

The Hero's Test

ALISOUN WITTING

Theseus had not been in Athens more than six months, learning the duties of a king from his father Aegeus, when his courage was tested. One bright spring morning, when all the world seemed new and alive, the people of Athens appeared strangely sad and gloomy, and the sound of women weeping came from many of the houses. Theseus was puzzled: what was the cause of this public sorrow? He asked his father; Aegeus hesitated, seemed embarrassed, and finally made some lame excuse about a festival of the dead. "If I cannot get the truth from my own father," he thought indignantly, "I will find it out from the common people." So he stopped the first citizen who passed him in the street, saying "Sir, tell me why my father's people mourn and appear sorrowful, in this season of joy and new birth."

The man stared at him.

"Why, have you not heard of the tribute¹ to King Minos?" he exclaimed. "He is the ruler of the Island of Crete, and he is the most powerful sea-king in the world. From every Greek city he demands a yearly tribute of seven boys and seven girls—and now the Cretan² ship has anchored in the harbor, and will sail with our children tomorrow."

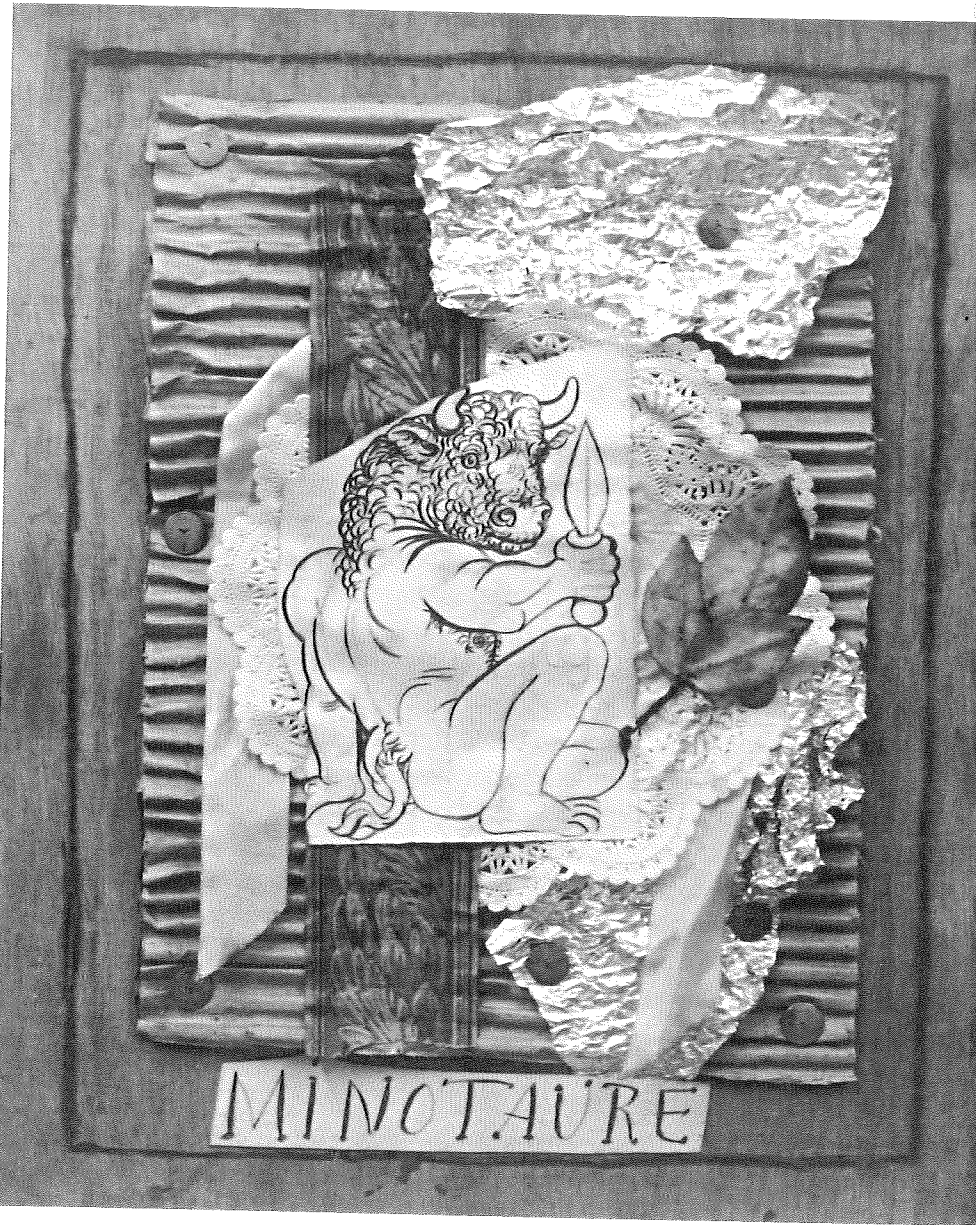
Theseus stood silent with amazement.

"And what happens to the fourteen boys and girls?" he managed to ask at last.

"It is too terrible to say," the man said, shuddering. "If you were not

1 **tribute:** expected payment

2 **Cretan:** from the island of Crete off the coast of Greece



Collage for the cover of the book *Minotaure*.
1933
Pablo Picasso

the king's own son, you might be chosen yourself—you are just the right age for the Minotaur.”

“Who is the Minotaur?” demanded Theseus sharply, growing more and more angry at the story he was hearing.

The man trembled. “He is a dreadful beast, half bull and half man, who lives on human flesh. King Minos keeps him underground in a labyrinth³ of twisting passages, where he is fed yearly on our Greek sons and daughters.” He covered his face with his hands. “Oh Prince Theseus, do not ask me any more. My own children are still too young; but in a few years I too must place their names in the lot, and perhaps see one or more of them sent to Crete for sacrifice.” And he wept with grief and horror at the thought.

Theseus nearly exploded with rage. “How can my father allow this to happen!” he cried in fury. “Has he no pride?—I can well see why he was ashamed to tell me this disgraceful thing!”

“Theseus, you are young, but you should not speak foolishly,” the man said sternly. “Your father is not at fault; even Zeus, father of gods and men, allows this outrage to continue. Minos is powerful enough to destroy Athens in a day if we refuse him his tribute. We are no happier about it than you are, but there is nothing else we can do.”

“There is!” declared Theseus passionately. “I will kill the Minotaur myself, and free Athens from this disgraceful tribute to Minos.”

Full of his resolution he strode to the marketplace, where the young boys and girls of Athens were already gathered to be chosen by lot.

“Father,” he said to Aegeus, “you were wrong not to tell me of this. A king must be responsible for his people; he must give his life for them, if necessary. You have no right to spare me because I am your son.”

And turning to the marketplace he cried out in a ringing voice: “People of Athens, I myself volunteer to be one of the tribute to Crete. But I am not going to die unresisting, nor will I allow the Minotaur to slaughter your children unless he first kills me.”

But the Athenians, far from being happy at this declaration, only protested that their handsome young prince should not rashly throw his life away in Crete, and leave them without a future ruler. Old Aegeus begged him to reconsider, to wait at least until he was full grown and might declare war on Minos. But Theseus had made up his mind, and his pride would not allow him to back down now, nor did he wish to.

³ labyrinth: a maze

“You are leaving me alone in my old age,” cried Aegeus in grief and despair. “You foolishly desert your people when they most need a young king! Do not go to Crete, Theseus; for my sake, if not for your own, stay in Athens.”

No use; he could not move Theseus. The next morning Aegeus, like thirteen other Athenian fathers, kissed his son in farewell, fully expecting never to see him again. But at the last minute he made Theseus promise one thing: if he should live, to return home under a white sail; if he died, to send the ship back with black sails.

The palace of Minos was huge. It covered acres of ground, a jumble of shining roofs and towers, walls and gates. Underneath his magnificent structure, deeper than the deepest basement, at the very foundation of the palace itself, lived the Minotaur. The labyrinth had a thousand twisting passages, a thousand rooms, and just as many dead ends. Through this maze roamed the frightful beast, whose body was shaped like a man's, and whose horned head was that of a bull. From time to time he gave a tremendous bellow, and his roaring shook the palace and the very ground beneath the city of Cnossus.⁴ His victims were led into the labyrinth and left to their fate. They never succeeded in finding their way back to the entrance of the maze, for there were just too many confusing tunnels and passages; and so, one by one, the Minotaur found and ate them. Sometimes they lived for days before they were discovered, sometimes only a few hours. Imagine the terror of a boy or girl left to wander in this awful place, expecting at every turn and every opening to meet the savage Minotaur!

But Theseus was not easily frightened. Arriving at Cnossus, he and his companions were presented to King Minos for approval before they were sacrificed. The young hero stood out among his companions like an oak among pine trees, and he appeared so noble that Minos' daughter, the beautiful princess Ariadne, fell deeply in love with him. That night in her pretty room, decorated with painted dolphins and graceful sea-creatures, she wept for hours to think of Theseus' terrible fate. At length she sat up, dried her eyes, wrapped herself in a dark cloak, and slipped out of her room. She ran softly through the long corridors of the palace, past the drowsy sentries,⁵ until she reached the cell where the Athenians were imprisoned.

⁴ Cnossus: ancient center of the Minoan civilization on Crete's north central coastline

⁵ sentries: guards

The boys and girls slept soundly, for their wine had been drugged that night to make sure they were rested and alert when they were sent into the labyrinth. (The Minotaur preferred a little sport before his meals.) But Theseus had eaten little, and had quietly poured his wine between the stones of the prison floor, for he suspected the Cretan trick, and had good reasons to stay awake. He was planning his strategy for the next day, and wondering how, unarmed, he would be able to kill the Minotaur. Stones would be his only weapon, he thought, or perhaps a bone from the Minotaur's former feasts. Theseus shivered in spite of himself. Then he saw Ariadne. She stood pressed behind a pillar, so close to the bars that when he stood beside them he could almost touch her.

"Theseus," she whispered, "listen closely. Tomorrow at the entrance to the labyrinth you will find an axe and a ball of string. With the axe you will have a chance to kill the Minotaur; with the string you may find your way back out of the maze." Theseus opened his mouth to thank her but the sentry nearby moved and coughed, and they both pressed into the shadows and held their breath. When the guard was quiet again Ariadne said quickly, "Goodby. If you live, remember me—I love you, Theseus." And she was gone, as swiftly and silently as she had come. As for Theseus, he lay down and slept soundly for the rest of that night.

Early the next morning the fourteen Athenians were awakened and dressed in white robes for their sacrifice. Then they were led, by the light of torches, down great flights of stone stairs, deep into the heart of the earth to the entrance of the labyrinth. Presently they stood trembling before a huge bronze door, which the guard unlocked with a great key. He shoved them in hastily—for he himself was afraid of an unexpected appearance of the Minotaur—thrust a torch into a bracket on the wall, and slammed the mighty door behind them. They heard the key turn smoothly in the lock and his footsteps retreating up the stone steps, and then they were quite alone in the gloomy cavern, with the torchlight dancing in weird shadows on the rough stone walls. Theseus alone did not give way to tears and panic. He looked closely about the doorway and sure enough, there was a large ball of stout string, and a sharp, double-edged axe. He strapped the axe about his waist, took the torch in his left hand, and gave the end of the string to one of his companions. "Now be quiet," he warned the bewildered boys and girls. "Don't move from this spot, but pray to the gods that it is I, and not the Minotaur, who will be guided back by this string." And he set out to meet the bull-monster, unrolling Ariadne's string as he went.

The labyrinth twisted like the coils of a snake, or like the coils of many snakes hopelessly tangled together. Theseus walked along circular passages, up flights of steps, down holes. He ducked under little doorways, found himself suddenly in huge rooms, scrambled down tiny tunnels, and bumped into countless dead-end turns. But he carefully unrolled his string, kept hold of his sputtering torch, and prayed under his breath that he would meet the Minotaur in an open space where he could fight freely, and not in one of the damp, narrow passages. Often the air trembled from the deep growls and bellows of the Minotaur, and Theseus followed the sound, his heart pounding as each roar grew louder and nearer.

Then suddenly he stepped round a corner into a large hall. The ceiling was high and a row of small windows at the top of the walls cast a dim, ghostly light. The floor was covered with bones, and in the center of this horrible place stood the shaggy, bull-headed Minotaur himself. Theseus dropped his torch and the ball of string and snatched the axe from his belt, and not a moment too soon, either, for the Minotaur took just one look at him, let out a tremendous howl of rage and charged. Then a long battle began. The Minotaur was a huge, powerful beast, but the wits of his bull head were not very sharp, and his fighting tactics were limited to a fast charge, horns lowered. After five or six murderous charges which Theseus easily sidestepped, the Minotaur became confused and furious. He stood stamping and snorting and glared at his quick-footed enemy with bloodshot eyes. He tried to force Theseus into a corner, meaning to pin him to the wall. But Theseus was far too quick to be trapped, and half the time the monster could not even see where he had gone. Soon the Minotaur began to tire; Theseus danced around him, drawing him on, dodging, and tormenting him until the beast was foaming at the mouth and rushing half-blindly about. Now Theseus began to use his axe. As the Minotaur rushed by Theseus would swing and graze his hairy shoulder, or an arm, or his powerful back. The Minotaur's roars grew even louder and more savage at these wounds.

But Theseus was getting tired, too. He had been hopping about so long and so energetically that his legs were trembling with fatigue and his breath was coming in gasps. So when the Minotaur turned suddenly after a blind charge and rushed straight at him, Theseus had to jump so quickly that he stumbled backwards and nearly fell. Now the Minotaur was in close and Theseus was swinging the double-edged axe to defend his very life. Raising the axe over his head, he brought it down with all his force on the huge bull's forehead and split the Minotaur's skull between the horns. The

axe-blow and the Minotaur's head were both so hard that the shock numbed Theseus' arms, and he fell exhausted against the wall as the monster spun around and toppled to the floor with a heavy thud. Theseus took the axe and chopped the Minotaur's head from his body. Then, finding Ariadne's string, he took one last look at the gruesome room and the dead Minotaur, and started back through the labyrinth.

He had to find his way in the dark this time, for his torch had gone out when he dropped it, and the way seemed very long. But the string guided him, and finally he could feel the pull of a human hand at the other end and hear the voices of his companions. The first person he saw was Ariadne, who cried out with joy and ran to embrace him. "We must leave here at once," she said fearfully. "It has been foretold that Cnossus will fall and the power of Minos be destroyed at the death of the Minotaur. Come quickly, Theseus, before my father's soldiers discover what you have done." She led them through the back ways of the palace and down a rocky footpath to the beach, where the Greek ship with its black sails was waiting, its sailors anxious to push off into the water.

When they were safely beyond the reach of Cretan ships, and the island itself was fading on the horizon, the Athenians were free to rejoice at their escape and to praise Theseus and Ariadne for their courage and love. They were, indeed, very much in love and overjoyed to be safe together, despite Theseus' weariness and Ariadne's sorrow at leaving her homeland. "I will make you my queen when we reach Athens," Theseus promised her.

The prophecy of the destruction of Cnossus was fulfilled that same day, for no sooner had the Greek ship dipped over the horizon than a mighty earthquake shook the island of Crete and tumbled the walls and towers of Minos' palace into heaps of rubble. King Minos himself was killed, most of his warships were sunk in the tidal wave that followed the earthquake, and the remains of the palace were burned by overturned oil lamps and torches. So the sea-power of Crete was destroyed with the destruction of the Minotaur, and not just Athens but all the Greek cities were freed from the yearly tribute. ∞

Birdfoot's Grampa

JOSEPH BRUCHAC

The old man
must have stopped our car
two dozen times to climb out
and gather into his hands
the small toads blinded
by our light and leaping,
live drops of rain.

The rain was falling,
a mist about his white hair
and I kept saying
you can't save them all,
accept it, get back in
we've got places to go.

But, leathery hands full
of wet brown life,
knee deep in the summer
roadside grass,
he just smiled and said
they have places to go, too.

