Perseus
by Alice Low

KING Acrisius of Argos had a beautiful daughter named Danaé, but he was not satisfied with her, for he wanted a son. He visited the oracle at Delphi to find out if he would ever have a male child. To his dismay he was told, "You shall never have a son. Furthermore, your daughter shall give birth to a son who shall take your life."

I must make certain that Danaé never has any children, said the king to himself. And he shut his daughter away from the world in a bronze house underground, so that no man would ever fall in love with her and father her child. Nobody could enter the house, for only a tiny section of the roof was open to the surface of the earth, to let in light and air.

Poor Danaé! She was all alone, week after week, with just a patch of sky to look at. Then one day a strange thing occurred. Suddenly a shower of gold rained down into her house, and that shower changed into Zeus, who declared his love for her.

Within the year Danaé bore Zeus's son, whom she named Perseus. Danaé tried to hide Perseus from her father. At last, though, King Acrisius discovered him and said to Danaé, "One day this son of yours will kill me. I cannot kill him, for that would anger his father, Zeus. But I will have the two of you sealed in a chest and tossed into the sea. If you do not survive, that will be Poseidon's fault."

"Please, Father, spare us," cried Danaé. "I will keep Perseus by my side always and make certain that he will never harm you."

But Acrisius said, "The oracle at Delphi never lies, and I must protect myself."

He ordered carpenters to make a large wooden chest. When it was finished, he put Danaé and Perseus in it and had it thrown into the sea.

For a day and a night, Danaé cowered in the chest, holding Perseus in her arms as the waves tossed them to and fro. Then, suddenly, Danaé felt a bump, and the chest stopped moving. "We are on land," she said to Perseus. "But how can we ever get out of this sealed chest?"

Perseus was too young to understand her, and he cried and cried because he was hungry. Danaé tried to comfort him, but his walls continued, which was a good thing. A fisherman, passing by, heard the cries and broke open the chest. His name was Dictys, and he took Danaé and Perseus to his home, where he and his wife cared for them gladly, for they were childless.

Perseus grew into a strong young man and became a fisherman on that small island. He and his mother were content until Dictys's brother, Polydectes, who ruled the island, fell in love with Danaé and tried to force her to marry him. Perseus defended his mother so bravely that Polydectes decided he had to get rid of him.

Pretending he was going to marry another princess, Polydectes asked each guest to bring a wedding gift. Perseus said to Polydectes, "Alas, I am too poor to bring a gift for a ruler and his bride."

And Polydectes said, "Then I shall tell you of a gift you can win for me, but I do not know if you are brave enough to get it."

"Tell me what it is, and I promise I shall get it for you," said Perseus. "I do not lack for bravery."

"Very well," said Polydectes. "I want you to bring me the head of Medusa, the horrible Gorgon."

Perseus was trapped by his bold promise, even though he knew that this feat was impossible for one man alone. Medusa was one of the three Gorgons—huge, hideous winged creatures, their hair was made of snakes, and their faces were so ugly that anyone who looked at them immediately turned to stone.

Fortunately for Perseus, a goddess and a god overheard that conversation, and not long afterward they appeared to him and offered him their help.

First Athena flew down from Mount Olympus, holding her dazzling shield of brass. She gave it to the astounded Perseus, saying, "You must use this as a mirror when you slay Medusa. In this way you will not look at her directly, but only at her reflection, and so you will not be turned to stone."

Perseus thanked the wise goddess and then said, "But I do not know where Medusa lives. How shall I find her?"

At that moment, Perseus saw a bright light overhead. Hermes, the messenger of the gods, flew down and landed at his side. "I shall be your guide," he said, "and also help you overcome the terrible Medusa. Here is a sword that can never be broken, not even by the hard scales of Medusa's neck."

"This is indeed a wonderful gift," said Perseus. "Now I must be on my way to slay Medusa and bring back her head."

"Not yet," said Hermes. "There are three other things you must
have first: winged sandals, a magic wallet, and a cap to make you invisible. These are guarded by the nymphs of the North, and only the Gray Women, who live in a dreary gray land, know where to find them. Follow me, and we will begin the long journey."

Hermes guided Perseus to the gray land, where it was always gray twilight. At last they found the shrunken old Gray Women, who had swanlike bodies and human heads, but only one eye among the three of them. Perseus and Hermes hid behind a rock and watched the Gray Women pass the eye around. Each had a turn to put it in the middle of her forehead.

"The next time the eye is passed around," said Hermes to Perseus, "you must grab it and not give it back until they tell you where to find the nymphs of the North."

Perseus waited for the right moment. Then he darted out and snatched the eye. The Gray Women ran around blindly, shouting, "Where is our eye? Who took it?"

"I took your eye," Perseus said, "and I will not give it back until you tell me how to find the nymphs of the North."

Of course the Gray Women were anxious to have their eye, and so they immediately gave Perseus detailed directions. He gave them back their eye and went on his way with Hermes.

Once more they traveled far and long, this time over the ocean to the north. The nymphs of the North received them warmly and gave Perseus the three magic gifts.

Perseus put on the cap of invisibility and the magic sandals and, holding the magic wallet, flew after Hermes to the island of the Gorgons. Beneath him he could see stones in the shapes of animals and men, and he shuddered, for he knew that they had once been alive—before they had looked at the fearful Gorgons. But he was confident, now that he was armed with Hermes' sword, Athena's shield, and the three magic gifts.

Perseus hovered over the Gorgons. Fortunately he remembered to look into the mirrorlike shield at their reflections. The three hideous, winged, snake-haired Gorgons were asleep.

"But which one is Medusa?" he thought. "She is the only one I can kill, for the other two are immortal. Again Athena came to his aid, saying, "That one in the middle is Medusa. Strike now, while she is asleep."

Perseus flew within inches of Medusa, his sword held ready. Then, looking into the shield, he struck off Medusa's head with one well-aimed blow. He stuffed the head into his magic wallet, which grew large enough to hold the head with all its snakes still hissing and wriggling.

The other two Gorgons woke up when they heard the headless body of Medusa thrashing about. They flew into the air in pursuit of Perseus. But they could not see him, for he had on his cap of invisibility, and he flew away in his winged sandals, faster than the wind.

Now Perseus headed for home alone, for Hermes, his mission accomplished, had left. On his way, Perseus slew a dangerous sea monster that was about to devour a lovely princess named Andromeda. Then Perseus took Andromeda home with him, for she had agreed to be his bride.

As soon as they reached home, Perseus strode into Polydeuces' palace and said to the ruler, "I have brought you the head of Medusa."

But Polydeuces refused to believe Perseus. "If you even had gone near Medusa, you would not be here to tell the tale. What a liar you are!"

Perseus could not stand to be taunted and mistrusted. And now he realized that this cruel ruler had sent him on the chase just to get rid of him. He pulled out Medusa's head to show it to Polydeuces, who turned to stone the moment he saw it.

Kind Dictys became ruler of the island, and Perseus sailed to Argos with his mother, Danae, and his wife, Andromeda. Danae wanted to see her father, King Acrisius, again and to be reconciled with him. But Acrisius was attending games that were being held in another city.

Since Perseus wanted to take part in the games, he journeyed to that city. There he took his turn at throwing the discus. As the discus left his hand, a sudden wind blew it into the grandstand. It hit King Acrisius, who was a spectator, and killed him. Thus was fulfilled the prophecy of the oracle at Delphi, which had predicted that the king would be killed by his grandson.
Theseus and the Minotaur
retold by Anne Terry White

IN the palace of old King Pittheus of Troezen a grandson was growing up—brave, strong, and handsome. And people said of him: "What wonder that Theseus is so fair and noble? Is not the great god Poseidon his father?"

The young Theseus was pleased enough with being a god's son, the more especially as his cousin Heracles was one. For Theseus idolized the hero whose praises sounded in every court. Often the boy said to himself, "I will be like Heracles and slay wild beasts and giants and evil men." So it was a shock to him to learn that he was no demigod but the son of a mortal—King Aegeus of Athens.

The secret was revealed to him in a curious way. For several years past on his birthday, his mother, the hunchess Aetna, had taken him to a great black stone standing by the sea. "My son," she had always said, "see if you can push this stone aside." Try as he would, he had never been able to do it. But on his eighteenth birthday he had scarcely exerted his strength when the mighty rock yielded, disclosing a hollow beneath, and in the hollow lay a gold-hilted sword and a pair of embroidered sandals. "This sword and these sandals were your father's," Theseus' mother said. "Take them up, for now they are yours."

Then she told him about her secret marriage to King Aegeus and how on parting from her he had said: "When my son—if you bear a son—is strong enough to move this stone, give him my sword and my sandals and let him come to Athens and make himself known to me."

Theseus at once put on the sandals and strapped the great gold-hilted sword by his side. He was all on fire to go to Athens. "I will provide you with a vessel and oarsmen," his grandfather King Pittheus said. "For the roads are beset with robbers."

"Indeed, indeed, grandfather, I will go by land," Theseus protested. "For how can I come to my father with his sword unstained? Greece rings with the fame of Heracles my cousin, and shall I avoid robbers rather than slay them?"

Theseus pleaded so hard that in the end King Pittheus, great as were his fears, gave in and said, "Do according to your spirit."

So Theseus set out on foot and alone.

Now as the young traveler strode lightly along, his mind busy with thoughts of Athens and high deeds, the first of the evildoers who beset the way rushed out at him from the woods. A black bearskin cloaked his bulky body and an iron club was in his hand. He stood squarely in the path, brandishing his weapon and shouting fearful threats.

"Theseus did not draw back. "To slay villains like you, have I come this way!" he cried and flung himself boldly on the attacker. Not in vain had the prince labored to perfect himself in wrestling and boxing. He soon left the savage dead upon the ground. But the iron club he took away and ever after carried with him. Did not Heracles his cousin also bear a club?

Many a time on that journey Theseus was glad of the powerful weapon. For the way to Athens, as his grandfather had warned, was infested with robbers. Three more scoundrels he slew before he reached the river Cephisus not far from Athens. And had not chance put him on his guard, before crossing that river, he might have lost his life. For now there came toward him a villain of another sort, a fellow richly clad and smiling and pleasant of speech.

"Noble traveler," he said to Theseus, "you must come with me and eat and drink of the best my house affords, for it is my custom to show hospitality to all who pass this way."

"I am in haste," Theseus answered, thanking him courteously. But the other seized hold of Theseus' hands and would not let him go. Theseus did not like to offend one who seemed so hospitable. So against his will he followed the stranger to his house.

Now while they sat at table, his host was called from the chamber, and the slave who poured the wine, whispering to Theseus:

"Young man, flee this house while yet you may! My master is a monster of evil. He will bid you sleep in his famed iron bed which fits all men. Once you are asleep, he will bind you to it. If you are too long for his bed, he will cut off your legs. If you are too short, he will stretch you to fit. Therefore is he called Procrustes, the stretcher."

Theseus said no word, but grasped his club, which he had laid down by him. And before he left that house, he had fitted Procrustes to his own bed.

News of the hero's exploits traveled fast. Long before Theseus arrived, Aegeus knew that a brave youth from Troezen was on his way to Athens. But the King had no thought that this was his son and anxiously awaited his arrival. For Athens was in
turmoll, and the childless King was afraid.  
"The people might set him on the throne in my place," he thought.

Now Aegeus' wife was none other than Medea, that same Medea who had taken such fearful revenge on Jason. In her chariot drawn by dragons she had escaped through the air to Athens. There she had gained great influence over the old King and had then got him to marry her. She knew who Theseus was. She, too, feared his coming. But it was for a different reason.  
"With a hero son by his side, the king will no longer hearken to me as of old," she thought.

And she said to Aegeus: "Let us poison Theseus at the first opportunity. For I have learned by my magic arts that he comes to destroy you."

So when with welcoming cries the Athenians brought the hero to the palace, Aegeus received him graciously, hiding for the moment his evil intentions. Theseus, for his part, was all eagerness. He could hardly wait to make himself known to his father. But the Prince had set his heart on having Aegeus recognize him of his own accord. So he gave no reason for his coming and accepted the King's hospitality merely as any hero might do.

Morning came. Theseus took his place beside Aegeus at the meal that had been set forth. A goblet of wine stood at the youth's place, and Aegeus watched eagerly to see Theseus drain it. For Medea had mixed a deadly poison for him. But Theseus did not even notice the wine. His happy eyes were turned on his father and he waited, a smile on his parted lips, hoping to be recognized. When Aegeus made no sign, the hero quietly laid his sword on the table.

A look of horror spread over Aegeus' face and a loud cry escaped him as he beheld the golden hilt. He reached across the table and dashed the fatal goblet to the floor. Then, weeping, he took his son in his arms and hugged him and passed his hands over the stalwart body and felt the knotting muscles and kissed the fair beardless cheeks of his hero son. Nor could Theseus look enough upon his father.

But Medea knew well that her hour had come, knew well that her witching rule in Athens was over. So once again she summoned her swift-flying dragons. And once more they bore her away—none is knew where.

Not long after Aegeus had acknowledged Theseus as his son and heir, Athens was thrown into mourning. Heralds had arrived from Crete to demand for the third time the terrible human tribute which every nine years had to be paid to King Minos.

Years before, Androgeos, the son of Minos, had gone to Athens to take part in the games. He had shown great prowess, overcoming all the Greeks. Provoked by this, Aegeus had treacherously caused Androgeos to be slain, whereupon King Minos made war on him. The King of Crete raised a great fleet and pressed Aegeus so hard that he was glad to make peace at any price. And the price was terrible—a tribute of seven youths and seven maidens to be sent to Crete and thrown to the Minotaur, the monster half-man, half-bull that lived in the Labyrinth.

Theseus saw that the Athenians were deeply angry with his father, who had brought this grief upon them. At once he offered to go to Minos.

"No, no, my son!" Aegeus pleaded. "The victims will be chosen by lot. Wait and see if you are selected. I have but newly found you!"

But Theseus was like a rock. "I will be one of the fourteen," he said, "whether I am chosen or not."

So Aegeus had to yield. Weeping, and with all Athens following, he went with the victims to the dismal ship.

"O my father, do not weep so," Theseus told him. "All is as the gods will. It may indeed be my fate to slay the Minotaur, and we who sail today in sorrow may yet return in joy. If so, you will know the good news from afar. For I promise you, if the Minotaur be slain, the ship that brings us home will not wear these deadly black sails but victorious white ones."

After this the vessel took to the sea, the land slipped away, and the youths and maidens turned their faces toward Crete.

At Cnossos, the capital of Crete, crowds gathered to see the Athenians whom the Minotaur would soon devour. With many a taunt the captives were paraded in front of the palace. Everyone ran out to see the victims, and with them Ariadne, King Minos' lovely daughter. She stood with a throng of her maidens and looked on as did the rest. But her gentle eyes fixed themselves on one alone—on princely Theseus, who, head high and eyes proudly flashing, marched looking neither to the right nor to the left. A surge of sudden love swept over the princess. And as the taunts rose all around her, she promised herself: "He shall not die!"

As soon as night fell, Ariadne stole out of the palace and went secretly to the captives.

"Fair youth," she whispered to Theseus, "I who for my brother's sake should be your enemy am not. Therefore, I have
brought you this." And she took from the folds of her dress a glistening sword and put it in Theseus' hand.

He grasped it joyfully and strapped it beneath his garments. "Now let the Minotaur roar as loud as he will—he will roar in vain!" Theseus said. "Thanks, gracious Princess. May I live to serve you!"

Ariadne then confessed her love, and Theseus, who found it easy enough to give his in return, promised ardently to make her his wife.

"Indeed I would have it so," Ariadne said. "But there is one thing more," she added. "Without it the sword would be useless, for you would never be able to find your way out of the Labyrinth, which the Athenian Daedalus built. The Minotaur's house is a maze. The passages turn and turn and lead into one another and end nowhere. None who enters may come forth again. Take, therefore, this ball of thread. Tie one end to the inside of the door and unwind the ball as you go. Then, winding it again, you will be able to retrace your steps."

So it was that the hero met the Minotaur in the gloomy depths of the Labyrinth and was not afraid. He came upon the monster sleeping and leaped on him and battled furiously with him. And when the creature lay dead at his feet, Theseus picked up the ball of thread and wound it back to the entrance.

What joy there was when Theseus' glad voice resounded through the passages and his companions saw their leader emerge! What embracing, what happy talk of home! With stealthy steps they made their way to their vessel, where Ariadne stood anxiously waiting for them. Deftly they hoisted sail, dipped their oars, and left the harbor so noiselessly that the Cretans never awoke to realize their loss.

Meanwhile at Athens King Aegeus daily mounted the cliffs by the sea and sorrowfully strained his old eyes in the direction of Crete. At last he saw the ship approaching—and his heart died within him. Black sails drank the wind. In the joy of homecoming, Theseus had forgotten to change the dismal sails of mourning.

"My son is dead!" the unhappy King cried out. "Why, then, do I live?"

Grief overpowered him and he cast himself headlong into the sea, which ever after has borne his name.

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The Judgment of Paris
by Max J. Herzberg

ONE of the most beautiful of the Nereids was the silvery-footed Thetis, who dwelt with her sisters in the depths of the sea, but was a favorite of Juno* and often visited the heights of Olympus. So lovely was she that both Jupiter and Neptune wished to marry her, but the oracles declared that her son would be greater than his father, and neither of the divinities dared risk being overthrown. She was therefore given in marriage to a mortal, Peleus, king of the Myrmidons of Thessaly.

To the marriage feast of Peleus and Thetis came all the gods, who brought many rich gifts. But one deity had not been invited to the celebrations—Eris, or Ate, the goddess of discord. She was greatly enraged at the oversight, and resolved that she would take revenge. While the merrymaking was at its height, therefore, she suddenly appeared in the midst of the revelers and threw upon the ground a wonderful apple, brought from the Garden of the Hesperides, and labeled "For the Fairest."

Immediately a contention arose as to who should have the apple. All the contestants finally withdrew, except three: Juno, Venus, and Minerva. They appealed to Jupiter to settle the dispute and award the apple, but he wisely declined to do so. He agreed, nevertheless, to appoint an arbitrator, and told the three goddesses that Paris of Troy would make the decision.

So the three goddesses then hastened to Paris. Troy was a city in Asia Minor; it was sometimes called Ilion or Ilium. Priam reigned over Troy. He had been twice married, the second time to Hecuba, and had fifty sons, two of whom were of particular note: Hector, one of the noblest heroes of ancient times, and Paris, who was destined to cause the destruction of his people. At the birth of Paris it had been prophesied that he would bring disaster to Troy, and he had consequently been exposed on a mountainside. But some shepherds had found him and had brought him up, and he was at this time a very handsome and attractive youth.

*Juno: Roman name for the Greek goddess Hera, queen of the gods (See page 3 for a table of Greek gods and their Roman equivalents.)