

AN UNEXPECTED REUNION

“Ah, Philo,” said Kritias, “so we meet again after all these years! I never thought I’d see you again when I stopped taking my sheep over to Kithairon in the summer. What brought you to Thebes today?”

“To tell Oedipus that King Polybos of Corinth had died and that the Corinthians wished him to return as their king,” answered Philo.

“He’d be king of two cities, then,” observed Kritias. “That should’ve pleased him.”

“Maybe,” said Philo, “but he seemed more pleased to know that Polybos was dead and that he had not killed him. In fact when I spoke of his returning to Corinth, he said he was afraid to return. He was afraid of Queen Merope because an oracle once told him he would mate with his mother.”

“But that’s daft,” said Kritias. “It shouldn’t be difficult to avoid mating with Merope, or any other particular women for that matter. You just don’t tup her,” he added, laughing.

“Well, yes,” agreed Philo. “But to humour him – in case he thought he might mate with her by accident –”

“By accident!” interrupted Kritias, laughing. “You mean like neither he nor she would notice!”

“I know,” said Philo, “but to reassure him I told him that neither Polybos nor Merope were his true parents.”

“And was he reassured?” asked Kritias.

“I suppose so,” said Philo. “But he must’ve guessed that long ago. It was well known that someone who’d had a drop too much once told him he was no son of Polybos and Merope. He kept pestering people to tell him the truth; it’s said that the King and Queen always prevaricated when he asked. That alone should’ve given him the answer – but no, he had to go to Delphi to ask Apollo.”

“And we heard today,” said Kritias. “what Apollo told him: he would slay his dad and mate with his mum.”

“That,” said Philo, “should’ve confirmed that Polybos and Merope were not his real parents. Even if by some tragic accident he did cause Polybos’ death, at least, as I said, he could easily have avoided mating with Merope! But what does he do? He flees from Corinth – though his mum and dad could be *anywhere*.”

“True,” agreed Kritias. “But I guess the god robbed him of his senses.”

“That may be so,” mused Philo. “But tell me, Kritias, why did you stop bringing your sheep over to Kithairon in the summer?”

“Because,” replied Kritias, “when I discovered Oedipus was our king, I wanted to leave Thebes. I asked Queen Jocasta for my freedom. She granted it and I moved to the north of the Theban territory, to a smallholding there.”

“But why,” asked Philo, “did you want to leave Thebes?”

“It’s a long story,” said Kritias. “When Oedipus killed Laios and, as he thought, all his escort where the three roads meet between Thebes and Delphi, I did survive. I was left for dead but, though badly injured, I did pull through and eventually made it back here. By that time Oedipus had got rid of

the Sphinx that had been plaguing Thebes and, enjoying the popularity of the people, had made himself King by marrying the widowed Queen, Jocasta.”

“Whoah!” interrupted Philo. “A bloke not sure who his parents are – wanting to avoid the prophecy he’d mate with his mother – this bloke marries a woman old enough to be his mother! Not exactly a sensible thing to do, if you ask me.”

“No, indeed,” agreed Kritias. “I guess he was carried away with the prospect of becoming King and Jocasta was still a fine looking woman.”

“Ah,” interrupted Philo, “the temptations of a crown and a warm bed – too much for him!”

“That’s about it, I think,” agreed Kritias. “Even if he may deep down have had a suspicion he might be fulfilling the prophecy, I reckon he kidded himself that Jocasta couldn’t be his mum.”

“Yes,” said Philo, “but surely the death of Laios must’ve made him suspicious.”

“Possibly,” replied Kritias, “It would certainly explain why there was never a proper investigation into Laios’ death; he wouldn’t have wanted to risk what might be discovered and the rumour that Laios and his escort were killed by a band of robbers surely helped him put uncomfortable thoughts aside.”

“But you knew better than that,” said Philo. “You must’ve recognized Oedipus when you got back here.”

“Of course I did,” said Kritias. “But I thought it best to confirm the rumour. After all, it would have looked a bit feeble to say Laios and all his escort except me were killed by just one person!”

“Yes, it would’ve,” agreed Philo. “Besides, if you had named Oedipus he wouldn’t have been too pleased. He might very well have accused you of lying and had you bannished, or even executed, for treason.”

“Exactly,” said Kritias, “I thought it best to keep quiet about Oedipus. Of course then I didn’t know Jocasta was his mum; I didn’t know then what Oedipus had learnt at Delphi.”

“But,” said Philo, “You told me the old prophecy when you handed the baby to me all those years ago!”

“I know,” said Kritias. “But how was I to know that Oedipus was *that* baby? I had no reason to connect the two. I mean, the baby didn’t exactly look like Oedipus, did he? For all I knew the baby, if he were still alive, had been brought up by you as a shepherd.”

“So,” said Philo, “it wasn’t until today that the two things got connected – because Oedipus himself insisted on questioning us both.”

“That’s right,” said Kritias. “I guess old suspicions that had lain hidden deep in Oedipus’ mind were coming to the surface. He wanted to find out one way or the other at last.”

“Yes,” agreed Philo. “I think maybe you’re right. But it was tough on Jocasta. She had no idea the young man was her son. She thought he had died, exposed on Kithairon as a baby with his ankles riveted together.”

“Bah!” exclaimed Kritias in disgust. “What sort of mother allows that to happen! I know it was Laios who cruelly riveted the ankles; but it was Jocasta

who handed the child to me, with its ankles still riveted, and ordered me to expose it to die on the mountain side. She could've asked me to remove the rivet and make secret arrangements for the baby to be looked after."

"But the prophecy?" questioned Philo.

"So what?" replied Kritias, "Why was Jocasta so concerned about Laios? The marriage bed was cold. The story is that Oedipus was conceived only because Laios got drunk one night. What sort of marriage is that! And as for the prophecy that she would mate with her son – well, she would have known who he was and easily have avoided that. No, she was no mother – just a craven coward, afraid of a cold-hearted and superstitious husband."

"May be you're right, " agreed Philo. "But you haven't told me why exactly you wanted to leave Thebes and move up north."

"Well, as I said," answered Kritias, "when I got back here I recognized Oedipus as Laios' murderer. Of course I was surprised to find him King and married to the wife of the one he'd killed. It was obvious that Jocasta didn't know that. She was merely enjoying her toy-boy after those sterile years with Laios. But it seemed just to me that a weak and cruel mother should unknowingly marry her husband's murderer – I didn't know at the time, of course, he was also her son."

"I see," said Philo.

"But," continued Kritias, "I was worried that Oedipus might recognize me. I felt my life might be in danger. I just wanted to get away from the city. That's why I asked Jocasta for my freedom and went to the smallholding on the northern border."

"So what will you do now?" asked Philo. "Are you going back? Or do you fear trouble if you stay in Theban territory?"

"Not from Oedipus, I think," said Kritias. "As he has made it clear he's going into exile immediately. And as for Jocasta, well, I have no reason to fear her; I think she'll not reach me from Hades. But I fear her brother, Kreon, who is King now."

"He looked a grim fellow," agreed Philo.

"So he is, if half the stories about him are true," said Kritias. "I fear he'll blame me because I disobeyed his sister all those years ago and allowed the baby to live. May be I should follow Oedipus' example and go into exile."

"But where will you go?" asked Philo. "Why do you not come back with me to Corinth? Kreon cannot reach you there."

"Why, thank you," replied Kritias. "Yes, it will be nice reminiscing again about old times and those summers we used to spend on Kithairon."

So the two old shepherds left that afternoon, taking advantage of the confusion in Thebes. By nightfall the Theban territory was well behind them and as they sat in the inn that evening they reminisced about old times and thanked the gods that they had been content with their lot as humble shepherds.