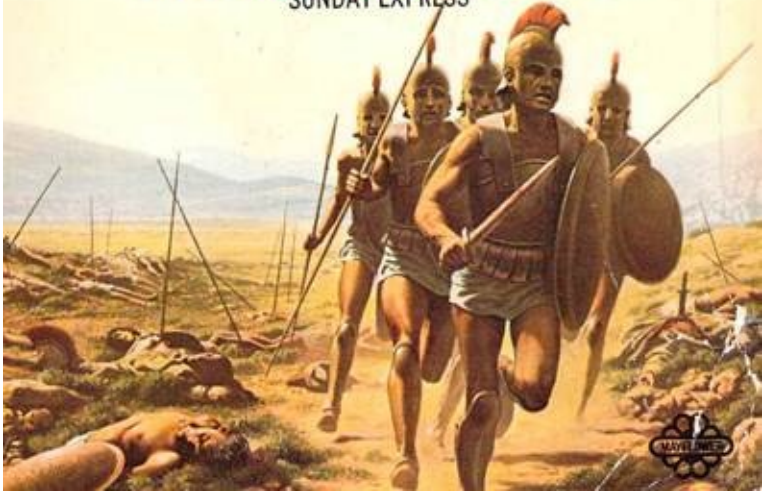


GEORGE SHIPWAY

AUTHOR OF **FREELANCE** AND **THE CHILIAN CLUB**

WARRIOR IN BRONZE

**'A NATURAL WRITER
WITH SUPERLATIVE POWERS'**
SUNDAY EXPRESS



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George Shipway

Warrior in Bronze

George Shipway was educated at Clifton and the Royal Military College, Sandhurst. From 1928 to 1947 he served in the Indian Cavalry, and from 1949 to 1968 taught at a boys' school in Hampshire. In 1968 his first novel, *Imperial Governor*, was published and brought him immediate recognition as an author of historical fiction of the highest order. Since then he has published six other novels, including the brilliantly prophetic *The Chilian Club*, *The Paladin* and *The Wolf*

Time.

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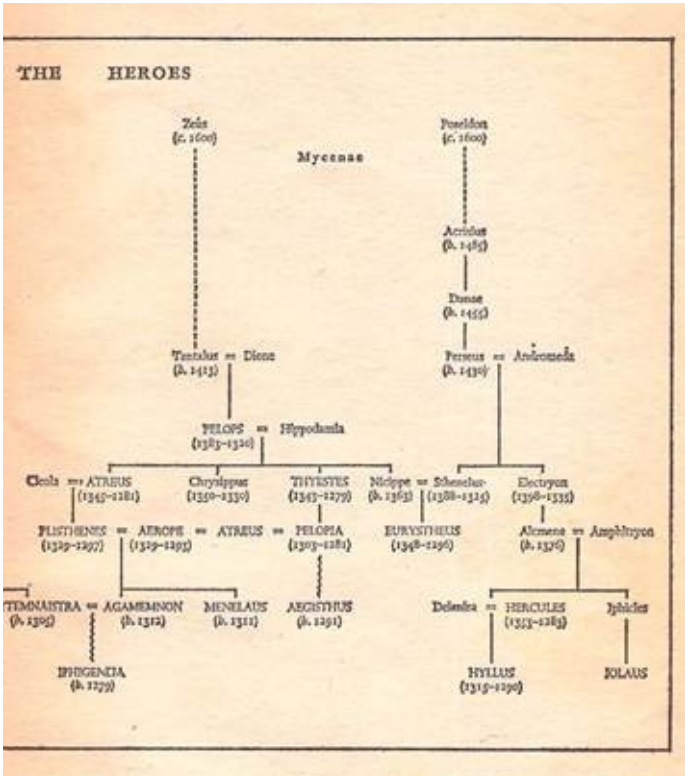
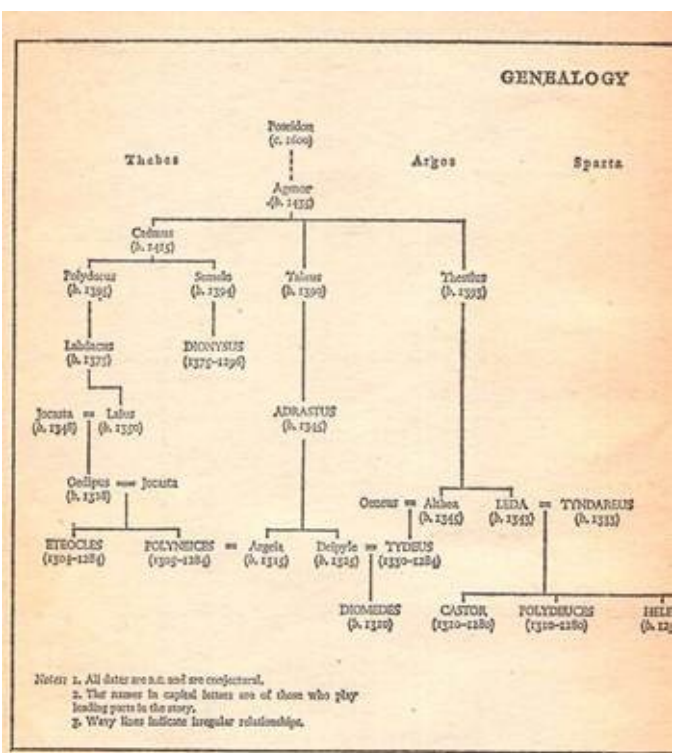
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To
Lorna

. . . γυναικί
καλή τε μεγάλη τε και άγλαά έργα ιδυίη





Chronological Note

SCHOLARS still dispute the chronology of the Greek Heroic Age; hence it would be a rash scribbler who ventured on definite dates. However, a distinguished archaeologist who recently excavated Troy estimate

the city's destruction by the Achaeans at c. 1270 B.C., by which time their leader Agamemnon may have been in his early forties. I have therefore placed his lifetime in the years 1312-1270 B.C. The Greek legends from Homer onwards, on which my tale is based, and in particular the detailed genealogies they contain, do not in general contradict this time-scale.

Chapter 1

THE palace's summer bedrooms gave on to a balustraded balcony shaded by a sloping terrace roof which overlooked the town. The balustrade's veined marble pillars supported an alabaster parapet soft enough to be cut by the small toy daggers we wore at our belts. The rail therefore was scratched and notched throughout its length; and all our nursemaids' scolding failed to stop an enchanting game. Nobody who mattered ever noticed; the bedrooms were always deserted during the day; except for servants we had the balcony to ourselves from dawn till dusk.

This was our playground; here my earliest memories begin.

From our eyrie the palace walls fell down like sheer white cliffs. The road which climbed the hilltop from the Northern Gate - not the Gate of the Lions, of course, which was only a postern then - curved between tiers of flat-topped houses and ended at a flight of steep stone steps leading to the Great Court's entrance directly below. On the citadel's guardian wall sentries looking small as flies paced the rampart walk. Broken, stony ground sloped from the base of the wall to a shallow valley thronged with houses painted yellow and red, white and blue and green like jewels spilled from a lady's casket.

From the balcony's height the buildings looked tiny as those small baked-clay cottages which slaves gave my sister to house her dolls. It seemed possible to lob a stone on to the farthest roofs - an illusion, as it proved. Our most strenuous throws just cleared the road beneath; although Menelaus, taking a run which bruised his chest on the parapet, once hit the guardhouse roof at the top of the steps. Unluckily a sentinel observed the whole performance; and a stern message from our mother forbade a repetition. So I never had a chance to beat my brother's record, an improbable feat in any event, for Menelaus was always stronger than I. Cultivated land surrounded the villages; olives and vines terraced the hillsides; sheep grazed wiry grass which bordered the forests of oak and cypress. In the crystalline sunlight of spring and early autumn you could sometimes catch a glimpse of the sea near Nauplia, a shining blade on the horizon's farthest rim. The whole mightiness of Mycenae, we thought in childish ignorance, was spread like a gaudy tapestry before our eyes.

We were very young then - Menelaus seven, myself a year older - and could not conceive of the vast foundations supporting our family dominion.

The patterned floors of the summer bedrooms extended to the balcony and offered a smooth surface for games we played with ivory discs: the patterns made convenient aiming marks and goals. The object was to throw or slide your counters within the chosen goal and knock your opponent's out. Our throws were erratic; we lost many counters which bounced between the balustrade pillars and dropped the height of eight tall men to the road below.

The disaster which struck one bright spring day had nothing to do

with accident. We had tired of the game, and were leaning side by side over the balustrade, chins just topping the parapet, trying to distinguish the warriors' evolutions on the Field of War in the distance. A chariot crunched slowly up the road from the gate, the occupants, judging from their armour, a Hero and his Companion returned early from parade. The Hero dismounted, spoke briefly to his driver and began to climb the steps. He came directly below our interested faces. I juggled in my hand an ivory disc - a finger's-breadth thick, a palm's-width across.

The temptation was overpowering. I reached out and dropped it.

The counter struck his helmet; ivory clicked on the boar's-tusk crest and spun away in the dust. The man jumped, lifted hand to helmet, raised his face and stared at the heads which peered at him from far above. In horror I recognized my target, and recoiled from the railing.

'Thyestes!'

'You fool!' Menelaus whispered.

Neither of us dared look out again. We heard the chariot's bronze-tired wheels descending the path, and the guard commander's voice calling a salute. Then silence. We stared dumbly into each other's eyes and awaited the doom which must fall on our heads surely as leaf-fall follows harvest. In a futile attempt to hide the evidence I feverishly told our attendant slaves to gather the counters littering the floor and conceal them under a bed.

Menelaus said in a strained voice, 'He's a long time, Agamemnon. Do you think he didn't see us?'

'No. Nothing escapes Thyestes.'

We were deadly afraid of Thyestes. Everyone was. I cannot think of him, even now, without a shudder of loathing.

Footsteps clumped the wooden stairway. We backed from the bedroom in panic like a pair of frightened mice, shuffled to the balcony and pressed our spines against the balustrade. Two formidable figures crossed the floor. One, as we expected, was Thyestes; the second his brother Atreus, Marshal of Mycenae.

A gold-studded belt, drawn tightly at the waist, secured a short leather kilt and emphasized Atreus' slim hips and powerful wide shoulders. Muscles rippled like lazy snakes beneath a skin burned oaken brown by the suns of forty summers. He was immensely tall, the biggest man I have known, taller than myself when I reached my prime. His face was sharply cut and lean, flat-cheeked and eagle nosed; yellow hair unflecked by grey curled behind his ears and caressed a beard trimmed short to a tilted point, the upper lip clean shaven in a fashion then prevailing. His mouth was thin and mobile, curving easily to a smile and as easily to a cruel knife-edged gash; deep furrows joined the corners to his nostrils. Before all else you

noticed his eyes, a blazing blue beneath shaggy brows the sun had bleached near white.

He dismissed the servants, and rocked silently on his heels. I glanced once at his face, and looked quickly away, and examined miserably the deerskin boots which encased his legs to the knee. They were laced with silver wire; golden-corded tassels dangled from the tops. He carried a chariot whip, the long oxhide thong looped between finger and thumb, and idly tapped the butt against his thigh.

The tapping ceased. 'A stone struck Lord Thyestes. Which of you threw it?'

I flicked a glance at Menelaus, who was staring, fascinated, at the whip. 'Not a stone, father. A counter we use for our games. It... slipped.'

'From whose hand?'

I licked my lips, and swallowed. Thyestes stirred impatiently. 'What does it matter? Impertinent little rats! Flog them both, brother, and have done with it!'

The growling voice recalled the man, though I did not dare look at him. He had discarded helmet and cuirass and wore an armour undershirt: a sleeveless woollen garment descending to the kilt. A handspan shorter than Atreus, his bull-necked head crouched on his shoulders like a brooding bird of prey. Heavy, thickset shoulders, and muscles cording arms and legs like hawsers intertwined. Thyestes moved clumsily, lacking his brother's sinuous grace but - as many a foeman found to his cost - he was quick on his feet as a cat. A bushy brown beard framed features harsh as wind-eroded rock. Only the eyes were sentient, deeply sunken, pale green like the offshore sea. When he was angry the pupils darkened, turned stone-grey flecked with white, twin ice-pools frozen hard.

He was angry now. My knees quivered; I was glad of the sun-warmed parapet which supported my shoulder-blades.

Atreus repeated, 'From whose hand?'

'I can't remember,' I muttered. 'It was mischance. We never intended ...'

Menelaus pushed himself from the balustrade and stood shakily upright, hands clenched tight at his sides. 'I dropped the disc, father,' he said in a tiny voice.

I raised my head to see Atreus' response. He might not have heard. His gaze was fixed on me; the long searching look a man gives a horse whose quality he doubts. I saw contempt in his eyes and, strangely, a flash of admiration. You could say I was overly young to read the thoughts of a man four times my age. True - but this percipience, an ability to probe men's minds and motives is a gift The Lady bestowed on me at birth. Without it I could not, today, be where I am.

'Insolent little swine!' Thyestes snapped.

Atreus roused himself. 'You aimed deliberately, Menelaus?'

My brother bowed his head. Atreus coiled his whip-thong round the handle, tightly ridging the shaft, and said briskly, 'Right. You shall be taught to respect your elders. Turn round. Fold your arms on the balustrade, and don't move!'

Menelaus obeyed. He sank brow on forearms, his hands gripped the parapet's edge. Atreus moved behind him, raised the whip and slashed it down. A weal scarred the boy's thin back. The second cut slammed a finger's width from the first, the third and fourth criss-crossed it. Red droplets beaded the skin. Menelaus squirmed a little, and bit his wrist.

Atreus ended the thrashing, unwound thong from shaft and dropped the lash distastefully. It trailed a scarlet smear on the painted plaster. Menelaus sank to his knees, scraping his forehead on the balustrade pillars. He had not uttered a sound, but now he moaned very softly. Thyestes stepped forward and lifted a foot. Atreus moved sharply to block the brutal kick.

'Enough, brother! The child has learned his lesson.' He added sternly, 'He is of our blood. Would you treat him like a slave?'

Thyestes scowled. Atreus gestured him to the stairway. As they went he said across his shoulder, 'Call the servants, Agamemnon. See his cuts are washed and anointed.' He paused at the head of the stairs and tugged his beard. 'You are both growing up,' he mused aloud, 'too old to idle here in charge of slaves and nursemaids and tumble into trouble. Time you began your training. I shall see to it.'

His teeth flashed white in a sudden smile, and he clattered down the stairs.

I did as I was told, and sent a man for the palace physician. Then I went to my brother. He lay curled up on the floor, eyes screwed tightly shut. Tears trickled down his cheeks.

'Thank you, Menelaus,' I whispered.

(Several years later Atreus recalled this episode. 'I knew perfectly well you were guilty,' he said, 'and you proved yourself a liar and a crook. I decided then you should follow me on Mycenae's throne. You see, Agamemnon, a king must be entirely unscrupulous, ready at need to betray his dearest friend - even his beloved brother. I think you meet the measure very fairly - just the kind of ruler our treacherous Heroes need.')

**

The transition was abrupt. Menelaus and I shifted quarters to the squires' wing: long gloomy chambers, dormitories and living rooms combined, on the first floor facing the mountains. The squire under training - about twenty sons of noblemen from Tiryns and Mycenae - quickly put us in our place. All were equal here, royal offspring like ourselves no more favoured than the rest. A young Companion named Diore had charge of this turbulent gang, a stocky dark-haired man with a scathing tongue and ready whip, who stood no nonsense from cocky children.

I shall not detail the training we endured for the next four years: a rigorous routine painfully familiar to every man of noble blood. We were routed from bed in the dark and running the fields before sunrise, Diores loping in rear, his lash drawing blood from the laggards. We paused to draw breath on reaching the Field of War: an extensive stretch of level ground six hundred paces from the citadel's gate where Mycenae's warriors paraded. Two narrow watercourses, dry in the summer moons, meandered across the surface: a test for aspirant Companions, who had to carry them at a gallop. Here we wrestled and boxed, jumped ditches and walls and performed strange muscle-racking exercises. Later we progressed to more exciting work: weapon training, spears and swords and bows; the care of arms and armour; battle drill and archery.

One day I objected sulkily to Diores that fighting on foot like common spearmen was hardly gentlemen's work. He forbore, for a change, to bite my head off, and said, 'Squad - down shields. Rest. Listen, and get this into your stupid skulls. You hope one day to be Heroes - The Lady save us! What are Heroes? They're men of noble blood, and the best fighters in the world. A Hero leads spearmen and bowmen, slingers, horsemen and charioteers: whatever they do he must do better. So he learns to fight on foot like a spearman, shoot like an archer, ride like a scout and drive like a Companion. Which will take you years, and you've hardly started. At the end, if you survive, you'll be fit to ride a chariot in the forefront of the Battle where Heroes always fight. Until then you work. On your feet, scum! Take up shields!'

In the afternoons Diores herded us to the palace wine stores and taught us vintages and serving: essential knowledge for budding squires - servants handed food at meals, but wine was a gentleman's business. Finally we observed the lords at dinner for three successive days, watching from the gallery above the Hall and listening with half an ear to Diores' running commentary. Then he loosed us on a banquet which King Eurys-theus gave to a visiting lord. I was told to attend on Atreus, Menelaus and Thyestes. We were timorous as kittens; and the brilliant scene, the noise and pageantry and splendour were no anodyne for nerves.

The Great Hall of Mycenae is sixteen paces long by fourteen wide, the floor laid out in patterned squares, red and yellow, blue and white. A charcoal fire burns day and night throughout the year on a circular hearth in the centre where food is cooked. Four fluted wooden columns frame the hearth and support an opening in the ceiling which a gallery surrounds, all roofed by a clerestory whose windows admitted light and air and allowed the smoke to escape. A single massive portal closed by brazen-plated doors led to the vestibule and portico beyond.

Brilliant painted patterns blazed from every handsbreadth of the ceiling; lions hunted stags along one wall, the figures large as life, colours flaring from the plaster. On another men in chariots drove to war, armour yellow-gold, horses paired in white and black. Winged dog-headed monsters flanked a red-veined marble throne and headed twin processions of birds and beasts and butterflies: an iridescent riot which seemed to live and move.

Torchlight shivered stars from crystal and silver and gold; the air was scented with charcoal smoke, roasting meat and wine. Squires

filled silver flagons from a wine store adjoining the vestibule and threaded a way through tables and gesticulating men: two hundred bare brown bodies gleaming with perfumed oil, bedizened with golden bracelets and necklaces and gems - a job that required a dancer's poise and a steady hand. You also had to dodge the foraging dogs: fast, heavy Molossians which Heroes kept for hunting, willing to tackle anything from a stag to a charging lion. Meanwhile Diores, from a seat near the door, watched like a falcon and counted each drop we spilled.

Nobody noticed the squires except when he wanted a drink. I kept - my primary duty - the Marshal's goblet abrim; but any lord, as I passed, could demand I filled his cup. Edging between outer tables on a journey from the wine store I felt fingers pluck my kilt and paused to do the bidding of the owner: a man whose body was white as a woman's. I saw his face in profile, hollow-cheeked and thin, features finely cut, a short fair beard. A Hero or Companion - no lesser mortal dined in the Hall. A resemblance to someone I knew flitted across my memory and escaped in the general din.

He tapped his empty cup, and smiled.

I stooped to obey his order, and glimpsed the opposite side of his face. From jawbone to temple the cheek was smashed and sunken, the skin grey-white and crumpled. His right eye, fixed and glazed, stared blindly from deep in the socket. The beard straggled limply across this frightful scar, like grass struggling to survive on barren ground.

I averted my gaze and filled his cup, a crystal goblet engraved with running hounds. He said, 'A paler wine than I last was served. What is the vintage?' He spoke softly and slowly, and hesitated between words as though he had to drag them from deep recesses in his mind.

'From Attica, my lord, and ten years old.'

He sipped, and rolled the liquid on his tongue. 'Full and mellow, perhaps a trifle sweet.' I waited, flagon in hand - according to Diores' lessons I could not go till he gave me leave - and wondered who he was. I knew by sight the household nobles and nearly all who lived outside the citadel: they constantly came and went within the palace. Not this one; and I could hardly have failed to notice his ghastly appearance.

He said, 'What is your name, lad?'

'Agamemnon, my lord.'

The good eye widened, a spasm twitched the unmarred side of his face. 'Indeed? An uncommon name. Surely I know it... you must be... His fingers stroked the pitted scar; furrows creased the forehead above the eye that searched my face, the other brow stayed smooth, unwrinkled - a most disturbing phenomenon. 'Impossible,' he

muttered. 'You're too old. Or too young. So hard to remember. The years run together like streams in spate, the waters flow so fast I see no more than a blur. You should have a brother, boy, a brother. Tell me...'

'Yes, my lord: Menelaus.'

'That's the name, that's it! All is coming back!' He spoke feverishly, stuttering, groping for words. His hand reached out and gripped my knee. Diore had warned me that amorous gentlemen heated by wine often tried to fondle personable squires waiting beside the tables; unless I was bent that way I had best leave swiftly on urgent errands. I did not draw away. No lewdness existed here, only an urgent excitement betrayed by the working face, by sweat drops beading his cheeks. None the less I felt embarrassed. The man was decidedly odd and I wished he would give me permission to go.

'Your mother,' he said hoarsely. 'No, don't tell me! Let me think...' He ran fingers through his hair, golden and streaked with grey despite the comparative youthfulness his unscarred features attested. 'Anaxibia? No, that's another. Who was Anaxibia...?'

I opened my mouth to tell him and caught, across the boisterous Hall, Atreus' eyes on mine. He looked both anxious and angry, and beckoned imperatively. Welcoming the pretext I said gently, 'I am summoned elsewhere, my lord. Have I your leave?'

Like the flame of a torch plunged quickly in water his face went blank, expressionless; the tenseness left his limbs and his body went lax in the chair. 'Leave?' he asked vacantly. 'Certainly. Why are you here? Ah, yes, the wine. Very passable, perhaps not fully mature; a thought too sweet for my taste. Where did you say it came from? No matter - off you go.'

I hastened between the tables to the Marshal's side. 'Pour wine,' he snapped. 'My throat is dry as a virgin's crotch. Where the blazes have you been? Your job is to keep my goblet filled - haven't you been told?'

'Yes, my lord,' I answered submissively. 'I was delayed in serving a gentleman yonder' - I pointed my chin to the outer tables - 'who asked me —'

'I saw you.' Cold blue eyes bored into my brain. 'His name is Plisthenes. You will never, Agamemnon, speak to him again. Is that understood?'

I nodded mutely, and tilted the flagon.

The strenuous existence which a squire suffered under training often made me yearn for my former life - a pampered child in the mighty Marshal's household. At the end of the day I dropped into bed and

slept like a corpse; and seldom found the energy to cross the palace courtyard to Atreus' apartment or the quarters where my mother lived.

But I cannot honestly say I missed my mother.

A delicate subject.

Aerope was then about twenty-five years old, small and dark, vivacious and voluptuous and fatally attractive. Lively hazel eyes in an oval face the colour of old ivory, a flawless skin, short tip-tilted nose and wide red mouth. Her open bodice revealed imperious breasts, nipples painted scarlet, inviting the clasp of a lustful masculine hand.

Lest sunlight darken delicate complexions many of the palace's noble ladies lounged all day indoors gossiping and prinking, only venturing out at evening to take the air in litters or to lie on rooftop couches watching the world go by. Not Aerope. She handled the reins as cleverly as any Companion and followed boar hunts dressed like a man in kilt and deerskin boots, galloping her chariot over the roughest going. Amid all her entertainments she found time, in successive years, to bear me and Menelaus and our sister Anaxibia: a harmless little creature who lived in her mother's apartments and hardly enters my story.

Aerope had forbidden us unannounced visits to her rooms since a day when Menelaus and I, both very young, trotted in unexpectedly and found Atreus caressing her in a most familiar way. We were neither surprised nor shocked; to small children the relationships of adults are both esoteric and uninteresting; but Atreus, flushed and annoyed, ordered us sharply away. We ran out, hurt and chastened.

On the occasions, nowadays infrequent, when I visited my mother I expected to find Atreus there - and usually did. She inquired sweetly after my health, hoped I was not overworked, and exclaimed at my physique - I was growing fast and developing hard muscles. Atreus amiably ruffled my hair and tweaked an incipient beard. I answered as manners dictated and left when politeness permitted. These were duty visits, which did not altogether account for the awkwardness I felt when talking to them together, an embarrassment never sensed when I met them individually.

Which was strange, for where else should my father be except at my mother's side ?

* * *

A messenger driving lathered horses arrived from Tiryns with news that flung the palace into confusion. That remote, majestic figure King Eurystheus of Mycenae hastily called his Councillors to the Throne Room and, behind closed doors, debated an intelligence which was obviously disturbing. With a fourteen-year-old's avid curiosity aroused I loitered in the vestibule until the Councillors, looking serious, spilled into the Court. Atreus came out last, walking slowly, chin in hand. His eyes lighted on my face and the absent expression cleared.

'Anxious to discover what it's all about? Well, there's no harm and' - he spoke half to himself - 'it's time you began to learn the intricacies of government. Word has come to Tiryns that Hercules sacked Pylos and killed all King Neleus' sons save only Nestor.'

Everyone knew of Hercules, Warden of Tiryns, who years before had left his native Thebes under a cloud, fled to Mycenae and taken service under King Eurystheus. He was a mighty warrior whose deeds resounded throughout the land and far beyond the seas.

I said so.

'Maybe,' said Atreus sourly. 'The king at first employed him as a huntsman, and Hercules - by nature a rover - roamed all over Achaea destroying beasts of prey. If you judged by his bragging you'd conclude that no one else had killed lions and boars before. Over the years he developed into a sort of hatchet man and troubleshooter -

Eurystheus allotted him all kinds of unpleasant labours. He's collected during his travels a ruffianly gang, scum of every description, commanded - so far as they can be commanded - by his son Hyllus.'

'How did it happen,' I asked, 'that Hercules became Warden of Tiryns?'

Atreus sighed. 'The man is a robber, a freebooter, and more than a little mad. He lifted cattle and horses; and angry rulers, knowing him Eurystheus' man, sent embassies to complain. The king recalled Hercules and, to keep him quiet, gave him charge of Tiryns.' 'Yet he has managed to sack Pylos.'

'He led a warband into Arcadia in pursuit of cattle raiders.' Atreus gritted his teeth. 'Fair enough - but he lost the rustlers- track and instead marched clean across Achaea to attack a realm with which we have no quarrel! This is the kind of anarchy we had in olden times before Perseus branded order on the land!'

'So,' I said, 'what now?'

'The king has summoned Hercules to Mycenae to account for his invasion. Eurystheus must control the lunatic, or he'll have a dozen rulers reaching for our throats! I wish I could devise a way of getting rid of him once for all. The trouble is,' said Atreus sombrely, 'the blaggard has become a legend in his lifetime, and attracts worshipping supporters - Heroes who should know better - besides his riffraff rabble.'

A visitor three days later gave Atreus the chance he wanted.

Journeying with a small retinue a seaman from Iolcos arrived on a rainswept winter's day. He announced himself as Jason, a son of Iolcos' ruling House, and Eurystheus made him welcome. He had come with a proposal which he explained to the king in Council on the morning after a banquet in his honour. I was present in the Hall as Atreus' squire: the Marshal insisted nowadays I attend him on formal occasions, often at the expense of my training on the Field.

The Council consisted of older, wiser Heroes on whom Eurystheus relied. They assembled in chairs in front of the king, while Atreus and two senior Scribes - Curator and Procurator^[1] - stood either side of the throne, ready to tender expert advice on war or economics. Eurystheus invited the visitor to state his case.

Jason was a stocky man with a neat brown beard, a broken nose and harsh storm-beaten features. His eyes were black and piercing; he had a mariner's rolling gait and spoke in jerky sentences, wasting never a word. He brought information, he declared, about a land called Colchis, far beyond the Hellespont on the shores of the Euxine Sea. Had anyone heard of it? No one had. Very well: he wanted to mount a seaborne expedition and sail to faraway Colchis. Therefore he had come to mighty

Mycenae, Achaea's wealthiest realm, to seek silver to pay his shipwrights, supplies to stock the ship and men of courage and purpose to form the crew. Iolcos, a penurious kingdom, rent by dynastic dissension, could provide neither one nor the other.

'What,' asked Eurystheus benignly, 'is the object of so hazardous a voyage?'

Jason said tersely, 'Gold.'

The Council stirred in their seats. Nothing makes men jump like the mention of gold, second only to iron in rarity and preciousness. Atreus said sharply, 'How do you know? How can you be certain there's gold in Colchis?'

'Had it from a Thracian who went there overland. Terrible journey. Took him three whole years. Lost an arm on the way, but brought back this.' Jason fumbled beneath his cloak and produced a sheepskin pouch. He loosened the string and poured in his palm a yellow glittering sand.

'There you are. River gold.'

Eurystheus stirred a fingertip in the little heap. 'It looks genuine enough. Atreus, send your squire to fetch a goldsmith. We'll have this assayed.'

When the man arrived Eurystheus tossed him the pouch. 'Examine this thoroughly, and ascertain the worth in sheep and oxen.' The smith squatted beneath the clerestory where the light was strongest, unfolded his scales and juggled weights, gritted the gleaming grains between his teeth and muttered to himself.

Atreus said, 'There may be gold in Colchis, Jason, but have you any proof there's enough to make a voyage worth while?'

'The Thracian's word, no more. A river flows through Colchis to the sea; the bottom's awash with gold. The locals peg fleeces to the bed. Wool filters the silt and traps the gold. After a time you haul up a golden fleece.'

The Curator stooped and whispered at length in Eurystheus' ear. The king meditatively examined his fingernails, and said, 'I am reminded of a factor which may bear on our discussion. Achaea contains no indigenous sources of gold; we import all we have. The bulk comes from Egypt: a supply which over the last few years has been drying up because their campaigns against the Hittites absorb Egyptian resources. The situation is becoming serious: we need gold to pay for imports. So we must find alternative sources, or trade will quickly decline.'

The audience nodded gravely. I suspect, with after-knowledge, the king's exposition passed well above most Councillors' heads. While Heroes cannot be faulted in questions of war and weaponry their mastery of economics is sometimes frail. But Atreus grasped the point, and said, 'I agree. We should at least examine the Colchis deposits.'

The goldsmith returned from the hearth, bowed to the king and mumbled, 'My lord, the sample is pure high-quality gold, and worth ten oxen or fifteen sheep.'

Eurystheus lobbed the pouch to Jason. 'We will support your venture. I shall let you have warriors from Tiryns and Mycenae. Silver will be given you, and ten cartloads of corn and oil. How many ships are you taking?'

'One. A fifty-oared galley. I call her Argo.'

'You know your business best.' Eurystheus looked doubtful. 'I'd suppose you needed more. However. Have you recruited crewmen from the lands you traversed while journeying here?'

'Not many. They believe it a fool's errand.'

'When people realize I'm supporting the expedition you'll have a flood of volunteers. One condition, Jason. Half the gold you find will be delivered to Mycenae. Agreed?'

'Agreed, sire.'

Eurystheus rose creakily - winter's dampness stiffened his joints. 'The Council is ended.'

I followed Atreus into the vestibule. He leaned against a pillar and scrutinized, eyes remote, the accoutrements of a sentinel who paced outside the portico. 'Fellow's helmet plume needs combing,' the Marshal murmured. Then he clapped my shoulder. 'I've had an idea for getting Hercules out. The moves will have to be subtle, but I believe the plan will work.'

* * *

Jason concluded his arrangements and interviewed Heroes who volunteered for Colchis. Meanwhile an outrider from Tiryns announced Hercules was coming. I was engaged on the Field of War and missed his arrival. On returning to the citadel I met an entourage gathered outside the Northern Gate - and a villainous lot they looked. Dioreas identified some characters as we passed: Iolaus, Hercules' nephew, a bitter-faced young man, trap-mouthed and restless-eyed; and Hercules' son Hyllus, not much older than I, a surly youth with a brooding air. A seasoned bunch, their armour grimed and dented - not the sort of men you would care to meet in a narrow pass in the dark.

Hercules, Eurystheus and the Marshal were closeted in conference. I learned later they questioned him closely about the Pylos escapade. Hercules, surprised and hurt, explained that his cattle-thieving quarrel had crossed into Pylia territory; and during a night pursuit - typical of Hercules to go on fighting after sundown - gave him the slip and he found himself at dawn below the rock of Pylos. A quick reconnaissance disclosed a yawning gate and sentries half asleep. Cheated of his prey, irritable and frustrated, Hercules pounced on a heaven-sent gift, caught the garrison literally napping, killed everyone in sight, collected all the booty his warriors could carry and marched away, satisfied with a job well done.

Atreus listened incredulously, met the king's despairing look and rolled his eyes to the ceiling. They made no attempt to expound the enormity of an unprovoked attack on a friendly city: Hercules' brain was not of the kind to unravel political niceties. Eurystheus, instead, casually mentioned Jason's mission and suggested the dangers involved would daunt the bravest paladin; men of proven valour flinched from a venture so hazardous. Of the few that offered to serve Jason chose only the most renowned.

Hercules swallowed the bait like a hungry shark. 'Why hasn't the idiot come straight to me? I'm just the leader he wants!'

'I don't think,' said Atreus carefully, 'Jason is seeking a leader; he's doing the job himself. He badly needs outstanding warriors like you - but he's a very selective man.'

'Selective?' Hercules spluttered. 'He can't have doubts about me! He'll jump for joy if I join him. It's a chance to add to my laurels, and Tiryns is damnably dull. If you'll release me for a while I'll interview Jason and tell him I'm coming.'

Eurystheus kept his face impassive. 'It can be arranged. Come to the Hall and take a cup of wine.'

There, relaxing in a chair, surrounded by admiring nobles, I first met Hercules. I had expected a giant, and found instead a person of middle height, almost as broad as he was long; tremendous muscles knotted a bulky body. He wore a lion skin - summer or winter he never changed - and carried a knobbed vine-staff. A shaggy man: tousled rust-coloured hair fell to his shoulders, the beard cascaded across a barrel chest, a furry mat swathed legs and arms. You could hardly see his face for all the hair, only mad blue eyes that stared between the tresses. His voice was high and squeaky, a chicken's cackle mouthed from the frame of a bull.

I poured him wine in a golden cup and waited close beside him: a moonstruck boy adoring a famous Hero, the remembrance of Atreus' criticisms gone like mist at sunrise. Hercules drained the goblet at a gulp. As I refilled it I asked, in reverential tones, the history of the tawny hide he wore.

'Ha!' he squawked. 'Have you not heard of the Nemean lion, my lad? Where have you been all your life? A monster which killed cattle, men and horses, and nobody would face him. So, naturally, they sent for me. The creature must have known I was on his track, and went into hiding. Took me days to find him. Cornered him at last on a rocky hillside, strung my bow and shot. By The Lady, the brazen barbs glanced off his hide like raindrops! I charged and swung my club; the wood splintered on his ribs. Nothing left but my hands, so I closed and strangled the brute.'

Hercules drank deeply, wiped his mouth. 'Not too difficult, really, for a man of my courage and strength.'

Atreus entered the Hall, Jason rolling by his side, and interrupted Hercules' fascinating discourse. The Marshal said, 'Here, Jason, is the Hero who wishes to sail in Argo. I promised you'd be surprised - it's Hercules, no less!'

Hercules waved his cup. 'Ho, Jason, well met! I'm told you want a champion to stiffen your force, set an example, provide initiative and guts. You've found him! When do we start?'

Jason's face showed none of the pleasure and gratitude befitting the occasion. 'Hercules, blast my eyes! Be damned if you step on my deck! Anyone but you! Are you aware,' said Jason tautly, 'that Neleus of Pylos, whose city you looted, whose sons you slaughtered, is my uncle?'

'I didn't know,' said Hercules.

'Nor I,' Atreus murmured despondently, seeing the stratagem he had woven shredding about his ears.

Hercules recovered his poise. 'Unfortunate, I admit, but these things

happen. Chances of war, my good fellow, chances of war!'

Jason's weatherworn features suffused. Atreus seized his elbow, led him aside and whispered energetically in his ear. The sailor angrily shook his head. After a long confabulation Atreus brought him back to Hercules who, between great gulps of wine, bragged loudly about a gigantic stag he caught and killed in Arcadia.

'I have persuaded Jason to overlook the - um - unfortunate accident at Pylos. He agrees you should return with him to Iolcos, and voyage in Argo to Colchis.'

Hercules belched. "Can't do without me. Bound to fail unless you have the strongest and bravest Hero in Achaea to lead the way. That me. I'll find you your gold.'

He buried his nose in the goblet. Jason turned on his heel and stamped from the Hall.

Atreus smiled contentedly as we crossed the Great Court together. had to promise Jason a sheep-flock's price in treasure. Well worth it. But fancy voyaging to the ends of the earth on the word of a wandering Thracian! These Argonauts will vanish without trace - and we're rid of Hercules.' Atreus chuckled. 'Pity about Jason, though. I like the chap. Now to dispose of another nuisance.'

His eyes discouraged the question that trembled on my lips.

Hercules, Jason and the Heroes the king had chosen departed for Iolcos. When Hercules tried to insist on taking his ragbag following Jason tersely specified Argo's strict capacity: fifty men and stores were all she could embark. Hercules growled and submitted. Hyllus and Iolaus led their retinue to Tiryns; Atreus watched them go and tweaked his beard. 'We'll have to evict those rascals before many moons have passed,' he reflected aloud. 'Shouldn't be too difficult now the figurehead has gone.'

The linchpins of Eurystheus' realm were Tiryns and Mycenae. Tiryns now lacked a Warden. The king accepted Atreus' suggestion and nominated Thyestes.

Menelaus was one of Thyestes' squires and must accompany him to Tiryns. We had never before been separated; both of us felt the wrench. I asked him, while he packed his gear, whether he enjoyed serving Thyestes.

Menelaus shrugged. 'I don't. Damnably free with his whip if you make a mistake. He's surly and unapproachable, and keeps his household nobles at a distance. Even his family fears him. The only person Thyestes likes is a ten-year-old daughter, Pelopia, and he dotes on the brat.'

I said, 'That curious creature Plisthenes lives in his household. Do you ever see him?'

'Now and again. Most of the time he stays secluded in his rooms. He's going with us to Tiryns - and I'd rather he wasn't. Fellow gives me the creeps.'

Thyestes and his retinue departed on a beautiful springtime day, warm and glorious, the light so clear you could see spears glint on Argos' faraway hilltop. Atreus stood on the tower that guarded the Northern Gate, and contemplated a vanishing dust cloud pluming the Argos road. Thyestes' migration plainly brought to a fruitful conclusion some devious design he concocted, and I expected him to

be pleased. Atreus' demeanour, on the contrary, was grave and forbidding. When the column disappeared from sight he murmured under his breath, 'Thyestes and Plisthenes gone. The way rolls clear ahead. The time has come.'

He turned and laid a hand on my wrist. 'You believe me to be your father?'

I stared, astounded. 'Of course. What else—'

'Such was my intention. So I have ordained it over the years since Plisthenes.. He stopped. His grip tightened, vivid blue eyes held mine.

'Prepare yourself for a shock, Agamemnon. I am your grandfather, and I'm going to marry your mother.'

My throat went dry, my legs were straws. 'You're my ... I don't understand. Then ... who is my father?'

'My son Plisthenes.'

Atreus guided me firmly down the steps. The compassionate tone he had used to soften the revelation melted from his voice, and he said brutally, 'Pull yourself together! The heavens haven't fallen; nothing is changed. Sit on this bench - and stop snivelling, boy!' I collapsed on a stone bench some long-forgotten builder had provided at the foot of the tower's steps. Atreus propped his shoulders against the rampart's massive stones, and looked at me balefully. 'Feeling better? Nothing, as I said, has changed. Since infancy you have believed me to be your father. In all but name I am. One generation divides us. What does it matter?'

'But... Plisthenes,' I stammered. 'Why have you ...'

'Shut your mouth, and listen. When I was sixteen years old I married a woman called Cleola, who bore me Plisthenes and died before she saw him. I brought him up - as I've brought you up - and taught him all the elements of statesmanship and war. He was tall and strong, radiantly handsome and, unlike your typical Hero, extremely intelligent. He was born to be king - or so I decided. Even Thyestes liked him, and made him something of a protege.'

A chariot rolled past on its way to the gate. Atreus absently acknowledged the Companion's salute.

'I looked round to find him a suitable wife, and settled on a daughter of the Cretan royal House: Aerope, Catreus' child. I brought her back to Plisthenes, and she bore him you, Menelaus and that girl - what's her name? - Anaxibia. Then I let Plisthenes go with Hercules to Thrace to buy horses for Eurystheus. It seemed a harmless expedition - but I hadn't allowed for Hercules. Rather than disgorge the ox-hide and bronze the king had provided for payment he decided instead to raid the herds, swooped with his ruffians and stole what he could and fled. Not fast enough - a warband overtook him. Hercules won the fight that followed and escaped unscathed.'

Atreus paused and bit his lip. 'Plisthenes was not so lucky. He returned as you saw him, grievously wounded, the wits bashed out of his head. The years I spent in teaching him were wasted.'

'Is he quite ... mad?'

'No. Plisthenes has lucid moments when he's apparently sane as you or I. He has become entirely biddable, and will obey to the letter any command you give him.' Atreus levered his shoulders from the wall, put a hand beneath my chin and

glared into my eyes. 'Get this into your head, Agamemnon : I intend one day to rule Mycenae!'

'But,' I gulped, 'you ... we ... are not of the reigning House. King Eurystheus has five sons. How can —'

'You're damnably obtuse today, young man! Wake your ideas up! Don't you see? Backed by the Host and influential nobles I shall seize the reins of power when Eurystheus dies, banish his sons - I may have to kill them - and rule in his stead. There'll be a dynastic upheaval: except for the sons and that villain Hercules - who doesn't count - Eurystheus is Perseus' last descendant. An alien ruler will take the throne, a man of Pelops' line. To make the usurper acceptable his successor - a suitable heir - must be assured.'

'And Plis ... my father is —'

'An imbecile who had to be hidden from the sight and memory of man. Thyestes was still fond of him and pitied his condition. I persuaded my brother to accept him in his household; and then re-cast my ideas. My obvious successor was one of my grandsons, either you or Menelaus, boys just out of infancy. I kept an eye on you both, and made my choice.'

'You are that heir, Agamemnon!'

I held my head in my hands. An ant crawled over my sandalled foot, and bit; I hardly noticed the sting. 'And the centrepiece,' I said, 'of a horrible and dishonourable design.'

'You're talking nonsense! Scrub these stupid scruples from your mind! Any expedient, any ruse, every crime in the catalogue justifies the enterprise of kings'

'And you propose to wed my mother. Why? I don't understand. ...'

'It looks better,' said Atreus patiently, 'if a man is married to the woman who has borne his heir. Besides, whatever you or anyone else may think, I'm very fond of Aerope.'

Atreus stood, and patted my cheek. The grim expression faded from his face. He smiled, and said, 'The shock has numbed your brain; you simply aren't thinking straight. I shall send you from Mycenae, and give you time to recover.'

Chapter 2

BRISKLY and efficiently Atreus organized the arrangements. He bent the rules a little and obtained the king's permission to grant Heroic status to Diores. A Companion, strictly speaking, cannot become a Hero until he has killed his man in battle: always a difficult feat because unless a charge is broken and he has to fight on foot a chariot driver seldom meets a foeman blade to blade. Although Diores had been a Companion for several years - he drove for a Hero who held an estate near Argos - he had not yet won his greaves.

The Marshal also persuaded Eurystheus to grant Diores Rhipe, an out-of-the-way demesne in the foothills which owed an annual tribute of three oxen, thirty sheep and a jar of olive oil. When the king called a levy of arms the holder had to provide three spearmen, a scout, his Companion and himself both fully armed and armoured.

The reason for so paltry a tribute lay in the manor's remoteness : a factor of little account in olden days before the Goat-men started seriously encroaching. Now they regularly decimated Rhipe's flocks. Eurystheus, and King Sthenelus before him, sent warbands to comb the area: after every expedition the troubles stopped for a while and then recurred. The Hero last holding Rhipe had begged the king for a demesne in easier reach of Tiryns or Mycenae. He was not alone; the majority of outlying estates suffered similar depredations.

The king granted Rhipe to Diores with injunctions to restore the farms and make it pay. Being a reasonable man he recognized the dangers and drawbacks and, because the holding had been abandoned for several years, provided breeding stock and seed corn, twenty sturdy freemen and a band of male and female slaves. With an eye to my safety Atreus added from his retinue a half-dozen seasoned spearmen who normally worked on his lands. He also gave me some personal slaves and, unusually, a Scribe: a youthful, serious fellow named Gelon. 'He'll keep Rhipe's accounts,' the Marshal said, 'and teach you the economics of husbandry. Gelon's a clever young man; if you listen to him carefully you may learn a good deal more.'

I took my concubine Clymene. About a year before I had begun to experience the usual sexual urges. Lightly-clad slave girls serving in the Hall or encountered in palace corridors excited fervid pricklings which resulted, on occasion, in hurried secret gropings and fumbling in corners. Someone must have reported these skirmishes to Atreus. I had been allotted a separate room in the squires' wing - a cubby-hole just large enough to accommodate a cot - and a lovely seventeen-year-old whom Hercules took at Pylos and sold in the Nauplia market. Though still a little shaken by the shock of a violent sack in which her family perished, Clymene became in time much more than a sheath for tumescence; she stayed for years my counsellor and friend. She was the first of a long procession of concubines, and the only one whose memory I cherish to this day.

On a windy dawn in spring we departed for Rhipe, a long column of men and carts and animals. I rode with Diores in a travelling chariot, for he had not yet chosen a Companion. 'Nice to be made a Hero, though I almost feel ashamed to wear my greaves. Everything has happened in a rush,' he explained, smacking his whip at a fly on the offside horse's withers. 'I've barely had time to collect a household, let alone find a decent driver who's willing to live in Rhipe.' He wriggled his shoulders beneath a new and shining cuirass. 'Damned bronzesmith has boxed the job: shoulder plates don't fit. Cost me forty fleeces and eleven jars of oil. Take me years to breed enough sheep and press enough olives to pay him.' We followed the road till noon - military way between strongholds, and therefore paved - and diverged on a stony track which led to Rhipe. Derelict byres and tumbledown walls signified the outer fringes of Diores' new estate. Glumly he surveyed the evidence of neglect: winter-withered weeds choking the vines, olive trees unpruned, ploughland smothered in deep rank grass, undrained pastures reverting to marsh. 'Enough work for a multitude,' he declared. 'I'd hoped to teach you driving, but there won't be a chance for moons. We'll all be labouring from dawn till dusk.'

Diores touched a sore point. His promotion and my relegation to Rhipe had ended for a time my training as a warrior at a most important stage: the art of handling a chariot in battle. Any fool can drive on a road; to swerve and turn and check at a gallop and lock your wheel with an enemy's is a different slice off the joint. But I was old enough to realize the transition Atreus ordered likewise belonged to a Hero's education. From boyhood they herd flocks on the hills, graduate later to care for precious cattle and learn the skills for tending vines and olives, ploughing and planting and reaping wheat and barley.

Husbandry is really a Hero's life; to the end of his existence he spends more time in shepherding than riding battle chariots. During daylight hours in peacetime it is hard to find a Hero; they are all away working the land or watching flocks. By nightfall at any season your Hero, like his peasants, is gobbling lentil broth in a ramshackle stone built farmhouse and wondering where the blazes his missing wether have gone. Royal household men fare better, of course; they can use the palace amenities. But this humdrum side of a Hero's career the bards don't often sing.

Rhipe proved to be an extensive domain. We marched till sundown before reaching Diores' manor perched on a rocky hillock protruding from a plain. Forested ranges cleft by valleys surrounded the plain; beyond them soared the mountains. A massive wall of rocks girdled a two-storied house hugged by thatch-roofed hutments like a hen

among her chicks. The place resembled a minor fortress, an appearance common to every settlement sited far from a citadel.

Diore looked more cheerful. 'Solid defences at least; no one will break in easily.'

We led our retinue through a gate whose oaken doors sagged tiredly on the hinges - 'That's the first job,' Diore commented - and assembled in a crowded mass in a courtyard before the house. Diore stamped through the buildings and allotted quarters. 'Offload baggage, turn the animals out to graze, mount guards. Clear the place up. Get moving!'

Before darkness fell we were fairly well settled and eating a meal. Robbers had ransacked every building. All metal articles the former holder may have left were gone - cauldrons, tripods, pots and pans - but a scattering of plain wood furniture remained. We found some wooden ploughs, hayforks and the like still littering the outhouses.

Goatmen don't use chairs and tables, nor do they till the land.

After posting a sentry on the gate tower Diore returned yawning to the Hall and stretched himself on a fleece-covered cot his slaves had found. The rotten twine fragmented and thumped his rump on the floor. He swore like a Hero, snuggled into a cloak and lay beside the hearth.

'Tomorrow,' he said sleepily, 'we start putting Rhipe to rights!'

*

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At the first whisper of dawn Diore and I rode out to explore the demesne; freemen appointed as bailiffs followed the horses on foot. Diore allocated fields to be ploughed for the sowing of barley and wheat, selected cattle pastures, hillside grazing for sheep and, on the higher slopes where trees began, foraging grounds for swine. He defined an extensive tract as common land where peasants would grow subsistence for themselves and the slaves and craftsmen - bronzesmiths, weavers, carpenters, potters and fullers - who must help make Rhipe self-sufficient.

It took us all day to ride the whole perimeter. Back at the manor I found Gelon, using a goose quill dipped in ink distilled from charcoal, scratching mysterious marks on a sheet of the paper Egyptians make from reeds. 'I'm working out the daily ration scales for our workmen,' he told Diore, 'in the proportion of five to two to one for men, women and children respectively.' (A babble of brats accompanied the slaves and some of the freemen had brought their families.) 'Do you approve my lord?'

'Whatever you think best,' said Diore. 'I've no head for figures. Talk the supplies we've brought and fix your calculations to make them last till harvest, four moons hence. Then, if The Lady is kind, we'll start living on what we produce.'

'Very well.' Gelon compressed his lips. 'I warn you, my lord, we shall have to live frugally through the summer.' Intrigued by my first

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