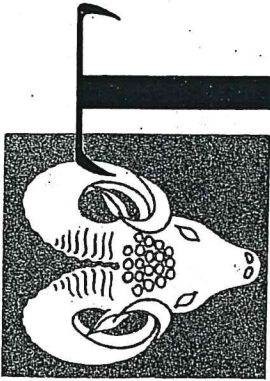


THE QUEST OF THE GOLDEN FLEECE



HE rightful king of a small Greek land had been deposed by his own kinsman, a ruthless half-brother named Pelias. To protect his newly-won power, Pelias then cold-bloodedly murdered every known claimant to the throne. Despite these desperate measures, he lived in fear that some day someone younger and stronger would depose and kill him in turn. His fear was not lessened by an oracle who warned him, "Beware of the man with one sandal!" The years passed peacefully enough, but eventually the dreaded man with only one sandal did appear at the king's court. His appearance and manly bearing caused considerable stir at the court, and no one, not even Pelias, was surprised to hear his identity.

He was Jason, the son of the old deposed king; a son who had been smuggled out of the kingdom in the times of danger, and had been brought up by a wise centaur in a far-off land. Now that he was grown, he claimed his father's throne for himself.

So commanding was the young man's presence that Pelias was afraid to deny him before all the court. Quickly, he thought of a plan to rid himself of the threat forever.

"Years ago," he told Jason, "a boy who was your own cousin was to be sacrificed to bring an end to famine. He escaped miraculously, for a golden ram descended to the place of sacrifice, took the boy on his back, and bore him to the land of Colchis. The boy later died, and his soul has never found rest so far from home. His ghost tells us that if we bring the fleece of that golden ram back to Greece, he will find rest."

"If you will do this service to the soul of a kinsman, then you, Jason, will receive my throne. Go to Colchis, and bring back the golden fleece!"

Jason could not refuse to do kindness to a dead kinsman, although the task was to be performed only with great danger. His courage was bolstered, however, by a notion that perhaps the goddess Hera would help him, for it was through her intervention that he had found his way to the palace. He had been walking beside a river when an old, wrinkled crone had stopped him, pleading for help across. When he had willingly carried her across, although he lost a sandal on the way, she had revealed herself as Hera. She was angry with Pelias; she told him, for he had offended her; Jason was to go and claim what was rightfully his.

Jason's first step in preparing to retrieve the golden fleece was to gather a band of heroes from all parts of Greece. All who came to join him were distinguished for bravery or cunning, and a few became famous for all time: Heracles, the twins Castor and Polydeuces, Orpheus the musician, and even a woman, Atalanta of Calydon, the huntress who was surer of aim and fleet of foot than any of her countrymen.

To carry the band to Colchis, Jason commissioned a ship from the master-builder Argus. The ship was named the *Argo*, for its builder, and its band of adventurers took the name *Argonauts*.

Many adventures befell the Argonauts in their eastward voyage to Colchis. On one occasion, they had to elude the Clashing Rocks which shrouded in mist, guarded a narrow passage and crushed anyone who tried to pass through. The Argonauts released a dove, and the rocks tried to crush it; the bird escaped with the loss of only a few tail-feathers, and as the rocks were drawing apart for another try, Jason and his crew sped through. Later they encountered the Amazons, a race of warrior women, and the savage, birdlike Harpies. Tragedy beset them, too: Heracles' best friend, Hylas, vanished without a trace, and several members of the party met violent deaths. Finally, in spite of all obstacles, they reached their goal.

Colchis was under the rule of a king named Aeëtes, whose court the Argonauts approached peacefully and courteously. When they had been duly received, Jason explained his mission to the king.

Aeëtes was unwilling to let the fabulous fleece go from his possession; yet he hesitated to insult a guest.

"You may have the fleece," he said finally, "if you can prove your worth by carrying out several small tasks."

Jason, he said, must yoke two fire-breathing bulls which were ravaging the land, and with them plow a certain field and sow it with the teeth of a serpent.

The task was even harder than it sounded. The king knew that

Jason would probably perish in the attempt to yoke the bulls. If he did manage to survive, he would get a shock when he sowed the teeth of the serpent, for armed men were to spring up from each tooth, ready to kill.

But while the king was issuing instructions to Jason, his daughter, the princess Medea, had joined him. At first sight she fell in love with the newcomer, and, although she knew her father's purpose, stole out that night to find Jason.

When she met him, she boldly proposed a bargain.

"I will help you get the golden fleece if you will take me away to be your wife," she said. Jason readily agreed, for Medea was endowed with a magical beauty.

The princess anointed Jason with a potion, and sent him out to do the tasks her father had assigned. Jason discovered that the liquid made him invulnerable, and he was easily able to capture and harness the bulls. He had to rely on his own wits for the second part of the test, however: when the armed men sprang from the serpent's teeth, he threw a stone into their midst to set them fighting against one another, and soon all were dead.

Medea then led Jason to the place where the fleece hung, and she herself subdued the guardian dragon, for she was a witch-maiden.

With the fleece in their possession at last, Jason and the Argonauts prepared to sail for home. Medea sailed with them, and her young brother as well. Jason soon learned why Medea had insisted on taking this youth with them, for, without a trace of regret, she murdered him and calmly cut up his body as the Argo was leaving the harbour. When the ships of Aëetes were seen in pursuit, Medea cast the pieces of her brother's corpse one by one over the side. The pursuers allowed their quarry to escape while they took time to collect the pieces of the dead prince.

Medea had already done great service to Jason, although doing so demanded monstrous crimes. She was to be of even greater use to

him. There was one time, on the way home, when she actually saved all the Argonauts from the clutches of Talus, a bronze giant on the isle of Crete; Medea lulled him to sleep, then pulled a plug in his ankle, which allowed all his life-fluid to flow away.

When the Argonauts, after a long and arduous voyage, finally reached their destination with the golden fleece, Jason discovered that Pelias had made plans to kill him.

"Let me take the city for you," pleaded Medea.

Her words sounded foolish, but knowing what strange and terrible powers the young woman possessed, Jason agreed to let her try.

Medea dressed herself as an old woman and, carrying an image of the goddess Artemis, managed to get by the guards of the city. She went directly to the palace of Pelias and demanded to see the king.

"The goddess Artemis has sent me to you, so that you may be made young once more," she told the startled king. Unbelieving, he asked for proof of her power.

For the first proof, Medea discarded her disguise of a crone, and told the king that she had just been rejuvenated into a young and beautiful woman. He could hardly believe his eyes; to convince him further, she performed a gruesome ritual before him.

Taking a very old ram, she killed it and threw pieces of it into a cauldron of boiling brew.

"This is the way the goddess makes her chosen ones young again," she told the king. "Look!"—and from a hiding place she pulled a frisky lamb, which she pretended was the old ram young again.

Convinced at last, Pelias allowed Medea to approach him and, reassuring him that he soon would be young and strong, she killed him and cut his body in pieces.

With his rival dead, Jason entered the city won for him by Medea, and in spite of his revulsion at her crimes, he married the princess.

