



III The Wanderings of the Trojans

AENEAS paused in his story. The banquet guests were silent. Dido sat quite still.

“All winter our people worked at ship-building, and by spring we were ready to sail. Twenty good ships were built, and loaded with supplies of food and wine, and small bundles of private belongings salvaged from the sack of Troy. It was hard work, organizing everything – but at least it kept us too busy to ask questions about our destination.

So we sailed, and before long reached Thrace, a land not far from Troy, where King Priam had ties of friendship. There were no unlucky signs, and so we surveyed a plot of ground for our settlement. I began to feel happy, and, in response to the wishes of my grateful people, agreed to call our new home ‘Aenea’.

Everyone gathered round to watch me sink my spade into the earth, and pronounce the city’s name. I chose a spot where the roots of a young tree broke the hard surface of the ground. Driving in the spade, I grasped the sapling and tore it out.

Some say that trees have guardian spirits. I know only this, that the scream that came from the wounded soil was

human. We clutched one another in horror, and stared at the hole. Dark blood bubbled up from its centre, and oozed towards my feet. ‘Stop, Aeneas!’ The words spurted from the soil. ‘This is a wicked land – no home for Trojans! You must know me – I am Polydorus!’

We all gasped at hearing the name. Polydorus had been sent by King Priam to seek help from the Thracian king during the war, but had not returned in time. Lucky man, we had thought.

‘Aeneas, Aeneas, a cruel tyrant rules this land. I came protected by the laws of hospitality, but he killed me, and left my corpse to rot dishonoured here on the shore. If you stay here, you will all be murdered. Leave this land; spare only a moment to calm my tortured spirit.’

People were already running towards the sea. The ships were afloat, and the anchors weighed, almost before I had completed the sacred rites and laid the ghost of Polydorus to rest.

Our course now lay southwards, to Apollo’s holy island, Delos. My father was keen to make this our next landing, for his friend King Anius would make us welcome in Delos, and there we could consult Apollo’s oracle.

Delos was a charming island. Anius greeted my father most warmly, and entertained us all with every comfort. As soon as I could slip away, I hurried to the temple of Apollo. ‘Show us a place of refuge, O Lord,’ I prayed, ‘Grant a haven to the weary survivors of your faithful Trojan people. O Apollo, you who can see beyond the sight of men, tell us where our new home must be.’

As I finished speaking, the floor under my feet began to sway. The stone blocks of the temple walls rattled like pebbles shaken by a giant hand. I could not tell whether

the voice I heard was around me or within me; but I expect you all know how it is when a god gives his answer.

'Seek out your first mother, Aeneas. Your first mother!' These words the oracle spoke.

What would you make of that? I was no stranger to the dark sayings of oracles, but this meant nothing to me. I consulted with my father: 'Perhaps it is the Earth? The Earth is often called the first mother of the human race. But how could we *seek out* the Earth, when we walk on it all our lives?'

My father, however, had a different idea. 'I think the god wants us to trace back to the beginnings of our race. We must make for the *first mother* of the Trojan people.'

'Troy is gone, sir,' I said impatiently. I hoped my old father was not seizing an excuse to return to the past.

'Be quiet, boy. I still have my wits. Now think – who is the ancestor of our people?'

'Teucer,' I answered automatically.

'Good. And Teucer was not born in Troy, was he? He sailed to Asia from . . . ?'

'From Crete. Crete? Is Crete our promised homeland?' Somehow I had never thought of Crete, with its tales of bull-worship and labyrinths and human sacrifice.

'It must be Crete, Aeneas. Remember, in Crete they pray to the Earth-goddess, the Great Mother.'

So we sailed at once for Crete. In the three days that the journey took I almost convinced myself that this was the right place for us. We disembarked. I selected a site. We marked out the boundaries. I formally named our new city 'Pergamea', after the old citadel of Troy. Work began. I called a council to frame policy and laws.

I was not really surprised when the first disturbing

reports came in. The newly-planted crops were wilting; the soil was drying up and cracking; the cattle were refusing to eat. When the people began to sicken, I drew my father aside for a private talk.

'Perhaps the oracle was wrong, sir.'

'Never, Aeneas. Apollo cannot lie. It is sinful to think such a thing.'

'But we are only human. We may not have interpreted the holy words correctly. Perhaps *your first mother* didn't mean Crete at all?'

'Well, then, Aeneas, the only thing to do is to return to Delos and ask the oracle again,' my father said finally.

I certainly did not welcome the prospect of retracing our steps. I was eager to arrive, not to wander for years on end. I went to bed that night still turning the problem over in my mind. I thought of one island after another, trying to make one of them fit the terms of the oracle. I must have dropped off at last into a fitful sleep.

My quarters consisted of a makeshift hut, one of the first buildings of our ill-fated settlement. Opposite my bed I had set up the images of our home-gods. Now, as I tossed and wrestled with the riddle in my mind, it seemed to my feverish brain that the statues' eyes began to glow, and that their lips moved and spoke.

'Listen to us, Aeneas. We are your home-gods, whom you rescued from the flames of Troy. We have not forgotten your devotion. You deserve our help. We know the true meaning of Apollo's words.'

'Then tell me!'

'Your *first mother*, Aeneas, is the land of your ancestor, Dardanus. He came from a western land called Italy. Italy is your promised home, Aeneas. Crete is forbidden to you.'

I awoke with the word 'Italy' humming in my ears. I went straight to my father.

'What you say is true, Aeneas,' he admitted, after a short silence. 'Our ancestor, Dardanus, did come from Italy. My mind was on a different branch of the family. Teucer came from a separate line.' He paused in thought again, and then added, 'You know, that poor girl Cassandra used to say we would end up in Italy, but who ever listened to her?'

We had no difficulty in persuading our people to abandon settlement on Crete. They accepted the news about Italy with willing hearts, and once more we put out to sea.

Almost at once we struck bad weather. We were buffeted by gales; thick storm-clouds hid the horizon by day, and the stars by night. My steersman, Palinurus, had to confess himself at a loss. We hove to and rode out the storm until the skies cleared.

On the fourth day we sighted land. Closer inspection revealed a nest of islands known as the Strophades, not far from Greece. At least we had been blown in the right direction. The place seemed pleasant enough for a short stop; there were some cattle wandering about to supply us with a meal.

Not till dinner was actually sizzling on our plates did the monsters appear. First we heard them — a whirring, whining noise like the onslaught of a thousand giant mosquitoes. And then we felt their savage claws, their furiously beating wings, and their foul, disgusting droppings.

You may have heard tales of the Harpies, ghastly creatures, half woman, half bird of prey, who force poor



wretches to starve to death in a land of plenty. There was no question of our eating any of the food now; what they had not seized was buried under a vile, stinking mess. We snatched up weapons and lunged at them again and again. They only shrieked more piercingly, flapped their wings and made off into the sky. All but their leader, Celaeno, who perched on a high rock and screeched down at us: 'Do you dare to come to the Harpies' land, and steal our food? The gods sent you to Italy – to Italy you will go, but then beware! Famine will punish you there; you will be forced to chew at your own tables. You will remember the Harpies then!' She flew away. Crying on the gods to avert this evil omen, we ran to the ships.

Our course now took us up the coast of Greece, a land we had reason to hate. We stared hard as we passed Ithaca, the island of false Ulysses, and wondered whether he was safe at home, enjoying the plunder and glory he had won at Troy. Since winter was near, we put in at Actium, on the north coast, and camped till the weather would let us sail again.

The seasons, at least, can be trusted, and in the spring we reached the coastal town of Buthrotum. I wanted to check the truth of an extraordinary rumour: that this Greek city was ruled by the Trojan Helenus, son of Priam, who had somehow married his sister-in-law, Hector's widow, Andromache.

No sooner had we landed than I saw her, Andromache, once the beloved wife of our greatest warrior. Day after day she had climbed the battlements of Troy, her baby in her arms, to watch Hector go out to defy the Greeks. She had stood quiet among the wailing women, the day they brought Hector's body home.

She recognized me at once. Rising from her knees (for she had been making a tomb-offering), she took me by both wrists, and looked me over slowly. 'It is you, Aeneas, son of Anchises. I am glad to see you alive.' There was little gladness in her words. The only man who really mattered was dead; living men were all much the same.

'The gods have preserved us both, Andromache,' I replied, in tones as formal as hers. 'Permit me to ask, are you still the – servant – of Pyrrhus?'

At the sound of that name, her lips tightened. She jerked herself away from me and spoke, her voice low and even, her eyes fixed on the sea: 'Even Pyrrhus was mortal. After he had killed my father and my brothers in Troy, he selected me to be his happy bride. I bore him two children. When he grew tired of me, he passed me on to his slave. I was lucky. The slave was Hector's brother, Helenus. He had not been killed, because he was a priest. Pyrrhus was eventually stabbed by Agamemnon's mad son, Orestes. Sometimes the gods are just.'

'Is Helenus still here, then?'

'He is king. Part of the kingdom came to him after Pyrrhus died. We live quietly. Helenus is planning to make the country a model of old Troy.'

We walked a little in silence, sharing memories too painful to speak of. Several times she looked at me as if to ask something.

'What is it, Andromache?' She stood still, and turned to me. There were tears on her face now.

'Is your little boy . . . ? Is Ascanius with you?'

'Yes.' I remembered hearing that Ulysses had flung Andromache's baby boy, Astyanax, from Troy's highest

tower, shouting that no son of Hector would ever grow up to avenge his father.

'I'm glad,' she said.

It was a relief to see Helenus coming to meet us. He welcomed me heartily, led me to the city, and showed off the towers and streets and temples, all built in exact imitation of Troy. I kissed the gate respectfully, but my heart was now longing for a land across the sea.

We stayed a few days, out of courtesy. Then, hoping the moment was right, I approached our host. 'Helenus,' I said, 'we are deeply grateful to you for your kindness to us. Allow me to ask one more favour, and then we must set sail. You are Apollo's priest; please use your prophetic powers, and tell me what dangers we must still face. I believe that the gods want us to settle in Italy, but there may yet be fearful horrors lying in wait for us. I must know all I can.'

Helenus was pleased to help. His dark, intense eyes reminded me of Cassandra, but he had none of her troubled restlessness. The holy sacrifice seemed to make him especially calm: he spoke Apollo's secret knowledge in a firm and steady voice: 'Your voyage to Italy will take place as foretold, Aeneas, but do not think that the journey is short. You must not settle on the east coast, nearest here, for it is filled with your enemies, the Greeks. Sail around Italy until you reach the land Jupiter has ordained to be yours. You must steer through the waters of Sicily, but avoid the narrow strait. There ships are swallowed by the monster Scylla or, if they try to escape her, gulped down by the swirling torrent of Charybdis. Be sure of one thing: do not forget to worship Juno. Win her favour, if you can.'

I pressed Helenus for one further point. 'How will we know when we have arrived?'

For a moment his face grew rigid. I was afraid that he might refuse to say any more. 'There are things, Aeneas, that the gods forbid me to reveal, but this, you may know. When you reach Italy, go to Cumae. Look for a priestess called the Sibyl. Consult her; she knows vital truths about your people. Some day after that, you will come to a river, and near its bank you will find a large, white sow with thirty piglets. There will be the site for your city.'

So – such majestic prophecies, such a grand and noble quest would end in a litter of pigs! Sometimes it is hard to trust the gods.

We prepared the ships. Helenus saw us off, presenting us with generous gifts. Andromache insisted on giving Iulus a beautiful cloak she had made herself. Her own little boy would have been exactly his age.

We sailed now by the shortest route, Palinurus steering with a sure eye and a steady hand. The second dawn at sea brought our first sight of Italy. We gathered on the decks to gaze at the distant coastline, all with our private dreams. My father spoke for us all. Lifting high a bowl of wine as a thank-offering to the gods, he prayed for fair winds and a calm passage.

Soon we were close enough to pick out rocks, trees, houses and temples. This was no uninhabited land. I saw four white horses, grazing peacefully in a field. When I pointed them out to my father, however, he exclaimed: 'War, Aeneas! Such horses are bred for war. This is a land of battles. But in time, perhaps, even war-horses can be trained to pull a plough.'

I had constantly in mind Helenus' warning about Juno.

so I insisted on a sacrifice there and then, as we sailed alongside the shore. As we rounded the southern point of the coast and aimed the ships towards Sicily, we could hear a curious noise, loud roaring and violent sucking. I remembered Scylla, the dog-faced monster-maiden, and Charybdis, the fatal whirlpool.

'Pull at the oars!' I cried to the men. 'Row for your lives!'

We forced the ships south, and put in, exhausted, on the shore near Mount Etna, whose peak towers over the coast of Sicily. This place made us uneasy, with its strange rumbling and shaking, and the bursts of smoke that bruised and stained the sky. We spent the night huddled in the woods, looking forward to dawn and sailing away.

The morning brought a surprise. A ragged, filthy figure of a man emerged from the bushes and begged us to let him sail with us. He was unmistakably a Greek soldier, rather less sure of himself than others we had met. 'I know you are Trojans,' he gasped, flinging his thin, tattered body at our feet. 'Kill me if you like – but don't leave me here.' My good old father held out his hand at once, and told him not to be afraid. I hung back a little, remembering Sinon.

'I was sailing home from Troy with my king, the famous Ulysses. Things didn't go too well, and we put in here for some rest and supplies. Some of us went exploring to see who lived in the caves up there. Well, we found out all right. An enormous ogre, a Cyclops, with one huge eye in the middle of his forehead. He trapped us in his cave and set about eating us, two at a time, morning and evening. You have to believe me – he crushed full-grown warriors between his teeth like nutshells, and swallowed them, hair, bones, and all. That's the way we'd all have gone, but for

Ulysses' cunning. He got the monster drunk and, while he lay there, belching out wine and human guts, we put out his eye with a sharpened stake. Next morning, when he let out the sheep he kept in the cave, he wasn't to know that we were hanging on to their fleece underneath. No one ever had brains like Ulysses, that's for sure. They all got away in the ships – all but me. I was left behind. I've spent three months hiding in the woods, nearly starved, eating only roots and berries, keeping out of their way. You see, the creature who caught us isn't the only one. There are at least a hundred Cyclops-monsters living here. Quick, sir, you must get away right now! Yours is the first human face I've seen in three months of terror: if you kill me for being a Greek, I don't care! At least I'll die at human hands, no worse than the risk I took at Troy.'

We could feel the earth rumbling. The sky was growing dark. Our eyes flew to the smoking peak of Mount Etna, but this was no volcanic eruption. Lumbering down the slope, each unsteady footstep rocking the earth, the blind Cyclops was groping towards the shore. His huge head blotted out the sun. We stood frozen as he shambled past us, waded into the sea and bathed the yawning hole in his forehead. Red streaks appeared in the waves.

We moved. Silently we slipped to the ships, hauling the wretched Greek on board with us, cut the cables, and heaved at the oars. The Cyclops heard, and plunged towards us through water several fathoms deep, bellowing with rage. But we had a head start, and were soon out of reach.

Round the southern coast of Sicily we steered, so as to avoid the strait of Scylla and Charybdis, and put in at Drepanum at the western end. And it was there, with just

a short way left to go, that my father, noble Anchises, passed away. No seer, no oracle, no vision had foretold this agony, the greatest I could suffer.

A day out at sea, and we were hit by the storm that drove us here to Carthage. The rest of my story you know, gracious Queen."

Aeneas had finished. For some time Dido and her guests sat silent.