

3

XVIII. *Jason*

We now come to one of the most wonderful stories, the Quest of the Golden Fleece; and I must tell you how it began.

Jason was the son of a man who was rightful king of a place in Thessaly: but the king's cousin, Pelias, took the kingdom for himself. The banished king could do nothing. A son was born to him, and he was afraid that Pelias might kill the child; so he pretended that the child was dead. The women set up a loud lamentation in the house, they beat their breasts, they tore their hair, as the fashion was; finally, they made a funeral, and draped the bier with purple, and pretended to bury the child. But what they really did was this: they put the child in charge of faithful persons, and sent him away secretly, by night, into the mountains, to the cave of the Centaur Cheiron. You remember Cheiron the Centaur, half man and half horse, who was the son of Cronos the old Titan; he had been trained in hunting and gymnastics—as far as a horse could manage—in music and medicine, and in the art of prophecy. He knew all about all the animals on the hills, and all the trees of the forest, and all the herbs of healing which grow in the ground. Indeed, he became the wisest of creatures, kind and good. He lived in a cave on Mount Pelion, with his wife and his old mother, and it was the custom to send young boys to him, like a sort of training school for the heroes. He taught all his boys to honour Zeus, and to honour their fathers, besides the arts I have mentioned. So to him Jason came; and there he remained for twenty years, learning to be a brave man, and a wise man.

Now Pelias was always uneasy in his mind. He knew

he had no right to be king, and he feared the gods might punish him; so he became more anxious than ever, when a strange oracle was given him by Apollo, "Beware of the man with one understanding!" He could not quite make out what this meant, and he brooded over it, as he was meant to do.

Then one day he heard everybody in the palace talking about a piece of news. "Have you heard?" they said. "A young fellow has just appeared in the market-place, a stranger. He is dressed in a close-fitting tunic, with a leopard skin thrown over it; he carries a pair of spears, and he has thick chestnut hair falling to his shoulders. Come and see!"

They came to see, but no one knew him. "A fine fellow, this!" they said. "He can hardly be Apollo, or the god of war, and those big boys, Otos and Ephialtês are dead, as we know. But who can he be?"

Pelias came to see also. He got into his mule-car, and came galloping along the street. When he saw the man, he was struck with fear; for he had one foot bare, and a boot on his right foot only, since he had lost the other in crossing a river. When Pelias saw this, he thought, "Here is the man with one understanding!" That is quite a good name for a boot, isn't it? No doubt Apollo meant to puzzle Pelias. And Pelias was very much afraid; but he hid his fear, and to hide it, he spoke very rudely to the young man. "Where do you come from, young stranger?" he said. "What old drab was your mother, what ditch were you born in? Tell the truth, and do not try to deceive me."

But Jason returned a soft answer. "Sir, I will show you what Cheiron's training is; for I come from his cave, and from the gentle breeding of his mother and his wife. Twenty years I have spent there, and I have never done a deed or said a word to make them ashamed of me. Now I come to my own home and claim the honour which is mine by inheritance. For I am informed that Pelias has robbed my father of his rights. And now can any of you kind people tell me where my father lives? I am Jason, the son of Aïson."

They led him to the place, and his father knew him, and wept for joy to see his beautiful son. Soon his two brothers came from their homes, and his cousins, and there was a

family feast. Jason did the honours; and after they had feasted and talked, he said, "Now for a serious word. Come with me to Pelias, and let us hear what he will say."

Straight from the feast they made their way to the palace; and there Jason said, still speaking gently:

"My lord, I do not complain or threaten. We ought to rule our passions, and so to act that happiness may follow. You and I are of the same race, and it is a shame for kinsmen to quarrel and fight. Keep your flocks and herds, keep your house and your wealth; but give me the sceptre and the throne which belonged to my father, that no violence may arise between us."

Pelias answered, "I will do as you wish. I am old, and you are young, and you may be able to quell the anger of the gods below. For Phrixos bids me bring him home, and the golden fleece of the ram which saved him. That is what he tells me in a dream; I have enquired of Apollo's oracle, and he tells me the same. Go to the far east, and bring them back, and I swear an oath to you that I will hand over my throne to you." So they agreed; but before I tell you how Jason accomplished the quest, I must tell the story of the ram with a golden fleece.

XIX. *The Ram with a Golden Fleece*

Phrixos was the son of the King of Boeotia, and he had a sister named Hellê; their mother was Nephelê, the Cloud. It must be awkward to have a Cloud for your wife; you never know when she will be at home, and when she will be flying about in the sky. And so the king seems to have found it; for he married a second wife, named Ino, who was one of the daughters of Cadmos. You remember Cadmos, no doubt, and his wedding, and the necklace given to his wife, which brought misfortune wherever it went. It brought misfortunes to Ino, one of them a very great misfortune, that is, jealousy, which makes the person who has it miserable, and every one who comes near miserable too. Ino had children of her own, and she was jealous of Phrixos and Hellê, and wanted to get rid of them.

So she made the following plan. First, she got hold of

the seed-corn which was to be sown in the land for next year; and she had it all parched, over the fire, so that it was dead, and could not grow. Then she put it back where it came from. In due time, the corn was sown; but no shoots came up—there was not a leaf, or an ear of corn, in the whole country. The people were in despair and did not know what to do.

Next, Ino persuaded her husband to enquire of the oracle at Delphi; and when he sent to enquire, she bribed the messengers who went there. She told them then to come back and pretend that they had asked the oracle, and that the oracle said, "Kill Phrixos and Hellê at the altar for a sacrifice, or your corn will grow no more." This was a dreadful blow to the king; but he had to obey what he believed to be God's wish, like Abraham and Isaac in the Bible. And in this case too there was a ram, but a different sort of ram from the ram which was sacrificed instead of Isaac.

This was a wonderful ram, with a golden fleece, which Nephelê from the clouds provided at the altar. There stood the two children, ready to be killed; there stood the sacrificer with his knife; there stood the king, full of sorrow, and jealous Ino, full of joy; and lo and behold, down came the golden ram, and up got the boy and girl upon his back, and away he flew into the sky.

For a long time, all was well; they passed over land and sea, making for the far east. But after a while, Hellê grew tired, and could not hold on any longer. She just dropped down into the sea, and was drowned; and the place where she fell is still called Hellespont, or the Sea of Hellê.

Phrixos could do nothing, and the ram went on, until he came to the far end of the Black Sea, to the east, to the land of the Colchians; and there he came down. The king of this land was named Aiêtês, the brother of the witch Circê, whom you will hear of in the story of Odysseus, if you can find some one to tell it to you. The ram was sacrificed, and his golden fleece was nailed to a tree in a sacred grove of oaks, and guarded by a terrible dragon which never slept.

This Phrixos, who was a cousin of Pelias and of Jason, was the man who appeared in a dream to Pelias, and told him to bring him back home, and lay his ghost. At least, that was what Pelias said; but perhaps he made it up, be-

cause he thought that Jason would probably be killed in trying to get the Golden Fleece.

King Aiêtês gave his daughter to Phrixos, when he was old enough to marry, and there he lived and died. But his sons returned to their father's old home, to claim his inheritance. And ever after they had to obey a strange rule. The eldest son, the head of the family, was never allowed to enter the town-hall. He might go anywhere else he liked, but if he entered the town-hall, he could not go out again unless he were taken to the altar, and sacrificed on the spot. You will not be surprised to hear that the eldest sons, from generation to generation, preferred to go away and settle in some foreign land.

XX. *The Argonauts*

You know now what a task Jason had to do. People knew very little about the world, then; and they had only very small sailing ships, or galleys that used oars, in which they were at the mercy of winds and waters. This voyage was aimed at the far end of the Black Sea, a dangerous sea which no one knew well: indeed, its proper name was the Unfriendly Sea; only men called it the Friendly Sea for fear of offending it. A noble ship was built for the voyage; the goddess Athena helped in the building, and set up as the stem a great beam of oak, which was brought from the sacred grove at Dodona. This great oaken stem had a voice, and spoke sometimes to the crew. The ship was named Argo, and the sailors were called the Argonauts, or Sailors of Argo.

All the great heroes of Greece came to take part in the voyage: their names you will hear often in Greek story. Heracles came, with Castor and Polydeucês, all sons of Zeus; Orpheus came, the great singer; Holdfast and Pullhard, sons of Hermês; Zetas and Calais, sons of the North Wind, and each had a pair of wings on his shoulders, shivering with purple feathers; Tiphys the steersman, and Mopsos the seer. And there on the shore was the old Centaur Cheiron, with his wife, who held young Achillês on

her arm, to wish good-bye to his father Peleus, and a happy voyage.

Across the Aegean Sea they sailed, and through the Hellespont, where Hèllè had fallen and died; and over the Propontis, a little sea between Hellespont and Bosporos, where they had many adventures. They had to fight with a tribe of huge men, who had six arms: two grew from their shoulders, and four from their sides. In one place, where they went to get water, they lost the boy, Hylas. As he let down his urn into a pool, the nymph of the pool saw this beautiful boy, and stretched up her arm to embrace him; she loved him so much, that she drew him down to the water, and he was seen no more. But Heraclês sought for him high and low, and he wandered so far, that the others put off without missing him, and left him behind. When they found he was missing, they were about to turn back for him; but a sea-god put up his head and shoulders out of the water, and said, "Why do you wish to take Heraclês in search of the Golden Fleece? It is his duty to serve King Eurystheus, and to perform the labours which the king ordains." So they went on, and Heraclês went about his proper work.

Again they had to put in, to the place where poor old Phineus lived by the sea. He had the gift of foretelling the future, and he told too much; so blindness was sent upon him by Zeus, and he was persecuted by the Harpies. These were huge great birds, with sharp wings and claws. Whenever Phineus took a meal, the Harpies would swoop down upon him from the clouds, and snatched the food from his hands, and even from his mouth: worse than that, they covered the rest of it with filth, so that he could not eat any of it, and he had to live by what kind neighbours brought him secretly. This was to cease, as he knew by his power, when Jason should come and deliver him.

He heard the tramp of the heroes, and came down to meet them, like a lifeless dream, bowed over his staff, and crept to the door on his withered feet, feeling the walls; his limbs trembled for weakness, and his parched skin was caked with dirt, and only the skin held his bones together. He sat on the threshold of the courtyard, and the earth seemed to reel under his feet. At last he said:

"Listen, brave men, if you are they whom Jason leads in the ship Argo. Save me, and leave me not in my misery.

I am blind, as you see, and I can eat no meat; for the Harpies snatch the food from my mouth, and bespatter all the place with filth. The oracle declares that I shall be saved by the sons of the North Wind, and let me tell you, I am no stranger to them, for their sister was my wife."

So they got ready a feast, the last prey for the Harpies. And no sooner had he touched the food, than out of the clouds swooped the horrible birds, like flashes of lightning, and clutched the food from the old man's hand, and sped away over the sea. But the two sons of the North Wind unfolded their purple wings, and sped away in pursuit, holding their swords in hand. They came up with the Harpies, until they just grazed their feathers with their finger-tips; and they would have destroyed them, but Iris, the messenger of the gods, met them, and said, "It is not lawful to kill the hounds of Zeus, but I swear to you that they shall visit old Phineus no more." So they turned back, and the Harpies flew on to their den in distant Crete.

The heroes washed the old man's skin, and made sacrifices, and set out a new feast, which he enjoyed, for the first time in many long years. And the old man said, "Listen now, and I will tell you what it is lawful for you to know. For I have learnt that Zeus desires to reveal his oracles to men incomplete, that they may not know too much. But this I may tell you. You will soon see, at the mouth of the Bosporos, two rocks, called the Clashers, which constantly clash together, and then move apart. You must take with you a dove, and when you come to the rocks, let her go; then watch if she passes through. If she escapes, you may follow; and row hard, for in that passage, rowing will be better than praying. But if she is caught, then turn back; for it is better to yield to God's will." Then he told them of other perils, and said that they should reach their goal, and that a god would guide them on their way home. Lastly he said, "Take thought of Aphroditè, goddess of love, for your success will depend upon her help. I may tell you no more."

Then the two sons of the North Wind returned, panting from their long chase, and said, "Sir, you are free from the Harpies for ever."

When the time came for departure, the heroes embarked, not forgetting to take the dove with them.

At the mouth of the Bosphoros, they saw two huge rocks rushing violently together; the rocks met with a crash, and sent up the sea in clouds of spray; then they leapt apart, and the sea rushed in to fill the gap, and met in the middle, rising like a great mountain of water. There was a swift current against them, and a wind blowing them on, which nearly matched, so they were obliged to put out the oars.

As the rocks drew together again, they let the dove go, and all craned their necks to see. Clash! went the rocks; as they went back, the heroes could see the dove had got through, only the rocks had caught one of her tail-feathers. They were able to see this, because one of them, named Lynceus, had eyes so sharp, that he could see everything under the sky, as clearly as if it were close.

The waves whirled the ship round; but the helmsman shouted out—"Row, you men! she's through!" and they rowed with all their might. As the rocks moved apart, a huge wave rose up in front of them, and carried them back; but another wave rose behind them and carried them onwards. The rocks were now rushing together again, nearer and nearer, but the men rowed as they never had rowed before, and the wave carried them out clear into the sea. The two rocks crashed together, and there they remained, joined into one: they stood still, and they have never moved since.

Then the heroes gave thanks to Athena, who had built the ship *Argo* so strongly that she was proof against all the perils of the sea.

They passed on, and came in due time to the island of *Arès*, where old *Phineus* had told them to land. This island was haunted by flocks of terrible birds, with brazen beaks and brazen feathers; you remember these, how *Heraclès* had scared them away from the *Stymphalian* lake. These birds used to shoot out their feathers like arrows; and the first notice of them which the heroes had, was that one of them shot out a bronze feather, and it struck one of the heroes on his shoulder.

"What's that?" he cried in dismay. Some one drew out the feather, and bound up the wound; and another said, "These are the birds of *Arès*! It is of no use to shoot arrows against them, they are too many and too strong; but I remember what *Heraclès* did, for I was there and saw it. He

shook a rattle of brass, and frightened them away. Let us divide ourselves; one half shall row, and one half shall put on their helmets, with nodding plumes, and hold up their spears, and make a roof over the rowers with their shields. When we come near the island, these will shout, and rattle the spears on the shields."

So they did. They shouted and rattled, and the birds shot their feathers in clouds, but they crashed on the shields and only made a louder din. So the birds were frightened, and all flew away to the mountains opposite.

The heroes landed, and now they found out why *Phineus* had told them to land there; for on the shore they found the four sons of *Phrixos* himself, who had set out for home in order to claim their inheritance, and here they had been shipwrecked. They were glad to get on board, and *Jason* hoped they might be useful when the ship came to *Colchis*.

The heroes sailed away, and coasted along by the *Caucasus* Mountains, where *Prometheus* was nailed to a rock. There they saw the great eagle, sailing high, near the clouds, and they heard the whirr of his wings, and the flapping of the wings shook their sails, high as he was. He sailed along with his wings pushed far out on both sides, like a ship with long shining oars. And soon they heard the bitter cry of *Prometheus*, as the eagle swooped down and tore at his liver. At last they came to the *Colchian* land; they entered the mouth of the river, and let the ship ride at anchor off the shore.

XXI. *Cupid and His Mother*

While the heroes were hidden among the reeds, their friends in *Olympos* were not forgetful of them. *Hera* in particular sought out *Athena*, and said, "What shall we do about the *Golden Fleece*? Do you think *Jason* will be able to persuade *King Aiêtès* to part with it? He has a wonderful tongue to persuade, and he always loves gentle words. Or will they have to fight for it? And how can so few fight against so many? Give me your advice."

Athena said, "Really I do not know what to say. I have

been considering many plans, but I cannot think of a good one."

They were silent awhile, with their eyes fixed on the ground. Then Hera said:

"I will tell you what. The king's daughter, Medeia, is skilled in all sorts of charms and spells. Would she help? What if she were to fall in love with Jason? Suppose we ask the help of Aphroditê."

"Well," said Athena, "I do not understand those things, I never cared much myself for gods or men, but by all means let us try."

So they went to the house which Hephaistos, the smith-god, had built for Aphroditê when he married her. He was away at the forge; but they found the goddess on a seat facing the door. Her golden hair was loose, and covered her shoulders; she was parting it with a golden comb, and just about to bind it up into braids. When she saw them, she rose, and greeted them, and gave them seats, gathering up her long hair in one hand, and said:

"Good friends, what brings you here? I have not seen you this long time; you do not often visit my humble home."

She said this, because her husband was not quite of the first rank, and Hera disliked him, although he was her own son. Aphroditê thus felt her vanity hurt a little. But Hera said:

"Ah, you are making fun of us! But this is a serious matter which we come about. Jason and his company are now on the river Phasis, in quest of the Golden Fleece, and I do not see how they can get it. Jason at least I am determined to save. I cannot abide that Pelias, who neglects my sacrifices; but I do love the young man. Once I was on earth, trying men, to see how they behaved: I took on me the likeness of an ugly old crone, and sat down by the side of a rushing river, when he came along. Then I begged him to help an old woman, and he took me up on his shoulders; ugly though I was, and carried me across the river. So I will certainly save him, and punish Pelias for his neglect."

"Well," said Aphroditê, "what can I do? I will help you if I can."

Hera said, "You can help us, indeed. Just tell your boy

Cupid to shoot one of his arrows at Medeia, and make her fall in love with Jason."

"Ah, if he will!" said Aphroditê. "He is a naughty boy, and will not do what I tell him. He is more likely to listen to you than to me. I mean to break his bow and arrows before his eyes, the little wretch! And he says that if I touch him, he will make me repent it!"

The goddesses smiled, and looked at each other. This vexed Aphroditê, and she went on, "Yes, you only laugh at my troubles; I get no sympathy from any one, and I ought not to have said anything about it. However, I will try and see if I can coax him."

Hera smiled gently, and took her hand, and said, "Do try, my dear, and don't be angry with the boy. I am sure he will be a good boy, and do what his mother asks him."

So they went out into the orchard, and there they found Cupid playing with young Ganymede, a boy whom Zeus had taken a fancy to, and so had sent his eagle which caught him up into the skies and brought him to Olympus to be his cup-bearer at table. They were playing for golden dice. Cupid was holding his hand full of the dice close to his breast, and laughing at Ganymede, who was then casting the last two, with gloomy looks; for he did not like losing. He lost them too, and went off in the sulks, without noticing the goddesses. Then Aphroditê said:

"You rogue, have you cheated the innocent child? Shame upon you!—Come now, do something for me, like a good boy, and I will give you a beautiful ball, the one which Zeus played with in his cave, when he was a baby. A golden ball, with blue circles round it! If you throw it up, it leaves a flaming track in the sky, like a comet! That is what I will give you, if you will shoot one of your arrows at Medeia, and make her love Jason."

"Give it me now!" he cried, and dropped his golden dice on the ground. "Now, now!" and he clutched hold of her dress on both sides, and clung to her. She smiled at him, and kissed him, and said:

"No, not now, but I promise to give it as soon as you have shot one arrow at Medeia."

Without another word the boy slung his quiver across his shoulder, and caught up his bow, and away he ran; through the orchard, out of the gates of Olympos, down

through the air, until he saw the earth stretched beneath him, the sea spread wide, and the mountains rising into the sky.

XXII. *Jason and Medeia*

Meanwhile, the heroes were taking counsel together, what was best to do. And Jason said to them, "My friends, it is always best to try persuasion first. Gentle words have great power. Let me go with one or two others, and let us take the sons of Phrixos to be our guides, and open the matter with King Aïêtês. If he will not listen, we can discuss whether it will be well to use force."

So Jason left the ship, with his comrades, and he held in his hand the wand that Hermês had given him, to show that his errand was peaceful. They passed over a plain, with lines of willows, on which was a strange sight. The Colchians are a wild race of men; and when a man dies, they do not bury him, or burn him, but they wrap up the body in an ox-hide, and hang it up in a tree. So in these trees were hanging long rows of bundles, in which were the bodies of their dead.

Then the heroes came to the king's palace, and a wonderful place it was. The god Hephaistos built it, with walls and towers and roomy chambers; and in the courtyard he built four fountains, one running with milk, one with wine, one with fragrant oil, one with water, which grew warm at the setting of the Pleiadês, and at their rising, it became cold as ice. He also made for him bulls with feet of brass, and mouths of brass, who breathed fire out of their jaws; and a great plough of adamant, all in one piece.

Medeia saw them coming. She was there in the company of her sister, the wife of Phrixos, and she cried aloud when she saw Jason with his friends. And the mother lifted up her hands, and cried out, and ran up to embrace her sons; and sobbing, she said:

"So you did not go far, my boys, and here you are back again! Why did you leave your mother?"

Meanwhile Cupid passed unseen, and glided close by Jason. He put arrow to bowstring, and drew it, and shot

straight at Medeia, who stood gazing at Jason. The arrow went deep into her heart, like a burning flame, and filled her with amazement, until her soul melted; and from that moment there was only one thought in her, the love for Jason.

That night there was a banquet, and King Aïêtês questioned his guests as to their coming. The eldest son of Phrixos answered: "My lord, our ship was wrecked, and we were saved by this stranger, who has come on a useless quest. His ship was built by the goddess Athena, and no storms can hurt it; and he is sent by one Pelias, who wishes to lay the ghost of Phrixos, by asking the gift of the Golden Fleece. Be it as you will, for they do not offer force, although the ship is full of the chief heroes of Hellas."

This filled the king with fury, and he cried out, "Begone, you traitors! It is my throne you want, and that is why you have brought all these armed men into my house! If you had not tasted my food, and so become my guests, I would have cut out your tongues, and cut off your hands, and left you only your feet to run away!"

The young man would have answered angrily, but Jason checked him, and said, "My lord, bear with us. We have no such desires; for who would cross the wide seas for another man's goods? Fate has sent us, and the bidding of a presumptuous king. Great is your power, and your name shall be published abroad in all Hellas."

These gentle words calmed the king, but he brooded hate and suspicion all the same. However, he thought he might try what these heroes could do, so he said:

"I bear no grudge against brave men, least of all if they have the blood of the gods in their veins. I will give you the Golden Fleece, when I have tried you. I will ask you to do only what I can do myself. I have two bulls, with brazen feet, and brazen mouths, who breathe fire out of their mouths. These bulls I yoke, and plough the fields of Arês; and into the furrows I cast not seed, but teeth from the Theban dragon, which Athena gave me when the dragon was killed by Cadmos. Then a crop of armed men grows up, and as they rise against me, I kill them all. If you can yoke the bulls, and plough the field, and kill the crop of armed men, I will give you the Golden Fleece. If not, I will keep it, for it is not right that a brave man should yield to a coward."

Jason was abashed by this; he did not know what to say; and the king sat, smiling grimly at him. At last he made answer, "My lord, you set me a hard task. But I accept the contest, even though it be my doom to die. Necessity brought me here, and I must do my part."

So he went away with his friends; and Medeia watched him as he went, and her soul crept after him like a dream, for she was possessed now of this terrible passion, and could think of nothing but Jason. But when the heroes were by themselves, the son of Phrixos said, "There is one thing that can help us. There is a maiden here who knows all manner of drugs and spells; if she would help us, we might succeed. I will ask my mother to entreat her." Jason said, "Very well then, go and try; but it is a pitiful thing that we must depend on the help of women." So far he had not noticed Medeia, and did not know who she was. Meanwhile the king laid his plans, so that when the bulls should have killed Jason, he would attack the heroes and kill them, and burn the ship *Argo* to ashes.

But Medeia had no rest for love of Jason. And after restless sleep, and bad dreams, she got up to seek her sister for comfort. As she opened the door, there on the threshold her sister stood, also in distress, and she cried, "Medeia, what is the matter? Why do you weep so?"

Medeia shrank from telling her secret; she said, "Sister, I have had terrible dreams. I fear the king may be plotting against your sons, along with the strangers!"

The sister said, "Ah me, I am afraid too! but first swear to help me, and to tell no one what I shall say."

Medeia said, "I swear to keep all secret, and to help as far as I can."

Then her sister said, "Can you think of any way to win the contest, for the sake of my sons? I have left them in my chamber, come to pray for help."

Medeia's heart leapt for joy. "I love you, my sister," she said, "and your sons; I will find out a charm to conquer the bulls."

And so Medeia prepared to keep her promise. She could see that disgrace would fall upon her, and perhaps death, for taking the stranger's part against her own father; but she could not help it, for she was filled with an overpowering passion, sent from the gods, like that terrible passion

which seized Helen in later days, and brought the ruin of Troy, and the death of thousands of brave men. She could think only of one thing, how to help Jason, although she spoke of her sister and the sons of her sister. She opened her casket of drugs, and took out a wonderful root, called the root of Prometheus; because it grew up from the ground where the eagle had let fall a drop of blood from his liver, or rather, a drop of that fluid which runs in the veins of the gods, for they have not blood like men. If a man should anoint his body with this, for one day he would be safe against any blow from anything made of brass, and safe from fire.

XXIII. *The Brazen Bulls and the Dragon's Teeth*

When day dawned, Medeia put on a beautiful robe, and a veil over it, shining like silver; and calling her twelve maids, she said, "Make ready the mule-car, and come with me to the shrine of Hecatê." They put the mules to, and Medeia mounted the car, and took up the reins and whip, and trotted down the street. The maidens trussed up their skirts, and laid hold of the car six on each side, and ran along with it. So they came to the shrine of Hecatê, goddess of night, lady of spells and charms and potions. Then Medeia said to the maidens, "Listen to me. You saw the stranger, and you know what he has come for. My sister and her sons beg me to accept his gifts, and protect him against the brazen bulls. I have summoned him to meet me here; and you shall have a good share of what he gives." The maidens were pleased to agree to this, and were ready to take part with their mistress.

Meanwhile the sons of Phrixos had returned to Jason, and told him to meet Medeia at the shrine of Hecatê; led by them, Jason came to the tryst, and Medeia saw him come. She sent her maidens apart, and Jason advanced alone.

Never was there so noble a young man as Jason. As Medeia gazed at him, her knees trembled, and she could not address him: they stood face to face speechless.

At last, Jason said, "Maiden, why do you fear me so

much? I am not a man of violence; I come in friendship to this holy place, as your suppliant, to crave your help. For surely one so lovely as you are, must be full of gentle courtesy."

Her heart grew warm within her, and melted like dew upon a rose. She said, "Take heed what I say. When the day for your trial is fixed, and my father has given you the dragon's teeth to sow, on the midnight before bathe in the river, alone; and then put on a black robe, and dig a pit, and there sacrifice a ewe to Hecatè, pouring out before her a pot of honey. Then go away without looking back, no matter what noises you hear. At dawn, soak this root which I give you in water, strip, and anoint your whole body with the water, as if with oil, and sprinkle it over your shield and sword. Then for one day no fire can hurt you, and no strokes from the spears of earth-born men. One thing more: when you have ploughed the soil, and sown the seed, and the earth-born men spring up, cast among them a large stone; they will fight for it together, and kill each other. Then you may take away the Golden Fleece, and may happiness go with you, wherever you go." Then she took courage, and caught hold of his right hand, and said, "Remember me, when you come to your own land, and I will remember you, in despite of my father. If you forget me, may a messenger-bird come over the sea and tell me; and may I be wafted through the air, as an unexpected guest, to remind you how I helped you to escape!" So she said, with tears running down her cheeks. And Jason replied, "Speak not of birds and unexpected guests! If you will come with me, you shall be honoured in all Hellas, and if you will be my wife, only death shall part us."

Then Medeia was glad, but she was unhappy too, for she foresaw that troubles were to come.

And so they parted. Jason returned to his friends, and Medeia passed through her maidens, and saw none of them; she mounted her car, and drove home, and walked through the company, and past her sister, without seeing anyone; she sat down by her bed, with her heart full of thoughts.

The time came. Jason did as he had been told, and anointed himself and his weapons, and in the morning he

was ready. King Aiêtès was in full armour, and handed to Jason the helmet with the dragon's teeth; and they repaired to the spot. There the King plumped down the plough in front of Jason, and said with a laugh, "There is your task, my good man! get on with it!"

Then Jason set up his spear in the ground by a tree, and leaned his helmet against it, and slung his sword over his shoulder; but he bore no armour upon his body, only took the shield with him, as he examined the tracks of the bulls in the soil, and went to meet them. Both bulls rushed out of their lair together, breathing fire and smoke. Jason held his shield before him, to meet their attack; they struck it with their mighty horns, but could not move him. Then he caught one bull by the horn, and dragged it to the yoke, and struck its brazen leg with his foot, and forced it down on the knee. He forced down the other bull beside it, then threw down his shield, and held them both on their fore-knees, while two of his comrades passed him the yoke. He fastened both bulls to the yoke, and lifting the brazen pole between them made it fast. Then Jason slung his shield behind his back, and took up the helmet with the teeth, and his own spear, which he used to prick the sides of the bulls, and to drive them along.

The bulls bellowed, and spouted flame, but it was of no use: go they must, and they drew the great plough, and cut a deep furrow behind them. As they went, Jason dropped the dragon's teeth in the furrow, turning round over and anon to see whether the earthborn men should rise too soon. But the time was not yet. The field was ploughed; he loosed the oxen, and let them go, while he filled the helmet with water from the river, and quenched his thirst.

By this time, the crop began to appear: helmets and shining spears thrust up from the ground, and soon the men were ready to fight. Then Jason took up a great stone, and hurled it amongst them. The earth-born men yelled, and rushed together, fighting over the stone; and Jason rushed on them, hewing them down, some with head and shoulders above the ground, some half risen to the air, some just standing upright, or making their first rush to battle. He cut them down as you cut corn with a sickle; and there they lay, biting the earth with their teeth.

XXIV. *The Golden Fleece*

But King Aïetês did not keep his word. He would not give up the Golden Fleece, and he pondered in his mind how he could destroy the heroes and their ship. Medeia was plunged in trouble, to think what must come next; and in the night, she went secretly to the shore, and called out to her kinsmen, "Save me, and save yourselves, while there is yet time, before the king can get his men together. I will charm the serpent, and I will help you to get the Golden Fleece."

So she guided the ship to the place where the fleece hung, in the sacred grove of Arês. She led Jason to the huge oak tree upon which it was hung. As they came near, the serpent, which never slept, saw them with his keen eyes, and hissed loudly at them, wreathing his coils all about. And Medeia sang a soft song, and while she sang, the serpent's head drooped and nodded, and his coils relaxed; while she sang she sprinkled his eyes with her magical brew, and he let his jaw sink down, and slept. Then she smeared ointment upon his head, while Jason took down the Golden Fleece, heavy and thick, and draped it over his left shoulder.

What joy there was in the ship, when they saw Jason return, bearing the Golden Fleece! He led Medeia to a seat in the stern, and said:

"Now, men, for the homeward voyage! Let a part of you row, and the rest hold their shields along the sides, to protect us from the shafts of our enemies."

By this time, Medeia's flight was known, and the people saw that the ship Argo was gone from her moorings. The king came into the market-place, holding a torch, and called upon all to give chase. So they manned their ships, and launched into the river; but the ship Argo was now well on her way.

It would be too long to tell of their journey home. It would be very puzzling too, for the earth must have had an odd shape in those days, as you will see. They came in due time to the mouth of the Danube: and while they were

there one of the Colchian ships caught them up. The other ships had gone in different directions, and lost them altogether, but this ship was commanded by Apsyrtos, Medeia's own brother, and it was full of fighting men. This was the cause of a dreadful crime, for which Jason and Medeia paid heavily. They arranged a meeting with Apsyrtos, in order to make peace together; and when Apsyrtos came to the meeting, Jason killed him with his sword. The Argonauts then set upon the Colchians, unexpectedly, and destroyed them.

After this, storms fell upon the heroes, and they would never have got home, but for the speaking stem which Athena had put in the bows of the ship. This stem uttered a voice and spoke, and told them that Jason and Medeia must be purified from the murder by the witch Circê, who lived in the far west in an island.

Then they passed into the Danube, and rowed up the stream, until after a long time they passed from the Danube into the Rhone, and from the Rhone into the Rhine, and from the Rhine into the Ocean Stream, which encompasses the earth all around. Then they came into the quicksands and marshes of the African coast, and into a lake from which they could not get out. Still they endured, and carried the ship Argo on their shoulders over the sand, twelve days and twelve nights. When they came to the sea again, they still had dangers to meet, Scylla and Charybdis, and the Sirens, whom I cannot tell you about now, but at last they found Circê's island, and Circê purified them from the murder.

While Jason was away, Pelias had killed his old father; for he never expected Jason to return, and never meant to keep his promise, and make Jason king. Jason was very angry at this, as you may imagine, and asked Medeia to punish the treachery of Pelias.

So Medeia spoke to the daughters of Pelias in a friendly way. "What a pity it is," she said, "that your father is such an old man, and cannot enjoy his kingdom!" "Well," said they, "it cannot be helped, can it?" "Can it not!" said Medeia. "I will show you." She got an old ram, and cut it up, and boiled it in a cauldron with some of her magical drugs, and sang charms about it, and lo and behold, out of the cauldron skipped a young lamb!

So she persuaded them to kill old Pelias, and boil him too. But no young Pelias came out of the cauldron; he was dead and done for.

Then the son of Pelias banished Jason and Medeia to Corinth.

But still trouble did not leave them. Medeia had been maddened by Cupid's arrow, as you have heard, and Jason seems to have been infected by her madness. He was at first, as you know, a man of peace, and gentle, and just, and not willing to shed blood if he could help it. He also had fine manners, as he showed by helping what seemed to be an ugly old crone. But he was now cruel, and heartless too. He became tired of Medeia, and married another wife. Medeia then destroyed the new wife by her magic, and killed her own two sons, and fled in an air-chariot drawn by dragons to Athens. In Athens she married the old king, and we shall hear of her fate later, when we come to the story of Theseus.