CHAPTER 3

*Trena-Practa*

 Anyone would be readily excused for reaching the conclusion that, in a nation where grinding poverty was the norm, its laborers forced into slavery and its women into prostitution, where living conditions were primitive, unsanitary and dangerous, ignorance universal and advancement the province of a privileged few, that the armies of Nin would be inferior to all others the world over, its soldiers judging their lives not worth fighting for, their nation worth little more than the dirt under their feet.

 Yet desertion was rare. Dozens of accounts in the writings of the priests testify that the armies of Nin fought with a valor scarcely to be matched by other peoples, distinguishing themselves over and over on the battlefield for bravery and deeds of prowess.

 It is useless to maintain that they fought for any love of country, or in self-defense, or for plunder . In themselves these reasons, although present, were clearly insufficient. It was not for the rewards of this life that soldiers strove so valiantly on the bloody battlefields, nor for any hope of improving their lot on this earth, but for the promise of everlasting life in the radiant and glorious paradise of Vanarosa, peopled with the souls of the good and the brave, with more than enough bliss to justify all the bitterness of mortal woe.

 To understand the fanaticism which the religion of Trena-Practa inspired, one must begin from the well documented fact

that ordinary people truly believed their rulers immortal. Citizens and slaves, their parents, their grandparents , down to five generations and even beyond, had lived under the rule of the same duke of so-and-so, a man who, by the testimony of legend and song, had been already alive for thousands of years. Down in the heart of the city anyone older than 60 was considered ancient; and these patriarchs testified from their own experience that in all their days this same duke had not aged by so much as a wrinkle.

 Thus re-inforced by the evidence of their senses, the indoctrination of the masses was unshakable. A commoner could actually witness the death of a nobleman and deny that it was happening. Such innocent bystanders might of course be killed on the spot; however there was no necessity for doing so. If they did not collapse with fright they would swear they'd seen a hallucination. The inexplicable has a kind of binding power over the ignorant mind. Even professional scientists habituated to propound simple explanations for new phenomena, are not immune to wonder, even terror when dealing with the incomprehensible.

 It was only to be expected that the priests would take full advantage of the dependable credulousness of the masses. A profound horror of the very thought of rebellion against their God-appointed sovereigns was systematically instilled in their parishioners through education and church attendance. Those who were thoroughly humbled accepted their fate with bitter resignation. But there was always the danger that the small number of independent-minded individuals would resist being taken in, and the priests were always on the look-out for them. The priests considered no stratagem too base, provided it served their notions of state security.

 There was, for example, the fabrication of prophets. At least once in every generation, that is to say, every 20 years or so, the priests arranged for the spontaneous emergence and sudden disappearance of a prophet from the common people . A man of striking features (there are records of women being employed as well ) would miraculously appear in the marketplace of one of the major cities of the realm. He was wild and disheveled. Burning eyes looked out through the matted knots of filth encrusted hair. His physical appearance was such as to make anyone believe he’d come directly from the interior of the Great Central Desert. It was there, so he claimed, that he’d spent many years in fasting, austerities and prayer. Because of these severe tests, he was now in a state of direct communication with the *Yagam*  , the invisible yet immortal king still immanent on earth.

 This prophet might circulate in public for a few weeks, gathering bands of followers about him and living off donations and alms. It is now believed that most of them functioned as police spies. What is certainly true is that they were extraordinarily diligent in ferreting out information from all kinds of people. On one occasion the information supplied by a prophet exposed a conspiracy between the priests and some of the wealthy families of Nin .

 I doubt that there was a single prophet of this type who wasn’t a fraud. This opinion is not popular , neither with the public nor among historians. To this day people recount the sayings of this prophet, the miracles of another, the saintly works of a third. In and of itself this appears harmless. Every society needs its role models; it doesn’t really matter where they come from. However, it is the business of historians to concern themselves only with the accuracy of the historical record . Theories of social control should be left to persons more qualified to deal with them .

 A few days before the prophet’s departure he would gather up a crowd and lead them up into the hills and forests on the outskirts of the city. Everyone knew that it was here that the revelation would be delivered. These manifestations were usually timed to coincide with the spring equinox, the hills already covered with a dense growth of the tall, sturdy trees of which Nin has always had an abundance: cedar, oak, elm, poplar. Amassed in their branches one could hear the songs of the newly returning birds, those fortunate beings granted so much more freedom than suffering mankind. In preparation for the Good News, the credulous populace sat down or reclined in the broad meadows. To still their hunger they plucked the berries from trees and vines, caught and roasted squirrels, birds and other small game.

 *Sprinkling a white powder about him as he dances, the prophet lays down the circumference of a circle 40 feet in diameter. Anyone else who, through carelessness or curiosity, strays across this boundary is straightway seized with horrible convulsions. Death usually intervened in about 15 minutes. Only the priests had the scientific knowledge to manufacture such a poison. The prophet himself must have been protected by some kind of neutralizing ointment or potion.*

 *Now the prophet calls for silence. Lifting his eyes towards the heavens, he spreads wide his arms. Three times he invokes the name of the invisible Yagam. From a flask set within a brazier over a bonfire he guzzles down a mysterious potion which sends his limbs twitching in nightmarish contortions. Ricocheting about the open space he screams a babble of incomprehensible words. At the same time he throws explosives and firecrackers into the throngs.*

These were quite dangerous: limbs might be blown off, and eyes blinded. A death toll of a dozen on-lookers was not uncommon.

 *The crowds take cover, leaving an even greater space for the ensuing ceremonies. Whirling a torch in the air, grunting like an animal, his face twisted with rage, foaming at the lips, comporting himself in every way like a lunatic, he dashes madly about the circumference of the circle, rending his clothes, shaking snake rattles and leafy branches stained with animal blood, cutting himself with stones and knives and crying out in unbearable pain. From a distance, the dust cloud raised above him must have shimmered with a truly supernal radiance.*

 *Now his delirium communicates itself to the superstitious multitudes. Roaring in lusty choruses , they participate in his frenzy. Madly do they stamp and dance, inflicting serious physical injury on one another, often with no more than their bare hands. Hysterical women pierce the air with deafening shrieks, the pious weep for joy, the deranged grovel like animals , defecate in the mud. There is much slashing about with knives, beating heads against trees, filling their mouths with grass and dirt, tearing out hair and breaking bones.*

 *Even the beasts hidden in the forests fill the air with their savage guttural cries. Some fancy they see the spirits of the dead moving through the pregnant spaces between the trees. All rejoice in ecstasy and pain as all Nature is given over to this orgy of frenzy, sorrow and death.*

 With the sudden collapse of the prophet the dance comes to an abrupt halt. Now he lies motionless in the center of the ring, in a misshapen heap like the carcass of a flayed beast. Neither breath nor heartbeat are in evidence. Only the strange whistlings of the night air buzzing above his head break the silence.

 Profound quiet reigns over all. Persons unable to control their outbursts might be strangled into silence. The fanatic throngs reel as if intoxicated. Women who, seconds earlier had been groveling on the ground, writhing as in labor, now lie flat on their backs , semi-conscious and paralyzed, totally spent. At that moment one could have heard the trembling of a butterfly’s wing. Even the birds mute their ecstatic chirpings.

 Only then does the prophet rise up and seat himself in a cross-legged position. His slow gaze wanders over the multitudes. Some he catches with his eye, others he silences with a look. Many feel he is looking into their hearts, reading their inner secrets. A deep chant, very low and soft at first, then rising in volume and pitch, wells up from within , as if he is transmitting messages from a higher source. Chanting is followed by singing ; then by short exclamations; then by silence.

 Gradually the prophet begins introducing disconnected words from the common dialect. These congeal into isolated phrases, then into entire sentences. By many indications he makes it plain that he is having a conversation with the Yagam.

  *Whirling his head the prophet asks:*

 *“ What is the will of the Yagam, the invisible king, supreme ruler over all being, divine or mortal , animate or inanimate in the land of Nin? “*

 *He gazes as one transfixed, his hands folded before him on his lap, his eyes hard as agates, or closed as if in sleep.*

 Those who were skilled ventriloquists could throw their voices so that their replies appeared to emerge like disembodied, detached utterances descending directly from heaven:

 *“....Ya... Tagum... Tagum...Dan... Dan...Yamo ...Toso....Tan..”*

 *None of this as of yet means anything. The prophet becomes increasingly agitated. His stomach muscles bulge, sweat pours copiously from his face, his eyes glaze over, his breath becomes forced, his voice constricted. Reeling out of control, he shrieks from intolerable pain. It appears to require an incredible effort of will for him to regain his equilibrium. In a moment he will begin speaking again in short, intelligible phrases:*

 *“...It is the will of the Yagam that taxes be raised ...."*

 *“ It is the will of the Yagam that the levees for war be increased.*

 *“ It is the will of the Yagam that the sin of blasphemy be punished .........”*

 *Once again, scratching messages into the earth with a sharp stick, he throws firecrackers into the crowds. Prolonged silence follows this pronouncement. He starts up again:*

 *“What is the will of the Yagam, the invisible king, supreme ruler over all beings divine or mortal, animate or inanimate in the kingdom of Nin? “*

These sessions went on for at least 5 hours; nor was it uncommon for the revelation to persist all through the night. People would camp out, fall asleep, leave and return. Much drinking, carousing and brawling went on during the interludes between the commands for silence.

 These productions were always terminated by elaborate rituals . One way or another the prophet contrived that his departure should appear as a divine ascension, vanishing in a cloud of smoke, or being whisked away by an entourage that would suddenly appear from nowhere and carry him off. Never again would he seen or heard from again in that region, although he might appear in other parts of the country.

 Some contemporary historians maintain that valid teachings or prophecies did once in awhile come from these charlatans. If so, these must have been a matter of coincidence or happy accident. Prophetic revelations were arranged affairs, closely correlated with the desire of the aristocracy to promulgate unpopular decrees or make a great many changes all at once.

 Contemplating the sinister and degraded edifice erected under the banner of Trena-Practa , one is amazed at the high poetic level of its scriptures, hymns and prayers. Consider this excerpt taken from a sermon delivered by a priest in Metax in the

third century R.I. :

 *“Upon that moment when the obedient and virtuous mortal shall quit this vessel of life, there shall come down to him from the crystalline vaults of the heavens giant birds with beaks of gold and talons of silver, flapping huge wings of royal purple and scented with perfumes in which are distilled the essences of all the fruits of orchard and vine . On their backs they carry the splendid and munificent figures of the asogi ( angels). The suffering wanderer, now come to the end of his journey, shall be clothed in raiment of gold, bedecked with pearls and many jewels. His face , radiating like a hundred suns, will light up the heavens into which these messengers have come to transport him. Upon arrival he will be asked to give a full account of his life on earth. He will have to confess if he had ever erred in his obedience to the immortals of this world ; .by this testimony will he be judged fit to join the congregation of the immortals of Vanarosa. Before him will pass all the days of his youth , all the battles in which he fought for the greater glory of Nin. If he is found worthy, and every man who has not sinned before his anointed princes will so be deemed, he shall be clothed from head to foot in a mantle of light and be transported to the paradisical summits of Vanarosa. The heavens will abound everywhere with sweet sounds, every manner of sensual delight will be accorded to him, and he will partake of the elixir of happiness at the nipples of bliss.”*

 All of the tenets of Trena-Practa are summarized in this passage: Goodness was defined in terms of humility, by not striving for fame or distinction, or to better one’s lot, through bravery as a soldier, resignation to one’s ignorance, by honoring the priesthood. The fundamental laws for morality, not killing, not stealing, not lying, and so forth, were also taught; yet these were considered of secondary importance relative to the sterling virtues of loyalty and subservience.

 Vanarosa was the home of the meek, the virtuous and the brave. Capital sins forever closed the doors to heaven. Among them suicide was given a prominent place. Death, cruel and prolonged to the wicked, was painless and quick to the good. No final home was assigned to evil-doers, the priests being too realistic to try to invent a Hell worse than that of daily existence.

 Mankind wasinstructed to disregard this life save in terms of serving their masters: being immortal gods, how could one dare to disobey them? The priests occupied an intermediary role, mortal not divine, yet superior to the common run of mankind and assured of Vanarosa .

 A strange, yet not totally unexpected phenomenon developed over the span of half a millennium. This was the implantation of a set of beliefs complementary to those taught to the populace, but within the aristocracy itself. This despite the fact that it was they who were the originators of most Mercian dogma and superstition. It appears that five generations of witnessing the deaths of antiquated relatives were required before that the psychic recognition sank in, that death would come to everyone regardless of caste. Eventually the more insecure and credulous found themselves clinging to a personal belief in heaven. With the passage of a few more centuries, the majority of the ruling class adhered to the doctrine of the heavenly paradise of Vanarosa.

 Those who did cleaved to this belief far more fanatically than suffering mankind, whose miserable lot from dawn to dusk might appear to most require the relief of bliss in the afterlife. However an abnormally long lifespan of 400 years, filled largely with idleness and depravity, produced a pathological horror of dying that could only be mitigated by the palliatives available from a particularly unwholesome set of beliefs, rituals and practices.

 At least the fears of the poor and disenfranchised were grounded in reality, for death grinned at them from every gutter, alleyway and tenement. No instruction was necessary to educate the masses into phenomena witnessed on a continual basis, such as infant mortality, injury, sickness, plague, warfare, violence and crime.

 In contrast: the cowardice of the nobility in the face of an unavoidable fate was, when not outright laughable, much to be pitied. Letting go of four hundred years of existence was not easily contemplated. The dreary emptiness of their lives always seemed preferable to an obliteration inconceivable to them, and for which they had never made any preparation.

 Aged and desiccated sybarites , to whom the experience of living now occasioned only unrelieved revulsion and disgust, wept like swaddled babies at the mere suggestion of the ultimate judgment at hand. Their minds infested with prejudice and superstition, their lives narrowly circumscribed by compulsive routine, they became bitter, cranky, garrulous, spiteful, impossible to deal with and morbidly suspicious. Every glancing shadow held within its orbit spirits of doom. They avoided even the touch of animals considered unclean. A distant thunderclap sounded to their ears like the cannon of some powerful enemy. Many had become chronic invalids by the relatively young age of 60 , and rarely ventured off the palace grounds. Those who did had themselves carried about on litters so that their feet would never touch the ground.

 There was a near- universal dread of silver. One can only speculate on the origins of this strange phobia. Not everybody shared these beliefs, but it is a fact that the Vanarosa of the nobility, unlike that of the people, held no silver objects. Not even in the form of plunder from conquered nations was it admitted into the kingdom.

 There are stories in the records of the priests which illustrate the extent of the silver phobia. Here is one of them:

*The Tale Of The Goldsmith And The Figurine*

 A high-born lord, a count, owned a silver figurine to which he was very attached . As he aged the silver superstition came over him, and there came a time when he decided that he had to get rid of it. On a certain day he had himself carried into the marketplace on a litter and taken to a goldsmith. The craftsman was instructed to fashion a figurine in gold that would be the exact copy of the original. The fee for the gold figurine was to be the silver one plus a small compensation.

 The goldsmith was intelligent and knew that gold is worth more than silver. Making an exact replica of the original might take three months, and although the nobleman had told him he could take his time , it was obvious that he wanted the work done right away. The goldsmith therefore decided to coat the original with a thin layer of gold, so shallow that each line, groove and indentation would remain visible, yet thick enough to hide all traces of the silver.

 Consumed by impatience his costumer was back in less than a week. Yet even he was surprised to learn that the new figurine was ready. This pleased him so much that he ended up giving the goldsmith a decent sum of money. The count took the figurine back to his villa and returned it to its pedestal.

 Shortly afterwards he held a reception to which all his friends were invited. The gold-plated figurine was passed from hand to hand, commented on and much admired . The crowning moment of the evening came when the figurine was presented as a gift to a countess he’d been courting for some time.

 It was unfortunate that the principal distinction of this woman, the apple of his eye, was an insufferable vanity. It gave her a perverse gratification to exploit every occasion to belittle her unhappy lover in public. Toying with the figurine she reeled off a long train of sarcastic jibes. After she berated its workmanship, she denigrated her host’s execrable taste. She carped that it had been years since she'd attended a party as boring as this one. She accused him of trying to embarrass her by loading her down with unwanted gifts. “For all we know”, she shrieked, “ the damn thing might even be made of silver!” Saying which, the figurine was lifted into the air, then hurled across the room into the fireplace.

 Upon striking the hearth it broke into several pieces, exposing the silver core. A wave of horror swept the room. For all her disdain, the countess fainted away. Carried to her bed she ended up spending a month in a private clinic . The count suffered a heart attack, fell to the floor, and expired a few hours later. But the story does not end here.

 For two days the pieces of the broken object lay unattended on the hearth. No one dared have anything to do with it. Finally a young duke who was not in the least way superstitious collected the fragments in a sack. His intention was to use them for an ingenious scheme of revenge against a man who still imagined they were friends, yet towards whom he manifested an unappeasable enmity.

 Going back down into the city he ferreted out the goldsmith. He showed him the fragments, the goldsmith turned deathly pale. The duke had much work to do to persuade him that no harm would come to him if he followed his instructions. He was instructed to melt down the fragments into a rectangular bar coated, once again, with a thin layer of gold. The duke promised to reward him handsomely if the work could be completed in two days.

 Now this goldsmith was the kind of person who is incapable of doing anything honestly. With the silver in front of him a second time, he could not resist the temptation to steal some of it for himself : to speak truthfully, he stole it all . In its place he substituted a thinly gilded bar of solid lead.

 The duke returned as planned. True to his word he paid the goldsmith well. As soon as left the shop, the goldsmith packed up and departed for the provinces, never to be heard from again. The duke hurried back to the palace and strode to the chambers of his unsuspecting enemy, a chronic invalid, crippled by 200 years of osteoporosis.

 Seated by his bedside, the duke assumed an unctuous tone: “I was given this bar in trade by a wealthy merchant.”, he explained,

“ Now it seems to me that its weight is wrong. I wonder if you can tell me if it is genuine or false?”

 His intended victim took it into his hands. He looked at the duke, nodded wryly and said : “You have certainly been cheated my friend. The thief who gave you this probably had it fashioned by some very clever goldsmith.”

 He scraped the surface with a sharp knife, exposing the core.

 “ What did I tell you? This is solid lead.”

 The duke was struck dumb, Weighted down with remorse he confessed the entire plot. When he had finished the invalid forgave him and the two friends became reconciled.

 **“ However I should tell you.” he said, “had the bar indeed contained silver I would have died instantly.”**