

DANAÛS, PERSEUS, AND THE GORGON

LLOUD was the song of the Muses about Danaüs, first of a line of great kings and heroes.

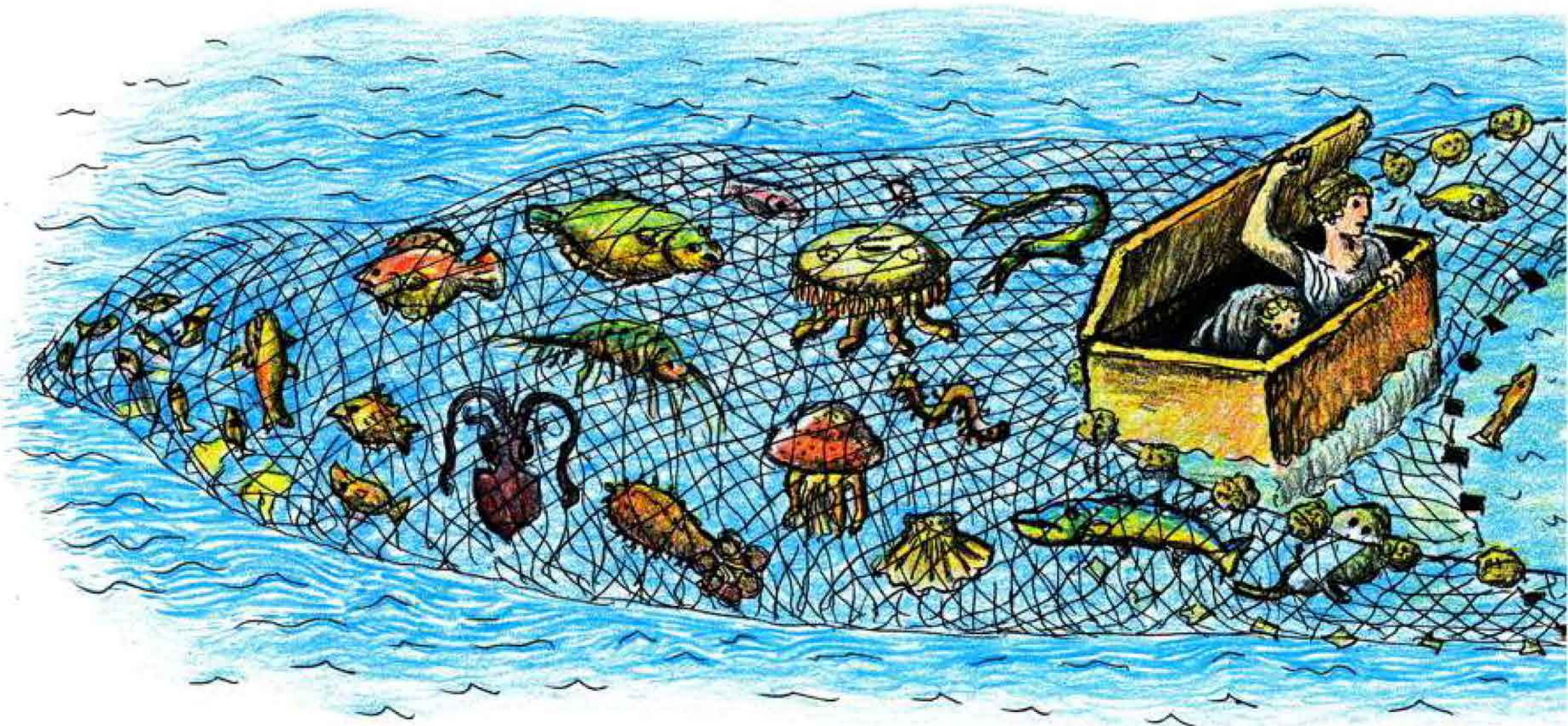
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King Danaüs of Libya had fifty daughters, his brother, King Aegyptus, had fifty sons. The fifty sons wanted to marry the fifty daughters, but they were rough and rowdy and King Danaüs did not want them for sons-in-law. He feared that they might carry off his daughters by

force, so secretly he built a ship with fifty oars and fled with his daughters. The fifty princesses pulled at the oars and rowed the ship across the wide sea. They reached Argos, in Greece, and when the people there saw the king standing in the prow of a gorgeous ship rowed by princesses, they were awed. They were certain that Danaüs had been sent by the gods, and made him their king.

Danaüs was a good ruler, and peace and happiness reigned in Argos until one day another splendid ship arrived. And who should be at the oars but King Aegyptus' fifty sons, who had come to claim their brides. Danaüs did not dare to oppose them and had a lavish wedding feast prepared. But secretly he gave each of his fifty daughters a dagger and ordered them all to kill their husbands as soon as they were alone. Forty-nine of the brides obeyed him. But Hypermnestra, the eldest, fell in love with Lynceus, her prince, and fled with him. In vain did Danaüs try to find new husbands for his widowed daughters; nobody dared to marry them. The forty-nine Danaïdes had to live a life without joy, and when they died and came to the underworld, they were sentenced to carry water forever in sieves, trying in vain to fill a bath and wash off their sins.

When King Danaüs grew old, there was no heir to his throne, and he had to send for Hypermnestra and Lynceus, who were living in great happiness. They became King and Queen of Argos, and their son became King after them. When he died, his son, Acrisius, inherited the throne. Acrisius, however, had no son. He had only a beautiful, golden-haired daughter whose name was Danaë, but her beauty brought no joy to her father. He wanted a son and heir to his kingdom. When an oracle told him that he would die by the hand of his daughter's son, he put Danaë in a sealed chamber that had neither windows nor doors, only an opening in the roof. There no suitor could see her beauty and she would remain unwed and childless. But Acrisius forgot to reckon with Zeus. The thunder-god spied the lonesome maiden through the opening in the roof, and in the shape of a golden shower he descended to her. No longer was Danaë lonesome, for now she was the happy bride of Zeus. But when her father heard the cries of an infant from her chamber he broke through the walls in a rage, intending to kill his grandson. When he learned that Zeus was the child's father he did not dare to lay hands on him. Instead, he put Danaë and her son, Perseus, in a chest and threw it into the sea. If they drowned, Poseidon would be to blame.



Zeus gently steered the chest to the shore of an island, and a fisherman who was casting his nets hauled it in. Great was his surprise when he saw what the chest contained. When Danaë had told him her story, he took her and little Perseus to his hut and cared for them as if they were his own, for he was a kind old man and childless.

In his humble hut Perseus grew into a fine and valiant youth, proud of being the son of Zeus and the beautiful Danaë. But Danaë's beauty attracted the eye of the ruthless king of the island. He wanted her for his queen. In vain did Danaë turn him away. She was the bride of Zeus and swore that she could marry no other. The king pursued her and would have carried her off by force if Perseus had not protected her. The scheming king decided to get rid of Perseus, and he let it be known that he was going to marry a princess from a neighboring island. As was the custom, all the men in the kingdom brought him gifts. Only Perseus was so poor that he had nothing to give. So he offered his services to the king instead. This was just what the king had expected. "Slay the monster Medusa and bring me her head," he said. No man who had ever set out to kill Medusa had come back, and the king was sure that now he was forever rid of Perseus.

Medusa was one of three horrible Gorgon sisters, so gruesome that all living creatures turned to stone at the sight of them. They lived on an island far out at sea, but nobody knew just where.



Perseus bid his mother good-bye and set out to search for Medusa. He went over land and over sea asking his way, but nobody could tell him where the Gorgons lived. As he stood at a crossroad wondering which way to go, Athena and Hermes suddenly appeared. Zeus had sent them to help him. They could tell him the way to the island of the Gorgons, but he needed more help than that. Athena lent him her shield, polished as brightly as a mirror. Hermes lent him his sword, which was so sharp that it could cut through the hardest metal, and he also needed three magic things owned by the nymphs of the north, they told him, but even the gods did not know where these nymphs lived. That was a secret closely guarded by the three Gray Sisters, and they would never willingly reveal it, for they were the Gorgons' sisters. But Hermes offered to take Perseus to them and find a way to get the secret out of them. He took Perseus under his arm, swung himself into the air, and flew off, swifter than the wind. They flew far, far to the west and at last they came to a land where the sun never shone and everything was as gray as dusk. There sat the three Gray Sisters. Their hair was gray, their faces were gray, and they had only one gray eye between them, which they took turns looking through. As one of the sisters was handing the eye to another, Perseus sprang forward and snatched it.

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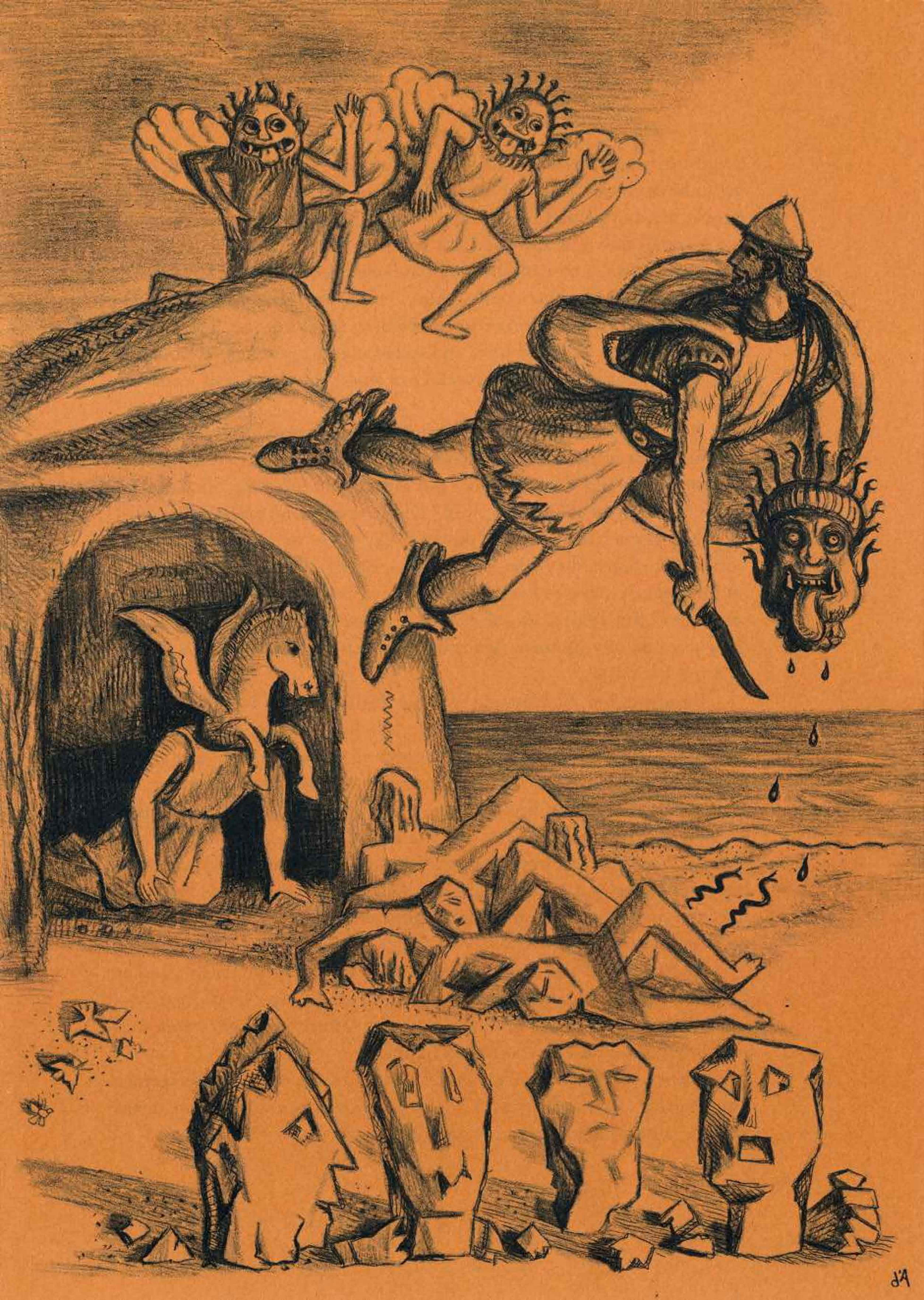
"Now I have your eye," cried Perseus. "You will never get it back unless you tell me the way to the nymphs of the north."

The three Gray Sisters wailed and begged for their eye, but Perseus would not give it back, and so they had to tell him the way. Again Hermes took him under his arm and flew with him far, far to the north, beyond the North Wind, where the sun never set. The nymphs of the north received them kindly, and when they heard why Perseus had come, they gladly lent him the three things he needed; a pair of winged sandals to carry him through the air, a cap to make him invisible and a magic bag to hold whatever was put into it. Now he was ready to slay the Medusa, said Hermes. He showed him the way and wished him good luck. Wearing the winged sandals, Perseus flew far to the west. When he came to the island of the Gorgons he did not look down. He looked, instead, into Athena's polished shield, and shuddered at the sight he saw mirrored there. The three Gorgon sisters were lying on the shore, fast asleep. Long yellow fangs hung from their grinning mouths, on their heads grew writhing snakes instead of hair, and their necks were covered with scales of bronze. Around them stood the strangest stones; it was easy to see that they had once been men.

Looking into the mirroring shield, Perseus swooped down, and with one deft stroke he cut off the Medusa's head. Out from the monster's severed neck sprang a beautiful winged horse, the Pegasus. He neighed and the other two Gorgons awoke. Quickly Perseus threw Medusa's head into the magic bag and swung himself into the air. Wailing, the two Gorgon sisters took to the air on heavy wings in groping pursuit. They could not find him, for he had put on the magic cap of invisibility.

On his way home, as he flew over the coast of Ethiopia, Perseus saw, far below, a beautiful maiden chained to a rock by the sea. She was so pale that at first he thought she was a marble statue, but then he saw tears trickling from her eyes. He swooped down and tore at her chains, trying to break them.

"Flee!" she said. "Or you too will be devoured by the sea monster!" But Perseus refused to leave and she told her sad story: Her name was Andromeda and she was the daughter of King Cepheus and Queen Cassiopeia. Her mother was very vain and had boasted unwisely that she was even lovelier than the Nereids. Poseidon could not tolerate having a mortal compare herself to the goddesses of the sea, and as punishment he sent a sea monster to ravage the kingdom of Ethiopia. To appease the angry god and save his kingdom, her father had to sacrifice her, his only



daughter, to the monster. And there she stood, chained to the cliff, waiting to be devoured. She had begged the prince to whom she was engaged to save her, but he had fled in fear.

"I shall save you and you shall be mine," said Perseus.

As he spoke, a horrible sea monster came from the sea, its huge mouth opened wide to swallow Andromeda. But Perseus sprang into the air, dived at the monster and drove his sword deep into its throat. The monster bellowed, lashed its tail wildly, and rolled over on its back. It sank and the sea was tinted red by its blood. Ever since, that stretch of water has been called the Red Sea.

No sooner was the monster dead than Andromeda's cowardly suitor returned with many warriors to claim her for his bride. Now he was bold and menacing and King Cepheus did not dare to oppose him.

"Andromeda, shield your eyes!" cried Perseus, and with that he lifted the head of the Medusa out of the bag. The suitor and his men stared in horror and whips!, they were changed into stones! Unfortunately, the king and the queen had also looked at the Gorgon's head and they too turned into stone. But since a son of Zeus was going to marry their daughter, the gods took pity on them and hung Cepheus and Cassiopeia in the sky as constellations.

Perseus lifted Andromeda into his arms and flew homewards. But when he arrived at the fisherman's hut, he learned that Danaë and the fisherman had gone into hiding. As soon as the king of the island had gotten rid of Perseus, he had tried to carry Danaë off. To save her, the kind old fisherman had fled with her. When Perseus heard that, he made straight for the king's palace.

"Here is the head you wanted!" he shouted, and pulled Medusa's head out of the bag. Startled, the king and his men looked up, and there they sat, turned into statues of stone, some of them with their mouths still open in astonishment.

The people of the island rejoiced at being rid of the tyrant, and as soon as the fisherman and Danaë came out of hiding, they made the fisherman their new king. He gave Perseus and Andromeda the grandest of wedding feasts and everybody was happy.

Perseus did not keep the Gorgon's head, it was much too dangerous for a mortal to own. He gave it to Athena when he returned her shield and the other magic objects he had borrowed.



Perseus thought that his grandfather Acrisius would be happy to see him now that he was a hero, and he set sail for Argos with Danaë and Andromeda. But when the old king learned that his grandson was approaching he fled, for he still remembered the oracle's warning, and so Perseus became king of Argos.

Perseus ruled wisely and well, his mother and his wife always at his side. Since he was a great athlete, he also took part in games all over Greece. One day, a sudden gust of wind changed the course of a discus he had thrown, and it killed an old man who was watching the games. Who should that old man be but Acrisius, his grandfather! Thus the words of the oracle came true.

After that, Perseus no longer wanted to live in his grandfather's city, Argos. So he founded instead the splendid fortified city of Mycenae, not far away, and many great kings and heroes were descended from him and Andromeda.

When at last Perseus and Andromeda died, Zeus put them, too, in the sky as constellations.

