



## CHAPTER ONE

These things are there. The garden and the tree  
The serpent at its root, the fruit of gold  
The woman in the shadow of the boughs  
The running water and the grassy space.  
They are and were there. At the old world's rim,  
In the Hesperidean grove, the fruit  
Glowed golden on eternal boughs, and there  
The dragon Ladon crisped his jewelled crest  
Scraped a gold claw and sharpened a silver tooth  
And dozed and waited through eternity  
Until the tricky hero Herakles  
Came to his dispossession and the theft.

Randolph Henry Ash, from  
*The Garden of Proserpina*, 1861

The book was thick and black and covered with dust. Its boards were bowed and creaking; it had been maltreated in its own time. Its spine was missing, or rather protruded from amongst the leaves like a bulky marker. It was bandaged about and about with dirty white tape, tied in a neat bow. The librarian handed it to Roland Michell, who was sitting waiting for it in the Reading Room of the London Library. It had been exhumed from Locked Safe no. 5 where it usually stood between *Pranks of Priapus* and *The Grecian Way of Love*. It was ten in the morning, one day in September 1986. Roland had the small single table he liked best, behind a square pillar, with the clock over the fireplace nevertheless in full view. To his right was a high sunny window, through which you could see the high green leaves of St James's Square.

The London Library was Roland's favourite place. It was shabby but civilised, alive with history but inhabited also by living poets and thinkers who could be found squatting on the slotted metal floors of the stacks, or arguing pleasantly at the turning of the stair. Here Carlyle had come, here George Eliot had progressed through the bookshelves. Roland saw her black silk skirts, her velvet trains, sweeping compressed between the Fathers of the Church, and heard her firm foot ring on metal among the German poets. Here Randolph Henry Ash had come, cramming his elastic mind and memory with unconsidered trifles from History and Topography, from the felicitous alphabetical conjunctions of Science and Miscellaneous – Dancing, Deaf and Dumb, Death, Dentistry, Devil and Demonology, Distribution, Dogs, Domestic Servants, Dreams. In his day, works on Evolution had been catalogued under Pre-Adamite Man. Roland had only recently discovered that the London Library possessed Ash's own copy of Vico's *Principj di Scienza Nuova*. Ash's books were most regrettably scattered across Europe and America. By far the largest single gathering was of course in the Stant Collection at Robert Dale Owen University in New Mexico, where Mortimer Cropper worked on his monumental edition of the *Complete Correspondence of Randolph Henry Ash*. That was no problem nowadays, books travelled the aether like light and sound. But it was just possible that Ash's own Vico had marginalia missed even by the indefatigable Cropper. And Roland was looking for sources for Ash's *Garden of Proserpina*. And there was a pleasure to be had from reading the sentences Ash had read, touched with his fingers, scanned with his eyes.

It was immediately clear that the book had been undisturbed for a very long time, perhaps even since it had been laid to rest. The librarian fetched a checked duster, and wiped away the dust, a black, thick, tenacious Victorian dust, a dust composed of smoke and fog particles accumulated before the Clean Air Acts. Roland undid the bindings. The book sprang apart, like a box, disgorging leaf after leaf of faded paper, blue, cream, grey, covered with rusty writing, the brown scratches of a steel nib. Roland recognised the handwriting with a shock of excitement. They appeared to be notes on Vico, written on the backs of book-bills and letters. The librarian observed that it didn't look as though they had been



touched before. Their edges, beyond the pages, were dyed soot-black, giving the impression of the borders of mourning cards. They coincided precisely with their present positions, edge of page and edge of stain.

Roland asked if it was in order for him to study these jottings. He gave his credentials; he was part-time research assistant to Professor Blackadder, who had been editing Ash's *Complete Works* since 1951. The librarian tiptoed away to telephone: whilst he was gone, the dead leaves continued a kind of rustling and shifting, enlivened by their release. Ash had put them there. The librarian came back and said 'yes', it was quite in order, as long as Roland was very careful not to disturb the sequence of the interleaved fragments until they had been listed and described. The Librarian would be glad to know of any important discoveries Mr Michell might make.

All this was over by 10.30. For the next half-hour Roland worked haphazardly, moving backwards and forwards in the Vico, half-looking for Proserpina, half-reading Ash's notes, which was not easy, since they were written in various languages, in Ash's annotating hand, which was reduced to a minute near-printing, not immediately identifiable as the same as his more generous poetic or letter-writing hand.

At 11.00 he found what he thought was the relevant passage in Vico. Vico had looked for historical fact in the poetic metaphors of myth and legend; this piecing together was his 'new science'. His Proserpine was the corn, the origin of commerce and community. Randolph Henry Ash's Proserpine had been seen as a Victorian reflection of religious doubt, a meditation on the myths of Resurrection. Lord Leighton had painted her, distraught and floating, a golden figure in a tunnel of darkness. Blackadder had a belief that she represented, for Randolph Ash, a personification of History itself in its early mythical days. (Ash had also written a poem about Gibbon and one about the Venerable Bede, historians of greatly differing kinds. Blackadder had written an article on R. H. Ash and relative historiography.)

Roland compared Ash's text with the translation, and copied parts onto an index card. He had two boxes of these, tomato-red and an intense grassy green, with springy plastic hinges that popped in the library silence.

'Ears of grain were called apples of gold, which must have been the first gold in the world while metallic gold was unknown . . . So the golden apple which Hercules first brought back or gathered from Hesperia must have been grain; and the Gallic Hercules with links of this gold, that issue from his mouth, chains men by the ears: something which will later be discovered as a myth concerning the fields. Hence Hercules remained the Deity to propitiate in order to find treasures, whose god was Dis (identical with Pluto) who carries off Proserpine (another name for Ceres or grain) to the underworld described by the poets, according to whom its first name was Styx, its second the land of the dead, its third the depth of furrows . . . It was of this golden apple that Virgil, most learned in heroic antiquities, made the golden bough Aeneas carries into the Inferno or Underworld.'