

## I

THAT SUN was ending in the West. The shepherd drew his eye across the land, to where heatless embers of light had gathered up on the far side of the stones and the brush and the darkling mountains that framed the dying day. The land direct beneath his gaze was smooth as compared to that which lay on the shadowed side of the valley, now difficult to make out against the sun's mortal glare. Yet the shepherd knew that place intimately even without the aid of his vision. There on that far side, the earth was steep upon its hills, and boulders jutted out nakedly there, twice or thrice as tall as a man, and the sharp clefts cut by the rains made passage over them hard and uncertain. Even the scrub that grew there—white-bloomed myrtle and red-bloomed mastic, and the rock-rose with its wrinkled pink petals—seemed hard put to grasp its roots into the stony earth.

The shepherd did not venture there, nor force his sheep to straggle over that uneven line. Here, where he sat, bathing in the final rays of light, there was a gentleness to the land. A soft swale was scooped out of the hillside below him, and in it lay a meadow that had been of late adorned with green grasses and purple-studded thistle. Across it stood a line of ancient stones, upright and tall as human beings and eerily

similar one to the next—the ancient leavings of some long-spent race whose gods were perished and forgotten. In the evening stillness this place was full of the buzz of insects and the swooping of bat and swallow as they took their twilight meals in a dance more akin to play than to feeding. Sitting high enough on the hill, yet not so high as to toss his view over the narrow horizon beyond, the shepherd watched his flock of sheep as they bayed and blinked their onyx-on-amber eyes and settled for the night amidst the dark worn pillars. The bells upon their necks rattled and tinkled as they lumbered down, ringing out a hundred tones and rhythms. His donkey, too, sank to its haunches, and his three dogs—two enormous white sheepdogs and a smaller bright-eyed pup of mottled black and brown and white—lay panting happily and gazing through the falling light.

The shepherd lifted a hand to his chin. His beard was grown long; it would soon be time to return. Each month or so he would go to his lowland shepherd's hut and sleep on his reed mat for two or three days; would hang his walking cane upon the wall; would bathe and shave the hair close to his cheeks, before renewing his necessities and setting out once more, past the threshold of that low-lain door, past the boundaries of his winter home, past the limits of that almost civilized life. Immersed once more in the wild he himself became once again a kind of wild thing, and his whiskers were let to grow to their wont, so that by them he might mark time. For time in those hills was of a nature dissimilar to itself. It drew out relentlessly into indivisible days, each disappearing into the next as a river ebbing into a borderless sea—a mass of time that could not be marked or counted in any way but the most arbitrary and ephemeral. Any hour was identical to any

other in these places; even night was but the inversion of uncountable days, for his sleep was restless and his eyes were keen to the dark, and sometimes the moon would sag in its sky, heavy with light, challenging all antitheses. Nay, but the turnings of light and dark could set no boundaries, for they were a rhythm like a heart's beat or the breath of his lungs, each lost into the next, by and by submerged in their repetition and hypnotizing regularity. But his beard did grow in one way only, and what had been two well-cropped cheeks became by and by a single animal-like grizzled thing that he might stroke or tug upon. So he, in lifting his hand to his face, knew that such and such a "time" had passed, and that "time" had come to set out toward the far-distant sea, or "time" had come to turn back once more and tend toward his source, or "time" had come to get him to the household of his ancestors. His hand now caressed those long hairs upon his chin, his neck, his cheeks—those hardy thickened curls of hair—and tugging them between his fingers, he said to himself, "Ho, it is almost time!" Then his hand fell, and all his knowledge of his appearance fell with it.

He was indeed a sort of stranger to himself, for the better part of physical considerations. Surely, he had known his face atimes in the pier glasses of the richer folk of his home-town, or had caught the trembling image of it in the limpid streams higher in the mount, those runnels and brooks that in winter and spring burred through the forests of oak and wild olive, before the greedy summer sun drank them up to a drop and left their passageways bare-boned. He would glimpse his image there shimmering upon the surface of the water, or glaring from the spectral halls of the mirror, and hardly would he know himself, a kind of wide-faced wild-eyed stubbled satyr

that gazed back at him from out its echo world, and seemed to smile impishly upon glimpsing him, as if to say, "And yet—I know *you!*"

Hardly would he glance back at that imago, for nothing constrained him to mind. To his own purposes, he knew himself. He knew his shepherd's dress—his hat, a mass of coarse black fabric that held tight in a ring about his brow and hung limp behind his head, down to the nape of his neck; his white, loose-armed, broad-shouldered shirt, with its large sable buttons; his dark, low-cut vest; his threadbare jacket woven of coarse but resistant wool and dyed to black; his broad, sand-colored pants that flared wide about his thick legs; his age-old boots with their leathern soles and their cork heels. He knew his body in the work it might do, and he never failed the use of it, but could measure it against all weights and all tasks and predict its capacity before he had committed himself to the merest movement. He knew his feet and the fall of his gait from his point of witness above, as he watched his straining limbs clambering along the paths his sheep had taken. He knew his hands, those wide-palmed, stocky-fingered apparatus to his body, imbued with a horrible strength. Aye, he knew to a fault his hands—though atimes when they were turned unusually, he would glance down at his fingernails and suddenly fail to recognize the shape of them. And that was a curious and most unpleasant impression. But it was equally a passing impression, easily quieted in the great all-consuming silence of the land, where he lived the better part of his days in something approaching perfect solitude, with only his beasts and his occasional helpmeet to hold him any tether to the human world. Here doubt was empty; all things grew solid and true. Much there

was of mystery; little of uncertainty. He had no need to turn his eye against himself, for he was himself alone and eternally—a kind of fixed center of things that wavered not nor grew ever unsteady, but was as that boulder rising there from out the severed flesh of the hill, or that ancient juniper growing upon the ledge, its tortured branches flung immobile along the lines of the prevailing winds, as though indicating constantly which way a traveler ought to pass.

When the sun had spent itself and sputtered out almost beyond recall, and the band of paling light about the top of the hills had grown narrow; when the stars, liberated by the extinction of the greater orb commenced their incessant glowing, and it seemed that the veil was dropped from off the face of things, so that the gleam of unreachable divinities could at last be perceived past the proud splendor of the sun; when finally the dark had come, and from his high vantage his sheep themselves seemed to be but chalky stones dotting the meadow where they lay immobile—then did the shepherd settle upon the hard earth, and drew his shaggy black sheep-pelt cloak over him and lay his crook beside him, to drowse into something like slumber. Likeness alone it bore to sleep; for he would not dream, and hardly would the lids of his eyes touch each other, so alert was he and wakeful of all danger to his flock. Nay, but this was a second waking in the formless promise of the deep. And he would rise with not five hours passed, alone there in the velvet night, and he would take bread and make a midnight meal for himself, as he gazed up at the hard glimmers that punctured the sky. So in waking dream he would await the dawn.

## II

HE GROUPED HIS FLOCK by the gathering light, to set out with them against promise of the sun. There was much ground to cover that day, and they could not afford to idle.

The sheep rose, groaning and protesting urgently, white and black and marbled, ram and wether and heavy-uddered ewe, and the young as well—one-hundred-forty-four head all told, with the lambs that had come to him that spring in the lowlands called Kuàréntòn, where he had driven his sheep to winter. Indeed, it had been a good year, and many had been born to the shepherd; but of these a crop had been cut off from the mob and sold for slaughter, so soon brought into the world so soon riven of it, to garnish the plates of *Hesper Tìónti*, the island's Spring-fest, and of the Christians' Easter. Those one-hundred-forty-four that he preserved to his name rose now to their master's voice in the morning freshness, ignorant, and thence indifferent, of their fortune to be yet alive, and shook the dew from their shaggy backs. They would be sheared before long, not for the sale of their wool, which indeed was of too coarse a quality to market, but merely so, to liberate them from the oppression of the summer heat. Their bells jangled dully in the heavy morning air, and the dogs rose jauntily and skirted about the mass of beasts and drew them to a knot, and the shepherd broke the quiet and still with guttural cries that seemed to hail from other ages and a lost race of men, and rose his arms into the air, hollering at his beasts in the accents of the urtongue. Like a distorted echo a braying trembled through the flock, for they had divined what the shepherd wanted of them, and

they began to trot out, up, to the north and the high land. They agitated their stiff legs, and the females that had lambed of late rose up sorely, still aching for their great berth of milk, and limped along behind the seething mass of white-backed beasts, and loitered behind them, sometimes falling sluggishly far back—though the shepherd knew that they would regain the flock once more, sooner or later, drawn as herd beasts to its gravity. The breath of them rose up like steam from off a broiling pale river, and the heat and smell of them obscured the morning fragrance of flowers.

The shepherd strode behind, moving with a certainty of purpose that could not be earned but through a life of this work—nay, through many lives of it, through the inheritance of these deeds and gestures from generations, through the vocation of the blood. This had been the work of his father, and of his father's father, and so backward into the fog-swallowed years, with such a regularity of unbroken line that it seemed to stand taut against change, and to abolish time itself, establishing an immortality of the human being upon this world. He and his brothers had grown with his father amongst the sheep, and had gone with him on the transhumance, the annual migratory herding, almost so soon as they had been strong enough to run. When in the passing of their youths the time had come, the flock had been swelled in the course of three springs, to be divided amongst the six brothers, with a portion put to the dowry of their single sister. Since then, one brother had died of malaria, and another vanished to the mountains, it was believed to his death, and another still come to a violent end at the hands of men he had recklessly made his enemies. Their sister had perished of her first childbirth. Now they were but three, these brothers,