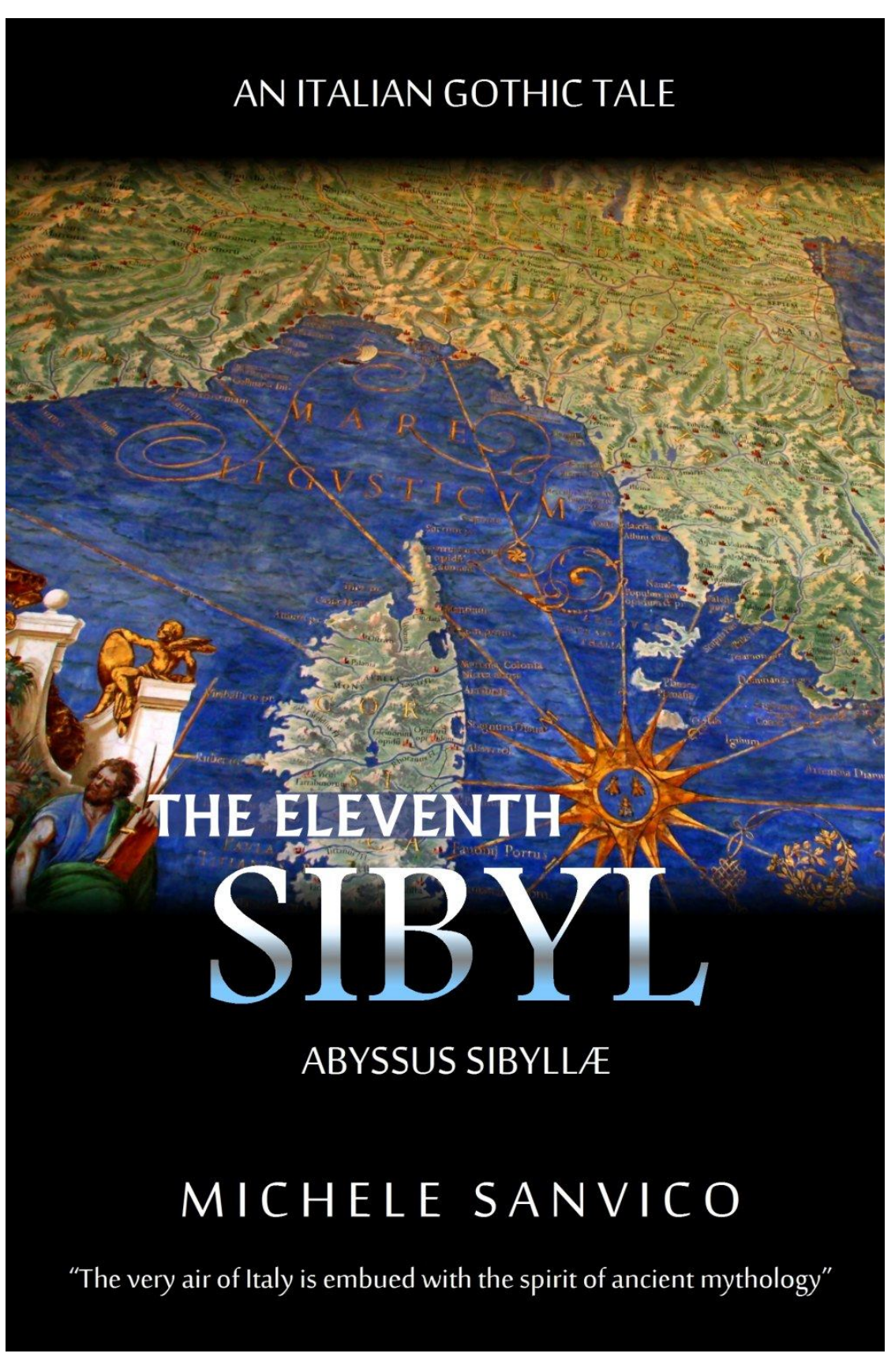


AN ITALIAN GOTHIC TALE



THE ELEVENTH
SIBYL

ABYSSUS SIBYLLÆ

MICHELE SANVICO

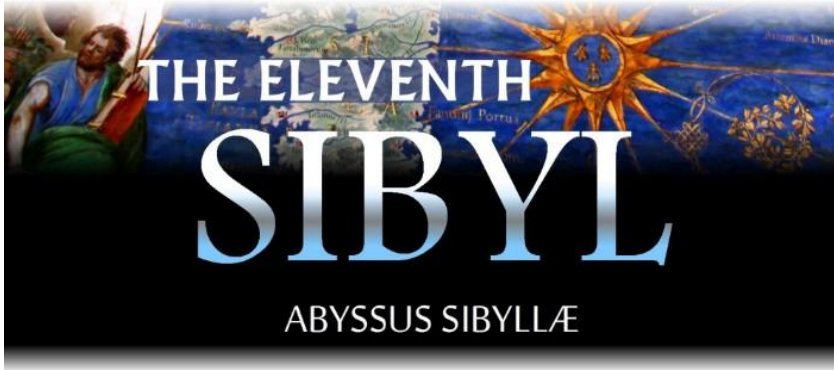
"The very air of Italy is imbued with the spirit of ancient mythology"

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

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

To Silvia, Agnese and Stefano

MICHELE SANVICO



AN ITALIAN GOTHIC TALE

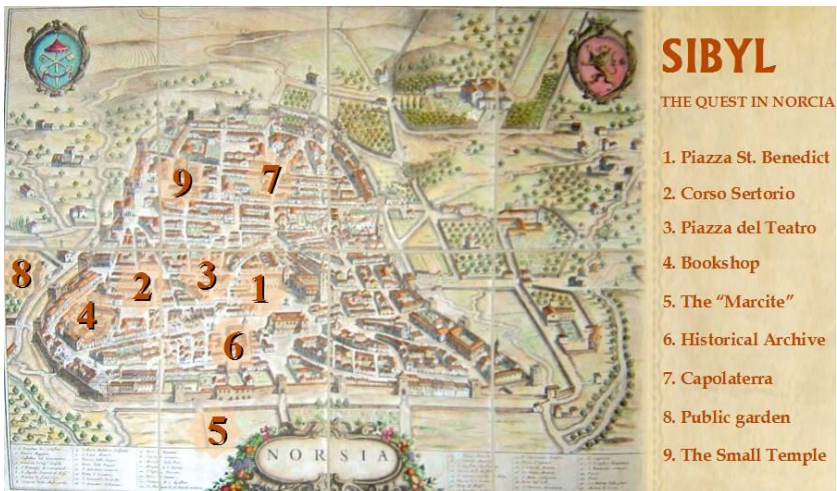
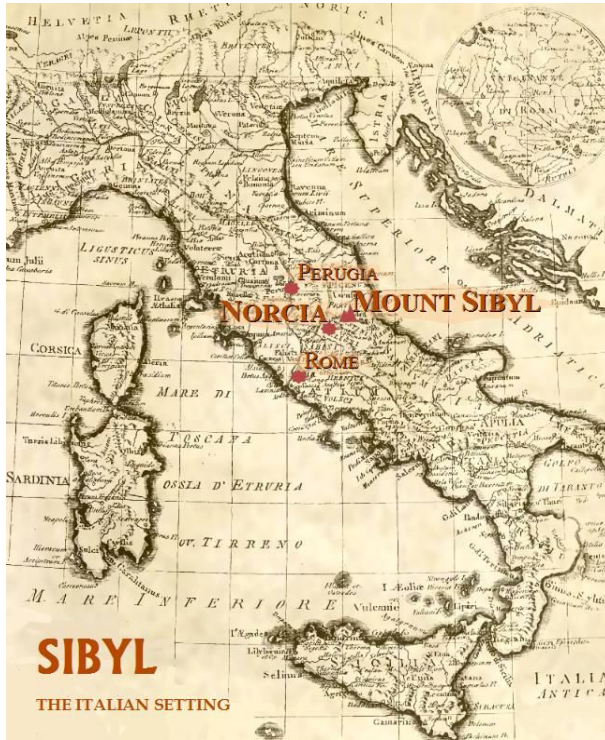
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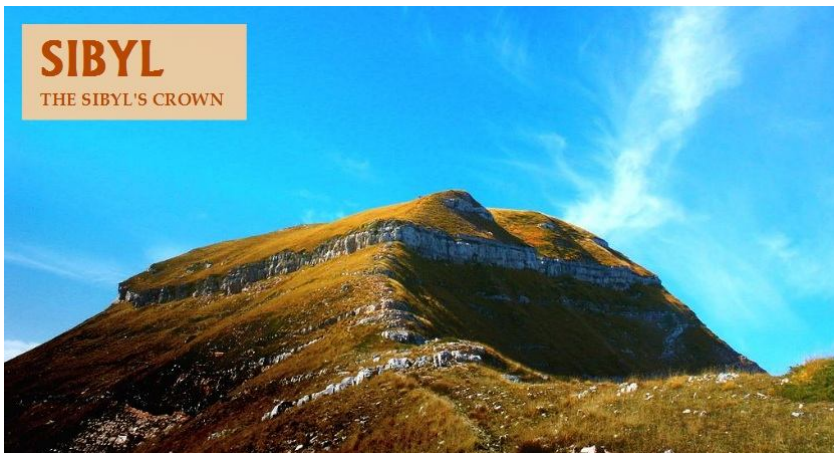
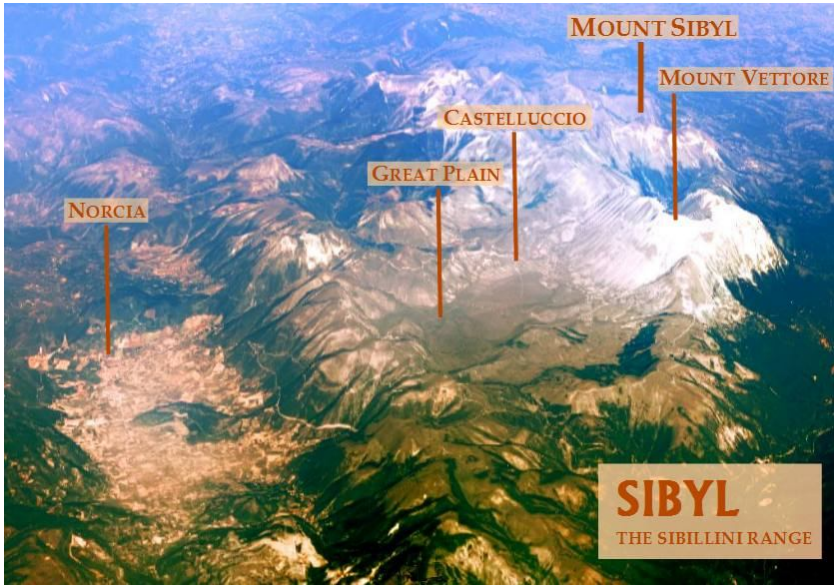
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IMAGES - NORCIA



IMAGES - SIBLLINE RANGE



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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 spanned 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 eccentric 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 unconceiva-

ble, 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 unrelentlessly 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 goatly 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, overwhelming 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 Reipublicae», 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 luscious 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, adjacent 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 evil-doers 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 blinding 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 Sertorius, 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 urgency 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 alleys 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, never-ending 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 horrida, 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 throbbled 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 outcome 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 appearance 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 saluum 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 Historiae*, 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 far-sighted 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 anyo-

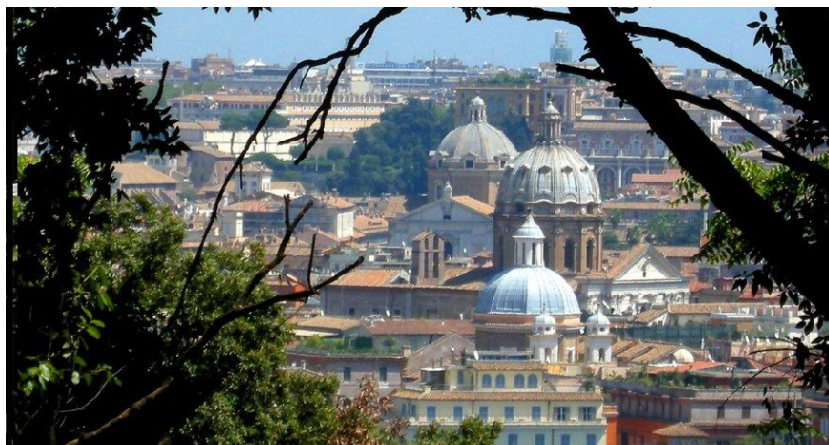
ne who intended to investigate deeper in a view to catching the ripples of everyday life as well as the bigger, longer waves which utterly encompass us, so that it is hard to perceive them. They are made manifest only to those who have been taught how to conceive the vertiginous depths of inaccessible 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 «Cumæa 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 Petronius 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 «horrida».

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 horrida, 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 appearances, 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, where-to 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...

IMAGES - THE SIBYL'S CAVE TODAY

