

Leonardo da Vinci
The Resurrection of the Gods

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ALMA CLASSICS

BOOK ONE

THE WHITE SHE-DEVIL

1494

“A statue of the goddess Venus was discovered in Siena, to the great joy of the townspeople, and was set up in the piazza, over the Fonte Gaia (the “Joyous Fount”). The people gathered in throngs to gaze upon Venus. But during the war with Florence, in a conclave of the Regents, one among them arose and spake: “Citizens! Since the Church of Christ forbids the worship of pagan idols, I am of the opinion that our armed forces are suffering defeat because of the wrath of God ever since our having set up the craven statue of Venus in our piazza. And therefore I counsel you: Break up the statue and bury it in soil belonging to the Florentines, so as to bring down upon them a chastisement from Heaven.” And that was precisely what the citizens of Siena did.”

*From the notes of the fifteenth-century
Florentine sculptor Lorenzo Ghiberti*

1

IN FLORENCE THE WAREHOUSES of the dyers’ guild stood hard up against the church of Orsanmichele.

Unightly sheds, shacks and sloping extensions on crazy wooden stilts clung fast to houses whose tiled rooftops tilted towards one another so closely that the sky was just a narrow crack, which even in daytime left the street below in darkness. Foreign woollens, dyed in Florence, were

strung out on crossbeams at shop entrances. Running down the middle of the cobbled street was a stream of coloured liquid spilling out of the dyers' vats. Over the portals of the main trading houses – the *fondachi* – hung the dyers' arms, the Calimala, *on a field of gules an eagle or upon a ball of wool argent*.

In one of these *fondachi* sat Messer Cipriano Buonaccorsi, consul of the noble craft of the Calimala, a wealthy Florentine merchant, surrounded by piles of trade ledgers and thick bookkeeping folios.

The old man shivered in the cold March air which wafted from the damp cellars, crammed to the rafters with merchandise, as he huddled in a ragged squirrel-skin coat heavily frayed at the elbows.

Stuck behind his ear was a goose quill; his weak, short-sighted though well-trained eyes ran effortlessly over the horizontal and vertical columns on the parchment leaves of a huge book of accounts noting every detail: “debit” to the left, “credit” to the right. The entries were made in a round, even hand without capitals or punctuation, in Roman rather than Arabic numerals, the latter being regarded as a newfangled frivolity, unbecoming for commercial records. On the flyleaf an inscription ran in large letters: “IN THE NAME OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST AND OF THE HOLY VIRGIN MARY THIS BOOK OF ACCOUNTS IS BEGUN IN THE YEAR OF OUR LORD ONE THOUSAND FOUR HUNDRED AND NINETY-FOUR.”

Having checked the latest entries and carefully corrected an error in the stock of bunches of long cayenne-pepper pods, Mecca ginger and bundles of cinnamon bark taken in surety for woollen merchandise, Messer Cipriano fell back wearily in his chair, shut his eyes and began to ruminate on a business letter he had to dispatch to his head agent at the wool fair in Montpellier in France.

Someone entered the shop. The old man looked up and saw his tenant farmer Grillo, who rented some tilth and vineyards in the grounds of his villa, San Gervasio, at the foot of the mountains in the Mugnone valley.

Grillo bowed reverently. He was holding a wicker basket full of eggs neatly bedded in straw. Two young cockerels, their feet trussed, dangled upside down from his belt.

“Ah, it is you Grillo,” Buonaccorsi said with the customary politeness with which he addressed without distinction both the mighty and the humble. “How is the Lord treating you? It looks as though spring will be a clement one this year.”

“For us old ones, Messer Cipriano, even the spring holds little joy. Our bones ache and pain us, and wait their turn in the grave... Here, to mark the holy festive day I have brought Your Worship some eggs and a brace of cockerels.”

Grillo was screwing up his sly greenish eyes deferentially, the skin around them gathering into multiple fine creases, of the kind that are brought about by the sun and the wind.

Buonaccorsi thanked the visitor and then turned to business matters.

“Well, are the labourers ready at the farm? Will we get it all done before daybreak?”

Grillo heaved a heavy sigh, and paused in thought as he leant on his staff.

“Everything’s ready and there are enough hands all right – only permit me to say, Your Worship, wouldn’t it be best to wait?”

“But did I not hear you say the other day there’s no time for delay? Others may get the same idea!”

“That’s true enough, but it’s a frightening business all the same. The sin of it! Lenten days are holy, but our undertaking is unholy...”

“The sin of it I’ll take upon my own soul. Fear not: I won’t betray you. But are we likely to find anything?”

“How else! The signs are favourable. Our fathers and forefathers knew of the mound behind the mill by the Wet Hollow. In the night there’s a will-o’-the-wisp leading a merry dance on San Giovanni. We’ve more than enough of this devilry about. I hear they pulled a full-length devil from the clay recently when they were digging a well in the vineyard at Marignola.”

“What was that? What devil?”

“A bronze one with horns. He had hairy goat’s legs with cloven hooves and an impishly wicked smile. He was skipping on one leg and snapping his fingers, all green with age and covered in moss.”

“What happened to him?”

“They melted him down into a bell for the new St Michael Chapel.”

Messer Cipriano was beside himself with anger.

“Why didn’t you tell me about this before, Grillo?”

“You were away in Siena on business.”

“You should have written. I’d have sent someone. I’d have come myself, whatever the cost. I’d have cast ten bells for them. The fools! A dancing faun into a bell, perhaps a genuine Scopas!...”*

“Yes, that was a foolish thing to do. But do not upset yourself, Messer Cipriano. They’ve had their just deserts. Since they hung the new bell, two years running the apples and cherries in their orchards have been eaten by grubs, and the olive harvest has failed. Worse still, the bell doesn’t sound right.”

“What do you mean?”

“How shall I put it? It doesn’t strike the true note. It doesn’t gladden the Christian heart. It just jabbers on without rhyme or reason. And little wonder – how can you turn a devil into a bell? I speak not to anger Your Worship, but the priest was probably right after all: what good can come out of all this devilry they keep unearthing? You have to be careful and have your wits about you. You have to arm yourself with prayer and the cross, for the Devil is sly and powerful, the swine – he’ll come in one ear and out the other. Take this marble arm that Zacchello dug up at the Mill Mound last year. The Evil One misled us, and what trouble we had with it, my goodness – it hardly bears talking about.”

“Tell me, Grillo, how you came across it.”

“It was autumn, St Martin’s Eve. We sat down to supper, but no sooner had the lady of the house put the gruel on the table than the farm hand Zacchello, my friend’s nephew, dashes into the room. As it happens I’d left him that night at the Mill Mound to uproot an olive-tree stump where I meant to sow some hemp. ‘Master, Master!’ Zacchello babbles, his face screwed up, trembling like a leaf, teeth chattering. ‘Lord be with you, dear fellow!’ I says. ‘There’s something nasty going on in the field. There’s a corpse rising from under the stump! If you don’t believe me, go and look for yourselves.’ We took lanterns and went.

“Dusk had fallen. There was a moon rising behind the trees. We came up to the stump, with upturned earth all around it. I leant over to have a better look, and there, coming out of the ground, was a white hand, beautifully shaped, with delicate slender fingers like a city girl’s. Well I never, I thought to myself, there’s something rotten afoot! I lowered the lantern into the hole and the hand began to move, the fingers beckoning. I could hold out no longer and let out a cry, my legs were giving way under me. But my grandma Monna Bonda – a midwife versed in various occult crafts, sprightly in spite of her age – had this to say: ‘What are you frightened of, you fools? Can’t you see the hand’s neither live nor dead, but of stone?’ And she grabs hold of it and pulls it up as if it

was a turnip. Above the wrist at the elbow joint the arm was snapped off. ‘Granny,’ I yelled, ‘leave it, don’t touch it! Put it back in the ground quickly or we’ll all end up in trouble.’ ‘No,’ she says, ‘that wouldn’t be right: let’s take it to the church and show it to the priest for him to read an incantation over it.’ But the old woman was lying. She never took the arm to the priest, but hid it in a corner in her trunk, together with all kinds of odds and ends – rags, jars of ointment, herbals, charms and suchlike. I was furious, and demanded she should hand over the arm, but Granny dug her heels in. And from then on Monna Bonda began to work miracle cures. If someone had a toothache, she’d only have to touch the cheek with the idol’s hand and the swelling would go down. Fever, colics, falling sickness – nothing was beyond her powers to heal. If a cow was in pain, unable to drop her calf, Granny would place the arm on its belly, the cow would low and there’d be a heaving little bundle in the straw.

“The word spread round the neighbouring villages. The old crow raked in a lot of money. Only it led to nothing good. Don Faustino wouldn’t let me be. If I turned up at church, he’d blame me in his sermon in front of the whole congregation. I was the son of perdition, the Devil’s apprentice; he threatened to complain to the bishop, refused to give me Holy Communion. Urchins ran after me in the street, pointing their fingers at me: ‘There goes Grillo the sorcerer – his granny’s a witch, they’ve both sold their souls to the Devil!’ Believe me, even at night I had no peace: the marble arm was always in my dreams, stealing up on me, softly going for my neck as if to stroke it with long clammy fingers; suddenly it’d go for my throat – I’d try to shout and couldn’t.

“This is not funny any more, I thought to myself. I got up one morning before daybreak and, while Granny was out gathering herbs in the dewy grass, I broke into her trunk, picked up the arm and brought it to you. Lotto, the rag-and-bone man, offered me ten *soldi*, but from you I got only eight. Though for Your Worship I’d sacrifice not only two *soldi* but my life too – may God send you, Madonna Angelica, your children and grandchildren every kind of blessing.”

“Yes, from what you say, Grillo, we’re bound to find something at the Mill Mound,” Messer Cipriano observed thoughtfully.

“We will – we certainly will,” the old man continued, again heaving a heavy sigh, “provided Don Faustino doesn’t get wind of it. If he does, he’ll give me the drubbing of my life – and he won’t leave you be either.

He'll turn the country folk against you, your work will be left undone. Well, God is merciful. Only don't leave me in the lurch, benefactor: put in a good word for me before the magistrate."

"Is this about the plot of land the miller wants to take from you?"

"The very same, sir! The miller's a skinflint and a scoundrel. He knows how to catch the Devil by the tail. I gave the magistrate a heifer, but the miller went one better and gave him a cow that calved while the trial was still on. My fear is the magistrate will now rule in his favour because, sad to say, it's a fine bullock calf. Don't let me down, patron! It's only for Your Worship I'm going to all the trouble at the Mill Mound: I'd never have taken such a sin upon my soul for anyone else..."

"Don't worry, Grillo! The magistrate's my friend, and I'll put in a word for you. And now off you go. There'll be food for you in the kitchen and some wine too. Tonight we're all going to San Gervasio."

The old man made a deep bow, thanked him and left, while Messer Cipriano withdrew into his little workroom next to the shop, which no one else was allowed to enter.

Here bronzes and marbles were hung on walls and ranged on benches as in a museum. Ancient coins and medals were displayed on cloth-lined boards. There were several crates of unsorted fragments of statues. Through the agency of his numerous commercial representatives he had acquired antiques from all over, from Athens, Smyrna and Halicarnassus, from Cyprus, Lefkos and Rhodes, from the depths of Egypt and Asia Minor.

After surveying his treasures, the consul of Calimala was again absorbed in thoughts of the all-important new customs duties on fleeces; having carefully considered the matter, he got on with the letter to his agent in Montpellier.

2

AT THE SAME TIME, THREE YOUTHS, Doffo, Antonio and Giovanni, were in conversation at the far end of the storehouse, piled to the ceiling with bales of cloth, where even in daytime the only source of light was a solitary flickering lamp in front of the Madonna. Doffo, Messer Buonaccorsi's clerk, a snub-nosed, ginger-haired, happy-go-lucky lad, was entering in a ledger the ells of cloth which Antonio da Vinci, a staid-looking young man with lacklustre, fish-like eyes and unruly tufts

of straggly black hair, was measuring with the *canna*, a Florentine rule, which he handled with consummate skill. Nineteen-year-old Giovanni Beltraffio, a meek and submissive Milanese student of painting with soft, inoffensive grey eyes and an indecisive expression, sat on a bale that had already been checked; with one leg over the other he listened attentively.

“So it’s come to this,” Antonio remarked with suppressed anger. “We’re now digging heathen gods out of the ground! Brown Scottish tweed thirty-two ells, six palms, eight inches,” he added, turning to Doffo, who entered the figures in an account book. Having folded the measured bolt, Antonio threw it angrily but with precision, so that it landed just where intended, and, raising his forefinger in prophetic imitation of Fra Girolamo Savonarola, exclaimed, “*Gladius Dei super terram cito et velociter!*”^{*} St John beheld a vision on Patmos. ‘An angel took the dragon, that old serpent which is the Devil and Satan, and he bound him a thousand years: and cast him into the bottomless pit, bound him, and set a seal on him, that he should deceive the people no more till the thousand years were fulfilled.’^{**} Now Satan has been loosed. The thousand years are up. False gods, precursors and attendants of Satan are coming from under the angel’s seal beneath the ground for the temptation of men. Woe to people on land and on the sea!... Seventeen ells, four palms and nine inches of brushed Brabant yellow.”

“Do you suppose then, Antonio,” Giovanni ventured with timid but keen curiosity, “that all these portents—”

“Yes, of course. What else? Beware! The time is near. Not only ancient gods are unearthed now, but new ones created in the likeness of the ancient. Today’s sculptors and painters are in the service of Moloch – that is, the Devil. They turn the Lord’s house into a temple of Satan. They worship unclean gods and depict them in the likeness of saints and martyrs. Bacchus – instead of John the Apostle, the wanton whore Venus – instead of the Mother of God. Such pictures are only fit to be burnt, and the ashes scattered to the four winds!”

The devout clerk’s murky eyes glinted menacingly.

Drawing his eyebrows together in a helpless effort of thought, Giovanni kept quiet, not daring to protest.

“Antonio,” he said at last, “I heard it said that your cousin, Messer Leonardo da Vinci, sometimes takes apprentices into his workshop. I’ve been meaning for a long time—”

"If you want," Antonio interrupted, "if you want, Giovanni, to ruin your soul, go to Messer Leonardo da Vinci."

"How is that?"

"He might be my cousin and twenty years older than me, but it is written: 'From an heretic, after the first and second admonition, turn thou away.'* Messer Leonardo da Vinci is a godless heretic. His mind is obscured by Satanic pride. By means of mathematics and black magic he aims to penetrate the mysteries of nature..."

And raising his eyes heavenwards, he quoted Savonarola's words from his latest sermon. "The wisdom of the day is madness before the Lord. These men of learning, they're all bound for the house of Satan."

"Have you heard, Antonio," Giovanni persisted, even more diffidently, "Messer Leonardo is now here in Florence? He's just come from Milan."

"What for?"

"The Duke has sent for him to enquire if some pictures could be bought from the estate of the late Lorenzo the Magnificent—"

"So what if he is? What do I care?" Antonio interrupted, applying himself with ever greater effort to measuring the stuff with the *canna*.

The church bells began to toll for vespers. Doffo stretched himself with relief and shut the book. Work was over. The shops were closing.

Giovanni stepped out into the street. Between the wet roofs the sky was grey with a barely perceptible roseate tinge of approaching dusk. A fine drizzle fell in the windless air.

Suddenly, from an open window in a neighbouring alleyway, came a song.

"*O vaghe montanine pastorelle...*"

"O beautiful mountain shepherdesses..."

The voice was young and resonant. By the measured sound of the treadle Giovanni knew that the singer was sitting at a spinning wheel.

He listened, lost in thought, and it then came to him that it was spring and his heart swelled with inexplicable elation and melancholy.

"Nanna! Nanna! Where in hell are you, girl? Are you deaf, or something? Come and have supper! The noodles are getting cold!"

Someone in wooden clogs – *zoccoli* – clattered along a tiled floor, then all was silent again.

Giovanni did not move for a good while. He stared at the empty window and the spring melody rang in his ears as from a distant reed pipe:

“O vaghe montanine pastorelle.”

Then with a soft sigh he entered the house of the consul of Calimala, and having ascended a steep staircase flanked by rotted, loose, worm-eaten banisters, he found himself in a large room which was the library, and where, bent over a writing stand, sat Giorgio Merula, chronicler at the court of the Duke of Milan.

3

MERULA, AN ERUDITE HISTORIAN, had come to Florence at the behest of his sovereign to purchase some rare editions from Lorenzo de' Medici's collection and, as usual, had stopped at the house of his friend Messer Cipriano Buonaccorsi, with whom he shared an intense passion for antiquities. He had got to know Giovanni Beltraffio quite by chance at a roadside inn on the way from Milan, and as the former had a neat, even hand and Merula stood in need of a good amanuensis, he took him along with him to his friend Cipriano's house.

As Giovanni came in, Merula was in the process of examining a tattered old volume not unlike a church breviary or psalter. He gently drew a moist sponge over its fine parchment prepared from the skin of a stillborn Hibernian lamb; some lines he erased with a pumice stone, others he sleeked over with the blade of a knife and a polishing tool, after which he inspected his work again, holding it up to the light.

“My precious ones!” he mumbled under his breath, snorting with delight. “Out you come, poor darlings, into the light... How delicate you are, how beautiful!”

He clicked two fingers and lifted his balding pate. He revealed a bloated face with soft mobile brows, a livid, reddish nose and small leaden-grey eyes that were full of life and irrepressible joy. At his side on the window sill stood an earthenware flagon and a mug. The scholar poured himself

some wine, drank it, grunted, and was about to immerse himself in his work when he noticed Giovanni.

“Hello, my good friar!” the old man greeted him merrily; he addressed him like this out of modesty. “I missed you. I was wondering where you were. Perhaps fallen in love somewhere, I wouldn’t be surprised! The girls in Florence are pretty. Easy enough to lose your heart! But I’ve not been wasting time either. I suspect you’ve not seen the like of it in all your life. Do you want me to show you? Perhaps not, or you’ll spread it around. I bought this from a Jew for a song, found it in his heap of junk. Well, all right, I’ll show you, but no one else!”

He beckoned him with his finger.

“Here, closer to the light!”

And he pointed to a page, covered closely in cuneiform church script. These were the Akathist hymns – prayers, psalms with huge, ungainly musical notations for chanting.

Then he took the book, opened it at another place and lifted it to the light, almost level with Giovanni’s eyes. The latter noticed that where Merula had erased the church writing he could distinguish other barely visible characters, colourless traces of an ancient script, impressions in the parchment – hardly letters, more like ghostly reminders, pale and graceful.

“Well? Can you see, can you?” Merula kept repeating exultantly. “There they are, my little pets. Didn’t I tell you, my good friar, what a wondrous sight!”

“What is this?”

“I still don’t know myself. Looks like excerpts from an antique anthology. Perhaps even fresh, as yet totally unknown treasures of the Hellenic Muse. And if it hadn’t been for me, they would never have seen God’s light! They would have remained undiscovered till the end of time under all those antiphones and penitential psalms...”

And Merula explained that some monastic scribe in the Middle Ages, wishing to make use of the precious parchment, had scratched out the ancient pagan writing and written over it anew.

The sun, barely penetrating the pall of rain, filled the room with a fading roseate lustre, by which the indentations, the shades of ancient letters stood out even more clearly.

“Look, look here: the dead are rising from their graves!” Merula exclaimed excitedly. “I think it’s a hymn to the Olympians. There, I can read the first lines.” And he translated from the Greek:

“Hail thee beloved, magnificent Bacchus, adorned with clusters,
Hail thee, awesome far-darting Phoebus with your silver bow,
God of the splendid locks, slayer of Niobe’s sons.

“And here’s a hymn to Venus, whom you dread so much, my young friar! Only it’s not so easy to read...

“Glory to thee, golden-limbed mother-Aphrodite,
Joy of men and of gods...”

The verse broke off, vanishing under the church writing.

Giovanni lowered the book and the indentation marks grew indistinct, the impressions faded, dissolving in the smooth yellow surface of the parchment – the shades vanished. All that remained were the clear-cut, bold black letters of the monastic breviary and the huge, angular, clumsy musical notations of the penitential psalm:

Give ear to my prayer, O God; and hide not thyself from my supplication. Attend unto me, and hear me: I mourn in my complaint, and make a noise. My heart is sore pained within me: and the terrors of death are fallen upon me.*

The roseate glow faded and the room sank into darkness. Merula poured some wine from the earthenware flagon, drank it and offered some to his companion.

“Here’s to my health! *Vinum super omnia bonum diligamus!*”*

Giovanni declined.

“Please yourself. I’ll drink to you myself. What’s the matter, my good friar? Why so moody, as though you’ve been fished out of a lake? Or has that fraud Antonio been frightening you with things to come, has he? To hell with them, Giovanni, let them go to hell! As if they had nothing better to do than croak for all they’re worth, pox on the hypocrites! Admit it: you’ve been speaking to Antonio!”

“I have.”

“What about?”

“The Antichrist, and Messer Leonardo da Vinci...”

“Well, there you are! All you think of is Leonardo. Has he put a spell on you or something? Listen, my boy, put all that rubbish behind you! Stay on and be my secretary! You’ll soon rise in the world. I’ll teach you Latin, turn you into a lawyer, an orator or court poet, you’ll grow rich and famous. What’s painting? Even Seneca the philosopher called painting a craft unworthy of a freeman. Have a look at your painters: uncouth, ignorant lot...”

“I heard,” Giovanni retorted, “that Messer Leonardo is a great scholar.”

“Scholar? Don’t make me laugh! He can’t even read Latin, he can’t tell Cicero from Quintilian and hasn’t got any Greek whatever. Some scholar! The likes of him are two a penny!”

“They say,” Beltraffio persisted, “that he invents wonderful engines and that his observations of nature—”

“Engines, observations! Well, my son, these won’t get you far. In my *Elegantiae linguae latinæ* you’ll find over two thousand new and most graceful turns of speech. Do you realize what that has cost me?... As for cleverly fitting wheels in engines, watching birds fly in the sky, grass grow in the fields – that’s not scholarship, that’s for amusement only, children’s fun and games!...”

The old man paused; his face grew stern. Taking his companion by the arm, he pronounced softly and gravely:

“Listen well, Giovanni, and never forget it. Our masters are the ancient Greeks and Romans. They achieved as much as can be achieved on this earth. All that remains for us is to follow and emulate them. For it is said: no pupil is above his master. *Non est discipulus super magistrum.*”*

He took a gulp of wine, looked with sly humour straight into Giovanni’s eyes, and suddenly the soft lines of his features dissolved into a wide grin.

“What a thing is youth! There you are, my gentle monk – how I envy you! A sticky spring bud is what you are! You don’t drink wine, you shy away from women. You are a spiritual athlete, an ascetic. But deep down – you’re the very Devil. I can see right through you. You are dull as you stand – but it’s fun to have you around. You, Giovanni, are now

like this book: psalms of penitence on the outside, but under them a hymn to Aphrodite!”

“It has gone dark, Messer Giorgio. Perhaps we should light the candles?”

“Wait, there’s time enough for that. I like to have a chat in the dusk, to recall my days of youth...”

His tongue was getting stiff, his speech slurred.

“I know, my young sir,” he continued, “you’re looking at me and saying to yourself: here’s an old fool, sozzled himself silly, talking rubbish. But I’m not all gone here!”

He tapped his bald pate with a finger.

“I’m not one to brag, but ask any man of learning and he’ll tell you no one has bettered Merula in the excellence of his Latin. Who discovered Martial?” he went on, getting ever more excited. “Who deciphered the famous inscription on the fallen Gates of Tibur? The times I’ve been perched so high up that my head would be spinning, stones breaking loose underfoot, and I’d hardly manage to grab hold of a nearby branch for dear life. I’d squat for days in the scorching sun on some ledge, studying and transcribing ancient inscriptions. Young village beauties would pass by, laughing: ‘Look at that silly mountain goat up there, girls! See how high he’s got, looking for treasure, no doubt!’ I’d banter with them before seeing them disappear out of sight, and then back to work again. Where the stones had crumbled, under the ivy and the brambles, I uncovered just two words: *Gloria Romanorum*.”

And as though savouring the majestic echo from the distant past, he kept mouthing in hollow solemn tones just these words: “Glory, thy name is Rome!” And then, again, “Ah, well, what good is it to reminisce? Nothing will ever return.” With a resigned gesture of his hand, he raised his mug and, in a hoarse voice, broke into the scholars’ drinking song:

“Sober mind is dull and torpid
 Cannot wax poetic.
 That is why for inspiration
 I elect intoxication.
Bibit constans, bibit vagus,
Bibit rudis, bibit magus.
 When I drink, I also sing

Better than Horace.
Dum vinum potamus –
Friends, let's sing to Bacchus!
Te Deum laudamus!"

A frog in his throat made him stop.

It had gone dark in the room. Giovanni could barely make out the outlines of Merula's face.

The rain intensified and was spattering from the roof gutters into puddles.

"That's how things stand, my good friar!" Merula slurred with a disobedient tongue. "What was I saying? My wife's a beautiful woman... No, not that... Wait... Oh yes, yes... How does it go?"

"Tu regere imperio populos, Romane, memento."*

"My word, they were titans in those days, masters of the universe!..."

His voice shook. Giovanni fancied he saw tears glisten in Messer Giorgio's eyes.

"Titans indeed! And now – it's a crying shame... Take our own Duke here in Milan, Ludovico Moro. Of course I am in his pay, I am writing a history of his accomplishments as though I were a Titus Livius, I'm forced to draw comparisons between this jackstraw, this upstart, and Pompey and Caesar. But in my heart, Giovanni, in my heart..."

As an experienced courtier he darted a quick glance at the door to see no one was eavesdropping, before leaning across to whisper in his young companion's ear.

"Love of freedom never has and never shall burn out in old Merula's heart. Only keep it strictly to yourself. Our times are evil, evil as never before. And what a sorry lot they all are, pygmies, slime of the earth! But they're so full of themselves, they want to be like the ancients! And what have they to boast of, what have they to celebrate? There, I have a letter from a friend in Greece who writes of some convent washerwomen on the island of Chios who found a genuine god of antiquity on the beach at dawn while rinsing clothes, a Triton with fishtail, fins and scales. They took fright, the daft lot. They took him for the Devil and ran off. Then they looked again and saw he was old, weak, probably ill

and cold, lying there on his belly in the sand with his green scaly back to the warm sun. His head was grey, his eyes murky, like a newborn babe's. They plucked up courage, the silly wretches, stood around him and launched into their Christian prayers. Then they attacked him with their rollers. They beat him like a dog, this ancient deity, the last of the mighty gods of the deep, the scion of Poseidon himself, perhaps!..."

The old man fell silent, hung his head dejectedly, and down his cheek rolled two maudlin tears in pity for the sea monster.

A servant brought light and closed the shutters. The pagan spectres dissipated.

It was supper time. But Merula was so heavy with wine that he had to be led away to bed supported under his arms.

Beltraffio lay awake a long time that night, listening to Messer Giorgio's blithe snoring, his thoughts on the person who lately preoccupied him more than anything – on Leonardo da Vinci.

4

GIOVANNI WAS SENT FROM MILAN to Florence by his uncle Oswald Ingrim, a glass painter, to purchase some pigments of the brightest, most transparent hues, such as could only be obtained in Florence.

Oswald Ingrim hailed from Graz, and was the pupil of the renowned Strasbourg craftsman Johann Kirchheim. He was employed to work on the windows of the northern sacristy of the Milan Cathedral. Giovanni Beltraffio, an orphan, was the illegitimate son of his brother, the lapidary Reinhold Ingrim, and came by his name from his mother, a native of Lombardy, who in his uncle's words had been a dissolute woman and the cause of his brother's ruin.

Brought up by his morose uncle, he was a solitary child. His mind was afflicted by Oswald Ingrim's endless tales of evil powers, devils, witches, sorcerers and werewolves. But the child's greatest terror was inspired by the tale of the succubus, "Mother of the Snowy Eyebrow" or the White She-Devil, which had reached pagan Italy from Nordic parts.

Every time Giovanni as a small child had cried in bed, his uncle had only to mention the White She-Devil for the boy to fall silent and hide his head under his pillow; but along with this unholy dread he was consumed with curiosity and a longing to see the white hell hag face to face.