

Theseus



Young Theseus had a secret. He lived with his mother in a little hut on a wild, sea-battered part of the coast called Troezen. For all his poor house and worn-out clothes, he was very proud, for he had a secret. He knew that he was the son of a king. His mother had told him the story one night when their day's catch of fish had been very bad and they were hungry.

"A king, truly," she said. "And one day you will know his name."

"But mother, then why are you not a queen and I a prince? Why don't we live in a palace instead of a hovel?"

"Politics, my son," she said sadly. "All politics...You're too young to understand, but your father has a cousin, a very powerful lord with fifty sons. They are waiting for your father to die so they can divide the kingdom. If they knew he had a son of his own to inherit it, they would kill the son immediately."

"When can I go to him? When can I go there and help my father?"

"When you're grown. When you know how to fight your enemies."

This was Theseus' secret...and he needed a secret to keep him warm in those long, cold, hard years. One of his worst troubles was his size. His being small for his age bothered him terribly, for how could he become a great fighter and help his father against terrible enemies if he couldn't even hold his own against the village boys? He exercised constantly by running up and down the cliffs, swimming in the roughest seas, lifting logs and rocks, bending young trees; and indeed he grew much stronger, but he was still very dissatisfied with himself.

One day, when he had been beaten in a fight with a larger boy, he felt so gloomy that he went down to the beach and lay on the sand watching the waves, hoping that a big one would come along and cover him.

"I will not live this way!" he cried to the wind. "I will not be small and weak and poor. I will be a king, a warrior...or I will not be at all."

And then it seemed that the sound of the waves turned to a deep-voiced lullaby, and Theseus fell asleep-not quite asleep, perhaps, because he was watching a great white gull smashing clams open by dropping them on the rocks below. Then the bird swooped down and stood near Theseus' head looking at him, and spoke, "I can crack clams open because they are heavy. Can I do this with shrimps or scallops? No...they are too light. Do you know the answer to my riddle?"

"Is it a riddle?"

"A very important one. The answer is this: do not fear your enemy's size, but use it against him. Then his strength will become yours. When you have tried this secret, come back, and I will tell you a better one."

Theseus sat up, rubbing his eyes. Was it a dream? Had the gull been there, speaking to him? Could it be? What did it all mean?

Theseus thought and thought; then he leaped to his feet and raced down the beach, up the cliff to the village where he found the boy who had just beaten him, and slapped him across the face. When the boy, who was almost as big as a man, lunged toward him swinging his big fist, Theseus caught the fist and pulled in the same direction. The boy, swung off balance by his own power, went spinning off his feet and landed head-first.

"Get up," said Theseus. "I want to try that again."

The big fellow lumbered to his feet and rushed at Theseus, who stopped suddenly. The boy went hurtling over him and landed in the road again. This time he lay still.

"Well," said Theseus, "that was a smart gull."

One by one, Theseus challenged the largest boys of the village; and, by being swift and sure and using their own strength against them, he defeated them all.

Then, he returned to the beach and lay on the sand, watching the waves, and listening as the crashing became a lullaby. Once again his eyes closed, then opened. The great white seagull was pacing the sand near him.

"Thank you," said Theseus.

"Don't thank me," said the gull. "Thank your father. I am but his messenger."

"My father, the king?"

"King, indeed. But not the king your mother thinks."

"What do you mean?"

"Listen now...Your father rules no paltry stretch of earth. His domain is as vast

as all the seas, and all that is beneath them, and all that the seas claim. He is the Earth shaker, Poseidon.”

“Poseidon ... my father?”

“You are his son.”

“Then why does my mother not know? How can this be?”

“You must understand, boy, that the gods sometimes fall in love with beautiful maidens of the earth, but they cannot appear to the maidens in their own forms. The gods are too large, too bright, too terrifying, so they must disguise themselves. Now, when Poseidon fell in love with your mother, she had just been secretly married to Aegeus, king of Athens. Poseidon disguised himself as her new husband, and you, you are his son. One of many, very many; but he seems to have taken a special fancy to you and plans great and terrible things for you... if you have the courage.”

“I have the courage,” said Theseus. “Let me know his will.”

“Tomorrow,” said the seagull, “you will receive an unexpected gift. Then you must bid farewell to your mother and go to Athens to visit Aegeus. Do not go by sea. Take the dangerous overland route, and your adventures will begin.”

The waves made a great, crashing music. The wind crooned. A blackness crossed the boy’s mind. When he opened his eyes the gull was gone, and the sun was dipping into the sea.

“Undoubtedly a dream,” he said to himself. “But the last dream worked. Perhaps this one will too.”

The next morning there was a great excitement in the village. A huge stone had appeared in the middle of the road. In this stone was stuck a sword half-way up to its hilt, and a messenger had come from the oracle¹ at Delphi saying that whoever pulled the sword from the stone was a king’s son and must go to his father.

When Theseus heard this, he embraced his mother and said, “Farewell.”

“Where are you going, my son?”

“To Athens. This is the time we have been waiting for. I shall take the sword from the stone and be on my way.”

“But, son, it is sunk so deeply. Do you think you can? Look...look...the strongest men cannot budge it. There is the smith trying...And there the Captain of the Guard...And look...look at that giant herdsman trying. See how he pulls and grunts. Oh, son, I fear the time is not yet.”

“Pardon me,” said Theseus, moving through the crowd. “Let me through, please. I should like a turn.”

When the villagers heard this, heard the short, fragile-looking youth say these words, they exploded in laughter.

“Delighted to amuse you,” said Theseus. “Now, watch this.”

Theseus grasped the sword by the hilt and drew it from the stone as easily as

though he were drawing it from a scabbard. He bowed to the crowd and stuck the sword in his belt. The villagers were too stunned to say anything. They moved apart as he approached, making room for him to pass. He smiled, embraced his mother again, and set out on the long road to Athens.

The Road

The overland road from Troezen to Athens was the most dangerous in the world. It was infested not only by bandits but also giants, ogres, and sorcerers who lay in wait for travelers and killed them for their money, or their weapons, or just for sport. Those who had to make the trip usually went by boat, preferring the risk of shipwreck and pirates to the terrible mountain brigands. If the trip overland had to be made, travelers banded together, went heavily armed, and kept watch as though on a military march.

Theseus knew all this, but he did not give it a second thought. He was too happy to be on his way...leaving his poky little village and his ordinary life. He was off to the great world and adventure. He welcomed the dangers that lay in wait. “The more, the better,” he thought. “Where there’s danger, there’s glory. Why, I shall be disappointed if I am not attacked.”

He was not to be disappointed. He had not gone far when he met a huge man in a bearskin carrying an enormous brass club. This was Corynetes, the cudgeler, terror of travelers. He reached out a hairy hand, seized Theseus by the throat, and lifted his club, which glittered in the hot sunlight.

“Pardon me,” said Theseus. “What are you planning to do?”

“Bash in your head.”

“Why?”

“That’s what I do.”

“A beautiful club you have there, sir,” said Theseus. “So bright and shiny. You know, it’s a positive honor to have my head bashed in with a weapon like this.”

“Pure brass,” growled the bandit.

“Mmm...but is it really brass? It might be gilded wood, you know. A brass club would be too heavy to lift.”

“Not too heavy for me,” said the bandit, “and it’s pure brass. Look...”

He held out his club, which Theseus accepted, smiling. Swinging it in a mighty arc, he cracked the bandit’s head as if it were an egg.

“Nice balance to this,” said Theseus. “I think I’ll keep it.” He shouldered the club and walked off.

The road ran along the edge of the cliff above the burning blue sea. He turned a bend in the road and saw a man sitting on a rock. The man held a great battle-ax in his hand; he was so large that the ax seemed more like a hatchet.

“Stop!” said the man.

“Good day,” said Theseus.

“Now listen, stranger, everyone who passes this way washes my feet. That’s the toll. Any questions?”

“One. Suppose I don’t?”

“Then I’ll simply cut off your head,” said the man, “unless you think that little twig you’re carrying will stop this ax.”

“I was just asking,” said Theseus. “I’ll be glad to wash your feet, sir. Personal hygiene is very important, especially on the road.”

“What?”

“I said I’ll do it.”

Theseus knelt at the man’s feet and undid his sandals, thinking hard.

He knew who this man was; he had heard tales of him. This was Sciron, who was notorious for keeping a pet turtle that was as large for a turtle as Sciron was for a man and was trained to eat human flesh. This giant turtle swam about at the foot of the cliff, waiting for Sciron to kick his victims over. Theseus glanced swiftly down the cliff side. Sure enough, he saw the great, blunt head of the turtle lifted out of the water, waiting.

Theseus took Sciron’s huge foot in his hand, holding it by the ankle. As he did so, the giant launched a mighty kick. Theseus was ready. When the giant kicked, Theseus pulled, dodging swiftly out of the way as the enormous body hurtled over him, over and down, splashing the water cliff-high as it hit. Theseus saw the turtle swim toward the splash. He arose, dusted off his knees, and proceeded on his journey. The road dipped now, running past a grove of pines.

“Stop!”

He stopped. There was another huge brute of a man facing him. First, Theseus thought that Sciron had climbed back up the cliff somehow, but then he realized that this must be Sciron’s brother, of whom he had also heard. This fellow was called Pityocampes, which means “pine-bender.” He was big enough and strong enough to press pine trees to the ground. It was his habit to bend a tree just as a passerby approached and ask the newcomer to hold it for a moment. The traveler, afraid not to oblige, would grasp the top of the tree. Then Pityocampes, with a great, jeering laugh, would release his hold. The pine tree would spring mightily to its full height, flinging the victim high in the air, so high that the life was dashed out of him when he hit the ground. Then the bandit would search his pockets, chuckling all the while; he was a great joker. Now he said to Theseus, “Wait, friend, I want you to do me a favor.”

He reached for a pine tree and bent it slowly to earth like an enormous bow. “Just hold this for a moment like a good fellow, will you?”

“Certainly,” said Theseus.

Theseus grasped the tree, set his feet, clenched his teeth, let his mind go dark and all his strength flow downward, through his legs, into the earth, anchoring

him to the earth like a rock.

Pityocampes let go, expecting to see Theseus fly into the air. Nothing happened. The pine stayed bent. The lad was holding it, legs rigid, arms trembling. The giant could not believe his eyes. He thought he must have broken the pine while bending it. He leaned his head closer to see. Then Theseus let go. The tree snapped up, catching the giant under the chin, knocking him unconscious. Theseus bent the tree again, swiftly bound the giant’s wrists to it. He pulled down another pine and tied Pityocampes’ legs to that...and then let both pines go. They sprang apart. Half of Pityocampes hung from one tree, half from the other. Vultures screamed with joy and fed on both parts impartially. Theseus wiped the pine tar from his hands and continued on his way.

By now it was nightfall, and he was very weary. He came to an inn where light was coming from the window, smoke from the chimney. But it was not a cozy sight; the front yard was littered with skulls and other bones.

“They don’t do much to attract guests,” thought Theseus. “Well...I’m tired. It has been a gruesome day. I’d just as soon go to bed now without any more fighting. On the other hand, if an adventure comes my way, I must not avoid it. Let’s see what this bone-collector looks like.”

He strode to the door and pounded on it, crying, “Landlord! Landlord, ho!”

The door flew open. In it was framed a greasy-looking giant, resembling Sciron and the pine-bender, but older, filthier, with long, tangled gray hair and a blood-stained gray beard. He had great, meaty hands, like grappling hooks.

“Do you have a bed for the night?” said Theseus.

“A bed? That I have. Come with me.”

He led Theseus to a room where a bed stood—an enormous ugly piece of furniture, hung with leather straps and chains and shackles.

“What are all those bolts and bindings for?” said Theseus.

“To keep you in bed until you’ve had your proper rest.”

“Why should I wish to leave the bed?”

“Everyone else seems to. You see, this is a special bed, exactly six feet long from head to foot. And I am a very neat, orderly person. I like things to fit. Now, if the guest is too short for the bed, we attach those chains to his ankles and stretch him. Simple.”

“And if he’s too long?” said Theseus.

“Oh, well then we just lop off his legs to the proper length.”

“I see.”

“But don’t worry about that part of it. You look like a stretch job to me. Go ahead, lie down.”

“And if I do, then you will attach chains to my ankles and stretch me – if I understand you correctly.”

“You understand me fine. Lie down.”

“But all this stretching sounds uncomfortable.”

“You came here. Nobody invited you. Now you’ve got to take the bad with the good.”

“Yes, of course,” said Theseus. “I suppose if I decided not to take advantage of your hospitality...I suppose you’d make me lie down, wouldn’t you?”

“Oh sure. No problem.”

“How? Show me.”

The inn-keeper, whose name was Procrustes, reached out a great hand, put it on Theseus’ chest, and pushed him toward the bed. Theseus took his wrist, and, as the big man pushed, he pulled...in the swift, shoulder-turning downward snap he had taught himself. Procrustes flew over his shoulder and landed on the bed. Theseus bolted him fast, took up an ax, and chopped off his legs as they dangled over the footboards. Then, because he did not wish the fellow to suffer, chopped off his head, too.

“As you have done by travelers, so are you done by,” said Theseus. “You have made your bed, old man. Now lie on it.”

He put down the ax, picked up his club, and resumed his journey, deciding to sleep in the open because he found the inn unpleasant.

Athens

Athens was not yet a great city in those days, but it was far more splendid than any Theseus had seen. He found it quite beautiful, with arbors and terraces and marble temples. After the adventures of the road, however, he found it strangely dull. He suffered, too, from humiliation; for, although he was the king’s son, his father was in a very weak position, so he could not be a real prince. It was his father’s powerful cousin, the tall, black browed Pallas, with his fifty fierce sons, who actually ran things. Their estate was much larger and finer than the castle, their private army stronger than the Royal Guard, and Theseus could not bear it.

“Why was I given the sign?” he stormed. “Why did I pull the sword from the stone and come here to Athens? To skulk in the castle like a runaway slave? What difference does it make, Father, how many there are? After we fight them, there will be many less. Let’s fight! Right now!”

“No,” said Aegeus, “we cannot. Not yet. It would not be a battle; it would be suicide. They must not know you are here. I am sorry now I had you come all the way to Athens. It is too dangerous. I should have kept you in a senic little village somewhere, outside of town, where we could have seen each other every day, but where you would not be in such danger.”

“Well, if I am no use here, let me go to Crete!” cried Theseus. “If I can’t fight our enemies at home, let me try my hand abroad.”

“Crete! Oh, my dear boy, no, no...” and the old man fell to lamenting, for it

was in these days that Athens, defeated in a war with Crete, was forced by King Minos to pay a terrible tribute. He demanded that each year the Athenians send him seven of their most beautiful maidens, seven of their strongest young men. These were taken to the Labyrinth and offered to the monster who lived there—the dread Minotaur, half man and half bull-son of Pasiphae and the bull she had fallen in love with. Year after year they were taken from their parents, these seven maidens and seven youths, and were never heard of again. Now the day of tribute was approaching again.

Theseus offered to go himself as one of the seven young men and take his chances with the monster. He kept hammering at his father, kept producing so many arguments, was so electric with impatience and rage, that finally his father consented, and the name Theseus was entered among those who were to be selected for tribute. The night before he left, he embraced Aegeus and said, “Be of good heart, dear sire. I traveled a road that was supposed to be fatal before and came out alive. I met quite a few unpleasant characters on my journey and had a few anxious moments, but I learned from them that the best weapon you can give an enemy is your own fear. So...who can tell? I may emerge victorious from the Labyrinth and lead my companions home safely. Then I will be known to the people of Athens and will be able to rouse them against your tyrant cousins and make you a real king.”

“May the gods protect you, son,” said Aegeus. “I shall sacrifice to Zeus and to Ares, and to our own Athena, every day, and pray for your safety.”

“Don’t forget Poseidon,” said Theseus.

“Oh, yes, Poseidon too,” said Aegeus. “Now do this for me, son. Each day I shall climb the Hill of the Temple, and from there watch over the sea...watching for your ship to return. It will depart wearing black sails, as all the sad ships of tribute do; but if you should overcome the Minotaur, please, I pray you, raise a white sail. This will tell me that you are alive and save a day’s vigil.”

“That I will do,” said Theseus. “Watch for the white sail...”

Crete

All Athens was at the pier to see the black sailed ship depart. The parents of the victims were weeping and tearing their clothing. The maidens and the young men, chosen for their beauty and courage, stood on the deck trying to look proud; but the sound of lamentation reached them, and they wept to see their parents weep. Then Theseus felt the cords of his throat tighten with rage. He stamped his foot on the deck and shouted, “Up anchor, and away!” as though he were the captain of the vessel. The startled crew obeyed, and the ship moved out of the harbor.

Theseus immediately called the others to him. “Listen to me,” he said. “You

are not to look upon yourselves as victims, or victims you will surely be. The time of tribute has ended. You are to regard this voyage not as a submission but as a military expedition. Everything will change, but first you must change your own way of looking at things. Place your faith in my hands; place yourselves under my command. Will you?"

"We will!" they shouted.

"Good. Now I want every man to instruct every girl in the use of the sword and the battle-ax. We may have to cut our way to freedom. I shall also train you to respond to my signals-whistles, hand-movements-for if we work as a team, we may be able to defeat the Minotaur and confound our enemies."

They agreed eagerly. They were too young to live without hope, and Theseus' words filled them with courage. Every day he drilled them, man and maiden alike, as though they were a company of soldiers. He taught them to wrestle in the way he had invented. And this wild young activity, this sparring and fencing, so excited the crew, that they were eager to place themselves under the young man's command.

"Yes," he said. "I will take your pledges. You are Athenians. Right now that means you are poor, defeated, living in fear. But one day 'Athenian' will be the proudest name in the world, a word to make warriors quake in their armor, kings shiver upon their thrones!"

Now Minos of Crete was the most powerful king in all the world. His capital, Knossos, was the gayest, richest, proudest city in the world; and the day, each year, when the victims of the Minotaur arrived from Athens, was always a huge feast-day. People mobbed the streets-warriors with shaven heads and gorgeous feathered cloaks, women in jewels and topless dresses, children, farmers, great swaggering bull herders, lithe bullfighters, dwarfs, peacocks, elephants, and slaves, slaves, slaves from every country known to man. The streets were so jammed no one could walk freely, but the King's Guard kept a lane open from quayside to Palace. And here, each year, the fourteen victims were marched so that the whole city could see them-marched past the crowds to the Palace to be presented to the king to have their beauty approved before giving them to the Minotaur.

On this day of arrival, the excited harbormaster came puffing to the castle, fell on his knees before the throne, and gasped, "Pity, great king, pity..."

And then in a voice strangled with fright, the harbormaster told the king that one of the intended victims, a young man named Theseus, demanded a private audience with Minos before he would allow the Athenians to disembark.

"My warships!" thundered Minos. "The harbor is full of triremes." "Let the ship be seized, and this Theseus and his friends dragged here through the streets."

"It cannot be, your majesty. Their vessel stands over the narrow neck of the harbor. And he swears to scuttle it right there, blocking the harbor, if any of our

ships approach."

"Awkward...very awkward," murmured Minos. "Quite resourceful for an Athenian, this young man. Worth taking a look at. Let him be brought to me."

Thereupon Theseus was informed that the king agreed to see him privately. He was led to the Palace, looking about eagerly as he was ushered down the lane past the enormous crowd. He had never seen a city like this. It made Athens look like a little fishing village. He was excited and he walked proudly, head high, eyes flashing. When he came to the Palace, he was introduced to the king's daughters, two lovely young princesses, Ariadne and Phaedra.

"I regret that my queen is not here to greet you," said Minos. "But she has become attached to her summer house in the Labyrinth and spends most of her time there."

The princesses were silent, but they never took their eyes off Theseus. He could not decide which one he preferred. Ariadne he supposed-the other was really still a little girl. But she had a curious cat-faced look about her that intrigued him. However, he could not give much thought to this; his business was with the king.

Finally, Minos signaled the girls to leave the room, and motioned Theseus toward his throne. "You wanted to see me alone," he said. "Here I am. Speak."

"I have a request, your majesty. As the son of my father, Aegeus, King of Athens, and his representative in this court, I ask you formally to stop demanding your yearly tribute."

"Oh, heavens," said Minos. "I thought you would have something original to say. And you come with this threadbare old petition. I have heard it a thousand times and refused it a thousand times."

"I know nothing of what has been done before," said Theseus. "But only of what I must do. You laid this tribute upon Athens to punish the city, to show the world that you were the master. But it serves only to degrade you and show the world that you are a fool."

"Feeding you to the Minotaur is much too pleasant a finale for such an insolent rascal," said Minos. "I shall think of a much more interesting way for you to die-perhaps several ways."

"Let me explain what I mean," said Theseus. "Strange as it seems, I do not hate you. I admire you. You're the most powerful king in the world, and I admire power. In fact, I intend to imitate your career. So what I say, I say in all friendliness, and it is this: when you take our young men and women and shut them in the Labyrinth to be devoured by the Minotaur, you are making the whole world forget Minos, the great general Minos, the wise king. What you are forcing upon their attention is Minos, the betrayed husband, the man whose wife disliked him so much she eloped with a bull. And this image of you is what people remember. Drop the tribute, I say, and you will once again live in man's

mind as warrior, law-giver, and king.”

“You are an agile debater,” said Minos, “as well as a very reckless young man, saying these things to me. But there is a flaw in your argument. If I were to drop the tribute, my subjects would construe this as an act of weakness. They would be encouraged to launch conspiracies against me. Other countries under my sway would be encouraged to rebel. It cannot be done.”

“I can show you a graceful way to let the tribute lapse. One that will not be seen as a sign of weakness. Just tell me how to kill the monster.”

“Kill the monster, eh? And return to Athens a hero? And wipe out your enemies there? And then subdue the other cities of Greece until you become leader of a great alliance? And then come visit me again with a huge fleet and an enormous army, and topple old Minos from his throne?”

“The future does not concern me,” said Theseus. “I take one thing at a time. And the thing that interests me now is killing the Minotaur.”

“Oh, forget the Minotaur,” said Minos. “How do you know there is one? How do you know it’s not some maniac there who ties sticks to his head? Whatever it is, let him rot there in the Labyrinth with his mad mother. I have a better plan for you. My sons are dead. My daughter Ariadne, I notice, looks upon you with favor. Marry her, and become my heir. One day you will rule Crete and Athens both...and all the cities of the sea.”

“Thank you, sir. I appreciate your offer. But I came here to fight a monster.”

“You are mad.”

“Perhaps. But this is the only way I know how to be. When I am your age, when the years have thinned my blood, when rage has cooled into judgment, then I will go in for treaties, compromises. Now, I must fight.”

“Why is the young fool so confident?” thought Minos to himself. “He acts like a man who knows he is protected by the gods. Can it be true what they say? Is he really the son of Poseidon? Do I have that kind of enemy on my hands? If so, I will make doubly sure to get rid of him.”

Then he said aloud, “You are wrong to refuse my offer. I suppose you are made so wildly rash by some old wives’ gossip in your little village that you are the son of this god or that. Those mountain villages of yours, they’re ridiculous. Every time a child does something out of the way, all the crones and hags get together and whisper, ‘He’s the son of a god, really the son of a god.’ Is that the way of it? Tell the truth now.”

“My truth,” said Theseus, “is that I am the son of Poseidon.”

“Poseidon, eh? No less. Well, how would you like to prove it?”

“Why should I care to prove it? I know. That’s enough for me. The whole world has heard that you are the son of Zeus, who courted your mother, Europa, in the guise of a white bull. Everyone has heard this tale; few disbelieve it. But can you prove it?”

“Come with me,” said Minos.

He led him out of the Palace, beyond the wall, to a cliff overlooking the sea. He stood tall, raised his arms, and said, “Father Zeus, make me a sign.”

Lightning flashed so furiously that the night became brighter than day, and the sky spoke in thunder. Then Minos dropped his arms; the light stopped pulsing in the sky, and the thunder was still.

“Well,” said Minos. “Have I proved my parentage?”

“It’s an impressive display. I suppose it proves something.”

“Then show me you are the son of Poseidon.”

Minos took the crown from his head and threw it over the cliff into the sea. They heard the tiny splash far below.

“If you are his son, the sea holds no terror for you. Get me my crown,” said Minos. Without a moment’s hesitation, Theseus stepped to the edge of the cliff and leaped off. As he fell, he murmured, “Father, help me now.”

Down he plunged, struck the black water and went under, shearing his way through until he felt his lungs bursting. But he did not kick toward the surface. He let out the air in his chest in a long tortured gasp, and then, breathed in. No strangling rush of water, but a great lung-full of sweet, cool air...and he felt himself breathing as naturally as a fish. He swam down, down, and as he swam, his eyes became accustomed to the color of the night sea; he moved in a deep green light. And the first thing he saw was the crown gleaming on the bottom. He swam down and picked it up.

Theseus stood on the ocean bottom holding the crown in his hand and said, “All thanks, Father Poseidon.”

He waited there for the god to answer him, but all he saw were dark gliding shapes, creatures of the sea passing like shadows. He swam slowly to the surface, climbed the cliff, and walked to where Minos was waiting.

“Your crown, sir.”

“Thank you.”

“Are you convinced now that Poseidon is my father?”

“I am convinced that the water is more shallow here than I thought. Convinced that you are lucky.”

“Luck? Is that not another word for divine favor?”

“Perhaps. At any rate, I am also convinced that you are a dangerous young man. So dangerous that I am forced to strip you of certain advantages allowed those who face the Minotaur. You will carry neither sword nor ax, but only your bare hands...And your luck, of course. I think we will not meet again. So farewell.” He whistled sharply. His Royal Guard appeared, surrounded Theseus, and marched him off to a stone tower at the edge of the Labyrinth. There they locked him up for the night.

An hour before dawn, Ariadne appeared in his cell and said, “I love you,

Theseus. I will save you from death if you promise to take me back to Athens with you.”

“And how do you propose to save me, lovely princess?”

“Do you know what the Labyrinth is? It is a hedge of a thousand lanes, all leading in, and only one leading out. And this one is so concealed, has so many twists and turns and secret windings that no one can possibly find his way out. Only I can travel the Labyrinth freely. I will lead you in and hide you. I will also lead you around the central chamber where the Minotaur is and lead you out again. You will not even see the monster. Since no one has ever found his way out of the maze, Minos will assume that you have killed the Minotaur, and you will have a chance to get to your ship and escape before the trick is discovered. But you must take me with you.”

“It cannot be,” said Theseus.

“Don’t you believe me? It’s all true. Look...”

She took from her tunic a ball of yellow silk thread and dropped it on the floor. The ball swiftly rolled across the room, unwinding itself as it went. It rolled across the bench, wrapped itself around one of Theseus’ ankles, rolled up the wall, across the ceiling and down again. Then Ariadne tugged sharply on her end of the thread, and the ball reversed itself, rolling back the way it had come, reeling in its thread as it rolled. Back to Ariadne it rolled and leaped into her hand.

“This was made for me by old Daedalus,” said Ariadne. “It was he who built the Labyrinth, you know. And my father shut him up in it, too. I used to go visit him there. He made me this magic hall of thread so that I would always be able to find my way to him, and find my way back. He was very fond of me.”

“I’m getting very fond of you too,” said Theseus.

“Do you agree?” cried Ariadne. “Will you let me guide you in the Labyrinth and teach you how to avoid the monster, and fool my father? Say you will. Please...”

“I’ll let you guide me through the maze,” said Theseus. “Right to where the monster dwells. You can stay there and watch the fight. And when it’s over, you can lead me back.”

“No, you’ll be dead! It’s impossible to fight the Minotaur.”

“It is impossible for me not to.”

“You won’t even be armed.”

“I have always traveled light, princess, and taken my weapons from the enemy. I see no reason to change my habits now. Are you the kind of girl who seeks to change a man’s habits? If you are, I don’t think I will take you back to Athens.”

“Oh, please, do not deny me your love,” she said. “I will do as you say.”

The next morning when the Royal Guard led Theseus out of the tower and forced him into the outer lane of the Labyrinth, Ariadne was around the first bend, waiting. She tied one end of the thread to a branch of the hedge, then dropped the ball to the ground. It rolled slowly, unwinding; they followed, hand in hand.

It was pleasant, walking in the Labyrinth. The hedge grew tall above their heads and was heavy with little white, sweet-smelling flowers. The lane turned and twisted and turned again, but the ball of thread ran ahead, and they followed it. Theseus heard a howling.

“Sounds like the wind,” he said.

“No, it is not the wind. It is my mad mother, howling.”

They walked farther. They heard a rumbling, crashing sound.

“What’s that?”

“That is my brother. He’s hungry.”

They continued to follow the ball of thread. Now the hedges grew so tall the branches met above their heads, and it was dark. Ariadne looked up at him, sadly. He bent his head and brushed her lips in a kiss.

“Please don’t go to him,” she said. “Let me lead you out now. He will kill you. He has the strength of a bull and the cunning of a man.”

“Who knows?” said Theseus. “Perhaps he has the weakness of a man and the stupidity of a bull.” He put his hand over her mouth. “Anyway, let me think so because I must fight him, you see, and I’d rather not frighten myself beforehand.”

The horrid roaring grew louder and louder. The ball of thread ran ahead, ran out of the lane, into an open space. And here, in a kind of meadow surrounded by the tall hedges of the Labyrinth, stood the Minotaur.

Theseus could not believe his eyes. The thing was more fearsome than in his worst dreams. What he had expected was a bull’s head on a man’s body. What he saw was something about ten feet tall shaped like a man, like an incredibly huge and brutally muscular man, but covered with a short, dense brown fur. It had a man’s face, but a squashed, bestialized one, with poisonous red eyes, great blunt teeth, and thin leathery lips. Sprouting out of its head were two long, heavy, polished horns. Its feet were hooves, razor sharp; its hands were shaped like a man’s hands, but much larger and hard as horn. When it clenched them, they were great fists of bone.

It stood pawing the grass with a hoof, peering at Theseus with its little red eyes. There was a bloody slaver on its lips.

Now, for the first time in all his battles, Theseus became unsure of himself. He was confused by the appearance of the monster. It filled him with a kind of horror that was beyond fear, as if he were wrestling a giant spider. So when the monster lowered its head and charged, thrusting those great bone lances at him, Theseus could not move out of the way.

There was only one thing to do. Drawing himself up on tiptoe, making himself as narrow as possible, he leaped into the air and seized the monster’s horns. Swinging himself between the horns, he somersaulted onto the Minotaur’s head, where he crouched, gripping the horns with desperate strength. The monster

bellowed with rage and shook its head violently. But Theseus held on. He thought his teeth would shake out of his head; he felt his eyeballs rattling in their sockets. But he held on.

Now, if it can be done without one's being gored, somersaulting between the horns is an excellent tactic when fighting a real bull. But the Minotaur was not a real bull; it had hands. So when Theseus refused to be shaken off but stood on the head between the horns, trying to dig his heels into the beast's eyes, the Minotaur stopped shaking his head, closed his great fist and struck a vicious backward blow, smashing his fist down on his head, trying to squash Theseus like a beetle.

This is what Theseus was waiting for. As soon as the fist swung toward him, he jumped off the Minotaur's head, and the fist smashed between the horns, full on the skull. The Minotaur's knees bent; he staggered and fell over. He had stunned himself. Theseus knew he had only a few seconds before the beast would recover his strength. He rushed to the monster, took a horn in both hands, put his foot against the ugly face, and putting all his strength in a sudden tug, broke the horn off at the base. He leaped away. Now he, too, was armed, and with a weapon taken from the enemy.

The pain of the breaking horn goaded the Minotaur out of his momentary swoon. He scrambled to his feet, uttered a great, choked bellow, and charged toward Theseus, trying to hook him with his single horn. Bone cracked against bone as Theseus parried with his horn. It was like a duel now, the beast thrusting with his horn, Theseus parrying, thrusting in return. Since the Minotaur was much stronger, it forced Theseus back-back until it had Theseus pinned against the hedge. As soon as he felt the first touch of the hedge, Theseus disengaged, ducked past the Minotaur, and raced to the center of the meadow, where he stood, poised, arm drawn back. For the long, pointed horn made as good a javelin as it did a sword, and so could be used at a safer distance.

The Minotaur whirled and charged again. Theseus waited until he was ten paces away, and then whipped his arm forward, hurling the javelin with all his strength. It entered the bull's neck and came out the other side. But so powerful was the Minotaur's rush, so stubborn his bestial strength, that he trampled on with the sharp horn through his neck and ran right over Theseus, knocking him violently to the ground. Then it whirled to try to stab Theseus with its horn, but the blood was spouting fast now, and the monster staggered and fell on the ground beside Theseus.

Ariadne ran to the fallen youth. She turned him over, raised him in her arms; he was breathing. She kissed him. He opened his eyes, looked around, and saw the dead Minotaur; then he looked back at her and smiled. He climbed to his feet, leaning heavily on Ariadne.

"Tell your thread to wind itself up again, Princess. We're off to Athens."

When Theseus came out of the Labyrinth, there was an enormous crowd of

Cretans gathered. They had heard the sound of fighting, and, as the custom was, had gathered to learn of the death of the hostages. When they saw the young man covered with dirt and blood, carrying a broken horn, with Ariadne clinging to his arm, they raised a great shout.

Minos was there, standing with his arms folded. Phaedra was at his side. Theseus bowed to him and said, "Your majesty, I have the honor to report that I have rid your kingdom of a foul monster."

"Prince Theseus," said Minos. "According to the terms of the agreement, I must release you and your fellow hostages."

"Your daughter helped me, king. I have promised to take her with me. Have you any objection?"

"I fancy it is too late for objections. The women of our family haven't had much luck in these matters. Try not to be too beastly to her."

"Father," said Phaedra, "she will be lonesome there in far-off Athens. May I go with her and keep her company?"

"You, too?" said Minos. He turned to Theseus. "Truly, young man, whether or not Poseidon has been working for you, Aphrodite surely has."

"I will take good care of your daughters, king," said Theseus. "Farewell."

And so, attended by the Royal Guard, Theseus, his thirteen happy companions, and the two Cretan princesses, walked through the mobbed streets from the Palace to the harbor. There they boarded their ship.

It was a joyous ship that sailed northward from Crete to Athens. There was feasting and dancing night and day. And every young man aboard felt himself a hero too, and every maiden a princess. And Theseus was lord of them all, drunk with strength and joy. He was so happy he forgot his promise to his father—forgot to tell the crew to take down the black sail and raise a white one.

King Aegeus, keeping a lonely watch on the Hill of the Temple, saw first a tiny speck on the horizon. He watched it for a long time and saw it grow big and then bigger. He could not tell whether the sail was white or black; but as it came nearer, his heart grew heavy. The sail seemed to be dark. The ship came nearer, and he saw that it wore a black sail. He knew that his son was dead.

"I have killed him," he cried. "In my weakness, I sent him off to be killed. I am unfit to be king, unfit to live."

And the king leaped from the hill, dived through the steep air into the sea far below, and was drowned. He gave that lovely blue, fatal stretch of water its name for all time – the Aegean Sea.

Theseus, upon his return to Athens, was hailed as king. The people worshipped him. He swiftly raised an army, wiped out his powerful cousins, and then led the Athenians forth into many battles, binding all the cities of Greece together in an alliance. Then, one day he returned to Crete to reclaim the crown of Minos that once he had recovered from the sea.