

WU MING

Translated by Robert P. Baird

The Emperor's Three Hundred Woodcutters Or: The Fable to End All Fables

The Emperor calls on us. He says this year we will have to work double, triple, maybe even quadruple time, and maybe at the end of it all he will give us a little something extra—not quadruple of course, triple either, but something, who knows? Maybe two small boars so that we can all have a banquet together, the three hundred woodcutters of the imperial squadron, or a sack of flour per head. I don't know, they didn't tell us. You don't set off to work triple or quadruple time for the reward. No, you do it for the glory, for the fact of participating in our Lord's great undertaking. They didn't tell us much about it, but you don't need to know the precise reason why you're working double, triple, maybe even quadruple time: if they tell you the work will go to the greater glory of your Lord, ask no questions, be happy for the privilege, take your little piece of glory, take your boar or sack of flour, and go away happy.

Sure, but you know how these things go, people start talking. The steward talks to the jester who talks to the damsel who talks to the butcher who tells his wife, and it goes around and around until the whole country knows, and everyone's saying that our Lord has not only called on us, the three hundred woodcutters of the imperial squadron, but also on the best storytellers, minstrels, men of letters, and miniaturist monks, because he has it in mind to bring together all the stories, histories, legends, and fables. They say he wants to put them into a book, many books even, so many that if you stacked them one on top of the other they would reach higher than the belltower. This is going to take a mountain of paper too big to imagine, but we are already imagining the number of trees and forests we'll have to fell, how many distant lands we'll have to visit to find enough wood, and how much water it'll take to extract the paper, so much that to drain all the rivers in the land wouldn't be enough. And then immediately we stop thinking, stop imagining; better to sharpen the tools and get to work.

First we go up North, where they have the biggest forests and the

best wood, and while we're preparing the axes and saws, and some of us have even started to work, we hear a voice from the summit of the mountain, as if carried on the wind. She says her name is Yjyk-Mar and that she's a huge birch tree, tall as the ninth heaven. The souls of the dead make their home in her branches, and wizards with extraordinary powers live in her bark nests. The birch tree tells us she's been there on the mountain since the beginning of the world. She says a yellow frothy liquid flows from her trunk that dissipates the exhaustion and dissolves the hunger of wayfarers. Even the first man, newly arrived on Earth and wondering what he was supposed to do, came to drink a few drops. He discovered a cavity in the middle of the birch's trunk, and from there the first woman emerged, who told him they were to become the parents of humankind.

The problem is that they're all birch trees here, all more or less similar, and we don't know how to distinguish this Yjyk-Mar from the others. If it were possible we would perhaps try not to cut her down, but as it is there's no way, no way we could leave the whole forest standing just to save the talking birch. What's more, this is just the beginning; if we make problems for ourselves now, we'll never get going, not to mention the double, triple, and quadruple time, the wild boars, the sacks of flour, the pieces of glory.

And so we go to the South and we come to an island with a mountain in its center named Ida, which, in the language of the place, means "woodsy." We chose the place exactly for that reason. But there too, after a short time, a voice comes and says: It wasn't enough for you to cut down Yjyk-Mar. Now you come to do the same thing with the ash tree of Nemesis, called Adrastea, the nymph who nourished Zeus in a cave on this very mountain. King Minos came here every nine years to find that god, and here he received the laws and the strength to rule for another nine years. While he was gone, the whole island made sacrifices—seven youths and seven maidens were sent to placate the hunger of the Minotaur, the half-man half-bull who lived in a dark room at the end of the thousand passages that branch from the back of Zeus' cave.

What a pity. I think that mountain will have to change its name.

Later we go East, and again the voice comes while we're preparing: It wasn't enough for you to cut the trunk of Yjyk-Mar and the ash of Nemesis on Mount Ida, now you've come here to do the same thing

with the fig tree under which Sakyamuni, known as Gautama, known as Siddhartha, freed himself from himself to become the Buddha.

But what could we do? We have to work, we've got the Emperor's orders. There's nothing we can do but lift our axes, cut the trunks, and be on our way.

Having found another forest, before we even put on our gloves a voice creeps through the ferns: It wasn't enough for you to shatter the trunk of Yjyk-Mar, the ash of Nemesis on Mount Ida, and the fig tree of Siddhartha Gautama the Buddha, now you're going to do the same thing to Daphne's laurel. Daphne refused all suitors so that she might live free among the hermits of the forest, at least until Eros made Apollo fall in love with her. He would not leave her in peace, and some say she grew so weary that she asked her father Peneus to transform her into a tree. Others, however, maintain that Daphne asked Mother Earth, who played a trick on her, leaving a laurel in her place and carrying her to the summit of Mount Ida, where she gave her a new name—Pasiphaë, the same Pasiphaë who would marry Minos, fall in love with a white bull promised to Poseidon, and thus bring the Minotaur into the world.

And after Daphne's laurel, the same fate will touch the poplar of Leuce, who was transformed into a tree to escape Hades, the god of the Underworld.

And after that the linden of Philyra, daughter of Oceanus and granddaughter of Cronos. One day Cronos seduced her, and when his daughter Hera caught him, he transformed himself into a stallion to escape. Nine months later, Philyra brought a monster into the world, half-horse and half-man. She was so ashamed of it that she asked her father to turn her into a linden. And then the pine tree of Pitys, who had two suitors, Pan and Boreas the North Wind. Pitys preferred Pan and so Boreas blew hard enough to cast her down into a ravine. When Pan arrived at the bottom he found her half-dead; to save the life that survived, he turned her into a pine. From then on, when the north wind blows, sap gushes from the pine cones: the tears of Pitys.

We will be pitiless with Carya, who was transformed into a walnut tree; and with Phyllis, who died for love and was turned into an almond tree; and with Cyparissus, who accidentally killed the deer who kept him company and in his pain asked the gods to change him into a cypress, the tree that always cries, the tree of the dead.

No sooner said than done. By the next stop we are so conditioned that we no longer hear the voice: It wasn't enough to chop the birch tree Yjyk-Mar, to saw the ash of Nemesis, to cut the fig tree of Gautama Buddha, Daphne's laurel, Leuce's poplar, Philyra's linden, Pitys's pine, Carya's walnut, Phyllis's almond, and the cypress of the dead. You will never want to stop, not even now before the wood of Little Red Riding Hood, Tom Thumb, and Hansel and Gretel.

On to the forest of Broceliande, where Merlin retreated, crazed by the death of his brothers. There he wed the fairy Vivian and taught her all of his spells before enclosing her in a glass house in the heart of the wood. And the forest of Nemi, where Numa Pompilius went to seek counsel from the nymph Egeria so that he could write his decrees. And Sherwood Forest, with Robin Hood and his Merry Men. And the terrifying forest of the Gauls, who stopped the Roman army until Caesar picked up an axe, cut down a hundred-year-old oak, and, taking the blame for the sacrilege upon himself, ordered his men to destroy it. And so they did, believing with good reason that the wrath of Caesar must be more imminent, if not also more terrible, than that of the forest divinity who, in the space of a few years, made the forest grow back more luxuriant than ever.

And because we have to do double, triple, and maybe even quadruple a year's work, here we are on a mountain called Golgotha, where the usual voice warns us that among all the trees on the peak there is one very special tree, a cedar that sprouted from the cross of Christ, that is, from the base of the cross. It remained planted there on the summit while the rest of the cross was carried away; a splinter from the cross even ended up in our Cathedral. But since that splinter of the cross has already been saved there's no need for the tree that sprouted at its base, and so we decide to continue our work.

Now not much wood remains to satisfy the needs of our Lord. We've already done double, triple, and maybe even quadruple a year's work, but we return to the North, to the land of forests, to see if any wood remains. And on the way we pass a place called Dodona, at the foot of Mount Tomarus, and we make a provision of oak, even though the voice asks us to pass by and to preserve those trees. For in distant times the sound that winds and storms produced in its leaves helped a great people foresee their future, their joys and catastrophies. Back in the North, we find a giant ash tree. Its branches reach to the heavens

and cover the world with foliage. Its roots descend to the kingdom of the dead and to the fountain of life. The voice doesn't make us wait: You had no piety for Yjyk-Mar nor for the ash of Nemesis, you didn't save Buddha's fig tree, Daphne's laurel, Leuce's poplar, Philyra's linden, Pitys's pine, Carya's walnut, Phyllis's almond, or the cypress of the dead. You chopped down the forests of Nemi and of the Gauls, the tree of the Cross, and the oaks of Dodona. Now you will also execute Yggdrasill, the "steed of Odin," who was hanged from its branches to die and was reborn after having learned the secret of the kingdom of the dead: the language of the runes, which confers every power.

And while we line up our largest saw, Yggdrasill reveals that our efforts lack all sense, that it has done no good to do double, triple, and maybe even quadruple the work we did in other years, because in the end we won't receive the boars or the flour, not even the pieces of glory, because the glory of our Lord is empty, false as a pewter coin.

Yggdrasill says: the Emperor has put aside more paper than has ever been seen before, a mountain, the sheets of which if stacked would reach the moon. And yet all of that paper won't do him any good, now that the forests have been chopped down. Not even the minstrels, men of letters, or storytellers can do anything, because of all the stories to be recopied in the calligraphy of the scribes, of all the legends of heroes and gods, of all the fables ancient and modern, of all of that, nothing remains: no record, no memory, no origin.