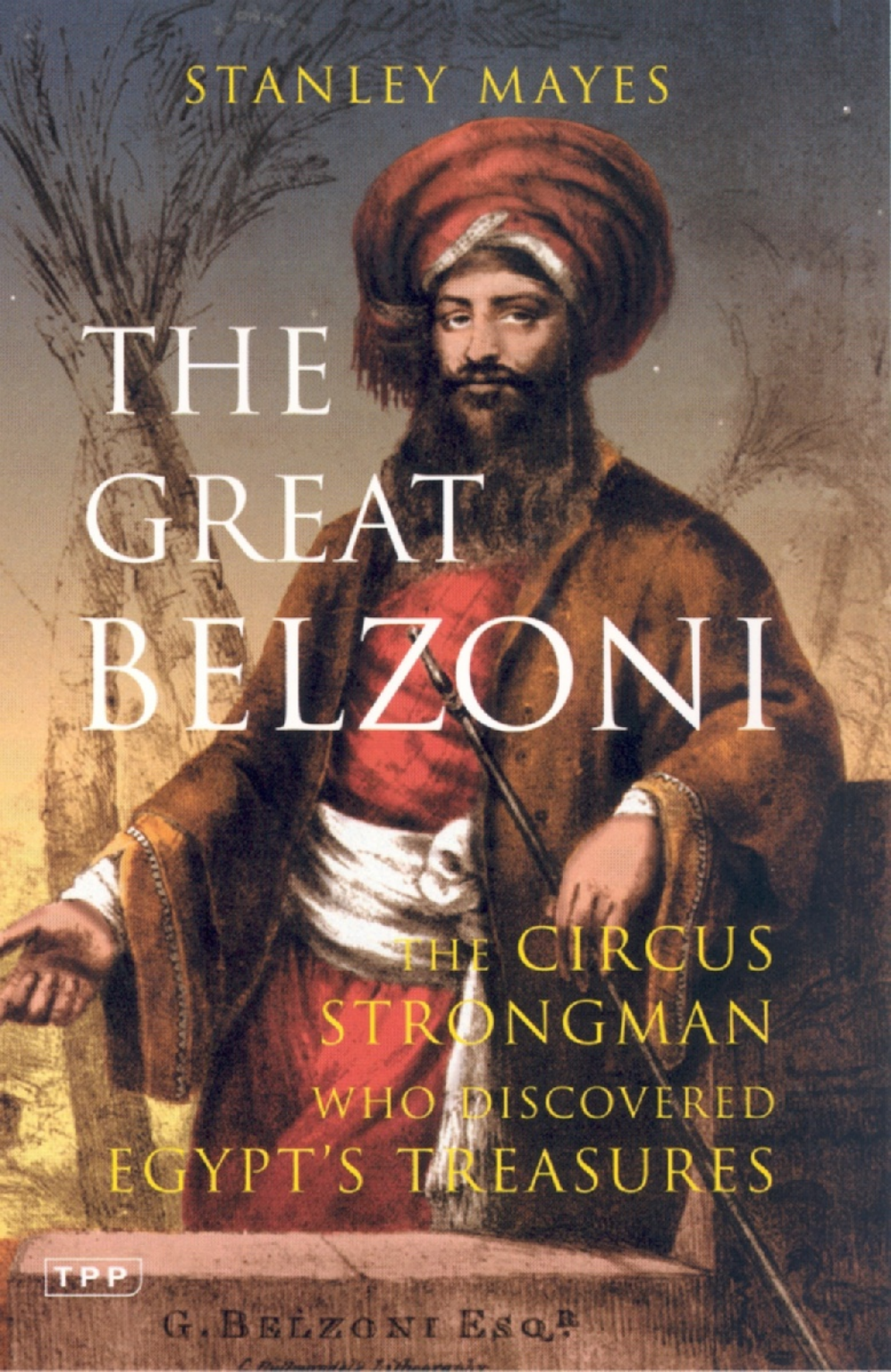
STANLEY MAYES

THE GREAT BELZONI

THE CIRCUS STRONGMAN WHO DISCOVERED EGYPT'S TREASURES



THE GREAT BELZONI

Stanley Mayes was a widely respected broadcaster, political commentator for the BBC Overseas Service and BBC World Service and a freelance journalist. He was working on his fifth book about Charles James Fox at the time of his death in 1992.

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The Circus Strongman who Discovered Egypt's Ancient Treasures

STANLEY MAYES

TAURISPARKE
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To My Daughter
DAPHNE

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The jacket design is reproduced from the coloured lithograph of Belzoni's own water-colour drawing; it is here printed in reverse to meet the requirements of the jacket. The end-papers are taken from line-drawings in Lefébure's *Les Hypogées Royaux de Thèbes* (1886) and show part of the left-hand wall of the first pillared chamber in the tomb of Seti I. Grateful acknowledgment is here made to the City Museum, Bristol, for permission to reproduce Belzoni's drawing of Abu Simbel and to the Griffith Institute, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, and the Bankes family of Kingston Lacy, Dorset, for permission to reproduce another drawing of Abu Simbel from the Bankes MSS. (both facing page 145). The Brockedon portrait of Belzoni (facing page 256) is reproduced by permission of the National Portrait Gallery. The Finsbury Public Library is thanked for allowing the reproduction of a Sadler's Wells play-bill in its possession (page 41). All other illustrations, including the jacket design and the end-papers, are reproduced by courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.

PREFACE

MY OWN interest in Belzoni goes back several years and grew out of a much earlier interest in ancient Egypt. Belzoni began to fascinate me in the way that that other pioneer of archaeology, Heinrich Schliemann, always has done. But whereas the German's place in the pantheon of great men was assured by his discovery of Troy and his excavations at Mycenae and Tiryns, it seemed to me that the Italian's achievement had never been properly recognized. Popular books on Egyptology devoted a few pages to him, but concentrated on the more flamboyant aspects of his character and career; they were also, in general, inaccurate. On the other hand professional Egyptologists were justifiably too busy catching up with the arrears of conservation, cataloguing and publication accruing over the last seventy years to be much concerned about an 'unscientific' collector of antiquities whose operations were carried out just twice that length of time ago.

Giovanni Battista Belzoni was born in Padua in 1778, the son of a poor barber. Poverty and the Napoleonic Wars drove him to England, and for ten years he wandered through the fairs and theatres of the British Isles, playing a pantomime giant at Sadler's Wells, performing feats of strength and conjuring tricks and arranging scenic effects with fountains and cascades of real water. He was tall and immensely strong; 'the handsomest man (for a giant) I ever saw' was Sir Walter Scott's verdict on him. In the year of Waterloo Belzoni arrived in Egypt, bent on persuading Muhammad Ali to adopt a new type of water-wheel for the irrigation of the country. The project failed and Belzoni was stranded. It was then that he undertook, on behalf of the British consul, to bring down from Thebes the colossal granite head of Ramses II which is now in the British Museum. During the next three years Belzoni excavated the buried temple of Abu Simbel, discovered six royal tombs in the Valley of the Kings, opened the Second Pyramid, found the lost city of Berenice, and by his efforts secured for the British Museum a superb collection of Egyptian antiquities. He died at the age of forty-five trying to reach the mysterious city of Timbuktu and to solve the problem of the Niger.

The question was, Could Belzoni be regarded as anything more than a freak, a 'character', a romantic adventurer whose Egyptian years were only an episode in a short but eventful career? What were his real motives in devoting himself so energetically and so single-mindedly to a succession of herculean tasks in Egypt? Was he any better or worse than

his contemporaries who engaged in the mad scramble for antiquities at the beginning of the nineteenth century? How much did Belzoni know of Egypt's past? Did he understand the significance of his discoveries or see where they might lead? In short, what was his contribution to Egyptology?

It is not easy to find the answers to these questions in Belzoni's own *Narrative*. Hastily put together, all offers of help refused, this sprawling, inconsequential account of his work in Egypt baffles as much as it entertains. We move in an almost uncharted world of nameless ruins and confused mythology. Belzoni died before the decipherment of the hieroglyphics had made any real progress. The tangled clues in his book need gathering into strong strands if they are to sustain a claim to greatness.

It is true that Belzoni enjoyed a brief fame in his own day. He was lionized in Regency London as a great and intrepid traveller; as a foreigner he was approved of for his devotion to the British interest. But he soon became a myth. The man of flesh and blood, with all his schemes and hopes, passions and perturbations, was turned into a pasteboard hero—the very model of a self-made man, a smug epitome of patience and perseverance. Dickens embalmed him in a phrase: 'The once starving mountebank,' he wrote, 'became one of the most illustrious men in Europe!—an encouraging example to those, who have not only sound heads to project, but stout hearts to execute.'

No biographer disturbed that mid-nineteenth-century interment. The centenary of Belzoni's death passed in 1923 with only some slight effusions in Italian journals and periodicals. His fellow-countryman, Camillo Manfroni, expressed the hope that someone with a knowledge of the material in the British Museum would undertake a life of Belzoni. In the last twenty-five years a number of letters have come to light in Italy and been edited by various hands. But it was clear that the chief sources for a life of Belzoni must be in Britain.

Not all, however, are in the British Museum and even the material that is there is widely scattered. The first task was to clear away the Victorian rubbish that buried the giant Belzoni as a mountain of sand had engulfed the colossi of Abu Simbel. (Even the articles on Belzoni in *The Dictionary of National Biography* and the latest edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica* were full of inaccuracies.) Then when almost every statement made about Belzoni after 1830 had either been rejected as false or held in suspense for further scrutiny, a search was begun among old newspaper files, contemporary periodicals, theatre records and reminiscences, collections of playbills and other trivia preserved in scrap-books and miscellanies, for traces of Belzoni's passage through the fairs and theatres of the British Isles. The harvest might have been better, but enough was gleaned to show the kind of world Belzoni

moved in during the formative years of his life, the sort of man he was and the ambitions that he cherished.

For Belzoni's Italian background and his relations with his family by far the most valuable source has been the letters published by Prof. Luigi Gaudenzio in *Giovan Battista Belzoni alla luce di nuovi documenti* (Padua, 1936). The other Belzoniana published by Manfroni and Bellorini have helped to fill in some of the gaps.

But it is Belzoni's contribution to our knowledge of ancient Egypt, still more the impetus that he gave to the study of its civilization, that are the *raisons d'être* for this book. Fortunately his *Narrative* could be checked by reference to the published journals of more than a dozen travellers who met him in Egypt. Turner, Burckhardt, Richardson, Irby, Henniker, Edmonstone, Pearce, Fitzclarence, Cailliaud, D'Athanasi, De Forbin, De Montulé, Finati—all show different facets of Belzoni's personality. My chief regret is that I have not been able to consult the MS. journal of Alessandro Ricci, the doctor who worked so long and laboriously on Belzoni's behalf in the tomb of Seti I; the journal is, I believe, still in Cairo. The first volume of *Il Corpo Epistolare di Bernardino Drovetti*, published by Giovanni Marro in 1940, has been of the greatest help. This scholarly edition of part of the vast Drovetti correspondence is a rich mine of information about the European community in Egypt, as it revolved around the influential French consul during the early years of the nineteenth century. Again I am sorry that I have not been able to search for further traces of Belzoni among the hundreds of letters still unpublished. But it is good to know that Professor Savina Fumagalli of Turin University has taken over the task which Professor Marro left unfinished at his death.

It was not enough however merely to straighten out Belzoni's tangled narrative and to supplement it from the letters and journals of his contemporaries. That might have provided an entertaining story, but it would not have answered my main purpose. I have tried therefore to relate Belzoni's work on each site in Egypt to what was known of it before his day and broadly what has been discovered since. A good deal of the pleasure in writing this book has come from the effort to trace the history and provenance of Belzoni's main finds. The results are given in an Appendix that may add a little to the reader's interest when he sees the objects themselves in the British Museum.

Work on my book was already well advanced when I learnt that two other books about Belzoni were on the way. They appeared almost simultaneously. I hope I am being fair to Mr. Maurice Willson Disher if I say that in *Pharaoh's Fool* he has seen the interest which Belzoni created in ancient Egypt rather as an exotic ornament of the Regency period he knows so well than as the beginnings of a new science. Mr. Colin Clair on

the other hand in *Strong Man Egyptologist* was prevented by the size and scope of a 'pocket' biography from doing more than concentrate on a single figure 'in close-up'. My own book is as long as these two together. At the risk of diffuseness I have moved backwards and forwards in time to show something of the way in which Egypt impinged upon the West both historically and politically. And the rivalries of the French and British for influence in Egypt could not be separated properly from the cut-throat scramble for antiquities.

Many people have helped with this book. I am grateful especially to Mr. Colin Clair for so generously placing at my disposal the results of his own researches into Belzoni's life which lack of space prevented him from using. I would also particularly like to thank Professor Luigi Gaudenzio of the University of Padua and Professor Savina Fumagalli of the University of Turin for all their courteous help and for the gift or loan of books.

My thanks are due to all those who have given me permission to quote from material in their possession: Sir John Murray, K.C.V.O., D.S.O. (various Belzoni letters); Sir Thomas Kendrick, K.C.B., Director and Principal Librarian of the British Museum (relevant passages in the Minutes of the Trustees and the Museum's Letter Books, as well as records in the Department of Egyptian Antiquities); the Master of the Rolls (F.O. and War Office papers in the Public Record Office); Dr. F. S. Wallis, Director of the City Museum, Bristol (a letter in Mrs. Belzoni's notebook); and the Librarian of the Guildhall Library, London (MS. material on Bartholomew Fair).

Others who have helped me in my search for Belzoni and whose kindness I now acknowledge are: Miss Lucia Paravicini, Librarian at the Italian Institute, London; Signor Girolamo Bonsembiante, advocate, of Padua; Mr. George Nash of the Enthoven Theatre Collection, Victoria and Albert Museum; Mr. Raymond Mander; Miss Sybil Rosenfeld; Professor Ernesto Scamuzzi, Superintendent of Egyptian Antiquities at Turin; Miss Rosalind Moss and Miss Barbara Sewell of the Griffith Institute, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford; Mr. Leslie Grinsell, Curator in Archaeology, The City Museum, Bristol; Dr. Philip Corder, Assistant Secretary of the Society of Antiquaries of London; and Quatuor Coronati Research Lodge No. 2076.

I owe a special debt of gratitude to University College, London and in particular to Professor Walter Emery and the Librarian of the College for allowing me to borrow books on Egyptology from the Edwards Library. Indeed, but for the kind encouragement which Professor Emery and Dr. A. J. Arkell gave to my amateur interest in Egyptology some years ago, this book would never have been written.

I received great help from the National Library of Rome, which sent me books on loan through the National Central Library. I would like to thank both these institutions, as well as Mr. Swanton of Beckenham Public Library and the Staff of the Westminster and Finsbury Public Libraries. Of the London Library I can only say that it was indispensable.

Of course, the British Museum itself is really the second hero of this book, in spite of the animadversions passed upon it in Chapter XV. I am very grateful to the staffs of the Reading Room, North Library, Print Room, Department of MSS. and Newspaper Library at Colindale. I am also indebted to Mr. I. E. S. Edwards and Mr. T. G. H. James, Keeper and Assistant Keeper of Egyptian Antiquities, for allowing me to browse through their records and search the cellars of the Museum for Belzoni finds that are not at present on exhibition.

Egyptologists and Orientalists may not altogether approve my spelling of ancient and modern Egyptian names. In both cases I have tried to be as consistent as possible, with some deliberate exceptions. When the Greek form of an ancient Egyptian name is much more familiar than the native spelling, I have not hesitated to use it; thus Cheops is preferred to Khufu. For expert advice—not always taken—on the transliteration of modern Egyptian names I am indebted to Mr. A. E. H. Paxton; in general, I have followed the system used in the 1929 edition of Baedeker's *Egypt*, except in the case of some pure Arabic names.

Lastly, I would like to thank Mrs. Emma Lewis for valuable help with my Italian correspondence and Miss Dorothy Evans for her excellent typing of my manuscript.

London, August 1958 STANLEY MAYES

CHAPTER I

Tell me, Muse, of that man, so ready at need, who wandered far and wide, after he had sacked the sacred city of Troy, and many were the men whose towns he saw and whose mind he learnt, yea, and many the woes he suffered . . .

HOMER, The Odyssey, translated by Butcher and Lang

My native place is the city of Padua: I am of a Roman family, which had resided there for many years. The state and troubles of Italy in 1800, which are too well known to require any comment from me, compelled me to leave it, and from that time I have visited different parts of Europe, and suffered many vicissitudes.

BELZONI, Preface to Narrative of the Operations, etc.

IN the early months of 1803 Charles Dibdin Junior was getting together a company for Sadler's Wells. For the past three years he had been author, producer and stage manager—for an inclusive salary of two guineas a week—at the little summer theatre that lay over the fields towards Islington. Now by a stroke of luck he was also part-proprietor. The previous season had not been very good. In fact, Mr. Siddons—husband of the great Sarah—and three of his four copartners in the Wells had decided to sell out. Negotiations were already in train when Dibdin discovered what was afoot. He approached his employers and asked if the deal had gone too far for them to withdraw. Siddons assured him it had not. Richard Hughes, who acted as general manager, told him it only needed youth, professional experience and a spirit of enterprise to make the Wells as prosperous as it had been before. The upshot was that Charles Dibdin and his younger brother Tom[1] bought Siddons's quarter share for £1,400, borrowing the money to pay the first instalment; William Reeve, the theatre's musical director, and Bob Andrews, the scene-painter, took another quarter share; a third was divided between Mr. Yarnold and Mr. Barfoot, two gentlemen of means living in North London; and Richard Hughes kept his own quarter share. Thus at the age of thirty-four Charles Dibdin Junior, a former pawnbroker's assistant, became the moving spirit of Sadler's Wells. In the course of a long professional life, both here and at other minor theatres, he wrote and produced over two hundred popular entertainments. They ranged from plays and burlettas through pantomimes and harlequinades to the most elaborate spectacles on real water. Of these

fugitive pieces little remains but a scatter of songs and a few truncated texts. Yet, oddly enough, Charles Dibdin was destined to introduce to the public in this first year of the new management a personality whose own eventual contribution to culture was to be so solidly monumental. For among the performers engaged at Sadler's Wells in the spring of 1803 was a certain Giovanni Battista Belzoni.

Most of the men in the previous year's company had been taken on again. First and foremost there was young Joe Grimaldi, who in the last couple of seasons had begun to found 'a *New School* for Clowns', as Charles Dibdin says in his *Memoirs*. 'The present mode of dressing Clowns and painting their faces', he points out, 'was then invented by Mr. G.' Grimaldi was now given a three-year contract 'at a high and rising salary'; probably it was less than ten pounds a week. (Dibdin himself by his new contract received only four guineas a week in summer and three in winter; he was, however, allowed a house rent-free in the Wells yard.) Next in importance was Jack Bologna, a splendid, spirited Harlequin now at the height of his powers. He had come to England nearly twenty years before as a small boy in his father's family troupe of acrobats. Jack's brother Louis was still with him. Then there was 'Jew' Davis, a coarse-grained comic given to playing crude practical jokes on the foreign members of the company, and a number of other useful but undistinguished performers. Dibdin realized that the Wells must offer bigger salaries if it was going to attract more talent. Eventually he was able to secure the services of Mr. Townshend from the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden, for twelve pounds a week. He was to play most of the leads this season until his conduct both on and off the stage became so impossible that his contract had to be cancelled. Mr. King, a popular singer and Harlequin, also came to the Wells from Covent Garden at this time. Other new comers included the eccentric Mr. Bradbury of the Royal Circus, famous for his antics on the stage with a live pig; Signor Cipriani, a clever mime and burlesque dancer; and the youthful Master Menage, an expert in 'skin work', i.e. animal parts, who had scored a great success two years before as the Monkey in *Perouse, or The Desolate Island*.[2]

The 'female department', as the age so inelegantly called it, seemed to be less in need of new talent than the men, though Wheeler, the stage-doorkeeper of the Wells, recorded that 'the manager's wife, Mrs. C. Dibdin, could bear no rivalry, and a song encored would dismiss the Lady singing it from ever singing it again, and at the end of the season from the theatre'.[3] In 1803 the twenty-odd ladies of the company were apparently augmented only by the three Dennet sisters—a singer and two dancers—and by little Miss Gayton, a nine-year-old child, whose

skipping-rope hornpipe was soon to be so popular with audiences at the Wells.

Such was the world into which Belzoni walked one day soon after his arrival in England. We are not told how he came to meet Charles Dibdin, though the latter says in the *Memoirs* that his prompter, Morelli, was the man 'to whom all the Italian Minstrels and gymnastical performers used to apply, on their arrival in England, as to a House of Call, and he brought them all, first, to me'. Certainly the original Pandean Band, which started a new vogue that summer for the Pan-pipes, came to Dibdin's notice through the efforts of Morelli. It is very likely that the prompter performed the same service for two more of his fellow-countrymen—the brothers Belzoni.

Francesco throughout remains a pale simulacrum of Giovanni Battista, but the two together in the flesh must have been a remarkable sight. According to Cyrus Redding,[4] a Cornish journalist who met them both some years later, Giovanni was 'full, if not over, seven feet in height'. Redding was a tall man himself—he claimed to be six foot one —and he says that he looked short beside Giovanni. He thought Francesco was six foot three or four. Probably there is some exaggeration here. A Spanish passport issued to Giovanni in 1812 merely gives his height as 'over six feet'.[5] John Britton says that he was registered in the books of the Alien Office as six feet six inches.[6] A search at the Public Record Office has failed to reveal this entry. However, in the absence of any conclusive evidence, we may take this last reference as likely to be near the mark. What earned Belzoni the epithet 'gigantic' was not mere inches of height so much as the magnificent proportions of his body. Broad-shouldered, deep-chested, long of limb, with a noble head carried splendidly erect upon a strong neck, he moved as gracefully as a ballet dancer amongst ordinary shuffling humanity. And that though Cyrus Redding allowed he had one leg slightly in-kneed.

Belzoni was a very handsome man; the existing portraits of him leave no doubt about that.[7] His strong aquiline features give him an air of great nobility, whether he is seen full-bearded and mustachio'd or with the lower part of his face clean shaven, whether he is in Regency costume or dressed *à la Turque*. The mouth is large and sensitive, the nostrils delicately formed, the eyes full of a mild compassion that still does not hide their fire. 'Blue eyes, fresh complexion,' says the Spanish passport, but the beard, we know, in later years was black. There is a gentleness about the face, a quiet, natural dignity, a sense of strength in repose. His manner was modest and unassuming. Those who knew him best spoke of his great good temper, and indeed his whole life was eloquent of his patience and perseverance. That he could also be jealous and suspicious of others is not surprising. He was too ready to

expect the best of his fellow men, and when they fell short of that to believe the worst.

What commended Belzoni to the manager of Sadler's Wells was his fine handsome address and above all his great strength. Probably the young giant—he was just twenty-four—demonstrated this in the simplest possible way, by letting as many men as could clamber upon him. The human load was limited only by their difficulty in holding on; Belzoni stood or walked about as though the men were kittens. Whether he had yet invented the piece of apparatus that allowed him to carry eleven persons at once is not clear; perhaps it was made for him here at the theatre. All that we know from Dibdin's *Memoirs* is that he engaged the two brothers. Giovanni was to give a weight-lifting exhibition and play any suitable parts that could be devised for him in pieces which had to provide scope for all the varied talents of the company. A Giant, a Cannibal Chief, a Wild Man of the Woods—it must have seemed to Dibdin there were many possibilities for a man of Giovanni's physique and appearance, even if his English at this time was very broken or practically non-existent. Francesco would be a supernumerary and make himself useful where he could. There is no record of his appearing in a part this season, though subsequently, Dibdin says, he 'performed as a Mime, on the Wells Stage, Lebrun's Passions[8] to music, in a very masterly and impressive manner; but it was *caviare* to John Bull, and we soon withdrew it'.

What had brought these two young Italians to England in the middle of 'the phoney peace' with Napoleon? . . .

Originally the family came from Rome, but for many years the Belzonis had been settled in Padua, where the boys' father, Giacomo Bolzon—to use the North Italian corruption of their name—made a modest living as a barber. He and his wife Teresa, a big, sad woman who suffered from chronic headaches,[9] had a hard struggle to bring up their four boys and at the same time help their even less fortunate relatives. (The story that Giovanni was the fifteenth addition to his parents' family is late and unlikely, though it may reflect some attempt to reckon up the various aunts, cousins, daughters-in-law and grandchildren that eventually became dependent on the barber and his four sons.)[10] They were a happy, united family. The fortunes of one were the fortunes of all. And if economic necessity sometimes drove them apart, love and affection as often brought them together again.

Giovanni Battista Belzoni—Giambattista or Gio Batta, to give him the familiar diminutives—was born in Padua on 5 November 1778.[11] Little is known about his childhood and early youth. There is the usual apocryphal story that he ran away from home after reading an exciting

adventure story—in this case a translation of *Robinson Crusoe*. Cyrus Redding gives a more circumstantial account of an episode that he must have heard about from Belzoni himself. It seems that Giovanni had never even been out of Padua till he was thirteen years old. Then one day his parents decided to give the family a treat. They closed the barber's shop, where Giovanni now helped his father, and went off into the country to picnic at the hermitage of Ortono, on a pleasant hill near the warm springs that feed the baths of Abano. The strange volcanic beauty of the place—lush grass, bare rocks and teeming vines—made a deep impression on the town-bred boy. When Giovanni returned to Padua, the bright dream over, the barber's shop disgusted him. A day or two later, still haunted by the beauty of the countryside, he stole away from the house with his young brother Antonio to find the delectable spot again. The way was longer than they thought, the roads hot and dusty. Presently they overtook a cart going to Ferrara. The driver offered them a lift and they gladly accepted. But when they reached Ferrara, almost fifty miles away, the man demanded payment and, as they had no money, took some of their clothes instead. The boys were now committed to a much bigger adventure than they had planned at first. For Giovanni, as soon as the urge to get away had asserted itself, the goal was Rome. There he knew that his family had its origins in a romantic past; there was the city of whose wonders he had heard his parents speak so often; there he might escape for ever from the boredom and drudgery of the barber's shop. For Antonio, only nine, the adventure had already gone too far. Presently he broke down and began to cry. Giovanni's own desire to go on was not so strong as his compassion for his brother. Together they returned to Padua.

Three years passed before Giovanni was able to realize his dream of going to Rome—this time with his family's blessing and consent. At sixteen the handsome young giant could no longer be kept tethered to a barber's chair. His ambitions were high but as yet undefined. He had had little formal education. To the end of his days he never learnt to spell either in his native Italian or in the English of his adoption. But he showed a certain mechanical aptitude and an interest in science, and it must have seemed that there was more chance for a bright lad in the bustling, thriving streets of Rome than in the quiet backwaters of Padua.

The times were not propitious. Even before Giovanni left home the states of Northern Italy had begun to feel the grinding pressure of the French military juggernaut. In March 1796, when the seventeen-year-old boy was just beginning to taste the sweets of independence in Rome, a young Corsican general of artillery was given command of the French army in Italy. In less than a fortnight he had thrown back the armies

of Austria and Piedmont and imposed his own terms on the King of Sardinia. During the next few months, with a series of crushing blows, Bonaparte carried the war right into Austrian territory. Milan fell, Mantua fell, and soon the road to Rome lay open. Early in 1797 the Pope was forced to accept a humiliating truce, and before the summer the ancient republic of Venice had signed her own death-warrant. A new Cisalpine Republic came into being and the 'liberated' states of Northern Italy found themselves saddled with a French army of occupation. Finally in February 1798 the Pope went into exile and the French entered Rome.

The sequence of events in Giovanni's own history is somewhat less clear. Certainly the French invasion of Rome unsettled him badly and caused him to change his plans. But we do not know how far he had progressed with his study of hydraulics, which he says interested him at this period. Perhaps this only meant that he had some job of work among the fountains of Rome, making or repairing the pipes for these ingenious *jets d'eau*. According to one account, he was boring an artesian well when the French entered Rome.[12] This may have been in a monastery, for at one point he decided to become a monk and began to prepare himself for admittance to the Capuchin order.[13] Belzoni's brief autobiographical notes in the Preface to his *Narrative* suggest that these were the studies which the French so rudely interrupted.

We need not place too much credence on the story that Giovanni turned to the monastic life because he had been crossed in love.[14] It is hard to believe that a young man of his energetic habit and restless temperament would seek consolation in the cloister. Much more likely is the explanation hinted at by Belzoni himself, that he was trying to make good the gaps in his education. And this is not at variance with the reason given by Redding that 'he had no means of support, and became a monk out of necessity'. There may also have been the idea in his mind that he could take refuge in a monastery till the storm of war was over. Belzoni had no wish to be pressed into the French army, and his size and appearance made him all too obviously an ideal fugleman.

But the unsettled state of the country proved chronic and even the monasteries were no longer safe from Napoleon's soldiery. Giovanni made up his mind to try his fortunes abroad. With a *colporteur*'s pack of religious images, rosaries and relics[15] to provide him with a living, he took to the road and trudged north over the Apennines, over the Alps into France. Here again the details are blurred. Redding says that after visiting Paris he returned to Italy in 1800. Finding the situation no better he set off again and this time went to Holland.[16] Evidently the prospects there seemed better, for after another visit to his home he went back to Holland, taking with him his brother Francesco.

Giovanni says little about his life at this time. In the Preface to his book he writes: 'My family supplied me occasionally with remittances; but as they were not rich, I did not choose to be a burthen to them, and contrived to live on my own industry, and the little knowledge I had acquired in various branches. I turned my chief attention to hydraulics, a science that I had learned in Rome, which I found much to my advantage, and which was ultimately the very cause of my going to Egypt.'

Giovanni can hardly have set the Zuider Zee on fire with his skill in hydraulics. Indeed, his friend Redding admits that the Dutch seemed to know more about the subject than the young Italian expected. Perhaps, as so often happens with those who are thwarted in their secret ambitions, Belzoni was obliged to lay claim to more qualifications than he possessed simply in order to have an opportunity to practise the craft of his choice. But it is true that when he came to write the Preface to his book nearly twenty years later he was anxious to give himself a respectable bourgeois background. So his early scientific pursuits were emphasized, and all reference to weight-lifting and other ignoble exhibitions was rigorously excluded.

In fact, we know now that during their stay in Holland the brothers supported themselves mainly by petty trading in and around the port of Amsterdam. There is a letter written jointly by the two young men—apparently the only one to survive from this period—which gives an idea of their precarious existence.[17] It shows their devotion to each other and the eagerness with which they looked for news from home. The grammar and spelling are very odd; the paper is torn and smudged. Yet through the simple, commonplace language shines a sturdy Italian independence—symbol of a spirit abroad in Europe that Napoleon was not going to quench.

The letter is undated, but from the reference to All Saints' Day—1 November—and the mention of the brothers' imminent departure for England it would seem to have been written towards the end of 1802.

'*Carisimi Gienitori*,' says Giovanni, as one who would write 'Dere Pairents——' (Inevitably the rough homespun texture of his Italian and the idiosyncrasies of his spelling must disappear in translation.) 'Dear Parents, I got your letter on All Saints' Day, and am very sorry about the trouble you have had, but also very glad to know that I shall soon be able to get my goods. I promise you I will soon repay the merchant who endorsed the bill, so that the money will be refunded and everything settled . . .' Evidently Giovanni has had to borrow. He goes on to say that after being ill for more than two months he has now quite recovered and will be able to work again as soon as he has his

stock-in-trade. He is glad to hear that his mother's headaches are better, but annoyed with his father for suggesting that he does not know how to look after himself properly. 'I've taken nothing but Peruvian bark powder, Peruvian bark extract, Peruvian bark essence,' he says indignantly. Francesco has been with him day and night and the good, kindly people in whose house they have been staying are patience itself. Giovanni explains that he caught the fever in a village to which he had gone with other traders to attend a fair.[18] There was practically an epidemic there and some of the others were still ill, but Francesco fortunately had escaped. 'He's as fat as a pig,' he adds by way of compliment to his brother. There is a word more about business. He asks his parents to tell Signor Bernardi that his boxes have never arrived. If he will send another lot before Giovanni leaves for England, he will do what he can. Then back to the family. So young Antonio is going to get married? Giovanni wants to know more about it. He makes a joke about his brother's drinking habits and wonders whether he is going to marry a rich wife. Then with lots of kisses and affectionate embraces for all the family he signs himself: '*Vostro filgio Gio Batta Belzoni*'.

To this Francesco adds a brief postscript. He assures his parents that Giovanni is quite well again, but he admits that the illness has cost them a lot of money. He too is all agog to hear more news of Tonio's intended marriage.

Soon after this letter was written and probably in the early part of 1803 Giovanni and Francesco came to England. They left a Continent dominated by Napoleon for a country divided against itself. The Treaty of Amiens, signed in March 1802, had brought only an illusory peace to a Britain wearied by nine years of war. In the months that followed, thousands of English tourists flocked to France, anxious to see what was left of the *ancien régime*, eager to quiz the new Paris fashions, and curious to catch a glimpse of the little sallow-faced man who had made all Europe tremble. Some of the more naïve were dazzled by the splendid efficiency of the State machine and the First Consul's smile for the gullible English. Why should they worry if Bonaparte wanted to bring the rule of law to other less enlightened countries? Britain was an island, and the narrow seas were her bulwark. So long as she was able to trade with the rest of the world, did it matter much what happened on the continent of Europe?

Yet there were others who came back from France shocked and disturbed by the ruthless militarism of the new order. The absence of all free discussion, the muzzling of the press, the subservience of the intellectuals, above all the miasmatic presence of the secret police filled liberal-minded Englishmen with disgust. The old Whig Opposition leader, Charles James Fox, whose sympathy for the ideas of the

Revolution had more than once made him suspect, now told Napoleon to his face that all government which existed by force alone was oppressive and evil.

It was unfortunate that England's well-being at this time depended on the prescriptions of 'Doctor' Addington. When George III in a moment of mad lucidity forced Pitt to resign over the question of Roman Catholic emancipation, Henry Addington—'that mass of conciliation and clemency', as someone once called him—became Prime Minister. Peace at almost any price was the 'Doctor's' policy. To achieve it he had given up all England's colonial conquests, except Ceylon and Trinidad, in return for a vague assurance that the *status quo* in Europe would be preserved. Ten days after the signing of the Peace Treaty Addington abolished Pitt's wartime measure of an income tax. In the next few months drastic cuts were made in the armed forces. And across the Channel Bonaparte smiled as he watched a nation of shopkeepers prepare their own ruin.

Throughout the summer and autumn of 1802 Europe's dictator outmanœuvred the English at every turn. He had already sent a task force to the West Indies and alarmed the United States by claiming part of Louisiana. Before long French officers were arriving in India to scheme with native princes for the expulsion of the English. In Europe the First Consul tightened his stranglehold on Italy and refused to withdraw French troops from the puppet Dutch Republic. He intervened in Germany and embroiled Austria and Prussia, so that there should be no concerted action against him. Then, while the English looked on helplessly, in October he raped Switzerland.

If there were any illusions left about the purity of Napoleon's intentions, this cynical extinction of Swiss liberty finally dispelled them. When Lord Whitworth went off to Paris in November as the new British ambassador, he was instructed by the Foreign Secretary, the lugubrious, long-necked Lord Hawkesbury, who looked 'as if he had been on the rack three times and saw the wheel preparing for a fourth', to acquaint the French Government with His Majesty's determination 'never to forego his right of interfering in the affairs of the Continent on every occasion in which the interests of his own dominions or those of Europe in general may appear to him to require it'. This 'forcible Feeble' negative was as far as the Foreign Office was prepared to go at the moment. Yet even the 'Goose' Addington, afraid to say bo, realized it was impossible now for Britain to give up Malta, as the terms of the Peace Treaty required, unless she was willing to sacrifice all her influence in the Mediterranean and endanger her Eastern trade. Whitworth had been in Paris only a fortnight when he informed the Foreign Secretary that 'the acquisition of Egypt is the object which the First

Consul has most at heart, and that to which our utmost attention should be directed'. As proof he cited the pretended 'trade mission' of Colonel Sebastiani to North Africa and the Levant. Two months later, when the Colonel's provocative report on the state of Egypt was published in *Le Moniteur* and picked up by the English press, all London knew that Napoleon's aim was to re-occupy Egypt and set himself astride Britain's vital trade-route to India and the Far East. The four thousand British soldiers waiting to be evacuated from Egypt would not be able to stop him. Only if Malta remained in British hands could the Mediterranean be kept open.

Resentment had grown strong against French provocation, complaisance turned to obstinacy. Yet now that the Government had taken a stand on Malta, it became terrified that public opinion might push it over the edge into war. The 'Doctor' still huddled the humiliating rags of the Peace about him, even though they no longer covered the nakedness of his policy. Fox cheerfully renounced war and urged the Government to honour its obligations. (It was one of the ironies of the situation that Britain could now be held up to obloquy as the violator of the Peace. If from many countries in Europe 'answer came there none' about the real infractions of the Treaty, it was only because Napoleon, like the Carpenter with the Oysters, had 'eaten every one'.) Meanwhile the younger Tories under Canning schemed to bring back Pitt. He, like another Cincinnatus, pottered about the gardens of Walmer Castle and bided his time. Lord Grenville and his friends spoke of England's lost prestige and clamoured urgently for war. Between talk of appeasement and calls for action, the people did not know where they were. Few realized as clearly as Castlereagh did that war was inevitable; that waiting for Europe to rise in revolt was mere self-deception; that every month of delay and vacillation gave Napoleon the time he needed to prepare for fresh conquests.

Such was the situation when the two Belzonis arrived in England. The total population of Great Britain was then about ten millions. London had some nine hundred thousand inhabitants. Its western boundary was Park Lane—once Tyburn Lane till its more fashionable residents found the name too grim. Oxford Street was a broad, airy avenue, flanked on either side by fine squares and ending at Tyburn turnpike. Beyond in open country lay the little hamlet of Bayswater, famous for its tea-gardens. Paddington itself was rural and remote; in the distance the cupola of its new church rose above the tops of venerable elms. From there the New Road ran through fields and nursery gardens past Tottenham Court to the pleasant village of Islington. North of High Holborn the houses of the new rich advanced in a planned and orderly procession, overrunning Bloomsbury and Russell

Squares and pushing on to Tavistock. Yet one could still walk from Gower Street to Hampstead through fields and country lanes. There were cows and dairy-maids even in Portland Place. South of High Holborn lay Covent Garden with its theatres and market, its coffee-houses, taverns, bagnios and brothels spreading down through a maze of mean streets to St. Clement's and the Strand. Already there was talk of removing Temple Bar because it hindered the flow of traffic between Westminster and the City. It was often quicker and more convenient to go by water or to cross and re-cross the river by the bridges. There were still only three at this date—Blackfriars, Westminster and old London Bridge.

It was an age of great prosperity for the London tradesman. The rapid growth of the capital, the increase in the number of manufactured goods, the restrictions on foreign travel during nine years of war and the delay in social reform, all contributed to the rise of a comfortable shopkeeper class with few pretensions to taste or education. Its amusements were mainly drinking and card-playing, but it was also fond of the theatre. And here the supply of popular entertainments was never equal to the demand.

By the Licensing Act of 1737 Covent Garden and Drury Lane were the only two theatres in London that were allowed to present legitimate drama. (An exception was made some thirty years later when Samuel Foote, the comedian, broke his leg in a fall from a horse belonging to the Duke of York and, on the Prince's intercession, obtained a patent to open the little theatre in the Haymarket during the summer months. As the other two patent houses were winter theatres, this did not affect their monopoly.) In 1752 an Act 'for regulating places of public entertainment' gave local magistrates the power to grant annual licences to minor theatres and halls for singing, dancing, and the performance of burlettas. A burletta was defined as 'a drama in rhyme, which is entirely musical'. In other words, so long as the actors did not speak dramatic dialogue in prose but sang or delivered their words in a form of recitative, they were within the letter of the law. This gave enterprising managers a great deal of scope. When John Palmer staged an elaborate pantomime-spectacle at the Royalty Theatre in Wellclose Square, Whitechapel, in 1786, the proprietors of the patent theatres were seriously alarmed and took steps to have the theatre closed. It opened again with a more modest pantomime, but this time Delpini the clown was unlucky enough to *speak* the words 'Roast beef!' without a musical accompaniment. Palmer was charged with contravening the Act. The magistrates found there was no case; whereupon the indignant patentees had the magistrates removed from office. Such was the strength of vested interests. Sheridan, as Member of Parliament, did not hesitate

to speak out strongly against bills intended to license theatres whose existence would affect him as manager of Drury Lane.

Although the monopoly of the patent houses was not finally broken till 1843, the minor theatres gained ground steadily. The Act of 1788 allowed four of these places of entertainment—Sadler's Wells, the Royalty, Astley's Amphitheatre and the Royal Circus—to 'continue exhibiting performances of singing, dancing, pantomime and music'. By the turn of the century the royal theatres were fighting a losing battle. Even the most prolific playwright could not keep them going with new pieces and long runs were unknown. Revivals with names like Kemble and Siddons were always a draw, but leading actors and actresses were apt to find provincial tours more profitable. Sometimes the most successful piece of the season was a pantomime, and here the minor theatres could compete on equal terms. Moreover they filled their bills with popular variety acts—jugglers, rope-dancers, acrobats, strong men, performing dogs and horses and every novelty that an ingenious management could devise or discover. Their appeal to the London tradesman and his apprentice was simple and direct.

Of the four minor theatres that existed at the beginning of the nineteenth century, Sadler's Wells was by far the oldest. In the year 1683 Mr. Sadler, a surveyor of highways and the owner of a 'Musick House' at Islington near the reservoir known as the New River Head, discovered in his grounds a medicinal spring which had once belonged to the Priory of Clerkenwell. He was quick to see its commercial possibilities and, in order to attract custom, laid out gardens round the well, engaged a pipe and tabor band for dancing, and stationed a damsel with a dulcimer in an artificial glen to play for those who felt romantic. Under his heirs and successors other entertainments were added: clowns, tumblers and rope-dancers soon made their appearance; interludes and pantomimes were performed. In 1765 the original wooden 'Musick House' was pulled down and a more solid structure took its place. Tom King, the actor who created the part of Sir Peter Teazle in *The School For Scandal*, became lessee of the Wells in 1772, and under his management the status of the theatre greatly improved. The elder Charles Dibdin began to write for it and the nobility bestowed its patronage. Sadler's Wells was now the principal home of pantomime in England, while from time to time it would delight the public with some startling novelty. One such was the presentation in 1783 of a play, *The Deserter*, acted entirely by dogs;[19] it helped the management to clear £10,000 that season. In the 1780s a number of famous Continental performers appeared at the Wells—Dubois, the celebrated clown; Redigé, a superb acrobat billed as the Little Devil; and his mistress, La Belle Espagnole, who danced with swords fastened to her feet and an egg under each.

These all came to stay. Under their tutelage grew up the young Bolognas, Richer, the rope-dancer, praised by Hazlitt as 'matchless in his art', and Joe Grimaldi, who in the year 1800 made his first appearance as Clown and ushered in a new era of pantomime at Sadler's Wells.

CHAPTER II

Need I fear
To mention by its name . . .
Half-rural Sadler's Wells?
. . . here more than once
Taking my seat, I saw (nor blush to add,
With ample recompense) giants and dwarfs,
Clowns, conjurors, posture-masters, harlequins,
Amid the uproar of the rabblement,
Perform their feats.

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH, The Prelude, 1805 [1]

CHARLES DIBDIN JUNIOR had got together his company for the summer of 1803. Probably, if he ran true to form, he then began to consider the writing of his pieces. He was a prodigiously fast worker. It was not unknown for him to begin the composition of a two-act burletta on Friday morning and have it ready for presentation to the public by the following Monday evening. A cynic might say that this was obvious from the sorry doggerel that has survived, but in fairness one must ask whether the impact of a modern musical play could be judged in a hundred and fifty years' time merely by reading its lyrics in cold print. Dibdin seems to have had the magic Harlequin touch capable of transforming the crude elements of song, dance, mime, scenic effects and stage tricks into something theatrically alive and compelling. Only in this way can we explain his successful management of the Wells for so many years.

The theatre was licensed to open on Easter Monday and the season usually lasted until the first or second week of October. Dibdin decided to concentrate on essentials this year and not attempt any ambitious stunts like the previous year's pony races. These had been organized with the starting-point and finishing-post actually on the stage. There were large doors at the back of the theatre that gave directly on to the Wells yard and commanded a view of the main gates and the open country beyond. But the races proved to be too big a draw. People living in houses nearby complained that their fences were broken down by boys climbing up to watch. The footpath along the New River that ran beside the theatre was blocked with excited spectators. Eventually the magistrates intervened and the races had to be stopped.

For the opening something was needed to mark the change of management. Perhaps a song by the company on the theme of 'new

brooms' would meet the occasion. Of course, it would have to be topical and glance at the political situation. Then there might be a melodrama, an operatic piece that would count as a burletta—preferably something founded on recent fact, a story that had caught the popular imagination. That could be followed by a 'serious' pantomime. This must give plenty of scope to Grimaldi. The programme had to end with

'THE PATAGONIAN SAMPSON'

a traditional harlequinade, for which a new theme, scenery and tricks would be required. Also somewhere in the evening's entertainment there must be room for a special gymnastic exhibition by Signor Belzoni.

Dibdin always liked a touch of the exotic. He had a friend at the

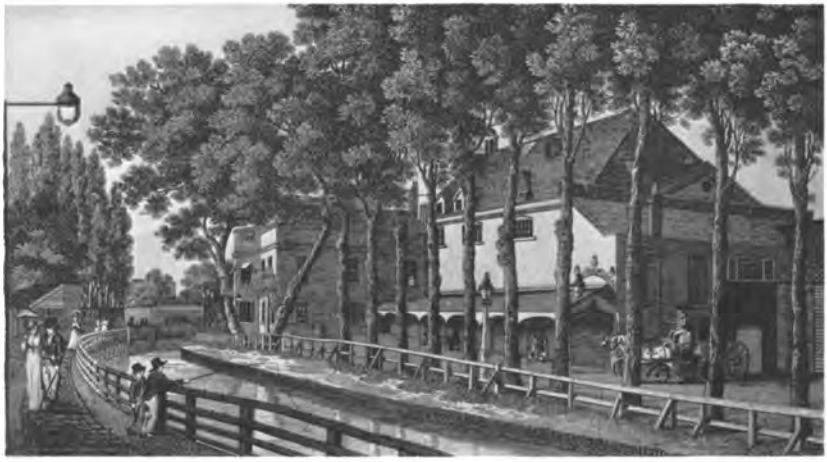
British Museum in the Reverend Thomas Maurice, an Orientalist who sometimes gave him ideas for original presentation.[2] Once at the scholar's suggestion the title of a show was advertised in Greek. On another occasion Arabic script was used on a poster. Whether Maurice's erudition was called in now is more than we can say, but Dibdin evidently felt it was wasting an opportunity to present Belzoni merely as 'the Italian Hercules' or 'the Roman Giant'. Instead he decided to bill him as 'the Patagonian Sampson'.

It is a great pity Giovanni in later years was so ashamed of his life in the theatre that he left not one word about his experiences at this time. Dibdin had chosen the story of Jack the Giant-Killer for his opening pantomime, and Giovanni, of course, was to play the Giant. Easter Monday fell that year on 11 April and probably rehearsals began towards the end of March. We may think of Belzoni and his brother striding out each day over the fields to the theatre. At the stage door they would exchange a word with Wheeler, its tall, gangling guardian, whom Dibdin described as 'an original being in every respect; he walked more like an automaton than a living being, something in the manner one would imagine that a pair of Tongs would walk; and talked, Ye Gods, how he would talk!'

Inside, the theatre seemed like a dark, empty shell, lit only by a few wax candles whose flames flickered in the constant draughts and sent great shadows scurrying up over the circle of open boxes and the gallery high above them. The stage was large for so intimate a theatre—ninety feet from orchestra pit to the back wall and almost fifty feet wide. Yet it must have seemed too small for the vast activity going on all over it at a rehearsal. Whatever piece was being taken down stage, you could be certain Bob Andrews and his men were busy in some corner putting the finishing touches to the scenery. In another Garland, the machinist, would be testing the operation of a 'trick'—perhaps a haystack that turned into a cart or a cottage that became an elephant. Here Jack Bologna would be practising his leap through a brick wall. Over there Grimaldi would try to perfect an eccentric dance routine. Some of the actors would still be conning their lines, others arguing with Mr. Smithyes or Mrs. Robinson over the shortcomings of their costumes. 'Jew' Davis would have the usual knot of men around him listening to his low stories. Mrs. Dibdin would be avid for any scandal about the prettiest Miss Dennet. Down in the orchestra pit Mr. Reeve sat at the piano and encouraged his fellow-musicians to greater efforts, while over all presided the amiable genius of Charles Dibdin, whose task it was to produce order out of this chaos.

When it came to Giovanni's turn, he would quietly and unassumingly go through his Strong Man act, lifting successively heavier weights till

GIOVANNI BATTISTA BELZONI



1. OLD SADLER'S WELLS AND THE NEW RIVER, 1813

2. A SCENE FROM 'PHILIP QUARLL'

he came to his last and most impressive feat—the Human Pyramid. The harness he wore for this weighed one hundred and twenty-seven pounds. It consisted of an iron frame fitted with ledges on which ten or twelve members of the company could perch themselves till the whole looked like some huge human candelabrum. Then delicately, Agag-like, holding a flag in either hand, Belzoni would walk round the stage with three-quarters of a ton of humanity dependent from his broad shoulders. When he came down to face the footlights there were no tortured muscles visible, no agonizing look on his handsome face. The beauty of Belzoni's performance lay in the ease with which he accomplished it.

Yet afterwards he must have been glad to escape from the dusty, dim-lit stage to the fresh spring air outside. There were tall graceful poplars along the edge of the New River that would have reminded Giovanni and Francesco nostalgically of home. Beyond the theatre, the grassy banks sloping down to the water were already pied with wild flowers. There were always boys fishing in the cut who must have goggled at the young giant and his brother as they walked along, talking earnestly in liquid Italian of their hopes and plans. The New River Head was only a stone's throw away—a large reservoir of irregular shape with an inner basin surrounded by a circular, tree-lined walk. From here seven-inch wooden pipes conveyed fresh water to all parts of the metropolis. Giovanni with his interest in hydraulics may well have persuaded the New River Company's engineer to let him look at the two steam-engines and the wheel that raised the water to a higher level for the benefit of the inhabitants of Pentonville, Tottenham Court Road and a great part of Marylebone. Certainly he would have admired the ingenuity of that enterprising Welshman, Sir Hugh Myddelton, who nearly two hundred years before, in the reign of the first King James, had brought London a water supply from Hertfordshire by an aqueduct thirty-seven miles long.[3]

Pleasant as the spring may have been in England that year, the clouds were gathering fast on the international horizon. On 18 February Bonaparte had sent for Lord Whitworth and talked to him for two hours with his elbows on the table. He enumerated all the provocations he had received from England; the chief was the refusal to evacuate Egypt and Malta. The presence of four thousand British soldiers in Alexandria, said the First Consul, was not a protection to the country but a challenge to him to invade. He would rather see the English in the Faubourg St. Antoine than remaining in Malta. Yet he still wanted peace; he insisted he had nothing to gain by going to war with England. Whitworth could hardly get a word in edgeways, but he gamely stuck to his brief.[4]