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Theseus



DIRECTIONS: Read the story of Theseus. Answer the questions.

On coming back from the quest for the Golden Fleece, the heroes returned to their own homes, where they continued their efforts to make their people happy. Theseus, one of the heroes, returned to Athens, and founded a yearly festival in honor of the goddess Athene. This festival was called Panathenaea, which means "all the worshipers of Athene." It proved a great success, and was a bond of union among the people, who thus learned each other's customs and manners, and grew friendlier than if they had always stayed at home. Theseus is one of the best-known among all the Greek heroes. Besides going with Jason in the "Argo," he rid his country of many robbers, and sailed to Crete. There he visited Minos, the king, who, having some time before conquered the Athenians, forced them to send him every year a shipload of youths and maidens, to feed to a monster which he kept in the Labyrinth.

To free his country from this tribute, Theseus, of his own free will, went on board the ship. When he reached Crete, he went first into the Labyrinth, and killed the monster with his sword. Then he found his way out of the maze by means of a long thread which the king's daughter had given him. One end of it he carried with him as he entered, while the other end was fastened to the door.

His old father, Aegeus, who had allowed him to go only after much persuasion, had told him to change the black sails of his vessel for white if he were lucky enough to escape. Theseus promised to do so, but he entirely forgot it in the joy of his return.

Aegeus, watching for the vessel day after day, saw it coming back at last; and when the sunlight fell upon the black sails, he felt sure that his son was dead. His grief was so great at this loss that he fell from the rock where he was standing down into the sea, and was drowned. In memory of him, the body of water near the rock is still known as the Aegean Sea.

When Theseus reached Athens, and heard of his father's grief and sudden death, his heart was filled with sorrow and remorse, and he loudly bewailed the carelessness which had cost his father's life.

Theseus now became King of Athens, and ruled his people very wisely for many years. He took part in many adventures and battles, lost two wives and a beloved son, and in his grief and old age became so cross and harsh that his people ceased to love him.

They finally grew so tired of his cruelty that they all rose up against him, drove him out of the city, and forced him to take up his abode on the Island of Scyros. Then, fearing that he might return unexpectedly, they told the king of the island to watch him night and day, and to seize the first good opportunity to get rid of him. In obedience to these orders, the king escorted Theseus wherever he went; and one day, when they were both walking along the edge of a tall cliff, he suddenly pushed Theseus over it. Unable to defend or save himself, Theseus fell on some sharp rocks far below, and was instantly killed.

The Athenians rejoiced greatly when they heard of his death; but they soon forgot his harshness, remembered only his bravery and all the good he had done them in his youth, and regretted their ingratitude. Long after, as you will see, his body was carried to Athens, and buried not far from the Acropolis, which was a fortified hill or citadel in the midst of the city. Here the Athenians built a temple over his remains, and worshiped him as a god.

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1. According to the story, how did the Aegean Sea get its name?

2. How was Theseus “careless”?

3. What caused Theseus’ character to change so much that his people stopped loving him?

4. Why is Theseus one of the best known of all the Greek heroes?
