JASON

HENRY TREECE

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JASON

The misty, fascinating figure of Jason leaps to new dramatic life in this novel by Henry Treece—one which combines deep research into legend and atmosphere with the fire and imagination of a matchless storyteller.

The myth of Jason takes a plausible form in this book—it is a vivid first-person narrative told by Jason himself, old in everything but memory, a vigorous memory that provides a glowing record of prodigious deeds and indelible experiences.

Jason recalls the days of his youth when he was reared secretly on Mount Pelion by the horse-herder Cheiron, his adventures on the long gold-seeking voyage across the Black Sea, at the treacherous court of the Eagle King of Colchis and finally in his own beleaguered kingdom of Corinth.

Though he is a warrior and affects to despise the poets, Jason is in fact one himself. His dreams are full of the search for an ideal and to the end of his life this ideal is the beautiful Queen of Lemnos whom he deserted. He learns too late that he must come to terms with his witch-wife, Medea.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

NOVELS

The Great Captains
The Golden Strangers
The Dark Island
Red Queen, White Queen
The Rebels
A Fighting Man

POETRY

The Black Seasons
The Exiles
The Haunted Garden
Invitation and Warning

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Carnival King

CRITICISM

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Men of the Hills
The Road to Miklagard
The Children's Crusade
Ask for King Billy
Desperate Journey
Hunter Hunted
Don't Expect Any Mercy
Viking's Sunset
Red Settlement

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HENRY TREECE

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PROLOGUE

The Cretan

For three days the Minoan had crouched, small and dark and afraid, hidden in the fern-hung mouth of the cave. Sometimes he scraped lichen from the limestone rocks about him, stuffing his mouth with the pulpy mash to allay his maddening hunger, sometimes sucking at the little pebbles that lay on the floor of the cave and pretending they were the fine fat olives of his native Crete; the Crete he had known before the brown-haired Achaeans had stormed into the crumbling harbour and made him a slave. The great Crete of Minos, whose ships once fetched tribute from every port in the world, whose bulls snuffed proudly in the Labyrinth arena at each festival, whose round-breasted priestesses were tireless in sounding the praises of the Mother, the 'Womb of All Men' in her many guises—Dia, Aphrodite, Hera, Hecate. All one, all the Mother who would nourish her people; who asked in return only the blood of the sacred king.

But when the bearded Hellene barbarians had rushed up the shore that afternoon after the last earthquake, sacking the great palace at Cnossus, wantonly slaughtering the sacred bulls and raping the gold-decked priestesses, even making water on the shrines, the Mother who had promised so much raised no hand to stop the invaders, no finger to strike them blind or mad.

Why had she not saved her children, the Minoan wondered? Was it because old Minos had slackened in his devotions? Or because Ariadne, the princess-priestess, had sailed away from the sacred shrines with the unbeliever, Theseus?

The Minoan leaned against the rock-wall, almost witless with hunger. He had last eaten four days before—a crust of dry barley bread and a crumb of goat-cheese snatched from the hand of a little girl who sat singing fables among the wild thyme, watching the black-faced sheep.

'Do not be afraid, little one, I shall not hurt you,' he said to her. 'I am hungry, that is all.' But perhaps it was his strange Cretan speech, or the old livid scars of the slave-master's whiplash across his thin brown body that frightened her; perhaps his long matted black hair, that hung half-way down his furrowed back . . . She ran away squealing, her flaxen hair flying in the wind. Then he had had to run too, eating as he went, in case her father or her

brothers should come after him with their long bronze swords or throwing-spears.

Now, after his grim journey over the mountain, he was in the cave mouth, the culvert, hidden by newly-sprouting fern. At least he did not suffer from thirst here. Clear spring water, flowing down from Mount Pelion, gushed out of the mouth of the culvert, icy cold, almost knee-deep. Sometimes he was so weak that he could not balance astride the stream to keep dry and was forced to stand in it until he could regain his strength. His feet and legs were chilled to the bone then. Like his mind, his life itself, they hardly seemed to belong to him.

Once he had been a merchant-prince himself, master of many olive groves and of great cattle-herds. Now he was nothing—a man old before his time by years of slavery in the low shafts of the gold-mines in far northern Paeonia, or crouched coughing in the damp in the lead-shafts under Mount Ossa.

He drew the strip of goatskin about his waist, his only dress, tightening it with a hide thong. Once he had worn fine silks from Egypt, and had slaves of his own to smooth aromatic balms into his skin. Now his hands were rough and misshapen, his skin cracked and covered with sores. If he walked into Cnossus, they would not know him, his teeth broken, his hair matted and shaggy, the hide about his loins stinking. Yet he had once worn gold and amethyst beads, and had his own box at the bull-ring at Cnossus, where he watched the boys and girls from Athens, the frightened young bull-leapers who were to exercise themselves for the glory of the All-Mother and her son, Minos. . . .

The Cretan stumbled to the mouth of the culvert and looked out. On the horizon, grey-blue in the late afternoon, stood the high snow-covered shoulder of Mount Pelion, noble and strong, but foreign, with its clusters of pine woods. Then came the rolling downs, where sheep were grazed and the sound of the shepherds' pipes made mad the heat of the afternoon. Then, so close at hand that he could have struck them with a pebble, had he the strength to throw one, a small grove or garden, hedged round with clumps of oleander and laurel, and towering over them, three dark cypresses that bowed with every breath of wind from the sea. Aconites still grew in the shade.

The clear water from the culvert in which he stood flowed down to that little grove, into a square bath with marble sides, its floor paved with a rude mosaic of coloured stones, not like the fine patterns of Crete, but at least

something to remind him that, here in Thessaly, there had once lived men who claimed kinship with Minos and made their regular yearly voyages to Cnossus for the great markets and feasts. Above the bath, in the rock, were carved a moon-sign and an axe: tokens of the Mother Goddess.

Suddenly the Minoan froze, his heart thumping with terror once more. He heard footsteps beyond that rock above the little grove. It could be a guard, leather-clad and bearded, coming to look for him, carrying the long bronze sword and the two spears that he feared. He had seen a runaway slave taken in Larissa less than a week before. The tall fair-haired Hellenes had used him for spear-practice, against the door of a barn. As the wretch shuddered, skewered like a frog with the bronze spears in him, the Hellenes had watched him for a while, sitting on their shaggy ponies, laughing. Then their captain had kicked his mount forward and leaning down, had ripped the man's stomach open with his long sword. The creature was still alive and screaming while his blood dripped to the dusty ground at his feet, steaming.

Men did not do this in Crete in the great days. A bull-leaper stupid enough to get gored was quickly finished by the Labyrinth servants. Two blows at the nape of the neck with the little moon-shaped stone axes, the goddesses' weapon, and it was all over. No nastiness like this Hellene thing. No standing round and watching while a man lost his courage and his dignity. That was the right way, the way the Mother had ordained it, the way that men were forgetting, now that the Hellenes were coming southwards in their hordes to destroy the old world, the world that had lasted thousands of years.

The Minoan, crouching back among the chill fern-fronds, caught at his breath. The footsteps had come closer, but there was no sound of clinking swords, no sound of snuffling dogs. It was a woman, still young, her deep bronze-coloured hair hanging down her back in ringlets and curls, in the old manner, as they used to wear it in the time of Minos. Her dress, too, was not the shapeless garment that the Hellene women slung on. This one wore a deep sky-blue bodice which exposed her gilded breasts, and walked easily in the wide and sequined flounced skirt that he had always known. About her neck a chain flashed, heavy with many carved seals. On each of her arms, from wrist to elbow, a spiral bracelet. Her feet were bare, as befitted one who walked close to Mother Earth.

The Minoan strained his eyes in the sunlight to see the nature of the bracelets. They were important to him. Then he saw that they were snakes, golden snakes, coiled round the woman's full arms, their tails coming almost

into the palms of her narrow hands, their heads stopping short of her rounded elbow.

By the time he had seen this, and had stepped forward from the darkness of the low culvert, she had deftly loosened her flounced skirt and was standing naked and knee-deep in the little pool, gazing towards the distant mountain and speaking softly to herself, almost like one in a trance, one about to perform a ritual of cleansing, of purification.

He was almost at the marble side of the pool before she turned and saw him. Her oval face was stern and her eyes wide with annoyance, grey eyes staring into his dark brown ones; but she made no attempt to avoid him, to cover herself, as the northern, man-ruled Hellene women would have done. Instead, it was as though she were commanding him, putting a spell upon him.

His voice was weak and trembling before this woman. ‘Lady,’ he said, and then stopped.

Her keen eyes ran over him like searching hands. The fixed and ritualistic expression on her face did not change. He saw the red-stained lips, the two round spots of ochre painted on the cheeks in the ancient manner, just as the doll-priestesses at Cnossus had always decorated themselves.

Her voice was as controlled as her features.

‘If my husband’s men found you here they would have little pity for you. They are Hellenes and know no mercy.’

The Minoan wrung his thin hands and gazed down at the sunburnt earth. His voice was hardly more than a whisper.

‘Lady, I am hungry. I will gladly take a sword in my belly if only bread goes into it first. You have a little wicker basket, lady. Is there bread in that, I beg you?’

For a moment he almost ran forward and snatched at the wicker basket which lay on the grass beside the woman’s flounced skirt. But she shook her head and smiled, a sharp bitter smile, almost like that of a cat or a fox, to expose her sharp white teeth.

‘You would not care to eat what is in that basket. Or if you did, it would sting you to death.’

The Minoan fell to his knees and covered his eyes.

‘I understand, lady. It is your house-snake—the sacred snake of the Mother. Beg her to forgive me. I am hungry. In my right mind, I would never offer an insult to Hera, or whatever name you have for her here. I am hungry, lady, nothing more. Help me.’

The woman climbed slowly from the water and stood above him. As she bent, the long damp locks of her bronze hair brushed his scarred back and he shuddered.

His eyes closed; he heard her voice, perhaps a little warmer now.

‘You are a slave, then. A runaway slave. Death waits for you at every turn in the road, at every river bridge or ford, yet you were once a man, I see. You come from Crete, by the bull-seal which you wear round your neck. They did not take that from you, though they have tormented you in other ways.’

‘Lady, I lost my teeth fighting to keep it. Even they, the Hellenes, respected that.’

She said slowly, ‘How do you know that I am not a Hellene, slave?’

The Minoan swayed with tiredness, but still could laugh, though it was a thin sound, in the wind that swept across the aconites and through the little grove of laurel and oleander and wild thyme.

‘You may be a Minyan, lady, but you are no Hellene. There are signs about you that tell me so. Hair and skin and eyes.’

For a while she did not answer, and then she said, ‘Yes, a Minyan, though my husband is Hellene, one of the conquerors. His men wait for me, beyond that ridge of rock, slave.’

The Minoan began to shiver, but struggled hard to remain a man.

‘Call for them, your husband’s dogs, lady. I can suffer no more. The Mother has decreed this for me, it seems; there is nothing I may do to change it now.’

For a long moment he knelt, waiting for the woman to blow on a whistle or to call out; but there was only the silence of the uplands, the cry of the questing wind, the reedy bleating of young lambs, and, far away, the maddening repetition of the shepherd’s oaten pipes, rising and falling in that mindless five-tone scale.

She spoke like a ghost from the ancient past.

‘Let me look at you, slave. Did they harm you before they put you to work in the mineshafts?’

He felt her cool hands strip away his goatskin, and he shook his tangled head, wondering what was to come.

‘They tried to, lady, as they did to all the others; but it was one of their feast-nights and the man with the knife was clumsy. I twisted from the blade and cried out as the others had done, but, in the darkness, he did not see he had only cut into my thigh.’

Her hands were as gentle as water on him, searching. At last she said, ‘You came out of it well. You did better than you knew.’

The Minoan rested back on his hams and smiled with irony. All his nerves and muscles were twitching.

‘It has not filled my belly, lady. I would perhaps give what I saved that night for a loaf of bread now.’

Her voice was like the rustling of the breeze through dry acanthus leaves. ‘What you have saved may gain you bread, and more than bread, my friend. The Mother knows on whom to place her duties.’

The Minoan, his eyes still closed, felt himself being borne downwards to the turf. What strength was left in him was not meant for fighting, he thought. He tried to say, ‘I pay my dues to the Mother,’ but he had no strength to spare, even for words, at that moment.

For a while it was as though a warm stream flowed over him, embraced him, drowned him; in his nostrils was the acrid scent of pine-boughs burning; in his ears, the wind that ripples across the snow of high Mount Pelion; on his parched lips, the harsh brush of hair that smothers all hunger, stills all voices.

He shrank, shuddering, from the warm, devouring, sacred flesh—as though it had been ice, or thorn. But in the end its power, its hunger, ate him, sucked his spirit from him as though he were a lamb upon the altar: and for a spear-like instant it was as though Poseidon’s vast and roaring sea rushed over him, took him up like a straw on its fearful wave, to pitch him as high as the blue sky; then, without warning, to drop him, plummeting downwards to the weed-bed, drained of all will or knowledge, fearless now. A shell without feeling.

At last, he came up once more from the smothering depths of the sea to feel the warm spring sun upon his bare breast.

The woman, lying beside him in the golden grasses, gazed at the blue sky. Her face was as still as alabaster. Slowly, she unwound the two gold snakes from her wrists and placed them on his thin body.

‘These will buy bread, my friend, and a passage back to Crete. Break them into pieces and spend them carefully. Go eastwards, by night, down to the coast. Someone will carry you home again if you tell them my name. I am still called the Queen of Iolcos by those who hold to the ancient faith. I am Perimede.’

‘Perimede of the many wiles,’ the man said softly. ‘I have heard of you.’

‘No less than that,’ she said.

The Minoan kept his eyes closed lest he should risk the wrath of the Mother by seeing a queen unrobed.

‘What of your husband, lady?’ he dared to ask at last.

Above him, he heard the rustle of the flounced skirt, and then the woman’s sad laugh.

‘My husband, Aeson, is an old man and a fool. He is as dry and parched as a last-year’s olive! He lets his brother Pelias reign as the tyrant of Iolcos in his place. Aeson is too worm-eaten a piece of tinder to put a son in my flesh. This, by the will of the Mother, you may have done for him. A queen must take many lovers. Old Aeson will die, of himself, soon. I need a son.’

The Minoan rolled on to his side, weary, yet full of a strange fearful pride.

‘If the Mother lets a son grow inside you, Queen, what will you call him?’

A shepherd was coming down the long slope, his flock behind him, his two black dogs weaving in and out among the untidy army of animals. The sharp fluting sound of his pipes cut through the cold air like the breath of winter, rising and falling, rising and falling.

The woman stood away from the pool now, almost behind the rock, her glistening snake-basket in her arms. She did not look at the Minoan as she spoke; it was as though, having taken his offering, she had almost forgotten him already. Yet she spoke into the blue air, like one compelled in a dream.

‘A son of mine shall be called Diomedes. Diomedes, which means “the Sly One” in the Hellene speech. He shall be crafty because he must kill Pelias before the day is done. He must kill his tyrant uncle, and set up a new

shrine to the Mother in Iolcos. That will be his duty, the duty your poor body may help me to fulfil.'

The Minoan rose, clutching the two gold bracelets to his thin chest, and turned towards the culvert where the shepherd would not see him.

But after a pace he paused and, with a violent jerk at the leather thong which held the amethyst seal to his neck, broke it away.

Not daring to look at the woman who had put such honour upon him, he held out the bull-seal.

'Diomedes, should he come from you, must carry a sign from the Mother, from Crete herself,' he said. 'Hang this about the prince's neck, lady. Not for my sake, but for Hera's.'

He held out the dangling seal, all he had left, his shaggy head turned away, his dark eyes closed in deference. He did not feel her take the amethyst from his hand. He only knew that when he got back into the dimness of the fern-hung culvert, the amulet had gone from his hand.

And gone also was the golden gleam from the two snake bracelets. As he stared down at them, waiting for the shepherd's pipe to die away into the distance towards Iolcos, he stared down at the twisted spirals of metal. Now he could see that they were of gilded bronze, not gold.

'Perimede of the many tricks,' he said. 'A worthy mother for Diomedes! May he prosper! May he gain great profit from his bull-seal—his father never did! But, after all, she did not say they were gold. I did. That was in my mind.'

As he spoke, the Minoan felt a shiver run along his back. It was as though the Mother had stroked her damp hand the length of his tired body.

The shepherd's dog was standing outside the culvert, sniffing curiously, and then suddenly barking sharply in warning.

The Minoan gazed helplessly at the black dog, seeing the flash of its white teeth, seeing its amber eyes as though they were the eyes of some vengeful god. He swayed on his feet, wondering whether he was strong enough to stoop and take up a big stone from the stream, to silence this creature before it revealed his hiding-place.

But the shepherd was already beside the dog, staring at the man who crouched in the fern-dimmed cavern. He was a short, thick-set fellow, who carried a stout oaken staff in his red hands. The hair stuck out from his round head like straw.

His voice was what the Minoan had expected, that appropriate to a red-handed man with an oaken staff and hair like straw.

‘Come on out of there,’ the voice shouted harshly, ‘You should be worth a pretty penny to me, Minoan! I don’t catch a runaway slave every day. Move on now, or I’ll have to come in and beat you out with my stick! I’ll break your ribs, I promise you, if you cause me any trouble!’

The Minoan did not delay. For most of his adult life he had been trapped in one cave or another, in reality or dream, by these yellow-haired Hellenes. He knew that he must come when he was called. He knew that his slavery could never end now.

He flung the gilded snake-bracelets back into the darkness of the culvert, where no one would think of looking for them. They were useless, anyway. Tricks to trap the unwary.

‘May Diomedes get more value from my seal,’ he whispered as the icy water of the stream flowed over his ankles.

Then he called out, ‘I come, shepherd. Do not send the dog after me. I come.’

His lips drawn back to show his broken teeth, half in pain, half in a shallow jest, he hobbled out under the ferns towards the waiting shepherd, pulling the goatskin tight about him once again, to hide as much of his body as he could.

MOUNT PELION

Part One

1

Diomedes Among the Horses

I AM DIOMEDES, son of Poseidon, they say. I have been called Diomedes of Colchis, of Iolcos, even of Corinth, during my warrior-lifetime.

But most men know me as Jason, 'the Healer,' nothing more—and often with no kingdom attached to the name. That is perhaps as it should be. Jason was the nickname given to me when I was a boy, by old Cheiron, master of the Hundred Horse-herders, who looked after me like a father until I was sixteen. Yet for the greater part of my life most folk who called me Jason laughed secretly when they said it, often holding their hands across their mouths so that I should not see, for in those days I had more to do with giving wounds than with healing them. All men knew that. I knew it, too, but made nothing of it.

How I got my nickname is perhaps the most important thing in my life. It is something I want to talk about, now that I am an old man, thin in the arms and legs, fat in the belly, and slow in my speech. . . . But I was not always so. Once men were afraid of me.

My earliest memories are of the long sweep of upland grazing just below the snowline on Mount Pelion, with the black horses galloping and neighing against the blue sky, the ground echoing with the thud of their lovely great hooves; and me sitting on the sheepskin saddle behind old Cheiron, wondering whether he was a horse or a man. His legs were so bowed with riding that they seemed to disappear behind the horse's shoulder muscles; and his back was so bent as he leaned over to talk in the horse's ear, he seemed a part of the creature's neck. His long black hair, which was never cut, and his beard, mingled with the horse's mane like one lot of hair. Even his long face, his nose and chin and jutting lower jaw, reminded me of a horse. He always dressed in horse-hide, and smelled like a horse. He laughed like one, too, and always stooped over his dish to eat like one, never using his knife or his hands, as the other men did.

Cheiron was the Horse King of Pelion. He could ride anything, and could talk to the wildest stallion until the creature was as mild as a lamb and willing to eat from his hand. I never knew Cheiron to strike a horse, yet they

all obeyed him. When I was old enough to ask him about this, sitting in the rambling horse-hide palace on the hill-side, with one tent leading into another and yet another, just like a house of stone or wood, he smiled and said, ‘My other name is Hippodamus, the horse-tamer—so I ought to know such things, don’t you think, boy?’

That seemed to make sense to me, and I said, ‘Hippodamus, there is something else that worries me; as you are my father, then I must have had a mother. Yet I have never seen her. Who is she?’

Cheiron never became cross at the questions I used to ask him. He was a good and patient teacher. But this time he began to wag his shaggy head the way horses do when they are restless, and then he took a stick and stirred up our horse-dung fire. Though I was only a little lad, I sensed that his mind was troubled. I was not called Diomedes, the Sly One, for nothing.

And at last he came back to the leather cushions stuffed with horse-hair, that were the only furniture in the audience hall, and said, ‘Your mother was Hippothoë, the impetuous mare, I think. Yes, that is who she was. She wanted you to be called Hippolochus, Son of a Mare, but I always thought that Diomedes sounded better. Don’t you?’

He glanced sideways at me, with his dark horse’s eyes, and I nodded, to please him.

‘All the same,’ I said, ‘a man cannot get away from the truth, from the *themis*, the law of God. Where is my mother now, Cheiron? I would like to meet her and talk to her.’

‘Aiee! Aiee! Lad!’ he said. ‘She is not one to be pestered by little gossiping boys. She has other things to think of. She is the Great Mare who rules beyond Pelion, and grazes out as far afield as River Peneus, across the wide plains and over the high hills. A man could spend a lifetime looking for her. She is not often seen.’

He must have noticed tears in my eyes at these words, because he slapped me on the shoulder and said, ‘There, Diomedes, try to be patient. This sort of thing happens to most boys of your age. They have to wait until their mother comes to see *them*. It will be the same with you. One day, when the time is right, your mother will come over the hill to claim you—I promise you that.’

His words comforted me, and I went away to sleep with the other boys under the long skin wind-break, and to dream of the Great Mare, with

tossing head and bright hooves and eyes, who would come for me if I was a good lad and perhaps take me riding on her broad back.

That dream kept me contented for years.

I don't know what Cheiron told the other boys. They never talked about it then—though later they called themselves the sons of Zeus, Poseidon and so on, when they got too old to believe they were suckled at a mare's teats.

We were a strange company, the Horse-herders. Like a folk on our own. The men were all short and very dark, with their hair down their backs, and hooked noses like eagles. I learned later that they were the children of the old Minoans who had settled in Thessaly and took to the hills when the Hellenes came down from the northern plains in their chariots to find land for themselves. We provided horses for half of the world, as I knew it then—Magnesia, Euboca, Locris, Boeotia; yes, even as far as Attica. Though the men of the Peloponnese bred their own horses, and bought nothing from us. Our horses were small and wiry, and the men of the far south wanted them bigger and stronger, to carry men in armour, not for drawing chariots in pairs.

There were always a hundred of us—never more nor less—and about thirty of us were boys like me. We used to think we were all brothers, and that Cheiron was our father, he was so kind to us—but when I grew older I knew better. Though they all called themselves Hippolochus—Sons of the Mare—that was not true. They didn't even look the same as each other, which they would have done if they had had one mother, surely. Some of them had black hair, some brown, some red. I was the only one with bright yellow hair—as yellow as that of any Hellene.

Once a boy named Aristides pulled my long yellow hair and called out to the others, 'Hoi! Look, a Hellene has got into our camp! Let us stone him!'

I was about nine at the time and he was much older; yet I think I could have bested him at fighting if I had been allowed. But the older boys came clustering round, laughing and neighing and pushing me from one to the other until I was dizzy and afraid.

Then Cheiron ran out of the tents, his stick in his hand, and drove them away from me, as though they were rough young colts.

'So, you think because Diomedes has yellow hair you have a right to bully him, do you? What about you with the red hair, Aristides? Is that a better colour? And what of you with the brown hair, Phillipos? Cannot the

Great Mare have colts of whatever colour she chooses? Must she always have black ones just because you think so?'

The boys were so ashamed, I was sorry for them. But then Cheiron called me forward to him and took the amethyst seal that had always hung round my neck on a thong.

'When you next feel like misusing your lazy strength,' he said, 'find out first of all if your victim is wearing such a token as this. This is the Great Mother's seal, my friends, and is only given to princes. You talk of Hellenes just because the Mare willed Diomedes to have yellow hair—but I tell you that with such a seal he could have walked into the Great Hall of Cnossus in the splendid days, and have sat beside Minos himself. Now what do you say?'

He stumped back to his palace, and then the boys clustered round me to see the seal and to ask my pardon. That night Aristides moved his place along the wind-break and slept next to me, holding my hand in his.

And after that, it must have got about among the men themselves, because they took to calling me 'the Minoan,' though the difference between us was as that between jet and snow.

By the time I was twelve, I was taller than anyone in the camp—the men included—and no one ever tried to tease me again.

I have since thought about those boys, who called themselves the sons of Cheiron. In truth, they were a mixed lot—but most of them of noble blood, had they known it. Some of them had been found exposed on the hills, as babies, to meet whatever death waited them because their parents could not afford to feed them; some were the illegal sons of princesses who dared not have them in the palaces; and some were the true sons of great ladies who sent them to Cheiron to be safe from the hands of murderous tyrant-kings.

That is perhaps why there was a ban on us in Iolcos. No Horse-herder was ever allowed within the city-gates. It was a law. When the Minyans of Iolcos wanted horses, they came out to a meeting-place at the foot of the hill and dealt with Cheiron in secret.

This, in its strange way, made us feel proud. We felt that we were too good for the weak men of Iolcos, and that they were afraid of us in some way, frightened to let us into their citadel.

But do not think, because we could not go into the city, that we had no entertainment. We sang, and danced, and fought with sticks, and rode; yes, rode, rode, rode, all the time!

Then there was another thing I must tell you about. We were a settlement of men and boys—but a day's ride away, beyond the pine woods, there was a Village of Women, all dark women like the Horse-herders, but most of them pretty, in the Cretan way, and very lively in their songs and dances, and always glad to see us when we rode to visit them.

This we did three times a year—at the Spring sowing-time, after the Harvest, and at Winter. We all went, men and children, taking the horses with us. It did not seem strange to us when we were children that there should be a whole village with no men in it—after all, our camp on the mountain-side contained no women.

Of course, there were things we did not think about in those days. For instance, we did not think about what happened to any boy children in that village. Later, some of us, whispering together at night under the wind-break, got to realize what must have happened—the boys were either exposed on the hills, or perhaps put into the river when the *aegre* came up from the sea, as an offering to Poseidon, while the girls were nurtured to womanhood, to become members of that place of females.

There was another thing which used to puzzle me when I was a young boy; always, after we had visited this Village of Women for the festivals, we returned home to our hill-side short of one man. There was a great secrecy about this and no one would talk about it: but it was a fact. No one knew who it would be, to stay behind; but it was always one of the grown men, not the children.

I once asked Cheiron about this, when I was riding alongside him, almost within sight of Iolcos. He leaned over his horse's neck for a while, whispering into the stallion's ear, and then he turned to me with a sideways glance and said, 'A man must be there to make the seeds grow in the earth, or to thank the All-Mother for a good grain harvest. And at Winter, he must be there to see that the snow does not lie too long, or the river rise too high. He must see that the year turns like a wheel. It is just that. There must be one man.'

He said this so quietly, so positively, that I did not carry the questions any further. I was about fifteen at the time, and had begun to know that there were many things in life that must not be pressed too far.

But later another thing happened which made me think about it all again.

Each year, before the mating-time of horses, there was a sort of ceremony among us, held in a hollow basin of the hill-side, into which we

drove all the young stallions who were ready. The grown men sat on horses at the lip of the basin, with sticks and spears, to keep the stallions enclosed. At first we young lads sat with them and only watched. But as we grew older and stronger, we were allowed down there, among the flailing hooves and swirling tails, to play our part.

Cheiron would go among the stallions on his own mare, touching certain of them on the rump with his white wand; then we made for the marked ones and put hide thongs about their muzzles and their hind-legs. Sometimes it took three of us on each rope to hold in the stallion.

But when we had got him quiet, one of the men would come swiftly with a sickle-shaped knife of bronze, and take away what they called the 'sweet breads.' While the stallion reared and squealed, and we held on furiously, beating at his nose with our sticks, another man would catch a few drops of the blood which trickled out in libation cups of glazed clay.

This was done so naturally, so often, that we thought nothing of it. It was a custom, and not to be questioned. We noticed that the stallions who had been so treated became quieter, more docile, more manageable, and thought it was a necessary part of their training.

Once when I asked a herdsman about the custom, he said, 'We call it "giving the Mother her due," Diomedes. She requires it and it always has been done.'

The unwarlike horses who had 'given the Mother her due' seemed content, after a little while, and we boys assumed that the Mother had put peace into their minds by reason of the ceremony.

On this occasion there was always present a young woman from the far village, usually the newest Nymph, a girl in her early teens. She came with a skin bag to collect the 'sweet breads' and take them back to her village as an annual offering. And whoever came, she was always dressed in the same way—wearing a short blue bodice, to show her upper body, and a flounced pink skirt, drawn in so tightly at the waist that we boys thought it must have been most uncomfortable to put on.

This girl was always treated with great respect by the herdsmen, who bowed before her and walked backwards from her presence. We boys stared at her long oiled locks of hair, her coloured lips and the round blobs of red on her cheeks; and especially we stared at the gilded tips of her breasts, which struck us as being most amusing.

One day, shortly after I had spoken to Cheiron about our loss of a man at every festival in the Village of Women, I stood by such a girl as she watched the stallions ‘giving the Mother her due.’ Her lips were slightly apart, and her hair dark and long down her back. She was staring as though she did not wish to miss a single movement of the man with the sickle. I was greatly daring and said to her, ‘You are very interested, lady.’

She turned to me after a while and gazed at me from my feet to my head, her black eyes vacant. ‘Yes,’ she said, in a low, almost hoarse, voice, speaking our language with a Cretan tang. ‘Yes, it *could* be a man.’

Her words were like a hard blow between the eyes to me. If she had not been the Nymph of the Year and dressed in her garb of priestess, I think I would have given her a good shaking. But there was some strange thing like an invisible wall between us, and I dared not touch her. She seemed to know this, too, because she smiled and drew out of the waistband of her skirt a little silver sickle, so small that it lay neatly in the palm of her narrow brown hand. Its blade was filed very sharp; I could see that from where I stood. I did not dare say anything to her about such a thing. But she gave a little nod of her head, which set the dark elf-locks dancing on her back, then she smiled and turned back to watch the men at work in the hollow basin.

Later she spoke, into the wind, and I hardly caught her words. ‘This year it is my task. I must know what to do.’

I dared to say, ‘Is it the man who is left behind?’

She nodded, absently, watching the boys holding a great black stallion whose hide glistened with the sweat of terror.

‘It happens after you have all gone. When we have chewed the laurel leaves. It is my turn this year.’

Then she moved her eyes round until they rested on me, in a sideways gaze. I did not like that at all. She looked like a cow or a snake, the way she stared, unblinking.

‘You are the only one with yellow hair among the herdsmen,’ she said gently. ‘You are outstanding among them, being so tall and so golden. There has not been a yellow one for many years.’

I did not want to stay with her any longer then, in case her mind turned to other things about me. I picked up the horse-hide bag she had brought and went down the slope, away from her.

‘I will collect the “sweet breads” for you, lady,’ I said, glad to be out of her staring sight.

Indeed, I was relieved when they told me she had left our encampment. I felt safer among men alone. But I did ask Cheiron about something she had said.

‘Why do the women chew the laurel, Father?’ I asked that evening as we walked round the grazing pens, tending the gelded horses.

Cheiron was chewing a grass-stalk, like a horse himself, and smiled a little grimly, so that the long lines down his face got deeper, and his narrow dark brow furrowed.

‘I saw you talking to the Nymph,’ he said. ‘It is not wise to meet one’s fate half-way. Moira, the will of God, is like a bridge, which should not be crossed until one gets to it; and then one should stride over it without thinking. Otherwise, a man’s life is full of dark dreams and forebodings. A man should go to the festivals singing, and taking what is offered him for the glory of the Mother. He should not always be thinking that he alone is to pay the reckoning. Others, many others, have gone before him. And many others will follow him. There is nothing unusual about it, my son.’

‘No, Father,’ I said, ‘only for the one who is chosen!’

He gave a gruff little laugh as he examined a horse that was shuddering in a corner of the rocks, and not grazing hungrily like the others.

‘Three men could run through a sudden rainstorm,’ he said. ‘Two would come out dry and the other wet. The raindrops fall where they will. Moira is like that—it leaves some dry, and one wet. Who is to say how the rain should fall?’

He stroked the gelding’s neck gently with soothing hands, and spoke into his ear. The horse seemed to shake his head, as though disconsolate, and then Cheiron left it and came back to me.

He looked up into my eyes through his own narrowed lids, as though searching my mind. Then he said, ‘It is after the festival that the women chew the laurel, my son. There is something in it that makes them drunk, gives them strength, and lets them be able to do what has to be done. It is the old faith that orders this, Diomedes, and men cannot change it—although the Hellenes have tried to stamp it out in those places where they honour the father above the mother. That is all.’

I placed my hands upon his hairy shoulders and said, ‘Father, if I have my way, I shall burn down all the laurel bushes between Thessaly and Tiryns, before I have done!’ I spoke with all the passion of a frightened boy.

He shook my hands away from him with a movement more sudden and violent than I had ever known. For an instant I thought he was going to strike me with the long bull’s pizzle that he always carried when he went among the herds at night.

‘Never speak such words again, Diomedes,’ he said. ‘If you were heard, think what could happen to you!’

I must have looked so shocked that his face softened and he patted me gently on the back, just as he had patted the miserable gelding a minute before.

‘Come, my son,’ he said, ‘let us go back to my palace. We will drink a cup of fermented mare’s milk to drive the cold out of our bones. It is chilly up here on the hill tonight. Then we will talk about the Spring festival. It is almost the day for us to ride to the Village of Women; they will be expecting us soon. This year you will go as a man. Your days of watching are over; now it is time for you to be a-doing!’

As we walked our horses down the hill, I said to him, ‘I should go with a better heart if I knew that I was not to be the chosen one at the feast, Father.’

Old Cheiron shook his head and said, ‘You are trying to run before you have learned to walk! The Mother is not like that; she is good to us. If she asks payment, it is only after she has given gifts. To be chosen never falls to a man in his first year. The Mother would not cheat a man like that; we are all her sons, don’t forget, and she wishes our happiness. She knows every one of us, and waits for us. Most times she is willing to wait all our lives.’

I came up to him doubtfully and took his wrist.

‘Do you swear, Father?’ I asked him in the shadow of the tents.

Cheiron smiled into my face. ‘It is not my place to swear on her behalf, Diomedes,’ he said. ‘Anything could always happen. We could be smitten by lightning as we rode over the hill. Or the thunderstones could crush us all. Who knows? But I will tell you this—and I have never told it before—the choice this year has fallen on one much older than you. One with red hair. He does not know it, nor should I have told you but to comfort you, for I love you dearly.’

He stopped then and his face darkened. ‘But what I have said is not to be revealed to anyone. You must understand that. If you were to pass on my word, then someone would know, and a second choice would be made—a choice that even I could not prevent, my son.’

After that, we drank fermented mare’s milk and ate the succulent shell-fish that had been brought up for us from the sea by the fisher-folk who dealt with us. But I did not enjoy my meal, though it was counted a privilege to eat with Cheiron in his skin-palace. I kept thinking of the poor devil who was chosen, already, without his knowledge. I sensed that it was Aristides, the proud lad who had once taunted me about being a Hellene. He who had held my hand in the night, to make me his friend again.

And now he was dancing and singing with his mates about the fires, thinking of the festival that was to come again in the Village of Women beyond the far pines. He was already finished—yet I dared not tell him so. Yet, by the following morning, I had forgotten him, for I found that under the trees the aconites had given way to hyacinths—and I have always been a great lover of flowers. There is something so hopeful about them: they seem to die—and then, when Spring comes, they rise again in all their beauty. They must be sent by the gods to show us that there is no real ending—and that all will come again, be reborn. In their tender leaves and petals are *themis*—the truth of life, of the gods.

2

The Village of Women

We arrived, after a day of riding from dawn to dusk, at the Village of Women. We were all there, even the smallest boys, in a long single file, threading down through the mountain slopes towards the pine woods; and always, as we drew nearer the place we were bound for, warnings went on ahead of us—the high, reedy singing of girls who were tending the goats and the sheep higher up in the hidden grazing-slopes. These songs followed us, seemed to hover like birds above us, guiding us forwards, forwards, all the while, to meet what lay waiting for us at the place where the Spring festival had always been celebrated by the Horse-herders.

Cheiron had told us before we set out that when the three days were over, one of us would be honoured by the Goddess. All the men nodded, their black hair blowing over their eyes as they sat on their ponies, their legs dangling; but the boys of my own age and younger just smiled and stared at him, as though he was speaking a formula which had nothing to do with reality, with life and death. For most of them, Cheiron might just as well have been chanting the names of the thirteen months of the Medusan calendar—the calendar that the Hellenes were already changing in many places. Aristides had been as bored as any of them, though he was one of the oldest of the boys and had been classed as a man in the Village of Women for the last three festivals.

As we came to the first of the pine woods, riding low under the overhanging boughs, I watched him carefully, being only a few yards behind him. He was laughing and singing, as though he hadn't a care in the world, and calling out to others like myself who were going for the first time as men, that we should never forget it! I shuddered to hear him speak like this, and wished that I could have drawn my pony alongside his, to warn him of what lay ahead of him—though I had given my solemn word to Cheiron, and, besides, I did not *know* what lay ahead of him, I only feared for him.

I had always lived on the rolling uplands, among the high soughing grasses and under the blue sky; now, below the pine-boughs, I began to be afraid in an unspeakable sort of way—I felt as I often do still when I am in

houses, enclosed by walls and with a roof above me—trapped. The pine wood was like a house, or rather a vast temple, with many columns to support its dark and fretted roof. Our horses' hooves sank into the mulch of ancient pine-needles and cones and a heavy smell of earth came up to us. Here and there bright red and green fungi stuck up through the loam, arrogantly. The smaller boys pointed at these and laughed, until Cheiron turned in his saddle and glared at them until they were silent once more.

My own nostrils were full of the smoky scent of the foliage about me. There was something musk-like, cat-like, woman-like, about it that disturbed me. Even the sudden brittle cry of a bird, startled in the depths of the wood and flapping its way through the tangled dry boughs, reminded me of the shrill singing of the women on the hills. Everything seemed to lead to women that day. There were women in the air, in the deep damp earth, among the boughs, in the scent of the leaves. It was as though the whole creation was *of* women, *for* women, and that we men and boys were as helpless as the little stuffed boy-dolls that the Minoan ladies used to hang in their orchard trees to ensure a good crop.

Just before dusk we came to the village. Aristides was singing a cheerful song about a sailor from Scyros who tried to pay court to a dolphin, when Melanos, Cheiron's second-in-command, held up his hand for silence, and we rode down out of the damp woods with bowed heads.

The village was a score or so of wooden huts, set round in a great half-circle at the edge of the woods, and overlooking a central cleared space in which stood a long low house, thatched with straw, and with window-holes only at its two ends. This was the feast hall. I had been there before in my status as a boy and knew that it contained only two rooms: one in which the children played and all feasted at the long trestle-table; and the other, which I had never entered as yet, into which the men went at night-time. As we dismounted and approached the door, a new feeling passed through my body and I began to tremble. I felt that I was on the verge of a high steep cliff, at the edge of some strange, perhaps awful discovery. I have always feared cliffs, and with a good reason.

The village seemed deserted and some of the little boys began to cry as the owls hooted all about us in the dark woods. Then one of them pointed to the lintel above the doorway and cried out, 'Look, Father Cheiron, there is wet blood over the doorway.'

We all looked and saw it. I suppose I had seen it before as a child without knowing what it was. This time it had a curious effect on me. My

lower jaw began to quiver so violently that I could not speak. Aristides could speak though. He shouted back to the little lad who had called out, ‘Take care, young one! That is the blood of the Gorgon who will come to get you before the night is out!’

He meant it to be a joke but no one laughed. Cheiron’s face was very pale as he knocked three times upon the closed door without even looking at Aristides. At any other time he would have given him a good beating for scaring a little boy, for the Horse-herders allowed no bullying. Straight fighting was one thing but bullying was another.

Then, as the third knock died away, the door opened and the young woman, the Nymph, who had been at the rounding-up of stallions stood there to welcome us. This time she was wrapped in a long robe of grey worsted with a hood which half-covered her face. But I could tell who it was by the round splotches of colour on her cheeks, and the long tails of oiled black hair that escaped the hood and fell over her breast.

Slowly she said, ‘Hera bids you welcome, men! It has been long since the snow first fell, and she has awaited you impatiently. Now come within and warm yourselves with wine and fire. The buds must burst, the fruit must grow! Come within to enjoy the blessing of the All-Mother!’

As she finished speaking, from the back part of the long-house the voices of many women were raised in a high, wordless, soaring song, a paean of some sort, accompanied by the beating of a little drum and a series of chords upon some stringed instrument like a lyre. These lyres were made with a turtle-shell and two bull’s horns. The strings were of sheep’s entrails.

It was all indescribably sharp and frightening to me this time, though as a child I did not recall it as such.

Then, according to the custom among the Horse-herders, we all rushed through the doorway and ranged ourselves about the long table to eat and drink what was set before us. This table was always well spread as a welcome to us after the long journey over the hill and down through the dark woods. There were warm oat-cakes, barley-bread, creamy butter, olives, and a great wooden dish set in the midst of everything piled high with grain soaked in milk, and containing morsels of sheep-meat, goat-flesh, and juicy particles of shell-fish. By each man’s wooden platter was a cup of Cretan wine in a finely-glazed cup with great handles. These cups were very old and had about them the look of an egg-shell, they were so delicate. Our own greyish Minyan ware was crude beside them.

Cheiron saw that the young boys were served first, for there were no women in this room and the men had to do all the sharing-out. He warned us all that the cups were precious things and that the women set great store by them, because they had come down from the earliest times. A broken cup would cost a full-grown horse, he said, so we must be very careful with them. At this many of the little boys refused to drink out of them, and had to be helped by the older ones.

Aristides, however, seemed possessed of a devil. First he took the seat at the head of the table where Cheiron himself should have sat; then, after laughing and roaring like a madman, he drained his cup at one gulp and flung it deliberately into a corner, where it smashed to fragments. Cheiron, who had calmly taken the seat below Aristides, did not say a word. But he bit his lips and stared down at the scrubbed boards of the trestle. Even Melamos, usually a quick-tempered man with the boys in his care, looked away, as though this had not happened. By now the little boys were so occupied with filling their bellies that they did not notice what had taken place. But those of us who were now classed as men glanced at each other and wondered. . . . Then the time for wondering was over, for the door that led to the second, secret room was flung open and a great sound of singing came to our ears. It was accompanied by the sharp scent of burning pine-cones and of some heavily resinous wood which stung the eyes and nostrils.

A crowd of little girls came running in, to take the hands of the young boys and to dance and play with them. For the first time I observed that these girls did not play like the children I had watched in other villages, farther south, roughly and without purpose. They moved always as though to music, with rhythm and shuffling bare feet. Their hands came out in small stiff gestures too, as though they had been trained to move only in this way. Each one wore a shapeless blue robe, and their hair, dark and oiled, hung loosely down their backs.

It is strange that I had never noticed all these things before when I had come to the long-house as a little one myself. Then, it had been a matter of reaching the journey's end, of sitting in the hay by a warm fire, of eating and drinking until I felt ready to burst! The little girls had been incidental, like furniture. We had played and laughed together for three days and then had parted without another thought. We did not even know each other's names. These were never told, on either side; which means nothing, of course, since all folk went under many different names at various stages of their lives in those days.

But my thoughts were taken from the playing children when Cheiron came behind me and pushed me forward, through the inner door.

‘Come, Diomedes,’ he whispered, ‘the days of playing and childhood are over now. We must now dance to a different measure or the corn will not grow, nor the mares foal!’

We went into a longer room than the one we had dined in. Its wooden floor was bare but along either wall, at the side, hay was piled to knee-height; and the walls themselves were decked with the interlaced boughs of pine and laurel and cypress, which cast off a bitter-sweet, musk-like tang.

At the far end of the room, a charcoal fire burned, and in its glow I saw a low altar, on which was set many sea-shells, a white marble cross with arms of equal length, and two statuettes of the Mother, wearing the short bodice which exposed her navel, and her flounced skirt, her arms held out before her and encircled with snakes.

The smell of the hay by the walls came sweetly to my nostrils then, and out of the corner of my eye I saw that here and there along the room stood a tall red-ware amphora—of wine, I suspected—with glazed cups standing beside each one. At least we were not going to be thirsty.

Then Cheiron gave the command, and we arranged ourselves in a long line, down the centre of the room, back to back, and forty in each rank. And when we were in position, the women came from the shadows at the far end of the hall, where the fire and the altar were, each of them dressed in the short bodice and flounced skirt, their dark hair flying and their bodies laid bare. The music started up again, the drum and the lyre, to give point to the movements of the bare and rustling feet.

Each woman carried a broad strip of cloth which she wound round the eyes of each man, wordlessly, so that we were all blindfolded. And then a voice began to chant, the voice of the Nymph who had shown me the little silver sickle when the stallions were giving the Mother her due. I shall never forget the words she spoke, as we stood silently in that pine-scented room:

‘Omphalos, Omphalos!
Sign of begetting, sacred cave!
Omphalos the Mother-sign,
The cave of death!
The Cranes dance
When Spring comes,
To show that they
Would do as we—
To find their man
And dedicate
Him to the Omphalos,
The sign of birth!’

As the chant ended, I heard Aristides cry out in the heavy silence, ‘Mother, I come! Why do you need to ask?’

There was something like a shocked gasp among both women and men, and then the sound was drowned by the shuffling of feet upon the wood and among the hay. I think it was the Cranes’ courting-dance that the women performed, though I could not see it, because of the bandage about my eyes.

But at last there was silence; the dance, whatever it was, was over, and someone, a woman, had taken me by the two hands and had guided me towards the hay by the wall. It was now that I did one of the things which have proved that I was not named Diomedes, the Sly One, for nothing! As we rolled over together, to make ourselves comfortable, I slid my cheek down the woman’s bare shoulder and pushed up the blinding bandage a little over my left eye—the one I lost later, outside Mycenae—and saw her. She was young, very young, perhaps a year younger than I was. But she had all the paint and the gilt that I had come to know. She had also a strength and a fire that I had never known before. Once, while we were resting, she whispered to me in a tongue that I hardly recognized as my own, ‘Can you see, brother? I think your bandage has slipped and you must not see. That would spoil the magic.’

I put on my most wooden voice and said, ‘Sister, how could you think such a thing? All I can see is the darkness, and that is enough for me!’

This seemed to satisfy her, because she said no more about it and gave her attention to other things. I forgot poor Aristides now, and gave my mind to the affair in hand. It was good to be among the men at last, I thought. If this was what it meant, it was good. But for a moment I saw a sharp picture of the stallions down in the hollow, and I shuddered.

‘What is it, brother?’ asked the girl. ‘Has the Mother touched you with her snake?’

I shook my head in the hay and did not risk an answer.

Soon after that, the drum began again, and the lyre sent its harsh chords vibrating down the long warm hall. The Nymph cried out in a shrill voice, ‘Men of the Horse People, Hera bids you to the dance again!’

My girl helped me to get up and led me back to my place once more. Then the Cranes’ dance started up a second time. And when it stopped, I looked under my bandage very secretly and saw that the Nymph herself had chosen me this time.

In the hay I was very careful, very discreet, remembering that my name was Diomedes. That I was the Sly One!

After a spell the Nymph said to me, ‘What did you think of the little silver thing I showed you on the hill that day, brother?’

I pretended to look puzzled and even made a movement as though I would take the bandage from my eyes, but she stopped me with cool firm hands.

‘What are you speaking of?’ I asked, as though troubled. ‘I have never taken silver from a woman on the hill-side, I swear by the Mother of us all!’

She put her narrow hand over my mouth at this, as though anxious that I should not say anything out of place. I smiled in my heart because I knew that I was speaking the truth anyway. It convinced the Nymph at my side, and after that she seemed to give herself to the ritual without a care.

For my own part, I now had no cares either; not even for Aristides. After all, he had been to this village for the last three years in the status of a grown man. A man’s luck cannot last for ever.

3

The Parting

AFTER three days and nights the sounds of the drum and lyre, of the shuffling feet, had become almost intolerable. Even the shouts of the children playing in the ante-room became the sharp head-splitting cries of the Erinnyes, of demons.

It was time to go. Old Cheiron, his horse-hide smock now torn, yawned and stretched by the door which led out to the pine woods and said, 'Oh, for the hills and the horses!'

I felt stained and sweaty and feather-light in the head. I walked past him and made my way, on the far side of the huts, to where I heard the sound of water rushing between rocks. We boys had always been taught to keep ourselves and our horses clean, and now I felt that I needed the cool freshness of water upon my skin, above all things.

There was a little round pool, hemmed in by great slab-like rocks, upended by some volcanic rising, and the stream ran down from the mountain and into this natural basin before brimming over the sides and making its way still farther down the slope among the trees.

I had already stripped off my tunic and was running towards this place when I heard voices, slow weary voices, coming from behind those pointed black rocks.

Three women lay there, half-submerged in the waters, letting the mountain stream run over them, as though they too were rocks, or shells, or some unfeeling work of Nature.

When the first of them saw me there was a great twittering, a shrill bird-like squealing and snatching for garments. One of them, her bodice drenched, appeared over the rocks and pointed her forefinger at me, between my eyes. She shouted out something which I did not understand and did not stay to enquire about. I turned and ran back through the huts, to the long-house, where Cheiron was assembling the horsemen.

When he saw me he laughed. ‘Have you, too, been to still a baby in the cold stream?’ he asked.

I gazed at him amazed. ‘Is that what they are doing?’ I said.

He turned from me and bound the sheepskin saddle on his horse’s back. ‘We are ready to leave,’ he said. ‘Come, Diomedes, do not delay.’ And that was all I had from him.

Only the little girls came to see us go. They stood in a straight line, the evening sun upon their oval wax-like features, their long dark hair floating in the wind, their tiny hands raised in the ritual signal of farewell. Few of the little boys bothered to turn in their saddles and wave back. We men merely smiled and then put our horses to the muddy slope that led upwards through the woods.

No one mentioned Aristides.

I think we were almost at the outer edge of the pine forest when I first discovered that the amethyst seal had gone from my neck. I was at the tail-end of the file and so did not feel myself answerable to anyone. I swung my black horse about and galloped back among the trees.

Riding down the slope I made good time and soon came upon the Village of Women once again. Now in the growing dusk all looked different. The little girls had gone and there was a great loneliness about the place, as though no one lived there at all.

Dismounting, I ran through the feast-hall and the door into the room where we had held our festival.

As I entered that place, its air now as thick as that of a goat-pen, there arose gasps all about me. It was as though I had defiled some awful and forbidden shrine. In the blue dimness, I groped my way towards the pallet of hay on which I had passed the three days of the Mother’s festival. My hands groped, near frantic, among the wisps of dried grass, until they came upon something hard and cold. It was the seal which had been wrenched from me in some paroxysm of ecstasy. I held it safely in my hand again and felt complete, myself again.

But before I could run from that room of smoke-laden fear, a cry at the far end halted me, made me stare towards the glowing fire, the little altar where the images of the Goddess held her writhing snakes.

‘Diomedes, my friend! My friend!’

I turned back like a man in a dream of death and saw Aristides; but not the Aristides I had always known. Only that call of his had been the true Aristides—only for a second or two. By the time I had focused my eyes upon him he was once again what I knew he must become—meat for the Mother, albeit seemly dressed.

Aristides sat before the altar, bolt upright, as though trussed like a cock for the table, in a high-backed gilded chair.

His face was painted, the eyelids blue, the cheeks red; but no paint could disguise his dreadful pallor, his stark terror. And though he wore the purple tunic of kings and priests, open at the breast and down as far as the waist, he was no king, unless it was the King of Death, which is no king at all.

He stared at me as though I were some creature of a past but desirable life; a fellow he would dearly like to embrace if only for safety's sake, but never would again.

'Aristides!' I called. 'My friend! What shall I do?'

The frozen creature in the chair did not answer me with his voice or hands. But his fear-crazed eyes swung to left and to right. I looked and saw the reason for his terror. On either side of him, squatting on their haunches, were the women, all of them dressed in the hateful blue bodice which exposed their lewdly gilded breasts, the hateful flounced pink skirts which jangled with sequins as the wearer walked.

But these women were not walking. They were sitting, and waiting. Some of them wore masks—of the bitch, the sow; the mare. But most of them wore their own haggard faces, their dark hair tangled over their shoulders, their cheeks pinked with blobs of horrible ochre. They were just white faces full of eyes, large black Cretan eyes, that saw everything and saw nothing. Their thin jaws moved in some awful rhythm as they chewed, and chewed the laurel. Of all things, the laurel! Mindless masks moving their thin and awful jaw-pieces.

In each woman's lap lay a bunch of shrivelled leaves from which the narrow brown hands plucked timelessly.

And in each woman's lap rested a little silver sickle. I saw the light from the wall-torches glinting on these things, and I recalled that day when the Nymph had come to watch the stallions 'giving the Mother her due.'

'Aristides,' I called once more, 'can you hear what I am saying, my friend?'

I think for a moment I may have had some mad idea of rushing forward and freeing the boy I had known at the Horse Camp. But he did not answer me. Instead, he stared straight before him and at last he began to laugh like a madman.

As I stood there wondering what I should do, the Nymph herself rose from behind the chair, her face still painted as before but her flounces now torn from her. She turned her black eyes towards me and said aloud, 'Diomedes, Boy of the Horses, do you come back again? Perhaps you cannot bear to leave us? Or perhaps next year you will wish to sit in the chair of Aristides? Which is it, my friend? There is room for two, it is a broad chair, made to hold twins.'

I did not answer her; I had masterfully known her many times in that strange festival of the Mother—but I felt no match for her at this moment. I swung round and ran from the room, my ears full of the wailing of those haggard-faced women who sat beside poor Aristides in his high-backed chair of death.

My horse galloped as furiously as though, he too, had been inside that fœtid room and had seen what I had seen. I found Cheiron waiting for me, dark-faced and grim, at the edge of the pine wood.

'Diomedes,' he said, 'you are a fool! You should have been where Aristides is tonight. That is the place for a fool.'

I pushed my tired horse beside his and leaned over to lay my head upon his harsh and hairy shoulder.

'Cheiron, my father,' I cried, unashamed of my tears, 'do not say that! I went back for my seal and saw poor Aristides in the chair. I did not mean to see it. I only wanted to find what I had lost. Believe me, Cheiron, I meant no harm.'

He sat silent for a while as the wind swept over us and the birds and the pine-boughs sighed around us. Then, at last, he said, 'You poor thing! You are no Minoan in spite of your seal and what they call you. . . . You are a Hellene, after all, my son. A simple man-thing. A God-lover: no subject of the Mother.'

I took his hard dry hand and held it.

'Yes, Father,' I cried out. 'That is what I am! After this festival, I am afraid of women! They frighten me, my father! They put terror into me!'

Cheiron did not say anything which might have been a reply to my own anguish. Instead he swung his horse round, still holding my hand as gently as he could, like a friend, a true father.

‘Come, Diomedes, the Hellene,’ he said softly. ‘We must try to catch up with the others before they reach the Horse Camp. But I am troubled about you. It is something I cannot decide about. Only the Oracle at Delphi can tell us what you are to do. If the women cause you so much dread then we must ask a man to lead you to whatever doom awaits you. The Oracle must reveal to you your Moira.’

I remember saying, between my sobs, ‘Yes, Cheiron! Yes, that is what we must do. I trust men, my father—I trust men. . . . But women are so different, so cruel, like animals. Yes, even the Mother, Cheiron.’

Then I recall that he turned in the saddle, stiff-faced, and cut me deeply across the cheek with his bull’s pizzle and that I did not cry. My tears were now for other, deeper things.

4

Oracle at Delphi

My next three days were a torment to me. Cheiron avoided me after he had slashed open my cheek with his whip—but I did not hold that action against him. I would have done the same to any young man who had spoken to me as I had done to him, making light of my authority, speaking loosely of the Mother. After all, she was a goddess, to whoever believed in her.

But the truth was that I had suddenly become sick with terror at the mere idea of women—of their *difference*. It was not that I had not had pleasure from their bodies; in the three-day festival, I had known ecstasies that almost matched the delights of riding an unbroken stallion across the hill pastures. No, it was not that. It was something else, something fearsome, cruel and destructive. They carried both pleasure and death in the darkness of their bodies. I could not think of it without horror. They were so cruel with it. Poor Aristides, sitting painted in the chair, and the women who had let him enjoy their comforts, now waiting, chewing the maddening laurel, their sickles ready to cut at him in a frenzy . . . All this frightened me. Even the little girls in their blue robes, with their oiled hair hanging down their thin backs, frightened me. One day they would sit like that, pale-faced and waiting, the sickles in their narrow brown hands. And the boy in the chair would be one they had played with as a child, years before—too many years before for one to remember the other.

Then there was that warm sickly smell of earth that kept coming into my nostrils and my mouth. I had known it, again and again, as I had lain in the hay during the festival of the Mother. It was not a man-smell; it was from the very bowels of the earth, from Earth Mother; and it made me afraid. . . . Zeus, I thought, how plain and simple are poor men! Their muscles are hard and strong, their speech is laconic and harsh. But they are understandable. If a man takes a wound in the arm or the leg, he wraps a bandage about it and it heals; but these women, I had learned, carried a permanent, frightful wound, that was of Mother Earth, and would not be healed until a man had died to cleanse it. At our Village of Women they cut the men with little sickles; down south at Eleusis, where Persephone was the queen, they ploughed him, stinking, into the fields to make the barley grow; on the

island of Naxos, the women-Maenads at the feast of Dionysus tore a man to pieces and fought with each other for the privilege of eating his tenderest flesh.

I sweated through three nights of terror under that wind-break on Mount Pelion, dreaming the Mother had come for me, had gobbled me back into the womb with sharp cat-like teeth, and that I lay putrefying there to bring a strange fertility to her once again. Like manure on a field.

I tell you, it was a filthy dream; it was all darkness and smoke and stench, the stench of sulphur and decay. Do not blame me for having it—I was young and had not known women before. I had only known men, and clean horses on the uplands, under the blue sky.

On the third night I remember waking from my nightmare and clenching my fists in the chilly darkness.

'Zeus, Father!' I said. 'Oh, Poseidon, Father! Free me from this horror! I will do anything to be rid of it. I will kill all the women. Even the mares and the polecats! Oh, God, release me from this thing. Let me fall into the clean sea. Let the squid pick my bones clean—as long as it is clean, clean, clean!'

In the morning Cheiron sent for me in his skin-palace but did not look at me with his dark eyes as he spoke.

'My son,' he said, 'the whip sprang from my hand before I could stop it that night. Do not be sullen because of that. It could happen to anyone at any time. I was troubled in my mind then. Perhaps over Aristides. I do not know.'

I knelt and kissed his brown foot that smelled of leather.

'Father', I said, 'it was not that. You may whip me with the bull's pizzle until I am black and blue and I will not care. It is this horror of the women that turns me from my food and from my sleep. I love you as I have always done, believe that; but I cannot bear to go any more to the Village of Women. The thought of it unmans me, Cheiron.'

He bent from his cushion and placed his hard hands on my shoulders so that I must bow my head. Then he said, 'Yellow-hair, dear Yellow-hair! You are not one of us after all. You are all Hellene, all Father-man. We of the ancient Crete accept the dream of the Mother, and the knife that ends that dream. We do not question the Mother's strength nor her rightness. But you of the north are different. For you, it must be the open brightness of the sun, not the shy darkness, the man-eating darkness, of the moon, or of the black sweet-smelling earth. We are a different folk from you and there is nothing

that can be done about it. Your life must go according to a different pattern now. We cannot keep you on the hill any longer. But you will never go again to the Village of the Women, my son, be assured of that.'

I stood up then, tall and yellow, straight-nosed and red in the flesh. I towered above Cheiron. I could have broken him in half at that moment, I felt so strong, so changed. But he looked up into my light eyes, my eyes of the sun, with his dark ones, eyes of the earth, of Earth Mother, and smiled slowly. And then I knew that I was younger than he, less than he—a child, before his long and ancient wisdom.

'Melanos will take you to Delphi,' he said. 'I cannot leave the encampment in case the Mother needs me. I must be here, always. Melanos knows the way over the hills and along the passes. He will see that you get there in time for the questioning. But I must wait here for She may call for me to go to the Village of the Women and even to sit in the golden chair that little Aristides last sat in. That could always happen to a Horse King on this hill-side. Do not think we have no responsibilities, my son.'

I said, 'Would she take you, too, Cheiron?'

He shrugged his brown shoulders and answered, 'I have been spared all these years when the lot was cast. Luck cannot last for ever. One day I must know the touch of the sickles myself. It is ordained. Now go, my son, for I have ordered Melanos to be waiting for you at the edge of the grazing fields. There will be two others to accompany you. I did this secretly so that the other boys in our encampment would not get wind of it all and try to escape from their own doom.'

He stood and hugged me to him. He was only a little man by Hellene measurements; yet as I put my arms about his hard small body, I was sorry for him, sorry to leave him. He had been the only father I had ever known—except for the gods, like Zeus and Poseidon, who were but dreams, names we called on when we were in trouble, to get us out of a whipping.

At the edge of the grazing fields Melanos was waiting for me, seated on a black stallion. There was another black stallion for me, too. The other boys whom I was to accompany were on black mares. They were auburn-haired youths, said to be twins, with whom I had had no dealings before because of their irritable tempers—Castor and Polydeuces. They had come, the other boys said, from far Sparta.

They grinned at me in the early morning sunlight and then began to spar off at each other, though they were sitting in the saddle. That was their

trouble—they cared more for fighting with their clenched fists than for any other thing. Each of them had a broken nose, which angered Cheiron who liked his boys to look well. And each of them vowed that he would never lift spear, or pull bowstring to chin, in the Hellene manner, while he lived. They declared that the only god-like weapon was the clenched fist. They thought they were throwing thunderbolts, like Zeus, perhaps!

Where they had got this strange notion, I do not know. But the truth was that even the wrestlers among us gave them best. They knew tricks of ducking, of guarding, and of counter-punching, which made us all look like fools when we took them on in a fight.

Polydeuces called out to me, 'Well, Diomedes, whose son are you? We are of Zeus.'

I knew his tricks, and said, 'I am of Cheiron, and perhaps of Poseidon. But who knows his father in times like these?'

Castor pushed his horse alongside mine and said, 'Poseidon, pah! You are the bastard of a wandering Hellene tinker. Your hair tells that story. We are Spartans, next in importance to the old Minoans themselves.'

I said, not meaning to be offensive, 'It would take two Spartans, as they call themselves, to beat one northern Hellene, friend.'

He made a grim face at this.

I knew well enough what would happen to me if he challenged me to fisticuffs and got me down from my horse, so I bent and took him by the ankle before he expected it. Then, kicking my stallion away from his mount, I stretched his leg as far as it would go without breaking.

And when the first groan came from his lips, I flung his leg up so that he slithered off on the far side and fell to the ground.

Melanos shook his whip at me and said, 'You have proved your point, Hellene. Now let us have no more of this horse-play. I will flog any of you to howling-point if this happens again. You are all the sons of Cheiron, and there shall be no more argument about it.'

Nor was there. We followed Melanos like little children, though we were all nearly seventeen at the time, and became good friends.

The ride to Delphi was a long one, the best part of a hundred and fifty miles, for we often had to skirt such inlets as the Pagasaean and Euboean Gulfs. Besides, we were not always allowed to ride through towns,

especially those held by Hellenes, who belonged to what they called a lawless folk; so that made our journey longer than it might have been.

Still, we carried our own water and wine-flasks, our own strips of dried sheep-meat lashed behind the saddle; and so we did not want. As for sleeping out of doors, we had always known that, and so we needed no taverns, no inns, to give us shelter.

I had never been so far afield before. I was especially delighted to ride close to Iolcos, where the Megaron of King Pelias stood high and white upon a rocky hill, its walls sheer, its many pillars a bright red in the morning sunlight. And all the red-roofed houses seemed to creep up towards it, as though for shelter. And below them, the deep green of the olive-fields, and then the grazing and the long-horned cattle.

I said as much to Melanos, with whom I rode mostly, and he replied, 'Why, that is nothing! Once you see the Acropolis at Athens, the Lion Gate at Mycenae, and the grave circle there, you will think that Iolcos is a dung-hill. Why, inside the great hall at Tiryns the pillars reach as high as the sky itself. Yes, I do not deceive you; they touch the sky. Anyone who has been there will tell you as much.'

I gazed at him open-mouthed, but Polydeuces laughed and said, 'Take no notice of old leather-bottom, Diomedes! He has never been inside a city-wall in his life! All he has known is horses and the bare hill-side!'

Melanos pretended to strike at him with his bull-whip but I could tell that Polydeuces' shot had gone home like his punches and after that I placed no reliance on what Melanos told me about such things.

We came to Delphi two weeks after starting out from Mount Pelion. And it was as well we did for we had run out of food and needed to get more, unless we were to eat the three jars of dried barley which Cheiron had given us to take as an offering to the Oracle.

It was still cold at Delphi. The wind either blew down from snow-capped Mount Parnassus or from the south across the Gulf of Corinth. We were glad to ride into the narrow ravine which led to the shrine of Apollo, just for its shelter.

After a while that narrow gulch opened out into a basin where all the buildings were. I can remember many red-tiled houses set among cypress trees, and beyond all a long building faced with many columns. I believe the shrine has changed a great deal since I went there, but my recollection of it was of something rather plain, and neglected. I recall that the red paint was

flaking off the wooden pillars which formed the entrance-way. I even broke off one of the flakes and hid it in my tunic to show the other boys when we got back to Mount Pelion. I was very simple in those days.

But in spite of the white doves that fluttered everywhere and the tall dark cypresses laid out in rows, Delphi was not the heavenly place I had pictured it. All along the steps of the shrine sprawled old men—blind, lame, their sores oozing in the cold sunshine, begging for bread, or anything the visitors cared to fling to them.

And within the precincts themselves there were women everywhere, young and old, little girls and toothless crones, all offering themselves for a small fee, and all professing to be gifted with second sight, to be the servants of Apollo.

You know what I thought of women at this time. When I saw them by scores there, I almost turned and ran to my horse, but Melanos held me and said, 'Don't be a fool, Diomedes! These creatures are either too young to frighten a man, or too old and dried-up to care! Go forward as though you do not see them. There is nothing to be afraid of. They are not like our women at the village, friend!'

I did as he said, pushing among them with my broad shoulders, scattering them on either side. Then I felt a little ashamed and threw an old bronze bracelet into the begging-bowl of a youngish woman whom I had almost knocked sprawling. She came back at me immediately, baring her breasts, hoisting up her tattered flounces, and I ran.

Delphi was the most sacred place in our country and had been founded by the Minoans under the divine guidance of the God Apollo, and was said therefore to be of the utmost beauty. I believe that, many years later, a great thing was made of it, temples built and altars raised, but at the period I am talking of there was little of this sort of thing to see. Certainly there was an altar in the Sacred Close, but it was a very plain affair, and garlanded with the brown-tipped laurels which I had come to abhor.

It was here that we offered our pots of grain to an official of the treasury—a long-nosed fellow who looked as though he smelled something bad all the time. He told us that for such a small offering we could only expect a small sacrifice. He took the grain and brought out three young lambs so recently born that they could hardly hobble across the courtyard. Sacrifices to Apollo were supposed to be without blemish but one of these lambs lacked an eye, one dragged a hind-leg, and the other had some skin disease which had removed the fleece from its rump. I think the eagles had been at

them on Mount Parnassus before the temple officials had got to them. Or perhaps some sharp farmer had traded them in, to be bought by such country simpletons as ourselves. But the officials had covered their fleeces with chalk and they looked passable.

Anyway, the lambs served as well as anything else as far as I could judge. They fell at the first blow of the stone axe and lay conveniently still while the official cut their throats and caught the thin trickle of blood in the libation cups for offering at the altar. Melanos, who watched, said that each lamb had bowed its head as though promising us good fortune before the axe fell, but I did not notice this. I only saw the ridiculous wreath of dying Spring flowers about each little creature's neck and smelled the tuft of greasy hair which was clipped from them for burning at the altar. Then they were disembowelled and some of our barley, not much, was scattered among the steaming entrails. I saw the lambs being cut up for roasting and eating later, but I did not feel like sampling such meat—nor did Polydeuces and Castor. They were as sickened as I was with all this.

After an hour an old man, his face covered by a dirty cloth, came to us and said that we were to go down to the cavern where the Pythoness was waiting for us.

This was the worst of all, for it was a steep drop, and the smell of sulphur came up, almost choking us. It was dark and like walking down into a volcano. Rats scuttled away from our feet as we got lower down and I did not like that either. Over all hung the heavy smell of ordure.

Then we drew lots to see who should go in first. The lot fell on me though I did not wish it that way. I had hoped one of the others would go first so that I might ask him how it all went. But I had to go. Melanos was standing with us, seeing that we did not do anything out of place there.

At first I could not see anything in the cellar, except a smoky lamp set in a crevice on one of the walls. Then someone spoke to me in a harsh cracked voice and I turned to see a figure hunched up, swathed in tattered clothes, and sitting on a tall bronze tripod.

The voice was high and nasal and the accent unbearably foreign and strained. I could tell that the creature was a woman, not a man, by the one shrivelled breast which was allowed to expose itself out of the dirty shift; but the voice might have belonged to either sex. It was the voice of age alone.

This then was the famous Pythoness about whom all Hellenes spoke with awe. For a moment I forgot why I was there; the whole thing seemed so ordinary. And then the woman on the tripod fumbled inside her shift and drew forth a handful of laurels. I almost turned and ran back up the dark stairs—until I saw that she was burning them and sniffing down the acrid fumes they produced. This was not to be the sickle-ceremony, when the Maenads chewed the laurel, and so I stayed, though my legs were shivering with the strangeness of it all.

At last, when I came near to the point of laughing aloud at the old crone, coughing and snuffling in the smoke, the ground shuddered under my feet and I almost lost my balance. Then from a cleft in the floor just below the tripod, a puff of sulphurous smoke belched out and half-hid the Pythoness. I also began to cough and sneeze and fell to my knees, wondering whether I was going to be sick in that quivering abyss.

But all at once a voice seemed to speak inside my head. It said, ‘Diomedes, seal-bearer, man among men, boy among women, what would you know?’

I said, in a voice which I did not recognize as my own, ‘Apollo, lord of light, what is my destiny, what is my Ananke?’

The Pythoness began to cough again and to spit all about her, not bothering where her spittle landed.

The sulphurous smoke came out in a puff once more, and once more the ground heaved below me, like the earth vomiting.

There was a deep rumbling in the cavern; nothing that sounded at all like a voice to me. And then a long silence.

At last I got off my knees and leaned against the wall, suddenly feeling unclean and very afraid and uncertain of what truth was at all.

The old crone on the tripod lifted one corner of the filthy shift that hid her face and mumbled something which I did not catch. I asked her in a low voice to repeat what she had said. At first I thought she would refuse; but she did speak again, though with a great show of contempt. I listened most carefully but made out her words only with difficulty.

‘Go back to Iolcos, boy. Get your father’s kingdom for him, even if it means putting a sword into Pelias. Set up a shrine to the Mother. She wants that.’

I did not know what all these words meant. My father, Poseidon, had as much kingdom as a god needed. And if my father was Cheiron, then he had his uplands and his horses; that was his kingdom. As for Pelias, he was the tyrant at Iolcos, and no enemy of mine. Indeed, such boys as I were not even allowed within the gates of Iolcos. And as for putting a sword into a king I had never seen, that seemed without all meaning.

I began to ask the Pythoness what it was all about, but she moaned and then made such a hissing sound out of her toothless mouth that I did not stay any longer.

I ran up the stairs to where Melanos was waiting with the others. He did not ask me what the Pythoness had said, nor did the boys. Polydeuces went next, and while he was gone Castor did not say a word. He did not even speak to his brother, when Polydeuces came rushing up those slimy steps just as I had done, scattering the rats before him.

We set off for home that afternoon after we had bought some more sheep-meat to see us through. I must say that the prices at Delphi were the highest I had ever known anywhere.

It took us nearly three weeks to get back to Mount Pelion because some sort of war had started up between the Spartans and the men of Thebes. We had to wait on a hill-side until the passes were cleared before we could go on. That put us out of reckoning with our food and we almost starved during the last stretch of our journey to Pelion. In fact, we should have starved if Polydeuces had not turned highwayman one night and robbed the litter of a great lady who was making her way to Delphi to find out if she was pregnant or not by her slave.

Polydeuces told us with a grin that if she was not pregnant by the slave she would be by him. But I did not think that was funny at all. I was still thinking of the dead Spartans we had passed in the defile, with their leather armour all stripped off and the vultures already tearing the masks of flesh from their faces. Yet their hair was still neatly oiled and combed: that is what astonished me most in the whole journey. They were such neat, careful men, though such fearless fighters. Spartans were true men.

5

The Hooded Queen

As we rode the slopes into the grazing lands of Mount Pelion, the mares squealed and kicked up their legs, the stallions reared and snuffed the air as though they greeted a victorious army.

It was dusk; the night-herdsmen expected us and blew on their little horn trumpets so that the men in the encampment should be warned of our approach and know to prepare food for us after the long ride.

Castor and Polydeuces galloped off straightway to tell the other boys under the wind-break what the journey had been like. But I made my way to Cheiron's skin-palace, for I knew he would want to hear what the Pythoness had told me.

The flap of his main tent was open and the fires and lamps were flaring in the evening breeze, so that I could see inside the place long before I got there.

Old Cheiron was sitting on his horse-hide cushion but no longer alone. There was a woman with him, her body covered by a long blue cloak and hood of some material like silk; it glistened in the firelight. At first I thought she must be one of the women from the village—the Nymph, perhaps—and I had no wish to meet her again. So I tried to edge my stallion out of range of the light cast by the lamps, into the darkness and safety once more. But Cheiron had been watching for me and his sharp eyes caught me before I could ride away.

'Hoi! Hoi!' he called. 'Come forth, Diomedes! Here is one who has been at some trouble to find you!'

My heart sank as I dismounted before the open tent and walked towards the woman on the cushion beside old Cheiron.

Her eyelids were darkened with blue, and she wore faint traces of the red dye from Crete upon her cheeks; but her face was that of an older woman, not a Nymph. Not that she was old, not past child-bearing, for example; but too old for me.

She smiled gently as I approached and knelt before her, in the customary manner, placing the back of her right hand to my forehead.

In a warm low voice she said, ‘How big he is! And he has a beard coming already, a golden beard!’

Old Cheiron answered, ‘He has just returned from the Oracle at Delphi. That will account for his wild looks, lady. Usually he is quite a well-mannered fellow. You must excuse him tonight.’

She smiled again and placed her hand upon old Cheiron’s arm.

‘I would excuse him anything at any time, Cheiron,’ she said. ‘One allows one’s son to do things which would call for flogging in another.’

I stared up at her rudely now, for I had not expected anyone to claim to be my mother on my return.

Old Cheiron laughed down at me like a merry satyr.

‘Come, lad,’ he said, ‘and salute your mother. She has waited long enough for you, in all faith! She has shown patience.’

I stared at them both, bewildered.

‘My mother?’ I said stupidly. ‘Why, my mother was the Great Mare, Hippothoë, surely.’

The woman laughed lightly and said, ‘What does it matter, one name or the other? I do assure you, Diomedes, that you came out of me and not out of any other mare! And I am the one to know a thing like that!’

I felt all wooden and stiff then as though I was a stranger to them both. It was not my world. I did not know what to say but Cheiron filled in the silence and added, ‘Your mother, Diomedes, has come to visit you. She is Perimede of Iolcos, a queen in her own right but for the tyrant-king, Pelias, who uses her and your father like slaves.’

This was too much for me. If I had been a younger boy I should have wept. But I could not do that before the woman in the blue cloak and hood.

‘Are you not my father, Cheiron?’ I asked, knowing the answer even before he replied.

‘In a way I am, lad. I have looked after you as well as any father could. But I am not your begetter. That was perhaps Aeson, the imprisoned King of Iolcos. Aeson, half-brother to the tyrant-king, Pelias.’

The woman shook her head and helped me rise from my knees; then she made a little sign that I should sit before her on the grass within the tent-flap.

‘It is many years since I carried you out from Iolcos in my apron,’ she said, ‘to put you in the safe care of Cheiron. If I had not done that Pelias would have slaughtered you, as he murdered all who were born at your time. His oracle had told him that there was to be born a noble youth who would one day bring death to him. A score of little boys died because of that oracle! But you escaped—that is the important thing.’

Cheiron half-turned his dark head and said almost in a whisper, ‘And now you are destined to put the sword into Pelias, Diomedes.’

I started with a cold sweat.

‘You speak almost the very words that the Pythoness spoke, Cheiron,’ I said. ‘How is that?’

He smiled above my head, into the darkness.

‘Ananke, truth, the will of God, has a way of floating about the world and of coming out of all men’s mouths at the most unexpected moments,’ he said. ‘So now we know what the Oracle told you!’

The woman made a little signal to old Cheiron and he rose, bowed to her, and went within the skin-palace, to some distant tent. And when we were quite alone the woman smiled at me and said, ‘Diomedes, I have waited for this hour so long that it seemed it would never come. Here, look what I have brought you.’

She reached behind her and drew out a long bundle, wrapped in the tanned hide of a goat. My fingers were shaking almost too much to untie the thongs which bound it. But I succeeded at last and a wonder lay before my eyes.

There were two throwing-spears of broad-bladed bronze, their heads riveted to polished ebony shafts, the sort of wood that comes from Libya, very strong though not too heavy in weight. And between them lay a sword—its leaf-shaped blade as long as my arm and grooved down the centre. The silver handle was fastened by a tongue-grip to the keen blade and was decorated with chiselled spirals. It was the finest sword I had ever seen and my fingers itched to take it up and to test its balance. But I had first to look at the other things; there was a heavy necklace of great oval amber beads, and one sandal, a sandal for the left foot, its toe armed with spikes of bronze.

I stood back from these gifts not knowing what I should say to the woman who called herself my mother.

‘These are from Hera,’ she said, lowering her blue-tinted eyelids. ‘They are sent so that you may fulfil the words of the Oracle, my son.’

I stammered a lot, not sure of what I wished to say to her, for as I have mentioned, women had begun to frighten me at this time. But she took my hands in her cold ones and said with a smile, ‘This sword you must put into Pelias, the *tyrannos*, after the harvest at the Feast of Poseidon, my son. Then Hera will be content.’

I tried to make light of this by turning the conversation.

‘What of the one sandal, lady?’ I asked. ‘And why the amber beads? Am I to wear such things?’

Perimede said softly, ‘The true warrior goes out with only one sandal on his left foot, the foot of war, the foot which faces his enemy. The bare right foot can so gain a purchase in the mud or the dust; while his left foot is then ready to kick the enemy in the middle so that he will bend towards the sword-blade.’

I nodded as though I were knowledgeable in such matters, I, the horse-boy; yet all the same I was disturbed that this woman should speak so calmly of affairs of this sort, men’s affairs.

But she went on, ‘As for the amber necklace—that is not for you in the end, my son. It is for the woman you choose to be your wife. Like the seal which hangs about your neck, it carries Hera’s good-will. No woman to whom you offer this necklace will resist you. Now are you satisfied, my son?’

I nodded though my thoughts were not at rest. The sword hung in my right hand as light as a spider-web. It was a lovely thing. It seemed to ache to be about its business. I had never held a real sword before, not one like this. This was a king’s sword, the sword of a goddess, if Perimede had told the truth. . . . Surely, no man could regret dying on it?

My mother was speaking to me again.

‘Such gifts bring certain tasks. You must set up the shrine of Hera once more in Iolcos. Pelias has thrown it down, has forbidden the sacrifice to the Mother. You must give her back her rightful place. You cannot take the gifts without taking the duties that go with them—it is your place to do what the Mother asks.’

I said, ‘I am a simple Horse-herder, Perimede. Why is this duty put upon me of all men?’

She half-turned from me, sadly it seemed, and coughed into her palm. The dry cough shook her body, though it caused me no grief.

‘I was the priestess of Hera at Iolcos once upon a time, my son,’ she said. ‘But I let my duties lapse when Pelias stole power in the kingdom. I was afraid that if I kept on with the ancient ways Pelias would kill the old man, Aeson. . . . So I betrayed the Mother and now her curse lies on me until you set up the shrine once more.’

With a sudden, almost savage movement she grasped my hand and thrust it upon her breast within the hanging robe. The flesh was as cold as ice. I would have drawn back but her voice, hissing like that of a serpent, forced me to let it stay.

‘With your hand upon the breast that suckled you, Diomedes,’ she said, ‘swear now that you will kill Pelias and raise an altar to Hera, the All-Mother. Swear now!’

Her strength at that moment was strangely greater than mine. I heard myself swearing as she had commanded me. A great darkness came over my eyes and then went again, leaving everything clearer than ever before. For a second the ground shuddered under my feet, as it had done down in the stinking cave at Delphi. Then all was still and I was sitting on the cushion, exhausted.

My mother stood before me, above me, the robe having slipped from her body now. I saw that she was as thin as one who had been through a long famine. Only her breasts were still full and round and painted as I had seen breasts before. Her face was haggard in the rushlight that flickered in the night breeze. She wore the blue bodice, the pink flounced skirt of the priestess.

Then I had no doubt that this woman was my true mother, whoever my father had been. And I felt a great respect towards her, bordering upon fear. Though I felt no tenderness, no love.

As I gazed up at her painted cheeks and flounced skirt I heard myself saying, ‘And you too have chewed the laurel? You too have taken the little sickle in your hand, the hand that once nursed me, Mother?’

She did not answer me at once but smiled sadly and then said in a whisper above my head, ‘In this life we must all do what we are called upon to do. There is no escaping it, Diomedes.’

I think she must have seen horror in my eyes because she stooped and flung the robe about her body once again. Then she kissed me gently upon the eyes with her ghastly painted mouth.

A sick scent came from her as though she was indeed under the curse of Hera and I felt faintly sorry for her though I could not think of loving her.

‘Do not be afraid, my son,’ she said. ‘Carry out your duties and I promise you, you will never know the sickle. You will never be the Chosen One at the festivals. That I swear to you, my son. Hera told me so in a dream.’

I said, ‘What of my friends here in this camp? They will ride to the Village of Women at the harvest time. They will suffer though I go free?’

Perimede closed her eyes and seemed to sway on her bare feet before me.

‘If you were staying here,’ she said, ‘I would send trusted men from Iolcos to wipe out the Village of Women, my son, so as to save all for a while at least. But this I cannot do now, not now that I have made my vows to Hera once again. Take your luck as it comes and do not think of others.’

I rose to say something more to her but old Cheiron had come into the tent again and was looking sternly at me.

Perimede nodded to him like a queen to her trusted servant. He bowed his dark head before her in silence.

‘Another will come to be your twin, my son,’ she said. ‘Another who will aid you in bringing back the glory of Hera to the world. You will not be alone. You will never be alone again.’

Then without any word of farewell she strode from the tent towards a white horse which waited for her outside. A Horse-herder ran forward to help her into the saddle and I noticed that she seemed to be in some pain as she seated herself upon the sheepskin.

So without turning towards us she rode away into the twilight towards distant Iolcos.

Cheiron watched her go, a satisfied smile upon his broad mouth. And at last he stood beside me looking down at the weapons which lay upon the ground in their goatskin wrappings.

‘Your days as a horseman are over, my son,’ he said. ‘Now we must set you to another trade, the trade that the Goddess has decreed, if we are to

have you ready for the test by harvest-time. Much lies before you, Diomedes. More than you or even I can ever know.'

My head still buzzed with confusion.

'My mother is a queen,' I said. 'Yes, my mother is a queen. But I do not love her.'

One says foolish things like that when one is very young, very young and bewildered and a little afraid.

6

Spartans

I HAD almost forgotten the woman who called herself my mother and had made me swear that dreadful oath. My right foot was at first raw, but was then covered with callouses so thick that they seemed like a sandal-sole, as I dragged my foot over the hard dry ground. My right hand, at first blistered from finger-tips to palm, with the twist that must be given to the spear as it is thrown, had become as smooth and leather-like as a well-worn saddle. It was of the same colour, too!

Under the sun, hour after hour, day after day, Cheiron made me practise. The other boys rode their horses over the hills out of sight but I must always practise, alone, almost like a leper shunned by men. That was Cheiron's command. He wanted me to be undisturbed.

Under the growing heat of the sun as summer came to its maturity, I lost all sense of self, of reality. . . . I was only a man who flung two javelins into a long sack of sand, in the region of the stomach or the heart; then, as the second javelin struck, drew my long bronze sword and ran forward to slash at the sandbag where, in a man, the base of the skull, or the spine, might lie.

That was the drill. Melanos, who had once been a javelin master in Laconica, saw that I got it right.

'Look, Diomedes,' he said, 'the first thing to learn is to act swiftly. Get your spears into your man before he knows what you are about. If the first one hits him he will be so shocked that he will not think of replying. Then, as he stands still, put the second spear into his belly. He will double up or perhaps swing away, sideways, with the pain of it. At this moment you must be at him like an arrow! That's where your unshod foot will give you a good start. And as you take your first stride, whip out your sword. It must be at the ready when you reach him. That is, in four paces. You can only rely on placing a javelin accurately at four paces; that is, to be quite certain of its effect. Good, say he doubles over by the time you get to him; then your next move is to strike downwards at him. Don't thrust! Use the edge. It is more certain. The point can go into all sorts of unimportant places but if you use the edge right you'll get him with two blows at the most. Hit the spot just

above his buttocks. That will lay him out, useless. But if you have time to take good aim, hit just where his head joins his neck. That will finish him. Do you understand?'

We practised together with two sticks instead of javelins and a heavy lath instead of a sword. I got so that I could reach Melanos three times out of five—and he was considered to be a very agile fighting-man. Then when the pace grew too hot and I was hurting him so much that he could not ride his horse for Cheiron, I was put on to the long sandbag. It was not so interesting but it allowed me to use real weapons and not sticks and laths.

Once old Cheiron was standing watching me with a few selected boys, mainly the older ones.

When I had been through the movements a number of times the old man turned to the boys and asked, 'Will any of you go in with Diomedes now?'

They all shook their heads, even though Cheiron had meant only with the sticks.

'I'll fight him with fists,' called out Polydeuces, 'but he has the better of me with edged tools.'

Others offered to wrestle with me or to jump over chasms on horseback against me—but no one would take me on at javelin and sword-play.

When they had all gone, old Cheiron came to me and said, 'It is getting towards the time when you must kill Pelias, my son. He will be no more bother to you than that sack of sand, though for one reason or another I would like to see you try your hand at a real man before you go down to Iolcos. I should feel more content then that your heart would not fail you. For it is your heart I am afraid of, not your hand. That I know to be hard enough!'

Three days after he had spoken these words I was at my practice when I heard talking and laughter behind me on the hill-side. I turned to see a group of perhaps a dozen men, standing beside their horses and watching me with interest.

They were strangers. Each one wore a short horse-hide tunic plated with strips of bronze, and a little kilt of wool. Many of them had hide-helmets fringed with the manes of mares. All carried javelins and either short Mycenaean dirks or leaf-bladed swords.

From the square cut of their beards and the way they had chopped off their light hair at shoulder-length I knew they were Spartans. A company of

foragers scouting the countryside to see what they could pick up—for in those days the men of Sparta were great rogues and thieves.

One of them called out to me in his clipped dialect, ‘Pretty boy! Pretty boy!’

This made me angry and I flung a javelin right into the heart of the sandbag. They all began to laugh then, especially when I went through my motions of chopping down the bag with my sword.

A big man with a red beard and one eye called out, ‘Quick! Quick! It will get away!’

Something happened in my head then like a hide thong snapping. I swung round and found that all the world was red, except that man with the one eye who leaned against his black pony grinning, his beard jutting out stubbly before him into the sunlight.

I must have been eight paces from him and for a brief instant I recalled what Melanos had taught me about the effective range of the javelin. But that thought passed as quickly as it had come.

I bowed my head in a quick movement, the motion one makes to deceive one’s enemy, then let fly with the first javelin. It took the man in the thigh. I had meant it for the heart but the distance had caused the spear to fall. No one said a word. I waited a little longer before I sent the second, aiming high this time. I saw it go between two plates of bronze in the region of his navel.

Then I was over the dusty ground and at him as he began to spew, bent double. My blade shore through the last three inches of his thick red hair at the nape of the neck and then he lay at my feet, his hands clenching upon the sandy soil as though he wished to possess it.

I stood bewildered at what I had done, not even thinking about the men who clustered around me. Then I slowly became aware of them. They were all smiling grimly but not one had drawn his sword.

I said to the tallest of them, a man whose hair was as white as bleached flax, ‘Well, what now, stranger?’

He shrugged his shoulders and looked down at the dead man with eyes as unfeeling as agates.

‘He spoke unwisely,’ he said. Then he bent and touched the dead man so that a little of his oozing blood came on to his finger-tips. This he brushed across his own thin lips and said, ‘Fare you well, Parados! Next time, mouth shut and sword out!’

Cheiron was standing behind me now, a short Scythian horn-bow in his hand with an arrow fitted. His face was grimmer than I had ever seen it. He was ripe to kill an enemy.

‘I saw it all,’ he said. ‘My boy was not to blame. He did what any warrior would have done.’

The man with the light eyes smiled down at him. It was a sneering smile but had something of warrior-warmth in it.

‘Put your bow away, Grandad,’ he said. ‘No one here complains. Parados was a born talker. He got his due.’

I had never heard Spartans speaking before and I was amazed at the way they chose their words—each one as short as it could be. This was the way for warriors to talk, I decided. After all, warriors were fighting-men not poets and orators. I was also impressed by their cleanliness and the plainness of their dress. They smelled like fresh hay.

I said to the man with the pale eyes, ‘I am sorry. I meant no harm!’

At this they all began to laugh and to slap their thighs, or each other’s backs, even their ponies’ rumps.

‘Meant no harm!’ they echoed until Cheiron and I began to think we were dealing with a crew of madmen.

Then the one with the pale eyes, who seemed to be their captain, swung his leg over his pony and said to Cheiron, ‘A man for a man. The lad rides with us now.’

But Cheiron raised his bow and pointed the arrow at the leader’s chest, drawing the string back to his breast.

‘He is the chosen of Hera,’ he said. ‘He may ride with no man, stranger.’

The man on the horse did not flinch but swung his great pony round and said, ‘Good luck to him, then. He needs it! We shan’t trouble you any more, Grandad.’

They rode over the hill, laughing, towards I know not where. Cheiron and I stared after them. They were like creatures from a dream.

At last I said, ‘If ever I joined a troop of warriors I would like it to be the Spartans.’

Cheiron seemed angry as he answered. ‘Go and get a spade. This one must be buried before the flies come. Spartans are just thieving dogs, no

more. You are to be a king, do not forget that.’

But although he spoke gruffly I felt that he was satisfied at last that I had had a real man to try my skill on.

7

Glory of Hera

I WAS sorry about killing that Spartan, for I had never killed a man before and I was not yet used to the idea of it. Besides, he had looked very brave as he leaned against his pony laughing and it is never pleasant to think that you have killed a brave man who was unprepared for the kill. I was also a little worried that the second of my javelins had hurt the horse in the side, for its point had gone a hand's width beyond the Spartan's backbone.

But Melanos would permit no thoughts of that sort. 'What's a horse?' he said. 'They heal all right if the wound is clean. And from what I hear you made a clean job of the killing. As for the Spartan, he deserved it. Anyone would have done what you did. Besides, Mother Hera was behind it all. She made you see red; she directed the shafts. Perhaps she even made the fellow taunt you, who knows? It is all a part of the will of God. Forget it now. You can't change the past!'

But it was not so easily forgotten. For a week, each night, I dreamed of that Spartan lying in foreign ground with the worms going at him. I even began to imagine what he must be looking like and thought a time or two of getting a spade and digging down to find out. But something stopped me—fear, I think.

Old Cheiron's attitude was quite different. He never mentioned the Spartan again but, instead, had all the young horses rounded up and placed in a corral near the encampment in case the Spartans called back. The stallions he was not afraid of leaving unpenned, for they would kick a man's brains out unless they knew him. Cheiron also made the boys come back into the tents after dusk so that he could keep an eye on them. He always looked after them well.

'Melanos and Diomedes are in charge of you,' he said. 'They are the battle-leaders now. I'm too old. If the Spartans return, do as they bid you; put up a decent fight. After all there were only a dozen of them and you are a hundred.'

Polydeuces and Castor, who had both been born in Sparta, rather scoffed at this and said secretly that one Spartan was the equal of any ten other men. Of course they did not say this when Cheiron was about for he was proud of his Minoan stock. Nor did they say it without a smile to me—though to tell the truth I was at that time very attracted to the plain glamour of those Spartan fellows I had met. I liked their style, their unconcern, their obvious bravery. And from that time onward while I was in the camp of Cheiron on the hill I did my best to imitate the Spartan way of speaking—the laconic style, as it was called, from their settlement of Laconica. I never said more if Yes or No would do. And most often I just shook my head or nodded without speaking at all. It was one of the phases young fellows go through. It did not last long.

But the band of Spartans did not come back. Some time later we got news from a shepherd who came down into the camp that they had tried to steal some goats outside Pherae, and had been set upon by the townsfolk, who had hanged as many of them as they could catch. The pale-eyed leader had got away after putting his javelin into four citizens—and secretly I was glad about that. He was the sort of man I wanted to meet again—a good bad man. . . .

I am running in front of the hare, however. I must go back and tell of the next fateful meeting upon the mountain about a month after I had killed the Spartan.

I was sitting under a rock alone, having gone through my day's exercises, with the hot sun beating down on my bare back, and burnishing a javelin-head, when I suddenly heard footsteps above me. I crouched against the rock and got my hand on to the hilt of my sword so that I could be ready if necessary. I will say this, I have never gone looking for a fight in my life; though I have never run from one that was put upon me.

I lay there waiting and at last the footsteps grew slower and lighter, as though the man who was coming knew about me, knew where I was. Then his shadow came round the rock and stayed still for a while, lying across the red earth before me. It was a very big shadow and for an instant I was afraid. It crossed my mind that it was the big Spartan I had killed, come looking for me again from under the ground.

But when I looked up from the shadow to the man, I saw that this was not so. The person who stood before me was no Spartan, judging by his dark brown hair and his curling beard; he was of Minyan stock—but only a little

less tall than I was, and broad, very broad. I had not seen so square a fellow in my life—and he was no older than I, that is, about seventeen or eighteen.

What struck me first was the fact that he was wearing woman's clothes—the blue bodice and the pink flounced skirt, but very stained and tattered. Then I saw that his brawny forearms were heavily tattooed. On each of them a tattooed snake curled down from elbow to hand, round and round the bulging muscle of his forearm. It was as though the snake's head lay in the palm of his hand and that every time he clenched his fists, which he often did, he crushed the creature's head. He even twitched the muscles of his arm so it appeared that the snake moved in agony.

When I looked up into his face I was even more startled. It was a very flat face and tanned a deep brown. The lines which cut across his forehead and down his cheeks were like the ravines that water cuts into the ancient sun-dried limestone on the far side of Mount Ossa. But it was the eyes that almost caused me to drag my sword out and go for him in a sudden rush—though, as far as I could see, he carried no weapons himself. You can't in woman's dress. It is not made for edged weapons.

Those eyes were light brown, blurred, and bloodshot about the irises. They did not seem to focus on any one thing but swung round from left to right all the while, as though searching for something that was not there and never would be there.

They were the eyes of a madman, it seemed to me.

Fumbling for my sword I said, 'Greetings, stranger! How goes it with you?' This was the sort of thing one said. Anything to keep the other man occupied for a little while.

But he paid no attention either to my greeting or to my movements in freeing my sword. Instead he squatted on the sandy ground before me and mumbled in a drunken sort of voice as though I was not there at all.

'I am from Tiryns where they breed men. The Mother came into my head and told me to kill my woman and her child. And when I had done this the Mother sent me here to find Diomedes the Bastard. I am to conduct him to the Feast of Poseidon at Iolcos.'

I shuffled slowly to my backside and then on to my feet. I said to him, 'And will this Diomedes not go unless you take him there?'

I was then ready to slip out my sword and to strike at this squatting madman. So I took my time waiting for his answer.

He grabbed up two handfuls of sand and seemed to stare at them as though counting the grains. He was as mad as that.

Then he said, ‘This Diomedes is called upon to kill someone named Pelias. The Mother is afraid that Diomedes may not be equal to the task. She fears that he may be as treacherous as his mother, Perimede, who swore to uphold the faith but then allowed it to die in Iolcos.’

This was all I wanted to know. I stepped forward and swung my bronze sword so fast that its blade made the air whistle past my ear. Then at the top of its stroke I brought it skimming down again.

It should have split the madman’s skull clean down the middle. But he was not there. He had leaned over to the side and with the same movement had flung both handfuls of sand into my eyes. I felt the bronze blade plunge into the sandy ground and then I staggered blindly, trying to get my eyes clear once more.

I do not know where the fellow hit me. I seemed to feel pain all over my body. It was a big shock, like an earthquake, that goes on all about one; or like a thunderbolt which strikes so that a whole village or grazing field is swallowed up at one blow.

I was lying on the ground and he was standing over me, still staring about him with that half-blind look.

He said, ‘Diomedes, I have found you then! I may not kill you because the Mother has told me to see that you get to Iolcos on your own two feet. Also because she has told me I am to be your twin and travel with you to far places. If she had not said those things I should now take your head between my fingers and thumb and squeeze it until the brains came out of your ears like oat porridge.’

He lifted me up as though I had been a small child and even shoved my sword back into its sheath on my belt. Then he put my two javelins into my hand. And all the while I was shaking with fear and hurt pride.

I said childishly, ‘There are two at the camp who will take you on at this fist-fighting—Polydeuces and Castor. They will beat sense into your thick head, I promise you. They are Spartans!’

But the young man in the flounced skirt only laughed deep down in his hairy chest and said, ‘I can hit a war-stallion on the nose so hard that he sinks to his knees, Diomedes the Bastard.’

He clenched his fist and held it out before me. The knuckles were scarred and broken so that it seemed as if he was holding out a piece of ancient rock for me to look at.

I knew then that what he said was true. It was the biggest fist I ever saw though he was shorter in height than I was.

I said, ‘It is my wish, to go to Iolcos and gain a kingdom there. I shall do it without your help, my fat friend.’

I felt a fool to speak such words but my pride had got the better of me, I am afraid.

He took me by the shoulders and began to push me down the hill towards the encampment and I had to go.

‘Whether you like it or not,’ he said, ‘I shall take you to Iolcos. I have been told to do that and I shall obey the Mother. I have walked a long way from Tiryns to do this, and I shall not be thwarted by a yellow-haired fellow whose beard has only just started to grow. Keep walking, Diomedes, or I shall have to carry you back into camp.’

I did not dare disobey him then for he had a strange wild authority in his thick madman’s voice.

I said, ‘The Mother seems to choose some strange helpers. I would as soon pick a wild wolf as pick you. Tell me at least what your name is, if you have one; for, to be sure, you look to me like some fatherless thing that was found on the hill-side.’

He gave me a clout that sent me staggering forward a dozen paces before I could halt myself. I was so infuriated at this, I tried to pull out the sword, once more; but he was beside me holding both my arms to my sides without any effort.

‘In future,’ he said, ‘learn to keep your mouth shut unless you know your enemy. That is good Spartan advice, my friend. They told me you were learning to be a Spartan so you should know better!’

I gasped, ‘Who told you that?’

He gave me another push and said, ‘Never you mind, Bastard! I hear and see things that don’t concern anyone else. Now ask your question in the proper manner, Spartan-wise.’

Like a whipped lad I said meekly, ‘Name?’

He nodded and smiled. Then he said, ‘Heracles, or the Glory of Hera! It seems the old woman stuck her teat in my mouth when I was born. Perhaps you haven’t heard, but I was born with teeth complete. They say I nearly bit her nipple off—but that’s just a way of speaking. Anyway she seemed to take a liking to me after that and gave me my name. Women are strange; you can’t account for their tastes!’

I glanced at his own curious dress and said, ‘You seem to like women by the way you clothe yourself, Heracles.’

To my surprise he did not take the insult or even offer to hit me. Instead he nodded and said, ‘Yes, Bastard, I do. Sometimes I even feel like a woman myself. It’s very strange.’

And that was how I came to meet Heracles, who was said later to be the strongest man in the world. But you can’t believe all you hear. They used to say I was the craftiest one, but I can tell you honestly I had a lot of luck. Most of my tricks came to me on the spur of the moment, as though Mother Hera put them into my mind. I’d never have thought them out myself.

Indeed if I had my time again, to control my life according to reason and serious thought, I should have acted very differently. I should, for instance, have kept away from women. I get on better with men, with warriors. What’s more, I should never have sailed a ship. I hate the sea! I am always sick! Nor should I have tried for a kingdom. I’d have been much happier on the horse farm with Cheiron. A horse-breeder, a herdsman.

8

Jason

HIGH summer in Thessaly. The twin-peaked mountain rising over all, shouldering the cobalt sky like a timeless friend. Only the smallest cap of snow left and that going fast. The lambs now solemn and plumping. Thick in their flocks, keeping together. The tufted-legged eagle high above them, screaming with fury, wanting to frighten them, to make one stray. The smooth brown snakes slipping over the hard ground from one hole to another on their secret business. Carrying the word of the Mother perhaps. The long-tailed green-brown lizards, stiff as statues on rocks, death in the midst of life, with the furnace heat all about them, shrivelling their strange skin; the heat coming back off the flat-faced rocks to hit a man like a blow in the chest or face as he passed. The streams dried to a trickle and the horses pounding over the hill-slope leaving clouds of dust behind them to fill eyes, nostrils, mouths. The pine-trees gaunt, still, almost as though they could not get their breath; only the cypress smiling, content with the dew on her foliage, the damp at her roots. And below, the crackling sage-brush, the ever-growing acanthus with its prickly flowers, the gay mosses, some of them flaring out like a red wound; the stately asphodel, the little dry brown-petalled lilies. And through the day, the cricket rubbing his dry legs together; and at night the cicada in the trees filling the purple air with his never-ending song, his laughter at the folly of men. Under the trees, the shepherds laughing too, filling the air with the mindless humour of their twittering reed-pipes. Shepherds bringing their flocks down to the coast in time for the Feast of Poseidon, to sell them at the markets of Iolcos, Pegasae, Halus. Confident of a good sale and singing.

Or the young men in their shallow single-sailed boats on Lake Bobeïs, naked as babies, diving into the blue water and coming up laughing with a fish in their mouths. Or the bands of Hellene youths, sworn comrades, walking about the hills, arguing and laughing and fighting without any cause —full of sun and air and the dream of freedom.

And lower down the slopes the vines, the olives, the square barley-fields, each enclosed by a dry-stone wall. The women bending over the brown grain, chopping with their toothed bronze sickles, flinging the swathe to one

side to be collected in wicker baskets by another, perhaps a young daughter. And the men with their dusty yellow hair sitting at the edge of the field, feeling the hot stones at their bare backs and only a goatskin loin-cloth about them, laughing to each other, pointing at this woman and that, betting on the speed or skill or fertility of their wives. The men who guarded the women and the barley, each one with his javelin in his hand or propped up beside him by the wall, throwing long sharp shadows across the dust.

Men who called out to me as I came down the hill from my own war-practice. 'Hoi! Hoi! Diomedes, boy! Stay and drink a cup of beer with us, just for luck! Look, Thessa, here is Diomedes, the one who loved you that night. Tell him to stay and drink with us!'

I strode on into the growing dusk, laughing and shaking my head.

'Diomedes! Diomedes!' they called after me, all standing at the wall now and waving, 'Take care tomorrow! Take care at Iolcos, at the Feast of Poseidon! Come back afterwards and love Thessa again. She likes it!'

Always it was the same on the mountain. A man felt wanted there, as though he belonged, almost as though it was his kingdom, and all other men's kingdoms, too. It was freedom among men, clean and clear under the blue of the sky. Different from that dark earthy Village of the Women where men had to go whether they liked it or not three times each year, to chance their luck.

Then my thoughts changed. Just outside the stockade of Cheiron's encampment Melanos lay, his head twisted under him, his hands spread wide. His heart was not beating and his lips were drawn back as though he were a wolf trying to make his enemy afraid with bared fangs. There was no mark on his body save a great bruise on the chest, as though a stallion had kicked him in anger. But all the stallions loved Melanos and would even have let him take their favourite mare if he had wanted to.

The camp of Cheiron was very silent though the rush-lights were burning. There should have been the sound of beer-singing now. But there was silence.

I wandered through tent after tent until I came to the long high-propped feast-tent and then I saw the reason for the terrible silence. Men and boys were huddled in a corner on their knees, afraid to move or make a sound. Castor and Polydeuces were sprawled on the sandy floor, holding their shattered faces, the blood coming from between their fingers—beaten men at last. Old Cheiron stood silently by the main tent-pole, one of his arms

outstretched as though he was warning them all to be still, though his face was twisted with agony. A short arrow pinned his arm to the thick ash pole, just above the elbow where the joint is.

In the middle of the thick trestle-table, cups scattered and broken about him, stood Heracles straddle-legged, wearing only his torn blue bodice now and holding across one arm a young boy, Peneleos. The boy dangled like a corn-doll, his dark eyes starting with terror. Heracles held a bronze reaping-sickle in his other hand and was making gestures with it at the terrified boy.

When I stepped forward to the table Heracles looked down at me vaguely, his eyes discoloured with blood. But he knew me well enough.

'Welcome, Bastard of Iolcos,' he said, smiling at me terribly. 'Come up on to the table and try your luck. They have all been waiting for this moment. So come up, I beg you!'

Old Cheiron gazed at me in pain and shook his head.

I said to Heracles, 'Put the boy down and act like a man, you fool.'

Heracles smiled again and made a stupid little waggling motion of the hips. 'Don't you think I would make a nice girl?' he asked. 'I should have been a girl, they say. What do you think?'

For a second he took his blurred eyes from me and I acted then. I used the heavy butt of one of my javelins, sweeping it against his shins as hard as I could. I thought the wood might crack with the force I put behind that blow, but it held and Heracles came toppling down to the straw-covered floor, the boy with him.

Even as he began to struggle up, to come at me, I took careful aim and still using the heavy butt struck him in the middle of the skull. It was a fearsome clout and almost paralysed my hands. It would have killed most men; but Heracles simply smiled and slowly fell back into the straw like a man in a sweet dream, unconscious.

Suddenly all the men and the boys in that place took to their heels and vanished, getting away while they could.

I went to old Cheiron and cut through the arrow shaft that pinned his arm to the pole. It was not a bad wound but it must have been painful. I tore a strip from his kilt and bound it, letting his arm hang from his neck to support it.

'The madness came on him suddenly,' he said nodding towards Heracles. 'He was drinking barley-beer when suddenly he rose and went

outside to fight Melanos. We did what we could but it was not enough.'

I said, 'He hurt you—of all men. For that he should die.'

Cheiron shook his head. 'The shaft was meant for someone else. It was my fault. I got in the way. Not even mad Heracles would hurt me.'

I stood over the great body and took out my sword.

'He shall lie side by side with Melanos in the same grave,' I said, drawing back my arm.

But Cheiron flung himself on his knees before me.

'You will offend the Mother, Diomedes,' he said. 'He is her ward and we may not touch him. I beg you leave him.'

I said, 'A man would put an end to a wild wolf, would he not?'

But Cheiron held my sword-hand and said, 'He is not himself when he does these things. It is the Mother in him. She will punish him enough if he has done wrong. Do not take it upon yourself to fulfil her duties. You have duties of your own at Iolcos tomorrow.'

Suddenly Heracles was sitting up again and smiling at me. His eyes were as clear as water and there was no anger in his features.

'Help me up, Diomedes,' he said. 'That blow of yours has taken some of the strength out of my legs! It was a good blow. One that I would not be ashamed of striking myself.'

Then he looked at Cheiron's bandaged arm as though puzzled.

'What have you done to your arm, Father?' he asked. 'And where are Melanos and all the boys?'

Cheiron nodded to me severely and I put my sword away. 'That blow has cured him of his madness for the time being,' he whispered. 'Why, Diomedes, you are a *pharmacos*, a healer! I did not think you had such skill! We must give you another name now. You must be called Jason—the Healer!'

Heracles gazed at me almost proudly. 'Jason the Healer,' he said, 'tomorrow I must lead you to visit Pelias at Iolcos. That is the agreement, is it not?'

Behind Heracles' back old Cheiron nodded to me and I said, 'Yes, Heracles, that is the agreement.'

‘Very well, my twin,’ he said, ‘then we must get some rest. You must be up before dawn to carry out our task. It is sleep that we need. Yes, sleep, dear brother!’

He took me by the arm then and led me to the wind-break where we all slept. Then he cleared a space, rolling the other frightened boys to one side or the other so that he and I lay together. He took my weapons from me and laid out the sheepskin pallet for both of us. I fell asleep that night with his great arm about me, under the stars. When I regained my senses in the morning his arm was still round my neck and his hand upon my chest. I tried to rise without waking him but I think he was already awake, waiting for me.

‘Come, Jason,’ he said with a smile, ‘we must eat barley-porridge and drink mare’s milk before we set off. No one knows when our next meal will be—if there is to be another one at all!’

9

The Crone at the Crossing

It was six miles, mostly downhill, to Iolcos, and we went along at a good pace that sunlit morning. Heracles was in great form and insisted on carrying my javelins so that I might conserve my strength for the trial which lay before me. He made light of what I had to do to Pelias, as though it were no more than wringing a hen's neck.

'We'll have you king by mid-afternoon,' he said. 'And we'll have the first shrine up to the Mother by evening. Of course it will only be a rough thing in the first place—a cairn or something like that, with perhaps a mare's skull set into it. But we'll do better later when you've collected a Mother tax.'

I grinned at him and said, 'You are already running the kingdom of Iolcos—before I've got it, even!'

Heracles gave me a great nudge and laughed aloud. 'Together, boy, we can beat the world!' he said.

There were many folk on the road down from the mountain; all men, though, since this was a man's festival. Many of them carried offerings—sucking-pigs tied by the legs, or lambs, or bags of grain and so on. These offerings they would lay on the palace steps for King Pelias to fling into the sea from the cliff-top later, as a gift to Poseidon, who looked after the rain, the rivers, the sea, and all the creatures that lived in river and sea.

There was one old fellow who drove a rickety ox-cart laden with olives and horse-hides. Heracles walked alongside this cart and every so often grabbed a handful of olives and stuffed them into his mouth. When he had eaten them he spat the stones at the old man's back. Of course he did it once too often and the driver swung round and saw what was happening. His face went as red with anger as a Samian pot.

But Heracles simply snatched another handful of olives and said, 'Take care, master! You travel in company with heroes. Say the wrong thing now and both you and your cart will go over the cliff into the sea. Your oxen I shall eat for my dinner!'

The old fellow put his whip about the rumps of the slavering creatures and rumbled off along the stony road without a word.

Heracles began to laugh again; then he sang a song which told in most impolite words how Poseidon was caught by Hera with his breeches down and how she caused a hyacinth to spring from his most secret place. I did not want Heracles to go on like that, because men were staring at him and muttering. Also, I do not care for that sort of thing myself. I don't mind a bit of rough-and-tumble but I do not care for jokes about parts of the body. It is my opinion that a man can get into too much trouble with the gods by taking these things lightly. To me, they are very serious, and sometimes even terrible.

I told Heracles to shut his mouth.

He put his arm round my neck and began to kiss me then, like a drunken man. 'Yes, beloved,' he said, in a mincing voice, 'I will do everything you say.'

That made the other passers-by mutter more loudly than ever. It also made me feel a fool. At that age I was very tall and heavy in the muscles. I used to wear my golden hair half-way down my back and I had a naturally stern expression on my face. I used to look at myself in the silver mirror that old Cheiron had and think that I was a very warrior-like fellow. I will not deny it, I was proud of my looks. And I might add there were many girls among the farms on Pelion who had confirmed my own opinion. That brings me to a strange thing. Yellow-haired girls, of the Hellenes, I was never afraid of. I would roll in the barn with them whenever they wished, without a qualm. It was the dark-haired ones, the Minoans—and even the Minyans, the cross-breeds who still held to the old Mother worship—who scared me. They were somehow deeper, more wily, more knowing, more dangerous. The flaxen ones always seemed simpler, more open. They asked no return. Or, at least, that is how I used to think of it in those days. But perhaps women are the same, under the skin, the world over. I don't know. I was always better at fighting than at love-play, or at understanding women.

But, I tell you, when Heracles began to make mock-love to me on that road to Iolcos, I got very annoyed. I hate to be pawed about by anyone.

'For the love of God leave me alone!' I said to him so that the other men would hear.

We were coming down a little slope between the rocks that led to the river Anaurus. The stream was quite broad here but shallow, not more than

waist-deep, and men had flung boulders into it so that if you were agile you could jump across without getting wet—unless, of course, you slipped or were pushed in.

And as I said those words to Heracles he stopped suddenly and let fall my two javelins. I thought my words had hurt his feelings at first but then I saw that he was staring down at the bank of the river.

An old woman was sitting there, her back to the water, staring up at the little gully down which we came. She was hardly more than a bundle of black rags but her face was very striking, as though it was carved out of veined white marble. Her black eyes burned in that mask as though they saw to the end of time.

Her left breast, pale and shiny as alabaster, hung limply from between the folds of her shift, exposed in the manner of aged widows.

I heard Heracles give a cry that was almost a sob, just behind me in the crowded gully.

'That is the teat I bit the nipple from,' he said. 'That is the breast of the Mother, of Hera!'

All I could see was an old woman with a torn breast, but nothing out of the ordinary. I had been into villages after the Spartans had gone through—and I had seen worse than bitten breasts. I turned to Heracles and began to tell him to control himself or his madness would come on him again.

But he was not there. He was running as fast as he could among the men with their piglets and lambs, back up the gully, leaving me alone.

I picked up my javelins and went onwards towards the stepping-stones. It was my intention to go straight across and to let Heracles come back and catch up with me if he wished. I was in no mood to be delayed that morning. After all, I had trained for months for this moment and I could not let anything hold me up. This Feast of Poseidon came only once a year to Iolcos. I had no wish to sweat through another year at my javelin practice just because of Heracles.

But at the ford I was stopped, despite all my fine ideas. The old woman called out to me, 'One-Sandal! One-Sandal! Come to me, darling!'

I looked the other way, away from that veined marble face and the gnawed, sagging breast; yet I was not to get away as easily as that.

'Golden-hair! Sweetheart!' she called again. 'Do you ignore your mother in her old age, my son?'

I was quite angry at this, partly because she was not my mother but largely because the other men who approached the river Anaurus beside me began to look at me as though I were ashamed of my kith and kin, putting on fine warrior-airs without the right to do so.

I swung round and went over to the old woman. ‘Lady,’ I said, ‘I have never met you before. Why do you speak so to me?’

She gazed away over my shoulder towards the high mountain and said as though in a dream, ‘You have always known me, Diomedes—or Jason—whichever you choose to call yourself. And I speak thus to you because the one who should have led you to your kill today, that fat fool Heracles, has taken it into his crazy head to run away and desert you.’

I was so astounded at what she knew I could not say anything.

She said, ‘I have sat here at the ford since dawn waiting for you. I feared that Heracles might go into a fit before he had stood you in front of Pelias. I wanted to be sure.’

I answered, ‘Heracles is afraid of you, lady. That is why he ran away. He is no coward. He meant to take me into Iolcos.’

She swayed from side to side a little, like someone moving in time to silent music, and then said, ‘Heracles is afraid of me because they always told him he had bitten my breast. And because of that he thinks I have put madness on him, have made him fall in love with boys. But it is all inside his own head. It is nothing that I have the power to do. Only the Mother of us all could do it.’

I said, ‘He spoke of you as the Mother, as Hera. Are you not what he said, lady?’

She smiled and began to play with a piece of her black garment, twisting it in her wrinkled horny fingers.

‘I am a high-priestess of Hera, One-Sandal,’ she said. ‘No more. Just as your mother, Perimede the mock queen, is an ordinary priestess. There is nothing strange in that. True, I suckled Heracles when he was put out to nurse; but that does not make me a goddess. I am one of many and they are to be found all over the world, One-Sandal.’

By now there was quite a crowd around us, listening to what we were saying. I bent and whispered to the old crone, ‘What do you want me to do?’

She smiled up at me out of her black sloe eyes in that white-veined marble face and said, ‘Carry me on your back over the river. I would like to

be there when you put the spears into Pelias.'

I whispered back, 'But this is the Feast of Poseidon, lady. Only the women of the palace will be there. No other women.'

She laughed outright and said at last, 'Sometimes poor Heracles thinks he is a woman. Take me with you and I will think I am a man. Or at least I will persuade others that I am. What is there to it but to cover my breast and my face? Then I am a black bundle of wizened age—nothing more. Do as I say, Golden-hair, and carry me over. It will be the better for you, I warn you.'

And so I carried her over the River Anaurus and at last set her down among the old men who clustered at the base of the long flight of stairs that led up to the Palace of Iolcos.

There is just one thing more; on the way there she said, 'You are a simple young fellow, I can see. But that is as it should be. The simple ones make the best instruments for the gods. Fools have no notions of their own to get in the way of the divine planning. However, simplicity itself is not enough—any more than is skill with the javelins and sword. There must be fate behind any action or it will fail.'

I said, 'The fate is that I gain a kingdom and then raise a shrine to the Mother. I see no difficulty, lady.'

She pressed so hard upon my shoulders then that I felt weak. It was as though she could change her weight at will. By doing this I think she was trying to impress me with her powers of magic. But I kept on and carried her as best I could.

After a few yards she said, 'You see no difficulty, hey? Just because you have a strong right arm you see no difficulty. Well, I have always held that men are fools, and young men the biggest fools of all. Now listen to me. You have never been in Iolcos before. You do not know what it is like there, especially at a feast to Poseidon. It will be full of men, warriors, bigger than you are, more numerous than all the Horse-herders on the hill. And all of them sworn to give their lives for Pelias the Black and Blue. Every king has such a company, my young friend. Now do you see any difficulty?'

I thought for a while and then told her that I was a Chosen One, and so must succeed, even if Pelias had a thousand men about him.

She laughed, a dry cracked laugh, and her stale breath came down to me almost like the smell that had come from the Spartan I killed out on the hill-

side that day. I wondered whether I was already bearing death on my shoulder.

‘Look,’ she said, ‘there have been many Chosen Ones—and sometimes they do not succeed first time. Sometimes they do not succeed at all, but end as white skulls grinning on the sand. But at last the Mother gets her will for she chooses another, and another, until that will has been achieved. So try not to be so certain, Golden-hair. The Mother will have victory at last—but you may not. She is prepared to wait.’

I had never thought of it like that and I must admit the possibility shook me. I felt more prepared to listen to the old crone after those words.

‘What am I to do, Hera?’ I asked at last.

She said, ‘You must take your chance as it comes, naturally. That is man’s lot. But you must have a plan to work to; it is no good hoping to walk up to Pelias and put the javelin in him as easily as you might pluck an apple from a tree as you passed. No, it will go like this: you will fall into line with all the other men who are in from the villages, bringing their offerings to Poseidon. And at last it will be your turn to stand before Pelias the Black and Blue. Don’t forget, there will be soldiers on either side of him, watching all the time. And when you present yourself with no pig or lamb or sack of olives they will wonder all the more. But they will not rush you as they might a black-haired one. Your golden hair will tell them that you are of the Hellenes and they will trust you—at least for long enough.’

She began to cackle to herself, as though the idea of my having golden hair but working for the Mother were a great joke.

Then she went on, ‘At last Pelias will call out to you, “What do you bring for Poseidon, stranger?” And you will say, “I bring two javelins, my king.” “Then lay them at my feet,” he will say. This is your moment for he will be a little off his guard. Now you must take the javelins as though you are about to step forward and lay them both at his feet; but see that you hold them with the points to your left hand for you must make a swift movement as you put your foot forward and plunge the first one in without fail. If you are lucky the second one should go in while the guards are still too shocked to act. Then a fast rush forward and off with his head! Waste no time. But do not cut the black fleece Pelias will be wearing on his head. Snatch that off first and cry out, “I am the son of Aeson! I am your king brought to you by Poseidon!” And put on the black fleece. They will not touch you then for it is a sacred relic.’

What she was saying so unnerved me that I had to rest and put her down for a while and lean against a rock.

I said, ‘Heracles did not say it was so tricky.’

She snorted. ‘Heracles cannot carry any message straight. That is why I waited for you at the ford, Golden-hair. But have no fear, you stand a good chance. You see, there is something else you do not know about: you have two uncles, Pheres, King of Pherae, and Amathaon, King of Pylus. They will be standing, one on either side of the tyrant-king, at this festival. That is their place. They would be pleased to see their kinsman butcher the usurper, have no doubt! They both have loved your mother, Perimede, since Pelias took away old Aeson’s manhood so that he could not produce an heir. They will hold back the guard if they can until you can slip on the black fleece, Golden-hair.’

I gazed at her, breathless in astonishment.

‘I did not know that Pelias had unmanned Aeson,’ I said when I could speak again. ‘That is a fearsome thing.’

She grinned and said, ‘A king must protect his succession, by whatever means, Golden-hair. Do not bewail old Aeson’s loss; he was too senile to suffer much. That is why your mother has been giving herself to half Hellas for many years—hoping to bear sons who will take revenge for her.’

I did not know whether to be shocked or angry. I said, ‘How many has she borne?’

The old crone shook her head. ‘Only you, Golden-hair,’ she said. ‘It seems that a curse is on her for something she hasn’t done right. This is often the way with priestesses. So it rests with you.’

She waited a while, then said, ‘It would be a shame if what happened to Aeson might happen to you. Those goatskin breeches of yours are very old and worn, and that might put an idea into Pelias’s mind, for he is a sly one too. Here, I have a gift for you which might be of some use.’

From a little wallet inside her shift she pulled out a leopardskin kilt, nicely pleated and edged with silver balls all round.

‘Wear this,’ she said. ‘It will add to your warrior-looks.’

I put it on, leaving beneath it my own small pouch in which lay the string of amber beads my mother had given me to buy a wife.

Then we went on our way among the thickening crowd. I did not feel like saying any more but old Hera on my back whispered once again as we drew near to the meeting-place, ‘Suppose all does not go as I have said. You are a simple fellow and may not have the quickness of wit to change your plans. If things go wrong look towards me as I sit among the old men and I will put words or deeds into you. I will get you out of trouble, if I can. No one can promise more, not even the Mother.’

And then we were at the foot of the steps themselves.

10

Pelias the Black and Blue

How to describe the wonder of it all! I who had lived all my life on the hillside was staggered beyond belief.

Before me in the line stood an old fellow who kept hawking and spitting as though this were an ordinary thing and no godly festival. He carried two half-dead cocks under his arm and stank vilely. He had an affliction of the eyes which made them water all the time. When I told him to keep quiet on such an occasion he made a rude noise and muttered about barbarians who were impressed by any sideshow. I stood away from him as far as I could because of my anger and the smell of him and took a good look about me to keep my mind occupied until it was my turn.

The javelin shafts burned my hand in those moments. And I kept wondering if my long sword had jumped out of its scabbard and fallen to the ground but I dared not look down. I am always nervous like that before I kill anyone. I can't help it. But there is this to say, once I am on the move I am as firm as a rock.

I must tell you: it was a marvellous place. The white rock sloped steeply upwards towards the deep blue sky. And the little square houses, whitewashed and with red roofs, seemed to cling to the rock as though they wanted to reach the sky itself. There were small garden plots between the houses, in which olives grew and tall dark cypresses.

And before me, oh the wonder of it! A white stairway so broad that four chariots could have come down it abreast. This stairway had three flat landings on it and at each level the courtiers stood, watching us common folk below. I had not been to Athens or Cnossus or Colchis at this time so I was greatly impressed by the stairway of Iolcos. If I went back now, it might be different; but then it was sheer glory to my young eyes.

And at the very top, as though the sky rested on its gilded roof, was the Palace of Pelias—tall and steeply-gabled, with a host of great columns to support it, columns which tapered to their base after the Cretan style and were painted alternately black and blue, the clan colours of Pelias himself.

To me at that moment it was like the gates of Heaven. I could not imagine myself mounting those steps and looking back towards the deep blue sea, Poseidon's sea, which rolled at the foot of the white chalk cliff on which the palace was built. . . .

But there was another thing to think about just then. Pelias had a bodyguard—but not what I had expected. They numbered about two hundred and were all immense black Libyans, naked as the day they were born, save for the polished leather sheaths between their thighs and their horse-head helmets. They carried broad-bladed throwing-spears, three to each man. I did not like their fierce white eyes and the way their lips curled as they gazed across the square at us all, as though we were rubbish, sacrifices to Poseidon like the goats and lambs.

One nod of the head from Pelias and we could all lie dead . . . That was clear.

Seven steps up the great stairway stood the man I had come to kill, the offerings piled below him; squawking hens, faintly bleating lambs, wheezing goats. They lay on the hot stone steps and would be thrown into the sea for Poseidon's meal by the end of the day.

I could see, standing beside Pelias, my uncles, the Kings Pheres and Amathaon, tall fair-haired men like myself; but I did not know which was which since I had never met them before nor had even known of their existence until Hera told me. I felt that too much had been kept from me in the past and decided that there would have to be some accounting for it when I came into power and stood, as King of Iolcos, on those same steps. But that could wait; there were other things to consider. Pelias, for instance.

He was a very impressive man, I will allow him that. Every inch the *tyrannos*, the king who gained his kingdom by strength and kept it by cruelty.

He was no taller than I, but appeared so because of the great black fleece which covered the top and sides of his head and hung down his broad back. His face itself was half-hidden by a mask of old ivory which had eye-holes and a hooked eagle-nose but left his thin mouth free to speak what words it would. About his neck, and broad enough to cover his shoulders and his breast, was a gold frill made of bars of that metal linked with silver threads. It gleamed in the sun very nobly and even tinkled as he moved to accept the various offerings. His middle-body was bare and streaked with blue, perhaps woad from Lemnos, in vertical stripes. It was easy to see why he was called 'the Black and Blue' now—because of the fleece and the woad.

A broad belt plated with bronze studs pulled in his waist, after the Minoan style, to the size of that of a girl. Below that his leather breeches flared out, hardly more than a wide-legged kilt, but fringed with gold wire and decorated here and there with gold stars. His lower legs and feet were bare but striped faintly with blue, this time in rings, as were his arms from shoulder to wrist.

He was a magnificent-looking man indeed; and equally magnificent was the great sword of Poseidon that he carried across his arm for the occasion. It was as long as my own but twice as broad in the blade. The handle was of gold fashioned in the shape of a fish with a curling tail. Its eyes were of amethyst. I could see that even at a distance of twelve paces.

I looked beyond him and upwards to the first great landing. My mother was there but looking much older now. She had seen me and had held up her hands a little so that I might observe the chains that bound her wrists. Beside her stood a frail old fellow, bald and nearly blind, but wearing his long robe with a certain dignity. Whenever he seemed to falter and to be about to topple down the steep steps my mother would edge her body round as though to support him. This must be Aeson, my reputed father. Looking at him and then at Pelias, I was not surprised that the tyrant had taken over the kingdom. One was a man—the other a scarecrow.

Suddenly I came out of my dream for the old man in front of me had made his offering and stepped aside. I heard one of the Libyans call out something, and then I stood face to face with the man I was pledged to kill.

I think that if I had been alone then I might have turned and run; my legs were shuddering, my heart thumping so desperately. But old Hera, sitting in the dust ten feet away from me, began to cough in such a way that I felt she was speaking to me, urging me on. I did all that I was to do because of that cough—nothing more. It is strange what reasons men may have for their fame! For me it was an old woman's dry cough.

There was a great silence about me; only my blood drummed in my ears. Then I saw that Pelias was gazing down at me as though he had seen a ghost. I heard him mutter to one of my uncles, 'So my oracle did not lie about the youth in the leopardskin who would carry two spears!'

And the uncle said, 'Are you afraid, Pelias? This is only some shepherd from the hills, dressed up for the festival.'

Then instead of giving the sign for the Libyans to close in about me Pelias did a very brave thing. He drew a deep breath of that hot summer air

and walked down three steps so that he could look at me more closely. The eyes behind the ivory mask were so light that I felt I was staring back through the holes in a skull.

At last Pelias the Black and Blue spoke to me but the words seemed strange though they were in my own dialect of Greek. I knew then that something had gone wrong for he did not say the words Hera had promised he would; Hera, who sat swaddled in black so close to me that I could have reached forward and pushed a javelin into her before anyone could stop me.

Pelias said, ‘Who are you, fellow? And what is your father’s name?’

All about me, like the rustle of locusts in a cornfield, I heard the hard soles of the Libyans’ feet shuffling in the dust until I was alone, cut off from all other men. I was trapped by the Black Guard.

11

The Questioning

In times of trouble a man is always alone. Climbing a rock-face with the eagle at his heels; riding an unbroken stallion for a wager; in the strong and pitiless sea, swimming towards a distant island; coming through the gateway of an unfamiliar town to find himself face to face with the guardian, the strong man of the place, the javelin already poised to throw as he bawls out the challenge word; aye, even lying in the feast-straw at a harvest gathering, the chieftain's daughter under him, a new body, a new trial, testing him, waiting for him to prove himself despite the wine—a man is always alone.

Though his companions may be beside him, behind him, calling their encouragement, their promises of help, it is the man's own strength, his own wit, that will win him through, and that of no one else. Help from another is a dream—even if the other is a god—it seems to me. Only the illusion of help is possible. True, a man may be hauled away from the eagle on a rope, or caught as he falls from the stallion, or dragged gasping from the clutching waves—but in his inner core he will know that he has failed the test. He will know that he must go back and try it again, unaided, to prove that he is good enough to live on in the world. And then there will be no companions, for he will go in secret, telling no one, perhaps to his death, perhaps to victory. And that victory is but a blowing of air through the lips, a word, a sign that there is yet another higher step to climb—another test, another victory, or another defeat.

When, later in my life, I stood outside the gates of Mycenae and the young boy flung a dart to pierce my eyeball, it was not of my yelling companions in their plumed helmets that I thought. I thought: Here suffers Jason, and there laughs a boy who will always boast how he halted the king-warrior in his tracks and made him howl and let fall his great sword.

At that time I did not even think of the victory I had come near to losing the city, the fame, the loot, the destruction of the Mycenaean League that had pestered me so long. Just the hot and screaming furnace of my ruined eyeball and the laughing boy baring his thin chest and revealing his white

teeth in a grin, as though he had stolen a hare, or a bagful of plums, or a golden ring, and got away with it.

When I wanted to kill him, it was not because I hated him. Indeed, I would have been proud to call him my son. But I had to show myself—not my enraged companions—that my loneliness was something braver, stronger, more kingly, than his own. And so with the sweat and blood running like a stream into my beard, I bent and picked up my own javelin from the dust and shook it at him. I would have gone to him if I could, and have smoothed his shaggy hair. But my own agony was so searching and I could not think of anyone but myself, there in that howling black tumult. I fell to my knees and heaved from nausea and they carried me to my tent in a little grove of cypresses. But I was still alone, though they stood about my bed as King Creon's Egyptian laid what he called healing salves upon my cavern of an eye.

All I thought of then, when I was able to think for the pain, was: This ends me as a javelin-thrower. A man, even a king, needs two eyes to put the spear where he thinks, and now I have only one. Who are these fools who stand about me, wringing their hands? They have two eyes apiece and I have only one. Their wailing will not give me back my eye. Let them go and leave me to suffer in my own way!

How can I tell you, I an old man sitting under a rotting boat, what it was like to be a warrior, a king? If you are not warriors and kings you will not understand my words; you will not understand my loneliness. Yet, again, I think that this loneliness was born in me, grew up with me, before I was a warrior, before I dreamed of becoming a king. Perhaps there are those who are meant by the gods to walk alone for ever.

I spoke those words once to a wise man of Athens; a man so wise that he wore no clothes but a loin-clout, and lived in a hole in the rocks below the Acropolis, eating beans and drinking stream water. He told me: 'Man's body is no more than a libation-cup, a container. Man's knowledge and feeling are the libation within that cup. The two together may please or appease the gods—whatever *they* may or may not be. Pour out the libation and the clay cup is nothing. Crack the clay cup and the libation spills, useless, to the ground. One way or another, the cup and the blood are hardly worth a man's time to worry about. Better to consider the beauty of the hyacinth or the changing patterns of the wine-dark sea. All else is a sort of vanity—and even hyacinth and sea are little better than toys in the eyes. I cannot help you one way or the other. Nor can you help yourself. Breathe, and be thankful for breathing—if you like breathing; run on the hills with the goats, or crawl

in the dust with the serpents—if you gain delight from running and crawling. There *is* nothing else. *To be* is all there is—alive or dead. And it does not matter which—either way you will be alone, always.'

I gave that wise man a necklace of blue Egyptian stones for his advice, a necklace which cost men's lives in the getting. He bowed and thanked me for the gift; then flung it into the bushes and went back into his hole in the rock. I heard him laughing and belching, crying and breaking wind, as I walked down the dusty track from his place. I do not think he knew I had been there, or remembered what I had said, or what he had replied. It was nothing, like the blue necklace, to him. He, alone in the rock; I, alone on the choking path . . .

I tell you this because I wish you to understand that there *is* nothing to hope for in life. What a man does or gains or loses is worth nothing in the end, or even in the beginning. He is alone, hopeless, helpless, like a pebble in the sun or under the sea. All else is a dream he makes for himself. And even that dream is nothing. You cannot weigh it in scales, can you? You cannot eat it or dress your pretty daughter in it, can you?

I have always known this, from my earliest days—though sometimes I have fought against it, in moments of forgetfulness, moments when I have tried to form life to the pattern of my dreams. All vanity—dried ordure on a hot rock, crumbling to dissolution.

And so I felt that day, below the steps of the palace of Pelias, as the Libyan spearmen closed in on me. True, I smelled the musky sweat of their bodies, felt the hard touch of their hands on my arms and neck. They wrenched my sword and my javelins from me and left me helpless, but I knew that it did not matter. I knew that each of them was as lonely as I. Even Pelias, striking a pose on the steps, his gold necklace jingling and the great black sheepskin on his head and shoulders glistening in the sunshine. A fine upstanding man, a king, but only drying ordure on a hot rock, when all was said and done, something which might not be there tomorrow, and certainly not in a hundred years.

Pelias said, his voice high in his head, a king who wished his people to hear every word he spoke, 'Come, man, what is your father's name, and why are you here?'

All my training on the windy hill had been wasted, it seemed now. The Libyans had my weapons and were holding them as though they were

snakes and would bite. I felt like weeping, to think that it would have been so easy to put the spears into the man who had wronged my family, but I had not been quick enough, sly enough, to do it. I must confess now that I did not feel tearful that I had in a way broken my promise to my so-called mother, to set up shrines to the Goddess; or that I had failed to carry out the commands of the Oracle at Delphi. What humiliated me, a young killer as I was then, was that before all the folk and dressed warrior-style I had failed in my promise to myself, to slay the tyrant. Nor did I like the way the black men were pulling me about and offending my person with their horny hands.

I think I have already said I was a big fellow by that time and proud of my muscles and my golden hair. I was at the age when young men take foolish risks, make stupid gestures of defiance, just to show those older than themselves that even the young have power and demand notice.

I spoke defiantly then, though Pelias would have had the power and the right, I suppose, to kill me out of hand for coming into his kingly presence armed on the Feast of Poseidon. Yet a strange thing stays in my memory. Suddenly I was not afraid of death, or even of humiliation. For somewhere high on the stone platform of the palace, I heard a harp begin to sound almost as though it were an oracle itself. One of those wind-harps that the Aeolians loved and hung in their corridors and among the boughs of their orchard trees—a half tortoise-shell, across which were stretched strings of gut, so that when the winds blew these strings vibrated to make a gentle rustling sound, as though a lyre-player had run his fingers in a whisper across the cords. There is nothing in such a sound to change a man's heart or mind, to give him courage. I had heard such harps a hundred times as I had driven horses past the orchards of rich men on my way down to the markets when I was a boy. But this one was different. It seemed to speak words to me, and the words were: 'All men must die, Diomedes, yes, even the great ones, the strong ones. It is no more than pulling a thorn out of the foot. Most men do it with a smile. Remember the Spartan on the mountain? He laughed till he died. Can you not do better than that?'

I raised my head then and looked into the eye-holes of the ivory mask of Pelias, and I made myself smile, too. I would not be outdone by a Spartan cattle-thief. I said in as clear a voice as I could raise, 'I am Jason, son of Cheiron, Black One; sometimes called Diomedes, son of Aeson—if miracles can still happen.'

I saw the faces of the crowd turn up towards the old cripple at the top of the wide stairs, and I heard the subdued laughter among the folk that such a dry old stick should produce so full a fruit. And then I felt small and young

for having drawn contempt upon the man who tottered helpless and half-blind above me. I even saw a momentary grimace of displeasure on the face of the woman who said she was my mother, the princess, the priestess.

Pelias made a sudden gesture to the Libyans who held me tightly. ‘Loose him,’ he said. ‘He is unarmed, and I have the sword of Poseidon. Perhaps all this is ordained, that he shall lay his head upon the steps as an offering this day. We may not question the ways of the Sea Father.’

They flung me forwards as though I were no more than a goat or a chicken, a trussed offering. That angered me. I heard Hera give another old woman’s dry cough. That angered me, too, for it was as though she despised me as a warrior, a champion of the Mother—not that it was my true will to serve the bloody Mother, far from it; but I wished to be regarded as of worth, like a sharp sword, whoever holds it.

When Pelias spoke again, I answered him out of sheer irritation—in the manner of a young man whose pride is hurt.

He said, ‘Well, Jason, or Diomedes, whatever you choose to call yourself, and suppose you stood where I am, on these steps, with a sword in your hand, on a great feast day . . . Suppose all that, if your head can hold such a thought. And suppose that a mad young man came at you with a sword and javelins, prepared to harm you. And suppose that you had been warned of all this by an oracle. Now tell me, what would you do?’

I formed my mouth into what I thought was a careless laugh, and spoke what came first into my head, just, as I say, out of anger and hurt pride.

‘If I were a timid man, like Pelias the Black and Blue, I should send that young warrior well away from my kingdom, where he could not harm me.’

I heard the Libyans give a deep sigh, as though they expected to be called upon to cut me down for those words. I heard the crowd suck in their breath, excited at such a start to the Festival—for it is not every day that these peasants have a chance of seeing a man howling on a javelin point. I saw the hand of Pelias clench about the great hilt of Poseidon’s sword, as though he would step down from the stair and put an end to me. Then, again, I heard the dry cough of Hera, this time as though she were encouraging me, as though she approved of my strange and sudden proud words.

Pelias said, smiling grimly, ‘And where would such a young fool as you go, to be safe?’

I spoke the first thing that came into my head.

‘To Colchis, to the kingdom of Aeëtes, whose gold I would steal. Then I should return here, buy me an army, and take Iolcos from its usurper.’

I was staggered at the words I dared utter. I was even more staggered that Pelias took them in the way he did; for he smiled, nodded his shaggy head, and then said, ‘You are not such a simpleton as I thought, Diomedes-Jason. Or are you? No man has ever sailed to Colchis and then returned to tell the tale. No man has ever bested the Eagle King of Colchis, much less taken his gold. But it might be done—yes, it *might* be done, by a youth who was prepared to risk all he had to do it.’

He seemed to be thinking deeply about this, when one of my uncles leaned over his shoulder and said, sneering, as it seemed to me, ‘What of this boy’s threat to take your kingdom, Pelias? Is that also a good idea? Have you grown so tired of ruling then?’

Pelias laughed in the sunshine, showing his white teeth under the mask, and the fringe of black hair on his upper lip.

‘Amathaon,’ he said, ‘any man who brought me back a shipload of gold from Colchis might have this midden-heap of a kingdom, and welcome. He would have no need to waste the gold on hiring an army, to sit on the throne at Iolcos.’

My mother gave a gasp at this, high above me, and I heard her. I also heard Hera give a little chuckle as though things were turning out well for the Mother Goddess after all.

I said, ‘Before the people, who are my witnesses, Pelias, I accept that challenge. I’ll buy your kingdom for a cargo of gold from Colchis. Now what do you say?’

He laughed down on me like an indulgent teacher who humours a forward child and said, ‘Aeëtes, the Eagle King, will hang you in a tree and shoot arrows at you. Either that or he will feed you to his bulls or his great snake. But why should I care? I am prepared to gamble a ship on such a venture, and if it does not succeed, then we will raise the taxes here to pay for the lost timber. Your death would affect no one.’

12

Amathaon and Pheres

THE black-skinned Libyans bundled me along a dark and winding passage below the great stairway. In the enclosed damp space, there was the thick smell of earth. I noticed in the torchlight that the walls were damp, and in some places streaming. We were under the bed of a stream, I thought. Here and there, skulls were set in the walls, just under the low roof of the corridor.

I asked the Libyan who held my arm tightly about these trophies, but he rolled his white eyes and shook his horse-maned head as though he did not wish to delay on his errand.

'All this was made before man walked on the ground,' he answered. 'Even before the men of Minos, and they have seen most things.'

I had always lived under the sky, in the open, and was frightened by closed places. Indeed, I could hardly breathe, but I could not accept this fool's words. I have always sought truth—though I have not always followed it when I have found it, I have to confess. But that is a different thing.

I said to him, 'Men made this. Their skulls are set in its walls. You talk like a sunstruck madman.'

The Libyans behind him made a great clucking with their lips, as though they were astounded at my daring and expected to see me stabbed on the spot for this insolence to their Captain. But he replied as calmly as he could, though I sensed that this tunnel made him afraid. These Libyans are at heart simple folk, though strong and brave in battle. But whereas you and I, men of the north, may know there is a ghost in the house and may ignore it, the Libyans must be always making signs, whispering spells, and at last when they can stand it no longer, hiding their heads under a blanket in the darkest corner of a room.

The Captain, however, controlled himself and said hurriedly to me, 'I tell you, no man made these tunnels under the Palace of Iolcos. They have always been here. The skulls you see are not those of men, but of some creatures like men, but different, just as lightning differs from an oil lamp.'

I could see no difference from the skulls I had sometimes seen, piled outside town gates as a warning to visitors—town gates in Laconica, for instance, where the folk were always fierce, being Spartans. They liked to collect skulls from the old Minoans—long, flattened skulls that had once worn black hair embroidered with silver and gold. It made the Spartans feel successful, I think. But I did not speak my mind to the Captain. You can go only a certain distance with Libyans. They will talk with you for so long, showing their big white teeth and laughing in the sun, waving their pink-palmed hands about, even slapping you on the back in friendship. Then all at once their temper changes, and you find yourself fighting for your life. They are like children, or like big dogs which cannot quite be trusted when they do not understand an order.

But it was my opinion that these skulls were those of Minoans, very many lifetimes ago; the skulls of young men who had been given to the Mother at the Festivals. I did not pursue the point; the Libyans would not have understood.

I find that I have an enquiring mind. Not only about the skulls. For instance, I noticed that our track swung round suddenly and that then the passage-way seemed to rise quite steeply as though mounting towards the surface of the earth once more.

I was about to ask the Captain if this was so, when he saw the words shape themselves on my lips and struck me on the mouth to silence me. It was almost as though he regarded this place as sacred, or was relieved at having got through it without harm from the Mother.

‘You talk too much,’ he said, not looking at me. Then he pushed open a low door and bundled me into a small square cell. ‘Wait there until Pelias has finished with the Feast. He will come to you.’

They left me there and went back down the tunnel. I tried the thick door but it was fastened. In the room was a table of stone and two long benches which almost occupied the length of the cell. There was a runnel along one side, lined with stone, into which a man could make water or do other things. There was also a small square window, through which the blue sky showed. I climbed on to a bench and could just see out of this. It gave on to a small courtyard paved with wide slabs of stone. I could also see the angle of a white wall and decided that this cell lay within the mound that had been erected when the builders set up the tall stairway that led to the entrance of the palace.

Since there was nothing to do I lay on the table and tried to rest, thinking about my past and about my failure to kill Pelias. I was still calling myself a fool, when the light from the window-hole was shut off.

This startled me so much that I looked up and saw Heracles staring down at me, his bearded face grimacing with the strain of hanging on to the window-ledge to look in. He must have leapt up from the courtyard outside. There was no other man I knew who could have done this.

'What do you want, coward?' I asked him, not rising from the table. I could not forgive him for running away at the ford. If he had stayed with me we might together have killed Pelias, it seemed to me.

But he did not take my words amiss. He only grinned and then whispered in his hoarse voice.

'Why are you lying on the table?' Heracles asked, his eyes stupid and wide. 'You are not *inviting* them to carve the meat, are you?'

I turned away from him and said roughly, 'I invite no one anywhere, and especially a crazy man of Tiryns whose promises are as brittle as old barley bread. Be off with you, woman, and let me rest in peace.'

Heracles made a vulgar noise at me from his mouth, then grinned again and said, 'I did not desert you, fool! I only went behind a rock to carry out a private function. Would you have had me display myself to the peasants on the road back there? Be of good heart, Jason, we shall have the spear-point in Pelias before we have done, I promise you. But in the meantime, there are other games to play. The great king has three daughters, here in the palace. Two of them are twins, and the other is a little thing not yet ready for bedding—little Alcestis, the "Homely One," they call her. She's betrothed to your cousin, Admetus of Pherae, so we can't touch her. But the other two are worth a man's consideration, I can tell you! A pair of real Hellene bitches, hair white as straw, and itching for a man. Pelias keeps them locked up in the garden most of the time, except when he sends them out riding for exercise with an escort.'

I was weary with waiting and allowed myself to speak with the fool.

'You seem to have spent your time busily since you betrayed me at the ford,' I said. 'You would make a good spy for some kinglet, Heracles. Tell me, what are the names of Pelias's twin daughters then?'

He hoisted himself up a little higher on to the stone sill of the window. The sweat stood out on his bull-like forehead and glistened in the sunshine.

His thick arms were tensed like ship's ropes in a gale, but he held on. He was indeed an enormously strong fellow, this fool, despite his female mind.

He laughed and answered, 'Ho! I can tell you that! They call the one Evadne, the Flower, because of her rosy cheeks; and the other one, Amphinome, the Sheep, because she's so easily led! It only needs the ram to drive her into a quiet corner and she's down!'

I said, 'You have wasted no time, fat one.'

Heracles snorted and said, 'I have yet to find the wall I cannot scale, or the woman I cannot master. And I can tell you, Jason, that if you have a fancy to pass a week or two pleasantly here in Iolcos the twin daughters of Pelias will put no walls in your way.'

More to pass the time while I was waiting than for any other reason, I said to him, 'How can a man tell the two sisters apart, if they are twins?'

Heracles began to grunt now, and I could see that his grip on the window-ledge was weakening. He said, 'Evadne has a slash across the cheek which she got from practising sword-play with the guard. And if that is not enough, then the other, Amphinome, carries one breast, the right one, a little lower than the left. She broke her collar-bone riding a stallion, and it has left her a trifle unbalanced—but the injury, though perhaps distasteful to an artist, does not limit her in other respects.'

I nodded to him and said, 'That is good news, Heracles. If I ever come alive from this room, I will make it my business to profit by your information.'

He gave a last heave and said, 'Pelias will not kill you, boy. He has been trying for a year to get a man brave enough to take his new ship to Colchis; he will not lose the chance now. But I must go, my friend, or I shall not have the strength left to loose myself down this wall. Rest easy, I shall be lurking below, waiting for you. If they do put a sword into you, I swear that I will put an end to the House of Pelias.'

I was about to laugh scornfully at his words when I heard footsteps outside the door of my room. Heracles winked hugely at me, then disappeared from view.

The door opened and the Libyan Captain came in, followed by other men, all with their swords held out as though they were doubtful of their reception. Behind them came Pelias the Black and Blue, his headgear flung back now to show his grizzled hair and furrowed brown forehead. He

walked easily, not like a king or a god, but like a strong man at home in his own house with his guards about him.

I was impressed by this Pelias, I must confess. There was a strength, a manliness, in the way he set his feet down, and in the way his broad shoulders swung. He made my two uncles, who walked behind him, look like boys; and my supposed father, Aeson, who tottered on a blackthorn staff in the rear, like a shrivelled scarecrow.

My mother was beside Aeson, supporting him, trying not to meet my eye. She looked a pathetic thing in spite of her position as a priestess of the Mother. I noticed that she had a maiden beside her, one who put on a demure face but whose breasts already had the look of suckling. This I found a little later was the woman Atalanta of Calydon, a priestess of Athene, and a most notorious whore under the guise of worship.

This Atalanta, who came with me on my voyage to represent the Mother in her virgin form as Diana, was always spoken of as a great athlete, a runner—but I learned in after-months that her only running was from bed to bed; and that her prowess as athlete was in no way connected with the race-course.

I have told you before how afraid I was of women—the small dark women who were close to the old Mother-worship, not the tall golden ones like myself, whose first homes were up in the northlands among the horses and the high grasses.

Now this Atalanta was of the north—she was no dark creature of the blue islands; her skin was fresh, her hair was of a brownish-russet sort. At the worst, she was a Minyan, but never a Minoan. There was no old magic in her, no darkness from under the earth. I can tell you that definitely. There was cruelty, yes, as is well-proved by her annual races against the young fools who wanted to get themselves an easy kingdom. She had no tears to shed when they were quartered and their bodies dragged round the course. Of course, all that was arranged beforehand. She took their gifts of gold, for her father was a poor king, little more than a crofter-king, and arranged to let them win at the last lap. But she always found a last burst of speed when they were slackening off, and then came the sacrifice. She and her father had the gold, and the young man was ploughed into the ground for the sowing.

In later days I learned how she betrayed Melanion, the Black One, a Cretan fool who trusted her word and thought he had won her after that race. He went the way of the others, and Atalanta went up on to Mount Parthenius with the next claimant, Meleager, the only man who ever kept on loving her.

It was there that she came to her full time and gave birth to a son. It shows her nature when I tell you that the two lovers, Atalanta and Meleager, exposed that baby on the hill-slopes for wolves and bears to tear at. Fortunately for him, the shepherds found him in time. Just as old Cheiron found the children left on Pelion in my own day.

Atalanta's son was recognized by the strawberry mark on his left buttock. She had it, too, like her old father. The shepherds with their usual irony called the lad Parthenopaeus, 'son of the pierced maidenhead.' I tell all this now because I do not wish to deceive anyone. Atalanta was not a virgin, although she sailed with me in *Argo* as the priestess of Diana. She was a strumpet and little more. Not that I have ever had anything against strumpets; they serve a useful turn on a voyage or a campaign. But I see no reason why a man should not speak honestly and call a sword a sword, and not 'an instrument for terminating existence.'

I could tell some tales about this Atalanta—how she took on the priestesses of Samothrace at their Feast of Dionysus, and outlasted them all, into the third day, when the brute men lay snoring on the sea-washed turf; how she wriggled in the gardens of the Palace of Colchis while the columns crashed down with fire, taking the heart out of that fool Meleager, until a flat-faced bowman of the Scythians put an arrow through them both, pinning them together like a grafted pear-tree. Yes, she yelped enough then, with the little arrow in her, though no man had ever heard her yelp with any other sort of piercing.

I am an old man, friends, and you must pardon me if I let my memories run in like the sea when they should be kept out. I have a tale to tell and should not let myself get carried away; but this woman Atalanta always did offend me. I am a fairly honest man, whatever they call me, and perhaps I am only called 'the Sly One' because I am so honest that the crafty fellows about me look on straightness as being crooked.

But, at all events, this Atalanta came into the room beside my mother, and holding her right hand, like someone privileged. And behind them came the three daughters of Pelias.

The little one, Alcestis, was a sweet creature. I would not have put that child in my bed for all the gold in Colchis; she was so tiny and well-formed and sweet-smelling, like a doll. Her two sisters were different; they must have been at least fifteen years old, and well ready for all that life could bring to a woman. I saw that slashed cheek, that hanging breast, and saw also that these two were the daughters of a true cattle-king, a steppe-warrior

whose proper palace was a wagon and no pillar-held hall. They were women, and that is as much as I thought then, as I rolled off the stone table to greet King Pelias.

I knew then that Heracles had been speaking the truth for once; that they were accessible. Evadne was the first to run her blue eyes over me and to whisper so that everyone there could hear, 'He looks well, sister.'

The other merely nodded, and fumbled with a fold of her skirt, pretending to find that one of the tassels had come loose, but in fact exposing her leg up to the thigh.

Pelias the Black and Blue knew that this happened. He was no fool, whatever may have been written of him in after-years. But he made little of it all. A man, a tyrant, like him, a widower, must suffer his daughters as they come. He could do something about a rebellious son, such as putting a bull-pizzle about his backside, but with a daughter it is different. Like all women, they are dangerous; they can call in a lover to murder their father. A son would never do a thing like that; the gods forbid it, just as they forbid coupling with one's mother. Only dogs and bulls do that.

I tell you, when I saw Amphinome show her white thigh, I felt a sort of pity for Pelias, that grand king. I knew that he, too, was in the power of the women.

But I beg you not to misunderstand my vision of life. You see, I know well enough that we are all here for a short time at the best, warriors or water-sellers. And I know that the gods—and I am a god-man and not a goddess-man—have provided certain little pleasures for men, to offset the agonies of living. Women, like grapes and lemons, are such pleasures. Yet a man may suddenly find himself in the power of the grape. He may find that his sword-hand is weak, or that the waves will carry him away and the eagles devour him, because of the purple wine-cup. . . . Women are dangerous like that, no more.

It is possible for a man to drink shallow or to drink deep. That is up to the man. That is his fate. His to choose. If he drinks deep, he will be killed tomorrow, perhaps. If he drinks shallow, he may last a few years—and fall down a gully in the treacherous moonlight, the light of the Goddess Diana.

Perhaps a man will die anyway. I can only put it as I see it, and, although men have called me crafty, even in my hearing when I disguised myself as a beggar after my luck ran out and I wandered the world, I was never really so. I never understood what the gods wanted me to do in life; I never

understood who was right and who was wrong—the men or the women, the sword-killers, or the bed-killers.

That is why I always kept remembering those Spartans on Mount Pelion that hot afternoon when I turned from my javelin-practice and threw the shaft into that laugher's body as he leaned on the shaggy pony. The Spartans were simple, you see. They were men, laughing men, who spoke little and meant much. They never troubled themselves with thoughts; they just clapped a man on the shoulder and called him friend, or clapped a sword into him and forgot him. That is how a man should go on, I always think. And because I looked for something more subtle in life than that, I failed. But I am tiring you; I will go on with my tale.

Pelias soon recovered from his anger when his daughter showed us her leg, and came straight at me, his right hand on my shoulder as though I were a son, an old friend of his, and as though there were no others in that earthy-smelling room.

He showed his worn-down white teeth in a smile and said quite loudly, 'The girl wants us to admire her white skin, Diomedes. She is, like all of them, under the illusion that the magic is hers alone. Poor beasts, let them dream.'

I made the slightest showing of obeisance, as befitted a young man standing before a tyrant, and said in as firm a tone as I could manage, 'Pelias, is it wise to speak so in public of your own daughter, the flesh of your flesh?'

The king shrugged his heavy swaying shoulders and patted me with a hard hand upon the chest. He smiled and said hoarsely, 'We men must stand together, Diomedes. She is, as you say, my flesh, but that does not make her any closer to me than you are—you, with your man's vision, the vision which I, too, can understand. She is of another world, although I put her into her mother one hot summer night. I, her maker, do not know her. But I know you, although I have the rare distinction of not having lain with Perimede, your mother.'

For a moment he looked as though he thought I would take offence at his words, but I was not concerned. Perimede meant nothing to me; they had told me she was my mother, Cheiron and Melanos, but I felt no loyalty towards her. Indeed at that moment I felt far more loyalty towards this man I had come to Iolcos to kill, Pelias the Tyrant.

I said, ‘Who takes your daughter takes your kingdom, King. Is that not so?’

He sat upon the cold edge of the stone table and seemed to stretch his muscles, a king at rest, in private, I thought. Then he nodded carelessly.

‘Sail my ship to Colchis; bring back a full cargo of gold, weighted to the waterline, and I swear to you, Diomedes, that you shall have my daughter—or both of them, if it suits you—and my kingdom, such as it is, when I have gone. How say you, friend?’

I pretended to consider the proposition for a while. I heard my mother sucking back her breath and the black Libyans grunting. It seemed an age before I could find words to answer him. And then I said, ‘Pelias, Iolcos must be poor in men if you must invite a stranger to fetch your gold and sit on your throne.’

He shook his head and looked down at the dirty floor where a beetle trundled a hard ball of mud towards some distant nesting-place.

‘Diomedes, a man must take life as he finds it. Iolcos is too busy to go voyaging. Its men are too fat, too fond of their board and bed. It needs a fresh young fellow like you to stir the place up. And I, who was myself a fresh young fellow once, understand that. I welcome such a youth, though he came to kill me.’

I smiled back at him then. I knew it was no use trying to deceive this grizzled warrior.

‘How do I know that your daughters are worth such a voyage, tyrant?’ I asked, wondering at my own words as I spoke.

King Pelias turned away from me and began to stroke the fine and polished leatherwork on one of the Libyan’s sword-belts. The man stood still and silent while the great king played so.

Then Pelias looked back and said, his eyes mere slits in the heavy shutters of their lids, ‘Have done with it, lad. Take them to bed and find out. But, for the love of Poseidon, get ready to sail out from Pagasae as soon as you can. I have said all I may. Consider my words.’

He went from the cell with a swirl of his cloak, not looking back at me. Such an exit as I, too, would make one day, I thought, if ever I became a king.

My mother and father stayed behind for a count of ten, staring anxiously towards me, until the black Libyans pushed them from the room. Atalanta

flung back her tawny head and dilated her nostrils like a horse at them, but the Libyans trundled her out all the same, without ceremony. In their own land they have goddesses and priestesses—but not white-skinned ones. Such count as nothing with them.

The daughters of Pelias were treated with more respect. The Libyan Captain took up little Alcestis and carried her away on his shoulder. The other two walked proudly behind, though, as she reached the door, Evadne half-turned towards me with a smile and said, ‘You will find how much we are worth if you care to enquire, spear thrower. Our door is always open to you now that you have our father’s word.’

I made a little bow of the head and kept my face straight. It was unwise then—as perhaps it always is and has been—to fling back a woman’s gift; though one should fear such a gift, for it carries with it a penalty, always.

I was left in the room with my two uncles, Amathaon and Pheres, the kings. Amathaon of Pylus, a tall fair-haired man who wore a horse-hide helmet and breast-plate, took his stand by the door, his long spear held at the ready. Pheres, shorter and wearing a grizzled ginger beard, cut short after the Mycenaean fashion, came over and sat on the stone table with me. He took my hand in his and smiled at me, anxious to show himself my friend.

It seemed that they were both troubled by something.

At last Pheres said in a whisper, ‘Is it true that you came here to kill Pelias?’

I could see no point in denying what must have seemed obvious now, and I nodded, letting my mouth twist into a bitter smile.

The two kings glanced at each other as though sharing a secret. Then Amathaon spoke from the doorway.

‘You have nothing to fear from us, Diomedes. I swear by Poseidon, or by Zeus, if you prefer that. We are your kin and wish you only well; you can trust us.’

I slid from the table and walked over towards the window as though considering what they were saying. Then I turned and asked, ‘If you hate Pelias yourselves, why have you not killed him before now?’

They glanced at each other again and then Pheres said, ‘Our kingdoms lie far apart, and Mycenae and Sparta lie between them, like a wall separating one orchard from another. Pelias has friends in Mycenae and

Sparta who would not let us join together to war on him. That is the simple answer, young one.'

I said, 'Either of you is capable of slipping a dirk into Pelias as he reaches for his wine-cup.'

Amathaon at the door began to laugh. 'You speak like a young fool,' he said. 'How long do you think we should live if we did that? The Black Guard are dedicated to Pelias. They call him father, and think he is a god. Myself, I sit on an uneasy throne in Pylus. My folk, the small dark ones, still hold Minos in their hearts. To them I am a foreigner, a usurper. One false move from me and they would rise to cast me down. There are many of them, of the old royal house of Minos, who would rejoice to see me running foul of Pelias. It would give them the chance they have waited for so long—to throw me down and to set up one of their Mother-worshipping princes again.'

Though I was only a young man, with my beard just starting, I felt bigger, more powerful than these two kings, my uncles. Of course I had nothing to lose on any venture, whereas they had already set themselves up as kings and so were more afraid, more cautious.

I said, with a bitter smile, I hoped, 'My dear uncles, you argue the point like cattle-drovers at a market. Should I do this, or do that, or do the other? I thought that kings were above such fearful wonderings.'

Pheres' lips were wet with spittle; his grey eyes were flecked with red, like a man who is drunk or exhausted after a long battle on a dusty field. He took me by the arm and almost shook me. I did not like his touch upon me; that is something I have never liked, for another man to take hold of me.

'You do not understand, yet,' he said. 'In ruling a new kingdom, a man must be cautious.'

I took his hand from my arm, as gently but as firmly as I could.

'I understand well enough, uncle, that you and Amathaon wish me to risk my neck by sailing a ship to Colchis and back again; and then by killing the tyrant of this city.'

They stared blankly at me as I spoke. And for my part I was amazed at myself, a simple Horse-herder, speaking so valiantly to two kings. But my courage was up and I could not rein in my tongue.

'Very well,' I said, 'I will sail to Colchis if the gods will allow me; and I will bring back a cargo of gold. And when that is done I may even kill Pelias

if the chance arises. But do not think that I shall do this for you. I shall do it for myself, first of all, since a brisk young fellow like me needs a kingdom about him in these times. And secondly I shall do it because I have promised Perimede, the woman who calls herself my mother, that it shall be done.'

Pheres came close to me again and I saw that his hand was itching on the coral pommel of his dirk.

'You will set up the shrines to the Mother here again?' he asked, his eyes staring.

I judged my distance from him and prepared to kick him in the groin if he came closer to make a thrust. Then I laughed and nodded.

'Yes, I shall raise the altars once more, uncle,' I answered lightly. 'Though I am the son of Poseidon, I shall honour the word I gave to Perimede and to Hera of the Ford. After all, those two women seem to have put me in the way of gaining a kingdom for myself and I am prepared to grant them their toys in return. It is little enough.'

Amathaon stepped forward and took his brother by the shoulders, trying to calm him down. Then he said to me, 'Diomedes, have patience with my brother. He has waited long for this chance, and now his temper outruns his wisdom. I promise you, nephew, that my brother and I do not want your gold or your kingdom; it will be enough for us if Pelias is silenced.'

I felt that I had gained some advantage, but even so I wished to press home my bargain.

'I shall need help from you, Uncle Amathaon,' I said. 'What do you offer?'

Amathaon nodded down on me as though he had expected me to say such words before long.

'I will send my two sons, Melampus and Periclymenus, to be your bodyguard,' he said. 'They are well versed in all the tricks of war.'

He turned to Pheres and asked, 'What of your son, Admetus, my brother?'

Pheres thumped one red hand into the other like a man under some strain, and said, 'Admetus may go, too. But I warn you, if he goes, Pelias will send his own son, Acastus, to keep an eye on my boy. My son is already promised as husband to that little girl, Alcestis, and Pelias will not want my lad to take up with another woman once he sets foot outside our own territory.'

Amathaon gave a laugh and slapped his brother on the shoulder. ‘There, there,’ he said, ‘you worry like an old butter-woman in the sun! Diomedes here is sharp enough to keep Acastus in his place, I’ll be bound.’

I knew this was no more than flattery but I nodded and smiled as though I believed all that was said. If I was to sail to Colchis, then I determined at that moment to take Heracles with me, and also Castor and Polydeuces. The three of them should be equal to settling any accounts that might arise between the sons of these kings.

I said, ‘Good enough, uncles. Now supposing I change my mind and tell my other uncle Pelias all that has passed between us in this room? What then?’

Amathaon’s fixed smile did not alter. He looked into my eyes through his own half-closed lids and said, ‘First, Pelias is so used to plots and counter-plots that he would not turn a hair. And secondly, my brother and I should make it our business to see that you died as swiftly as was possible. For instance, a snake might sting you in your bed; or the wine-cup you drank from might be more bitter than you expected. Oh, there are a hundred things—a tile might fall on your head as you passed down the street; a stallion might rear above you and beat out your brains; a black guard might go mad in the sun and put a javelin into you in the market-place. It would not be a difficult thing, nephew, I assure you.’

I smiled back at him and said, ‘That is all, uncle. I was curious to know, no more.’

Amathaon made a little bow towards me and said softly, ‘Young men are always curious. It is well to satisfy their curiosity without delay, then their minds rest more securely.’

He was still smiling as he followed his brother from the narrow room.

13

Evadne and Amphinome

THE last days before sailing: so many things to remember, so many new things for a boy who had lived his life on the hills among the horses . . . Outside Iolcos, among the dark pines, was a dancing-floor; a circular thing, thirty paces across, with whorls and spirals cut into the turf to show the dancers where they must move. I have seen these dancing-floors or mazes since, in many parts, and some of them have been called 'Troys' because there was one in after-years at that damned city. This summer night with the sun coming low over Mount Pelion and the red-flecked clouds riding in long lines across the dark blue sky, we who were to sail in *Argo* sat on the mound above the dancing-floor and watched the women dance for the success of our voyage. It was a joyous dance, performed to the music of the sacred thigh-bone flute, the twanging of the turtle-shell lyre and the bull's-hide drum. This music was sweet and comely, not martial, like that of the Dorians. It was women's music. We men whose beards were just coming sat and smiled and nudged each other, making a mockery of the dying airs, yet to tell the truth it moved us all and made us think of the bed and the hearth and the laden table, and of women in the home.

My mother was among the dancers. She had been away in Corinth at some festival for priestesses since that day when I had first met Pelias the king. Now she looked younger, more like a girl, although she must have been almost forty. Perhaps it was the sunlight, or the paint on her face, and her dyed hair. But she had a changed look as she swayed and bent and then raised her arms above her head, like the necks of swans courting.

After the dance, when we men were drinking barley-beer under an awning, she came to me and drew me aside.

'My son,' she said, 'it is good to see that you have taken your place among the men and are about to become a leader, perhaps a king.'

I offered her my clay cup to drink from, a sign of homage to my mother. In those days a man did not allow a woman to drink from his cup—that is, a man of the Hellenes, because it was thought that women, once overcome,

must be kept in their place as underlings. But with one's mother it was different.

Perimede took the cup and sipped at its rough edge. She looked over it at me and whispered so that the others should not hear, 'I will drink to the success of your voyage, my son, and to the baby in me which is unborn.'

Her lips were wet with the beer and her blue-painted eyes were smiling at me over the cup-rim.

This look made me feel like a little boy again, as though I was in the power of women. I put on a sneering face to show that I was not afraid and said scornfully, 'Have the gods restored to old Aeson what he has lost, then?'

Perimede handed back the cup and lowered her eyes to gaze on the sunburnt turf as though she had suddenly become very modest and maidenly.

'My son,' she said, 'there are always ways and means if a woman has the magic in her. It seems that my magic still works in Corinth.'

I said, like a blundering ass, 'Why do you want other children at your age, Mother? You have me.'

Perimede began to hum the melody which the flutes were still playing and said, 'Are you mine still? They tell me that Pelias treats you like his own son, lets you drink at his board and ride his favourite horses. They tell me you are his man now. If that is so, then I must bear another son who will set up the altar to the Mother here in Iolcos. Your Minoan father has failed me!'

Her words stung me so much that I turned from her and went back into the tent to drink with my friends. I did not watch her when she walked back to the dancing-floor.

Heracles, his beard dripping with purple wine, laughed and said, 'That is another black mark against you, twin-brother—turning your back on a priestess like that. Take care or you will wake one night to find a serpent in bed with you!'

Admetus and Acastus, who were drinking with us, laughed immoderately at this, because they were princes. I determined that when we were afloat I would discipline these two for that laughter. The captain of a ship is like a king or even a god; he may do as he thinks fit, even though there are princes on board.

I was angry that these men should laugh at what was to me a most serious thing. Suppose my mother did give birth to a son and did come to hate me—then it would be an easy thing for her to disown my parentage and to push forward her new son to the throne of Iolcos. This was something to be thought about seriously.

Indeed, as I walked alone between the two high stone walls, on my way back to the palace at nightfall, I thought about the problem very hard. As I saw it, the only sure way was to put an end to Perimede, awful as such a thought was. In our laws at that time it was forbidden to kill one's father or mother, or one's brothers and sisters. Just as it was forbidden to lie with one's mother. Men who did this went blind or mad, and were torn by wild beasts in the woods; that is, men of the Hellenes. This law did not apply to Minoans, who did many things which were distasteful to us; for under the Mother-law a king might prolong his reign, and so his life, by marrying his queen-daughter. A brother might do the same with his sister, as they had always done in Egypt.

I wondered what penalty I might suffer for drawing a knife across my mother's throat one night. . . . After all, by what she had said, I was half a Minoan. Perhaps the punishment would be blindness in one eye, or half-madness. . . . Looking back on my life I think I did perhaps suffer such a punishment without knowing it. I did lose an eye; and I did certain things which men thought were almost the acts of a madman. Yet I did not kill my mother. That was strange. Perhaps I was punished for other laws which I broke in my lifetime.

I was in the middle of my thoughts when Heracles put his leg out of the shadows and tripped me up. He crouched under the wall where the bright moonlight did not reach, his teeth white in the purple dusk. He was like Pan the wood-god and frightened me for a moment.

Then I saw who it was and put my fingers about his throat to frighten him in return, but he was too drunk to be made afraid by me. He only laughed and gurgled as I strained to choke some sense into him.

At last, when he had grown tired of struggling with me, he gave a twist and flung me into the dust as easily as a bear flings a too-venturesome hunting-dog.

'Get up, fool,' he whispered hoarsely. 'We have an assignment, you and I. An invitation that should not be ignored by men who will soon be away on the sea, sailing the gods know where!'

He was in that sort of mood which I could not fight; as though he was the other half of me, drawing me wherever he wished. And perhaps I was in a surrendering mood that night for my mind was weak with my troubles. So I went with him, by alleyways and under passages, sometimes running as swift as deer across open moonlit places, sometimes crawling on hands and knees past sleepy Libyan guards.

I did not even realize where he was taking me until I smelled the aromatic herbs burning in the tall Cretan tripods, and saw the great wall-paintings of black-haired, slant-eyed princes, their waists drawn in, their shoulders set square, the snake-bracelets encircling their arms.

This was a little-used part of the Palace of Iolcos, a corridor down which I had only passed once, on my way to the armoury to find myself new javelins for the voyage.

'Who waits for us here, brother?' I asked.

Heracles pushed me through a tall bronze-studded door without answering.

The two daughters of Pelias, Evadne and Amphinome, lay on their hide-thong beds, drinking from libation cups and laughing. Little Alcestis sprawled on a bearskin rug, singing to herself, very tired, unconcerned that her big sisters were in such a mad mood.

Heracles bundled me beside Evadne, who moved over to make room for me and spilled the wine from her flat cup over my chest as she moved.

I remember I was shocked that these women should defile libation cups by drinking from them, but even more shocked that the libation should be poured over me as though I were a sacrifice.

But these thoughts did not bother me long. Evadne, when one did not see the slash across her cheek, was a creature of beauty; and she understood the ways of men.

She was practical, too, and when once she saw that little Alcestis was sitting up and watching us, she cuffed her soundly and ordered her to go to sleep in the corner, or the winged ones would come for her and carry her away in their claws.

Half-way through the night, Heracles roused me from a sleep into which I had sunk and then hauled me from Evadne's bed.

'Share and share alike, brother,' he whispered. 'Amphinome awaits you impatiently.'

To tell truth, I felt proud of these Hellene women that night. Riders of horses, users of swords, yet still women—and with none of that dark sly Cretan thing about them. A man could be himself with such creatures of air and sunlight, and no fear of blood-sacrifice at the end of it.

In later years, when I was past my prime and the High King Creon, who held Thebes, was trying to test me before he gave me his fool of a daughter, Glauce, one of the questions he asked was: 'Which of the daughters of Pelias was the more gallant lover?' I told him that at that time I did not know about such things, only what drunken sailors had said in the waterside taverns at Pagasae. But I tell you now, in secret, that they were as light is to dark, or moon to sun, both of an equal strength and value and skill and loveliness.

Had my destiny not lain before me, I could have been content to share my life with them both, as their father had suggested. This would have been no unusual thing among the cattle-kings of those days, especially the Macedonians, who were hearty fellows, wagon-dwellers, whose only thoughts were beef and beer and watching their herds increase by breeding. They counted their wealth in children and calves. I ended up with no children—except my son, Euneus, who became the wine-king of Lemnos and is said to have supplied the Hellenes with their drink during their campaigns against Troy. He never knew me, nor I him, the way things turned out. . . . But I am an old man, and I am overrunning my tale again. It is a pity that I have no servant who could pluck my sleeve and warn me when I am racing on ahead of myself. But that is the way things are with me, now; no servants, no children, no wives, no one to comb my hair and beard, to keep me clean.

Back to that night in the palace. I was awakened by a storm—thunder rolling over the town, and a sulphurous smell in the room. Rain cut through the window-holes and splashed on the tiled floor. It was as though the gods were hinting at something which men could not understand. The cows were lowing in the corrals and the bulls roaring in their pens below the palace. I think I heard a lion somewhere, out beyond the walls, barking like an old man coughing in the damp winter weather. They did this when they were foraging; not the full roar, but just a small warning that they were about. They were often old lions, who had to hunt alone because they had been thrown out of their tribes and deserted by their wives, who usually did the hunting. I am reminded of myself again—and no servant to pluck my sleeve and tell me to get on with the tale!

But I rose from the bed of Evadne—yes, I had changed once more by dawn—and saw that Heracles was kneeling before little Alcestis, his face almost purple in the early light; his thick lips spattered with foam. He was holding her close to him and looking like a god come down and made into a bull. I did not like it because the little girl was staring about her, eyes wide, mouth screaming silently. I have never hurt children in all my life as a warrior, and this I did not like.

I did not wish to interfere in matters of a king's daughter, so I shook Evadne and told her to see to things. But she only half-opened her tired eyes, glanced at her little sister and then smiled.

'She will have to get used to rough treatment,' she whispered, pulling me to her again, 'if she is to live in the Palace of Iolcos.'

But I was not of that mind. I drew away from Evadne and took Heracles by the hair at the nape of the neck and pulled him on to the floor. Little Alcestis ran away through the door, holding her hands over her mouth.

The two women went back to sleep and I dragged Heracles from the room. He did not protest or raise a finger against me, though he was strong enough to have broken my neck at one blow. It was as though we each had power over the other in those days. I cannot explain it. But there was something deep between us, something hidden behind a curtain, as though the gods had decreed it. He was my twin, my other self; perhaps my darker self. I do not know. But there it was. I did not like it but I could not change it.

At the end of the long corridor, where the tripods still burned and flung out their heavy smoke, and the paintings of the Cretan princes stared down at us stupidly, we met a black-cloaked man striding towards the room of the princesses.

I saw that it was Pelias by the grizzled black beard which jutted from a fold of the garment. He was carrying something under the cloak, the sword of Poseidon, I think. His face, such as I could glimpse of it, was like the thunder which rolled above the palace. He seemed a man who sought vengeance.

I pressed myself against the wall and dragged Heracles with me, though the fool tried to break from my grasp and run on down the dim corridor.

Pelias passed by us, staring straight ahead like a man in an awful dream. He did not see us, I am sure.

What would have happened if he had seen us is a mystery to me. I have often wondered about it. Did he wish to put an end to me for having come to Iolcos to kill him? Or did he wish to put the sword into Heracles for what he had threatened to the little one?

That is only one of the mysteries in my life. There are many, and I, an old man, am too tired now, sitting below the shell of *Argo*, with the chattering fishwives about me, to answer such questions.

All I can tell you is that Heracles and I ran from the palace, into the morning storm, and stayed the rest of the day in a hovel beyond the town, where a charcoal-burner's wife let us sleep under a pile of sheepskins.

14

Phrixus

On a bright morning, two days later, I was down at the jetty at Pagasae, watching the slaves loading the *Argo*, and making casual conversation with Argus the Thespian, who had first had the idea of building this long-ship. He was a black-haired garrulous little fellow with a talent for making drawings on damp clay tablets. He showed me his various sketches for the *Argo*, and also certain designs for war chariots which he had made. They struck me as being very real to the eye, though he never could draw horses correctly. He always seemed to get their hind legs wrong. Of course I was never anything of an artist but I did know what horses looked like and I tried to show him, scribbling with a bone needle on the wet clay.

But I dug too deep into it and ended by throwing the botched tablet into the water. Argus laughed and said, 'Each man to his trade, Diomedes! You use the needle as though it were a javelin.'

I said, 'It is a matter of degree. There are better javelin-men than me, among the Dorians. Just as there have been better designers than you, doubtless. I imagine that old Daedalus, who designed the great House of the Axe on Crete, would have spoken in jest of your drawings.'

Argus turned away from me and sulked. I never could bear a man who sulked—or a woman, either. I like them to come out with it and have done; not to bottle it up and go about with black looks for a week.

I fancy that I might have given Argus a smack alongside the head for his ill temper but just then a squad of Libyans led by a horse-maned captain came marching into the dockyard, calling for me.

For a while my bowels turned within me, for I did not yet trust Pelias and thought that he had chosen this moment to put an end to me, just when I was feeling a little more secure.

But I put on a good face and said smilingly, 'You come from Pelias, Captain? And how is he feeling this morning now that the storm has blown over?'

The black man's face was hard and shiny like marble. He looked over my head and said, 'The king sends for you. You must come with us.'

Argus was still sulking so I did not bother to waste words on him by wishing him good-bye—though, I confess, at that moment I would have liked to say good-bye to some man or other, so that the memory of my last hour might live.

I played for time, rather stupidly I think now, and pointed across the blue water to the new ship.

'Look, Captain,' I said, as brightly as I could, 'is she not a fine vessel? Seasoned timber from my own place, Mount Pelion, with a prow cut from the oak of Apollo himself at Dodona. An oak prow that speaks in an oracular voice, my friend. Nothing less! And all dedicated to Athene. Should not a man be proud to sail in such a ship?'

But the captain was not looking where I pointed. He gave a small cough and said, 'You must come with us.' His face was very stern.

Then I knew, or thought I did. They would murder me in some quiet grove on the way from the harbour, where the houses were few and far between. If I had had any other weapon than my short Mycenaean dirk I would have made some sort of showing there on the jetty at Pagasae, so that men should remember me. But a dirk is useless against bronze swords and spiked javelins. So I turned and stood in the midst of them, and when the captain gave the order, marched in step with them. This I found hard, for their military paces were shorter than my own free man's steps. But if you are to die soon it does not matter, one way or another, how you march.

As we went I ran over in my mind the various spots where they might suddenly turn and kill me. For example, there was a narrow alley just beyond the market-place at Pagasae, where the sewage drain ran down the middle of the street and few folk ever visited because of the stench. Then there was a sunken road beyond the town wall, where the oak-trees met together above, shutting out the blue sky and making a dim cavern even in daytime. This was a spot much used by robbers after nightfall and I knew it well, having been there a time or two with my new drinking-friends, just for the sport of picking a fight with the brigands. Yes, that would be where I should die, I decided.

But to my immense surprise when we reached this spot, the guards trailed their javelins and began to sing a camp song about an old lecher who was changed by Zeus into a tortoise and could never overcome the

encumbrance of his shell. Even the captain joined in and after a few lines asked why I did not sing with them.

I said, ‘There are various reasons, friend; but the immediate one is that I do not know the words.’

He laughed and said, ‘There will be time enough to teach you the words before we reach the king’s summer-house.’

So I knew that I was not going to be killed after all.

But the memory of those minutes has always stayed with me, even when I have forgotten some of the great battles in which men say I took part. That day the sweat did not trickle—it coursed—down my back and between my legs, as I marched with the Libyans. It was because I was so alone, I think, not just because I was afraid. If a man like Heracles had been with me, I think I would have faced that squad of Libyans with a smile.

But, if I was lonely, Pelias must have been lonelier that morning. The long hall of his summer-palace was as silent as death, though there must have been a score of folk in it.

Herbs burned in a dozen tripods, filling the low room with bitter smoke; hide curtains had been drawn over the square window-holes the length of the hall and, since the summer was at its height, the air was almost unbearably heavy.

Pelias sat at one end of the room in a gilded oak chair raised on a dais. He wore a beaten silver mask studded with garnets, representing the face of the fish-god Poseidon. Above him towered a stone image of Zeus, his arms folded, his long face stern and sightless.

At the other end of the room, ranged before a tiny altar to the Mother which was covered with small clay images and shells, stood the women, the priestesses, my mother in their midst, wearing the sow-mask of Demeter.

She held a libation cup of finely-glazed earthenware in each hand. About her arms were two red coral snakes that I had never seen before.

The Libyans led me before the king and then withdrew, no longer merry, but silent as spirits.

I knew better than to break that silence; and so I stood before the king, my head bowed, my hand ready to draw out the dirk and plunge it into him if he made any move to harm me.

But he did not move. He did not even seem to breathe. For a moment, I was filled by the awful thought that he was indeed a god and not an ordinary man.

I stood so long before Pelias that I lost all sense of self; the silence and the heavy smoke-laden air seemed to put a spell upon my mind, to freeze it. If anyone had asked me my name I doubt whether I could have told him.

Suddenly there was a harsh chord struck from some sort of harp or lyre, behind me, at the far end of the hall where the women stood. I did not turn round although I recognized that my mother's was the hoarse voice which trailed through the air among the rafters.

> 'Diomedes, son of Poseidon, the Chosen One;
> Now comes the hour when truth must be told.
> The hour when the purpose of the voyage
> Must be laid bare in the sunlight.
> Know then that many lives ago
> Phrixus of Orchomenus fled the land,
> Rose from the stone of sacrifice
> And robbed the Mother of his sacred blood.'

As she came to these words the other women took up the cry and sang in unison, 'Aye, robbed the Mother of his sacred blood! Phrixus the thief, the coward, the man who feared to die!'

Someone began to hammer gently upon a bronze gong, filling the thick air with vibrations.

Then my mother went on again, her voice keeping time with the lyre and the terrible gong.

> 'Phrixus stole the Mother's sacred ram,
> Rode it to Colchis like a common horse!
> Rightly the men of Colchis at his death
> Denied that coward burial. Rightly his ghost
> Squeals evermore by night among the trees,
> Across the hills, under the seas,
> Squeals in the purple air of dusk!'

The chorus of women came in, 'Aye, and all the air is tortured with his howls! No bird will nest, no corn will grow, no cow will calve, where Phrixus' howls are heard!'

Once more my mother raised her voice:

> ‘Pelias of Iolcos mourns his ancestor,
> The coward Phrixus.
> Pelias is haunted by that coward’s ghost.
> Nor shall Iolcos prosper till the fleece
> Of that gold ram be brought back here again.
> Then shall the haunting cease,
> The ghost lie still;
> Then shall King Pelias smile again
> To see the crops spring thick upon the starving land.’

I was suddenly aware that, as the voice went on, the still figure of the king on his gold chair seemed to come to life, and the head to nod as though in approval of the words.

I was watching him, fascinated by the nodding silver mask, when there was a sudden slithering rush behind me and before I could turn to defend myself, the women had grasped me, by neck and arms, legs and body, with their hot hard hands.

For an instant as they dragged me back, powerless, I felt terror once more, as I had done when the Libyans came for me down at the harbour that morning. But this was a different sort of fear—not the sort a man can fight against with a sword or a javelin. It was as old and as deep as a dream.

As I lay back, still staring up at the king, he seemed to grow immense in the blue smoke of the burning herbs and to rise until his silver head almost touched the roof-tree. Then slowly he swung forward over me and came down and down until his body seemed about to smother me, to crush me, like a tottering wall.

I felt the weight of the king upon me and smelled his foetid breath in my nostrils. It was like being buried in a grave, or lying under a heap of corpses, wounded, after a battle, unable to move. I have experienced that, too, and it was less fearsome than this awful moment below the throne of Pelias.

I do not recall that any words were spoken though I think that the lyre and the shuddering gong kept on beating all the time. Or this may have been the sound of my heart or my blood throbbing in my veins—or the heart and blood of Pelias; I do not know, for we seemed to be one and indivisible there.

I was only conscious that I had been dedicated to my task; that the king had breathed something into me, had made me sacred, a part of himself; and that I must now sail to Colchis and bring back the fleece, or that something unspeakable would happen to me. Yet no word of threat or promise was spoken in that hall; it was all in my head and my heart and my blood. It was beyond words.

At last when I could breathe no more, my senses left me, and when I woke I was lying beside a lily-pool out in the garden that overlooks the harbour at Pagasae.

The two daughters of Pelias were sitting beside me, smiling and twirling the spindles with which they spun sheep's wool, rolling the thread backwards and forwards in their long narrow hands.

Evadne said, 'A man may be great in battle or bed, but small when he faces the Mysteries.'

I said, 'You, a Hellene, I thought. You, clean; of the sun.' My mind had not come back to me fully.

Evadne smiled down on me and stroked my damp hair like a gentle mother or a beautiful sister.

'Hellene, Minyan, Cretan—all,' she said, 'all must bow before the Dark Ones.'

Amphinome laid down her spindle and bent over me to wipe the sweat from my forehead.

'Jason,' she said, 'in this land the gods take possession of a man and sometimes make him a god too, even without his wishing.'

I said, 'Is Pelias a god, Amphinome? Answer me that.'

But she and her sister began to laugh, and reach for lily-flowers with bent sticks, leaning over the blue pond, their reflections shimmering like white fishes.

Evadne turned and spoke over her shoulder, 'Who knows who is a god and who is not, Jason?' she said. 'Those things are hidden, or men would go mad with the knowledge of the truth.'

I began to wonder then whether I was mad also, though I was far from knowing the truth about anything at that moment.

Evadne seemed to know what was in my mind and left off her stretching after lily-flowers and came and lay down on the grass beside me.

‘You will know all when the time is ripe,’ she said, stroking my face. ‘Until then, remember only that your name is Jason, the Healer. And try, however you may, to heal the sickness that is in your heart.’

I never really understood what she meant for I had not thought myself sick in any way. Yet there must have been a sickness in me, even then, for this light-hearted young woman to have noticed it so certainly, when there were other things to occupy her.

LEMNOS

Part Two

15

The Sailing

WAS PELIAS a god? I asked myself this as *Argo* nosed past Sciathos, the summer wind in her purple sail and the oarsmen, two by two, sitting idle and laughing in their seats.

Was I, perhaps, a god also? What was a god? The wind that bent the tall pines over until their tops touched the ground; the seas that tore down high cliffs and toppled them into the water; the proud sweep of the eagle's wing; the putting of life into the corn-seed, the foal into the mare; God in the thunder, the rolling, rattling drum that shook the village roof-tiles and sent them slithering down into the dust; God in the shaking, quivering earth, that threw men off their feet and flat on their faces in the dirt?

God in power, in fertility, in pride?

After we had run down the channel at Pagasae and had felt the sea bear us up and away towards the distant islands, I think the God had come into my head. There was a fullness in my skull as though what was inside was straining to be let out, a pressing outwards, almost a bursting, so that I felt my eyes starting and wanted to raise my voice and roar at all the world like an immense bull. I wanted to fight with the sea, Poseidon himself, with the thunder, with the winds. I wanted all men to fall flat before me when I approached; all women to surrender themselves to me when I glanced their way, like rutting mares before the great king stallion.

No, I am wrong; it began to happen *before* we set sail. Perhaps its beginning was in the long hall when Pelias lay upon me and breathed something into me. Then, perhaps, this grew when we all gathered at the dockside before the launching.

That was a very strange morning. Poor Argus was not sure that his ship would take the strain and many of our crew of fifty were set on pulling ropes about it, round the keel and over the gunwales, drawing them tight so that the bolts which held the planks together would gain an extra support when we hit the water.

Then led by Heracles we dug a trench to the sea, for *Argo* to run down. Not a deep trench, but hard work in the hot sun that day. Even Atalanta took a wooden-bladed shovel and helped to shift the mud, her skirt tucked up so high into her belt that each time she bent one of the sailors whistled or called out some comment. She did not mind; this is what she had intended, for all her paint and gilt and silver ornaments, the silver of the moon-goddess, Diana Virgin.

At last, when Argus gave the word, we got into the ship, reversed the oars, putting the handles outboard, and bound them to the thole-pins; so, pushing like madmen, we all got *Argo* moving on her rollers down into the water. We were a little surprised when we found that *Argo* was as steady on the sea as she had been on the sand. Even Argus, the designer, was amazed, though he affected not to be at all excited and said that he knew from his drawings on the clay tablets that the launching would turn out well.

But Heracles, with his dark smile, drew me aside and said, 'That fool takes all the credit. I wonder where we should have been if I had not laid the child into the trench to help the keel slide through?'

This shocked me at the time for I had not seen this happening, though when I cast my mind back I did recall a smothered gasp from the crowds on the harbour-side when we had got half-way down the trench.

I meant to ask him whose child it was, but in the general rush and excitement, I forgot. Nor did I ever know. It was probably some unwanted creature who would otherwise have been exposed on Mount Pelion and left to the wolves. At least the ship-death was a quick one; there is that to be said for it.

Once we had proved that the vessel was seaworthy, we dived overboard and raced each other back to the shore, shouting in the sunshine, slapping the foam into our friends' faces as we went.

Pelias, wrapped in his black ram-fleece, stood on his high rock and watched while we raised a cairn of stone to Apollo and lit fires of dried olive wood to burn before it. Then two steers were dragged protesting down the beach and made to stand still while I got on my knees and whispered a prayer to Apollo for the safe conduct of the voyage.

I covered my face with my hands with a great show of devotion for, to tell the truth, I had forgotten the words of the prayer, but I was able to make out that I spoke under the stress of great feeling and so my inaudible words

were forgiven, and, indeed, in certain quarters, praised. They said that I was moved by the God.

Afterwards my mother put libation cups of lustral water in my hands, which I cast over the fires, and followed this by sprinkling a sack of barley-meal into the smoke.

Heracles struck one of the steers in the middle of the forehead, such a mighty clout that the dumb creature died where it stood and tumbled, a slack heap, on to the ground. Ancaeus, who was to be our steersman, chose to kill the other steer with his double-headed bronze axe, but in the excitement he made a poor stroke, and though he cut through the sinews on one side of the animal's neck, so that its great head hung sadly sideways, the steer stayed alive and set up such a bawling that I stopped praying and ran forward with my short dirk. As I cut its throat, the warm blood splashed me from chest to knee and the people raised a great cheer to see me stand steaming before them in the sunlight, my red dirk dripping, my head flung back and laughing.

That was when I first felt entirely like a god. During the flaying of the hides, the burning of the sacred thigh-bones, and the feasting that followed, I still had the roar of that crowd in my ears, still felt the hot blood upon my body.

My mother did not speak to me before we sailed. She and her women were occupied with beating gongs and striking the cords of their lyres. But Pelias drew me aside when all the others were busy with wine or women and whispered to me in his hoarse voice, 'My son, this day the light has shone in your eyes. Fare forward, for the gods are with you.'

The man I had come to kill, and who now made me love him by calling me his son, by foretelling my godhead.

I had intended to cast overboard Acastus, the son of Pelias, who had been slighting me; but after those words, I could not bring myself to do such a thing. I did not love Acastus but at least I would let him alone, for his father's sake.

Only one other thing I recall, as we hauled up the sail and drew away from the grey harbour-stones of Pagasae: a fat woman in a bright blue gown was holding up a little boy to watch the *Argo* go. He was a golden-haired child, and as brown-skinned as a Cretan from the good summer weather we were having. This little child's face lit up as the purple sail rose and he cried

out wordlessly and clapped his hands so that all the folk about him smiled, too, and clapped their hands with joy at his joy.

Atalanta, who stood beside me at the prow, nodded her head and said, ‘That child is called Achilles. He is the son of Peleus, who rows in the fifth bench here. One day little Achilles will be great Achilles and all men will know his name.’

I said, ‘Who will be the greater, Achilles or I, priestess?’

Not that I believed this strumpet, but I was interested in what she might say. Indeed, it had crossed my mind that if she said Achilles would outdo me, I might even leave behind an order that the child was to be attended to; I do not mean killed, but merely crippled, as was the custom then among the Hellene tyrants.

But Atalanta said, ‘Jason will gain a queen; Achilles a dead friend.’

At the time that answer satisfied me; though in later years it would not have done so. We learn by experience not to trust anyone, and least of all the priestesses.

But as we drew from the shore and the wine-dark waves broke over our straining oars and the sea-mews swirled about our mast-top of stout ash, I forgot Achilles and Atalanta, even forgot the task that lay before me in distant Colchis. And all I knew was that for the first time in my life I was sea-borne, free of land, the master of men, the war-leader—I, who had never been in a battle in my life! So one may see the irony of the gods at such a choice.

On the seventh day out, as we were nearing the island of Icos, which lay on the horizon like a blue-grey humped fish, something happened which showed me clearly enough that the hands of the gods are always outstretched to clench about any man who sets himself too high.

Atalanta, laughing, mother-naked and as gold as honey, was amusing herself by diving from the gunwales and swimming about the ship, calling out that she was Aphrodite come again, and bobbing up and down in the blue water like a young dolphin. I watched her from my place behind the oak prow, smiling at her childish antics in what I thought was a masterly way. I saw that she was both a superbly made woman and a great swimmer; still, I put on a show of tolerant contempt.

Suddenly she came alongside and, grasping at one of the oars, smoothed her fair hair back from her broad forehead, looking up at me with twinkling

grey eyes that were screwed up in the sunlight. I saw the thin crust of salt on her golden skin.

‘Well, Diomedes,’ she said, ‘you may not be afraid of men with their spears but are you not fearful of the hand of Poseidon?’

I looked over her head and pretended not to hear her, but I knew that many of the men heard her and were staring at me curiously. In those days a man who set himself up to be a leader was expected to accept any wagers, however dangerous, without a second thought.

I still did not answer her, though she asked the question twice more.

Then she changed her approach and called loudly, ‘In my father’s kingdom I took on all comers in the foot-race, and beat them. I, held in the hand of Sea Mother Tethys, challenge you to race me in the waters.’

To tell the truth, most of my time had been spent on solid land and I was no great swimmer. I could have done without this taunting at the start of the voyage. I was just unbuckling my leather breast-plate when Heracles leaned over to me and whispered, ‘I warn you, do not go.’

For once I felt ready to take the advice of my twin without question, for it was what lay in my own mind. And I began to fasten up the buckles once more, despite the smiles of the oarsmen about me.

Then suddenly Meleager jumped up and ripped off his hide tunic. His russet hair flamed in the breeze and for a second he looked a young god, laughing and sneering.

‘If Jason will not take you on, then I will, woman!’ he shouted, and, before we could stop him, he had dived in beside her.

Now this was something I could not control. If I did not jump, too, then I might just as well cut my own throat there and then. I drew away from Heracles and stripped off my breast-plate and kilt and, though I was mortally afraid, I dived in beside the two, taking a great mouthful of salt water as I came up.

Men were looking over the ship’s side, some of them laughing, some of them, my friends, looking grave. But I coughed a time or two, then I yelled out, ‘Poseidon!’ and struck out after Atalanta and Meleager.

It was as though a hand bore me up, thrust me along, and soon I was abreast of them; and then, flailing my arms with all my force, I was before them, riding the powerful waves. I thought a prayer to Poseidon as I swam,

thanking him for letting me do this thing in the sight of my watching fellows.

And when I had gone perhaps two hundred paces from the ship, I slowed down, thinking that I had proved my strength over the other two; but, as I glanced over my shoulder, I saw that Atalanta was still coming on strongly, overtaking me, and that Meleager was now far behind for all his sneering face.

I laughed back at the woman and shouted, ‘We have done enough, priestess. Let us return to *Argo* now.’

But, the water frothing about her and running in swirls over her brown body, she called back, ‘This is only the beginning, sea captain! I do not get into my stride so easily. I will race you to the little island that lies off Icos. That would be a fair trial for one who sets up as a hero.’

The power that Poseidon had put into me was flowing away bit by bit and, to tell the truth, I doubted whether I could even get back to *Argo* easily. In a way, it seemed just as sensible to keep straight on.

Then Atalanta drew beside me and, flinging her long hair from her face with a nod of the head, lay in the sea and said, ‘You and I, together, hey, Diomedes?’

The strength of Poseidon came into me again at this challenge—yet I fancy that the woman was not putting out all her skill, for though she did not pass me, yet I was never able to draw away from her. Moreover, as we went farther and farther from the ship, she swam so close to me that our bodies caressed each other in the water, hers smooth and shiny, mine rough and brutish, like two dolphins at their courtship.

Once she almost had me under with this teasing play, and I swore rudely at her for I was afraid she would smother me. I even began to wonder who was the stronger, Poseidon or Tethys. . . .

And then we were near the rocky shore of the little island. The waves roared and foamed among the black rocks, deafening me.

Perhaps I was a stroke in front of Atalanta when we were both pitched on to the sand, with the seas running back from us, trying to drag us in again. I was exhausted and coughing, as I got to my hands and knees like an animal. Atalanta was still laughing as she crawled over to me and put her arms about me.

‘Diomedes,’ she said hoarsely, ‘I am your prize, given to you by Mother Tethys. Take me now, Diomedes, in the sunlight, away from the ship. Take me, I beg you. The gods do not offer twice.’

This amused me because she had done little but offer herself since we had set forth from Pagasae, but I hadn’t the strength to wrestle with her and sank down under her in the hot damp sand, gasping for breath. She was more powerful than I would have given her credit for, and pinned me down, laughing, with my arms outspread and the sun above, making me close my eyes.

And then while I was still gathering force to throw her off I heard the thudding of feet on the beach and looked up to see Meleager coming at me, his face stern, his hand dragging at a short knife which he had bound on the inside of his thigh so as not to be seen.

And as he came Atalanta’s grip on me became stronger. It was then that I saw what a trap I had fallen into. They had got me on to the rocky isle, out of sight of *Argo*, where no one would see what happened to me. Perhaps they would go back and say that I had sunk into the sea on the last stage of the race. . . . The idea infuriated me.

But there was little I could do, for Atalanta had locked her legs about mine and was pressing down on my body heavily. She was sobbing now with the exertion and the smile had gone from her golden face. Her light hair was hanging, wet and heavy, over her features, giving her the look of a sea-goddess claiming her sacrifice. It caused a stir of fear in my heart.

And Meleager was above me, trying to get his dirk into me and finding it hard not to pierce the woman at the same time. I rolled one way and then the other until I felt my mind leaving me from sheer weakness.

I felt Meleager’s hands in my hair, dragging my head back so that he could draw his blade across my throat, and I began to scream with terror and pent-up fury. To have come so far only to fall into such a trap was enough to make a man doubt the gods he prayed to. I could have wept.

Then sand began to fly everywhere and there was a great tramping on the beach by my ears and roars of anger that were not mine.

The weight of Atalanta’s body lifted from me as fast as the lightning strikes, and I suddenly saw her lying yards away from me, her head against a rock, looking like a broken doll. And when I turned, I saw Heracles, naked and drenched, holding Meleager in his hands like a bundle of rags. Whether it was sea-foam or the spittle of rage that flecked the lips of the madman, I

do not know. But he seemed a god incarnate at that moment and I thought that he would break Meleager's limbs from his body, like brittle sticks.

But suddenly came a roll of thunder from behind us, from Icos itself, and Heracles straightened up and shook his head as though to clear it.

'The Mother speaks,' he murmured hoarsely. 'She says that this is not the death that waits for Meleager.'

I tried to get to my feet, but my legs were no stronger than those of a little child and I was quivering in every muscle of my body. I could only lie back, helpless, and watch Heracles as he unwound the hide-thongs that he always wore about his waist and lashed Atalanta and Meleager together, body to body, dragging their hands tightly behind them.

And when he had made such a bundle of the two he said, 'So, you are together now, my pretties! Take your fill of each other if you can! It will be a bitter coupling, my friends! Yet it will teach you what it means to threaten Diomedes, on whose shoulder rests the hand of Poseidon himself!'

I will give him credit, Meleager did not make a sound, but only glared in hatred at the world about him. Atalanta, though, began to weep and to cry out to Heracles to let her go because it had not been her wish to harm me ever, but that Meleager had persuaded her to this trick.

Heracles stooped and flung sand into her face, which silenced her for a while. Though as he took me up over his shoulder and carried me back to the waves, she began to scream and scream, until the blue sky seemed full of her voice and the white birds in the upper air took up her wailing and carried it across the dark sea towards Icos.

Heracles stayed beside me on the swim back to *Argo*; talking to me, encouraging me, and even putting his hand under me when I flagged. But at last, when we came within reach of the ship, he swam away from me to let the sailors know that I was capable of making my own way—though, to tell the truth, I was almost out of my mind with fear and exhaustion when they dragged me over the side of the ship.

We put in at Icos that evening for, whenever we could, we spent the night on land, passing from island to island. And the next day, against the will of Heracles, I ordered that *Argo* should stand off the little isle where we had left the two lovers.

I went ashore myself, fully armed this time, to find them. When at last I did, they were a sad sight, half-covered with mud and drifting weed. Atlanta's bright hair was dirtied with the droppings of sea-birds, and

Meleager's body scarred by the waves which had rolled him over and over against the sharp-toothed rocks as he had tried to protect the woman who was bound to him.

Their hands were as white as dead shells and when I cut through the hide-thongs which bound their wrists they both came to life and howled with the agony of the returning blood.

Meleager became in later years a great javelin-thrower and won fame according to the poets at the funeral games when Pelias died, but that morning on the shore, he could not have held a twig in his white fingers. In fact, as I gazed down on them, in my kingly armour and with my lance in my right hand, I thought that the kindly thing would be to finish them off, to put the lance-head through both of them, as they lay gibbering in the mud.

But I could not bring myself to do it, though my twin, Heracles, would have done it, I know; I have always been against spoiling lovely women, and, despite her nature, Atalanta was a lovely creature. She cried up at me, her light eyes bleared and her rounded cheeks swollen, 'Do not hurt me, Diomedes! Do not put the spear into me. I beg you, do not kill me. Kill me later, if you must, but not now!'

Meleager began to weep, a boy who has been savagely thrashed, holding out his two white hands like a blind beggar asking for pity. So I contented myself with kicking them both a time or two, where I thought my metal-shod sandal would hurt them, and then I cut through the thongs which bound their bodies together, little caring if the blade slipped on the wet hide.

It was here that I made one of my many mistakes; for the blade did slip as I passed it between then, not deeply, certainly, but enough to let their blood mingle, to bind them together with a thong more lasting and unbreakable than mere hide.

Then they were truly of one flesh and blood, and so held together throughout the voyage, giving me much reason for uneasiness from time to time. But it is my belief that Poseidon guided the knife and that I was not to blame. The gods often talk to us out of speechless objects like knives, or sea-shells, or even falling tiles from a roof. And it profits no man to question such silent voices; it is the gods who command through them.

I went back to the ship and after a while sent two men to carry the pair aboard once more. No one should ever say that I was vengeful towards my crew.

And this action of mine bore its own reward some months later, when Atalanta remembered my kindness and went alone to pay homage to the Mother on Samothrace, instead of the whole crew going. I know that it has been represented on vases that we all went, to the Festival of Dionysus, but that is not true. If we had gone, one of us would have been the Chosen One, to be torn by the Maenads on the hill-top, and I could ill afford to lose a single man in the task that lay before me at Colchis, at the court of the infamous Eagle King, Aeëtes.

So, chastened, the two sailed on with us, as we set our course across the open sea towards the Hellespont. And no man from that time forward dared to contest my right to speak or act as I chose; not even surly Acastus, the son of Pelias.

16

Lemnos

EACH morning Lynceus the look-out man watched the dawn and then cut a notch on a long olive-wand, to keep an account of the days we spent voyaging; and each evening Orpheus, a singer from Thrace, sat up on the dais by the prow and gave us a ballad, accompanied by a kithera, or small harp.

This Orpheus was a most talented player of instruments, and often as I watched his slim fingers on the strings I envied him his skill. I have seen him make old warriors weep when he had sung of the fights they were in. I even once saw him make a Spartan weep. This Spartan was a very old man, nearly blind, and his right hand useless from a sword-cut; but still a warrior in his heart, a hard-faced old man, too proud to beg his bread, even though he was almost starving and his ribs stuck out like the bracers in a boat-shell. Orpheus said to him, one day in the market-place of Tiryns, 'I have sung love ballads for the young boys and girls, Grandad, now what shall I sing for you?'

The old Spartan looked beyond Orpheus and hardly moved his lips when he answered, 'Sing "The Rape of Locris," if you know it. If not, keep quiet, for all true men know it.'

'The Rape of Locris' was nothing to do with women; it was about five Spartans who fell into an ambush when they were cattle-stealing west of Delphi. As I recall it, the last verse went:

> 'Five of us began it; one ended it.
> Only he, Cometes, came back home.
> He went on his knees because his feet were gone;
> He drank like a cat, because his hands were gone;
> But his heart was still high
> As he came singing through the gates
> Driving three bullocks before him.'

This was the sort of thing Spartans liked; and Orpheus sang the song so well that the old man turned his head away to weep.

When we were on the island of Bebrycos, later on, the king there, Amycus, who claimed to be the son of Poseidon, took offence at some remark Orpheus made in his hearing and forced the singer to stay the night in the bull-pen. The bull was so ferocious that no one dared even open the gate to feed him, but in the morning when the proud king went out to see what had happened to our musician, he found Orpheus on the creature's back, riding round the corral, strumming on his harp and laughing.

It was largely because of this incident that our boxer, Polydeuces, found occasion to challenge Amycus to fight with the studded gloves, and killed him with a great right-hook which shattered the king's skull. Polydeuces, though a Spartan and in many ways rude, valued the skill which Orpheus brought to his craft as a singer and harpist.

Among the crew we also had a Cretan, Phanus, who prayed always to Dionysus, but apart from that was the best juggler I have ever seen. He could throw a dozen lemons into the air and none came down again; they disappeared while you watched them. Then he would take them out of men's ears, one by one. We never grew tired of seeing this trick, when there were any lemons to spare, that is.

Then there was Caeneus the Lapith, who claimed to have been a woman in his younger days and had tokens to prove it. He was a great curiosity wherever we went; but very deceptive, in spite of his high fluting voice—he could break a man's arm with one twist of his strong hands.

No wonder we had such a rare collection of men—the heralds had been going about Hellas for a year, to all the courts and settlements, offering men great wealth if they would come on this voyage. There were princes, sailors, soldiers, the sons of gods, the sons of witches—all sorts, even a man whose only joy was in tending bees and collecting their honey. He was Butes of Athens, a wrinkled old man, who could always find wild honey for us, to sweeten our wine or to make our dry barley cakes appetizing.

The only one of the fifty-odd crew who did not ever seem to become popular in the ship was a young fellow, Hylas, a Dryopian, who minced about the place so much that one night Atalanta painted his lips and put flowers in his hair while he slept. I fancy she was a little jealous of the affection that this Hylas inspired in Heracles. We men did not like it either, but we knew what Heracles was; and there was no changing it. Once, when Prince Acastus jostled Hylas purposely at the well in Lemnos, Heracles sought him out and so mauled him that we were afraid his ribs were broken. Luckily, Atalanta had skill with herbs and potions, and Acastus lived. After

that men left Hylas strictly alone, and he and Heracles carried on as they wished. We looked the other way, the wise way.

I have just spoken of Lemnos; that was the next island we reached, after Lynceus had almost covered his olive-wand with notches. A big island, as you know, and one of the most important places of my life.

We reached it when all our stores were exhausted and our planks giving near the waterline. We were half-crazed with hunger and thirst, when Ancaeus first sighted the hump of the island, the pine-clad hill which rose from its centre and seemed to carry the white clouds on its peak.

Though Orpheus beat out the rowing-time for us, the men gave up, one by one, unable to put any strength into their work now that they could see their goal. Only Heracles, Castor, Polydeuces and I still held oars when we were within a mile of Lemnos, and soon the two Spartans let go the heavy handles and sank in their benches, the breath shrilling in their throats. Heracles, who was sitting on the opposite side of the ship from me, turned and shouted, 'By all the gods, little Jason, but if you and I come into port together with *Argo* our names will never be forgotten as true sea-cocks!'

I tried to answer him, but I knew well enough that my own arms and hands could not last the distance; and my back seemed near to breaking. I could only give him a grin before I too let fall my oar and sank to my knees, groaning despite myself.

Heracles let out a great yell then and pulled at his ash shaft like a maniac. The *Argo* swung sideways, and we began to turn about. I tell you the honest truth, that man drove our long-ship on alone, though in circles, and useless for our purpose—but he drove it alone, and had he been long-armed enough to reach across and grasp my oar, I believe that he could have taken us into port, slowly though it might have been, such was his power.

But without warning his own oar, bending almost double with the terrific strain this madman put upon it, snapped with a noise like the crack of a score of bull-whips, and Heracles fell backwards into the lap of the sobbing man behind him.

This damage to his great pride was more than he could bear; his face and neck almost purple, he scrambled up and, taking the broken end of his oar, began to lay about him, his eyes closed, his mouth dribbling spittle, until I feared he would break someone's neck.

The men, seeing that Heracles lacked any spark of pity, forced themselves one by one to take up their oars again and with raw hands and

leaden arms, set to once more, pulling painfully at the heavy weight of the long-ship.

Argo staggered forward like a war-horse which carries a javelin in its chest but will not give up the battle.

And so after many sweating hours we came into the harbour of Myrina, dedicated to the goddess of that name, and set foot on the soil of Lemnos for the first time in our lives.

But when our relief at having reached dry land ebbed away and our wits came back to us once again, we all stood amazed at the silence of the place. The harbour was deserted. From the white houses which stood beside the quay, no smoke rose. No hens clucked outside them; no children tumbled on the doorsteps; no dogs barked . . .

I was unwilling to risk the whole of my crew in a place where the windows were all shuttered and only the black flies broke the silence with their droning hum.

'Who will come with me to find what lies within this town?' I asked.

Heracles, Castor and Polydeuces stepped forward. I did not expect Argus or Orpheus or Butes to offer—after all, they were concerned more with shipmaking and music and the keeping of bees than with ambush and blood. But I had hoped that the princes might offer to come with me along the alleyways.

'Very well, four true men are the equal of forty of the other sort,' I said, a little sharply. But they all stared back at me stonily, as though they would sooner risk my taunts than their lives.

Hylas suddenly gave a little giggle and stepped forward to be with Heracles. He was not one I wanted, but Heracles seemed to appreciate the gesture and placed his arm about the boy's shoulders.

I turned about then and led the way across the paved harbour and towards the first of the houses. Five against Lemnos, I thought, with a bitter smile. Perhaps Orpheus would tell of this in a song and, as the years went on, we would become heroes who fought gallantly taking a great citadel. In those days men often gained their immortality not from what they really did but from the skill and wit of a well-intentioned bard.

We crept through the narrow winding streets, our swords, javelins or dirks in our hands, until at last we came to an open place backed by a high

wall in the middle of which stood a great wooden gate, its pillars shaped with lions carved in stone, much like the Lion Gate at Mycenae.

It was as we were approaching this gate that from the narrow sentry-box let in the wall at its side stepped forward an armed figure.

We halted as this guard took up his position, straddle-legged and presenting a long javelin towards us. His body armour was very fine: of black polished hide, plated with bright bronze. His helmet had side-flaps which quite enclosed his head. We could see only the bright blue eyes staring at us through the holes beneath the boar's crest.

Hylas said with a snigger, 'What thin legs this warrior has! Surely you could push him off his feet, uncle?' He always used this word when he addressed Heracles in public.

Heracles was scratching his bearded chin and glowering, as though he was unsure about something, uncertain, perhaps even afraid.

But there was no time for me to show fear. I sheathed my long iron sword and put a smile upon my face. Then I stepped forward three paces and stood still.

'I am the captain of a ship,' I said. 'I come from King Pelias of Iolcos. I bring peace; have we your permission to enter and rest a while?'

The guard at the gate shifted his feet a little to get a better balance, and made ready to thrust with his long lance if I went a step nearer. But he did not speak.

I said again, 'We are men of peace. I beg you, lead us to your king. He will know of some of us, for we are of old clans in Hellas.'

Once more the guard was silent, but began to crouch for the thrust.

The third time I spoke, a little angry now. 'Dogs are meant to keep out thieves, not princes and captains. Let us pass.'

It was like a strange dream, this stillness of the guard, his silent threatening. I could not understand it. Then there was a sudden shuffling sound behind me and Castor plunged forward, his battered face further twisted with fury. Before I could stop him, he moved towards the guard and, as the lance came snaking out, ducked like the boxer he was and let the shaft go over his left shoulder. Then before the guard could draw back to strike again, the Spartan brought over his right hand and struck the man a blow with the pommel of his dirk, alongside the head.

I have never seen anything like it. The guard gave a moan and toppled sideways, lance flying one way, helmet the other, and lay prone on the dust. We looked down on a cascade of long red-gold hair, carefully curled into many love-locks. And on a delicate oval face, lovely, but now twisted in pain. The bright eyes stared up at us, blue-painted, and in terror; the red mouth shaped itself into sobbing. Blood ran across the face from the gash which Castor's blow had made below the ear.

The Spartan boxer stepped back in alarm. Hylas began to giggle once again. Heracles stepped forward and ripped off the black breast-plate and then turned to me and said, laughing, 'It seems that we have come among Amazons—of a sort! Unless the men of this island use their women for other purposes than those we know of!'

I was suddenly aware of many bright eyes peering down at us from the grilles in the Lion Gate and, as Heracles slung the weeping woman over his shoulder, I set mine to the oak planks. There was a sound as though those behind the gate were trying to push the heavy wooden bolts into place, but then, under my pressure, the gate slowly gave and swung half-open.

Behind it we could hear the sound of voices, high voices, twittering with fear, and then the sound of feet thrumming lightly on the pavement which lay beyond.

Polydeuces said, 'This is the strangest welcome I have ever known. The men of Lemnos must be tired of life when they leave a woman to keep their gates! And such a woman, little more than a girl-child.'

Heracles gave the girl a slap on the behind as she lay over his shoulder, and she shuddered at his touch. Hylas made a grimace of annoyance and looked the other way.

'There, there!' said Castor. 'I will put you over my shoulder and do the same for you, little hyacinth!'

The boy put on an expression of sulky anger and walked through the gates. I'll give him that—Hylas was first through the Lion Gates of Lemnos! But that was no great distinction, as it turned out.

We found ourselves in a wide market-square, in the middle of which was a stone figure, roughly representing the Mother in her warlike form as Athene. And at the base of this figure huddled a crowd of folk, all in armour which looked a little too big for them. . . . Nor did they seem to know what they intended to do with their weapons. The lance-heads waved in the air like pine-tops troubled by the gales.

Heracles paced forward over the baking hot pavement, the girl hanging like a broken doll over his broad shoulder. Then, taking up a stance much like that of a herald, he made his black beard jut out and called in a loud, rough voice, ‘Men of Lemnos, we had hoped to greet you in peace, but you have decided that we shall be met with weapons. So be it; we of Iolcos have never begged for mercy yet, and shall not do so now. But we are great bargainers, nevertheless. And we are hungry men, too. So let me put a proposition to you now: stand back and let us go to your king and ask him for food and drink—or stay where you are and I will break the neck of this young man who lies over my shoulder. From his armour, he seems to be a prince; very well, the choice is yours. Gain our friendship, or lose your prince.’

At these words a great sighing and twittering broke out once more, but no one answered the strong man.

Then Heracles gave a shrug of his mighty shoulder, so that the woman fell off. He caught her before she touched the pavement and raising his knee bent her over it, one hand about her ankles, one about her neck. Now she was gabbling with fright and her face was drenched with tears and blood. A most piteous spectacle!

When Heracles began to put a certain force into his bending and twisting, I was about to push him aside, for I did not want a useless murder done in the market-place of Lemnos. But he half-turned to me and winked, all the time making a great show of screwing the girl’s neck round. Then suddenly she fainted and lay limp over his thick knee. For an instant I thought she was dead, her stillness was so convincing.

It certainly convinced the crowd below the statue of Athene. They flung down swords and javelins, and fell to their knees, pleading. Here and there, helmets came off to show long hair—red, and gold, and even black.

Then from the midst of them all came a tall slim figure, dressed in fine parade armour of thin gold and wearing a white woollen kilt which hardly reached the thighs. Her corn-gold hair, braided with silver, reached below her waist, for she was not long in the body. But her legs were long, very dusty, but very slim and long, the longest legs I have ever seen on a woman. And her hands the narrowest and finest. Her face was perhaps a little thin and her nose ever so slightly curved, so that the nostrils, dilated, gave her a look of pride—though she was immensely afraid, I could tell by the way her mouth twitched. She carried a great lion-crested helmet in the crook of her

left arm like a proper warrior. It was a splendid helmet—and a splendid arm! But even so it was those long, long legs which most caught my fancy.

In after years men spoke of her as the Queen of the High Gate; but it was of no wooden gate they talked. It was an entrance of another sort: and the sailors made up a rough rhyme about a man having to stand on a stone to enter it. No man ever sang that in my presence, however, until I was too old to prevent it.

But this woman walked right up to Heracles and said in a low voice, ‘Have done with this bloodshed. If you must kill, then take me. I am the queen of this island. I am Hypsipyle.’

Heracles looked her up and down, and even reached out a great hand to pinch her buttock derisively. The gold-armoured queen stood still while he did this, her eyes closed, as though she knew that she must suffer now.

‘Is this your daughter, lady?’ asked Heracles, of the girl he still held sobbing.

The queen shook her corn-coloured hair and whispered, ‘No, yet she is as dear to me. . . . She is Urania, my chief Nymph; that is why she of all others held the gate against you. Set her down now and kill me if you must kill anyone.’

As Heracles put the girl on to her feet once more, she ran forward and clasped Hypsipyle about the legs, kissing them almost frantically, as though she were asking a favour of a goddess-image in a shrine. Hypsipyle bent and stroked the girl’s hair.

It was a most touching scene. As I watched them, it crossed my mind that the two of them were to the daughters of Pelias as gold is to copper—and there had been a time, not so far away, when I had thought highly of Evadne and Amphinome. That shows how a man’s taste can change!

I said, ‘Let there be no more talk of killing, lady. We simply met force with a greater force, that is all. We are voyagers who call at your island—not pirates and murderers—for rest and refreshment before we go on our way.’

Castor, who had hit the girl Urania so hard on the jaw, now came forward and lifted her up and began to caress her as though she were a bitch-puppy or a kitten. I thought she would shudder from the hand which had laid her low; but instead she clung to him and nuzzled her face in the hairy pelt of his chest as though she needed comfort.

Queen Hypsipyle saw this and smiled at me, a faint and weary smile. ‘You see, lord,’ she said, ‘we are but women after all. Our only desire is love.’

I suddenly heard the sound of many feet behind us and turned quickly, thinking that these women had engaged us while their men came behind to trap us; but I was wrong, the steps belonged to the men of *Argo*, who had followed us into the city to see what had become of us.

One of them, a young man named Echion, who had a most pleasant voice, like that of a lion that has eaten butter, and who claimed to be the son of Hermes the herald, said aloud, ‘You do right, lady, to surrender to our great leader. He is Diomedes-Jason, liege-man of Pelias of Iolcos and captain of the greatest ship the world has ever known. Under his guidance we sail to the end of the earth; and when we return to our country he will be our king in Thessaly.’ This Echion always took upon himself the duty of announcing who we were, and often this caused me some embarrassment; but this day his words had what seemed to be a strange and fortunate result.

The Queen Hypsipyle suddenly gazed into my eyes and said calmly but firmly, ‘Diomedes-Jason has no need to sail to the end of the earth to gain a kingdom; one waits for him here if he will accept it. I should be proud to sit beside such a man, aye, and to lie beside him and bear his children.’

In those days, I must remind you, the women spoke what was in their minds, right out; they did not go into dark corners and whisper, as later became the custom after the men had fully enslaved them.

As she spoke I seemed to sense a surge of movement among the other women in that white sunlit square, as though they too wished to choose themselves a man from my ship’s company. There is no mistaking the wave of excitement that can ripple over a crowd of people gathered together. Captains know it in battle when they appeal to their fighting-men; orators know it when they stand upon the steps of a palace and talk to the folk below them.

I put on a stern and even cautious look—which must have looked amusing to many of these women, who were older than us by perhaps five years—for we were little more than grown boys. But I struck the pose of a full man and said, ‘Have you not husbands of your own, lady? Are there no men in Lemnos?’

An old woman, whom I later knew to be the nurse of Hypsipyle, ran forward from the crowd and flung herself at my feet, her grey hair

bedraggled, her wrinkled face coursing with tears.

‘Great one,’ she quavered, ‘you may well ask such a question. Once, a year ago, there were men on this island—but something like a disease spread among them. They grew tired of us and went on raids along the coast of Thrace to find themselves fresh women from among those barbarous folk. Some of our men died on the far shores, some of them stayed in Thrace with their new-found toys. None of them came back to us.’

Hylas, speaking out of turn, said in his young voice, ‘So, old hag, after a year of chastity, the lasses of Lemnos are hot to lie with the first men who come to their island, is that it?’

The old woman smiled at him so keenly that I almost felt the pert young fellow wince before her glance.

Then she said, ‘In this life a woman, above all creatures, must be practical. On an island like this there is no place for silliness. Woman needs man, just as man needs woman. Our men have gone for ever and we know they will not return. What wiser course, then, than to offer ourselves in love to such well-born adventurers as yourselves, and so not only place our kingdom under strong protection, but also breed a new and stalwart stock to carry on our race?’

To tell you frankly, most of my men—except Meleager, who was being held back by Atalanta, the woman who claimed him, and Hylas, whose heart was set on Heracles—were already casting their eyes over the assembled women, making their choice. Some of them had even moved beside the girl they wished to couple with.

But I made no move as yet. Instead I said, ‘The old woman tells a sad story; but why, if your men had gone on a raid, did they not take their armour with them, the armour which you now wear?’

Hypsipyle stepped forward at this and knelt before me, her head bowed, her long hair falling as low as the dust.

‘Diomedes-Jason,’ she said haltingly, ‘it is plain that you are no ordinary man. It is plain that your eyes see through the mists of confusion. I will confess to you—our men did not do as we said. What they did was to bring back their Thracian concubines and try to set them up in our houses here. No woman of Lemnos would tolerate such an insult; so, a year ago, we rose as one body and drove our menfolk away, sending their Thracians packing with them. That is all.’

Heracles grinned and said, ‘I had not thought that even angry women had such power.’

Suddenly Hypsipyle looked up at this laughing face, and the smile died on it as though he had become turned to stone instantly. I do not know what there was in her clear, tanned face, or in her light eyes, that had this effect; but there was something. That woman, on her knees in the dust, had only looked at Heracles, her corn-gold hair streaming over her shoulders, her thighs covered with dust, and the strong man became as nervous as a young stallion moving on to the battlefield.

He backed away and stood behind me, holding the hand of Hylas, who was secretly grinning at ‘Uncle’s’ discomfiture.

Then Hypsipyle rose and took me by the hand and kissed my right arm from wrist to elbow, looking up between each kiss with her bright eyes.

‘I am yours, King,’ she said simply.

I began to say that we must make the voyage to Colchis, but a sort of magic passed from her to me and I could not finish my declaration.

‘Why risk your life, my man,’ she said, ‘to gain a paltry kingdom on the mainland when you already stand on the soil of your own territory? You are already a king, Jason. Can you not understand that? Your voyage is over, the searching is done. You are a king.’

To tell the truth, when my shipmen began to cheer at these words, I was more convinced than ever. I was a king!

And what a glorious queen the gods had flung in my path! It would have been madness to refuse such an offer. I was a king, the King of Lemnos, and without a fight, without bloodshed or suffering.

I had become a king simply by walking through a gate.

17

Hypsipyle

THERE was great feasting that day, and for three days afterwards. After our wave-tossed voyage from Iolcos the men were glad to have their feet on solid earth again, for the greater part of them were no true sailors. And here every man had his choice of women, some of them taking on two or even three, so great was the urgency on both sides—the men who had been imprisoned in a ship, the women who had either been husbandless a year or had never known a man.

As for me, as I sat at the long feast-board and ran my hands through the tumbling tawny locks of the queen, Hypsipyle, I thought of the golden fleece of Colchis only as something far-distant, perhaps unattainable anyway, and certainly foolish to go questing for. Pelias the Black and Blue seemed now to be a figure out of a child's nightmare; even old Cheiron was a dream. My mother, her breasts painted and her flounced skirt bobbing, was an ageing tyrant of the home, a relic from the days when Minos ruled the seas, someone gone in the head with too much hoping. Now, as we gobbled up our succulent dishes of roast kid and olives stuffed with prawns, and as we swilled down mead and barley-beer, I ran my hands over the queen's long limbs and laughed at her; she, light in the head from all the feasting, did as much to me—and all were glad. All except Atalanta, who feared that one of the more lissom Nymphs might entice Meleager from her; and, of course, Hylas, the boy, who feared that 'Uncle' Heracles might leave him and find a woman instead—or five women, for that matter; his strength and appetites were large enough.

Phanus the Cretan, a sly man if ever there was one, who had a girl on each knee, began to beat his knife-haft on the long table and to sing a silly little rhyme, inspired both by the pride of his lost nation and by the deep draughts of wine he had enjoyed—for all men from Cnossus were great winebibbers.

It went:

‘Once the ships of Minos
Ruled the blue salt sea
And forced the proud Phoenicians
To pay their lawful fee;
Now the fat men of Tiryns,
The men of Mycenae,
Aping Cretan power,
Think that they own the sky!
But the slow blue tide is turning,
And Dorian men of blood
Are always moving southwards
With javelin and sword.
Let them all come, and perish,
As lush weeds choke and smother;
The snake, the bull, the Mother
Will never let another
Stand where Minos stood!’

Had we been in Hellas, these words would have cost Phanus his life, or at least his tongue and eyes. But here, on Lemnos, we were suspended between heaven and earth; we were in dreamland where men desired only to eat and drink and laugh, with no thought of the past or of the future. There were Dorians, or Spartans, sitting at the board, but they only laughed at Phanus’ little ditty.

Then Orpheus, who had come in, his hair awry, his tunic torn, staggering with wine and love, a young girl clasping his waist, called out tipsily, ‘You Cretans never were poets—and now you never can be! I’ll sing you the proper song for this gathering.’

The giggling girl fetched his lyre for him and put it in his hands. He sat on a pile of sheepskins before Hypsipyle and me, and sang this to us:

‘I sought my love among the pines
But their needles turned me away:
In the pool’s dark depths I looked for her—
And the great fish looked for me. . . .
I stood upon the high hill-top
But clouds cloaked my questing eyes.
Yet I found her by chance one summer night
In a bed of strawberries!
In a bed of strawberries she lay
As I rolled drunk from the hall,
Singing to pass her time away
And tossing a golden ball.

The strawberries we ate that night,
The golden ball we shared,
While the long-legged queen held Jason tight.
What bird can fly, ensnared?’

There was a great deal of laughter in the feast-hall at this song and all men called out for Orpheus to make up one about them; but he was too weary and flung his lyre down and reached for his girl again.

Hypsipyle smiled and took me by the hand.

‘Come, my king,’ she whispered. ‘There are more seemly places for great ones to declare their love for each other than this feast-hall.’

I went with her into a small chamber heavily draped with Assyrian silk to keep the draughts from coming in through the window-holes. And there on a broad gold bed we competed with each other in declaring our affection. The sounds of singing from the hall died away as though we were the only creatures left on earth.

Hypsipyle the long-legged queen was perhaps no more than seventeen, but in all ways she was knowledgeable. I whispered this to her in my admiration as the night rolled on like a broad and powerful river that bore us relentlessly with it. She laughed, blue-lidded, and said hoarsely, ‘A queen must know all things from the cradle.’

Yet a strange difference came over her when the dawn with its rosy fingers parted our silken curtains. She knelt beside the bed as though she were praying to a god—to me—and her face was drawn and haggard.

‘Dearest lord,’ she said, ‘I have more to confess than my love for you. Will you promise that when I have told you, you will not hurt me?’

I was too sleepy and content to harbour thoughts of hurting anyone then. That night had been too sweet for any bitterness to break its spell, and so I smiled and nodded and stroked the queen’s honey-coloured breasts.

‘If I hurt you, may my right hand rot,’ I said, ‘and may my javelin never reach its target.’

She smiled up at me sadly and said, ‘Your javelin has already reached its target, with a vengeance, which is why I want to tell you this. Know, Jason, that I am a goddess myself. That I am also called Myrina and have power over the corn in the earth and the fishes in the water. I can make them grow and multiply.’

I think, having enjoyed her as a woman, I was a little stupid, a little drunk by our closeness to each other—for remember that I was of the men, a Hellene, and in my deepest heart believed that women were the lesser creatures, although in certain places they still held on to their sly little dark ways which frightened simple herdsmen and warriors.

But now, in her gold bed, I felt masterly again and I said in a teasing voice, ‘If you are what you say, my dear one, then show me a trick of your magic—something more unusual than what you have already shown me, which is the magic of all beautiful women, goddesses or not!’

The queen’s face stiffened and seemed to become a mask of ivory in the dawn light. Then in a low, hard voice she answered, ‘Very well, Jason, I may not refuse such a request, though it was not my wish to make any proofs to one like you. Hold my breasts, one in each hand, as though they were apples.’

This command I complied with readily, and laughing. Yet when I saw her heavy eyes close and heard her breath moan through her half-open mouth, as though she were in a trance, the laughter left me and I looked down at her in alarm.

Suddenly what had been warm and soft became as cold as ice and as hard as stone. I seemed to be holding two rocks, or the breasts of a marble image—just as barren women hold the stone breasts of the Mother-statues in the shrines, begging for a child.

The chill ran through my fingers and up my arms, until it seemed to reach my heart itself. And then I noticed that Hypsipyle’s golden hair, caught wafting in a little breeze that blew in through the window-hole,

stayed still, outstretched in the air, as though it had become frozen, too. An image knelt beside that bed, not a living woman. And then the image spoke, its voice as stiff and harsh as its breasts.

‘Now take your hands away, sailor,’ it said.

I tugged and tugged but I could no more have moved my hands than I could have overcome Castor at boxing, or Orpheus at verse-making. I was a prisoner, chained invisibly to the stone breasts of the kneeling goddess.

‘Let me go, for God’s sake,’ I said. ‘I do not deny your magic now, I swear!’

The queen gave a shudder and a deep sigh, and her breasts became warm and soft again. I took my hands away and moved from her, to the other side of the bed, rubbing my tingling fingers to get life into them once more.

The queen rose and lay beside me, comforting me like a little child who has had a bad dream and has cried out in the night.

‘Poor husband,’ she said, ‘so now you are afraid of me for doing what you asked me to do. That is the way of men, and who is to change it? Yet I declare to you that never again shall I use the power that is in me. I swear it, Jason, and I command you to believe my words.’

I thought: How simple and silly are the proud daughters of Pelias, one with her dolls, one with her slashed cheek, one with her broken collar-bone. . . . How simple and stupid have all the women I have known been, compared with this slim woman whose power is buried so deep beneath her great loveliness. . . . Yes, even the dark-haired girls of the Village of Women, where we used to go when I was a stripling under Cheiron’s care. They were dancers, sly blood-letters, maniacs imprisoned in their ancient Cretan dreams. But here was a woman of the Hellenes by her appearance, straight-backed, open-eyed, tall and proud . . . Yet a goddess, one gifted with a power that did not need the silver sickle to make itself known, a power that lived in every lock of her hair, every drop of blood in her slim body.

Hypsipyle made me feel very young, a lad again, and very stupid —not a warrior, a javelin-man, a king; just a man-fool.

I said haltingly, ‘How dare I love you, Goddess, from this time onwards. How may I do anything but fear you?’

She gave a sorry little laugh and took me in her arms warmly. ‘The fit has passed, lover,’ she said. ‘Have courage to master me again as you have

done. Break my magic with your strength, dearest one. I am only yours now. The goddess has gone from me and will not come back again.’

At first hesitantly, then gradually with boldness, I did as she commanded; and at last my pride flowed back into me as though I had never felt those two cold balls of stone within my hands. I was a man again, a king, by the time the cocks were crowing out beyond the houses.

18

‘What bird can fly, ensnared?’

A YEAR passed like a day. Such a year as I had never known before or since; a year of god-like pleasures as the varied seasons rolled by. *Argo* lay half on her side, beached and forgotten by all except her creator, Argus, who alone went down to the waterside each day to inspect the rigging, her planks, the caulking of her seams. Sometimes he could persuade a few men to go with him, those whose new wives drove them out of doors for a day or two for certain reasons—and sometimes he took young girls, the Nymphs of the island, those who were at the verge of marriage, but had not yet been allowed that happy state.

I do not think he was unhappy, one way or the other, in spite of the fact that I would never give him an audience when he came, glum-faced, to pester me with complaints. Frankly, it was firm in my mind that I would never again set foot in that ship—I was too contented as I was.

My queen, Hypsipyle, saw to that. Proud towards all others, she was a slave to me, tending me in all ways, gladly obeying my every wish or desire. And always moving about like a goddess, tall and golden; but a goddess with her sting drawn now. Which sometimes made me think I was a god . . . More than a mere king.

In fact, once when we had a late-summer thunderstorm, I went on to the pine-covered hill in the centre of the island to test this notion, for the first time in my life disregarding the heavy, sulphurous air, the black clouds that reached down their fingers to grasp at me, the sword-like streaks of lightning.

And I stood unprotected upon the hill, in an open place, and pointed my finger at the sky where the turmoil seemed at its thickest. Putting on my most severe voice, I cried out, ‘Have done with this roaring and rumbling. Leave this island in peace, I command you!’

I don’t know whether my words were heard or not. All I can report is that there was a sudden crack of thunder directly above my head, a sound as though two gigantic planks had been smacked together. As I ducked with the

spasm of fearful surprise, my head almost touching my feet, a tall pine tree immediately behind me shuddered and groaned, then split down the middle, its branches falling to either side, the new damp wood of its trunk laid bare, like a woman cruelly stripped of her clothing by raping marauders. I was sorry for that tree and turned towards it in wonder. But without warning the rain came down in a solid sheet, like myriads of javelins with all the earth as their target, missing nothing. The weight of water bore me down, flung me among the prickly purple flowers of an acanthus clump. Then from the rock above me a stream, dried up by the constant heat of the long summer, broke forth and poured on its old way, rolling with it the rotting carcass of a sheep. This thing came to rest at my very feet, its sneering skull picked clean of wool and flesh, its black eye-sockets staring, its swollen belly slashed open and empty, the rib-bones white as snow and poking like accusing fingers out from the tattered hide.

The ravens had been at it, and perhaps the foxes, I thought. But why should it be flung down at me in this unceremonious way? Had the gods answered me so? And did that mean I was not a god? Or was it a warning of my own doom? A doom like that of a sheep, my Ananke?

I confess, I ran down the hill without stopping and then lay shivering in Hypsipyle's bed, drawing comfort from her warmth. She rolled over and said sleepily, without opening her blue-lidded eyes, 'There, husband, you are wet through! It is unwise to go out on the hill when *they* are disputing among themselves about the future of man. A toppled tree might fall upon you, or a sudden stream drown you. I could not bear to lose you now that I have found you at last. Lie close and cease your shuddering.'

A little later she gave me warm goat's milk and soft barley cakes spread thick with wild honey. The milk I drank from a glazed libation cup, with great proud handles on it. But when I had drunk a mouthful of it, I seemed to see reddish streaks of blood floating in the liquid and I could not stomach it any further. I emptied it down the terra-cotta drain-runnel that ran along one side of the room and went on eating my honeyed bread, while the queen, her back towards me, bent at her task of blowing on the charcoal embers of last night's fire, in the hearth-stone which was dedicated to Hestia.

That, I think, was the first and last time I tried to find out if I was indeed a god. After this, I contented myself by being a mere king. King Jason, of Lemnos!

My companions from *Argo* had no such torments of mind, though. They took their good fortune as it came and drank it to the lees. Which is what

stout-hearted sailors should do; for who, indeed, can see into the future? No mortal man. It takes us all our time to realize what we are doing in the present—or to remember rightly what we did in the past.

No, my men took each day as it came and then forgot it, like good honest creatures, and their women seemed content to do the same; so we were a happy isle, in the year we stayed there.

As we swam in the sea or the streams, men and women together, naked as dolphins, Orpheus made up merry songs which set us all laughing. Once he sang a little verse about the wedding of Heracles and Hylas, which almost earned him a broken neck—but which the women of Lemnos, and especially the young and mischievous Nymphs, found very diverting. Though Heracles went round with a face as black as thunder for days afterwards.

At other times, in the season, we hunted, running in parties, javelin in hand, the women with their skirts tucked up into their girdles, to chase deer or fox, and then to sit together under sheltering rocks and to drink from the calfskin wine-bags that we always carried with us.

And sometimes we would walk into the sea with bone-headed tridents, waist-deep, to spear the fat fish which swarmed in lazy shoals along the eastern shore of our island.

Always we left a deer, or a basketful of fish, when we returned home, as an offering to the gods who had given us success that day.

We were always most happy, like children, on that island, with the blue sky above us and the blue sea all about us. Our world was blue and golden and green—save for the colours of the many flowers and herbs which covered the hill-side, and which we men joined the women in picking—making garlands for each other to wear. These were things we would never have done back on the mainland, where men did not go with the women to gather herbs, and would never think of wearing flowers in their hair. But here all things were different.

Then there was grape-gathering, treading the full and succulent fruit, storing the wine in great red earthen jars. That was a truly merry time, when hardly one of us stayed sober save perhaps Atalanta, who was in all things save one remarkably abstemious.

Those who had no skill were set to chop wood and to stack it beside each house, in readiness for the winter. But such men as Butes the bee-keeper, were always occupied. His mead, made from fermented honey, was the most highly-prized drink on that island, for it was by some secret always

more potent than the Lemnian wine. And we held many feasts—not religious ones, you understand. There were no sacrifices, no blood, just merriment. It was as though we had all had enough of gods and goddesses, and, though secretly fearful of them, had agreed to keep them out of our revels. We were just men and women, enjoying each other and the fruits of the earth, unthinking, unrepentant.

Yes, we kept ourselves busy enough. Acastus and Admetus, who had seen the bronze-workers of Tiryns at their trade, set up a forge and a cowskin bellows and made what they called swords and spearheads—rough and ready things, but better than the flint we should have had to fall back on when our own weapons were worn out. Castor and Polydeuces, to everyone's surprise, began to call themselves potters and gathered clay from a little valley in the island, with which they moulded cups and small figures of men and women and bulls, much like the images that are to be found at Pylus. Every house on the island had one of these figures before they had done.

Perhaps the most useful work that we did in our year on Lemnos was to uncover a quarry, from which the strongest of us dragged out blocks of stone, which we hewed and shaped to form the two pillars of a new gate, headed by twin lions, and based on what we could recall of the Lion Gate of Mycenae, the lions only slightly raised from the surface of the stone—for we had no chisels strong enough to let us round out the figures—and leaning towards each other as though in great affection. These pillars were solemnly dedicated to Hypsipyle and myself, when they were at last raised, and, as an act of acceptance, the queen and I were compelled to embrace each other below the stone lintel in the presence of all the men and the Nymphs, while Atalanta intoned certain ancient Minoan charms and spells, dealing with the duties and uses of man towards woman, and of woman towards man. This was the only marriage ceremony we had, Hypsipyle and I; but it was carried out in public, we clasping each other's hands, and so it was a true marriage; one which I hold as being the only binding marriage of my life, despite the ceremonies I assisted at in the future.

I am an old man now, when I tell you this; women pass me by and young girls speak of their affairs in my hearing as though I were a block of stone. Yet there was a time when I, too, had hot blood in my body, when I knew what love was, and when no woman of whatever age passed me by without reluctance. I have been with many women, I admit; but it was only Hypsipyle that I truly loved and that I was truly married to, under the new Lion Gate of Lemnos, the gods help me! All others were a dream, a

nightmare, a penance, a torment of the flesh, matter for repentance in my after-years. Only she was clean; all others left a scum of filth upon my body and my mind. I tell you this because I want you to understand why I did certain things afterwards, and how I suffered at having done them.

Oh, Hypsipyle, my darling, my dear, my long-limbed and clean golden one! My Hellene, my wife-mother, my only lover! I weep as I recall your name. Wherever you are, forgive me! Forgive a boy who did not know what he was doing; forgive an old man who, knowing, has tortured himself all his years ever since and will die with the sword of regret passing through his body from side to side, as my javelin passed through the belly of the laughing Spartan on Pelion that distant summer day. But he went quickly; I have lingered on and have known the sword a thousand times, a thousand swords, God help me!

You must forgive me; I must speak, or I should weep, and a king must not weep where fishermen and washerwomen can see his tears. Not now that the Dorians have set the new fashion of men being known as cowards if they weep . . . We must all laugh now, whatever the occasion.

19

The One in Black

We lay beneath a spreading beech tree. The time of wine-treading was over and all about the island my men lay with their women, taking life as it came, laughing into the sunshine. The youngest ones sang, boys and girls, garlanded, moving in circles across the dancing-floor that was cut in the turf below the white cliff. Their voices came up to us, clear and strong, as though youth and summer would last for ever, the flowers never fade, the sea always run as warm and as blue, with the dolphins sporting about the rocks beyond the harbour wall.

My life had come to a standstill, its port of rest, I thought. I recalled my mother's words at the skin-palace on Pelion, and so I took the necklace of amber from the pouch at my side and gently placed it about Hypsipyle's neck as she smiled up at me, chewing a blade of grass between her strong white teeth, her blue eyes wrinkled against the bright light.

'Wear these for ever, sweetheart,' I said. 'These are a sign between us, an amber chain to bind us together.'

I saw that the queen had been biting her finger-nails, and that they were ragged and torn, down to the quick of the finger. She had lovely slim hands and this spoiled them. But she was of that quick and nervous disposition that one finds in high-bred horses—a delicate temper which can flare out suddenly and destroy its owner. I saw the vein suddenly throb in her throat as I hung the necklace upon her.

Her smile went away and she looked over the sea and whispered, 'If only life were simple,' she said. 'If we were only cows or geldings. Only sticks and stones, without feelings.'

I was troubled at her words and answered, 'What is in your mind, my queen? Tell me and I will kill the serpent that crushes you.'

This was the first time since our marriage that I had seen Hypsipyle so troubled, and her sad face cast a shadow on my own pleasure.

She rose from the grass, fingering the amber, and said at last, ‘I wonder whether you can bind me to you by a string of beads, Jason.’

I followed her to the cliff-edge and made to place my arm about her, but she sensed what I was about and drew away a little.

‘Do you not love me still?’ I asked.

She nodded, speechless, and the warm tears ran down her smooth checks in the sunlight. She was like a sad goddess, or a ghost, that cannot join in the life of mankind about it.

I saw the youths splashing in the green shallows below us, teasing the girls, pushing them into the water and then diving after them to drag them out, laughing and spluttering. I saw the sea-birds, as small as sparrows from the height we were, skimming among the rock chimneys below. I saw all this as though I were a god, and all below me was in my grasp, my power.

‘Then if you love me, dear one, laugh,’ I said.

The queen sank down upon a tussock of grass and hid her face in her hands.

Slowly she answered, ‘Once I loved another man, he who was the King of Lemnos by my choice. Our vows to each other were no less strong than those we have made, you and I.’

I put my hand upon her brown shoulder and said, ‘That is all past, my dear. Your king left you for a Thracian girl, so the bargain is cancelled. What have you to reproach yourself with then?’

She looked up, and her face had changed to stone, stiff and without tenderness. Her voice had altered, too. It was like the voice of an oracle, speaking through a bronze mask, its lips not moving, its tones steady and without expression.

‘He did not desert me,’ she said. ‘I killed him at the Festival of Dionysus, a year ago. I drugged him first and then, when I had chewed upon the laurel, took a knife and killed him in his bed.’

The gay little world below me seemed to whirl about me, and for an instant I thought that I should fall from the cliff-top into the water, Poseidon’s water, Aphrodite’s water. . . . The water of Myrina, who was Aphrodite, who was Hypsipyle . . . She who sat before me, telling me this.

Suddenly, upon that high place, I felt the power run from me, the man leave me. I did not dare speak while the queen felt the Goddess come into

her again. I feared for a moment that it was her will to cast me down, into the water. This was to be my end, then, I thought. Not the knife, but the fall from the high place . . . So my term was up, my kingship over and done with after all. Hypsipyle, my golden Hellene, was deeper than I had thought.

But she ignored my shrinking, my wide-eyed gathering-together of my strength to fling her back if she came at me, and said stonily, 'I slew him and ate the sacred parts, according to the law. The taste of his blood was in my mouth for many days; the sickening smell of his flesh in my nostrils—until I never thought I should be clean again. The feasting happened up there, above the snows, at the time when the wine in the casks had matured and we all, the women of Lemnos, could drink away our nightmares.'

I said, in a voice that sounded to my ears much like her own, 'So that is why there were no men? You all destroyed your husbands?'

She nodded, untouched by my horror.

'They came, the Black Ones of Samothrace, the women of the Mother, and commanded us to do this. We drank from their libation cups and obeyed. What else might we have done, we who have known no other way?'

I sank down upon the grass, my short dirk in my right hand, in case she swung round and came at me then. It is a dread thing to be on the point of killing a woman one loves, loves and suddenly fears, all at the same time. It is not natural, certainly not to the simple folk I had come from—the rough and shag-haired wagon-dwellers, the beef-eaters who drank themselves stupid each night about their camp-fires, fought only with giants and bears, and treated their women as kindly as they treated their hunting-dogs.

'That is all over, my queen,' I said. 'It cannot happen again, now that we are here, the men of *Argo*. We are strong and different. We are the chosen of Zeus and Poseidon.'

Hypsipyle stared away from me and gazed over the broad seas that stretched to the far and misty islands.

'I wish to Poseidon-Father that I could be sure,' she said. 'The burden is too much for us to carry, we women of Lemnos. Still, though my body has been happy with you, my dreams are filled with that awful day, the men lying before us, white and drained, the blood upon our lips as we stared foolishly at each other. And then that night, when we wandered above the snows, calling out that Adonis was dead. "Poor Adonis!" some of us called, like wraiths, shrill among the snows. "Poor, poor Dionysus!" the others called. We did not know who was dead, or why. We only knew that there

was some dark thing in us, in the island, that had taken the man-seed from us.'

Then she began to weep so bitterly, the wall of the temple broken down, that I rose and, putting my dirk back into its goatskin scabbard, took her in my arms and hugged her to me, all fear of her, all anger with her, dissolved, as water can dissolve hard limestone.

'Hypsipyle,' I said gently, feeling my strength coming back, 'you have lived in a world of terror and of darkness. But now there is no fear, now there is only sunlight. For we, the men of the *Argo*, are with you and will always shield you from such things. Lemnos is free at last, the ancient spell is broken.'

She clung to me then as though she were a little girl and not a queen, a priestess with knowledge of the Mysteries.

'May your arms be as strong, your courage as high, your faith as great, when you come face to face with the Black One herself,' she said, shuddering.

I eased her wet face from my chest and asked, 'What Black One, dearest?'

She said, 'The Mother-priestess of Samothrace. She is here on this island once more. Her boat landed in the night while we were sleeping, and lies hidden in the Cove of Silence, at the far end of the island.'

I stared down at her. 'She has come upon the same errand again?' I asked.

My heart stood still when Hypsipyle replied.

'She has come to remind us that the Feast of Dionysus approaches,' she said. 'And she has brought with her the potions, the cups and the laurel-herbs.'

Then I did something which I have regretted all my life. I suddenly drew back my hand and struck Hypsipyle across the mouth, knocking her down upon the coarse grass with the force of my blow. She fell, limp and half-senseless, weeping and laughing with hysteria, all at one time, and stretched herself, shivering upon the turf in the sunshine, which had suddenly grown so harsh.

I walked away and left her there, striding down towards the village where my men should be. It was in my mind for a while to get out the javelins and swords and to put an end to this island of women for all time.

But as I got nearer the beach where the young men and girls still ran and sang, my resolution left me. Instead I sent for Atalanta and said to her, ‘There is a wrong here which you can put right. If you do not earn your keep as I command, then neither you nor your friend Meleager will see this day out, I promise you. I shall feed you to Poseidon’s fishes, priestess.’

Atalanta shrugged her slim shoulders and smiled at me, drawing her purple shawl about her head.

‘Don’t threaten me, Jason,’ she said. ‘I have more knowledge and more power than you know. I am not afraid of swords, or of Poseidon’s fishes—if indeed they be his, and not Aphrodite’s. But that can wait. You have a pattern before you which I can see, but which your earth-born eyes are too blind to know of.’

I was about to say something harsh and commanding to her then but she held up her hand and silenced me easily.

‘I know that the Black One of Samothrace has come here,’ she said. ‘And I know for what purpose. I am not a fool, Jason.’

I got down from my throne chair and stood on the ground beside her, the fury gone from me and only fear in its place.

‘Will you help me, Atalanta?’ I asked, calmly now.

She smiled and nodded. ‘A little, Jason,’ she said. ‘Just a little. Enough to let your pattern fulfil itself, but no more.’

I asked, the fear raising the hairs on my neck, ‘The Feast of Dionysus—it will not take place here this time?’

She turned from me and moved her bare toes on the dusty floor, as though sketching out a design of some sort.

Then she said, ‘For one, it will. For one alone, and no other.’

I dared to ask at last, ‘Will that one be—close to me, Atalanta?’

She walked slowly away and at the door turned and whispered, ‘Some things I cannot tell you. But I will tell you that *Argo* shall make the voyage to Colchis. Now are you satisfied?’

I had to nod then. After all, how could *Argo* sail without me? I thought. I should be safe—and that was what really concerned me at that moment, cowardly as it may seem.

I hoped that the Queen Hypsipyle might also be safe, for though I had struck her down on the hill-top, yet I still loved her, but in a strange and twisted way now.

20

‘Dionysus! Sweet Dionysus!’

ATALANTA did not eat and drink with us in the long-hall after this meeting for some months. It was as though she had withdrawn herself from the world of men. We lost a lamb or a goat, from farm to farm, and saw little fires burning here and there at the edge of the pine woods. The heavy stench of the burning was borne down on the breeze to our nostrils as we sat at food, and turned our stomachs.

Sometimes the smoke spirals were black and oily; and no one but Phanus the Cretan knew what this was. He would not say, although Castor threatened him, with a great bunched fist.

Three times when we were out hunting we saw Atalanta walking on distant hill-tops with another in black. They did not seem to be speaking to each other but made motions of the arms and sudden little dipping movements of the head as they went along. It was like some awful and inevitable dance.

Then one morning Hypsipyle smiled at me and said, ‘Jason, they have gone to Samothrace—Atalanta and the other. We have given them bronze bowls to take with them as an offering. There, on Samothrace, the skilled ones will make inscriptions on the bowls, saying that the men of *Argo* have made their obeisance to the Mother.’

I nodded, sullen as a boar at being forced to lend my name to such an offering. But Hypsipyle stroked my face, for she had completely forgiven me that blow by this time, and said in a low voice, ‘If it is a boy-child, we will call him Euneus, for he was begotten on a couch, within four walls, and not on a bare hill-side as slaves beget their brood.’

I had noted that she had changed in the past months, but had simply thought that she was more contented, having a husband about the place again. Now I took her hands joyfully and said, ‘I do not care what you call him as long as he is mine, a son to bear a sword through the world, to sail a ship, to ride a stallion!’

She laughed and drew me down towards her.

‘There you go,’ she said, ‘thinking of war and adventure, when the little creature is no bigger than a doll! A tiny bud upon the bough as yet!’

I said, ‘Take note, Queen of Lemnos, that this prince-to-be is of Poseidon, and not the Mother!’

I had meant this only as a jest, though perhaps with a grain of strong sense behind it; but Hypsipyle took it rather more seriously than I had expected.

She clutched my arm and held me.

‘I beg you, husband,’ she said, ‘think what you will, but do not speak your thoughts out loud. All that we do is watched, upon this island. All that we say is heard—in that other place.’

She waved her hand in the direction of Samothrace. I laughed at this, but in my heart’s deeps I was glad that Atalanta was not here and the Black One with her, to hear my words.

Nor had Atalanta returned when the women of Lemnos began to bear their children, one after the other, for the full-term had now passed and most of them had conceived at the same time.

I ran from the queen’s bed-chamber where her women were bathing her hot brow, my new red-earth-coloured boy-child in my arms, for all to see.

I was a man drunk with joy. ‘Look,’ I called to all I met, ‘here is the prince! Here is Euneus, new-come into the world to find himself a kingdom!’

I must have been nineteen at this time and was proud that I could get a child, unaided by any other magic than that of my own strength, upon a queen.

Castor and Admetus were talking at the gable-end of a thatched house where they lived as I raced down the village street. Each carried a bundle in his arms and each set up a great roar of laughter at my words.

Then Castor flung back the shawl that covered his bundle and shouted out, ‘May not a Spartan do what a man of Thessaly can do, then?’ I saw that he held a boy-child, every bit as beautiful, or as ugly, as my little Euneus. Admetus the Prince of Iolcos did not shout, but merely uncovered his baby for an instant, saying slyly, ‘This is to be a king, one day, so it would be unfitting for such as us to stare too familiarly upon his face, shipmaster!’

Even old Butes, the Bee-minder, whom everyone thought was past begetting anything but honey, had a child, albeit a girl-child, to hold up to the sun. For Orpheus, there were twins, both boys; and strangely, for once, he was dumb to create a song about them. That is often the way it goes with poets and such folk; they can make up ditties about other people, but when it comes to something which hits *them* deep down in the belly they are silent.

So Polydeuces, a rough and ready fellow, whose little lad was as strong and as black as a Cretan ox, made up a song for Orpheus. You can imagine the sort of thing it was—about a flute finding the sound-hole of a lyre one dark night and creeping inside to keep warm. Then, when next the musician struck a note, out tumbled the prettiest pair of harps the world had ever seen. We all laughed at it, even the women, for a while, but when he kept on with it, told him that enough was enough and sent him sulking back to his mead-cup.

It was a fine spring of the year on Lemnos. The new fathers only left their children long enough for the mothers to feed them, then off they went with the little bundles on their backs, up into the hills to laugh and boast and roll the babies on the lush new turf in play.

Men in Hellas pretend that their only love is war or the breaking-in of stallions. But on this little island away from other men we learned how to love babies, to tend them, to play with them unashamedly. Though often we made them sick, jolting them up and down on our backs until we were taught just how such things were done.

My own house was loud with the crying of two children, the other one named Thoas, because he was so nimble, even at such an early age. His mother, one of Hypsipyle's waiting-women, had died with some fever of the blood soon after his birth so that the queen felt it was her duty to bring up the child as the 'twin,' or companion, of our own Euneus.

I cannot tell you how happy we all were, playing at being fathers; when, late in the spring, a black-sailed boat came into harbour with the north wind.

Heracles met me as I strolled down towards the wharf, his face dark and screwed up. He had kept much to himself in the last months, and most of us thought that this was because he had not begot a child when the other sailors had. But I do not think that he cared one way or the other; Heracles had many children in his lifetime, in all parts of the world. One more or less did not matter to him; he was like the poppy that scatters its seeds carelessly into the wind, letting them fall where they will; ignoring them when they have rooted in the warm dark soil. In Hellas today there might be a thousand men

who claim him as their grandfather. So one child on Lemnos would mean nothing to Heracles.

I said to him, ‘What news, brother? Your face holds some tidings, I’ll warrant.’

He looked beyond me, his thick mouth pursed, and said gruffly, ‘*She* is back; Atalanta. She is in the black-sailed boat.’

I nodded, watching the boat turn about and tack into the wind towards Samothrace once more.

‘We expected she would return, sooner or later,’ I said. ‘That is often what happens when folk go in ships, Heracles.’

His great hands began to twist at the leather of his belt-thong as though they wished to burst it asunder. And he said, ‘You speak to me as you would to a child, brother. Sometimes I think that I might break your neck for that.’

I laughed lightly and moved a little to one side so that he got the sun in his eyes. Then I said, ‘Come now, Heracles, there is no reason to break my neck because the priestess returns to us, is there?’

I was watching his feet, getting ready to move as soon as their tendons tensed. But they did not. His hands fell limply to his sides and he said, ‘If she demands the sacrifice I have dreamed of, Diomedes, I shall tear the limbs from her body. That much I promise you. Do not say that you have not been warned.’

Then he walked past me and went towards the house where he lived with the boy, Hylas. He did not turn back once. As he mounted the limestone steps that led up to his house, I could see only his great broad back—no head. It was as though he had no head, only a hunched and massive back.

I turned about in time to greet Atalanta, who still wore the purple cloak of a priestess. But her face was gay, despite her solemn dress.

‘All is arranged, King Jason,’ she mocked me. ‘Now you can sleep—or whatever it is that you do at night—in peace!’

‘Who is to be the sacrifice, Atalanta? Who has been arranged for?’ I asked, losing something of my pride in asking.

She stooped and snatched up a small handful of pebbles from the path, then held them before me on her open palm.

‘Tell me, island king,’ she teased again, ‘among these stones, which is the prettiest, the most meet for the gods?’

I answered, ‘Don’t be a fool, girl. How can I choose among so many? How do I know the taste of the gods?’

With a little chuckle, she flung the pebbles over her shoulder and said, ‘So it is with men. Who knows the taste of the gods? That is your answer.’

She was about to walk past me but I took her by the arm until my fingers almost met in the soft flesh and said viciously, ‘On your answer may depend your life, woman.’

She turned on me eyes so wild and wide that I unclenched my grasp and stood away from her. True, a man may kill a woman if he is strong and brisk with the dirk, but it is something which follows him afterwards and waits behind his door at night, like spitting on an altar, or making water in a sacred well, an obscene thing.

She said to me, ‘My life will take care of itself, Jason. There are others than me to keep a watch upon it.’

Then she made a little mocking bow and went on her way upwards through the dust to the limestone steps towards the village.

I had no chance to speak with her again before the feasting, nor did I talk about this thing to any other—Heracles or Hypsipyle. It was locked within me and I carried the burden about day by day, secretly, a load on my heart.

But when the day of Dionysus did arrive, it was sunny and warm, and the rain flurries from the north had blown themselves out. The grass was a fresh green and the trees bent over kindly to give their shade.

We gathered, men and women, in a broad glade on the hill, a verdant place with a little pool, hemmed in on all sides by the pine woods, and thick-strewn with acanthus. The women said that this place had once been the mouth of a volcano, but had been filled in by Zeus so that Lemnos should have a meeting-place for all festivities.

The little pool, deep and as clear as crystal, was set about with steep and pointed rocks. Lilies floated on its unruffled surface, but it seemed as cold as ice to the eye. I said to Hypsipyle as we passed, on our way to our bench among the pines, ‘Though I am a son of Poseidon, I would not care to fall into that pool, my queen. A man would need to swim like a fish to get out of it alive.’

She did not seem to hear me and soon, seeing everyone drinking and singing and laughing, men and women already rolling on the green turf in fun, the thunder-cloud lifted from my heart and my eyes saw only gaiety.

‘Bring me the biggest cup of wine there is on this island!’ I shouted, proudly, boastfully, like a northern chief among his wagons and his cattlemen.

Atalanta herself brought the cup, a deep bronze vessel, exactly like those she had taken to Samothrace. But I thought nothing of this; nor did the woman at my side, Hypsipyle, make any comment. So I drank from it without another word, almost draining it at one draught, just to show them that I was a king and a stout drinker. I even stood while some of the older women draped flower garlands and vine-leaves about my head and shoulders, and then stripped off my tunic.

Beyond the little mound where our bench was set, some of my own folk, Castor, Ancaeus and Meleager, to name but three, were dancing with young women, not their own wives, their heads decorated with bull’s horns, and great stuffed leather phalluses bobbing about on their thighs as they jumped here and there. If they could dress up as priests, then I could bear to dress as a god, I thought. Though that thought brought with it an undertow of chill to my heart—but I shook it off and called for more wine. This I shared with Hypsipyle, seeing that half of it spilled down her bodice so that she had to strip it off to dry.

I do not know whether her look of anger was real or not; I was already in no mood to search beyond the surface of things. The women dressed as Maenads, in corn-coloured robes of rags, and wreathed in flowers of all sorts, were making circles about various men, then running at them, flinging them down, and rolling them about; all the time crying out like she-wolves, or vixens, or grunting sows. Yet somehow they did it all prettily, like women, and in game. They even had old Butes down, but let him go when he began to groan and complain of rheumatics.

Each time, one of the ‘priests’ pointed at a man, and off went the Maenads to bundle the chosen one about the grass and among the pine-needles. Ancaeus pointed at Acastus, and down he went, trying to fight for his pride, but overcome by the weight of the score of Maenads!

And always after they had had their rough fun with the chosen man, they went back to the trestle-table where the tall wine-jars stood and quenched their thirst, for the sun was now rising rapidly and standing almost above our heads.

Castor called out to me, in the middle of the afternoon, ‘Your turn soon, Jason!’ And I waved back at him, taking it all as a great jest.

Hypsipyle and I now had our couch moved into the shade, and stretched out together, our arms about each other. I could hear the shrill cry of girls in the uplands above us, among the trees, putting up a token resistance to the sailors who chased them. On this day there was a general interchange of partners. No man held it against his wife, or wife against her man, that this was so. A woman needed a change and the men were only too pleased to instruct the virgins.

But I stayed with my queen for she was all I desired. Though, this day, she seemed more moody, more distant, than she usually was in our palace above the harbour.

And once when I was loving her I suddenly became aware that she was looking beyond me, twining and untwining her fingers behind my neck, as though her mind was on other things. I whispered to her, ‘Dearest, what is there about this day that darkens your spirit? Tell me, what is to happen?’

But she still looked through me, as though I were a ghost and she could not hear my words.

It was then that Castor rose, unsteadily, from the mound of women among whom he had been lying and, shaking the hair from his eyes, pointed at me with his thick red finger.

‘There it is!’ he shouted, his speech blurred and tipsy. ‘There is what we came for! Up, Maenads, up!’

The flower-decked women set up a high screeching and came at me, in a half-circle, to surround me. Whereas they had been laughing before, their faces were set and strained now, and there was a look in their wide, blue-painted eyes that reminded me of the flat sheen of the agate. Eyes like obsidian, like dull glass.

My right hand instinctively felt for my dirk, but like all the others, I had left my weapons behind for the feasting; that was the rule, in case a man, made mad by wine, took it into his mind to stress his argument too vigorously.

I began to rise from the couch where I lay, but to my sudden horror felt that Hypsipyle’s arms were locked about me. I looked down at her face. It was calm now, smiling gently, inevitably, like that of a goddess again.

Then I heard myself giving her her other name, as though the spell were upon me, too.

‘Myrina, Myrina!’ I gasped, ‘let me go! Let me take my chance against this crowd. I ask only that!’

She opened her red lips and said, ‘Is Diomedes afraid to play the part of Dionysus, then? Is the Sea King a coward?’

I struck at her and felt my blows meet her soft flesh. The flesh that had suckled my son, Euneus. But still I struggled, until she could hold me no more, and so I broke away and turned to meet the women. But they were already on me, their dark mouths open, their fingers outstretched like cat’s claws.

I stepped half a pace back, then ducked. Some of them sprawled over me, thudding to the turf and gasping, then clutching at my legs. I brought up my knee a time or two and felt the soft impact of my blows. But they were all over me, the Maenads, heavy on my shoulders, dragging down on my arms, kicking my feet from under me, even pinching my nostrils tight so that I could not breathe.

I half-turned in the skirmish and saw that Hypsipyle was leaning on her elbow on the couch, smiling still, watching all these antics rather like an indulgent mother.

I heard a great silence about me as though the crowd had expected this. I glimpsed Atalanta once, her arms about Meleager, close to him, their eyes turned on me, mocking.

I tried to yell out, ‘Myrina! Bitch! Traitress!’

Then they had me down and were on top of me.

I swear that in all my battles, when the stallions neighed and rose above me, when the arrows hailed about me, when gaunt-faced men with javelins drove at me and the chariots thundered, I never once felt that lonely chill of the heart that I knew that late afternoon, as the Maenads tore at each other’s hair to be first at me.

Then, when I was about to yell out in terror, the whole dream changed. I heard merry laughter above me, I felt hands tickling me, pinching me, pulling gently at me, lips pressed to my body, caressing not biting, the fingers stroking not tearing.

A woman, whose name was Aglaia, laughed down into my face and tugged gently at my beard. ‘There, O King,’ she said, ‘now you will

understand a little of what it was like at the last feasting when our husbands left us!'

She gave another tug at the hair of my body, her breast across my face. I used my teeth on it, not hard, but hard enough, and it was her turn then to cry out!

And suddenly they had left me, like flies rising from carrion into the sun. I put on the best face I could, and lay there for a while, my heart thudding, as though I were dead.

All at once the crowd started shouting and cheering and the queen, Hypsipyle, rose and cried out in mock misery, 'Alas! Poor Dionysus is gone from us! Alas, Mother, we are left lonely again!'

Then, a little impatient perhaps, I rose and went to her. She raised her voice again and called, 'Dionysus has risen from the dead! The Mother be praised, the corn will grow once more!'

Something rose in my gorge and I was not myself for an instant. I took her by the hair and dragged her face so close to mine that our eyes looked deep into each other's. I did not care if I hurt her, my pride was so broken.

But there was no fear in her lovely oval honey-coloured face, no fear in her wide blue eyes. Only softness and gentle mockery.

She whispered back, 'Well played, Jason-Dionysus! Well played. We shall long remember on Lemnos how well the king defended himself against the women!'

Then, before I could reply, though my hands clenched in her hair must have been hurting her, she put her arms about me and drew me to her, pressing her lips upon mine to stifle my words. And so we stood, my fingers loosening in her thick hair gradually, until I was in her power again, her husband, her lover, the slave to her dear warmth.

It was at this point, when we seemed to melt into each other there on the mound, with the folk shouting about us, that a sudden clap of thunder banged us all into silence. The sky lowered, blue-black, leaden, over our heads, so low that it seemed to weigh us down.

And in that silence there rose the great roaring voice of Heracles, who had not come up the hill with us that morning. We turned to see him, clothed in a rough bear-pelt, its hairs all horrid, his club in his right hand, his left arm about the waist of slim Hylas, whose head was decked with vine-leaves and the buds of aconites.

‘Have done!’ Heracles yelled. ‘The sky is angry with you for this mockery!’

He was like some vengeful messenger of the gods at that moment, and even I stood appalled at his majesty. But not the Maenads. As soon as the giant had made his utterance, they gave a shrill scream and ran towards him. Hylas uttered a little cry and dragged away from the arm of Heracles.

Before the great man could raise his club, they were upon him, much as they had been upon me, but more fiercely this time, leaping up at him like hounds at a bear in the market-place of Athens.

The club fell from his grasp, and I saw his heavy hands go up to shield his eyes. Then he was down, Heracles was down, the great man was on the turf, kicking with his thick legs, but each one hampered by three women. His arms the same. And they sat upon his thick body like cormorants upon a rock. Not even Heracles could dislodge them now.

He was my twin, my brother in fortune and misfortune; I did not forget that. Indeed, I made a move to run to his aid, but my queen wrapped her long legs about me and shouted in my ear that it was all in game. That he would rise as whole as I had done. And after she had said this three times, I let myself lie back, let my hands unclench again.

I felt the wine-cup pushed against my lips once more, and drank deep, down to the gritty lees in the bottom of the cup. I turned my eyes away from the roaring madman who fought upon the red-bespattered turf with the Maenads. It would all end well, I thought. This was in game, a sop to the Mother of Samothrace. Nothing more.

But the edge of reality sliced like a keen razor through my contentment. While Heracles was down, pinned like a boar with ten javelins in him, helpless though straining, I heard Atalanta cry out, shrill, like a woman who feels the first thrust of man into her body, breaking its sanctity. A high, sharp cry, needle-pointed, with the regret of all virginity in it; the loss of all youth, all dreams of chastity. And in that cry also the fear of birth, of delivery, of wracking agony, of death.

I gazed upwards and saw her, apart from Meleager now, alone, once more the priestess, pointing towards the edge of the deep green pine woods.

Hylas came running, his garland of aconites askew, his thin face stretched like a stiff ivory mask with terror. His legs raced fruitlessly, like the leaden legs of a dream. Behind him came a cluster of young girls, not one of them older than he was, the Nymphs of Lemnos, the untouched

virgins, their ice melted now and turned to fiery vengeance for all that the world's men had ever done to womankind.

'Save me, Uncle, save me!' Hylas called.

They all laughed, for Uncle Heracles was pinned down by more women than even he could manage. We saw the white froth at his thick lips, like the scum on broth.

'Save me, Uncle, I beg!' screeched Hylas, running in circles like a hunted hare.

Heracles gave a great lurch and seemed to hurt the back of the woman who lay across his right arm. Her groans mingled with the cries of the boy. But Heracles, the strongest man in the world, could not rise in spite of this.

Then the young girls came in, like lithe hounds, edging the terror-stricken youth towards the pool. I saw their intention, suddenly, as though it had been revealed to me in a vision from the gods. I tried to rise from the couch to save him; but my wife, my queen, Hypsipyle, dragged me down and pressed herself against me.

'Be still, husband,' she gasped. 'Dionysus must meet the Mother today. It is decreed. If it is not Hylas, then it will be you.'

I was so shocked by her words that I fell back and made no more move to help the lad for the time being.

He screamed, but they laughed at his screams and put their many arms about his reed-like body. They even set his garlands upon his brow again before they skimmed with him across the sheep-nibbled turf towards the deep pool where the lilies floated.

Then we saw them raise him, steadily as he yelled, and heard the splash of his white body as it struck the cold waters. He was in the pool, shrieking and trying to grasp the slippery limestone rocks that surrounded it.

I rose to watch it all. Hylas came up, spluttering, much as I had done when I raced with Atalanta in the sea towards Icos. But he seemed to know that he was finished, a thing I have never known, being a born fighter.

A Nymph from the clan of Teumessian, the vixen, kicked down at his clutching fingers and sent him once more into the crystal depths.

We all moved forward to see this thing happen. It was fascinating. Often a Nymph would lean down and gently unlatch the lad's fingers from the

stone, so that he slowly sank again, bubbling at the lips. We marvelled at their skill, untaught as it must have been, for they were so young.

Then, as the agonies of Hylas became a sort of madness, the older girls put their legs over the rocks and trod him into the water so that he got little time to breathe at all, try as he might.

At last he floated under the water-lilies, still, his white backside upwards, his pretty face in the cold depths. His garlands floated sadly on the surface, lonely now.

Only then did we turn away, as the Nymphs wiped their eyes of the imaginary ritual tears and shrilled out, 'Poor Dionysus! He has left us! Will he ever come again, Mother?'

I swung round and was sick where I stood, upon the trodden turf, among the aconites. Hypsipyle whispered to me, 'There, my love, better him than you. He was a grown man. He was fifteen, at the least. At that age a man should know how to protect himself. I hope that our little Euneus will.'

I could have struck her again, for those words, but my force was gone after that horrible moment of the death of Hylas, he calling out for his uncle, for his mother, for his pet dog, and so on. It took the strength out of a man.

Indeed, I was hardly aware of what went on when Heracles was upon me, having shaken the women clear of him, some with arms hurt, some with legs, and some with their heads beaten on the rocks that broke through the green turf in the glade.

His mouth was a mess of sticky froth, like the slime or a snail. 'Call yourself shipmaster,' he shouted. 'Call yourself sun-king? Only a lie-a-bed with rotting queens. Only a shotten herring!'

Then he drew back his great right fist and punched me. The blow carried with it its own salve, a numbness in which I knew that some of my teeth had gone, and my lips were split. I felt the blood run into my beard, and I still smiled at him and held out my hands in friendship, for I was in my way deeply sorry that young Hylas had been drowned.

But he hit me again and I reeled round and felt the harsh turf against my bruised cheek. Then I knew that Heracles was kicking at my side, my heart, my middle.

And when the dreadful ecstasy of this punishment eased away, I found the strength to turn my head and to see that the Queen Hypsipyle and the priestess Atalanta were holding long bronze daggers into Heracles' side, so

that the sharp points already drew blood from him. The other women had run away and all the men, the sailors, stood frozen. They seemed to care neither one way nor the other. But their brown faces had gone white. I saw that Orpheus clutched his lyre as though afraid it would be taken from him. I wanted to call out and tell him that there were other things to fear that terrible day, but Hypsipyle dragged me up by the hair and hissed into my ear.

'He will kill you if you stay,' she mouthed. 'He has no knowledge of the ritual, this Heracles. Go, Jason, go. Sail your ship beyond the headland until we have settled with him. Then come back at nightfall. All will be well, my love, I promise you.'

I was astounded at her coolness. I did not know whether I loved or feared her most. Then Atalanta drew her dirk across Heracles' chest, leaving a thin red line behind it, and cried out to me, 'Go now, you fool! Or never call yourself the shipmaster again! Meleager will take your place, I swear, if you do not go and let us settle this affair.'

I do not know what I should have done at that moment—whether I should have gone willingly like a whipped cur, or whether I should have called my men to follow me and then have destroyed the women to save my twin, Heracles. But the question did not arise for Castor and Admetus ran forward and took me under the armpits, scurrying me down the slope in spite of my cries, towards the distant harbour.

The last thing I saw of that dreadful glade was Heracles standing, stark, the women on either side of him like bitches hunting a bear, the limp white fish-body of Hylas draped over his brown arms, dangling. . . . And the last thing I heard from him was that dreadful cry, 'Oh, Hylas, where have you gone? Where have they sent you, my dear?'

On the trodden sand of the wharf troupes of young girls were dancing and clapping their hands together, singing, 'Dionysus! Oh, sweet god, where have you gone? Where is he, my sisters, oh, where is he now?'

Their voices wailed but their mouths smiled. If I had had lightning to my hand, I would have burned them all, like the plains in a long summer, dried and dead and brown.

My men shoved me aboard and the ship staggered against the incoming breakers. Ancaeus took the helm; Meleager stood at the prow. Castor and his brother, Polydeuces, bent over me, waiting to knock me down if I tried to rise again. And all for my own good.

I did not try. I knew that they were my masters when it came to blows. So I lay still, my eyes closed, listening to the sea-mews, the gannets, the gulls—and wondering what life could have for me after this dreadful dream. . . . I do not know how long I slept.

But when the red sun fell from the sky, I looked about me and saw Atalanta. ‘Did you kill him, kill my twin?’ I asked.

She was lying beside Meleager, smiling, and said softly, ‘To kill a man into whose head the gods have come is a blasphemy. Your twin still roams across Lemnos, carrying his white trophy.’

I rose and called to Ancaeus, ‘Turn the helm, man. Let us go back and pick up Heracles.’

Strangely, I did not think of going to Hypsipyle, or to my little son, Euneus, of whom I had been so proud before. It was Heracles, whose other name was my own, Diomedes, that I thought of.

But Ancaeus looked beyond me, as though I had not spoken, and said, ‘This Jason thinks he swings the world on a string. He must learn that other men have their opinions, too.’

He was too good a navigator to rise and destroy at that moment. But I often wish I had broken through my dreams and gone to him as he stood by the steerboard and smashed my fist down on his head. I am sure that I had enough force to knock sense into him then.

Instead, I lay with my face on the hot oak boards and wept like a young girl who is bringing forth her first baby. And when that weeping stopped and the boards grew cold at sunset, we were standing out in the broad sea, beyond all chance of returning to Lemnos.

I whispered to Castor who still knelt above me, ‘Where are we bound for, Spartan?’

He patted my cheek, smiling, and said, ‘To Colchis, dear captain. Where else?’

I turned over on my side and wept again—for Heracles, for Hylas, for Hypsipyle, and for little Euneus, my first son. My own darling.

COLCHIS

Part Three

21

Towards the Rising Sun

As Spring grew into Summer, and Summer declined towards the reddening of leaves, my sadness became more bearable. I consoled myself secretly that on the way back from Colchis, one day, we would put in at Lemnos once more, either to stay, or to pick up my queen, my son, and poor Heracles, before going on to Iolcos.

I was feeling more than ever that I must be a king now, after my authority on Lemnos, and after the mutiny on *Argo* had died down at last. Hypsipyle had put something in me which had not been there before—kingly pride. True, I had known pride as a horseman, as a javelin-thrower, as a shipmaster; but the kingdom of a horse's back, or of a ship's deck, is small, very small. Now I knew what it was like to be the master of a whole island.

In my dreams, as I lay rocking on the deck at night, too hot to sleep under the awning, or in a hut on one of the other small islands we called at, sailing towards the Hellespont, to take on fresh water, or to kill fresh meat for ourselves, I always saw myself as a king again. Yet, strangely, it was never as the King of Iolcos. It was always some other place—often a great city built upon a hill, its acropolis shining white in the sun, the doves rising above it into the blue air, the red roofs clustering below, men and women moving thick about the broad streets, a hundred ships lying at anchor in a score of trimly-kept harbours. And riches—yes, rooms leading onto rooms, and all full of gold, of silver, of swords and delicate inlaid body-armour and helmets. Rooms into eternity.

Yet in this dream it was not Hypsipyle who sat beside me on the throne chair, but another—a smaller, darker, shadowy presence; a queen I did not know, who smelled of strange, musk-like spices, and spoke to me haltingly in a language I did not fully understand. I could never be sure whether she was my friend or my enemy, and always woke from these dreams in a sweat, for they usually ended with this shadow-queen bending over my bed as I slept, the great bulk of Heracles behind her, her fingers feeling for my throat while he smiled and whispered, 'Hylas! This for Hylas!'

I asked Orpheus about this dream—he was one of the few I dared confide in; I would never have thought of asking Atalanta, who, although she bowed to me before the men, always smiled at me mockingly, as though she were waiting for something to happen to me, when we met alone. Orpheus shook his head and said that he was not a dreamster but that it seemed to him the gods had strange adventures in store for me.

Not that we did not have adventures enough as it was—though never so many, nor so strange, as the bards have sung of in after-years. But I never saw anything magic in them. They were the sort of things that happen to all men who go questing strange lands.

For instance, we had to run the gauntlet of the King of Troy's galleys, before we could get into the Hellespont. Those galleys knew we were there, and even called out on speaking trumpets that they would tie us back to back and drown us, when they *did* catch us, for evading the toll that the proud King Laomedon had set on all Greek ships. But we only laughed in the darkness, and, hugging the Thracian coast, we rowed with muffled oars, sometimes passing a Trojan galley with no more than twenty paces between us. They flung resinous flares into the sea, but by luck never saw us, and we passed unharmed into the Sea of Marmora. Atalanta claimed to have engineered this by her prayers to Athene, and afterwards to Diana. We let her have the credit of it, but no one, except perhaps Meleager, really believed that her prayers had helped. If the credit goes to anyone, then it belongs to Lynceus the look-out man, and to Tiphys, who was at the helm when all this happened.

Once inside the straits, our luck seemed to change for a while; old King Cyzicus, who ruled on the peninsula of Arcton, welcomed us warmly, because his dead father had known Heracles; and, to tell the truth, we were able to do this king a service in return. His settlement was always being raided by shaggy-haired Phrygians, barbarians who still wore bearskins and painted their faces with woad. My shipmen were brisk enough to ambush and kill off nearly a score of these ruffians, and to make their chief beg for peace. Later, poets and even painters made much of this, declaring that the Phrygians were the brothers of Dia, each having no less than six arms! I can tell you, if that had been true, we should not have stayed to ambush them!

A sad thing happened just after this event, all the same. We had dedicated our anchor-stone to Athene and had set course again, but a sudden autumn storm drove us back, to seek shelter once more on the peninsula of Arcton. As we landed at twilight, armed men came out of the bushes and set about us with axes and long iron swords. We did not wait to ask who they

were, but formed a shield-ring and laid about us with a good heart. When their leader was down, our enemies retired. It was only at dawn that I discovered we had killed our host, old Cyzicus. That is what life is like, never straight and simple. You see, poor old fellow, he had not expected us to return so soon and thought we were a boatload of Thracian pirates. We held funeral games in his honour and gave him a good send-off, on a high wood pyre, with milk and honey and the blood of mares as libations. Poets have said that I even set up a shrine to Dia, or Myrina, or Demeter at this time—but that is a lie; Cyzicus was no man for the Mother. He was much like me in his views. I was deeply sorry to have killed him, and one can say that about few men these days.

Some weeks afterwards, when the storms had died down a little to let us go on, we killed another king, Amycus of the island of Bebrycos. But his death I did not regret for one second. He was a great loud-mouthed fellow, with red hair, his fat face covered with warts and scars, who prided himself on being the greatest fighter with his fists in all the world. He used iron-plated boxing-gloves and would not let us take food and water on board until one of us had met him in a fight. I would have loved to batter this tyrant, but I was not skilled at the sport, and so let Polydeuces the Spartan have his will and meet this Amycus.

It was not a long fight, although at the start King Amycus moved round briskly and with craft. But the moment he saw his chance the Spartan, who had been instructed by an old Cretan in the island-art, led with a left which flattened the king's nose; then, while he was staggering, half-blind with the punch, swung over a right which caught Amycus under the ear and broke his neck. We all heard the bone snap like a rotten twig, and he fell, a pole-axed bull, as though the ground had opened up beneath his feet to let him drop into a hole.

After that we got the food and water we asked without further objection. We even sacked the royal palace on the hill above the harbour, and, just in case Amycus had been—as he claimed—the son of Poseidon, we drove a herd of twenty red bulls into the sea as a peace-offering. I hated to see the terrified creatures floundering and bellowing in the salt water, but we had the future safety of our voyage to consider.

Argo was loaded to the gunwales with spoil when we did leave that place, but I am not certain that we did right in sacking the palace as we had, leaving hardly one stone standing upon another. Yet I confess that we were carried away by Polydeuces victory—and were a little angry because certain sons of Amycus had tried to incite the crowds to butcher us after the fight.

Anyway, it was not long before we ran into the late autumn rains and had to put ashore at Salmydessus in Eastern Thrace. The blind king there, Phineus, treated us well. He was a timid old man, of perhaps fifty years of age, bent like a hoop, and beardless. His grizzled hair had gone from his forehead, but what there was of it hung down his back, in strands or elf-locks after the Cretan manner. From his accent and the bull-seals which jangled about his scrawny neck I judged him to be a Minoan—though I would not have mentioned this in his presence, for since the Dorians had overrun Crete and had dragged down the great palace there, the House of the Axe, few men cared to claim descent from Minos. That is as may be—I have never, in my later years, minded being called a Cretan myself—because of my mother's intercourse with the Minoan slave.

But King Phineus seemed sensitive about his origins and told us, when we sat at a meal with him, that he was the son of Agenor the Manly, whose grandfather had been Zeus himself. He spoke airily of his Achaean cousins, who were foraging here and there across the world, but this deceived none of my men. He claimed in his wine-cups to have been blinded by the Mother for forecasting the future too accurately; but Atalanta, who had skill in medicines, told me privately that his eye-afflictions were due to the cold winds and the dust which were brought to Salmydessus across the northern plains. She said that if she chose she could put salves on his red and sticky eyelids and on his bloodshot eyes so that he would, in time, see again.

When I asked her to do him this service, she laughed and refused. 'If his affliction keeps him in fear of the Mother,' she said, 'then we will let him stay as he is. These days she needs as many followers as she can get—with rebels like you going about the place, swearing by Poseidon and Zeus all the time!'

So poor Phineus kept his blindness and his fear of the Mother. But one thing I did relieve him of—his sightless terror of the winged Harpies. These, Phineus claimed, were great bird-like she-monsters, who swept out of the empty air and carried all with them. He would not be persuaded otherwise, for he said he had heard them clearly enough and, moreover, the priestesses had described them to him, telling him that these Harpies were the messengers of the Mother and would follow him and drop their ordure upon his food to the day he died.

But two of my fellows, Calais and Zetes, kept watch with me and soon found out what these Harpies were! Some of them were such so-called sacred birds as kites or sea-eagles, for which the priestesses laid out food regularly to attract them into the palace courtyard; others were simply

migratory birds, like kestrels, harriers, ducks and waders, calling wherever there was food to be had on their long flight in the autumn of the year.

Calais and Zetes kept watch, as I say, and lit fires and set up scarecrows. In three days the birds began to avoid the palace and old Phineus was overjoyed. No doubt the birds came back again after we left, but at least we had given the blind king a little space of peace while we rested at his court. And for this he was indeed grateful; he added to our treasure and gave Ancaeus expert instructions about the navigation of the waters that lay ahead. In fact he knew all there was to know of weather, friendly and hostile tribes, tides and vegetation between his own kingdom and Colchis. There was only one thing he said that was perhaps useless to us.

'When you reach Colchis,' he said in his old ram's wheezy voice, 'put all your faith in Aphrodite! Pray to her and not to Poseidon, I beg you.'

I do not know whether this was because he was, in truth, a devotee of the Goddess, the Sea Mother, or whether his wife, Yaga-Mash, much younger than he, influenced him.

She was his second wife, and not the sort of woman I would have trusted. Short and squat, with coarse black hair, a yellow face, and slanting dark eyes, she was not the type I admired. Yaga-Mash was the first Scythian I ever met and had, indeed, come from Colchis herself, as a slave, when she was ten years old. I learned that when she was only a young girl a party of Thracians had raped her twenty times in the public square at Abdera, while the rough-haired peasants had looked on and cheered each time. This she had never forgotten or forgiven. The child which had come from this brutal union she flung into a furnace and thereupon swore an oath to drag down all the kings of Thrace. The priestesses of the Mother were not slow to take advantage of such a convert, and trained her first as a dancer and then, when she had won the heart of Phineus, had taught her other tricks which would keep the senile king in constant terror of the Mother.

Yaga-Mash had assumed the Hellenic name of Idaea, the Wooded Mountain, after Mount Ida, and that I resented. She was of a foreign race and had no right to take such a name. Besides, she claimed to be a princess of Scythia. Later, I asked about her when I travelled in Colchis and no one had ever heard of her family.

But most of all I disliked her unrelenting cruelty. I realize that her experience in the market-place of Abdera could not have been pleasant—though such as Atalanta would not have objected, I am sure—but that was no reason for Yaga-Mash to treat old Phineus as she did. After all, in my

young days, few girls reached the age of thirteen without being raped. Hellenic girls made little of such a thing and could always account for their baby by saying that Poseidon, or Zeus, or ancient Cronos, even, had visited them in their dreams. We all knew what it was like and thought none the worse of them. If a man waited to marry until he could find a virgin in Hellas he would wait for ever. And in our view, when I was a young man, the girl who had gained a little experience was all the easier to deal with. But there you are, women invent all sorts of reasons for what they do; they are not like men, who are thinkers, reasoners, creatures of knowledge.

Old Phineus had actually married an Egyptian when he was a young man of fifteen or so, a noblewoman called Cleopatra. My men, Calais and Zetes, who scared the birds away, claimed some sort of kinship with this Cleopatra, the Glory of the Father, which is why they agreed to help Phineus in the first place.

I do not know what to make of it all, though. In the dungeon below the palace at Salmydessus were two young men who had been there for ten years and who claimed to be Cleopatra's sons. Each day the Scythian guard brought to the place by Yaga-Mash used to flog these youths until their backs were a festering mass of sores. Their hair had fallen out and their finger-nails had grown like a boar's tusks until they pierced the palms of their hands. They were kept always in the dark so that their eyes looked the colour of a fish's belly.

Now these two youths, who had forgotten their own names, claimed to be Egyptians, and swore on the most binding oaths that they were the nephews of Calais and Zetes. They said that they had been imprisoned by Yaga-Mash on a trumped-up charge of enjoying each other.

Calais and Zetes, who didn't care one way or the other, released these two—whereupon they went mad and had to be put into another cell, but this time above ground. Zetes also threatened Yaga-Mash in secret one night that if he found her at Salmydessus when we returned, he would nail her to the city gates and disembowel her with a wooden stake. He was a fierce-looking fellow, with great bushy eyebrows, and I think that he may have reminded her of those Thracians again because one day, a week before we set sail from the kingdom, she had packed up all her clothes and ornaments and had gone, on swift camels, towards the north.

Phineus seemed greatly relieved at this and promised us good entertainment when we came back from Colchis. But, there again, I am not

sure that Yaga-Mash ever went far from him. I think she came back as a priestess and continued to frighten the old fellow until he died.

However that may have been, we had other things to think of, and as soon as the weather cleared we set course again.

22

The Clashers

AUTUMN became Winter as our prow pushed onward through the inland sea, the waters ever seeming to thicken, to darken, as we went. Our olive tally-stick became notched from end to end. It was as though we would never reach the place we journeyed to find.

The cold was bitter now, and the land, which we always had in view on our steerboard side, became bare and treeless. At night we slept on shore and foraged where we could, sometimes catching no more than a brace of hares or a few pheasant. Sometimes, at dusk, distant camel trains with their bells tinkling on the cold wind passed us by, but the men who went with them never dared approach our fires, and so we met no one. We felt that the world ignored us, as though we were unclean.

Old Butes, who now had no bees to tend and who, like all old men, dreamed in his idleness, came to me as I leaned on the oak prow one afternoon.

'Captain Jason,' he said, looking over his shoulder to see whether anyone was listening to him, 'I am troubled in my mind.'

It was always my custom to let any man of my crew speak freely to me at all times and so I put my hands on his thin shoulders and said, 'Say on, old fellow. Perhaps I can intercede with the gods for you and rid you of your troubles, as we rid blind Phineus of his Harpies!'

Butes shook his head. 'My trouble concerns us all,' he answered. 'It is a dream I have each night, a dream so real that this oak staff I hold in my hand is less real than my dream.'

I took his stick and fingered it. 'This seems solid enough to me,' I replied. 'Your dream must be of some consequence.'

He snatched the staff back a little hastily as though he was cross with my mockery. 'Know, Jason,' he said sharply, 'that we have a great trial before us, one that may well cost us our ship and our lives. I dare say no more, for

the gods may have given me a secret vision which must not be shared; I do not know. The ways of the gods are not easily interpreted.'

I laughed at him and said, 'Did you seem to see two rocks floating in the waters, waiting to crush us?'

He almost fell and nodded his bald old head so violently that the drip on the end of his sharp red nose fell off.

'By Zeus,' he said, 'so you have this dream also?'

I shook my head and smiled. 'No, old man,' I told him. 'But before we left his palace blind Phineus warned me that all ships must keep an eye open for the Clashers when they have reached these waters. Why else do you think I stand always here at the prow, watching, when I might be under the Captain's awning, warming my hands by the brazier?'

He bowed and went away to his cubby-hole, which we all called the 'beehive,' as a taunt to him. He did not row like the other men, being too old and weak in the back.

Three mornings later, we broke through a thick grey mist that lay on the surface of the sea like a wall of smoke. And before us, with the white sea-birds crying above them, were the Clashers; two gigantic pyramids of ice, half blue, half grey, and rearing up so high that the *Argo* seemed like one of those ivory toy-boats that Cretans still carve for their sons in memory of their once-great sea-kingdom.

The men stopped rowing and began to back-water with their broad-bladed oars. For a while there was complete silence as they turned and saw what lay before them. Then the babble broke out, and Atalanta clutched her throat as though she suddenly feared to die, to lose her young life, her hungry body, and to sink in the cold waters for the fishes to eat.

I could not help taunting her. 'Well, sister,' I called out, 'now tell me, does this sea belong to Poseidon or to Aphrodite? If the first, then I shall do what I can to save us. If the second, then I hand over my duties to you. Then you shall make the plans.'

The wretch fell on her numbed knees and held out her hands to me, crying, 'This stretch belongs to Poseidon, Captain,' she said. 'There can be no doubt of it, for those great rocks are in the shape of what a man has, not what a woman has.'

We all laughed then because it was pleasant to see this proud woman on her knees, begging; and also we liked the sad little joke she made, in spite of

her terror.

I bowed as if accepting my authority from her, though in all truth I must have felt as troubled in my mind as she did, for I had never seen such mountainous blocks of ice before, having come from the warm seas. But it is not a captain's part to show his fears to his crew, so I put on a good face and called out to the men to get up a little more speed.

I had noticed that these two ice-floes swung against each other, rubbing their sides with a great crunching and then swinging apart with some undertow of the tides.

I would have rowed round them, but now I saw that there were others coming southwards, in line, like horsemen entering a city. To go round the Clashers would be to meet the oncoming floes in any case. So I made the men pull *Argo* closer and closer, until at last we lay in the dark icy shadow, right underneath their terrible majesty.

They were very beautiful in their way and must have come a long distance—perhaps as far as we had come—breaking off from the far northern ice-land and floating with the current towards the southern shores. Sea-birds nested on them and Acastus even thought he saw a wolf prowling on a ledge, two masts high, on one or them, as though it had been cut adrift when this floe broke away.

We heard the crunching of ice on ice, a horrible, tearing sound. Pieces fell into the leaden waters with a great splash, drenching us; we were so near.

Three times I watched these two masses rub together and then swing away again, perhaps a ship's width, to loll on the slow tide once more, waiting for the next encounter.

Old Butes cried out, 'The gods guide us, Jason! Have a care! They wait to trap us.'

Castor shouted to him, 'What, old sheep, are you afraid to go into the waters and feed the fishes then? Why, your scraggy old bones would hardly serve as a snack for some of the brisk young fellows whose fins I have seen in the last few days!'

This made us all laugh, and while they were in this frightened merry mood I watched the movement of the ice-floes and then, suddenly, beat my mallet hard on the prow and bawled out, 'Right! Row now for your very lives!'

Ancaeus gripped the steerboard helm as though it had been a bucking stallion, to keep the nose of *Argo* straight. The men rowed so hard that I feared their oars would snap.

As we flew nearer, I felt the ship shudder when our keel crunched on some underlying ledge of ice, below the water. It halted us a little but the men pulled like maniacs after this.

Then we were almost in darkness. It was like going down a narrow street between two high houses where the light never reaches and the sun's heat cannot penetrate. There was no room to row now and we had to ship the oars speedily. I leaned over the side and let my hand run along the ice as we went on with the dying impetus of our last strokes. The walls were deathly cold and as rough as granite. Now they were not grey, but almost black or dark green, in places; as though they were covered with lichen. Great stones were embedded in them, and Lynceus even shouted out that high up at mast-head level where he sat in his crow's nest, there was the remains of a man lying, enclosed in this ice and wearing a gold belt about his jerkin.

'Such a man as I have never seen,' he explained. 'He has no beard, no nose to speak of, and only slits in the flesh for eyes.'

To tell truth, I feared that we would never get between the Clashers, for our speed had died off almost completely now. It seemed that we must be crushed, for we had two ship's lengths to go before the clear sea opened out before us again. That being so, I was about to suggest we all abandon *Argo* and scramble up the sheer ice-faces to look at this man, and perhaps to dig him out and take his gold belt. If we were to die, then what matter if we had a bit of sport first?

But just then Ancaeus took over and yelled out, 'Let each man push on the ice-walls with his oars!'

As they began to do this feverishly, I gave up my notion of leaving the ship and, instead, more to busy my mind than anything else, let loose a white dove from the basket, as an offering to the Mother.

I don't know whether the trick worked or not—you can never prove these things, the prayers of word or deed—but certainly *Argo* seemed to bound along and we were almost out of that grim and silent tunnel when the two floes ground together once more. Tiphys, who had taken over the steering after Ancaeus gave the orders to use the oars, yelled out that the rudder would be crushed, and certainly there was some rending of timber.

But we stayed afloat, curvetting like a young horse, and so came clear of the ice.

Atalanta was stretched out on the after-deck, her face to the planks, weeping and beating her hands on the wood. She was like a little child, so terrified that she could hardly speak. I went back to her and shook her by the shoulder.

‘There, girl,’ I said, ‘be brave! Even Hylas didn’t make a scene like this when they put him in the water, did he?’

She looked up at me, her eyes bleared and swollen with crying. Then she smiled and it was impossible to believe that she was a priestess; she was no more than a frightened young woman who feared to be hurt, to have her lovely body crushed and cast into the blackness of the deep and silent waters.

I gave her a smack on the backside to cheer her up and then went down among the men. It was bitterly cold but they were all sweating, tearing off their skin hoods and wiping their brows and chests.

Admetus grinned and said, ‘Never again, Jason! They can keep their gold in Colchis for all I care! I am for a soft bed before the fire from now on, and anyone can voyage in these seas who cares!’

We all laughed, and I broached a new cask of barley-beer to celebrate. Some of us mulled it over the braziers and we made merry until dusk. It was not every day that one tricked the Clashers.

Atalanta came to me and said, ‘Shall you not make a prayer of thanksgiving to the Mother, Captain?’

I was sitting on my pallet under the awning, half-drunk. I reached up and pulled her down beside me. She did not protest. ‘My prayer shall be one without words, and made to her priestess,’ I said. Meleager saw all this and looked away, whistling, as though he was too relieved at his own safety to object to what I was about. Men do such things when they have been badly frightened.

And so as night fell we steered towards an island that suddenly came up out of the sea-mist. Along the shore-line burned bright red fires and we made for these.

My men wanted to go ashore armed but I would not let them. ‘Look, fellows,’ I said, ‘we have just come through a great danger. It is beyond reason to think that the gods would save us from the ice-mountains, only to

let us be slain by mere men. Leave your swords under the floor-boards where they are, and jump ashore like good peaceful fellows.'

I led the way, dragging Atalanta with me in case the services of a priestess were necessary. She was wearing all her trumpery, the purple breast-plate, the black shawl, the bronze snakes about her arms. She gave a great shudder as we waded, waist-deep, through the waters. 'A drop of cold water will do you no harm, pretty,' I said to her; but she had put on that goddess-mask and so I said no more, and let her walk alone when we had gained the beach.

A man carrying a resinous torch was waiting to meet us. He was very small and his eyes set so close together that he looked cross-eyed. His face was pale, his hair and beard black. But he was of no Scythian breed; his nose was too hooked, his brows too narrow. He looked much as I had always been told the distant Hyperboreans from the farthest north appeared. He was wearing skins, from head to toe, but even that did not make him more than the size of a boy. And soon I found that all his folk, men and women, were like him in size and looks.

I called out, 'We come in peace from our ship, the *Argo*. May we rest the night beside your fires?'

He smiled and said, 'Who shall prevent such big men as you are? Come, Jason, and welcome, but I beg you, leave our women alone; we have no wish to mingle our blood with any other men.'

We all laughed at this for, in truth, none of us would have wished to interfere with these folk. As they gathered round us, they reminded us more of bears than of human men and women.

What surprised me was the man's speech; it was understandable, but spoken back in the throat, in a series of grunts. A sort of Greek, but mingled with something else, I know not what.

'How do you know my name?' I asked as we sat at meat beside the fires.

The man said, 'Why should we not? The horse-herders have been watching you, following you, since you came into the great sea. They can ride faster than you can sail, my friend. One of them came to our island only yesterday to collect the spearheads we make for them, and he told us of you and of the *Argo*.'

So the mystery was explained. But now came another problem—suppose these horse-herders went on riding east until they reached Colchis and gave warning of our approach, days before we got there? It might well be that we

would be met by a fleet or an army and slain before ever we set eyes on that precious golden fleece.

While I was thinking all this, the man who had first greeted us, the headman, Machaon, was telling all who would listen that he and his folk worked in iron at the many forges that lay along the shore. He showed us swords and javelins that were far better than anything we carried; longer, sharper, more delicate and light, most of them having handles of whalebone.

Great was the bargaining that night and as my men became more tipsy with the mead which Machaon had set before them, so the islanders of Ay-mari, as the place was called, became bolder and bolder in their demands. At first I thought that we would all be cheated out of our lives. . . . Then suddenly I saw that the iron-workers were getting as drunk as my Hellenes. . . . But the balance swung; as one group got drunker, the other became more sober. And so before we stretched out by the great fires all was even and my men got their new weapons at a bargain-price!

The islanders of Ay-mari were a kindly simple lot, and woke us next morning by playing music to us on a sort of harp and on a strange hoarse flute, the wind for which was provided by a goatskin bag held under the arm and squeezed. It made a weird music, half between a groan and a snarl—but there was something appealing about it, especially after it had been going on for an hour or so. It seemed to come inside the head and stay, as though it had always been there. Orpheus was delighted with these bagpipes and bought one of them, instead of swords and lances. It was he who introduced them into Hellas, and from there, I believe, they spread farther and farther west until all the world had them. But I want to put it on record here that we found them, and no one else. They came from Ay-mari, and their pipe-master was Machaon, whose name was pronounced, in their curious dialect, something like ‘Mac Harn.’

We left, the next day, anxious now to get to Colchis without delay. Atalanta had a stone raised to the Mother on the highest part of the island. Machaon was very agreeable to this, for all his folk were Mother-worshippers and he only held his place as headman, he told us, because he had taken his daughter as his wife after his first wife died. All succession passed through the women on that island and though it had once been the custom to kill the king or headman at the end of each year, now they allowed him to live as long as the queen wished. This, said Machaon with a dark smile, was very convenient, because his daughter thought so highly of him—since he had always been kind to her when she was little—that he would never die, that is, not until the Mother called him at last, as she did all men.

They were a pleasant enough folk and claimed that their grandfathers had come up from Egypt, and that one day, in the far future, they would all go back there again with their iron swords to rule that place. I do not know whether they ever did; they seemed very small to be warriors. But then, a man with a long iron sword does not need to be very big, if his opponent has only a short bronze one. Bronze is well enough and will carry a pretty polish—but the edge blunts quickly and the blade bends. Perhaps these men did go to Egypt; or perhaps they went somewhere else. That was not my concern. My problem was to load the ship with food and water, and to set course before the horse-herders on the shore carried news of our approach to Colchis. This we tried to do.

23

Trophies

DURING the days that followed, the riders never left us. Hunched on their small horses, legs dangling, sometimes sitting on high piles of sheepskin with bundles or cooking-pots rattling behind them on the horses' rumps, they moved along the shore, never seeming to pay any heed to us, but always there. They wore thick skin jackets and high hats of sheepskin, made in the shape of rough cones; all carried long lances and short bent bows across their backs.

There must have been two hundred of them, all told, strung for a mile or more along the southern land. At night their camp-fires glowed through the blackness and we envied them the warmth as we crouched on shipboard under the awnings, afraid to put ashore ourselves now, but dropping Athene's anchor-stone each night just out of reach of their bows, we thought. Luckily we had loaded enough food and water on the island of Aymari not to need to land. All the same, *Argo* came to seem a very small ship, and our lives circumscribed like those of prisoners. Quarrels began to break out among us over the silliest trifles because we were penned up together.

For example, Ancaeus and Tiphys almost brained each other before I could stop them, arguing about which star one should steer by to reach the Pillars of Heracles—as though anyone cared! And even old Butes got Phanus by the throat and tried to strangle him when the Cretan said his taste was for rough wine and not for honey-mead made by the bees. In that case no intervention of mine was needed, because, though small, Phanus was as strong as a wolf and soon had the old man over his knee, pretending to smack his backside for being such a fool. But it was there, this unrest, all the same.

Then at dawn one day Polydeuces came to me as I lay under my tent in the after part of the ship and woke me roughly. 'Look, master,' he whispered, 'I found this sticking in our mast.'

It was an arrow, short and thick, very strong. Its point was of hard iron, filed like a razor-edge.

‘It was on the side which faces the shore,’ he said, his broad face grave. ‘One of *them* must have shot it, as a warning.’

I said, ‘A warning of what? They cannot touch us, they have no boats. They cannot swim their little horses out to sea to where we are.’

But secretly in my heart I also was troubled like the Spartan boxer. If their bows could reach us, then they were very strong weapons—and the archers who aimed with them were no fools. . . . Suppose they let fall a shower of such arrows while we all lay asleep? It crossed my mind that I would hate to wake into a screaming dawn, to find myself pinned to my couch! The barbs of those arrows were very broad and cruel; no man could disengage himself once he had been struck. I began to think of a shipload of men, all pinned to deck or rowing-bench, all dying slowly, powerless to help each other. . . . It was not a pleasant thought.

But I swept it aside, as a leader should, and forced a smile which I did not feel—though good enough to trick simple Polydeuces, who was better in the boxing-ring than out of it when it came to using his brains.

‘Thank you for bringing this, friend,’ I said. ‘But we shall find a way. I have a plan already.’

To tell the truth, I knew of no way to scare off these haunting riders; nor had I a plan. I was as frightened and bewildered as anyone else in my company. But Polydeuces went away grinning and left the arrow with me, having promised to tell no one about it for the time being; not even his brother Castor, from whom he usually kept no secrets.

As for me, from then on I anchored *Argo* another fifty paces offshore each night. Though I got into the habit, thenceforward, of making a dawn-patrol the length of the ship, in case there were other arrows. I found one, stuck in the deck exactly between Atalanta and Admetus, with whom she had been lying for the past few nights. As I drew the barb from the oak planks, she stirred in her tumbled sleep and murmured, ‘Yes, my love, if you wish. Yes, a hundred times.’ Then she sank back into a deep slumber once more. Sleeping or waking, there was but one thing in her life, poor devil. No wonder women seldom make good soldiers! They haven’t the singleness of mind for the trade. Oh yes, I know, many of them can become expert with the javelin and even the dirk, and they love dressing up in armour, if it is pretty and the helmet does not disarrange their hair. But very few—yes, very very few—have ever gained fame as warriors, in spite of their patroness Pallas Athene’s military feats. Hippolyte the cavalry-leader was perhaps the only one fit to rank beside a man—and look what happened to her—she

gave herself up to that young idiot from Troezen, Theseus, they called him, nothing but a common bull-dancer, and spent the rest of her days suckling his brats. A woman like that deserved something better—a shipmaster or a leader of the hosts. No, women are not reliable, not even the best of them. And in war it is the first essential that a warrior should be reliable, whatever else he is not.

I'll say that for my crew on the *Argo*, they were reliable; whatever land they came from, whatever the gods they prayed to, the colour of their eyes and hair, and so on. I could now trust them all—even Meleager, who at one time had looked troublesome.

In fact, it was Meleager and his boon-companion Acastus, son of Pelias and Prince of Iolcos, who took the next move in our adventure and brought about some good by taking it. I will tell you how it happened.

One night just before dusk when we were considering where to anchor, there was a high shouting from the shore. The voice of a single man, raised on the wind and yelling out in a language I did not know.

Lynceus, the look-out man in the crow's nest, called down that one of the riders had got stuck in the oozy salt-marshes that lined the shore now, and was waving to us. It seemed that his horse was sinking gradually and the man, though putting on a jocular voice and pretending not to be concerned, was deadly afraid.

Meleager heard this and came to me, his thin face twisted in a smile. I think he was secretly at war with all men because Atalanta had taken up so frequently with Admetus.

'Jason,' he said—for by now most men had got into the habit of using my nickname and ignoring my first and princely one—'Jason, I have a taste for taking a swim. Acastus would like to go with me. Have we your permission?'

As he spoke, he nodded his head towards the shore like a Spartan. I liked that in him—and, of course, I knew that he was a fish in the water; after all, I had once competed with him, off Icos!

I turned away and said, 'A swim would be refreshing. But who can breast the waters dressed in a bear's hide?'

He smiled and clapped me on the shoulder. 'That is soon remedied,' he said quietly.

He and Acastus stripped to the skin and slipped overboard almost before anyone noticed it. The water must have been freezing cold, but the swimmers did not show it. They swam under the surface for a good period before coming up to breathe. I admired that, for I would not have dared to do it, not knowing what cold sea-beasts lurked about these shores, waiting to take a man by the neck or the leg.

And at last in the dusk I lost sight of them. I went back to my awning and occupied myself by building up charcoal on the brazier, for it looked like a cold night again.

When the two climbed back over the ship's side, instead of bringing a hostage as I had expected, they carried only small things—a bow, a hat, a head.

Acastus said airily as he rubbed himself dry, 'In the water a man can bring only portable things. It would need Heracles to bear a man on his shoulder through the brine—and Heracles has left us now.' I think he was trying to taunt me, knowing that I missed my twin.

I came near to striking him across the face, although he was a king's son and my cousin. 'You do not need to tell me,' I answered angrily.

Then I calmed down and looked at what they brought. The head was still smiling, or weeping, I do not know which, because it was a foreign head, not the head of a Hellene, whose expressions I know. This was flat-faced and yellow, though the blood had drained from it by now. The eyelids were slanting, and the eyes, when I opened their cold shutters and looked within, were dark brown, almost black. The lips were thick and the big teeth yellow. The coarse black hair was heavily braided with silver thread and wound round into a bun on the top of the skull. From the gold ear-rings, this must have been a king or a prince. I had thought it might be a Scythian prince, for it somehow resembled the face of that Yaga-Mash, who miscalled herself Idaea—but the nose was too hooked and prominent. Perhaps this man had been the son of a Scythian and a Hellene; I do not know. Such mixtures were common in the eastern lands.

What I did know, however, was that his high sheepskin hat was worth a fortune, for it was everywhere decorated with beads of gold and silver, and the edge of it was trimmed with alternating pieces of amber and of jet. To get such a hat, a man must have sent from Colchis, or Egypt even, to the farthest north, where amber and jet are as common as the blue clay which we moulded for our bead-necklaces. This hat was like a king's crown, and

much more valuable than most of the bronze or iron crowns which I had seen on the brows of village tyrants in Hellas, among the rough Dorians.

But it was the bow which appealed most to me. I had never beheld another like it—though later I was to see many, in Colchis and on the plains about that city. It was very short, and always bent, as curved as Diana's moon-sickle. At first I thought it was of some wood which did not grow in Thessaly—but, as I examined it, I found that it was made of layer upon thin layer of horn, the horn of bulls, it seemed; but each layer bound to the next with thin silver wire, and the whole thing so highly and smoothly polished that the joints were nearly invisible.

I pulled on the string, which was of twisted gut and hair—human hair, I think—and, although it was soggy with the water, it needed all my force to bend that bow. And when I let the string go, it made a twang that put the harp of Orpheus to shame!

Castor heard this and said, 'A bow like that would drive a shaft through a fat man and come out at the far side, Jason.'

I nodded. 'It makes me wish I were a bowman and not a javelin-thrower,' I said, smiling.

But I did not mean this, for a javelin-man is considered of the highest rank in an army. He is usually a fine swordsman, too, which sets him above mere archers, who shoot their arrows and then run away.

All the same, I put the three trophies in my sea-box, under my bench below the striped awning, and promised Meleager and Acastus that they should be rewarded in due course. They laughed back at me and said, 'We ask no reward, Jason. We are not common sailors. Getting these things was a pleasure to us, an evening's entertainment.'

It was as though they had rehearsed their reply, for they spoke together. Then they left me and took it in turns to be warmed and comforted by the priestess, who had been waiting at the edge of the crowd anxiously all the while I was examining and displaying the trophies. Atalanta always admired a brave man, she was never tired of telling us; and here were two truly brave men.

This incident had a strange result, one which I had not expected. The following dawn, I was awakened by great yellings from the shore and looked overboard to see a whole host of riders gathered at the water's edge, hatless, weaponless, and holding out their hands as in an act of pleading.

The foremost one of them, seeing me awake, a bent old fellow in a black gown, stumbled his way through a sentence or two of Greek—the sort of Greek that black Libyan villagers speak, having learned a smattering from the traders.

‘Great one,’ he called, ‘my son’s head is lost from its body. The body begs for its head so that it can lie at peace in the ground, complete. Ask not I for bow or anything else—but only head, I plead with you. That head shall buy you peace also, a weeping father says so.’

I smiled back at him in contempt; but I have never been one to neglect an opportunity. So, when I had unbraided the precious metal from the coarse black hair, and cut off a lock of that hair as a charm, I flung it into the water and saw it bob along slowly on the shoreward tide. I was surprised it did not sink, it was so heavy.

Half the horsemen ran neck-deep into the icy sea to gain the head and the old man fell on his knees in the swamp and seemed to call down blessings upon me.

When the men brought it to him, he clutched it to his chest as a little girl holds a precious doll, stroking it and fondling it. I felt quite disgusted. But savages do not behave like the men of Hellas.

I watched them go further up the shore and shoot a flight of arrows high into the air above them, as though in a final token of farewell. The shafts went up as thick and black as a swarm of bees: I could hear their buzzing, too.

Then they mounted their shaggy ponies and we did not see them again. It was a good bargain.

After that we camped on shore whenever we wished and the final stage of the voyage to Colchis would have been a pleasure, had it not been for the great cold and the snow-laden winds that blew down on us from the far north.

24

The City

FOUR days after the chief had got his son's head back, and when we could tolerate the bitter winds no longer, a great calm fell on the sea. Then a thick, almost blue fog came down and lay heavily on the slow waters.

Towards dusk one day Lynceus called down softly that a galley was approaching, and we lay to beside the salt-marsh, our oars shipped, no man even whispering or coughing.

This vessel came from the direction of Colchis and stood high out of the water. When Argus saw it, he made a wry face and shrugged his shoulders, for it was something magnificent. It made our *Argo* look far smaller than we had thought it was. It was richer, too, for the curling prow was thick with gold, and so was the mast-head. Purple awnings draped it from end to end, their silver tassels blowing back in the slight breeze.

We could hear men talking and laughing aboard, as though they were well-fed and rich and happy. The oarmaster's mallet came down slowly, lazily, with a hollow thud, as though he did not wish to tire his rowers. A captain stood on the prow-deck, his red cloak blowing out behind him, his golden helmet garnished with long white horse-hair plumes. I thought I would have a helmet like that one day, instead of what I had got—dried horse-hide plated with strips of bronze. He carried a tall staff with a wagging pennon as long as two men lying down. On its white background there was embroidered a great black eagle with a lamb in its talons. This was the sign of the Eagle King of Colchis—Aeëtes the Mighty, the man who had once been the tyrant at Corinth in his youthful days, but had set up in the east because of his overwhelming ambition. The story was that he had coaxed Phrixus out there, to marry one of his many daughters, Chalciope, but had then played the tyrant over Phrixus and had even had him murdered when he wished to make another alliance for Chalciope with a nomadic Scythian chieftain from far north.

That sort of thing was happening all the time—warriors gained cities and set themselves up as kings. Then, the next thing was either to send their sons out to capture every other place near at hand, or to marry their daughters off,

again and again, until all the lands about were under one father-ruler. So a tyrant might become a High King—just as that fool Agamemnon did, later in my life. Usually these High Kings were murdered in the end, by some other young fellow who envied their glory—and then the whole pattern began again. I speak with feeling here, because as I shall tell you, before I became an old man I, too, got caught up in the drunkenness of being a High King. . . . How wise a man can be, after the event!

This Colchian galley did not see us, by some miracle, for we had not had time to bring down our sail. Perhaps the sail was so begrimed by now that it was indistinguishable from the heavy fog that lay upon the sea!

It passed by, followed by a covey of gulls who seemed to expect good pickings from such a ship. No gulls ever followed us! Any more than they followed the ships of the frugal Phoenicians.

When it had gone and we bobbed gently in its heavy wake, Castor said quietly to me, ‘Jason, if that is how they live at Colchis, then be prepared for your crew to swear allegiance to Aeëtes, like those gulls. Better a fat belly in Colchis than a dry crust in Iolcos!’

I patted him on the shoulder and said, ‘Perhaps Aeëtes does not need the services of a Spartan boxer! Perhaps he will hang us over his city walls for the kites to peck at. Then a fat belly would only be an inconvenience, Castor!’

I was anxious for my men not to lose their fighting spirit, which men may easily do if they are offered rich pickings by the enemy.

Old Butes said, ‘Well, I suppose they have bees in Colchis, as they have in most places I have been to. It would content me well enough to set up my hives in the palace garden there and live out what is left of my life collecting honey and making mead.’

Atalanta put her arm about the old man and said, laughing, ‘You can’t hoodwink us like that, ancient fellow! We know you are seeking a new young wife, since all the girls of Hellas have turned against you for your toothlessness. It is not bees you are after, but other makers of sweetness.’

Butes pretended to be shocked at first; then he smiled and nodded. ‘Perhaps you are right, priestess,’ he said. ‘I have not had a woman for some time, and I hear that these Colchians respect age and will do all its bidding.’

Atalanta said, ‘Make sure you have something left to bid with, old fellow!’

She began to tease him with her hands, but he pushed her away and went laughing back to his place. I called Atalanta over to me for she was, after all, the priestess of our ship.

‘Lady,’ I said, ‘we have come a long way—to gain the gold fleeces and to set the soul of Phrixus at rest. How say you about making plans—you who can see into the future?’

Atalanta said, ‘In a case like this, a man can have no plans. We do not know what is waiting for us at Colchis, and the Mother has sent me no dreams. I am content to take all as it comes, Jason.’

I thought a while and answered, ‘Men like Castor and old Butes may well want to settle down in Colchis. We may find that we have no crew left to sail *Argo* back to Hellas.’

The priestess put out her hand and held my own. There was warmth in her fingers, and her oval face framed in its fur hood looked lovelier than I had ever seen it. I do not know why I had never looked at Atalanta before, save in derision, as a man always looks at a loose woman.

She said softly, ‘Jason, it is in your mind that you will not return to Iolcos to claim your kingdom. What really worries you now is that you may not have enough men to get you back to that long-legged witch of a queen at Lemnos. Is that not so?’

I was a little surprised at this girl’s knowledge of me, but in the end I had to nod that I agreed with her. Though, in all truth, Lemnos was rapidly fading from me then—even my little son, Euneus, whom I had dearly loved at the time when I played with him. I suppose I was still young and fickle then, although I was approaching twenty, an age when most men settle down.

Atalanta said gently, as her arm crept round me, ‘Why return to Iolcos? Why return to Lemnos? You have all you need *here*—more than most men would dare to want.’

I said, ‘But Meleager . . . ?’

I was only trying her out, I think, but I am not sure. I did not understand myself in those days.

She made the gesture of spitting on the deck. Her red lips were very pretty, even in such a rude motion.

‘I have only wanted you, ever,’ she said. ‘I took Meleager to make you jealous. Now we could settle in Colchis, and live as man and wife with no

one to forbid it. How say you?'

I looked again at Meleager, who frowned beside the helm. She followed my stare and said softly, 'A little knife would solve that problem while I counted ten. That is easy to arrange. Besides, Meleager is a fickle fellow and may well find himself a black-haired Colchian once we have landed. Then there need be no blood-letting at all.'

There was some sort of magic in that woman, I have no doubt of it. A tingling sensation went through my hand and arm and down into my lower belly as she stood by me. And she looked lovelier than any woman I had known. My mind became most confused, as though she was making my tongue try to say something.

But I fought against it, I know not why, and said to her, 'I dare not. You are a priestess, Atalanta. Who would dare marry Persephone, my dear?'

She shrugged her shoulders and said, 'All women are Persephone, Jason. All bring warmth, and death, whether they know it or not. That is their task in the world. They cannot help themselves, poor animals! So do not be afraid of me. As for my duties as a priestess, they need not keep me long from your bed. I have lived with them long enough to make light work of them. Besides, they have priestesses enough in Colchis, by what I heard at Samothrace. I might well retire from the sad business and spend my energies in the home. Living with all you men on this ship these many months has made me see life with a difference. In Hellas I moved from shrine to shrine . . .'

I could not help myself. 'Aye, and from bed to bed,' I said.

She smiled and nodded. 'Yes, of course,' she answered. 'That is the privilege of my trade, and I am a princess, too, don't forget. My father brought me up to take what I wanted. But now I am more settled, more serious, I think. I have watched you on this voyage and I think I could love you and bear your children.'

A sea-bird skimmed low over our deck just then, crying aloud. There was something in that cackling scream, that bird-like laughter, which went through me like a sharp dagger-blade. I came out of my dream and pushed the woman away from me.

And at that precise moment, the fog lifted and we saw Colchis—far away yet, it is true, but near enough to snatch a man's breath from his body. We all stared and pointed, dumb for a while as we took in the sight of that mysterious rich city.

It lay, on many levels, all white and golden in the setting sun, the towers and climbing roofs leading to a great and sprawling palace on a hill. And behind the town rose an immense cliff-wall, that seemed to touch the sky, blue in the distance, and then becoming mountain upon mountain, reaching away to the farthest span of man's vision. The high peaks were like an army of giants that stretched away to eternity. I had never seen mountains so high, so draped with rose-coloured snow. And that glorious city lying beneath them, its hundreds of streets falling down to the harbour, and the masts of ships swaying there on the tide like a forest of pines.

Admetus came beside me and said, 'Old Aeëtes has found himself a rare place to settle in, Jason. It makes my father's city look like a dung-hill. I tell you, if you have designs on the throne of Colchis, you may well find that I shall stand against you with my sword in my hand!'

He smiled as he said this, but I knew that my cousin was serious, deep in his heart. I said, 'I think you can keep your sword for some other belly, Admetus. I shall not contest you. But let me remind you that in the palace of Iolcos, King Pelias, our uncle, has a small daughter, Alcestis, to whom you are betrothed. You would not desert her for a new throne and a few sacks of gold, would you?'

He turned away and said, 'For Colchis, I would betray all Hellas, Jason.'

This was the first time I had heard him speak like that, and I decided to watch Admetus from then on. It is strange how men change when they come within sight of riches, however loyal they have been to each other before. Riches seem to bring out the treachery in a man—and a woman. I still felt the traces of Atalanta's touch upon my hand. . . . She, too, was ready to cast away her lover for the sake of sitting beside me on the throne at Colchis. It affected all men and women alike. Only the brute beasts cannot be tempted by gold and power.

25

Procession

ONCE I thought Iolcos was a city of dreams and wealth, but I had not seen Colchis then. Later, having lived in Colchis, I went to Corinth, and then to ruined Cnossus. . . . They were only big villages. Gold it is that makes great a city, and Colchis had its fingers clasped about the world's gold in those days.

We came in at nightfall, a sea-mile before the harbour, and beached *Argo* up a little stream, having to pull hard against the water which came rushing down from a mountain. We dragged her into a place where the rock overhung and all was dark; then we covered her with dead boughs and brown bracken, until nothing was to be seen of our ship.

I divided the crew into three parties; Acastus led one, Admetus another, and myself the third. Among my men I took Castor and Polydeuces, Phanus and Orpheus, Calais and Zetes—all good fellows who had proved themselves. We left Ancaeus, Tiphys and old Butes behind in the *Argo*. They were joined, at their own choice, by Argus, who had not the heart to desert the vessel of his devising, and Lynceus, the look-out man. This raised a problem, because Idas then wanted to stay with his brother, Lynceus, but I had him in my party since he was an expert fighter with the short dirk. He came reluctantly, although I assured him that Lynceus would come to no harm, and indeed those left behind were really the most fortunate, as they had good supplies of food and drink, whereas we who were entering the city might not see the day out.

At the last moment Atalanta, though still angry with me for pushing her away, fell before my feet and clasped my ankles.

'I beg you, master,' she said in a newly humble tone, which I should have suspected had I been an older, more wily man, 'take me with you. I am a priestess and can bring good fortune or the reverse to your venture.'

I slapped her on the backside, trying to seem good-humoured, like an old wagon-chief, though I was far from feeling hardy at that moment, and

replied, ‘Come and welcome, as long as you bring your bed-mate with you to keep you occupied. I have things to do that need no interruption.’

So she and Meleager joined my company, though he came with a face like thunder because of what I had said. That has often been my undoing—that I could not resist making a jest which I did not really mean, but which came into my mind at the last moment. That is what made me so different from the Spartans I loved; they always stopped speaking when they had said enough—but it must have been the Cretan in me that kept me talking on, running my neck further and further into the noose. At least, that is how I always excused myself.

We wore our full armour, but hidden under our thick wool cloaks. Our helmets we hung between our legs so as not to be seen. All men had to be content with sword and dirk. I permitted no javelin, which could not be hidden; nor did we take our shields, since they were so bulky and cumbersome.

I also made each man ruffle his hair and dirty his face with mud from the stream. So I hoped we might appear like wandering peasants. Phanus objected loudly when I made him take off the many seals and bracelets that he wore, Cretan-style, but I told Polydeuces to punch him in the mouth if he argued further, and Phanus was silent then. In a way, I was sorry for him, because his trinkets were very beautiful, and we never did find them again, though he marked the spot where he buried them in the mud beside the stream. I think some questing horseman dug them up. None of my men had them, I know that. At least we obeyed that first rule of voyagers, we did not prey upon each other’s valuables. As it turned out, Phanus did not need them, which was just as well.

We entered Colchis at dawn, not by the main gates near the harbour, but half-way up a mountain-slope where the city wall was crumbled and low and there was only one guard, a man old enough to be my grandfather. He leaned on his spear half-asleep and yawning. Castor tiptoed behind him and ended him at one short blow. I do not think the man ever felt it and that made me happy, for he was a pleasant-faced fellow, such as would be kind to babies and cats. But the spear he carried was so long and sharp that we could not take the risk of letting him live and see us.

In fifty paces we were in a narrow alley which led directly to the main avenue of Colchis. It was the broadest street I have ever seen. And the most comely. The houses were white, square-faced and flat-roofed. Each of them had a golden eagle painted between the two upper windows, and small

neatly shaped bushes growing before the central door. Along this avenue were planted trees of various kinds. We thought that in Summer it must be a pleasant place to see. And, we observed, that being so broad and straight, it led down to the great harbour itself. What a size that was! And how many ships—all side by side, their masts rising as thick as lances in a battle-array!

We drank from a water-butt—they had them outside each door, filled from a fall-pipe that came down from the roof—and then walked on, sauntering as though we were common peasants enjoying their sight of the great city. Some of us walked on one side of the road, others on the other. The companies of Acastus and Admetus were nowhere to be seen, yet; they were coming through the gap later, we arranged.

Colchis, waking up. Men staggering through doors and the gateways of courtyards, rubbing their eyes, spitting, scratching their hair. On their way to collect water or to raise bundles of wood upon their shoulders. A rich city leaves its possessions in the courtyard for there are no thieves. Wood and wine-jars stood about everywhere in porches and yards. Then the women, leaning out of the upper windows, calling down to the men to hurry. Imperious women. Women who ruled the roost. Like the women of Crete or of Samothrace. Even in looks—with their oval olive faces and their blue-black hair.

I said to Phanus the Cretan, ‘We could leave you among this lot and no one would know you were not a Colchian. Even your accent is the same.’

He grinned and said, ‘We never left our wine outside at Cnossus! Some Greek would have come in the night and stolen it!’

He was a good joking fellow, Phanus, whatever one did to him. And I have yet to see his equal as an acrobat over the bull’s back. All the noblemen in Crete learned that trick at one time. It has died out now, since the Dorians have taken over. Of course, it was a useless and very dangerous sport—but one likes the old customs to be kept up. Things change too fast in the world as it is, without men destroying the ancient habits of a conquered people. I have always tried, in all my conquests, to mingle with the vanquished, to let them keep their customs, even their gods. Myself, I have prayed to as many gods as there are in this world—even the frog-god of damp Paxos! And the bronze dragon-god of the Phoenicians. I don’t think any of them have helped me much, now that I look back; but that is not the point; a conqueror must show good manners, or how is he to expect good manners from the conquered?

I must say that the manners of everyone we met that morning in Colchis were very good. A young woman, coming fresh from milking the goats in a courtyard, her pitcher on her shoulder, gave me a great lazy smile and offered me the pitcher to drink from. The milk was thick and warm and nourishing. We emptied her pitcher before we had finished—but she only smiled and said what big fellows we were. Looking at Castor, she said for all to hear, 'I am old enough to take another husband now. You are welcome, if you wish.'

Castor patted her shoulder and said, 'I will come back later, sweetheart. But I have business to see to this morning.'

She nodded and said, 'Big men like you always have! But you know which our house is, and I shall wait for you. My first husband is a nice enough man—but tired. He is Teutarus, and I am Teutara. That means "continued practice." '

When we all laughed at that, she turned and said, 'Very well, you are all welcome then. I have four more sisters.'

Then she went inside with a smile.

Phanus said, 'By the Mother, but I could settle well with that one. She has the merry view of life.'

I said, 'Come on, she may also keep a knife under the pillow!'

Phanus shrugged and said, 'That is a custom we Cretans expect. You Hellenes are too suspicious. With women, what will happen will happen.'

'Not if I can help it,' I said. 'Come on.'

I should not have said that, for it tempted the gods.

Smoke began to rise from chimneys and soon dogs and hens were barking and clucking in the courtyards of the white-fronted houses. Always girls or grown women passed us, carrying meat under their arms, or pitchers of water on their heads. And always they smiled at us, or made some merry inviting comment, in that quaint dialect of theirs which so resembled Cretan. They seemed both proud and confident; as though Colchis belonged to them and not the Eagle King Aeëtes whom we had come so far to meet. These women seemed unlike any I had met before: beyond Mount Pelion, in the Village of Women, the creatures were hag-ridden and, in their frenzy, fearsome things; the women of the clans in Hellas were proud, true, but always dependent on their fathers or husbands; the women of Lemnos were something between those two—they wanted to be like Hellenes, but at times

they went back to the old practices and became as frightening as those beyond our mountain. But the women of Colchis were neither like the one nor the other. They went about their tasks like strong men, they strode in their flounced skirts or doe-skin breeches, like young princes, unafraid and laughing. Yet they had a joking word for all strangers, and when there were groups of girls walking together, would stop and point and pass audible remarks about us, sizing up our good points and our bad, for all to hear. And this they did openly, without guile, like farmers standing beside a sheep-pen at a market.

Phanus slapped me on the back and said, 'Don't look so startled, Jason! If you had come to my land before it was pillaged, you would have found the women there just like this. These are the children of a proud kingdom. They have never known rape, you see, and that makes a woman gay and easy, not to have known bloodshed. They think that the world will never change. My people were once like that. But they have changed sadly now, I tell you, since your shag-haired cousins from Doris have taught them differently.'

There was a bit of malice in his last words, as there would have been in mine had I been a Cretan; but I smiled and ignored it. A leader of men must be above small squabbles in the street.

Instead I said, 'Well, if the women work like this, I'd like to be a man of Colchis! There would be little to do, I think.'

Phanus smiled and said, 'I wonder. You seem hardly the sort of fellow who would lie in bed all day, waiting for night to come! A man who likes to be up and doing does not take easily to a doll's life, the life of a pet cat, a talking-bird.'

Castor scratched his rough head and said, 'Who does the fighting here? If the men lie abed, who carries the lances?'

Phanus answered, 'Probably the same hands which carry the babies, friend. Unless these Colchians keep a hired army from the far plains, the yellow men with snake's eyes. I do not know.'

Polydeuces said, 'Then maybe there is a trade for us in the king's army. I fancy myself as a captain, friends! There must be good pickings to be had in a land as rich as this.'

No one answered him, but we were all thinking hard about it. A long voyage gives a man second thoughts about the sea, about returning to face the same trials. I for one was with Polydeuces. The kingdom of Iolcos now

seemed very distant, weak and thin, like last week's dream. Only plotting and death waited for me there, I decided. But here, as a general for King Aeëtes, all things might be possible and easily gained. I had forgotten the daughters of Pelias, Heracles, my once-dear Hypsipyle and my laughing little son, Euneus. . . . After all, it might be argued, a man with a strong right arm can find himself a queen anywhere; and babies are not so difficult for a young fellow to get. But gold is hard to come by.

We sat beside a white marble fountain and drank the cold clean water that had come down from the mountains behind us. As the streets filled, women with trays of food—honey cakes and little round meat pies—passed us and flung their wares, laughing, into our outstretched hands.

The streets filled rapidly and soon the crowds were lining the pavements, laughing at the antics of the dwarfs in coloured clothes who balanced on their hands or turned cart-wheels along the way.

Atalanta, who had been very thoughtful for a while, especially when the Colchian women made sheep's eyes at me, came to my side and said, 'Jason, it seems that a procession is about to pass this way. It might even be the king, the Eagle whom you have brought us so far to meet. If we stay here, we shall not see him for the crowd. Cannot we move to another place? To present a petition here will be impossible.'

Orpheus heard this and said, 'I agree, Captain. There is so much noise here that I shall never hear what music they play for the marching. Such shouting will drown the pretty flutes; we shall only hear the drums and cymbals and they are dull affairs.'

Calais and Zetes winked at me, as though to say that women and musicians were always a nuisance, like children. . . . So I smiled and gave in.

We moved farther down the slope, to a street which curled round away from the broad avenue and where there were no folk waiting.

From here, lower down, I first saw the great palace of the Eagle King clearly. It stood like a mountain above all other buildings, stark and white in the early wintry sunshine. A great golden bird, its wings outstretched, was set upon the highest point of the gable front, and its hundred pillars were carved with the figures of horsemen and of fighting women.

I was about to make some comment on this, when we heard a sudden clatter of hooves, and round the corner, as though riding hard to join the

main procession when it appeared, came a large company of horse-riders. They filled our narrow street from wall to wall.

Meleager said with a gasp, ‘Look at them—they must be blind. They do not see us. They will ride us down.’

I saw the hunched figures with their high fur caps and their long and vicious lances. They sat high up on thick saddles of sheepskin, their bowed legs hardly to be seen. No wonder Meleager had thought they were blind, for their eyes were so narrow, so sunken in their heads, that from the distance they could hardly be seen. These must be men of the far plains, mercenaries in the army of King Aeëtes. But I was still so confident of myself that I thought Meleager was taking too gloomy a view.

‘Why should they ride us down?’ I asked. ‘We have done them no harm. These are not Spartans, my friend!’

But as they came closer my heart began to thud. They had seen us but were not moving to right or to left, and as far as I could see, there was no way we might escape. I did not feel like turning tail and running before them into the main square, for all the crowds to jeer at us.

Then Atalanta shook me by the arm. Her face was white with fear—she never was a very brave women when the dice fell against her and she was likely to get hurt.

‘For the love of the Mother,’ she gasped, ‘if we may not run, then let us kneel in the street and beg their mercy. I have no wish to come so far and then be trampled by a hundred horses.’

I could see that their first rank had no intention of halting. They rode on, never moving their eyes, their flat yellow faces expressionless—though I think they clasped their lances a little more firmly when they saw us there. It boded no good—and frankly I thought of following Atalanta’s advice; after all, we were in a deserted street—I now knew why—and no one would see our humiliation. I have never minded begging a man’s pardon in private—but not in public. A leader must not do that.

I was about to tell my friends to follow the advice of the priestess, when a short squat man held up his hand and stopped the cavalry. Then he rode forward towards us, his parchment face screwed up into an expression I had never seen before.

I expected him to ask who was the leader and to tell us to make ourselves scarce as they passed. But he did not do that. Instead, as he drew

nearer, he yelled out in a language that I did not understand. It was more like the yelping of a wolf than the voice of a man.

Phanus, still smiling, stepped out and called to him that we were sorry to be in the way, that we were strangers in Colchis, and so on. The man on the horse screamed something at the Cretan; then, with a sudden vicious motion, pulled out a curved bronze sword from the folds of his many coats. He penned Phanus against the wall, turning his pony so violently that the white slaver from its mouth spattered the Cretan's chest. Phanus was just in the act of saying jestingly that this was no way to treat a visitor when the man slashed upwards at him, catching him under the left armpit. The sound of that blow was horrible to hear; and Phanus gave a short high yell and fell on to his knees, his arm hanging like a bloody rope.

Even as he knelt there, retching, the man on the horse continued to scream abuse at him, nodding his head, bouncing up and down on his sheepskins as though he had gone mad.

It was in my mind to run forward and take the fellow by the left foot to fling him out of the saddle. He could not have got at me easily that way. Polydeuces was already dragging out his sword, but his brother stopped him, saying that we should all be killed if we showed fight now.

Atalanta suddenly gave a scream and ran back down the alley into the main street, mortally afraid. No one called after her, not even Meleager. He, like the rest of us, was too frightened by what had just happened.

I don't know what we would have done then for the man on the horse had raised his wet sword again and had turned towards Polydeuces. But without any noise, a door of the house against which we crouched opened suddenly, and we ran inside, dragging poor Phanus with us, his blood spouting over the mosaics and over our hands and arms.

A woman was standing there waiting for us, her hand upon the latch. She was tall and had once been yellow-haired when she was young. Her clothes were made in the old Corinthian style and she wore them with a certain majesty.

As she shut the door, she said, 'I knew that all Greeks were fools—or I should not be here—but I never thought I should see a party of them standing in the way of the King's Killers! That is a new thing in Colchis, where these humped monkeys have lorded it for ten generations! But come, get your wounded fellow on to a bed. It was a cruel slash and he will lose his arm, I am afraid.'

We did not answer her as she led us into a roofed courtyard where bright-plumaged birds flew about in the lattice rafters. She clapped her hands and three girls ran in with hot water and linen bandages. We stood round, looking on the white sleeping face of Phanus, who had luckily fainted away now. The old woman turned to me when she had examined the man's wound and said, 'If you have a sharp knife, then do this man a service and cut through the one remaining strand that keeps his arm on his body. If it stays there, it will rot and kill him. He may die anyway, but one can only do one's best.'

So I cut the arm of Phanus from his body as the rest of the horsemen clattered along the street outside. Some of them knocked on the door with their lance-butts as they passed, as though in derision. But I was too occupied to care; Phanus was a strongly made fellow and my knife made no easy work of it. I was red to the elbows when I had finished and he had come out of his dream and was crying.

Castor, tough old Castor the boxer, was sick on the floor; and that is a thing I had never seen before. One has to voyage as far as Colchis to learn some things about one's friends!

Then the three girls gathered round and put oil and bandages on the wound. One of them forced a drink into the Cretan's mouth, and he lay back on the bed and was quiet again.

I turned to the lady of the house and said, 'We owe you our thanks for saving us. We are your servants.'

She half-turned from me, smiling sadly, and said, 'What should I need with servants, I who was once the chief concubine of Aeëtes and had a thousand servants! No, friend Greek, I do not need servants or thanks. I am a lonely old woman now and have no use for such things. As for saving you, that was only because I saw you were foreigners and did not know the customs of this nightmare city. Besides, you can give me news of what is happening in the world I used to know. Here only the king hears news; the rest of the kingdom is in darkness and thinks it is the only city in the world.'

'Where did you come from, lady?' I asked.

She passed her white hand across her forehead. 'Mycenae,' she said. 'I came as a slave, with a shipload of others like me, all the daughters of headmen and kinglets. Aeëtes would only have Hellenes at that time, nearly a thousand of us in the palace, each one calling herself his wife. He used to import a fresh shipload each year: to remind him of his old kingdom, he

said. Then he grew tired of Greeks and filled his house with slit-eyed Scythians. So we had to fend for ourselves. I am fortunate, being here. I saved some money in his service, or I would be with the others, in whorehouses, or scrubbing floors, or working down at the harbour painting the ships.'

I was about to put another question to her while she was in this mood of talking—something about the gold fleeces; but she sighed wearily and said, 'Come into the upper room. You will see the procession from there. After all, that is what you were waiting for, wasn't it? You have paid dearly to see the show.'

We left poor Phanus sleeping and all gathered at the windows, keeping well back, on the lady's advice, in case we should be observed.

The sound of music soon came to us, the flutes and drums and clashing cymbals. Then a dozen dwarfs, leading bears and muzzled wolves. Tumblers gambolled all ways across the street, calling out to the empty flat walls so that their shrill voices echoed and re-echoed like the speech of apes in a thick forest.

'Aeëtes collects such creatures from all over the world,' said the lady of the house. 'He has even made one of them his chancellor—Kush-kush the Idiot, they call him. But he is no idiot. One day, if the luck is with him, he will gain this kingdom for his own, and then the world will be ruled by a mannikin!'

Down below, the King's Killers suddenly appeared, their lance-heads held so high that I could have leaned from the window and touched them, if I had dared. I saw the man who had hurt Phanus and wished dearly that I might have put my dirk into his back as he passed.

But then there was something new to hold my attention; another troop of riders came by, but this time all women, wearing hide helmets and strapped breeches, but with their bodies bare and streaked with blue woad. Many of them lacked a right breast; where it should have been the flesh was scarred. Some of them, delicate creatures, no doubt, had hung gold ornaments over such scars to keep them from view.

The woman at my side said with a bitter smile, 'That is the cohort of Amazons, the women of Sarmatia. They cut off their breasts when they are young so that they can draw the bow without impediment. It matters little—they are not out to attract men, but to kill them, usually. That is, except when they hold a truce and let the men come to their cities in the mating season.

The cohort you see here are mercenaries. Aeëtes keeps them for his amusement; he sometimes sets them on to fight his others, the yellow riders you met. It makes a diversion when the games are on, after the harvest has been gathered.'

I looked down on these Amazons and shuddered. They were all tall and slightly built but well-muscled. Their hair seemed to be clipped short, like a young boy's, and they rode their horses much as old Cheiron did, hardly rising from the saddle, one with the beast they rode. I saw the horn bows slung over their scarred and painted backs, the heavy quiver of arrows at the saddle-bow, the broad swords at their sides. They had faces of stone, these women, and caused no desire in me whatever. I confess, later, I did stay with one, a cattle-queen, out on the plains when we were on a hunting-trip, but it was an experiment more than anything else. All the other men were doing it and I did not want to be different. But I hated every moment of the night. It seems they never wash, and grease their bodies each day with mutton-fat so as to slip away from any opponent who tries to grasp them in battle.

After that awful night, when I felt like the woman rather than the man, I have hated mutton, and have never eaten it since, except when I have been on a campaign, or starving in my later years as a beggar outside Corinth.

Suddenly the woman beside me took my sleeve and pointed down. 'Now you will see the Sacred Pair,' she said. 'They are the real rulers of Colchis, not old Aeëtes.'

Below me on a throne-platform, above which fluttered a fringed canopy of rich scarlet, sat two people, a young woman and a mere boy. They were like dolls, in their stillness and their heavy stiff garments. Their faces were oval and painted, like those of images, with gold. Their shining black hair was coiled round upon the tops of their heads, in a cone, and glistening with the precious stones that were braided into it.

'Who are those pretty puppets?' Castor asked the old woman of the house.

She turned and smiled at him. 'Under the gold they are not pretty, my friend,' she said hoarsely. 'Nor are they puppets. Each has more power in the little finger than you have in all your great fat body.'

Castor didn't care for this reference to his already thick waist, but he put on a good Spartan face and smiled and said, 'Very well, lady; but who are they?'

The woman turned back and said, ‘The son and the daughter of the king, Apsyrtus and Medea. According to the law of this land they are husband and wife, though she is ten years older than the prince. That does not matter; they each have their other lovers, in secret. But to the outside world, the custom has to be kept, so they always appear together. Yet they hate each other, and one day there will be a death in the palace—either his shaggy horsemen or her Amazons will murder one or the other, mark my words.’

I looked down on the pair as they slowly moved below, the ritual smile fixed on their golden doll-like features.

‘They are not Hellenes,’ I said. ‘Indeed, I have not seen folk like them before.’

The woman said, ‘The princess is more than half-Scythian. Her mother came from the most distant plains. The mother of Apsyrtus was brought in a ship from an island of the Hyperboreans, they say. Some fog-bound stretch of damp heathland and oak forest, where the men worship stones and the women dress only in blue war-woad.’

I gave a little chuckle at these words, for the lady seemed so contemptuous of what, indeed, happened in almost exactly the same way in Colchis itself. That chuckle broke through the silence below like an arrow whizzing through the air. For an instant, all faces looked up towards our window, and hands clenched about javelin shafts. Even the doll, Medea, raised her face slowly, her golden flat oval face, as though she looked directly at me. But there was no sign of recognition in her glazed dark eyes. They seemed to be the eyes of one who has drunk potions or has gone into a trance.

The woman beside me gave a gasp and drew back in fear.

‘For the love of Zeus,’ she said, ‘are you mad? Do you want them to come into this house and kill us all? No one must look down from windows upon the gods.’

‘The gods?’ I said, hardly understanding.

She nodded, frantically. ‘They are gods, she and her brother. King Aeëtes has had them proclaimed through the world as such. Medea stands equal to the Mother herself, and Apsyrtus ranks with Poseidon and commands all the waters and the shipping. Even the fishes come into the harbour to be caught when Apsyrtus calls them.’

I had to leave the window then, or I should have laughed outright.

‘That little creature!’ I said. ‘A god? Poseidon? He is hardly as big as Poseidon’s morning droppings! Why, I’d like to see that, in the harbour—what you speak of, the fish, I mean! Yes, I’d like to see that!’

The woman had regained her composure now and said a little sharply, ‘You may well do so, Greek. For Apsyrtus hangs men in the water, prisoners and captives, sometimes disobedient slaves, for the big flesh-eating fish to take. That is how he gets them to come at his bidding. . . . You may be such fish-food yourself before the day is out.’

She went away to tend to Phanus then, for he was howling out again like a she-wolf with an arrow barb in her belly.

Castor said to me, ‘Pelias knew what he was doing, sending you here, Jason. The odds are a sheaf of arrows to a dry goat’s turd that we’ll never set eyes on Iolcos again.’

I said, ‘But he values us all—the heroes from the various states, Atalanta the priestess, his own son Acastus . . . He would not send us to our death. And what of his fine ship, *Argo*?’

Polydeuces joined his brother and frowned.

‘Castor is right,’ he said. ‘Pelias wants us dead, in spite of that nonsense about our getting gold for him. A ship means nothing to that tyrant. And as for us, the heroes, we were all hand-picked, from the various cities; all of us men who might become tyrants ourselves one day and threaten him. Even his son—ever since the day Acastus threatened him; even Admetus, who should have married Alcestis . . . Pelias doesn’t want the son of a foreign king on his throne. As for Atalanta, she has offended Pelias so much that it is a wonder he did not have her chopped up to feed his leopards long ago. No, the pattern becomes clear to me now. We are little more than dead men, my friend!’

I ground my teeth, then drew my sword and felt its edge. ‘Not if I can avoid it,’ I said.

It was then that the knocking came on the door below.

26

The Eagle King

THE others began to take out their weapons, but I waved them back. ‘This is one quest I shall make alone,’ I said. ‘Stay hidden and offer up a prayer for me.’

They huddled against the wall in that upper room, like bullocks awaiting the pole-axe. Meleager mouthed something about seeking his beloved among the enemy, but he made no move to follow me.

I was almost down the stairs with my sword in my hand when the woman who had sheltered us stopped me, her finger to her lips. ‘Put that thing away,’ she said, ‘or we are all dead carrion! Your friend Phanus is dead; the girls could not save him after so great a loss of blood. He is not to be got back with a sword, Hellene. Now Kush-kush himself has come for you.’

The knocking was still echoing through the house as I strode across the inner courtyard where poor white Phanus lay stretched out, the maidens kneeling beside him, wailing, half in sorrow, half in terror at the knocking on the door.

‘Salute, Phanus!’ I said, raising my sword as I passed his still body. ‘May you dine this night with Minos.’

The old woman scurried behind me, tugging at my arm as we crossed the mosaic pavement of the vestibule.

‘For all our sakes, put up your sword!’ she moaned. ‘It is death to show a weapon on this day of the gods. They will tear out our eyes with spikes and lop off our hands. That is the custom here.’

A thin high voice behind the door called out, ‘Am I to wait any longer, Ephesta? If my servants come in they will not leave you or your house undisturbed, I promise you.’

The old woman, who had once been a royal concubine, fell to the floor, tearing her hair, beating at her breasts, hammering her fists on the cold stones. I put up my sword and patted her shoulder.

‘All is well, old mother,’ I said. ‘I shall go out to them in peace.’

It took me some time to unbar the great door, and when I swung it open at last I was astonished at what I saw. It was a little hunched old man, sitting on a splendid litter carried by four great slaves—but such an old man, and so wrinkled, that at first I thought it was an ape! His body was no bigger than that of a four-year-old child; and it was wrapped round with brown fleeces, joined so cleverly that I could not see where one ended and the next began. His hands and feet were not visible, but his head was, and it was this which most amazed me. It was like a head made from old leather, or like a pig’s bladder that boys play with, which has been allowed to shrivel up and fall into folds. Black eyes shone through the slits of his eyelids; his mouth was so enfolded in wrinkles that until he spoke it was hidden. His nose, flattened to his face, was little more than another fold of skin, though its black nostrils flared out on either side of it.

But it was this creature’s hair which made my own flesh creep, made me wish to destroy him on the spot. It was an auburn red and thicker than any hair I had ever seen. It seemed to sprout from his wrinkled skull as I watched, and hung down on to the litter, all about him, like a cascading river on the banks of which a bloody battle has just been fought.

One solitary amethyst was set into the flesh of Kush-kush, just below his right cheekbone; that was the only sign I saw of his high rank.

He sat, like a dead man save for his moving eyes, for the space in which a man might count to twenty, and then opened his turtle’s mouth and said to me in a vile dialect of Cretan, ‘You are the man who laughed.’

It was not a question, but a statement, as though he already knew the answer.

I nodded, trying to make light of it. ‘I chuckled because a gnat got into my tunic and tickled me,’ I said. ‘Is that a crime?’

The slaves who carried the litter hissed with surprise at my daring words. Kush-kush seemed to go into a long trance before he answered. Then he said, hardly moving his lips, ‘When the Eagle King has done with you, there will be no gnats, no tunic, not even a body to go inside one.’

I seemed to lose all my fear when he had said this. I know now that many men of my race, the old Achaean breed, the wagon-chiefs, knew this feeling. It is as though the gods fill one’s head to bursting, and then one speaks as one wishes, kills or spares as one desires. . . . Dies, even, without feeling anything of the blow.

I said to Kush-kush between my clenched teeth, ‘Do you know, I could end your life now as I stand here?’

He shut his slit-eyes in the sun and did not move.

At last he said, in his dry goat’s voice, ‘And do you know I could end your poor life if you were half a world away from here?’

I admired this shrivelled creature’s courage and laughed as I reached for my sword. I think it was in my mind to see if it was possible to strike terror into him; I don’t think I truly meant to kill him. I am not sure. I have forgotten after all those years, and I am a wizened old man myself now, you see. . . .

But men were on me before I could get my hand upon the bone hilt. I tried to shake them off, but they were like flies about a piece of raw flesh. I was down on the ground and they were kicking at me, at my head and eyes, my belly, my back. And beating down at me with their heavy lance-butts. I thought they would kill me there in the street with all the hangers-on of the procession gazing down at me, as though I was just another entertainment on that festival of the two painted gods.

And when I heard myself howling with pain, the blows suddenly stopped, and I saw Kush-kush looking down at me, not smiling, not moving a muscle of that wrinkled face, even though I was in his power. I said, ‘For God’s sake, kill me, you ape!’

He said to me, ‘You will die, my friend, but not now. The Eagle King must speak with you first. That is why you are still left alive.’

I hadn’t the strength to answer him. I could only glare up at that heap of rags. The gathered townsfolk laughed at my powerless glaring and not even that angered me, I felt so weak.

I think the slaves carried me to the palace of Aeëtes. I remember very little; only tall columns and many steps, and being sick beside a huge bronze tripod from which greasy black smoke belched from time to time.

They flung me into a cell which had no windows. I lay on the cold stone floor and was sick again. When I clenched my fist to beat upon the floor it hurt me so cruelly that I fainted away. One of those men had broken the bones of my hand, stamping on it. I think that they had cracked a rib also, for when I breathed, a fierce agony went through my body and brought the cries to my tattered mouth again.

Then I wished they had killed me. I have never held life so highly that I wish to go on with it in defeat and pain. Men like Castor and his brother like pain—they have told me so many times. It makes them feel warm and merry, they say; it is like getting drunk on barley-beer. I have heard other fist-fighters say this. There is something they say in those metal-plated gloves which, when it hammers a man's sense out of him, brings about a sort of trance which is pleasant at the time, once one has become used to it. But I was never of that sort. If I could not be the victor at one stroke of the sword or javelin, then I was ready to lie down and die. I hear that lions and leopards are of a similar turn of mind, fierce beasts as they may be when the fight is going for them. This was what kept me from being a true Spartan, I think. Those men can go on suffering, and never say a word, though they see that the battle is lost.

I must have been in the cell a long time, for my face was stuck to the floor with blood when I awoke. And my right hand was so stiff that I could not move the fingers. The pain had gone; no, not gone, but, like a thief, had slipped behind the hedge, waiting.

Someone came to me and roughly rolled me over. It was one of those Scythians in a high cap, carrying a lance. One of the King's Killers, such as had ridden poor Phanus against the wall and robbed him of his arm.

He looked into my eyes and then spat on my cheek.

I said, 'Very well, put your lance into me. I am content.'

But he did not do that. He called two others and they bundled me, moaning with the awakened pain again, down a long corridor, where the bronze tripods filled the air with black smoke.

And at last we were in a high hall full of shaggy-coated men with long lances. They stood in straight rows, like tables set for a feast, silent. And at the end of the hall, on a throne set high on white marble steps, beneath a great bronze figure of an eagle with outspread wings, sat a man.

There was no asking who this man was; he wore the golden mask of an eagle, its curved beak coming down almost to his chest. His golden cloak also was shaped like the wings of an eagle, and even his sandals were formed with claws at their toes.

The men flung me on to the lowest step before this king, and then stood back a pace, their lances lifted, as though to pin me if I made a move to run up at their king.

But he waved them away and said in a hollow voice from within the golden mask, ‘I have my dirk.’

In my fevered and miserable state, the Eagle King looked gigantic as I gazed up at him beyond the tall steps. This was the man I had sailed for nearly two years to find. . . . And now this! I began to laugh at the foolishness of men, at my own stupidity. What was I, when confronted by these great ones—Pelias, Aeëtes? Nothing but a boy. True, I was brave enough and brisk enough when it came to flinging the women on to the turf—but the men . . . I was close to weeping in misery as I laughed. One can laugh and cry at the same time in such moments of reality.

The Eagle King waited a while, then said very gently, ‘Why do you always laugh at the wrong time, Diomedes?’

This stopped me from laughing any more.

‘You know my name?’ I said. ‘How is that? Who has told you?’

Aeëtes nodded his golden head, as though he were laughing inside that fearsome mask.

‘If you were a simple Scythian,’ he said, ‘I should tell you that I had been informed by my witch, or in a dream of magic, or because I am a god and my children are gods. But you are a Hellene, from Thessaly, not greatly different from myself—I who am a Corinthian and a Hellene, too. So I tell you the truth. Your Uncle Pelias sent me a message that you would be coming, sooner or later. Moreover, the priestesses of Samothrace sent me the same message. And if that is not enough, we have captured a member of your own crew, a girl-thing who calls herself Atalanta, when she is not calling herself Demeter, or Aphrodite. . . . She seems to be a fool. She told us all before we had even pulled out her first tooth!’

I said, ‘You should have made rape the punishment. Then she wouldn’t have given in, I assure you!’

The Eagle King seemed to like those silly words, for his head and chest began to shake again, as though he found it hard not to laugh aloud.

At last he said, ‘I think I care for you, Diomedes. It is a pity that they treated you so badly. But perhaps you shouldn’t have threatened Kush-kush. He is a vicious little monkey.’

I eased myself up until I could kneel on the lowest step that led up to the throne.

‘Tell me one thing,’ I asked. ‘How did Pelias and the women of Samothrace get their message to you? No ship passed us on the way, and we outstripped the riders along the shore.’

Aeëtes nodded, not laughing this time. ‘A very wise question,’ he said, in his high muffled voice. ‘And I shall answer it because you will tell no one else. You will, sadly, be dead before this night is out. The messages came by pigeons, my friend. We have an arrangement, you understand, between the kingdoms. Few know of it because few can read, and few can write. But we are no fools, we kings. The lesser ones think we know by magic, or by spies —but that is all part of the game, like my mask and my wings. Convenient to frighten the fools, Jason. Life is a little more than mere magic, my friend. If one rules a kingdom, one must know about all other kingdoms. I could tell you what they are doing in Egypt at this time, or in Thrace, or in Crete. Kush-kush and I know all. Or, I should say, Kush-kush knows all, for he can read; then he tells me. Unfortunately, I was always too busy to learn the symbols. My youth was taken up in chariot-racing, and in winning kingdoms.’

I said, ‘What if Kush-kush is a liar?’

The Eagle King lowered his golden head and whispered, ‘He is, my friend. I have proof of that. But in the main he tells me roughly what is going on. And he is powerless now that my son and my daughter are gods. We could crush him in a day. These men, whom you see in the hall, are all vowed to slaughter my enemies. They are my Killers; that is their title, and one which they proudly bear. Are you satisfied?’

In spite of the pain in my chest, I smiled and said, ‘No. These men whom you trust have just as probably sworn a secret oath to Kush-kush, to be *his* killers, too. So, if your son, or your golden daughter, offends them, what then? A god can die with one thrust of the lance, just like a peasant. There is no difference in flesh, that I have noticed.’

The Eagle King half-rose from his throne. I saw his talon-gloved hands clench on the arms of the chair. I thought he was about to call the lance-men forward to pierce me. But he sat down again and was silent for a while.

Then he said, ‘You are no man’s fool, Jason. They told me that in the messages. What am I to do with you?’

I said, ‘Kill me, I suppose. Yes, kill me, and then let that wrinkled apple, Kush-kush, take your throne from you, and violate your daughter, as his queen. That is the way it goes, isn’t it?’

He stroked his chin below the golden mask and said, ‘Medea would not hate that any more than she hates lying with her brother, Jason. I cannot understand her; she knows what her duty is, yet seems anxious to avoid it. But that is my affair. As for Kush-kush taking my throne, I know the little ape has been hungering after it for ten years. I wonder . . .’

I took my chance and said, ‘What do you wonder, Eagle?’

For a moment I thought I had spoken too readily, for he seemed to freeze. But at last he said, ‘I wonder if you could slip a little sharp Mycenaean dirk into him one of these evenings. I mean, something quiet and unobtrusive, not to cause alarm in the palace.’

I pretended to think for a while. Then I said, ‘I am to die tonight, Eagle. Ghosts are no great swordsmen. A man cannot be in two places at once.’

He laughed again and said, ‘You should see my son, Apsyrtus! He fathers three children a night—provided the palace women sleep bed to bed! He seems to be in many places at once!’

Then he coughed and, seeming to recollect himself, said, ‘My concubines are very tolerant with the boy. They understand that a prince must have training.’

All this time, there was silence in the hall. I was amazed at the discipline of these Scythians. Their sheepskin hats must have been very warm and uncomfortable for fires were blazing in tripods everywhere, and the sweat was pouring down my face.

I made myself rise, in spite of the stabbing pain in my chest, and said, as though carelessly, ‘I am a javelin-man, really, Eagle. I have never trained with the dirk. You need my friend Heracles to do a job like this. He is, unfortunately, blind-mad on Lemnos!’

Aeëtes chuckled once more. ‘Heracles,’ he said, ‘has recovered—as far as he ever will, the poor swine! He is with the King of Troy at present, pretending to build him a navy and secretly plotting to put a baby, little Priam, on the throne, when he can find the chance to kill Laomedon, that is.’

I said, ‘The pigeons, Eagle?’

He nodded.

Then he said, ‘I have been thinking, the javelin is only a longer dirk, my Hellenic friend. Is it not?’

I said, ‘Cracked finger-bones and broken ribs never made a javelin-man, King.’

The Eagle sat still for the count of fifty and then, in the thick air of that silent hall, he murmured so that I could hardly hear his words, ‘It can wait until finger-bones and ribs are ready, can it not?’

I said, ‘But you promised me death tonight, Eagle.’

Now his voice seemed as far away as my childhood on Cheiron’s hill.

‘Go to my daughter, the Goddess,’ he said. ‘She knows my mind. She will have the answer for you.’

I was about to speak when he made a small signal with his hand and the lance-men took me by the arms and body and almost carried me away from that golden figure on the high marble steps.

27

Medea

I ONLY recall a maze of passages. Afterwards, a great bronze gong almost bursting the drums of my ears; and then a small room, full of aromatic smoke. My eyes smarted and my wounds howled. When I was a man again, I looked about me and saw.

The new room was low-ceilinged and its white plaster walls covered with bright paintings—blues, red, greens, gold—of winged lions and serpents, and of princes striding, sword in hand; and of women prancing, holding snakes to their mouths, their long black hair curling down to their wasp-waists.

As I was flung into that room, I almost fell headlong into a small round pit, cleverly tiled with marble slabs, at the bottom of which a heap of little snakes writhed about each other, hissing and striking even at shadows.

I looked around me, on hands and knees; at the far end, under a broad wall-painting of a woman surrendering to a long thick serpent, stood a high chair of carved and gilded wood, its back and arms shaped cleverly to represent sheaves of corn. For a moment I thought that they were real sheaves, they were so delicately sculpted.

But my eye was soon taken by the woman who sat on that chair—a small firmly-built woman, her bare feet just showing from beneath her spangled, flounced dress, her full breasts supported by a stiff bodice which made them thrust outwards like the prongs below the prow of a war-galley. Her oval face, still golden, was flat, and her other features fine but indolent. The eyes and lips were perhaps too full, too rounded, as though she had been made by a dollmaker to represent fullness, fertility. Her black hair, now loosed from its bindings, fell like a thick thunder-cloud over the arms of the golden chair, over her white arms and red-nailed fingers. She played with it, lazily, watching me all the time, her breasts hardly moving as she breathed, her black eyebrows arched like those of a little girl who sees a new toy that interests her.

And about her, everywhere, leaning against the walls, sprawling on the floor, were women—the Amazons. They still wore their blue body-paint, but many of them had relieved themselves of their restricting leather breeches. They lounged or lay, whispering to each other, caressing each other, as though they were sufficient unto themselves, content with their fellows, complete.

The mutton-fat on their bodies mingled its peculiar scent with that of the aromatic smoke from the tripods and the sharp reptilian odour which came up out of the snake-pit. It assaulted me like a slap across the face.

The golden-faced woman in the throne chair said in a low and vibrant voice, 'I am Medea, the Goddess. Though you have passed the first test and have come free from my father, the Eagle God, you may not find escape from me so easy, Hellene.'

The Amazons made no sign of having heard her words; they seemed too taken up with their own affairs to bother. In some ways, as they writhed on the floor, they reminded me of the snakes in the little pit beside me; even the blue markings on their bodies seemed the same. Perhaps they did not understand the Greek dialect that this Medea spoke, I thought.

I said, 'Goddess, I have a broken rib and a right hand which would not hold a hair-comb at this moment, much less a sword. How then could I escape anyone?'

She answered, 'Your name is Diomedes, the Sly One; one of my names is Medea, the Cunning. In a way they are the same name. You are also called Jason, the Healer; and one of my tasks as the Goddess in this place is to heal. We might hold a competition—your slyness against my cunning; your healing against mine. That would be more interesting than battles with swords. My women will give me such battles at any time I ask them, against my father's hairy Killers. Such things are amusing, to pass the winter; but now the Little Courtyard is stacked high with skulls, and our trees are laden with the hide-wrapped bodies of those who have entertained us. This place stinks of useless death. Let us have a competition of healing, Jason.'

She rose from her seat slowly, even heavily, like a doll moving in her stiff clothes, and came silently towards me as I stared. The set mask of her face never varied. Only her wide dark eyes moved, and her thick black hair swung with her pacing.

I thought she was coming to touch me as I lay on the floor holding my aching side; but she passed me by, a little continuous hiss sounding from her

half-opened lips all the while.

I saw also that now the Amazons were turned towards us, watching, and hissing gently in the same way. It was as though they were accustomed to what was to happen, as though it were a daily ritual.

Medea halted at the edge of the snake-pit and inclined her head towards me. ‘Watch well, King of Lemnos,’ she whispered mockingly. ‘I do not think that long-legged Hypsipyle ever showed you such a thing.’

Then she lowered herself to the marble rim of the pit and gently eased down among the little snakes. As their hissing grew in volume, Medea’s set mouth began to smile as though she were relishing some dainty feast. ‘Come closer, Jason,’ she said, ‘there are things you cannot see where you lie.’

It caused me pain to do as she had commanded, but I dragged myself to the lip of the pit as Medea stooped and lifted up her heavily flounced skirt. I saw that her feet were set among the snakes, treading some of them down, and that they were writhing about her ankles and lower legs, striking at her again and again with their blunt snouts.

And when I had seen this, she gave a little laugh and squatted down among them so that they could reach other parts of her—as though to prove to me that there was no deceit in this magic.

I thought, as I watched her at this strange game, that Medea was very comely—though in a different way from Hypsipyle, or the panting daughters of Pelias. And I wondered what sort of showing the lithe Atalanta, who had her own special talents, would make in this pit of vipers.

Medea slowly rose, brushing the snakes from her, and stood waiting for two of her Amazons to lift her from the pit.

‘You see, Jason,’ she said, as she stood above me, ‘I am not frothing at the mouth. I am not howling with the agonies of poison. So—I have healed myself. There is proof for you.’

I was afraid that she would now command me to get down among the snakes and do as she had done. Sick as I was, I would rather have gone unarmed into a pen with three bulls than do this. Snakes have always frightened me. Most of my worst dreams have been concerned with them.

I said, trying to smile easily, ‘Goddess you are not baffling peasants on a market day. You are dealing with one who has seen a little of the world. The fangs of those pretty snakes have been drawn; that is the answer to the secret!’

Medea's blue-lidded eyes grew wide; her nostrils flared as though she had the power to breathe fire over me, to shrivel me like some flame-spouting dragon. But instead she waved imperiously with her plump and well-formed hand towards a young Amazon girl who sat on a fringed red cushion below the throne.

The Amazon's face showed no change of expression as she first bowed her cropped head then plunged forward like a young runner in the funeral games in Athens. At the edge of the pit she halted to kiss the hem of Medea's skirt; then, stripping off her leather buskins, she jumped among the snakes.

I watched in some horror as their vicious hammer-heads beat at her legs and thighs. Her mouth made the shape of screaming for a little while, then her eyes rolled back and the spittle gathered on her lips like sea-foam. She staggered a while and, just when she seemed about to fall among the furious, seething mass of vipers, Medea made another sign and two warrior-women caught their fellow below the armpits and hauled her arching body out on to the stones of the floor.

The Goddess smiled down at me, her mouth twisted in triumph.

'Do you still say their fangs are drawn, Jason?' she asked. 'Look at her wounds. Feel her heartbeats. Touch the wet body and brow of one who truly knows agony.'

The girl's skin was as cold as ice and it seemed that her heart had given up the struggle of beating any longer. I rose painfully and was about to speak the angry words which already came to my tongue, when Medea pushed me aside, and forcing open the girl's clenched teeth, thrust something into her mouth, then stood away.

Before my eyes the stiffening body began to soften, to flush with life again. A smile moved across the girl's face and her eyelids flickered. She slowly sat up, then crawled towards Medea and once more kissed the sequined flounce of her skirt.

'Take her away, you others,' the Goddess said. 'She will need rest after her ordeal.'

Then Medea walked slowly back to her golden chair and was lifted into it by four of the women.

'What do you say now, Jason of Lemnos?' she asked proudly. 'Can your healing match my own?'

I fell down before her and said, ‘Lady, if it could, I should heal my own wounds. You are my conqueror. I can say no more.’

I have seen enough women of that domineering sort to know that if a man gives way before them they will, by some perversity, or by some inner weakness of the female kind, lose their firmness for a while—long enough for a clever man to find a way of redressing the balance. This I counted on in that moment, and to my great joy it worked.

Medea’s features lost something of their stiffness, her dark eyes came suddenly to life, as though she was uncertain what to do. And then she said in a voice less stony than before, ‘So, there is honesty in you, Jason. You are man enough to admit defeat. What are these wounds you speak of, man?’

I played my next trick then and said, ‘Kush-kush, the great one in whose shadow I am not fit to walk, has thought it proper to have my hand crushed and my rib stove in. A small penalty, lady, for my stupidity in threatening his sacred life.’

Even a fool should have seen through my words—but Medea did not, goddess as she claimed to be.

‘Kush-kush!’ she muttered, her face lit with a new anger. ‘When will that thing of the dung-heap cease to play his barbarous games! When shall we be free of him in this city! He belittles us in the eyes of the world!’

She came down the steps once more and paced the small room, the stiff fabric of her many skirts adding their rustle to the hissing of the snakes. Each time, her skirt brushed my face as I kneeled before her empty throne, wondering how well my plan might turn out. A heavy aromatic scent came from this goddess as she walked near me. A strange and thrilling scent—that of death in life, or life in death, I do not know which; a scent which caused me to think of the name *Persephone*.

And at last Medea bent and touched my back with her warm finger-tips, in the place where the pain was. Many wicked things has she done in her lifetime, and many times has she betrayed and humiliated me; but I swear that something came from her hands that night, some soothing love, some healing. I felt it surge through me like the vibrating strings of the lyre, and set all the nerves of my body tingling.

‘Lady,’ I murmured. ‘Oh, lady! What have you done to me?’

When next I knew anything, I lay in a soft bed with lamps burning about me and tame doves cooing in the rafters. My body had been stripped and washed clean; bandages were bound about my hand and chest. The scent of

crushed herbs and aromatic oils came from them. Medea was bending over me, her long black hair lying on the coverlet beside me, holding a cup of spiced wine to my lips.

'Drink this, Jason,' she was saying in a low warm voice. 'Drink this and be strong again.'

I drank, then smiled and said, 'Why do you wish me strong, Goddess? You thought me your enemy.'

She fed me with the white flesh of a chicken, held in her fingers, as one would feed a pet leopard or a lynx.

Desire and love issued from her body as she stood so close to me. Her voice was warm now, not the cold tone she had used in her throne room.

'I wish you to be strong because you are the man who shall put an end to Kush-kush,' she said.

'Nothing more, Goddess?' I asked, holding my mouth open again for the wine.

Medea leaned forward with the cup, then suddenly drew it away and pressed her lips on mine. I felt the wine spill over my shoulder, and knew the warmth that body brings to body.

After a while she rose a little way and whispered, 'I have chosen you, *King* Jason. You, a Hellene, not a flat-faced Scythian like the princes here. Oh, I have dreamed of your coming for so long. What do you say to me, *King* Jason?'

I began to say, 'Goddess . . .' But she placed her fingers over my mouth and whispered down at me, 'That is for the public place, not for the bed, beloved. Speak bravely to me, as to a woman and not an image of stone.'

I said, measuring my words, 'You are the most lovely woman I have seen, Medea. You are the most powerful, the most desirable. But how can you be for me? You have a husband.'

Now, I swear to you, I really did want her then. And she had some magic about her that made her seem more lovely even than my sweet Queen of Lemnos. So I was speaking the truth to her; though, at the same time, I was testing her. A man is capable of doing these two things at once, with honesty. If a woman does it, then she is being dishonest. That is one of the great differences between the two. I tell you this, and I have been a king in many places and know what is true. I am not a common man babbling, I assure you.

Medea shook the black mane of hair away from her face and tied it back with a golden ribbon. Then she blew through her nostrils, as though in disgust, though not at me.

‘A husband!’ she echoed, in mockery. ‘My brother! Apsyrtus, the Streaming One! Do you understand what that means, Jason? A husband, you say! A streaming one!’

Then she began to laugh, rocking backwards and forwards on my bed until I feared she would awake the palace.

I put my arms about her and when she had finished laughing she began to cry. Then she did nothing at all but rolled over beside me and lay like an unhappy girl in my arms.

‘Goddesses,’ I thought. ‘All women beneath the gold and the stiff brocades. All women; all to be conquered at last!’

And thinking so I went to sleep.

28

Many People and the Tasks

SHORTLY before dawn I awoke, troubled by a thought which my wounds and the excitements of the last two days had driven from my mind.

Medea was awake, too, beside me, staring into my eyes.

She smiled when I stared about me. 'Sleep again, husband,' she said. 'All will be well, I promise you.'

'Can you enter another's dreams then?' I asked, wondering.

She stroked my face and whispered, 'There was no need. All night you have been talking of the crew of the *Argo*, asking where they are, if they were safe, and so on. I have lain awake listening to you.'

Outside, the last of the winter winds was blowing itself away. The samite curtains which covered our windows rose and fell, rippling like scarlet waves.

'What of them then, lady?' I asked softly, almost like a slave.

Medea smiled again and held me close. 'They are all safe and well, even that Atalanta you have called out for half the night. They are in the palace; many of them put to bed in the dormitory of my Amazon guard. They should have no complaints. Those girls are loyal to my commands.'

I said, 'And you commanded them to entertain my men, lady?'

She shook her head and lowered her eyelids a little. 'No, Jason-husband,' she answered. 'I told them that you would be cared for in my own room. It was their Captain, Xantha the Golden-skinned, the girl who went into the snake-pit, who spoke for them. She said, "What the Goddess does, her slaves can do no less." That was all.'

I lay back smiling then; thinking that our voyage had not been so unfortunate after all. True, there had been set-backs, but Lemnos had paid for many of them—and now this Colchis, after an unpromising start, was turning out better than I had dreamed of. Besides, it was a very rich city. We Hellenes needed gold above all things. . . .

As dawn came slowly through the window-holes, and the winds dropped, the curtains before the doorway swept aside and the great Eagle King stood over us, a dark shadow in the weak northern light. Without his mask, his long face and light plaited hair seemed handsome to me. His cloak swept about him, making him seem a giant as I lay below him, my arms about his daughter.

Aeëtes nodded and smiled in the pale light.

‘So the Goddess has given you her answer, Jason,’ he said softly. ‘It is well.’

Then he passed from the room again, as lightly as the morning breezes, and I found myself shivering beside Medea.

‘Have no fears, husband,’ she said. ‘The Eagle King is no monster, whatever folk have said of him. He is a Hellene like yourself, who was forced to leave his birthplace and has now gained for himself a rich kingdom. He has great power, indeed, but he does not misuse it. All the wickedness that has been done in Colchis can be laid at the doors of Kush-kush the Cripple, and my foolish brother, Apsyrtus, who craves to sit in my father’s place on the throne.’

I said, ‘Apsyrtus plots with Kush-kush, is that it?’

She nodded. ‘Kush-kush will not pull the meat from the glowing fire for another to eat,’ she said. ‘If Aeëtes falls, Kush-kush will not wait long before he hangs Apsyrtus in the tree beside the Eagle King.’

I must have gazed at her with a puzzled expression for she said hurriedly, ‘Can you not see that you have been long awaited here—by everyone?’

I said, ‘I do not understand, Medea. I am a simple fellow who came to Colchis for a shipload of gold at the command of my king, the tyrant Pelias.’

Since she knew so much, there was little point in saying less than I did; though I must confess, as I spoke, I did not feel like a simple fellow at all. I felt very sly, very crafty, and very confident.

What Medea answered then took away some of that confidence and let me see that others were as sly as I thought I was.

‘I must explain to you, beloved,’ she said quietly and slowly, as though she were talking to a little child. ‘In ruling a great kingdom such as this is, things are never as simple as they may seem. It is as though the gods put problems on us, once we have accepted power from them. Only a herdsman

living in his tent on the plains is free of problems, and even he may think that the gods have set him great tasks, gathering fuel, finding grassland, hoping that the Spring will come early and his herds will multiply.'

I dared to ask, 'What are the problems in Colchis, dear one?'

She was long answering; then at length she said, 'My father fears for the safety of his kingdom against Kush-kush; he even suspects that his son may snatch the bone from under his nose. In Scythia son kills father when the time comes, just as the young buck kills the old stag. In these wild places, it is a law of nature, of the savage gods who rule the howling plains. My brother, by decree, is such a god.'

I whispered, 'But you are a goddess, and quite as strong as your brother. Is that not so?' There was slyness in my question.

Medea snapped her fingers and said with a bitter smile, 'Do not tell me that you are deceived by the gold paint, Jason! Or by the mask that my father wears. Those things are for the Scythians, not for Hellenes like you, men of thought, of wisdom.'

I took her by the wrist and said, 'But the snake-pit . . . Only a goddess could have walked among the vipers as you did, lady.' To tell the truth, I was anxious to learn this trick.

She waited a while, then answered, 'It is a trade that must be learned like any other trade—that of goddess, of priestess, call it what you like. There is a long preparation, lover. Just as there is for those who write and those who read, and those who play sweetly upon the lyre. Nothing more. When I was a child, my mother prepared me for fame by putting snake-venom in my milk—always a little more each moon-turning. When they let the first snake bite me—a very small snake for a small girl—it made me ill, but did not kill me. So they knew that I was moving towards godhead. After that a snake bit me every seventh day; then every third day. I have been bitten by the little hissing worms all my life, and each time their biting caused me less pain, less concern. Now I get into their pit perhaps three times each day and it is no more to me than being stung by a horse-fly. That is all there is to know.'

I nodded and then said, 'But your magic in healing the girl who followed you into the pit?'

She smiled. 'Oh, Xantha,' she said. 'She, too, has had some practise in drinking the snake-broth and in being bitten before. Yet to be sure that she did not die I placed a lozenge of snake-venom in her mouth—a dried paste of flour and venom. She is one who has given me pleasure—in the

battlefield, the garden and the palace. I would not wish to lose her. Did you not see, she sits upon the red cushion below the throne? She is my "adopted one," as they say in Colchis. Her gentleness consoles me for the brutish ways of my husband-brother, Apsyrtus.'

I stayed silent a while and then said, 'With such a friend, how can you need me, Medea?'

The princess gazed up at the rafters where the doves cooed to each other in the morning light.

'One day your questioning will put poison in your cup,' she answered, never looking at me.

I did not reply to this, but still smiled at her, waiting. She made herself turn towards me at last and said, 'Xantha has no power to father a child on me. And the son of Apsyrtus I would choke as he came into the world. Is that enough?'

I said, 'Enough, Goddess.' No more than that.

I could not use her name when she spoke in that fashion; for she was speaking not as a woman but as something beyond woman, beyond the kindness of the heart, the reason of the mind; a heartless, mindless thing—a goddess.

She rolled from the bed like a tired woman then and clapped her hands for the women to come in and wash her and deck her body out once more with the tricks of her divinity.

All Amazons, they paid no more attention to me as they knelt about her than if I had been a footstool or a favourite hound. And that is how I felt as I leaned on my elbow, watching, amused, a sleepy traveller from Hellas. One chosen by the Goddess at the port of landing, safe for the moment, and contented in that safety as a man is contented to rest within a cavern when the thunderstorm is roaring outside.

29

The High Garden

THERE was an enclosed green place set between the angles of several walls, high above the central court of the Eagle Palace. It was quiet there and I could look down on the folk below without myself being observed. Red flowers trailed from stone urns, watered by a fountain-spray that came down from the mountains above the city.

Winter had passed, and my body was strong again. The Spring of the year arrived early in Colchis, and the flowers bloomed when ours of Hellas were still close-locked inside the tight green bud.

My men were not unhappy in this place. The food and wine were good, perhaps too good. And we were regarded with fear and respect, which always pleases a man. The mincing descendants of the early Corinthians who had come to Colchis were a weary, inbred folk; to them we seemed like striding gods of Hellas. To the Scythians we were men of mystery and giant strength. Castor and Polydeuces had seen to that—by taking on four Scythian wrestlers, the best among the skin-tents, and beating them almost to idiocy with their iron Spartan fists.

I played my own part in these affairs, for I had not lost my skill with the javelins. Melanos had done his job well.

Kush-kush came to see me one evening, just after I had sent Xantha away and was resting, lazy and content. He was carried up the white marble steps to the High Garden, as it was called, and was set down by his slaves in the shelter of the white wall beneath a flowering urn. The trailing creeper hung over him like red blood. I smiled to observe this, lazy on my couch after the young Amazon's visit.

Kush-kush stared at me through his little pig's eyes for a while and then caused his parchment face to smile.

'You have quickly become a man of power here, Jason,' he said.

I nodded, and chose a dried almond from among the basket of fruits and nuts that Medea always had placed by my couch. I bit it slowly, not looking

at Kush-kush, but treating him as though he were beneath regard.

The last piece of almond I did not eat, but flicked it with my thumb and finger, so that it almost struck him.

I said, ‘To Medea the Goddess I am Jason. I am Jason also to the Eagle King. That is as it should be. But to you, who are neither a goddess nor a king, I am the Prince of Colchis. Address me by the title that Aeëtes, your master, has given me.’

Kush-kush swallowed hard and did not answer for a while.

Then he shrugged his narrow shoulders and made the mockery of a bow towards me.

‘Prince of Colchis,’ he said, ‘I passed Xantha on the steps. She had the look of a woman who has worked hard to please a prince.’

I nodded and picked out a piece of nut from between my teeth.

‘She is teaching me the speech of her land,’ I said, ‘and I am not an apt pupil. Such a pupil tires a teacher, Kush-kush.’

The dwarf smiled and said, ‘Medea will be pleased to know that her “adopted one” has worked so hard with you. Your own priestess, the woman Atalanta, has been speaking with me. She tells me that you are always an exacting pupil.’

I drew my short Mycenaean dirk from the belt at my waist, as though to test its edge, watched the dwarf’s eyes widen, and then pushed the weapon back slowly.

‘I have been known to tire some folk to death,’ I said. ‘Folk who thought to teach me what they wanted, and not what I wanted.’

Kush-kush nodded. ‘That is understood,’ he said, smiling again. ‘No one takes lightly such men as you, Prince of Colchis.’

I began to scratch myself and to yawn, behaving badly to show my contempt. He waited until I was still again, then said quietly, ‘You and I could rule Colchis, my friend.’

I sneezed and answered, ‘Colchis has a king, and a princess, and another prince, who stand before me in the reckoning.’

The hunched man under the flowering urn bowed his head and closed his eyes. When he spoke it was but as though a little breeze had blown among

the red flowers, no more. Hardly anything a man could hear, unless he had a cat's ears. My ears have always been keen, like a cat's.

'Together we could give the wheel a new centre, the world a new sun, now that Cnossus has fallen.'

I belched and scratched at the mat of hair that had grown on my chest in the last year or so.

I said, 'Wish in one hand, Kush-kush, and make water in the other. See which comes true first.'

Kush-kush leaned his great head to one side and winked his right slit of an eye. 'Yes, you are a tiring pupil,' he whispered. 'But that need not last for ever. There are other ways of teaching than those which little Xantha uses—though I shall commend her efforts to the Goddess, Medea, be assured.'

He was most angry, yet I admired him for showing it so little. He snapped his fingers twice and the slaves appeared and carried him down the white steps again. I could have put my dagger in his back then, up in the High Garden, and no one to see me do it—but I felt lazy, and there seemed more days to come, more nights, more of everything. When one is young, that is how it always seems. So one is amazed to find that this hour might be the last hour, this food the last food, this refreshing drink a cup of poison.

But there was perhaps another reason why I did not kill Kush-kush. With half an ear I had sensed the movement of feet in the great courtyard below, and that peculiar quiet humming that the King's Killers always made when they escorted Aeëtes from place to place within the palace. That was one of their privileges—when all others must be silent and fall upon their faces as the king passed.

If Aeëtes was on his way to see me, then it would not look well for the dwarf to be lying with me in the little garden and my dirk in his ribs. Not that the Eagle King would have minded, that I knew well enough; but there would be others with him, the Scythian captains, of whom I was not sure. They were a sudden and excitable lot, and I did not want a lance in me before Aeëtes could prevent it.

But I was wrong. The Eagle King came into the garden alone, though I heard the captains whispering beyond the walls, as though they waited for him.

He was dressed in a purple cloak and the golden mask, which he flung from his head as soon as he had stretched out on the grass beside my couch.

I did not rise to greet him. In private, he and I had long come to an understanding—as fellow-Hellenes.

‘Jason, my son,’ he said, without much pause, ‘things are coming to a head in Colchis. It is almost the time for us to act, I think.’

I said, ‘That has been in my mind, Father, for some days. I am glad that you speak your heart to me.’

He placed his great clawed hand upon my leg and said, ‘You are closer to me than the son I begot on one of my wives, Jason. The gods have been good to me in sending such a son here when I most needed one. Apsyrtus is weak and afraid. Kush-kush has frightened him, I think. I cannot trust my own son, you see, Jason. He is likely to break away from me and use his horsemen to ride me off the throne. Then Kush-kush will crown him, and afterwards find the occasion to poison him.’

I nodded and smiled. ‘Yes, that is the problem,’ I said lightly. ‘And how can we avoid it, Father?’

Aeëtes said, ‘One must act like a Hellene, like a Spartan Hellene. That is clear to me.’

I made a gesture as though the king had discovered a new truth. Then I bowed my head before him to hide my smile, and he went on. ‘You will save Colchis from this terror. That is why Zeus sent you here. First, you will marry my daughter Medea and so become a god. Through her, both you and I will rule, safe from the fear of sacrifice. Kush-kush and poor Apsyrtus will have to become as nothing, be made to disappear. So Colchis will be safe for us.’

I looked him in the eye and said, ‘What then, Eagle?’

He smiled and picked at a silver thread which hung from his cloak.

‘The Sly One,’ he said. ‘You are well-named, Diomedes! I will tell you, since you ask. When I am safe, holding this throne for my daughter, you and Medea will sail back to Iolcos with the load of gold that Pelias wants. It is little enough and we shall not miss it, here in this rich land. You and she will then find the occasion to put Pelias out of the way—he will be easily tricked, when he has once held the gold in his hands. Later, you and Medea will pass on to Corinth, where I am still the king in the eyes of the gods. So you will become the tyrant there and set up my house again. The end will be that our family will hold half of the world. How do you like that, my son?’

I whistled like a surprised street-boy and said, ‘A Colchian League, to match anything the Achaeans have thought of! Our power will reach farther than the arm of Zeus!’

This seemed to trouble Aeëtes for an instant, but he passed his hand over his forehead and said mildly, ‘Let us be discreet when the gods are listening, my son. We all know that the arm of Zeus has no length—it stretches beyond man’s measuring. But you are young and the God will understand, perhaps.’

His red-veined eyes were those of a fearsome man, but a madman at the same time, a power-crazed madman. He dreamed of ruling the whole world, I could see. Just as his daughter, the woman who kept me in her bed to keep her brother out of it, was power-mad.

But who among the kings of that time was not power-mad? I know that Agamemnon was, and Priam, too, when their time came. It was an understandable madness of kings, though let me stress to you that I never suffered from it. I only wanted fame as a warrior, like the Spartans. Enough land to stand on, and my only possessions a pair of well-balanced javelins, and a horse. Don’t forget the horse; I was reared with them. I was always a simple fellow at heart.

I said, ‘Very well, Father; we shall rule the world, with the aid of Zeus.’

The Eagle King rose to his feet and clasped my hand.

‘That is good, my son,’ he said. ‘Now I have your sacred promise, made in the gaze of the All Mighty One.’

He began to sing, a little verse that Orpheus had made up for him; but stopped in the middle of a line and said, ‘But I beg you, kill Apsyrtus gently; for he is my son after all.’

I bowed my head and answered, ‘That was in my mind, Eagle. I hope that he will choose to die quietly. I cannot control that.’

Aeëtes paused, his clawed hand on the low gate that led into the garden. He was like a man in a slow dream.

‘Your marriage to Medea,’ he said, as though whispering to himself, ‘will be made easy. The marriage tasks will cause you no trouble. Yet one must perform them so that the watching gods may be satisfied and may bless the union.’

He turned and smiled at me broadly, a moon-calf’s smile. I bowed my head; and when I had raised it again, he had put on the golden mask and had

drawn himself up to his fullest height before going out to join his waiting captains beyond the white wall of the little garden.

30

Apsyrtus

I WAS out riding with a score of my Hellenes in the long grass country beyond the city when the first untoward incident happened. Polydeuces and I were separated from the others, questing for hares, trying our small ponies against each other, laughing and teasing one another—as we all did when we were together.

The Spartan was just saying, 'I don't think you are shaking the dice very wisely. This kingdom isn't Hellas, you know.'

I recall staring at him in wonder. 'What lies behind those words, flat-nose?' I asked.

Polydeuces turned his pony round to see that we were alone, that the others were far behind, specks in the distance, and then said, 'That young girl, Xantha. They hung her upside down, with hide-ropes, from the city wall early this morning. Then later some of the fellows with the fur hats shot arrows into her. She was calling out for you when she died.'

I said, 'Many women have called out for me, brother.' But though I had put on a stern face, my heart thudded. Medea was to blame; she had heard of our secret and had taken her vengeance. And I knew from whom she had heard that secret.

I had not seen Medea for seven days. She had been on some secret journey into the hills with three of her priestesses and a strong company of Amazon guards. I had not enquired where she was going, nor had she said farewell to me. A strange chillness had come over her. I began to think that Polydeuces was right, that I had rolled the dice wrong, in playing with poor Xantha.

But I was not allowed time to brood on this, however, for suddenly, as we entered a narrow gully where the grasses were already to the height of my saddle, our mounts stumbled, snorted and bucked, then fell sideways to the ground.

I rolled clear and saw that my pony's forelegs were wrapped round with thongs, at the end of which were stone balls. Polydeuces was on his knees, bellowing and shaking his fists, shouting out about an ambush, when men rose from the high grasses and took both of us roughly by the arms and legs. They did not speak a word to each other, these fellows in the high fur hats. It was as though all had been arranged carefully beforehand.

Polydeuces struck out at one or two, but their leader hit him skilfully behind the ear with the shaft of a bronze axe, and then Polydeuces went limp and struck out no more. They tied his wrists, but I noticed that they did not tie mine. They did not need to—I was not strong enough to break from their grasp in any case, although they were much smaller men than we.

Then they hustled us swiftly in and out of the long grass and towards a cavern which lay in a rocky outcrop, hidden by swaying reeds.

Apsyrtus was sitting there on a boulder, his sword in his hand, many men clustered behind him, all waiting, the arrows on the bowstring.

Polydeuces was flung into a corner and ignored, although by now he was rolling his eyes horribly and biting his lips until the blood ran into his red beard.

Apsyrtus looked so young to be decked out in plated armour and wearing his tall horse-mane helmet that I could not take him seriously and began to laugh. As a god in a procession, with the thick robes covering his slight body, and the young face caked with gold, he was acceptable, as a sort of god-like doll; but in warrior-gear he was nothing but a boy playing at soldiers.

I say I laughed. And as I did so, a squat man in a fox-skin cap strode forward and struck me with the back of his hand. It was a heavy blow for one of his size, and made my head ring.

Apsyrtus smiled now and said, 'That was unfortunate, Hellene. But if you do not know our customs you must be taught them.'

I shook my head to clear it, then said, 'My men are close behind, boy. They will want to know why I am treated so.'

Apsyrtus said, 'I hope they do not come, for their own sakes. But I do not think they will come, anyway. Men of mine let loose a hundred hares in their path and I think they will be chasing those creatures until dusk.'

Then he grinned again and added, 'You have no idea what trouble we went to, catching a hundred hares and bringing them out here in wicker

baskets!'

'Am I worth such trouble to you, boy?' I asked, sneering.

He rose from the boulder and began to mince about the cavern. Then he stopped and nodded. 'Yes, Jason,' he said, 'I think you are. There is much that I want to say to you, and in the palace the opportunity does not occur, since we must always treat each other formally. Besides which, my father's guards are always about there.'

I said boldly, 'You are angry with me because your sister the Goddess has shown some liking for me. Is that it?'

He threw back his head and laughed aloud.

'Why, Medea!' he said at last. 'You are one of many, my friend! I could not count them if I had ten hands! Her trade as a priestess calls for such wide commerce. Think of all the visiting kings and princes who come to Colchis. We could not be inhospitable and offer them the common women of the street-houses.'

I said, the anger rising in me now, 'But you do not like it because Medea loves me, of all others.'

My words sounded false to my own ears as I spoke them. Apsyrtus came beside me and patted me on the shoulder as one would a big rough dog of whom one is uncertain.

He shook his head and said, 'Love? Medea love? You are more stupid than I thought, Hellene. I am not angry with you at all. I am a prince, not a market-haggler who goes red in the face when he is bested in a bargain. And soon I shall be a king. Does a king get angry because a sailor enjoys himself at the court of Colchis for a few months? No, my friend, there is no place for anger in the ruling of a kingdom.'

He sat down and waved to me to do the same. We squatted together on the boulder, like friends. Then he said, 'It is all very simple, Jason, or Diomedes, or whatever you call yourself. You are a nuisance, that is all—and not because of my sister, but because you are an interfering fellow, a sly devil. Things of some importance are likely to happen in Colchis very soon, and it would be foolish for those concerned to let their plans be hampered by a wandering sailor. Do you understand, friend?'

I waited a while and then said, 'Yes, I think I do. You either intend to kill me, and so get me out of the way, or you mean to ask me to join your party and help you in the revolt. Is that it?'

The young man laughed again and slapped his white hand on his buskined thigh. ‘Oh, Hellene!’ he said. ‘But you set too high a value on yourself! Kill you, and have your kinsmen from Iolcos come seeking me next year? No! That would be foolish. But it would also be just as foolish to ask you to join me. First, I could not trust a man like you. And second, you have no more than fifty rough fellows to bring to my army, whereas by sending out my sign among the tribes of the plains I could raise a thousand trained riders in four days.’

I was very puzzled then. This smiling youth Apsyrtus truly made me feel a barbarian, a bearded fool, much as the Minoans must have made my wagon-chief forefathers feel fools because of their beef-fed slow minds and their shouting and belching at the feast-board.

‘Very well,’ I said. ‘What is it, Prince?’

Apsyrtus leaned towards me and said gently, ‘Simply this: you came here to get a shipload of gold. Very well, you shall have it. Colchis has more than it will ever need. Load it, in peace, and then go back home and leave our affairs to us.’

I pretended to think about this for a while and said, ‘What if I seemed to agree to this but came back next year with a fleet of ships to take the rest of your gold from you?’

He rubbed his thin hands together like a cat washing itself, then said, ‘Once you have left Colchis you will never return. Have you seen the size of our navy? Do you know that we also have a pact with Troy to keep such as you out of the inland sea?’

I answered, ‘We have been here once; we could do it again.’

Apsyrtus whispered, ‘One ship may slip through, a dozen would be sunk before they had come through the Hellespont, my friend. Besides, make no mistake, we followed every mile you rowed. We knew that sooner or later we should have to deal with you. But what is one ship? We can afford to let that fly stray into our web; it brings amusement with it.’

I said, ‘Your words make sense. But what if I refuse your offer, Prince?’

Apsyrtus said, ‘You would only refuse because you wish to get your hands on the kingdom of Corinth, through my sister. Very well, we will add Medea to the bargain. You shall take her, too, in the *Argo*, and have your kingdom of Corinth, if you can get it. I want nothing of it. I shall have my work cut out ruling my own Colchis once the blow has been struck. There are riches and power enough for me here. Now what say you?’

Apsyrtus seemed honest enough as he spoke. There was something about his young face which, though it reminded me of Hylas to a degree, I did not find unpleasant.

I said, ‘So you will give me a shipload of gold, and let me take your sister away with me? Is that it? And in return, I must swear upon the sacred shrines never to come here again?’

He nodded. ‘Just that,’ he said. ‘And I consider it to be a fair arrangement.’

I rose and touched the hem of his skirt with my lips. He was, after all, a great prince, and seemed soon to be a great king. A little public deference never does harm to an adventurer who finds himself outnumbered.

‘So be it, Apsyrtus,’ I said. ‘I swear to keep my side of the bargain. I pray to the gods that you will.’

For an instant a cloud passed over his unwrinkled face, as though he did not like my reference to the gods. But then he smiled and said, ‘I have never broken my word to a fellow-warrior yet. To old kings and their hangers-on, yes; but to warriors, no. Go in peace, with your bull-necked friend, and take your gold and your girl. After that, think of Colchis only as an ancient dream which will never come to you again.’

They untied Polydeuces and gave him a goatskin flask of wine to empty. He had forgotten his anger after hearing the words which passed between Apsyrtus and myself.

The prince felt in his pouch and then pressed a finely-chased gold seal into my hand. It showed an eagle lying dead with an arrow in it.

‘Keep this as a memory of me, Jason,’ he said. ‘It may get you out of difficulties if your ship is stopped by the Trojans on the way back. One must always be prepared for such things. Farewell and may good fortune perch on your prow.’

Polydeuces and I reached the palace long before our fellows. It seemed that the hundred hares of Apsyrtus had kept them truly busy.

I was just able to warn Polydeuces not to breathe a word of what had happened that day when a pale-faced eunuch wearing the royal livery came into my room and told me that the Eagle King had been searching high and low for me, and wished to see me without delay.

Polydeuces and I smiled at each other. Then I put on a clean tunic of yellow linen, combed my straggling hair, and went to the audience room.

31

The Tasks

THE guards before the king's door were expecting me. They grounded the butts of their javelins and stared ahead, making no move to prevent me from passing. I recalled my oath to Apsyrtus in the cavern that afternoon, and wondered what I should say to Aeëtes. My mind was very confused by all the various arrangements I had made.

The king sat alone at a round gilt table, eating iced fruits from a silver dish. He wore no body armour; only a silk wrapper and a narrow bronze circlet about his long fair hair. His fingers and wrists were bare of rings and bracelets.

As I entered, he yawned and said, 'Greetings, my son. I have been waiting for you. You have been back from hunting long enough to have paid me a visit, have you not?'

He pushed the fruit bowl towards me and I took a handful of grapes, so frozen in honey that they seemed as solid as pebbles, until the warmth of my mouth thawed them and let them run deliciously down my throat.

I ate slowly for I had much to think about. I even wondered, as the syrup melted on my tongue, whether I might improve my chances by drawing my dirk and killing the King of Colchis at this moment. True, he was a fine man, tall and handsome in his way; and he had been kind to me. But if he was to die anyway, and Medea and Corinth come to me, might I not gain greater favour with Apsyrtus and even Pelias of Iolcos, if I made the first move? I imagined myself bargaining with the young prince for three extra galleys of gold—after such a deed were done. Aeëtes was munching busily at a plum, not caring if the juice ran into his golden beard. I thought that three swift blows would do the thing.

Then he looked up at me with a smile and said, 'Sit, my son. You look uncomfortable. And there is much to say to you. First, the marriage tasks—these will be simple ones, as I have said. As you know, all men who take a princess to wife must pass the tests. But, as you perhaps do not know, not having been a king yourself . . .'

I held up my hand and stopped him, jestingly. ‘You forget that I was the King of Lemnos, Father,’ I said.

He waved my words aside. ‘Yes, yes, that is understood. A summer’s frolic, no more. I speak of great kingdoms now. As I say, if you had been such a one, you would know that marriage tests are hard for those whom the father does not want as his son, and easy for those he loves. The common folk are never allowed to see what passes; they are told later by the heralds in the market square. If by chance a wandering shepherd saw the truth, then he would never be allowed to speak to his fellows. He would be struck by dumbness for witnessing the sight. The gods would see to that.’

I said, ‘Tongue cut out, Father?’

He smiled, but did not answer. Instead, he went on. ‘Your tasks will be three; first, to yoke the brazen bulls of Hephaestus, and to plough three furrows with them; then to sow it with dragon’s teeth; and last, to overcome the great serpent which guards the sacred fleece in a cavern beside the upland waters of the river Phasis. So, Medea, the gold, Iolcos and Corinth are yours, my son. The world is yours, indeed, for after I am gone, there will be a throne in my city of Aea for you, or your sons, to sit on.’

I said, ‘You make it sound too easy, Father; but remember that though I have broken many stallions, I have never tamed a bull, killed a serpent, nor ploughed a field! How will that work?’

I will be frank; I was already feeling for my dagger beneath the gilded table as I spoke. The madness I had seen in the eyes of Aeëtes that night in the little garden was coming back, and I feared that he was raving once more, that this was another trick to put an end to me, however nicely it was dressed up in pleasant words.

He chose an iced pear and began to suck at it. Then he looked up and whispered, the juice seeping from his lips, ‘The bulls of Hephaestus are of bronze, and have never moved since we set them up beyond the palace. Your “bulls” will be tame and painted bullocks, whose only claim to maleness will be the stuffed leather pouches that swing between their legs—much like the great phalluses that the priests wear at the festival of Dionysus. They will not cause you trouble. As for the ploughing, that will be done by my favourite grandson, Aegeus, who will be dressed as your twin, since Heracles is not here, and who delights in such rustic sports, being half a peasant himself. His mother was a farmer’s daughter from the uplands beyond Ares; one I captured on a little sporting raid in my young days.’

‘The serpent?’ I said, idly wondering. ‘What of that?’

Aeëtes nodded and said, ‘A trick to frighten away marauders from the gold-factory, my son. Inside a great snakeskin, brought to me by a merchant from the farthest sun-rising, we put three of our slimmest young boys. They are trained for the trick and writhe most fearsomely. And so they should, for their period of training is a long one. Some of them only learn the movements by the time they are too plump to go on as snake dancers, and then it is too late. But they are dedicated youths and live well enough while they last.’

I stared at him, bewildered. He saw my look and went on. ‘You see, they are under the care of my priestesses in the grotto at Ares. These good women see that the boys go back to the Mother when they become too fat to be sewn into the snakeskin. It would not do to have them babbling all over Colchis that the serpent is not real. And boys do babble, out of pride, when they can. Mine are kept in the grotto, away from all others. However, while they live, they are provided for; the priestesses keep them on a strict diet, true, but food is not all. There are other pleasures that a boy may enjoy, pleasures which have never fattened any man!’

He reached for another pear and smacked his lips.

I had half-drawn my dirk now and was watching the place at the side of the king’s neck, where a vein beat slowly.

He said, ‘Do not look so concerned, Jason. I know you think there must be something else, something that I have not told you of, perhaps. Well, there is. But it is as foolish as the bulls and the serpent! It is this: after the field is ploughed, you will sow it with magic teeth. I will tell you that these dragon’s teeth, as the people call them, came out of the mouths of nothing more warlike than boars. Creatures killed in the chase over the years—all killed by kings, however; we must grant them that importance. This is an interesting ceremony for it concerns more than you, my friend.’

I said lightly, ‘It seems that Colchis is full of interesting ceremonies, Father. I shall be sorry to leave it.’

He paused in his eating then and gave me such a look as halted me in my thoughts. I saw for the first time why the people had called him the Eagle; his eyes were almost an amber colour, and their pupils were not round like those of other men, but more of the shape of crescent moons, and very cold and piercing. I tell you, as he looked at me, my blood ran chill; I felt more

like a hare or a helpless mouse between the paws of a cat than a warrior and a shipmaster.

He looked down again, clenching and unclenching his strong fingers.

‘It is a custom among my daughter’s Amazons,’ he said carefully, ‘that each should kill a man before she is permitted to marry. Some break the rule, of course, as all women do. Poor Xantha was one. She was beloved of my daughter, but she broke the rule nevertheless, and had to pay the traditional penalty. I hope that the pleasure she gained in the marriage bed seemed worth the pain as she hung over the high wall, watching the archers putting the arrows to their bows.’

I felt the sweat burst from my forehead. My hands clasped round each other, and I could not move, I was so afraid at the king’s words. Perhaps I had been wondering when this topic would be raised; I had not thought it would be now, though.

Aeëtes did not seem to observe my distress, but went on. ‘All things here in Colchis are performed according to ancient custom, you must know. Not as in parts of Hellas, where the old ways are dying or dead, and the new rough ways taking their place. Here, an Amazon must kill a man before she is considered fit to bear one, for the Mother. So the ritual is this: the young maidens who have a fancy for marriage are buried in the earth, which is the Mother herself, the night before their trial. It is only a light covering that is placed upon them, and I believe they have straws to breathe through. This is a sign that they come from the womb of the Mother and must return to it at last. At the other side of the Field of Ares, also lightly buried, are those young Scythian men who desire to be known as warriors. At a signal, the teeth are scattered, a trumpet is blown, and all break from their graves, pick their opponents, and then fight to the death, one side or the other. So, in Colchis, we are assured that all Amazons to marry are strong creatures, who will not die easily in childbirth as do the weak women of Crete; also we know that those men who count themselves warriors are worthy of the name. And you, who are soon to enjoy marriage yourself, will give the signal that allows marriage to others. It is a fair exchange, my son, do you not think?’

I said, ‘A fair exchange, Father.’ My fear had suddenly left me, and I knew now that if I was to kill the Eagle King it must be done then, as he leaned back in his chair. I rose and moved round towards him, as though stretching my legs and thinking.

When I was almost behind him, I said, driven by some strange fancy, ‘Your true son, Apsyrtus, will not like me to marry Medea and push him from his place. Must he die as well as lose his wife and his kingdom, Eagle?’

I was remembering my oath to Apsyrtus in the cavern that day and I wanted Zeus to hear that I was fulfilling it.

Aeëtes did not move his body, but gently pushed the empty fruit dish from the table. It clattered to the stone floor and rang like a gong. The thing was done so naturally that I did not suspect it until the door before me opened and I saw Medea standing there, her face gilded, her eyes dark and staring, her black hair crimped and curled until it flowed over her shoulders like a hundred snakes. Behind her stood three ranks of Scythians, the King’s Killers, all with their lances held at the ready, stone men of death.

I pushed my dirk deep down into my kilt, as though it had been hot iron burning my hand, and turned to the princess, bowing low.

I said, breathlessly, ‘They told me you were in the far hills, Goddess. It is a great honour that you should leave your duties and honour me now.’

Her dark glazed snake’s eyes looked beyond me as though I were a bodiless spirit, whose voice could not be heard.

‘Greetings, Eagle God,’ she said in an even voice. ‘Your daughter comes to pay her tribute to you.’

I was talking as wildly as a young lad now, for the terror was in my heart. This was the trap I had always feared in Colchis.

‘Goddess,’ I said, ‘your father, the Eagle, has told me of the marriage tasks. May I be worthy of the honour you do me.’

Medea said, ‘Father God, I came as quickly as the winged chariot would bear me when I received your message, My charioteer killed three horses on the long journey. A daughter can do no more.’

Aeëtes did not look at her. His back was still towards me and his fingers tapped at the gilt top of the table where the silver fruit dish had stood.

He said in a tired voice, ‘To have killed ten horses would not have been too many, woman. What delayed you?’

I noticed that she flinched as he called her ‘woman’ instead of ‘goddess.’ It was like a blow on the face to her. I noticed also that her bare feet were dusty and raw, as though she had stood long in the chariot, driving herself.

The flounced skirt was torn and her blue bodice was dark with sweat. There was dust even on her neck and breasts. She had wasted no time in coming to the palace, it seemed. Aeëtes' command had been an urgent one, then.

She answered and said, 'Out on the plains I ran into a hunting party, Eagle King. They were chasing a hundred hares, they said, loosed for them by Apsyrtus the Prince, and would not let me pass for a while.'

Aeëtes half-glanced at me then and frowned.

'Even Hellenes must learn the customs of a country,' he said quietly, clenching his fist upon the table top. 'A goddess does not wait for hunters to pass.'

I kneeled beside him and said, 'I shall speak to them, Eagle.'

Aeëtes glowered down at me. '*Speak to them?*' he said. 'When did Hellenes become so slavish that words curbed them? When I was king in Corinth we chopped out a man's tongue and cut off his two hands to impress the law upon him. That was how Hellenes once expected to learn what there was to be taught, sailor.'

I did not like these words, nor the way he addressed me suddenly. It was as though the situation had changed, without warning, as it does in dreams. My bowels turned to water, as the poets say, kneeling beside that terrible king on the cold stones of the floor. And all because my stupid crew had got in the way of Medea's chariot. Such a thing could ruin all my plans, could bring death upon us all, just when we were in sight of our fortune. Inwardly I cursed Admetus, Castor and the rest, for senseless fools. That is the way kingdoms are lost, by one stupid act.

I said, quaking, 'I will punish them, Father. I swear to you I will.'

Medea said in a voice like ice splinters, 'You have already done enough swearing. And there has already been a punishment.'

I rose on shaking legs, weak in all my limbs, only half-understanding those strange words.

Then Medea strode slowly forward and stood beside the golden table, gesturing to the men in the room beyond the door.

Two of them came forward, carrying with them a square frame, of wood lashed with vine-trailers. On it was tied a man, a Scythian, his pale head lolling backwards. His arms and legs dangled helplessly as though they were jointless. But his eyes were open and still had sight in them, and his twisted mouth moved at every step the bearers made across the floor.

Then I recognized him as one of those men who had thrown the thongs round my horse's legs and had taken me to the cave to meet Apsyrtus. I recalled that he had stood beside me all the time I had talked with the prince, had planned with him and had made the oath to Zeus.

Medea said quietly, 'The Hellenes caught hares but let them go again; we caught a wolf but tamed him. One of my husband-brother's wolves, Eagle. One who spoke many interesting words before speech left him and howls took their place.'

Aeëtes said, without looking at the creature or at his daughter, 'Even howls may be interpreted by those who are skilled in such things, Goddess.'

Medea made a sign with her hand to the two who held the broken man. They flung the frame upon the floor and went through the door, shutting it behind them and leaving us alone.

She then said, 'This trophy shall hang beside Xantha, on the city wall, as a traitor to the Mother. And if his words were true to their bitter finality, another one shall hang beside them before sunset, to make a sacred trio.'

She looked at me as she spoke, the look of the vipers in the pit of marble. Even her teeth, which showed for a moment between her pale lips, looked like those of a serpent about to strike. Her black hair seemed to writhe with every motion of her body. I was terribly afraid then, and my little dirk in my kilt-belt felt only a toy. Zeus, but I was afraid! I almost wet myself, as I have seen young warrior-boys do when they faced their first cavalry charge.

But my tongue clove to my mouth-roof and I could not even beg, out of my dry throat, for mercy.

Aeëtes said, 'What news, then, daughter?'

Medea shrugged her shoulders and answered tiredly, 'This fool Jason has sworn by Zeus to betray us both. He is in league with my thing of a brother.'

Aeëtes answered just as slowly, 'What penalty is there for that, before we hang him on the high wall, daughter?'

Medea sat down upon the floor beside the groaning wretch. She bent over and felt his arms, searchingly, never taking her fingers away even when the Scythian cried out.

Then, when I was near to crying myself, she said, 'He should have the fate of Uranus. But with a difference. Let a knife be put into his hand and let

him cut away his own pride before we hang him from the wall. So he may come to peace with the Mother.'

Aeëtes nodded and laughed, deep down in his chest. I wished I had put the dirk into him when he first offered me the iced fruits. But now it was too late.

Then the Eagle King said, 'Let it be put on record by the scribes that Jason of Iolcos, one-time King of Lemnos, and captain of the *Argo*, carried out his marriage tests. That he took my daughter, Medea, to wife; and then sailed away out of all men's knowledge. We must see that all of the crew are silenced, too, and the ship burned.'

He turned and looked at me at last. 'So, Jason,' he said, 'your honour will be satisfied, will it not? Men of times to come will speak of you as a great voyager, a great warrior and prince. Only ourselves, and of course you, will truly know what end met you. Is this not a kindness?'

I nodded, feeling the sweat running down my inner leg then. I clutched at my shuddering mouth to keep myself from weeping aloud.

And when Aeëtes dictated this account to the slave who was called in, and I watched the man's needle-point scratching it all out upon the clay tablet, I cried like a child, calling for my mother, for Cheiron, for Heracles, to come and save me. But no one seemed to hear me; least of all the wretch upon the wooden frame. He had died growling before the scribe came in at Medea's call.

Then, as I grovelled and rolled about on the stones, begging for mercy, Aeëtes put on his mask and called for the great door to open. Fur-hatted Scythians filed into that low room, each one wearing the face of death. And when they were arranged all about me, Medea said to them, 'Regard, warriors of the plains, the great hero, Jason, who is also called Diomedes, the Sly One. See how sly he is now. See also how brave he is, to do to himself what is asked of him by the Mother. Not even Oedipus did better than Diomedes!'

Two of them dragged me to my feet. I was powerless to stand alone. My arms were held by my side as they tore off my tunic.

Medea picked up the dirk which tinkled to the floor.

'Look, he shall use his own weapon in this act of courage,' she said, running her thumb along its edge. 'It is keen, though not too keen. It will increase the value of the offering by being so. Here, Jason, take it in your

right hand. Have no fear, we shall direct you aright. Such things must be done according to custom.’

It was only when I felt the bone haft of the dirk truly in my wet palm that my mind and body gave way utterly to terror, and all I heard then were my own slobbering shrieks that echoed down from the rafters like the cries of a wood full of birds.

Then the strong arms of the men bent me forward, and deep down in my heart I knew that I had been brought to the edge of my end. A great silence came upon my tongue and into my heart then, and like a thing of stone, beyond reason, beyond feeling even, I grasped the knife and prepared to do what Medea had commanded.

32

Night Battle

I THINK those moments left their mark upon me for the rest of my days. Never afterwards was I the same Jason who had strode with his javelins and amber beads along the road to Iolcos, the world already conquered in his dreams.

That dreadful scene in the audience room of the Eagle King was the great climax of my life—harsher, more powerful, closer to me, than any of my much-praised adventures in ships or with the sword in my hand. Those were the creations, very often, of lying poets, who had their bread to earn from me.

In training a horse or a soldier, or perhaps even a singer, the master breaks down the spirit of the one he teaches until there is no spirit left, no man, only a shell. And then, when man or horse is nothing, the master, if he is a good one and knows his trade, will begin to build up a new spirit within that shell of a body, a spirit which will be all war-horse, or swordsman, or singer. There will be no room left for other things, the things which once distracted man or beast and kept them from being warrior or war-horse.

This the teachers do, or the gods through the teachers, to fit each man of worth for his destiny.

I have seen laughing farm-boys changed into grim-faced spearmen prepared to put the javelin into their mother, their sweetest little sister, when the captain commanded it.

What such men suffer in their dreams is another thing. Not even the gods can turn a man's secret dream to right or to left. . . .

A man must be broken before he can be mended; and I was horribly broken that night. Broken down to a weeping, trembling, despised thing.

And then, suddenly, when humiliation had gone beyond me, and I was nothing but a gibbering column of flesh without a heart, the gods surprisingly raised me again into something new and different, a new Jason.

The knife-edge was already fumbling towards its keen path of horror, when shrill horns began to scream outside. A flight of arrows came through the long lighted window of the king's room. I saw the men in high fur hats toppling backwards and forwards and sideways. Even Aeëtes was leaning against the gilt table, holding his right arm tenderly, gazing in fascination at the short arrow which stuck out of it on both sides.

And all at once the table collapsed and he fell to the floor, his mask awry, his high voice bawling for someone to pick him up.

There were shouts and the thundering of many feet on the terraces outside, along the corridors inside. Horses were neighing and stamping within a few paces of us.

The men who held me began to chatter in their throaty speech to each other. Too busy now for me, they drew their swords and let me sink to my knees as they ran to window or door.

As in a hazy dream, I saw Medea and her father run through an aperture in the far wall, even as the great door crashed inwards and Castor rushed into the room, his helmet-plumes bloody, his body-armour scarred and dented. Behind him were Polydeuces, Admetus, Acastus, Meleager, even Atalanta. Even she wore a helmet and breast-plate, as though she were playing the part of Athene. But there was no play-acting on the point of her short leaf-shaped sword; the blood there was real enough.

Castor hauled me to my feet and ran his hands over me. Then he slapped me on the back and laughed hugely in my face. 'Zeus be praised,' he said, 'you are whole, Captain! We have brought your weapons and armour. Put them on without delay for now there is butcher's work to do!'

I almost fell into the king's gold chair as they strapped on my leg-guards and buckled my breast-plate. I saw that I was still clasping that little Mycenaean dirk, and threw it to the floor in a weak passion of disgust.

Polydeuces grinned. 'That's the spirit, Captain!' he said. 'Tonight's is sword work, not dirk play!'

The heavy sword they put into my hand brought me back to manhood once more, though uncertainly for the time being.

'What is the news?' I said, hardly caring.

While they were all trying to tell me, a party of fur-hatted Scythians essayed the great door, but my men beat them off, laughing. A little later Amazons on ponies tried the same thing screaming their high-pitched

women's war-cry. And once again the Argonauts went at it with a will and drove them back with flailing swords.

Admetus, standing beside me as I gradually stilled my shuddering, said, 'The palace rebellion has happened, Diomedes. Apsyrtus rode in with his companions just as the city gates were about to be closed, crying for the head of the king! Half the city has gone to him; the other half, mainly Amazons, is for Medea.'

I tried to jest and said, 'And who is Medea for?'

Admetus smiled grimly as he replied, 'At the moment men say that she supports her father's cause. But if the tide turns against her, they say she will throw in with anyone who has victory in his hand.'

I asked, 'If a man is sworn as I am to both sides, which does he follow?'

Castor laughed as he wiped his sword. 'If he is a Spartan,' he said, 'he goes down the middle of the road and takes his pickings as they come.'

We all shouted and slapped each other on the back at these words. Then, leading them, I went from that awful room into the thick smoke which was already billowing along the corridors.

Bodies of men, and women, and even horses, lay about in the great rooms. In one such room the fountain-bowl was choked with the bodies of painted Amazons, whose heads and arms and legs dangled, dripping. I noticed that the water spray, which in these things is pumped back again and again, was now red and not silver.

Yet in another place, a long pillared cloister where hanging red flowers grew profusely, one could not move without stepping on the bodies of Scythian bowmen. Each one, as far as my dazed eye could see, had been mutilated after death, in the fashion of the Amazons.

Perversely, I passed through the room where Medea had first received me. The golden throne was broken and charred with fire; the bright wall-paintings were hacked and splattered with blood. So many bodies lay in the round marble snake-pit that the hissing little vipers were now crushed and silent.

Once, at the end of a long alley, I saw Apsyrtus, mounted on a big white horse, driving his Scythians on with the flat of his sword. He saw me, too, and laughed, shouting out, 'Follow on, Hellene! Kill what we leave! You shall share our victory!'

Then he had gone, shouting and laughing with his raving companions.

When we came a stage lower and reached the High Garden, I waved my men back and stepped into it alone. I wanted, strangely, to be undisturbed in that place for an instant, if only to say a prayer to the spirit of poor Xantha, who had died a little too soon and too cruelly. But as I walked among the overturned urns and the blackened statues, it was not of Xantha that I thought.

Aeëtes, the Eagle King, sat there, lonely in the centre of the grass, in a little garden chair too small for his bulk. Arrows bristled from his body like the quills of a porcupine. All Scythian arrows, the short thick shafts that the strong horn-bow sends. The final messengers.

The Eagle King had lost his gold mask now and his face in death was that of a weary and wrinkled old farmer worried about next year's harvest.

I stood before him for a moment and shook my head. 'Poor old fellow,' I said to myself, 'so much for your great Colchian League! So much for Corinth!'

I did not feel pity for him, or anger, or anything. He was just a madman whose dream had cracked without warning, like a thin Cretan cup, no more.

I waved on my men and we made our way down to the next terrace. Looking over the stone parapet, we saw the main battle going on in the Great Courtyard below. Medea's women warriors were bunched in so tight a group that they could not get their ponies moving, but had to fight from a distance, flinging javelins, as women do, clumsily and with a poor aim. Round them, and pressing in always, were men in high fur hats, on horses and on foot. Some were leaning over and slashing with long curved swords; others were running under the bellies of the women's horses with dirks. The air was filled with noise; screams and bellowings came up to us as though we leaned over the Place of the Damned.

I said, 'Shall we go down and help one or the other of these armies?'

But Acastus took me by the arm and said, 'A wise man waits until they kill each other. Then he collects the reward of his patience, Jason.'

And that is what we did. The Amazons made a last desperate, yet gallant attempt to break through, and were cut down, one after the other. But they left behind them only a handful of Scythians—and not one of them worth a handful of grain, their wounds were so bad.

We went down into the courtyard and collected ornaments, weapons, silver-studded belts and breast-plates, and even a light cart to put our spoils on.

And everywhere we went it was the same. That night we had become rich men, without raising a finger to make ourselves so.

True, Argus was slashed across the thigh by an Amazon he bent over. She knew he was after her arm-bands, and she was not yet quite dead. He howled a lot, but Castor kicked him in the backside and told him to take such scratches like a man. I foolishly ran into a side room where three warrior women were hacking down an old Scythian chief, and took a blow across the shoulder with a stone axe. It was nothing much, but every winter afterwards I remembered that room.

The strangest wound was that sustained by Atalanta and Meleager; we all laughed about this. They had left us for a while to go foraging, as they said. When we heard them crying out for help we went to find them. They stood propped against each other in an alcove, with an arrow pinning them together by the flesh of their sides—nothing serious, but no doubt painful, and certainly surprising, in their circumstance.

I cut the shaft through and freed them.

Castor roared with laughter. ‘Can’t you two wait till the battle is over?’ he said.

Atalanta was too busy weeping, and Meleager rubbing his side, to take exception. This incident made us merry afterwards whenever we recalled it. Orpheus created a song about it, but it is not fit to set down here.

Only one of our company died that night; Iphitus, the young brother of the King of Mycenae. His head was crushed by a maddened riderless horse, as his old nurse had once told him it would be—though he never believed her, but had her tongue slit for malicious gossip. I was sorry about Iphitus, for he was a pleasant young fellow and very quiet and comely in his ways. I had hoped to deliver him safely back to Mycenae and perhaps gain some reward from the king there. But these things happen in war, and it is foolish to try to make plans for the future.

The only plan I made that night was to find Medea and to slit her throat for the terror she had caused me. But she was nowhere to be seen. We caught a townsman who had ventured into the street to try and find some loot, and frightened him half to death with our questioning. He said the townspeople believed Medea had got into her famous serpent chariot and had driven off through the clouds to the land of the Hyperboreans, to the far distant land of ice at the edge of the world.

At that time there were many Hyperboreans in Colchis, trading their jet and their copper for anything they could lay hands on. A crude, uncouth folk, but very skilled in a sort of magic—and extremely good at handling dogs and horses.

But no one believed that Medea would go to their misty damp land—not even to escape her brother's vengeance. I felt sure that she was hiding somewhere and would have to come out before long.

One thing pleased me mightily. Above the main gate of the citadel, Kush-kush was dangling on hide-ropes, like a little jigging monkey, his long hair streaming down, his bent little legs twitching. No one understood what he was saying, though one Colchian said he was calling down curses on the world. We watched him a while, then put two arrows into him to end his agony. We never found out who had hung him there—Medea or Apsyrtus—but whoever it was had done right. This was, indeed, Dikê, Justice!

Now everyone was merry, except for the wounded among us, and even they cheered up when we found a deserted house just beyond the palace, one of its ground-floor rooms stacked high with wine jars. The owner must have been a guilty man, perhaps a usurer, a Phoenician—for he had left in haste, leaving all his things strewn about; even a young slave-girl who was in the middle of her labour and already squealing.

We carried her gently into an upper room and found a soft bed for her. Atalanta saw to what had to be done in the case. Meleager heated water for the occasion on a charcoal fire which he lit in the hall-way. Old Butes, in his busy, senile way, told Meleager that fires should not be lit on mosaics because the heat loosened the cement and the coloured stones came loose and got lost. But Meleager paid no heed to him. Nor did we; that wine was too good. We drank it from shallow glazed cups of a blue-clay ware. Acastus thought they had come from Egypt, they were so fine, almost as thin as the shells of hen's eggs. Polydeuces, in fact, bit his cup in pieces after he had drunk from it and called out for an iron beaker—something he couldn't get his teeth caught up in, he said.

That was the way with Spartans always; they destroyed anything which seemed too elegant, and pretended not to like fine things. I have seen Spartan hill-kings who cut their wives' hair with kitchen knives, however beautiful the hair might be, and dressed them in coarse sacking with a rope tied about their waists for a girdle. One king I knew, near Amyclas, had his head shaven and always wore a greasy old horse-hide tunic which his shepherd had cast away. He maintained that any man who desired more than

a horse-hide to cover him was an affected donkey. Yet that king gave more meat and grain to the public kitchens each year than would have kept a standing army in the field. He did not tell me this; I heard it from his slaves and farmers, whose fathers had come from Crete, where things were always delicate and richly-made, and where the princes took an hour to put on their finery each day.

For me, there was something about the Spartan way, something which set a man beyond mere riches and possessions to let him be his real self, which appealed to me, and always did—even though I was often too concerned with fine things and power to follow their rough example.

After a while, when we had drunk many tall jars of wine, Castor suggested that we cease this selfish behaviour and give the poor people of Colchis a chance to enjoy themselves. So, merry and thoughtless, we carried out a score of amphorae into the market place and then went knocking on the doors of the tall tenements about the square. The windows were crowded with folk, watching the fighting at the palace; and at first they thought we had come from the Eagle King to kill them, for one reason or another. But we went into house after house without our breast-plates or swords, to show we were no murderers, and soon they came down and sat about in the square, drinking such wine as had never passed their coarse lips before. It was a merry night, with the torches and braziers blazing, and the Colchian girls dancing to the bone flutes of the city, and in the meantime making their voluntary payment for our friendliness in their own way. The women of Colchis were much freer than those I had known in, say, Athens or even Corinth, when one permitted them to be so. Nor did their fathers and husbands exert too much authority over them, but smiled at their antics and went back to the good wine, laughing.

I think it was the strain they had come from, a mixture of savage Scythian and pleasure-loving Cretan. Yet at heart simple creatures of the moment; no wonder they had fallen slaves to the wily Corinthian, Aeëtes, when he founded his strange colony.

That feast, if we can call it such, lasted until dawn, and we were not molested. Sometimes troops of fur-hatted warriors rode round and round us, and even accepted jars of wine to quench their thirst after the fighting; and when they saw we were not palace guards or Amazons, they went away.

True, a bedraggled and bleeding company of Medea's girls did come with their light swords and javelins to shriek at us; but each one of them bore more than one wound, and were so weary that we just laughed and

invited them to sit down on the wall and drink. They shook their heads, some of them sternly, but most of them weeping now. And then they went away, too. I think they were ambushed by Scythians in a side street, for we heard much shouting and screaming, and only men's laughter and the clattering of triumphant hooves.

I am afraid that we got very drunk; especially Atalanta, Echion, Calais and Periclymenus. We slung them on to the handcart, among the loot we had taken. They made a laughable sight, their arms and legs dangling down like those of puppets or dead men.

As dawn broke, a party of armoured horsemen cantered down the long ramp from the palace, their red-haired captain shouting out my name. I was not happy about this for they all had lances and seemed a stern-looking lot.

But Castor dragged me to my feet and said, laughing, 'Go on, Captain, show yourself. It is Moira, the will of Zeus, and if you die we will try to avenge you. Take my little dirk with you, in case; they are sometimes useful on horses' bellies.'

But when I stood before the Captain of Horse, all eyes upon me, he bowed his head and came very near to smiling. He was a friendly-looking young fellow, when his face was in repose; but at this time he had a deep cut across his right cheekbone which spoiled his appearance. His right forearm was bound round with a bloody bandage, too. Yet he seemed cheerful enough, for one in his case.

'My lord, Jason-Diomedes,' he said, with a certain respect, 'I come from the king, Apsyrtus, to tell you that victory is his. He is not unaware that you and your men gave no help to the enemy, and wishes to keep his side of the bargain.'

I nodded carelessly, as though I was expecting such words; though, indeed, my legs shivered as I stood on the cold stones.

The man went on, 'King Apsyrtus requests that you now go with your crew down to the harbour and sail away without further delay. He says that your ship has been brought there for you and is seaworthy. He says that he has had it laden with all the gold fleeces and provisions it can carry, and that you are welcome to these as your payment for this night's work. He has only two requests to make of you.'

He paused here, and I felt that some trickery was afoot. I always have felt that about such generous offerings; it is born in me. I think I learned it from the Village of Women, where, though the pleasures were sweet, the

final payment was a dear one; perhaps from my mother, Perimede, who gave but who wanted in return; perhaps from old Hera of the Ford. Nevertheless, I consoled myself that I was not dealing with hard-bargaining women now, but men who thought more or less like myself, and I said gravely, 'What are the king's requests, Captain?'

He smiled and said, 'They are simple ones. First, that you and your folk shall never come to Colchis again. And second, that you shall hand over the woman Medea, who calls herself goddess, for punishment. It is the king's will that this Medea shall be torn apart by horses in the public square, so that all Colchis shall know her end and be free of her wickedness.'

I said, 'I am most willing to swear by all the gods never to come here again; but as for that second command, I cannot fulfil it. Medea is not with us here, nor have I seen her all night. She is not with me, Captain, but must be hiding somewhere in the city. I am as content to see the end of her as any man, but I am no sorcerer; I cannot make appear what is not there! We shall sail away, as the great Apsyrtus commands, and we thank him for his gifts. As for Medea, if we see her on our way down to the harbour, we shall hand her over to the soldiers. Is that enough?'

The young captain smiled, bowed, and then said, 'It is enough, Hellene. The king will be well content.'

Then he waved with his hand and the whole troop of horse turned about and rode back up the ramp to the palace.

Polydeuces the Spartan said, 'It is a good man who so trusts the word of another.'

Admetus the prince said, 'No, a fool, who trusts the word of any man in his cups, friend!'

I said, 'Perhaps we are all fools, drunk or not. But let that pass. Let us go down to the ship and catch the morning tide. Let the Avengers, the Erinnyes, seek out Medea and bring her to her proper judgement. This affair is out of our hands now.'

And so, with the cheers of the townsfolk in our ears, we got up and staggered down the steep and winding road towards the sunlit harbour.

Castor and Polydeuces pushed the handcart, for they were the strongest among us. Half-way down the hill old Butes fell into the gutter-runnel and said that his feet were plaguing him. The truth is that the old fellow was drunk. But no one accused him of this, for he was proud of his strong head, and indeed drank more mead from his bees than any man I know. But wine

is different, especially the thick red wine we had been drinking. I suspect that it had come from Peparethus, where they are famous for the potency of their vine-drink. How it got to Colchis, I do not know. But merchants were always passing this way and that among the islands, especially those hook-nosed Phoenicians, the craftiest traders in the world.

We just flung old Butes on to the cart, on top of Atalanta, and went on. She was asleep and did not mind. She would not have minded if she had been awake, either; even though Butes might have been her grandfather.

33

Morning Tide

So we reached the harbour, where a small crowd waited to cheer us on our way. I think they were glad to see the back of us, for we were foreigners, but they made little sign of it.

Argo bobbed up and down in a clear channel, ready for sailing as the Captain had said. Even Argus could find no fault with her; and I certainly could find no fault with the cargo of gold which Apsyrtus had had put aboard from the warehouse beside the wharf. The decks fore and aft, and even the aisle between the rowers' benches, were heaped high with fleeces, each one as heavy as a child with the gold particles caught up in the greasy wool. In Colchis they lay such fleeces on the bed of the gold-bearing stream, not far from Ares, the place where I was supposed to plough the field with bronze bulls. The specks of gold, coming down in the water, catch in the fleeces, which are dragged out when they are saturated with the precious metal.

There was the price of a kingdom on board the *Argo* that morning. I was only too anxious to be away with it, before Apsyrtus changed his mind!

The tide helped us, too, and before long we stood off the city and set a course homewards again.

The meat and drink were good. Apsyrtus had kept his word. I felt almost sorry in my heart that I should have to come back to Colchis one day, with perhaps fifty ships like *Argo*, to get more of this gold. I should have to break my word to him, but only a fool could let such a chance go.

I asked the princes and the Spartans if they would come back with me in a year or two, and they smiled and said that nothing would please them more. We are a practical people, I think, and do not let words spoken in the stress of the moment weigh too heavily with us. I know that some folk have called us wily and crafty and even treacherous; but that is because they are dreamers, and cannot see the truth that stares them in the face. In this life, a man must make provision for himself and his family; that is sense. All else is nonsense and women's stuff, the stuff of dreams and visions.

Now a strange thing happened and I do not know how best I can explain it. At the end of the first day out, when Colchis was a white blur in the farthest sunset, Atalanta came to me and said that the fleeces were stirring at the after-end of the ship and that she thought something was hidden under them.

I remember answering, ‘Maggots, my dear! They get into old fleeces. That is all!’

But she came back again and said that she had felt under the fleeces and that what her hand had touched had not been maggots, but something which would interest me much more.

I went quietly with her as the men rowed and put my own hand under the sheepskins. She was right; it was a woman.

Together we rolled back the top layers and soon we saw this woman. It was Medea, dirty and ragged, her hair a tangled mess, her face swollen with weeping, her lips bitten and bleeding.

She stared up at me with wide frightened eyes, as though begging me not to hurt her any further. Indeed, she had good reason to do so for I had my short sword out and was considering putting it into her as she lay. The only reason I did not do this without delay was that I did not want to ruin the skins and lose any gold by drenching the wool in blood.

So I just glared down at her, while Atalanta poked her in the side with her foot, rolling her about. There was no love lost between these two women ever, although they prayed to the same goddess and sometimes conducted rituals together.

I said, ‘Either I should throw you overboard as an offering to Poseidon—and because you tried to take away my pride; or I should turn about and hand you over to your husband, Apsyrtus. I gather that he wishes to speak a few words with you—before they tie you to the horses!’

Medea sat up on the skins and shook her head wearily. ‘No, Jason,’ she said. ‘Apsyrtus is not as simple as that. He wishes me dead, yes, but he put me here, under the fleeces.’

I almost fell backwards with surprise at these words.

‘Put you here?’ I said. ‘Why, his captain commanded me to hand you over if I saw you. Why should Apsyrtus put you here, on the ship of one of his friends?’

Medea wiped the tears from her eyes with the back of her dusty hand. The movement left streaks of grime across her face, so different from the gold with which I had first seen it coated.

'How like a boy you are,' she said, flatly. 'Apsyrtus has no friends, and least of all you, a foraging Hellene. What have you done to help him, but roam about his city, drinking and plundering?'

I said, 'But Apsyrtus has sent me homewards, with a cargo of gold, and friendly farewells. I do not believe you.'

Atalanta snorted and said, 'Put the sword into her, Jason. She will betray you if you don't. I can smell such things from far off. Don't forget, I am a witch-woman, too.'

Beaten and bedraggled as she was, Medea looked up at Atalanta with scorn, and said slowly, 'This woman is a fool. I would not have her as my scullery maid. Listen to me, Jason; my brother gave you a cargo of gold only to claim it back. He is as much a miser as my father. And he put me aboard this ship to give himself an excuse for pursuing you and getting back that gold. Do you not see, he will follow you in his swift galleys and run you down. He will find me aboard, where he carefully put me, and you will pay the penalty for breaking your oath to him, for not giving me up. He will accuse you of helping me to escape. Then he will kill you and all your crew. He will sink *Argo*, and no man will ever know what happened to your brave venture.'

I put my sword back and sat down upon the fleeces, suddenly weary.

'Tell me,' I said, 'and see that your forked tongue speaks the truth. If Apsyrtus wishes to kill you and me, then why did he not do it in Colchis? Why let us get so far before he carries out such a plan? It is not reasonable. I would kill a man where he stood, not chase him half over the world to do it.'

Medea began to put a fishbone comb through her tangled hair and to wipe the grime from her face with spittle. It seemed that she was growing more pleased with herself every moment.

She said, 'Apsyrtus did not kill us in Colchis because he wishes to be known as a just king now that he has taken the throne. Besides, there are many folk in Colchis who still follow me and call me goddess; just as there are many Corinthians who would like to have a Hellene such as you as their new king, and not a bastard Scythian. Finally, Apsyrtus fears that the secret of your killing might come out, at some time. So, he does not want hordes of Hellenes coming here for vengeance. He wants to show a clear reason for

killing you and your crew, which will be acceptable to all reasonable kings; the sort of thing that they would do themselves. Now do you understand boy?'

I turned away, to think, and as I did so, I saw the first of the Colchian galleys pulling swiftly away from the harbour towards us, a sleek hound on the scent of its quarry.

I looked back and said, 'I see, Medea. The galleys have convinced me. There is more truth in you than I gave you credit for.'

She placed her fine hand upon my thigh and I could not resist its warm touch. There was a magic in it always which bewitched me, even against my will.

Then I stood up and took the pace-hammer.

'We must row hard, my brothers,' I called, 'if we are to live.'

34

Hostage

It was three days before the score of Colchian galleys drove in about us like dogs baying about a wallowing stag. We had watched them lying back for hours, waiting for the moment to strike. They were so swift, so low in the water, so well-manned, that they could have taken us before we had got three miles out of harbour—but they had not chosen to do this. I wondered why, and asked Medea, who now sat like a queen above my rowers, her pride and confidence restored, although she was still dressed in rags.

She answered, 'Apsyrtus has a snake's mind. I should know of such things. He is not content with a simple killing but wishes to gain glory by it, too. Far from shore and other eyes, he means to put an end to us all and then to return with your body and mine as trophies, and marks upon his own flesh as though the battle had been a bloody one. Besides, like a cat, he takes pleasure in prolonging the terror of his victim. We are his mouse.'

I said, 'That seems to be a family tradition of the House of Colchis.'

Medea allowed her set lips to smile faintly and said, 'Each man is entitled to his opinion, in a world of reason, though he has only rags on his back and black bread in his belly. But Apsyrtus will kill us all within the next hour, if he has his way.'

Then she turned away from me and watched her brother's galleys cutting the white foam, as though she were at a horse race, almost idly, not like a gambler who has much at stake on any of the horses. Her fortitude impressed both my men and me; say what one might, she had great courage, even in the depths of defeat and humiliation, and an undying spirit which I have encountered in no other woman and in hardly another man. My Spartans, though they had once hated her, now regarded her as their queen and addressed her with an enormous respect. Nor, throughout the voyage, did I ever hear a man speak lewdly in her hearing.

To tell truth, Medea, in rags or gold brocade, was my match and perhaps more than my match. She, of all creatures under the sun, had broken me down to nothing that night in the audience chamber, and before her eyes I

could never be a full man again, boast as I might, shout as I would. Even in my armour, my javelins steaming, my beard frothed with battle-spittle, I have stood before her as she sat calmly in a chair with her embroidery, quaking like a young lad. Yes, I know I was big enough and strong enough to put a sword through her, but in cases like this there is a strength beyond steel, beyond powerful hands and arms. She was the sort of woman a man looked to as his leader, however strong he was.

And now as the galleys set their sharp prows at us, I touched her on the arm and said, 'To be practical, Medea, how are we to avoid letting your brother kill us, then?'

She smiled, showing her white cat's teeth, and let her heavy lids sink so that I could not see the expression of her eyes.

'If you always trust me so, Jason,' she said, 'our marriage will be a happy one and we shall enjoy great fame.'

A buffet on the cheek from Polydeuces could not have shaken me more. I had forgotten that she and I were betrothed, given to each other.

She went on before I could speak and said, 'To our starboard bow where the waves are breaking against a wall of sea-mist, lies an island. It is only a small island, but big enough for our purposes.'

I was puzzled by her words, but just then Castor began to shout out in warning and the air was full of the buzzing of arrows. Some of them overshot us and hissed into the sea; others stood vibrating like a string of Orpheus' lyre in our gunwales. None of them found a mark, this time.

'They mean this,' Medea said, still in full view of her brother's archers, as though she sat in her own room and safe. 'We must act quickly before the next flight. Give me the speaking-trumpet.'

Ancaeus handed her the megaphone of cow-hide and, setting it to her fine mouth, she stood near the prow and called out, 'I, Medea, Princess of Colchis and wife of Apsyrtus, speak to you. Pay heed and pass my words to my dear husband, for he is among you somewhere.'

Her full voice carried over the rough waters, and I observed that the oarsmen in the galleys rowed at a slower pace, as though to listen, such was the magic of that voice. Even the skimming sea-birds seemed to sheer away from our mast-head as the voice boomed, leaving us still and wrapped about with dignity.

Castor whispered, 'I would follow her to the pit, brother.'

Polydeuces nodded, but did not speak. I think that he was weeping for some reason or other.

Then Medea spoke again, like Athene calling up all warriors who had died in battle among the arrows and the hooves.

'I, Medea, daughter of the Eagle King, Goddess, priestess of Persephone, speak to you. Tell my husband that I know why he follows this ship. Tell him that I know he wishes to regain me, to carry me back in disgrace to Colchis. My *daimones* have told me so, and they are not to be questioned. This is my fate, my Moira, my Ananke, and I accept it at the Mother's command. You are the avengers, my friends, the Erinnyes; and I know you all. So does the Mother know you all, and will be waiting to speak with you about this day's work some time—tomorrow, next year, in ten years' time, in battle, on the still waters, in a deep valley. But let that pass, as we all shall pass. I speak of other things.'

She waited so long then that the rowers ceased their rowing, both those in *Argo* and those in the galleys. And a heavy silence settled on the waves.

Medea glanced down at me and smiled, her elf-locks twisting in the wind like living snakes. Then she put the trumpet to her lips again and called out, 'I accept my fate, tell the King. But I will surrender myself to no one but him. Only kingly hands shall make me captive. Beyond us lies a little island. There, Jason will set me down and wait off shore in his ship. And there, on the beach which is shaped like the Mother's moon, shall my husband take possession of me, for good or ill. And that shall be at the sun's rising tomorrow. Is that agreed?'

I gazed up at her in bewilderment. She saw this and smiled down at me, mischievously like a young girl. And then I looked away, unable to meet her eyes again.

Across the broad and greying sea the trumpets spoke from one galley to another, each time repeating the words of the smiling Goddess. And at last other words came back, in answer, passing from ship to ship, like a growing wind, or like bulls bellowing to each other across the broad plains.

The captain of the nearest galley called through his trumpet, 'Hail, Goddess and Princess of Colchis. Your husband accepts you as a hostage. He will take possession of you, mind and body, on the beach shaped like the Mother's moon, at dawn. See that you meet him there unarmed and unattended. If all goes well, great Apsyrtus promises that he may let Jason sail freely back to Iolcos. Those are the king's words, the words of a god!'

Medea spat on the fore-deck and said, ‘A god! A painted boy!’

Then she flung the speaking-horn away from her and went back to her chair, beckoning me to follow. I did so like a whipped dog and stood before her as she spoke to me in a voice charged with quiet fury.

‘My brother is either an idiot or the most wily man I have met,’ she said. ‘We must make a test and find out which it is, Jason-husband.’

I said, ‘I am your servant, Medea.’ I could think of no other words, I regret. It was as though she put the words into my mouth; I cannot explain it. But Castor told me that it was like this with him; he would start to say something and then hear himself saying the other thing, when he was with Medea.

She said, ‘Tonight when they lie off shore and cannot see what goes on, I want you to swim to the island and to conceal yourself close to the little beach. See that you hide above the beach, so that you can come down with speed, the slope to aid you. Watch him with care, Jason. And when the moment comes, take him. With their king as our hostage, the galleys must let us sail on freely. Is that clear in your mind?’

I said, ‘But what if Apsyrtus kills you before I can get to you, Medea? Or what if I choose, suddenly, to let him put the dagger into you?’

I meant the last as a grim joke; the cold smile in her dark eyes froze my lips and I wished that I had not said such words.

Medea answered, ‘If I die on the Mother’s moon-shaped beach, then I assure you that *Argo* will never reach harbour again. So much is revealed to me, Jason. I speak only what I know. If Apsyrtus kills me there, his ever-growing pride will force him to sink you, too. Is that understood?’

I nodded and went away. When the moon went down, I stripped off my clothes, all except for a hide-thong about my waist, into which I put a bronze dirk. Then I slipped over the side and swam silently towards the island.

The water was bitterly chill, though the Spring was well forward; and I thought that my heart might stop and that I might sink into the darkness below and make a meal for the great fishes.

But Poseidon once more put his strong hand under me and bore me towards the shore.

I landed, unseen, and crawled up a little gully where the stream still flowed, and lay down behind a thick sage-bush, not ten paces from the moon-shaped beach of the Mother.

35

Strange Meeting

I SLEPT. I will not say soundly, for the cries of birds and of hunting creatures in the high woods above broke in on me. Nor were my dreams of the prettiest. But I slept, beside the stream, shielded from the sea winds by the grey-green sage-bush.

And just before dawn I was wakened by the falling of pebbles and soil away to my left, where a small headland ran out into the waters, hiding the Colchian galleys from me, and me from them.

I looked through the sage-bush and saw Apsyrtus clambering, wet, down to the little beach. So small a man, I thought, without his robes or his armour; a boy, a young boy. His dark hair, bound high on his head to keep it from getting sticky with salt, left the back of his neck exposed. It was a young neck, unwrinkled, curved like a swan's. He wore little and so I saw the youth of his body, its unformed unspoiled innocence. I could have gone out there and then and put an end to him as he stood, breathing hard from his swimming and climbing—but seeing his boy's body, I could not. He was hardly any bigger than poor Hylas who was drowned in the pool at Lemnos.

Perhaps some traitor in his court might kill him later; but I was not the one to do it. Let his Moira come upon him from another hand, not mine, I thought. To kill such would leave me, a tried warrior, unclean. So I lay back and watched him as one watches an ant scuttling over a hot rock.

He came towards the beach at first half-fearful, his head turning this way and that at every island sound. And then he sat down, about eight paces below me on a flat stone, and began to whistle as though to keep his courage up. He was shuddering still from the cold dawn water of the sea.

Once I saw him stoop and feel between his thighs carefully. I could not see what he was at but in my heart I knew that he had a little dirk there, strapped secretly to his inner leg, as swimming warriors often have. Then I smiled in my head for I knew that this boy meant to take Medea one way or another. I like seriousness in a boy or a man; especially in a king.

Seriousness is what makes a man, though the gods may laugh and fling him down because of it.

He sat with his narrow back towards me and clapped the warmth into his white fingers. Then he reached up and unbound his hair. It fell about him like a dark cloud, in oiled ringlets.

I could have frightened the wits out of him by nicking a pebble at his white back, I thought. But I put aside the temptation and waited, listening to him breathing, muttering, and sometimes whistling a little snatch of one tune or another.

And at last I saw Medea come swimming round the headland, her black hair in the sea, the waters running over her plump white shoulders as though she were a fish. She swam with strength and confidence as one born to the waves—as Aphrodite, the lover of Poseidon himself.

When Apsyrtus saw her his thin body stiffened and he sat on his stone as though it were a throne and he about to receive a hostage. There was a boyish pride in his back, in his posture, though I could see that his right leg quivered, like that of a nervous horse before a battle charge.

Medea stood knee-deep and shook the hair from her face and eyes, almost as though he was not there. She was smiling in the dawn, gently, sisterly. The thin wet bodice and flounced skirt clung tightly to her body and limbs. One would have said that young Aphrodite had come to visit her dawn island, to surrender to her lord.

Bare-footed she strode up the beach, kicking shells and starfish with her square feet, like a child, or one deep in thought. I wondered whether she and Apsyrtus had met to plot still further, to join in murdering me and my crew at this place. Was this the answer to her strange confidence, her smiling? For an instant I even wondered if they both knew I was behind the sage-bush and would come to me now and be my fate. . . . It was a disturbing thought and I slipped my dirk from its thong and set my right foot under me so that I could spring at them. I would take Apsyrtus first, I thought, for he had a weapon. Then Medea might be easier—perhaps, perhaps.

Three paces from him, she bowed her black head and said quietly, ‘Greetings, husband-brother. You see, I come to you.’

Apsyrtus answered in his high throaty voice, ‘I see you do, woman.’

If they were acting, then this was well done for it sounded like truth to my ears.

Medea said, ‘Woman? Do you not call me sister, or wife, or goddess?’

The boy on the rock said, ‘All these words are a mockery. Save your breath, for you will need it soon, very soon.’

Medea laughed and then knelt before him, mocking. She gazed into his face and said, ‘Great king! Great king! How like his Eagle father is this little boy! But does he remember crying when he fell out of the apple-tree and I bathed his sore head? And does he remember crying when I first took him and showed him what a god-husband must do? Great king, oh, great king!’

He could not stand such teasing long; nor, in his place, could I have. Suddenly he jumped up and snatched the dirk from between his legs and went at her. She rolled clear, laughing on the sand, as he struck petulantly, not yet seriously.

He tried to follow her, striking here and there and always missing. And she laughed up at him all the while, her hair now golden with sand-grains.

‘What a warrior,’ she said. ‘Oh, what a killer! Take your time and strike carefully, little brother. I have no other weapon than you can see, I promise you!’

‘By Zeus, I will!’ he shouted and, measuring his stroke, he thrust down at her. She moved ever so little, but enough to keep the blade from her heart. It sliced across her shoulder and made a red mark with it as it went. But Medea laughed; this was what she had been waiting for. Her two strong hands clasped round his wrists as he bent forward and, with a heave of her lithe body, she had him off balance and lying upon her, caught.

Only then did she call out softly, ‘Jason! Jason! Are you there?’

I put my dirk away. It was not needed now. So I ran forward and jerked the boy to his feet, holding his arms behind him fiercely. He was crying, the tears making runnels down his salt-encrusted face.

Medea still lay before him, saying, ‘God! Great king! Little husband!’

He kicked at her mocking face but missed and caught her side. She did not move but only mocked on, letting him use his bare feet on her as though she could not feel it—almost as though she welcomed it, as though certain pains were a pleasure to her.

At last I said, ‘Have done, Medea. He is your prisoner now. There is no need for this. Let us tie his hands and swim him back to the ship before his men awake.’

She rose and shook the sand from her skirt. Then she bowed towards me. ‘I am your servant, husband-Jason,’ she said, the mockery gone from her face, ‘but we must not hurry a thing like this.’

The wretch was shivering all over as I held him; pity flowed out of me towards this weak boy.

I said, ‘I will not have you playing with him like a cat with a mouse. You have your hostage; very well, treat him well now.’

She came up to him and stroked his smooth face, smiling.

‘So I shall, Jason,’ she said. ‘You do not have to remind me of my duty. But before we take him I must talk with him. He and I are princes of Colchis, and princes must not be hurried in their dealings with each other. You are a Hellene; however great and brave, only a Hellene. So, while Apsyrtus and I speak with each other on what must follow this, I beg you to swim back to *Argo* and wait.’

I said, ‘I could go farther up the hill until you need me.’

She shook her head and smiled gently. ‘No, I want no interruption,’ she said. ‘The talk of princes must be secret.’

Her deep power struck at my heart and my belly again. I felt that I must obey.

‘Am I to bind his wrists for you, Medea?’ I said.

She laughed and picked up the little dirk that had scratched her shoulder. Then she shook her wild head and said, ‘No, Jason. I would not have a prince dishonoured so. I have his dagger and that is sufficient. I swear I will not use it on him unless he forces me to do so. Now will you go?’

I was waist-deep in the water before the boy called out, ‘Don’t go! Don’t leave me, Jason! You were my friend once.’

Now this sounded very sad to me. He to call after me, who was his enemy, rather than be left alone with his sister. Besides, his voice sounded thin and quavering, like that of a hare, or a newly-born lamb.

I did not turn to reply, for that would belittle a prince, to acknowledge his signs of fear. Later, I thought, as I breasted the tides, I will tend him well —after we have got clear of his galleys. I will find a wife for him and perhaps a little kingdom somewhere in the Epirus, where he can do no harm among the rustic folk.

I was still thinking like this when they dragged me aboard *Argo* and asked me how it had gone.

I said, ‘Well enough, brothers. We have him safe. His sister is giving him a piece of her mind at the moment.’

They all laughed at this as though I meant more than I had said.

‘Do you mean “mind,” Jason?’ Acastus called out.

But I ignored him and went aft, towards the awning.

‘Where is Atalanta?’ I asked. ‘I have grazed my shin on the rocks and need a salve to put on the cut. Poison often comes from old weedy rocks.’

Butes was sitting on his haunches in the early sun. He looked up at me, humming, and said, ‘Atalanta is not here. She went overboard just after you. We thought she had an arrangement with you. Meleager has been furious, as usual, that you two should spend a night together on a little island.’

I stared at him amazed.

‘Atalanta with me?’ I said. ‘I have not seen her.’

Nor could I see the little beach from where we were anchored beside the headland. But suddenly I heard a noise from that direction, faint and then growing. At first it sounded like laughter, hysterical laughter.

‘She is tickling him to death!’ old Butes said, screwing up his wrinkled eyelids against the sun.

Then the laughter became a squeal, like that a sucking-pig might make, and above it rose for an instant a high reedy singing, but the voices of two women. It was the sort of singing I had heard at the Village of Women when I was a boy. I had heard it since, on Lemnos, just before Hylas had gone into the deep cold pool.

I went to the side of the ship, my legs trembling. Castor came behind me and said, ‘Stay where you are, brother. This is not our affair. Princes have their own ways together.’

He was holding a broad dirk at my back, the point pressing against my skin. Castor was a good fellow, one of my dearest friends always, but never one to quarrel with.

So, as we all watched, equally deep in the mystery, we saw the two women climbing slowly up the loose sand that led to the top of the headland above the sea.

They were alone, holding out the front of their flounced skirts before them, like housewives who carry back a load of grain or olives from the market. We watched them in silence as they stood at last above the waters, black with the sun behind them, like two images.

On the little breeze that blew across the island we heard their voices, high and mournful. ‘Dionysus! Poor Dionysus!’ they sang. ‘When will he come again? Oh, when?’

Then each woman began to make the motion of throwing, as though they cast something down into the sea below them. This went on for some time but no one spoke on the crowded deck of *Argo*.

And at last when the seaward ripples came towards us from the island, sharp-eyed Lynceus, the look-out man, pointed and said, ‘See, there it is. How strange that it should float!’

Calais ran to his side and followed the pointing finger. Then suddenly he swung away and was as sick as a dog over the boards.

The others did not heed him but stared, with their eyes and mouths wide, across the dark waters.

I left them then and went under the awning. I put a blanket over my head so that I should not see or hear any more.

Later I did hear the two women laughing and chattering to each other, but I did not uncover myself. It was Atalanta who switched the blanket from my head and, smiling, said, ‘Give me his dirk. That, too, must go to Aphrodite or the offering will be incomplete.’

I handed her the little toy without looking at her face. What I saw on the lap of her skirt was enough for me. Even the sea had not washed that away.

Soon I heard Medea calling out to the awakening galleys but I could not bring myself to listen to her deep vibrant voice.

At last, as I felt our anchor-stone being pulled up, grating against our side, and the oars make their first strokes, her shadow fell before me on the deck and I heard her say humbly, ‘My lord husband, now you have your free choice of a kingdom. It could be Colchis or it could be Corinth. I have no wish for both. But you shall judge, for you are my master in all things now.’

I sneered up at her. ‘Master!’ I said. ‘You have made me your slave, your executioner.’

She lay down before me and clasped my ankles as though I were a great king. The deck beneath her became marked with her tears.

‘I implore you, husband,’ she said, ‘believe me. All I do is for you, and you only now. If you disbelieve me, put a dagger into me as I lie before you, and let us have an end to everything.’

I saw her broad back, the wet bodice stretched over it, and even put my hand upon my knife-haft. But this was a thing I could not do, though a small part of my mind wished it done. If one of my men had done it, at that moment, I should have been pleased.

At last I touched her on the neck and said, ‘Zeus help us, Medea. I think we have both sinned heavily this morning. We will sail for Iolcos. I have seen enough of Colchis for the rest of my life, however long the gods may let it be; though I have a black feeling that it may not be long.’

She rose and went away to the bow of the ship, speaking to no one, but burying her lovely face in her delicate hands. And so, silently we set course, leaving the shocked galleys bobbing on the waters in the lee of the island, like puzzled hounds that have lost their master and do not know which way to go.

36

Homecoming

THE last twenty years of my life have gone in a flash of lightning; yet the first twenty seemed endless. I think that I began to be an old man that morning when the two women sang to Dionysus from the cliff-top on the island.

Orpheus made a song on the way back. It went:

> ‘So comes the hero, standing at the prow,
> The face salt-caked but sacred now,
> The oar-blades rising and falling
> Like drum-sticks over the ox-hide,
> And all the world filled with the thunder
> Of such a homecoming; all joyous
> As though the streams ran wine
> And the hyacinth bloomed throughout the year.
>
> So comes the hero, Jason, king of men,
> Bringing his gracious queen, she
> Of the many magics, loveliest of queens.
> Fortunate he who claims such bride;
> Happy beyond all other kings,
> For he shall father such a brood
> As shall bring glory on the earth.
> Hail, Jason; hail, Medea! Hail!’

When he first sang it I smiled and gave him a gold arm-ring which I had picked up in Colchis. That is the chieftain’s duty, to reward his bard. But, as he sang it again and again, wherever we landed to take on meat or water, those words became emptier and emptier; more and more a lie.

True, my face was salt-caked—but that was about all! It bore the lines of worry, not glory. Nor did I notice, as we journeyed on, that our oars echoed round the world. Instead, they grew more and more weary. So much so that

some of my men wanted to sail into Lemnos again and forget that we had homes in Thessaly.

Dearly I wished to see Hypsipyle and my little son, but Medea forbade a landing there since, she said, the women of that place had come again under the Mother's curse, and all who landed there would put their lives in the gravest danger.

There was another reason, too. Medea, 'my gracious queen,' was now heavy with child; and this made her seem strangely dearer to me. It was as though I adored her in spite of myself. She said that she had conceived the child the night after we had left the island where Apsyrtus had been killed, and this was the Mother's way of telling us both that our deeds had been sacred and that our union was blessed.

Women say things like that, just as they used to say in my grandfather's time that children were born because the sea or the winds entered a body and made it sacred. Half the men I knew in Hellas claimed to be sons of Poseidon, which meant their mothers had swum in the sea and conceived; or sons of Zeus, which meant that they had lain out in a thunderstorm and the lightning had gone into them. The truth is that they did not know *who* their fathers were; for our people did not keep records in their early wanderings, and it was the custom among the wagon-folk to drink and be merry when a new grazing ground was discovered. Men and women were in and out of one wagon or another all the Spring, until the green shoots were eaten by the cattle and it became necessary to move on. The families became very mixed; it was, indeed, a wise son who knew his own father! That is why we had to be extremely careful to bed only with those of our own age; many mistakes happened when the tribes met and got drunk, and young men lay with older women, or the other way round. Of course we tried to avoid this; we were not like the Cretans and Egyptians and the early Thracians who did it deliberately to keep a hold on the throne, or the chieftain's seat on the village platform.

Still Medea said that the Mother had assisted in putting our child into her and I let that pass. I recall that I may have had something to do with it—especially at that time, for I was anxious to stress on Medea the fact that she had surrendered to me and had publicly announced that thenceforward she was my servant. I also recall that I did not spare her. Indeed I was more savage than I perhaps would otherwise have been, because our coupling was required to take place in public, according to Colchian law—and I wanted such as Atalanta and surly Meleager, and even doting Castor, to see that I meant to be master in my own place from then on.

Orpheus sang a verse in which he said that our wedding took place in the Cave of Macris, but I can tell you that there was no singing, no dancing, no golden cloths, as in his poem. It happened under the striped awning on *Argo* and there was a storm blowing up at the time. There was no singing—only crying from Medea, who, despite everything one might think, was not as hardened as she claimed. Apsyrtus could perhaps be blamed for this, but he was only a boy and so perhaps I should let it pass without further comment.

The truth is that Medea suffered a great deal in her child-bearing all her life, in spite of her charms and amulets, her potions and hymns to the Mother. Yet, like the she-cat, she became insatiable, although she knew what lay ahead of her.

Orpheus also sang about our visit to the Isle of the Sirens, and alleged that old Butes sprang overboard to reach them because of their wild song, but that Aphrodite rescued him and took him away as her beloved.

The truth was that one morning we ran alongside a small islet where two women stood up to their waists in the water, begging us to take them with us, and saying that they had been marooned by Thracian pirates who had ravished them and left them to die. We flung them pieces of salt meat and loaves of barley-bread and then went on, for they were wizened and ugly. We sympathized with the pirates, if they ever existed. It is my belief that they were runaway slaves whose boat had sunk—either that, or they were doing what young Cretan girls used to do among the Cyclades; that is, they had gone from ship to ship, along the trade routes, bartering themselves to the girl-hungry sailormen. There used to be quite a trade in that sort of thing at one time, for sailors were always ready with their money after a long and lonely voyage.

As for old Butes, the fact is that he got drunk on his own mead and tried to show us how he used to dance along the outstretched oars when he was a young fellow. He slipped when one of the rowers let his oar sink a little and fell like lead right under our keel. Argo was low in the water with her cargo of gold and there was no way of getting at the old man until it was too late. The keel carried him along for a mile, I would say. Every so often you could hear it grating on him under the water.

Orpheus made up the tale about Aphrodite because Butes had many powerful relatives and we did not want them to accuse us of negligence in looking after the old man. They might have claimed ‘blood money’ for him, his weight in gold, perhaps, and that would have been a bad bargain since he was no great help as a seaman or a warrior at any time. Though, to be just,

many of us did value his skill at finding wild honey for us on the various shores and islands we stayed at.

The voyage back to Pagasae lasted from Spring to the following Winter, no longer, in spite of the mad stories which the poets put about, hoping to bring greater credit to us all in our own cities. There was much boasting in those days; it was hard to come at the truth of anything.

However, but for a very strange and unexpected happening, we should not have reached Pagasae at all!

We were standing off the Hellespont at dawn one day when four tall ships rounded the cape and sighted us. They were Trojan men-of-war and bristled with spears. Terrible great hulks, like floating porcupines; enough to strike fear into any voyager.

And they were fast—so fast that once they got the scent of us they were after us like lynx after a hare! We had hardly got ourselves turned round to face the open sea again, when the first of them was on us, taking the wind out of our sails with its huge bulk. Castor and his brother were all for abandoning ship and taking our chance in the sea, since we were fairly close to shore.

‘If we stay crowded together like this,’ Castor said, ‘they will put a volley or two of javelins aboard us and skewer us to our seats.’ Medea, however, sat very still and pale with her morning sickness. Her lips were pinched in and her nostrils wide. She said, ‘If my father the Eagle were alive no Trojan bastard would dare come within two cables of a Colchian galley.’

I reminded her that she was not aboard a Colchian galley now, but a ship from Hellas. And that the Trojans were not to know who was aboard us—however great she thought herself.

We were arguing in this fashion when a great man appeared on the prow-platform of the leading warship and began to shout down at us in a voice that sounded like a bull roaring. He called us all manner of piratical Thracian pigs, and things of that sort. Then he said he would keel-haul every man of us and feed the bloody remnants to his lions.

I yelled up at him, ‘Come down on to my deck, Heracles, and we’ll see who is the better man!’

The big man stopped shouting and peered down. Then he suddenly gave a shout and all the javelins were withdrawn. The Trojan ship laid off and half swung about, narrowly missing us. Its wake came near to capsizing us, but now we did not care.

Heracles swung himself over the side on a double rope and came down to us so fast that he scorched both his great hands.

He almost ran at me, first embraced me like a lover, and then gave me such a clout on the side of the head that I fell among our shipped oars and broke three of them.

My head was ringing but I was overjoyed. Medea was smiling, too, to see this big man embracing everyone, calling them by their nicknames, and swearing monstrous oaths of friendship over and over again.

When he went aft to meet her he saw her priestess's bodice and skirt, saw the gravid belly and great breasts; then he fell down before her like a lion doing homage to a king and kissed her feet tenderly, putting her right foot upon his neck as a sign of allegiance.

His madness had left him completely. It was as though Hylas had never existed. Heracles was a man now, red-faced, grown, generous, laughing. I have never seen such a change come over a fellow.

That night there was no more sailing. We all had to go aboard the leading warship, and there, on the mid-deck, we held a great feast. Heracles asked us our news but didn't listen to a word we said! He was so full of what he called his labours—which, as far as I could gather from his thick drunk voice, consisted of killing lions, boars, bulls, and stealing women's girdles! He mumbled something about robbing orchards and lifting cattle—but it was all a great confusion! Like a big boy boasting of his prowess and none of it making much sense. All the same, this talk seemed to have had a good effect on him for he said that the Mother had lifted the load from his mind, and had helped him to destroy the King of Troy and to put a new king on the throne, a little lad called Priam—a nice little fellow, Heracles said, as though he had fathered the boy himself.

'So you are the regent?' I said, half-drunk myself.

Heracles tried to focus me with his red-rimmed eyes and said unevenly, 'Regent? What's regent when he's at home, hey?'

He paused, swayed a little on his seat, then drank the wine belonging to the two who sat on either side of him. 'I'm a regent?' he said. 'Nay, shipmaster, I'm a general, and a prince, and a god, and God knows what else! That's what I am, and never forget it.'

He began to throw things about and I thought he was going to have one of his mad fits. But Medea pointed her finger at him and put on a stern face. The effect was astounding. Heracles, who was afraid of no man born,

stopped his swearing and his fumbling, and staggered over to the dais where she sat. He bent over her and patted her belly gently, smiling and nodding like an idiot in a village compound.

'Forgive me, Queen,' he said, thickly, the spittle flecking her white breast, 'and tell the king inside you to forgive me. Tell him, whoever he is, that Heracles is his friend and will see right done by him, even if the sky should fall. Tell him he has no better man to stand beside him than old Heracles, the strongest man in the world!'

He went on caressing Medea and she went on smiling calmly, like a she-cat who is stroked, a she-cat who has had her fill of cream.

I dragged him away and told him not to be a fool. But later when we had gone to bed, Medea said to me privately, 'That Heracles, he is a great man. I think that the Mother will honour him with godhead before his day is out. With Heracles beside us, we can rule the world, husband.'

In the morning, before I was properly awake, Heracles was back again, fondling Medea and whispering in her ear. I stirred in bed, my head thick with wine, and said, 'What are you at this time, madman?'

But he paid no heed to me. And Medea looked over his shoulder and said very solemnly, though with a little wink, 'He is paying homage once more to the unborn king. Leave him be. He is a good fellow, this Heracles. I wish there were more like him. He says he is going to forsake little King Priam of Troy and come home with us.'

Sure enough, despite all I said to the contrary, a day later he left his three warships to fend for themselves, having taken what he called his fair wages from their holds, and came aboard *Argo*.

Castor did not like this, partly because Heracles was so strong and loud-mouthed and partly because he kept so close to Medea, whom Castor and his brother had taken a great fancy to. But there was nothing to be done about it. Medea put her arm round the thick waist of Heracles and rubbed her face against his bear-like bush of a beard. No man could have looked prouder at this, and no men more envious than the Spartans.

It began to get so intense, this love-play, that I went aft and told them both to watch themselves now that we were coming among the islands of Hellas.

But Heracles had been at the wine-flask again and he bawled out for all to hear, 'Go and roll in the pig-sty, Diomedes! I know what I want; and so does the queen! I have always been for the Mother, which is more than I can

say for some folk I know! Besides, I'm your twin, am I not? And a twin shares and shares alike. That is the law and no gossiping little shipmaster is going to change the law, while I have a right arm on my body!'

Medea was laughing and nodding all the time he was saying this.

I went away, and later the two Spartan brothers came to me quietly under the pretence of asking about a rope that had to be spliced.

'Say the word, Jason,' said Polydeuces, 'and we two will throttle this swine and put him overboard before we come in sight of land.'

I shook my head and said, 'This public fondling pleases me no more than it pleases you, my friends. But Heracles is my twin, and he did call the Trojan ships off when they might have rammed us. We owe him something.'

Castor said, 'But you do not owe him your wife, Jason. You cannot share your future kingdom and your bed with him. Say the word, while he is drunk and we are in the way of doing the job.'

But, try as I would, I could not bring myself to speak the command which would have killed Heracles. I have always been sorry that I didn't; but who, except the gods, can see into the future?

He came with us to Pagasae and it is my belief that during the dark winter nights that had come down on us, he found the occasion to come closer to Medea than ever before.

I mentioned this to her once, when I was angry in beer, but she only smiled and turned her head away.

'So jealous,' she said, 'and all because your twin shows better courtesy towards a queen than the rest of your red-necked sailors! Jason, are you not ashamed to speak such words?'

I think I was angry because by now, in some perverse way, I had begun to love Medea; and I think that she loved me, too. Or perhaps a part of me. Perhaps I should have been two men to satisfy her fully, a man half-Jason, half-Heracles.

Why do the gods not make a man complete? If they did, he would stand a better chance of being happy in this dark and cruel world.

37

Landfall

As we sailed nearer and nearer to the last of the islands, Sciathos, my mind turned more often to what I should do in Iolcos. I could foresee many difficulties; Pelias would claim all the gold we had gained, after our wages were paid—and once he had the gold, he would not feel inclined to give up his throne. That did not trouble me greatly—the throne, not the gold, I mean—because Medea had stressed to me, night after night, that the kingdom of Corinth was now mine and hers. What troubled me was that Pelias had given me his two daughters, Evadne and Amphinome, and would not look kindly on the interloper Medea.

I mentioned this to her, but she only smiled in her slow eastern way, and went away to lie down and talk with Atalanta. If to be a goddess means that a woman should be remote from common human affairs, then truly Medea was a goddess. She always seemed to be living in a strange dream that involved only the highest things, the snow-covered mountain-tops of man's condition. All else below she ignored or sneered at. Men might die for her in their hundreds, herds of cattle might be burned in their pastures by plain-fires; but Medea seemed not to know. Yet she might be concerned deeply about one man, or two, if they were kings or heroes; and she might weep bitter tears over one bull, if it was a sacred animal. Life for such goddesses must be very simple; they only see a small part of the world, but that most clearly, most intensely.

I could get little advice from her on the problem which lay before us. Men like Heracles and even my Spartans were all for forgetting our oath to Pelias, and for marching up to the palace and killing him without further discussion.

'Then,' said Heracles, smiling towards Medea, 'we can all be great in the land, and share each other's good fortune, with you as our king, a king like a shipmaster, no more, and ourselves as a free company about you.'

Castor and Polydeuces said, 'If Medea has a wish to sit on the throne in Iolcos, we shall let no man keep her from that wish, Jason. Not even you,

though we love you as liege-men should love their lord, the giver of rings and swords.'

Next I called Admetus to me, the Prince of Pherae and my cousin. In secret, I said to him, 'Admetus, you are betrothed to the little daughter of Pelias, Alcestis. If you still wish to marry her, will you take her sisters, Evadne and Amphinome, into your household at Pherae and find husbands for them?'

He was a good enough fellow when you knew him, and he nodded. 'I know what is in your heart, Jason,' he answered. 'I will take them off your hands, to leave you a clear course to run. There should be no difficulty in finding them husbands. I have young brothers, and young brothers grow into bigger brothers. Until they grow, I can find ways of keeping the two women busy.'

I patted his shoulder and said, 'You are a good fellow, Admetus. You shall have a double share of the gold, the share that old Butes should have had.'

He smiled a little wickedly and said, 'That is what I had hoped, shipmaster.'

Then he went away, and I next sent for Acastus, the Prince of Iolcos and next in line to Pelias. This was a more difficult thing to speak of. But at the time I had a dagger in my hand, pretending to peel a pear. A dagger is a wonderful argument at any time, whether pears are in season or not.

He glanced at me and then at the dagger.

'I thought it might come to this, Jason,' he said, in a resigned manner. 'Still, the voyage has been a good one and I have no complaints. There have been adventures and entertainments.'

He was about to kneel before me, when I raised him and said, 'Acastus, it is not as bad as that—unless you make it so. I have come to like you as we have travelled together; it would ill become me now to put an end to you without giving you the free choice which all Hellenes claim as a right from the gods.'

Acastus sat on the bench beside me and said, 'Very well, what do you want, Jason?'

'I do not want your father's kingdom,' I said, 'though there are certain others who think I should claim it, after the promise Pelias made to me at the Feast of Poseidon. Yet I do not wish your father to lay hands on all the gold

which we have so hardly won. Suppose that Pelias died—somehow, I do not know. And suppose that I had to sit on his throne for a little while before I went elsewhere. Suppose I then handed it back to you, the rightful heir. Would that be to your liking, Acastus?'

He bowed and said smiling, 'That would suit me, cousin. I know my father well; a fierce old stag who might well overlook me at the end and give the throne to my younger brothers. But I agree to what you say with two conditions—that you leave me with a full treasury of gold, and that you take the madman Heracles away with you, wherever you go.'

I stuck my knife into the narrow table that was set before us and said, 'The gold, yes; but what have you against Heracles, apart from his madness?' (I had hoped to be rid of him, too, at one stroke!)

The prince answered, 'No king is ever safe with him, and once I sit on the throne of Iolcos, I want to be safe. I do not want him to murder me at a feast, or to violate my wife when I am away hunting. That is all.'

I said, 'It is enough, Acastus! But reflect on this—no king is ever safe. That is a condition he must accept in accepting his throne.'

He said, 'But there are some risks which a king should avoid, when he can. No stag willingly jumps over a cliff; he does that only when the hounds are on his heels.'

I said, 'The hounds are always on a king's heels, my friend. But I see your point. If we arrange for Heracles to be disposed of in some other way, will you agree to my scheming? You won't try to hold me to my promise to marry your sisters, for example?'

Acastus laughed aloud then and slapped his thigh.

'By Poseidon,' he said, 'but they are the last thing in my thoughts! Give them a bracelet or two and they'll be content till the next stranger comes along. Just see that little Alcestis weds Admetus, as was arranged; that is all I ask. As for the other two, the man who marries them will wake up to find he is keeping a common-house before a month is out!'

So Acastus went from under my awning, content. All seemed propitious now and I stood at the prow once more with a clear mind.

But in the Gulf of Pagasae, three days later, a new complication arose. We almost ran down a fisherman in his small boat, before dawn. He was out, with his young son, trying to dredge the fishing ground before the brisker fellows put their nets to work.

We dragged him on board to get the news from him. At first he was tight-lipped and stubborn, for he thought we were pirates from Andros who were always raiding up and down the coasts at that time. But when I told him who we were, and what ship he was on, he began to talk. Heracles helped him by twisting a little thong about his neck, with a stick pushed through it. Indeed, so occupied did Heracles become in this play that I had to kick him away from the man, in case he should overdo it and we heard no news at all.

But when he had recovered, the fisherman did speak, and told me Pelias had had news that we had foundered off Colchis and that all the crew were dead, including his son, Acastus. This had enraged him so much that he had made an end of my own family. My mother, Perimede, he had strangled the morning the rumour came; my so-called father, Aeson, he had poisoned by making the old fool drink bull's blood tinctured with foxglove juice; and my infant brother, who had been named Promachus—that is the child Perimede was carrying when I left, thought to be the by-blow of some Achaean kinglet she had met on a visit to Delphi—had his brains dashed out on the palace floor by one of the king's Libyan Guard.

That last made me sad. I did not regret Perimede, who had got me into all the trouble I had known so far; nor old Aeson, whose life had ended many years before, had he known it. But that little boy, to be murdered so brutishly, shocked me. And all because his name, Promachus, meant 'champion', and Pelias felt that this was an omen—that one day Promachus would rise against him and become a champion of the people and push him from his throne.

Acastus heard this news for he stood beside me as the old fisherman told it. He whispered to me, 'Very well, Jason; you have the reason you needed now. No man can deny you the blood-rights against my father. Kill him and good fortune sit on the point of your sword.'

I touched his hand secretly in acknowledgement, so that no one should see. I kept my face straight, though in my heart was a great joy at his words—just as there was a great sadness at the death of little Promachus, whom I had never seen, but who was my brother.

Now all must be done swiftly and secretly. Heracles wanted to kill the fisherman and his son, so that they should not return to land and spread the tidings that we had returned, and so put Pelias on his guard. But I stopped that. Instead, we bound both father and son, hand and foot, and slashed their sail across. Then we left them lying in the bottom of their miserable little

boat for some other fisherman to find later in the day. It was an act of kindness, though it seems harsh when I tell of it.

We lay offshore out of sight of Pagasae until dusk and then made a landing in a little creek between two limestone rocks. Only a goatherd saw us put in and Castor brought him down with one stone from his great leather sling. The goats did not seem to mind; they went on much as before, munching everything they could find, master or not. Rather like a kingdom without a king, I thought!

Then we went into a little gully, and decided what we should do. Once more, we were all of one opinion, just as though we were on shipboard. There was no more argument.

38

The Grove of Artemis

Between Pagasae and Iolcos there is a wood of cedars. Here the trees grow thickly and shut out the sky. Lower down on the ground are oleanders and laurels, and below them, in their season, aconites. In the middle of the wood is a small glade through which a stream flows; fresh water when the tide is on the ebb, salt water when it is on the flow. I had been here many times when I was a child, when Melanos was in a good mood and brought us down to see the sea and to play hide-and-seek as a special treat. He told us it was dedicated to Artemis, the virgin, the 'High Source of Water'. Like little ones, we never questioned him, but repeated the prayer he spoke and then got about our game.

Now we, the men of *Argo*, lay in that wood as night came down and the owls began to call. Medea's time was not far away, and at Atalanta's order, we had made a litter of sapling-boughs to carry her when she first began to groan and to bite her lower lip. All the same, she tried to march with the men for a while, not wanting to seem weak in their eyes. But as we had mounted the last rise before the grove and as the walls and roofs of Iolcos showed themselves for the first time in the dusk, she had leaned against a rock, the sweat standing in great beads on her forehead. Then she gave in and let us carry her, making some wry jest about the richness of the litters that queens were offered in Hellas.

Our plan was, at first, to scale the town walls of Iolcos—they were very low and we had ropes from the ship to help us—and then to go boldly into the palace and capture it. But when she had rested a while and her first pains seemed to die away, Medea rose from her rude couch and whispered to Atalanta, who now stayed beside her always.

Shortly, Atalanta came to me and said, 'Medea the Queen has made few requests to Jason, her husband. Women at the verge of birth are often capricious, yet by the laws of the Mother, they must be obeyed. What Medea asks is not capricious, Jason, but of service to every man here. Medea shows, even at this hour, her great love for you. You may not refuse her if you wish to prosper for the rest of your days.'

I said, leaning on my elbow beneath a bay tree, ‘What does the queen ask, priestess?’

The men listened for the answer; for now all were under the spell of the Colchian, to greater or lesser degree.

Atalanta said, ‘Medea desires that you let her and me go into Iolcos alone. We shall tell anyone who questions us that we are the only survivors of the voyage and we shall be treated with kindness and respect. If you doubt that, then there is another thing I shall put to you—she is a queen, I a priestess. As such, we are safe from the hands of common men. Let us go and we shall achieve the purpose you desire without the loss of a single man of the *Argo*. Is it agreed?’

I said, ‘But in her state . . .’

Atalanta smiled and said, ‘In her state, all men will honour her. A lithe virgin might not come off so easily, queen or not, but a woman near her time is inviolate.’

I looked at the princes and the Spartans for advice and after a while they nodded. Heracles did not join them, but went to the litter where Medea lay and bowed low on the grassy turf before her, kissing her bare feet in homage.

We were all weary and by now, after our march, somewhat dispirited at the sight of the city we had to take and the deed we had to do. I glanced around and saw that the men under the bushes had dug the points of their javelins into the ground, as men do when they set up camp at night, not meaning to fight until the morning light comes again. This was sufficient answer for me. So I said, ‘Tell Medea that you may go and that I pray the gods will hold their cloaks over you both until you return.’

Atalanta did not go straight back to Medea, but went instead to a little mound beside the stream in the glade and began to dig at what seemed an ant-hill, with her hands. As we watched, we saw her feel about and at last draw forth something wrapped in bands of yellow linen. She slowly uncovered the thing and we saw that it was a small image of Artemis, thickly covered in gold leaf, but still bearing the shape of a goddess.

She called softly to me, ‘This and the unborn child inside Medea are the only tokens, the only weapons, we shall need to gain you a kingdom, Jason.’

So the two left us, Medea leaning on Atalanta’s shoulder, but not so heavily as I would have expected.

Heracles came back to us and squatted down on his haunches tugging at his thick red beard. ‘The women have the hearts of great warriors,’ he mumbled. ‘Yet if Pelias harms them, I swear that of Iolcos, not one stone shall be left standing upon another by dusk tomorrow, Jason.’

I took his thick wrist in the darkness and said, ‘I shall be beside you, brother, and it will not be sweat that drips from my javelin-point.’

Meleager began to cry out like a wild dog and to say that I had sent his lover to her doom, but one of the others, Iphitus of Mycenae, flung him to the turf and held his hand over the fool’s mouth. Iphitus was a good fellow, though over-arrogant because of the fame of his brother, King Eurystheus, who had set up many splendid tombs, in which the dead men wore masks of solid gold. And this at a time when the rest of Hellas had to be content with bronze, or even natural copper dug out of the ground, for their helmets.

As the hours passed, we chewed at dry barley cakes which we had brought from the ship, and drank stream water from our helmets. Luckily the tide was on the ebb and the water was quite fresh.

It was during one such visit to the stream that I thought I saw Acastus before me, on his knees, drinking, and I slapped him on the back to tell him that his kingdom was not far away now. But when the man turned, I saw that he was Idmon the Argive who claimed to be son to Apollo.

This set my mind working so I went back through the grove and searched for Acastus. He was nowhere to be found. Nor had any man seen him leave the wood.

Then another thought struck me: if Acastus, whose father was to die, had gone, then what of Admetus, whose little betrothed, Alcestis, lay fast asleep in Iolcos? I searched for Admetus then, and could only learn from the man who had lain next to him that Admetus had gone beyond the wood to relieve himself. But he was not with us now. . . .

I made a roll-call, quietly, not to disturb any passing herdsman. Yes, the two princes had gone from us.

I went back to Heracles and the Spartans and told them. Castor, who never spoke ten words if two would do, said, ‘Princes! Trustless dogs!’ Then we began to buckle on our swords, meaning to go after them towards Iolcos.

But before we could do this, there rose a strange wailing beyond the wood, and we heard the sound of rushing, thudding feet. We shrank back into the bushes as two forms ran headlong among the boughs. There was a little moonlight and we saw that they were women—they were in their

night-attire, blood-drenched and wide-eyed. At first I had thought they were the women who had left us, but as they came closer, shrieking and tossing their tousled heads from side to side in anguish, I saw that they were Evadne and Amphinome, the daughters of King Pelias.

They halted a moment at the little stream and tried to wash the blood from their arms and faces, crying all the while. Heracles rose from behind the laurel-bush where he lay and went to them. They screamed at the sight of him, immense in the dim light. But he caught Evadne and held her roughly by the quaking shoulders.

'What news, woman?' he said, his great beard wagging in the girl's face. 'Tell me or I will throttle you!'

Evadne's blank eyes gazed through him. 'Kill me, kill me, I beg you,' she howled. 'I, who have torn my father's body at the command of a witch, beg you to kill me. Look, I have no knife or I would have done it myself.'

Heracles flung her from him. She rolled on the ground for a while, beating the damp turf with her clenched fists; and then she rose and staggered after her sister into the darkness beyond the wood, still crying bitterly like a mad woman.

Polydeuces turned to me and said grimly, 'Well, at least Pelias is dead then, Jason—whoever killed him. That is a good thing.'

Castor said, 'A good thing if they are not setting some trap for us . . . A good thing if our own women come back safely.'

I noticed that Castor, who had never been over-friendly towards Atalanta before, now spoke of her and of my wife as '*our* women', as though he felt some kinship, some possession, towards them, and I smiled, although to tell the truth I was in no smiling mood, deep down.

Then suddenly everything seemed to happen in that little cedar grove of Artemis.

The bushes parted again and we saw Medea come staggering like a drunk woman, clasping her lower belly and howling like a she-wolf. Atalanta tottered behind her, singing and clutching at a bundle which she held to her breast. Her face and the front of her garments were red and shining in the moonlight.

Medea fell in a heap beside the little stream in the glade and began to heave. Atalanta ripped off her flounced skirt and knelt beside her to do what had to be done.

And, as we men watched from the bushes, in a sort of horror, the child was born. It was like an awful wrestling match at the games when one of the men must die. Then she lay back and groaned, her breathing slow and harsh. Heracles wanted to go to her but the Spartans and I had just enough wit left to hold him back, for such a thing was forbidden until the mother and her baby were washed clean again.

My legs and jaws were quivering beyond my power to stop them. Then that quivering turned to joy as I heard the child cry out loudly, like a new-born lamb. And that joy turned again to horror when Atalanta stooped, took up the baby and held it in her arms. . . . For she had suddenly stripped the covering from her bundle and now we could all see that she held the white head of Pelias, its eyes rolled back and sightless, its mouth gaping to show the yellow teeth and gums.

Slowly she bent and put both trophies into the arms of Medea, who lay back exhausted on the rough couch now. And Medea just as slowly groped at the head and then, with wet hands, daubed the baby's face and body. . . .

I heard her say, 'Seldom is a child washed in the sacred blood of a king! It is a good omen!'

I think I was about to rush out and tear both baby and head away from her, but at that moment there was a great scuffling and shouting, a great thudding of feet upon the ground, and into the clearing ran a squad of the black Libyan Guard, their javelins raised for the cast. Behind them, many in their night-attire, came townsfolk of Iolcos, eyes staring, hair uncombed, mad with fury, shaking sticks and fire-spits, their only weapons.

I shouted, 'To me, men of *Argo*; the queen and her prince must be saved!'

I heard feet about me, not many, but I thought nothing of that at the time; and then we were standing about Medea, our swords out, in a tight ring. Atalanta lay upon the queen's body, shielding it with her own. Heracles snatched up the baby and held it to his great bear-like chest as though it was the fruit of his own loins.

And all round us stood the Black Guard, frozen like images, their hands drawn back to pin us with their javelins.

I yelled, 'Come on, then! Let us begin the play! I'll take any three of you with me.'

Castor and Polydeuces shouted out their own challenges and began to bite their lips until the blood ran into their beards. Orpheus, who was

somehow among us with his lyre, struck up a chord or two and sang:

> ‘In the Grove of Artemis
> The heroes stood their ground,
> Blessed of the Mother,
> A queen in their midst.
> Who dares assail such warriors,
> Such guardians of the Child?
> Who dares come forth
> And test the Mother’s fury?’

The Libyans rolled their eyes and made low grunting noises in their chests, uncertain whether to attack or not, brave and fearful at the same time.

Then the bushes parted again and a tall figure stepped forward. At first I thought it was Pelias come back from the dead, for he wore the kilt, the necklace, the leg-guards and the high black fleece headdress. In his right hand he carried the great sword of Poseidon.

But when he spoke I knew that it was Acastus, son of the murdered king.

He said clearly, ‘I dare come forward, to claim my father’s head. Who shall deny me will suffer the vengeance both of Zeus and of Poseidon. For one head, twenty will roll in this stream tonight.’

Heracles began to scream out a challenge to Acastus, but Medea reached up and silenced him.

Then, helped by Atalanta and Castor, she rose, unsteadily but bravely, and pointed her finger at Acastus.

‘Who killed Pelias?’ she said in a high voice. ‘I will tell you—his daughters, Evadne and Amphinome. So the gods have rewarded them with madness.’

Acastus struggled to keep his voice even and replied, ‘Who gave them the laurel to chew? Who set them on to kill their own father, from whose body they came, causing them to tear him to pieces like wild dogs over a dead sheep?’

Medea began to laugh at these words, her voice soaring in the moonlight above the heavy boughs of the cedars. I shuddered where I stood, near her. A Libyan before her gave a snuffling groan and then launched his javelin. It was as though he could stand this thing no longer. The shaft passed between Medea and Heracles and struck a tree-trunk behind us. Acastus turned as

swiftly as the lightning strikes and took the man below the jawbone with the great sword of Poseidon. No one else moved. It was as though we all stood in the presence of the gods.

Then suddenly the baby, my child, began to cry out again, and broke the spell.

A woman in the crowd began to weep loudly, until the men with her struck her on the mouth to silence her. The Libyans began to lower their javelins and to draw back a pace, into the shadows of the great cedars, as though afraid.

Acastus held his sword point downwards now, so that it dragged in the turf. With his left hand he pushed back the great black sheepskin and looked me in the eye.

'All is finished, Jason,' he said. 'Pelias is dead; my people have made me king in his place. There is not room for two kings in Iolcos.'

I lowered my own sword and stood before him, watching every move he made in case this should be an act of treachery.

I said, 'What lies between us, both you and I know, Acastus. There is right and wrong, upon both sides. What would you have us do now, King of Iolcos?'

I said the last words mockingly, but he did not take them so. Instead he answered, 'Give me back my father's head, so that his body shall go to greet the gods entire. And leave half of your cargo of gold upon the beach near Pagasae, for it was truly my father's gold. In return I give you his ship and the rest of the fleeces, to do with as you please.'

In some curious way, I was suddenly aware that we, the crew of *Argo*, were few in number; that many must have deserted us when the Libyans first ran into the glade. I think we were not more than a dozen, at the most, two of them women, and one a poet whose only weapon was his lyre.

Bitter at the heart I said, 'The bargain is made, Acastus. And all the folk here have heard it. Yet one day I may visit you again, with more men at my back, and then I shall remind you how you broke your oath of friendship to me.'

The crowd hissed through their teeth, but Acastus only smiled and held out his hand for the head of his father. Atalanta gave it to him, by the long black hair. It swung, mocking in the moonlight.

Then he said, ‘You can visit me whenever you choose, Jason, and with as many men as you can bring. I shall not run from you, never fear. Now go, and start you on your way, and thank the gods that I am a merciful king.’

Behind him I saw Admetus my cousin, holding Alcestis by the hand. She was weeping bitterly as she looked up at her dead father’s swinging head. Among the crowd, also, I noticed many of the men who had sailed with me to Colchis and back. They stood with the townsfolk as though they had never been my comrades, had never seen me in their lives before.

So I bowed before Acastus and then, as the Libyans parted their ranks to let us through, we lifted Medea on the litter and carried her and the baby slowly through the wood of Artemis.

We did not look back, nor did anyone fling a javelin at us. There was only a great sighing in the grove, as though the dawn breezes mourned among the boughs.

And when we were clear, the twelve of us, I said, ‘So, we sail to Corinth now, Medea? Is that it?’

She nodded and gave suck to the little one at her breast. I did not care to watch as the morning light strengthened.

‘To Corinth,’ she repeated slowly. ‘That is, if we have men enough to handle the ship now.’

On the shore at Pagasae we flung half of our cargo of fleeces as we had promised. If we had had greater numbers of oarsmen, I should have sailed away with the whole cargo, but Acastus knew what he was doing. He knew that with our few men he could catch us before we were out of the gulf if we did not keep our word.

CORINTH

Part Four

39

Mount Cyllene

FIVE years have passed, my friends.

On the foot-hills of Mount Cyllene; a day's ride from my palace in Corinth; hunting with my two sons—Medeius, who was born in the wood outside Iolcos, the night Pelias died; and little Argus, three years old, and named after the great Argus who built our ship; named after him in consolation because I had let that fine ship rot upon the beach of the Isthmus that lay between the two seas.

Medeius at five years of age could sit a horse as though Cheiron himself had been his teacher, and could put a javelin into a young boar at ten paces.

'King Father,' he would say, his blue eyes laughing up at mine, 'shall I ever be a great one like you and sail to the world's end, and then come back to be king in Corinth?'

Only Castor and Polydeuces and Heracles were with me still; the others had gone back to their own places when they had seen that the folk of Corinth accepted me as their new king. These three led my body of companions, fifty of the most fearless warriors of the mainland, most of them Achaeans.

When I rode after wild pig with my two sons these companions always came with me, but stayed at a respectful distance if I sat down upon a rock to talk to my boys. Only Castor and Polydeuces and Heracles dared come close to me then. The others squatted on the hill-side, splendid in their tall horse-plumed helmets and leather breast-plates, with their javelins sticking up above them like the bristles on a hog's shoulders.

The villagers all about the land knew me and my bodyguard, and ran waving to their doorways when we passed. 'Come quickly,' they would shout to others inside, 'Jason and his Achaeans are coming! Oh, look at their helmets! Look at their lances! Look at their swords! And, oh, the horses, the bold horses!'

Heracles used to tell Medea about this when we got home, and the two of them used to make a great mock of it, pointing at me and shouting out in the dialect of the peasants, ‘Look at the great king, oh, look at him! And, oh, the bold horses!’

Then Heracles would bring in all the children we had adopted, a dozen of them, boys and girls, the unwanted children of kings and princes. . . . After little Argus, Medea could have no more children of her own. Birth was always painful to her, and we lost perhaps seven children before we learned the truth, that Medea’s children would always be born dead thereafter. A physician who came to tend her from Athens professed to have made a great study of this trouble. It was growing extremely common, he said, among all those who had practised as snake goddesses. Repeated doses of snake venom caused the blood to clot, he said, and this blood, passing into the baby, caused its death. Sometimes, if the father’s blood was very strong and pure, then the first children might be born healthy; but later, when the father’s desire flagged, then the mother’s envenomed blood took control and killed the child before it could come into the world. This physician said that in all Crete, and among the Cyclades where the Cretans had lived for so many generations, there had not been a child born live to a priestess for twenty years, to his knowledge.

But who is to prove such things? To me, a king and a warrior, physicians may well be liars, like the poets. . . .

You see, even Orpheus was a great liar—and I called him one of my closest friends. I will tell you only one example, but it will show you what I mean; on our way to Corinth from Iolcos, Orpheus made up a great song in which he described the funeral games held the day after the sad death of King Pelias.

Now, if there were such games at all, we were not there to see them; we were on the broad seas, and wondering what sort of reception we should get at Corinth. But that didn’t prevent Orpheus from saying that we had all attended the games. According to him Polydeuces had won the boxing contest, Calais the mile race, Zetes the sprint, Heracles the wrestling match, Meleager the javelin-throw, and so on! He even accounted for the death of Glaucus, one of our worst-tempered crew, who got his neck broken in one of Heracles’ fits on the homeward trip, by saying that Glaucus was devoured by his chariot-horses, they having been made mad by Aphrodite.

If you cannot trust poets and physicians, whom can you trust, I ask? Yet I suppose they mean well. Certainly Medea’s affliction meant that many

children who would otherwise have been exposed on the hill-side were taken into our house and reared as if they had been our own.

But I loved my two boys beyond any other children, though I tried not to show this.

And especially I loved straight-backed Medeius. And when he asked if he would ever be a great one like me, I smiled and said, ‘Greater, my prince, far greater!’

Then Medeius said, ‘And will my brother Argus be great as well?’

And I answered, ‘How can the gods neglect him, my son?’

Heracles was angry when I said this and shook me in front of my sons, telling me that I was tempting the gods by such foolish words.

But I was not to be treated so before my little princes, and I pushed his arm from me and said for all to hear, ‘If the gods will not listen to the King of Corinth, then to whom *will* they listen?’

This pleased my sons, but not my followers, who nudged each other and muttered, crossing their fingers and spitting on the ground to absolve themselves from the consequences of my words.

‘You tempt the Erinnyes, Jason,’ said Castor. ‘Not even kings may do that.’

I said, ‘Castor, each day you get more and more like an old woman warming her belly over the kitchen fire, afraid of every owl calling in the trees outside! Don’t you think that the gods would have had me before now, if they had wanted my poor carcass?’

Castor said, ‘A man can live to be a hundred—and still they will have him in the end for something he did when he was a beardless boy.’

I answered, ‘Well, if they leave me till I am a hundred I will not mind going into the dark alleys with the Furies. So have done and let us find a wild pig for the boys to practise on.’

Truly, I thought, Castor was getting old before his time.

At the next turn in the rock-walled gully we came upon a man sitting on a horse, with a girl-child beside him on a white pony, and upwards of two score men behind him. It was as though he was waiting for us. He smiled as we came into view.

This was no ordinary man. The forefront of his polished bronze helmet was deeply embossed with a dragon's head, its staring eyes of red garnets, its grinning teeth of boar-tusk ivory. The horse-hair plume above it stood a foot high and was dyed the colour of fresh blood. His thick frieze cloak was of the same colour, and so were his broad leather sword-belt and high buskined sandals. On his wrists and fingers, gold glimmered. His broad flat face was creased on either side of the powerful nose with deeply-etched lines which ran down into the grizzled black of his jutting beard. He gazed at me with bright grey eyes, as though he was amused that I should appear round the bend in the gully just as he had expected me to do.

He held up his right hand, palm outwards, to show that he came in peace. And then he said, 'Greetings, King of Corinth. You are somewhat out of your way, up here on Cyllene, but I wish you well at the hunting.'

I was a little taken aback at this greeting, for my hunting rights reached even beyond Cyllene, and I did not care for a stranger to question what I did in those days. I had got old and severe, you understand, since gaining my kingdom. I said shortly, 'The King of Corinth rides where he wishes in Hellas.'

The man on the horse smiled again at this boast and then scratched the side of his nose with a thick forefinger on which glinted a broad ring of red gold.

'I am glad to hear that,' he said. 'In these days of strife it is a lucky king who can ride unmolested through his own territory, much less through Hellas—whatever that word means!'

I was nettled by this and said, 'You know my title, but it seems that you do not know much else about me. I, who have sailed across the world's seas, am not to be questioned about a ride across my own kingdom.'

The young girl who sat on the pony beside him—thin, flat-chested, with straggling straw-coloured hair and a squint in her right eye—giggled at this and said, 'There, Father Creon, they all said this Jason was a great boaster and a liar. Now we know the truth.'

The man on the horse turned such a fierce glare upon the girl that she lowered her head and seemed about to snivel. My elder son, Medeius, kneed his pony forward until he was only a pace or two from her and said in his boy's high voice, 'If you were a lad I would punch out your teeth for speaking so about my father, girl-thing!'

I waved him to keep back and then I said, ‘So, King Creon of Thebes it is. And are *you* not riding a little out of your own way, King Creon?’

He smiled that creased smile again, and said, ‘I must ask you to pardon Glauce, my daughter. She is a forward child from spending so much of her time among the soldiers with me, but she means no harm. If the prince wishes to punch her in the mouth, or to do anything else to her that takes his royal fancy, then he is at liberty to do so, though I would beg him not to spoil what little she has in the way of good looks. We shall have to find a husband for her one day!’

But he did not answer my own comment, I noticed, about his being so far from Thebes. Instead, he rode up to me and held out both his hands. I took them hesitantly in my own, observing their strength as I did so.

‘I have waited for King Jason to come this way for five days,’ he said quietly. He still held my hands and I could not get to my sword, even if I needed it desperately.

He seemed to know what was in my mind for he let me go and said, ‘This is no ambush, Jason. This is a visit from one who wishes to become your friend.’

I had heard much of this Creon of Thebes, a powerful tyrant who had sworn one day to be the High King of the Peloponnesus. He was a man of great riches and great cruelty to his enemies. He kept a bigger standing army at this time than any other king in Hellas, it was said. I wondered why such a man should ride so far and so secretly so speak with me.

I asked, ‘Are the wild pig sweeter on Cyllene than in Thebes, Creon, that you come hunting on this hill-side?’

He took my reins and gently led me out of earshot of the men who were with us. Then he said, ‘The wild pig I hunt sits on a throne in Mycenae, Jason. What think you of that?’

He waited, smiling, until I spoke.

I answered, ‘King Eurystheus of Mycenae is no friend of mine—and no foe, either. I have nothing against him.’

Creon put his brown hand upon mine and said, ‘And nothing for him, Jason. Shall I tell you what is in my mind at this moment, friend?’

I did not answer but merely gazed at our hands, one on the other against the grey of my horse’s neck. Creon saw that look and clasped my hand even tighter.

‘King of Corinth,’ he said in a sort of mocking formality, ‘things are about to happen in Hellas. Certain kings are banding together for a great hunt, and Eurystheus is the beast they will drag down. Those who are in at the kill will gain much profit, for Mycenae and Tiryns are no mean cities to sack.’

I said, ‘Who will sit on the throne of Mycenae if you have the good fortune to bring your quarry down, Creon?’

He smiled, a splendid figure in the bright sunlight, and whispered, ‘Who but I, my lord? Who but I? My kingly comrades will get their plunder, and I shall get the land and what grows on it. A fair exchange, think you not? And all for a little riding and sword-play!’

I struggled for time, thinking that if Creon did as he said, his armies must come through my own kingdom to reach Mycenae; and, what is more, once he had taken that city, he would straddle my own place like the two legs of a colossus. It even crossed my mind to make war on Thebes myself, in the hope of preventing Corinth from being so overrun and so surrounded. But I said, ‘Tell me, Creon, as king to king, who rides with you on this hunt?’

Behind me I heard the flies buzzing at the horses’ tails, the men talking and laughing with each other, as though they were old companions, and our children shouting out as they scrambled among the rocks together. It was a warm, comradely day; the sort of day when men should speak of peace, of women and hunting, and not of war.

Creon answered, ‘As king to king, Jason, I will tell you. There will be Acastus of Iolcos, who is a cousin of yours; and there will be Theseus of Athens. Each of them is likely to bring certain other kinglets who are interested in making their fortunes at one easy stroke. You would be wise to join with us in the chase before our numbers grow too great, for those who ride at the first blast of the horn may look to gain the greatest rewards.’

So, it seemed that the whole north was on the move against southern Mycenae. Corinth would stand alone if I did not ride with them—alone and isolated. But I did not rush to Creon’s offer. I had heard too much of the man to seem anxious.

I said, ‘We have our corn harvests to fetch in and the grapes to tread. I had thought to ride about my kingdom this summer with my sons. They have not seen the peasants at their work, and it is good for princes to know what goes on in their father’s lands.’

Creon took his hand from mine and said smiling, ‘There speaks a good father. This year we have hastened with our crops because of the business that is soon to occupy us, and I saw to it that my little daughter, the girl who was so pert with you, took her turn in the corn-fields. With her shift off, a cloth about her middle, and her hair tied back, she looked no different from a boy—and she did a strong boy’s work, that I can tell you.’

I watched my son Medeius wrestling with her on a high rock, trying to hook his leg about hers and fling her down as Castor had taught him. She was standing up to the lad well; there was more in that squint-eyed little bitch than I would have given her credit for.

I turned as my son threw her at last and said, ‘Yes, I was thinking of passing the summer pleasantly, Creon. I was not thinking of war.’

He nodded and wiped his damp brow with a corner of his heavy cloak. ‘It is good to dream of pleasant things,’ he answered in an even voice. ‘Though we who are gifted by the gods with kingship often must lay aside our pleasant dreams to a later day. In this hard world only the common folk, the cowherds and the crow-scarers, have the time to dream. The kings must ride when the horns blow.’

I said, as evenly as he, ‘The king who does not ride when the horns blow may find himself a cowherd or a crow-scarer. Then he has all the time in the world to dream—but no kingdom to dream in. Is that how you mean it, Creon of Thebes?’

The king in the blood-red cloak nodded gravely in the sun, though the smile never left his fierce rough features.

‘You speak with the wisdom which all Hellas claims for you, King Jason,’ he answered gently.

Then I knew; he had not spoken the final humbling threat against me, but I knew. Unless Corinth came in with Thebes and Athens and Thessaly, we should lie stark and stripped as though the locusts had settled on us and eaten us up—finished as a kingdom.

And all was prepared for this war against Mycenae, all was ready in the north, the crops in, the armies out; whereas we of Corinth were still living as though this were but another year, like the hundred that had gone before it. . . . I cursed my blindness in not having spies in the north as I had them in the south. There I had blundered stupidly, like a fool who thinks that all the gods are on his side and deaf to the entreaties of other men.

I swung my horse round and said to Creon, ‘I can ride with you within the week, bringing chariots, javelin-men and archers. Will that do?’

He patted my horse’s neck gently, just as if it were his own beast. I did not like that. Then he said, ‘That will do well, Jason. And for my part I shall see that the armies, passing through Corinth, do no more harm than they do in their own places.’

I said, as though the answer to my question was of little consequence to me, ‘Where are your armies now, comrade?’

King Creon of Thebes looked down at his pommel and said, ‘For the past five days, while I have waited to speak with you, they have been camped along your eastern border, in the Isthmus. It will not hurt them to wait a further week before we move. My soldiers have learned patience under me. It is a good virtue for a fighting-man. Too often wars are lost through haste, not cowardice.’

I did not answer him. I knew now what I had feared—that I was in the grasp of Creon of Thebes whatever I did. There was only one way out for me—to ride with him against Mycenae.

When we got back to the place where we had left our men, I found Creon’s daughter Glauce sitting on a rock, nursing little Argus who had fallen and cut his knee and was crying.

I said, ‘One day you will make a good little mother, princess. A good mother and a good wife for some strong young king!’

I meant it only as a passing token of good-will.

She grinned up at me, as though she knew some secret that was denied to others. But Medeius burst out and said, ‘Father, this girl says that *she* is to be our mother. She says we shall be *her* children, to beat when we are naughty, to love when we are good, and obey her.’

I saw Creon frowning at his daughter, and saw her staring impudently back at him.

I said, ‘She is only teasing, Medeius. Don’t forget, all girls tease boys like that. All girls do it. That is what makes them so interesting to play with; they are so different.’

But Medeius shook his head and said, ‘No, Father, she was not teasing. She swore upon the breasts of the Mother that she was to marry you and to become Queen of Corinth. She swore and swore again. That was why I wrestled with her, to show her who was right.’

I said, ‘Well, you proved who was right. You threw her down, did you not, Medeius?’

He nodded, looking at the ground. ‘Yes, Father,’ he said, ‘I threw her down—but that proves nothing, only that I am stronger than she is. It does not change the truth, the will of the gods.’

I bent over Glauce and said softly, ‘Is this a dream you have had, little one, that you shall marry the King of Corinth?’

She shook her head and gazed up at me steadily.

‘No, Jason,’ she answered. ‘It is no dream. It is something my father has been telling me for almost a year now—that I am to be the Spring-queen of Corinth, and, whether you like it or not, you shall be my corn-king.’

I turned to look at Creon, who sat above me on his white horse. He was staring at me, the smile twisting his mouth corners. He did not bother to speak but only smiled, silent and powerful.

I swung my leg across my saddle and said to him, ‘Farewell for the moment, King of Thebes. We shall have much to talk about within the week, it seems. A great deal seems to have been happening, here and there, and I have been blind to it.’

King Creon returned my salute, a little mockingly I thought, and said, ‘Yes, a great deal—and discussion will not change it now, my friend. The embroidery of this pattern cannot be unravelled by words. Only the knife may cut through the threads of which the cloth has been woven.’

40

Acanthus

HAVE you watched the acanthus grow? First there is nothing in the chill soil of winter. Then, as the sun mounts higher and loses his red frost-nipped face, little green daggers push up from their hiding-place, at first weak in colour and too thin to stand all but the kindest of breezes, it seems.

But the year's wheel turns and you go once more to the sheltered place among the rocks. Behold, a wonder! The acanthus stands as tall as a man's knee! Its little daggers have grown to leaves broader than a man's hand, and from each leaf nine other daggers have unfolded, each formed beside its fellow, and each with a separate strong life of its own. Even the green is stronger now, as though the acanthus has gained courage and dares to declare itself to the world's eyes.

But a little while later the leaves have unfurled entirely and thrust outwards, glorious in their deep greens, their flaring bronze, even their dead pale white, as though some already wore a shroud, like men.

And above them all, like the banners above a proud army, rise the flowers; tall, heavy stalks garnished their length with deep purple shields, as though they are held up against the sky in warning of a hail of arrows. From beneath these purple shields, shy as young roe deer, peep out the delicate pink petals, tender, strange in such a furious growth, like a lovely woman in the wagon village of a northern cattle chief. And for each flower there is a ring of spikes, hard and unbending, the spears that protect such a woman, but so merged in the green that the hand is on them, plucking at the flower, suffering the wound, before it knows.

And soon the clump which covered a space no bigger than a boy's ox-hide buckler has consumed land on which a feast-hall might be built, in its growing. And all standing thick and arrogant, as though it would outlast the world. Now the flowers have lost their prettiness, their delicacy, and have all faded to white as though they no longer care what man thinks; for they are secure, harsh with their browning spikes, and almost too tall for a common man to reach. No longer do the winds of late summer put fear into them; they can withstand a gale, a thunderstorm, an earthquake.

That is how my own life grew, from nothing to fierce profusion. And that is how the plot against Mycenae grew in Hellas of the north. Each day new leaves coming out from the parent shoot, new shields, new spikes, and always losing their softness, growing more arrogant. No man may halt a natural growth.

This I thought of as I paced the market-place of Corinth, considering our situation, talking to one chief or another—asking if the harvest was in, the swords tempered, the horses shod. And I also thought briefly of the winter again, when this proud luxuriant growth of green and bronze and purple sinks back into the ground, its strength and warlike pride humbled as the oxen set their heedless hooves upon the rotting stalks. . . . When all becomes mud and mulch again.

But this image I cast aside almost as soon as it came to me. No man must try to foresee his end, try to push aside the curtain which the gods have hung before him to keep him blind and humble like the stalled ox before the butcher comes with his axe.

I was watching a girl dancing outside a red-striped booth set up by the Phoenicians, who now came every market-day, so clear were our seas for their long galleys. She was olive-skinned and, though sinuous and lithe, very full in the breast and hips. I stood and admired her great wide black eyes, tinted with blue, her delicate straight nose, fine as an Egyptian's, her long mantle of thick dark hair, her pretty writhing hands, thin and fragile as the first acanthus of spring.

They had decked her well, to attract the crowds before they sold their pots and pans and rolls of unbleached linen. About her brown forehead glittered a circlet of gold set with agates of all colours; above her breasts bobbed a string of blue Libyan beads; her arms and legs flashed and jingled with a score of silver bangles.

As she swayed and stamped in the dust among the pots and pans, the glazed bowls from Crete, the red amphorae from Naxos, I called over the hook-nosed fellow in the blue robes who seemed to be the head-trader of this band and said to him, 'How much for the girl? My wife could use her in the house.'

He placed his hand upon my arm, in the way of Phoenicians, who seem not to regard the pride of kings in the outlying places to which they bring their wares, and he said in his lisping voice, 'Ah, Jason, my dear man! Trust you Corinthians to pick out the best we have! This girl was once a princess in the land of the Hittites, She cost us a fortune, I can tell you! We would

never have got her, whatever we offered, but her poor father's crops had failed and he needed money badly to equip an army against the marauding Scythians.'

I said, 'I don't want her life history, fellow. How much is she?' I was thinking of myself, not Medea, I must confess.

The man began to shake his head as though in despair. 'Oh, King,' he said, 'how can I put a price on what is priceless? How can I bring myself to part with the finest treasure of our collection? There is not enough money in Corinth to buy such a one. And your wife would only beat her for her beauty and her love-tricks. And think how lonely we old men would be without the companion who helps to shorten our long voyages.'

I said, 'Stop this babbling, man, and sell me the girl. You can find another one to warm your beds and to attract village fools to your booths. Indeed, I will find you half a score myself, Hellenes with bright hair and blue eyes, girls who itch to see beyond their villages, who cannot find a rich husband among the dry hills.'

The Phoenician made a wry smile and answered, 'There is no market for straw-haired Hellenes, now, master. Their skin gets red in the sort of sun we travel through, and they adore garlic. This treasure here is worth two score Hellene wenches—and what space have we on the galleys for two score women? We find that one woman is more than a match for thirty men, if she is of the right metal. No, King, much as I would wish, I cannot sell you this girl. My fellow-traders in this venture would cut my throat as I slept if I did so. I am so sorry; I bend and kiss your feet in sorrow, King. But I cannot sell her.'

I spat on the ground, as one always does with these folk, and pretended to turn as though to leave the booth. He let me go a step or two, as they usually do, and then plucked me by the sleeve and said in my ear, 'But I can sell you something even more precious than this lovely Hittite, Jason. I can sell it for the rude dirk you carry in your belt. Yes, I would even accept that dirk, poor as it is.'

I said, knowing these bargainers, 'What rubbish do you wish to foist upon me now, fellow? I have told you what I want from you, and nothing can take its place.'

The man said, looking into my eyes closely, 'You will want this, and it is not rubbish, King. Or let me say it otherwise—if you do not want it, and if

you do think it rubbish, then King Jason of Corinth is near the end of his days. His spool will have run out, the well of his life will be dry.'

I said in a low voice, so that the peasants and soldiers about me should not hear in that crowded place, 'You have news?'

He nodded, his eyes shut, his long face serious now. 'Give me the dagger first,' he said.

I answered, 'I am a king, fellow. I could have you blinded or put into a pit of adders. Then you would tell your news without my dirk.'

He nodded and said with a strange smile, 'Yes, that is so, for I cannot bear pain. But what news would I tell you, Jason? The truth—or the first thing that came to my tongue in its agonies?'

I pulled the dirk from its sheath and held it out to him. I had a hundred more in my armoury. His hand came forward and then halted. 'The sheath as well, King,' he said, smiling. 'It is a poorly made thing, but will be regarded as curious in Egypt when we set up market. The princes there are fond of these rough shepherd things from Hellas. They wear them for their quaintness. It is only a fashion of the moment. Later they give them to the children to play with.'

I gave him the sheath, which was decorated with Thracian silver thread-work, and he drew me gently to the back of the striped booth.

Then, whispering so low that I could hardly hear him above the bleating of sheep and the twanging of Assyrian lutes, he said, 'The men of Mycenae are ready for you all. They have fortified their citadel. I was there a week ago. Creon will not find the prize easy to get.'

When he stopped, I said, 'Is that all I get for my dagger, you old fraud?'

The Phoenician shook his head and answered in despair, 'Why do you Hellenes always think we mean to trick you? Surely, you know now that we give value for money. We have tried long enough to prove it.'

I took him by the throat and squeezed it a little. He went very red in the face and his cone-shaped hat fell off. When he had done coughing, he said hoarsely, 'Let me go on, Jason. I was coming to the important parts. You Hellenes are so hasty. That is no way to do business, King.'

I put out my fingers again and he began to talk fast, his veined eyes wide. Phoenicians were always like that; and their trade among the Hellenes was always hazardous, I must admit, for in those days we were a hardy folk,

fresh from the northern plains and not used to being kept waiting in a bargain.

He said, ‘It is known as far as Cythera that Creon means to eat you up after you have helped him against Mycenae. First he will make you marry his fool of a daughter and then he will poison you and sit on your throne chair.’

I said, ‘Is that all, fellow?’

His confidence had come back. He smiled and rubbed his hands as though their palms were itching with some skin disease.

‘I should remember more if I had, say, the amethyst seal that hangs about your neck. It is a poor thing, but this ancient Cretan ware has a ready sale in certain lands which still try to live as men did when Minos ruled the roost.’

I had worn this seal as long as I could remember, but little luck had it brought me. The trader seemed to be speaking the truth, and for the truth a chipped old seal is nothing to a king. I undid it and put it into his wrinkled hand.

He did not even thank me but said in his whining voice, ‘I am a fool to my calling. I sell too cheap and buy too dear. But that is my nature, Jason, and I cannot change it. Perhaps I shall get my reward when I go at last into the shades! To the land of Bel the Dragon!’

I said grimly, ‘You will get it here, and now, in Corinth, unless your words come fast, fellow.’

He glanced at my clenched hands and said, ‘You have asked for it, so you shall have it, for who may deny a great king? Listen carefully then; the pattern of your life has come to the point where the stitches run so close together that the design is lost. Some folk in the countryside round about think that the design has already ended, so confusingly are the threads mingled.’

I took him by the belt and twisted it tight about his thin old belly. He choked for a moment and then fell on his knees, his hands together, beseeching me to stop, but silently now.

When I did, he said at last, ‘There is a plot in the palace against you. Medea, whom you thought you had tamed by marriage and caring for her children, longs for more than a husband who spends his days on the hills hunting wild pig. She knows of Creon’s plans and wishes to hold on to her

throne. After all, Jason, it is *her* throne, and not yours. It was her father, the Eagle King, who first held it.'

I said, 'You are a lying old devil, but say on. Give me good value now. Tell me who will share her throne with her since your ear seems to have been at every key-hole and you know so much. Who will Medea take for her king if she is tired of me?'

The Phoenician said, 'Your twin, Heracles. He will sit beside her when they have put you away. All the villages know that, King. It is amazing that this news has not reached you before. But perhaps no one dares tell a great tyrant like yourself. Yes, both Medea and Heracles think that you do wrong in joining Creon in this venture. They have already sent messages to the king in Mycenae, offering to join him in a league against Creon and his lapdogs. So they hope to preserve Corinth. Is that not good value?'

I stayed silent, thinking. What this fellow said sounded possible to me; both Medea and Heracles had seemed strange and aloof during the days I had been calling up the men to join Creon. There had been much whispering together, much moving away when I approached down the great corridors of the palace.

I said, 'One last question, trader; when will they kill me, does your oracle say?'

He smiled broadly and smirked with his thick lips, holding both his hands outwards as though catching rain in them.

'Trust a Greek to ask a question like that,' he said. 'But there it is, and I will try to answer it. If I were you, Jason, instead of being an old beggar who has to make his living out of rusty dirks and cracked seals, I would not go home tonight. No, I would not go to my palace, even though I were a king. I would rather sleep in some villager's pig-sty or cow-byre. Is that sufficient answer, great one?'

I said, 'That is sufficient answer, fellow. Though I shall not take your advice.'

He shrugged his narrow shoulders and straightened his robe before going back to the front of his booth where the peasants were gaping at the girl dancer.

'She is a pretty thing,' the trader said, watching her as though we had never held that conversation. 'But she is getting to be too proud. That is because these fools of villagers treat her like a goddess, Jason. It goes to a

girl's head, you see. Perhaps tonight after the crowds have gone I will whip her or get one of the slaves to crook her straight nose with his fist.'

I said, 'But you told me she was without price, a princess of the Hittites. You would not spoil such a creature, surely?'

The Phoenician said, 'That was trade talk, nothing more. I got her from a Cretan whore-house in exchange for two sacks of barley. The girls were starving there since the place has become so deserted. That is her price, King, no more and no less. She was the daughter of an old bandit, now too crippled with rheumatism to carry on his trade. But I shall sell her at a profit when we get to the land of the Hyperboreans. There the women are like shambling she-apes, and the men will regard this creature as a queen.'

I said, 'Why did you not sell her to me when I first came here? You would have got a good price for her from me, the mood I was in at that time.'

He stooped and picked up a glazed lamp which he began to polish on the sleeve of his robe.

Then he said to the lamp, 'Kings do not carry money on their persons. I could not expect to be paid until tomorrow at the earliest. And, by then, who knows what might happen to a king—such a king as Jason of Corinth? I want to be paid!'

41

The Eagle Tower

I WENT back to the palace at dusk by way of dark lanes and olive groves so that I should not be seen. I only spoke to one man, a guard who was new to his duties and very anxious to please. He stared straight ahead as I passed him in the narrow passage-way that led to my chamber. I gave him the customary greeting but I could see that he was too scared to answer me. Some of my old soldiers would have slapped me on the back and used my name, holding me by the sleeve to tell me about their families or how the crops were doing in whatever place they came from. But not this young lad; he stood as stiff as a bronze image.

Nearer my chamber I slipped off my sandals so that the sound of my feet should not announce my approach. Yet even so, as I came to the tall oak door someone farther along the corridor coughed behind the wall-hangings. It was not such a cough as a man makes when the sea-damp lies on his chest; but a light cough, a warning signal, perhaps. It sounded to me like the cough a woman makes when the talk turns to some topic she wishes to put an end to. I wondered for an instant whether Atalanta stood behind that wall-hanging; she and Medea had been much together in the years since we had settled in Corinth, sharing secrets, helping one another in childbirth and such women's matters.

If I had had time, I would have whipped that hanging aside to see who was there. If I had had a weapon, even that dirk I had given the Phoenician in the market-place, I might have pushed it through the hangings a time or two, to frighten whoever waited there. But I was without any sort of weapon, not even a stick. It suddenly came upon me that I was a fool to go into this place unarmed. Perhaps I have always been a fool when it comes to danger; it is as though I trust too much in the kindness of the gods, as though I were their darling—and looking back, I know I have never been that!

I kicked open the oak door and jumped into the room.

It was dim in there and smoke from the tripods made the air stifling. Medea, pale-faced and tense, was sitting up in her bed of carved cedarwood, the woven coverlet drawn up to her chin, her black hair spread about and

tangled. Three paces away, kneeling in the attitude of prayer upon the mosaic floor, was Heracles. He was breathing a little too heavily and his clothing was disarranged.

I must tell you about this floor; it had fascinated me all the years I had been king in Corinth, and no one remembered who had first made it. Ten paces square, it was inlaid with pieces of coloured stone—blue, green, red and yellow—not one bigger than a finger-nail. At the four corners were men or women warriors, brandishing javelins—black figures against pale backgrounds. At the edge of the four sides were great beasts—the lion pierced by an arrow, the stag entangled by the loops of a snare, the leopard about to fall into a pit.

The fourth one was—you might have guessed—the bull. His great horns sweeping forwards, he was in the action of goring. Inlaid beside him were the words: 'Bull, the man-slayer.' But this bull seemed doomed, for above his proud neck was poised the labrys, the Mother's double-headed axe, about to fall on him at the height of his leaping and thrusting. He did not know. In a way, he was like me, I always thought as I leaned out of bed and gazed at him.

Within a circle at the centre of this floor—on the spot where I usually had the bed placed so that I could not see it—was the climax of the artist's imaginings. There stood the naked Mother, hair streaming out on either side, eyes glaring, teeth grinning. She held an apple in her right hand. A mirror was falling, eternally, from her left. Her body was bare of clothes and her great buttocks and belly spread out as though she could contain the earth. Her navel was as round as my palm, and made up of glistening agates. The artist had made all red between the heavy thighs, using clusters of garnets.

And sitting at her feet, his finned tail curled under him, was crowned Poseidon, gazing into her eyes as she pranced before him. He looked at her with a malignant curiosity, the lust of one enemy for another. His trident was held out, as though he had just made a thrust, as though that was why the mirror had fallen from her hand, and her eyes had widened. As though that was the cause of the red, the glinting garnets.

This floor had always disturbed me. I think an old Cretan had created it, generations before. That is well: if such an artist had been living in my own times, I would have given him the slow death for such an image.

I stood for a moment regarding Heracles and my wife, wondering what to say or to do. Then Medea held out her plump white arms and said, as though she were about to weep, 'Oh, husband! You are back to comfort me.

I woke and found myself alone. My dreams have come again, Jason. The horrible dreams of snakes and slime. I sent for your brother to stand watch over me until you came.'

I thought I saw a little flicker of amusement in Heracles' eyes but I was not sure. I said coldly, 'There is a guard along the corridor. You could have called for him. He is paid to watch over you, Queen.'

Heracles rose stiffly from the floor and moved towards me. 'Do you set a paid guard above your twin, Jason?' he asked in a voice that seemed too ready to take offence.

Yet I noticed that he carried no weapons. He wore a single thin tunic of lamb's wool and I should have seen even a little dirk if he had had one. He must have come to Medea's room in some haste, I thought bitterly. His unarmed condition gave me courage and I answered, 'No, Heracles; but sometimes it seems that my twin sets himself above me—out of bed, or in it.'

At first I thought he would rush at me and try to crush me in his arms; but Heracles was always unaccountable. It was the woman in him, I think. Instead, he snorted like an angry bull and strode towards the door. After it had closed, I heard him shouting at the guard in the passage-way as though he was venting his spite on the poor fellow.

I went towards the bed, leaned over my wife and said, 'Why do you still plot against me, Medea? I thought all that was over.'

She began to cry and held out her hands towards me.

'Comfort me, Jason,' she said. 'Hold me in your arms and let me hold you, my lover.'

I drew away from her; her words had brought into my mind a picture of myself held tight while soldiers ran in with their javelins. I remembered Apsyrtus and how Medea had held him so that I could catch him that morning. I recalled Hypsipyle's long legs about me at the festival of Dionysus.

I said hoarsely, 'Why do you hate me, woman? Why do you plot to deliver me to the Mycenaeans?'

Then I saw hate wrestling with love in her white face. She was a creature in torment. The tears which streamed down her cheeks were real enough, but from what source they came I knew not.

She cried out, ‘The Mother is driving me mad, Jason. My love, my love, the madness bursts from me as though I am giving birth, like something that cannot be stayed once it has started. Oh, Jason, my love, my love! If you could only rid me of the smoke, of the darkness of my dreams, I should be whole again. Can a king not heal his wife? The peasant folk call you *pharmacos*, Healer, and your touch cures their sores as they kneel in the fields. Can you not heal my dreams, dear heart?’

I said gravely, ‘Yes, Medea. That will be the easiest thing I have ever done. I shall need only my short sword to do it.’

She began to wail then and to tear at her hair in distraction. It was too much for me, in that closed room with the air heavy with sweat and herb-smoke. My head began to throb like a hide drum beating and I came close to shouting out, myself.

Suddenly I ran to the wall and tore down a short javelin which always hung there on an iron hook, meaning to put a quick end to the sad affair. Medea saw what I did, but made no effort to move in the bed; it was as though she had surrendered herself entirely to whatever the gods might decree. I saw this and halted in my thrust, suddenly feeling the sacred duty on me, the heavy hand of the gods, who demand that all should be done in the correct manner, according to the ritual. In that moment, I was king and priest—as well as being the Healer.

In Athens they call their kings the Shepherds of the People. That is an easier task, to drive the flocks along and to protect them from wolves. But to heal and to kill at one time—that is not easy for any man. I must admit that as I looked down on Medea with the javelin raised in my hand I suddenly understood how the queens, the priestesses of the Mother, could lie abed in the warm embrace of their sacrifice-king and afterwards help the wine-drunk Maenads to tear him. That would be the decreed end, the end that brought glory to him and fertility to the corn.

And as the women ate of the pale and sacred body there would be no thought of man-flesh in them; but only the thought of the glory and the fertility, the sweet flavour of devotion to the hidden forces that kept sun rising and sea flowing and birds flying.

All this passed through my head in an instant as I bent to kill the queen, my wife.

And then, like a thunder-clap, the common world broke in and shattered the cup of my understanding, spilling the wine of my insight, causing the

javelin to falter and to pass under her arm into the carved cedar wood of the bed-head.

There was a great cry and the oak door burst open to let men pour across the floor towards me, my own guards, their short swords out and pointing at my heart. . . . Heracles led them.

I knew there was a low door behind the bed-hangings, that led to a spiral stairway up to a covered tower in the palace wall. I had only been there once, though, for it was thick with spiders' webs, and now bats alone made it their home. This tower was called the Eagle's Eyrie, because old Aeëtes, the father of Medea, had had it built, a lifetime ago, so that he could look down on his kingdom in pride.

I ran at this door now and wrenched it open, the javelin still in my hand, and, as the men came at me, shouted to Medea, 'I shall come again, woman. Be ready for me!'

She cried out and held her arms out to me; but I had no time for such things. The hands of the first soldier were almost on me when I passed through the door and dragged it shut behind me. At first I thought they would not let me push down the bar on the inner side, but I managed it, with a struggle. And as I staggered up the first few stairs, slipping on the filth left by the creatures which used this place as their nest, I heard Heracles bawling out below me, and Medea seeming to plead with him.

I waited a while in the darkness at an angle of the stairs, thinking that if they broke down the door and followed me this might be a good place to use the short javelin on them. I only hoped that Heracles came first, so that I could put the point well into him while I still had the strength in me.

But there was suddenly a strange silence in the chamber beneath me, and then a puzzling high burst of laughter, as though someone had made a jest. Among the other voices I distinguished that of Medea, and this bewildered me more than anything.

For a moment I became suspicious that the whole incident had been engineered not so much to kill me as to injure my pride, to humble me. . . . Perhaps songs would be made of the king who ran away, of Jason the Cuckold, who shivered in the dark tower while Heracles enjoyed his queen.

A great anger came over me and the blood in my head so deafened me that I almost missed the sound upon the stairway above me—almost, but not quite.

It came to me just in time and without thinking I bent double. A sword swished over me and clanged against the stone wall by my head. I twisted round, my knees on the sharp stairs, and pushed upwards with the short javelin into the darkness. It went almost the length of its shaft, as though through clinging river mud, before the iron point grated on something hard. My ears were filled with the shriek which burst out above me. Then I heard a sword go clattering past me on the stairs, and I rolled aside as the first spout of warm blood poured over my head and shoulders.

A heavy body toppled over me as I knelt, and a hand scrabbled fiercely for an instant at my shoulder, tearing away my tunic there. Then I heard a man groaning as he tumbled from step to step downwards. His weight struck the door below with a clash of armour.

For a while there was silence and then I heard Heracles calling out through the door, 'Is he dead, Iphitus?'

I waited a moment, laughing to myself in the darkness; then I answered, in a similar cautious tone, 'Yes, *he* is dead, Heracles; but my name is not Iphitus!'

So they had set the son of the Mycenaean king on to me! This was a most poetic justice. The gods could not have arranged it better, I thought.

There was stillness in the chamber after my last words, so I began to make my way up the stairway once more, bent double and thrusting out at every turn. . . . Yet, by now, I was reasonably sure that ill-fated Iphitus had been the only one waiting to ambush me. If there had been others I should have known of it before this, surely.

I passed the rest of the night alone in Aeëtes' round tower, facing the stairway, the javelin between my knees as I squatted among the ordure of bats and the dried feathers and bones of dead birds.

And as the sky grew lighter, I sent up a prayer to thank that Phoenician in the market-place who, by chance, had saved my life in return for a rusty dirk and a cracked neck-seal. . . . Men say that Phoenicians never give value for money—but this one did, though I had to half-choke him to get it!

When dawn came, sounds rose from the streets outside; the rattle of ox-carts, the whining songs of goatherds and water-sellers. I even heard the slaves mumbling their sad ditty as they were marched out to the olive groves. It was a simple little thing, in the old Cretan tongue which few Corinthians now understood. Malanos had taught me this manner of speech when I was a lad upon the mountain:

‘Chains will not chafe for ever;
Even the iron will rust;
Blue eyes will turn to stone,
And slaves have rest.’

At the time of which I speak there was a stirring among the slaves up and down Hellas, especially among those who spoke the ancient tongue of Minos. But it came to nothing; the Cretans were finished—in spite of their brave songs about freedom and so on. They had had their day and now it was the turn of the Hellenes. One day, perhaps before many years had passed, it would be the turn of someone else—the Achaeans? The Dorians, perhaps?

When dawn broke fully I heard Castor calling up the stairs to me, asking what had happened and telling me to come down and show myself. He was quite angry when he opened the door and saw that I had killed Iphitus, for he said the King of Mycenae would follow me to the world’s end to get his revenge now.

I said, ‘War had to come between Corinth and Mycenae, brother. Better now than when I am an old man and cannot hold a sword.’

He shook his head and mumbled that he would almost as soon trust Mycenae as Thebes. I pushed past him telling him not to be an old woman.

Medea was alone in the chamber, grovelling in rags, her hair covered with white ashes as a sign of repentance. The palace children stood about her, gazing at me with large round eyes, silent and in fear at what I might do.

Medea had been sly in this move; she knew that I could scarcely put the javelin into her with our children watching.

As I stepped into the chamber, she called out, ‘See, I adore you, Jason. I did not go with Heracles, though he begged me to. I had no part in what happened last night. I tried to warn you, didn’t I?’

I could not answer her, my heart was too full. The children kept staring at me, the little ones holding on to the tunics of their elders. I was most moved by this sight and I think that I should have passed through the chamber without another word, but one lad, Pheres, who was devoted to Medea and followed her about like a dog always, suddenly broke the silence and called out in his shrill child’s voice, ‘One day, Jason, I shall remind you how you have humbled the queen, my mother!’ He was not even the child of her body and blood, but one we had found on the hill-side.

The last link of my patience snapped. I think I might have broken that boy's neck in my fury if Polydeuces had not jostled me aside with his great shoulders and snatched Pheres away from me. Then all the other children, except my Medeius and Argus, put their arms about one another and began to chatter like hens when they smell the scent of a fox outside the farmyard. The noise set my teeth on edge, for I have never hurt children in my life, and I hate to have them cry at me as though I am a monster.

My anger turned against Medea, who now lay clutching at my ankles and rolling her head on the floor in misery, shrieking all the while that she had meant me no harm, that the gods had forced her, that Heracles had threatened her, and so on.

I called out to a group of Libyans, who lounged at the outer door, watching all this and making coarse jests. I knew they had no loyalty or respect for Medea; she had forfeited that one day when she had called their captain a black-faced ape, in front of the women of the palace. She had done this more or less as a jest, I think, to amuse her women; but Libyans are sensitive about the colour of their skins, nor do they hold apes in high regard.

I knew that I had picked the right men for the task I had in mind. I called out to them, 'Take this woman to the market-place and put the lash about her for all to see. When you are weary, find a strong slave who will take over from you; and see that the thing is well done. It is not every day you may whip a queen and go unscathed.'

As they dragged her out, laughing among themselves, Medea turned her pale face towards me and said, 'This is a day you will always recall, husband.'

My body was shuddering now but I mocked back at her and answered, 'You will recall it better than I, woman, if these men carry out the orders as I have given them!'

But no one else in that room laughed with me, and even the Libyans had gone strangely silent. My children lay face downwards on the floor now, sobbing. I wanted to touch them and to tell them that I loved them as much as ever; but my pride would not let me.

A little while later I went out into the courtyard where no one could hear me, and called a slave woman to me.

'Go swiftly into the market-place,' I said, 'and tell the captain of the Libyans that I have spoken with the gods. Tell him it is the will of Zeus that

we must show mercy to Medea. She is not to be flogged after all. Make that plain to him; Medea is not to be flogged.'

The girl covered her face with her shawl and ran sobbing to carry out my command.

After that I put on my helmet and armour and, calling Castor and Polydeuces to me, went out into the city to assemble all the able-bodied men over fifteen and below fifty who possessed a horse and a weapon.

This was for the war against Mycenae. By mid-morning we were ready to ride, nearly eight hundred of us, towards the meeting-place which had been decreed by Creon of Thebes.

42

The Battle for Mycenae

MYCENAE stood before us on its high rock. Those of Creon's army who had come from the far north gazed in wonder at the tall thick walls, and, in the centre of the fortress, the steep-gabled hall, the Megaron, with its many columns of grey granite, tapering at the base like those ancient columns at Cnossus.

'Look, look!' a grey-bearded captain said, pointing as he sat hunched on his sheepskin saddle. 'There is the city of the Cyclops! Only the creatures of the Other Place could have put such a town together, stone on stone.'

His men were simple folk from beyond Illyris, straw-haired fellows who painted their faces with blue woad and wore little but stiff leather jerkins to protect them. They had only one war-cart among the hundred of them, and daily squabbled about their right to ride in it and be great ones. They had never seen a city, or a pitched battle, before. Many of them had not even seen the sea or a ship with sails.

Creon heard this and smiled. He looked splendid in his bronze corselet, with the head of Zeus beaten out upon the breast-plate, and with his long thin bronze leg greaves, all chiselled with the leaves of acanthus. Men have said that Creon of Thebes was a villain, a man without honour; that may be so, but he was certainly a man with pride and beauty, and never a coward. His thin greyish hair blew beside his face, from under the great cheek-guards of his iron helmet; his hooked nose was made straight for the moment by the long nose-guard; and the narrowness of his head was disguised by the wide and spreading red plume which bobbed in the wind, and which made him appear a foot taller than he was.

He stood with his short iron sword in his right hand, his chopped beard jutting forth, a broad copper collar about his throat, and looked almost like a god.

The chariot was a thing to be admired, too. The body of the cart was of woven plaitwork to lessen the jolting; a silver pole stood out in front, at the end of which was a golden yoke. Two black horses stood under that yoke,

their breast-stupas decorated with bronze nails, their frontlets of gold, beaten thin and punched with the shapes of sea-monsters such as the octopus and the squid. The wheels of the chariot were of heavy bronze, set on iron axle-trees, having eight spokes, and silver hubs.

I mention this because at that time most of us, even the kings, had war-carts of pinewood, plated with iron if we could get it, and often having solid wooden wheels.

Creon heard the captain from Illyris and called out to him, 'You are wrong, my friend! Men made Mycenae and men can take it, even if they have nothing more than bows in their hands! These great stones will fall to the bow as easily as to the thunderstone!'

He was speaking thus to keep their courage up; the men of Illyris used the short bow, made of layer upon layer of horn, which had to be warmed and rubbed with lard before it could be bent, so strong was it and so great its curve. Yet once strung, in the hands of a master-archer, it was capable of sending a short arrow for three hundred paces, and of killing an armoured man at that distance, or even further.

After Creon spoke those words to the captain from Illyris his men let fly a volley over the walls of Mycenae. I do not think it did much good—save perhaps killing a few women and children who were gathered in the passage-ways beyond the walls—but it had the effect of bringing a herald up on to the high platform above the great gate.

At first I did not recognize him, he was so enclosed in bronze and iron; but when I heard his voice I knew well enough who it was. No one else in Hellas had a roar like my brother Heracles.

'Creon of Thebes, Jason of Corinth, Acastus of Iolcos,' he called along the wind, 'go back to your homes, I command you. This Place of the Tombs is not to be taken by a bunch of ragged goatherds, I tell you. You may have done very well against the poor devils of shepherds who have their huts outside our walls, but you will meet your deaths if you come up the ramps at us. So go now, before Eurystheus and I come down and take your tongues and hands from you and send you packing back to your dung-hills!'

Creon's face did not move a muscle as Heracles shouted out these insults. But when he had finished, he put a speaking-horn to his thin lips and shouted, 'Nicely spoken, Great Ox! For this, we will broil you on the tallest pyre you could wish for, when we come in. We will do you the honour of

binding your wrists and ankles with bronze chains—no common hide-thongs for such a fine shouter!'

The Spartans behind the first line of our chariots laughed at this, the laughter that comes close to madness. Some of them were already stripping off their breast-plates and standing near-naked on the plain; others were chewing on the edge of their hide shields in their war-fury. They knew well enough that Eurystheus of Mycenae had sworn to put an end to every Spartan he could lay hands on; they knew also that Castor had been betrothed as a young lad to the little princess, Electra, the ward of Eurystheus, and so had a lawful claim to Mycenae by marriage. And they were anxious both to gain revenge on the Mycenaean king and to set their man on his throne.

One of them, a leather-lunged fellow named Amphomis, began the Spartan battle-chant:

'Who shouts the loudest
Sleeps the deepest;
Wrapped in rags,
A stick in his hand,
A sword-hole in his heart,
When Spartans have passed!'

But Theseus, who stood in the war-cart next to me, and was a very cautious fellow, turned back and waved to the Spartan to keep his mouth shut. I did not greatly trust Theseus, I must confess; he was the sort who might change sides if he saw the battle running against us. I winked at the Spartan, Amphomis, and decided to keep a close watch on this Theseus once things had started. Polydeuces was in the chariot with me, holding the reins, and I whispered to him, 'An Athenian should not open his mouth when a Spartan speaks. It may be that either you or I will have to put a javelin into the bull-dancer before the day is out.'

Polydeuces nodded, glowering, and said, 'You take the words from my mouth, Jason.'

Heracles stayed up there a while, calling down taunts. In the Theban army was a company specially recruited and called 'The Sacred Band.' They were all woman-haters, men who had taken boys as their lovers, and who now were assembled in the first ranks, with their lovers beside them decked in white flowers. No one among my Corinthians cared greatly for them, but all had to give them their due as fighters. They were, apart from the

Spartans, as bloody a company as I have known—even including the Scythians. But Heracles, of all men, turned his spite on them and called out, ‘I see the pretty boys have come to take Mycenae! Well, they shall have their fill this day, one way or the other! And then we will hang them from our orchard trees like dolls, to bring on the next year’s crop!’

I was angry that he, who had so loved Hylas, should speak in this way, and called out, ‘Go and search in the pool of Lemnos, Fat One. There you will find another pretty boy to hang beside them.’

Heracles knew well enough where I was positioned but he scanned the horizon, as though he could not place me, and then said, ‘That is a voice I think I know! Yes, it is a man whose wife dreams she is always giving birth to snakes. Lift up his kilt, some of you, and see if he has a little adder there, tucked away warm!’

I think that everyone except my own men and the Spartans laughed aloud at this rough jest. My face went hot under my bronze cheek-flaps, and if I could have toppled Heracles from that high wall then, with a thunderbolt, I would have done it. But Polydeuces gripped my sword-arm tightly and said between his big teeth, ‘Do not show your anger, friend. He is digging his own grave with every word he utters. We shall have him before long. My Spartans have sworn an oath and they do not forget easily.’

Theseus drew his chariot alongside mine, a twisted smile on his thin white face, and said, ‘This Heracles is a man of some humour, Corinthian. Shall I carry on the jest and have a look at the little adder?’

I did not take this well. I had never forgiven Theseus his cowardice in not sailing with me in *Argo*. At the time when the crew was being assembled, he was out on a number of cattle-raids, he said, to replenish the stalls at Athens, and could not come. This deceived no one in later years, when we heard that during our voyage he had been sitting at home with his little Minoan queen, daily waiting for news that we had foundered, so that he could set himself up in our places.

I knocked his outstretched hand away and said to him quietly, ‘You may be a friend of Creon, and a pretty player of the lyre, but to me you are nothing. You are no more than those painted Phoenicians who sing and dance in the market-places to collect a crowd before their stalls. Take care, Theseus! What the poets say of you is one doing; what I know is another.’

He had a young girl in the war-cart beside him, who was munching honey-cakes all the time and getting her black locks sticky with the stuff.

She heard my words, and though, being a Cretan, could hardly understand my dialect, she got the drift of what I was saying and began to giggle at him and point as though in mockery. Theseus struck the little Cretan across the face, knocking the honey-cake from her hand on to the ground, he was so nettled at my words.

I smiled and whispered, 'It is well enough when your opponent is a girl, but what of a man for an enemy?'

He did not answer, but moved his war-cart round so as to be on the other side of Creon, away from me. Polydeuces laughed to see him go and called out that the bull of Minos must have been a castrated calf. I joined in the laughter, which rang through the Spartan ranks, though I must confess that Theseus, despite his character, looked a fine fellow in his Cretan gear—his broad gold belt which drew his waist in like that of a wasp, his black helmet from which two great serpents writhed to form a crest, and with the double-headed stone axe set before him on the chariot, as proud-looking as the prow of a ship.

Creon heard our exchange and frowned. 'Let us stay as brothers until Mycenae is humbled, Jason,' he said. 'Battles are not won when brothers quarrel with each other.'

I accepted his rebuke since he was, for the time being, our High King; but I determined to remind Theseus of this occasion once we were inside the walls and sword play was over. Theseus was lighter than I, and a foot shorter in height. He could choose any form of combat, except wrestling, at which he was a great master.

Then an amazing thing happened. While Heracles still stood on the high walls, his hands on his broad hips, the Lion Gate opened for a brief space, and a group of small girl dancers ran out. Their heads were wreathed with the myrtle, as though they mourned the death of a sacred king; their lithe bodies were clothed with fine white robes, which, in the morning sunlight, allowed every motion of their long legs to be seen as they danced and sang.

The place of their dancing was a Troy-town maze, cut in the turf before the Lion Gates and, as they swayed about each other, they flung small eggs made of stone high into the blue air and caught them as they plummeted down.

The captain of the Illyrian mercenaries called out to Creon, 'Master, from this range my men could clap an arrow into each of the dancers the moment you said the word.'

King Creon held up his bronze-braceleted hand and, shaking his grey head, said sharply, ‘There will be time for that later, perhaps, man. Listen to what they are singing, you may learn something.’

Theseus winked at the captain behind Creon’s back. I did not like that, either. When a High King speaks, lesser kings should bow the head and mind their manners, whatever they think. Order and obedience come above all things, in statecraft as in sailing a ship.

I turned from this Theseus and listened to the shrill voices of the young girls of Mycenae. The song they sang was not easy to follow, being in the old dialect that the Cretans had left behind them, and being full of riddles; but it was worth listening to while one was waiting for a battle to begin.

They sang:

‘Out of the egg, the bird;
From the bird a seed.
The seed lodges among rocks,
And apples grow.
Hang the corn-boys in the branches,
Let them laugh in the breezes;
So the new year will turn again
Like wheel upon the axle.
So twigs will grow to branches,
Giving home to nests.
In nests the eggs are laid
And we throw them in the air,
Blessing the Mother’s fruitfulness;
Blessing the Father’s seed.’

One of the Illyrians said, ‘Those eggs they throw up—are they of the Mother or the Father?’

Their captain laughed and grunted, ‘What does it matter? When old Creon gives the word we can go up there and see for ourselves.’

But no arrows were shot from the horn-bows that time. Creon allowed the girls to finish their dance, and even stood still, smiling, as the Lion Gates were flung open again to let the virgins pass into the city once more. Theseus glowered and made a gesture as though Creon did not know his business. But my men—the Corinthians and the Spartans—agreed with me that he had done right. It would have brought small credit to us, the men of

half Hellas, to have slaughtered these young girls as they sang and danced. Our trade was with men, with warriors, and not with women.

I am not whitening Creon. In his time he did many wrong things, perhaps more than most of the tyrants of those days. For example, never in all his battles did he allow the bodies of his dead enemies to have decent burial, but had them piled in heaps on the field and left for the kite-hawks and the straying dogs to crunch at. This was an offence to all those clans who either buried their dead in grave-shafts or put their burned ashes in urns. And I can understand their fury against Creon—though, to me, a rough and ready fellow brought up among the stallions on the hill-side, such things did not matter. In my view, once a man is dead that is the end of the story. When the light has faded from his eyes and the hands have unclenched about the sword-hilt, what does it matter whether fire, or worms, or dogs eat the poor flesh that once housed his pride and cunning?

All the same, Creon of Thebes was at one time abused in most towns of Hellas for his brutishness, but this morning, as we drew up in our array outside Mycenae, he acted like a quiet god, and not like a brute beast. The girls passed inside the wall and there was silence for a while.

The Spartans sat down in the dust and began to comb each other's hair, making themselves neat and comely for the battle. Those Thebans who belonged to The Sacred Band caressed one another and spoke of the celebrations they would have when that day was done. Above us the eagles wheeled, gold against the blue sky, as though they had been told that there was red feasting to be had before long.

Creon commanded his artificers to set up a small pavilion, and then called us under its striped awning—Acastus, Theseus and me. We each hated the other, we lesser kings, but we hated King Eurystheus even more, and this kept us smiling together that day.

Creon sat himself in the one gold chair in the tent and took off his high helmet. He set it on the turf beside his chair, but I noticed that he slung his heavy sword up across his thighs, its ivory handle under his hand. He was sure of me, I knew, because of my sworn oath to take his daughter, Glauce, in marriage as soon as the fighting was done; but I do not think that he trusted Theseus, any more than I did. Theseus had a nickname in Hellas, 'He who lays down,' and this was given various interpretations by various people. In Thessaly they said that it meant the sort of thing that Hylas did, and, for that matter, what Heracles sometimes did. But I will give Theseus

greater credit than that; I think it came from an incident in his youth, when he was foraging along the Isthmus to make his name as a hero.

You understand, one of the places he passed through was Epidaurus, which was ruled by a man with a club-foot called Periphetes. As a baby this Periphetes had been nailed up by the feet to a barn-door by a clan of travelling Dorians. They were rude players of the goatskin bagpipes, who held nothing sacred, not even the blood of kings. Somehow, the baby had survived when the Dorians had passed through the village, driving all the cows before them, and had grown up in a shepherd's hut, to become a man ridden by vengeance. Frankly, Periphetes was never anything more than a village headman; he was never a king, in the sense that I was a king, or Acastus or Pelias were kings. At a guess, I would say that Epidaurus covered two hundred acres, no more. But he styled himself king, and we will leave it at that. The point was, that any stranger who came through his miserable stretch of scrub and dried olives was always considered as an outlander and in some way connected with those Dorians who had crippled him. Not even the true subjects of the great Minos, and carrying his seal as a passport, were allowed to go unchallenged through Epidaurus. I think that Minos must have chuckled at this hobbling fool. He could have sent a man with a little knife at any time to be rid of this Periphetes; but he did not put himself out to do so.

At all events, along comes young Theseus, full of some nonsense about being the son of Poseidon—whereas we all knew that he was a bastard, the by-blow of a Spartan drunkard on the body of Aethra, who claimed to be the bride of Aegeus of Athens—and meets Periphetes in a bean-field.

'Halt!' calls the cripple, holding out a spear made of flint set in an ash-shaft. 'He who passes through Epidaurus must first satisfy the king of that place that he is no Dorian.'

Theseus—and I swear to this—said, 'Great One, I have heard of your fame and fear to stand before so great a warrior-king. I lay down my sword and beg your mercy.'

Then he flung down an old sword he used to carry, which he had found under a stone somewhere, and bowed his head before Periphetes. When the old man came forward to lay the shaft of his javelin on Theseus' neck, harmlessly, only as a sign that he had put Theseus under the yoke, this brisk young fellow from Troezen flicked out a sharp dirk that he kept hidden in his woollen vest and ripped out the cripple's bowels.

This was all done in a field, outside the village, at the year's start, when the rams were first sniffing at the ewes, and the buds first showing on the dry boughs. I could find you a score of women, peasants' widows, who saw it happen. Theseus killed that old madman as he stood defenceless over him, with nothing more than a stick in his hands.

Of course, the poets made a song about it later when Theseus got himself a gold chair to sit on and a red-tiled roof over his head. But that is the truth; 'He who lays down his sword' should be the true nickname—but that is too long for men to say. In fact, I would go a step further, and call him, 'He who lays down his sword, but keeps his dagger!' But there is no man in Hellas who has enough breath to say all that for a nickname! Men have got so lazy in these later years.

What was I saying? I am old and easily forget. Yes, I remember telling the story of my life at a feast-board in Clitor. Long before I had finished what I wished to say, a young man sitting beside me—a lad I had wanted to interest because of his yellow hair and blue eyes—said loudly to his father, 'This old scarecrow is a tedious fellow. Why do we listen to him? He has done nothing with his life.'

And this set me thinking, for often the young speak truth, sometimes without knowing it. Perhaps I am a tedious fellow; and perhaps I have done nothing. Perhaps everything was done *to me*. . ., When I have acted, it has perhaps been because Pelias, or Heracles, or Medea, or Creon, have willed it, not I. Now this is a strange thing, that a man should learn from the young who know nothing. And that a man should be made aware of his pattern, his *themis*, by a fool.

My pattern has been stitched by women, I fancy even more than by men. There were the girls at the village beyond the pine wood, then Perimede who called herself my mother then Hera of the Ford, then dear sweet Hypsipyle, and then Medea. . . . Do I forget the two daughters of Pelias? One with the slashed face, the other with the hanging breast . . . No, those two did not mean much to me, not even as much as that little washed-out fool Glauce, Creon's brat, for whom I gave my dear sons and my life before all was over.

Yes that is it; all my life, although I have half-feared them even while loving them, women have ruled me, have twitched my arms and legs as though I were a puppet. Only once have I acted alone and that was when I was a boy, throwing javelins on the sandy hill-side. And I killed a Spartan with one, thrown at a venture.

Come to think of it, that Spartan fellow who grinned even when he was dying, could have killed me as a lad can kill a sparrow, if I had not taken him unawares. I am ashamed to remember it. All my courage has been invented later by poets—those liars—but I do not recall that Medea ever employed a poet to set down her feats. She was self-sufficient; yes, a goddess, in that. Those who sang of her later did so because she had impressed them and not for payment. Poseidon help me, but I paid a score of them, before I was thrown over the cliff-top above Pagasae, so as to leave a good name behind me.

There was only *one woman* ever in my life—that is, a woman I could feel comfortable with, not fearing, not despising—and that was the long-legged Queen of Lemnos. My sweet Hypsipyle. She was of my kind; her skin and hair and eyes were so like mine that she might have come from the same litter as myself, the same womb.

She was my other-self. And our little son, Euneus, was myself born again. I never knew that boy after we left Lemnos; but I heard great things of him. He turned out to be a good trader when the Trojan War broke, as it had to, by force of circumstances out there in the Aegean Sea, with everybody jostling for a trading-place, after *Argo* had set a fashion among the merchants.

Things get too much for me to describe at my age. The world is a bigger place than we used to think it. . . . There are, for example, the Hyperboreans, in a little island among the far mists. They rear stones to mark their pathways over their land, high above the oak forests. And in the south of their land, they have a big circle of such stones, to which they travel each year at the coming of the growth-time; and there they lay a red-haired youth upon the altar, in homage to Apollo. I have heard that they can sail the broad blue seas in little shells of boats—nothing more than skin stretched tight upon wicker. That is a miracle in itself, and proves to me at least, that they are the children of Poseidon. Or else he would have given them to the basking shark or the squid, wouldn't he?

But I tread on the train of my tale like a young bride whose dress is too long for her! Our business is the battle for Mycenae, and Poseidon knows how poorly I can describe it! I, who speak to you as an old man of more than thirty years, and whose scars have long since grown back into the flesh—all except for my eye. That will never grow again. That is lost for ever. Always I shall see but half the world—never the fullness of it, the roundness, the whole breast of the world. The *woman* of it all.

43

Afternoon

WHEN the sun had passed from his highest station above our heads and the horses in the war-carts began to shake themselves as though a load had gone from them, there came to us a great howling of horns and the Lion Gates opened once more. A troop of horses, followed by a score of chariots, came out, stirring up the dust and frightening the waiting vultures, which flapped into the blue sky on leather wings, squawking and tucking in their bare heads as though they were afraid. Afraid of all but dead men, who are still and cannot hold a javelin or shoot an arrow.

We watched this party come down the rocky ramp, making towards us. Creon beside me said, 'Look, they carry the great red flag of Tiryns. It must be Heracles who leads them. This is a task for you, my son-to-be.'

In those days it was the custom for man to choose man, or company company, in battle. Not as it became during the Trojan affair, which lasted so long that men forgot the old ways and all joined in, sometimes fifty on to ten, or ten on to one. That is no proper fighting. . . .

The company of Heracles came across the scrub-covered plain towards us and only halted when they were two hundred paces from our front line.

Then the great voice I knew bellowed out through a speaking-horn, 'Have your Corinthians rested well, sailor-man? If so, let them ride forward, man for man, and try their hands at something a little harder than rowing or lute-playing! Come forth, Jason; I, Heracles, challenge you so that all men may hear me.'

Creon smiled and nodded to me, his brown cheeks wrinkled with amusement. He had pushed his cheek-flaps outwards in the heat.

Polydeuces said to me, 'Do not take only Corinthians, Jason; our Spartans deserve to wet the edges of their swords before all others.'

I said, 'Brother, there will be time enough for the Spartans to play today. But in this first skirmish I would like them to sit back and see how the game goes. I do not want to waste the best fighting-men of Hellas, until we see

how it is. Tell them that, and tell them that I can better spare Corinthians than Spartans just now.'

So, with a bad grace, he got down from the war-cart and I called up a young lieutenant from Corinth to take his place beside me. I heard the Spartans grumbling, but at last they took it as well as they could and sat down again to hone their sword-blades and comb their hair.

As I rode out to meet Heracles, at a point between the army of Creon and the walls of Mycenae, Heracles called to me all the way, making reference to little private things that only he and I had known before, mocking me before the armies. I did not reply, but loosened my sword in the sheath and saw to it that my two javelins sat comfortably in my hand, ready to let fly as soon as they were needed. For it was in my mind to put an end to Heracles that afternoon, the man who had tried to take my woman and my life.

But when we were within flinging distance and I already had the first of the javelins ready, Heracles shouted out, in a quieter tone this time though, 'Welcome, Jason. Come and feel the bear's hug! Throw down your spears and let me put my arms about you, little one!'

Anger clouded my sight. I felt the sweat trickle down my back and my legs start to quiver. Like the lightning of Zeus, I let the first javelin go. I hardly saw it streak through the dusty air, but I did see it pass through the white plume of Heracles' helmet. He tried to dodge it, but it went on, and would have gone through his head if I had been a palm's length lower. It killed a horse which stood behind the chariot of the madman. My men shouted with praise; his men groaned, though I heard at least two praise my skill.

Then Heracles laughed and said, 'Marriage has not dulled your eye, brother! That had me afraid for an instant; it was not as I wanted this meeting to go.'

My hand was back for the second cast when I saw that he was smiling, and resting both hands on the rail at the front of his serpent war-cart. There were no weapons in his hands. And then I observed that each of his men carried his spears shaft upwards, as men do when they come in peace.

I held my own javelin for a moment and called out, 'Make ready, Fat One. You have called us out and now we must be given what we came for.'

He answered me in that gentle sort of voice a man uses when telling a bedtime tale to small children. 'There, brother,' he said calmly. 'We all cry for the moon as our mistress! But this day let us be sensible and discuss how

best to get the moon! Dreams are one thing, death is another. And neither of us wants to die, I suppose.'

Heracles could talk to an adder and make its forked tongue stay in its flickering. My javelin-hand fell for the moment.

'What do you want, madman?' I asked.

He said calmly, 'I want you to ride forward and talk to me as brother to brother. Let me give you a message I have first, and then, when you have received it, our companies shall try out the war-play, if you wish. But let us, like champions, talk and laugh together first.'

I did not trust him but my men were watching me, wondering whether I was brave enough to go forward and have words with the strongest man in the world before the real fight began.

I said to the Corinthian beside me, 'Get down, friend, and let me go forward alone. If there is treachery, try to avenge me.'

He bowed his plumed head and jumped into the dust. 'I shall put a javelin into him, King,' he said, 'the moment he raises a hand towards you; that I swear.'

I said, 'You are a good fellow, Icadius. I shall not forget you.'

Then I went forward to meet Heracles, my javelins on the chariot floor but my short dirk ready in the breast of my tunic, under the corselet, in case it was needed. I think Heracles saw me feel for it and he smiled.

'Come on, boy,' he whispered, 'there will be no need for that.'

We both rode on until the sides of our chariots touched and we stood only a pace from each other. I glanced down and saw that there were no weapons in his cart at all and I must confess that this gave me to think either that Heracles was very brave or very mad.

I said, 'Well, what do you want, before we begin, fellow?'

He pushed back his great helmet and scratched his curly beard, muttering that the sun and flies had plagued him terribly that day and saying that it would be a good thing if we followed the Cretan custom and shaved our faces clean of hair.

I answered, 'Come to the point. What have you to say?'

He shrugged and whispered, 'Will you be a child all your life, brother? Can you not see when the gods make you an offer?'

I said, ‘The gods have made me an offer of Mycenae. That is all I know. They did not offer me a conversation with a madman, as far as I recall.’

He replied smiling, ‘Then you were not listening, brother, for I heard them tell you that you might have both, and come away from the battle unscathed.’

I gazed at him in some bewilderment. ‘What do you mean?’ I asked.

Heracles felt under his bronze corselet and began to scratch his belly, saying something about fleas and ants liking this hot weather. Then he looked up and, screwing his eyes into little humorous slits, said, ‘Listen to me carefully, Jason, for there will only be time for us to speak these words once. So I shall speak plainly and without delay. If you do as I say, then you shall be king of Corinth *and* of Mycenae, while I shall hold Tiryns.’

I broke in and said, ‘You wish me to betray Creon?’

He closed his eyes and said, ‘Do not talk in such poet’s terms. Try to see the reality of the world, not the dream, brother. Now listen again: Creon was not born to pluck the apples off the tree for a horse-herder. What he will do is to let you win Mycenae for him, and later, when you have married his wet-eyed daughter, he will put aconite poison in your wine and then claim Corinth for himself, too. So you will lose all you have ever gained, and the voyage to Colchis will have been a fool’s errand. Can you not see that, brother?’

I stood silent, the hot sun on my bronze plates, burning my shoulders. Our horses attracted the flies, which swirled round our war-carts in a buzzing black cloud. The sweat ran down our faces as we stood between the armies, talking.

I said, ‘Come to the point, Heracles. You tried to kill me only a few days ago; now you speak as though for my good. What is it you want, my life, my wife, or kingdom, what?’

He wiped his broad hand down his red face and said huskily, ‘I do not have to tell you that I am sometimes a madman. That is something no man can help; it is between the gods and a man. When I tried to kill you, I did not know what I was doing. That, you must believe, or all I shall now say is a mockery.’

I said tauntingly, ‘That would be no surprise to me, fellow. But tell me more.’

He placed his hand on the side of my war-cart and gripped the rail so tightly that I saw it move from its seating. He was enormously strong, my twin.

'Listen Jason,' he said, 'I speak to you as to my other self. This may perhaps be the last time I shall have the chance to do this, so I beg you, listen. I do not want your life; I am prepared to fight against my passion for your woman, the Queen Medea, though I love her dearly; I have never wanted that dung-hill, Corinth, and never shall. What I want is your brotherhood all our lives and the kingdom of Tiryns. I want us to rule, you in Corinth and Mycenae, myself in Tiryns. That is all.'

I said 'What of Creon and what of Mycenaean Eurystheus then?'

Heracles answered slowly, 'We will kill Creon some time during this battle. I have a hundred archers who are dedicated to that task alone. As for Eurystheus, I will arrange to send him out to you to do as you please with him. He is an old fool, and in the last weeks has been smitten with the summer sand-blindness. He cannot see a horse three paces away. He would fall before a young girl with an ox-goad as a weapon. I have no fears about this; he wants my death as much as Creon wants yours, my brother. You see, life is not a piece of plain linen; it is a cloth on which the gods have had stitched a tangled pattern. It is at times like these that this pattern becomes understandable. Let me make you understand, therefore.'

I said, 'Be quick, Heracles, for my men are restless, and we wish to kill you all and return to our tents.'

He nodded and smiled, knowing that I was weakening. Then he said, 'Creon is half-brother to your mother, Perimede. You may not know that. So, he considers that he has a right also to the throne of Iolcos. He will grasp out and out, until he strangles poor little Acastus, too, you see. He dreams of becoming High King of all Hellas. You are no more than a beetle, an ant even, beneath his feet. As for me, the pattern is more complicated: on the surface, Eurystheus praises me, because I once killed Homadus the Arcadian, who had raped his sister. Let that pass. I did not know what Homadus was supposed to have done at the time. He insulted me in a tavern above Aulis and I had struck him down before I knew what I was doing. But, you see, Eurystheus makes that an excuse for pretending to love me, and for offering me the hand of his daughter, Admete. But make no mistake, once he has me on the hook he will gaff me like a weary fish! I do not imagine these things, brother. I have been told on the best authority that he means me to die during one or another of my marriage tasks. In his wine-

cups a spy of mine heard him boast that I shall never come alive out of my labours for the hand of his daughter, Admete. So, you understand, both you and I will be dead and the stray dogs will quarrel over our bones while the vultures dip in to find the sweetest entrails. . . . And then both Creon and Eurystheus will still be sitting comfortably on their chairs, sharing Hellas, perhaps, and each with a daughter to tempt the next fool of a newcomer.'

Suddenly this man in the cart beside me seemed to speak my Moira, the will of Zeus. It was as though the *daimones* used his tongue to tell the truth of the world.

I heard myself saying, 'You have spoken my fears, Heracles. I think I knew all this before, but was blind to it. Will you swear on the teats of Hera that you mean me well now?'

I knew that this oath would bind him, for he was always terror-stricken by Hera.

The smile left his face. A runnel of sweat came down his dusty brown face. He nodded, gripping my chariot-rail until his knuckles were as white as Libyan ivory. Then he said thickly, 'I swear. If I lie, may she put her hand up into me and drag out my insides.'

I was silent for a while, then said, 'What am I to do now, brother? Creon will suspect me if I am not careful.'

Heracles said, 'Go back to him. Say that I refuse to fight you and wish for an alliance with you all. Say that I will deliver Eurystheus to him, as helpless as if he were bound hand and foot. That should convince him. Say that I will hold my men back and let him come into Mycenae when the time is ripe. Tell him that all I want is to ride away to find a throne somewhere else—in Crete, perhaps. Tell him anything that the gods put into your head. I swear to you that all will be well. I swear to you—on the bitten breast of Hera!'

Now, behind me, I heard my own men and the men of Creon beginning to grumble and to ask what we were waiting for. I knew it was time to go.

I said, 'I shall do as you say, brother; and may the gods watch over us and keep us to our promise.'

Then I swung my war-cart round and Heracles did the same. But as we passed each other, he leaned over and whispered to me, 'Watch that sly dog, Theseus. He has been promised a boatload of your Colchian gold for putting a knife into your back when the dust of battle rises thickly today. Watch him,

and silence him as the occasion arises. So, farewell, brother, and let us drink a skin of wine together when all is over.'

My men did not like to ride back without a fight. But they obeyed me. Creon sat on his horse, watching us come. When we reached him, he said with a twisted smile, 'So you let the madman talk you out of your battle-rights, Jason? I did not expect to have such a man as my son.'

I bowed to him civilly and answered, 'We cannot talk here, High King. Let us go to your pavilion, alone. I have just learned something that will interest you.'

Creon said, 'Aye, but will it convince me also, Jason?'

I bowed and said, 'Yes, lord. It will convince you, for it comes directly from the gods themselves.'

44

Evening

WHAT I told Creon seemed to please him.

'With Eurystheus and Heracles out of the way,' he said, 'what could not I—we, I meant, my son—do in Hellas?'

From the corner of my eye I suddenly noticed Theseus lounging outside the tent-flap, leaning on a long javelin and smiling to himself.

I said to the High King, 'Father, I think that "I" was put into your mouth by Zeus himself. With my own kingdom of Corinth to rule and with your daughter as my new queen, to fondle and to get pretty things for, from every place in the world, what time should I have to give to Mycenae? I have been thinking, Father, that after we have taken Mycenae it would profit me little to sit upon a double throne with you. I am not meant for such an honour, a horse-herder and a sailor, to sit beside a High King. My lord Creon, I shall be well content with the hand of Glauce the Wide-eyed.'

Smiling in my secret heart, I fell to my knees on the green turf and held out both hands, their palms together, to place them within his own, as a bondman does before his master.

Creon came forward and took my hands, as though this was what he most wanted. I glanced up and saw that his eyes were glad, although he put a note of false regret into his deep voice.

'This is unlooked for, my son. Yet perhaps the gods have guided you aright. Who shall gainsay them?'

From under my eyebrows I saw him nod towards Theseus who held the javelin, and I heard the sound of that man's feet going away. I smiled again in my secret heart. Heracles had been right then, madman though he so often was. In spite of all, he was closer to me than anyone else. He was bound to me, our dooms intertwined like breeding snakes, whether I liked it or not, as though it were all willed by *themis*, some god-like law beyond our birth, beyond the stars themselves.

As I knelt silent, Creon spoke again: ‘You shall lose nothing by this, my son. You can only gain.’

Then he went out of the tent, leaving me in the posture of a slave. I was content. I praised myself inwardly for having got to know more than any other man, save my brother Heracles. It satisfies a man to see farther than his companions. Especially when they thought to out-see him.

Without warning, the fighting began, even as the sun began to fall from the sky behind the western hills. I heard the high shouts, the thundering of many hooves, and ran back to my chariot to see that a vanguard of Mycenaean cavalry had come down the ramp and was making for us in a long double line.

Our bronze trumpets sounded and we pulled the war-carts into a great square, our foot soldiers within it, javelin-men and bowmen standing shoulder to shoulder.

Polydeuces, who was again in my chariot, said grimly, ‘When they get nearer, fall to the floor of the cart as the arrows fly. I can see that these are largely Scythians and Thracians, who like to shoot from the saddle, although they wear the Mycenaean crest upon their helmets. It would be a bad bargain to be killed so soon by a mere mercenary. There is no honour in that, Jason.’

Polydeuces never called me ‘king’ when we were together. This Spartan truckled to no one, and still thought of me as an ordinary sea-captain. I was glad to have such an honest fellow beside me at this time. Better he than sly Theseus, who bowed when he spoke to me, but was always waiting his chance to put his sword under my shoulder-plates.

That first charge was nothing. The mercenaries seemed to lose their step as they came nearer, and broke up into small groups, each attacking a single chariot. Here and there I saw men of Creon’s army toppling, or fighting furiously hand to hand. But a strange thing happened to me; at first the enemy seemed not to see me, and left me alone and unassailed, as though they had been commanded not to harm me. Polydeuces whispered, ‘They are keeping you for last, Jason! Or perhaps Heracles or the Mycenaean king want to meet you in battle alone.’

I did not answer, not even to my Spartan. But in my heart I knew that Heracles had given orders that I was secretly in league with him. This idea was strengthened when, during the second charge, a small group came at me, but seemed to spend most of their effort in clashing their swords against

mine, or against my chariot rail, without doing further damage, before they rode away into the city like men who have danced at a festival, no more.

This, I thought, is to make it convincing, in case Creon wonders why I should be so neglected!

The next troop to come at us were Libyans who ran on foot down the ramp and over the plain. They were like black marble Furies, so fierce, so intent on their prey. Some carried broad-bladed spears, some curved swords, and some merely iron-shod clubs. They had a band of slingers with them who halted every now and then and let fly a volley of stones. One of them struck my leading horse—though fortunately the beast was wearing a metal nose-piece and so, apart from staggering a little, the horse sustained no real harm.

Our archers picked off most of the Libyans before they got near to us. Suddenly it seemed the plain was thick with black bodies, writhing in the sunset dust.

Creon and Theseus laughed loudly at this, as though killing Libyans was a sport, like shooting geese or sticking wild pigs.

He ordered The Sacred Band to run out and disembowel all who still lived.

‘Remember,’ he bawled, ‘I want no trophies from these monkeys. I want no black heads hung on the chariot rails; they will attract the flies in this hot weather, and they are not worth the getting. Just bring back the arrows for the archers. They are running short of them now.’

The pretty young men ran away singing to do this, and were very quick at their work—as quick as women with the embroidery needle. Indeed, I think that there may have been some women with them, dressed as boys. This I judged by the way they ran—a delicate mincing way. But with The Sacred Band, there is nothing certain. Such twilight folk move in the world of half-truth always.

Towards the first sign of dusk, the main guard of Mycenae rode down the slope, their plumes nodding, their long spearheads gleaming in the dying rays of the sun. I said to Polydeuces, ‘But these are men. At last, they send men against us.’

He nodded and answered, ‘Yes, these are men. If I were not a Spartan, I would most like to be one of the Mycenaean lords.’

That was a great deal for him to say. I noticed that he now closed his cheek-pieces and slung his heavy hide-shield up on his left side. It was seldom that Polydeuces took such precautions. Behind me I heard Castor yelling at his Spartans to put on their body-armour again, that these were no village-maidens to be bowled over in one's nightshirt.

I have never known a group of cavalry come at the attack with such leisure. The foremost lords were even smiling. A hundred paces away I could see their white teeth showing between the hair of their upper lip and that of their chin. Most Mycenaeans at that time wore face hair, which was usually black, and this let one see their teeth from a distance.

I noticed also that their bards rode with them, singing to the lyre. They did not stay at home, like ours, to make their songs after it was all over. They carried swords like any other warriors, too. I made a little vow to myself that if I came unscathed out of that day, I would, when I got back to Corinth, issue orders that from now on all Corinthian poets and singers should first be trained as fighters, and should prove themselves in battle before they took to the trade of sitting on their behinds in safe rooms, singing to women and children.

I mentioned this to Polydeuces, but his wry answer was: 'Why not abolish the trade of bard completely? They do little that is useful. My own folk get along very well without them. A man can tell you what he has done, if he wishes, without having it put down to music.'

I said, 'At least the bards tide the dark winter days over, friend.'

The Spartan answered, 'Is there not hunting? Are there not girls to roll in the straw? What are words and music, compared with such time-passers?'

I should have thought of an answer to that, but the Mycenaean cavalry suddenly started forward at a fast gallop and began to break our square. Their horses wore iron chest-plates, some with a spike in the centre, and this helped them in the shock of battle.

Then all became so mixed that our archers were afraid to loose their shafts in case they should strike us, the chariot-lords, and so stood helpless, like oxen waiting for the butcher's pole-axe. They did not have to wait long, for the Mycenaeans were soon amongst us.

I cut down their leader, a short squat man wearing a gold helmet with the highest plume I have ever seen. I told Polydeuces to steer the war-cart near to where the man fell, so that I could collect the trophy, but suddenly I saw that the Spartan was on his knees beside me, spouting blood from the mouth.

There was a javelin through his back. Its point stuck out a foot from the hair of his chest. This had come from behind and not from the Mycenaeans. It came to my mind that Theseus' hand had been behind this stroke, and that the shaft had been meant for me, not for poor Polydeuces.

I bent and said, 'Brother, oh brother, what can I do for you?'

But Polydeuces shook his head and smiled, his broken boxer's nose wrinkled up, like a child's when he grins into the sun.

'Burn me decently, Jason,' he croaked. 'Don't let that butcher Creon have me shovelled on to the dog-heaps to rot in the sun. That is all. Good luck, brother.'

He died just like that, without complaint. His twin, Castor, ran up and rolled him off the cart and took his place, without a word of grief. Men say that Spartans have no tears. I think they weep inside, like limestone caverns where the water drips secretly.

When I tried to turn the horses away to a quiet spot, so that we could get a little breath, Castor dragged the reins from me and swung the thing out among the thickest of the attacking horsemen.

'Let us do this job well, Jason,' he said, 'for our debts are mounting. There is something to pay now.'

Five Mycenaeans came at us, on all sides, and so we could talk no more. Luckily they all used swords, and not spears, so that they found it hard to get at us effectively. I took three of them, and Castor two; he was holding the reins and that hampered him a little since our horses now had the battle scent and were not easy to keep in check.

But these men were not easy to kill, for they had learned the old Scythian trick of sliding under the belly of the horse when the blow comes. Still, we did it and came back to our line unhurt, except for some cuts along the right arm. They were all clean cuts and bled freely. We tore linen from our kilts and bound up each other's hurts, joking together, as warriors do.

And when we could get back into the fight the brave lords of Mycenae were dead, lying with their horses among the black Libyans in the comradeship of death, which knows no rank, no colour of the skin, no riches and no poverty.

Theseus came alongside me in his gilded war-cart and called out, 'Well done, Jason! I saw that last tussle of yours. Creon will be pleased with you.

The first man you killed was the eldest son of Eurystheus. That was a shrewd killing, friend!'

I looked coldly at him and answered, 'My charioteer, Polydeuces, has also been killed; and that was not so shrewd, for the one who cast the javelin.'

He nodded and turned away from me. 'These things happen in the dust of battle,' he called back over his broad shoulder. 'Death cannot always pick and choose on such occasions.'

Then the dusk came down and we drew back, tightening our ranks lest the Mycenaean king should attempt a surprise attack.

Creon rode beside me on his white horse and said, 'Well, son, if your friend Heracles spoke truth in promising that he would yield the city to us, he is certainly putting up a convincing fight before he does so.'

I answered, 'This is but the beginning, High King. We must wait and see what follows before speaking the final word.'

Creon stared me in the eye and said in a low tone, 'What follows must be very good, or I shall wonder just what it was you and he talked about when you sat in the middle of the plain together, keeping us waiting like dogs for their meat.'

Then he rode back to his pavilion to slake his thirst with wine. That last dusty affray had made us all dry and the wine-skins came out along the chariot-line almost as though the captains had given an order for this to be.

So we were gay when the next foray came down from the city. I was not even watching, but was on the ground behind my war-cart, snatching a quick meal of black barley-bread and onions, which I had in a bag slung on the tailboard. It was the custom in Corinth to go out to battle with the bag stuffed with food, and to bring it back stuffed with heads, if one was lucky in the fight. . . .

They still collected heads in Corinth, as they did in the north; though up there the chiefs slung them on a hide-thong at the front of the chariots for the people to see and admire at the triumphal homecoming.

But, as I say, I did not see the next fight start, and it was under way before I got back beside Castor in the cart.

This was a small affair. There were perhaps a score of Mycenaeans, no more, all in their finest armour and helmets. And it seemed that their reins were tied each to the other, so that they must stay in one band.

I said to Castor, ‘That is a strange way of making a horse charge, brother. The horses might as well be hobbled.’

His eyes were keener than mine and he pointed and said, ‘There is a reason for it, Jason. In their midst is a man who looks blind, as far as I can tell. His lords are telling him when to strike, it seems.’

I said, ‘Then that is the King of Mycenae himself. Blindness has come down on him recently. If the king comes out, and blind, then the end of the battle must be near.’

Castor said, ‘It is the king. I can see the lion on the front of his helmet, even in this dusk.’

Those were the last words Castor was to speak. An arrow buzzed through the air and thumped at his back. He half-turned and grinned like a savage beast into the dusk from whence it came. Then he fell gently over the chariot side and lay under the wheels.

Another arrow thudded into the cart by my side. I jumped down and ran with my dirk out among the archers, but I could not find Theseus. Then I heard Creon’s loud voice commanding all leaders to stand ready in their carts and so I had to return, my vengeance unsatisfied.

And when I got back on to the platform, the little fight before our lines was over. The blind king was down and all his guardians with him, dragged by each other because of their knotted reins. Some of them were still alive, some even unwounded. But our Spartans ran out and dealt with that.

Then our trumpets blew a great paean of joy, for we had put an end to King Eurystheus and to his eldest son. The way was clear for us now.

I turned my cart back to where King Creon sat on a white horse and said to him, ‘High King and father, the day is ours. Let us now make our camp and rest before riding into the city at dawn.’

He looked down at me as though I were a child, then said, rather too loudly, I thought, ‘What, Jason! I thought you had a relish for the battle! Would you lay off so quickly?’

I answered evenly, ‘All has happened as Heracles said it would. He has delivered the king to us and so we should be content with this day’s work.’

Creon spat into the dust and then wiped his mouth with the back of his right hand.

‘Yes, there is still Heracles,’ he said.

I answered, ‘But he is our friend! He has given us the victory, High King.’

Suddenly Theseus was beside Creon, smiling and pulling at his light beard. ‘Our broom must sweep clean, Jason,’ he said. ‘There must be no one of consequence left if we are to feel secure in Mycenae.’

I was astounded that the High King allowed the Athenian so much freedom in speaking to me. But Creon only nodded and smiled. ‘Go back to my tent, Jason,’ he said ‘There is wine laid out for you there. I wish you to drink to the health of your bride-to-be, my dear daughter, Glauce.’

When I hesitated, a sharp reply on my lips, he said gravely, ‘That is a command, Jason. Go back to my tent.’

Immediately a group of Thebans stepped forward, their lances at the ready as though this had been arranged. I was within the ring, like the nave of a wheel, the spokes being the poised lances, each one not more than a foot from my breast.

I could do nothing but obey. Creon called after me, ‘I guard you against further danger, my son. There shall be no more fighting for you this day. Glauce would wish me to bring her lover safely home. Young brides have such silly fancies!’

I was still in the king’s striped tent—though I did not drink that man’s wine, thirsty as I was—when a shock-headed slave ran in to bring news to a captain who guarded me.

‘Oh, master,’ he cried, ‘there is great merry-making out there! You would never believe it unless you saw it! Fat Heracles came down without his armour, and waving a truce-flag. But the High King would have none of that! He set twenty men on to him, and now they have overcome him and are whipping him. Every man in the army is to have a lash at the Fat One’s behind! I tell you, his backside is red raw already, and only half of the men have had their turn!’

I rose from my stool but two men put dirks into my side and motioned for me to sit again.

One said, ‘The High King would not be pleased, Jason, if you ran out now. He wishes you to be spared this sight, I think. He is a kindly man, Creon, despite what folk have said. So rest awhile.’

I had laid my own sword and dirk upon the table when I entered the tent and so could do nothing but sit and tear at my hair. I think I could hear

Heracles bellowing even from where I was, though I tried not to listen. Instead, I now began to drink at the wine which I had refused before, so as to drown my anger.

At last the distant bellowing and the laughter stopped and there was a great silence over the plain before Mycenae. It was then that the captain who guarded me smiled at me and said, 'My orders are that you may take the evening air now, King of Corinth. It should freshen you, for your face is pale after this day's fighting.'

I ran out and pushed my way among the thickly clustered soldiers. I saw that the Spartans were in a group by themselves, sitting with their backs to Mycenae, and silent. Not one of them held a sword in his hand. It was as though they had decided to fight no more. All looked sullen and rebellious, and did not speak even to me.

Nor would Heracles fight any more, it seemed. He lay, alone, two braziers lighting him, face downwards on the earth, the clothes stripped or whipped from his bulk, his arms and legs spread out and shackled to great stakes driven into the earth. It was as though all knew his love for Earth Mother and had laid him upon her, as though they had placed a groom upon the body of his bride after the wedding-feast, as they do in Eleusis when he is consecrated to death.

If I had not known Heracles, there was little in this red man that I would have called my twin. I could not bear to look any further, for he was silent as though asleep. His breath came very slowly, very deeply in his throat, like a groan.

An old spearman, standing beside one of the braziers warming his behind, said roughly to me, 'He's not dead, Jason. Just tired. It has been a hard day for him. But old Heracles will wake fresh as a daisy in the morning, and then the whippers can start once more. Be up early to see the sport! It is not every day we see such a thing, though in Thebes we have long dreamed of it.'

I went past the man without answering his mockery. If I had had my sword, I would have chopped him down I think, for my anger filled every part of me.

I lay in my tent, alone. Polydeuces, Castor and now Heracles—who was left for me to call my friend? Not even Medea, for in sending her to the market to be lashed, I had destroyed that last link with her. Yet at the time I had felt the gods on my side. Now I thought differently. Yes, even Medea

would have been something, something to go back to, to share my sorrows with.

I began to think of my children, of Medeius and little Argus: they must be all my world now. They and my revenge against Creon and Theseus—when the time was ready. But it must be done slyly, I thought, as I fell into an uneasy sleep.

Before dawn I rose and went out again to where the braziers still smouldered. Heracles was not there. Only the stakes and iron shackles remained, and the links of the chain were broken. My heart rose in me, for I knew that if Heracles had been brought into our camp by Creon, the smiths would have unbolted those shackles properly, so that they could be used again, since iron was hard to come by. They would not have snapped them like this.

I raised my bare head to the sky, trying to find the words which would give thanks to the gods for letting my twin recover his strength and break free again.

It was at this moment, when my head was thrown back and my arms outstretched, that from behind a rock on the plain a young boy stood up, his pale face full of fury. I saw his hand go back and heard a dart whizz lightly through the air.

I even heard his young voice cry out, ‘Death to the traitor! Death to Jason, who brought shame upon his brother, great Heracles!’

For an instant, as I stood helpless, I thought how much like Hylas, who was drowned in the pool at Lemnos by the girls, this lad was.

Then a fearful shock struck my head, my right eye was afire, the blood in my veins suddenly screamed out, and I fell to my knees in the dust where the blood of Heracles still lay in dark patches.

‘My eyes! Oh, Zeus, my eyes!’ a thin voice shrieked somewhere above me. ‘Pull this thing out, for the love of the Mother! I am blind! I am blind! Oh, God!’

Then I heard the Spartans about me, their voices like the sea’s roar. They lifted me up as one raises a child.

I said, ‘Kill me, for God’s sake—but let that boy go free. He is the messenger of the Mother; he pays me back for letting Heracles be so shamed. He settles my account with the Mother for all the wrong I have done.’

And when I yelled these words, I fell back into their arms, exhausted, but still making sounds which had no meaning, even to me, unless they meant that I did not wish to live a moment longer with this furnace in my brain.

45

Stalled Ox

An old young man with herbs bandaged across his eye-holes. One orb gone, a screaming white pit of blackness, knife-keen anguish, pulsing with agony, burning like the sun, burning like remorse. One eye remaining, but dark as yet, aflame as yet, one eye ascream with sympathy for the other that is gone, hot as the other, furiously remorseful as the other, chattering, shouting to be pulled out to join its lost fellow, its brother, its other self.

I tore at this remaining eye, lying on a sweat-drenched pallet in my room at Corinth. But slaves held my wrists, and the soft-voiced Egyptian physician whom Creon had had sent to me in my mad agonies after the battle placed warm herbs across my brows, binding them there with strips of fine linen.

Someone played music to me on the little Dorian flute. Sometimes a harp strummed deeply in the shadows that lay about me. Once a singer, a boy or a woman, I do not know which, sang some verses. I came out of my swirling whirlpool torment to recognize one phrase of the song. It began, 'And this it is to be a king. . . .'

Madness took me in the form of laughter and I tore again at my bandages, wrestling with the hide-thongs that kept me in my bed. I heard the sound of blows above my shouting and somehow knew that they had driven the singer away for so disturbing me.

It went on like that for many days. I do not know how long. The Egyptian gave me potions to drink, bitter drinks that sometimes set me shuddering before my limbs went numb and lay like chill stones upon the sodden flock of the bed.

Merciful it was when he gave me those drinks which turned the mind to unfeeling stone. But only too often the mind lived on while the body lay dead. Then I knew the wrath of the gods. A lance thrust would have been pleasure. I craved for the short passport to completeness with the earth.

I prayed once, 'I am a stalled ox waiting for the last kind blow of the axe. Zeus, give it to me now, I beg you. Father, hear me and be gentle.'

A voice said, ‘We shall have you well again, Jason. Then you will marry my daughter and be king once more, sitting on the golden chair.’

I said at last fumbling for the words, ‘You are Creon of Thebes. Because of you I lie like this.’

The voice said, ‘It is your Moira, Jason. No wish of mine. Do not blame me. Who am I to weave a man’s pattern?’

I said, ‘End my pattern, Creon. Put your knife into my side now, while I wish it. You can have the gold chair. It is nothing. Only quietness, freedom from agony, is of value now.’

But the voice went away from me and I was left only with my gibbering eye-socket again. It called so loudly that I could no longer hear flute or harp or singer; only its calling, in the mad language of despair.

Then another day, or another week, a softer voice spoke to me. It said, ‘Jason, husband. Jason, Jason.’ Only that. That, but warm and gentle, like a shower of rain in early summer. Not the harsh and biting rain that rides on the winter wind. I mean the rain of summer, which lies on a man’s head and shoulders like the kisses of his lover, and he puts out his tongue and sips the sweet drops in gratitude.

I said, ‘Are you the Queen of Lemnos, lady?’

The voice said, ‘I shall untie your right hand. Then I shall place it on my breast. So you shall tell me who I am.’

And when this was done, I wept, for one breast is so much like another. I could not tell. I shook my furnace-head and shuddered as the salt tears fell into my socket once again, like a mountain stream tumbling into a cavern.

Gently the woman’s hands tied my hand, for fear an even greater madness might come upon me and cause me to destroy myself, I think.

Then a light flowed behind my eyes, a pale blue gentle light, and I said, ‘You are Medea. The woman I brought from Colchis. You killed your own brother. You bore me sons. You tried to murder me. I almost had you whipped. You once kneeled in the snake-pit and let the adders come as close to you as breathing.’

The voice said, ‘Yes. And for all you speak I suffer still. Snakes come into me and out of me incessantly, in my dreams. That is all I have to show for all my pains, all my life, husband. That, and a furrowed back, where the black-skinned Libyans used their whips in the market-place even though you countermanded the order.’

I said, ‘I am sorry, and I am not sorry. It was a lovely back, but mine was a lovely eye, too. We lose these things. Nothing lasts for ever, Medea. No, not even the iron that the trading Phoenicians boast will outwear the sun himself.’

Medea said, ‘I think life is too long, Jason, husband. If the gods would only take us in the first year of marriage, then all would be well. One would go into the shades with the sweet tang of honey on the lips.’

I said, ‘Forgive me. I tried to be a god, but I was only a small man. And now I am a stalled ox, awaiting the pole-axe.’

Medea said, ‘Lie still. Heal and be a king again. The axe will not fall yet awhile, not if you lie still.’

I said, ‘So you forgive me, Medea?’

‘Forgive is only a word,’ she said. ‘There is more in life than forgive. Life is a rich melody and forgive is but one of its notes. Rest and know that I am still your wife, that of all men I need you the most. Once a queen, I am now only something alive, something under the sun; but something that wants Jason to be healed and laughing again. We share each other’s sin.’

I said, ‘Medea, if that is love, then you love me; and I love you. Though we may destroy each other, yet we are still meant to be together, man and wife, woven in the pattern, lacking completeness if apart.’

Medea said, ‘For too long we have listened to the poets. They seek only sweetness, gentleness, unity and freedom. Yet the gods are not always sweet or gentle; nor is the life they order unified and measured to a perfect dimension. And freedom is only a dream. No thing is free, not the great pine tree which is constrained by its roots; not the deer, which must move where the grass grows greenest; not the lion, which sighs upon the burning rock and dies, still waiting for its prey.’

I said at last, ‘Even the free birds fall from the sky when the thunder rolls, Medea. Bring my boys to me, I beg you.’

After that there was a day, or a week, of silence. The pain came back and back, waves on the beach at Pagasae. . . . Then a small warm hand lay on my forehead, and a voice said, ‘Good when we ride the horses again into the wind, King-Father.’

I cried so much that the salt tears ran down as far as my matted chest.

I tried to say, ‘You are my love, my son, Medeius.’ But I could not speak those words. And then another hand tugged at my leg and a smaller voice

said, ‘Have you forgotten Argus, King-Father? Argus wants you to play with him again. Come out of the bed soon. I have a new bow. Show me how to bend it.’

I thought: So had the boy at Mycenae, who put a dart into my eye, no doubt. So have all young boys. A new bow, and an old father . . . And I could not speak.

The Egyptian came and between my teeth forced a tube, down which he blew a powder. It was dry and acrid on my tongue. Then I slept again.

And when I woke, hands were caressing me where I did not desire them, and there was a weight on my chest. I could scarcely breathe. I thought they were preparing me for a sacrifice.

This must be the end, I thought. Zeus has come at last, though tardily. So like the gods!

But a new voice spoke and said, ‘I am offended, husband-to-be. My women have taught me how it is done. And I have practised it on the slaves. But it does not work with you. That must mean you do not love me. Is that why all lies cold and dead under my hand?’

I said, ‘You are Glauce. And you come to me in a bad time, little one. It would need the thunderbolt of Zeus, together with the sea-foam of Aphrodite, to move my dry tree-trunk of a body now. I beg you, leave me. Say a prayer for Jason and then go back to your father.’

Glauce said, ‘I do not think I care for you, either, Jason. You are thin and dirty, and you stink of sweat. Your arms are like sticks and the bed you lie on is drenched through and through. This room smells like a goat-pen. They say that when the bandage comes off, your eye will only be a hole, and you will have to wear a patch across it to keep the dust out, in the summer. That is not the king I dreamed of.’

I said, ‘Go gently now, Glauce, and find yourself another slave to practise on. You must be ready for the next husband they find for you!’

The weight went from my chest; the warm hand from my body. It was so sudden, I heard myself laughing. I heard someone else laughing, someone not Glauce. A gentle warm voice.

Medea said, ‘I sat beside you, listening, husband. The little fool thinks she can do what I cannot do. Young girls always think so. She, a thin bean-pole! Yet it was funny; it made you laugh; for the first time since Mycenae you have laughed. That is a good omen, husband.’

I said, ‘I laughed, yes. But much as Poseidon must laugh when a little boy first plunges from the high rock above Laurium. The laugh of mockery, of death.’

Medea answered then, ‘No, not the laugh of death. There is about you now the look of a man who will soon wish to sit in the saddle again, to hold a javelin and knock down a wild pig on the uplands. I have seen this before, and I know how soon sickness can swing about and turn to strength again.’

She gave me a sweet honey drink from a thin glazed cup. It tasted good; the first drink to pass my lips and taste good after many weeks of darkness. Later she washed my face and body and untied my hands and feet. I clenched my hands and bunched up what was left of the muscles of my arm. She patted me on the back, encouraging me, but did not speak while I did this, while I found myself again.

I was soon tired and slept. But when I awoke, she was there, washing my face and turning sweet herbs upon the brazier.

After a while I reached up and gently unwound the bandages from my eyes. For a moment the light was like a dagger striking me again and again through the head; but that gradually went and I saw the room I lay in—the hanging curtains, the square window-hole with two tall green-black cypresses against a blue sky, the white plaster of the walls with their black frieze of horsemen and archers. All clearer than ever before. And Medea, too. Dressed like a mourning matron in a woollen robe of purple dye, her thick hair covered by a black cloth.

I said, ‘Medea, it is as though I see you for the first time. You are so lovely.’

She came to me then and put her arms about me and let her warm tears run down my cheek.

‘We have burned the hatred out of ourselves, husband,’ she said. ‘Before, we moved like blind moles beneath the ground, not knowing what drove us onwards. Now the gods have taught us what life is, you by a chance dart, I with the lashes in the market-place.’

I tried to raise myself and to say how much I grieved at having treated her so; but she put her hand over my mouth, smiling, and said, ‘All has to be. That is the Moira, the pattern, and no one can escape it. But we have come to the other side of the great wall of suffering now; now we can glimpse a little of what lies before us again, and can set our feet on the path towards life. I would not have missed a single lash the Libyans gave me; for

each one wiped away a year of my wickedness and brought me nearer to rebirth, to cleanliness and happiness again. All was intended to that end by the gods, husband. Suffering, we are their pupils; acting, we are their agents. That is all.'

I said, 'I know now. And I do not wish to be a king again. A king stands above others and is the first to be struck by the lightning when gods are angry. You see, I killed a blind king—or let my men kill him, which is the same thing—and for that I suffer the loss of one eye. That is a warning, wife. From this time forward, I wish to live such a life that the gods will not find need to punish, to make even the score, to humble my pride. Now there must be no pride ever again.'

She nodded and said, 'We are fortunate. Some men die without learning their lesson. But we have been given another chance, husband. The gods are kind, in their way, and if a man has only the sense to listen to their silent voices.'

I answered, 'Are you prepared to give up this kingdom, Medea?'

She nodded, smiling now a little bitterly. 'It is a small thing to give up. During the months you have lain here Creon has sat on the throne; his men have raped our women, have crunched the city in their jaws like hyenas with bones, or poured it into their bellies. Corinth would never be ours again, husband. He is the tyrant here now. So we give away nothing.'

I made a wry jest. 'It could be mine again if I married ox-eyed Glauce as we arranged, Medea!'

Medea also smiled and said, 'Would that not be too great a price, with her father snuffling over your shoulder, even in the marriage-bed, commanding you what to do? Besides, Creon has clenched his mastiff-teeth upon this bone, and there will not be an easy letting-go. I will tell you, Jason, soon after you were brought to bed, he asked me to become his queen. He said that together we could rule Hellas, not merely Corinth. He said that he had waited all his life for a woman of my strength.'

I put my hand over my eye, to shut out this new sharp world, and groaned. 'What had he in mind for me?' I asked. 'Was I to be poisoned, here in my bed? Was the Egyptian to put a quiet end to me and to tell the people that Jason had died honourably of his wound, got at Mycenae?'

Medea came to me and said softly, 'It was not to be as easy as that, my love. You were to be openly declared as a traitor to the city and to be flung

over the cliff above the Isthmus. It is being put about that you and Heracles were plotting, even in the battle.'

I said, 'And you refused him, to let me live?'

She said in a whisper, 'See, you are still alive, husband. I told Creon that he would get little good from me as his wife, that a poison came from me which would shrivel him or any man, that in taking me he would be accepting the slow death. That answered him, and so he has turned once more to gaining Corinth by wedding you to his fool of a daughter.'

I answered, 'Up above Mount Ossa lies the valley of Tempe. There it is green always, and the winds do not disturb the frailest of Spring's blossoms. A river flows there, too, the Peneus. Children wade into it, taking the fish in their hands with the blessing of Poseidon upon them. No child has ever drowned there; no herd has ever suffered drought. A man carries the shepherd's crook in Tempe, not the javelin. Youth and time stand still and there is only laughter on the hills. There, away from the runnels of cities and the smell of flesh burning at the altars, we could be young again, and our children could know happiness. Once, when I was as small as Argus, I remember diving into dear Peneus and coming up with a fish in my mouth. Old Cheiron called the other lads to see me, and told them that this was a true sign that I was a son of Poseidon. Shall we go up there, Medea, with our children? Shall we go and be done with kingdoms and bloodshed?'

Medea held my hands tightly now and nodded. 'Yes, Jason, that is where we must go, if you want it so badly. I can see it all in my head, now that you have told me. We should be happy there, a farmer and his busy wife.'

I laughed and said, 'And our little princes and princesses going barefoot, the wind in their uncombed hair, driving sheep and geese with hawthorn sticks! And never a thought between them of kings and battlefields!'

Medea was silent for a while, then said, 'It is the will of the gods. We will go there and be reborn into the world. This is a vision which has come to us both. Zeus be praised that we are able to receive his message.'

She paced the little room a while, then turned to me and said, 'It will be some weeks before you are strong enough to make the journey, Jason. During that time you must not let Creon know that you have been reborn from the dead. Let him think that your marriage with Glauce shall go forward as planned. Otherwise he would have you killed, and our children, too, in case one of them should rise and push him from his throne as the years pass by. Look, I have an idea; you must seem to marry Glauce, but

then something will happen, and you and I will leave Corinth while everyone is amazed. Yes, I will gather our children and hold them safely at the shrine of Hera, on the hill above the town, and there you will come to us and we will go to Tempe.'

I felt my head reeling again and asked, 'What will happen at the wedding, Medea? I do not understand. And how shall we get down, all of us, from the high hill-top, when the city is held by Creon's butchers?'

Medea came to me smiling. 'I cannot answer the first,' she said. 'What will happen at the wedding has not yet been told to me by the Mother. But how we shall escape from Corinth is easy to tell you. A tunnel leads down from the altar of the shrine, and comes out above a little gully that goes towards the sea. We could pass down that and then take a boat across to Phocis; the sailors ask no questions when there is gold to put into their palms.'

I said, 'You have given me life, Medea—you who once seemed to want only my death.'

She held me close and said, 'That was another Medea, not the woman who holds you now, husband. Those times have passed, my dear. So sleep and become strong enough to walk with your children down to the sea. Sleep and dream with laughter of your wedding to be, of your new wife who will never hold you in her thin arms! Dream of ox-eyed Glauce, and much good may it do her!'

Then she placed the bandage back about my eyes, as it had been before, and went from the room. The Egyptian came in soon afterwards and I heard him clucking above me as I made pretence of being asleep. He seemed dissatisfied with the progress I was making—but not I! My heart was bounding like a young stallion's as he first feels the level plains under his new-shod hooves. . . .

46

The Wedding

THE day came at last and no one knew our secret. No spies had been at work, it seemed, lurking behind hangings to learn what was afoot. Crafty Creon was less of a king than I had thought him. I always kept spies in the houses of *my* enemies, and my friends. Grooms, serving-men, guards, palace women, goose-girls.

The night before the wedding I spent with Creon and his many sons and grandsons, drinking and sharing the horse-play the Theban court enjoyed. A score of my own company were there, lying about on the floor and boasting or singing. They made many comments on Glauce, in the hearing of her father, and all to do with certain private matters. But he only smiled, his thick grizzled hair bunched back to keep it out of the way; his linen tunic with the Lion on its breast deeply stained with the wine he had spilled.

There were no women in the chamber. This was the Night of the Bridegroom.

Orpheus sat on a cross-legged stool, his fingers hardly able to find the right strings, and sang what he called my marriage song. I have almost forgotten the words now, for it was sung only once, and then in a voice muzzled by strong wine. But it went something like this, as I recall it:

‘Through the great gates
Rode her suitor.
His helmet was of gold,
His greaves of silver,
His corselet of bronze.
A wreath of white flowers
Hung about his javelins.

Never had man so bold
Asked for a maid so comely;
Never king such a queen.
With him went the crown of Corinth;
With her the throne of Thebes;
And fortunate their children,
Buds of a young tree,
One day to be apples,
High Kings of Hellas!’

This was the sort of thing expected from an official poet at such a time. Deadly dull, you understand, but correct and formal—as far as Orpheus could make it in his condition.

But one of my men, a man from Aegira, who swore he had once swum across the Gulf of Corinth with a lion-cub between his teeth, got to his feet unsteadily and snatched the lyre from Orpheus.

‘Come, bard,’ he shouted, ‘that is no song for a wedding eve. My king likes them with more salt!’

He had never played on a lyre in his life, I think, and he made a rough job of it now. But the men, even Creon and his brood, laughed at the words he croaked:

‘The battering-ram
Goes at the little door,
And scatters the flowers
From the lintel.
What was a white door
Becomes a red one!
“Oh! Oh!”
Cries the little door.
“Down you go, my pretty!”
Yells the ram.
“Let in my army and be glad!”

The king’s hot flood of men
Surge through the corridors
Searching the inner room,
Searching the treasure chamber.
When they find what they want,
They lie down and sleep,
Smiles on their faces,
Well content.

The queen smiles too.
“Such an invasion,
Such a siege,” she says;
“How like a dream!
Why did I ever lock the door?
Having lost its latch,
This door shall never close again!” ’

The man flung the instrument from him and reached for another cup of wine, but fell sprawling on to the red tiles before he could drink. The cup shattered and everyone laughed again.

Creon said, ‘He is a good poet—for a javelin-man! See that he is rewarded tomorrow, my son. He must try to recall that song so that Glauce may have the pleasure of it, after your wedding night is over—not before! Give her time to see the humour of it!’

I smiled absently, for my mind was not on Glauce, but on Hypsipyle. All this talk of gates and doors led me back to her—Queen of the High Gate.

I do not remember much more of that night, except that I wrestled with Creon's eldest son, according to the ritual. He was supposed to let me beat him, and when his shoulders were on the floor, to say aloud, 'So I yield her to you, victor. May my sister thrive and grow fruitful as the cornfield under the warmth of your sun.'

But he forgot the words and only laughed like a madman. And I forgot that I had to throw him down, and got thrown myself instead—into a shallow pool in the courtyard, among the golden carp and the floating lilies! Some of the men looked solemn, and said it was an omen—but I did not care.

And when the dawn came and the cocks in the hovels about the palace began to crow, those of us who could still walk went to our bed-chambers to sleep through the day until the wedding rites that evening.

Lamps were burning in the room where Glauce lay and I heard the sound of girls singing, greeting the happy sunlight, promising the new bride everlasting joy and light.

At a dark corner of the twisting corridors where a tall bronze tripod smouldered and the wall-hangings fluttered in the first breezes, Medea was standing, swathed in a black garment which made her one with the remaining shadows of the past night. Her face was white and grave. As I started in surprise, feeling for the sword that was not there, she put out her hand and held my arm.

'Do not forget, husband,' she said softly, 'strange things will happen tonight. Things we must not speak of. But, when all is done, we go away together, you and I. The doors of Hera's shrine on the high hill-top will be open to us. Through them we shall vanish out of man's knowing to our happiness. The simple folk will say we rode away together in my serpent chariot, never to be seen again. That is how it shall be, Jason; you and I, and our children, no longer kings and queens, but happy ones, living on distant shores where no one knows us, feeling the sun on our backs, the cool water lapping at our feet. That life shall start tonight, beloved one.'

I bowed before her and held her two hands tightly for a moment. They were as cold as ice, although her voice was warm and vibrant.

Then I heard the shuffling of feet in some other room and knew that I must leave her, leave the wife I had already pretended to renounce by public proclamation.

When I glanced back, Medea had faded once more into the shadows, and as I tumbled on to my sheepskin bed, I even wondered whether I had really met her and spoken to her in that dim passage-way.

I fell into a deep drunken sleep, and did not wake until my men were tugging at my hair, rolling me this way and that, calling out to me that it was time for me to put on my wedding robes.

And so it was; the dusk had already begun to threaten the far edges of the sky.

My great Throne Room was already crowded with folk—the kin of Creon, men and women, the maidens who waited on Glauce with garlands of white flowers, the servers of wine, the guards of my own company and of Creon's—even the fifty peasants who, by our law, had the right to witness such a wedding and to drink in celebration of it afterwards.

There was such a hubbub of talk and laughter that my wine-fuddled ears could scarcely understand what went on. Then a young boy opened a wicker cage of white doves, according to the rites, and let them flutter up among the rafters, where the blue smoke from the herb-braziers and the tall tripods hung. The beat of their wings made me start.

Creon, who acted as the priest on this occasion, shook his own head, as though he too suffered from the powerful wine we had drunk that dawn. Then, slipping his silver mask over his face so that he became a god, he said in the stiff and formal tones required, 'Jason, have bread or wine passed your lips this day?'

I bowed before him and said, 'No, my lord. My lips are dry; my stomach is empty.'

He turned to his daughter, who stood fondling a little grey Egyptian kitten, and asked the same question. For a moment she did not hear him, because she was listening to something a pale-faced girl was whispering to her. It must have been something lewd, for they were both giggling and nudging each other.

Creon seemed to frown. The skin of his forehead above the silver mask wrinkled for an instant; then it grew calm again and he repeated his question.

This time Glauce pushed her silly companion aside and said in her foolish lisp, 'Yeth! I mean, no! My lipth are dry and my belly ith empty!'

As soon as she had said this, she turned to her companion and said in the sort of whisper that rang through the smoky room, ‘But I don’t thuppoth it will be for long! Judging by the ram-look on hith fathe!’

The peasants who stood at the back of the room snorted and put their red hands over their mouths, and tried to contain their rustic mirth.

I suddenly felt very cold, very calm, disinterested, almost as though all this was happening to someone else and not to me.

Then, among the peasants at the far wall, I suddenly glimpsed a black-robed figure. It was a woman, who stood quite still when all others were craning their necks to see what happened. I could only glimpse her eyes, wide dark eyes, their lids faintly tinted with blue. It was Medea, there was no mistaking that, although her face was covered by her hood, which was drawn up almost to the bridge of her nose.

I made no show of having seen her at all, but turned my eyes on Creon, who was saying, ‘So, in the sight of the people, this man and this woman bind themselves to each other until the gods shall loose the knot which holds them. In token of which they shall step into the bath which clears them of all past error, all past sin, so that they may start again, afresh and clean.’

The bath was a round pool, waist-deep and set with lapis lazuli and crystals taken from the rocks above Daulis. The water in it was a faint green, tinged here and there with a rusty red, from the herbs and flowers which had been cast into it and now floated on its surface.

This pool was called the Cauldron of Cleansing.

Creon held out both his hands and said, ‘Come, my children, we will enter the Cauldron together, and so the deed will be done.’

Still clutching her kitten, Glauce took her father’s hand. I glanced for a moment towards the figure in black and thought that the dark eyes above the fold had widened. They suddenly became round, and their irises seemed small in the great expanse of the white about them. But no sound came from Medea, and I took Creon’s hand.

He was a little impatient, it seemed, and muttered something to me, under his breath; but because of the fluttering of doves, the drumming in my own drunken head, and the muffling effect of his silver mask, I did not catch clearly what he had said.

I know only that I was a little too late to grasp his hand firmly, and so only caught his finger-tips, in the lightest of grips. So my Ananke, my fate,

spoke to me; and because of this the Furies, the Erinnyes, came for me later. But I did not know then.

What happened next I can hardly recall, it was so much like a dream. I think I slipped, getting down into the pool, and this took me for an instant away from Creon's grip. The folk about me gasped as though this was a bad omen for the marriage. I just smiled up at them, still tipsy, and put out my hand again. But now Creon had gone on to the next stage in the ceremony. He frowned at me briefly and then took a large flat libation cup of striped Mycenaean ware from a slave and, scooping up water from the pool, splashed it first on Glauce and then over me.

She giggled and told him to mind the little cat. I shuddered as the cold water struck my head and body. Then it trickled down my face and on to my lips. I was licking my lips and wondering why this water should be so hot, so bitter to the tongue, when Creon filled the cup to the brim, and, first taking a draught of it himself, handed it to Glauce. She grasped the cup and, having drunk, pushed her little Egyptian cat's nose into it.

'Drink, pretty one,' she whispered, 'thith man thall marry uth both! Royal queen and royal cat!'

Creon then held out his hand for the cup in anger; meaning to pass it to me, I suppose. But even as he did so, his fingers clenched and his back arched. He suddenly tore the mask from his face and I saw that his lips were drawn back from his wide mouth, exposing his long yellow teeth in a frightful grin. He staggered like a drunken man, clutching for a support that was not there.

And as he did this Glauce began to yell out, letting the cat fall into the water and clutching at her belly.

Men clustered about the pool suddenly, hemming us in.

I gazed in wonder at it all, until the cat began to writhe and vomit in the pool, stretching out its forelegs and then its hind-legs, in spasms, like a thing made of wood, with hinged joints. Its eyes seemed to come out from its skull like small balls of clay that slingers use in their practice, and it moved from us as in a dream, under the weed and herbs, sending up a bloody froth behind it to the surface.

The air above us was filled with shocked whispers, and then with loud talk and calling. Glauce, her thin shift stuck hard with the wetness against every curve of her body, was gurgling and crying out for her mother, making sounds that are not pleasant from the mouth of a young woman. Creon was

retching and cursing by turns, swaying sideways and then regaining his balance, as though fighting for his life.

Then, swallowing hard to keep down her vomit, Glauce screamed out, ‘Fire burns my entrails! Oh Mother! Oh Mother!’

Blood began to run out of the corners of her mouth and she clawed at her shift, as though even its light weight was a torment to her suffering flesh.

Creon was the first to sink down on to the floor of lapis lazuli, like a very tired man taking his rest after hunting. I saw with horror that his eyes had rolled completely back and so only showed their whites. His face was one I did not know now. Even his mask was more familiar to me, more human.

I swung round, bewildered, meaning to get out of this cauldron of death without delay. But Creon’s eldest son stood at the rim, a broad dirk in his hand, his features twisted in fury.

‘Get back in, horse-bastard,’ he shouted. ‘Drink with them, my father and my sister, and go with them to wander in the bloody shades!’

He cut down at me and caught my arm. That keen blade opened my shoulder and then my own red blood mingled with the trailing wisps that already floated in the pool. I was beside myself with terror. My old fear of the water came back, though I claimed to be Poseidon’s darling.

I do not know what words I called out, while Creon bubbled at the lips and Glauce shrieked as she tore at her white body; but suddenly I saw that my men, my company, were using fists and shoulders to get to me, and that the sons of Creon were drawing out hidden dirks and slashing wildly. There was a confusion of arms and legs. Men fell into the pool beside me, groaning, and I forgot Glauce and Creon and the Egyptian cat.

Suddenly I felt strong hands beneath my armpits and a young captain, Demosthos Naxos, shouted down at me, ‘Save yourself, Jason, or you are a dead man! Run! Run! We cannot hold them off for ever! They are too many for us, and armed!’

I did not seem to understand what he meant for a moment, but he struck me across the face with his clenched fist. Somehow, this cleared my head and, scrambling up, I went bull-headedly towards the great door, shouldering among the tight-locked fighting men.

By some mercy of the gods no one hurt me, though many hands went out to strike at me or to grasp me.

Medea, her black hood thrown back, was just outside the door, poised like a runner at the start of a race.

‘Jason, you fool,’ she said, ‘you have left it almost too late. We shall be lucky now if we escape the guards on the terraces.’

I recall saying, ‘They are my guards, Medea. Nothing to fear.’

And I recall the blow she gave me on the mouth, her face wrinkled with frightened anger.

‘Creon has set his own men there,’ she said. ‘You are like a boy! He was a king, at least. He took precautions!’

‘But not enough, my love,’ I said. Then I gave her a push.

‘Start forward,’ I gasped. ‘Carry out our plan. Make it appear that I am chasing you.’

So we ran down the long passage-way, Medea screaming, while I yelled out, ‘Stop, woman! You shall suffer for this wicked deed!’

47

Hera's Shrine

No one stopped us. The guards were drinking, I think. We passed from the palace like ghosts, unseen by men. The streets were almost clear, and those few lovers who strolled in the shadows had other things to think of.

In any case, what kings and queens did was no man's affair. There was a saying in Hellas at that time: 'When great ones play, even the moon hides her face.'

Medea was a fast runner and easily drew away from me, despite her hampering robe. I have watched Atalanta, who had some fame in this sort of thing, but I think that Medea would have beaten her at the foot-race, and at most other things, too.

I shouted out after her, 'Do not leave me too far behind, wife! We are clear of the guards and the crowds now.'

She half-turned, running, and called back, 'Hurry, tortoise! We must get to our children on the hill-top. They are alone in the shrine, and night has its terrors for a child.'

I remember calling out, with some mockery, 'Even with Hera to guard them?'

But she did not answer and so we ran on between the white houses and across the little squares where donkeys stood tethered by the water-troughs, waiting for the new day's labour.

It was when we had left the last of the houses behind us, and came round the first of the toothed rocks below the Mount of Aphrodite, that my pounding heart jumped almost out of my mouth.

Hera's shrine, where Medea had hidden our children until we could come and take them away down the gully towards the sea, was an ancient place, built of pinewood and daubed with ochres. It had a porch supported by tree-trunks, carved inwards towards the base, in the Cretan manner. No man knew when it was put up, but it was now dry and cracked and full of

the worm. Each year, in Corinth, we had to put in new boards or pillars as the old ones gave way.

And as we raced, gasping, towards this place, great flames suddenly burst out from its roof, sending a shower of red sparks upwards into the night breezes on the hill-top, and crackling like the laughter of a madman.

For an instant both Medea and I halted in our running, and gazed with fear at this thing. Then she cried out, ‘Medeius and little Argus are there, and all the others, our foster-children. Oh, Zeus, save them, the poor little ones. I have bolted the doors!’

She ran forward, her arms outstretched, her black hair wild in the wind now. She was like a Fury launching herself at her quarry.

I was too stricken with horror to say anything. I stumbled onwards among the rocks like a man in a drunken nightmare. The owls called about my head; rats or snakes scuffed the dust beneath my feet. I cared not, but only saw the red and orange flames which now wrapped themselves about the wooden shrine as though they clenched it in a fearful and destroying hand.

I heard Medea screaming now, and saw her tearing at her hair as she went. I think I was doing the same.

We were almost on the first steps that led up to the great doors when from behind the shrine a chariot rolled out, drawn by two tall black horses. I saw the chariot first, its front decorated with great bronze serpents—and then I saw the man who rode in it. It was Heracles, dressed in his full armour, and carrying an iron sword. He was throwing back his great head and laughing, much as the flames laughed, in a mad crackle.

Behind him rode a score of men—the men of Tiryns, judging by the blue horse-hair plumes of their helmets.

Medea saw him and stopped dead, almost tumbling herself into the dust.

‘You!’ she cried out, her voice like that of a suffering night-bird. ‘You! I thought the gods had freed us from you!’

Heracles flung back the cheek-flaps of his tall helmet and called back, ‘Yes, Medea, I! No gods can free you from one who has kept his pledge to the Mother! See, I have given her such an offering this night as shall never be forgotten.’

Then Medea ran at him, striking for his legs with a little dirk. But he bent in his war-cart and swung her up, laughing as though she were a

helpless doll. His men pushed their horses round the chariot, each of them pointing his sword at my body.

I shook my head, left them, and staggered to the great door and beat upon it, the sparks and bits of smouldering wood raining down on my bare shoulders.

‘Let me in! Mother, let me in!’ I cried. ‘Do not take my children! Do not take the innocent ones!’

The door was too thick for me, the bronze hinges too strong. I was face to face with my own defeat, and I turned, weeping, towards Heracles in the chariot.

‘Brother, twin,’ I shouted, ‘remember our pact and aid me!’

His thick voice rose above the laughter of his horsemen. ‘I remember only what you let them do to me outside Mycenae!’ he said. ‘Would you like to see the marks your fellows left on me? Such marks cry out for vengeance!’

I cried again, ‘Remember our sacred pact, Heracles!’

I was on my knees now, my burned hands clasped as though he were a god. All the king, all the man, had gone from me and I let the salt tears run into my mouth.

Heracles cried out in mockery, ‘The only pact I recall is that your twin may share your wife! She is bound to me by flogging, brother. We carry the same sign on our backs!’

I looked at Medea but she hung from his thick arms like a length of cloth, her arms and legs dangling, the sense gone out of her.

‘May the Mother eat you up!’ I shouted, feeling my own wits sliding away from me.

Heracles gave a great gust of laughter and answered, ‘She has other things to satisfy her hunger now, Jason! Be thankful I let you live.’

Then he raised his right hand in a signal to his horsemen, and, while I still grovelled on my knees, they swung about and were gone among the black rocks and out of sight.

Now my ears were full only of the great roaring of fire. I heard no children’s voices, no anguish from within. Only fire and crackling wood and the startled cries of the night birds as they flew away from that dreadful hill-top.

And at last the folk of Corinth came up the path, led by the sons of Creon, shaking their fists, sticks, knives, at me. I lay among the ashes and they kicked me about the face and body until I raised my head and showed that I was alive.

A merchant of Corinth was the first to speak. He said bitterly, ‘You have destroyed the royal house of Corinth and have sent away our queen. You should die the death!’

He stooped to strike me with a stone he had picked up but Creon’s eldest son held his hand and said grimly, ‘He has killed our father and our sister. We, the sons of Creon, have first right to the vengeance, fellow!’

They dragged me to my feet and held me fiercely as though I had been a vicious wolf, instead of a tired, half-blind creature of despair.

I groaned, ‘It is finished. I have offended the gods all my life and now is the time of payment. I do not shrink from what must come. Only let me see my children once before I go.’

The great doors had fallen down and the shell of the shrine lay open and smouldering now. Creon’s sons shoved me among the embers and laughed as I scrabbled in the hot ashes.

Here there was a piece of linen, burnt at the edges; there a charred and brittle bone. On the flat stone altar of Hera was heaped a faintly glowing little mound. In the midst of it lay a wisp of golden hair, which sprang into flame and vanished even as I put out my hand to take it.

‘Medeius! Oh, Medeius!’ I cried, falling forwards on the hot stone altar, a dead man myself.

And after an eternity, they came forward and dragged me away from the now cold stones. Creon’s eldest son said, ‘What shall we do with the one-eyed horse-breeder then, my brothers?’

They were silent, but the merchant of Corinth called out, ‘He calls himself Jason, the Healer, the *pharmacos*! So, let him heal himself and us all! Let him heal Corinth and Thebes! Let him die the death of the *pharmacos*!’

Then, in that ruined open space, with the pale fingers of dawn drawing back the black cloth of night from the world, they all began to cry out, ‘Let him die the death! Give him to the sea! Give him to Poseidon!’

But it was almost midday, with the red sun above our heads, before they had finished tormenting me and, trussed like a chicken, swung me above the

blue sea three times and then let me drop, towards my just reward.

The white cliff-face passed by my eyes like all the days of my life, as I fell towards the still bay where the sharks' fins moved like little black sails among the ripples. There was a young boy and his sister, brown-limbed and half-naked, upon a ledge in the white rock, putting rock-weed into a flat basket.

I heard the boy cry out as he pointed, 'There goes the king! How well he falls! Look, Jocasta, look!'

His shrill voice stayed with me, in my head, until I struck the harsh blue waters.

EPILOGUE

The Beach at Corinth

An old man, sitting on the rough sand under a rotten hulk. Once a king. Once a sailor. Once a thrower of javelins. And once the tamer of stallions.

Now, a beggar. An old man of forty with a hole where his eye should be, and a piece of black barley-bread in his lap. One piece, that a dog would despise, to last the day. Beside him, a cracked clay pot to hold what skimmed goat-milk the herdsmen's wives can spare. To last the day, or two days. To last for ever, perhaps.

That is my Moira, that is the will of Zeus. And now I have no name; not even a name any more. The fishermen's boys call me by a word which means 'bed-wetter.' I look away when they shout this after me, as though I do not know they speak to me. But they know well enough that I understand, and they laugh all the more.

Years ago, they, or others like them, for boys are always the same, sat about me on the sand while their fathers were mending nets, and asked me the story of my life. I used to tell them then how I killed the Spartan, and how I lost my eye. I even told them about Heracles, and how we once lorded it in Colchis, my men and I.

But at last, when the nets were mended, the boys winked at one another and then got up and ran away suddenly, mocking me, calling me an old goat, a liar-man, an eater of rotten cabbages, a dreamer in the barns.

Women came to me and screamed at me, shaking their distaffs, and told me not to fill their boys with such lies. Men with thick arms came to me and swore that if they caught me interfering with their daughters they would tear my ears off.

When this first happened, the sight of my one remaining eye used to go dark with blood and my hands used to clench as though they held javelins. A lion does not care to be threatened by jackals, not even an old lion, gone in the teeth.

But there was nothing I could do, I learned that. Once a party of young fishermen taunted me until I flared up at them; then, laughing, they flung me from one to the other until I was reeling with exhaustion. After that they

carried me to the sea and flung me into a brackish pool among the anemones and the rotting tunny skins.

‘There is your kingdom, Great One!’ they said.

I lay there half the night, and they brought their girls to see me and to fling mud at me. Yes, they threw me into the water, as though I had not seen enough water.

Once, centuries ago, the sons of Creon threw me into the water. That dream of horror has never left me. I still awake, sweating with the memory of it; yes, even now, when I am an old man and dried up, as dry as the old man Aeson once was.

Bound hand and foot, heart heavy as iron with the grief of my children’s death by burning, I fell down past the white cliffs, then through the blue water; until it became green, and then a dusty grey where the sun hardly reached it. The swaying weeds reached up for me, and the great fishes that man seldom sees in the sunshine brushed past me, their sides hard and sharp with spikes, their great mouths opening and shutting like the beating of a tired heart. Their flat dull pale eyes knew no mercy, no reason.

And when I lay on the sea-bottom, screaming silently with the salt water in my every passage-way, the rusty iron hooks of the boats above caught in my clothes and dragged me up to the light and the air again, so that the suffering should go on, and on.

This was the custom—that the *pharmacos* should be saved, if the gods allowed it. At first I was grateful and thought a prayer to Father Poseidon for helping me out of his watery kingdom. But when the first rush of air struggled with the water in my belly and chest, I loathed him, and wished they had let me stay there and die.

Coming back to earth-life after the death by water is like being born again, an old beachcomber once told me. If so, then birth must be horror to the child breaking from the womb’s dark waters. No wonder they shriek when they come out of the tunnel into the air and light. I shrieked when they pressed the salt water from me and laid me out on the shore to dry. And, whenever my strength allowed me, I shrieked and shrieked again, as the sun fell from the sky, and the fishermen left me, shaking their lousy heads and laughing at a ruined king. That seemed all I could do then, to lie in the sand and howl, like a woman in labour, or a broken-backed dog.

An old crone sat by me that night and sang to me—or, at least, sang beside me, for she never looked me in the eye. I think that she counted me

already dead. She was my mourner, who would bury me in the morning. The sons of Creon would pay her for that service.

She sang a song about a king who went in a long-ship to find the city of gold, and came back a god, married to the fairest princess the world had ever known.

I dimly knew that this was my own tale, and I tried to roll on to my side and tell her that it was not like that at all; that the poets had lied. That my life had been a nightmare of horror, no more.

But she pushed me back and closed my staring eye with her wrinkled dry fingers, as though I were a corpse that was making a nuisance of itself, making her paid task too difficult.

'Lie quiet, my pretty,' she crooned. 'Lie quiet and let the law, the *themis*, fulfil itself! Lie still and die properly.'

I tried to ask her if she was named Hera but my thin voice was lost in the sounding of the sea and the whistling of the sand-dunes in the night-breezes. She never heard me and I was too weak to ask again.

In the morning when she had gone up towards the town to fetch men who would bury me, I crept away and hid under a pile of rotting sea-weed buzzing with flies. I heard the men shouting that the sea must have stolen me after all, and I heard their feet thumping about me. Then it was silent again, and the next night I crawled farther from that place, drinking salt water, slobbering over shell-fish, sometimes retching, sometimes slipping into my nightmare once more.

When a man begins his life, he never knows how it will turn out. He may start rich and end poor; start strong and end weak; start handsome and end ugly. He never knows. That is why the gods are there, to control a man's pattern, his Ananke. A man's pattern is stitched for him in coloured wools over the years by the Fates. And if he tries to outrun his pattern then the Erinnyes chase him down, the Furies, and bring the Dikê, the justice of the gods upon him.

I never knew that I should be a stinking beggar, despised by boys. Nor did I foretell that my Furies should fling me into the sea like a bundle of stinking sea-weed.

Luckily, all that is hidden from a man; or else he would cut his throat after wining at his first feast, or bedding his first wife, or riding his first horse.

What did I do after I had escaped from the shore? I forget the details, they were so many. I forget where I went first; all places seemed the same for a while, for some years.

I know that I stood in the crumbling Labyrinth at Cnossus singing a song and holding out my hands for bread, while the tow-headed Dorian women pelted me with filth and said that I had come too late to gain a kingdom for myself.

I know, also, that I sailed as a ship's cook to Lemnos and ran among the rocks there, calling out for Hypsipyle, until the goats took to the hill-top crags to be away from my voice and the sour-faced women who stank of woad beat me with ash staves down to the harbour again, shouting dirty names after me.

It was at that time, when I was half in sleep, half in a terrible awakening, that a man stirred me with his foot and said to me, 'You old fraud! Call yourself Jason! I am King Euneus of Lemnos. I am the son of the true Jason. Do you think I would not know my hero-father? You are a dung-stained old rogue. Get from here on the next tide.'

That must have been my son, my first child. He of whom I had once been so proud. He did not know me, but had me thrown on to the wooden jetty to be trundled away like refuse by the first barge that came into Myrina.

I was likewise at Tiryns. That was a fine place, with walls thick enough to stand siege by the gods themselves. I forget how I got there. I think a woman led me, telling me that I must pretend to be a blind man and then the High King there would have pity on me and give me food and lodging.

As in a smoke-haze, I recall the feast-hall of Tiryns, and Heracles lying on a couch among the winebibbers, fat and pink as a swine, sweating over the body of a woman who looked like Medea. She spared me a glance from heavy blue-lidded eyes, then went again at the wine-cup and the hog who rode her.

A guard with his helmet askew and his breeches spattered with wine or otherwise, I know not, ordered me from the place when he found that I was not a blind harper or a conjurer.

I always surrendered now, without question, when any man commanded me. This night, at Tiryns, I lay in the mouldy hay of a barn, shuddering and wanting to die once more. In the dusk an old woman came and lay beside me, pulling up the rags of her robe, as though this was a passport to let her share the warmth of my sty.

I saw, when the dawn-light came, unwelcome, that her front teeth had been broken and that her thin hair had once been golden, but now was hardly enough to cover her head.

‘What is your name, lady?’ I asked her, as she went at some private task in the dark corner of the barn.

‘I am Hypsipyle,’ she answered wearily. ‘I was once a queen. I was once loved by a great hero, a king.’

But the tale had become so common through Hellas that no one was ignorant of it. I nodded and rolled back among the hay to sleep; and when I was kicked into life again by the byre-men, she had gone and with no regrets from me. She was not my dream.

My dream came once more, before I crawled back to the beach at Corinth to end my days. Where was it—I forget. . . ? Perhaps it was in Egypt, or in the city of the Phoenicians in Caria. It does not matter. A dream will come where it will and one place or another makes no difference to a vision.

I was plaiting rushes in a market-place somewhere, still pretending to be a blind man, getting more kicks than bowls of milk. It was in the days when I had a young boy called Urion to look after me. He had a red disease of the skin and could not resist scratching all the time. He spoke a vile Phrygian dialect and always stank of garlic.

One morning, when the market was just starting, he pulled at my rags and said, ‘Look, old man, the traders have come! Now there will be rare fun!’

They were hook-nosed Phoenicians, singing and dancing to flutes and timbrels as usual and leading a white bear on an iron chain. They set up a red-striped awning not far from me, and began to tell the sky how fine were the wares they had brought—blue beads from Egypt, horse-hides and frozen oysters from Hyperborea, silver from Libya, and so on. They always did this song and dance to get the country crowds round their stalls.

But there was a difference this time. There was a young red-headed fellow among them who played on the goatskin bagpipes—a merry, jigging tune. And when he had got well under way a girl came out from the tents and danced to the pipes, flinging her short linen skirts high over her thighs, laughing in the sun, and brushing her heavy hair from her forehead with a long-fingered brown hand, as though she loved it all—the sun, the dancing, the music, the whole world.

When the peasants had bought and gone and the hook-nosed merchants were packing up their gear, I called to her and she came over and stood by me. The scent and warmth of her slim young body hit my nostrils like a blow from the past.

‘You are lovely, my dear,’ I said. ‘I, who have known queens, tell you that you are lovely.’

I was a little drunk with the sour wine-lees that my boy Urion had stolen from the butts of the Phoenicians; and so I spoke rather more boldly than was my habit in those days.

But the girl took it well, and smiled, and even pressed her warm lips on my bald head and said, ‘So I should be lovely, old one. I am the daughter of a queen myself. Once my mother ruled the island of Lemnos—though perhaps you have never heard of such a place. She was a queen and my father, who never stayed to see me born, was a king and a hero of Hellas. His name was Jason-Diomedes.’

I kept my eyes and mouth steady and said, ‘Where is your father now, lovely one?’

The girl got up from the dusty earth and pulled the sequined covering over her little thrush-tawny breasts.

‘He is dead,’ she said. ‘He was a great hero who captured many cities and then died in his fame. One day he will be a god, when the world sees sense again.’

I took hold of her skirt but very gently and said, ‘Have you not a brother who is the King of Lemnos, my pretty one? Please, tell me that?’

She stared down at me, the Egyptian blue about her eyes, making them seem perhaps more black and more surprised than they really were, and said, ‘A brother? No, I have no brother. I have had seven husbands, and all Egyptians or Africans, but no *brother*! I do not even recall my mother, to tell the truth, old man.’

Then I began to weep and cry, clutching her garment and wanting to hug her to me and to tell her the truth of it all. But a big black-faced Libyan came forward with a bull-hide whip and slashed through the air at us. I had to let her go, or I would have lost a hand, or she something of her precious tender flesh.

Urion laughed sneeringly as this took place, and busied himself with drinking the last cup of milk we had gained by my rush-weaving.

The Phoenicians went on down the hot road and I never saw my daughter again. She was my own body and blood, I am sure of that much.

No, I punched Urion in the face and left him in the market-place at Halicarnassus—yes, that is where it all happened, I remember now—and then I let myself be conscripted to row in a galley back to the kingdom of Corinth.

The food was bad; there was no pay; rats ruled the ship after dark. But I got back to the Isthmus and at last found old *Argo* again, the ship that we had once sailed out in, youths all of us, full of sunshine and courage, full of the dream that Hellas was *the world*. . . .

I had reached my bitter haven at last. This was my Moira, my destined life, the way Zeus (or Poseidon, it matters not which) had ordained I was to go before I took to the earth and ended among worms.

What memories flow through an old man's head! Believe it or not, I often used to recall the littlest, silliest things, the sound the libation cup made when poor Aristides broke it in the Village of Women—the deep damp sound my javelin made when it went into the laughing Spartan's belly, that day on the summer hill-side—the hay-like scent of Hypsipyle's corn-coloured hair when we first lay together in her palace on Lemnos. . . . I even recalled the hard brown body of Atalanta as she swished beside me in the waters, racing towards Icos. Yes, she *was* lovely, that woman Atalanta. I don't know what happened to her in the end. Some say she was given to a bull after Meleager tired of her, some say she died in labour, as so many priestesses seemed to do in those days, because of one thing or another. There was even a story going round that she had taken up with a wandering band of traders, who used her as a dancer by day, and a common whore by night. But I do not think that this was likely; Atalanta was lusty, yes, but she liked to choose for herself. I give her better credit than that.

I recall well enough how she and I once sat on the cliffs above Colchis, during the time when I was engaged with that poor little Xantha, and so was safe as far as Atalanta was concerned. She wore a white wool chiton and was weaving the myrtle into a crown to wear at a feast given by the Eagle King that evening. She gazed across the wide black seas and said suddenly, 'Jason, dear brother, there is only one thing in life, I find—cleanness.'

I did not understand what she meant then, but I nodded as I played with a sea-shell and thought of the enclosed green garden where the Amazon Xantha would come after the feasting.

‘Yes,’ I said, ‘I suppose you are right, sister.’

How young I was in those days; how free from pain, from dirt. And now I am back in Corinth, an old man, unclean. Strangely enough, the daughters of Pelias—whatever their names were—seldom come into my mind. It is Medea who comes back to me, again and again. Her vision wrestles with that of sweet, hay-smelling Hypsipyle of the High Gate. Medea the dark and secret; Hypsipyle the golden, the clean, the blue-eyed lover.

But always it is Medea who wins, though her hair is black, and though she still smells in my dreams of the oily tripod-smoke, the scent of rancid flesh at the burning altar.

Always it is Medea, in Crete, in Lemnos, or in Tiryns.

Often, as I sat in the sunshine on the beach, or under the great oak prow of my old ship, I used to remember Medea. Her breasts, rouged and gilded, of course. When I first saw her, standing above the white steps that led down to the harbour at Colchis, my eyes formally honoured those breasts; but my hands weighed them, rudely, like a market-man.

I recalled her oval face, like an olive, and her red pouting lips; her slanting blue-painted eyes, a little puffed, a little tired, like a satiated but still intent cat; her black hair, curled into snakes, hanging down her back to her waist, oiled and scented. . . . It was a lovely face in its way, but after those heavy breasts, that load of corruptible flesh upon her rib-bones, her face was a mockery to trap fools; the carved and gilded exterior of an ancient tomb that contains flesh so melting that its fibres can scarcely keep it clasped to the chalky bone. . . .

All flesh, over-ripe, due for decay; all as dark as buzzing flies. Like Nature, all hills or valleys, hills or holes. Dark holes into the earth, that lead to yet another world of horror. Deep, deep and sucking like a quagmire. The lily-white and rotting bones of unborn heroes, still in the prison, inside the ravening tomb.

I was thinking these thoughts one day when an old fisherman came along the beach towards me and sat in the shadow of the *Argo* to mend a small net. I had often seen him before but had never thought to speak to him. He was only a fisherman, and I had once been a king.

But this day I felt lonely, and I said to him, ‘Friend, however a man looks at it—Mother-wise or Father-wise, Hera or Zeus—or whatever names you care to give them, he is in the lap of the gods. Man is too small, and they are too great. He can only, like a blind one, *endure*. I, who have been a

great one, tell you this. I tell you that of all the dangers of life, women are the worst.'

The old fisherman tied a knot in a piece of string and then spat on to the sand. He did not look at me when he spoke; it was almost as though he thought I was a shadow, or a ghost already.

He said, in his rough Achaean dialect, 'Women are well enough, if you keep them in their place. A man has his fish to catch, and his cattle to find pastures for. Then there's wood to chop and the roof to see to before the rains come. A man and his sons have work to do to keep food in their bellies and clothes on their backs. . . . As for women, they keep the fires alight and give milk to the boy-children. Women are useful in any house; a man can't be out fishing all day and be feeding children.'

Then he closed his eyes and leaned back against the planks of the ship. He said, 'As for what you say, friend, women don't have to be taken too seriously. They are like other animals, dogs and cats and pigeons; useful but not serious. Taking fish out of the sea, corn off the land, delivering a lamb with the snow up to your thighs, they are the serious things. Women give a man a sort of pleasure when he is young, and look after his house when he is older. Cut their hair off, knock their front teeth out, if they get to be overbearing. Give them babies to suckle. That keeps them busy. And if they try to frighten you with their darkness, just knock them down! Cows and she-goats have the same darkness, and who is afraid of them? There's nothing to be afraid of in these things.

'It's the sun that parches up the corn-shoots, or dries a man up on the hill-side, that is to be afraid of. It's the sword in a man's hand, the javelin flying through the air. That is what you have to be afraid of.

'Take my word for it, stranger—and I'm an older man than you are—it's the sun, the sword, that have to be watched and prayed against. Not women, with their childish little dark ways. Look at my arms, friend. Now look at my big hands. I could kill *any* woman. I could kill any goddess, inside or outside their stinking shrines.

'That is because I am *a man*, stranger, and because the man-God, Zeus, has given me strength. Only strength matters in the world today. Not darkness and dreams and mystery. Only hand-strength and arm-strength. The strength of a man in the sunshine, friend.'

I did not altogether like the way that man spoke. I did not like the little black cloud that suddenly came into the sky and seemed to clench itself

about the sun, lessening its light, bringing a chill wind down the beach. I pretended that I had not heard him, and I went on speaking as though he had gone.

To the cloud, I said, ‘A man can never win. Not against the goddesses, the women. They are always there, in power, to bring a powerless man out of their bellies, or to lay him on his funeral pyre, decked with flowers, weeping; all so easily, with blue eyes and graceful hands, their heads set to one side—like a frieze, no more. That is all a man’s death means to them, the strong women. No, a man can never win against that dark love-grave whose inner secrets a man can never know, never share.’

The old fisherman began to turn and look at me intently. I thought: here is a man at last who understands.

‘Look, friend,’ I said, ‘I have been a king. I have eaten white bread every day and have possessed horses and weapons and armour. But sometimes, in the open harsh salt sunshine, I often wish I had gone with the Spartans that day on the mountain. They were hard brown-skinned men, with hair like sun-bleached flax. Their white teeth were clean, not caked with blood. Their eyes were clean, not painted with blue. Their smiles meant only a joke—or, at the worst, death by sword or javelin. I can understand that; I am an old javelin-man myself. No, not the slow rotting, the dark hole, and the sulphur fumes rising out of Earth’s black bowels . . . Yes, I think I should have gone with the Spartans after all.’

The fisherman got up and slung his net over his shoulder. He didn’t even look at me. As he walked off down the beach, he said, ‘Spartans! Rubbish left behind by the dogs! You need a woman to take care of you, stranger. You shouldn’t be let out alone. And you want to come away from that boat. It’s near-rotten. The first thunder-clap will bring that prow down like a chopper on your head if you don’t move.’

I was too angry to answer him. He had not been listening to me. But he was right; when the first thunder-clap came, the prow began to shake as though it were a live thing. It was quite terrifying.

The fisherman stopped and looked back at me. ‘Move away, you old fool!’ he shouted. ‘You’ll get your head knocked in!’

But I have been a king and I could not let a common fellow like that see me scuttling away like a crab from danger. So I sat there, feeling the old timbers quaking at my back, my arms folded, just to show him what kings did.

Then the next thunder-clap came—and it seemed as though the world would end.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *Jason* by Henry Treece]