

The Day of Returning

DAYLIGHT BURNED RED on the eyelids—in my nostrils the smell of tar, hot from the deck-boards throbbing under my head. Through the railings, grey-brown rocks sped between a race of water and a heaven deep with sun. I sprang to my feet as masts and cranes listed and the deck thrust up against my soles and knee-joints; then the inky waves foaming out from the ship's side, and the sun and the rocks and the rising and falling spokes of windmills tipped with pointed sails all turned one way as we passed the jetty and with a roar of anchor chains glided into a round, blue harbour. Among bundles and passengers we tumbled into the row-boats rocking under the starboard side, and barefooted men with white sashes round their waists, pushing the oars before them, moved us away from the steamer while it backed swiftly out into the open sea, bound for other islands off the coast of Asia Minor.

We glided in between massive caiques with painted prows floating in the rippling glaze of their reflections. Phrangisko threw his knapsack on to the embankment and steadied me up the water steps—his stern brows and black moustache contrasting oddly with the woolly bulk of the British uniform worn by the Greek Army after the Liberation. He was on leave from the fighting in the Macedonian sector, and we were going together to

the house of his cousins from America, a farm in the middle of the island.

Passing under whitewashed arcades, blue in the shadow of six o'clock in the morning, we entered a wineshop where a thin, sweet, pungent smoke mingled with the smell of the sea. "Anything to eat?" Phrangisko called. A man swinging his heels among the empty tables dropped his eyelids and both corners of his mouth, with a slight click of the tongue as he tipped his head back. This was the answer No—a gesture so absolute in its denial as to allow no subsequent appeal except (as in the present case when the man indicated two chairs) the mute appeal of patience. A boy ran in with a handful of red mullets wriggling between his fingers. He poured on them a yellow jet of oil and set them to fry over some embers in a grate, then brought the crusty pink fish and a cylindrical copper cup of bitter wine: "Good appetite," he murmured.

Later, seated sideways on the flat, square wooden saddle of a tiny donkey plying its accurate hoofs over the cobblestones—"you are not accustomed to our roads," said Phrangisko—I saw the narrow walls give way to a path paved in rough, sugary marble, through a brown land rising on either side to naked limestone heights and a massive mountain, dotted all over its lower slopes with the tiny white squares of farms and churches. Sometimes we crossed a stream-bed where thickets of rattling calamus reeds sprouted out of the dry boulders.

On the edge of a gully where egg-plants, ochre, beans and gourds grew in shallow terraces, Phrangisko pointed to a little flat-roofed house with an empty doorway and no windows: "That is where my grandmother has come to be close to my cousins: it's the first time she has ever seen them." From a house on the other side a girl came out to meet us: "My sister," he said. Leaving the beast where it stood, the three of us went to the front where a round pear tree cast its black shadow on a terrace open over the wide valley beyond.

The room into which I stepped was as clean as if the sea had washed it, with a pattern of curly waves in indigo and saffron

under the ceiling of glossy, jointed poles of calamus. On the walls huge daguerreotypes of expressionless faces with black headkerchiefs or pointed handlebar moustaches stared out of their oval vignettes, while the salt breeze—though the sea was an hour away to east and west—stirred the lace curtains in the windows and the cloth on a table where a blue and white paper flag sat stiffly in a little vase.

“Be seated,” said the young woman, her bare feet arched across the sill. “You have come in time for the wedding of my aunt Evyenía tomorrow night. Forty years she has waited to make her choice, poor burning soul! With her dowry she could have married anyone on the island, but”—with a flexible gesture of the wrist and a roll of her eyes—“such a one as she has chosen! He comes from the mainland, where there is no sea, only mountains. They say the people from there are bad. Here on the islands one is quiet, glory be to God. . . .”

She brought me a tin tray with a small glass of colourless spirit, a glass of water and a saucer of some kind of fruit rind boiled and sugared. I ate the sweet, sticky spoonful and gulped a fiery draught of raki, while the young woman said, “You are welcome.” I remembered the formal answer out of my phrase-book: “I have found you well,” as I drank my water, and she murmured, “With your good health.”

“Do you make this sweet yourselves?” I asked.

She nodded.

“And our own raki,” Phrangisko called from a back room where he was changing his clothes, since hospitality was only for strangers. “Every household makes its own.”

“And our cousins go from house to house to learn who makes the best,” his sister added crisply.

A sharp note of bells carried across the fields. “Now they will come; aunt and cousins, mother and father, brothers, sisters-in-law, nephews, nieces, uncles. In Greece you find big families.”

Out on the terrace we could see them coming across the fields from a chapel with a blue dome. I recognized a figure in shorts

and T-shirt with a sailor's cap on the back of his head. It was Tom Condor, christened Athanasios Kondarini in the Greek church in Brooklyn Heights, recently employed in an airlines office in Akron, Ohio, whom I had met at boat-drill two hours out of New York harbour. His sisters, on leave from a New York department store, their bobbed hair and pretty painted faces visible among so many heads swathed in kerchiefs, took long strides in their plaid trousers through the other slowly-moving women.

"Poor Ann and Zoe," said Phrangisko at my side. "It seems already half the island has asked to marry them. The other half considers them—you will excuse the word—*tsóules*, because they paint themselves and go about in trousers. They don't deserve it, but people here are narrow in the head."

Mrs Condor, deep in conversation with some other women, bore no resemblance to the grizzled, warm-hearted immigrant I had known on the liner, with her smile of affection for young people cooked into the lines of her big plain face; now she had the look of hard concentration of farmers who talk about crops or the value of their beasts, and she was also darting scowls of fury at her daughters.

A crowd of people stood round me, asking how I had come to Greece, whether I had parents, how I fed myself as a student and where I lived. Mrs Condor called, "Eh, Andrew, what you doing talking to all these bums? You come inside. My brother and sister want to meet you."

All through a day of meetings, greetings and words of friendship and appreciation, I learned the names and relationships of this island clan while the afternoon changed from white to blue and then from gold to violet; then in a tiny kitchen we sat on wooden boxes round a low table, reaching out to the plates of fish and bread and cheese and the wineglasses in our midst. No one drank alone, but raised his glass and everyone touched theirs together, saying, "To health, to the health of us all." Phrangisko's leave, they said, had come in good time since the grape har-

vest was just beginning; they explained how the bread oven was heated with dry thyme bushes; how there was little to do in winter after the fields were sown until the spring harvest; how stains on the tablecloth were wine stains and these were good luck.

VERY EARLY NEXT MORNING, lying fully dressed and wrapped in a blanket on the little forecourt, I looked up into an oyster sky and heard inside the house Mrs Condor's voice growl, "Zoe, Annoula, God-damn' lazy *tsóules*, get up!"

"Jesus Christ, what's there to get up for?"

"I hear you say Jesus Christ again, I slap your face."

"Hey, fella." Tom was tapping my shoulder. "Come and have breakfast."

Inside, her grey hair falling down her back, his mother crouched beside a tiny hearth cooking Turkish coffee over some glowing twigs. At the far end Zoe and Ann still huddled on a matting of long calamus poles across trestles. Mrs Condor picked up a boulder-shaped loaf: "Those two, all day holler-holler for the Post Toasties and the ice-cream sodas. My kids been working ever since they were little children. Now I bring them home. I just want them to have a nice time."

Two resentful voices drawled at the end of the room, "Good-bye Brooklyn."

Mrs Condor stared at the hearth with a look of incomprehension. A shadow fell along the bar of sunlight on the floor.

"Ooooooh, welcome to the Yannaki!" she cried to a small child holding a dish covered with an embroidered napkin which he placed on the table. He went without a word.

"That's my nephew," said Mrs Condor. "You know, Andrea, I got thirty-two nephew-and-nieces on this island." She sighed. "I don't know why we ever leave this place, honest to God! Long ago my husband had big fleet of *kaíkia* but all the time he has to go away and fight with the *Touírkous* and *Voúlgarous*; so one day he sells his boats and we go away . . . Thirty whole years we work

like the mules, we make the children, we buy the grocery store, we make the money slowly-slowly—and now my husband goes off to Jersey City with some God-damn' *Ispána*. For that I spend my life behind the counter! Ever since I leave my brothers and sisters use my fields and now they want us to stay as long as we like—one year, maybe two. But it would be nice if my husband was here too, eh? Just before he goes away I tell him, I say, 'You listen to me, Zakharia. That woman, she nothing but *skatá*.'

"Mother, such language!" said Zoe.

"Get out of here, you two God-damns. I'm talking to Andrea."

Tom said, "Let's see what Yannaki has brought us."

His mother lifted the cloth off a plate of honey and sesame seeds. "Nice, eh? Every day the same thing happens: just like that, somebody brings something. I've never been so happy in all my life," she murmured warmly. "You stay here, Andrew, just as long as you want, I tell you." Then she looked at her son in his shorts, bare to the waist, and suddenly snapped out, "I tell you I get mad if I see you go out of the house like that, naked."

"Hell, Ma, it's hot," said Tom.

"Panagia!" Mrs Condor invoked the All-Holy Mother of God. "For what I bring my kids here to make me ashamed in front of my people!"

Voices called to us, "We shall go up into the hills." A train of donkeys halted outside and the grandmother came out of her little house leaning on a stick, with long skirts about her ankles and a black kerchief over her head and bowed shoulders. Age had worn her face down to a type that could belong to any race on any continent; as one of her grandsons lifted her lightly on to a saddle, she might have been some ancient empress; we moved forward, fifteen or twenty of us all round her on the path.

We climbed up to the flat top of a hill and saw the blue-grey mountains of the Cyclades and the pale rocks of the deserted shore. Once some Turkish pirates came to the top of this same hill, which "opened up and swallowed them," and the cousins led us to a deep fissure which had never closed again. Mrs Condor

said, "Often I think of this place when I'm trying to sell frozen vegetables to the lousy customers."

Passing through a ravine planted with fruit trees, bending low to avoid the spiky branches and the red-crust ed pomegranates that bumped our heads and shoulders, we came to a deep spring festooned with ferns and ivy. This place belonged to the old grandmother; with a covert glance at her brothers and sisters Mrs Condor whispered to me, "They're afraid she'll leave the place to me. They're good people but jealous . . . so help me God!"

The rest of the day was given over to preparations for the wedding of her younger sister. Towards sundown the women came wearing clean headcloths and the men with their moustaches trimmed, their chins shiny and the back of their necks clipped white. In the back room a table had been set with a new cloth and candles. The priest, the lower half of his face hidden under a curly beard and his long hair tied up and knotted under a cylindrical hat, swung a brass censer on the end of three clanking chains and chanted the wedding rite while Aunt Eveyña stood on the other side of the table in a short dress, her face a stiff mask, beside the man she had chosen from the mainland. Clouds of incense stinging the nostrils floated beneath the low ceiling and as the priest administered Communion in a long-handled spoon, Ann and Zoe beside me muttered, "Couple of spring chickens!"

Then plates of food were carried in and the room filled with voices talking all at once and a sharp smell of wine, while a loaf of dark, heavy bread which the priest had consecrated was cut up into little squares and given out. Candles and chalice were cleared off the table to make way for a gramophone with a vast, pink amplifier the shape of a morning glory; out of it a voice brayed full, nasal and pitched high over the jangling, syncopated rhythm. Young men danced with their arms on one another's shoulders in an open circle, or men and women followed each other with downcast eyes in endless mimicry of escape. Long after midnight, as we made our way through the beds of gourds

and melons in the moonlight, Tom translated for me the song they were singing behind us:

Now all the birds, now the swallows,
 Now the partridges softly sing, Awake,
 My Master, good Master, awake to embrace
 Her body like a cypress tree
 And her white neck.

Mrs Condor said, "That's the song people sing when they gather round the house and the bride takes the sheet off her bed with her blood on it and hangs it out of the window, so the neighbours can see no man ever messed her up before."

NEXT MORNING THE TABLES in Phrangisko's house were set end to end under the pear tree. Many of the relatives forgathered once again for the wedding breakfast in the early sunlight. No one went to the winepress that day. In the shade of a wall Phrangisko busied himself making a wineskin from the goat slaughtered for the feast. He sewed together the holes of its severed limbs with a heavy needle and long gut thread, drawing the whole skin through the hole where the neck had been, with the hair inside and the malodorous, wet, fleshy side out. One of his younger brothers brought me a piece of calamus and made a flute out of it with a few strokes of his knife. He cut off one piece below the joint, pierced the joint inside, bevelled the rim of the opposite end into a plain open mouthpiece and bored six holes down one side with a red-hot nail from the kitchen. He held it to his mouth at an angle and blew; each note was clear and sweet and round. His mother stood with a distaff under one elbow, slowly twisting thread from a cloud of brilliant, snowy wool. Through the day we went on eating and drinking while Evyenía sat inside with her husband in his undershirt lolling against her shoulder and rolling his black eyes up at her weatherbeaten face. The two of them left

next morning to catch the boat for Piraeus and the cousins went to work in the winepress before daylight.

Tom and I joined them at the quadrangle of plastered walls, with a bottom sunk several feet lower than the surrounding field where Phrangisko and his brothers, their trousers rolled up to their knees and straw hats shadowing their faces, were trampling about on the mound of grapes. We took off our shoes and hopped over the wall.

The sun climbed. We plunged in with purple shins and ankles, lifting our knees slowly and squeezing our toes into the clusters of hot, bursting globes, while the mound sank slowly around us and the juice gurgled out of a hole at the bottom into a deep, plastered pit. A thyme branch stuck into the hole kept back the skins and seeds, to be boiled up for raki and jelly and cakes at a different season. During the morning others of the family came with cartloads of grapes from the outlying fields and dumped them into the press. Sometimes we would step out and lying flat on the ground reach into the pit to bring up a gourd full of the warm, sweet juice we had been treading; it was too sticky to quench our thirst, too sweet to stop drinking. Then under the great silence of the Mediterranean noon we climbed out and went to wait for our meal under the pear tree. Beyond the vineyards stretched a broad, open country with secrets of its own—the sunken paths, the calamus thickets in the torrent beds, here and there stands of cypresses, small caves, hidden springs, the orchards and olive yards of a monastery, and from every high place a different view of the steep, calcareous shore. Yet everything close by was somehow at noonday painful—the bruise of bedrock under one's bare feet and the prick of spiny plants dead since winter; everywhere the vine leaves wilted and unpicked grapes lay hot and juicy over the parched clods.

Ann and Zoe passed below the terrace in their plaid trousers. "We've ate already; we're going over to Naoussa. Maybe we can stir up some trouble."

Their uncle shuffled up from the fields; a woollen sash wound round and round his waist held up trousers that trailed about his bare ankles. Under his straw hat his eyes gleamed out of lean bones ornamented with a long, grey, curled moustache. For a moment he watched the figures of the two girls teetering slightly down the uneven path, then turned to his wife at the kitchen door; they exchanged glances. "They have eaten already," she said—her slow words were uttered out of a face habitually stiff with reserve—"and now they go to pay their calls in Naoussa."

In the kitchen she set before us plates of beans and mullets cooked in oil, wedges of bread, thick white cheese with one or two goat's hairs stuck to it, and a gourd of acrid wine. She stood in the back of the room while her husband and sons, her American nephew and I ate in silence, and two of her daughters sat on the terrace, grinding lentils. Flies buzzed and looped under the low ceiling. The grumbling millstone stopped. The uncle drank the last of his wine, made the sign of the cross three times, yawned to the ceiling, then lifted his wiry frame on to a bed over a grain bin by the oven and fell asleep with his straw hat over his face.

I had been here four days—long enough to be able to wander off when I wished, leaving the others now to their midday rest. I sought my own by crossing the field in the intolerable sunlight to an enormous fig tree that grew beyond the winepress and lay down on the sharp, flinty ground beneath it. This was the hour when all life withdrew into small, shady places, as if sound or motion might somehow affront the immense stillness of the sun at its height; all I heard was the occasional dry rasp, like a goat's tongue, of the heavy leaves of the fig tree scraping.

To wake up two hours later into a world where the light had changed and the landscape was beginning to shape itself anew with shadows was like journeying back a long distance from a state where thighs and shoulder-blades were rooted in the stony earth. I looked up to see Phrangisko standing in the cool darkness under the tree.

“Let us go and drink water before the others come down,” he said, and he led the way to three old and bristly pomegranate trees round the mouth of a well. “This is the best we have,” he said, pushing a bucket over the edge. “We have six other wells, but they run dry by autumn. Water is all.” He yawned and drew the bucket up again. “Do you have the flute?”

I took the piece of calamus out of my pocket and handed it to him.

“You must hold it like this, off to one side.” He blew across the hole and a tumult of ear-splitting trills poured up into the leaves that quivered like pointed tongues.

It was four o'clock and the vineyards were receiving the first caress of slanting sun—as if the island were beginning to breathe again—when the rest of the family arrived at the winepress. A scum of foam and bubbles floated on the dark surface of the pit. Sounds began all over the island: goat-bells, donkeys braying, bells of distant churches, mingling in the softer air with our long afternoon's clamour as we dipped the juice up out of the pit with broken gourds and petrol cans and poured it into the goat-skin bags like the one I had watched Phrangisko making the day before; the stumpy protuberances of their severed legs and necks bulged into shape and they lay about on the ground and lolled against one another, obscene and lifelike. We lifted them up on to donkeys struggling under their weight, and lashed them four to a saddle. Later we rode to Naoussa on its blue bay, where the eldest brother, who had come back from the Albanian war in 1940 with one leg amputated, kept a wineshop for the fishermen; then home again on the dusty, brittle-stepping donkeys, past shepherds with their flocks, the path melodious with their bells, through a warm wind that sighed in the osiers along the beach where light, swift waves ran in out of the purple sea.

Days passed. The fierce brilliance of morning followed the amber sunrise, and after the blue air of afternoon the moonlight lay warm and honey-coloured on the paving-stones of the forecourt where I slept. We worked all day in the winepress and

sometimes went to the sea at night, walking out into the water and drawing in nets full of fish for the evening meal. One night we visited Phrangisko's married brother; two men came with instruments, a little goatskin drum and a tiny bagpipe of a kidskin with two reeds sticking out of it, embedded side by side in wax in a split piece of wider calamus, with a section of cow's horn tied to the end for resonance. The two of them sat down on the parapet, and to the drum's soft urgent thudding and the hysterical shriek of the pipes the others danced with their fingers intertwined, the moon shining on their ankles as they lifted and whirled and stamped. Near me in the darkness Mrs Condor said, "Nice, old-fashioned evening, eh, Andrew?"

PHRANGISKO LEFT ONE MORNING, wearing his army uniform. No one said anything and I was struck by the sudden, soundless finality of Greek departures, as of waters closing over someone's head. A week later I myself walked across the island, then watched the windmills and the rocky shoreline draw farther and farther back across the steamer's widening wake. In the early afternoon we put into the port of Syra, backing in alongside a Swedish freighter unloading tons of American grain. Beyond the girders of the covered after-deck the harbour was like a painted stage: the wave-lapped walls with its flat coping-stones and cobbled area extending round us in a semicircle and on the other side the green- and pink-washed fronts of coffee-shops and restaurants named after the islands of their proprietors, each with its row of chairs and tables outside, crowded with passengers for Piraeus and street-vendors ready to swarm on board with their boxes of *loukoumia* and baskets of tin icons. On the embankment stood a line of men with shaven heads, each with a bundle at his feet. I asked one of the ship-hands who they were.

He answered in English, "Good people. Democratic people—exiles, prisoners. We got rotten government." He was off before I could ask him another question but I caught the words in Greek, "Our countrymen, our brothers."

Then we were all cleared off the stern as about two hundred men were led by armed guards to the foredeck. I squeezed my way past a group of smartly trousered women wearing silk scarves and broad sun-glasses talking French to a Greek Catholic priest; one of them, casting a glance over the rail, said in the throaty, masculine voice of Athenian women of the richer class, "Where would they be taking the goat-thieves now!" Finding no barrier, I walked straight on to the foredeck through the prisoners' midst and sat down with my back to a stanchion, where I read my Greek dictionary in hopes that somebody might notice.

A young man with grave eyes and a sickly, brownish-yellow face leaned forward on one knee and, looking over my shoulder, said, "Are you English?"

"American," I replied.

Three others drew closer. A boy who could not have been older than fifteen, though his shaved and bony head gave him an expression of mature savagery, said to me in broken English, "Better you be American. Churchill God-damn' son of a bitch."

The man with the yellow face said, "It is thanks to him we find ourselves where we are now."

"Thousands of us sacrificed our lives and all we had, fighting the Germans while they occupied our country," said another. "Churchill wanted to show us his gratitude; so he gave orders that we should all be disarmed as soon as our liberators landed in Greece. They mowed us down with their machine-guns as we marched into Athens without weapons. And now to please the British, the politicians send us into exile on islands where there is no water."

"Where?" I asked.

"Youra, an island off Syra, where the sun is strong in the quarries and we break stone all day with one bowl of soup for nourishment; where the beds are of rock and the barracks are made of tar paper which blows in and out with the wind in winter. If you are American, you should see it. What do you do?"

"I am a student," I said.

“In that case you are a *confrère*,” he said. “I am a student too.” He took my dictionary, then asked for my fountain-pen and wrote his name on the last page, adding beneath the signature: “Law student. A souvenir.”

Then a guard with a revolver clanking briskly on his hip barked at everyone to stand up. The prisoners rose to their feet; I remained seated on the deck.

“Eh, you!” the guard shouted. “Get up!”

I pointed at my hair and there was quiet laughter. The guard ordered them to move away.

I moved to another stanchion. More prisoners gathered round me; seated high in their midst, I asked one man who spoke French, why they were in prison.

“Parce que nous voulons une politique populaire.”

Another man, glaring at me, said, “Tell this man . . . Ask him why . . .” and one by one the accusations were translated for me. Did I say America was prosperous, and if so why were there two million unemployed? I had never thought about it and asked him where he got his information. In the newspapers, he said, and I protested it must be an exaggeration. Did I say America was a democracy? Then why had the former Vice-President been forbidden to address a university in the Middle West? I said if that came from the papers it was probably untrue as well. The man insisted that thousands of students went to hear Henry Wallace speak in an open field after he had been denied access to the university hall; was that democracy? *“Eh bien, nous aussi, nous sommes des étudiants,”* he repeated as the guard came by to disperse them all again. I had never seen people who looked less like students, but with their shaved heads and their thinness it was hard to tell their age.

After that a man told me he was being set free because he had signed a paper renouncing his Communist affiliations. The others had refused to sign and were being taken now to a detention camp on Makronisos, off the eastern coast of Attica.

The light was fading out of the sky and a cold wind blew. Someone pointed to the mountains of the mainland rising smooth and velvety against the crimson sky, and said, "General Markos is up there, in mountains higher than those—he and others who are still free. They fight for us who are captives, but what happens to individuals is of no importance." I could see he was grinning.

A few feet away some other prisoners were having an argument with a man whose immaculate collar and saddle shoes showing through the dusk proclaimed him for one of the first-class passengers. I watched his beseeching Levantine gestures, and feeling I had no business here, returned to the little deck where the Athenian women and the Catholic priest were still talking in the language they preferred to their own. The moon rose while we sailed into the Saronic Gulf and the shores of Attica and the Argolid drew closer on either side. Once the priest extended an arm out over the sea and said, "*Quel spectacle merveilleux que les rayons de la lune sur les ondes!*" and one of the women murmured hoarsely, "*N'est-ce pas que notre Grèce est belle, mon Père?*"