

THE SCYTHE

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"THAT", said Nicholas Tsoulakis impressively, pointing southwards to the peak of a great mountain rising dim and distant in the morning mist, "is Mount Athos—the Holy Mountain—where the monks live in caves hewn out of solid rock and drink the best wine in the world; it is the mountain on whose slopes no woman ever trod."

Nicholas spoke his native tongue—Greek; our interpreter, Panos Panagopoulos, explained, and we, being neither scholars nor cynics, believed.

The caique chugged on through the gently heaving waters of the Aegean. On our right, never more than a mile to the west, was the coast of Chalcidice; sometimes it threw out long rocky fingers which threatened to clutch our small boat to its impenetrable heart; at other times it fell away into little rippling bays of silver sands. The hills above lay bare and gaunt, broken only by brown spots of scrub, and for the most part there was no sign of life—no mark of man—on the exhausted soil. But occasionally small dark rows of age-old vines showed that even here man was trying to wrest life from the rocky hillside, and perhaps as a result of the process, drown other peoples' sorrows in a glass of wine; and once we passed a peasant bending over his sun-withered crops—an eternal figure of the past, present and future, working on into an eternal morning.

There were six of us in the caique: Nicholas Tsoulakis the owner, his son Alexis, the interpreter Panos Panagopoulos (Pandi for short), and we three—strangers in a strange land. We were in Greece on business for the Allied Governments, and we were going by caique to the village of Kato Vlasia because there is no road along the rocky coast of Eastern Chalcidice.

For four hours we chugged southward; the August sun rose higher and the dancing waves threw burning stabs of light a thousand ways. The mists of morning vanished into the sky—far far above and unfathomably clear; the bulk of Athos loomed ever nearer, and the coast of Chalcidice became what it really is—a study in black and white. The last rocky finger of land made a despairing clutch as we turned westwards into a broad bay, Athos heaved out of sight round a headland, and across the bay the straggling huts of Kato Vlasia slowly disentangled themselves from the protecting folds of hills.

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In another twenty minutes the caique's engine ceased its rhythm—a few protesting splutters and it was silent altogether. We glided noiselessly over the few remaining yards of water which separated us from an old broken down jetty, scattering a swarm of small fish which had been playing in the shadows. Alexis leapt lightly onto the creaking timber, made the boat fast and helped us ashore. By this time twenty or thirty mangy nothing-to-do villagers had gathered to watch; they were all men,—the women being busy with their never-ending duties. A small round olive-skinned man about forty detached himself from the crowd and came towards us. He was neatly dressed in light grey gabardine trousers, tan and white shoes and a white shirt on which circles of sweat were beginning to form under the armpits. He was the mayor of Kato Vlasia and we advanced to meet him, treading carefully to avoid the gaps caused by some of the rotten planks of the jetty having fallen into the sea. After the numerous handshakes and flowery welcomes were over the mayor with an expansive wave of his fat hand invited us to join him at a little cafe on the other side of the dusty square.

As we reached the cafe we noticed that an old man was speaking to Pandi;—at least he looked an old man, although he may not have been more than forty-five. He had taken no part in the general commotion which had greeted our arrival, but had remained quietly on the fringe of the crowd, until he had found an opportunity to speak to the interpreter. He had a lean face almost completely covered by a reddish grey beard, and a pair of bright grey eyes which peered out from under the peak of an old cloth cap. But in those eyes twinkled none of the traditional gaiety of the Mediterranean; in them there was no youthful glimmer of ancient Greece such as one so often finds, even when an emaciated body belies its proud heritage. Nevertheless in some mysterious way there clung to the old man something of the dignity of the ancient world. He wore a tattered blue jacket so large that its bulging pockets knocked against his knees as he walked, a pair of goatskin breeches, and what appeared to be a bundle of rags bound round his feet with hempen rope. In one hand he carried a string bag containing black bread and a bottle of dark red wine; in the other a sack containing something hard and metallic which clanged when it touched the ground.

"He wants to know if we can give him a lift to his home", said Pandi, "it will not take us more than a kilometre out of our way."

Pandi's tone of voice clearly showed that he was in sympathy with the old man.

"All right," we said, after a moment's pause, "so long as he does not mind waiting an hour or so."

"I shouldn't think he will," smiled Pandi, "it took him nearly two days to get here on foot over the hills."

Pandi explained to the old man, who said quite simply, "Thank you", and smiled a slow sad smile. Then he walked slowly back across the dusty square to the jetty—to wait.

"By the way", we asked, "what is the old fellow doing in Kato Vlasia.?"

"Oh, he came to get a new blade for his scythe; it cost him a thousand drachmae; he says it's time to cut his oats."

The mayor's eyes had betrayed some impatience with our apparent interest in the old man, but oily and amiable and with many elaborate gestures, he at last succeeded in getting us seated at one of the rough deal tables under the shade of a cypress tree. The landlord brought ouzo and hard-boiled eggs chopped into little pieces, and soon we were discussing the problems of a post-war Kato Vlasia, Greece and the world at large. But even when all the problems, real and imaginary, dissolved into the fifth glass of ouzo, we were still conscious of the old man sitting on the broken-down jetty, gazing out at the flashes of sunlight on the sparkling sea. The day grew hotter, the cicadas played a muted drowsy tune, the sun beat relentlessly through the meagre cypresses and the circles of sweat under the mayor's armpits spread over his entire shirt;—but still the old man sat—an eternal figure gazing on into an eternal afternoon.

At about three o'clock we forced ourselves to our feet and walked a trifle unsteadily back across the dusty square to the little jetty. Nicholas Tsoulakis and his son appeared from the shadows of another cafe at the other end of the square and a few of the hangers-on drifted back to watch our departure. The mayor made his inevitable speech, but neither we nor the old man paid much attention, and only sketches of it floated through the heat into our consciousness—"traditional friendships of the illustrious allies . . . the renowned feats of arms of the great General Byron . . . the wind of freedom which by your leave blows over our beloved country . . ." However it was all over at last. We stepped on board; the old man, his eyes shining, hopped after us; Alexis cast off, the fish again scuttled, the engine sputtered; then as it swept into its rhythmic chug, we were away and the handclapping of the hangers-on died into the increasing distance

across the bay. The land, worn-out and old, with all its problems was left behind; the hills gradually folded Kato Vlasia back into their dry-sucked bosoms, and the caique ploughed on through the fertile furrows of the sea. In half-an-hour we reached the open sea, Athos burst into view around the rocky headland, and the cool caress of the Aegean was on our brows.

We sailed on for four hours into the late afternoon and early evening until we reached the old man's little cove. We sailed again past the rocky coast of Chalcidice, no longer a study in black and white; for the hills were throwing long shadows over the water, and their silhouettes were red-rimmed against the western sky. The sea still sparkled, but the beams it threw in the sunlight were like flashing jets of diluted blood.

All this time the old man had sat, almost motionless, in the bows—somehow detached from the sea, the caique, and ourselves. He was a symbol of the land,—the dry land, the hard land; every year he would cut his oats, every year he would pluck his grapes from his few ancient vines, and, every year—if he were lucky—he would somehow manage to keep himself alive.

We turned into the bay, out of the red sunlight into the purple shadows of the hills. Alexis shut off the engine and we glided towards a semi-circle of pebbly beach; the keel grated on the stones and the old man, who had taken off his rope-and-rag shoes and rolled up his breeches, rose from the bows.

We looked at the old man's home; it was a hut of the usual mud and wattle, about fifteen feet long and eight feet high; one small squat chimney, little more than a hole, rose from the centre of the roof, and one dark opening,—the entrance—loomed in the middle of the wall which faced the sea; there were no windows. In front of the hut was a small cabbage-patch, and in it strutted a bedraggled cockerel among five or six of his wretched lovers. Behind the hut and to the right was a field of what might-have-been oats, a sickly yellow color against the chalky soil strewn with white and grey boulders. The field stretched indefinitely up on the hillside, finally losing itself among some outcrops of rock. On one of these rocky bluffs rose two wooden crosses, marking the resting place of the old man's two children who had died some fifteen years before.

The old man thanked us, picked up his string bag and looked around for his sack. It was not there.

"I have forgotten my scythe," he said simply.

For a moment there was silence while he looked at us and then at his hut.

"What will you do?" we asked.

"Go back tomorrow", he said.

"And will it still be there?"

"I don't know, perhaps."

We watched the old man wade ashore; we watched the rippling waves lapping the bulging pockets of his tattered blue jacket, and his string bag trailing in the water; we watched him walk slowly up the beach and disappear into the darkness of the hut. As the caique's engine shattered the calm of the twilight evening, silence fell on our hearts. But after all we had orders to be back by nightfall, and surely it would be folly to return to Kato Vlasia with an old Greek who had been stupid enough to leave his scythe there? The scythe was probably stolen by now anyway.

In front of us the sea still sparkled in the rays of the sinking sun; behind us, the old man's hut, the field of oats, the cabbage-patch and the two little crosses had merged into the darkness of the hills. If the hens still scratched we did not see them.

Then as we left the shadows, Athos rose bright and triumphant in the evening air, and, looking back we could just see the faint white strip of a mule track as it breasted the summit of the hills at the start of its two-day journey back to Kato Vlasia.