

THE CLASH

Pentheus, King of Thebes, sat watching the prisoner who was standing before him between two guards. They had told him that the prisoner had put up no resistance and, indeed, seemed to have wanted to be captured.

The king regarded the young man, with his long, blond hair – too long, the king thought, for any decent Greek. He could not be a Greek, the king decided, and he was most certainly dissolute: you could smell his perfume. The king found the young man's eyes even more disturbing: they were too large. They looked round and innocent. 'Yes,' thought the king, 'I see how he might seduce the women of our city and, I suspect, some of the men also. But,' and the king shuddered. He found those eyes menacing, almost hypnotic.

So *this* was the person who had appeared with his band of wanton women and was enticing the women of Thebes to join in their disgusting practices on Mount Kithairon. Some of the men, and not just the young ones either, had, it was reported, been enticed out as well. The king had to put a stop to this madness; decency must be restored to Thebes.

"Who are you? Why have you come to Thebes with your rabble?" the king asked.

The young man fixed the king with his eyes and answered: "To honour Semele and establish the worship of her divine son."

"My aunt Semele?" said the king. "My grandfather, Kadmos, has already honoured her with a tomb. But there is no son, divine or otherwise. She died when the lightning bolt struck her house, and the bastard in her womb died with her. I know she claimed the child's father was Zeus, but then," he added with a laugh, "what girl who has conceived illicitly has not said that?"

"The father was Zeus," replied the young man firmly, "and Zeus himself rescued the unborn child, though he could not save Semele from Hera's wrath; and he hid the embryo in his own thigh and in due time bore Dionysos, a god, son of a god."

"By all the gods!" exclaimed the king. "Do you really expect me to believe that claptrap – Zeus using his thigh as a womb! You blaspheme him! Or are you raving, having eaten too many mushrooms up on Kithairon? Yes, I know you and your women drug yourselves with those mushrooms, and with wine, when have your orgies."

"You do not know what you are talking about," the young man said. "Oh yes, we do eat the mushrooms; they liberate our minds from the prison of our bodies. They heighten our perception; they allow us to see visions of *true* reality and bring us closer to our god."

"They poison the mind!" interrupted the king. "They kill all thoughts of decency. They just corrupt otherwise good people so that they will join in your disgusting practices."

"So," said the young man, "you think we drug ourselves and have orgies up there on Mount Kithairon?"

"I have no doubt you do," answered the king. "You seem to meet

together only by night – the time for deeds of shame.”

“Deeds of shame can be committed by daylight,” replied the young man. “But we are not ashamed of what we do. Dionysos brings true freedom and liberation. We commune with the god himself.”

“Yes,” replied the king slowly, “yes, I have heard reports of how you commune with your god. But I can scarcely believe they are true. I have heard it said that your women, in their frenzy, actually hunt beasts of the mountain, even lions, and tear them apart with their own hands, consuming the living flesh in the belief they are consuming the flesh of their god.”

The young man looked the king straight in the eyes. “Do you really think,” he said, “that women could do such a thing?”

The king felt uncomfortable. What was the young man doing? Was he implying that it was true? Did his women actually do that?

“Yes, they do eat the flesh of their god,” the young man continued. “And they drink his blood – in wine, the gift of Dionysos. The god takes many forms.”

“A god who is supposed to be my cousin,” mocked the king. “If this god is so great, where is he then? He is not named among the Olympians. Where is his temple? Where is his image?”

“You are looking at him,” replied the young man.

The king stared.

“Yes,” the young man said in answer to the king’s unspoken question, “Yes, I am Dionysos, god, the son of a god. I am he.”

“Now I know you are mad,” laughed the king. “Your wine and those mushrooms have really turned your head! You, a god! Can’t you see that you are a my prisoner? I could have you put to death if I wished. As for the women, the Mainads I think you call them, I shall send out my soldiers and capture them all. I *will* put a stop to this madness that’s upsetting the city.”

“You have no power over me,” the young man calmly replied. “As for sending out an army to capture *women* – that will really look manly to your fellow Greeks, won’t it? And you must know that your mother, Agave, and her sisters have joined the Mainads.”

The king looked startled at those words.

“Yes,” continued the young man. “They will repent that they mocked their sister and they will know that their sister’s son is a god. Oh, yes, know, king, that your mother and aunts are indeed with my Mainads. How great you will appear when you imprison your own mother and aunts!”

The king was visibly shaken and sat silently thinking. The young man’s eyes fixed him once more; they stared straight into the king’s eyes.

“Imprison me, if you must,” the young man said. “But know that I shall not remain in prison. But what is it you intend to send your army against? You think you are an intelligent man, always guided by reason. Yet now you would act with no other evidence than hearsay and rumour – and some rumours you, yourself admit are hardly credible. Should you not at least see for yourself what the Mainads do and if it is as you think. Consider, your own mother is there. Can the Mainads be the dissolute band you say they are? Is it

not reasonable to find out the truth before acting?"

The king found himself agreeing with the young man. Yes, that was the reasonable thing to do. He should not go on hearsay and rumour, especially where his mother was concerned. Of course he was man of reason. Wasn't it because he was a man of reason that he wanted to stop the spread of irrational madness in the city? Yes, of course, he should find out what the Mainads were doing and then he would know how to act.

"But how shall I know where to find the Mainads? Who will guide me?" asked the king.

"I will," said the young man. "I will help you; but first, please dismiss your guards."

The king did as the young man said. The guards were dismissed and the king asked the young man how he should come to see the Mainads.

"I shall show you a hiding place where you will be able to see all that goes on," the young man said. "But if they caught sight of you it might be dangerous if you were to be seen as a man. You know what women can get like if they've had too much wine. They'll all want you at once! You had better come disguised as a woman to be on the safe side."

The king protested that that was not dignified. But he was now too much under the spell of the young man and his hypnotic eyes. Yes, he thought, of course it would not be reasonable to appear there as a man, especially as the king. It is only reasonable that he disguise himself. He must, he thought, do the reasonable thing. When reason clashes with madness and excess, reason must always win out. 'Yes,' he said to himself, 'I must do the reasonable thing.'

So it was arranged. The king not only put on women's clothing; but allowed himself to wear a long, blond wig and put on make-up in the manner of a woman. He looked far more feminine than the effeminate young man who guided him out of the city towards Mount Kithairon as evening was turning to night.

Not long after dawn, the city was roused with the shoutings of women as they returned from the mountain. They were dishevelled and bloodstained, and they were shouting that Dionysos had come to them as a lion. The people looked in horror at the women and gasped as they saw the king's mother, Agave.

"See, the head of the lion! See, the head of the god!" she cried, as she held up the bloody head she had wrenched off with her own hands from the neck of her own son.