

# Theseus



There was once a king of Athens whose name was Aegeus. He had no son, but he had fifty nephews and they were waiting for him to die so that one of them might take his place. They were wild, worthless fellows, and the people of Athens looked forward with dread to the day when the city would be in their power. Yet so long as Aegeus lived, the rowdy nephews could not do much harm; they were generally content to spend their time feasting and drinking at the king's table and quarreling among themselves.

It so happened one summer that Aegeus left his kingdom in the care of the elders of the city and went on a voyage across the sea to the old and famous city of Troezen, which lay nestled at the foot of the mountains on the opposite shore. Troezen was not fifty miles by water from Athens, and the purple-peaked island of Aegina lay between them, but to the people of that early time the distance seemed very great; it was not often that ships passed from one place to the other. And as for going by land round the great bend of the sea, that was a thing so fraught with danger that no sane man had ever dared try it.

King Pittheus of Troezen was right glad to see Aegeus, for they had been boys together, and he welcomed him to his city and did all that he could to make his visit a pleasant one. Day after day, there was feasting and merriment and music in the marble halls of old Troezen, and the two kings spent many a happy hour talking about the deeds of their youth and of the mighty heroes whom both had known. And when the time came for the ship to sail back to Athens, Aegeus was not ready to go. He said he would stay yet a little longer in Troezen and that the elders of the city could manage things well at home; the ship returned without him.

But Aegeus stayed, not so much for the rest and enjoyment which he was having in the home of his old friend, as for the sake of Aethra, his old friend's daughter. For Aethra was as fair as a summer morning, and she was the joy and pride of Troezen; Aegeus was never so happy as when in her presence. So it happened that some time after the ship had sailed, there was a wedding in the halls of King Pittheus, but it was kept a secret, for Aegeus feared that his nephews, if they heard of it, would be very angry and would send men to Troezen to harm him and his new bride.

Month after month passed and still Aegeus lingered with his bride, trusting his elders to see to the affairs of Athens. Then one morning, when the gardens of Troezen were full of roses and the heather was green on the hills, a baby was born to Aethra, a boy with a fair face and strong arms and eyes as sharp and as bright as the mountain eagle's. And now Aegeus was even more reluctant to return home than he had been before, and he went up on the mountain which overlooks Troezen and prayed to Athena, the queen of war and wisdom, to give him insight and show him what to do. Even while he prayed, there came a ship into the harbor, bringing a letter to Aegeus and alarming news from Athens.

"Come home without delay," these were words of the letter which the elders had sent. "Come home quickly, or Athens will be lost. A great king from beyond the sea, Minos of Crete, is on the way with ships and a host of fighting men. He declares that he will carry sword and fire within our walls, and will slay our young men and make our children his slaves. Come and save us!"

"It is the call of duty," said Aegeus, and with a heavy heart he made ready to go at once across the sea to lead his people. But he could not take Aethra and their child, for fear of his lawless nephews, who would have slain them both.

"Best of wives," he said, when the hour for parting had come, "listen to me, for I shall never see your father's halls, nor dear old Troezen, nor perhaps your own fair face, again. Do you remember the old tree which stands on the mountain side, and the great flat stone which lies a little way beyond it, the one no man but myself has ever been able to lift? Under that stone, I have hidden my sword and the sandals which I brought from Athens. There they shall lie until our child is strong enough to lift the stone and take them for his own. Care for him, Aethra, until that time, and then – and not till then – you may tell him of his father, and bid him seek me in Athens."

Then Aegeus kissed his wife and child and went on board the ship. The sailors shouted, the oars were dipped into the waves, the white sail was spread to the breeze, and Aethra from her palace window saw the vessel speed away over the blue waters towards Aegina and the distant shore.

## SWORD AND SANDALS

Year after year went by, and yet no word reached Aethra from her husband on the other side of the sea. Often she climbed the mountain above Troezen, and would sit there all

day, looking out over the blue waters and the purple hills of Aegina to the dim, distant shore beyond. Now and then she could see a white-winged ship sailing in the offing, but men said that it was a Cretan vessel, and very likely was filled with fierce Cretan warriors, bound upon some cruel errand of war. Then it was rumored that King Minos had seized upon all the ships of Athens, and had burned a part of the city, and had forced the people to pay him a most grievous tribute. Other than this, there was no news.

In the meanwhile, Aethra's son had grown to be a tall, ruddy-cheeked lad, strong as a mountain lion, and she had named him Theseus. On the day that he was fifteen years old, he went with her up to the top of the mountain and with her looked out over the sea.

"Ah, if only your father would come..." she sighed.

"My father?" said Theseus. "Who is my father, and why are you always watching and waiting and wishing that he would come? Tell me about him."

And she answered, "My child, do you see the great flat stone which lies there, half buried in the ground, and covered with moss and trailing ivy? Do you think you can lift it?"

"I will try, mother," said Theseus. And he dug his fingers into the ground beside it, and grasped its uneven edges, and tugged and lifted and strained until his breath came hard and his arms ached and his body was covered with sweat, but the stone was moved not at all. At last he said, "The task is too hard for me until I have grown stronger. But why do you wish me to lift it?"

"When you are strong enough to lift it," Aethra said, "I will tell you about your father."

After that, the boy went out every day and practiced running and leaping and throwing and lifting; every day, he rolled smaller stones out of their place. At first, he could move only a little weight, and those who saw him laughed as he pulled and puffed and grew red in the face, but he never gave up until he had lifted his target. And little by little he grew stronger, and his muscles became like iron bands, and his limbs were like mighty levers for strength. Then on his next birthday, he went up on the mountain with his mother, and again tried to lift the great stone. But it remained fast in its place and was not moved.

"I am not yet strong enough, mother," he complained.

"Have patience, my son," said Aethra.

So he went on again with his running and leaping and throwing and lifting; he practiced wrestling, also, and tamed the wild horses of the plain, and hunted the lions among the mountains. His strength and swiftness and skill were the wonder of all men, and Troezen was filled with tales of the deeds of the young Theseus. Yet when he tried again on his seventeenth birthday, he could not move the great flat stone that lay near the tree on the mountain side.

"Have patience, my son," again said Aethra, but this time tears crept into her eyes.

So he went back again to his exercising; he learned to wield the sword and the battle ax and to throw tremendous weights and to carry tremendous burdens. And men said that since the days of Hercules there was never so great strength in one body. Then, when he was a year older, he climbed the mountain yet again with his mother, and he stooped and took hold of the stone, and it yielded to his touch; when he had lifted it quite out of the ground, he found underneath it a sword of bronze and sandals of gold, and these he gave to his mother.

"Tell me now about my father," he said.

Aethra rejoiced that the time had come for which she had waited so long, and she buckled the sword to his belt and fastened the sandals upon his feet. Then she told him who his father was, and why he had left them in Troezen, and how he had said that when the lad was strong enough to lift the great stone, he must take the sword and sandals and go and seek him in Athens.

Theseus was glad when he heard this, and his proud eyes flashed with eagerness as he said, "I am ready, mother, and I will set out for Athens this very day."

They walked down the mountain together and told King Pittheus what had happened, and showed him the sword and the sandals. But the old man shook his head sadly and tried to dissuade Theseus from going.

"How can you go to Athens in these lawless times?" he said. "The sea is full of pirates. In fact, no ship from Troezen has sailed across the sea since your kingly father went home to the help of his people, eighteen years ago."

Then, finding that this only made Theseus the more determined, he added, "But if you must go, I will have a new ship built for you, stanch and stout and fast sailing. Fifty of the bravest young men in Troezen shall go with you, and I hope with fair winds and fearless hearts you shall escape the pirates and reach Athens in safety."

"Which is the most perilous way," asked Theseus, "to go by ship or to make the journey on foot round the great bend of land?"

"The seaway is full enough of perils," said his grandfather, "but the landway is beset with dangers tenfold greater. Even if there were good roads and no hindrances, the journey round the shore is a long one and would require many days. But there are rugged mountains to climb, and wide marshes to cross, and dark forests to go through. There is hardly a footpath in all that wild region, nor any place to find rest or shelter, and the woods are full of wild beasts. Dreadful dragons lurk in the marshes, and many cruel robber giants dwell in the mountains."

“Well,” said Theseus, “if there are more perils by land than by sea, then I shall go by land, and I go at once.”

“But you will at least take fifty young men, your companions, with you?” King Pittheus asked.

“Not one shall go with me,” said Theseus, and he stood up and played with his sword hilt, laughing at the thought of fear.

When there was nothing more to say, he kissed his mother and bade his grandfather goodbye, and went out of Troezen towards the trackless coastland which lay to the west and north. With blessings and tears, the king and Aethra followed him to the city gates, and watched him until his tall form was lost to sight among the trees which bordered the shore of the sea.

### ROUGH ROADS AND ROBBERS

With a brave heart, Theseus walked on, keeping the sea always upon his right. Soon the old city of Troezen was left far behind, and he came to the great marshes, where the ground sank under him at every step, and green pools of stagnant water lay on both sides of the narrow pathway. But no fiery dragon came out of the reeds to meet him, so he walked on and on till he came to the rugged mountain land which bordered the western shore of the sea. Then he climbed one slope after another, until at last he stood on the summit of a gray peak from which he could see the whole country spread out around him. Then downward and onward he went again, but his way led him through dark mountain glens, and along the edges of mighty precipices, and underneath many a frowning cliff, until he came to a dreary wood where the trees grew tall and close together and the light of the sun was seldom seen.

In that forest, there dwelt a robber giant, called Corynetes, the cudgeler, terror of travelers. For oftentimes, Corynetes would go down into the valleys where the shepherds fed their flocks, and would carry off not only sheep and lambs, but sometimes children and the men themselves. It was his custom to hide in the thickets of underbrush, close to a pathway, and, when a traveler passed that way, leap out upon him and beat him to death with a club. When he saw Theseus coming through the woods, he thought that he would have a rich prize, for he knew from the youth's clothing and manner that he must be a prince. He lay on the ground, where leaves of ivy and tall grass screened him from view, and held his great iron club ready to strike.

But Theseus had sharp eyes and quick ears, and neither beast nor robber giant could have taken him by surprise. When Corynetes leaped out of his hiding place to strike him down, the young man dodged aside so quickly that the heavy club struck the ground behind him; then, before the robber giant could raise it for a second stroke, Theseus seized the fellow's legs and tripped him up.

Corynetes roared loudly and tried to strike again, but Theseus wrenched the club out of his hands, and then dealt him such a blow on the head that he never again harmed travelers passing through the forest. Then the youth went on his way, carrying the huge club on his shoulder, singing a song of victory and looking sharply around him for any other foes that might be lurking among the trees.

Just over the ridge of the next mountain, he met an old man who warned him not to go any farther. He said that close by a grove of pine trees, which he would soon pass on his way down the slope, there dwelt a robber who was very cruel to strangers.

“He is called Pityocampes, the Pine Bender,” said the old man, “for when he has caught a traveler, he bends two tall, lithe pine trees to the ground and binds his captive to them – a hand and a foot to the top of one, and a hand and a foot to the top of the other. Then he lets the trees fly up, and he roars with laughter when he sees the traveler's body torn in sunder.”

“It seems to me,” said Theseus, “that it is full time to rid the world of such a monster,” and he thanked the kind man who had warned him. He hastened onward, whistling merrily as he went down towards the grove of pines.

Soon he came in sight of the robber's house, built near the foot of a jutting cliff. Behind it was a rocky gorge and a roaring mountain stream, and in front of it was a garden wherein grew all kinds of rare plants and beautiful flowers. But the tops of the pine trees were laden with the bones of unlucky travelers, which hung bleaching white in the sun and wind.

On a stone by the roadside sat Pityocampes himself. When he saw Theseus coming, he approached the prince, twirling a long rope in his hands and crying out, “Welcome, welcome, stranger! Welcome to my inn, the true Traveler's Rest!”

“What kind of entertainment have you?” asked Theseus. “Have you a pine tree bent down to the ground and ready for me?”

“Aye, two of them!” said the robber. “I knew that you were coming, and I bent two of them for you.”

As he spoke, Pityocampes threw his rope towards Theseus and tried to entangle him in its coils. But the young man leaped aside and when the robber rushed upon him, he dodged beneath his hands and seized his legs, as he had seized Corynetes, and threw him heavily to the ground. Then the two wrestled together among the trees, but not long, for Pityocampes was no match for his lithe young foe. Theseus knelt upon the robber's back as he lay prone among the leaves, and tied him with his own cord to the two pine trees which were already bent down. “As you would have done unto me, so will I do unto you,” Theseus said.

Then Pityocampetes wept and prayed and made many a fair promise, but Theseus would not hear him. He turned away, the trees sprang up, and the robber's body was left dangling from those branches.

The road which Theseus followed now led him closer to the shore. By and by, he came to a place where the mountains seemed to rise sheer out of the sea, and there was only a narrow path high up along the side of the cliff. Far down beneath his feet, he could hear waves dashing against a rocky wall, while above him the mountain eagles circled and screamed, and gray crags and barren peaks glistened in the sunlight.

But Theseus went on fearlessly and came at last to a place where a spring of clear water bubbled out from a cleft in the rock; there, the path was narrower still, and the low doorway of a cavern opened out upon it. Close by the spring sat a red-faced giant, with a huge club across his knees, guarding the road so that no one could pass. In the sea at the foot of the cliff basked a huge turtle, its leaden eyes looking always upward for its food. Theseus realized this must be the domain of Sciron, a brother of Pityocampetes who was the terror of all the coast, and liked to make strangers wash his feet so that while they were doing so, he might kick them over the cliff to be eaten by his vicious pet turtle below.

When Theseus approached, the robber raised his club, and said fiercely, "No man can pass here until he has washed my feet! Come, set to work!"

Then Theseus smiled, and said: "Is your turtle hungry today? And do you want me to feed him?" Sciron's eyes flashed fire, and he said, "You shall feed him, but you shall wash my feet first!" And with that, he brandished his club in the air and rushed forward to strike.

But Theseus was ready. With the iron club which he had taken from Corynetes, he met the blow midway, and the robber's weapon was knocked out of his hands and sent spinning away over the edge of the cliff. Then Sciron, black with rage, tried to grapple with him, but Theseus was too quick for that. He dropped his club and seized Sciron by the throat; he pushed him back against the ledge on which he had been sitting, and he threw him sprawling upon the sharp rocks, holding him there, hanging half way over the cliff.

"Enough! enough!" cried Sciron. "Let me up, and you may pass on your way."

"It is not enough," said Theseus, and he drew his sword and sat down by the side of the spring. "You must wash my feet now. Come, set to work!"

Then Sciron, white with fear, washed his feet.

"And now," said Theseus, when the task was ended, "as you have done unto others, so will I do unto you."

There was a scream in mid-air which the mountain eagles answered from above; there was a great splashing in the water below, as the turtle consumed its meal.

Athens was now less than twenty miles away, so he strode bravely onward, happy in the thought that he was so near the end of his long journey. But it was very slow traveling among the mountains, and he was not always sure that he was following the right path. The sun was almost down when he came to a broad green valley where the trees had been cleared away. A little river flowed through the middle of this valley, and on either side were grassy meadows where cattle were grazing, and on a hillside close by, half hidden among the trees, there was a great stone house with vines all over its walls and roof.

While Theseus was wondering who it could be that lived in this pretty but lonely place, a man came out of the house and hurried down to the road to meet him. He was a well-dressed man, and his face was wreathed with smiles. He bowed low to Theseus and invited him kindly to come up to the house and be his guest that night.

"This is a lonely place," he said, "and it is not often that travelers pass this way. But there is nothing that gives me so much joy as to find strangers and feast them at my table and hear them tell of the things they have seen and heard. Come up, and sup with me, and lodge under my roof; you shall sleep on a wonderful bed which I have, a bed which fits every guest and cures him of every ill."

Theseus was pleased with the man's ways and, as he was both hungry and tired, he went up with him and sat down under the vines by the door. The man said, "Now I will go in and make the bed ready for you, and you can lie down upon it and rest; later, when you feel refreshed, you shall sit at my table and sup with me, and I will listen to the pleasant tales which I know you will tell."

When he had gone into the house, Theseus looked around him to see what sort of a place it was. He was filled with surprise at the richness of it, at the gold and silver and beautiful things with which every room seemed to be adorned, for it was indeed a place fit for a prince. While he was looking and wondering, the vines before him were parted and the fair face of a young girl peeped out.

"Noble stranger," she whispered, "do not lie down on my master's bed, for those who do so never rise again. Fly down the glen and hide yourself in the deep woods ere he returns, or else there will be no escape for you."

"Who is your master, fair maiden, that I should be afraid of him?" asked Theseus.

"Men call him Procrustes, or the Stretcher," said the girl, and she talked low and fast. "He is a robber. He brings hither all the strangers that he finds traveling through the mountains. He puts them on his iron bed. He robs them of all they have. No one who comes into his house ever goes out again."

"Why do they call him the Stretcher? And what is that iron bed of his?" asked Theseus, in no way alarmed.

“Did he not tell you that it fits all guests?” asked the girl. “It most truly does fit them. For if a traveler is too long, Procrustes hews off his legs until he is of the right length, but if he is too short, as is the case with most guests, then he stretches the man’s limbs and body with ropes until he is long enough. It is for this reason that men call him the Stretcher. Hark! hark! I hear him coming!” And the vine leaves closed over her hiding-place.

The very next moment Procrustes stood in the door, bowing and smiling as though he had never done any harm to his fellow men.

“My dear young friend,” he said, “the bed is ready, and I will show you the way. After you have taken a pleasant little nap, we will sit down at table and enjoy a meal together.”

Theseus arose and followed his host; when they had come into an inner chamber, there, surely enough, was the bedstead, of iron, very curiously wrought, and upon it a soft couch which seemed to invite him to lie down and rest. But Theseus, peering about, saw the ax and the ropes with cunning pulleys lying hidden behind the curtains. He saw, too, that the floor was covered with stains of blood.

“Now, my dear young friend,” said Procrustes, “I pray you to lie down and take your ease, for I know that you have traveled far and are faint from want of rest and sleep. Lie down, and while sweet slumber overtakes you, I will have a care that no unseemly noise, nor buzzing fly, nor vexing gnat disturbs your dreams.”

“Is this your wonderful bed?” asked Theseus.

“It is,” answered Procrustes, “and you need but to lie down upon it, and it will fit you perfectly.”

“But you must lie upon it first,” said Theseus, “and let me see how it will fit itself to your stature.”

“Ah, no,” said Procrustes, “for then the spell would be broken,” and as he spoke his cheeks grew ashy pale.

“But I tell you, you must lie upon it,” said Theseus, and he seized the trembling man around the waist and threw him by force upon the bed. And no sooner was he prone upon the couch than curious iron arms reached out and clasped his body in their embrace and held him down so that he could not move hand or foot. The wretched man shrieked and cried for mercy, but Theseus stood over him and looked him straight in the eye.

“Is this the kind of bed on which you have your guests lie down?” he asked.

But Procrustes answered not a word. Then Theseus brought out the ax and the ropes and the pulleys, and asked him what they were for, and why they were hidden in the chamber. He was still silent, and could do nothing now but tremble and weep.

“Is it true,” said Theseus, “that you have lured hundreds of travelers into your den only to rob them? Is it true that it is your move to fasten them in this bed, and then chop off their legs or stretch them out until they fit the iron frame? Tell me, is this true?”

“It is true! it is true!” sobbed Procrustes, “and now kindly touch the spring above my head and let me go, and you shall have everything that I possess.”

But Theseus turned away. “You are caught,” he said, “in the trap which you set for others and for me. There is no mercy for the man who shows no mercy.” And he went out of the room, leaving the wretch to perish by his own cruel device.

Theseus looked through the house and found there great wealth of gold and silver and costly things which Procrustes had taken from the strangers who had fallen into his hands. He went into the dining hall, and there indeed was the table spread with a rich feast of meats and drinks and delicacies such as no king would scorn, but there was a seat and a plate for only the host, and none at all for guests.

Then the girl whose fair face Theseus had seen among the vines, came running into the house, and she seized the young hero’s hands and blessed and thanked him because he had rid the world of the cruel Procrustes.

“Only a month ago,” she said, “my father, a rich merchant of Athens, was traveling towards Eleusis, and I was with him, happy and carefree as any bird in the green woods. This robber lured us into his den, for we had much gold with us. My father, he stretched upon his iron bed, but me, he made his slave.”

Then Theseus called together all the inmates of the house, poor wretches whom Procrustes had forced to serve him, and he parted the robber’s spoils among them and told them that they were free to go wheresoever they wished. The next day he went on, through the narrow crooked ways among the mountains and hills, and came at last to the plain of Athens, where he saw the noble city and, in its midst, the rocky height where the great Temple of Athena stood. A little way from the temple, he saw the white walls of the palace of the king.

#### BACK IN ATHENS

In the years of Theseus’ infancy, Minos, king of Crete, had made war upon Athens. He had come with a great fleet of ships and an army, and had burned the merchant vessels in the harbor, and had overrun all the country and the coast. He had laid waste the fields and gardens round about Athens, had pitched his camp close to the walls, and had sent word to the Athenian rulers that he would march into their city with fire and sword and would slay all their young men and would pull down all their houses, even to the Temple of Athena, which stood on the great hill above the town. Then Aegeus, the king of Athens who had arrived just time to witness the attack, with twelve elders who were his helpers, went out to see King Minos to discuss a treaty with him.

“O mighty king,” the elders said to Minos, “what have we done that you should wish thus to destroy us from the earth?”

“O cowardly and shameless men,” answered Minos, “why do you ask this foolish question, since you can but know the cause of my wrath? I had an only son, Androgeos by name, and he was dearer to me than the hundred cities of Crete and the thousand islands of the sea over which I rule. Three years ago he came hither to take part in the games which you held in honor of Athena, whose temple you have built on yonder hilltop. You know how he overcame all your young men in the sports, and how your people honored him with song and dance and laurel crown. But when your king, this same Aegeus who stands before me now, saw how everybody ran after him and praised his valor, he was filled with envy and laid plans to kill him. Whether he caused armed men to waylay him on the road to Thebes, or whether as some say he sent him against a certain wild bull of your country to be slain by that beast, I know not, but you cannot deny that the young man’s life was taken from him through the plotting of your own Aegeus.”

“But we deny it! We deny this!” cried the elders. “For at that very time, our king was sojourning at Troezen on the other side of the sea, and he knew nothing of your young prince’s death. We ourselves managed the city’s affairs while he was abroad, and we know whereof we speak. Androgeos was slain, not through the king’s orders but by the king’s nephews, who hoped to rouse your anger against Aegeus so that you would drive him from Athens and leave the kingdom to one of them.”

“Will you swear that what you tell me is true?” said Minos.

“We will swear it,” they said.

“Now then,” said Minos, “you shall hear my decree. Athens has robbed me of my dearest treasure, a treasure that can never be restored to me, so, in return, I require from Athens, as tribute, that possession which is the dearest and most precious to her people – and it shall be destroyed cruelly as my son was destroyed.”

“The condition is hard,” said the elders, “but it is just. What is the tribute you require?”

“Has the king a son?” asked Minos.

The face of King Aegeus lost all its color and he trembled as he thought of his little child then left with its mother at far away Troezen. But the elders knew nothing about that child, and they answered, “Alas, no! He has no son, but he has fifty nephews who are eating up his substance and longing for the time to come when one of them shall be king, and, as we have said, it was they who slew the young prince, Androgeos.”

“I have naught to do with those fellows,” said Minos. “You may deal with them as you like. But you ask what is the tribute that I require, and I will tell you. Every year when the springtime comes and the roses begin to bloom, you shall choose seven of your noblest

youths and seven of your fairest maidens, and shall send them to me in a ship which your king shall provide. This is the tribute which you shall pay to me, and if you fail for a single time, or delay even a day, my soldiers shall tear down your walls and burn your city and put your men to the sword and sell your wives and children as slaves.”

“We agree to all this, O fearsome Minos,” said the elders; “for it is the least of two evils. But tell us now, what shall be the fate of the seven youths and the seven maidens?”

“In Crete,” answered Minos, “there is a house called the Labyrinth, the like of which you have never seen. In it there are a thousand chambers and winding ways, and whosoever goes even a little way into them can never find his way out again. Into this house the seven youths and the seven maidens shall be thrust, and they shall be left there.”

“To perish with hunger?” cried the elders.

“To be devoured by a monster whom men call the Minotaur,” said Minos.

Then King Aegeus and the elders covered their faces and wept and went slowly back into the city to tell their people of the sad and terrible conditions upon which Athens could alone be saved.

“It is better that a few should perish than that the whole city should be destroyed,” they said.

Years passed by. Every spring when the roses began to bloom, seven youths and seven maidens were put on board of a black-sailed ship and sent to Crete to pay the tribute which King Minos required. In every house in Athens, there was sorrow and dread, and the people lifted up their hands to Athena on the hilltop and cried out, “How long, O Queen of the Air, how long shall this thing continue?”

Meanwhile, the little child at Troezen had grown to be a man, and he was standing now at the gates of the city. When King Aegeus was told he had a visitor, he gladly met the strong young man whom, it was said by many, had cleared the road to Athens. Once glance at Theseus’ shining face, royal sword, and golden sandals, and Aegeus’ heart swelled with pride. His son had made his way home!

At that same time, the annual black-sailed ship was being rigged for another voyage of sacrifice to Crete. The rude Cretan soldiers paraded the streets, and the herald of King Minos stood at the gates and shouted, “Yet three days, O Athenians, and your tribute will be due and must be paid!”

Then in every street the doors of the houses were shut and no man went in or out, but everyone sat silent with pale cheeks, and wondered whose lot it would be to be chosen this year. But the young prince, Theseus, did not understand, for he had not been told about the tribute.

“What is the meaning of all this?” he cried. “What right has a Cretan to demand tribute in Athens? And what is this tribute of which he speaks?”

Then Aegeus led him aside and with tears told him of the sad war with King Minos, and of the dreadful terms of peace. “Now, say no more,” sobbed Aegeus, “it is better that a few should die than that all should be destroyed.”

“But I will say more,” cried Theseus. “Athens shall not pay tribute to Crete. I myself will go with these youths and maidens, and I will slay the monster Minotaur and defy King Minos himself upon his throne.”

“Oh, do not be so rash,” said the king, “for no one who is thrust into the den of the Minotaur ever comes out again. Remember that you are the hope of Athens, and do not take this great risk upon yourself.”

“Say you that I am the hope of Athens?” said Theseus. “Then how can I do otherwise than go?” And he began at once to make himself ready.

On the third day, all the youths and maidens of the city were brought together in the marketplace so that lots might be cast for those who were to be taken. Then two vessels of brass were brought and set before King Aegeus and the herald who had come from Crete. Into one vessel, they placed as many balls as there were noble youths in the city, and into the other as many as there were maidens; all the balls were white save only seven in each vessel, and those were black as ebony.

Then every maiden, without looking, reached her hand into one of the vessels and drew forth a ball, and those who took the black ones were borne away to the black ship, which lay in waiting by the shore. The young men also drew lots in this manner, but when six black balls had been drawn, Theseus came quickly forward and said, “Hold! Let no more lots be drawn. I will be the seventh youth to pay this tribute. Now let us go aboard the black ship and be off.”

Then the people, and King Aegeus himself, went down to the shore to take leave of the young men and maidens, whom they had no hope of seeing again, and all but Theseus wept and were brokenhearted.

“I will come again, father,” he said.

“I will hope that you may,” said the old king. “If when this ship returns, I see a white sail spread above the black one, then I shall know that you are alive and well, but if I see only this same black sail, it will tell me that you have perished.”

And now the vessel was loosed from its moorings, the north wind filled the sail, and the seven youths and seven maidens were borne away over the sea, towards the dreadful death which awaited them in far distant Crete.

At last, the black ship reached the end of its voyage. The young people were set ashore, and a party of soldiers led them through the streets towards the prison, where they were to stay until called. They did not weep nor cry out now, for they had outgrown their fears. But with paler faces and firm-set lips, they walked between the rows of Cretan houses, and looked neither to the right nor to the left. The windows and doors were full of people who were eager to see them.

“What a pity that such brave young men should be food for the Minotaur,” said some.

“Ah, that maidens so beautiful should meet a fate so sad!” said others.

And now they passed close by the palace gate, where stood King Minos himself and his daughter Ariadne, the fairest of the women of Crete.

“Indeed, those are noble young fellows!” said the king.

“Yes, too noble to feed the vile Minotaur,” muttered Ariadne.

“The nobler, the better,” said the king, “and yet none of them can compare with your lost brother Androgeos.”

Ariadne said no more; yet she thought that she had never seen anyone who looked so much like a hero as the tallest of the lot, young Theseus. How tall he was, and how handsome! How proud his eye, and how firm his step! Surely, there had never been his like in Crete.

All through that night, Ariadne lay awake and thought of the Athenian man, and grieved that he should be doomed to perish; suddenly, she began to lay plans for setting him free. At the earliest peep of day she arose and, while everybody else was asleep, she ran out of the palace and hurried to the prison. As she was the king’s daughter, the jailer opened the door at her bidding. There sat the seven youths and the seven maidens on the ground, but they had not lost hope. She took Theseus aside and whispered to him. She told him of a plan which she had made to save him; Theseus promised her that, when he had slain the Minotaur, he would carry her away with him to Athens where she should live with him always. Then she gave him a sharp sword, which he hid underneath his cloak, telling him that with it alone could he hope to slay the Minotaur.

“And here is a ball of silken thread,” she said. “As soon as you go into the Labyrinth where the monster is kept, fasten one end of the thread to the stone doorpost, and then unwind it as you go along. When you have slain the Minotaur, you have only to follow the thread and it will lead you back to the door. In the meanwhile, I will see that your ship is ready to sail, and then I will wait for you at the door of the Labyrinth.”

Theseus thanked the beautiful princess and promised her again that if he should live to go back to Athens she should go with him and be his wife. Then with a prayer to Athena, Ariadne hastened away.

### THE LABYRINTH

As soon as the sun was up, the guards came to lead the young prisoners to the Labyrinth. They did not see the sword which Theseus had under his cloak nor the tiny ball of silk which he held in his closed hand. They led the youths and maidens a long way into the Labyrinth. Then the guards left them, as they had left many others before, to wander about until they should be found by the terrible Minotaur.

“Stay close by me,” said Theseus to his companions, “and with the help of Athena who dwells in her temple home in our own fair city, I will save you.”

Then he drew his sword and stood in the narrow way before them, and they all lifted up their hands and prayed to Athena.

For hours they stood there, hearing no sound, and seeing nothing but the smooth, high walls on either side of the passage and the calm blue sky so high above them. Then the maidens sat down upon the ground and covered their faces and sobbed, “Oh, that he would come and put an end to our misery and our lives.”

At last, late in the day, they heard a bellowing, low and faint as though far away. They listened and soon heard it again, a little louder and very fierce and dreadful.

“It is he! It is he!” cried Theseus. “And now for the fight!”

Then he shouted, so loudly that the walls of the Labyrinth answered back, and the sound was carried upward to the sky and outward to the rocks and cliffs of the mountains. The Minotaur heard him, and his bellowings grew louder and fiercer every moment.

“He is coming!” cried Theseus, and he ran forward to meet the beast. The seven maidens shrieked, but tried to stand up bravely and face their fate; the six young men stood together with firm-set teeth and clinched fists, ready to fight to the last.

Soon the Minotaur came into view, rushing down the passage towards Theseus, and roaring most terribly. He was twice as tall as a man, and his head was like that of a bull with huge sharp horns and fiery eyes and a mouth as large as a lion’s, but the young men could not see the lower part of his body for the cloud of dust which he raised in running. When he saw Theseus with the sword in his hand coming to meet him, he paused, for no one had ever faced him in that way before. Then the monster put his head down, and rushed forward, bellowing. But Theseus leaped quickly aside, and made a sharp thrust with his sword as he passed, and hewed off one of the monster’s legs above the knee.

The Minotaur fell upon the ground, roaring and groaning and beating wildly about with his horned head and his hoof-like fists, but Theseus nimbly ran up to him and thrust the sword into his heart, and was away again before the beast could harm him. A great stream of blood gushed from the wound, and soon the Minotaur was dead.

Then the youths and maidens ran to Theseus and kissed his hands and feet, and thanked him for his great deed. As it was already growing dark, Theseus bade them follow him while he wound up the silken thread which was to lead them out of the Labyrinth. Through a thousand rooms and courts and winding ways they went, and at midnight they came to the outer door and saw the city lying in the moonlight before them. Only a little way off was the seashore where the black ship was moored which had brought them to Crete. The door was wide open, and beside it stood Ariadne waiting for them.

“The wind is fair, the sea is smooth, and the sailors are ready,” she whispered, taking the arm of Theseus. When the morning dawned, they were far out to sea, and, looking back from the deck of the little vessel, only a speck of the Cretan mountains were in sight.

Minos, when he arose from sleep, did not know that the youths and maidens had gotten safely out of the Labyrinth. But when Ariadne could not be found, he thought that robbers had carried her away. He sent soldiers out to search for her among the hills and mountains, never dreaming that she was now well on the way toward distant Athens. Many days passed, and at last the searchers returned and said that the princess could not be found. The king covered his head and wept, and said, “Now, indeed, I am bereft of all my treasures!”

Back in Athens, Aegeus had sat day after day on a rock by the shore, looking and watching in hope he might see a ship coming from the south. At last the vessel with Theseus and his companions was spotted, but it still carried only the black sail, for in their joy the young men had forgotten to raise the white one.

“Alas, alas! My son has perished!” moaned Aegeus, who fainted and fell forward into the sea and was drowned. That sea, from then until now, has been called by his name, the Aegean Sea.

Theseus grieved the loss of the father he barely knew, but he was comforted by his new love and new friends. The people of Athens declared their choice – the boarish nephews were ousted from the palace and Theseus, the people’s hero, would be their new king.

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