, concealed in the midst of distant, inaccessible mountains, though not far from Rome, the magnificent city which held the wreck of an Empire and the majesty of a papal court — had decided to write down a description of the tokens signalling that presence, endowing them with a poetic substance and setting, for both the living and posterity, the peculiar features that had struck the fancy of those writers and poets, by tickling their sensibility, which was apt to respond easily to the eerie and the picturesque.

Battista Spagnoli was a Carmelite friar born in Mantua in 1447, whose name had achieved wide renown across Europe owing to his extensive production of fine poems in Latin, to such an extent that he had been pronounced by Erasmus of Rotterdam the new Publius Vergilius Maro of the Christian world. He was the author of an educational workbook, the *Adolescentia*, whereon many generations of young students, belonging to both the lower classes and the well-to-do members of the European aristocracy, had practised their Latin, together with the decency and decorum of well-behaved Christians, so as to win a mention, humorous as well as nostalgic, in *Love's Labour's Lost* by William Shakespeare. Sure enough, the great poet was among the many young boys who had been sweating over the well-rounded, priggish Latin of the pedantic «Mantovano». In spite of all that, even Battista Spagnoli, in his work dedicated to Nicholas of Tolentino, could not escape the fascination of the divine prophetess, concealed in her rocky dwelling in the Apennines, and reported that a Sibyl lived in a cave placed on a mountain-top, «culmen in obscuris vetus est ubi fama Sibyllam degere speluncis».

And Ludovico Ariosto, the celebrated man of letters, the gentleman member of the cultivated retinue of the Dukes of Este in Ferrara, the immortal author of *Orlando furioso*, had yielded, too, to the might and captivation of that singular, extraordinary legend: «the Cumæan Sibyl», he wrote, in the octaves subsequently discarded from the final version of his famous poem, «who had fled, in antiquity, to a Cavern in the territory of Norcia, placed on a mountain-top amidst a gloomy forest», thus endorsing, with his words, that popular belief, according

to which the Cumæan Sibyl had found a refuge among the Apennine's craggy peaks, after having relinquished her abode in Cuma, in fear of the new, ever-expanding Christian faith.

I put down my books, and again turned my eyes towards the liquid, glittering gorgeousness of the Marcite, with the poplar trees gently swaying under the caressing breeze, their leaves quivering at the mellow touch of the sunbeams, pouring from the sky and allaying the dampness which sprang up from the crystal clarity of the rivulets and the dripping herbage.

The queer legend, the foolish hearsay, which so profoundly had worked upon my imagination, affecting my soul down to its very essence, and crushing it, one dark evening, on the desolate pavement of a public square in Norcia, had not refrained from enshrouding with an impalpable, cryptic veil the manifold works by writers and poets; in their books and verses, the myth re-emerged now and then, as an incoercible revelation of a concealed potency, which disclosed itself with a restrained discretion, a sort of sober and almost demure attitude; no trace could be found, in such behaviour, of the voluptuous, sinfully sensual features that had marked that same legend in the lands of Germany and Flanders; a tract that had urged many a knight from Northern Europe to travel as far as Italy, in search of an unattainable *Frau Venus Berg*.

I picked up another booklet, a short essay on local history and traditions, published many decades ago. In it, too, I could retrieve additional remarks, and references to authors and scholars, once famed and illustrious, who had all been enthralled by the secret might of that fable, which originated from the ground, the rocks, and the potencies of the Earth, concealed beneath the very roots, of unfathomable antiquity, which made up the buttresses of the mountains of Norcia.

In the work by Gian Giorgio Trìssino *Italy freed from Goths*, published in 1548, the humanist from Vicenza — better known for his having been the mentor and patron of such a sublime talent in the architectural art as Andrea Palladio — the man of letters devoted an entire chapter to an interview between Narses, a general of the Byzantine Emperor, and the Sibyl, in her dwelling on the Apennine. Narses, a military commander and a ruler, who lived in the VI century A.D., as he was waging war against the Goths in the name of Emperor Justinian, moves forward to the «far-famed Norcia», where he is seized by

a strong desire, «to go and see your celebrated Sibyl, venerable with age and wisdom, from whom, through a special regard by the Almighty, every deed of man may be known, be it accomplished today, in the remote past, or in time to come». Proceeding through that «frigid country», Narses climbs «the mount named Vittore», and then he comes at length «to a hamlet called Gallo»: there, he is told, is to be seen «the huge and deep cavern of our sapient Sibyl, to the wisdom of whom many people appeal». Yet, as it is also reported in the narration about Guerrino the Wretched, this is no safe trip: the story holds — with a patent disregard of historical truth — that «no man has ever come back from within the Sibyl's cave, other than a fellow-citizen of ours, a holy man and of rare learning, whose name is Benedict, who is now dwelling on Mount Cassino, and there he lives in solitude and sanctity».

At last, Narses arrives «at the cavern leading to the abode of the Sibyl»; he crawls through «a cranny which was elongated in shape, and gaping as an open egg»; from there on, just as had happened to the character portrayed by Andrea da Barberino, the Byzantine general will come across lovely maidens of charming beauty, who, amid «unchaste dancing and singing and playing», will admit him to the presence of «time-honored Sibyl»; and, speaking in prophecy, she will disclose to the visitor's sight the vision of things to come, and the deeds which would take place in Italy in future centuries.

Once more, in this account, the town of Norcia is celebrated, with a sort of formal, official endorsement — which the parties seem to consider as rather plain and obvious — as the true and only abode of the Apennine oracle, to whom anyone may turn, to get a response on future, forthcoming events. And Gian Giorgio Trìssino, the seventeenth-century learned scholar enamoured of the classical world, as he was writing that ponderous poem — including twentyseven lengthy chapters, the progression of the narrative requiring an episode during which Italy's glorious fortune is predicted — regarded it as quite reasonable, that his main character may proceed to a place marked by the magic of prophecy, being the abode of a most illustrious and uncontested oracle; a true prophetess, who was speaking as if through a direct link to the past ages, up to the ancient Sibyls. And, such land bestowed with the gift of prophecy, in the poet's view, could be no other place but Norcia.

Sure enough, there were people who would not be readily inclined to trust such a tale about a small town, lost in the mountains and harbouring so unusual and extraordinary a presence. One of them was Giovanni Antonio Magini, the astronomer and cartographer from Padua, who, in 1621, reported in his *General description of the Earth* that in the vicinity of Norcia, among the peaks of the Apennine chain, «a vast and ghastly hollow exists, which is commonly known as the Sibyl's cave»; however, he details that, on this specific subject, «liars and cheaters are used to utter a lot of foolish babbles». And such idle talk is the very reason for the cavern being the target of an uninterrupted parade of shifty, disreputable visitors, «insomuch as the residents of Norcia, beholding the great concourse of necromancers and wicked people of all sorts who interminably proceeded to the cave, resolved

to disrupt the passageway leading into the hollow, so as to seal it for good; and they also decided to keep a discreet watch over it».

Once again, I closed the books I was carefully perusing. They were all lying in a heap on the wooden planks of the small bridge.

At the present stage of my investigation, Norcia's repute as the place were a Sibyl dwelt, was to be considered as a plain fact. Throughout the centuries, that queer hearsay, a sort of uncanny fairy tale, had worked upon the imagination of writers and poets, and urged men from all countries to journey as far as Norcia, a small town concealed among lofty mountains, harbouring in their souls a wish that was unreasonable as well as unhealthy, and wholly unattainable: for too strong was the fascination which originated from that legend; too utterly compelling the spell arising from the crowned mount and the gloomy entrance, which rapidly precipitated into the darkness of rocky pits; too forceful the evil charm creeping out from the «huge, frightful, ghastly hollow which was named after the Sibyl», as Leandro Alberti, a Dominican friar who was the author of another «General description» — the *General description of Italy* — put down in 1550. That darkness; that unfathomable profoundness, wherefrom a sinister, bewitching summons proceeded; that call, which enticed men to leave behind all the grass and wind and sun of the mountain-top, and rather descend into the subterranean chambers hidden beneath the earth, in the gloomy dampness, passing through stone jaws, about which «a popular lore, or a foolish rumour, maintains that they would provide admittance to the realm of the Sibyl»; a gate, therefore, to a secret, amazing world, where the warm embrace of the prophetess — sheltered and screened by the giant vaults looming over vast, inscrutable abysses, which are concealed within the very heart of the mountain — might quench, at last, their thirst for knowledge, their childish yearning for loving caresses; and also the grim, sullen craving for annihilation, that was experienced by the lost souls when reaching the dark, icy womb of the dame, whose abode was the ageless, immutable rock.

«Such fairy tales, and the like», noted down Leandro Alberti in conclusion, «are told by the peasants about the Sibyl's cave, as I myself happened to hear in my father's house, when I was a small child, for the thrilled entertainment of women».

And a cold, eerie shiver ran down my spine, as I put down my books, and looked, for a last time, at the sunlight dancing amidst the leaves and crystal dewdrops of the Marcite.

CHAPTER 9
THE SHADOWS OF THE EMPERORS

«**NUNC UBI** Regulus aut ubi Romulus aut ubi Remus?»

What has become of Marcus Atilius Regulus, of Romulus, and Remus? These words were written by Bernard de Cluny, during the twelfth century, in his work *De contemptu mundi*: he called in vain for the names of such great men of old, for «stat Roma pristina nomine, nomina nuda tenemus», ancient Rome nowadays lives only in names; nothing else is left to us, but bare names of vanished men.

In the same way, the names of those antique families and lineages: Claudia, Fadena, Turpilia, Cesidia, Memmia, Plotia, Anicia, Calpurnia; these words, once illustrious, though made diaphanous today by the long lapse of centuries; those lofty, brilliant names of the *gentes*, the families who proudly claimed their ancestry to be rooted in Norcia, and lived within the walls of the Vetusta Nursia, the antique Norcia, before the Roman troops, with their warfare of leather and steel, arrived in the land of Sabine — now and then, such haughty names still resonate in our present times, as they come forth into view emerging from the soil — unceasingly shaken, for centuries, by earthquakes — in the form of inscriptions engraved on perennial marble: infre-

quent, serendipitous findings, *marmora erratica* whose lustre is tarnished by the clay of past ages; and we break the spell of time but for an instant, when we say aloud a family name of old, summoning back to life the faces and hands and mirth of those who today are no more; and soon they vanish once again, retreating to their oblivious emptiness, as our voice dies away, overshadowing their withered names.

With the invaluable help of such precious marbles, rare fragments of republican and imperial Rome, we are able, though partially and with remarkable difficulty, to make out the endless sequence of lives, and the unbroken progression of happiness, ambitions and suffering that have been throbbing in the very names of those distinguished families, on that very soil inhabited since time immemorial, among illustrious palaces and temples, ever since Manius Curius Dentatus, a consul and a military leader, conquered Norcia to the rule of Rome, in 290 B.C. The town became a *civitas sine suffragium*, and then was associated with the *tribus Quirina*, later changing its name to *Municipium Nursiae*, and finally assigned to the territory of *Regio IV Sabina et Samnium* by Emperor Augustus.

Among the names of such distinguished families; amidst those people, coming from the senatorial and equestrian orders; within the number of the most celebrated inhabitants of Norcia, who, in Roman times, great honour had bestowed upon their own town by their uprightness in serving as magistrates and public officers, a single *nomen gentilicium*, among others, stood out in splendour and nobility. Their eminent lineage would attain to the most prominent offices connected with the rule of the Empire, handing down to future ages the enduring fame of their family name: Vespasii.

Vespasia Polla, mother — and grandmother as well — to Emperors, was born in Norcia, «Nursiae orta honesto genere», from a fine upstanding family, as Suetonius reports; he also adds that six miles from that town, along the road leading to Spoletium, «in monte summo appellatur Vespasiae», near a hillock called after the family's appellation, a princely palace rose, belonging to that ancient, distinguished lineage. And, as a matter of fact, between the villages of Biselli and Serravalle, at an elevation of some 3,000 feet, near a handful of stray, isolated houses making up the small hamlet of Piandoli, a place is to be found, the name of which is, from time immemorial, Forca Vespia. A stretch of flatland extends among the mountains, with sloping

meadows; as you leave the sparse buildings behind, the view opens up over distant peaks, immersed in light shades of blue, that overlook the town of Norcia, lying in a valley, and hidden from sight owing to the interposing hills. Here, in this very place, looking down at the ploughed soil, in the grass of those meadows high above sea level, the visitor may happen to touch, with reverential fingers, the remnants of a life gone by, the life of Vespasii, now buried in the ground: earthenware potsherds, broken handles once belonging to small amphorae, fragments of travertine stone, all of them silent tokens of a past splendour, of which, in our present time, only the remains of shattered walls can be found; walls that once stood princely above the earth, and now run across the fields in straight lines, overgrown with weed, which enshroud the living present and the dead signs of the past with equal forgetfulness.

Two sons were born to Vespasia Polla, and her husband Titus Flavius Sabinus: the elder, Sabinus, was raised to the honour of the «praefecturam urbis», the highest administrative office in Rome; the younger, Titus Flavius Vespasian, who was born in 9 B.C. in Falacrinae, a small village located between Norcia and Rieti, attained the ultimate, topmost dignity of the Roman Empire, «ad principatum usque processit», giving birth to the glorious kindred of the *gens Flavia*, whom Suetonius celebrated in his work *De vita Caesarum*.

Vespasian, the general who was acclaimed Emperor by his legions; the political leader who ruled the Empire with sound practical wisdom, and the decency and witty cleverness typical of an Italian small-town native; the man with a sturdy build, «compactis firmisque membris»; the creator of the *Amphitheatrum Flavium*, the astounding Colosseum; the hard-working, unflagging statesman, ever so accommodating to the pleas of beseechers and the needs of friends; always cheerful in feasting and a brilliant maker of humourous puns — «facetissima», to such a degree that he could not resist jesting even when the first tokens of illness and impending death were made visible to him: «vae — inquit — puto deus fio», «alas, I think soon I am going to turn into a god»; up to the very end of his life, when, leaning on his closest comrades, standing up beside his deathbed, he made his exit as a true, unyielding Roman *princeps*: «imperatorem stantem mori oportere», an Emperor can't leave the world lying in his bed, he must die in an upright posture.

And then came Titus, a commendable son keeping up with his illustrious father, «amor ac deliciae generis humani», a princely soul and a master at captivating people — a most challenging craft — with his ingenuity, straightforward disposition, and brilliant fate. A legendary renown was achieved by his unselfishness and the extent of his sympathy, so much so that a remarkable, poignant sentence, which he pronounced one evening, as he attended a dinner together with his friends, would be engraved forever into the hearts of future generations. His words — reported by Suetonius and, according to him, fully deserving the praise they received at the time — were, as the thought came to the Emperor's mind that, throughout that very day, he had not enjoyed any opportunity to do good for anybody: «amici, diem perdidi», fiends, comrades of mine, today I have lived in vain.

Yet, kindhearted, high-minded Titus ruled for two years only: after him came his brother Domitian, who quickly revealed his vicious, overbearing nature, not devoid of shades of pure cruelty. Not only was his ruthlessness unlimited, as is reported by Suetonius, it also came cunningly unexpected. He used never to pronounce a baleful verdict, without preceding it with words of mercy, so that the surest token of an impending, heinous death was the very mellowness of the preamble. He sentenced to death both friends and foes, on preposterous grounds, often with a view to plundering their wealthy possessions, so as to cover the ludicrous expenditure which the public works, the games in the circus and the funding of the Roman army imposed on him. In Rome, he built a stadium, now the famous Piazza Navona; the temple of Jupiter the Preserver on the Capitol Hill; the Forum, which today is named after Nerva; he also had many a huge triumphal arch erected in various districts of the city, and porticoes as well, capped with quadrigae and emblems of victory. He went as far as to say that «et patri et se fratri imperium dedisse», meaning with these words that the Empire had been given to his father and brother by he himself, so that, his relatives having now passed away, «illos sibi reddidisse», they had handed it back to him.

Held in contempt by both the populace and the aristocracy, he turned the more wary and mistrustful, as he sensed the end of his life drawing nearer, for he knew for certain the year and day and time of his own death from the divinations which the soothsayers had read for him when he was still a boy. As the crucial point in time was get-

ting closer, ill omens became apparent and recurrent: thunderbolts smote the temple of the *gens Flavia*; for the first time ever, the lots, cast in the temple of *Fortuna Praenestina*, proved unfavourable to him; the soothsayers foretold an impending future of blood and death, accompanied by a political turmoil. Finally, that very day, being the Moon in the constellation of the Aquarius as it had been portended to him, conspirators broke into his chambers by a contrivance, and he was slain by steel daggers.

The people in Rome received the news of his death with apathy, the Senate with a wicked glee, as it ordained that all inscriptions mentioning his name should be scratched out, «abolendamque omnem memoriam», so that any memory of him be wiped away.

Such was the lineage descending from Vespasia Polla, an offspring of ancient Norcia; a kindred of emperors, who, originating from the lofty mountains of the remote Sabine province, greatly accrued to the glory and power of Rome, before their bloodline dried up.

Yet who can remember — among the inhabitants of Norcia who walk every day along the street bearing the name of Vespasia, in the city's upper district — the imperial descent which that woman had bestowed upon their hometown, so that Norcia's name was praised across the whole Empire and as far as its remotest provinces? Who can ever conceive, in our present times, that the very name of Norcia, mentioned in the immortal work by Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus, and those celebrated names of emperors, Vespasian, Titus, Domitian, whose lineage was rooted in Sabine, and whose extraordinary accomplishments are depicted in the books written by Publius Cornelius Tacitus, Lucius Cassius Dio, Titus Flavius Josephus, may have aroused the bewildered, spellbound awe of countless generations of youths, young students, professors and scholars, across each and all of the prominent colleges and universities located in Italy, France, the German princedoms, the British kingdoms and Northern Europe; arousing the inflamed passion of sentimental noblemen, yearning for the bygone splendour of the classical world, and rascals in search of lost treasures hidden in the mists of the past, and annalists, and philologists, their eyes exhausted from endless nights spent in perusing old, tattered books; and all this, ever since the Middle Ages, and then during the Renaissance and the centuries of Baroque and the Ancien Re-

gime, and further on throughout the Romantic era, up to the present age; and everyone cherishing, within their souls, the paramount name of Rome; with many of them — actually lots of them — harbouring in their hearts a consuming desire to see the very birthplace of such emperors belonging to a celebrated lineage, the admirable city of Norcia?

I was lost in my thoughts for a little while, my mind immersed in fanciful vagaries, lightly browsing through the pages written by Suetonius, the words in them speaking with a living voice between my hands.

At last, I closed the book and put it by the others, pressing a hand over my eyes. I had realized, by then, that it would be of no use to question the authors of the classical world, carefully scrutinizing the old tales of the *gens Flavia*, and setting forth in search of ancient inscriptions engraved on the marble which re-emerged from the ploghed fields. My investigation was heading towards more recent centuries, and my attention was being directed to ages that were closer to our present time. By a clear and imperative voice, I was summoned back to the task of unravelling that mystery, which I had pledged myself to shed light upon.

What were the findings I had actually made, in the course of the search which I had recently completed? I tried to sum up those preliminary results, which, as an embroidered needlework on a piece of precious cloth, shone and glittered, with intertwining threads, in front of my bewildered eyes, in my feverish quest for any clues that might convey a meaning about that unsettling mystery which little by little was rising up again from the abysses of time.

As far as I had ascertained from my scrutiny, the Apennine Sibyl had proved to be baffling enough as regarded the antique lore from where this uncanny fairy tale originated. No classical work, including the ones by Trebellius Pollio and Suetonius, seemed to provide any mention of this story, other than sparse, enigmatic words, which indistinctly appeared to hint, in a way that was puzzling and exceedingly shifty, at the presence of an oracular site, that was placed in the very midst of the Apennine chain, well before the coming of the Christian Era.

Subsequently, the sleepy stillness of the Sibyl had lasted more than a thousand years; she had been lurking among the rocks, in silence, concealed within the core of the mountains that encircled the small

town of Norcia. She had rested there, unknown to the Benedictine scholars, who never wrote a single line about her, although it seemed that such a cumbersome neighbour had chosen to settle in the very vicinity of prominent monastic sites, and what is more near to the hometown of the holy monk Benedict, the patron-saint-to-be of Europe.

Later, during the fifteenth century, the vague and sinister shadow of the Sibyl had made a sort of reappearance on the great stage of the world: first, with the adventures, daring and amazing, of *Guerrin Meschino*, published by Andrea da Barberino; then, with the account by Antoine de La Sale, the gentleman who, on a clear, sunny morning, had climbed a mountain with his retinue of merry peasants, leading their balky horses by the halters; and, finally, with *Tannhäuser*, who — so the story went — renounced the salvation of his immortal soul to plunge once and forever into the wicked, unholy seductions of the *Frau Venus Berg*.

Ever since that time, the Sibyl had revealed anew, and openly, the enthralling potency of her own myth, which entirely enshrouded her prophetic faculties, as if it were a cloak embroidered with stars and originating from the womb itself of the mountain range, providing a shelter to her secret life and pure essence; and reinforcing, at the same time, that peculiar character of pagan lewdness, which was a much coveted aspect in Northern European countries.

I had questioned the many poets and men of letters who had yielded to the spell of the legend about Mount Sibyl and its cave; I had scrutinized their corresponding statements, each one of them attesting to the queer renown achieved by that mountain, all of them reverberating that murky fascination which such a peak had been scattering about, throughout many centuries, with unrestrained munificence. The mark impressed by this whole process was utterly unmistakable: it had travelled across different ages, as though a rogue, abnormal wave, heading in upstream direction, finding its way from one century to the next; yet, eventually, it had lost in strength and — apparently — ended its long journey at the very threshold of the nineteenth century, when no further reference to the Sibyl and her mountain could any longer be found in literary works. It seemed as if the legendary tale, after so many centuries, had undergone a process of unremitting contraction, until it had withered and vanished altogether, just as the Industrial Revolution was in full swing in the European continent, with its import of dramatic changes that would affect both the minds and souls of men.

Was my quest really over? Had I truly retraced all the steps that — at the very climax of a tangled investigation, which appeared to be crammed with shifty suggestions, enigmatic clues, and puzzling, deceitful hints — would enable me to look upon the results I had obtained — though partial as they were — as thorough and possibly conclusive indeed, in the lack of better evidence bringing to a supplementary, more exhaustive appraisal of the whole matter, so hard to unravel?

I hesitated a moment, my mind in confusion, my soul quite lost before that thread, which was gradually disappearing from sight within the intertwined, entangled mass of quotations, literary works and authors, that I had been so proficient in retrieving, toiling for weeks over my books, and leaping from one century to another, with undue carelessness. I had travelled across very different customs, in search of a common trait that might help secure, once and for all, the blurry, shadowy image of the enchantress concealed by curtains of rock, the prophetess hidden in the gloomy chambers to be found in the very heart of a mountain: the Sibyl, whose likeness seemed to be doomed to eternal concealment within the rugged, unfathomable cliffs of the Apennines.

Then, a book, with a dusty, crumpled page peeping from its inside, seemed to call my attention. I had chanced already to examine those lines of text while I was immersed in my profitable, stimulating reading, sitting on the wooden bridge which overlooked the clear, murmuring waters of the Marcite. It was a short essay on bygone Norcia, which provided, with some sort of complacency typical of scholars, a lengthy narrative on the Sibyl's local tradition, regarded as a distinguishing feature of the rustic lore that lived and thrived in Norcia's countryside. The essay also contained a comprehensive list of quotations from a number of authors with whom I had already made acquaintance — Lalli, Ciucci, Trissino, Oertel, all men of letters who had confronted the topic of the Apennine oracle throughout the centuries. Moreover, the short treatise reported that «it was with the advent of the Age of Enlightenment that the fairy tales of old, overcome by a new era of reason and truth, and restored to their original position as naive chatter by the populace, were reinstated as mere fables, with the result that no more curiosity was aroused by them in the nineteenth century, especially in Norcia, where no one heeded such old stories anymore, save Carlo Renzi and a handful of hunters of bogus tales».

That name — Carlo Renzi — who ever could he be? Was it, maybe, another man of letters, or perhaps a poet, who, as the nineteenth century rolled by, had persisted in dealing, on a solitary basis, with the legend of the Sibyl, in the silence and emptiness that was now enshrouding this slightly tarnished myth, by all odds doomed to a swift, inexorable decline towards an oblivion that the modern world, with all its steam engines and the raw potency of both iron machinery and electric power, was already enforcing on any expressions of the human soul which did not fit in with the crudeness of scientific reasoning and industrial manufacturing processes — on their way towards a triumphant, widespread colonization of the whole world? Could it be, perhaps, some sort of local scholar, enamoured of the old tales, who, for his own delectation or possibly an academic interest, had devoted to the scrutiny of that popular lore, that was hastily precipitating into sheer forgetfulness, and required, in an age ruled by science, an accurate, thorough examination, in the light of the new investigation methods which were now made available by the general advancement being achieved in human knowledge and technology?

However, I could not retrieve any further references. Carlo Renzi, a name that had reappeared unexpectedly and by accident from the pages of a booklet dealing with local traditions in nineteenth-century Norcia, seemed to shun any attempt at gaining further information on him, as if the Sibyl herself, after having called back the memory of such a personage from the thick mist of a long gone past, had right away swallowed him up into the bowels of her own mountain, so as to veil, once and for all, any trace that might have been left by him in our world.

Though I had advanced so far in my search, getting through many a toilsome hardship, I was about to give up any hope of grasping the meaning of the tangled matter that was being unravelled before my very eyes in recent times. It seemed to me that the Sibyl was actually circumventing any effort on my part to secure, at last, a preliminary impression of her likeness, though partial and hazy as it might be; she was setting herself free, and beyond remedy, from the investigation I had been building up as a step-by-step process, by retrieving hints, clues and unclear, enigmatic suggestions, which pointed at some hidden significance, and mysteries still to be uncovered, eerie secrets enshrouded in the gloom of underground hollows, that were created when the world was young, and had never been touched by the warm sunlight, neither were they ever trodden by foot of man, who could have stepped outside to tell the world the dark, mournful wonders concealed in those subterranean chambers.

But, luckily enough, my discouragement was soon to be dispelled. While perusing a guidebook of Valnerina, recently published and revised with up-to-date tourist information, I stumbled upon the very reference I was so eagerly looking for: the book reported that, in Norcia — a modern town which enjoyed the benefits of a number of public health and welfare services — a nursing home for elderly people was available to local residents, and its name was «Fusconi-Lombrici-Renzi».

When my eyes fell on that surname, «Renzi», I started asking myself whether there might be any connection with that Carlo Renzi «hunter of bogus tales», whom I was eager to spot for such peculiar reasons as related to my enquiry. I began to nourish the hope, though oddly uncomfortable and utterly groundless as it were, that all the threads might eventually gather together, and the two Renzis could ac-

tually be reconciled into a single person, or, at the very least, into the same family lineage. Of such kindred I may track down the descendants, if any, so as to retrieve from them — even though with a ghost of a chance — firsthand information about their remote ancestor.

Without delay, I plunged myself into a frantic scrutiny of the imposing heap of books which was now part of my small, personal library, currently disguised inside the cupboard in my hotel room, not far from the antique *Mons Frumentarius*. However, now it seemed that my luck had deserted me: the guidebooks, at least the ones that I had near at hand, did not provide any further mention of the name of Renzi, nor did they make available any additional detail on that nursing home. They rather lingered on a series of extensive descriptions of the monuments to be found in Norcia, accompanied by picturesque accounts of the gorgeous meals, favoured with all sorts of toothsome local delicacies, that would greet the visitor when arriving in town.

Utterly disappointed, I flung the books I was reading onto the bed. At this juncture, there was no chance of getting the answers I urgently needed in those withered pages: rather I ought to address the very source of such information, which, for that mattered, was to be found only a few yards away. By a sudden impulse, I then left my room and, leaving the hotel, I took to the right towards Piazza San Benedetto, proceeded along Via Roma, crossed the city walls through the gate of Porta Ascolana, and headed to Viale Lombrici, whose name — and not by mere coincidence — seemed to be included in the longer designation of the nursing home for elderly people I was interested in, placed on that very street.

Yet, I did not go as far as where that was actually located; I walked instead into the building of the public health authority, halfway along Viale Lombrici on the right. I got in; as I glanced around, I instantly noticed that I had actually found what I was looking for: a collection of printed leaflets, sitting on a table in the waiting room, containing information details on the health and assistance services available to the general public in Norcia and the Valnerina's surrounding area. From the small heap, I soon picked up the brochure I was looking for: a description of the mission and activities carried out by the nursing home for elderly people «Fusconi-Lombrici-Renzi».

As my eyes went through the cold, glossy pages, my hands were shaking uncontrollably. I wished I could find, within that leaflet, a

section which might shed light upon the origin and history of the nursing home — by all means a tangled sequence of events, if it was to be judged by the composite aspect that its very name had taken on with time.

And, truly, in the last page, I could actually read the following words: «the nursing home now includes an additional branch, the Renzi Orphanage for Young Ladies, established by the last will and testament of Carlo Renzi, born in Norcia and deceased on June, 26th 1839, leaving no heirs».

I leaned against the wall of the lounge, then sank down into one of the plastic chairs ranged along the sides of the room, while the people waiting for medical examination glanced at me with puzzled amazement in their eyes.

What was the real nature of my latest findings? What new clues and suggestions had I grasped now within my hands? As I began thinking it over with dispassionate concentration, I sensed that nothing really upsetting had been just revealed to me. On the other hand, I could feel that something, an additional piece of truth, acting as a source of fresh, supplementary uneasiness, had finally come within my reach, unexpectedly popping up, in full view, as jetsam hurled from a long gone, forgotten past. This scrap of information now demanded to be thoroughly looked into: a close, in-depth scrutiny was required, especially in connection with a number of peculiar aspects which appeared to be uncommonly bizarre, and uncannily weird.

From now on, I would assume — though I still could not provide any circumstantial evidence of what I now considered as a fact — that Carlo Renzi, a man who was born in Norcia and had lived in the first half of the nineteenth century, the founder of a charitable institution for young orphan ladies, was almost certainly that very same person, about which the rumors went, that had entertained an unusual curiosity, an eccentric interest, as regarded the legend of the Sibyl; and such curiosity of his was considered as worth mentioning — and as such recorded — in a few lines reported in a short essay on the local history of Norcia.

For the time being, I still could not make up my mind as to what all this might actually portend; yet I felt that — even though I wasn't able, in that very moment, to articulate my vague, unclear impressions

with better accuracy — that name, an evidence of some hidden truth, was nothing less than a key link to the chimerical world in which my soul, little by little and with a sort of careless insanity, was plunging itself. I also realized that, following my first contact with the case of Carlo Renzi, I had taken another unwary step in the direction of the invisible core of that legend, hurrying unknowingly towards a gloomy doom, which I had started to fear of late, as eerie nocturnal nightmares had begun to haunt my sleep. I was aware that, by my hazardous conduct, I was apt to materialize, into our actual world, the whimsical occurrence of an encounter, of which I dared not figure out the time and setting, and whose potential feasibility turned the very hours and days of my life into pits of dull, barren, swelling terror.

However, I was now quite unable to stop the impending course of events. I would get to the bottom of all that. I would not shrink from the peril. I was determined to probe deep into the clue that presented to me. And I would eventually meet with Carlo Renzi, and his strange case. The case concerning his personal, awesome encounter with the Apennine Sibyl.

CHAPTER 10
THE LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT OF A CHARITABLE MAN

«**ECCE, LABORA** et noli contristari»; rejoice in the work you are doing, and be not unhappy, said Benedict, in the tale of the Goth and the sickle, as narrated by Saint Gregory the Great. The Goth, a simple, guileless man, who wished to take orders and wear the monk's garb to devote his own life to God, was eagerly following the instruction given to him by the holy man, that he should clear an uncultivated ground beside a lake, of weeds and brambles, so as to grow an orchard there. Haplessly, the blade of the sickle, which so energetically was being wielded, got loose from the handle, and was flung into the deep waters of the lake. The good man, with a feeling of embarassment and dejection, went to St. Benedict and asked to be severely chastised for the great, irreparable harm which he supposed he himself had caused. But the holy man, taking the handle from the Goth's hand, plunged it into the water, and, right away, with a flashing leap the iron blade re-emerged from the lake and locked itself into the wooden handle again, as if it had never left its place. And Benedict, as he handed the tool back to the astonished man, encouraged him not to

be sorrowful, and continue unflagging, while always rejoicing in his work.

With his words, Benedict celebrates the joyfulness deriving from the application of a vibrant, creative energy, the bliss arising from positive accomplishments, the pure, straightforward happiness which, ensuing from a profitable effort, only arises in vital spirits, inclined to kindheartedness and living in the joy of building up the heavenly kingdom on earth, so as to mirror the sovereign perfection of the divine world above.

A feeling alike, imbued with a quiet, foreshadowing sense of anticipation — a sort of tranquil expectation of the rewards which would be bestowed upon me following a sound research programme, consisting of an unbiased field investigation — had inhabited my soul since the early morning, when, leaving my hotel, I took to the left towards Piazza Garibaldi, skirting the walls of the old church of St. Francis, until I got to the entrance of the huge monastic quarter that was once dedicated to the holy man from Assisi.

My destination was there: a place, housing an unexpected, unheralded boon, where my search was now burgeoning with fresh advances, which were totally unforeseen. I had been toiling for many days over the new material I had found, without breaks or delays, touching no food and taking no rest, pressed on by a frantic urge, a feverish compulsion to scrutinize the data I was retrieving, to probe deep into the new information which I was collecting in bits and pieces; I craved for a confirmation, as regarded a fanciful assumption that, as my investigation proceeded onward, was gradually taking form in my mind; a nebulous, morbid shape, which had in itself much of the hazy reverie and visionary daydreaming; a sort of vague reality, marked by mysterious, though unequivocal signs, which hinted at the gloomy, shadowy substance of nightmares.

There, in the dusky rooms of the Historical Archive of the Municipality of Norcia; within its chambers clogged with oddly-shaped metal racks, which stood out, in the dim light cast by old electric bulbs, like the wreckage of discarded, collapsing machinery; among the shelves encumbered with thousands upon thousands of books, parchments and miscellaneous papers, the withered and voiceless memories of a vanished, forgotten Norcia — travelling upstream, against the flood tide of running time, back to the thirteenth century, as thou-

gh frail witnesses to the mighty revolutionary motion of centuries — I had undertaken a thorough, frenzied examination of the old papers. I was going after that winding, elusive lead, a thread which quite unexpectedly had made its appearance, and was marked by the name of Carlo Renzi, of whom I was pursuing the feeble trail amidst the stacks of documents which were supplied to me in quantity, on a table now overflowing with books and folders, by the Archive manager.

My yearning to penetrate the giddy, entrancing maze of the section dedicated to antique books and documents was almost painful: what old accounts, surely never published, what stunning records attesting to the concealed life, in past ages, of the myth of the Sibyl would I be able to retrieve in the Secret Archive of medieval Norcia, which housed the classified correspondence between the local government and the Vatican authorities; or, amid the huge books containing the old Charters, boards and amendments; or, among the miscellaneous papers of the Council of Forty, the decrees issued by the Chief Magistrates, the land register of Norcia's eight municipal districts and countryside — stowed as valuable treasures in decrepit wooden cases, containing bundles of tattered sheets held together by ragged, threadbare straps, each parchment conveying its own frail, brittle message, and dreaming its sleepy, undisturbed dreams across the centuries?

Yet too acutely compelling was the summoning call coming from that clue — a thin, feeble evidence, of which I had become aware, without any preceding warning, in the waiting room of a public office placed in the vicinity of the city walls of Norcia; so that, as I filled in the forms with the lists of documents I wished to consult, now forming a stack of considerable height on my table, I continued to scrawl in the bottom line, with a hasty, wavering script, the words: «Public Health and Charity Institutions - Section II: Renzi Orphanage for Young Ladies».

Surrounded by dusty, tattered papers, I was making my entrance, without being really aware of it, into a long gone, expired world; a frozen, motionless landscape, made eternal by the lapse of centuries, which had settled on it a thin coating of oblivion, as happens to snapshots taken long ago, their colours fading away, and portraying unknown people, to whom nobody is able, in our present time, to assign a name; dumb faces, possessing no identity, who can tell no more tales.

That world, vanished forever and inhabited only by ghosts, for centuries had been an actual, tangible reality, which was manifestly rooted, with foundations as solid as masonry, amidst the solid walls and lofty palaces of the Italian towns; it was a world providing aid and relief to generations upon generations of men and women belonging to the lower classes, a prospect of shelter and potential redemption to poor families with many children, haunted by hunger, ensnared by constant, unremitting poverty, who could not rely on any possible deliverance towards a more decent, more tolerable life, and thence were forced by necessity to commit their children — the youngest, the weakest, or the ones most at risk of incurring a social or moral decline — to the institutions that, since time immemorial, catered for the needs of humble, poverty-stricken people: the charitable, Church-run Opere Pie.

Ever since the Middle Ages, the Italian municipalities had assumed that they would not be in a position to take on the burden of assisting their fellow-citizens in need; rather it was commonly understood, after the Gospels, that they should be dealt with by the patronising charity of the well-to-do, and the soothing solace provided by the Church. That was the reason for scores of plump members of the aristocracy — grown rich in their life by exploiting the grievous, exhausting labour of the peasants, stooping over in the ploughed fields beneath the scorching sun; and the toil of their women, washing and rinsing the refined clothes, so soft and smooth, which belonged to others, at the frosty water of fountains, in icy winter mornings — that was the reason for such noblemen, on their deathbeds, to set down their last will and testament, lading it with bequests, legacies and endowments, in favour of those same poor people, formerly robbed at pleasure, now the beneficiaries of so generous allowances, so as to win forgiving credits in the afterlife; for who ever knew whether life after death might be exactly as the priests depicted it from the pulpit, with purgatory and all the other stuff? That was no chance to be taken.

And middle-class individuals, who had spent their existence between the meandering columns of double-entry bookkeeping and the supercilious decency of their honourable, respectable lives, within their closed communities of equals, were apt to find their own heart swelling — as they were drawing their last, panting breath before their passing into the grave — with a reverential pining for the poor

and the destitute, while they uttered their final words, with quivering voice, in front of the notary public, as regarded what amount of money should be assigned to which religious establishment, and how many Masses were to be celebrated for the eternal and peaceful rest of their own poor, peccant souls, in the years and decades to come.

Over such endowments and legacies — often in cash, and more often than not in the form of real estate, acres of cultivated land, and buildings and properties in town — the Church retained its firm, benignant hold. As an undisputable part of its holy mission, its priests played the role of witnesses, advisors, as well as final beneficiaries and caretakers, with reference to the affluent testators and their last wills; and nobody could deny that on the Church alone rested the task of feeding the hungry and visiting the sick, fostering in this way an excessively broad interpretation of the remarkable words pronounced by Jesus Christ in the Gospel of Matthew: «For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me».

For centuries, the institutions set up by the Church, in the form of religious establishments scattered across the land of Italy, had attended to the management of the huge quantity of assets hoarded by the Opere Pie. In 1860, just before the first in a series of comprehensive reforms undertaken by the newly born Italian State for a thorough rearrangement of the charity sector, the Opere Pie would sum up, across Italy, to thousands upon thousands of establishments, each one of them carrying out charitable activities, providing dowries to poor young ladies, redeeming destitute women from sin, attending the sick, imparting an education to orphans and indigent youngsters, supporting the blind and the deaf-mute. Each and every college, boarding school, orphanage, foundation and asylum for destitute people was deeply rooted into its own territory and municipality, with sound and steady links with the town in which it carried out its specific mission of aid and relief; each establishment was the owner of lands and properties of considerable size: an ever-growing boon, due to the continual inflow of cash, bequeathed by affluent fellow-citizens who wished to leave a durable mark — by giving the donation their own name — on the history of their local community, wherein they had spent their lives and done business.

For many centuries, such institutions had provided the only relief from the wretched shabbiness of hovels; the desolate hunger of small children; the abandonment of orphans, deprived of their parents' care and affection; and the perdition of women, ensnared in the filth of harlotry, in a desperate effort to keep themselves and their own children alive. The Opere Pie were always to be found within the town walls and at the very centre of cities; their boarding schools and colleges were part of the urban setting; the adjoining streets were named after the establishment's name — *via del Conservatorio*, *via degli Orfanelli*. The religious brotherhoods and sisterhoods, which ran the charitable activities, thrived vigorously, as they grew in power and presence within the local communities: they actually gained ascendancy over the leading individuals who were in control of local government, owing to their indefatigable, farsighted exertion to establish and maintain close connections with the most prominent families in the district.

Yet a new era was dawning, which would provide increasing relief, at last, from the burden of misery and deprivation that, for centuries, had haunted the poor and the destitute, while favouring at the same time a narrow circle of wealthy land owners. The coming of the Industrial Revolution, the application of new farming methods, the rapid swelling of cities owing to large inflows of new residents from the countryside, called for a programme of reforms, which was enacted in 1862, shortly after the creation of the Kingdom of Italy. In a view to contrasting the inordinate fragmentation of the Opere Pie, the government set up a Congregazione di Carità, a joint charitable institution, headquartered in each of the Kingdom's municipalities, whose mission would be «to provide relief to the lower classes,... bringing assistance and supplying education services to poor people, and supporting them in their search for an employment», and putting it under the administrative control of the city council.

A subsequent reform was carried out in 1890, which promoted the transformation of the Congregazioni into «Istituzioni Pubbliche di Assistenza e Beneficenza», public institutes for charitable assistance, fostering an «amelioration in the moral and material conditions of the poor»; another radical change was introduced by the national law approved in 1937, which permanently assigned to the newly-established City Assistance Authorities the jurisdiction over the charitable sector, for long an exclusive area, dominated by prosperous religious esta-

blishments. And the Opere Pie gradually started to recede from both the central districts and suburbs of Italian towns, after many centuries of steadfast dedication to the effort of providing solace to the suffering of poverty-stricken men and women.

The very memory of such institutions began to fade away; until they vanished altogether from the forgetful hearts of people, utterly oblivious to that ancient, merciful office, and to a presence that once was tangible and substantial; a presence that seems pointless in our modern times, as welfare services are available to everybody, and common, widespread wealth is considered as a positive, undisputed fact of life, which is simply to be taken for granted. Yet, you just need to take a walk, with humble, open-minded disposition, into the dusky chambers and corridors of the National Archives, or in the rooms of minor local archives, such as those of Norcia; and you will hear those voices again — coming from the dusty shelves and the files crammed with withered letters, in the section of the catalogue pertaining to ancient charitable institutions — asking, with heavy-hearted entreaties and a wording full of spelling errors and local dialect terms, for the admission of a son to a boarding school, or the assignment of a dowry to a betrothed daughter; they were looking for deliverance from forlorn poverty, they were trying to abate the number of mouths to feed at each meal; so that a ghost of a chance may also be given to those who, in misery and despair, would be only destined to go astray, in an underworld of robbery and degradation.

This lesser world — concealed in silence and gloom as it were, under an obliviousness which has sealed it off from our current lives, while human history runs its course and the poor people seem to have withdrawn into some secluded fringes of society — was now piling up on my desk, talking with a newly restored voice, and narrating, with fresh eagerness, its stories of old, which had been sleeping for long amidst the lost, tattered papers, utterly unheeded.

The Renzi Orphanage for Young Ladies was established in 1841, following a bequest devised, in his last will and testament, by Carlo Renzi, a wealthy merchant from Norcia, deceased in Rome on June, 26th 1839, leaving no heirs. The young orphan ladies, deprived of any means of livelihood, would be accommodated and given an education within the walls of the Orphanage, a place «devoted to the training of minds and the upbringing of hearts», where the maidens would recei-

ve the teachings which are essential to rear decent, well-mannered women — without forgetting the import, as I ascertained while browsing through the dusty records put down in a neat, minute script, of learning how to carry out «womanly, household duties».


Programma
delle materie sulle quali saranno esaminate le alunne del Pio Istitut
Sezione prima
Classe Seconda
Sezione seconda
Catechismo
Storia Sacra
Grammatica
Aritmetica
Scrittura
Classe prima
Catechismo
Storia Sacra
Aritmetica
Scrittura

The subjects that the young orphans would study in the classrooms included religious education, Biblical history, reading, grammar, arithmetic, handwriting and calligraphy, geography and history. The classes started in November and closed in June; a final examination was held at the end of the school year, «before the City Council Deputation». The proficient, well-mannered pupil would get a reward for her performance at school, «taking into consideration her learning achievements, a result of both nature and persistent application, with whom she has devoted herself to her studies throughout the year»; with the hope, too, that the praise might foster «in the maidenly heart an ever-increasing aspiration towards education and learning, to the solace of her parents and the honour of the Nation», an encouragement that would certainly have an odd ring to the ears of a little orphan girl.

In later times, the Orphanage had undergone a transformation akin to the change that all Opere Pie across Italy had experienced, following the enactment of a series of new laws: in 1864, the institution was assigned to the newly-established «Congregazione di Carità in Norcia»; then, in 1937, all charitable activities were transferred to a

Municipal Assistance Authority, subsequently under the control and administration of a Joint Charitable Institute, also based in Norcia; finally, the latter, together with other similar establishments, was turned into a nursing home for elderly people, as I had got to know during my visit to the office of the public health authority.

The ponderous folders indexed under the name of the Orphanage were still piling up before my eyes: school registers, lists of pupils, exam reports and administrative expense sheets were following one another, in endless sequence, between my hands, as I loosened the straps of the ragged, dusty binders which the Archive manager was still laying on my desk.

However, I had not found any answer to my initial question as yet. Who was Carlo Renzi? According to some miscellaneous papers, which I had retrieved in one folder, Renzi was a merchant, who had amassed great wealth in Rome, in the early nineteenth century, by setting up a business in processed pork meat; even so, prior to the very establishment of his trading firm, the papers seemed to suggest that he had benefited from «an abrupt, unexpected acquisition of wealth», that had occurred in Norcia, when he was still a young man; taking advantage of such favourable circumstances, he had launched his new trading activity, and, later on, had come out as a prominent, successful businessman among the many inhabitants of Norcia who, after leaving their native town set in the middle of a mountain range, had chosen to settle in the capital city of the Papal States.

I raised my eyes: a chill, unsubstantial shadow seemed to creep into the reading room, piercing through the sturdy stone walls of the Archive, as though sudden, baleful clouds were passing over hurriedly in the sky, so that the sun was shining now with a dull glaze. The papers, lying on the table in a chaotic jumble, amidst the folders and envelopes, their edges covered with mould, seemed to quiver gently, as if they shivered under a faint, eerie draught.

I looked at the sky through one of the room's windows: it was noon, and the sun was blazing steadily in the clear, cloudless air, its rays falling, with unheeding forgetfulness, upon the poplar trees and the dripping grasslands of the Marcite. Nonetheless, a thin, icy shiver had run down my spine, so that I was compelled to push back the papers lying in front of me and turn away from the growing bundle of folders.

Two centuries had elapsed, and from those documents and papers were now coming to light a number of clues and leads that — inconclusive as they were — could not but foster a whole train of further meditations, opening the way to new rash, daring conjectures and giving rise to questionable theories, tinted with whimsical, awesome shades. Undoubtedly, nothing more than a thankful disenchantment could ever arise from all that: a relieved feeling of confidence in the belief that it was mere foolishness to let one's mind dwell on such weird, nonsensical speculations.

For the sudden acquisition of wealth by Carlo Renzi — a young man from Norcia, enamoured of local tradition and lore, «hunter of bogus tales», particularly the oddest and most bizarre which were running all over the countryside, and among the coarse, naive shepherds who journeyed the secluded mountain meadows and the craggy cliffs, stormed by the frosty northerly winds — could not connect in any way to the mysterious legend I had been investigating in recent times: a preposterous, unholy superstition about a Sibyl that would conceal herself in her gloomy retreat within the mountain, lurking in darkness and waiting for the unwary, foolhardy visitor.

My hands plunged into the mass of documents, almost vanishing from view within the heap of papers, I began to feel a dismal sense of dejection.

I feared that the protracted, overstraining exertion of my faculties on the inquiry I was carrying on; the unrelenting scrutiny of old tattered books and frayed bundles of papers, which narrated the stories of people who died long ago; my prolonged, unsettling reveries about a fairy tale that was utterly unknown to most people — definitely a fanciful account delivered around a campfire set up by dull, illiterate peasants, who were prone to believe any foolish report rendered to them, and were afraid of their own shadows, being in their nature to be slave to the most unreasonable and unsophisticated figments of imagination — I feared that all that probing and searching might bring about certain queer and unpredictable effects on my exceedingly sensitive spirit, whose acuteness had been magnified by my persistent acquaintance with that fable, which, as my investigation proceeded further, was gradually taking on a hue of morbid weirdness.

Sitting there, in the lonely, gloomy rooms of the Municipal Archives, at a reading desk laden with heaps of rotten files, I resolved

not to let myself plunge into a pit of foolish, nonsensical madness; I would not suffer my search to drive me towards unfathomable abysses of raving superstition and gullible despair. I would not allow my imaginative faculties to prevail over my logical thinking and my ability to fully comprehend the very nature of facts and circumstances, with a thoughtful appreciation of any existing bonds and correspondences, basing on careful reflection, a sound application of the intellect, and good sense.

While I lingered over such thoughts, I sensed that a firm composure, a most welcome distance was now pervading my soul, reinstating myself in my customary condition of self-possession, which I did not want to lose again on account of extravagant, insane cogitations.

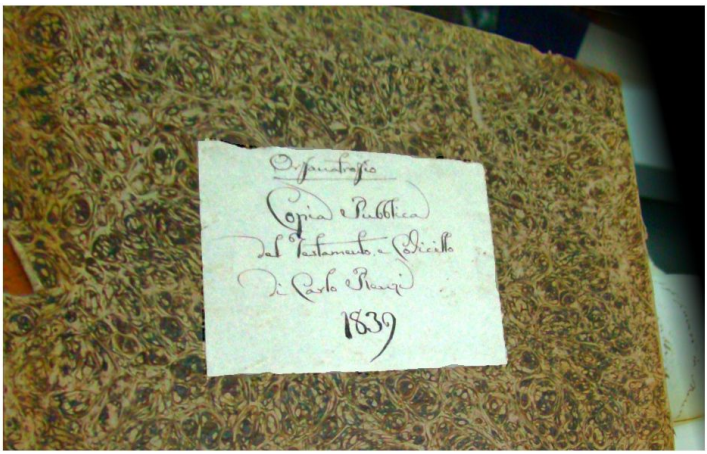
The sudden wealth achieved by Carlo Renzi, his juvenile interest in the fable of the Sibyl; all that now appeared to me as truly inconsistent, and utterly foolish: nothing more than castles in the air, built on the flimsy fabric of a silly, preposterous premise, which was the insane offspring of a rushed expedition to a public office in Norcia. Those papers, which were scattered before my eyes; that accumulation of musty information about the Opere Pie and the boarding schools for poor young girls and the multifarious charitable institutions — now they all presented to my sight their true essence: a silly mistake, a dead trail in an investigation which was finally coming to an end; a search which would result in nothing; an inquiry that would simply lead nowhere.

I took a folder in my hands. It seemed too heavy, as if its envelope might contain something different from the customary miscellaneous papers which were piling up on my desk. Almost mechanically, I opened the envelope: a small notebook was held inside, with the hardcover, back and edges bound in black leather. I checked the tag attached to the cover, bearing a handwritten text on it: «Orphanage», said the script, «Public copy of the Testament of Carlo Renzi - 1839».

My hands quivered: the notebook fell upon the papers and binders that were scattered over the desk. The dull thump drew the attention of another visitor to the Archive: an academic researcher, who was sitting at a desk facing the farthest window of the room. He raised his eyes, cast a glance at me and then immersed himself again in an absorbed perusal of his papers.

The last will and testament of Carlo Renzi. The very foundations of the age-old history of the Orphanage for Young Ladies rested on that very document, together with its school, and classes, and orphan pupils, and all the way through each subsequent transformation, up to today's nursing home for elderly people.

By all odds, it could do me no harm, if I resolved to open that booklet, with its binding slightly frayed and strewn with moisture stains, and its cover not perfectly clinging to the underlying cardboard frame. I turned the first page: in it, it said that on January, 24th 1837, before Domenico Batoli, a notary public registered at the District of the Capitoline Hill in Rome, there appeared in person Carlo Renzi, together with two witnesses, to make, publish and declare that the present document was his last will and testament, and dispose of his own property and effects at his death. The testator bequeathed a sum of five thousand two hundred thirty-eight scudi to the establishment, in the town of Norcia, of an orphanage for young ladies, to be named after Renzi himself, and to be initially controlled and managed by the local Bishop. Besides, Renzi bequathed additional money to the benefit and improvement of his hometown; the assistance to the poor and the needy; the restoration of the monument designated as the Tempietto; the celebration of Masses for the repose of his own soul and the soul of his long-deceased parents. On the bottom line, there were the original signatures of Carlo Renzi, the witnesses and the notary public.



And that was all. Nothing, asbsolutely nothing seemed to portend that anything odd, anything unusual had ever happened to the wealthy testator. The document just witnessed to the charitable intent of an old, lonesome merchant, with no descendants at all, who, at the very end of his earthly life, had devised to avail the town where he was born, the place he had left in his youth to pursue his fortune elsewhere, in Rome, the city of Roman ruins and ruling Popes; by this resolve, so bounteous and high-minded, he definitely hoped — lacking a progeny to whom his family name would otherwise be entrusted — to live a little longer in the minds and souls of his fellow-citizens; securing for himself, at the same time, the praise that would earn him, in the afterlife, a rebate of a certain number of years in Purgatory; a place, the latter, he would certainly attend, owing to a trifling sin, or maybe more than one, he had not been able to shun while practicing his activity in trading.

As a consequence, any idle, unsubstantiated assumption establishing a possible connection between Carlo Renzi and the legend of the Sibyl — the latter as groundless and unlikely as the said assumption — could be dismissed altogether.

I rose from my chair. My investigation was over. I felt a queer sense of relief and fulfilment. I had pursued all trails, I had checked out all clues, and nothing had been overlooked. Utterly disappointed, I struck Renzi's testament with my hand: it was flung abruptly off the table and onto the floor. Again, the academic researcher cast a glance at me: this time he was greatly annoyed, and turned back to his papers with a gesture of irritation.

I stooped over to pick up the booklet, and, for an instant, I stood motionless, my hand reaching out to the floor, my gaze frozen and petrified by a sudden, piercing bewilderment, my breath stifled in my throat parched to a crisp.

From the ragged binding of the cover, a small, withered envelop had slipped out and was now lying on the floor; at all appearances, it had been concealed between the leather and the underlying cardboard frame, battered and covered with mould. When my hand, at last, picked it up from the floor, I could sense the reek of dusty antiquity and old dankness which was given off by the frayed, decrepit paper. It appeared that the envelope had been thrust there, into the leather binding of the booklet, at the very time of the writing of the last will and

testament of Carlo Renzi; so that, presumably, nobody had ever been able to read the words it contained ever since the year 1837, when the merchant from Norcia had appeared, together with two witnesses, before Domenico Batoli, «notary public registered at the District of the Capitoline Hill in Rome».

My hand was shaking, as I came back, with unsteady steps, to my reading desk and sat down again in my chair. That words were creeping, as dim, eerie shadows, out of the lifeless abyss of a long-gone past, perished altogether, and cast long ago into a region of sulky silence — the dismal silence to be found in forsaken, derelict burial chambers, bereft of the bitter solace imparted by the forlorn tears of descendants, and utterly deprived of such tender, devout acts which only can be fulfilled by loving relatives, with their attendance and uttered words of prayer, to relieve the affliction of souls that live and prosper no longer in our earthly world.

Cautiously, with stiffened fingers, I opened the small envelope: in it, I found a slip of paper, likewise withered with time. Only a few words were written on it, in the neat nineteenth-century handwriting of Carlo Renzi, as was also visible in the original signature placed at the bottom line of the testament.

«Vultus tuus perspexi deformis», were the words, «turrigera mater, membra vulnere praebui lacerata maiestati divinae».

In the silence of the reading room, the crash of the papers, binders and files being hurled onto the floor was less loud than the scream of alarm uttered by the startled academic, as I rushed out, running madly and unthinkingly towards the exit, knocking down the tables and furniture which stood in my way; until, dashing in a frenzy of insanity along Via Cesare Battisti, I finally burst into the afternoon sun, amidst gleaming stones and charming buildings, breathing the crystal-clear air and the peaceful, soothing elegance of Piazza San Benedetto.

CHAPTER 11
THE MAN WHO BEHELD THE SIBYL

A MILD, BENEVOLENT LIGHT was gently falling upon the narrow alleys which were resting, undisturbed, under their own silent, secretive spell. The mellow radiance called forth shadowy recesses, immersed in an invigorating chill, which bade the visitor — notwithstanding the late hour — go further up along the quiet, secluded streets, proceeding up a steep slope; and turn yet another corner, walking between the small houses, bathed in a cloister-like stillness, coming across a secluded courtyard paved with tiny pebbles, and flanked by windows adorned with geraniums, burning fiercely in the glare of the setting sun; and linger, in the growing darkness, before the houses' minute doors, each opening onto a short flight of steps, its railings bedecked with white cyclamen, gleaming in the dim evening light.

This is the hour when, at the far end of a narrow street now engulfed in shadow, the stern façade of a church is suddenly revealed to the visitor; or, perhaps, the lofty walls of a monastery appear in the dusky light, with their tolling bells announcing — in the air now turned sharp and chilly — the appeasing, relieving coming of twilight.

Capolaterra, concealed in the upper and easternmost district of the town of Norcia — a district which is disregarded by the traveller and the tourist, who better enjoy, with delight, the glittering windows of the shops lined up along Corso Sertorio, overloaded with sausages and round cheeses, and always raising their almost irresistible call — Capolaterra retains, within its small, unassuming buildings, the long past memory of a rustic, unfashionable way of life. In its hovels for sheltering cattle and fodder; in its cheerless and miserable lodgings, placed on the first floor, turned nowadays into welcoming accommodations, family groups from the small hamlet of Castelluccio, in the highlands, used to find deliverance and shelter from the harsh, brutal, merciless winter which each and every year established its rule at the foot of Mount Vettore, accumulating mounds of frosty snow until the white heaps surmounted the roofs of the shabby houses, when the storm struck the vast expanse of the flatland of Castelluccio with its staggering fierceness; and the salvation of both their earthly bodies and immortal souls belonging to the sparse inhabitants still dwelling in the small village was entrusted to the knell of a bell, hanging in the belfry of the church of the Heavenly Mary: alone in the dark, it resisted the tempest's fiendish yell — shouting back in the night, in reply to the wind's ruthless blows and the rain's overwhelming downpour, the mighty, overpowering words of the motto engraved in its imperishable bronze: «sabbatha pango, fulgura frango, dissipo ventos, domo cruentos», I celebrate Sundays, I dispel the lightning, I drive off the winds, I vanquish the wicked.

It was about dusk. I was walking the solitary alleys of the Capolaterra district, in Norcia, along the undisturbed peacefulness of Via Anicia, and I was listening to the light, placid murmur of the water which poured ceaselessly into the cast-iron basin adorning Piazza Palatina. The air had turned chill, as it descended swiftly from the mountains which surmounted the town; sweeping across the ice-cold region of fields and sloping countryside, enshrouded already in a growing darkness; and skirting the town walls on the eastern side, which sheltered the houses belonging to the antique quarter of San Giovanni. I had spent the entire afternoon alone, wandering restlessly through the muffled, subdued hustle of Norcia's less frequented streets, as I tried to shun the crowd and the glittering lights of the shop windows:

I was yearning for some sort of repose, a relief that seemed to have deserted me, and which apparently I couldn't find anywhere.

I had discontinued my investigation. Why? I myself did not know, after all. Nonetheless, of one thing I was absolutely certain: I would never go back to the Municipal Archive; I would never sit again in that reading room, never again would I fill in request forms asking for dusty documents, tattered folders stained with mould, and all sorts of withered papers, made unreadable by the exhausting, unremitting action of time, and telling forgotten tales, vanished already from the memory of mankind, about people who no longer live in our earthly world. It would have been better to let them rest in peace, in such century-long oblivion as had for ages veiled them with its perennial, irrevocable, ultimate shrouds.

My firmness reinforced by this decision, I fancied I had regained at least part of my original self-possession; a frail, ephemeral semblance of equanimity, on which I would capitalise to gather up all my spirit — the same spirit that I feared was about to desert me altogether. I was determined to reclaim my place amid the ranks of plain, normal people, who appeared to be so peacefully unconcerned. I intended to dismiss, at last, any unwise eagerness to probe into facts which were far above the ordinary and the reasonable; I wanted to get around any design to walk uncertain paths, with their slippery, unsafe edges, that might lead my steps towards such places as no man, who should deem himself in his right mind, would ever tread.

So I resolved to go back again where the throng and the shops were. I went down along Via Anicia, and then turned right towards Piazza Vittorio Veneto: there I found a number of parties, sitting already at their tables, placed under the smart awning of the restaurant, ready for dinner. I also settled myself in a chair, and managed to choose the dishes from the menu, which presented to the visitor its enticing, captivating temptations, that ranged from the most delicious food, garnished with precious truffle, to the luscious, tasteful pork meat prepared in accordance to Norcia's old recipes and traditional craft.

I considered the cheerful crowd that was strolling along Corso Sertorio, enjoying the sight of the sweet, toothsome delicacies lined up, as though in close ranks, on the shelves flooded with light, behind the lavishly-arranged display windows.

I leaned back in my chair, as I sipped, with deliberate absorption, from the glass of wine that the waiter had just handed me. A sense of restfulness and peaceful quietness now pervaded my whole frame. It was a charming May evening, and the air — within the walls that surrounded and guarded the town — was, after all, warm enough. My thoughts began to drift, untroubled, unchecked, in a way that had not recently occurred to me anymore, notably ever since my queer investigation had come to life on a sinister, eerie winter night.

The lively scene conveyed to me a feeling of wholesome soundness and everyday healthiness: the food, joyfully served in my plate, was releasing its delectable, full-bodied flavour, whose appetizing notes would soon thrill my mouth and tongue, both in full expectation of such enticing delights; family groups walked leisurely in front of the charming, floodlit shops, while children frolicked merrily and chased one another around the war memorial facing the Town Hall Theatre; the shopkeepers, happy with the sales of the day and in a good mood, were about to roll down their shutters: with warm, genial gestures, they were seeing the last customers out of their shops, as the latter lingered on the threshold in conversation, with their multifarious loads of sausages and cheese.

With a smile, the work written by Monsignor Innocenzo Malvasia in 1587 came to my mind; he was a protonotary apostolic sent by Pope Sixtus V to the Italian region of Umbria, in a view to checking the financial and administrative conditions of that province, which was subject to the rule of the Vatican. In his *Relatione de la Prefettura de la Montagna*, a written report centred on that territory in the highlands, he declared that, in Norcia, «by the very sharpness of the air and the barren nature of the soil, the wits of the natives are grown likewise sharp; neither can there be found any idle or lazy man, as industry and trade are common and widespread indeed». And Angelo Benucci, secretary of the Congregational Council for the Borders of the Papal States, in his account on *Norcia and its condition*, dating to 1781 — in considering the great abundance of wool and weaving mills, dye-works and other art and craft businesses, plenty of them established within the city walls — noted that «the citizens of Norcia are ingeniously talented: they make extensive use of plant and machinery, they are full of managerial spirit and proficient in trading»; he also ad-

ded that «in all times they have been recognised as such, and that was certainly no mistake».

Might it be that the pragmatic perspective, the disposition to plain, straightforward thinking that I lacked, when I made efforts to direct my own life and confront with real issues, were exactly the talents with which Norcia was so bountifully endowed?

Definitely, for my mental balance, it would have been of no benefit if I pushed forward with the scrutiny of such ancient books with their mouldy, decrepit bindings: volumes which had been shelved, for centuries, in dusty racks buried within the rooms of some irrelevant small-town archives, only inhabited by a handful of bespectacled bookworms and skinny postgraduate students; the latter, in search of unpublished material to be included in their worthless, soporific PhD dissertations, works which would soon be sleeping their own peaceful, oblivious slumber, lying undisturbed in shelves of the same kind.

I smiled again on considering that, as I consumed myself, sitting in the small restaurant near the Town Hall Theater — a number of tasty dishes parading before me, my table crammed with luscious, delicious food — as I was engrossed in the vain effort to draft a preposterous, unattainable decision on whether to follow a practical, mundane course of life, or yield to the entreaty, originating in our very souls, to intellectual knowledge, literary study and valuable, highly-sophisticated learning, this very same choice had been taken already, by the town of Norcia itself, some seven centuries earlier. It had happened when the rumour about a small, republican, independent enclave, ready to lock horns with anybody and a veritable enemy to liberal arts, had spread itself throughout Europe.

It was Franco Sacchetti, a fourteenth-century writer and poet, a contemporary of Giovanni Boccaccio, who gave rise to this odd reputation, as droll as utterly groundless. In his collected tales, *Il Trecentonovelle*, Sacchetti recounted and chastised the bad habits and despicable traits, depicted with a disconsolate yet humourous taste, of his fellow-citizens from Florence. In dwelling upon a popular topic which emphasized common people's mistrust of well-educated members of the upper classes — including «knights, and magistrates, and physicians» — the poet, in his tale no. CXXVII, reports that «Norcia, so diminutive a stretch of land as it is, has never given any admittance to such well-read men, nor to any other scholar who might attempt to

corrupt the town by education and learning»; he went on by saying that «when holding their town meetings, they would not allow any educated man to take part in them, and shout instead: all learned people, get out of here. And that's the reason for such a small portion of Italy being so effectively ruled».

Although the writer from Florence had only in mind to criticise some peculiar, deplorable aspects typical of his hometown's public life, his portrayal of Norcia — an Italian town that proclaimed loud and clear «all learned people, get out of here» — achieved great renown in Europe among men of letters, magistrates and scholars across the centuries.

John Milton, the prominent seventeenth-century English poet, the author of the celebrated poem *Paradise Lost*, reported this same piece of information as an entry into his *A Commonplace Book*, an early work containing miscellaneous notes and quotes, a sort of learning tool that was in use, in his times, among college students in Oxford and Cambridge. Citing from *Thoughts*, a work by Alessandro Tassoni, an Italian man of letters who lived in the late sixteenth century, Milton noted down that «in Norcia, a town lying in the Papal States, when a public session is held, an outcry is raised, that all learned people be cast out; and no public office is ever assigned to physicians, nor to any other men of letters; on account of that, the town was ever so sensibly ruled that, when Italy was struck by grim hardship in the past, neither the inhabitants of Norcia nor the people living in the small hamlets in the countryside suffered any inconvenience from the ravaging adversity».

And the *Encyclopaedia, or a Systematic Dictionary of the Sciences, Arts, and Crafts*, edited by Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert in the second half of the eigthteenth century, reports an identical entry under the term «Norcia»: the reader is informed that «the small Italian town», though subject to the rule of the Pope, is administered «as if it were a democracy»; and that «four magistrates are elected, who are required to be fully ignorant of reading and writing»; and the conclusion — with a typical stance of French haughtiness — goes as far as to affirm that by this deplorable practice «barbarian customs» have been reinstated «in the very heart of Italy».

Should I have applied to my present condition the same remedy which the citizens of Norcia, according to that odd and widely-known tradition, were used to stage when they handled governmental affairs,

cutting out scholars and men of letters altogether? Should I be willing to cry out, together with the illiterate magistrates of ancient Norcia, «you all learned people, get out of here», and throw away all my books on the Sibyls; the volumes and papers I had treasured which told the tales of Guerrino, de La Sale and Tannhäuser; all the notes I had put down, with painstaking scrupulousness, on Giovanbattista Lalli, Trìssino and Ludovico Ariosto; my written records on Carlo Renzi and his orphanage for young ladies; the guidebooks and the faded pictures of the crowned mountain sitting among the cliffs and precipitous ravines of the Apennines; and cast aside, with that same gesture, several months spent in investigating the case; and give up my inquiry once and for all, so as to cut short — and this time for real — a search which had definitely taken on a shifty, unwholesome character, and a morbid, unwary hue; a quest which would certainly guide my steps towards an extravagant, far-fetched, balefully hazardous conclusion?

A sense of sudden, unutterable void was taking hold of my soul. Why should I delve deeper into all that? I considered, once again, the family groups who were taking their stroll along Corso Sertorio, with a leisurely attitude. Everything seemed to be pointless. People did not know: actually, they knew absolutely nothing. Who ever remembered the name of Guerrino the Wretched, and what deeds he had accomplished? Who would ever recollect who, in their lives, had been a Father Fortunato Ciucci, or an Antoine de La Sale, or even a Fazio degli Uberti? Who would ever recall to mind — by a great exertion of memory — a forgotten, insignificant legend that referred to a Sibyl perched on a heap of rocks, amid desolate, far-off heights? Who ever may care for all that insignificant stuff?

I looked at the children who were merrily frolicking between the legs of their parents. Those stories, those legends were dead long ago, together with the old peasants who, for interminable centuries, had recounted, with ardent, sparkling eyes, such a breathtaking tale, sitting by the blazing flames which roared in the great hearth, and surrounded by the bewildered gaze and the intent, speechless concentration of the forefathers of those very same children who, in our present times, capered about beside the display windows of the shops lined up along Corso Sertorio. By a sad, foolish contingency, any one of those young Italian boys and girls would sure enough be fully acquain-

ted with Hallowe'en, or Santa Claus; yet they would know nothing about the lore — now lost in time, and vanished from their minds altogether — of their own ancient Sibyl.

The time had come to pay my bill. Vague remnants of a truffle-scented chocolate mousse still lingered in my plate, as the waiter hastened to remove it from the table, which was scattered with the abundant leftovers of a delectable battle.

I reached for the wallet within the pocket of my coat. My fingers met with an object; I drew it out: it was Carlo Renzi's small, withered envelope.

For an instant, I stood still, my body stiffened into an attitude spasmodically concentrated in holding, by the fingertips, that scrap of paper, which had just come back, abruptly, from a world of oblivion, unexpected, unwelcomed. I sensed an uncanny, troublesome feeling of fear; could it be perhaps that I had inadvertently placed that envelope in my pocket, that morning, on leaving the Archive in a hurry, as I rushed frantically towards Piazza San Benedetto?

I strived to get a hold over such idle, unwarranted feelings. What connections might ever be established between that envelope and my search — between that piece of crumpled, colourless paper, which I had discovered in it, and my investigation on the Apennine Sibyl, an enquiry that was now over and concluded and utterly dead? Definitely none, that was the correct answer. Perhaps the envelope just contained a piece of a joke, a jest, a queer pun in Latin contrived by Carlo Renzi to make fun of the notary public Domenico Batoli, or possibly of the witnesses; or maybe he just meant to have fun at the expense of the future, prospective managers of his still-to-be-founded Orphanage, who would be the target of a sort of posthumous prank, an uncommonly belated one, played along the flying course of decades and centuries; not to mention another chance, unlikely as it were: that Carlo Renzi — in a supposed whimsical mood of his — might have played a mischievous trick on such supercilious scholars, so naively credulous, who, just like myself, would be found toiling over his papers in a distant time to come — yet not so distant as to be entirely beyond the reach of a resolute, ingenious man such as Renzi himself.

However, while I was still immersed in such deep cogitation, I sensed that any explanatory endeavour was irredeemably stained by the mark of an unrealistic, desperate wishful thinking. It was a cra-

ving, dazzling desire not to be confronted with the truth; a crushing urge not to go further. I utterly refused to acknowledge the unmistakable tokens of an inscrutable fate, by whom I was being summoned — with a fervent and uncheckable bidding — to prosecute my journey towards that ghastly, unspeakable nightmare, whose influence I was trying to elude with despairing, unavailing efforts.

I could wait no more. My bloodless, quivering hands proceeded to open that envelope over again. Once more, I took out the withered scrap of paper from the inside: again, the neat, meticulous handwriting of Carlo Renzi appeared before my eyes.

«Vultus tuus perspexi deformis, turrigera mater, membra vulnere praebui lacerata maiestati divinae».

The words stood out neatly in the lifeless radiance cast by the streetlamps, as the square was gradually turning into a still, desolate place, just like that past evening when everything had started, on a day that seemed now to recede into far-away, inaccessible distances, so utterly impenetrable, so thoroughly unknown.

«Thy face», I translated mentally, «thy disfigured face did I behold...». I did not end the sentence. No connection, no connection at all might those lines ever establish with the awful object of my search, the unnameable entity which, one night after another, was increasingly haunting my dreams with insane, shapeless fears; the loathsome, unearthly creature whose name is not to be uttered, nor its semblance summoned.

But the words swelled, towered up in the night as though they were mighty, daunting cliffs onto which the whirling waves of my painful distress were breaking frantically; a single word out of them, in particular, seemed to demand my attention with a sort of weird liveliness — as if it was crying out, in the still of the night now enshrouded in full darkness, its foul, hideous message, which broke out from the very depths of barren, unexplored abysses, only inhabited by deadly subterranean waters, that had never quenched any man's thirst.

I turned my eyes to that word; I carefully read each single letter, written by the firm, unswerving hand of Carlo Renzi; and then full awareness — as if it were a wave that is no longer restrained by its embankment — flooded and engulfed my appalled, awe-stricken soul.

I could stand it nomore: I needed final confirmation, beyond any question, right now. I got up from the table almost mechanically; I crossed the Theater's square; I hastened along Corso Sertorio, then turned right and proceeded to my hotel; I entered the lobby and asked for the key at the front desk, then went quickly to my room.

I knew already which source of information I would get my answer from. Like a madman, I threw around my books, my ancient volumes with their frail bindings, and the bundles of old documents, the guidebooks and the miscellaneous papers, flinging loose pages all over the room, smashing their covers into the furniture and door — until I found what I was looking for.

I took the book in my hand: it was *Fasti* by Ovid, the work which the Latin poet from Sulmona had dedicated to the classical world and its ancient rituals, traditional celebrations and religious festivals. I opened the volume and, browsing its pages up to Section VI, I could see the words that I had already come across earlier in my investigation.

«Frontem Cybele redimita corona», wrote Ovid. However, I had put down my notes with some inaccuracy. The literal quotation, in effect, was «turrigera frontem Cybele redimita corona»: Cybele, the Great Mother, her head coronated with a turreted crown.

«Vultus tuus perspexi deformis, turrigera mater», were the words written by Carlo Renzi, «membra vulnere praebui lacerata maiestati divinae».

Now I no longer had any doubt. Indeed, I was absolutely certain of that: when Renzi wrote down his message, entrusting it to the future generations by hiding it within the binding of his own last will and testament, he intended to refer — manifestly and with full deliberation — to a specified and clearly identified entity: the turret-crowned deity, Cybele, the Great Mother, the goddess who feeds and nourishes the earth, the bringer of life and death, worshipped amidst the deep ravines and the precipices of the mountains; Cybele, whose priestesses, in their frantic excitement, in the orgiastic rapture of divination, uttered grievous prophecies about the dreadful fate of men.

And their very name — the name of those priestesses consecrated to Cybele — was «Sioboulen», a word that, in the antique Phrygian idiom, stood for «Sibyl».

«Vultus tuus perspexi…». Any residual illusion, any remaining hope that the whole matter might result in a mere dream, weird and grotesque as it was; or, perhaps, a sort of foolish prank, played a very long time ago; or, even, a mistake, a dismal misrepresentation of a plain, commonplace reality — albeit overshadowed by the myth's ominous presence — any such hopes and illusions had now vanished altogether.

A conclusive, undisputable certainty had eventually grown in me: Carlo Renzi — the merchant from Norcia, the philanthropist, the man who died in Rome in the early summer of the year 1839 — at some point of his earthly life, had had a close encounter, in his actual person, with the eerie, abominable creature who uttered words with the voice of the Great Mother — the entity «who speaks mournful words with delirious lips», and who had been dwelling for endless centuries in the dark recesses of the mountains lying near Norcia.

Of one thing I now felt assured: he had actually encountered the Apennine Sibyl.

CHAPTER 12
A VISION AT THE VATICAN MUSEUMS

THE CHEERFUL PEALS, so heartening with their brilliant resonance, raised cleanly by the bells of the Basilica of St. Peter, ringing out amid the lofty Roman palaces, and then fading away along the old streets of the Borgo Pio district. The sound broke into a thousand fragments of silvery, tinkling music over the pavement of broad flagstones, bringing about long reverberations in the bright air, and echoing with last, persistent overtones, which resounded with a dark and solemn quality.

The bells were striking half past eleven: they heralded, with timely joyousness, the simple prayer, so highly moving, of the Sext, the Midday Prayer at noon: that would be the hour when the appeasing, comforting words of the *Angelus* — an invocation to the Blessed Virgin Mary introduced by Pope Calixtus III in 1456 so that all churches in Christendom, at the very same hour, may beseech the Mother of God for divine favour and protection — would rise over the busy, uncaring city with its voice full of relieving tenderness: «Angelus Domini nuntiavit Mariae – Et concepit de Spiritu Sancto – Ecce Ancilla Domini – Fiat mihi secundum Verbum tuum…» — The angel of the Lord declared unto Mary - And she conceived of the Holy Spirit - Behold

the handmaid of the Lord - Be it done unto me according to thy word...

The hour was still early; lunch would only be served around one o'clock. Yet, sitting at a table which was at some distance from the others, outside the restaurant in Borgo Pio, not far from my dwelling in Rome, I was unable to feel any anticipatory delight, any thrilling expectation, even though an enticing scent of cooking had begun to pour out, in bountiful abundance, from the steamy bowels of the place.

So I was in Rome again. As for Norcia, it was of no use spending further time in ruminating upon dull and redundant lucubrations. I had settled my bill at the hotel; I had given instructions to have my books sent to my address in Rome, in due time and without urgency; I had placed my diminutive luggage in my car, and I had finally departed from Norcia, by an irrevocable decision. With no regrets. Once and for all.

Perhaps, I was just fleeing; or maybe I was only leaving: I could not tell for certain. I only knew that a sense of overwhelming weariness, a thick, murky wave of exhaustion, a gloomy feeling of dismal, unwarranted dejection had taken possession of my soul, so as to render intolerable any deferral of my departure from that town, encircled by mountains.

And that face: that very face was coming back into my mind over and over again. The face that Carlo Renzi had mentioned in the few lines he himself had written; the face that he had possibly seen one day, in actual reality, as a tangible, genuine occurrence, with his earthly eyes; the very same day when he had looked back, in turn, into terrific, unbearable eyes — which had cast their gaze across the boundless, echoing sweep of centuries, and harboured nothing human within themselves.

I was being haunted, unforgivingly, by a vision, which persisted in tormenting my spirit with an unrelenting urge: it was the portrait of Medusa, painted in 1598 by Michelangelo Merisi, known as Caravaggio, on a small, wooden ceremonial shield, subsequently presented as a gift to the Grand Duke of Tuscany Ferdinand I de' Medici; that face — which seemed to protrude, by remarkable craft, from the convex surface of the wood itself, bulging from the curved shield as though it were a living thing, and projecting the foul, repulsive sha-

dow of its own snakelike hair, writhing horribly in its final convulsions before death stiffened its revolting and abominable coils; those features — which the artist's hand had skilfully drawn so as to faithfully reproduce the true lineaments of the loathsome creature, the way Perseus had beheld them in that same shield, polished up to a mirror-like glossiness, in which to consider the monster's semblance while eluding its hideous, abhorrent eyes that turned flesh into stone; and thus the hero had been able to cut off the creature's head with his sword, and let out its hateful life; that vile and distorted countenance; those disfigured, agonizing traits — caught by the painter in the very moment its wicked, fiendish soul forsook its execrable body, the freak's awful head already detached from its neck, bleeding a filthy, brown-coloured ichor, apparently spilling out from the shield, and flooding down to the very feet of the horrified spectator, standing aghast in contemplation of that prodigious and amazing picture.

The vision of that face used to haunt, of late, my dreams; especially in very late hours at night, when I awoke from a deep sleep and cried out aloud, my face deathly pale, the sheets in my bed soaked with icy sweat, gasping for breath as I was swept over by a queer, overwhelming wave of terror, so unwarranted yet so oddly familiar.

And those words — «vultus tuus…» — were coming back to my mind over and over again, tormenting my soul, and reverberating grimly between the gloomy walls of my room, concealed in darkness.

One night I could not hold myself back. Seized by a frantic, disquieted mood, I awoke, got up suddenly and went to the bedroom cupboard; from the pocket of my coat, I drew out the withered envelope which still held the slip of paper containing the words written by Carlo Renzi in 1837; then I seated myself at my writing table, amid chaotic heaps of papers and scattered books, and I concocted an improvised translation, with the help of a dictionary, right from the Latin text.

«Thy disfigured face did I behold, oh turreted, crowned mother, and I sacrificed unto thy divine glory my bleeding, torn-apart limbs», thus I rendered it in English.

Once more, that night, when I had fallen asleep again, the face of Medusa had come to me in my dreams, more vivid than ever, as if the time elapsed during the preceding hours had given her the opportunity to draw the more nearer and to lurk grievously, like a mournful shadow, not far from the building where my dwelling was; as if her foul, polluted exhalation were about to mingle with my own breath; or her poisonous blood were on the point of dripping — a wet, loathsome thing — all over my tangled sheets, which were lying in a heap at the foot of my bed.

But it was gone half past eleven in the morning, and the sky, veiled with thin, colourless clouds, was casting its dull radiance over the tourists who, with their cheerful and unmindful gait, were proceeding along the streets of Borgo Pio, heading to Via di Porta Angelica and the outer walls of the Vatican City.

It was now clear to me that I wouldn't be able to hold out for much longer; I couldn't stand such a strain for long

I flung a few coins on the table as a tip and got up. I started walking nervously. I could not sense within myself any firm purposefulness which could stir in my soul a tangible desire to get back home. I looked at the tourists again, as they moved through the streets in droves: young men in multicoloured shirts, burdened with their knapsacks; old married couples, by all appearances refined, wealthy people in their retirement; seminary students in their black cassocks, seemin-

gly of East Indian origin or coming anyway from other far-eastern countries.

My head was now hurting with aching pain; blurred, whirling thoughts were frantically reeling within my brain, intermingled with confused, whimsical feelings which originated, as an erratic radiance, from a hidden, sheltered portion of my spiritual being; while odd mental associations, restlessly incoherent, seemed to pierce through unknown layers of awareness, so as to reveal themselves in a sudden flash of light — just to collapse again, after a few seconds, into a magmatic ocean of which I myself could not fathom the depth, nor investigate the origin.

I realized that I had joined, without any conscious deliberation, the great concourse of people who were leaving the Borgo Pio district in and endless queue, as they turned right along via di Porta Angelica, skirting piazza del Risorgimento and coming finally to a halt along viale dei Bastioni di Michelangelo, where the multifarious crowd formed a long queue.

Under the lofty ramparts, made of solid old bricks, which sheltered the Vatican City's sovereign territory, a jolly multitude of people, belonging to a large number of assorted countries from every continent, in their motley and multifarious attire, were standing in a merry and unconcerned mood, as they proceeded in slow motion — like a small, many-coloured army — towards the viale Vaticano.

I had unthinkingly lined up with the throng of tourists that were queuing, with placid steadfastness, for their turn of admission to the Vatican Museums. At this sudden apprehension, an ominous chill ran down my spine, which for some reason I could not pinpoint at all.

In utter amazement, I continued to advance while keeping my position in the line; steadily, one small step after the other, together with all the people in the queue, in a sort of mechanical fashion — as though we were all rank after rank of ants, progressing in unison, engrossed in some disciplined, absorbing task, and determined to carry back to our anthill's tunnels, concealed within the green grass, the rich, tasty remnants, tiny as they might be, of a luscious breakfast, in a garden bathed in sunlight and reverberating with the sound of laughter.

The many languages being spoken, the variety of attitudes and the multifold differences displayed by the people's countenances and

features — everything contributed to an ever growing sense of astonishment, so oddly extravagant, that had apparently seized my very soul; so much so that I felt I had no chance to shake off the queer bewilderment arising from that strange hour and that sundry crowd. Nonetheless, it would have been enough to make a mere exertion of the will, by which I should leave that queue at once — by the simple gesture of placing my foot on the street's tarmac — and then quit the sidewalk packed with tourists, even though I should be in danger of being run over by the fast-moving cars which careered heedlessly along the viale Vaticano.

As the line progressed at a snail's pace along the sidewalk, my state of agitation increased, getting ever more acute and painful: I could not really understand what I was doing there, amid that throng, in expectation of an occurrence for which definitely — and at variance with the aspirations held by all those people, who were utterly unknown to me — I had no fancy at all. Wrapped up in that chaos of voices and languages, I felt altogether befuddled and lost, my mind led astray, by the noise and crowd, from an urgent, compelling yearning of mine for silence and stillness and discernment: a yearning which was swelling within my very soul as an imperative request.

At last we reached the main entrance to the Vatican Museums: it was a dark, gaping cavity, carved deeply into the walls built by Pope Leo IV more than a thousand years earlier, as though it were a dank, gloomy gateway to a huge burial mound, which oddly enough had escaped the extensive bulldozing carried out long ago, when the new concrete apartment buildings had been raised, and the noisy roads cutting through the modern city had been constructed.

Carried along by the swarming people, I moved into the vast entrance hall of the Museums, together with a thick pack of tourists: the place was frantically humming with bustling activity, and reverberating with the countless footsteps of a frenzied legion of tourists, all of them engaged in a hunt for the cloakroom, the guided tour timetables, artistic prints and cheap souvenirs available for sale at the adjoining gift shop.

I was taking deep breaths, as I fought against the incoming throng of hasty tourists who flocked before the display cases, where the decaying remnants of dusty mummies were on show — still wrapped in their linen cloths — together with a number of alabaster jars, that

once had contained, drenched in the finest ointments, the entrails of those same corpses which had undergone arcane treatments aimed at imparting immortal life to their withered remains, according to their own wish, made when they were still alive.

The heat was getting ever more intolerable. With a growing sense of oppression, I moved across the rooms dedicated to ancient Egypt; I was determined to leave that part of the museum as soon as I could, with the intention of reaching an area where I could breathe more freely. I found myself, instead, inside the overcrowded rooms of the Pio-Clementino exhibition, where the crowd was pressing even more than before.

The masterpieces of Greek statuary art besieged me on all sides, almost whirling amid the packs of swarming tourists, as though their marble likenesses, their bodies frozen in stone might abruptly rush here and there, emerging and vanishing all of a sudden in front of my dazed eyes, amidst the countless, yelling shapes of the flushed visitors.

I struggled to withdraw, but the incoming waves of tourists were too massive for me to overcome them; I was pushed back again into the Museum's rooms, which followed one another in endless intricacy, made of recesses, vestibules, corridors and chambers; while the motionless marble faces of the statues seemed to merge crazily with the sneering, sweaty countenances of the visitors, still pouring into the rooms as if they were part of inexhaustible ranks.

I went through a number of chambers, as I cut across the throng with unsteady pace, until I found myself in the Sala Rotonda, the Round Hall, where I could lean for a moment on the railings that protected an enormous Roman basin of red porphyry stone, found at Nero's Domus Aurea; it appeared that the room had been almost overlooked, for the time being, by the unyielding concourse of people which continued to flood the adjoining chambers. From the huge recesses in the room's round wall, the sullen marble shapes of Hercules, Jupiter, Hera and other ancient gods were glancing at me with stern disfavour, while my heart leaped wildly in my breast and I gasped for breath with increasing difficulty, even though the air now seemed to be less suffocating.

I had to get out of there. A feeling of urgency and impending danger had now seized my very soul, so that I was compelled to turn

my awe-stricken eyes, now lost in terror, towards the paneled ceiling — built in imitation of the Pantheon's dome — as if some unknown harm might strike from above, and a threat might abruptly fall upon me, like a bird of prey with its sharp, ruthless claws. I gasped for a breath of fresh air; my vision got blurred and my eyes closed in pain, as I strove to elude that quivering shadow, which seemed to dash upon me from unfathomable, timeless abysses, while I raised my arm as if to protect my face and body from being torn asunder.

A group of noisy visitors, led by a Museum tour guide, made their entrance into the room, paying little or no attention to the learned explanations being provided to them regarding the masterpieces on show in the round hall.

Seized by a sudden feeling of dread, I flung out of the room and bolted across the maze of chambers crammed with invaluable works of art: I rushed past the marble staues of Meleager, Apollo Belvedere and Laocoön, seeing nothing, listening to nobody, forcing my way through the throng of amazed, irritated tourists; the ancient faces carved in stone were pressing me, their marble shapes seemed to come to life, taking the illusory, gruesome consistency of flesh, just to pounce — with stiff fingers, not yet fully turned into muscles and tendons — on my frenzied, unheeding body, as I dashed by their appalling and dreamlike semblances.

I ran for a long time, closely followed by a swelling feeling of some danger beyond imagination; a sort of groundless awareness about a weird, impending peril; a sensation of troubled anticipation of a forthcoming threat, which would pounce on me any moment now, striking its bloody, savage blows with merciless eagerness.

As I rushed frantically ahead, I went through the full extent of the Gallery of the Candelabras, and past the endless sequence of price-

less Roman statues which crammed the available space between the arched ceiling, adorned with frescoes, and the floor inlaid with coloured marble.

Drawing nearer to the end of the Gallery, I slowed down: the sense of an imminent danger had grown more and more acute, my clothes were now drenched with sweat, my heart pounded like a hammer within my breast, heaving furiously in a fit of terror.

I left the Gallery of the Candelabras and, following the next turns of the corridor, I found myself in front of the entrance to another elongated passageway; I went through the door, and got in: there, a shiver of utter horror ran through my body, and all became suddenly clear to me.

A huge gallery opened before my eyes — of immeasurable length, and whose arched vault, overwhelming and inaccessible, was covered, every inch of it, with stuccoes and frescoes, painted in the form of human figures, and decorated in the grotesque style, making up a single ocean of lavish, shimmering colour, almost unbearable to the eye. On both sides, ranged in succession along the endless walls, whose seamless continuity was broken by the openings of many exceptionally tall windows, a series of large, frescoed, square-shaped areas displayed their liquid, watery colours, showing all the hues of lazuline blue and pastel green: they followed one another in endless sequence, flooding with their cyan glare the gigantic passageway up to its farther end.

I was in the Gallery of Maps; those square-shaped areas, painted in fresco, were maps; and now I knew, with absolute certainty, why I was there.

My whole frame was now shaking with fear. What had happened since that very morning — the mournful dream of Medusa; the troubled apprehension that had inexplicably seized my spirit in the streets and alleys of Borgo Pio; my unwarranted determination to follow the steps of the swarming tourists, a resolve which I had made without being aware of it, pressed by some uknown influence which originated from a secluded, impenetrable portion of my soul; my inability to break loose from that odd feeling of being subjugated, to the point that I was compelled to enter, against my own will, the Vatican Museums and proceed through the row of chambers burdened with antique masterpieces, overstocked with the portentous holiness of art

and the noisy herds of visitors — all that had not definitely happened by mere chance.

I took a few reluctant, mechanical steps into the Gallery. I really wanted to stop and get back; yet I could not urge my legs to do so.

The extraordinary elongated room was packed with visitors, staring at the arched ceiling with their faces upwards, or in pensive contemplation of this or that map, painted on the portions of wall between the high windows. Apparently, everything seemed just right.

The forty geographical maps, frescoed by the painter Antonio Danti in 1585, depicted — as if revealing themselves to the astonished sight of a delighted traveller who was flying in the high sky between earth and heaven — the mountain ranges, waterways, lakes, coastal outlines and the propitious presence of towns, hamlets and strongholds, all of them a token of flourishing prosperity, lying in the territory ruled, in the Italian peninsula, by the Papal States, the way one could behold them when the Pope was Gregory XIII. The wealth of details represented in the maps, the miniature features that had been portrayed there, the accurate rendering of a multifarious bounty of place-names, were the offspring of Ignazio Danti's systematic work. Danti, a great mathematician, astronomer and cosmographer born in Perugia, in Central Italy, and a crafted manufacturer of fine precision instruments, astrolabes and sundials, was Antonio's brother, the artist who had actually painted the frescoed maps on the walls, based on the preparatory drawings arranged by his skilled, celebrated brother-scientist.

The profusion of cartographic details was such that the tourists rested in delight before the huge maps that depicted the regions and lands they already knew, their countenances shining with wonder as they traced, on the frescoes, the very same names and places — often reported with a queer, old-fashioned spelling — which they came across each and every day while going from home to work in present times.

However, my feeling of mounting horror and dismay was utterly unknown to those visitors. There I was, alone, in that Gallery, crushed by the vaults, excessively decorated and overwhelmed with gold, and surrounded by all those sixteenth-century maps, which — I knew for certain — were trying, with their treacherous call, to entice my soul through their squared frescoes and into their shimmering colours,

drenched with turquoise blue, so as to induce me to stand up before the magnificence of such unreal, dimensionless kingdoms, and then plunge myself into the illusory semblance of their unsubstantial territories, where my spirit would break any remaining ties, healing and vital as they were, to the concrete reality of the world.

I went on; yet it was as if my legs had been turned into wooden sticks. The whole of my frame was trembling in an attempt to resist a contrasting exertion, as I endeavoured to shun that call which — under the grim, malevolent glare of the maps — was getting ever more compelling.

I had been summoned there on purpose. I had tried to flee, but all my efforts had been in vain. And now, it was too late; my steps had led me, at last, before the fresco depicting the territory of Umbria, and the specific portion of that territory which had been subject, in past ages, to the rule of the Duchy of Spoletium, as it was to be seen in year 1585.

I recognised, close to the ceiling, on the farther side of the map pointing southwards, the towns of Spoletium, Monteleone and Cascia; just below, I could see Norcia, reported with its Latin name «Nursia», with its surrounding walls and its many stern towers, now totally vanished — razed to the ground by centuries of raging earthquakes; and

the river Torbidone, painted on the wall with a thin stroke of the artist's brush, and winding its way through the marshy countryside.

My eye, pressed by an evil volition which I was trying to resist without any success, was fleeing across the mountains and valleys I knew so well, with no possibility of stopping my foolhardy rush towards annihilation, and collapse: the villages of Ancarano, Castel Sant'Angelo, Visso, and Mount Bove; and then, turning eastward, a barren region of mountains having no names, stark, wild and desolate; and finally a solitary stronghold, which also lacked its frescoed caption, yet — judging by its lonesome position — it could only be the small hamlet of Castelluccio, the ultimate outpost marking the border of an unfriendly realm of snow, high cliffs and winds.

At that very moment, I realized that nothing would save me from the appalling encounter I feared; and that my desperate flight to Rome had only represented a sort of ultimate, pointless effort to elude the fiendish fascination pouring forth from that ominous, eerie legend; and that the preternatural potency of that name was inexhaustible, and all struggle against its call would be in vain: for there was no place on earth to hide, in an attempt to shun that imperative, unyielding summon, which knew neither mercy nor relief.

Beyond the peaks with no names, rose a huge, mighty mountain, whose profile had been painted by Antonio Danti with rough, uneven strokes: it was Mount Vettore. Just below, on the westward side, a

smaller mountain was visible, whose outline I found familiar as if I had known it since time immemorial, and whose shape itself seemed to be calling my name from a timeless and far-away distance.

On the very top of that mountain, with a swift stroke of the brush, a cavern had been drawn; at its side, with a neat, easily-readable lettering, a caption had been painted: «The Sibyl's Cave».

Finally my mind gave in, and I lost my senses.

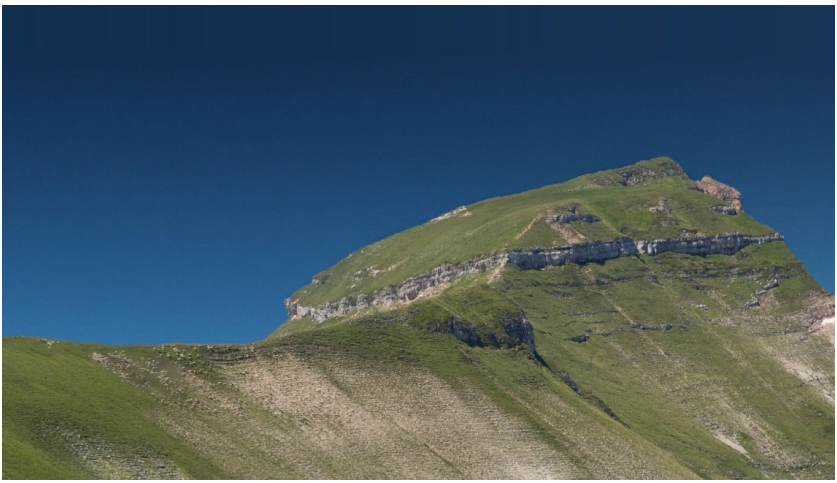
«*Geht es dir besser?* — Are you better?». My eyes blinked open; the sturdy German tourist was bending over my body, staring right into my face to catch any possible sign of revival. «Viel besser, danke schoen — Much better, thank you», I said as I rose with some difficulty to my feet. I looked around: a monumental bronze pine cone, a Roman masterpiece shining in the afternoon sun, stood right before me; next to it there were two graceful peacocks, both made of bronze as well. I was in the Belvedere Courtyard of the Vatican Museums.

Slowly, as though I had just awakened from a quiet, undisturbed sleep, I directed my steps, with an altogether new purpose, towards the exit of the Museums.

Now everything was clear to me. No doubts, no hesitations lingered any longer in my soul; there was no room left for worries and fears. The time for perplexity and questioning and wavering was over. Now I knew that no chance was given to ever escape that summons, and shun the unswerving might originating from that myth. Just like Carlo Renzi, I would confront with that Face, directly and in person, turning aside no more, calling forth unwarranted justifications no more.

My flight to Rome, my attempt to elude the looming legend had been utterly useless. I would, right now and with no further delay, go back to that land. I would return to those mountains. I had to go back to Norcia.

CHAPTER 13
THE MIDDAY FIEND



BLESSED IS THE SOUL — oppressed by a grave distress overburdening his heart; his aching spirit made wordless by a sorrowful grief; lost in wavering, undecided thoughts, as if they were dust so thin as to be swept away by a light breeze, or autumn leaves being scattered all over a desolate alley; a feverish and restless anguish haunting his mind, leaving him no chance and rendering him forgetful altogether of any former peacefulness and quiet happiness which used to inhabit his heart, all such feelings warded forcefully off by the dark, rolling clouds obscuring his horizon — blessed is the soul that, unexpectedly, beholds a clear blue patch in the sky, progressing amid the storm; first, it allays the gloomy tint of the heavy black clouds; then, with its blazing radiance, it breaks through the magnificence of the whole heavens above, while the sun, now reborn to a fresh dazzling splendour, wipes away all worries and concerns and tormenting woes, and bestows on the aching spirit an appeasing plenitude, that arises from a reconciled conflict: a clash that is finally over.

Such was the encouraging, lighthearted cheerfulness that now inhabited my spirit, as I climbed, at a steady pace, the steep mountainside — strewn with scanty herbage, clinging tenaciously to the white

rocks — of the illustrious cliff whose fascination was so remarkably weird; the mountain whose name had resounded throughout the centuries with its magical spell; the peak wearing its princely crown, an uncanny kingdom of stone, alternately flooded with sunlight and stormed by the pouring rains and icy winds from the North: before my very eyes, it rose at last the impressive, gorgeous, eerie likeness of Mount Sibyl.

I looked up: right in front of me there stood the Sibyl's sinister, crowned mountain-top — so bare and so apparently insubstantial, in the translucent distance and crystal-clear air that was still between that peak and myself. Yet, now it stood there, as an actual and tangible reality: definitely it looked different, and the more stunning if compared with the image that had once seized my soul and left a scorching, permanent mark in it, when I had come across that old withered picture which I had found, several weeks earlier, in the guidebook of the hiking trails, at the lobby of my hotel in Norcia.

For months that mountain had been the object of my queer investigation, a foolish search I was carrying out among dusty old books and forgotten popular lore, balancing myself between learned studies and irrational superstitions, in a view to tracing, in the twists and turns of history, the footprints of a legendary presence, which had manifested itself at times, and enigmatically — in the brave deeds accomplished by a popular Italian hero, or among the learned quotations noted down by ancient cosmographers from Northern Europe; traversing the centuries in disguise, as if it were a silken thread, a thin and almost invisible one, unravelling throughout the ages back to the ancient, classical writers, Suetonius, Trebellius Pollio; and whose end had been flung, by a chance as much odd as inconceivable, into the wavering and undeserving hand of a man living in our present time, so that that shadowy mark, which had loomed in past ages, with its pale presence, over the mountains of Norcia, had been now secured and treasured between my fingers.

I had eventually realized, in the chambers of the Vatican Museums, burdened with artistic masterpieces and crammed with tourists, that any attempt to shrink back from that fateful encounter would be pointless: I could not elude that call, which arose from the very rocks and trails and grasslands of that mountain, and turned its cliff into something different from a mere fairy dream, originating

from the overflowing potency of that legend: now it had become a factual truth, living its own existence in our real world, at a definite place, that was easily located on any map; and only a cowardly, faint-hearted attitude could hamper the way towards it.

My heart replenished with such fresh realization, I had accordingly left Rome; I had returned to my hotel in Norcia, where I had booked a room again; then, by car and with no further delay, I had directed my course towards the national road that led to Castelluccio. I was driving in a happy and determined mood, and when I arrived at the first rising slopes of Mount Vettore, whose huge mass rested on the grassy expanse of the Plains — solitary and boundless as they were, and still drenched in the early morning's dew — on the northern side of which was to be found the near end of the trail that Guerrino the Wretched, in his fanciful romance, had taken to get to Mount Sibyl, I decided to proceed further towards Forca di Presta, the high pass leading to the mountain-side lying in the Marche region. From there, just outside the small village of Montemonaco, I would take the alternative trail to the Sibyl's cave, the one that had been trodden by Antoine de La Sale, the author of *The Paradise of Queen Sibyl*, in the fifteenth century, of which we have a fully detailed description, as it is reported in the amazing account of his remarkable journey. My climb to the mountain would have been much quicker if I chose to go the same way as the gentleman from Provence, rather than proceed along the elevated routes walked by the popular, legendary hero, who had followed a winding course unravelling across precipitous cliffs and ravines, stormed by the winds from all directions.

An acute craving had taken hold of my spirit, as I now yearned to confront with that mountain, and was actually rushing, without any further reserve, towards that call; and I would not stand any additional bothersome, unwanted delay.

After passing Montemonaco, I moved on to the twisty, unpaved road that toiled its way up the slope of the mountain, until I got to the Sibyl's Refuge, a small lodge for tourists and hikers placed midway to the top. From there, having parked my car near the lodge, I had begun my ascent on foot, following the narrow trail which, starting from the rear side of the refuge, went up the mountain-side by a steep rise.

The morning sun, warm and friendly, shed its neat, lustrous shine on the grassy incline, flooding the slopes with the bright-green gla-

re typical of high altitude plant life; a light wind, also going up the steep mountain-slope as I myself was doing, caressed the tussocks of grass gently, and then vanished beyond the high ridges which, on raising one's eyes, were to be seen in the elevated regions of the mountain, as the masters of the airy borders — marked by their own immutable profile of stone, drenched in a dazzling blue radiance — with the translucent line of the sky. The air, almost shimmering in the sunlight's golden effulgence, with its vivid cyan hue and light-blue shades, provided a glimpse, in the far distance, of the watery, polished surface of the Tyrrhenian Sea, sparkling in the sun.

Following that very same trail, on May, 18th 1420, Antoine de La Sale, the gentleman from Provence, had ascended the slopes of Mount Sibyl, together with a few smart local peasants, leading their plodding horses by the halters up the steep incline, with their burden of torchlights and food supplies. «Tant y sont les herbes et fleurs de toutes couleurs et estranges manieres, qui sont tresodorans que c'est un tresgrant plaisir», wrote de La Sale: so great a variety of herbs and flowers, of all possible colours and fashions, spread about their fragrances that the wearisome climb was turned into a real pleasure; and indeed the flowers accompanied my own steps with their charming redolence, which, in the increasing heat of the summer morning, travelled enjoyably across the clear and refreshing air, as if to reward the lonely wayfarer for his unexpected and most welcome visit.

Nobody was in sight. The mountain, that working weekday, was completely desolate. Only the chirping of crickets and the humming of insects accompanied the dull repetitive thump, virtually mesmerizing, produced by my hiking boots when hitting the rocky ground, as I laboured my way up the trail flanked by tufts of grass.

In the deep silence, in the exertion of the climb, my thoughts had taken on a tinge of troubled restlessness, full of expectation. Every step I took, every panting breath I drew brought me closer and closer to the high crown of stone and the cavern: I knew they were waiting, up there, in their barren and deserted highland, for the coming of that unexpected visitor, clambering up along the track flooded with sunlight. I wished I were already on the mountain-top to see, with my very eyes, the dark entrance to that cavern; I wanted to feel its icy breath, leaking out from the bowels of the mount, and creating an odd, unpleasant contrast with the scorching heat raining down from

the summer sun; I yearned to set my foot, with wavering, uneasy step, on the rocky soil of the cave's entrance, and get at last into its gloomy vestibule, the air inside befouled by a stale stench of dankness, my sight still bedazzled by the blazing beams of the sun outside, with my pupils gradually adjusting to the deep darkness in the hollow, until I would be able to see, examine and discern, so that I would finally gain the understanding I craved for, and quench eventually my thirst — so insane and ominous and irrepressible — for true knowledge.

Yet I knew that actual access to the cavern would not be easily attained: as a matter of fact, the cave had been subject, throughout the centuries, to collapses, repeated alterations and awkward attempts to carry out unauthorised excavations, each one of which had been the cause of irreparable damage and modifications.

As I proceeded beyond the steepest section of the trail and reached the summit of Mount Zampa, at an elevation of some 6,000 feet — from there the trail started which followed the outline of the high ridges, ascending with a gradual slope up to the isolated peak of Mount Sibyl — the account written by de La Sale about the cavern and the access to its entrance hollow came to my mind.

In his report, the author of the *Paradise* had maintained that, ever since the fourteenth century, officials of the Papal States had the entrance to the cave sealed, with a view to preventing sorcerers and enchanters from gaining access to it. However, at the time of de La Sale's expedition, the entrance was open — «ouverte» — and the traveller had successfully crept in, working his way through the small aperture which opened in the solid rock of the barren mountain-top.

Yet, as early as 1550, in his *General description of Italy* Leandro Alberti reported that «as the citizens of Norcia disapproved of the unrelenting inflow of sorcerers who ascended to those bleak ridges, they resolved to seal the cave, thus preventing anyone from gaining access to it»; so the place was rendered once more inaccessible.

Sure enough the cavern remained closed for a long time, as is confirmed by Father Fortunato Ciucci, a benedictine monk who wrote *The Chronicles of the antique town of Norsia*, dating to 1650. In his work he reports that «our town was compelled to seal the entrance to the alleged Sibyl, as it is still sealed today», with a view to circumscribing the great concourse of wizards and enchanters, who persisted in their

attempts to reach the cave's entrance «to stage their abominable rituals».

Throughout the subsequent two hundred years, the cave was forsaken and derelict. The place had been consigned to its own secret, forlorn life; beaten by the raging winds that stormed the mountain-top, it was as if its own fame — indeed, Apennine Sibyl's fame — had vanished altogether from everybody's mind, the same way all that foolish chatter and those bogus tales, arising from popular benightedness and superstitious beliefs, were being gradually dispelled by the new philosophical and scientific principles of the Age of Reason, back into the uncivilized darkness they had come out of.

For more than two centuries, the only visitors who manifested an interest for so desolate a territory would come from the ranks of scientific researchers: they were famous botanists, like Ulisse Aldovrandi from Bologna, who already in the sixteenth century had collected and classified specimens of local flora; the Sicilian naturalist Paolo Silvio Boccone; Pierantonio Micheli from Florence; and then the two great Jesuit cartographers, English-born Christopher Maire and Ruggero Giuseppe Boscovich from Dalmatia, who in 1755 were entrusted by Pope Benedict XIV to make the *New Geographic Map of the Papal States*, the first Italian cartography drawn by the use of scientific measurements and ground surveys, with the aim to assess the actual length of the meridian arc running across the whole extent of the territories under the Pope's rule, cutting through the town of Rimini and crossing, at its very centre, the dome of St. Peter's in Rome.

Hence no further news, no additional piece of information would be available, for a period longer than two hundred years, as to the conditions and accessibility of the Sibyl's cave. The final decade of the nineteenth century would roll by, before any new firsthand information be retrieved about the actual state of Mount Sibyl's mountain-top, as it would have been recorded by the first parties of amateur sightseers.

Meanwhile I had taken the route which wound its way up along the barren crest leading from Mont Zampa to the Sibyl's elevated peak, encircled by its huge crown of stone, whose actual dimensions, so imposingly massive, were now to be appreciated fully as the intervening distance continued to decrease. I set my feet on the ground with the utmost care, cautiously following the course of the track, that

was very narrow and beaten by a strong wind, as it ran between the empty realms in the high sky and the echoing abysses of the appalling, bottomless ravines which opened on both sides.

Everything was absolute stillness. The sun flooded, with its waves of ardent, transparent radiance, the deserted highlands, a wide and ambiguously forlorn region, whose utter soundlessness was to be apparently ascribed to the troublesome, uncanny lack of any living being.

To my right — like heinous jaws which opened with a savage yell to clutch at the unwary wayfarer who walked incautiously along the thin crest, immersed in the translucent effulgence of the sky — there gaped the blood-curdling abysses of the Gole dell'Infernaccio, the Ravines of Hell, on the bottom of which ran the Tenna stream, unseen amid dense thickets. In the deep silence, the restless, subdued murmur of the whirling waters rose high up in the air as a light and inviting vibration: a promise of torpid, soothing refreshment to the scorching heat of the sun, now at its zenith — and the absolute certainty of a quick death on the sheer, jagged cliffs which hideously went down abruptly to the gorge's bottom, with a ghastly leap into

sheer emptiness: an immense space imbued with blue light, enclosed within the opposing ravines of Mount Sibyl and Mount Priora, precipitating for more than three thousand feet, if only my step, staggering on the verge of the abyss, had lost its grip hurling my body into the unfathomable depths of that bottomless, merciful void.

With a shiver of pain, I suddenly realized that I was standing on the very same spot from which that picture — depicted in the little guidebook that I had chanced to stumble upon several weeks earlier — had been taken: the narrow cliff; the elongated crest, rising gradually and flanked by appalling chasms; the barren ridge which proceeded up to the Sibyl's peak, with its huge, stark crown of stone, marking the boundary of the mountain's loftiest and most secluded region. Everything was just there. Everything seemed to match to a perfect degree the reality that had once been frozen in that picture, before the photographer's eye, in an unspecified moment of the past; only, the colours were different, so rich and shining with life was the sight I beheld, as a witness belonging to a time that was still young, and pulsing with the vibration of the present hour, the solitary point in time of high noon.

And, that very moment, I was stricken with panic. The sun, high up in the sky, cast all around its ardent beams, as if they were darts

being shot by a magical, gigantic bow, pointing towards the defenceless earth. That was the time of the midday fiend, when the refulgent star at its culmination exhausts and blots out the shadows of the living beings, who become the prey, according to an ancient Jewish lore, of the evil potencies dwelling in the countryside flooded with sunlight, along the secluded trails running across the fields, and in far-off, deserted places; they were eerie creatures, who would fall upon the wayfarer in the bedazzling radiance of the midday sun, sucking their blood and lives and taking away their very souls, weakened by the dull stupefaction brought about by the glowing star.

With an effort, I turned my mind away from such unwholesome, unsafe reveries, arising from a sensitivity which was unreasonably overstrained, as it worked in secrecy within my spirit; I had been given a sign of my own excessive weariness, a mental fatigue that was certainly induced by my weird climb to that mountain-top subject to the rule of the overwhelming effulgence of midsummer, cast by the sun at the apex of its godlike might.

As I proceeded along the brink of the precipice, heading to the Sibyl's peak, I forced my spirit to focus on real occurrences, actual facts and the most significant dates that had marked a number of events of great relevance in the cavern's recent history, when men urged by an eagerness as extravagant as romantically foolish had endeavoured to open their way through the mouth of that weird and mysterious cave, which had been sealed many centuries earlier.

It was in 1885 that something eventually happened on that peak, beside the forlorn cavity and amid the tufts of grass, which for a longtime had been living their undisturbed life on the summit, in stillness and silence, carefully watching the cave's forbidden entrance: an impenetrable hollow that nobody — who ventured as far as that remote cliff, lost amid the Apennines, pressed by daring, shameless purposes — could ever break open.

That year Giovambattista Miliani, a member of the family who founded the historical paper factory in Fabriano, on the eastern side of the Apennines, and himself an enthusiastic hiker, pushed himself up to the top of Mount Sibyl, having been lured there, as many others in earlier times, by the enthralling call raised by the ancient legend; yet what he found up there was a mere «heap of wrecked stones». No trace of the cave's entrance was to be seen anywhere. The access to the Si-

byl's kingdom was permanently sealed, buried forever under a mound of rocks, preserving — as though they were ever vigilant guards — the chimerical subterranean realm.

However, disappointment was soon turned into a new exciting and very promising sort of feeling. In 1889, when the Italian Alpine Club, founded some twenty-five years earlier, gathered its members in Amandola, a small hamlet near Ascoli Piceno on the eastern side of the Apennines, for its XXI National Congress, Mount Sibyl was not far from that location, being only a few miles away from the thrilled participants. That was too short a distance not to make an attempt at a daring climb and cherish the idea, if the chances were favourable, to open their way into that fantastic, stubbornly defiant cave, by means of picks and shovels to be brought with them to this purpose in their backpacks. Thus, the party of merry hikers, fully equipped, set forth for Mount Sibyl, harbouring mirthful and warlike ambitions at the same time; yet, despite their cheerful firmness of purpose, their endeavour to break into the cavern proved ineffectual, and the place continued to keep the secret of its gloomy spell.

Nonetheless, the potency and momentum of that myth were still unrestrainable: too wild was the might which oozed from that barred cavern, concealed in the rocky bowels of a mountain; too far-reaching was the echo of that extraordinary legend, that already in long-gone centuries had crossed the lofty fastnesses of the Alps and found a welcoming haven in the pensive disposition, inclined to revery, of the Flemish and German poets, on whose hearts the mild sun of the northern European lands cast its rays.

So, in June 1897, two strange individuals, their manner urbane and refined, were seen looking for an accommodation at the finest hotel in Norcia. The first guy, an old man, wore a long authoritative beard; the second was slightly younger, and at all appearances he was a learned scholar as well, and a scientist.

The authoritative man was a celebrated French academic, Bruno Paulin Gaston Paris. A professor of German and Romance philology, a prominent researcher in medieval studies, Paris was an outstanding member of the *Académie Française*, which he had joined by taking the seat that had formerly belonged to the great chemist and microbiologist Louis Pasteur. He was fully conversant with the ancient lore pertaining to Tannhäuser, the German knight who according to legend

had spent twelve months beneath the eerie mountain whose name was *Frau Venus Berg*, relishing in the sinful, forbidden delights provided by the voluptuous goddess of love and her charming, handsome cortege. Ever since several years earlier, Gaston Paris had yielded to the obscure spell cast by that peculiar legend, which narrated of a cavern buried in the heart of a far-off mountain rising in Italy, among the peaks of the Central Apennines, near the small, secluded town of Norcia. And the myth's potency had drawn him, in his declining years, to those steep slopes, and on the verge of such ravines as he had often dreamed of while sitting in lecture halls at his university, with the aim of investigating, in the very place where his fancy had had its own primeval source, the ultimate mystery which established an unexpected, enlightening link between the dusky world of German fairy tales and Italy, the land of light, classical ruins, and Sibyls.

His companion was Pio Rajna, an elegant and well-educated man, born in Northern Italy's Valtellina, an eminent philologist and Romance literature scholar, a professor at the Universities of Milan and Florence, a member of the illustrious *Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei* and a senator-to-be of the Kingdom of Italy. He had been in touch with Gaston Paris for years on account of their common research interests as philologists, and shared with his French colleague the same enthusiasm for the myth of the Sibyl: hence no hesitation had arisen in his heart when he had received an invitation from that famous scientist to travel together — once in their lifetime, as they both knew it was definitely a one-time chance — towards that enthralling mountain, which had cast on them both an identical fascination.

However, Gaston Paris, owing to bad weather — which was amassing swift rolling clouds on the ridges that lay around Norcia, so that it was not advisable for a man not in his full health and vigour to go off hiking — would never attain the Sibyl's mountain-top; he would not have his chance to linger, engrossed in deep thought, near the hollow of that cave, among the wrecked stones, silent witnesses to the passage of Tannhäuser, the German knight who had renounced the world and vanished forever into the enigmatic subterranean realm. Actually the old scientist, despite the long journey he had made from far-off France to visit the place in person, would wait in Norcia for his friend to return, while Pio Rajna would attempt the ascent, confident of his skills as a proven climber, used as he was to

the rages and changeability of weather — a well-known matter to any hikers accustomed to the imposing majesty of the Alps, a mountainous chain he was fully acquainted with and of which he was in due awe.

The Italian philologist, as he ventured in that preliminary exploration, chanced to reach the Sibyl's top despite the dark driving clouds, burdened with rain, which had overtaken the hanging cliff. In the heavy mist, with its icy touch; in the faint, dreary radiance that turned the midday light into a mournful dusk leaking out from the core of the mount itself, Pio Rajna could notice nothing but a large stone, which totally obstructed the entrance to the cave.

That very summer, following the departure of Gaston Paris from Norcia to travel back to France, Rajna had ascended to the Sibyl's peak two more times, with a view to better appreciating the nature of the impediment which barred the access to the cavern. It was apparent that the entrance tunnel, which one supposes may be placed behind the large obstructing stone, was impracticable as it was full of rocky debris. The rumours — as were reported by the peasants who more than once had accompanied the philologist up to the mountain-top — said that several unsuccessful attempts had been made at breaking into that passage, in recent times indeed, by ill-advised treasure hunters; and that, on a specific occasion, such gullible adventurers were attended by no one less than a priest, who during the excavation works had duly sprinkled holy water on the broken rocks, in case the evil spirits which dwelled within the cavern should endeavour to set themselves free from the underground darkness by taking advantage of the hollows being opened by the men's digging.

As I proceeded along the windy ridge, flooded with the early afternoon sunlight, I could not help recalling to mind the nervous noise of countless hooves, the muffled, stealthy thumps with which many generations of men had trodden that same track, tempted by the gloomy fame of that cavern and the reliable, trustworthy hearsay which hinted at unimaginable treasures lying in a single, staggering heap somewhere in the unexplored winds and turns hidden within the mountain, whose hollows gleamed in the boundless, uncanny darkness with a feeble sparkling radiance, originating from the dull glow of the innumerable pieces of gold and the many precious stones that the eerie queen of that secret realm had been hoarding throughout the cen-

turies, by robbing the lordly knights who had dared to venture beyond the sombre ramparts of her kingdom.

Yet other men, resolute explorers determined to get the better of that obstinate, unyielding legend, which persisted in its unacceptable impregnability, were preparing to open their way inside the cave's walls, so contemptuously unwelcoming. They earnestly wished to win a victory over that place in the name of scientific knowledge and for the successful establishment of their modern investigation methods. For the very first time in the already astounding history of that mountain, a «Committee for the excavation of Mount Sibyl's cavern» was set up in 1920, in Montemonaco, by Mario Monti Guarnieri, PhD. Right away, the committe started designing an action plan to clear out the debris which had been obstructing the cave's entrance for many centuries. In the month of August of that same year, they actually carried out a preliminary round of that challenging and backbreaking task: an operation to be performed at an elevation in excess of seven thousand feet and in the utter lack of suitable machinery.

Although the upshot of such hard exertion proved to be scant, the result was thrilling enough: indeed, a section of the cave's entrance was unearthed — «shallow and a few yards long, an uncomfortable passageway to be accessed by twisting one's body inside it».

So the cavern was really there.

It was no dream, no fairy tale being told by the old peasants to their children before sending them to their large, hay-stuffed beds: it was no extravagant and fanciful poetical reverie, noted down on old sheets of paper as it was contrived by scrawny learned courtiers just to entertain their noble, bored patrons. Now, anyone who was so obliging as to venture up to the Sibyl's mountain-top — the site that had achieved, across many centuries and throughout Europe, a great renown for its being the place where a hollow in the very rock of the mount provided an access to an enchanted underground kingdom, with its evil and unchaste spell — would be able to touch the entrance to the cave with his very hand, and observe the heinous gloominess oozing from within as a loathsome black ichor, and consider the whiffs of chilly air leaking out from the cavity, with their burden of weird scents, undoubtedly originating from the multitude of awful chambers which, in the still untrodden core of the cave, followed one another to form a labyrinthine pattern, marked by huge chasms which

threatened to swallow at each step the daring explorer who, entering into the cavern alone, had tempted the barren darkness — un unfriendly, almost tangible obscurity — before he could even get a glimpse, after that last bend of the tunnel, or beyond that next chamber of stone, of the shimmer of a flickering light, the dim shine of a gemstone, announcing the presence of the pale, unsubstantial likeness of a lady, her white arm raised in a gesture of summons, so bewitching and dreamlike: an everlasting invitation — just as everlasting as the eternal stay, in such subterranean chambers, of that same visitor, consigned forever to a realm of horror and doom.

The finding of the cave was just what was needed for the Montemonaco Commitee — now designated as «Roman - Umbrian - Marchigian» — to become widely known among the people who had turned the legend of the Sibyl into their personal dream and illusory goal; and soon afterwards Pio Rajna, now a senator of the Kingdom of Italy, announced his total support of the project, so much so that he accepted to take on the office of honorary chairman.

Ever since that moment events began to unfold with unusual speed. The president of the Commitee was Norcia-born Domenico Falzetti. As a result of his active and enthusiastic drive, a new round of scientific excavations was carried out in August, 1925. However, when the digging team got to the top of the Sibyl's cliff, a nasty surprise was awaiting them: during the few years that had passed since the last excavation campaign, unknown diggers — in their chimerical search for the legendary riches hoarded within the mountain's core — had attempted again to break into the cavern, notably with cursory ineptitude, as they had caused, by the furious blows of their haphazardly placed picks, the disappearance of the cave's entrance. Thus, all the efforts that only a few years earlier had led to such an exciting find had been made pointless.

Yet Falzetti did not let such occurrences plunge the Committee into disheartenment and pessimism: under his resolute and energetic lead, the entrance passageway was unearthed again. From then on, the excavation works were fervently carried out: the mountain-top now echoed with the clank of the picks smashing the stones, while the shovels took the shattered debris away, and the largest rocks were removed by using long iron shafts acting as levers and operated by the

workers' bodies, with the help of the whole party of excited and inflamed men.

At length, after several days of hard work, an astonishing, unambiguous sign emerged before the diggers' bewildered eyes; and a shiver ran down their spines, as though something that was well-known and utterly familiar to them had succeeded, that very hour, in escaping its age-old confinement within the cave, so as to reappear from a long-gone past, which everybody had always considered, within their disbelieving hearts — up to that very time — as a childish fairy tale: a mere legend, that none of them had ever really believed in.

«We unearthed», writes Vincenzo Frenguelli, a member of Falzetti's team — «a sort of lintel carved in stone, with squared edges, set in a horizontal position and resting with both ends on two vertical stones, which were buried in the mound of wrecked rocks that obstructed the entrance hollow; such artifacts could not be mistaken for the remaining fragments of rough stone scattered all about, due to the apparent symmetry in their cut and overall shape».

That was the very evidence everybody was waiting for. That hollow was no ordinary cavern, it was no mere hollow carved by the rainwaters and the uncaring forces of nature; these lintels indicated, by their silent presence, that such a secluded place, beaten by wild winds

and stormed by icy rain as it was, had been possibly chosen by unknown local dwellers, since time immemorial, as their hallowed site for the celebration of the subterranean rituals of the Great Mother, on the mountain's crowned peak. «Turrigera frontem Cybele redimita corona», wrote Ovid. Indeed, the lore of the Sibyl was about to find its eerie confirmation based on actual facts.

Domenico Falzetti realized that excavations were not to be carried out in the absence of a clearance which, at this juncture, should have been provided by higher-ranking authorities. Hence he decided to address Pio Rajna in Rome, who meanwhile had taken his post as a senator. The illustrious man, through contacts within the Directorate-General for Excavations and Museums, was successful in arousing the interest of Giuseppe Moretti, at that time the Director General at the Department of Antiquities and Heritage in the local areas of Marche and Abruzzi. As a result, in 1926 a preliminary field survey was conducted on the mountain-top by the same Department: the promising outcome was that an underground hollow was actually present, and the explorers were able to creep into it «through a narrow crack which is to be found within the slanting layers of rock». However, the subterranean cavity was «less than twenty-five feet long, thirteen feet wide and ten feet high», with no further access «to any internal vaults, galleries or pits. This vestibule alone presents itself free from the rubble; and a small opening only, from that same vestibule, betokens the possible existence, in a long-gone past or maybe even in present times, not really of the actual chambers that popular lore had turned into the Queen Sibyl's paradise, but at least of further hollows that might be placed beyond the entrance cavity».

All such occurrences hinted at an imminent change in the excavating effort, which should be possibly increased so as works would advance at a much quicker pace, at least according to the statements released by Giuseppe Moretti. He declared that «he was confident that all the collapsed rocks which had fallen from the cave's ceiling onto the original stone floor would soon be cleared, and access to further cavities will be granted».

Despite such ranting announcements — which indeed turned into nothing — the conditions on Mount Sibyl's cliff remained the same for many years more, with no changes at all. Only Domenico Falzetti, stubbornly clinging to his firm, haunting belief that the time

had finally come to unveil the secrets of the cavern, persisted in his endeavours, unsuccessful as they were for the time being, to gather attention and financial resources to back his efforts, with the aim to complete his own extraordinary and unreasonable investigation.

He still did not know he was not alone. Indeed, new support and inspiration was about to be bestowed upon him, yet not from Italy, but actually from Belgium. Help would come from a man who, just like the resolute and energetic explorer from Norcia, had devoted a significant portion of his own life to the study of the gloomy, uncanny myth of the Apennine Sibyl, and to the mysterious, awe-inspiring fascination which seemed to ooze from that cavern, haunting the whimsical reveries of men: a fascination which urged them to deeds which they themselves — who were living their own ordinary and conventional lives — would never have imagined, nor even thought would be actually accomplished by them in the course of an incredibly exciting, extraordinarily enthralling adventure.

CHAPTER 14
CHILDREN OF THE GODDESS

FERNAND DESONAY was a young professor, a teacher of philology at the University of Liège, in Belgium. In his early years, his enthusiasm for the history of Romance literature — which had opened to him a brilliant academic career — had been abundantly nurtured by a close acquaintance with old novels and tales, dating back chiefly to the fourteenth and fifthteenth centuries. Among such novels, a fascinated wonder had always been stirred in his spirit by the narration, written by Antoine de La Sale in old French, as contained in *The Paradise of Queen Sibyl*, and the author's description of a place of mystery, concealed within the inaccessible mountains of Central Italy, where an ancient lore reported that the secret abode of a subterranean prophetess was to be found; and the oracle's name — Sibyl — bespoke the classical origin of that legend, an antique world now lost and vanished altogether, yet so dear to Desonay's heart ever since the studies of his youth.

The wondrous report by de La Sale and the scrutiny of the admirable works of classical Greek and Latin writers had rendered his heart responsive to the elusive call arising from the many enigmatic

remnants that ancient paganism had scattered all around — whether in the shape of marble ruins, or in the form of popular, traditional lore — across the countryside and highlands which had once been subject to the rule of the Roman Empire. Such remnants, buried in the rich soil of the lands of Italy or narrated in the form of tales by old storytellers around the blazing flames of winter campfires, still cast their entrancing spell on sensitive people, their eyes looking far enough as to pierce into the distant past, and their ears accustomed to listening to the faint, disregarded voices of the men who had lived their earthly lives ahead of us.

It was because of all this unspeakable and overflowing richness of his soul that Fernand Desonay became, in French-speaking countries, the leading translator and reviser of the critical editions of Antoine de La Sale's works. He gained a widespread academic renown and subsequently joined, as a distinguished member, the illustrious *Académie Royale de Langue et de Littérature Françaises de Belgique*.

And it was because of that call, coming from the outlandish and unfamiliar mountains raising their peaks not far from the small town of Norcia, that Fernand Desonay, on August, 26th 1929, on his arrival in Italy, ascended to Mount Sibyl's top, following the ancient footprints left by his favourite author. He toiled his way up the mountain-side alone, with eager expectation, until he reached the portentous cavern, in front of which Antoine de La Sale had halted and wavered, as he had fearfully believed it would not have been safe to go in, «sans grant dangier de ma personne», withouth endangering his own life.

Unlike the author of the *Paradise*, Desonay would have definitely got in, had that cavern not been reduced to «a little more than a mere hole in the mount. On the stone wall, at the cave's entrance, a few remaining marks of old carved inscriptions were hardly visible. The main hollow was sealed. The paradise was buried...».

A piercing discouragement took hold of his spirit. However, the time had finally come for two great dreamers — two romantic enthusiasts, Falzetti and Desonay — to meet up and join forces in a view to making their common, chimerical illusion come true.

Already in the following year, in 1930, Fernand Desonay had learnt about the «Committee» that had been established in Montemonaco, under Domenico Falzetti's lead; as a result, the Belgian philologist resolved, that summer, to get back to Italy in order to join a new

expedition, planned by the Committee between August, 15th and 18th, and heading to the Sibyl's mountain-top.

However, during the short lapse of time which had passed since his previous visit, the cave, as Desonay reports, had been subject to significant changes, owing to clumsy excavation works which had been carried out by unknown diggers in the meantime: «recent mining activities had altered the cavern's outside appearance: the entrance hollow had utterly vanished; a deep, funnel-shaped trench was now visible, with a number of large stones at its bottom». The party began to remove, with great effort, a large quantity of rocks and rubble, with the aim of bringing to light anew the entrance crack that provided access to the vestibule — the same crack that had been unearthed by Giuseppe Moretti in 1926.

«Very soon», reported Desonay, «we found the right spot at the lowest point on the left side. After another hour we dug out a hollow seven feet deep, and found an internal void. I myself, with the aid of a torchlight, saw that cavity at the bottom of the trench. In addition to that, a member of the party said he sensed a very light draught coming out from the inside».

However, they could not get any further, as it proved impossible, with the tools they had carried with them, to widen the narrow crack which was deeply set among the rocky layers of the mount; and, «though unwillingly», the disheartened diggers were forced to «retrace their own steps and leave the place».

Again, notwithstanding the stubborn determination of a handful of dogged men, their dream had burst into pieces once more, as it had broken against rocks that were far more unyielding than the picks and shovels they had been using to accomplish their task. Again, the cavern was forsaken and left to its own silent existence, under the sun and the raging winds, in the pouring rains which every so often storm those mountainous ridges, from time immemorial, with gelid yet protective violence.

Long years would roll by before a new dream, a new fanciful hope, born within a poet's bosom, came to establish itself by those wrecked stones, in a revived though illusory search for a passageway to the unattainable subterranean kingdom of the Sibyl.

The poet was Tullio Pascucci, also known as the «Colsalvatico», an unconventional man of letters originating from the Marche region;

born into a family of wealthy landowners, and holding in his spirit a fervent and overpowering love for his own land, he was the energetic patron of a variety of multifarious cultural projects. He was a man designed for brave deeds, too, as he was urged by an ardent and absolutely unselfish enthusiasm for endorsing the rights of the poor, the destitute and any oppressed fellowmen.

Indeed, it was he, in October 1943, who delivered from deportation and mass extermination forty Roman Jews, with many children among them, who had fled the Italian capital after the roundup in the Ghetto by the Nazis, and had looked for shelter in Fiastra, near the small town of Macerata, not far from the area where the Pascucci household owned its estate and villas. Colsalvatico managed to provide the male members of the fleeing families with counterfeit documents with a view to concealing their true identity; he also arranged for the allocation of small family groups to each of the tiny hamlets scattered over the surrounding countryside. For that very accomplishment — a daring and dauntless deed by a poet for whom, at variance with the vast majority of the common people, human values were far more important than clinging selfishly and basely to one's own gloating, self-centered existence, to the quiet living typical of those who have no concerns at all, and pretend everything is just going to be all right as ever — for that testimony, in 2009, Tullio Pascucci was bestowed the title of Righteous among the Nations, and his name is to be recorded forever, amid the many thousands of Righteous men coming from all over the world, who are recognized and celebrated at the International Institute for Holocaust Research, the illustrious Yad Vashem, in Jerusalem.

Subsequently Colsalvatico joined the insurgents who were opposing the German Army among the pinnacles and versants of the Apennines, in Central Italy; and, perhaps, it was in that very predicament that the poet had his first opportunity to ascend Mount Sibyl, making his personal acquaintance with the magical spell of that legend, and the gloomy fascination connected to that queer hearsay, closely linked to his own native land, which he loved so deeply and was so dear to his heart as to harbour a feeling similar to reverence.

Hence, in the summer of 1945, not long after the end of World War II, Tullio Pascucci would have been seen slogging his way up the mountain-side, as he climbed the peak whose name was sacred to the

antique oracle, leading a donkey by its halter, overburdened with tools and supplies. He worked hard, emboldened by the repetitive blows of the picks, which — stroke after stroke — undermined the firmness of the secret that the enigmatic cave had been sheltering in its dark bosom for long-past centuries; while the blazing rays cast by the midday sun fell unforgivingly on the improvised archeologist. The bewildered peasants, down there in the hamlet of Montemonaco, felt sure that he was a sort of eccentric, freaky sorcerer, though duly equipped with explosive material — as some villagers could not restrain themselves from reporting to the Department of Antiquities and Heritage, possibly mistaking the crack of local hunters' rifle fire, echoing amid the wooded valleys, with alleged, unauthorised dismantling activities being carried out by the rash poet and man of letters.

Colsalvatico was eventually compelled to give up his attempt, following several days of ineffective excavation works, during which he had suffered from sunstroke, a dangerous hazard in high places.

Thus, the poet had failed; and still the Sibyl would sneer, with her uncanny laughter reverberating in the clarity of the air between the appalling ravines, at the vain attempts to creep into the recesses which provided an access to the most secluded and unfathomable chambers of her subterranean realm.

Time had come for a scientist, the following year, to resume that relentless, undeclared war on the chaotic jumble of ruined stones, that seemed to deny access, once and forever, to that illusory kingdom, where for too long no human foot had trod the undisturbed dust, in a stillness which definitely treasured the memory of much older footprints, marked by boots wrought in iron and leather, and of men clothed in precious, finely embroidered garments, their shattered bones, crumbled to pieces as centuries rolled along, lying eternally on the coarse rocky soil of the forsaken cave.

In the meantime I had reached the end of the trail which ran along the mountain ridge, on the very verge of the hanging abysses that, on my right edge, fell precipitously down to the invisible, murmuring bottom of the Gole dell'Infernaccio, and opened up on the left towards an awe-striking view, with the overhanging gorge of the Lake of Pilate hemmed in by the hellish cliffs which made up Mount Vettore's range: the Saviour's Peak, the Pinnacle of the Devil, Mount

Argentella, the cliff of Palazzo Borghese, Mount Porche and Banditella, and Mount Prata. Just in front of me, as if suspended in the dazzling, golden radiance of sunlight, there stood the huge, dreadfully massive wall of stone known as the Sibyl's crown.

«Turrigera frontem Cybele redimita corona». A feeling of blind terror overwhelmed my heart, as my knees gave way under the weight of my own body. I fell on my hands, immersed in the scorching sun, yielding to an irrepressible dizziness, my head bent on the grassy track, as though I were in the very presence of the deity, who calls the eternal gods to her revelling feast, summoning «et satyros et, rustica numina, nymphas» — the satyrs and nymphs and sylvan deities — with the clashing, deafening noise of the cymbals — «cymbala rauca» — with their rhythmic pulse, while the corybants dance feverishly in the orgiastic rapture of their cruel esoteric rituals; and it would be safer for mortal eyes to turn one's head obediently away, shunning that inhuman, inviolable gaze, cut in hallowed stone, and cast by the same goddess to whose name that mountain had been consecrated in ancient times.

Crown of overhanging rock; unassailable wall carved in the mount's body; sacred token of a kingly potency; grisly likeness of dominance; its awesome shape is visible across the translucent distance of those faraway highlands, as it looms over the small hamlets subject to the rule of its divine eye; its ramparts open the way to the upper-

most region of the mount, forbidden to mortal beings — the barren cliff, where the goddess, alone in the dark, sits in her ghastly, baleful cavern, uttering heinous prophecies about the unavoidable fate of men: «Sibyl, who speaks mournful words with delirious lips».

All of a sudden a slender, fleeting shape darted before my eyes, followed right away by a number of other small flying beings, dispelling my dismal, sinister visions in the afternoon's effulgence.

They were alpine swifts, with their cream-coloured belly, which, in numbers, flew merrily in the sky above the sheer ravines, and then reverted from time to time to their landing points on the crown's rocks. They were positively used to the bleakness of the cliffs and the loneliness of the mountain-sides; they showed neither fear nor awe of the past sacredness of those stones; their free and cheerful flight was at one with the essence of the mountain itself, with the very air shining with the beams cast by the declining sun, and with the freshness of that airy world, almost floating amid the thin sunset clouds, as if nothing had ever happened on that peak, and the bottomless abysses now being veiled with growing shadows had never echoed the exalted, unfathomable, eerie name of the Sibyl.

I carefully considered the wall of rock now rising before my eyes. When seen from so close a distance, the Sibyl's crown did not look as stately, nor as ominous as one would have expected; at the point where the trail reached its highest elevation, after having climbed the final stretch of the ridge — enlivened by the darting flights of the alpine swifts — the stone wall offered the visitor its less forbidding look, as it rose there for a height not in excess of a dozen feet, the clamber made easier by a rope secured to the cliff by means of a few pitons, driven into the rock in recent times by unknown hikers.

With its help the climb was comfortably achieved, as it proved sufficient to clamber up the crown's cracks and ledges using my hands and feet, clinging to the uneven surface of the rock and taking advantage of the rope for additional protection. In a few moments, I left the fateful crown of the Sibyl behind my back, and set my foot on the grassy expanse which surmounted the precipitous cliff, carved in the mountain's grey stone.

For the first time in my life, I found myself at the very threshold of the mystic, unearthly topmost section of Mount Sibyl, now flooded, in a soft and dreamy hue, with the slanting, blazing rays cast by the

setting sun. A cool, caressing breeze ran across that desolate, inanimate region, where the supremacy of silence — drawing upon its long and unchallenged control, unconcerned with the fleeting passage of men — had established its own ageless rule, as an immutable dream only marked by the relentless turn of the uncaring seasons.

Only a few dozen feet, rising a steep slope, still lay between the mountain-top and myself; and in a very few steps — I knew that for certain — I would get to the cavern, which was placed at some point of that troublesome climb, on the side of the versant opening to the south.

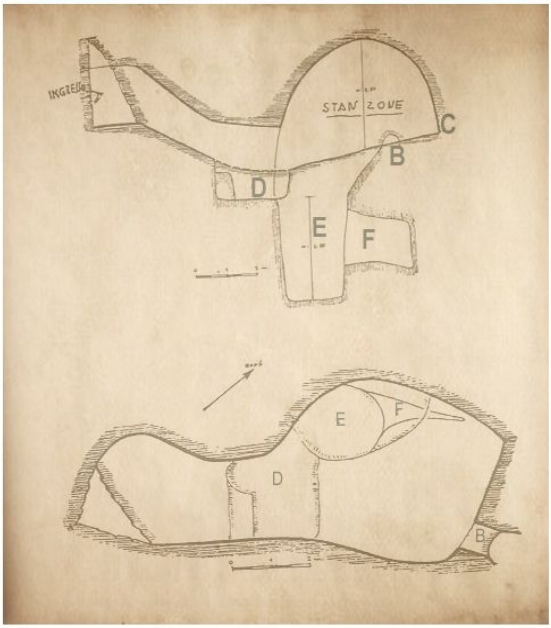
The sun was rapidly declining, and the wind was growing chill. My heart was pounding frantically within my breast. I began to clamber up the track, getting ever nearer to the spot where I believed the mouth of the cavern was to be found.

That baffling cave, so adamant in protecting its own secretive essence, by veiling and sheltering the arcane whispers of its inhabitants from the inquisitiveness of men, after innumerable frustrating attempts, utterly profitless, having been carried out across more than five hundred years by knights, sorcereres, men of letters and explorers coming from all over Europe, had at last yielded to modern science: in August 1946, it was unveiled — though partially and unsatisfactorily — that which had been the object, for centuries, of a harrowing, irrepressible craving.

It was Cesare Lippi-Boncambi — a professor of Mineralogy and Geology in the Department of Agronomy at the University of Perugia, who drafted the first ever comprehensive catalogue of Umbrian caves — that put down the one and only existing topographical survey, laid out with scientific accuracy, of the cavern placed on Mount Sibyl's cliff.

«The entrance passageway», says Lippi-Boncambi, as he provides the first available description of the cave after the other one, written several centuries earlier by Antoine de La Sale in his *Le Paradis de la Reine Sibylle*, «after traversing a short sloping corridor, leads into a large chamber 12.6 feet high and 7 to a maximum of 20 feet deep which makes the central portion of the cave, featuring a total width of 33 feet». At the farther end of this large vestibule, as the geologist reports, a narrow opening in the rock could be noticed, from which the cave's outside could be reached.

In the course of that survey, a clue dating back to five hundred years earlier, as mentioned by de La Sale himself in his account, was unexpectedly unearthed: «while I was carrying out my exploration», writes Lippi-Boncambi, «within an unfinished trench initially excavated by Colsalvatico, a few steps carved in the rock were uncovered, which, according to that Author, would match those belonging to the stair depicted in the fanciful account written by the traveller from Provence»; indeed, de La Sale, who lived many centuries ago, maintained he observed a subterranean hollow in which many seats cut in stone were lined up against the walls — «ou sont sieges entaillez tout entour».



And that was not all. At the close of his report, Lippi-Boncambi writes that «in the cave's layout, a number of offshoots are to be spotted, which may provide possible extensions to the hollows that are at the moment sealed».

So, in spite of the fact that the outline and shape of the vestibule had finally been disclosed, the cavern still resisted any effort to pene-

trate its most secret recesses, concealed in everlasting darkness, and echoing the feeble, murmuring noise of the cold underground waters, hidden from the view of all living beings and sheltered within the inaccessible bowels of Mount Sibyl.

Yet man's resolve is often steadier and more stubbornly single-minded than the very rocks which hinder the way leading to dreams, and reveries, and superior aspirations, all of them nurtured with devotion and straightforward uprightness, never deflecting from one's own object, throughout a whole existence committed to the search for the very same wonders pouring forth from an imaginary world — a world that has cast its spell on us ever since we were small children, during the many nights spent in reading, in a snug, familiar bed, such fabulous tales as we would always cherish in our hearts during every moment of our maturity.

That was the very spirit with which Fernand Desonay — more than twenty years having elapsed from his unsuccessful expedition to Mount Sibyl, dating to 1930 — delivered a lecture at the Academia Belgica of Villa Borghese in Rome, on February, 19th 1953, before an interested audience, whose attention he riveted and ultimately captured by arousing in the conference hall an excited enthusiasm. He narrated, with compelling emotion, of the antique prophetess and her abode concealed amid the craggy ridges of the Apennines; and of the amazing cave and the fairy world it granted access to; and of Guerin Meschino, the Wretched, and Antoine de La Sale; and Tannhäuser, and Leandro Alberti and Ludovico Ariosto; he then described, with fervent, moving eagerness, the commitment of those men who, in present days, had entered into a harsh and relentless struggle with that cliff, suspended in a radiant blue sky: and they were Gaston Paris, Pio Rajna, Domenico Falzetti, Tullio Colsalvatico; up to the latest, unexpected and most promising findings as retrieved by Lippi-Boncambi: they betokened that this fight would not be lost, as the cavern positively extended throughout a significant portion of the peak's bowels; so that the Sibyl would open her mouth and speak to us again, unveiling her portentous secrets harboured within the cave for two thousand years — if only the right machinery and funding could be found, as well as the required firmness of purpose to carry on with such a troublesome and excruciating excavation work, yet so full of thrilling promises, on the barren, unfriendly, legendary cliff of Mount Sibyl.

The public praise and enthusiasm raised by his lecture, subsequently delivered at the Marchigian Club in Rome as well, stirred a new delighted, passionate interest in that astounding cave, insomuch as a most significant result was eventually attained: the association in the venture, as a an essential and most-welcome participant, of Giovanni Annibaldi, the Director General of the Department of Antiquities of Marche.

Thus, on July, 1st 1953, an expedition including Fernand Desonay, Domenico Falzetti, Giovanni Annibaldi and seventeen men, of which four workmen equipped with picks and shovels, ascended the Sibyl's mountain-side and set up a camp beside the hollow marking the cave's ruined entrance. Their resolve was firm and almost foolhardy: they were determined to bring to light, once and for all, the internal galleries which, departing from the vestibule, led into the cavern's farthest recesses; and, from that very point, the party intended ultimately to uncover all the gloomy meanders of that cave, by leaving no chamber unexplored, no corridor untrodden, no pit unfathomed: indeed they wanted the Sibyl finally to yield to their uncompromising, headstrong will, and hence renounce all her unutterable secrets, and proclaim herself — at long last, for now and all the future time to come — thoroughly defeated.

Soon the excavation began, and immediately took on a frantic, unrelenting pace, with the diggers absorbed in their work with a sort of meticolous alacrity and a dogged, feverish commitment, as never before had been seen on that same peak. During the nights, the party camped out on the mountain-top, only to resume their work as soon as the first dim signs of the coming dawn appeared in the sky, so acutely their picks yearned to break those rocks and overturn those great stones which impeded their progress towards a world of imagination and dream.

However, the Sibyl would prove neither so obliging, nor so genial as to readily bestow her favour upon anyone. It soon became apparent that all the efforts already made in recent times, during the previous expeditions, had been utterly in vain; they would have to start again from scratch. «The cave's entrance was in a miserable condition», Falzetti had to register. «For sure, that very mess of earth and rubble had been elicited by Colsalvatico during his excavations with

dynamite in 1946. And it is unnecessary for me to say that no trace at all remained of the gallery dug in 1930».

Yet these were not the sort of people who would lose their enthusiasm to the point of giving up their search. The digging went on, and with even greater vigour than before. «As we cleared the rubble», noted down Falzetti, «we discovered new hollows, large and small alike», a manifest sign that we were working on the remnants of side walls which were once part of a ruined chamber. It was apparent, from the overall picture that was emerging as their digging reached further down, that «at some point in the past a large stone vault had collapsed, whose broken remains were that portion of curved roof which surmounted what we assumed to be the cavern's vestibule».

Time went by, and nothing resurfaced yet from that heap of ruined rocks, shattered by the mines that some unknown treasure hunter had set off, with staggering, inexcusable awkwardness, after the visit to the mountain-top and the cave's survey made by Lippi-Boncambi.

Yet, something emerged at last; it was a clue, a piece of evidence: «on a big rock», registered a thrilled Falzetti, «we found a date of the utmost importance. There were letters engraved, ‘AV’, joined as in monograms, followed by a 'P', with a dot between the former characters and the latter; and, finally, the number '1378', written in modern Arabic numerals yet in an old-fashioned script».

Thus, someone had visited the cave in the fourteenth century, well before Andrea da Barberino wrote his novel, or Antoine de La Sale climbed the mount together with the local peasants.

Again, the diggers — worn out by their tiring exertion which had spanned over several unproductive days, and disheartened by the initial lack of findings — resumed their work of clearing the rubble with increased ardour. Further objects, as frail, valuable relics discovered among the wrecked ruins of a rocky temple, were brought to light: an old spur; an ancient knife, covered with rust; and, finally, at a remarkable depth under the volume of debris, a coin. It was, as Annibaldi reported, «a double Tournois coin of Henry II of France, dating to the end of the sixteenth century», which proved by its very presence that the cavern, in past ages, was «open and visited indeed».

However, notwithstanding such sparse tokens, and despite the shattered and uncertain remains of what might have been a level underground passageway, nothing else was ever found. Feelings of discouragement and frustration then seized the hearts of those men. The rocks, scattered all around in bulky heaps beside what had been the cave's vanished mouth, witnessed their utter defeat. Once again, the antique prophetess, the oracle who had buried herself within the inaccessible womb of the earth, had prevailed; and her grim, jeering laughter echoed in the far distance, beneath the darkening sky, in the cold sunset air.

At last, I reached the very place where the cavern, in stillness and silence, amid the scanty grass growing on the cliff, lived its own inanimate life, caressed by a delicate wind, and touched by the slanting rays of a pale setting sun. The stones on the mountain-top were blazing with the scarlet glare of the declining sunlight, which was flaring out from the dusky clouds that hovered near the horizon, the harbingers of twilight. The boundless, all-embracing night of the mountain was nigh.

A cool, light breeze gently enshrouded the summit of the mount. I turned my eyes towards the cave. It rested at the bottom of a shallow hollow, lying on the versant looking towards the south side of the peak. The grassy ground, departing from its usual, barren roughness, gave way to a sort of trench, excavated by all appearances in the very rock of the cliff; it was full of rubble and large broken stones, definitely the offspring of the shattering of the same rocky material of which

the mount itself was made. Scaffolding tubes covered with rust, portions of wooden beams, fragments of rotten planks still emerged from the jumble of beaten and disfigured boulders, attesting by their miserable wretchedness to the unsuccessful, devastating attempts at breaking into the cavern by force.

Thus, that was what remained today of the cave of the Sibyl. In the suddenly growing iciness of the air, a last, lingering beam of the setting sun caressed those mangled stones, casting its light on their coarse, mutilated likenesses. With a shiver of bitter dismay, I fully realized, in that very hour, what waves of emotions had swept over the hearts of such men — Falzetti, Desonay — as they left that place forever, at the beginning of September 1953. More than once, in the following years, Fernand Desonay would come back to see, again, the mount's peak: but it was as if he went to some sort of antique mound, an empty and deserted burial place, now forgotten by all living beings; and his silent, doleful visits had become less and less frequent, until the elderly Belgian professor had likewise taken on the hazy substance of a vague, blurred reminiscence in the accounts of the old villagers of Montemonaco.

For fifteen years, the cavern had rested there alone, forsaken and unguarded. It was in that period of time that the most devastating and

irreparable collapses took place, at the hands of unknown treasure hunters. The rocks inscribed with the antique engravings, which had been unearthed in the course of the expedition led by Giovanni Annibaldi, were stolen, and no trace of them was ever found again.

Later on, in 1968, the local Tourist Office of Ascoli Piceno entrusted the geologist Odescalchi with the task of carrying out a geophysical survey on the summit of Mount Sibyl, in a view to locating any hollows that may be possibly present under the rocky mountain-top. The geolectrical investigations — executed at ground level above the elevation of the Sibyl's crown by measuring the ground resistivity through electrical conductors suitably driven into the soil — revealed a pattern of instrumental disturbances in the electrical fields, which bespoke the potential existence of new unexplored tunnels that would lie beyond the cave's ruined vestibule.

In 1983, the Marche Speleology Association made a further attempt at pinpointing the cave's lost entrance. «We observed», they reported, «that at the very spot where the wrecked stones had collapsed, a large hole was visible in the snow cover — which is more than 6 feet deep — from which a noticeable current of air oozed out; it was slightly warmer than the outside air, a sure sign that the underlying cavern was comparatively wide in extension». The subsequent year, the members of the same association undertook further excavation works, and, after great labour, they succeeded in locating the position of one of the chambers that had been mentioned by Lippi-Boncambi in 1946. «As the digging went on», they registered, «we came across what must have been the vaulted ceiling of the second chamber, leading deeper into the cave».

And that was not all. The young spelunkers were convinced that they had just located the very entrance to the cave, though fully collapsed, which had been mentioned by Antoine de La Sale in 1420. And they believed that access to this passageway was provided, in ancient times, by means of a trench carved in the rock, now concealed by the surface layer of turf; remnants of a wooden paving would be visible in the trench — perhaps a leftover of some digging activities of old.

At the end of the twentieth century, only the Cultural Society «Elissa», a project set up by Anna Maria Piscitelli, a passionate journalist who had settled in Montemonaco to follow her dream of rediscо-

vering the ancient oracle and prophetess, continued in the effort to shed light on the mystery of that cave, waiting in stillness on the mountain-top. Finally, in the year 2000, the Cultural Society — supported by a grant from a Marchigian bank, and with the backing of the local Department of Antiquities and the Faculty of Geology at the University of Camerino — promoted a new round of scientific research on the mountain-top, with the performance of a geognostic survey based this time on a ground-penetrating radar. The high-frequency electromagnetic pulses, as reflected by the subterranean masses of rock, unveiled, according to the geological report edited by Angelo Beano, «multiple radar echoes […]. And the correlation between the topographic profile of the electromagnetic disturbances and the geological patterns as measured during the survey carried out at ground level, fosters speculations that a number of hollows may actually exist beneath the peak's surface», so that it could be assumed, as reckoned by the Project Elissa, that «vast underground cavities should exist 50 feet below the surface, as an intricacy of convoluted galleries with an overall length of some 170 yards».

The discovery was absolutely extraordinary; however, as to the subsequent phase — the drilling operations, to be conducted on the Sibyl's cliff at the most promising spots, with regard to the presumed presence of subterranean hollows situated right below ground level — that phase would never take place.

Dusk was now coming. The sky, turned into a deep dark void, showed the faint twinkling of aloof, far-away stars, which before long would conquer by their grave and majestic haughtiness the entire line of the horizon; they would subjugate the whole celestial sphere to their fiery and unquenchable potency, and cast their arcane, quivering light over the mount's crowned summit, the wrecked vestiges of the excavations, and the shadows of those men, who, on that cliff, had fancied they could let into the world the foolish and amazing fairy tale which they had been dreaming of during endless, sleepless nights, haunted by formidable figments, that belonged to their own lost childhood — an unattainable time of their life they still despairingly cherished in their soul, and longed for, though it was gone forever.

I glanced for the last time at the gloomy abyss of the Gole dell'Infernaccio, now covered with icy, ominous vapours, and enshrouded in a thick forbidding shadow, with the invisible, murmuring waters of

the river Tenna at the ravine's bottom. I turned my back to the cave, switched my flashlight on, and began my descent by retracing my steps along the trail which followed the crest, as if suspended amid the radiant stars, which now ruled the nocturnal sky, utterly unchallenged.

«Despite the disbelief of so many», wrote Fernand Desonay — I could now hear, mingled with the repetitive thump of my own hiking boots, the gentle sound of his kind, desperate voice — «I do wish I will be able to visit these places again. There are other areas in Italy where caves like the Sibyl's were discovered and subsequently cleared, with similar features to that of the Sibyl's; and they were eventually recognized as ancient centres of worship sacred to deities which are still unknown. Hence, why should the Sibyl of Montemonaco not be conveying, as well, valuable information with regard to history and literature?».

«I raise my head towards Mount Sibyl», said Desonay's voice, now faint and vague and distant, «my eyes travel up the mountain-side, and climb even further, along the crests and ravines. And at last, beneath the crown of stone, there I see the Enchantress, the Queen, the awesome Fairy».

«There she is», said that voice in a low murmur, as it died out into nothingness, «she is the Fairy who haunts the dreams of men».

CHAPTER 15
THE SIBYL'S BROKEN DREAM

«FRIGIDA NURSIA», cold and wintry Norcia, as Publius Vergilius Maro writes in Book VII of his *Aeneid*, when depicting the powerful army of Italian fighters raised by Turnus, the king of Rutulians, to destroy the Dardanians, who had come to the land of Italy from sacked Troy, led by Aeneas, son of Anchises and the immortal deity Aphrodite. Amid the multitudinous ranks — similar to a winged cloud swarming with shrieking birds, «aeriam volucrum raucarum nubem», as they cast their harsh rallying cry, craving for blood and slaughter — the great poet notes the presence of the troops supplied by the far-off town of Norcia, lying beside the cold and unfriendly mountains of Sabine.

Indeed — though the season had fully entered that period of the year which is the warmest and finest; at the very height of a sunny, enjoyable summer, which tempted visitors to linger a little longer among the charming little squares and the old houses adorned with flowers, enjoying the pleasant sight of the mountains covered with shadowy forests, and luring the tourists into prolonging their stay un-

til the end of the good season, when autumn would make its appearance in Norcia well in advance, carrying its load of frosty, persistent rain and ominous leaden clouds, swiftly rolling in above the barren peaks which surrounded the Plain of St. Scholastica — indeed, despite the radiant, crystal-clear luminosity of the midsummer day, the morning air carried a distinctive note of chilliness; a soft, subdued scent of alpine woodlands; a vague fragrance of the winter snows still to come, which sent a shudder, so shadowy yet so enjoyable, down the tourists' spine, as they roamed Corso Sertorio, in throngs and in good spirits, in search of the juiciest delicacies and the most exquisite treats.

As I sipped from a cup of flavoured coffee, sitting at the refined tables of the café *del Corso*, I could not divert my thoughts from the likeness of that mount and its solitary top, blazing with the last slanting rays cast by the setting sun, while the evening breeze suddenly rose, stroking with its gentle touch the mangled, wrecked stones, which had sheltered for long centuries, with staunch and loyal devotion, the dark secret of the Sibyl's unfathomable cave.

Was that the end of it? Had the dream cherished by Miliani, Gaston Paris, Rajna, Falzetti and Desonay really got shattered against those very rocks, those remnants of subterranean chambers, all smashed by powerful explosions? Had that dream achieved its own consummation, for good and beyond hope, before those stony walls, turned abruptly into rubble as the echoing sound of the exploding mines, after countless reflections, died gradually away amid the welcoming, trustworthy ravines — so entirely oblivious and uncaring — which encircled the disfigured summit of the cliff?

Was that dream really over? Wasn't there anything that might still remain to be done, by a sort of stubborn dedication, against logic and notwithstanding glaring evidence to the contrary, despite the fact that all guesses had proven incorrect, all chances definitely unfavourable?

I finished my coffee. The cup was now empty. Any slightest remaining fragrance of the heavenly and finely delectable drink which had been held in it was rapidly fading away, and in a few moments would have vanished altogether.

Again, I considered the throng of tourists, concentrated, with the full vigour of their spirits, on the instant gratification of hasty, fleeting whims, and on the satisfaction of cursory and ephemeral cravings, by

the purchase of goods which, as is commonly believed, would bring them a superior and almost flawless degree of happiness, if only they adhered, with ever increasing ardour, to the well-tuned, preternatural revolving scheme consisting of industrial manufacturing and consumer sales. Before long, those same tourists would get into their stylish cars featuring cool, streamlined designs; they would shake virtual hands with remote counterparts on meeting times and venues by using their sleek, fashionable smartphones; and finally they would make for their hometowns, where job positions of great moment and relevance were in eager expectation for them to exert, on a number of major issues, all the cleverness and brain power — truly a full set of sharp, pointed tools — that was attainable by such well-trained minds, so skilfully moulded by the ever revolving cycle of a consumer economy.

So my quest was now over. The fanciful reverie, the illusory daydream which, for centuries, had nurtured the troubled visions of fiery and desperate men, wise and foolish at the same time, coming from all European nations; the dream which had rendered that land lost amid the mountainous ridges so immensely dear to the heart of sensitive, unsettled souls, in their restless search for ultimate spiritual revelations; that dream had shattered against a heap of wrecked stones, forsaken in their oblivious solitude on the mountain's peak — while, at the same time, further down, lavish cars were fleeting in quantities along roads and highways; and huge TV screens, with their enthralling dazzle, were proclaiming aloud the reference framework to which people's thought and behaviour must conform, as well as the purchasing priorities to which consumers must stick as they live their lives; by all this, marking the triumph of an all-pervading money-making scheme which crushes all dreams of men when they do not fit into its own strategy, and eradicates any figments that are not recognised as its own.

I got up from the table, leaving a few coins as a tip.

Suddenly the name of Carlo Renzi came back to my mind. It was a fact that Carlo Renzi, a businessman, a philanthropist, the man who had been the founder of an orphanage for young ladies in Norcia, had enlisted himself in the ranks of those men who, throughout several centuries, had been harbouring within their souls the same dream.

The withered envelope that had slipped out from the ragged binding of his last will and testament; the scrap of wrinkled paper, its yellowish hue almost faded away, preserving the neat, minute script put down by the unfaltering hand of the wealthy merchant; his obscure, loathsome words, still echoing in present times with a sort of ominous note, as they stand out frightfully and nastily on the wizened paper, though a long time had elapsed since his pen had noted down, on the paper whose surface was now frail and dusty, the dreary, wicked meaning of that sentence — all that was the tangible evidence that somebody, beyond that heap of rocks and the ruined entrance to the mangled cave, had ventured into the cavern's inner recesses, pushing themselves as far as the vestibule and the sealed tunnels further ahead, whose actual existence had been confirmed by Lippi-Boncambi, and had walked through chambers and tunnels whose soil no human foot had ever trod for several hundreds of years. And, possibly, they had succeeded in getting to the very place, buried deeply into the ground, where the presence of the deity was conspicuous, and supremely strong; and the revelation of her superhuman, fiendish potency loomed awesomely over their souls.

«Vultus tuus perspexi deformis, turrigera mater, membra vulnere praebui lacerata maiestati divinae».

Did Carlo Renzi ever actually meet the Sibyl? Could it be imagined that the trader from Norcia — who according to the papers had benefited from «an abrupt, unexpected acquisition of wealth», that had occurred when he was still a young man — had succeeded in creeping into the cavern in a time between the close of the eighteenth century and the first decade of the nineteenth, when the entrance passageway was by all appearances still sealed, and the earliest written report on the conditions and accessibility of the cave's mouth, as put down by Giovambattista Miliani, would be published only a hundred years later, in 1885?

My head was aching painfully. I could not focus my thoughts with sufficient clarity on the demanding issues, hauntingly insurmountable, which had now been drawn to my attention. The Sibyl; the hollow on the crowned mountain-top; the ruinous explorations; the excavation works; the slip of paper with Carlo Renzi's handwriting: everything whirled and reeled crazily in my head, so dizzyingly that any attempt at coherent reasoning was thwarted, and my brain

could not grasp the true import of such facts and events: the clues that had been bountifully strewn by the myth along the unhurried yet unrelenting course of the centuries. Any potential effort on my part to put together the fragments of that puzzling, entangled story was apparently impractical and doomed to failure.

As I walked along Corso Sertorio, headed towards Porta Romana, I was seized by a disheartening sense of despondency. What if the whole matter turned out to be, merely and plainly, an utter fake? What if the legend of the Sibyl, with her mountain and cavern and underground kingdom and committed enthusiasts popping up devotely in all ages, were but figments, illusory walk-on actors treading a shadowy stage, where the main characters were the pale vapours enshrouding the Apennine peaks at dawn; a theater, erected on the stammering babble of old illiterate villagers, and whose foundations were laid deep into ignorance, and misapprehension, and sheer nothingness?

In his *General description of Italy*, Leandro Alberti wrote that «it comes as a bit of a surprise that so many years have elapsed, from the time this Cavern was discovered and saluted as the Sibyl's abode, and no mention of it has ever been recorded at all, neither in the works by Strabo nor in Pliny's nor in the writings of any other inquisitive Author, in search of oddities and rarities. And yet every reader can consider by himself how scrupulously Strabo has provided a full description of the Caves and hollows that are to be found in Cuma, and Baiae, and Naples; and Pliny, as well, has written most accurate reports of the many wonders of Nature; however, no one of them ever wrote a single word about that Cavern, nor provided any accounts as regards the cave's folk tale».

The illustrious antique ascendancy, dating back to the worship of Cybele and the classical world's lost lore, the noble pagan lineage of the cave, as marked by the cryptic, shifty words written by Trebellius Pollio and Suetonius: was that all only an empty dream, a mere fancy, which would soon vanish into thin air, fading away amid the idle chatter of silly wives, the drowsy talk of drunken villagers and the foolish gibber of unsophisticated men of letters? «I am convinced», wrote Alberti, with a jeering, scornful understatement, «that not much time has passed since the rumour about that Cavern has spread […]. For if the cave had been really known in antiquity, there is no doubt

that its finding would have been duly recorded, as actually was the case for the Oracle at Delphi, and Podalirius, and Avernus, and the Hollow and Cave of the said Cumæan Sibyl, and many other places likewise, as well as caverns, lakes, trees, rivers, springs, woods, temples, altars and further Oracles of the same kind, where evil spirits are said to utter deceitful words to beguile men».

I found myself rehearsing in my mind the tortuous research work I had gone through in recent times; for several months I had scrutinized fragments of a wider knowledge, scraps of information, unclear, scattered clues of what I reputed might be the truth; and now I was cursing my own foolishness, my readiness to place my trust, with plain naiveness, in the most fanciful assumptions and convoluted, whimsical lucubrations, if only they provided me with a help in upholding my own view and expectations as regarded that cave and its legendary renown.

Now I could be very proud of myself, indeed. In fact I was presently being informed that I was by no means alone within my pit of ignorance, as I plunged myself, with merry and lightheaded recklessness, into the unwary enjoyment typical of the soul who wants to believe not so much what is actually true, but rather what he yearningly pines for: «hence, the fame of that cavern having spread far and wide», says Leandro Alberti, «it's now a long time that not only from Italy, but even from foreign countries men of outlandish birth have journeyed to those places, to have certain vile and blameworthy wishes of theirs fulfilled, that is, riches and glory and lecherous delights and the like. Afterwards — when they finally realize they have been cheated, for as to the cavern's reputation nothing at all can be retrieved on the spot that can attest to its truth — such frustrated visitors, in an effort not to be treated at home as fools because of their credulous travelling and fruitless money wasting, falsely maintain they have really got what they have been looking for, yet it is but a pathetic lie».

And I found myself cheated, too, if so foolishly I had been drinking of the waters springing from the Sibyl's unbelievable humbug; if I had been wasting my valuable time, exhausting my eyes over the pages of untruthful, nonsensical books, considering myself as a great scholar, a learned researcher into oddities, as though I were one of those «learned and pragmatic Germans» mentioned by Leandro Alberti, who had travelled as far as Italy in a view to visiting such a fan-

tastic place, «at their own significative expense», «having been enticed there only by the widespread fame of the place»; and, having been «downright cheated», and «holding that the celebrated narrative about the cave was just a mere fake», they retraced their own steps back to their northerly country, «cursing both themselves and their fellow-men, the latter for circulating such foolish tales, the former for having placed their trust in them so naively»; and so they left, «swearing at whoever believed in such Demons», and «promised never ever to believe in spells and enchantments anymore».

According to the German scholars mentioned by Leandro Alberti, this was positively to be considered as a fitting counterbalancing event, if there was truth in the picture that Friedrich Kluge, a German linguist who lived between the nineteenth century and the twentieth, had depicted in his essay entitled *Bunte Blätter*. «It was actually the German travellers, when they came to Italy to visit the celebrated Mount Sibyl, who carried with them the German lore of Tannhäuser», Kluge wrote. «And it was because of the many expeditions they made to that Italian region, that the legend about the German knight began to share a connection with that mountain». Thus, the German travellers, who in the course of many centuries had journeyed in quantities as far as the Apennine ridges lying in the territory of Norcia, had just been running after an empty myth, devoid of any substance, transferred to that remote place by their own forefathers: a sort of merry-go-round on a historical scale, a swinging motion which would prove ludicrous indeed — were it not shocking and flabbergasting instead. «The tales which Antoine de La Sale had heard from the lips of his local guides were nothing else than the same German lore», relocated to Italy by earlier travellers, who had set off in earlier times, of course, from Germany.

Thence, no pagan cult, no German knight, no enchanted mountain. And no Sibyl.

«In conclusion, all such tales being told about the said Cavern must be regarded as fables, and mere lies», wrote Leandro Alberti as an ultimate, irrevocable close, «an enjoyable narrative to be delivered to a thrilled and delighted audience»; and nothing else.

I realized I was about to feel sick. My stomach was rocking crazily; a feeling of acute, uncheckable revulsion was swelling inside my body as if it were warm slime; my sight faltered; I had to prop my

body against a wall belonging to one of the buildings which flanked Corso Sertorio. The passers-by were casting bewildered glances at me, as they definitely assumed that I was, by all odds, completely drunk.

I needed to sit down and pull myself together. However, my hotel was far too distant from where I was at the moment to think I would be able, in my present condition, to get there. Staggering and wavering, I made for Via Foscolo and proceeded towards the small, cozy bookshop — provided with a fair supply of books — which I had visited several months earlier when I had made my initial purchases of papers and essays dealing with the myth of the Apennine Sibyl, a collection through which I had imparted the basic momentum to my foolish, preposterous enquiry.

As I went in, I headed immediately to the inner room, where I knew there was a chair, in which I could make an attempt at regaining my self-control, and collect my thoughts.

It was, in my personal case too, a very peculiar closure indeed, a scornful and derisive outcome. In that very bookshop, my soul once overflowing with expectations and trust and fears, I had commenced my odd investigation, weird and promising as it were, teeming with outstanding developments and amazing, unexpected offshoots, whose inspection would positively lead to staggering new breakthroughs, totally unpredictable at the time.

On the contrary, I was now sitting in that same bookshop, my spirit downcast and thoroughly defeated by my own ingenuousness, my gullible and easily duped foolishness, my disposition to believe in the most implausible and child-appealing fairy tales. They only needed to be printed on the withered pages of some dusty antique book, bearing on its cover a flowery title in Latin. Shouldn't I devote my time — with the same dull commitment, eagerly unrestrainable as ever — to the mating behaviour of unicorns, or the assessment of the genealogical ascendancy of the Seven Dwarves, or even the scrutiny of the crucial, challenging topic of the quality of the tailor's cut used for making Cinderella's magical ball gown?

Anger began to pervade my soul. The very thought of my simple mindedness and silly, laughable heedlessness had taken hold of my spirit, and overwhelmed my heart to the point my breath was almost cut off: I had made a stupid simpleton of myself, a man who did not shrink from trusting any childish, preposterous nonsense — especially

when it was passed off as solemn truth — about the Apennine Sibyl: I was but a fool, hanging on every word uttered by any swindler who laid out in front of me a clumsy lie about Cybele and a barren, insignificant mountain placed near the town of Norcia and a heap of rocks pretending to be a cave's ruined entrance, and other stories and reveries and fabricated lies, in which not even a child — and that was really hard for me to acknowledge — would ever place any trust at all.

I grasped with rage one of the many volumes that surrounded me on all sides, in the section of the bookstore devoted to local guidebooks and publications relating to art history. There were photographic editions showing Valnerina's beautiful sights, and books on hiking and leisure, and essays describing the main Umbrian towns, and books, lots of books, scores of books, books everywhere.

I could not stand it longer. The books, those very books, had been just lying to me with their untroubled indifference; telling me their amazing tales; providing me with their fascinating accounts of the outstanding deeds achieved by men coming from far-away countres; and narrating the stories of mysterious, inaccessible places, of which nothing would I have ever known, had I not gone through the fanciful, bewildering fables that were hidden within their pages, printed with refined type and preserved amid their scented bindings, from which a fragrance of ink and paper emanated.

I opened the volume, a guidebook about Umbria which I had grasped haphazardly from an adjacent shelf, and started to read, with a sort of wild resolve, with frenzied fury, almost ripping the book's pages as I feverishly turned them with frantic violence. Perugia, Assisi, Gubbio, Spoletium, Foligno; I read the printed words with scorn, and utter contempt, as though I wished to avenge the insult I felt I had suffered, and take vengeance for the lies that had been told to me; skipping through the words and sentences with hatred and aversion, running across towns and chapters, as if I were fleeing, the way a lunatic does, heading in no direction at all, amid disguised, unforgiving enemies, who would show me no mercy as they ruthlessly pursued me.

Then, all of a sudden, I stopped.

Among those written words, amid those sentences, something had echoed in my mind like a foreboding alert, a sinister and solitary knell, which, as it resounded in the distance through the woodlands

and across the open expanse of the fields, announced that, in a neighbouring hamlet, a sorrowful and ghastly service was about to begin, a grievous ceremony on the occurrence of a bereavement, which had called — hushed and unheralded — on the village's shabby houses, forlorn and undefended as they were, being accompanied by the glacial breath of death.

«Membra vulnere praebui lacerata maiestati Dei», I read, as I instantly turned pale.

It was an excerpt from an ancient *Passio*, a Passion or the legendary account of the martyrdom of a saint, St. Felician of Foligno. And, with a shiver of eerie horror, I realized that it contained virtually the same words as those used by Carlo Renzi to put down in writing the dreadful, ominous, bloodcurdling narration of his hideous and baleful encounter with the deity lurking within a mountain, the Apennine Sibyl.

CHAPTER 16
PUNISHMENT AND MARTYRDOM

PERUGIA, the town which «enfolds herself in her own medieval streets, hemmed in between towering buildings tarnished by the lapse of centuries; dusky alleys, passageways with sloping steps, shadowy courtyards, sombre palaces; and yet, all of a sudden, at the very end of a small lane, a superb landscape appears, gently declining towards the slopes of distant mountains, as sweet as closed lips holding back words of love for chaste restraint of their own. […] This contrast between narrow and airy, solemn and joyful, urban and rustic is a true echo of the town's own history, engraved in murder and sanctity, fine arts and stillness».

That was the description of the Umbrian town as depicted by Maria Sticco, an author whose heart overflows with poetic inspiration; her words depict faithfully the town's secretive, withdrawn character, where «amid its charming silent streets, in its small squares and hushed corners, the very houses seem to convene for a confidential gathering; and from their harmonious arched windows, from the shutters left ajar and the balconies with their curved railings overgrown

with ivy, from the sturdy iron gratings at ground level and the dignified entrance gates — surmounted by a motto, a coat of arms or the name of Jesus carved in stone, adorned with an elegant flourish — from all that a sort of unknown *genius loci*, a deity pervading with its blessings the whole place, seems to reveal its own presence».

As I walked the town's dark passageways, in which the ancient and dignified Etruscan stones disguised themselves, with refined discretion, amid the medieval and Renaissance masonry, I just needed, as well, «to lift my eyes within certain small alleys only six feet wide, and discover sumptuous window frames and precious stone decorations, taking delight in the unexpected beauty proceeding from the neat, unblemished likeness of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century architectural stonework, abandoned with a sort of aristocratic neglect in the subdued light and quietness of the streets».

My destination was in the district of Porta Sole, on the upper and most prominent portion of the town, swept by a cold northerly wind, which that very day was blowing with steadfast obduracy from the ridges encircling the town on its north side. As I entered the lofty stone gate of the Biblioteca Augusta — one of the most illustrious library collections in Italy, open to the public since the early seventeenth century — I assumed I would be able to retrieve, amid the large selection of rare books treasured in the chambers of that distinguished and richly endowed establishment, the sources of information which I needed as I endeavoured to shed light upon that new and unexpected clue: a startling correspondence, that originated from the words referring to the Apennine Sibyl written by Carlo Renzi in 1837 on a withered slip of paper; such words seemed to be inexplicably linked, through an obscure yet undeniable connection, to an antique quotation retrieved in the narration of the life and martyrdom of St. Felician, an early Christian saint originating from the town of Foligno; a man who, by all appearances, had nothing to do with Renzi himself, nor with the investigation I had commenced several months earlier — an enquiry which, as for myself, was now heading towards its final ending, trite and unimaginative as it may be, yet definitely a conclusive and ultimate termination.

Indeed, I had ascertained — through a visit carried out in person to the mountain-top sacred to the Sibyl, after which I had gained full firsthand information about the situation actually extant up there —

that the cavern, for centuries the object of a sort of frenzied scrutiny, though basically groundless and unreasonable as it were, just wasn't there anymore. That hollow, after a period of inaccessibility which had lasted for more than two hundred years, had undergone repeated collapses following many clumsy attempts at breaking into the entrance passageway and adjacent vestibule, so that the way in had been obstructed forever.

The legend connected to the cave, a fairy tale which had taken a remarkable part in helping to spread the cave's enthralling fame across Europe, amid gullible men of letters and easily deceived treasure hunters, was but a trite prank, a sort of secondhand humbug, which had been transported up to the mount's barren peak by some unknown German visitor of old, whose chatter in German about a lost knight bearing an unintelligible name had been naively received, and passed on, by the illiterate peasantry which inhabited that remote, faraway territory.

I had no intention of spending even a single additional day in dealing with such twaddle; and in fact I was already considering the best way to arrange the details of my final and irrevocable return to Rome, when — among the guidebooks and publications on local history lying in the shelves of the Via Foscolo bookstore — I had run across that queer, inexplicable quotation, which had awoken weird echoes within my heart.

After my careful perusal of that sentence, I initially thought that those words, that statement did not deserve any further scrutiny; nor did I believe, by any means, that they supplemented any additional piece of information as compared with the conclusions I had already reached as to the most likely outcome of my investigation; with the latter, neither link nor relation seemed to exist at all. «St. Felician», so stated the guidebook of Umbria, concisely enough, in the chapter devoted to Foligno, «the town's patron saint, a bishop and a martyr, who lived between the second and third century AD; the town's cathedral church is dedicated to him. The *Passio Sancti Feliciani*, an ancient written document dating to the sixth or seventh century AD, provides an account of his martyrdom, which took place in Foligno, in the reign of Emperor Decius». Then the quotation from the *Passio* followed, «membra vulnere praebui lacerata maiestati Dei», a sentence that wit-

nessed to the appalling, unendurable ordeal which the early Christian martyr had suffered for his allegiance to the true faith.

«Unto thy divine glory I sacrificed my bleeding, torn-apart limbs». The queer consonance with the words — so similar, and basically conveying the same meaning — written by Carlo Renzi struck my fancy as something extraordinarily curious, and weirdly bizarre.

The guidebook did not provide any further information on St. Felician, and rather lingered on a detailed description of the tourist sights and artistic monuments to be found in the Umbrian town. Sure enough, my enquiry was now definitely over; and such inconsiderable finding, though unusually peculiar as it were, could not persuade me to change my mind, as I was firm in my resolve to terminate an investigation which had been dragging on for too long. Nevertheless, when I was still in Norcia, as I was retracing my steps to my hotel after leaving the bookstore in Via Foscolo, I made a short diversion to the Historical Archive of the Municipality. Sitting in the reading room, I carried out a quick search, dully inattentive, amid the dusty files and folders of the Archive: and indeed I could not retrieve any relevant information on St. Felician.

So I left, and walked towards the square adjoining the church of St. Francis, feeling a sense of grateful deliverance and appeased cheerfulness: no link existed, nothing was to be found; finally, my investigation, after so many months, was about to come to an end.

My heart relieved, I returned to my hotel. I started to pack my bags, stowing in my suitcase my clothes and personal belongings, which, for so long, had been my companions in the course of that lengthy, interminable stay in the town of Norcia. However, after a few minutes, I dropped that dull and uninteresting job altogether; again, I left my hotel and, after getting into my car, I drove away from Norcia, heading to the most important Umbrian town, Perugia, the place which Maria Sticco had celebrated with charmingly elegant words.

To call off my enquiry and terminate all search activities, giving up my inquiry for good; and hence to skip a clue, though trivial and uncertain as it may be; a residual piece of evidence, which might afford me the opportunity of lingering a little longer — for a time that, at all events, would be irredeemably short, limited and transient — in that fairy dream, in that captivating illusion in which I had been living, and breathing, and daydreaming for endless months; no, I

would not consent to that. I would not leave, now and forever, with dissatisfaction and frustration, that extraordinarily enthralling fable; I would not deliver myself, by an act of deferential submission, to the rule of a single creed, pervading the whole world: a harmonious and unopposed dream, devised elsewhere with tireless, punctilious accuracy; the same, undifferentiated message, oozing out of rank after rank of TV screens, cleverly scattered all over the globe, and suggesting, with their alluring voices — day and night, night and day, as they enshroud the heavens with their glimmering light, up to the most isolated regions of the earth — that we should renounce our own selves, and let our souls be lulled, lovingly, trustfully, in that sweet ocean, so warm and cozy, which is made of thoughts conceived by others on our behalf; a dream that is especially concocted by people who know us in depth, and truly love us, and understand every single light and each shady corner harboured in our hearts, and bestow on us all such goods that we ought to know we should be craving for; and let us fall into the happy, oblivious sleep of contented children, lest we bother the grown-ups, just as they are coping with the grave and majestic task of ruling — and devouring — the world.

It was because of all these reasons — with the aim not to acknowledge myself defeated, subdued, unquestionably beaten; and compulsively urged on by my frenzied resolve to get to the bottom of the whole matter — that, sitting at a table in the reading room of the Biblioteca Augusta, in Perugia, I continued my scrutiny of old volumes of hagiography and the history of the Church, searching the ancient catalogues of martyrs, reviewing the *Acta Martyrum*, and examining the *Legendae* and *Passiones*, which narrated the wondrous, legendary tales of the believers in Christ who, bearing testimony to the true faith at the time of early Christian communities, had suffered martyrdom, often enough in grisly and admonitory fashions, at the hands of Imperial Rome's authorities.

Soon I managed to collect a significant bulk of information on St. Felician. The ancient tale about Felician was narrated in a Passio which was preserved at the Bishopry Archive of the Cathedral of Spoletium. The antique parchment scroll was part of a collection of valuable documents, known as the *Legendary tales of the Cathedral*, edited, according to the caption in the prefatory sheet, by the monk Offredus at the *scriptorium* of the Abbey of St. Felix of Narco in Valnerina, in 1194.

Felician, as the scroll recounted, was born in Forum Flaminii, a small hamlet located northwards from the present town of Foligno; he was a member of a local Christian family. After his consecration as a bishop at the close of the second century AD, owing his ordination to Pope Victor I, Felician had begun to promote the gospel of Jesus Christ in several Umbrian towns, preaching the word of God with fierce, stubborn persuasiveness, and incurring almost everywhere the animosity of the imperial authorities, who endeavoured, though in vain, to check his fiery and indomitable fervour. It was Emperor Gaius Messius Quintus Decius, promoting a policy of strong anti-Christian repression and supporting the restoration of pagan cults, who ordered, in 251 AD, his imprisonment and subsequent killing, which was preceded by excruciating tortures and savage abuses.

According to the tale narrated in the *Passio*, a young Christian woman, Messalina, visited the bishop while he was detained in prison; she was thus known as one of the followers of the new loathed faith, and she was subsequently beaten and slain, «iniurata et caesa poenaliter»: and so she trod herself the bitter and grievous path of martyrdom, preceding the holy bishop by one day into death.

The agony of St. Felician took place the following day, «ad Montem Rotundum», a place which was traditionally situated not far from the town of Foligno. According to the ancient *Passio*, Felician, who had undergone appalling tortures, had then been chained to a chariot, and the horses had been spurred into a gallop, until his body, «poena laceratus», was torn apart into dusty, bleeding remains, now lying on the very ground that had seen him in his office as a bishop. With the oblation of his life to God through the supreme sacrifice of martyrdom, «membra vulnere praebui lacerata maiestati Dei», he had hallowed his own death, and sealed it in perpetuity with Jesus Christ's life-giving Cross.

This legendary tale, utterly impossible to confirm, and whose origin, according to scholars, was to be situated as late as the sixth century AD, was the outcome of a protracted process, involving the formation of an oral lore, being handed down within the early Christian communities from one generation to the next, over many hundreds of years, by using the narrative format of the *Passio*. This was designed so as to impart moral teachings to the devotees, through its indication of a course of conduct, an ultimate and fully redeeming route to be

followed in order to bear witness to the name of Jesus — through a downright imitation, *imitatio* in Latin, and a thorough, unconditional adherence to the agony of the Passion.

Sitting at a table of the Biblioteca Augusta's reading room, I removed my glasses taking my head in my hands. Nothing else was to be found. No connection seemed to exist between the legend of St. Felician, an early Christian martyr dating back to the third century AD, and the gloomy and uncanny tale of the Sibyl; no link at all was to be retrieved, at first sight at least, between an ancient divination centre, clinging to the mountain-sides of the Apennines in the region of Norcia, as reported in the ambiguous excerpts from such classical authors as Suetonius and Trebellius Pollio; and the shadowy figure of a bishop and preacher, a saint still being worshipped all over the district surrounding the town of Foligno, a man who had left a clear imprint on the lore of a whole community, as well as his very name to the dedicatory appellation of a cathedral. It was as if Carlo Renzi alone, in a peculiar way of his own, so eerie and unfathomable, had intended to establish a weird and baffling connection between the prophetess and the man of faith; between Norcia and Foligno; between an obscure legend and — on the other hand — a radiant, exemplary tale, whereupon the nobility of martyrdom cast, in accord with the inestimable gift of saving grace, the effulgent light of deliverance from sin, and attested to a firm, unshakable trust in resurrection.

Perhaps, quite simply, no answer was available. Perhaps that cryptic, inexplicable sentence had been put down by Renzi with no intention at all of setting up a connection with the excerpt, featuring a similar character and wording, taken from an old tale about a forgotten martyrdom which had occurred more than fifteen centuries earlier. Or maybe Renzi, in the course of his business trips, had chanced to visit the fine cathedral of Foligno, and had come across the story of Felician; perhaps somehow he had merely stumbled upon the quotation from the *Passio Sancti Feliciani*, being stricken and astounded by the narration, and possibly moved, too, by a narrative so imbued with despair, so utterly overpowered by the impression of a ghastly, impending death — yet, at the same time, so overflowing with an unspeakable sense of anticipation, a perfect and unblemished trust in divine, all-embracing mercy, which admitted neither uncertainty nor hesitation.

I lifted my eyes, turning my attention away from the papers that were lying in front of me, and looked at the students and scholars who, immersed in their own thoughtful perusal, were examining the documents that encumbered the reading desks ranged in rows along the room.

I was arriving to the conclusion that the facts had actually taken place that way, and that no link, if not by mere chance or due to an inconsequential literary affinity, could be established between the words noted down by Renzi on that withered slip of paper and the poignant, unearthly plea which a bishop who lived in the third century AD had raised in the very hour of his own martyrdom — when, as I carried on with my investigation and probed further into the legendary account, while scutinizing the details of the *Passio*'s excerpts, I became aware that a tangible link did actually exist, vague as it may be, and yet — if submitted to a close though quite hazardous inspection, productive of weird and slippery implications — utterly striking and giving way to hazy, unpredictable upshots.

According to the old narrative, it appeared in fact that St. Felician had visited, in the course of his fiery preaching journey, several Umbrian towns: leaving Foligno, he had directed his steps towards Spello, where he had proclaimed Jesus Christ's striking and earthshaking message. Then, he had headed to Bevagna, and Perugia, and Assisi; from the latter town he had to flee in haste, owing to the open enmity he had stirred up against himself among the followers of the pagan and imperial religion; subsequently, there were Trevi, and Plestia, situated at the centre of the plateau of today's hamlet of Colfiorito; and then Terni, and Spoletium. And, finally, Norcia.

A puzzled weariness, a sense of total exhaustion overwhelmed my soul, as I pushed aside, with a weary gesture of my hand, the papers piling up hapazardly on my desk. So a link appeared to exist, even though it was nothing else but a mere geographical kinship: an identity of locations, that added up to the literary affinity which, ever since the beginning of this search, had established a first connection between the sentence written by Renzi and the excerpt from the *Passio*. And that was all. No further evidence had come into view that might hint at something new: an additional relationship, a supplemental correspondence, which might justify a revival of my enquiry. I presently felt, with a sort of clear and acute internal knowledge re-

sting at the very bottom of my confused, withered heart, that my investigation was now steering towards its final and straightforward conclusion.

Yet a troubled and shadowy indecisiveness was upsetting my dismayed spirit, reverberating a gloomy echo in the most secluded regions of my soul. I sensed that the more I endeavoured to disregard the results which were proceeding, apparently incoherently and at random, from the latest and conclusive steps of my investigation — the more vigorous were my attempts at shunning the maze of cryptic connections and elusive bonds and stealthy concatenations which were gradually adding up one after another in the mysterious and unfrequented territory of my search — the stronger the opposing force, the counteracting thrust exerted its drive, urging me to direct my eyes anew towards such riddles and affinities, and retrace my steps across such lands which I had so hastily and eagerly forsaken, by reconsidering such voiceless clues which my mind had dismissed, on their first appearance, without going into any detailed scrutiny, as I was oppressed by a nameless, unaccountable dread. It was because of this dread that I felt free in my attempts to divert, by any means, my transfixed, horror-stricken soul from the prospect — merely conjectural for the time being — that an illusory figment, a face seeping in from the hideous, inhuman realm of nightmares might take shape inside the actual reality of our world; in the cruel, forlorn radiance of twilight; in the life of the living beings who, day after day, breathe the air that surrounds our bodies, moulded in a frail and inanimate material, so painstakingly vulnerable, and tread the ground with their tiny and unwary existences, totally unaware of the grievous danger looming over them, heinous and merciless, from beyond the visible universe.

As I departed from Perugia, my forehead wrinkled, thoughtfully engrossed in driving, my car speeding along the road to Norcia, I continued my musing and considered, with intense anguish, the information I had come across when perusing the pages of the books preserved amid the stark, solemn walls of the Biblioteca Augusta.

St. Felician, at Norcia, in the *Basilica Argentea* — the second main church after the one entitled to St. Benedict — had preached ardently and zealously, as was his habit, against the lies of heathendom, by setting the resplendent truth of the Incarnation against the sombre mendacities uttered by the antique deities of Rome and Italy; he had hur-

led himself, with all the impetus of his fiery eloquence, against the false gods, who would soon be flung, as he used to say, into a chasm of darkness; for each man, now reinstated in a condition of redemption owing to the salvation of his eternal life by the immolation of resurrected Christ, would proclaim the triumph of the true faith, with the words of Daniel the Prophet: «I do not worship idols made by human hand, I worship the living God who made heaven and earth and who is Lord over all living creatures».

With my hands frozen on the wheel, my mind wandered restlessly, amid shifty, hazy figments; altogether unsated, seized by a troubled and apparently unwarranted inquietude, as the meandering road opened its way between the lofty cliffs which loomed over, and guarded, the course of the river Nera. Felician, Messalina: the wild and passionate sermons delivered by the holy bishop, marked by intense anger and a hue of feckless folly; Emperor Decius, the imprisonment of the preacher and his ensuing martyrdom, fiendish and savagely ruthless: everything was whirling unceasingly within my brain, worn out by strain and fatigue; while, inside my very skull, I could hear the sickening echo — like piercing screams gushing from the throats of loathsome brutes being ruthlessly slaughtered — of the shrieks and invocations rising from that mangled flesh and contorted lips and bleeding limbs, «membra vulnere praebui lacerata maiestati Dei», which seemed to reverberate further excruciating, unbearable invocations, which had likewise risen from torn-apart limbs. Thy disfigured face, I cried in my mind as well, thy disfigured face...

When I got to Norcia, evening was drawing in. I parked my car in the usual slot near Porta Ascolana and began to walk slowly towards Piazza St. Benedict.

I didn't feel like going back to the hotel. The gloomy sky above was swept by thick rolling clouds; the weather was cool and windy; and the few sparse passers-by, enshrouded in a sullen and unwelcoming disposition of their own, marked by a sort of sulky indifference, were hastily crossing the public square beside the statue of the holy man, without turning back, as they headed straight for home and the warm, comforting affection accorded to them by their families. The streetlamps, whose light appeared to lack the usual brightness, seemed to foresee the bad turn in the weather that was looming over the town; and the nocturnal firmament, dismal and desolate, managed to

announce — with dreamy, far-away bolts of lightning, and with the dank smell of rain, so unequivocally mournful — the coming of the storm.

Urged by a sudden, whimsical impulse, I turned left, heading for the gleaming, unblemished mass of the Cathedral of St. Mary Argentea, the «silver-coloured», emerging from the darkness as though it were a white ship, with its neat and elegant outline. Strange enough, the great wooden portal, at that late hour, was still open; under the stern, watchful gaze of the lofty belfry, stalwart and strongly built, I crossed the entrance doors, left ajar, and went in.

The Cathedral of St. Mary preserved, in its very name, which echoed an illustrious descent, the memory of the now lost *Basilica Argentea*, whose noble foundations were lying in silent oblivion beneath the walls of the present Christian building. It was in this once pagan edifice that, more than one thousand seven hundred years earlier, St. Felician had proclaimed — with his dogged, frenzied attacks on the inept and fallacious gods to whom the heathens accorded their infecund and ineffectual worship — the redeeming mystery of Jesus Christ's death and resurrection, for whosoever believeth in Him shall not be lost, but shall receive instead the gift of everlasting life.

The airy central nave and aisles, desolate at the time, still seemed to resound with the exciting eloquence of the preaching bishop, who-

se stark and uncompromising sermons, fervently backed by an adamant faith, had certainly sparked public outrage among the adepts of the antique cults, amid the enraged, whispering forces which served the unforgiving deities who dwelled in that remote territory, deeply set in the middle of grim and unfriendly mountain fastnesses.

I sat on one of the many benches, now empty, that were ranged in long rows along the central nave of the Cathedral.

I began to feel a sense of shifty bewilderment, though peculiarly lucid: it was clear to me that I myself could not provide any account for my own present conduct; I did not know how to explain the reason for my being in that place, while the night, out there, was coming on with unrelenting readiness, and the first heavy raindrops were falling on the roofs and deserted streets of Norcia.

My quest was over. That last clue, a thin, colourless thread which at first had seemed to materialize the semblance of a connection between St. Felician and Carlo Renzi; the ancient preacher and the formidable, shadowy prophetess; the witness to the true faith, slain «ad Montem Rotundum», and the Sibyl concealed in the gloomy, unfathomable womb of the Apennines; that thread had broken at last. It had now revealed its very nature: a mere figment, a deceitful illusion, a vain and unrealistic attempt at keeping alive a search that — now I discerned it clearly — had attained its farthest limit, its ultimate and insuperable boundary, beyond which only unknown lands were to be found, whose inhabitants were dreams, and fiendish visions, and insanity.

It was over now. Wearily, I got up from the bench and began heading slowly towards the entrance gate.

Then, suddenly, a staggering thought, utterly absurd and unwholesome, burst out of the very depths of my brain.

Those words — «Montem Rotundum» — that piece of information so punctilious, so remarkably accurate, continued to flash insistently, with unflinching perseverance, within the most secluded regions of my soul, besieging my heart for some time now; yet my shaken and enervated spirit seemed not to grasp the meaning of this silent pounding, a subterranean hammering that — like the mournful thunder which was now rumbling ominously in the dark sky above the arched ceiling of St. Mary Argentea — played its role as a herald, a murmuring harbinger of a secret foreboding, deeply concealed in the

very resonances which echoed from outer space down to the inaccessible hollows hidden in the hypogeal abysses.

A figment, a likeness was endeavouring to resurface, to come back to my mind; a semblance that was already known to me, a face, a mark which could but convey in itself the key to that cryptic riddle, the answer to that nightmarish enigma, waiting solely for the disclosure of the right combination, the revelation of the most harrowing elucidation, to unfold in full its mystically heinous potency.

It was as if the clear radiance of daylight had suddenly fallen, with its harsh and inescapable sharpness, on the very connection which, for many days, I had been clumsily and foolhardily groping for: «Mons Rotundus», the round cliff; the peak girdled by a ring of sheer rock, encompassing the barren and rounded mountain-top; the queenly crown, an endless and all-embracing circle, ill-omened token of the invincible, fiendish rule of Cybele; that mountain, which had been the setting for the ghastly *Passio* of St. Felician, was nothing else than the towering, sinister, abominable cliff of Mount Sibyl.

I was hurled back, and fell heavily on the bench which I had left a few moments earlier when I was about to leave the church. The rain outside was now pouring down with savage, unrelenting rage, as the thunderbolts that marked the summer storm illuminated with their fierce brightness the deserted naves of the Cathedral.

Bewildered and awe-stricken, I stood stock-still, considering in amazement that bond now unveiled and become unequivocally blatant and intelligible, from which — in spite of all my desperate and pointless endeavours to elude its atrocious implications — I should not find neither shelter nor deliverance anymore; any residual hope to avert my horrified eyes from that unbearable, inhuman truth having vanished completely.

St. Felician, a bishop and preacher who lived in the reign of Emperor Decius, had not passed away in Foligno, as mistakenly held by the anonymous scholars which, several centuries later, had noted down the account of his death on parchment scrolls: instead, he had been martyred there, among the barren mountains near Norcia, on the peak of the mount sacred to the Sibyl, crushed by a myth that was more potent, slain by a presence which was even more antique and dreadful.

He had been visited; but not by Messalina, as reported in the account provided by the late revisions of the *Passio*, the «Christian virgin and martyr from Umbria»; that semblance of a woman was perhaps more akin to Messalina the Empress, the ruthless and unchaste wife of Emperor Claudius, who lived two hundred years in advance of Felician's martyrdom, and whose abhorred name would be linked forever with the memory of the loathsome turpitudes and vile iniquities she committed in the course of her life, marked by baseness and brutality. And that very name, loathed and cursed, would take on a different meaning with the course of time, now designating the grievous, fiendish visitor who, falling upon Felician in the shape of a godlike, death-bringing virgin, had torn apart his body savagely and fed herself on his flesh, «speaking mournful words with delirious lips».

Hence it was she, the Sibyl — beyond the foggy, equivocal curtain raised by the early Christian popular lore — the unclean virgin, the heathenish Messalina, the dark feminine fury that struck down and killed whoever had threatened her age-old, heinous dominion, which she herself had established in such remote territories from time immemorial, ever since the prophetess had resolved to set up her subterranean abode in the dark secret heart of the mountain whose cliff was topped with the sacred crown of regal rule.

All was now clear; all things were now given a fully manifest significance that was radically new; nothing was left to covertness or veiled behind unvoiced words; and what was now being disclosed before my very eyes was assuming so direful a meaning, and so uncanningly appalling, that it proved almost unbearable to my spirit, and utterly harmful for the balance of my mind and the very deliverance of my immortal soul.

And Carlo Renzi's invocation, «vultus tuus perspexi deformis, turrigera mater, membra vulnere praebui lacerata maiestati divinae», so incredibly akin to the words — much older indeed and echoing with weird, blood-curdling affinities — uttered in the third century AD by a dying bishop, his voice choked by his own gushing blood; that invocation now revealed itself in the fullness of its foul, astounding, sinister significance.

For Renzi the merchant, Renzi the philanthropist, the man from Norcia, who in his early years had yielded, as a «hunter of bogus tales», to the spell of the enthralling fairy tales that circulated about the

Apennine Sibyl, had made no casual reference — stretching out across ages and civilizations only by a mere chance — to the poignant, desperate words which had marked the conclusive, direful hour in the life of the early-Christian bishop, experiencing the harrowing and unendurable torment of agony.

Felician, right before his death, had a personal, real, forthright encounter with the antique prophetess dwelling in the mountain's core; he beheld, from a distance so close as to be almost inconceivable, the horrific, fiendish face of the Sibyl; he had set his own eyes into the appalling, unbearable eyes of the ominous oracle of a deity, Cybele.

«Vultus tuus perspexi deformis». I was now aware that the words written on a withered scrap of paper by the trader from Norcia, who lived in the nineteenth century, had not been noted down by mere accident. Carlo Renzi, too, just like Felician, had the chance to behold, in our real world, at a specific and actually existing place, in a particular hour of his earthly life, the semblance of the Apennine Sibyl; and he had subsequently escaped the destiny of death which that inhuman and heinous semblance imparted to all living beings.

What I had been dreading the most, for several months, was now to become true. My encounter with the Sibyl could not be considered as an imaginary prospect anymore, a chance as ludicrous as unachievable, a morbid and unwholesome reverie.

Very soon, I realized with a shiver of terror, my gaze too would set itself on the face of the Apennine Sibyl. And the very thought of that made me feel Death creep over me from behind, with his silent and unforgiving steps, enshrouding my soul with his black wings which stifle and ravage and quench all created things, and hushing for evermore the immeasurable fright that engulfed my heart — as I walked out of the Cathedral of St. Mary Argentea and right into the downpour, with unsteady pace and shaking in every limb.

From then on, I would be waiting for a meeting which would be held — of that I now felt assured — not so far away in time.

CHAPTER 17
UNVEILING THE SECRET

BENVENUTO CELLINI, the celebrated goldsmith and sculptor, in chapter LXV of his work *The life of Benvenuto of Master Giovanni Cellini from Florence written by himself*, after reporting the most-famous episode of a necromantic summoning performed amid the desolate and ghostly ruins of the Colosseum on a full moon night of the year 1531, wrote that «the most suitable locality» to have a book consecrated to the Fiend «was the hill country of Norcia». Such was the dark, sinister fame of the inhabitants of that town, for «the peasants also of that district are people to be trusted, and have some practice in these matters, so that at a pinch they are able to render valuable assistance».

This odd and absolutely remarkable fame, from a certain point of view opposed altogether to the rumour circulated by the fourteenth-century poet Franco Sacchetti — who had considered the citizens of Norcia as enemies of education and literacy, with their loud utterance «all learned people, get out of here» — had spread, surprisingly enough, far and wide, if we consider that Johann Wolfgang Goethe, the great German writer, poet and playwright, in Act IV of the second

part of his capital masterpiece, the tragic play *Faust*, published in 1832, mentions «der Nekromant von Norcia, der Sabiner», the necromancer from Norcia, the sinister man from Sabine, who was burnt at the stake, entirely devoured by its consuming fire, in a place of mystical and excruciating transmutation: «the flames were reaching up with their greedy tongues» and «the timber packed round his body was set on fire with brimstone and pitch» — thus evoking, perhaps, that very excerpt from Benvenuto Cellini, a passage which he knew very well; or, he had rather made reference, in his own literary style, to the legend of the celebrated sorcerer and alchemist Cecco of Ascoli, an assiduous and mysterious visitor of the Sibilline mountains, who was also burnt at the stake by the Inquisition as a heretic in 1327.

Such queer and eerie fame that for centuries had been attached to the inhabitants of Norcia was now linked permanently, in my imagination, to the shadowy and enigmatic figure of Carlo Renzi, the wealthy merchant from Norcia, who, based on clues that had gradually taken a tangible and fully unequivocal shape, had made an inconceivable, nightmarish encounter with an entity who could only belong to the realm of dreams; a potency which was dwelling, silent and inviolable, among the stark and desolate mountains that encircled the town of Norcia; spreading about its evil spell, and oppressing, with its wicked and unswerving suggestion, the hearts and minds of men for unfathomable ages; a dark abyss, that spanned at least twenty centuries; and this enchantment — as Renzi appeared to suggest with his secret, despairing message, entrusted to a withered slip of paper concealed amid the pages which contained the last will of his earthly life — was still positively and alarmingly operating; its enthralling seduction, ominously virulent, was still oozing from that cliff and the heap of wrecked stones that secured, seemingly forever and ever, the gloomy entrance to the cavern.

The children's merry laughter was rising in the air with spontaneous cheerfulness, among the slides and swings scattered all over the shady viale della Libertà, within the large public garden beside the northward stretch of the town walls. The heat of the summer day met a firm and unswerving barrier in the thick foliage of the trees, which sheltered, with attentive benevolence, the children's lively games; as elderly people, sitting on the sizeable and inviting garden seats — walking sticks clutched in their wizened hands — were waiting, with

no haste at all, for the much-coveted hour of lunchtime, when they would get up, by degrees and with thrilled anticipation, and, together with the cheerfully swarming children, would head for their homes to enjoy the luscious meals prepared for them by experienced and talented hands.

I was also sitting on a bench, looking at the jolly, gamboling children's play. I revolved in my mind all the relevant aspects of the apparently indecipherable matter that continued to upset my soul down to its very core; I considered from all sides the many facets to that riddle, which now compulsively engrossed my every thought. My quest had finally come to a standstill, so that I was now forced into a troubled, uncomfortable inaction, lacking any prospect of progression which might heave me up from that bench and put the crippled, frozen machinery of my investigation back on track; a foolish investigation indeed, yet it had led my steps up to such gloomy territories: unfriendly and unexplored regions, from which only by a grueling effort I would retrace my way back to ordinary habits and commonplace insignificance; and much harder would it be to go further ahead — towards a realm that was unknown, appalling, and fiendishly inhuman.

By following the footprints left by Felician of Foligno, a holy man who lived in the third century A.D., Carlo Renzi had chanced to behold, in the course of his earthly life, the blood-curdling, ominous semblance of the Apennine Sibyl; in spite of that, he was still alive after that close encounter, and had bequeathed the memory of this extraordinary and preternatural event to a short sentence written, in 1837, on a withered slip of paper, concealed amid the pages of his last will and testament.

But how could Carlo Renzi have met the Sibyl? By what passageways had he been able to break his way into the secret, underground realm of the priestess consecrated to Cybele, the goddess? How had he succeeded in winning for himself the access to that barred and unfathomable world, forbidden altogether to the multifarious crowd of adventurers that, throughout the centuries, had endeavoured to probe its obscure, uncharted hollows — some of those visitors pushed back with derisive scorn, and some others swallowed up by the dark, unexplored pits, which no part of them would ever hand back to the outside world, not even frail, fleshless bones, to be mour-

ned before a grave stormed by the unmerciful winds and the icy, uncaring rain?

As I had realized on the ground of the results arising from my search, the cavern had been sealed for centuries, according to the statements retrieved in the works by Leandro Alberti and Father Fortunato Ciucci. As a matter of fact, both authors related that Norcia's local authorities had been compelled to close the entrance to the cave so as to oppose the great «multitude of enchanters» and «restrict the inflow of sorcerers and soothsayers». Additional, updated reports on the existing conditions at the cave's mouth would appear only two hundred years later, when Giovambattista Miliani wrote, after carrying out his own inspection on the mountain-top, that the entrance to the cavern presented itself, sadly enough, as a mere «heap of wrecked stones». It was the year 1885, and more than half a century had elapsed since Carlo Renzi had made his personal, direct, horrifying experience with the Apennine Sibyl; and no clue at all seemed to justify any possible assumptions that, in the course of that stretch of time, anything might have changed on the crowned mountain-top — in other words, that the access might have been reopened, as a result of excavations or inspections of some kind, and subsequently sealed again, in such a way that Miliani, on his arrival on the summit, had the chance to ascertain firsthand the irreparable damage suffered by the cave's entrance.

Hence, the issue was still there, as jumbled as utterly unchanged, in all its puzzling essence: how could Carlo Renzi have broken into the cave? Where had he made his entrance from — if the young man from Norcia had really ever entered that place?

The bell of Porta Romana struck noon. The women, in a resolute and authoritative manner of their own, began to recall their children, who were still capering about amid the flowerbeds and swings, oblivious of everything but their own games. My head was aching painfully, and I was starting to feel the harsh, throbbing pangs of hunger.

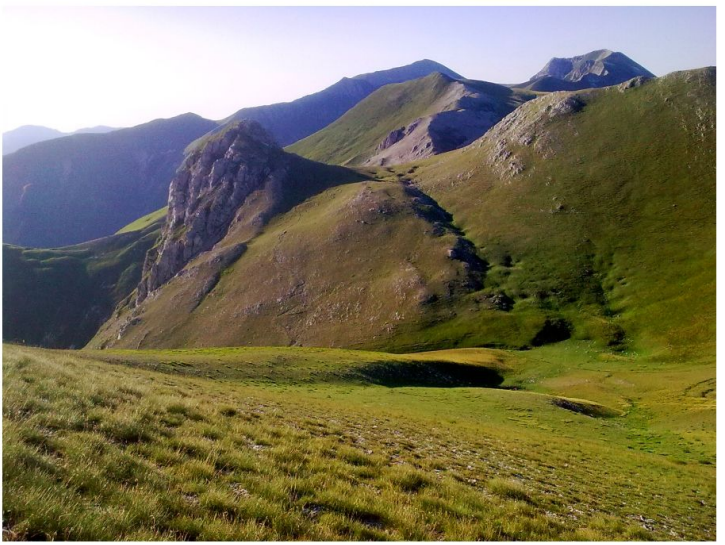
In my somber and disheartened frustration, I also seemed to catch glimpses of some sort of wizardry, a hint of sneaky necromancy which appeared to imbue the life of Norcia and its inhabitants: Carlo Renzi and his extraordinary encounter with the Sibyl; the compulsive attraction experienced by Falzetti and Desonay for the excavations at the cavern; Father Ciucci and his *Chronicles of the antique town of Nor-*

sia; Vespasia Polla and her unequal, ruthless lineage of emperors; and St. Benedict as well, with his grim, dreary abbeys scattered all over Europe.

A sinister and deceitful community, I found myself considering in my soul, as an obscure, whimsical reverie: a population that was allegedly prone, by innate disposition and an age-long familiarity with shiftiness and beguilement, to any sort of connivance, including the worst ones. It was not by mere chance that Pietro Barbo, who would later become Pope Paul II, had indicated the citizens of Norcia, in 1454, as «the nastiest men in the world», as he happened to confront with their defiant obstinacy in the struggle they had started against the Duchy of Spoletium for the conquest of lands that both towns reclaimed, at that time, for themselves. Likewise, it was not by mere chance that, in the capital city of the Papal States, an old saying, now totally forgotten, was passed on from one generation to the next, in the colourful Roman idiom: it stated that «the butcher from Norcia ends up at the Rotonda». The «Rotonda», the Round Dome, was the public square facing the Pantheon, the illustrious Roman monument; and the butchers from Norcia were two meat cutters, established in Rome coming from the town surrounded by lofty mountains, who, in 1638, were caught in the act of preparing the sausages typical of their craft by making use — in addition to pork meat — of human flesh; flesh of men they themselves had murdered; and on account of that, Pope Urban VIII Barberini had commanded the court to sentence the perpetrators to an exemplary, grievous punishment, which was executed «at the Piazza della Rotonda, where both heinous butchers from Norcia were put to death and then slaughtered and dismembered», as is recounted in the old manuscript *A description of the most conspicuous public executions carried out in Rome*, a book that once belonged to the illustrious aristocrat Prince Paolo Borghese.

And, really, every feature of those barren mountains and jagged ridges seemed to tell a tale of secret, invisible witchcraft, working in covertness and stillness, and watching from afar the petty, ever-busy world of men. Wasn't it Goethe himself who wrote, in his *Faust*, that «mighty are the potencies of the mountains»? Wasn't it the sublime German poet who declared that «the people living in the cliffs ponder unceasingly over the arcane revelations of nature and rocks; the spirits, having retreated from the flatlands since ages past, are swarming

within their mountains more vigorously than ever; they work with inaudible energy in the convolutions of pits and abysses, amid the fumes of the inexhaustible metallic vapours; through endless scrutinies and observations, and by the amalgamation of natural elements, all their exertions are consecrated to the discovery of new, formerly unknown truths; with the gentle touch marking the presence of supernatural potencies, they make use of diaphanous moulds, and, as they stand in silence, looking into crystal shapes, they consider the visions of a higher world»?



Mystery and secrecy presided over those lands, discreetly and in disguise, sheltering obscure secrets in the depths of the earth, unknown to the unsuspecting people, occupied with innumerable cares and trivial undertakings. Indeed, wasn't that very public garden a token of that unexplored abyss, a covert chasm which rested silently underneath the outer layer of ordinary, everyday existence? Those flowerbeds and trees, that very embankment propped against the town walls, didn't they actually conceal the antique burial ground of pre-Roman times, dating back to the Iron Age, that was brought to light in 1998 in the course of an excavation for the construction of an offensive and deplorable multy-storey car park made of concrete, placed at Norcia's

main entrance gateway? Weren't they resting — such burials and corpses and valuable grave goods — beneath the huge earthwork, in silent reserve, hushed in slumber as thousands after thousands of years rolled by, immersed in the oblivion of a dank, unfading darkness, only inhabited by the writhing, contorted roots of the trees which bathed themselves in the sunlight above, as the graves remained buried and unfathomed, possibly for evermore?

An undisciplined company of merry children, going back home after attending their classes at school, now over, ran noisily in front of my seat. The leaves on the trees rustled with their subdued murmur, tinkling lightly in the early afternoon's sunbeams, as the public garden was gradually emptying, leaving me all alone, with my own troubled, utterly unproductive thoughts, while I was still sitting on that bench placed beside the fine gravel of the garden path.

Yet I sensed, with lucid sharpness of thought, that I was missing a primary, substantial element. A sort of compelling anguish continued to tickle, with troublesome urgency, the innermost recesses of my own consciousness: a recollection, a clue, a hint that seemed to be crucial, and decisive; a trace, which persisted in eluding my restless, spasmodic scrutiny. And yet it had to be there, lurking in the dark corners of my brain, so unequivocally insinuating, and full of significance; a clue that was ripe for retrieval and acknowledgement — had I been able to pinpoint its shifty, insubstantial outline from the depths of my drained, washed-out memory.

And such a clue — I now realized with sudden astonishment — had something to do with the last will and testament set down by the merchant from Norcia, Carlo Renzi, as the final accomplishment of his earthly life.

It came in fact to my mind, as I was seized by a nervous, excited apprehension, that Renzi, amid the many instructions given in his last will, not only had he bequeathed to the Orphanage for Young Ladies a conspicuous endowment — catering in this way for the foundation, in Norcia, of a highly-commendable charitable establishment, which, after his passing, would confer on his name the praise and respectful gratitude as bestowed by his fellow-citizens — he had also destined an amount of money, likewise remarkable and substantial, «to the restoration of the monument know as the Tempietto».

At first, I had not paid any attention at all to that odd, puzzling bequest, that concealed within itself a peculiar and uncomon resolve, for which no apparent reason could be found. Renzi, the wealthy merchant, the philanthropist, had determined, with amazing and bountiful liberality, to see about the restoration of one of the lesser monuments in Norcia: the Tempietto, or Small Temple, a shrine rising in the Capolaterra district, placed at the easternmost and less frequented side of the town.

It now appeared to me that that resolve, that bequest — the result of a careful and conscious deliberation, and to such a degree that Renzi had intentionally included a specific instruction in his will and testament as he had it put down before the notary public Domenico Batoli — might conceal a special meaning: a perfectly weird, peculiarly bizarre significance, as compared, in particular, with the manifest feeling of complacency and self-praise which had driven the merchant's choices as to the destination of the money to be bequeathed for charitable and philanthropic purposes.

He might have destined, the wealthy trader, the same notable amount of money to the refurbishment of any of the churches being the subject of far greater devotion by the populace, or the renovation of a prominent public building enjoying a wider reputation; it was through charitable activities as such that he would have been accorded the passionate, unceasing appreciation from both the common people and local authorities of Norcia and its countryside.

But Renzi had chosen to fund the restoration of that minor, utterly insignificant shrine, known under the popular name of «Small Temple», totally neglected by the piousness of women and peasants, unimportant from any artistical standpoint, and whose function as a public building across the centuries was still hazily unclear.

The hour was late in the afternoon, and the air was turning chill. I got up from the garden seat and, in that very moment, an eerie, unattractive thought sudddenly struck my mind. Totally upset, I directed my steps in haste towards Porta Romana, and entered Corso Sertorio; then I turned right heading for Via Cesare Battisti, so as to reach my hotel as quickly as possible. I climbed the stairs with frantic speed: I urgently wanted to check, in the volumes which cluttered haphazardly all the available space within my room, a piece of information that, in recent times, I had chanced upon inattentively, without being able

to recognise in any way, at the time, its sinister, uncanny significance; a meaning which now, at last, seemed to materialize as a gloomy shape over the dreary, increasingly oppressing landscape of my investigation.

Rummaging through my collection of papers, I quickly retrieved the passage I was looking for with troubled expectation. And there it was: the Tempietto, also known as the Passion's Shrine; a small-size, square-shaped building in a classic style, propped against an earlier edifice standing on Via Umberto I, in the Capolaterra district; built in 1354, it presented two large arched windows, decorated with the instruments of Jesus Christ's Passion and a queer low relief featuring geometrical patterns and figures of animals and men, of enigmatic — and possibly occult — character.

As I was seized by an excruciating, uncheckable anguish, which stifled my breath with cruelly inhuman fingers, suppressing its life-giving flow, I continued to read with frenzied anticipation, overwhelmed by that intuition which had upset my shaken and frightened soul, when, at the public garden of Porta Romana, I had finally established a connection between that piece of information — which I had stumbled upon several weeks earlier, without realizing at all that the offspring of that finding, by necessity, would be marked by aberrant insanity — and the latest and most startling outcomes of my quest.

At last, I found out what I was eagerly looking for: a few lines that, in a book about the history of local arts and lore, as they hastily described the origin of the Small Temple, shed an unnatural, distorted light upon the whole story in which, as I was now increasingly aware, I had been horribly plunged, with no remaining chance of deliverance of any sort.

I could now understand, finally, why Carlo Renzi, the wealthy merchant, the «hunter of bogus tales», the man who had written on a queer slip of paper the very same words that had been uttered already by a martyr who lived in the third century AD; the man who maintained he had been admitted to the fiendish, horrifying presence of the Apennine Sibyl, so that he had been able to behold her loathsome, contorted features; I eventually realized why that affluent philanthropist had resolved to restore — rather than the Cathedral of St. Benedict or the Town Hall or the Castellina — a minor, unimportant, wholly undistinguished monument, which rose off the beaten track in an

out-of-the-way district of the town: and that was because the Tempietto, or Passion's Shrine, as attested with stern hastiness by the book I was holding in my quivering, terrified hands, «was possibly built on the very site of a small, much older church, that had been wrecked by the earthquakes several centuries earlier».

That small church, I read, «was dedicated to a holy bishop, a martyr and a preacher, who had been active in Umbria during the third century of the Christian era». And his name, so the book stated, was Felician of Foligno.

CHAPTER 18
IN THE SIBYL'S SHRINE

«UBIQUE CREDIMUS divinam esse praesentiam», as Benedict proclaimed in his *Sancta Regula*. We know that the divine presence is everywhere; it endows the world with the boundless, untainted grace of his blessing, hallowing each part of the Creation in the harmonious and consonant chant which all living beings intone, with grateful voice, to honour the Almighty. «Domine, labia mea aperies, et os meum adnuntiabit laudem tuam», as the invocation from Psalm 51 says, «O Lord, open thou my lips; and my mouth shall shew forth thy praise».

And yet all created souls, frightened and beguiled by the foul, treacherous wiles conceived by the dark forces of Evil, raise to the heavenly potencies a grievous outcry: «ego ad te clamavi, quoniam exaudis me, Deus», such is the call from Psalm 17, engulfed with anguished desolation, «inclina aurem tuam mihi et exaudi verba mea». I have called upon thee, for thou wilt hear me, O God; incline thine ear unto me, and hear my speech; hold up my goings in thy paths — this is the plea voiced by the tormented and bewildered creature — that my footsteps slip not.

Potent is the fiendish spell oozing from the darkness; a fascination which hides itself, with shrewd and artful subtlety, in the very heart of the kingdom of light, ensnaring by its mellow voice the souls of men, sowing slyness in the heart of the simple-minded, and conjuring its servants which, in secrecy and disguise, render hideous services to the stealthy, unholy potencies of the night. «Custodi me ut pupillam oculi», keep me as the apple of thy eye — this is the entreaty rising to heaven from Psalm 17, a harrowing cry filled with awe-stricken terror — «sub umbra alarum tuarum protege me»: hide me under the shadow of thy wings.

For a different shadow had settled its abode, covertly and unacknowledged, upon the houses and palaces of St. Benedict's town; another presence lived in silence its own mysterious, elusive existence within the old walled ramparts, erected as a shelter from the horrors which, from the outside, loomed over the peaceful lives of the residents, bustling with their unguarded, industrious liveliness, their minds absorbed in all sorts of daily occupations, carried out with active and assiduous exertion; a different intellect, lurking ominously in stillness, was engrossed in deep thought, considering all matters and occurrences that followed one another throughout immense, overextended spans of time; immutable events they were, invariably resembling each other, and yet renovated altogether, and sparkling with a brand new radiance across the lapse of centuries; in quiet, withdrawn expectation of such visits, which, during innumerable centuries spent in a silent, self-reliant vigil, had never failed to manifest themselves, in the piercing frost of new moon nights — when, from the mountains close by, enshrouded in a maddening, dazzling darkness, a faint, distant call could be heard, as indistinct as mournfully intangible, which curdled the very blood of all men who, at that late hour, cuddled up within the cozyness of warm sheets, their bedroom door double-locked, would happen to be listening to its appalling, gruesome resonance.

So, the shadow of an occult dweller inhabited the small, forgotten, solitary shrine erected in the quiet district of Capolaterra, sacred, in ages past, to St. Felician. And that monument, so utterly peculiar, so evasively unimportant, concealed — amid its carvings wrought with experienced mastery and the rich sculpted decoration that adorned the arched openings facing the corner between Via Umberto I e

Via del Tempietto — a dark and sinister message, which, through the dedication to the bishop whose name had been hallowed by the agony of martyrdom suffered under Emperor Decius' rule, established a cryptic, unfathomable connection with the gloomy potency that reigned within the bosom of Mount Sibyl, the peak which rose at a distance of only a few miles from Norcia.

Again, I considered, with increased attention, the picture of the Tempietto as it appeared on a page of the book I was holding in my hands. The monument, a small and inconsiderable one, presented itself as an unassuming, unadorned building, with a look as demure as unpretentious: its position at a crossroad corner emphasized its reserved, subdued character, being its overall semblance any different from that of a small loggia which protruded, in its own good-mannered and deferential way, from a private house; an impression that was reinforced by the presence of a well-proportioned, unobstrusive cornice, laden with arched shingles, with their red hue typical of old bricks.

On the curved lines of the arched, unglazed windows and along the cornice was a sequence of fanciful carvings; a lacework craftily wrought in stone; a series of cryptic geometrical patterns, flowering blossoms and odd, whimsical creatures, which followed allegorically one another along with the antique instruments of the Passion of Christ: the lance, the nails, the cross, the ladder, the pincers.

A wicked sense of mystery seeped from that building; an acute stench of dankness, and rotten earth that had been resting for long in the foul air of a sealed grave, lying in subterranean stillness, only trodden by loathsome, reddish brown pests, and other invisible creatures of the darkness.

For what obscure and inconspicuous reason had that shrine been erected? To what unvoiced, indecipherable purpose was it intended? What sort of gloomy spell had fallen upon those fourteenth-century architects, so as to urge them to build such arched windows and carve all those puzzling, extravagant emblems, at the very same spot where, many centuries earlier, a small church had stood sacred to the worship of St. Felician?

Yet was that place, that edifice really sacred to Felician, the saint and bishop who introduced Christianity into Norcia? Sure, the tokens of Christ's excruciating and redeeming Passion, wrought in stone, were intended to remind the devotees that Felician had not been

slaughtered as a follower of any wordly, ephemeral principles; instead, he had borne glorious witness, thorough and exhaustive, to the Resurrection, by taking on himself the very same suffering that Our Lord had undergone when he had climbed, as a sacrificed innocent, the holy and ghastly Cross.

Perhaps, Carlo Renzi had perceived that such a monument, so unassumingly humble, so remarkably insignificant with its plain and unostentatious semblance, concealed within itself a much darker quality, far more cryptic than the puzzling emblems which adorned its pillars and the stones skilfully chiselled by able hands. Perhaps, the Small Temple was something totally different; perhaps, that unpretentious building, devoted to an unknown, impenetrable purpose, was more than that.

Could that small shrine — so quiet, so discreetly inconspicuous in its sequestered and unfrequented corner, concealed amid the maze of alleys and passegeways which crossed each other in tangled convolutions all over the town's uppermost district — possibly mark a sort of gateway, the starting point of a spiritual and esoteric route, which, departing from Norcia, might lead the traveller as far as the crowned mount, and the Sibyl? Was that the initial step that the devotee, after reaching Norcia from unknown and far-away lands, had to face, if he had determined to carry out his own mystical climb up to the kingdom of the deity, abiding by the eerie, irrepressible call arising from the myth?

Could it be the very point where the force converged, and was refined and exalted; the geodesic spot where the concentration of powers was achieved, together with the accumulation of the indomitable spiritual resources that were needed to fulfil the most venturesome journey any wayfarer had ever been given the chance to undertake?

Sure enough, the shrine was actually placed at Norcia's easternmost end, not far from the Porta Palatina, the gate through the surrounding walls that would lead the traveller, after crossing the steep ravine of the Capregna valley, overlooking the town, up to the trail heading to Poggio di Croce; and, from there, across Mount Veletta, his steps would tread the track winding its way up to the remote outpost of Castelluccio, following from then on the same course that Guerrino the Wretched himself had taken, towards the barren highlands leading to Mount Sibyl. Thus, that was positively a truly favourable spot,

a most convenient starting point for anyone who had resolved to challenge that inspiring, unwordly route — yet guarded and disreputable as it was — without attracting too much attention.

Aghast, I considered once more the inoffensive likeness of the Tempietto, peaceful and untroubled as it was depicted in the picture. Had that place possibly been the covert, instrumental harbour for all such elusive and unnamed visitors, who — as they arrived in town from far-off countries, whose foreign name would resonate to the listener's ear with an odd, irksome ring — had responded, throughout hundreds of years, to the baleful spell rising from the lost kingdom's subterranean chambers, and had then been seen following the footsteps of Felician, Guerrino, de La Sale and Tannhäuser, along the trails which made their way up the barren and jagged slopes of Mount Sibyl?

Agan, a shiver ran down my spine: to what creature and nameless, hidden potency was that building truly consecrated?

The book about the history of local arts and lore was still open at the page containing a description of the architectural and allegorical features of the Small Temple. Once again, I scrutinized its likeness, and the fine pictures which reproduced artistically its guise in an elegant, old-fashioned black and white print.

My thought wandered over those sheets of paper and the images of the shrine, with no tangibly definite target; I could find neither repose nor relief, in the growing bewilderment that was upsetting my flustered and confused spirit. I sensed that my foolish and extravagant quest, my utterly preposterous investigation, which I had commenced several months earlier, was currently bringing my steps in ominous and unwholesome directions, possibly altogether destructive, from which it was absolutely necessary to divert my shaken soul, my weakened and distressed perception, as it was now growing exceedingly responsive to any sort of strain, owing to a far too close intimacy, being protracted too much in time, with the fanciful and illusory realm of dreams.

Yet I did know that I would never be able to dispel such dusky, mournful clouds, and no place existed on earth where I could find any respite, and comfort, and oblivion, hadn't I first confronted — by drinking up to the last sip the bitter, marshy waters which awaited in stillness and silence at the very end of the gloomy trail I was now trea-

ding — with the fiendish spell that had been working throughout the course of my insane inquiry, though in a disguised semblance across the inscrutable darkness of unknown centuries.

As I turned the pages, my attention was then attracted by a large printed picture which showed the painted frescoes adorning the inner recesses of the small shrine sacred to St. Felician. Under the faint, inadequate light cast by the lamp sitting on the table of my hotel room, those shadowy figures stood out like unreal reveries, lacking any consistency; disembodied spirits, that seemed to resurface from an unfathomed past, as motionless as if they had fallen into an uneasy, never-ending sleep, that endured throughout unbroken ages, during which the stars had been unceasingly revolving in their orbits, until they had occupied again and again, as generations followed unrelentingly one after other, an equal position in the celestial sphere.

I drew my face closer to the book, as I inspected with increased eagerness the blurred and insubstantial shapes that loomed up from the pictures. The frescoes, badly damaged by neglect and exposure to the elements, portrayed, by all appearances, a procession of human figures, standing in upright position; they were perhaps saints, judging from the haloes which surrounded their heads, still partly visible, and bearing faint, elusive vestiges of the old gilt decoration, now almost vanished.

One of the figures, dressed in a woman's robe and indicated in the caption as «St. Barbara with her tower», jumped suddenly and inexplicably to my attention. She was frozen in a fixed attitude, a vain and ethereal semblance as it were, drawn on the rear wall flanking the arched opening that faced Via Umberto I; she held, in her left hand, open and with the palm turned rigidly upwards, an object. Her face stood out indistinctly amid the chips of plaster and the irregularly-shaped stains of mould and dampness, too degraded to be intelligible in that old, faded black and white image; yet her hand, oddly gaunt and elongated, appeared to be well preserved enough, so that it stood out neatly, with its solemn and dignified gesture, against the tarnished and almost faded-out background of the fresco.

And there she was: another saint, a virgin, a maiden delivering her own self, with gelid and inhuman transport, to the excruciating anguish of a sacrificial martyrdom, which had taken place during the early centuries of the Christian Era, lost in a misty distance, was now

appearing before my astonished, awestricken eyes; she came forth with cheerless steps, bursting abruptly into my investigation with pressing, ruthless fury, and demanding — with an urging as imperative as irrevocable — my aid and intercession, as though a silent, unutterable message were hidden between those frescoed fingers, amid those marks of paint and fragments of plaster, which, as they crumbled into grit, just seemed to follow the same doom of corruption and dusty wreckage that had stricken those ancient bodies and limbs after their martyrdom, now rotten and vanished altogether in the secretive and unrelenting decay brought about by Death, a process that had reached its consummation almost two thousand years ago.

With stiffened fingers, I considered again the female semblance, blurred as it was, that emerged from the picture. Indeed, that tower was one of the iconographic attributes of St. Barbara; according to tradition, the early Christian saint, who lived in the third century AD, had been confined by her own father in a bulding of this sort, on account of her conversion to the true faith in Jesus Christ. In this juncture, she had three windows opened in the tower's walls to celebrate the mystery of the Holy Trinity, which she revered with awe. Owing to that, the maiden had subsequently suffered a harrowing martyrdom, «ut omne corpus eius inquinaretur sanguinibus», so that her body should be thoroughly drenched and tainted with her own blood.

I was stricken by a sense of bewildered unease and alarmed giddiness. That maiden, a saint and a virgin, a prophetess attesting to the divine power and guidance; that same gloomy period of the world's history, the age of a savage and uncompromising struggle between the forces of paganism and the new order of the Word of God, which, ground-breaking and utterly irrepressible, was proclaiming at that time the beginning of a new era; that same ruthless and murderous brutality, which craved for blood — «membra vulnere praebui lacerata maiestati Dei» — and mangled the flesh of whoever had attempted to resist a heinous potency, unleashing unremittingly all its might to defend its own survival and rule; everything, everything reminded me of Messalina, the virgin and martyr, who had preceded into death, a hideous and horrifying death, the holy bishop and preacher, Felician of Foligno. Messalina, whose likeness, distorted by popular lore and veiled by the unrelenting lapse of centuries, concealed the ghastly

and blood-curdling features of Cybele, and of her vaticinating oracle, buried in the abysses of a mountain.

Again, I gazed in terror at that picture: the countenance, now blotted out and vanished; the scrawny and hooked hand; and, then, that object, a tower, held by that palm now dripping with mildew, so revolting in its livid, lifeless rigidity.

And, all of a sudden, I understood. In that instant my heart came to a halt, as the eerie and unearthly import of that semblance jumped to my mind with its appalling, overpowering significance.

I couldn't wait any longer. I rushed frantically out of my room, I left the hotel in a hurry, the staff looking in amazement at me; and then I ran, hurling myself amid the throng of tourists who, that late hour in the evening, were still lingering along Corso Sertorio, enjoying the pleasing chill of Norcia's summer nights; I thus proceeded through the silent and now solitary alleys that ascended in the darkness towards the town's upper district; and still up I went, among the secretive, unpretentious streets flanked by stern buildings, sleeping in the shadows; between houses that had been repeatedly smashed down across the centuries by earthquakes, and always rebuilt; up and up, until I got to Capolaterra, and the place where, in past ages, the ancient church dedicated to St. Felician once stood, sacred to the name of the bishop who had dared to challenge the obscure, baleful queenship of the Sibyl; up I went, till I found myself before that odd and retired monument; up, until I got to the Tempietto.

Night had come, the only light being cast by the stars which twinkled with palpitating indifference over the roofs and houses of Via Umberto I. In the deserted street, all was perfect stillness; people were sitting, unaware as they were, between those old walls, enjoying their evening meal; it appeared that no living soul had any intention, that late hour, to set out for the echoing, lifeless alleys of Capolaterra.

The Small Temple was lying just before my eyes, glowing slightly in the thick darkness reigning in the starry night; its sullen arched openings were filled with grim, unwelcoming gloominess. It stood there, inscrutable and soundless.

An icy, irrepressible tremor had seized my whole body. Even so, I had to do that. I had to carry on with my task; I needed to make my attempt to get firsthand confirmation, at close distance, by ascertaining, with my very eyes, what that picture, a faded and blurred black

and white print, was not able to reveal with certainty: that same absolute, conclusive and indisputable certainty which I now needed with desperate and impelling urgency.

I drew nearer to the arched opening on the right side. I had to know for certain. I must inspect that thing, standing right there, at the very spot where it had established its abode several centuries ago; an occult guidance, a token unveiling a truth that lived, in our heedless and ever-rushing world, only in the spirits of those who, from remote lands, had replied to the faint and obscure call which had summoned them, with unwavering and overmastering might, as far as those jagged, sequestered mountains, and towards that city encircled with old stone walls; leading them into the very heart of such a modest and unostentatious district, only inhabited by a rustic progeny of peasants and shepherds; and then up to the very place where, in ages past, rose the small church dedicated to St. Felician, the same place where, in our present day, stood that reserved and unfriendly monument, that guarded within its walls a secret that was to be unveiled to the minds of the few who had been favoured by the myth — like, possibly, Carlo Renzi himself.

Nobody was to be seen. The stillness of the night was only broken by the barking of faraway dogs. I clambered over the front wall upon which the arched openings rested, holding the flashlight I had brought with me from the hotel tight in my hands; then, I jumped, and got into the Tempietto.

And there I was, in the dark, square-shaped hollow between the arched, unglazed windows and the building's rear wall. Drops of sweat were running wildly down the back of my shirt, while my legs were shaking with increasing agitation as seconds passed, so that I was forced to cling frantically, with my quivering hands, to the low parapet which I had just managed to climb over.

My eyes were facing the rear wall, on which the decayed, mouldy plaster was painted with frescoes which portrayed the likeness of saints, with their haloed countenances washed out almost entirely by the action of rain and sun; and there stood the painted image of St. Barbara as well, with her scrawny hand and showing no features at all on her face.

I was aware of her presence, as she was standing there, right in front of me, immersed in darkness. My whole body was trembling. In

the oppressive stillness, I could hear the harsh, gasping sound made by my own breathing — a wheezing noise, as though it were the foul exhalation seeping out from a burial place whose door had been slightly opened a few moments before after centuries of forlorn sleep.

My arm went up; the flashlight was turned on, and its bright and shimmering light cast its radiance onto the gloomy wall. And there she was. And then I knew, with undisputable certainty, that that fresco did not and could not portray the image of St. Barbara, the holy virgin who suffered a savage and excruciating martyrdom in the third century of the Christian Era. Anybody who had proposed the picture's identification with the saint holding the tower in her hand had actually misunderstood the very nature of that fresco, and had thus made — without being aware of it — a gross and almost blatant mistake.

And yet, who ever might have known; who ever would really be able to understand, down to the very core of it, the actual truth? Perhaps I myself had arrived at the point of sensing the ominous and astounding significance of that truth, as disguised under the deceitful guise of the worship of a Christian martyr and saint, only owing to

my disturbed acuteness and my strained, morbid sensitiveness; my soul imbued as it was with a spiritual distress which was developing — on account of my prolonged acquaintance with the mysterious and overpowering beguilement oozing from that legend — into a sort of foolish and voluptuous dizziness, a wild craving for annihilation, which had brought my steps, in the stillness of the night bespeckled with silent, uncaring stars, up to that sullen and cheerless monument, in which I now stood to carry out a foolhardy and utterly insane task.

The beam of my torch, cutting through the darkness, cast a brilliant light on the crumbling plaster, which had been painted over with frescoes several centuries earlier. Possibly, I found myself considering in my soul, I was standing on the very spot where at the close of the eighteenth century the young Carlo Renzi — after having made his entrance into the small forlorn edifice, by clambering over the walled parapet in the front, for fun or playful challenge, or even as a childish prank contrived by unschooled kids in rags, looking for creepy adventures and hidden treasures — had happened to behold, for the first time in his life, that queer, eerie image, which the Benedictine monks maintained portrayed the blessed virgin Barbara, even though all the boys in town were perfectly acquainted with her haggard, scrawny and somewhat uncanny semblance: a figure that was so oddly unfit to stand for the good martyred woman of whom the priests used to recite the antique tale during the lessons of Christian doctrine.

Perhaps Renzi, a teenager at the time, had experienced the same feelings that now, in the clammy gloominess, in the night air imbued with dank, mouldy whiffs, I myself was sensing as well, as I stared at the frescoed image, under the flickering light cast by the torch I was clutching with my quivering hand.

The lines of the fresco, stark and almost primitive, seemed to attest to the fact that the work was painted following the marks left by far older brushstrokes: cryptic, forgotten portraits, whose stern and unadorned drawing style recalled long-gone ages, lost amid the mists of time, when the rule of Rome had not yet established itself by the course of the great river that would accompany its glorious rise, ripe splendour, and fall.

The likeness of the saint, a body with no head — beheaded by the rages of centuries and weather — was standing just in front of me, in the secluded space of the small shrine, only a few inches away from

my eyes. The feeling I was experiencing was horrifying; a choking, unutterable anguish grasped tightly at my throat, stifling my breath, clutching my stiffened limbs, which appeared now to be utterly unable to respond to my declining, almost vanishing volition, as the latter attempted pointlessly to hold back the tremor that shook frantically my whole body.

I gazed in dread at that baleful, vicious semblance. Where her head should have been, only decayed plaster was visible, turned into fragments and still blotted with the faded, incoherent remnants of paint intermingled with mildew stains. Clearly, in the course of the historical repair funded by Renzi and carried out after his demise, the full restoration of such an extended area of frescoed wall could not be achieved, so that it was certainly assumed that the representation of the head's features was lost forever; nobody would ever see again her face, with its undoubtedly sinister and loathsome likeness, too heavily damaged by the merciless, consuming potency of rain and sun to envisage its potential recovery. On the other hand, I thought as I was immersed in the darkness, the flashlight casting its wandering beam on the chapped and dilapidated wall, maybe it had been much better that things had taken that turn, with nature proving itself — as always — to be smarter and positively more cautious than the foolishly unwary spirit of men.

A sense of horror and cruel wickedness seeped from the tainted plaster; a reek of death seemed to ooze from that relic of coloured paint, which once had marked, by outlining her outrageous features, the ghastly countenance of that withered, timeworn saint.

«Vultus tuus perspexi deformis, turrigera mater, membra vulnere praebui lacerata maiestati divinae».

I could not bear any longer the blind, fiendish stare, devoid of any trace of soul, that seemed to protrude from that section of the rear wall. So I turned my eyes away, and directed the beam of my flashlight towards the neck, the shoulders and the torso of that frescoed image. Large portions of painted plaster were missing, wiped out from the surface of the masonry by the fury of the elements, despite the restoration work that Renzi had commissioned over a hundred and fifty years earlier.

Nonetheless, her scrawny, elongated arm still emerged neatly amid the blotches of old detached mortar; and her hand, with its

gaunt and hooked appearance, actually held, in its palm turned upwards, the contour of a tower: a sort of turreted shape, outlined with delicate and meticulous care, definitely to be ascribed to the nineteenth-century restoration funded by Renzi.

My heart leaped frantically in my chest, as if it were reacting to a savage, abrupt discharge of energy, pulsing wildly and offensively through my body; my eyes ran to that elusive likeness, so full of inexplicable suggestion, so stunningly familiar, and whose printed picture, reproduced in black and white within the book on the history of local lore which lay in my hotel room, had not been able to convey the eerie spell, the subtle, naughty fascination, as I could now sense, in the fullness of its compelling vigour, standing there in that gloomy and deserted place, my face caressed by the damp, delicate whiffs of the night breeze which crept in through the high arched openings, only a few inches away from that gaunt, scraggy hand and that obscure object, which, at last, I was about to inspect from a very short distance, so as to quench my insuppressible thirst, an overpowering craving that had taken possession of the innermost depths of my soul.

And the truth I had craved for so acutely; that undisputable evidence, an ultimate, conclusive confirmation of an implausible surmise, a ludicrous conjecture which had darted through my mind as I considered, in my hotel room, the picture of the frescoes on the Tempietto's rear wall; that evidence, that confirmation was now there, before my very eyes, under the quivering light cast by my torch, in all its appalling, horrifying — though insanely amazing — reality.

Because that object — presented with mournful and malignant readiness by a lean, emaciated hand, with its gaunt and elongated fingers — was not a tower at all; that object, with its uncannily familiar look, was a mountain, a ragged and precipitous cliff, with its perfectly drawn likeness, and full of details which the painter's brush had intended to put down with meticulous and almost academic accuracy: the desolate slopes which ascended by a steep rise towards the bleak ridges outlined in the highlands; the jagged, dismal crests, that loomed on both sides over formidable ravines, overhanging the invisible gorges underneath; the threadlike mark of a trail, that ran daringly along such crests, as if suspended between the sky and the broken cliffs of sheer rock; and, finally, the barren crown of stone, a regal dia-

dem carved into the towering, mournful mountain-top, standing out ominously against the fresco's murky and dilapidated background.

Thus, it was Mount Sibyl that that outstretched hand offered to the wayfarer coming from foreign lands and distant kingdoms; it was the crowned mountain, sacred to the priestess of Cybele, that the semblance portrayed on the fresco to be found on the rear wall of the Small Temple in Norcia was handing out, as a vicious and forbidding endowment, to the visitor who, carrying out his secretive pilgrimage, had answered the commanding subterranean call raised by the myth; that same semblance — Barbara, Messalina, Sibyl — who lay in wait for such visitors, with unfaltering hunger, immersed in her watchful, vigilant sleep, in her abode made of stone lying within the hidden womb of the Apennines.

I presently realized everything, with fascinated horror. Everything — under the flickering, wavering beam of my flashlight, before that mysterious, headless likeness, bearing no face at all, and facing that mountain casting its wicked spell arising from a divine presence

— had now taken on a clear and utterly manifest significance, as glaring as incontrovertible. It was a ghastly and amazing connection, which linked, by a single thread that crossed the unrelenting chasms of time, the pre-Roman cults devoted to the Great Mother; the excruciating martyrdom of St. Felician; the construction of a small church dedicated to the bishop and preacher, which would later become a centre of worship sacred to his savage and inhuman murderer; the endless ranks of visitors, lured for centuries to that place by the faint, almost inaudible summons raised by the ghost who inhabited in secrecy the depths of the mountains; that minor, unpretentious shrine, with its restrained and unassuming character, a landing point amid the ancient walls of the town of Norcia, utterly heedless and unsuspecting; and, at the same time, an occult, esoteric starting post for the trail heading towards the barren crests which led up to the dark cavern of the Sibyl.

And now I could also understand, with a sudden and dazzling intuition, the reason why Carlo Renzi — who, since his early youth, had certainly perceived what the hidden, unspoken meaning of the Tempietto was, together with the ominous purpose concealed under those frescoed characters, veiled amid the remnants of old, washed-out colours, with their primitive and unadorned lines drawn on crumbling, decaying plaster — why Renzi had resolved to preserve the memory of those simulacra, ghostly and wicked likenesses as they were, by providing, after he had passed away, for their careful restoration and revamping and conservation, lest they vanished forever into full oblivion owing to rain and sun; so that the future visitors to come, in response to the fated and imperative call raised by the Sibyl, might be directed to the proper trail towards that enchanted and bewildering mountain, just like the many wayfarers who had preceded them along the same path across the unrelenting progress of the centuries.

Yet I still needed a final confirmation; I longed for crucial, conclusive evidence that might set the seal, once and for all, on what I had hardly discerned, when I was still enjoying the cozy protection of the cheerful, comforting walls of my hotel room, in the snapshot printed within the book on the history of local lore and traditions.

As I quivered, gently touched by the subdued, murmuring whisper of the icy breeze which, creeping into the shrine through the dark

unglazed openings, betokened the coming of the dawn, I turned my flashlight up again, and directed its bright, radiant beam onto the mountain's painted image.

And right up there, beyond the barren crown of rock, in the cliff's uppermost region, very close to the mountain-top, there was the entrance to the cave: the Sibyl's dark and dismal cavern, standing on the side of the peak facing south, sketched by the painter with a few coarse lines, drawn with individual strokes, quick and resolute, of the paintbrush, which outlined its likeness as it was in antiquity; an unfathomable, vertiginous hollow, the way it had presented itself to the visitors for hundreds and hundreds of years, prior to the subsequent demolitions and ruinous collapse that had altered its appearance forever and beyond repair.

I could not turn my gaze away from the grim and entrancing image of that cavern; my eyes were running along each brushstroke, each single trace of coloured paint: the jambs of the entrance passageway, carved in the peak's hard grey limestone; the unbearable, stifling darkness of the inner chamber, which was hardly visible beyond the entrance hollow; a faint, glowing radiance, lightly drafted with a soft touch of colour, that seemed to ooze out from the innermost recesses of the cave.

An acute and unutterable dread began to overwhelm my soul, while the sky started gently to brighten, and the night faded gradually away, as a presage — which nature conceived within its very essence — of the coming, in the celestial sphere above, of the effulgent, most revered star of Light.

By a frenzied, resolute exertion of the will, I urged myself to shift my eyes to the other side of that frescoed semblance, where the slopes of the crowned mountain faced north: it was the precipitous versant, which fell abruptly for thousands of feet down to the grisly and appalling gorge of the Infernaccio, where the river Tenna gurgled, unseen in the distance, among inaccessible cliffs of perpendicular rock.

Right there, on the steep, barren slope of Mount Sibyl, just beneath the crown of stone that encircled the ill-omened peak on all sides, a few thin and almost unnoticeable brushstrokes were to be seen, sketched with quick and crafty cleverness in the same grey colour as already used by the unknown artist to trace the entrance to the famed and heinous cavern.

It was the access to a cave.

So all the clues were now put back together; each piece of evidence now joined flawlessly with one another: Carlo Renzi had uncovered the second entrance to the Sibyl's Cave.

CHAPTER 19
THE CALL OF CYBELE

THE FLEETING DAY goes by, and the sun already turns its blazing face towards the far horizon, as it declines over the shadowy mountains, covered with woods and immersed in the sleepy stillness of the sweet afternoon hour. It goes down on the quiet, sunny slopes, clothed in the green radiance of the grassland; and over each beloved hill, so dear to the heart on account of a lifelong intimacy, with their familiar and amicable outline, which blocks out the view of the far-off lands — flooded with golden, hazy sunlight — stretching across the plain up to the bordering territories, where the language seems to resound with a harsh, foreign ring. The sun goes down on the fertile countryside, too, overwhelmed by the lustruous shine of the wheat and still echoing with the clanking of the scythes, which — throughout the day, with their rhythmical, mesmerising cadence, and under the fiery and merciless rule of the glowing star — had been severing the thin, quivering stalks, so as to celebrate the hallowed and perennial ritual of harvesting.

And the way a peasant comes back to his rustic abode made of stones, with its welcoming, refreshing walls, as he leaves behind the fields, scorched by the sun, and the generous, plentiful land — bringer of life and mother to the children of men; exhausted by the wearing labour accomplished amid the harvested crop, his face covered with the parched dust swept away by the wind into the glazing, flaming air; and withal, in his soul, contented with the work he has been able to carry out so far, and gratified by the sight of the many sheaves made ready; looking forward in anticipation to a sweet homely rest amid his children's joyful eyes and his spouse's loving hands; feeling happy for having secured, by the offering of his manly exertion, the sustenance for the long winter months, when his family would sit by the stark and frugal table, while the frosty snow whirled and eddied outside the house — and yet oppressed in his soul by grave concerns, his mind turning again and again to those ears still to be reaped, and the many rustic duties still to be completed, and that very portion of the field still left untouched; with the wheat now lying defenceless under the onrush of the wind and the heinous hail; and with his experienced and attentive eye questioning with anxiety the fiery clouds at sunset, foreshadowing possibly the coming of the rain, or perhaps the ominous storm; cares and worries that would make his sleep uneasy and his night grievous, as he would be longing for the first signs of the coming dawn; his senses fully alert as he would listen to the voices of the night travelling across the air, lest they whispered, with a sneering and sinister pitch of their own, a shrill omen of doom — just like that peasant, so did I feel, numb and exhausted, my spirit consumed and almost frozen following that baleful and loathsome encounter; ever since that sleepless night, spent within the mournful arched hollows of the Tempietto at Capolaterra, before that semblance of a woman, a faceless abomination whose cadaverous hand held the ghastly and fateful emblem of Mount Sibyl.

I too feared, like the peasant — who saw the dark rolling clouds getting closer and closer, and sensed the chill, abrupt gusts of wind, signalling that the first rain showers were moving in — the offspring of a troubled, dismayed suspension, that often betokens future liveliness and impending action: a dreaded, most unwanted action, which I had more than once envisaged — and, at times, even longed for — as occurring solely in the fanciful realm of dreams; yet never had I dared

to conceive such unwholesome reveries as an actually feasible prospect, unless in the raving madness and foolish designs of a soul that intended to cast itself irrevocably into the pits of derangement and insanity.

Nonetheless, I experienced at the same time a sense of appeased and unconcerned idleness, a sort of untroubled fullness, a feeling of unexpected, negligent dislike. That night spent in the shrine, along with creepy, fiendish wraiths, resurfacing from long-gone ages whose memory was to be considered as lost amid the abysmal gulfs of time and oblivion, had truly represented the culmination, the outermost and insuperable edge, and the ultimate rewarding achievement of my weird and venturesome inquiry: an investigation on the Apennine Sibyl that was manifestly trivial, and oddly outmoded; a search for the elusive, fascinating clues left by a legend amid the pages of books talking about history, literature and poetry; a quest into which I had thrown myself headlong, with foolhardy haste, and all the doggedness I could unleash; a hunt that had taken up my whole life for several months, draining all my vigour and robbing my soul of any remaining energies.

And the conclusion I had got to was definitely amazing: by following the hardly perceptible footsteps left by Carlo Renzi, a trader and philanthropist from Norcia, who lived in the first half of the nineteenth century, I had ascertained that the reserved, unassuming monument known as the Tempietto, or Small Temple, sitting inside Norcia's walled ramparts in the town's easternmost district, was an ancient centre of worship dedicated to Felician, a third-century bishop and preacher, whose martyrdom was connected, with ties as solid as undisputable, to the name of the prophetess sacred to Cybele, who ruled that land from the unexplored darkness which lurked within the depths of the mountains.

And among the dilapidated frescoes painted on the walls of that minor bulding, apparently insignificant as it were, from which, however, the occult and secretive potency of the Sibyl had beamed as a sort of mystical beacon; amid the images, mostly vanished, which were to be found there, at the very point from where the devotees — after reaching St. Benedict's town following the call raised by the priestess who attended to the cult of the Great Mother — undertook their baleful journey towards the crowned mount and the ghastly cavern, its

entrance sealed for centuries; among those likenesses and semblances, the nameless figure of a woman, with no face nor features, a hallowed painting of an early Christian virgin, or rather the blood-curdling wraith of the vaticinating prophetess of the heathens, offered in her scrawny hand the ultimate revelation, the unearthly disclosure of the occult trail which would lead the traveller up to the actual, tangible presence of the Apennine Sibyl.

Yet that traveller would never be able to attain the obscure chambers of the weird underground kingdom, nor would he ever set his horror-stricken eyes on those so fiendish and lethal as the Sibyl's, by passing through the entrance hollow leading into the illustrious cave, whose fame had gone as fas as the remotest regions of northern Europe: instead, he would find his way into the subterranean realm by sneaking through an occult passageway, concealed among the sheer ravine overhanging the gorge of the river Tenna, amid the hideous, precipitous cliffs of the Gole dell'Infernaccio.

That was the charming, luring message that such a beheaded woman, holding in her hand the wicked and bewitching likeness of the mountain sacred to Cybele, the Goddess, presented to the enthralled wayfarer, inebriated by a luscious sense of anticipation — now eagerly and increasingly furious — of the final, deadly encounter with the deity.

I could feel the echoing, summoning yells swell relentlessly within my soul; they were increasingly taking on a wild resonance, and loudness, until they turned themselves into a savage and ruthless clangour, like the beat of a frantically compulsive dance, accompanied by the dissonant, jarring noise of the cymbals — the «cymbala rauca» — shaken by the devotees seized by the insane frenzy of a vicious, orgiastic feast.

I knew that the time had now come. I knew that such a raving call was intended for me too — «convocat aeternos ad sua festa deos; convocat et satyros et, rustica numina, nymphas», she summons the immortal gods and satyrs and nymphs to her revelling feast — so that I would be trying in vain to postpone that encounter any longer, in an attempt to elude or delay the fulfilment of my doom, by putting forward new pleas and additional excuses, and lingering still over reasons and apologies which would only make up a manifest collection

of cowardly contrivances aimed at evading — I now realized with agonizing certainty — what could not be put off any longer.

And yet, I was also painfully aware that I would not answer that call, and yield to the cruel and inhuman spell arising from those summons, if I had not endeavoured to delay for some time more the eerie, appalling hour of that encounter, the ill-omened time of that hideous meeting — which I now sensed was fated and unavoidable.

I was actually engrossed in this sort of thoughts, as I drove my car musingly along the gentle, peaceful slopes of the sunny hills, covered with grass, lying south of Perugia, between the broad valley of the river Tiber and the course of the creek Genna. It was there that a friend of mine resided, an expert in geologic research and a learned naturalist, with his charming house sitting on a hilltop flooded with sunlight, together with his kind and accommodating family. I turned up unexpectedly in their lives, as if I were a small helpless bird that had fallen from its nest, looking for shelter and relief, before the mangling claws snatched it and the shadow fell forever on its tiny life.

I needed to know what was awaiting me down there, lurking in darkness; I wanted to understand what unfathomable depths and greedy, bottomless abysses shivered with anticipation for my imminent coming; what winding galleries and dreadful labyrinths writhed, dismal and dreary, beneath those ominous, unexplored mountains; what mighty chasms, echoing with the roaring noise of the gelid subterranean waters, opened their jaws to greet the piercing, awe-stricken yell of those who had ventured along the slippery, treacherous trails carved in the mountain's stone by the century-old streamlets trickling from invisible underground springs.

And, sitting in his living room, so cozy and welcoming, my friend described to me the true nature of the titanic, primeval energies which had heaved, from the ancient seabed, such huge mountains, shaping the colossal, towering fastnesses of the Sibylline Range.

He showed me how such imposing ridges rested on hidden foundations, concealed within the womb of the earth; a solid, gigantic layer made of limestone, several hundred feet deep, which was created during the Upper Triassic, more than two hundred million years ago, when the sea had broken into the core of the ancient land mass that still joined the territories, later to undergo the rifting and partition, of Europe and Africa. He explained to me how on that layer —

forged in the course of long-forgotten ages and across uncounted, endless cycles of life and death of innumerable marine creatures, living in myriads within the waters of that vanished ocean — subsequently worked the blind, tremendous forces exerting their thrust on the Earth's crust, so as to dislocate and dismember the old seabed. From its mangled pieces, during the Jurassic period, some one hundred and fifty million years ago, there arose gigantic masses of limestone, whose immense volumes were lifted, and then inclined and rotated, and their massive frames were contorted, so that huge lowlands were created, soon submerged by the sea waters, whose furious waves still enshrouded those towering cliffs of stone.

And, finally, he presented to my sight the superhuman potencies whose abode was the unknown depths of the earth: ten million years ago, during the Miocene, they awakened abruptly from their deep, unquiet sleep, and hurled up the colossal peaks of the Sibilline Range beyond the turbulent face of the sea, crushing the imposing fastnesses and building up, at last, the mountainous chain in the form which is known today, with its ludicrously arched shape, as it would be subsequently and finally wrought during the Pleistocene convulsions which occurred two million years ago.

And such astounding, formidable events were impressed with indelible marks in the strata of sedimented rock — carnelian, red ammonite, jasper limestone, white limestone, marlstone, red limestone, grey

and ashen limestone — succeeding one after another along the versants made of emerging minerals, accumulated in long broken layers, interspersed with twisted faults, silent witnesses to the prodigious energies capable of bending the rock, by warping and stretching it as if it were a soft, yielding and elastic material. And I could perceive that every stratum, each single layer, only a few inches thick, narrated a tale which spanned more than one hundred centuries, and hinted at an unknown, utterly forgotten age which had lasted in excess of ten thousand years, corresponding to a succession of four hundred generations of human lives, in the course of a time when no man had yet left any footmark impressed on the curved surface, still wild and deserted, of our planet.

And he told me, moreover, of the enchanted Plains of Castelluccio: the Great Plain, the Small Plain, the Cànatra Valley, the Lost Plateau; a dreamlike tableland, a sort of gigantic step that had been thrust, under the unremitting pressure exerted by the hectic and inexorable tectonic compressions, beneath the mountainous ridges that encircled Norcia and the direful chain whose peaks bore the names of Vettore and Sibyl. He explained to me that such a vast expanse of grassland, suspended amid the rolling clouds which travelled fast across the sky, swept by northerly winds — a soft, spongelike terrain when trodden upon, made of fertile earth drenched with water; a basin full to the brim with peaty sediments, resulting from the decay of countless generations of long-vanished plants — concealed within itself a cryptic, baffling secret.

And he described the weird mystery of rainwater. As a matter of fact, rain used to fall copiously on the Castelluccio meadows and the surrounding Plains; in addition to that, the plateau was encircled by lofty mountains on all sides; and yet, the grassland did not turn into a vast lake, only owing to the presence of a huge chasm, the rocky hollow called the Inghiottitoio, or the Swallower, situated at the southernmost end of the Plains. To such a chasm, the great natural drainage channels named «Mèrgani» — carved in the spongy ground and the underlying layer of sedimented limestone — conveyed the many billion gallons of water that were poured each year over the grassy expanse, in the form of rain. And he explained to me that such an immense, titanic quantity of rainwater vanished altogether into the unfathomable bowels of the deep foundations of the Sibilline Range, and

never did it resurface amid the scanty, ungenerous springs which, in the bordering territories of Norcia and the valley of the river Tronto, gushed with criystal-clear springs, though utterly inadequate to allow for the astounding volume of precious liquid drained into the abysses of the earth withouth giving any further sign of itself. And he told me of the attempt that Lippi-Boncambi, the illustrious geologist from Perugia, had made to assess the hidden route of the waters, by spilling an ever increasing quantity of fluorescein into the Swallower's bottomless cleft; however, the daring experiment had not yielded the result that the talented scientist had intended to achieve, as not the slightest trace of the dyeing substance was ever to be retrieved in the spring waters gushing in the contiguous valleys.

And that was the indisputable evidence, a dark and elusive omen, that beneath the Plains, in the underground limestone, concealed by the sediments of vegetal origin that for thousands of years had filled up the gigantic step; underneath the mountains which enclosed the plateau on its eastern side — Mount Vettore, Mount Argentella, the cliff of Palazzo Borghese, Mount Porche, Vallelunga's Peak and the Sibyl's turreted mountain-top — the invisible work carried out by the subterranean waters had dug vast unknown hollows and caverns and tunnels, which accommodated and stocked prodigious volumes of clear liquid, stored in icy underground lakes. And perhaps the earthquakes to come will set such waters free from their unseen basins, by creating new resurfacing springs and allowing for the drainage of the hidden reservoirs in the course of interminable ages, much longer than any human lives, spanning across periods of time as long as hundreds of thousands of years.

And, doubtless, as my friend maintained, that cavern too, the Sibyl's gloomy and inaccessible cave, placed on the summit of the hallowed and crowned mount, was a gateway to the dreadful hollows that the underground waters had carved, with a silent and secretive work of their own, into the strata made of limestone on the rocky mountain-top; and such hollows would go down, with tangled, twisty meanders, towards the mount's hidden core, connecting eventually with the natural subterranean passageways — that no human eye had ever beheld — buried under the very foundations of solid limestone which supported the Plains of Castelluccio overhead: there, waters lay in stillness, in the perennial darkness of the titanic chambers which, for

millions of years, had rested in secrecy, beneath the layer of peaty sediments that had accumulated with the gradual disappearance of the ancient forests.

And who ever might tell what had actually established its abode, during the lapse — totally unknown to men — of primeval and impenetrable ages, amid the silent, imposing walls of those galleries and caves? Who might ever know what appalling, heinous actuality was concealed under the nasty, loathsome and abominable name conferred to the Sibyl of the Apennines?

When I took my leave from the quiet, hospitable house, bathed in the hilltop's sunlight, that already betokened the coming sunset, my friend held me tight, putting his hands on my shoulders, as he smiled at me in the rapidly declining light. He said nothing about a second entrance to the cavern; sure enough, it was possible that a further entryway might be disclosed to the brave and well-advised wayfarer who had determined to venture as far as the unexplored recesses of that famous and sinister cave; nonetheless, only by climbing up to the mountain-top, and carrying out an attentive search amid the broken rocks, would he be able to check in person whether that passageway existed solely in the kingdom of legends, in the fairy realm of dreams; or, instead, there was an actual chance of locating a second entrance, through which it would be possible to break one's way into the darkness and through the abysmal depths of the unknown.

As I drove my car heading back to Norcia, an absolute and crystal-clear certainty began to flood my whole frame: my quest, my foolish, preposterous and gorgeously venturesome investigation, carried out in the course of several months of wondrous, inconsiderate pursuit of the truth, with its weird and unwholesome offshoots — which had led my steps from Norcia to Rome, then to Norcia again, and subsequently up to the Sibyl's mountain-top, and later on to Perugia, and up to my present return to Norcia — was now getting, at last, to its final conclusion.

And another certainty, this time utterly eerie and blood-curdling, was swelling with raging fury in my mind, aghast and awe-stricken as it were: I was scared to the very bottom of my soul.

I did not want to get back up there. I feared to climb that mount again. For now I wasn't bedazzled anymore by the blinding gleam of ignorance, the dull shadow cast from comforting and unsuspicious

benightedness. I had now been given the unsettling awareness of the enlightened, an astonishing and horrifying wisdom which turned into an unsafe hazard my clambering back towards that cliff, in a foolish attempt to force my way into such subterranean, inviolable obscurity, by making use of the amazing understanding I had come across as to the possible, certifiable existence, in actual reality, of a second entry-way.

I feared I was going to find a final and conclusive answer, which would prove ghastly and unbearable; I feared I was close to ascertaining, with my very eyes, the concrete actuality of what should not have been allowed, in our real world, to have either substance or quarter, an abode where she had been permitted to establish — in a past age perhaps as distant in time as many millions of years — her foul dwelling.

I feared I was about to discover, in actual, tangible reality, the second entrance to the cave. I feared there was no room left at all for further dodging, nor any chance to put forward brand new excuses with a view to delaying, at least for some additional time, my encounter with the overwhelming, awe-striking potency of the myth.

Nothing could have helped me to elude, once more, the Sibyl's peremptory and commanding summons. Hence, I would have climbed that mount, and faced, at last, my descent into the abyss.

CHAPTER 20
THE VISION OF THE SIBYL

THE MUFFLED THUMP of my footsteps treading on the chips of stone echoed grimly in the air imbued with sharp, dank scents. The trail, hidden from view due to the glowing mist made of frosty vapours which ascended the mountain-side in drifting swirls, apparently went up only for an unreasonably short stretch, as it seemed to die away into the radiant whiteness of the fog, only a few feet away from the marks I was stamping on the wet ground, flanked by sods of dripping grass, drenched with water. At every crackling noise made by my boots on the gravel, it was as if the path were reaching its final, furthermost and conclusive termination — by ending up, after a few steps from where I walked, in the dazzling void suspended between the barren ridges of the mount and the dull, milky sky, flooded with the light cast by a dim and ailing sun, hiding itself above a shroud of thin haze; or, possibly, by opening abruptly onto the bewildering and unexpected peacefulness of the abyss, which receives the shapes of human bodies in the resplendent effulgence of its mist, with its beguiling and accommodating ashen jaws.

I was panting hard, as I climbed the steep versant of Mount Sibyl, pressed by the icy gusts of fog, which, dashing frenziedly up the rocky ravines, ascended rapidly until they reached the mountain-tops veiled with clouds. Without fail, the fog was carrying with the wind,

beyond the summit's bleak and desolate cliffs, the droll news of my coming, that had long been expected with wicked lust.

I moved along frantically, with furious and feverish excitement, scrambling up the stones that the thin, unrelenting drizzle had rendered slippery, with liquid streamlets, slick and treacherous, that hindered my progression on the track now sodden with mud.

The time available to me was presently over. The fiendish call was now surging with frenzied and inexhaustible ardour; the piercing, ghastly summons, and the savage clashing yells that rose from those heinous overhanging rocks could not be endured by human ear. As a spike that had been driven into the whitish osseous fabric of my skull, the Sibyl's inhuman and commanding voice was breaking its way through the vulnerable, quivering cavities of my eyes, and was overwhelming my brain with outrageous, unholy screams: I was requested to attend the goddess' wicked feast, amid the ranting mirth of unknown creatures with their grotesque, abominable faces.

A wild and irrepressible dread was now swelling in my soul, gnawing at the soft, enervated flesh of my drained heart; grasping the bowels inside my belly with a ruthless and unwavering hand, and twisting the swollen, throbbing mass of my tongue into my hardened throat, so as to choke within my engulfed lungs any desperate attempt to gasp for air.

I climbed, heedless of any other feeling but gushing, overpowering fear; I was urged by that submerging and imperative call, which pressed my steps into a crazed rush, forcing my body to dash itself up the steep and uneven slope, headed to that dreadful, unimaginable, blood-curdling encounter; yet fancied for so long, and anticipated several times during many endless nights spent in half-sleep, as I prepared myself for such a meeting with meticulous care and an unhealthy sense of morbid expectation, tasting beforehand its ominous flavour of insanity and death.

Blinded, bewildered, enshrouded in the gelid, diaphanous luminosity which shone all around, as an ethereal, unearthly glow, which concealed from view the airy trails running along the ridges and flanking the atrocious ravines — falling abruptly, only a few steps away from my boots, for hundreds and hundreds of feet, down to wooded gorges only inhabited by icy, invisible running waters — I plodded and faltered along in the light, almost flimsy rain, my head bent

down, my face ashen white, catching every glimpse of the track made insubstantial by the mist, amid the eddying vapours that swirled across the line of the crest, beaten by harsh winds and stormed fiercely by the rolling clouds.

As I trudged through the muzzy, subdued radiance, I eventually got to a lofty wall of rock, sheer and imposing, on which I rested both my hands, and then, with a weary, quivering gesture, my very forehead, so that I could sense its uneven coarseness and cold, malignant dankness. It was the looming, mournful wall which made up the Sibyl's crown, easily recognised owing to the stretch of rope secured to the rock by means of a few pitons; its uppermost end seemed to vanish amid the milky, heavenly refulgence of the air embued with cloudy mists.

That savage, vicious invocation had now turned into an earnest plea, a fervent and doleful entreaty, uttered in tones of forlorn affliction, haphazardly interspersed with vile stammered words and garbled warnings about excruciating punishments that would be imposed on me in the event I did not present myself at the grievous encounter that had been set for me since time immemorial. Awe-striken and crushed by the fiendish bellow raised by the deity, which was almost bursting my eardrums, I grasped the rope like a madman and scrambled up the rocky wall with frantic haste, until I attained the grassy plateau set on the upper side of the mountain's crown.

The summit of Mount Sibyl was dominated by the fog; the clouds, as they rolled unrestrained across the precipitous voids that gaped amid the barren, majestic peaks of the surrounding mountains, were breaking onto the mountain-top's cliff with resentful and unforgiving anger, hurling themselves against the bleak expanse and lashing the scanty herbage that clung, with forlorn and unprotesting stubbornness, to the rocks of the crest.

Hazy whirling shadows appeared to flock that deserted and suspended region, swept over by the weather's tumultuous rage; they rushed from one side of the mountain-top to the other, with a quick swirling motion, as though all the wicked creatures of the air, the eerie and unholy inhabitants of the upper sky had also convened at the sinister cavern of the Sibyl, in eager expectation of the hallowed and abominable feast over which the divine prophetess would soon preside, with her ruthless and heinous hand.

Dazed and befuddled by the frosty whip of wind and rain, I headed for the culminating slope, towards the side of the peak facing north, skirting the hollow full of rubble, scaffolding tubes and shattered wooden beams that once had been the main entrance to the Sibyl's cave.

As I walked by those broken boulders and battered, crunched stones, overwhelmed by the frantic fury of the highland's raving and deafening gale, I stood for a moment, and looked at that ancient entranceway, now permanently and irrevocably sealed. That was the very place from which — ever since long-gone, forgotten ages, living no longer in the soul of men, and lost to the world, like the waters that leap from a rocky ledge overlooking an abyss, and disappear into the damp shadow of a deep gorge, with its towering walls of stone — an odd and inexplicable spiritual power had cast its spell as far as remote countries and foreign, far-off lands; a call that had lured to that cavern uncounted men in search of an occult, elusive truth, hidden within the unexplored womb of the earth, and sheltered in the twisted convolutions of the rock, beaten and moulded by the wrath of earthquakes, and crushed by the godlike thrust exerted by the same primeval forces that had hurled upwards the colossal fastnesses of the Sibilline Range.

Yet my quest was for another entrance; a different access, a secret and veiled one, quite distinct from the famed and celebrated entryway that, throughout the centuries, had been repeatedly and savagely disfigured, until it had suffered total destruction by the explosives of such dreamers and adventurers and treasure hunters, who — willing to do anything not to see their dream vanish irreparably into thin air, and fearing they might be compelled to renounce the illusory deliverance provided by the myth — had resolved to blow up that dream, that fairy tale, smashing down the remnants of the entrance hollow to the amazing subterranean realm.

The call, with its wild and inhuman yell which was now overpowering the raging outcry of wind and rain, was not coming from that heap of shattered stones anymore, forsaken as they were on the grassy and rocky soil of the mountain-top; it now rose — that mournful, ominous plea — from the side of the peak facing north and the ghastly chasm which overhung the horrifying abyss of the Gole dell'Infernaccio; it came from the very spot, treacherously suspended over the precipitous, dreadful and inaccessible cliffs, that the featureless semblan-

ce, painted on the inner wall of the Small Temple at Norcia, had pointed her gaunt and emaciated hand at, marking with accuracy its actual position on the mount's frescoed image.

Hence I attained the Sibyl's topomost crest, crossed the ridge, and began to walk down the slope on the cliff's northern face, until I got to the upper boundary of the mountain's rocky crown — of remarkable height on that northerly side — and stopped on the brink of the ravine, which plunged with an appalling and almost hideous leap to the bottom of the gorge, where the icy waters of the river Tenna murmured in the distance.

Again, I was scared to death, as the gusts of damp cold wind grew wilder and wilder, in the declining light of the late afternoon. Now the ravine opened before my eyes as an abysmal pit, immersed in deep shadow: initially, the precipitous cliff went down almost perpendicularly, with a jump into the void in excess of one hundred and fifty feet, the surrounding rocks marked by the strata of limestone exposed by uncounted centuries of erosion; then, the mount's steep versant followed, an abyss that glided breathtakingly and overwhelmingly down, across turfy, uneven slopes with an amazingly vertiginous incline, and through slanting grasslands wondrously suspended in the echoing nothingness, where no foot of man had ever impressed its mark since the very dawn of the world — other than a sign of an appalling transit that could only have been thoroughly fleeting, and definitely lethal.

The ghastly entreaty, the undendurable summons, uttered now by several voices, with a shrill and discordant pitch of theirs, hurled in the wind as if they were baleful yells cast into the abyss by some unnamed, loathsome dwellers of the cliffs, were presently rising from the imposing foundation of the Sibyl's crown, at the point where it joined the sloping versant of the mount, which then started its precipitous, dizzying descent to the gloomy depths of the valley.

That mournful, subterranean call had now turned into an imperative appeal, urged by the cadenced, mesmerizing throbbing of the cymbals being shaken by the devotees, summoning the deities of the creeks and crags and woods to a revelling feast, while in the underground hollows the ancient altars, carved into the bedrock of the mountains, were made ready.

It was the faceless semblance who directed my steps, which were now faltering owing to sheer dread, and mounting darkness; it was the beheaded likeness who showed me, with her scrawny, elongated fingers, the way that the mountain itself had wrought so that the wayfarers, enlightened by the myth's divine potency, might attend the eerie and nasty gathering called by the Sibyl with frantic, murderous urgency, and with a fiendish and ravenous frequency throughout long-forgotten ages, lost amid unexplored chasms of time.

Down along the crown I went, while the sun vanished below the horizon and the mountains took on the shade of antique gold; and the wind fell too, so that vast radiant patches of the sky became visible, with their dark nocturnal hues, strewn with sparkling stars in the approaching twilight. The secret trail disclosed itself before my steps: it was a jagged trail cut in the mount; a sheer track amid the looming cliffs of the numinous crown; a hanging passageway suspended in the evening chillness; forbidden to those who had ventured along its slippery and precipitous route, beneath the overhanging peaks portending sudden death — if the mighty and prodigious call raised by the myth had fallen silent, or if amid the crests had lingered, as an indistinct echo, only the uncaring whisper of the wind.

On the last leap, before I attained the shadowy ledge resting at the bottom of the crown of stone, I lost my foothold, and fancied I was about to fall into the empty gulf, a dark, boundless void, which extended beyond the craggy ravine — my face lashed by the chill air frantically streaming past my frame, in anticipation of the abominable, gory impact, that would terminate all my hopes and cares in a pool of blood, and whose reverberations amid the barren precipices of the gorge I would never hear as a living soul.

Yet it was on the ledge covered with grass that I fell, on the verge of the abyss, which unquestionably would have welcomed my body, if only I had bent, with a gesture as unwary as baneful, towards the bottomless chasm.

The clashing noise of the cymbals, greedy and compulsive, appeared to resound in the gloom before my face, while the loathsome plea, now vibrant and alluring, caressed the dark wall of stone from where I had just come down.

I lifted my eyes and I pointed my flashlight at the cold and stark rampart of stone which, in the night hour, seemed to die out in dark-

ness as a distant, illusory shape. And there it was, in the gloom, conjured up by the radiant beam: a narrow breach, a dark recess, opening in the mount's solid rock. That was the hideous entryway to an underground realm, with its numinous and fiendish spell. That was the second entrance — screened from view and deceptively concealed — to the sinister cave of the Sibyl.

Orifice of darkness, hollow of dark abomination, primeval opening wrought by awesome subterranean potencies, hurled in antiquity from the the silent bottom of an archaic sea, where it had rested uneasily, unceasingly shaken by earthquakes, sleeping its age-long sleep; until the gleam of remote stars was able to creep into its hidden recesses, and the rainwater began to mould its gloomy meanders, by establishing stealthy, secretive connections with the tangled shafts and the treacherous, mysterious pits which unfolded within the womb of the mountain, like barren and lifeless passageways — and yet walked grimly with resounding footsteps, ghastly and unreal, which echoed in a place where no sound should be heard at all, apart from the mournful and inauspicious noise of the whispering waters in the clefts of the abysses.

My hands were trembling, overwhelmed by sheer terror. My numb, frozen limbs stiffened further under the icy breath that oozed from the cavern. Fear beclouded all my thoughts and froze any resolution of mine, engulfing my very soul with the fiery blaze of its supreme and irrepressible rule.

I had reached, at last, the farthermost and ill-fated boundary of my quest; I had attained the ultimate and conclusive end of my foolish, unwholesome investigation. Beyond that boundary, had I dared to resolve — with a decision inconsiderate as well as irrevocable — to go past the atrocious threshold of that cavern, I would have gained nothing more than the access to the unfathomed kingdom of dreams, an unknown, deceitful land of insanity, where my fatigued spirit, exhausted by an unreasonably prolonged intimacy with the overpowering spell of the myth, would have fallen prey, without fail, to delirium, aberration, and madness.

Yet too seductive had now become the mellow, sneering plea that summoned me, with its sinister chant, to the portentous gathering; too piercing was the wail that seeped from that wicked hollow, with its appeal, raised in an alluring tone, that the sacrificial offering take pla-

ce on the bare, dank altars of stone, which were waiting within the gloomy recesses of the mount.

With a gruesome and grievous step, I put my foot into the dark, direful cavern of the Sibyl.

The call rose as a mournful cry, the yells grew in fierceness and expectation, as I entered — with faltering steps, my mind confounded and bewildered by the dreary echoing of inhuman utterances and the harsh muttering arising from invisible, whispering beings — the sombre hollow, its hideous boundaries of rock enshrouded in darkness beyond the thin radiant beam that trickled from my faint, wavering flashlight.

That hollow was some twenty feet deep and its farthest side was sealed by a wall of stone, on which a gate of darkness, an entryway gaping onto the eerie, lifeless bowels of the mount, gave access to the winding tunnels that descended rapidly into the core of the cliff, penetrating deeply into the mountain's concealed foundations.

Terror overwhelmed my soul, as the voices, with pressing apprehension, urged me to hasten towards the cruel and grisly feast, hurrying my steps with craving eagerness and directing me, with frantic vehemence, to the gate's gloomy opening — the rocky walls resonating with the throbbing beats of the drums, and the air echoing with the bronze clash of the cymbals.

I proceeded, the way a madman does, by crossing the ghastly entrance, between coarse walls of stone, dripping with water, and falling seemingly back into the darkness beyond the scant glow cast by my feeble light. In the swelling clamour, I noticed, with bewildered gaze, the jumbled remains, shrivelled by the lapse of centuries, that lay at the threshold, amid fragments of rocks, splinters of wizened bones, and ragged cloth and leather, which had once adorned those same corpses; and golden and silver coins as well, that would be of no use anymore to their owners, whose names now rested in peace and oblivion for evermore.

I sensed that time had finally come, and only a few moments separated the present instant from the baleful and undendurable hour when the unholy gathering would take place, and the fiendish, inhuman encounter — between the Sibyl and myself — would occur.

I stepped forward, and then my flashlight quivered, and went out. The frenzied voices reached a climax, the piercing wails rose hideously in the darkness that had abruptly curdled about my frame.

And then the voices fell silent at once; only an indistinct rustle still lingered in the dark, now turning into a solid black shroud; muttering whispers, murmurs chasing and querying each other in the stygian emptiness, arising from sheer gloom; a feeling of queer and restless movements; stealthy, uneasy footfalls sneaking all around, and weak, insubstantial fingers touching my arms and face.

And, at last, I heard whispered words, «en illam, adveniet, adveniet», here she comes, the voices said in the dark, «Magna Mater, Cybele».

A gelid gust of air hit my face softly.

Horror, supernatural and unspeakable, devoured my heart.

My sightless eyes, immersed in darkness, seemed to catch a glimpse of a faint, hazy glow — in that place, where no glow should ever exist, nor should it possess any visible materiality in our world.

Emerging from the farthest end of the tunnel, a flimsy gleam appeared, that slowly moved forward in the dark.

A veiled semblance, holding a lamp in her joined hands, advanced with grievous steps.

«I am the first and the last», a voice said, «I am the hallowed and the loathed. I am the whore and the saint».

I fell to my knees, my soul seized by the impending shadow of death.

«I am the virgin and the bride. I am the mother and the daughter. My name be praised forever, for I am the perverted and the inviolable. No mortal being has ever seen through my veil».

Sheer terror poured out from my heart, bursting through my blood and bowels, sweeping over my brain and shattering it into pieces; I bounced up and leaped ahead, rushing frantically beyond the gruesome and ephemeral likeness, hurling myself, as if I had gone crazy, towards the gloominess which engulfed the far end of the ghastly tunnel.

I ran, darting insanely through the darkness, stumbling as a madman amid the rocks, and then switching on my flashlight again, which I was still holding in my stiffened hands. I dashed along endless tunnels and meanders of unfathomable gloom; I descended tortuous pas-

sageways, inhabited by the dreamlike shapes of stalactites wrought in white limestone; I went through uncharted caverns, unexplored chambers buried within the heart of the Sibilline Range; I screamed, and raved, throughout my foolish and vertiginous flight into the impenetrable dusk — while fearing, at the same time, in my frenzied state of mind, to hear once more, arising from the very bottom of the gloomy cavities which opened in the rocky walls of those frightful and vicious hollows, the inhuman, harrowing voices that I had perceived as a disembodied muttering in the gloom, when I was still in the cave's horrifying vestibule, haunted by the wicked potency of the myth. And so I strained my vision, urging my eyes to catch any fleeting glimmer, any impalpable flicker that might betoken, portending her imminent coming, the presence of the eerie figure carrying her flimsy light, and enshrouded in her numinous aura, as a ghastly herald of death, whose cult was to be celebrated on loathsome pagan altars bestrewn with gruesome, gory curdled remains.

Blinded, my spirit obnubilated, I walked crazily along deserted subterranean trails, going down for many miles and traversing sullen, echoing underground hollows; I skirted vast expanses of dark, frosty waters, forbidden lakes that rested since time immemorial beneath the mounts, unseen by any eye of men and subject to the supremacy of stillness, and darkness; I fathomed the stark, concealed abysses of limestone that pierced the titanic mass of rock from which the mountains themselves had been wrought.

And when I saw a dim glow, I feared that that pale semblance might be appearing again, enfolded in her lambent veil: she, who, by her grievous coming, had flooded my heart with swelling, unearthly terror.

But that faint glow descended from a crevice in the ceiling of the hollow, last and final cavity of a grueling, unbounded and mysterious maze which ran hidden beneath the earth, utterly unknown to men, within the secret, accommodating womb of darkness.

I grasped the rocks with my quivering hands and climbed frenziedly the jagged wall of stone, scrambling up the fractured boulders, hurled there, with furious might, by the pressure of the waters, and reaching eventually that radiant opening, from where the fresh night air, with its invigorating purity, seeped into the hollow.

I clambered up, and came out from the gloomy subterranean pits. Up there, in the sky entirely devoid of stars, the moon was shining with dazzling effulgence. A massive, gigantic mountain, immersed in dark shadow, loomed imposingly on a vast plateau, covered with velvety grass. The flickering lights of a far-off hamlet quivered in the distance.

That mountain was Mount Vettore; that remote hamlet was Castelluccio of Norcia; and the crevice of stone which I had come out of was the unexplored, abysmal, appalling chasm of the Swallower.

EPILOGUE
THE DREAM IS NOT OVER

A FULL MOON NIGHT, a night of radiance. The wind, that until not long ago had caressed the grassland — the slender leaves gently swaying back and forth, the herbage shimmering with moist dew-drops — had now fallen. The divine refulgence of the nocturnal planet flooded the vast expanse with glowing stillness, as the glaring orb proceeded along its arched course across the celestial sphere, heading west with solemn, dignified motion, beyond the silent slopes of the mountains.

The soft, dewy ocean, anticipating the coming of the dawn, gave forth sweet fragrances of earth and pasture; the peaceful, untroubled air had now turned chill, in the thrilling hour which heralds the benign sunrise.

Stillness. From the gloomy bottom of the rocky pit — craggy and uneven, carved into the limestone soil by unremitting rainfalls throughout innumerable centuries — nothing was coming out. The sullen hollow, the Swallower, with its twisty and unexplored meanders, a harbour to the rainwaters running in haste across the surface of the

plateau and hurling themselves eventually into the jagged funnel of stone, was resting in silence.

Was that really the conclusion of my dream? Was that hollow the farthermost boundary, the ultimate end of an amazing story, an odd fairy tale which, immersed in the ardent, bewitching spell of the radiant moonlight, I had been telling myself as I dreamed in the sleeping sea of unending grass sitting at the foot of Mount Vettore?

A dull weariness, bitter and merciful, overwhelmed my heart. Now I doubted no longer. Everything had been just an illusory figment; everything had gone lost in the reckless, deceitful foolishness that had woefully unsettled my faltering spirit, worn out by an immoderate and baleful acquaintance with the ominous, ghostlike coils of the myth. The haunting reveries and nonsensical clues and heinous likenesses, which, like unreal wraiths, had taken on ghastly and fallacious shapes, casting their harrowing shadows across the misleading trail of my unhealthy investigation, were but empty semblances, treacherous and untruthful illusions, that soon would be dispelled by the gusts of the wind — the way the insubstantial shreds of a dream fade rapidly away when dawn comes.

I closed my eyes and wept miserably, as my heart pulsated with unhappy joy, and was filled with grateful tears and a sense of sedulous, orderly balance, which I had regained, at last, amid the rich grass of the plain.

So, nothing had really occurred. I had been dreaming a wan dream, within the magical walls of the town of Norcia, among the shifty mountains which rose in that region, teeming with cryptic legends and gloomy tales, that still endeavoured to speak — with voices that grew feebler and feebler as seasons went by — to the practical and businesslike minds of men.

I had been sleeping. Now I had awakened. I bent my head with gratitude, fully convinced. I was being brought back, with patronising sternness, to the firm strictness of our commonplace, undistinguished world.

Never again would I wander in amazement through the hazy realms of poets, shimmering with legendary romance; I sensed, with a sort of drained appeasement, that — following my passionate and joyful renunciation of the illusory regions inhabited by myth, and pursuant to my entrustment to the loving and reliable care of befitting

dreams devised elsewhere by others, with all the harmonious delectations scheduled by the global market for our convenience — happiness could be finally mine, once and for all.

Shivering for the last time, my eyes turned once more to the black abyss which opened gloomily before me, in the faint glimmer of the dawn.

And yet, as I looked at it with thankful obedience, and began to go drearily back to a miserable world of dull slavish automata, I beheld that flimsy, quivering gleam, which appeared to proceed from the dark womb of the Swallower. And I knew for certain that such a glow could not be anything else but the reflection of the rising sun on the white limestone of the pit — and not the veiled, appalling shadow of the Sibyl, who was emerging slowly from the ghastly abyss, so as to receive my forlorn, submissive soul within her merciful and sheltering arms.

THE SIBYL'S CAVE, TODAY

«I raise my head towards Mount Sibyl: my eyes travel up the mountain-side,
and climb even further, along the crests and ravines.
And at last, beneath the crown of stone, there I see the Enchantress,
the Queen, the awesome Fairy.
There she is: the Fairy who haunts the dreams of men»