

# Contents

The Gods of Greece .....	5
Deucalion and the Flood .....	13
Cadmus and the Dragon's Teeth .....	15
Perseus .....	19
Heracles and His Labors.....	23
Jason and the Golden Fleece .....	29
Theseus .....	33
Agamemnon, King of Men.....	37
Achilles, Bravest of the Greeks .....	41
The Adventures of Odysseus.....	45
Lycurgus (825 B.C.) .....	53
Draco and Solon (638-559 B.C.) .....	55
Pisistratus the Tyrant (605-527 B.C.) .....	59
Miltiades, the Hero of Marathon (490 B.C.) .....	61
Leonidas at Thermopylae (480 B.C.).....	65
Themistocles (died about 453 B.C.).....	69
Aristides the Just (died about 468 B.C.).....	73
Cimon (died 449 B.C.).....	75
Pericles (495-429 B.C.) .....	79
Alcibiades (450-404 B.C.).....	83
Lysander (died 395 B.C.).....	87
Socrates (470-399 B.C.) .....	89
Xenophon (430-357 B.C.).....	93
Epaminondas and Pelopidas (418-362 B.C.) .....	97
Philip of Macedonia (382-336 B.C.) .....	99
Alexander the Great (356-323 B.C.).....	101
Demosthenes (384-322 B.C.).....	107
Aristotle, Zeno, Diogenes, and Apelles .....	111
Ptolemy (283 B.C.) .....	113
Pyrrhus (319-272 B.C.).....	115
Cleomenes III (235-221 B.C.) .....	117
The Fall of Greece (146 B.C.) .....	121
Pronunciation Guide .....	123

# PERSEUS

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## I

IN a Grecian city named Argos lived beautiful Danaë, the king's daughter. An oracle warned the king that he would be killed by Danaë's son. To save his life, he ordered Danaë and her child, Perseus, to be shut up in a chest and cast adrift on the Mediterranean Sea.

For two days and nights the chest floated on the water. At the end of that time it struck against some rocks on the shore of an island called Seriphos. There was a little opening in the side of the chest and peeping through it, Danaë saw a man coming over the rocks toward her. As soon as he was near enough, he threw a fishing net over the chest and drew it ashore.

He broke the chest open, let Danaë out, and told her that she had landed upon an island ruled by his brother, Polydectes. His own name was Dictys. He then took Danaë and her child, Perseus, to his home.

Years went by and Perseus grew to be a strong and handsome man. Danaë was still a beautiful woman and Polydectes fell in love with her. She refused his love, and Perseus also was unwilling to allow him to marry her. Then Polydectes told Perseus that he was about to marry and that he wished to give the head of the Gorgon, Medusa, to his bride for a present. Perseus promised to get him the Gorgon's head, which pleased Polydectes. He did not want

the Gorgon's head, but asked for it because he believed that the young man would never return alive if he went in search of it.

The Gorgons were three horrible sisters who lived on a distant island near the land of the setting sun. Their hair was a nest of snakes that hissed at all who came near them. They had wings of gold and claws of brass. Two of them were immortal, but the youngest, Medusa, was mortal. Her face was that of a beautiful woman, but never free from a frown. Whoever looked upon it was turned to stone.

When Perseus had made his promise, he went out from the palace and sat on the cliffs of Seriphos. While he was gazing at the white-capped sea, Hermes, the messenger of the gods, appeared before him and promised his help and that of Athena, the goddess of wisdom, who would lend her shield. Hermes offered his sword of light. Both agreed to guide Perseus to the land of the setting sun where the three Gray Sisters lived. These sisters would tell him the way to the home of the Hesperides. The Hesperides were beautiful nymphs who had three magic treasures which Perseus must get before he could reach the land of the Gorgons.

Leaving Seriphos, Perseus began his long journey to the land of the setting sun. When he arrived there he found the three Gray Sisters. They were the strangest beings that

he had ever seen. They had among them only one eye and one tooth, which they passed in turn from one to another.

When Perseus reached their dwelling, the door was wide open, so he walked in. He was overjoyed to find the three sisters all taking a nap, with their one eye and one tooth lying beside them. He quickly seized both these treasures. That done, he awakened the sisters and inquired of them the way to the home of the Hesperides. At first they refused to tell him, but when they found that he had their eye and tooth, they quickly told him how to go. Perseus then gave them back the eye and the tooth.

It did not take him long to reach the home of the Hesperides, an island in the Western Ocean. The nymphs had been told by Athena that Perseus was coming, so when he arrived they gave him welcome and agreed to lend him their magic treasures.

"The distance across the sea to the home of the Gorgons is great," said one of the nymphs to Perseus. "Take therefore these winged sandals of gold. With them you can fly through the air like an eagle."

"The Gorgon's head," said another of the nymphs, "must be kept in this magic wallet, lest you look upon the terrible face and be turned to stone."

"To get near the Gorgons," added the third, "you must wear this cap of darkness, so that you may see without being seen."

The hero then slung the wallet over his shoulder, put the sandals upon his feet and the cap upon his head, and vanished. As swift as lightning, he crossed the dark waters and reached the home of the Gorgons. They were all asleep. Without looking at them, Perseus held up the shield of Athena and saw reflected upon it the frowning face of Medusa. With one blow

from the sword of Hermes, he struck off her head and without looking at it, placed it within his wallet. Then he hurried away from the weird place.

The other Gorgons awoke at once and followed Perseus in furious haste but, as he wore his cap of darkness, they could not see him. With his sandal wings he flew so fast that he was soon too far for them to follow.

## II

AS Perseus was flying along the coast of Africa he heard the sound of weeping. He looked down and saw a beautiful girl chained to a rock at the water's edge. Hastening to her, he took off his cap of darkness that she might see him and exclaimed, "Fair maiden, why are you chained to this rock?"

"Alas!" she said, "I have been offered as a sacrifice to Poseidon. You cannot save me, however much you want to."

Her words made Perseus all the more determined to help her. "Why is Poseidon angry?" he asked. "And who has dared to treat you so cruelly?"

"I am Andromeda, daughter of Cepheus and Cassiopeia, king and queen of this land," replied the maiden. "My mother boasted that I was more beautiful than any nymph in Poseidon's palace. Her pride enraged Poseidon so that he raised great storms and sent a terrible monster to devour our people. The priests said that if I were offered to him the rest of the people would be spared."

Then with the sword of light Perseus cut the chain which bound Andromeda to the rock. At this moment the monster, huge and ugly, came plowing through the water. Perseus could not be seen because he had put on his cap of darkness and before the creature could harm the





Perseus with the Gorgon's head.



maiden, its head was cut off by the sword of light.

On his swift-winged sandals, Perseus, with Andromeda in his arms, now flew to the palace of Cepheus and Cassiopeia.

There had been many glad weddings before that of Perseus and Andromeda, but none was ever more joyful. For he was admired as a wonderful hero, and everyone loved the girl who had been willing to give her life to save her people.

After the wedding Perseus went back to Seriphos, taking Andromeda with him. When he reached the island, Polydectes was in his palace feasting, and Perseus hastened at once to the banquet hall and said to the king, "See! I have brought that which you desired."

With these words he held up the head of the Gorgon. The king and his courtiers gave one look and were instantly turned to stone.

The Gorgon's head had now done its work, so Perseus carried it to a temple of Athena and there offered it to the goddess. Ever after she wore it upon her shield, and its snaky ringlets and frowning face can be seen on her statues. The sword of light was given back to Hermes, who also returned the winged sandals, the

magic wallet, and the cap of darkness to the Hesperides.

### III

YOU will remember that Argos was the birthplace of Perseus and to that city he returned, taking Andromeda with him. His grandfather, who was still king of Argos, remembered the oracle that he should die by the hand of Danaë's son and was much alarmed. But Perseus quieted the fears of the king, and the two became very good friends. While playing quoits one day, however, Perseus accidentally hit his grandfather with a quoit. The wound caused the old king's death, and thus, as the Greeks used to say, "What had been fated came to pass."

Perseus was overwhelmed with sorrow. He could not bear to live any longer at Argos and therefore gave his kingdom to a kinsman of his, in exchange for the kingdom of Tiryns.

At Tiryns Perseus ruled long and wisely. The gods gave him and Andromeda a glorious place among the stars after their death. With Cepheus and Cassiopeia they can still be seen in the skies not far from where the Great Bear shines.

