

The island

□ ROGER JONES

*"I do not surrender to you,
I only wait."
(Stirner)*

There were three of them. They lived in the hut on the beach. Rastrick was in charge.

Very often Rastrick was not nice to the others. Particularly he was not nice to Minus. To Erg he was less nasty. Minus had a dog-like, passive, kick-inviting manner, which made him an obvious butt for Rastrick's unpleasantness. At the same time it made him rather an unsatisfactory target. Kicking Minus was too much like kicking a jellyfish: there was no resistance. This refusal to fight back angered Rastrick and he bullied Minus all the more.

Rastrick's comparatively humane treatment of Erg was part of the system. There was, if you like, a kind of hierarchy. Rastrick bullied Erg and Minus, but especially Minus. Erg also bullied Minus, especially when Rastrick was away. Rastrick encouraged this arrangement because it kept Erg happy and the status remained more or less quo at all times. Minus had no opinions, and no feelings to be considered.

Apart from their co-operation in the bullying of Minus, there

was another, more subtle bond between Rastrick and Erg. This was the knowledge, or at least suspicion, on Rastrick's part that Erg had seen him one night in the copse on the North Cliff.

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As there was a hierarchy, so there was a routine. Both were necessary because Rastrick said so. Often. There were few things Rastrick said that he did not say often. And if Rastrick said a thing was so, then it was so. Because Rastrick had his information from the House direct.

On rare occasions in unbending mood, Rastrick would summon Erg and Minus to him and lecture them. These lectures usually took place in Rastrick's half of the hut, separated by a partition from the quarters shared by Erg and Minus. Seated at his table, the others standing opposite in attitudes of respectful attention, Rastrick would point out at length, in condescending and paternal tones, what he called the Facts of the Situation. Though life was not easy for any of them, there could be no doubt that it was better so. Where would they be without System, without Order? Where would they be without the Routine which was the living proof of the extent to which others were prepared to burden themselves with responsibility for every aspect of the daily lives of their subordinates? And was it not the rankest ingratitude to repay such selflessness with grumbling? Was not a measure of (menacing overtone) discipline a light price to pay for their relief from the mighty burden of care and worry—a burden which they themselves were so obviously ill-equipped to bear?

To these homilies Erg and Minus would listen in silence. They knew better than to answer Rastrick's highly rhetorical questions. They knew better than to try to follow exactly the logic behind the numerous and intricate arguments Rastrick used to drive home his points. And afterwards, in their own part of the hut, Erg used to go through the whole thing again for Minus's personal benefit. What he lacked of Rastrick's dialectical subtlety he compensated for a ready resort to violence. Erg maintained that this type of persuasion was especially suited to Minus's feeble intellect and inferior social status.

The House stood at the top of the Hill. It commanded a

view of the entire island except certain portions of beach which were concealed from the House by the cliffs which backed them. Rastrick went to the House once every seven days for orders. It was his habit to leave in the evening and return about noon the following day. The distance to the House was not great, but the Hill was steep and the one path rocky. The House seemed farther from the beach than it actually was; some trick of the light, combined perhaps with the angle from which they normally saw it, seemed to blur its outlines, almost blending it at times into the hard grey rock on which it was built.

The beach where they lived was in plain view of the House. There were no cliffs between the unseen watchers at the top of the Hill and the strip of sand with its jetty and the long hut which made up their effective world. Into the minds of the three men the idea of this constant surveillance to which they were subject had sunk over the years, until it was no longer a consciously formulated thought. But the knowledge was there, like the idea of breathing, and as permanent and as real.

Minus was not allowed to leave the beach. Erg went once every twelve days to collect wood from the other beaches and from the copse on the North Cliff, which was on the opposite side of the island. Erg was permitted, in the course of his duties, to enter the copse from the seaward side. At no other point might he leave the area directly bordering the sea. It went without saying that any divergence from his permitted sphere of activity could have been observed from the House. In which case . . . Erg preferred not to think about it.

Every seventh week the day of Erg's wood-collecting coincided with Rastrick's trip to the House. It was on such a day that, returning unusually late, Erg had seen Rastrick in the copse.

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It was Erg's opinion that Rastrick's visits to the House must be the occasion of spiritual and perhaps even physical exertions of the very highest order on the part of their leader. It was difficult to interpret in any other light the apparent discrepancy between, on the one hand the obvious comfort of Rastrick's life on the beach, and on the other his repeated assertions that life was not easy for any of them. During the six days out of seven that

Rastrick spent on the beach his work was one hundred per cent supervisory. On the purely physical level it is no exaggeration to say that he never lifted a finger. The others waited on his every need. It was obvious, therefore, that Rastrick did his suffering when he was elsewhere: in other words, when he was up at the House.

This theory did not rule out the possibility that Rastrick suffered mentally and spiritually six days out of seven, but maintained a calm and carefree air in the presence of his subordinates. However, this was not a possibility which ever occurred to Erg, who was not personally given to the spiritual agony, awful sense of responsibility and so forth, which are the privileges of Command.

As a prop to his deductions Erg adduced: one—Rastrick's abnormally subdued manner and other signs of fatigue that could sometimes be detected in him on the day of his return; two—Rastrick's obvious lack of embarrassment at the total and glaring absence of manual labour from his daily curriculum.

Erg often expounded this theory to Minus during Rastrick's absence, or at night when they were alone in their bunks. Its premises granted, it was good theory and logically sound. Erg was particularly attached to it because it proved beyond all doubt the care and forethought which whoever arranged their lives had brought to the task, the equity which governed the allocation of duties and privileges. Yet the frequency with which Erg made Minus listen to his ideas on the subject, and the wheedling, half-hopeful vehemence with which he challenged him to mention any way in which things might have been arranged both differently and better, are difficult to explain. Perhaps the thought that once a week Rastrick had to suffer on their behalf seemed in some way a justification, even a motive, for Erg's own ferocious ill-treatment of Minus on the other six days. But what satisfaction Erg could have derived from the ready assent of the apathetic and insignificant Minus remains a mystery. Minus would say yes to anything if ordered to. Otherwise he said nothing.

Perhaps then Erg felt something lacking in these one-sided colloquies. Though right and necessary, it was at times just the tiniest bit regrettable that Minus had no opinions of his own, either on the discomfort or otherwise of Rastrick's personal

situation, or indeed on any other matter. There was something quite definitely unsatisfactory about Minus's willingness to say yes when told to do so; likewise, there was something not quite right about his failure to say yes when not ordered to do so. In other words, Minus was a poor conversationalist. It could hardly have been otherwise. Minus's occupation was not the sort which commonly attracts people of a high order of intelligence. Its daily performance neither required nor inspired those flights of pure intellect which might have made Minus a more stimulating companion on the spiritual plane.

Minus's main task (apart from such routine chores as cooking and waiting on Rastrick) was the polishing and arrangement of the stones on the beach.

The patterns for the arrangement of the stones were changed every week on Rastrick's return from the House. They consisted invariably of elongated rectangles interspersed with circles having a diameter exactly equalling the height of the rectangles. Squares, circles of the wrong size, triangles, and irregular polygons of all sorts were not permitted. There was, however, considerable variation from week to week in number and disposition of the orthodox rectangles and circles. Rastrick's supervision of Minus during the hebdomadal performance of this task was extremely close and demanding. Particular attention had to be paid to regularity of shape, rectitude of line and evenness of disposition. At such times a certain duality might have been observed in Rastrick's attitude to Minus and his task: sometimes he would jeer at Minus saying that so degrading and pointless an occupation was merely an expedient dreamed up by a benevolent authority to keep Minus busy and happy in the face of his total incompetence to perform any really useful function; other times, he would take extraordinary pains to impress on Minus the value and necessity of the job which was his lot. Without, however, actually specifying the precise function of the stone patterns; and this was something which Minus for his part had long ago stopped even trying to guess at.

Rastrick of course knew what the stones were for. He did not tell Minus, because as he said it was not necessary for Minus to know. Erg occasionally hinted that he himself was in on the secret. But on the few occasions Minus had plucked up the

courage to ask for enlightenment he had been met with violence, evasion or abuse.

Erg's job was the care and maintenance of the jetty. He completely repented it on an average once every ten days. This accounted for the enormous supply of paint which was kept under tarpaulins behind the hut. There was no question about the importance of Erg's job. For it was to the jetty that one day the Boat would come, changing all their lives. But neither Erg, nor Rastrick himself, claimed to know exactly who or what the Boat was, or looked like, or what exactly would happen on that great day when at last the Boat came to them bringing . . . What? And indeed it was precisely these questions which formed the main topic of conversation between Erg and Minus. When there was any conversation. Which was almost never.

The reason for this paucity of amicable discourse lay in the different natures and social positions of the parties involved. Also in the seldomness with which a desire for conversation on the part of one coincided with a like desire on the part of the other, and/or with a suitable opportunity for mutual indulgence. Also in that fact that Minus's part in any conversation was restricted, for reasons detailed above, to a mere handful of mandatory yeses.

These factors combined to keep sapient colloquy to a minimum.

The redistribution of the stones according to the new pattern for the week seldom took more than a day, even with Rastrick at his most demanding. The remainder of his working time Minus spent in raking the beach around the stones to keep it smooth and free of debris; and in polishing and arranging in piles according to colour, shape and size his reserve supply. These were aspects of Minus's work which Rastrick seldom deigned to oversee in person. Thus, during a considerable portion of his waking life, Minus was left free to pursue his second, secret, invisible and totally unguessed-at occupation.

Minus's other occupation was: cerebration or thinking.

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Scene—the hut; time—night. Erg snoring. Minus snoring. Muffled snoring from Rastrick's quarters. Rastrick and Erg asleep. Minus not asleep but awake, thinking.

Minus knew without realising it that the people most likely to get the right answers are the people who ask the right questions. In subconscious accordance with this principle Minus had formulated the following questions which he considered to be pertinent to his situation: (1) Who lives at the House? (2) Are there more than one of him? (3) Supposing Erg is not lying, what was Rastrick doing in the copse? (4) How soon is the Boat coming? (5) And then what? (6) Why do the stones have to be changed so often? (7) Why is Rastrick so nasty? (8) Where can I find the answer to these questions?

Minus called this his Short List. That is, it was a list of questions from which he had eliminated, over the years, (a) all questions too nugatory to deserve serious attention; (b) all questions to which he already knew the answer; (c) all questions whose solution would automatically be implied in the solution of another question.

Minus was fond of his Short List. After the long years of weeding and pruning the survivors were all old friends. Sometimes, however, he wondered if he was applying the standards of group (c) with sufficient rigour. Question (2) for example, was definitely suspect from this point of view. But he had developed a certain affection for it after so long, and so he let it stand, despite vague misgivings. Besides, Question (2) was involved so closely with Question (1) that it would have been very difficult to say which was the more expendable. And attempts to combine the two questions in one—e.g.: Who and how many live (?lives) at the House?—left a lot to be desired.

On this particular night and at this particular time Minus was giving particular attention to Question (8), it being a Thursday. He usually did it that way—one question a night. It was a good system; from it Minus reaped the benefits of methodic and orderly enquiry, while avoiding the monotony of always thinking about the same question on the same night of the week. This consideration, too, had weighed heavily on his decision not to reject Question (2) or combine it with Question (1).

Minus stopped snoring.

Rastrick and Erg continued to snore because they were still asleep. Minus had stopped snoring not because he was awake, for, as has already been explained, he was awake before. He

stopped because on this particular night at this particular time he realised rather suddenly that, if he knew the answer to Question (8), there was a ninety per cent chance or better that all other questions would be reduced to child's play and mere worn out superfluities. He began to snore again, more thoughtfully.

Perhaps five minutes later the snores stopped for the second time. Minus had realised another thing. He knew the answer to Question (8).

When his snores resumed this time they were real snores.

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The ground under his feet was grey and black in the moon. There was a cicada singing somewhere in the grass. He could hear his own breath and the sound of his feet on the steep path. He could hear the sea, quieter than he had ever heard it. He went up without pausing until his breathing began to hurt and, looking up, he saw the lump of the House above him not fifty yards away. Then he stopped and rested, his head down, putting his hands on his knees to take the weight off his spine. When he felt better he raised his head and looked again. The walls were silver-grey and the windows thick black holes. No light came through those windows, and no sound. He straightened slowly and went on.

He found a doorway, but no door. He peered and listened. Nothing. He took from one pocket a candle and from another matches. He lit the candle and went in.

There was only one room: it occupied the whole interior of the house. There was quite a lot of furniture. Most of it—bunks, tables, chairs, shelves—was made of some light, shiny metal, which showed no traces of rust. Other things—wood, paper, cloth—had succumbed wholly or partly to age, rot and the work of animals (rats or ants or both), and crumbled to dust and splinters. Dominating the centre of the room and reaching to the ceiling was a box of the same shiny metal about twelve feet square. It had a number of little glass windows and many rows of knobs and buttons. There were several similar but much smaller boxes bracketed to the walls in different parts of the room.

He shuffled slowly about, bending now and then to peer at

something on the floor. Dust had laid a uniform blanket of grey everywhere which swallowed his footsteps like sand. There was a smell in the place, unfamiliar and strong—like mushrooms perhaps . . . He couldn't place it.

His inspection completed, he stood still in the middle of the room leaning his back against the metal casing of the machine, and digested the information he had so far. The answer to Question (1) was: nobody. The answer to Question (2) was: seventeen.

Minus had never seen a skeleton before but he knew what a skeleton was, and that these were skeletons. Seventeen of them. Most were lying on the bunks; two or three were clustered in a heap at the foot of the machine; one was sitting at a table as though it had gone to sleep there with its head on its arms—and never woken up. Mixed with the dust and bones were small pieces of clothing and equipment—belts, boots, buttons, a pair of spectacles—which had not perished. Minus stooped and picked up a button from the floor. He blew on it then rubbed it on his sleeve. He held the candle close and peered. The markings on it meant nothing to him. It was familiar enough, though. He had the same buttons on his own clothes. So had Erg; so had Rastrick.

His fist closed tight around the button and he stood still for a few moments, thinking. Then he went out. In the doorway he paused long enough to blow out the candle and throw it down on the floor. It sank into the dust as though returning to its rightful place.

His way took him, not back to the beach, but further away from it. He walked like a man asleep, looking straight ahead with eyes that focused on nothing. His arms hung loose at his sides. Occasionally he stumbled on a stone or some unevenness in the rough path; but he never looked down. It seemed as if nothing could have interrupted that dead, purposeful walk. He moved fast. Before long he could hear the wind in the twisted fir branches of the copse; and the sea, much louder now as the waves arched and smashed themselves on the rocks far below at the foot of the cliff. The sound of the wind was hopeless and sad; the sound of the sea was angry. Both found an echo deep inside him in feelings long suppressed, hidden even from himself, but which boiled up now with every step he took.

He had never been here before, but his walk never slowed or faltered. A few moments and he was in the trees. Still he moved straight ahead, turning his head from side to side now as he went, hunting. The trees cut off some of the moonlight, but his eyes quickly adjusted to the deeper shadow. The copse was not large. He soon found what he was looking for, in the place where he knew it must be.

Rastrick was standing immobile at the very edge of the cliff, where the trees opened out onto nothing. His face was to the sea. Minus saw him and made a sound that was half sob, half shout. Rastrick heard it and turned. Minus stopped about ten feet away. For a long moment the two men looked at each other. Something on Rastrick's face glittered in the moonlight. Tears. He had been crying. He stared dully at Minus. There was no surprise in that look, only a kind of hopeless resignation. He made no attempt to speak. It was Minus who broke the silence. He had almost to shout to make himself heard over the wind and the waves.

"Rastrick. I have some questions . . ."

As he spoke he brought up the hand with the button in it and thrust it towards Rastrick. Perhaps Rastrick interpreted the gesture as a threat. He took a step back and fell out of sight.

Minus crawled to the cliff-edge and looked over. He had no trouble identifying the dark form printed on the pale rock below. On a boulder which jutted above the reach of the swirling water Rastrick was spread like a victim on an altar. His head had opened like a tomato and from it a dark stain flowed to meet the greedy sea.

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When Minus got back to the beach the stars were beginning to go out. He went into the hut and lighted a lamp. Erg lay in his bunk where he had left him, and could be counted on not to move. He was lying on his back with his mouth open. The wooden handle of a breadknife protruded from his throat just below the Adam's apple, and the point of the knife was an inch deep in the wooden boards which took the place of a mattress. Minus looked down at him without expression. There was a great

deal of blood; already some flies had found it and were buzzing and wading about contentedly.

Minus put the lamp down on the chair and with a sudden awkward movement he jerked the blanket up to cover Erg's head. Under the blanket the knife-handle still stuck up grotesquely. Leaving the lamp where it was, Minus turned and went out. The door closed very quietly behind him.

He went down the beach, walking like a tired machine. He came to the stones and began to break up the patterns with his feet and kick sand over them. There was something curiously disdainful in his heavy, deliberate movements.

When he had finished he walked very slowly out to the end of the jetty and sat down to wait.

The sun came up out of the sea.