Oedipus

HENRY TREECE

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Of all the ancient myths the Oedipus theme has most vehemently provoked human attention. Freud saw Oedipus as a symbol of deeply-hidden impulses towards the mother and away from the father. Others have seen him as the tragically dramatic figure of misfortune, arrogance and error.

Henry Treece considers both these interpretations to be later accretions to the primal version of the story. Taking a cool look at the pre-Homeric Greek scene and its people, he attempts to realize what it might have been like to be a lame boy, cast out from his sheltering family, to make his own way through the ancient world. He sees Oedipus as driven onward in a persistent and bitter search for esteem, not by Furies, but by an awareness of his own physical inadequacy among men of heroic capabilities.

Coming unprepared from a simple shepherd community in the mountains, into the tumultuous world of cattle-kings, priests and city-dwellers, Oedipus sees all with the uncomplicated, wide-eyed stare of the divine fool; untrained in ritual or palace-protocol, he hobbles on his way to become the superior of his betters, without even knowing it.

Yet, in this process of self-fulfilment, Oedipus makes mistakes which must be expiated at the last; and he is tormented by a dream which seldom leaves him. This is the price he must pay in his passage from shepherd to king.

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OEDIPUS

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1

I WAS ten years old before I saw my first horse. Of course, up in the sheep-pastures on Mount Cythaeron, I had heard the men talk of horses, but we were a poor folk, we shepherds, and always went on foot; and because we lived among the high, steep rocks, no lord from the valleys ever came up to our eagle's nest on his horse. I was lame in both feet and could not go with the men down the sharp rocks and the treacherous, sliding scree-slopes to sell at the sheep-market held outside the walls of Thebes on feast days. So I did not set eyes on a horse until, at the age of ten, I was better able to scramble about and strong enough to swing myself, by the branches of dry bushes, over the rocky ledges to fetch back any light-headed ewe or stubborn ram which might break from our flocks and try to cheat us of the market-price.

What I had heard of horses, among the sheep-folk, was that they were terrifying beasts, whose nostrils spouted smoke and whose thunderous hooves caused the great plains to quiver and tremble as though Old Earth-shaker Poseidon had laid his hand on the soil, as he often did on the sea, and had stirred it to throw men off their feet. I had also heard that the mask of a horse's skull was the secret, inner face of the god, meet to be nailed on trees to remind men of the god's nature. Once, a travelling merchant told me that a rutting stallion could bite off a grown warrior's hand, if meddled with at the wrong time. And my own father, old Nomius the shepherd, swore that the god of horses had such great eagle-wings that he could fly to his stable in the highest mountain-top of Thrace.

But the horse I saw, when I was ten and driving our brown-fleeced herd into the market outside Thebes, with my mother, Rhene, beside me, weighed down by her baskets of goat-milk cheeses, was not at all what I had expected. It was a simple, fat-bellied beast with shaggy hair all over its body, and a black mane that hung down, all coarse and tangled, like a peasant-woman's hair. No smoke came from its nostrils. Its movements were measured and docile, like an old man's, and it did not thunder down the rocky stream-bed that led out between the mud-huts from the city to the rough market-stalls and pens where we sold our cheeses and sheep.

I saw the sweat glistening on its hide, and the black swarm of flies that followed it and clustered about its rump and I said, ‘What! That thing a horse? It cannot be!’ I was about to laugh at the creature, to point my crook at its deformities, so that the other hill-folk should share my jokes: but my mother set down one of her baskets hurriedly and put her hard hand over my mouth, as though she was in great fear.

Then, looking up, now silent, I saw what made her afraid, and I forgot all about my first horse. It was the man on the beast’s back who frightened Rhene, my mother. He sat, squat and heavy, his cloth-bound legs sticking out straight before him, a black wolf-skin wrapped round his thick body, and a horse-hide helmet pulled well down over his great head. But, for all the tall red crest of the helmet, and its jutting peak and its smothering cheek-flaps, I saw his face. It was flat and brown and covered with old white scars. His eyes were narrow and grey, and his nose was set sideways, as though someone had struck it with a heavy stick. His greyish-black hair hung down to his breast, as rough and tangled as his horse’s mane; and his beard went right up his cheeks to his lower eyelids, grizzled and bare in places where the scars showed through, all puckered and white. He was much like a bear sitting on the horse, except that he bore a great round ox-hide shield on his back, and held a thick ash-shafted javelin in his left hand. Across his thighs as he rode lay a broad bronze sword, with a short handle of some black wood or other, whose name I did not know then.

As I saw him coming down the dry stream-bed towards us, I said to Rhene, my mother, ‘Who is this man, then? He seems to think well of himself.’

The words were out of my mouth before I could stop them; though I do not think it had been in my head to say them until that very minute. I heard the dark-skinned market-folk about us draw in their breath, astonished; and I saw some of them, the old men and the women, move back, away from me, their black eyes wide and full of shocked reproach.

I saw the horseman’s grey eyes widen a little and felt a sudden shuddering of the skin down my neck and back as his glance fell across me like a whip-lash. I knew, from such chill crawling of the flesh, that this rider could be no ordinary man.

Then, in my horror, I saw that his horse was coming towards me, guided by his square brown hands, and I knew that he meant to tread me down for the foolish words I had let fly from my mouth. Now I was most truly afraid, with my mouth open and dry and my heart thumping and trying to escape

out of my throat. All my life, because I was a lame boy, the village-folk up in the hills had treated me kindly, even when I had deserved harsh words or even blows: but now, here in the hard white sunlight, between the brown-mud beehive huts, a man was going to ride me down, on the first horse I had ever seen.

No one moved to save me, and I would have cried out for mercy if I had had any voice at all. Instead, like a crippled bird, I shuffled among the rocks on the stream-bed, hoping to get away, then, suddenly darkness fell upon the hot stones and I saw the rough brown hoofs coming closer and closer, until they looked bigger than anything else in the world.

And when I had given up all hope of escaping, Rhene, my mother, let both her cheese-baskets sink into the dust, and moved towards the horseman, her black shawl falling behind her and her grey hair tumbled down her back.

'Great king, Shepherd,' she said, holding out her hands.

And suddenly I heard the market-folk gasping, 'Oh, save us, Mother! Look, she has touched the Shepherd's bridle! Look, she has dared even that!'

There was such terror in these words, that I rolled sideways then, out of the horse's path, and looked up to see what was happening.

My mother was kneeling, with her hair all over her face, and her arms outstretched, pleading. A woman in the crowd screamed out, 'She is dead!' It was almost as though this woman had seen a vision, her voice was so sharp and sure.

I wanted to call her a fool, and to command the horseman to turn aside: I wanted to order all the people to come down and protect us, my mother and me, but I was so young and powerless, so helpless, despite my shoutings and taunts which had brought on this disaster.

Suddenly the horse saw my mother and snorted and moved aside with a start, as though it had come out of a dream, and for a moment my heart was light like a bird. It was, to me, as though the god had answered me. I moved towards my mother, meaning to lift her up, when all at once the rider leaned over and I saw his eyes open, and his mouth snarl like an old lion when he is disturbed in the sun. He drew back his bearded lips and showed his yellow teeth, also like an old lion. Without a word, he struck downwards, once, at my mother, with the wood of his javelin-shaft and then rode on.

It was almost as though he had done nothing, had seen nothing, had meant no harm. But I heard that awful dull blow and my mother's cry, that ceased almost as soon as it began, and left her rolling on the dusty ground and holding her hands to her breast, weeping.

I took up a stone, blind in my fury, meaning to knock the man from his horse. But a black-haired shepherd ran at me and almost broke my wrist, preventing the cast.

'What, you fool!' he said. 'Would you have him turn back and butcher us all!'

The peasant women were gathered round my mother now, soothing her, wiping her lips and tidying her grey hair. I fell to my knees beside her and said, 'Dear mother, I swear I will avenge the blow you took for me. If I have to wait a lifetime, I will make that man sorry he raised a finger against you!'

But she only smiled a little, crookedly and in pain, and said, 'Silly boy! Silly boy! This was meant to be. We have come lightly out of it. Now go and pick up the cheeses from the dust; they are covered with flies and no one will want to buy them if they stay there any longer.'

2

BEFORE the moon had changed three times, my mother took to her bed from the blow which the king had given her on the breast. That is, just after the vine-treading down in the valley. As she lay pale and sweating, with my father wiping her brow and I stumbling back and forth to the stream behind our cottage to fetch cool cloths for her fevered body, we heard the songs of the people below, coming up on the warm wind, celebrating Dionysus and the heavily-laden vine. These songs were gay and shrill, and the reed pipes which accompanied them were thin and sharp, like our mountain wine itself; but our ears were not open to such happiness. It seemed to come up to us from another world entirely; a place where the gods were different and the customs strange. Usually some of us shepherds were asked down to the valley for the wine-feast, for we were not so unlike each other, valley-dwellers and hill-men; we had all come from the First Days, when the Cretans had sailed to Attica and mingled with the Shore Folk there.

But now, with the sun's heat shimmering over the hillside and our sheep staggering on weary hooves to whatever shade they could find from the scrub bushes on Cythaeron, we felt alone. We felt as a rock must feel when the sea draws back from it at ebb-tide, to leave it solitary and exposed, its footing now revealed to be littered with slippery grey-green weeds, the bones of ships and of long-dead men.

My mother spoke no word against the king who had struck her down so calmly. She had worked hard all her life and at the end had got small reward for her bent limbs and wrinkled face; only a sudden blow on the breast to finish her labours. To see her suffering through the heat, with the flies coming in at dawn through the window-hole and settling on her, black on her pain-bleached skin, caused sudden angers to rise in me. I would strike at the creatures with a laurel branch, and would curse them as servants of a cruel king, who was not content to strike the blow alone, but must have buzzing slaves to make the bearing of it even harder.

My mother would raise her hand gently when I spoke such words, and would whisper, 'Oedipus, oh Oedipus, you are only a little boy still. These flies are not the king's servants at all. They come from beyond his calling,

from earth and sun. Mother Dia and Father Zeus are their masters, not the man who struck me. He is only a weapon in the hands of the gods, and the flies are another weapon. He is the clumsy sword and they the little daggers.'

I wept on my knees by her bed and said, 'I will have his sword one day, mother. I will punish him for this, and have his sword.'

While she was stroking my head, my father came in weary from the herds and said, 'I think not, son. When the gods gave you those twisted feet, they did not mean you to throw down mighty men. They wanted you to learn humility, to contemplate your misfortunes and to know that there are greater ones than yourself, who can rule your life by giving you a burden to bear even before you have left the womb.'

My father was a bent old man, whose Minyan black hair had faded to grey and then white, and now had almost all fallen away, leaving his sun-browned head bare and shiny in the heat. He had grown old suddenly in the last year, and the flesh had shrunk from his arms, leaving them like bent sticks tied together with blue cords. Yet, when I was seven, I remembered him laughing on the hill-top and chasing young sheep which would not come to the pen at dusk. Then he ran like a god, I thought, with the setting sun behind him and the hair on his head trailing behind him like a dark flame. And I remember how once he had gone to two unruly rams that were fighting for the herd, and, bending swiftly, had swung them both up in his arms and carried them back to the pen. In those days, he never said bitter things to me, never spoke of my lame feet so coldly. Instead, he would put me on his knee and stroke them and say, as kindly as a woman, 'Courage, my son! One morning you will wake and find them as straight and handsome as the Lord Apollo's.'

I used to look at them every dawn-time after that, expecting each day that my father's words would be fulfilled. And though my feet were always as bent as before, I did not lose faith in him.

Up in the hills, shepherd families were very close to each other; and though in matters of prayer and offering we generally followed the Mother, it was to the shepherd-father of each house that the family looked for all help and guidance. In every cottage the people were like this. We envied no one, and were proud to tend our flocks and to sell them for a fair price. We did not complain when the ewes dropped their lambs away in the snow in the darkness, and we had to sit with them, shivering on the hillside, and caring for them. Nor did we complain when the hot sun burnt up all the

pasture and we had to spend days away from home, leading our parched creatures to higher valleys where there was still green grass above the snow-line.

I had known nothing else than this, it was life. I was content, as long as I had a mother to bake oatcakes for me after a long day on the hill, and a father who taught me gently how to do this and that about the sheep-yard or in the pasture.

Now, to see my mother shrinking before my eyes, while the gay songs came up from the green valley, and to hear my old father speaking so bitterly about my ruined feet, as though my end was in my beginning and as though I had no power to change anything, as though I must suffer and suffer until the world ended, made me weep afresh.

My father, who had always been so gentle, suddenly flung down his olive-wood staff and beat on the mud wall of our house.

'May the gods relieve us of this weeping fool!' he shouted.

I had never heard him say anything so cruel as this before, and I was shocked out of my tears. Even my mother forgot her pain and stared at him for a moment, before smiling down at me and stroking my damp hair again. 'There, my lamb,' she whispered in her dry, crackling voice, 'the father is weary and sad, or he would not speak such words. Forgive him, Oedipus, for he will be kind again when a moment has passed.'

I took her hard hot hand and nodded. 'I forgive him, mother,' I said. 'I know what it is to speak without thought. I did that down by the stream-bed at Thebes, and brought this pain upon you. I know how it is.'

But she took hold of my ear and pulled it and said, 'No, my lamb, it was not you who spoke. It was something beyond your understanding that prompted you. You must not blame yourself for everything that happens, if you do, then you will never grow to be a man, for you will walk, bent-backed, with the load of your guilt for ever; and such a burden will keep you from doing great things, just as though you had heavy stones tied to your hands and feet.'

When her tongue had spoken the word 'feet', she smiled again and drew her crooked hand away from me, and passed it over her wet face as though to wipe away what she had said.

It was the time for my father's meal of sheep-broth and barley bread. I got up from the bedside and ladled out the food for him, and after a while he forgot his anger and nodded to me as he sat down to eat. Then he did

something which he had not done since I was a little boy; at the edge of his clay plate, he laid out two or three of the best pieces of meat and said, ‘Eat, my boy. This is for you.’

I knew then that I was back in his heart again, and that what he had said earlier was already forgotten.

I had come, though, to a new step on the stairway which now I must climb; and so I said to him, ‘Father, be assured, I shall not weep again at what you say. So now that I ask you something, do not hold back from answering me.’

He looked down at his plate as he wiped the last of the meat juice from it with a piece of bread and said, ‘Very well, Oedipus, what is it that you wish to ask?’

I said, ‘Do you believe that the gods have punished me by giving me these twisted feet, and that for the rest of my days I must suffer them and never become like other men?’

I heard my mother sigh deeply in her narrow bed below the window-hole, but she made no effort to prevent my father from answering what I had asked, and after a time, while he wiped his mouth with a cloth to be rid of the crumbs and meat juices, he said, finding the words hard to make, ‘All in the world must suffer, lamb. You are not alone in fulfilling the fate, the pattern, the moira decreed for you by the gods.’

I nodded, trying to understand, but not protesting any longer. He saw this and smiled, then placed his hand upon my shoulder and said, ‘This suffering comes even to the greatest ones, the kings. Even to the gods themselves. They also have fought together and have brought agony and death to one another, as you know. It is all in the ancient songs, and you have heard them, by the camp-fires, when we shepherds have gathered at feast times.’

My mother cried out for water to wet her cracked lips, and I went to the cold stream to get it in a clay jar. When I came back, I heard her saying heavily, ‘So, you must tell him, husband. It is now your task to tell him.’

And after I had held the jar to her lips and had brushed the black flies away once more, my father said, ‘Sit down, Oedipus. There is something I must tell you, to make clear what I have said already.’

I felt that I was standing at the edge of a great cliff, and that I must hold my breath in case I lost my balance and fell. So, most carefully, I sat down on the stool and listened to my father, hardly daring to look at him.

He said slowly, ‘It is in my heart that the gods gave you your twisted feet as a sign to me, and not to you. I think that your feet are part of my punishment for meddling in their affairs.’

I was bewildered by his words, for I was the one who suffered, not my father, it seemed. He knew what my eyes spoke and smiled sadly, waving his hand so that I should not interrupt him. Then he said, ‘Do you think it no suffering for a father to see his son stumbling, a cripple, among the swift sons of other men? Do you think that a father does not weep a hundred times a day, deep in his heart, at such a punishment? If I have been gentle with you, has it not been because I wish for gentleness myself, after such hard usage by the gods? And if I have been harsh to you, is that not because I have revolted against their harshness to me?’

Never, in my life, had my father spoken so to me; never had he dug like a cockle-woman on the shore so deeply into the sand that covers all things, good and bad. Now I dared not come between him and the oracle, and I sat, holding my breath and waiting, not venturing even to nod my head.

He said, his eyes now staring at the timber of our roof, ‘This age which has suddenly come upon me; this wound which has struck down your mother—they are of the same origin as your poor feet, my son. They are all part of the punishment. So, I must tell you why the great ones have laid such heavy hands upon us, why we, who meant to harm no man, are visited by such penalties.’

He rose on his stiff legs and went to the tall jar that stood in the coolest corner of our cottage, and poured himself a cup of the sharp-scented wine. His thin hand shook as he raised the wine to his lips, and trickles of it ran down his chin and into his white beard, as red as blood.

Then, with bowed head, he said, ‘Many years ago, I sinned against the will of the gods. At the time, what I did was done in honesty and with no wish to offend the great ones. But we men are blind, even though we think to see in the bright sunlight, and what we do is often more, or less, than what we thought to do. A tortoise on the sand may think he walks towards the waves; but the gods know that it is the waves who come to him. So it is with man; he thinks to do one thing, but does another.’

My mother coughed and said weakly, ‘I must hear you tell him all before I sleep. Take courage, husband, and let your words flow like the wine; do not hold them back. Oedipus is old enough to understand now.’

Then my father said, ‘Perhaps twelve years ago, things were not well, away at the great city, in Thebes. Whose guilt it was, no man can tell, for we men know nothing; but the King there, Laius of the Cattle, was unhappy. He was like many other kings of the steppeland-folk, the bull-herders who came down from the north a thousand generations ago. He prayed, standing, to Zeus and Poseidon, and when he was young, no man’s hair was more golden, and no man’s eyes more blue. But at this time, in Thebes, his fine looks were already leaving him, for a great poison ate at his heart.’

From the shadowy bed, my mother coughed again, and my father went on more quickly, ‘His wife, Jocasta, was of the Shore folk, and counted her ancestors back to the first Minos of Crete. She was little more than a child when Laius rode into Thebes and flung her over his horse, and told the people that she was his Queen. He was old enough to be her father, even then; but it was always the same with cattle-kings from the north—they took what they wanted, whether it was a bullock or a throne. And to get a throne among the Shore Folk, a man needed to take the Queen who went with it. So Laius took Jocasta, despite the anger of her old father, Menoeceus, and her savage brother, Creon. And that is where the first guilt rose, perhaps, for though she was but a young girl, Jocasta had already been consecrated as a priestess, and given the title *Shining Moon*, to indicate that she belonged to Dia-Mother. And this dedication, as you will understand, made her different.’

As my father spoke these words, I felt a warm shame rising to my cheeks, for I almost knew what he would say next. It was something I had learned from the other, older boys, the sons of shepherds, as we gossiped on the hot rocks, while the herds grazed. I did not know it myself, of my own body, but I could already understand what it was they were talking about.

My father looked at me keenly, then said, ‘Yes, I can see you know what I mean. They have already told you, it seems. Well, that relieves me of the shame of telling you. So Jocasta was different, because of the goddess in her. She was young, and strong, and had this constant flame burning in her body, calling out to be quenched, so that the seed should grow and put forth its fruit. They say, here on the hills, that never for a moment in the day did she know peace from its raging; that like ancient Pasiphaë she cast hot eyes on all males that moved beneath the sun.’

My mother shifted in her damp bed, and coughed again. So the old man my father passed away from his memories of the young girl and said, ‘Laius Cattle-Chief was big enough in battle, but small in bed, they say. It was often thus with the rough-haired kings from the north; there had been some

freezing of the blood, some wasting of the great force. And so, when they came among the small, brown Cretans, they were wanting, in a way they had never suspected, up on the grasslands, with women as cold-eyed as themselves. But what man will admit such a failing? No, I should not ask you that, Oedipus, for you are only a lad yet. But, I will tell you, for a man, king or not, to find himself lacking in that power is far worse than that he should run before the spears, or a charging bull. And so this Laius Cattle-Chief went to Delphi, having told the folk at Thebes that he meant to ask the priestess there, the Pythoness, at what season his wife would be most fruitful. But I can tell you that always he carried a bull's pizzle as a whip, and wore bull's horns on his helmet when other men wore horses' manes; they say that he always drank from a horn and never from a cup, and that his chariot-floor was laden with large stones; always round stones, as big as my fist and bigger. You can make of that what you wish; I only speak what everyone knew.'

Now I was staring away from my father, my neck hot and red. He said, 'At Delphi the old crone said, "Thank the gods you have no son, for he would murder you, King of Thebes!" At least, that is what he announced to the people when he returned home again. Though some of them said he had never been to Delphi at all, but to the Shrine of Cybele in Calydon where the priestesses know a cure for what troubled him. Whatever the case, King Laius put his hot young wife down into the cellars below the Great Megaron at Thebes, so that her warmth would not thaw him and cause such seed to spring as might murder him.'

I was beginning to yawn and shuffle on my stool, and my father notice this. He said quickly, 'You must not think I am making this up. It has been passed up from the market at Thebes to us by the cattle-guards, and there is no shame in speaking of it, my son.'

I said, 'No, there is no shame, father.' In truth, I was weary of this talk of old kings and queens and their troubles. But I waited on, for the father to say something which chimed in with my own lame feet, and so I tried to be patient.

'Soon,' he said, 'Jocasta's belly began to swell. Now this was strange, because King Laius had not been with her. Certainly, since she was of royal blood, he took her food to her at night, and even drank a cup of wine with her. But that was all. When he reproached her, she told him that his memory must be at fault, since he had drunk most heavily one night, and would not let her rest until dawn. For his part, the King swore that she had enticed the

young captain of the guard while he had been at Delphi, and that the child to come was not his own. And then, do you know . . .'

But suddenly my mother raised herself on the narrow bed and said, 'Oh, my dear husband, but what a poem you could make out of threading a needle! Listen, son, I will tell you; the Queen bore a son, and Laius, terrified that the Pythoness had spoken the truth, threw that baby out here, just below our door, with a nail through his feet, so that he could not crawl away from the wolves that roamed the hill then. I heard the baby crying, if that is the word for such a feeble sound, and brought him in. We drew the nail from his poor soft baby feet, and they were a piteous sight. If he had lived, he would have been a cripple all his days.'

I turned to her and said, 'So, the King's son died, mother?'

She nodded. 'Aye, before that night was out, my lamb. The poor weak thing had been badly treated; and the nail through his limbs had put an end to him. But we should never have meddled, Oedipus. For within the year, you were born, my son, and your feet were as you know them. And that is why your father thinks the gods have put this trial on us for meddling in King's affairs.'

She lay back then, panting, and my father took her a cup of wine with honey in it to round off the sharpness of the grape.

'And is that all?' I asked.

They both nodded, gazing at me in the dusk like old owls.

'So,' I said, 'I am being punished in place of King Laius' son, is that it? And because of Jocasta's heat? Because of the shame of Kings and Queens? Because of the wilful pride of the gods?'

But they did not answer me this time, and my mother had shrunk down into the bed, letting the wine-cup spill its red over her shrivelled breast.

My father said, 'Come, son, and help to wipe this off her. I cannot hold her and wipe her at the same time.'

I took a cloth and did as he bade me. Then I looked up and said, 'But, father, she is as cold as ice. Look, her eyes are staring up into her head. What is wrong with her, father?'

3

WE let the hearth-fire die, and rubbed ourselves with its cold, white ashes. From behind the cottage, we took the dark boughs of pine, and some of cypress from a little valley lower down our hill, and with these we filled the window-hole and doorway, to keep out the sun's heat and the flies. Then we sat together in mourning, my father and I, before the door, one on either side, eating nothing, and only drinking from the water jar that stood between us when our thirst became unbearable in the three days of public grieving. We spoke no word to each other.

And at the end of the third day, shepherd women in black robes, with their hair uncombed and wild, came to our house and took my mother away, bearing her on their shoulders, and grinning awfully with their white teeth to drive away all spirits which might try to intercept them. A tall black-eyed woman went in front, singing a burial song of three sounds which made no sense to me, in a high voice like that of the wind crying through the grasslands at evening-time. In her right hand she carried a flask of red wine, which she spilled into the dust at every three paces; in her left hand she held a skin bag of white dust, which she scattered after the wine. I had never seen this woman before. I think she came from a hidden shrine beyond our pastures, and was called in at whatever house death visited, to lead the dead one away. My father did not answer me when I whispered, asking who she was, but only stared before him, still and heavy-eyed.

When darkness fell, this woman came back alone and stood before us, the night-wind shifting the long snakes of her hair about her shoulders. She stood, seven paces from our door, and pointed a black stick towards us both, carefully, like a bowman taking aim. This was to quench all sorrow, yet I do not know that it eased my pain at all for the loss of my mother.

After it was over, she leaned her staff against the wall and said to my father, 'It is done, old man. The offering has been accepted, and the journey into the dark kingdom has begun. Persephone awaits her there, to make her one of the hand-maids.'

I was only a boy, I was too full of sorrow for any words to help me, I wanted my mother back in the flesh and not in dreams. No talk of

Persephone could take the place of my mother's smile, her gentle hands, the songs she sang to me at night when I was too hot to sleep in our stifling room. I looked away when this stranger smiled at me and said, 'All will be well, Oedipus. Now there is no cause for grief.' For me, there would always be grief, always this loss standing between myself and the sun, and no words from a black-robed woman from foreign places could alter that, I thought.

But my father nodded and smiled, as though he believed this woman's words. Then he rose and unblocked the door so that she could enter. After he had kindled the hearth-fire again and let what light there still was come in through the window-hole, he poured out clay cups of wine for us and we sat about our rough-hewn table for a while.

When we had drunk a farewell toast and had flung the rest of the wine upon the floor as a libation, he said, 'Priestess, we are alone, this boy and I. From now on our life will not be the same, with no woman in the house. What must we do, think you, to heal our wound?'

As he spoke, I saw this white-faced woman's great eyes moving about the house, as though they touched and counted everything we had. They were like a dealer's hands in the market-place, that feel everywhere to see if there is a good bargain to be had.

She was not a young woman, yet not an old one, and though her face was lined, it still had comeliness about it, and her hair was unmarked with grey.

She moved her long finger up and down her thin nose a while, then said softly, 'How many sheep have you, old man?'

My father told her, and told her also how many rams, and how many lambs there might well be in the coming Spring.

She nodded and asked then, 'Are the pastures rich in this part of the mountain?'

My father told her that there were no richer, until one got north of Mount Othys. I did not like the quick way his answers followed on the heels of her questions, nor the eagerness in his old face.

I think the woman sensed my feeling, because she turned her head and stared at me fixedly, before smiling and touching my arm. Her fingers were so cold that I drew away, in spite of the laws of hospitality. Even this she noticed, with her quick eyes.

Then, forgetting me, she said, ‘You have no other children to share farm and flock, but this boy?’

My father shook his head, now leaning over the table and gripping its edge with tight-clenched hands, so that the whiteness of his knuckles showed, even in the twilight.

Suddenly the woman rose and, taking an ember from the hearth-fire, lit the lamp that hung from the rafter above her. Her action, taking this on herself in our house, shocked me strangely. I wanted to jump up and snatch the ember from her hands, but dared not. I looked across at my father, and his smile showed that he was well pleased by what she had done.

Then the woman turned and said solemnly, ‘My duties at the Shrine are over. Another younger one has been sent to take my place there. This house will serve as well as any other, now that my race is run.’

My father rose then, as though to take her in his arms, but she shook her tangled head and held up two white hands to stay him, and her teeth showed white as she smiled. She said, ‘Not yet, not yet, old man. You are as hasty as a youth. That is not the way the Mother approves of, once the Feast of Dionysus is over.’

She moved away from him and turned her back. Then, stooping, she put her hands beneath her black robe and began to work at something. My father stood watching and impatient, his hands clenched by his side. He did not look at me, it was as though I had gone from the room; and, indeed, I would gladly have left it at that moment and have run across the hills, to anywhere, to nowhere, to be away from this changed place, which had been my home while my mother lived.

Then something the woman said fixed me in my seat. Her white face half-turned over her bent shoulder, she whispered to my father, ‘It is too much for me, this girdle-knot, the goatskin aegis of the Carian goddess. It was tied so long ago, I have forgotten the twist of the thongs. Follow my fingers and see if yours can unfasten it.’

My father stood close behind her, breathing fast and deep, his hands moving in the shadows, until at last he said, like a man drowning in despair, ‘It is no use. We must take a knife to it.’

Then she turned towards him, and I saw in the flickering lamplight that she was trembling, too. ‘Yes,’ she said whispering, ‘let us take a knife. But do it quickly, before the sound of Her wings has passed from my ears.’

I saw my father fumbling at his belt, then feeling again within the black folds of the robe. The woman gave a little gasp and said hoarsely, ‘Take care, it has grown tight with the years. It would go ill to shed a drop of the blood dedicated to her, yet.’

I shrank away, wishing I could be anywhere but in that room, where the mocking shadows danced through the thick air.

Then I heard the knife-blade cut through leather, with a sharp snapping sound; and I heard the woman suck in breath, as though freed from some long-borne burden. With a savage gesture she flung the thing onto the hearth-fire, where it curled and twisted like a snake, sending sharp and bitter smoke into the room. The bronze knife clattered to the stone floor and my father took her in his arms, guiding her to the bed where my mother had lain pale that same afternoon.

I stood up and went to the door, for this was a thing I did not want to see, this woman on my mother’s bed. I do not think my father saw me at all, his eyes were blind in a manner I had never known before.

But as I stumbled towards the night, the woman looked over his shoulder at me with wide eyes and said, ‘Stay, Oedipus! Stay! We must have a witness for our wedding, and who better than you to tell the people of the mountain that your father has taken a new wife, and that the gods have sent you another mother?’

I stayed, for I was too afraid to disobey her: but, on my knees with my head bowed, I saw nothing for my tears. I only heard; and hated what I heard.

4

THE woman's coming to our house changed me. Now, as I watched the sheep in some hidden grazing-dale, I would lie motionless for hours, staring at a small blue flower among the wiry grass, or counting all the snow-clad curves of the billowing clouds that built their immense battlements over my head in the blue sky. It was as though all action had gone from me, all thought as well; as though now I was lame in my head as well as in my feet. The only thing that moved in me, deep as a well, deep as the pits where the black-faced Minyans dug for metals, was a little red worm of vengeance—not only against this woman who had taken my mother's place, and my father's poor shreds of love for me, and the dread king who had struck down with his javelin at Thebes when we took the sheep in to market; but against all men. All the world that was the god's; and the god himself, who had caused me to be marked, branded, hobbled like a bullock grazing before the butcher came to him with the pole-axe.

Once as I lay, holding a dead dry lark in my hand and stretching out its limp wings, as though I might learn the secret of what let it fly so strongly upwards, away from the earth, away from torment, I heard whispering and laughter above me, and looked up startled to see a string of shepherd children on the hill above me, pointing at me and chattering. When I turned my eyes upon them, they crossed their first two fingers at me, as though warding off evil, as though I had now become different from themselves and must be guarded against.

A tall boy shouted out, 'Medea has come to your house. Stop staring at us, clawfoot.'

His sister, a thin-legged girl with dark hair that blew out like a banner, pushed at him and screamed, laughing, 'No, not Medea—she died too long ago. This stranger is Torone, the Shrill Queen! Have you never heard her telling clawfoot and his old father what they must do about the house? Oh, it bursts the ears!'

When I got to my feet, to go to them and ask them to treat me as they had done before, to come down and play with me in the dale, they turned and ran away, waving their heads and arms, pretending to be afraid of me,

but laughing all the time. Their mocking voices came back to me on the wind that always blew across the mountain, stabbing me to the heart.

That evening, I spoke outright to the woman, ‘Some say you are Medea, and some Torone. What do you say to that?’

She was stirring porridge in a clay pot for when my father came home, and did not look up at me. Her hair hung down on both sides, hiding her face. She said, ‘Let them say what they will say. Only the thunderbolt and the lightning-sword can silence babbling starlings in a tree. But what harm does their noise do? They are not worth putting poison down to kill them, the silly birds. My name is Oresthea, which means, “Dedicated to the Mountain Goddess”. If the little fools of the huts choose to call me something else, that is their affair. I do not care what they call me, as long as you call me mother.’

I let fall my horn spoon on the table top and said, ‘But you are not my mother. My mother was Rhene, and she has gone into the ground.’

Oresthea turned her head from the hearth and looked at me through her hair. ‘Rhene, the Old Ewe,’ she said, smiling. She spoke with such contempt that I went out into the darkness, and did not come back until my father fetched me, dragging me by the neck of my shirt, his face set with anger.

All this time, he was changing, too. At first, when he had taken this woman to his bed, he had seemed for a while younger and brisker. But then he had fallen back again, worse than before. His feet dragged as he went with his crook up to the grass slopes, and his face became more drawn and haggard. He reminded me of a fly that has been sucked dry by a spider; his skin hung about him and his bones began to show their shape. He ate little now, and often made a grimace when Oresthea set his food before him. But when he left it untouched, she never railed at him, as my mother would have done, but flung it into the hearth-fire and let the flames eat it up instead.

My father never spoke to me about her; he moved in his own silent world of misery, as I did. We were like two helpless men, adrift in their fishing-boats on a tideless sea, who watch each other, as the boats pass, but have no heart to speak.

By the time winter came, and the wind had fangs in it, my father was out at all hours, as though he hated to return to his home and hearth-fire now. I pitied him, for he had grown so old, but shrank from putting my hand on his, almost as one might shrink from touching a dead man, or a dedicated one who was to be the Sown Man of the year.

Yet Oresthea scarcely seemed to notice all this. She went about our house busily enough, tending fires, making oatcakes, skimming the milk and shaking it in jars to make butter. She also lived in her world, over the boundaries of which no foot might tread.

Many times, and especially when she sat near the window at her olive-wood loom, weaving black cloth, I heard her singing quietly:

'*Omphale, Omphale, centre of things,*
Cavern of serpents, of beating wings,
Of milk-curdled moon and the throbbing strings
That sing of Omphale, the centre of things.'

I could make no sense of her words, and would have died rather than ask her what the song meant. I did ask my father, though, one evening when I met him out beyond the pines that bordered our grazing. He gazed at me, half-bewildered, then pointed to my navel and said, 'That is Omphale. It is a sign that you came from a woman. They say the gods have no navel. You have one, so do not dream you are a god.'

Then he went off to search for a lost sheep, and said no more about this. It did not help me to understand Oresthea's song, and after a while I ceased even to hear it when she sang, her white fingers busy at the wool.

It was perhaps a year after she came to our house when I saw a small brown snake. It lay on a bank of dried bracken, in the first warmth of the new sun, and did not move when I scrambled up to look at it more closely. It was almost as though it lay there waiting for me. Its eyes were open and its tongue darted out now and again, so it was not asleep. For a while I knelt by it and thought: Here is the terrible serpent that kills all who come near it. Here is a strand of the hair of Medusa! Yet it does not sting me. How like a little god it is, lying on the brown fern fronds and taking no account of the world! How restful and secure, how confident!

It was no longer than my arm, if that, and no thicker than my middle finger, or at the most, my thumb. Down its coiled back was a pretty zigzag of gold, like a gentle lightning. Its black eyes shone as brightly as chips of the jet that Hyperboreans brought in their trading-wagons down to Halus, for the Phoenicians to collect.

I leaned above the little snake and said, 'You are a Prince, yet you have no feet. You do not complain for having to go on your belly through the dust, yet I strike my head in bitterness because I cannot run.'

The snake watched me, without moving, his dark tongue flicking out before him.

I went closer and said, ‘Now I think I can understand. You have no Omphale, no navel, like other creatures—and so you must be a god, as my father said. How proud I should be if you were my friend, little Prince.’

I wished that the shepherd children could see me now, my face so close to the pretty head of the snake, as though we spoke of secrets together. They would not taunt me then, I thought.

Suddenly love gushed from my heart like a stream towards this silent brown friend among the bracken. I could help myself no longer, but put my lips to his head and kissed him. And as I drew my lips away, his small head moved at me, so swiftly and silently, as though he kissed me in return. His kiss was sudden and sharp, and then he had gone, slithering away into the deeper parts of the dry fern.

I laughed at his shyness in kissing me so briefly and then in running away. I sat by the fern for a while, begging him to return. But he did not come again, and then my lips and cheeks began to go cold, and my eyes closed of their own will, so that I could hardly see out of the slits that the lids made. The sun above me in the pale sky suddenly began to lurch and then to go far away, into the distance, and then came roaring back until I thought it would shatter the mountain. Inside my head a bronze gong began to beat, and when I tried to stand, my legs would not hold me up. I stretched out on the bracken and heaved then, for my stomach was revolting against something. A different new life had come into me. I thought: This is what it is to be kissed by a god. Perhaps I too am becoming a god, am ridding my stomach of all cares and learning to move upon my belly like a god.

I recall feeling down, to find if I still had a navel, and I remember the harsh scratching of the bracken as I tried to slither, as the little snake had done, across the ground.

Then the sun came down very near to me, and I felt the furnace of his breath on the back of my head. I could have reached up and have touched it. It was unbearable, and so I fell away from it into the red and grey clouds which whirled before my closed eyes.

I was away, wandering in strange worlds for longer than I know. When I saw Oresthea again, her belly was swelling, and there was a round hole in the thatch of our roof, through which I could see the dry sky.

I pointed at it with my forehead, for my hands would not raise themselves, and said, ‘Why?’

Oresthea looked up and said calmly, ‘In the height of the summer, the sun breathed on it and burned it. One would have thought the sun was anxious to come into our house and destroy us all.’

I did not want to speak of this, for now I remembered how fiercely the sun had kissed me on the hill, how fearful his love was. How like death.

I said, ‘Why, my father, not mend it, the hole?’

Oresthea smiled bitterly and said, ‘Your father is an old man, Oedipus. He is beyond mending—though, to give him his due, he has not been beyond making something.’

She slapped herself on the belly with the flat of her hand. Then, lifting her lip, she said, ‘But it will be a poor thing, it will come to nothing, I have no doubt. Either that, or it will crawl on four feet all its life, or wriggle like the snake you kissed, in the dust.’

Now I shuddered to think of the little snake, for I knew that it had not been my friend after all. Nor was the sun my friend, it seemed, for he had tried to come into the cottage to fetch me away and burn me, as he burns the dried olive-branches after the harvest.

I shut my eyes and went to sleep again, so as not to see or hear anything of life.

Another time when I woke, it was dark, and the clay lamp flickered near the hearth-stone. My father was not there, but Oresthea sat, twisting the long strands of her unbound hair in her fingers, and gazing like a sightless god about her, as though she would be alone for ever in her dream.

The hole was larger in the roof now, and green mosses grew on the walls. The air was full of a strange scent, of damp wood and sour wine, of vinegar and the smoke of pine-cones.

As in the market-place of Thebes that day, when my tongue ran away with me, speaking words I had not intended, now I suddenly said, ‘A father and a son—and out of the sky the great furnace blazing, bringing all to nothing, toppling them down, all of them, the house-roof and the tall pine.’

My words meant hardly anything to me as I spoke them, yet to Oresthea they must have borne a heavy message, for her eyes came back into her head and she let fall the strands of her hair. Then she rose heavily and dragged her stool to the bedside and leaned over me. Her shadow, from the clay lamp,

was enormous and covered me like a shroud, with a heavy blackness, a thick blackness, that had the smell of autumn woods in it, the scent of newly-turned earth, that lies hidden from the eye beneath green lichens.

She laid her cold hand upon my head and said, as though there was no one to listen, ‘A father and his son were there, and an eye from above gazed down on them, not yet burning bright, but waiting and watching them, in all they did. This was on the island of Minos, before all things. No, not before the labyrinth, for it was the father, ingenious Daedalus, who built that for the bull-running. Or to hide the monster that the Queen, Pasiphaë, had brought forth after coupling with the bull in her Maenad frenzy. I do not know. It happened before men had grown to right sense and could tell the story properly.’

I did not wish to hear the woman’s mumbling, but sleep would not take me away from her voice; nor was I strong enough to raise my fingers and put them in my ears. I shrank, tight as a mouse in his hole, and tried to think of other things; but always her words bored through my dreams and came to me.

‘Daedalus Artificer, who set up the great stone circle of the Hyperboreans; builder of palaces, man to whom the natures of all stones and metals and woods was known. Yet, for all his skill, this Daedalus must remain a prisoner on Crete when the Great King bade him stay. When Minos the Terrible shut the gates and closed the ports, this Daedalus could not go to where his old heart beckoned him. On the shore at Phaestus, he sat with his son, Icarus son of Moon-Goddess Car, and together they wept at being slaves. Two men weeping, the father and the son.’

She was silent a while, and then I felt her pushing me sideways, making a place for herself on the thong-bed. I kept my eyes closed as she sighed and heaved her heavy body beside me. The sharp scent of her garments filled my nostrils. Her hair fell across my face, as though spiders ran on me, but I had not the force to move my head away.

She groaned for a while and said in another voice, ‘I am near my time, I think, Oedipus. You will lie in the bed where your father’s son is born, perhaps. And ignorant folk in later days may say that you lay with your father’s woman and a son was born between you. Ah, what they say! What they say, the fools of this world!’

She laughed without merriment a while, then she settled herself and was still. And when I thought she would let me be, with her endless story, she went on again and said, ‘So, on the shore at Phaestus, father and son

weeping in thraldom. And at last the god speaking and telling the old artificer that a clever man could build himself wings, like a bird, if only he took feathers, and bound them together with twine, and set them in beeswax, and lashed them to his arms. Oh, Daedalus, how could you trust the man-god so! Yet he did, old fool, and made the wings, and told Icarus how they should fly together out of Crete. And Icarus trusted his father, just as the father trusted the god. They must have been mad, the two of them. Perhaps they had kissed the Mother's snake, as you did, Oedipus, and so knew madness!'

I struggled in my heart, wishing to break from her scent and her ruthless tale.

She put a hand on my breast as though to keep me where I was, and said, 'Then the high winds came, as they do from the sea in Crete, and the old man took his son to a hill-top and showed him how to imitate the birds of the air. And by some whim of the god, they soared from their hill, catching the currents like gulls, and rising, rising, rising, until they were drunk with their new glory. Down by the shore, fishermen whose long rods shivered in their hands, looked up and saw these two laughing in the blue sky. Men ploughing in the King's fields let go the plough-handles and gazed up at them. Shepherds raised their crooks to point, and all cried out, "See, see, the gods are flying away from Crete! Oh, Mother Dia, but the times we live in! The times we live in!" Delos, Paros, fell behind the two; the sacred island of Samos lay to their left; and to their right, Calymene, famed for its honey. In the dry blue air, the two were weightless, they were witless with the aethereal wine of the sky, their bodies had no more substance than gossamers, they knew no fear now, no hatred for Minos, no common human cares, not even love for one another. Daedalus threshed the insubstantial air with great motions of the arms, like a powerful oarsman rowing in his place, like a farmer threshing corn, moving on relentlessly braver with, every stroke of his pinions. But Icarus, the Darling of the Mother, cried, "Oh, to equal the sun! Oh, to rise, to climb up to his red cheek and spit in his face!" And so he turned his face upwards and, caught in a hot current, swept on, higher and higher, like an eagle who skims up the face of a tall cliff without moving one feather of his pinions. Now old Daedalus, glancing back over his brown shoulder, saw his reckless son straying from course, and he wheeled and came round, below the boy, a thousand feet below, and called up, "Come down, you fool! I, who know the nature of all substances, tell you that beeswax cannot stand against the sun." But the young man, sent mad with the hot dry air that coursed through his veins, and never wishing to set foot on hard earth again, shouted down in derision, "Go, sink to earth if

you will, old man, but let us who seek glory find it where we will. Go, crawl on ground and chew on a goat's teat!"

'And, as the young one spoke these words, the sun's great cavern eye opened, and let loose the furnace-blast of heat that lay behind it. Daedalus shrieked in the upper air, so that all the Cyclades heard his words, "Come down, my son, the wax is melting!" And Icarus, looking along his arms, saw that they were now wet with molten wax, and that behind him floated a trail of feathers, black and grey and white. And now, whereas air had once flowed swiftly through his veins in place of blood, lead coursed heavily, slowly, painfully, and his heart beat so slowly that it sounded in his ears like the anvil-blows of a dying smith, like the hoof beats of a spent horse, like the rivers of Thessaly in winter when their swift freshets congeal and come to an icy halt. So he stopped, and stood for a space in the empty air, like a man grappling with a dream, in the midst of blue nothingness, and all the folk below saw this youth standing on air, the sun smiling over him, as though holding him up for a space of three breaths. And as the island people gazed and wondered, Icarus began to fall. At first, he fell like a man turning over in bed, slowly in the night; then he fell faster and faster, until he spun like a whipped top. And now his golden hair stretched upwards to the sun as his leaden body plunged. The sound he made was like rain hissing through the air; like a waterfall swishing down. He saw the wine-dark sea far, far beneath him, so far that he could not see the waves at all, but everything looked polished, like smooth agate in his eyes. He saw as far as Egypt, that golden land where the Nile runs like a broad silver belt between deep green shores; he saw the mountains of Thrace, with the black rams fighting among the snows; he saw the furthermost neck of the Middle Sea, where the Pillars of Heracles come towards each other, like lovers warm for kissing and beyond which lie the orchards of Paradise, heroes' home; he saw even the great grey circle of stones which his father had put up for the savage, skin-clad men of Hyperborea. And as he saw these things, and saw his naked wingless arms, and felt the empty air beneath his helpless flailing feet, he yelled and yelled. But no sound came from him to his weeping father, for the rush of furious air quite stifled any words he spoke. And, as he flashed past his poised father, like a stone cast from a mountain, like a weighted javelin coming towards earth, he looked towards old Daedalus with eyes so great and piteous that the old artificer tore at his own wings, trying to unfix them, so that he might join his son in death. But the gods will not let us go from their presence when we will, but when they will, and the wax stood firm to hold the feathers in. And Daedalus saw his son plunge down and down, beyond his helping, until the youth was nothing but a speck of dust, and

hardly to be seen against the dark blue of the Icarian Sea. There was no splash of white, no difference, when the sacrifice was swallowed up. It was as though the sea, the Mother of us all, could take a thousand offerings to her breast and never sigh, and never show how she had eaten them up, and taken them into herself. All that old Daedalus glimpsed at last, when in his heavy grief he bent his pinions low, was a tattered wing floating upon the waters and a shoal of hungry fishes nibbling at its edge, thinking the wax was such meat as had just fallen to their maw.'

Suddenly I woke from my dream and cried, 'Medea! I know you now, Medea!'

But she did not answer me. Her own time of crying out had come upon her. Now was she Torone, the Shrill Queen, indeed.

5

My own sickness overwhelmed me and I knew no more until I woke to find myself lying outside on a pallet of straw with the morning's warm sun upon me. My father was on his knees beside me, holding a water jug in his hand and gazing down on me.

Seeing my eyes open, he said, 'You were well out of it. It came to nothing. At our age one can expect no more than to be a jest for the gods. But there is colour in your face, as though the life from the one has gone into the other. That is the way of things: on the mountain here, a man may lose a lamb one day and find a ram the next. You look stronger already. I look to see you walking when I return.'

He rose and went, setting down the water jug beside me. I lay and thought: This is the kindest he has been for a long while. Perhaps things will be better in this house from now on.

As I lay idly dreaming, with mountain-birds wheeling and crying above me and the thin bleating of sheep coming up to me from below, a little space of peacefulness came over me, a calm after a long tempest, and for a while my body and my heart were at rest. This does not happen often in the life of a man as restless as I am, but, when it does, such moments of grace lie like precious, sparkling stones against the blackness of life. I was not happy or sad, neither hungry nor satisfied: I was as nothing, or, rather, as everything; a part of the earth and the sky, not a creature on them or under them, but of them, not fighting them any longer but moving with them, or staying still as they stayed.

My father was right, I walked that day: or, at least, I went on all fours at first, into our house. The woman, sitting in her black in the darkest corner, said weakly, 'Ah, what is it that goes on four legs in the morning?'

I said, 'It is man, who in the afternoon goes on two. And this afternoon, I shall go on two, Oresthea.'

She laughed into the dark folds of her robe. 'I, in the evening of my age,' she said, 'must make do with three now, for I need a staff to keep me upright.'

Though I did not love her, I pitied her, for it seemed that she was being punished by the gods for throwing away her girdle so lightly. She held out her hands to me and raised me, though I did not ask for her help. ‘You are the only lamb I shall know,’ she said. ‘For both of us, for better or for worse, this must be so. No more water runs from the stream and the well has become dry over the years of drought. Will you be my son, Oedipus?’

She was so thin and haggard, I was in such a state of lazy peace, I nodded, no more: but I gave my silent consent. As I did this, a brown bird, large and frightening, struck itself on the lintel of our door, with a clattering of wings, as though it had tried to come inside. There was a fluttering of feathers and a scraping of beak and claw on the woodwork: and then it had gone again.

Oresthea shuddered and said, ‘I have not seen that sort of bird before. It was too small for an eagle, yet too large for a hawk.’

I was as startled as the woman, but I said boldly, ‘It was nothing but an owl, blinded by the sun, that mistook its direction and blundered to the doorway.’

Oresthea bowed her head and whispered, ‘Then, if it was an owl, it was not nothing, for the owl is the Wide-Eyed, Glauce, Her bird. So she has sent a warning—but whether to you or to me, we do not know. Though we shall, aye, we shall.’

There was not long to wait before we knew. That night, though I went quickly to sleep, it was not to rest. A long dream wrapped its cloak about me and would not let me go until dawn. In this dream, like Icarus, I trod the empty blue air and fell, the wax of my wings melted on my shoulders, shrieking. Before me, at a lower level, my father and Oresthea were flying together, with a steady beat of wings, she with her black robes streaming out behind her, he with his shepherd’s crook pushed through his belt as though, even in the sky, there were flocks and herds to tend. As I fell, crying out to them, they half-turned in the air and pointed downwards without answering me, then plunged on, always growing smaller in the blue distance. Still plummeting down, I looked towards where they had pointed and saw, on a golden shore where the white wave-crests tumbled ceaselessly, my mother, Rhene, holding up her hands towards me, as though calling me to her. Through the rushing of the air about me, and the grumbling of the sea, I heard her voice as I had known it long ago. She was saying, ‘Come, come, my lame son. Let yourself fall and I will catch you. I will hold you and steady you: there is no need for feet!’

Yet, in this dream, I knew that I was falling too fast, too heavily for anyone to catch me and to save me from dashing myself to pieces on the golden shore. To draw me on like this, with open arms, was to invite me to my death. I tried, angrily, to shout this to my mother, Rhene, as I fell; but the roaring wind filled my mouth and throat, driving back my words.

In a helpless sweat of terror, I moved my outspread wingless arms, and suddenly, unaccountably, glided in a warm air-current away from her arms, and then plunged like a whistling rock towards the harsh, green, salt sea, where shoals of weed waited to smother me, and great fishes loitered like dark shadows away from the sun, their jaws already open for the feast.

In the last moments of my fall, I glanced towards my mother on the shore, meaning to reproach her, and saw that a brown owl sat on her right shoulder, staring at my end with wide, golden, pitiless eyes.

I hit the water crying, ‘Glauce! Glauce!’

Then I was awake, and my father and Oresthea were on either side of me, gazing down, their faces passionless and stiff.

My father said, ‘He has been too long indoors, in his sickness. He must be set to work in the clean mountain air, as soon as he can follow a flock with his crook.’

Oresthea shook her head, saying, ‘There are some sicknesses which lie deeper than that, old man, and cannot be cured by breathing the morning air.’

Then they went away and left me shaking in my damp bed. I do not know whether I loved them or hated them. For now I had other things to think of; to the burden of my feet had been added this of the falling dream. I did not blame Oresthea for giving it to me by her tale of Icarus; I think it had lain in me from my birth, as a seed lies deep in the earth and never shows itself as a poisonous weed until the peasant rakes away the upper covering, the pine-needles, and so lets the waiting seed see light and put forth its leaves.

In Man, it is all falling: when he is but a seed, he falls from the father to the mother; and when the time has been accomplished, he falls from her out into the cruel light. In his career through the world of mankind, he may fall many times, defeated in battle, or from a horse, or by hitting his foot against a stone after a feasting; and, at the end, his daylight falling done, he tumbles down again into the darkness of death, and then into a hole in the earth. So, it is always falling; that is man’s destiny, his pattern woven on the loom.

Only some of us are blind to it, or hide it by climbing, either to hilltops or fame; not knowing that by such elevation we but set ourselves the higher for the final fall.

My dream came again and again, even though I had become strong enough to go out on the hillside with a small flock of my father's sheep. And at last, even in the sunlight, its sights and echoes hardly left me through the daytime. It was always the same, save that after a while, when my father began to grow more and more impatient with me, thinking I was betraying his old age, avoiding my shepherd's work and forcing more labour on him than his bent body could stand, a new thread became woven into the dream.

It was that, as I flew, I suddenly became aware that I held a round pebble in my right hand; and that, as he and Oresthea drew away from me, to desert me in the upper air, a rage overtook me and I flung that pebble, which struck him on the head and tumbled him down beside me to the green water and the fishes.

And when my mother, Rhene, waiting on the shore, saw this, she smiled and said, 'So, you have brought him with you. You have destroyed your father.'

When she said these words, the brown owl on her shoulder flapped its wings, then flew away, crying joyfully and letting fall white droppings over the shore.

This was more terrible to bear than the other. And at last, when I could tolerate this dream alone no longer, I told it all to Oresthea one day when my father was away at the village in the low valley, bartering a load of fleeces in exchange for flour and wine.

She was silent for a time, then quietly she said, 'I think that there might be a cure for this sickness, Oedipus. It seems to me that Glauce, who is the owl in your vision, is demanding an offering. It seems also that your dead mother is disturbing you from the place where she is. She, too, is asking for something.'

I said, 'Do you mean that they are telling me to throw a stone at my father, to put an end to him?'

I was afraid almost to utter the words; and glad when Oresthea shook her head. 'No,' she said, with her bitter smile, 'for he would be little enough of an offering to anyone as he is now. I think the god has given us the answer in your mother's own name; Rhene, which means the ewe.'

I said, ‘You still speak from behind a dark curtain, Oresthea, and I do not see your words.’

She answered, ‘Like most men, you are blind to what lies most plainly before your eyes, Oedipus. That is why you need such women as I am to tell you what the gods are saying. You are all the same, men, whether you are Kings or slaves.’

I grew impatient then and struck the table with my spoon. ‘Very well,’ I said, ‘what are the gods saying? Tell me, if you know. But I do not think you know.’

She looked above my head, musing and smiling, and then said distantly, ‘You will not be at rest until an offering is made. See, Zeus has sent you this dream to inform you of that wish. Your mother, Rhene, in this dream implores you with upraised hands. What could be more plain?’

As she spoke, the hair of my head seemed to rise and the skin of my shoulders to move of itself. I said, scarcely able to find breath for the words, ‘They are asking me to fall from the sky? They want me to do as the old Kings did, to leap down off the mountain, off the cliff?’

Oresthea said, now wearily, ‘Not all of them did; only the poets say they did. Poets will say anything to please their lords, who give them rings and bracelets, and set meat and wine before them at the table. Many of the kings who leaped out into the sky were not kings, but other men, dressed as kings, Oedipus, who deceived the god by their crowns and robes and their well-combed hair. For a king, it costs small labour to send another, a prisoner or slave, up to the high place. And, after the leap, the king is born again, and lives in ease and comfort until the next offering must be made. And there are always slaves, always prisoners, among the cattle-kings.’

I ran my thumb-nail along the ridged wood of the table, where between the grain the sappy growth is soft enough to bear an impress. In this wood I drew a man leaping from a high rock. The woman came behind me and, with her sharper nail, scratched across what I had drawn, as though to blot it out, to kill it before it must be made flesh.

Then, by the window-hole looking out across the hill-pasture, she said, ‘Your mother the ewe gives us the answer. Her beseeching in your dream would be satisfied if you gave to Rhene a leaping ewe. Surely, there are enough old ewes among our flocks on the mountain for one to be offered?’

I said, ‘My father knows them all, and has names for them all. To his old eye, each one’s face is different and familiar. He would know, though no one

told him.'

Truly, I did not wish to deceive my father because of this woman's prompting, even though such deceit might set me free of my heavy dream. I would rather risk his wrath by asking him for a ewe. Though even there, I was not sure that I wanted a dumb beast to fall to its death for me. I was a soft-hearted boy then and suffered for all the world.

Oresthea sighed and rapped slowly with her white knuckles on the window-stone, deeply thinking. She said, 'I now know your father well enough to understand that he would rather you suffered the dream all your life than give you the least of his flock to save you.'

I was about to answer this, defending my father, though almost knowing what she said to be the truth, when she held her hand against my lips and said, almost fiercely, 'Be silent, fool, and listen to one who sees further into the future than you do, one who knows what will come to you if you do not take the chance that is offered you now. Look, there is an old ewe, Metope, I think he calls her, because of her blundering, headlong running. She is almost dead on her feet already. There is worm in her fleece and her hooves are almost eaten away with rot. Yet she is a ewe, such as Rhene the Ewe would accept. Go now to the pasture while your father is still down in the village, and send Metope on this errand for you. Who will know, but you and I, that she did not, in her blind blundering, slide on the mountain shale and lose her balance? By Hera, but she would be no loss—and what she might do for you is countless.'

Oresthea almost shoved me out of doors, and I went, under the spell of her swift, hot words, leaving myself no time for thought or compassion.

Old Metope was grazing listlessly near the cliff-edge, where the rocky lip is flaked and layered by heat and ice, so that parts of it slither down every year, making the pathway wind about where the mountain-side has fallen away.

I snatched up a handful of fresh grass from near the edge, and as I did, looked over giddily. Far below there were dark pines, swaying in a different wind from what I felt upon my face. And beyond the pines, there were white-walled cottages, so small that five of them could sit upon my finger-nail.

Nearer to me, on the sheer cliff-wall below me, grey-green bushes sprouted from fissures in the rock, coming out at an angle, up towards the sun, as though they defied all falling. As I looked down at all this, a brown

bird broke from a bush in the cliff-wall and fluttered jerkily below me. It seemed much like the owl which had tried to fly in at our cottage, or the one which sat in my dream on Rhene's shoulder. As I thought this, the bird turned again and mounted higher, up towards me, and suddenly began to cry out.

Perhaps it was the blood drumming in my head, or perhaps the wind that cut across the bird's calling, but it seemed to speak words I knew. 'Cast yourself down. Be washed of all sin,' it said. 'All things are given to him who leaps towards them, Oedipus. Leap now, and claim your heritage!'

And truly, as I listened, there was within me a strong pulling, an urging to go forward over the crumbling edge. The sweat burst from my forehead as I struggled with the temptation to leap. But at last I broke from the spell, and flung myself backwards onto the safe dry turf and springy heath. My heart almost came out of my mouth as I gasped for breath; but I still held the bunch of fresh green grass in my right hand.

I looked a little way up the slope. Old Metope was standing quite motionless, watching me with her amber eyes from which the water drained down her bone-like face. The strong smell of her brown fleece came to me on the wind, and I knew then that what Oresthea had said was true; Metope was almost at her end. And I knew also that I could never face such a terrible fall as lay before me now, in waking or in dream.

Pulling together my courage, I rose to my knees and called softly, 'Metope! Come, Metope! Here is grass, Metope! Come on, old girl! Come on then!'

She gazed at me quite still. I could see the light glaze on her old eyes, like the beeswax polish that men rub onto the ash-shafts of javelins to make them slide through the hand more swiftly. Or when they put their weapons away for the winter and wish to preserve the wood from worm.

I smiled at this thought, and said to the ewe, 'It is a little late to think of keeping the worm from you, Metope. Come now, and do us both a good turn, lass.'

Then she broke from her dream and lumbered towards me. On my knees, I moved nearer the cliff-edge where the rock was tottering in layers, and held the bunch of grass above the lip.

Metope was truly named, Headlong, for she was onto the toppling rock, with the grass already in her dry old mouth, before she knew what was happening to her. I saw the upright layers poise outwards, then give way,

and for a moment my heart thumped with agony for it seemed that the ewe might swing round and back to safety. But the brown fleece was too heavy for quick movement, and she went over, taken by its weight, out into the empty air, with the grass in her mouth still. I leaned over to watch, and as she whirled round heavily, forty paces below me, her amber eyes fixed for a moment on mine and she gave a sad small bleat, which the rush of wind carried away immediately as she went on down. The green grass fell from her mouth and, being lighter, followed down after her, but always going slower and slower, while she went faster and faster, until, just before she struck the line of jagged rocks that fringed the pathway far below, I could not bear to watch any longer, and drew back onto the safe heathland, my mouth parched and all my limbs shaking with the fever of what I had done. It was sunset before I was strong enough to rise to my feet, and, leaning hard on my crook, to make my way down towards our house once more.

6

IT had been too easy. The gods do not wish us to find life too easy, and always exercise themselves to drag the balance down if we look to have made too good a bargain. This is how they keep the *moira*, the shape, in life.

As I entered our cottage, the air struck me, thick with anger and guilt. As thick as smoke from the hearth-fire.

My father was already there, sitting on his stool at the rude table, glaring and furious. He had broken several clay cups, which lay about the board and on the rush-strewn floor. In the far corner, Oresthea stood, her robe drawn up to her eyes, silent and shivering, as though she had already been visited by his wrath.

His pale eyes glaring, the spittle running down either side of his mouth, my father gave me no time to sit, but shouted straightway, 'Do you want to kill me? Yes, you want to kill me. Indeed, now I know that you will kill me. It is plain in your face and in your hands. I think you have already killed me!'

I stopped, aghast at this attack, like an unsuspecting man who turns a corner and is suddenly drenched with icy water.

'What do you mean, father?' I asked, but knowing.

'What do I mean!' he echoed. 'I mean that I was on the lower road, coming through the pines from the village, when I saw you fling old Metope to her death on the rocks. There was no more of her than the beetles could feast on when she came to earth. Is that the way? A son who destroys his father's stock is already three paces forward to destroying the father himself. That is in your mind, Oedipus, it is clear. Your mind is as twisted as your feet. You are no true son of mine.'

As he went on like this, he rose higher and higher from the stool, and his hands reached out blindly to find a knife. But there was no knife, and he began to fling cups and jars at me, wildly, like an Egyptian ape. Some of them struck the wall beside me; others reached my head or body and stung me, as I stood entranced at his fury.

Suddenly Oresthea moved from her dim corner, and sweeping her arms wide to free them of her black robe, wrapped them round the old man, pinning his own thin arms to his bent body. He kicked and frothed at the mouth, flinging his head backwards again and again so as to use it as a club on her face. But she was too agile for this, and holding her own head to one side, called out over his shoulder, 'Go, Oedipus, go! Leave this place now. It is no longer your home. If you do not go, he will die of anger. His old heart will burst with grief, and then his blood will be upon your head for father-killing.'

I did not question this; her words came so surely and hit the target so squarely in the middle. I turned, and with nothing but the staff in my hand, fled from the house, down the hillside path, stumbling in the darkness.

As I went, I still heard my father's high reedy yelling, and then, after a little time, the woman laughing shrill and fiercely, like a Maenad when they tear the King.

My world had changed so utterly, so swiftly, that there was no thought in my heart but to go, and go, and go, from the house on the mountain. All my life seemed to have been leading up to this point, I cannot explain it, but now it came to me like a great truth—that this moment had been destined always. I felt no guilt, no remorse, no sadness, even—but only the great pulsing to be away, to be free of the incubus. I think that between them, the woman Oresthea, and the falling dream she had given me, had driven me over the cliff-edge of madness for a while, and that, like the old ewe, I was worthless now.

And then, as I ran into the poplar groves at the foot of the hill, where the white roads start and the common world begins, a great dark figure suddenly came up from the ferns that bordered the path and moved at me. God, at first I thought it was Pan, because of the shaggy shoulders and the great height and width. Then a hard-shafted javelin thudded across my breast and stayed me, and a man's voice said, 'Not so fast, fellow. You give me no time to feel in your pouch!'

It was a stern, but in a way laughing voice, the voice of a soldier. Trembling with relief that I had not met the goat-god, I said, 'You will have to search elsewhere for pickings, man. I have only this staff I lean on, and this ragged wool that covers my back, and that not too well.'

He grunted, but ran his great hands over me all the same. Then, thoughtlessly, he took me by the shoulder and shook me, without malice, but

for something further to do. In his great dry hand I was like a straw doll. I dared to say, ‘Steady, sir, I am lame and you will have me down.’

Then he let me go and stood away. ‘There will be no pickings from the mountain,’ he said, without feeling. ‘The shepherds carry nothing with them but a skin of wine and a goat-cheese these days. It is different in Corinth; there the cattle-barons go dressed in enough gold to buy a farm of one’s own.’

I found myself smiling and said, ‘Then why do you not go to Corinth?’

In the darkness he answered, ‘And why don’t you keep your advice to yourself? Do you want me to knock your teeth out, lad?’

Then I heard him fling his javelin into the ferns, as though it was no longer needed, and say, ‘What are you doing, out at night?’

I told him I was running away, and that my father was old and mad. He said that all old men were mad, and especially the Kings. Peasants could claim no great credit for madness these days.

Then, turning his broad back on me, he said without interest, ‘I will light a fire and make the best of this night’s lodging. Stay if you wish, and share what I have. Perhaps, by the dawn-time, you will change your mind and go back up the hill to your father. There are worse things than an old fellow’s madness to put up with in the world these days.’

A strong comfort came from this man, as we sat in the firelight, eating his dry barley-bread and sharing his skin of tart red wine. His great hairy legs were thrust out before him, and he wore sandals as worn and tattered as my own. About his lower body, above the short, pleated soldier’s kilt, he wore nothing but a thick band of studded horse-hide, meant to keep spear-thrusts from his belly. His furry chest and arms were covered with a tracery of blue tattoo-marks, mostly of circles and waving lines like snakes. In the middle of his wide forehead, above the bushy beard and eyebrows, there was an eye tattooed in blue and red. His brown hair was cropped so short that, even in the firelight of small olive twigs, I could see the dark sunburned skin under it.

Beside him, on the rough grass, lay his javelin and a round leather helmet, like a cooking-pot, made stronger by short bronze strips.

There were no rings on his thick fingers, or bracelets on his thick arms. He was only a man, man undecorated save by his maleness. A strong smell came from him, of sweat and leather, and something else which I could not place. I think it was bravery. He was the finest man I had ever seen; he was

like a great stallion that knows no master, but walks through the plains, under the thunder-stone and the jagged lightning, unafraid, as though his own thick hide could stand against them. Yet, beneath all this force, he was gentle in his voice and movements; more gentle than women are, for all their reputation of softness and compassion.

Munching a piece of hard cheese, I smiled at him and said, my mouth full, 'Are you a hero, sir?'

He turned his blue eyes on me and said, 'For the love of Zeus and Hera, do not call me "sir". I am not a lord or a cattle-chief, I am Halesus the Wanderer, the man who sells his javelin to any one, black or white, who can find him in bed and board for a comfortable war. I am the simplest thing the gods ever made, a soldier.'

I said, 'Then you have answered my question, soldier. You are a hero—or what I call a hero.'

Halesus bit off a piece of hard crust and chewed it in broad teeth, saying, 'A hero! What is that? You shepherd folk who have never held a sword in your hands and have only seen sheep's blood flow, you do not know what you are saying. There is no thing called a hero. There is only a man who gets his bread by selling his skill with the sword. It is like one who gets it by playing the lyre, or inventing verses, or weaving cloth. It is a trade, lad, and there is no more to it than that. All else is what the drunken poets sing, to please the lords who provide the wine that makes them drunk.'

I said, 'Is there no glory, then, no standing high beside the gods?'

He began to tear up fern fronds and pile them under a tree on the grass. Over his broad shoulder he said, 'I cannot understand half of what you say, lad. No one stands beside the gods; that is not in the power of man. The gods are now here, everywhere, up high, down low. You cannot even see them to stand beside them. The gods are prayers and songs, they are not anywhere, they are not men. And as for this glory . . . Zeus, but when you put the spear-point into a man and you see yourself in his eyes before they close, there is no glory. Only the thought that next time you may be the one lying in the dust and spewing. And if you ever stood on a plain and heard the chariots coming against you, with the horses thumping the ground and the great wheels whirling, and all you have in your hand to stop them is a pointed stick—oh, then there is no glory, lad. Only sweat running out of you like a mountain stream. Zeus, but I have seen bigger men than me stand with their mouths gaping and the piss spurting from under their kilts when the chariots came. Don't talk to me of glory. Make yourself a bed and go to sleep. Here,

you are like a left-handed cripple—let me make a bed for you. It will save time.'

Halesus, Wanderer, paid soldier. I loved him from the moment I saw him. As he lay, his broad back towards me, fast asleep as soon as his shorn head touched the bracken-bed, I thought: Here is a man! Oh, by the gods, this is what I would like to be! Oh, gods, let me become this! To be so easy in the mind, to sleep so swiftly, not to be tormented by dreams! Zeus, but that is a glory in itself. This man has glory and does not know it!

With him I felt safe for the first time since I was a little lad and had walked with my mother Rhene, hand in hand, outside our house. I felt that the gods had led me to him, though crookedly, in bringing Oresthea to our house, in letting her make me murder the old ewe Metope. It all worked towards a purpose—that I should meet Halesus and learn what a man really was.

I smiled to myself under the open sky, watching the poplar boughs waving in the breezes, and then I was asleep, undreaming, in the presence of the man's great strength and reasonableness.

We were together for two changes of the moon, walking down through the Isthmus towards Corinth. No man offended us, all came out of their cottages to ask if we were hungry or thirsty. It was a simple life, that of a wandering soldier. Who would be a lord, a king even, if he could walk under the sky through the world and have all given him, and no evil thoughts to keep him from sleep?

Only once did we have a mishap; it was in a gully overhung with cypress trees, north of Commyon in Megaris, where the land was infested with robbers. Yes, in spite of what Theseus of Athens boasted, that he had cleared all that place and had torn the bandits apart on bent saplings, there were always robbers there. It would have taken more than the Athenian braggart to clear the soil of robbers. They grew as fast as acanthus; they were about all that did grow in that place, apart from a few brown laurels and dusty cypresses!

Four of them leapt down from the rocks in front of us one bright afternoon, men dressed in old hides, and carrying flint axes. Halesus stopped and stroked his beard gently, looking at them. He whispered to me, 'Step behind me, Oedipus, I don't want anything in my way when I start.' Then he jutted out his stubbly beard at their leader and said, 'Very well, if you ask for death, who am I to deny it? Come on, let us have it over. My boy and I have a long way to go.'

The leader came forward, stiff-legged like a fierce dog and holding his axe tightly, with white-knuckled fingers. His black eyes were shifting like a snake's head as he came, searching for advantage. But Halesus stood as still as a statue, and even flicked some flies from about his head as the man came on.

Then, just when the robber jumped in with a sudden fierce lunge, Halesus was not there, but by the man's side. He swept his left foot round, knocking the fellow's legs from under him, and then pushed the short javelin slowly into the man's black beard, under his chin. The robber lay so still and staring, with the beads of sweat breaking out of his dark forehead, that I could have laughed; he was so changed from what he had been.

His fellows stopped still, their axes now hanging down, their mouths open, as though they were about to ask permission to leave.

Halesus suddenly kicked the fallen chief in the groin and then withdrew the javelin and stood away from him. I saw the man in the dust reach up into his beard to see how bad his wound was; his fingers came away stained red, but there was no great hurt done.

Halesus then said, 'The day is too hot for boy's play. My lad and I are weary; and I am sure you must be also. While you good fellows sit down in the shade, under the rock, your chief will fetch us bread and wine and we will put from our minds all thoughts of loot and blood-letting—which are, after all, things for small men to consider, and not for the likes of us.'

So the robbers sat down as Halesus sternly invited them, and their chief went somewhere and came back soon with wine-skins and round loaves under his arm. He also brought cheeses and apples, and we sat and ate and passed the wine, as though we had known them a year.

The black-bearded chief sat near us and said, 'If I could only afford a bronze javelin like that, instead of a flint axe, I should be better off.'

Halesus glanced at his javelin negligently, where it lay close to his hand, and said, 'I don't know. Trade is bad everywhere these days, chief. The cattle-kings eat up the land and take all the profit. You are as well up here in the rocks as you would be anywhere. As long as you have good wine like this, and crisp bread like this, what are you grumbling about? As you can see, my boy and I have no such luxuries.'

The men laughed at this, and so did the chief. He said, 'Aye, soldier, but you have a fortune in your arms and legs; you do not need riches. They come to you as you pass along.'

Halesus said, ‘I spent five years of my life working from dawn till sunset, to learn my trade. At the end of it, I possessed only what I stood up in. I even had to kill three good fellows to get this javelin. Do you think that was easy?’

The robbers stared at him silently, saying nothing. Halesus said, smiling, ‘Nay, fellows, stick to your rocks, and pray that the next traveller that comes down the gully is some rich Phoenician with a thin beard like a goat, and a fat belly quivering with fright.’

The chief said grinning, ‘It would not be the beard or the belly we wanted, but what was in his donkey’s panniers, soldier.’

Halesus said, in a pretended gravity, ‘Well, when you find this trader, do not take all from him. He may overtake me on the road, and I might want to dip my own hand into his panniers.’

So, all laughing now, we took our leave of the robbers. They stood on their rocks and waved until we were out of their sight.

And when we were alone again, Halesus said, ‘That turned out well, Oedipus. I feel better after that good dinner.’

I said, ‘Zeus, Halesus, but you were splendid. That is the glory I meant, when I spoke to you.’

He swept big his hand out and scooped a green lizard off a rock before the creature could flicker away. Then, breathing on it, he let it go running into the fern. He wiped his brow and said, ‘That was not glory. I felt sure they would knock us both on the head with those terrible axes. But you never have to let them know you are afraid. You have to see what is the best you can do; and I saw that their chief was a bit unsteady on his right leg. He had a bandage round it, at the ankle. He must have sprained it, leaping down from his rocks onto fat Phoenicians! It was that bandage which gave me the answer; so I kicked his legs from under him, no more. This javelin did the rest. I won’t gainsay, it needs practice to know how far you should push it in, at a tender place like the throat, but as I said, I suffered a long training at such things. I have always found you can frighten these fellows more if you stick your point in where they cannot see it. Then they go only by the feeling of it, and think they are murdered before you have even drawn blood. Oh, they are a good simple lot of men, these Megarians. It is a shame the cattle-kings don’t come up here and recruit them. They would fight for no pay at all, and they are easy to handle. If ever I become a captain, and have my own band of wandering soldiers, I shall come up here and comb the rocks

for my axe-men. They do what they are told, and have no hero-dreams that get in the way of obedience.'

I could have stayed with Halesus for ever, his words were so real and true. But when we got within a day's walk of Corinth, his manner changed towards me, and he became a little more distant.

On the high road, sheltered by poplars, and ringed about with a sort of heather, was a white cottage with a red tiled roof. Vines grew before the house, and white cows grazed on the green slopes behind it. Seven grey doves perched on the roof-ridge, purring in the sun. I said, 'This looks a pleasant place. One could stay here and live like a king, if only there was a woman to cook and to gather olive-wood for the fires.'

Halesus gave me a long look, then set his fingers between his lips and whistled three times. The hide before the door swung aside, and a young woman came running between the vines towards us. She wore only a grey skirt of unbleached linen, and her breasts were as golden as honey, and as freckled as a thrush's breast. Her long brown hair was bunched up on the top of her head with red ribbons. She laughed as she came running, and flung herself into the open arms of Halesus.

When they had finished rubbing their faces together, he said to me, over her shoulder, 'This is my sister. She is always glad to see me home again.'

But I knew that she was not his sister. I could tell that from the way she looked at him and held him close, and the way his right hand went up and down her body as he held her like a doll in his arms.

So I lost Halesus, and all so suddenly. True, the laughing two gave me food and drink, and a pair of sandals for my bruised feet, but though they smiled at me often and stroked my head, I knew they were only waiting for me to go, before they got about whatever it was that held them together.

While the woman went into the house, to prepare, as she said, Halesus stood out on the road with me, pointing with his short javelin, and saying, 'Keep on and on, over those blue hills, and then down into the plain. And there you will find Corinth. The King and Queen there are friendly folk, if you like their sort. As for me, I do not go there, because there is no place for my trade. They have their own warriors. Besides, I do not care for their sort of cattle. You will see what I mean if you go there. For me, there is a limit to what a man can stand.'

He waved to me briefly and went towards the house, never looking at me again. He was like a god walking between the vines—but not Dionysus!

This god would have torn ten Maenads apart before ever they laid hands on him.

Truly, when I was out of sight of that pleasant cottage I wept and wept, to lose such a friend. Oh, Zeus, I prayed, let me meet him again! Let me grow to be like this paid warrior, this wandering soldier, for there can be no better sort of life under the sun.

And so I went on, slowly, weeping and laughing in turns, to think of losing him but also of the pleasant time we had been together as friends. Not once, as I climbed the blue hills, did I think of my angry old father and of evil Oresthea; not once, even, did I remember Rhene my mother, or the old ewe I had tempted to her death. And now, my heart was free of Icarus and his frightful falling from the sky. It was as though I was cleansed of so much, by running away from the mountain.

And then I had other things to think of, for suddenly, as I topped a rise in the land, I saw the place to which my footsteps had led me by chance. The place where another thread would be woven into the pattern of my small life.

7

As I looked down across the great compound, I thought I had never in my life seen such beautiful creatures as the folk of Corinth. They were all alike, it seemed to me, both men and women; and it was hard to tell one from another, while their backs were toward me.

Up in my hills beyond Cythaeron, the folk had been small and bent, and often monkey-faced, with dark hair and short thick limbs, worn by toil and the fight with rams and mountain slopes; strong and agile folk enough, but not beautiful. And now I was seeing beauty in men for the first time.

They were tall and long-legged. They walked upright, never looking on the ground, but holding their fine narrow heads up proudly towards the sun, and laughing a great deal, and waving their long slim arms, and gesturing with their thin-fingered hands as they chattered and jested. What amazed me most was their colour; I knew they were of the south, distantly, and prayed to the Mother, but their skins were a deep, deep brown, almost black. I would have thought they were Libyans but for their hair, which was a sombre colour of deep red, or bronze. Later I learned that these folk spent little time in their houses, and much out in the sun and the wind, with their cattle, which gave them their colour; and as for their hair, they wore it long and in a hundred small plaits, which they covered with a paste of fat, and red clay, from their hills. These plaits were drawn back behind the head and either bound round with tight rings of gold or bronze, or slipped down inside a tube of ram's horn, so that it hung down between their broad shoulders and out of the way when they were working or fighting.

So every man's hair, drawn into this long tail or club, gave Corinthians their name—'Men of the Clubs'.

As I looked over the rock and watched them, my heart rose like a lark to see such folk, laughing and splendid, the men often going two by two with their arms about one another, or holding hands as our small children do in the hills, and jesting, swinging out the other hand to gesture, or to point at what took their fancy. I thought: How much like dear brothers they are! Almost like lovers. Their lives must be very carefree and complete.

The women were the same, though they tended to run about more than the men, who walked with long paces, taking their time. Sometimes, two girl-companions would run up behind two young men and pull at their hair-clubs, or slap them between the shoulders, or snatch at the thin, fringed hide aprons they wore, trying to steal them and to leave the men uncovered. And this was done with the greatest good humour, the girls squealing with laughter if they were caught and their own short aprons were flicked up, or clapping their hands and pointing if they succeeded in stealing the men's coverings, and leaving all bare.

The whole plain of the dusty compound was shifting constantly with this merry movement, and I thought: These Corinthians must be a great and fearless folk to laugh and play so much beneath the sun. Who would dare be their enemies?

Yet they must have had enemies, for suddenly I saw their soldiers in one part of the compound; rank upon rank of these tall brown men, dressed no differently from the others, but holding long spears. I had never seen spears so long, they were over twice the length of the men, and with blades as long as swords, two-edged and hardly varying in width from shank to tip. These waiting warriors stood with their spears upright on the ground and one leg curled backwards round them, resting on them, like storks or herons or cranes. Some of them, the captains, I thought, wore bands of white fox-fur round their foreheads; others had long slanting tattoo-scars across their cheeks. All wore bronze bracelets from wrist to shoulder, which made their arms glisten as the sunlight caught them, so that there was a never-ending movement of light among this regiment.

I leaned my chest against the hot grey rock, and sighed and sighed, and almost burst into tears to see such lovely men, such warriors. Oh, Zeus, I thought: to be one of them! To have such a long spear and lean on it in the sun like that! To have legs and feet like that!

Then the quiet voice came into my head again, the voice I had heard on the hill-face before old Metope went over into the gorge, and said, 'Why don't you go down to them, Oedipus? They are only men, and you are of the race of men. Why not ask if you can join them?'

'I will,' I said. 'Oh, I will!' And then I left my rock and ran through a cloud of dust into the basin, trying to keep my course straight and steady; trying not to seem inferior by my lame stumbling, and growing prouder and prouder with every step that did not fling me down. Indeed, I think I had never run so well as I did that bright morning. I felt that I was becoming a

warrior with every pace, and my heart rose and rose in me until it almost burst.

What was in my mind, I do not know now. Perhaps I meant to fall at the feet of the nearest great captain, and beg him to let me join his company; or perhaps I was running blind into a dream, the outcome of which I had not paused to think of.

All I recall is that, as I left the slope and set foot upon the flat ground of the compound, a high shout went up on all sides of me, a shout less of alarm than of derision; and then the blue air was suddenly filled with the buzzing of javelins.

I saw them swinging above the dust cloud, their long blades spinning like tops in the air, throwing off a golden light as they spun, evil stars twinkling in broad day and close to the earth. And I was bitterly afraid, for I knew that the long spears carried death towards me faster than any deer could run; I who could only hobble, like a broken-winded horse.

So I stopped in the dust, my hands at my sides, looking towards the far hills, trying to seem as though death was no enemy of mine, as though we took each other's hand ten times a day in comradeship. Then, as the sweat of terror ran down my back, the flying spears bent towards the earth like striking hawks, and with a harsh *chuck!* plunged into the earth before me, falling criss-crossed in a long tunnel, the first pair missing my bunched feet by less than a finger's length. At first, I smiled with relief that these weapons had not killed me. Then, as I understood that they had never been meant to kill me, but to set up an obstacle for my lameness, my smile turned to a bitter twitching of the mouth. I thought: So they would not spoil their fine spear-blades by letting them pierce this worthless hide, let blood flow from this carrion-flesh! They regard me as nothing, as others have always regarded me. Where shall such as I find friends, if not among those my heart cries out to? In another moment, I should have broken down and wept, and have spoiled all my fine gesture of running down the hill towards these gods. But my tears were halted by a hoarse cry that came from the tallest of the captains, who stood nearest to me, at the head of his javelin-men.

'Onto your knees, boy,' he shouted. 'No man may approach the King but on his knees.'

So, swallowing my grief, I bowed down and crawled through the dust, along the tunnel that the crossed javelins had formed, while all about me the plain echoed with laughter and merry shouting.

I kept my shamed head down, and did not look up again until I had passed between the javelins; and when I looked up, I knelt in the long shadow of a hide wind-break, where a young man and a woman sat together on a stool of black wood and leather-thongs, looking down at me with curious light eyes, and smiles that scarcely moved their pretty lips.

They were so alike, these two, that they seemed like twins, like a brother and a sister come from the womb within the one birth-pang.

The man wore a necklet of red-dyed ox-tails about his neck and below each knee; the woman wore neck-rings and anklets of dull red Libyan gold. Both had the eye-sign of Ngame scarred at the middle of their forehead, and marked in with blue dye.

The woman spoke first, showing her even white teeth, and holding up her brown face so that I should see the round spots of red ochre which her cheeks were painted with.

She said, ‘It is a warm day for such as you to be running in. We two of Corinth, Polybus and Periboea, Bull-King and Cow-Queen, greet you, lame stranger; but we do not require our visitors to come into our presence at such a speed.’

As she spoke, so gently, so pleasantly, so warmly, I saw the sweat-beads gather under her breasts, and her delicate brown hand go up to wipe them away. It was the sort of movement that I would not have thought a Queen would have dared to make in public. Yet, in a strange manner, it was an action which endeared her to me. Suddenly, I knew that I had come home; that I wanted this woman to be my elder sister and this man my brother; that I wanted nothing more than to shed all my blood for them, to let it run out of me like strong wine from a broken cask. And, in that moment, I was sure that it would be strong wine, no less than the strongest.

I think the two great ones read all this in my face and eyes and trembling hands, for the King, Polybus, said in a low voice to me, ‘Rise, boy, and come into the shade. Sit near us at our feet, and tell us what has brought you so far, to Corinth.’

I was amazed at the lovely clear Greek this King spoke; it was like fresh water coming down from a mountain stream, so bright and clear that one might see all the water-flowers, all the darting fishes in it, though they lay right at the bottom, on the pebbled bed. I had always been told that we of the hills spoke the best Greek, because it was the most ancient and had been told to the first Minos by Cronus himself, at the beginning of time.

But this King's words were as beautiful in my ears as polished stones, as agate and garnets and even as that precious stone which Poseidon gives his favoured swimmers in the shells of sea-creatures. I could have listened to him, and have watched his sister-Queen's fine hands, all day, and it would only have seemed a moment in time. She said, 'Come, boy, do as the King says. Move into the shade and tell us of the world outside.'

By now the many folk upon the compound-plain had forgotten about me, and had turned back to their strolling and jesting and loving one another. So I spoke to the King and Queen, at first slowly, wishing my speech were as fine as theirs, and then all hurriedly, not choosing my words, but telling them all my tale, all that I knew of my life, from the first day I remembered seeing the sun, until the hour when I quarrelled with my shepherd-father and ran from our cottage.

And all the time I spoke, my voice babbling on like a brook in a deep gully, two young girls wafted broad fans of fern-leaves over our heads, to give breeze and to keep the flies away.

And at last, when I was breathless and wordless, the King leaned down towards me and placed his cool hand on my hot forehead and said, 'So, we all have dreams, it seems, I to be a god, and you to be a warrior. Yet how unlikely it is that either dream should come to pass! This is the lesson we men must be at pains always to learn, young friend, that what we wish for may not be that which is intended for us at our birth; that what we hope for is often a gaily-painted snake that may look well, but would sting us to death if our hand ever closed on it.'

Queen Periboea nodded and smiled, as though her husband's thoughts and words were hers, too, as though, almost, she had been speaking to me, and not the King.

I smiled back at them and said, 'You are such great ones, and I am a ragged fellow from the hills. Why do you even lower yourselves to listen to me, much less to spend your words on me?'

It was Periboea who answered this time. She said quietly, and simply, as though she was speaking to a young child, 'We, the Princes of Corinth, are a gentle people. Oh yes, we are very strong, as you can see, but we are kind with our strength. This is our first law, that strength without forbearance is but brutality. As you see, we train for war, but that is not to say we thrust war on others. Our second law is this, that no man must begin a quarrel, but that once a quarrel has been begun no man of Corinth must come away from it defeated.'

I said, ‘And are they always victorious, Great Queen?’

She smiled and lowered her eyelids slightly. ‘Only the gods are that,’ she said. ‘But at least our warriors who fall, do so with no feeling of defeat in their hearts, for they stand like lions until the end and go down smiling.’

Then the King said, ‘You ask many questions for a young boy, Oedipus. It is not easy, even for Kings and Queens, to answer questions on such a hot day. Come with us now, to where we were going, and you will see how the folk of Corinth live. Then you will not need to ask any more questions.’

It was all like a dream to me, the way the two rose from their stool and took me by the hand between them, leading me among the folk over the great sun-scorched plain. I could not believe my good fortune, I a crippled shepherd, in the close presence of such gods! A hundred times, as we strolled over the dust of the compound, I thought: In a moment I shall wake, and find my mother lying stark and blue upon the hide-bed in our cottage; or my father, beating his bloody fists against the wall, and shouting out that I am no son of his. Or, perhaps, old Metope staring at me in reproach as she went over the cliff-edge, as though she knew who pushed her and why, as though she knew what she would look like when her thin body struck the jagged rocks below . . .

But I did not wake, and we went on among the tall folk of Corinth, through the sunlight, until we came to a broad basin in the ground, penned in by oaken stakes the height of a man. And here there was much shouting and bellowing and the sound of hooves and of feet. Dust rose above the stockade, into the blue air, and I was curious to know what lay beyond, and what the sounds all signified.

The Queen touched my cheek with her long fingers and said, ‘This is where our people temper their courage, until it becomes as hard and unbreakable as the sharp bronze, Oedipus. This is the bull-pen of Corinth, sacred to the great beast from whom we take our sign.’

As we came near, horns began to blow, as though in warning, and suddenly before us two gates swung open to let us in.

I had heard of the bull-dancers of the Labyrinth, the boys and girls whose lives were dedicated to entertaining the old King of Crete with their antics. But this, of Corinth, was not the same thing. The Bulls of Minos were an ancient outworn strain, carrying all fat and little muscle, nothing more than piebald vaulting-horses too slow to catch a cripple like me, and too stupid to do anything with him if they did by some chance overtake him.

Much has been sung by the poets about those bulls of Crete; but I can tell you, they were such that a sudden turn or twist would bring them to their knees, or crick their spines and leave them helpless. You have seen those great ox-like beasts on the pitchers and vases from Crete, so you will know that what I say is true. They were too short in the leg, too long in the back to be agile; and those great horns of theirs! I laugh now to think of them—so long that a man could jump between them and be out of danger, levering himself up onto the big stupid head. And set too close together, so that those silly mottled beasts could not hook like swordsmen, and then sweep in to the final thrust. . .

But the bulls of Corinth were as black as Night, lithe in the hinderparts but deep as a chariot in front. Their high-muscled necks rose above their broad chests, and set at the end of them, small vicious heads, with swift sharp eyes that missed nothing, and horns, horns, oh, what horns! They swung out and round and then forward, like great hooks of bone, at their base as thick across as a man's arm; at their points, as cruel as a sword.

In the great bull-pen, I saw perhaps a dozen of these beasts, their black hides shining like the silk of Babylon with sweat, the muscles and sinews that lay beneath that hide all working with every small movement, their tufted tails swishing like whips, and their small cleft hooves causing the grey dust to spurt out on every side, whenever these killers turned to sniff the air.

King Polybus watched me and smiled. 'You have not seen such before?' he asked.

I shook my head. 'Such could only be seen in terrible dreams, King,' I answered. 'If they came up the hills to where I have lived, the folk there would run screaming and fling themselves over the cliff-side, thinking that Poseidon had come for his vengeance.'

The Queen laughed at me and then leaned over and gently brushed the hair from my damp forehead, as though I was her younger brother, or her growing son, if she had been old enough to have a son of my age.

Yet as she did this, there was a shouting and a stirring among the bulls that caused her to forget me and turn away. A line of men and women had been sitting opposite from us, on the ledge of the stockade, calling down to the bulls and from time to time prodding at them when they came close with the butts of their long javelins. Now, without taking leave of his companions, one of the men, a tall warrior whose ochred hair was even longer than that of the others, jumped down among the beasts and began to

run between them, laughing and calling them by familiar nicknames: ‘Hey, bull! Hey, Big-nose! See who has come among you! Hey, Thin-arse, haven’t they fed you lately?’

To see the black bulls swing round, as though they understood him, and drive in towards him was the most fearful sight I had ever witnessed. Yet, somehow, with the dust now rising above his bronze-coloured head, and the tall spear still held upright, the man came between them, turning and twisting as the horns slashed and clashed together. The noise of the horns against one another was sickening. Then he was clear, and began to race towards where we sat on the stockade. He was perhaps half-way to safety when a young girl on the far fence called to him, ‘Hey, hey, brother, you did not pat Father Zeus. He is hurt at your neglect.’

The tall warrior stopped, sending up dust much like a bull himself, then laughed with white teeth up at the sun and turned back. Beside me, Polybus whispered, ‘That was a foolish taunt. The captain Jaccus is too valuable to be teased into going back.’

The King had hardly spoken when I saw the great bull they had called Father Zeus put down his head and swing in to meet the tall captain. I heard the man’s spear-butt rattle sharply on the beast’s horns, but one might as well have tried to stay a thunder-storm by pattering with a horn spoon on a clay pot. I saw the tall captain come up fast out of the dust on the horn, twirl in the air, still on the horn, his arms and legs now flailing, and then disappear among the clustered hooves and the thrusting heads that circled him, beating at each other like great drums, and all now shrouded with grey dust.

I was so horrified at this, all my limbs shuddered, and I nearly fell down into the bull-pen, my shocked fingers almost useless to keep me up there in safety. Then my attention was suddenly taken by what was happening beside me; for the King and Queen leaned towards one another, and with a single movement, as though they had practised it long, reached out and touched each other in a certain part of the body, gently and even nobly, as other folk might kiss. I had never seen this done before, and now it made the blood race in my veins to watch it. Yet, deeply I knew that this was but a farewell gesture among the cattle-folk who lived by the fertility of what these two now touched.

Then the Queen said, ‘Go well, with wings on your ankles, love.’ And before she had finished, the King was down and running across the basin, shouting and clapping his long hands together loudly, zigzagging like a

mother-bird trying to entice the hunter away from her fledglings. Then, as the great beasts turned to snort at him, he ran round them, digging at their rumps, twisting their tails, driving them to distraction like a gadfly, everywhere at once.

And suddenly these killers left the man upon the ground and turned to their new enemy. But the King was never where they thought to gore him, and while he drew them further and further away from the still body of Jaccus, other men jumped down from the stockade and dragged their captain out of further danger. Then the King gave a great leap and was up beside them all on the far stockade, wiping his wet brow with the back of his long hand and frowning at what had so needlessly happened.

I turned to say something to the Queen about her husband's bravery, but she was not listening to me. Her wide grey eyes were fixed on the black beasts, and her mouth was a little open, as though she was speaking silent words of mockery at them. Her bare breasts rose and fell quickly in the sunlight, a thin layer of dust upon the damp brown flesh of them.

Then she too was down and running, though more delicately than her husband the King. I heard the folk at the other side call out their encouragement, especially the many women, who had gathered now, during this excitement. I saw three men rise suddenly, balancing with care on the stockade, and poise their long javelins as though aiming towards the most dangerous of the bulls. But the King stayed still, his arms outstretched as though he indicated that Periboea should leap into them.

She did leap once, twice, three times, as the horns swung at her thighs. Then, even while she was laughing and tossing her ochred hair about her, her feet slipped in the dust and she was down. I saw her more clearly than I have ever seen anything; so clearly that I might have been standing a pace away from her. All else in the world was blotted from my sight; I saw only her. She lay, her breasts now full in the dust, her slender arms hooked about her head, the hands cupped over her ears and the sides of her face. She was still laughing, though the turmoil of hooves was scattering dirt into her face. I saw one hoof rest for a second in the small of her back, and then the great black head of Father Zeus swing down, and his right horn just miss her flank. This horn caught in the thong of her hide apron and tore the aegis away from her, swinging it upwards, tattered and bloody, into the air.

'Oh, Mother Dia!' I was saying. 'Oh, protect Night's Daughter! Oh, Father Poseidon, do not let them destroy her!'

And suddenly, as though the god had spoken back to me, I knew that this was my opportunity to make myself great in Corinth, and at the same time save this lovely woman. The gods had put this chance into my hands, I thought. In one swift run, I may show my love for her and wipe out all the humiliations of my past.

I was easing myself forward to leap, when a great hand took the hair of my head and held me fast. Twisting, I saw that a dark-faced warrior was behind me, his eyes white and wide, he was clenching his fingers into my hair, and saying, 'This is not for you, Outlander. This is for Kings and Queens. Not for a lame boy.'

I struck at him, but he only smiled and held me tighter. Then, through my sudden tears, I saw the King swooping down among the black bulls once more, and coming up like a swimmer with a fish in his hands. I saw him leap high over a bull's down-thrust neck, then plunge back through the dust to where arms reached down from the stockade to drag them both up.

To the man who held me I said, 'I must go to them. Let me go to them. They are my friends. Look, the Queen is bleeding.'

The warrior put his great arm about me and said, 'She has come to no harm, lad. We all carry such scars, both men and women, who live among the black bulls. He will know what to do for her, without your help. Come with me to the tent, and we will drink a cup of wine to celebrate this morning.'

As I turned from the bull-pen, I saw the King still holding his Queen in his arms, like a pretty doll, and nuzzling her breasts as he carried her away. She was smiling up at him, and twisting his bronze hair in her fingers, as young lovers do.

8

SO I had come to Corinth; to that open, hot, dusty place, where the sun and the birds of prey cleared all carrion away, and where men and women lived most of their lives under the blue sky or the stars.

Corinth then was not as it has become, since the new folk came there and built their places. When I first knew it, you would not have called it a city, but a great cattle-ranch. The plain between the mountains was covered with pens and stockades, and in the centre of them all, on a slight rise in the ground, was Corinth. It was little more than a dozen mud-built huts and look-out towers, but all connected by hundreds of skin-tents, which led from one to the other, in a series of twisting tunnels and wind-breaks, supported on stout oaken poles, or ash posts. There were no streets, but only these tunnels, which led from tent to tent. A man would go in at one end, then he would not be seen until he came out, half a mile away, at the other side of the city. In other places I have seen, there are districts where Kings and barons live, then other places where the swordsmiths have their homes; and last, those filthy hutments where the conquered, the slaves, gnaw at bones and breed their fly-bitten children.

But in Corinth, all men were equal; all were barons and their families. So all lived together, in the great labyrinth of hide-tents, like one enormous family of tall, brown brothers and sisters.

In other places, also, such as Mycenae and Athens, a man could walk any day in the streets and point to five different families of folk who lived there—golden Achaeans, dark Cretans, brown thin-nosed Libyans, pale Phoenicians, and even yellow-faced and slit-eyed Sarmatians from beyond the Inland Sea where the gold lay hidden. But not in Corinth. Each man and woman there seemed to have come from the same womb. Even their features were so alike that for a time I could not remember who was who; they had that sharp, narrow look to their heads, with heavy handsome eyes and slightly curved noses which flared out into fierce nostrils. Their lips were well-formed but heavier than those of Cretans, and often looked as though they were about to speak, even when they were not. But of all their qualities, I admired most their slender arms and legs, and their slim bodies. These

attributes gave them speed and grace. Yet they were as strong as any people I have ever seen, despite their light build. I have been there when a young boy of the Corinthians has thrown his long javelin through a charging lion, so that the weapon passed out on the other side, and travelled on for another twenty paces. Like their own bulls, the men of Corinth were sleek, dark-skinned killers; they were not like the fat and muscle-bound bulls of Crete, not like the heavy-limbed steppe-folk who rode in wagons because they could not breed horses strong enough to support their great bellies and thighs.

When Jaccus the Captain died, after they had got him from under the horns, the city spent the rest of the day in mourning. No men or women left the skin-tents, and the cattle were unfed. No one spoke or even sang mourning songs for the dead man. All was silent, so silent that I thought I could hear the sheep bleating on Mount Cyllene, a day's march away.

In this strange place, I knew no one but the King and Queen, and the hard-faced warrior who had given me a cup of wine to drink. And they were nowhere to be seen now. The hot sun beat down on the deserted city of tents, and in the deep blue air the eagles circled. Out in the dusty plain, cattle lowed or bulls bellowed in fury. That was all.

Since no one came to lead me into the city, I stayed outside, lonely and lost, already feeling that what had begun in a warm blaze of friendship had suddenly fallen to dust and cold ashes. An hour before, I had felt courage and nobility growing in me, the seeds of greatness; yet now, as the sun declined, I was a boy again, a peasant, almost an outcast.

It was in this dream that I wandered away from the tented city down a narrow dry stream-bed which at last fell into a hidden valley, a closed green place, where the pine-boughs and laurels flung their arms across my path and seemed to forbid me to penetrate this secret place. The evening air was heavy with the whirring of small flies, and a dampness rose from the grass and mosses beneath my feet. Pigeons in the upper trees of the gully stopped their purring as I pushed through the bushes, and a laden silence fell upon the grove. Below me, I could hear water trickling, and I made my way down, as the moon came up, to where a narrow brook bubbled out of the rocks, and where I could bathe my hot feet in the cool waters.

As I sat there, I thought: Now which way, Oedipus? The folk of Corinth are beautiful and brave, but they live within themselves, and have no place for a wanderer of another blood. So, which way now, Oedipus?

As I was thinking this, a shaft of moonlight struck, straight and silver, from above my head and lit up a dim part of the little valley, showing me a tunnel that was formed by the stream-bed and the overhanging branches above it. It was as though Mother Dia had answered my questioning and had pointed with her silver finger the way that I should take away from Corinth. And so I dried my wet feet and stood up knee-deep among the rushes, and went along the dusky tunnel. And when I had found its entrance, the finger of moonlight withdrew, as though I had read the Mother's message right. So I felt at greater peace within myself, and pushed on under the branches and reeds, until I should receive her next command.

There was still heat in the ground from the sun that had beaten down on the land that day, and it drew out all the deep scents of earth, of lichens and thick leaves and of water. Above my head, crickets shrilled in a constant turning of the wheel, almost providing a roof of sound to that hidden place. I thought: Here is a place where something could lie in wait for a traveller by night. Something, that could be dangerous to him.

As I thought this, a dove rose fluttering from above me, brushing among the branches, and a grey feather floated down and lodged upon my damp lips. It roused such a terror in me that I spat and spat until I was rid of the sign.

For a second, I almost turned and rushed back the way I had come, up onto the parched plain of Corinth. My heart thumped inside my chest so fiercely that I leaned for a while on the green trunk of a cypress, trying to find my breath and my courage again.

And as I leaned, I seemed to hear the sound of water and doves, of crickets and the sighing of boughs in the evening wind, forming themselves into a voice which said: Fare forth, boy. Fare forth, and see, see, see!

Do not mistake me, I did not hear this in the way that I can hear a man speaking to me in the hot daylight, asking for orders, clear and sharp. I heard it rather as a faint buzzing in the head, somewhere behind the head, or above it, not near the ears. The words shaped themselves within me as the sound of water dripping onto a cottage roof from the trees above may shape themselves into an old song, every note and beat of the rhythm so right that one knows the god had meant it so.

And when I had convinced myself, in that dark valley, of the words I had heard, I began to wonder, with the green dusk wrapping me round and causing me to lose myself, if I had been wise ever to leave my old father's shepherd hut on the mountain-top; if such as I ought ever to dare the great

world beneath and go looking for a truth in life. I was, indeed, afraid, and my teeth chammered against each other as though some Phoenician puppet-master drew on the strings of my lower jaw. It was evening, and cool now, and I felt the flesh on my back creeping in the dusk; yet my hands were streaming with sweat and my brows were so flooded that the water ran into my eyes in torrents, blinding me.

And at that moment, that very moment, as I tried to sweep away the sweat from my eyes, a sudden high, sharp laugh sounded in my ears, a young woman's laugh, so close, that I clenched my hands and almost screamed with fear. Above me the crickets and the doves still built their roof of music over me, as though nothing had happened down below. And though the echoes of that clear-throated laugh still sounded in my head, I began to wonder whether I had truly heard it or not; whether my weary heart had created yet another sound inside me, to increase my ordeal of suffering.

Then the laugh came again, but now distantly and smothered, as though not for my ears only; as though it had a meaning and a life of its own, which it would still have even if I were a hundred miles away.

And now my thudding pulses drew me forward, telling me to find out what this was, what this meant for me, or for anyone; and, knowing how daring I was, praising my own boy's bravery in silence, I pushed on down the dark tunnel.

At last my feet sensed solid ground again and I knew that I was walking on rock which sloped upwards, away from the stream. I put out my hands on either sides and found that I was in the mouth of a cavern, for there were no leaves and branches to touch now. I went cautiously, making no sound, moving like a snail, slow and close to the earth. And at length, as I came round a bend of this rocky corridor, I saw a round clay fat-lamp burning on the floor of the cave, sending up a twisting whirl of black smoke, and casting forth an orange glow which caused the air above it to flicker as though a moth's wings beat there. Great shadows crouched and lurched above me on the walls and roof of the high limestone dome. I crouched too, wondering if a javelin would come to my heart from the inner dimness of the cavern. But nothing came, and so I stared in front of me, above the lamp, and saw that the light stood at the base of a great column of rock; but a rock of a different sort from the cavern about me. It was of black, streaked with grey and yellow veins, and its lower parts were shiny as though it had been rubbed by many beseeching hands in its lifetime. As my eyes became used to this orange half-light, I saw that the tall rock was shaped, by the gods or by men, so that it had something of the shape of the Mother, a high image,

reaching up and up into the darkness, the curves of its breasts jutting out well above my head. It was the Libyan goddess, Ngame, from beyond the Nile.

As I stood wondering at this secret shrine, I heard once more the laugh which had drawn me onward. It came from behind the mother-image, deeper in the cavern. Softly I leaned by the rock listening, holding my breath, and heard the rustling of bracken, and the restless movements of bodies. All that I heard, I already knew of, having been reared among the creatures, and being familiar with the getting of things. And, now that I was in the presence of folk who were doing what I had seen my father's creatures do, I felt no more excitement than I had known seeing a ram mount a ewe. I was curious, certainly, because in our house my mother and my father had been old folk since I could recall, and between them I had never seen what happens to a man and a woman in the heat of love. Nor, up on the mountain, at the festivals, had any of the light-hearted girls been able to rouse in me any feeling but uncertainty and fear.

So I waited and listened, curiously, at what went on in the cavern. And after a while, when the bracken had ceased to rustle and the folk in the darkness were drawing deep breaths and making such sounds as they might do after a hard race, I heard a woman's voice which I already knew. It said, 'So, it is finished, dear one. Now we can sleep a while, until the god visits us again.'

And then, there was a pause before Polybus answered, 'And what of the sign he sent us today—the lame boy? What is to become of him, my Queen?'

I shuddered with my chest against the chilly stone of the mother-image as I waited for Periboea's reply. When it came at last, her words were so smothered by weariness and warm comfort that I could hardly hear them. Quietly yawning, she said, 'He shall be cared for, husband. I think we came whole from the bull-pen because he watched over us, so that merits some gratitude, I would say. The god sent him and he shall stay.'

I felt as a ghost must feel, hovering above the feast-board and hearing his name mentioned as though he had gone completely from the earth.

The King said, 'We must do as the old custom demands, and name him as our son. Is that well, wife?'

Periboea laughed in her weariness and said, 'Aye, that is well! He shall come from me in the presence of witnesses and be named Oedipus of

Corinth. Now will you lie back and rest, my love, or the god will not visit us again this night for sheer exhaustion.'

I waited until they were both quiet and breathing heavily in sleep, then, taking care not to knock over the fat-lamp set for the Mother, I crept from that cavern and made my way back through the dappled moonlight along the little stream.

At a place where the rushes grew thickest and would make a sheltered bed for me, I lay down, with the doves still murmuring above my head, and went into a dream, smiling and thinking: So, at last the wheel turns towards home! At last the god's will makes itself known by little and little. So, I was not wrong to set my feet towards Corinth, for there I have found a kingdom where I may become a hero. There I have found a father and a mother.

It was not long before the endless chorus of the stream put an end to my thinking and let me escape from the trials of the day.

9

TO be reborn . . . I have heard men say that it is more agonizing than to die, to pass breathless and dreaming into the shades. But these were men who had been dragged from rivers, three-parts drowned, whose lungs had already given up the painful fight for air, and now wished only to rest, to render up the ghost in silence, and not once more to draw in the bitter air that seemed to split their water-logged hulk asunder. Or men pulled pale from battle scurries, drained of blood and weary of all effort; men to whom the soft salves and the reviving wine brought back with them all the thudding shock and the fearful gushing of blood that they had thought to leave behind after the first thrust of javelin or slash of sword. To these men, being brought to light again was such torment that, screaming without words, they loathed their friends who so witlessly made them take up the burden once again, when all had so painfully been laid down.

For me it was not the same. There was no agony. Indeed, as I lay within the King's hide-tent, nestling with my head between the thighs of Periboea, the woollen coverlet above me as was the custom, I half-persuaded myself that this was my first birth, this warm and sheltered waiting to come forth; and that all which had gone before, old Rhene's death, the shepherd's anger, the frightened ewe's scrambling fall from the cliff-edge, all dreams, no more. Even the awful screaming of Icarus out of the high blue air, which was my screaming at the injustice of my feet, even that was a dream now; and the only truth was the softness of the Queen's embracing body, and the sharp excitements of the scents it pressed to my nostrils.

While we were waiting, she lay quite still, hardly breathing, a warm image of the Mother with legs outspread to give me room; and, suddenly overcome by this warmth and softness, by the aromatic musk, the incense of the ritual, I turned towards her and pressed my lips in gratitude for her gentle kindliness. 'Mother Periboea,' I whispered, 'this heals all suffering.'

As I thanked her so, in the darkness, she lost her stillness and moved, shuddering, then her hand came down to hold my lips against her, and at last to push them away.

Then, above me in the King's tent, there was laughter and movement, and suddenly the coverlet was drawn away and the light came down on us both.

King Polybus called out, 'Behold, a son is born! To Corinth, the Queen has given a son!'

The tall warriors in the tent beat with their clubs upon the round hide bucklers they carried, and echoed their King's words, laughing and already looking round for the wine-jars.

Queen Periboea waited for me to slide away from where I lay, then held me to her and kissed me on the forehead and said, smiling, 'It is a forward son, but among cattle-breeders that is not amiss.'

I scarcely knew what she meant, but I laughed back at her and stroked her cheek. Then I went to the King my new father and knelt before him in homage. He laid his hard hands upon my shoulders and raised me, then said, 'Oedipus of Corinth, in all parts save the feet you are a fit Prince to live amongst us. And those, if the gods will give their aid, may yet be righted.'

Through Corinth that afternoon the folk celebrated their new Prince, and at least three tipsy cattle-men fell in the bull-pen, giving themselves up in the thoughtless gaiety of the day. Now, wherever I went, tall men and maidens came out from the tents and touched me, smiling, saying that there had never been a Young Guardian so handsome, so meet for the title.

That night, in the King's tent, a physician and a craftsman came and looked at my feet, twisting and turning them all ways so that they knew every bone and sinew in them. And at last the doctor turned to the Queen and said, 'It is not unlikely that something can be done. As you see, Periboea, at present they curl round like a half-clenched fist, so that the Prince walks on their outer-edges, uncertainly. Now if, using stout leather and strips of horn, we might make him such a pair of sandals as would straighten these toes and make firm these ankles, then he would be no different from other men.'

Periboea nodded and said, 'I will give ten head of cattle for such a pair of sandals, doctor. You and the shoemaker may divide them between you, as you decide. And see that you fashion a pair of wings at the ankles, so that the Prince will go more nimbly.'

So, for ten cows, I lost my lameness. But it was not an easy losing, for at first the stout leather and the horn strips punished my tender feet more harshly than I could bear. At such times, I went alone into the little green

valley where the Mother stone was, and beat my fists and my head against her black side. Then, once when my tears ran out as fast as the narrow stream among the trees, a flock of white doves which had been nesting on the breasts of the stone image flew startled from the cavern, and in their flight let drop their leavings onto my head and bowed shoulders. I thought: This is a sign. Even the birds are mocking my tears now. Oedipus, Prince of Corinth, you must weep no more.

I went back to the city, walking bravely then, though my toes and heels were chafed raw in spite of the wings on my ankles! And never again did I let anyone see that the sandals troubled me. So, after a while, I forgot them, just as I forgot the falling screams of Icarus, and grew agile in the bull-pen with the other youths of my age, while the King and Queen looked down from the stockade and cheered me on.

Only twice did I have misfortune there, among the swirling black beasts; and each time I was dragged out safely. The first time, as I lay with the horn in my groin, the King swung me over the stockade and punched King Zeus so hard on the muzzle that from that day on, the bull's name was changed to 'Sore-nose'. On the second occasion, I lay over the horns of the bull they called 'Charred Timber', silently praying that he would not jolt me off with his head-tossing and get me in the belly as he had done a seasoned warrior only two days before. This time it was Queen Periboea who came racing in, through the sunlight, and swung so hard on the beast's tail that he bellowed and lowered me to the dust unmarked.

I did not regret the goring I got from King Zeus, though, for in those days among the Corinthians, it was the mark of manhood to show a scar where I had mine.

No, there was nothing I regretted, that first year in Corinth—until the grass faded from the plains or grew so harsh and dry that no cattle could bear it in their mouths.

Then, one morning the King sent for me and said, 'My son, it is time for us to go.'

I held his hand and said, 'Go, father? Where are we going?'

King Polybus smiled sadly and said, 'You are not going anywhere, Oedipus. You are the Young Guardian; you heard the people call you that on the day of celebration. Your task is to guard Corinth while we are away.'

'Away?' I echoed, feeling the old loneliness stealing back across my heart.

The King rose and drew with his wand upon the cow-dung floor of the tent. ‘See,’ he said, ‘we are here now in Hellas; but the grazing is almost done, and if the cattle are not taken north, to where the sun is less fierce, they will all die. It is the custom of our folk, each year, to move northwards to Parnassus, or even Oeta, and to graze there until the new grass springs on our own plains once again.’

As he spoke, he traced the journey with his stick, showing the cattle-track through the Isthmus and up towards the colder hills.

He got from his knees at last and said, ‘While we are away, you will be King of Corinth. Is that not some reward, my son?’

I nodded, though I would rather have wept. Then I said, ‘Am I to stay alone among the tents, father?’

King Polybus poured a cup of wine for us both and shook his head. ‘No, son,’ he answered, ‘we must take the tents with us, to set them up elsewhere. You will reign over the mud-huts we leave here. And in them will live the very old ones and the very young ones, who are too weak to make the long journey to the northern grazing-lands. They will be under your care, and that of the score of young warriors I shall leave you, to help guard the place until we come again.’

Sipping at the sharp wine, I said, unthinking, ‘So I am to be the Shepherd of the People, father?’

King Polybus almost let fall his wine cup as I spoke. He turned on me eyes which I had not seen before, and said, ‘Do not use that title in my presence again, Oedipus. What other, lesser folk choose to call themselves is not my affair; but we of the cattle do not relish the smell of sheep’s wool, nor taste the strong flesh of sheep. Those things are for the savages, the First Folk, the hill-men; not for us who stand upright in the sun to pray to the Father, fearless of all things. We do not dash our brains out from high places when we wish to make an offering; we walk upright among the black bulls. That is our way and no other, never forget that. Your name is only the Young Guardian now, and later, when the years rest heavier upon you, it will be the Bull of Corinth. But do not talk to me of shepherds ever again.’

After that, he went from the tent and ran across the bull-pen three times, as though to cleanse himself of something. The Queen came to me and sat by my side, smiling and fondling me as though to take away the hurt of her husband’s words. It was wrong of me to do it, I know now, but my injured pride and my disappointment were sharp little wounds to bear at that

moment, and I said, ‘Oh, mother, he does not deserve you, that man!’ I held closely to her and touched her in affection. After a while she drew away from me, smiling crookedly, and said, ‘Come, my forward son, this will not do. The wine has gone to your head and your hands. Let us see who throws the longest javelin.’

So she led me to a quiet part of the city and flung javelins with me through the afternoon, at a straw-image the size of a man, set fifty paces away. She hit this image five times to my one, and always in the same place. When a crowd of cattle-folk gathered to see how things went, she allowed me to get nearest the target, and purposely flung her spears wide of the mark. Then, when she had let me have my small victory, she put her arm about me and we walked back to the tent, our long and red-ochred hair lying mingled on our shoulders, and our brown legs moving in harmony, for now I could walk almost as well as she did, while I wore the shoes the King had had made for me.

And as we went, the sun on our shoulders, she whispered, ‘Folk who did not know might take us for brother and sister, Oedipus, not mother and son. Now you have lived under the sun on the plains with us a season, you are like any other man of Corinth. Is that not good?’

I said, ‘Yes, Queen, it is good. I ask for no more.’

She glanced at me sideways and said, smiling, ‘Then you are easily satisfied, Oedipus! But you will grow older, if the gods will it, and one day you will not be so easily satisfied, unless I have read you amiss.’

I said, ‘But mother, I want life always to be as it is now, with you and my father watching over me, and the black bulls snorting in the pen with the sun on their shining backs.’

She let go my arm and said very quietly, ‘The gods do not let life flow on endlessly, like a stream. It is not always sun-time, and even the great bulls sink at last to their knees and place their dry old muzzles in the dust.’

I said, ‘Yes, of course, that is understood. But the bull will have five years of good life before he goes and the birds perch on his ribs. That is long enough.’

At the door of the King’s tent, Periboea turned and let her fine lips move into a faint grimace. She said, ‘In five years, Oedipus. Yes, five years perhaps. How old will you be then?’

Staring at her, I said, ‘I shall be eighteen, shall I not, mother?’

She nodded, smiling, and said, ‘Yes, and at eighteen a man will be a King or nothing. At eighteen, he will have sons of his own, and women in three kingdoms perhaps.’

I held out my hands towards her. ‘Mother,’ I said, the tears coming now, ‘I want no other King but Polybus. I want no other woman but you as my mother. I do not think of sons, I who am content to be your son.’

Whether the Queen grew older or younger then, I do not know, but she changed in a strange way that I had not known before. Some wordless thing passed from her to me, speaking a message which almost terrified me. Then, her face like a stiff mask, she drew me out of the sun and just within the flap of the King’s tent.

And there, in the shadows of the afternoon, she made a gentle magic, which left me fighting for words and breath to speak them and weeping that I was her slave for ever. As she pushed me out into the sunlight again, she whispered, ‘So, you will wait until we come again, Guardian? You will wait for five years, if needs be, my son?’

I could not answer her now. If I had done, it might have been to say that I had now glimpsed what a King was, what a god was, even, and that every hour she was away in the green north would be a little death to me, keeping me from my kingship.

10

THEY went away, the tall cattle-folk, moving like slender reeds across the desert out of Corinth, driving the black cattle before them; the plain was dark with cattle, shrouded with grey dust; the air shuddered with the sound of hooves; it was like the end of the world, I thought.

I watched them go, some of them waving to me, others calling out for me to take care of the old women. But Polybus and Periboea did not wave or call out; they were resting from the fierce sun in a wagon that went at the head of the herds.

When they were out of sight and their only memory was the still settling dust, I turned away sadly. The captain of the youths who had been left to guard Corinth came to me, bowing his ochred head and said, 'Come, Boy, now we take our leave also.'

I stared at him amazed. 'Take our leave?' I said. 'Why, we are expected to stay and guard this city till the King comes back.'

He was a pleasant enough fellow generally, but this day his smile was a mocking one as he looked down on me a little, for he was seventeen. 'Guard this place!' he said. 'A hillock covered with cow-dung and a score of crumbling mud-huts! Who would wish to take that? What great conqueror will come in the King's absence to capture a dozen old women and ten children that can hardly walk?'

I stared back at him as levelly as I could and answered, 'If the King did not wish his city guarded, why did he give me the title of Young Guardian, and leave me an army to safeguard his summer city?'

The young warrior whose name was Eurotas, laughed in the dust and placed his two hands on my shoulders. Then, speaking gently to me, as though I was a baby or a simpleton, he said, 'By the gods, but where were you reared! Do you not know that in Corinth, when the King is away, a chosen one, a virgin youth, must be left in his place so that, should the temper take him, the god has someone on whom to vent his wrath. So the King is spared to make his city again, in the next year.'

I shook my head, unable to believe him. I said, ‘But you, the Guard, you are here to protect the city. That is what the King said.

Eurotas shook me, as one might shake a doll. ‘What the King said and what the King meant may be two different things, Boy.’

I pulled away from him. ‘Out with it,’ I spluttered. ‘What is in your mind, traitor?’

The youth mocked me for a little while, then shrugged his shoulders as though I was hardly worth the labour of convincing. He said, ‘My friend, we are left here not to guard the city—which, even the King knows, is nothing but a sun-dried plain and a few ox-hides—but to guard you; to prevent you from leaving Corinth.’

By now, others had gathered round and were nodding their bronze heads, their expressions as wooden as that of Eurotas.

I felt cold inside me and said, ‘And what if I turn now and leave the city which you say is a worthless dungheap. What then?’

One of the others, named Cleitus, said smiling, ‘We must fill you full of javelins, Boy. That is the Law in Corinth.’

Two hunched old women, wearing black shawls, had hobbled to where the young men were standing and arguing. One of them caught my eye and nodded, muttering, ‘Aye, that is the Law.’

Eurotas turned towards her slowly and said, ‘Yes, old one, it is the Law. Now tell him what the other winter law is; he is the King’s Son and must know, since he must be present to see the decree obeyed.’

The old woman passed her hand across her face, then, with her eyes down said, whispering, ‘It is, that the weakest of the old and young, who cannot stand the winter, must go into the ground.’

When she had said this, she turned to her companion and they went off together, to one of the huts in the shade.

Cleitus came up to me and took my wrist in his strong hand. ‘Do not look so afraid, Boy,’ he said. ‘Every folk has its laws. They are sacred from the start of time, and cannot be broken. If you stay with us, no harm will come to you, unless by lightning, and you will greet the King and Queen again when the year has turned.’

My thoughts were so mixed and desperate, I hardly knew what I was saying. I answered, ‘It is not myself, but the old ones, I am concerned for.’

Cleitus laughed and said, ‘Have you never wondered why there are so few old ones in Corinth? Did you think they vanished into the air, or that the bulls ate them all up to keep the city tidy? When I am old, I shall hope for a young warrior with a sharp javelin and a fast hand to help me away from life’s weariness. It is nothing, if it is well done, Boy. As for the sick children —they will attend to their own affairs if the winter comes down hard enough on this open place.’

Later, as we sat in the shadow of a hut, Eurotas slapped me on the back and said, ‘So, now will you come with us for a while, to a village below Cyllene, where the girls will soon be dancing after the wine-treading? While we are gone, such old ones who cannot face the end that the Law decrees may slip away.’

Eurotas was not a bad fellow at all. For a Corinthian, he was kindly, and hated to see anyone suffer too much.

We went to the village. It lay three days away and was called Stymphalus. Long before we saw the white-washed cottages and the trailing vines, we heard the stamping of bare feet, the rattling of the sistrum and the high reedy voices of the villagers.

They were small and dark, like my own mountain folk, and treated us like gods. Indeed, all along the way the peasant folk had bowed before us as we trailed our javelins and strode along, our faces set like stern masks, in the Corinthian manner. They had come running with bread and olives and jars of wine, for it was the custom of Corinthians never to carry food, but only a spear, which gets food. This was part of the Pride of Corinth, as it was called then.

It was the same in the village. The headman came out and asked who was the Young Guardian this year. Cleitus pointed at me; and then the headman fell on his knees before me and pressed his lips to my sandalled feet. His wife came after, and said, ‘I trust that you will see the women are handled gently, sir.’

Eurotas pushed beside me and said solemnly, ‘The Young Guardian has not yet learned the ritual, woman; so I speak the answer for him: “Aye, by the Mother, they shall be used well, and as gently as a priceless drinking-cup”. Is it well said, woman?’

She nodded, a little sadly, I thought, and then went into her cottage.

Cleitus laughed and nudged me in the ribs. ‘It is not all sadness, you see, when the King and Queen go to the winter pastures, Boy! But the women

will not be for you, our virgin lord; yours will be the wine and the music alone.'

Eurotas said over his shoulder, 'Aye, that is, if he does not wish to break the Law.' He held out his javelin on the flat of his hand, as though this spoke words enough. And beneath his smile I read another, sterner message. I shrugged my shoulders and said, 'It is all one to me, friends. There is only one woman I love, and that is my mother, the Queen.'

They gazed at me, their faces twisted between laughing and frowning, then nodded rather too gravely, and went away to find women and wine.

I sat alone for a while at the edge of the village, weary of the sight of drunkenness, for most of the dark-faced villagers had already spent their day celebrating the treading, and now sprawled about in the late sun, red-lipped and snoring, wherever they had fallen.

At last, I rose and made my way up the lower slopes of the mountain, leaning on my javelin and thinking how strange and various the world was; how thankful I had been, to come to Corinth and be reborn, and yet how afraid I was now, that beneath the clean, bright sunlight there lay these customs. On a high rocky peak, I looked out over the countryside and saw the grey mountain ridges all running one way, parcelling up the land, dividing it into kingdoms as the god willed. I saw the setting sun glinting on the seas, to my right hand and my left. I thought: Here a man might think he was a god, to see the land all at one swoop. Yet what is that land, when all is said and done?

Perhaps I spoke that last thought out loud; I do not remember. But suddenly, from behind me, a voice said, 'Hellas is nothing but the carcass of a dead lion—with all the ribs showing.'

I turned so sharply that I almost lost balance and fell, and my fear of heights came flooding back at this for an instant. Then I saw, sitting below me, and twisting white flowers to make a garland, a girl of about my own age; a dark-haired girl of the village, with silver bracelets on her wrists, and her ears pierced with gold rings, from which hung long droplets of red glass. Her eyes were very wide and their lids daubed with blue and her lashes were so long that they seemed painted onto her face.

She wore the open blue bodice and the long flounced skirt of a Mother-priestess, and her bare feet were tinged pink at heel and toe after the Minoan custom.

I said to her, 'Why are you here, woman?'

She looked down at the flowers in her fingers and said, ‘Because I live here. Because my father, the headman, has the grazing rights hereabouts, and I can move where I will. I am no slave, Young Guardian of Corinth.’

She spoke proudly, but gently, and did not look up at me until her words were finished. Like a skilled wrestler, she had me on the wrong foot, and almost threw me. I stammered and said, ‘I came up here to be quiet; to think my thoughts alone.’

She laughed in light mockery, then said, ‘Most of the Young Guardians say that, but what is it they are thinking about? What have they to think about, they who are chosen for a season and who pass like flowers when that season is ended?’

I slithered down the rock towards her. She heard me coming and leaned back against a smooth stone, putting the stem of a flower between her teeth and biting on it thoughtfully, her wide eyes searching me as I came, not afraid, not even alarmed, but only quietly curious.

As I came towards her she spat out the flower stalk and said, ‘It is for you if you wish it, according to the custom; but it would not be wise doing, Guardian.’

I brushed aside her words and said, ‘I do not know what you mean. What I ask you is this—why do you say the Guardians only last a season? Have there been others here? What do you know of them?’

She looked away, shading her eyes with her long thin hand and then, slowly turning her head towards me, said, ‘We here are older than Corinth, much older. We were here before those red-haired savages walked upright on two legs. And though they treat us as though we were meant for their pleasure, like slaves and cattle, we shall still be here, with our flowers and our wine, when they have gone into the ground.’

I had heard this sort of thing all my life, among the First Folk, as the Cretans called themselves, and it did not disturb me. I asked again, ‘What of the Guardians, girl?’

She leaned on her elbow away from me and said. ‘There have been many, perhaps one each year. My sisters could tell you more of them; this is my first time on the mountain. They fade like flowers. That is all I can say.’

I thought hard on her words; ‘my first time on the mountain’. Surely, she had been here before, since it was her father’s grazing hill; so what did these words mean?

I said, ‘This is the first time you have been up the mountain to speak to the Young Guardian of Corinth; is that it?’

She nodded, the sun touching red lights into her dark hair. I thought I heard her laughing gently within herself. Then she looked at me, white-eyed, and said, ‘Not to speak to him; not that, but another thing. The choice he has to make with us. His self-choice, on the mountain.’

It was too much for me, tired as I was from the day’s long march. I brushed it away and leaned over her and took the flower-garland. ‘Let me help you,’ I said, ‘let us put red flowers into the wreath, it will be prettier then.’

She handed the thing to me, and came closer so that I could choose from the litter of blooms that lay within the lap of her flounced skirt. And while I plaited the garland, she watched me with her great eyes, never speaking, but smiling and chewing on a grass-stem, making no attempt to help with the wreath.

‘What is your name, girl?’ I said at last.

She answered, whispering, ‘I am Geilissa, the Smiling One. And you are Oedipus, who adores his mother, the Queen of Corinth.’

I nodded and agreed that this was so.

Suddenly she held her head closer to mine and whispered, ‘And you are also Oedipus the son of Rhene, who died after the King struck her with a spear. Though you are tall and red-haired like the others, you are of our Folk.’

At first I was about to deny this, so proud had I become of my new parentage and race. But she held her narrow hand over my lips and said, ‘Do not lie before a priestess of the Mother, Oedipus, son of Rhene, or the words will flutter after you like birds all your life, pecking at you every night in your dreams. And such as you have enough dreams to think about already. Is that not true?’

I nodded, lowering my eyes in shame, and said, ‘You know much, Geilissa.’

Suddenly she took the garland I had worked on so long and tore it apart into shreds of broken flowers and leaves. Then she flung it from her and stood up on the mountain.

‘Yes,’ she said, ‘I know much. I do not want to know more. Come, let us go down to my father’s house and listen to the singing.’

I went down the hill with her, as the dusk came purple across the land. It seemed that, a spear's cast away, another moved in the twilight. Geilissa saw me turning now and then, as I tried to glimpse this dogged shadow. Then she said, 'It is well. There is nothing to fear now. He will go to the feasting and be drunk by the time we enter the wine hall.'

I said, 'Who was it, Geilissa? Who followed me up there and down again?'

She laid her hand upon my arm and said slowly, 'One of your warriors. There are no men as tall as that in our village.'

I was angry and said, 'What, must I be followed everywhere? Do they think I will fall and hurt myself? Do they think a lion will come and tear me?'

She smiled and said, 'Perhaps, perhaps, Young Guardian. But now they know that you are quite capable of going up a mountain on your own without coming to harm, do they not?'

I said, my anger falling, 'I should think so, indeed! Why, I was raised among mountains.'

I did not know why she leaned against the wall, helplessly laughing, before she took me inside to drink at their festival.

11

THE winter passed, and so did my boyhood. Cleitus taught me the javelin, Eurotas wrestling; and each of my other men added something to the store so that, by the first budding, I could stand unmoved and watch such old folk as needed it be sent into the shades and then put in the ground. When doubts seized me, I reminded myself that our salted meat was dwindling each day, that old folk had been given years to eat at the feast, while we, the young ones, were new-comers to the festival-board and had our bellies still to fill.

When they came back, leading the herds, the King and Queen looked more finely-drawn than I had seen them. When I went forward to greet them, as a son should, it seemed that for a moment they hardly knew me, or hardly expected that I should still be there. This, I told myself, was because they were weary from their long journey, and a tired traveller may become so blind with weariness that he does not recognize the house his heart has drawn him to, over a thousand miles.

But as the sun strengthened and the grass grew high, things were as they had been before: the labyrinth of tents grew out and out to house the growing families; we took new scars upon our bodies from the bulls; and the King and Queen both loved me in their different ways.

I got to know, in the way a cattle-man gets to know, from the gossips of the tribe, that Polybus the King had questioned Eurotas long and carefully about my behaviour in their absence and had been given a favourable report of the wine-festival.

Periboea, being a woman and so more practical, came at the questioning a different way. Calling me to her bower one afternoon, she laid her hand upon me and said, ‘So you did no more than make a garland for the black child, Geilissa?’

I nodded and answered, ‘I made a garland, which she destroyed and threw away. That is all, mother.’

She smiled and drew me to her, holding me close for a while as though considering. Then at last she said, ‘A sign tells me that this is the truth and that you only love the Queen, your mother.’

It was a year since I had first seen her, and in that time I had grown a great deal: so now her words meant more to me than they would have done when I first hobbled into Corinth. My face burned under her searching and I said hoarsely, ‘I love only the Queen.’

She nodded and arranged her hide apron. Then, rising from the hide-thong stool, said, ‘One day I will make a garland for you, as you did for Geilissa, Oedipus. See that you do not destroy it and discard it, as she did.’

I laughed at her, not knowing what she wanted me to do, and suddenly her pleasant face became a frowning one. She said, in a harder voice now, ‘Unless you walk carefully, I do not think your new shoes will last for five years.’

I looked down at my feet and saw that truly I had given the shoes some wear since she had been away, for I could not do without them now.

The Queen said, ‘You are growing so fast, in every way, that I must get another pair made for you before the summer-grazing is over.’

The new ones were red, and ornamented with garnets near the toes. I wore them to see the King and Queen lead the folk and the herds away that fall. My two friends, Eurotas and Cleitus, who stood beside me, waving their farewells, jostled me about a bit in their comradely horse-play. Cleitus said, ‘This year you are more glad to have your shoes than sad to see them going, Guardian.’

Eurotas put on a stern look and said, ‘When these shoes lead you up the hill at the wine-feasting, will not these pretty stones be a temptation to Geilissa?’

As they both laughed, I said firmly, ‘Not while your javelin is as keen as it is, Eurotas. I watched you honing it yesterday.’

He looked me in the eye and said, ‘Aye, Oedipus, you did. What of it?’

I smiled at him and said, ‘Afterwards, I went to my tent and sharpened mine, too. One does well to be prepared for all things, when one is a King—even the King of a deserted hillock in a dusty plain.’

This time Geilissa did not climb the hill with me: she was suckling a dark-haired baby and no longer wore her pretty clothes, or her pretty face. And when I went up the hill, to be away from the wine-bibbing and drunken brawls, her young brother went with me, laughing and anxious to please. He was a pleasant-faced lad, with long black hair like a girl’s. He had put red flowers in it, and a necklet of them over his shoulders.

As we sat on the rock that looked over Hellas, and he was picking at grasses with his delicate fingers, I suddenly said to him, ‘You have itching fingers, lad. Would you like to hold my javelin?’

Even as I spoke, I felt rather than saw, a third presence rising from somewhere and towering over me, as hawk towers over dove before the plunge.

Geilissa’s brother nodded and smiled, ‘Aye, lord, I would, if it pleases you,’ he said. ‘But it must be by your consent.’

His dark hair had toppled from its dressing onto his shoulders. I said, ‘Why, you make a prettier girl than your sister, lad!’

His white teeth gleamed in the dim light, and I sensed the hawk poised above the pigeon once again.

I laughed and flung the javelin to him. ‘Here,’ I said, ‘so hold it! But do not cast it in this twilight; you might hit a rock, or someone behind a rock, and that would be bad for blade or man.’

Geilissa’s brother flung the weapon into the grass and ran down the hill like a frightened hare, his black locks bobbing up and down on his pale shoulders, scattering flowers as he went.

I rose and picked up my javelin, then calling into the dusk said, ‘Come out, Eurotas! You will gain little profit skulking behind a stone.’

My feet were set and my javelin poised as I called: but nothing moved, though I called again and waited a while.

Then my ears, quickened by anger, heard a rustling further down the hill and I knew that it would be fruitless to wait longer. I went to the headman’s cottage in my own time and drank a cup of wine with Eurotas.

I said, ‘Your face is flushed and you are breathless, fellow.’

He gazed at me smiling and answered, ‘You would be if you had drunk as much as I have, lord.’

And so that occasion ended.

Then the god unfolded the years like a Phoenician merchant showing a roll of cloth in the market-place, but with this difference, that with the merchant one might buy or reject, as one chose: but, with the god, one accepted without option and put up with the bargain, for good or ill. My bargain was not ill.

It brought me ever greater strength, and a honey-coloured beard to go with it. It took from me Eurotas, who died one dark winter full of javelins when we raided a cattle-town south of Cyllene, being desperate for meat. He passed, in my arms, under a thorn-bush, smiling; and with his last breath he said, ‘So, Guardian, you are here to see me off, after all! I never thought it would be so when we first met.’ I smoothed his torn hair and said, ‘You expected to put the spear into me that night when Geilissa came with the garland, did you not, old friend?’

He nodded, his eyelids blue with the coming farewell, and said, ‘That was my duty. I am glad it never had to be done, brother.’

It was the first time he had used this word and I was very moved. Born to old folk on the bare mountain, I had had no brothers, and always envied those boys who had. And now, having found a brother, I was losing him under the thorn-bush with the ash-shafts sticking from him like terrible stiff limbs.

Eurotas took my finger between his white teeth and bit it quite hard. Then he gasped and said, ‘That is to remember me by: I possess nothing, so I have no gift to leave you.’

Cleitus was standing by, keeping watch and leaning on his spear, with his thin right leg wrapped round it after the manner of cattle-men. He gazed down at us both, then said through clenched teeth, ‘Go in peace, Eurotas. I will look after him now. He shall not lack a brother. He has proved himself.’

Then Cleitus turned away, as though our friend was merely going on a short journey and would return before the sun set. This he did so that Eurotas and I could make our farewells in private, as warrior-brothers should.

When, later, he and I were laying the traveller in the safe ground under the thorn, Cleitus said to me, ‘My sister, Clymene, is about your age, Guardian. She is with the Queen in the north now, but she will be back in the spring, if the gods will it. That would make us brothers, indeed.’

I laid a myrtle-branch on the grave of the gone traveller, then said ‘First, my mother’s consent must be got, and that might not be easy. Have no fears, we do not need any stronger chain to bind us together as brothers than your promise to Eurotas.’

Cleitus pursed his lips and bit at the hair on his lip. He said, ‘You have been the Guardian for almost five seasons, Oedipus. All things come to an end at last, even breathing, as Eurotas has just shown us.’

We stood, each leaning on our javelins, like two tall trees, our voices very quiet as warriors' voices should be. The others of our company, sitting or lying on the grassy hummocks, must scarcely have heard us.

I said, 'You are warning me that I may cease to be the Guardian, and you are offering me Clymene, your sister, so that I shall have a family to live in, shall not become outcast and alone?'

Cleitus looked away and said, 'Something like that had occurred to me, too. I am pleased that you spoke of it first.'

We said no more, but went back to Corinth silent and hungry.

When the King and Queen returned that year, their coming was late. It was almost summer and we who held Corinth for them were near to starving.

Yet we looked no more haggard than those who came back with the cattle. It had been a time of misfortune, they said. The northern pastures had been sun-struck and half the world was foraging for fodder up there. We had lost many folk and many beasts. And, worst of all, the Queen, Periboea, had suffered a miscarriage and had lost her first-born, which would have been a son.

This news gave me great sadness, and I felt that at the least she might have told me, before she went away, that she might return with a second son.

I went straightway to her tent, my hair freshly dressed and wearing my bronze, making long proud strides for all the folk to see. But an old guard at the door crossed his javelin before my breast and said firmly, 'She will see no one, Guardian.'

I took the javelin-shaft in both hands and suddenly wrenched it from his grasp. His eyes widened, so to learn how powerful I had become. I snapped the ash across my knee and called out, 'Periboea, Mother, your son is here. May I enter?'

There was a long silence before the Queen's voice came back to me. It said, 'I have no son, stranger. My son died out on the steppelands, without ever breathing the air. Leave me in peace.'

The guard whose javelin I had broken smiled as I went away from the tent, but bore me no ill will. I met him in the green valley the next morning, searching for a new spear-shaft. He came to me and said, 'Hold up your head, Oedipus. These are things we all must learn to bear, who move in the

shadows of Kings and Queens. Such storms pass, and, if they do not, we are often left stark and so have no need to worry ourselves.'

I took this man aside, for his face and words bore the stamp of one who could be trusted: and I said to him, 'Friend, you know all there is to be known of me. Now, I ask you, what lies before me? I have served Corinth well and the Queen well. What must I expect?'

The man's face changed as I spoke, until he looked like someone else: not a hero, but a man plunging from battle, his foemen at his heels. Then, suddenly breaking away from me, he ran into a thick part of the wood and I lost sight of him.

While I was still standing there, in wonder, a band of warriors came beating through the reeds with their spear-shafts. In their midst walked my friend Cleitus and his sister, Clymene. Their hands were tied and a broad thong of hide yoked their necks together.

I went towards them, calling out, 'Cleitus, brother! Clymene, what is it?'

But they looked away from me, as though I did not exist, and went on, tight-lipped, with the soldiers, towards the cavern where the Mother-image stood. And when I tried to follow, two soldiers turned on me and flung me to the ground. One of them said, 'Come no nearer to the cliff-edge, Oedipus, or you too might fall.'

Later that day, as I sat with the flies buzzing about me, a man came to me and said, 'The Queen has sent for you, stranger. It would be well for you to go quickly and not keep her waiting.'

He did not need to tell me that. My fury was such that I could not have gone slowly if I had wished.

Now there was no guard to bar the door and I strode within like a god come to bring disaster. Outside, the sunlight was white and blinding: inside, the tent was as dim as a tomb, and blinding in another way. There blackness began as purple and only gradually resolved itself to grey. And in that greyness, I saw Periboea and her husband sitting hunched on the hide-thong stool, wrapped in dark clothes, like two shrivelled images. I felt that, now, I towered above them. I did not wait for them to speak but, thumping my javelin-butt on the hard polished dung floor, said, 'So, this is a fine greeting for the Guardian who has watched over your city so long.'

They turned their eyes upon me together and gazed with stiff pale faces into mine. If they had waited much longer, in the heavy silence that lay

between us, I think my anger would have gushed away and left me unmanned.

But King Polybus spoke and said, ‘Though you are great in size, you are no wiser in wit than when we took you in and made you our son.’

In the fresh onrush of my anger, I said, ‘Do not speak so loud, King. From where I stand above you, it would be no hard thing to put this javelin where your hands could not get it out again.

Oh, god, I had spoken again just as once I did at the sheep-market outside Thebes, when my old mother, Rhene, paid the penalty for my lightness.

But this time there was no such sudden doom. King Polybus closed his eyelids slowly, and this was terrible to see. Then he said, ‘Only a born fool threatens a King, club-foot.’

I could have vomited with fury at that word. Its cruelty was like a blow in the pit of the stomach. But there was nothing I could do: Polybus, hunched and unweaponed, was still more of a man than I was. His maleness came at me like the heavy smell a goat may leave behind, in a hot hollow of the hills: and I listened, humbly now, to what would follow.

Slowly, most slowly, he said, ‘Oedipus of Corinth, the Queen and I have flown in the face of the god, just as Icarus once flew in the face of the sun, and we have tumbled, our wings’ wax melted. We thought to be blessed by a son of our own bodies, but he was wrested away from us. Do you know why?’

My mixed passions would not let me answer. Then the Queen said, in a voice so like her husband’s that for a moment I did not know which of the two was speaking, until, in the grey gloom, I saw her even white teeth as her lips opened and closed.

She said, ‘We lost our born son because we had already performed the sacred ritual of adopting you. It seems the gods pay more attention to these forms than men may do.’

I dared to say, ‘So, the gods are on my side, mother?’

There was some bitterness in my meaning, but the Queen let it fly by and answered, ‘More than that, Oedipus. You are their Chosen One. You are now the yoked bullock which cannot fly from the wagon: the harnessed horse which may not leave the chariot-pole. You are as fixed as the moon in the containing sky.’

I said, in fear now, ‘What burden must I bear, mother?’

And after a time she said, ‘A King’s burden, young man. So, do not call me mother any more. All that has passed, with your boyhood. Hark now, for I shall say this but once: the King, Polybus, so much afflicted by the gods, is even now dying from a fever brought on him by the black flies of Sarmatia. He may make the northern journey once again, but no more. This we have been assured of by our doctor.’

As I understood her words, I fell before the King, onto my knees, as a ritual. But he saw what I was about, and kicked me aside, so that I sprawled before them both. And now I forgot my javelin and my beard, and lay there, humbled.

Queen Periboea spoke on, as though nothing had changed, and said, ‘When I come back in the next spring, you will take me to wife and become the true King of Corinth. This has been agreed by all the folk, and by the priests of the northern pastures, on whom we depend. And it has been sanctioned by the present King who sits beside me. So, together, we may provide an heir for Corinth at last.’

She waited a while, then said, ‘Now what is in your heart to ask?’

I bowed my head and said, ‘Now I understand why Cleitus and his sister offended you. May they be set free, Periboea?’

She drew the dark hood over her eyes but did not speak: and so I knew that my request had come too late.

I rose and turned my back upon them without formal leave-taking: for now, in cold anger, I knew that they were my slaves, and not I theirs.

12

BUT it was the gods who laughed last. That fall they went away as usual, leaving me and a new body of Companions to make pretence of guarding the sun-scorched hillock.

And that year, for the first time, having no Eurotas, no Cleitus, to control me in friendly brotherhood, I did more than drink wine at the village festival below Cyllene. Nor did I mount the high hill and gaze over the grey rib-bones of Hellas: my other pastimes left no time for this. And now, as King-elect, my fame was too great for any young warrior-boy to threaten me for breaking the law.

The girl I lay with, in her father's barn, was much like that Geilissa, whose garland I had helped to make when I was still a boy. She may have been a younger sister, for all I know: or some relation. When the wine fumes thicken the senses, a man does not ask too closely.

Yet, though I was not the first to be with this doe-eyed girl, though for her years she had learned much, just as there are child-dancers or lyre-players whose every touch brings perfection to movement or melody, though these performers hardly know what it is they do to their watchers and listeners, this village priestess failed to move me, try as she might, sweat as we might, in the darkness of the barn among the sweet-smelling hay.

At first I was angry with her, feeling myself cheated: and I came near to striking her because she did not give to me what I had heard Eurotas and Cleitus describing after such festivals. But at length, drawn-faced and weary, she patted my cheek with her small hand and laid her painted lips to my damp forehead, smiling like a patient sister who has reached her limit despite herself. 'King,' she said, 'it is no use. It is as though you are asleep, waiting for someone else to waken you. I could be here till dawn and still the Goddess might not visit us.'

She yawned then and said, 'Do not fear, I will tell no one: or, if you wish it, I will boast of what a time you gave me. But, I beg you, let me rest now, while you go to the house and drink the wine, or I shall be useless to the

others who will come later to the barn door, sighing: and that would get my father's village a bad name for lack of hospitality.'

I gave her a small agate seal, scratched with a palm tree and a bull, that I had picked up idly one day in the treasure-tent of Polybus. It was old Cretan ware and pleased her. She dropped it within her bodice and smiled, then said, 'Go along now, Oedipus; your secret is safe with me. I will tell them that it was a fearful joy; that it was like a rushing, burning wind from the desert; or a great stream that bursts its rocky banks, tossing the stones aside; I will say that for a while I thought ancient Pan had come back to earth again, stamping his hooves and savaging at all things.'

I said, 'You may say what you wish, Geilissa's sister. Anything that will keep your own pride bright. As for me, these new Companions of mine are young boys and dare not point their fingers at me, or smile too long before my face. It matters little, what did not happen: I am only sorry for the trouble and hard work you have suffered for nothing.'

She closed her blue-lidded eyes, smiling, and said, 'No, not for nothing, Oedipus; not on my part, that is, though the reward is greater when the dance-steps move in unison and the thunderbolt of ecstasy visits both equally and together.'

I stood with my hand on the lintel, thinking that she must be a little drunk, or out of her mind, so I said, 'These are wild words, little one. You need sleep. I will leave you now.'

As she turned in the hay she waved her hand at me and said, 'Do not despair; there will come someone to awake you, one day.'

After the festival, I led the Companions back to Corinth hill. They dragged their feet and went like sleepers, yawning and complaining through the dust and sun. One of them called out to me, 'You are a heartless man to whip us on at a time like this, Oedipus. Have you no pity?'

Another youth in the band answered him and said, 'Of course he has no pity. These Guardians are chosen because they are like snorting bulls who cannot be worn down. See, this one walks as though he had slept soundly all night. Oh, by the gods, I envy him!'

I said nothing to change their opinion of me, but led them on firmly and unsmiling. In my heart, I thought: Yes, I am different from them, now I know, but not in the way they think. Geilissa's young sister has taught me more about myself than I knew before the festival began. Well, what I have

not known I shall not miss, and, as she said, the time may come when another hand awakes the Sleeper. Until that time, I am content as I am.

Corinth was more sun-baked and desolate than I had ever known it before. As I gazed over its dust and its crumbling grain-huts and watch-towers, it seemed to me like an already dead city. I could not picture people in it, black cattle in the pens, as it was for half the year. As I looked at the empty sky above it, I could not picture the banners and totems of the King and Queen and all the barons, fluttering in the wind.

But soon we had wind enough, all the same. It came without warning over the hills to the West, and blew through the deserted place as though it meant to brush it into the Saronic Sea, as far as Salamis. I had never known such a fierce wind; it was like the rushing breath of a dragon. We could not even face it, but lay on the ground, our bent backs towards it, our heads tucked into our shoulders. Under this onrush, a man soon felt as burned and dry as a husk at winnowing-time. Some of the young Companions began to say that this was a plague on us, for something we had done, or not done. I could not answer him then, for the dust had risen on the wind and filled all the air. Many of us lay down and coughed until we thought our hearts would burst. The few cattle we had, lay on their sides and gazed at us with pitiful great eyes, until these eyes became coated with grey dust, and they gave up the ghost.

This wind roared across our plain for three days and nights; and on the fourth day, when I went my rounds of the cattle-posts, I found that half the Companions had left.

This made me angry, that chosen young warriors should forget their oath so easily and should desert me. I got the others together, under a rock, and said, ‘Comrades, those who have left will suffer the Furies of their own guilt for the rest of their days. They are outcasts now, for they can never set foot in Corinth again and be treated as men. That is their punishment.’

I thought that my words made sense, yet there were some youths in the back ranks who smiled at one another behind their hands as though I had been making a jest. I dismissed them before I lost my temper completely.

The next day the wind came back; but bitterly cold this time, and striking from the East towards the hills. As we sheltered behind the few mud walls that still stood, I saw about our hillock many dead old folk, who could not stand such weather, and, worse than that, the stiff-legged carcasses of all our milch-cows and food-beasts.

I said to the lad who crouched beside me, ‘This is a bad business, Alopecus. When this wind drops and the sun comes down again, such carrion will bring the flies. We must gather together tonight, after dusk, when the wind falls, and dig deep graves for the folk and the dead cattle. We will go hungry, but that is better than being a feast for the flies.’

Alopecus, the Fox, as we called him, nodded his sandy head and muttered that he would get the youths together with spades as soon as he could, and that what I ordered was the best for all concerned.

But that evening, when the wind died at last, no one came, though I blew on my horn a hundred times; and when I went out to the cattle-posts, I found no one there at all.

Now, in all truth, was I King of Corinth—for I was the only living thing in that desolate place. I was King of the Dust and the already stinking carcasses, King of Carrion.

That night, troubled in mind and nostrils, I tried to sleep in the Mother cavern, down beside the little stream, on the bracken where Polybus and Periboea had once lain, sheltered by the tall stone image of the Goddess.

It was not a pleasant night; the wind got up again near dawn, and tore branches from the trees, flinging them in at the doorway. And the dry white sea-shells which lay thick upon the floor rolled and clattered about the place as though life was in them again.

What most disturbed me and kept me from rest was the sound the wind made, blowing across the cave mouth, as a man blows across the lip of a flute to get his notes. As the direction and force of the fierce air moved and changed, it was as though a strange inhuman voice spoke to me and said: ‘Who are you? Whose son are you? There is nothing for you here. Leave the city; go, go, all is over now.

As I sat up, undecided, wondering whether my ears were playing tricks on me, even whether I was going mad, I felt the earth beneath me shudder under the thick layer of bracken. As I looked about me, startled, the tall black image of the Mother seemed to shift slightly, swaying on its broad base. Life stirred in that cavern, but a strange inhuman life as though earth was stirring from a long sleep, shaking itself before visiting mankind with its long-pent up wrath. It was as though, all at once, earth was man’s enemy, his destroyer not his mother.

Then I had hardly time to fling myself sideways, as the tall stone image came down. I felt its base sliding, sucking the soil from under me, and I saw

its pinnacle, its unshaped head, coming over and over, as though it brushed the cavern roof. For a moment, it seemed to poise, without motion above me, and three white doves flew with a terrified beating of wings from, its crevices, and away into the light.

Then I leaped forward, making for the cave mouth, my feet crunching the dry white shells that covered the cave floor, just as the image heaved itself down with a sickening wrench onto the bracken where I had been lying. The air was full of dust, and then damp soil, of roots and wriggling worms which had never seen the light before. My eyes and mouth were covered with the things of earth, cast up by the tilting foundations of the plinth.

A brown snake slithered between my feet, hissing, and disappeared into the dry reeds beside the trickling stream. It seemed for a moment that the creature was warning me to follow, too, and I did so, no longer aware of any feeling but that of wishing to be clear of this threatening shrine.

As I burst my way up through the tangled boughs, I heard behind me a long, slow rumbling, like the deep breathing of an earth monster, and then the slow rustling, like a laughing whisper, that a thousand thousand small stones might make in slithering down into the pit. I paused for a breath and looked back over my shoulder; the cavern had gone, and the pine trees near it were gently keeling over, as though to lay themselves in homage over the place where it had been.

When, shuddering, I reached the hillock of Corinth, a new sign of the god met my eyes; all the mud-huts were down and flat with the earth, and where there had been the carcasses of folk or cattle, now there were only shapeless mounds of dust.

It was as though Poseidon had sickened of that city and had wiped it from earth's face, as though it had never been.

Then, as I stood alone, gazing in my bewilderment over this new desert, dark clouds came down and blotted out all sight of the surrounding hills; the air became thick and heavy, a sulphurous brown essence tinged the world, and jagged forks of lightning struck down, here and there, without purpose, or if with purpose, then an evil one.

I covered my head and ears with my upraised arms and ran, now deeply afraid, from what had been Corinth; and as I left the plain, the blue-black clouds split and echoed with a gigantic sound of laughter. As I glanced back, I saw the rain come down, as though it had never rained in the world before;

as though the god now wished to make complete his destruction, and wash away even my staggering footsteps from the dust.

13

I TOOK the northern track, along the ridge that ran towards the Isthmus. I was like a lost dog, searching for his master and not knowing which way to look. My heart was laden with guilt; I was the Guardian who had let the city fall while its King and Queen were away. I wanted to find Polybus and Periboea and to fall on my knees before them, begging their forgiveness. Then, again, in another mood, I felt some anger towards them, as though they had deserted me, had left me to bear an intolerable burden. Then I thought that if I met them, I would strike Polybus across the face and call him a coward.

For a while, I did not know what to do. I sat down on a rock, with the sea coming into view on either side of me, between the dark-boughed pines. Then, the hard dry feel of the javelin-shaft in my hands reminded me of Halesus, the wandering soldier, many years before, and I thought: Yes, that is what I will do; I will go to the cottage of Halesus and ask his counsel. He is a man of the world and will know what I should do.

It was late in the afternoon when I saw that cottage again, and the change in it saddened me. Most of the fine trees had been uprooted, or broken off clumsily by the winds. Half of the red-tiled roof had fallen in, to lay bare the moss-covered rafters that stood up like the forgotten bones of dead sailors on the sea-beds among the Cyclades. The vines, once so cleanly pruned and standing in rows, now straggled everywhere about the ground, brown and shrivelled in the leaf, and bearing fruit no larger than the smallest nail of my fingers. No doves purred upon the ridge; only a dusty and ruffled crow sat on the byre and watched me in silence with mocking black eyes.

At the door, I called, ‘Halesus, my friend, can I enter? It is Oedipus, old companion, am I welcome?’

I thought a voice within bade me enter, and so I pushed open the creaking door; but there was no welcome for me. What I had heard was a woman crying out for her own ears, not for mine. She sat, the woman of Halesus, in the middle of the floor, by the scattered ashes of a cold hearth-stone, her hair now wild and uncombed, an old hide flung about her, gazing vacantly and hardly seeing me as I stood in the doorway.

Clay vessels and stools lay smashed on the tiles; a clothes-chest stood, hacked open, the new wounds on its wood showing bright in the dimness. In a rush cradle, a baby cried hungrily, its thumb and fingers going time and again to its mouth.

I went forward and kneeled before the woman who raised her eyes to my face without interest. The only meaning in them was of weary fear. She was so unlike the merry girl I had once seen running out to greet her returned warrior.

I said, ‘Greetings, lady; do you remember me?’

At last she nodded and said, ‘I have reason to, as you will see if you look about you.’

‘What do you mean, lady? I have only been here once, and then I did not enter. All I saw was Halesus sweeping you into his arms like a god, and carrying you away. What have I done to you?’

She shook her tangled brown hair over her face and started to laugh weakly. Even the child in the rush basket was silent then for a space.

Suddenly she looked up, her eyes sharp now, and said, ‘Have you come to complete the misfortune you brought to this house? Is that it? Is that why you bring your javelin with you, Guardian of Corinth?’

I dropped the weapon from me, and as it clattered on the floor I took her hands and said, ‘What is it, lady? Tell me, I swear I do not know.’

Perhaps there was some honesty in my voice, which reached to her heart, for she nodded gravely and said, ‘There has been nothing but ill luck in this house since the day I first saw you, standing lame, beyond the vines at the road’s edge. You were the messenger of the Furies.’

I tried to smile at such a thought, though the effort was great for me, and I answered, waving my right hand about to indicate the hole in the roof and the shattered furniture, ‘But, lady, I do not control the winds! They destroyed the houses of Corinth equally with your cottage. Why, when Halesus comes back again from his wanderings, he will have the tiles back in a day, and the vines pruned and put in order within a week. He will . . .’

She turned her head away from me and said, ‘These things his hands will never do. Halesus lies under a heap of stones where the vineyard meets the stream. He will not move again, the javelin of Polybus saw to that.’

I was astounded. I looked at the baby boy in the cradle and judged him to be less than a year old. ‘This happened when the Corinthians came north

the last time?' I asked. But she waved aside my words and said, 'No, Halesus died for speaking your name in the same season that you came to this house. As the Corinthians came along the road with their cattle, my man stood outside and called, "What news of young Oedipus then? How is the lad faring?" And the King of Corinth, jumping from his cart, ran forward and said, "You speak of my adopted son, fellow, the Guardian of Corinth. How dare you be so familiar?" Halesus laughed then and said, "If he is any man's son, King, he is mine as much as yours—for I found the lad when he was lost, and kept him from all harm, and saw that his belly was filled when, otherwise, the poor fool would have starved." When he heard this, the King of Corinth gave a shout of anger and struck Halesus down. So you brought death on him, who was like a father to you.'

Her words struck at my deepest parts, for they echoed, as from the distance, my own old father's words that I would kill him; and tied in among the strands of the dream, somehow, was my mother falling in the dried stream-bed at Thebes, and old Metope the ewe toppling from the cliff-edge where I betrayed her. As I kneeled on the cold stone, I wondered if this woman of Halesus could be right, after all, in saying that I carried misfortune with me where I went . . . It was not a pleasant thought, and to wipe it out, I said, 'But, lady, all men suffer bad seasons in life, for it is the will of the gods, so that we do not grow too great in pride. The wind which struck your house, struck Corinth also.'

She began to rock back and forth, laughing and beating with half-clenched fists on her breast, not hard, for there was little force left in her, but almost as a ritual which must be observed even if without any feeling behind it. She said, 'This house lost its roof the season following Halesus' death, Oedipus. Two young warriors, Eurotas and Cleitus, came here by night and tore it down, saying it was by the King's command. And in the following year, they came again, just before the vine harvest, and trod the grapes into the ground, commanding me never again to tend them by order of the King. I tell you, they have harried me year by year, and all because my man stood out there in the road and asked news of you.'

I put my arms about her, to comfort her and not for any reasons of love; or, if there was any love at all, it was for dead Halesus, killed by the King I had grown to think of as my father.

For a moment, the woman shrank from me, but when I insisted, let herself be drawn towards me and at last put her own arms about me and wept. I said to her in a while, 'And the child in the cradle, sister. Whose is that, since Halesus has been gone so long?'

Bitterly she laughed and said, ‘Whose is it? Look in his face and see if you can tell! His fathers are every man of the Guardian’s Company, for all I know. They came and slaughtered what cattle I had left, and then with the blood still on their hands used me.’

Shocked, I said, ‘But they were little more than lads, my last Company, not one of them would outface a goose. I have seen them tremble when a wild dog came from the thicket at them.’

She sighed and said, ‘They knew well enough what to do, Oedipus. And what they did required no courage.’

I stood now, stern in mind, and said, ‘I will hunt them down, sister, for I think they have gone northwards the same way that I am going. As for the child, if its being causes you pain, I will take it to the hill myself. I am the lord of the men who got it on you; it is my duty to rid you of the burden.’

She sprawled full length upon the floor now, laughing as though she had no power to stop. Then, looking up at my amazed face with her tear-stained one, said, ‘Be rid of him! By Zeus, but he is all I have left to love now! They even put the spear into our old watch-dog before they left. The one Halesus cared for so much when he came home.’

All this was beyond my simple wit to understand. For me, in those youthful days, the truth was black or white, not grained and whorled with green and grey, as it becomes to an older man.

To save myself from thinking too savagely, I set about the duty of putting the woman’s house in order. The sun had come out again, and day after day I sat upon the roof-ridge, setting the tiles in place sawing new rafters to replace broken old ones, until at last the friendly doves came back, sensing that kindness had returned to the air, seeing the mild blue smoke rise from the chimney once again.

And when this was done, I cut back the vines, and took a hoe and cleared the weeds which had sprung up between them. I even beat out nails of bronze and repaired the splintered clothes-chest. There seemed nothing I could not turn my hand to at that time, though I had never done such work before.

One morning, as I sat, sweating in the sun, feeling almost whole and clean again, a piece of oak between my knees and an adze in my hand, trying to shape a table-leg, the woman, Minthe, came to me with a wine-flask and a piece of soft white bread. I said, ‘But you are wearing your finest

fleece robe, Minthe: and, look, your hair is as bright and tended as when I first saw you. And you have painted your eyes, you hussy!'

She gave me the food and drink but said nothing. Yet between us, as I ate and drank, swallowing noisily for something to do, there passed a dart of warmth which made the muscles of my belly quiver. I held out the empty flask and the wooden platter for her to take back to the house, but though she took them, she let them fall behind her as she came to me and stood close by me, so that her breasts were against my cheek. Then, as she stroked my hair, she whispered, 'Oedipus, no one has been more gentle with me than you have, not even Halesus himself. The season of giving is upon me, you merit your reward.'

The ends of her gleaming bronze hair were against my lips; I brushed them away and said, 'My reward is in rendering you the justice you deserve, Minthe. And later I shall seek out those who have wronged you and shall bring home their error to them.'

Without warning, she let fall the pin which kept the folds of her robe together, so that the heavy cloth fell open and my face suddenly lay against her body. She had scented it with the wild mint from which she took her name, and that, and the musk which mingled with it, struck sharply at my nostrils, enclosed as they were by the heavy robe and drawn forth from her by the sun that lay outside the warm tent of wool.

Above me, she whispered, 'You will never find them, the gad-flies, for they will have been swallowed by the forests and the hills. Or they will have gone to the greatest gad-flies of all, their King and Queen, the black-faced cattle-herders.'

She came even closer to me, and seemed unable to help what she did with her hands and her body. 'Minthe,' I said, 'Minthe, sister.'

She laughed, deep and quietly in her throat and said, 'Carry me into the house, as Halesus did. Do that for him, for his memory, if you will not do it for yourself.'

She was as light and warm as a bird with the sun on its breast-feathers. And when I had laid her on her bed, I saw that the room was clean and decorated with small branches of pine, and the flowers of wild lily and asphodel. She must have been picking these while I had worked in the vineyard that morning. I glanced round, but could not see the baby in its rush cradle. This was like the silent waiting bower of a maiden.

Lying back, her blue eyes closed, she said, ‘You are so strong, Oedipus, yet your heart beats as though you are afraid. Do not be afraid of me, friend, for there is no harm in me, only love, only the wish to please you, to pay back kindness with kindness.’

Her hands were holding me so firmly that I could not draw away from her. Yet there was about me that same feeling I had had with the village-Geilissa at the wine-feast; it was almost a pain, as though I was bound with a cord somewhere, tied so that every movement was against the sharp thread that held me in, a writhing prisoner.

Minthe was gentle with me, as though she knew of this keen binding-cord and wished to untie it with careful fingers, but still it stayed. Then, later, she was like a thirsty traveller who sets her mouth to the stoppered spout of a flask but cannot cause the wine to flow, however hard she works with teeth and lips at the wooden cork.

There was a smallness in me, I knew now, a failing which kept me from perfection, however skilful I had made myself as a warrior, as a javelin-thrower. I wished I could be away from that sweetly-scented room, outside on the roof, hammering tiles, or in the orchard, sawing wood under the sun. There, at such simple tasks, I knew what my hands were about. But here, though she guided them, they were clumsy helpless things.

Yet, at last, she smoothed my furrowed brow and said with her patient smile, ‘There, Oedipus, at least it was a little wedding. It was something, my love—and in time the vine may bear more grapes.’

I sat, the least of men, for a while, in silence. Then I went to the outer shed where the baby was now crying, and took him up in my arms and held him to my chest. His tiny mouth nuzzled against me, seeking, and his small fingers closed about my useless breast.

Minthe watched me, smiling, as she stirred meal into the goat’s milk in a clay pot, to make a porridge for us both. She said, ‘Together, we could teach this child to become a good man. In this world, there are so few good men that this would be a great work, Oedipus.’

I did not know what to answer, but feeling called to say something, I asked, ‘What name have you given him, Minthe?’

She turned her face towards the meal-bowl as she stirred, and answered, ‘I think of him as Agamemnon, for that means “most resolute”, and I can tell you that when he is hungry, there is no man more resolute, although this one has no teeth to bite with yet!’

While the porridge cooked, I watched her feeding the child, and a great peace came on me to see the love that flowed from her with the milk. I even went to her, half in game, and set my own bearded lips at her breast, as the child paused to take breath. She hugged me to her and said, laughing, ‘So, you would have me for your mother, not your wife, Oedipus!’

As I kneeled back, laughing, she sent a white squirt of milk into my face, as though it was all a great jest, as though she was Aphrodite, come again, and filling the sky with stars. ‘Do not rob the little one, King,’ she said. ‘You are big enough to fend for yourself.’

And when the child was asleep in his rush cradle, she and I sat at our evening meal, no longer needing to talk so as to kill the silence of the house. Then, when we had finished and Minthe had washed the platters we had eaten from, she came to me and said, so gently, ‘We are drawing closer all the while, Oedipus, with every breath we take. Let us make the offering to each other once more; perhaps the gods have made it their will now, and the knot may be untied.’

But, yet again, the binding cord was there, and though my heart-beats mingled with hers, I was like a traveller who longs to make the journey which his weak legs will not carry him on, and so he must remain outside the shrines he would have visited, like a forbidden stranger.

I did not sleep as she did afterwards, but lay in the dawn, watching the pale amber light paint her sweet pale face, touch the bronze of her body, as though kissing it gently so as not to waken her. And as I looked down at her, I thought: Not even Periboea was so beautiful, not even that long-legged Queen with the red ochre in her hair and the scars of courage on her body.

And this thought led me to my own duty in the world. It was to seek out Polybus and Periboea and to tell them that Corinth was destroyed by the gods. And then, to seek out my Company and to punish them for their wrongs to Minthe. That was as far as my thoughts would go, in that sweet dawn-time.

So I slipped quietly from the bed, and taking up my javelin, went towards the door. The baby, Agamemnon, saw me go, for even my gentle stirring had wakened him. But though his great blue eyes were fixed on me, he did not cry out. It was as though he was in this plot beside me. I went to him quietly and bending over him said, ‘Have no fear, little one, I will come back to you both, when my task is done.’

The child seemed to know what my words meant, for suddenly he smiled and held out his hands towards me, as though to bid me farewell.

I shook my head and moved away from him, out of the house. On the doorstep I laid a small goatskin bag, containing what gold and jewels, mostly Cretan seals, I had gathered up from the deserted city. ‘Father Zeus,’ I said silently, looking up at the dawn sky, ‘these things I leave as a sign of my return and my gratitude. I beg you, Father, see that Minthe and the child lack for nothing until I come to them again, which I surely shall. This I vow, Father, and may you punish me with the worst of torments, even with falling —aye, even with that—if I do not keep my word!’

So, almost running now with fear of the words which had escaped my lips, I went through the vineyard and out onto the white road that led northwards through the Isthmus.

14

IT was no easy going; the season was one of thunder and sudden dark storms which blotted out the pathway, sometimes leaving me within a foot of the cliff-edge. The sea below me was black now, tinged with deep green, and boiling at the shore's lip. I was glad when the road fell again among woods, though this was the place most travellers dreaded because of the robbers who waited there.

But I was not the same boy who had once walked this road beside Halesus. I was a head taller than any man I had seen, apart from King Polybus and Halesus himself, and my arms were now so strong that I felt I could cast a javelin through the trunk of an oak tree. Besides, there was this pride in my heart that I was the Guardian of Corinth, and the son of a King and a Queen.

A group of black-haired men waylaid me on the third day, for I was walking whistling and making no secret of my coming. They suddenly appeared before and behind me, growing out of the rocks, rough cudgels in their hands. I stood, as though I did not notice them, and smoothed my red-ochred hair and brushed down the fringes of the bull-hide apron I still wore, after the fashion of Corinth.

I gave them every chance to come at me, if they wished, and they all knew it. And when they stood still, silently watching me like dogs afraid to go to meet the lion, I flared out my nostrils as cattle-herders do, and said into the air above them, 'A dead dog lies somewhere; no one could mistake the stench.'

This was the Corinthian challenge, but no one answered it. Instead, the old man who was their leader came forward, his cudgel thrust into his hide belt so that I should see he intended peace, and said, 'It is a long time since Halesus brought you down here, Oedipus, and now the puppy has grown into a lion indeed.'

They all put their staffs beneath their arm-pits, and we went to their village among the caves, where a fire was burning and women were

preparing acorn porridge. It was bitter fare, but good enough to fill the stomach on a journey such as mine.

I asked them if they had seen any youths of the Company passing this way. They told me that there had been some, perhaps a dozen, all of them laughing-drunk and next to helpless. I asked if they had carried anything worth taking, but the robber-chief shook his head and said, 'We do not touch Corinthians, Oedipus, whatever they carry. That is our law here among the rocks. We have a proverb: "Disturb a Corinthian, and turn over a beehive." No, the oldest Corinthian could walk down the Isthmus laden with gold, and he would never know that we had watched him go.'

I made some pretence of disliking their barley-beer, screwing up my face and even spitting the stuff out, and then said, 'What of the King and Queen of Corinth? They are long due back at their city, of which I am the Guardian. Do you know where they are grazing now?'

A young woman with a monkey's face suddenly laughed and pointed her finger upwards to the sky. But the robber-chief struck her across the shins with his hazel-switch and sent her hopping away from the fire. Then, turning to me with a solemn face, he said, 'You are the Guardian, yes; but you know as well as we do that there is no city. The gods have seen to that.'

I did not wish the man to hold any advantage over me, so I flung the dregs of my beer into the fire, and held out the horn for more. And when a woman had filled it, I drank slowly, as though my mind was heavy with great thoughts. Then, wiping my lips and coming back easily to the matter in hand, I said, 'They rebuild Corinth every year. It is nothing for grazing-folk. Such as we can create a city overnight, where nothing stood before.'

The old man looked away from me and spat into the fire. He said, 'To build a city, there must be hands to set up the bricks and timbers. A city does not grow of itself, like a mushroom, Oedipus.'

I said, 'Corinthians have hands, old man, big, strong hands, with long fingers that can hold in a bull or cast a javelin, one thing as easily as the other.'

He drew with his horny finger in the dust beside his knees, then said, 'Guardian, there is some news which travels no farther than an old woman may throw a bullock.'

Then he looked away again, as though afraid to speak.

I said, 'Do the gnats always bite as badly as they are doing now, old man? I think they congregate here because you do not clear the bracken out.

On the plain, at Corinth, we set fire to it each year, to destroy their nesting-place. It is a good custom.'

The old man stared at me and said, 'The bracken will not be burned this year at Corinth. Those who would burn it have sailed away to Egypt.'

I nodded and smiled at him, in tolerance, as a great lord should at a peasant, then said, 'No bracken, no gnats, you understand? It is the same with flies. Now if a carcass is left lying about, old man, there you will be plagued with flies. I have heard it said that the flies come by the will of the gods, but I can tell you . . .'

He did not wait for me to finish, and I was glad, for I was talking only to fill the void of silence between us.

He said, 'Up on the northern plains all the cattle have died, Oedipus. Some say the gods burned up the grass to starve them; others say that great floods came down and drowned them; and still others swear that Sarmatians have moved southwards and driven away all the cattle of the Hellenes. I am a simple man, and do not know which is the truth. But I can tell you, with my hand upon my heart, that Polybus and Periboea, and all their folk able to walk and to carry a javelin, have gone in ships from Trachis towards the Nile. That is where their fathers came from, and where their gods call them to now, in their time of disaster. So, you see, there will be no city-building, no bracken-burning.'

I stood up and weighed my javelin in my right hand, directing its point towards the headman. I said, looking over his shoulder, without seriousness, 'Are you the horn that the gods blow through, then, when messages are to be given to the world?'

He shook his gnarled head and laid his palms out flat in the dust before me, showing no fear. He said, 'I am an old man, who takes from rich travellers what they cannot live to use, no more. The message I give you comes not from the gods, but from a sailor we met and fed here, two moons ago. He was in the foremost ship, which carried the King and Queen of Corinth. He could say what they wore, what they ate, what words they spoke. He held out his hand for the Queen to lean on when she stepped into the land of Egypt.'

I began to laugh and to throw my javelin up into the air. 'Where is this old sailor, man?' I asked. 'I would like to put a question or two at him myself.'

The headman bowed his face and answered, ‘He did not stay with us long. He became too fond of my eldest son’s wife, and so he went away, very suddenly, to the place from which they do not come back. But, to prove my words, here is the gift the Queen gave him when he had set her feet on the sand.’

From the hide pouch at his waist, he drew a small seal of gold, marked with a bull’s horns, between which was engraved a staring eye. I had seen this seal before, many times, hanging between Periboea’s breasts. I had seen it lying in the dust, the day she fell in the bull-pen, running to glory after the King.

And as I held the gold seal in my fingers, a sadness came from it, a coldness, the winter that truth can bring in its simplest words.

I said fiercely to the man, ‘You shall not have this back. I shall keep it, for I was closest to them both.’

I had expected him to flare up, and shout, and to wave his arms about as peasants do; but he only smiled and nodded. Then he said, ‘I already knew you would speak those words, before I brought this seal from my pouch. Take it and keep it, for it is all you have left of the Queen, your mother, now.’

If he had wished, this old man could have taken me then, for all the strength had drained from me, and I was no more the warrior than I had been when I met him first, walking beside Halesus. But he dealt kindly with me, and said, ‘Your life has come to its cross-roads, Oedipus. You are a King without a kingdom, a son without a Mother.’

I said to him humbly, all my pride gone, ‘What should I do, old man? What is there to do?’

He shrugged his brown shoulders and said, ‘If you were of our folk, I would say, “Go out and rob a trader, some old Phoenician or other”. For that takes a man’s mind off his grief, to hear these fellows squealing out! But since you are a warrior, and a Corinthian yourself now, I cannot advise you. I suppose, among great folk like you, the thing would be to go to Delphi, and there at the shrine of Hera, ask advice of greater than I am.’

I thought for a while, then said, ‘I will do as you say, old thief. But one thing I ask of you—while I am away, for long or short, will you see that Minthe, who was the wife of Halesus, is guarded? Will you swear to keep her safe from all harm?’

He smiled and nodded. ‘I will do that,’ he said. ‘But when you come again, I shall put a price on my labours. Is that well, Oedipus?’

I said, ‘That is well. Ask what you will, it will be given to you. By this seal, I swear it. And may they put nails through my hands and feet if I do not pay my debt.’

15

IN the days before the god came to Delphi, Hera Crone had her grotto there. It lay at the further end of a high cavern, and was a natural cell under the earth, approached from above by a sloping gallery out in the rock. Down there, the air was thick with sulphur-smoke, for from a wide rift in the floor the earth's entrails bubbled and from time to time flung up sparks, hot ashes and molten metals. Cretans had held this shrine once, judging by the broken pots and the green-tarnished bronze tripods they had left behind, half-buried under white ash; but when I went to Delphi for the first time in my life, there were no priests, no interpreters of the Oracle, and not even any catch-penny farmers waiting to sell half-starved white lambs to those who came seeking the truth.

When I reached Delphi, it was late fall, and the winds which flowed down from Parnassus were heavy with the threat of rain. I looked for a city, or at least houses and taverns where a man might stay, but there were only a few rows of blackened hutments, many of them in ruins, and cave-holes on the hillside overlooking the shrine, out of which pale-faced folk gazed down, beckoning me to share their homes.

I climbed up to one of these, but the odours from refuse left outside the door halted me, and what followed sent me running back. It was an old woman, whose shrivelled dugs hung flat like purses on her belly, and whose hair had all fallen out, save for a strand above each long ear. She opened her toothless mouth and pointed into it, then gestured to another part, asking for food, making a promise in return. I thought: If truth is to be found here, then Hellas has truly fallen into ruin.

Poets have since sung that Hellas, like every other land, has had its summers and its winters, its times of fame and of famine, of robust health and sickness near to death. I think I came upon Delphi in its hour of decay, before Bright Apollo leaped down and nursed it back to youth again.

When I entered the shrine of Hera Crone, the cavern seemed deserted. I avoided the ordures and yellowing bones that littered the floor and, holding my hand over my mouth, made my way to the sloping gallery which led below.

The acrid smell of sulphur came up at the nostrils like heated vinegar, but its sharpness, covering the scent of decay in the outer cave, was almost welcome. At least, one could put a name to it.

I went down, feeling my way, until I stood within the dim light cast by a fat-lamp perched on a stone ledge; and below me I saw a rivulet of russet-red that seemed to glow and fade in time with the breaths I took. Testing it, I breathed fast, and watched the red glow in time with me; then I drew in a deep breath and held it until my lungs almost burst; the bright red glow stayed steady.

I wondered how this fissure in the earth, this wound full of fiery blood, could know what lay in my secret heart; then, as I gazed down, the red eye closed as though winking, as though covered by a lid of white ash, and from it there issued a puff of yellowish-green smoke that shot upwards for a yard before dispersing itself in the air. It was like the breath of such monsters as the poets tell us roamed in the dawn world of giants, before the gods were born to create order and reason among the creatures.

This thought was in my heart when, from below, a thin and mocking voice called up to me, ‘Leave your javelin behind you, Corinthian; then come down and say your say.’

I could not tell whether it was a man or a woman speaking; there were echoes of both in the high-pitched voice, as it fled like a bat about the cavern roof.

Putting on my most commanding tone, I called, ‘Is it the Pythoness who speaks to me?’

The red fissure began to glow again, throbbing with my excitement, and above the pulsing sound which came from it, I heard a laugh, and then that voice again, saying, ‘Aye, Shepherd of the Empty Pastures, call it the Pythoness if that gives you courage. Come down.’

Empty-handed now, I trod the slope towards the lower floor, and there, sitting on a great stone, I made out the figure of a woman, shrouded in a grey robe which covered the head, and dragged upon the ground. In her left hand she held a pair of bronze scales, while with her right she took pinch after pinch of sand from a wooden bowl beside her, feeding it first into one balance, then into the other, so that the yard-arm from which they hung was always still.

More to put myself at ease than anything else, I said in my deepest voice, ‘That is a pretty pastime, Pythoness, weighing sand-grains!’

The old woman looked up at me, her hands quite still, the delicate balance in them untrembling, and I saw that her face below the eyes was covered with a grey cloth. But her brown eyes smiled above the cloth, though not in a way which gave me the ease I sought. She said, ‘It is not perhaps as pretty as you think. I am weighing the life of a King, Corinthian, putting his good deeds in the one pan and his bad in the other.’

She stared at me so directly, my legs began to tremble. I said, ‘He will be pleased to know that his life has been so evenly balanced. That must come to few men.’

She turned her head away from me and coughed, or laughed, I could not tell which. Then, almost whispering, she said, ‘He will never know. The answer will be given to higher than Kings. Nay, though the poor fool gallops his horses to death, on the rocky road from Thebes to Delphi, he will not reach this place in time to know.’

I sat down, unbidden, on a flat-topped stone, and said, ‘A fruitless journey is always a sad one.’ It was a witless thing to say, but all that would come to my tongue then. I was sweating and shuddering, weary from my own journey, and fearful, deep in my heart, now that I had come to the Pythoness at last.

She set the balance aside most gently and, never taking her eyes from me now, said, ‘Have you not yet learned that all journeys are fruitless ones? Even those of the lover to his waiting woman’s door? For though he should enjoy her, what follows will bring him disaster. The son he cradles so lovingly in his arms will one day come to full manhood and put a javelin in his father. All pleasures lead to pain, and all journeys to the chasm’s edge, the fall.’

I said in anger then, ‘If this is the only message there is for man to know, then life is an empty flask, and the heroes have wasted their time setting it to their lips.’

The Pythoness rocked backward and forward, chuckling behind the grey cloth that hid her lower face. ‘The heroes,’ she said. ‘All fools, all children.’

I thought of Polybus among the bulls, of Halesus driving back the robbers in the stony gorge, and I said, ‘You, a dry old creature sitting in the dark, a thing of rags among the world’s offals! You dare to belittle men of courage, in whose hair the sun makes his light to shine? Next you will scorn the gods themselves. Next you will say you can out-yell the thunder!’

I was still shaking in my passion, alone in a circle of dim light, when the walls of the cavern seemed to throb, then boom, and the rocky floor beneath my feet shuddered as a horse's hide will when gad-flies light upon it. Amazed, I glanced down and saw that grey dust was rising about my knees with the tremor of the earth.

'Trickery! Trickery!' I shouted. 'I am a Prince of Corinth, old hag. That sets me close to the gods, and makes me their guardian. Sense should be shaken into you before you bring down disrepute on all men's dreams and understanding.'

I was taking my first step across the swaying floor when suddenly a great deep pain flowered within the left side of my body, then shot upwards like a knife inside my chest towards my throat. I halted and gasped, for it seemed that my gullet was on fire, and I tried to raise my hand to it, but felt such agonies in both my arms, from elbow to finger-tips, that I stood dripping sweat and terrified to move. Inside my mouth there was such a stench, such an uncleanness, that I thought myself to have been struck with rottenness where I stood, like an ancient oak before its time has come to fall. And as I glared at the old woman, my eyes seemed to strain against their lids, as though about to burst from my head, and across my sight there crawled a fiery worm, moving from right to left, and blotting out all else with the glowing legs or hairs that waved about its wriggling body.

In the moment of light still left me, I wondered whether I had been smitten from behind by dagger or arrow, or whether there was poison in that sulphurous air which had brought on my death. This, then, was why the Pythoness wore that strip of grey cloth across her mouth, so that she should not breathe the foul fumes of the place.

I was still worrying at this thought when the dust of the cavern rose about my head and I pitched forward into it, glad to be rid of my torment. The dry sound of the old woman's laughter was in my ears as I fell, mingled with the deep throbbing of the fire, and the distant booming of the cavern walls. It was good to die, and pass away from the thick and stifling horror of the place.

16

NOW a strange dream came to me. I thought I was in a deep cavern, but not the one in which my agony had come upon me; or, if that one, at another time in past or future, when I was something other than myself.

And in this dream I was lying on a tumbled heap of hides and bracken, gazing about me silently in the twilit dusk, turning my eyes from point to point about the cavern as flames from a wood-fire lit up the dark and rocky walls.

All round the grotto were ledges of stone, and set in rows upon these shelves were countless rocks, it seemed, all of them of a round shape, but of many sizes. Some were so small that a man's hand might have enclosed them; others were too great to hold in one hand. There were still others whose round shape was half-hidden by harsh and flowing strands of grey or reddish weed, that made me shudder in my dream and think of a dead man's hair.

I was thinking this when my eyes fell towards the glowing fire and I saw that a man was sitting there on a low stool and watching me with bright dark eyes.

He was one of the most handsome men I had ever seen, with a long oval face and a curled black beard. His skin was the colour of sun-bleached ivory, and his black eyes were so great that they seemed to flare in his head. From his fine silken tunic of crimson, hung about with golden fringes, I guessed him to be a king of some rich country. The gold rings on his arms and fingers glinted in the firelight. A sword that lay by his feet glowed red as though it was a living thing.

This splendid man saw my eyes on him and smiled at me. I saw his white teeth shining in the dusk of the cavern, the dog-teeth more pointed than most I had ever seen.

He said in a gentle, low voice, 'So, you have come to my counting-house, Oedipus. I had expected that you might turn your steps towards this place, but hardly as soon as this.'

In my dream I spoke back to him and said, ‘I know you, but I do not know your name. I had not meant to come here, but I arrived all the same.’

The man nodded his darkly glistening head and said, smiling, ‘All the folk you see here have said the same, since the dawn-time of the world. All have come here to rest but three days, and have even rolled a stone across the entrance so that they might be undisturbed. Yet something has come to them all and has disturbed them, and then has made them stay. See, the folk, the many folk who have come to the sepulchre!’

Without looking at them, the man waved with his arms as though to draw my eyes towards the laden ledges of the cavern. And then I saw that what I had taken to be rocks were the skulls of men.

I saw this with no horror then, but only a great interest, and I said, most knowingly, ‘Ah, but there must be some error in your counting-house. Your scribes have set together coin of different places, for these are not all of one sort and cannot be exchanged in the market-place, as they are.’

The man rose and, holding his bearded chin in his right hand, paced about, casting a long shadow, and pausing from time to time to look at the heads and then back at me where I lay watching.

He said, ‘You are a brisk young fellow to be walking alone through the world, Oedipus. I do not know whether or not it would be a kindness to you to kill you, and so put an end to a quest which can only disappoint such a clever young fellow as you are.’

I laughed at this, as though he was making a great jest, and I said, ‘Since I am to become a hero and then a king, it matters little whether you kill me or not; for I shall rise again after the third day, and shall ascend to the right hand of Zeus, as is foretold by the prophets.’

The black-haired man pinched his thin lips together then and nodded, in complete agreement with me. ‘Yes,’ he said calmly, ‘of all the folk that have left their heads here, yours is to speak the longest and loudest. Rise and bid them greeting, since you are to outlive them, my friend.’

I was standing beside this tall man, whose shoulders were high above my head, and following his pointing finger. There was a newly-cut head on a lower ledge, with hair on its damp cheeks and long yellow plaits hanging from the dome of its skull. The tall man touched the cold forehead lightly and said, ‘This was a king of Egypt. He went forth in his chariot so often against the sand-folk that in the end he thought that his bare hide was proof

enough against all javelins. Yet, as you see, there was one point that found its way inside and stopped the beating of his heart at last.'

I pushed the man's hand aside and said, 'Tell me of this trophy, this which is of yellow bone and has no flesh or hair. This, with the bars of blue and russet streaked across its dome.'

The black-haired king hung his head low and said, 'I must confess his name escapes me, Oedipus. It is so long ago, perhaps it was in the time of another House than that of Cadmus. Yet I think it was a chieftain of the Hyperboreans, they who first set up the grey stones in the mists to call the sun back to their island. I know no more.'

I began to laugh then, as though I had indeed caught this great king out in error, and I said, 'Very well, kinglet, if you do not know all things, then have the wit to invent a story that will pacify me. Look, what of this skull? Now, what of this, I say?'

I pointed to a flat bone thing that, when it was a man's, could have borne but small flesh on its surface. A brownish scum of hide still held to it, and from this flowed an arm's length of reddish hair, but so coarse that even a horse would have been ashamed of it. The upper teeth that still remained were large and square and as yellow as a buried ox-bone.

The black-haired king put his arm about my neck and said, in great sadness, 'He is of the First Folk, Oedipus. This was the first great king of all, who watched the sun come up on its maiden voyage over the ice-floes, and spoke the first prayer that would fetch up the bright fire day by day until our own weak times. Do homage to this man, if we shall call him man, for he is the beginning of us all, the father.'

I said, amazed, 'And is this Zeus, then? This the sun-springer?'

The black-haired king nodded, gravely, and I could not doubt his word. He said, 'Aye, this is how we began, my friend. From this flattened bone with its russet hair, and underneath it a knowledge of the pointed stick that would bring down a roebuck or plait a thong so that our families could cross a river, bundles on their backs. This is our beginning, now kneel and pray to this.'

I was about to obey this tall man's command, and kneel as he had said. But, suddenly from the corner of my eye, I saw his white hand reaching back behind me into the shadows, as though it was about to grasp the sword that winked so redly underneath the stool in the dying fire's glow.

So I smiled up at him and whispered, ‘No, friend, you do not catch me as easily as that! What, do you think I have come through my trials so far to let a ghost-king take my head off in a stinking cave?’

When I said this, the black-haired man shrank down to my own stature, and no longer had his long fingers about my neck. He was no longer greater than I, but my equal. He smiled and said, as though lovingly, ‘I am glad in my heart that you did not kneel when I said, Oedipus brother, for I should have felt remorse, as bitter as winter’s wind, to have your head upon the ledge, staring at me through the future, when you might have been sitting beside me at the fireside here.’

I nodded negligently at this and began to stroll about the cavern, snapping my fingers, no longer lame, but as strong in the ankle as an ox.

I said, ‘Tell me, brother, what is the next test then?’

The black-haired one shrugged his shoulders and spoke so quietly that I could scarcely hear his words.

‘There is yet another cavern, leading off from this,’ he said, ‘and in that place waits the Queen of all Things. She lies in her downy bed, this Queen of Heaven, waiting for the hero-king who has looked upon Zeus here and has come away unscathed by my sword of stone.’

I was truly amazed then, and said, ‘Is the sword made of stone, brother? It glinted so redly, I thought it was of gold from Outland.’

He took up the sword and drew it from its calf-skin scabbard. ‘See,’ he said proudly, ‘it is of red flint. Yet it carries the edge that was first put on it, when the sun made its original step over the mountains of dusk to bring growth to the corn.’

I ran my thumb along the flint-edge and found that what he said was true. This blade would have felled the stoutest oak of Dodona in one chop. It would have taken the four legs of a dragon from under it as easily. This was the sword on which the world spun, the world’s sword, out of the original red flint of the world, the sword of death and youth and immortality.

I said to the black-haired king, ‘For such a sword, I would run any race, swim any river, leap into any fire.’

He put his lips close to mine and said, ‘Aye, but would you leap off any rock?’

His words touched my deepest fear and staggered me. He drew me up out of the dark safety of my conceit into the clear light of his taunting, like

fish on hook, and said again to me, ‘Would you jump down?’

Now I could feel myself pushing up as from the sea-bottom towards the surface of the water; and soon I must come out into the light of waking, and leave my dream. ‘Would you jump down?’ he kept saying.

With a loud splash I broke the green water’s surface, like a great fish flailing his tail and shimmering in the sunlight, the bellows of my lungs threshing to gain salt breath not air, my long jaws snapping at the line that dragged me out.

‘No,’ I yelled, ‘no! But I would meet you half-way. I would hang from a tree!’

I heard my words echoing about the distant caverns, out of one into another, until the end of time, or its beginning, I did not know, each repetition growing fainter and fainter, until all that was left was a whisper, then a faint sigh, then nothing louder than the sound smoke makes, rising from a dying fire.

And all at once his voice came back to me, close to my ear, as it had been before. He said, ‘Hang from a tree; that is a good answer my brother. That offers a good bargain, Oedipus. I will be content. Now come, to seal the bargain, let us go forth to greet the Queen of Heaven.’

I went with him, my hand in his, a little child, and he once again far taller than I was; so tall that now his head was lost in all the shadows of the cavern-roof, and I could only hear his distant words by straining all my being. Only hear them in my inner head, not with my ears, not with man’s common understanding, but the understanding that comes to earth-worms when they break through to the light, or to bats in the deep darkness when they slip away in mid-flight from a rock they do not see, but which would shatter their frail bodies if they struck it in their swoop.

17

NOW we stood on a stone platform, looking out and down over a great cavern that lay beneath us. In the purple air of the hidden place, pinnacles of stone hung down, like a forest upside down below our eyes, all glistening and dripping with an ichor of the earth that cast off a scent of emptiness and chill.

His great hand loosed mine now, as though to give me leave to jump from that ledge into the half-dark if I chose. 'Brother,' he whispered, echoing, 'brother!'

I waited, wondering what his next words would be. I did not breathe in case I smothered what he had to say. Yet when he spoke it was deeply inside my heart that I did not need to fear I should not hear it. He said, 'Watch what I do, then listen.'

I saw one of his great hands take a black hair from his other arm and twitch it from the skin. His fingers held the hair a while, curling, writhing as though life lay in it, then let it fall from the platform into the purple dusk.

I watched it float down and down, strange lights glinting on it as it went, until it fell right away from us, beneath our feet, swirling like the seed-pods of the sycamore.

It was a lifetime falling, and at last I looked up at the black-haired king and said, 'That fall has no ending. Are we to wait here for ever then?'

He did not answer me, but, listening with his head cocked on one side, placed his cold hand upon my arm. Then, with a strange smile, he nodded as though the moment he had waited for had come.

From down below there came a dull thudding, then a great booming, as of bronze gates clanging in a hidden tomb. This sound echoed up to us from down below, shuddering along the walls of stone, shaking our solid platform, then going on among the pinnacles of hanging rock, playing among them like breezes in an earthly forest, breaking off twigs and branches, but now of stones, showering us with flakes of stone, with bat's droppings, with the grey feathers of pigeons, with dried egg-shells from which the birds had fled ten generations ago.

The voice above me said, ‘And now look down!’

Far, far below, a sea of amber eyes glowed up at us, each one as searching as a sword. It was as though the distant cavern-floor was thick with eyes that shifted in a swarming mass, seething pale like curdled milk, or like the myriad maggots on a dead goat’s hide, or like a shoal of fishes in a moonlit sea, just underneath the surface, watching and waiting.

I said in fear, ‘What is it, brother?’

Then the black king said, ‘We have announced our presence to the Court of Heaven, and now they wait your coming, Oedipus.’

I looked across the balustrade of stone and saw below the surging swarm of creatures, brown and grey, that moved so fast in all directions no eye could follow them.

I said, ‘I cannot go amongst them. They are not men.’

The black king stroked my hair and whispered then, ‘What men call men is not the dream we dream. I have seen man-seed that would have grown to be as fine a warrior as Heracles, yet tumbled into the world when hardly heated in the womb’s dark oven. Is that a man-shape? What is it then? Man got it, and given due protraction it would be as finely shaped as any oak-grove god. Yet now it lies upon the grass, a snail? A worm? What is it then?’

I took the hem of his garment and tried to drag away from that awful place of watching. ‘Let us go back into the counting-house,’ I cried.

He took me by the hair and said, ‘And I have seen great kings after a year below the ground. No one would call them men, my friend. Not when the earth has drawn their substance off again. Yet what are they? What name should be emblazoned on the tomb that covers such remains?’

Then, as I stood beside his knee, struggling to find the thought that would have let me answer him, the winding slope that came upwards like a spiral from the dark below was filled with life and glowing eyes. I heard sounds as of running water, and of leathery carcasses rubbing against each other, mounting towards me, then swirling round me, smothering me, and over all the black king laughing with his head among the pinnacles of rock.

‘Go with them, down, my friend,’ he said. ‘When you have once lain with the Queen of Heaven, nothing more can harm you, brother. No, you will stand with feet more stubborn than rocks, and will outface great kings and heroes. Once you have passed this test, no falling from the cliff-top, no

hanging from the tree, can frighten you. Go in peace, brother, oh, go in peace and do not fight the warp, you who are the weft.'

His high voice towered away from me, then soared until it rose out of that high-domed cavern, and I was left alone among the swarming hordes.

And as they lifted me and bore me downwards, I thought: I have seen all this before, among the ants and termites of the earth. Here there are workers and, at their flanks to keep the stream in line, gaunt-fanged warrior-folk. Yet these are so enormous, each one much like a bull in size.

They carried me as though I was a piece of straw, or the edge of a laurel leaf torn off to line a nest. I rolled about upon their backs, flailing my arms and legs to get away, but always being put in place again by some great-pincered warrior at the side.

And as we spiralled down, the air was full of heavy humming sounds, much like the strings of a mountain-harp, left outside some shepherd's door in Thessaly—but louder, heavier, more fearful, and not made by strings.

And at last, after a year of wandering, we passed over the great floor of the echoing cavern and so into a long tunnel hewn out of the rock, where the carrier-ants lifted me so carelessly and held me so close to the roof that I was bruised and stifled, and lay like a man drowned below the ground in a sea of limestone.

And in the end we came to a cell scarcely bigger than my father's house on the hill-top, the place where I was born among the sheep. Yet this place was far holier than my father's house. This I could tell by the great silence which had fallen over the swarming ranks that carried me. I felt myself sliding from their backs, and standing in the doorway, my legs trembling. Behind, a wordless whisper seemed to say, 'The man has come to ask your blessing, Queen of Heaven. Oedipus has come at last.'

Behind me a stone was rolled into the entrance way, and there was no going back. I stared, with widened eyes, before me through the dusk. The cave was lit by aromatic lamps, by wicks of flax floating in libation-cups. There was no other furniture, indeed, there was not room for more, beside the great square pallet that covered all the rocky floor.

On the pallet lay a pale figure, twisting slowly this way and that, like an earth-creature avoiding light, its eyes closed, or covered with a gauze-like cloth. This figure seemed so gross, so helpless, so immobile, that it was a while before I could think of it as being other than a great and bloated worm.

Yet, as I gazed in the half-dark, another form of reason took my mind. It was as though a silent voice spoke up: This is the fecund Mother, this is She. Round Her the whole life of the city moves. Workers tend her, warriors guard her, all so that one day from her womb a god may come.

I fell to my knees before her then and, as the light caught her writhing form, I saw that, though it was so obscenely large in size, there was about her a strange gigantic beauty, and that, though her breasts and other parts were so immense, her hands and feet and face were those of a Queen, perfect in shape and sweet to look upon.

I looked down at my own common limbs, my hairy arms and goatlike legs, and suddenly despised them, wishing I might be of her race, the race of gods. Imploring, I held out my hands towards her and said, 'Great Mother, I am your servant, come in my dream to pay homage at your shrine. Oedipus of Corinth dreams towards you, Queen of Heaven; have mercy on him, make him great.'

But only a village fool would expect the gods to speak in the language of mankind. I was still kneeling there, my hands outstretched, when she rolled over slowly towards me, and made a chuckling sound in her throat, as though she was swallowing honey, or as though she had forgotten the use of language altogether, but was greatly amused at something in her deep cavern home. I began to laugh, too, in courtesy to the great one who deigned to let me kneel before her.

And in the midst of my laughter, her gross white body drew itself against me like a swamp-snake, and seemed to clench about me. It had a strength greater than anything I had known, yet it moved so quietly, so unhurriedly. I tried to call out, to say that I was unworthy, that I was but the son of a hill shepherd; but my mouth was stopped by a part of her, and then I was sprawling on the pallet, half under her, half inside her, feeling the great suction of her body like the mouth of an octopus beneath the sea, drawing me in, squeezing from me the very essence of my life.

I reached for my dagger, but some limb came from the dusk and held my hand hard against me; I opened my mouth to bite at whatever was near to me, but her gross tongue writhed inside my lips and forced my jaws apart. Now I was choking, strangled by wave on wave of obscene flesh, by warm fold on fold, smothered by a sort of love that never had refined itself so that man might bear it and still live.

And all the while her humorous sobbing sounded in my ears, as though she was speaking a message of truth, something that I should commit to

memory and carry up again to the world of men. As I lay, my shoulders pinned to the pallet, my limbs twisted and cracking with the fearful strain, I felt that I had failed men in having come face to face with the Mother, and, being inadequate, had not the strength to bring her message up into the light.

Now I was sodden with sweat, dissolving into a dew of flesh, losing my identity, becoming the sap of the earth-roots. Now my eyes were closed and I had no wish to open them again. I could no longer breathe for the great tongue that passed into my throat. I could not move at all, only with her enormous movements, each one of which was like a thunderclap.

And in that moment, I gave up all fight and surrendered entirely to her great power; and as I rendered up the ghost, the cave in which I lay was filled with the sound of multitudes of voices, all rejoicing, as though they had never ceased since the world first spun out into the sky. Deafened by this paean of glory, choked and crushed, I died in dream.

18

BRIGHT sunlight on my face awoke me; a cool air blowing across my body and into my nostrils, clean as mountain water, caused me to gasp like a swimmer plunging deep into a lake at morning-time. I flung back my head and opened my eyes.

An old man sat beside me, holding a cup by my lips. ‘Drink this,’ he said, ‘it is the good wine of Crisa. There is strength in it, and it is strength that you need.’

His wrinkled hands were gentle. So were his smooth face and his weary grey eyes. He sat like a woman by me, holding my head, keeping the cup from tilting over as I drew at it, preventing the wine from spilling on my chest, just as though I was a little child. He seemed so ancient, so wise, so gently certain of himself, that I felt he had been there since time began.

I said, ‘I have been dreaming, and it was a bad dream, old man. It took me down into earth’s bowels, into the unclean darkness.’

He nodded and smiled. ‘I know, my son,’ he said. ‘I heard your crying and watched your struggling. So I carried you here, onto the hillside, to this small house.’

I gazed round me and saw that I was lying before a cottage door, on a heap of hay, with tendrils hanging down from a creeping-plant that grew upon the wall and formed a bower above me. All about me were green hills and valleys, silver streams and rows of cypresses. I heard the calling of sheep and the deep lowing of oxen. The sky above my head was blue.

I said, ‘I was not here before. I was in the cave of the Oracle at Delphi, when a sickness came upon me.’

The old man let my head down onto the hay. ‘You were threatening the Pythoness,’ he said. ‘You had come so far in pride that you thought in your heart you were already strong enough to taunt the God. So, you were punished—a little, but enough to warn you for the future.’

I sat up in the hay and said, ‘You know a great deal, old man. And what you say is as near the truth as may be. I was proud, but now I am afraid.’

The old man smiled and said, as though to himself, ‘We are all afraid, my son. Fear is man’s heritage, since he has elected gods to govern him. Once, when men walked alone with their heads high, across the hills questing, the sword in their hands, careless of life, there was no fear. That was in the childhood of man, when the cypresses down there were but blades of grass, and the sun was no bigger than the nail on my little finger. In those days, men walked the earth without fear, without dreams, without songs. Their hearts were light in them because they had no priests, no poets, to remind them always of death and the darkness after death. So, these men strode through the seasons like children, taking what they needed from the earth, flinging away what they grew tired of. At night, they slept unafraid; in the morning, they rose and walked on through the world.’

I said, ‘But they knew pain and death, old man, surely. All men know such things, it is their condition. Man is not immortal.’

He half-closed his eyes wearily and said at last, ‘Aye, they died. If they met an enemy who would not step aside, they killed him. And in the end they met other men stronger than themselves and died also. But they went down uncomplaining, my son, unconcerned that this was their end. There lies the difference; our men today grow up among songs and stories of death and agony, they fear the sword that will put an end to them in twenty years’ time, they see the shadow of their enemy approaching when that man has not yet left his mother’s arms. At dawn-time, they sweat with terror at the night which will come when the sun goes down again. For now, after so many generations, they have been taught to fear by the poets, the singers, the priests. Consider, the lion has no story-tellers, no gods to offer to, yet he stalks through the grassland unafraid, and if he meets another lion, he does not howl and moan for aid from earth or sky. Instead, he faces his enemy and goes forth.’

I laughed and said, ‘And leaves his carcass for the birds to squabble over.’

The old man nodded. ‘That happens,’ he said. ‘But when it does, the lion goes down in his pride, without speculation on the Underworld. As he sinks to the earth, he does not reproach the gods, does not even consider that he will not rise again. We, looking down upon his bones, weep tears—but not the lion. We, made sick by prayers and the prattle of poets, tell ourselves the sad story of the noble lion who died; but it is a story that the lion himself had never known.’

‘Why are you telling me this?’ I asked.

He rose slowly and placed the empty wine-cup on the window-ledge. Then he turned and stood above me. ‘I tell you this,’ he answered, ‘because you, of all the youths of Hellas, are nearest to what ancient man once was. Beginning from nothing, you are walking through the world to take from it what you want. Yet, already, you have learned too much of fear, and this you must unlearn if you are to become a hero and a king.’

‘Shall I become these things, old man?’ I asked.

He shook his head like a mild old sheep and said, ‘Aye, if you fare forth without thinking. If you fare forth, and forth, and forth; never staying too long in one place, and never looking backwards.’

I said, ‘But I am lame, old man. Can great glory come to a cripple?’

He placed his fingers round my ankle bones and said, ‘You are no more lame than a hundred others. The good shoes you wear will bind your sinews close enough together to let you win a throne, if that is what you want. As for the glory you speak of, that is in the head; it is another fault the poets lead us into. Do not think of glory, for it is a snare, but think only of doing, and doing, and doing.’

I thought a while on what he had said. And then I asked, ‘But yours is cold comfort, old man. By going forth and taking from the world, a man can have no friends, no family. Are these not the greatest joys of life?’

He leaned against the lintel of his door and looked up into the blue sky, shielding his pale eyes with his hand. Thus, standing so, he answered me. ‘The man who shall be great may have no family, no friends. He must come into the world as though with the sky as his father, a cold virgin his mother. His life will be on hills and desert places, unhampered by worldly loyalties and unbetrayed by selfish friends. Alone, he is complete; but if he pours the wine of his own being into too many other cups, he will run dry himself, and hang, at last, an empty wine-skin on a forgotten tree.’

I thought of my mother, Rhene, of my old father, of Polybus and Periboea, of Minthe and Halesus, the folk who had shaped my life so far. Then I said, ‘Old man, I have listened to you, but I am not certain that you speak the truth. You have had many years to find it in, but I am not sure that its light has shone upon you yet.’

He listened to me patiently, fingering the grey strands of his beard, and when I had finished, he sat beside me once again and, taking my hands in his, said softly, ‘Then I will tell you things that will prove to you how much I know, my son. You came to Delphi to find out where Polybus and Periboea

are. I will tell you: they have gone away from Hellas. Plague has struck their people and their herds, the great bulls and the tall men are dead, King Polybus is dead and in the ground. His queen has sailed among a cargo of hides for Egypt. Now are you content?'

I shook my head. 'Tell me of my father,' I began.

He laid his hard hand on my lips and said, 'Father . . . mother . . . Can you not break from this dream? It is not your feet that are crippled, Oedipus, but your mind. Until you throw away your swaddling bands, how can you be a king, a hero? A king must be his own father, must kill all dreams of a father greater than himself. And he must put aside all thoughts of a mother, who can only hinder him with her smothering love. The woman of his life shall be the wife he chooses for a while, before he passes on; she is all the mother his body needs. The world is full of folk seeking a mother, or a father, and so remaining children all their days. There are youths who could have been great heroes, yet they stay as sons, placing the father's foot upon their necks, and when that earthly father has died, creating in their dreams a sacred ghost still to enslave them. Whole kingdoms, whole dynasties, have stayed stunted by this comfortable slavery. In Crete, for a hundred generations, it was the mother's breast men cried for; in their youth, they saw her as young, too, calling her swift Diana; in the middle-days, she rose as gallant Aphrodite from the waves; and in their doddering age she sat beside the dying fire with them as Hera, grey-haired, aged crone. No, Oedipus, choose your three fathers or your three mothers, as you please; but, if you do, forget all else, for you will never come to greatness.'

His voice flowed on, over me, like the warm winds of that hillside, like the distant sound of bees whirring about their hive, a part of Nature, a part of truth. I looked up at the old man and said, 'Who are you, you who seem to know so much?'

Almost whispering, he answered me, 'I am Teiresias, did you not guess?'

And, as he spoke, I knew then that he was the old man who saw both ways, towards the past as well as towards the future. To cover my fluttering fear, I said, 'Among the villages, they say you have walked up and down the world since time began. They say that Hera punished you for looking on while her sacred snakes coupled on the mountain.'

The old man smiled and nodded in the sunlight. 'Aye,' he answered calmly. 'And they said the same about my father, and his, if the truth be known. Up and down Hellas, they will always be saying this and that, for

they are a race of born gossips. They are the greatest talkers in the world, my son, and I tell you this who have listened to most men, at camp-fire and feast-board.'

I rose from the bed of hay, and said, 'I have resolved to fare forth as you have advised me, Teiresias. But, first, tell me two things: in which direction should I go to prove myself? And, for my amusement, when shall we meet again, you and I?'

Teiresias moved slowly towards the house door, as though he did not mean to answer me; but, at the step, he halted and, half-turning, said, 'Walk towards Thebes, young man. There is work for you there, if you have stomach for it. As for our next meeting—it will be when neither you nor I desire it, and at a place we shall not love. I dare say no more.'

I went to him then and even took the hem of his robe, trying to hold him back a little while so as to learn more of the future. But he drew away from me with a strangely powerful shrug of the shoulder and said, almost roughly, 'Delay me no further. You have been told as much as you may profit by. To tell you more might cause you to stumble in the journey meant for you. Now, leave me be, there are others waiting at Hera's shrine for answers to their prayers, each one as deserving as you, and most of them wiser.'

When he went on down the hill, I saw that he carried a grey cloth in his right hand, and a pair of scales in his left. I looked away then, and did not watch him go.

19

THE road away from Delphi was not an easy one. It lay between mountains and alongside gorges, whose steep pine-clad sides made me afraid, especially by night when, as the path swung to left or right without warning, and my eyes, never keen once the sun had gone down, often did not bring me word of the turning until my crippled feet were at the very lip of the drop. Then, sensing only emptiness and death before me at the next pace, I would stop violently, shivering like a terror-struck horse, pulling back on the rein before an unsuspected obstacle: a dead man or a wall.

So, that is why, on the narrow road between Delphi and Daulis, I was terrified to look down into the deep, stone-strewn gullies below me. And at night, when I slept with my cloak round my head on the mountain, I would always drive my javelin as deep as it would go into the earth, and then tether myself to it with thongs from my breeches, so that if I rolled about in my sleeping and my dreaming, this would keep me from going over the edge.

It was a lonely road at this time of the year and I saw no living creatures except eagles, circling the sky above me, and sometimes a red fox trailing his brush as he ran away up the hill slope, trying to pretend that he was not afraid of me, but was suddenly called out on an urgent errand that demanded his attention.

Below Parnassus there is a place where three roads meet, and where, I had always heard, robbers sometimes lurked, to pluck the pigeons on their way to or from the Shrine at Delphi.

At this place, I wrapped my cloak tightly round my left arm, to act as some sort of shield should the need for such arise, and my javelin I grasped half-way down its ash-shaft, where I could manage it best for thrusting against swords, daggers or other javelins.

But no one sprang out of the black rocks at me, and I took the middle road that led in the direction of Orchomenus, thinking that it might be broader and less dangerous than the other two. In this, I was wrong, for after a while I found that the road shrank to the width of a mere path, with a sheer rock wall on the left, and an unguarded precipice on the right.

It was while I was stumbling along this path, at its narrowest, that, topping a rise which lay before me, a chariot appeared, drawn by two horses and completely filling the roadway. One of its bronze hubs often scraped against the wall of rock, while the bronze tyre of the other wheel ran within a hand's breadth of the precipice. The charioteer who drove it looked very worried as he pulled on the long reins, curbing and guiding his two white and snorting horses. He was a splendid charioteer, though full of fear, and the morning sunlight glistened on his high conical bronze helmet, and on the gold bracers at his wrists. The man who stood at his right hand was much shorter in stature and seemed older, though this was hard to tell because his head was largely covered by a black hood and only the fringe of his grizzled beard jutted out. Yet I could tell that he too was afraid, for he kept his eyes turned away from the precipice under the left wheel, and his brown hands, which gripped the forward chariot-rail, were as white about the knuckles as sun-dried bones.

All this I saw at one glance, as the chariot appeared above the rise, flinging up clouds of dust from the parched roadway. Then I heard the charioteer almost screaming at me, 'Stand aside for the King, you fool! These horses will shy at your staff and we shall be over the edge. Stand aside!'

Now my shepherd-father had brought me up since my childhood to give way to horsemen and charioteers, and I would gladly have done what this proud man ordered if there had been any space at all to move in. But, where we were, if I had pressed against the rocky wall, the chariot-hubs would have broken my legs; and to stand on the hand's breadth which the wheel left, on the precipice side, would have been a certain death, with my lameness and my terror of such heights.

So, with a dry throat and my heart thudding, I called out, 'I ask your pardon, great ones, but as you see, I am not firm on my feet, and to do as you ask would kill me.'

The charioteer had slowed down his horses until they were walking, but still they came on towards me. I turned about, with the intention of running back up the road a mile, to where the three roads met, and where we could have passed one another without any danger.

But suddenly I heard the two men laughing behind me, and then the charioteer shouted, 'We cannot wait all day, cripple, we are on the way to the Oracle and that will brook no delay. So, stand aside for your betters, club-foot!'

As I ran, hearing the horses snorting and the heavy bronze wheels coming up behind me, I suddenly knew that these men did not value my life at all, that they did not care whether I was crushed or whether I fell to my death, that, indeed, they meant to run me down whatever I did. Then I was filled with a great anger, for all my life I had tried to be gentle to others and not to harm them without good reason: and these noble charioteers had no reason to harm me whatever.

I think, also, that as the charioteer spoke, as though I was carrion, rubbish, unworthy of life, I remembered how Teiresias had warned me that I must fare forward and take what I wanted from the world, if I was to become a hero. This thought boiled up in my head, as I shambled on before the slavering horses: and, suddenly, the feeling that if I did not make a stand now, I should truly become what the charioteers had said—unworthy rubbish, hardly a man at all.

So, I stopped and, turning, called out, 'I admit no betters, save the gods and my father. If you drive at me further, I will strike your horses on the nose with this javelin and you will see, then, who will step aside.'

As I was speaking, thinking what a great show I was making, I heard the man in the black hood say, with the greatest contempt, 'Wait no longer, Polyphontes, drive over the fool. He is worthless.'

Now, indeed, was I in a mortal sweat of terror. Though I grasped my javelin and pointed it towards the horses, they loomed up at me as though what I threatened them with was a reed, or a cornstalk. I saw their hooves beating down like war-hammers, and I knew that even if I flung myself, I should not escape their crushing blows. I think I wept then, at being crippled and despised by men and women, and even horses. And I think I heard the two charioteers laughing at me as they came on, seeing my tears and my lameness and my despair.

In a less dreadful moment, I am sure that I would have fallen before the horses, begging for pity even: but, suddenly, that cruel laughter from the chariot made me a man, made me all at once careless of the life I had tried to protect. In a moment of extreme clearness, as the horses' heads came closer, spattering me with white froth, I sprang sideways towards the edge of the precipice. And, as I sprang, I even had the wit to thrust my short javelin into my hide belt, as though it was worth the keeping, however desperate the danger I now faced.

This is a strange thing about men: even in the moment of their greatest peril, there is one small corner of their hearts which rests, in tranquillity,

elsewhere; unaffected by the deadly instant. Years later, I saw a Spartan, in the forefront of a spear-charge, with barbed arrows flying so thickly at his body that he stood no chance of coming alive out of the charge. And the moment before he fell to his knees, the shafts sticking from him like the quills of a porcupine, he called out to a friend in the next rank, 'Hey, Crotus, did you remember to put the wine in the shade?'

I saw every detail of the chariot, as it drove at me: the chiselled ram's head at the end of the tilt-pole, the careful hide-lashing of each joint in the frame, even the sweat-marks on the forward rail where hands had held it from year to year, marking the polished wood.

Then, as I swung across its path, I saw all the countryside which lay below me, at the foot of the sheer precipice. Beyond the mosses that clung to the cliff-face lay a steeply-sloping pinewood, and against its dark foliage I saw a young eagle, speckled gold against green, darting after a dove. The feathers round that dove's neck were not grey, but of a faintly bluish tinge, and it was chittering with terror, as the eagle came on, its red claws already set forward for the strike, its hooked beak open and its tongue just showing, as though at any moment it would give a shriek of triumph. And far below that, beside a small stream and with five old brown-fleeced sheep about him, grazing, I saw a boy gazing upwards at the eagle, or at me, I do not know which, but with his brown hand shielding his eyes from the morning sun; just as, years ago, I had once stood below the rock with my father, waiting for a ruined cattle-breeder to jump down and put an end to all his troubles.

Then I was over the edge, with nothing but the blue air beneath my right foot and my body, and my left foot almost under the whirling chariot wheel. I felt the harsh agony of the bronze as I fell downwards and sideways: but there was no time to cry out. My breath was all needed to let me grasp at the yellow spokes of the wheel. One hand caught and then, by a miracle, the other. My arms were almost torn from my body. My belly and thighs were cruelly rubbed against the rough limestone of the cliff-face. My mouth and eyes were full of dust and grit from the road above me. I heard the charioteer, Polyphontes, cry out, 'Keep still, you brutes. You will have us all over!' I heard his lash striking hard on the backs of the horses.

Then, the swinging of the wheel brought me up and over, with my right foot back on the road, just behind the chariot-deck. And before I lost my balance again and hurtled down into the place from which I had escaped, I cast myself sideways, like a wrestler, and lay choking with relief on the road.

‘God,’ I cried, ‘God, I will repay you. Oh, thank you, Lord of Light.’

Then, a demon filled my head, and as the chariot horses reared and bucked, in terror at my wrenching of the wheel and their master’s thrashing, I knelt and cast my javelin at Polyphontes’ broad back.

It flew, straight as the eagle, and entered between two bronze plates, between his shoulder-blades. I saw him throw up his hands, dropping the reins, to reach backwards at what had hurt him. Then, he gave a shrill squeal, like a woman, or a pig, and leaped sideways, over the low framework of the chariot. And a second later I heard his body crashing down among the pine-boughs.

Still on my knees, now weaponless, I looked at the chariot. The horses were quiet now, and shuddering with fear. The man in the black hood had turned round and, for the first time, I saw his face. He was that same king who had killed my mother, with one careless blow of his spear butt, eight years ago in Thebes.

Even so, I do not think I should have harmed him for this. I do not think that my wish for vengeance was as strong as my thankfulness at having escaped the chariot and the chasm: and what anger I had felt had largely flowed out of me at seeing Polyphontes the charioteer fall among the pines, where I had been so terrified of falling. No, I would have let this man, this king in his mourning robes, have driven on to wherever he might be bound. I might have flung a stone, or a curse after him, not wishing to strike him or damn him, but only to give vent to my pride in having overcome his action against me.

But his fates, his Furies, would not let him go from that place so easily, would not let me pass on my way without further guilt. And, all at once, he sprang from the still chariot, towards where I kneeled in the dust, with a short bronze sword in his right hand.

This caused no more fear in me, no greater beating of my heart. I waited for him, almost with contempt, and as he slashed down at my head, moved from his slow, old threatening, and caught his arm in my strong hands. I felt his bones, his worn old muscles, his thinness: and for a while I even looked at the brown and wrinkled skin on the back of his hands, with the thick blue veins knotting over them. Then I looked up, smiling, into his watery eyes. He was so old, so harmless, now, that I bore him no grudge. His age was enough punishment, I thought, in my young pride. I thought: I am a cripple and a peasant, yet I am greater than a king and his charioteer, greater than two white horses and their war-cart.

I think I would just have shaken him a little, and then have let him go on along the road; but suddenly he brought up his old sharp knee into my face, laughing at my tears and the blood which spurted from my nose. In quick, youthful anger, but still with no true malice, I rose and forced the king back to his war-cart, bending his dry body over the deck to make him humble. Then, for want of something more to punish him, I saw the long, trailing reins of ox-hide, and I looped them round his neck, in contempt.

He stared up at me, with a furious terror in his faded eyes. Then he shouted out, 'You gelding! You ruined ox! You thing, you!'

I held him down, laughing, but the two horses, made sensitive by their ordeal on the narrow path, took fright at his shrill and sudden voice and whisked their cart away, and the bound king with it. He flew from my hands, backwards, tangled in the reins and screaming. The dust rose round him as he twirled along the road, like a great fish being drawn from the sea, and fighting with his old, veined hands all the while, to keep the reins from throttling him.

Had his luck held, with all his struggling he should have torn himself free within a few yards: but, suddenly, as though they had come to the end of their struggling, their war with the world, the white horses plunged sideways, towards the precipice. One wheel of their chariot broke down the lip of rock that kept them safe, then the whole cart lurched, scattering chips of limestone, and the great pole with its bronze ram's head heeled over.

Amid the grey dust, and under the hot blue sky, first one white horse, then the other slewed sideways and fell, galloping still in the empty air, with mane and tail soaring upwards and as stiff as carved stone: then went the chariot, cracking and crumbling, flinging its pieces back onto the path where I stood, the bronze sword hanging in my hand still. And last of all went the black-robed king, still clutching at the reins about his throat, still staring wide-eyed up at the blue sky as though the god might yet come down and wrench him away from the falling; but still screaming out, in his old man's hoarse voice.

As he slid over the edge and out of my sight, I started to run forward, as though, even now, I might save him.

But all at once a brown snake slithered through the white dust, at my feet, from a parched bush of lavender, and coiled, hissing, before me, its flat head darting here and there sideways, halting me.

I stopped, struck at it with the king's sword, and missed the mark. Then I heard that sickening crashing among the pine-trees and forgot the snake for a moment.

When I remembered it again, it had gone, leaving only its crooked trail across the white dust of the mountain road.

20

I CAME over the road that lay along Mount Phineas, sniffing like a hound. It was a grey day with the streaked cloud flying low and a breath of dampness in the air. If it had been a hot day with the sun coming off the rocks all plain and empty, in the way the sun can kill a scent by purifying it, it would have been different. But on these damp days, yet with enough sun lurking in the baked rock to give life to what lies in them, there is still the chance of picking up the odour of something that waits, that lies about, that is.

And as I came over the rocky road, with walls of stone on either side of me, hemming me in, I caught the whiff of man, and I thought: Oho, it is as I suspected, there is someone here.

But, recall, I had flung a great king from his cart, I had put the javelin into a noble charioteer and I had a royal sword hidden inside my goatskin shirt. I had shown them that a lamed man could be as good as they—as good as kings and charioteers.

So I went forward, with the scent of man in my nose, under the grey sky, and trying to walk as level as I could, on my crooked feet, to show that a cripple is greater than his crippling.

There was a very narrow spot between the limestone walls where the road had been cut through the mountain, and on its sides the wild lavender grew, and the mosses, and the acanthus. It was like a garden of sorts, but a stern garden, where but an inch beneath the flowers, rock lies, hard and unyielding, the heat and the death in it under just a skin of moss and little red flowers.

Then eight men stood behind me, their short javelins poised for the cast. I heard them rise out of the rock, and half-turned, a smile on my lips to greet them, however hard my heart thumped, for any man must meet his end smiling or he is no man. So I stopped and shuddered a little, in spite of my goatskin, and I said aloud, ‘Very well, fellows, put the spears in and let’s have an end to it.’

One of them, the very tallest, came down the rock slope, bounding on long legs, trying to keep the copper-rings in his dark hair, trying not to lose

his spear and his dignity. I stood and smiled at him, being beyond dignity at that moment and being in the very shift of death. This captain dropped onto his long feet in the road behind me, and I saw his bloodshot eyes and long fingers that itched about the ash-shaft, and I smelled the ambition and the unleashed fury in him.

He was a Cretan, but bred long in the leg and slim, just as when you have a herd of small bulls, one year, one of them by some accident from the gods, grows large and broad; so this captain was long, and his skin so dark, so shining, as though his mother had come from Libya.

I do not know why I say mother there, in place of father. The gods know, it is not because I set the mother above the father. I am a Zeus-man, not a Hera-man; but I know that each partner in the getting has a part to play. As in cattle, from the father you may get the type, the breed, but from the mother you get the heart, the courage. It is no use being born a bull with father's long horn, if you have no courage to put that horn into whoever offends you.

But this is not what I am saying. I am saying that this Cretan captain landed just behind me and poised his spear. I turned to him, a little more clumsily than I needed to, making the best play of my lame feet that I could, to gain his sympathy for a second, and I said, 'Am I trespassing, then? Am I a terrible cattle-thief that you bring seven men to put an end to me? Are you afraid of me? Come on, now, lad, are you afraid of me?'

The tall captain was not easy in his heart; his eyes rolled and his hand shook a little on the spear-shaft, and for a moment I thought I had got him. It was my intention to get close enough to him to take him round the slim waist in one of my wrestling-holds and then use him as a shield for those above me, so that they could not get at me without pinning their leader.

But I have yet to meet the Hellene who can outdo a Cretan in craft, when it comes man to man. Even as I put out my friendly hand towards him, judging the distance in split-inches now, and smiling all the while, as one does to a nervous dog with bared fangs, the Cretan fell back a half-pace; no, not fell back but leaned back on his hinder-foot, as a Spartan boxer does, before coming in with a counter-blow. And so my hand missed his, and suddenly I felt the point of his hand-spear pricking hard on my breast, just breaking the skin. And he was still smiling.

I was for the moment beside myself that I had been bested. Do not forget, I was brought up by Cretans and could speak the tongue as well as any who saw King Minos in his prime. Now I could not help myself, but

whispered to him gruffly, ‘It was a bad move, lad, to pin me that way. Your wife may come to regret it this winter, when you weep at your side of the bed and offer no advances.’

It was the worst thing I could have said. This captain shook his black hair till the metal in it rang, then he drove at me with all his force.

It was good to have been a wrestler; for I saw the slight bunching of his muscles and the swing of his limbs before he thrust. Pivoting on my left lame foot, I swung round and let the javelin and man move into the empty air; then, as he came to me in the force of his thrust, I chopped my right hand down, like an axe, stiff, using the hard edge, on his neck. Being lame, I was firm-based and solid, while he was slim and lithe and mobile. He was like water running against a rock, and he fell on his knees beyond me, his lips to the earth, and his javelin clattering on down the rocky slope out of sight.

I was still laughing at his plight when another man, whom I had forgotten in this small triumph, leaned over the rock-lip and swung his ash-shaft against the back of my neck. So, cut down in my laughter, I kneeled beside the Cretan captain, and was as sick as he was in the dust of the mountain path.

And that was how they brought me down towards Thebes, until we got to the lower ridges of Mount Phicium.

The captain was running beside us all the time, at first commanding, then begging his party to kill me. But they had seen his weakness and were not content to obey him now. As for me, though my case was a desperate one, I could not resist saying to him, ‘Take care, Diana, or a mouse may come out of the rocks and challenge you to combat, with all this shouting of yours!’

Because I had called him by a girl’s name, which was also the name of one of his goddesses, he struck out at me and almost knocked my weak legs from under me. But I turned on him and bunched my right fist and said, ‘Come, fellow, let us either fight or remain peaceful. I am willing, whichever way you choose; but I will not have you hitting me from behind.’

This pleased the other guards, who by now had little respect for their captain. They halted a while, to let him make up his mind; but the blow I had given him at first was enough persuasion for him not to persist.

I was not surprised at this, because on my best days I was able to crack an olive log by using my hand as I have described; and though I never

counted myself a boxer, in the Laconian manner, I saw no reason why a man should not use the hand-edge in boxing, in chopping up at his opponent's gullet, to slow him down a while and position him for the usual right-hand hammer-blow to the jaw.

You will think that this must have been a very leisurely progress down towards Thebes, that I should have such thoughts about combat between men; but in truth it was not so. The Cretans almost swept me off my lame feet, in their rush to take me to judgement. All the same, some of them smiled at me as we went along the hilly road, as though they were pleased with me, and were not entirely my enemies, and were doing what they did because it was what they were paid for, and not what they desired.

We came round a bend in the rocks and into the open.

Thebes lay down below me, in a great basin, half-clenched round by saw-toothed mountains, which seemed about to close on the city like a giant's hand. I had never seen Thebes from above before, as the eagle sees it, entire; I had only seen it as the sheep sees it, going to the market, or as the cow sees it, going to the slaughter-house, from the dusty, rock-strewn road that runs alongside the narrow, dirty stream, where the women from the huts outside the walls knelt to wash clothes and beat them with round stones and small wooden bats, singing lewd songs in chorus, to set a time, a rhythm, to their beating and so make the labour a little easier.

But now I saw Thebes like a lame god looking down on it, in its wholeness. From where I stood on the mountain-side, it looked so much smaller than I remembered it as a boy, when I came with my mother to sell the sheep. That is how things are: in our childhood we make a great palace out of a hovel, a great mountain out of a hillock, a fierce bull out of a gelded steer, and a god out of a cattle-king.

Yet, though Thebes looked so much smaller, there was about it a certain breath of terror, which seemed to rise with the black smoke of its thousand chimneys, from its dark thatched roofs or mud-coloured tiles, up towards the weeping grey clouds which hung over the city like a soiled awning, or like the age-old canopy that rests above an altar in a country shrine, stained by ten generations of sacrificial smoke, by the burning grease of lamb or oxen.

Yes, Thebes was like a great sacrificial altar. I could see its Great House, the home of its kings, set on a mound above the innermost maze of streets and alley-ways; it was square, like an altar, of grey stone, and mud-bricks, with window-holes that looked as dark as Cretan eyes. And all about its upper battlements, row upon row of cattle-skulls were nailed on beams, the

bone now a deathly white after countless seasons of summer sun and winter rain, of scouring wind and blown sand. Ten thousand horns stood out from these skulls, pointing up towards the sky, giving the grim fortress something of the look of a watchful porcupine that senses an enemy always at hand, and raises its spines for the conflict. These horns made me think that Thebes was always waiting for conflict, for war, ready to be assailed. A city of dread, of ominous waiting for death.

The heavy mud walls which circled it, broad-based and hulking, set about their summit with sharpened oaken stakes, added to this feeling; and especially the great south wall, which rose and rose like a cliff-face, full of small black window-holes, as though it was a city in itself, as though it was living and watched over the plain with its many eyes. That was a fearful wall. It has been in all of my dreams since I first saw Thebes from the mountain-side.

Some men dream of swords hacking at their arms or head, others of the javelins entering their bellies, or fire-hardened stakes picking out their eyes. I know that this is true, because I have known many fighting men and have talked with them about their dreams. I don't know what the women dream about, because I have never yet met any who would talk about the secrets that came to them in the night, to make them weep, or groan, or laugh. But I know that my dreams were always of the south wall at Thebes; and as I grew older I got to know why this was so.

Along its upper battlements, apart from the sharpened stakes, there were trees, some of them as dead as stakes, and black and gaunt; some of them still putting out feeble leaves in the dry mud they were set in. But though they were alive, they were half-dead, and the leaves they grew were brown and shrivelled almost before they came to fullness. These were the trees of fertility, from which, in a good season, straw-dolls were hung as prayers of thanksgiving to the goddess; and from which, in a bad season, when drought or murrain murdered crops and herds, men and even women were hung in place of the effigies, to bring prosperity back to the gaunt citadel once more.

At the foot of this great wall was yet another wall, of brown rock, a natural wall, that led down into a deep chasm or gully, more than a hundred feet down, where sunlight seldom struck. At the bottom of this awful place, in winter, a small stream of brackish water meandered; in summer, this water went away, or stayed only as isolated pools of stinking weed. And scattered all among the rocks which then paved the gully floor were the bones and entrails of cattle and men, some of which had fallen there by

accident at night, but most of them having been cut down from the fertility trees, or flung there after a battle, when all the hostages were slaughtered.

There was a saying in Thessaly, which I heard later, to describe an evil smell. It was: 'This carries the perfume of the south wall.' No one ever needed to ask, Which south wall? All men in Hellas knew that it meant Thebes.

Across this chasm was built a wooden bridge, standing on charred and lichened piles that went down into the darkness. It was so narrow that two hay-wagons could not pass each other without much squeezing and pressing and cursing. It was a Theban boast that this bridge had been set up by the First Folk, before the Hellenes came down from the north; and that it would still be standing when they were driven back to their mists and steppelands again.

This bridge was the main entrance to the city, and the rocky path which led from it went under the high square gateway where the oaken-gates, set with huge bronze studs, swung from tree-trunks with the ancient bark still on them, but now so old that the bark was like stone itself and could not be peeled away from the wood. Even the myriad worm-holes in these posts and the gates themselves had been filled with centuries of dust and now looked like pock-marks on a granite rock.

I have spoken much about what Thebes looked like to me, that day when the soldiers brought me down the mountain road, but this is because that city, like the sight of my first horse, filled my eyes and my heart, and stayed with me forever by its terrible majesty. I have met men who have spent half their lives in Cnossus or Troy, and yet could not describe more than one street, or two or three houses they had seen; but, for me, it only needed the space of ten breaths to give me such a picture of that stinking city as would never leave my mind again. It is the same with a woman; a man might live with one for ten years, and then find it beyond his tongue to say what she was like. Yet, at another time, whipping his chariot-horses through a small village, he might glimpse a straw-haired girl up to her knees in a stream, washing herself, and might take in every curve and colour of her body, so that suddenly it is as though he had known her all his days, and could describe her, down to the birthmark that lay between her breasts, or the length of her bronze-hued eyelashes.

Men are such various creatures, so strange in what they see and recall. No man may speak of men; for they are not one creature, but a thousand creatures, each one, like the pebbles of the sea-shore, slightly different from

his fellows. I have known men who could describe the exact set and shape of a bull's horns, seen by moonlight in a corral, yet could not tell you of what form was the nose of the king they served for a year. I once knew a man, a Sarmatian, with bright dark eyes that missed nothing, one would have said, who suffered a fearful wound when a burning beam fell upon him, during a siege. For a day and a night, he lay under that smouldering heap of wood, while his fellow-warriors fought and then feasted and then slept, until someone found him by chance, still breathing. When they could, they got a doctor to him, who said that the only chance of saving his life would be to cut away all the flesh of his shoulder, and to take off the right arm with an axe. This Sarmatian was a strong man, with hard bones; not an easy man to deal with, sick or well, and the doctor was forced to bring other men to help in the task, which lasted from dawn until sunset of one day.

Now, when I spoke to this Sarmatian about the affair, wanting to know how it felt, warrior-like, since one day it might happen to me also, he said he did not recall it at all; but that what he remembered most clearly was a little girl, with red ribbons in her hair, who passed through the tent where the doctor was working, holding a blue flower with fine streaks of yellow in its petals. He said that there were four streaks in most of the petals, but three streaks in two of them. I asked him how long the little girl had stood beside his bed, but he said that she had run through the tent, turning her eyes away from him, as though she was in haste to get away.

These things are Mysteries. Their secrets are known only to old Cronus, who stretches time, or pinches it in, to suit himself.

And why do you think I am stretching time in this manner, talking of cities and men and time? I will tell you; it is because I am not anxious to describe what happened to me next; it is because I am ashamed of what they did to me, on the mountain road above Thebes.

There were soldiers with tall spears lying all about, among the rocks, in the hills, and waving to us as we hurried past. But at a narrow part of the road, below a pointed hill, seven men stood, their heads hooded in lion skins, with slits for the eyes to look through, and their arms and legs dyed blue with the juice of a mountain herb. Each of them held a length of thin hide between his hands. I did not need to be told that these were the Throttlers, whom men feared so much, Hera's special servants, priests of a sort.

As we drew near them, they bowed their hidden heads and began to form a circle round me, for the soldiers flung me forward to them, as though glad

to be rid of me and my stumbling feet.

It was hard to keep my balance, and for a moment, I even thought of drawing the dead king's short sword from under my shirt and striking out at the Throttlers. But I felt that this would be useless in the end, for I could not strike more than two or three of them, before the others got to me, with the soldiers to help them also. So, I set my mind on standing upright, on not losing my balance. And, with difficulty, I confronted the tallest of them, who seemed to be their chieftain by the many bronze bands he wore about his arms and ankles.

For a while, he stared at me with his black eyes, through the holes in the lion's hide, then in a rough voice, he said, 'Kneel, man, kneel.'

This was a hard command to one who had the beginnings of kingliness in him, who had sensed the greatness of flinging down a king unaided. So I made as though I did not hear him. At least, I thought, I will force this Throttler-chief to ask me again, and then again.

But he did not speak again; instead, he nodded to the soldiers, and the captain whom I had so belittled up the hill slipped suddenly behind me, and dragged at me so harshly, pulling backwards, that I groaned and fell to my knees to be rid of the pain. This I have seen done many times, by arrogant young bull-dancers, who wish to make a great show of the bull kneeling before them; but I had never thought that it might happen to me. My pride was hurt so much that I saw my tears dropping down into the dust between my hands. That other part of me was hurt, too, I will not hide it; and I groaned and cursed with every breath, fearing almost that I had been unmanned by the Cretan's cruel handling. Whatever I might have said of him as a warrior with weapons, he knew how to handle a man to lessen him, only with the bare hands.

As I knelt there, fearing that I should never walk again, I heard a light sound of laughter from well above me, up the hill, and knew that a woman had seen what had happened to me. This turned my pain to shame and anger. But before I could struggle to my feet, the Throttlers were about me, each swinging his hide-loop easily round my neck, so that I was tethered on all sides. This, I learned, was the ritual, the old custom, that all seven should do the deed, and so share the guilt, if there did result any guilt, from the throttling. It was harder for the Furies to follow seven than follow one.

Now I knew better than to try to stand, or even to struggle, for any movement of mine would have tightened the nooses about my throat and would have started my end.

They had me bent so low now, by their equal straining on the hide-ropes, that the point of the dead king's sword pushed down into my body, and reminded me that I still had a weapon, though I was in no position to use it. They say that, before this end, a man considers in a flash what his life has been, how he has used or misused it, every picture of his past. . . For me, this was a lie. I thought of nothing but anger, and the lost pride of that moment, and the leather thongs that were round my throat, choking me and humbling me. Not a fierce bull, but a poor consenting bullock, meek below the axe, I tell you, tears scalded my face at the thought.

Then the Throttler-leader said to me roughly from under his lionskin, 'Go like a man, cripple, even if you do not walk like one.'

The captain I had knocked over laughed and called out, 'He is a man all right. I have a lump on my neck the size of a sling-stone to prove it.'

While they held me down, discussing my manhood, a strange hollow voice floated above us from the hillock.

'Is the stranger ready for the questioning? Does he kneel waiting for the words of the Sphinx, humbly as he should?'

I tried to see who spoke, but the thongs pulled me down again, and the leader called out, 'Yes, Great One, he kneels and is humble.' I smiled through my anger knowing that his words told only one side of the truth.

Then the voice came again, 'So, let him answer the Sphinx' question: What is it that in the morning walks on four legs, in the midday walks on two, and in the evening on three?'

The words of the old rustic riddle echoed from hill to hill, among the rocky alleys of the mountain, until they lost all sense and turned into the snarling and yattering of jackals. On my knees, I smiled through my tears to think how simple these folk were, using as their password a thing which any shepherd beyond Mount Cythaeron could have answered. And I thought: In this silly life, a man gains fame not from great things, but from accident.

A hard pull upon the hide-thongs brought me back to my senses, and the leader said evenly, 'If you know, answer: if you do not, bow your head and we will see that all is done quickly.'

I said, 'A voice from far away is speaking in my head. Would you interrupt it, fellow?'

I made them wait a moment, to salve my pride, then, when I heard their feet shuffling and felt the thongs tightening a little with their impatience, I

said in as loud a voice as I could use, ‘This has come to me, that it is Man the Sphinx speaks of. For in the morning of his childhood he crawls on hands and knees, as I do now; in the midday of his youth he walks on two legs, as I hope to do again before long; and in the evening of his old age he needs a stick to support himself, and so goes on three legs, as we must all do, if the Divine One lets us live as long as that.’

As I spoke, the nooses fell from my neck suddenly, and the leader of the Throttlers called out, ‘He has spoken the words, Great One. Is he to go?’

From above, once more, the light laughter rippled about the hill, but there was no answer. The leader put his foot into my side and said, a little shortly it seemed, ‘Onto your feet, stranger. The luck has been with you; so pass to Thebes and use it well.’

As I got up, with difficulty, I thought: to kill a king and take his sword was a moment’s work, and no lightning struck me afterwards. Now, here I am, above Thebes itself, having deceived the Sphinx which knows everything and punishes the greatest—yet I am unhurt!

Now I thought of my past and of my envy of heroes. So, this is what it was to be a hero, a deceiver of Sphinxes! It was nothing. It was like wringing a dove’s neck, no more. Perhaps to be a god was as easy: and certainly, in my hot youth of that moment, I felt that I was but a pace from godhead.

The leader said sharply, ‘Do not stand here, like a fool, or we may consider again. Get on your way, and pray to the Mother as you go. Thank her for all things.’

I inclined my head towards him, but did not look at any of them, in case they read my secret from my eyes. Then I turned and began to walk down the hill-road. But when I reached the first bend, where a boulder hid me from them, I swung to my left and leapt onto the rushy bank of the hillock, bending low and hurrying, up towards where the hollow voice had come from. I had chosen well, or luck was truly with me, for reeds and rocks gave me such cover that none of the men dotted here and there on slopes seemed to see what I was about. Once, indeed, there was a high shout, and I dropped flat, expecting the arrows and javelins to come through the air at me: but the shout was answered from another hillside and I knew that it was one soldier talking with his friend, no more.

My last rush, over the flat rock-strewn top of the hill, was easiest of all, for now those on the road were hidden from me by the steepness of the

hillside.

And here I stopped dead, for before me stood the Sphinx that all men feared, and I almost laughed at man's stupidity. This Sphinx was nothing but a square tent, of painted cloth; or, to speak more clearly, three screens, supported on a gilded frame of wood, standing a little higher than a tall man, and set like a wind-break on the grey hill. Across the cloth, in rude brush-strokes, of reds and ochres and blacks, was shown a woman with staring red eyes and an open mouth, set in the shape of cursing or of screaming. On her shoulders, wings like those of an eagle flared out, and her lower parts were those of a lion, its tail curling upwards and round again, as though she was lashing it about in fury. I am no painter, but I could have done as well. I walked towards this tent and fingered the rough linen and the thickly-daubed paint, listening all the while. Then I heard, faintly, what I had expected—the light, quick breathing of someone within.

I drew out the dead king's bronze sword and, holding it behind my back, as a kindly bull-killer does, so that the beast may not see what his end is to be, and make things more difficult by his sudden panic, I stepped round the third screen, to the open side of the wind-break.

Before a low stone altar, on which shells and herbs were set, stood a woman, waiting with a bronze dirk in her left hand. Her right was held across her body, to cover it. She was much older than I, but still very beautiful, still young enough for a youth to think of with desire, although she had been at great pains to hide her beauty. Her long black hair fell almost to her waist, tangled into snakes with cow-grease; her oval face was daubed thick with white ochre, so that her blue-lidded eyes stared from it as big as pebbles; her mouth was so botched with red, that it seemed like that of a leopard which has just risen from a fresh kill.

Though her body above the waist was bare, on her upper arms were loosely-tied the great wings of an eagle, now dry and losing their plumage. About her lower belly was a lion's skin, its clawed feet and tufted tail hanging about her finely-shaped legs. In the enclosed space, within the tent, the smell of sweat and hides and cow-fat came from her and I saw that her legs and body were dusty, as though she had withheld from bathing for many days during her vigil above the city.

I said to her, lightly in my youth, though she was just old enough to be my mother, or an elder sister at the least, 'Come, lady, you will not frighten me with that little knife. See, your hand is shaking, I could take it from you without any trouble.'

Her black eyes widened still more, and she hissed from her open mouth, like a civet-cat caught in a bush.

I laughed again and said, ‘You should be at a woman’s trade, pressing cheese, washing the linen, suckling a baby, and not playing this game dressed in rubbish from the town-midden. The time has gone for such childish foolery.’

Her sudden rush at me took me so much by surprise that she almost bowled me over, on my lame feet; but I had sense enough to lean sideways, so that her dirk only ran along the skin of my ribs and did not enter my body. Still, the sharp sting of it was enough to anger me, and I grasped her wrist and twisted it hard. She gasped with pain and the bronze knife fell onto the ground. She was strong, for a woman, but I was stronger, and for a while, her body pressed so close to mine that I knew all its nature. I think that this was part of her assault on me, for while she stayed there, the force seemed to drain out of me. I shook her off, still holding her wrist, then, bringing the dead king’s sword from behind my back, said, ‘Let us be rid of this.’

When she saw the bright blade in my hand, her painted face twisted so violently in terror that the ochre cracked and some of it fell, leaving her cheeks exposed and ruddy.

I smiled and said, ‘There is no need to struggle so. I shall not hurt you as you have hurt so many poor travellers who came this way.’

The king’s sword was keen and cut through the thongs which bound the eagle-wings to her shoulders without trouble. They fell between our feet and we trampled on them as we swayed. It was this wrestling which brought her the first pain, for as I pushed the sword down to slit through the belt of her lion-girdle, she swung sideways, then gave a sharp gasp. As the tawny hide slipped to her ankles, I saw that the sword had run between her legs and caused blood to mark her inner thigh. She saw it, too, and stared down as though a terrible deed had been done. I shook her back to sense and whispered roughly, ‘Those who lie dead with your noose about their necks would willingly change places with you, lady. Come now, we have stripped off your finery and can see what you are—a woman, no more than that. So finish with this pretence and let us go on the next stage of the journey.’

Perhaps my pride had blinded me for the moment; or perhaps she was more crafty than I had allowed her: but, almost before I had finished these words, her free hand went out, trying to make me kneel as the man below had done so easily. At another time, I might have laughed, but now a real anger came over me, and as I arched back to avoid her vicious fingers, I

struck down sharply with the sword-flat across her wrist, knocking her hand away and causing her face to wrinkle with pain.

'That you will not try again,' I said. 'Once is enough for one day. I am not to be misused by any slut of Thebes.'

And I swung her round, so that her back was towards me, and grasped her by the thick hair, close to her head. As I did this, she said, 'I am a Queen. I am no slut.'

I did not answer her, the rage in me choked my throat. But, pushing her here and there, I hacked at the gilded poles which held the Sphinx-tent upright, until the painted cloth fell about us. Then, kicking at it savagely, I shoved it to the further lip of the hill, where the rocky ground fell steeply. A sudden gust of wind caught it and whirled it away, down towards a dry valley. Sometimes, it caught in bushes, or on boulders, but always the wind tore at it again, until it was gone.

I thought the woman would break her savage silence then and scream, but she did not. Instead, she gasped and then began to weep, calling on the Mother to witness that I, and not she, had done this thing. Indeed, her crying was such, and the movements of her warm body so violent, that for a moment, in my youth and compassion, I almost forgot my hard purpose and held her to me to comfort her and to ease myself. But suddenly I heard the harsh shouts of the soldiers from other hillsides, calling that the Sphinx was down and that some disaster must have struck their Queen. Then there was an angry buzzing on all sides, as though the hive had been overturned and all the bees were swarming.

The passion left my body and my head cleared. I grasped the woman's hair again, pushing her before me like a shield, and placing the sword-point in the small of her brown back so that it made a depression in the flesh but did not break the skin. Grimly I said to her, 'Woman, you shall be my shield. If your men come at me, they will kill you first. Call them off, and let us go down to Thebes.'

She stood stiffly at first, as though she would rather die on the hill; then all her body began to shudder, as though a new life had come into it, almost as though I had been loving her, not pushing a hard blade at her. She nearly fell to the ground while this fit was on her, and found it hard to get her breath. But when it was past, she was strangely calm, and moved easily, no longer stiff or struggling. And going before me to the edge of the hill overlooking the city, she called down in a high, clear voice, 'This is as it was

decreed. Let no man move to stand in the way of her wishes, for it was Aphrodite herself who sent this man up the hill to me.'

I smiled, standing behind her, thinking what a small place the world was, and how simple the men and women who walked in it. Aye, even Kings and Queens! Even gods and goddesses.

Then this Queen moved down the hill with my fingers in her black hair, as mildly and slowly as a broken horse between the shafts of a cart. Seeing her nakedness, the soldiers fell on their knees before us, hiding their heads: but their Queen walked on as though she was newly clothed with fine garments, as though she felt no shame at being led, uncovered, towards the city. As though, indeed, by some perversity of nature, she was proud to be so taken.

I thought: Who has captured whom? Is this the Queen Bee, and am I the new lover whose husk will be swept from the hive when all is over?

21

As we went on down the hill, and the road flattened and became broader, and smoother from chariot-wheels and wagons, and the enormous squat beehive city grew nearer and nearer, I had much time to observe the woman's broad back before me. It was what I saw most of all—except, from the corners of my eyes, her soldiers walking in long, silent files on either side of us, five paces away, trailing their spears, but making no move to harm me and to rescue their Queen.

Under the sun-browned pelt of her back, small whiter ridges and scars showed as the sun fell on them, criss-crossed, and running from shoulder to the place where my sword-point pressed, above her thin waist.

I said, 'You have known the lash, woman. We shepherd-folk of the hills dream that Kings and Queens lie always on soft beds, eat meat for every meal, drink the good wine whenever they are dry, and never know pain until the god comes for them at the end. But you have felt the lash.'

I thought that she might ignore my words; or answer them arrogantly, furious to be the hostage of a limping peasant youth: but, to my great surprise, she laughed and half-turned her head to glance at me, even though I still held her hair, close to the head, most firmly, as one would hold in a violent stallion, the bronze bit pulled back hard, in case he broke away.

She said, 'Those who are not Kings and Queens are blessed by the Gods, if they but knew it. Those whose simple trade it is to tend flocks and herds, or even to bear swords and javelins, have a pleasant life with their common tasks. But Kings and Queens, standing as high and lonely as mountain-peaks, are always under the eye of the god. Just as Parnassus bears its load of bitter snow, so do Kings and Queens bear their harsh duties, their burdens towards the god and the people. And these burdens, not like a bale of hay, cannot be cast away on a moment's whim when the going is hard.'

I said, mocking, 'But the rewards are great, woman. What man would not say a prayer or two, sacrifice an ox or two, walk in a painted procession before feast-days, in return for a soft bed and clean linen, a well-stocked storehouse, fine armour and a horse?'

Now her laughter was as sharp as spoiled wine, and she said, ‘The peasant’s eyes see only such outward things, by daylight. What Kings and Queens know, shut within walls and by darkness, the peasants never learn. If you knew these things, you would not envy a king his horse and armour.’

I said, ‘I know that some kings go first in the battle; and that some drink the hemlock-cup at the end of their lives. But I have seen peasants, quarrelling over the price of a sheep, put daggers into one another, and that pain is no less than a king’s, as he rushes into battle. And I have seen a cattle-breeder, a man of common blood, dash his brains out from a high rock when drought ruined him, and all the people gazing up at him as he came down through the air. No king felt more fear, or more shame, or more agony than that man.’

After a while, the Queen said, ‘These you name are but few. What if every peasant knew that, like it or not, he was doomed to feel the axe-edge or to leap from the high wall, at the moment when he was in his full flood and the wine tasted sweetest on his lips? What if a peasant knew that he would never grow into quiet old age, would never creep gently into his bed and fall into the last sleep? That the end might be tomorrow, or the next day, and that it would come, inevitably, with agony and blood? Would the peasant envy the king then?’

I said, ‘There are kings who live to a great age, and die in their beds quietly.’

She answered, ‘Yes, there are. I can think of three of them, throughout Hellas.’

With my sword point, I traced a long scar that lay across her shoulder-blades. ‘Who gave you that?’ I asked, being bested in our other argument.

She shrugged and said, ‘My father, Menoeceus, when I rose too hastily from my knees at the Feast of Dionysus. I was young, and felt sick that I should be compelled to hold the libation cup below the altar where the youth was torn.’

There was another scar, which ran crooked, like a mountain stream, almost the length of her backbone. ‘And who gave you that?’ I asked, drawing the sword-pommel down it lightly.

‘Laius, who was my husband, put that on me,’ she said, without bitterness. ‘And that was when I gave him strong wine to drink, one night in a cell beneath the ground, where I was a prisoner.’

I said, ‘You have paid high prices for small errors! Now here, around your hips, is another token, newer than the rest. Who gave you this, and why?’

This time the Queen’s voice was low and hoarse: if she had been any other woman, I would have said that she was feeling shame.

She said, ‘Creon, my noble brother, gave me that. But I cannot tell you why. Such things are not for the ears of a wandering peasant, however quick he is to turn the tables on his betters.’

Half-angry, half in contempt, I twisted my fingers harder into her hair at these words, and shook her head as she walked. But she gave no sign that I had hurt her, and went on proudly in silence, until we came to the bridge over the chasm which lay under the great South Wall of the city. And when we were there, there were other things than talk, to occupy my thoughts.

From below came up a scent so strong and sickly-sweet that, recognizing it, I almost let the woman go, so that I could lean over the balustrade and vomit; or so that I could run across the dust-laden timbers onto solid ground. Though she did not face me, the woman sensed what was in my heart and said, mockingly, ‘One would have thought you country-folk to have had stronger stomachs. We who live in palaces must harden ourselves to worse than this.’

I held my breath and hurried her over the gulf before I took air into my mouth again. There, in the dust of the rocky road, lining its either side, kneeled women in black robes, many of them grey-haired, all of them hooded with mourning-shawls, or strips of dark cloth. As they saw me coming, leading the stripped and humbled Queen before me, they held out thin hands towards me, and opened black mouths to cry, ‘Hail, Shepherd! Shepherd of the People, we greet you. We, who lie in your great hand now, greet you.’

These words went to my head like strong wine. I was only a youth and had acted as I had for myself only, for my own pride, for my anger at being born lame. Now, suddenly I heard voices praising this pride and this lameness, as though I had suffered for them, in being proud and crippled, suffered for these black-robed women.

For a moment, the god roared through my blood, almost drowning me, stunning me, rendering me senseless: and I cried out, ‘What is it you desire? What would you have me do, my people?’

Then one old crone, shuffling forward on her knees across the rocks, screamed out, ‘Creon denies our husbands burial. Give them decent graves, Shepherd!’

And the others joined in, like bitches howling on the scent of a fox, ‘Give them graves, Shepherd!’

Through this noise, the Queen spoke bitterly over her shoulder, ‘You will need to fly through the air, and snatch their bones from the vultures’ beaks!’

Her words drenched my glory like icy water, for they called up my terror of the sky at a moment when my feet were on the solid rock and my fame was mounting. These black-robed widows would have me fly as high as the eagles, I thought—and, when I fell, as Icarus fell, would turn their wrinkled faces to another Shepherd, another crippled fool willing to die for them.

I nodded, and smiled, my face like a mask, stiff now not with glory but with fear, and this seemed to pacify them, for the worst of the shouting died down and fell away to a whimper here and there.

In the shadow of the great gate, the Queen said, ‘So, you have appeased them, peasant. You will do well enough as their king, until you fail and fall.’

I said coldly, ‘When will that be, woman?’

She answered quietly, ‘When you do not give them their dreams. When the sun ceases to glow at your word, and when the corn does not grow as heavy in the head as they would like it.’

I said, ‘But I am not a god. I cannot speak to the sun and make it shine, nor to the rain and make it come down. You know that, well enough.’

She answered, laughing, ‘Yes, I know it, and so do they in their hearts: but you have selected yourself to be their Shepherd, their scapegoat, their sacrifice; and now, if your word does not suffice, then, they think, perhaps your blood and bones might.’

She spoke so calmly and so wisely that I knew she was a true Queen, born with the knowledge of peoples and gods and sacrifice; bred among blood and agony; as deep and as subtle as the rich soil in the fields. Beside her, I was a boy, a husk, an idiot—one who played with the toys of life, who lived in a dream and not in the real world.

As we marched on under the gateway, through the belly of the great South Wall, she said to me, ‘You have had your moment’s fame, Shepherd. Now let me share a little of it. Lend me your cloak to cover my body, as we go to meet my brother.’

I did as she asked, and even helped to knot the ragged strip of cloth about her slender waist, thinking as I did it how brave this woman had been to walk into her city, under a thousand eyes, with no other covering than her pride.

Creon the Prince, her brother, stood in the cobbled square within the gate, leaning on his long spear. He was a thin-limbed warrior, taller than most men I had seen, whose black hair hung down, below his horse-head helmet, to the small of his back, teased into ringlets with oil and ochreous clay. A black beard clung to his oval face from ears to chin and the hair on his upper lip came down on either side to join it. His skin was not honey-brown like his sister's, but had that burnt pallor which no sun will ever alter. It was the paleness of a dead man; but with an underlayer of darkness within it, that seemed to struggle to come through but could not. His lips were thin and white, between the dark hairs of his beard, and his eyes were as grey as flint-stone. It was as though he and the Queen had come from different fathers, or different mothers, they were so unlike in everything except their majesty.

Looking up at Creon for the first time, I felt my own courage waver. I wondered whether I had met my master at last.

Then I saw him nod carelessly to the armed men who stood in ranks behind him, as though to say: Leave this in my hands. I shall not need you yet awhile.

And, as the tension among them relaxed, like a bow-string loosened, and as I heard them grounding their javelins again, he said to me in a light voice, as mocking as his grey eyes, 'Welcome, Shepherd. We have waited for you a long time. But, at last, She has sent you to guide us and to cover us with your body. We of Thebes are well contented.'

Then, still smiling his thin-lipped mocking smile, he drew off his tall helmet and fell to his knees in the dust before me. So did all his host. And as the hot air shimmered with their silent laughter, I heard the Queen whisper to me, 'You may loose me now, boy. Both sorts of our people have chosen you as their King.'

Bewildered and half-afraid, I felt her take my hand and lead me out of the sun, into the shadows of the Great House. And at the head of the stairway that fell down into its tunnelled entrance, she said as evenly as though she offered me a piece of sun-dried bread, 'So, I am yours, as the sword in your hand is yours, got by cunning and kept by craft.'

And as we went down, out of the light into the chill darkness, she added, ‘And you are mine, Shepherd, just as my breasts and the buds on them are mine.’

If she had not held me then, I should have fallen down into the dark, so heavy with threatening were those words. Thus, I became the Shepherd King of Thebes.

22

I TELL you, my lords, this was not of my asking, this kingship of Thebes. Yet who would refuse a kingdom and the woman who went with it? Who, born lame among shepherds, would refuse a hero's title?

I was guided down the dark and winding stairway, damp and chill to the feet, the walls of that place wet with earth's moisture. Up to me, from the cavern below, voices cried, 'Anax! Anax! The King!'

It was both throning and wedding, down there in the half-darkness, lit only by the bronze-red flame of fat-lamps set on ledges in the rock. For a while I stood alone, backed by hard-faced javelin men, while old women of the household took away my clothes, washed me in oil and then covered me with a paste of white clay, all but my hair, which they daubed with red ochre, and my eyelids that they painted blue.

I held fast to the sword I had taken from the dead king, and the high buskined-sandals which supported my lame feet. The slave-women grumbled at this breaking of the ritual, but I snarled at one of them, so that the warriors should not hear, 'Be silent, old woman, or you will be the first to fall.'

Then, in the close and crowded darkness, horns blew and gongs sounded; and, from behind a pointed pillar of limestone, two people came. It was Creon, leading his sister Jocasta by the hand, though so changed were they, by their ceremonials, that, in the sooty light of the fat-lamps, it was hard to recognize them at first.

Half-covering his face, Creon wore a gilded leather mask, the face of a lion, on either side of which his hair hung down, heavy with yellow clay mixed with fat, and half-curled in ringlets. His upper body was painted white, as mine was, but riding above the matted hairs on his breast was a gold lunula, the moon-sign, which bobbed up and down as he walked.

About his middle, like a great protective girdle, he wore the tanned genitals of the bull, spread out and gilded, splendid with embossing.

But even more splendid was his cloak, which stood out from his shoulders on broad supports and then fell heavily until it trailed a yard

behind him on the cavern floor, as he walked. It made a clashing sound as he moved, and when he came closer I saw why this was; the cloak was of small bronze rings, all interlinked, and lined with the pelts of lions.

On his feet he wore high-soled sandals of cork-bark and leather, covered with shaggy hide and having claws like those of the leopard. He was already a tall man, but these sandals made him a giant.

He held a staff of ebony, circled with silver serpents, in his right hand, and leaned on it with every step as he led his sister towards me.

If I had seen her thus bedecked, as a child, I should have run howling up the hill for safety: for in her wedding-gear she was more a monster than a woman, a creature of fearful dreams. While the slaves had been anointing me, it seemed that others had been at pains to take from Jocasta the semblance of womanhood and to recreate her as a beast, an animal of darkness.

On her head they had fitted a tight bronze helmet, surmounted by a coiled serpent, and having a beaked mask that jutted out to conceal her eyes and nose. Below this her long hair starred out, each coil of it wrapped round with silver wires, like the rays coming from the moon.

Her cloak fell in two halves, to hide her arms and hands, in the form of great wings, the tips of which brushed the ground as she came forward. It was of gold, but beaten so finely that it was as transparent as fish-skin, and made a faint crackling sound with every movement of her body.

About her waist deer-hide thongs had been pulled so tightly that I could have spanned her with my two hands. She gasped with this imprisonment as her brother brought her forth.

I gazed at her padded hips, at the lioness-mask and dangling claws which hung before her middle-body; at her skirt of pleated linen which came in tightly to her ankles and was there bound with a thong, so that it was all she could do to hobble along on bare feet, as Creon led her to me.

In the flickering lights of the cavern, the Queen of Thebes seemed more like a great insect, a bee, than a woman, with her mask and wings, her thin waist and heavy lower-parts. Only her breasts proclaimed her as a creature of the world that I inhabited: yet even they seemed strangely alien, among all the trappings of this Theban madness.

Then, as they came closer and closer to me, this royal brother and sister, I saw what they shared in common, though they were unlike in so many other ways. It was the serpent birthmark of the House of Cadmus, a brown

discoloration of the skin that circled the navel and then coiled downwards and was lost. With this sign of their nobility, they had no need to paint and torment their bodies so stupidly: for the god had already made manifest their pride of origin.

I had been so concerned, watching them approach, that in the dim place of ceremony I had not seen another come forth from the crowd and stand beside me; but when he coughed, in the damp of the cavern, I turned and saw this bent old man, whose grey hair hung onto his shrivelled breast, and whose head and shoulders were covered with a hood and cape of black goatskin. In his left hand he held a shallow brown clay bowl, such as those the ancient Shore Folk used before the first Hellenes came; and in his right hand, a short knife of black flint, such a thing as lies beyond man's memory, back into the misty days when the land was covered with green forests and the sun never dared to show his face over the dark hills, lest some mere-monster should raise a great claw and pluck him from the sky.

As in a dream, I heard the Old Man at my side say, 'Who gives this woman to be the wife of this man?'

And Creon's mask vibrated with his deep and muffled answer, 'I, the Lion of Thebes, give her, Old Menoeceus.'

Then once more the Old Man spoke. 'Do you, stranger from Corinth, take this hive's Queen and swear to nourish her with all your substance?'

I smiled beneath my mask of clay and said in a clear, conqueror's voice, 'Yes, I will do that.'

Then all at once the Old Man took Jocasta's hand and drew her close to me. So close that I felt the heart beating behind her breast. So, as we stood flesh to flesh, he drew the flint knife lightly across our bodies then held the clay bowl between us, as though it caught the libation.

I smiled again, at the dark eyes which gazed at me through the holes in the bronze mask, as though to say, 'This old fool. . .'

And then I suddenly felt that my body was wet, was clinging to hers as though stuck with such resin as comes from the summer pear-tree, and I knew that the ancient knife and bowl of Thebes could still fulfil their purpose.

And as I looked down, in astonishment, the barons set up a great cry: 'It is done! There is a King in Thebes again! The Queen has chosen wisely! Anax! Anax!'

I heard these words vibrating across the cavern's stony roof, then up the winding stairs towards the light. And distantly I heard the people up above, in the sunshine, echoing what had been shouted below. Then, suddenly, I was alone in the cavern with Jocasta and her brother, for the Old Man had withdrawn into the shadows and the barons had gone up the stairs to join in the feasting.

Creon slowly raised the gilded lion-mask, pulled it from his head and gazed down at it, then, with a sharp movement of the hand, flung it towards me.

'Take this and become our new Lion,' he said, his pale lips twisted in a strange smile. 'It is your duty now to stifle in the thing, until another comes to take the duty from you.'

I swung the stiff leather shell from my finger, carelessly, and said, 'It holds no value, and no terror, for me: but who takes it from my grasp, now it has been given, must be taller than any man the sun has so far shone upon.'

As I said this, I heard Jocasta gasp beside me in that chill cavern. I said, 'You are too restricted, my Queen. You should undo the girdle that holds you in so cruelly. Here, let me cut it with my sword.'

But she drew away from my outstretched hand, as though my words brought fear into her heart.

Tall Creon loomed above me, smiling and fingering his curled black beard. 'Not so fast, Lion,' he said. 'You must not hope to change everything in one short day! Others have tried, great kings—yet they now lie still and staring, no longer interested in bringing change to ancient Thebes.'

In my young pride, I said, 'I dealt with one of them myself. It is his sword I hold now in my hand. So much I have already changed.'

But Creon did not answer. Instead, he turned away whistling, then, after a while said lightly, 'Let us go up the inner stairway to the dome. It is due to you to see what manner of city you have inherited.'

I began to follow him, but Jocasta called me back. 'Untie my ankles, Lion,' she said. 'I cannot do it for myself, since this girdle keeps me from bending.'

I got to my knees before her and with my clumsy fingers wrestled at the tightly-knotted deer-hide. It came to me suddenly as I kneeled that if either of them had wished to end my life then, they could have done so, my head bowed meekly before them like that of a sacrificial ox.

But neither of them moved to end me. They only smiled down on me as I kneeled, and when the knot was untied, led me to the secret stairway that mounted up and up, out of the cavern, and into the blue sky.

23

WHEN the stairway had ceased winding round the smooth and echoing mud dome, we came out upon a platform of oak so dry and aged that it resembled sun-baked brick rather than wood. A wind was blowing up there, though there was no sign of breeze below in the streets, and the whole structure of the platform moved and creaked beneath our feet. I was afraid for an instant, seeing market-stalls down there no bigger than my thumb-nail and men who looked like ants.

Creon, behind me, heard my gasp and pushed me forward almost brutally. 'Come, King, come,' he said laughing, 'the city you have won lies before you like a new bride waiting for her master's viewing.'

Such was my fear of this great height, I thought for a moment that Creon meant to push me onwards until we came to the balustrade and so tumble me down to the distant earth; and, in my anger, I turned on him and clenched my fist to strike him.

Jocasta saw what was in my heart and calmly took my arm and placed it about her, as though to indicate that, if I were to fall, she would fall with me. It was the first time in my life that anyone had so shown me such love. Then she pointed with her free hand and said, 'Gaze upon it, Oedipus. Is it not a great place, this Thebes?'

I gazed and saw its greatness, yet it was a stern splendour mixed with terror. Corinth had been a dusty bull-ranch, flat and open to the sky: its only terror lay in its bulls, not in its labyrinth of skin tents. Delphi was a place of squalid cave-holes set in the rocks; what terror it had, hid underground, and out of common sight, beside the glowing fissure that breathed like a man. Later in my life, I saw Athens and Colonus, and they were, for the most part, white places, where doves sat upon the red roofs and dark cypress-trees stood like tall maidens behind high garden walls.

But Thebes was like nothing I had seen before, or would ever see again. It stood with a background of blue hills, and flanked on two sides by a precipitous gully, enclosed within its enormous walls of mud-brick and timber. It was a closed city, almost a secret city; yet so immense that, as I

stood above it that evening, with the bronze glow of the dying sun in my eyes, I thought that no place could have equalled it in size, search where one might throughout the world. To my left rose a great high cube of whitened brick, its cliff-like walls pocked with countless window-holes in rows; to my right, a red blunt-topped pyramid swept down, in terraces, to a broad square base as large as a town itself. Beyond both these great places lay a treble line of tall beehive domes, much like the Great Dome I was standing on: and every building was connected with every other by many bridges, some broad and stout, some made so flimsy by distance that they seemed no more secure than spider's webs.

Above all, except us, towered an immense chimney, whose mouth was broad enough for a man with arms outstretched to fall into it with space to spare on either hand; and up, out of this stained funnel, an oily black smoke rose ceaselessly, letting drop its ashes and soot on all the houses below it, and eddying in the wind over the city like an eternal cloak of mourning.

Jocasta nodded towards the chimney and said, 'Below that is the Great Shrine, in whose altar-furnaces the offerings are burned.'

Creon nudged me in the side. 'Flesh and fat give rise to this black smoke,' he said. 'It stains the clothes, as well as the house walls. When the wind lies in this direction, I tell you, it takes a brave man to stand on this balcony—or one without a sense of smell!'

I turned from him and said to the Queen, 'Such a furnace must devour many oxen.' It was meant to be nothing more than an observation, of no worth, requiring no answer. But once again Creon used the opportunity to speak. 'Oxen!' he said. 'By Mother Dia, but there are not so many cattle in all Hellas! Our furnace burns *everything*—every man, woman, child; every dog; every dead bird; every sick sheep . . . In Thebes, all offal goes to the fire—even vine-stems and worn-out shoes. How else could we keep our city palled by such a fine cloak of black, King Oedipus!'

As he spoke, a change of wind caused the smoke to eddy in our direction for a moment, and I almost vomited to smell it, and to see the marks it left upon my robe. But Jocasta and Creon outfaced it, until the wind had swung about once more, as though they had stood under the caress of Spring's sweetest breeze.

I looked away and saw, behind the Royal House, countless rows of small domes, set so close together that from our great height it seemed that a man could scarcely walk between them. The Queen put forth her finger, pointing, and said, 'In those hives the Workers swarm. They are of our own blood, the

old Cretan blood. Without them, this city could not gain its bread or drink its wine.'

I said dryly, 'I trust they are well rewarded for their labours.'

Creon answered me and said, 'We do not grind them down. That would be like maiming one's right hand. To show how we love them, as our own blood, we give them new homes in the great white house with the many windows once they have proved themselves, and there they show their gratitude by labouring from dawn to dark like a colony of bees.'

As he said this, I glanced at Jocasta, for a strange low buzzing was coming from her breast and throat at the mention of bees. And truly, in the bronze touch of the dying sun, with its unearthly light across her breast and forehead, glinting on the tight round helmet and beaked mask, she looked more than ever a Queen Bee. The evening breeze touched the wings of her cloak and fluttered them for a moment. She was not with us now, as she gazed over her city, her hive. Creon glanced at me and at her, then curled his lips in a smile and said, as though to take my eyes from her, 'And, over there, in the tall domes, live the Drones, Oedipus—the Barons. They are the Hellenes who came here as conquerors from the north, but now have only their dreams and their palaces. You saw some of their women when you first came from the hill, you recall. They knelt and begged you to bury their dead husbands.'

I sensed, as he spoke, that this was one of the chasms I would have to leap in Thebes, and I said, as calmly as I could, 'These Hellenes who live in the city, what is their function then, if they do not rule?'

Creon bit his lower lip and looked to the sky before answering; then he said, 'In every kingdom there must be men who are held answerable. Crops might fail, cattle might die, the rains might not come. . . So, Mother Dia sent us the Hellenes, who thought they came as lords, but now stay within our high walls like stalled oxen ready for the festival, whenever it might fall. Do not look so solemn, brother! The Barons and their families know this and do not do badly out of it. They stride and boast their days away, enjoying their power while it stays with them, and, by the Law of Thebes, our Cretan workers show them all respect.'

'Laughing behind their hands?' I said, bitterly.

Creon nodded, then shrugged and answered, 'Each man born of woman on this earth, Cretan or Hellene, must pay his price. No man eats a supper he does not work for. Yet, you will find these Barons and their women happy

enough as you get to know them. And you will, for they have called you their Shepherd, as they did old Laius before you, the King whose sword you are carrying now. . . He gave them great joy, locking up and belittling the Queen Bee of the Workers. Ah, the Drones made merry until, when their Shepherd went away to Delphi, their laughter was silenced a little, as you saw, looking over the bridge before the main gate.'

I did not like this prince's sly insolence. Each word he spoke was low and evenly-spaced from its fellows, as though well considered. But I could not show anger to him yet, until I had made myself secure in Thebes. Then, perhaps, the time would come. So, to bridge the silence after his words, I said, 'Why was Laius Shepherd on his way to Thebes when I met him?'

Creon rubbed his fine nose and answered, 'In the Council, he told the Barons that he was going to ask how the Sphinx might be destroyed, so that they should suffer no more. He was of their blood, remember, the Hellene blood.'

I said, 'But that was not the true reason?'

Then Jocasta turned from the balcony and said, in her honey voice, but as coolly as autumn streams on Cythaeron, 'No. King Laius was afraid, after all those years. He had put off his duty, time after time, as Shepherd of the People, and now was running away with his lover, Polyphontes the charioteer. That was when you met him and brought the Fall upon him, as was decreed. So he fulfilled what was intended for him, though he dreamed he had gone free. The Mother's arm is long, Shepherd.'

Her words sent a chill into my body. When I had felt anger at Laius on the narrow path, I had thought it was because his chariot bruised my foot: but then I had seen him to be the king who had killed my mother, and so had flung him over the side of the mountain. Yes, indeed, Laius had died because the Mother's arm was long, even after death, and I had been her instrument.

This set my mind onto a new course. I said, 'Here, in Thebes, who is it that keeps the Law between Workers and Drones, then? Your wine-treaders and herdsmen can be no match for the Barons?'

Creon knocked his chest with his knuckles and said proudly, 'In this great hive, that is my task. I am the Leader of the Law and my warrior-bees enforce it. See, over there is a great pyramid. It was built for us by Egyptian artificers who wandered here when our city was a village. In that red house live the soldiers. If you look about the city, you will see such soldiers stationed everywhere: beside wells, on balconies, on bridges, on roof-tops.

You cannot mistake them, they are tall men of our dark blood and all wear the red horse-mane crest on their helmets.'

I looked and saw the sunlight glinting on their javelins, in terraced gardens, on stairways which spiralled round the Barons' domes, even on the ledge which ran round the furnace-chimney, half-way up its height.

I said, 'It would be hard for any Theban to keep a secret, Creon!'

He nodded and said, 'We of the Royal Hive must have eyes everywhere. Only so may we sleep safely.'

Along one broad terrace, far away from us, a crowd was watching a chariot race, waving excitedly: but among the many dark heads I now saw red-crested ones. Beneath the stunted trees, high on the East Wall, a long line of girls and youths danced in a white-robed procession, to the sound of flutes and timbrels, as though celebrating my wedding to Jocasta. Yet, every five paces along the balustrade stood a red-crested man, leaning upon his tall spear.

It seemed that nowhere in Thebes might any folk gather, workers, drones, or barons, unless under the stern gaze of the soldiers. I thought: We must change that! If I am to be the King here, we must change that!

It was while my mind was busy with this problem that Jocasta touched my arm and said, as excitedly as a young girl, 'Look! Oh, look! The King-Stallion, Hippomedon, lord of horses, is out grazing again after his long sickness. That is a good omen for you, Oedipus!'

Far away, and down, on the summit of a tall pyramid where grass grew within a walled field, a great white horse had his head bent towards the ground. The wind in his high pasture whipped mane and tail about, making him look like the horses I had dreamed of when I lived on the mountain with Rhene and Nomius. Now this, I thought, is the horse I should have seen when I was ten—not the fat-bellied shaggy beast that Laius rode on! This would have cheered my heart in those distant days—to see this white godlike creature coming down with a king upon his back.

I said, 'Whose is that horse? Who may ride him?'

Creon sniffed and said, 'No one may ride him, Oedipus, not even the King. Hippomedon's back has never been burdened and never will. He is too noble: he belongs to all Thebes as their guardian. He came at the dawn-time to live here and is sacred. When Hippomedon is sick, Thebes is sick; and when he neighs, and gallops, and grazes in contentment, Thebes is merry and contented.'

I nodded, putting on my serious look, for no horse could be as holy and could live as long as Creon said: but, all the same, I played his game and asked mildly, ‘Is it good for such a valuable beast to live in the smoke of the Great Chimney? Surely it will stain his whiteness? Surely the soot will taint his pasture? And, should Hippomedon ever take it into his head to jump over that wall, would he not fall down the Chimney?’

Creon looked me directly in the eye, his own eyes dancing with something that sent a cold chill across my back. He said, ‘We all live in the smoke of the furnace, so why not Hippomedon, who is our patron? The whiteness of us all is stained by the sacrifice, and we wash ourselves clean again; so why may Hippomedon not be washed by the kindly grooms? The food and drink we put into our mouths is tainted by the bodies of all the Sown Men who ever went into the earth to provide it: so should not Hippomedon’s grass be flavoured also? And, as for jumping down into the Chimney—Hippomedon is the King-Stallion. Should his time come, he has the same right and duty of all our kings, to leap out towards his glory when he is called.’

I thought: Zeus, but is there no escape from this falling? Must I see it everywhere?

My legs were shaking so much now that, though I fought my hardest to control them, I could not, quite. Suddenly Jocasta took me by the arm, firmly, and whispered, ‘Let us go down, husband, to a gentler place. You have seen enough for the first time. Thebes is like old wine, it must only be sipped gently or it will scatter the senses. It is like the sun, a man should not stare at it too long or he goes blind. Come, come, my king, you must untie this girdle or it will choke me.’

So we went down, with Creon behind us smiling, his long shadow falling before us on the ancient steps, like a dark and silent javelin.

24

In Nature there are hills and valleys, dark clefts and gorse-shrouded mounds; streams, prominences, hollows. And from each its air, its odour, its special sense.

So it is with man: for in man the gods have made their world again, walking small. In man they have built these things, volcano-navel and stiff-stretched isthmus. It is all there, from the prongs of Paeonia, which are the toes; to the closed and secret Gulf of Corinth, which is the warm ecstatic entrance to the womb itself. The long ships, with their sharp and purple-headed prows, enter this secret haven through the narrow opening between Chalcis and Patrae. It is a painful passage often, because the harsh, grass-covered rock almost encloses it, forcing the long-bodied vessel to squeeze through, into the open and receiving gulf, with arrows loosed from either side by waiting wreckers; or barbed javelins, accurately cast and sharply-piercing the probing figurehead, the ram or boar, causing the foremost men, the ship-guiders, to topple bloody, even before they get within; making the ship to unload its cargo on the horrid shore while yet the straits grip hard and the full opening is yet to be achieved, the goal, the landing-place.

In Nature there are such hills and valleys, such welcoming warm havens, and such searching prows, such pressings-through and such early unloadings in strange parts.

Yet, as though to encourage further voyages, sometimes the gods let cargoes be unloaded where they should be set, where busy hands wait ready to receive them and to carry them away, into some other place, some necessary darkness that the steersman does not know, or, knowing, would not be concerned, his own trade being done, his purpose carried out.

Now to rest before other voyages, he sleeps, his arms outspread, upon his back, breathing in and out, careless of enemies, his shirt undone, his dagger cast aside. It will be midday, with its ardent sun, before the captain sees the world again.

And so I slept, and voyaged, yet and yet; finding new capes and bays, fresh undiscovered crevices and groves, harsh grazing, and sharp-spurting

streams, steep aromatic woods, keen spines and slippery slopes. In nightly journeyings I learned new pathways through the hills, and hid where even crafty foxes had not known the way.

The vine's blood, working in the secret cask; the kneaded flour, warm in the baker's oven; the barley-ale, moved beyond endurance with the balm and bursting from its bung, spurting out into the deadly light of day, to lie, no more than froth upon the kitchen tiles, soiled white upon the red, already target for the questing flies.

This it was, as far as words can tell, which is not far, to be with Jocasta. I was her voyager, and she my place of journeying; and part of her, one part, the one and darkest part, the haven of my quest, the target of my blunted arrow. And, hitting that, both of us died, both suffered, the sender and receiver, both fell down, gasping, and then coming back from the dead to raise each other and laugh again.

You understand, my lords, I speak beyond my sense. There are some things which gods have made and put a name to, which may not be disclosed after the flush of dawn. Or, if disclosed, are less and laughable. There are two languages, two sets of actions; one for the staring sunlit day, the bragging boy that sweats beside the baked mud-wall; one for the cool of evening, when the moon slides through a sky of indigo, as ice-floes glide beyond Propontis, from the North, showing their regal tips, and never letting know that underneath the black, concealing wave, three-parts of their essential weight, their force, their hidden power swings, near to the bottom of the sea.

My wedding-gift to Jocasta was no more than this voyaging, no more than the old sword I had taken from Laius and always wore in this strange foreign city which was supposed to be mine, but which I never truly loved. On our wedding night the Queen smiled at me, after the women had bathed us and gone, and I stood before her bed, which had a great swirl of carved peacock-feathers at its head, painted a deep green, as though she lay in the grove of Apollo. And the eye of each feather was coloured with gold, edged about with red, like a tired watchful eye: the Mother's eye, or something else, Dia's sign.

There was never such another bed in Hellas, and it was broad enough to hold four sleepers. Standing, unclothed but for the dead king's sword which I held before me in its shielding scabbard, I mentioned this, more to cover my shyness than for any other reason.

Jocasta, who was leaning on her elbow, gazing me up and down, nodded so that her dark hair suddenly fell all about her and then she whispered from between its shining locks, ‘You are right, husband. She may have given you slow feet, but your eyes are quick enough. There are times when the bed must hold four. But this is not the moment for us to think of the festivals. Now, there is another thing we must do, to prove to ourselves whether our union will be blessed, whether yours is the king for my queen.’

I laughed, bragging, to hide my uncertainty and began to climb into the peacock-bed. ‘You will soon find out,’ I said, silently praying that Upright Apollo would send me a sign, or that black bull Poseidon would come into me and make me greatest among men.

But the Queen flung back her hair, swishing it across me as I knelt above her, like a gentle lash, and said, as she saw me shiver, ‘It is not this weapon I doubt, which is as fine as any I have seen, and straight enough to reach the mark, when you have learned patience enough to use it like a soldier.’

I said, bewildered, ‘What other weapon is there, lady, in this room?’

Jocasta laughed, as though she were once more a girl and said, ‘You goose! Am I to teach you everything! Look, leaning against the stool there is the old bronze sword that Laius once carried and which now is yours.’

Her meaning was not yet clear to me. I knew nothing of the bridal customs of Thebes then, and for a wrenching moment thought she meant some brutal rite such as the oldest Libyans followed, using the blunted bull’s horn. I drew away, shaking my head, but she grasped my hair and shook me, laughing.

‘Oh, goose! Goose!’ she said. ‘Not that! Look at me, my King, and you will see there is no longer any need for that; not after a score of wine-treadings, my love.’

Then she got from the peacock-bed and, patient as a mother, showed me the Theban ritual. She was a good teacher, and at last, as she held her brown forefinger against her long thumb to make a ring, I lunged forward with the sword, so that it passed through the ring and buried its point in one of the golden eyes of the bed-head.

‘There,’ she said, taking the bronze from me and leading me now like a child, ‘it was well done. No drop of blood was spilled, which is a good omen for our time together.’

Yet, for a moment, what was in my mind was not the omen, but the pock-marked surface of the wood, which had been painted and repainted as

though to cover the small holes.

Jocasta drew me to her and patted the middle of my back gently as she took my head upon her breast. ‘There,’ she said, ‘you are thinking of the countless swords which have been there. Put them from your mind, King: this bed is as old as Thebes itself. All the queens have lain here since time began, not I alone, and for each king who claimed a place upon the mattress there is a sword-hole. Once, there were many kings within the year and, so, many marks of their skill. But now the times have changed, my love. Perhaps yours will be the last. Come, now, and let the old days count their own dead, for us there is other counting to be done.’

Oh, Jocasta, my dearest! Your cool, calm teaching drove away my fears and taught how a king should act. Your gentle, ruthless fingers untied the knot of my remaining ignorance and gave me king’s knowledge. Whispering in the darkness at my ear, you spoke words which no other—not Oresthea, or Periboea, or Geilissa, or even sweet Minthe—could have laid tongue to. In the purple darkness when we had outlasted the oil-lamps, you were all these women to me, and yet more. You were Queen and Lover and Mother, and, for the first time in my life, I was hero, king and god!

The next morning, as I lay with my hand over my eyes, to keep out the sun’s hot rays, still half-asleep and dreaming, my slack limbs a part of the great bed, the Queen bent over me, already robed, and slapped me hard upon the cheek, then kissed me when my eyes opened with the shock of her blow.

‘Awake, you sluggard!’ she said. ‘Come to the window and see my wedding-gift for you.’

Her dark hair was hanging about my face, like a tent. I grasped it with both hands and drew her down to me and said, ‘I am too weary to look through windows, woman. There is a gift nearer at hand which you can give and which I do not have to rise to take.’

Jocasta laughed and touched me for a moment. ‘You would have to rise whatever the gift, my love,’ she said, ‘and at the moment it would be easier for you to get to your feet, from what I observe.’

Then she untangled her hair from my fingers, and helped me to lift my heavy body from its dream. In play, I fell back many times, dragging her with me, until I saw that even she, the patient, the teacher, the long-enduring, was becoming angry at my rough clowning. So I gave in and went to the window with her and looked down onto the Little Courtyard, which was private to the King and Queen of Thebes.

‘There,’ she said. ‘Gaze upon your wedding-gift.’

A golden-haired groom stood below us, as still as a statue, holding a pair of shining black horses, their long manes braided with blood-red ribbons, and their harness of gilded leather, embossed here and there with silver and with garnets. Behind them, catching the sun’s full light, was a chariot. And it was the most beautiful thing, apart from my wife, that I had ever seen.

It looked light enough for a man to carry it across his shoulder, for its polished wooden framework was hardly thicker than my thumb and its floor was not of solid wood, but of tightly-woven leather thongs all painted red and blue like a wall-hanging. Great loops of curved hornbeam swept backwards like wings at either side of it, for the charioteer to hold onto when the going was hard: the tall wheels, shod with bronze tyres, had only four spokes, as though this chariot swept along on thin air! The long, slender pole, which came from underneath by the axle-tree, curved up gracefully until it passed through the padded yoke which held the black horses together; and, at its foremost end, there was a ram’s head chiselled from gold, on whose horns the sun played with each movement of that godlike cart.

Jocasta placed her hand on mine and, with the morning wind whipping her dark hair about her oval face, yawned, smiling, and then said, ‘The ram’s head goes well, husband. The groom down there had my orders to take it off if I shook my head this morning, from this high window: but there was no need. I nodded down to him, and so the ram’s head stays.’

I bowed slightly, to acknowledge her pleasantry, but did not reply. There would be other nights when the reply could be given, many other occasions —but the sight of such a war-cart comes but once in a lifetime.

Almost without thinking, I recalled the words of the ancient song, and I chanted it, there in the morning sunlight by the open window.

‘*With all-outstripping chariot-wheel, O Indra, thou*
far-famed, hast overthrown the twice ten kings of men,
With sixty thousand nine and ninety followers!
Thou goest on to fight and fight intrepidly,
destroying castle after castle here with strength!’

Then, turning to the Queen, my heart fluttering like a bird, I said, ‘I must go down, my love, and drive my chariot.’

She stayed me with a hand grown suddenly as strong as mine, and then, mocking, she laughed into my eyes. ‘You! As you are now, after the night?

These horses would run away with you, scenting me on your body. They would whirl you over the edge of the world, my love! And that scallop of a cart would dash itself to pieces on the rough roads. Such wheels would break themselves against a fragile tortoise-shell.'

I stared at her and said, 'So, I am to gaze down upon this toy you have given me, but never use it lest it breaks, Queen?'

She shook her head patiently at the scorn in my voice and whispered, drawing me close, 'Oedipus, it would be a sin against the gods if, after they had brought you to me, I let you break yourself in this pretty wedding-gift. We must not waste what Night's Daughters have given us, my love.'

I said, still angry, 'So, I am not to ride in it?'

But she placed her fingers across my lips to silence me, and said, 'Yes, dearest: we are both to ride in it, then we can protect each other; or, if there is to be destruction, we shall go together. No, have no fear of me, I have driven chariots like this since I was tall enough to hold the reins. My old father, Menoeceus, saw to my training, for in his tribe, the women were always reckoned to be as hardy as the men. I am strong, my King, as you should know by now.'

And so we rode down out of Thebes, robed and standing upright for the people to see us go. Through the streets, she stood beside me on my right hand, staring ahead, her chin held high, while I controlled the pawing horses.

But once we were outside that grim city and beyond the chasm which they called the Cleft of Dia, where the hills end and the plains begin, clothed in their russet-coloured grasses, Jocasta laid her hand upon mine to halt me.

'Come,' she said, 'and let us drive this cart as it should be driven. Away with these robes, they hamper a charioteer.'

She took first turn, her lithe body leaning back with the reins wrapped about it, just under her breasts, and her right leg over the polished hornbeam front so that her strong foot could grip the bar and guide it. The sun caught all the dark hair of her body, turning it to bronze. It lay upon her shining skin, turning it to dark honey. The hairs of her head flamed backwards in the warm wind, like the smoke of an altar-offering. And she laughed wordlessly up at the sun, and drank the blue sky with her open mouth, like a goddess.

At first, the speed of her driving frightened me, for the ground beneath our whirling wheels unrolled so rapidly that I thought, if a chasm lay in our way, she would surely plunge us down into it, being unable to stop.

But, at last, my body caught the rhythm of her madness and I too stared at the sun and drank the blue sky, and shouted, ‘Faster! Faster! Oh, by the gods, faster!’

It was as though I could not have enough of it; as though, after the night we had spent in the peacock-bed, all the grossness, the earthliness, had been drained away from me, leaving me light and weightless, no longer of the soil, of the earth. And a strange, empty, sweet courage came into my head, so that for a long space I felt certain I could fly like a bird, like an eagle, higher than the sun.

‘Give me the reins, sweetheart!’ I called to her. ‘Oh, give me the reins!’

She half-turned to me as we hurtled on and called back, ‘Oh, Eagle! Eagle!’

Then, setting her mouth to mine, she wrapped the reins about us both, and pushed my left leg outward onto the surging bar. And so, our bodies joined, letting the fierce black horses hurl us on and give us the blessing of their galloping, we saw no earth, no sun, no sky, but coupled like eagles high in the topmost air above the mountains, and knew that the savage joy we got came from outside ourselves, leaving us guiltless, no more sin in us than in two pine-boughs which caress each other as the night breezes bring them together, again and again, until Dawn’s stillness comes at last.

And when our stillness came upon us, we sank together onto the tumbled royal robes on the plaited thong floor, curled together gasping in the chariot: and the black horses, sensing that our wedding-course was run, came to a gentle halt and, as we slept together in the sun, found sweet green grass to graze upon, and did not paw the earth, or whinny, until the shadows came and our long dream had blown away among the hills, as the first of the evening breezes came across the plain.

And then, wiping each other’s faces with our hair, we once again put on our public robes and set the ram’s head, like an arrow-point, once more towards the gates of Thebes.

25

LIFE has as many seasons as the year itself, and they are Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter. My Spring had been my coming down from the mountain to find another world at my feet. Halesus, Polybus, Periboea and Teiresias had been the showers of rain that made my young shoots grow, like showers of cool rain on the parched earth. The seed in that earth had been planted by Rhene and Nomius, my father and mother; and the second sowing had been scattered by Oresthea the Maenad. I had sensed the fruits of that seed when I had mown down King Laius, had taken Jocasta and had imposed my will on Creon.

Now, in Thebes as King, in my high Summer, came the other crops to garner, the harvest of my life. Jocasta, the field of my tilling, was like a plain which had been long neglected, let grow with thorn and thistle, or harrowed only with salt and not with seed. She was a thirsting field that, under the warm touch of my sun, under the warm drench of my rain, drew in my seed as fast as I could scatter it, and, overnight it seemed, let spring the green shoots of the crop we should garner.

First she brought forth my dearest daughter, in whom I saw lineaments of Rhene and so had called Antigone, ‘in place of my mother’, though Creon and his followers laughed a little behind their hands when I gave out such a name for such a small creature with its fingers thrust into its mouth, and kicking in my arms as the priests flung water over its body. In the next year came twin boys, Eteocles the Glorious and Polyneices the Striver. They were not easy grain to gather and Jocasta almost died of them. Some of her women, the older ones, advised her to bear no more children lest her body, which had lain fallow so long, should suffer harm. But my pleasant Queen held my hand as I sat by her sick-bed in the time when she was recovering, and smiling said, ‘Our House cannot halt here, can it, Oedipus? There must be two girls to match the two boys, do you not think?’

Seeing how thin and weak she had grown after the last bearing, I said, ‘Dearest, I would not risk your life and love for all the sons and daughters in the world. But I shall be guided by you.’

She laughed, even though she was still weak, and said, ‘Of course you will! You have never been able to find the way in without my guiding! Yes, we will wait a while and then we will work together to shape another daughter. Boys are well enough for Hellenes, but it is girls who gain thrones in the Cretan parts of the world, and our House must sit on many thrones to make great our dynasty.’

Her prayers to Dia for a daughter must have been persuasive ones—though, being a man, I was never permitted to enter the women’s shrine when she gave them up. I only know that there was much sacrifice of white lambs and that the tall chimney above the shrine-furnace sent out its dark smoke daily.

A daughter was born at last, and because she screwed up her little red face so wisely when I first spoke to her in the reed cradle by the Queen’s bed, I had her called Ismene, the Knowing One!

Yet, as she grew and reached the age of walking and talking, I saw how much I had tempted the gods in giving her this name, for she was slow at all things. Do not mistake me, there was no prettier child in Hellas: her hair was long and thick and straw-golden; her eyes were large and blue; and her limbs were perfectly shaped, though very small. To look at her with her sister and her two brothers, you would have said that she was the sweetest of them all: but when you watched her try to run with them, or sing with them, you saw then that Ismene was meant to be the last lamb of our getting. She fell too often and forgot the words too often; nor could she ever hold a melody in her head for two minutes at a stretch.

I said to Jocasta, ‘So speak the gods, my Queen; this must be the last child of our age.’

Jocasta nodded and smiled a little sadly. She said, ‘Of my age, Oedipus, you mean. These children should have come earlier in my life, when my youth was strong in me. Yet the tyrant Laius, whom the good gods led you to kill, was afraid of the prophecy, and so the field lay fallow too long. Not even a Queen, not even a priestess, can bring forth alone, without the aid of the husbandman.’

Yet we were not sad: our growing children kept us from sadness, watching them grow and play together. Antigone was always the leader of them all, as though she knew what her name was from the start. Tall and golden for her age, she would tend them and carry them, teach them what she had learned, rule all their games, and even smack them if it crossed her mind that they needed correction.

In the green garden set on a flat terrace high above Thebes, behind the Queen's Chamber, I said to her one day when she was five, 'But Antigone, is it right to be so stern with your kindred?'

I was only jesting, of course, but my sons took it all most seriously. Polyneices tugged at my robe and said, 'King, she smacks us almost every day. My brother and I are indebted to you for your concern in this matter.'

I turned to Antigone, who was gazing me full in the face strictly and without fear, and I said, 'Is it right, daughter, to smack these two Princes every day, do you think?'

Antigone nodded, and said, 'Father, you are a king with many affairs to see to. If you could spare time away from your counsellors and generals, you would see your sons in a less princely mood.'

I sat her on my knee, looking over the wooden balustrade across the city to keep my face straight and asked, 'Oh, indeed, and what mood do you speak of, Princess?'

Antigone played with my beard and said, 'Oh, you should see them fighting, father. They never leave off until I smack them. They are always at it.'

Eteocles and Polyneices stood by me, tugging at my sleeves to gain my attention. 'Ho! King,' said Eteocles, 'you must not be misled by such women's gossip. We fight because we are men, and all men must fight. But we are brothers and do not harm one another. She does not understand men, father.'

I stroked his dark head and nodded. 'I am pleased to speak with one who understands men, Prince,' I said. 'We must talk more of this, so that I may learn from you. But, in the meantime, let there be less fighting and less smacking, or you will frighten little Ismene.'

As soon as I mentioned her name, she looked up and smiled and held out her arms to me. The others shouted out and ran to her and, between them, picked her up and staggered towards me with her, as though she was a most precious burden that must not be dropped. Antigone scolded them with every step until their baby sister was safely in my arms and playing contentedly with the golden chain that hung from my neck.

This was, indeed, my summer up in the high green garden, with my pretty brood, and Jocasta smiling down upon us from her painted balcony while her women tended her hair, some days curling and oiling it so that it hung about her shoulders like glistening dark snakes; at other times building

it up on her head, with ivory pins and silver wires, until it looked like the high dome of the Great House itself. She was as beautiful a Queen as any man could wish, despite her gathering age. There was not another woman in all Thebes I would have looked at twice when Jocasta was present. She stole the beauty from all others when they were in her presence.

I have to confess that I adored her so increasingly that, at last, I even became jealous of her brother, Creon; and once, when we were walking over the high bridge, between the poplars, that connected the Great House with the Hall of Barons, I said to him, 'Brother, is it not time we let some of the old customs lapse?'

He switched at an overhanging branch with his walking-staff and said, 'Which old customs, King? There are so many here in Thebes.'

I found it hard to lay bare my thoughts, as I always did with this Creon; but I said at last, 'The custom of your lying with Jocasta at each full moon, brother. That was in my mind.'

We walked on seven paces before he answered. 'What do you think happens then, King?' he asked, taunting me a little with his dark eyes.

I shrugged my shoulders and said, 'I do not enquire into the Mysteries, Creon, and I shall make no guess. I only think that it would seem better before the children if I was not shut out of the bed-chamber on these occasions, and better still if you did not go there at all.'

Creon drew me to a stone seat which overlooked the beehive huts of the Workers and said, 'My dear brother, you are still a barbarian, are you not! Laius, my dead brother-in-law, whose sword you wear by your side, had some such idea when he was afraid our sister, Jocasta, would whelp a hound with fangs that would tear him. But, grim as he was, Laius could not override the law, the will of the goddess and the people. They rose and warned him that should the crops fail or the cattle die, he would have to answer for it.

I said, 'Look, Creon, you and I are grown men and we must not talk like children. We both know which is the real world, and which the world of dreams. If we are honest with ourselves, we must admit that this coming-together of blood-kindred at the full moon has no influence on anything which lies outside the bed-chamber. Is it not so?'

Creon rose then, and made much ado about adjusting his loin-guard, bending over to see that the straps were in place and the buckles secure. He looked up at me, our eyes on the same level, and smiled, to show his even

white teeth between the dark fringes of his bearded lips, and said, ‘Ask me for ten white horses, or a score of javelins. Ask me for the Prince’s crown from off my head—and you shall have them, and willingly. But demand from me the moon-privilege, which is older than Egypt herself, and I will close my hand about it like a miser. No, I will do more: I will shout your demand over the roof-tops, from every balcony and bridge in Thebes, and we shall see what the people think of their Shepherd’s jealousy.’

I rose, too, and saw that I had grown so much that my eyes were now on a level with Creon’s forehead. I said, as calmly as a king should, ‘I took the sword of Laius with bare hands. I flung down the Sphinx with the sword I had so gained. And now, with a hundred other swords to add to that one, do you not think that I could not change the moon-custom?’

We were walking towards the end of the bridge, at a point where it narrowed and dipped a little, for the timbers here were shaky with age and the worm. Creon stopped and began to dance up and down on the sagging wood, causing it to creak as though it might give way at any moment, to cast us both down to where men moved, as small as flies, in the dust below. A great sickness and fear came over me then, and I clutched at the rail so as not to fall. ‘Be still, you fool!’ I said, forgetting all kingly calm now.

Creon smiled and came to me, laying his hand on my shoulder like a dear friend. ‘Come, brother,’ he said, ‘you who have cast down a king and a Sphinx should have no fear of a little tumble yourself. For, as we all know, the gods keep to their customs, one of which is that every man shall reap the benefit of his gifts to others, shall enjoy the same thing.’

I was too shaken to say any more to him, but shrugged off his hand and composed myself for my council-meeting with the Barons in their great hall.

But, the next day, I had it proclaimed from all the towers and bridges that from this time forward the moon-privilege should cease. The people bowed their heads and made no protest. Jocasta covered her head with a black cloth for three days and nights, and painted her face with white ash mixed in the stall of the stallion, Hippomedon. Yet she breathed no word to me of any opinion on the matter.

Creon went out of his way to whistle loudly whenever he passed me in any of the hundred corridors of the Beehive, and for a week went about without his loin-guard, as though to show me and the people that, for all my edict, he had grown no less.

I thought no worse of him for this, since, in his place, I would perhaps have done much the same myself. A man must keep his pride, by whatever means, for, once that is lost, all is lost.

26

ANOTHER custom which I wiped out at this time was the wearing of masks. It had always been the practice with the Theban kindred, when walking in the dust at ground level, among the common people, to put on lion-heads. These had come from living beasts, generations before, and were now so hairless that they could hardly be recognized for what they were, and so dry and stiff that they would crack at a touch. My children had always cried when these stinking pieces of hide had been strapped on them before going down into public places, and, I must confess, I had no great liking for the great, maned mask which was the King's. Even to think that once old Laius had snuffled within it troubled me. Besides, in the heat of the lower city, these masks made breathing hard, and, once the sweat was in them, attracted flies. When our family walked abroad, I have seen the black flies leave the midden-heaps in swarms, and come buzzing about our heads and shoulders as though they were part of our retinue. It was after one such occasion that little Ismene began to have nightmares that she was to be devoured by flies that I sent out my order, prohibiting the use of such masks. Yet, so as not to offend the oldest families of Barons, who feared that my prohibition would make my title, Lion of Thebes, meaningless, I had made for myself a light gold shell in the form of a lion-head, its mane radiating out like the sun's rays, and with good clear eyeholes and mouth-space. This mask was made for me by an old Mycenaean named Phimacus, the Muzzler of Pain, who had served his apprenticeship hammering out grave-masks for the dead kings of his own city, and who, when I employed him, had grown so skilful in managing the metals that he created for my lion-mask two eyelids which could be worked by strings hanging over my breast, so as to open or shut as I chose. My children had great enjoyment from this toy, especially little Ismene, who would sit on my knee for half an hour at a stretch, pulling the strings and shrieking with pretended terror whenever the gold lids snapped open to show my staring eyes.

For this mask, and the pleasure which it gave my darlings, I rewarded Phimacus with a farm house, twenty cows, and a bag of Cretan seals which would buy him enough grain to sow a five-acre field.

Jocasta, who was always very careful with the household accounts, scolded me and said that I was a fool with money: but later she, and even Creon, agreed that this mask was a great improvement on what the kings of Thebes had worn before.

Yet another reform comes to my mind, of about this time: I changed the Theban calendar. Previously, since the most ancient times, it had been the rule to divide the year into three seasons, based on the Chimaera, a dream-beast which had a lion's head, a goat's body and a serpent's tail. Each part of this sacred beast represented a season of the Queen of Heaven's sacred year: but, to lessen her sway and to increase my own, I first announced that in future there should be four seasons, to correspond with the course of the sun's chariot across the sky: at first, Spring, when the chariot first appeared; then Summer, when it raced directly above our heads and left our shadows below our feet; then Autumn, as the chariot began to go away and our shadows grew longer and fainter; and, at last, Winter, when the chariot had gone over the hill and there were no more shadows.

The people accepted this change with no great stir. Indeed, those who had images or icons of the Chimaera in their houses merely painted or attached an eagle's wings to the beast, so as to accept the new season I had added.

But I had not yet gone as far as I intended in this direction. The Theban year, sometimes dedicated to Medusa, consisted of thirteen months, of twenty-eight days in each division, each month being said to represent a phase of the goddess's moon, from waxing to waning—but, in all truth, being a sacred counting of the days it took between each issue of blood from the Queen's body.

Jocularly, as I sprawled on our broad bed one evening, I said to my wife, 'Jocasta, you would not mind if I change the number of months in a year?'

She twisted my hair between her fingers and said, 'Mind? Why should I mind? It will not alter what happens to me at certain times. That will go on as before, until Hera-crone touches me with her dry finger. How many months does the great Lion of Thebes think there should be in a year, then?'

She was mocking me and so I mocked back and said, 'A hundred! No more and no less! How does that suit you, woman?'

She laughed and drew my head to her breast, holding it there, like a young mother teaching her first baby to suckle. And she said, 'That suits me well enough, for it will mean I shall grow older all the more slowly; and that

would please me, since I carry so many more years than you do already, and have lately come to find wrinkles where there were none at all, when I was first yours.'

I kissed her and fondled her, to tell her that I loved her dearly: though, in all truth, she was beginning to show her years. Yet, in all things that concerned me, she was as warm and ardent as I could have desired. Indeed, her loving had grown the more frequent and intense as time passed, as though Jocasta was driven by a Fury to keep pace with, and even surpass, all that I was capable of.

Once when, breathless, I spoke of this to her, smiling, she wiped my forehead with her long hair and said, 'The torch burns brightest just before it reaches the hand, since all the resin sinks to that spot. The flame has not devoured all, yet, my love. There is still some sap left in the pine-branch before all falls to white ash and the fire dies.'

These words troubled me. I was youthful and lusty, and did not like to think of her fires dimming. Nor did I wish to hear her speak of dying. These thoughts joined together and led me to think of pine-branches, and then of trees in general.

And especially I thought of the row of trees, sacred to the goddess, which stood on the top of the East Wall of Thebes. They were oaks, reputed to have been brought in the dark years from the sacred grove at Dodona: but now, because of their great age and because their roots drew small nourishment from the hard clay of the wall, most of them had ceased to put out new growth, and few of them bore more than a dozen shrivelled yellow leaves each Spring.

These trees were the Queen's Trees; or sometimes called 'The Hanging Trees', because in the olden days the Queens of Thebes were required to cure plague or famine by hanging themselves from one of these trees. King Laius—and I will say that this is the only good thing I know of him—had prohibited this wicked custom, so that in my day as King of Thebes, what was hung from these trees was an image or effigy of the Queen, whenever any disaster threatened.

Yet there was a secret sect within the city which held that the old custom should be revived, and often I would look up to see small corn-dolls by the score dangling in the wind from the dry boughs of the dying oaks. I once tackled an old crone named Megamede the Crafty, known to belong to the most ancient family in Thebes, on this matter; but she brushed me aside with her horny hand as though I was a boy, and said, 'You sheep-men from the

hills know nothing of the proper usages of corn-growers. The dolls which you see swinging up there are to bring fruitfulness to the earth, no more.'

I said, 'You may be called Megamede, old woman, but I am called King in Thebes; and I have eyes in my head which show me that *this* is the corn season, and that our fields are thick with harvest already. They do not need inducement to put forth.'

Megamede drew her shawl over her eyes and said, 'Great King of Thebes who knows all . . . let an old woman tell you that nothing stays for ever in this world of change. This year, yes, the yield is good: but even in times of plenty, we must see that the fickle earth is reminded that her children will need her bounty next year, and the year after.'

She turned from me before I could say any more, and went away muttering.

Jocasta was nearby when this happened. She drew me aside, frowning, and said, 'You see! You may do what you wish with the masks and the Chimaera: but it is not the will of the people that you should meddle with the Queen's Trees.'

I said, 'If I had my way, they would all be chopped down by nightfall.'

Jocasta placed her fingers across my lips to stop me from saying anything further. Then she whispered, 'A tree cut down is gone for ever. These oaks may be old and riddled with the worm, but the gods may still have a use for them.'

Angrily I broke away and said, 'Zeus will smite them down in the next thunder-storm, you will see!'

But he did not. They are standing in Thebes even today, as you know. I may have been the King, but I was not the spy of god. That much became plain to me then.

27

YOU smile, my lords. And I can understand you. You think I ran before I could walk. You think that, like an impetuous youth, I spurred my horse too fast along the way, to reach my journey's end without seeing which way I took to gain it.

Or, perhaps, you smile because you think I am an old man babbling on, ahead of events, putting them out of sequence, putting time out of joint, the chariot before the horse . . .

Yes, you are right. Talking to you here, I have botched the pattern of the weaving, like an unskilled girl, or like a half-blind crone who has the knowledge but not the eyes or hands to do her bidding any longer.

It is a strange thing, an old man's memory. A fickle beast to ride upon. Sometimes it goes slow when it should gallop: and often it races through the pleasant valley of the years when, if it knew its manage, it would halt and graze a while.

I tell you, there are days of my boyhood which seem like a year; and there are months of my manhood that are gone in one breath. I cannot tell you what I broke my fast on yesterday; but I can describe to you, down to the last stitch, the robe worn by the baron, Orchus, when he came secretly to visit me soon after I showed my kingly power in Thebes. It was of red-dyed wool and reached down to his calf. In the middle of its breast was embroidered in yellow silk the tusked head of the Boar, his family crest.

You smile again. I know what you are thinking, so I will not go on . . . Yet, I will tell you what he said to me, for it has great bearing on my life.

I was alone in the green garden up above the city, watching the great stallion Hippomedon grazing under a pall of dark smoke when suddenly a shadow fell beside me on the grass. I half-wondered if it was someone come to kill me, some young man who had loved King Laius, or some captain who thought I had mistreated his master, Prince Creon. But I sat quite still, as a king should, knowing that when the last day comes nothing can divert it.

Then Orchus was kneeling before me and putting his yellow-bearded lips to my robe.

I said, ‘Sit beside me, baron. What brings you here? Is there no hunting in the hills today?’

Orchus glanced about him, here and there, then said in a low voice, ‘Yes, there is hunting, Lion; but what I have to say is of more importance.’

He waited then, and so I said, ‘Speak, my lord. You have that right, and the King must listen.’

He took my hand in his fervour and even put his mouth close to my ear.

‘Anax,’ he said, ‘you have come in a good time. We have waited for you so long to come and save us that many of us feared we were lost for ever.’

I withdrew my hand from his hot grasp as gently as I could without offending him. ‘Tell me what is in your mind, Orchus,’ I said. ‘It is the King’s duty to listen. Speak, and have no fear, you are a baron.’

‘Then, Shepherd,’ he said, ‘lead us forth. Lead your people forth, back to the place they came from, the green north where horses graze. Lead us from this foul place, Marsyas, across the salt sea, to peace.’

‘Why do you call me Marsyas?’ I asked. ‘No one has given me that name before.’

Orchus paused a while, biting his knuckle, then answered, ‘Marsyas is the Great Battler of our legend, only he fit to stand beside Indra. It was he who brought down the stone tablet, given him by Zeus, and showing him as the judge, the arbitrator of the warring tribes.’

I smiled, that such a great baron as Orchus should elect me the champion of the captive Hellenes of Thebes—I, the son of a poor shepherd, who had gained his place by luck and by craft. I said, ‘And where is this famous tablet of your Marsyas, that tells of his fame as god’s messenger? Where can a man set eyes on it?’

Orchus looked away from me and said in a whisper, ‘Creon keeps it, by force. He keeps our only sign from the god in his charnel-house, the place where he broods upon the fame of his fathers and the destiny that shall be his.’

I had been in Thebes for seven years when Orchus spoke thus to me, yet there were many things I did not yet know. A king such as I was is much like a war-horse wearing eye-shields. He may go forward strongly at his will

—or at what he thinks is his will, for his Queen and lords always ride him, however lightly they hold the rein on his mouth—but there are always rules and observances which keep the full truth from his eyes if he attempts to look sideways, away from the straight path he treads. So, although there were many things I knew—that old Menoeceus kept a secret chamber high on the South Wall, where often I suspected him of plotting with the older men of the Council; that the Phoenician-merchant Guild which always had an office in Thebes used the Mother Shrine where the great chimney was to carry out their dealings with other travelling merchants, and even changed money there, or sold white doves for the sacrifices; that Jocasta had a college of virgins to whom she taught the rituals and songs over which she was Mistress—though where this college was, I could never discover. Thebes was so great, and there were so many winding alley-ways where a king must never walk.

But I had never heard before of Creon's charnel-house.

I said to Orchus, 'Come, man, all princes have their secret chamber, away from the great halls and open places, where they can do what princes wish to do, in proper privacy. Even the wolf has his lair. No doubt, you have your own armoury where you can drink and boast with other barons, without your wife and children bothering you?'

Orchus nodded. 'That is true,' he said, 'but my armoury is not like the charnel-house of Creon, Anax.'

He did not speak again for a while, and I let silence come upon us for it is not the place of a king to show too much curiosity. Instead, I rose and tried to fling small pebbles and pieces of dried clay across the great space which separated me from the King-Horse, Hippomedon. One of them dropped near to his feet and he looked up at me, across the void, his white mane fluttering. He and I, two kings on a high place above the city, washed and fed by slaves; guarded, obeyed, almost worshipped—but alone.

Orchus traced the outline of his shadow in the dust, then said, 'Anax, I will come to the point. Kill me afterwards if you will. Death can be no worse than living as we do in Thebes. For us, the Hellenes, our life is a terror here. When we came down from the steppelands in my great-grandfather's time, we were free men, looking for a world to conquer, with our horses, and war-carts, and wagons. But we have been tricked by the folk of Thebes, and are now penned in like stalled oxen waiting the pole-axe. Oh, yes, they allow us the titles we claim, they allow us fine clothes and houses. They bow before us in the streets and run to stand in our shadows as though

that were an honour. But, all the time, they are smiling secretly, whispering to one another of sacrifice, of rebellion and punishments to come.'

I slapped him on the shoulder and laughed; 'Why, baron,' I said, 'You are as foolish as a girl! Look, your hands are trembling!'

He turned on me fiercely. 'Anax,' he answered, 'I tremble with anger, not fear. For a hundred years we have been kept prisoned and fattened in this place, made to live on in a black dream. The truth is never spoken to us. Yet we know, by example, what that truth is. It is this: We are no more than walking-dead. We cannot escape from this city. If we ride beyond the walls, Creon's guards come with us, to protect us, they say. Three times a year, one of our noblest youths is called upon to take a message to the Goddess, as they put it. We do not see him again. And, whenever we seem to grow too great in numbers, or too knowing in policy, we are accused of plotting against Thebes, and the strongest and wisest of us are thinned out by Creon, and their bodies flung over the bridge, into the ravine below the South Wall.'

I looked upon the ground. 'I have heard Creon praise you barons,' I said. 'I have heard him say that without you, Thebes would lack noblemen.'

Orchus spat into the dust. 'What Creon says, and what he thinks, are different things, Anax,' he said. 'His heart is as dark as the serpent's; his thoughts are as slithering and subtle. He is of the Ancient Folk, who came here when all Hellas was a green forest, inhabited only by shaggy creatures who wore the hides of beasts and carried swords of stone.'

I smiled and nodded. 'I have heard this dream before, Orchus,' I answered. 'And these hairy men wore the antlers of stags on their heads, and had never seen the sea. Is that not so? They spoke the language of trees and birds and foxes. Is that not true?'

He said gravely, 'Yes, Anax, that is true. The ancient Sea-Folk of Crete came with their bronze swords and put an end to them. The men of Egypt came with their long axes and laid bare the forests. Then came others from the Rising Sun who built cities where the forests had been. We came last, in our war-carts and wagons, wanting only grazing-land for our herds, and were made prisoners by these Cretans, these Egyptians. It is a story that someone must change. In every city there must come a saviour, one who is not a Cretan, an Egyptian, even a Hellene, to lead us to our freedom once again. You are our saviour, Anax. We barons look to you. Only you can cast down old Menoeceus; his son, Creon; his daughter, Jocasta. Laius, the King before you, was a fool. When he should have been leading his people, he was busying himself with his sweetheart, the charioteer, Polyphontes. And at

last, he even ran away with his lover and left us. When we heard that you had met them, and had put an end to them, we knew that you were the Promised One, coming to lead us at last.'

He rose and leaned on the wooden balustrade. 'Anax,' he said, 'your people are waiting for a sign from you. If you stood here, high above the city, and blew upon your horn, every Hellene would rise and follow their Shepherd, and then all this would be yours.'

He swept his arm round in a great gesture, over the roofs and streets and walls, and the fields and hills beyond.

I said quietly, 'But it is already mine, Orchus. I am the King here, and the Queen is my woman.'

The baron turned and came towards me. His light eyes were narrow, his yellow beard was shaken in the wind that always blew in that high place above the city. He said, 'If you are so certain, let me show you what you have not seen before, the charnel-house of Creon. And let me show you the tablet of the Hellenes, given to us in our wanderings by Zeus, but stolen from us by the tyrant you call your brother.'

I thought the man had overreached himself, speaking so to me, but there were tears upon his red cheek and so I did not speak back to him as sharply as a king should.

I said, 'Very well, Orchus. If it pleases you, show me these things. But do not hope that I shall weep, or fly into a rage, or blow upon horns merely because you wish me to. A king has many people to watch over, and each one of them has his request.'

He said no more, but led the way down the quivering steps to the lower levels. In the little round garden, set with ilex and laurel, where my children played, Antigone was sitting on the thin grass, her small legs tucked under her, her golden hair floating about her shoulders in the breeze. Before her she had laid out a little pattern of sea-shells and pebbles and the red petals of flowers. The shells formed the outer circle, then came the petals, and, in the middle, a tiny pyramid of pebbles streaked with ochre.

I bent and kissed her. 'Why, my lamb,' I said, 'what is this thing, a little grotto?'

She shook her head and her hair went into her eyes. She scooped it away with her thin hand and smiled, screwing her eyes up in the bright sunshine. 'No, King,' she said. 'You always get these things wrong. You are not very clever, for a king. Uncle Creon is far quicker to understand.'

I smiled and said, ‘Very well, Princess, then put me right, and tell me. What are you making?’

She said, ‘It is a grave, for my dead bird, King. I buried him in the pathway, near the megaron, when he died; but I was afraid that the soldiers would kick the earth off him, or the chariot-wheels disturb him. So, I dug him up again and put him here. He had changed, father. When I buried him, he was whole and his feathers were all bright. But when I dug him up again, his eyes had gone, and the feathers had fallen from him. Perhaps, another time, I shall take him from the earth again, and then I shall see if my bird has changed once more.’

Behind me, Orchus snorted. In a low voice he said, as to himself, ‘There, it is in the blood. This House is burdened with the load of dead flesh. The stench of it is on them all.’

I gave him a stern look, then smiled down at Antigone and said, ‘Think no more of your bird, my love. Soon, when I can find a workman who knows how it is done, you shall have a dancing-floor here, where your grotto is. We will have it made in a circle, as you have laid your shells, and it shall be made with small pieces of coloured stone, set in the shape of flowers and shells, and anything else you desire. Then your bird will have a memorial fit for the pet of a Princess of Thebes. Will that do?’

She laughed and nodded. We left her still smoothing the small grave with her tiny hands, her hair hanging down to the ground on either side of her head.

And when we were out of earshot, I said to Orchus, ‘You must never speak that way again, baron. The Princess Antigone is of my blood, remember, and one day she will be a great Queen.’

He shrugged his heavy shoulders. ‘She is the daughter of Jocasta,’ he said, ‘and in Thebes it is the mother-blood that flows the stronger.’

I tightened my lips so as not to answer him, and let him lead me down past the palace steps, and into the square that lay inside the South Wall.

Here there were many booths, and houses with open shutters where wine was sold, or where Phoenicians laid out dyed cloth and finely-glazed cups. We stopped before one of these, a low, white-painted house, in the front of which a grey-haired old woman kneeled, scraping hides and mumbling to herself.

Orchus drew his cloak across his face and whispered, ‘I leave you, Anax, now. To stay longer would be to challenge the beast I have no sword to slay.

I beg you, Shepherd, bring back the tablet for your people.'

I did not answer him. I did not even hear him leave me; but I saw that mine was the only shadow that fell across the old woman as she worried at the hides with the narrow flint scraper.

She sensed that shadow lying over her and looked up slowly with grey-filmed eyes about which the small flies buzzed.

'Lord of Light,' she said, 'Lord Laius of Light.'

I struck my staff upon the ground and said, 'I am not Laius, old woman. I am Oedipus. Draw back and let me enter.'

She flattened herself on the hide and bowed her head. 'Oedipus, son of Laius,' she said. 'I have no power to stay you.'

She had not welcomed me, I understood; but in those days of my kingly power, much like the Bulls of Corinth, I raced onwards unperturbed by omens.

At the back of the narrow room an arched door led down seven stone steps into the foundation of the South Wall itself. The air was dim and on it lay a heavy, sickly scent. At the foot of the seven steps, there was another door, under which shone the russet light of a lamp. To this door I strode and, not deigning to knock, thrust it open with my staff.

28

THE air which came to meet me seemed to hang, thickly, in my nostrils, almost as heavy as the smoke that rose from the chimney of the Shrine. The cellar was low and arched, partly of rock, and partly of hard-dried clay-bricks. One single lamp burned in a bronze dish, hanging from the roof by chains, its dark smoke spiralling about it as I flung open the door.

Creon sat on a low stool with his back to me, and an old hide wrapper about his shoulders in this chilly place. His black hair was wild on his head, and he seemed less a Prince than an animal, or such a man as had moved but a little way from animals in all the generations of his breeding.

He did not turn when I flung open the door. It was as though he felt himself to be beyond such human observances. As for me, what I saw before me so staggered me, so cast me back into my past, that all was like a fearful dream come back to life again. It was the dream I had known at Delphi, years before, when I had gone to ask the Pythoness for news of the King and Queen of Corinth. But now it was closer to me, more fearful, heavier with odours.

Then Creon said hoarsely, 'Come, brother, come. Sit beside me and contemplate the passage of mankind and the futility of kingship.'

I had half-prepared a proud command for his ears, but the nature of his charnel-house silenced me and humbled me. I went forward and stood beside him, glad that I had a staff to lean upon.

'Look, brother,' he said, sweeping out his bronze-ringed hand. 'Here is the whole world's history. Gaze on it and be humble. All of our royal House should know humility. Where better to learn it than here, in the Place of the Skull!'

I followed the sweep of his hand and shivered, though not now only with cold.

Before me, in row on row, on ledge after ledge, were the dead. In the first rank, they lolled on stools, some of them wearing garments that had come from the loom scarcely more than a year ago; some of them with the bloom still upon their cheeks of painted wax, the lustre in their beards and

hair. In the further ranks, the brightness had faded, and the silent ones sat, as dark and hunched as old leather water-jugs, upon their stools or stones, the hair that shrouded their shrivelled features grey and wispy, as delicate as the webs of spiders. Furthest away, upon the ledges, were stacked the heads of the most ancient, some of them like yellow stones from a river-bed, others like great and wizened brown fruits.

Creon glanced up at me and said, 'Here a man learns wisdom from the whispering. A Prince, sitting alone in this holy place, hears voices that sound no longer in the council chamber. For all these were great ones, wise ones, my brother. Not such as walk the streets babbling in wine.'

My hand across my mouth, I said, 'Who are they, Kings of Thebes?'

Creon shook his head. 'Not of Thebes, my lord,' he answered me. 'But Kings and lords of other places, wise ones who have fallen in battle against Thebes. Once, in the early days of our House, it was the custom for victorious princes to split the skulls of the defeated and drink their brains like wine, so that the courage and wisdom should not be wasted on the vulture who flapped about the field. But, as we have become greater, and wiser, we have put that act of barbarism aside. If you look, you will see among the furthest ranks, those which have formed Cadmeian drinking-cups.'

I drew away and said, 'I do not wish to touch them, Creon. Among my folk, such things are unclean and evil.'

He nodded. 'Among your folk,' he said softly. 'Aye, among your folk. But "unclean" and "evil" are only words, brother. I am called evil by fools who do not know the usages of our House. Because, after war, I will not waste the wisdom of the defeated kings and lords by throwing their bodies into pits, I am condemned. Because I stack them in heaps so that, when quiet times come, I may go among them and choose who shall be in my charnel-house, my enemies say that I am Creon the Unclean, the Carrion-Eater, and so on. Oh, you will hear this said as far away as Lemnos, as far as Corcyra —but judge if it be true!'

I answered, 'If I had my way, a fire should be lit in this place to make all clean. Then I should have the walls dragged down by horses and this place of skulls levelled with the outer earth, so that the dark dream of it should be forgotten.'

Creon the Prince rose slowly and came towards me, putting his hands upon my shoulders and staring into my face. His own pale, burnt-white

features were set in a stiff smile, but his black eyes were piercing and fierce. ‘Oh, shepherd-king,’ he said, ‘oh, shepherd-king! You would be acting stupidly then, for though they lay below a thin covering of dust, these heads would still speak, to those who had ears to listen. They are our friends, no longer our enemies, brother. From them we learn the wisdom of the ages. Would you destroy that wisdom?’

I answered, ‘Each man’s task and duty is to learn afresh, from what lies about him in the world. To sit, lonely, in a cavern, hearkening to the voices of the dead is to be half-dead oneself.’

Creon stood back from me a little, then said, smiling, ‘And you think I am half-dead, then, brother?’

I answered, ‘No, not yet, perhaps, Creon; but the time will come, if you do not change, when the people will think of you as King of the Dead and not Prince of the Living. They will not want a ghost to govern them.’

He sat again and shook his head. ‘You Outlanders,’ he said. ‘Your quaint ideas! You would change everything overnight. Then you would be left with nothing but your stupid sheep, bawling on the cold hillside. That would be your kingdom; they would be your people.’

I said in anger, ‘I shall speak to the Queen about this, Creon. She has sense enough to follow my reasoning.’

Creon sucked his upper lip down between his teeth, and looked hard at the ground a while. Then he said harshly, ‘Jocasta is of the House of Cadmus, too, Shepherd. Below the Shrine, she has her Queenly charnel-house, though its occupants do not come from the battlefield, but are the dead Kings of Thebes, the husbands of past Queens. Nor are they lodged as these old ones are—but in great clay pots, to keep them perfect for the day when all will rise again and sing praises to the Mother, her enormous family of royal ones. Aye, even the dead children are there, the little princes and princesses, the smallest of the babies who did not live to grow to greatness. They are there, the innocent ones. Such innocence sees clearly into the future; such children look forward into the years they might have lived into, and tell the Queen what they see; and so she knows what lies before her, through the mouths of the small dead.’

Suddenly I said to him, the truth coming on me, ‘Has my daughter, Antigone, been here?’ I recalled her busy-ness with the dead bird and its shrine.

Creon flicked the edge of his long cloak across the floor, causing the sour dust to rise. ‘Antigone is of my blood, too, Oedipus,’ he said. ‘She is not merely the daughter of a shepherd. Her duty is to learn the observances of the House to which she belongs. Yes, she has sat with me a while, listening to the whispering of these councillors.’

His words so angered me, to think that he should secretly have put things into the pure heart of that young one, I lost all control of myself for a savage moment, and struck out with my staff at the lolling bodies in the front rank of the dead.

Creon leaped at me and dragged my arms to my sides, hissing like a snake about to strike. But as the stiff bodies toppled, they revealed something which I had not seen before, the discovery of which made the kingly power rise within me once again.

For there, as Orchus had told me, lay a square tablet of stone, a sword’s length in dimension and no thicker than my finger. Though the light in that cellar was dim and the lamp-flame flickering, though the limestone was dark with age and dust, I saw clearly enough what was chiselled into its face. There were three figures, the central one set higher than the others as though he was their lord. He stood, broad-shouldered in a tunic emblazoned by the sun’s rays, and holding, in his left hand, above his shaven head a great sun-disc. His right hand was raised in blessing or command, but with a most imperious gesture.

On either side of him, and standing on a lesser plane, were two plumed and bearded warriors, each bearing a small buckler and a weapon. The one on the left had a curved axe, the one on the right a club or mace, bound to his wrist by a thong. Their war-kilts flared out about their bodies as though they were pictured at the instant of moving towards each other.

I pointed to this stone tablet and said, ‘So, this is your place of Cadmean wisdom, hey? This, dear brother, does not belong to you. This is the tablet of Marsyas the Battler. It is a sign from Zeus himself, showing the Father of Gods bringing peace to his warring sons. You, who despise Zeus, have no right to this. Nor shall you keep it any longer!’

I broke from, his grasp and took up the tablet. It was so heavy, I could scarcely lift it. But once it was in my hands, Creon drew away and made no move to take it from me again. He backed against the wall and stared at me with wide dark eyes as I struggled towards the seven steps that led up to the light.

At the door, I halted, breathing hard. ‘Take care, brother,’ I said. ‘When the Shepherd comes with his staff, it is a wise wolf who runs before him.’

But he did not answer as I panted up the stairs. I glanced back once, and he was still leaning against the wall, staring wildly, his mouth opening and froth gathered at its corners.

29

I WAS with Jocasta in the great bed, under the peacock's eyes. She was weeping and lay with her back towards me. The stone tablet of Marsyas was propped against the wall, beneath the rushlight where I could see it best.

'So, all this must end,' I said. 'All these evil old customs. The Prince's charnel-house shall be destroyed, and so must yours.'

Jocasta began to weep again, biting at her knuckles, her white shoulders shaking. 'You will bring death upon the House,' she said at last. 'We have always kept the law in Thebes, now you wish to change everything; but there are those stronger than you, my love, who will punish us all if we cast away the old duties.'

I made myself laugh, and even slapped her on the back. 'You talk like a fool, wife,' I said. 'What harm can come to us, we who are the bright children of Zeus? Let us take our wisdom from that tablet. Let us walk in the light and peace of Zeus, who holds up his hand in blessing over us.'

She began to cry again, and I knew that the darkness within her was painful to bear. Even though I loved her dearly, I knew that there was this darkness that had been handed down to her. Always, through her life, there had been certain observances which could not be spoken of in the light; which, perhaps, should not be spoken of at all; I had heard the children say things, when they were together, which now came together in one pattern, like wool upon the loom, and made a picture.

I said to her, 'And no longer are the boys to be taken to the Shrine, or the girls to that stinking midden where Creon gains his foul wisdom.'

When she burst into tears again, I was too impatient to comfort her. I who came from the high clean hills was untaught in the customs of such dark ancient places as Thebes, I did not know the hold that the rituals had got on the royal Houses in such cities. Certainly, my Queen had behaved very strangely at times in our early years of marriage, but I had laughed at what she did and said, since not all people are the same in their tastes and appetites. But now I saw her curious ways as being tied to Creon's

wickedness, and I said, ‘From now onwards, our children shall grow up in the light, clean and comely.’

Jocasta turned her face towards me. Its whiteness was marked with her tears, and her black hair was damp against her neck and shoulders. ‘Oh, husband,’ she said, ‘if only you could have come earlier. If only Zeus had sent you to us before . . . But I am mad, for this is your second coming. When you came to me first, and I a virgin, they put you out on the hill for the beasts to destroy. Yes, this is your second coming. You came this time to kill your father, to kill Laius, and to lie with me.’

I was angry at this babbling and began to shake her, to bring sense back to her. ‘Stop this!’ I shouted. ‘I have come only once, and Laius was not my father. Nor are you my mother, though you . . .’

I did not finish what I had begun, but Jocasta knew what words I had been about to say. She smiled at me sadly and said, ‘Though I am old enough to be so, is that it? Yes, that is it, Oedipus. I am old enough, and I am getting older all the time, while you have yet to grow to your full height. It is sad, to grow old and dry, while the lover in your bed is still green and fresh and springing like the new barley.’

Now I tried to comfort her, but she broke through my arms and said, ‘Oedipus, my love, you must take another. You are angry with me because I am growing old while you are still young. I beg you, take another woman, one of the barons’ daughters, who will love you in secret. All I ask is that she is not seen with you in the public places, so that the people would point at me in scorn. Look, I will arrange it; there are a score to choose from. I have seen them all casting envious glances at you on the feast-days. Look, there is Maera, daughter of Lynceus; Himera, daughter of Eurymachus the sword-swinger; Adrasteia of the wide embrace, daughter of . . .’

But I placed my hand over her mouth, laughing and saying, ‘Enough, you cuckoo! You are enough for me. How could I ever love another, having known you?’

Then, somehow, we made love, though now the shadow of her age lay between us, having been called to life that evening.

And in the morning, Jocasta lay back on the pillow with a pale strained face. ‘Oedipus,’ she said, ‘things are not as well as once they were. Perhaps it is because I am growing old; but perhaps it is because the Mother has deserted me for wedding with you. Perhaps now I should turn to Zeus and do the things you say?’

I sat on the edge of the great bed, lacing on the strong high sandals that supported my ankles. ‘Perhaps, my love,’ I said. ‘Or then again, it might be me. I have wearied myself with many things in recent days, so do not blame yourself.’

She rolled over onto her elbow and lay gazing at the tablet of Marsyas. At length she said, ‘This belongs rightfully to the Hellenes of Thebes. It is their icon, their sacred picture, just as ours once was the Sphinx. It is only right that they should have it again. Creon did wrong to take it from them and to hide it away. Shall you return it, husband?’

I nodded. ‘That is what I intended,’ I answered. ‘That is why I rise so early, my love. I shall take it to Orchus, the elder baron, and he can set it up where his kinsfolk decree.’

She stared a little longer at the icon, then said, ‘It is very old. See, the chisel-marks are crude and clumsy, as though a child made this, or a man learning to carve during the childhood of the world. Yet, I have heard that there are statues and paintings, golden vases and cups, made when Crete stood at Dawn’s gateway, which are of such perfection that you would think the beasts breathed and the men could speak. This stone of Marsyas must have come from such ancient times that men were scarcely men, but more like snuffling animals.’

I nodded, trying not to listen to her chattering. Then she laughed and said, ‘Oedipus, beloved, I have a new idea. This is not Zeus commanding the warriors to be brothers after all!’

As patiently as I could, I said, ‘Who, then, is it, little bird?’

She put on a serious look, and said, ‘The one in the middle is Jocasta, Queen of Thebes, in her shortest tunic, taking off her girdle before two men. The tall one with the axe is Creon, and the other, who shakes a shepherd’s staff is . . .’

I leaned over her and stopped her from babbling on any further with a kiss. She tried to struggle from beneath my lips, so that she could name me, but I would not let her go. I lay on her and was strong this time.

At last, when I had almost stifled her, I said in triumph, ‘Very well, evil creature, and who is the one with the shepherd’s staff?’

She smiled up at me, her hands behind her head, her black hair flaring across the pillows. ‘Just a man with a staff, my love,’ she said.

When I had put on my blue cloak, I called two slaves and ordered them to accompany me, carrying the tablet, to the house where Orchus lived. They wrapped it round with fine linen and walked behind me, their heads bowed. It was morning, and the streets were empty save for a few old women who stood gossiping at doorways. The workers were out in the fields, and the warriors with them, in the main. So, we got to the house of Orchus in good time, and I knocked three times on the great door with my staff so that whoever was within would know the King had come.

There was a shuffling behind the door at last and a young girl, her golden hair unbound and tangled, stood looking up at me. I said to her, 'You are Timandra, daughter of Orchus, are you not? So, Timandra, let me in, I have something for your father the baron. She gazed at me wordlessly for a while, her lips quivering, then tears began to stream down her pale cheeks. 'My father is dead,' she said. 'He drank poison in the night and died. We heard him groaning, but when we found him in the courtyard, it was too late to help him. He told us before he died that it was because of you. Because he had told you of the tablet, and took you to Creon's secret place.'

I put my arm about her. The two slaves looked away. I said, 'Tell me, Timandra, what else do you know?'

She stared at the ground and said, 'Last night, at sunset, one of Prince Creon's captains came to my father with a message from his lord. When he had whispered it to him, my father's face went white. We did not hear the words that were spoken, my mother and I, but we thought that no good would come of them.'

I stood for a while comforting the girl. Then at last I said, 'Have patience, Timandra, there will be vengeance after a while. But say this to no one save your mother. As for the Stone of Marsyas, I will not leave it in your house now, for that might call doom upon the rest of you. Nor will I hand it back to any other Hellene. Instead, I shall set it up in my own chamber, and so you will know that, at last, you Hellenes of Thebes have a king of your own. Do you understand my words, girl?'

She nodded and even smiled a little.

'Very well, Timandra,' I said, 'now we know something that was not clear before. Give my greetings to your mother, and ask her to pray to the god that all will turn out well.'

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THAT day, when the greater part of Creon's police were out in the fields, watching over the workers, I gathered together all the slaves of the palace, and taking oil-jars, stout ropes, levers and draught horses, first set fire to the charnel-house, then dragged it to the ground, a heap of rubble. Some of Creon's red-crested watchers came bustling at us while we worked, but the slaves met them and wrenched the javelins from their hands.

I returned to the palace on the shoulders of the slaves who had been foremost in this work, and who rejoiced in having a King who would work among them with pick and mattock.

As I passed in my rough triumph along the cliff-like streets, through the barons' quarter, I heard from many windows the joyful whisper, 'Shepherd! Shepherd!' and saw faces of men and women smiling down upon me.

And when the slaves set me down at last on the palace steps, I called out to them, 'My people, we are at the beginning of the new times. With the god's help, all shall be well in Thebes. Go back to your tasks peacefully, raise no hand against any man—but if, after this day's work, you should be used unjustly, let the rumour be spread so that I shall hear it, and at the least I will promise you revenge.'

Most of these slaves were of other kingdoms, men taken in battle or after raids on crops and cattle. Few of them were Cretans, many of them had once been of noble blood in their own places. Never before had they had a King of their own.

Now, as I spoke to them, they knelt in the dust and even wept without shame. A great russet-haired slave, who had given himself the position of leader that day, stood before me and said, 'Anax, I am Kilhwych from an island far to the North. In my day I have led a hundred javelins over the green hills and have driven five hundred head of cattle before me. Now I stand before you and take you as my master, on earth or sea, in rain or shine, in winter and in summer. I am your man!'

He bent suddenly and kissed the hem of my kilt. He was so strong, drawing it towards him, that he almost had me off my feet. I did not fall,

though, but leaned on him, smiling and waving to them all.

Three red-crested guards came running down the palace steps at the noise the slaves made, cheering and shouting, their long leather shields held out before them, their stabbing-spears at the ready. But the slaves brushed them aside, as though they were children playing with sticks. Then, in good humour, they flung the guards about, from one to the other, until I had to ask them to let the poor fellows be.

As I walked up the winding stairway to the high garden under the dome, I thought: Ah, Oedipus, all is coming right. At last there is a King in Thebes —one who has as his friends both the barons and the slaves. Creon and his red-crested soldiers may find that, between two such rocks, they are pinched hard!

I took my seat near the wooden balustrade, and gazed across the empty space at the pasture where Hippomedon, the King Horse grazed. He was standing quite still, staring back at me, his mane and tail brushed out in the wind, and his great dark eyes seemed as though they were smiling at me, greeting a fellow-king. I waved to him and called, 'Well, Hippomedon, was it well done, friend?'

He whinnied and nodded his great head, then pawed at the earth as though he would have come to me but for the deep chasm that lay between us over the city.

I shouted, 'Thank you, King. This is but the start, and if the god wills it, you shall see even more before long.'

I do not know what made me turn then; it was not a shadow, for the sun was full in my face; nor was it a sound of breathing, for the wind was too strong to let that come to my ears. It was, perhaps, a sudden tightening of the skin at the base of my head, a stiffening of the hairs on my neck and my back.

Creon was standing close behind me, smiling his pale-lipped smile, and leaning on a long slim javelin. I carried no weapon that day, not even a short dirk. I saw his black eyes flicker down to my belt as I turned, as though to see if I was armed.

He said quietly, 'You do well to talk to Hippomedon, brother. He is a wise old one, and his advice is perhaps better than that of barons, and certainly of slaves.'

As he spoke, I tensed my legs, thinking to jump sideways if he brought the javelin up. To go backwards would be to lean my weight too hard on the

shaking balustrade of wood, when one push from Creon might send me toppling down over the roofs of the city.

And while I was so preparing myself, I said, smiling, ‘You are early back from the fields, today, brother.’

Tall Creon nodded and said, ‘Word came to me that fire had broken out in the city, and as its Guardian, it was my duty to you to come back with all the soldiers and the workers to beat out the flames.’

I said, ‘A fire? Yes, I heard something of the sort myself, and went down to see it; but it was hardly worth the cost of the shoe-leather. A small place, of no importance now, a hide-scraper’s shed, no more. I was able to clear away all traces of the rubbish with the help of a few strong horses.’

He half-turned away from me, and dug the point of his javelin deep into the thin soil. I breathed more freely then, and let my legs loosen, knowing that the bad moment had passed.

He said, ‘Lion of Thebes, let me speak frankly with you, as one brother to another. To rule a city whose laws are as ancient as the rock on which it stands is no task for a child. To govern a stronghold which is surrounded by envious enemies is no work for a fool. To use and control men, whether they be dark or white, requires something more than a moment’s passion, a gay dream; something more than an heroic surging of blood to the head.’

I did not answer him, but smiled and reached out for his javelin that was stuck upright in the ground. He made no movement to prevent me. He did not even glance at me as I broke it over my knee. This made me feel less like a King than a young fool, a boy in his first battle risking his life in a gesture to gain the praise of other young fools.

Creon said, as though I had not moved, ‘We have seen much, my father and my sister and I. We have learned how to build onto the greatness of Thebes, to enlarge what our ancestors of the House of Cadmus left us as our legacy. It is no small thing to increase the greatness of a beleaguered city, when it was already the pride of the world.’

I now dared to lean upon the rocking balustrade, and even to turn my back on the tall man who brooded over me. I said, ‘A man comes into the world bearing nothing. He comes naked and unclothed. And when, at last, he leaves the world, he goes out naked and unclothed. What he has gained or lost between coming in and going out are of no account. He may have lost a limb, or gained a kingdom—but where he goes, into the ground or high on the funeral-pyre, his lost arm or his rich palace are of no concern to him. It is

all over quickly, and the profit or the loss are of no more weight than a straw dropped by a sparrow in the nesting-time.'

Creon sighed deeply then, and even turned and smiled at me. 'Brother, oh dear brother,' he said, 'you are either a fool or a god, I do not know which. You have come from nothing, from the hills, and now are Lion of Thebes. How can you know the middle way! The way that we, of ancient kingly blood must take, we who are neither fools nor gods, but who come into the world with a duty, a heavy inheritance, which we must nurture towards the day when we hand this charge on to our children! If you would trust me, I could perhaps teach you the duty of kings—a duty which at times may seem madness in its execution, but which has been proved since ancient times by long practice. Will you not trust me, Shepherd?'

I answered with my back towards him, 'Am I not trusting you now, Creon? You stand behind me, and this balustrade is rotten with the worm.'

I heard him move back away from me, and then his voice: 'You are asking to become a hero, are you not, Oedipus? A martyr? So, if I gave you that, to please your pride, what would happen to me? I will tell you, the slaves and the barons would tear me as hounds tear the wolf. Then they would destroy my father and my sister. They might even, in their heroics, destroy your own children, those on whom the fate of Thebes will one day rest. And when they had wiped out this House, what next would be left for them to do? Why, to drag down the city itself, to raze its walls, burn its shrines, level it with strong horses and levers as you levelled the charnel-house today. So, at last, they would wake to find themselves free, in a wilderness. Free to starve, free to be destroyed by other waiting enemies from outside. And then, in their despair, they might even vent their wrath upon each other, barons blaming slaves, and slaves blaming barons, for what they had done together. So, at the last, Thebes would be only a heap of dust, and a mound of skulls bleaching in the sun and wind.'

I said, 'You would make a good merchant, brother. You are as persuasive as a Phoenician pedlar. Why do you not get a wagon and a few rolls of cloth and travel round the villages? The old women would listen to you, you would persuade them.'

He bowed his head under my insult, but did not fly into a rage.

'Let me persuade you, brother,' he said. 'Let me persuade you to come with me now and listen to the counsel of the Old Man of Thebes, my father Menoeceus, who is wiser than I, or you, or your barons and slaves.'

I was about to make some jesting reply, when I heard a man cough quietly, somewhere behind the buttress of the dome-wall. Creon saw the look in my eyes, for he smiled and said, ‘A King should not be afraid, brother. It is all for the best.’

I said, ‘How many of your red-crested cut-throats are waiting there, Creon?’

He said carelessly, ‘Two score, brother. I thought the honour of a King demanded no fewer.’

I laughed and said, ‘So, you come to me with your pretty little javelin, as though that was all you had to back your words; yet two score javelins huddle behind the wall to put an end to me if I raise a hand towards you. Two score javelins to support your argument, hey, Creon?’

He raised his dark eyebrows and smiled. ‘You jump to conclusions, brother,’ he said. ‘These soldiers are as much yours as mine, as you must know. They are here to escort you as befits a King, on your visit to old Menoeceus. You cannot walk alone through the streets of Thebes, can you?’

I wrapped my cloak about me and said, ‘Very well, let us go. If I do not go consenting, I shall be dragged there, shall I not?’

Creon smiled up into the sky and began to whistle like a bird for a moment or two. Then he said, ‘I do believe that you think these men are here to kill you, brother. Perhaps to fling you over the balustrade, into the street. Tell me, is that what you think?’

I said, ‘The thought had crossed my mind, Creon. If not now, then perhaps another time.’

He followed me, one pace behind, as we went to meet the soldiers. He said in a light whisper, ‘A man like you must live in a world of shadows.’

I answered him in the same tone and said, ‘Once the enemy is dead, his shadow will bother me no more, brother.’

We moved between the files of waiting red-crested soldiers. He laid his long white hand upon my shoulder and said in my ear, ‘How glad I am, then, to be your close friend and not your enemy, Lion of Thebes.’

We went down the steps and into the streets. No folk were about and other guards stood everywhere, before doors and alley-ways, to keep them clear. At last we came to the great South Wall of the city.

It was much higher and thicker than the walls on the other sides and was built on a rocky cliff-face which overlooked the plain. From its flat battlements, which were broad enough to drive two chariots along at one time, it was possible on a sunny day to see Mount Helicon to the west, and, if the sky was clear, a distant faint shimmering, like light glinting on spear-points, which men said was the Gulf of Corinth.

Below the South Wall, the rock fell, in browns and greys, cut through with fissures, in which grew wild plants, mosses and thyme. Only the hardiest of climbers, or those tired of life, could scale this cliff-face; and in all its history, Thebes had never fallen to attack from the south. It was called The Wall of Pride, partly because its proud defences had never been breached, and partly because, in the ancient days, proud generals who had lost too many men in battle jumped from the wall at this point, to regain their honour on the jagged rocks far below. But for years, under King Laius, this custom had been abandoned, and when I was King of Thebes, the only bodies which went down from the high wall into the misty valley were those of worn-out horses or diseased cattle that no butcher would deign to destroy.

At one corner of this wall, old Menoeceus had his private chamber, away from the palace. He was half-blind and suffered from a palsy which made it hard for him to jostle among the barons and servants who always crowded the megaron and vestibule at the Great House. But in his own chamber, built in the very lip of the wall, with a window-hole and oaken balcony overlooking the chasm, the old man could live quietly and think about the world as it had been in the grand days, before the cattle-kings came down and set Hellas in an uproar with their endless feuds.

The stairway up to the battlements was very steep and dangerous, but so many men now pressed behind me that I could not have fallen backwards if I had tried.

When, at last, I entered the dim chamber of the Old Man, I was astounded to see that all my family waited for me there, ranged behind Menoeceus, who was sitting on a stool and warming his hands over a bronze brazier. Jocasta stood in her shrine robes, her breasts bare and painted, the flounced blue skirt trailing in the dust of the cell-like room. Antigone was beside her, her golden hair oiled into snakes upon her shoulders. On Jocasta's other side and a little back, towards the window, were my sons, Eteocles and Polyneices, leaning upon the ebony javelins which young princes carried in those days. Little Ismene was hiding behind her mother's skirts and I did not see her at first.

But when I did, I saw that she, like all the others, was pale-faced and grave. They all stared at me with big round eyes as I stumbled in, breathing hard from the climb, as though I was a stranger from Outland, come to visit Thebes for the first time. I could see that they had been well briefed, for they did not return my smile or my greeting.

Even proud Creon was silent, and moved back to the wall, to give old Menoeceus the first place in that assembly. He was so long in addressing me that I thought he had fallen asleep, as old men sometimes do when they sit before a fire.

I said, 'Well, Old Man, you sent for me, and I am here. What greetings have you for the King of Thebes?'

Menoeceus turned his pale and watery eyes on me as though I was of little worth, then said, ignoring my question, 'You have made many changes, Oedipus.'

I nodded, lightly, and answered, 'Every farmer, going to a new farm, makes changes, Old Man. Sometimes he mends a fence here, or drags down a cow-byre there, or sets fire to a heap of bracken somewhere else . . . It is the way of things.'

Menoeceus stared down into the glowing charcoal brazier, then said, 'Thebes is no farm, Shepherd; it is a city, and a great one. You have been its King for seven years, and I have watched you, a King dreaming, and wakening from his dream from month to month, or year to year, to strike out in his wakening, to drag down and destroy, as though to convince himself he still lives. You have lain with your woman, my daughter, so sweetly these seven years, Oedipus, that I have tolerated your changes, for in your dream-time you have fathered a family for Thebes. So, it has been a fair bargain for us of the House. You have been a good farmer and have sown the seed in that field which is most fruitful. But now, do you not understand, young man, the seven years are up. The harvest is gathered, and is here, facing you in this room. The field is no longer fertile; it will bear no other harvest. So, farmer, what now?'

I looked at Jocasta as he spoke, but her ivory face framed in its dark-bronze hair was like that of a patient image of the Shrines. Her blue-lidded eyes were heavy and unblinking. I could not tell what she might be thinking.

I said, 'Old Man, you mean that my course is run? That now you will destroy me, on the grounds that I have tried to change the ancient ways in Thebes? Is that it?'

Menoeceus drew a long, rasping breath, an old man's breath, and cupped his hands like a dome above the glowing charcoal.

He said, in his old sheep's voice, 'We are allowed but a short time on earth, before we go back into the place decreed for us. We are not given our bodies, but only lent them. We are not given our golden crowns and our chariots and our drinking-cups, but only lent them. In time, we must hand them back, Oedipus. It comes to us all, my son.'

I am a shepherd's son, not a wily king; I am a direct man, not a bard or a seer. I understand what I can see, or touch, or taste; but I do not always understand words, especially those words which are spoken to hide rather than to expose the truth of life. Above all, I hate the snake-like words of ritual and observances.

I said to him, 'You seem to have held your borrowings a long space, Menoeceus. And so did your other son-in-law, Laius, who was the king here from the time I was a little boy, until I met him on the mountain road in my manhood and flung him over. Why speak to me of a mere seven years?'

Menoeceus smiled. 'There are many things we cannot understand or explain,' he said. 'For one man, seven years is but a day. For another man, thirty years are but seven.'

I strode towards him and spat into his fire. My spittle crackled on the charcoal, as in derision. I said, 'Tell this to fools, dotard. Tell this to beardless boys who have never killed a man or lain with a woman. But do not tell it to me. I am a hero, and a King of Corinth in my day. Go with your pedlar-son, Creon, and sell this worthless babble in the villages; for it will not do in Thebes!'

I thought the old man would have fallen in a seizure. His eyes flamed, the cords of his neck stood out, his gaunt old hands almost plunged, grasping, into the fire. 'You dare to say what will not do in Thebes,' he shouted. 'You, an Outlander, a shepherd from the hills! You, a crippled peasant!'

I gave him time to quieten a little, then I said, 'A king is only a man, old one; and you, who have lost the greater part of your manhood, are even less than a byre-slave in my eyes. But, since you are the father of my woman, Jocasta, I listen to you. Tell me what you have in mind, Old Man. Tell me, and I promise you, the King of Thebes will listen to you.'

All this while, my family stared at me silently, like bright-eyed hawks, but did not speak. I could not tell whether they were with me or not. But it

had always been my way, when my blood was roused, I did not mind what others thought, be they as close to me as my hair and hide.

Old Menoeceus glared up into my eyes. With the white spittle at his mouth's corners, he said, 'So, you ask a judgement, and you shall have one. In your arrogance, you took from my son's charnel-house the tablet of Marsyas, which belongs to him. Do you hold to be true that which you see carved on that stone?'

I said, 'Yes, Old Man. That stone tells us of the power of Zeus. It tells us that he will arbitrate between all men if we will take him as our god.'

Old Menoeceus smiled then and said, 'There are two warriors pictured on that stone. Such men as could be Creon and yourself. Is that not so?'

I laughed. 'So, it is to be between the two of us,' I said. 'That is the way you plan to be rid of your seven-year king?'

Menoeceus bowed his head, then said gently, 'There is another way, if you would prefer it. Outside this window, there is an ancient balcony which stands above the chasm at the city's entrance. If fear of Creon is too great for you, go now and put yourself into the hand of your god, see if he will give you a bird's wings to let you hover down to safety. That is a fair offer, surely?'

I heard Jocasta gasp, and saw Antigone clutch more tightly at her mother's waist. I half-turned and said to them, 'Have no fear, my women, Oedipus is not so mad that he thinks he may fly. He is called Lion of Thebes, and the lion does his fighting on the ground.'

I swung away, but Creon came up with me and put his hand upon my arm. 'Then let it be as in the tablet,' he said. 'For you the mace; for me the ancient axe.'

I flung him off. 'Choose as you will,' I said, 'I would meet you with only a stick in my hand.'

31

THE time was between sun's setting and moon's rising, so that neither of us should have the god's advantage. We stood face to face in that narrow gully called the Cleft of Dia, which lies three bow-shots from the west wall, out towards the plain. Above us, on the steep slopes of the Cleft, the crowds waited and watched us—barons, soldiers, workers, even slaves. That evening, Thebes would have seemed like a dead city to any stranger who had entered its streets.

Creon had put on a long-faced horse-mask, crested with red; I had brought out the gold lion-mask which Mycenaean Phimacus made for me. Phimacus, 'the Muzzler of Pain', he was nicknamed, and that evening, with the powdery blue of the sky above me and the pale stars just coming out, I hoped that his name was a good omen for me.

We were stripped to the waist, and oiled so that if it came to wrestling we should stand a better chance against each other. I wore my red war-kilt and Creon his black one. Beneath his knees, he wore circlets of white ox-tails, which fluttered about as he moved, trying out his axe. This was an ancient weapon, a bronze semicircle socketed onto an ash stave, and carved with symbols which had long been forgotten by men. I noted this axe with some pleasure, for it was not the sort of thing that could deliver a straight blow; it had to be used in a swinging movement, because of the way its edge was set, and a swinging movement is always slower than a straight one, as any Cretan boxer knows. I bore a heavy mace of black oak, set with flints at its round end. This brutal weapon was double-thonged to my wrist, after the manner of the stone of Marsyas. I had had my reddish hair and beard combed out, like the warrior on the tablet, so that it would flare in the sun's last rays.

Each of us carried a small round buckler of cow-hide, set on a frame of thin ash wood. Strong enough to turn a glancing blow, but not strong enough to stand a direct assault.

We were alone in the gully, shaking our arms and legs to loosen their muscles, waiting for the horn to blow above us. I noted how much room I had to use, between rocks and ruts, and decided that, if Creon would allow

me, I would take up a central position and make him do all the circling, since I was slow on my feet.

More to pass the time than anything, I called out to him mildly, ‘Will you play fair, Creon?’

He showed his white teeth in a grin above his black beard. ‘We must take our chances as they come, Shepherd,’ he said. And then, as the first glow of the moon shone out of the clouds above us, the horn sounded, far-away and misty, like a horn of the far north when the bronze-decked hunters ride through their dark-green forests at evening-time.

And Creon was on me like a leopard, swinging his axe at my legs. ‘Aha!’ I thought. ‘So that’s what he is aiming for!’ And I brought down my buckler on the bridge of his high nose, sending him staggering back, the blood running into his black beard.

He was almost down, and I heard a sharp cry of amazement from above me, as though the folk of Thebes were astounded at such an early blooding. I stood where I was and made no attempt to follow up that first blow. Instead, as Creon flung out both arms to keep his balance, I said, ‘Hey, brother, have no fear! I’m not coming for you yet.’

He half-turned from me and blew out the blood from his nose, with finger and thumb, his axe tucked under his left arm. If I had chosen, I could have had him then. But I knew that he was only testing me, so I stood still, and whistled a little sheep-herding song I had known as a child. I think this had an effect on him, for he swung round all at once and ran at me again, this time flailing at neck level with his axe. I stopped the first swing with my buckler, and the weight of the blow almost wrenched my arm off. I thought my left wrist was cracked for an instant, and in my anger I drove the end of my mace up into his belly, like a knife. He grunted, rolled back his eyes, then smashed his own buckler under my chin, just above the throat. I reeled away from him and choked. For a while I fought hard not to lie on the ground and vomit, there among the black grass. There was a greyness before my eyes, and the rocks seemed to dance up and down in the faint moonlight.

But Creon was just as I was, fighting back the vomit, choking for breath, unable to go on straightway. And in this, I was his master, for I was ready before he was, and I walked to him and beat at him as a boy beats the bushes to drive out the partridge for his lord. And he was hard put to it to ward off my blows, so that in the end I had shattered his light buckler, and he flung it away from him, being useless.

Above me, the crowd whispered to see the buckler go. The reedy voices of the barons' women sounded in my ears. Some of them called down such shameless words at Creon, and such shameless offers to me that despite myself I had to smile.

I was in the midst of that smiling when my enemy was upon me once again, striking out now with his axe held in both hands to give greater power to the blow.

This must be said of the Prince of Thebes, he was an agile warrior and a most courageous man. His first three blows flayed the cow-hide from my buckler and left its wood exposed. Then, shifting his attack, he caught me a glancing blow above the left hip, which tore through the skin and made me bite at my lips. I struck at him in anger and slashed the horse-crest from his head. A hand's breadth lower and I should have broken his skull. As it was, he felt the helmet fly away and laughed. Then he was at me again, and this time he used a downward chop at my shoulder, but I saw it coming and moved towards him slightly. His curved blade missed me, but the stout shaft of the weapon struck my left shoulder with such force that the little shield fell from my numbed fingers.

I thought that my arm was broken and this angered me. I had grown to be so big in the last seven years that I could take up most men, one under either arm, and carry them like children. Jocasta often said that I was bigger than the bull of Crete, my chest was so broad and so covered with reddish hair. Now, when Creon had hurt me on the shoulder, I seemed to swell to twice my size, and from inside my chest, I heard myself sending forth a great deep roaring sound, as though I was in truth a bull, or an angry lion. I had never done this before, and did not know what god spoke out of my belly. It almost frightened me that this power should have lain within me so long without my knowing. I was enormous. I was a giant, a monster. I went at Creon forgetful of his axe now, and taking no guard. He saw me coming upon him, enveloping him like a great cloud, and for a moment his lips parted as though he might be about to scream in terror. But he controlled himself and, instead, chopped at me with his axe. I saw the blow as though I had eyes as sharp as an eagle's. I laughed. I struck at his axe as it came towards me. My flint-headed mace broke the ash-shaft with a sharp crack. The bronze axe-head went clattering down the rocky gully. Creon flung the broken shaft at me. It struck my cheek and laid it open, but I laughed again, and let the blood stream down as though it pleased me so. And all the while the crowd above us was screaming and shrieking and cheering and howling.

It was like being among blood-maddened animals. I hissed at Creon, ‘Now, brother, now!’

He backed before me until there was no more room to escape into. His shoulders were against the wall of brown rock. I said again, ‘Now, brother, now!’ And went for him, my useless left hand tucked into my kilt-belt, but my right shearing through the air with the flint-headed mace. It was in my thought to break his ribs first, and then to tread him down into the dust as an enraged bull treads a serpent. I thought that this would give the folk up there a show they would always remember.

And Creon knew what was in my mind. He seemed to shrink to half his size. His lips gibbered and his eyes opened so wide that I thought his lids would split with the strain upon them.

I tried to laugh at him, but all I could do was to growl. Yet this was worse for Creon than any laughter. He held up his white arm to stop my first blow, but I think that my mace would have shattered the main gate of Thebes at that moment. His hand was flung away from the flint-head, and I heard the dull sound my weapon made upon his body, just below the arm-pit. He screamed and fell sideways, away from me to the left. Now his long black hair was trailing in the dust. Now I had him, and I slewed sideways to strike again, where his hair parted at the base of his neck, when all at once, with the turning motion, the hide thong of my left sandal burst, and in the weakness of my legs, I fell sideways, upon my wounded arm. Now it was my turn to groan, to forget the enemy beside me, and to try to right myself, to roll my weight off my stricken limb.

But Creon was on me, sweating with the pain of his wounds, but tearing at my bearded throat with his white teeth. At such close range, my mace was a hindrance to me. When I tried to raise it, he rammed it down into my body again with the weight of his own. Our sweat mingled, our blood mingled, our breath mingled. Yet I had sense enough, in all this struggling, to wind the thong of my mace about his neck and to draw it tight. Choking, he reached down into his belt and I felt that he now had a dirk in his hand. For a second, the thought came to me that he would be victorious after all, since he could no doubt push up with his dagger before I could throttle him.

And then, in the grim and moonlit silence above us, I heard a shrill scream, and felt a shower of rocks and soil come over my face. Then, for a moment, the moon’s light was blotted out, and it was as though a dark-winged creature was flying above us. Then there was a shock as a body fell upon us both, and I was now fighting to breathe. Enough sense came to me

to tell me that a woman's breasts were over my face, and a woman's body was spread over Creon and myself. I heard him choking still, and then I heard Jocasta's voice saying, 'Stop, stop! Let this be the end! It is a sin against the gods for such as you to die so uselessly.'

I felt her snatching at the dirk which Creon held, then struggling to slash the thong that was strangling him. Then the three of us were lying in a heap on that dusty floor, sucking in the air like half-drowned swimmers come up from a deep wreck.

And it was long before we had the strength to rise and to clamber once more up the steep slopes to the lip of that chasm, called the Cleft of Dia.

32

SEVEN years can pass like a long summer's afternoon, in the mind of a King who has proved himself great, as I had done in the darkened gully. True, I had a left arm which was never strong again, but Creon had a shattered side which left him with a cough like an old lion and took six inches off his height, for from that night of combat onwards he did not walk upright any more, but with a sideways crouch that put an end to his dignity and left me the tallest man in Thebes.

This so hurt his pride that, as soon as he was able to travel in a litter, Creon left the city and went to a farm he had near the sea at Rhamnus. He had a woman there, named Elaea, who had once been a temple-dancer in Mysia and whose skin was as dark as bronze, although her hair shone like white flax upon her shoulders. Jocasta did not care for this Elaea and called her a whore and worse. I laughed, for she was lying upon me when she said this, though serving-women and soldiers were passing to and fro in the megaron beyond our open door. I said, 'You are only jealous because this Elaea wears red flowers in her hair and knows more tricks than you do.'

She was angry then and tried to strike at me, but I hugged her close with my strong arm and she could do nothing but gasp for breath. But when I let her go, she said, 'Very well, but if I hear that you go riding to visit this woman with her red flowers, I shall put an end to your capers for ever, I warn you. The dead baron's daughter, Timandra, is another matter: she would be meek and discreet. But I will not have you going to this Elaea, who has the black blood of witches in her veins and who would cause you to shrivel up like an old man.'

When later this Elaea had a son, called Haemon, and the child had reddish hair like mine, Jocasta began to say I had wronged her, and went on so long about it that, in a sort of anger, I did go to see Timandra by night, and was well received both by the girl and her mother, who were honoured that the King should visit their house. Yet, all the same, I returned to my palace by dawn, my love for Jocasta as great as ever. She was lying, smiling at me when I came through the door-curtain, and looking very beautiful although now her hair was grey about the temples.

She said, ‘Are all things possible to a King, then?’

I took her by the hair and drew her beside me. ‘You are a witch,’ I said. ‘You have put a spell on me. You know that I am lost without you.’

They were happy years of my life, after Creon had gone to his farm. I had the tablet of Marsyas set up in the main square within the South Wall, so that all men should now know that they might pray to Zeus if they chose, and that no longer need any Theban go in fear of his life as the Mother’s feast-days came.

There was a spirit of freedom abroad in the city for the first time, and I counted the weakness in my arm a small price to pay for this. Barons and slaves spoke with each other openly, and now even Creon’s red-crested soldiers learned to smile.

This last was not difficult to bring about. The day after Creon went off in his litter, I sent for the Captain of the Guard and told him directly that the times had changed. He shuffled his feet on the tiled floor for a space, glowering grimly under his tall helmet, then said, ‘How changed, Lion?’

I patted him on the arm, although I knew he didn’t like this, and said, ‘From now on, the red crests are to go, and they will be replaced by white crests, such as the mane old Hippomedon wears, and such as I, your King, will wear in future.’

The Captain did not like this, but he could not very well protest since I had virtually done him the honour of wearing a kingly crest.

Then, like a cunning wrestler, I caught him still off-balance and went on, ‘Also, from this time forward, your numbers shall be increased. In that way, the hours of your duty will be lessened, and you will be more able to lead the lives of ordinary men and not go about all your days, burdened with shield and spear.’

The Captain’s mouth fell open. ‘But how can that be, Anax,’ he said, ‘for there are only so many soldier-families in Thebes, and you cannot make them more by announcing your law, however great your voice.’

I smiled and said, ‘But I can, Captain, for my law is that, in the future, the strongest youths from both baronial families and from among the slaves shall be appointed to serve as soldiers, too. In that way, your numbers will increase.’

He was about to protest, but I silenced him and said, ‘What are soldiers for, my friend? I will tell you—they are to protect Thebes. And are not the

barons and the slaves a part of Thebes? Then, they should have the duty of protecting our city, equally with you.'

He went away disgruntled, and that night a few of the red-crests left Thebes on stolen horses. In one of the barracks at the northern suburb of the city, a minor mutiny flared up, a few houses were burned and a wine-store looted. But within a week, all was forgotten and I punished no man who had been involved, although I got to know all their names through my spies, and made a note of them for the future, should they be needed.

After this, I had the army in the palm of my hand, especially when I had promoted certain barons and slaves to be captains of the various companies.

When old Menoeceus heard of these reforms, he sent a message to me by one of the youths he always had about him. This boy, a golden-haired lad who thought rather too much of his curls and his long lashes, stood before me boldly, swaying his narrow hips, and said in his fluting voice, 'My master, the Queen's father, bids me welcome you to your second seven years of kingship. Yet he would have you know that enough is enough. He commands me to tell you that the wheel, in turning too far, comes back upon itself once more.'

I glared at him, as shaggy as a lion, and he coughed and added lamely, 'My lord.'

I said, 'Yes, lad, your lord and his lord, as well. Now go back to the old man on the wall who sent you, and tell him this. "The lion may listen to the old ram's bleating, but he does not wish to bleat himself because of this. The lion will reign for as long as he wishes, and not as long as the ram decrees. The lion will surround himself with other lions and not with rams." Have you got that?'

I made the fellow go through it, again and again, in his lisping voice, before I kicked him down the steps into the street.

And then I went to the soldiers' Mess where the first company of my new officers were eating their supper. I sat with them on the bench and ate black beans and drank the sharp red wine that was their fare, and when we had emptied the wine-skins, I stood on the table and said, 'My comrades, I have to report to you that all goes well. If there should come a time when things go badly, you will be the first to know that, also, and whatever there may be bad in store for you, I shall share equally, as I have shared your food this night. Is it well?'

They beat on the tables with their fists and their knives. ‘It is well, Lion!’ they roared.

I went back, unguarded, to the palace, smiling to think how powerless old Menoeceus and his brooding son had suddenly become: and from that night I always took my supper with the soldiers, in the various Messes up and down the city. Nor did I ever go armed or accompanied, unless it was by my two sons, who were now growing big enough to learn something of the soldier’s trade themselves, and who took to it readily, to become great favourites with the men before many weeks were out.

Yes, all went well. As soon as my wounds had healed enough to let me use a pick and a mattock, I went up to the little garden where the children played, and there I dug the foundations for Antigone’s dancing-floor. When it came to laying the mosaics, however, I had to get help from two of the slaves who had done such work in Phaestus before they were captured.

So, together, we made a pretty floor, with Antigone to tell us what patterns and shapes and colours she wanted. In the centre was her bird, looking alive once more, with its blue wings outspread and its yellow beak open as though in song: round it we laid a circle of red flowers, then one of green leaves. I think they were myrtle leaves, but it is now so long ago I cannot be quite certain. What I do recall is that the main stretch of the floor was of pure white, and its outer edge in a key-pattern of black upon gold.

When Jocasta saw the dancing-floor growing and glowing under our hands, she clapped her hands like an excited little girl herself and said, ‘Oh, what a pretty floor! Oh, if I had had such a floor when I was a child!’

There and then she tore off her heavy skirt and danced while the slaves gazed open-mouthed, until I flung my red cloak over and drove her back indoors.

But the damage was done. Antigone was watching and later I had to call her to me and tell her, very sternly, that though a Queen might dance so, it was not correct for an unmarried princess to do the same. Especially before the sons of the barons, as word had come to me she had been doing in the new Spring moonlight.

Antigone just gazed at me with her wide blue eyes, a little smile at the corners of her mouth, her hair blowing across her face all the time and having to be smoothed away. And when I had finished, all she did was to pick at the embroidery on the front of my throne-robe and say, ‘But, Lion,

you talk as though I am a little child. You talk as though I am stupid, don't you? But it is you who are stupid, Lion. Have you ever thought of that?'

Then she turned quickly and ran out of the throne-room, knowing I could not catch her, on my heavy feet.

But if I had had Hermes' speed and could have caught her, I could not have punished her, for I loved her too deeply ever to lay a finger on her in anger.

I loved her so deeply that, even now, to recall that love is enough to make me weep, my lords.

33

SO in the fourteenth year of my time as King, seeing my people walking tall and proud about me, I took heart and set up a shrine to Zeus in the spot where Creon's charnel-house had been.

It was a tall place, with rough-hewn columns of red sandstone and a high-peaked roof which glowed in the afternoon sunshine as though the god was pleased with my work.

To Jocasta, lying passive on the great bed in our curtained room, I said, 'You need not look so stern, my love. I shall not ask you to officiate there. I shall make the offerings to Zeus myself: so, I shall be both Priest and King.'

She turned her face to the pillow. 'Some of the people may not like that,' she said. 'Menoeceus will not approve, I am certain. He will say that you fly too high.'

I sat beside her and smoothed the little folds at her waist with my fingers, but she put my hand away suddenly.

'Why,' I said, 'what has happened to Thebes when the Queen has grown to be the most modest of its women! Look, Jocasta, you have lost touch with the temper of your people. They are all gay now, and proud. Even the youngest girls hold up their heads and gaze boldly at the greatest warriors. And if a man takes their fancy, they approach him and speak outright, using the words men created, without blushing and lowering the eyelids, and all such foolish slavish tricks. Why, then, should you, who are the leader of the women, suddenly become so quiet, so mild and timid? Do you remember the day you gave me my chariot, at our wedding? You were not timid then. You were like a she-eagle, Jocasta.'

She rolled away from my hand again and whispered, 'I am older now; Thebes is older; all is changing.'

The god was in me and I would not brook such talk. I climbed onto the broad bed and tried to put my point to her, that change must come to all things, but that change was not itself bad. For a while, it seemed that I convinced her, as I made my argument again and again.

Then suddenly she began to weep, as though in guilt, and whispered hoarsely in my ear, ‘Oh, if only Creon were here. He would advise us.’

I was angry and flung away from her across the bed. ‘So, that is the meat you still yearn to eat!’ I said. ‘I thought I had trained your tastes to fresher fare! So, no doubt, Creon has been in your memory all this while. No doubt, with your eyes closed so modestly, you have pictured him when I have been most close to you.’

I left her weeping and strode out of the palace, furious at my thoughts, until I came to the Mess of my First Company, where Kilhwych from Afar, who had once been a slave, was now the Captain under my new order. There was loud singing in the hall and resin torches flared along the walls. The soldiers sprawled at the long benches, laughing and drinking, and hardly sparing a glance for the three girls who danced for them in the open space near the hearth-fire.

Captain Kilhwych came to greet me, his red beard combed and oiled, his broad lips smiling. ‘Welcome, Anax,’ he said. ‘We are celebrating the new temple, and later we shall go beyond the hill where one of the workers tells us an old lion has made his lair. Will you come?’

I said, ‘Do you need to ask? If someone will lend me a javelin, I will lead you. But first a cup of wine, and then send these women away, they are streaming with sweat but no one heeds them. See that they have a cloak to cover them, or they will catch their death of chill on the way home.’

One of them, a brown-haired girl with a pert nose, and eyelids heavy with blue, heard me and came to me. ‘Anax,’ she said, ‘how considerate you are! You always think for the good of your people!’

I knew that she was teasing me, but I only bowed my head, as a King should, and said, ‘I try to, girl.’

She came nearer and said, pouting, ‘But it is not for our good to send us away, empty-handed and empty-bellied, like this, with but a cloak to cover us. We were promised more for our entertainment, my sisters and I.’

I pushed her away a little and whispered, ‘There will be another time, little one. The Captain will give you something, and to go empty-bellied from such a gathering as this may be no bad thing. You must think of the future, my dear.’

She flung back her thick hair and snorted at me. ‘The future,’ she said. ‘What future? Creon never spoke to us of the future, but only of the past. The past is all a man may know of; the future is still hidden in the womb.

Look you, tonight you run to meet the lion—but will you run back again as blithely, King? Can you be sure of that?'

I lost my patience with her then, and had the three of them paid off and sent packing. Kilhwych put his hand on my shoulder and told me not to pay attention to such women, who were of the old Theban families and were bound to speak so. Yet it took much wine before her words faded, and then I was less steady on my feet than I should have been for the work that lay before us.

Far from the city, in a moonlit grove below a steep shoulder of grey rock, where the owls called and a little spout of water came down with a rattle of pebbles, we smelled the lion we had come for. When the nets were spread about the thicket where he lay grumbling, Kilhwych and I went in with our long javelins to stir him up and get him into the silver light and away from his dark shadows.

But this one needed no stirring. It was as though he had long waited for us, and he came out suddenly with a great scattering of dust and a flailing of the tufted tail. He was a black lion, not a golden one, and much younger than we had heard. An old arrow-shaft still stuck in his left fore-foot, but that did little to slow his speed. He was almost onto Kilhwych before the Captain could get his spear-point up, slashing with his claws and nodding his head up and down like a mad thing. Kilhwych fell sideways to avoid him, and so I went in, poking before me with my borrowed javelin to keep the beast away from the man.

But it was not a weapon I knew; the grip was different from mine, and the lion swung at it and knocked it aside, as a man will brush away a hanging apple-bough that threatens his head.

When my weapon left my hand, two of the men beyond the net began to clamber over to give help, but I waved them back, and flung myself upon the lion, which was just then running in, belly to the ground, to grip Kilhwych in its open jaws. I locked my two hands under its mane with enough force to have broken a man's neck, yet it was all I could do to keep the beast from breaking from my grasp. Kilhwych rolled away, got to his knees and shortened his spear. 'Hold on, Anax,' he gasped. 'Do not loose him until the spasm has passed.'

In my pride, I called back, 'I will do better than that. I will tell him to lie still when a greater lion commands him.'

The men outside the net shouted at this, like fools, for they were as fuddled with the strong wine as I was. I played up to them and spoke to the lion, ‘Hey, boy! Hey, boy! Do you not know when the Lion of Thebes is speaking to you? Have you no respect for Oedipus?’

His roaring fell away to a deep growling, then I was almost flung from him with the great start he gave as Kilhwych’s spear went in. The men cheered, but the lion writhed more fiercely than ever. I held to him closer than a brother, my face buried in the stinking hair of his black mane, until his threshing grew weaker. ‘Hold on, Anax! Kilhwych shouted. ‘It is not time yet. The end has not yet come!’

And, truly, I thought I was holding on, but my arms must have weakened suddenly, for in his dying spasm, the beast flung me from him, rolling in the dust, and as I went, one of his great dew-claws caught me, opening my flesh from thigh to navel.

Then he was still and shuddering, and I was being lifted over the net and laid upon the black grass in the moonlight.

Kilhwych said, ‘You saved my life, Lion. When we get back to Thebes, I will have that dancing-girl flogged for putting a curse upon you tonight.’

I said, ‘Better give her a gold cup and a necklace of beads for her warning. If I had had sense, I would have listened.’

When they got me to the little stream that fell from the rock and bathed away my blood, they found that the lion’s dew-claw had not gone deeply, and that the wound was no more than a soldier might get in spear-practice. Though I carried its marks with me all my life, and ugly marks they were, too.

All the same, I did not go back to the palace that night. We returned to the Mess and had fresh wine-jars unstoppered, and it was dawn-time before our thirst was slaked. And then we were all so stupid in our speech that anyone entering the hall would have thought he had come into a place of madmen. Few out of the hundred of us could stand steady on his feet, much less walk home.

And it was at this time that a stranger arrived, wearing a high black-plumed helmet and grey cloak, and carrying a long bronze sword.

He stood for a while looking round the tumbled company, his thin, hooked nose held high, his nostrils flaring. Then he saw my bound feet, and no doubt my great size, for I was the biggest man in Thebes, and he came and stood before me.

‘King Oedipus,’ he said, without bowing his head, ‘may the blessing of Athene be upon you.’

I was weak from my wound and tipsy with the wine. My sight was so blurred that now I could hardly see the man. But for all that, in my heart, I felt like a god. And I said to him, negligently, ‘Let us have no more of that woman’s babble, fellow. Here we are men, and take care of ourselves. You speak to the Lion, not the lioness, my lad.’

Many of the soldiers went quiet when I said this, mostly those whose fathers had come from the far island or from the southern shore. Even red-haired Kilhwych put on a serious face and tried to whisper something to me, but I shook my head at him and said, ‘Get back to the wine-jar, lion-tamer, and no more of this slavish whispering.’

Then, when I could see the man in the black-plumed helmet again, I said to him in my loud King’s voice, ‘So, where do you come from, and what are you, to break into a feasting like this, and at such a time in the day?’

If I had spoken to other men after such a manner, they would have backed before me with bowed head, and trembling legs. But this man stood where he was and stared into my face without shame or fear.

He said at last in a cool and even voice, ‘I come from Athens, Lion of Thebes. My name is Perses and I am the messenger of King Theseus, who sends you his greetings.’

I considered this a while as I sipped at the new cup of wine the mess-servant had put into my hand. ‘From Athens, from King Theseus,’ I said. ‘Since when has Athens sent messengers to Thebes? Since when has that sly little bull-dancer dared to send to the Lion? Are there no more girls for him to dance with, that he sends to a man at last? Has he run short of boys, that he now wishes to find out what men are like?’

I would have rambled on in this way for even longer, but Kilhwych came to me and put his hand upon my mouth, as though he had never been a slave, as though he had always been the equal of a King.

The dark-faced herald glanced at him and said, ‘No, do not silence the King if he wants to speak. He has that right in his own place. My own King will be pleased to hear all that the Lion of Thebes wishes to say.’

I think that these last words sobered me a little, and I glowered at him and said, ‘What is this? Why do you dare to come here, where an Athenian has never trod before? What is your business?’

The man smiled and answered me calmly, ‘I have ridden far and fast, King Oedipus, since yesterday. If I might sit before you, as the bearer of friendly tidings should, I might speak more clearly in your ear.’

I was ashamed then, that this man Perses should have to remind me of my duty, and I waved for the servants to bring a stool for the man to sit on. I even called for a cup of wine for him, but he waved this away with his ringed hand, and said, ‘I do not come to Thebes because I wish to see your city, or its Lion. I am not sent to invite you to a feasting, or to beg your daughter’s hand in marriage for my lord. My business is more urgent than all these things. It strikes more closely at your heart, Lion.’

I was growing impatient then and said, ‘No more of this beating about the bush, Athenian. Give me your message and be gone.’

He bore my taunting better than I would any man’s, even a great king’s, then gazed mildly at me and said, ‘My master, the King of Athens, gives you brotherly greetings. He wishes nothing from you, but would offer you everything.’

I beat my wine-cup so hard upon the board that it cracked within my hand and let the red lees flow upon the white wood like blood.

I said in fury, ‘He, the bull-dancer, dares to offer me everything! How can he offer me everything when I have all I want?’

The messenger said quietly, ‘You have it now, perhaps; but who knows for how long you will hold it? King Theseus offers you your life, and that is everything, for without that, palaces and treasure-chests are nothing.’

In my wild drunkenness, I would have leapt at him then and have done to him what I did to the lion, but my new wound twitched me back, groaning in my chair. Kilhwych ran to me and said, ‘Listen to him, Anax, hear what he has to say.’ And so I let that slave’s counsel guide me while soldiers rubbed oil and wine into my opened wound and bound it with strips of fine linen.

And while this was being done, Perses spoke over my shoulder, saying, ‘My master sends to tell you that a lord from Rhamnus has been seeking his aid to put you from this place and destroy you.’

I said, making myself smile, ‘So the wind blows that way, then! Creon seeks the help of the bull-dancer! That is a new song to sing! And what, may I ask, does Creon offer in return for the help that Theseus will give him? Does he offer my daughter, Antigone? Or my two sons? Or is Jocasta to be the reward? Come on, out with it!’

Perses clenched his teeth at my harrying, but let himself answer me at last and said, ‘The prize is even greater. He offers him the whole of Thebes.’

I laughed and said, ‘Then Creon must be a madman. For he is willing to cut off his nose then to spite his face! He would be left with nothing.’

Perses said gravely, ‘He would have his vengeance, and that, for a man like Creon, is beyond value. Yet, I am to tell you from Theseus that his offer was refused. King Theseus has his own rightful place, and does not wish to take from another king what belongs to him. That is not the way of the Erectheids.’

I laughed scornfully and said, ‘Let that pass. I will not argue with you on such a point. What, then, does this Theseus want from me, in return for his not helping Creon? Come, there must be some bargain he has in mind. He is an Athenian, isn’t he?’

Perses rose from his stool and flung his grey cloak about his shoulders. Looking beyond me, he said, ‘My King asks for nothing except your good will. He is a king, and not a peasant haggling at the market. Yet, I would tell you, Lion of Thebes, that if he were such a peasant, there is little which I have seen as I rode through your country that he would find worth his while to bargain for.’

I rose, too, at this, in spite of the pain in my body, and said in anger, ‘What! Nothing in this rich land, with its grain-fields, its olives, its herds of cattle—nothing! Why, it is richer than Crete ever was!’

Perses went to the door before turning to answer me. And then he said, ‘Lion of Thebes, it is true what the folk say, out in the country, that you have busied yourself too long indoors. Take a neighbour’s advice, Oedipus, and ride round your kingdom more often. Go out and see what this thing is you call a kingdom. Then you will set less store by it. Then you will be grateful for any price a well-meaning neighbour offers you for it.’

He spoke so gravely and with such a calm face, that I felt uncertainty striking up at my heart from my belly.

‘What do these words mean, messenger?’ I asked, in my hurt pride.

He paused but a few moments to answer me. ‘Ride out,’ he said, ‘and you will see that this grain you speak of is already withered on the stalk. You will hardly find an olive worth the pressing. And you will find, in the further hills towards Athens, that the cattle you boast of are staggering on the hoof with the flies already at their eyes. Your rich kingdom is a dusty boneyard,

Oedipus, where the only scent is that of murrain, and the only flocks you have are of hungry vultures.'

The soldiers held me back until he had ridden away, and then they carried me back to my palace and laid me on the bed for my wound to be dressed again.

Jocasta came to me, pale-faced and wild-haired. Her eyes were beyond weeping now, and she looked down at me with only a faint smile of sadness.

I said to her thickly, 'You have heard the bad tidings?'

She nodded her head. 'I have known it so long,' she said. 'My father Menoeceus first sent me word of it, but you were so happy, building your dancing-floor and the shrine to the god, I had no heart to drag you down in mid-flight.'

I said, 'I have been a fool, Jocasta. I have left the kingdom untended, as your brother once warned me.' It was hard for me to say this. She smiled at me and smoothed my hair. 'I am as much to blame,' she said softly. 'As I have grown older, I have left things undone that had always been done. I have held back from making certain offerings. I have accepted changes here which I should have fought against. So, I have offended the Mother. She demands too much from us, husband. We are only men and women, after all, not gods, not goddesses. We are only simple children.'

Then, for the first time for long enough, she lay beside me and we comforted each other in the only way we knew. Yet it was little enough comfort, at the end, for the fire was burned out of us, and when that has gone, there are only words left, and words are but air, but breath, and worthless save to poets and singers. Words cut no cords, fill no bellies, kill no enemy.

In the darkest hour of the night, Jocasta drew me to her again and whispered in my ear, 'It has come to me, my lord, an answer has come to me. We must leave Thebes, you and I, before it topples about us. We are its bad omens and without us the city might again be great.'

'The children,' I said. 'What of them? What of Antigone?'

She smiled a little, sadly in the darkness. I felt the muscles of her face moving beside mine. She said, sighing, 'Always Antigone, my love. Yes, always Antigone. Very well, we will take her with us in the chariot, but the others we must leave, if we are to go fast and far. Old Menoeceus will see that no harm comes to them. They are his blood, they are the royal House.'

I thought of this a while, then said, ‘Where shall we go, beloved?’

Her whisper came to me like the rustling of a bird’s wings, or Egyptian silk when the wearer moves her body. ‘We will go to green Outland, my love,’ she said. ‘Far, far to the North where no one knows us, where the altar-smoke does not rise . . . Where the herdsmen sing all day.’

34

IT was as Perses had said, the kingdom was dying in the hot summer. Standing in the chariot, with the hunched and smoke-shrouded city far away to the right hand, smouldering like a funeral pyre, we looked about us and saw only desolation. The fields were shrivelled in the heat and the corn-stalks lay beaten down and empty, or stood up scarcely longer than my hand, like withered reeds.

Here and there, men and women lay still, among the corn, their arms flung wide, their mouths open as though they had died asking for water.

And it was the same beyond the fields, in what had once been our richest pastures. Here the grass had shrunk back into the earth leaving only grey dust to take its place. Where once the sleek-coated herds had grazed in families, now only isolated groups of beasts rocked on their hoofs, waiting to fall, the white bones showing through their rotting hides.

Antigone wept to see what lay about us. Jocasta and I held one another, like children walking through the darkness.

In one hollow, an old beast crouched with her dust-caked muzzle to the ground, while about her three calves lay, their hoofs in the air, their legs as stiff as alder-sticks. About the lip of the hollow, grey-feathered vultures strutted, shaking their dry wings, rattling them like waiting Furies. I set the chariot at them and they scattered away out of distance, hopping a yard in the air, like the mocking messengers of death, and then turning with a squawk as we passed, to go back to their stations.

In another place a young bull lay on his side, his hind legs pushing out slowly, as two carrion-birds thrust their heads into the open black cavern of his belly, time and time again.

Near him, a great bull, his father, stood swaying by a rock, his head now hidden by a swarm of black flies, his tail rotted down to the haunches. Now and again, when he had found the strength, this old king beat his monstrous head against the rock, trying to dislodge the dark and buzzing swarm.

I drew in the horses and leapt down. ‘Hide your face, my pretty,’ I said to Antigone. Then I went with my javelin and gave peace to the silent

suffering creatures that had once been my pride. It was not easy, for the old bull was still strong, despite all that had happened to him in the drought and the cattle-plague. When he went down to his knees and rolled over, the swarm of flies rose from him a moment, almost as though they knew what I had done, and swung in one motion towards me. Some of them touched my arms and legs, in a whirring swoop, and I ran back from them with a strange fear. One bloated thing, striped with black and yellow, brushed against my lips and almost made me vomit.

When I was in the chariot again, Jocasta said, 'Let us be gone, or the horses may take this plague, too, and then we are truly doomed.'

I lashed them, gave them a free rein, and prayed in my heart to Zeus, standing, that we should come unharmed from this vast boneyard of Thebes. I vowed to set up shrines to the god wherever he permitted me to find a home at last. In my terror, I vowed so many things that I have forgotten most of them now, and those which I do recall are like nightmares to think upon.

Beside me, the Queen stood silent, gripping the handrail, but her lips were moving as mine were, and I knew that she, too, made her promises, but to another, not Zeus now.

Antigone still wept, her head half-covered with the white linen cape of her robe. And so, she was the last of us to see what lay before us as we approached the boundary of my ruined kingdom.

It was Jocasta, her eyes still as keen as a bird's, who first took my arm and pointed. 'Look,' she said in amazement, 'we are not to go free after all.'

I looked where she pointed, and saw, on the low wall of rock which marked the northern frontier of Thebes, a long line of men; some of them on foot, some mounted on shaggy horses, and a few in chariots, their javelins glinting in the harsh sunlight. Even from that great distance, I could see the red crests in their tall helmets, and I said, 'So, it has come to this. Creon has been doing more than amuse himself with his Mysian dancer. He has gathered his own red-plumaged scavengers once again and waits for the time when he can lead them to pick the city's bones.'

Jocasta said, 'Let us go forth. I know how to talk to him. I am his sister. He would not break the bonds of blood between us.'

But Antigone said, 'No, mother, if we do, Creon will kill my father. I feel that in my heart. We may go free, you and I, but the Lion will not escape with us.'

I knew that Antigone was speaking the god's words, her voice was so firm and strong, her tone left no room for doubt. Even Jocasta knew it.

'Shall we turn south then, husband,' she said, 'and take our chance along the Isthmus, towards Corinth, or even Mycenae?'

I shook my head. 'I cannot set my face in that direction again, my love,' I answered, 'for that would be to go back to my past, to my childhood. I am a King now and cannot go begging among shepherds and herdsmen. They all know of my fame, and they would laugh to see the Theban Lion in tatters, with a wooden bowl in his hand.'

Jocasta said, 'There is King Theseus of Athens. We could be at his gates in two days, my love. It would be no dishonour to ask shelter of a brother king, Oedipus.'

Her quiet words showed me how great a fall my pride had caused itself to take. In my memory, I saw the high-bridged nose of Perses, heard his mocking words again, pictured the fierce swirl of his cloak as he turned his back upon me and walked to the door of the Mess-hall.

I said, 'No, Jocasta. Not Theseus either. This is a chasm I must leap alone. Always my eyes have been shut before, but at last they are open. It has taken this misfortune to show me what the truth is, beloved. My place is in my city now, in Thebes. We must go back.'

The two women in the chariot beside me stood silently as we swung about and made our way again inside the city. The guards at the gate, my white-crested ones, gazed down at us, as though we were only shadows on a sunlit wall. They scarcely made the effort of raising their javelins in homage. This struck into my heart with a deeper chill than seeing Creon's army had done; but I did not tell my fears to the two beside me.

35

WHEN my family were gathered safely in the stout-walled Treasury below the Dome, I went out into the streets of Thebes, into some places I had never walked along before. Refuse lay about, ungathered. On the cobbles a calf's severed leg swarmed with flies. Old men sat blank-eyed and silent, under the overhanging wooden eaves of their hovels, finding what shade they could. Half-dried pools of stinking yellow water lay scummy in the runnels which once the Workers had kept so clean. Three black-shawled women knelt among the ordure, wailing over the thin white body of a child, and only stopped when my shadow fell near them to glare up at me with dark-rimmed eyes, as though I was Death-Bringer himself walking among them. One of them tried to spit upon my feet as I passed, but her mouth was too dry to let her make this gesture of defiance.

I went first to the House of Barons, and mounted the winding stone steps to its topmost level, where the family of Orchus still lived. His widow sat in the middle of the room, upon the mosaic floor, her head covered with a coarse grey cloth, her hands gaunt and listless upon her knees. She did not return my greeting when I entered. Timandra was there, by the window, looking out over the great well of the building, which stretched down, hardly ever touched by the sun, to the level of the streets.

I went to her and stood beside her, silently, waiting for the girl to speak first, as was the custom. But she turned her face away from me, and stared into the pit below us.

Once there had been a courtyard down there, a clean and comely place, with palm trees and a fountain and singing-birds in cages all about the inner walls. Now the stone fountain lay upon its side, broken, and half-buried under rubbish. The cages were broken open and empty. A score of cats foraged singly or in groups, their family origin shown by their markings, grubbing among the waste, spitting at one another, striking out, half-mad with famine. A heavy sweet stench came up from the well of the building and I turned from the window and said, 'Is there no word for a King, then, my friends? No word for your Shepherd?'

The old widow rocked and moaned to herself, clawing her grey shroud more closely about her head. Timandra, who had once smiled so invitingly, stood from me as though my flesh already rotted, drawing her gauze skirts away lest they should touch me. She said, as though to herself, 'Shepherd! There is no Shepherd in Thebes. And soon there will be no sheep.'

I took her arms suddenly, before she could escape me, and said, 'You, the families of the barons, you Hellenes, have you no loyalty to your King?'

She laughed in my face, her eyelids closed as though she did not wish to look upon my features any longer.

'Go among the families you talk of, Oedipus,' she said in scorn. 'Go, visit them, take your leprous shadow into their houses. Why bring your plague only to us? What have we done against you that you should punish us alone? Go to them, I say, and see what greeting you will get.'

I flung her from me angrily, and was indeed about to go along the corridors to see what the other families might say, when, from high above the city, a shrill voice sounded out, carried on the wind that always blows across Thebes. It was the voice of an old man, the voice of Menoeceus, made louder through a speaking-horn, misshapen and echoing, like the booming roar of a beast, like the misty bellowing of Minos' bull deep in the dark labyrinth at the beginning of time.

'Where are you, club-foot?' it called. 'Where are you hiding, bringer of disaster? In what dim place do you grovel now, afraid? Come forth to the light, club-foot. Act like a King, though you may be none. Stand beneath the sun and leap for the People, club-foot. Leap out for Thebes, and show at the end you are no coward!'

I fell back from the window, the blood drained from my heart, and looked about me. The old woman sat still now, listening, waiting for a sign. Timandra lay where I had flung her, by the wall, gazing up at me with wide, mocking eyes, her mouth twisted as though she had been speaking the same words as old Menoeceus.

I went to her and drew my sword, the bronze sword I had taken from dead Laius so long ago. I took it from its scabbard slowly, so that she would have time to see what I was doing. Her eyes stayed wide and unblinking, even as I set the cruel point under her left breast and bore on it lightly, pushing in the soft flesh.

And I said, 'Speak up for me, Timandra. Come with me to the other families, and persuade them that I am still the Shepherd. They will listen to

you, the daughter of Orchus.'

I could feel that I was hurting her, I could see a tiny bubble of blood appear from under the sword's point and then trickle down over her white ribs. But still she gazed back at me, her teeth bared like those of a wild-cat, her stretched lips never moving.

I said, 'Come, I can see that I am persuading you. I can see the sweat gathering on your forehead. Come with me and help me and I will not hurt you any more.'

Then Timandra seemed to draw all her strength up into her crouching body, and before I could pull the blade away, she thrust up towards it, so that the point went deeper into her.

I swear, I had not meant to injure her, but only to gain her help with the other Hellenes. And now, with her blood on the blade and on my sandals, by her own pride, I had done the thing I least desired to do.

I said, 'For the god's sake, lie still and I will withdraw it, girl. Why did you cause me to do this thing?'

I was kneeling by her, trying to pull out the sharp bronze without widening the wound, when she spat at me and fell across my thighs.

The old woman was watching now, shaking her head like one with an ague, but not speaking. She made no move to come to the aid of her child, and I was horrified.

Now I could see how all things were turning against me. Now I understood what it is to be the instrument of the god, to bring disaster without wishing to do so, and yet to be powerless to prevent it.

I laid the girl down as lightly as I could, then rose and said, 'Lie still, Timandra, do not move. I will run to the Mess of the First Company, and I will bring back a doctor. There is a Syrian who will know how to deal with this wound.'

But as I went, now swordless, to the door, the old woman spoke for the first time and said, 'He will come too late, Corinthian. Yet, when he does come, he will see what manner of Shepherd we have in this midden. He will see how brave the King of Thebes is now.'

I did not listen to her any longer, but stumbled down the winding stairs, my knuckles in my mouth, hiding my face as I passed the doors where shrouded faces stared out at me.

And as I went, their whispers followed me all the way; ‘Oedipus the Hero!’ they said. ‘Oedipus who slew the Sphinx! Slayer of Laius! King of Corinth! Monarch of the dungheap! Jump, Oedipus, jump, my lord!’

I did not halt until I reached the Mess, where Red Kilhwych was Captain. He stood, among the men, towering silently above them as they sat or sprawled, their javelins and swords across their knees. They all turned dark eyes upon me, but did not speak.

I paused in the doorway for a while, looking from face to face, hoping to see a smile, to find one among them who was still my friend. But they all gazed towards me, as though their sight was so keen that it could pierce my body, as though I was already a shadow that they could stare beyond, into a brighter world, a world they had more desire for.

At last I found the strength to go forward, towards tall Kilhwych. ‘Captain,’ I said, ‘a girl is hurt. Where is the physician?’

He was long in answering me, and when he did, he seemed ashamed that I had caused him to acknowledge my presence. He said, ‘Have you not heard the Old Man calling, Oedipus? Why this talk of girls and surgeons? Are you so possessed by devils that you wish to live for ever?’

I almost kneeled before him. I tell you, I a King, and he once a slave. I said, ‘I beg you, Kilhwych, listen to me. Timandra is hurt and bleeding on a sword. A surgeon with his herbs and needle could save her. Where is he, I beg you? Send him to the House of Barons, Kilhwych.’

Around me the soldiers were muttering and drawing closer, taking their weapons in their hands, not speaking words I could distinguish, but mumbling like the dark things in dreams. I could not even see them clearly any more; they were like dim shadows that swirled about me, at the edge of sight. Only tall red-bearded Kilhwych still stood out distinctly, above me, as though I was falling to my knees before him.

And he was smiling as he said, ‘Go up to the South Wall, Oedipus. Take my advice and go there on your own. Go there, like a King, and not like a hobbled goat. Go to Menoeceus consenting, and do not put us to the unclean work of carrying you. Go now, before we lay our hands upon you.’

So, evading their hands, as one evades the moving claws of monsters in a dream, I slid away from them and staggered back into the street. I do not think that Timandra mattered any more, in my heart. She had chosen for herself, I thought. I had done all I could to save her, and now, however I did it, I must try to save myself. In those last minutes, the pride had gone from

me, and the strength. I was fighting for my breath under a great and stifling dream that lapped about me like the waters of an unclean pool.

Yes, I said to myself as I ran through the sunlight, along the deserted streets, yes, I am a coward, I am afraid. But, Zeus, give me a chance to grow again; give me a space to breathe in and I will be a King once more. Listen to me, Zeus. I did set up a shrine to you here. Is that worth nothing to you?

36

As I wrestled and ran, my great black shadow going before me along the roads and then up the inside of the South Wall, where the steep steps were, the little ledges that left hardly room for the toes, that threatened to throw a man backwards, down into the sun-baked square . . . As I went, a sudden, deep calmness came upon me, breaking through the curtain of my fear, as though truly the god had leaned down and spoken to me, placed his hand upon my shoulder like a father and breathed into my ear.

And I halted, clinging to that narrow stairway, with the city under me and its men like ants, and I said to myself: 'Oedipus, what are you? And why are you afraid? You are not one of those brutish kings of the green north who ride on the backs of a sea of reindeers to the summer grazing, and lay your first-born under the oaken wagon-wheels so that the pasture shall be rich. Each one of them is like an animal King Lynx, King Bear, King Wolf. Their hairs grow straight out and uncombed, their red eyes blaze, they sniff at the edge of green-scummed meres to speak with their mothers, the water-monsters with scales along their arms. You are not like them. You are a King of the sunlight, in Hellas! You have walked high on the hills to become a hero, and you have been concerned in no act of darkness. For Zeus you set up a shrine; for Antigone, a dancing-floor. All clean things, open things, pretty things. You brought up your family to be clean and pretty, and not to grunt in caverns, playing at hunters with sticks for javelins, while one of them went on all fours, clothed with a wolf-skin to give the others practice at casting. Why, then, should you clamber up this wall now, like a brutish beast, to cast yourself from the top and break all that the god had made of you? What dark dream do you move in, that you should take upon yourself all the terrors of the world? You, who have walked through Hellas, seeking nothing but a hero's name, why should you be made the scapegoat of sins that were not yours? Sins that were old and ingrained long before Crete came up like a great fish from under the green sea and reared her golden palaces for the god's approval?'

Now, this pause, this speaking to my own heart, quietened me, and then I said: 'Therefore, cast aside your guilt, and let it rest on the back where it

belongs. Have faith, Oedipus. All may yet be well, if you have faith.' And so I went upwards, smiling now, to meet old Menoeceus.

To reach his chamber, one had to gain the battlement roadway and then, on its further, outer side, go down seven steps into the thickness of the wall. Above these steps stood a young man wearing the white crest on his helmet and holding a spear twice as long as he was. When he saw me, instead of giving the royal salute I had become used to, he half-turned away, and whistled as though I did not exist. He could not have been older than sixteen, and his beard was still very thin. If I had chosen, I could have rushed him off his feet and held him over the wall until he begged my forgiveness. This thought came into my head, as I watched his posturing, and made me smile to myself, in my new strength of heart.

But, instead, I ignored the fool and passed down the stairway as quickly as I could.

Old Menoeceus was alone in his chamber, wrapped in his sheepskin cloak and rubbing his gnarled hands above a brazier of olive-wood. He looked up briefly and nodded to me, then signed for me to sit beside him on the oaken stool he often used.

The room was small and the air heavy with the scent of aromatic wood. What made it more oppressive was that the old man had the woollen curtains drawn, to cover his window-hole which led onto the balcony overlooking the cliff-face of the outer wall.

I forced myself not to speak to him, but suddenly he laughed soundlessly, then slowly turned to me and said, '*King* Oedipus, ah, *King* Oedipus!' And all the while, his damp old eyes, as faded as blue cloth left too long in the sun, were set on me, until I began to feel almost a boy again. And while he was looking at me, he was rubbing his dry old hands together, making a sound like deer-hides being scraped of their fat before the tanning.

And when he had grown tired of gazing at me in this mocking way, he turned back and spoke as to the glowing brazier, and said, 'Many years ago, when I was as young as you are now, a misfortune happened to me. It was during Poseidon's festival at Onchestus, the city near the lake. We Thebans were a little drunk, you understand, for in those days we were a proud folk and though the feast was for the god, in our hearts we made it for the Mother, and drank her red wine as though we were celebrating Dionysus, and not the Thunder-man.'

He stopped a while, and began to scratch at his ankle, until I said, ‘All this is tiresome, old man. You cried out for me across the city so urgently that, now I have come, you might have the goodness to be brief.’

He smiled at my words, then said, ‘The Minyan King, Clymenus, was there, drunker than most of us, and swearing that the city of Orchomenus was to Thebes what a palace is to a midden. He was an old fellow at that time, and most of us young folk were happy enough to let him have his say, since we knew that words broke no bones, that words did not feed cattle or make the sun rise earlier. Unless they were a god’s words—and old Clymenus was no god. At the time I am speaking of, he was hardly a man, for his legs were so weak that he could scarcely move on them without a staff to aid him.’

Menoeceus paused again, but this time as though to let his last words take their effect on me. I made myself stare into the charcoal embers, and clenched my mouth tightly so that I should not be taunted to reply.

He waited a while, then said, ‘But there was one among us, my charioteer, whose name escapes me after all these years . . . A pouting boy with yellow hair, not a true Theban, and hence more touchy than the rest of us whose fathers had held Thebes for five hundred years . . . When this boy heard the old king, Clymenus, boasting of his city so, he suddenly bent down in the chariot and picked up a stone which lay on the floorboards, in the way charioteers carry stones with them to frighten the horses of other charioteers. And he flung this stone at King Clymenus, striking him at the back of the neck. No blood was drawn, but the old king fell from his own war-cart as dead as though a javelin had gone through him.’

I shuffled on the stool and said, ‘Go on, old man. Let the music play and let us have done with the dance, for it already grows tedious.’

Menoeceus began to shake his head, palsied, like an old sheep, and said, ‘I was blamed for this death, since my charioteer was regarded as my own personal weapon, like my sword or my great shield. And, because of that flung stone, the sons of Clymenus did not rest until they had gathered a great army and had almost starved Thebes to death. You can imagine what torments I suffered in those days, as children lay dead before the doors of this city, their rib-bones sticking out like the branches of a hawthorn tree. Women spat at me when I walked the city, and men flung entrails in through the palace windows at night. Just as they are doing now, King Oedipus.’

I nodded, at last seeing the drift of his story. He glanced at me briefly and went on, ‘And at last, Prince Erginus, son of dead Clymnus, sat on his

horse at the city gates and told us that he would spare our poor lives, on condition that, for twenty years, we paid him a yearly tribute of a hundred cattle, in requital for his murdered father. Now, in those days, Oedipus, a hundred cattle were many. In the outlands, there were great kings who did not even own a hundred cattle. And twenty hundred cattle were more than any Theban could picture in his mind, however hard he tried. So, when Erginus' words were made known through the city, the people came to the steps of the Great House and demanded that I should pay for this suffering I had brought on them.'

Then, screwing up my eyes, I said, 'What punishment did they ask, old man?' Though I knew already how he would reply.

He looked me in the face and answered, 'They demanded that, instead of cattle-payment, I should jump from the South Wall, and so give a life for a life.'

He waited then, and I said quietly, 'We all can see that you did not jump, old man.'

He wiped his damp eyes on the edge of his gown and said gravely, 'No, I was too much of a coward, King. I was like many men who might be named. Instead, I let my people pay the tribute, and so beggared Thebes for twenty years. It was at that time that I had this chamber built, up here above the city, so that I could lock myself away from the people, and be safe from their anger.'

At last I said to the old man, 'All that is done, and the tribute paid. What is finished, is finished. A man does not hope to drink the same cup of wine twice.'

Menoeceus spat into the brazier and said, 'Does he not? That is news to me. You young ones always have news to bring. We old ones are all fools, who do not know the world. But I will tell you something that you do not know, now. It may surprise you, even you, to hear what I have to tell you, now. It may astound you, even you, the king, as they call you, club-foot.'

He spat into the fire again, and said, 'On the last year of the tribute, when Erginus' heralds came to tell us that we had paid in full, and that we were now forgiven, I was so enraged by the low estate I now held in Thebes, that I sent out certain bodyguards who still obeyed me, and I had those heralds taken. Though they were unarmed, and rode under the protection of the god, I had their ears, noses and hands cut off and hung about their necks, before I sent them back to Erginus.'

He gazed at me then, as though he expected horror to show on my face. I said coldly, ‘And how did you explain that to the people, Menoeceus?’

He shuddered and replied, ‘I told them that, in a dream, Heracles had advised me that this was the will of the gods; and out of my own purse, I had images of stone set up to Zeus the Preserver, Artemis, and Athene. Our cattle multiplied and our crops grew for a while, then drought took us in its grasp, and we became as poor and as sick as we are today. If Erginus had not been suffering the same fate, with his armies staggering on their feet, he could have taken Thebes at that moment, as easily as brushing a fly off one’s arm. Then the folk of Thebes came again to the Great House and demanded that I jump from the walls, to turn away the plague and to bring rain on the land once more. And do you know what I did?’

I shook my head and said, ‘Whatever you did, life has gone on, and until our new misfortune, Thebes has been as prosperous as most other places, except Athens and perhaps Corinth.’

Old Menoeceus rose stiffly and stood at the other side of the brazier. He thought a while, then said, ‘In my cowardice, I sent for the charioteer who had flung the stone, twenty years before, at the old king, and I dressed him in my robes, and sent him out to that balcony. And, pushing a spear-point into his back, I made him leap out into the darkness and die for me, so that the people should take me to their heart again, and stop spitting at me in the streets.’

I said, ‘Your life has been a hard one, old man. And your spirit must be troubled for you to tell me all this. No man brands himself a coward unless he is at the cliff-edge of fear.’

Menoeceus stared at me, his sheep’s head nodding and the water running down his grey cheeks. He said, ‘I am too old now to care whether I am a coward or a hero, Oedipus. But I can tell you that these last ten years of my life have been scarcely worth the living. I am like a ghost in Thebes. When I pass, even the children stare through me, as though I was a walking mist, nothing. That is no way for a man of a royal House to live. That is no way for a King to live.’

I stood, too, now, and said, ‘So you would advise me to jump from the window into the darkness, so that the people should not call me a coward?’

He shook his head and said, ‘No, not that, either; but so that you should save the people, so that you should cause them no more suffering. I, who

have made them suffer so much, know what I am talking about. Only I could give you such advice.'

I went to the far wall, where a tapestry hung, rudely stitched, to show Dia bathing in a stream with her women standing about her, gazing at her secrets, and there I leaned a while, my right leg shuddering with excitement and from the effort of climbing up so high.

And I said, 'This room has grown cold suddenly. I suppose that being so high above the city, the night-winds turn it into a tomb, once the brazier-fire has burned down a little.'

Old Menoeceus nodded and said, 'That is why I always put on this sheepskin, once the sun goes down. I have learned to do that in the twenty years I have been waiting up here, shut from the city.'

I said, 'One learns by experience, old man. I have often thought I would like a sheepskin jacket like yours.'

He stared at me, his eyes growing too big for their lids, as though he read an answer in my words. And then he said to me, 'So, you will not jump, Oedipus? You have made up your mind?'

I nodded and began to pick at a loose thread in the tapestry. I said, 'I would not jump for what you call your sin, or for my own. It has taken me years to learn a little of what life means, and I will not destroy that learning in one minute, just for an old man's dream.'

He said, 'It is not for me, but for Thebes, for her starving people, of whom you are the Father, the Shepherd, the Healer. That is why you should be warned by my years of misery and should prove yourself a man, and a king, and a hero, now.'

I went over to him and said, 'Old man, old man, you are asking me to do this, just as you asked your charioteer to do it years ago, to ease your own mind, not to save the people. Is that not true?'

He held his horned old hands so close to the brazier-bars, that I thought I could smell the hide on them burning; but he did not draw them away. This, I could see, was a punishment he gave himself, a little grief in place of the great grief he thought he should have suffered for the people, years ago.

And when I felt sure he would stand there until his fingers became white ashes, and I could bear this foolishness no longer, I went to him and put my arm about his thin old shoulders.

‘Very well, old man,’ I said, ‘perhaps your words have gone to my heart. Let us look down from your high place and see what lies below. If I am to leap, then let us smell the air together a moment or two, before I go.’

He came, consenting, and smiling, through the heavy curtain with me, and together we stood on the oaken ledge that stood out over the chasm. In the night-breeze, the balcony shuddered under our feet, and a dizziness came and went in my head as I dared to lean on the rail and look down. There was a purple glow about the chasm, as though a light of some sort was trying to pierce up towards us from the gully where the bones of men and horses and cattle lay. And far out, away to the west, the summer lightning played over the low hills, as though the deep-blue sky was twitching with life.

The old man saw this and said, smiling, ‘That is the silver blood of the goddess, beating through her veins. She is waiting and watching, Oedipus. Let your leap be far out, like an eagle’s thrust, despite your crippled feet; let it be a glorious one for her to see and remember.’

I drew in a deep breath and held his hand firmly.

‘This will be something for everyone to remember, old man,’ I said.

I think that he knew what I was doing, right at the end, when it was too late to draw back. But he did not speak. Only his pale, damp old eyes turned on me, like those of a bullock who goes sadly under the sledge-hammer.

The low rail of the balcony was no great obstacle, for I was in the fullness of my strength at that time. The sunlight flowed over the balcony, where he had been standing, and where I now stood alone. And the summer lightning still played above Helicon, as though nothing had happened at all. As though nothing that men could ever do would change what the gods had in their hearts for us.

I went back into the room, and put another olive log on the brazier. It sprang to life straightway and flung up a little warmth to my hands and face.

I was still bending over it, like an animal relishing a brief comfort, like an ox chewing hay before the priest comes down the steps to lead him away, when the handfall came upon my shoulder. I had expected it, at one time or another, so did not put myself to the bother of drawing away.

I said, ‘What now, Creon?’ My ears had caught the movement of many feet outside, upon the battlement; he had not come alone. I heard the clink of sword blade against shield-rim, the creak of leather. ‘What is it to be, brother?’ I asked, stirring a charred twig into life with my finger.

And Creon answered, ‘I wish it could have been as quick as what you did for Menoeceus, brother. He waited for that mercy most of his life, but no one dared to do it for him until you came.’

I nodded, patiently, for now a strange peace had come upon me after all the running and the shouting, a grateful weariness. I said, ‘It is not to be the fall, then?’

Creon shook his head. ‘No, brother,’ he replied, mildly. ‘Who would be worthy now to go out from where the father of our House has gone? Come, let us go to the Dome, for that is the law. It is your duty and your right to see your kingdom once more, at the end. It will leave a darkened picture in your head, no doubt, but all kings share the privilege of bidding farewell to what was lent to them a while to govern.’

I went with him quietly, and the many soldiers drew back to give us passage to the steps that led down from the battlements.

37

IT was growing dusk, upon the high platform under the Dome, and the city looked limitless in its towers and roof-tops. A west wind had risen now and blew the smoke across the clustered houses and courtyards, sometimes hiding them, making them seem even more and more mysterious.

The soldiers, wearing the red crest, all of them, stood well away from us, so that we could speak in privacy as princes should.

I said, 'It is a splendid place, brother, though it has fallen on its evil days. Yet, it will rise again.'

He nodded. 'Yes, it will rise again,' he said. 'Such a city as this could not vanish from the earth, whatever trials it had to bear. That is the only thought that has ever been deeply in my heart. To me, Thebes has always been mother, sister, wife. It has changed, as kinsfolk do with time, but it has always nurtured me, as I have tried to protect it, the way an elder son must do.'

'That is what makes you a prince,' I said, 'and me a shepherd still.'

He laughed, with his greying dark hair flying across his face for an instant. 'Do not belittle yourself too much, brother,' he said. 'You have begot kings, and that is no small thing for any man to do. See old Hippomedon: he has begot war-horses in his time, but look at him now!'

In his bleak and walled pasture, the King of Horses lay upon his side, his legs thin, his ribs gaunt, his mane and hide tangled and grey with soot. Only the occasional movement of whisking tail showed that he was still alive.

Then, almost as though he was saying something of little note, Creon half-turned and pointed out over the west wall. 'Look, Anax,' he said, 'and see the final trial old Thebes must tolerate, before she comes into the sunlight of her proper greatness once again.'

I gazed where he pointed, towards the Cleft of Dia where once he and I had fought like springtime stags, and where now the murrained cattle had flung themselves in heaps to die. And at first, as I stared towards the dark and crooked fissure that ran between the distant grey rocks, I could see little

but a thin brown haze which swung and swirled slowly and undecidedly at a man's height above the cleft, no more substantial than the smoke from a seaweed-burner's fire upon the shore.

I rubbed my eyes and said, 'Is that anything of importance, brother?'

Creon bent upon the balustrade, his head cocked sideways. 'Listen,' he whispered.

He was gripping the worm-pocked grey oak with fingers as white as bones, and his breath was hissing from him as he listened.

Then I also froze, for there on the dusty plain and seeming to issue from that sombre gully, as from the speaking-trumpets which sea-captains use in bellowing to one another over tideless seas, came first a flat and bodiless whisper, like the lifeless rustle of dust beneath an ill-fitting door, and then a deep whirring sound, much like distant bull-roarers being swung by warrior-youths preparing for a battle.

As this sound grew, so did my eyes clear, to show me the air thickening above the cleft, as though it was taking on substance, a dark and whining life of its own. And now it was becoming black, and not a faint smoke-like brown. Streams and whorls of blackness were sweeping up from the earth until they reached the height of six tall men, until they threw deep shadows on the parched grey plain. And now a heavy, living buzzing came to us, as sudden as the blow of an angry fist.

I said, 'By Zeus, but someone is to be visited!'

Creon nodded. 'We need not trouble our heads with guessing who,' he said. Behind him the soldiers whispered, but did not move.

And, far below upon the plain, I saw that restless dark shower thicken and grow still greater, and within its cloudy darkness, particles beating desperately against one another, and the whole moving structure rising and falling, rising and falling, as though deep inside it was a living heart that pulsed and had thoughts and dreams, and could see and understand.

From its underside a thin black shower fell constantly; yet, as this strange rain went down, other rains gushed upwards all the while to fill the empty spaces, to thicken and increase the gathering storm-cloud.

I said to Creon, 'Should we not go down? Would it not be foolish to be caught, up here in the open?'

He leaned harder on the rocking balustrade and shook his head. 'Watch, Anax,' he said. 'It is the omen that the Mother shows to you. You would not

stride from the council-hall when she was speaking, would you?'

Then, as he said this, it seemed that a light film of gauze was suddenly flicked between us and the setting sun, and for an instant all the red brightness left the air.

And at our feet on the rough grey boards of the platform lay a fly. It was on its back, its great wings torn, its yellow-streaked belly full to bursting. I stared down at the flailing legs, the swinging head, the blind and agate eyes, the moist black tongue shooting in and out like a javelin wielded by an idiot.

Then I stamped my foot upon the thing and drew away to see the gout of blood which splashed across my sandal.

Creon rubbed his chin and smiled. 'Call out the army, Lion,' he said. 'One pair of feet will be useless, especially crippled feet.'

Now the air was so oppressive, so blackened, and the droning so heavy, that I had to keep myself from shrinking down and from covering my ears with my hands. And always, about our feet fell more and more of these torn-winged creatures from the flailing, furious army that passed over us. To move a step was to tread through a nameless pulp of rottenness.

Then, as the nasal droning of the flies grew louder and louder, I took Creon by the shoulder and said, 'You have had your will. I have seen the omen. I have seen what my stewardship has brought to Thebes. The lesson is learned, Master. So, let us go down where we can breathe freely again.'

He did not seem to hear my words, but said, as though musing, 'The Mother draws her black cloth over the city to wipe away all carrion. Carrion to wipe out carrion, that is the law. These little messengers will pick all clean, leaving but the whitened bone. And when they have gone, the city will rise from its bed of sickness and learn to walk again. You, in your way, were such a carrion-fly, brother, though you never had the courage to take to your wings as these little warriors do.'

I would have answered him then, hotly because I was afraid, but suddenly the air shimmered with darkness, as though indeed a black cloth had been drawn down in a slanting flash between us on the high platform and the shivering orange-glow of the sun. There was an exultant, thunderous deep note in the skirling of the flies, as though they were calling upon me to see what their true intention was, proving their strength, their purpose.

And as I gazed before me, across the thick and shuddering chasm, I saw the King Horse, Hippomedon, start with terror. I saw him try to rise from the

soot-laden pasture where he lay, and, after many struggles, get onto his shaking old legs.

He stood a moment, gazing round about him, almost as though he had come out of a long dream and was looking for me. Then, as his great dark eyes found me, he stood quite still and neighed three times through the growing twilight at me.

I would have answered him, as king to king, but at that moment his open mouth was stopped, his wide eyes were filled, his head and then his gaunt grey body grew to monstrous size, as the swarm of flies struck down at him and clung.

For the space of three breaths, old Hippomedon tottered on his new black legs, his noble head grown shapeless and writhing, a monstrous image of disaster.

Then, all at once, the bloated neck swung upwards, the curling mouth opened like that of a deep-sea creature, and his last shrill scream sounded over the chasm that lay between us. And with this, the King Horse seemed to draw back on his ghastly haunches, as for the last commandment of his reign, then, lumbering towards the low wall that separated him from the cliff-face of his dusty pasture, he broke through the crumbling brick and, with a force that was incredible, plunged out and down into the dusk.

I saw him go, and saw the army of black tormentors leave him in his grey arching towards his death, as though they were well satisfied. Then I could bear no more and covered up my eyes.

And Creon with his hand upon my shoulder, said in my ear, ‘He has gone where all must go at last, down the great chimney, into the furnace of Talus. It is a shame you could not watch until the end. He measured his last leap well, old Hippomedon. Not a hoof touched the chimney-side as he went down.’

I turned and drew away. And then at last I said, ‘Come, now, Prince of Thebes. Your story has been stressed enough. Let me go down, too. I will not drag my hooves either. Take me to the furnace now.’

He pushed me on towards the waiting soldiers. ‘It will not be the furnace for you, Anax,’ he said slowly. ‘Nor will the leaping be so splendid, or the going so fast. Yet, we must all learn patience, brother, all learn patience. It is not given to every king to pass as swift Hippomedon went, rising from his quiet dream to find the simple answer laid before him.’

38

RED-HAIRED KILHWYCH came down the three dusty steps of the cell with a clay dish of sheep-meat in one hand and a goatskin of red wine in the other. He was a slave again, like all the other white-crests, but this wretchedness seemed of small consequence to him. He nodded and said, 'The flies are dying off now, Oedipus. There is not so much sweeping up to do. They have taken all they wanted and cleared this midden out a little. A month is quite enough, for visitors of that sort. Ah, yes, the Queen and her children seem well enough. The princess Antigone met me in the passage-way to the megaron yesterday and asked me to say that they were well. Then she began to weep a little and said she dreamed about you always, and wanted you back, but the Queen slapped her and told her she was of the House of Cadmus. The boys are well, too. Always fighting, the little lions, and sometimes giving one another a bloody nose. I wish I had boys like that. A father must be proud to have such strong young warriors to call his own. Ah, I almost forgot, some of the witnesses are already here, from as far away as Egypt, the market-folk say. But the others won't be here for a while yet. The judges came in, in their black robes and hoods, last night after sunset. Thirteen of them. They spoke to no man, and are in that attic-room in the Dome, seeing nobody, like black ghosts. Well, it shouldn't be long now. Creon couldn't stand the waiting any longer. He bit his finger-nails down to the quick, tore lumps of his beard out, snapped three bows, out hunting—then rode away. Nobody knows where. They say he won't be back until it is all over and the judgement given. He was always impatient, Prince Creon. I've known him since he was no older than the young princes, Polyneices and Eteocles. Always the same. A slave sees many things in a lifetime, Anax. Ah, well, if you don't want the food, I'll take it up to my own cell and eat it myself. It's a shame to waste good meat. Shall I leave the wine-skin? Yes? Very well, Anax, it may let you get a bit of sleep. A bit of sleep and dreaming to pass the time away. It must be tedious for a great king to stay down here in the dark, with no one to talk to and nothing to do. But, mark my words, Oedipus, it will pass. It all passes, if you only wait. Just wait, just be patient, just swill down the wine and let it bring sweet dreams to waste the time. The trial will come soon enough, my lord.'

Such dreams! I was in the far North, beyond Thessaly, beyond Thrace, up in the deep green plainlands where the grass is taller than a man and sighs constantly under the grey skies. I was in boats, breasting the great rivers, and sometimes helping to roll these boats on logs over the rocky portages, with the ice-cold wind in my face.

It was strange, up there. Men's faces were as yellow as gold, and their black eyes slanted inwards, like slits cut in unbleached linen. But some of the kings were like real men, some of them like Hellenes. These lived in great solid-wheeled wagons, a hundred in each flax-haired family, and followed their king-horse to the new pastures. Such beef-eating, such singing round the camp-fires! And such drunkenness on the mead they always carried with them.

Some were like animals, each guarding his boundaries. They took the names of animals, such as King Wolf, King Bear, and so on, and wore fangs and claws as their ornaments.

One of them, up beyond the Great Waterfall, had three hundred wives, all young girls. His was a hard life, I tell you! A hard end, too, for as soon as the youngest wife passed the word round that his powers were flagging, they came to him at night and lay on him, to smother him. No, I would not be that king!

The queens in some parts were as dreadful. Great-bellied slugs that kept their dead babies in clay-pots in the wagons, afraid to lose the innocent wisdom. Fat creatures, all breasts and bellies, and their long hair crimpled and curled and greased till it clung round their faces and hid their eyes and features. Some of them had bones through their noses, and flat stones let into their lips to make them stick out frightfully. The gods know how many of these women I saw! In some places, *all* the women were queens! This was when there were too many men.

But where there were too many women, it was fearful, for often these women would hunt in long-haired packs to drag the men down. Men were their enemies, they said, and so they ran after them through the tall grassland or the stunted woodland, and when they caught them, lay on them and ate their flesh. Often many women would hold a man down while their Queen pushed sharp sticks into him, or cut open his belly to find what was inside.

Yet, sometimes, it was the other way about, especially when the woman's belly was big with a child, for then the men were curious and wanted to see what it was like before it came out into the light. I saw this often and the babies were like small frogs, but slimy and crouched.

I tell you, the North was not pleasing to me, though all the Queens wanted me to lie with them in the wagons; and once, when I pulled an ancient sword out of a stone, they carried me on their shoulders and acclaimed me King, Bear, Artos, for my strength. Yet it was a very poor sword, made of such soft copper that I would have preferred one of the stone knives these wagon-folk carried.

Another time, somewhere between the sea and a smoke-charred shrine, three of these Queens took me in a black-painted boat, and sang to me as though I was dead. They wore black garments, and lamented over me. They promised that at last I should come to the Isle of Apples, where all heroes rest, but I leapt from their boat and swam across the mere away from them. I put up my fingers in the moonlight and crossed them like the sign for a fish. I shouted to them, 'I come of Hellas, of Great Poseidon the Fish, and not of your wagon-folk!'

The three black-robed Queens shrieked back over the salt-lake, 'Fish, Fish, come back to us, Fish!'

But I did not go. Though after that, among the grass-folk, I carried the nickname fish. And often the boys would draw the shape of the fish, in two bent lines, with a dot for its eye, on my wagon.

And once, since by now I had such fame, some old men, trying to tempt me, even asked me to turn water into wine, and the fish, which was my sign, into bread. But I did not let them trick me into this, for their punishment for such defiance of the god is to nail the culprit to a tree, his arms outspread along the branches on either side; and I had no wish to become such fruit!

Ah, yes, in my wanderings, I went in a tarred boat across the Narrow-Sea and was there when great stones were raised in a circle for Zeus. I even carved a dirk, such as they carry in Mycenae, upon one upright, but I did no heavy work. That was for slaves, and these folk had enough of those.

Ho, I could almost tell you I had met Indra himself, my lords, I was away so long! At least, I did meet a big, fat-bellied king with hair and beard like flames, who died of eating three whole pigs and was then burned in his war-cart. He made a great crackling, and his wives, who lay upon him as he burned, made a great crying, I can tell you. But they were chained there and could not run away.

Husbands and wives . . . what troubles they bring on one another! Mothers and fathers . . . what a confusion they are! I had seven of one and five of the other—and at the end I might have been better without any. Up in

some bleak place of grey skies and brown peatbogs near the sea, I fed a man in chopped pieces to the swine in a dry moat, then stabbed another behind a hide curtain with a rusty meat-knife—and all because a woman, a Queen, would claim me as her returned son! After that, to get free of it all, I was a year acting the madman so that their harsh northern courts should not sentence me to the same deaths. It was hardly worth the effort, I tell you, my lords.

Other kings were burned in their boats, with their stallions and pigs and wives beside them on board, all with their throats cut. I cannot recall where this was. It was along a great blue river, whose name I forget. But then, who can remember all that happens to him in life? It is a hopeless task. I cannot even remember the name of a certain snow-covered island, where I stood with a company of warriors and burned down a hall, with the whole family in it, for some revenge or other. I know that the old father and mother wrapped themselves in a damp ox-hide, then lay down to sleep, as though they were far from the fierce flames; and that their eldest son, a most able fighting-man, was pinned by the falling rafters against the gable wall and had his lower legs burned off, but still kept on singing! I tell you more, he was so fond of his great bronze axe, he even took care to drive it deep into the wooden wall so that the flames should not take the temper from the edge! Now, that is a warrior for you!

But, in the main, it was a dark and closed-in place, the North. Always in wagons, or caves, or in little snow huts, or grovelling under the roots of trees to find a home. Always the air seemed thrice-breathed. There was a thick smell of fish everywhere. Either that or burning flesh, and smoke.

Yet there were fine warriors in the North. Once, as I sat on a wagon-wheel and watched them dancing before a raid, I thought that, with only twelve of such men, I could come down into Hellas and take Thebes. Up there, they had a way of bringing down any high wall that stopped their progress. It was to knock out a brick or two, then light fires in the hole, and after a while, the whole wall came down. I thought: Oh, with twelve such followers, I could bring down the South Wall! I could even turn water into wine!

But a man thinks so many things. His mind moves like a gadfly when he is off wandering in strange places. And his thoughts seem so silly when he is back home again, in the sunlight. He wonders why on earth he ever lent himself to such thinking, such dreaming!

There was such a dream I had. I was between two soldiers in a long and echoing hall, somewhere underground, I think; and before me were row on row of black-draped judges, their faces covered.

Between us burned bronze braziers, full of sharp-smelling herbs.

From time to time, these black judges called questions to me, and I either nodded or answered them, as I felt best. On either side of the hall, crowds of people gathered together to hear the fine answers I gave to these fools. And often they would sigh, or suck in their breath, or even groan, with admiration, when I had made an especially clever reply.

I still recall some of the things that were said. A very tall black-robed judge stood up and said, 'And did you indeed slay the Sphinx, my boy?'

I nodded, laughing. So he laughed back and said, 'And you are aware that the Sphinx is so sacred that no man must ever touch her?'

I said, 'Of course, any fool knows that.'

He smiled and the crowd cheered, and I was happy, as a great warrior is always happy to hear folk cheering.

Another time, a smaller judge rose and said, 'Was not Periboea, Queen of Corinth, your mother, my friend?'

I answered, 'Aye, master, I came from between her thighs, from under a blanket.'

Then he said sharply, 'And so, you lay under the blanket with your mother?'

I shouted, 'Of course, did I not say so?'

Once more, the people clapped their hands and sighed.

A third judge rose, a shrivelled old fellow, with no more sense than a sheep, and bleated out to me, 'Menoeceus was the father of the House of Cadmus. Is that not so?'

I nodded solemnly that this was so. He said then, 'And so, by royal decree, he was *your* father?'

I punched one of the soldiers at my side, and he laughed, too.

'The old sheep,' I said. 'The old sheep!'

Then I answered him, making a funny face which set all the folk laughing. I said, 'Yes, he was my father, too, old sheep.'

‘Then,’ said the old judge, in a very good humour, ‘it was your father that you flung from the South Wall, to his death?’

I did a little dance with my feet and answered, ‘It was not heavy work; you could have done it yourself, old sheep. All I did was to place him where the woodwork was most rotten, then to push him gently in the back, like this.’

I began to push one of the soldiers, but he swung on me and drove the hard hilt of his sword into my belly so that I almost wakened.

The sheep-judge sat down and said to those others about him, ‘So, there is no more to ask. He has admitted every charge. And there is but one answer open to us to give, that he shall be awarded self-blinding. The Lion of Thebes shall lose his eyes by his own hand.’

Then all the people moaned, as though this merry scene was ended and now they must go back to their work. I thought I would provide for them a little while longer, being a kindly fellow, and so I shouted out, ‘Wait, you hasty fools! Did I not taunt the Mother in the Soldiers’ Mess? Did I not set up a shrine to Zeus in the square? Did I not burn down Creon’s charnel-house and take from it the Tablet of Marsyas? Are these great deeds not worth considering? Would you shrug me off so abruptly?’

But suddenly they were all gone, in a great swirling rush, full of wailings and mutterings, and I looked round to find myself not in my cell below the ground, but in the broad bed with my Queen, Jocasta. She was rubbing my hands and forehead with scents, and my children were all standing about the bed, gazing at me with wide eyes.

I smiled at them and said, ‘Hey, now, what a splendid meeting after so long! And how is your dancing-floor, Antigone?’

She did not answer me, but put the hem of her skirt in her mouth, and turned away, weeping. Then the two boys, Polyneices and Eteocles, came towards me and each took one of my hands. They said, in unison, ‘Though you lose your eyes, we shall always be there to guide you, Lion of Thebes.’

I pulled away from them and took Jocasta by the shoulders. I felt that they had now become very thin, and more wrinkled than any shoulders I had ever touched. I almost drew my hands away, but I made them stay there so as not to hurt her, and I said, ‘What dreams a man may have, after wine, my beloved! Oh, what silly, silly dreams.’

She looked down on me with a grave white face and said, ‘The wine they gave you was drugged, Oedipus. It was meant to make you dream, and

then, in your lasting dream, to deliver yourself into their hands, my love.'

I shook my head and smiled. 'But, wife,' I said, 'the places I have been to in my dream! I could tell you of kings and queens such as you have never heard before. I could tell you of great horses with humps on their backs, and iron birds flying through the sky, circling the earth in an hour! I could tell you of three men hanging on crosses while the thunder roared, and of beasts as big as a house that swim deep under the sea, waiting to overturn the ships of men.'

She placed her white hand hard over my mouth and almost screamed at me, 'You fool, you dreamer, do you not see that you have condemned yourself in the trial? Are you such an idiot that you do not understand, Oedipus? The dreaming is over now, the trial is over, and, unless the goddess smiles on you, you too are ended.'

I began to make a joke again, then looked down at my arms and wondered whose they were, so thin had they become, so white the hairs upon them. And then I felt down my thighs and legs, and they were thin and shrivelled in the same manner, and the hairs all white.

I was still thinking of this, when the slave-woman, Lydia, came into the chamber and said softly, 'The food and drink are laid, my lady. Shall I help to lead the old king to his supper with you?'

I shook her off and got down from the bed unaided. Though when my feet touched the hard floor, I wished I had not sent her away so sternly, for I was almost too weak to support myself.

Jocasta came beside me then and put her arm about me. 'Come, Oedipus,' she said sadly, 'let us eat and drink and be as merry as these wicked times will let us.'

I laughed and held on to her. 'Let us do that, my sweet,' I said, 'for, upon my king's honour, I am as hungry as a hunter!'

39

THE serving-women had laid the bare board of the table with baskets of dark barley bread, dishes of olives, dried fish from Aulis, and a griddle on which steamed brown strips of baked goat's flesh. Each of us had a glazed cup of fine Minyan ware before us, and at my place, the head of the table, there was a red clay jug of our strong-smelling wine.

As we took our seats, on the thonged stools, I smiled across the board at Jocasta and said in jest, 'Is this wine drugged, too, my love, so that I shall deliver myself into your hands?'

She did not answer me but sat with her pale face all screwed up like a small child about to cry out loud. Then, hardly knowing what I did, but speaking the first words that came into my mouth, I took up a crust of broken bread in my left hand, and my wine cup in my right, and I held them before me and said. 'These are the body and the blood of the god, my children. Take them, eat and drink of them, and be thankful that he comes to us, to nourish us, in this house.'

Jocasta hid her face then with her hands; but the older children ate solemnly at the bread and sipped the wine, as though they were following my command. Only Ismene did not do this. She was ten at this time, but never quick to understand what happened about her, though she was the prettiest little girl in all Hellas.

She looked round the table at the serious faces, then started to laugh as merrily as though someone had come behind her and, taking her by surprise, had tickled her under the chin.

'What silly words, father!' she said. 'Oh, you are a silly father!'

Then she began to throw small pieces of bread at her brothers, and even to flick wine from her cup at them, on the end of her finger.

Jocasta stared at her as though she had done something wicked, and even reached across the table to take the cup from her. But I put my hand upon the Queen's. 'Patience, my dear, patience,' I said. 'She is still but a little child, and does not see the world as we see it. The god will think no worse

of her for laughing at this feast. He is a man, a father himself, and she is his daughter. To his house will she go at last, in her time.'

Jocasta placed her hands upon the table-top and said, like a distracted woman, 'I am lost to explain to you what lies before us, husband. It almost seems to me that you are still in your dream, you take this so lightly.'

I smiled at her and said, 'I am the Lion of Thebes, my love. And when has the lion been troubled because a little bread, a little wine, have been flung into his lair? You make too much of nothing, Jocasta. Come, let us forget this family squabbling and eat our fill. For my part, I am hungry after lying so long in that cold cell.'

But Jocasta did not eat; she rose suddenly and ran from the board, towards the painted cloth that hung down the wall to keep out draughts, drawing her hair over her face, her shoulders shaking. And then Antigone came beside me as I stared at my wife, and, taking my hand in hers, said gently, 'Father, father, come out of your dream. Do you not understand yet, tomorrow they mean to punish you? Tomorrow, your reign will be ended, and the Lion of Thebes will be no more. Listen to me, father, and try to understand.'

And indeed I did listen, and I could hear the words she spoke; yet, always, these words seemed like a barrier, a wall, to understanding, as though they hid the sense behind them and did not make it clear, as words are meant to do.

I smiled and shook my head at her. 'Oh, you are trying to puzzle me, daughter,' I said. 'You are being just as merry as little Ismene, but in your own teasing way. Is that it?'

Then, as Antigone began to weep, too, Polyneices stood up in his place and struck the board with his strong fist. 'My lord,' he said, quite sternly for a boy so young, 'hear this and be silent. Tomorrow, they mean to put out your eyes, to make you blind. The court has decreed this, and the people will observe that it is done. The lion will not see again. You will not see.'

His face was so grave, his shoulders so squarely set, his hands so trembling, that now I had to treat him like a man who brought a message to me in council. I looked back at him as evenly as I would have done in the throne-room, and I said, 'Prince, your words are stern, but the speaking of them does you credit. You do not shrink from declaring hard tidings, and that is a good quality in one who will be a king when his time comes. Now fetch your mother back to the table, and let us eat our fill.'

But instead of going straightway, as I had ordered, Polyneices struck his two fists at his head and said to his brother, ‘It is truly spoken, that whom the god will destroy, he first makes mad.’

This angered me now and I too beat with my fists at my head. I was amazed at the way my voice rang out and echoed in that enclosed place. It was like a real lion roaring, and as I heard myself, I felt proud that I could still summon such power to my voice, though my limbs had become so strangely shrunken, since I last remembered looking at them.

I do not know what I said. I do not even think I spoke in words, but in roars, and in a fierce and kingly growling. Yet my meaning must have gone forth to my family, for they all shuddered and shrank down in their seats, as though they knew the correct observances when a king addressed them. Even Jocasta came back from the wall and took her place once more.

And then I smiled upon them, as an old lion should upon his obedient brood, and raised my wine-cup to indicate to them that they should do likewise. And so we drank our toasts together, a king and his family, all together in their house, all at one table in peace, the quiet, noble Kindred.

And when we had drunk a little, and had eaten a little, I laughed at each of them and told them more of my long travels in the North. Ismene leaned forward, her blue eyes wide and shining, her little mouth open with excitement. I spoke chiefly to her, for she was the youngest, and most loved to hear strange stories.

I said, ‘And, beloved, did you know, there are little dark-faced men among the white hills who can make the winds blow from which quarter they wish? Did you know that? They can take a length of deer-hide, and by tying knots in it, can hold in this wind or that, so that the other winds may run free. This you would not believe, unless you had seen it happen, as I have done. Come, let me have your hide girdle, and I will show you how it is done. Come, Ismene, pass me your girdle, do not delay, girl!’

She was already fumbling at the thong about her small waist, when the heavy curtain before the main door swung aside and an old man stood there, looking at us all, his head waving from side to side, like a serpent’s.

He carried a white stick, the peeled wand of willow, and tapped with it lightly but impatiently upon the tiles before him. I saw the black robe, the hood that cast his flinty eyes in shadow, and I called out to him from the table, ‘Welcome to the feast, old man. Take your place at the board. It is long since you sat in judgement on me at the trial, you must be hungry.’

He stood quite still then and laughed, a thin sound like an old goat this time; and then he said, ‘It is even longer since I spoke to you in the cavern of Delphi, Oedipus. Longer, since I sent you on your way to become a King. And I have been hungry most of that time, walking up and down the world, advising kings and judging kings, sighing over the ruins kings leave behind them when they think to rise higher and to become gods.’

Then he came, slowly and tottering a little, and sat down at my right hand. From his garments to my nostrils came a sour dry smell, the scent of great age and of things growing beyond maturity and then passing into the ground.

I blew down my nose and then said, ‘You came to see the ruins here, in Thebes, old man?’

He sipped at the wine-cup, letting as much run down his breast as down his wrinkled throat. ‘I came to give you yet another chance,’ he said, ‘to set you on your way again, as a weary horse must be whipped onwards from stable to stable, lest he sink down in the straw of one place and die of too much resting.’

Jocasta said, ‘But, old Teiresias, it was you who spoke the judgement on the Lion before the council, and such a cruel judgement as you gave will end the journey of any horse, any king, however strong.’

Teiresias munched at the barley bread, letting crumbs fall where they would about him, as though he was careless of everything except the secrets that stirred in his nodding old head. Then he smiled, if the raising of dried white lips is a smile, and said, ‘Jocasta, Queen and Shining Moon, you have lived in palaces long enough now to know that what is proclaimed to the people may not always be what is given to them; and you have yourself governed these simple folk so long that you must know they do not question what it is you put into their hands. Let a great king hold out a stone to a peasant and say, “Here, man, take this, it is a golden apple from the tree of Aphrodite”. Then, that poor man will take away the stone and will wrap it in soft wool and keep it all his life as a sacred relic. It will be the thing he dreams of handing on to his children’s children. It will be of greater worth to him than farmstead and oxen, plough and seed-corn. Let his neighbours, or his children, tell him that what he guards is but a rough pebble, such as any man might pick up for himself from the stream—yet it will not change his vision of it. A king has given this thing to him and has told him what it is—and so it becomes what the king said, and no words man speaks shall change

the vision in his heart. You, a Queen, a priestess, know these things as well as I do, Jocasta.'

I was feeling merry again and poured more wine into the visitor's cup. 'So, old man' I said, 'at one time we talk of horses, at another, of pebbles. Now what shall the talk be of—snakes and dancing-floors?'

He groped about for a while, trying with stiff fingers to find the cup I had set before him. And when he had it in his hand again, he said, 'You are still as much a fool as when you first came to me, to ask where the Gad-flies of Corinth had gone, Oedipus. For men like you, all must be told bluntly, as a drover beats a cow with a hawthorn staff.'

Little Ismene had been listening to him quietly, her chin upon her hands, her eyes screwed up with bewilderment, but at the mention of the cow and the staff, she burst out laughing. Teiresias turned his shaking head towards her and smiled. 'Here is one who will come to deep understanding,' he said. 'She hears beyond the word; she dares to laugh when all others are grave-faced and still. Such a child would hear the answer of the god in rustling leaves, or in the sound of rain upon a roof. A bargain with you, Jocasta; in return for what I shall tell you, let me take the little one back to Delphi, and train her in all ways to become the Pythoness there. Is it a bargain?'

Jocasta frowned but said, 'That depends on what you tell us, Teiresias. The princess may not wish to go with you; she loves her family.'

But Ismene cried out, 'I do not love my family, Queen. The boys hit me, and my sister never plays with me. She drives me away from her dancing-floor when I want to smash the pretty stones. I do not love them.'

I reached out and took Ismene's hands. 'But, lamb,' I said, 'You love your mother the Queen, and you love the Lion your father, do you not?'

She stared into my eyes and whispered, 'It is you who love me, Lion, not I who love you. These two things have become mixed in your heart, Anax. But they are not the same. I will go with this old man and watch the drover beating the cow with the hawthorn staff. That will be better than having boys hit me and my sister always washing me and combing the tangles in my hair. She will not let me be dirty. I do not love her.'

Teiresias set down his wine cup and said, 'She has given the answer from her own lips. The voice has spoken from beyond her, and we must not haggle with it, like old women at a trader's booth.'

Then he stood up, holding onto his white wand, and said, 'Here is my part of the bargain, Lion of Thebes, and you will do well to take it in your

hand, as the peasant takes the pebble from the king. Tomorrow, the people of Thebes expect their King to blind himself and to die for them, partly as punishment for his ill-ruling of the kingdom, and partly as an offering to the goddess so that the crops will grow again and the cattle thrive. Yet this may be avoided.'

Jocasta stood and said in a shrill voice, 'You lie, Teiresias. The words of the judgement were plain to all who heard them.'

The old man shook his head, and then he said, 'Remember the words once more, Jocasta. I knew what I was saying when I spoke them, and I know what I am saying when I repeat them here. They were these: "The Lion of Thebes shall lose his eyes by his own hand." Is that not so, Oedipus?'

I nodded and said that this was so. And then I went on in my sickness and tipsiness to say that this was a very inconvenient way to end one's reign over a kingdom, but Teiresias waved away my words.

He said, 'What is the Lion of Thebes, my lord?'

I laughed at his error and said, 'You mean, *Who* is the Lion of Thebes, old man. Your wits are on their voyages again!'

But he stared down at me still and said again, 'What is the Lion of Thebes, my lord?'

I searched my head for an answer, then I said at last, 'If you mean the words you speak, it is that gold mask, made for me by Phimacus, the Muzzler of Pain. That is the King's image.'

Teiresias sighed as though after hard labour, then said, 'And where is this mask Phimacus made for you, Oedipus?'

I said, 'It hangs on the wall, above the high chair, in the throne room, old man.'

He nodded, like an old sheep going off to sleep, and then he went on, 'Send your son, Eteocles, to fetch the mask.'

And when Eteocles had returned with the thin gold shell, and had laid it on the feast-board before Teiresias, and he had run his wrinkled stiff fingers over its polished surfaces, he said, 'Now, Oedipus, have you a hammer, such as is used to knock in the nails of a stallion's shoes?'

I laughed and said, 'Aye, old man, a score of them, down in the farrier's shed.'

Teiresias bowed his head calmly and said, ‘Then send your other son, Polyneices, to fetch such a hammer to this room.’

And when the boy had returned, and had laid the hammer on the thick board of the table, the old man said, ‘So, the judgement is being fulfilled as in royal houses everywhere in Hellas; your two sons have assisted at your death and dethronement.’

Now Jocasta was standing by the wall, her arms about the two girls, her eyes closed, fearful of what might happen.

But Teiresias was smiling as he said to me, ‘Now, take up the hammer, King of Thebes, and with your own hand, knock out the eyes of the golden lion that Phimacus once made for you.’

I said, laughing, ‘But this is fool’s play, old man. To ruin such a fine piece of work is fool’s play.’

Suddenly Teiresias beat upon the table with his willow wand, and we all started, even I started, feeling the hairs upon my back rise as though I were a stallion and the whip had slashed across my back.

‘Take the hammer and do as I have said,’ repeated the old man. And there was such power, such magic, in his voice, that I took the hammer and with two blows, knocked in the finely-moulded eyes of the glistening Lion mask. And when I had done this, Teiresias felt the jagged holes with his thin fingers and nodded. ‘So, it is well,’ he said. ‘In my presence, I who spoke your judgement, you, Oedipus, have blinded the Lion of Thebes with your own hand. So, I am not forsworn before the Goddess, or before the people. Their sentence has been carried out in a proper manner.’

Jocasta came forward, breathing hard, and asked, ‘But, Seer who knows all, this may be well enough for us of the House, this ritual—but our simple folk, the people, for whom this is done, will want more. They will feel cheated at such a mock-offering.’

But already the old man was feeling his way to the door again, letting the sharp tip of his stick run along the spaces between the square tiles to guide his steps. He only stopped once, and as he turned to us, said, ‘Of course, woman, there must be a little show. That is understood. All Kings and Queens know of this, anointings, and cutting of flesh, and burning of herbs . . . It is well known to us all. But, listen carefully to me; at the time appointed, when all the folk are gathered, let Antigone lead her father to the top of the stairs for all to see him. Let his eyes be tightly closed, and their pits filled in with the dried blood of a black ram. Let his face be somewhat

scratched so that his own blood mingles with the sacrificed beast's. From down below, the people will only see that their tall King is being led, blinded and bloody. They will see his sons walking proudly on either side of him, carrying the sacred thigh-bones of oxen which they hold firmly away from their ruined father, so denoting that they keep the kingship from him. Then they will hear Creon the Prince, from above, call out that the deed is done and that Oedipus must travel on his blind, lame feet away from Thebes, to die in some other place because of the heavy curse that rests upon him.'

Jocasta went to the old man and said, 'There you are at fault. Creon hates the King my husband so much that he would never lend his voice to such a lie.'

Then Teiresias said, 'You speak like a woman and not like a Queen, Jocasta. In the high policy of kingdoms, love and hate are luxuries for fools, and Creon is not a fool, as you must know. Take my word, he will do as I have told you, because then he will be rid of Oedipus, and will so become the guardian of your two sons, Eteocles and Polyneices—which is as good as being a king himself. As for the daughters, I shall take Ismene with me to Delphi and so bring other glory to the House of Cadmus by electing her a Pythoness in due course, when she has learned the rites. And Antigone will lead her father away to some place where he can end his days quietly, and where she can find herself a brisk young farmer who will give her a fire to tend and babies to suckle. So, it will end well, after all.'

Jocasta was staggered by these words. At first she smiled, but then, as she thought of what Teiresias had said, she began to frown.

'What of me, old man,' she said, 'am I to be left behind in Thebes when Oedipus has gone away? Is that my end? I tell you, it is not a thing I want, for in the last years I have lost all pleasure in my work as the Queen, and as the Priestess of the Smoking Shrine. Yet, is that to be my end?'

The old man shook his head. 'Yours is the most difficult task of all, Jocasta,' he answered. 'Without your aid, Oedipus and Antigone will not go free out of the city. As you have said, there may be some among the people who will wish for the occasion to show more fierceness, more suffering in the Royal House. For these few dissatisfied ones, perhaps from among the Barons and their women, it will seem a poor festival where the King has done all his writhing and crying behind closed doors. So, to you will fall the duty of giving such folk an expiation which they can remember and tell to their children. You, Jocasta, will stand even higher than Creon, on the

topmost wall, in the crook of the tallest hanging-tree. You will tear your hair and wail as Antigone leads the blind king out to show him to the people. Then, after Creon has announced that the judgement has been fulfilled according to the word, you will set up an even louder voice and will tell the multitude that, for shame of what you have done, and so that your King shall not go into the darkness alone, you will carry out the most ancient sacrifice of the Queens and will hang yourself from your own girdle.'

Antigone gasped; the boys stared with stone faces; Ismene chuckled again. But I stood forward and said, 'No, old sheep, this is where the rope of reason breaks!'

But Teiresias also laughed as he laid his bony hand upon my arm, and said, 'And this is where her girdle must break, also. She must choose one that is old and frayed and will not stand her weight. So, after she has flung herself down and has swung a little space, it must break and let her fall safely to the battlements of the wall. So, the folk will cry out aloud that the Goddess has relented and has taken away the bitter cup from Jocasta's lips. It is well known that the gods will intercede at times. Did not the satyr, Marsyas, find, when he was about to sacrifice his son to Zeus, that the boy was miraculously changed into a ram? No man questions such things, Oedipus. And you will do well not to question them, but must stumble on with your daughter through the gates, to your safety.'

Jocasta was shaking now, and leaning on the broad table as though her legs would not support her as steadily as a Queen's limbs should. She said, 'Old man, you who see all through your blind eyes, this sounds well and I can already see that, if the god wills it, our family can one day be knit together again, in some quiet place, after all has been forgotten and the crops have sprung to take men's minds off sacrifice. But, I am a woman and afraid, I am not a great warrior like Oedipus or Creon. To think of such fierce things turns my inside to water, drives my senses away. I am not a goddess, I am only a weak woman, in spite of all they say, Teiresias. And may it not happen that when I fling myself down, the girdle, however worn and frayed, may not break, may not let me down to safety? May this not be, Teiresias?'

The old man smiled at her, like a gentle father to a daughter afraid of the dark, and said, 'Aye, woman, that may well be. For some of this old leather, this old linen, can be as lasting as the oak of Dodona. But, here again, a Queen's wit should be nimble enough to deal with old leather and old linen. You have made miracles happen in the Shrine before, have you not? Very well, then, if the girdle does not break, see that you have enough breath to

keep you alive for a space, and have six sturdy girls, your handmaidens, waiting behind the battlements to run forward and cut you down after you have swung a decent while. They can set up such a wailing that the folk below will be satisfied. And then one night, you can leave the city shrouded and go to seek your husband. Is that not well?'

Jocasta nodded that she was satisfied, and the old man went onwards to the door. He did not turn to say his last words, which were, 'See that little Ismene comes to me before the sacrifice tomorrow; and see that you leave your last instructions to your family, Oedipus, when I have gone, for they must be perfect in all things. Such an occasion must be recalled by all with satisfaction, Lion of Thebes.'

So he went, shuffling and laughing down the corridor, and then Jocasta hurried to the women's quarters to find six handmaidens whom she could trust.

I sat alone among my children, wondering what a ruined king should tell those he leaves behind him, and finding the words hard to come by.

To the two boys, I said, 'My sons, Eteocles and Polyneices, promise me that, when I am gone, you will live sweetly together as Princes should, and that you will not fight each other, or do each other any hurt until I come again, as come I shall in the god's season.'

They stood before me as straight as javelins, and nodded their bright heads slowly. 'We promise, father,' they said. 'We will never raise hand or sword against one another.'

I slapped them both on the shoulder as though we were men together and smiled at them. 'Well said, my sons,' I answered them. 'So I shall go with a quiet heart.'

To Antigone I said nothing, for she was so close to me that there was no need to speak my thoughts to her, she knew them as they came into my heart. She would be going with me, holding my hand, and so there was nothing I needed to ask of her.

But to Ismene, who was on my knee and tugging at my beard now, I said, 'And you, little one, swear that you will remember me. Swear that you will try to learn wisdom and kindness, and that you will always behave as a King's daughter should.'

She was laughing out loud now, and chattering about the drover beating the cow with a hawthorn stick. At the corners of her little red mouth the white flecks of foam had gathered in her merriment.

Suddenly Jocasta came in, rushing like a black wind, and snatched the merry child out of my arms.

‘She will do well enough,’ the Queen said. ‘Do not load her with too many burdens. If, one day, she learns to wipe herself clean, that will be enough for her to learn.’

Then Antigone took me by the hand and said, ‘Come, father, come to your bed. This day has been long enough, and already the black wings are beating in my head.’

So I went with her, smiling to comfort her, while Ismene still chuckled and threshed about in the Queen’s arms, and the two Princes gazed on like images of stone.

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THOUGH it was but shortly after dawn, the sun was beating hot upon Thebes. The caked ram's blood on my eyes and forehead pulled at my skin and was hard to bear. The black flies which swarmed over the gashes I had made upon my cheeks were hard to tolerate. I stood, in my oldest garments, torn and soiled, swaying on the heavy staff that Jocasta had found for me, almost believing that I was such a blinded king as the judgement required.

Antigone stood before me, where I could touch her with the staff to know which way I was supposed to direct my steps. She was silent, and had been so since she was present at my calm leave-taking with the Queen before the sun rose.

My sons stood on either side of me, jesting with each other, and sometimes whispering to me that I did well, that I was a better blind man than any who came begging into the market-place of Thebes.

They spoke so firmly, so gaily, that at times I almost feared they wanted me gone, wanted to see what it was like to rule a kingdom without having a father present to command them in this and that. This thought troubled me, but it was not a thing that a great king might speak aloud, lest those who heard should think he was weak and ready for the grave.

Ismene I had not seen since the night before. The women had taken her before sunrise to the house where Teiresias was lodging. I think I had heard her screaming in the night, perhaps as they took her, like a mole crying under the ground, or like a fierce little weasel when a boy puts an arrow into it in children's hunting. No, it was more like a bird of some sort, a thin, reedy screeching, like the sound young herons make when they are dragged from the nest among the river-rushes. Or a shepherd's pipes played out of tune.

Or it could be like a young hawk, shrieking with fury as blundering bats intrude upon its hiding-place. I do not know, there were other sounds then that drove Ismene's squealing from my head. The heavy droning of many folk gathered together, the shouts of soldiers, the rattling of bronze-shod chariot-wheels upon the cobbles down below, beyond the window.

And often bursts of gay laughter, sudden loud spurts of sound, that made me wonder what the joke had been, to cause such jollity. And sometimes phrases of ancient songs, about kings who died for the people, or shaggy old ghosts who watched over cities as though they were farms and saw that the common folk were fed, like cattle.

It was stifling behind the heavy curtain of wool that cloaked us from the citizens below. I began to tell Antigone how enclosed it was, when Polyneices touched me on the arm and said, 'Be silent, father, they are drawing back the shrouding, we shall be seen.'

I obeyed the boy and stood quite still; and then I heard the curtains slide on their rings of bronze, and felt Antigone draw me forth by the hem of my tattered robe.

There had been a rumbling vibration of voices before, but all at once this stopped, as swiftly as a keen sword slips through a melon. Now there was dead silence, a charged and expectant quiet, like the space between the two last breaths a dying man may give, as his children bend above him, listening.

And then there was a low groan that seemed to spread flatly across the space that Thebes covered, to echo and reverberate against the cliff-like walls, the high clay domes, and come again to settle as birds do after sweeping round their nests at night.

This groan stopped my ears for a while, and made me proud to be a King, even proud to be a blinded King. This, I thought, is the love the people bear for me! This is the mourning for their father, their Shepherd!

Then, high above my head, the rams' horns blared, and after their harsh skirling, the voice of Creon sounded over the city. I knew it was his voice, I could not mistake it, but what were the words he said I do not know. Too many feelings lay within my heart, too many touches on the skin, the chafe of robe, the pushing of my sons, my crippled feet on the hot stone steps, the breath of wind upon my blood-stained face, the tug of Antigone, the pulsing of my blood, the fear that pulsed even harder in my belly for Jocasta . . . All these things. I did not hear his words.

Was it an eagle screaming? Was it thunder? I do not know. I only know that after his words stopped, Antigone's voice came back to me and said, 'Touch me with your staff, father. Feel where I go. Now we must make the last walk down the stairway for the folk to see their King.'

We went down slowly, as though into a hot and deafening pit of voices. I could not see the folk, but I sensed their closeness, how tightly they were

packed together, their monstrous crowding; and I smelled the sweat of bodies that had waited, breast to breast, since dawn, to see my misery, to see what thing it was to be a King, and so what common folk have come free out of, having no one but their families to care for.

At the foot of the steps, which I could not see, Antigone swerved a little to the left, and my stick followed her, knocking gently at her slowly moving legs. She led me as a patient bell-wether does the thrusting flock, teaching me tolerance, instructing in humility—and all of this coming back to my understanding through a staff of olive-wood. The sort of staff that cow-herds use on cattle; and here was I, putting it to the royal flesh of Thebes.

Then difference came; we were among a heavy press of folk. I felt that we were passing down a narrow alley-way between the crowds. It needs no eyes to tell if folk press closely on you. I felt their breath, I smelled their sweat, I even felt their agony at being crushed so close under this hot sun. Even their thoughts came to me, their heart-beats, their anger at me, their pity of my blood-caked face on which the flies still made a festival.

I broke my silence then and said, in a voice I did not know to be my own, ‘The god upon you all! Lion blesses all!’

Yet this was not their wishing. A King goes silent to his end, not blessing. To utter words through blood offends the folk. He should die speechless, not chanting like a bard. Only so may his agony be tolerated, only so may he stand above common men, they who must cry aloud and ask for mercy, for forgiveness. These things a king must be above; he must go under ground as silent as a stone. And I had let words free.

I heard the hissing, the blowing through the lips. I felt my daughter falter, through the stick. And then I felt the soft wet splash of ordure on my face, my neck, my legs. I felt the people’s movements as they flung at me what they had brought to fling, in case I broke the kingly peace and spoke. I even felt the thing they threw strike on the back of Antigone. And I would have loved to open my eyes then and stride among them, knocking them down with monstrous buffeting, like a heedless god moving among the wicked to bring doom.

At that time, I could have gone, chest bare, to breast a black-maned lion in his pride. I could have shoved a mountain down. I could have leaned upon a chariot and bade it stop—though it was drawn by raging stallions.

But I held back, knowing that this was still the testing-time, that if I turned and opened my dried eyes, all would be lost, and my dear Queen

would have to pay the debt I owed. I stumbled on, flies furious about my face and mouth, the people pulling at me, dragging at my clothes.

Then, from the crowd, two shrill thin voices called above the muttering. A woman screamed, 'He *must* be of the gods, see? Who but a god could get a family with such a shrivelled husk!'

And then a child's voice, saying, 'See how a god can fall, from such blunt feet!'

I felt a stick being thrust between my legs and for a moment I swayed, then fell, striking the dusty earth with my right cheek. And up above me the laughter sounded, like a tidal wave coming in upon an undefended shore, bearing me down. I lay, how long I do not know, until a hard hand took me by the hair and pulled at it, then other hands pressed hard upon my shoulders, lifting them.

And as I rose, a voice said in my ear, 'What, Anax! Has it come to this! You did not roll so drunken on the ground that night we faced the lion!'

It was the voice of red Kilhwych, who had been Captain once and then a slave again. I whispered, 'Friend, put out your hand and lead me to the gate. I think this crowd will stifle me.'

But all I had was a blow upon the ear that almost laid me low. And then the crowd's mad laughter once again.

I answered then, 'I understand, old comrade. We must travel with the times. Do not fear, I forgive you, Captain.'

The next blow that I took was in a secret place, and nearly made me vomit in the dust. Kilhwych had always known the place to strike, but never before had he put his fist to me. This was my sharpest trial. I almost turned and took him in my arms, to show the folk the lion was still in Thebes.

But Antigone put her arm about me, and I felt her tender warmth, the softness of her flesh, so different from the blows I had endured.

'Fare forth,' she whispered. 'Onward, father, now.'

And so at last I heard the shouting fade, heard both our footsteps echoing beneath the arching oven-door of Thebes. I halted then and said, 'Look back, beloved. How goes it with Jocasta on the wall?'

And thus Antigone: 'She waits. She wails. She lifts her arms and leaps. Now all the folk are hushed; all are gazing upwards at that leap. And now she swings a while, her white arms by her side. Yes, it goes well. I would

have sworn she jumped then to her death. Oh, Mother Jocasta, Queen, what artifice! How fit to be a queen who dares do that!'

And then my daughter's voice stopped and I heard her suck in her breath, as though a drench of water has been flung on her bare flesh.

'Tell me, Antigone,' I said, 'what happens now?'

I felt her shuddering against my staff. She said, as though another voice was speaking in my ear, 'Oh, god! Oh no! He will not let her down!'

I shook her shoulder, clenched it in my claw. 'What happens, girl?' I growled. 'What is it now?'

In horror, the voice of Antigone again: 'Prince Creon stands below the tree. His crested soldiers keep the girls away. They cannot cut my mother down. She hangs in very truth, and she is still.'

Such moments come to most men, when they stand at the cross-roads of their lives. I might have run back, my staff of olive-wood against their swords; or I might have flung myself down, outside the gate, over the wooden balustrade, to that deep chasm where the bodies lay. True, I was close enough to it, the stench came upwards to my nose and almost stifled me. I could have gone down there and lain with Menoeceus. So short a time had passed, I should have known the old king once again. I should at least have lain in honour, of some sort.

But then my daughter took me by the arm. 'Be careful, Lion,' she whispered in my ear. 'One of the guard, a red-crest, watches us. If you should open but one eyelid now, Jocasta's death has been for nothing. Fare forward, King.'

And when we were beyond the gate, beyond the stinking bridge above the chasm, onto the road where the air was heavy with the scent of thyme, I sat down on a stone and bowed my head.

'Where can we go now, daughter?' spoke my voice.

Her own came back, firm as young oak. 'It comes to all,' she said, 'even to kings. Now all lies in my hands. You are beyond all ruling now, my father. So, hear my words; we go to ask the mercy of King Theseus. He sits in his summer palace at Colonus, the place where they breed brave horses, and where nightingales, drunk by the nectar of the water there, sing in the cypress trees, flutter in their bridal dance among the berries of the wild ivy.'

I smiled, to hear my daughter speak so like a bard, then said, 'Theseus is my enemy, I think. I taunted him when I was great. So, surely, he would

deliver us back into the hand of Creon?'

Antigone drew me to my feet again. She said, 'All fools, all children—even the kings among you! Oh, men, what fools! Creon is glad to be so safely rid of such a beast as you, old lion. Trust me, Father, I know more than you think. We'll go to bright Colonus, and there find a bed to lie upon. What else is there to do, except die? And do you really want to die, old Oedipus—you, a king, a lion, a hero? Do you *want* to die?'

I shook my head and even tried to weep. 'No, daughter,' I said at last, 'I do not want to die. The world is a poor place, and has but a few crumbs of comfort to offer, but I do not want to leave it yet, if I must speak honestly.'

She dragged me on, and spoke then in a weary, almost scornful tone, as tired mothers do to their noisy overbearing children.

'No, of course you do not wish to die,' she said. 'No man wants to die, however crippled he is, however full of pity for his aches and pains. Only the boys, drunk in the battle's glory, think they wish to die. But not the old ones, they who have but a few more miles to tread. Those miles are very sweet, even on crippled feet.'

I said to her then, almost afraid, 'Antigone, did you come from my seed, or I from out your darkness? The sun is in my head; I do not know.'

She drew me on along the dusty road, and laughed a little. Then, lightly as night wind through the apple-boughs, she said, 'You are all boys, all fools, even you great ones who take the lion's name for yours.'

EPILOGUE

SO at last we came to Colonus in Attica, the place where fine horses are bred, and where nightingales sing in the cypress trees and among the berries of the wild ivy.

Antigone was more weary than I from our long journey and was close to weeping by the time we first came in sight of the white houses and the vineyards. To move her mind from sad thoughts of her mother, I said, 'All things in life must have an end, daughter; and with each end, there is a new beginning. What will begin here, in Colonus, no one can tell; but it might well be better than you have ever known before. Have courage, lift up your heart, and let us go forward gladly, to see what the gods still have waiting for us.'

She smiled sadly and said, 'So far, there have been no signs of welcome, no children dancing and throwing flowers beneath our feet, no flutes sounding, no trumpets blowing. Yet the news of our coming must have been passed down from the hills by shepherds, to the town.'

I said, 'When I first went to great Thebes, there were no trumpets blowing either, my love. There were only widowed women in black, kneeling in the dust and stretching out their shrivelled hands towards me, begging me to bury their sons and husbands, begging me to put bread into their mouths. Sometimes it is the exit which is important, not the entrance.'

Antigone shook her head. 'Our exit from Thebes was no great triumph, father. I do not recall any trumpets or flowers then, either.'

She meant well, yet her words came to my ears with a chill about them, for what she said was true enough; our only triumph in leaving Thebes was that we left that wicked city alive at all, and I, the King, leaning on an olive-wood staff, with ram's blood smothering my face and the black flies clustering about my head.

I said, 'This time it will be different, daughter.'

But it was not different. One might have thought that Colonus was a town of the dead, that a plague had struck it and all the folk were away burying their lost ones. Only dogs walked in the sunlit streets at the edge of

the town, and even they turned and ran up side-alleys when our long black shadows fell across them in the morning sun.

I spoke no more to console my daughter, but pulled down the hood of my robe and leaned heavily on my stick, lest any eyes watched from the shuttered windows of the place, and spies carried word to the King there that Oedipus was not blind. Antigone put her hand on my shoulder to guide me and walked, herself, like a funeral-mourner, her tangled golden hair half over her face, her black skirt dragging in the summer dust.

And in this way we came to the market-place of Colonus, through the silent town, and saw that we were expected there, for a party of elders were gathered by the well, dressed in their white council-robes, and in their midst, on a black chair carved with lion's heads, sat King Theseus, holding the sacred staff, the aegis, in his right hand, and staring before him like a god.

No one spoke as we shuffled over the dust of the square, but all eyes were set on us, marking our every movement, every fold in our garments.

As we drew nearer, from under my caked lashes, I took good stock of King Theseus for, of all men at this moment, my hopes were set most heavily on him. I had never seen him before, though I had heard the impossible tales of his bull-dancing and his wrestling and his voyaging. Despite myself, in my mind, he had become something of a hero, and the picture I had of him was of someone tall and broad in the shoulder, with the lion-face of a god. So my first sight of him was a disappointment, for he was a small man, too dark-haired for a true Hellene, and already thick in the waist, although he could have been no older than I was at the time.

I thought: Of such metal is the sword made! The world has become an ordinary place when its greatest heroes are little men with fat bellies, who use scent on their hair and paint their eyes like Egyptian women.

I wondered what Theseus thought of me—a supposedly blind, lame man, leaning on a thin girl's shoulder. Did he think: Is this fellow he who cast down the terrible Sphinx, and strangled great Laius in his chariot? Is this the man who outfaced Creon and caused old Menoeceus to jump from the city-walls? No, it cannot be so!

Always in our youth, we dream that the coming together of great heroes must be attended by glory, by people cheering and by eagles cutting through the air above. But our meeting in the market-place of Colonus was a quiet thing, far quieter than the meeting of the two hill-farmers who have stock to sell, and ale to drink.

The only sign at all which came to me of any difference between us and ordinary men was that, as my shadow fell across King Theseus in his chair, thunder growled distantly in the hills behind the town, and that, under my feet, but as gently as though it was a mere shuddering of the nerves, the earth moved. Deep in my heart, I knew then that this was Theseus himself, Beloved of Poseidon, and that this sign had been given me, this tremor of the earth as light as a child's hand stroking the father's sleeping head.

I stood quite still before the King, making no sign that I had felt anything. And then the tremor came again, and again, three times in all, and I knew that Theseus was silently praying to his Protector, asking for this indication to be given to me. So, knowing that it was now my place to speak, before the King of Athens, I bowed my head very low and said in a quiet and humble voice, 'I have come, Theseus, as it was promised I should, to the place where the nightingales sing among the ivy leaves. Now do with me as you will, Athens.'

For a time, I thought that Theseus had not heard me, the silence lay so heavy between us. It crossed my mind that perhaps policies had changed between the cities, even that Theseus might have made some pact with Creon to catch me and destroy me. I thought: Perhaps even now, in the upper windows of the houses about this market-place, archers are fitting arrows to their bows, pleased that my daughter and I are such easy targets.

The sweat began to run down my sides from my arm-pits, under my heavy robe. My right leg began to twitch and quiver, as it always did when I was on the edge of some desperate undertaking. I felt that if something did not happen soon, I might even fall over at the King's feet, in the dust, and be dishonoured before him. This feeling came so fiercely over me that the staff almost slid from my wet hands.

Then Theseus spoke, and his voice was as low as mine had been. He said, 'Hail, King of Thebes, you have come far through the summer heat and the dust of Attica must lie thick in your throat. Here we have a good wine that will wash the dust away.'

With my head still bent, I heard him rise from his chair; and then I felt his hand, the hand of Theseus, upon my shoulder. It was as hot as my own, but strong and full of purpose. It guided me away from the well in the square, and across that place to a little flat-fronted house decorated with squat Minoan columns. Through a slit in my eyes, I saw that the red and blue paint on the house, much worn by the strong sun of Attica, was peeling here and there, like the skin from a man's face in the deserts of Libya. This

was a strange house for a great King to live in, I thought; yet a good enough place for him to poison me, or imprison me, or have a dirk pushed into my back, if these things were what he had in mind for me.

At the door, he turned and said farewell to the old men who had witnessed my coming to Colonus; and inside the small tiled vestibule, he called to women to take Antigone to the bath-house and to see that she was decently robed, as befitted a princess of Thebes.

She did not want to go, I could tell by the sudden grasp she made at my arm; for it was in her mind, too, that this Theseus, famed through the world for his trickery, meant to put an end to us. But I shook off her hand and told her to obey the King, speaking as though there was but one king on earth, and that Theseus was that one.

When she had gone, her feet dragging on the tiles, Theseus led me down a latticed passage-way, where the sun struck in at us every other step, and where caged birds were singing and fluttering. From my eye's corner, I could see flashes of yellow and red and blue, and thought that he must have brought these bright-plumaged birds from Crete, or even Egypt, to decorate his house in Colonus.

All at once, Theseus said, 'I have brought these bright-plumaged birds from Egypt, to decorate my house in Colonus. A king may allow himself few pleasures, being so often at the beck and call of his people; but this pleasure I permit myself, to hear bright birds singing in the cool twilight.'

I was too amazed that he should have spoken the very words I was thinking, to make any reply. And, at the end of the corridor, we turned inwards, into the body of the house, and came to a cool chamber where the sun was kept out by striped awnings that covered the window-holes. Here, with the tiles cool beneath my feet, I sat on a stool which the King of Athens placed by my leg. He sat on another stool, no higher and no lower than the one he had given me.

I thought: This is a good omen, if this king sets himself no higher than me.

Yet there was still a whisper in the crevices of my heart which said that the drink he offered me might be poisoned. So I sat quite still, not speaking, and waited for what might happen. I decided in my heart that if I was at all suspicious of anything, I would slip the dirk out of my robe and at least see how immortal this Theseus was after all.

Then a slave-girl came in with a wine-jar and two clay cups, placed them between us, and almost ran from the chamber.

So we sat silently, the wine between us, while outside the honey-laden bees hummed in the sunshine, and the Egyptian birds fluttered in the corridor.

At last, when the air of the room had taken on weight and lay heavily upon my heart, King Theseus said, ‘Pour the wine, brother.’

I did not hear him clearly at first, or perhaps I did not think he could be speaking to me, calling me by a word that made me as great as he was. I sat quite still, hardly breathing, but feeling the haft and blade of my dirk pressing against my belly, under my robe, as though reminding me that it was there when I needed it, which might be now.

Then Theseus spoke again, and said, ‘Pour out the wine, brother. Though it is the pleasant duty of the host, in this case the guest should do it, if it sets his mind at rest from thoughts of poison.’

Now I knew that the King of Athens was speaking to me, and not to someone who had crept into the chamber silently behind me.

I smiled as best I could and waved my hands. ‘But, Theseus,’ I said, ‘you have heard my story. You know what punishment I suffered, and how it has left me. How can I pour the wine, when I cannot see the cups?’

The King of Athens laughed softly in that dim room and said, in a whisper, leaning forward until I felt the warmth of his breath, ‘You can see the cups as well as I can, by opening your eyes, brother. It is not a difficult feat to perform for one, like you, who has killed the Sphinx and taken a kingdom single-handed with a borrowed sword!’

His words were like a cold wind on me, and for a while I sat quite still, wondering what the crafty Athenian meant to do with me, even speculating whether I might take the bull by the horns, as they say, and silence him now, in this secret room. I stood almost two heads taller than he, and as far as I had heard, he was skilled in nothing more deadly than wrestling, whereas I had had my fair share of all the rough and tumble of battle, and was as able with the dirk as with javelin or club.

He seemed to know what was in my mind, and said, ‘Brother, it is not the custom for gentlemen to kill gentlemen, and especially those who have fallen on evil times. Come, pour the wine which is set before you.’

Still hesitating, I said, ‘I am no gentleman, King of Athens. I am the son of a hill shepherd, no more.’

Theseus said, ‘Have done with this jesting, Oedipus. Among the rabble that runs about the land these days, both of us are worthy of note. There are such things as crofter-kings, brother, and you have grown from being one of those to having held great Thebes in your right hand. As for me, I was the son of a visiting war-lord of Athens, got upon the daughter of a crofter-king, so we are equal. Come, I say, for the third time, pour the wine.’

Then I opened my eyes, with some difficulty because the ram’s blood had formed a thick crust which stiffened the lids. But I brushed it away and then stared at the King.

He was little to look at; rather womanly, with his eyelids painted blue and his thin golden beard done in small curls. But he was a man, sure enough; each of his movements and words made this clear.

We drank together, letting the heavy red wine pour down our throats like warriors, not like mincing courtiers. He wiped his small mouth with the back of his hand and said, smiling wryly, ‘So, Oedipus and Theseus drink together at last. It is well, for in all Hellas there are not two such as we.’

I said, ‘I have made little enough of my chances, when all comes to all, Theseus. I am at the end of my life, and yet even Creon can outface me. I count that no great reputation.’

Theseus served the wine this time, and said, as he handed me my cup, ‘You are much like me; we both have allowed women too much say in our affairs. With me there have been three of them, and each one more demanding than the former. But then, it was the same with old Jason; between them, Medea and Glauce broke him, and he was a stouter fellow than either of us, if the poets can be believed.’

We thought silently together for a space, while the flies buzzed about us and the doves purred outside. Then Theseus said, ‘But we are not at the end of the road by a long pace, yet, friend. We could make good our many losses if we stood together. This Creon, for instance, he could be toppled; he could be got at. I have yet to see the King, however tall, who did not put his mouth to the dust and kiss it, when the javelin went in. But who am I to tell you this —you threw down Polyphontes and King Laius when you were only a lad.’

As he spoke, I pictured those two men going over the cliff-edge, and the screaming stallions of the chariot turning their great terrified eyes on me. I

thought also of the ewe, Metope, falling, and old Menoeccus plunging from the high South Wall, and I shuddered.

Theseus laid his gold-ringed hand upon my arm and said, as softly as a woman, 'I choose my words badly. I know that you have this falling dream . . . But then, so have I, friend, so have I. My own father went off the rock when I hoisted the wrong sail, coming back from Crete, and it is in my omens that I, too, will go in much the same way. It is not a thing which I let weigh on me too heavily, or spoil my joy in the daylight. A King must learn to live with his destiny; after all, most of our subjects will suffer worse ends than we shall, for they will go blindfold like the ox to the butcher's shed. We, at least, are allowed the dignity of knowing our deaths and so of preparing our hearts for them gradually.'

I did not reply to him, for as yet I was as blind to my fate as any of the common folk he spoke of. Then the King of Athens said to me, 'Come, now, brother, why do you not begin afresh? Together, let us take Thebes and destroy Creon; then you will sit upon the throne-chair there, and I in Athens; and we will draw up a pact that never in our lifetime shall the two cities war with each other. Who knows, by forming such a League, we might, before the owl cries out to us at last, take in the whole of Hellas. Mycenae is ready for shaking, and Corinth would be no more than an afternoon's work. Then there is only Sparta, to the South, and from what my spies tell me, the folk there are so befuddled with Cretan wine and so drained by their women, that even their greatest warriors go into battle on the backs of slaves, being too feeble to walk themselves.'

I said, 'Theseus, you make it sound too easy. You are much like these Phoenicians from Caria, who paint a rosy picture of the repayment-terms when they make a loan. What price would you ask for your help in getting back for me my kingdom?'

He laughed softly in that shaded room, and said, 'You are not the fool some people say, Oedipus! Look you, I swear I mean well to you. I should ask only two things: that you leave your daughter, Antigone, in my care, as my ward; and that, in the first instance, you should go into battle as my paid General. How does this seem to you?'

I answered, 'Theseus, let us not gabble like market-gossips. Both of us, you and I, know that I come through your land like a beggar, with no power to bargain, but only a hand held out for charity. I can make no conditions—I can only agree to accept, or refuse, what is offered me. If I accept, I am your slave; if I refuse, I go hungry, and perhaps die.'

Theseus ran his slender fingers through his golden beard smiling, and said, ‘You have listened to too many lies about me, I think, brother. I do not drive so hard a bargain as you think, not with a brother-King, at least. Antigone would live close to me, in my palace; and if ever she wished to become a Queen, I would marry her willingly. She is a pretty lass, and not of tainted stock, as Ariadne and poor Phaedra were. I think you have trained her away from the Mother, well enough. She would be a docile wife for a King of Athens.’

It hurt my heart to hear this king talking of my daughter so; as though she was a thing to be chewed over at a cattle-market. I recalled my Antigone when she was a little golden-haired child, riding on my shoulders in the sunlight, in the pleasant days of my life; and now, here was this Athenian bull-dancer, who could not count the women he had known, asking for Antigone to share his bed, and become one of the numberless many.

I said, ‘It does not please me to buy back my throne with my dear daughter’s body, Theseus.’ I felt that I had to come straight out with it, for at that moment, I was angry, deep down, and hardly cared whether he called his guards or not. I was very weary with walking and lack of food. The wine we had been drinking was taking its toll of my reason, too.

The King of Athens laughed again and said, ‘You carry too heavy a load about with you, Oedipus. Very well, if you do not wish your Little Mother to become one of the House of the Erectheids, then we will forget it for the while. She shall live as my ward in the palace, while you and I go about men’s affairs.’

I bowed my head then, and asked, ‘And, as a General, what place would I have in Hellas?’

Theseus drummed a little impatiently on the table-top with his finger-nails, then said, sighing, as though he was tired all at once, ‘My friend, my dear friend, no man can hope to grow strong again in a day. No old man, by dreaming all night, can wake to find his limbs as firm again as they once were, in his youth. All takes time. The vine does not put forth its fruit in a day. It must suffer the pains of pruning before the plump grapes ripen.’

I nodded and said, ‘You sound much like the old women at the shrines, Theseus! If I read your oracle right, you are saying that I must wait, and must suffer, before I sit on my throne again. That I must work for you, and serve your ends, before my own power is given back to me. That, indeed, I must become your slave, in a way, if I wish to become King of Thebes again. Is that read correctly, Theseus?’

The King of Athens said, ‘I am offering you what seems to me a fair bargain, Oedipus. As you have already said, you come here as a beggar, with nothing to offer. So, I am showing you how you can find wares to offer which would be acceptable to me. I do not think I am cheating you. I cannot call to mind any other King who would speak to you as I have done.’

There was, indeed, much kindness in what he had said, but with Theseus there always seemed to be some half-bidden plot peeping out from his eye-corners. All his life he had had to use his natural craft and slyness to keep his place, and such a man, however well-meaning, was for ever on the look-out for a favourable bargain. I decided that I would test him, and said, ‘Look you, Athens, if you mean so well towards me, how does this notion strike you—that I leave Antigone here, in your full protection, but not as your wife, unless she freely demands such a state; and that I travel on, alone, and later find my own way of getting back my kingdom?’

Theseus struck the table-top and said heartily, ‘My good Oedipus, you must have thought I was some thick-lipped trader from Libya, some hook-nosed midden-raker from Jericho! Look you, with me a bargain is a sort of game, an amusement; and if I come up against a better bargainer than I am, I do not hold it against him. So, yes, of course! Leave your daughter in my care, I will get women to look after her until you return; and go your own ways to regain Thebes. That suits me well enough. We shall end by being brothers after all, and one day, when Hellas is united under us, you will see that Theseus the Bull-dancer was not the Canaanite haggler you took him for.’

We shook hands on this, and for a while I blamed myself for distrusting this even-tempered King who had seen so much suffering in his own lifetime.

As we ate honey-bread and drank more of his wine, Theseus looked up at me quickly and said, ‘A man like you could sell his sword and javelin to these rough kings of the North. They are drunken fools, who set great store by warriors from our part of the world. With luck, inside a year, you could come back with enough treasure to buy yourself an army which would take Thebes from Creon for you.’

I nodded, and said, ‘Something of that was in my mind also, Theseus. But when I go North, it must not be as the ruined old King of Thebes. No farmer would pay much of a price for a broken-backed horse. No cattle-king of the North would want to employ a warrior who had run from his own house, hobbling on a stick.’

Theseus pulled at his curled hair and nodded, his mouth moving in a faint smile, but his light eyes always fixed on mine. He said, ‘I am three strides ahead of you, brother. When you go North, take a new name, call yourself Clawfoot, anything, but not Oedipus. Become a new man, a man dedicated solely to affairs of war. Forget the past. If you do not, and if you carry northwards with you any hint of your past greatness, there will always be found another man who will test himself against your old fame, some young bull who will challenge you to see how strong you really are, who will put the sword into you for his own growing glory. Or, indeed, let us not discount it, Creon may well have spies in the North, or if not spies, hangers-on who will try to gain a place in Thebes by bringing him your head, wrapped up in a sheepskin.’

I nodded. ‘Yes,’ I said, ‘so what do you suggest, Athens?’

Dipping his long forefinger in the red wine, Theseus drew on the table-top, showing the boundaries of his kingdom near Colonus.

‘See,’ he said, ‘here, over the brow of this scrub-covered moorland, there lies a deep cleft in the ground. The local folk do not go near it, because they say the ghosts of the dead ones call out and tempt travellers to fall down into the darkness to their death.’

I think he saw my face twitching as he spoke of falling, because he touched my arm suddenly, to comfort me, then went on quickly, ‘The voices the peasants hear are the sounds of the wind blowing through the fissures and caverns of the limestone in this place. The cleft I speak of seems to fall sheer, into the darkness, but in truth, after twenty paces or so, the cavern slope grows gradual, and one could roll down into the blackness in complete safety. At the foot of the slope, there is a long gallery, striking cross-ways, where a stream runs, and into which small creatures, like deer and foxes, go for shelter. A crafty man could seem to jump to his death into that cleft, but with care could land in safety far below, and could live on stream water and fresh meat until such time as he felt ready to make his way out again, into the open country far beyond Athens. Now, if I were doing this thing, I would strike North towards Marathon, and take a trading-ship along the coast, to Magnesia, where the folk are all ten generations behind the times, and where I would not be known.’

I laughed too, as he spoke, and said, ‘That is well enough for a King of Athens to say, but he has gold, and Oedipus of Thebes has none.’

Theseus bowed his head, as though enjoying some great but secret joke. Then he put his right hand into his robe and drew forth a hide bag and slid it

across the table towards me.

‘Always at your service, brother,’ he said. ‘There is enough silver and gold in that to buy a passage to Hyperborea. It has been waiting for you these last three months!’

I took the bag and weighed it in my hand. I enjoyed the heavy feel of it, having been such a poor King for so long. But I did not like his words; for they seemed to say that he knew more of me than I had done of myself, which is never pleasant for a man to hear. In a little flare of pettiness, I said, ‘Suppose that, instead of doing as you say, and taking a ship, I buy myself an army of men with this gold and come back and take Athens from you?’

The small-boned King stretched his arms and yawned, as though he was deliberately giving me the chance to take him at a disadvantage if I so wished. And when I made no move, he said, his arms still above his head, ‘You would never attempt that, brother, while your dear daughter Antigone was in my care.’

So we drank and laughed together, half in friendship and half in gentle malice; the way two men drink and laugh, mostly, when they are warriors at heart.

And before we parted that day, we arranged for the ceremony of my death; for black-draped women to accompany us, singing their dirges to the Mother, calling me Dionysus and so on, and for three priests of Attis to come with rams’ horns to sound the signal for my death-leap, and for Theseus to stand near the cleft with my daughter, Antigone beside him, as witnesses to my end.

We even arranged which stone-mason should carve my burial slab, with all my history on it, to be set up in the precinct of the Solemn Ones, near the Grove of the Erinyes at Athens.

Theseus recommended a clever young fellow named Saurus the Lizard, who was most swift with the chisel and could turn out a very pretty headpiece, without all the foliage and extreme decoration that so many masons used in those days, covering the stone with such a tangle of acanthus leaves that a man could hardly read what the lettering was meant to convey.

Before we parted, I said, ‘What of Antigone? Is she to be let into the secret?’

Theseus shook his head. ‘Not yet,’ he answered. ‘That can come later, when you are safe away. Besides, her tears will make the affair all the more

convincing to those who might otherwise be sceptical. Have no fear, I will see to it that when the right moment comes, she shall know the truth.'

It was good enough reasoning; one might trust Theseus to think out the best policy in such matters. There was only one other thing, and I said to him, 'If I am to start a new life, as Clawfoot the soldier with a sword to hire, then I must have a sword. Is that not so?'

The King of Athens said, 'Last night I lay sleepless in my bed, sweating in the summer heat, and it came to me to go secretly to the cleft I have mentioned, and to fling down there a good sword and a long spear, as an offering to the Mother of Night, so that I should find sleep before the dawn came. You see, it was all decreed by someone beyond our understanding. You will find those weapons ready for your hand, brother, when you go down into the hole. As you see, all is arranged. So, sleep in peace now, and may good luck sit upon your shoulder tomorrow, and for ever. Good night, good night, now look toward the future, King of Thebes.'

And so I did; and the prospect lulled me off to sleep.

On the morning of the day when I was to go into the earth, they brought Antigone to me while the court-maids were anointing my body and head and feet. The women smiled at her in sisterly sympathy, but she did not return their smile. Her large eyes were full of tears and she wore her golden hair tangled and uncombed. There was dust upon her arms and legs, and upon her unbleached shift of linen.

I took her hands and kissed them; then I said, 'What, daughter, so sad on this bright day?'

She looked about her, blindly, and whispered, 'Are we not to be alone, father?'

The women moved from the room, bowing, when I nodded them away. Then I put my arms about Antigone's waist and drew her to my knee. With the sleeve of my newly-woven white fleece robe, I wiped the tears from her cheeks and put my own bearded face close to hers. I said, 'There must be no grief, daughter. You will live under the protection of King Theseus, who has sworn an oath to care for you as though you were his own.'

Antigone suddenly burst out laughing, like a crazed woman. 'His own what?' she cried. 'If you mean child—then little luck has come to his own flesh and blood; if you mean woman—then he has had three wives, and each of them died in violence, one just as my mother did, hanging. You will trust the Athenian after that? You will leave me with him?'

I smoothed her hair and said, ‘Patience, sweetheart, patience. A man can only do a little at a time, and we have done much already. We must go by step and by step, as gradual as the tortoise, to our goal.’

She flung herself from me and ran to the wall, where she beat with her fists in anger. ‘The tortoise!’ she mocked. ‘The King of Thebes a tortoise! Yes, now I think of it, he does drag his legs much like a tortoise! And they tell me, in the women’s quarters, that he will shortly go down into the ground, like a tortoise avoiding the winter snows. Well, King Tortoise, what shall we talk of now? There seems nothing more to say.’

I had never known my daughter in such a mood before; always she had been a sweet-tempered child, but now, this morning, she was a bitter-tongued woman, as sharp as a lemon, as tart as old wine, a daughter of Crete like her mother.

I suffered with her, the more so since I could not reveal the secret which Theseus and I shared. Yet I came as near to it as I dared, and said, ‘Antigone, I beseech you, have no fear for me. Though I must go down into the darkness, I swear to you, by hands and feet and heart, that I shall come again; that I shall rise from the dead and that you shall sit upon my right hand once more. This, may the gods have pity on me, I swear to you. Believe in me, and do not question my word.’

Antigone stopped beating at the wall and came back to me, her eyes dry and her lips curled. Had I not known she loved me, I would have thought she hated me. She said, ‘I have lost my mother, my brothers, my sister, to lead you through the wilderness to a place of rest; and now you plan to go away from me, with a dream in your head, while I stay, alone, with a King whom I distrust as my guardian. You sit there smiling, in a clean robe they have given you, your body made sacred by the oil they have put on you, their robe, their oil, and you ask me to be patient, to wait for your dead hand to come up from the earth again and take hold of mine! Is this my future, then, King Oedipus? Is this the reward of a princess of Thebes, that she must hold her tongue, and dry her eyes, while rogues spend all we have earned? Is the royal House of Thebes shrunk now so small that its King and its Princess must bow to the will of a womanish bull-dancer from Crete? Is it good value, after all our plagues, our dead beasts, our flies, our old men being flung from high walls, for you to become the Sown Man of Athens, and me to become the whore of Theseus?’

I tell you, I did not know my daughter could speak such words; or even that they had a place in her heart. In that moment, I almost revealed the

secret, that I was not to die in the cavern, but that I was to gather men about me and take back Thebes again. . . It was on the end of my tongue to tell Antigone this, it was like standing on the cliff-edge again. I drew back only with great labour, great beating of the heart; and when I considered how close I had been to that edge, I shuddered at the narrowness of my escape.

Trembling, I rose and took both of her hot dry hands, and I said, 'Dearest of daughters, I swear to you that I adore you more than anything else in the world. You are more than daughter to me, you are like a mother; yes, you stand in place of a mother at this time. You and I are of the one flesh; your hands are shaped like mine, your eyes are of my colour, your skin is of the same tint and texture. In you, I see myself reflected. If a lock of our hair lay upon the floor, no man, no god even, could say from whose head it was shorn. We are so close, the King of Thebes and his Virgin Mother, that we should never doubt one another, should never speak in conflict, for we are the one flesh in its male and female forms.'

Then Antigone withdrew her hands from mine and clasped me about the neck, drawing me to her, as though I was her child, or her dearest lover. There was such softness, such tenderness, in her now that my head whirled to remember who she was; she seemed to be all women I had known, and both joy and terror swept through me to feel her flesh so close-pressed to mine. She whispered hoarsely in my ear, 'If we are so much the same, Oedipus; if we are the one flesh . . .'

Now, with hammers beating in my head, I pulled away from her, for I was standing once again at the chasm lip, with the swirling darkness below me, calling me down. I was afraid of the voices of my blood, of the words her mouth or her body might speak. On her hair she wore the perfume that her mother had left lying in the horn box when she went out so gaily to the hanging-tree, and the scent of it turned my mind, turned my reason, so that I did not know which was wife and which the daughter. If Antigone had held me a heartbeat longer, I should have abandoned myself to the final sinning, I am certain of that. But a small grain of sense, of rightness, still fluttered in my heart, and I fell back from her, stumbling over the gilded stool and almost measuring my length upon the red-tiled floor.

Antigone was standing still now, sighing and wringing her hands, and letting great tears fall upon her breast. She saw the fear in my eyes and shook her tangled head.

'Father,' she said, 'if we are the one flesh, then let me take your place today. Let me go into the earth instead of you.'

I got to my knees, and then to my feet, always watching her as I rose. I said, ‘Daughter, I cannot let this cup pass from my lips to yours.’

Antigone bent her head and answered, ‘Poor King, do you not know that all your life another has drunk the draught meant for you? Have you never understood that? Have you been blind in truth as well as pretence? Think of it, Oedipus, think of those who have taken your place, falling from the mountain, or hanging from the tree . . . So, what break in the pattern would it be if now I went down into the cavern so that you might reach your destiny?’

Her words struck into my heart sharper than any horn, any javelin, any draught of hemlock. In the one breath, I both loved and hated my daughter, and the truth she showed me rose into my throat like vomit, or like the great wave that drowns all things in a quiet harbour. Hardly aware of my movements, I ran to the door and called out, ‘Theseus! Theseus! Fetch this woman away from me, she is driving me mad! She will spoil all!’

While their feet shuffled across the floor, I hid my face in my robe, so as not to see her go. She went silently, consenting, and at last the only sound I heard of her was her quick breathing and the trailing, distant sob that whispered back to me down the echoing corridor.

‘Antigone,’ I said aloud to myself, ‘Antigone! Wait for me, my love, and I will come again. Wait for me, daughter, mother, I implore you!’

But there was no sound now in the corridor, and my weak pride would not let me go to the door and call her back again. Then, all at once, the tears burst up from my heart to my eyes, and in my misery I fell onto the floor.

And it seemed as long and as far as falling from the southern wall of Thebes, and as kinless.

As I lay upon the cold stones, I even envied Menoeceus, for now all his agony was over. There were no more green Springs for him to wait for, anxiously; no sleepless nights to waste, rolling on a foreign bed alone, in villages where no one even knew his name.

Truly the end is in the beginning, and I was a lonely boy again.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

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In the earliest and most primitive of Helladic myths, the Sky-god Uranus married Mother Earth and fathered seven Titans on her. As a result of a bitter family quarrel, in which the mother incited her sons to violence, the youngest of the brood, Cronus, attacked and killed his sleeping father. Then, supreme, he married his own sister, Rhea. From this vicious union, Zeus was born in Crete and, escaping his tyrant-father's efforts to destroy him, became Lord of the Universe after he had deposed Cronus by striking him down with a thunder bolt.

This original, germinal, hard-core source of all family dissolution—involving *Hamlet* and *King Lear* no less than *Electra*—is the root from which the story of Oedipus has developed into its classical and sophisticated forms; and though the Uranus myth has several interpretations, its basic obsession with parricide and incest indicates clearly enough the minatory nature of its message. It is a Commandment, a Law, plainly stated for savage ears, that there are two activities prohibited if a man is to prosper and if tribal communities are not to disintegrate through divine vengeance.

The story of Oedipus is so close in its narrative detail and primal force to the mythic original that I am convinced of its very early provenance; persuaded emotionally that the characters, who are named not by patronymics but by their own attributes (Ruler = Creon, Club-foot = Oedipus, Shining Moon = Jocasta, Cattle-owner = Laius, Cattle-queen = Periboea, Ox-chief = Polybus) *must* belong to a point in time long before the gold-rich fortress of Mycenae came to eminence, or the limestone bastions of Tiryns were raised. That is, to a late Neolithic or early Bronze Age epoch when kings were cattle-herders and queens were matriarchal priestesses cosseted in such mud-built citadels as existed, like Queen-bees in the hive and, indeed, at times representing the Bee-goddess of pre-agricultural days—Melissa who, after mating, caused her consort to be destroyed just as Mother Earth had once contrived an end for Uranus in the first brutish formula.

If such a thesis is accepted by the imagination, then the Oedipus theme may belong historically somewhere within the period 2000 BC to 1700 BC; that is, later than Hesiod's Golden Age when the beehive provided the example for the ideal republic and when Cronus' subjects lived on wild fruits, honey and sheep's milk, which I date at about 3000 BC; also later than his Silver Age, when Moon-goddess worshippers ate bread made from cultivated cereals, adored the mother as the family ruler and refused to revere Zeus, which I date at about 2000 BC against Cretan patterns; but

rather at the time of Hesiod's 'men with bronze weapons who came in like fruit falling from the trees, who rejoiced in war being arrogant and merciless, and who ate flesh as well as bread.'

These I take to be the earliest influx of Hellenic herdsmen, like Laius, from the northern Balkans or even the steppelands; such men as represented their four-wheeled chariots or wagons, their Sun-god, and their warriors in combat, diagrammatically, about 1700 BC at Monte Bego in the Maritime Alps and in the Val Camonica near Lake Garda, and so anticipated the fighting-kings of Mycenae, who were Hesiod's second race of Bronze men, by a hundred years at least.

I do not see these first warrior-herdsmen as an organized force of invaders, such as the Achaeans proper became under the High King Agamemnon, but rather as isolated foragers who sometimes established themselves as rulers, but sometimes had to settle for being a tolerated minority, like my 'baron-caste' in Thebes.

As for my conception of that city (whose name means 'Admirable' and so singles it out above other settlements of the time), I have here drawn on the recent archaeological excavations of James Mellaart, thirty miles south-east of Anatolian Konya; that is, Iconium, or ancient Greek Lycaonia, Land of Sly Wolves. The neolithic brick-built city which Mellaart has been uncovering since 1961 precedes Cnossus by 4,000 years, is twice the size of Troy and three times bigger than Jericho, the only other neolithic city so far discovered. Konya's wall paintings of leopards and wild bulls, together with its many clay figurines of the ubiquitous goddess in a state of pregnancy, at first seem to identify this city with neolithic mainland Greece and the Cyclades. Yet nagging at the back of the mind is the suspicion that this city of long bricks might be a Sumerian outpost, since the journey from Susa to Konya, for the most part along that life-line the Euphrates, would not have exceeded 900 miles—a feasible distance for the far-ranging ancient world.

However, the recovered skeletal remains of Konya's inhabitants, with their long heads and tall stature, provide yet another cross-track for the imagination to travel down. These people do not seem to be the round-headed Sumerians of Mari, or yet the small-boned Minoans of Crete (who, in any event, did not establish their Asiatic settlements until about 1800 BC). Moreover, Konya's bones are too old to have been those of steppeland Hellenes, long-headed and long-limbed as those Aryan nomads probably were.

So, taking another plunge into the prehistoric dark, I think of the Nilotic peoples, who are long-headed and long-limbed, and who had the choice of a well established land route round the Canaanite coast, or of a voyage of 250 miles from Libya to Crete, in such stout sea-going vessels as we know Egyptian and Phoenician merchants to have possessed.

The Helladic myth that the goddess Athene was born in Libya, wore a goatskin apron, had as her childhood toys a spear and shield, and went through a form of ritual combat in which she accidentally killed her playmate, Pallas, inevitably leads one to think of such handsomely-profiled warrior-herdsmen as the Masai, Galla and Latuka, who in the third millennium might have been 'Libyans' herding in the Lower Nile. Certainly the long-horned cattle and their herders' physique, dress and hair-styles as shown on the walls of the vizier Mereruka's tomb near Saqqarah and dated at 2400 BC could have been seen around Lake Victoria less than twenty-five years ago.

In support of my description of the cattle-herders, Polybus and Periboea, pottery finds in Crete dating from 4000 BC suggest a strong Libyan contact. Moreover, when Upper and Lower Egypt were tyranically joined in 3000 BC, *before* the First Minoan Age, great numbers of Nilotic dissidents sought refuge in Crete, and later moved northwards as far as Thrace in the Minoan expansion which gradually developed, carrying with them the worship of their goddess Neith, whom Plato identifies with Athene and who, in pre-Hellenic times, had shrines in many other places than Athens. Moreover, it was the Libyo-Thracian goat-goddess Aegis who gave a name to the Aegean Sea.

That such a formidable wave of African peoples should leave no racial mark on the Europe in which they settled is not surprising when we recall that in AD 1772 Lord Mansfield set free by Parliamentary Act 15,000 Negro servant-slaves in England, who thereupon disappeared without trace into the Anglo-Saxon melting-pot within five generations.

The supplementary facts that the cultivated olive was first brought to Greece from Libya, and that about 1600 BC Hellenic mercenaries assisted in the expulsion of the Hyksos Shepherd-kings from Egypt, only serve to stress the polyphony of movement operating in the eastern Mediterranean during early pre-history. So, it is no more strange that Thebes should have been terrorized by the imported Egyptian Sphinx than that Mycenae should later have brought amber from the cold Baltic, or have exported weapons to southern England.

It is against such a racially and culturally diversified background that I set Oedipus, the shepherd who became The Shepherd, the peasant cripple urged on by his infirmity to become a hero and then, like other heroes, to meet the fate he had evaded throughout his life. He is the prototype of every saviour who finally suffers at the hands of those he saves. I see him not as a roaring doom-driven Achaean tyrant-king, but rather as a simple, partially-Cretanized mainlander of pre-Hellenic stock, a complex perhaps of Hesiod's Golden and Silver Races, coming down from the remote pastoral hills into a land already torn by conflicting interests and immigrants, and among whom he hobbles in search of his hero-fulfilment, like a divine fool and not an invading warrior.

In this conception, he is a sensitive young man who, terrorized through his childhood and adolescence by primitive 'magic', as a hero wages private war on it (as Perseus did upon the Gorgon and Theseus upon the Minotaur), destroying totems, curbing necrophilous savagery, and attempting various elementary social reforms within the city. However, when a sequence of natural disasters strikes Thebes, this kingly innovator becomes the obvious scapegoat for his people's frightened wrath, and finally the victim of those vested interests of the 'magic' he had tried to suppress, and which now indict him according to the twin taboos of the traditional law, as expressed in the Uranus myth.

Only one historical obstacle seems to stand in the way of such a re-statement—that, according to legend, Oedipus sought his last refuge with Theseus, King of Athens, who must have lived about 1400 BC if he indeed led the expedition which finally sacked Cnossus.

Here I shelter behind Peake and Fleure (*The Horse and the Sword*) who suspect the reliability of all Athenian records before 1350 BC, and deduce that many exploits later attributed to Theseus were in fact performed by nameless chieftains of Troezen at a much earlier period. If this is the case, then an early Bronze Age Oedipus might well have met 'Theseus', whatever his real name was, at some time long before 1400 BC.

In any event, the strangely somnambulistic, claustrophobic and compulsively echoing nature of the Oedipus tragedy *will* create its own collateral myths, which here are not those of the classical Athenian drama, but rather a counterpoint commentary on them, in another manner, in another age, intended for another audience.

HENRY TREECE

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.

Book name and author have been added to the original book cover. The resulting cover is placed in the public domain.

[The end of *Oedipus* by Henry Treece]