

THE OLD
ONES HEAR

Malcolm Jameson
1942

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Title: The Old Ones Hear

Date of first publication: 1942

Author: Malcolm Jameson (1891-1945)

Date first posted: Dec. 14, 2021

Date last updated: Dec. 14, 2021

Faded Page eBook #20211227

This eBook was produced by: Al Haines

[Source: Unknown Worlds, June 1, 1942]

THE OLD ONES HEAR

By Malcolm Jameson

The Old Ones may hear—and act, too—in somewhat different manner, in ways we do not expect. And in ways that military tactics do not take into account—

Yesterday our forces occupied the island of Aea.

Axis War Communique.

The promontory loomed ahead, vague and shadowy. Behind it, dark against the starry western sky, lay the remainder of the small island. The commander who sat in the stern sheets leaned forward and spoke quietly to the men on the aftermost thwart.

"Land ahead," he said. "Pass the word forward to make no noise."

Under the dim starlight the men sent the whispered message on its way. The scantily dressed lieutenant and midshipman who sat on either side of the boat officer shivered and pulled their blankets tighter about their shoulders. Their blouses had been ripped apart and blown off by the terrific blasts of the bombs that had sunk their ship.

The boat went on. All was silent except for the faint ripple under its bows and the swish of quickwater along the sides. Even the wounded were quiet, though the faithful mast groaned once or twice as the hastily rigged sail slightly shifted its position.

It was a strangely assorted boat load, those men huddled together on the thwarts and in the spaces between. Thirty-odd of them were various ratings of his majesty's ship *Peeblesshire*; nine were Anzacs, all wounded; four were what was left of the crew of a cargo ship sunk four days before. The oddest was a queer old Greek, clad in his quaint skirted uniform. He had been the Anzacs' mountain guide and had fought with them from Mount Olympus, down through the desperate stand at Thermopylæ, across the flanks of lofty Parnassus, past Delphi to the water's edge. A little touched, they thought him, for when they had rigged the mast he produced a leather bag as if from nowhere and hung it on the mast by the nock of the sail. "For good luck," he had grunted, by way of explanation. Ever since, he had sat doggedly on the third thwart and never taken his eyes off it.

The commander peered anxiously ahead. It had been a hard trip, even though luck had been with them, just as the old Greek had foretold. They had driven more than sixty

miles through the winding waterways of the Gulf of Corinth and that of Patras, and always with a miraculously favorable breeze. Not once had a roving Stuka found them, nor the prowling coastal motorboats. But they had had to leave their ship in a hurry and there was room only for men, not for spare stores of provisions and water. The wounded were very miserable, and some were near death. The commander wondered what the island was, and whether it held capture for them, or haven.

There was not a glimmer of a light to be seen. Nor could his keen, night-piercing eye detect that there had ever been a light on the end of the jagged cape which he passed close aboard. He gave the tiller a touch and headed up into the cove that lay inside. Suddenly he started. For dead ahead, square across his bows, he could distinctly see the masts and upperworks of a cruiser. It was an enemy cruiser. He knew that at a glance from its fat, single stack with a deal of rake to it. He had laid his sights on a sister of it, not two weeks before, and watched her disappear in a gush of flame, smoke and splinters.

"Douse the sail," he ordered huskily, and put his tiller up.

The sail came down with a rush and with remarkably little noise, but the nails of the commander's disengaged hand were biting hard into the palm. He expected momentarily to hear a staccato challenge or be fixed in the prying beam of a searchlight. There were such things as picket boats, too, which might be lurking anywhere. But there was no challenge. The ship was as dead, apparently, as a hulk left to rot in some back channel.

The boat had way enough upon it to neatly round the stern of the alien warship. He eased it off a little and studied his unexpected adversary more closely. There was not a man on deck, so far as he could see, and, astonishingly enough—for it lacked only an hour or so to the dawn—her colors flapped at both bow and stern, for all the world like noontime on a gala day.

"Out oars," he whispered, and waited patiently while the extra men slid off the thwarts and lay down out of the way in the soggy bilges. Of a sudden a daring idea had come to him. Perhaps the bulk of that cruiser's complement were on shore, and the remainder, certain of their safety, had been celebrating an easy victory over an undefended island. It might be that they were all drunk. He had heard that discipline on some of those ships was not of the best.

"Give way together," he ordered, and pointed the nose of his overladen craft toward the unguarded gangway.

For several minutes there was only the rhythmic stroke of the oars and the sound of water dripping from their uplifted blades as they swept forward for the next impulse. The commander steered her deftly, and after a few more low-spoken orders, felt the bow graze the platform of the accommodation ladder. Ready hands grasped at stanchions, and the rowers boated their oars without a sound. The moment they were alongside, the commander leaped like a panther to the landing stage and swiftly mounted the ladder.

There was no one at the top of it. A quick turn around the deck revealed nobody. He listened at a hatchway and at a

ventilator. The ship was silent as the tomb, except for the faint throbbing of machinery far below decks. He went back to the gangway and beckoned his men to come up.

They swarmed up the ladder, all of them that could walk, gripping what pistols and rifles they had contrived to keep with them in their hurried evacuation. There was a low conference and the group split up into several smaller squads. They parted, some going forward, some aft, the remainder below. Fifteen minutes later they reassembled, as had been agreed upon.

"A rum thing, sir," said a petty officer. "Not a living soul in the ruddy ship. But there's lights below and some auxiliaries running. They left a few burners going, so there's some steam in the boilers, though their water's low."

"How long will it take to get steam enough up to move her?" asked the commander sharply.

"Two hours, sir. Maybe less."

"Get at it. Mr. Torkingham!"

The lieutenant acknowledged.

"Have the wounded men brought up out of the boat and put 'em to bed. When you have found yourself some warm clothes, go up on the bridge and get acquainted with all the gadgets there. When there is steam enough to work the anchor engine, heave short. We're getting under way in two hours."

"Aye, aye, sir."

"I notice there's not a boat on the ship. Every set of skids and davits and all the booms are empty. I'm curious about that. While you are making ready, I am going to take a pull ashore and find out what has happened. I'll be back shortly."

The commander waited stolidly at the top of the gangway while the injured men were being carried up. He was concealing his impatience as best he could, for he felt he could not leave this unknown island without some explanation of his bizarre landfall. Never in all the histories of the navies of the world had there been a precedent for it. To leave a modern warship all standing with not even an anchor watch or a water tender on board! It was incredible. Not even during the darkest, undisciplined days of the Menshevik revolution at Kronstadt had it a counterpart.

He thought back over the escape and the marvels of the previous day and night. When he had left the shattered *Peeblesshire* she was an inferno of raging flames. There had been no opportunity to salvage a chart. Yet the boat had found her way through the winding channels to this place he did not recognize, and always with a good, stiff following breeze that veered and hauled as if to order. He wondered quizzically about the queer old Greek and his "windbag" and his talk of good luck. Well, they had had fair winds. And as for good luck! Just now he stood on the quarterdeck of a ship quite as good in some respects as the one he had had blown from beneath him. And he had taken it without a vestige of a

struggle. He was short-handed, of course, but he could manage.

It occurred to him to ask the men about the Greek. He wanted to question him as to what island this was, how it lay as regards Cephalonia, and how far from Cape Matapan. But none of the men knew where he had gone. No one had seen him since they made the gangway. He had not come on board. He was not now in the boat. Maybe, feeling himself safe among his own people and his duty done, he had swum ashore.

The commander shrugged. It did not matter greatly. He had never been able to get anything out of the old fellow, anyway, but scarcely intelligible mumbles. He picked out a few men for a boat's crew, then slid down the ladder and into the boat. By that time it was full light, though still gray, and he could see that the pull would not be a long one.

He stood up in the boat on the way in, examining the shore. Ahead of him was a quay of antique masonry, hung over with green moss. Alongside it lay the abandoned cruiser's boats—power boats, pulling boats, even life rafts ripped from the bases of the masts—but in none of them was a boatkeeper. The desertion of his prize's crew had been absolute and complete.

To the right and left stretched sandy beaches, studded with the protruding ribs of vessels left to go to wrack many years before. They marred the beach as the straggly, yellow teeth in the gums of a hag mar her smile, transforming it into something sinister and ominous. As he drew closer he saw

one peculiar relic and he knew it from its unique shape. It was covered with green patina of many centuries, but it could have been but one thing—the bronze ram of an ancient trireme.

He mounted the worn treads of the ancient steps of the quay with misgivings that grew with every foot of progress he made. This unknown islet—and he thought he knew them all, for he had cruised this coast many times since his midshipman days—appeared to be the graveyard of ships. Was it subject to a strange and swift pestilence? If so, why had it not been mentioned in the "Sailing Directions"? A sense of disquiet, unease, descended upon him, far more disturbing than had been the roar of the plunging Stukas or the screaming of their deadly bombs. He wondered whether he should go on or turn tail and fly. But curiosity drove him forward.

"Wait here," he said tersely to the boat crew, and strode off up the gentle slope, doing his best to quell the thrills of expectancy, amounting almost to fear, of imminent disaster.

There was no town to be seen, nor houses of any sort. Nor were there tilled fields. The place was more of a park, lovely in its grassy stretches, and spotted with clumps of trees and hedges. He found a path which ran between two winding rows of bushes and followed it for some distance. At a turn farther on he caught a glimpse through the copses of an establishment of some sort on the top of the hill.

"Ah," he thought, "the villa of a rich playboy, perhaps a retired munitions millionaire, or an exiled grand duke."

He stopped to survey it, though he could see little except the red tiles of its roof and the olive grove surrounding it. But his viewing of the place was cut short in an unexpected way. Before he knew what was happening, a horde of snapping wolves descended upon him. There were hundreds in the pack and they swarmed about him, leaping and snarling.

He drew his pistol, but hesitated to use it. He did not want to advertise his presence on the islet. He pivoted on one leg and kept himself in an incessant swinging, kicking at the fangs of those animals that threatened him most. Once or twice he succeeded in landing a vicious kick squarely in the jaws of the plunging brutes, and after that the others kept at a more respectful distance. He noticed then that they were not truly wolves, but near-wolves—a noisy pack of blustering jackals, willing and eager to pull down a lamb, but not overbold when it came to man. Yet they surrounded him, and their ceaseless yapping and snapping annoyed him. He could defend himself, but hardly progress.

Again a miracle happened. In his turning and twisting he had put his back to the villa on the hill, but now he heard a vibrant, contralto voice berating the creatures in tones of withering scorn. He did not recognize the odd dialect she used, but he did know the biting end of a black-snake whip when he saw one. The end of a long lash flashed by him, nicked a patch of yellow hair from the rump of one of the howling doglike creatures, which promptly slunk away, yelping and whining miserably. He heard the whistle and

snap of the lash again and the distressed cries of another victim. He wheeled to see who his rescuer might be.

His senses reeled, and he could only gasp. The wielder of the lash was a woman; he had already surmised that from the voice. But nothing in his previous life had prepared him for what he saw. He was gazing at a woman, but such a woman as exists ordinarily only in visions and dreams. She was the incarnation of ideal voluptuous beauty, but at the same moment she was also the incarnation of cold, vindictive fury as she laid mercilessly about her with her whip. Her hair, under the touch of the first ray of the morning sun, was as a mass of flame, and there was an uncanny, quality to her flashing green eyes which had the curious property of seeming to repel yet attract irresistibly at the same moment. There was hardly a detail of her exquisite figure he did not take in at that first startled glance, for she wore only a filmy veil of a garment that revealed more than it hid.

She seemed suddenly to become aware of him, as if she had not observed him before. Raging scorn melted from her face and she took on an expression of utter tenderness and longing that was more than he could bear. In that instant she cast her whip away from her and stretched out her arms to him in passionate welcome. He staggered forward blindly, all thought of ship or duty vanishing from his mind. He only knew that unless he reached her and embraced her, the drum-like roll of his throbbing pulses would drive him mad.

Yet he had taken not more than one or two strides before her manner altered again, and he froze where he stood under the compulsion of her calm, imperious gaze. She was cold

and haughty now, and queenlike, and regarded him with a cool, appraising look that was almost as terrifying as had been her fury and her ardor.

"You are a Briton, our ally?" she asked, a trifle hesitantly. "The man Hermes brought?"

"Hermes?"

"Oh, you wouldn't know, of course. He assumes many forms." She relaxed her forbidding attitude and permitted herself a little smile. "But you were not to come upon my island. You were brought to take that hideous, smoking iron galley away—"

"But its crew—what became of them?"

She stooped and picked up her whip, flicking it tentatively as she did. The wolfish animals which had been cowering and whimpering about her feet slunk a little farther away.

"Have no fear of them. They will not return to interfere with you. Later, when I have disciplined them properly, I shall take them to the other side of the island and turn them into the pasture with my swine. Those are they who came to me from the sky." She seemed to be laughing inwardly, as if at a pleasant reminiscence.

The softening of her mood brought back his earlier yearning with all its imperativeness. He sprang forward to snatch her into his arms, but she recoiled and looked at him with something like horror.

"No, no!" she cried. "Not you! You are our friend, our ally. It cannot be. Take what the gods have provided and go. It is a privilege few have had who have stepped upon this island and dealt with me, but it is so ordered. Go!"

The kaleidoscope of emotions to which he had been subjected in this last strange hour showed a new phase. A chilling sense of awe began to grow upon him as the monstrous truth of what he had seen and heard began to dawn upon him. He looked at her now with something akin to fear, yet there was a degree of grudging respect in it, too. That these long dormant ones should stir themselves now to help, if only a little, was something to be honored. He felt impelled to bow.

"I will go," he said quietly, "at once. But tell me—I must know, for my sanity's sake—who are you?"

Her eyes widened, as if she were deeply hurt.

"I? In the old days I had a name, but that does not matter now. I am everywhere, anywhere, and my work is always the same—I turn men into beasts."

She shuddered, and her look changed. It was a horrible mixture of passion and power—and agony. "Go!" she said.

THE END.

[The end of *The Old Ones Hear* by Malcolm Jameson]