RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

Island

Aldous Huxley

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WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY DAVID BRADSHAW

For over a hundred years the Pacific island of Pala has been the scene of a unique experiment in civilisation. Its inhabitants live in a society where western science has been brought together with eastern philosophy and humanism to create a paradise on earth. When cynical journalist, Will Farnaby, arrives to search for information about potential oil reserves on Pala, he quickly falls in love with the way of life on the island. Soon the need to complete his mission becomes an intolerable burden. In counterpoint to *Brave New World* and *Ape and Essence*, in *Island* Huxley gives us his vision of utopia.

About the Author

Aldous Huxley was born on 26 July 1894 near Godalming, Surrey. He began writing poetry and short stories in his early twenties, but it was his first novel *Crome Yellow* (1921), which established his literary reputation. This was swiftly followed by *Antic Hay* (1923), *Those Barren Leaves* (1925) and *Point Counter Point* (1928) – bright, brilliant satires of contemporary society. For most of the 1920s Huxley lived in Italy but in the 1930s he moved to Sanary, near Toulon.

In the years leading up to the Second World War, Huxley's work took on a more sombre tone in response to the confusion of a society which he felt to be spinning dangerously out of control. His great novels of ideas, including his most famous work *Brave New World* (published in 1932 this warned against the dehumanising aspects of scientific and material 'progress') and the pacifist novel *Eyeless in Gaza* (1936) were accompanied by a series of wise and brilliant essays, collected in volume form under such titles as *Music at Night* (1931) and *Ends and Means* (1937).

In 1937, at the height of his fame, Huxley left Europe to live in California, working for a time as a screenwriter in Hollywood. As the West braced itself for war, Huxley came increasingly to believe that the key to solving the world's problems lay in changing the individual through mystical enlightenment. The exploration of the inner life through mysticism and hallucinogenic drugs was to dominate his work for the rest of his life. His beliefs found expression in

both fiction (*Time Must Have a Stop*, 1944 and *Island*, 1962) and non-fiction (*The Perennial Philosophy*, 1945, *Grey Eminence*, 1941 and the famous account of his first mescalin experience, *The Doors of Perception*, 1954).

Huxley died in California on 22 November 1963.

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TO LAURA

ALDOUS HUXLEY

Island

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
David Bradshaw

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

In framing an ideal we may assume what we wish, but should avoid impossibilities

Aristotle

ALDOUS HUXLEY (1894–1963)

ON 26 JULY 1894, near Godalming in Surrey, Aldous Leonard Huxley was born into a family which had only recently become synonymous with the intellectual aristocracy. Huxley's grandfather, Thomas Henry Huxley, had earned notoriety as 'Darwin's bulldog' and fame as a populariser of science, just as his own probing and controversial works were destined to outrage and exhilarate readers and non-readers alike in the following century. Aldous Huxley's mother was a niece of the poet and essayist Matthew Arnold, and he was a nephew of the redoubtable Mrs Humphry Ward, doyenne of late-Victorian novelists. This inheritance, combining the scientific and the literary in a blend which was to become characteristic of his vision as a writer, was both a source of great pride and a burden to Huxley in his formative years. Much was expected of him.

Three traumatic events left their mark on the young Huxley. In 1908 his mother died of cancer, and this led to the effective break-up of the family home. Two years later, while a schoolboy at Eton, Huxley contracted an eye infection which made him almost completely blind for a time and severely impaired his vision for the rest of his life. The suicide of his brother Trevenen in August 1914 robbed Huxley of the person to whom he felt closest. Over twenty years later, in *Eyeless in Gaza* (1936), Huxley's treatment of the death of the main character's mother and his embodiment of 'Trev' in the novel as the vulnerable Brian Foxe give some indication of the indelible pain which these tragic occurrences left in their wake. To a considerable

degree, they account for the darkness, pungency and cynicism which feature so prominently in Huxley's work throughout the inter-war period.

Within months of achieving a First in English Language and Literature at Balliol College, Oxford in 1916, Huxley published *The Burning Wheel*. Huxley's first collection of verse, and the three which followed it, *Jonah* (1917), *The Defeat of Youth* (1918) and *Leda* (1920), reveal his indebtedness to French symbolism and *fin de siècle* aestheticism. Also discernible, however, beneath the poetry's triste and ironic patina, is a concern with the inward world of the spirit which anticipates Huxley's later absorption in mysticism. These volumes of poetry were the first of over fifty separate works of fiction, drama, verse, criticism, biography, travel and speculative writing which Huxley was to produce during the course of his life.

Unfit for military service, Huxley worked as a farm labourer at Lady Ottoline Morrell's Garsington Manor after he left Oxford. Here he met not only D.H. Lawrence, Bertrand Russell, Clive Bell, Mark Gertler and other Bloomsbury figures, but also a Belgian refugee, Maria Nys, whom he married in 1919. By then Huxley was working for the *Athenaeum* magazine under the adroit editorship of Middleton Murry. Soon after he became the first British editor of *House and Garden*, worked for *Vogue* and contributed musical criticism to the *Weekly Westminster Gazette* in the early 1920s.

Limbo (1920), a collection of short stories, preceded the appearance of *Crome Yellow* in 1921, the novel with which Huxley first made his name as a writer. Inspired by, among others, Thomas Love Peacock, Norman Douglas and Anatole France, Huxley's first novel incorporated many incidents from his sojourn at Garsington as well as mischievous portraits of its chatelaine and his fellow guests. More blatantly still, *Crome Yellow* is an iconoclastic tilt at the Victorian and Edwardian mores which had

resulted in the First World War and its terrible aftermath. For all its comic bravura, which won acclaim from writers such as Scott Fitzgerald and Max Beerbohm, *Crome Yellow* may be read, along with Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* (1918) and Huxley's second novel *Antic Hay* (1923), as an expression of the pervasive mood of disenchantment in the early 1920s. Huxley told his father that *Antic Hay* was 'written by a member of what I may call the war-generation for others of his kind'. He went on to say that it was intended to reflect 'the life and opinions of an age which has seen the violent disruption of almost all the standards, conventions and values current in the previous epoch'.

Even as a schoolboy Huxley had been an avid browser among the volumes of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, and it did not take long for him to acquire a reputation for arcane eclecticism. Moreover, as his prestige as a debunker and an emancipator grew, so Huxley was condemned more roundly by critics of the old guard, such as James Douglas of the *Daily Express*, who denounced the explicit discussion of sex and free thought in his fiction. *Antic Hay* was burned in Cairo, and in the ensuing years many of Huxley's books were censured, censored or banned at one time or another. Conversely, it was the openness, wit, effortless learning and apparent insouciance of Huxley's early work which proved such an appetising concoction for novelists as diverse as Evelyn Waugh, William Faulkner, Anthony Powell and Barbara Pym. Angus Wilson called Huxley 'the god of my adolescence'.

From 1923 onwards Huxley lived abroad more or less permanently, first near Florence and then, between 1930 and 1937, at Sanary on the Côte d'Azur. In *Along the Road* (1925), subtitled 'Notes and Essays of a Tourist', Huxley offered a lively and engaging account of the places and works of art he had taken in since his arrival in Italy, and both the title story of his third collection of tales, *Little*

Mexican (1924), and his third novel, *Those Barren Leaves* (1925), are set in that country. According to Huxley, the theme of *Those Barren Leaves* is 'the undercutting of everything by a sort of despairing scepticism and then the undercutting of that by mysticism'. For W.B. Yeats, *Those Barren Leaves* heralded the return of philosophy to the English novel, but it was with his fourth novel, *Point Counter Point* (1928), that Huxley cemented his reputation with the reading public as a thought-provoking writer of fiction. *Point Counter Point* is Huxley's first true 'novel of ideas', the type of fiction with which he has become most closely identified. He once explained that his aim as a novelist was 'to arrive, technically, at a perfect fusion of the novel and the essay', arguing that the novel should be like a holdall, bursting with opinion and arresting ideas. This privileging of content over form was one of the many things he had in common with H.G. Wells; it was anathema to the likes of Virginia Woolf. Huxley was fascinated by the fact that 'the same person is simultaneously a mass of atoms, a physiology, a mind, an object with a shape that can be painted, a cog in the economic machine, a voter, a lover etc', and one of his key aims in *Point Counter Point* was to offer this multi-faceted view of his principal characters.

Huxley's more sombre mood in the late 1920s was epitomised by *Proper Studies* (1927), the most important of the four volumes of essays he published during the decade, and the one in which he first set himself unequivocally against what he regarded as the vulgarity and perversity of mass civilisation. Between September 1925 and June 1926 Huxley had travelled via India to the United States, and it was this visit to America which made him so pessimistic about the cultural future of Europe. He recounted his experiences in *Jesting Pilate* (1926). 'The thing which is happening in America is a revaluation of values,' Huxley wrote, 'a radical alteration (for the worse) of established standards', and it was soon after visiting the United States

that Huxley conceived the idea of writing a satire on what he had encountered. *Brave New World* (1932) may be read as Huxley's contribution to the widespread fear of Americanisation which had been current in Europe since the mid-nineteenth century, but this humorous, disturbing and curiously ambivalent novel offers much more than straightforward travesty. Similarly, although *Brave New World* has become, with Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, one of the twin pillars of the anti-utopian tradition in literature and a byword for all that is most repellent and 'nightmarish' in the world to come, it was written with Huxley's gaze very much on the crisis-torn present of Britain in 1931. When placed alongside *Brief Candles* (1930), a well-received collection of short stories, *Music at Night* (1931), a typically energetic and wide-ranging volume of essays, and *Texts and Pretexts* (1932), a verse anthology with commentaries designed to show that even in the highly-charged political atmosphere of the early 1930s 'they also serve who only bother their heads about art', Huxley's polygonal appeal as a novelist, thinker and pundit is brought home. In 1934 he published *Beyond the Mexique Bay*, an account of his travels in the Caribbean and Central America, and in 1936, *Eyeless in Gaza*. Stimulated by his conversion to pacifism in November 1935, Huxley's sixth novel imbricates the fears, foibles, prejudices and dissensions of the age with a fictionalisation of his own history. A commitment to questions which are essentially religious, rather than political or philosophical, is evident in Huxley's work for the first time.

When Huxley left Europe for the United States in April 1937 he was at the height of his fame as a novelist and the Peace Pledge Union's leading celebrity. Ironically, he was by now far more concerned with the virtues of non-attachment, anarchism, decentralisation and mystical salvation than with the failings of contemporary society, the role of pacifism in national politics or the art of fiction. If

Huxley had been intent on exposing the meaninglessness of life in the 1920s, from the mid-1930s he was preoccupied with seeking the meaning of existence. *Ends and Means* (1937), in which Huxley tried 'to relate the problems of domestic and international politics, of war and economics, of education, religion and ethics, to a theory of the ultimate nature of reality', signalled his departure for the higher ground of mystical enlightenment where he would remain encamped for the rest of his life.

It was to lecture on the issues which dominate *Ends and Means* that Huxley and his friend and guru Gerald Heard had travelled to the United States. Huxley had every intention of returning to Europe, but his wife's need to live in a hot, dry climate on health grounds and the lucrative prospect of writing for the movies contrived to keep the Huxleys in America until it was too unsafe to return. Huxley's reaction to Hollywood and its cult of youth finds mordant expression in *After Many a Summer* (1939), the story of a Citizen Kane-like character's life of grandiose illusion. The materialist excesses of Jo Stoyte are counterpointed by the ascetic convictions of Propter, a modern-day anchorite modelled on Heard. Huxley and Hollywood were not compatible, and his failure to write a popular play in the inter-war year was mirrored in his largely unsuccessful efforts to write for the movies. Walt Disney's widely reported rejection of Huxley's synopsis of *Alice in Wonderland* on the grounds that he 'could only understand every third word' was symptomatic of Huxley's problem. His natural bent was for the leisurely and allusive development of an idea; above all else the movie moguls demanded pacey dialogue. His disenchantment with the world of the film studios is evident in the opening pages of *Ape and Essence* (1948), Huxley's ghastly and graphic projection of Los Angeles as a ruinous, sprawling ossuary in the aftermath of the atomic Third World War. While the threat of global nuclear conflict has receded for the

present, Huxley's discussion of the rapid deforestation, pollution and other acts of ecological 'imbecility' which preceded the self-inflicted apocalypse he describes in the novel, is still chillingly topical.

Huxley spent most of the war years in a small house at Llano in the Mojave Desert in Southern California. In 1926 he had dismissed meditation as 'the doze's first cousin', but it was to a life of quietistic contemplation that Huxley now devoted himself. This phrase of his career resulted in the excellent *Grey Eminence* (1941), a biography of Father Joseph, adviser to Cardinal Richelieu; *Time Must Have a Stop* (1944), a novel set in Florence in 1929 in which, to borrow Huxley's words, 'a piece of the *Comédie Humaine* … modulates into a vision of the *Divina Commedia*'; and *The Perennial Philosophy* (1945), a profoundly influential anthology of excerpts and commentaries illustrating what Huxley called 'the highest common factor of all the higher religions'. He went on to say with typical humour and humility, 'The greatest merit of the book is that about forty per cent of it is not by me, but by a lot of saints, many of whom were also men of genius.' *The Devils of Loudun*, a compelling psychological study of sexual hysteria in seventeenth-century France, which was subsequently turned into a successful film, appeared in 1952. In the same way that Huxley's astringent social satires caught the mood of the 1920s, so, in the years during and following the Second World War and the enormity of the Jewish Holocaust, his personal concern with spiritual and ethical matters and his consternation at the accelerating arms race reflected both the tone and unease of the zeitgeist.

Huxley also acquired new readers through his support of the marginal and unconventional, and his detractors, hitherto exercised by what they saw as his immorality or preachiness, began to pour scorn on his alleged faddism. In 1942 he published *The Art of Seeing*, a passionate defence of the Bates method of eye training which aroused a storm

of protest from the optometrist lobby. Even more outrageous, for many, was his suggestion in *The Doors of Perception* (1954) and its sequel, *Heaven and Hell* (1956), that mescalin and lysergic acid were 'drugs of unique distinction' which should be exploited for the 'supernaturally brilliant' visionary experiences they offered to those with open minds and sound livers. *The Doors of Perception* is indeed a bewitching account of the inner shangri-la of the mescalin taker, where 'there is neither work nor monotony' but only 'a perpetual present made up of one continually changing apocalypse', where 'the divine source of all existence' is evident in a vase of flowers, and even the creases in a pair of trousers reveal 'a labyrinth of endlessly significant complexity'. Not surprisingly, *The Doors of Perception* became a set text for the beat generation and the psychedelic Sixties, the Doors naming their band after the book which also earned Huxley a place on the sleeve of the Beatles' *Sergeant Pepper* album.

Maria Huxley died in February 1955, shortly before Huxley published his penultimate novel, *The Genius and the Goddess*, in which John Rivers recounts the brief history of his disastrous involvement, when he was a 'virgin prig of twenty-eight', with the wife of his colleague Henry Maartens, a Nobel Prize-winning scientist. Not for the first time, Huxley's theme is the havoc which ensues when a man with an idealistic misconception of life born of a cloistered and emotionally deprived upbringing experiences the full, sensual impact of human passion.

Huxley married Laura Archera, a practising psychotherapist, in March 1956. Two years later he published *Brave New World Revisited*, in which he surveyed contemporary society in the light of his earlier predictions. Huxley's knack of keying in to the anxieties of the moment was as sharp as ever, and this touch is also evident in a series of lectures on 'The Human Situation' which he gave at Santa Barbara in 1959, published in one

volume in 1977. Both books address problems which are no less pressing today, such as overpopulation, the recrudescence of nationalism and the fragility of the natural world. Huxley's last novel, *Island*, was published in 1962, the year in which he was made a Companion of Literature, and the year after his Los Angeles home and most of his personal effects had been destroyed in a fire which, Huxley said, left him 'a man without possessions and without a past'.

Island is the story of how the offshore utopia of Pala, where population growth has been stabilised and Mutual Adoption Clubs have superseded the tyranny of the family, and where *maithuna*, or the yoga of love and *moksha*, an hallucinogenic toadstool, ensure that the Palanese have little reason to feel disgruntled, falls victim to the age-old menaces of material progress and territorial expansionism. *Island* is perhaps Huxley's most pessimistic book, his poignant acknowledgement that in a world of increasing greed, mass communication, oil-guzzling transport, burgeoning population and inveterate hostility, a pacific and co-operative community like Pala's 'oasis of freedom and happiness' has little hope of survival. Soon after *Island* was published Huxley commented that the 'weakness of the book consists in a disbalance between fable and exposition. The story has too much weight, in the way of ideas and reflections, to carry.' But, while some readers would agree with this criticism, for others *Island* exemplifies Huxley's particular contribution to twentieth-century letters. In his early days the highbrow incarnate and a reluctant lecturer for the Peace Pledge Union, Huxley became for many a companionable polymath, a transatlantic sage at large, whose unending quest for synthesis and meaning in an ever-more perplexing and violent world provided a paradigm for their own search for peace and understanding.

Before his eyesight was damaged, Huxley's ambition was to specialise in the sciences, and it is significant that in his last published work, *Literature and Science* (1963), he pleads yet again for a *rapprochement* between the two cultures, arguing passionately against the contemporary stress on their dichotomy. The book begins by emphasising the wide-ranging erudition of T.H. Huxley and Matthew Arnold. Their descendant, one of the most stimulating and provocative writers of the twentieth century, proved himself a worthy inheritor of their abilities over the course of his long and varied career.

Huxley died of cancer at his home in Hollywood on 22 November 1963, unaware that President J.F. Kennedy had been assassinated earlier that afternoon in Dallas. In 1971 his ashes were returned to England and interred in his parents' grave at Compton in Surrey.

David Bradshaw
Worcester College, Oxford
1993

Chapter One

"ATTENTION," A VOICE began to call, and it was as though an oboe had suddenly become articulate. "Attention," it repeated in the same high, nasal monotone. "Attention."

Lying there like a corpse in the dead leaves, his hair matted, his face grotesquely smudged and bruised, his clothes in rags and muddy, Will Farnaby awoke with a start. Molly had called him. Time to get up. Time to get dressed. Mustn't be late at the office.

"Thank you, darling," he said and sat up. A sharp pain stabbed at his right knee and there were other kinds of pain in his back, his arms, his forehead.

"Attention," the voice insisted without the slightest change of tone. Leaning on one elbow, Will looked about him and saw with bewilderment, not the grey wallpaper and yellow curtains of his London bedroom, but a glade among trees and the long shadows and slanting lights of early morning in a forest.

"Attention"?

Why did she say, "Attention"?

"Attention. Attention," the voice insisted—how strangely, how senselessly!

"Molly?" he questioned. "Molly?"

The name seemed to open a window inside his head. Suddenly, with that horribly familiar sense of guilt at the pit of the stomach, he smelt formaldehyde, he saw the small brisk nurse hurrying ahead of him along the green corridor, heard the dry creaking of her starched clothes. "Number fifty-five," she was saying, and then halted, opened a white door. He entered and there, on a high white bed, was Molly.

Molly with bandages covering half her face and the mouth hanging cavernously open. “Molly,” he had called, “Molly …” His voice had broken, and he was crying, was imploring now, “My darling!” There was no answer. Through the gaping mouth the quick shallow breaths came noisily, again, again. “My darling, my darling …” And then suddenly the hand he was holding came to life for a moment. Then was still again.

“It’s me,” he said, “it’s Will.”

Once more the fingers stirred. Slowly, with what was evidently an enormous effort, they closed themselves over his own, pressed them for a moment and then relaxed again into lifelessness.

“Attention,” called the inhuman voice. “Attention.”

It had been an accident, he hastened to assure himself. The road was wet, the car had skidded across the white line. It was one of those things that happen all the time. The papers are full of them; he had reported them by the dozen. “Mother and three children killed in head-on crash …” But that was beside the point. The point was that, when she asked him if it was really the end, he had said yes; the point was that less than an hour after she had walked out from that last shameful interview into the rain, Molly was in the ambulance, dying.

He hadn’t looked at her as she turned to go, hadn’t dared to look at her. Another glimpse of that pale suffering face might have been too much for him. She had risen from her chair and was moving slowly across the room, moving slowly out of his life. Shouldn’t he call her back, ask her forgiveness, tell her that he still loved her? Had he ever loved her?

For the hundredth time the articulate oboe called him to attention.

Yes, had he ever really loved her?

“Good-bye, Will,” came her remembered whisper as she turned back on the threshold. And then it was *she* who had

said it—in a whisper, from the depths of her heart. “I still love you, Will—in spite of everything.”

A moment later the door of the flat closed behind her almost without a sound. The little dry click of the latch, and she was gone.

He had jumped up, had run to the front door and opened it, had listened to the retreating footsteps on the stairs. Like a ghost at cock-crow, a faint familiar perfume lingered vanishingly on the air. He closed the door again, walked into his grey and yellow bedroom and looked out of the window. A few seconds passed, then he saw her crossing the pavement and getting into the car. He heard the shrill grinding of the starter, once, twice, and after that the drumming of the motor. Should he open the window? “Wait, Molly, wait,” he heard himself shouting in imagination. The window remained unopened; the car began to move, turned the corner and the street was empty. It was too late. Too late, thank God! said a gross derisive voice. Yes, thank God! And yet the guilt was there at the pit of his stomach. The guilt, the gnawing of his remorse—but through the remorse he could feel a horrible rejoicing. Somebody low and lewd and brutal, somebody alien and odious who was yet himself was gleefully thinking that now there was nothing to prevent him from having what he wanted. And what he wanted was a different perfume, was the warmth and resilience of a younger body. “Attention,” said the oboe. Yes, attention. Attention to Babs’s musky bedroom, with its strawberry-pink alcove and the two windows that looked on to the Charing Cross Road and were looked into, all night long, by the winking glare of the big sky sign for Porter’s Gin on the opposite side of the street. Gin in royal crimson—and for ten seconds the alcove was the Sacred Heart, for ten miraculous seconds the flushed face so close to his own glowed like a seraph’s, transfigured as though by an inner fire of love. Then came the yet profounder transfiguration of darkness. One, two, three, four … Ah God, make it go on

forever! But punctually at the count of ten the electric clock would turn on another revelation—but of death, of the Essential Horror; for the lights, this time, were green, and for ten hideous seconds Babs's rosy alcove became a womb of mud and, on the bed, Babs herself was corpse-coloured, a cadaver galvanized into posthumous epilepsy. When Porter's Gin proclaimed itself in green, it was hard to forget what had happened and who one was. The only thing to do was to shut one's eyes and plunge, if one could, more deeply into the Other World of sensuality, plunge violently, plunge deliberately into those alienating frenzies to which poor Molly—Molly ('Attention') in her bandages, Molly in her wet grave at Highgate, and Highgate, of course, was why one had to shut one's eyes each time that the green light made a corpse of Babs' nakedness—had always and so utterly been a stranger. And not only Molly. Behind his closed eyelids, Will saw his mother, pale like a cameo, her face spiritualized by accepted suffering, her hands made monstrous and subhuman by arthritis. His mother and, standing behind her wheelchair, already running to fat and quivering like calves'-foot jelly with all the feelings that had never found their proper expression in consummated love, was his sister Maud.

"How can you, Will?"

"Yes, how can you," Maud echoed tearfully in her vibrating contralto.

There was no answer. No answer, that was to say, in any words that could be uttered in their presence, that, uttered, those two martyrs—the mother to her unhappy marriage, the daughter to filial piety—could possibly understand. No answer except in words of the most obscenely scientific objectivity, the most inadmissible frankness. How could he do it? He could do it, for all practical purposes was compelled to do it, because … well because Babs had certain physical peculiarities which Molly did not possess

and behaved at certain moments in ways which Molly would have found unthinkable.

There had been a long silence; but now, abruptly, the strange voice took up its old refrain.

“Attention. Attention.”

Attention to Molly, attention to Maud and his mother, attention to Babs. And suddenly another memory emerged from the fog of vagueness and confusion. Babs’ strawberry-pink alcove sheltered another guest, and its owner’s body was shuddering ecstatically under somebody else’s caresses. To the guilt in the stomach was added an anguish about the heart, a constriction of the throat.

“Attention.”

The voice had come nearer, was calling from somewhere over there to the right. He turned his head, he tried to raise himself for a better view; but the arm that supported his weight began to tremble, then gave way, and he fell back into the leaves. Too tired to go on remembering, he lay there for a long time staring up through half-closed lids, at the incomprehensible world around him. Where was he and how on earth had he got here? Not that this was of any importance. At the moment nothing was of any importance except this pain, this annihilating weakness. All the same, just as a matter of scientific interest …

This tree, for example, under which (for no known reason) he found himself lying, this column of grey bark with the groining, high up, of sun-speckled branches, this ought by rights to be a beech tree. But in that case—and Will admired himself for being so lucidly logical—in that case the leaves had no right to be so obviously evergreen. And why would a beech tree send its roots elbowing up like this above the surface of the ground? And those preposterous wooden buttresses, on which the pseudo-beech supported itself—where did *those* fit into the picture? Will remembered suddenly his favourite worst line of poetry. “Who prop, thou ask’st, in these bad days my

mind?” Answer: congealed ectoplasm, Early Dali. Which definitely ruled out the Chilterns. So did the butterflies swooping out there in the thick buttery sunshine. Why were they so large, so improbably cerulean or velvet-black, so extravagantly eyed and freckled? Purple staring out of chestnut, silver powdered over emerald, over topaz, over sapphire.

“Attention.”

“Who’s there?” Will Farnaby called in what he intended to be a loud and formidable tone; but all that came out of his mouth was a thin, quavering croak.

There was a long and, it seemed, profoundly menacing silence. From the hollow between two of the tree’s wooden buttresses an enormous black centipede emerged for a moment into view, then hurried away on its regiment of crimson legs and vanished into another cleft in the lichen-covered ectoplasm.

“Who’s there?” he croaked again.

There was a rustling in the bushes on his left and suddenly, like a cuckoo from a nursery clock, out popped a large black bird, the size of a jackdaw—only, needless to say, it wasn’t a jackdaw. It clapped a pair of white-tipped wings and, darting across the intervening space, settled on the lowest branch of a small dead tree, not twenty feet from where Will was lying. Its beak, he noticed was orange, and it had a bald yellow patch under each eye, with canary-coloured wattles that covered the sides and back of its head with a thick wig of naked flesh. The bird cocked its head and looked at him first with the right eye, then with the left. After which it opened its orange bill, whistled ten or twelve notes of a little air in the pentatonic scale, made a noise like somebody having hiccups, and then, in a chanting phrase, *do do sol do*, said, “Here and now, boys; here and now, boys.”

The words pressed a trigger, and all of a sudden he remembered everything. Here was Pala, the forbidden

island, the place no journalist had ever visited. And now must be the morning after the afternoon when he'd been fool enough to go sailing, alone, outside the harbour of Rendang-Lobo. He remembered it all—the white sail curved by the wind into the likeness of a huge magnolia petal, the water sizzling at the prow, the sparkle of diamonds on every wave crest, the troughs of wrinkled jade. And eastwards, across the Strait, what clouds, what prodigies of sculptured whiteness above the volcanoes of Pala! Sitting there at the tiller, he had caught himself singing—caught himself, incredibly, in the act of feeling unequivocally happy.

"'Three, three for the rivals,'" he had declaimed into the wind.

"'Two, two for the lily-white boys, clothèd all in green-oh; One is one and all alone …'"

Yes, all alone. All alone on the enormous jewel of the sea.

"'And ever more shall be so.'"

After which, needless to say, the thing that all the cautious and experienced yachtsmen had warned him against happened. The black squall out of nowhere, the sudden, senseless frenzy of wind and rain and waves …

"Here and now, boys," chanted the bird. "Here and now, boys."

The really extraordinary thing was that he should be here, he reflected, under the trees and not out there, at the bottom of the Pala Strait or, worse, smashed to pieces at the foot of the cliffs. For even after he had managed, by sheer miracle, to take his sinking boat through the breakers and run her aground on the only sandy beach in all those miles of Pala's rock-bound coast—even then it wasn't over. The cliffs towered above him; but at the head of the cove there was a kind of headlong ravine where a little stream came down in a succession of filmy waterfalls, and there were trees and bushes growing between the

walls of grey limestone. Six or seven hundred feet of rock climbing—in tennis shoes, and all the footholds slippery with water. And then, dear God! those snakes. The black one looped over the branch by which he was pulling himself up. And five minutes later, the huge green one coiled there on the ledge, just where he was preparing to step. Terror had been succeeded by a terror infinitely worse. The sight of the snake had made him start, made him violently withdraw his foot, and that sudden unconsidered movement had made him lose his balance. For a long sickening second, in the dreadful knowledge that this was the end, he had swayed on the brink, then fallen. Death, death, death. And then, with the noise of splintering wood in his ears he had found himself clinging to the branches of a small tree, his face scratched, his right knee bruised and bleeding, but alive. Painfully he had resumed his climbing. His knee hurt him excruciatingly; but he climbed on. There was no alternative. And then the light had begun to fail. In the end he was climbing almost in darkness, climbing by faith, climbing by sheer despair.

“Here and now, boys,” shouted the bird.

But Will Farnaby was neither here nor now. He was there on the rock face, he was then at the dreadful moment of falling. The dry leaves rustled beneath him; he was trembling. Violently, uncontrollably, he was trembling from head to foot.

Chapter Two

SUDDENLY THE BIRD ceased to be articulate and started to scream. A small shrill human voice said, “Mynah!” and then added something in a language that Will did not understand. There was a sound of footsteps on dry leaves. Then a little cry of alarm. Then silence. Will opened his eyes and saw two exquisite children looking down at him, their eyes wide with astonishment and a fascinated horror. The smaller of them was a tiny boy of five, perhaps, or six, dressed only in a green loin cloth. Beside him, carrying a basket of fruit on her head, stood a little girl some four or five years older. She wore a full crimson skirt that reached almost to her ankles; but above the waist she was naked. In the sunlight her skin glowed like pale copper flushed with rose. Will looked from one child to the other. How beautiful they were, and how faultless, how extraordinarily elegant! Like two little thoroughbreds. A round and sturdy thoroughbred, with a face like a cherub’s—that was the boy. And the girl was another kind of thoroughbred, fine-drawn, with a rather long, grave little face framed between braids of dark hair.

There was another burst of screaming. On its perch in the dead tree the bird was turning nervously this way and that, then, with a final screech, it dived into the air. Without taking her eyes from Will’s face, the girl held out her hand invitingly. The bird fluttered, settled, flapped wildly, found its balance, then folded its wings and immediately started to hiccup. Will looked on without surprise. Anything was possible now—anything. Even talking birds that would perch on a child’s finger. Will tried to smile at them; but his

lips were still trembling, and what was meant to be a sign of friendliness must have seemed like a frightening grimace. The little boy took cover behind his sister.

The bird stopped hiccuping and began to repeat a word that Will did not understand. ‘Runa’—was that it? No, ‘Karuna’. Definitely ‘Karuna’.

He raised a trembling hand and pointed at the fruit in the round basket. Mangoes, bananas … His dry mouth was watering.

“Hungry,” he said. Then, feeling that in these exotic circumstances the child might understand him better if he put on an imitation of a musical comedy Chinaman, “Me velly hungly,” he elaborated.

“Do you want to eat?” the child asked in perfect English.

“Yes—eat,” he repeated, “eat.”

“Fly away, mynah!” She shook her hand. The bird uttered a protesting squawk and returned to its perch on the dead tree. Lifting her thin little arms in a gesture that was like a dancer’s, the child raised the basket from her head, then lowered it to the ground. She selected a banana, peeled it and, torn between fear and compassion, advanced towards the stranger. In his incomprehensible language the little boy uttered a cry of warning and clutched at her skirt. With a reassuring word, the girl halted, well out of danger, and held up the fruit.

“Do you want it?” she asked.

Still trembling, Will Farnaby stretched out his hand. Very cautiously, she edged forward, then halted again and, crouching down, peered at him intently.

“Quick,” he said in an agony of impatience.

But the little girl was taking no chances. Eyeing his hand for the least sign of a suspicious movement, she leaned forward, she cautiously extended her arm.

“For God’s sake,” he implored.

“God?” the child repeated with sudden interest. “Which God?” she asked. “There are such a lot of them.”