

Antoni Maria Mulas
by Benvenuto Lobina, from Po Cantu Biddanoa, Ilisso 2004, pg.178 - 256.

Antoni Maria Mulas lived there, in those houses that now belong to Pissentica, Su Butegheri's wife. Pissentica is his granddaughter, the daughter of his son, from Sisinni, whom Antoni Maria had never wanted to see because he said his mother had died because of him.

They were two large houses, inside a very large courtyard. In the house with the porch were the servants and maidservants; in the other, in the new house, lived Antoni Maria with Barbara, his wife. After Barbara had died, he stayed there alone.

Bah, there wasn't much left alone, or he would have gone crazy.

But Coixedda had taken care of that, looking for his company, since the day Antoni Maria had sold his soul because the sorrow was killing him.

Now and then, with those seven servants on horseback, now Antoni Maria would go down to Campidano and come back at night with two girls, one on the archon and one on the horse's rump, and he would carry them both in the trestle bed.

But the night he had brought those three statues, hot as mares, which from Campidano were not, the trestle bed had broken and fallen down. So, he had the cooper build himself a bed that took up the whole room, with his feet planted on the floor.

Antoni Maria Mulas was a man like few are born, he was a man of value, skilled, and just. And he was a mountain of a man, over six feet tall and sturdy in proportion. Strong as a slave, he entered the herd of cows and played with the three-year-old bulls as if they were kids: he took one by the horn and one by the other and made them walk beside him, at the pace that he wanted. When he released them, the bulls fled as if they were pestered by flies. And he laughed: Antoni Maria's laughter was heard from mountain to mountain, like the sound of a bell.

And he was devout: he went to church every Sunday, to great mass, and stayed with the others in the chapel. Among the others it looked like a tower, kneeling he seemed to be standing.

When she died, in childbirth, Barbara was twenty-two years old. Antoni Maria was left as if lightning had struck him. Neither word nor tears came out of him, he had taken the child by the feet and had thrown him into the manure heap. (A servant had picked it up right away, fortunately). Then he chased everyone away and locked himself in the room with the dead woman. He had opened the door after three hours: Barbara was on the bed, composed, in her wedding dress, and he sat beside the bed, silent, black as a coal.

He had not moved until the next day when they had brought in the coffin. He had sent everyone away again, and when he had let them in, the coffin was already closed, nailed shut. And he in the same chair, dumb as a log.

At the time of the funeral, he hadn't wanted anyone to touch the casket: she had lowered herself down, had loaded it on her shoulders, and walking in front of the priest had carried her first to the church and then to the cemetery. He had put her in the grave, he had buried her.

Hooded, without raising his eyes, he had returned home. Eight days shut up in the room without a bite of bread, without a sip of water. The people of the house had heard noise, voices, turmoil; it

seemed that with Antoni Maria, in the room, there were all the devils of hell, with one screaming more than the others.

On the eighth day he had left the room calm, he even seemed happy. Her face flat, her eyes bright, bore no sign of what he had been through. He had made saints, rosaries, and medals disappear from the house, then he had saddled his horse and rushed out with a blow of spurs like a wind. It was a stormy night: tongues of fire had risen from the horse's hooves.

He had returned after a month, one night, with those seven, also on horseback, seven demons. Where he had brought them from, no one had ever known, where they were from could not be understood, neither by their dress nor by their speech, for they mixed the dialects of the North and Campidano, of Ogliastra and Sulcis.

He had changed in everything, he even seemed taller, more imposing. Dressed like a duke, he rode a mare that looked like a painting, with harnesses that looked as silver as the spurs he wore, which silver they must have been judging by the sound the wheels made.

Of the despair that had seized him at Barbara's death, and of Barbara herself, though only a month had passed since her death, he seemed to remember no more.

During those seven days when he had been locked in the bedroom after he had buried Barbara, Antoni Maria had gone wild, banged his head against the wall, blasphemed God and Our Lady, and even tried to recite the Our Father a few times, but he had been unable to find peace: Barbara's death had broken his heart and twisted his thinking.

By the third day, he had thought that if the devil removed the figure of Barbara from his mind and eyes, he might even sell his soul. Immediately there had been a rumbling, thunder, and a voice coming from underground, and then he, the Demon, s'Eremigu, had appeared and heard it.

First, they had argued, they had screamed, they had rolled on the ground, but finally, they had come to an agreement: Antoni Maria had sold his soul to s'Eremigu, and he would deliver it to him the day "Coixedda" called him to himself. In return s'Eremigu would erase Barbara from his memory and thought, make him forget her face, her eyes and voice, and all the pain he had felt when she died.

"Against dog bites, you need dog hair" Coixedda had answered him (which was like saying a nail drives out a nail), "women, I'll give you, as many as you want, as many as you want to pass, of every race, and loins of iron to ride them, and steel harness. And money and jewels and gold, all you want, and seven lost souls to serve you. Your eyes will see in the dark and you will not be seen by anyone if you don't want to, and you will be able to enter every place even through the keyhole, without making any noise. Your horse will have the same qualities as you, it will leave neither footprint nor shadow, it will run faster than the wind, and on its back, you will be able to carry the world. No one will be able to touch you, no one will be able to reach you, no one will be able to stop you".

And now Antoni Maria, back in the village with those seven demons, lived day and night with those two obsessions: women and money.

When it popped into his head, after dinner, he would set off for Campidano, stealing women, followed by the seven shadows, black as darkness.

He liked the Campidano women with big round breasts, strong in hips, and rump. He would lay one on each side each night, but no matter how much they held up, by morning they were both exhausted.

When he reached where he alone knew, Antoni Maria would make the seven horsemen stop and enter the villages alone, at night. Without anyone seeing him, without a whisper, he would enter the dark rooms and choose the two fawns that seemed to him the most beautiful, the shapeliest. Without the fawns noticing, he would load them on his shoulder still asleep, then set one in front of the archon and one on the horse's back, and off he would go. When the beautiful girls woke up, they would find themselves tied with a string to Antoni Maria; he would tie them up so that, asleep as they were, they would not fall off the horse. And him laughing, laughing, going back to the village: it was a game to him, the game he liked best.

He would keep them a week, at most, then send them back to their countries with the seven demons and a bag of joys and gold coins to each.

The Campidano girls liked Antoni Maria's cock so much that they cried like fountains when they left, more than they had cried when they arrived.

After a few days, Antoni Maria would go looking for two more, in another country.

But the time of those three... Yes and no there had been turmoil in the room! The trestle bed fell down every night with a great clatter, and Antoni Maria did not like to finish her things on the floor. Besides, four of them on that bed were cramped.

It was then that Antoni Maria had sent seven yokes of oxen into the forest, the largest oxen he owned, and each yoke had hauled a juniper log. Immediately Antoni Maria had sent for Puleu, the cooper, and had him build, in a single day, a bed of more than four squares, with the planks nailed down and the feet driven into the ground. The bed was so large that it took up almost the whole room.

Now he could ride them as he wanted the three wild fillies! They felt like kicking, and the bed no longer fell over. But now on the bed of nailed planks, they were the ones who were egging him on. It didn't seem real to Antoni Maria: he went through all three of them every night, at least twice. It was a game to him, with those loins and that cock that the devil had tempered for him.

They were three Arabs. How they had ended up in Antoni Maria's bed my father, good soul, had told me.

One of those seven demons he always carried attached to the back had made his head like a beehive with tales of the women of Sulcis: perhaps they were not as white as those of Campidano, but to run the mare! Always in heat, they went through the countryside, into the sheepfolds, day and night, looking for those who would scratch them. And they would take cock, strokes, and strokes.

Antoni Maria had let him sing before, or so it had seemed, but one night he had woken all seven of them and they had left.

As he always did, he had not said where they were headed. And walk, walk, they had ended up in Sulcis.

To Antoni Maria there was no need to point out roads or places, he knew every place, and he always knew where he was even though he had never been there before. During the day they would stop

at some abandoned cottage, at night they would leave again. But it seemed to Antoni Maria that neither the places nor the women he saw were to his liking.

So, he continued on, from village to village, until the demon in his body made him arrive near a rather large village called Sant'Antiogu. This village seemed to be planted in the middle of the sea, but it was not so, because there was a path that came ashore, with a small bridge at the end.

Since by the time they had arrived near the village it was long before dawn and they were tired, Antoni Maria had taken them to a cave that he knew was full of wood pigeons, and they lay down.

But they had not yet closed their eyes that a popping sound made them gasp. They pricked up their ears and rushed out of the cave, opening their eyes wide.

There was a moon, and Antoni Maria had seen on the seashore, a bastion. From the bastion came down in torments men in a kind of white dress, a dagger on their belts and a rifle in their hands, and they ran toward the village shooting: moors, they were, Arabs who had come from the devil's house to rob and kidnap women and men. Of the women they knew what to do; the men would sell them as slaves, who knows where.

Antoni Maria had ordered those seven not to move from the cave. Meanwhile, the demon who was at his command had already suggested to him what he should do: his soul was not sold to him for nothing.

If he did not want to, no one would see Antoni Maria, no one would hear him or his black mare, which left no trace even if it passed over the sea sand.

On his horse, slowly, Antoni Maria approached the bastion and hid. And he'd seen that when the Arabs with the pop had all dismounted, people who had remained on the bastion had pulled in a ladder that reached to the ground.

Now, far away, there were pops, shouts, and cries for help.

Antoni Maria had dismounted from his horse, tied it to an old boat, and approached the bastion, straining his ear: words had come to him that he did not understand, voices sharp and quick, others guttural and people laughing: females. Coixedda had not lied to him this time either.

There was no moon now, and, with eyes piercing through the darkness, Antoni Maria had seen a rope the size of an arm coming down from the bastion to the ground, where it was tied to a bollard.

Quick as a cat, he had attached himself to the rope, and like a cat had climbed onto the bastion without making a sound. The people inside had not noticed anything. A bit of clattering had been heard from outside, then nothing. After some time, the long ladder had come out of the basting ship again. When the ladder touched the ground, at the top was Antoni Maria. And behind him, meek as lambs, three Arabs.

They too wore a foot-length dress and were wrapped in a sheet. On their faces, they had a handkerchief that let only their eyes, black as pitch, show. And beautiful, they had to be: Antoni Maria, with the help of all the demons, knew how to choose them well, his sheep. Other than low assed sulcitanas!

When the seven devils had seen them enter the cave, all three of them on Antoni Maria's black mare, white as three ghosts, they had been speechless. But Antoni Maria had not even given them time to close it that they were on their way again, toward Biddanoa.

Behind them, they could still hear the Arabs firing, and the people of Sant'Antiogu screaming and crying.

And marenghi deniers, coins and jewels, gold and silver, a room full. And when there was nothing left in the room, he had thrown down a passage and joined the room with another. And in a short time, he had filled that one too.

For gold and deniers, he always went to Ogliastro, in the company of the seven lost souls.

What had happened was that once a priest from Ogliastro had stripped all the church saints and taken home all the gold they carried on them, promises of the faithful: jewels, gold and silver chains gold and silver arms and legs, precious coins: marenghi and shields, even gold watches. Quintals. Afterwards, with a pickaxe he had knocked down the grating of the chapel and ran to Justice in despair, to tell them that people had entered the church and robbed the saints of all the gold and silver they were carrying. He had already informed Monsignor to have the thieves excommunicated, Justice would do his duty.

Justice had thrown two poor guys in jail, but he had to release them right away because he could tell they were two stray dogs who had nothing to do with stealing from the church.

Since then, in other towns in Ogliastro from time to time, thugs would enter churches at night and steal all the saints' gold. But thieves Justice had never been able to catch any.

To Antoni Maria, however, "someone" would tell how things were, and he would go right in. He would go in, at night, quietly, with those damned souls following, into the homes of the priests he knew and get them out of bed:

"I want a quintal of gold, whatever."

"But I'm a poor man, I don't even own a penny...."

Antoni Maria would nod to one of those, who would light a big fire in the hearth and put a tripod on it, to red-hot. When the tripod was red, he would make the priest drop his pants and place the tripod behind him, very close:

"Two quintals or I'll make you sit on the tripod."

"Yes sir, yes sir, as your lordship wishes. But wouldn't one quintal be enough?"

"No. Two."

The priest, the poor man, pulled up his breeches as fast as he could, and with a candle in his hand carried them to a dark warehouse full of barrels and vats. In one barrel was gold. They would load the horses and set off.

Once, however. Once a fat-as-a-pig priest, when he had seen the red-hot tripod behind his back, had cried like a torrent:

"I have nothing, me, neither gold nor marenghi, not even the saints have anything left here, the church has been stripped by thieves. Go away, go away, for the love of Jesus Christ, I cannot give you anything."

And he was crying, crying, and screaming, it looked like they were tearing him apart.

Then Antoni Maria had winked at the one who was closest to the priest, and the one had dropped a hand on his shoulder. The hand was heavy and the priest had fallen on his ass on the hot tripod, screaming and barking as if they were flaying him.

Then they had lifted him, sat him down with his ass soaking in a cauldron of cold water, and went down to the basement: nothing.

"Enough, let's go."

As soon as they had gone outside Antoni Maria had heard a big laugh: Coixedda.

And Antoni Maria, furious:

"But why the fuck did you make me come to this pig's house, didn't you know he had already been robbed?"

And Coixedda:

"Of course, I knew. But I wanted to see if the tripod or the priest's ass was wider."

Since the day Barbara died, Antoni Maria could not see blood.

Always carried a rifle on his shoulder, but he carried it more as a habit than to use it, the threat would be enough.

He liked to go hunting, though; he liked game.

And from time to time he would leave, with those seven sons of the devil, they would go to Tònniri, or closer, to Arriu 'e Pròcus or Perdemengianu. There was game then.

Upon reaching the spot he would put the seven to clatter and he would stand in the post. When the animal, boar or roe deer it was, came within his range, he would first let it get away and then shoot it: at the back, however, at the hole already made, so that no blood would come out. And so, you couldn't even see where the ball had come in.

He had never shot a Christian, except that time at Lusciori, one of the servants, but he had done him no harm. The scare, however, had been great.

In the vineyard, Antoni Maria had a row of vines that did not produce much, but the grapes were of a quality that had never been seen in the village. Antoni Maria ate nothing but that, but because it was scarce he did not allow anyone to taste even a grape.

But the grapes from that row also pleased Lusciori, and one night he pretended to go to bed and went down to the vineyard. He was already on the wall and was about to jump in when he hears thunder and sees a flashing. At the same time, he feels a warm tingling in the back of his head, but sharp, as if a burning ember were being passed to him. Without understanding what was going on, his cap, handkerchief, and hair braid flew off his head, because back then men wore their hair long like women, twisted around their heads with a handkerchief.

Trembling like a leaf, with his neck all singed, Lusciori hastily picks up his cap and runs terrified into the village.

When he is about to enter the house, on the portal he finds Antoni Maria, still, with a pipe in his mouth:

"Where the hell were you at this hour, Lusciori? I bet you were at that widow's house... Am I wrong?"

"Devil of jokes," he says, with his cap full of holes pulled over his head up to his ears.

"Lusciori, Lusciori... you know very well that my gun doesn't fail, if I don't want it to fail. Be careful and stop thinking about those grapes, if you don't want me to aim three fingers further in. In that case, it could be that together with the plait of your hair your head will also fly up".

Domentilla had appeared in the courtyard on horseback at sunrise. Antoni Maria had seen her through the window but had not moved until he heard a knock at the door. He had opened it only when it seemed to him that she was about to fall under the knocks.

He had recognized her at once, although almost fifteen years had passed: then she was a little girl without guile, frightened, in the beginning, and now she was a stoned woman, she was past thirty. It was her and she was another, perhaps in those years her beauty had more gained than lost.

She was no longer a rose button, now, but a velvety rose, blossomed but not leafed out, and she had figure, beauty, and rose scent.

"Why did you come back?"

She had looked at him without answering.

"When did you leave your country?"

"Last night."

"Whose horse is that?"

"Stolen."

"Did you get married, or not?"

"No."

"What do you want?"

"Do I stay or do I leave?"

"Stay, for now."

And she had stayed. By day she filled his house, by night his bed, as big as the room.

Be it that Antoni Maria was also beginning to get big, be it that Domentilla was worth three, Antoni Maria stealing women had gone no more.

He also went out of the house very little; he had quieted down. With Domentilla he did not miss anything, she was a companion, sister, mistress of the house, and sleeping female.

Sometimes he thought it was a joke of Coixedda's that he had sent her to him who knows why, for good no' damned be it.

To Domentilla the river had taken her away.

She had gone to Flumendosa to wash wool with the servants and had entered the water too. She was strong and could swim, when she had seen in the middle of the river a beautiful expanse of water, it looked like a mirror, she entered and started to swim: but the water was deep and treacherous and had swallowed her.

In vain they had gone looking for her, on foot and on horseback, following the river, hours and hours: they had not found her even dead.

Antoni Maria when he had heard about it had not uttered a single syllable; he had locked himself in the house lost, in the empty house, suddenly too big for someone like him who did not know where to bang.

And at night the voice:

"It is time, Antoni Maria Mulas."

He had gotten up, called those seven, filled each one's saddlebag with as much gold as it would fit, and let them loose.

Afterwards, he saddled his horse and gone out.

It was a pitch-black night, the entrance to the cave only he could see. He had spurred the horse and entered the darkness.

After a while, a scream had been heard: ugly, long, angry. And immediately a roar, a thunderclap that had jolted people into bed, aborted animals, frozen eggs in nests.

Even the mountain had shuddered and crashed down on the cave, crushed it, buried it, stifling the cry. Where the cave had been, there was now a lower mountain: that one.

And from the top of the new mountain had been heard a burst of laughter more chilling than the scream, and a clang of chains: Coixedda was returning to her hell house with Antoni Maria's soul in tow.