Mythology: Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes

SET FOUR: Adventure Stories

CHAPTER SEVEN
The Quest of the Golden Fleece

This is the title of a long poem, very popular in classical days, by the third-century poet Apollonius of Rhodes. He tells the whole story of the Quest except the part about Jason and Pelias which I have taken from Pindar. It is the subject of one of his most famous odes, written in the first half of the fifth century. Apollonius ends his poem with the return of the heroes to Greece. I have added the account of what Jason and Medea did there, taking it from the fifth-century tragic poet Euripides, who made it the subject of one of his best plays.

These three writers are very unlike each other. No prose paraphrase can give any idea of Pindar, except, perhaps, something of his singular power for vivid and minutely detailed description. Readers of the Aenid will be reminded of Virgil by Apollonius. The difference between Euripides' Medea and Apollonius' heroine and also Virgil's Dido is in its degree a measure of what Greek tragedy was.

The first hero in Europe who undertook a great journey was the leader of the Quest of the Golden Fleece. He was supposed to have lived a generation earlier than the most famous Greek traveler, the hero of the Odyssey. It was of course a journey by water. Rivers, lakes, and seas were the only highways; there were no roads. All the same, a voyager had to face perils not only on the deep, but on the land as well. Ships did not sail by night, and any place where sailors put in might harbor a monster or a magician who could work more deadly harm than storm and shipwreck. High courage was necessary to travel, especially outside of Greece.

No story proved this fact better than the account of what the heroes suffered who sailed in the ship Argo to find the Golden Fleece. It may be doubted, indeed, if there ever was a voyage on which sailors had to face so many and such varied dangers. However, they were all heroes of renown, some of them the greatest in Greece, and they were quite equal to their adventures.

The tale of the Golden Fleece begins with a Greek king named Athamas, who got tired of his wife, put her away, and married another, the Princess Ino. Nephele, the first wife, was afraid for her two children, especially the boy, Phrixus. She thought the second wife would try to kill him so that her own son could inherit the kingdom, and she was right. This second wife came from a great family. Her father was Cadmus, the excellent King of Thebes; her mother and her three sisters were women of blameless lives. But she herself, Ino, determined to bring about the little boy's death, and she made an elaborate plan how this was to be done. Somehow she got possession of all the seed-corn and parched it before the men went out for the sowing, so that, of course, there was no harvest at all. When the King sent a man to ask the oracle what he should do in this fearful distress, she persuaded or, more probably, bribed the messenger to say that the oracle had declared the com would not grow again unless they offered up the young Prince as a sacrifice.

The people, threatened with starvation, forced the King to yield and permit the boy's death. To the later Greeks the idea of such a sacrifice was as horrible as it is to us, and when it played a part in a story they almost always changed it into something less shocking. As this tale has come down to us, When the boy had been taken to the altar a wondrous ram, with a fleece of pure gold, snatched him and his sister up and bore them away through the air. Hermes had sent him in answer to their mother's prayer.

While they were crossing the strait which separates Europe and Asia, the girl, whose name was Helle, slipped and fell into the water. She was drowned; and the strait was named for her: the Sea of Helle, the Hellespont. The boy came safely to land, to the country of Colchis on the Unfriendly Sea (the Black Sea, which had not yet become friendly). The Colchians were a fierce people. Nevertheless, they were kind to Phrixus; and their King, AEetes, let him marry one of his
Mythology

Chapters 7-8

daughters. It seems odd that Phrixus sacrificed to Zeus the ram that had saved him, in gratitude for having been saved; but he did so, and he gave the precious Golden Fleece to King AEetes.

Phrixus had an uncle who was by rights a king in Greece, but had had his kingdom taken away from him by his nephew, a man named Pelias. The King's young son, Jason, the rightful heir to the kingdom, had been sent secretly away to a place of safety, and when he was grown he came boldly back to claim the kingdom from his wicked cousin.

The usurper Pelias had been told by an oracle that he would die at the hands of kinsmen, and that he should beware of anyone whom he saw shod with only a single sandal. In due time such a man came to the town. One foot was bare, although in all other ways he was well—clad-a garment fitting close to his splendid limbs, and around his shoulders a leopard's skin to turn the showers. He had not shorn the bright locks of his hair; they ran rippling down his back. He went straight into the town and entered the marketplace fearlessly, at the time when the multitude filled it.

None knew him, but one and another wondered at him and said, "Can he be Apollo? Or Aphrodite's lord? Not one of Poseidon's bold sons, for they are dead." So they questioned each other. But Pelias came in hot haste at the tidings and when he saw the single sandal he was afraid. He hid his terror in his heart, however, and addressed the stranger: "What country is your fatherland? No hateful and defiling lies, I beg you. Tell me the truth." With gentle words the other answered: "I have come to my home to recover the ancient honor of my house, this land no longer ruled aright, which Zeus gave to my father. I am your cousin, and they call me by the name of Jason. You and I must rule ourselves by the law of right—not appeal to brazen swords or spears. Keep all the wealth you have taken, the flocks and the tawny herds of cattle and the fields, but the sovereign scepter and the throne release to me, so that no evil quarrel will arise from them."

Pelias gave him a soft answer. "So shall it be. But one thing must first be done. The dead Phrixus bids us bring back the Golden Fleece and thus bring back his spirit to his home. The oracle has spoken. But for me, already old age is my companion, while the flower of your youth is only now coming into full bloom. Do you go upon this quest, and I swear with Zeus as witness that I will give up the kingdom and the sovereign rule to you." So he spoke, believing in his heart that no one could make the attempt and come back alive.

The idea of the great adventure was delightful to Jason. He agreed, and let it be known everywhere that this would be a voyage indeed. The young men of Greece joyfully met the challenge. They came, all the best and noblest, to join the company. Hercules, the greatest of all heroes, was there; Orpheus, the master musician; Castor with his brother Pollux; Achilles' father, Peleus; and many another. Hera was helping Jason, and it was she who kindled in each one the desire not to be left behind nursing a life without peril by his mother's side, but even at the price of death to drink with his comrades the peerless elixir of valor. They set sail in the Ship Argo. Jason took in his hands a golden goblet and, pouring a libation of wine into the sea, called upon Zeus whose lance is the lightning to speed them on their way.

Great perils lay before them, and some of them paid with their lives for drinking that peerless elixir. They put in first at Lemnos, a strange island where only women lived. They had risen up against the men and had killed them all, except one, the old king. His daughter, Hypsipyle, a leader among the women, had spared her father and set him afloat on the sea in a hollow chest, which finally carried him to safety. These fierce creatures, however, welcomed the Argonauts, and helped them with good gifts of food and wine and garments before they sailed away.

Soon after they left Lemnos the Argonauts lost Hercules from the company. A lad named Hylas, his armor-bearer, very dear to him, was drawn under the water as he dipped his pitcher in a spring, by a water nymph who saw the rosy flush of his beauty and wished to kiss him. She threw her arms around his neck and drew him down into the depths and he was seen no more. Hercules sought him madly everywhere, shouting his name and plunging deeper and deeper into the forest away from the sea. He had forgotten the Fleece and the Argo and his comrades: everything except Hylas. He did not come back, and finally the ship had to sail without him.

Their next adventure was with the Harpies, frightful flying creatures with hooked beaks and claw who always left behind them a loathsome stench, sickening
to all living creatures. Where the Argonauts had beached their boat for the night lived a lonely and wretched old man, to whom Apollo, the truth-teller, had given the gift of prophecy. He foretold unerringly what would happen, and this had displeased Zeus, who always liked to wrap in mystery what he would do—and very sensibly, too, in the opinion of all who knew Hera. So he inflicted a terrible punishment upon the old man. Whenever he was about to dine, the Harpies who were called "the hounds of Zeus" swooped down and defiled the food, leaving it so foul that no one could bear to be near it, much less eat it. When the Argonauts saw the poor old creature—his name was Phineus—he was like a lifeless dream, creeping on withered feet, trembling for weakness, and only the skin on his body held his bones together. He welcomed them gladly and begged them to help him. He knew through his gift of prophecy that he could be defended from the Harpies by two men alone, who were among the company on the Argo—the sons of Boreas, the great North Wind. All listened to him with pity and the two gave him eagerly their promise to help.

While the others set forth food for him, Boreas' sons took their stand beside him with drawn swords. He had hardly put a morsel to his lips when the hateful monsters darted down from the sky and in a moment had devoured everything and were flying off, leaving the intolerable odor behind them. But the wind-swift sons of the North Wind followed them; they caught up with them and struck at them with their swords. They would assuredly have cut them to pieces if Iris, the rainbow messenger of the gods, gliding down from heaven, had not checked them. They must forbear to kill the hounds of Zeus, she said, but she swore by the waters of the Styx, the oath that none can break, that they would never again trouble Phineus. So the two returned gladly and comforted the old man, who in his joy sat feasting with the heroes all through the night.

He gave them wise advice, too, about the dangers before them, in especial about the Clashing Rocks, the Symplegades, that rolled perpetually against one another while the sea boiled up around them. The way to pass between them, he said, was first to make trial with a dove. If she passed through safely, then the chances were that they too would get through. But if the dove were crushed, they must turn back and give up all hope of the Golden Fleece.

The next morning they started, with a dove, of course, and were soon in sight of the great rolling rocks. It seemed impossible that there could be a way between them, but they freed the dove and watched her. She flew through and came out safe. Only the tips of her tail-feathers were caught between the rocks as they rolled back together; and those were torn away. The heroes went after her as swiftly as they could. The rocks Parted, the rowers put forth all their strength, and they too came through safely. Just in time, however, for as the rocks clashed together again the extreme end of the stem ornament was shorn off. By so little they escaped destruction. But ever since they passed them the rocks have been rooted fast to each other and have never any more brought disaster to sailors.

Not far from there was the country of the warrior women, the Amazons—the daughters, strangely enough, of that most peace-loving nymph, sweet Harmony. But their father was Ares, the terrible god of war, whose ways they followed and not their mother's. The heroes would gladly have halted and closed in battle with them, and it would not have been a battle without bloodshed, for the Amazons were not gentle foes. But the wind was favorable and they hurried on. They caught a glimpse of the Caucasus as they sped past, and of Prometheus on his rock high above them, and they heard the fanning of the eagle's huge wings as it darted down to its bloody feast. They stopped for nothing, and that same day at sunset they reached Colchis, the country of the Golden Fleece.

They spent the night facing they knew not what and feeling that there was no help for them anywhere except in their own valor. Up in Olympus, however, a consultation was being held about them. Hera, troubled at the danger they were in, went to ask Aphrodite's help. The Goddess of Love was surprised at the visit, for Hera was no friend of hers. Still, when the great Queen of Olympus begged for her aid, she was awed and promised to do all she could. Together they planned that Aphrodite's son Cupid should make the daughter of the Colchian King fall in love with Jason. That was an excellent plan—for Jason. The maiden, who was named Medea, knew how to work very powerful magic, and could undoubtedly save the Argonauts if she would use
her dark knowledge for them. So Aphrodite went to Cupid and told him she would give him a lovely plaything, a ball of shining gold and deep blue enamel, if he would do what she wanted. He was delighted, seized his bow and quiver, and swept down from Olympus through the vast expanse of air to Colchis.

Meantime the heroes had started for the city to ask the King for the Golden Fleece. They were safe from any trouble on the way, for Hera wrapped them in a thick mist, so that they reached the palace unseen. It dissolved when they approached the entrance, and the warders, quick to notice the band of splendid young strangers, led them courteously within and sent word to the King of their arrival.

He came at once and bade them welcome. His servants hastened to make all ready, build fires and heat water for the baths and prepare food. Into this busy scene stole the Princess Medea, curious to see the visitors. As her eyes fell upon Jason, Cupid swiftly drew his bow and shot a shaft deep into the maiden's heart. It burned there like a flame and her soul melted with sweet pain, and her face went now white, now red. Amazed and abashed she stole back to her chamber.

Only after the heroes had bathed and refreshed themselves with meat and drink could King AEetes ask them who they were and why they had come. It was accounted great discourtesy to put any question to a guest before his wants had been satisfied. Jason answered that they were all men of noblest birth, sons or grandsons of the gods, who had sailed from Greece in the hope that he would give them the Golden Fleece in return for whatever service he would ask of them. They would conquer his enemies for him, or do anything he wished.

A great anger filled King AEetes' heart as he listened. He did not like foreigners, any more than the Greeks did; he wanted them to keep away from his country, and he said to himself, "If these strangers had not eaten at my table I would kill them." In silence he pondered what he should do, and a plan came to him.

He told Jason that he bore no grudge against brave men and that if they proved themselves such he would give the Fleece to them. "And the trial of your courage," he said, "shall be only what I myself have done." This was to yoke two bulls he had, whose feet were of bronze and whose breath was flaming fire, and with them to plow a field. Then the teeth of a dragon must be cast into the furrows, like seed-corn—which would spring up at once into a crop of armed men. These must be cut down as they advanced to the attack—a fearful harvesting. "I have done all this myself," he said; "and I will give the Fleece to no man less brave than I." For a time Jason sat speechless. The contest seemed impossible, beyond the strength of anyone. Finally he answered, "I will make the trial, monstrous though it is, even if it is my doom to die." With that he rose up and led his comrades back to the ship for the night, but Medea's thoughts followed after him. All through the long night when he had left the palace she seemed to see him, his beauty and his grace, and to hear the words he had uttered. Her heart was tormented with fear for him. She guessed what her father was planning.

Returned to the ship, the heroes held a council and one and another urged Jason to let him take the trial upon himself; but in vain, Jason would yield to none of them. As they talked there came to them one of the King's grandsons whose life Jason once had saved, and he told them of Medea's magic power. There was nothing she could not do, he said, check the stars, even, and the moon. If she were persuaded to help, she could make Jason able to conquer the bulls and the dragon-tooth men. It seemed the only plan that offered any hope and they urged the prince to go back and try to win Medea over, not knowing that the God of Love had already done that.

She sat alone in her room, weeping and telling herself she was shamed forever because she cared so much for a stranger that she wanted to yield to a mad passion and go against her father. "Far better die," she said. She took in her hand a casket which held herbs for killing, but as she sat there with it, she thought of life and the delightful things that are in the world; and the sun seemed sweeter than ever before. She put the casket away; and no longer wavering she determined to use her power for the man she loved. She had a magic ointment which would make him who rubbed it on his body safe for that day; he could not be harmed by anything. The plant it was made from sprang up first when Prometheus' blood dripped down upon the earth. She put it in her bosom and went to find her nephew, the prince whom Jason had helped. She met him as he was looking for her to beg her to do just what she had
already decided on. She agreed at once to all he said and sent him to the ship to tell Jason to meet her without delay in a certain place. As soon as he heard the message Jason started, and as he went Hera shed radiant grace upon him, so that all who saw him marveled at him. When he reached Medea it seemed to her as if her heart left her to go to him; a dark mist clouded her eyes and she had no strength to move. The two stood face to face without a word, as lofty pine trees when the wind is still. Then again when the wind stirs they murmur; so these two also, stirred by the breath of love, were fated to tell out all their tale to each other.

He spoke first and implored her to be kind to him. He could not but have hope, he said, because her loveliness must surely mean that she excelled in gentle courtesy. She did not know how to speak to him; she wanted to pour out all she felt at once. Silently she drew the box of ointment from her bosom and gave it to him. She would have given her soul to him if he had asked her. And now both were fixing their eyes on the ground, abashed, and again were throwing glances at each other, smiling with love's desire.

At last Medea spoke and told him how to use the charm and that when it was sprinkled on his weapons it would make them as well as himself invincible for a day. If too many of the dragon-teeth men rushed to attack him, he must throw a stone into their midst, which would make them turn against each other and fight until all were killed. "I must go back to the palace now," she said. "But when you are once more safe at home remember Medea, as I will remember you forever." He answered passionately, "Never by night and never by day will I forget you. If you will come to Greece, you shall be worshiped for what you have done for us, and nothing except death will come between us."

They parted, she to the palace to weep over her treachery to her father, he to the ship to send two of his comrades for the dragon's teeth. Meantime he made trial of the ointment and at the touch of it a terrible, irresistible power entered into him and the heroes all exulted. Yet, even so, when they reached the field where the King and the Colchians were waiting, and the bulls rushed out from their lair breathing forth flames of fire, terror overcame them. But Jason withstood the fearful creatures as a great rock in the sea withstands the waves. He forced first one and then the other down on its knees and fastened the yoke upon them, while all wondered at his mighty prowess. Over the field he drove them, pressing the plow down firmly and casting the dragon's teeth into the furrows. By the time the plowing was done the crop was springing up, men bristling with arms who came rushing to attack him. Jason remembered Medea's words and flung a huge stone into their midst. With that, the warriors turned upon each other and fell beneath their own spears while the furrows ran with blood. So Jason's contest was ended in victory, bitter to King AEetes.

The King went back to the palace planning treachery against the heroes and vowing they should never have the Golden Fleece. But Hera was working for them. She made Medea, all bewildered with love and misery, determine to fly with Jason. That night she stole out of the house and sped along the dark path to the ship, where they were rejoicing in their good fortune with no thought of evil. She fell on her knees before them and begged them to take her with them. They must get the Fleece at once, she told them, and then make all haste away or they would be killed. A terrible serpent guarded the Fleece, but she would lull it to sleep so that it would do them no harm. She spoke in anguish, but Jason rejoiced and raised her gently and embraced her, and promised her she would be his own wedded wife when once they were back in Greece. Then taking her on board they went where she directed and reached the sacred grove where the Fleece hung. The guardian serpent was very terrible, but Medea approached it fearlessly and singing a sweet magical song she charmed it to sleep. Swiftly Jason lifted the golden wonder from the tree it hung on, and hurrying back they reached the ship as dawn was breaking. The strongest were put at the oars and they rowed with all their might down the river to the sea.

By now what had happened was known to the King, and he sent his son in pursuit—Medea's brother, Apsyrtus. He led an army so great that it seemed impossible for the little band of heroes either to conquer it or to escape, but Medea saved them again, this time by a horrible deed. She killed her brother. Some say she sent him word that she was longing to go back to her home and that she had the Fleece for him if he would meet her that night at a certain spot. He came
all unsuspecting and Jason struck him down and his dark blood dyed his sister's silvery robe as she shrank away. With its leader dead, the army scattered in disorder and the way to the sea lay open to the heroes.

Others say that Apsyrtus set sail on Argo With Medea, although why he did so is not explained, and that it was the King who pursued them. As his ship gained on them, Medea herself struck her brother down and cutting him limb from limb cast the pieces into the sea. The King stopped to gather them, and the Argo was saved.

By then the adventures of the Argonauts were almost over. One terrible trial they had while passing between the smooth, sheer rock of Scylla and the whirlpool of Charybdis, where the sea forever spouted and roared and the furious waves mounting up touched the very sky. But Hera had seen to it that sea nymphs should be at hand to guide them and send the ship on to safety.

Next came Crete—where they would have landed but for Medea. She told them that Talus lived there, the last man left of the ancient bronze race, a creature made all of bronze except one ankle where alone he was vulnerable. Even as she spoke, he appeared, terrible to behold, and threatened to crush the ship with rocks if they drew nearer. They rested on their oars, and Medea kneeling prayed to the hounds of Hades to come and destroy him. The dread powers of evil heard her. As the bronze man lifted a pointed crag to hurl it at the Argo he grazed his ankle and the blood gushed forth until he sank and died. Then the heroes could land and refresh themselves for the voyage still before them.

Upon reaching Greece they disbanded, each hero going to his home, and Jason with Medea took the Golden Fleece to Pelias. But they found that terrible deeds had been done there. Pelias had forced Jason's father to kill himself and his mother had died of grief. Jason, bent upon punishing this wickedness, turned to Medea for the help which had never failed him. She brought about the death of Pelias by a cunning trick. To his daughters she said that she knew a secret, how to make the old young again; and to prove her words she cut up before them a ram worn out with many years, and put the pieces into a pot of boiling water. Then she uttered a charm and in a moment out from the water sprang a lamb and ran frisking away. The maidens were convinced. Medea gave Pelias a potent sleeping-draught and called upon his daughters to cut him into bits. With all their longing to make him young again they could hardly force themselves to do so, but at last the dreadful task was done, the pieces in the water, and they looked to Medea to speak the magic words that would bring him back to them and to his youth. But she was gone—gone from the palace and from the city, and horrified they realized that they were their father's murderers. Jason was revenged, indeed.

There is a story, too, that Medea restored Jason's father to life and made him young again, and that she gave to Jason the secret of perpetual youth. All that she did of evil and of good was done for him alone, and in the end, all the reward she got was that he turned traitor to her.

They came to Corinth after Pelias' death. Two sons were born to them and all seemed well, even to Medea in her exile, lonely as exile must always be. But her great love for Jason made the loss of her family and her country seem to her a little thing. And then Jason showed the meanness that was in him, brilliant hero though he had seemed to be: he engaged himself to marry the daughter of the King of Corinth. It was a splendid marriage and he thought of ambition only, never of love or of gratitude. In the first amazement at his treachery and in the passion of her anguish, Medea let tall words which made the King of Corinth fear she would do harm to his daughter,—he must have been a singularly unsuspicious man not to have thought of that before,—and he sent her word that she and her sons must leave the country at once. That was a doom almost as bad as death. A woman in exile with little helpless children had no protection for herself or them.

As she sat brooding over what she should do and thinking of her wrongs and her wretchedness,—wishing for death to end the life she could no longer bear; sometimes remembering with tears her father and her home; sometimes shuddering at the stain nothing could wash out of her brother's blood, of Pelias', too; conscious above all of the wild passionate devotion that had brought her to this evil and this misery,—as she sat thus, Jason appeared before her. She looked at him; he did not speak. He was there beside her, yet she was far away from him, alone with her outraged love and her
ruined life. His feelings had nothing in them to make him silent. He told her coldly that he had always known how uncontrolled her spirit was. If it had not been for her foolish, mischievous talk about his bride she might have stayed on comfortably in Corinth. However, he had done his best for her. It was entirely through his efforts that she was only to be exiled, not killed. He had had a very hard time indeed to persuade the King, but he had spared no pains. He had come to her now because he was not a man to fail a friend, and he would see that she had plenty of gold and everything necessary for her journey.

This was too much. The torrent of Medea's wrongs burst forth. You come to me?" she said—

To me, of all the race of men?
Yet it is well you came.
For I shall ease the burden of my heart
If I can make your baseness-manifest.
I saved you. Every man in Greece knows that.
The bulls, the dragon-men, the serpent warder of the Fleece,
I conquered them. I made you victor.
I held the light that saved you.
Father and home—I left them
For a strange country.
I overthrew your foes,
Contrived for Pelias the worst of deaths.
Now you forsake me.
Where shall I go? Back to my father's house?
To Pelias' daughters? I have become for you
The enemy of all.
Myself, I had no quarrel with them.
Oh, I have had in you
A loyal husband, to be admired of men.
An exile now, O God, O God.
No one to help. I am alone.

His answer was that he had been saved not by her, but by Aphrodite, who had made her fall in love with him, and that she owed him a great deal for bringing her to Greece, a civilized country. Also that he had done very well for her in letting it be known how she had helped the Argonauts, so that people praised her. If only she could have had some common sense, she would have been glad of his marriage, as such a connection would have been profitable for her and the children, too. Her exile was her own fault only.

Whatever else she lacked Medea had plenty of intelligence. She wasted no more words upon him except to refuse his gold. She would take nothing, no help from him. Jason flung away angrily from her. "Your stubborn pride," he told her—

It drives away all those who would be kind.
But you will grieve the more for it.
From that moment Medea set herself to be revenged, as well she knew how.
By death, oh, by death, shall the conflict of life be decided,
Life's little day ended.

She determined to kill Jason's bride, and then—then? But she would not think of what else she saw before her. "Her death first," she said.

She took from a chest a most lovely robe. This she anointed with deadly drugs and placing it in a casket she sent her sons with it to the new bride. They must ask her, she told them, to show that she accepted the gift by wearing it at once. The Princess received them graciously, and agreed. But no sooner had she put it on than a fearful, devouring fire enveloped her. She dropped dead; her very flesh had melted away.

When Medea knew the deed was done she turned her mind to one still more dreadful. There was no protection for her children, no help for them anywhere. A slave's life might be theirs, nothing more. "I will not let them live for strangers to ill-use," she thought—

To die by other hands more merciless than mine.
No; I who gave them life will give them death.
Oh, now no cowardice, no thought how young they are,
How dear they are, how when they first were born—
Not that—I will forget they are my sons
One moment, one short moment—then forever sorrow.

When Jason came full of fury for what she had done to his bride and determined to kill her, the two boys were dead, and Medea on the roof of the house was
stepping into a chariot drawn by dragons. They carried her away through the air out of his sight as he cursed her, never himself, for what had come to pass.

CHAPTER EIGHT
FOUR GREAT ADVENTURES

Phaethon

*This is one of Ovid’s best stories, vividly told, details used not for mere decoration, but to heighten the effect.*

The palace of the Sun was a radiant place. It shone with gold and gleamed with ivory and sparkled with jewels. Everything without and within flashed and glittered. It was always high noon there. Shadowy twilight never dimmed the brightness. Darkness and night were unknown. Few among mortals could have long endured that unchanging brilliancy of light, but few had ever found their way thither.

Nevertheless, one day a youth, mortal on his mother’s side, dared to approach. Often he had to pause and clear his dazzled eyes, but the errand which had brought him was so urgent that his purpose held fast and he pressed on, up to the palace, through the burnished doors, and into the throne-room where surrounded by a blinding, blazing splendor the Sun god sat. There the lad was forced to halt. He could bear no more.

Nothing escapes the eyes of the Sun. He saw the boy instantly and he looked at him very kindly. "What brought you here?" he asked. "I have come," the other answered boldly, "to find out if you are my father or not. My mother said you were, but the boys at school laugh when I tell them I am your son. They will not believe me. I told my mother and she said I had better go and ask you." Smiling, the Sun took off his crown of burning light so that the lad could look at him with out distress. "Come here, Phaethon," he said. "You are my son. Clymene told you the truth. I expect you will not doubt my word too? But I will give you a proof. Ask anything you want of me and you shall have it. I call the Styx to be witness to my promise, the river of the oath of the gods."

No doubt Phaethon had often watched the Sun riding through the heavens and had told himself with a feeling, half awe, half excitement, "It is my father up there." And then he would wonder what it would be like to be in that chariot, guiding the steeds along that dizzy course, giving light to the world. Now at his father’s words this wild dream had become possible. Instantly he cried, "I choose to take your place, Father. That is the only thing I want. Just for a day, a single day, let me have your car to drive."

The Sun realized his own folly. Why had he taken that fatal oath and bound himself to give in to anything that happened to enter a boy's rash young head? "Dear lad," he said, "this is the only thing I would have refused you. I know I cannot refuse. I have sworn by the Styx. I must yield if you persist. But I do not believe you will. Listen while I tell you what this is you want. You are Clymene's son as well as mine. You are mortal and no mortal could drive my chariot. Indeed, no god except myself can do that. The ruler of the gods cannot. Consider the road. It rises up from the sea so steeply that the horses can hardly climb it, fresh though they are in the early morning. In midheaven it is so high that even I do not like to look down. Worst of all is the descent, so precipitous that the Sea-gods waiting to receive me wonder how I can avoid falling headlong. To guide the horses, too, is a perpetual struggle. Their fiery spirits grow hotter as they climb and they scarcely suffer my control. What would they do with you?"

"Are you fancying that there are all sorts of wonders up there, cities of the gods full of beautiful things? Nothing of the kind. You will have to pass beasts, fierce beasts of prey, and they are all that you will see. The Bull, the Lion, the Scorpion, the great Crab, each will try to harm you. Be persuaded. Look around you. See all the goods the rich world holds. Choose from them your heart’s desire and it shall be yours. If what you want is to be proved my son, my fears for you are proof enough that I am your father."

But none of all this wise talk meant anything to the boy. A glorious prospect opened before him. He saw himself proudly standing in that wondrous car, his hands triumphantly guiding those steeds which Jove himself could not master. He did not give a thought to the dangers his father detailed. He felt not a quiver of fear, not a doubt of his own powers. At last the Sun
gave up trying to dissuade him. It was hopeless, as he saw. Besides, there was no time. The moment for starting was at hand. Already the gates of the east glowed purple, and Dawn had opened her courts full of rosy light. The stars were leaving the sky; even the lingering morning star was dim.

There was need for haste, but all was ready. The seasons, the gatekeepers of Olympus, stood waiting to fling the doors wide. The horses had been bridled and yoked to the car. Proudly and joyously Phaethon mounted it and they were off. He had made his choice. Whatever came of it he could not change now. Not that he wanted to in that first exhilarating rush through the air, so swift that the East Wind was outstripped and left far behind. The horses’ flying feet went through the low-banked clouds near the ocean as through a thin sea mist and then up and up in the clear air, climbing the height of heaven. For a few ecstatic moments Phaethon felt himself the Lord of the Sky. But suddenly there was a change. The chariot was swinging wildly to and fro; the pace was faster; he had lost control. Not he, but the horses were directing the course. That light weight in the car, those feeble hands clutching the reins, had told them their own driver was not there. They were the masters then. No one else could command them. They left the road and rushed where they chose, up, down, to the right, to the left. They nearly wrecked the chariot against the Scorpion; they brought up short and almost ran into the Crab. By this time the poor charioteer was half fainting with terror, and he let the reins fall.

That was the signal for still more mad and reckless running. The horses soared up to the very top of the sky and then, plunging headlong down, they set the world on fire. The highest mountains were the first to burn, Ida and Helicon, where the Muses dwell, Parnassus, and heaven-piercing Olympus. Down their slopes the flame ran to the low-lying valleys and the dark forest lands, until all things everywhere were ablaze. The springs turned into steam; the rivers shrank. It is said that it was then the Nile fled and hid his head, which still is hidden.

In the car Phaethon, hardly keeping his place there, was wrapped in thick smoke and heat as if from a fiery furnace. He wanted nothing except to have this torment and terror ended. He would have welcomed death. Mother Earth, too, could bear no more. She uttered a great cry which reached up to the gods. Looking down from Olympus they saw that they must act quickly if the world was to be saved. Jove seized his thunderbolt and hurled it at the rash, repentant driver. It struck him dead, shattered the chariot, and made the maddened horses rush down into the sea.

Phaethon all on fire fell from the car through the air to the earth. The mysterious river Eridanus, which no mortal eyes have ever seen, received him and put out the flames and cooled the body. The naiads, in pity for him, so bold and so young to die, buried him and carved upon the tomb:

Here Phaethon lies who drove the Sun-god's car.
Greatly he failed, but he had greatly dared.

His sisters, the Heliades, the daughters of Helios, the Sun, came to his grave to mourn for him. There they were turned into poplar trees, on the bank of the Eridanus,

Where sorrowing they weep into the stream forever.
And each tear as it falls shines in the water
A glistening drop of amber.

Pegasus and Bellerophon

Two of the episodes in this story are taken from – the earliest poets. Hesiod in the eighth or ninth century tells about the Chimaera, and Anteia’s love and the sad end of Bellerophon are in the Iliad. The rest of the story is told first and best by Pindar in the first half of the fifth century.

In Ephyre, the city later called Corinth, Glauclus was King. He was the son of Sisyphus who in Hades must forever try to roll a stone uphill because he once betrayed a secret of Zeus. Glauclus, too, drew down on himself the displeasure of heaven. He was a great horseman and he fed his horses human flesh to make them fierce in battle. Such monstrous deeds always angered the gods and they served him as he had served others. He was thrown from his chariot and his horses tore him to pieces and devoured him.
In the city a bold and beautiful young man named Bellerophon was generally held to be his son. It was rumored, however, that Bellerophon had a mightier father, Poseidon himself, the Ruler of the Sea, and the youth’s surpassing gifts of Spirit and body made this account of his birth seem likely moreover his mother, Eurynome, although a mortal, had been taught by Athena until in wit and wisdom she was the peer the gods. It was only to be expected on all scores that Bellerophon should seem less mortal than divine. Great adventures would call to such a one as he and no peril would ever hold him back. And yet the deed for which he is best known needed no courage at all, no effort, even. Indeed, it proved that What man would swear cannot be done, —
Must not be hoped for, —the great Power on high
Can give into his hand, in easy mastery.

More than anything on earth Bellerophon wanted Pegasus, a marvelous horse which had sprung from the Gorgon’s blood when Perseus killed her. He was A winged steed, unwearying of flight,
Sweeping through air swift as a gale of wind.

Wonders attended him. The spring beloved of poets, Hippocrene, on Helicon, the Muses’ mountain, had sprung up where his hoof had struck the earth. Who could catch and tame such a creature? Bellerophon suffered from hopeless longing.

The wise seer of Ephyre (Corinth), Polyidus, to whom he told his desperate desire, advised him to go to Athena’s temple and sleep there. The gods often spoke to men in their dreams. So Bellerophon went to the holy place and when he was lying deep in slumber beside the altar he seemed to see the goddess standing before him with some golden thing in her hand. She said to him, "Asleep? Nay, wake. Here is what will charm the steed you covet." He sprang to his feet. No goddess was there, but a marvelous object lay in front of him, a bridle all of gold, such as never had been seen before. Hopeful at last with it in his hand, he hurried out to the fields to find Pegasus. He caught sight of him, drinking from the far-famed spring of Corinth, Pirene; and he drew gently near. The horse looked at him tranquilly, neither startled nor afraid, and suffered himself to be bridled without the least trouble. Athena’s charm had worked. Bellerophon was master of the glorious creature.

In his full suit of bronze armor he leaped upon his back and put him through his paces, the horse seeming to delight in the sport as much as he himself. Now he was lord of the air, flying wherever he would, envied of all. As matters turned out, Pegasus was not only a joy, but a help in time of need as well, for hard trials lay before Bellerophon.

In some way, we are not told how except that it was purely through accident, he killed his brother; and he went to Argos where the King, Proetus, purified him. There his trials began and his great deeds as well. Anteia, the wife of Proetus, fell in love with him, and when he turned from her and would have nothing to do with her, in her bitter anger she told her husband that his guest had wronged her and must die. Enraged though he was, Proetus would not kill him. Bellerophon had eaten at his table; he could not bring himself to use violence against him. However, he made a plan which seemed certain to have the same result. He asked the youth to take a letter to the King of Lycia in Asia and Bellerophon easily agreed. Long journeys meant nothing to him on Pegasus’ back. The Lycian king received him with antique hospitality and entertained him splendidly for nine days before he asked to see the letter. Then he read that Proetus wanted the young man killed.

He did not care to do so, for the same reason that had made Proteus unwilling: Zeus’s well-known hostility to those who broke the bond between host and guest. There could be no objection, however, to sending the stranger on an adventure, him and his winged horse. So he asked him to go and slay the Chimaera, feeling quite assured that he would never come back. The Chimaera was held to be unconquerable. She was a most singular portent, a lion in front, a serpent behind, a goat in between—

A fearful creature, great and swift of foot and strong,
Whose breath was flame unquenchable.

But for Bellerophon riding Pegasus there was no need to come anywhere near the flaming monster. He
soared up over her and shot her with his arrows at no risk to himself.

When he went back to Proetus, the latter had to think out other ways of disposing of him. He got him to go on an expedition, against the Solymi, mighty warriors; and then when Bellerophon had succeeded in conquering these, on another against the Amazons, where he did equally well. Finally Proetus was won over by his courage and his good fortune, too; he became friends with him and gave him his daughter to marry.

He lived happily thus for a long time; then he made the gods angry. His eager ambition along with his great success led him to think "thoughts too great for man," the thing of all others the gods objected to. He tried to ride Pegasus up to Olympus. He believed he could take his place there with the immortals. The horse was wiser. He would not try the flight, and he threw his rider. Thereafter Bellerophon, hated

FOUR GREAT ADVENTURES 143

of the gods, wandered alone, devouring his own soul and avoiding the paths of men until he died.

Pegasus found shelter in the heavenly stalls of Olympus where the steeds of Zeus were cared for. Of them all he was foremost, as was proved by the extraordinary fact that poets report, that when Zeus wished to use his thunderbolt, it was Pegasus who brought the thunder and lightning to him.

OTUS AND EPHIALTES

This story is alluded to in the Odyssey and the Aeneid, but only Apollodorus tells it in full. He wrote, probably, in the first or second century A.D. A dull writer, but less dull than usual in this tale.

These twin brothers were Giants, but they did not look like the monsters of old. They were straight of form and noble of face. Homer says they were tallest of all

that the life-giving earth with her bread ever nourished, Handsome too, after peerless Orion alone. Virgil speaks chiefly of their mad ambition. He says they were

Twins, huge-bodied, who strove with their hands to destroy the high heavens,

Strove to push Jupiter down from his kingdom supernal.

They were the sons of Iphimedia, some say, others, of Canace. At all events, whoever their mother was, their father was certainly Poseidon, although they went generally by the name of the Aloadae, the sons of Aloeus, their mother's husband.

They were still very young when they set about proving that they were the gods' superiors. They imprisoned Ares, bound him with chains of brass and shut him up. The Olympians were reluctant to try to free him by force. They sent the cunning Hermes to his assistance, who contrived stealthily by night to get him out of his prison. Then the two arrogant youths dared still more. They threatened that they would pile Mount Pelion on Mount Ossa and scale the heights of heaven, as the Giants of old had piled Ossa on Pelion. This passed the entrance of the immortals, and Zeus got ready his thunderbolt to strike them. But before he hurled it Poseidon came begging him to spare them and promising to keep them in order. Zeus agreed and Poseidon was as good as his word. The twins stopped warring against heaven and Poseidon felt pleased with himself, but the fact was that the two had turned to other plans which interested them more.

Otus thought it would be an excellent adventure to carry Hera off, and Ephialtes was in love with Artemis, or thought he was. In truth the two brothers cared only for each other. Theirs was a great devotion. They drew lots to decide which should first seize his lady, and fortune favored Ephialtes. They sought Artemis
everywhere over the hills and in the woods, but when at last they caught sight of her she was on the seashore, making directly for the sea. She knew their evil purpose and she knew too how she would punish them. They sprang after her, but she kept straight on over the sea. All of Poseidon's sons had the same power: they could run dry-shod on the sea as on the land, so the two followed her with no trouble. She led them to the wooded island of Naxos, and there, when they had all but caught up with her, she disappeared. They saw instead a most lovely milk-white hind springing into the forest. At the sight they forgot the goddess and turned in pursuit of the beautiful creature. They lost her in the thick woods and they separated in order to double the chance of finding her. At the same moment each suddenly saw her standing with ears pricked in an open glade, but neither saw that back in the trees just beyond her was his brother. They threw their javelins and the hind vanished. The weapons sped on across the empty glade into the wood and there found their mark. The towering forms of the young hunters crashed to the ground, each pierced by the spear of the other, each slaying and being slain by the only creature he loved.

Such was the vengeance of Artemis.

**DAEDALUS**

*Both Ovid and Apollodorus tell this story. Apollodorus lived probably more than a hundred years after Ovid. He is a very pedestrian writer and Ovid is far from that. But in this case I have followed Apollodorus. Ovid's ac-count shows him at his worst, sentimental and exclamatory.*

Daedalus was the architect who had contrived the Labyrinth for the Minotaur in Crete, and who showed Ariadne how Theseus could escape from it.* When King Minos learned that the Athenians had found their way out, he was convinced that they could have done so only if Daedalus had helped them. Accordingly he imprisoned him and his son Icarus in the Labyrinth, certainly a proof that it was excellently devised since not even the maker of it could discover the exit without a clue. But the great inventor was not at a loss. He told his son,

> Escape may be checked by water and land, but the air and the sky are free, and he made two pairs of wings for them. They put them on and just before they took flight Daedalus warned Icarus to keep a middle course over the sea. If he flew too high the sun might melt the glue and the wings drop off. However, as stories so often show, what elders say youth disregards. As the two flew lightly and without effort away from Crete the delight of this new and wonderful power went to the boy's head. He soared exultingly up and up, paying no heed to his father's anguished commands. Then he fell. The wings had come off. He dropped into the sea and the waters closed over him. The afflicted father flew safely to Sicily, where he was received kindly by the King.

Minos was enraged at his escape and determined to find him. He made a cunning plan. He had it proclaimed everywhere that a great reward would be given to whoever could pass a thread through an intricately spiraled shell. Daedalus told the Sicilian king that he could do it. He bored a small hole in the closed end of the shell, fastened a thread to an ant, introduced the ant into the hole, and then closed it. When the ant finally came out at the other end, the thread, of Course, was running clear through all the twists and turns. Only Daedalus would think of that," Minos said, and he came to Sicily to seize him. But the King refused to surrender him, and in the contest Minos was slain.

**QUIZ QUESTIONS**

1. What or who are the harpies?
2. What was the name of Jason's ship?
3. Which heroes started out on the quest with Jason but didn't return with him?
4. Who were the warrior-daughters of Harmony and Ares?
5. Which of the following was not a part of the task that Jason performed for King Aetes in order to get the Golden Fleece?
6. Who helped Jason accomplish his task for King Aetes, and why?
7. What did Phaethon want to do?
8. Who were Pegasus and Bellerophon?
9. What monster did Pegasus and Bellerophon destroy?
10. Which father and son used wings made by the father to escape from the Labyrinth?
11. Why does Jason undertake the search for the Golden Fleece?
12. What happens to Pelias after Jason returns with the Golden Fleece?
13. Explain what happens to Jason, Medea, and their sons once they go to Corinth after the death of Pelias.