

The Story of Perseus

THERE was once a princess named Danae, and she had a little baby boy whom she called Perseus. The little boy's father was far away, and Danae had no one to take care of her and her child.

One day, some cruel people put Perseus and his mother into a boat, and set them adrift on the great wide sea. They floated about for many days, and Danae held her little boy close, and sang him sweet lullabies, to keep him from crying at the great waves that every now and then swept over the little boat.

She thought that they both would die; but somehow the frail little bark did not upset, and one day a large wave carried it upon an island, where it rested on the sloping shore. There some kind people found them, and gave Danae and her little boy a home. The mother and son lived there for many years, until Perseus was no longer a little baby boy, but a brave, fearless young man.

Now the king of the island was a wicked and cruel man, who for some reason hated Danae and Perseus, and wished to get rid of them.

So he planned some means of getting Perseus out of the way, for the wicked king knew that if the boy were gone he could easily do what he liked with the mother. At last he thought of an adventure that would please Perseus, and, at the same time, be so dangerous that the youth, he felt sure, would never come back to his home. On an island, in the middle of the ocean, on those shores the fierce waves beat all day long, there lived three terrible sisters known as the gorgons. They were half women and half dragons. They had beautiful faces, but their bodies were so hideous that one could think of them only as ugly monsters. Instead of skin, they had large scales; their hands were made of brass; but most horrible of all, in place of hair on their heads, there writhed hundreds and hundreds of poisonous snakes, with open mouths and hissing tongues. Not very pleasant creatures to meet, you may well say. With one blow of their tails or of their brazen hands, they could have crushed poor Perseus to atoms. But worse than that, worse even than the deadly bite of the snakes, was the power of their fierce eyes; for whoever looked a Gorgon in the face, was immediately turned to stone. Of the three, the most terrible was Medusa and the task that the king had thought of giving Perseus was nothing less than cutting off Medusa's head, snakes, and all.

Since merely looking at the Gorgon would turn Perseus to stone, and he could not very well cut off her head without looking, the king was pretty safe in thinking that Perseus would never return to the island.

So he sent for the boy, and when he stood before him, began to praise his boldness and courage, of which, he said, he had heard so much. Perseus, of course, was flattered by these words of praise, and replied, "Indeed, O King, I think there is

no task from which I would shrink in fear.”

The king was delighted, and said, “If I thought that, my boy, I would let you undertake a task that I am saving for the bravest man in my kingdom.”

“And do you think me worthy of this honour?” cried Perseus, in great delight.

“You may try it, if you like,” answered the king. “It is to bring me the head of Medusa, with its snaky black locks.”

Perseus gladly agreed, and left the palace. Oh, how the wicked king chuckled over the success of his plot! In seeming to do the boy an honour, he thought he was really sending him to his death.

Now after poor Perseus left the palace, he began to think over his promise, and somehow the plan did not seem nearly so pleasant nor so easy as when he was talking with the king. The more he thought of it, the less he liked the idea. In the excitement of the moment, he had promised to do something that would surely cost him his life. When he had passed the gates of the city, he sat down under a tree by the roadside and began to think very soberly; but the more he thought, the more hopeless did his task seem. Perseus was a very brave youth; but the bravest person in the world would rather be alive than be turned to stone, and the thought of what would probably happen to him made him so sad that he could not keep the tears from his eyes. Suddenly a voice said, “Perseus, why are you weeping?” Perseus raised his head in surprise, and saw a mischievous-looking little fellow, with an odd-shaped cap, strange, winged shoes, and a staff, wreathed with serpents, on which he leaned as he spoke. It was no other than the swift-footed god Mercury, but this Perseus did not know. Still there was something so kind and comforting in the tone in which the queer-looking stranger asked the question, that, almost before he knew it, Perseus was telling him the whole story.

When he had finished, Mercury sat silent for a few moments, lost in deep thought, and then said, “My boy, you have undertaken a dangerous task, yet with my help you may succeed. But first of all, you must promise to do in all things just as I tell you.” Perseus promised, and in the next story you will hear whether or not he succeeded.

How Perseus went in Quest of Medusa's Head

NOW all the gods and goddesses had watched over Perseus ever since his birth, and when Mercury came to them and asked them to help the youth, they readily consented.

Pluto lent him his wonderful helmet, which made the wearer invisible; Minerva gave her shield which shone like gold, and was so bright that it reflected things as in a mirror; and Mercury himself gave his sharp, crooked sword and his winged shoes, with which Perseus could fly more swiftly than the fleetest bird.

All that Perseus now had to do was to find out the way to Medusa's island home, and the only people in the whole world who knew where that was were three sisters who lived together in a cave.

They were queer creatures, and the strangest thing about them was that instead of having two eyes each, as you and I have, there was but one eye for all three of them. They took turns in using that single eye; so that while one of them had the eye, the other two could see nothing at all; and while they were passing the eye from one to another, all three sisters were, for the moment, blind.

But such an eye as that one was worth much more than any other six eyes put together. With it the sisters could see what was going on in the farthest parts of the earth, and that was how they knew the way to Medusa's home.

To this cave, in which the three sisters lived, Mercury led Perseus, and after giving him some parting advice, hid himself in the grove near by, while Perseus stood just outside the cave, behind a bush, and waited.

By-and-by one of the women, with the wonderful eye in her forehead, came to the door of the cave. As she led her sisters by the hand, she told them of everything that she was seeing with the eye – strange things that were happening in countries far away.

They were interested for a while; but at length one of them grew impatient and said, "Sister, it is my turn to use the eye now. Give it to me."

And the third sister said quickly, "No, that is not true. It is my turn." And the middle one, who had the eye, cried out, "I pray you, sisters, let me keep the eye a little longer. I think I see some one behind that thick bush."

When Perseus heard these words, he trembled in his winged shoes. However, he need not have been afraid, for the sisters fell to quarrelling about the eye, and at last, the one who had it was forced to take it out of her forehead.

Now, at that instant, all three of the sisters were blind, and Perseus, seeing his chance, darted out and seized the eye. Then began a dreadful hubbub, each one of the three insisting that the other had taken the eye, and I do not know how it all would have ended, had not Perseus spoken.

“My good women,” he said, “do not be frightened. The eye is safe. I hold it in my hand this very moment.”

With a cry of anger the three sisters darted in the direction from which the voice came. But Perseus was too quick for them. On his winged feet he rose high in the air, and then, from a safe distance, called out, “You shall not have your eye back, my friends, unless you tell me exactly how to find the island on which Medusa lives.”

This was a secret with which the sisters would not have parted if they could have helped themselves; but the loss of their precious eye was a thing too terrible to think of. So after a few minutes, they told Perseus all he wanted to know, and he set their hearts at rest by clapping the eye into the forehead of the sister standing nearest him.

Then he flew back swiftly to the grove where Mercury was waiting, thanked him for all his help, and, after bidding him farewell, started out on his errand.

He flew over many lands and seas, until at last he came to the island where the terrible Gorgons lived. He dared not look down, even for an instant, for fear of being turned to stone. But Minerva’s bright shield served as a mirror, and, reflected in it, he saw the three monsters lying fast asleep on the shore beneath him.

He took his sharp, crooked sword, and, fixing his eyes on Medusa’s image in the shield, he darted down. With one thrust, he cut off the head of the sleeping Gorgon, and then flew up into the air again, holding the horrid head behind him.

The hissing of the snakes on Medusa’s head awakened her two sisters, and they started up to follow Perseus; but on account of Pluto’s helmet they could not see him, and he escaped with the head of snaky-locked Medusa.

Back over land and sea he flew, and he had many strange adventures by the way. When he reached the island where his mother lived, he went straight to their little cottage. He laid aside the shield, the helmet, the sword, and the winged shoes; and, after wrapping the head of Medusa in a cloth, went to greet his mother.

She was overjoyed to see her son, for she had long since decided that he must be dead. You see, it had taken a long, long time to reach the island where Medusa lived; for it was so far away that no one but the three sisters with their wonderful eye could tell how to reach it.

Perseus told his mother all that had happened to him, and, above all, how he had met fair Andromeda, which is the story I am going to tell you next. In return, he heard how cruelly the king had treated Danae during her son's absence; and vowed that he would take revenge.

The next morning he went to the palace. The king was more surprised than pleased to see Perseus, for he, too, had thought him dead. "Aha, Perseus!" he cried, "so you have come back without doing what you promised to do. Your courage is not so great as you would have us believe."

"Nay, your majesty," answered Perseus, "I have slain Medusa, and have brought you back her head."

"That you must prove by showing us the head," said the king, with a sneer; for, of course, he did not believe Perseus.

"Since your majesty insists, behold the head!" Perseus cried; and drawing it from the bag at his side, he held it aloft in all its horrid beauty. The king gazed at it an instant, with the sneer still on his face, and then sat motionless—turned to stone in all his royal state.

When the people heard what had happened, there was great rejoicing, for they had all feared and hated the cruel king. Perseus chose a better ruler for them, under whom they lived in peace and happiness.

Perseus knew that he owed his success to the help which Mercury and the other gods had given him, and he never forgot the debt he owed them. The head of Medusa he gave to Minerva. She was much pleased with the gift, and placed it in the centre of her bright shield. From that time on, wherever Minerva was seen in battle, there glistened her shield with the head of Medusa, turning to stone all who gazed at its horrid beauty.

How Perseus won a Wife

THIS is the story of the happy rescue of Andromeda by Perseus, which I promised to tell you next. It all happened after Perseus had slain Medusa, and when he was hurrying back to his island home.

In an island near Greece, there lived a beautiful woman whose name was Cassiopeia. Long after the time I am talking of, she was placed among the stars, and on a starry night anyone will show you Cassiopeia's Chair, brightly shining in the heavens.

But at the time of my story, she still lived on earth, and, as I said, she was very beautiful. She was also very vain of her beauty, and one day boasted that she was fairer than any of the sea nymphs. Now the sea nymphs were very fair indeed, and it angered them when Cassiopeia compared herself with them.

People in those days seem to have had very cruel ways of showing their anger. The nymphs sent a sea serpent to the island where Cassiopeia lived, and he did so much harm that everybody was in despair. At length the people went to their temple to consult the oracle.

This was an old custom among the people of long ago. In many cities there were beautiful temples built to the gods and goddesses; and in these temples dwelt priests who were supposed to be the oracles of the gods – that is, through them the gods spoke to human beings. If anyone was in doubt as to what he should do in time of trouble or wanted to know something that was to happen in the future, he would go to one of these oracle and offer up a sacrifice to the god, in return for which the oracle would utter words of warning or of advice.

When the men of this place went to their oracle to inquire why such trouble had come upon them the answer was, "Because of the vanity of Cassiopeia. If she will give up her daughter Andromeda to the serpent, the sea nymphs will be satisfied and the sea serpent shall trouble you no longer.

Great was the grief of the people at these words. Andromeda was so gentle and good that everybody loved her. Many thought her even more beautiful than her mother, for whose vanity she was to die.

And Cassiopeia herself? She would not believe the answer of the oracle. She rushed to the temple, and fell on her knees, and offered to make any sacrifice if the oracle would take back the cruel message – that Andromeda must be given as a peace offering to the sea serpent.

But the oracle repeated only the same heartless answer, – "If you wish your town and all the people to be saved from ruin, you must give up your daughter."

Then Cassiopeia went sadly home and locked herself in her room; for she could not bear to look her child in the face. Ah, how bitterly she regretted the vanity that had led to all the trouble, and how she hated that beautiful face of hers which had formerly given her so much pleasure!

Meanwhile, the sorrowing people led Andromeda to the seashore, and bound her with chains to an overhanging rock. Then they stood sadly round, waiting for the coming of the monster who was to devour the fairest and best of all their young maidens.

Andromeda herself pretended to be very brave, so as to lessen her poor mother's grief; but in truth she was much frightened, and she shuddered at the thought of the serpent's cruel jaws.

All were watching anxiously, when; suddenly, something black was seen above the water, afar off, – and they knew that it was the dreaded creature. Nearer and nearer came the serpent, lashing the water with its tail and snorting in a most horrible manner. Now it had almost reached the rock to which Andromeda was chained. The poor girl gave one terrified shriek; and all the people covered their eyes with their hands, for they could not bear to see what was to happen.

All at once something like a little black cloud came darting through the air, a crooked sword flashed an instant in the light, and then was buried in the monster's back.

Perseus, flying above the spot, had seen, a glance, the girl bound to the rock and the hideous creature raising itself to attack her. Quick a flash, he had darted down, and was now fighting a fierce battle with the monster.

The people watched the long combat with eager eyes. When Perseus at last pierced the serpent's heart and the ugly creature floated lifeless on water, such a shout went up from the shore that the hills round rang with the echo.

Then Perseus unfastened Andromeda's chain and led her to her parents. Such happy tears the people shed! And such rejoicing and praise of Perseus on all sides!

The hero became Cassiopeia's guest, and, after a few days, when he had seen that the rescued girl was as good and lovable as she was fair asked for her hand in marriage. As for Andromeda, she had loved Perseus from the moment she saw his crooked sword flash above the serpent's head, and so she gladly consented be his wife.

The girl's parents now began to prepare for wedding, and the whole village was invited to be present at the feast. Now there was an old man of whom Andromeda's parents were very much afraid. Some time before, he had asked for their daughter as

his wife, and the parents had been afraid to say no.

But the girl hated this old man, and that was another reason why she loved Perseus, who had saved her not only from the sea serpent, but from the man whom she dreaded quite as much.

The wedding day dawned at last, bright and sunny, and with great pomp and rejoicing Perseus and Andromeda were married. The people flocked to the tables that were spread with many good things, and the feast began.

When the merriment was at its height, suddenly the wide doors swung back, and the startled people saw, standing in the opening, an ugly, scowling, little man, holding a sword, and followed by a band of armed soldiers.

There was silence in the room, until at length the old man spoke: "Perseus, I have come to claim my promised bride, Andromeda. Give her to me peaceably, or else I and my soldiers will kill you all."

Andromeda was very much frightened and clung to Perseus in terror. Her husband laid his right hand on a bag which he wore at his side and said, "The one you call your bride, sir, is my wife, and no power of yours can take her from me."

"We shall see," was the old man's answer; and he started towards Perseus.

But in the middle of the room he came to a sudden stop, and stood there motionless, his sword raised to strike; for Perseus had lifted the terrible Gorgon's head, and instantly the old man was turned to stone, just as he stood.

When his followers saw what had happened to their master, they turned and fled from the house; and the merry-making went on as though it had never been interrupted.

After that Perseus took his wife to his island home, and there they spent many happy days together in his mother's little cottage.