CHAPTER NINE
Perseus

King Acrisius of Argos had only one child, a daughter, Danae. She was beautiful above all the other women of the land, but this was small comfort to the King for not having a son. He journeyed to Delphi to ask the God if there was any hope that some day he would be the father of a boy. The priestess told him no, and added what was far worse: that his daughter would have a son who would kill him.

The only sure way to escape that fate was for the King to have Danae instantly put to death - taking no chances, but seeing to it himself. This Acrisius would not do. His fatherly affection was not strong, as events proved, but his fear of the Gods was. They visit with terrible punishments those who shed the blood of kindred. Acrisius did not dare slay his daughter. Instead, he had a house built all of bronze and sunk underground, but with part of the roof open to the sky so that light and air could come through. Here he shut her up and guarded her.

So Danae endured, the beautiful,
To change the glad daylight for brass-bound walls,
And in that chamber secret as the grave
She lived a prisoner. Yet to her came
Zeus in the golden rain.

As she sat there through the long days and hours with nothing to do, nothing to see except the clouds moving by overhead, a mysterious thing happened, a shower of gold fell from the sky and filled her chamber. How it was revealed to her that it was Zeus who had visited her in this shape we are not told, but she knew that the child she bore was his son.

For a time she kept his birth secret from her father, but it became increasingly difficult to do so in the narrow limits of that bronze house and finally one day the little boy - his name was Perseus - was discovered by his grandfather. "Your child!" Acrisius cried in great anger. "Who is his father?" But when Danae answered proudly, "Zeus," he would not believe her. One thing only he was sure of, that the boy's life was a terrible danger to his own. He was afraid to kill him for the same reason that had kept him from killing her, fear of Zeus and the Furies who pursue such murderers. But if he could not kill them outright, he could put them in the way of tolerably certain death. He had a great chest made, and the two placed in it. Then it was taken out to sea and cast into the water.

In that strange boat Danae sat with her little son. The daylight faded and she was alone on the sea.

When in the careen chest the winds and waves Struck fear into her heart she put her arms, Not without tears, round Perseus tenderly She said, "O son, what grief is mine. But you sleep softly, little child, Sunk deep in rest within your cheerless home, Only a box, brass-bound. The night, this darkness visible, The scudding waves so near to your soft curls, The shrill voice of the wind, you do not heed, Nestled in your red cloak, fair little face."

Through the night in the tossing chest she listened to the waters that seemed always about to wash over them. The dawn came, but with no comfort to her for she could not see it. Neither could she see that around them there were islands rising high above the sea, many islands. All she knew was that presently a wave seemed to lift them and carry them swiftly on and then, retreating, leave them on something solid and motionless. They had made land; they were safe from the sea, but they were still in the chest with no way to get out.

Fate willed it - or perhaps Zeus - that they should be discovered by a good man, a fisherman named Dictys. He came upon the great box and broke it open and took the pitiful cargo home to his wife who was as kind as he.
They had no children and they cared for Danae and Perseus as if they were their own. The two lived there many years, Danae content to let her son follow the fisherman’s humble trade, out of harm’s way. But in the end more trouble came. Polydectes, the ruler of the little island, was the brother of Dictys, but he was a cruel and ruthless man. He seems to have taken no notice of the mother and son for a long time, but at last Danae attracted his attention. She was still radiantly beautiful even though Perseus by now was full grown, and Polydectes fell in love with her. He wanted her, but he did not want her son, and he set himself to think out a way of getting rid of him.

There were some fearsome monsters called Gorgons who lived on an island and were known far and wide because of their deadly power. Polydectes evidently talked to Perseus about them; he probably told him that he would rather have the head of one of them than anything else in the world. This seems practically certain from the plan he devised for killing Perseus. He announced that he was about to be married and he called his friends together for a celebration, including Perseus in the invitation. Each guest, as was customary, brought a gift for the bride-to-be, except Perseus alone. He had nothing he could give. He was young and proud and keenly mortified. He stood up before them all and did exactly what the King had hoped he would do, declared that he would give him a present better than any there. He would go off and kill Medusa and bring back her head as his gift. Nothing could have suited the King better. No one in his senses would have made such a proposal. Medusa was one of the Gorgons,

And they are three, the Gorgons, each with wings
And snaky hair, most horrible to mortals.
Whom no man shall behold and draw again
The breath of life,

for the reason that whoever looked at them was turned instantly into stone. It seemed that Perseus had been led by his angry pride into making an empty boast. No man unaided could kill Medusa.

But Perseus was saved from his folly. Two great Gods were watching over him. He took ship as soon as he left the King’s hall, not daring to see his mother first and tell her what he intended, and he sailed to Greece to learn where the three monsters were to be found. He went to Delphi, but all the priestess would say was to bid him seek the land where men eat not Demeter’s golden grain, but only acorns. So he went to Dodona, in the land of oak trees, where the talking oaks were which declared Zeus’s will and where the Selli lived who made their bread from acorns. They could tell him, however, no more than this, that he was under the protection of the Gods. They did not know where the Gorgons lived.

When and how Hermes and Athena came to his help is not told in any story, but he must have known despair before they did so. At last, however, as he wandered on, he met a strange and beautiful person. We know what he looked like from many a poem, a young man with the first down upon his cheek when youth is loveliest, carrying, as no other young man ever did, a wand of gold with wings at one end, wearing a winged hat, too, and winged sandals. At sight of him hope must have entered Perseus’ heart, for he would know that this could be none other than Hermes, the guide and the giver of good.

This radiant personage told him that before he attacked Medusa he must first be properly equipped, and that what he needed was in the possession of the nymphs of the North. To find the nymphs’ abode, they must go to the Gray Women who alone could tell them the way. These women dwelt in a land where all was dim and shrouded in twilight. No ray of sun looked ever on that country, nor the moon by night. In that gray place the three women lived, all gray themselves and withered as in extreme old age. They were strange creatures, indeed, most of all because they had but one eye for the three, which it was their custom to take turns with, each removing it from her forehead when she had had it for a time and handing it to another.

All this Hermes told Perseus and then he unfolded his plan. He would himself guide Perseus to them. Once there Perseus must keep hidden until he saw one of them take the eye out of her forehead to pass it on. At that moment, when none of the three could see, he must rush forward and seize the eye and refuse to give it back until they told him how to reach the nymphs of the North.
He himself, Hermes said, would give him a sword to attack Medusa with - which could not be bent or broken by the Gorgon's scales, no matter how hard they were. This was a wonderful gift, no doubt, and yet of what use was a sword when the creature to be struck by it could turn the swordsman into stone before he was within striking distance? But another great deity was at hand to help. Pallas Athena stood beside Perseus. She took off the shield of polished bronze which covered her breast and held it out to him. "Look into this when you attack the Gorgon," she said. "You will be able to see her in it as in a mirror, and so avoid her deadly power."

Now, indeed Perseus had good reason to hope. The journey to the twilight land was long, over the stream of Ocean and on to the very border of the black country where the Cimmerians dwell, but Hermes was his guide and he could not go astray. They found the Gray Women at last, looking in the wavering light like gray birds, for they had the shape of swans. But their heads were human and beneath their wings they had arms and hands. Perseus did just as Hermes had said, he held back until he saw one of them take the eye out of her forehead. Then before she could give it to her sister, he snatched it out of her hand. It was a moment or two before the three realized they had lost it. Each thought one of the others had it. But Perseus spoke out and told them he had taken it and that it would be theirs again only when they showed him how to find the nymphs of the North. They gave him full directions at once; they would have done anything to get their eye back. He returned it to them and went on the way they had pointed out to him. He was bound, although he did not know it, to the blessed country of the Hyperboreans, at the back of the North Wind, of which it is said: "Neither by ship nor yet by land shall one find the wondrous road to the gathering place of the Hyperboreans." But Perseus had Hermes with him, so that the road lay open to him, and he reached that host of happy people who are always banquetting and holding joyful revelry. They showed him great kindness: they welcomed him to their feast, and the maidens dancing to the sound of flute and lyre paused to get for him the gifts he sought. These were three: winged sandals, a magic wallet which would always become the right size for whatever was to be carried in it, and, most important of all, a cap which made the wearer invisible. With these and Athena's shield and Hermes' sword Perseus was ready for the Gorgons. Hermes knew where they lived, and leaving the happy land the two flew back across Ocean and over the sea to the Terrible Sisters' island.

By great good fortune they were all asleep when Perseus found them. In the mirror of the bright shield he could see them clearly, creatures with great wings and bodies covered with golden scales and hair a mass of twisting snakes. Athena was beside him now as well as Hermes. They told him which one was Medusa and that was important, for she alone of the three could be killed; the other two were immortal. Perseus on his winged sandals hovered above them, looking, however, only at the shield. Then he aimed a stroke down at Medusa's throat and Athena guided his hand. With a single sweep of his sword he cut through her neck and, his eyes still fixed on the shield with never a glance at her, he swooped low enough to seize the head. He dropped it into the wallet which closed around it. He had nothing to fear from it now. But the two other Gorgons had awakened and, horrified at the sight of their sister slain, tried to pursue the slayer. Perseus was safe; he had on the cap of darkness and they could not find him.

So over the sea rich-haired Danae's son,
Perseus, on his winged sandals sped,
Flying swift as thought.
In a wallet all of silver,
A wonder to behold,
He bore the head of the monster,
While Hermes, the son of Maia,
The messenger of Zeus,
Kept ever at his side.

On his way back he came to Ethiopia and alighted there. By this time Hermes had left him. Perseus found, as Hercules was later to find, that a lovely maiden had been given up to be devoured by a horrible sea serpent. Her name was Andromeda and she was the daughter of a silly vain woman,

That starred Ethiop queen who strove
To set her beauty's praise above
The sea-nymphs, and their power offended.

She had boasted that she was more beautiful than the
daughters of Nereus, the Sea-god. An absolutely certain way to draw down on one a wretched fate is to claim superiority in anything over any deity; nevertheless people are perpetually doing so. In this case the punishment for the arrogance the Gods detest fell not on Queen Cassiopeia, Andromeda's mother, but on her daughter. The Ethiopians were being devoured in numbers by the serpent; and, learning from the oracle that they could be freed from the pest only if Andromeda were offered up to it, they forced Cepheus, her father, to consent. When Perseus arrived the maiden was on a rocky ledge by the sea, chained there to wait for the coming of the monster. Perseus saw her and on the instant loved her. He waited beside her until the great snake came for its prey; then he cut its head off just as he had the Gorgon's. The headless body dropped back into the water; Perseus took Andromeda to her parents and asked for her hand, which they gladly gave him.

With her he sailed back to the island and his mother, but in the house where he had lived so long he found no one. The fisherman Dictys' wife was long since dead, and the two others, Danae and the man who had been like a father to Perseus, had had to fly and hide themselves from Polydectes, who was furious at Danae's refusal to marry him. They had taken refuge in a Temple, Perseus was told. He learned also that the King was holding a banquet in the palace and all the men who favored him were gathered there. Perseus instantly saw his opportunity. He went straight to the palace and entered the hall. As he stood at the entrance, Athena's shining buckler on his breast, the silver wallet at his side, he drew the eyes of every man there. Then before any could look away he held up the Gorgon's head; and at the sight one and all, the cruel King and his servile courtiers, were turned into stone. There they sat, a row of statues, each, as it were, frozen stiff in the attitude he had struck when he first saw Perseus.

When the islanders knew themselves freed from the tyrant it was easy for Perseus to find Danae and Dictys. He made Dictys king of the island, but he and his mother decided that they would go back with Andromeda to Greece and try to be reconciled to Acrisius, to see if the many years that had passed since he had put them in the chest had not softened him so that he would be glad to receive his daughter and grandson. When they reached Argos, however, they found that Acrisius had been driven away from the city, and where he was no one could say. It happened that soon after their arrival Perseus heard that the King of Larissa, in the North, was holding a great athletic contest, and he journeyed there to take part. In the discus-throwing when his turn came and he hurled the heavy missile, it swerved and fell among the spectators. Acrisius was there on a visit to the King, and the discus struck him. The blow was fatal and he died at once.

So Apollo's oracle was again proved true. If Perseus felt any grief, at least he knew that his grandfather had done his best to kill him and his mother. With his death their troubles came to an end. Perseus and Andromeda lived happily ever after. Their son, Electryon, was the grandfather of Hercules.

Medusa's head was given to Athena, who bores it always upon the aegis, Zeus's shield, which she carries for him.

CHAPTER TEN
THESEUS & THE MINOTAUR

This dearest of heroes to the Athenians engaged the attention of many writers. Ovid, who lived in the Augustan Age, tells his life in detail and so does Apollodorus, in the first or second century A.D. Plutarch, too, toward the end of the first century A.D. He is a prominent character in three of Euripides' plays and in one of Sophocles.

There are many allusions to him in prose writers as well as poets. I have followed Apollodorus on the whole, but I have added from Euripides the stories of the appeal of Adrastus, the madness of Hercules, and the fate of Hippolytus; from Sophocles his kindness to Oedipus; from Plutarch the story of his death, to which Apollodorus gives only a sentence.

The great Athenian hero was Theseus. He had so many adventures and took part in so many great enterprises that there grew up a saying in Athens, "Nothing without Theseus."

He was the son of the Athenian King, Aegaeus. He spent his youth, however, in his mother's home, a city in
southern Greece. Aegeus went back to Athens before the child was born, but first he placed in a hollow a sword and a pair of shoes and covered them with a great stone. He did this with the knowledge of his wife and told her that whenever the boy—if it was a boy—grew strong enough to roll away the stone and get the things beneath it, she could send him to Athens to claim him as his father. The child was a boy and he grew up strong far beyond others, so that when his mother finally took him to the stone he lifted it with no trouble at all. She told him then that the time had come for him to seek his father, and a ship was placed at his disposal by his grandfather. But Theseus refused to go by water, because the voyage was safe and easy. His idea was to become a great hero as quickly as possible, and easy safety was certainly not the way to do that. Hercules, who was the most magnificent of all the heroes of Greece, was always in his mind, and the determination to be just as magnificent himself. This was quite natural since the two were cousins.

He steadfastly refused, therefore, the ship his mother and grandfather urged on him, telling them that to sail on it would be a contemptible flight from danger, and he set forth to go to Athens by land. The journey was long and very hazardous because of the bandits that beset the road. He killed them all, however; he left not one alive to trouble future travelers. His idea of dealing justice was simple, but effective: what each had done to others, Theseus did to him. Sciron, for instance, who had made those he captured kneel to wash his feet and then kicked them down into the sea, Theseus hurled over a precipice. Sinis, who killed people by fastening them to two pine trees bent down to the ground and letting the trees go, died in that way himself. Procrustes was placed upon the iron bed which he used for his victims, tying them to it and then making them the right length for it by stretching those who were too short and cutting off as much as was necessary from those who were too long. The story does not say which of the two methods was used in his case, but there was not much to choose between them and in one way or the other Procrustes' career ended.

It can be imagined how Greece rang with the praises of the young man who had cleared the land of these banes to travelers. When he reached Athens he was an acknowledged hero and he was invited to a banquet by the King, who of course was unaware that Theseus was his son. In fact he was afraid of the young man’s great popularity, thinking that he might win the people over to make him king, and he invited him with the idea of poisoning him. The plan was not his, but Medea’s, the heroine of the Quest of the Golden Fleece who knew through her sorcery who Theseus was. She had fled to Athens when she left Corinth in her winged car, and she had acquired great influence over Aegeus, which she did not want disturbed by the appearance of a son. But as she handed him the poisoned cup Theseus, wishing to make himself known at once to his father, drew his sword. The King instantly recognized it and dashed the cup to the ground. Medea escaped as she always did and got safely away to Asia.

Aegeus then proclaimed to the country that Theseus was his son and heir. The new heir apparent soon had an opportunity to endear himself to the Athenians.

Years before his arrival in Athens, a terrible misfortune had happened to the city. Minos, the powerful ruler of Crete had lost his only son, Androgeus, while the young man was visiting the Athenian King. King Aegeus had done what no host should do, he had sent his guest on an expedition full of peril—to kill a dangerous bull. Instead, the bull had killed the youth. Minos invaded the country, captured Athens and declared that he would raze it to the ground unless every nine years the people sent him a tribute of seven maidens and seven youths. A horrible fate awaited these young creatures. When they reached Crete they were given to the Minotaur to devour.

The Minotaur was a monster, half bull, half human, the offspring of Minos' wife Pasiphae and a wonderfully beautiful bull. Poseidon had given this bull to Minos in order that he should sacrifice it to him, but Minos could not bear to slay it and had kept it for himself. To punish him, Poseidon had made Pasiphae fall madly in love with it.

When the Minotaur was born Minos did not kill him. He had Daedalus, a great architect and inventor, construct a place of confinement for him from which escape was impossible. Daedalus built the Labyrinth, famous throughout the world. Once inside, one would go endlessly along its twisting paths without ever finding the exit. To this place the young Athenians were
each time taken and left to the Minotaur. There was no possible way to escape. In whatever direction they ran they might be running straight to the monster; if they stood still he might at any moment emerge from the maze. Such was the doom which awaited fourteen youths and maidens a few days after Theseus reached Athens. The time had come for the next installment of the tribute.

At once Theseus came forward and offered to be one of the victims. All loved him for his goodness and admired him for his nobility, but they had no idea that he intended to try to kill the Minotaur. He told his father, however, and promised him that if he succeeded, he would have the black sail which the ship with its cargo of misery always carried changed to a white one, so that Aegeus could know long before it came to land that his son was safe.

When the young victims arrived in Crete they were paraded before the inhabitants on their way to the Labyrinth. Minos’ daughter Ariadne was among the spectators and she fell in love with Theseus at first sight as he marched past her.

She sent for Daedalus and told him he must show her a way to get out of the Labyrinth, and she sent for Theseus and told him she would bring about his escape if he would promise to take her back to Athens and marry her. As may be imagined, he made no difficulty about that, and she gave him the clue she had got from Daedalus, a ball of thread which he was to fasten at one end to the inside of the door and unwind as he went on. This he did and, certain that he could retrace his steps whenever he chose, he walked boldly into the maze looking for the Minotaur. He came upon him asleep and fell upon him, pinning him to the ground; and with his fists—he had no other weapon—he battered the monster to death.

As an oak tree falls on the hillside
Crushing all that lies beneath,
So Theseus. He presses out the life,
The brute’s savage life, and now it lies dead.
Only the head sways slowly, but the horns are useless now.

When Theseus lifted himself up from that terrific struggle, the ball of thread lay where he had dropped it. With it in his hands, the way out was clear. The others followed and taking Ariadne with them they fled to the ship and over the sea toward Athens.

On the way there they put in at the island of Naxos and what happened then is differently reported. One story says that Theseus deserted Ariadne. She was asleep and he sailed away without her, but Dionysus found her and comforted her. The other story is much more favorable to Theseus. She was extremely seasick, and he set her ashore to recover while he returned to the ship to do some necessary work. A violent wind carried him out to sea and kept him there a long time. On his return he found that Ariadne had died, and he was deeply afflicted. Both stories agree that when they drew near to Athens he forgot to hoist the white sail. Either his joy at the success of his voyage put every other thought out of his head, or his grief for Ariadne. The black sail was seen by his father, King Aegeus, from the Acropolis, where for days he had watched the sea with straining eyes. It was to him the sign of his son’s death and he threw himself down from a rocky height into the sea, and was killed. The sea into which he fell was called the Aegean ever after.

So Theseus became King of Athens, a most wise and disinterested king. He declared to the people that he did not wish to rule over them; he wanted a people’s government where all would be equal. He resigned his royal power and organized a commonwealth, building a council hall where the citizens should gather and vote. The only office he kept for himself was that of Commander in Chief. Thus Athens became, of all earth’s cities, the happiest and most prosperous, the only true home of liberty, the one place in the world where the people governed themselves. It was for this reason that in the great War of the Seven against Thebes,* when the victorious Thebans refused burial to those of the enemy who had died, the vanquished turned to Theseus and Athens for help, believing that free men under such a leader would never consent to having the helpless dead wronged. They did not turn in vain. Theseus led his army against Thebes, conquered her and forced her to allow them to be buried. But when he was victor he did not return evil to the Thebans for the evil they had done. He showed himself the perfect knight. He refused to let his army enter and loot the city. He had come not to harm Thebes, but to bury the Argive dead, and the duty done he led his soldiers back to Athens.
In many other stories he shows the same qualities. He received the aged Oedipus whom everyone else had cast out. He was with him when he died, sustaining and comforting him. He protected his two helpless daughters and sent them safely home after their father's death. When Hercules** in his madness killed his wife and children and upon his return to sanity determined to kill himself, Theseus alone stood by him. Hercules' other friends fled, fearing to be polluted by the presence of one who had done so horrible a deed, but Theseus gave him his hand, roused his courage, told him to die would be a coward's act, and took him to Athens.

All the cares of state, however, and all the deeds of knight-errantry to defend the wronged and helpless, could not restrain Theseus' love of danger for the sake of danger. He went to the country of the Amazons, the women warriors, some say with Hercules, some say alone, and brought away one of them, whose name is given sometimes as Antiope, sometimes as Hippolyta. It is certain that the son she bore

Theseus was named Hippolytus, and also that after his birth the Amazons came to rescue her and invaded Attica, the country around Athens, even making their way into the city.

They were finally defeated and no other enemy entered

Attica as long as Theseus lived.

But he had many other adventures. He was one of the men who sailed on the Argo to find the Golden Fleece. He took part in the great Calydonian Hunt, when the King of Calydon called upon the noblest in Greece to help him kill the terrible boar which was laying waste his country. During the hunt Theseus saved the life of his rash friend Pirithous, as he did, indeed, a number of times. Pirithous was quite as adventurous as Theseus, but by no means as successful, so that he was perpetually in trouble. Theseus was devoted to him and always helped him out. The friendship between them came about through an especially rash act on Pirithous' part. It occurred to him that he would like to see for himself if Theseus was as great a hero as he was said to be, and he forthwith went into Attica and stole some of Theseus' cattle. When he heard that Theseus was pursuing him, instead of hurrying away he turned around and went to meet him, with the intention, of course, of deciding then and there which was the better man. But as the two faced each other Pirithous, impulsive as always, suddenly forgot everything in his admiration of the other. He held out his hand to him and cried, "I will submit to any penalty you impose. You be the judge." Theseus, delighted at this warm-hearted action, answered, "All I want is for you to be my friend and brother-in-arms." And they took a solemn oath of friendship.

When Pirithous, who was King of the Lapithae, married, Theseus was, of course, one of the guests, and was exceedingly useful there. The marriage feast was perhaps the most unfortunate that ever took place. The Centaurs, creatures who each had the body of a horse and the chest and face of a man, were related to the bride and came to the wedding. They proceeded to get drunk and to seize the women. Theseus leaped to the defense of the bride and struck down the Centaur who was trying to carry her off. A terrible battle followed, but the Lapithae conquered and finally drove the whole race of Centaurs out of the country, Theseus helping them to the end.

But in the last adventure the two undertook he could not save his friend. Quite characteristically, Pirithous, after the bride of the disastrous wedding feast was dead, decided that for his second wife he would try to get the most carefully guarded lady in all the universe, none other than Persephone herself. Theseus agreed, of course, to help him, but, stimulated probably by the idea of this magnificently dangerous undertaking, declared that first he would himself carry off Helen, the future heroine of Troy, then a child, and when she was grown marry her. This, though less hazardous than the rape of Persephone, was perilous enough to satisfy the most ambitious. Helen's brothers were Castor and Pollux, more than a match for any mortal hero. Theseus succeeded in kidnapping the little girl, just how we are not told, but the two brothers marched against the town she had been taken to, and got her back. Luckily for him they did not find Theseus there. He was on his way to the underworld with Pirithous.

The details of their journey and arrival there are not known beyond the fact that the Lord of Hades was perfectly aware of their intention and amused himself by frustrating it in a novel way. He did not kill them, of
course, as they were already in the realm of death, but he invited them as a friendly gesture to sit in his presence. They did so on the seat he pointed them to—and there they stayed. They could not arise from it. It was called the Chair of Forgetfulness. Whoever sat on it forgot everything. His mind became a blank and he did not move. There Pirithous sits forever, but Theseus was freed by his cousin. When Hercules came to the underworld he lifted Theseus from the seat and brought him back to earth. He tried to do the same for Pirithous, but could not. The King of the Dead knew that it was he who had planned to carry off Persephone, and he held him fast.

In the later years of his life Theseus married Ariadne's sister Phaedra, and thereby drew down terrible misfortunes on her and on himself and on his son Hippolytus, the son the Amazon had borne him. He had sent Hippolytus away while still a young child to be brought up in the southern city where Theseus had spent his own youth. The boy grew to splendid manhood, a great athlete and hunter, despising those who lived in luxurious ease and still more those who were soft enough and silly enough to fall in love. He scorned Aphrodite, he worshiped only Artemis, the huntress chaste and fair. So matters stood when Theseus came to his old home bringing Phaedra with him. A strong affection grew up at once between father and son. They delighted in each other's company. As for Phaedra, her stepson Hippolytus took no notice of her; he never noticed women. But it was far otherwise with her. She fell in love with him, madly and miserably, overwhelmed with shame at such a love, but utterly unable to conquer it. Aphrodite was back of this wretched and ominous state of affairs. She was angry at Hippolytus and determined to punish him to the utmost.

Phaedra, in her anguish, desperate, seeing no help for her anywhere, resolved to die and let no one know why. Theseus at the time was away from home, but her old nurse—completely devoted to her and unable to think anything bad that Phaedra wanted—discovered all, her secret passion, her despair, and her determination to kill herself. With only one thought in her mind, to save her mistress, she went straight to Hippolytus.

"She is dying for love of you," she said. "Give her life.
Give her love for love."

Hippolytus drew away from her with loathing. The love of any woman would have disgusted him, but this guilty love sickened and horrified him. He rushed out into the courtyard, she following him and beseeching him. Phaedra was sitting there, but he never saw her. He turned in furious indignation on the old woman.

"You pitiable wretch," he said, "trying to make me betray my father. I feel polluted by merely hearing such words. Oh, women, vile women—every one of them vile. I will never enter this house again except when my father is in it."

He flung away and the nurse, turning, faced Phaedra. She had risen and there was a look on her face which frightened the old woman.

"I'll help you still," she stammered.
"Hush," Phaedra said. "I will settle my own affairs."

With that she entered the house and the nurse trembling crept after her.

A few minutes later the voices of men were heard greeting the master of the house on his return and Theseus entered the courtyard. Weeping women met him there. They told him that Phaedra was dead. She had killed herself. They had just found her, quite dead, but in her hand a letter to her husband.

"O dearest and best," Theseus said. "Are your last desires written here? This is your seal—yours who will never more smile up at me."

He opened and read it and read it again. Then he turned to the servants filling the courtyard.

"This letter cries aloud," he said. "The words speak—they have a tongue. Know all of you that my son laid violent hands upon my wife O Poseidon, God, hear me while I curse him, and fulfill my curse."

The silence that followed was broken by hurrying footsteps.

Hippolytus entered.

"What happened?" he cried. "How did she die? Father, tell me yourself. Do not hide your grief from me."

"There ought to be a true yardstick to measure affection by," said Theseus, "some means to know who is to be trusted and who is not. You here, look at my
son—proved base by the hand of her who is dead. He offered her violence. Her letter outweighs any words he could speak. Go. You are an exile from this land. Go to your ruin and at once.”

"Father," Hippolytus answered, "I have no skill in speaking and there is no witness to my innocence. The only one is dead. All I can do is to swear by Zeus above that I never touched your wife, never desired to, never gave her a thought. May I die in wretchedness if I am guilty."

"Dead she proves her truth," Theseus said. "Go. You are banished from the land."

Hippolytus went, but not into exile; death was waiting close at hand for him too. As he drove along the sea-road away from the home he was leaving forever, his father’s curse was fulfilled. A monster came up from the water and his horses, terrified beyond even his firm control, ran away. The chariot was shattered and he was mortally hurt.

Theseus was not spared. Artemis appeared to him and told him the truth.

I do not come to bring you help, but only pain,
To show you that your son was honorable.
Your wife was guilty, mad with love for him,
And yet she fought her passion and she died.
But what she wrote was false.

As Theseus listened, overwhelmed by this sum of terrible events, Hippolytus still breathing was carried in.

He gasped out, "I was innocent. Artemis, you? My goddess, your huntsman is dying."

"And no other can take your place, dearest of men to me," she told him.
Hippolytus turned his eyes from her radiance to Theseus brokenhearted.

"Father, dear Father," he said. "It was not your fault."

"If only I could die for you," Theseus cried.
The calm sweet voice of the goddess broke in on their anguish. "Take your son in your arms, Theseus," she said. "It was not you that killed him. It was Aphrodite. Know this, that he will never be forgotten. In song and story men will remember him."

She vanished from sight, but Hippolytus, too, was gone. He had started on the road that leads down to the realm of death.

Theseus’ death, also, was wretched. He was at the court of a friend, King Lycomedes, where a few years later Achilles was to hide disguised as a girl. Some say that Theseus had gone there because Athens had banished him. At all events, the King, his friend and his host, killed him, we are not told why.

Even if the Athenians did banish him, very soon after his death they honored him as no other mortal. They built a great tomb for him and decreed that it should be forever a sanctuary for slaves and for all poor and helpless people, in memory of one who through his life had been the protector of the defenseless.

CHAPTER 11
HERCULES

The greatest hero of Greece was Hercules. He was a personage of quite another order from the great hero of Athens, Theseus. He was what all Greece except Athens most admired. The Athenians were different from the other Greeks and their hero therefore was different.

Theseus was, of course, bravest of the brave as all heroes are, but unlike other heroes he was as compassionate as he was brave and a man of great intellect as well as great bodily strength. It was natural that the Athenians should have such a hero because they valued thought and ideas as no other part of the country did. In Theseus their ideal was embodied. But Hercules embodied what the rest of Greece most valued. His qualities were those the Greeks in general honored and admired. Except for unflinching courage, they were not those that distinguished Theseus.

Hercules was the strongest man on earth and he had the supreme self-confidence magnificent physical strength gives.

He considered himself on an equality with the gods— and with some reason. They needed his help to conquer the Giants. In the final victory of the Olympians over the brutish sons of Earth, Hercules’ arrows played an important part. He treated the gods accordingly. Once
when the priestess at Delphi gave no response to the question he asked, he seized the tripod she sat on and declared that he would carry it off and have an oracle of his own. Apollo, of course, would not put up with this, but Hercules was perfectly willing to fight him and Zeus had to intervene. The quarrel was easily settled, however. Hercules was quite good-natured about it. He did not want to quarrel with Apollo, he only wanted an answer from his oracle. If Apollo would give it the matter was settled as far as he was concerned. Apollo on his side, facing this undaunted person, felt an admiration for his boldness and made his priestess deliver the response.

Throughout his life Hercules had this perfect confidence that no matter who was against him he could never be defeated, and facts bore him out. Whenever he fought with anyone the issue was certain beforehand. He could be overcome only by a supernatural force. Hera used hers against him with terrible effect and in the end he was killed by magic, but nothing that lived in the air, sea, or on land ever defeated him.

Intelligence did not figure largely in anything he did and was often conspicuously absent. Once when he was too hot he pointed an arrow at the sun and threatened to shoot him. Another time when the boat he was in was tossed about by the waves he told the waters that he would punish them if they did not grow calm. His intellect was not strong. His emotions were. They were quickly aroused and apt to get out of control, as when he deserted the Argo and forgot all about his comrades and the Quest of the Golden Fleece in his despairing grief at losing his young armor-bearer, Hylas. This power of deep feeling in a man of his tremendous strength was oddly endearing, but it worked immense harm, too. He had sudden outbursts of furious anger which were always fatal to the often innocent objects. When the rage had passed and he had come to himself he would show a most disarming penitence and agree humbly to any punishment it was proposed to inflict on him. Without his consent he could not have been punished by anyone—yet nobody ever endured so many punishments. He spent a large part of his life expiating one unfortunate deed after another and never rebelling against the almost impossible demands made upon him. Sometimes he punished himself when others were inclined to exonerate him.

It would have been ludicrous to put him in command of a kingdom as Theseus was put; he had more than enough to do to command himself. He could never have thought out any new or great idea as the Athenian hero was held to have done. His thinking was limited to devising a way to kill a monster which was threatening to kill him. Nevertheless he had true greatness. Not because he had complete courage based upon overwhelming strength, which is merely a matter of course, but because, by his sorrow for wrongdoing and his willingness to do anything to expiate it, he showed greatness of soul. If only he had had some greatness of mind as well, at least enough to lead him along the ways of reason, he would have been the perfect hero.

He was born in Thebes and for a long time was held to be the son of Amphitryon, a distinguished general. In those earlier years he was called Alcides, or descendant of Alcaeus who was Amphitryon's father. But in reality he was the son of Zeus, who had visited Amphitryon's wife Alcmena in the shape of her husband when the general was away fighting. She bore two children, Hercules to Zeus and Iphicles to Amphitryon. The difference in the boys' descent was clearly shown in the way each acted in face of a great danger which came to them before they were a year old. Hera, as always, was furiously jealous and she determined to kill Hercules.

One evening Alcmena gave both the children their baths and their fill of milk and laid them in their crib, caressing them and saying, "Sleep, my little ones, soul of my soul. Happy be your slumber and happy your awakening." She rocked the cradle and in a moment the babies were asleep. But at darkest midnight when all was silent in the house two great snakes came crawling into the nursery. There was a light in the room and as the two reared up above the crib, with weaving heads and flickering tongues, the children woke. Iphicles screamed and tried to get out of bed, but Hercules sat up and grasped the deadly creatures by the throat. They turned and twisted and wound their coils around his body, but he held them fast. The mother heard Iphicles' screams and, calling to her husband, rushed to the nursery. There sat Hercules laughing, in each hand a long limp body. He gave them gleefully to Amphitryon.
They were dead. All knew then that the child was destined to great things. Teiresias, the blind prophet of Thebes, told Alcmena: "I swear that many a Greek woman as she cards the wool at eventide shall sing of this your son and you who bore him. He shall be the hero of all mankind."

Great care was taken with his education, but teaching him what he did not wish to learn was a dangerous business. He seems not to have liked music, which was a most important part of a Greek boy's training, or else he disliked his music master. He flew into a rage with him and brained him with his lute. This was the first time he dealt a fatal blow without intending it. He did not mean to kill the poor musician; he just struck out on the impulse of the moment without thinking, hardly aware of his strength. He was sorry, very sorry, but that did not keep him from doing the same thing again and again. The other subjects he was taught, fencing, wrestling, and driving, he took more kindly, and his teachers in these branches all survived. By the time he was eighteen he was full-grown and he killed, alone by himself, a great lion which lived in the woods of Cithaeron, the Thespian lion. Ever after he wore its skin as a cloak with the head forming a kind of hood over his own head.

His next exploit was to fight and conquer the Minyans, who had been exacting a burdensome tribute from the Thebans. The grateful citizens gave him as a reward the hand of the Princess Megara. He was devoted to her and to their children and yet this marriage brought upon him the greatest sorrow of his life as well as trials and dangers such as no one ever went through, before or after. When Megara had borne him three sons he went mad. Hera who never forgets sent the madness upon him. He killed his children and Megara, too, as she tried to protect the youngest. Then his sanity returned. He found himself in his bloodstained hall, the dead bodies of his sons and his wife beside him. He had no idea what had happened, how they had been killed. Only a moment since, as it seemed to him, they had all been talking together. As he stood there in utter bewilderment the terrified people who were watching him from a distance saw that the mad fit was over, and Amphitryon dared to approach him. There was no keeping the truth from Hercules. He had to know how this horror had come to pass and Amphitryon told him. Hercules heard him out; then he said, "And I myself am the murderer of my dearest."

"Yes, Amphitryon answered trembling. "But you were out of your mind."

Hercules paid no attention to the implied excuse. "Shall I spare my own life then?" he said. I will avenge upon myself these deaths."

But before he could rush out and kill himself, even as he started to do so, his desperate purpose was changed and his life was spared. This miracle—it was nothing less—of recalling Hercules from frenzied feeling and violent action to sober reason and sorrowful acceptance, was not wrought by a god descending from the sky. It was a miracle caused by human friendship. His friend Theseus stood before him and stretched out his hands to clasp those bloodstained hands. Thus according to common Greek idea he would himself become defiled and have a part in Hercules guilt.

"Do not start back." He told Hercules. "Do not keep me from sharing all with you. Evil I share with you is not evil to me. And hear me. Men great of soul can bear the blows of heaven and not flinch."

Hercules said, "Do you know what I have done?"

"I know this," Theseus answered. Your sorrows reach from earth to heaven."

"So I will die," said Hercules. "No hero spoke those words." Theseus said. "What can I do but die?" Hercules cried. "Live? A branded man, for all to say, "Look. There is he who killed his wife and sons!" Everywhere my jailers, the sharp scorpions of the tongue!"

"Even so, suffer and be strong," Theseus answered. "You shall come to Athens with me, share my home and all things with me. And you will give to me and to the city a great return, the glory of having helped you."

A long silence followed. At last Hercules spoke, slow, heavy words. "So let it be," he said, "I will be strong and wait for death."

The two went to Athens, but Hercules did not stay there long. Theseus, the thinker, rejected the idea that a man could be guilty of murder when he had not known what he was doing and that those who helped such a one could be reckoned defiled. The Athenians agreed and welcomed the poor hero. But the thing out of all; he could only feel. He had killed his family. Therefore he
was defiled and a defiler of others. He deserved that all should turn from him with loathing. At Delphi where he went to consult the oracle, the priestess looked at the matter just as he did. He needed to be purified, she told him, and only a terrible penance could do that. She bade him go to his cousin Eurystheus, King of Mycenae (of Tiryns in some stories) and submit to whatever he demanded of him. He went willingly, ready to do anything that could make him clean again. It is plain from the rest of the story that the priestess knew what Eurystheus was like and that he would beyond questions purge Hercules thoroughly.

Eurystheus was by no means stupid, but of a very ingenious turn of mind, and when the strongest man on earth came to him humbly prepared to be his slave, he devised a series of penances which from the point of view of difficulty and danger could not have been improved upon. It must be said, however, that he was helped and urged on by Hera. To the end of Hercules’ life she never forgave him for being Zeus’s son. The tasks Eurystheus gave him to do are called “the Labors of Hercules.” There were twelve of them and each one was all but impossible.

The first was to kill the lion of Nemea, a beast no weapons could wound. That difficulty Hercules solved by choking the life out of him. Then he heaved the huge carcass up on his back and carried it to Mycenae. After that, Eurystheus, a cautious man, would not let him inside the city. He gave him his orders from afar.

The second labor was to go to Lerna and kill a creature with nine heads called the Hydra which lived in a swamp there. This was exceedingly hard to do, because one of the heads was immortal and the others almost as bad, inasmuch as when Hercules chopped off one, two grew up instead. However, he was helped by his nephew Iolaus who brought him a burning brand with which he seared the neck as he cut each head off so that it could not sprout again. When all had been chopped off he disposed of the one that was immortal by burying it securely under a great rock.

The third sacred labor was to bring back alive a stag with horns of gold, sacred to Artemis, which lived in the forests of Cerynitia. He could have killed it easily, but to take it alive was another matter and he hunted it a whole year before he succeeded.

The fourth labor was to capture a great boar which had its lair on Mount Erymanthus. He chased the beast from one place to another until it was exhausted; then he drove it into deep snow and trapped it.

The fifth labor was to clean the Augean stables in a single day. Augeas had thousands of cattle and their stalls had not been cleared out for years. Hercules diverted the courses of two rivers and made them flow through the stables in a great flood that washed out the filth in no time at all.

The sixth labor was to drive away the Stymphalian birds, which were a plague to the people of Stymphalus because of their enormous numbers. He was helped by Athena to drive them out of their coverts, and as they flew up he shot them.

The seventh labor was to go to Crete and fetch there the beautiful savage bull that Poseidon had given Minos. Hercules mastered him, put him in a boat and brought him to Eurystheus.

The eighth labor was to get the man-eating mares of King Diomedes of Thrace. Hercules slew Diomedes first and then drove off the mares unopposed.

The ninth labor was to bring back the girdle of Hippolyta, the Queen of the Amazons. When Hercules arrived she met him kindly and told him she would give him the girdle, but Hera stirred up trouble. She made the Amazons think that Hercules was going to carry off their queen, and they charged down on his ship. Hercules, without a thought of how kind Hippolyta had been, without any thought at all, instantly killed her, taking it for granted that she was responsible for the attack. He was able to fight off the others and get away with the girdle.

The tenth labor was to bring back the cattle of Geryon, who was a monster with three bodies living on Erythia, a western island. On his way there Hercules reached the land at the end of the Mediterranean and he set up as a memorial of his journey two great rocks, called the pillars of Hercules (now Gibraltar and Ceuta). Then he got the oxen and took them to Mycenae.

The eleventh labor was the most difficult of all so far. It was to bring back the Golden Apples of the Hesperides, and he did not know where they were to be found. Atlas, who bore the vault of heaven upon his shoulders, was the father of the Hesperides, so Hercules went to him and asked him to get the apples for him. He
offered to take upon himself the burden of the sky while Atlas was away. Atlas, seeing a chance of being relieved forever from his heavy task, gladly agreed. He came back with the apples, but he did not give them to Hercules. He told Hercules he could keep on holding up the sky, for Atlas himself would take the apples to Eurystheus. On this occasion Hercules had only his wits to trust to; he had to give all his strength to supporting that mighty load. He was successful, but because of Atlas' stupidity rather than his own cleverness. He agreed to Atlas' plan, but asked him to take the sky back for just a moment so that Hercules could put a pad on his shoulders to ease the pressure. Atlas did so, and Hercules picked up the apples and went off.

The twelfth labor was the worst of all. It took him down to the lower world, and it was then that he freed Theseus from the Chair of Forgetfulness. His task was to bring Cerberus, the three-headed dog, up from Hades. Pluto gave him permission provided Hercules used no weapons to overcome him. He could use his hands only. Even so, he forced the terrible monster to submit to him. He lifted him and carried him all the way up to the earth and on to Mycenae. Eurystheus very sensibly did not want to keep him and made Hercules carry him back. This was his last labor.

When all were completed and full expiation made for the death of his wife and children, he would seem to have earned ease and tranquility for the rest of his life. But it was not so. He was never tranquil and at ease. An exploit quite as difficult as most of the labors was the conquest of Antaeus, a Giant and a mighty wrestler who forced strangers to wrestle with him on condition that if he was victor he should kill them. He was roofing a temple with the skulls of his victims. As long as he could touch the earth he was invincible. If thrown to the ground he sprang up with renewed strength from the contact. Hercules lifted him up and holding him in the air strangled him.

Story after story is told of his adventures. He fought the river-god Achelous because Achelous was in love with the girl Hercules now wanted to marry. Like everyone else by this time, Achelous had no desire to fight him and he tried to reason with him. But that never worked with Hercules. It only made him more angry. He said, "My hand is better than my tongue. Let me win fighting and you may win talking."

Achelous took the form of a bull and attacked him fiercely, but Hercules was used to subduing bulls. He conquered him and broke off one of his horns. The cause of the contest, a young princess named Deianira, became his wife.

He traveled to many lands and did many other great deeds.

At Troy he rescued a maiden who was in the same plight as Andromeda, waiting on the shore to be devoured by a sea monster which could be appeased in no other way. She was the daughter of King Laomedon, who had cheated Apollo and Poseidon of their wages after at Zeus's command they had built for the King the walls of Troy. In return Apollo sent a pestilence, and Poseidon the sea serpent. Hercules agreed to rescue the girl if her father would give him the horses Zeus had given his grandfather. Laomedon promised, but when Hercules had slain the monster the King refused to pay. Hercules captured the city, killed the King, and gave the maiden to his friend, Telamon of Salamis, who had helped him.

On his way to Atlas to ask him about the Golden Apples, Hercules came to the Caucasus, where he freed Prometheus slaying the eagle that preyed on him.

Along with these glorious deeds there were others not glorious. He killed with a careless thrust of his arm a lad who was serving him by pouring water on his hands before a feast. It was an accident and the boy's father forgave Hercules, but Hercules could not forgive himself and he went into exile for a time. Far worse was his deliberately slaying a good friend in order to avenge an insult offered him by the young man's father, King Eurytus. For this base action Zeus himself punished him: he sent him to Lydia to be a slave to the Queen, Omphale, some say for a year, some for three years. She amused herself with him, making him at times dress up as a woman and do woman's work, weave or spin. He submitted patiently, as always, but he felt himself degraded by this servitude and with complete unreason blamed Eurytus for it and swore he would punish him to the utmost when he was freed.

All the stories told about him are characteristic, but the one which gives the clearest picture of him is the account of a visit he made when he was on his way to get the man-eating mares of Diomedes, one of the
twelve labors. The house he had planned to spend a night in, that of his friend Admetus, a king in Thessaly, was a place of deep mourning when he came to it although he did not know. Admetus had just lost his wife in a very strange way.

The cause of her death went back into the past, to the time when Apollo in anger at Zeus for killing his son Aesculapius killed Zeus's workmen, the Cyclopes. He was punished by being forced to serve on earth as a slave for a year and Admetus was the master he chose or Zeus chose for him. During his servitude Apollo made friends with the household, especially with the head of it and his wife Alcestis. When he had an opportunity to prove how strong his friendship was he took it. He learned that the three Fates had spun all of Admetus' thread of life, and were on the point of cutting it. He obtained from them a reprieve. If someone would die in Admetus' stead, he could live. This news he took to Admetus, who at once set about finding a substitute for himself. He went first quite confidently to his father and mother. They were old and they were devoted to him. Certainly one or the other would consent to take his place in the world of the dead. But to his astonishment he found they would not. They told him, "God's daylight is sweet even to the old. We do not ask you to die for us. We will not die for you." And they were completely unmoved by his angry contempt: "You, standing palsied at the gate of death and yet afraid to die!"

He would not give up, however. He went to his friends begging one after another of them to die and let him live. He evidently thought his life was so valuable that someone would surely save it even at the cost of the supreme sacrifice. But he met with an invariable refusal. At last in despair he went back to his house and there he found a substitute. His wife Alcestis offered to die for him. No one who has read so far will need to be told that he accepted the offer. He felt exceedingly sorry for her and still more for himself in having to lose so good a wife, and he stood weeping beside her as she died. When she was gone he was overwhelmed with grief and decreed that she should have the most magnificent of funerals.

It was at this point that Hercules arrived, to rest and enjoy himself under a friend's roof on his journey north to Diomedes. The way Admetus treated him shows more plainly than any other story we have how high the standards of hospitality were, how much was expected from a host to a guest.

As soon as Admetus was told of Hercules' arrival, he came to meet him with no appearance of mourning except in his dress. His manner was that of one gladly welcoming a friend. To Hercules' question who was dead he answered quietly that a woman of his household, but no relative of his, was to be buried that day. Hercules instantly declared that he would not trouble him with his presence at such a time, but Admetus steadily refused to let him go elsewhere. "I will not have you sleep under another's roof," he told him.

To his servants he said that the guest was to be taken to a distant room where he could hear no sounds of grief, and given dinner and lodging there. No one must let him know what had happened.

Hercules dined alone, but he understood that Admetus must as a matter of form attend the funeral and the fact did not stand in the way of his enjoying himself. The servants left at home to attend to him were kept busy satisfying his enormous appetite and, still more, refilling his wine-jug. Hercules became very happy and very drunk and very noisy. He roared out songs at the top of his voice, some of them highly objectionable songs, and behaved himself in a way that was nothing less than indecent at the time of a funeral. When the servants looked their disapproval he shouted at them not to be so solemn. Couldn't they give him a smile now and then like good fellows? Their gloomy faces took away his appetite. "Have a drink with me," he cried, "many drinks."

One of them answered timidly that it was not a time for laughter and drinking.

"Why not?" thundered Hercules. "Because a stranger woman is dead?"

"A stranger—" faltered the servant.

"Well, that's what Admetus told me," Hercules said angrily.

"I suppose you won't say he lied to me."

"Oh, no," the servant answered. "Only—he's too hospitable. But please have some more wine. Our trouble is only our own."

He turned to fill the winecup but Hercules seized him—and no one ever disregarded that grasp.
"There's something strange here," he said to the frightened man. "What is wrong?"

"You see for yourself we are in mourning," the other answered.

"But why, man, why?" Hercules cried. "Has my host made a fool of me? Who is dead?"

"Alcestis," the servant whispered. "Our Queen."

There was a long silence. Then Hercules threw down his cup.

"I might have known," he said. "I saw he had been weeping.

His eyes were red. But he swore it was a stranger. He made me come in. Oh, good friend and good host. And I—got drunk, made merry, in this house of sorrow. Oh, he should have told me."

Then he did as always, he heaped blame upon himself. He had been a fool, a drunken fool, when the man he cared for was crushed with grief. As always, too, his thoughts turned quickly to find some way of atoning. What could he do to make amends? There was nothing he could not do. He was perfectly sure of that, but what was there which would help his friend? Then light dawned on him. "Of course" he said to himself. "That is the way. I must bring Alcestis back from the dead. Of course. Nothing could be clearer. I'll find that old fellow, Death. He is sure to be near her tomb and I'll wrestle with him. I will crack his body between my arms until he gives her to me. If he is not by the grave I will go down to Hades after him. Oh, I will return good to my friend who has been so good to me." He hurried out exceedingly pleased with himself and enjoying the prospect of what promised to be a very good wrestling match.

When Admetus returned to his empty and desolate house Hercules was there to greet him, and by his side was a woman. "Look at her, Admetus," he said. "Is she like anyone you know?" And when Admetus cried out, "A ghost! Is it a tricksome mockery of the gods?" Hercules answered, "It is your wife. I fought Death for her and I made him give her back."

There is no other story about Hercules which shows so clearly his character as the Greeks saw it: his simplicity and bewildering stupidity; his inability not to get roaring drunk in a house where someone was dead; his quick penitence and desire to make amends at no matter what cost; his perfect confidence that not even Death was his match. That is the portrait of Hercules. To be sure, it would have been still more accurate if it had shown him in a fit of rage killing one of the servants who were annoying him with their gloomy faces, but the poet Euripides from whom we get the story kept it clear of everything that did not bear directly on Alcestis' death and return to life. Another death or two, however natural when Hercules was present, would have blurred the picture he wanted to paint.

As Hercules had sworn to do while he was Omphale's slave, no sooner was he free than he started to punish King Eurytus because he himself had been punished by Zeus for killing Eurytus' son. He collected an army, captured the King's city and put him to death. But Eurytus, too, was avenged, for indirectly this victory was the cause of Hercules' own death.

Before he had quite completed the destruction of the city, he sent home where Deianira, his devoted wife, was waiting for him to come back from Omphale in Lydia—a band of captive maidens, one of them especially beautiful, Iole, the King's daughter. The man who brought them to Deianira told her that Hercules was madly in love with this Princess. This news was not so hard for Deianira as might be expected, because she believed she had a powerful love-charm which she had kept for years against just such an evil, a woman in her own house preferred before her. Directly after her marriage, when Hercules was taking her home, they had reached a river where the Centaur Nessus acted as ferryman, carrying travelers over the water. He took Deianira on his back and in midstream insulted her. She shrieked and Hercules shot the beast as he reached the other bank. Before he died he told Deianira to take some of his blood and use it as a charm for Hercules if ever he loved another woman more than her. When she heard about Iole, it seemed to her the time had come, and she anointed a splendid robe with the blood and sent it to Hercules by the messenger.

As the hero put it on, the effect was the same as that of the robe Medea had sent her rival whom Jason was about to marry. A fearful pain seized him, as though he were in a burning fire. In his first agony he turned on Deianira's messenger, who was, of course, completely innocent, seized him and hurled him down into the sea. He could still slay others, but it seemed that he himself could not die. The anguish he felt hardly weakened him.
What had instantly killed the young Princess of Corinth could not kill Hercules. He was in torture, but he lived and they brought him home. Long before, Deianira had heard what her gift had done to him and had killed herself. In the end he did the same. Since death would not come to him, he would go to death. He ordered those around him to build a great pyre on Mount Oeta and carry him to it. When at last he reached it he knew that now he could die and he was glad. "This is rest," he said. "This is the end." And as they lifted him to the pyre he lay down on it as one who at a banquet table lies down upon his couch.

He asked his youthful follower, Philoctetes, to hold the torch to set the wood on fire; and he gave him his bow and arrows, which were to be far-famed in the young man's hands, too, at Troy. Then the flames rushed up and Hercules was seen no more on earth. He was taken to heaven, where he was reconciled to Hera and married her daughter Hebe, and where

After his mighty labors he has rest.
His choicest prize eternal peace.
Within the homes of blessedness.
But it is not easy to imagine him contentedly enjoying rest and peace, or allowing the blessed gods to do so, either.

CHAPTER 12
ATALANTA

Sometimes there are said to have been two heroines of that name. Certainly two men, Iasus and Schoenius, are each called the father of Atalanta, but then it often happens in old stories that different names are given to unimportant persons.

If there were two Atalantas it is certainly remarkable that both wanted to sail on the Argo, both took part in the Calydonian boar hunt, both married a man who beat them in a foot race, and both were ultimately changed into lionesses.

Since the story of each is practically the same as that of the other it is simpler to take it for granted that there was only one. Indeed it would seem passing the bounds of the probable even in mythological stories to suppose that there were two maidens living at the same time who loved adventure as much as the most dauntless hero, and who could outshoot and outrun and outwrestle, too, the men of one of the two great ages of heroism.

Atalanta's father, whatever his name was, when a daughter and not a son was born to him, was, of course, bitterly disappointed. He decided that she was not worthy bringing up and had the tiny creature left on a wild mountainside to die of cold and hunger. But, as so often happens in stories, animals proved kinder than humans. A she-bear took charge of her, nursed her and kept her warm, and the baby grew up thus into an active, daring little girl. Kind hunters then found her and took her to live with them. She became in the end more than their equal in all the arduous feats of a hunter's life. Once two Centaurs, swifter and stronger by far than any mortal caught sight of her when she was alone and pursued her. She did not run from them; that would have been folly. She stood still and fitted an arrow to her bow and shot. A second arrow followed. Both Centaurs fell, mortally wounded.

Then came the famous hunt of the Calydonian boar. This was a terrible creature sent to ravage the country of Calydon by Artemis in order to punish the King, Oeneus, because he forgot her when he was sacrificing the first fruits to the gods at the harvest-time. The brute devastated the land, destroyed the cattle, killed the men who tried to kill it. Finally Oeneus called for help upon the bravest men of Greece, and a splendid band of young heroes assembled, many of whom sailed later on the Argo. With them came as a matter of course Atalanta, "The pride of the woods of Arcady." We have a description of how she looked when she walked in on that masculine gathering: A shining buckle clasped her robe at the neck; her hair was simply dressed, caught up in a knot behind. An ivory quiver hung upon her left shoulder and in her hand was a bow. Thus was she attired. As for her face, it seemed too maidenly to be that of a boy, and too boyish to be that of a maiden." To one man there, however, she looked lovelier and more desirable than any maiden he had ever seen. Oeneus' son, Meleager, fell in love with her at first sight. But, we may be sure, Atalanta treated him as a good comrade, not as a possible lover. She had no liking for men except as companions in the hunt and she was determined never to marry.
Some of the heroes resented her presence and felt it beneath them to go hunting with a woman, but Meleager insisted and they finally gave in to him. It proved well for them that they did, because when they surrounded the boar, the brute rushed upon them so swiftly that it killed two men before the others could come to their help, and, what was equally ominous, a third man fell pierced by a misdirected javelin. In this confusion of dying men and wildly flying weapons Atalanta kept her head and wounded the boar. Her arrow was the first to strike it. Meleager then rushed on the wounded creature and stabbed it to the heart. Technically speaking it was he who killed it, but the honors of the hunt went to Atalanta and Meleager insisted that they should give her the skin. Strangely enough this was the cause of his own death. When he was just a week old the Fates had appeared to his mother, Althea, and thrown a log of wood into the fire burning in her chamber. Then spinning as they ever did, twirling the distaff and twisting the thread of destiny, they sang, To you, O new-born child, we grant a gift, To live until this wood turns into ash. Althea snatched the brand from the fire, quenched the flame, and hid it in a chest. Her brothers were among those who went to hunt the boar. They felt themselves insulted and were furiously angry at having the prize go to a girl—as, no doubt, was the case with others, but they were Meleager’s uncles and did not need to stand on any ceremony with him. They declared that Atalanta should not have the skin and told Meleager he had no more right to give it away than anyone else had. Whereupon Meleager killed them both, taking them completely off their guard. This news was brought to Althea. Her beloved brothers had been slain by her son because he had made a fool of himself over a shameless hussy who went hunting with men. A passion of rage took possession of her. She rushed to the chest for the brand and threw it into the fire. As it blazed up, Meleager fell to the ground dying, and by the time it was consumed his spirit had slipped away from his body. It is said that Althea, horror-stricken at what she had done, hanged herself. So the Calydonian boar hunt ended in tragedy. To Atalanta, however, it was only the beginning of her adventures. Some say that she sailed with the Argonauts; others that Jason persuaded her not to do so. She is never mentioned in the story of their exploits and she was certainly not one to hold back when deeds of daring were to be done, so that it seems probable that she did not go. The next time we hear of her is after the Argonauts returned, when Medea had killed Jason’s uncle Pelias under the pretext of restoring him to youth. At the funeral games held in his honor Atalanta appeared among the contestants, and in the wrestling match conquered the young man who was to be the father of Achilles, the great hero Peleus. It was after this achievement that she discovered who her parents were and went to live with them, her father apparently being reconciled to having a daughter who really seemed almost if not quite as good as a son. It seems odd that a number of men wanted to marry her because she could hunt and shoot and wrestle, but it was so; she had a great many suitors. As a way of disposing of them easily and agreeably she declared that she would marry whoever could beat her in a foot race, knowing well that there was no such man alive. She had a delightful time. Fleet-footed young men were always arriving to race with her and she always outran them. But at last one came who used his head as well as his heels. He knew he was not as good a runner as she, but he had a plan. By the favor of Aphrodite, always on the lookout to subdue wild young maidens who despised love, this ingenious young man, whose name was either Melanion (Milanion) or Hippomenes, got possession of three wondrous apples, all of pure gold, beautiful as those that grew in the garden of the Hesperides. No one alive could see them and not want them. On the race course as Atalanta—poised for the starting signal, and a hundredfold more lovely disrobed than with her garments on—looked fiercely around her, wonder at her beauty took hold of all who saw her, but most of all the man who was waiting to run against her. He kept his head, however, and held fast to his golden apples. They started, she flying swift as an arrow, her hair tossed back over her white shoulders, a rosy flush tingling her fair body. She was outstripping him when he rolled one of the apples directly in front of her. It
needed but a moment for her to stoop and pick the lovely thing up, but that brief pause brought him abreast of her. A moment more and he threw the second, this time a little to the side. She had to swerve to reach it and he got ahead of her. Almost at once, however, she had caught up with him and the goal was now very near. But then the third golden sphere flashed across her path and rolled far into the grass beside the course. She saw the gleam through the green, she could not resist it. As she picked the apple up, her lover panting and almost winded touched the goal. She was his. Her free days alone in the forest and her athletic victories were over.

The two are said to have been turned into lions because of some affront offered either to Zeus or to Aphrodite. But before that Atalanta had borne a son, Parthenopaeus, who was one of the Seven against Thebes.

QUIZ QUESTIONS

1. What was the Medusa?
2. How did Perseus kill his grandfather?
3. Which creature is being described: It was half bull, half human, the son of King Minos of Crete. It lived in the Labyrinth made by Daedalus. Every nine years fourteen young Athenians were sacrificed to it.
4. How did Theseus change the government of Athens?
5. What was Hercules’ main characteristic?
6. Why did Hercules perform his twelve labors?
7. Which of the following was not one of the labors of Hercules?
8. How did Hercules clean the Augean stables?
9. Which of the following was not one of the labors of Hercules?
10. Whom did Atalanta tell her father she would marry?
11. How did Theseus find his way out of the Labyrinth? Who told him the “secret” to escaping it?
12. How is Perseus’ birth magical? Explain how Perseus was conceived and born, and who his parents were.