

355

## LOTUS AND MANNA

By LOUIS GOLDING

I do not possess the ingenuity and arcane scholarship of those German savants who demonstrate that Aeschylus and William Shakespeare were pure Germans, and I will therefore not try, as I am tempted, to prove that Odysseus was a pure Jew. It may seem unnecessarily modest on my part, for there is a not innumerable school of Jewish writers whom no ethnic or chronological or psychological difficulty prevents from proving that any gentile possessed of any virtue is a Jew and any Jew possessed of any vice is a gentile. But for my own part I am content to hail Odysseus as the most Jewish of the Greek heroes. I am anxious to claim the Odyssey as a poetic pattern of the Diaspora.

It is possible that such a thought would not have imposed itself upon me if I had been content to be a quiet clerk in London or a fervent seller of sewing-machines in Cincinnati. But, waking lately in my vaulted bedroom in the island of Djerba, off the coast of Tunisia, it occurred to me suddenly that I, a humble Jewish wanderer, had at length fulfilled the circuit of Odysseus's wanderings, for Djerba, the island of the Lotophagi, was the only island of Odysseus's tribulations whither my vagrant sail had not yet impelled me. I had bathed from that desperate strand in Ischia where Circe converted his sailors into swine. I had plucked rosemary in the island where the sirens sang. I had climbed the fuming volcanoes of Lipari, where Aeolus unloosed the bag of winds. I had plucked the scarlet anemones of Ithaca, the beginning and end of his journeys.

It was only to the island of the Lotophagi, the Lotus-Eaters, I had not penetrated, the outer limit of his perils, and the most sinister of them all. For here the Lotophagi dwelt, that quiet people who offered not death to the sailors of Odysseus, but oblivion. "Now, whosoever of them did eat the honey-sweet fruit of the lotus had no more wish to bring tidings nor to come back, but there he

chose to abide with the lotus-eating men, ever feeding on the lotus, and forgetful of his homeward way.”

It was those words that most of all jangled in my head when I awoke that morning of Rámadán, to the near cry of the muezzin on his minaret and the loud boom of the gun on the yellow shore. I had come to Djerba that I, too, might eat the lotus. I met a forgotten community of Jews that had been eating lotus for two thousand years. True that nowhere upon the diverse tempest-twisted tracks of the Odyssey had I not met Jews—whether they drank Asti Spumante in Capri or *rezzinato* in Ithaca, that careful distillation from glue and turpentine. But here in Djerba I had met the Jewish Lotus-Eaters; I saw them immured in ghettos more impregnable than the sunken fortresses of Verdun—more impregnable because the bastions consisted of no more than a string slung between two twigs which they themselves had suspended. I beheld the only voluntary Jewish ghetto in existence, and the air was heavy with the insidious enchantment of lotus.

So it was that the thought came to me, not that Odysseus was a Jew, but that he was the most Jewish of the Greeks; not that the Odyssey was to be confused with the forty-year wanderings of the pastoral Jews in the stark desert, but that it was a pattern of the adventures of the later Jews, seeking Ithaca, seeking Zion, across a hundred seas, perilous with ogres and seductive with sirens.

Do not try to convince me that the conception of the Wooden Horse was not purely Jewish. It could be proved, moreover—but that would be a digression—that it was the prototype of the Tank which figured so conspicuously in a later Great War. And a man would need little ingenuity to parallel the incidents of Odysseus's seafaring with the uncompleted tale of the Jewish exile. Who is Circe but the goddess of stocks and bonds who has converted so many of our most promising sailors into swine? How many different shapes in our history has Polyphemus taken, from Spanish Inquisitor to Tartar Cossack? How often have we, too, not been detained in the island of Calypso, not for years but centuries, offering our bewitched hearts to Parisian intellect, London

manners? Nor is our Odyssey completed. With Ithaca almost in sight, on what island of Phæacia shall we be wrecked again? And of what nature will the marvellous Phæacian ships be that will carry us home at length? The golden keel of a Rothschild bequest? Will it be the iron keel of some Napoleonic soldier? But we are not arrived in Phæacia yet. Our sailors are dispersed. Some are reconnoitring dizzily between Scylla and Charybdis. Some of us stuff our ears with wax or bind our bodies to the mast because of the gentile Siren that bids us lose ourselves upon her mouth. And some are drowsed with the lotus century beyond century, and are forgetful of the homeward way. It is of the Jewish Lotophagi in the primordial island of the lotus that I purpose to write here.

Once or twice a month the *Compagnie de Navigation Olivier* may provide a craft for you, almost as primitive as the galley of Odysseus itself, whereon you may proceed to Djerba. But I counsel you to take the long journey by train round the flat sandy coast by way of Sousse and Sfax to the oasis of Gabes and thence by a bone-shaking public automobile to the narrow strait which separates you from the white miracle of Djerba. Djerba, loveliest island, I salute you, island of the lotus which seduced the sailors of Odysseus from Ithaca and the progeny of Abraham from Zion.

That once there grew a fruit here, overpoweringly enticing, Homer, and to a lesser degree Herodotus, make abundantly clear. What else attracted hither to this remote beach the first adventurous Jews? What else attracted me? "*Mán hu?*" indeed, as the Hebrews asked when they first saw the manna fallen upon the ground. "*Mán hu? What is this?*" I wonder that no scholar has attempted to prove that manna and lotus were the same vegetable.

What, then, was the lotus? Had I not come to Djerba to feed on it? No man to-day shall decide what it veritably was, saving he enter, as I did, into the dwelling-places of the Jews. Certain learned half-wits declare the lotus was no other fruit than the date (though Herodotus explicitly declares that in sweetness it *resembled* the date,

*ergo* it was not the date). More dangerous patients prove laboriously it was the olive, the clover, the pomegranate. And there are some, finally, speaking more wisdom than they know, who declare it to be the fruit of the wild jujube—*zizyphus lotus*.

I say they speak more wisdom than they know, for if they were to pluck the fruit of that tree and devour it straightway they would abandon their theory. The raw lotus, as Rawlinson correctly says, looks and tastes like a bad crab-apple. I refuse to believe that the sailors of Odysseus forgot the name of their native land in the stupefaction caused by an overdose of crab-apples, or that acute stomachic pains were the cause of their languor. The fact is that, precisely as Herodotus remarks with a somewhat audible sniff, "the Lotophagi even succeed in obtaining from it a sort of wine." Exactly. It was the wine distilled from the lotus which was the secret of it all, the most potent wine I have ever tasted. And it is not the few French colonials of Djerba who distil it, or drink it. It is not the Muslims of Djerba who are responsible for it, the Supreme Teetotaller having turned their talents in other directions. It is the Jews of Djerba who distil the lotus. They are the Lotophagi, by which you must translate lotus-drinkers. Whether it was the Jews in the Jewish villages of Hara-Kebîra and Hara-Serîra who seduced the sailors of Odysseus from Ithaca as they themselves are seduced from Zion I will not decide. So early as that I do not believe that the peoples of Israel in the north and Judah in the south had sunk their differences. It may be that the people of Hara-Kebîra were a colony of Israelites and the people of Hara-Serîra a colony of Judæans, and that they first joined forces to entertain the Greek strangers from the Ionian Islands. All that seems to be rather hazardous theorising. I merely wish to make it quite clear that if you would now desire to partake of the lotus even where those old sailors partook of it, it is from the hands of a Jew you must receive it in the far island of Djerba, hemmed in by yellow sands.

\* \* \* \* \*

Not even a Jewish stranger will find room in either of

the Haras, or ghettos, of Djerba. He must pitch his tent in the gentile village of Houmt-Souk, where there are one or two primitive hotels. Here also, though they actually live in the ghettos, the Jewish goldsmiths forgather to sell the gilt trinkets they have hammered and fretted and bejewelled, squatting in their vaulted rooms several miles away. How many shadowy centuries back extends the Jewish tradition of jewellery in Djerba? Whither derived? From those primal goldsmiths who bedecked the heart of a priest with twelve jewels in rows? For though most of the conventions they work in are Arabic or Byzantine in nature, others are earlier than the Hellenic from which the Byzantine are derived; sacerdotal they seem, as if the artificers had an uneasy memory of that thaumaturgic jewellery which winked with its own fires in the precincts of the Lord, the Urim and Thummim. . . .

It was in a beautifully disposed company we set forth southward from Houmt-Souk to explore the ghettos of Hara-Kebîra and Hara-Serîra. We were a Protestant, a Muslim, a Greek Churchman, a French Catholic and a Jew. I could not help pointing out to my friends that I felt like a hen shepherding the chickens she has hatched into the hen-coop they have deserted. They could not repudiate the analogy. "But you seem to forget," said the French Catholic, a somewhat cynical young gentleman, "the part the Divine Chanticleer played in the fecundation of your eggs." When we approached the entrance into the first ghetto, the Muslim, being a native of the island, said a little uncomfortably he would wait for us outside the village. I am certain his motive was not a sense of social superiority. The official cheikhs of the island are Muslims, it is true. But the *élite* are a small handful of Jews. Indeed, a tiny house was pointed out to me in the Hara owned by a certain Jew who was a preponderating influence not only in the politics of Djerba but of the whole colony. His property in the Faubourg St. Honoré was considerably more extensive, but he preferred squatting on a Djerba rug with a decoction of lotus beside him to sitting stiffly in his gilt Louis Quinze salon amid the plop of Veuve Cliquot corks. His motive was not a sense

of social superiority, I repeat, even though every Jew he would meet in the village wore a garment of shame to distinguish him from all Muslims. But it was a garment of shame from which the shamefulness had departed, a distinction retained as deliberately as the string suspended between two twigs marked off the deliberate ghetto. Nor did the Muslim forbear to enter the Hara for fear of physical violence. I say that not only because the Jews and Muslims of Djerba have lately lived together on terms of scandalous amity, but because that particular Muslim was an *Aïssaouïa*, and therefore very readily subjected himself to more deadly violence than any Jew, or, indeed, any Christian, could possibly have conceived. In certain conditions of religious ecstasy he could transfix his whole body with swords till he looked like a bull in the arena after the banderilleros have finished with him. Moreover, and I have seen him do it, he could devour live scorpions with the utmost relish in attestation of the glory of Allah and the superiority of Mohamet over his predecessors, Moses and Jesus.

It was not fear, therefore, that kept my accomplished friend beyond the circuit of the ghetto. It was taboo. It was the piece of string suspended between the two twigs stuck into the opposite corners of the ghetto street. His friends, the Jews, respected his own taboo. He respected theirs. As foreigners in the island, the Catholic, the Greek Churchman and the Protestant, proceeded with me into the places of my kinsmen.

\* \* \* \* \*

The houses of the Jews in Djerba are indistinguishable from the houses of the Muslim. A blind wall faces upon an unpaved narrow lane, and the dark door is opened not a second longer than will allow you to enter. You find yourself in a sunny court crowded with multitudes of children. There are few trees and no flowers in the court, for there is no living water in Djerba. The water-supply of the island consists exclusively of wells and rain-cisterns, which helps to explain why the Djerba Jewesses are much slimmer than their sisters in Tunis. The Djerbans, like Rebecca, must make their way to the well, balancing the

clay jar on their erect heads. The Tunisians have water laid on, which absolves them from their sole opportunity of exercise. Not that their menfolk mind. The Jewess of Tunis is valued by weight. In Djerba she is more frequently valued by her head-dress of gold coins, and still more frequently by charms more impalpable. But I must quell my impatience to arrive at that theme. I must endeavour first to compose their setting. A number of small archways on three sides give upon this central court, and each is the entrance to the single vaulted chamber which is the whole territory of a single family. The walls above the archways of this central court are sometimes inlaid with rows of coloured tiles, but only among the more elaborate jewellers and the master carpet-weavers. The building consists of one storey only. Usually the patriarch of the family, with his spouse, occupies the chamber nearest to the door, so that the constitution of a house is only a single stage removed from a tribal encampment, the tents merely being stiffened into dried brick and whitewash. The cooking has no ampler machinery than a few three-pronged clay shards not many inches high, heaped up with charcoal. There are no chimneys in the rooms, of course, and the open court is the sole kitchen. Water is stored in the shadow in great clay amphoræ, of precisely the shapes that the Romans introduced into the island, and they themselves introduced from Greece. As you enter, the first thing you set eyes on is the patriarch of the household seated upon the capital of some pillar which once held up a Roman temple; he turns over upon his knee the pages of a holy book expounding an earlier creed, a creed worshipped in a temple earlier than the Roman temple, in a temple overthrown by the Roman worshippers. Little does that old man know what a symbol he is of one of the great revenges of history. He is more potent than Samson with the ruins of Dagon about him. For Samson was slain with Dagon, but this old Jew of Djerba has his foot on the neck of Jupiter, and his quiet murmur is in truth a hosanna of victory.

A brightly-striped hanging suspends in each archway. You push this aside to enter a small shadowy vestibule, and

VOL. CXXII. N.S. O\*

turning right or left you enter the chamber proper, one-half of which is occupied by a low and deep recess. In this recess the whole family sleeps upon piled rugs, and in a higher and smaller recess in one of the side walls the rest of the family's rugs are stored against the keen winter nights. Other belongings than these they do not possess. It is as if they had inherited from some remote exodus the knowledge that he travels swiftest who carries least; as if their lotus-heavy somnolence were sometimes for a sharp moment disturbed by the fancy that the whitewashed brick of their vaults had sagged of a sudden into the brown camel-skin of a nomad tent; as if the wandering from Palestine into Arabia, from Arabia across the torpid sea to Abyssinia, from Abyssinia to this quiet fringe of Libya, must on the morrow be resumed; and the way to the Pillars of Hercules is perilous and the breath of the enemy is hot upon the neck.

\* \* \* \* \*

We had not left taboo behind us at the insubstantial portals of the ghetto. It was true that my Catholic friend, on account of his grace and good spirits, was *persona grata* among these Jews of Djerba; moreover, they spoke little French or none, and he a certain amount of their Judæo-Arabic (so that I, incidentally, had an easy channel of communication with them). And yet the moment we swung aside the curtain that shielded from the sun the household of his friend, Sidi Pinhas Sabban, a sense of taboo once more asserted itself. It was an arcane sensation, difficult to describe, and I can vouch that my own little conscious mind had no part in it. I can only speak with certainty of its effect, and its effect was to exclude my three Christian friends from that dark vaulted room as certainly in the spirit as the Muslim was excluded some hundreds of yards away in the flesh. It was not that my friends, and least of all the Frenchman, became in the slightest degree embarrassed or ill at ease. It was merely that they knew that they were outside, excluded, and we, Sidi Pinhas Sabban and I, were within, held together in a mystery till the end of time.

When I come to reflect upon that uncanny moment it strikes me as a more beautiful corroboration of his most desperate allegations than any professional anti-Semite ever dared to hope for. That little goldsmith who twists gold thread in the Island of the Lotus-Eaters off the coast of Libya, and I, the chance wanderer from misty England, we *were*, indeed, the Elders of Zion. We *were* the agents of a wide-world conspiracy. And what made us more dangerous was that our complicity was a thing so subtle, secret, spiritual, spontaneous. We had not sent letters to each other in invisible ink detailing the latest stages in our plans for the assassination of all the gentile financiers in Lombard Street and Wall Street. We had made no swarthy arrangements for the exchange of Muslim and Christian children between our countries to be ritually murdered on the coming Passover. And yet, not having conveyed a single syllable to each other by any medium, or having been in the faintest degree aware of each other's existence until the swinging aside of that curtain, having as common superficial currency not more than five words of French on his side and five of Arabic on mine, we could have organised in the knowledge of our oneness vaster projects than those. Drugged as he was by his African lotus, drugged as I was by my Hellenic asphodel, we had a potency which had already performed great things and will perform them again. It had made their creeds for our Catholic and Greek Orthodox and Protestant friends in the room with us and for the Muslim beyond the gate. It had made their creeds. Who knows to what ultimate creed it may still address itself, even until the fires of the sun wane and the glaciers thrust their snouts from the saddles of all the hills into the grey, nipped lands?

\* \* \* \* \*

And, I repeat, all this was uncanny. For how little had I in common with this shy, brown-eyed besmocked little Jew from Djerba, and how much with my three Christian friends? For the Protestant was an Englishman, and we had all English literature in common from Beowulf to James Joyce; and the Greek and I had in common the

o \* 2

memory of the cloven cliffs above Delphi and the blue rapier of the Gulf of Corinth beyond the olive-groves. And if the Frenchman and I had no more in common than the memory of a bottle of Château Lafitte, what a bond was there!

Yet soon, soon, verily, in the bond of the wine distilled from lotus were the two Jews to pledge their race, and in the sweetened lotus preserved whole in spirit to record the mystic benefaction of manna. Yet I confess myself baffled by the nature of the taboo which imposed itself in Pinhas's small room. First he brought forth two three-legged stools and sate himself down on one. He expected, I gathered shortly, that I should assume the other. But I did not do so until I had pressed the three gentiles to occupy it singly or divide it between them. "No, no," whispered the Catholic. "It is not right. We Christians must sit on the floor. It is expected here. Do you sit upon the stool." I did so, my head somewhat in a whirl. I had never known in general history or personal experience the gentile so assume or so submit to disabilities with regard to the Jew. I had a feeling that we had attained antipodes, or the secret side of the moon. Yet I could not suppress a certain sense of self-satisfaction that I and my brother should be enthroned on stools and the Christians lie at our feet upon the floor. It was as if we were the twin Kings of Israel and Judah and the outer tribes had come in to pay us dues. The badge of his shame, the white smock imposed on his fathers by the fathers of his Muslim friends, became in this curious half light a princely robe, the garment of a high mystery. It grieved me that I was not myself thus marked out. But I, at least, I too sat upon a throne. Whatever smouldering inferiority complexes my Jewish existence in a gentile world had engendered in me were at that moment extinguished. "Make yourselves quite at home," I said, with gracious condescension.

Sidi Pinhas was, it was evident, happy to be entertaining us. His wife, he said, would shortly reappear from the well where the camel all day, at the end of a tether, made his sardonic rounds. She had gone with

their first baby to draw water. In the meanwhile he drew forth a cruse of wine. He carefully poured away the layer of olive oil with which it was protected from the air, even as the wine of the Romans two thousand years ago was protected and the wine of the Italians to this day. Then he passed a glass over to me and I made politely to pass it further to my friend the Frenchman. Once more I heard the thud of the wings of taboo in the air.

“Cashair!” he exclaimed urgently, “Cashair!” I wondered in what language he spoke. But I perceived from my host that it was, in fact, I and not the others who was expected to drink that wine. “Cashair!” my host repeated. But upon his Jewish lips, although there was no demonstrable difference in his mode of pronouncing the word, I promptly understood it. *Kosher*, to be sure, the wine was *kosher*. I saluted him and raised the wine to my lips, such a wine as I had never before tasted. A certain acidity there was about it, but an insidiousness which had once worked legendary woe. I was drinking the wine distilled from the lotus, incredibly after three thousand years denied the gentiles and become the Jews’ proud privilege—*cashair*, forbidden! For that was the stress placed upon the word by the Frenchman. Till that time I had only known *kosher* as a dietary mode or substance which all the world *might* partake of and the poor Jew *must*. It had now become a stuff of taboo. Only the proud Jew might, the poor gentile must not.

Not that my friends were denied good cheer. To them Sidi Pinhas brought a flask of *boukkha*, the fiery distillation of peaches, which for some reason they might partake of what time the distilled lotus was denied them. To them he brought dried cakes; to me, in addition, the lotus itself preserved in spirit—*nebk*, he called it; and then for us all, out of the rug recess he brought a dish of still warm cooked meats, in the three-pronged clay shard in which it had lately been prepared. It was whilst we were engaged upon these foods, and these liquors to wash them down, that his wife appeared, the loveliest lady I think I ever set eyes on.

\* \* \* \* \*

I have seen in various lands ladies who were lovely in various modes. But the wife of Sidi Pinhas (and, to tell the truth, the greater part of these Jewesses from Djerba, though she was the loveliest) had a beauty I could not associate with any living race I had encountered. She was, of course, a long way removed from the cold creatures of the North, fair as they are. Under no grey skies were those eyes enkindled. But she was beautiful not in the way that, for instance, Spanish women are beautiful, or Italian women, or the Turkish women whom Angora has permitted to walk forth unveiled. She recalled to me for a moment the Bedouin women of the mainland, but I was quick to see that that was because, like them, she wore great bangles over her elbows and above her brown feet, and the folds of her gown were held together by a large chased clasp. But she had not their nimbleness, their inquisitive chin, their ridged nose, their restless eyes. She wore a headdress of gold coins, and seemed less like a living woman of the people, despite the child at her breast, than the queen of some race that has ceased to exist.

Or had I not seen somewhere certain women not unlike her, in their gravity, in their calm assurance? Where had I seen them, then, if at all? Then of a sudden I remembered—in the uplands of Thessaly, in the smaller Ægean Islands, where the Greek type still lingers. It was they who seemed her kinswomen, not the urgent and ardent Jewish women out of Eastern Europe, not the tempered Jewish women of Western Europe and America. She seemed, and all these Jewesses of Djerba seemed, not Jewish, not Semitic, but Greek. She seemed even earlier than Greek, as if she went back to the Greek beginnings in Crete and Mycenæ. There I had seen her precise image, I now at length realised, that same full chin, those long, grave eyes, that unilinear brow and nose. I had seen her in the pattern of a Cretan vase treading an airy dance, or bearing an urn upon her head, or distilling potions out of secret herbs. More recently, but not less ceremonially, she had been distilling out of lotus the wine I held to my lips now.

\* \* \* \* \*

What secret does that Jewess of Djerba hint at, who seemed so much more Greek than Jewish? What irrecoverable knowledge must first be recovered before it shall be divined? For seeing that it cannot be disputed that she stands at the fountain-head of our race, that she presents our archetype unperverted by the strains of Khazar or Iberian or Teuton, shall we dare to believe that we were primordially creatures of the Mediterranean sea coasts and islands rather than sullen wanderers from the gaunt Arabian peninsula? The aspect of these or those do we perpetuate, these swift Greek creatures of sea and wind whom no creek in the ultimate antique seas did not harbour, or those swarthy submitters, the Arab Semites, those paragons of the principles of sterility?

Is it preposterous that the Jewess from Djerba should lead us so far away from all our ancient anchorages? Go with me so far as this, then. Admit the Jewess of Djerba and her kinsfolk in those proud ghettos to be not such dull Jews as the Jew of London or Chicago. Admit that when Odysseus brought back to their ships those of his sailors who had fed upon lotus he could not find certain of them. For these had found sanctuary in the ghettos and had thereon taken to themselves Jewish maidens for wives; they it was who produced the race of the modern Lotophagi, whom you may visit for yourselves, those Hellenic Hebrews who read the Torah of Moses and feed upon the lotus of Homer.