



THESEUS AND THE MINOTAUR



THERE USED TO BE A GREAT MANY KINGS IN THE WORLD, BECAUSE EVERY city and island called itself a kingdom. But one king and one island struck fear into all the rest. King Minos of Crete so terrified his neighbours that they paid him tributes every year to be left in peace. It was King Minos who built a palace with a cellar-like maze. It was King Minos who kept a monster called the Minotaur in this famous Labyrinth and fed it on human flesh.

"Why do we send tributes to Crete every year?" Prince Theseus asked his father, the King of Athens.

"To keep King Minos from sinking our ships or making war on us," said King Aegeus (though he did not like to talk about it).

"And what do we send?"

"Seven men and seven women," said the king.

"As slaves?"

"Not as slaves," said the king reluctantly. "To feed the Minotaur."

"How revolting! Never again!" Theseus vowed. "This year I'll go as one of the fourteen, and kill this Minotaur!"

Nothing the king could say would change his mind. As the tribute-ship set sail, the old

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man called from the dockside, "Good luck, Son! I shall keep watch on the cliff top every day. If you succeed, raise a new white sail. If you fail, raise this black one."

"I shall succeed!" called Theseus.

King Minos laughed to see the prisoners arrive from Athens. "Who'll be first into the Minotaur's den?" he asked.

"I shall," said Theseus, stepping forward. "I, Prince Theseus of Athens, claim that honour!"

"You boasting young puppy," snarled Minos. "My Minotaur will make short work of you. Guards! Put the prince into the Labyrinth!"

Behind the throne, the king's plain little daughter, Ariadne, sat listening. She was ashamed of her father's cruelty, and hated to see how he fed the horrible beast in the basement. She was still more unhappy when she saw brave and handsome Theseus dragged away to feed the monster.

Down went Theseus, into the dark, but he paused, not knowing which way to go. The guards marched away.

"Prince Theseus!" It was Ariadne. "Here. Take this." She dropped down to him a ball of string.



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"Even if you can kill the Minotaur, you won't ever find your way back to the entrance unless you use this."

"Excellent!" exclaimed Theseus. "I could marry a girl as clever as you!"

Then he tied one end to the entrance and set off, unwinding the string as he went, forgetting everything but the Minotaur.

But Ariadne did not forget.

Theseus felt his way in the dark. It was true: without the string he would soon have been hopelessly lost in the maze of winding corridors. Suddenly, his fingers brushed warm, wiry hair, then the bony curve of a horn. The Minotaur bellowed in his ear and flung him through the darkness. It stamped on him with sharp hoofs. The string was knocked out of his hand. They fought in utter darkness. The monster, half-man, half-bull, crushed him between hairy arms and lashed him with its tail. But Theseus took hold of the horns and



twisted them first one way, then the other. He kicked and butted and struggled, and at last the beast gave a gurgling gasp and fell dead.

Filled with panic, the prince scabbled around for the ball of string. There! No, that was the Minotaur's ear. There! Yes! Now he had only to wind it in and so retrace his steps.

At the door of the Labyrinth, Ariadne stood waiting.

"You're alive! You escaped!" she cried, and she took him by the hand and hurried him away.

They freed the other thirteen prisoners, then ran to the harbour. "You must take me with you, or my father will kill me too!" said the princess.

"Of course! Come aboard!" said Theseus, raising the old black sail with two pulls of his strong arms. The sail filled, and they were at sea before anyone knew they had escaped.

Theseus sat on deck in the sunshine and thought about what he had done. He was proud. His father would be proud, too. "I must change this sail for a white one," he was thinking.

Just then, Ariadne came and sat at his feet, gazing up at him. "How wonderful!" she sighed. "To be free of my wicked father and to be married to a brave prince!"

"Married?" said Theseus, turning rather pale. He suddenly realised that just because Ariadne had saved his life, she expected to marry him! He studied her face. That nose was very big. And those eyebrows were very thick. "Mmmm," he said. "How wonderful."

On the way home, the ship put in at an island for supplies. Theseus sent Ariadne ashore to buy wine and bread. While she was gone, he set sail and hurried away, breathing a sigh of relief.

"When I marry," he thought, "it will be to a beautiful queen or a goddess." He was in such a hurry to get away that he quite forgot to change the black sail for a white one.

King Aegeus, watching day after day from the cliff below Athens, saw the ship as it

hove into view. He saw the black sail full of wind. And in that moment, he believed his son Theseus had been killed and eaten by the Minotaur. He threw himself off the high white cliff into the water below.

And ever afterwards the sea was called the Aegean Sea, after the father of that ungrateful hero, Theseus.

