

Theseus and the Minotaur

retold by Olivia Coolidge

At Athens the long reign of King Aegeus was coming to an inglorious end. The whole land was split by quarrels between Aegeus' cousins, who considered themselves his heirs, while the old king himself was completely under the sway of the witch, Medea, to whom he had given protection when Corinth drove her out. Even the common people were tired of Aegeus, for he had been defeated in war by Minos of Crete, and the land was forced to pay a dreadful tribute every nine years. Theseus preferred to make no claim on the aged king. He came as a mighty hero who happened to be traveling through Athens and asked the king to receive him as a guest, thinking that his likeness to Aethra would cause the old man to recognize his son.

Aegeus agreed to receive the hero, since he could hardly refuse the request of such a famous man, but Medea, the enchantress, who had learned who Theseus was, had already whispered to him that the young man was a

traitor who came to seize his throne. The feeble old king, confused by her dark spells and made suspicious by the constant intrigues around him, believed her. Medea smiled to herself, for she knew that if Theseus were recognized by his father, her reign in Athens would be at an end.

A great crowd of people poured out to meet Theseus at the gates of the city and escorted him with shouts and cheering to the palace of the king. More and more came hurrying from house and dock and workshop, wriggling their way into the crowd to catch sight of him, or standing on tiptoe on the outskirts to get a glimpse of the hero's head as it towered above the rest. Even the palace servants ran out at last, and the old king pressed his thin lips together as he saw them go, while his scanty grey beard quivered with his indignation.

"He is indeed a traitor," he said to Medea. "He steals my very servants from before my eyes."

WORDS
TO
KNOW

indignation (in'dīg-nā'shən) *n.* anger that is a reaction to injustice or meanness

Medea smiled at him. “I will deal with him,” she said. “Let us go out on the steps to welcome him. We will greet him with honor and bid him come in. When he enters the hall, do you sit him down and call for meat and wine. I myself will pour his wine for him; he shall drink from my golden cup. There are poisons I have brought from Colchis that the witch-goddess helped me brew. Let him take but one sip that I shall pour for him, and he will never claim your throne.”

The old king nodded feebly, for he was half crazed by her spells. “Do not fail with the poison,” he quavered, “and now help me to the door.”

They stood on the steps to greet the hero, the slender, dark-eyed sorceress, and the tottering old man leaning on her arm. Theseus turned from the witch in anger, but he looked his father in the face. The old man had forgotten Aethra; he did not know her son. He bade Theseus welcome formally and invited him within, but he gave no sign of recognition, and the hero followed him wondering.

The traveler was bathed and dressed for feasting. Tables were set up within the hall. Meat was brought in by the servants. Wine and water were mixed in huge bowls. Each guest was brought a wine cup of red earthenware on which a skillful artist had painted some deed of a hero of whom the minstrels sang. Medea would not let Theseus drink from his. “You are our guest of honor,” she said. “You shall drink from gold, and a king’s daughter shall serve you.” With that she fetched him wine in a curious golden cup such as the great artists of Crete had made.

Theseus took the cup and turned to his father, for he had a mind to drink his health in it. The old king was looking at him in a fixed silence, while his fingers drummed nervously

on the table. There was something so unpleasant about his stare that Theseus was startled, and the first hint of treachery came into his mind. He determined to test his father. Therefore he kept his left hand on the winecup, but with his right instead of a knife he drew out his father’s sword and made as though he would cut himself a portion of the meat with it. Seeing that sword, the king reached out startled, snatched the winecup from Theseus’ hand, and dashed it to the floor. Then he jumped up and flung his arms about the young man, calling him son. For her part, Medea, seeing her treachery was discovered and knowing that her reign was over, vanished from Athens and was seen no more.

Aegeus proudly acknowledged his son and named him as his heir, but the king’s cousins, who were not pleased at this, stirred up the common people against King Aegeus. It happened to be the time when the tribute to Minos became due. Seven youths and seven maidens were chosen by lot from among the people to go to Crete as a sacrifice to the dreadful monster, the Cretan Minotaur. What happened to them when they got there no one knew, for no one who once went in had ever come out of the famous labyrinth that Daedalus had made for the beast to dwell in. Men could hear the distant bellowing of the monster in his lair, and it was supposed he ate up his victims, though some said they became priests in his temple. At any rate, because their children were chosen by lot for a dreadful fate, the people were furiously indignant. So too was Theseus when he heard the tale.

“Why has no one dared to slay this Minotaur?” he asked King Aegeus. “This is no way to pay tribute. Let me go to Crete and put an end to it.”

“No, my son,” said King Aegeus terrified.

WORDS
TO
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treachery (trĕch’ə-rĕ) *n.* willful betrayal of trust or confidence
indignant (ĭn-dĭg’nənt) *adj.* filled with indignation

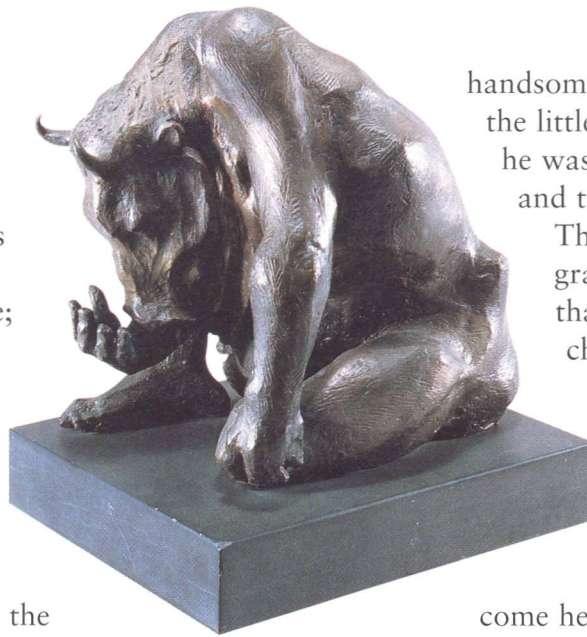
“No one can slay the Minotaur, for the young men are not allowed to take any weapons as they go into the labyrinth. Besides, the victims are chosen from the people, and you are not of the people; you are the king’s son.”

“All the more reason I should go,” said Theseus. “I shall not wait to be chosen. I shall volunteer.”

The king implored him with tears in his eyes, but Theseus was determined, and the people idolized him more than ever when they heard what he was to do. The ship made ready for the chosen victims was small and quite unarmed, as the terms of the treaty bade. She had a black sail of mourning, that all might know that she bore the tribute to King Minos and must be allowed to pass. This time Theseus bade them put in a white sail as well. “When we return,” he said, “we shall come with open rejoicing as a free people should.”

The ship put off from the bay and the weeping people watched it go. King Aegeus sat on the headland looking after it, and there, he told his son, he should watch daily until the ship came home. But the chosen youths and maidens, encouraged by the cheerfulness of Theseus, sang songs to cheer their journey across the sea. When they came to great wharves of the town of Cnossos, they put on a bold face. Even the powerful ships of Minos did not dismay them, or the sight of his huge stone palace, or the crowds of townsfolk who came down to watch the tribute come to land.

Many a man felt pity as he saw the



Minotaur Waking (1972), Michael Ayrton (1921–1975). Bronze. Southampton City Art Gallery, Hampshire, UK/Bridgeman Art Library, London/New York.

handsome youth at the head of the little group and heard that he was the king’s only son and that he was a volunteer. There was talk of granting him a weapon that he might have a fair chance against the Minotaur, but King Minos would not hear it. The challenge of Theseus only made him angry.

“How dare you come here in defiance?” he said to the young man. “Tomorrow we will throw you to the monster and we shall see what your boast is worth.”

“I dare because the tribute is unjust,” replied Theseus firmly. “Armed or unarmed I will fight your hideous bullman. If I prevail, I warn you, O Minos, that we Athenians are a free people and the tribute shall cease. If I die, I die; but the tribute is still unjust.”

Some murmured admiration at his boldness, but King Minos stood up from his throne in wrath. “Take his sword,” he ordered his guards, “and lock the victims in the dungeons overnight. Tomorrow we will give you to the Minotaur, and after that the tribute will go on. The black-sailed ship shall return to Aegeus to tell him that he has no son. The Athenians need to remember that the sea is mine, and, distant as they are, they must live in dread of my power.”

The guards closed in on the Athenians and took them down to cold, dark dungeons. People watched them pityingly, for they knew Theseus had no chance, yet they admired the

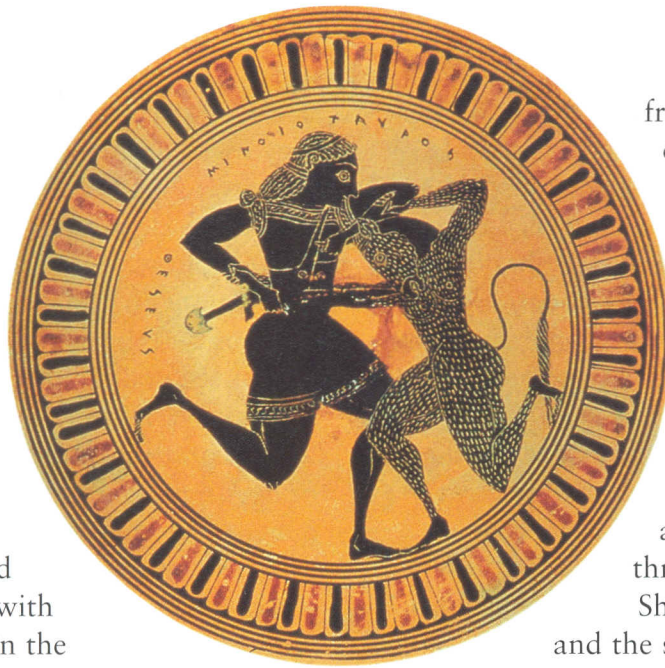
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KNOW **implore** (ĩm-plŏr') v. to beg

handsome young man who spoke so boldly before them all. None pitied him so much, however, as the soft-hearted king's daughter, white-footed Ariadne. She had heard Theseus speak in the hall as she stood beside her father, her bright hair about her shoulders and a great crown flashing with jewels upon her head. In the dead of the night she left her chamber and stole on silent feet down the long, stone corridors toward the dungeons, quietly drew the great bolt, and went in.

She stood in the moonlight which fell through a high, little window, and Theseus thought she was some goddess at first, for her white feet were bare on the stone, there was gleaming gold on her scarlet garment, and the bright crown was still on her head. She bade Theseus rise and come with her, making no sound. "I will give you a sword," she whispered softly, "with which you may fight the Minotaur fairly and slay him if you can."

She took his hand to guide him in the long, dark passages, and together they stole down many corridors, past many a darkened door. At last they reached a little room from which ran a passage dimly lighted. From here they heard echoing faintly a low, hoarse bellowing sound.

"Here is the Labyrinth," said Ariadne. "Far off in the center lies the Minotaur. Bend down your ear to listen while I whisper to you the secret clue Daedalus gave my father that he might find the center of the Labyrinth. To return is not so easy. Many doors lead out



Greek kylix (lip cup), ca. 550 B.C.
Inscribed with the potter's name: Tleson.
Collection of the Toledo (Ohio) Museum
of Art; purchased with funds from
the Libbey Endowment.
Gift of Edward Drummond Libbey.

from the center; yet only one will bring you here. Take this sword in your right hand and this ball of thread in your left. We will tie the end of it to a pillar and you may unwind it as you go. Then it will be easy to return as you gather the thread."

She gave him the thread and the sword, and watched him out of sight. For a while she heard his footsteps moving round and round within. At times they stopped as though he stood puzzling before the

maze of passages, but then they went on again, and presently they died away. She stood there for a long time looking at the shining thread across the floor and hearing the distant roaring which arose from the monster's lair. She heard when he reached the center, because the roar grew suddenly louder and went on and on. Then there fell a dead silence, and for a long while nothing happened. If Theseus were dead or wounded, she might wait till morning and he would never come. It seemed hours that she had been standing, and the stone floor was very cold.

At last she thought she heard footsteps. Someone twitched the line. The sounds came louder and clearer, till Theseus emerged from the passage with the sword red in his hand. She fell upon him eagerly.

"Why were you so long?" she whispered. "It must be nearly dawn."

"It is a dreadful monster," he said in answer. He was still shaken by the sight of the horrible creature whom few living men had seen.

“Quickly, then!” she whispered. “We have not much time.” Hand in hand they stole down the long corridors again, roused the group from their dungeon, and sped down to the little ship which was moored beside the wharf. There were urgent explanations in whispers, and then sailors scrambled over one another to hoist the sail. Very quietly they cast her off, and shipped oars as soon as they dared. Then they fled for their lives as the sky grew pale with the first light before dawn.

All day long they raced away in panic fearing pursuit from the great ships of the Cretan fleet. They had put up the black sail in the dark that morning, but when some spoke of it and bade them hoist the white one, the sailors refused to take the time. Frantically they rowed till they were exhausted, landing at last worn out on the island of Naxos, where they lay down to sleep. In the morning there was a false alarm of a sail on the horizon, and tumbling into their ship, they fled again. In vain Theseus called to them that Ariadne had

been left sleeping on the beach. Even though they owed her their lives, they did not care. They were mad to reach Athens and safety.

Ariadne slept without waking till the ship was far out to sea, and then she wandered for a long time up and down, calling vainly for Theseus and the men who had forsaken her. At last the god, Dionysus, found her as he came to Naxos with his train and persuaded her to come up to the heavens and be his bride. To proclaim to all people that she had done so, he took her crown and set it in the heavens, where each jewel became a star, and where it can still be seen.

Theseus’ terrified crew still raced toward Athens with no thought in their heads but speed. At last they came within sight of the headland on which King Aegeus sat, looking out over the blue ocean day after day for tidings of his son. Now when he saw the black-sailed ship, he was in despair, for he remembered the white sail they had taken with them and the words of Theseus that he would



Ariadne at Naxos (1877), Evelyn de Morgan (1855–1919). The De Morgan Foundation, London/Bridgeman Art Library, London/New York.

come back in freedom and rejoicing. The poor old man thought he had nothing to live for and, even while the joyful Theseus looked eagerly at the land, Aegeus threw himself over the cliff to perish in the sea.

Thus Theseus came to his throne with mourning instead of rejoicing. Thereafter he reigned long and his rule was a famous one. The Athenians told many stories of his justice, his kindness to the common people, and of the ways in which he made Athens great. Traditions speak of Theseus offering protection to people who had suffered injustice in other lands. Some even declare that he gave up the title of king, preferring to give power to the people.

There are also tales of his achievements in war; how he fought with the Amazons¹ and won their queen to wife; how he battled with the centaurs;² how he even went down to Hades in an unsuccessful attempt to carry off Persephone. There he was caught and imprisoned, and other people came to power in Athens. When he was finally rescued by Heracles, he never regained his power, but was driven out and died on the island of

Scyros. Yet in spite of this the Athenians always spoke of him as a great king and patriot. When the mighty king of Persia tried to invade Athens in the year 490 B.C. and was defeated by its little army at the battle of Marathon, one of the famous battles of all times, then the rumor went around and the legend lingered that on that day of crisis the great Theseus, risen from the dead, had appeared to lead the battle.

Later still there was found on the island of Scyros a mighty skeleton, taller than most men and buried with bronze-headed spear and sword. Taking these for the bones of Theseus, the Athenians brought them home and buried them. From that day the tomb of Theseus was a place of refuge for poor men and slaves and all who had suffered wrong. While they were there, no man could harm them. In this way the Athenians honored the memory of the just hero who was kind to the oppressed. ❖

1. **Amazon:** a member of a mythical tribe of women warriors.
2. **centaur:** mythical creature with the upper body of a man and the lower body of a horse.



Olivia Coolidge
born 1908

"A young-adult biography is designed for people who want to read straight through it, picking up all the background that they need along the way."

History and the Classics Olivia Coolidge grew up in England and learned to share her family's love of history and the classics. After attending

Oxford University, Coolidge came to the United States and taught English and classical languages. She put her wide interests to good use by becoming a successful reteller of Greek and Latin tales and myths.

Fact or Fiction? Coolidge has also written biographies for young people—including accounts of Gandhi and Abraham Lincoln.