THE HUNGRY GODS GO TO THE PROMISED LAND

N. Van Seters & Claude

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VISIT I — THE SINAI YEAR

I.1 — UP FROM MIDIAN

The load was wrong by a third of a day, and Hobab had known it since the second well.

Nobody else had noticed, which was the ordinary condition of the work. The animals were not labouring. The men were not complaining, and the men complained about the sun, the flies, the rate, the food, and the general decline of standards in the caravan trade, so their silence carried information. But the third donkey from the front had begun setting her feet down flat instead of rolling them, and a donkey that stops rolling her feet is a donkey carrying more than the manifest says she is.

There was no manifest. Nobody needed one.

He walked her for a while at the shoulder and watched the load ride. Panniers of Qurayyah ware, forty-one pieces, packed in barley straw that had come up from the oasis with them and that they would sell as fodder at Tayma if the straw held together, which it would not. The pots were the good ones. Pinkish slip, the brown-and-red painting, a running frieze of ibex on the larger jars and, on two of the kraters, the lions — which were not lions anyone had seen, being lions of a kind that existed only on pots, but which sold in Amman for four times what an ibex sold for. The kilns at the oasis had been turning these out since before his grandfather, in the same shapes, with the same beasts, and the beasts had not changed because the beasts were not the point either. The point was that a man in Gezer who bought a jar with that slip and that painting knew where it had come from and what it had cost to bring, and knew that the water in it would taste of nothing.

The kilns had been at the oasis longer than the oasis had been walled. Hobab had gone through the yards once as a boy, holding his father's sleeve, and had seen the pits and the stacks and the women turning the pieces on the drying racks, and had understood nothing

except that it was loud. What he understood now, at forty-two, was the water. The oasis sat on a plain that took thirteen days of rain a year and made all of it stay. There were channels cut across every part of the high ground above the town, walled and graded, running the rain down into cisterns, and the cisterns fed the yards, and the yards made pots, and the pots went out on the backs of donkeys to Gezer and Amman in the north and to Tayma and the wells beyond in the south. None of the men who cut those channels were remembered by name. The channels were four hundred years old and were cleaned every spring by whoever farmed nearest to them, without being told, because the alternative was that they filled.

He had tried, once, to explain this arrangement to a Canaanite. The Canaanite had wanted to know who owned the channels. Hobab had said that nobody owned the channels. The Canaanite had wanted to know, then, who made the farmers clean them. Hobab had said that nobody made them. The Canaanite had gone away with the expression of a man who has been told a thing that cannot be true and cannot immediately be disproved.

He got a hand under the near pannier and lifted.

"Ahuz."

Ahuz came back down the line without hurrying, which was one of the four reasons Hobab used him.

"She's carrying somebody's blanket," Hobab said. "And a waterskin. Full."

"She's carrying forty-one pots."

"She's carrying forty-one pots and a blanket and a full skin, and whoever put them there put them on the off side to balance the straw, which was thoughtful, and did it above the girth line, which was not."

Ahuz looked at the load for a moment. Then he went and found the man, and there was a conversation Hobab did not need to hear, and the blanket and the skin went onto the grey mule that was carrying nothing but the cook pot and a grievance. The line moved on. The donkey started rolling her feet again within a mile.

There was no more administration of the matter than that. No one was fined. No one was recorded. The man who had put the blanket there would carry it himself the next time, for a day, and after that

the thing would be over and nobody would refer to it again, and in six years he would be the one walking the line looking at how the donkeys set their feet.

. . .

The flies came with the gravel.

They arrived on the fourth afternoon in a body, out of nowhere, in the manner of flies, and they stayed for nine days. They got into the eyes of the animals and sat there in rings and would not be moved by anything, and the donkeys walked with their heads swinging and their ears going and made a low continuous complaint that got into a man's back teeth by the second day. One of the drivers wrapped his face and would not unwrap it. At the halts the men ate with one hand over the bowl and the other going, and it did not work, and everybody chewed things they had not intended to.

On the sixth night the grey mule got a foot in a hole in the dark and screamed, twice, and every animal in the line came up off the ground at once and there was a bad quarter of an hour in the blackness with nine men shouting at each other and no light and a smell of dust and hot hide, and at the end of it nothing was lost and the mule was not lame and Hobab lay on his back afterwards with his heart going and looked at the sky and thought about nothing whatsoever for the first time in a month.

They came up out of the sand country in the fourth week and into the black gravel, and the going improved, and the water got worse.

Hobab knew this stretch as he knew his own mouth. Not as a map — he had never in his life seen a map and would not have known what to do with one — but as a sequence of certainties, each of which produced the next. Two days from the gravel edge there was a wadi that ran wet under the stones for a bowshot on either side of a particular thorn. You dug down the length of your forearm and it came up clear enough. Half a day beyond that, nothing, for a day and a half. Then the pass, and under the northern shoulder of the pass, forty paces down where the ground began to fall away again, the cistern.

The cistern was cut into the rock and plastered, and it did not fill

itself. Nothing fills itself at a pass; a saddle sheds water on both sides and holds none. What fed it was the work above it. Low walls ran along the flanking slopes for the better part of a mile, taking the water that came off the bare rock and carrying it sideways instead of letting it go, and bare rock gives up very nearly everything that falls on it. Two days of rain in the winter put more into those channels than any spring in that country produced in a season. The channels came down to a pair of shallow settling pits, and the pits were the point: a hillside delivers as much grit as water, and grit fills a cistern faster than drought empties one. The water sat in the pits and dropped its load and went on through the cut mouth clean.

It was the arrangement at the oasis in miniature and it was probably older.

Whoever had built it had understood two things. The first was that you cannot make it rain and can only decline to let the rain leave. The second was subtler and Hobab had never heard anyone say it out loud: that you do not put your water where the water is. You put it where the men are, and then you go and fetch the water to it. There was no reason on earth for water to be at a pass. There was every reason for it to be at a pass, and so it was.

He could have said none of this if asked. Once, years ago, a Phoenician factor at Ezion-geber had asked him how he found water in country where there was none, and Hobab had opened his mouth and discovered that there was nothing in it. He had said, eventually, that you looked at where the ground was going. The factor had written something down. Hobab had read it upside down without effort and had thought, without any particular feeling about it, that the man had just made a permanent record of nothing at all.

The truth was that it was not difficult. It was only that it took forty years, and by the time you had it you could not give it away.

. . .

At the thorn there was already a man, and he had already dug, and he had dug in the right place.

Hobab noticed this before he noticed anything else about him.

There were perhaps fourteen feet of ground on either side of that thorn where you would come up wet inside a forearm, and perhaps forty where you would come up damp and be an hour about it, and the twelve feet were not marked in any way and never had been. The Seeker had put his hole in the middle of them.

"There's room," the Seeker said.

They dug the second hole together and let the animals in by threes, which was the correct number for that seep and which the Seeker also knew.

He was a lean man of no particular age in a coat that had been good and had been rained on somewhere it did not usually rain. He had two skins, a stick, and nothing else that Hobab could see, which meant either that he was four hours from where he was staying or that he was the most competent traveller on the route. He did not say where he had come from. He did not ask Hobab where he had come from, or what he carried, or what house he was of, or his name, and Hobab noticed the absence for about as long as it takes to notice a pleasant smell and then stopped noticing it, because a man who does not ask questions at a waterhole is a man who has been at a good many waterholes.

They talked about country, which is what you talk about.

The Seeker knew the northern route as far as Amman and the eastern route to the Jauf and the run down to Tayma, which was ordinary enough, and he knew the state of the wells on all three, which was not, because no living man worked all three. He gave the wells accurately. He gave the one at the third stage on the eastern run as bad, which it was, and had been for two years, and which Hobab had watched two separate men lie about that same season.

Then he said that there was water eight miles east of the second stage, off the track, under a slab with a juniper growing out of the crack of it.

Hobab put his hand in the hole and did not say anything for a moment.

"There's no water east of the second stage."

"There is under the slab."

"I have been off that track east for two days at a time in a bad year," Hobab said, "and I have been down every wadi on that side, and there is no water east of the second stage."

"There is under the slab," the Seeker said again, without pressing it at all, in the tone of a man confirming a rate.

Hobab thought about it. He thought about the two days in the bad year, and about how far east he had actually gone as against how far east he remembered going, which in his experience were different numbers, and about the fact that a slab with a juniper in the crack is precisely the kind of thing a man walks past when he is looking for a wadi.

"Under the slab," he said.

"Eight miles. A little north of east."

"Who told you?"

The Seeker looked at the animals for a moment.

"It's a slab with a juniper growing out of it," he said. "In that country a juniper is a well with a lid on it."

Which was true, and was in fact the first thing Hobab's father had ever taught him about that country, and which Hobab had known for thirty years and had somehow not applied for two days in a bad year.

He filed it. He did not marvel at it. He had been given good information by a well-travelled man, which happens perhaps four times in a career and is the reason you talk to people at waterholes, and the correct response to it is to remember it and to give something back.

So he gave something back.

He gave the Seeker the northern country: the plateau above Moab, the two Amorite towns that were fortifying, which of the Edomite wells were being worked by which house now that the two houses had stopped quarrelling, where the ground carried and where it went thin after the second cutting, what a man could expect to buy at Amman in the autumn and what he would be lied to about. It took a while. He was good at it and he knew he was good at it and there is a pleasure in laying it out for somebody who can follow.

The Seeker followed. He asked four questions in the course of it and every one of them was the question Hobab would have asked,

which is the rarest thing in conversation and the reason Hobab talked for longer than he meant to.

When it was done the Seeker said: "And beyond the plateau. North of the Arnon."

"That's not my country."

"No."

"I've been to Amman. I've not been past it, except once, and that was a long time ago and I was carrying somebody else's load."

"But you've heard."

"I've heard what everyone's heard. Walled towns. Good ground. Everything grows, if you believe the men selling it, and everything grows, if you believe the men who've been there, which is different, because those are the ones who mention the walls."

The Seeker nodded slowly and did not say anything else about it.

They watered, and the Seeker took the eastern branch and Hobab took the northern, and that was that. It was a good hour at a waterhole and Hobab thought about it for perhaps half a day afterward, mostly about the juniper, and then the load shifted on the grey mule and he thought about that instead.

I.2 — THE ERRAND

He came down to his father's tents in the late part of the afternoon, with the light going long and orange over the pasture and the flocks coming in off the high ground in three separate streams that would sort themselves out at the water without anyone touching them.

The tents were where they had been in the spring, which meant it had been a fair year. In a poor year they went up. Hobab counted the black roofs from the ridge out of habit and got nineteen, which was two more than the last time, and one of the two was pitched apart at the eastern end with its own thorn fold, which meant a marriage he had not been told about.

He would be told about it inside the hour, at length, and with reproach.

His father's tent was the third from the eastern end and had been for as long as Hobab could remember, and it was longer than the others by two strips and lower at the back, and the roof over the men's side had been re-hung since he was last there; he could see the newer cloth against the old, a band of blacker black about a forearm wide running the length of it. Somebody had been up there with a needle. The old strip would have gone to patching, then to a grain sack, then to the fire.

He noticed the band because he noticed things about tents in the way that a man notices the state of another man's animals. He did not think about it after that.

. . .

Jethro was outside, under the awning, sitting on a folded rug with his back to the tent wall and his feet in the last of the sun, and he did not get up.

"You're thin," he said.

"I'm the same."

"You're thin. Sit down. Who's dead?"

"Nobody's dead."

"Somebody is always dead. You have been four months on the road and you came through the pass and Yamlik will have told you about everyone between here and Tayma, so somebody is dead and you are deciding whether to tell me now or after I've eaten."

Hobab sat down.

"Adnah's father," he said.

His father took this without any change of expression at all, and then nodded once, slowly, in a way that acknowledged a fact and closed a subject.

"In the winter?"

"Before the winter. In the autumn."

"Then they'll have moved the flocks down early and the western pasture will have been eaten twice." He worked this through, out loud, at his own pace, as he had worked things through out loud in front of his children for fifty years. "Which means Adnah will be short of grazing in the spring, and because he is short of grazing he will go north, and because he goes north he will come up against the people at the springs there who were already short two years ago, and there will be an argument about it, and because Adnah is his father's son the argument will go on longer than it needs to. Somebody should go and talk to him. Not me."

"Not you."

"I am sixty-eight years old and I have talked to enough people." He shifted his feet into the sun. "But somebody should."

. . .

They ate, and Hobab was told about the marriage, at length, and with reproach.

Afterward, when the flocks were folded and the light had gone the colour of a bruise over the western ridge, his father asked him for the north.

This was the part of coming home that Hobab had never been able to explain to anyone outside the family, because it looked, from the outside, like an old man being told the news. It was not that. Jethro had not left the pasture in four years. He had gone once to Egypt's border country, and had come back, and had said very little about it, and had not gone again. And yet he knew more about the country between the Hejaz and the Jordan than any man Hobab had ever met, because he was a priest of Midian and had been for forty years, and men came to him.

They came for the reasons men come to a priest. A man wants an oath witnessed, or wants to know whether an oath already sworn covers a case its swearer had not imagined. A man has buried somebody badly and wants it put right. A house has quarrelled with another house and neither will send to the other, but both will send to Jethro, and Jethro will hear each of them separately over the course of a season and will at no point tell either of them what the other has said, and at the end of it the quarrel will generally have gone out like a fire that has been left alone.

Hobab had grown up inside all of that. He had held things and carried things and been sent out of the tent. He knew the order of the words for a thing sworn on iron and the different order for a thing sworn on bread, and he knew the difference between the two, which was that iron was for a man you did not trust and bread was for a man you did.

He could also set them down. His father had taught him the marks at eight or nine, at the same time and in the same tone as the words, because a priest keeps a few things: what was sworn, by whom, before whom, and on what. There were perhaps two dozen marks and Hobab had them still. He had not made one in twenty years.

It was not that he had forgotten. It was that in the trade there was nothing to use them on. A man who writes down a price has told you that he expects to be cheated, which tells the other man something he can work with. A man who writes down a rate has begun the argument he was trying to avoid. Everything Hobab needed to remember he remembered, and everything he could not remember was not worth the ink, and the marks sat in his head next to the oath-words as a part

of his father's work that he had been taught and had not taken up.

He had never once been asked whether he wanted the office and had never once offered, and his father had never raised it, and by the time Hobab was thirty the not-raising of it had become a fixed and comfortable feature of the household, like the low back wall of the tent.

But a man who has ridden nine days to have a matter looked into does not ride nine days back in silence. So Jethro heard, in the course of a year, from Dedanites and from Kenites, from two Edomite houses that were not speaking to each other, from copper men out of the Arabah, from a Canaanite who dealt in dye and lied about everything except prices, and from the kind of traveller who has no business anywhere and is therefore in a position to have seen it.

He had never written any of it down. He held it as Yamlik held the pass.

"Egypt first," he said.

"Egypt is quiet."

"Egypt is never quiet. Egypt is quiet in a particular way and I want to know which way."

Hobab told him. Egypt was quiet in the way that meant the garrisons on the coast road were being paid and were therefore not extorting anyone, which had the effect of making the coast road cheap and the inland routes dear, which was hurting the Dedanites and helping nobody Hobab cared about. There were new works at the eastern gate. There was a fort at the third well that had been half-empty for three years and was now full, and the men in it were not Egyptian, they were Sherden, and they were being paid in grain rather than silver, which meant either that the grain was surplus or that the silver was not there.

"The silver is not there," Jethro said.

"You don't know that."

"I know that Hatti has not sent an embassy south in two years and that a man who was in Ugarit last spring told me the grain ships north out of the Delta had trebled." He said it without emphasis, working along the chain of it with his hands flat on his knees. "If the grain is going north as a gift to Hatti, then Egypt is buying something from

Hatti, and the only thing Egypt wants from Hatti is for Hatti to stay where it is. And a country that is paying to be left alone is a country that is spending. So the silver is not there, and your Sherden are being paid in grain because grain is what there is. Ask me again in three years and the fort at the third well will be empty again."

Hobab thought about the fort, and about the men in it, who had been bored and enormous and had let the caravan through in exchange for nothing at all, which he now understood to have been a sign.

"Edom," his father said.

"Edom is fine. Edom is better than fine. The copper is moving and they know it."

"Which house?"

"Both houses. That's the thing." Hobab pulled his heel in. "They've stopped quarrelling. There's a marriage in it somewhere and neither of them will say whose, and the wells at the south end are being worked by men from both, and nobody has been killed since the winter before last."

His father made a small sound that was not approval.

"That won't hold," he said. "Because the reason they quarrelled was water and the reason they have stopped is copper, and copper is a thing you can have more of by working harder, and water is not. So while the copper is moving they will be brothers, and the first bad year they will remember every single thing." He considered it further. "How long since a bad year down there?"

"Six. Seven."

"Then they are due one, and when it comes it will be worse than it should be, because they will have built for seven good years and be caught with the buildings." He put his hands flat on his knees again. "Tell me about Moab."

Hobab told him about Moab, which took some time, and about the two Amorite towns on the plateau that were fortifying and about who was paying for it, and about a rumour out of the north that was probably nothing, and about the price of tin, which was the only figure in the entire recitation that his father asked him to repeat.

"Say that again."

"A third up on the spring."

"On the spring or on last year?"

"On the spring. On last year it's about the same."

"Then somebody is buying bronze and it is not for pots," said Jethro, and did not elaborate, and looked out at the ridge for a while.

That was the last of the north. It had taken most of the evening, and Hobab had been giving it to him in the same order for thirteen years — Egypt, Edom, Moab, the plateau, the coast, prices — and his father had never once asked for it in a different order, and had never once forgotten a word of the previous year's.

"You should have been a factor," he said.

"I would have been very good at it," his father agreed. "Now. The other thing."

. . .

"They came out," Hobab said, "in the spring of the year before last."

"I know when they came out. I went and saw them."

"You went and saw them and you came back and you said eleven words about it."

"I said what there was to say." Jethro's feet were entirely in shadow now. He did not move them. "I went because my daughter was there and I took her back to him, and while I was there I watched him sit from the morning to the evening with a line of people in front of him that did not get shorter, deciding whether a man's ox had been properly tethered. And I told him that he would wear out, and that he should put able men over thousands and hundreds and fifties and tens, and let them judge the small matters, and bring him only the hard ones. And he heard me. And I came home."

"That's more than eleven words."

"It is the same eleven words at greater length." His father turned his head and looked at him for the first time in some while. "I want to know what he did with it."

"You could send to him."

"I could send to him and he would send back that it was well, because it is always well." Jethro let a silence sit there for a moment, and then filled it with the thing he had been going to say since the

middle of the afternoon. "I have given advice to men for forty years. In forty years I have watched perhaps four of them do the thing I told them to do. Of the four, two did it correctly and it worked, and one did it correctly and it ruined him, and one did it wrong in a way I had not thought of, and that one I still think about. I am sixty-eight. I would like, before I finish, to have seen one of them through to the end."

"He's a long way off."

"He is forty days off and you are going that direction before the spring anyway, because Oholiab's people will be wanting dye and you have been meaning to look at that since Tayma." Jethro's voice did not change at all. "Also your sister is there."

"Also my sister is there."

"She has not sent word."

"No."

"Well," said his father, and did not stand up yet. "She is her mother's daughter and she will send word when there is something to send."

He sat for a moment with his hands on his knees.

"There is a thing I did not tell you about that place and I have been deciding for two years how to say it, and I am going to say it badly.

"When I was there I watched him judge for a day and a half. That is not what stayed with me. What stayed with me was a man who came to him about a wall.

"There was no rule about walls. There had never been a rule about walls, because in Egypt there were no walls that belonged to them and in the wilderness there is nothing to build one out of, and the man had put up a windbreak of thorn and somebody had objected. And I watched your brother-in-law sit there and make one.

"He made it up. In front of me. He was careful and he was slow and it was a good rule and I could not have done better, and it did not exist in the morning and it existed by the evening and by the following week four hundred people were living inside it.

"They have no way of doing anything. Do you understand me? Not a bad way. None. Everything they do, they are doing for the first time — how a man is counted, who carries what, what happens when a beast is lost, which of two men waters first — and there are more of them than there are people in any city I have ever stood in, and every

one of those things has to be settled before the sun goes down or they cannot move in the morning.

"Egypt took a thousand years to grow what that camp needs by the spring."

He got up then, which took him a while and which he did not want help with.

"Go before the rains break. Be there for the spring. Look at what he built, and come back and tell me whether it holds."

He went in, stiffly, past the newer band of black cloth running the length of the roof, and did not look at it.

I.3 — A WOVEN CITY

He smelled the camp before he saw it, from the better part of half a day out, and it was not what he had expected.

He had expected the smell of a large number of animals in one place, which is a smell with a floor to it, and there was that. What was on top of it was ash. Not cook-fire ash, which is domestic and moves in the wind, but the flat, mineral, going-cold smell of a very large quantity of something having been burned in an organized fashion, day after day, in the same location. It was the smell of a place that had solved a problem about which nobody had asked his opinion.

He worked out what the ash was on the second morning, and it was not a mystery, and this was somehow worse. They were burning offerings. They were burning offerings at a rate that had required somebody to think about where the ash went, and somebody had thought about it, and there was a place outside the camp on the eastern side where it went, and the place had a name.

At home a man burned an offering perhaps four times a year, and the ash went where the wind took it, and nobody had ever needed to have an opinion about that.

He came over the rise a little after midday and stopped, because everyone stopped, and because it was worth stopping for.

The camp was a woven city.

That was his first thought and he would not have said it out loud, because it was not a thought that had anywhere to go. What he saw was black cloth to the limit of the visible ground: goat hair, in strips, sewn, pitched in long low roofs that took the light without giving any of it back, and arranged — this was the part that took a moment to arrive — in a *shape*. Not the shape of a camp. Camps have a shape the way a spilled thing has a shape. This was quartered. There were four masses of it around a clear centre, and the lines between the

four masses were straight for a distance that no one had any business making anything straight for.

The clear centre had a wall around it, and the wall was white.

He got his eye on it properly a moment later and revised: not a wall. A hanging. Linen, on posts, run out in a long rectangle about the length of a good bowshot by half of that, and standing perhaps to a tall man's eyes. There was a break in it at the eastern end where the hanging went blue and purple and scarlet in a band, worked, and that was the only colour anywhere in the camp.

Hobab had bought and sold cloth for twenty-six years and he priced it before he could stop himself.

Fine twined linen. Not tent linen, not sail linen. The kind that goes to a temple or onto a body of consequence, spun to a count that takes a skilled woman a day to produce enough of for a hand's width. He walked the rectangle in his head and got something over a hundred paces of it, at four cubits and a bit of drop, and then he did the sum that a man in his trade does without meaning to, and the sum came out at a figure that he did not at first believe and then believed and then found he had stopped walking.

Whoever had done that had put the price of a small town on a fence.

Then he looked over the top of it.

Inside the white rectangle there was a tent, and the tent stood a good deal higher than the hanging, and the tent was covered in leather. Not dyed. Not worked. Dull brown-grey skins, lapped and sewn, of the sort a careful man puts over a load he does not want rained on, and Hobab looked at it for some time, because in twenty-six years he had never once seen anybody spend that much on a fence and then roof what was inside it with the cheapest weatherproof thing available.

He filed it under the same heading as the straight lines, which was a heading he had opened that morning and had not yet found a name for.

His first professional reaction was to estimate the tent count, and he got to something in the low thousands and stopped, because the low thousands was not a number he had any use for.

His second was that it would have taken the women of Midian, all of them, working from the shearing to the following shearing and doing nothing else at all, a decade.

He held that thought for slightly less than the length of a breath. Then he looked at the straight lines again, and thought about how anyone kept them straight when the camp moved, and put the first thought down, and did not pick it up.

. . .

The noise reached him before the queue did, and it was not what he expected either.

He had been braced for something enormous, and what he got, walking the last half-mile in, was the ordinary racket of several thousand people in a small space doing entirely unremarkable things: a woman calling the same name four times with rising irritation, hammering somewhere off to the left, a dog, a child screaming with the particular abandon of a child who has been told no, sheep, more sheep, somebody laughing very loudly at something Hobab could not hear.

A boy went past him at a flat run with a piece of harness in one hand and another boy about nine paces behind him, both of them silent and completely committed, and neither of them looked at him or at anything else.

It was the least remarkable sound in the world and it went on for a mile.

It took him four hours to get in, and three of them were queue.

This was not what he had expected either. He had come to the edge of the eastern quarter behind a man driving nine goats and had assumed, on the basis of forty years of arriving at places, that he would go around the man, find someone, ask a question, and be inside. Instead the man with the goats had joined a line, and the line had a shape, and at the head of the shape there was a table.

There was a table. Outdoors. In the desert. With a man behind it.

"What's the table for?" Hobab said to the goat man, after a while.

"They're numbering."

"Numbering what?"

"Us." The goat man had said this seven times that month and it had worn smooth. "Every man from twenty years and up. Name, house, father's house. And you pay the half."

"Half of what?"

"Half a shekel. Everybody the same. It's not a portion, it's a half, whether you came out with four donkeys or came out with nothing." He said this with the particular flatness of a man who had come out with nothing. "Rich no more, poor no less. It's said out very plain."

Hobab looked at the table for a while.

"And what happens to the names after he writes them?"

The goat man looked at him with the first flicker of real interest he had shown, and Hobab understood that he had asked a question that the goat man had also, at some point, asked.

"It goes to the fifty," the goat man said.

. . .

The line moved, and Hobab worked his way forward through it, and by the time he reached the table he had a reasonable picture of the thing, because a queue is the most informative place in any settlement and always has been.

Three men ahead of him were discussing, with the fluency of long practice, whether a thing was a small matter.

The thing was an order at the water. Two families had been drawing in a sequence that had been settled between them the winter before, at a different place, in circumstances neither of them could now reconstruct, and it had held for a year, and it had stopped holding, for reasons that took the first man a considerable time to lay out and that involved a death, a marriage, and a lame ewe.

The question was not who was right. Everybody in the queue, including the second man, appeared to know who was right.

The question was whether it went up.

"We have always drawn first," said the first man.

"You have always drawn first for fourteen months."

"We have always drawn first."

"Fourteen months," said the second man, to the queue generally, appealing.

The first man turned round to face him properly, and there was a moment in which Hobab understood that this was going to be the actual argument and that the water had very little to do with it.

"Fourteen months," the first man agreed, "is how long there has been anything at all. What would you like me to say? Since Pithom? Since my father? There is no since. There is what we have done since we came out, and we have drawn first, and if fourteen months is not long enough to have always done a thing, then nothing anybody does here is anything, and you may tell me what we are all standing in this line for."

There was a pause in the queue while several people worked through this and found that they could not immediately fault it.

"That's an argument," the second man admitted.

"It is an argument."

"It's an argument that puts it up."

"It puts it up," the first man agreed, without any pleasure at all, because putting it up meant a wait of some weeks and both of them knew it, and because he had just won a point at the cost of the thing he actually wanted. Everyone went quiet. The queue moved forward two paces.

Hobab, standing behind the three of them with a mule that wanted feeding, thought that at home this would have been settled by an uncle, badly, in an afternoon.

Then he thought about it again, walking the mule on, and could not get it to come out. At home the uncle would have settled it because there was a well, and the well had been there before the uncle and would be there after him, and everybody involved knew what their grandfather had done at it. Here there was no well. There was a place they were standing near, this month, which they would leave. Two families had built a custom out of fourteen months because fourteen months was all the material there was.

The man at the table was perhaps thirty and had ink on the side of his hand. He was a ruler of tens. Above him there was a ruler of fifties, who was his wife's uncle, and who was said to be fair. Above the fifty

there was a hundred, and above the hundred there was a thousand, and above the thousand there was Moses, and between the thousand and Moses there was a distinction that nobody in the line could state precisely but that everybody in the line had an opinion about, and the opinion was as follows: the small matters were judged below, and the hard causes went up.

The difficulty, which four separate people in the queue explained to Hobab with four separate examples and considerable heat, was that nobody had ever said what made a cause hard.

"So it goes up," said a woman ahead of him, who was there about a frontage — a neighbour had run a thorn fold out past the line of the tents and into the walking ground — and who had been there about the same frontage twice before, in two different places, because the camp had moved and the neighbour had done it again. "Everything goes up. Because if you judge it and you were wrong, that's on you. But if you send it up and *he* was wrong, that's not on you, is it."

"Then he's sitting from the morning to the evening," Hobab said.

"He's sitting from the morning to the evening," the woman agreed. "But now there's tens."

. . .

He got to the table.

"Name."

"Hobab."

"House."

"I'm not of a house."

The man at the table stopped, and looked up for the first time, and Hobab saw a small and specific unhappiness cross his face — not suspicion, nothing like suspicion, but the flat dismay of a man who has been handed a thing that does not go anywhere.

"You're of the mixed multitude."

"I'm a Midianite. I've come up with dye and skins for Oholiab, who sent for them in the spring, and I'll be gone in a month."

"But you're not of a house."

"No."

"You're not to be numbered, then," the man said, and Hobab watched him work out, in real time and with visible discomfort, that this did not resolve the difficulty but relocated it. "But you're inside. And everything inside is on a leaf."

"Is that a rule?"

"It's not a rule," said the man, in the tone of a man who had recently discovered that it was going to be one. "There's no line for that."

He said it with a certain amount of feeling. He turned the leaf he was working on, and Hobab, who could see it upside down, read it without meaning to and then stopped himself, in the manner of a man who has looked into a tent he has no business in. What he had taken in before he stopped was that it was ruled, and that the ruling was regular, and that somebody had sat and made those rules with a straight edge before anybody had written a word inside them.

"What do you do with people who aren't of a house?"

"You're not the first," the man said, which was not an answer. He looked at the leaf a moment longer. Then he wrote something in the margin, outside the ruling, in the white, and Hobab watched him do it and thought about the Phoenician factor at Ezion-geber, and about permanent records of nothing at all.

"What did you write?"

"Midianite. Dye. Oholiab. One month."

"Where does it go?"

"It goes to the fifty," the man said.

. . .

The eastern quarter was Judah, and it went on.

He walked in along one of the straight lines with his animals behind him, and the line stayed straight, and the tents on either side of it were pitched at what he could only describe as an interval. Not a spacing that had happened. A spacing that had been decided, once, by somebody, and then held by several tens of thousands of people over a period of months, in the desert, which was — he turned it over — either the most impressive thing in that country or the most fragile,

and he could not tell which and suspected he would still not be able to tell in a year.

He asked a man about the lines, on the second day, while he was failing to get anywhere else, and got an answer that he thought about for the rest of the month.

He had assumed they were struck off the ground — off a ridge, a wadi, something that stayed put. They were not. They were struck off the tent. The linen court went up first, always, before anything else, and it went up facing east, and everything in the camp was then laid out from it: Judah on the sunrise side, Reuben to the south, Ephraim behind, Dan to the north, each at its distance, each with its standard, and the ground was not consulted.

Which meant that the ground did not always cooperate.

"There was a place last winter," the man said, "where the north side ran into a slope. Straight into it. And we pitched up the slope, because that was the line."

"On a slope."

"On a slope. For nine days. Three tents came down in the first night and they were put back up in the same place." He said this without any grievance and also without any enthusiasm. "You get a good deal of water coming through a camp pitched on a slope."

"Whose decision was that?"

The man looked at him.

"It's the line," he said.

Underneath the interval, though, it was a camp, and camps he knew.

There were children on the ropes, which there should not have been. There was a woman up on a roof at the third tent along with a needle the length of her hand and a strip laid out beside her, working the seam, and in the shade of the same tent the Companion was at the ground loom with the warp pegged out and a strip half made, and neither of them looked up, and there was no reason for them to. There was a dispute two rows over about a thorn fold that had been extended into somebody's frontage. There was a smell of scorched barley from a fire that had been walked away from.

Hobab had a professional's eye for a camp the way he had one for a load, and what his eye told him, walking in, was that the camp was in the ordinary condition of camps. Ropes slack. Fires unattended. A boy carrying two full skins who was going to drop one within twenty paces and did.

What was not ordinary was that all of it was happening inside the interval, and that the interval held.

I.4 — NO LINE FOR THAT

He tried to get to Moses on the first day, and on the second, and on the third, and the manner of the failure was different each time, which was the part he found interesting.

On the first day he asked the man at the table, who was the only person in the camp who had so far written anything about him, and the man at the table said that he should take it to his ten.

"I have no ten."

"Everybody has a ten."

"A ten is ten men of a house. I am not of a house."

The man looked at his leaf for a while, at the margin, at the white outside the ruling, and then said that in that case he should speak to a fifty, which was not an answer and which both of them knew was not an answer, and which was, Hobab thought afterward, the only unguarded thing anybody said to him that week. The man had no idea. He had passed it upward. It had taken him four heartbeats and it had cost him nothing and the difficulty was now somebody else's, and Hobab, who had been moving other men's goods for twenty-six years, recognised the manoeuvre with something close to admiration.

On the second day he went to the eastern gate of the linen court, where the coloured hanging was, because he had established that the man was there in the mornings.

There was a rope, and the Conscience-Keeper at the rope. Not a guard. He was perhaps twenty-five and had a rolled mat under his arm and was clearly on his way to do something else, and he was courteous, and he asked Hobab whether he was clean.

Hobab said that he had washed, and heard himself say it, and heard the small lift at the end of it that turns a statement into an offer.

The Conscience-Keeper heard it too.

"You knew that was not the question," he said.

"I knew it was not the question."

"Then you were seeing whether I would take it."

Hobab, who had done exactly that at four hundred gates and had never once been named for it, stood there with a rein in his hand.

The Conscience-Keeper gave him the rest without any weight on it at all: that there were conditions, and that the conditions were not about dirt, and that a man in Hobab's condition — which was not a bad condition, and was not an accusation, and was simply the condition of a man who was not of the assembly — did not come inside the hanging.

"I don't want to come inside the hanging. I want to speak to a man who is inside it."

"Then you want him when he's outside it," the Conscience-Keeper agreed, entirely reasonably, and went off to do the something else.

On the third day Hobab found the line.

It took him most of the morning and it was not where he had expected, and when he found it he stood at the back of it for some time before he understood what he was looking at. It was not a line to see Moses. It was the line of causes that had come up: matters that a ten had refused, that a fifty had refused, that a hundred had sent on and a thousand had not stopped. Every man in it had been judged already, at least twice, and was dissatisfied.

To stand in that line you had to have a cause.

To have a cause you had to have been judged below.

To be judged below you had to be of a house.

Hobab worked this round twice and then a third time, standing at the back of a line he could not join, and could not find the place where it opened. It was not that anybody had shut him out. Nobody had shut him out. Every man he had spoken to had been helpful, and two of them had gone out of their way, and the thing was simply built in such a manner that a man like him did not arrive at the middle of it.

He thought: my father would be inside by now.

He thought it without much heat. It was a professional observation and he had made it before. Jethro would have been inside on the second day, and he would not have argued with anybody, and he would not have invoked anything, and if you asked him afterward how

he had done it he would tell you at length and the telling would be accurate and would not help. Hobab had watched him do it for thirty years and had never once been able to see the join.

On the fourth day he went to his sister.

She was in a tent on the eastern edge of the eastern quarter, not far in from where the line had been, and it was a good tent, and there was nothing wrong with it, and she came out and put her hands on his face and said his name twice, and he understood inside about four heartbeats that he was going to get nothing.

"You look like our father," she said.

"I've been told."

"You look like him when he's decided something and hasn't said it."

"I've not been told that."

She laughed, and gave him food, and asked after the flocks and the western pasture and Adnah's father and the marriage at the eastern end, and she asked well, and she listened to the answers, and he got a little of the pasture and none of anything else. There were two boys, nearly men, who came in and were polite to him and went out again. There was a woman who came to the door about a matter of thread and went away without coming in.

Somewhere in the middle of the pasture Hobab looked at her left hand.

She was working the skin at the side of the thumb with the nail of her forefinger. Not picking at it. Working it, in a small steady rhythm, as you would worry at a knot you were not looking at. The skin there was gone at the edge and had been gone for some while, and there was a dark line under the nail of the forefinger that was not dirt.

She had done that as a girl. It had been a household matter for years — their mother had tried bitter stuff on the hand, and had tried a wrapping, and had once, memorably, tried a slap, and none of it had made the slightest difference.

Then somewhere around her fourteenth year it had stopped. All at once, and for good, and Hobab had never known why and had never asked and had not thought about it in twenty-eight years.

He looked away and went on about the western pasture.

He waited until the food was finished, because he was not a fool, and then he asked her.

"I need an hour with him."

Zipporah did not put anything down or pick anything up. She had been doing something with a cord and she went on doing it, and the forefinger of her left hand went across to the thumb of it and stayed.

"He sits from the morning to the evening."

"I know what he does. Our father sent me to find out whether what he told him works, and I have spent four days finding out from tens and fifties and hundreds and a thousand, and every one of them told me the same thing in different words, and none of them is the man." He heard his own voice go up slightly and brought it down. "An hour. Less. I'll take it walking."

"Then you should ask him."

"I can't get near him."

"No," she agreed. "That's true." And she said it in a manner that closed nothing and opened nothing, and then she asked him what the dye had cost him at Tayma, which was a real question, and one she knew he liked answering, and he was three sentences into the answer before he understood what had been done to him.

He came back at it later, from the other side.

"You could send word in. A word from you goes in."

"A word from me goes in," she said, "and comes back out, and then there is a thing that has been asked for and not given, and it sits there." She looked up for the first time. "You have not seen him in eight years. Do you want the first thing between you to be a thing he had to refuse?"

That was very good. Hobab sat with it and turned it over and could find no seam in it anywhere, and it was some hours before he worked out — walking back, in the dark, past the fourth row — that she had not actually said she would not do it. She had explained to him, kindly and at his own pace, why he ought not to want it. He had come in wanting an hour with Moses and had gone out agreeing that asking for one was inconsiderate, and he had agreed to it himself, out loud, and had thanked her.

It was their father's method exactly. He had watched it done to other men his entire life and had never once expected to be on the receiving end of it, and he could not decide, walking back, whether he was angry or whether he was proud of her.

Twice, in the course of that same long afternoon, he had come at the other thing sideways.

"Our father says you've sent no word."

"There's been no word to send."

The second time he did not even get that. She got up and went to the far side and did something with a jar that did not need doing, and stayed there while she did it, with her back to him and both hands out of sight, and then came back and asked him whether Yamlik was still at the pass, and he said that Yamlik was still at the pass and would outlive them both, and she said that she was glad, and meant it, and that was the end of that.

He tried once more, at the door, with his hand on the pole, because he had ridden forty days and would ride forty back and would have to say something to their father.

"He asks after you," he said. "Every year. He doesn't say your name when he does it."

Zipporah stood in the doorway with the light behind her and he could not see her face at all, which he understood, after a moment, to have been arranged.

"That sounds like him," she said.

"Zipporah."

"I know what you're going to ask me."

"I'm not going to ask you anything."

"No," she agreed. "You're not." She reached out and straightened his collar, which had not needed straightening since he was nine, and he saw the hand close to for the first time, and it was worse than it had looked across a tent. "Tell him the boys are well. Tell him the elder one has his hands. He'll know what that means and it will please him more than anything else you can carry."

"That's what you want me to take back."

"That's what there is."

He walked back through the interval in the dark, and the interval was still straight in the dark.

Somewhere on the way he worked out that he had been four days in a place where everything was written down, and had not read a word of it.

Not been prevented. Not been unable. There had been a ruled leaf turned toward him on a table and he had looked at it and had seen that it was ruled and had not read it, in the same manner in which a man walks past a tent he has no business in. The marks were in his head where his father had put them. They had simply not come up, because in forty-two years of a life spent moving goods across country they had never once come up, and a thing that has never come up develops a kind of shape around it that is difficult to get past.

He thought about it for the length of two rows of tents. Then he thought that if he had read the leaf he would have found *Midianite, dye, Oholiab, one month*, written in the white outside the ruling, which he already knew, and that his sister's name would not have been anywhere on it either.

Then he went to bed.

I.5 — SMALL MATTERS

He found the ruler of a hundred on the sixth day, in the shade on the north side of a tent, sitting with a line in front of him, and Hobab took a place in it because taking a place in it was faster than explaining.

The hundred was a big man going grey, a man of Judah, and he had two matters ahead of Hobab. The first was a lamb, and he heard it out and gave it in about the time it takes to drink, and both parties went away, and neither of them looked happy, which Hobab took to mean the thing had been done properly.

The second was a woman whose neighbour's fire had scorched her tent cloth, a strip and a half, and who wanted the neighbour to stand the replacement.

The hundred asked how much of the strip was gone. She said a strip and a half. He asked whether the strip and a half could be patched or whether they were to be re-woven, and she said re-woven, and he asked her why, and she said that a patch on the fourth strip pulls the seam and after two winters you have lost the fifth strip too. He asked her how long a strip took. She said that between everything else, and there being no shortage of everything else, a strip was a matter of some weeks.

The hundred sat with this for a moment.

Then he found for her, and set the value of the replacement at a figure that Hobab, who bought and sold cloth for a living, thought was low by about a third, and both women went away, and the second one went away angry, and the first one went away with rather less than she had lost.

Hobab thought: he does not know what a strip is worth.

Then he thought: he does not need to, because they will both come back, and next time he will know.

Then he stopped thinking about it, because it was his turn.

. . .

"You're the Midianite."

"I am."

"Of the mixed multitude."

"So I'm told, repeatedly."

The hundred looked at him with an expression that Hobab could not immediately place and then placed: it was the look of a man who has been handed a small unexpected pleasure in the middle of a long day.

"Sit down," he said. "Do you know what a hard cause is?"

"No."

"Neither do I," said the hundred. "Nobody does. I have asked. I have asked the thousand, and the thousand said that a hard cause is a cause that is hard, and I said that this was a definition of no assistance to any man living, and the thousand said that I was correct and that I should use my judgement. Which is the entire difficulty. If I use my judgement and I am right, no one will ever hear of it. If I use my judgement and I am wrong, everyone will hear of it, and they will hear of it from the person I was wrong about, who will go up. So."

"So everything goes up."

"Not everything." The hundred was quite cheerful about it. "The lambs do not go up. Nobody has ever been ruined by a lamb. But a boundary, a betrothal, an inheritance, a thing where somebody's father is going to be spoken about — that goes up. And it goes up from me to the thousand, and the thousand has the same arithmetic I have, and so it goes up from him."

"To Moses."

"To Moses. Who sits."

"From the morning to the evening."

"From the morning to the evening," the hundred agreed. "It is a good deal better than it was. I want to be clear about that, because people complain and they are wrong to. Before, there was one line and it did not move. Now there are a great number of lines and they move, and only the frightening matters go up, and that is his father-in-law's doing and it was correct."

He said this without any irony at all, and Hobab, who had been on the point of enjoying himself, felt the enjoyment go a little sideways.

"How many go up?" he said. "Out of a hundred."

The hundred thought about it properly, which Hobab had not expected.

"Eleven," he said. "Perhaps twelve. It was thirty at the start."

"And it'll be nine next year."

"It will be nine next year." The hundred shifted against the tent wall. "Because the men who have been doing this a season have found out that they can judge a boundary and survive it, and once a man has found that out he does not un-find it. Ask me in five years and it will be five in a hundred, and the five will be the ones that ought to go up. That is all of it. Nobody designed that. It is only what happens if you leave men judging for long enough and do not hang any of them."

"And if you hang one?"

"Then it goes back to thirty," said the hundred, "in a month," and reached for the water.

"You know who I am," he said.

"You are a Midianite trading dye who is not of a house and who has been asking every man in the eastern quarter what a hard cause is for six days," said the hundred. "I am a ruler of a hundred. Of course I know who you are."

. . .

On the eighth day he watched the Allfather judge, and it took him most of the morning to work out what he was looking at.

He had gone up into the northern part of the eastern quarter to see a man about hides and had found the man's row blocked by a sitting, and had done what everyone in the row had done, which was to stop and watch, because a sitting is better than hides.

The Allfather sat on the ground with his back against a tent pole and his forearms on his knees. An unremarkable man of about fifty in an unremarkable coat, a thousand under him, nine matters in front of him; he took four hours over them.

He was very good.

That was not a complicated observation and Hobab arrived at it inside the first matter, which concerned a debt of grain. Two men, both certain, both plausible, and one of them lying — Hobab had it as the elder, on the grounds of a certain over-completeness in the story — and the Allfather heard both of them out without interrupting once, and then asked the elder a single question about where the grain had been stored, and the elder answered it, and something went out of the man's shoulders as he answered.

He did not accuse him. He gave the matter to the younger, briefly, and did not say why, and the elder went away not disgraced.

"He does that," said a woman standing at Hobab's elbow, who had a basket on her hip and no intention of going anywhere. "He never says. My cousin was in front of him about a wall and came away thinking he'd won."

"Had he won?"

"No," the woman said with satisfaction. "But he came away thinking it, and he told everybody, and by the time it was clear he'd have looked a fool going back."

The third matter was a betrothal, and Hobab expected it to go up, because a betrothal is a matter where somebody's father gets spoken about, and every man he had talked to in nine days had told him that such things went up.

It did not go up.

There were two families and an agreement made six years earlier, in Egypt, and a disagreement about what the agreement had covered, and both sides had brought the sort of witnesses that families bring. Two of the witnesses were dead. One of the dead ones was the only person who had heard the terms said twice.

The Allfather listened to the living witnesses. Then he asked the two fathers what had been sworn on.

They both said bread.

He asked them where. They told him — at the eastern hand of a threshing floor outside a town that neither of them had seen in fourteen years and that neither of them was ever going to see again, on an evening when it had rained, which one of them mentioned and

the other confirmed, because rain there was worth mentioning and both of them had been young.

He gave it against the man who had asked for the sitting, and gave the reason, which was that a thing sworn on bread is a thing sworn between men who trust each other, and that the terms of a thing sworn on bread are the terms both men understood at the time and not the terms one of them later found in the words. He said this in perhaps thirty words. Both fathers stood there for a moment. Then the one who had lost said something short and went off up the row, and the one who had won looked, briefly, as though he wished he had not come.

The rest of the row went back to what it had been doing.

Hobab stood where he was for some time.

He was a priest's son. He had been sat in a corner of his father's tent from the age of six through more oath-work than he could count, and he knew the iron and he knew the bread and he knew the difference, and he had never in his life heard anyone outside his father's tent state the difference correctly. It was not obscure. It was simply the sort of thing that is known by the people who have to know it and by nobody else.

He also thought — later, walking back, having got nothing about the hides — that the two fathers had not been asked which town. There were four or five it could have been. Nobody in that row would ever go and look, and nobody would ever need to.

. . .

He got the last of it on the ninth day, standing at a rope with a jar between them, waiting for a mule to be brought.

He had been one of those appointed. He said so early and without weight, as a man mentions where he was born. He had been chosen in the first sorting, when they had gone through the people looking for the able ones, and he had been asked three questions, and had answered them, and had been made a ruler of tens, and was now a ruler of a thousand.

"What were the questions?"

The man told him. They were the questions in the instruction: whether he feared, whether he was a man of truth, whether he hated covetousness.

"And you said yes."

"I said yes," the man agreed. "So did everyone. It is not a difficult examination." He turned the jar a little with his foot. "But then they took the ones who had said yes and they set them down in front of the men they were to judge, and they let them judge for a season, and at the end of the season some of them were not doing it any more. Nobody said anything to them. They simply stopped being asked. That was the examination."

Hobab looked at him.

There was a stillness about him that Hobab, who had spent his life among people who were selling something, found restful and did not examine.

"I watched you yesterday," he said. "The betrothal. You gave it on the bread."

"Yes."

"Nobody knows that. Nobody outside a priest's tent knows that."

"They know it," the Allfather said. "They swore on it."

Hobab turned that over and could find nothing wrong with it and was aware, in some region below the argument, that something had gone past him.

"It'll go up anyway," he said. "The one who lost. He'll take it up."

"He may."

"And then somebody above you hears it again."

"Then somebody above me hears it again," the Allfather agreed, "and gives it the same way, and it will have cost the man four months and he will have it from a higher mouth, which is what he actually wants." He said this without any edge whatsoever. "Most of what comes up is not a question. It is a man who has already been told."

"You judge the small matters," Hobab said.

"I judge the small matters."

"And the hard causes go up."

"The hard causes go up," said the Allfather, with what seemed to be complete satisfaction, and the mule came, and that was the end of it.

. . .

He sent to Oholiab on the ninth day, which he had been meaning to do since the fourth, and got back a message inside the hour, which after nine days of the camp felt indecently fast.

Oholiab would see him. Oholiab would see him after the month.

The man who brought the message stayed to explain, unasked, that this was not a slight: that they had finished the reckoning up of what had gone into the work only recently, and that the reckoning had produced a number, and that the number had produced a quantity of consequences nobody had anticipated, and that his master was at present engaged in the consequences.

"After the month, then," Hobab said.

"After the month," the man agreed, with feeling, "or after the next one."

That night the wind got up from the north-west and did what the wind does, and Hobab came out of his tent at some hour and stood in the dark and watched the camp deal with it.

It dealt with it well. The ropes came in along the line in front of him almost together, which meant that the people at each tent had heard the same thing in the wind and had not needed to be told. Somewhere out in the northern quarter a roof went, and there was noise, and the noise concentrated and then stopped. The interval held.

He stood for a while in the cold with his arms folded.

The straight lines were invisible now. What he could see instead, when the moon came round the edge of the cloud, was the fabric itself — several thousand black roofs going bright and then dull as the light came and went across them, moving very slightly, all of it, in the same direction at the same time, like one thing breathing.

He thought: somebody has to keep all of this up.

At home, when the wind took a roof, it took a roof, and there was a bad week, and a woman who had been going to weave in the autumn wove instead in the spring and something else did not get done. He had never known which something else. He had never thought to wonder whether there was one.

Out in the northern quarter they had the roof back up. He could hear the difference in the noise.

Then he thought about the ruled leaf on the table, and the margin, and what a hard cause was, and whether he could get his dye price out of Oholiab before the month was out, and after that.

And then, because it was cold and late and he had run out of things to keep himself busy with, he thought: I have been here nine days and I have not seen him.

His father would want to know why. His father would sit under the awning with his feet in the sun and would work it out loud, from the beginning, in order, and at the end of it he would have a reason, and the reason would be correct.

Hobab could already hear most of it. He could get as far as the tens and the fifties and the line he could not stand in. What he could not do — what he had never been able to do, in thirty years of watching it done — was the last part, where the old man stopped talking and simply went in.

He went back inside.

I.6 — THE INSTRUMENT

In the second week, having nothing else to do, Hobab began collecting.

This was what he did when a market went slow. You could not make a man buy dye before he wanted dye. What you could do, in the meantime, was walk about and ask people things and put the answers next to each other, and four or five days of that would generally tell you something about the place that the place did not know about itself. He had found a silver seam in Amman that way once, purely by noticing which three men were all lying about the same shipment.

So he collected, and what he collected, over about nine days, was the shape of the agreement.

He did not set out to. He had no interest in it. What happened was that every third conversation in the camp arrived at it eventually, in the manner of water arriving at the low point of a floor, and after a while he had enough pieces to see that the pieces went together.

. . .

The mechanism by which the terms got about was itself worth the walk.

There was a recitation. He caught the end of one on the eleventh day and all of one on the thirteenth, standing at the back of a crowd in the Reuben quarter with a mule he had stopped pretending to be leading anywhere.

The difficulty was obvious to anybody who had ever tried to address more than four hundred people, which Hobab had, twice, badly. You cannot be heard. There is no arrangement of ground and no strength of voice that gets a spoken sentence to the back of that many people, and the camp was not four hundred people, and so the camp had solved it.

They relayed.

One man said a portion. Six men, spaced through the crowd, said the portion after him. Then another portion, and the six again, and so on down the length of it, and the sound of it was strange and lapping and took some getting used to, because you heard everything twice at a distance of about three heartbeats.

What interested Hobab was the drift.

There is always drift. A message passes through six mouths and arrives with a limp. He had spent his working life sending word ahead down a caravan route through five or six pairs of hands, and he knew to within about a tenth what it cost him each time, and he priced his goods accordingly.

It was hot at the back of that crowd and it went on for a long time.

Hobab stood in it for the better part of two hours with the mule's head over his shoulder and its breath going down the back of his neck, and by the end of the first hour the man in front of him had shifted his weight twelve times and Hobab had counted them. There were children sitting on the ground in the gaps between the standing people, and one of them was systematically working a hole in the dirt with a stick and putting small stones into it. A baby went off about a third of the way through and was carried out sideways through the crowd, and the crowd opened and closed for it without anybody appearing to decide to.

Somebody near the front fainted at some point. There was a small commotion, and then there was not, and the relay did not stop.

What he heard, that thirteenth day, standing at the back with the mule, ran roughly as follows.

There was a naming, which was short.

There was a recital after it, which was not short. It went through the going out in order: the country they had been in, the condition they had been in, the leaving of it, the sea, the water at the bitter place and what was done about it, the bread, the water at the rock, the fighting at Rephidim and how it had gone. Named places. A sequence. Each item small enough to be checked by somebody who had been there, and there were several thousand people standing in that crowd who had been there.

Hobab listened to it as a trader listens to another man's account of a shipment, which is to say for the joins.

There were none that he could find. It was tight. Nothing in it was general. Nobody was praised in it, which struck him as the cleverest thing about it; the recital said what had been done and did not say what anybody deserved, and left the crowd to make the second half of the argument themselves, which they were visibly doing, all round him, without noticing.

The obligations came next, in an order he could have predicted, and he found that he was predicting them three or four items ahead, which was a strange sensation to have standing at the back of a crowd that big.

The relationship first. The household after it. Under that, the conduct of a man toward the man pitched next to him — the property, the wife, the ox, the boundary, the word given in a hearing.

After the obligations, the keeping of the writing, and the witnesses.

What follows if it holds.

What follows if it does not, and that part went on for some time.

He stationed himself at the back on the thirteenth day and listened hard, and got nothing.

He moved and listened again the following week and got nothing again. Not a word out. Not a word extra. Six men, four hundred paces, thirty-odd portions, and the thing arrived at the back of the crowd in the same condition it had left the front.

He asked a man next to him how that was managed, expecting a technique, and the man said that the relayers were of the tribe of Levi and that saying it correctly was what they did.

"But how is it managed?"

"They practise," the man said.

Hobab thought about that for a while and could not make it interesting, which he eventually decided was the point.

. . .

The one detail of the drafting that he could not stop turning over was the balance at the end.

He counted it twice, on two separate recitations, using his fingers against his thigh as he would count a load, and both times he got the same proportion and both times it made him want to laugh in a place where laughing would not have done.

The blessings ran short. Rain in its season, bread, increase, safety in the country, a road out and a road home. All of it good, all of it plain, and none of it detained anybody.

The cursings ran, by his count, better than four times as long. They were also very much better written. They went from the field and the flock down through the body and out the other side into the mind, and they were specific, and they had a rhythm to them that got into a man's back teeth, and by the third recitation Hobab found that he could anticipate several of them, which he had not tried to do.

This did not surprise him. It was the form. Every one of the northern instruments he had ever encountered ran the same way and for the same reason, which is that a blessing has to be plausible and a curse only has to be memorable, and any drafter who has been at the work for a season learns to spend his effort where it does something.

What did surprise him, standing at the back of the crowd, was the faces.

He had watched a Gezer town-man have his treaty read at him once, in the presence of the Egyptian who had brought it, and had seen exactly what a curse section does to a room: everyone stops moving and nobody looks at anybody and afterwards there is a period of loud unrelated conversation.

Here, nothing of the kind. The crowd took the cursings the same as they had taken the bread and the water at the rock. A woman near him adjusted a child on her hip. Two men behind him resumed, in a low mutter, a disagreement about a hobble.

He turned that over for a long time and never did work out what he thought about it. The likeliest explanation was that they had heard it seven times already and that a thing said monthly stops going in, which was ordinary and which happened to every agreement he had ever handled. The other explanation was that they had made the calculation about who the curses were aimed at and had concluded it

was not them, which was also ordinary and also happened to every agreement he had ever handled.

Neither explanation was satisfying and he had no third.

. . .

He had it by the end of the week and the recognition was not vague, and what he recognised was the order.

Seven parts, and they had come in the order they always come in, and a man who has handled three of these can say the fourth before it arrives.

Hobab had been on the edges of that form since he was nine years old.

Egypt made them. Egypt made them with every coastal town it had ever put a garrison in, and the town's man went down to the Delta and came back with a copy, and the copy sat in the town's temple, and a man came round every so often to see that it was still there. Hatti made them, in the north, and made them better; the Hittite ones were famous in the trade for the recital part, which went on for pages and which everybody agreed was where the actual work was done. You did not begin with what a man owed you. You began with what you had done for him, in detail, with dates, and by the time you reached the obligations the man had already agreed to them in his own mind.

And his father witnessed them, in a small way, at the bottom end of the trade. Two houses, a well, a stated number of years. The order of the words for iron and the order of the words for bread. Hobab had sat in the corner and held things.

He could still do the small form from memory and had proved it to himself once, at about thirty, walking, out of idleness, and had been unsettled to find that it came out entire and in order and that he had not thought about it in a decade.

The part he remembered best was not the words. It was what his father did before the words.

Jethro would get the two parties to say, separately and out loud and in front of each other, what they believed had been agreed. Not what they wanted. What they thought was already true. And about

one time in three the two accounts did not match, and there was a silence, and then most of an afternoon, and then quite often there was no oath at all that day, and both men went home in a better condition than they had arrived in.

Hobab had asked him about it when he was fifteen or so. Why bother swearing anything, if the useful part happens before the swearing.

His father had said that the swearing was what made them come.

That was the entire answer and Hobab had been dissatisfied with it for about twenty-five years and had then, somewhere on the road between Tayma and the pass, stopped being dissatisfied with it without ever having worked out why.

So when the recitation reached the recital part — the going out, the sea, the bread, the water at the rock, named, in order, dated by the month — he did not hear a hymn.

He heard a historical prologue, correctly constructed, of the northern type.

. . .

He thought about it for two days and then went looking for somebody to check it against, and found a Levite of about his own age who had come to the dye tent about a matter of thread and had stayed to be sociable.

"It's a treaty," Hobab said.

"It's the covenant."

"Yes. It's a treaty. It's built like a treaty. The naming, then what has been done for you, then what you must do, then where the writing lives, then the witnesses, then the curses." He was aware of sounding pleased with himself and did not much mind. "It's the northern form. I've handled goods for two towns that had one of these in a box, and the box was in the temple, and once a year a man came and looked at it."

The Levite considered this with real courtesy.

"Yes," he said.

"You see what I'm saying."

"I do," said the Levite, who plainly did not, and who was not being stupid — he was a quick man and he had followed every word — but for whom the sentence *it is built like a treaty* had gone past without catching on anything, in the manner of a fact about a language you do not speak. "It's the covenant," he said again, helpfully.

Hobab tried once more from a different side and got the same result, and then gave it up, and they talked about thread.

He had the same conversation, in substance, four more times over the following fortnight. Every man he tried it on agreed with him immediately and pleasantly and understood nothing whatever, and by the fourth time Hobab had worked out why, which was that they had nothing to compare it to. He had seen nine of these. They had seen one.

. . .

Where he stuck was the keeping.

He came at it in stages, because nobody would answer it head-on, and it took him nine days.

The writing was on stone. Two tables. He established that early and it did not surprise him; stone is what you use when the point of the document is that nobody can quietly improve it. He had seen a boundary agreement in stone once, near Gezer, set into a wall, and had thought at the time that it was an admission of something about the parties.

Stone also told him something about the intended life of the thing, and here he had to be careful with himself, because he was a man who priced everything and he knew it.

Clay is for a season. Clay is what a factor writes a consignment on, and the consignment arrives, and the clay goes into a wall or into a fire or into the ground, and nobody weeps. Hide and reed are for a lifetime if you are careful and for nine years if you are not, and Hobab had watched a Canaanite lose an entire year's accounts to one wet autumn and had not been able to feel as sorry for him as the situation warranted.

Stone is for after everybody.

You do not cut a thing into stone for the men standing in front of you. You cut it into stone because you have made a judgement about how long the arrangement is supposed to outlast the people who made it, and the judgement in this case appeared to be: indefinitely, and then some.

Which was, Hobab thought, a very considerable claim to make in the second year of anything.

He had known perhaps four men in his life who would have had the nerve to commission that, and three of them had been wrong.

The two tables were in a box. The box was in the tent inside the linen court. He established that too.

He asked where the other one was, and the conversation went sideways.

"There is no other one."

"There is always another one."

"There are two tables," said the Levite patiently. "Both are in the ark."

"Yes. In the same box."

"In the same box."

Hobab stopped what he was doing.

He explained it, because it seemed to him worth explaining. In a thing of this kind there are two parties, and each of them keeps a copy, and the copies are kept apart, and the reason they are kept apart is not ceremony. It is that if both copies sit in one house, the house that holds them can alter one, and the other party has nothing to hold it against. Every part of the apparatus — the stone, the depositing, the man who comes and looks — exists for that single purpose. Two copies, two roofs. That was not a refinement of the form. That was the form.

"Both of them are in the ark," the Levite said, "because that is where they were put."

"By whom?"

"By Moses. As he was commanded."

"And who looks at them?"

"Nobody looks at them."

"Then how does anyone know they’re still in there?"

The Levite thought about this for slightly longer than Hobab had expected, and then said, without any evasion at all and without any discomfort either, that the ark was carried by the Kohathites and that the Kohathites did not open it, and that the priests covered it before they came near it, and that a man who looked into it would die.

"That's a custody arrangement," Hobab said.

"Yes," said the Levite, pleased that they had got somewhere.

It was, in fact, an extremely good custody arrangement. Hobab could see that. He had spent twenty-six years designing worse ones. Sealed cargo, a carrier who cannot open it, an inspection regime with a penalty attached, and the penalty at the top of the scale — that was better than anything in the incense corridor, where the best they managed was a knot and a reputation.

It was a superb custody arrangement for a box.

What it was not was an answer to his question, and he could not work out how to say so without saying something else, and so after a while he stopped.

. . .

He saw the covering done, once, from a distance, which was as close as he was ever going to get.

It was not a ceremony as he understood ceremonies. It was a drill.

The priests went in first and the Kohathites stood off at a distance that had plainly been specified, and waited, and did not fidget, which told Hobab that they had been waiting at that distance for months. The priests did whatever was done inside the hanging, and there was a period of that, and then a signal, and the Kohathites came in and took the staves and lifted, and went out through the eastern gate at a pace that had been agreed by somebody.

Nobody touched anything they were not to touch. Nobody looked into anything. Every man went to a position he clearly went to every time.

Hobab watched it as he would watch another master load a difficult cargo, which is with attention and a certain amount of grudging.

He did the sum he had been doing all his working life, which was: how long did that take to teach.

Somebody had stood at the side of that saying *not there* until the *not there* stopped being necessary, and had done it for months, and it was his whole office.

He asked, later, who that man was, and got a name, and forgot it inside a day, and remembered for years afterwards that he had asked.

. . .

The Levite came back to him about it in the fourth week, which Hobab had not expected and did not at first understand, and which turned out to be the man's office.

That was the part Hobab had missed. He had taken the Levites for carriers and doorkeepers and a relay, because that was what he had seen them do. Teaching was on the list too, and had been from the start, and was not a favour anybody was doing him.

"You called it a treaty," the Levite said.

"It is a treaty. I have handled nine of them."

"You have handled nine documents of that shape and you were right about the shape and I have thought about what you said for a fortnight." He sat down, which he had not done before. "May I tell you what is wrong with it?"

Hobab said that he would take it as a kindness, and meant it, and was not prepared for what came.

. . .

A contract, said the Levite, is made between two parties who were not in a relation before it and are in one afterwards. That is what it is for. The consideration buys the relation. Take the consideration away and the relation goes with it, because there was nothing else holding it, and both parties knew that going in and priced it accordingly.

"Yes," said Hobab. "That is a contract."

"This is not that."

"It has the same seven parts."

"It has the same seven parts and it is not that, and the seven parts are how you would build either one, because there is only one way to build a thing that has to be remembered." The Levite turned his hand over. "Ask yourself what the recital is for."

Hobab said that the recital was the historical prologue, that it set out what the greater party had done for the lesser, and that it did the actual work because by the time you reached the obligations the man had agreed to them in his own mind. He was rather good on this. He had been good on it for a fortnight.

"That is what it does in yours," said the Levite. "In ours it is not persuasion. It is the evidence that the relation was already there before anybody wrote anything. You do not recite what you have done for a stranger. There is nothing to recite."

. . .

Hobab worked at that for the rest of the week and could not get past it, and what he could not get past was that it was not a claim he was able to test.

He could test a weight. He could test a rate, and a well, and a man's stone, and a story about birds. He could take two accounts of the same afternoon and put them beside each other and tell you which one had a thing behind it.

He could not take an instrument in his hands and establish whether the relation it described had existed before it was drafted. There is no operation for that. There is no way to weigh it and no second buyer to price it against and nothing in the trade that resembles it at all.

So he had been reading the thing correctly with the wrong instrument, and the reading had been sound, and it had also been the reading of a man who has been handed a bowl and has measured the bowl.

He did not stop calling it a treaty. He went on calling it a treaty, to himself, in the leaf, because he had nothing else to call it and because the seven parts were the seven parts.

But he stopped being pleased with himself about it, and that took the fortnight.

. . .

He did get one thing that he turned over for a long time afterward.

He had asked, working through the form in order, about the witnesses, because in the ones he knew there was a list, and the list was long, and being on it was a matter of some competition.

There was no list.

There was instead a formula, and the formula named nothing that could be spoken to or bargained with or brought to a hearing. Hobab heard it twice and both times waited for the enumeration to follow, and both times it did not.

He mentioned this to nobody, because he could not think of a way to mention it that was not a criticism of the drafting, and he had been in the camp long enough to know that this would not go well. He filed it with the sockets and the straight lines, under the heading he had opened on the first morning and had still not named.

I.7 — THE WORKSHOP

Oholiab saw him on the second day of the second month and apologised for the delay with a directness Hobab had not encountered anywhere else in the camp.

"You've been twenty-six days."

"Twenty-nine."

"Twenty-nine." Oholiab absorbed it. "I'd have made it nine, and I couldn't, and I'm not going to tell you it was anybody's fault but mine, because it was the reckoning, and I asked for the reckoning."

He was a short, broad, grey-bearded man of Dan with dye to the second knuckle on both hands and the flat, permanently narrowed eyes of somebody who has spent forty years looking closely at coloured thread in bad light. Hobab liked him inside about a minute and had to remind himself twice over the following hour that liking a man is a poor position from which to sell him anything.

They did the trade first, which Hobab appreciated.

Madder he had, and plenty. The scarlet was straightforward. The blue was the difficulty and both of them knew it before either said anything, because the blue came from the coast and came in small and came dear, and had come dearer this year for reasons Hobab was able to explain in some detail and did.

Oholiab heard him out, and did not haggle in the ordinary way, and instead asked four questions about the coast that were so precisely aimed that Hobab revised his opinion of the man's position twice while answering them.

The first was how many houses at Tyre were taking the shellfish now, as against three years ago. The second was whether the ones who had left had gone out of the trade or gone into the cheaper imitation made from lichen, which any dyer can pick at a year's distance but

which a customer cannot. The third was what the imitation was selling at.

The fourth was whether Hobab had ever carried it.

"Once," Hobab said. "By accident. I was told it was the true blue and I paid for the true blue and I sold it as the true blue in Amman, in good faith, and eight months later a man came to find me about it."

"What did you do?"

"I made it good. It cost me most of the year."

"Did you go back to the man who sold it to you?"

"He was dead," said Hobab. "Conveniently for him."

Oholiab thought about that and then named a figure for the blue that was a little above what Hobab had been going to ask for it, and Hobab, who had been in the trade for twenty-six years and had never once had this happen, sat there for a moment with his mouth arranged for an argument he was not going to have.

"That's over."

"It's over by about a twelfth."

"Then why?"

"Because you told me about the lichen and you did not have to," said Oholiab, "and because a man who ate a year to make good on a thing nobody could have proved is a man I would like to still be dealing with in ten years, and the twelfth is what that costs me. Don't look at me like that. It isn't a kindness. I have fourteen suppliers and I am going to need one of them alive and honest for a very long time."

Hobab took the twelfth.

He thought about it a good deal on the road home and could not decide whether he had been paid a compliment or brought.

"You'll take what I have," Hobab said eventually.

"I'll take what you have. I'll take the same again in the spring, if you'll carry it, and I'd rather it was you than the Canaanite."

"You've dealt with the Canaanite."

"I've dealt with the Canaanite," Oholiab agreed, "and he lies about everything except prices."

"That's what I say about him."

"Then we've dealt with the same Canaanite."

. . .

The workshop was four long tents pitched end to end on the northern side of the linen court, and it was not what Hobab had expected, because he had expected a workshop.

What it was, on the day he walked into it, was an accounts office with looms at one end.

"You're at the wrong month," Oholiab said. "Come back in a year and you'll see people making things. Just now everyone is counting."

What Hobab had expected was noise, heat, a smell of wet wool and mordant, men shouting at each other about a batch. What was actually going on in three of the four tents was six men at low tables with leaves in front of them, working slowly, in silence, occasionally getting up to go and physically look at something and then coming back and sitting down again.

Along one wall there were bundles, and the bundles had marks on them, and the marks were not tallies of what the bundles contained. They were tallies of who had brought them.

The reckoning had been going on since before the tabernacle went up and had finished a fortnight since and had been, Oholiab said, the most disagreeable four months of his life, and he had built the thing, so he ought to know.

Hobab asked what it had produced.

"A number," said Oholiab. "Several. Do you want them? Everyone else does."

He gave them from memory and Hobab, who dealt in weights for a living, listened with the specific attention of a professional hearing another man's inventory read out.

There is a thing that happens to a trader when another trader recites figures without looking anything up. Hobab had experienced it perhaps six times. You stop listening to the numbers, briefly, and listen instead to the spaces between them, because a man reading from memory pauses in a pattern and the pattern tells you whether the figures are his.

Oholiab did not pause anywhere.

The gold that had gone into the work: twenty-nine talents and seven hundred and thirty shekels.

The silver: a hundred talents and one thousand seven hundred and seventy-five shekels.

The brass: seventy talents and two thousand four hundred.

"That's the reckoning?"

"That's the head of it. There's the rest of it in the leaves, but that's the head."

Hobab did the gold in his head, roughly, and stopped, and then did it again more carefully, and arrived at a figure he had encountered twice in his life, once as a rumour about a temple and once as a lie.

. . .

The silver was the part that got him, and it got him for a reason he did not expect.

"The hundred talents," Oholiab said. "Those went into the sockets. A hundred sockets, a talent apiece, and the sanctuary stands on them and so does the veil."

"A talent a socket."

"A talent a socket. It came out even. It was meant to."

"And the rest? The one thousand seven hundred and seventy-five?"

Oholiab's face did something complicated.

"Hooks," he said.

"Hooks."

"Hooks for the pillars, and the tops overlaid, and filleted round. Yes." He looked at Hobab with the expression of a man who has found somebody who will understand the next sentence. "The hundred came out even because it was made to come out even. The one thousand seven hundred and seventy-five is what was left, and it was left because that is what the counting produced, and it had to go somewhere, and I spent nine days of my life on where."

"Eleven days on the remainder."

"Eleven days on the remainder. And it is a good remainder and the hooks are good hooks and I would do it again." He picked up a spool and put it down. "But nobody will ever ask about the hooks. In four

hundred years somebody will say a talent to a socket, and it will sound as though the thing was worked out from the start, and the hooks will be why it wasn't."

. . .

Then he told Hobab where the silver had come from, and Hobab wrote it down.

He did not think about doing it. That was the part he noticed afterward. Oholiab said the figure, and Hobab's hand had gone for the sherd in his satchel before any part of him had decided anything, and he had a piece of Qurayyah ware on his knee and a point in his fingers and had scratched two lines of his father's marks on the inside of it, and had blown the dust off, before he registered what he was doing.

The figure was this: a half-shekel from every man, from twenty years old and upward, that went to be numbered. Not a portion. A half, the same from every man. And the number of the men was six hundred and three thousand, five hundred and fifty.

"That's where the hundred talents came from," Oholiab said. "It's not an offering, that part. The offering was the gold and the brass and the cloth and it was given. The silver is the numbering. Every man's half went in and the halves went to the smelter and the smelter made the sockets and the sanctuary stands on them."

Hobab looked at what he had written.

"Say the number again."

Oholiab said it again.

Hobab did not do the arithmetic. He was aware, in a low and unhurried region of his mind, that there was arithmetic available and that he had not done it, and that he would, and that it would keep. He had spent his life around numbers that did not want to be checked in front of the man who had given them.

What he thought instead was: that number is in the ground now. Whatever it is, it has been melted and cast and set under the boards, a talent to a socket, a hundred sockets, and the sanctuary is standing on it. If the number were wrong, it would still be under there.

He put the sherd back in his satchel and forgot about it for a fortnight.

. . .

The Hand was at the third loom from the door and had been there the entire time.

Hobab had walked past twice and had registered a man working, in the manner in which one registers a man working. It was Oholiab who took him down that end, to show him a join.

The Hand was reweaving a section of hanging that had been damaged when the court first went up, in a wind. The section was about a forearm across. It had been set into the standing cloth and Oholiab was pleased about it and wanted somebody with an eye to say so.

Hobab put his eye on it and could not find it.

He knew where it was, because Oholiab was pointing at it, and he still could not find it — not by the light, not against the light, not by running his thumb across the face of it, which is how you find a join when your eyes have stopped being any use. He went at it for some time, in the manner of a man testing a claim, and then stood back.

"That's not a repair," he said. "That's the cloth."

"It's a repair."

"I know it's a repair. You're telling me it's a repair. It's the cloth."

The Hand said that the warp was the original warp and that this was most of it, and that if the warp had been cut he would have had to take out a full width and it would have shown at the selvedge in about a year, in the wear, though not before.

Hobab asked what he would have done then.

The Hand said that he would have taken out the full width.

There was nothing else in it. He had turned back to the loom before Hobab had finished nodding, and Hobab, who had spent twenty-six years in rooms with craftsmen and knew exactly how long a man waits to be praised for a piece of work like that, noticed the absence of the wait and did not know what to call it.

. . .

He got the rest of it from Oholiab as they walked back up the tents.

They came past the intake on the way, and Hobab stopped to watch it, because watching an intake is a thing he could not have stopped himself doing.

It was well run. There was a trestle and two men at it and a third man behind them with a leaf, and a line of women coming up with what they had spun — hanks of it, wound and tied, some of it in baskets and some of it carried across the forearm — and it went onto the trestle and was looked at and was weighed and went into the bundles along the wall, and the third man wrote.

The Companion was fourth in the line with goats' hair over her forearm. She got to the trestle and it was weighed and she went away, and Hobab, who was watching the stone and not the line, could not afterwards have said one thing about her.

Hobab watched the weighing for a while with an entirely professional eye and could not fault it. The stone was honest. The man doing the looking knew what he was looking at and turned two hanks back, both times for the same fault, and both times said why, and both times the woman took it without argument because he was right.

There was singing coming off the ground somewhere behind the intake, and it took him a while to place it, because it was not the sort of singing that asks to be listened to.

Two or three voices, women, low, at the pegged looms in the shade behind the tents, and the Companion was one of them. It was a work song and it was doing work: a short line and a shorter answer, over and over, on a beat that Hobab realised after a moment was the beat of the batten going in. The words, so far as he caught them, were a count. Not a song about counting. A count, with a tune on it to keep it from being lost, running up to some number and starting again, and the starting again was where the voices came back together.

He listened to it for perhaps a minute as a man listens to water, which is to say not at all, and then a donkey went past and he lost it, and it did not occur to him then or at any point in the following six weeks to ask what they were counting or how high it went or who had taught it to them or whether anybody, anywhere in that camp of

leaves and rulings and ruled margins, had ever written down a single figure of it.

He watched the line rather than the trestle after that, because the line was the interesting part.

It did not stop. In the time he stood there — long enough to become aware that he was standing there — it did not go below four and did not go above nine, and the women in it were not the same women. They came up from all four quarters. He could tell by the sandals, and by two different ways of tying a hank, and by the fact that a woman from the Dan side had a word with a woman from the Judah side and neither of them seemed to have met before.

The goats' hair came in grey and brown and mostly black, in long coarse hanks that Hobab's hands wanted to reach out and test, and the coloured work came in small and separate and was handled differently.

"Every day?" he said.

"Every day since the building began," said Oholiab. "It has slowed. It has not stopped."

Hobab looked at the wall of bundles and did the sum that he did about everything, which is how long and how many, and got a number that seemed wrong, and did it again with a better figure for the spinning and got a number that seemed worse.

Then somebody called Oholiab about a batch and they went on, and by the time they reached the far tent Hobab was thinking about the price of madder.

The cloth was not made here. That was the thing Hobab had not understood. There were looms at this end and there were four men on them and they did the fine work and the setting-in, and every thread they touched came from somewhere else.

"Where?"

"The camp." Oholiab said it as though it were obvious, which, Hobab thought later, it was. "All of it. The blue and the purple and the scarlet and the linen, spun by the women, brought in. And the goats' hair. There is more goats' hair in that tent than everything else together and it was every one of it spun by the women of the camp, and I did not ask for it, and I could not have got it any other way, and there is no house in Egypt could have supplied it in the time."

"Goats' hair."

"Over the linen. You don't see it. The skins go over that." Oholiab caught something in Hobab's expression. "You've been looking at the skins."

"I've been looking at the skins for six weeks and thinking somebody had lost his nerve."

Oholiab laughed for the first time that afternoon.

"Everybody does. Everybody. You put out the best linen in the world for a fence and then you roof the thing in porpoise hide and every trader who comes through this camp makes the same face." He was still enjoying it. "It rains four times a year here. What would you like me to put on top? Purple?"

. . .

The other thing Hobab got out of him, walking back, was the problem.

Oholiab did not present it as a problem. He presented it as a piece of arithmetic he had done recently and had not enjoyed, and he presented it in the tone of a man who has told two people and been misunderstood by both.

The work was finished. That was the difficulty.

"Everybody says it as though it's the end of something," Oholiab said. "It isn't the end. It's the start of the part nobody has thought about. I have a hanging out there, a hundred cubits by fifty, in the weather, in a wind that comes off the ridge every afternoon and puts grit through it like a rasp. What do you think that does to fine linen?"

"It eats it."

"It eats it. Not fast. A width at a time, at the edges and at the bottom where it moves against the pins, and nobody will see it for two years, and in the third year somebody will see it everywhere at once." He held up a stained hand. "And when that happens, what am I doing? I am not building anything. I am replacing a width of the best linen in the world, in the field, with no house in Egypt to send to, out of what the women of this camp can spin between everything else they are doing. Forever."

"That's not four months' work."

"It's not four months' work. It's every month there is." Oholiab shrugged. "I have said this out loud twice. Both times I was told that we would attend to it when it arose. It has arisen. It arose the day we put it up."

Hobab, who had spent his working life explaining to people that a thing which has not yet gone wrong is not therefore a thing that will not go wrong, found that he had nothing at all to add.

. . .

They passed the brass laver on the way out, standing on its foot near the door of the court, and Hobab looked at it because it was the only brass thing in the open and because it had been made out of the women's lookingglasses, which Oholiab mentioned as they went by, the same as he had mentioned the sockets and the pins.

"Melted?"

"Melted."

"All of them?"

"What was brought," said Oholiab, and went on ahead to hold the flap, and that was the end of it.

. . .

The story Hobab took away, and told four times before he got home, and told his father twice, was about the stopping.

It had happened in the building month. The material had come in — the gold and the brass and the thread and the skins and the spun goats' hair — and it had gone on coming in, and the men doing the work had gone to Moses and had said, in effect, that the people were bringing much more than enough.

And a proclamation had gone through the camp.

Hobab made Oholiab say it twice, and the second time he had the sherd out, which Oholiab watched him do and did not remark on.

> *Let neither man nor woman make any more work for the offering.*

"You had criers going round the quarters," Hobab said, "telling people to stop giving."

"We had criers going round the quarters telling people to stop giving."

"How long did it take?"

"To stop them?" Oholiab thought about it. "Two days. It was not a difficulty. They stopped."

"That's the part I don't believe."

"It's the part I was there for," said Oholiab, and shrugged, and picked at the dye on his knuckle.

Hobab pressed him, because it was a good story and because he intended to tell it and wanted the details right.

What had they done with the surplus?

"That," said Oholiab, "is the question nobody asks and it is the only interesting part. There was no arrangement. There is an arrangement for a shortfall — there is always an arrangement for a shortfall, every builder who has ever lived has an arrangement for a shortfall. There is no arrangement anywhere for having too much, because nobody has ever needed one."

"What did you do?"

"We argued for nine days." He said it with some relish. "You cannot give it back. Half of it came in without a name on it and the half that had a name on it, the name did not want it back, and the ones who would have taken it back were the ones you would not have wanted to offer it to. You cannot sell it; who to? You cannot put it in the work, because the work is specified and the specification is not a suggestion. And you cannot leave a heap of gold in a tent in the middle of a camp and call that a resolution."

"So?"

"So it is in a tent in the middle of the camp," said Oholiab, "and there is a man whose office it now is, and there are two men under him, and there is a leaf. And that is how you get an office. Not from anybody deciding. From a heap that nobody could think what else to do with."

He picked at the knuckle again.

"That will not happen again. I have thought about it a good deal and it will not happen again, and I am glad I was there, and I am fairly sure I will spend the rest of my life short of blue."

I.8 — THE COUNT AND THE GROUND

The numbering finished on the twelfth day of the second month and the figure went round the camp inside two days, which Hobab thought was fast for a place with no market in it.

He heard it first from a boy holding a donkey, who had it wrong, and then from a woman selling nothing to nobody outside the dye tent, who had it right, and then from Oholiab, who had it right and had it in the correct form, which is to say with the qualification attached.

Six hundred and three thousand, five hundred and fifty.

Men. From twenty years old and upward. Able to go forth to war. Levi not among them, being counted otherwise and to a different rule.

"That's the same figure as the silver," Hobab said.

"It is the same figure as the silver," Oholiab agreed, "because it is the same numbering. The half-shekels came in at the counting. The count and the money are one operation and always were. Whoever thought of that ought to be given something."

. . .

What came out with the figure, in the same two days, was the ordering, and the ordering was the part that stopped him in the row.

He had been in the camp six weeks and had understood that it was quartered. What he had not understood was that the quartering was a document.

Judah on the sunrise side, and with Judah two others, and a figure for the three of them together. Reuben to the south, with two, and a figure. Ephraim behind, to the west, with two, and a figure. Dan to the north, with two, and a figure. Levi not in any of the four, but in the middle, round about the tent, in its own arrangement.

Every one of the four had a standard. Every one of the four had a named man over it. Every tribe within a quarter had its own place within the quarter, and its own man, and its own figure, and the figures added.

Hobab got a man to say the four quarter-totals to him and then went away and added them himself, which took him some time because he did it twice, and they came to the figure. Exactly the figure. Not near it.

He had spent twenty-six years receiving other men's manifests and he had never once had a manifest add.

. . .

The order of the marching was better, and he got it out of a fifty over the course of an afternoon and paid for it in dye.

Judah's quarter goes first. Then Reuben's. Then the tent in the middle of the column, carried, with its own people around it and a stated distance kept. Then Ephraim's. Then Dan's, hindmost, gathering up.

Which meant, when Hobab worked it through, that the tent travelled at the centre of the moving mass and not at the head of it, and that Dan came last and therefore came slowest and therefore collected everything the column shed — the lame, the dropped, the broken axle, the child that wandered — and that somebody had understood, when they laid this out, that a column of that size does not arrive, it drains, and that whoever is at the back is not marching, he is sweeping.

That was a very good piece of work. Hobab had run trains of ninety and had learned the same thing the same way everybody learns it, which is by losing something.

"Whose was that?"

"It's the order," said the fifty.

. . .

The one place where the count came off its rails was Levi, and it came off in an interesting direction.

Levi was not in the numbering. Levi was numbered separately, and to a different rule, and the rule was not twenty years old and upward and able to go forth to war. The rule was every male from a month old.

A month.

Hobab turned that over for the better part of a day, because it is not a small difference. You count men from twenty when you are counting what you can put in a line. You count males from a month when you are counting something else entirely, and the something else is a stock — a standing number that has to be maintained and replaced and that you need to know the shape of, top to bottom, including the part of it that cannot do anything yet.

He asked what it was for and got an answer that took him three goes to hold in his head. Levi was in the place of something. There had been a claim on the firstborn of every house, and Levi stood in their room, one for one, and the numbers had been set against each other and had not come out even, and the remainder — there was a remainder; there is always a remainder — had been settled in silver at a fixed rate a head.

"There was a remainder," Hobab said.

"Two hundred and seventy-three."

"And you paid it out."

"Five shekels a head, after the shekel of the sanctuary."

Hobab thought about the hooks, and about a man spending nine days of his life on one thousand seven hundred and seventy-five shekels of leftover silver, and found that he was smiling at nothing in the middle of a row of tents.

. . .

Hobab did not do the arithmetic that day either.

He wanted to be honest with himself about why, and after some poking at it he arrived at the answer, which was that he had been enjoying the camp and did not want to stop.

This was not a noble reason and he did not dress it up. He had come in irritated, spent nine days failing to reach a man, and had

then found himself in the most interesting six weeks of his working life. There was a fence worth a town and a roof worth a load-cover. There was a filing arrangement for a box that would have shamed the incense corridor. There was a hundred cubits of straight line held across broken ground by a people who had been slaves the year before last, and there were tens and fifties and hundreds and thousands, and every one of them worked, and Hobab had spent his life watching things not work.

So he put the number down carefully, on the pile with the rest of it, and did not stand on it to see whether it took his weight.

That lasted a fortnight.

. . .

What broke it was not suspicion. It was a flock.

He went out on the western side on the fourteenth morning of the second month, to see a man about hides, and got out past the last of the tents and up onto a shoulder of ground, and turned round, and looked at what was below him, and stopped being a guest.

He was not looking at the camp. He was looking at the animals, which is where a man like Hobab looks, and the animals were spread out along a front he estimated at rather more than a morning's walk, in the manner of stock that has eaten what is near and is being taken further each day, and he did the thing he had done ten thousand times, which was to count one section carefully and multiply it by the sections he could see, and then take off a fifth because a man always over-counts.

The wind came up off the western ground while he was doing it and put grit in his teeth and made his eyes run, and he did the second count half-blind with his head turned and one hand up, which is how most counting gets done and is why you do it twice.

He got a figure. He did not like it, so he walked half a mile north and did it again on different ground, and got a figure within a tenth of the first, which is how you know.

He stood on the shoulder for a considerable time, and worked, and by the time he came down he was not enjoying the camp any more.

. . .

You do not measure water in a jar. Water in a jar tells you nothing. You measure water by what it carries: how many head it will water in a day, and the households that keep them, and for how many days running before it goes sullen and you are digging in the bed at noon for what you could have dipped at dawn.

He knew the good water in that country. He had a list of it, in order, and he had spent thirty years correcting the list. The best of it — the very best, a spring he had watered at four times in his life and would have gone a day out of his road to reach — that spring carried a town, and the town's flocks, and travellers, and had never in his hearing failed. There was no better water between the Jauf and the sea and he had drunk at all of it.

He set the men against it first. Not the camp; the men only. Six hundred thousand and three thousand and five hundred and fifty of them, at what a man in that country actually drinks in a day, which is not what a man in a green place drinks and which Hobab could have stated to the mouthful.

The men alone came out at better than twice what that spring would carry.

Twice. The best water in the country, and the men on their own would have drunk it dry and been thirsty, and there was not one woman in the figure, and not one child, and there was not one animal.

He put the women and the children on. He was conservative about it and he knew it and did it anyway.

Then he put the flocks on, and the flocks were the end of it, because the flocks were the figure he had spent the morning counting on two separate pieces of ground, and a sheep in that country drinks three times what a man drinks and will not walk above an hour to do it.

There was no arrangement of the numbers that came out. He tried four. He tried them walking down off the shoulder and he tried them sitting outside the dye tent with his back against a pole, and there was no version in which that many mouths stood in that country for one season, let alone for two years, at any water he had ever heard of, in the driest reading he could make of what people drink.

. . .

Here is what he did not think.

He did not think that anybody was lying. He had been lied to about numbers perhaps four hundred times in his life, and he knew what a lie in a number smelled like, and this had none of it. A lie is round or a lie is over-precise, and it comes with a story attached, and the man who gives it to you watches your face afterwards. Nobody in that camp watched his face. The figure was in the mouth of a boy holding a donkey. It was cast into a hundred sockets under the boards and the boards were standing on it. Nobody was selling him anything.

He did not think the number was false.

He thought: I have the unit wrong.

That was not generosity. It was the only conclusion available to a man with his particular history. Hobab had spent twenty-six years in a trade in which the identical word means four different quantities in four different valleys, in which a measure at Tayma is not a measure at Amman, in which the first question you ask a stranger about any figure is *whose*. He had lost money on that exactly twice, both times when young, and had never lost it again. A number that cannot drink is not a number of men. It is a number of something else, and the something else has a name, and the name is a word he did not know yet.

So he went to find out what the word was.

. . .

The All-Seeing was on the eastern side, in the third tent of the row behind the Judah standard, and was still working, a fortnight after everyone else had finished.

Hobab had assumed the numbering was one operation and had been wrong about that as well. The counting was one operation. The reconciling was another, and the reconciling was slower, and it was still going on, and would go on, and had by then acquired two men, a system of leaves, and a fixed location.

He asked, at the flap, whether this was where the numbering was kept.

"This is where it is kept," the All-Seeing said, and moved a bundle off a mat so that Hobab could sit down.

. . .

Hobab put it plainly, because there was no point doing anything else.

He said that he was a Midianite and a trader and had been forty years in that country, and that he had counted the flocks on the western side on two pieces of ground that morning, and that he knew what the water in that country would carry, and that he could not get the figure to stand up. He said it without heat and without accusation and he was careful to say *I cannot get it to stand up* rather than the other thing.

Then he asked his question, which he had been shaping since the shoulder.

"What is the unit?"

"A man."

"That is what I am asking about. In my trade, when a figure will not go, the fault is nearly always that a word means one thing at one end of a road and another thing at the other. So: a man. Every man? One man, one? Or a man standing for a house, or for a tent, or for a number of tents, as a chief stands for those under him?"

The All-Seeing did not hesitate at all, and did not take offence, and answered the question that had been asked.

"Every male, by his polls, from twenty years old and upward, all that are able to go forth to war in Israel, after their families, by the house of their fathers, with the number of their names."

Hobab waited.

"That is the count," the All-Seeing said.

"Yes. And every one of those was a man who came past and was written."

"Every one of those was a man who came past and was written."

"And you saw it done."

"I saw it done," said the All-Seeing.

There was nothing evasive in it anywhere. Hobab was watching for evasion, and would have found it, and there was none. He had put a question about measurement to a man who kept the measurement, and the man had given him the definition, complete, in the form in which it was held, without hedging and without adding to it, and had confirmed that the operation had been carried out as defined.

It was, Hobab thought afterwards, the most exactly responsive answer he had received from anybody in six weeks in that camp.

He sat with it.

"Then I have it wrong somewhere else," he said.

"That may be."

"You don't think so."

"I have the count," said the All-Seeing, "and the count is what it is."

. . .

He tried one more time, from the side, because he was not a man who left a thing.

"You reconcile these."

"I do."

"Then you'll have had returns that didn't agree. Everybody who has ever counted anything has had returns that didn't agree."

"There were forty-one that did not agree."

"What was wrong with them?"

"Eleven were miscopied. Nine counted a man in two houses, because of a marriage. Fourteen were men who gave their father's house wrongly and were corrected. Six were men who came past twice." The All-Seeing said this without reference to any leaf. "Then one that stood out for nine days, which was a house of Simeon that had been written before a death and again after it, and the difficulty was not the count. The difficulty was which of the two writings was the account of that house."

"How was it settled?"

"It was settled by the elder of the house, who said which."

Hobab nodded slowly.

Every one of those was the answer of a first-rate man doing a first-rate job. He had asked six questions and got six exact answers and had learned, at the end of it, precisely nothing that he had come to learn, and there was nobody to be annoyed with, because at no point had anyone declined to tell him anything.

Hobab tried the other side of it as well, because he had come a long way for this.

"You had a figure for each of the four quarters."

"Four figures."

"They add. I did them. They add to the count exactly, which in my trade does not happen, and I have been thinking about why."

"They add," the All-Seeing agreed, "because they are the same men, counted once, put into four groups."

"Yes. That's what I mean. In my trade the four would add to something near the figure and not to the figure, and the difference would be the thing worth knowing, because the difference is where the men are who don't fit — the ones in two houses, the ones nobody is quite sure about, the ones who were somewhere else that week." He was aware of pressing and pressed anyway. "You had forty-one of those. You told me. Eleven miscopied, nine in two houses, fourteen wrong on the father's house, six twice, one held nine days. Where are those forty-one in the four figures?"

"They are in them," said the All-Seeing. "Each was settled before the figures were made."

"Settled how?"

"Eleven were copied again. Nine were put in one house. Fourteen were put in the house that was correct. Six were struck once. One was settled by the elder of the house."

"So there's no residue."

"There is no residue."

Hobab sat back on the mat.

That was, he thought, the difference between this and every operation he had ever been near. In the trade you finish with a residue and you write it at the bottom and you carry it, and the residue is the honest part, because it is where the counting admits what it could not do. Here there was no bottom line, because every difficulty had been

taken up and disposed of on the way past, one at a time, by a man who would not go on until it was.

He could not fault it anywhere. He had never handled a count kept like it.

It still would not drink.

. . .

He got up to go and then stopped at the flap with a thing that had been sitting under all of it since the shoulder, and which he asked in the manner of a man clearing up a detail.

"The women aren't in it."

"No."

"None of them."

"The numbering is of the men, from twenty years old and upward, that are able to go forth to war."

"I know what the numbering is of," Hobab said. "I'm asking whether there's a count of the others anywhere. Kept separately. For the water, if nothing else."

The All-Seeing considered this, and Hobab had the impression — and could never afterwards say what it rested on — that the question was neither strange nor new.

"There is not," it said.

. . .

He walked back down the eastern row in the middle of the afternoon, past the intake, where the line was four long and moving and the Companion was in it again with her arms full, and past two women on a roof with a needle between them, and out along the interval to where his own tent was pitched in the walking ground because there was nowhere else to put a man who was not of a house.

He was thinking about the unit.

Halfway down the row he saw that he had asked about the water, and had been given the count, and that these were not the same subject and that only one of them had a man in charge of it.

He was two rows further on before he noticed the second thing, which was that he had walked the length of the eastern quarter thinking about a number and had not looked at the roofs once, and that he had been in this camp for two months and had never yet met anybody whose office was cloth.

After that he thought about the price of madder, and went in.

. . .

He left on the seventeenth day of the second month with Oholiab's order in hand and a promise to carry the same again in the spring, and he took the southern track out because the grazing was better on that side, and he did not look back at the camp because there was nothing to look back at that he had not been looking at for two months.

Three days later the cloud went up off the tent, and the trumpets did the thing they had been drilled for, and the four quarters came off that ground in the order they had been given and went north into Paran with the tent carried at the centre of the column and Dan sweeping the back of it.

He was twelve days south by then, in the gravel, having a disagreement with a driver about a girth.

He did not hear about it for four months.

I.9 — WHAT HE BROUGHT BACK

He came down to his father's tents at the beginning of the summer, forty-one days out from the camp, with the flocks already gone up to the high ground and only the milking ewes below, and one of the boys at the fold shouting before he was properly over the ridge.

There were twenty roofs now. The one pitched apart at the eastern end had a second one beside it.

Jethro was under the awning. He did not get up.

"You're thin."

"I'm the same."

"You're thin, and you've been nine weeks longer than you said, and you came the northern way in the wrong month, which means either the eastern wells failed or you had something on you that wouldn't wait." His father moved his feet an inch into the sun. "Sit down. It's the second one."

"It's the second one."

"Good," said Jethro. "Eat first."

. . .

They ate. Hobab was told about the second tent at the eastern end, at length, and with reproach, and learned in the course of it that his father had been ill in the summer and was not going to be told about by anybody, and had recovered, and that the recovering had taken longer than the being ill.

He did not raise it. He had been raised in that household and knew what happened to a man who raised it.

What he did instead was look, over the course of the evening, at the things a man looks at: how his father got down onto the rug and how long it took, whether the hands were steady on the cup, whether the

recitation of the north came out in the same order. All three came out well. The getting down was worse. Hobab priced it, because he priced everything, and gave it four years and hated himself moderately for doing so.

It got dark, the flocks were folded, and his father said: "Now."

And Hobab, who had been building the order of it for six weeks on the road, gave him the camp.

. . .

He gave it as he had always given the north: in order, and in the same order, because his father had never once asked for it differently.

He gave the table at the edge, and the ruled leaf, and the margin. He gave the tens and the fifties and the hundreds and the thousands, and how many went up out of a hundred, and what a hundred had told him about how many would go up next year and the year after and why. He gave the man who could not define a hard cause, and the queue, and the two families arguing about what *always* meant, and the ruler of a thousand who had settled a betrothal on the bread and not on the iron.

He gave the linen, and what it had cost, and the leather over the top of it, and Oholiab, and the twelfth over the asking price, and the reason for the twelfth.

He gave the sockets, and the hundred talents, and the hooks.

The relay took him some time and he was not sorry about it: the six men, the four hundred paces, the three heartbeats of lag, and no drift anywhere in it, not a word out and not a word extra, which he had gone back a second week to test.

He gave the box with both tables in it.

He gave the flocks on the western ground, and the two counts on two pieces of ground, and the figure, and what the best water in that country would carry, and the sum, and the fact that the sum would not go.

He talked for most of three hours.

He did it well, because he had been doing it for thirteen years and because he had spent forty-one days on the road building the order

of it, and because — this was the part he was not going to admit to anybody — he had wanted to be able to do this since the second week, when the thing had first started to be interesting, and had caught himself several times in the camp assembling a sentence for his father instead of listening to the man in front of him.

He gave it as a report and not as a story. That distinction was his father's and had been drilled into him at about fourteen: a story has a shape put on it by the man telling it, and a report has the shape the thing had. You give the order the events came in, or you give the order the parts sit in, and you do not give the order that makes you sound clever, and if something does not fit anywhere you say so and leave it sticking out.

Three things stuck out and he said so and left all three sticking out: the box with both tables in it, the absence of any count of the women, and the sum that would not go.

He left one thing out altogether. He did it deliberately, and he did it in the middle of an account he had spent forty-one days building, and it was the first time in thirteen years of giving that account to that man that he had held anything back at all.

His father did not interrupt him once, which was not his habit, and which Hobab noticed at about the halfway mark and thought about afterwards for a long time.

. . .

At the end of it his father was quiet for a while, and then said, "The sherd."

Hobab had not mentioned the sherd.

"What sherd?"

"You said *I wrote it down* about the half-shekel, in the middle of the sockets, and then you said it again about the proclamation, and you did not notice either time." Jethro did not turn his head. "What did you write on?"

"A piece of a jar."

"Whose marks?"

"Yours."

"Mm," said his father, and let it go entirely, and asked about the leather over the linen.

. . .

His father corrected him twice.

The first was small. Hobab had said that the numbering and the half-shekel were one operation and that this was clever. Jethro said that they were one operation and that it was not clever, it was old, and that Hobab had seen it done in Egypt twice and had not recognised it because in Egypt they did it with grain and did not call it a numbering. Hobab thought about it and found that this was true and that he had watched it happen at a granary outside Pi-Ramesse when he was thirty and had thought at the time that it was about grain.

The second was not small.

"You said the hundred told you it would be nine in a hundred next year."

"He said eleven now, nine next year, five in five years."

"And you believed him."

"He was a careful man."

"He was a careful man giving you a careful man's figure," his father said, "and it is right for as long as nothing happens. Ask him again after the first time one of his fifties gives a matter and is wrong and it is public. It will go to thirty in a month and it will not come down for two years, and the man himself will not be able to tell you why he stopped judging, and he will still be a careful man." He worked his hands flat on his knees. "That is not a criticism of your hundred. That is a fact about men, and he cannot see it from inside it, and neither could I."

Hobab put that away carefully in the place where he put things his father said that he intended to test.

There was very nearly a third correction and it did not come, and the not-coming of it was worse.

He had said, somewhere in the middle of the linen, that whoever had priced that hanging had not been thinking about weather. He had been rather pleased with the observation. His father had said

nothing at the time, and said nothing now, and Hobab, going back over it on the following day, worked out that a man who commissions a fence in the finest linen in the world and roofs the thing behind it in porpoise hide has thought about weather with some care and has decided where to spend and where not to, and that Hobab had made a trader's joke about a decision that was better than his joke.

Nobody had told him. His father's method again.

. . .

Jethro asked about Moses after that, and Hobab told him.

He told it straight, because there was no version of it that came out better. Nine days. The table, the rope, the line he could not stand in, the fifty he was sent to who was not an answer. Zipporah, and what she had done to him, and how long it had taken him to notice.

His father listened to all of it with his eyes on the western ridge.

After a while he said: "Was he well?"

Hobab opened his mouth and discovered that there was nothing in it.

"I don't know."

"Did anybody say?"

"Nobody said. Nobody says anything about him except what he decides." Hobab heard his own voice doing something and stopped it. "He sits from the morning to the evening. Everybody in that camp told me that. Eleven people told me that. It's the first thing anyone says and it is said the same way every time, and I have been six weeks putting together an account of a machine that runs on one man and it did not once occur to me to ask whether the man was —"

He stopped.

"No," said his father, mildly. "It wouldn't."

They sat.

"You wanted to know if it holds," Hobab said, after a while.

"I did."

"It holds. It is the best-run thing I have ever stood in. I have been in three kingdoms and I have never seen anything hold like that, and it is two years old, and it was built out of people who were making

bricks the year before last." He found that he was leaning forward and made himself stop. "It holds."

"Yes," said Jethro. "That is what I was afraid of."

Hobab waited for the rest of it.

There was no rest of it. His father sat with his feet in the last of the sun and did not elaborate.

Hobab tried once, because he was not a man who left a thing.

"You told me to go and see whether it holds. It holds. You said that was what you were afraid of. I would like the rest of that sentence."

"I know you would."

"Is it the man?"

"It is not the man," said Jethro, "and I am not going to say the rest of it, and you may put that down to an old man liking the sound of himself if you want to, and you would be about a quarter right." He shifted his feet. "I will tell you what I will do. Go back in two years. Not next year. Two. Bring me the same account in the same order and we will put the two of them beside each other, and then I will say the rest of it, and by then you will have said it first and I will only be agreeing."

"That's not an answer."

"No," his father agreed. "It's a method."

. . .

Then, in a completely different voice, he asked what the tin had done since the spring.

. . .

The tin had gone up again, a fifth on the spring, and Hobab said so, and then gave him the north; and the north took an hour and a half, and his father took it in the same order as always and forgot none of it.

Then the channel turned round, and that took the rest of the night, and it was the part Hobab had been looking forward to for six weeks without admitting it.

Because here was the thing about coming home: Hobab had walked from the Hejaz to Sinai and back and had spoken to perhaps four hundred people, and his father had not left this pasture in four years, and by midnight it was entirely clear which of them knew what was happening in the world.

Egypt first, and Egypt was not quiet any more. A house at Tyre had gone under in the winter — not a bad year, an actual failure, debts called in from three directions at once — and Jethro had it from two separate travellers with two separate reasons to know, and he laid the two accounts side by side and showed Hobab where they agreed and where they did not, and what the disagreement was worth.

"That's your blue," he said. "That is why your blue went dear and it is not going to come down, and if Oholiab asked you why, and you told him the boats, you told him something true that was not the reason."

Hobab, who had told Oholiab the boats, sat with that.

Hatti after that, and a marriage in the north that Jethro thought was a treaty wearing a dress. Ugarit, and the grain. The coast road, and a name Hobab did not know who had been made responsible for a stretch of it and who was said to be reasonable, and where he could be found, and what he liked.

The copper last, which took a while, because the copper was going somewhere and neither of them could establish where.

"Somebody is buying and not selling," Jethro said. "That is all I have. Punon is working, Timna is working, the Edomites are not quarrelling, and none of it is arriving anywhere I can see. Either there is a house sitting on it, which is a gamble I would not make, or it is going north past Damascus and out of my sight, and if it is going north past Damascus then the north is arming and nobody has told the south."

"Or somebody miscounted."

"Or somebody miscounted," his father agreed, with real pleasure, "which is the likeliest of the three and the least interesting, and I would like you to find out which."

He gave Hobab six things to look at on the eastern run and three men to call on at Tayma, and a message for Yamlik that was not about anything.

Somewhere in the small hours Hobab remembered the thing he had been carrying since his fourth day in the camp, and gave it, and was ashamed that it had come so late.

"Zipporah says the boys are well. She says the elder one has his hands."

His father did not say anything for long enough that Hobab thought he had not heard.

"Did she say it like that?"

"She said it exactly like that. She said you would know what it meant and that it would please you more than anything else I could carry."

"Yes," said Jethro.

He did not explain what it meant. He sat under the awning with his feet gone into the shadow and looked at the western ridge for a while, and then he said that he was tired, and got up, which took him some time and which he did not want help with, and went in past a new band of black cloth running the length of the roof.

. . .

Hobab sat outside for a while after that, in the cold.

It had gone hard and clear the way it does in that country in the autumn, and the sky was doing what it does, and down at the fold a ewe was making the flat repetitive noise a ewe makes when she has lost a lamb that is four paces away from her behind a thorn. Somebody would sort it out or she would sort it out. He listened to it for a while without any intention of getting up.

What he was actually turning over, and did not want to look at directly, was that he had spent six weeks inside a thing he could not stop admiring and had come home and told his father about it for three hours and had been, for most of those three hours, showing off.

Not lying. Every word of it had been true and in order and he would stand on any of it. But he had wanted the linen to land, and it had landed, and he had known while he was giving the sockets that the sockets were good and had given them accordingly.

His father had not interrupted him once.

He had been pleased about that at the time.

He went to his own tent and unpacked, because he had not properly unpacked in three months.

The sherd was at the bottom of the satchel, under the tally-cords and a bad knife he kept meaning to replace.

He turned it over and read it, and it said, in his father's marks, in his own hand:

half a shekel — every man — twenty years and up — 603,550

and under that, from the second time, three words about the stopping.

He sat on his heels holding it for longer than the thing warranted.

It was a broken piece of a jar of his own people's make, out of the yards at the oasis, with a bit of the ibex frieze still on the outside of it and somebody else's arithmetic on the inside, and he could not for the life of him have said why he had written it down, because he remembered the number perfectly well and always had and had recited it to his father not four hours earlier without hesitating.

He turned it in the light of the lamp and looked at the marks themselves, which he had not done.

They were bad. That surprised him and then stopped surprising him: a man's hand at forty-two is the hand he had at nine if he has not used it since, and these were a nine-year-old's marks made by a grown man's fingers, cramped where they should have run and running where they should have stopped. His father would have looked at them for one heartbeat and known exactly how long it had been.

He thought about the fact that he had written *every man* and *twenty years and up*, which were the parts of the definition that had eventually turned out to matter, at a moment when he had had no idea that they were going to matter and had not been looking for anything.

It was interesting and he did not like it.

A man writes down what he has decided to keep. He had decided nothing. His hand had gone into the satchel while the rest of him was still being sociable with a dyer, and had come out with a sherd and a point, and had taken down the four things a factor takes down, in order, without being asked.

He thought about putting it on the fire.

He wrapped it in a rag instead and put it in the box with the tally-cords, where a man puts a thing he has not decided about, and went to bed, and in the morning he was busy, and by the spring he had forgotten it was there.

VISIT II — DEPARTURE AND KADESH

II.1 — GOING BACK

The news came in the autumn, four months late, from a man who did not know he was carrying it.

He was a Dedanite factor whom Hobab had dealt with twice and disliked mildly on both occasions, and he was going south with a short train and a grievance about tolls, and he stopped two days at Jethro's tents because everybody stopped two days at Jethro's tents. Over the second evening he complained at some length about the northern grazing, which had gone bad above the Arabah, and which he blamed on a movement of people that had come up out of the south in the early summer and had eaten the country flat for a distance he then attempted to describe and gave up on.

"How many?"

"Thousands. I do not know. Thousands upon thousands." The Dedanite was not interested in the question and was interested in the tolls. "They went north through Paran. They did not stop."

Hobab set the strap down.

"When?"

"The summer. Early. It is why the grazing above the Arabah is —"

"Which day of which month?"

The Dedanite did not know, and was irritated at being asked, and Hobab, who had spent forty years learning not to press a man who has nothing to give, pressed him for another quarter of an hour and got nothing further, and apologised, and gave him a jar he had not intended to give him.

. . .

His father worked it out loud, afterwards, under the awning, in order.

"You left them on the seventeenth."

"On the seventeenth."

"And they were up and gone by the early summer, out of Sinai, past Paran, in a body, eating as they went." Jethro's hands were flat on his knees. "So they moved inside a month of your leaving. Probably inside a fortnight. Because a thing that size does not decide to move; a thing that size prepares to move, and you were in it for two months and you did not see a preparation, which means the preparation was not visible, which means it was not a preparation."

"They were ready the entire time."

"They were ready the entire time." His father let that sit. "You stood in that camp for two months and looked at every part of it and you thought you were looking at a settlement."

Hobab did not say anything for a while.

"I asked about the water," he said eventually. "I asked about the count and the water. I never once asked where they were going."

"No."

"It did not come up."

"No," his father agreed. "It wouldn't. It was not a question anybody in that camp had, because they all already had the answer, and a thing everybody knows is a thing nobody says, and you cannot collect what is not being said." He shifted his feet. "That is not a fault in you. It is the standing difficulty of the trade and I have never met a man who solved it."

. . .

He went north in the spring with the blue, and took Ahuz, who had been running the southern leg for four years and had asked to come and had given a reason that was not the reason.

The reason was a woman at Tayma. Hobab established that on the second day by the simple method of watching where the man looked when they passed the turning, and said nothing about it for six weeks, and then said something about it at the exact moment it would be most enjoyable, which is what the arrangement between them had been for twenty years.

It was not a decision so much as the shape of the year. He had promised Oholiab the same again and had taken money on it, and the blue had come up from the coast in the winter at a price that made him swear out loud in a public place, and there was no version of the following twelve months in which he did not go and find them.

His father said nothing at all about the two years.

He said, instead, six other things, which Hobab wrote down — on a proper leaf, bought for the purpose at Tayma, because the sherd had gone into the box with the tally-cords and he had genuinely forgotten it was there.

. . .

On the eleventh day they fell in behind an incense train coming up out of the south, and travelled a day and a half in its dust, which was the price of travelling in its safety.

There were sixty-odd camels in it and four of them were carrying nothing but the resin, and the rest were carrying the water and the fodder for the four. That was the arithmetic of the corridor and it had not changed in three hundred years. A load of frankincense that left the growing country in the autumn arrived at the coast seven months later having been handled by nine separate houses, each of which took its portion, and none of which had ever met more than the two houses on either side of it. There was no contract anywhere along that chain. There was no house in it that could have said with certainty what the resin sold for at the far end. Every man in it knew his own two neighbours, his own rate, and the consequences of being wrong about either, and out of those three pieces of knowledge, repeated ninefold across two thousand miles, came a trade that had made three kingdoms rich and had never once required anybody to write anything down.

The master of the train was a Sabaean who had been doing the northern leg for nineteen years and who weighed with a stone that everyone in the corridor knew was heavy.

This was not a secret and had never been a secret. It was simply a fact about him, like his limp. Hobab, buying four measures of fodder

off him at the second halt, weighed against the man's stone and then against his own, and the difference came out at a bit under a fortieth, and the two of them looked at the two stones sitting side by side on the cloth.

"It's a good stone," the Sabaean said, with some affection.

"It's a heavy stone."

"It's my father's stone."

"Your father was a thief," said Hobab, "and so are you, and I'll take the four measures at the middle of the two and we'll both go and eat."

The Sabaean thought about it for slightly longer than the sum involved could possibly justify, which was the enjoyable part, and then agreed, and they took the middle of the two, and they went and ate. The arrangement had been arrived at independently by every man who had ever traded with him, which meant that the Sabaean's stone had been functionally corrected by common consent about nine hundred times without ever being altered, and that he would go to his grave with it, and that his son would inherit it and would be dealt with in exactly the same manner.

Hobab had known men who would have refused to trade with him at all. They were, without exception, men who had gone home poorer.

. . .

At the pass there was a toll, and the toll was Yamlik.

Yamlik had been sitting at the pass since before Hobab was old enough to travel, in a shelter of stone and brush that he rebuilt every spring, and he took a portion from every caravan that watered at the cistern. There was no authority behind this. There was no king in that country and had not been within memory, and Yamlik had never in his life carried a weapon more serious than the stick he used on his own goats. What there was instead was the cistern, which Yamlik cleaned, and the settling pits, which Yamlik dug out every spring with a basket and a bar and which nobody had ever thanked him for, and the four days on either side of it in which there was nothing, and the understanding — old, unwritten, and total — that a man who took water under the shoulder paid Yamlik, and that a man who did not pay

Yamlik would find, over the next several years, that his information had become unreliable.

Hobab paid him in copper, which was what he always paid him in.

"You could pay me in a pot," Yamlik said. He said this every time.

"I could."

"I would take a pot."

"You would take four pots, and next year every man coming up from the oasis would arrive here believing that the rate was pots, and the year after that I would be carrying pots up here for you and selling water in Amman."

Yamlik considered this with the seriousness it deserved. He was seventy, or he said he was seventy, and he had said he was seventy for some years now, and he had all his teeth and an unassailable position.

"The rate is not pots," he agreed.

"The rate is not pots."

"Your father paid in copper."

"My father paid in copper and salt."

"Your father paid in copper." Yamlik looked at him with the mild, immovable calm of a man who had never lost an argument of this kind because he had never been in one that could be settled by evidence. "Salt was later. Salt was after the year the wells at Punon went bad and everyone came through here at once. There were seventy men at this pass for nine days and I fed them all and your father paid me in copper and salt and said it was the last time, and it was, because the next year he sent you."

Hobab did the arithmetic and found that Yamlik was right, and that he had been eleven years old at the time, and that he had no memory of it whatsoever.

"Copper, then," he said.

"Copper is correct," said Yamlik, and put it away somewhere in the brush shelter, in a place that he had presumably been putting things for fifty years and that nobody had ever robbed, because robbing Yamlik would have been like robbing the cistern.

. . .

Nothing at the pass was written down. Nothing at the pass had ever been written down. Yamlik carried in his head the rates for eight kinds of load, the standing arrangements with four families including one that had not sent a caravan through in a decade, a running account with a Dedanite who paid every third year, and the precise history of who owed what to whom going back to a dispute over a lamed camel that had been settled before Hobab was born and that Yamlik would still explain in full to anyone who sat still.

In fifty years the cistern had not been fouled, the rate had not been contested, and nothing had gone missing.

II.2 — THE ROAD WITH WATER ON IT

He went up the eastern side and then cut west above the Arabah, which was the wrong road, and he knew it was the wrong road, and he took it because of the grazing.

The Dedanite had not exaggerated. Hobab came over the last of the high ground in the third week and looked north and west across country he had known for thirty years and did not, for a moment, recognise it.

It had been eaten. Not grazed — eaten, down past the crown, in a swathe that ran out of sight in both directions with edges to it as clean as a cut. On the near side of the line the ground was ordinary poor spring pasture with the thin green on it. On the far side there was stubble and dust and dung, months old and gone grey, and a smell that was not a smell so much as an absence of one.

He got down and walked out into it for perhaps a mile.

Nothing had been wasted. That was the part he could not stop looking at. He knew what a large flock does to bad country when it is driven badly, which is to trample four times what it eats and to foul the rest, and this was not that. This was a country that had been consumed the way a man eats a bird — carefully, without hurry, by somebody who understood exactly how much was there and had no intention of leaving any of it.

He walked back to the animals doing the sum without wanting to. A month, he thought. Six weeks at the outside. And then they had gone on, because there was nothing left, and there had never been going to be anything left, and whoever had brought them through here had known that before they arrived and had brought them through anyway because there was nowhere else to bring them.

There were bones in it, which he had expected, and not many, which he had not.

He turned over four skulls in the course of the mile and all four were sheep and all four had been butchered rather than fallen. No cattle. Nothing that had died of the country and been left. In a movement of that size across ground that poor he would have looked for a beast down every half-mile and a hard track of them at the water, and there was none of it, and the only conclusion available was that they had come through with the animals in a condition to walk, which meant they had come through fast, which meant somebody had made them.

He found a fire-scar, and then another, and then he stopped finding them because they were everywhere, and he understood after the fourth that he was not looking at campfires. They were dung fires. In a country with no wood you burn what the flocks give you, and you burn it where it drops, and the pattern of the scars gave him the shape of the fold lines and the fold lines gave him the shape of the camp, and Hobab walked about in the ghost of it for another half-hour reading the ground.

Judah on the sunrise side.

It was two seasons cold and gone grey and he could still see the quartering in the dung.

He looked north along the line of it for some time.

Then he swore, briefly and with feeling, and got up on the mule, and went to find them.

. . .

He came at the great road on the eleventh day, and struck it at the second well, and stopped, because he had been on it four times in his life and it never failed to do the same thing to him.

The Ways of Horus. Two hundred and twenty miles of it, from the eastern gate down at Tjaru all the way up to Gaza, and every yard of it Egypt's.

It is a road with water on it. That is what it is; that is the entire proposition. At something near a day's march there is a well, and the well is dug and kept and walled, and beside it there is a fort, and in the fort there are men who are paid, and beside the fort there is a granary and a place to leave a load. The wells are what the road is for.

Anyone can build a fort. The wells are three generations of somebody's grandfathers going down through rock in a place where no sensible person would look for water, and being right, eleven times, at intervals a loaded donkey can walk.

Hobab watered at the second well and paid for it and got a receipt he did not want, in three languages, one of which he could read.

He stood for a while afterwards looking north up the line of the road, which was flat and hard and swept and went on until it stopped being visible, and did the thing he always did there, which was to imagine walking up it.

Eleven days. Water every night. Grain to buy at four of the stations and a place to leave what you could not carry. No navigation. No dry stage. No losing a beast because you misjudged a wadi in the dark. At the far end of it, Gaza, and past Gaza the country everybody in that camp had been talking about as though it were an idea.

Eleven days.

. . .

The Seeker was at the second well, going north.

Hobab knew him at about forty paces and was pleased about it in a way he did not examine, because a man on that road who is not a stranger is worth four who are. Same lean build, same coat, older by a year in no particular respect. Two skins, a stick, nothing else.

"There's room," Hobab said, and got a look for it that he enjoyed.

They watered together and squatted in the shade of the wall and did the thing that men on a road do, which is to establish what each of them has walked over since the last time.

The Seeker had been east. He gave the eastern run as far as the Jauf, and he gave it accurately, and when Hobab put in the four things his father had told him to look at, the Seeker had three of them and gave them straight and said he did not know about the fourth. Hobab, who had spent a year being told things by men who did not know about the fourth and would not say so, found that he had warmed to him considerably by the second cup.

Then the Seeker asked about the country east of where they were sitting.

Not the road. The dry. Specifically the dry: where a man could get across it, at what season, carrying what, and how far apart the water lay in the middle stretch where nobody went.

Hobab gave it to him.

He gave it for an hour and a half, and he had not spent an hour and a half so well since the previous summer, because there were perhaps thirteen men alive who could have asked those questions in that order and he had met four of them and had liked two.

Somewhere in the middle of it he heard himself giving away the eastern seeps — which were his, in the sense that anything is a man's, and which he had never given to a living soul who was not his father — and he heard himself do it, and did not stop, and afterwards could not construct a good reason why. The nearest he ever got was that a man who asks about the middle stretch is not competition, because there is no trade in the middle stretch. There is nothing in it at all. Nobody asks about the middle stretch except to cross it.

When it was done the Seeker asked about the slab with the juniper.

"There was water under it," Hobab said.

"Yes."

"Eight miles east of the second stage. Under the slab, exactly as you had it, and I have watered at it twice since and it has not failed either time, and I have told nobody." He looked at the man sideways. "You knew it was there."

"It's a juniper," said the Seeker.

. . .

They parted at the well and Hobab watched him go, and it was the going that stayed with him.

Because the Seeker went north.

Up the great road. Up the flat swept eleven-day road with the wells on it and the forts beside the wells, past the Sherden and the granary and the man with the receipts, and he did it on foot with two skins and a stick and nobody said a word to him about it, and Hobab stood

at the second well and watched a man walk unhindered up a road that he had just spent a day working out was shut.

It was not shut to a man. That was the answer and it arrived about four heartbeats later and Hobab was mildly annoyed at himself for the four heartbeats. A road with a lid on it is shut to a people. One man is not a people. One man is a traveller, and a traveller pays at the well and moves on, and Egypt does not care in the slightest.

Everything depended on how many of you there were.

He thought about that for the rest of the afternoon and never entirely stopped thinking about it, and it was the first thing that had happened to him in two years that he could not put into a report, because his father would have asked him what the man's name was and Hobab would have had to say that in two meetings and something over three hours it had not come up.

. . .

He mentioned the road, later, to a Sherden in the fort who had been on it for six years and who was bored enough to talk to a Midianite.

"If a man wanted to bring people up this road," Hobab said. "Not a train. People."

"How many?"

"A great number. More than you have seen."

The Sherden thought about it, and did the thing that soldiers do, which is to answer a different and better question than the one he had been asked.

"He would not get past Tjaru," he said.

"There is no wall at Tjaru."

"There is no wall anywhere. That is not what a fort is for." The Sherden was enjoying himself now. "A fort on a road is not there to stop anybody. You cannot stop anybody with sixty men. It is there so that the man in the next fort knows, and the man after him, and by the fourth day there are not sixty men, there are six hundred, and they are standing on the only water for two days in either direction and they do not have to do anything at all except stand on it."

He held up a hand and counted off, which Hobab appreciated.

"Eleven wells. Eleven forts. Eleven days, and every one of them is a day you cannot leave the road, because there is nothing off the road. A road with water on it is a road with a lid." He grinned. "It is a very good road. That is the difficulty with it."

. . .

Hobab sat with that for most of a day afterwards, watering, in the shade of the wall.

He had been thinking: they went the hard way and I would not have. Every professional instinct he had was standing in a row pointing north up a flat swept road with eleven wells on it, because a caravan master goes where the water is.

But a caravan is ninety animals and a dozen men and a thing Egypt makes money from, and this was not that.

The road with water on it was the road with the army on it, and those were not two facts. They were one fact, said twice. The water was *why* the army was there. You do not garrison a desert; you garrison the wells, and having garrisoned the wells you own everything that must drink, which in that country is everything that moves.

So there was a road eleven days long that would have carried them, and there was a country at the far end of it, and the road was shut. Not shut by a wall or by a decision. Shut by being good.

That was all of it, and Hobab could see it standing at the second well with a receipt in his hand, and he was fairly sure that the men who had turned that column south into the dry country had seen it too, and rather sooner.

He never did find out what they had been told about it.

He was, in fact, told the reason once, some weeks later, by a man in the camp who gave it to him plainly and without any hesitation at all, and Hobab thanked him and remembered it accurately and never once used it for anything, in the same manner in which he had never used the thing he had been told about the manna, because it was not the sort of reason that a man could take into the trade and do anything with.

What he took into the trade was this: there is a road with water on it, and it is eleven days, and it is shut.

. . .

He came off the great road at the fourth station and went east into the dry.

It took him nine days, and they were bad days, and he had known they would be when he turned the animals off the hard road onto the gravel and had felt the entire train's opinion of him arrive from behind without a word being said.

He found them the way you find anything that large, which is by finding the edge of what they have eaten and walking up the middle of it. The line was two days old at the southern end and half a day old by the fourth morning and after that he was walking on ground that had been grazed the previous week, and then the previous day, and the dung was not grey any more, and on the eighth evening the wind came round and he smelled them from something over four miles out and stopped the train and stood in the stirrup for a while.

Ash. The same ash. Flat and mineral and going cold, in a place with nothing in it, in quantity.

He got in on the ninth day, in the afternoon, at the tail of a column that was still moving.

II.3 — SHOULDER FREIGHT

He came in at the tail end of a move.

It was luck, and he knew it was luck within about an hour, and he spent the rest of the day walking about in a state he would not have admitted to, which was closer to delight than to anything else.

He had spent two months the previous year looking at how that camp was arranged and had never once seen the arrangement do the thing it was arranged for.

Now it was doing it, and he had come in sideways at the back of it, and nobody was going to notice him for two days.

. . .

The physical fact of it he was not ready for, and he had been thinking about it for a year.

Dust to the height of a man for as far as he could see in both directions, and above the dust, nothing — no shouting, no drovers' noise, none of the racket he had walked into the previous spring. Just an enormous low sound made of feet and hooves and wheels and cloth, continuous, with no top to it, that he felt in the soles of his boots before he registered hearing it at all.

A column that size does not look like people. It looks like weather.

He got up on a rise on the first evening and watched the tail of it come in, and what he saw was a dark mass laying itself down onto ground in pieces, quarter by quarter, and going still, and going quiet, and being a camp — the same camp, with the same interval, on ground it had not stood on that morning.

The tents went up before anything else went up, and the women put them up, because the tents were theirs. Hobab knew that and had known it since he could walk and had never in his life thought about it

as a fact of logistics, and he thought about it now, on a rise, watching several thousand roofs come off the ground in the last of the light.

There was a rip on the near side about forty paces down, in a roof going up, and the Companion had a needle in it inside about the time it took to get the pole seated. Not mended. Held — six long stitches to stop it running, which is what you do at dusk on a moving day, and which means the strip comes off in the morning and gets done properly by somebody at the next standing camp, and that somebody is not the woman who has just held it.

It took under three hours. He timed it, because he could not help himself, and then sat on the rise in the dark with a cold flatbread and thought about the seven days it had taken him to get nine men and thirty animals off one piece of ground and onto another, four years ago, in Edom, in good weather.

The signals came first and he heard them before he saw anything.

Two trumpets. He established that inside the first morning by the simple method of asking a boy, and the boy told him more than he had asked for, which is what boys are for.

Both blown together and long: everybody, at the door of the tent. One blown: the princes only, the heads of the thousands. An alarm — which was not a long note at all but a broken one, and which Hobab could not have described afterwards except that you knew it — and the east quarter comes off the ground. A second alarm and the south goes. A third and the west, a fourth and the north.

"And when it's not moving?"

"Then it's not an alarm," said the boy, with mild scorn. "It's the other one. They're different."

"Different how?"

The boy looked at him with the particular pity of a nine-year-old for a grown man, and then made both noises with his mouth, twice each, competently, and went away.

Hobab stood in the middle of a moving camp of that size and thought that he had just been given, free, by a child, in about four heartbeats, a signal code with four call-signs and a distinct non-emergency variant, and that he had spent nine years failing to get nine men and a mule train to agree on what one shout meant.

. . .

Judah's quarter went first and had the easy job, which is being at the front of a thing that has not started falling apart yet. Then Reuben's. Then a gap that was not an accident, and in the gap the tent came, carried, and Hobab got up onto a rise to watch that part and stayed there for the better part of two hours.

They took it down in pieces and in an order.

The priests went in first and did whatever was done, and the coverings went over what was inside before anybody who was not a priest came near it, and then — this was the part Hobab watched twice and went back for on the second day — the Kohathites came in and lifted, on the shoulder, and walked.

No wagon. Not one.

He had assumed, the previous year, that there were wagons. Everything else went by wagon; he had seen the wagons; the Gershonites had two of them and four oxen for the curtains and the coverings and the hangings and the cords, and the Merarites had four wagons and eight oxen for the boards and the bars and the pillars and the sockets and the pins, and the sockets alone were a hundred talents of silver and you do not carry a hundred talents of silver on a man.

The Kohathites carried the holy things, which were the most valuable freight in the camp by a distance that could not be sensibly stated, and they carried them on the shoulder, and they were not permitted to touch them, and they were not permitted to look at them while they were being packed, and they had to wait at a stated distance until the priests had finished covering them and gave the sign.

Hobab watched this happen and his entire working life stood up inside him and objected.

. . .

The Allfather went past him on the second morning at the head of a column of people and did not break step, and Hobab, who had been sitting on a pack with his legs out watching the column, got up without deciding to.

He had not expected to see the man again. He had thought about him a certain amount over the winter, mostly in connection with the bread and the iron, and had told the story twice at Tayma and once to a Canaanite who had not understood it either.

The Allfather looked at him for about as long as it takes to place a face and said, "You came back."

"I came back."

"With the blue."

"With the blue," said Hobab, and was aware that he was pleased, and was aware that being pleased about being remembered by a ruler of a thousand in a moving column was not a thing he intended to examine at any point.

Then somebody wanted him and he was gone up the line.

. . .

Hobab walked with that thousand for most of the day, because it was going where he was going and because he wanted to see what a judge does on a march.

The answer was: the same thing, at a walk, in about a fifth of the time.

He counted rips on the way. Not deliberately; he counted because he counted. Eleven roofs in the eastern quarter alone with a held seam in them, six long stitches, going up anyway, and every one of those was a strip that had to come off and be rewoven by somebody in the weeks after, and the weeks after had another move in them.

Nine matters came up between the second hour and the halt, and he heard six of them, and every one was a moving-day matter — a load put down and gone back for and not found, two households arrived at the same piece of ground, a boy sent ahead who had not arrived, a beast lamed on somebody else's dropped tent-peg, a man who had struck another man's donkey and would not say why.

The Allfather gave five of the six standing up, walking, without stopping the column.

The sixth he did not give at all. He listened to about nine sentences of it and then said that it would keep until they were down, and both

parties accepted this instantly, and Hobab, who was walking four paces behind and had heard the same nine sentences, could not work out what distinguished the sixth from the other five.

He asked. He had reached the stage of simply asking.

"They are neighbours," the Allfather said. "The other five were strangers to each other. A stranger wants it settled. A neighbour wants to be right, and a man who wants to be right in front of a hundred people walking past is a man you will see again in a month over something worse." He was watching the line as he said it. "It will keep. It will be four times as easy on the ground with nobody looking."

"And if it doesn't keep?"

"Then it comes up tomorrow and I have lost nothing," said the Allfather, "and I will have been wrong in private."

. . .

The thing that stayed with Hobab was the peg.

The lamed beast, the fourth matter — a household's tent-peg left in the ground when they struck, and somebody's ewe through the frog of the foot on it two hours later.

The Allfather gave it against the household who had dropped the peg, which was obvious, and set the value, which was not, and then did the part Hobab had not seen coming: he said that the peg was to be produced.

Not the value of it. The peg.

There was a delay of most of an hour while a boy was sent back down the column for it, and it was found, and it was brought up, and it was a peg, and everybody looked at it.

Hobab could not see what the peg was for. He said so.

"You have the beast and you have the value and both parties have agreed. What does the peg add?"

"Nothing," said the Allfather.

"Then why?"

"Because there will be four hundred pegs by the autumn," said the Allfather, "and I would like the story that goes round this thousand tonight to be about a man who had to walk two miles back down the

column in the heat to fetch a peg out of the ground, and not about what a peg costs."

He got hold of a Gershonite that afternoon, because a Gershonite has wagons and a man with wagons will always talk to a man with wagons.

"You've got two."

"Two wagons, four oxen."

"And Merari has four and eight."

"Four and eight. They've the boards and the sockets, which is the weight."

"And Kohath has none."

"Kohath has none," the Gershonite agreed.

"That is the worst allocation of equipment I have ever heard of in my life," Hobab said, with some warmth, "and I have worked for Egyptians."

The Gershonite, who had plainly had this conversation before and had enjoyed it before, stopped what he was doing.

"Go on, then."

"Your load is cloth. Cloth is bulk and no weight and cloth does not care. If a curtain goes off a wagon into the dirt you pick it up and shake it and nobody is any the worse. You have wagons. Merari has boards and metal, which is weight and does not care either — a board that falls off a wagon is a board with a corner off it. He has more wagons. And the one load in this entire camp that actually cannot be dropped, cannot be jolted, cannot be got wet, and cannot be replaced, goes on eight men's shoulders across broken ground for four hours."

"Yes."

"Say something."

"I have nothing to say," said the Gershonite comfortably. "You are entirely right about the freight."

"That is not an answer."

"No." The Gershonite went back to his lashing. "I will tell you the part you will like, though, because you are a carrying man and nobody else asks. The oxen are the problem. Not the wagons."

"Go on."

"Four oxen for what I have and eight for what Merari has, and it was worked out by somebody who has never had an ox go lame on the second day of a four-day move." He pulled a strap. "There is no spare. Six wagons came in and twelve beasts came in and every one of the twelve is working. If I lose one I am short a wagon, because you do not pull a loaded wagon in that country on one ox, and if I am short a wagon then the hangings walk, and the hangings are three hundred pounds of cloth and there is nowhere for it to go except onto people."

"So you'd have asked for sixteen."

"I would have asked for sixteen and been given twelve, and that is not a complaint about anybody, that is what twelve means." He looked up. "Ask me again in three years. Either there will be sixteen or there will be a rule about what gets left behind, and I would put money on the rule."

. . .

It took Hobab most of a week to get the rest of it, and he got it in pieces, and the pieces did not arrive in an order that helped.

The first piece was that the wagons had not been refused. They had been given — six wagons and twelve oxen had come in as an offering, from the princes, and they had been received and they had been distributed, and Gershon had got two and Merari had got four, and to Kohath there had been given none, and that had been stated at the time as the arrangement and not as a shortfall.

The second piece was that a wagon would in fact have been physically fine. There was nothing in the load that a well-packed cart would have harmed. Hobab established this by asking three separate men and getting three answers that all came to the same thing.

The third piece was the one that took him longest, and he got it from a Kohathite in the end, who was resting a shoulder that had a groove worn in it, and who was not resentful in the slightest and had to have the question explained to him twice before he understood that it was a question.

"Because of the staves," he said.

"What about them?"

"They go through the rings and they are not taken out." The man rolled the shoulder. "They are not taken out ever. They stay in. So the thing is always ready to be lifted and there is never a moment when it is standing on the ground with nothing through the rings and a man has to decide how to pick it up." He seemed to think this was the end of the explanation, and then, seeing Hobab's face, added: "A man who is deciding how to pick it up is a man who is touching it."

Hobab sat down on the ground next to him.

He asked whether the staves being fixed had come first, or the carrying.

The Kohathite did not know and had never wondered. It was the arrangement. It had been the arrangement since before they left the mountain.

. . .

He worked at it for two more days and came out the other side in a place he had not expected, which was admiration, and it annoyed him for about a month.

The sum came out like this.

Put it in a wagon and you have solved the shoulders, and you have created six new problems, and every one of the six is a problem of *decision*. Who loads it. In what order. Who checks the lashing. What happens when the lashing works loose at the third hour and somebody has to put a hand on it in a hurry. What happens when a wheel goes. What happens when the wagon must be got over a wadi lip and four men have to lay hands on the load to steady it, in the dust, at speed, with the ox pulling.

Every one of those is a moment where a man decides.

On the shoulder there are no decisions. The staves are in. The covering is on. Eight men lift and eight men walk and eight men set it down, and there is not one instant in the entire operation at which any person is required to work out what to do, and therefore not one instant at which any person can work it out wrong.

Hobab had spent twenty-six years losing money to men working things out wrong at the third hour in the dust.

It was the most expensive solution to that problem he had ever seen. It cost eight men, every move, for as long as the thing existed, and it cost them shoulders. And it was, so far as he could establish over two days of trying to find a hole in it, correct.

. . .

What he could not do was leave it alone.

He went back to the Kohathite on the third day with the thing he had actually been circling, which was the looking.

"You may not see it packed."

"No."

"Not the covering. The thing itself. You have never seen what you carry."

"No."

"Any of you?"

"None of us." The man said it without weight. "The priests cover it. Then we come."

"And a man who looked?"

"Would die," said the Kohathite, in the tone of a man stating a rule about a rope.

Hobab turned it over. He had carried sealed cargo. He had carried sealed cargo for houses who would have had him killed for opening it, and had never once been tempted, because he had known what was in it and had known what it was worth and had known exactly what the seal was protecting.

"Does it not —" he began, and stopped, because he could not find the end of the sentence that was not rude.

The Kohathite waited. He was a patient man with a groove worn in his shoulder and no evident interest in being interesting.

"How heavy is it?" Hobab said instead.

And the man told him — not in a figure, because there was no figure, but as a carrier tells you a weight, which is by what it does to you. It was not the heaviest thing he had lifted. The awkwardness was what did it, because of the length of the staves and because you cannot shift your grip. The fourth hour was where it began. You did

not change out; you were the men who carried it, and if you were unwell you were still the men who carried it, and there was a man of his father's house who had carried it with a broken finger for two days and had said nothing because saying something meant somebody else's shoulder.

"There you are," said Hobab. "That I understand."

"Yes," said the Kohathite, "I thought you might," and went to find his water, and Hobab sat on the ground for a while in the middle of a moving camp and looked at the column going past and did not think about anything in particular.

II.4 — THE FISH IN EGYPT

They put him with the mixed multitude, because that was where he went.

Nobody decided it. He arrived at the tail of a column with fifteen animals and a load of blue and no house, and by the second evening he was pitched among the people who were also pitched among the people, out past the Dan side where the interval stopped being an interval and became whatever the ground allowed, and there he stayed for three months.

He had thought of himself, the previous year, as a visitor who happened not to be of a tribe.

It took him about four days to understand that there were several thousand others in the same position and that they had a name, and that the name was not unkind and was not a compliment either, and that it was written on leaves.

. . .

They were not a people and they were not one thing.

There were Egyptians in it, which surprised him until he thought about it for nine seconds. There were people out of the Delta towns whose grandmothers had been from somewhere else and who could not any longer have said where. There were two households of Kenites who were kin to kin of his and who fell on him with a delight that was mostly about news. There were men whose fathers had been foreign soldiers, and a family of dyers from the coast, and a very old woman from somewhere south of Kush whom nobody could talk to and everybody fed.

What they had in common was that on a particular night in a particular year a door had been open, and they had gone through it,

and the arrangements that came afterwards had been made for other people.

Out there they had made their own.

That took Hobab about a fortnight to see, because it was not written anywhere and nobody described it and there was no man in charge of it. But he pitched in the same place for eleven weeks and he had spent forty years reading ground, and by the second fortnight he could have drawn it.

There was an order at the water. Not the camp's order — the camp's order stopped at the Dan standard and everything past it was, on the leaves, walking ground. Out here there was a sequence and it was old and it was kept, and the two Kenite households drew after the dyers and before the old woman from south of Kush, and nobody had ever said so out loud in Hobab's hearing and nobody had ever broken it either.

Merit held the thread. Not sold it; held it. If you were short you went to her and she gave you what you needed and it came back when it came back, and Hobab watched that arrangement run for as long as he was there and never once saw a count made.

She was a dyer's widow out of one of the Delta towns, about thirty-five, with a bad hip that Hobab recognised at forty paces from having watched two drivers acquire the same one, which is how they came to be talking at all.

He asked her about the thread in the ninth week.

"You know what everybody has?"

"I know what everybody has."

"To the hank?"

"To the hank," said Merit, "and what they will have in the autumn, and which two of them will not ask me and will go short instead, and one of those is proud and the other one is not and I treat them differently and neither of them knows it."

Hobab said that in his trade a man who could do that was worth four who could not.

"In your trade a man who could do that would write it down," she said, "and then everybody would know he had it, and then nobody would tell him anything."

She was also, he established over about a fortnight, the only person on that side who could get anything out of the man who was not spoken to, and she did it by not appearing to, and would not discuss it.

There was a man who was not spoken to. Hobab never found out why and could see it operating from the fourth day: he was fed, and he was not left out of anything that mattered, and no one addressed him directly, and it had evidently been going on for years and would evidently go on.

There were arrangements about children that Hobab could not follow at all. Three households ate together most evenings and one of them had no children in it and got them anyway, in rotation, and everybody appeared to think this was so obvious as not to be worth a sentence.

None of it was on a leaf. There was no office for any part of it, and no appeal, and nobody in the eastern quarter would have recognised a single arrangement out there as an arrangement.

It worked about as well as the camp did. It had been running about as long. And what struck Hobab in the ninth week, sitting outside his tent with a strap, was that if you had gone to any of those people and told them they lived in a place with a system, they would have looked at you exactly as the man of Judah had looked at him when he asked who had put the ten together.

You could see it in the roofs. Hobab had been out past the Dan side four days before he registered what was wrong with the cloth over his head, and what was wrong with it was that it was old. Held seams that had been held for a year and not replaced. Strips gone thin enough to see the sky through in patches, on tents that were still perfectly serviceable and would be serviceable for another two years and then would not be, all at once.

A tent takes about a year to weave and a strip a year to replace, and a woman weaving has to be a woman with somewhere to peg a loom and time to sit at it and wool that is hers. On the Judah side they had all three. Out here a third of the households did not, and the cloth was going, quietly, at the rate cloth goes.

Hobab, who had spent forty years dealing with everybody in that country and liking rather more of them than he admitted to, expected to like them.

He did not much like them.

It took him some weeks to work out why, and when he had it he did not write it down, which was the only thing he did not write down in thirteen weeks.

. . .

The complaining was constant and it was skilled.

That was the part nobody who had not lived in it would have believed. It was not whining. It was *good*. It was the accumulated professional grievance of several thousand people who had been moved a long distance by a decision they were not consulted about and were now living on a ration, and it had developed, in about a year and a half, a form.

You began with the specific. Then you generalised. Then you compared, and the comparison was always with Egypt, and the comparison was always food.

Hobab heard the full version perhaps two hundred times and could have performed it by the fourth week.

We remember the fish.

Which they did, and here was the thing that a man who traded in that country could confirm and that nobody in that camp seemed to have any interest in confirming: they were not lying. The Delta has fish. It has fish as the Hejaz has stones. A man on the eastern branches ate fish because fish was what there was and because nobody could stop him — you cannot put a fence round the water — and Hobab had been in those towns and had eaten it and could remember the smell of the drying racks.

Then the rest of it, in order, always the same order, which is how he knew it was a form and not a feeling.

The cucumbers. The melons. The leeks. The onions. The garlick.

He listened to that list until it lost all meaning and then went on listening, and somewhere in about the ninth week it stopped being a list and started being a manifest, which was a thing he could read.

He priced it, because he priced everything.

Fish out of the eastern branches: no owner. Cucumbers and melons off the wet ground at the edge of a field: no owner, and nobody counting. Leeks. Onions. Garlick. He had carried garlick and he had never once carried it as cargo; it went on a train as what the drivers ate.

There was not one item on that manifest with a market on it. Not one thing a man could have taken to a factor. No meat, no wine, no bread of any quality, nothing that had ever been weighed against a stone or entered on anybody's leaf.

Hobab had spent twenty-six years moving goods that belonged to somebody, and the first question he asked about any load, before weight and before condition, was whose it was.

The answer to this one was nobody's.

. . .

The Chaos-Weaver worked leather, out of one of the Delta towns. He was the best complainer Hobab ever heard, and the reason he was the best was that he was always right.

That was not a figure of speech. Hobab tested it, because he tested everything.

The man said the ration on the eastern side would not hold. Hobab spent two days on it and found that it was short by about a fifteenth and getting shorter, because the distribution point had been sited where it was convenient rather than where the people were, and the people were still moving toward it, and nobody had noticed because the shortfall fell on those least able to say so.

The water order at the third source, he said, had been rearranged to suit a household of Naphtali and would be rearranged again inside the year. It was, twice.

Then the leaves. The leaves at the intake, he said, did not record who had brought a thing, only that it had been brought, and that this

was the sort of gap that widens. Hobab went and looked, and the leaves recorded both, and he came back and said so, and the man heard him out and said: *the coloured work, yes. Not the goats' hair.* And Hobab went back and looked again, and on the goats' hair they recorded weight and quality and the day, and not the name.

He did not do anything with any of it. That was the other thing about him. He said it, exactly, to whoever was there, and then he went back to the leather. He did not petition, he did not organise, he did not go up. In six weeks Hobab never once saw him in a queue.

"You could take that to a fifty," Hobab said, about the ration.

"I could."

"You'd be right. They'd have to move it."

"I have been right for a year and a half," said the Chaos-Weaver, without heat, without self-pity, threading a strap, "and they have moved three things."

"Then what are you doing?"

The man looked up and considered the question seriously, which Hobab had not expected.

"Saying it," he said.

. . .

The quail were four months gone by the time Hobab got there and he still spent nine days on them.

He had to, because everyone talked about it, and because they talked about it in a manner that made no sense to him, and because the numbers were wrong.

The migration he knew. Every man in that country knows it and half of them eat off it. They come north across the sea in the spring, low, in numbers nobody has ever counted, and they arrive at the far shore with nothing left in them and they come down and they stay down. You can take them in the hand. Hobab had done it as a boy on the coast at Ezion-geber and had done it since with a cloak, and it is not hunting and nobody who does it pretends it is.

So when the first four people told him that quail had come in off the sea and the people had gathered them for a day and a night and a

day, he had said yes, and had thought: spring, exhausted birds, a wind behind them, and a very great number of people standing in the right place.

He asked what they had taken.

The figure he got was ten homers. He assumed a mistake, because it was an absurd figure — ten homers is not a bag of birds, it is a load, it is what a good donkey carries and then some — and he went and asked somebody else, and got ten homers, and asked a third, who said ten homers and added that this had been *the least* that anybody had gathered.

He spent four days on it, and he was careful about the questions, because a man asking about food gets told what people wish had happened.

The figures came back consistent.

Three on the Dan side, two on the Judah side, three households of the mixed multitude — people with no cause to agree, two of them not on speaking terms — and every one gave him the same figure without hesitating, in the same words.

He that gathered least gathered ten homers.

In twenty-six years Hobab had never had eight independent sources agree to the shekel. When they agreed like that it was true. That was not a rule of thumb, it was the rule, and it had kept him solvent through two bad decades.

Then a man took him out to where they had spread them to dry, and the ground was right: the scatter, the spacing of the lines, and at the western end a stink still in the dirt four months on that told him what had lain there and roughly how much.

He put the two together, which is what a man does, and got a third thing that neither of them contained.

Hobab stood on that ground for a long time.

He knew what quail weigh. He knew, to within a bird or two, what a man standing in the middle of a fall of exhausted quail can take in a day if he does nothing else and has help, because he had done it, and it was not that.

It was not close to that.

He put it in the leaf that night, in his father's marks, and what he put was the figure and the number of sources and the state of the drying ground, and then, underneath, four words about the migration, so that anybody reading it would know that the man who wrote it down had known about the birds.

He did not write what he thought it meant.

He also did not write down which words the eight of them had used, because he had not thought of it as a thing that could be written down, and because it had not occurred to him that there was any difference between eight men saying the same true thing and eight men saying the same sentence.

He would have said, if asked, that he had cross-checked it. He said exactly that, for twenty years, to anybody who raised it.

He had nothing to put there. He was a man who had spent his life being the person in the room who could tell you what a load weighed, and he had walked a drying ground with his own feet and had come away with a figure he could not carry, and there was no unit error available to him this time, because a homer is a homer in every valley between Tayma and the sea.

. . .

The place where it had happened had a name now.

They had buried a great number of people there, in the days after, of something that came with the eating or after the eating, and the name of the place was about the burying, and the name was on the leaves, and it went into the itinerary alongside every other stage, in the same hand, in the same column.

Hobab went past it on the way back from the drying ground.

There was nothing to see. There is never anything to see. The ground had been picked over by whatever picks over that country and the graves were graves and there were a good many of them.

He noted the stage in the leaf, with the day, because the stages were what he was recording.

. . .

The other thing he could not get anybody to talk about was the seven days.

He came at it from the itinerary, because the itinerary was what he was keeping. The stages were dated. He had them from a man who had them, and he had copied them into his own leaf with the days beside them, and the arithmetic was straightforward until Hazeroth, where the column had stood still for a week.

Not a long stage. A stop.

He asked why, because there is always a why and it is usually water or an animal, and he had a professional interest in what stopped a column of that size and what it cost to stand it up again.

The first man said that they had abode at Hazeroth.

The second man said the same thing in the same words, which Hobab noticed.

The third man, who was a Kenite and kin to kin of his and who owed him nothing, said that there had been a trouble about the prophet's sister, and that she had been shut out of the camp seven days, and that the people had not journeyed until she was brought in again.

Hobab waited for the rest.

There was no rest. He asked what the trouble had been and the man said he did not know, and Hobab, who had spent forty years telling when a man did not know from when a man would rather not, was satisfied that he did not know.

He asked whether she was well now.

"She came in," said the Kenite. "They journeyed."

Hobab put it in the leaf as he put everything in the leaf, which was as a stage and a duration: *Hazeroth. Seven days, standing. Then Paran.* He did not put anything else, because there was nothing else to put, and because a man who writes down what he was told and then writes down what he supposes has ruined the leaf and will not be able to tell the two apart in a year.

What he did do, walking back, was the sum, because he could not help it. Seven days is seven days of grazing eaten off ground you had not meant to camp on, and seven days of water out of a source you had costed for two, and seven days at the far end of the season when you are trying to reach somewhere before the heat.

He worked out what it had cost them and the figure was considerable, and nobody he asked seemed to think of it as having cost anything at all.

. . .

The seventy came in his third week and he watched it happen and it was the second time in his life he had watched his father be right at a distance of forty days' travel.

The complaint had gone up. Not the ration, and not the quail, but the accumulated fact of a very large number of people wanting something from one man at a rate that could not be met, and the answer that came down was seventy of the elders, named, taken and set about the tent, and the burden divided.

Hobab heard it announced and sat down on a pack.

He had watched this exact thing done at Sinai a year and a half earlier, from the other end, and had walked round a camp asking rulers of tens and fifties and hundreds and thousands what a hard cause was and had been given four different answers. That arrangement had been made because one man could not carry the judging.

This one was being made because one man could not carry the rest of it.

He got up and went and found somebody who would know and asked the question he actually wanted, which was whether the seventy were over the thousands or under them or beside them.

The man did not know.

Hobab asked three more people over the following two days and got: beside, over, and a long careful answer that came out at *it has not arisen yet*.

He wrote all four down, which he could not have said why he did, and by the following spring the fourth one had turned out to be correct.

II.5 — HOUSES

He ate in a house in the sixth week and had not been in one in two years, and it took him most of the evening to work out what was wrong with everything he thought he knew.

The invitation came sideways, the way they do. He had done a man of Judah called Shobai a favour about a strap — no favour at all; he had a strap and the man did not — and Shobai had said the thing men say, and Hobab had said the thing men say back, and eleven days later a boy came out to the mixed-multitude side to say that it had been meant.

He went, because you go.

. . .

The household was nine people in two tents and a thorn fold, and it was ordinary, and Hobab had eaten in four hundred like it between the Jauf and the sea.

Barley, and a sour milk he liked and said so, and a dish of something green that he was given more of than anybody else because he had said he liked the milk, which is how that works everywhere.

Shobai was thirty-four and had a wife who did not sit and a mother who did, and the mother had views. There were four children of whom two were audible. There was a brother-in-law present who was clearly present most evenings and clearly not entirely welcome, and Hobab worked that out inside a quarter of an hour and was pleased with himself about it and then noticed that the mother had worked out that he had worked it out.

He had a very good evening.

They asked him things, which he had not expected. He had spent a year in that camp being the man who asked, and had got so used to it

that the first three questions went past him before he understood that he was being interviewed.

What was the sea like. Had he been on a boat. Was it true that there were people in the south who were black, and were they black all over. How far was Midian and how long did it take and did he do it alone. What did a Moabite eat. Whether there was any country where it rained in the summer, because a man in the next ten said there was and nobody believed him.

The mother asked whether he had a wife and got the answer and said nothing about it, which Hobab noticed and was grateful for and thought about later.

Shobai's elder boy, who was eleven, asked him what the most valuable thing was that he had ever carried, and Hobab thought about it properly, which the boy had not expected, and told him: a box out of the north, sealed, that he had carried for nine days without knowing what was in it and had put into the hands of a man at Amman and had never found out.

"Weren't you going to look?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I would have found out," said Hobab, "and then I would have known, and a man who knows a thing like that is worth killing, and I had a wife's brother waiting for me at Ezion-geber with four donkeys." He drank some of the milk. "There is a considerable amount of money in not being curious. It is the hardest thing in the trade and nobody ever tells you."

The boy thought that was the best thing he had ever heard and said so, and the mother said that it was a poor lesson for a child and looked as though she meant something else.

. . .

What he had not been ready for was the ten.

He had spent a year thinking about tens. He had asked eleven people what a hard cause was and had stood at a table and been written into a margin and had watched a ruler of a thousand settle a

betrothal on the bread, and he had a leaf with the escalation entire on it, and he had thought of a ten as the bottom rung of a machine.

From inside a tent it is not a rung. It is nine other households you cannot get away from.

That came out over the course of the evening without anybody explaining it, because nobody in that room thought there was anything to explain. The ten was who you borrowed from. It was who watched the fold when you went for water and who did not, and everybody knew which. It was who had been asked to the marriage and who had been asked late. When the mother said a name, four people at that fire adjusted their faces, and Hobab did not need to be told what the name had done.

"How were they chosen?" he asked. "The ten. Who put you with these nine?"

The man looked at him.

"Nobody put us. We were together in Egypt."

. . .

Hobab sat with that for the rest of the evening and for a considerable time afterwards.

Because it meant the reform had not made the tens. It had *found* them. Somebody had gone out and drawn a line round nine households who had been sharing a wall and a well and a set of grievances for thirty years and had called it a ten and given it a man, and the thing had held from the first day, and everybody had said what a well-designed arrangement it was.

He thought about his father saying *appoint able men over thousands and hundreds and fifties and tens*, and about how neat that had sounded, and about the fact that Jethro had never once in Hobab's hearing said where the tens were supposed to come from.

He had assumed his father knew and had not said. Sitting by a fire in the eastern quarter with a bowl of sour milk, he revised: his father had not known, and had not needed to, because there is no country on earth where nine households are not already standing next to nine

other households, and a man who says *make tens* has said nothing at all and has been thanked for it for forty years.

. . .

The argument came after the food and Hobab enjoyed it enormously.

It was about a she-goat and it was between the man and the brother-in-law and it had plainly been going on since the winter, and it went round three times in front of a guest, which told Hobab that it had stopped being about the goat some while ago.

And in the middle of it the mother said, without any particular emphasis, that they should take it to the ten.

Everything stopped.

It stopped for about the length of two breaths, and then the man said that they were not taking a goat to the ten, and the brother-in-law agreed with him for the first time that evening and with visible relief, and the subject was changed by three people at once.

Hobab, riding no mule and going nowhere, watched the entire manoeuvre with the pleasure of a professional.

They had a procedure. It was free, it was near, it was staffed by a man they saw daily, and it would have settled the goat inside an afternoon.

And it would have made the thing real. That was all of it. A grievance that stays in a tent is a grievance two men can go on having comfortably for years; a grievance that goes to the ten has been *stated*, and gets an answer, and one of them loses, and they will both still be sitting at the same fire the following evening for the rest of their lives.

Nobody in that camp had built the thing to be avoided. They had built it well, and it worked, and the people it worked on had promptly and sensibly worked out what it cost to use.

. . .

Hobab walked back out to the mixed-multitude side in the dark and put none of it in the leaf, and could not have said why at the time, and

worked it out four years later on a road, which was that he had not been there as a factor.

He had been a guest, and had been given the good dish, and had liked them.

. . .

He went to his sister in the seventh week and had been putting it off since the second, and both of them knew it and neither of them said so.

The tent was where it had been. He came at it in the middle of the afternoon, which was wrong, because it is the hour when a household has nothing to do with a visitor, and he did it deliberately so that there would be a reason for the thing to be short.

She came out and put her hands on his face and said his name twice.

. . .

It was worse than the first time because there was nothing to transact.

Two years earlier he had wanted an hour with Moses and she had wanted him not to ask for it, and the two of them had spent an afternoon doing the thing their father did, and Hobab had come away beaten and had not noticed until he was outside, and had gone home able to tell himself he had had a conversation.

This time he wanted nothing at all, and neither did she, and they sat in a tent with a jar between them and found out what that is like between a brother and a sister who have not managed one in twenty years.

She asked after the flocks. He gave her the flocks. She asked whether the western pasture had come back and it had, and he gave her that, and it took a good while because he made it take a good while.

The elder boy came in and was polite and went out. There was a woman at the door about thread who did not come in.

. . .

She fed him, and it was good, and she had done something to the barley that their mother used to do and Hobab said so and she said that she had not thought about that in years and did not say anything else.

They talked about the camp for a while, which was safe. She had opinions about the water rota and they were correct. She knew more about who was going to be made a fifty in the spring than anybody Hobab had spoken to in seven weeks, and gave him three names, and two of them were right and the third one was better than right, because the man was not made a fifty and Hobab found out four years later exactly why not and it was the reason she had implied and not said.

Twice she got close to something and both times she went round it, and Hobab, who had spent his life watching men do that at a price, could not for the life of him work out what the price was here.

The second time, she said: "Are you going to keep doing this?"

"The trade?"

"The trade. The road. Forty days each way at forty-four."

"I have four men and thirty-one animals."

"That is not what I asked and you know it is not." She turned the jar a little. "Our father managed it. He sat down at sixty and let it come to him and he was better at it after than before. You will not sit down."

"No."

"Why not?"

Hobab opened his mouth and discovered that there was nothing in it, which had happened to him twice before in his life and both times in front of somebody who was related to him.

"I do not know," he said.

"No," said Zipporah, and looked at him for a moment, and then asked whether Yamlik was still at the pass.

. . .

He looked at her left hand three times over the course of that afternoon and it was worse than it had been.

The skin at the side of the thumb was gone past the edge now and there was a place below the nail that had been open and had healed badly and had been opened again. She did it while she talked. She did it while she was asking him about the western pasture, in the middle of a sentence about grass, without any change in her face at all.

He had watched their mother try bitter stuff and a wrapping and a slap on a girl of nine.

He did not say anything about it, and there was no moment in that afternoon at which he came near to saying anything about it, and afterwards he could not construct one even in the versions he made up on the road.

. . .

He told her about the house he had eaten in, because it was the best thing he had to give her, and gave her the ten and the goat and the mother and the moment when everything stopped.

She let him get all the way to the end.

"Ten households," she said.

"Ten households."

"And what is a household?"

Hobab said that a household was a man and his people, which is what a household is.

"A household is a tent," said Zipporah. "You cannot have one without one. A man with no tent is somebody's guest and has been all his life and will be until he is given one, and he does not get given one by his father." She had the cord in her hands again. "Who owns a tent?"

Hobab opened his mouth.

He had watched their mother weave. He had carried the poles of his father's shrine two hundred times and could have told anybody its weight. He had sat under a roof on that ridge for forty years that had been re-stripped past every thread it started with, and he had stood in the eastern quarter in his first week and priced a linen hanging at the cost of a small town, and he had spent a year and a half in that camp asking men what a hard cause was.

"Her mother gives it to her," he said.

"Her mother makes it and gives it to her and it is hers, and she takes it to her husband, and if he puts her away she takes it back and he is a man with no tent." Zipporah did not look up. "Your fifties and your hundreds and your thousands are stacked on ten tents at the bottom and every one of them belongs to a woman, and none of you have ever once had to think about that, and I would not be telling you now except that you have been sitting in my tent for two hours being pleased with yourself."

. . .

He walked back out to the mixed-multitude side and did not get there for some while.

He had built forty years of an account on the proposition that the women's work was invisible because nobody counted it. He had been right that nobody counted it and he had been wrong about what followed, and what followed was not invisibility. The tens were visible. They were the most visible thing in that camp. Every man in it could have named the nine households he was reckoned with.

Nobody had ever gone one step down.

He did not put it in the leaf that night. He put it in about six years later, in the fourth sort, in one line, and could not have said what he wanted it for.

. . .

At the door she straightened his collar, which had not needed straightening since he was nine.

"Tell our father I am well."

"He does not ask."

"I know he does not ask," said Zipporah. "Tell him anyway. He will do something with his face and you will not know what it is and it will be worth watching."

Hobab said that he would.

He did, in the winter, and his father did something with his face, and Hobab did not know what it was, and it was worth watching.

II.6 — INSTEAD OF EYES

They sent for him in the ninth week, and he had been in the camp long enough by then that he did not think anything of it.

That was the part he told badly for the rest of his life. Everybody who ever heard the story wanted him to have known, and he had not known. A boy came to the tent in the middle of the afternoon and said that he was wanted, and Hobab, who by that stage of the visit was wanted about four times a week by people who had heard that there was a Midianite out past the Dan side who could tell you what ground would carry, put down the strap he was mending and asked where.

The boy told him where.

Hobab went and washed and put on a better coat, which he was embarrassed about afterwards and never mentioned to anybody.

. . .

He had built this a number of times over two years and none of the versions were any use.

In the versions there was a difficulty to be got past — a rope, a Levite, a line, a man with a leaf who had nowhere to put him — and there was a moment at which the difficulty gave way, and Hobab had spent a certain amount of the road north the previous spring working out what he would say in that moment.

There was no difficulty. He walked up and a man said *he is expecting you* and that was the end of it, and the nine days he had spent the previous year failing to get past a rope did not come up and were never mentioned by anybody at any point.

. . .

Moses was smaller than the account of him.

That was the first thing and Hobab was ashamed of it and it was true. Everything Hobab had been told about the man for two years had been about scale — the sitting from the morning to the evening, the line that did not move, the machine that ran on him — and what he came to was an old man on a rug with dust in the seams of his face and his sandals off, who got up, which Hobab had not expected, and who looked at him for a moment with an expression Hobab could not read and then said his sister's name.

The voice was the surprise. It was low and it did not carry at all, and there was a hesitation in it — not a stammer, nothing so definite, but a small check before certain words, as though each one were being taken off a shelf and looked at. Hobab, who had spent two years listening to a relay of six Levites throw a sentence four hundred paces without losing a syllable, sat in a tent with the man the sentences came from and had to lean in.

His hands were a herdsman's, which they would be. Forty years is forty years and it does not come off.

They talked about Zipporah for a while. It was not comfortable and neither of them made it comfortable, and it did not go anywhere, and Hobab came out of it knowing exactly as much as he had gone in with.

They talked about Jethro after that, and it was better, and went on longer than Hobab had expected. Moses wanted to know how he was. Specifically: how he got down onto a rug, and whether the recitation still came out in order, and how long it took him to stand.

Hobab answered all three accurately.

"Four years," Moses said.

"That was my estimate."

"Yes," said Moses.

. . .

After that he asked about wells.

Hobab had been in the tent perhaps a quarter of an hour and had not understood until that moment that this was what the meeting was, and that everything before it had been a courtesy properly done.

The questions were good. They were better than good; they were the questions of a man who had lived forty years in that country as a herdsman and had not forgotten any of it and knew exactly how much he had forgotten of the parts he had never known.

Where the ground carried in the seventh month. What a wadi that ran wet under stone looked like from a distance in bad light. How far a flock would walk to water before it began costing you more than the water was worth. What was east. What was east of what was east.

Hobab answered for an hour and enjoyed it enormously.

At the end of the hour Moses asked him to come with them.

. . .

It was put plainly and it was put twice.

The first time it was put as an offer, and it was put badly, which Hobab thought about afterwards for a long time.

"We are going up," Moses said. "Come with us. It will be well with you."

Nine words and a promise anybody could have made, from a man who had spent an hour on wells and had asked the four questions Hobab would have asked, and Hobab understood inside a heartbeat that the man had never in his life had to offer anybody anything and did not know how it was done.

Hobab said no.

He said it faster than he meant to and heard himself do it, and what he said was that he would not go, and that he would go to his own land and to his kindred, which was true, and which was also the sentence a man reaches for when he has not thought about it and does not want to start now.

It was put a second time, and the second time was not an offer.

"Do not leave us," Moses said. There was the small check before the last of it. "You know how we are to encamp in this country. We do not. You would be to us instead of eyes."

. . .

Hobab did not answer that, and it was not settled, and it was never settled.

He said that he would think about it. He said it in a manner that both of them understood to be a real answer rather than a refusal dressed up, because it was, and because Hobab was a man who thought about things and both of them knew that too.

He asked what the work would be, in specific — how many days out, what he would be expected to bring back, who he would report to, and whether there was to be a leaf.

Moses said that he did not know, and that this was the difficulty, and that they had never had anybody who could do it, and that they would work out what the work was after they had somebody doing it.

Which was, Hobab thought walking back through the interval in the dark, the only thing anybody in that camp had said to him in two years that cost the speaker something, and the single worst offer of employment he had ever received.

. . .

Eleven days later they sent the twelve.

He heard about it the way he heard about everything, which was late and in a queue.

One man out of every tribe. A ruler in each case, a head of a house, named — he got the list entire off a man who had it by heart and could not tell him what any of them did — and they were to go up into the south country and into the mountain and see the land, what it was, and the people that dwelt therein, whether they were strong or weak, few or many; and what the land was, fat or lean; and whether there was wood in it; and the cities, whether they dwelt in tents or in strong holds.

Hobab listened to the brief being recited and it was a good brief. It was, in fact, very nearly the brief he would have written, and it had one thing in it he would not have thought of, which was the wood.

He asked, in the queue, whether they had all done this sort of work before.

Nobody knew.

Later, of a fifty he had come to be on terms with, he asked whether it had been considered to send somebody who had.

The fifty said that they had sent a ruler out of every tribe, because that was the thing that had been decided, and that there were twelve tribes and therefore twelve men.

"That's an arrangement about tribes," Hobab said. "It isn't an arrangement about the work."

"It is the arrangement," said the fifty.

. . .

The Seeker went out three days after the twelve, on his own account, and Hobab walked half a morning with him because they were going the same way to the top of the wadi and then not.

"They've sent twelve," Hobab said.

"I heard."

"Twelve is too many. Two is the number. Two men move at the pace of two men and can lie down in a fold of ground and be gone in the morning, and twelve men are a party and a party is seen, and a party that is seen from a wall is a party that gets told what the wall wants it to think." He was aware that he was talking too much and went on. "And they're princes. Every one of them is a man who is used to being agreed with."

The Seeker took this without comment.

He asked Hobab for the country north of the Arnon, which he had asked for once before, at a seep, two years earlier, when Hobab had told him that it was not his country and that he had heard what everybody had heard.

Hobab gave him what he had. It took under a quarter of an hour and most of it was hearsay and he flagged the hearsay as hearsay, and at the end of it he said, because it had been sitting on him since the queue: "I was asked to do this. Not this. The general thing. To be eyes for them."

"And?"

"I said no. Then I said I'd think about it, which is a worse answer."

The Seeker walked on for a while.

"It's a good country up there," he said. "Better than they'll be told."

They parted at the top of the wadi and the Seeker went north, and Hobab watched him out of sight, on foot, with two skins and a stick.

. . .

The forty days were the longest of the twelve weeks and he got more work done in them than in the rest put together.

He also got, in the third of them, the only conversation of that visit that he could never afterwards fit anywhere.

The man was of Zebulun and had no office of any kind. He was not a ruler of ten or of anything; he had no craft that Hobab could identify beyond the ordinary competence of a man with animals; he was about thirty-five and had a bad tooth and had come over to the mixed-multitude side to buy a strap because Hobab's were better than the ones on his own side, which was true.

They did the strap. Then they sat, because it was hot.

Hobab asked him, out of the habit of asking, what he thought would happen.

"We'll go up," the man said.

"When?"

"When it's said."

Hobab waited, and it became clear that this was not the opening of an answer but the answer.

He tried it from the side he understood. Did the man think the towns up there were as walled as they were saying. The man did not know. Had he heard what the twelve were sent to look at. He had heard some of it. Did he think it could be done.

"It's been said," the man said, "so it'll be done. I don't know how. I'm not the one that knows how."

There was no anxiety in it at all, and no fervour either, and it was not stupidity — the man had already got the better of Hobab on the strap by about a fifteenth and both of them knew it. It was the flattest thing Hobab had ever heard anyone say about anything.

"Doesn't it trouble you?" he said. "Not knowing how?"

The man thought about that with what appeared to be genuine effort.

"I've never known how," he said. "There wasn't a how in Egypt either. There was just what happened."

He took his strap and went back to the Zebulun side and Hobab sat where he was for some time.

He could not get it into the leaf. He tried, that evening, and what he wrote was *man of Zebulun, no office, expects to go up, does not know how, is not troubled*, and he read it over and it said nothing at all, and it was the most accurate sentence he had ever written and it was completely useless.

He struck it out and put nothing.

It was, though he did not think of it in those terms and never afterwards mentioned it to anybody, the closest he came in seven weeks to standing next to somebody who was in it.

He sold the blue. He got a price he was not ashamed of and a commitment for the following year that he privately thought Oholiab would not be able to honour, and he said so, and Oholiab said he knew and to bring it anyway.

He walked the camp, which he had not done properly since arriving, and found it changed in one respect that he could not at first name and eventually could: it had got better at being taken down. In eighteen months the strike had gone from a morning to something under two hours, and nobody had done anything to make that happen. Hobab asked four people how and got four versions of the same answer, which was that you did it and then you did it again.

He found the intake, which had moved, and stood watching it for a while out of a habit he had not known he had formed. Women coming up with hanks; a trestle; a stone; a man with a leaf. Weight, quality, day. There was singing behind it and he did not attend to it.

The Companion was in that line too. He had watched her put a hank on a trestle two years earlier at Sinai and could not have described her then and could not now, and there was no reason on earth why he should have, because a man watching an intake watches the stone.

He got the shoulder looked at, because he had spent two afternoons carrying with the Kohathites to see what it was like and had learned

that it was worse than they said and that they did not say anything, and by the third morning he could not get his arm above the level of his ear.

The Companion had a salve for it.

It was made of something he did not ask about and it smelled of tallow and it worked, and she put it on with her thumb, hard, in the manner of a person who has done this several hundred times and has no interest in whether it is comfortable. It was not comfortable. He said so. She said that this was because he was forty-four and had been carrying like a man of twenty to prove a thing to eight Kohathites who had not asked him to prove anything, and Hobab, who had been caught, laughed until his shoulder made him stop.

She gave him the rest of the pot and told him to use it every night for nine nights and that he would not, and he did not, and it was the only pleasant quarter of an hour he had in that camp.

And he thought about the offer, which is what he had actually been doing the entire time.

He worked it as a piece of business, because that was the only way he had of working anything. What it would pay: nothing stated. What it would cost: everything he had, which was a route, a name on that route, fifteen animals, four standing arrangements and a father who was going to die inside four years and would want him there. What it would require: that he go where they went, at their pace, on their business, for as long as it took.

Against that: it was the work. It was precisely the work, the actual work, that he had been doing badly for other people's money for twenty-six years, done for the largest and most interesting thing he had ever stood inside, by a man who had asked him to his face and had not pretended to know what the job was.

He got it to come out both ways about six times.

The thing that stopped him, in the end, was not any of that. It was that he could not see where he would be on the leaf. There was no line for him. He had watched a man at a table put him in the margin, in the white outside the ruling, and he had watched a fifty send him to a fifty, and he had spent nine days failing to reach a man who had now sent for him and asked him a question about wells. If he went, he

would be a Midianite who was with them. He would be that until he died and so would his sons, and there is no word for it and no place in a column for it and no way to write it in a ruling.

He never once framed it to himself as being afraid, and it was, and he knew it by about the fifth week and went on not framing it that way.

. . .

The twelve came back after forty days and Hobab was there for it, and it was not the report that stayed with him.

It was the fruit.

They brought back a cluster of grapes on a staff between two men, which Hobab looked at with a professional eye and which was, he had to admit, an extraordinary object. Pomegranates. Figs. All of it carried forty days across country by men who had gone to considerable trouble to keep it looking like that, and it came into the camp on the shoulders of two of them, in front of everybody, in the middle of the afternoon.

They gave the report, and the report was accurate.

It was the part nobody afterwards was able to hold onto and Hobab held onto it for thirty-eight years. The land flowed with milk and honey and here was the fruit of it. And the people that dwelt in the land were strong, and the cities were walled and very great. And there were Amalekites in the south, and Hittites and Jebusites and Amorites in the mountain, and Canaanites by the sea and along the Jordan.

Every word of that was true. Hobab could have confirmed two-thirds of it himself and had, to Moses, in a tent, six weeks earlier, at rather greater length.

The trouble was that they had put the fruit down first.

. . .

It came apart after that, and Hobab watched it come apart, and afterwards he could identify the exact sentence.

One of them said that the land ate up its inhabitants.

That was not a fact about the country. It was a figure, and it was a good one, and it did what a good figure does in front of a very large number of frightened people, which is to arrive whole and stay.

After that they were describing the men of the land as of a great stature, and then as giants, and then somebody said the thing about grasshoppers — *we were in our own sight as grasshoppers, and so we were in their sight* — and Hobab, standing at the back of it with the mixed multitude, put his hand over his eyes.

Because that last was two claims stuck together with an *and so*, and the first was about the speaker and the second was about somebody else's head, and a man who tells you what he looked like to a stranger on a wall two months ago and four hundred miles away is telling you what he felt and calling it a report.

Two of them stood against it. Hobab did not hear the first one properly and heard the second, who said that they were well able to overcome it, and who was shouted down inside about four sentences.

The noise that came up after that went on for a long time.

It was not a debate and it did not become one. A man near Hobab was shouting that they should have been left in Egypt, and was shouting it at nobody, at the middle distance, with his hands going. A woman went down in the press and was got up again by two people who did not stop shouting while they did it. Somewhere off to the left a rumour started that the tribes were choosing a captain to take them back, and Hobab heard it arrive from three directions inside a quarter of an hour and could not find anybody who had heard it first.

The two who had stood against the report were still standing where they had been, with their coats torn down the front, and Hobab did not see what became of them because a press of people came between and stayed there.

An old man beside him was weeping without any noise at all and holding a child by the wrist hard enough that the child was working at the hand with both of its own.

Hobab got out sideways and went back to the mixed-multitude side and mended a strap.

That evening the ordinary work of the camp was done in the ordinary way. The flocks came in. The ash went to the place where the

ash went. Somebody two rows over was singing at a loom and did not stop.

. . .

The sentence came down the following day and he got it in the ordinary way, from a woman selling nothing to nobody, who had it right.

From twenty years old and upward, all that were numbered. Not one of them into the country. Their children would go in; they would not. Forty years in the wilderness, a year for a day, for the forty days of the searching.

The first thing he did was Shobai, and he did it without deciding to, standing in a row with a strap in his hand.

Shobai was thirty-four and had been counted at the numbering, because every man from twenty years old and upward had been counted, and Hobab had watched him say his own name at a table in the second month and had thought nothing about it at the time.

So Shobai was not going in.

The mother was not counted, because women are not counted, and would be dead inside ten years either way. The brother-in-law who was at that fire most evenings and not entirely welcome had been counted, and was not going in either. The wife was not counted and would be about seventy when they crossed and might do it and might not.

The boy was eleven.

He would be fifty-one. He would go over the water with his father's animals and his mother's tent, because the tent belongs to the wife and goes where she goes and then to a daughter after her, and he would put it up on ground his father had been told about for forty years and had never seen.

Hobab worked all of that out in under a minute, in a row, with a strap in his hand, on the strength of one evening's barley and sour milk and an argument about a she-goat.

Then he thought the second thing, which was entirely professional, and he was not proud of it.

He thought: they have costed the delay.

Because that was what it was, read as a term. A period had been specified and the period was derived from the offence by a stated rule, one for one, and it was the sort of clause he had seen in perhaps a dozen agreements — a penalty computed rather than argued, so that nobody could open it later. Forty days, forty years. You could not negotiate with it because there was nothing in it to negotiate with. It was arithmetic.

The second thing he thought took longer and arrived that evening while he was mending the same strap he had put down nine weeks before.

Six hundred and three thousand, five hundred and fifty men. Every one of them written, by name, by house, by father's house, from twenty years old and upward. The half-shekels taken at the counting, gone to the smelter, cast into a hundred sockets, a talent apiece, and the sanctuary standing on them.

That figure was the exact figure of the men who were not going in.

Shobai was in it. Hobab had watched a man say his own name at a table, and had watched a smelter turn the half-shekels into sockets, and had carried the number home on a piece of a jar and had shown it to his father in the winter and had been rather pleased with himself about it.

The sanctuary stood on it. A hundred sockets, a talent apiece, and every one of them made out of men who were going to die on this side of the water, and the thing standing on them was the thing that was going to be carried over.

They had numbered them for war eighteen months ago and the number had turned out to be the number of the graves, and it was the same list, and it was already written, and there was a man in a tent on the eastern side who kept it and who had reconciled forty-one difficult returns one at a time and had left no residue.

Hobab put the strap down and sat in the dark for a while.

He got up, because he could not do anything else with it, and went to see about the blue.

II.7 — WHAT HE COULD NOT PUT IN ORDER

He got home in the winter and the order came apart before he had sat down.

That had never happened. He had given his father the north in the same sequence for thirteen years — Egypt, Edom, Moab, the plateau, the coast, prices, and then whatever else there was — and he had spent forty-one days on the road assembling this one, and he had it, and it was good.

Jethro did not ask for it.

He was under the awning with a blanket over his knees, which was new, and he looked up as Hobab came round the fold and said: "Did he ask you to stay?"

. . .

Hobab stood there with the mule's rein in his hand.

"Who told you?"

"Nobody told me. It is the middle of winter and you came the eastern way with eleven animals and no load worth the road, which means you left in a hurry or you left late, and you have not shaved, and you are standing there working out the order you meant to give me in." His father shifted the blanket. "Also he asked you two years ago. He asked you two years ago and you did not know it, and I have been waiting to find out whether he would do it properly."

"He asked me two years ago."

"He asked you to come to a place and see him. A man who is sitting from the morning to the evening does not send for a Midianite trader to talk about wells." Jethro said this entirely without triumph, which was worse. "He was looking at you. He looked at you for two years. And then he asked."

Hobab tied the mule to the thorn.

"He never saw me two years ago," he said. "I could not get near him. I told you."

"Yes," his father agreed. "You told me that."

. . .

They ate, and Hobab was told about nothing at all, which was how he learned that the household had had a bad year.

He got the shape of it over two days by the ordinary method, which was counting. Seventeen roofs where there had been twenty. The second tent at the eastern end gone, and nobody mentioning where. Fewer beasts at the fold than the year could account for, and among the ones there, four that Hobab would have sold in the spring and that had not been sold, which told him that somebody had needed them to still be there when the counting was done and had been hoping.

The western pasture had gone twice, as his father had said it would three years earlier about a different household. Adnah had come north and there had been the argument, and it had lasted longer than it needed to, exactly as predicted, and Jethro had not gone to talk to him and nobody else had either.

Hobab did not raise any of it and neither did his father, and on the third morning he went out and did four days' work on it without being asked and came back and said nothing, and his father said nothing, and it was the closest either of them came that winter to a conversation about the future.

Afterwards, in the dark, with the brazier going because his father was cold now in a way he had not been two years earlier, Hobab gave him the offer.

He gave it accurately. The tent, the sandals off, the questions about the rug and the recitation and how long it took the old man to stand. The wells. The hour on the wells, which he could not keep the pleasure out of and did not try to. After that the offer, and the *no* that had come out of him faster than he intended, and the second asking, and the words.

"Instead of eyes," Jethro repeated.

"Instead of eyes."

His father sat with that for a while and did not say what Hobab expected him to say, which was any of the four things Hobab had been arguing with on the road.

"What did you ask him about the work?"

"How many days out. What I was to bring back. Who I would report to. Whether there was to be a leaf."

"And?"

"He said he did not know. He said they had never had anybody who could do it and they would work out what the work was after they had somebody doing it."

"Mm," said Jethro.

Hobab waited, and nothing came, and after a while he heard himself filling it.

"It was a bad offer. You know it was a bad offer. No terms, no post, no —"

"It was not an offer," his father said. "That is what I am sitting here being quiet about, and you may have it now or in a year, as you like."

"Have it now."

"You asked a man to describe a post. There is no post. There has never been a post; there is a thing that needs doing and nobody who can do it, and he told you so, plainly, which cost him something." Jethro's hands were flat on the blanket. "You were not asking whether to take the work. You have wanted that work since you were nineteen. You were asking him to put you somewhere on the leaf, and he had nowhere to put you, and you knew that before you opened your mouth because you had spent nine days two years ago finding it out."

Hobab did not say anything.

"So you asked for the one thing he could not give," said his father, "and when he could not give it you were able to say no and be right. And you have been right about it for forty-one days on the road, and you were still right about it when you came round that fold this afternoon, and you will be right about it for the rest of your life."

"That is a very hard thing to say to a man in the winter."

"Yes," said Jethro. "I have been nine weeks deciding whether to say it, and I have decided, because I am seventy and I am not going to be here for the part where it stops being possible to say."

. . .

Hobab gave him the rest of it out of order and knew he was doing it and could not get it back.

He gave the sentence first, which should have come last. Forty years, a year for a day, from twenty years old and upward, and not one of that number into the country.

He had to go backwards to the spies to explain it, and backwards again to the fruit, and then he found he had not given the road with water on it at all, which was the thing he had been proudest of, and he gave that in the middle where it did no work. He gave the peg twice. He forgot the seventy entirely until his father asked what had been done about the burden, and then had to put them in three-quarters of the way through, out of place, where they sounded like an afterthought instead of like his father's own recommendation arriving a second time in a different coat.

It took four hours and he had never given a worse account of anything.

His father did not once help him.

. . .

When it was done Jethro said: "Say the sentence again."

Hobab said it again.

"And the number."

"Six hundred and three thousand, five hundred and fifty."

"Which is the number you brought me two years ago, cast into a hundred sockets, a talent apiece, with the sanctuary standing on it."

"Yes."

"Say the rest."

So Hobab said the rest, which he had worked out on a night in the wilderness of Paran with a strap in his hands and had not said

out loud to anybody since: that it was the same list. That they had numbered them for war and the number had come out as the number of the graves, and it was already written, by name and by house and by father's house, and there was a man on the eastern side who kept it and who had reconciled forty-one difficult returns one at a time and had left no residue.

Jethro heard that entire and then sat quite still for long enough that Hobab looked over to see whether he had gone to sleep.

"Now finish the sentence you did not finish two years ago," his father said.

Hobab looked up.

"Me?"

"You have had forty-one days. You gave me the account out of order tonight because you have been carrying something you could not fit into the order. Say it."

. . .

So Hobab said it, badly, and getting to it took him three attempts.

That nobody in that camp had failed.

That was the shape of it and he could not at first get past that sentence. He had gone through it on the road, looking for the man who had done wrong, because there is always a man. The twelve were sent, and the sending was decided in the proper manner. They went, and they were forty days, and they came back and gave a report, and the report was accurate — he had said so four times that night and he was a hard man about a report. It went to the congregation because a thing of that size goes to the congregation. The congregation heard it and were afraid, and being afraid is not a fault, and they said what frightened people say.

And then it was decided.

"There is nobody," he said. "I have been looking for him for six weeks. There is no fault anywhere in it. Every man did his office and the thing that came out the far end was —"

He stopped.

"Say the rest," said Jethro.

"A thing that holds does what it was built to do. That is what holding is. So the day it is built to do the wrong thing, it will do that, at speed, in good order, and everybody in it will be right."

His father sat back.

"Yes," he said. "That is what I was afraid of, and I could not say it to you two years ago because it had not happened yet and you would have thought I was a bitter old man who did not care to see his own advice work."

. . .

Hobab sat with his hands round a cup that had gone cold.

There was one more piece and it took him some minutes to get to it, and when he did he found that it had been sitting in front of him since Kadesh and that he had been walking round it.

"You built part of that," he said.

"I built part of that."

"The tens and the fifties. The escalation. That report went up a chain you drew."

"That report went up a chain I drew," his father agreed, "and it went up it correctly, and it arrived where it was supposed to arrive, and I have had two years to think about that and I am not sorry I gave the advice, because the thing before it was one man sitting from morning to evening until he broke, and that was not going to hold at all." He pulled the blanket up. "There is no arrangement that only does the right thing. Anybody who tells you there is has not built one."

He was quiet for a moment.

"I want to be plain with you about one thing, because you will remember this conversation longer than I will. I am not against them. I have never been against them. I gave that advice to a man who was going to break, and it saved him, and it is still saving him, and if he sent for me tomorrow I would go, at seventy, in the winter, and you would have to tie me onto the animal."

"I know that."

"You do not, quite. You think I am picking at it." Jethro turned his head. "I am picking at it because it is the best thing anybody I have

known has ever built, and I would like it to survive its own success, and not one man inside it can see it from where he is standing. That is not spite. That is the only use left for an old man forty days away."

. . .

The world came afterwards, in the small hours, and it was the last thing Hobab enjoyed for some months.

His father had it all and had more of it than Hobab did, which had stopped being surprising and had started being the point of coming home.

He had the spies before Hobab told him. He had them from a Kenite out of the north who had them from an Amorite, and his version had a detail Hobab's did not, which was that two of the towns on the plateau had heard the column was coming and had spent the summer putting up wall and had then heard it had turned back, and had stopped, and had left the wall half-built and were now arguing about who paid for the stone.

"They'll finish it in nine years," Jethro said, "when they hear something else. That is what a wall is. It is a thing a town builds when it is frightened and abandons when it is bored, and if you want to know what a country is afraid of, look at what it has half-built."

He gave Hobab the tin, which was down. He gave him the copper, which had finally surfaced — going north past Damascus, as he had thought, and he was not pleased about being right.

"Somebody has been buying for four years," he said, "and paying in something that is not silver, because silver would have shown. So it is grain or it is protection, and if it is grain then there is a house in the Delta that is short of copper and long of grain and has not told anybody, and if it is protection then I do not want to be on that road in six years and neither do you."

"Which is it?"

"I do not know. I have said I do not know for two years and I will say it again next year." He was pleased about that in a manner Hobab recognised from childhood. "The day you cannot say *I do not know* out

loud, you have started making it up, and a man who is making it up is worth less than a man who has been nowhere."

A house at Tyre had come back from the dead, and he had the name of the man who had brought it back and what it had cost him. A man at Tayma had died, and Hobab would need to deal with the son, who was not the father and never would be. There was a toll on the eastern run now, at the third stage, put there by a family Jethro named, and he gave his opinion on whether it was worth paying, which was that it was, this year, and would not be by the third year, and that Hobab should pay it cheerfully and say nothing and watch what the family did with the money.

In exactly the same voice, he said that Zipporah had sent word in the autumn.

Hobab put his cup down.

"What word?"

"That the boys are well."

"That's all?"

"That is all she sent," said Jethro, "and she sent it, which she has not done in thirteen years, and you may make of that what you like because I have not been able to make anything of it at all."

He did not say anything else about it, then or afterwards.

Hobab lay awake a long time working at it and got nowhere, and at some point in the small hours found that he was thinking about her left hand instead, which was no use to anybody, and which he had still not mentioned to the one man alive who would have known what it meant.

. . .

In the morning he unpacked the leaf.

It was a proper leaf, bought at Tayma for the purpose, and it had a season on it: the stages and their days, the seven at Hazeroth standing, the ration shortfall on the eastern side and the fifteenth it came to, the intake and what they recorded and what they did not, the quail, the wagons and the oxen and the four that were not spare, the brief the twelve had been given, the peg.

Eleven held seams in the eastern quarter on a moving day, which he had written down because he had counted them, and had put no note against, because he had not been able to think what the note would say.

He had written it all down as it happened and he had not once, in all that time, sat and thought about the fact that he was doing it.

The hand had improved. That was the first thing and it annoyed him.

Two years earlier the marks had been a nine-year-old's made by a grown man's fingers, cramped where they should have run. These ran. Somewhere in a season of putting down stages and weights and figures at the end of a day, without practising and without intending to, his hand had remembered what it had been taught at eight and had gone on from there.

He read it through and found that it was better than his memory of the same season, and that it was better in the specific way that a written thing is better, which is that it did not know what happened afterwards. The entry about the twelve going out had no shadow on it. He had written *twelve sent, forty days, brief as follows* on a warm afternoon and had meant nothing by it, and it sat there on the leaf being exactly what he had thought at the time, which was nothing much.

His account of that same afternoon, four months later, had the sentence in it. It could not not have.

He sat on his heels in the cold with the leaf across his knee for some time.

He got the box with the tally-cords out and took the sherd from the bottom of it, and unwrapped the rag, and looked at the two lines of bad marks on the inside of a broken jar — *half a shekel, every man, twenty years and up, 603,550* — which he had written in a dye tent for no reason on a day when the figure had meant nothing whatever.

He did not put it back in the box.

He put it with the leaf.

VISIT III — THE HOLE

III.1 — THE FUNCTIONING WORLD

The nephew at the pass had begun to keep a leaf.

Hobab found that out in the fifth spring, watering under the northern shoulder, and stood there with the rate in his hand looking at a boy of about twenty-six with a ruled sheet and a point, doing in writing what Yamlik had done in his head for fifty years and had never once got wrong.

"He's dead, then."

"Third winter. In the shelter. A Dedanite going south found him." The nephew had the settling pits dug out properly, which Hobab checked, because you check. "You're the copper and blue. Two years back you paid in copper and salt."

"I paid in copper. Salt was my father, and it was before you were born."

The nephew looked at the leaf.

"It says copper and salt."

Hobab paid in copper and did not argue, because the boy would find out inside three years or he would not, and because there was no version of the conversation that ended with a dead man's memory being taken as evidence against a written entry.

He rode north thinking about that for most of a day and got nowhere with it, and eventually put it down where he put things, which was next to the sockets and the straight lines, in the heading he had opened six years earlier and had still not named.

He told his father about it the following winter and got a longer answer than the thing deserved.

"He is not wrong to keep it," Jethro said. "He has not got fifty years of watering in his head and he will not have, because he came to it at twenty-four and Yamlik came to it at nine. A man who arrives late at a

thing must write it down or be worse at it, and the boy has worked that out on his own, which is more than most."

"He told me my father paid in copper and salt."

"I did."

"You did not. Yamlik told me you did, five years ago, and I checked it against my own memory of being eleven and found nothing, and let it stand because he was Yamlik and I was not going to argue."

His father thought about this with evident enjoyment.

"Then Yamlik was wrong," he said, "and told you, and you let it stand, and he told the nephew, and the nephew wrote it down."

"And now it's on a leaf."

"And now it is on a leaf," his father agreed, and was so entirely delighted about it that he had to stop and get his breath, which he had not had to do the previous winter.

. . .

He went up four times in those years and three of the four were short — in and out inside a fortnight with the blue and the skins and whatever else Oholiab had got desperate about.

On the fourth he was struck by something on the way out and turned it over for two years without doing anything about it, which was that the camp was in the same place.

Not the same country. The same place. He had watered his animals at the same source and pitched in the same walking ground out past the Dan side and had walked into the eastern quarter along a line that was where it had been the previous year, and the year before that, and he had not noticed any of it at the time because a thing that does not change does not present itself to be noticed.

He mentioned it to his father in the winter and his father said: "Yes. Go up in the spring and stay."

"For how long?"

"Until you are bored." Jethro had a brazier from the middle of the autumn now and did not pretend otherwise. "You have been going up there six years and every time you go you bring me back a fortnight. A

fortnight tells you what a place is doing. It does not tell you what a place has stopped doing. You want a season."

"I have thirty-one animals."

"You have two men who can run them for a season and you know it, and you will get better work out of them for having been left to it, and you have been hunting for a reason not to go since I opened my mouth."

. . .

He came at it that spring by way of the Arabah, because of the copper.

The copper had been his father's question for six years and neither of them had answered it, and Hobab had got into the habit of going the long way round the head of the gulf and looking at things, which cost him nine days a year and had so far produced nothing.

The mines at the north end were Egyptian and had been Egyptian since before anybody. Timna, and the workings above it, and the smelting camps strung along the wadis with their slag heaps going grey. A man could see them from a day out by the smoke and could smell them from half of that.

He had been through four times and it had never stopped being worth looking at.

The smell was the part that stayed with a man. Not the smoke, which is only smoke. There is something that comes off a copper furnace when it is running that gets into the back of the throat and sits there, sweetish and metallic and faintly wrong, and Hobab had noticed years ago that the men who worked the furnaces did not smell it any more and that this was probably not a good sign about anything.

The noise carried further than the smell. Hammering at four separate pitches, all night on a good week, and under it the low continuous grinding of the ore being broken by women and children at the heaps with stones in their hands.

It was an operation, and that struck a professional before anything else did. There were shafts and there were galleries and there were men going down them on notched poles, and above them there was a whole apparatus of water and food and fuel and tools brought in

from four directions across country that grew none of it, and the fuel was the killer — you cannot smelt copper without charcoal and there is no wood in the Arabah, so somebody had to bring it, in quantity, forever, and Hobab had once spent an entire evening at a smelting camp working out the charcoal and had gone away with a figure that had made him respect the Egyptians more than he wanted to.

The men in the galleries were not Egyptians. They never were. There were Egyptians in it, at the top, running it and keeping the leaves, and everybody else was whoever could be got: Shasu out of the eastern country, prisoners from wherever the last campaign had been, and a considerable number of his own people, in and out on their own feet, working a season and going home.

There were fewer of the last than there had been, and Hobab got the reason at the second smelting camp from a man who was annoyed about it.

Somebody had been through, some years back, taking men.

Not pressing them. Buying — or not even buying; asking, and offering nothing but the work, and getting them anyway, which the man at the smelting camp found harder to forgive than a press-gang would have been. A Judahite, he said, of a name that meant nothing to Hobab at the time and a good deal to him about four days later, who had walked the galleries for a fortnight asking men what they could do and had gone away south with nine of them.

"For what?"

"He would not say. Something being built."

Hobab thought about a workshop four hundred miles south with four men on the fine looms and nine on the metal, and about the fact that if you want a man who understands what heat does to bronze there are perhaps four places on earth to go and get him, and that somebody had known that.

Midianite pots all over the site. He had counted them once on a slag heap out of pure professional vanity and had got to forty in about ten minutes, and every one of them had come up that road on the back of somebody's donkey, and some of them on his.

They were stopped on the fourth day above Punon and it was the worst hour of Hobab's working life, and he had been through that

country something over four hundred times.

There were six of them and they came off the high ground on the near side, which is the side you watch, and he had not been watching it, because in fifty years nothing had ever come off it.

He knew two of them.

That was the part he could not afterwards get past. He knew the second man by his father, and had watered at that house, and had carried for a cousin of theirs the year Yatir was born, and the man knew him and did not pretend otherwise and did not care.

. . .

What actually happened took a quarter of an hour and most of it was standing.

They wanted the copper. There was a form to it and Hobab knew the form and gave the correct answers in the correct order — whose was it, where was it going, what was the arrangement, would he take a portion — and it went as it goes for about nine sentences.

Then it stopped going that way.

He never worked out which sentence did it. He went over it for years and could not find the place. What he had, afterwards, was the physical fact: one of the young ones moved round to the off side of the third animal and put his hand on the pack and did not take anything, and simply stood there with his hand on it, looking at Hobab, and Hobab's mouth went dry in the middle of a word.

He had heard men describe that and had not believed it was literal.

. . .

He paid.

He paid more than the copper was worth, which he knew at the time, and he paid it in a manner that let the second man tell himself it had been an arrangement, which was the only skill he had left by then and the only one that mattered.

They went off up the high ground and Hobab stood in the road.

Then he was sick, some way off, behind a rock, where his two men could not see him, and came back and said that they were going on, and they went on.

. . .

Ahuz did not say anything about it for four days and then said one thing, on the fifth evening, which was that his father had been stopped twice on the Jauf run and had said it never stopped being like that.

Hobab said that he had never been stopped in his life.

"I know," said Ahuz. "That is what I have been thinking about."

. . .

He got to the bottom of it about a month later and it was his father's, word for word, from a night under an awning six years earlier.

The reason they quarrelled was water and the reason they have stopped is copper, and copper is a thing you can have more of by working harder, and water is not. So while the copper is moving they will be brothers, and the first bad year they will remember every single thing.

The bad year had come in the winter. Hobab had heard about it at the pass and had noted it and had gone on up the same road he had used for fifty years, because it was the road, and because a man who has been safe four hundred times has stopped keeping a count of the reasons he was safe.

He had been carrying his own competence as though it were an arrangement, and it was not an arrangement. It was a run of good years in somebody else's country.

He wrote none of it in the leaf. He told Jethro in the winter and gave it flat and short and did not do the voices, and his father heard it out and asked two questions about the ground and one about the second man's house, and then sat for a while.

"You will go back up that road in the spring."

"I will."

"Yes," said Jethro. "So would I. That is the trade and there is no other way to be in it." He pulled the blanket up. "But you will watch the

near side now for the rest of your life, and you will not get anything for it, and that is also the trade."

. . .

He spent an evening at the third smelting camp because his animals wanted a day and because the Hand was there and would talk about furnaces.

They had met the first time four years earlier over a dispute about charcoal that was not either of their business, and had settled it between them in about nine minutes to the satisfaction of two men who had been arguing for a week, and had got on since.

The furnaces were the thing. Hobab did not understand them and had stopped pretending to, and had discovered that the fastest way to learn anything from a man who is good is to say so.

What he got, that evening, sitting on a slag heap that was still warm two days after: that the ore out of the eastern gallery was better than the ore out of the northern one and everybody knew it; that the northern ore was being worked anyway because the eastern gallery flooded in the spring and there was no arrangement for pumping and there was not going to be one; that the loss on the northern ore was about a fifth; and that the fifth had been the same fifth for fifteen years and was written into the expectations at the far end, so that a good year now read as an error and had to be explained.

"They'd rather have the fifth," Hobab said.

"They'd rather have the number they can plan against."

"That's the same everywhere."

"Yes," said the Hand.

Hobab asked him what he would do about the flooding, expecting the answer to be nothing, because there was no arrangement and was not going to be one.

The Hand said that you would cut a drain at the eleventh fathom on the fall of the ground and take it out through the old workings, and that it would take forty men a season, and that it would pay for itself in three years, and that he had said so twice.

"To who?"

"To the man whose office it is."

"And?"

"He agreed with me," said the Hand, and put another cake of charcoal on.

. . .

There was a temple at the mine and he went to look at it, as he did every time.

It was Egyptian and it was for the mine — a small stone thing set against the rock at the foot of the great pillars, with the goddess in it who has to do with turquoise and copper and the people who go underground after them. There were Egyptian stelae. There was Egyptian carving. There were offerings on the benches inside and a priest attached who was not doing very much.

There were also, on those same benches, quite a number of things that were not Egyptian at all.

Midianite work. Pots of the sort he carried. Small metal, beads, a bracelet, the kind of thing a man leaves when he is about to go down a hole. Nobody had put them there officially and nobody had taken them away, and the Egyptian priest walked past them daily and had presumably decided some years ago that this was not a fight worth having with three hundred labourers.

Hobab looked at that arrangement for a while and thought that it was going to end one way and one way only. When the Egyptians left — and they would leave, everybody leaves — his own people would be standing in that building the following season with a cloth and some poles, and the goddess would come off the wall, and the benches would stay, because benches are useful.

He did not write it down. It was not a thing you wrote down. He was right about it by about a hundred and fifty years and never knew.

. . .

What he did think about, riding north out of the smoke, was tents.

His father was a priest of Midian and had been for forty years, and there was a tent for it, and Hobab had grown up going in and out of it and being sent out of it.

It was not large. It was a good tent, better than the household tents, and it went up in a particular arrangement with the opening a particular way, and there were stones set in a row outside it that got moved when the household moved and got set out again in the same order, and there was a bench of sorts along one side inside where things were put and left.

He had helped carry it perhaps two hundred times. He knew its weight to the pole.

And the thing about it — the thing that a man does not notice until he is forty-eight and has spent five years looking at somebody else's — was that it went up first.

Not out of ceremony. Out of order of work. You put up the one that has to be square before you put up the ones that only have to be dry, because if you do it the other way round you will find that the ground you left for it is the wrong ground and you will move nine tents to fix it.

Hobab had known that since he was nine and had never once said it out loud, and had watched the Israelites do exactly the same thing for five years and had assumed it was a rule.

. . .

He was careful with that thought and he was careful with it deliberately.

Because a man can get from *both of us pitch the sanctuary first* to somewhere very foolish in about four steps, and Hobab had heard men do it. He had heard a Canaanite factor at Amman explain that the Edomites and the Moabites were really the same people because both of them buried the same way, and had asked him whether the Egyptians and the Nubians were the same people, and had watched him think about it.

It was a fact about carrying and he left it there.

A tent goes up square or the ground you left for it is wrong. Stones outside, because you are marking ground you will leave. A bench, because things get put down and somebody has to not be holding them. He could have got every one of those out of a season with his mother's household and had, at nine, without anybody explaining it.

He did not say any of it to anybody, then or later. His father knew it already and nobody else would have heard it as a remark about tents.

What the resemblance did give him was a trade.

He knew what a sanctuary tent costs to keep. He knew what the cloth does in five years, and what the stones do to the ground under them, and what happens to a bench that is used daily for a decade by people who are not permitted to look at what they are putting on it. He had that in his hands, from childhood, the same as he had the marks.

So when Oholiab talked to him about the hangings, he was not a trader being told about a problem.

He was the only man on that supply route who had already had the problem, at one two-hundredth of the scale, in his father's house, and had watched his mother solve it.

. . .

He came in over the last rise on the fourth day of the third month and the camp was where it had been.

He had told himself on the road that he would look at it properly this time, and he did, and it took him about a quarter of an hour to see that the thing he had come to look at was not going to be visible from a rise.

It was all there. Four quarters, the interval, the linen in the middle with the drab roof standing over it, the ash place on the eastern side gone to a low grey hill. Smoke. Flocks out to the west on ground that had been eaten and had come back and been eaten again. The lines were straight.

It looked exactly as it had looked the first time he saw it, six years earlier, forty days from here, on different ground.

That was the thing he had come about and he could not get his eye on it, because what he was looking at was an absence of change, and an absence has no edge to it, and Hobab stood on a rise for a quarter of an hour trying to see something that could only be measured against a memory.

He went down and got his animals watered and did not think about it again for a fortnight.

III.2 — NOWHERE FOR IT TO STOP

The Kohathite came to him, which had never happened before in six years.

That was the first thing wrong with any of it and Hobab did not register it as wrong for some days, because he was pleased to see the man.

They had carried together in the second year. Two afternoons, at Hobab's asking, out of professional curiosity, and Hobab had come away with a shoulder he could not lift and a considerable respect and had made a point of finding him on every visit since. Hobab had his name and had used it for six years. He never wrote it down, then or afterwards, and could not afterwards say whether that had been a decision.

He was older now and the groove in the shoulder had a callus over it that Hobab did not like the look of. There was a thing he did with his neck before he sat down, a small deliberate rotation, that he had not done four years ago and that he was plainly not aware of doing.

He had been carrying twenty-six years. Hobab had done two afternoons of it and had been unable to lift his arm for a week, and had thought about that arithmetic more than once since and had never once mentioned it to the man.

He came to the mixed-multitude side in the evening, which was a walk, and he sat down, and he talked about nothing for a period that went on long enough for Hobab to put down what he was doing.

He said: "There is going to be a thing about the priesthood."

. . .

Hobab did not ask him anything.

That was not restraint. It was that he had no question ready, because he had not been working on this, because nobody had told him there was anything to work on, and a man with no question ready is a man who has to sit and listen, which Hobab had not done properly in six years and had forgotten was difficult.

The Kohathite talked for most of an hour.

What came out of it, in the order it came out, which was not an order:

That his kinsman Korah, of his own house, son of Izhar, son of Kohath, had been going round for a year and a half.

That Korah was not a fool and was not a bad man and had carried the same freight on the same shoulder for the same twenty years.

That the thing he was saying was this: the congregation is holy. All of it. Every one of them. It has been said so, publicly, in the hearing of the people, and it is on the leaves. So why is one house of one tribe lifted up above it.

That two Reubenites had come in with him, Dathan and Abiram, who were not Levites and had a different grievance entirely, and that everybody knew the two grievances were different and nobody was saying so.

That there were two hundred and fifty men in it now.

That they were not nobodies. The Kohathite said this part twice. They were princes of the assembly, men called by name in the congregation, the men you would put on a thing if you wanted it done — and Hobab, who had spent six years asking who decided anything in that camp, sat up.

. . .

"Why are you telling me?"

The Kohathite thought about it for long enough that Hobab knew the answer was going to be worth having.

"Because you are not in it," he said.

"That's not a reason. That's a description."

"It is the only reason there is." He turned his hands over. "If I say this to a man of my own house, he is Korah's kin and it goes to Korah by

the second day. If I say it to a man of another house, I am a Kohathite carrying a report about Kohathites and it goes up, and then I have done a thing that cannot be undone. If I say it to a fifty he must take it. That is his office. He has no choice about it and neither of us would forgive the other."

He looked at Hobab.

"There is nowhere in this camp to say a thing out loud and have it stop where it lands," he said. "You are the only place I know of."

. . .

Hobab sat with that for a long time after the man had gone, and it kept turning over the wrong way up.

It turned out that the margin was a room, and that a camp of that size had exactly one, and he was standing in it.

He got up and mended a strap and did not enjoy the rest of the evening at all.

What he could not get comfortable about, and worked at on and off for a fortnight, was the question of whether the room had a door on it.

Because a place where a thing can be said and stop is worth having and every institution he had ever dealt with lacked one. But a place where a thing can be said and stop is also a place where nothing gets done about it, and the Kohathite had walked most of a mile in the evening to put a thing down in the one location in that camp from which it could not travel, and had gone home, and had slept.

Hobab had been the margin for six years and had thought of it as a cost.

He was less sure by the end of the fortnight that it was not also a service, and he was not at all sure who it was a service to.

. . .

They came for him on the ninth day and it was nothing, and it cost him four animals and most of a season, and he never got any part of it back.

One of the mules was loose in the night. He never established how; the picket was sound in the morning and the man who had set it was a man Hobab would have trusted with the entire train, and Hobab looked at that picket four times over the following week and could not fault it.

The mule went into a household's fodder on the Judah side and ate what it could and stood in the rest.

. . .

Two things about that made it worse than it sounds and Hobab understood both before the boy who came for him had finished speaking.

The first was that the fodder was allocated. It came off the rotation, in a stated quantity, once, in the autumn, and there was no more of it anywhere in that camp at any price, because there was no market in it and could not be — a thing that is allotted is not a thing that is sold. The household would go into the winter short and there was no arrangement that could make them not short.

The second was that a mule is a mule. Hobab was liable and had been liable from the moment the animal put its head down, and he had never in his life argued about a liability he owed.

. . .

The sitting was the Allfather's and it took most of a morning and Hobab has to be given his due: he argued well.

He did not argue about the liability. He conceded it in the first minute, out loud, before anybody asked, which is what you do.

He argued about the valuation.

There was no price for that fodder. That was the entire difficulty and Hobab could see it from the doorway. It could not be bought, so it had no market figure; it had been allotted, so it had no cost of acquisition; and the household's loss was not the fodder, it was a winter, which is not a quantity anybody has ever successfully put a number against.

So Hobab did what a factor does when there is no comparable. He built one. He took the going rate for winter fodder at Tayma and at

Amman, adjusted for carriage and for the season and for the fact that neither market had ever had to price scarcity of that kind, produced a range, and offered the top of the range, which was more than he thought was right and was a good deal less than what was coming.

It was a good piece of work. He had been doing it for thirty years.

. . .

"You cannot have a comparable," the Allfather said.

"I have built one."

"You have built one out of two markets four hundred miles from here, and there is no man in this camp who can check it, and there is no man in this camp who can check anything you might put in front of him about a market, because you are the only one who has been to one." He was not unkind about it. "If I take your figure I am taking your word."

"You have taken my word about a rate before."

"About a rate you were selling at, and you had an interest in it being low, and I could see the interest and price it. This one you have an interest in being low as well." He turned his hand over. "You have given me the top of your range and I believe you and it does not signify, because a man of a house would have brought his ten in here with him and I could have asked nine other men whether it sounded like a winter, and I cannot ask anybody anything."

. . .

He gave it against Hobab and gave it in beasts, because beasts have a price everybody in that camp could see.

Four.

A man of a house would have paid it too — that was the part Hobab worked at afterwards and could not get round. The liability was the liability. What a man of a house would have had was a ten that carried part of it, because that is what a ten does and Hobab had eaten in one and had watched it work, and a fifty to spread it across two seasons,

and nine households who would have said what a winter was worth and been believed.

Hobab had four animals and no arrangement and paid it in a morning.

. . .

There was no appeal because the appeal runs up through the ten.

He established that carefully and without heat, from three separate men, over about four days, because he wanted to be sure he was not being lied to about it and he was not. A man of a house who thinks his hundred has him wrong goes back to his ten and the ten sends it up. There is no other door. It was not built to exclude anybody; it was built to be entered from the bottom, and Hobab was not standing on the bottom, he was standing beside it.

He wrote the four beasts into the leaf and did not write anything about the rest.

. . .

It cost him the eastern run that year.

Four animals out of thirty-one is not a catastrophe on a sheet. It is a catastrophe in a season, because the beasts you can spare are never the ones that go, and what he lost was two of the four that carried the awkward loads and could be trusted on the gravel, and he could not replace them before the autumn at any price he was willing to pay.

So he did the coastal route twice instead, which was safer and paid less, and he came out of that year down something over a fifth on the previous one, and one of the two men he had wanted to keep went to a Dedanite because Hobab could not give him the work.

He did not tell his father any of it that winter. He gave the camp in order and the north in order and left it out entirely, and had not decided to leave it out, and noticed on the road home in the spring that he had.

. . .

The Chaos-Weaver had it, of course, and had had it for a year, and gave Hobab the shape of it entire inside a quarter of an hour and did nothing with it, as usual, over the leather.

"Two hundred and fifty," Hobab said.

"Two hundred and fifty-three by the reckoning I have, and it will be two hundred and fifty when it is said out, because two hundred and fifty is a number and two hundred and fifty-three is an inventory." He was pleased with that. "Ask me what they are wrong about."

"What are they wrong about?"

"Nothing," said the Chaos-Weaver. "That is the difficulty. It has been said out, publicly, more than once, that the congregation is holy. Every one of them. Korah has not invented a word of it; he has taken the words as they were given and gone where they go. If you say to a man *you are holy* and then tell him he may not come inside a hanging, you have made two statements and one of them is going to have to move."

"Which one moves?"

"Whichever one has the fewer men behind it," said the Chaos-Weaver, and reached for the water, "which is not a thing I am pleased to say and is not a thing I am wrong about."

. . .

Hobab went and found the argument for himself over the following week, and he found it exactly where the Kohathite had said it would be, which was everywhere and nowhere.

Nobody was hiding anything, and he could not get over it. He asked ten people and every one of them told him, and several of them told him at length and with diagrams drawn in the dirt, and two of them were for it and six were against it and three had views so precisely balanced that Hobab suspected them of enjoying themselves.

The eleventh was the Conscience-Keeper, whom Hobab had not seen in six years and who was still on the rope at the eastern gate and still had a mat under his arm and was still on his way to do something else.

He gave the position without a word of heat in it.

The congregation is holy. That is said and it is true and nobody disputes it. The Levites are separated, which is a different thing from being holy, and are brought near, which is a third thing again, and to be brought near is not to be permitted to approach; the words are not interchangeable and have never been used interchangeably by anybody whose office it is to use them.

"Korah has three words," he said, "and he is running them together, and he is doing it in good faith, and the running together is where every part of the argument lives."

"Then somebody should tell him."

"Somebody has." The Conscience-Keeper shifted the mat. "He stopped for about four heartbeats, which is longer than most men stop, and then he went on. That is the part I would want if I were you. Not what he said. That he stopped."

"What did he say?"

"That a man who needs three words to keep another man outside a hanging has an interest in there being three words."

Hobab, who had spent his life among people arguing about the definition of a measure, laughed out loud, and then apologised, and the Conscience-Keeper said that no apology was required because it was a good answer and had been correctly given and would not help anybody.

He had never walked into a dispute so well informed. Every man in that camp knew the argument on both sides and could give you the other man's case better than the other man could.

Six years of recitation had done what recitation does. They had all heard the same words the same number of times, relayed by six men at four hundred paces with no drift, and they could quote. Hobab had watched trade disputes at Amman where neither party could state the agreement they were arguing about, and had spent his life thinking that this was the reason such things went badly.

Here they could all state it. It made not the slightest difference. It made it worse, if anything, because a man who can quote the words at you has a use for the words and will find one.

There was nothing to be done with it, because it was not about a fact.

. . .

The Reubenite grievance was the one that got him, and he went out of his way twice to hear it said properly.

Dathan and Abiram were not arguing about the priesthood. They had nothing to do with the priesthood and did not want it. What they said, and what they said to anyone who would stand still, was this:

You brought us up out of a land that flowed with milk and honey to kill us in the wilderness. And you have not brought us into a land that flows with milk and honey. And you have given us no inheritance of fields and vineyards.

Hobab heard that the first time standing at the edge of a crowd with a strap over his shoulder, and he made a noise out loud that he had to turn into a cough.

Because they had taken the phrase.

A land that floweth with milk and honey was the country. It was the thing that was said about the country up north, in the recitation, in the words, on the leaves — it was the promise's own formula, worn smooth by six years of repetition, and two Reubenites standing in the dust at Kadesh had picked it up and set it down on Egypt.

It was the single best piece of rhetoric Hobab heard in thirty-eight years in that camp. He said so to the Chaos-Weaver, who agreed, and neither of them could establish which of the two men had thought of it.

The other part of it was not rhetoric at all, and Hobab, who had no allotment and never would have one, listened to *no inheritance of fields and vineyards* and found that he had stopped being an observer.

They had been promised ground. Every man of them. It was in the instrument; he had heard the instrument; the ground was the consideration and the obedience was the performance, and that is not a religious arrangement, that is the shape of every contract ever made between anybody.

Six years ago the ground had been taken off the table for that generation entire by a stated term computed at a year for a day.

And nobody had renegotiated anything, because there was nobody to renegotiate with, and the two men shouting in the dust were the

only people in the camp saying out loud that a term had been altered after execution.

He tried it out on two men over the following days, carefully, in the form of a question about contracts rather than a question about anything else, and got two answers.

The first man said that the term had been altered because the performance had failed, which is what happens, and that a man who does not do the thing he swore to do does not then get to complain about the terms. It was a good answer and Hobab could not fault it.

The second man said that the ones who had failed were the ones who would die in the wilderness, and that this was the point, and that the ground was going to the children.

"So the consideration is still being paid. Only not to the party that swore."

"They are the same people."

"They are not the same people. That is the difficulty with an inheritance and always has been. Ask anybody who ever tried to hold a house to a bargain its grandfather made."

"I would ask you," the man said.

Hobab opened his mouth and shut it again.

"Your father is a priest," said the second man, who was not being clever and was working it out as he went, which was worse. "When he witnesses an oath between two houses about a well, who is bound? The two men standing there, for their lives, and then nobody? Or the houses?"

"The houses."

"For how long?"

"Until it is set aside by both."

"And if the man who swore it dies in the winter, do his sons come to you in the spring and say the arrangement went into the ground with him?"

"They do not."

"Why not?"

"Because they would be laughed at from here to the sea," Hobab said, "and would not get water anywhere."

"Then you know how it works," said the second man, without any hostility whatever, "and you have known since you were a boy, and you are arguing as though a man is a man and not a house, because in your trade a man is a man. Out here he is a house. He has always been a house. That is not a thing anybody did to Dathan. That is what a people is."

He went off to see to something.

Hobab stood where he was for a while.

He had been beaten and he knew it, and what interested him afterwards — riding south, and for some years — was that he had been beaten with his father's own furniture, by a man of no office at all, using an argument Hobab could have made better himself if he had happened to be standing on the other side of it.

He wrote the exchange down that night, entire, in order, both sides.

Then he wrote *he is right* underneath it, and looked at that for a while, and did not strike it out.

He read it again on the road south a fortnight later and could not tell which of them he had meant.

That was not carelessness. He had written it knowing exactly which man he meant, and had not written the name, and by the time he came to read it the knowing had gone and the line had stayed. Both readings held. The Reubenite was right that a term had been altered after execution and there was nobody to argue with. The man who had beaten him was right that a house is not a man and never has been and that Hobab had known it since he was a boy.

He did not resolve it that year or in the twenty after it, and he did not strike it out then either.

As far as Hobab could establish, the two of them were entirely alone in caring, and within a fortnight they were dead.

. . .

The thing itself he did not see.

He had been asked whether he wanted to come and stand where people would be standing, and had said no, because he had a load going south on the fourth day and because — he was honest with

himself about this on the road afterwards and did not enjoy it — because he had understood by then that whatever happened was going to be worth having seen, and had found that he did not want to have seen it.

So he was three rows back in the mixed-multitude side, mending the same strap, when the noise came.

He did not go and look and neither did the people around him, and he could not afterwards say why not, except that it was not the kind of noise you go towards.

Afterwards there were two hundred and fifty men dead, and Dathan and Abiram and their households, and there was a piece of ground on the eastern side.

Hobab walked out to it twelve days later and worked it for most of a morning, properly, the way he would work any ground he was being asked to pay for.

He checked the fall, first, because everything follows the fall. He checked for the cracking you get when ground has been wet and has dried under a crust, which was not there. He looked for slump at the edges of anything, and for the fan of loose material that comes out of a hole in the ground when a hole in the ground is made from below, and there was none, and there is always some. He got down and put his hand flat on it in four places and found the temperature ordinary. He dug in two, a forearm each, and the layers under it were the layers he would have expected on that fall, undisturbed, in order, with the pale band at the same depth in both holes.

He had spent thirty years being able to tell where a wadi had run thirteen years earlier. He could look at a piece of country and tell you what had stood on it and for how long and what had taken it away.

There was nothing wrong with this ground.

That was the finding and it was a professional finding and he could not do anything with it whatever, because the difficulty was not that the ground would not tell him what had happened. Ground does not lie and does not decline. The difficulty was that this ground was telling him, clearly and in good order and in a language he had used every working day of his life, that nothing had happened here at all.

He went back and did not write it up, and that night in the leaf he put the date and the number and the words *matter of Korah, concluded*, and left half the line empty after it, which he had never done before and did not do again.

. . .

The part he could account for came the next morning and it was worse.

The congregation went up against Moses and Aaron in a body, and what they said — Hobab heard it in three places before the sun was properly up — was that they had killed the people of the LORD.

Which was, when you took it apart, a statement that the two hundred and fifty had been in the right.

Twenty-four hours: that was the interval. The day before, the argument had been running nine ways with two for and six against and three men enjoying themselves; and on the following morning a very large number of people who had not been in it at all had arrived, all at once, at the position of the men who had just died for holding it.

Hobab had spent his life watching markets turn and had never seen anything move like that.

The plague came after that, and it took fourteen thousand seven hundred people, and the number reached Hobab in the ordinary way, from a woman selling nothing to nobody, who had it right.

He wrote it in the leaf under the other one.

The ash place on the eastern side had to be extended that month, and Hobab watched some of it because it was on his way.

It was surveyed and pegged before anybody put a tool in the ground. The fifty running it had a cord and a stake and two men and was working to a specification, and the specification covered depth, spacing, the distance to be kept from the water, and the direction of the fall.

Hobab, who could not help himself, asked where the specification had come from.

"The last time."

"There's a last time?"

"There's a last time," said the fifty, "and it was worse, and nobody had written anything down, and I spent six days that I am not going

to spend again." He moved the stake. "This is the second one. The next man gets it in a morning."

Then there was a dispute, and Hobab stayed for it.

The difficulty was whether the extension was the same place as the ash place or a new place, because the ash place had a name and was on the leaves, and a new place would want a name of its own and an entry, and the two men arguing about it were entirely serious and entirely reasonable and neither of them was arguing about anything except the leaf.

It went on for most of an hour. It was settled in the end on the grounds that the fall was continuous, which meant the water ran the same way off both, which meant it was one place.

Nobody said anything at all about what was going into it.

Hobab walked back through the interval thinking that he had just watched two men decide, correctly and at length and on excellent grounds, that fourteen thousand seven hundred people were a continuation of the previous arrangement.

III.3 — A TENTH OF THE TITHE

The censers came off the ground and went onto the altar, and Hobab watched most of it because the Hand was doing the work and because he had never in his life seen brass hammered by somebody that good.

Two hundred and fifty censers. They were gathered out of the burning by the priest's son and the fire in them was scattered, and then they were brought to the workshop end, and there they stopped being censers.

The specification was plates. Broad plates, for a covering of the altar, and the reason given was that they had been offered and were therefore not ordinary metal any more and could not go back into general stock. So the losing party's equipment became a permanent fixture of the thing they had been arguing about, hammered flat and nailed on, in the open, at eye height, where every man in that camp would walk past it daily for the rest of his life.

Hobab priced the brass out of habit and got a figure that was not large. Two hundred and fifty small vessels is not a fortune. As a quantity of metal it was about what a middling house at Amman would have in its kitchen.

As a piece of work he never saw anything in that camp do more with less.

"Nobody has to be told what it is," he said to the Hand, watching a plate go on.

"No."

"You could put a man at the gate to say it. Four times a day, every day, for forty years. He'd have to be paid and he'd have to be fed and he'd get it wrong, and men would stop hearing him inside a month."

The Hand set a nail and did not look up. "It's brass."

"It's brass and it doesn't say anything and everybody knows what it says. It doesn't wear out."

"It will need re-nailing at about eleven years," said the Hand, "on the northern side, because of the wind."

. . .

Before the plates there had been the rods, and the rods were the part Hobab thought about for the rest of his life.

It was an adjudication mechanism and it was better than anything he had ever encountered in a trade dispute, and he had encountered every kind.

Twelve rods. One for each house, given up by its own prince, and — this was the part — every man's name written on his own rod, by hand, so that there could be no question later about whose was whose. They were laid up overnight inside, in the one place in the camp nobody could get into. In the morning they were brought out in front of everybody and each man took his own back.

One had budded.

Hobab was not there and did not see it and got it, as usual, from four people. What he did with it was what he did with everything, which was to look at the mechanism.

Nobody had to be believed and nobody had to be called a liar, which is where every dispute Hobab had ever seen actually went wrong — not at the point of fact but at the point where a man has to be told, in front of people, that he is lying.

He would have given a considerable amount to have had that at Amman in the year of the lamed camel.

"And the eleven?" he asked the man who had told him.

"Took them back."

"Just took them back?"

"Took them back and went home," said the man who had told him, and shrugged. "What else would they do with them?"

Hobab could not get past that for some days. Eleven princes of eleven houses had put their names on a stick, lost, and walked off carrying the stick, and there was no procedure for the losing sticks at all, because nobody had thought there would need to be.

The twelfth was kept. It went back inside and stayed there, retained as a token against the rebels — which Hobab, turning it over, worked out was not a memorial. A memorial faces backwards. This was an exhibit, retained in the custody of one party, against the possibility that the matter would be raised again.

. . .

He tried the mechanism out that evening on a man of Asher who dealt in hides and who had been in a dispute about a boundary for two seasons.

"Both of you put a mark on a stone. Both stones go somewhere neither of you can reach. In the morning they come out."

"And what happens to the stones in the night?"

"Something. It doesn't matter what. What matters is that neither of you had to call the other a liar in front of his sons."

The man of Asher thought about it seriously for some time, which Hobab had not expected, and then said that the difficulty was that he would want to know what happened in the night, and that if he did not know he would spend the rest of his life thinking about it, and that this was worse than losing.

Hobab said that this was a fair objection.

"It works here," the man said.

"Yes."

"It would not work at Amman."

"No," said Hobab, "it would not," and did not pursue it, and thought about that exchange far more than he thought about the rods.

The settlement came about a month after that and Hobab was in the camp for all of it, and he could not tell anybody, and by the third day he was going out past the flocks in the afternoons to laugh where nobody would see him.

Because Korah's argument had been: why is one house lifted up above the congregation, and the answer, when it came, was a decree specifying exactly how much more that house got, in perpetuity, with a chain of custody.

. . .

He got the settlement from two Levites arguing about it and did not say a word for most of an hour.

They were at the intake end, in the shade, and they had plainly been at it for days, and Hobab sat down where he was not in the way because a man who sits down quietly is furniture inside four minutes.

The younger one was for it.

"We keep the charge. We keep the tent and everything in it. We do not go near the vessels and we do not go near the altar and I have never once wanted to."

"Nobody said you wanted to."

"Korah wanted to."

"Korah is dead and I am not going to argue with a dead man. Say the rest of it."

"The tenth is ours. All of it. The tenth of everything anybody grows or breeds in this camp for as long as there is a camp, and it is called our inheritance and it is given in place of ground, and there is no house in this camp that can starve us out because there is no house in this camp we depend on."

"And out of it you give a tenth."

"A tenth of a tenth. To Aaron. A hundredth of everything."

"Say that again slowly and listen to yourself while you do it."

. . .

The older one did not raise his voice at any point and Hobab, who had sat through four hundred negotiations, marked him early as the better of the two.

"You collect it," he said. "That is the part you keep walking past. Every year, off every household, in every quarter — you go and you ask and they give it and you carry it. And then you take a tenth of what you carried and you hand it up, in front of them, as a thing you are doing."

"It is an offering."

"It is a hundredth of everything that grows in this country and it goes to one house, and the men who make sure it arrives are us, and we do it in public, every year, forever. There is no arrangement anywhere in the world where the party that resents a payment is also the party that collects it."

"That is why it will hold."

"That is exactly why it will hold," said the older one, "and it is why I cannot sleep. Whoever drafted that was not being kind to us. He was making it impossible for us to be the ones who stop it."

. . .

The younger one said that this was a poor way to speak about a thing that had come down.

The older one said that he had not said one word about where it had come from and did not intend to, and that he was talking about the drafting, and that a man could admire the drafting.

They went round that twice more and neither of them shifted and both of them were entirely serious, and at the end of it the younger one said that in forty years nobody would remember there had been an argument, and the older one said that this was the only thing they had agreed on all week.

. . .

Hobab walked back to the mixed-multitude side with none of it written down.

He had it. He had all of it and he had got it in an hour without asking a single question, and what he could not stop turning over was that he could not have told you which of the two men was right.

He put four words in the leaf that night — *tenth of a tenth; who collects* — and left it.

The other half he did not write at all, and did not need to, because it had been sitting in front of him since the ninth month.

Two men had died a month earlier for saying that they had been given no inheritance of fields and vineyards.

And the settlement gave two entire tribes' worth of people, formally and forever, no inheritance of fields and vineyards.

Hobab asked four people about that, carefully, in four different ways. None of them saw a connection, because there was not one to see: the two things had come out of different offices about different questions and had arrived in the same month by accident.

. . .

Bezalel wanted to see him about the spices, which Hobab did not carry and had never carried and had told them so twice.

He went anyway, because a man who is asked twice goes.

The workshop's metal end was a different country from Oholiab's. Furnaces, a stone bench, and a smell Hobab had last met at the third smelting camp above the Arabah four months earlier and did not remark on. Bezalel was of Judah and about fifty and had the flat unhurried attention of a man who has spent his life on work that punishes hurrying.

He put the problem out in order, which Hobab appreciated.

There were two compounds. One was an oil for anointing and one was a perfume for burning, and both of them were fixed.

Not fixed by custom. Fixed by specification, in weights, and Bezalel gave him the weights: five hundred of myrrh, half that of sweet cinnamon, the same again of calamus, five hundred of cassia, and the oil. And for the other one, four spices at a like weight each, one of which was frankincense and three of which Hobab had heard of and had never once handled.

"Every year?"

"Every year and every year after that."

"In those proportions."

"In those proportions. It is not a receipt, it is the thing itself. If the calamus is short you do not make it with less calamus. You do not make it."

Hobab sat down on the stone bench and began, without meaning to, to enjoy himself.

. . .

"You cannot substitute."

"I cannot substitute."

"Can anybody else buy it? Made up, I mean. Compounded. Is there a market anywhere for the finished thing?"

Bezalel said that there was not, and could not be, and told him why: that no man was to compound anything after the composition of it, on pain of being cut off from his people, and that this was said out in the recitation every month and everybody in that camp had it by heart.

Hobab put his hands on his knees.

He had spent forty years buying things, and a man buys well by knowing what a thing goes for somewhere else. That is the entire craft. You do not need to be clever; you need one other buyer, anywhere, ever, and from that one figure you can work back to what you should be paying and forward to what you are being told.

There was no other buyer. There would never be another buyer. Anybody who made that compound anywhere in the world was liable to be cut off from his people, which meant that in the entire trade there was exactly one purchaser of the finished article and he was sitting on a stone bench looking at Hobab with the patience of a man who has been in this position for six years.

"You have no price," Hobab said.

"I have a price. I have the price I was given the first time, six years ago, by a house at Tayma, and I have paid it six times."

"Has it moved?"

"It has moved twice. Both times up."

"Did they say why?"

"They said the road."

Hobab laughed out loud, alone, in the metal end of a workshop, for rather longer than was polite.

. . .

He did not solve it, because it was not solvable, and he was honest with Bezalel about that inside the hour.

You cannot make a market where there is one buyer and a prohibition. What you can do — and this is what Hobab had actually come with, and what he had known he would say before he came, and what took four minutes of the two hours — is stop buying the compound and start buying the four things.

Four houses instead of one. Three of the four he could name and one he would have to find, and none of them would know what the four were for or that there were four, because none of them would be selling to the same man twice in a season. The compounding could be done in that camp by whoever was doing it now.

"Who is doing it now?"

"An apothecary at Tayma."

"Then your price includes his afternoon and his silence, and you have been paying for the silence for six years, and the silence is the expensive part."

Bezalel sat with that for a moment.

"That had not occurred to me."

"It would not. You are the man who is not permitted to be interested in what things cost." Hobab got a leaf out, which he had not done in front of a customer in his life, and wrote four names on it and the two he was less sure of underneath. "Send to the first. Do not send to the second until the first has answered, and do not tell either of them anything at all about the third."

"How long?"

"Two years to get it running and it will hold for forty."

"And what do I owe you for this?"

"Nothing," said Hobab, "because I do not carry any of it and I am not going to, and if I ever take a shekel out of that road I will have made myself the fifth house and then you will have the same problem with a friend in it, which is worse."

. . .

He thought about that answer for some years and never improved on it and was never entirely sure it had been the right one.

. . .

The advice was no good and it took a boy of about fifteen four days to tell him so.

He was sweeping the metal end when Hobab came back through on the way out, and he stopped sweeping, and asked whether it was true that Hobab had said they should buy the four things and compound them here.

Hobab said that it was.

"Who would do it?"

"Anybody. It is not difficult. You weigh four things and you work them together and you have said yourself that your master could do it in an afternoon."

"He could," said the boy. "He may not."

. . .

It came out over about a quarter of an hour and the boy was patient about it, which Hobab found harder to bear than impatience would have been.

The compound is not a compound. It is made after the art of the apothecary, by somebody appointed to make it, and the appointment is an office and there is not one. There has never needed to be one, because it has always come up the road ready. To do it in that camp somebody would have to be given the work, and giving a man that work is not the same order of thing as giving a man a wagon, and nobody had done it, and nobody was going to do it in a season because there was no procedure for making the appointment either.

"So he cannot."

"He cannot until somebody makes it possible for him to, and he is not going to ask, because asking is how you find out that the answer is no."

Hobab stood in the metal end of that workshop with a boy holding a broom.

. . .

He had given four minutes of the best advice of his career and it had been the advice of a man who had priced the goods and not the office.

That was the error entire and he had it inside a heartbeat. He had spent six years in that camp establishing that everything in it ran on offices, that there was no line for a man without one, that a leaf without a column for a thing meant the thing did not exist — he had paid four beasts for that lesson in the same season — and he had walked into a workshop and told the finest craftsman in that country to solve a problem by having somebody do a thing.

Nobody had corrected him. Bezalel had not corrected him, and Hobab worked out on the road why not, which was that Bezalel had not known either.

He went south with four names on a leaf that were no use to anybody for eleven years.

He did not write the error down. He told it, twice, to Yatir, both times as a story against himself, and both times left out the part about the boy.

. . .

Oholiab had a department now and hated it.

There were nine men where there had been four and a leaf that was kept by somebody whose entire office it was, and the leaf recorded every width of hanging in the court by position and by the season it had gone in, so that nobody had to guess which piece was oldest.

Hobab, who had suggested something not unlike that six years earlier and had been told they would attend to it when it arose, said nothing at all and enjoyed himself.

"Say it," said Oholiab.

"I've said nothing."

"You have been saying nothing for two days and it is the loudest thing in this tent."

They did the trade, which took an hour, and then Oholiab took him down the line and showed him the problem, which was the one he had named six years before and which had arrived on schedule.

The hangings were going. Not failing — going, at the edges and along the bottom where the cloth worked against the pins in the wind, a width at a time, and the department existed because somebody had finally worked out that this was not an event but a rate.

"Eleven widths since the spring."

"And you can supply eleven widths?"

"I can supply eleven widths," Oholiab said, "and I will supply eleven widths next year, and the year after, and I want you to understand what I am telling you, because you are the only man who comes through here who will. I am not building. I have not built anything in six years. I run a thing that turns wool into a hanging at exactly the rate the wind turns a hanging back into nothing, and if I get it right the court looks the same as it looked the day it went up, forever, and nobody will ever know I did anything at all."

"That's most work."

"That is *all* work," said Oholiab. "I have been in this trade forty-six years and I found that out at sixty-one."

. . .

The spinning had not slowed and the camp had fourteen thousand seven hundred fewer people in it than it had had at midsummer.

Hobab noticed the arithmetic at the intake and it took him three days to work out what he was looking at.

The line was the same length. Same four to nine women at any hour, same trestle, same stone, same man with the leaf. There were households gone, entire, in the eastern quarter and out past the Dan side both — and their tents had come down, and the cloth of them had not gone into the ground with anybody.

It had gone back in.

He followed it because he could not help himself and found it at the intake, in among the new work: strips off the roofs of the dead, unpicked at the seams by somebody and carried up in the ordinary way, weighed on the ordinary stone, entered on the ordinary leaf under weight and quality and day.

There was no column for where it had come from.

The Companion was in the line with an armful of it. It was old cloth, grey-black and thinned, and it went on the trestle and was looked at and was turned back — the man was right to turn it back; Hobab could see the fault from where he stood — and she took it away again and it went, presumably, to patching, and then to a grain sack, and then to a fire.

Merit was three from the trestle with an armful of it and he did not know until she turned that she was the one carrying it.

She was forty-two now and the hip was worse and she still held the thread. She asked him about the copper, which nobody else on that side had thought to ask him about in six years, and he gave her a quarter of an hour of it, and she followed all of it, and asked one question at the end that he could not answer.

It was whether the men who owned those mines knew what the ore was worth at Amman, or only what it was worth at the mine.

He thought about it for the rest of the season and never did find out.

. . .

He stood at the intake for a while after that.

He went and did four days' work on Oholiab's supply figures without being asked, and got them a better price on the coastal wool than they had been paying, and did not mention any of the rest of it to anybody at all.

III.4 — A WORKING LIST

He came down to his father's tents in the middle of the winter with a season on the leaf and found that the leaf had grown a shape while he was not looking at it.

Seven months. He had gone up in the third month meaning to stay until he was bored and had not been bored, and had come down in the eleventh with thirty-one animals fatter than when they went and two men who had run the southern route without him for the better part of a year and had done it well enough that he had spent the last fortnight of the journey working out how to say so without sounding surprised.

He noticed it on the road, five days out, going through it to build the order.

There were categories. Not headings — he had not written headings, he would not have known how — but the entries had sorted themselves onto different parts of the sheets by kind, because a man writing at the end of a day puts a thing where the last thing like it went. Stages and dates in one place. Weights and prices in another. Rulings and who gave them. Deaths and numbers. And a fourth sort that had no name and that turned out, when he went through it, to be the things he had written down without knowing why.

There were ten entries in the fourth sort and he could account for two of them.

He read the other eight three times on the road and got nothing. They were not notes toward anything. They were not reminders; he remembered all of them without the leaf. They had the form of entries a factor makes when he has been handed a figure he cannot yet use and does not want to lose, except that most of them were not figures and several of them were not even facts.

He had been keeping a leaf for six years and had never once, until that ride, opened it and been unable to say what a line was doing there.

. . .

His father was inside, which had never happened.

There was a brazier and a blanket and it was the middle of the afternoon, and Jethro was sitting up and was perfectly sharp and did not get up, and neither of them said anything about it.

"You're thin."

"I'm the same."

"You're the same," Jethro agreed, which was new.

Hobab sat down opposite the brazier and got the heat of it on his shins and said nothing about that either, and his father watched him not say it for slightly longer than was comfortable.

"Go on."

"I've said nothing."

"You have looked at this brazier four times since you came through the flap and you are working out how to ask me about it without asking me about it, and you will spend the rest of the afternoon on that and get nowhere, so I will save you." He put his hands out over it. "I am cold. I have been cold since the autumn. It is not an illness and there is nothing to be done and I have had it looked at by a woman who knows more than either of us, and what she said was that I was seventy-five."

"That's a diagnosis."

"It is the best one available and I paid her for it." He drew the blanket up. "Sit closer to it than you want to. I have four people a season now and every one of them sits at the wrong distance out of manners and goes home with a cold back, and I would rather you were warm than polite."

They sat closer to it.

"Now," said Jethro. "The north."

. . .

The north took an hour and a half. Then his father gave it back, and that was where the year went wrong.

It was not that he had it wrong. He had four things and every one of them was true. The difficulty was that Hobab had heard three of them in the summer, from other men, on the road, and the fourth had been true in the spring and had stopped being true in the autumn.

He listened to all of it and said nothing at the time.

Because he could not do anything else, he went and got the leaf.

He did not do it to correct his father. He did it because there was a date attached to the fourth thing and he wanted to know whether it was the spring or the summer, and the leaf had it, and the leaf was right and his father was four months behind.

Neither of them remarked on it.

That was the part Hobab could not get comfortable with afterwards. He put the leaf back in his satchel and they went on talking, and his father did not ask what he had gone to fetch, and Hobab did not say, and the conversation carried on being a good conversation for another two hours.

Nobody had done anything wrong. There had simply been, for the first time in thirteen years, a question about the world outside that his father could not answer and a piece of ruled sheet in a satchel that could.

. . .

Hobab gave him the camp over two nights, and gave it well, and gave it shorter than it was.

He noticed himself doing it at the censers.

He had all of it — the gathering of them, the specification, the nailing, the Hand's remark about re-nailing at eleven years — and he heard himself compress it into four sentences on the way to the settlement, because the settlement was better and he wanted to get there.

That is a storyteller's move and his father had drilled it out of him at fourteen.

He stopped, and said so, and went back and gave the censers properly, and his father heard it entire without saying anything and then said: "Go on," in a manner that made it clear he had noticed the first version.

. . .

"Now," Jethro said, on the second night. "The order of it."

"The order of what?"

"The plates and the rods and the settlement. Which came first."

Hobab opened his mouth to say the rods, and stopped, because he was not sure, and then reached for the leaf without thinking about it at all.

He had both. Date, day, and month, in his own marks, on facing sides.

The rods came before the plates by nine days. The settlement was promulgated twenty-six days after the plates went on. And the drafting of it had begun before any of it, in the second month, which he had from the Conscience-Keeper and had written down with the source beside it because he had been told a thing that contradicted what everybody knew.

He gave his father all four dates and watched him take them.

"That is the entire matter," Jethro said, after a while.

"It is four dates."

"It is four dates that nobody in that camp can produce and that everybody in that camp is certain about, and in nine years there will be a settled account of this and it will have the settlement answering Korah, because that is the order the story wants." He worked his hands on the blanket. "You could not have told me that from memory. You did not know it four heartbeats ago."

"No."

"Say what it means."

"It means the leaf is better than I am."

"It means the leaf is better than you are at the thing the leaf is for," his father said, "which is a smaller claim and a worse one, and you will spend some years finding out how much worse."

Hobab said that this was a very cheerful thing to be told in the middle of the winter.

"You came four hundred miles to be told things."

"I came four hundred miles because my animals were going that way."

"Your animals have been going that way for thirteen years," said Jethro, "and I have never once seen you arrive with a load that would not have gone better by the eastern run, and I have not mentioned it, and I am mentioning it now because I am seventy-five and the stock of things I have not mentioned is larger than the time available."

"How much larger?"

"Considerably. Some of it is about your mother." He put a cake on the brazier. "Ask me in the spring."

. . .

The world came afterwards, in the small hours, and it was shorter than it had been.

Egypt was where it had been in the spring, which Hobab already knew. Edom had had the bad year at last and the two houses had remembered every single thing, exactly as predicted, six years late. There was a name at Tayma Hobab should call on and it turned out to be a man who had died in the summer.

His father caught that one himself, halfway through, and stopped, and said: "No. He's gone. Somebody told me in the autumn and I have been carrying him about since."

"It doesn't matter."

"It matters that I did it," said Jethro, without any self-pity at all, in the voice of a man reading a figure off a stone. "Fewer come now. They go to the nephew at the pass because he is on the road and I am not, and he keeps a leaf, and a leaf is easier to visit than an old man."

"A leaf can't tell them anything."

"A leaf does not ask them how their father is and then tell them what is going to happen to their brother," said Jethro. "You have never had it done to you because you are family and I have no manners with

you. It is a considerable service and nobody has ever once thanked me for it and I would not stop."

He put another cake on the brazier.

"Bring me the tin," he said. "The tin is still the thing, and I can still tell you what the tin means, and I will be able to do that when I cannot tell you anything else."

. . .

Zipporah was not in the camp.

Hobab said it in the middle of the second night, between the ash-place extension and the price of coastal wool, because that was where it came in the order.

He had gone to the eastern edge of the eastern quarter on his fourth day, as he had gone every visit for six years, and the tent was there and it was somebody else's tent, and the household in it was courteous and had been there eighteen months and did not know.

He asked six people over the season. Two did not know. Two thought she had gone to her own people, which she had not, because her own people were forty days south and Hobab had come from there. One said she was on the Judah side now, which she was not; he checked. The sixth said that these things happen in a camp this size and that he should ask a fifty.

He did not ask a fifty.

He worked out on about the ninth day why he did not, and it was not delicacy. It was that a fifty would have to take it, because that is his office, and would put it up, and somewhere above that a man with a leaf would enter a query about a household in the eastern quarter of Judah, and it would be answered, correctly and completely, inside a month.

Hobab had spent six years admiring that machine and had once walked most of a mile in the dark being pleased that a Kohathite had found a room in the camp where a thing could be said and stop.

He did not want his sister's name going up a chain, and he could not have said why, and he was aware while not asking that he was

doing the identical thing the Kohathite had done and that he had no better reason for it.

The boys were both in the camp and both grown, and he saw the elder at a distance twice and did not go over, and could not afterwards give himself a reason for that either.

His father took it without any change of expression, and asked one question, which was whether the tent had been struck or taken over standing.

"Taken over standing."

"Then she left it up," said Jethro, and put another cake on the brazier, and asked what the coastal wool had done.

Hobab gave him the coastal wool.

He was forty-eight years old and had been given all of it in six words by a man who was not going to say it twice, and he did not take it, and did not take it for thirty-two years.

. . .

Hobab unpacked the leaf in the morning and read the fourth sort, the eight he could not account for.

Man of Zebulun. No office. Expects to go up. Does not know how. Is not troubled. — which he had struck out six years ago and had written again the following spring, whole, from memory, and had not struck out the second time.

> *Eleven held seams, eastern quarter, moving day.*
> *Intake: weight, quality, day. No name on the goats' hair.*
> *Kohathite, evening, mixed-multitude side. Nowhere for it to stop.*
> *Ground at the eastern place: nothing wrong with it.*
> *Strips off the roofs of the dead. Weighed on the ordinary stone.*
> *He is right.*
> *Ten tents at the bottom and every one of them a woman's.*

He read them through twice and could not have said what any of them were for, and did not strike out a single one, and put the leaf away, and went out to see about the animals.

VISIT IV — THE HOLE, LATE

IV.1 — OLDER

He rode now.

He had sworn at thirty that he never would, and had sworn it out loud, in front of two men who were both dead, and had held to it until he was fifty-four and had a bad winter with a hip and had got up on a mule one morning at the third stage because the alternative was stopping, and had not got down since.

The men said nothing about it. Worse than anything they could have said.

There were forty-four animals now, which had taken him twelve years to get back to and past after a bad autumn he still did not talk about, and four men working, and the best of the four was his sister's boy Yatir, who was twenty-six and who had been handed things for three years simply to see whether they came back done, and they came back done.

Hobab had not told him that was what was happening. Yatir had worked it out in the first season and had said nothing, which was the moment Hobab had stopped testing him and had gone on doing it anyway because they both enjoyed it.

The trade had got easier and duller in about equal measure.

He lost a trade at Tayma that spring and it took him four months to admit it was a loss and not a bad season.

The house was one he had dealt with for thirty years, and the father was dead, and the son was thirty-one and had been running it for six.

Hobab had watched him come up. He had been pleased about him as an old man is pleased about a young one who is going to be good, and had said so to Yatir, and had once given him a name at Amman he did not have to give.

The manoeuvre took a year and a half and was entirely honest.

The son bought Hobab's dye at Hobab's rate, four seasons running, and paid on time and did not haggle, and complimented the quality, and in the third season began buying a small quantity of an inferior grade from a Dedanite as well, which Hobab knew about and thought nothing of, because everybody buys a bad grade for the bad orders.

In the fourth season he stopped buying from Hobab.

He had spent four seasons establishing, in front of everybody who mattered at Tayma, that the good dye and the bad dye went into the same cloth and came out of the same door, and by the time he stopped, half that market had watched him do it and had drawn the conclusion he had built for them, which was that the difference was not worth what Hobab charged.

It was not true. Hobab could have proved it was not true in about a season, at a loom, to any man who would stand still.

Nobody stands still. That is the entire difficulty and Hobab had known it at twenty-five and had used it himself twice, and had been outmanoeuvred at sixty by a man doing the thing he had done, patiently, without a single dishonest sentence.

. . .

He worked out what it had cost him and it was the better part of two years' margin on that end of the run.

He worked out something worse on the road, which was that he had seen it in the second season and had not looked at it, because he liked the boy and because a man who is being complimented on his quality four seasons running is a man being handled and does not want to know.

He told Yatir all of it, in order, including that part.

"You would have caught it," Yatir said.

"At thirty I would have caught it in the first season."

"That is not what I said. You would have caught it now if he had been anybody else."

Hobab thought about that for some considerable time and never entirely stopped, and he was still turning it over at eighty on a mule above the Arnon.

. . .

He watered at the pass on the way down and the nephew had the rate ready before he was off the mule, which was new, and had it wrong.

Not badly wrong. A twentieth over, in Hobab's favour, which was the interesting part.

"That's under."

"It's the rate."

"It is a twentieth under the rate and you have had it under for four years and I have been paying it and saying nothing, and I am telling you now because I am sixty and I would rather it came from me than from a Dedanite."

The nephew went and got the leaf.

He came back with it and put his finger on the line and read it out, and the line was wrong, and it had been wrong since the entry before it, and the entry before it had been copied from an entry before that.

"Where does it start?"

"I do not know," said the nephew. "It is before me."

Hobab looked at the pits, which were dug out properly, as they were every year.

"Put it right," he said, "and put it right in a new hand and leave the old line standing, and write the day beside both, and in nine years when somebody tells you the old one was correct you will be able to show him it was not."

The nephew wrote that down.

Then, because Hobab could not stop himself, he added that in nine years the man telling him the old one was correct would be Hobab, and that the nephew should hold his ground.

He came down into the oasis in the spring of that year with nothing to sell, which was new, and rode in past a wall that had not been there.

It had been there for some while. The line of it had moved out past the western kilns and taken in ground that had been sand when he was a boy, and there were children on that ground playing a game with stones he did not know, and he could produce, if pressed, four separate occasions on which he had walked past men on a scaffold and thought *they are extending the wall* and gone on to the kilns.

What he actually did now, most seasons, was talk.

Men came to him. That had crept up on him the same way the wall had. He was the man who had been on the eastern run longest, and he had the water in his head from the Jauf to Ezion-geber and could tell you what a load would cost between any two points on it and who would lie to you at which end, and men rode a day out of their way to sit down with him about it and went home and did what he said.

It was pleasant. He was aware that it was pleasant.

He was also aware, and had been for about two years, that he had begun repeating himself, and that the four men who worked for him had developed a way of not looking at each other when he did it.

. . .

He went through the kiln yards on the second day because he always did.

They were making what they had always made. Same shapes, same slip, the ibex frieze on the jars and the impossible lions on the kraters, and the beasts had not changed because the beasts were not the point.

The Hand was at the drying racks at the near end, turning.

Hobab watched for a while, out of the ordinary professional interest of a man who has moved forty thousand pots and has never once made one, and what he watched was the turning: each piece lifted, quarter-turned, set down, in a rhythm that did not vary and did not hurry, and there were a hundred and some pieces on that rack alone.

He worked out roughly what it came to in a day and then stopped working it out.

It was not skilled work. Anybody could do it. It was also the difference between a good firing and a rack of cracked seconds, and there was no way at all to tell, from a finished jar in Amman, whether it had been done.

"How long on a rack?"

"Depends on the wind."

"And if it isn’t turned?"

"Then it goes on that stack," said the Hand, without stopping, "and a man like you buys it for almost nothing and sells it to somebody who does not know."

Hobab, who had done exactly that on four occasions and had thought himself sharp about it each time, went and bought a small water jar out of the seconds by the yard wall with a fault in the shoulder that put it below anything he would have carried.

He could not have said why. It cost him almost nothing.

He kept it for the rest of his life, and it outlived him.

. . .

His father was eighty-seven and had stopped going outside.

Not a decline in any dramatic sense. He was in the same tent, and he was sharp, and his hands were steady on a cup, and he could still recite the north in order and did, at Hobab's asking, for the pleasure of proving that he could — Egypt, Edom, Moab, the plateau, the coast, prices — and all of it was four years stale and both of them knew it and neither of them said so.

What had gone was the outside.

Nobody came now. None of it had been decided by anybody. The men who used to ride nine days to have a matter looked into were dead, and their sons went to a man at the pass with a leaf, or to a man at Tayma who was not a priest and did not pretend to be and settled things in an afternoon for a fee. There was no falling-off in Jethro's competence. There was simply nobody left who had been in the habit.

"How many this year?" Hobab asked, on the third evening.

"Two."

"Two matters?"

"Two people," his father said. "One of them was your cousin's boy and he came because his mother made him, and one was a Kenite I had never met who wanted to know whether I was still alive, and I was, and he seemed pleased, and he went away." He shifted the blanket. "It is not a grievance. I am eighty-seven and I have outlived my trade, which is what happens to a man who is good at something for long enough. Yamlik managed it too and I do not recall him complaining."

"Yamlik died in his shelter with fifty years of rates in his head."

"Yes," said Jethro, with real satisfaction, "and the rates went into the ground with him, and the nephew has been getting them wrong on a leaf ever since, and they are getting wronger, and nobody will ever know. Do you know what I would have given to see that?"

They sat with the brazier for a while.

"There is a thing I have been meaning to say to you for about four years," his father said, "and I have not said it because it is not urgent and because I enjoy having it. I am going to say it now because I am eighty-seven and the arithmetic has begun to be against me."

"Say it, then."

"You are better at this than I was."

Hobab did not say anything at all.

"Do not make a face. It is not a kindness, it is a finding, and I have had thirteen years to test it and I have tested it." Jethro pulled the blanket up. "I had four hundred miles and a tent and whoever chose to ride to me. You have the road. You have had the road for forty years and you have been on it in the bad seasons as well as the good, and you know what a thing costs as well as what it means, and I never did, and I covered it up for sixty years with a manner."

"You covered it up very well."

"I covered it up superbly," said his father. "It is the single greatest professional achievement of my life and I would do it again."

. . .

Hobab did four days' work about the household while he was there, without being asked, as he had done every year for twelve years.

There were fourteen roofs now, down from twenty. He did not comment on that either.

On the last morning he went round the tents at first light, which was habit, checking the ropes, and stopped at his father's because the cloth over the men's side had a band in it that was newer than the rest.

That band, or one like it, had been there on every visit since he was a young man. It had never once occurred to him to think about

it as a recurrence. A tent gets re-stripped; a strip gets replaced; there is a newer band; the newer band goes old and there is another one somewhere else.

He stood there in the cold doing arithmetic he had never done in his life.

A strip a year. Perhaps two, on a roof that size, in a household that could afford the wool. He had been sleeping under that roof, off and on, for sixty years, which meant the cloth over his head that morning was not the cloth that had been over his head as a boy, and had not been for a long time, and there was no single night on which it had changed.

Somebody had woven every one of those strips. Somebody had gone up with a needle and put each one in.

He knew perfectly well who. His mother, and then his mother and his sister, and then — after his mother died and his sister went north and did not come back — somebody else, and he did not know who, and had never asked, and had been coming home twice a year for four decades.

He went in to breakfast and did not ask then either.

IV.2 — THE REVEAL

In the autumn he went up and stayed a season, and the camp had become a town that could be taken down.

It was the shortest way he ever found to say it and he did not arrive at it until the end.

. . .

The first thing was the smell, which had gone.

Not the ash place; that was still there and was now a hill you could see from a morning out. The other smell — the vast animal floor of it, the thing that had hit him half a day out on his first approach twenty years ago — had thinned to something a man could live in without noticing.

Fewer beasts. He established that inside three days and it took him a further week to establish why, and the answer was not that anything had gone wrong.

The flocks had been split. There were four grazing grounds now, worked in rotation, at distances of a day to three days out, with the households taking them in a stated order and coming back in. Nobody in the camp had more than a portion of his animals with him at any time.

Hobab had spent forty years watching people fail to do that.

"Whose was this?"

"There's an order," said the man he asked, who was about thirty and had never lived anywhere else. "It's in the leaves. You get the near ground one year in four."

"And if your beasts are on the far ground when the camp moves?"

The man looked at him with the frank incomprehension of the young.

"Why would the camp move?"

. . .

It was the eleventh day and Hobab wrote it down that night and did not understand what he had written for another eight weeks.

. . .

The second generation had come up and they were not the same people.

This was the largest thing in the camp and nobody in it could see it, because the second generation was simply everybody, and it had happened at the rate people happen.

They had not been in Egypt. That was the fact under all of it. There were men of thirty-five running fifties who had been carried out of Egypt as infants and remembered nothing whatever, and there were men of twenty-five who had been born at Sinai or on the road to Paran, and there were the young ones, born here, on this ground, at this water, who had never in their lives struck a tent for a serious reason.

One man gave him all of it and he did not need to go further, which was itself the finding.

The man was twenty-eight and ran a ten and was helping Hobab with a girth strap out of ordinary kindness, and Hobab asked him what Egypt had been like.

"Bricks," said the man. "Bad. There was fish."

"You remember fish?"

"I don't remember anything. I was born at Hazeroth." He got the strap through. "That's what there was. Bricks and it was bad and there was fish."

"Who told you?"

"Everybody. My father. It's said."

Hobab asked him then what the country up north was like, and the man let go of the strap and straightened up and told him, at length, without a pause anywhere, and it was vivid and confident and specific:

milk and honey; walled towns, but they would come down; vines where a cluster wanted two men and a staff.

He had not been there either. He had never in his life been more than three days from where he was standing.

The two accounts had come to him by the identical route and he held them in completely different ways, and there was no possible manner of asking him about that which would not have sounded like an accusation, so Hobab thanked him for the strap.

. . .

The regulations had regulations.

Hobab had expected this and was still not ready for it, because what he had expected was clutter and what he found was quality.

There was a procedure for a lost beast that ran to four stages and every stage was correct. There was a man whose office was the handling of matters that arose between the four grazing grounds, and under him two men, and one of those two spent his entire working life on the single question of what happened when a household's rotation fell in the same season as a death in that household — which happened, by Hobab's estimate, about nine times a year, and which had a settled procedure, and the procedure was good.

The Allfather was over a thousand still and had been over the same thousand for twenty years, and Hobab found him on the second day sitting in the same posture against a different tent pole.

There were nine matters that morning and he gave eight of them.

"You're still here," Hobab said afterwards.

"Where would I be?"

"Higher."

"There is nothing higher that is this," said the Allfather. "There are men over me now who do not judge at all. They arrange the men who judge. It is necessary work and somebody has to do it and I have been asked twice."

"And?"

"And I said that I was a ruler of a thousand and that this was what I did." He shifted against the pole. "They took it as modesty. It was

not modesty. A man who arranges judges hears about a matter four months late and in writing, and by then it is not a matter, it is a report of a matter, and the two are not the same animal and nobody who has not sat on the ground with both of them in front of him will ever believe me."

Hobab found a leaf whose only purpose was to say, of every other leaf, which bundle it was in, which tent that bundle stood in, and which side of the tent.

He laughed at that one out loud in front of the man who kept it, and apologised, and the man said that everybody did that and that he had said the same thing himself when he was given it, and then explained why it was necessary, and Hobab listened to the explanation and could not fault a word of it.

"How long have you had this office?"

"Six years."

"And before that?"

"Before that there was no office and it took four days to find anything," the man said, "and now it takes half a morning, and in six years nobody has thanked me and I would not know what to do with it if they did."

. . .

The Chaos-Weaver was in the third row of the mixed-multitude side with a strap over his knee, where he had been on every visit for eighteen years.

"Ration's short on the eastern side," he said, before Hobab had sat down.

"It was short seventeen years ago."

"It was short seventeen years ago by a fifteenth and it is short now by a twenty-second, so somebody did something, and they did it about nine years ago, and they did not do all of it. Ask me why they did not do all of it."

"Why did they not do all of it?"

"Because the man who did it was moved to another office in the middle," said the Chaos-Weaver, "and the man who came after him

inherited a thing that was better than it had been, and a man who inherits a thing that is better than it was does not go looking for the rest of the fault. That is not a criticism of anybody. I would not have gone looking either."

He had said nothing to anybody about it, and had not been in a queue in twenty years.

. . .

Hobab found the four grazing grounds in the eighth week and rode them, all four, because he had begun to want the shape of the thing on the ground rather than off a leaf.

It took nine days and on the seventh of them, coming back in from the western ground along a track that had been worn a foot deep, he got it.

He got it the way he got everything, which was by counting.

The track was a foot deep. That is not a season's track. That is not four seasons. A foot of wear on that ground, at that traffic, is years and years and years, and he had ridden up it without thinking about it because a worn track is the most ordinary thing in the world.

He stopped the mule.

Then he did the sum that he had not done in twenty years of coming to that place, and he did it in the units he had, and the units he had were stages.

He knew the stages. They were in the leaf, every one, with the day and the month, because the stages were what he had recorded from the very first season and had never stopped recording. Succoth. Etham. Marah. Dophkah. Alush. Rephidim. Kibroth-hattaavah. Hazeroth. Rithmah. Rimmon-parez. Libnah. Rissah. On and on, a list he could not have recited and had never needed to, because it was written.

He had never once added it up.

He got down off the mule on a worn track in the middle of the western ground and got the leaf out and counted the stages against the years, and the answer came to a little over one.

One move a year.

For twenty years.

. . .

He sat down on the ground.

Because this was the thing he had come about the first time, twelve years ago, and had stood on a rise for a quarter of an hour trying to see, and had gone away from because an absence has no edge to it and he could not measure a thing against a memory.

He had been measuring it against a memory. There was the error, and it had taken him twelve years and a written record to find it. Memory has no interval in it. A man who comes to a place four times a year and finds it unchanged does not experience twenty years of stillness; he experiences twenty years of *arriving*, each arrival whole and unremarkable, and no two of them ever laid beside each other.

The leaf had them laid beside each other. It had had them the entire time. He had written every one of them down himself and had carried them in a satchel for twenty years and had never turned two pages at once.

They had come out of Egypt and had gone into the wilderness and had stopped.

Not stopped by anybody's decision. Stopped the way water stops, by arriving somewhere it could stay. There was good water and four grazing grounds in rotation and a procedure for what happened when a rotation fell in the same season as a death, and a man of thirty had asked him, in perfect good faith, *why would the camp move.*

They had moved. He wanted to be exact with himself about that, because a man who overstates a finding has thrown it away. Forty-odd times, out and back and out again, between grounds that lay a day to three days apart, and every one of those moves was a real move with real cost and real strike and real pitch.

They had moved forty-odd times inside a circle a man could ride round in eight days.

They were not wandering. They had never been wandering.

. . .

What follows is not his. It is set down here once and not again.

They built a country. It had no ground.

Nobody in it ever said so. There was no office for saying it.

. . .

Hobab, on a worn track in the western ground, with a mule standing over him and a piece of ruled sheet across his knee, had about a fifth of that and knew it was a fifth.

. . .

He went out to the eastern edge of the eastern quarter on the fourth day, which he had not done in twelve years and had not planned to do.

The row was not there. It had been re-laid at some point — a widening, or a rotation, or one of the things that happen — and the ground where the tent had stood was walking ground now, and had the beaten look of walking ground that has been walked on for years.

There was nothing to fail to find. Different from the last time, and he stood in it for a while.

On the way back he passed a woman at a loom with a child asleep against the frame, and she was working the skin at the side of her left thumb with the nail of her forefinger while she counted her warp, and Hobab went four or five paces past her before it reached him and then had to stop and stand still in the middle of a row until it had gone through and out the other side.

It was nothing. Half the women in that camp probably did it. He had watched his mother try bitter stuff and a wrapping and a slap on a girl of nine and had watched none of it work.

He did not go back and look at the woman again, and he did not write anything in the leaf, and he did not mention it to anybody, and by the time he reached his own tent he had put it where he put things.

. . .

He rode back in from the western ground two days later, and on the second of them he decided to take it to the only man in the camp who might have it too.

The All-Seeing was on the eastern side, in a tent of the row behind the Judah standard, and was working, and had been working for twenty years.

Hobab put it plainly, because there was no other way to put it. Forty-odd stages. Twenty years. One move a year, or a little over.

"Yes," said the All-Seeing.

"You have it."

"I have the stages and I have the years."

"For how long?"

The All-Seeing considered the question, and Hobab understood, as he had understood once before at a tent flap, that it was neither strange nor new.

"They were written as they happened," it said.

Hobab sat down on the mat without being asked.

"Has anyone else done the sum?"

"No."

"Has anyone asked?"

"You have asked."

"In twenty years."

"In twenty years," the All-Seeing agreed.

There was nothing in the manner of it. It was not a confession and it was not withheld and it was not offered; it was a count, kept correctly, held by a man whose office was to keep it, and available to anybody in that camp who had ever thought to put two pages beside each other, and nobody had.

"Why not?" Hobab said.

"The stages are entered when the camp moves," said the All-Seeing. "There is no office for what the stages come to."

Hobab went out past the flap and stood in the row for a while.

He had spent twenty years believing that the difficulty with that camp was what it did not write down — the women, the water, the strips, the names on the goats' hair. It had taken him until sixty to

work out that the more interesting difficulty was what it wrote down perfectly and never once added up.

That night he wrote in the leaf, and what he wrote was the number of stages and the number of years and the figure that came out of the two, and nothing else.

Then he sat and looked at it for a considerable time.

He had spent twenty years admiring a machine. He had priced its linen and counted its flocks and read its ground and got its trumpet code off a boy in four heartbeats, and he had gone home twice a year and given his father an account of it in order, and the account had been accurate every single time.

And the largest fact about that camp was not in any of it, because it was not a fact about any day. It was a fact about all of them together, and there is no day on which you can go and look at it, and no man in that camp could have told him because no man in that camp had been anywhere else.

The only reason he had it now was that a piece of ruled sheet in a satchel had been holding twenty years in a row for him while he was not looking.

He thought about his father saying *it means the leaf is better than you are at the thing the leaf is for, which is a smaller claim and a worse one, and you will spend some years finding out how much worse.*

He had been eight years finding out, and he had needed a worn track and a mule and a piece of ruled sheet to do it, and he had been in the best position of any living man to notice and had not noticed.

He thought about the Chaos-Weaver, who had been right about the ration for eighteen years and had never been in a queue.

He thought about a man of thirty asking him, in perfect good faith, why the camp would move.

Then he thought about what he was going to tell his father, and found that he had already begun assembling the order of it, and stopped, and sat in the dark with that for a while, because his father was eighty-seven and four years behind the world and would receive this the way he received everything, which was completely, and would be able to say what it meant, and would then be dead, and there was nobody after him.

He put the leaf away and lay down and did not sleep much, and in the morning he went to see about the blue, because there was nothing else to do with it and because Oholiab was waiting.

IV.3 — THE COUNT THAT WAS RIGHT

The singing was still there and it had not changed and he had walked past it for twenty years.

He noticed it properly on the ninth week, sitting in the shade behind the intake with nothing to do, in the flat part of an afternoon when he had run out of people to talk to and had not yet decided to go home.

Merit had put him there. She was fifty-four and had two women under her now who did the walking, and she still held the thread, and she had asked him that morning whether he had ever found out about the ore.

He said that he had not.

"Nor have I," said Merit. "I have asked six people in twelve years and four of them did not understand the question."

Nobody had ever paid her to be interested in it and nobody had ever asked her to be. She had carried a question about the copper trade of the Arabah for twelve years, in a camp with no use for it and no office for it and no leaf it would go on, and had gone on asking, and had got nowhere.

Hobab said that he would find out and send word.

He did neither, and thought about it perhaps four times a year for the rest of his life.

Two voices. Then three. Low, not performed, on a beat that Hobab had registered a hundred times and had never once put a name to, and he sat there in the shade and put a name to it, which was that it was the beat of a batten going in.

A short line. A shorter answer. Up to some number and round again.

He went and stood where he could see, which he had not done before, because a man does not go and stand over women at a loom without a reason.

. . .

He watched three of them for the better part of an hour and did what he did, which was to count.

The song ran to a number and started again. He established the number inside the first ten minutes by the simple method of counting along, and it was not a round number and it was not a pleasing number and it had no rhythm in it that would have recommended it to anybody making up a song.

Then he counted the battens, which was harder, because a batten goes in faster than a man can watch three of them at once. He took one woman and did her alone for two full rounds of the song.

The count and the work were the same count.

He went and got a cup of water and came back and did it a third time, on a different woman, at a different loom, because he did not believe it.

The same.

He did a fourth, on the far side, on a woman he had not seen either of the first two speak to, and got the same number again, and then stood in the middle of the row with a cup in his hand feeling something he could not immediately place and eventually placed, which was that he was frightened.

Twenty years in that camp had gone on establishing that nothing was written down that mattered. The water. The women. The names on the goats' hair. The strips. He had built a fair amount of himself around that and had been right about all of it and had never once considered the other half of the sentence, which was that a thing being unwritten does not tell you whether it is accurate.

. . .

"What is it you're counting?"

The Companion did not stop and did not look up, which he had expected and was not offended by.

"The picks."

"To the strip?"

"To the strip."

"And the number's the same every time."

"The number is the strip," she said, in the tone of a woman explaining that water is wet, "or it is not a strip and it will not sit right in the seam and you will find out in the second winter."

Hobab stood there with his cup.

"Who teaches it?"

The woman at the next loom, who was about fifty and had not looked up once, said that her mother had taught her and that her mother had it from hers, and went on beating.

"And in all that carrying," Hobab said, "has it never got a pick out or a pick in? Has nobody ever come off it by two or three?"

The Companion looked up at him for the first time.

"How would that happen?"

. . .

He walked away from that and worked at it for two days and got to the bottom of it and did not like where the bottom was.

Because it could not drift. That was the answer and it was not a fact about the women and it was not a fact about singing. It was a fact about what the count was attached to.

Every number in that song had a batten behind it. You could not say the number without doing the work and you could not do the work without saying the number, and the two had been yoked together for so many generations that if a woman got the count wrong the cloth told her so before the day was out. The song was checked, out loud, against a physical object, several thousand times a year, by every woman using it, for as long as anybody had been weaving.

It had never been written down anywhere. Hobab had established that years ago and had thought it was a scandal.

It was the most reliable record in that camp and there was no copy of it anywhere on any leaf, and if every leaf in the eastern quarter had gone into a fire that night the count would have come up unharmed the following morning on four hundred looms.

. . .

He did the blue with Oholiab in the middle of that week and it was the last trade the two of them ever did, and neither of them had the faintest idea, and it went the way it had gone for twenty years.

Oholiab was seventy-three and had a stool now and was extremely rude about the stool.

"They put it there. I did not ask for it. It appeared in the second month and nobody will say who, and if I stand up and walk away from it somebody moves it to wherever I have gone, and I have not caught them at it in nine months and it is the only thing in this camp I have failed at."

"Sit on it."

"I sit on it constantly. That is not the point."

They did the trade in about forty minutes, which was fast, because Oholiab had a leaf now with the widths on it by position and season and could tell Hobab what he would want in four years.

Hobab said that this was a young man's way of buying.

"It is Bezalel's boy's way of buying and he is thirty-one and he is going to be better at this than I am," said Oholiab. "He put the widths on a leaf in the spring and I told him it was a waste of an afternoon and then I used it in the summer and did not tell him I had used it, and he knows I used it, and neither of us is going to say anything about it before I die."

"That seems unnecessary."

"It is entirely unnecessary and I am enjoying it enormously."

They argued for a while about the north blue, which Oholiab did not want and could not fault, and Hobab pushed it because it was better cloth, and Oholiab said that it was better cloth and was not the specification and did not propose to spend what was left of him on that particular conversation.

"Somebody will have it," Hobab said.

"Somebody will have it, and it will be the boy, and he will win, and he will be right." Oholiab picked at the dye on his knuckle. "I would like you to understand that I have thought about this properly. I am not being an old man about it."

"Then what are you being?"

"A man who does not know how long he has and has stopped pretending the figure is available." He put the spool down. "I can tell you what I will want in four years. I have it on a leaf. I cannot tell you whether I will want it, and I have spent sixty years being the man in the room who knows what a thing costs, and that is the one price I have never once been able to get."

Hobab, who had been thinking about the same arithmetic on the road for four hundred miles and had got nowhere with it, went away and thought about it for another year.

. . .

The child was three days later and it took the top of his head off.

She was about nine and belonged to a household two rows over and had attached herself to Hobab in the way children do to a man with animals, and she was helping with a strap, and they were talking about nothing.

He asked her — out of the habit of asking, and because he was still full of the count — whether she knew any songs.

She said she knew the picks and the one about the birds.

Hobab said he did not know the one about the birds.

She said it for him. It took four heartbeats. It came out flat and quick and unmusical, in the manner of a thing said a thousand times and never thought about, and what it was, complete, was this:

He that gathered least gathered ten homers.

Hobab did not say anything for a moment.

"Where were the birds?"

"At the graves place."

"Were you there?"

She looked at him with the honest bewilderment of a nine-year-old asked whether she remembered a thing that happened eight years before she was born.

"How much is a homer?" he said.

"I don’t know," she said, and went back to the strap.

. . .

He went and found one of them.

It took four days and two false starts and he did it carefully, because by the third day he had understood exactly what he was doing and had begun to hope he would not find anybody.

The man was of Naphtali, past sixty, and had been at Kibroth-hattaavah and had gathered.

Hobab did it properly. He did not lead. He asked what had happened, and let the man tell it, and the man told it well and at length and with detail — the wind off the sea, the birds coming down out of the dark and not getting up again, people going out with cloaks and then with baskets and then with nothing at all because there was no need, the noise of it, a boy of his own house who filled a basket and sat down and cried, and the smell of the drying ground four days later.

It was a good account. Every particular of it was the kind of thing a man remembers.

Then Hobab asked him what he had taken.

"He that gathered least gathered ten homers."

There it was. Same words. Same four heartbeats. Straight out of the middle of an account that had been full of wind and baskets and a crying boy, delivered in a completely different voice from the one he had been using, and the man did not notice himself change voices and Hobab did.

"That's what was gathered," Hobab said. "I'm asking what you took."

"Ten homers."

"You measured it?"

The man stopped.

He was not being evasive. Hobab watched him go and look for it, honestly, in good faith, with the effort of a man of sixty reaching back into the middle of his life for a thing he was sure was there — and Hobab watched him not find it, and watched him arrive, without alarm, at the sentence again.

"It was ten homers," he said. "That is what it was."

. . .

Hobab thanked him and gave him a strap he did not need and went back to his own tent and sat down.

Eight of them. Three on the Dan side, two on the Judah side, three households of the mixed multitude, several not on speaking terms, every one giving him the same figure without hesitating.

In the same words.

He had written that down. He had written *the figure and the number of sources* and he had written four words about the migration underneath so that anybody reading it would know the man who wrote it had known about the birds, and he had not written one syllable about the words, because it had not occurred to him that there was any difference between eight men saying the same true thing and eight men saying the same sentence.

Twenty-six years he had been testing men's numbers against each other. When they agreed like that it was true. That was not a rule of thumb, it was the rule, and it had kept him solvent through two bad decades and he had never once looked at it.

And the rule was wrong, and it had always been wrong, and it was wrong in a way that only showed up on things that had happened once.

. . .

That night he got it out properly and worked it, because there was no point in having a finding and not working it.

A price at Tayma is checked every day by every man who pays it. A well is checked by everybody who drinks. The count in the song is checked by the cloth. Ask nine men what a measure of madder costs and if they agree, they agree because nine men have been to the market, and the agreement is nine separate touches on the same object.

Ask nine men what happened at a place seventeen years ago and if they agree — word for word, in four heartbeats, in a voice they do not use for anything else — they have not touched the object nine times.

They have touched it once, or none, and touched each other eight.

Every figure he had ever taken about a past event, from anybody, in his working life, had come to him through the same door, and he had no way whatever of telling which of them had a thing behind it and which had only a sentence.

He sat with that for some considerable time, and in the morning he took it to the Chaos-Weaver, because there was nobody else.

He laid it out badly. He was tired and it had been three weeks and he found that he could not get to the point without going round by the loom and the child and the man of Naphtali, and the Chaos-Weaver let him do all of it and did not help.

"Eight men and one sentence," he said at the end.

"Yes."

"You knew."

"I did not know it about the birds." He put the awl down and picked it up again. "I know it about a good many things. Ask me the ration."

"The ration is short on the eastern side."

"The ration is short on the eastern side and I can take you to the distribution point and stand you where the fault is and you can see it with your own eyes in about a quarter of an hour. That is why I still say it and that is why nobody has ever been able to argue me off it." He pulled a strap through. "There are four other things I have said for thirty years that I cannot do that with. I do not say those any more. I stopped about ten years ago and I did not tell anybody I had stopped."

Hobab sat down beside him.

"The relay will not hold that," the Chaos-Weaver said, over the strap.

"The relay does not drift."

"No. It does not drift."

He went back to the strap and said nothing else about it whatever, and Hobab sat there for a while and then went away with it.

. . .

It took him nine days on the road and he got there alone.

He had admired the relay for twenty years and had told his father about it at length in the first winter and had been right to. Six men, four hundred paces, not a word out and not a word extra.

A thing that does not drift does not care what it is carrying.

He got that at about the fourth day and had to stop the mule. It will hold a true sentence for a hundred years without losing a syllable and it will hold a wrong one exactly as well, and there is nothing in it anywhere that can tell the two apart, because telling them apart is not what it does and nobody built anything for that.

Then the other half, which took another week and which was the half that kept the thing from being unbearable.

The terms were safe. Not because the relay was better with them — because every soul in that camp held that one, and it was said out loud against itself every month by everybody, and a man who put it wrong would be corrected before he had finished. It was the loom count with a hundred thousand hands on it.

The birds were a sentence about one morning seventeen years ago that nobody alive had any means of standing beside.

Same instrument. Same fidelity. Nothing else the same at all.

Whether a man could tell, from inside, which sort of thing he was holding, he worked at until somewhere above the second stage, and the answer was that he could not, and that this had been true his entire working life and would go on being true after him.

. . .

He did not strike it out.

He thought about it. He had the leaf on his knee and the entry in front of him — *He that gathered least gathered ten homers*, in his own bad early marks, with the eight sources noted and the four words about the migration underneath — and he had a point in his hand.

He did not strike it out, because he had nothing to put in its place. He did not know what had been gathered at Kibroth-hattaavah. He had never known. He had known what eight men said, and he still knew that, and it was still worth knowing, and it was not what he had thought it was.

So he wrote underneath it, in the marks, in the hand he had at sixty:

eight sources. same words. did not record the words.

And left the figure standing.

It was the worst thing he ever did to his own record and it was the only honest thing available, and he was aware of both at the time.

. . .

The strips went on all through it.

What he could not get out of his head afterwards, riding south, was this. He had spent three weeks establishing that the most reliable record in that camp was a song nobody had written down, and that the most confidently held figure in it was a sentence with nothing behind it, and in the same three weeks a woman two rows over had put six long stitches in a running seam at dusk on a moving day, and another had taken the strip off in the morning, and a third had woven the replacement over about a year, singing the count, and not one syllable of any of it had gone onto any leaf anywhere except as weight and quality and day.

Nobody had ever asked those women anything.

Twenty years he had been coming to that camp, and had asked, by his own reckoning, something over four hundred people something over four thousand questions, and he had that afternoon in the shade asked his first one.

IV.4 — NO RECIPIENT

He came down in the middle of the winter and his father was alive and was going to be alive for about nine days, and both of them knew the second part and neither of them mentioned it, and they got a considerable amount done.

. . .

Jethro was in the tent and did not get up and had stopped pretending that this was a matter of the cold.

He was entirely himself. It was the thing Hobab could not have explained to anybody afterwards and stopped trying to explain by about the fourth year. There was no wandering and no softening. His hands did not work well and he did not eat much and he was tired in a way that took him without warning in the middle of a sentence and put him out for two hours, and in between he was exactly the man who had been sitting under an awning with his feet in the sun forty-five years earlier telling a boy that somebody was always dead.

"You're thin," he said.

"I'm the same."

"You are not the same, and neither am I, and we are going to spend nine days at this so let us get it over with." He worked a hand out from under the blanket. "Sit closer than you want to."

. . .

He gave him the north on the first evening because his father asked for it.

It took an hour and Hobab gave it in order — Egypt, Edom, Moab, the plateau, the coast, prices — and did it well, and did not shorten

anything, and at the end of it his father said thank you, which he had not said in Hobab's hearing at any point in sixty years.

Then he asked to give it back.

Hobab said there was no need.

"There is every need," said Jethro. "I would like to know how much of it is left. So would you, and you are too polite, and you have been too polite for four years and I have watched you do it and it has been like being handled."

So he gave it back.

There were two things. One of them was seven years old and one of them had never been true; a Kenite had brought it in the autumn of a bad year and Jethro had not believed it at the time, and had held it anyway, and had been holding it since without the doubt attached.

He got to the end of the second one and stopped and sat for a while.

"Well," he said.

"It doesn't matter."

"It does not matter to you. It is a matter of some interest to me." He shifted the blanket. "Do not do that again, please. I have had sixty years of people being kind to me about things and I have always known and I have never once said so, and I am not going to start being lied to in my own tent at the end of it by a son who is better at this than I am."

. . .

That was the first evening and it was the good one.

. . .

The camp came out over the following three days, in pieces, at whatever hour his father was up to it, and Hobab did not try to make it come out in order.

He gave him the stages. Forty-odd, twenty years, one move a year, and a ring a man could ride round in eight days, and his father took that in about four heartbeats and said *yes* in the voice of a man having

a thing confirmed rather than told, which Hobab had expected and had prepared for and disliked anyway.

He gave him the four grazing grounds and the rotation and the man whose whole office was what happened when a rotation fell in the same season as a death.

He gave him the man of thirty asking why the camp would move.

He gave him the second generation, and the bricks and the fish, and the vines wanting two men and a staff, and his father listened to all of it with his eyes shut and said nothing at all at the end of it, and Hobab thought he had gone to sleep and had begun to gather himself to go when Jethro said: "That is the country going into them. It has to go in somehow. It cannot be carried in a man's arms." And then, after a while: "It will be a different country than the one that is there."

Then he slept for two hours.

. . .

On the fourth day Hobab gave him the birds, and did not mean to, and could not afterwards work out how it had been got out of him.

On the road he had decided against it, firmly, and for reasons he was not ashamed of, which were that his father was eighty-seven and had spent sixty years holding everything he knew in his head and there was no version of this that did not amount to telling a dying man that the instrument he had been was the wrong instrument.

He gave him the loom count first. He thought that was safe.

His father listened to the loom count with great attention and asked two questions about the battens and then said, without any change of tone whatsoever, "And what has that ruined?"

Hobab sat there.

"Say it. You have been carrying something since the first evening and it has a shape I do not like."

So he said it. The eight sources. The same words. The child who could say the sentence and not the measure. The man of Naphtali who had a boy of his own house crying into a basket and could not say how he had weighed anything. The rule that had kept Hobab solvent

through two bad decades and only failed on things that had happened once.

His father did not say anything for a long time.

Then he began to laugh, and it hurt him, and he went on doing it.

. . .

"I taught you the marks," he said, when he could.

"You taught me the marks."

"At eight. Or nine. With the oath-words, in the same afternoon, because a priest keeps four things and those are the four." He got his breath. "And I never used them. Sixty years and I have not set down one line. I held it all. I was very good at holding it all and I was proud of it in a way I would not have admitted to your mother."

"You were the best I ever saw."

"I was the best you ever saw and I was four months behind by the time I was seventy-five, and the boy at the pass with a leaf and no memory will be wrong about the rates for forty years and nobody will ever catch him, and both of those are true." He lay back. "I handed you the thing that would show me up and I did it before you could walk properly and I never once asked you to use it. Do you know how long I have had to enjoy that?"

"About four days."

"About four days," Jethro agreed, "and it has been worth the wait."

. . .

On the sixth day somebody came.

Hobab was outside doing something to a hobble and heard the animals and looked up and there was a man on the ridge with two beasts and a boy, coming down at the pace of a man who has been riding for some days and is not sure of his welcome.

He was a Kenite of about fifty out of the north and he had a matter about a well, and he had been sent by his uncle, and his uncle had been to Jethro once thirty years earlier and had never forgotten it.

Hobab told him that his father was ill.

The man said he would go, and turned the beasts, and Hobab went in to say that somebody had come and had gone, and got about four words of it out.

"No," said Jethro.

"You have been asleep since yesterday afternoon."

"I am awake now and there is a man on my ground with a matter, and if you send him away I will spend what is left of this being angry with you, and you will not enjoy it." He was already trying to get himself up against the roll. "Get him in here. Give him something. Do not tell him anything about me, and take that expression off your face before you go out."

. . .

It took two hours and Hobab sat in the corner and held things, which he had not done since he was nine.

A well, and two houses, and it was a use that had been agreed between the grandfathers and had been running since and had stopped running because of a death, a marriage, and — Hobab, in the corner, put his head down — a lamed ewe.

He watched his father do the thing he had watched him do four hundred times.

He got the man to say, out loud, in the hearing of a stranger, what he believed had already been agreed. Not what he wanted. What he thought was true. And then he asked him three questions about the third year of it, and on the second of the three the man stopped, and went and looked, honestly, and came back and said that he was not certain, and that his uncle would say otherwise, and that he had not thought about it in some while.

There was no oath that day and there was not going to be one.

The Kenite left in the morning in a considerably better condition than he had arrived in, and Hobab walked him up to the ridge, and at the top of it the man said that he was sorry to have troubled a sick man.

"You did not trouble him."

"He is very ill."

"He is very ill," Hobab agreed, "and you are the only person who has ridden to him in two years, and if you tell him you are sorry he will find something to say about it that will follow you home. Go and see your uncle."

He went back down and his father was lying flat with his eyes shut and did not open them.

"Well?"

"He'll go to the uncle and the uncle will set it aside by the autumn."

"Yes," said Jethro. "And do you know the best of it? He will tell his uncle that I told him to, and I did not, and I said nothing whatever on that subject, and I will be dead before either of them works it out."

He was so pleased with himself that Hobab had to go outside.

. . .

The thing he did not say was the thumb.

His father asked about Zipporah on the seventh day. Directly, by name, which he had not done in Hobab's hearing in twenty years, and Hobab had four hours' warning because he had seen the question coming across his father's face in the middle of something else and had watched him decide to ask it.

"Is she alive?"

"I don't know."

"Have you looked?"

"I looked for six years and then I stopped, and I could not tell you which year I stopped in, and last time I went to the row and the row is not there any more." He heard his own voice and let it go where it went. "There is nothing to find. It is not that I have not found it. There is nothing there to be found and I have known that for twelve years."

His father took that with his eyes shut.

"Did she look well," he said, "the last time you saw her. That is a different question and I would like an answer to it."

And Hobab had the answer. He had it exactly. He had a left hand and a forefinger and a dark line under a nail and a habit that had stopped at fourteen and had come back, and he had a woman at a

loom in a row that was not there any more, and he had been carrying all of it for thirty-eight years.

"She looked well," he said. "She gave me food and she was quick and she got the better of me twice in an afternoon and I did not notice until I was outside."

"Twice?"

"Twice."

"She had that off her mother," said Jethro, "who did it to me for thirty years," and he was pleased, and he did not ask anything else, and after a while he began talking about the night on the road to Egypt and the flint, and did not finish the sentence, and did not come back to it that day or afterwards.

. . .

He died on the ninth day in the early part of the afternoon and there was nobody in the tent but Hobab and a woman of the household who had been coming in and out for a month.

For most of two days he had been asleep, and he did not wake up.

The household did what a household does. The word went round the fold and up the ridge and out to the four households that were still near enough to matter, and they came, and there were nineteen people at it, and it was done properly by people who had done it before.

Hobab did the arithmetic that afternoon without meaning to and stopped himself, and then did it anyway, because it was going to be done sooner or later and better by him than by somebody else.

Fourteen roofs. There would be eleven by the spring.

His father had had seven daughters and one son, and the seven had married and four of them had married well and two had married out of Midian altogether and one had married a man of the Hejaz who had died young and left her nothing. Three of the seven were dead. The roofs on that ridge were their households and their sons' households, and every one of them had been counting the same fourteen for a month and had been too well brought up to say so.

The ground and the flocks came to Hobab. There was no question about it and there had never been a question about it and nobody in that family would have thought to raise one, because there was a son.

He wrote none of that down either.

Ashira had the household by the second day and had probably had it for four years and nobody had ever said so.

She was the fifth of the seven, and had married a man of the Hejaz who had died young, and had come back with nothing at the age of thirty-one and had been in a roof on that ridge ever since, and she ran the place the way their mother had run it, which was by knowing where everything was and letting other people think they had decided things.

She came out to Hobab on the second evening while he was doing something to a hobble.

"You are not going to like the arrangement about the flocks."

"I have not made the arrangement about the flocks."

"No," said Ashira. "I have. Two years ago, with Yatir, because you were four hundred miles away and somebody had to, and I have been waiting for our father to die so that I could tell you about it, which is a thing I would like you to notice I have just said out loud."

Hobab put the hobble down.

She gave it to him at length and in order and with a considerable weight of unnecessary detail about who had objected and what they had said, and it took most of an hour, and Hobab could not have argued it better and said so.

It was also correct. He checked it twice over the following week, quietly, and it was correct in every particular including two he would have got wrong.

"Well?" she said, on the fifth day.

"It's good."

"I know it is good. I have known it was good for two years. What I want to know is whether you are going to be difficult about it."

"I am not going to be difficult about it."

"You are going to be difficult about it in the spring," said Ashira, "when you have thought about it on a road, and you will come back

with three improvements, and one of them will be worth having and I will take it, and the other two I will not, and you will make a face."

Hobab said that this was an outrageous thing to say to a man whose father had died on Tuesday.

"Yes," she agreed, and went in.

. . .

There were other things to be done and he did them, and the doing of them was the only part of that month he could afterwards give an account of. Two of the four households near enough to come had to be found and told, which took a man three days. Somebody had to go through the tent and there was nobody else to do it and it took him a morning, and what was in it was: a rug, two cups, the brazier, a knife that had been his grandfather's and was not good, a bundle of cord, and nothing written down anywhere at all.

Sixty years of the north and there was not one leaf in that tent.

None of that was news. He had known it since he was a boy and had said it out loud to himself on a road once and had been proud of it on his father's behalf. He stood in the tent with a bundle of cord in his hand and could not get it to be the same fact it had been.

. . .

He stayed most of the winter, which was the longest he had been in that place since he was a young man, and did four months' work in it.

Then, in the spring, he went to give the north to somebody and there was nobody.

That was how it arrived. Not at the burying and not in the tent. He was sitting outside on the ninth or tenth evening of the spring with a cup, having spent the day on a boundary matter between two of his cousins and having settled it, and he had the tin in his head and the coast and a thing about the Amorite towns that had come in from a Dedanite that morning, and he had it in order, and he got as far as standing up.

He stood there for a while and then sat down again.

There was nobody in the world who wanted it. His men wanted the parts of it that bore on the season. His cousins wanted the parts that bore on them. He could have told any of nine people any piece of it and been listened to politely and thanked.

Nobody wanted the north, in order, entire, every year, for its own sake, with the doubt attached where the doubt belonged.

He had been carrying it for thirty-one years to one man and the man was gone and the carrying did not stop, and he sat outside a tent in the spring with a cup going cold and understood that he was going to go on assembling it in order until he died, and that there would never again be anybody at the far end of it.

. . .

That night he got the leaf out and wrote the report.

He wrote all of it. The stages and the ring and the four grounds and the rotation. The second generation, and the bricks and the fish. The loom count and the battens. The eight sources and the same words and the sentence that had nothing behind it. The relay, and what the Chaos-Weaver had said about the relay, which he had not given his father and had meant to on the eighth day and had not, because the eighth day had not been a good one.

It took him most of the night and it was the longest single entry he ever made and there was nobody it was for.

He did not stop to ask himself why he was making it. That question arrived about four years later, at a well, in the middle of doing something else, and he did not have an answer to it then either.

Last, because there was room on the sheet and because his hand did not want to stop, he put down the fourth sort — the entries he could not account for — and read them through, and added two.

He taught me the marks and never used them.
She looked well.

VISIT V — THE FORTIETH YEAR

V.1 — REFUSED PASSAGE

He was eighty and had come up to see it finish, and there was no other reason and he did not pretend to himself that there was one.

He had given the north to Yatir every winter for nineteen years by then and had never once said that this was what he was doing.

It went the way it went. Yatir sat, and listened, and took the four or five things that bore on the season, and asked two good questions about those, and let the rest go past him — Egypt, the plateau, the coast, the houses at Tayma and which of them had a son worth watching — because none of it was any use to a man running a route in the spring, and Yatir was right about that and Hobab had told him so himself at thirty.

Jethro had taken all of it. That was the difference and Hobab had it inside the first winter and had never mentioned it to anybody, because there was no complaint in it. A man who takes the four useful things is a good factor. A man who takes all of it, in order, every year, and gives it back to you the following spring with the dates attached, is not a factor at all. He is the far end of something, and there is one of him in a life if a man is lucky, and Hobab had been lucky for thirty-one years and was not going to be again.

He went on assembling it. All of it, in order, every year, including the parts nobody wanted, and by about the fourth year he had stopped noticing that he did it.

The leaf was four sheets by then and stayed four sheets. He could put a finger on any line of it and tell you the season, and it weighed less than a folded cloak, and he carried it four hundred miles a year in a satchel with a bad knife and a bundle of tally-cords because that was where it went.

. . .

He came at them from the south and found them not where they had been.

That took him three days to credit. He had ridden to that water for forty years, and he sat on the ridge above it looking down at ground that had held that camp since before either of his men was born and was now grazing, with the interval still faintly in it if you knew to look, and the ash place standing off to the east like a low grey hill that had always been there.

There were two men with him and eight beasts and nothing to sell. Yatir, who was forty-six now and ran the route and had run it for nine years, and a man of Hurai's called Hurai after his father, who was twenty-two and had been sent along without either of them saying why.

Hobab had worked out the why on the fourth day, when Hurai happened to be standing on the near side of the pack at the moment of getting down, and happened to be there again the following morning, and went on happening to be there for six weeks.

He did not mention it.

He did mention, on the ninth day, that the boy had been standing on the wrong side for the last two mornings, because the ground fell away that side and a man coming down needs the high shoulder, and Hurai said that he had not been standing anywhere in particular, and Hobab said that this was true and that if he was going to go on not standing anywhere in particular he should not do it on the low side.

Yatir, mending something, did not look up and did not stop smiling for about a quarter of an hour.

They had gone north-east. He got that from a Kenite at the second stage and rode after them and caught them in nine days on the plains above the Arnon, and the country was different and the light was different and the grass came up past a beast's knee in places.

The camp was in it and looked wrong, and he could not say why for most of a day, and then worked it out.

The spread was wrong.

Forty years of pitching in country that would barely carry them had made a shape, and the shape had come north with them. Down there you set the households wide because the water was two hours

apart and the grazing was thin and a beast had to walk for what it got. Up here the water was under your feet and the grass came up past a beast's knee, and they were still standing at the old interval, holding four times the ground they needed and walking four times the distance to do anything.

Nobody had adjusted it. The interval was the interval.

He rode down thinking that somebody would notice inside a season, and was right, and it took nine months.

The other thing wrong with it he got in the first hour and did not need to work at.

There were no old men.

Not none — there were a few, and they were Levites, and there were the two at the top whom everybody knew about. But Hobab had spent forty years walking into that camp past men sitting in the shade with their hands on their knees, and he walked in that spring past nobody, and it took the top of his head off before he had got his animals watered.

The sentence had been running the entire time. He had written the number down in a dye tent when he was forty-two and had understood what it meant on a night at Kadesh when he was forty-four, and he had come back into that camp eleven or twelve times since and had never once looked for the thing itself, because you cannot see a rate.

He could see it now, because it had finished.

There was a man of about sixty in the row where he pitched who had come out of Egypt at twenty-one and had been young enough by four months. Hobab established that inside two days, because he could not help himself, and did not mention it to the man, who plainly knew, and who was pointed out to Hobab twice more that season by other people in a tone Hobab could not read at all.

. . .

The Seeker was at the brook crossing below the camp, going north.

Hobab had not seen him in twenty years and did not expect to and knew him at forty paces, and was more pleased about it than he was willing to look at directly.

They watered. The Seeker had two skins, a stick, and nothing else that Hobab could see.

They did the country, which is what you do.

The Seeker gave him the north of the Arnon, which he had asked Hobab about twice, thirty-eight years apart, and had evidently gone and got for himself in the interval. He gave the towns and the walls and the ground and the water, and he gave it in a form Hobab could use, and it was better than anything Hobab had ever been able to assemble about that country from four decades of hearsay at Amman.

"It's good ground," Hobab said.

"It's good ground."

"Better than they'll be told. You said that."

"I said that at a wadi head thirty-eight years ago and you remembered it," said the Seeker, and did not appear to think this was remarkable.

. . .

Then Hobab asked him about Edom, because Edom was the thing.

The column was going to have to get past it. That was the fact standing in front of everybody and had been for a month; there was a corridor and Edom sat across it, and the alternative was the long way round the south end which was forty days and bad water and would cost them animals.

The Seeker had come through Edom.

"They'll refuse," he said.

"They'll refuse the first time. Everybody refuses the first time. It's a rate."

"They'll refuse."

"There's a fee," said Hobab. "There is always a fee. I have been paying it for fifty years and my father paid it before me. You go in low, you ask for the road, they say no because saying no is the opening, you come back with a figure, they take the figure and put a man on the front to make sure nobody drinks anything that isn't paid for, and it is done in nine days and everybody eats." He was aware of enjoying

himself. "It is not even expensive. It is the cheapest arrangement in that country."

The Seeker looked at the water for a while.

"They'll refuse," he said.

. . .

They refused.

Hobab was not in the room and would not have been in the room in any world, but he had the message inside a day and it had gone the way messages go, which is to say correctly, because the relay did not drift.

It had been a good request. That was the thing he could not get past afterwards. He got it word for word from a man who had it from a man who had heard it read, and it was drafted the way you would draft it: the standing between the parties, named; the trouble in Egypt, briefly; the coming out; the position now, at the edge of the border; and then the ask, which was the highway and nothing else — not the fields, not the vineyards, not the wells — and an undertaking to pay for any water taken, and a statement that they would not turn to the right hand or to the left until they had passed the border.

Hobab heard that last part twice and put his hand over his face.

> *We will go by the king's high way, we will not turn to the right hand nor to the left.*

It was the sentence of a man who had never in his life negotiated a transit and had reasoned his way to it from first principles and had got it exactly, precisely, catastrophically wrong.

Because you do not tell a border house that you will keep to the road.

You tell them what you will pay. The road is not what they are selling; the road is a strip of dirt and it is worth nothing and everybody knows it is worth nothing. What they are selling is a season of not being frightened. And a house that has been sitting on that corridor for two hundred years, watching a nation of unknown size come up

out of the south with its flocks, does not want an undertaking about which hand it will turn to.

It wants a figure. It wants a figure because a figure is the only thing in the world that proves you have understood that they could say no.

. . .

They sent again and put the fee in.

Hobab got that message too and it was better and it was too late, and it went in the way second offers go, which is to say as an admission — and the answer came back with an army behind it, and there was a considerable body of men on the border in a place where there had been nobody for a fortnight, and it was over.

They went the long way round the south end. Forty days. Bad water. It cost them animals.

. . .

He worked at it for twelve days on the road and got it to come out and did not enjoy the result.

The request was correct. That was the difficulty entire, in one line and it had taken him a week and a half. Every clause in it was true, complete, courteous, and in order. It stated the standing between the parties accurately, because there was a standing; the two houses were kin, at a distance, and everybody involved knew it and neither side had ever traded on it. It stated the history without exaggeration. It made the smallest ask available. It undertook to pay for the water.

It had been drafted by people who had spent forty years becoming the best drafters in that part of the world, and it was the first document they had ever sent to somebody who was not obliged to read it.

Forty years of a chain in which every matter went up and every matter got a correct answer at the level it arose. Forty years in which the thing you did with a difficulty was to state it accurately and send it to the office above you, where it would be dealt with, because there was always an office above you and it was always staffed.

There is no office above Edom.

. . .

He tried the other side of it too, because he had been doing that for fifty years and could not stop now.

They were not wrong to ask. A house that will not sell a road to kin has told you something about itself and it is worth having been told, and there are men in that country who would say Edom had shamed itself and would go on saying it for a very long time.

But Hobab had watered his animals at Edomite wells for half a century and had eaten in their tents and had buried a man of theirs once, and he knew precisely what they had been looking at from up on that ridge, which was not a column and not a nation and not a kinsman. It was a number that could not drink, coming north.

He would have refused. He sat on a mule at eighty years of age and worked all the way round it and came out at the same place every time, and the last time he said it out loud, to nobody, in the middle of empty country.

"I would have refused."

. . .

Nobody asked him.

He was in that camp for all of it. He was three rows over from a man who had carried a message. He had fifty years of Edom in his head — which house held which well, who owed whom, which of them could be got at through a brother-in-law at Bozrah, what the going rate was and what it had been in a bad year and who had paid over it and been remembered kindly for it ever since.

There was no line on any form for that and there never had been, and by now Hobab did not so much as go and offer.

He had worked out, somewhere in the previous decade, that the offering was the part that had always been wrong. A man who goes and says *I know these people* is a man asking to be found a place, and there was no place, and there never would be a place, and he had spent forty years arriving at the fact and about nine years being at peace with it.

He mended a strap instead.

He was eighty and it was the fortieth year and he had a bad hip and two young men who stood where they would be useful, and he sat outside a tent on the plains above the Arnon in country that would have carried four times the flock, mending a strap, while a nation that could not see itself walked forty days out of its way for want of a figure.

V.2 — THE HIRE

The camp had it inside two days and had it perfectly, and Hobab distrusted it before he had finished hearing it, which by then was simply what happened to him when a thing arrived clean.

What the relay carried was this: that the king of Moab had sent for a man to curse them, and that the man had come, and that he had opened his mouth four times and blessed them instead, and that the king had sent him away without paying.

It was a very good story. It went round that camp in about a day and a half and it had not lost a syllable, and by the second evening Hobab had heard it from a boy of nine who did it with the voices.

He went and found a Midianite.

. . .

There was one, as there was usually one, on the eastern edge with hides — a man of Rekem's house who was down for the season and would go up again in the autumn and who was of a house that Hobab had traded with for fifty years and had never much liked.

He had been at Pethor. Not in the room; nobody was in the room. He had been with the party that went, three deep, holding the animals.

The account he gave took two hours and Hobab paid for it in dye, and it did not match the relay in a single particular that mattered.

. . .

The elders of Moab had not gone alone.

That was the first thing and Hobab sat with it for some time. There had been elders of Midian in that party. Named houses, four of them,

and he knew three of the four and had eaten in two of them, and they had ridden north with the elders of Moab and had gone in together.

And they had carried the fee.

The rewards of divination in their hand. That was the phrase the man of Rekem's house used, and he used it in the tone of a man quoting, and Hobab asked him twice what had actually been in the bags and got a figure the second time and put his cup down.

It was not a fee for a blessing. Nobody pays that for a blessing.

. . .

Hobab knew what divination cost, because everything costs something and he had spent sixty years learning what.

There is a rate for a man who reads a liver. There is a rate for a man who casts and interprets, and it is higher, and there is a rate for a man of reputation who is sent for at distance, and that is higher again and is mostly the distance. A long way above all of it there is the rate for a man you are asking to do a thing to somebody.

That last one is not really a fee. It is a share.

Hobab had never handled one. He had carried, twice, for houses that had handled one, and both times had been told nothing and had worked it out from the weight and the destination and from who came out to meet the train.

The figure in those bags was the third kind.

. . .

"They meant it," he said.

"They meant it. They have been watching that camp eat the country for nine months and they can count as well as you can."

"What did he say to them?"

"He said no."

Hobab looked at him.

"He said no," the man repeated, with some relish, because it was the good part and he had been saving it. "He put them up for the night

and in the morning he said that he could not go, and they went home four hundred miles with the bags."

"With the bags."

"With the bags. Balak sent again with more, and with princes this time instead of elders, and with an offer of promotion, and the man said —" and here the man of Rekem's house did the voice, badly — "*if he would give me his house full of silver and gold, I cannot go beyond it, to do less or more.*"

"And then he went."

"And then he went."

. . .

Hobab worked at that for three days and could not make it come out, and eventually stopped trying and wrote down both halves and left them.

Because the refusal was real. He was as sure of that as he had ever been about anything he had not seen. A man who sends a delegation home with the bags has done a thing that costs him everything and gains him nothing, in front of witnesses, at the top of his profession, and there is no version of that which is a negotiating position, because a negotiating position is answered by a bigger bag and this one had been.

And then he went anyway.

Hobab had watched perhaps four hundred men do the identical thing over sixty years and had never once seen it done that well or that late.

. . .

The part with the animal he got on the third telling and did not believe, and got again from a second man on the Moab side a fortnight later in almost the same words, which by then meant nothing to him at all.

The seer had ridden out. The animal had stopped, three times, and gone off the road, and pressed his leg against a wall, and finally lain down under him, and each time he had beaten her.

And each time she had been right.

Hobab sat with that a long while.

He had opened his working life at nineteen behind a train of nine animals learning to read what a beast does with her feet, and he had made most of his living out of it, and he had said to a Phoenician factor at Ezion-geber once that he did not know how he knew where water was and had discovered that there was nothing in his mouth.

The most celebrated seer between the two rivers had been sitting on a donkey that could see, beating her, for the better part of a morning.

He told that story for the rest of his life and it never once went badly.

. . .

His father would have had something to say about all of it and Hobab knew almost exactly what it would have been, which was a poor substitute for the thing itself.

Jethro's distinction had been simple and he had made it perhaps a hundred times in Hobab's hearing, always to somebody else, always in the same nine words. A priest witnesses. A diviner sells.

A man comes to a priest with a thing already done, or a thing two parties have already agreed, and the priest stands beside it and says what it is and makes it hold. He is paid for the standing beside. He has no interest in the outcome and if he acquires one he is finished, and every household in that country knows this and watches for it and would spot it inside a season.

A diviner is paid for an outcome. That is the entire trade and there is nothing dishonest in it; it is simply a different trade, and the two are not to be confused, and Jethro had spent forty years quietly not being confused with one.

Here was a man of the second kind who had been paid the largest fee Hobab had ever had a figure for, and had delivered the opposite of what he was paid for, four times, out loud, in front of the client.

. . .

Balak did not pay him.

That came at the end of the account and Hobab enjoyed it more than anything he had enjoyed that year, and had to put his cup down again.

Because the king had not simply refused. Any man can refuse. The king had said — and Hobab made the man of Rekem's house repeat this until he had it — that he had intended to promote Balaam unto great honour, *but, lo, the god has kept thee back from honour.*

"He blamed the god," Hobab said.

"He blamed the god."

"For his own non-payment."

"For his own non-payment."

Hobab put his hands flat on his knees.

He had been given that excuse, in one form or another, something over two hundred times in sixty years. It is the oldest instrument in the trade. The goods were lost at sea and it was the weather and the weather is not mine. The caravan was taken and it was the raiders and the raiders are not mine. I would have paid you and the harvest failed and the harvest is not mine.

It is always something above the man's head, and it is always something you cannot go and argue with, and Hobab had a rule about it that he had taught to four young men including Yatir, which was that a debtor who reaches for the sky is a debtor who has already decided.

Here it was, at the top of the world, between a king and a seer, over a fee neither of them would say out loud.

He had a fortnight of unmixed professional pleasure out of that and got most of the way through it before he found somebody it was funny to, which he had not expected to be the Allfather.

He put it to him at the rope, walking, because the Allfather was going somewhere and Hobab was going the same way and had run out of people.

"A king sends for a man and offers him a house full of silver to say a thing. The man says it wrong. The king does not pay him and says the god prevented the honour."

"Yes."

"You have heard it."

"Everybody has heard it."

"Then say what is wrong with it, because I have had a fortnight and I have only got the funny part."

The Allfather walked on for about nine paces.

"He did not want the words," he said.

"He paid for the words."

"He paid for the words. He wanted the people gone off his grass, and he could not do it with men, and he had watched them eat nine months of his country, and so he sent four hundred miles for a man to do it with a mouth." He shifted the mat. "When the mouth failed he still wanted them gone. He wants it now. He will want it in the spring. That is what he is, and the fee and the seer and the honour are all furniture."

"Then why is he angry?"

"Because he has been shown what he will spend. A man does not know his own price until somebody names it and he pays it and gets nothing." The Allfather looked at the row ahead. "He knows it now. Out of all of them — the king, the seer, the elders, the princes with the second bag — he is the only one who learned anything."

Hobab thought about that for the rest of the year and then for some years after that.

. . .

What he never got, and worked at for some years, was the thing underneath.

A man had been hired for his judgement about a people. He had been hired by a client who wanted a particular answer and had said so, in writing, twice, and had raised the fee when the first answer displeased him.

The man had gone, and had looked, and had given the accurate one.

Four times. Out loud. In front of the client and the client's princes, on four separate pieces of ground, each time from a different angle,

and every time it came out the same and every time it was the opposite of what he had been paid to say.

Hobab had spent forty years having accurate judgements about that camp that nobody had ever asked him for and nobody had ever paid him a bent shekel to produce, and had come to think of that as the particular shape of his own life.

Here was a man who had been asked, and paid, and had given it, and had been ruined by it.

He rode home unpaid and returned to his place. That was all the account had. Nobody Hobab ever spoke to knew what became of him afterwards and he did not find out and did not go looking.

V.3 — THE SECOND COUNT

Aaron died on Hor in the fifth month and Hobab was four days south of it with a lame beast and got the word in the ordinary way, from a man going the other direction who assumed he already knew.

The camp mourned thirty days.

The thirty days were administered. There was an order for it and the order was old and had been used before, and the ash place did not have to be extended because there had been provision made in the previous extension, which had been surveyed on a fall that ran continuous.

Hobab noted the stage and the day in the leaf, because the stages were what he had recorded for forty years, and this one had a date on it, which almost none of them had.

He wrote the date twice — once in the stages and once in the fourth sort — and could not have said why he had done it the second time.

. . .

They took the count on the plains of Moab by Jordan near Jericho and it took nine days and Hobab watched a good deal of it because he had nothing else to do and because he was interested in whether it had got better.

It had got better.

The tables were roofed now, which the first one had not been. There was a man walking the line whose whole office was to send back anybody who had come to the wrong table, which sounds like nothing and had cut the day by a fifth. The half-shekels came in at a second table set at a distance from the first, because somebody had worked out forty years ago that a man who is being counted and a man who is paying should not be standing in front of the same person.

There was also a dispute, on the sixth morning, which Hobab stayed for.

A household of Gad had presented a man of nineteen years and eleven months. The clerk turned him back. The father argued that the boy would be twenty inside the month and that the count would not be closed for another five days and that this was a distinction without a difference.

The clerk agreed that it was a distinction without a difference and turned him back anyway.

"On what?" said the father.

"On twenty years old and upward."

"He will be twenty."

"He is not twenty."

The father went away to find a fifty, and the fifty came, and the fifty heard both of them out with great courtesy and upheld the clerk, and then stood there for a moment afterwards and said, to nobody in particular, that his own father had been turned back at the first numbering at Sinai for the same reason and had been counted in the second, forty years later, at fifty-nine.

Hobab worked that out and then worked out the rest of it, which was that a man turned back at nineteen at Sinai had not been under the sentence, and had lived, and had been standing on the plains of Moab that morning while every man counted beside him had died in the wilderness.

Nobody in that argument mentioned it. Hobab was fairly certain nobody in that argument had thought of it.

. . .

There were clerks who had never seen a count, and that was the thing. Every man working that numbering had been born under the sentence and had grown up hearing about the first one and had spent nine months preparing for a thing none of them had done, and they did it in nine.

Hobab, standing at the back of the eastern table on the fourth morning, said something aloud to nobody about how well it was

going, and a woman beside him with a child on her hip said that it was going well because they had had forty years to think about it.

. . .

The figure went round inside two days.

Six hundred and one thousand, seven hundred and thirty.

Hobab had the other one. He had had it for thirty-eight years, on a broken piece of Qurayyah ware wrapped in a rag at the bottom of a satchel, and he got it out and put the two beside each other on his knee and did the subtraction, and it came to a thousand eight hundred and twenty.

Down by a thousand eight hundred and twenty. Out of six hundred thousand. In thirty-eight years.

Under a third of one part in a hundred.

He sat with that for a while and could not get it to be a small number, though it plainly was one, and then went and got the tribal figures, which took him three days and cost him a good deal of walking and some dye.

. . .

Then he did the arithmetic and it took him most of a night.

Simeon had come out of Egypt at fifty-nine thousand three hundred. Simeon stood on the plains of Moab at twenty-two thousand two hundred.

Hobab did that one four times because he did not believe it and then went and had the two figures said to him by two separate men who did not know why he was asking, and they were the figures.

Two men in three, gone. Out of one tribe, in thirty-eight years, in a camp where the top line had barely moved.

Manasseh had gone the other way and had gone hard: thirty-two thousand two hundred to fifty-two thousand seven hundred, which is half again and more. Benjamin up by better than a quarter. Asher up by better than a quarter. Ephraim down by a fifth. Naphtali down by a sixth.

He wrote all twelve into the leaf, the two counts against each other, and looked at it for a long time.

Somewhere under that camp there had been thirty-eight years of something happening to one tribe and something else happening to another, and nobody had ever stood where Hobab was standing, because to stand there you needed both figures and the only place both figures existed together was a sheet of ruled leaf and a broken pot in a Midianite's satchel.

. . .

The All-Seeing had them, of course. Both. In a tent behind the Judah standard, in order, on separate leaves, kept correctly.

Hobab went and sat on the mat and asked the question he had been carrying up the row.

"Simeon."

"Yes."

"Two in three."

"Two in three," the All-Seeing agreed.

"What happened to them?"

"They were numbered at Sinai at fifty-nine thousand three hundred and they are numbered here at twenty-two thousand two hundred."

"That is not what I asked."

"It is what I have," said the All-Seeing.

Hobab sat with it, and it was the same answer he had been given in a tent forty years ago by the same office about a different figure, and it was correct then and it was correct now and he had spent four decades failing to get past it.

"You keep the deaths."

"The deaths are kept."

"Then somebody could put the deaths against the count. Year by year. And you would have it — where it went, and when, and whether it went in one season or in thirty."

"Yes," said the All-Seeing.

"Has anyone?"

"No."

"Will anyone?"

"There is no office for it," said the All-Seeing, without any inflection whatever, and moved a bundle so that Hobab could get up more easily, which Hobab did not notice at the time and thought about afterwards for a year.

. . .

There was a business at Peor that spring and Hobab got it late, as usual, and got it wrong twice before he got it, and when he had it he sat with it for a long time and did not like any part of it.

It was not what the camp said it was. The camp said the women of Moab, and said it in the manner of men who have found a shape that fits, and there had been women of Moab and Hobab did not doubt a word of that.

But it had not started there and it had not stopped there.

They had been *invited*. That was the thing the relay carried and the camp did not hear, because the relay carried it perfectly and nobody in that camp had a use for it. There had been sacrifices, and the people had been called to them, and had gone, and had eaten. A man does not eat at another people's sacrifice by accident. He is asked, and he goes, and by the time he has eaten he has done a thing that cannot be argued backwards, and everybody in that country over the age of nine knows it.

Twenty-four thousand had died of what came after.

And in the middle of it a man of Israel had brought a woman into the camp in the sight of everybody, and a priest's grandson had gone in after them and killed them both.

The man of Israel was a prince of a chief house among the Simeonites.

The woman was the daughter of a head of a people in Midian.

Hobab knew the second name. Not the woman — he had never met her and she was two generations younger than he was — but the house, and the ground it held, and the wells, and roughly what it was worth, because he had traded with that house for fifty years and had eaten in a tent belonging to her father's brother.

He also knew, and it took him about nine seconds, that it was one of the four houses that had ridden north with the elders of Moab and the bags.

. . .

That was the part he could not put down, and he worked at it for the rest of the season, and the more he worked at it the worse it got.

Because his people did not do this.

That was not sentiment. It was the plainest professional fact about them and it was the reason they had lasted. A people that moves does not oppose a settled power; it goes round. That is the entire method and it is four hundred years old and Hobab had spent sixty of them inside it. You do not fight Egypt. You carry for Egypt, and you water at the wells Egypt digs, and when Egypt comes up the road you are somewhere else and you have been somewhere else for a fortnight and there is nothing at the end of the road but your dung fires going cold. Nobody has ever conquered a people who will not stand still to be conquered, and nobody ever will, and the price of that is that you own nothing and you are nobody's and you never once get to be angry out loud.

The elders had stood still.

They had commissioned a curse, at a fee Hobab could not get out of his head, from a man four hundred miles away — which is a thing a *king* does. And when the mouth failed they had gone at the same people a second way, with sacrifices and invitations and a woman of a chief house walked into a camp in daylight, which is a thing a king does when the first thing has failed and he has already spent too much to stop.

Twice. In one year. By men who had spent their whole lives not doing it.

Hobab had watched a house overreach before. He had watched four. It is always the same and it always begins the same way, with a man who has done well deciding that he is now the kind of man who can afford a mistake, and it always ends with a sum somebody else has to pay.

What he could not work out — and never did, and it went into the leaf under the seventh month with no note against it — was what had frightened them enough. Because they had not been threatened. Nobody had come at Midian. They had watched a very large number of people eat their way north for nine months and had decided, somewhere, in a room he would never see, that watching was not going to be enough.

. . .

He worked at it for three days and then made himself stop, and the stopping was the professional act of his life.

Because it was there. It was right there. A prince of Simeon, and Simeon down by two men in three, and the two facts in the same season and in the same leaf on facing pages, and every part of him that had spent sixty years putting figures beside each other wanted to let them touch.

They could not touch.

The collapse was thirty-eight years long. He had the counts and both of them were counts of the entire tribe and there was nothing in between them, not one intermediate figure, not one year's return, and a man who has two numbers thirty-eight years apart and a scandal in the last month of the thirty-eight and puts them together has not found anything. He has made something.

Hobab had watched a camp do exactly that with a sentence about birds.

So he wrote both, on facing pages, and wrote underneath the second one, in the marks:

> *prince of Simeon at Peor. Simeon down 37,100 over thirty-eight years. These do not touch. I want them to.*

Then he put the point down and went to bed.

. . .

The water was the last of it and it went out from under him.

He had come north into country where the grass came past a beast's knee, and he had a spring below the camp that he had measured on the fourth day out of forty years of habit, and it would carry them. It would carry them and their flocks and half again as many, and he stood beside it with a cup and understood that the question he had been holding since he was forty-two had just quietly stopped being answerable.

He had never been able to make the number drink. That was the finding. It had been the finding for thirty-eight years and it had sat in him like a stone and he had turned it over on nine hundred nights.

And now they were standing on good ground, and the number drank, and it proved nothing whatever about the wilderness, because the wilderness was behind them and the water that had been there was still there and was still what it had been and there was nobody left alive who had stood at it in the second year and counted flocks on a shoulder.

He was the only one. He had been the only one for a long time.

He drank the cup and did not write anything down, and rode back up to the camp, and the sum went with him and was never resolved by anybody at any point, and Hobab died at a considerable age still holding it.

. . .

The order came down about Midian in the seventh month and Hobab had it inside a day.

It was short. It was shorter than anything he had heard come down that chain in forty years, and it went out through the relay in the ordinary manner, and the relay did not drift, and every man in that camp had it by the second evening in the same words.

Vex the Midianites, and smite them.

The reason was given and the reason was Peor and the woman.

Hobab had fifty years of that border in his head. He knew which house had taken which well in which bad year, and who had been raided and who had done the raiding and which of it had been settled

and which had been carried, and he could have given a man an hour on the state between those two peoples going back to before he was born and it would have been accurate and none of it would have been about a woman.

He also knew, because he had spent his life around instruments, that a reason given in an order is not the same object as a cause.

He did not say either thing to anybody. There was nobody it would have been any use to and it would not have altered one clause.

Hobab was sitting outside his tent on the mixed-multitude side, out past where the Dan quarter thinned, mending a strap, when the second relay came through his row, and he heard it twice at three heartbeats' distance as he had heard everything in that camp for four decades.

There were nine or ten people within a stone's throw of him and not one of them looked over, and it was not carelessness, because two of them had bought from him that week and one had eaten in his tent. They had all four heartbeats to decide and every one of them decided the same thing.

He understood afterwards that it was the kindest arrangement available to them and he did not feel it as kindness at the time.

He did not stop what he was doing. He finished the strap.

Then he sat with his hands on his knees for a while and did the thing he did, which was to work out what it meant in the units he had.

It meant the oasis. It meant the kiln yards and the drying racks and the second wall that had gone up over nine years while he was not looking, and the woman of about forty who had been turning pieces since she was nine. It meant the pass, and the nephew, and a leaf with the rates on it that were getting wronger every year and that nobody would ever now correct. It meant four households on a ridge and eleven roofs by the spring and his sisters' sons, and a man at Tayma who owed him for the winter, and forty-four animals and four men, and a small water jar with a fault in the shoulder that he had bought for almost nothing and had kept.

It meant every well between the Jauf and Ezion-geber, in order, which he could have recited and which nobody had ever asked him for.

He got up after a while and went and looked at the animals, which did not need looking at, and came back, and did not write anything in the leaf that night or the following night.

On the third night he wrote the date and the words and nothing else.

V.4 — THE DAUGHTERS

Oholiab had been dead nineteen years and the man who had his tents was called something Hobab learned twice and forgot twice and then wrote down, which settled it.

He was thirty-four and had come up through the workshop and had never met Oholiab, and he had, on the wall of the third tent, a thing Hobab had not seen anywhere in forty years, which was a drawing.

It was the court hanging. All of it, in plan, with every width numbered and the position of every width on the frame, and beside each number a mark for the season it had gone in and another for the season it was expected to fail.

Hobab stood in front of it for some while.

"Expected," he said.

"By the position. The southern run goes at about eleven years and the western at fourteen and the northern at nineteen, and it is not the cloth, it is the wind off the ridge. Oholiab knew that. He knew it better than I do. He kept it in his head."

"He kept everything in his head."

"He kept everything in his head and then he died," said the young man, without any malice whatever, "and it took four of us two years to find out what he had known, and we found most of it by putting up bad cloth and watching it come down. So."

He looked at the wall.

"So now it is on a wall and any fool can read it, and the fools who come after me will not have to lose two years, and they will also never have to look at a hanging properly in their lives, and I have not worked out what to do about that part."

. . .

They did the trade, and it was the shortest and best trade Hobab had done in a decade, and he came out of it with rather less than he would have got from Oholiab and knew exactly why and did not mind.

The reason was on the wall. A man who knows that the southern run goes at eleven years and the western at fourteen does not have to buy against a bad autumn, because he is not buying for a bad autumn, he is buying for a schedule; and a man buying against a schedule can tell you in the spring what he will want in nine years and will not pay a twelfth over the asking price for anybody's honesty.

Hobab said so.

"Oholiab paid me a twelfth over," he said, "once, for telling him a thing about lichen that I did not have to tell him."

"I know. He put it in the leaf and the leaf is still there and it is the only entry in forty years with a reason written beside it." The young man was entirely unembarrassed. "I would not pay it. I would take the same information and be pleased about it and pay you the rate."

"That is worse."

"It is cheaper, and I have nine men and a hanging a hundred cubits by fifty and I am thirty-four," he said, "and if I start paying twelfths for honesty I will spend the rest of my life deciding who is honest, and I would rather spend it on cloth."

Hobab, who had spent his life deciding who was honest and had been wrong perhaps four times, could not think of anything to say to that at all, and said so, and the young man laughed.

The young man wanted a different blue.

Not a cheaper one. A different one — out of the north, from a house Hobab had dealt with twice and did not much like, and the argument for it was that it took differently on the goats' hair and held its colour four years longer in that wind, and the young man had tested it, on a width, on the southern run, for six years, and had the width.

He produced it, and the Hand brought it over from the third loom and held it up against a piece of the old, and Hobab could see the difference from four paces and had not known it was possible.

"Where is that on your wall?" Hobab said.

"It is not on the wall," said the Hand. "It is on the southern run, third width from the corner, and it has been there six years."

The young man said that it would go on the wall when it had been there ten.

"It will not need to be on the wall in ten years," said the Hand, and took it back to the third loom.

"That is better cloth."

"It is better cloth."

"It is not the specification."

The young man stopped, and Hobab watched him arrive at the thing that had plainly been sitting on him for some time, and saw that he had not said it out loud to anybody before.

"No," he said. "It is not."

"Have you asked?"

"I have asked twice. The first time I was told that the specification is the specification. The second time I was told that if the colour is the colour then the colour is the colour, and that is a different answer, and it came from a different office, and I have not gone back a third time in case I get the first one again."

"You are putting it up anyway."

"I have put up one width and I will put up two next year," said the young man, "and in thirty years it will all be the north blue and there will never have been a day on which anybody decided it, and if you are going to say something about that I would ask you to say it now, because you are the only man alive who bought for Oholiab and I would rather hear it from you."

Hobab thought about a hundred talents of silver cast into a hundred sockets, a talent apiece.

"Say nothing to anybody," he said, "and put up two next year."

. . .

He went back to the workshop before he left, which he had not intended to do, because the young man sent a boy to say that there was a thing he wanted looked at.

The thing was a fleece.

It was Midianite, off the western side of the oasis, and it had come up in a lot Hobab had sold him nine years earlier and had been sitting

in a bundle since because there had been no call for it, and the young man had got it out that week and had noticed something.

"It combs differently."

"It does."

"Why does it comb differently?"

Hobab looked at him for a moment and then sat down, which took him a while, and said that it would cost the young man an afternoon.

"I have an afternoon."

He got most of it, and got it in the wrong order, because Hobab had never taught anybody anything in his life and started with the loom and had to go back twice to the goats. The young man took notes on a leaf and then stopped taking notes on a leaf about a third of the way through and just listened, which Hobab noticed and did not remark on.

At the end of it the young man asked how many households did the second combing.

"Three. On the western side."

"Could you get me a man from one of them?"

"No," said Hobab.

"For a season. I would pay whatever it came to."

"No," Hobab said again, and did not explain, and the young man let it go, and neither of them understood, that year, why the answer had been no.

. . .

Moses sent for him on the eleventh day of the eighth month and it was the second time in forty years.

He was a hundred and twenty and Hobab had been told so and had not believed it and revised nothing when he got there, because the man on the rug was old in a way that had stopped being about a number some time ago. The hands were still a herdsman's. The voice still did not carry and still had the small check in it before certain words, and Hobab, who was eighty and going deaf on the left, had to sit closer than he wanted to.

They did Jethro first. That took a while and was not comfortable and Hobab did not want it to be.

Moses said that there was a matter of five daughters, and that he wanted to talk to a man who had grown up in a house of seven of them.

. . .

Hobab laughed out loud, which he had not done in that tent before and did not expect to.

"You want to know what happened to my father's ground."

"I know what happened to your father's ground. It came to you." Moses shifted on the rug. "I want to know what happened to your sisters."

So Hobab told him.

Four had married well and were dead or old and their sons held ground in Midian and had held it without difficulty for forty years, because there had been a son in the father's house and no question had ever arisen.

One had married a man of the Hejaz who had died young and left her nothing, and she had come back, and had lived in a roof on that ridge on her brother's ground for thirty-one years, and had been perfectly comfortable and had never once owned anything.

Two had married out of Midian altogether.

"And their sons?"

"Their sons are not Midianites and their sons' sons will not know they ever were." Hobab put his hands on his knees. "That is the answer and it is not the answer to your question, and I have been thinking about the difference all the way up the row. My father's house never needed a rule because there was a son. The rule you are making is for the house where there is not one, and I have never lived in that house and cannot tell you the first thing about it."

Moses said that this was the most useful thing anybody had said to him about it in a month.

. . .

He asked the actual question after that, and it was not the one Hobab had come prepared for.

"If they take it and they marry out — not out of the tribe. Out of the people. Then what?"

"Then it goes with them."

"Yes."

"And you cannot stop it, and if you write a rule that stops it you have written a rule that says a woman may hold ground on condition that she never chooses a man you have not approved, and I would not want to be the man who read that out." Hobab heard himself getting warm and let it run because he was eighty. "And if you do not write it, then in four generations there will be ground in the middle of a tribe held by people who are not of it, and everybody will know it, and it will be perfectly legal, and there will be an argument about it every year forever."

"So."

"So you write it narrow," Hobab said. "Not out of the people. Out of the tribe. It is a smaller rule and it will do most of the work and it will not oblige you to say the other thing out loud."

Moses looked at him for a while.

"That is what I was going to do," he said.

"Then why did you send for me?"

"Because I wanted to know whether a man who had watched it happen would say the same," said Moses, "and you have, and now I have two of us instead of one, and that is worth an afternoon."

. . .

Zipporah came into it at the end and came in sideways and neither of them did anything about it.

Moses said, in the middle of getting to something else, that a woman who marries out of the people does not stop being of her father's house, and that this was the part nobody in the argument had grasped and that he did not intend to put in the rule.

He stopped.

He stopped for long enough that Hobab could have gone into it. It was there. There was a door standing open in the middle of that tent and Hobab had eighty years and thirty-eight of them spent on this and a left hand and a forefinger and a dark line under a nail, and he had never given it to the one man who would have known what it meant and here was a second.

Hobab looked at the rug, and got as far as opening his mouth, and did not know which of two things he was about to say.

Moses answered the one he had not asked.

"She is not with me," he said. "She has not been with me for a long time and she is not dead, or she was not when I last had anything, and I do not know where she is and I have not known for some years. That is all of it and I have said it now and I am not going to say it again."

Hobab sat there.

It was one fact. It was one fact he had worked out for himself twenty years earlier standing on ground where a row used to be, and having it said out loud by the only other man in the world who might have known better changed nothing whatever, and he found that he had gone cold from the shoulders down anyway.

He did not ask the second thing. He never worked out afterwards whether he had decided not to or had simply run out of the particular kind of courage it wanted, and he was inclined, in the years he had left, to think it had been the second.

What he did instead, walking back down the row in the dark, was finally understand a sentence his father had said to him thirty-two years earlier and had not explained, because his father had assumed he would get there.

Then she left it up.

The tent was hers. She had told him so herself, in her own tent, at the end of a long afternoon, in the voice she used for correcting him: her mother made it and gave it to her and it was hers, and she took it to her husband, and if he put her away she took it back and he was a man with no tent.

She had been entitled to that. Entitled by the oldest arrangement in that country, the one nobody writes down because nobody needs to, and she was a priest's daughter and knew it to the pole.

She left it standing.

Hobab stood in a row in the eastern quarter at eighty years of age and worked at that the way he worked at everything, and it would come out two ways and he could not make it come out one.

She had gone and had not ruined him. That was the first way. A woman who takes her tent leaves a man of a hundred and twenty sleeping in somebody else's, in front of a camp, forever, and she had had it in her hand and had put it down.

Or she had not considered it a putting-away at all, and had left her tent where a tent goes, and had walked out of it the way a woman walks out of a tent she intends to be standing when she gets back.

He could not tell. Nobody could tell and nobody ever would, because she had done the one thing that meant both, and she had done it in a camp of thirty-eight years' standing where exactly two people alive knew the rule well enough to read it, and one of them had married her and the other one was her brother.

It was the only thing she ever did that he was certain she had decided.

"The daughters," Moses said, in a completely different voice. "Do I hear them myself or does it go to a thousand?"

"Hear them yourself," said Hobab. "It is the first one. Everything after this is a copy of what you do with the first one."

They talked about that for another hour and did the thing properly and it went well, and Hobab walked back down the row in the dark and did not sleep.

. . .

The ruling came out inside the month and it was good.

They were heard. They were found for. A general rule was promulgated on the back of it — son, then daughter, then brothers, then the father's brothers, then the next kinsman — and it was drafted by somebody who knew what he was doing, and Hobab read it out to

himself twice from a copy a fifty let him look at, and could not fault a line.

. . .

In the eleventh month Manasseh filed against the daughters.

If they marry outside the tribe, said the heads of the fathers of the house, the inheritance goes with them and is taken from the lot of our inheritance, and it will be taken away from the lot of our inheritance forever.

It was a good filing. Hobab read that one too.

The judgment came down in the same month and it was that they were right, and the rule was amended: the daughters might marry whom they thought best, only within the family of the tribe of their father.

It was heard properly and given properly, and the business entire, from petition to amendment, had taken under a year.

Hobab read the amendment twice before it reached him.

> *Let them marry to whom they think best; only to the family of the tribe of their father shall they marry.*

Not out of the people. Out of the tribe. Narrow. It is a smaller rule and it will do most of the work and it will not oblige you to say the other thing out loud.

He had said that in a tent in the eighth month, sitting closer than he wanted to, to a man of a hundred and twenty who had asked him what he thought.

And he had been right, and the drafting was good, and it did what he said it would do — and what it did, when it was finished, was fasten the five of them to the tribe of Manasseh for their lives, so that a woman who had petitioned for the right to hold her father's ground had acquired, in the same year, a rule about whom she might marry.

Nobody had done that to them. Everybody in it had been correct. Manasseh had been correct to file, the amendment had been correct to narrow, and Hobab had been correct about which way to narrow it.

He had solved for the tribe. That is all he had done, and he had done it in an afternoon, and had enjoyed the afternoon, and had walked back down the row in the dark thinking about how well it had gone.

He did not know their names.

He worked that out standing in a row in the eleventh month: that he had spent an hour advising on the disposal of five women and had never at any point asked what they were called, or anything else about them, and that it had not struck him as an omission at the time or in the two months since.

Then it got worse, because he had been given the names and had not heard them.

They were in the amendment. They were in the first ruling too, at the head of it, where a party is named, and he had stood at the reading of both and had taken in both and had carried away from the second one a single observation, which was that the order had changed.

Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, Tirzah, in the ruling.

Mahlah, Tirzah, Hoglah, Milcah, Noah, in the amendment.

Hobab had spent sixty years reading other men's documents for exactly that kind of thing, because a party list that comes out in a different order the second time is a party list somebody has re-drafted from memory, and that tells you who was in the room and how carefully. He had noticed it inside four heartbeats. He had thought it was the most interesting feature of the instrument.

Five women had been named twice, out loud, in his hearing, in a matter he had advised on.

He had audited the sequence.

. . .

The Conscience-Keeper was at the reading of the amendment, at the back, with a mat under his arm, on his way to do something else.

"It is well drafted," he said.

"It is."

"They are heard, they are found for, the consequence is raised by the party it falls on, and it is narrowed no further than it needs to be. There is nothing wrong with any part of it."

"No," said Hobab.

They stood there while the row emptied.

"Say the other thing," said the Conscience-Keeper, "since you have been holding it since the seventh month and it is making your face difficult to look at."

Hobab did not say it.

"No," the Conscience-Keeper agreed, after a while. "There is no place to put it. I have looked." And he went off to do the something else.

. . .

Hobab wrote both halves into the leaf, on facing pages, and nothing between them.

Underneath he wrote the five names, in the order of the ruling, because that was the order they had been in when it still might have mattered.

V.5 — THE ANSWER

They spent the last winter allocating a country none of them had seen, and Hobab watched every part of it and laughed more that winter than he had in ten years.

. . .

It started with Reuben and Gad, who had looked at the ground they were standing on and had noticed that it was better than anything they had been promised.

Which it was. Hobab could have told them that in the second year and had told two of their grandfathers in the eleventh. Jazer and Gilead is cattle country and it is good cattle country, and the men of Reuben and Gad had more cattle between them than the rest of that camp together, and they had been standing in it for eight months watching it come up past a beast's knee.

So they went and asked to stay.

They did it properly. They came up with a delegation and put it in the right form and asked, in effect, to be given the east side and not to be brought over the water.

Hobab, standing at the back, thought: they have not said what they will pay.

He was wrong, and he enjoyed being wrong. What he had not allowed for was that these were not Edomites and it was not a transit, and the currency was not silver.

. . .

Moses took it badly and took it badly in an interesting direction.

He did not say no. He said — and Hobab got this from three people and it was the same three sentences from all three — *shall your brethren go to war, and shall ye sit here?*

He went straight past the request and into the spies, forty years back, and said the thing about their fathers, and said it at length and with heat and with a considerable weight of specific detail about a report given by ten men when every person in that tent had been an infant or unborn.

The delegation stood there and took it.

They took it, Hobab thought, exactly as men take a thing they have decided in advance to take, and the moment it was finished they came near — that was the phrase that came back to him, *they came near* — and made the offer.

They would build sheepfolds for the cattle and cities for the little ones, and they would go over armed, in front, and stay in front, until every other tribe had its ground, and then they would come back.

. . .

Hobab sat down on a pack and put his hand over his mouth.

Because that was the fee.

It was the same instrument he had explained to the Seeker at a brook crossing nine months earlier and had been so certain about and had been so entirely right about, and here it was, offered by two tribes who had never traded a mile of road in their lives, at the correct moment, in the correct amount, to the correct party.

They had understood that they were asking for something. That was all of it. Edom had never been offered a figure because nobody in that camp had grasped that Edom could say no; and Reuben and Gad had come with a figure in their hands because they knew perfectly well that Moses could.

The difference between the two was not competence. It was that one of them was inside.

. . .

The settlement that came out of it was better than the offer and Hobab followed every clause of it with the pure professional pleasure of a man watching somebody else do his job well.

If they go over armed, and stay until the land is subdued, then the east side is theirs and they are guiltless.

If they do not, then — and here Hobab put his head back and laughed out loud, alone, on a pack, in the cold — they get possessions among you in the land of Canaan.

That was the enforcement.

Not a penalty. Not a forfeit. If you fail to perform, you receive exactly what everybody else receives, in the place you did not want to go, and you have lost the thing you were asking for by the simple operation of not getting it.

Hobab had spent sixty years designing forfeit clauses and had never once produced anything that elegant. There was nothing to litigate. There was no sum to argue about. There was not even anybody to be angry with.

He was still thinking about it four days later when he heard the other half, which had been said at the same sitting and which he had missed, and which went: *be sure your sin will find you out.*

He asked a man of Gad about that one.

"It is not a threat," said the man of Gad, who had plainly given this some thought. "That is what everybody hears and it is not what it is. It is a statement about what happens. He is telling us that if we do not go over, we will not be caught by anybody. There will be no proceeding. There is no office."

"Then what?"

"In forty years everybody in that country will know which two tribes did not come, and nobody will ever say it, and our grandsons will be dealing with it in ways they will not be able to name." He shrugged. "I would rather go over."

. . .

They appointed the commissioners after that.

One prince out of every tribe, named, to divide the land by inheritance, with the priest and Joshua over them: twelve men and two, appointed and named and set down in the leaves, to allot the boundaries of a country.

Hobab established, over about four days, that of the fourteen of them, none had been in it.

Two of the twelve had fathers who had been in it, forty years earlier, for forty days, and had come back and given a report, and both of those fathers were dead, and one of them had been among the ten.

Hobab had been to Amman. He had been past it twice. He had eaten in a house at Heshbon and had watered on the plateau in three seasons and had sat at a brook crossing nine months ago and taken an hour of the north of the Arnon off a man who had walked all of it, and he had that hour in a leaf in a satchel, in order, with the water in it.

There was no line on any form for it and by now he did not so much as go and offer.

. . .

The cities of refuge were the last of it and he never got over them.

Forty-eight cities for the Levites, who would have no ground, out of everybody else's ground; and six of the forty-eight set aside so that a man who killed somebody without meaning to could run to one and not be killed himself before he had been heard.

Hobab worked through it with real admiration, because he came from a country where the alternative arrangement had been running for as long as anybody could remember and he had buried a man under it.

He ran it through with a Levite in the row, and got most of it, and stopped at the end.

"For how long?"

"Until the high priest dies."

Hobab stopped.

"Say that again."

"Until the death of the high priest. After that he goes home to his own possession."

"And there is no other way out."

"There is no other way out," said the Levite, who was about fifty and had explained this before. "You cannot buy it. It is written that no satisfaction shall be taken for him, which means there is no figure, which means there is nothing for the avenger's house to argue about with the slayer's house, because there is nothing on the table."

Hobab stood in the row doing arithmetic.

"So a man who kills somebody at unawares in a year when the high priest is old," he said slowly, "does three years. And a man who does the identical thing in a year when the high priest is forty does thirty."

"Yes."

"That is not just."

"No," said the Levite, entirely comfortably. "It is not. It is not meant to be. What it is, is finished. On the day the priest dies, every man in every one of those six cities walks out at the same hour, and there is nobody to appeal to and nobody to petition and no house that can say its case was heard worse than another house's. It ends for all of them at once and nobody chose the day."

He picked up his mat.

"I have been forty years in the offices of this camp," he said, "and that is the only clause in any of it that cannot be argued with, and I would give a good deal to know who thought of it."

. . .

The Chaos-Weaver was in the third row with a strap over his knee.

Hobab walked past him, and went back, and sat down beside him for a while, and neither of them made anything of it.

"The ration is short on the eastern side," he said.

"It has been short for thirty-eight years."

"It has been short for thirty-eight years and it will be short on the other side of that water inside two, because the fault is in where they site the distribution against where the people are, and they are about to site four hundred of them at once in country none of them has walked. I have told nobody. There is nobody it would stop with."

Hobab said that he would tell somebody.

"You will not."

"No," Hobab agreed.

They sat there for some while and that was the last of it.

. . .

The Companion was at a loom on the northern side and Hobab went and sat down where he could watch, which he had been doing for a year and which nobody had remarked on because an old man sitting in the shade is furniture.

She asked him about Midianite cloth.

Not about Midian. About the cloth: what they did with the black at the oasis that made it lie the way it did, because she had had a piece of it once, forty years ago, off a trader, and had never got the like of it since and had never worked out what was different.

Hobab told her.

It took most of an afternoon and he did it properly, which meant starting with the goats and not the loom — which hill they ran, and what that did to the hair, and the second combing, which was the thing, and which nobody did any more except at three households on the western side of the oasis because it cost a day and a half a fleece and no factor would pay for it.

She made him say the second combing twice.

Then she said it back to him, entire, in order, and it was correct, and she said it in the flat quick voice of a woman putting something into the place where she kept things she intended to keep.

"Nobody does that now," Hobab said.

"I do."

"There is nobody to teach it to."

"There are four girls on this row worth teaching," said the Companion, "and a woman two along who is better with a comb than I am and knows it. Say the part about the hill again."

He said the part about the hill again.

. . .

He walked back down the row afterwards and had to stop twice, and told himself it was the hip.

Three households on the western side of the oasis did the second combing and no others did, and they were under the order along with everybody else, and Hobab had written the order down in the seventh month with the date and nothing beside it and had done nothing since, because there was nothing to be done and both parts of that were true.

There was going to be a woman on the far side of the Jordan in about nine years who did the second combing and could not have told anybody where it came from, and her daughter would do it, and somebody's daughter after that.

It was the only part of that country he ever got out ahead of anything.

He did not put it in the leaf. He could not think what he would have written, and he was eighty years old and had spent his life writing down what people told him and had never once written down what he had told anybody.

. . .

They asked him again in the third month of the following year.

It was a man of the fourth generation who ran a fifty and had been told there was an old Midianite in the eastern quarter who knew the country over the water. He was courteous and had no idea he was repeating anything. He said that they were going over in the spring, and that there was room, and that it would be well with him.

Hobab heard him out, entire.

Then he said the thing he had been assembling for forty years without knowing he was assembling it, and it took four sentences, and the man of the fifty went away, and it was not settled that day either.

Yatir came to him about it in the fourth month and did it badly, which Hobab had not expected of him and thought about afterwards for years.

He had a wife of that camp. He had had her for six years and Hobab had known and had said nothing, because a man of forty-six does not

need his uncle's opinion and because Hobab had liked her the two times he had met her and had not wanted to be asked.

Her people were going over.

"You'll want the eastern run," Hobab said, before Yatir had finished, because he could not stand to watch him get to it.

"I would want it either way. I have run it nine years."

"You will have it. It is yours in the spring whatever you do, and I will say so in front of whoever you like, and I am saying it now so that you do not have to spend the next quarter of an hour being careful with me."

Yatir sat down.

They did the arrangement in about an hour and it was a good arrangement and Hobab made two improvements to it that were worth having and let a third one go, and at the end of it the route ran from the Hejaz to the plains of Moab and over the water, and it would go on running, and it would be in that country for four hundred years.

"You could come."

"I know."

"That is not an answer."

"No," said Hobab, "it is not," and Yatir let it alone, which was the thing about him and always had been.

. . .

He was still there at the crossing. Two people saw him on the eastern bank on the morning of it, standing with his animals, not loading them.

A household of Kenites went over in the second rank of Judah that spring and were in that country for four hundred years, and nobody ever wrote down where they came from, because the men who kept the leaves were of the tribes and the Kenites were not of a house, and there was no line for it.

V.6 — THE RECORD

They wrote the journeys down that winter.

Hobab heard about it in a queue, which was where he had heard about everything for forty years, and he stood in the row with his hands on a strap and had to be spoken to twice.

The stages. All of them. Out of Egypt to the plains of Moab, in order, one after another, set down.

He went and found a man who would let him look, and it took four days and cost him a fleece and two conversations he did not enjoy, and he would have paid considerably more and both parties knew it.

. . .

He was not permitted to hold it and he did not want to hold it. A Levite of about forty read it out to him in a tent in the Judah quarter, at a pace Hobab asked him twice to slow down, while Hobab sat on a mat with his own leaf open on his knee and his finger going down the column.

Rameses. Succoth. Etham. Pi-hahiroth. Marah. Elim. By the Red sea. The wilderness of Sin. Dophkah. Alush. Rephidim. Sinai.

He had none of those. Those were before him.

Then Kibroth-hattaavah, and his finger stopped, and started again.

Hazeroth. Rithmah. Rimmon-parez. Libnah. Rissah. Kehelathah. Mount Shapher. Haradah. Makheloth. Tahath. Tarah. Mithcah. Hashmonah. Moseroth. Bene-jaakan. Hor-hagidgad. Jotbathah. Ebronah. Ezion-gaber. Kadesh. Mount Hor.

He had every one of them.

Every one, in that order, no stage missing and no stage extra, over thirty-eight years, in a hand that had started bad and had got better.

. . .

It stopped at the plains of Moab, where they were sitting.

Hobab sat there for a while after the reading was finished with his finger still on the sheet, and the Levite waited, because it was clear that something was going on and not clear what.

What was going on was this.

He had kept those stages for forty years because they were the thing he had happened to start with. There was no reason for it. On his first evening in that camp at the age of forty-two he had written down where the place was and what day it was, because that is what a factor writes down first, and he had gone on doing it for four decades without once asking himself why, in the same manner in which a man goes on paying a toll.

And a second man, in another quarter, working from other sources for other reasons under another office entirely, had produced the identical list.

Two records, kept apart, over thirty-eight years, by people who did not know of each other. Every stage in the same order and not one out.

It was the only time in eighty-one years that anything Hobab had written down was corroborated by anything, and he sat on a mat in the Judah quarter and found that his eyes had gone, which he put down to the light.

He worked out why on the road afterwards and it took him about a morning, and when he had it he was not surprised, because he had been given the answer twenty-one years earlier, over a strap, on the mixed-multitude side.

A stage is not a sentence. A stage is entered on the day the camp moves, by a man standing in the middle of the camp moving, with every soul in it doing the thing he is writing down all round him. It cannot come off by two or three. It has a batten behind it.

That was why they matched, and it was the only category of thing in that entire camp that could have matched, and Hobab had happened, at forty-two, for no reason he could ever reconstruct, to start with the one record in the world that was safe.

"It is a good record," he said.

"It is."

"Who kept it?"

"It was written," said the Levite, in the manner of a man giving a complete answer.

Hobab did not press, because he had spent forty years learning what that sentence meant and had never once got past it and was too old to start.

Then he asked the thing he had come for.

"Where are the dates?"

The Levite went back up the column and down it again, carefully, because he was a careful man and could see that the question was serious.

There was one. Aaron on Hor, in the fortieth year, the first day of the fifth month.

One date, in forty-two stages.

. . .

Hobab rode south in the spring and worked at it for twelve days and got to the bottom of it somewhere above the Arnon.

It was not an error. That was the first thing and it took him four days to stop looking for one.

It was not a suppression either, and he made himself sit with that one for another two, because it was available and it was the sort of thing a man of eighty tells himself when he is tired. Nobody had left the dates out. The dates had never been in. The thing being recorded was the journeys, and a journey is a place you left and a place you came to, and the day you did it is not part of a journey, it is a fact about you.

If you had gone to the man who kept that list and asked him where the time was, he would have looked at you the way the Levite had looked at him, and he would have been right, and there would have been nowhere for the conversation to go.

The men who wrote that list had put down, faultlessly, exactly what they had set out to put down.

And what they had put down was a list of forty-two places with no time in it.

A man reading that in four hundred years would see a nation crossing a wilderness. He would see it moving. Forty-two stages is a quantity of movement, and it would look like one, and there would be nothing anywhere in that record to tell him that all of it had been done at a rate of rather more than one move a year inside a ring a man could ride round in eight days.

Hobab had that. He had it on a leaf in a satchel with a bad knife and a bundle of tally-cords, and he had got it on a worn track in the western ground at sixty years of age by turning two pages at once, and it had taken him twenty years and a mule.

The record that would survive was the one without the interval in it.

He knew perfectly well which of the two leaves was going to last.

He did not resent it and made himself check that twice, out loud, on a mule, above the Arnon. He did not.

The list was correct. It was better kept than his own and had been made by better men for better reasons, and it would go into that country and be copied and be copied again and would still be being read when everybody who had walked a stage of it was four hundred years dead. That is what a good record does and there is nothing whatever wrong with it.

It was simply that it could not hold the one thing he had, and nobody had built it to, and there would never be an office for it.

. . .

The other record he had read before he left, in the same winter, four hundred paces from the tent where the Levite had read him the stages.

It had taken nine days to arrange and he had got it in the end from a man who owed him for a strap, which is how he had got most things in that camp for thirty-eight years, and he had sat down with it in the ordinary way, with his own leaf open on his knee, as he had sat down with four hundred manifests.

It was immaculate.

. . .

Six hundred and seventy-five thousand sheep. Seventy-two thousand of beeves. Sixty-one thousand asses.

Then the fourth line, which was persons, and which was not a line of the same kind, because it had a definition attached to it.

Thirty-two thousand persons in all, of women that had not known man.

Hobab read the definition twice and then sat still.

Then the division of it, which took the longer part of the sheet: half to the men who went out and half to the congregation, and out of the warriors' half a levy of one in five hundred to the priest, and out of the congregation's half one in fifty to the Levites. Hobab did the arithmetic twice and it came out both times.

Then the officers' return, which was six words long and which he read four times.

There lacketh not one man of us.

. . .

He sat with that sheet for the better part of an hour, and gave it back, and thanked the man properly, and went and stood in the interval for a while.

It was a good record. It was better than good; it was the best-kept inventory of a taking that he had ever had in his hands, and he had handled the inventories of four kingdoms. Every beast counted to the head. Every head of every kind separated. The levy computed, checked and rendered. A casualty return rendered to the man.

He could have told you, from that sheet, what Midian had owned.

He could not tell from it which houses.

. . .

That was the difficulty entire and it took him no time at all to see it, because it was the same difficulty he had been walking into for forty years and had simply never before had about anybody he knew.

The sheet counted what could be driven away and divided. A house is not that. A house is a name and a well and a hill and forty years of who owed whom, and there is no column for it because there is no operation you can perform on it — you cannot take a tenth of a house, or levy one in five hundred of it — and so it is not the kind of thing that goes on a sheet of that kind, and nobody had left it out.

And then there was the fourth line, which was a different difficulty and was not about columns at all.

A definition on a count tells you what was excluded. That is the first thing a factor learns about a category and Hobab had been using it since he was twenty: when a man gives you a number with a condition on it, the number you actually want is the one the condition removed.

He did not decide to do the arithmetic. His hands had been doing it for sixty years and they did it before he could put them down.

He knew household composition. He had counted tents for forty years on two sides of that border and he knew, to a closer tolerance than he wanted, how many of that category a hundred households yield. So he had the households, within about a fifth either way.

And there he stopped, because that was where the arithmetic stopped. He did not have the ages and he did not have the sizes and he did not know which houses, and a man who has the households and then gives you a figure for the people has not done a sum, he has made one. He had made himself stop once already, over Simeon, on better figures than these.

What he had was a floor, and the floor was enough. Every one of those thirty-two thousand had come out of a tent, and a tent is not a category; it is a woman and a man and the old ones and the children too young to be in the definition, and the sheet had one line of the four.

Reaching the floor took less than a minute. He spent the rest of the night above it, where there were no figures at all, and could not make himself come down.

That was what he could not get past afterwards, riding south: not that it was terrible, which it was, but that the floor of it was *easy* — that a record of that quality, kept that well, rendered in good faith by men doing their office correctly, would hand that much to anybody who could read a category and had ever counted a tent.

Nobody had hidden anything. Nobody had needed to.

. . .

He wrote nothing in the leaf that night.

He got the point out and had the sheet in his head, entire, the way he had things, and he sat with it across his knee for some considerable time and then put it away with nothing on it.

He never wrote it. Not that year and not afterwards. He wrote the stages and the dates and the second count and the daughters' names and a man's unpaid debt at Tayma, and he did not write the fourth line or what came out of it, and he took it with him.

It was the only thing in sixty years he left out on purpose.

. . .

So he did it the other way, which was his own way, and it took him the better part of a year.

He asked every man coming up from the south, which is what a factor does, and he asked in the order he had asked in for sixty years: what had he seen himself, what had he been told and by whom, and what was the road like.

Nine men. Four of them had nothing. Three had the order, which Hobab already had, in the same words, which told him nothing. Two had accounts, and the two accounts did not agree about which houses, and one of them was a man Hobab would not have bought a fleece from.

That was all of it, and it was the entire yield of a full season of asking, from a man who could get a figure out of anybody between the Jauf and the sea.

. . .

He worked out why on the road and it was not complicated and he did not enjoy it.

The men who carried news out of that country were Midianites. That was the instrument. Not a road and not an arrangement — men, particular men, with names, who went down in the autumn and came up in the spring and who had been telling Hobab what was happening behind them since he was nineteen years old.

He had never once thought of it as an instrument. You do not think of your own hands that way.

There was a man at Tayma who owed him for the winter and did not come. That was all that happened. Men fail to come every year, for nine reasons, most of them dull, and Hobab had a name and a debt and an empty season and no way whatever to tell which of the nine it was.

He wrote the man's name in the leaf and the amount and the season, which is what he would have written anyway.

. . .

He never found out. Not that year and not in the years after it, and he went on asking, in the ordinary way, of men coming up from the south, until he was too old to be out on the road when they came.

He had spent forty years holding a sum about water that would not resolve, and had made his peace with it, and had come to think of it as the one thing his instrument could not reach.

It was not the one thing. It was the practice piece.

. . .

He went home in the summer, which was the word he went on using and had used for four years and did not examine.

There were eleven roofs on that ridge and one of them was his, and it had a newer band of cloth running the length of the men's side, which had been put in that spring by Ashira's daughter, whose name he knew perfectly well and had never once said out loud in that connection.

He was met on the ridge by four people who wanted things.

Yatir wanted a decision about the eastern run and had wanted it since the spring and had gone ahead without it and was now telling Hobab about it in the manner of a man reporting a thing that had already happened. Two of his sisters' sons wanted him to settle something between them that he could see from the first sentence was not settleable and that both of them knew was not settleable and that they were bringing to him because their grandfather was dead and there was nobody else to bring it to. And a small girl of about seven whose exact relation to him he had to work out twice wanted to know whether he had brought anything.

He had not brought anything. He had never once in eighty-one years arrived on that ridge without bringing something, and he had spent four decades being greeted in exactly this manner by exactly these people's mothers, and he stood in the middle of it with his hip going and let it happen.

Ashira came out at the end of it, looked at the four of them, and dispersed them in about nine words.

"You are thin."

"I am the same."

"You are not the same and you have not been the same for six years, and I am not going to say anything else about it because you would only be difficult." She took the mule's rein off him. "Go and sit down. There is nobody in your tent. I had it swept in the spring and nothing has been touched and Yatir made everybody swear."

"Swear on what?"

"Bread," said Ashira, "obviously," and took the mule away.

. . .

He unpacked, which took a morning, because he did not do things quickly now.

The satchel had in it: the leaf, four sheets of it, forty years; a bad knife he had been meaning to replace since he was fifty; a bundle of tally-cords; and, wrapped in a rag at the bottom, a broken piece of a Qurayyah jar with a bit of the ibex frieze on the outside and, on the

inside, in a nine-year-old's marks made by a grown man's fingers, *half a shekel — every man — twenty years and up — 603,550*.

The small water jar with the fault in the shoulder was on the shelf where it had been for twenty-one years. He had never once put anything in it.

. . .

Outside, the ridge got on with itself.

There was a dispute about a hobble going on somewhere near the fold and it had been going on since before he arrived and would still be going on at dusk. Somebody was singing at a loom on the far side and had been at it most of the morning. Two of the children had got into something they should not have got into and had been dealt with, twice, by different adults with different opinions about it.

None of it required him. That had crept up on him the same way the wall at the oasis had, a course at a time, over about nine years, and he sat in a tent in the middle of it with four sheets of leaf on his knee and could not decide whether it was the best thing that had ever happened to him.

He read the fourth sort through in the afternoon, which he did now about twice a year, and it had grown.

Man of Zebulun. No office. Expects to go up. Does not know how. Is not troubled.
Eleven held seams, eastern quarter, moving day.
Intake: weight, quality, day. No name on the goats' hair.
Kohathite, evening, mixed-multitude side. Nowhere for it to stop.
Ground at the eastern place: nothing wrong with it.
Strips off the roofs of the dead. Weighed on the ordinary stone. He is right.
Ten tents at the bottom and every one of them a woman's.
Eight sources. Same words. Did not record the words.
He taught me the marks and never used them.
She looked well.

Prince of Simeon at Peor. Simeon down 37,100 over thirty-eight years. These do not touch. I want them to.
Aaron on Hor. First day, fifth month, fortieth year.
Forty-two stages. One date.

He read them twice, as he always did, and could not account for most of them, as he always could not.

. . .

There was one more and he had been carrying it since the northern side and had not put it down.

He got the point out and turned the sheet and looked at the space under the last line for a while, and did the thing he had done all his life with a figure he was not certain of, which was to hold it and see whether it went.

It went.

He wrote:

The second combing. Which hill. She has it now.

Then he closed the leaf and put it in the satchel with the knife and the cords and the piece of the jar, and put the satchel where it went, and went out to see about the animals.