

Forrest Reid



*Demophon,
a Traveller's Tale*

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CHAPTER I

The Coming of the Nurse

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Beyond the grove of laurels sacred to Artemis lay a blue, crinkled sea. It glittered dazzlingly in the hot sunshine; and far out in the bay where water and sky met, the dark rocks of Salamis rose like a dream-island, because a God had dropped a haze about them.

High overhead an eagle passed, bearing some small white woolly beast in his talons; and before he had disappeared there emerged on to the rough dusty track that wound up from the shore through the hillside fields a man, a little girl, and two goats. The man climbed slowly and laboriously, having a heavy wine-skin upon his shoulders; the little girl carried a basket of figs; the goats, with the perversity of their kind, strayed to this side or to that.

The man walked without lifting his gaze from the stony path before him. His name was Keleos. He was on the threshold of old age, his beard was grizzled, his skin tanned like leather, and the sweat ran in beads from the roots of his matted hair to his bushy eyebrows. The little girl was hot too, but she was almost naked, and her slenderness made her cool to look at. Her body was thin as a boy's; her limbs were burnt by the sun to a golden brown. She had a very dirty face, because she had rubbed a dirty hand across it more than once; nevertheless, she was beautiful. For the third time, in the shrill monotonous voice of childhood, she called out, "Daddy, is this a good place?"

Her father had promised to rest when they reached a suitable resting place, but the suitable resting place seemed always a little farther on; and he answered now, without raising his head, "The spring is near. Then we can rest and drink too, and you can cool your hands and face in the water, Iole."

Iole was silent. Not because she had no more to say, but because behind her father's back she had stuffed her mouth with a fig. As soon as she had swallowed it she began again: "Daddy, may I give Demophon some figs?"

The man shook his head.

"Why mayn't I?" Iole asked. But already her attention had wandered, following a butterfly that kept hovering a few yards in front of her, spreading out his gorgeous wings when he alit for a moment on a stone in the path. She piped on, "Daddy, why mayn't I?" and the man answered gravely, "You know he is too sick to care for them, my bird."

Iole dropped a pace behind and chose another fig. She looked up in the direction of the house, which was not yet in sight, though she could see the fields beside it, yellow with the ripened corn. To-morrow the reapers would be busy, and to-morrow she, too, would be busy, helping to tie up the sheaves, but more particularly searching for nests of field mice. Then, as her eyes rested upon them, the colour of the fields changed. A ripple of wind, it might be, sweeping across them and bending the heavy ears sideways: but Iole knew that it was the spirit of the Great Mother herself passing through the corn, and for a moment her expression became thoughtful.

She knew it was a God who was responsible for her brother's sickness; or if not a God, then a bogey, such as the wicked Mormo. Or it might be a witch, or a vampire, or even a possessor of the evil eye. Demophon, at any rate, had been hung about with charms and amulets till he resembled a small idol, though these precautions had been taken too late to make him any better.

A turn in the path aroused her from meditation. She hastened her steps, because she wanted to be first at the well. She was not first, however; somebody was there before her; an old woman, who was sitting on a great flat stone under the lime tree, and looking down into the water.

Iole stopped abruptly; but the woman did not turn her head. Though she seemed old, and looked tired and worn and melancholy, she was not, Iole presently thought, really very old. She was strong, and her body was erect. It was her hair that was old, old and gray, gray as the stone on which she sat; and it was drawn down smoothly in two rippling waves on either side of her broad forehead. Her throat rose like a strong column from the loose draperies of her dark robe; her feet were slender and beautiful. Suddenly she lifted her eyes, and they were very deep and stern.

Nobody spoke—neither Keleos, nor the woman, nor the goats, nor Iole.

At last the child took a step forward. "Mother," she whispered, holding out her basket with its fruit. And still the woman made no movement.

Keleos sat down and wiped the sweat from his eyes. He greeted the stranger, and invited her to come with them to the farm house.

She shook her head. "I am looking for my daughter," she answered.

Keleos gazed down towards the sea. He did not renew his invitation, and once or twice he glanced at the woman uneasily. She was not of their part of the world, he knew. Better to keep silent and wait for an explanation till she should give it of her own accord.

Such, however, was not Iole's view. Before Keleos could check her first question she had asked three. "Are you waiting for her? Is she really lost? Was she a little girl like me?"

"Be quiet, ill-mannered child," her father broke in hurriedly.

But the woman did not seem to be offended. "She was older than you," she answered. "I think she has been stolen."

"By pirates?" Iole guessed; and her next thought was that it would be pleasant to be stolen by pirates—great fierce bearded men with gold rings in their ears. They might make her their queen. Then she would live on an island of her own, and send them all over the world in search of treasures. And she would have black slaves, Ethiopian boys; and tame panthers from Lydia. And the slaves would swing a great fan of peacock feathers to keep the room cool, and the panthers——

So absorbing were Iole's visions that she ceased to pay much attention to what the stranger was saying. Iole had begun to envy the stolen daughter. Nothing ever happened at Eleusis. You might go down to the sea day after day and never catch a glimpse of a pirate. The woman was talking

now to her father, and what she talked about was not very interesting. It was of her own wanderings, and she seemed to have found nothing and to have had no adventures.

Still, when at the end of it all Keleos again urged the stranger to come with them, Iole also whispered, "Come."

But the woman did not stir till Keleos began to tell her about Demophon. Then she got up, and they knew that she had yielded; and it was only now, as she rose and stood in the green flickering shadow of the lime tree, that they saw how tall she was—taller than Keleos. There was a majesty about her, a grandeur, something commanding and awe-inspiring, so that Iole instinctively clasped her father's hand, half wishing they had not been so persistent in their invitation.

They resumed their journey, the goats now walking quietly in front, side by side, demure as boys in the procession of Apollo. After them came Iole, and behind her Keleos and the stranger, whose name was Deo. And as she climbed the stony path Deo stooped from time to time to gather the dark poppies growing beside it.

Presently the farm house came into view—a low oblong building of wood and unbaked brick. On one side of the gate was a willow in whose hollow trunk the bees had swarmed; on the other was a rough wooden image of Priapos, which, with the old dog Tauros, guarded the entrance. Behind the house was an orchard, its trees covered with pink-and-white blossom. Some of this blossom had already fallen, and lay among the long green grass like a light drift of coloured snow. And through the apple boughs a blue thread of smoke

rose from a hidden fire, bearing the sharp bitter pungency of burning leaves.

Tauros had got up at the sound of familiar footsteps, and he advanced to meet them, with a bushy wagging tail and a caution bred of rheumatism. Iole rushed on past him and into the house to tell her mother of the visitor, so that before Deo and her father reached the door Metanira herself was there, with the younger girl Rhodea peeping out from behind her.

Metanira was thin, dry, and sharp-featured. In her small, quickly-moving eyes there was neither the benevolence nor the candour that shone in the simple open gaze of her husband. She had an air of suspicion and peevishness, and the thin, wry smile with which she welcomed the stranger did not alter this expression.

Nevertheless, her words were kindly enough as she invited Deo into the house. It was a much larger house than it had appeared to be from the road. The principal room was wide and lofty, with great smoke-blackened beams that supported the roof and were half lost in shadow. A fire smouldered on the open hearth, and on the farther wall were doors, now closed, leading to the sleeping chambers. The seats had blue woven coverings; there was a big square table, waxed and polished; and in one corner, his white face still puckered though his feeble crying had ceased on their entrance, lay Demophon. His toys were strewn beside him. Tauros, who had come in last, walked slowly up to him, but the others hung in the background, for, though nobody could have said why, a feeling of expectancy seemed to fill the room as the stranger, with the poppies in her hand,

crossed the dark earthen floor and stooped down over the bed.

They saw her kiss the sick boy on his mouth, and then they saw a marvellous thing, for at that kiss the paleness left his cheeks and the flush of health returned to them. They saw him stop crying and his tears turn first to wonder, and then to a half-sleepy laughter, as the new nurse lifted him from his bed and held his naked body in her bosom.

A murmur rose from the little group of watchers by the door. Iole clapped her hands, and Rhodea in imitation clapped hers also. Keleos and Metanira dropped on their knees, because they believed they had received a direct answer to their prayers, and that the Gods had chosen this woman as their intermediary. But already, in the midst of her thanksgiving, the practical mind of Metanira was planning how they might keep the stranger with them. They might tell her that she was likely to find her lost daughter here. After all, she was just as likely to find her here as anywhere else. So Metanira began immediately to produce arguments and persuasions. She remembered a dream she had had a few days ago, in which she had seen a maiden wandering over the fields at night, with a lighted lantern in her hand; and she had come up the path to the house, and had put the lantern on the ground and had knocked at the door. Clearly a God must have sent this dream, and clearly its meaning was that the lost girl would find her way sooner or later to the farm.

Keleos listened gravely to his wife's words. He was a pious old man, but for some reason the Gods never communicated with him directly, so that it was always

through Metanira that he learned of their purposes and desires. Deo said nothing at all; nor was it possible to read in her countenance whether she had been impressed by Metanira's dream. She was busy infusing the poppies she had gathered in warm milk, and when the drink was ready she gave it to the little boy, who, after he had swallowed it, sank into a quiet sleep.

Metanira, through a running monologue constantly broken by some fresh inspiration, now set to the preparation of their own evening meal, while Iole laid the table. All the good things the larder contained were spread out in a feast—curds and milk, yellow loaves, cheese and onions, apples and honey, dark purple wine in goat-skin bottles, and water from the spring.

CHAPTER II

The Childhood of Demophon

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From that memorable day upon which he passed into the keeping of the new nurse, Demophon thrived and grew apace. Of the nurse herself they learned nothing beyond the extremely little she had already told them, and they stood too deeply in awe of her to ask the questions Metanira never tired of asking when she was not there. They were questions, to be sure, upon which only Deo could have thrown much light, but Metanira continued to ask them, supplying the answers also, and if these were more remarkable for variety than consistency, at least nobody was in a position to contradict them. Metanira, at the same time, had the good sense to refrain from interfering between Deo and her little boy, though the stranger's methods were in some respects by no means to her liking.

For in this small household Deo and her charge lived very much apart. To Keleos it mattered nothing; he went his customary ways; but Metanira found it harder and harder to accept an arrangement which practically ignored her existence. It was humiliating. Deep down in her heart she was still grateful to the woman who had saved her child's life (or at least had arrived at the mysterious turning point in his illness, for Metanira was becoming sceptical): nevertheless, she was hurt by Deo's attitude of aloofness. If the nurse was fond of one member of the family, it seemed to Metanira that she ought to be fond of them all. And if she

wasn't fond of them all—then she might at least try not to show it quite so plainly.

At first she had thought Deo to be merely reserved, and she had waited hopefully for this reserve to thaw into a more genial relationship. As the months passed, however, the futility of such a hope became apparent. It was not reserve at all: it was an unconscious and complete indifference. In vain Deo's attention was drawn to the charms of Iole and Rhodea: the nurse looked at them, and then, without a word, sank back into her own thoughts. What *were* these thoughts, Metanira wanted to know? And why did she refuse to speak even of her lost daughter? It was only with Keleos that she now and again entered into conversation, giving him advice about farming matters, of which she seemed to possess an exhaustive knowledge. And since her advice invariably led to the happiest results, Keleos had come to regard her with an absurd admiration. There was no use in appealing to him. Metanira's growing dissatisfaction was in fact expressed chiefly to the pots and pans, and in sudden unexpected slaps of which Iole and Rhodea bore the brunt. She admitted all Deo's good qualities, but because one did this there was no need to be blind to her faults. Metanira was not blind to them. She decided that of all human imperfections what she most disliked was secretiveness. It was not, she assured her husband, that she had the slightest wish to pry into Deo's affairs (though one would have thought that between two women more or less of the same age there might be *some* little show of confidence); it was——

Metanira never definitely stated *what* it was, so Keleos never quite understood. But if she did not wish to pry into Deo's secrets—then he did not see what she had to complain of. He himself did not believe there *were* any secrets.

That was because he was a man, Metanira told him. All women had secrets—including, if he cared to know it, his own wife. This last remark, however, was lost upon Keleos. He had passed the age when it might have aroused uneasiness. He merely pointed out how Demophon was flourishing under the new nurse's care, and Metanira could not deny it. The boy was growing in strength and beauty as she had never known a child to grow before. "Why does she want to sit up at night after everybody else has gone to bed?" Metanira demanded, choosing a safer point of attack. "When does *she* go to bed? Twice I lay awake on purpose to listen, and I never heard a sound. What does she do? And the fires she keeps up! They're not out even in the morning. Why should she waste so much wood?"

"Surely that is a small matter!" Keleos answered good-humouredly. "What are a few logs of wood—one way or another?"

Metanira had expected this reply. "You don't understand," she said impatiently. "Nobody grudges her the wood.... If there was any *sense* in it! But there isn't; and she might easily fall asleep and the whole place be set on fire. I've peeped through the door, and the room was as bright as day. We don't want to be all burned in our beds."

That night she tried again to lie awake and listen, but it was hard after the long toil of the day, and very soon she

fell asleep.

Her grievance remained alert. It entered into her dreams, and she dreamed of a long conversation with Deo, in which she boldly asked as many questions as she wanted to. In the morning this bravery had vanished.... And so it went on, till at last it seemed to Metanira that unless she could share *one* of these mysterious vigils with Deo her mind would never be at rest again.

On the very next night, summoning up all her courage, she resolved to do so. She entered with a rather tremulous excuse of sleeplessness, and sat down by Deo's side. The nurse took no notice of the excuse, nor indeed of Metanira's presence. And very soon poor Metanira wished she had not come. The hearth, as she had expected it to be, was heaped with great logs that blazed and crackled, shooting out fierce tongues of scarlet flame, like angry serpents, and filling the whole room with light and rapid shadows. The economical Metanira longed to extinguish the fire, but she dared not say a word. In front of it Deo sat motionless. She had taken Demophon from his bed, and he sat on her knees, wide awake and watching the flames, holding out his hands as if to encourage them. Surely he ought to have been asleep hours ago! To Metanira, watching him wistfully, he never once turned his head.

She had again that painful, humiliating feeling of supreme unimportance. And she felt incapable of drawing attention to herself by even the timidest speech; for alone here, in the great empty hall at night, with this mysterious nurse, her subconscious uneasiness had risen to the surface and had turned to fear. It was not that she could associate

any thought of evil with that stern silent figure beside her. It was almost, indeed, a holy dread, such as might be awakened by the loneliness of great plains and silent mountains, by the sea or the sky. And it seemed to Metanira that Demophon, little boy though he was, had somehow passed out of her reach, had passed from *her* small busy world into this other, vaster, more remote world, which was Deo's—that he was no longer her son, but the son of the woman who held him in her arms. Irrepressible tears rose in Metanira's eyes and flowed one by one down her thin cheeks. But she uttered no sound, made no complaint.

And presently, try as she would to keep awake, the drowsy coils of sleep began to steal like a heavy vapour into her brain. Through the gathering dimness, that grew ever denser and closer, she became aware of a shadowy form towering above her; then she ceased to struggle, and her soul was borne down and down, far below the level of consciousness....

When she opened her eyes dawn was breaking, and she was once more in her own bed in her own room. She would have liked to believe she had never left it—to believe she had only dreamed of that late visit—of Deo, and the child, and the fire. But she could not deceive herself; she knew it had all actually happened.... Keleos was yawning and muttering below his breath: he was up and dressing, moving about in the semi-darkness of the gray winter morning....

So the days slid by, till winter turned to spring, and the new tender herbage, like a delicate green mist, crept over the awakened earth, and over the dark boughs of the trees. The birds were abroad, happily building their small houses.

In the valleys were violets, crocuses, and hyacinths. Primroses decked the mossy banks of the water meadows, and the sweet fresh perfume of leaf and blossom mingled pleasantly with the salt smell of the sea.

Iole and Rhodea gathered baskets full of wild flowers, making the whole farm house gay with them. Demophon had attained his seventh birthday; and in face and body and limbs was lovely as a little God. He would sit in the swing near the oak tree, while Deo pushed it high and higher, and Tauros watched it till he grew tired of moving his old head from side to side. But when Iole pushed it, it only went a little way, and when Rhodea pushed it, it did not go at all.

Nobody could have imagined he had ever been ill. He laughed and shouted and played from morning till night. Even if he fell and hurt himself he did not cry. To simple-hearted Keleos it was a joy to watch him: only to Metanira there seemed something unnatural in that flawless physical perfection. It would have pleased her better had he, when he tumbled and cut his knees, come weeping to her for consolation; it would have pleased her better had she to find an excuse now and again for some passing fretfulness such as other children showed. How could she feel he was really hers when she could neither scold him nor comfort him?

And a new anxiety had arisen, for in these golden days of early summer Deo kept him for long hours out of doors, and they wandered deep into the woods, only returning when the evening shadows were stretching across the fields. Had she been able to watch them in their rambles, Metanira might have been more alarmed still. What kind of nurse was this, at whose touch a bright, new flower would spring up

out of the ground? Demophon would dance round it, shouting and clapping his hands. He, too, touched the grassy bank with a small finger in very careful imitation of Deo; but no flower sprang up, though he stood gazing in solemn expectancy. Then Deo, whom Metanira knew only as cold and stern and silent, would laugh and catch him in her arms and hold him close, breathing a divine sweetness about him, so that the flame of life in him was strengthened, and through all his body and limbs there glowed the dawning spirit of a God.

And sometimes in the very heart of the woodland, where a stream ran out from a rocky ferny cave, and the dark mossy ground was starred with red anemones, a visitor would come to them. He was a boy of fifteen or thereabouts. His thick hair was short and curly—so curly that it was like the little curls of astrakhan, except that it was yellow. The first faintest golden down had just touched his cheeks, and his bright eyes were the merriest Demophon had ever seen. He wore nothing but a big flat-brimmed country hat at the back of his head, and on his feet sandals with queer little wings attached to them. He carried a rod, and twining up this rod were two golden snakes. The moment he saw him Demophon felt happier than he had ever felt before.

This boy must be a boy Deo knew, for she was not a bit surprised to see him; but it was for Demophon he had come, and in two minutes they were friends. He was the most wonderful person in the world. He could make toys out of wood or clay or pomegranate skin; he made a pipe of hemlock stalks (binding the hollow stems with white wax), and when it was finished he showed Demophon how to blow

out of it musical sounds. He taught him how to throw a spinning quoit; he taught him how to run and leap and wrestle and box and swim; he turned the sylvan glade into a green gymnasium and Demophon himself into the smallest of small athletes.

They were the jolliest sports imaginable, though with his present instructor Demophon would have found any sport jolly. He had conceived for him a kind of worshipping admiration, and trotted after him whithersoever he led, filled with unbounded trust. He imitated this glorious leader in all his words and actions, sometimes so unsuccessfully that his hero would nearly die of laughing. But probably the leader was less careless than he seemed to be. Deo, at all events, was willing to trust them together far out of her sight and hearing, nor did Demophon's subsequent descriptions of hairbreadth escapes and reckless adventures bring more than a smile to her lips. Even when he told her how he had fallen out of the very top of an oak tree, and how the other boy had just managed to catch him before he reached the ground, she only made him promise that he would not attempt such feats when he was by himself. And once he asked her, "Is he my brother?"

She looked at him in surprise, for Demophon was quite old enough to know that brothers are not picked up in the woods in this haphazard fashion. He did know it. He himself did not understand why he had asked such a question; and the only explanation he could give was to repeat passionately, "I want him always—always."

Deo took him in her arms. "You queer little boy," she murmured, looking into his dark, shining eyes. "You are very

human after all.”

“I love him,” Demophon answered. “And I love you....” Then he added, as if the thought dimly troubled him, “I don’t think I love anybody else. Ought I to?”

“You love Keleos a little,” Deo said, “and Tauros.”

Next morning the woodboy brought a young ram on his shoulders. He gave it to Demophon, telling him it was a present for him, if he could keep it; and he watched him closely as he struggled to do so. Demophon struggled stoutly, very red in the face, till the ram suddenly butted him in the stomach. Then he tumbled over in the grass, and the woodboy laughed; but the ram ran away and was never seen again.

Demophon had learned to be nearly as silent concerning his doings as Deo herself, yet a chance word about this ram, the wooden boats, the Pan-pipes, and other similar treasures, set the parents asking questions, and then exchanging conjectures as to who the mysterious playmate might be. Keleos could think of nobody, but Metanira thought of Linos, the son of Phaleris, an idle, good-for-nothing boy, much given to wandering about the countryside, spying after the water nymphs, and the cause of endless trouble to his good old father and mother, who were decent hard-working people. In this way she created for herself a further grievance against Deo, who, characteristically, either could not or would not tell them anything. Nor was it removed when she discovered that the new playmate could not have been Linos, because Linos had run away from home early in the year, following a troop of dancers to Megara. The fact is, in Metanira’s heart, her first

feeling of gratitude to Deo had long since given place to jealousy. From now on she began to take wretched counsel with herself, and at last, in the name of prudence, to shape a secret plan.

Every night, as usual, she retired early with her husband to their bedchamber; but one night, as soon as she heard from his breathing that Keleos had dropped asleep, she got up, and wrapping a woollen fleece about her, sat down to wait. She was very patient, and not till she believed it to be past the middle of the night did she stealthily open her door. Then, like a ghost, Metanira glided into that room where the fire was burning with its great light. Before the hearth sat Deo, and kneeling on her knees was Demophon. His hands were clasped round Deo's neck, and she was anointing his body, though with what mysterious unguent Metanira could not tell. But as she stood there a sudden thought, and this time a quite new thought, came to her. It entered her mind, not as a suspicion, not as a possibility, but fully grown, as if some one had whispered it in her ear. Tales had reached her, as they had indeed reached all the world, of the witches of Thessaly, of their powerful charms which could raise furious storms on a cloudless night, or draw down the moon into a pail of water. And Metanira was convinced that she had been harbouring one of these baleful women in her house. She knew enough of their magic to know what unholy transformation followed on the anointment of their bodies. She half expected at that moment to see feathers sprouting on the body of Demophon, to see both nurse and boy taking flight in the form of screech-owls. It had been by magic, she now saw, that Demophon had been cured. It had