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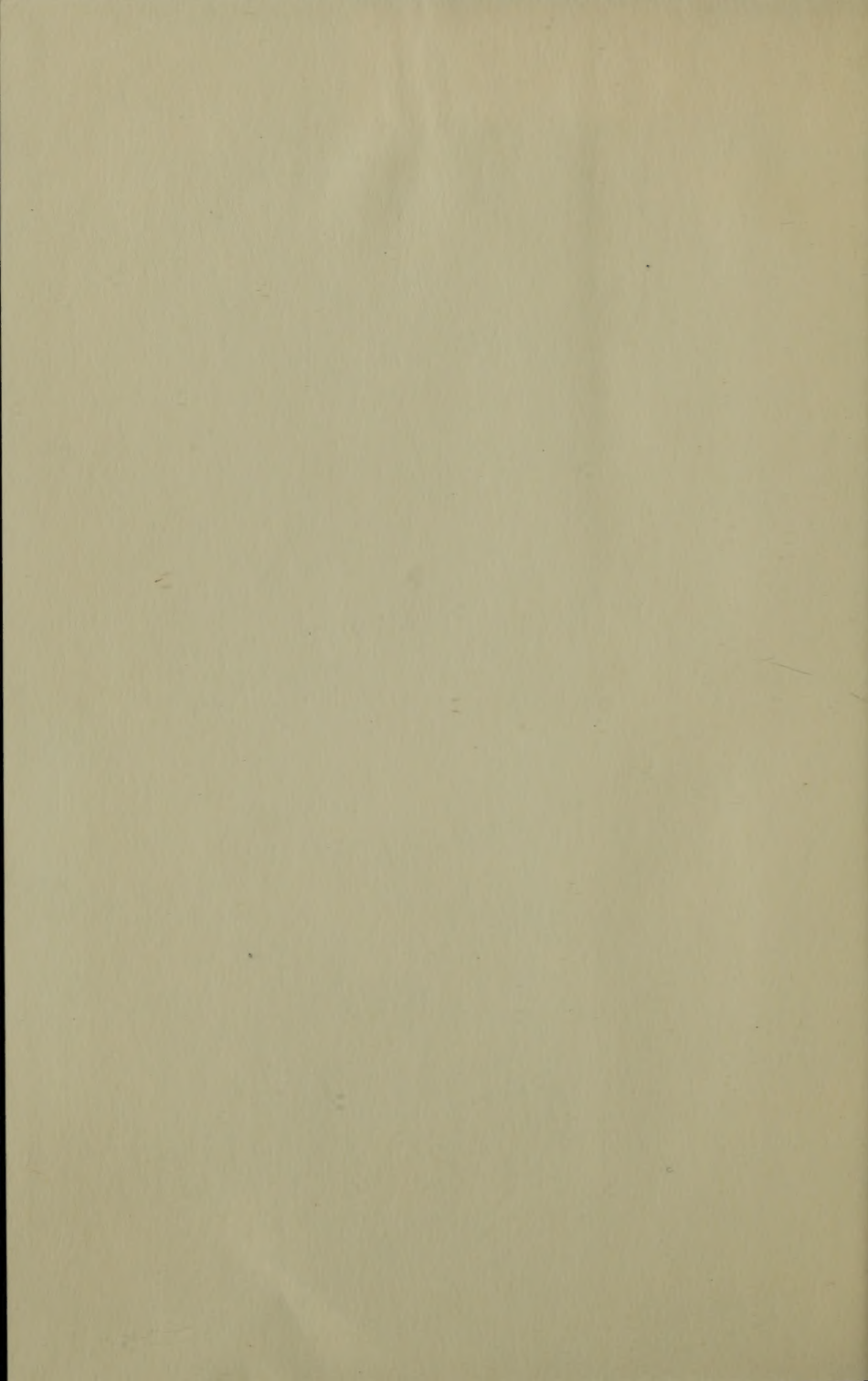
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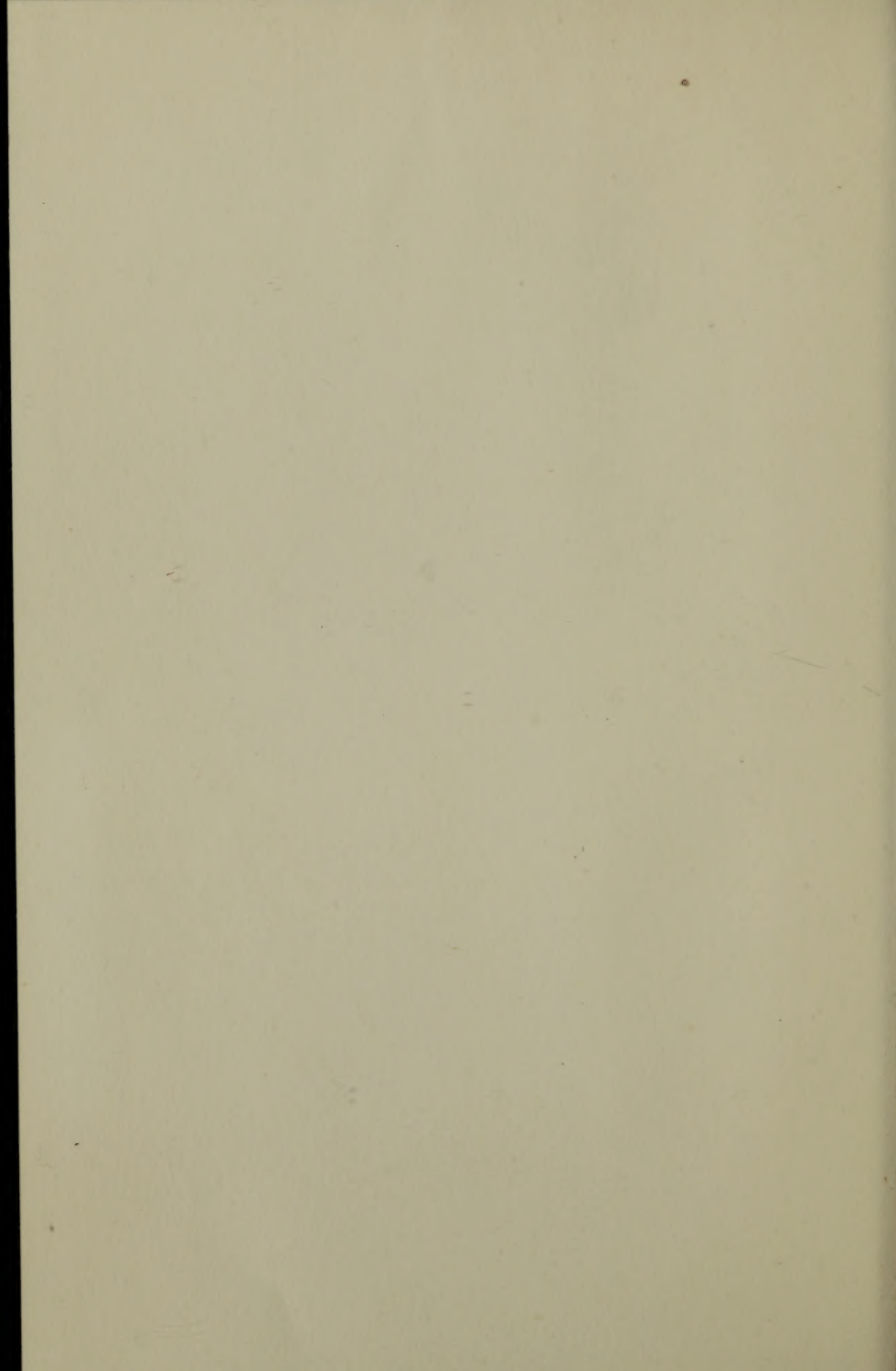


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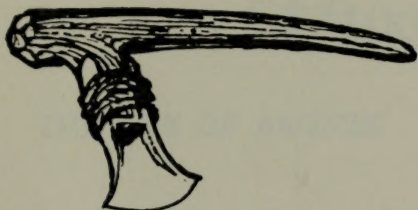
THE AXE OF BRONZE

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On Salisbury Plain in England stands a great circle of massive stones called Stonehenge. It is now known that these stones were placed there by men who lived four thousand years ago in the days before written history. Archaeologists and historians have pieced together all possible evidence, and from this have formed theories of how the giant stones were moved and how the men who moved them lived and worshipped. **THE AXE OF BRONZE** describes this unknown past, but the author has made every effort to use all the known facts and to make his story one that could have happened.

THE AXE OF BRONZE

A STORY OF STONEHENGE



KURT SCHMELTZER

Illustrated by

M. A. CHARLTON

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NEW YORK

THE
AXE OF BRONZE
A STORY OF STONEMEN



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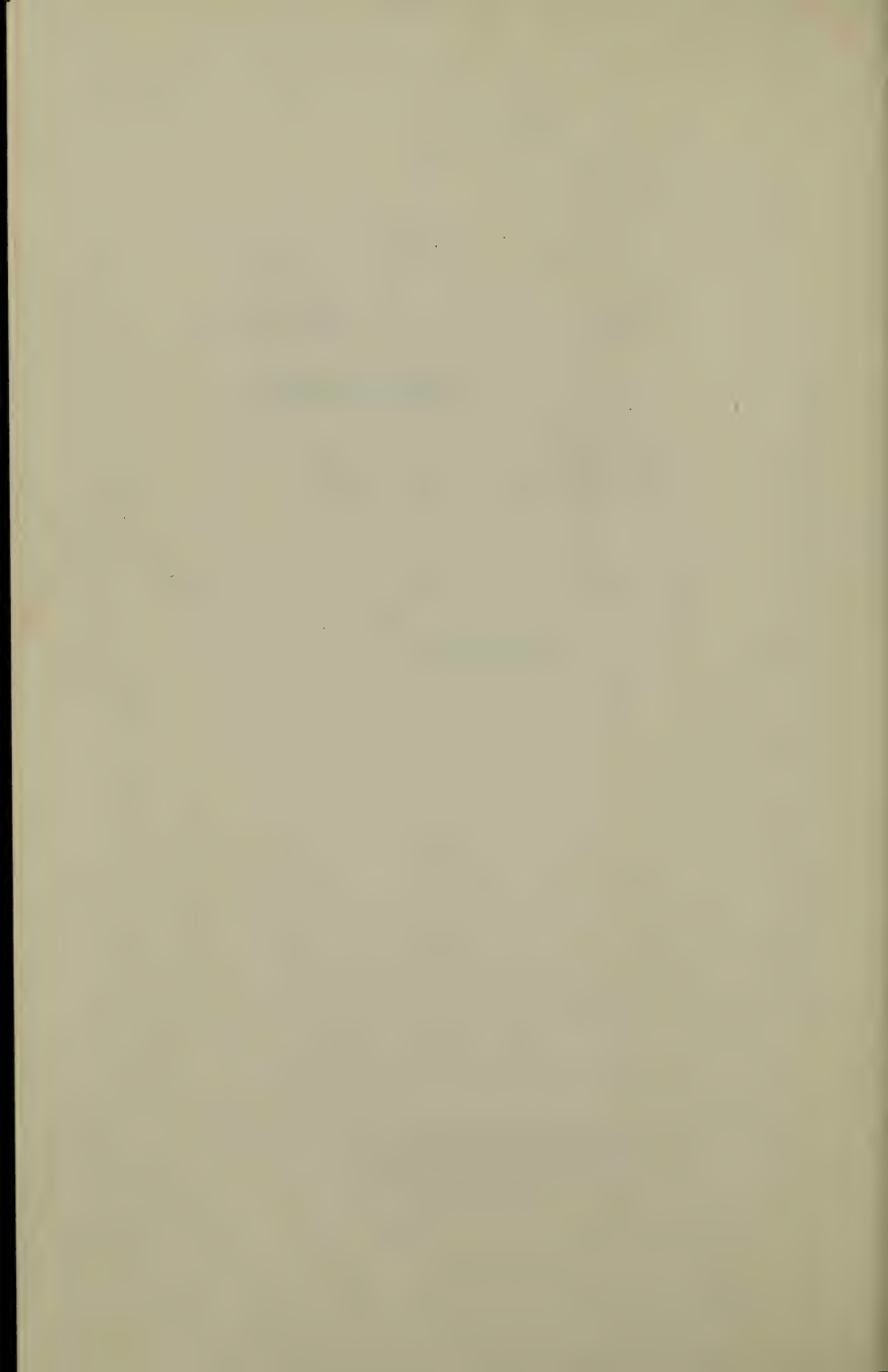
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THE AXE OF BRONZE



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Hannah and Trevor Shaw
for help and advice*



Chapter 1

BIRNO came out of the hut, put two fingers into his mouth and let out a shrill, piping whistle. A boy appeared in the doorway of a neighbouring hut and joined him, as though he had been waiting for the signal. Like Birno he had a fur bag, slung by a strap over one shoulder and in his hand an axe made out of deer antlers and fastened to a convenient cudgel. Both boys were nearly naked; curly black hair hung down to their shoulders and their bodies were burnt brown by the sun. They might have been between fourteen and fifteen years old, though it was difficult to say exactly.

They and the others in their village were known as Darkheads and they lived four thousand years ago in the days before history was written.

"Are you going to take the baskets and collect sea-gulls' eggs?" asked Grandmother, who had followed Birno out of the hut. "Meat is becoming scarce and we can't expect the Fathers back with more for some time yet."

"Yes, Grandmother, we'll get some for you," replied Birno. "Look!" he went on, pointing to where the red rim

of the morning sun had just appeared over the mountain tops. "Look, the sun is rising!"

They turned, and raised their hands towards the East, and chanted together:

"Greetings, beautiful sun,
Grant to us a joyous day."

The old grandfather, feeling his way out of the hut, lifted his blind eyes to the East and murmured the holy chant. From all the near-by huts came women and children, gathering together to greet the rising sun.

The little village consisted of about a dozen low, round huts lying on a smooth mountain slope. It was surrounded by a wall built of rough pieces of stone to about the height of a man. A spring gurgled outside the wall, feeding a little stream that ran downhill. A few sheep were grazing, and some goats, waiting to be milked, jostled each other in their eagerness to reach the huts.

By this time the two boys had fetched baskets made of plaited willow. They threw them over the wall, shooed back the dogs who would have liked to accompany them, climbed nimbly over the wall themselves and picked up their baskets again on the other side.

"Shall we go to the cliffs or down to the bay, Amer?" Birno asked his friend.

"There are more likely to be eggs in the cliffs," replied Amer. "Listen, Birno, the days are long just now. Let's go and look for eggs first and then we can still go down to the bay to swim."

"Yes, and we can collect shells too, and knock out flints," said Birno eagerly. "Grune is being a spoilsport again, as

usual," he added. "He is being secretive and he wants to be on his own."

"Let him," shrugged Amer. "If he is with us he only causes quarrels and unpleasantness."

They now turned off the path leading to the bay and walked through the wood which reached as far as the village wall. It was early summer and already there were a few berries here and there which the boys picked and greatly enjoyed although they were not yet really ripe.

Birno was always jolly and in a good mood, and he leaped and frolicked around as usual, but Amer was strangely silent and downcast. Suddenly he spoke: "One of our hearthstones wept yesterday evening. Mother says it will bring bad luck and she is frightened for Father's safety; at first she did not want to let me go to the shore."

Birno looked concerned. "Have you kept the tears?" he asked.

Amer put his hand into his bag. "Here they are," he said and produced several small pieces of copper.

"The narrow-faced ones, who live down the river, hammer pieces like that into tools," Birno said knowingly. "But Grandfather says it is unlucky. The Gods do not like us to use the tears of stone as tools. Grandmother says they must be beaten flat and then they will do no harm."

"Shall I do that?" asked Amer.

Birno's grandmother was the wise woman of the village. "Grandmother is always right," he replied at once. "Beat them flat and then no evil will come of it."

They laid the pieces of copper on a flat rock and then Amer found a suitable stone with which he started hammering, quickly and skilfully.

"Look, they don't split like shells and flintstone!" he

cried. It was not long before the stone's tears had become small, flat leaves.

Birno inspected them curiously. "Sharp at the edges, like flint," he remarked. "Do you think you could use them for cutting?" He tried it on a hazel sapling but only succeeded in cutting his finger. It bled, and he put it in his mouth.

"There you are!" he cried. "Grandfather was right; it is unlucky to use them as tools. Take them home, Amer, and bury them in the ashes of your hearth."

Amer put the little pieces of copper back into his fur bag and the two boys continued on their way. Amer's good spirits had returned.

Soon they came to the edge of the wood and found themselves standing at the top of the cliffs which rose steeply out of the sea. Screaming sea-gulls whirled round their heads and far below the tumultuous sea dashed its waves against the rocks. The sea-gulls nested in these cliffs and the two friends climbed about with agility and confidence, finding plenty of nests with eggs in them. The gulls scolded and screamed angrily, but that did not disturb the boys. They tested the eggs by breaking one out of each nest. If it was fresh, they gulped that one down and put the remainder into their baskets. If the eggs were already developing, the gulls were allowed to keep them.

It is no easy matter to scramble about in the rough cliffs, especially if one hand is holding a basket with fragile contents. However, both boys were experienced climbers and they helped each other. All the same the sun was high in the sky by the time they had filled their baskets; the tide was going out and they found that there was



a strip of sand wide enough for them to climb right down onto the beach.

At that moment a cry rang out across the sea:

“Hei-o! Hei-o!”

“The Fathers are bringing the stone,” shouted Amer. “Look, Birno! There they are, paddling! Hei-o! Hei-o!” he shouted back and waved across to the men.

“Hei-o! Hei-o!” the calls resounded back and forth.

It was a strange craft which was being laboriously paddled through the waves several hundred yards from the coast; an immense raft made of tree trunks, on top of which rested a colossal four-cornered stone. Several boats floated around the raft, and one of them was heading for the beach.

“Father,” cried Amer, “Father, we have been collecting eggs!”

“So we saw,” replied his Father as he jumped onto the beach. “Come, let us have them, we are all hungry and thirsty.”

He was a wiry man, like all the others who had been sitting with him in the canoe, which was made from a hollowed-out tree trunk. They were black-haired men with long beards, sunburnt and clothed only in loin-cloths of fur. Amer’s Father was already packing the contents of the basket into his fur pouch.

“It is lucky that we met you. Is all well in the village? We are going to the Holy Stones to erect this new one.”

With that he sprang back into the canoe, holding the bag of eggs in his hand. The men grasped their paddles again and the boats set off in the direction of the river.

The two friends with their empty baskets ran along the

narrow strip of sand left by the outgoing tide, keeping the river in view the whole time.

Birno felt both sorrow and pride, for his Father had been killed in an accident on an earlier expedition. The Holy Stone had killed him: the Gods themselves had taken his Father to them, and throughout the village everyone spoke of him with great reverence.

Merwin the Priest, wrapped in his bearskin, was seated on top of the stone, as protector to ensure the safety and success of the dangerous journey. He seemed to have recognized Birno for he raised his hand. Birno bowed low and Amer bowed too. Then the raft made its way round the promontory into the channel that led far inland, and disappeared from the boys' view. Still stupefied, they gazed after it.

"I wish my beard would begin to grow," said Amer, and Birno nodded. They both had the same desire, for the appearance of their beards would be the sign that they had reached manhood, and then they would be allowed to take part in the sacred expeditions.

They still had to go some distance along the shore before they reached the bay, where they could collect mussels brought in by the tide. They filled their baskets with the mussels, and ate a few besides, for by now they were becoming hungry. Then they climbed about on the chalk cliffs encircling the bay and with axes made of deer antlers knocked some of the plentiful flints out of the chalk. These they put into their fur pouches. Finally they swam about in the sea for a while and at last started to make their way homewards.

The dogs were the first to greet them, with much joyful barking and energetic tail-wagging, as they clambered

over the village wall. This attracted the attention of the other children of the village, who had been playing on a see-saw, and they too came running towards the two boys.

At once the children's faces were filled with disappointment as they saw that the baskets contained mussels instead of eggs.

"No eggs," they announced to the village. "The boys have brought no eggs."

Of course the boys were too proud to tell mere children the great news, that they had seen the Fathers with the Sacred Stone and that the Fathers had taken the eggs. Only when they reached the huts where the mothers sat did they explain.

Then there was joy in the village; the mothers clapped their hands together and everyone crowded round the two boys to hear the details. Yes, the great Priest and magician had sat on top of the stone wrapped in his bearskin, and the Fathers had been hungry from rowing and had taken the eggs from them. What did it matter then that they would not be able to eat gulls' eggs that night, if it was the Fathers to whom they had been given. The Sacred Stone was now on its way to the other Holy Stones. It would be set in position on Midsummer Day and shortly after that the Fathers would be back with meat in plenty.

The children shouted and danced for joy, ate mussels and cried out again and again, "Birno and Amer have seen the Fathers on the raft!"

Suddenly, the boy Grune appeared from his hut. His face was angry and scowling. "Why didn't you wait for me?" he demanded.

Amer laughed and Birno said, "We whistled the signal as usual. You could have come if you'd wanted to."

Peevishly Grune turned and walked away.

In front of Birno's hut sat his grandmother with the old blind grandfather. She had a distaff in her hand and was spinning wool which she had plucked off the sheep. The grandfather was polishing a spearhead of flint with a sandstone which from time to time he dampened. This he could do, blind as he was, for he could feel with the tips of his fingers where there were still jagged edges that had to be filed down.

"We have heard the news from the children already," his grandmother said to Birno, "You saw the Fathers with the Sacred Stone on the raft and they let you refresh them with your gulls' eggs."

"Yes, we were lucky," replied Birno, "and we took your advice and beat flat some of the tears that Amer's hearthstone wept last night."

"Well done," muttered the grandfather.

"We brought mussels instead of the eggs," Birno continued, "and some flints from the chalk rocks."

"Let me see," said his grandmother and Birno emptied his fur pouch.

"Fine big pieces," murmured Grandmother approvingly. "They will do well for knives and spearheads."

Then they ate the mussels and as the sun dropped behind the hills, they rose, stretched out their hands to it, and chanted:

"Farewell, dear Sun,
Accept our thanks for the day you have given us.
Return to us tomorrow."

It was a beautiful still evening. A gentle breeze blew from the sea, and the fire flickered in front of the hut.

Later, when they were ready to sleep, Grandmother would cover the embers with ashes to keep in the heat, so that next morning the fire need only be fanned up and re-fuelled to make it crackle merrily and burn throughout the day. Now, one star after another pricked the darkening sky with its point of light and a pale moon shone down upon the people squatting round the fires in front of their huts. Grandmother had put down her distaff and was letting her busy hands rest. Grandfather too had finished his task.

“Soon, Birno, your beard will grow,” he said, “and you will be allowed to go with the Fathers to fetch the Sacred Stone. Then you will see the other Holy Stones that have already been set up, there where our ancestors are buried. And you will be at the Midsummer Feast when a new stone is put in place and all the Fathers of the district gather together to sacrifice to the Gods.”

“I am impatient, I can hardly wait for the time to come,” said Birno. “Tell me a little about it, Grandfather, you have been there so many times. The Sacred Stones are so heavy and big, how can they be brought up the river?”

“The hardest part is to hew them out of the cliffs,” said Grandfather. “Many, many Fathers must work for several moons before the block is ready. There are tired arms and tired backs, and that is not all. Look at me and my blind eyes. You know how that happened; splinters of stone destroyed them. But the Gods have taken my eyes and the Gods will give them back.”

“The Gods will give them back,” repeated Grandmother quietly.

“With strong levers the stone is raised a little so that rollers can be pushed underneath it,” Grandfather con-

tinued. "It is pushed down to the shore on these rollers and at last dragged onto the raft. Oh, yes, it is heavy work. It cost your Father his life, Birno. But the Gods will give him new life. We placed his most beautiful weapons and tools with him in his grave so that they should be there at the time."

"Shall I be allowed to see his grave, there by the Sacred Stones?" asked Birno.

"The other Fathers will show it to you," said Grandfather. He was silent for a while as if remembering, and then went on: "The journey on the raft is the easiest part of the task, for the Fathers have only to row and steer along the coast until they reach the river mouth. Going upstream along the river is harder again, for the current is strong there. But then comes the most difficult part. The stone has to be taken off the raft and put onto new rollers, so that it can be dragged up the river bank and away across country. But there are many hands to help. Other Fathers have already dug the hole in which the stone is to stand and the Priests have measured carefully so that the hole is neither too wide nor too deep, and so that the stone itself stands at the right height and the right distance from all the others. Intricate scaffolding must be built so that it can be raised up and lowered into its hole, until at last it stands in its place and the hole can be packed with rocks and earth. Only another two or three winters, Birno, and you will be there too, seeing all this for yourself."

"Oh, Grandfather, and I shall come back and tell you all about it!" cried Birno.

"A good distance away from the rest," continued Grandfather, "there has stood from time immemorial an immense, unhewn block; the Gods themselves erected it

and on Midsummer Day the sun rises directly behind it and throws its shadow up to the central arch of the temple. You will see that too, as I saw it when my eyes still lived."

"It is time to sleep," said Grandmother and started to cover the embers of the fire with ashes, using a shovel made of the shoulder-blade of a deer, fastened to a stick.

Then they all went into the hut. In the front was a small porch, in which sheep and goats were allowed to stay during the winter, while behind this was the actual round hut. It was dark, for in the summer there was no fire inside, and they had to feel their way to their sleeping-quarters. Each bed was a flat stone slightly raised and covered with furs. Grandfather and Grandmother slept on one side, Birno on the other. In the middle of the round room a post had been set up to support the roof of reeds and grasses.

Soon all three lay wrapped in their furs while outside the dogs guarded the village.



Chapter 2

FROM the time that the Fathers had departed there had been less and less to eat in the village, despite the fact that good supplies of smoked meat had been hung on the posts over the hearths. Therefore the two friends decided that next day they would go to the river with their rods to catch some fish. The fish-hooks were carved of bone and had sharp barbs on them, the lines were made of twisted animal gut and the rods were hazel branches. They would also take bows and arrows and, of course, their axes, for who knew when there might be a buck or a deer to be killed.

Birno had a particularly good axe with a hole for a handle which he had drilled himself. For days on end he

had sat outside his hut with the axe between the soles of his feet, tirelessly twirling a stick between the palms of his hands, drilling steadily into the hard stone, watching the hole slowly deepen. Over and over again he had put damp sand into it as his grandmother had shown him. His hands were sore and blistered from the constant rubbing of the stick, but at last the hole was completed and now he could wear the axe in his belt. All the other boys, particularly Grune, envied him for it and many tried to copy him, but so far none had succeeded.

“Don’t attack any large animals,” said Grandfather as they were leaving. “There are not enough of you for bears or elk or cattle, and besides you need spears and the Fathers have taken those with them.”

The boys promised to obey and departed. This time Grune had joined the party. The dogs were allowed to come too, and with yelps of joy they leaped and bounded about the wood like mad things. The boys whistled and called them back and tried to explain how necessary it was to keep quiet on a hunting expedition. Eventually the dogs seemed to understand and followed obediently and quietly.

It was not a great distance to the river. On the way they almost caught a fox but he was too quick for them and vanished like lightning into his earth.

When they reached the river they found two boys already there, who looked round with annoyance and gesticulated as if to say, “Don’t make so much noise or the fish won’t bite.”

Birno, Amer and Grune knew the two who were already fishing. They belonged to the people lower down the river, known as the “Narrowheaded Ones”, who used weapons



Chatter

and tools made of the tears of stones—bronze was its real name. And sure enough, both the boys had bronze axes in their belts and looked somewhat contemptuously, or so it seemed to the three, at their axes of stone.

The Narrowheads had fair hair and blue eyes and, as Grandfather, who could remember their arrival in his youth, had said, they came from far away in the East. At that time there had been quarrels with the Darkheads and even fights when the Narrowheads had wanted to settle on a hill farther down the river. Later they had come to terms over it and the Darkheads who were settled higher up the river had watched with amazement and some horror at what the fair-haired Narrowheads were able to do with their bronze tools. How quickly they could fell trees and chop off their branches, how soon had a fence of slender trunks sprung up round the place where they now lived! They built huts out of tree trunks too, much larger huts than the low dwellings of the Darkheads. They terraced the hill inside their fence, and then tore up the earth with a large implement which was pulled by the women and guided by the men. This was a plough, but what was the purpose of all this labour the Darkheads had not at first been able to understand. Then the Narrowheads had strewn seed in the furrows; the seed came up and transformed the entire hill into terraces of green fields. The Darkheads had shaken their heads over these extraordinary happenings, but by and by they had discovered the reason for them: these green grasses contained grains which could be ground between stones and made into a sticky paste with water. If this dough were spread onto hot stones and left a while in the embers of the fire, it would turn into a hard cake that was good to eat, particu-

larly when spread with a little honey. Birno's grandmother and a few other women had tried to imitate this— but, alas, there had been too little grain, for how much soil could be worked with shovels made from the shoulder-blades of deer? And then, too, they had to protect the young grain from the sheep and the goats, who were rather too fond of eating it. Moreover, the flints, which they found in the chalk, were too small to be beaten into a stone plough.

The two lads with the bronze axes felt themselves to be far superior to the other three with their stone weapons. Birno and Amer and Grune, however, who still regarded the Narrowheads as intruders, were annoyed that these boys were fishing from a spot which they looked on as their own. When they said, with many rough gestures, "Go farther up the river if you want to fish," it would have taken very little more to start a real fight.

Fortunately at this moment a number of wild pigs appeared on the far side of the river—it was a boar with his sows, who had come to drink and who were not in the least disturbed or frightened at the presence of the five boys on the bank.

"We must encircle them," Birno called to the others. "Will you help? You cross the river lower down, and we will go farther upstream."

There was immediate agreement; fishing-rods were cast aside and the two Narrowheads made off in the direction Birno had indicated. Meanwhile he and his two friends called the dogs, quietened them, and ran upstream as fast as they could.

All the boys were skilful hunters; they had learnt from their Fathers. After crossing the river, they formed them-

selves into a semicircle. Then, sending the dogs in front, they stealthily followed through the wood to the place where the wild pigs ought still to be. Birno was in the middle, to his right Amer, and to his left, one of the boys from the lower village. Wild-boar hunting is a dangerous sport. Pigs have a tough, thick hide which an arrow with a stone head can scarcely penetrate. They really needed spears, but these they had not been able to bring; their only weapons were their stone axes.

Ahead of them the dogs were barking excitedly as crashings and crackings sounded through the undergrowth. With bow and arrow taut and ready in his hands, Birno crept forward. Suddenly he heard a piercing cry to his left! He rushed forward in the direction of the cry and saw one of the fair-haired boys on the ground and the infuriated boar on the point of drawing back to charge him with its tusks. Dropping his bow and arrow, Birno snatched his axe from his belt. It was the work of a moment to give the boar a mighty blow with both hands. The animal gave a terrible grunt and collapsed with its entire weight on the boy beneath. It was dead. The blow had hit it right between the eyes and smashed its skull.

As Birno pulled the animal away, the boy underneath sat up. He was covered with blood, but it was the blood of the dead boar. He looked at Birno and then at the strong brown arms which had dealt the mighty blow. He passed his hand over first one and then the other.

"Birno saved Alf's life," he murmured. "Alf will never forget."

No sooner had he spoken than there were renewed cracks in the undergrowth. The dogs howled with excitement and Grune and Amer appeared, dragging behind

them one of the sows which Amer had killed with an arrow straight to the heart. The other wild pigs had evidently made off into the forest.

Birno was struggling to pull his axe out of the boar's skull, where it was firmly wedged, when Alf's friend Luki appeared. "Oh, Alf," he cried joyfully, "have you killed the boar?"

"Birno did it," replied Alf. "I stumbled and fell and before I knew what had happened, the boar fell on top of me."

"So we made no kill," said Luki disappointedly.

"You can take the boar," said Birno, "and we will take the sow which Amer has killed."

"No," said Alf. "You killed it and you should have it."

Birno laughed. "There are only three of us. We cannot possibly carry two heavy pigs back to the village."

"Well then, we shall help you," replied Alf.

They argued one way and then the other, while Amer and Grune struggled to split open the belly of the sow with their stone axes. They wanted to take out the guts so that they could tie the legs of the animals together with them. Then a branch could be placed between the legs so that they could carry it. It was hard work, for the hide of a pig is tough. Alf, meanwhile, had finished arguing and came to watch. Seeing the difficulty, he pulled his bronze axe out of his belt, and with one swift stroke made a cut that freed the intestines. Luki had already done the same with the boar, and the other three were remarking in amazement how quick and effective these bronze tools seemed to be, when all of a sudden the dogs set up a furious howling.

"Wolves!" cried Birno. "They can smell the fresh blood."

Luki and Grune rushed after the dogs, bows and arrows ready in their hands.

Alf cut down a couple of suitable saplings with his bronze axe and stripped them of branches. Birno and Amer bound the legs of the two dead animals together, then pushed the two saplings between the legs and called to their companions. Soon the others returned with the dogs, dragging a dead wolf behind them.

"We have got some booty after all," laughed Luki gaily.

The young trees from which the dead pigs were hanging were each carried by two of the boys and Luki threw the dead wolf across his shoulder. In this way they went towards the river which they crossed. They collected their fishing-rods and the bag containing the fish Alf and Luki had caught earlier, and then walked on towards the village.

There was great excitement when the boys heaved the magnificent booty over the wall. The dogs barked, the children danced about and the mothers came and clapped their hands together.

But the three boys could not persuade Alf and Luki to come into the village with them and join in the feast.

"You slew the pigs with your stone weapons. How could we come to your feast?"

This was understandable.

"Shall we see you again?" asked Birno.

"Tomorrow morning by the river?" suggested Alf.

"We shall be there," replied all three.

Then the two Narrowheads set off with their fish and the wolf Luki had killed, in the direction of the village lower down the river.

The upper village was certainly in joyful mood. There

was meat enough to last for many days, together with the two magnificent pig skins. The women had already started to skin the beasts and to cut up the flesh into juicy pieces for frying on hot stones. Everyone in the village ate his share of the meat, but of the skins Birno naturally gave one to his grandmother while Amer took the other to his mother. The two women stretched the skins out on the ground and started to rub them clean with pieces of stone. All the fat and flesh which had stuck to them was scraped off and children and dogs stood around greedily to grab at the tidbits.

Afterwards the hides had to be stretched across wooden frames so that they could dry out; the three boys helped at this task with quick, skilful fingers. Both Amer and Birno laughed and joked all the time they worked but Grune grumbled because he had not killed anything. Moreover, he had lost an arrow. It had stuck in the hide of a pig which he had hit but not managed to kill before it ran off. Grune was not the sort of boy who could take pleasure in the good fortune of others.

"Don't fret, Grune," said his friends, trying to cheer him. "Another time you will have better luck."

"But my arrow-head has gone," grunted Grune crossly, "and I shan't get that back."

Birno was naturally very anxious to keep the massive tusks, so he broke them off from the boar's skull.

"Give them to me, Birno," said Grandmother. "I will bore holes through them and thread them onto a piece of twisted gut for you to wear round your neck."

"Ooooooh, Grandmother!" cried Birno, as he handed her the huge teeth.

"You have earned them," said Grandfather.

Birno was very proud.

Later when he was putting away his fur pouch and his fishing-line, he noticed that the bag seemed unusually heavy. "What can have been left in it?" he wondered. He felt inside with his hand and, to his amazement, drew out a beautiful bronze axe with the handle of deer's antlers.

Alf's bronze axe! He recognized it immediately and put it straight back into the bag. How had Alf's axe got into his bag? Slowly, he began to understand. Alf had given it to him in gratitude for his swift blow at the boar's skull. Birno was completely dazed. What was he to do? Should he ask his grandmother? She would say, "Bury the axe in the ashes, so that it does not bring misfortune upon us." But no—to bury the wonderful axe in the ashes on the hearth—he could not bear to do that. But what *was* he to do? It was impossible for him to wear it in his belt where until now he had carried his stone axe. Everyone in the village would see it and shake their heads and ask his grandparents why they allowed such things.

Taking his bag, he went out of the hut and gave his piping whistle.

Almost at once, Amer and Grune appeared. "What's up, Birno?"

"Come to the village wall, behind those bushes where no one can see us."

The other two followed, full of curiosity.

When they were out of sight behind the shrubs, Birno produced the axe.

"Alf's axe!" they both cried. "How did you get it?"

Birno told them how he had found it in his bag, and how he thought it must be a gift from Alf.

"You must return it to him," said Amer at once. "What

would the Fathers and the Priest say if you were to carry an axe of stone's tears about in your belt? Have you shown it to your grandparents?"

"I wanted to know what you thought about it, first," replied Birno.

Grune had picked up the weapon in his hand and was examining it carefully. "What a beautiful axe," he said at last. "How is it that the Narrowheads can use them? Aren't the Gods angry with them for it? Why, only today they saved Alf from great peril."

"By means of Birno's stone axe," Amer pointed out.

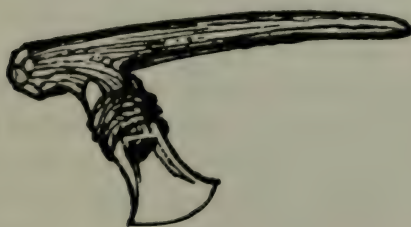
"But the Fathers of the Narrowheads are helping to set up the Sacred Stone," said Grune.

"Yes, but they are not allowed to carry their tools and weapons of stone's tears for the holy work," Amer added.

"Perhaps Alf and Luki can explain?" suggested Birno. "We shall see them tomorrow and we can ask them."

He hid the bronze axe in his fur pouch again and they returned to the huts.

"Don't tell anyone in the village about this," Birno begged his friends. And they promised not to.





Chapter 3

ALF and Luki were already waiting at the river when the three from the upper village arrived. They had pulled their canoe onto a flat piece of bank; it was a light craft of plaited willow with skins stretched across to make it waterproof. The boys from the upper village had heard of such boats but had never seen one close to, for the Fathers still rowed canoes made of hollowed-out tree trunks, which they thought better for the open sea where there was a danger of storms. So the three approached the little boat curiously, and inspected it carefully from all angles.

Birno was carrying the bronze axe in his fur bag and he noticed the disappointment in Alf's face when he saw only the stone axe in Birno's belt.

"Did you put your bronze axe into my pouch?" asked Birno, drawing it out as he spoke.

"It is for you," said Alf, "because you saved my life." "Don't you like it?" he added as he saw Birno's worried face.

"I am not allowed to wear it; my grandparents say that weapons and tools of stone's tears are not pleasing to the Gods."

Luki had by now pushed the boat back into the river. "Get in," he cried, "I will paddle."

They all jumped into the canoe, Alf and Birno sitting together in the stern.

"Obviously what happened to our ancestors is not known to your folk," said Alf, when they were comfortably settled, and Luki was paddling with swift strokes down the river. "It happened once," Alf began, "that our ancestors were sacrificing to the Gods and had built a great fire. As the fire burnt, tears began to flow from one of the stones on the hearth. All the people began to wail and lament, for they were afraid that the sacrifice was not pleasing the Gods. But what happened? More tears flowed from another stone—these however were white, and they mingled with the brown tears of the first stone. The wailing became louder, and when the tears had become hard, everyone wanted to beat them flat, and bury them in the ashes to appease the Gods. But then it was discovered that these mixed tears were as hard as stone and that it was almost impossible to beat them flat. At last our ancestors understood that they were a gift from the Gods who wanted men to have better tools than the stone ones which they had used till this time. It was the Priest himself who first realized what the Gods meant and he told the people. Since that time we have always made bronze tools and weapons; you can see for yourself how strong they are and

that the Gods are not angry with us for using them. We still use flints for arrow-heads, though, because they get lost so easily."

Birno had been listening excitedly. "Can I tell this tale to my grandparents?" he asked.

"Yes, of course," replied Alf.

"But which stones weep white tears in the heat?" asked Birno.

"We are going to fetch some today," said Alf. "The Fathers told us to do so before they left to help with the Sacred Stone, for our supplies are running low. There are plenty of stones in the hills towards the west. The white stone's tears are known to us as tin. If you mix tin and copper together while they are still hot and liquid, they will harden into the metal we call bronze."

Birno was holding the bronze axe in his hands and gazing at it lovingly. "They will let me wear it," he said. "They *must* let me wear it. Thank you, Alf!"

Alf's story had reminded him of one he had often heard his grandmother tell: how the Gods had given fire to man. Now he told it to Alf: "There was a time when men did not understand how to make fire themselves. The only sort of fire they knew was the lightning with which the Gods burnt trees. At this time it so happened that one of our ancestors was chipping a stone into the shape of an axe. He had found a piece of yellow sulphur stone and with it he was hitting small flakes off the piece of flint, when suddenly, lo and behold, sparks shot up and fell upon the dry moss where he was squatting. The moss started smouldering. The man was frightened and he tried to blow it out. But he couldn't. What happened? The moss started to burn with bright flames. And that was how the Gods

gave man the gift of fire and taught him to make it for himself."

"I have heard that story too," said Alf, "and I've been told that because it was a Priest to whom fire was first shown, it is the Priests who have always kept the secret, and the right to kindle fire."

"It is the same with us too," said Birno. "That is why my grandmother covers the embers with ashes at night, so that in the morning the fire can be brought to life again."

Grune, who was squatting*in the canoe in front of the two boys, had been listening to this conversation. Now he turned round and asked Alf: "But if your stone's tears are so hard, how can you beat them into the shape of weapons?"

"We don't," said Alf. "We pour them into moulds." And he grinned at the puzzled look on Grune's and Birno's faces. "It is much easier and quicker than making stone tools."

"Hei-o! Hei-o!" shouted Luki, pulling the paddle with a good deal of splashing through the water. On the broad hill which they were now passing was the village of the Narrowheads with its terraced fields and its fence of tree trunks. Women and children shouted back "Hei-o!" and waved to the boatload of boys.

"Our village," explained Alf, and he shouted and waved back.

"I've often seen it in the distance when I've been wandering through the woods," said Birno.

"The hut on the farthest edge there is ours," said Alf, "and that woman sitting in front of it is my mother. Hei-o, Mother!" he called, cupping his hands round his mouth.

"Hei-o, Alf!" came the reply.

"Mother makes the best pots in the village," said Alf proudly.

"I haven't got a mother any more," murmured Birno. "Soon after my Father's death she was bitten by a poisonous snake while she was gathering berries in the wood. Now she sleeps beside my Father near the Holy Stones."

"Oh," said Alf. "Then you haven't a father or a mother?"

"No, but my grandparents are still alive," said Birno. "And sometimes when I am asleep my mother comes to me, and tells me not to be unhappy. She is with my Father again and after a while I shall be with them too."

Birno did not know why he was telling his greatest secret to this boy from the other village. He spoke in a whisper for he did not wish Grune who was sitting in front of them to hear.

"My mother shall be your mother too," Alf whispered back.

"Oh," said Birno.

"I have a sister," said Alf, "she is younger than I am and her name is Seya. She shall be your sister too."

"Oh," said Birno again and looked at Alf happily.

With that their conversation ended, for the boat had reached the mouth of the river and they had to cross a bay which stretched some distance inland; it was the same bay that the Fathers had crossed with the Sacred Stone. There was no current to help them here, so everyone had to paddle. The paddles were lying in the bottom of the boat.

With five strong oarsmen they were soon on the opposite bank. They leaped out of the boat, pulled it up onto the beach and took the baskets which were piled up in the bow.

"You haven't brought any axes. How are you going to break the stones?" Grune asked.

"We don't need axes," laughed Luki. "You'll see."

They walked along a narrow path which had been trodden through the undergrowth and was obviously much used. One behind the other they climbed up a slope and then on through a thick wood till at last they came to a cliff. In front of this a framework had been erected—two sturdy forked posts had been driven into the ground five paces apart. Across them lay a smooth trunk and from this hung a leather sling with a heavy stone inside.

"Look out!" called Luki. "Get behind the trees. There will be stone splinters everywhere in a minute. Give me a hand, Alf."

The three did not know what to make of this at first, but they quickly grasped the idea and stood behind some thick tree trunks. Alf and Luki now pulled the stone in its leather sling as far back as they could, and let it crash with all its force against the wall of rock, at the same time throwing themselves flat onto the ground. The splinters of stone darted everywhere and several large pieces came rattling down. These were dark, but they glittered at the broken edges.

Again and again the stone crashed against the rock, and each time the boys filled their baskets with the pieces that had been knocked off.

"Easier than breaking bits off with an axe, don't you think?" called Luki. "My basket is full already."

He swung it up onto his shoulders; the others did the same and then they all made their way back along the path to the boat waiting for them on the beach below. They distributed the heavy baskets evenly over the boat and

each boy took his load between his knees, so that the boat was properly balanced. Then they rowed back.

In the fence surrounding the Narrowheads' village there was a gate which slid back. Inside this gate a narrow path led between posts to another gate which had to be opened. It was easy to see that this was a protection against wild animals and hostile tribes attacking the village. Dogs sprang towards them barking joyfully, but at once started to growl when they saw the strange boys. Alf and Luki spoke to the dogs and quietened them. Soon, children came running out and stared curiously at the black-haired strangers.

The boys emptied their baskets near a hearth of stone slabs. Not far away was the house in which Alf lived. A stately woman came out of it towards them.

"This is my mother," said Alf.

The woman at once noticed the bronze axe in Birno's belt.

"So you are the lad who saved Alf's life," she said. "How glad I am that you have come and I can thank you."

"His name is Birno," said Alf.

"Thank you, Birno," she said. "But you must be hungry," she continued, "there are millet cakes ready, and meat too. Come inside the hut."

In the doorway stood a young girl, gazing rather shyly at the approaching figures.

"That's Seya, my sister," said Alf.

Just outside the hut a fire was burning, over which a piece of meat was roasting, spitted on a stick that rested on two forked branches. From time to time Seya turned it, while Mother went into the hut to fetch a bowl full of brown cakes.

"Seat yourselves round the fire," she said, passing a cake to each boy. Then with a bronze knife she cut slices of meat which she put onto each cake.

"Eat up," she said with a smile. "Seya and I will eat later."

As she spoke, Luki, who had run across to his parents' hut, rejoined his friends. In his hand was a cake with an enormous piece of meat on it. Chewing hungrily, he sat down with the others.

"Don't you like them?" he asked, for the others were only nibbling timidly at the strange cakes.

"Seya baked them," said Mother.

Seya looked down and blushed. But the three boys immediately began to bite into the cakes with much scrunching and munching.

"Suddenly they like them," laughed Luki.

"Grandmother baked millet cakes once," said Birno, slightly embarrassed. "But we only had a little millet, so I had forgotten how good they were."

"I like them with meat on them," said Amer in between mouthfuls.

"Meat from the wolf which Luki slew yesterday," said Alf. "He has given us the legs."

While the boys were eating the women had returned to their pottery.

"Look!" cried Amer in amazement. "That wheel is turning by itself!"

"No, it's not," laughed Luki. "Seya is turning it. Don't you see?"

They quickly stuffed the remaining food into their mouths, and still chewing, ran towards the strange contraption which Seya and her mother were using. Seya was

turning a bobbin-like stick, resting on two forked branches, winding on to it a long, thin rope of leather. The leather was attached to the potter's wheel, on which Mother was shaping a lump of clay into a bowl, and as Seya turned her bobbin, the leather rope pulled the wheel round. The three boys had never before seen anything so wonderful and they almost forgot to swallow the food they still had in their mouths.

"May I try it?" asked Grune and reached towards the bobbin. "Yes, but turn it smoothly," said Mother, laughing.

Grune found he could do it too.



"Our mothers do it the other way round," observed Birno. "They start with the brim of the pot and finish with the bottom."

"I know," said Mother. "But with a wheel it is much quicker, and the pots have a flat bottom so that you can stand them anywhere and not only between stones."

"It is like magic," said Birno. "I'm going to build a wheel like this for Grandmother. She won't believe her eyes when she sees it."

The three boys were reluctant to leave the turning

wheel, but at last Grune released the bobbin and let Seya turn it again, and they went to the stone hearth where Luki was blowing a bright fire into a roaring blaze. He was using a skin, made into a sort of bellows such as the three had never seen. Before the glowing stones had reached the point of shedding their tears, however, a shout rang out from the gate in the palisade: "Come quickly, come quickly! There is a bear in the trap! Quick, quick!"

A pair of small boys came running in from outside, excited and out of breath.

"Hurry up! We have seen it and it is still alive!"

"The spears!" shouted Luki, picking up the bellows and running to his hut. Alf ran too, and a minute later they reappeared, each clutching a tall spear with a flashing bronze head.

The mothers looked anxious and alarmed but the boys took no notice of that. They raced towards the gate as fast as their legs could carry them, with Birno, Grune and Amer in hot pursuit, and behind them the two boys who had brought the exciting news.

On they ran and then up the hill to the edge of the forest. Soon they were amongst the trees and had to slacken their pace because of the thick undergrowth. The hill became steeper and steeper, rocks blocked their way and streams had to be jumped. "We're nearly there," puffed Alf breathlessly to the others. "There, you can hear him growling already." A few more leaps and then between the rocks they saw a huge, shaggy form heaving and rolling: the bear was imprisoned between the tree trunks which formed the trap. Behind it was the low, black entrance to a cave which led into the mountain. Insects hummed and buzzed everywhere—bees, wasps and flies.

“Look out!” shouted Alf and ran forward, his spear held in both hands. Immediately they heard a wild howl that chilled the blood, and then the struggling mass—the bear—lay motionless. Alf had struck its heart.

“Good blow!” called Luki. “But be careful of the wasps. They are just as fond of honey as bears are!”

Beside the trap a honeycomb had been placed as a bait for the bear. The bait had served its purpose, for the bear was caught. But now it was covered with greedy bees, wasps and flies, who were not to be driven away easily. The boys threw handfuls of earth over the comb until it was completely covered and then the humming insects gradually disappeared too. Now they could begin moving the tree trunks which trapped the bear. Then they bound the legs of the dead animal together, pushed a pole between them and shouldered the tremendous load. All five had a great weight to carry and they had to stop frequently on their laborious descent to the village. The two younger boys who had brought the news were allowed to carry the spears, which pleased them very much.

The mothers beamed, the children shouted and the dogs barked madly when at last, puffing and blowing, the boys arrived in the village. The bear was gutted and the meat distributed; the three from the upper village were each given a large piece to take to their homes. And now, already, the sun was quite low in the sky.

There was great feasting in the upper village as one can well imagine: yesterday roast boar, today baked bear's meat. It was delicious and many people, not only the children, were amazed at the doings of the three boys, and at the things they had to tell about the Narrowheads who lived lower down the river: about the revolving potter's



wheel, the plaited canoes, and, not least, about the tools and weapons of stone's tears. But as the boys talked of these, the mothers' faces became frightened, and they did not dare even to touch Birno's flashing axe. They listened disbelievingly to the tale of how the Gods had given this metal to man. What would the Fathers and Merwin the Priest say to this?

They had, of course, heard long ago that the people lower down the river used weapons and tools of this new material, but only the fact that the Fathers of these Narrowheads were helping to erect the Holy Stones had lessened their mistrust of them. Now one of their own boys was bringing a Narrowhead axe into the village and even wearing it in his belt! What had his grandparents to say about that?

Grandmother looked sad and refused to eat any more of the bear's meat when she learned that the animal had been killed with a bronze spear. Birno retold Alf's tale but she only sighed deeply and asked Grandfather what he thought of the matter.

Grandfather also put the bear's meat aside. "When the Fathers and Merwin the Priest return, we shall ask them," he replied, after lengthy consideration. "Till then, Birno, you must bury the axe under the ashes."

"Do as Grandfather asks you," said Grandmother, turning to Birno. Birno was miserable. How could he bury his beautiful axe in the ashes? Bravely he fought back his tears and, without a word, dug a hole in the heap of ashes behind the hut, placed the axe in it and covered it again. What would the Priest say? Would he allow Birno to wear the axe? He was now a little relieved that he would not be able to see his new friends from the lower village next day.

Alf had told him, as they parted, that it was their turn to guard the cattle until the new moon.

The grandparents had gone silently into the hut, and silently Birno followed them, to wrap himself in his furs and lie down in his sleeping-place. All his desire to make a potter's wheel for Grandmother had gone.

Chapter 4

GRUNE was busy making a potter's wheel for his mother. The bobbin which could be turned between two forked branches he had already finished, the leather rope which connected it to the wheel was also lying ready, but to make the wheel—that was the most difficult part! He struggled with chisels and scrapers of flint on a block of wood, but he could only get off small splinters. He would have to carve and scrape for many, many days. Then he remembered Birno's sharp bronze axe—of course it would be a much quicker and easier task with that. At once he set aside the scraper he was using, put two fingers in his mouth and gave the well-known whistle, the signal of the three friends. It was not long before Birno and Amer appeared and pushed through the children who were watching Grune at his work. Amer cried at once: "Oh, you are making a potter's wheel, like the one Alf's mother and Seya use!"

Grune made a disappointed face. "Aren't you wearing your new axe in your belt?" he asked Birno when he saw the stone axe in its usual place.

Birno laughed to cover his confusion. "I had a bit of

difficulty with my grandparents," he replied. "Now I've got to wait and see whether the Fathers and the Priest will let me use it. Till then the axe has to be buried in the hearth ashes."

"Oh," said Grune, frowning. "I wanted to borrow it from you, Birno, to help me do this job," and Grune indicated the block of wood, which he had been scraping with his stone chisel. "With the bronze axe it would take next to no time to make a smooth wheel."

"Wait until the Fathers return," said Birno. "It won't be long now."

"And supposing the Fathers and the Priest say it must remain in the ashes?" asked Grune. "What then?"

Amer laughed. "Well, then everything will stay as it was before," he said. "We can do without things like that and still be happy, can't we, Birno? You can kill wild boars with a stone axe just as well. And the women can make pots without wheels—after all, until now they have managed without—they have had to."

"You're so dull," grumbled Grune. "New things are interesting and good, and I'm determined to have my potter's wheel ready by the time the Fathers come back, even if I'm not allowed to use your bronze axe, Birno."

He made a cross face, reached again for the stone knife which he had put aside and continued carving at the hard block.

"Can we help you, Grune?" asked Birno.

"No you can't," growled Grune. "I can manage it myself."

So Birno and Amer went away.

"I hope the Fathers will be reasonable," remarked Amer.

"The Fathers, perhaps," replied Birno. "But what about

Merwin the Priest? Whatever's going to happen will depend on him, you know."

On this and the following day Birno and Amer went fishing and egg-collecting without the third member of their trio. Even with only two of them they enjoyed themselves well enough, and on both evenings they brought full baskets back to the village, so that no one went hungry. In the meantime Grune struggled at his potter's wheel and grumbled to himself.

One evening, when the sun had already sunk behind the hills, Birno was poking about with a stick in the hearth ash. He had no particular reason for doing so, except that he wanted to enjoy the pleasant feeling of knowing that his bronze axe was still lying there, safe and hidden; perhaps one day he would be allowed to wear it in his belt again.

But now—he poked vainly without hitting anything hard and solid—only loose ash. Surprised and alarmed, he fetched the shovel and dug busily.

"Why are you digging in the ashes, Birno?" asked his grandmother.

"Oh, Grandmother," stammered Birno, "my axe has gone. I buried it here, and now it has disappeared."

Amer appeared whistling merrily. "Grune's wheel is finished," he said gaily. "Everyone is laughing, for Grune's mother does not know what to do with it." He stopped as he noticed Birno's dismayed face. "What has happened, Birno?" he asked.

"My axe has gone," said Birno. "I buried it in the ashes here, and now it has gone."

"Oh-h!" said Amer thoughtfully. "And the children have been saying that Grune carved his wheel in the forest,

because he did not want them to watch him making it. I wonder if Grune would know anything about your axe, Birno?"

"O Gods, preserve us from evil," sighed Grandmother.

The two boys were already on their way to Grune's hut. Outside there was much laughter and activity; the children were turning the bobbin, the leather sling raced round the wheel and the wheel whirled on its axle. Grune stood before it, a lump of clay in his hands, which he was trying to shape into a pot on the wheel. He was splashed with clay from top to toe; many women stood watching near by, making jokes and laughing at his efforts.

Grune saw the two friends approaching and he noticed, too, the look of suspicion and anger in their faces. Quickly he turned back to his work and pretended not to have seen them. Birno stepped closer to him. "Have you taken my bronze axe?" he hissed into his ear. "If so, I want it back."

Grune sneered at him. "What lies in the ashes doesn't belong to anyone. And therefore I have every right to keep whatever I may happen to find there."

For a moment Birno was speechless. Was this Grune, his friend?

"Amer, did you hear what Grune said?"

Amer came closer. "You will return the axe!" he whispered fiercely. "Otherwise our friendship is finished."

"I shall keep it," replied Grune stubbornly.

In a moment Birno and Grune had fallen upon one another, the children standing by jumped aside in fright, only to crowd round again at once, for a fight between two big boys—a fight for life and death perhaps—was something not to be missed.

Both boys were strong and agile fighters; blows hailed



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down, the newly built potter's wheel was knocked over and even the low roof of the hut was damaged. Grune's mother came rushing out and tried in vain to separate the two boys. Other women approached curiously and watched them. It was an exciting fight, and for a long time it remained uncertain who would get the upper hand. Then it happened that Grune, who had freed himself for a moment from Birno's clasp and was rushing at him again, tripped over the fallen wheel and lost his balance. Birno made use of this moment; he grasped the staggering boy round his waist and with a mighty heave flung him to the ground. At once he dropped on top of Grune, pinning down his arms so that he could no longer move.

"Will you return the axe?" Birno gasped into his adversary's face.

Although Grune could hardly breathe under the weight that was on top of him, he shook his head defiantly. Birno lifted his body and let it drop onto the other so that Grune moaned and groaned.

"*Will you return the axe?*" Once more Grune shook his head.

Again and again Birno raised himself and let himself fall, each time asking the same question. At last there was a feeble nod. Birno got up, wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand and waited for Grune to get up too.

Grune's mother rushed to her son. "Grune, Grune," she wailed, "what have they done to you?" and she tried to pull him into the hut.

But Grune freed himself from her and stepped up to Amer. "The axe is hidden in the forest," he gasped, in a shaky, breathless voice. "I will fetch it and give it to you."

Amer nodded and whispered the message to Birno. Birno nodded back, pushed through the staring children and into his grandparents' hut.

Despite all that Grune's mother could say, Amer and Grune made their way to the village wall, clambered over it and disappeared into the forest.

"Have you hurt yourself?" asked Birno's grandmother when she saw him picking a spider's web off the wall and placing it on a scrape. To Birno's relief she did not seem to have noticed the fight. After all, they hadn't made much noise and children's shouts could be heard in the village all day and every day.

"Nothing much, Grandmother," replied Birno, "just a small cut; it will soon heal."

It was really a very good thing that his grandmother had not noticed anything. What would she have said? "The axe of stone's tears will bring misfortune to the village, I can see it already." Birno considered: would she not really be right to say that? On the other hand, if he had not hidden the axe in the hearth ashes but had lent it to Grune, what would have happened then? No theft, no quarrel between old friends, no fight. Birno shook his head. He didn't know what to think.

Should he ask Grandmother's advice? No, that would never do. After all, if Amer brought the axe back, he could re-bury it in the hearth ashes at once, except that then Grune might steal it again. No, he did not want to risk that. He would hide the axe in his fur pouch and keep it on him at all times. So he brooded to himself, as he helped his grandmother with her evening tasks, until at last Amer appeared in the distance, walking along with bent head. Birno went towards him.

"We haven't got the axe," said Amer. "Grune showed me a hole in a rotten tree where he said he had hidden it, but the axe is not there. Grune is not only a thief but he's a liar," he added angrily. "I could see that he was not telling the truth. I will never speak to him again."

"We must keep an eye on him," said Birno. "We are two and he is one. We will outwit him in the long run and get the axe back."

Amer nodded. "Shall we tell the Fathers when they return? They will soon notice that we three are no longer going about together."

"It is our own affair," replied Birno. "But we must tell Alf and Luki."

After this the two separated.

As Amer was passing Grune's hut, Grune came out as if by accident. He was smiling artfully. "What did Birno say?" he asked Amer.

"We do not talk to thieves and liars," answered Amer and turned his back on him.

"Huh!" said Grune to the air. Then he made an ugly face and disappeared into his hut.



Chapter 5

DURING the days that followed little else was talked of in the village but the fight between Birno and Grune, and the ill-fated bronze axe which had caused it. Grune's mother was often to be seen talking with the other women—telling them how well and sensibly her son had behaved in trying to get rid of this axe which could bring nothing but misfortune to the village. While as for those ruffians Birno and Amer, she would declare—setting upon her poor boy, and then going round with pained expressions on their faces, as though they were suffering goodness knows what injustice—let them wait until the Fathers returned, then they would learn what justice was.

Grandmother, to whom Birno had eventually told the whole story, simply looked sad and anxious. "Strife in the village, disagreements with the neighbours; no," she said with a sigh, "I do not like it; and it is all the fault of this axe of stone's tears which is not pleasing to the Gods."

Birno did not know what to say to all this. He felt himself to be in the right and Amer agreed with him. But what was to be done now, neither of them knew. The best thing was to disappear from the village as early as possible; to fish and hunt and collect eggs and mussels, and to return home late. Amer's mother was a kind woman: she comforted the two boys: they could talk to the Fathers, she said, and tell them how everything had happened and the Fathers would understand.

The days passed. Soon the Fathers would be home.

Then one day at about noon, shouts of joy resounded through the village. A few children who had been playing on the other side of the wall began the cry, "The Fathers are coming! The Fathers are coming back!" Then, in the distance could be heard the dull droning of the ox-horns, which the Fathers were blowing to announce their arrival.

All the mothers dropped their work and ran as fast as they could to the wall where steps had been built to make it easier to climb. Of course the Fathers would be heavily laden, for they brought with them wild pigs, stags, deer, beaver, fish and game.

Birno and Amer were among the first to meet the Fathers and help them. Earlier, from a deer-path, they had seen the boats arriving and had waited for them down by the river.

Merwin the Priest, with his long white beard, strode in front, wrapped in his mighty bearskin. Everyone, women

and children, stood to one side as, breathing heavily, he mounted the steps over the wall. He did not wait for the others but made straight for the hut where Birno's grandparents lived.

When Birno had thrown his load over the wall and scrambled after it, he saw Merwin sitting by the fire with blind Grandfather while Grandmother was handing him a bowl of milk in welcome. Birno approached hesitantly until the Priest motioned to him. "Come here," he said. "Soon your beard will be growing. You may hear what befell us when we erected the new Holy Stone."

Grandmother stood listening in the background, for it was not the custom for women to sit with the men whilst they talked.

Merwin told Grandfather of the new stone, which they had just erected in the immense Stone Circle, the temple of the Gods. "Only a few more stones have to be brought," he finished, "then the work that our ancestors started generations ago will be complete."

Grandfather nodded. "A great work," he murmured, "a holy work. My dead eyes cannot see it any more, but in my mind I see it clearly."

Birno realized that the stolen axe could not be mentioned now, while the talk was of such holy things. He could not really believe that the Priest would give his consent for him, Birno, to wear and use the axe. His heart was heavy. He stood in the background with bent head.

Meanwhile an immense fire had been built between the other huts, the ox-horns were droning, the children shouted and laughed and sometimes another sound could be heard—the sound of Orlaub, the village minstrel, playing his harp.

At last, Merwin rose and walked over to the fire. Grandmother took blind Grandfather's hand and followed, leading him, with Birno behind them. The horns became silent, the mothers quietened their children and now only the sound of Orlaub's beautiful voice could be heard, to the accompaniment of his harp; it was a song of thanksgiving to the Gods.

The harp which Orlaub played was nothing more than a bent branch decorated with carvings. Dried gut was stretched across it, gut of varying thicknesses to give the different notes.

The deer which the Fathers had brought had been skinned. Now it lay roasting over the fire on a mighty wooden spit supported by two forked branches. The womenfolk industriously basted the meat, letting the fat trickle slowly over its sides while the delicious smell crept temptingly into the nostrils of the hungry people.

Everyone stepped back reverently as Merwin approached Orlaub to listen to his song. When it was over, Merwin raised his hands in blessing. "Let us thank the Gods!" he cried, and all the people—men, women, and even the smallest children—threw themselves to the ground and touched the earth with their foreheads, while the Priest spoke a prayer.

As soon as it was finished, he turned to the women. "And now," he cried, "your men deserve a good meal. Don't let your meat burn!"

The women jumped up at once and started turning the spit again, for the side of the deer which had been hanging over the fire during the prayer, had become dangerously brown.

Orlaub started another song, in which everyone joined,

clapping their hands and dancing gaily, and then they sat down to a magnificent feast, Merwin himself cutting up the meat with his flint knife.

Everyone ate heartily. Only Birno did not feel hungry; he would rather have run away into his hut and curled up in his furs. Once when he glanced sideways, he saw Grune chewing busily a few yards away from him.

Then Amer came up to him. "Did Grandfather tell the Priest about the axe?" he inquired.

Birno shook his head. "They only talked about the Sacred Stone," he said gloomily.

"Don't be sad any more," Amer said, trying to comfort him. "Remember, we have found two new friends in the lower village."

"But what shall we tell them?" asked Birno.

"Only what happened," replied Amer. "And that the liar and the thief is no longer one of us. But now, let's be merry with the others!"

Birno's face brightened. "You are right, Amer!" he cried. "Let us enjoy ourselves too!"

And the two joined in Orlaub's next song and danced more gaily than anyone.

After the dance, as the boys lay panting and exhausted on the ground, Grandmother came along, dug about in her fur pouch and produced a necklace. It was made of the teeth of their boar. She had drilled a hole through each tooth and threaded them together. Now she hung this necklace round Birno's neck. Merwin saw her and walked slowly towards them. "Did you kill a boar?" he inquired in a friendly tone.

Birno looked embarrassed, but Grandmother at once began to tell the Priest all she knew: and how by his

prompt action Birno had saved the life of the boy from the lower village.

Merwin ran his fingers over the teeth. "It must have been a mighty beast," he said. "Seldom have I seen such magnificent tusks. Wear the necklace as a mark of honour, my young friend!"

Birno bowed his head. But of the stolen axe Grandmother said not a word. Perhaps she did not want to spoil the happy feast.



Chapter 6

THERE was new life in the village after the return of the Fathers. They had brought back so much meat that they could be lazy and idle for a few days, sitting round the fire and gossiping. Certainly they had enough to talk about. Plenty had happened in the past weeks, and they had renewed old acquaintance with many of the Fathers from other villages. The women stood behind them listening, asking questions and telling what had happened in their own village.

So it was that the story of the bronze axe and the fight between Birno and Grune came to be told.

What?—Birno had been given a bronze axe by a boy from the lower village? And Grune had stolen it out of the

hearth ashes? The Fathers stroked their long beards and roared with laughter. Where were the rascals? Grune must come and show his booty. A bronze axe, such as the Narrowheads used? Such a thing had to be seen! Out with it, Grune!

Shy and cross, Grune stood before the Fathers.

“Come on, Grune! Show us the axe!”

“It was lost in the forest,” mumbled Grune. “I hid it in a hollow tree and could not find it again.”

Again the Fathers roared with laughter until the ground seemed to shake. So the axe had been hidden in a hollow tree and could not be found again! He could tell that to Birno, but not to them. “Off with you, Grune! Go and fetch the axe!”

Grune crept away and climbed over the wall.

Amer nudged Birno: “D’you think he’ll bring it back this time? Shall we follow him?”

Birno nodded. “Come on!”

They clambered over the wall, and just caught sight of Grune disappearing into the forest. Quickly and quietly, they ran after him.

For some time they could see nothing of Grune in the dense undergrowth, but at last they saw him crouching under a tree and staring angrily in front of him. They had crept up to him so silently that he had not noticed them. They lay down on the mossy ground in a place where they could keep an eye on him without being visible themselves, and watched.

For a long time Grune sat under the tree obviously not knowing what to do. At last he got up, stretched his limbs which had become cramped and then walked off. Cautiously, Birno and Amer followed him. Grune did not stay

in the forest, but plodded back to the village and they watched him climb over the wall and disappear from view.

When they got back themselves, they found Grune sobbing angrily, in the midst of a circle of Fathers. Some of them seemed to be talking indignantly to him while others were laughing and jeering at him. At last Grune's mother came running up and dragged him away to their hut, crying to the Fathers, "Leave the child alone! He meant well in removing the unlucky axe from the village."

The Fathers shook with laughter. All except Amer's Father, who said, "I think we should ask the Priest for advice."

But Birno and Amer were already over the wall again and running through the wood. This time they went in the opposite direction, towards the brow of the hill where Alf and Luki were herding the cattle. In the distance they could already hear the cows lowing and soon they approached a large but widely scattered herd. The dogs immediately sprang towards Birno and Amer, barking angrily, and when the boys tried to calm them, it made no difference; they only barked the louder until Alf came running up. A few words from him were sufficient to calm the faithful watchdogs.

"So at last you've come to see us!" called Alf, joyfully. "We are in rather a lonely spot. Oh Birno, you are wearing the boar's teeth round your neck!" Then he cupped his hands over his mouth and called loudly in the opposite direction, "Luki, come and see our visitors!"

Luki came running up breathlessly. He too said at once, "Oh, you're wearing the boar's teeth!"

The Darkhead boys stood there feeling rather embar-

rassed. "Grandmother drilled holes through them and threaded them onto a cord," said Birno at last.

"But you still haven't got the axe?" Alf looked at Birno anxiously.

"Grune stole it from him!" cried Amer. "Grune is a thief and a liar, we don't speak to him any more."

"Oh," said Alf and Luki together.

Amer now told them everything that had happened in the upper village; how Birno had been made to hide the axe in the ashes and how Grune had stolen it from him in order to finish his potter's wheel more quickly; how he had rudely claimed that whatever lay in the ashes belonged to no one, and whoever found it might keep it. Amer then told of the fight between Birno and Grune and the outcome of it, of Grune's deceitfulness and of what the Fathers had said.

"Have you told all this to the Priest too?" asked Alf.

No, Birno had not dared to do this; neither had Amer.

"Only a few more days and we shall have finished herding the cows," said Luki. "Then we can all four watch Grune's movements and find out where he is hiding the axe."

They all readily agreed to do this.

"But you must be hungry," Alf declared. "Seya has just come with our food. She is sitting under the big oak-tree over there and there is sure to be enough for all of us. Come on!"

Followed by the dogs, they walked through the cows who went on chewing placidly and only occasionally stopped to moo at them.

There was Seya sitting among the bilberry bushes in front of a fire, over which she was frying a piece of meat.

Her mouth was purple from eating berries. She got up slowly when Alf called to her: "Two friends from the upper village have come to see us. It's a good thing that you brought so much meat; there should be plenty for all of us."

"Greetings," said Seya shyly, and Birno and Amer replied: "Greetings!"

Seya was indeed a pretty girl and this time she was wearing a magnificent brooch which was fastened to the front of her dress. The brooch was a twisted spiral of gleaming bronze and it shone almost as brightly as the sun.

"Was that made from stone's tears?" asked Amer pointing to the brooch with his finger.

Seya blushed. "Luki made it," she said, and Alf added, "He gave it to her on the day when the sun stood highest in the sky."

Luki was already cutting up the meat that was frying over the fire. Seya took rye cakes from her basket, passed them to the boys, and they all started to eat with gusto.

When they had finished Alf and Luki showed their friends what they could do with the cattle. They coaxed two heifers from the herd. The animals were quite tame; they came readily in answer to their names and allowed a leather strap to be tied round their horns. Then with a nimble leap each boy got astride the back of an animal and, holding the leather strap in his hands, directed the beast first this way and then that.

The two boys from the upper village watched, dumbfounded. They knew, of course, that dogs could be tamed and trained to live with men, and that sheep and goats allowed themselves to be milked and to have wool torn from their coats, but to ride on the back of a cow . . . !

When Alf and Luki had dismounted and untied the leather straps from the cows' horns, they plunged their hands into Seya's basket and produced another two cakes (which they had evidently saved especially for this purpose) and gave them to the cows, who seemed to enjoy this food much better than their own grass and clover. Then the two boys stroked the animals' flanks whereupon the cows rubbed their big heads against the boys' shoulders.

"If you are kind to animals," said Alf, "then they trust you and you can do what you want with them."

Naturally, Birno and Amer did not want to be outdone. Birno nodded to Amer, stood with his legs apart and stretched his arms upwards to the sky. With a tremendous leap Amer landed on Birno's shoulders, grasped his outstretched hands, gave another leap and balanced, head hanging downwards and legs in the air, upon Birno's hands so that the tips of his toes just touched the lower branches of the old oak.

Seya clapped her hands with delight. Now it was Alf and Luki's turn to stare, but already Amer was springing down again, turning a somersault in mid-air as he did so, to land safely upon both feet again. Then the two boys began walking on their hands, turning cartwheels and somersaults, so that the three spectators were speechless and the dogs barked and leapt about and even a few cows stared in surprise and mooed gently.

Birno and Amer had practised these tricks until they were perfect, and no one else in the village could imitate them. Handstands and cartwheels Alf and Luki could do too, and there was a whirling of arms and legs under the old oak-tree such as it had probably never witnessed before.

When the two boys got back to the village they were greeted with consternation. "Have you seen Grune?" they were asked.

It appeared that the Fathers had gone on teasing him mercilessly about the bronze axe which he had kept on saying he had hidden in a tree and could not find again. He had not been able to show his face anywhere without someone mockingly asking him about the axe, and at last, unable to bear it any longer, he had run away, and could not be found.



Chapter 7

FOR days it had been raining. The earth was sodden and the sky was an unrelieved grey. All the trees were dripping, water ran down the reed roofs of the village, sheep and goats stood huddled together and wet, while the dogs crept into the huts. Inside, the people crouched round their fires or lay, wrapped in furs, on their sleeping-ledges.

How lucky it was that the Fathers had brought so much meat, for no one felt inclined to go hunting or fishing in this continuous heavy rain. It was a good thing, too, that the women had collected sufficient wood, for even that would have been an unpleasant task in such weather.

Would the sun never again appear from behind the thick, grey clouds and shine down once more on the village? They could only wait patiently. The mothers performed their daily tasks inside the huts and of course the Fathers deserved a rest after the heavy work they had just done. Only the children grumbled, for there was little room to play inside the small huts. In the end, they ran outside in spite of the rain; it only ran off their shining skins again.

It was during this wet weather that it occurred to Grandmother that it must be near the time to take meat,

eggs and milk to the Priest in his cave up in the mountains—and soon she was going from hut to hut, asking all the women how much they could contribute towards the gift. Birno and Amer were to take it to the priest.

Grune's mother contributed her share and suggested that Grune should go, too, and help to carry the load. Grune had come home again after running away but he was far from happy. He was now sitting on his bed with a sullen face. He said he had twisted his foot the day before and couldn't walk so far. His mother looked at him doubtfully. "Yesterday?" she asked, "and we haven't heard of it till today?"

Grune grunted: "Mustn't complain about everything all the time." And he made a great show of rubbing his ankle.

In the end, Birno and Amer set off without him through the dripping wood to the Priest's cave, carrying two big, well-filled baskets and a large jug. Today they both wore fur cloaks which protected them a little from the rain and they had also pulled fur caps over their heads. They didn't talk much during their damp walk, though Birno remarked that there were a lot of hazel nuts this year. He pointed out whole clusters hanging on the bushes.

"Good supplies for the winter," was all Amer replied.

At last, looking like drowned rats, they arrived in front of the cave in the mountains where the Priest lived.

"I'm sure we'll find him at home in this weather," remarked Birno and, stopping at the entrance, he carefully put down the jug he had been carrying, between some stones. Then he took off his fur cloak and cap and beat them against the rock so that the water splashed off them. Amer did the same, and then one after the other they

walked into the cave at the back of which they saw the glow of a fire.

Merwin, who had been sleeping on his stone bench, wrapped in furs, raised himself up, yawned widely, and stroked his long white beard. "Ah, my young friends so you've come to see me?" he cried with pleasure.

Birno replied: "The mothers have sent food to you, great Priest, which they hope you will enjoy." Then they placed their baskets and the jug on the ground.

"Thank you!" said Merwin. "And please give my thanks to the mothers." He unpacked the baskets, poured the milk from their jug into his own, and stored the meat and eggs neatly in niches in the rock wall. He threw wood on the fire which was burning low and when he had made it blaze up he invited his visitors to sit down. There was a stone bench and several other slabs of stone. Hesitantly, and embarrassed, the boys sat down. Always before, Merwin had received their gifts at the entrance of the cave. They had never been so far inside. Now, as the blazing fire illumined the dark cavern they stared in surprise. What things there were to see! If they had ever heard of a palace they would have believed themselves to be in one now, but they, of course, knew only their own low, narrow huts. Now they saw magnificent, gleaming white pillars that seemed to support the roof of the cave. As it was raining outside, water was dripping gently down these pillars, and where the drops fell off it seemed that similar white peaks had grown out of the ground. It was a limestone cavern in which the Priest lived. He smiled when he saw the astonished faces of the boys. "Do my young friends like my home?" he inquired.

He fetched some smoked meat and gave a piece to each

of the boys, followed by a cup of milk. The fire sparkled and crackled, throwing its light upon the pointed stone columns which surrounded them on all sides. Merwin lit pine splinters and placed them here and there in cracks in the rock wall so that the spectacle became more and more fantastic and strange. The boys were dumbfounded and scarcely dared to breathe or swallow. For a while they sat opposite each other in silence. Birno considered whether perhaps he could now tell the Priest the tale of the bronze axe, but he did not quite know how to begin.

The Priest, however, was thinking of other matters. He had known these boys since they were small and he had always liked and approved of them. He knew their parents and their grandparents; they had all been good people. . . .

He took his fur cap off and ran his hands through his long white hair. "Even Priests grow old," he murmured, "even Priests must one day go to the Gods. Who will follow in my steps then? There are many things a Priest must know and understand: he must learn the courses of the stars and the clouds and what they mean to men. He must watch the ills and ailments of men and heal them, should the Gods wish it. He must gather the Fathers together and guide them in the erecting of the Holy Stones. He must lead the dead to their graves and commend them to the Gods. To learn these things one must be young as you are. Now mark me well!" he continued in a louder voice. "I shall go into the sacred place and I shall call you, first one, then the other, and show you to the Gods. They will reveal whether it is one of you whom they wish to be my companion, and, later, my successor."

The boys had listened in amazement to what Merwin said and neither of them had grasped his full meaning.

Almost in fear, they looked at each other, and then back at the Priest who was wrapping himself in his impressive bearskin, drawing the head over his white hair. From one of the niches in the rock he took two dishes, one of which he filled with a yellow powder and the other with embers from the fire. Then he walked towards the back of the cave and disappeared through a narrow crack.

“What’s going to happen?” asked Amer nervously.

But Birno knew as little as Amer and both lads stared into the gloomy depths of the cavern where the Priest had vanished.

Suddenly there came a low call: “Birno is to enter the holy place.”

“Go on, Birno, go on!” Amer urged him. “The Priest called you!”

Hesitantly Birno stepped forward, turned round once to look at his friend as if seeking help and then squeezed through the cleft through which the Priest had disappeared. Complete darkness enveloped him. He felt his way a little farther. There seemed to be stones underfoot. Suddenly a brilliant light flared up before him. He looked down, dazzled—then he was in darkness again.

“What did you see?” thundered the voice of the Priest.

“Bones and skulls,” stammered Birno. For many mighty skulls and bones lay strewn about the holy place and Birno had seen them as he lowered his eyes from the blinding light.

“You may go back!” called the Priest.

Birno turned round; through the crack in the rock he saw with relief the glow of the fire in the outer cave. He felt his way back, and immediately Amer besieged him with questions. But before he could give any answer the



solemn sound of the Priest's voice came again: "Amer is to enter the holy place!"

"Don't be afraid!" Birno had time to whisper and Amer set off, a little more boldly than Birno had done. For this reason he noticed the dim glow in the Priest's bowl and also saw that Merwin sprinkled something over the embers to make them blaze up.

"What did you see?" called the Priest to Amer, when the flaming light had died again.

"I saw an ox, and an enormous bull!" cried Amer and, in fear, grasped the stone axe in his belt.

"You are to stay!" cried the Priest. "The Gods have chosen Amer—to Amer they have shown the sacred bull!"

Again he sprinkled some of the powder onto the embers so that they blazed up. Then he lit a torch from the blaze and held it high up against the rock wall, making Amer jump back in fright. For there on the rock he saw again an enormous bull, which, with horns lowered, seemed to be preparing to charge.

"It is alive!" he screamed. But no, the bull did not move—it was a picture, painted in lifelike colours on the wall. Amer had never before seen such a thing.

"Only Priests may see the holy bull," said Merwin now. "The Gods only show it to those whom they have chosen as Priests, when the holy powder blazes up. And you, Amer, will not speak about what the Gods have just shown to you. For to be silent is the first duty of a Priest after he has been allowed to see the sacred picture."

Merwin blew out the torch and turned back towards the entrance. "From now on you will be my companion," he said to Amer.

When they reached the outer cave again Merwin

fetches from the sleeping-quarters another bearskin similar to the one he wore himself. This he laid on Amer's shoulders. "Amer is the chosen one," he said. "You, Birno, go home and rejoice in the blessing which has been bestowed on your friend."

If it had not been such an impressive and solemn occasion, Birno would certainly have started to laugh when Amer, little Amer, stood before him wrapped in the mighty bearskin. Amer himself was probably the most surprised of all at what had happened. Certainly he felt it to be a great honour that he was now to become the companion of the powerful Priest but it also lay heavily upon his heart that the free and happy life that he had led up till now had so suddenly come to an end. Sadly Birno said his farewell and stepped out of the cave. The rain had stopped and the sun shone brightly upon the wet earth. Only the trees and bushes were still showering raindrops as the gentle breeze stirred them, and a blackbird was pouring out a happy song.

"Oh, the sun!" murmured Birno, and he rubbed his eyes at the pleasant sight. Then he walked slowly along the path, back to the village, the empty baskets in his hands.



Chapter 8

BIRNO considered: ought he to go to Amer's parents and tell them what had happened at the Priest's cave? But perhaps the Priest would want to bear the news to Amer's parents himself? What should he do? Certainly he would be asked what had become of Amer. What would Amer's parents say? Would they be glad or sorry? And what of himself, Birno? The three of them had been friends together for so long, even if Grune had not always been easy to get on with. Then there had been the quarrel with Grune, and now he had lost Amer too, and he was left to himself. If he wanted company he would have to go to the other village. Yes, Birno was sad. And he was worried too—ought he or ought he not to go to Amer's parents?

No sooner had he climbed the village wall, than the children came running towards him: "Where is Amer? He has got a baby brother!"

Now Birno knew still less what to do; he could not even ask Grandmother, for she would surely be with Amer's mother, helping her. He was thoroughly perplexed. Then he met the blind grandfather in front of the hut; he was occupied as usual with an arrow-head which he was polishing.

"Have you come back from the Priest?" asked Grandfather.

"Yes, Grandfather, and I need your advice," said Birno as he squatted down beside the old man. Then, hesitantly, he began to tell what had happened in the Priest's cave: how the Gods had chosen his good friend Amer to be Merwin's companion and successor. How he, Birno, did not know whether he ought to tell Amer's parents or whether he should wait and see what the Priest would do.

"Grandmother went to Amer's mother to be with her when her baby was born," said Grandfather.

"The children told me about it," replied Birno. "They said that Amer had a new brother."

"Oh," said Grandfather. "Now, Birno, go and ask Amer's Father to come to me. I will explain matters to him. He will be glad and proud of the great honour that has been done to his son on the very same day that a second boy has been born to him."

So Birno went and fetched Amer's father, and then he went off to see to the sheep and goats.

Several days passed, and then one morning when the Fathers had just returned from their hunt and the mothers were busily frying the game they had brought back, and the children were playing on the see-saw there suddenly appeared two imposing figures wrapped in bearskins. They stepped over the wall and walked towards the hut in

which Amer's parents lived. Merwin was in front and two paces behind him, as was seemly, the boy Amer.

Soon all the Fathers were gathered together round the entrance of the hut, and then in a loud voice the Priest told them what most of them had already heard, that Amer had become Merwin's pupil and companion and was later to be his successor.

Amer's mother, her new-born son in her arms, wept with joy and pride when she saw her elder son again. He looked so dignified and impressive in the bearskin that she did not dare to put her arms round him as she would have dearly loved to do.

The Fathers blew upon the ox-horns. Amer hardly dared to raise his eyes, it felt so strange for him to be the centre of this solemn occasion in the old familiar village. If only Birno were standing beside him. But Birno was not there. He had gone to collect mussels from the bay with his two friends from the lower village and, as they had planned, they were keeping an eye open for Grune in case they should come upon him somewhere in the forest with the stolen axe and be able to get it back from him. They had plenty to tell each other about the events of the last few days, and none of the three was quite sure whether Amer was to be envied or not. Naturally, it was a great honour to be the Priest's companion, but always to have to wander solemnly round, clad in a bear's skin, never again to be allowed to hunt or fish, or even to collect mussels as they were going to do now. . . . No, they decided that Amer was *not* to be envied.

Suddenly Luki cried: "Look, was that Grune? Something disappeared in the bushes just there!"

They rushed to where Luki had pointed but there was

nothing to be seen. They looked for footprints on the damp ground, but it was covered with the rotting vegetation of the previous year, and they could find no trace in it of Grune or anyone else, so, disappointed, they continued on their way.

When they came out of the forest onto the top of the cliffs and saw below them the wide sea, ruffled by the breeze, Alf let out a cry: "Look! Look at that big canoe out there!"

The two others had seen it at the same moment. It was not a canoe but a large ship with masts and rigging such as the boys only knew from the tales of the Fathers; they themselves had never seen such a sight. Such ships came from far away, and their sailors were brown-skinned people; this they knew from the Fathers.

"We must go at once and tell the others!" cried Alf. "Luki, you stay here and signal to the ship when it comes nearer!"

Alf ran to the lower village, Birno to the upper one. Even from a distance, he could hear the droning of the ox-horns. What was happening there? Birno was just about to scramble over the wall in his usual way, when he saw the two figures in bearskins climbing up the steps on their way home. Birno raised his hands in greeting. Hot and breathless he gasped out the news of what they had just seen from the cliffs.

To his surprise the Priest went on his way without stopping. Not towards the bay, but quite obviously to his cave. He was followed by Amer who only ventured to throw a short friendly glance towards Birno.

"Curiosity does not become a Priest," said Merwin, his head half-turned towards Amer. "First we will consult the

Gods and tomorrow, if the strange ship is still there we will go over and visit it."

Birno stared after them and only when the two had disappeared, did he climb the wall to where all the people of the village stood crowded together. He had now recovered his breath and when he told them about the strange ship that was making towards the bay he certainly caused the sensation he had hoped for and expected. All the Fathers ran and fetched their weapons and set off with all speed for the shore. The mothers forgot their household chores, called the children, seized the smallest by their hands, and ran after the Fathers. In the end, a whole swarm of people were hurrying through the forest with all the dogs of the village in noisy pursuit.

As they made their way down to the sea they could see the lower villagers, who had a shorter route to the bay, already running about on the beach.

The strange ship was now so close that they could recognize the brown men upon her. The oarsmen were sitting one behind the other in long rows but occasionally they also climbed up and down the tall, slender tree trunks which had been erected on the ship and which were hung with white cloths, billowing out in the breeze. Now they were rolling up these cloths over long crossbars.

"The Fathers say these big canoes are driven by the wind which gets caught in those white cloths," said Luki when he had found Birno among the new arrivals.

"Rubbish!" said Birno scornfully. "If the wind blew strongly it would turn the whole canoe over into the sea."

"Well then, why do they hang the cloths up?" said Luki. "And now they have rolled them up the canoe is not

moving any more. Look, they are putting a boat out and some of them are getting in."

Some of the brown men were definitely rowing towards the coast and waving with little white rags.

The Fathers blew upon the horns, their blasts echoing round the bay, the children jumped about excitedly on the sand and everyone stared half-curiously and a little fearfully at the approaching visitors.

The brown men did not wear furs but long white garments, slung from their shoulders and flapping round their dark legs in the fresh breeze. Long, glittering bronze weapons hung from their sides. Stunned and speechless, everyone stared at these strange figures who smiled pleasantly, their teeth flashing in their dark faces. But what they were saying no one could understand.

The strangers showed the villagers little transparent shining balls with holes drilled through them; they gave some of these to the women and the children, making gestures that were at last understood: the men wanted to exchange these strange, beautiful balls for food and drink.

The Fathers all talked at once in their excitement and sent the mothers home to the village to fetch meat and eggs. Obediently the women set off.

"Do look, Birno," said Alf, "these strangers wear weapons of stone's tears. And what beautiful weapons too!" Cautiously he fingered the sword hanging by the side of one of the brown men who happened to be standing near.

The man laughed, his teeth flashing, and drew the sword from his belt, cutting the air with it so that it whistled.

The boys jumped aside in alarm.

This only made the man laugh louder and he called a

few incomprehensible words to his companions. They also laughed, came nearer and drew their swords, fingering the sharp edges with their brown hands, gesticulating and calling to the boys to do likewise.

At last Alf and Luki ventured to touch the weapons. Oh, they were magnificent! These brown people must be artistic and skilful men! The handles of the swords were beautifully decorated with intricate patterns, and the head of a strange animal crowned the hilt. Tentatively they ran their fingers over the swords, exclaiming at their beauty.

The delight of the brown men at this admiration was obvious. One of them ran to the boat and brought out something even stranger: a big disc with a round knob in the centre and on the reverse side a handle and leather loops. He placed his left arm through the loops, grasped the handle and held the disc in front of his chest. With the right hand he took his sword and stood as if he were about to fight. Then the boys understood: with this disc you could protect yourself against the blows of an enemy.

The brown men laughed again, and fetched another shield from the boat, and then two men gave a lively display of swordsmanship so that the noise rang and clattered round the bay. By this time the Fathers too had gathered round the two swordsmen and were watching the entertainment with interest.

At last the mothers, heavily laden with food, came in sight over the brow of the hill. The brown men threw their shields back into the boat, sheathed their swords and began to take glass beads from their bags. Soon a brisk barter began: glass beads in exchange for meat, eggs and milk. Some of the boys collected together a pile of wood

and soon a fire was burning and the scent of roasting meat wafted across the beach.

"Look, there's Grune," said Alf to Birno. "But he is not wearing the stolen axe in his belt."

"He wouldn't dare," said Birno.

Grune slunk away when he met the gaze of the two boys. The strange men ate and drank greedily—it was probably a long time since they had tasted fresh meat and milk. Then they rowed back to the ship, taking some of the delicacies to those who had remained on board. Meanwhile the mothers had threaded the sparkling glass beads onto dried gut—and now they hung the new ornaments round their own and their children's necks. Everyone laughed and danced with merriment.

Soon the boat returned and the brown men called to the Fathers to come closer. One of the strangers held a bag in his hand, took something out of it and showed it to the Fathers. Gradually the folk from the lower village began to understand. These were the dark, flashing stones from which the white stone's tears were obtained. The strange seamen had come to trade for such stones. They wanted to give the villagers glass beads and strange fruits in exchange. The fruits which they produced were yellow balls from which they pulled the thick skin. The inside they divided into many pieces which they gave the Fathers to eat.

How they sucked and munched! Nobody had ever tasted oranges and tangerines before. Immediately everybody else wanted to try them, particularly the women and children. But at this the brown men looked serious: in one hand they held a sack of stones, in the other a yellow ball and, by signs, showed that they would only exchange one yellow ball for a sack of stones.

The faces of the people from the upper village fell: where should they find such stones? However, the folk from the lower village were talking eagerly to Alf's Father who was the village elder. At last he tried to make the brown men understand by means of gesticulations that if they wanted to stay, they should leave the bay and go round the headland to get a little farther inland.

It was some time before they could make their meaning clear. Then the brown men jumped into their boat and signalled for their big ship to follow them. Alf's Father also got into the boat to show them the way. He called to the other Fathers to go to the stone quarry and to take sacks and baskets with them. The Fathers from the upper village looked puzzled and angry, until Birno began to tell them about the stone quarry, how easy it was to strike off the stones there, and how all that had to be done was to collect up the chippings and carry them to the seashore.

The mothers and children besieged the Fathers with requests that they should help to carry stones, and trade with the strangers for the yellow balls and glass beads. Why should the people from the lower village be the only ones to get these lovely things?

One after another the Fathers set off to collect skin bags and baskets from the village and at last they were all down by the river. They got into their canoes and started paddling downstream towards the headland as Birno had directed. Even Grune who had been with them on the earlier visit to the quarry was now talking excitedly. He was in the other canoe, paddling energetically with the Fathers.

Everybody worked hard for there was a great deal to be done. They scurried up and down the narrow path from the headland to the quarry, and all the while the swinging

block thundered ceaselessly against the quarry face. The Fathers from the lower village had grumbled at first when the people from the other village appeared, but they soon agreed to work together, for they realized how long it would take to fill a ship as big as the one belonging to the brown men. Such a task could not be done in one day, nor even in two or three.

Meanwhile, for each basket of stones, the brown men were giving one yellow ball or one glass bead; they even allowed the villagers to choose which they would take.

Tired, but happy, the Fathers returned to their villages in the evening, each bearing a number of yellow balls and a handful of sparkling glass beads in his fur pouch. Soon the sounds of sucking and chewing arose from all the huts; then the mothers sat and threaded up the beads, making each necklace more beautiful than the last.

Grandmother, and the blind grandfather too, enjoyed the strange fruit that Birno had brought them, and listened with wonder to the story of the day's excitements.

"Once while my eyes still lived," said Grandfather, "I saw a ship like that, with brown men in it, away in the far distance. Now, Birno tells us that there is another such ship. But it is the first time that I have eaten this strange fruit!" and with eager enjoyment he chewed the juicy pieces that Grandmother handed to him.

The following day when everyone was busily at work again, Merwin and Amer appeared on the shore and gazed across at the ship. But all the boats were now on the far side—how were they to get across?

"What are they doing over there?" muttered the Priest. He watched the men with heavy bags and baskets cross a plank onto the ship and there empty their loads.

Amer recognized this as the place to which they had rowed with the boys from the lower village, and he told the Priest about the quarry where the people from the lower village obtained rock chippings in order to get the white stone's tears.

"The Gods will not like this work," murmured Merwin.

Suddenly Amer forgot his priestly bearing and putting two fingers in his mouth, let out a piercing whistle.

"What are you doing, Amer?" said Merwin, frowning at him disapprovingly.

But Amer was waving wildly towards the other shore and crying, "There is Birno and he must have heard the signal. Look, look! he is coming over in the canoe to fetch us!"

The Priest stopped frowning and asked: "What were you doing with the boys from the lower village?"

Amer told him how their friendship had come about, how Birno had killed the boar and now wore its teeth, and how Birno had saved Alf's life. All this Merwin had learnt from the grandmother, but now Amer continued with the tale of the bronze axe, given to Birno, and told how Grune had stolen it and of all the excitement which this had caused in the village.

"And what has become of the axe of stone's tears?" asked the Priest.

"Grune says he has lost it in the forest," replied Amer. "But no one believes him and everyone thinks that he has hidden it."

"Hmm," said the Priest and stroked his beard, "hmmm!"

Birno's canoe was by now quite close, so they both climbed down to the beach.

"What are the men loading into the strange boat?" the Priest asked Birno, who was shipping his paddle.

"Stones which weep white tears," replied Birno and gazed fearfully at the Priest's stern face.

"Take us across," said the Priest and climbed into the canoe. Amer followed him and grasped one of the paddles.

The Priest looked so grave that the boys did not dare to speak, and they moved across the water in deep silence. Only the paddles splashed.

The brown men waved amiably at the newcomers with their white rags. They probably thought more help was coming for the loading of their ship. At first, when the imposing personages in bearskins climbed out of the boat, they laughed, but when the villagers who were carrying the stones dropped their loads and respectfully raised their arms in greeting, they realized that the men in bearskins must be Priests.

"Men of the upper village," cried Merwin, "come here to me!"

Silently the Fathers gathered round him. The sun had hidden its face behind thunder-clouds. A storm was blowing up. Through the rumble of thunder the Priest's voice could be heard: "My people, the Gods look down upon your work with displeasure. They do not wish stone's tears to be used to make tools and they disapprove of the help you are giving in this evil task. You must make sacrifices to appease them. Go home at once to your village!"

A flash of lightning streaked across the sky and, as if to emphasize the Priest's words, a mighty peal of thunder rolled and echoed round the cliffs.

All the people threw themselves upon the ground and touched the earth with their foreheads. Even the brown men had hidden their faces at this sudden sign given by the Gods. Then as the storm lifted, leaving only the distant

rumble of thunder, they saw two canoes moving away across the water—the men from the upper village with their Priests.

The Fathers of the lower village had stayed behind and now returned to work. Their Priest had no objection to the use of tools made of stone's tears, although he still used stone knives when sacrificing to the Gods. Nevertheless, it was with a feeling of sadness that they looked after the disappearing boats.

In silence, the upper villagers rowed back. Merwin said no more. Only when they stepped out of the boat did he speak: "Tomorrow you will bring two sheep to the altar in the hills as penance for this offence!" And turning to Grune's Father: "You will bring the axe of stone's tears which your son keeps hidden!"





Chapter 9

EARLY next morning, after the sun had been greeted in the usual way, the Fathers chose two of their best sheep to be sacrificed to the Gods. Grune's Father, meanwhile, took his son aside: "You will go and fetch the axe!" he said with a grim face.

Grune did not dare to argue. He crept away, climbed the wall and disappeared into the forest.

Soon, all the preparations for the sacrifice were completed. Birno and Grune were to lead the two sheep, by

leather thongs tied to their horns. When the time came, Birno was ready, but Grune was nowhere to be seen. Where was he? Had he brought the axe back?

"The rascal has not come home," his Father told the others angrily. "We shall not be able to take the axe to the Priest."

The Fathers looked at each other, perplexed and uneasy. The Priest had been angry yesterday—what would he say today if they were unable to produce the axe? They discussed the matter among themselves. Should they go and look for Grune? But where had he hidden himself?—and all the time the Priest was waiting for them to bring the sacrifice. They blamed Grune's father—why had he not gone with the boy to fetch the axe? That boy of his was thoroughly unreliable. Surely he knew that by now?

At last Amer's Father said, "We shall have to start now whether we have the axe or not. Let us promise the Priest that we will give it to him as soon as Grune has brought it back."

The Fathers nodded in agreement. The sheep were lifted over the wall onto the grass the other side, where they leaped about merrily until they were given to Birno, to be led by their leather thongs.

It was a long way to the altar stone which stood in a large clearing high up in the forest. It was a massive stone block which had been consecrated generations ago as a place of sacrifice.

With heads bowed, the Fathers walked across the clearing, Birno pulling the now tired and unwilling sheep along behind him. Merwin and Amer were already standing before the stone in their bearskins, awaiting their arrival.

"Greetings," said the Priest.

“Greetings,” murmured the Fathers in reply. The sheep bleated miserably.

Then followed the sacrifice. The blood of the sheep had to run across the altar stone. A fire was lit before the altar so that the smoke enveloped the stone, and while the sheep burned, Merwin spoke a prayer in which he implored the Gods to look favourably again upon men.

At last he lowered his arms and turned back to the Fathers, who were standing behind him with bowed heads. “Now hand me the axe of stone’s tears,” he demanded.

The Fathers did not dare raise their heads. It was Amer’s Father who at last plucked up his courage and told the Priest that Grune had not brought back the axe nor even come home himself. He promised that as soon as it was returned, it should be given to the Priest.

Merwin looked at the Fathers with anger in his eyes. “The sacrifice we have just made will be in vain,” he thundered. “Go home!”

In deep gloom, the Fathers set off towards home. Grune’s mother met them, as they climbed over the village wall. She was weeping. Grune had still not come back. When the Fathers told of the useless sacrifice, wailing and lamenting could be heard from every hut.

The days passed. Grune did not return, and the axe which had caused all the trouble could not be taken to the Priest. Nearly everyone in the village joined with Grune’s mother, or at least agreed with her, in bitterly accusing Birno. It was all his fault. He had brought the unlucky axe into the village. If he had not, the Gods would not have been offended, Grune would not have disappeared and everyone in the village would have been happy and content.

Unfriendly looks met Birno wherever he went, and often

he heard angry words directed at him. Whenever he could, he left the village early in the morning to go hunting, fishing or collecting mussels. Often he met his friends from the lower village, who tried to console him and cheer him up. It was from them that he learned some news of Grune. On the day the strange ship sailed away, a boy had been observed swimming after it, and the brown men had been seen to pull him on board.

Birno mentioned no word of this in the village—for everyone would have said as usual: It is all Birno's fault. It was now midsummer, and if it had not been for the unpleasant atmosphere, he would have enjoyed wandering through the forest and along the shore, eating berries and bringing a bagful home for Grandmother. He wondered whether he should go to the Priest and tell his trouble to him? No, that he dared not do. Of course he could have told everything to Amer, and perhaps Amer would have been able to explain to the Priest. But he no longer met Amer.

Once, when he had gone to fetch his friends from the lower village, he found nearly all the Narrowheads gathered together outside their fence, doing something which seemed to him very extraordinary. Wherever the grass was growing high, they were cutting it down with strange knives shaped like the crescent moon, which they swept across the surface of the ground. The children were there too, spreading out the cut grass with forked branches.

"Why are you cutting the grass?" asked Birno when at last he found Alf. Alf straightened up.

"Oh, Birno!" he cried with pleasure. "We haven't seen you for many days. Have things improved in your village?"

Birno shook his head and looked at the shining sickle which Alf was holding in his hand. "What are you cutting all this grass for?" he asked again.

"We dry it in the sun so that it keeps for the winter. Then the cows, the sheep and the goats don't need to go hungry and they can give us milk all the year. What do you feed your animals on, when the snow has covered everything?"

"We have to clear away the snow or else we collect tree bark and moss," said Birno. "Often we have to kill the animals, if the snow remains on the ground too long."

He was envious for, at once, it became clear to him that again the Narrowheads had the advantage of them through their tools—those shining sickles of stone's tears. To cut grass with a stone knife would be a hopeless undertaking. It would be easier to pull up the grass by hand. He resolved to try this so that they would at least have a small supply for their sheep and goats during the winter.

Today, of course, Alf and Luki were not free to wander through the forest. Birno could see that; the hay must be cut first. Already they were bent again over their task, sweeping the bronze sickles through the grass.

Birno returned to his own village and found a place just outside the wall, where the grass grew thick. He started to pull up handfuls and spread it out. Grandmother's animals would not go hungry during the winter, and the two old people would not be deprived of their milk. It was a pity that Amer could not be there to help, then the work would not have seemed so dull.

Amer? What had Amer been doing all this time?

Each day Amer went off with the Priest to visit the villages higher up in the mountains. Previously he had

scarcely been aware of these villages. He had only known that from them came other Fathers who helped to erect the Sacred Stones. There were many miles to be covered over hill and dale, through thick forests, and Amer was often astonished when he saw how far the land stretched.

From Merwin, his teacher and Priest, he had already learned and discovered many things, about which he had previously not bothered his head. He had become acquainted with healing herbs, he knew the nightly courses of the stars in the sky, the phases of the moon and how one could forecast the next day's weather by the shape and drift of the clouds.

In all the villages they visited they were received with friendliness and hospitality: they were taken to see sick people, upon whom Merwin laid his hands, telling them which herbs would help to restore them to health. Everywhere they were given presents—meat and eggs, mushrooms and berries, milk and honey. Amer always had plenty of good things to carry back to the cave.

One day, as they were returning from such a mission, they met Birno waiting at the cave. His eyes were sad, and tears ran down his cheeks. He told the Priest that the blind grandfather had died the previous night. He had gone to sleep as on other nights, but this morning he had not woken. He had lain stiff and cold beside Grandmother.

"Tomorrow morning early I will come to prepare him for his last journey," said Merwin. "Go, Amer, and accompany your friend," he added, kindly.

"Thank you, great Priest," replied Amer reverently, and Birno also murmured words of thanks. Then, for the first time for many a long day, the two friends walked together again through the forest.

Birno, in his grief for his grandfather, did not feel like talking and for a while they walked in silence. At last Amer asked about his parents and his new-born baby brother, all of whom were well. Then he said, "Has anything been heard of Grune?"

Birno told his friend what he had learnt from Alf and Luki: that Grune had swum after the strange ship as it was leaving and had been pulled on board by the brown men. "We shall never see him again," said Birno. Then he told, too, of how unfriendly the villagers were and how lonely and miserable his life had become. "And now Grandfather has died," Birno finished, with tears running down his cheeks. At last he pulled himself together. "How do you like your lonely life in the cave?" he asked his friend.

"It isn't lonely," replied Amer, and told about his visits to the other villages. "And I have much to learn from the Priest. He is a good man and I am glad to learn from him."

By now they had reached the village wall and, as usual, Birno climbed nimbly over. But Amer did not copy him: his new dignity as the Priest's pupil would not allow that. Slowly and with dignity he mounted the steps and walked down again on the other side. Birno was surprised and, for the first time, he became fully aware of the change in his friend.

Then Amer went on to his parents' hut where he remained for a while. Birno, however, returned to his grandmother, sat down beside her by the fire and stroked her old hands.

Early next morning Merwin and Amer appeared, the hoods of their bearskins pulled far down over their heads, as a sign of mourning. Before sunrise, a few Fathers from the village had gone off to dig a trench in the burial

mound, where the dead grandfather was to lie. With the help of a few other women, Grandmother had sewn his body into a skin, not forgetting to put in a few gifts which might be of use in the next world—a stone axe, a chisel, bow and arrows—all things which he had made and polished himself. She also included a jug for him to drink from. A sacrificial goat stood ready to accompany Grandfather.

Merwin examined these preparations and indicated his satisfaction. He spoke words of comfort to the weeping grandmother. Soon she would see the good old man again and be reunited with him for ever. His sight would be restored and he would be able to see her once more.

Then the Fathers laid the body upon a bier which they had made from tree trunks. They lifted it over the wall, and the procession wended its way down to the river with Merwin and Amer at the head of it. Gently they laid Grandfather in a canoe and the long boat-journey began—down the river to the headland, round it and then inland up another river, until at last they came to the wide road along which the Sacred Stones were rolled far over the hills and dales.

Birno and Amer had been sitting together in the back of the canoe, hardly speaking to each other. Now they followed the Fathers, who were walking in front with the bier.

Suddenly Birno heard the dull sound of an ox-horn being blown. He raised his head and nearly cried out in wonder and astonishment at what he saw: not far from him in the midst of the plain stood a circle of immense rocks—the Sacred Stones!

Now for the first time he was allowed to see them!

"I am looking at the Sacred Stones!" he told himself. Never in his wildest dreams had he imagined them to be so tall, so huge, so wonderful.

The funeral procession halted. The Priest raised his hands, and the ox-horns droned out again.

Surrounded by green fields and distant hills the immense, four-cornered stone pillars stood there forming a circle, which enclosed yet another ring of stones. Over the top of the pillars, slabs of stone had been laid—it was a breathtaking sight.

Now the men who were carrying the bier turned aside and walked towards one of the many mounds on the plain outside the circle of Holy Stones. There stood the Fathers who had gone on ahead early in the morning to make the grave for the grandfather. A door between two massive stones, topped by a third horizontal slab, led into one of the mounds. Burning torches of pinewood lit the passage down which the men now carried the bier. Merwin walked in front, Amer followed him; then came the Fathers and Birno, who was tempting the goat with a bunch of grass.

The passage, flanked on each side by giant stones, led deeper into the mound. Often they had to stoop in order not to bump their heads against the roofing stones. On the right and left were small caverns in which the ancestors of the village slept their eternal sleep.

"That is where your parents sleep," Amer's Father said softly to Birno and indicated one of the small side rooms. Birno stared into the dark depths. There lay his parents. Tears welled up in his eyes.

The bearers stopped before a newly dug hole. More torches were lit—and then the dead grandfather was laid in his grave. With a quick stab to the heart the Priest

killed the goat and let its blood run into the open grave. Then he raised his hands, commending the dead man to the Gods; the ox-horns droned fearfully in the narrow vault and again tears rolled down Birno's cheeks. Then the Fathers began to fill in the grave, Merwin raised his hands once more and they all turned and walked slowly out of the vault.

In the bright sunlight lay the plain, with its gigantic circles of Holy Stones in the middle. High up in the sky larks were singing joyfully.

The Fathers began to replace the stone which blocked the entrance of the grave and which previously they had removed. It was heavy work and everyone had to help raise up the mighty slab with levers and replace it in its position.

Finally the whole entrance was covered with earth. Once again the Priest raised his hands and the ox-horns droned a last farewell.



Chapter 10

AFTER the grandfather's funeral the village people became more friendly towards Birno. They no longer threw him scornful glances or made unkind remarks in his hearing. He was worried, however, about his grandmother. She was so quiet now, so wrapped up in her own thoughts, whereas before she had always been laughing and ready to cheer him up when he was depressed. He felt that perhaps he ought to sit with her more often and tell her of all that he had seen and done during the day, so as to divert her a little. He told her about the supply of hay he had collected so that the sheep and goats should not have to go hungry during the winter. He dared not

mention the shining sickles of the people in the lower village, but nevertheless Grandmother asked almost at once: "Did you see this being done in the lower village?" Birno had to confess that indeed he had. Then she smiled a little and said, "Ah, yes, there's always something new to be learned if one keeps one's eyes open." Fortunately she knew nothing of the sickles.

And what of the Narrowheads in the lower village? Autumn had arrived and the terraced fields which they had laid out behind their fences were rustling in the wind, yellow and heavy with grain. Birno had been to see his friends, but again he found them busily at work with the other villagers. What were they doing this time? They were cutting down the yellow corn with their shining sickles, the women were bundling it together into big sheaves and then piling the sheaves up in heaps.

"The Gods are good to us!" cried Alf gaily. "Just look, Birno, look at the harvest they have given us!"

"It'll make good cakes, won't it, Seya?" asked Luki, for Seya was close by with the other women and girls, tying up the sheaves with ropes of straw.

"Later, when the sheaves are well dried, we shall beat out the grain and store it in sacks," said Alf. "And after that the women will grind it between stones ready to make it into cakes. Mmm!" he licked his lips. "They taste good with meat. You must come, Birno, as often as ever you wish: the women love making cakes. They have to get a good fire going, too, to bake them, and that makes the hut nice and warm in winter. It is when the spring comes, though, that our mothers have the hardest time. The ground has to be ploughed then, ready for the new grain, and they have to pull the plough. That is terribly hard

work, especially for the younger girls. They have to help too you know."

Birno tried to imagine Seya, pretty, delicate Seya pulling at the front of a plough. No, he thought, she would not laugh as gaily then as she had when Alf and Luki were tending the cattle and they had ridden on the tame cows and showed off their own tricks and acrobatics.

Suddenly he said, "Why don't you let your tame cows do the heavy work? They are much stronger than the women."

Luki nearly burst with laughing; he thought Birno's idea so funny that he took it for a magnificent joke.

Alf did not laugh but stared at Birno. Then he took two mighty sweeps with his sickle, making it whistle through the corn.

"When the harvest is home, we'll try it," he said.

Luki was still shaking with laughter. "What will you try, Alf?" he brought out between gasps.

"To teach the cows to pull the plough," replied Alf quite seriously.

"You'll break off their horns," laughed Luki, "then you'll have ugly cows without horns and the women will still have to pull the plough."

"We could put a leather strap round their necks and let the cows pull on that," Alf went on thoughtfully.

"Ha! ha! ha!" roared Luki. "And throttle them, eh?"

Alf said no more, but Birno could see that he was thinking hard.

A few days later, when the autumn wind was already blowing colder, Birno met his two friends.

"Have you got time to come and see the cows?" Alf cried. "You'll be amazed."

This time Luki did not laugh at all.

Two younger boys were tending the cows; Alf said a few words to them and they disappeared, only to return again quite soon, followed obediently by two cows from the herd.

"It was your bright idea, Birno, that we should use cows to pull the plough—well, Luki and I have thought out a good way of making it work," said Alf.

Quickly they moved aside some stones to reveal two short, strong, narrow pieces of wood, which they had hidden there. The wood was heavily padded on one side with leather. Laying a piece of wood on the forehead of each cow they strapped it onto the animal's horns. Birno noticed that Alf and Luki had attached to the ends of each piece of wood two more long straps, which now hung down on both sides of the cow's head. The boys drew these straps backwards and laid another broad leather band across the cow's back. This band had loops and through the loops the boys pulled the ends of the long straps.

"There you are," said Alf.

They led the cows to a fallen tree, tied the thongs onto it, and then, with shouts, encouraged the animals to pull.

"Cows have most of their strength in their necks," said Alf. "Now you can see what a good idea that was of yours, Birno."

The cows obediently started moving together, and sure enough, without any great effort they pulled along the heavy tree trunk to which they had been harnessed.

"Our secret," laughed Luki. "Not even Seya knows anything about it. When the spring comes we will surprise the whole village, and the mothers will be so pleased. You won't say anything about it just now, will you, Birno? The

two boys who are herding the cows now, are the only others in the secret."

After their work, they gave the cows a few cakes to eat, which the two boys had brought in their bags. The cows seemed quite satisfied with this arrangement.

Birno promised that he would not give away their secret. He also promised to come down to the lower village in the spring when the two boys would be showing off their great surprise to the Fathers and mothers. Although he felt very honoured at his friends' confidence in him, yet in his heart he felt sad that in his own village things like this could not happen. At the same time he was afraid of his own thoughts. Would the Gods not be angry that he even dared to think such things? If only Amer had been there he could have talked about it to him.

He felt terribly alone as he returned to the village. He could, of course, tell Grandmother of his adventure. But she would be sure to ask what the cows could be used for. Then, when he had to tell her of the plough of stone's tears used by the Narrowheads to tear open the ground so that they could sow seeds in it, she would fear the anger of the Gods and become anxious again.

That winter was exceptionally hard and there were heavy falls of snow. The sheep and goats stood huddled together in the entrances of the huts bleating loudly and hungrily whenever Birno came to feed them with a bundle of hay. It was not long before everyone in the village knew that Birno had a stock of dried grass for his animals, and since it was the custom for the villagers to share everything, they took supplies for their hungry animals from Birno's heap of hay. Soon it was all used up, and the winter was not nearly over. The sheep and goats had to be fed on

the bark of trees again, until they became as thin as sticks and gave not a drop of milk.

The children, however, were as gay as ever. Although it was usually too cold for them to play on the see-saw, they had made themselves a slide. Most of them wore fur shoes during this bad weather, and they slid along, with shrieks and yells, on the smooth, leathery soles of their



shoes. On warmer days there were snowball fights that caused still greater noise and merriment.

In the evenings they sat indoors round their fires. The mothers and grandmothers told stories of dwarfs and giants and fire-spitting dragons, while the Fathers produced tales of hunting adventures and of their ancestors. They told how their forefathers had come from far across

the sea and settled here because there were many wild beasts to kill, and plenty of meat. The children sat staring into the crackling fire, listening open-mouthed to all the tales. Out beyond the village wall they often heard the howling of hungry wolves; but the villagers were undisturbed by such noises. Were they not sitting safely inside their huts with the sheep and goats sleeping peacefully at their doors?

If fresh snow fell during the night, there was plenty to do next morning; paths from one hut to another had to be dug, and the shovels made from the shoulder-blades of animals were much in demand. The village wall, too, must not be allowed to get snowed up, or wolves and bears could walk straight over it into the village. The spring behind the wall had to be kept free of snow, too. All the Fathers and mothers, and of course the elder boys, were kept busy. Birno was usually first on the scene: really it was more pleasure than toil to throw the fresh powdery snow into the air and clear a path. Of course it was not possible to go fishing in such weather, for the river was covered with a thick layer of ice, but they could hunt despite the heavy snow. This they did and there was never any shortage of fresh meat in the village.

Hardly anyone ever spoke of Grune these days; but sometimes Birno asked himself, Where is he now? Is he in that ship with the brown men? Did he take the axe with him? But of course there was no answer to these questions.

The hard winter passed at long last, and the spring came, with blustering winds and sudden patches of sun. Then the thaw set in. The Fathers ran to the river which had swollen and was beginning to rise well above its

banks. They pulled the canoes far up the slope for safety. In time they had to be dragged almost to the village wall, for each day the waters rose higher and the rushing and the splashing of this usually peaceful little river could be heard even inside the huts. It was a good thing that the village lay so far up the hillside.

Alf and Luki, in the village below, had hardly seen Birno at all during the winter. He had only been there a few times to eat cakes with them; but now that the spring had come he would certainly be paying them a visit so that they could show off their great invention. Birno was looking forward to this visit tremendously.

If only the floods would go down! But no, they seemed still to be rising. The canoes were already lying close to the village wall and one night when the spring gales were blowing as though they wanted to pull the roofs from the huts, Birno suddenly heard cries and screams outside, and in the midst of the uproar, a sound like the familiar piping whistle. He threw his fur skin aside, leapt up and ran out of the hut. In the darkness there seemed to be something going on in the village and then, to his immense astonishment, he suddenly saw Alf coming towards him.

“Our village is completely flooded by the river,” gasped Alf. “Many of our animals have been drowned, and perhaps our people too. We want to ask your Fathers if we can stay in your village for a while.”

Birno was almost speechless with horror. “Where are your parents? And where is Seya?” he managed to ask. “They can all come into our hut. I will wake Grandmother so that she can stoke up the fire.”

Birno hurried inside. “Grandmother!” he cried. “Grandmother, stoke up the fire quickly. The people from the

lower village have come over. They need shelter, their village is flooded.”

Before Grandmother could reply, he was outside again. Alf was not to be seen, so he ran to Amer's hut. Amer's Father was the village elder and Birno had to tell him the news at once, for what Amer's Father said carried great weight with the villagers. But he was already standing in front of his hut and Birno had no need to tell him the news. He was talking to the villagers: “We will give shelter to the people from the lower village!” he cried. “Each hut will take one family. Then at dawn we will see what else can be done.”

It was an exciting night: the wild whistling of the wind, the rushing of the water on the other side of the village wall, the children crying and the women calling out to each other through the darkness—it was more like a bad dream than real life. Meanwhile goats and sheep were driven from the doors of the huts, furs were spread out and sleeping-ledges were made ready.

Alf had gathered together his wet and shivering family and led them to Birno's hut. Grandmother had already got the fire going: it was blazing merrily and throwing queer lights and shadows onto the walls.

“First we must get you dry and warm,” said Grandmother to her unexpected guests.

“We thank you for your kindness,” said Alf's Father. “But after the women and children have been brought to safety I must join the men of our village again and go back to see if any of our animals can still be saved. I expect Alf will want to come with me.”

Alf, of course, was more than ready to go and Birno joined them. The Fathers from the lower village were

called from the huts and nearly all the men from the upper village went with them. Luki managed to find his two friends and together they climbed over the village wall and then felt their way through the darkness, straight across the rough ground because the familiar path was covered with water. Often someone stumbled and tripped over a fallen tree, cursed, picked himself up again and plodded on.



When they got nearer to the flooded village they were guided by the frightened lowing of cattle above the roar of the storm.

“Thanks be to the Gods,” said one of the men, “at least some of the animals seem still to be alive.”

Fortunately the entrance through the fence was at the highest point of the village. Even so, they were up to their knees in water before they could pass through the gateway. The lowing of the cattle seemed to come from very close by. Goats were bleating too, but there was no sound from the sheep. First they found two goats that had

climbed onto the roof of a hut and were crying for help. Huddled together close to the fence where the water was lowest, stood the cattle. The water reached above their bellies and their lowing became louder as they realized that men were at hand. The cows were only too glad to follow the men and willingly allowed themselves to be pulled through the narrow gate. Other men lifted the goats from their roof-island, already swaying dangerously in the current, and carried them after the cows. Then they searched for the remaining goats and sheep only to find carcasses floating here and there on the water. These, too, were shouldered and carried away, for the skins and the meat could still be used.

It was impossible to get into the huts for the water reached up to, and often over, their roofs. None of the provisions inside could be reached, not even the corn. At last the men resigned themselves to their losses and with gloomy faces started back to the upper village. Now there would be no more cakes to eat and where could they get grain to sow in the coming year?

The animals they had rescued plodded wearily along the track, thankful, no doubt, to feel firm ground beneath their hooves again. The day was already dawning when the men reached the upper village. The goats were lifted over the wall but the cows, of course, were too heavy for this, and, since they could not climb over the steps, they had to remain outside the village with two boys to guard them. This was an important task as the wolves would now be hungrier and fiercer than ever.

There had never been so many people in the village before, nor such noise and activity, but of everybody there, Birno was surely the happiest, for he had his two friends

with him and, for the time being, Alf and Seya were even sharing his own hut.

On the day after the great flood, the spring storm blew itself out and the waters seemed to be slowly receding. So far there was still enough to eat, for they had the drowned sheep and goats, though the people from the lower village hated to watch them all being skinned and roasted. How glad they were that the cattle had been saved! It was now Alf's and Luki's turn to guard the cows, and Birno went with them.

Were the Gods angry after all with the people of the lower village because they used tools and weapons of stone's tears? Had they sent them this disaster as a warning? Birno was not the only one in the upper village to whom this idea had occurred, but nobody actually spoke of it; they did not want to offend their unfortunate guests. The upper villagers merely gazed at the shining bronze axes of the men and the brooches and rings that many of the women wore, not daring even to touch them.

Even Merwin, who arrived with Amer in the village next day, remained silent, though he could not conceal the sadness in his face. Only the children were untroubled. They had quickly made friends with each other and they enjoyed playing together.

It was some time before the floods had gone back far enough for the people to return home to the lower village, and when, at last, it became possible, most of the upper villagers volunteered to help repair some of the damage. Birno, of course, was among them.

The lower village certainly was a shocking sight. All the huts had to be cleared out so that the things in them could be dried, particularly the skins and bags in which the corn

had been stored. Perhaps the grain would still grow if it were sown soon enough. But first the ground had to be ploughed and this was still deep mud, into which one sank to the ankles.

All the wood was wet, but fires must be lit inside the huts in order to dry the roofs, the walls and the floors.

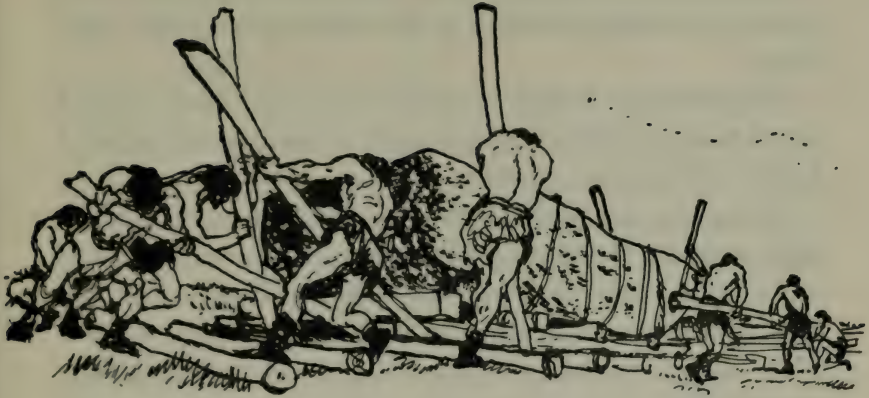


Smoke from the wet wood rose in a dense cloud over the whole village and hung here until a light spring breeze drove it away and the sun shone through once more.

After a few days, the ground became firm enough for the Fathers to start ploughing. Then the boys came along with their secret. They fetched the two cows, who were none the worse for their adventure, and harnessed them to the plough. All the people had collected to watch what the boys were doing. When they saw how easily the animals

pulled the plough, they clapped their hands and shouted in amazement and delight.

Most surprised, of course, were the Fathers from the upper village, who, in all their lives, had never seen so many new things as they had during the last few days when they had been helping the Narrowheads in the lower village.



Chapter 11

SEVERAL years had passed. Each summer the Fathers had been away from the villages, preparing another stone, and the boys had been left behind to see that there were sufficient eggs, meat, and fish for the people to eat. Generally Birno had taken a few of the smaller boys with him on his expeditions, teaching them to shoot accurately with their bows and arrows, to paddle and to swim. Alf and Luki had enjoyed coming with them on these hunting expeditions. The boys were bigger and stronger now, and one day, when the Fathers returned home with the news that another stone lay ready to be erected the following summer, Amer's Father suddenly looked at Birno intently. Then he grasped him by the shoulders, and ran his fingertips over Birno's cheeks, crying, "Look here, this lad's beard is growing! Well done, Birno! You will be there when the new stone is erected." Smiling a little, he added, "We saw Amer with the Priest, and Amer's beard is growing too."

Birno flushed with pride as everyone stared at him in friendly curiosity, nodding to him and saying, "Good luck, Birno!"

Only Grune's father went off sadly and had no kind word to say to him. His son ought to be growing a beard by now. *Where was Grune?*

As soon as he could, Birno ran down to the lower village, whistled the signal and told the good news to Alf and Luki. Their faces also had a few hairs but they were so fair that it was not as obvious as with Birno who was dark. They looked curiously at Birno and tried to pull at their own whiskers.

Birno said consolingly: "It will still be several moons before the autumn and winter are gone, and by then your beards will have grown too. You'll both be there when the new stone is fetched and erected."

Soon the boys were laughing again. "We will rub our faces with bear's fat; they say it makes your hair grow faster," said Luki.

Alf asked, "Would you like to come inside so that Seya can admire you too?"

Birno looked uncomfortable. "I saw the tracks of wild horses," he said, "let us follow them." The other two were quite ready to do this, so they fetched bows and arrows and set off at once.

By the time that spring arrived Alf's and Luki's beards were growing well, and they, too, were allowed to fetch the stone with the Fathers. They put their tools and weapons of stone's tears carefully away in the roofs of their huts, and got out instead some special stone tools which had been made by their ancestors and were kept only for

this sacred occasion. The Priest Merwin would not this time regard the Fathers of the lower village with disapproval when he greeted them.

At last, the Priests arrived, stately in their bearskins. Merwin was bowed now, for he was an old, old man; even his white beard seemed longer. Behind him came Amer, who now had a black beard, or at least the beginnings of one. Gaily Amer nodded to all his friends whom he had not seen for such a long time.

The Fathers had done their job well. An immense four-cornered block lay ready; many, many feet long, and as wide as a man is tall. The surface had been rubbed quite smooth: there were no corners or jagged edges. The Fathers surveyed their work of the previous years with pride, and indeed they had reason to do so. But the boys were staring in amazement at the many strange faces of the Fathers from the other villages, men whom they had not seen before.

“Let us begin!” cried Merwin to the men. He stretched his arms towards the sun saying: “Look down with favour upon our work, O Gods!” and Amer repeated the words after him.

Then Merwin divided the tasks between the Fathers: a large number of them were to go into the forest to cut down trees, the thicker ones to be used as rollers and the smaller ones as levers. Some Fathers he sent to the raft, which had to be inspected to see that it was still seaworthy and repaired if necessary. Other Fathers were to spread pebbles and stamp them down on the road along which the stone was to be rolled to the beach. The remaining men were to hunt deer and to prepare any they might happen to kill.

Soon the forest was ringing with the blows of axes, and from the road the thud of the pounding could be heard: men grasped big stones in both fists and pounded down the pebbles they had spread. The three boys were busy at this last task, or rather they were the ones who fetched the pebbles in baskets and shook them onto the road. They were hot from their work for the sun stood high in the clear sky.

For many days everyone had to work hard in order to complete the preparations in time. At night they slept in huts that were still standing from previous years. Actually these were only some dilapidated sheds and when it rained, the water dripped through onto people's faces. Inside they lay closely packed, but no one minded about this for after the heavy work of the day they were all tired out and it was no time at all before snores resounded from every hut.

At last, after many days' toil, everything was ready and the mighty rollers lay in place. Merwin and Amer raised their hands and asked the Gods for their help, then the levers were put under the stone to lift it, and the men stood waiting to push the first roller underneath it.

"Heave-ho! Heave-ho!"—Crack! Crack! A couple of levers had snapped under the weight of the stone, but more lay ready and again the men chanted "Heave-ho! Heave-ho!" as they wedged them underneath.

The end of the enormous stone rose a little more with the combined effort of all the men. "A bit more! A bit more! Now the rollers!" And at last a roller could be pushed underneath. Slowly the Fathers pulled out the levers which had been freed, and then moved towards the other end of the giant stone. Again the cries of "Heave-ho! Heave-ho!"

sounded and soon another roller lay beneath the other end. More rollers were forced under the middle of the stone and then the men were allowed to have a rest. They had deserved it and they sat down gratefully, wiping the sweat from their faces with the backs of their hands.

The next thing was to fasten leather straps lengthwise round the stone; the men in front started to pull on them, while others, as many as could find room, pushed from behind. Merwin organized everything carefully and arranged for men to stand ready in front with new rollers while others behind waited to carry the old ones forward as soon as they were released. All this had to be done quickly as the newly surfaced road sloped a little towards the shore, where the raft was already being hauled into place.

In response to encouraging shouts from the Priest everyone heaved, and those standing at the back of the stone pushed against its weight with their hands and shoulders.

Slowly, slowly, the immense block started to move. As one of the rollers at the back was released two men picked it up and ran to the front where one of the spare rollers had already been placed under the foremost end of the stone. The work went on, with much puffing and blowing, until the stone rolled of its own accord down the gentle slope to the shore. Running like the wind the Fathers kept up the supply of rollers and let the stone gather enough speed to roll right down to the raft.

And now the tip of the stone was on the raft. "Pull! Push!" echoed Merwin's shouts. Wrapped in his bearskin he was now in front with those pulling, now at the back with those pushing, and all the while his shouts continued, encouraging the men to make their utmost effort.

The raft creaked and groaned and the foremost end of

it buried itself deep in the sand of the shore. The men laboured on. At length Merwin cried out, "Halt!" The stone was resting on the raft, pressing it down into the water.

"That's enough for today!" he called. "Light some fires and rest yourselves. The wind and the clouds are with us. We shall have a good journey tomorrow!" The Priest looked exhausted and leaned heavily upon Amer's shoulders as he walked to the hut which had been kept especially for the two of them.

The Fathers stood rubbing their sore shoulders and stretching their tired limbs. A few ox-horns droned and Orlaub the singer, who had brought his harp, started a song of thanksgiving in which everyone joined.

"The journey across the water will be easier than the work here," Birno said to his friends, as they began their meal. "But when Grandfather was alive, he once told me that the hardest part is still to come; that is, moving the stone up the river-bank and across many meadows and hills—and at last setting it up in the Holy Place."

The other two only nodded. No one felt much inclined to talk, they were all far too tired. As soon as they had eaten their food, they crept into the hut and lay down to sleep.

"We'll set off when the raft floats on the tide," Merwin had said earlier. "Otherwise we will not be able to get away."

It was still pitch dark when very early the next morning Merwin went from hut to hut, rousing the sleepers and saying, "It is time to go. The raft is floating freely."

Dazed, the sleepers rubbed their eyes and one after another tumbled out and ran towards the beach.

There was the raft floating in the sea and several Fathers who had been guarding it plunged their paddles into the water in order to keep the clumsy craft the right distance from the shore.

Many of the Fathers, including those from the villages where Birno and Alf lived, had come in canoes and these lay ready, awaiting the new voyage.

Merwin and Amer were already at the beach giving instructions for the rollers and levers to be loaded into the canoes, and by now Merwin had decided which Fathers were to row the raft and which were to ride alongside in the canoes. Again the ox-horns sounded, this time in farewell. Merwin and Amer stood on top of the Holy Stone and stretched out their arms to the rising sun:

“Greetings, beautiful sun,
Grant to us a joyous day!”

Then the paddles dipped into the water and the huge vessel started to move slowly through the waves.

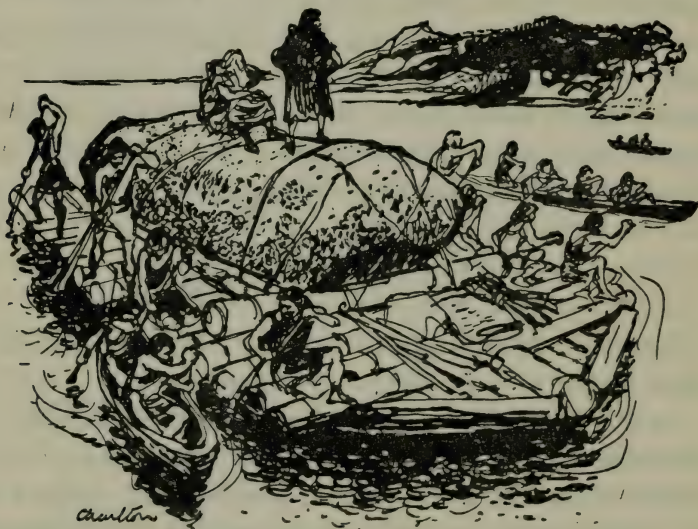
On the raft, Birno, Alf and Luki were sitting one behind the other beside the stone, rowing with steady, even strokes. From above they could just hear the prayers for a successful voyage which Merwin and Amer were endlessly repeating.

They had gone a good distance when Birno half turned towards Alf and asked, “Do you recognize the cliffs over on the left?”

Alf recognized them and so did Luki. They were the cliffs where the boys had so often searched for gulls’ eggs. Even now, two boys who were climbing about on them began to shout “Hei-o! Hei-o!” and waved their arms at the boatloads of men.

Birno felt as though he were dreaming. How long ago it seemed since he and Amer had shouted "Hei-o! Hei-o!" in exactly the same way, when the Fathers had brought the last Holy Stone across the water.

The boys from the cliff had scrambled down and were running along the beach. One of the canoes rowed towards them and the Fathers took gulls' eggs from the boys. Everything was exactly the same—only this time it was neither



he nor Amer on the beach. Now Amer was seated on the stone wrapped in a bearskin, murmuring prayers, while he, Birno, sat on the raft paddling.

Bewildered, he took one hand from his oar and felt his face. Was this really the same Birno? Yes, it was, except that now he had a beard.

At this point, the Fathers in the canoe joined them, and everyone received a few gulls' eggs. Hastily they gulped them down. How good they tasted!

"Hei-o! Hei-o!" shouted the boys from the shore as they ran along the strip of sand.

The fleet of canoes rounded the foot of the cliffs, and in the far distance the men could see the lower village with its fence and its terraced fields. As Birno glanced behind him at the open sea, he suddenly let out a cry of surprise: "Alf! Luki! Look! Look! Isn't that another of the brown men's ships behind us?"

The two swung round. "They have come to trade for white stone's tears again," cried Alf. "And they will not find a single man in the villages."

"Do you think they are bringing Grune back?" suggested Luki.

But the ship had disappeared behind a strip of land. Had Merwin and Amer noticed the strange ship too? Birno stared upwards. But the two sat motionless, murmuring their prayers.

They passed the mouth of their own little river; Birno knew the rest of the way; he remembered it from the time of his grandfather's funeral.

Hour after hour the journey went on as the oarsmen, breathing hard and sweating, moved the heavy raft slowly through the water. The tide was far out now and the water much shallower than it had been before.

"Pull into the shore, men!" called Merwin at last, from his seat on the stone. "We have come far enough for today."

He had chosen a good landing-place. The raft grounded on a level strip of sand which was gradually widening as the tide went out, and which made a perfect resting-place for the cumbersome craft. The men laid down their paddles beside the stone and climbed off the raft, stretching their legs and rubbing their tired muscles.

Women and children were running down the shore towards them. They stared curiously at the raft and its huge load, and then threw themselves reverently to the ground as Merwin and Amer descended from their lofty seat.

“Is that your village beyond those bushes?” called Alf.

“That’s right,” replied one of the men who had helped pull the canoes up onto the beach. “And welcome to it, you and your people!”

It was only a small village and there was not room in the huts for so many extra visitors, so some of the Fathers had to settle down for a night in the open. But the women had prepared a good meal, after which they all sat and enjoyed themselves round a huge fire.

Early next morning, when the raft was once more afloat on the incoming tide, the expedition set off again. They had to land several times more before reaching the right river, and the paddling was getting harder and harder as the current increased, but at last—at last, there was the landing-place and a number of men waiting there for them, waving to them, blowing a welcome to them on their horns.

Among these men stood a strange figure.

“That’s our Priest!” Alf whispered to Birno, who looked curiously at the stranger. He was very, very old, just as Alf and Luki had said. Surely he must be older even than Merwin. There the Priest stood, bent almost double, clad in an immense cowhide that seemed almost to crush him. But the strangest thing about him was what he wore upon his head. Real ox-horn seemed to grow from both sides of his forehead.

The Priest raised his hands in greeting. Merwin had

climbed down from the stone with Amer's help and now went towards him with outstretched arms, Amer following.

Awed and excited, all the Fathers watched: it was common knowledge that the quarrel over the bronze tools had made enemies of the two Priests. Halkon, the other Priest, was proud that in his youth he had been present when the Gods showed men the miracle of bronze—when for the first time brown and white stone's tears flowed together. Merwin, who had not been there, did not believe in the miracle, and was afraid of the Gods' wrath if men used anything but stone. At length the two had agreed that the Narrowheads could help to erect the Holy Stones on condition that they came without their bronze tools.

Halkon waited until the old man and the boy were standing before him. On his breast, gleaming in the sun, was a bronze brooch which held his cowhide in place.

"So you have chosen a companion?" he said, as he eyed Amer critically. "Will he also insist on stone weapons?"

"Naturally," said Merwin and pulled Amer forward. "His name is Amer."

Halkon beckoned to several Fathers to come closer. They were standing near by holding a chair made out of branches. Halkon sat down in it, for his legs were very weak. Coughing a little, he settled himself comfortably. Then Halkon's men arranged the rollers and slung leather straps about the stone, while the canoes were being drawn up the bank to safety.

Meanwhile Merwin and Amer hurried hither and thither to see that everything was in order. Eventually Merwin cried, "Heave!"

There were at least twice as many men helping now, but it needed all their strength to overcome the slope of

the bank. Previously some of the men under Halkon's direction had repaired the long road. They had dug a deep hole near the Sacred Stones, in which the new stone was to stand. They had also prepared the scaffolding by which the stone was to be first raised and then lowered into its hole.

When at last the stone had been successfully pulled from the raft and up the river-bank, Amer helped the Priest to his lofty perch on top of the stone, and then climbed up after him. Halkon was carried in front in his chair by two of the Fathers. The four best ox-horn blowers marched on Halkon's left and right, blowing for all they were worth; then came the stone on its rollers, attended by men who continually took up the logs from behind the stone and placed them in front of it again. In this fashion the procession made its way slowly across country, the stone crunching and crashing all the time on its rollers.

The three friends were among those who had to pull at the leather straps. At such a task there was no opportunity for conversation; they were working far too hard to feel any desire to talk. When the mound where his parents and grandfather lay came into view, only Birno paused to glance at it.

Then the majestic ring of Holy Stones appeared before them and slowly, to the continuing sound of the ox-horns, the procession of men moved towards it.



Chapter 12

WHEN the three friends could let go of the leather straps, they stared in speechless amazement at the circle of stones which they now saw at close quarters for the first time. Between the four-cornered stone giants they could see another ring of pillars and, inside this, stood yet another smaller circle. In the centre an immense block of stone lay flat on the ground. This must be the altar. All the blocks in the outer ring were connected by long slabs of stone laid across the tops of the uprights. A ditch some distance away surrounded the whole group of stones, but this ditch had been filled in at one point, so that the new stone could be taken more easily to its place in the temple—for temple it was at which the boys were gazing in such wonder.

And now the new stone lay with its foot towards a steep slope leading up to a gap in the outer ring where a stone was still needed. Over the edge of the ramp a hole had been dug. Tree trunks of all shapes and sizes lay piled up

on every side: what they were for, the boys could not even guess at the moment.

Amer, meanwhile, had leapt down from his place upon the Sacred Stone and was helping Merwin to descend; then they joined Halkon, who had risen from his chair. No one was allowed to set foot in the holy temple; even the Priests kept their distance, for Midsummer Day, when the sun would stand at its highest, had not yet come. At the moment they all wanted to rest from their labours. The following day they would go hunting for wild horses, which were to be sacrificed to the Gods on the day that the stone was set up. The horses were considered sacred animals, and it was forbidden to eat them.

"There is the sacrificial altar," said Amer's Father as he pointed to a stone structure a short distance from the temple. "I think Halkon has had it enlarged. But now come over to your sleeping-quarters," he added. "The Fathers who have been working here will have prepared an evening meal."

A little way away from the ditch stood a number of simple huts made of branches, leaves and rushes. In front of them fires were burning, over which meat was being roasted. Jugs of water stood ready. Halkon's group had worked hard too.

Everyone was hungry and thirsty, and soon they were sitting round the fires eating heartily. There were several youths whose beards were just beginning to grow. They soon joined Birno, Alf and Luki, and a lively conversation began.

"We have already got some horses for the sacrifice," they said eagerly. "When you have finished eating, you can come with us and we'll show them to you."

Quickly the last mouthfuls disappeared and were washed down with a few gulps of water. It is no small task to catch wild ponies alive. Walking between the huts they approached a thick fence, so high that not even a pony could jump over it. There was a narrow gate, the crossbars of which could be pushed back. Sure enough, two shaggy ponies were standing there, their manes and tails blowing in the wind. When they noticed the boys entering, they galloped in panic to the far end of the enclosure and could not be tempted to come closer, even with luscious bundles of grass.

“Leave them; of course they are afraid of us,” laughed one of the boys. “Perhaps they even realize what is in store for them, although really they should consider it an honour to be sacrificed to the Gods.”

The day before Midsummer the Priests called all the men back to work. Outside the temple lay a large, unhewn block of stone, called the Heel Stone. On Midsummer Day at sunrise it pointed its long shadow straight at the enormous central stone arch of the temple. The plan was for the new stone to be placed in its hole at the exact moment that the sun rose behind the Heel Stone and threw its shadow onto the arch. Now it was time to pull the stone up the steep slope, and let it drop over the edge and slide down into the hole.

Gradually the boys began to understand that all the tree trunks placed in readiness were going to be used as supports for this work. As the stone was pushed upwards the trunks were thrust underneath it from behind, to prevent it sliding backwards.

By midday a good deal of the work had been done; a number of Fathers were already standing inside the temple on the far side of the hole and pulling from there. In the afternoon, after a short rest the work continued, and when night came and the men lay down to sleep, one end of the stone hung right over the edge of the slope, and only needed a few more pushes next morning before it would drop into its place.

During the warm summer night, a heavy thunderstorm blew up over the land; lightning flashed, thunder rumbled and rolled—all the sleepers started up from their beds and stared at the sky, as the lightning streaked across it. The two Priests and Amer were watching, too, with fear in their hearts. Were the Gods angry? Were they displeased with the work of the Fathers?

The Gods are angry about Halkon's bronze brooch, thought Merwin.

The Gods are offended because Merwin will not accept their gift of stone's tears, thought Halkon.

The Gods are angry because the Priests are not friendly with each other, thought Amer.

But none of the three spoke a word.

At last, when the day was beginning to dawn, the storm died down. The ox-horns sounded. The boys were up first, fetching the sacrificial ponies and taking them to the altar in the temple. With great difficulty they succeeded in pushing and pulling the ponies through the temple pillars; the animals, naturally timid, had been frightened still more by the thunderstorm.

In the east a red glow faintly coloured the disappearing storm clouds. At any moment the rim of the sun would appear over the hills. Halkon had gone to the altar inside



the stone circle, to offer the sacrifice at the moment of sunrise. Merwin stood ready with Amer to give the signal for the final heave. Everyone looked towards the east.

Suddenly a magnificent rainbow arched itself through the cloudbanks. Merwin threw himself to the ground and touched the earth with his forehead. Amer did likewise and all the Fathers followed their example. When they got up again, the sun itself was just rising above the hills and pouring its light over the countryside.

“Let the stone go!” cried Merwin. “Look upon us with favour, O Gods!”

With a tremendous rush the Holy Stone dropped into its foundation hole. At the same moment, Halkon cut the throats of the sacrificial animals, letting their blood pour over the altar.

“Look on us with favour, O Gods, and be pleased to accept our offering,” he chanted.

All the people stretched their hands towards the sun:

“Greetings, beautiful sun!
Grant to us a joyous day!”

Then Halkon went and lit the sacrificial fire on the altar outside the temple and the Fathers carried out the sacrificed horses and placed them upon it. The fire burnt brightly; the smoke wafted upwards and wrapped itself round the pillars; now the shadow of the Heel Stone reached the circle, and still the coloured rainbow arched itself majestically across the sky.

A fresh morning breeze blew over the embers of the fire so that it burnt up again even more brightly. Merwin and Amer had left the Fathers securing the stone in its hole, and were offering their prayers at the altar.

Suddenly a voice was raised above the crackling of the fire: "Look! Look! Stone's tears are flowing from the sacrifice! Brown stone's tears and white ones. Come, Merwin! See! they are mingling! The Gods are showing us the miracle. Oh, Merwin, Merwin! The miracle!"

The voice was Halkon's, and he was pointing excitedly into the fire.

At his cry Merwin had come out of the temple with Amer. Slowly he had walked to the fire, and now he was staring into the flames. The Fathers too had stopped their work and were thronging round the sacrificial altar.

Suddenly Merwin swayed and fell, overcome by the sight of the mingling stone's tears, the miracle of the Gods. Amer caught him in his arms. Slowly he let the heavy body sink to the ground.

"It was granted to me to see the miracle," Merwin whispered to himself. Then his breathing stopped. Halkon bent over him. "The Gods have taken him," he said softly to the Fathers. "But they were good to their faithful servant. They have shown him the miracle before his death and built him a shining bridge across the heavens. And you too," he cried with a loud voice, "you too have seen how the Gods let brown and white stone's tears flow together beneath our sacrifice!"

The dead priest lay on the ground beside the fire and Birno saw that there was a gentle smile on his calm old face. Birno felt dazed. He did not dare to try and understand what had happened. He could not even believe it. Amer would have liked to throw himself down beside his dead master and weep. He felt glad that Halkon was standing beside him, his arm across his shoulders.

"Fetch my chair," Halkon said quietly to the Fathers,

“fetch my chair, lay the body upon it and carry it into the Holy Place.”

The sun shone warmly from the east and threw the shadow of that solitary rock, the Heel Stone, onto the central arch of the temple. Slowly the last of the rainbow faded, while the Fathers carried their dead Priest into the temple. Everyone followed with bowed heads and the ox-horns droned sadly.

In the innermost circle of stones, before the altar, Halkon ordered the chair to be put down. “Dig his grave here!” he commanded the Fathers. “In the midst of the Holy Stones, beneath the altar Merwin shall find his rest.”

The Fathers fetched their tools, while Halkon and Amer spoke their prayers over the dead man.

“Would you like to come with us?” asked one of the boys with whom the other three had become friendly. “We must go to fetch a sacrifice for the dead Priest. Our village is not far from here.”

They all crept out of the Temple. The wide plain was drenched in sunshine and larks’ songs trilled through the air. The smoke from the sacrifice was still blowing about but the rainbow had vanished.

Everyone was deeply moved by Merwin’s death; Merwin, the great Priest, who was now laid to rest beneath the altar. Before the Fathers separated and returned to their villages Halkon called them together once more. Amer stood beside him.

“Here,” said Halkon, “is Amer, still a youth, but the Gods themselves have chosen him to be Merwin’s successor. He is your Priest now, Fathers of the upper villages, and a great task is set before him. You were all present

when the Gods showed Merwin the great miracle before his death: stone's tears flowed from the sacrifice and mingled, brown and white stone's tears. The Gods have given to you the material to make the shining tools and weapons; Merwin was allowed to see it, and Amer will permit you to build hearths from which mixed stone's tears will flow. Now go in peace!"

He raised his hands, the ox-horns sounded and Amer bowed before the stately figure of the old Priest.

The Fathers of the upper village had understood little of what Halkon had said, save that Amer was now their Priest. A little doubtful of his extreme youth they set off on their journey homewards. The miracle of the stone's tears, which they would now be allowed to use, had not made a great impression on them. They had rarely even seen such tools and weapons, for the Narrowheads had only been allowed to bring stone tools for the work upon the Holy Stones. The upper villagers were used to stone tools, they knew how to make them and how to use them—why change? Several were afraid, too, afraid of the unknown. Only a few realized that this change might alter their whole lives.

Despite the sadness in his heart, Birno was not unhappy. His friends in the lower village would show him how to build a hearth for making stone's tears—soon he would possess a bronze axe again and this time he would be able to wear it openly in his belt.

Amer's feelings were different: his heart was full of sorrow for his beloved Priest and teacher, and fear at the prospect of living alone in the cave. How happily he had started off for this great occasion, how sadly he now returned. His Father had sat beside him in the canoe. "You

must stay in the village with us for a few days," he had said. "It will please your mother, and your little brother too."

Amer looked at him uncertainly. What would Merwin have said to such a suggestion? But Merwin had been an old man. He had not had a mother or a father for a long time. He had never spoken of any relations. He had been quite alone.

"First I will go to my master's cave and pray for him, and afterwards I will come to my parents for a few days," he said at last and suddenly felt happier for having made the decision.

During the excitement and work of the past few days, scarcely anyone had given a thought to the strange ship with the brown men. But now, as they paddled back along the river, Alf remembered it. "Do you think the brown men have waited for us?" he asked Luki.

"They know the rock from which they can get the stones for the white tears," replied Luki. "Why should they wait?"

"Oh, that would be unfair, just to take it!" cried Alf.

Then they saw Birno waving from the upper village canoe which was ahead of them, and pointing excitedly in front of him. Now they could see what had been hidden by the trees and shrubs along the coast: in full sail, the great ship belonging to the brown men was moving rapidly along the waterway towards the open sea. Obviously she was heavily laden for the stern lay very low in the water.

"What did I tell you?" shouted Luki. "They have helped themselves and they are already on the way back. No yellow balls for us and no glass beads!"

"Oh, that is stealing!" cried Alf, shocked, and the Fathers shouted angry words across the water.

But it made no difference. With its sails set the brown men's ship moved fast, much faster than the canoes, and soon it disappeared behind a headland.

While the Fathers returned to the village to tell the news to the mothers, Birno accompanied his friend part of the way back to the cave. He knew how sad Amer must be feeling, and tried to distract him from his thoughts by talking about the new things that would be happening in the village.

"When we have built a hearth for making stone's tears, will you come and speak a blessing over it?" he asked.

"Yes, I will do that," replied Amer.

"Soon all the Fathers will have shining tools," Birno went on enthusiastically, "and the mothers will have brooches to pin on their dresses. We will make fields so that we can harvest the corn and have cakes to eat. Oh, and we will keep cows to pull the plough, as they do in the lower village." His description got more and more lively and detailed as he told of all the things for which in his heart he had always envied the people of the lower village.

Meanwhile they were very near the cave. The thunderstorm which had taken place the night before they had set the stone in position, seemed to have been much worse here. There were signs of a very heavy fall of rain still to be seen.

Amer had been listening to Birno's chatter up to now, but suddenly he cried out: "Look! Look, Birno!"

An ancient oak, which had stood on the hill slope over the cave entrance, must have been struck by lightning. It

lay shattered on its side, its branches a tangled mass on the ground. But this was not all. As the boys hurried towards it they saw that the entire cave entrance had collapsed and lay buried beneath the heavy tree trunk with its tangle of branches.

Tears streamed from Amer's eyes. Birno too surveyed the damage in horror and bewilderment. But then he drew Amer closer towards it. "An animal is moving in the branches!" he whispered and took his stone axe out of his belt. "Let's go and see what has been caught."

He crept closer, pushed branches and leaves aside and peered in. Suddenly he cried out: "It's not an animal, Amer, it's a man!"

At this, Amer pulled off his bearskin, which was hindering him, and helped his friend to clear the branches.

"Who can it be?" asked Birno. "He's as thin as a post and as brown as one of the men from the strange ship. But he is not dead, he moved again just now."

The face of the man was turned away from them and anyway was almost covered with shaggy black hair. The two youths had to work hard before they could free the helpless body. The man was scratched and bleeding, and faint moans escaped him when the two had to handle him more firmly. At last he lay freed before them on the flat earth. He looked more thin and pitiful than any human being they had ever seen before. Birno pushed back the shaggy hair from the man's face and immediately leapt back in fright.

It was Grune.

"We must take him to the village straight away," said Birno. "Perhaps Grandmother knows a way of bringing him back to consciousness."

Carefully they laid him on Amer's bearskin and, picking it up, one in front and one behind, carried him down to the village. He was not a heavy load.

When they lifted him over the village wall the children and dogs came running as usual, and stared curiously. Birno laid a finger on his lips. "Don't make a noise," he said. "We are bringing in a sick man." They carried him to Grune's parents' hut, followed by the whole crowd.

Grune's mother wept pitifully as they laid her son on the bed. His father could barely restrain her from throwing herself across the helpless body.

"First he must be washed and his wounds cleaned," said Amer, who had learned such things from Merwin.

Birno however ran to his grandmother and hastily told her what had happened. Grandmother searched amongst her bundles of dried herbs, the scent of which always filled the hut. Then she hurried with Birno to the hut of Grune's parents. The whole village was gathered round the entrance, but they quickly made way for her.

Grandmother was well known as the wise woman of the village and rightly so. Without further ado she pushed the wailing mother aside and between the palms of her hands rubbed some of the dried herb leaves to powder. Then she held them under the nostrils of the unconscious Grune. "Get some milk ready," she said to the others.

After a short time Grune opened his eyes, although it was only to close them again straight away. "Now for the milk," said Grandmother, and put her hand under Grune's neck to raise him up a little. She held the jug of milk to his lips and poured some into his mouth. Grune groaned, coughed, and groaned again—then he started to swallow.

"I will stay with Grune," said Grandmother to the

others. "What he needs most is rest. So you had better all go. Only Amer may stay with me."

Reluctantly, everyone did as Grandmother told them. Outside they besieged Birno with questions. There was not much he could tell them: only that the old oak, shattered by lightning, blocked the entrance to the cave, and that they had found Grune unconscious in its branches. At length the people went about their business, shaking their heads. Where had Grune been all this time? What had he been doing by the Priest's cave? If he had returned with the brown men from across the sea, why had he not gone first to his parents in the village?

Birno wondered too.

It was several days before Grune had recovered sufficiently to tell Amer, who had undertaken to look after him, what had happened. During his story Amer discovered, to his surprise and delight, that the Grune who had returned was a completely changed person.

Oh, those brown men! After they had pulled Grune on board, they had turned him into a galley slave. He had been made to row, row, row ceaselessly although they had given him little enough food. When he did not pull hard enough upon the oars they rained blows upon him, covering his back with bruises and scars. The heat in the homeland of the brown men was unbearable. Certainly his masters lived in beautiful houses, but the galley slaves were quartered in the most miserable, evil-smelling hovels. He had been almost glad to be driven back to the ship again. The worst thing of all was that, month after month, year after year, he had not a single friend, no one to whom

he could talk, for he had only learned a few words of the queer language which the brown men spoke.

And then, on the last trip, the familiar coastline of his home had suddenly appeared—he had scarcely been able to believe his eyes. But truly it was there, the bay in which they had so often been swimming and had collected mussels, the headland and the path leading to the quarry. The slaves had been closely guarded and it was only by a miracle that on the night of the storm he had been able to leap overboard and swim until he reached the familiar coast. The first thing he had wanted to do was to give the Priest the bronze axe, which had brought him so much misfortune and which all this time he had carried with him, carefully hidden.

As if in a dream, he had run along the old familiar path by night. He had seen the village in the distance, but he had not slackened his pace despite the storm in the hills and the lightning and the thunder. Then he had slipped into the cave, but alas, he had not found the Priest. He had placed the axe on Merwin's bed and was just at the entrance of the cave again, when a tremendous crash shook the earth. That was all he knew. When he awoke, he was lying in his parents' hut and Birno's grandmother was giving him milk to drink.

Exhausted, Grune closed his eyes. He had told his story slowly and with many pauses while Amer had listened to him in silence.

"Will you tell all this to the Priest?" asked Grune after a while.

"Merwin is no longer alive," replied Amer. "I am his successor."

"Oh, you are the Priest now?" whispered Grune. "Surely

the Gods will not be angry with me, now that I do not carry the axe of stone's tears any longer?"

"They were not angry because the axe was made of stone's tears, Grune. They were angry because you had no right to carry it. That axe was given to Birno, and to Birno it belonged!"

"Oh?" said Grune doubtfully.

Then Amer started to tell him about the miracle that had so recently happened at the Sacred Stones, how Merwin had watched it just before his death. "The Gods have shown that they are not angry when men use tools and weapons of stone's tears," said Amer. "And they will not be angry with you any more since you have suffered so much and have also brought back the axe at last."

"Thank you for telling me all this," whispered Grune. "Can we three be friends again?"

"Indeed we can," said Amer. "But you must sleep a little now. And I shall go and fetch Birno, and he will be here when you wake."

With a happy smile Grune closed his eyes. He turned over comfortably onto his other side. Long before Amer reached Birno's hut to tell him the story, Grune was fast asleep.





