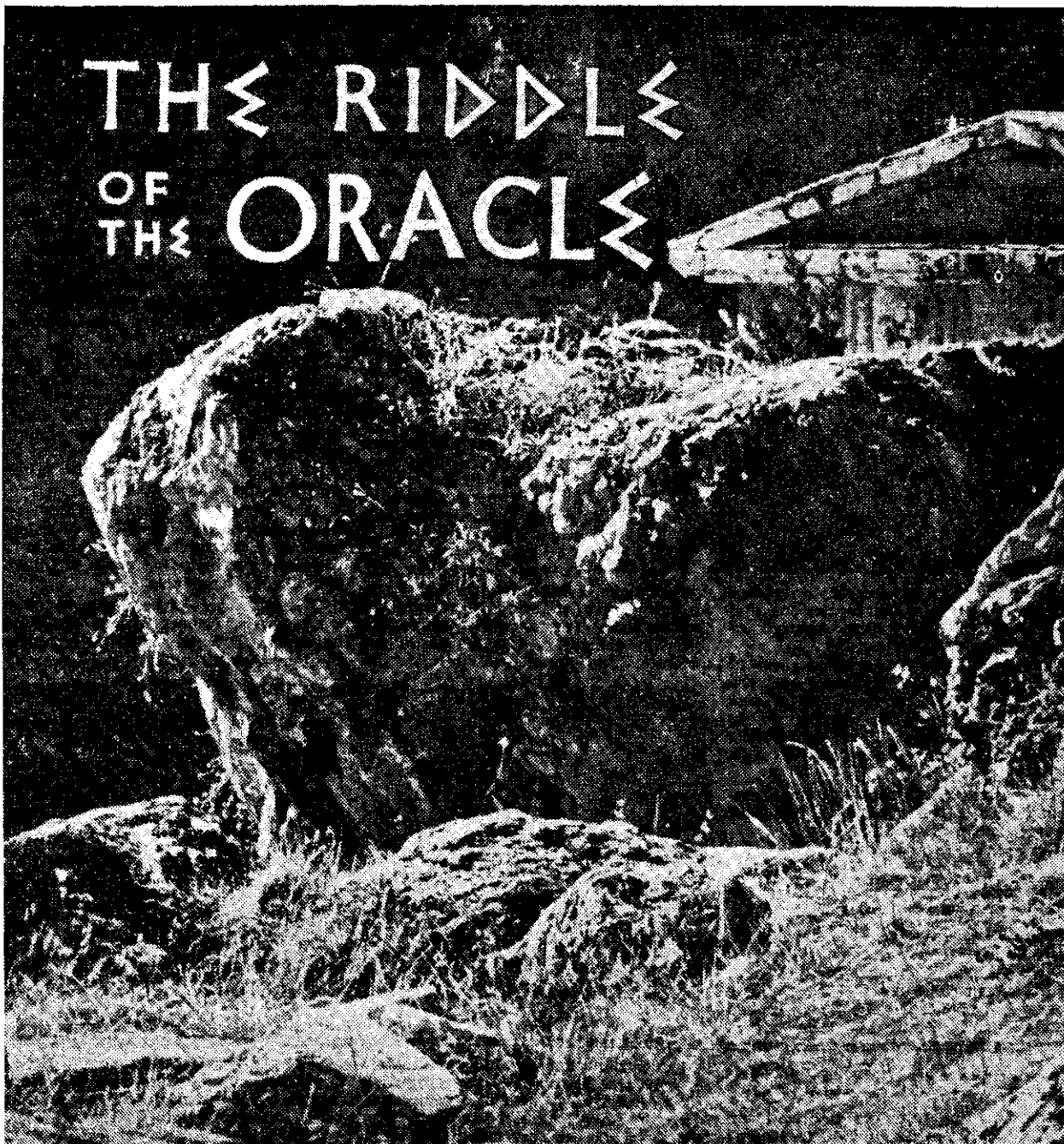


THE RIDDLE OF THE ORACLE



AT LEFT: The Sybil's Rock at Delphi, with the roof of the Athenian treasure-house showing in the background.



of the flute and drum the frenzied Maenads would go to the mountain heights to dance and sacrifice animals.

These rites undoubtedly provided emotional outlets in a somewhat restricted society, and were thoroughly approved. It gave people a chance to forget themselves.

Today Delphi is an impressive ruin, perched on slopes below towering cliffs and looking down a wide valley. One of the treasure-houses, that of the Athenians, built to house the more perishable offerings, has been restored, but the Temple, above the Sibyl's Rock where the priestess went to meditate before prophesying, is only a floor and some fallen columns. Nevertheless, the visitor can still sense what Rex Warner called "the real, pervading and immensely powerful genius of the place." And even while he does, the nagging voice of doubt intrudes. "Oh, yes, magnificent scenery. But it was all a gigantic hoax, the greatest confidence trick in history. You don't really believe it, do you?"

But the Greeks *did*. Not only the ordinary more credulous people, but the finest minds of their civilisation, scientists and philosophers, men like Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, all believed in the Delphic Oracle. To dismiss the Oracle completely may mean assuming that all these men were either liars or dupes. They themselves were not above a little cautious investigation, for Croesus, wealthiest of Greek kings, sent to all the major oracles to ask them the same question at the same time—What Croesus was doing at that moment. Only the Delphic Oracle correctly answered the seemingly impossible. Croesus gave her a great treasure, and then asked her whether he should invade Persia. The answer, that if he did so a mighty empire would be destroyed, was one of the more ambiguous on record.

The priests may have framed these ambiguous answers when they could not more accurately interpret the priestess's reply or answer from their own common-sense or knowledge of events and places. But even allowing for deliberate ambiguity, coincidence, and a remarkable intelligence system, there are some answers given by Cottrell in *The Pythoness* that can be explained only by abnormal sense or second sight, both faculties which scientists find are quite common in less sophisticated societies.

Was the priestess genuinely inspired? Or was it merely that, as Julius Caesar remarked at a later date, "Men are very apt to believe what they hope to be true"? Leonard Cottrell gives both sides of the argument in his dramatic impression of Delphi.

HAD your horoscope cast recently?

When was your palm last read? Do you like to ask the tea-leaves or the cards before coming to a decision? If you do, you needn't be ashamed of yourself—the Greeks had the habit, and they had a word for it, too. The word was Oracle, and for a really guaranteed result the Oracle was Delphic.

If the ancient Greek wanted to know whether to go into business with that hard-headed Roman, or whether he should marry the ugly but rich widow, or even what was wrong with his prize sheep, he would consult the Oracle. And if the City fathers were having trouble with their finances, or the army in difficulty in a siege, or the townplanners wondering where to put the main street, they would send off to the Oracle. Wealthy as Croesus or poor as a mountain shepherd, they could be sure of an answer.

All they had to do was to go to the Temple of Apollo at Delphi and submit their question in writing to the priests there. On a set day, if all the omens were right, they'd drink at the Castalian Spring to clean themselves of any sin, and take their offering of cake and a

sacrificial animal to the Temple. Then they would go one by one to an inner room, where there was an old woman dressed as a young girl sitting on a tripod stool and attended by several priests. She would be in some trance-like state and unable to speak coherently, but her answers would be interpreted by the priests, who would put them into verses. (In later times the replies were in prose, after critics had remarked that the God of Poetry wrote some of the worst verses in Greece.)

The answers were not always clear—the Delphic Oracle had a name for ambiguity. The Pythoness, for so the priestess was called, could speak with as double a tongue as any snake, although in fact that name came to her at second hand, from the early legend of Apollo slaying a Python at Delphi and then making that his own sanctuary. This legend is just one of the many stories about Delphi which are contained in a BBC programme *The Pythoness*, which Leonard Cottrell has made, using the comments of ancient and modern writers as well as his own great knowledge of archaeology. It will be heard from 1YC on Tuesday, August 20, and from 4YC on Wednesday,

August 21. The programme also includes some Greek music of the fourth century B.C., recorded by Arda Mandikian.

For over a thousand years Greeks, and later Romans, came to Delphi to consult the Oracle, to worship Apollo, and take part in Games and musical festivals in his honour. But Apollo was not the only god at Delphi. Dionysus had his rites there, too, and in the winter months, when Apollo was thought to have left the temple, people were sent from all over Greece to take part in these other rites. To the sound

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