

The LAND of MANFRED

A deleted chapter of *Italian Interlude*

by

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[Taken from an earlier draft of the manuscript, these pages
fill in part of the trip between Naples and Rome.]

We continued on our way through undulating country which soon gave way to more mountainous terrain. We took a turnoff and followed a narrow, winding, picturesque road lined with almond trees in flower, to visit the strange medieval town of Sant'Agata dei Goti, where the houses are built atop the narrow and deep gorge of the Isclero River, the rocky sides of the gorge in many cases continuing directly into and forming part of the walls of the houses while here and there verandahs and balconies and even rooms could be seen suspended over the void.

We next came to the neighbouring towns of Arpaia and Forchia, each claiming to be built where, 321 years before Christ, the Romans suffered the famous and humiliating defeat in the so-called Battle of the Caudine Forks, at the hands of the Samnites.

The argument between the two towns has been going on for centuries, Forchia basing its claim on its ancient Roman name, Forculae (forks, or, more accurately, oxbow or yoke). The inhabitants are so proud of this name, and of their descent from remote Samnite ancestors, that they have incorporated a Roman Legionaire passing under the 'forks' in their town's coat of arms.

The inhabitants of neighbouring Arpaia, not wishing to be undone by those of Forchia, have affixed one of the usual marble tablets to their town hall, the inscription on which translates as:

"Here, in the narrow pass the Caudine Valley, in the year 433 of Rome, the Legions of the Consuls Veturio and Postumio capitulated to the soldiers of Ponzio Samnita, and passed under the yoke of the Samnites. Arpaia, the unshakable watchtower of the Samnite people, fosters this memory, teaching its people that where there is virtue one finds glory."

We leave the disputants to settle their age-old controversy, and follow the road which now climbs gently, and absorb the peaceful vista of rolling hills, the byzantine blue of the sky and the emerald green of the pastures intensified by the smoky gray patches marking olive cultivation. We arrive at Benevento, a town rich in Roman ruins. Notable among these is the Arch of Trajan, generally considered to be the best Roman triumphal arch in Italy. Notable also are the Church of Santa Sofia, a Lombard construction dating from the 8th century, containing remains of the original frescos; and the 12th century Cathedral with its splendid façade and belfry in Pisan-Pugliese style.

Benevento (Beneventum) was once Maloenton, but its Oscan, perhaps Samnite, name sounded too much like Maleventum, which in Latin means Bad Omen, so when the town fell to the Romans after their victory over Pyrrhus in the year 275 B.C., they changed it to Beneventum, Good Omen.

Despite its churches and good omens, Benevento has its share of superstitions. Said to have been the centre of worship of the Germanic God, Wothan, brought in by the Lombards, the nearby valley of the Sabato River is still believed to be the place where Satan, in the guise of a Ram, presides over periodical reunions of witches, necromancers and dealers in the black arts. On certain moonlit nights the infernal company holds initiation ceremonies, during which the new recruits, if female, have to swear over their own blood, drawn from the left breast, that they will be adulterous at least once a month; and, if male, besides having to help in beguiling mortals so that the girls may fulfil their oath, to cause some devilry of their own at least once between each meeting.

This belief is probably one of the reasons for the existence, in many of the more remote villages of the Region, of 'Inciarmatori' who, by means of magical potions, 'drive the devil' out of those who have been possessed, or, alternatively, claim to be able to cure all kinds of diseases and ailments. Likewise, some women are accounted to be famous 'Occhiarole' and can drive the malocchio, the dreaded 'evil eye', out of anyone - as well as supplying a little magic of their own in the shape of love potions guaranteed to bring the most recalcitrant of men to the feet (or into the arms) of the desirous woman.

Malocchio can be contracted or given in the most innocent manner. It is enough to look at anyone fixedly for a second too long or pass some remarks which could be taken wrongly to 'give' the malocchio. It can manifest itself in many ways, but generally by a sudden sickness or bad luck in a business venture. But the spell can easily be removed by the Occhiarole, who place a plate containing water on the suspected victim's head, and pour a little olive oil on the water. If the oil remains in a compact mass all is well; if on the other hand the floating oil breaks up into a number of separate floating masses it is malocchio. The Occhiarola must then drive it out by means of incantations coupled with prayers and obscure phrases only known to herself.

Beneventines still believe in the existence of *arcijanare*, a special kind of witches, born from the promiscuous union of ordinary witches and devils on the banks of the Sabato River on the night of St. John.

These *arcijanare* would come into Benevento on the night of Christmas of each year, and enter the houses to steal the babies. Beneventine mothers, however, place a new *ginestre* (broom) outside their front door on that night; and, no self-respecting witch being able to resist such an object, they stop to admire it and spend the night counting the strands in the brooms. Soon daylight approaches, and the witches, suddenly becoming aware of it, depart in a hurry back to their infernal abodes where the devils are awaiting them - without the babies whom they had hoped to bring up as devils. Thus the Beneventine babies are safe for another twelve months.

Another spot in Benevento said to be haunted is the Bridge of Lepers, over the Sabato River. The bridge is so called because close to it, in the 12th century, there was a leper's hospital; but the ghosts that haunt the bridge on moonlit nights are not those of lepers - they are the soldiers of King Manfred.

This King, who is always spoken of in the South as having been good and just, was the illegitimate son of Emperor Frederick II. History describes him as having been an enlightened, charming and cultured man, but immoral and irreligious. After the death of the Emperor (1250) and of his son Conrad (1254), Manfred, believing that the latter's little three-year-old son, Conradin, had died, assumed the Crown of the South and became the head of the Ghibelline party in Italy. For this he was excommunicated by three Popes in succession.

When in 1260 he received a message from Conrad's widow that her son was alive and well, he

replied that it was too late for him to step down but that he would, if given the chance, bring him up as his heir. But this suggestion came to nothing.

Meanwhile Pope Urban IV had invited Charles of Anjou to come to Italy to subdue Manfred, and they met in battle near Benevento in February 1266. Charles won the day, mainly because he had ordered his troops to concentrate their blows upon the enemy's horses, a deed which in that chivalrous age was considered disgraceful, but he thereby dismounted Manfred's cavalry.

Manfred fell mortally wounded near the Leper's Bridge and remained buried under the bodies of a group of his soldiers who fell over him; it was not until three days later that his body was found. The victors then marched past, each man depositing a stone or piece of rock over his body, so that a tumulus was formed over him. This was the 'grave mora', the 'heavy mole', mentioned by Dante in the 3rd canto of *Purgatory*.

Two years later Pope Clement IV had the remains of Manfred exhumed and dispelled beyond the confines of the Kingdom "for", he said, "a heretic must not rest on ground that belongs to the Church".

The remains were cast beyond the river Verde, now identified with the Garigliano, which marked the border of the Pope's rule. According to Dante:

"the rain now drenches them,
and the wind drives, out of the kingdom's bound,
almost by the banks of the Verde, where with
lights extinguished, he removed them from their bed."

And the ghosts which haunt the Bridge of Lepers, those of Manfred's soldiers, are searching for the bones of their King.

There was nothing magical about the trattoria a few miles beyond Benevento where we happened to stop for lunch: it was simply full of good food. It was just an ordinary unpretentious eating house of the type one encounters all over Italy along the principal (and some of the secondary) roads, often far removed from any town or village. There the guest cannot order from a sophisticated menu replete with names of unknown and often non-existent dishes. In a trattoria you are in the hands of the host.

In this particular one, after the usual apologies from the host that we had arrived on a day when there really was nothing special to eat, followed by our assurances that we could hardly believe it since the trattoria was renowned far and wide for its good food, we were seated at a table covered with a spotless table cloth; and while waiting for the food to arrive helped ourselves from the carafe of local wine which, as in trattorie everywhere, decorated the centre of the table.

Soon an antipasto arrived: a large dish of farced tomatoes, split hard-boiled eggs, anchovies, sardines, salami and ham, artichoke hearts preserved in olive oil, grilled peppers, olives. This feast was only to put our stomach 'right' and to prepare it for the reception of the lunch when it arrived.

It did: a huge helping of fusilli swimming in a luscious gravy made with onions, tomatoes and egg fruit, and covered with a local cheese made from ewe's milk; followed by the meat course, incredibly tender and tasty slices cut from a four-week-old goatling grilled over a wood fire, and served with a contour of 'lambassune'; the latter, the host informed us, were wild yams collected by his wife and children from the meadows and pasture lands on the sides of the mountains. It was a memorable lunch!

Fully restored we again took the road, descending the eastern flanks of the Apennines, the country becoming stony and parched as we reached the flatlands which continue to the Adriatic Sea, the north-eastern horizon broken by the mountains of the Gargano Peninsula, our goal.

The Gargano lies on the opposite side of Italy from Naples, and is the spur in Italy's boot. It consists of a single huge mountain range detached from and independent of both the Apennines and the Murge. Its sides fall precipitously to the sea and it is only accessible from Foggia by way of Lucera to the north or Manfredonia to the east. We chose the latter because on the way we would see Santa Maria di Siponto, a Romanesque church dedicated to the Holy Mother by Pope Pasquale II in the year 1117. The church is all that is left of Siponto, a town dating from Greek times and razed to the ground by Manfred in the year 1256, the only way he could induce the inhabitants to leave the malaria-infested locality and transfer to Manfredonia, the new city which he had built only three kilometres away.

Santa Maria is square in plan, its chief glory being the rich portal supported by two lions. The interior is bare but conserves its primitive style of decoration featuring blind arches. There was no sign of the famous Madonna, and having satisfied our curiosity we were about to retire when a man appeared from behind the church and, in answer to our questions, pointed out a doorway on the left which concealed a long flight of steps down to the crypt.

When I mentioned that the church had likenesses to the Pisan-Lucchese school he retorted that, if this were so, then it was only by chance; Siponto never copied anything from anyone, let alone from far away Pisa or Lucca, and it was older than them anyhow!

The crypt is the full size of the church above, and was only dimly lit by the candles upon the altar. By this feeble light we saw the large wooden statue of the Madonna holding the Child on her knees. Reputed by some to be Byzantine and by others to date only from the 13th century this very impressive group, the Madonna with her face blackened and the Child with cropped hair reminiscent of Roman portraits, gives the impression of being as old as time. Legend has it that it was originally made by St. Luke.

How old is it really? where did it come from? what rites did it witness during its long life? There is something of the secret about it being in this dark crypt, mysterious in itself. Yet it may be only the subdued light, the burning candles and the smell of incense which give this impression.

We arrived at Manfredonia, which may be said to be the continuation of vanished Siponto. It never did attain to the importance of its mother town, yet when first built it became a busy port, traded with Venice and the East, and had a mint of its own as well as being the Seat of the Archbishop of Siponto. Its principal building is the massive fortress-castle begun by Manfred and finished by his victor, Charles of Anjou; it now houses the Museum, where are exhibited the antiquities excavated at Siponto.

Being far removed from normal lines of communication, Manfredonia has little history of its own; it simply followed the political vicissitudes of the South. Still, it did not go unnoticed. The city was sacked by the French in 1419 and again in 1528, and burnt to the ground by the Turks in 1620.

Connected with the last, there is, in the Town Hall, the painting of a beautiful dark-haired girl, one Giacoma Beccarini, who, with many other unfortunate maidens from the pillaged town, was, on that occasion carried off by the Turks and sold into slavery. The more fortunate among the girls were bought for harems; and Giacoma, even more fortunate, became the favourite of the Sultan. She is said to have been liberated some years later, together with a son, by the Knights of St. John; much against her wish it appears. The son had been brought up a Mahomedan, but became, and eventually died, a Christian monk.

Today the main industry of Manfredonia's 45,000 inhabitants is agriculture and fishing; and it is endeavouring to become a tourist centre in line with the opening up of the Gargano Peninsula. It boasts several comfortable hotels and many good restaurants where an excellent 'mountain' wine and tasty local dishes are served.

Whatever importance Manfredonia has had is due to its position as the gateway to the Holy Mount of Sant'Angelo, which has, for many centuries, been a pilgrimage place. This mount is part of the Gargano Range and is a barren wilderness of chalk, limestone and flint. On it is a town which bears the same name as the mount, only eighteen kilometres distant from Manfredonia, but 843 metres above it in altitude. It can be reached by a very good but very steep road which has no less than twenty-one hairpin bends as well as many other curves.

The town of Monte San'Angelo 60 years ago was much bigger than Manfredonia, which then numbered barely 8000 souls. This was because in the vicinity of the latter there was much wasteland, swampy and malaria-infested; and the inhabitants found refuge in the higher ground. Now, with greatly improved drainage and sanitation, the deepening of its port, and the construction of a railway line which connects it through Foggia to the rest of Italy, the people of the mountains come to it to find employment.

From Monte San'Angelo there are some magnificent views of the gulf, and visitors find much to admire in the so-called Tomb of the ancient Lombard King Rothari with its Byzantine frescos; in the Church of Santa Maria Maggiore; and in the Norman castle. The town itself is extremely ancient, though its buildings are mostly 'only' of medieval date, as are its narrow, stepped and arched streets. But what renders it famous is the Grotto and the Basilica of Saint Michael.

The grotto is the forerunner of all the Saint Michaels in Western Europe but it was already a famous pilgrimage place long before the introduction of Christianity in this region of Italy. To this vast cavern there would come, in pagan times, ailing men, who, having wrapped themselves in the skin of a black goat, would endeavour to fall asleep in its dark recesses. If, despite the superstitious fear of the deity and of the mysterious darkness around them, they did succeed in falling asleep, and if they slept long enough, the deity would come in a dream, give them a drink of water, and therewith cure them.

With the advent of Christianity the healing cave and its deity were forgotten; until one day in 490 A.D., it is said, a local herdsman lost a black goat and found it near the entrance of the grotto. Unable to drag it away he threw a stone at it, but the stone only went a little distance before it turned back and hit him!

Completely overcome with superstitious terror, the farmer ran to the nearest priest, who took him to the Bishop of Siponto, the future Saint Laurence. The Bishop went to the cave and, entering it knelt and commenced to pray. Suddenly there was a flash of light, and the Archangel Michael, wearing a red cloak and brandishing a fiery sword, appeared and told him that he had driven the devil out of the cave and that he had erected an altar there, which he wanted Laurence to consecrate.

Laurence entered further into the cavern, which was now ablaze with light, and he saw the altar in a recess. He then remembered that many years earlier the Emperor Constantine had visited such a cave at Sosthenium, in the mountains of the Bosphorus, and that the Archangel Michael had appeared to him there, and had ordered him to turn it into a Christian shrine. The Emperor had built a church there, the first of several built in the East. All these grotto-churches were dedicated to Saint Michael, and were places of healing.

Saint Laurence did what the Emperor had done, turned the heathen grotto into a Christian

shrine, and the healing properties of the water which he found in a well within the cavern became known far and wide. A martial Saint who expelled the devil by force was in keeping with the times; the cult of the Archangel was established and the shrine became a stopping place for crusaders to and from the Holy Land. Thousands of pilgrims came to pray there and the town of Monte Sant'Angelo was established in order to shelter them; and in due course similar shrines were consecrated to St. Michael elsewhere in Western Europe, notably La Sacra di San Michele in Piedmont, Mont Saint-Michel in Normandy, and St. Michael's Mount in Cornwall.

The grotto at Monte Sant'Angelo is surmounted by and entered through the Basilica, a beautifully proportioned building with a characteristic octagonal belfry, built during the 13th and 14th centuries by local artisans. Access to it is through a small paved courtyard with, at its end, a double archway, the one on the right terminating at the head of a stone stairway descending, as it were, into a dungeon, which is actually a small atrium open to the sky and with a railed gallery above it. At one end there is a massive bronze door, which opens into the grotto.

This door is among the finest in Italy, and it would be worthwhile going to Monte Sant'Angelo just to see it, if for nought else. It opens in the centre, and the two halves are each divided into twelve panels, each representing a biblical scene, the last showing the apparition of the Archangel to Saint Laurence. The main elements of each scene and figure are outlined in silver damascene, and many of the panels bear explanatory inscriptions in silver inlay and a profusion of details in coloured enamels.

Halfway up the door, outside the panels, there is a horizontal line of eight heavy bronze rings hanging from lion-headed masks. These are knockers which the pilgrims are said to bang noisily both on entering and leaving the shrine, in order to draw upon themselves the notice of the Archangel; but no one used them while we were there.

This splendid door was an offering to the sanctuary by an obviously wealthy Amalfitan, one Pantaleone, who was the head of the rich Amalfitan merchant community in Constantinople, and he had it cast there in the year 1076, as is attested by an inscription.

Passing through it we found ourselves in semi-darkness, only broken by the reflection upon the wet floor and walls of the cave of the light emanating from a brightly lit tabernacle enclosing a large statue of the Saint.

As our eyes became accustomed we began to distinguish our surroundings. We saw more lights too, a row of little oil lamps hiding behind red glass shields, which threw a ghostly light as they hung, on chains, from gilt angels affixed to the wall on each side of the Saint's statue; and there were lit candles on altars.

We were in a immense cave with sloping roof and walls constantly dripping water. The floor was paved with stone blocks, and on it a number of people were kneeling. At the far end of the cavern we discerned a group of separate altars, made of coloured marble, and each protected from the dripping water by a rose marble baldachin supported by marble columns. All these altars were on a raised marble platform, reached by wide marble steps.

The main altar was on a platform atop a separate lot of steps inside a large open-work marble enclosure, and surmounting it was a marble tabernacle containing the huge gold-winged white marble statue of St. Michael, dressed like Roman legionaire, wearing a high gold crown, weakly holding a gold sword in his raised right hand, and gingerly standing upon a poor dwarfed monster, who no doubt symbolises the original occupant of the cave.

The Saint's representation is probably meant to be benign and warlike at the same time; but this

blend of opposites has resulted in a weak and effeminate-looking youth wearing long curls, absent-mindedly standing upon the dwarf and seemingly undecided as to whether to cut him down or not. Though it has been there since the 17th century, it is not a good statue; at least, we did not think it in keeping with the high artistic traditions of Italy. Yet it is attributed to Sansavino. But then, such is Faith; others even claim that it was done by Michelangelo! One would have liked to have seen the original bronze statue of the Saint, the one that was melted down by Saracen pirates during one of their many incursions.

What is really beautiful is the Episcopal Chair standing against the wall in the same enclosure. Formerly kept in the church of Santa Maria di Siponto and dating from the 12th century, it is made of marble, the side panels exquisitely carved in high relief with a martial figure of St. Michael slaying a dragon, the back piece featuring an open work Arabic pattern of interlaced circles and volutes, the whole supported by two crouching lions. This chair, though a couple of centuries later in date, is a fitting companion to the bronze door.

We did not see the ancient healing well from which modern pilgrims drink to restore their health, but this was because we did not know where to look for it in that huge cave. We were later told that it is behind the main altar.

Wishing to take a photograph of the inside of the dark shrine, and not having dared to bring in a tripod or flash light, I had to steady myself for a time exposure by standing and bracing against the wall, an act obviously disapproved of by a small group of pilgrims who were kneeling on the wet floor with their heads bowed and silently praying near me. They no doubt resented my apparent want of humility and respect in this holy place. Had the procedure taken a little longer than it did, I am sure that they would have remonstrated with me. However, the resulting photograph was worth the risk.

On the way out we stopped at one of the stalls lining the little piazza outside the even smaller courtyard, where one can buy the usual tourist souvenirs, but here with greater accent upon religious objects. We were not tempted by the many statuettes of the Archangel, some in coloured plaster, others in plastic or tin. We spied some genuine-looking pilgrim staffs - in a sense we were pilgrims too; we bought one of those.
