

# PERSEUS AND MEDUSA

King Acrisius [uh-KRIS-ee-uhs] of Argos had one child, his daughter Danae [dan-AY-ee], who was good and beautiful. But Acrisius wanted a son, so he made a journey to the Delphic oracle to ask if he would ever be the father of a boy. The priestess said no, but his daughter Danae would have a son, and that son would kill him. To prevent this, Acrisius shut Danae up in a bronze underground apartment with an open roof to let in light and air. The poor prisoner was cut off from men, but Zeus, drawn by her beauty, came to her through the open roof in the form of a shower of gold and made her his bride. Then he left her. Time passed, and one day a messenger came running to Acrisius and panted out, "Majesty, a son is borne to your daughter!" The king, aghast and scared, had a big chest made. Danae and the baby boy, Perseus, were placed in the chest and set adrift on the sea.

By wind and wave they drifted to the tiny island of Seriphus. A fisherman, Dictys [DIK-tis], who was tending his nets, found the chest on the beach and released the prisoners. Dictys was a good man. He took the woman and the baby home to his wife. As they had no children of their own, they were delighted to have Danae and Perseus stay with them. Perseus grew up tall, strong, and athletic - in all ways a princely young man.

Dictys had a brother, Polydectes [paw-lee-DEK-teez], King of Seriphus, who was a cruel and wicked man. The lovely Danae and her handsome son drew his attention. He offered to marry the lady, but she, already the bride of Zeus, refused. Polydectes bullied her, but he feared Perseus. He developed a plan that he was sure would lead to the young man's death. He flattered the lad for his prowess at the games, his skill at boxing and with the discus. He told Perseus he was wasting his talents on Seriphus. There was a big world out there; he should go see it and do great deeds and become a hero.

"How could I become a hero? asked Perseus.

Polydectes replied, coolly, "Go kill the Gorgon. Medusa of the snaky locks, and bring me her head."

The king explained to Perseus that there were three sisters, called Gorgons, living somewhere far away in the west in the land of darkness. Two were very ugly, but Medusa was most beautiful. However, her hair of coiling serpents was so terrible the sight of it turned men to stone. No one knew exactly where these horrible sisters lived.

The hero needed all the help of the gods, and he got it. Athena gave him her strong shield, so highly polished it was like a mirror. Hades gave his helmet that made the wearer invisible. Hermes brought a pair of silver sandals with bright wings. They also gave him a special weapon, a sword with a curved blade, like a sickle. But there were no guidelines for him to get there. Athena told him he must find the Gray Sisters, who would tell him where to go.



Hermes was his guide for the first stretch of the journey. They flew over the seas to the black-earth country of the Cimmerians. In that wild twilight zone of the northern borderlands they found the Gray Sisters. They were like three old gray birds who had only one eye and one tooth between them, which they passed around. Perseus had to trick them into telling him what he wanted to know by stealing the eye; then he returned it to them with thanks. He and Hermes flew on, east of the sun and west of the moon, to the very limits of the earth: the back of the North Wind. This was the blessed land of the Hyperboreans, who lived happy in a climate of never-ending spring, feasting and dancing to the tunes of lyre and pipes. They gave Perseus a big leather wallet, which would always stretch to the right size for anything in it. So, with Athena's shield, Pluto's invisible helmet, Hermes' sandals, and his sickle sword, Perseus was ready for Medusa.

Alone now, he flew off to the far west and found the Gorgons' cave as the Gray Sisters had told him. Outside near the entrance were statues of men, their stone faces set in expressions of terror. With his back to the cave, Perseus kept his eyes on Athena's shield which, shining like a mirror, reflected the shapes of the Gorgons who were sleeping inside. Two of them were ugly things, though decorated in gold and bronze, with curved, cruel claws and huge teeth. They were immortals, and Perseus could have done nothing to them. But the third sister, Medusa, was mortal and beautiful, though a bit pale, and it would have been hard to find her in the darkness - except for the whispering sounds of the serpents that were her hair. Silently thanking the gods for the invisible helmet, Perseus backed into the cave, watching the images in the mirrored surface of his shield. Focusing on the reflection of Medusa's head, he rose a bit on the winged sandals, raised the sword above him, and Athena, who was always there at the right time, guided his hand. With one sweeping blow, the curved blade cut



off the snaky head, and Perseus dropped it into the leather bag, drawing the latches tight-but not before he had spilled some blood. From those drops sprang the winged horse, Pegasus. But Perseus was already in the air. The other two sisters woke up and ran raving and screaming after him, their golden wings clattering, bronze claws slashing. But Perseus, victorious, was gone.