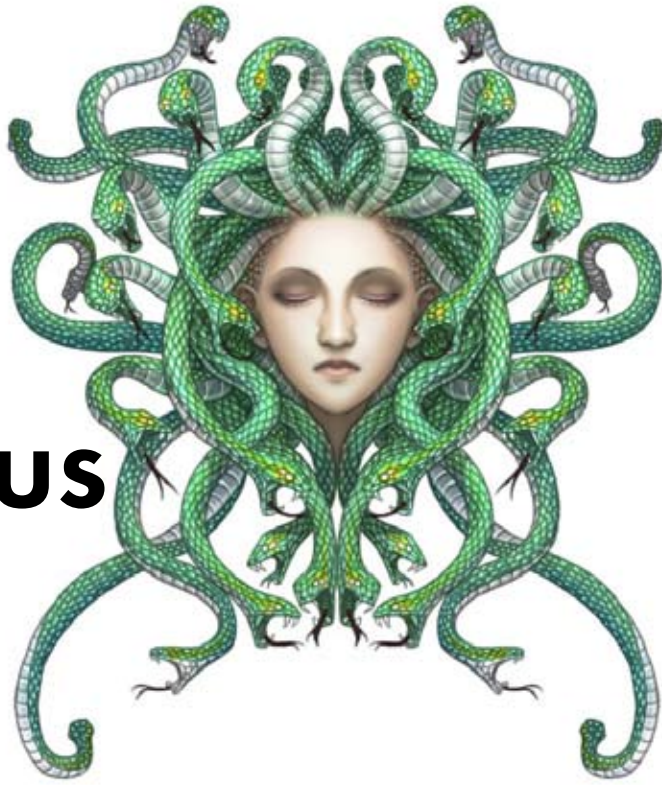


# Perseus



King Acrisius of Argos was uncertain in battle, unlucky in the hunt, and of fitful, flaring temper. He sat brooding in his throne-room.

“My daughter, Danae, grows tall and ripe,” he said to himself. “Her eyes fog over when I speak to her. She is ready for a husband, but am I ready for a son-in-law? I dislike the idea and always have. A son-in-law will be a younger man waiting for me to die so he can take the throne. Perhaps he will even try to hasten that sad event. Such things are not unknown. I loathe the idea of a son-in-law. But she is ready for a husband, and princesses must not be spinsters...a grave decision...I shall consult the oracle.”

## The Prophecy

He sent to the oracle at Delphi, and the messenger returned with this prophecy: “Your daughter will bear a son who will one day kill you.”

Acrisius had the messenger beheaded for bringing bad news and retired to this throne-room to continue his brooding.

“The auguries of the Pythoness are suppose to be immutable,” he said to himself. “But are they? How can they be? What if I were to slay my daughter now

while she is still childless; how then could she have a son to kill me? But, must I kill her to keep her childless? Is it not sufficient to forbid her male company all her days? Would I not be accomplishing the same purpose without calling upon my head the vengeance of the gods? Yes, that is a much better plan.”

Thereupon, he shut the beautiful young girl in a brass tower which he had specially built with no doors and only one window, a slit too narrow for a child to put an arm through. The tower was surrounded by a high spiked wall patrolled by armed sentries and savage dogs. Here Acrisius locked his daughter away, and so murderous was his temper in those days that no one dared asked him what had become of the laughing young girl.

Acrisius stayed away from the tower and waited for someone to bring him word that his daughter had died; however, the news he was waiting for did not come, and he wondered what was keeping her alive. How could a girl like that, a princess used to hunting, swimming, and running free on the hillsides, a girl who had never had her wishes crossed in her life – how could she stand this imprisonment?

He rode past the brass tower which glittered in the hot sunlight. The brass helmets of the sentries glittered as did the brass collars on the necks of the huge dogs. As he rode past, he tried to see through the slit, tried to glimpse her face looking out, but the brass glitter was so bright he could not see.

The King took to watching the tower from his own castle wall, but the tower was far away, across a valley on the slope of a hill. The tower was only a splinter of light, but it seemed to glow more and more hotly until it hurt his eyes. One night he could not sleep so he went out on his castle wall in the night wind and looked out across the valley. It was a black night – no moon, no stars. The hill was only a thicker darkness. Then, suddenly, as if a torch were lighted, the tower burned clear, shining as brightly as if it were day instead of night. But the tower was lit from the inside now – the brass walls flaring more whitely, like silver, casting a dim radiance over the valley and throwing the giant shadow of trees past the hill.

Amazed and fearful, Acrisius summoned his soldiers, leaped on his horse, and rode to the tower. As they galloped toward it, the light died, and the burning tower subsided into the hillside. He led his soldiers up to the black wall. The dogs were howling. The sentries recognized the king and opened the gate. He galloped through and rode up to the slit window. Then, through the snarling of the sounds and the clatter of weapons, he heard another sound, sudden as an arrow – the sound of a baby crying.

The brass tower had no doors, having been built with no doors, so now Acrisius bade his soldiers take sledges and batter the brass walls. When the wall was breached the king stepped through and entered his daughter’s cell. There in the torchlight he saw her sitting on a bench nursing a baby. She looked up at him

and, smiling secretly, said, “I have named him Avenger.” The word for avenger in Greek is “Perseus.”

The king’s first thought was to kill mother and child, but he had a second thought. “She must be under special protection of Apollo himself, perhaps, master of the Delphic Oracle, who does not wish his prophecies thwarted. I can die but once, true enough, but if she is being protected by the gods, and I kill her, then they will torture me through eternity. Well, we shall test the quality of her protectors.”

Acrisius ordered that Danae and the baby be taken from the prison and put in a wooden boat without sails, without oars, and without food or water. “Yes,” he said to himself, “we shall test the drift of events. If she is under divine patronage, the ship will be guided safely to harbor. If, on the other hand, it runs into misfortune, then, obviously, she is not being protected by the gods, and the accident of her death will bring upon me no high reprisal. Yes, I like this idea.”

Thereupon, the princess and her infant son were set adrift in an empty skiff without sails and without oars. Acrisius returned to his castle and went to sleep.

Danae sat up straight in the boat and tasted the night wind as it sang past her face and whipped her hair about her shoulders. The baby laughed for joy and reached his hands to catch the glittering points of the waves. All night they drifted, and the next day, and the next night. A light rain fell, giving them water to drink; a gull dropped a fish right into the boat, giving them food. On the second morning, Danae saw that they had drifted into the lee of an island. Fishing boats stood off shore, and the fishermen were casting their nets.

She shouted. One of the slender boats sailed toward them. The fisherman was a huge, bearded fellow named Dictys who took them on board and put into shore. He was amazed by the beauty of the girl and by the impudence of the baby who pulled boldly at his beard and gurgled, but did not cry.

Dictys took mother and child to King Polydectes of the island of Sephiros. Polydectes, too, was amazed at the beauty of the young woman. He called her daughter and offered her the hospitality of the island – a house to live in and servants to wait upon her – and paid Dictys the value of a month’s catch for the prize he had drawn from the sea.

## The Island

Perseus grew to be a strong, fearless lad. He loved to run, to swim, to hunt, to fight with the other boys. At night, lying near the fire, he loved to hear his mother tell stories that made his brain flame with excitement – stories of the gods, of heroes, of monsters, of battles, of transformations, and of strange loves.

She told him about the three sisters called the Gorgons who were very tall and beautiful with long golden hair and golden wings. She told of how the youngest

and most beautiful, named Medusa, flew into one of Athena’s temples to meet with Poseidon, risen secretly from the sea. Athena, learning of this, became enraged and wove a spell upon her loom; Poseidon, below, awakened to find that he was holding a monster in his arms. Medusa’s eyes bulged as if someone were strangling her, and a swollen blackened tongue forced her mouth open, showing the yellow fangs of her teeth. Her fingers and toes were brass claws; worst of all, each golden hair was now a live, hissing snake. Poseidon roared with fury, cast her aside, and dived into the sea. Medusa spread her wings and flew away, weeping, to find her sisters. She was so horrible to look upon that everyone who saw her face was turned to stone. So her sisters took her to a far place, a secret place, where they lived together plotting revenge upon Athena.

Perseus made his mother tell this story over and over again for, like many children, he was fond of stories that frightened him. Best of all, though, he liked to hear of the days when his mother had been shut up in the brass tower: how she had been so sad she thought she must die; how she would look out of the slit in the wall and see nothing but a single star; how she gazed at that star, magnified by her tears, until it seemed to fill the whole sky. Its light fell keen as a sword-blade through the blackness; and, as she watched, the blade of light flashed through the slit in the brass wall filling the dark chamber with a golden light. The gold pulsed, thickened, and gathered itself into a tall column of light and formed itself into the shape of a man, but such a man as she had never seen...taller than mortal man with golden hair and hot golden eyes, wearing gold bracelets on his mighty arm, and carrying a volt-blue zigzag shaft of pure light as other men carry spears.

She knelt before him. She knew he was a god, but he raised her up and said, “Yes, I am a god, but do not be afraid. I come as a man.”

“He rode the golden light every night into my dungeon,” she said to Perseus, “and was always gone by dawn...as the morning star vanishes when day begins.”

“And was he my father?” asked Perseus.

“He was your father. And some day he will return to me, I know. That is why I must not take another husband, for how can I love an ordinary man, remembering him?”

“So I am the son of a god?” said Perseus.

“Yes.”

“What does that make me?”

“A hero. Or a very great scoundrel.” She smiled and drew the boy to her. “But let us hope that you too will rescue maidens and thwart mad kings. Sometimes, as now, with the firelight in your eyes, you look quite like him, but not so tall, not so tall.”

So Perseus grew to manhood. He was the most splendid young man on all the island. He could outrace, outswim, outclimb, outfight any other lad on Sephiros; still, he raged at the peacefulness of the times because he wished to try himself

in battle.

Now there was one who had watched Perseus grow with great displeasure. King Polydectes, long in love with the beautiful Danae, was very eager to get rid of her fierce, young son so that he might compel her to marry him. He was a sly one, Polydectes, sly and patient and very cruel in his quiet way, and he made a skillful plan to rid himself of Perseus. He spread the news he was to marry a princess of another island and invited all the young men of Sephiros to the palace. There, he asked them, as was the custom, for gifts which he would bring to the bride.

“What she loves above all else is a fine horse,” he told the young men. “And I have promised her fifty splendid stallions. Will each of you select the best of his herd?”

All the young nobles promised, except Perseus, for he had nothing of his own, living as he did on the bounty of the king.

“Well, Perseus,” said Polydectes. “I hear nothing but silence from you. What gift will you bring? What do you offer your king and your host who has been so generous with you and your dear mother over the years?”

Polydectes had studied Perseus well and felt sure that the boy’s flaming pride would lead to some rash offer – that was the whole point of his pretended marriage and the gathering at the palace.

“I do not wish to embarrass you, Perseus,” he said. “I know that you do not have the resources of these other young men, but surely I can expect a token gift, a rabbit you might snare, perhaps, or a fish you might catch.”

“Oh, King,” cried Perseus. “Oh, Host and Benefactor, I owe you too much gratitude to repay you with the common gift of a horse. I shall bring you the head of Medusa!”

The throne-room rang with laughter, but Polydectes’ face was grave. “You choose to jest,” he said. “That is not courteous for a guest of such long standing.”

“I do not jest,” cried Perseus. “Promises are sacred to me. I will bring you the head of Medusa, or you can take my own. This is a pact of blood, Polydectes.”

Perseus turned and strode out of the throne-room. He went to a cliff overlooking the sea and, stretching his arms to the sky, said, “Oh, unknown father on Olympus – Zeus, or Apollo, or Ares, or whoever you may be who visited my mother in a shower of gold – grant your son one boon. Not the head of Medusa. I shall win that for myself, but I need to know where she is and how to get there. Please help me.”

He dropped his arms and stared at the blank sky, which seemed more blue and more empty than ever before. “Good day, brother,” he heard a voice say.

He whirled around. There stood a magnificent creature with a round hat, a laughing face, a jaunty beard, winged sandals, and a golden staff entwined with serpents. Perseus knew that it was the god, Hermes, and that he should fall on his

knees, but his knees would not bend, so he bowed instead.

“Our father, Zeus, is away on one of his trips,” said Hermes, “but in his absence I do some of his business so I am here to serve you. What is all this now about the head of Medusa?”

Perseus told him of the rash promise he had made to Polydectes.

“Rash, indeed,” murmured Hermes. “Foolhardy, in fact. It’s a family trait, I suppose. God-seed and human make a strange mixture, a ferment in the blood; leads to great exploits or great folly. But...folly itself can be the seed of exploit. Let us see what we can do.”

“I need...”

“Please, allow me to tell you what you need. First of all, I must tell you that sister Athena takes a special interest in your case. She is responsible for Medusa’s petrifying aspect, you know, and is a sworn enemy of the Gorgon sisters. She sends you these.”

Hermes reached into his pouch and pulled out a pair of Talaria, silver-winged sandals like those he himself wore. “She is not only a potent spinster,” he said, “but she cobbles magically, too. She made me my winged shoes, and now she has made you a pair. With these, you can fly more swiftly than an eagle. Now, listen, and I will tell you what to do. Set out today. Fly north. Search until you find the Gray Sisters. When you find them, you must force them to tell where you can find the Nymphs of the West; no one else can tell you. These Nymphs have in their keeping certain pieces of equipment which you will need to kill Medusa. Without these implements you must fail...Come down, Perseus! How can I speak to you when you’re up there? Come down. You can practice later.”

Perseus laughed with joy, turned a somersault in the air, then hovered above Hermes’ head, ankle-wings whirling like the wings of a humming bird.

“I heard you,” he cried. “I heard you. Gray Sisters, Nymphs of the West...their secrets will be my weapons. Thank you, dear brother. Thank you, Hermes. Thank Athena for me. Farewell.”

He turned so that the setting sun was on his left hand and sped away, shouting, “I can fly! I can fly!”

## The Quest

Gulls screamed, amazed, at the tall thing which flew but did not fish; falcons stooped for a closer look, then flew away; and Perseus flashed over the sea to where the land began again – a fair, rich land. He flew over fields of wheat and groves of olive trees, herds of sheep and cows, tiny villages and white cities. The land became wilder, and mountains stood up with only a few poor villages clinging to their sides. Behind the first mountains were taller crags topped with snow, the first snow Perseus had ever seen. He flew past these mountains, great

forests, a plain full of rivers, and another range of mountains where neither man nor beast was to be seen. A hailstorm raged, spitting hard sharp pieces of ice at Perseus so that he had to wrap his face in his cloak as he flew.

When the storm blew itself out, Perseus found himself over the sea again, a sea of ice, not flat but full of great billows and troughs as if it had frozen all at once during a gale. The sun was a huge pale moon peering heavily over the edge of the sky. The air was so cold he could hardly breathe.

Perseus heard a thin crackling, keener than the wind. He dipped and saw three hunched figures. Thereupon, he raised his arms, pointed his toes, and plunged to earth feet-first, landing among the three Gray Sisters. Three hags they were, very long and lean. They had been born countless years before time began and had grown older every day since. They had gray hair, never cut, so long it fell to the ground and dragged behind them as they walked. Their skin was gray; they wore no clothes, just their long gray hair; and their skin was tough and wrinkled as an alligator's. Their bare feet were like leather claws.

They sat in a close circle, scolding and jabbering and tittering. They kept snatching at each other's hands, and then Perseus saw that they had but a single eye and a single tooth for the three of them. They quarreled constantly, snatching the eye and tooth away from each other.

"Give me the eye!" cried one. "I want to see! My turn to see!"

"Give me the tooth – then you will see me, see me...you will see me smiling."

"I want the tooth for biting. If you take the tooth, then I must have the eye."

"And what will I have?"

Swiftly, Perseus stepped among them, shuddering as his hand touched their withered claws. He seized the tooth and eye and stepped back.

"Where's the tooth? Give me the tooth!"

"Where's the eye? Give me the eye!"

"It's my turn! You've had it too long!"

"My turn...my turn."

"I don't have it."

"I don't have it."

"I don't have it."

"Where is it?...Where's the tooth?...Where is it, where's the eye?...You have it...You must have it..."

"No, you, you..."

"I have it," said Perseus. "I have them both, tooth and eye."

"A stranger!"

"A thief!"

"A man!"

"A man! Give me the eye so that I may see him!"

"A man! Give me the tooth so that I may smile at him!"

"But he has them."

"Oh, yes, he has them."

"Give them back to us, young sir, so that we may see you and smile at you. Please?...Please?"

"I have your tooth and your eye," said Perseus, "and I will return them to you only in exchange for your secret."

"Our secret? What secret?"

"Where do I find the Nymphs of the West?"

"Oh, that secret. No, we may not tell. No, it's a secret within a secret, and they are for keeping, not for telling. We dare not tell. It's a Gorgon secret; they will rip us to pieces if we tell."

"You belong to the Immortals and cannot die," said Perseus, "so you will crouch here through the ages with no tooth in your mouth, no eye for your head. And while you may do without smiling or without chewing, you will soon be wanting your eye. Oh, yes...think how long and dark the moments are for two of you when the third sister has the eye. Think of your darkness now. Think of the torment of hearing a voice and not being able to see who is speaking, and it has only been a few minutes. Think then of these minutes stretching into hours, and the hours into days, and the days into months, and the months into years – dark years, endless, boring, heavy, dark years with mind and memory growing emptier and emptier..."

"Give us the eye, the eye! Keep the tooth, and give us the eye!"

"There is a little jelly in my hand. It lies between my thumb and forefinger. Just a bit of pressure, a bit more, and it will be crushed, useless, unable to see. I am impatient. I must have the secret. I must know where to find the Nymphs of the West. The secret! Quickly! My finger is pressing my thumb. The jelly trembles. Can you not feel the pain in your empty sockets?"

"Aieeee..."

"Stop!"

"Do not crush it! We will tell...We will tell..."

"Quickly then."

And speaking together swiftly, sobbing and tittering and sighing, they told him how to find the Nymphs of the West, who alone could give him what he needed to overcome Medusa.

Now who were these nymphs, and why were they the guardians of this secret? Ages past, when Hera married Zeus, Mother Earth gave her as a wedding present a tree that bore golden apples. Hera loved this tree very much, but after a while she found she could not keep it in her own garden for Zeus would steal the beautiful golden apples and distribute them as favors to the nymph or dryad or naiad or Titaness or human girl he happened to be courting at the time. Therefore, Hera took her magic tree and planted it at the very end of the earth, on the uttermost

western isle, a place of meadows and orchards of which Zeus knew nothing. Here it was that the Titan, Atlas, stood, shoulders bowed, forehead knotted, legs braced, holding up the end of the sky. It was the three daughters of Atlas, enchantingly beautiful nymphs, whom Hera appointed to guard the treasure. It was a wise decision. These lush and fragrant dryads made better guards than any dragon or three-headed dog or sea-serpent for such monsters could be killed or chained or outwitted, but no one could get past the nymphs. They danced among the trees and shouted enticing invitations to the marauder until he forgot all about his quest and came to dance with them. Then they would stroke him and give him wine to drink and dance in about in circles until he was so befuddled they could do what they chose with him. Then they would dance him to the edge of the cliff and push him into the sea. They did all this under the eye of their father, Atlas, who groaned occasionally under his burden, or stamped his foot, making the earth shake, or shrugged his shoulders, making comets fall. These strange storms of the Titan's grief gave the island a bad name; fishermen avoided it, and sailors. Other dark secrets came to be buried here with the Nymphs of the West, and they guarded them with the same fatal skill with which they guarded the golden apples. So it was that they held the Gorgon secret.

Now, following the directions of the Gray Ones, Perseus flew west. He flew and flew over a strange misty sea until he saw the mighty hunched figure of Atlas holding up the sky. Then he dipped toward earth. The nymphs were dancing when a shadow flew over the grove.

"It's Hermes!"

"Welcome, sweet Herald! Welcome, dear cousin!"

"Come down! Come quickly! Tell us all the news!"

Perseus came lower and hovered a few feet above the ground.

"He's not Hermes!"

"But he has Hermes' sandals. Hermes has a helper! Oh joy!"

"Not a god at all, a man! A lovely young one. All fresh and clean and lovely."

"Come down, man!"

"Come play with us, stay with us..."

"Come dance with us."

"You must be a great thief to steal Hermes' sandals; come tell us how you did it."

"Come down...Come down..."

Still standing on air, Perseus bowed. "Nothing would give me greater pleasure than to dance with you and tell you stories, but I have a promise to keep first, a promise to keep, weapons to get, an enemy to kill."

"Oh, you foolish men with your ridiculous quests, your oaths and enemies and impossible voyages. When will you learn to eat the fruit and spit out the pits and sleep without dreaming in the arms of your beloved? Have you ever slept in a

woman's arms, sweet young sir?"

"My mother's."

"Your mother's...Good for a start, but not enough, not enough. Come kiss us, lad – we need kissing. It has been a dry summer."

"I cannot kiss you know," said Perseus. "Even up here I smell your apple-blossom scent, and grow bewildered, and almost forget who I am. What then if I were to come close and touch your apple-ruddy skin and drink your cider breath? I would grow drunk as bees among honey suckle, lose my sting, and forget my oath. Please help me, Nymphs. Do not bewilder me."

"Come down...stop this talking, and come down...Forget your quest, we'll give you something better. Come down..."

"Look, you lovelies," said Perseus. "My father was Zeus who wooed my mother as a shaft of fire, a fountain of light. My birth was strange, and the auguries thereof. Deeds are my destiny, adventure my profession, and fighting my pleasure. Unless I fight and win, I am no good for love either. Have you ever seen a rooster after he is beaten in a fight? His comb sags, he is unfit for love, he disappoints his hens. Tell me your secret. Give me what I need to fight Medusa. Tell me where to find her, and I will go there. By the gods, I will come back with her head in my pouch. Only then I will be fit for you, beautiful ones. I will come back and tell you the tale of my battle, and other tales too, and dance with you, and do your pleasure."

"He speaks well, sisters. He must be the son of a god."

"He is our cousin then. We owe him loyalty."

"The Gorgons are our cousins, too."

"But so ugly. So ugly and so foul. I prefer this handsome new cousin."

"Yes, I like this one, this flyer with his bright yodel and silver spurs. He will keep his promise, I know. He will come back and treat us most nobly."

"Let us tell him...quickly...the sooner we tell, the sooner he will go, and the sooner he will return."

"I smell rain on the wind. With any luck, the clouds will come and hide the eyes of Father Atlas so he cannot see us dance with the stranger and grow jealous."

"Quickly, then..."

They ran to Perseus and, seizing his ankles, pulled him down, and clung to him, kissing and whispering. He grew dizzy with their apple fragrance and the touch of their smooth hands and the taste of their lips, but they were not trying to befuddle him now, only to touch him because they were unable to reveal anything to anyone they could not touch. And when he put their whisperings and murmurings together he learned what he had to know about where the Gorgons dwelt and how to find Medusa.

Then they pulled him to a huge tree whose twisted roots stood half out of the ground. They searched among these roots and gave him three things: a shield of

polished bronze, bright as a mirror, and he was told that he must never look at Medusa herself but only at her reflection in the shield; a sword, sickle-shaped, slender and bright as the new moon; and, lastly, a Cap of Darkness – when he put it on he disappeared altogether, and they had to grope about to catch him and to extract three kisses each for the three gifts.

He took off his Cap of Darkness and rose a bit in the air, gleaming with happiness. “Thank you, sweet Nymphs. Thank you, beautiful cousins. With these gifts I cannot fail.”

“Will you keep your promise?...Will you come back and tell us your story?... Will you come back to dance and play?...Will you come back another day?”

“Farewell...Farewell...” cried Perseus. He rose to the top of the trees, smiled at the sight of Hera’s golden apples shining among the leaves, and resolved to steal one when he came back to take home to his mother. Then he soared away past Atlas’ angry face, scowling back at him; he flashed past the mighty shoulder of the Titan and flew northward again, following the outer rim of the earth.

With the Cap of Darkness on his head, invisible as the wind, Perseus followed the curve of the dark sea that girdles the earth until he came to the Land Beyond – the Land of the Hyperboreans where the sea is a choked marsh, and the sky is low and brown, and the weeds give off a foul stench. Here, he had been told, was where the Gorgons dwelt.

He came to earth, picked his way through the rattling weeds, and came to a kind of stone orchard which looked like one of our own graveyards, a grove of statues. Looking closer, he saw that they were the old, worn-down stone figures of men and beasts; he realized that he was looking at those who had seen Medusa’s face and had been turned to stone between one breath and the next. There was a stone child running, a stone man dismounting from a stone horse, and stone lovers, touching. Perseus closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He drew his new-moon sword, held it ready, and raised his bright shield. He had to judge all his movements by the weight of things because the Cap of Darkness made him invisible even to himself.

Now, going silently as he could, he made his way among the terrible stone figures until he heard a sound of snoring. He stood still and looked. Glittering in the muddy light were brass wings. He raised his shield now, not daring to look

directly, and held it as a mirror and guided himself by the reflection. In a covering of weeds lay three immensely long, bulky shapes. He saw brass wings and brass claws. Two of them slept as birds sleep with their heads tucked under their wings. But the third one slept with her face uncovered. Perseus saw the hair of her head stand up and writhe as he looked into his mirror shield, and he knew that it was Medusa. He felt the roots of his own hair prickling with horror as if they too were turning into snakes.

He kept the shield in front of his face and walked backward. The head of Medusa grew larger in the shield. He saw the snakes swelling, writhing furiously, darting their tongues, biting each other in their fury at the stranger’s approach so that their blood ran like sweat over her forehead. He tilted his shield to keep her head in the center because he was directly below him now. He smelled the terrible stench of the bleeding snakes. Then he raised his sword, and, guiding himself by the reflection, struck a savage downward backhand blow, feeling the horror, anger, pride, and pleasure of battle mingling in him like a mighty potion, firing him with the furious triumph of the deed done at the very moment of the doing. His sword whipped with a magical momentum, shearing its way through the snakes, through the thick muscles and tendons, through the lizard toughness of her hide, through bone and gristle and sinew, striking off the monster head as a boy whips off the head of a dandelion in the field.

Swiftly, he stooped, scooped up the head by its limp dead snakes, stuffed it into his pouch, and stood amazed for where her blood had fallen, two creatures sprang up, a warrior holding a golden sword and a beautiful white horse with golden mane and golden hooves and astounding golden wings. They were Chrysaor and Pegasus, children of Poseidon, whom Medusa had been unable to bear while she lived as a monster, and who had grown full-size in her womb.

But Perseus did not stop to look as the sisters were waking. He sprang into the air and flew off as fast as he could. The Gorgons, without losing an instant, spread their brass wings and climbed into the air and sped after him, howling. He wore the Cap of Darkness, and they could not see him; however, they could smell the blood of the cut-off head and followed the spoor like

hounds of the air, howling. He did not dare look back but heard the clatter of their brass wings and the snapping of their great jaws. Athena, however, had cobbled well, magically well. His sandals carried him faster than the Gorgons could fly.



He drew away from them until he heard only a very faint tinkle and a cry like wind-bells chiming. Then he lost them altogether.

## The Return

Perseus had his prize. Medusa's head was wet and fresh in his pouch, and he was eager to get back to Sephiros to boast to his mother and make Polydectes eat his words, but first he had promises to keep.

Therefore, he flew back to the Island of the Hesperides and danced with the three Apple Nymphs. All night, they danced in the orchard. They danced him as they had never danced a marauder before. They whirled him among the trees, one after the other, then all together, faster and faster. He grew drunk as a bee on their apple fragrance, their ruddy skin, and their petal touch. He was a hero! He had just finished his first quest, killed his first enemy. He was drunk on triumph too, strong with joy. He danced and strutted and gleamed. When dawn came, he saluted it with a great bawling golden-voiced challenge. He celebrated like a hero, and the nymphs were so giddy with pleasure that they watched him helping himself to a golden apple from Hera's tree and only smiled.

But now the ground trembled. The sky growled thunderously. It was full morning now. The mist that had been hiding the eyes of Atlas had blown away, and the Titan looked down and saw his daughters enjoying themselves in the orchard, a sight he could not endure. He stamped his foot and made the earth shake, roared thunderously, and shrugged his shoulders making comets fall, huge flaming bolts of rock that bombarded the orchard, setting fire to the apple trees.

Perseus' blood rose as murder sang in his heart. He flew straight toward Atlas' mighty face, poised there before the gargantuan frown, and, standing on air, opened his pouch and drew out Medusa's head. The Titan turned to stone. He was a mountain now, holding up the western end of the sky. It is a mountain still this day – Mt. Atlas.

"Farewell!" shouted Perseus. "Farewell, sweet cousins, beautiful nymphs. Farewell, my apple-lovelies."

"Will you come again? Will you come again?..."

"Will I not?" cried Perseus. "Every mid-summer I will return, and we will do the orchard dance again until the trees flame. Farewell..." and he flew away.

Southward he flew, then eastward. He crossed a desert; and now, far below, he saw the first gleam of that matchless blue that belonged to his own sea. But as

he followed the Philistine shoreline which is the eastern boundary of that sea, he saw a very strange sight: a naked girl chained to a rock and, pushing toward that rock, the huge blunt head of a sea monster. The shore was black with people, an ant-swarm of people, watching.

He came lower and saw that the girl was wearing magnificent jewels. She was not weeping, but gazing straight ahead, blankly. On the shore, in front of the crowd, stood a tall man and woman wearing crowns. Perseus took a quick look and saw that the monster was still some way off. He dropped to earth and, taking off his Cap of Darkness, spoke to the man wearing the crown, "Who are you? Who is the girl, and what is the sacrifice? Is it a private ceremony or one decreed by the gods? My name is Perseus, and I wish to know."

The Queen put her face in her hands, and wept. The King said, "I am Cepheus, king of Joppa. This is my wife, Cassiopeia, and that unfortunate girl is my

daughter, Andromeda. My wife, foolish, boastful woman was vain of her beauty and that of our daughter – not without reason, as you see – but she took it into her head to praise herself among the people, saying that she and Andromeda were more beautiful than any Nereid, who, as you may know, are very jealous and enjoy the patronage of Poseidon. So they went weeping to the god of the sea, saying my wife had insulted them and demanding vengeance. Poseidon sent that sea serpent, longer than a fleet of warships, whose breath is fire, to harry our coast, destroy our shipping, burn out villages, and devour our castle. I consulted the oracle who told me that the only way I could wipe out my wife's offense was to sacrifice my daughter. But I am king, and private woe must yield to public welfare. Therefore, you see her, the lovely innocent child, bound to the rock, and the beast swims near, swims near..."

Perseus said, "When public welfare battens on private woe, there is a great disorder in events, a filthy confusion that needs the cleanliness of a sword. Poseidon is my uncle, King, and I feel free to play with his pets."

Perseus heard the water hiss, saw spouts of steam rise as the monster's scorching breath ruffled the surface and made the sea boil. He knew they had spoken too long. Without waiting to put on his Cap of Darkness, he drew his





sword and leaped into the air. Over the beast's head he flashed and fell like lightning, right onto the great scaly back. He rode the monster there, in the water, hacking at the huge head with his new-moon sword until the flames of the beast's breath were laced with blood, and the great neck split like a log under the woodman's ax.

The monster sank. Perseus flew off his back, dripping wet, flew to the rock, struck away Andromeda's chains, lifted her in his arms, and bore her gently through the air to where her mother and father stood.

"Here is your daughter," said Perseus, "but only briefly, very briefly, for I claim her as my bride."

"As your bride?" shouted Cepheus. "What do you mean? Do you think I shall give my daughter, Andromeda, the most richly dowered princess in the East, to an unknown vagabond?"

"I may be a vagabond," said Perseus, "but I shall not long be unknown. If you were not going to be my father-in-law, Cepheus, I should explain to you what kind of fool you are. For the sake of family harmony, however, I forbear. You were content to serve your daughter up as dead meat to this monster as the price of your wife's vanity because he came well-recommended, but you refuse to give her, warm and alive, to him who slew the monster. And why? Simply because it is unexpected. Father-in-law or not, you are a fool, Cepheus, a pitiful fool. If by word or deed you seek to prevent me from taking your daughter, you will be a dead fool. I do not ask your leave; I am announcing my intention. Say goodbye to your parents, Andromeda."

Perseus lifted her in his arms again and flew away.

When he landed on Sephiros, he was amazed to find the island deserted. His mother was not at home, nor was anyone in the village. He hurried to the castle and found it blazing with light. There was a clamor of shouting and laughter and a clatter of weapons. He forced his way through a crowd of revelers, and entered the throne-room.

There he saw his mother, deathly pale, but loaded with jewels, sumptuously garbed, her beautiful bare white arm in the swarthy clutch of Polydectes. Now Perseus understood that the king had taken advantage of his absence to force Danae to marry him. He had returned just in time.

His great voice clove the uproar. "Polydectes, ho!"

All voices ceased. The king stood rigid, staring at him, his face fixed in an amazed snarl. Perseus saw him gesture to his guards. They drew their swords and stepped forward, twenty of them.

"I have brought you your gift, Polydectes," said Perseus. "Your wedding gift. Remember? Different bride, same gift."

He put his hand into his pouch. "Mother!" he shouted. "Close your eyes!"

He drew out the head of Medusa, and the throne-room became a grove of statues.

Stone guards stood with stone swords upraised. One held a javelin, about to plunge it into Perseus' back. A statue of Polydectes, mouth frozen in a scream. Among all the frozen shapes of terror and wrath, the white beloved trembling figure of his mother, Danae.

He put the head in his pouch, stepped to Danae, and took her in his arms. "Be happy, mother," he said. "I am home now. Your danger is a dream, your enemy has become his own monument."

"It is the gods," she whispered. "Their whim is implacable; their caprice, our fate. Look, Perseus..." She led him to one of the stone figures. A bearded old man wearing a crown.

"Who is that?"

"Your grandfather, Acrisius, one of the guests, attending the nuptials of a fellow-king. He did not know that I was the bride."

"Your father? He who shut you in the tower?"

"Shut me there to thwart the prophecy...that his grandson would kill him."

"Delighted to oblige," said Perseus. "I never did fancy his style. Shut you up in a dungeon...Met another parent like that recently. Oh, that reminds me. Come home. I want you to meet your daughter."

It was Perseus' own wedding night, but before he received his bride, he went to the temple of Athena and the temple of Hermes to thank them for what they had done. He made them gifts. He gave the bright shield to Athena, a very curious shield now, permanently emblazoned with the reflection of Medusa's head which had burned itself on the metal; the Cap of Darkness he returned to Hermes. He very much wanted cap and shield for himself, but he knew that gods who give gifts expect a rich return.

However, he did keep the winged sandals and the new-moon sword. He knew that his deeds had just begun and that he would have a great deal of traveling and fighting to do in days to come.

As for Medusa's head, it was too dangerous to keep. He threw it into the sea. It sank to the bottom, where it still rests, pushed here and there by the tides, passing islands, making coral wherever it goes.