

## A Single Olive Leaf

'Two hundred and seventy-two days and nights we've been out here. Outrageous! That Noah's son Ham quite specifically said forty. "Don't you worry, Mr C" says he, "We'll be on the high seas for forty days and forty nights, then we'll all be out on dry land again" That's what he said. Should have expected it, of course. They have been quite unreliable ever since it all started. Turned up three days late, crowded all the animals together, set off any old how without waiting for half of us. I've seen better organisation in a Nubian pig-sty, if you don't mind me saying so.

'I tell you straight, when I get off this boat I'm going to go right up to that Noah fellow and give him a piece of my mind. He'll get no more business from me, I can tell you! In my day, we'd have had this thing sewn up in no time, no nonsense, certainly not! Two hundred and seventy-two days and nights. I can't say that the crowd on this Ark is up to much. Too many moaning minnies and wastrels - can't see them building us a future after the waters go down. Not enough backbone some of them. Just look at that Minotaur down there - he's been sitting crying into his hankie ever since we left. I'm a dry-land sort of person, I think I've told you that before. Can't abide this messing about in boats lark. Give me some parkland and a wood, a pipe and some wine, and I'm content.

'So here we've been for almost three hundred days and nights. In the early days, when it was still raining cats and dogs, we had an election for a captain. Geryon got the job, he was favourite. Well, let's face it - a giant with three bodies is not someone you say "no" to, far less organise a mutiny against. So that was us ship-shape for a week or so. But then food started getting scarce, so of course we started getting the rabble-rousers coming out - the faun, the nymph, the people of the woods. Can't abide them - give them a good hair-cut and a taste of military discipline, that'll sort them out. So they all start complaining, and even Gorgon can't bring 'em back into line. She turned a couple of them to stone with one of those famous looks of hers, but that was all. Oh dear, would you look at that Harpy over there! Oh, that's just plain uncivilised! But not much you can do about it now. Mark my words, this past few months has brought out everyone's true nature. I still try to keep a grip on things, still comb my mane, dress for dinner, polish my hooves if I go visiting, still polite to the ladies.

'Now there's a problem, my friend - we only realised it three months ago. Somehow or other there aren't any two of us. There's either a male or there's a female. Noah messed up on the embarkation, I expect. Going to make it a bit tricky when it comes to having children, I shouldn't wonder. But not much we can do about it now. The faun was a bit upset when he found out.

'So, what was I saying? Oh yes, two weeks out and then they started kicking up a fuss about rations. Well, we had to sort a few things out. Geryon resigned of course, couldn't handle the pressure. Gorgon tried it for a bit, and then Scylla took over. She was quite good as a captain, my kind of woman. All right, she's not much too look at - six heads and a belt of barking dog's heads. Makes flirting a bit risky, as I found to my cost. I'll tell you about that some other time. She had had some experience of life at sea.

'Ouch, that's my lumbago again! A real martyr to it, me, but I don't complain. No relief from it in these conditions, of course. Next time I get on an Ark, I'm bringing some cushions. You look at me and think: he's as strong as a horse. Yes, I am, but horses aren't built for twenty-seven weeks at sea. Two hundred and seventy-two days now.

'But nothing lasts. Scylla gave up just last month. So since then we've been sort of drifting aimlessly. Down to our last barrels of food now - just olives. There's been a Stymphalian bird sitting on the roof all the while, watching out for land. Gives us a report every so often, shouting down with that big bronze beak of hers. No land, though. You mark my words, there's land out there somewhere, just itching to be found.

'It's a bit of a strain for an old chap like me. The chimaera next door here - hush! quiet now, he's sleeping, can't you see? - he's quite a civil sort. You wouldn't think it to look at him - all lion's head and serpent's tail. But he introduced himself on the first night - "Don't mind me smoking a pipe, do you now, Mr C?". Shared his pipe with me. Good tobacco he had too - of course, that ran out in the fourth week, so now he sleeps and I dream.

'So, what was I telling you? Now, some time ago, was it June...or July? Can't remember now, one month's much like another. Well, anyway, there we were in the middle of nowhere, nothing to be seen except the water all around, a bit misty, when all of a sudden the Stymphalian bawls out "Ship ahoy!!" Naturally we all rush out on to deck. Sure enough, as sure as my name's Mr C., there's another ark like ours, just off the starboard bow. Couldn't quite make out who was on it, but there was a bunch of them all cheering and waving.

'When we came up close, I tell you I felt quite pleased to be on our Ark. At least we had some good *breeding* on our Ark, some real *names*, if you know what I mean. But I can hardly tell you what we found on this other ark, makes me angry even to think about it. Strange beasts - kangaroos, koalas, beavers with duck's bills, birds with fur, black swans, the lot. You name it, they had managed to get some bit quite wrong. It was obvious why they hadn't been allowed on the main Ark. Raucous they were, noisy tykes. Obviously hadn't got a care in the world. Well, there we were in the middle of nowhere, so we had to make conversation. The beasts on the other ship had called themselves Strinians, and had a party going. Seemed to me to be a nine month party from the state of their living quarters. I just kept below deck.

'Well, it was one thing after another, let me tell you. We floated along side by side. The Strinians had managed to rig up some kind of mast and sail on their boat, and showed us just how fast they could go. I don't hold with that new-fangled kind of thing. Let the Fates take us where we're going at our own speed, that's what I say. Never done us any harm until now. These unnatural beasts, they'll end up on the rocks somewhere, you mark my words.

'So, at dusk on the day after we had met the Strinians, what should happen? "Ship ahoy!!" comes the call from the Stymphalian. Reliable sort of bird that, never leaves her post. "Ship ahoy!!" she shouts. Sure enough, not far off the port side, very low in the water, there's another Ark. Listing heavily, its decks awash. Let me tell you, sir, I wouldn't have set foot on that Ark for all the silver in Attica. Oh no, my friend, not me! Well, it didn't seem to bother the animals on that Ark at all. They seemed to be used to it. We steered close to the boat and looked down on them. Until then I had thought the Strinians

were a bit odd; but you should have seen this bunch. Cows turning into great black glistening things, blowing spouts of water through the tops of their heads; smaller beasts whose hind legs had flattened and shortened; turtles happily gallivanting around in the water. Oh, I can tell you this, they're on to a slippery slope there. They waved cheerfully to us, said they need no help and we passed them by. They were going nowhere, except downwards. We were better off without them.

'The Strinians, they cast off south-eastwards after that - two, three months ago, was it? - partying all the way. Dashed glad to see the back of them I was. It made our ship seem much more peaceful when the racket had subsided. I tell you, if I had got on that Ark by mistake, I think I might have jumped overboard a long time ago. How Noah could have let them on, I don't know. Shows no class, no breeding.

'Well, it's just been one thing after another. This morning, I was up on deck getting a breath of fresh air - the Harpy had been at it again in the night, and the air was pretty foul, let me tell you - warming my back in the sunshine. All of a sudden, almost made me jump right out of my skin, there's the Stymphalian shouting out "Bird ahoy!". So we look around and sure enough, there's a dove just at the end of its strength, fluttering down on to the deck beside me. I picked her up, and everyone clustered round. The Sphinx - yes, that po-faced one over there, with her blessed riddles - wanted to know who the bird was and where it had come from. The Typhon just felt hungry and wanted to eat her, of course, but we told him to go below deck and stick his heads under a cold shower.

'Well, it took the dove some time to recover. Obviously been flying for a good few hours. But after a decent feed of grain, she was as fit as a fiddle. Grand blighters those doves, I kept a few of them in Thrace when I was there. Plucky little devils. So anyway, the dove recovers, says she's been sent out by old man Noah, of all people, to see if there's any land. Cock-eyed idea that, let me tell you. Dry land, hoof-wash, if you'll pardon my Mesopotamian. There's no more dry land than there's hairs on the palm of my hands.

'So, the dove was sent out. Seems Noah had tried sending out a raven a while back, but the raven had never returned. Could have told him that. Unreliable birds those ravens, never liked them. Unlucky too. I had a neighbour once, found a raven on his stable roof one morning, by nightfall he was dead. So the raven never came back, so Noah waited seven days and sent out the dove. She had been flying for hours without sight of land. Lucky she saw us.

'Gave her some olives to eat, as well, that's all we had left from the rations, then sent her back. She flew off to the north, clutching an olive in her beak. There was still a single leaf attached, saw it dangling as she flew.

'Done for, that Noah, I'd say, done for. Looking for dry land! Pity the dove can't speak, she could have led him to us. Still, we're heading west, we'll run up against something sooner or later. Don't like the look of those storm-clouds ahead, though. We're in for a rough passage, you mark my words.'