

Khalif Harun Al Rashid

to the Creator of *THE MASKMAKER*

He was passionately curious about his empire, but the walls of his palace separated them. He wanted to talk to his people, to know them, to touch them, but his position locked him into a rigid role. He wanted to live a thousand lives and experience the sensation of being someone else, but he was forced to be one person, the ruler of his nation in war and peace. But one evening he dressed in the dirty robes of a street-musician, and leaving the palace through a secret door, mingled with his subjects and found out more about their lives that night than he had during decades of issuing decrees about them. This night changed his life entirely and he became addicted to its delights. From then on he led a double-life: in the daytime he was the powerful khalif, leader and judge; at night he was the man of the street — now the peasant, now the soldier, now the beggar — depending on his mood. During the days he was one; during the nights, many. Others *dreamt* their desires from dusk to dawn, he *lived* them. And as it came to pass, one night he met Zoraida, the gypsy beauty and he forgot about Harun al Rashid, his real self, because, drunk with love, it seemed to him that his daily life was just a role he played, and the mask of the comedian that loved Zoraida, his real self. When, after weeks, he returned to the palace, the guards didn't recognise him and threw him out, for in the meantime his ambitious heir, Ahmed had been crowned. They even buried Harun al Rashid (that is, a corpse they found somewhere and identified as his) so the once-king had to accept his comedian-mask with the dirty robe, and go on living as Zoraida's lover even after love had gone, not mentioning who he really was, for no one would have ever believed him. His only choice was to live in misery and die in anonymity.

This character of Harun al Rashid was conceived and written as a short story by the greatest genius of Hungarian literature, Frederic Karinty, poet, writer, utopist, philosopher and mystic, considered by his contemporaries a mere humorist, which among other things he really was. But rotating the prism of his art, humor changed into tragedy, then into encyclopaedic wisdom, then into religion, for humour was only one facet of that prism. But his age categorised him as a jester and forced him to make his living as one, till the end of his days: his clown-mask stuck on his face and each tear rolling down his cheeks provoked harsh laughter from a cruel public.

I loved this man and regarded him as my spiritual father. I knew him when he was alive, and I suffered seeing him so misunderstood. I knew that time would bring salvation to his name, when he would no longer

be around in the flesh. And indeed, today I see the change of climate: the recognition of his true genius grows day by day.

When Marcel Marceau's Maskmaker sobs inside, under the comic mask, everyone else in the audience bursts into laughter, but me. My tears invariably run down my face, for on another stage, invisible inside my brain, the double-image of Marceau and his Maskmaker fuses with the double-figure of my master and his self-symbol, Harun al Rashid, as they desperately try to tear the mask of the ridicule off their faces. And when after years of calvary (Marceau condenses them into minutes) the Maskmaker finally succeeds in slowly pulling off the laughing mask, the bronze, majestic face which is liberated from under it does not give me the feeling of relieved freedom as it does to others.

While the bitter-sweet melody of long-forgotten beginnings fades in again, the old face which reappears from under the mask is a new face, not subjected any longer to either sobbing or laughing: it is the face of a man long dead, a face not made of flesh, for it is the eternal face of its own statue, unfeeling and unchanging, the way posterity keeps it immortal.

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