

How Theseus Lifted the Stone

Charles Kingsley

Greek

Advanced
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Once upon a time there was a princess in Trœzene, Aithra, the daughter of Pittheus the king. She had one fair son, named Theseus, the bravest lad in all the land; and Aithra never smiled but when she looked at him, for her husband had forgotten her, and lived far away. And she used to go up to the mountain above Trœzene, to the temple of Poseidon and sit there all day looking out across the bay, over Methana, to the purple peaks of Ægina and the Attic shore beyond. And when Theseus was full fifteen years old she took him up with her to the temple, and into the thickets of the grove which grew in the temple-yard. And she led him to a tall plane-tree, beneath whose shade grew arbutus, and lentisk, and purple heather-bushes. And there she sighed, and said, "Theseus, my son, go into that thicket, and you will find at the plane-tree foot a great flat stone; lift it, and bring me what lies underneath."

Then Theseus pushed his way in through the thick bushes, and saw that they had not been moved for many a year. And searching among their roots he found a great flat stone, all overgrown with ivy, and acanthus, and moss. He tried to lift it, but he could not. And he tried till the sweat ran down his brow from heat, and the tears from his eyes for shame: but all was of no avail. And at last he came back to his mother, and said, "I have found the stone, but I cannot lift it; nor do I think that any man could in all Trœzene."

Then she sighed, and said, "The Gods wait long; but they are just at last. Let it be for another year. The day may

come when you will be a stronger man than lives in all Trœzene.”

Then she took him by the hand, and went into the temple and prayed, and came down again with Theseus to her home.

And when a full year was past she led Theseus up again to the temple, and bade him lift the stone: but he could not.

Then she sighed, and said the same words again, and went down, and came again the next year; but Theseus could not lift the stone then, nor the year after; and he longed to ask his mother the meaning of that stone, and what might lie underneath it; but her face was so sad that he had not the heart to ask.

So he said to himself, “The day shall surely come when I will lift that stone, though no man in Trœzene can.” And in order to grow strong he spent all his days in wrestling, and boxing, and hurling, and taming horses, and hunting the boar and the bull, and coursing goats and deer among the rocks; till upon all the mountains there was no hunter so swift as Theseus; and he killed Phaia, the wild sow of Crommuon, which wasted all the land; till all the people said, “Surely the Gods are with the lad.”

And when his eighteenth year was past, Aithra led him up again to the temple, and said, “Theseus, lift the stone this day, or never know who you are.” And Theseus went into the thicket, and stood over the stone, and tugged at it; and it moved. Then his spirit swelled within him, and he said, “If I break my heart in my body, it shall up.” And he tugged at it once more, and lifted it, and rolled it over with a shout.

And when he looked beneath it, on the ground lay a sword of bronze, with a hilt of glittering gold, and by it a pair of golden sandals; and he caught them up, and burst through the bushes like a wild boar, and leapt to his mother, holding them high above his head.

But when she saw them she wept long in silence, hiding her fair face in her shawl; and Theseus stood by her wondering, and wept also, he knew not why. And when she was tired of weeping, she lifted up her head, and laid her finger on her lips, and said, “Hide them in your bosom, Theseus my son, and come with me where we can look down upon the sea.”

Then they went outside the sacred wall, and looked down over the bright blue sea; and Aithra said,—

“Do you see this land at our feet?”

And he said, “Yes; this is Trœzene, where I was born and bred.”

And she said, “It is but a little land, barren and rocky, and looks towards the bleak northeast. Do you see that land beyond?”

“Yes, that is Attica, where the Athenian people dwell.”

“That is a fair land and large, Theseus my son; and it looks toward the sunny south; a land of olive-oil and honey, the joy of Gods and men. For the Gods have girdled it with mountains, whose veins are of pure silver, and their bones of marble white as snow; and there the hills are sweet with thyme and basil, and the meadows with violet and asphodel, and the nightingales sing all day in the thickets, by the side of ever-flowing streams. There are twelve towns well peopled, the homes of an ancient race, the children of Kekrops the serpent king, the son of Mother Earth, who wear gold cicalas among the tresses of their golden hair; for like the cicalas they sprang from the earth, and like the cicalas they sing all day, rejoicing in the genial sun. What would you do, son Theseus, if you were king of such a land?”

Then Theseus stood astonished, as he looked across the broad bright sea, and saw the fair Attic shore, from Sunium to Hymettus and Pentelicus, and all the mountain peaks which girdle Athens round. But Athens itself he could not see, for purple Ægina stood before it, midway across the sea.

Then his heart grew great within him, and he said, “If I were king of such a land, I would rule it wisely and well in wisdom and in might, that when I died all men might weep over my tomb, and cry, ‘Alas for the shepherd of his people!’ ”

And Aithra smiled, and said, “Take, then, the sword and the sandals, and go to Ægeus king of Athens, who lives on Pallas’s hill; and say to him, ‘The stone is lifted, but whose is the pledge beneath it?’ Then show him the sword and the sandals, and take what the Gods shall send.”

But Theseus wept—"Shall I leave you, O my mother?"

But she answered, "Weep not for me. That which is fated must be; and grief is easy to those who do nought but grieve. Full of sorrow was my youth, and full of sorrow my womanhood. Full of sorrow was my youth for Bellerophon, the slayer of the Chimæra, whom my father drove away by treason; and full of sorrow my womanhood, for thy treacherous father and for thee; and full of sorrow my old age will be (for I see my fate in dreams,) when the sons of the Swan shall carry me captive to the hollow vale of Eurotas, till I sail across the seas a slave, the handmaid of the pest of Greece. Yet shall I be avenged, when the golden-haired heroes sail against Troy, and sack the palaces of Ilium; then my son shall set me free from thralldom, and I shall hear the tale of Theseus's fame. Yet beyond that I see new sorrows; but I can bear them as I have borne the past."

Then she kissed Theseus, and wept over him; and went into the temple, and Theseus saw her no more.

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