

## PILGRIMAGE

*Amazing Stories*, October by Nelson Bond (1908- )

In her twelfth summer, the illness came upon Meg and she was afraid. Afraid, yet turbulent with a strange feeling of ex-altation unlike anything she had ever before known. She was a woman now. And she knew, suddenly and completely, that which was expected of her from this day on. She knew—and dreaded.

She went immediately to the *hoam* of the Mother. For such was the Law. But as she moved down the walk-avenue, she stared, with eyes newly curious, at the Men she passed. At their pitifully hairless bodies. At their soft, futile hands and weak mouths. One lolling on the doorstep of `Ana's *hoam*, returned her gaze brazenly; made a small, entic-ing gesture. Meg shuddered, and curled her lips in a refusal-face.

Only yesterday she had been a child. Now, suddenly, she was a woman. And for the first time Meg saw her people as they really were.

The warriors of the Clan. She looked with distaste upon the tense angularity of their bodies. The corded legs, the grim, set jaws. The cold eyes. The brawny arms, scarred to the elbow with ill-healed cicatrices. The tiny, thwarted breasts, flat and hard beneath leather harness-plates. Fighters they were, and nothing else.

This was not what she wanted.

She saw, too, the mothers. The full-lipped, flabby breasted bearers of children, whose skins were soft and white as those of the Men. Whose eyes were humid; washed barren of expression by desires too oft aroused, too often sated. Their bodies bulged at hip and thigh, swayed when they walked like ripe grain billowing in a lush and fertile field. They lived only that the tribe might live, might continue to exist. They reproduced.

This was not what she wanted.

Then there were the workers. Their bodies retained a vestige of womankind's inherent grace and nobility. But if their waists were thin, their hands were blunt-fingered and thick. Their shoulders were bent with the weight of labor, coarsened from adze and hoe. Their faces were grained from the eternal struggle with an unyielding earth. And the earth, of which they had made themselves a part, had in return made itself a part of them. The workers' skin was browned with soil, their bodies stank of dirt and grime and unwashed perspiration.

No, none of these was what she wanted. None of these was what she would *have*, of that she was positively determined.

So great was Meg's concentration that she entered into the *hoam* of the Mother without crying out, as was required. Thus it was that she discovered the Mother making great magic to the gods.

In her right hand, the Mother held a stick. With it she scratched upon a smooth, bleached calfskin scroll. From time to time she let the stick drink from a pool of midnight cupped in a dish before her. When she moved it again on the hide, it left its spoor; a spidery trail of black.

For a long moment Meg stood and watched, wondering. Then dread overcame her. Her fear-thoughts shook her body. She thought suddenly of the gods. Of austere Jarg, their leader; of lean Ibrim and taciturn Taamuz. Of far-seeing Tedhi, she whose laughter echoes in the roaring summer thunders. What wrath would they visit upon one who had spied into their secrets?

She covered her eyes and dropped to her knees. But there were footsteps before her, and the Mother's hands upon her shoulders. And there was but gentle chiding in the voice of the Mother as she said, "My child, know you not the Law? That all must cry out before entering the Mother's *hoam*?"

Meg's fear-thoughts went away. The Mother was good. It was she who fed and clothed the Clan; warmed them in dark winter and found them meat when meat was scarce. If she, who was the gods' spokesman on earth, saw no evil in Meg's unintentional prying, Meg dared look again at the magic stick. There was a question in her eyes. The Mother answered that question.

"It is `writing,' Meg. Speech without words."

Speech-without-words? Meg crept to the table; bent a curious ear over the spider-marks. But she heard no sound. Then the Mother was beside her again saying, "No, my child. It does not speak to the ears, but to the eyes. Listen, and I will make it speak through my mouth."

She read aloud.

"Report of the month of June, 3478 A.D. There has been no change in the number of the Jin Clan. We are still five score and seven, with nineteen Men, twelve cattle, thirty horses. But there is no reason to believe that `Ana and Sahlee will soon add to our number.

"Last week Darthee, Lina and Alis journeyed into the Clina territory in search of game. They met there several of the Durm Clan and exchanged gifts of salt and bacca. Pledges of friendship were given. On the return trip, Darthee was linberred by one of the Wild Ones, but was rescued by her companions before the strain could be crossed. The Wild One was destroyed.

"We have in our village a visitor from the Delwurs of the east, who says that in her territory the Wild Ones have almost disappeared. Illness she says, has depleted their Men—and she begs that we lend her one or two for a few months. I am thinking of letting her have Jak and Ralf, both of whom are proven studs—"

The Mother stopped. "That is as far as I had gone, my child, when you entered."

Meg's eyes were wide with wonder. It was quite true that Darthee, Lina and Alis had recently returned from a trip to China. And that there was now a visitor in camp. But how could the speech-without-words know these things, *tell* these things? She said, "But, Mother—will not the speech-without-words forget?"

"No, Meg. *We* forget. The books remember always."

"Books, Mother?"

"These are books." The Mother moved to the sleeping part of her *hoam*; selected one of the tumbled pile of calfskin scrolls. "Here are the records of our Clan from ages past—since the time of the Ancient Ones. Not all are here. Some have been lost. Others were ruined by flood or destroyed by fire.

"But it is the Mother's duty to keep these records. That is why the Mother must know the art of making the speech--without-words. It is hard work, my little one. And a labor without end—"

Meg's eyes were shining. The trouble that had been cold within her before was vanished now. In its place had come a great thought. A thought so great, so daring, that Meg had to open her lips twice before the words came.

"Is it—" she asked breathlessly, "Is it very hard to become a—Mother?"

The Mother smiled gently. "A very great task, Meg. But you should not think of such things. It is not yet time for you to decide—" She paused, looking at Meg strangely. "Or—is it, my child?"

Meg flushed, and her eyes dropped.

"It is, Mother."

"Then be not afraid, my daughter. You know the Law. At this important hour it is yours to decide what station in life will be yours. What is your wish, Meg? Would you be a warrior, a worker, or a breeding mother?"

Meg looked at the Clan leader boldly.

"I would be," she said, "a Mother!" Then, swiftly, "But not a breeding mother. I mean a *Clan*

Mother—like you, O Mother!"

The Mother stared. Then the harsh lines melted from her face and she said, thoughtful. "Thrice before has that request been made of me, Meg. Each time I have refused. It was Beth who asked first, oh, many years ago. She became a warrior, and died gallantly lifting the siege of Loovil... .

"Then Haizl. And the last time it was Hein. When I refused, she became the other type of mother.

"But I was younger then. Now I am old. And it is right that there should be someone to take my place when I am gone—" She stared at the girl intently.

"It is not easy, my daughter. There is much work to be done. Work, not of the body but of the mind. There are problems to be solved, many vows to be taken, a hard pil-grimage to be made—

"All these," swore Meg, "would I gladly do, O Mother! If you will but let me—" Her voice broke suddenly. "But I cannot become anything else. I would not be a warrior, harsh and bitter. Nor a worker, black with dirt. And the breeders—I would as soon mate with one of the Evil Ones as with one of the Men! The thought of their soft hands—"

She shuddered. And the Clan Mother nodded, understanding. "Very well, Meg. Tomorrow you will move into this *hoam*. You will live with me and study to become the Jinnia Clan's new Mother...."

So began Meg's training. Nor was the Mother wrong in saying that the task was not an easy one. Many were the times when Meg wept bitterly, striving to learn that which a Mother must know. There was the speech-without-words, which Meg learned to call "writing." It looked like simple magic when the Mother did it. But that slender stick, which moved so fluidly beneath the Mother's aged fingers slipped and skidded and made ugly blotches of midnight on the hide whenever Meg tried to make spider-marks.

Meg learned that these wavering lines were not meaningless. Each line was made of "sentences," each sentence of "words," and each word was composed of "letters." And each letter made a sound, just as each combination of letters made a word-sound.

These were strange and confusing. A single letter, out of place, changed the whole meaning of the word oftentimes. Sometimes it altered the meaning of the whole sentence. But Meg's determination was great. There came, finally, the day when the Mother allowed her to write the monthly report in the Clan history. Meg was thirteen, then. But already she was older in wisdom than the others of her Clan.

It was then that the Mother began to teach her yet another magic. It was the magic of "numbers." Where there had been twenty-six "letters," there were only ten numbers. But there was a most peculiar magic. Put together, oftentimes they formed other and greater numbers. Yet the same numbers taken away from each other formed still a third group. The names of these magical things Meg never did quite learn. They were strange, magical, meaningless terms. "Multiplication" and "subtraction." But she learned how to do them.

Her task was made the harder, for it was about this time that the Evil Ones sent a little pain-imp to torment her. He stole in through her ear one night while she was sleeping. And for many months he lurked in her head, above her eyes. Every time she would sit down to study the magic of the numbers, he would begin dancing up and down, trying to stop her. But Meg persisted. And finally the pain-imp either died or was removed. And Meg knew the numbers... .

There were rites and rituals to be learned. There was the Sacred Song which had to be learned by heart. This song had no tune, but was accompanied by the beating of the tribal drums. Its words were strange and terrible; echoing the majesty of the gods in its cryptic phrasing.

"O, Sakan! you see by Tedhi on his early Light—"

This was a great song. A powerful magic. It was the only tribal song Meg learned which dared name one of the gods. And it had to be sung reverently, lest far-seeing Tedhi be displeased and show her monstrous teeth and destroy the in-voker with her mirthful thunders.

Meg learned, too, the tribal song of the Jinnia Clan. She had known it from infancy, but its words had been obscure. Now she learned enough to probe into its meaning. She did not know the meanings of some of the forgotten words, but for the most part it made sense when the tribe gathered on festive nights to sing, "Caame back to over Jinnia—"

And Meg grew in age and stature and wisdom. In her sixteenth summer, her legs were long and firm and straight as a warrior's spear. Her body was supple; bronzed by sunlight save where her doeskin breech-cloth kept the skin white. Un-bound, her hair would have trailed the earth, but she wore it piled upon her head, fastened by a netting woven by the old mothers, too ancient to bear change.

The vanity-god had died long ages since, and Meg had no way of knowing she was beautiful. But sometimes, looking at her reflection in the pool as she bathed, she approved the soft curve of her slim young body, and was more than ever glad and proud that she had become a neophyte to the Mother. She liked her body to be this way. Why, she did not know. But she was glad that she had not turned lean and hard, as had those of her age who had become warriors. Or coarse as had become the workers. Or soft and flabby, as were the breeding-mothers. Her skin was golden-brown, and pure gold where the sunlight burnished the fine down on her arms and legs between her high, firm breasts.

And finally there came the day when the Mother let Meg conduct the rites at the Feast of the Blossoms. This was in July, and Meg had then entered upon her seventeenth year. It was a great occasion, and a great test. But Meg did not fail. She conducted the elaborate rite from beginning to end without a single mistake.

That night, in the quiet of their *hoam*, the Mother made a final magic. She drew from her collection of aged trophies a curl of parchment. This she blessed. Then she handed it to Meg.

"You are ready now, O my daughter," she said. "In the morning you will leave."

"Leave, Mother?" said Meg.

"For the final test. This that I give you is a map. A shower-of-places. You will see, here at the joining of moun-tain and river, our village in the heart of the Jinnia territory. Far off, westward and to the north, as here is shown, is the Place of the Gods. It is there you must go on pilgrimage before you return to take your place as Mother."

Now, at this last moment, Meg felt misgivings.

"But you, Mother?" she asked. "If I become Mother, what will become of you?"

"The rest will be welcome, daughter. It is good to know that the work will be carried on—" The aged Mother pondered. "There is much, yet, that you do not know, Meg. It is forbidden that I should tell you all until you have been to the Place of the Gods. There will you see, and understand—"

"The—the books?" faltered Meg.

"Upon your return you may read the books. Even as I read them when I returned. And all will be made clear to you. Even that final secret which the clan must not know—"

"I do not understand, Mother."

"You will, my daughter—later. And now, to sleep. For at dawn tomorrow begins your pilgrimage...."

Off in the hills, a wild dog howled his melancholy farewell to the dying moon. His thin song clove the stirring silence of the trees, the incessant movement of the forest. Meg awakened at the

cry; wakened and saw that already the red edge of dawn tinged the eastern sky.

She uncurled from the broad treecrotch in which she had spent the night. Her horse was already awake, and with restless movements was nibbling the sparse grass beneath the giant oak. Meg loosened his tether, then went to the spring she had found the night before.

There she drank, and in the little rill that trickled from the spring, bathed herself as best she could. Her ablutions finished she set about making breakfast. There was not much food in her saddlebags. A side of rabbit, carefully saved from last night's dinner. Two biscuits, slightly dried now. A precious handful of salt. She ate sparingly, resolved to build camp early tonight in order to set a few game traps and bake another hatch of biscuit.

She cleared a space, scratching a wide circle of earth bare of all leaves and twigs, then walking around it widdershins thrice to chase away the fire-demon. Then she scratched the firestone again, and a piece of the black metal from the town of the Ancient Ones—a gift of the Mother—and kindled her little fire.

Two weeks had passed since Meg had left the Jinnia territory. She had come from the rugged mountainlands of her home territory through the river valleys of the Hyan Clan. On the flat plains of the Yana section, she had made an error. Her man had shown the route clearly, but she had come upon a road built by the Ancient Ones. A road of white cret, still in fair repair. And because it was easier to travel on this highway than to thread a way through the jungle, she had let herself drift southward.

It was not until she reached the timeworn village of Slooie that friendly Zuries had pointed out her mistake. Then she had to turn northward and westward again, going up the Big River to the territory of the Demoyes.

Now, her map showed, she was in Braska territory. Two more weeks—perhaps less than that—should bring her to her goal. To the sacred Place of the Gods.

Meg started and roused from her speculations as a twig snapped in the forest behind her. In one swift motion she had wheeled, drawn her sword, and was facing the spot from which the sound had come. But the green bushes did not tremble; no further crackling came from the underbrush. Her fears allayed, she turned to the important business of roasting her side of rabbit.

It was always needful to be on the alert. Meg had learned that lesson early; even before her second day's journey had led her out of Jinnia territory. For, as the Mother had warned, there were still many Wild Ones roaming through the land. Searching for food, for the precious firemetal from the ruined villages of the Ancient Ones—most of all for mates. The Wild Ones were dying out, slowly, because of their lack of mates. There were few females left among them. Most of the Wild Ones were male. But there was little in their shaggy bodies, their thick, brutish faces, their hard, gnarled muscles, to remind one of the Men.

A Wild One had attacked Meg in her second night's camp. Fortunately she had not yet been asleep when he made his foray—else her pilgrimage would have ended abruptly. Not that he would have killed her. The Wild Ones did not kill the women they captured. They took them to their dens. And—Meg had heard tales. A priestess could not cross her strain with a Wild One and still become a Mother.

So Meg had fought fiercely, and had been victorious. The Wild One's bones lay now in the Jinnia hills, picked bare by the vultures. But since that escape, Meg had slept nightly in trees, her sword clenched in her hand... .

The food was cooked now. Meg removed it from the spit, blew upon it, and began to eat. She had many things on her mind. The end of her pilgrimage was nigh. The hour when she would enter into the Place of the Gods, and learn the last and most carefully guarded secret.

That is why her senses failed her. That is why she did not even know the Wild One lurked near until, with a roar of throaty satisfaction, he had leaped from the shrubbery, seized her, and pinioned her struggling arms to her sides with tight grip.

It was a bitter fight, but a silent one. For all her slimness, Meg's body was sturdy. She fought pantherlike; using every weapon with which the gods had endowed her. Her fists, legs, teeth.

But the Wild One's strength was as great as his ardor was strong. He crushed Meg to the ground bruisingly; the stink of his sweat burning her nostrils. His arms bruised her breasts; choked the breath from her straining lungs. One furry arm tensed about her throat, cutting off the precious air.

Meg writhed, broke free momentarily, buried her strongteeth in his arm. A howl of hurt and rage broke from the Wild One's lips. Meg tugged at her sword. But again the Wild One threw himself upon her; this time with great fists flailing. Meg saw a hammerlike hand smashing down on her, felt the shocking concussion of the Wild One's strength. A lightning flashed. The ground leaped up to meet her. Then all was silent... .

She woke, groaning weakly. Her head was splitting, and the bones of her body arched. She started to struggle to her feet; had risen halfway before she discovered with a burst of hope that she *could* move! She was not bound! Then the Wild One...

She glanced about her swiftly. She was still lying in the little glade where she had been attacked. The sun's full orb had crept over the horizon now, threading a lacework of light through the trees. Her fire smouldered still. And beside it crouched a—Meg could not decide what it was. It looked like a Man, but that of course was impossible. Its body was smooth and almost as hairless as her own. Bronzed by the sun. But it was not the pale, soft body of a man. It was muscular, hard, firm; taller and stronger than a warrior.

Flight was Meg's first thought. But her curiosity was even stronger than her fear. This was a mystery. And her sword was beside her. Whoever, or whatever, this Thing might be, it did not seem to wish her harm. She spoke to it.

"Who are you?" asked Meg. "And where is the Wild One?"

The stranger looked up, and a happy look spread over his even features. He pointed briefly toward the shrubbery. Meg followed the gesture; saw lying there the dead body of the Wild One. Her puzzled gaze returned to the Man-thing.

"You killed him? Then you are not one of the Wild Ones? But I do not understand. You are not a man—"

"You," said the man-thing in a voice deeper than Meg had ever heard from a human throat, "talk too much. Sit down and eat, Woman!"

He tossed Meg a piece of her own rabbit-meat. Self-unaware that she did so, Meg took it and began eating. She stared at the stranger as he finished his own repast, wiped his hands on his cloak and moved toward her. Meg dropped her half-eaten breakfast, rose hastily and groped for her sword.

"Touch me not. Hairless One!" she cried warningly. "I am a priestess of the Jinnia Clan. It is not for such as you to—"

The stranger brushed by her without even deigning to hear her words. He reached the spot where her horse had been tethered; shook a section of broken rein ruefully.

"You women!" he spat. "Bah! You do not know how to train a horse. See—he ran away!"

Meg thought anger-thoughts. Her face burned with the sun, though the sun's rays were dim in the glade. She cried, "Man-thing, know you no better than to talk thus to a Woman and a master? By Jarg, I should have you whipped—"

"You talk too much!" repeated the Man-thing wearily. Once more he squatted on his hunkered

studied her thought-fully. "But you interest me. Who are you? What are you doing so far from the Jinnia territory? Where are you going?"

"A priestess," said Meg coldly, "does not answer the questions of a Man-thing—"

"I'm not a Man-thing," said the stranger pettishly, "I am a Man. A Man of the Kirki tribe who lives many miles south of here. I am Daiv, known as He-who-would-learn. So tell me, Woman."

His candor confused Meg. Despite herself, she found the words leaving her lips. "I—I am Meg. I am making pilgrimage to the Place of the Gods. It is my final task ere I become Mother of my clan."

The Man's eyes appraised her with embarrassing frankness. "So?" he said. "Mother of a Clan? Meg, would you not rather stay with me and become mother of your own clan?"

Meg gasped. Men were the mates of Women—yes! But never had any Man the audacity to suggest such a thing. Mat-ings were arranged by the Mother, with the agreement of the Women. And surely this Man must know that priestesses did not mate.

"Man!" she cried, "Know you not the Law? I am soon to become a Clan Mother. Guard your words, or the wrath of the Gods—"

The Man, Daiv, made happy-sounds again. "It was I who saved you from the Wild One," he chuckled. "Not the Gods. In my land, Golden One, we think it does no harm to ask. But if you are unwilling—" he shrugged. "I will leave you now."

Without further adieu, he rose and started to leave. Meg's face reddened. She cried out angrily, "Man!"

He turned, "Yes?"

"I have no horse. How am I to get to the Place of the Gods?"

"Afoot, Golden One. Or are you Women too weak to make such a journey?"

He laughed again—and was gone.

For a long moment Meg stared after him, watching the green fronds close behind his disappearing form, feeling the stark desolation of utter aloneness close in upon her and envelop her. Then she did a thing she herself could not understand. She put down her foot upon the ground, hard, in an angry-movement.

The sun was high, and growing warmer. The journey to the Place of the Gods was longer, now that she had no mount. But the pilgrimage was a sacred obligation. Meg scraped dirt over the smoldering embers of her fire. She tossed her saddlebags across her shoulder and faced west-ward. And she pressed on... .

The way was long; the day hot and tedious. Before the sun rode overhead. Meg was sticky with sweat and dust. Her feet were sore, and her limbs ached with the unaccustomed exercise of walking. By afternoon, every step was an agony. And while the sun was still too-strong-to-be-looked-at, she found a small spring of fresh water and decided to make camp there for the night.

She set out two seines for small game; took the flour and salt from her saddle-bags and started about making a batch of biscuit. As the rocks heated, she went to the stream and put her feet in the water, letting the water-god lick the fever from her tender soles.

From where she sat, she could not see the fire. She had been there perhaps a half an hour when a strange, unfamiliar smell wrinkled her nostrils. It was at once a sweet-and-bitter smell; a pungent odor like strong herbs, but one that set the water to running in her mouth.

She went back to her camp hastily—and found there the Man, Daiv, once again crouching over her stone fireplace. He was watching a pot on the stones. From time to time he stirred the pot with a long stick. Drawing closer, Meg saw a brown water in the pot. It was this which made t

aromatic smell. She would have called out to the Man, but he saw her lust. And,  
"Hello, Golden One!" he said.

Meg said stonily, "What are you doing here?"

The Man shrugged.

"I am Daiv. He-who-would-learn. I got to thinking about this Place of the Gods, and decided too, would come and see it." He sniffed the brown, bubbling liquid; seemed satisfied. He poured some of it out into an earthen bowl and handed it to Meg. "You want some?"

Meg moved toward him cautiously. This might be a ruse of the Man from the Kirki tribe. Perhaps this strange, aromatic liquid was a drug. The Mother of the Clan had the secret of such drinks. There was one which caused the head to pucker, the mouth to dry and the feet to reel...

"What is it?" she demanded suspiciously.

"Cawfi, of course." Daiv looked surprised. "Don't you know? But, no—I suppose the bean-tree would not grow in your northern climate. It grows near my land. In Sippe and Weezie territories. Drink it!"

Meg tasted the stuff. It was like its smell; strong and bitter, but strangely pleasing. Its heat coursed through her, taking the tired-pain from her body as the water of the spring had taken the burn from her feet.

"It's good, Man," she said.

"Daiv," said the Man. "My name is Daiv, Golden One." Meg made a stern-look with her brow.

"It is not fitting," she said, "that a priestess should call a Man by his name."

Daiv seemed to be given to making happy-sounds. He made one again.

"You have done lots of things today that are not fitting for a priestess, Golden One. You are not in Jinnia now. Things are different here. And as for me—" He shrugged. "My people do things differently, too. We are one of the chosen tribes, you know. We come from the land of the Escape."

"The Escape?" asked Meg.

"Yes." As he talked, Daiv busied himself. He had taken meat from his pouch, and was wrapping this now in clay. He tossed the caked lumps into the embers of the crude oven. He had also some taters, which Meg had not tasted for many weeks. He took the skins off these, cut them into slices with his hunting-knife and browned the pieces on a piece of hot, flat rock. "The Escape of the Ancient Ones, you know."

"I—I'm not sure I understand," said Meg.

"Neither do I—quite. It happened many years ago. Before my father's father's father's people. There are books in the tribe Master's *hoam* which tell. I have seen some of them....

"Once things were different, you know. In the days of the Ancient Ones, Men and Women were equal throughout the world. In fact, the Men were the Masters. But the Men were warlike and fierce—"

"Like the Wild Ones, you mean?"

"Yes. But they did not make war with clubs and spears, like the Wild Ones. They made war with great catapults that threw fire and flame and exploding death. With little bows that shot stone arrowheads. With gases that destroy, and waters that burn the skin.

"On earth and sea they made these battles, and even in the air. For in those days, the Ancient Ones had wings, like birds. They soared high, making great thunders. And when they warred, they dropped huge eggs of fire which killed others."

Meg cried sharply, "Oh—"

"Don't you believe me?"



"The taters, Daiv! They're burning!"

"Oh!" Daiv made a happy-face and carefully turned the scorching tater slices. Then continued.

"It is told that there came a final greatest war of all. It was a conflict not only between the Clans but between the forces of the entire earth. It started in the year which is known as nineteen and sixty—whatever *that* means—"

"I know!" said Meg.

Daiv looked at her with sudden respect. "You do? Then the Master of my tribe must meet you and—"

"It is impossible," said Meg. "Go on!"

"Very well. For many years this war lasted. But neither side could gain a victory. In those days it was the Men who fought, while the Women remained *hoam* to keep the Men's houses. But thousands of Men died by thousands. And there came a day when the Women grew tired of it.

"They got together . . . all of them who lived in the civilized places. And they decided to rid themselves of the brutal Men. They stopped sending supplies and fire-eggs to the battling Men across the sea. They built walled forts, and hid themselves in them.

"The war ended when the Men found they had no more to fight with. They came back to their *hoams*, seeking their Women. But the Women would not receive them. There was bitter warfare once again—between the sexes. But the Women held their walled cities. And so—"

"Yes?" said Meg.

"The Men," said Daiv somberly, "became the Wild Ones of the forest. Mateless, save for the few Women they could linber. (Linber—to kidnap (derived from Lindberg?—Ed)

Their numbers died off. The Clans grew. Only in a few places—like Kirki, my land—could humanity not become a matriarchy."

He looked at Meg. "You believe?"

Meg shook her head. Suddenly she felt very sorry for this stranger, Daiv. She knew, now, why he had not harmed her. Why, when she had been powerless before him, he had not forced her to become his mate. He was mad. Totally and completely mad. She said, gently, "Shall we eat, Daiv?"

Mad or not, there was great pleasure in having some company on the long, weary, remaining marches of her pilgrim-age. Thus it was that Meg made no effort to discourage Daiv in his desire to accompany her. He was harmless, and he was pleasant company—for a Man. And his talk as wild as it was at times, served to pass boring hours.

They crossed the Braska territory and entered at last into the 'Kota country. It was here that the Place of the Gods was—only at the far western end, near Yomin. And the slow days passed turning into weeks. Not many miles did they cover in those first few days, while Meg's feet were tender and her limbs full of jumping little pain-imps. But when hard walking had destroyed the pain-imps, they traveled faster. And the time was drawing near... .

"You started, once, to tell me about the Escape, Daiv," said Meg one evening. "But you did not finish. What is the legend of the Escape?"

Daiv sprawled languidly before the fire. His eyes were dreamy.

"It happened in the Zoni territory," he said, "Not far from the lands of my own tribe. In those days was there a Man-god named Renn, who foresaw the death of the Ancient Ones. He built a gigantic sky-bird of metal, and into its bow-els climbed two score Men and Women.

"They flew away, off there—" Daiv pointed to a shining white dot in the sky above. "To the evening star. But it is said that one day they will return. That is why our tribe tries to preserve the

customs of the Ancient Ones. Why even mis-guided tribes like yours preserve the records—"

Meg's face reddened.

"Enough!" she cried. "I have listened to many of your tales without making comment, Daiv. But now I command you to tell me no more such tales as this. This is—this is blasphemy!"

"Blasphemy?"

"It is not bad enough that your deranged mind should tell of days when *Men* ruled the earth. Now you speak of a *Man-god*!"

Daiv looked worried. He said, "But, Golden One, I thought you understood that all the gods were Men—"

"Daiv!" Without knowing why she did so, Meg suddenly swung to face him; covered his lips with her hands. She sought the darkness fearfully; made a swift gesture and a swifter prayer. "Do not tempt the wrath of the Gods! I am a priestess, and I know. All the Gods are—*must* be—Women!"

"But why?"

"Why—why, because they are!" said Meg. "It could not be otherwise. All Women know that the gods are great, good and strong. How, then, could they be men? Jarg, and Ibram, and Taamu. The mighty Tedhi—"

Daiv's eyes narrowed in wonderthought.

"I do not know their names," he mused. "They are not gods of our tribe. And yet—Ibram . . . Tedhi...."

There was vast pity in Meg's voice.

"We have been comrades for a long journey, Daiv," she pleaded. "Never before, since the world began, have a Man and a Woman met as you and I. Often you have said mad, impossible things. But I have forgiven you because—well, because you are, after all, only a Man.

"But tomorrow, or the day after that, we should come to the Place of the Gods. Then will our pilgrimage be ended, and I will learn that which is the ultimate secret. Then I shall have to return to my Clan, to become the Mother. And so let us not spoil our last hours of comradeship with vain argu-ment."

Daiv sighed.

"The elder ones are gone, and their legends tell so little. It may be you are right, Golden One. But I have a feeling that it is my tribal lore that does not err. Meg—I asked this once before. Now I ask again. Will you become my mate?"

"It is impossible, Daiv. Priestesses and Mothers do not mate. And soon I will take you back with me to Jinnia, if you wish. And I will see to it that you are taken care of, always, as a Man should be taken care of."

Daiv shook his head.

"I cannot, Meg. Our ways are not the same. There is a cus-tom in our tribe . . . a mating custom which you do not know. Let me show you—"

He leaned over swiftly. Meg felt the mighty strength of his bronzed arms closing about her, drawing her close. And he was touching his mouth to hers: closely, brutally, terrifyingly.

She struggled and tried to cry out, but his mouth bruised hers. Anger thoughts swept through her like a flame. But it was not anger—it was something else—that gave life to that flame. Suddenly her veins were running with liquid fire. Her heart beat upon rising, panting breasts like something captive that would be free. Her fists beat upon his shoulders vainly ... but there was little strength in her blows.

Then he released her, and she fell back, exhausted. Her eyes glowed with anger and her voice

was husky in her throat. She tried to speak, and could not. And in that moment, a vast and terrible weakness trembled through Meg. She knew, fearfully, that if Daiv sought to mate with her, not all the priestessdom of the gods could save her. There was a body-hunger throbbing within her that hated his Manness ... but cried for it!

But Daiv, too, stepped back. And his voice was low as he said, "Meg?"

She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. Her voice was vibrant.

"What magic is that, Daiv? What custom is that? I hate it. I hate *you*! I—"

"It is the touching-of-mouths, Golden One. It is the right of the Man with his mate. It is my pleasure that you enter not the Place of the Gods, but return with me, now, to Kirki, there to become my mate."

For a moment, indecision swayed Meg. But then, slowly, "No! I must go to the Place of the Gods," she said.

And thus it was. For the next day Meg marked on the shower-of-places the last time the stars indicated the path of her pilgrimage. And at eventide, when the sun threw long, ruddy rays upon the rounded hills of black, she and Daiv entered into the gateway which she had been told led to the Place of the Gods.

It was here they lingered for a moment. There were many words each would have said to the other. But both knew that this was the end.

"I know no Law, Daiv," said Meg, "which forbids a Man from entering the Place of the Gods. So you may do so if you wish. But it is not fitting that we should enter together. Therefore I ask you to wait here while I enter alone.

"I will learn the secret there. And learning, I will go out by another path, and return to Jinnia."

"You will go—alone?"

"Yes, Daiv."

"But if you should—" he persisted.

"If by some strangeness I should change my mind," said Meg, "I will return to you—here. But it is unlikely. Therefore do not wait."

"I will wait, Golden One," said Daiv soberly, "until all hope is dead."

Meg turned away, then hesitated and turned back. A great sorrow was within her. She did not know why. But she knew of one magic that could hear her heart for the time.

"Daiv—" she whispered.

"Yes, Golden One?"

"No one will ever know. And before I leave you for-ever—could we once more do the—touching-of-mouths?"

So it was that alone and with the recollection of a moment of stirring glory in her heart, Meg strode proudly at last into the Place of the Gods.

It was a wild and desolate place. Barren hills of sand rose about here, and of vegetation there was none save sparse weeds and scrubby stumps that flowered miserly in the bleak, chill air.

The ground was harsh and salt beneath her feet, and no birds sang an evening carillon in the drab wilderness. Afar, a wild dog pierced the sky with its lonely call. The great hills echoed the cry dismally.

Above the other hills towered a greater one. To this, with unerring footsteps, Meg took her way. She knew not what to expect. It might be that here a band of singing virgins would appear to her, guiding her to a secret altar before which she would kneel and learn the last mystery.

It might be that the gods themselves reigned here, and that she would fall in awe before the sweeping skirts of austere Jarg, to hear from the gods' own lips the secret she had come so far to

learn.

Whatever it was that would be revealed to her, Meg was ready. Others had found this place and had survived. She did not fear death. But—death-in-life? Coming to the Place of the Gods with a blasphemy in her heart? With the memory of a Man's mouth upon hers.

For a moment, Meg was afraid. She had betrayed her priestessdom. Her body was inviolate but would not the gods search her soul and know that her heart had forgotten the Law; had mated with a Man?

But if death must be her lot—so be it. She pressed on.

So Meg turned through a winding path, down between two tortuous clefts of rock, and came last unto the Place of the Gods. Nor could she have chosen a better moment for the ultimate reaching of this place. The sun's roundness had now touched the western horizon.

There was still light. And Meg's eyes, wondering, sought that light. Sought—and saw! And then, with awe in her heart, Meg fell to her knees.

She had glimpsed that-which-was-not-to-be-seen! The Gods themselves, standing in omnipotent majesty, upon the crest of the towering rock.

For tremulous moments Meg knelt there, whispering the ritual prayers of appeasement. At a moment she expected to hear the thunderous voice of Tedhi, or to feel upon her shoulder the judicial hand of Jarg. But there came no sound but the frenzied beating of her own heart, of the soft stirring of dull grasses, of the wind touching the grim rocks.

And she lifted her head and looked once more... .

It was they! A race recollection, deeper and more sure than her own halting memory told her, once that she had not erred. This was, indeed, the Place of the Gods. And these were the Gods she faced—stern, implacable, everlasting. Carven in eternal rock by the hands of those long ago.

Here they were; the Great Four. Jarg and Taamuz, with ringletted curls framing their stern judicial faces. Sad Ibrim, lean of cheek and hollow of eye. And far-seeing Tedhi, whose eyes were concealed behind the giant telescopes. Whose lips, even now, were peeled back as though to loose a peal of his thunderous laughter.

And the Secret?

But even as the question leaped to her mind, it had its answer. Suddenly Meg knew that there was no visitation to be made upon her here. There would be no circle of singing virgins, no communication from those great stone lips. For the Secret which the Mother had hinted . . . the Secret which the Clanswomen must not know . . . was a secret Daiv had confided to her during those long marches of the pilgrimage.

The Gods—were Men!

Oh, not men like Jak or Ralf, whose pale bodies were but the instruments through which the breeding mothers' bodies were fertilized! Nor male creatures like the Wild Ones.

But—Men like Daiv! Lean and hard of jaw, strong of muscle, sturdy of body.

Even the curls could not conceal the inherent masculinity of Jarg and Taamuz. And Tedhi's head was covered with Man-hair, clearcut and bristling above his happy-mouth. And Ibrim's cheeks were haired, even as Daiv's had been from time to time before he made his tribal cut-magic with his keen knife.

The gods, the rulers, the Masters of the Ancient Ones *had* been Men. It had been as Daiv had said—that many ages ago the Women had rebelled. And now they pursued their cold and loveless courses, save where—in a few places like the land of Kirki—the old way still maintained.

It was a great knowledge, and a bitter one. Now Meg understood why the Mother's lot was unhappy. Because only the Mother knew how artificial this new life was. How soon the Wild Ones

would die out, and the captive Men along with them. When that day came, there would be no more young. No more Men *or* Women. No more civilization... .

The Gods knew this. That is why they stood here in the grey hills of 'Kota, sad, forgotten. The dying gods of a dying race. That because of an ill-conceived vengeance hu-mankind was slowly destroying itself.

There was no hope. Knowing, now, this Secret, Meg must return to her Clan with lips sealed. There, like the Mother be-fore her, she must watch with haunted eyes the slow dwindle of the tiny number . . . see the weak and futile remnants of Man die off. Until at last--

Hope was not dead! The Mother had been wrong. For the Mother had not been so fortunate in her pilgrimage as had Meg. She had never learned that there were still places in the world where Man had preserved himself in the image of the Ancient Ones. In the image of the Gods.

But she, Meg, knew! And knowing, she was presented with the greatest choice a Woman could know.

Forward into the valley, lay the path through which she could return to her Clan. There she would become Mother, and would guide and guard her people through a lifetime. She would be all-wise, all-powerful, all-important. But she would be a virgin unto death; sterile with the sanctity of tradition.

This she might do. But there was yet another way. And Meg threw her arms high, crying out that the Gods might hear and decide her problem.

The Gods spoke not. Their solemn features, weighted with the gravity of time, moved not. But spoke to her. But as she searched their faces piteously for an answer to her vast despair, there came to Meg a memory. It was a passage from the Prayer of Ibrim. And as her lips framed those remembered words, it seemed that the dying rays of the sun centered on Ibrim's weary face, and those great stone eyes were alive for a moment with understanding ... and approval.

... shall not perish from the earth, but have everlasting Life...."

Then Meg, the priestess, decided. With a sharp cry that broke from her heart, she turned and ran. Not toward the valley, but back . . . back . . . back . . . on feet that were suddenly stumbling and eager. Back through the towering shadow of Mt. Rushmore, through a desolate grotto that led to a gateway wherein awaited the Man who had taught her the touching-of-mouths.