

CASSANDRA

J. S. ERSKINE

Slowly a faint greyness crept up the eastern sky, dimming the stars in its progress, and in time with this brightening the sea around the little ship grew towards clarity. The gunwales were outlined against the dappled luminosity of the waves, while overhead the square of sail, hanging limp where it had been when the wind dropped after midnight, began to stir uneasily against a background of light half-seen. The grey brightened and became blue, a narrowing bowl of sky that shut the world in from the outer emptiness of stars, and against the glow of sunrise stood the wavy line of distant mountains dominated by the shoulder of Phrygian Ida. Scattered here and there over the still sea were other similar ships of the Greek fleet, becalmed also by that sudden dropping of the wind.

The little ship took form in the growing light, an undecked boat rising high at bow and stern. In the centre, a little abaft the mast, a tent had been rigged; yet the floor-boards and the rowers' stagings were dark with sleeping forms, men and women huddled together for warmth, their clothes drawn over their faces to shut them away from reality or from the grim fears of the night. Now they began to stir, to peep from their coverings, to sit up and stare uncomprehendingly at the empty sky lightening above them, at the empty sea around, at the strange crowded little ship and the distant line of mountains. Some women, huddling their faces between their knees, began to whimper in rising tones as the misery of the waking world dawned in their minds which emerged only slowly from the timelessness of sleep. Greek warriors sat up, rubbed the sleep from their bearded faces, blew sharply through their noses, stretched once, and surveyed the keening women with hungry, speculative eyes. One muttered smutty ridicule to a dark middle-aged woman whose beautiful face was contorted in an almost animal intensity of sorrow, but she paid him no heed and probably understood nothing of his words.

They were all astir now, the men moving about, the women huddling together for comfort and protection, when the flap of the tent was drawn aside and a woman came out. For a moment she stood still, gazing blindly at the sky, like a sleep-walker moving in a reality through which this everyday world is seen only as a half-remembered dream. She was dressed in the black and white of a priestess, yet her bright brown hair hung long down her back as though she were a virgin, and she came

from the king's tent. Her face showed neither youth nor age, sorrow nor shame nor joy, but in it there was a depth of withdrawn calm as of a pool seen dimly, far down between the ferny walls of a chasm. Still with that air of walking in her sleep, she picked her way across the crowded floor-boards towards the helmsman's platform where he crouched beside his giant oar, and a wave of feeling eddied around her, women stretching out pitying arms towards her, forgetting for an instant their own misery in her greater loss, Greek warriors eyeing her appraisingly, drawn by her womanliness, angered by her calm, hating her for their own fear that they might share in the guilt of sacrilege. It was the king who had taken her, but before this they had suffered the tortures of pestilence for the king's misdeeds. The calm about her was something to be dreaded. If she had shown fear, anger, humiliation or contempt, they could have understood and gloried in their triumph over Troy. But her eyes met theirs without interest, not unseeingly but rather as seeing too much, as though their past, present and future lay in her hands in spite of them. Uneasily they invoked the gods and twisted their fingers into horns to call down the protection of Pan against the evil eye.

Lifting her long robes with one hand, Cassandra clambered to the steering platform. She gave a glance at the Cretan helmsman, and he scrambled uneasily away, marking his breast with the sign of the double-axe, while his companions jeered softly at his fear. She seated herself facing the east, draping her robe to cover her bare feet; then she sat motionless, watching the eastern sky for the first rays of the sun. The heaven was now clear and starless, but in the dawn the sea-mist was rising in amethyst clouds that hid the peak of Ida and the dim haze of smoke that told where Troy had been. Silently she waited. . . .

The calm of Cassandra's spirit was not born of unbreakable courage or brutal indifference. She had known fear and horror and shame, she had wept for her slaughtered family and her own desecration, but that had been long ago when first Paris had returned triumphant, bringing the fair Helen whose beauty overmastered the judgment of men and the justice of women. Then Cassandra had stormed and wept and prophesied, but Paris had sneered and Priam rebuked and Hector, strongest and gentlest of them all, had comforted the jealousy that she had never felt. Even Hecuba her mother, tender to her own as she was fierce to others, had defended her against their anger, sheltering her in her madness and not in her truth. For they all knew that the god had touched her, so that she saw things not as others do and was, therefore, mad; while she knew that the god

had touched her, so that she saw things not as others do, and so was sane. She had seen the ships gathering out of the western sea, the armies in the plain; she had heard the drumming hoofs and the rumble of chariot wheels, the clash of arms, and the shrieks of the wounded; she had seen fire rising from the roofs of Troy, her father lying dead, his white hair soaking in his own blood, and she had known the horrors of humiliation at the altar of her god. Joys foreseen can be enjoyed again, but repetition dulls the edge of grief. For ten years she had mourned for Troy and for her family and for herself; the tears were shed and dried long since, and now before her she saw only the rocking azure sea, the whitewashed city of Mycenae, and Helen's vengeful sister with a bloodstained axe.

Could it have been otherwise? Could it have been better? She had had so little part in causing any of the ills from which she had suffered. Had she been born a man, she must have fought and died with the others. Had she been a woman like the others, she would have borne children for the Greeks to toss from the city wall, and she would have gone to slavery and death as she was going now. Instead, the gods had touched her, and life could never be the same again.

She could not remember a time when her life had not been full of the gods, names and tales as familiar as those of her family, as real and often not to be distinguished from them. She knew the tiny images of the household and the clumsy olivewood statues of the temple, but she had come to realize that the real god was her grandfather Laomedon. No one else knew this, and she kept her secret well. But she watched him, seating herself near his high chair, her little woollen tunic pulled well down over her knees, her bright brown hair shining down her back, her grey eyes unsmiling as she plumbed his white-bearded face, his barrel-like body, his cackling voice and sudden bursts of shrill laughter, groping for the secrets of his godhood.

Others were less certain of Laomedon's divinity. She had heard her mother, Hecuba, haughty daughter of a Phrygian king, refer to him, in her wrangles with Priam, as a bandit-chief, while disgruntled guests had murmured within her hearing rude remarks about horse-thieves from Thrace. And all this Cassandra pieced out by the endless questionings of childhood and wove secretly into her pattern. Out of it she built a picture of the past, of jostling tribal wars, a southward trend of the charioted warriors of the steppe, throwing city against nation and nation against empire. Laomedon and his tribe had seized this land along the narrow strait, thrusting southward the earlier inhabitants,

themselves but a little while in possession. On this high mound he had built his tiny city where formerly a village had huddled among ruins of ancient grandeur. He had seen the possibilities of blackmail in this dangerous strait where ships must wait a favourable wind and take on food and water. Watching him, she came to realize the ruthlessness behind his loud good-fellowship and the subtle calculation of chances which made his boldness effective. He was an unlovable character on his selfish side, but he had the greatness also of a man who has long followed a vision. He would sacrifice others to himself ruthlessly, but he would sacrifice himself to his vision, and that vision went farther and deeper than that of other men. So Cassandra watched, and Laomedon saw, as he saw most things, and singled out this attentive grandchild as a favourite, and one day in jest, when a serious choice of war or alliance in war lay before him, he lifted her to his knee and in mock-serious tones asked her advice, and to his amazement he heard his own secret thoughts laid bare in slow childish tones as though an oracle had spoken. He set her down with superstitious uneasiness and murmured: "Some god has touched her." The others picked up in sympathy his unease and his words, but he, because some god, if only a minor god of robbers, had touched him too, he alone realized that she spoke the truth as though she shared his mind.

Years passed, and faces came and went in the great hall of Laomedon, for he was a lover of new things that men could bring him from outside his narrow world. Every shipman and wandering outlaw was welcome for a while to stand before the king's high seat and to tell his tale to the old man and, incidentally, to the quiet child who sat on the step of the throne. Then Laomedon sent the man to meat and bade him stay a while that they might learn all that he knew before he went on. And at times the judgment of Laomedon wavered, so he put a large hand on his granddaughter's hair and said: "Is this the truth, little one?" Then Cassandra in her slow certain voice told out the flaws in the story — this king's name mistaken, that old traveller's tale incorporated as his own, the distance between ports foreshortened; and the boaster withdrew unhappily to the hospitable wine-jar muttering: "The little liar! Who could have told her?" But hundreds had told Cassandra, and their stories lay neatly interlocked in her superb memory, forgotten and yet there. She did not reason or compare or remember. She could not have said: "When he said this, his hand shook and he wiped his palm upon his garment." Instead she said simply: "At this point he lied." The knowledge that the gods had touched her

now surrounded her in the household, so that the slaves shunned her or fawned upon her, and the other children mocked and tormented her unless she were protected. For those whose eyes are fixed upon truth are little aware of the pebbles in the path, which are here today and are thrown at sparrows before the morrow. Sadly her parents vowed her as a priestess to Apollo.

Dearest of all to Laomedon and Cassandra were the outcasts from far places who had known the great cities beside which Troy was a squalid village. These men, it seemed, had all been princes or great merchants in their own lands, but the old man showed little interest in that. Instead, he bombarded them with questions about the paving of streets and the building of ships. And, when they had spread their wares of knowledge before him, these former rulers of men seemed often to have little to tell. But there were a few who knew many things.

It was late in the season when Poseidon came, an old Pelasgian travelling with a ship in which he held no share. Halted at Scamander mouth by the first breath of the monsoon, the captain had no choice but to pay toll to Laomedon and to lie there to await a drop in the wind, for oarsmen could make no headway against both wind and that fierce current. Risking much, the captain accepted Laomedon's invitation and crossed the plain to Troy to visit the king, and with him went Poseidon who had lost everything and so risked no more than his old age. They stood together before the king's high seat while the king searched the captain's mind, for the Pelasgian cities to the south were his best allies. Then, more from habit than from doubt of his own judgment, he put his hand on Cassandra's head. "Eh, child!" he asked. But Cassandra was not looking at the captain. She raised a finger and pointed to Poseidon. "Ask him," she said.

The ship beat on up the strait to the Black Sea, but Poseidon remained behind in Troy, and day after day the two old men talked together. Messengers came and went about the ordinary business of state, but Laomedon now referred them to his son Priam, glancing only at the results and marvelling at the smooth efficiency with which Priam replaced him, for he had a low opinion of the wisdom of his son. The two men talked and the child listened, realizing that in this broken old man she had found another god. About himself he would tell little, about outer things much, and once Laomedon, finding himself out of his depth, put his hand on her head and asked half-jokingly: "What says the oracle?" But Cassandra covered her face with her hands and did not answer. In the presence of the high gods, one prays but does not speak.

Under Poseidon's guidance Troy changed rapidly from a robber-stronghold to a naval state. Shipbuilding was begun, trade was carried on, the tolls on ships were made regular and were given the colour of protection by the suppressing of pirates. Poseidon was happy again, though Laomedon reaped the harvest of his knowledge, but he was happiest of all, perhaps, when Cassandra, now a slim long-legged twelve-year-old approaching marriageable age, sat beside him at the fire and picked his brains for the knowledge of gods and men and especially of Crete. And once, because in his love for her the urge to confession was strong in him, he asked playfully: "And why do you expect me to know so much of Crete?" And she answered simply: "You were king of Phaestos." She did not know how she knew, but so all things made sense.

Then Apollo came, a tall, slim, clean-shaven Egyptian between youth and middle age. His dark eyes were sunken, the bones of his cheeks prominent, as though he had always been underfed, and there was a brooding melancholy about him. His interpreter, a Sidonian sea-captain who spoke all languages badly, stumbled through his explanation, obviously understanding imperfectly what he wished to say, obviously trying to shift an unwelcome charge to another while giving the impression of performing a service. The stranger was a great man in his own land; he wished to see other cities and had heard much of the wealth of Troy; he hoped to be allowed to stay, and, when he returned to Egypt, he would send rich gifts. Laomedon measured the Egyptian with contemptuous eyes and essayed a few questions, but nothing passed the double barrier of clumsy interpretation, so he dismissed him indifferently. He might stay. At worst, he could be sold as a slave.

But that night Laomedon missed his oracle and, looking around the hall, he espied her seated beside Poseidon, who was in earnest talk with the stranger. The Egyptian, she reported later, was a priest of Apollo and had been involved in some political intrigue, so that he had fled into exile. His name could not be pronounced, but it meant "Apollo-be-exalted." Laomedon was unimpressed, for that much he had guessed. At best a penniless exile; at worst a spy. Of little value even as a slave. Cassandra contradicted his unspoken word. "Ask Poseidon," she urged. "This Apollo knows many things."

She set herself to teach the stranger the language of Troy, laughing delightedly like a child at his harsh accent and clumsy handling of intricate terminations; but in a few days the drawn lines of melancholy had left his face, and he strode about the

little city, looking at all things and speaking awkwardly to many and laughing with sudden joy from the heart as one does who finds life good. Soon the old sailor and the young priest and the old king were walking together, and the bright-haired girl sat on the step beside them, her eyes upon the new god whom she had found, her face ecstatic as that of a priestess in frenzy as she drank in new knowledge and fitted it into her vision of life.

It was at this time that the first disaster occurred. The western Greeks, whom the Trojans had regarded with the contempt due to inept barbarians, attacked the city unexpectedly under the leadership of Herakles of Tiryns, battered down the gates, and were bought off with difficulty when the defence of the outer city seemed at an end. "So it was in Crete," said Poseidon sadly; "we underestimated these barbarians, and they mastered us. The peoples of the north are on the march, and here you stand across their path." "Could you not hold your cities?" asked Apollo. "They had no walls," said Poseidon apologetically; "we thought the sea was ours, and, when that slipped, all was lost." "Once we, too, were overrun by the barbarians," Apollo admitted; "but now we hold the cities of the outer lands. When the barbarians come, we retreat to our cities, while the barbarians scatter over the land; then we come out and conquer them piecemeal in time." "Troy is walled," said Laomedon, "but our numbers are few." "If Troy were walled as we wall our cities," retorted Apollo, "a hundred could hold it against ten thousand." On a tile he drew with a burnt stick a neat design of steeply battered walls of stone, crowned by battlements and broken by projecting shoulders with slits for archers to shoot from. In his clumsy Greek he explained the plans, the recessed gates and inner courts to be reached only under fire from all sides, the sally ports for chariots, the stands for great stones to hurl upon attackers. Laomedon gazed incomprehendingly at the picture, his dim faded eyes watering with the effort, before he shook his head hopelessly. Apollo passed the tile to Poseidon and then, snatching it back, he added some squiggly marks beside or beneath important features. Poseidon shook his head at these also. "I cannot read them," he said; "they are not like our writing. But the wall, yes, I have seen such. And yet higher in Babylon where their wooden horses would easily overtop such a wall as this." Cassandra was peering over their shoulders, her far-sighted eyes straining perplexedly at the unfamiliar design. "Wooden horses?" she repeated uneasily. "Moving towers to capture such walls," Poseidon explained; "draw one for her, Apollo." The Egyptian smiled

ruefully: "I have heard of them but never seen one. Like this?" He drew an absurd and gigantic horse, like a child's wooden toy, standing beside the wall with its head leaning into the city. "No, not like that," objected the Cretan vaguely; "it has wheels; men are inside; it rolls to the wall; the neck is swung by ropes and comes down on the wall like a ladder, and the men climb up to the wall."

Laomedon emerged from his musings. "You could build walls like that for me?" he asked. "I have built the walls of cities in Canaan," said Apollo simply; "give me the men and my reward and it shall be done." "Your reward?" asked Laomedon tonelessly, for giving was not one of his pleasures. "High standing among you and this maiden for my wife," said the Egyptian. Cassandra's grey eyes smiled at him with a love that was above kindness and hope. She saw Poseidon's hand come out swiftly and then draw slowly back, and she knew that it was not from selfishness that the old man wished to hold her. For months she had watched Apollo's love growing, and she had been his wife in thought and had seen novelty fade, and love turn into custom, and new custom was with the indelible moulding of his youth. She had seen his eyes turn back toward the south as he hungered for his homeland and felt nauseated at exile among barbarians and with her for being a barbarian and making his return impossible. She had seen him talking hungrily to the seamen in the hope of gaining news of home, until at last he sailed away. She did not see herself waiting on the citadel and searching the sea for his return, while her love died slowly within her, for she knew that he would never return. In that vision all urgency of love had died already. Her body might still sing in his presence and her mind rise in joy to meet his, but she knew that in speaking of marriage he was showing a rift in his godhood, for that would never be. For all his subtlety he did not know himself. "She is vowed to Apollo," said Laomedon noncommittally. "I am Apollo," laughed the Egyptian, but there was a hint of uneasiness in his voice as though he touched sacrilege. "So be it," said Laomedon.

Under Apollo's guidance the new walls were built, slowly at first and then with increasing speed. At first Cassandra had gone often to watch, but in her memory there clung the horrid picture of the wooden horse leaning over the wall, and with each sight of the ramparts this grew clearer. Apollo pressed for their marriage. Her parents, uneasy at such a future for their daughter, so useless and helpless and clearly insane, temporized and delayed. Poseidon spoke anxiously to Cassandra. "An Egyptian

is always an Egyptian, and a quail always turns back to the south," he said. "I know," agreed Cassandra. "An Egyptian priest may marry only the daughter of a priest." "I know," said Cassandra. "A chain keeps a dog from much evil, yet he hates and bites the chain." "I know," said Cassandra. They were silent a long while. Then she leaned toward him and stroked the grizzled curls that no longer reached his shoulder. "And I love you, my father," she said simply, completing his thought, "and I love him, too. All that I have is what you have given me. Yet I know that you will leave me, for you are a Pelasgian and belong to the sea, and he is an Egyptian and belongs to the river. But I do not belong to Troy, for our great work seems to me a thing to last but a day and to end in hatred and fire."

At last Apollo found her beside the citadel and led her out to sit with him in the sunlight upon a heap of stone. "Cassandra," he said impatiently, "I can never come to an end of these delays. I have talked with your grandfather and your parents and they will say clearly neither Yes or No. Are you also unwilling to be married to me?" Cassandra puckered her eyes as though she had difficulty in seeing him, and, indeed, in her mind he seemed already far away, half-way to Egypt. "The king of Egypt is old and ill," she said. "Even Egyptian kings die, and then nothing will stand in the way of your return but Cassandra. I think I am a coward, Apollo. If I truly loved you more than myself, I should marry you and keep you here and be glad to have you hate me. As it is, you will go back to your death. Here also you would find death in the city you helped to build. Everywhere there is death and nowhere love." He beat his hand impatiently upon the stones. "Wisdom is folly if it stands in the way of action," he said; "Egypt is nothing to me now while with you Troy could be everything to me. And where does your wisdom come from if not from me? And what would you have been without me?" Cassandra sat hugging her knees and gazing over the blue sea which was dim in afternoon haze. "You have given me much," she agreed, "and yet at the end of it I am nothing. I cannot see to weave as Polyxena does, and yet at times I think I can see the truth. All my life I have desired nothing so much as that." "Yet no one will ever believe it when you tell it," he jeered savagely. For a moment she hid her face in her hands. "That is true, too," she said in a muffled voice. When she raised her head, there were tears in her eyes. "The king of Egypt is dead," she said. He stared at her blankly. "The king of Egypt is dead," he repeated; "a ship has just brought the news." His eyes turned towards the sea, and slowly the anger went out of them and a new

light brightened his face as it had when first he had found Cassandra, and she, watching him, knew that he had forgotten her and was thinking of Egypt.

So the youngest of her gods passed first out of her sight, and Cassandra served the temple of Apollo as a priestess, stilling the emptiness of her personal life in the ecstasies of ritual and the thrill of divination. Laomedon died, and Poseidon, lonely as before, took ship again in a boat sailing to the Black Sea and returned no more. But their spirits remained with Cassandra, and she talked alone with them, seeking some greater truth in the small stupidities of daily life. At first she prophesied with the assurance of youth, and her bitterness was the greater when she was met with laughter and disregard. Then gradually she became calm. Life would go on, yet these poor mockers would be dead, and she, who understood a little, would be dead with them, because of them. Laomedon had sought power, Priam was seeking wealth, and all for nothing. The wooden horse would lean over the smoking wall, and new barbarians would overrun the citadel they could not use. Somehow she could not hate them, any more than one could hate the waves that gnawed perpetually at the shore. The sun shone upon all. . . .

She was walking on the rampart, these thoughts running in her heart, just at the point where last she had spoken to Apollo, when her eyes, so keen at a distance, so dim near at hand, picked up the sail of a ship racing towards the port before a following breeze. It was Paris's ship, she knew, and there was something unusual about that distant sail which made her heart feel heavy. . . .

The sky was bright now, and in the distance the white wings of seabirds flickered over the heaving water. A silence fell upon the ship as a tall bearded figure pushed through the flaps of the tent and stood watching the bright-haired priestess on the steering platform. He glanced around the ship at the watchful sailors and the shrinking women, and there was triumphant pride in his face. But when he looked at Cassandra, the pride left him, and he stood with his hands dangling open and a hungry emptiness in his face, a disappointed child. A gleam of sunshine flashed across the water, and Cassandra arose and with arms outstretched began to chant her hymn of welcome. Somehow, because death was so near, the words took on new meaning for her and she felt that this Apollo to whom she prayed was both the sun and her own private god Apollo who had gone from her to Egypt and his death. The words came to an end, and she stood there motionless, her heart full of a great thankfulness for the beauty of the life that had been hers.