

The King Must Die

Longman Simplified English Series

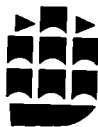


The King Must Die

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Longman Simplified English Series

This book has been specially prepared to make enjoyable reading for people to whom English is a second or a foreign language. An English writer never thinks of avoiding unusual words, so that the learner, trying to read the book in its original form, has to turn frequently to the dictionary and so loses much of the pleasure that the book ought to give.

This series is planned for such readers. There are very few words used which are outside the learner's vocabulary¹. These few extra words are needed for the story and are, marked* when they appear to indicate that they are explained in the Glossary. Long sentences and difficult sentence patterns have been simplified. The resulting language is good and useful English, and the simplified book keeps much of the charm and flavour of the original.

At a rather more difficult level there is *The Bridge Series*, which helps the reader to cross the gap between the limited vocabulary and structures of the *Simplified English Series* and full English.

It is the aim of these two series to enable thousands of readers to enjoy without great difficulty some of the best books written in the English language, and in doing so, to equip themselves in the pleasantest possible way to understand and appreciate any work written in English.

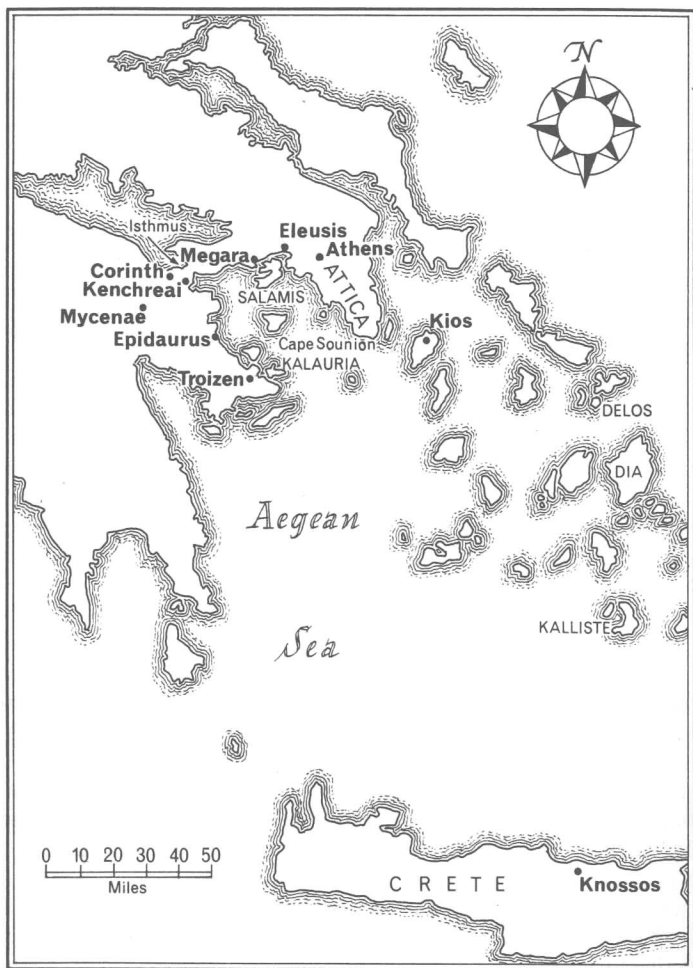
¹The 2,000 root words of the *General Service List of English Words* of the *Interim Report on Vocabulary Selection*.

Introduction

THESEUS used to be regarded as one of the imaginary characters of ancient Greek literature. Recent discoveries in Greece and Crete show that he may have been a real King of Athens. He was, perhaps, as important then as Alexander was in later times.

Artistic remains show the figure of his enemy, the Minotaur. They also show youths and girls performing the Bull* Dance; it is likely that these were indeed sent to Crete for this purpose, as slaves of the god Poseidon. The Palace* of Knossos, the famous 'Labyrinth', has been found, with the sacred axes which gave it its name. It was clearly wrecked by an earthquake. In the Throne Room itself, there are signs that a ceremony for a new king was violently interrupted.

The author has built her story on the basis of these recent discoveries, so its details often do not follow the various accounts of ancient writers. She shows Theseus as a boy in Troizen; as a boy-king in Eleusis, where custom killed the king each year, and where women ruled the land; as the future king of Athens, the capital city of the state of Attica; and as a self-chosen slave of the god for whom the Bull Dance was performed in Crete. She tells how Hellene kings were expected to sacrifice themselves for the people. Her story ends with a windy night three or four thousand years ago, when fate destroyed the Cretan empire, and the glorious Labyrinth fell in ruins. Thus Theseus escaped to Athens, where his father waited for death.



Contents

Map: Greece at the time of Theseus	viii
Chapter 1 The King Horse	1
Chapter 2 The Sacrifice	7
Chapter 3 Poseidon the Earth-Shaker	13
Chapter 4 The Secret of My Birth	19
Chapter 5 A King of Eleusis Dies	25
Chapter 6 The Companions	32
Chapter 7 My First Battle	38
Chapter 8 I Meet My Father in Athens	45
Chapter 9 The End of Women's Rule	53
Chapter 10 The Bull-Dancers are Chosen	59
Chapter 11 The Voyage	66
Chapter 12 The House of the Axe	74
Chapter 13 The Corinthian	80
Chapter 14 Life in the Bull Court	87
Chapter 15 The Goddess-on-Earth	93
Chapter 16 The Cranes Gather Arms	99
Chapter 17 A King of Crete Dies	106
Chapter 18 I Meet My Bull	113
Chapter 19 Poseidon is Coming!	118
Chapter 20 The Labyrinth Falls	125
Chapter 21 The Feast of Madness	134
Chapter 22 A King of Athens Dies	143
Comprehension Questions	147
Glossary	153

Chapter 1

The King Horse

THE old part of Troizen, where the Palace stands, was built long ago. But the Palace was built by my great-grandfather. At sunrise, if you look at it from Kalauria across the water, the columns* are as red as fire and the walls are golden. It shines bright against the dark woods on the mountain side.

Our house is Hellene, and we are descended from Ever-Living Zeus. We worship the sky gods, before Mother Dia and the gods of earth. And we have never mixed our blood with the blood of the Shore People, who had the land before us.

My grandfather had about fifteen children in his household, when I was born. But his queen and her sons were dead; my mother was the only remaining child of his marriage. As for my father, it was said in the Palace that he had been a god. I soon noticed that some people doubted this. But my mother never spoke of it, and I did not care to ask her.

When I was seven, the Horse Feast became due. It is held every four years, so I remembered nothing of the last one. I knew that it concerned the King Horse, but I thought that it was some ceremony in his honour. In my view, nothing could have been more fitting. I knew him well.

He lived in the great Horse Field, down on the plain. From the Palace roof I had often watched him, as he tossed* his white head in the wind or played with his wives. The year before, I had seen him do battle for his kingdom. One of the House Lords saw the fight begin, and rode down with me through the olive*-trees for a nearer view.

The great horses tore up the earth with their feet, and shouted their war-cries. The hair on their necks streamed in the wind as they charged. At last the loser fell. The King Horse threw up his head with a cry of victory, and ran off towards his wives. He had never had a rope round his neck, and he was as wild as the sea. Even the King himself could never ride him. He belonged to the god.

His courage alone would have made me love him. But I had another cause as well. I thought that he was my brother.

Poseidon can look like a man or like a horse, whichever he chooses. In the form of a man, he was said to have been my father. But there were songs in which he had horse-sons too. Surely the King Horse was one of these? It seemed clear to me, therefore, that we ought to meet. I had heard that he was only five years old. 'So,' I thought, 'though he is bigger, I am older. It is right for me to speak first.'

When the Horse Master went down to choose young horses for the chariots*, I got him to take me. While he did his work, he left me with a servant, who began to talk with a friend and soon forgot me. I climbed the fence, and went to look for the King Horse.

I saw him standing by himself on a little hill. I went nearer. I was thinking, as every child thinks once for the first time, 'Here is beauty.' He heard me, and turned to look. I held out my hand, and called, 'Son of Poseidon!' On this he came up to me. I had brought a lump of salt, and I held it out to him.

There were noises behind me. I heard the servant cry out, and I saw that the Horse Master was beating him. Men were waving at me from the fence, and cursing each other. I felt safer where I was.

The King Horse was so near that I could see the eyelashes round his dark eyes. A handful of long white hairs fell between them, like a white waterfall between shining stones. His teeth were large and strong; but his lips, when he took the salt from my hand, felt softer than my mother's breast*. When the salt was finished, he brushed my face with his, and smelled my

hair. Then he went back across the field, waving his long tail in the air.

Now I was seized and pushed hurriedly out of the field. The Horse Master pulled me on to his horse in silence, and hardly spoke all the way home. After this, I feared that my grandfather himself would beat me. But he only said, 'Theseus, you went to the field as the Horse Master's guest, but you gave him trouble. That was bad manners. A wild horse might have bitten your arm off. I forbid you to go again.'

This happened when I was six years old; and the Horse Feast was due next year. It was the chief feast at Troizen. The Palace took a week to get ready for it.

On the feast-day I woke at sunrise. My old nurse dressed me in my best things: my new deer-skin drawers* with coloured borders, my red belt, and my golden necklace. When she had combed my hair, I went to see my mother dressing. She was just out of her bath, and they were dropping her dress over her head. Its golden ornaments shone and rang as she shook out its folds. Her breasts were as smooth as milk; she still kept them bare, for she was then only twenty-three.

They began to comb her hair. It was darker than mine; the colour of polished bronze*. I ran to the window. Morning was red, and the columns seemed to burn in it. Down in the courtyard, the House Lords were gathering in their war-dress. This was the moment that I had waited for.

They came in by twos and threes. The older warriors*, whose beards were full-grown, were talking together. The young men were laughing, or shouting to their friends. They wore their leather helmets*, that were crowned with feathers and bound with bronze. Their broad chests and shoulders were smoothly oiled, and shone like gold in the morning light. Their wide leather drawers stood stiffly out below their slender* waists, which were pulled in by their thick sword-belts.

While they waited, the young men rested their left arms on their tall shields, and their right arms held out their spears*. I looked carefully at the signs upon their shields – birds or fish or snakes – and picked out friends, who raised their

spears to return my greetings. Seven or eight of them were uncles of mine. Their mothers were women of good blood, whom my grandfather had got as prizes of war, or as gifts from neighbouring kings.

The Country Lords were coming in from their horses or their chariots. They too were bare to the waist, for the day was warm; but they were wearing all their jewels. The sound of men's voices grew louder and deeper. I straightened my shoulders, and pulled my belt in. Then I looked thoughtfully at a youth whose beard was starting, and counted years on my fingers.

The War Leader went in to tell my grandfather that they were ready. Soon he came out again; and his beard stood out like the front of a warship as he shouted, 'The god is on his way!'

They all left the courtyard. Then a servant came in to ask if the Lord Theseus was ready to go with the King. I had expected to go with my mother. She was the chief priestess of Mother Dia in Troizen. But Poseidon is the husband and lord of the Mother, and on his feast-day the men go first. So, when I heard that I was to go with my grandfather, I felt like a man already.

I ran to the top of the Palace roof, and looked out. Now I saw which god the men were following. They had let loose the King Horse, and he was running free across the plain. He went through the corn in the common fields, and no one raised a hand to stop him. He would have gone up to the olive-trees on the hill, but some men were there and turned him away.

While I was watching, I heard a chariot down in the empty courtyard. It was my grandfather's, and I remembered that I was to ride in it. By myself on the Palace roof, I danced for joy.

They fetched* me down, and the driver lifted me in. I was eager to see my grandfather in his war-things. But when he came out, he was dressed as a priest.

The road was empty, and I asked where the people were. 'At Sphairia,' he said. 'I am taking you to see the ceremony, because soon you will have to wait on the god there, as one of his servants.'

This news surprised me. I wondered what service a horse-god wanted. I imagined myself combing the hair on his forehead, or giving him food in a golden bowl. But he was also Poseidon Blue-Hair, who raises storms; and he was the great black Earth Bull, whom the Cretans fed with youths and girls.

'How long shall I stay?' I asked.

He looked at my face and laughed, and ran his big fingers through my hair. 'For a month each time,' he said. 'You are old enough now to do your duty to Poseidon, your birth-god. So today, after the sacrifice, I shall name you publicly as his servant. Behave respectfully, and stand still till you are told. Remember, you are with me.'

We reached the shore at a place where the water was shallow, and crossed over to the island of Kalauria. At first we could see across to Troizen. Then we turned inwards, through the pines*. The horses' feet drummed on a wooden bridge, and we stopped. We had come to the little holy island at the big one's foot; and kings must walk in the presence of the gods.

The people were waiting in an open place beyond the trees, in front of Poseidon's shrine*. My grandfather took my hand, and led me up the rocky path. On either side, a row of youths were standing. They were the tallest boys of Troizen and Kalauria, and their long hair was tied above their heads. They were singing a song to Poseidon the horse god.

The Horse Father (they sang) is like the fruits of the earth. He is like the sea, whose broad back bears the ships safely home. His bright eye is like the sunrise on the mountain. His hair is like the white water that blows off a breaking wave. When he strikes the ground with his foot, men and cities tremble, and kings' houses fall.

I knew that this was true, because the roof of the little temple had been rebuilt in my own life. Poseidon had thrown down its wooden columns, and had made a crack in the Palace walls. I had felt unwell that morning, but after the shock I felt better. Our part of the world had always been sacred to the Earth-Shaker.

As we walked between the boys, my grandfather was looking

for future warriors among them. But I had seen ahead, where the King Horse was quietly feeding from a bronze pot in the sacred place. There had been medicine in his feed at day-break, to make him calm. I did not know this, but I was not surprised at his calmness. I had learnt that a king must receive his people with a good grace, when they come to do him honour.

Chapter 2

The Sacrifice

THE summer air bore scents of pine and flowers; of sweat from the young men's bodies; of salt from the sea. The priests came forward to greet my grandfather, as chief priest of the god. He made a sign to Diokles, my favourite uncle a big young man, eighteen years old. 'Look after the boy till we are ready for him,' he said.

My grandfather washed his hands in a bowl, and a boy dried them. Then the King Horse lifted his head from his feed. My grandfather set his hand on the horse's nose, and pushed it down hard. The head sank, and rose with a gentle toss. Diokles leaned down to me and said, 'Look, he agrees. That is a good sign. It means a lucky year.'

I thought that we had finished and would go home now. But my grandfather took a sharp knife, and cut some hair from the horse's head. He gave some to the older lords. Then he signalled to me, and Diokles pushed me forward. 'Go and take it,' he whispered.

I stepped out. I thought that I was being honoured like this because the King Horse was my brother. Five or six strong white hairs were put in my hand. I had meant to thank my grandfather, but now I felt that I was in the solemn presence of a king. So, like the others, I raised the hairs to my forehead* in silence. Then I went back, and Diokles said, 'Well done!'

My grandfather spread his hands, and called on the god. He greeted him as Earth-Shaker, Wave-Gatherer; brother of King Zeus and husband of Mother Dia; Shepherd* of



My grandfather spread his hands, and called on the god

Ships, Horse-Lover. At the end he said, 'Lord Poseidon, hear our prayer, and accept the sacrifice.' Then he took a great axe, and felt its edge. Tall men were standing beside the King Horse, with ropes in their hands.

It was a good clean killing. Since then, I have often done the same, while all Athens watched. Yet, even now, I still remember: how he rose up like a tower, and dragged the men like children; the deep red cut in his white throat, and the hot smell of blood; the ruin of beauty, the fall of strength; the sadness and the pity as he sank upon his knees and laid his bright head in the dust. That blood seemed to tear the soul out of my heart.

I felt suddenly alone. But between me and my mother were the dead horse and my grandfather, with his blood-red axe. He took a cup of wine, and poured it on the ground. Then he made a sign to me. 'Come,' Diokles said. 'Father wants you. Your life must be made sacred to the god.'

I thought, 'The King Horse was sacred to him, too.' Tears blinded my eyes, and Diokles drew his hard young hand across them. 'Behave,' he said. 'The people are watching. Are you not a warrior? It's only blood.'

I looked at the people, and memories came back to me. 'Gods' sons fear nothing,' I thought. 'Now they will know whether I am a god's son or not.' Inside me, all was darkness and tears; but my foot stepped forward.

Then I heard a sea-sound in my ears. It was like the roar of a breaking wave, that went with me and bore me on. I heard it then for the first time. I moved with the wave, as if it broke down a wall in front of me.

My grandfather dipped his finger in the blood of the sacrifice, and made the sign of Poseidon's three-pointed spear upon my forehead. Then he and old Kannadis took me to the holy spring, and dropped a gift in for me. It was a bronze bull, with golden horns.*

When I got home, my mother asked, 'What is it?' I put my face between her breasts and cried.

'Do not be sad because of the King Horse,' she said. 'He has gone to the Earth Mother, who made us all. Tomorrow

you shall take her a present for him.'

Next day we went together to the sacred stone. It had fallen from heaven long ago, and it lay in its own silent corner of the Palace grounds. The House Snake had his hole there. She put my cake on the cold stone, and she told the Goddess that it was my gift to the King Horse. But I remembered the living horse's breath, and his soft warm lip.

I was sitting among the house dogs in the Great Hall, when my grandfather passed through and greeted me. I rose and answered, as he was the King, but I did not look up. He stood for a moment in thought, then he said, 'Come with me.'

I followed him up the stairs to his own room. It was warm, as it faced south, and the chimney from the Hall went through it. The royal bed was there, and boxes for his clothes and jewels. His arms hung on the wall: bow, shield, sword and dagger*, his hunting-knife, and his tall helmet. There were skins on the floor, and a chair. He sat down, and I sat at his feet.

'Well, Theseus? Why are you angry?'

I looked up, as far as his hand, and saw the royal ring of Troizen on his finger. But I kept silent.

'When you are a king, only evil and ugly things shall die. The brave and the beautiful shall live for ever. Is that it?'

I looked at his face, to see if he was laughing at me. Then I felt as if I had only dreamed of the priest with the axe. He drew me against his knee, and dug his fingers into my hair, as he used to do with his dogs.

'You knew the King Horse. He was your friend. So you know whether he chose to be King or not.' I remembered the great horse-fight and the war-cries. 'You know that he lived like a king. But later, a younger horse would have taken his kingdom. He would have died without honour.'

The big hand lay quietly now, on the arm of the chair. 'He died for another cause. But if I tell you, then you must listen, even if you do not understand.

'Long ago, our people lived in the far north, beyond Olympus. They never saw the sea. They lived by the increase of their cattle, and built no cities. They had few skills, because