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Heroes

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Heroes

Stephen Fry is an award-winning comedian, actor, presenter and director. He rose to fame alongside Hugh Laurie in *A Bit of Fry and Laurie* (which he co-wrote with Laurie) and *Jeeves and Wooster*, and was unforgettable as General Melchett in *Blackadder*. He has hosted over 180 episodes of *QI*, and has narrated all seven of the Harry Potter novels for the audiobook recordings. He is the bestselling author of four novels – *The Stars' Tennis Balls*, *Making History*, *The Hippopotamus* and *The Liar* – as well as three volumes of autobiography – *Moab is My Washpot*, *The Fry Chronicles* and *More Fool Me*. *Mythos*, his retelling of the Greek myths, is a *Sunday Times* bestseller.

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HEROES

Volume II of Mythos

STEPHEN FRY



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To all the heroes we have never heard of.

Perhaps you are one.

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CONTENTS

Foreword xiii
Map xiv
The Olympians xvii

Introduction 1
Hera's Dream 5

PERSEUS 7
The Shower of Gold 9
The Wooden Chest 11
The Two Strangers in the Oak Grove 19
The Graeae 27
Gorgon Island 31
Andromeda and Cassiopeia 34
The Return to Seriphos 39

HERACLES 45
The Line of Perseus 47
Snakes Alive 55
Youth and Upbringing of a Hero 57
Crime and Punishment 60

Copyrighted Material

The Labours of Heracles 64
1. The Nemean Lion 64
2. The Lernaean Hydra 66
3. The Ceryneian Hind 69
4. The Erymanthian Boar 71
5. The Augean Stables 74
6. The Stymphalian Birds 76
7. The Cretan Bull 77
8. The Mares of Diomedes (incorporating the Story of Alcestis and Admetus) 78
9. The Girdle of Hippolyta 88
10. The Cattle of Geryon 94
11. The Golden Apples of the Hesperides 100
12. Cerberus 112
After the Labours: Crimes and Grudges 118
The Giants: a Prophecy Fulfilled 124
The Shirt of Nessus 127
Apotheosis 133

BELLEROPHON 137
The Winged One 139
Bearing False Witness 147
In Lycia 152
Chimerical Reaction 156
Flying Too High 160

Copyrighted Material

ORPHEUS 165
The Power to Soothe the Savage Beast 167
Orpheus and Eurydice 168
Orpheus in the Underworld 172
The Death of Orpheus 179

JASON 183
The Ram 185
Return to Iolcos 193
The *Argo* 202
The Isle of Lemnos 207
The Dolionians 212
Hylas Disappears 214
Harpies 218
The Clashing Rocks 223
Deaths, Razor-Sharp Feathers and the Phrixides 229
The Eagle King 234
Three Goddesses 237
Medea 239
The Khalkotauroi 240
The Grove of Ares 244
Escape from Colchis 248
The Journey Home 251
The Magical Death of Pelias 263
Medea Rises Up 267

Copyrighted Material

ATALANTA 271
Born to Be Wild 273
The Calydonian Boar 275
The Calydonian Hunt 281
The Foot Race 289

OEDIPUS 295
The Oracle Speaks 297
Where Three Roads Meet 302
The Riddle of the Sphinx 303
Long Live the King 308
The Aftermyth 322

THESEUS 327
The Chosen One 329
Under the Rock 331
The Labours of Theseus 338
1. Periphetes 338
2. Sinis 339
3. The Crommyonian Sow 341
4. Sciron 342
5. Cercyon and the Birth of Wrestling 344
6. Procrustes, the Stretcher 347
The Wicked Stepmother 352
The Marathonian Bull 356
The Queen of Poisons 358

Copyrighted Material

The Story of the Tribute 360
The Bull from the Sea 363
To Crete 369
The Dungeons of Knossos 371
The Bull Man 377
Abandonment and Flight 384
Father and Son 387
Theseus, the King 393
Envoi 405
The Rages of Heracles 407
Afterword 409

List of Characters 415
Olympian Gods 415
Primordial Beings 418
Monsters 424
Mortals 429
Acknowledgements 456

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Foreword

Heroes can be regarded as a continuation to my book *Mythos*, which told the story of the beginning of everything, the birth of the Titans and gods and the creation of mankind. You don't need to have read *Mythos* to follow – and I hope enjoy – this book, but plenty of footnotes will point you, by paperback page number, to stories, characters and mythical events that were covered in *Mythos* and which can be encountered there in fuller detail. Some people find footnotes a distraction, but I have been told that plenty of readers enjoyed them last time round, so I hope you will navigate them with pleasure as and when the mood takes you.

I know how off-putting for some Greek names can be – all those Ys, Ks and PHs. Where possible I have suggested the easiest way for our English-speaking mouths to form them. Modern Greeks will be astonished by what we do to their wonderful names, and German, French, American and other readers – who have their own ways with Ancient Greek – will wonder at some of my suggestions. But that is all they are, suggestions . . . whether you like to say Eddipus or Eedipus, Epi*daur*us or E*bee*thavros, Phil*oc*tetes or Philo*cteet*ees, the characters and stories remain the same.

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The World of the Greek Heroes

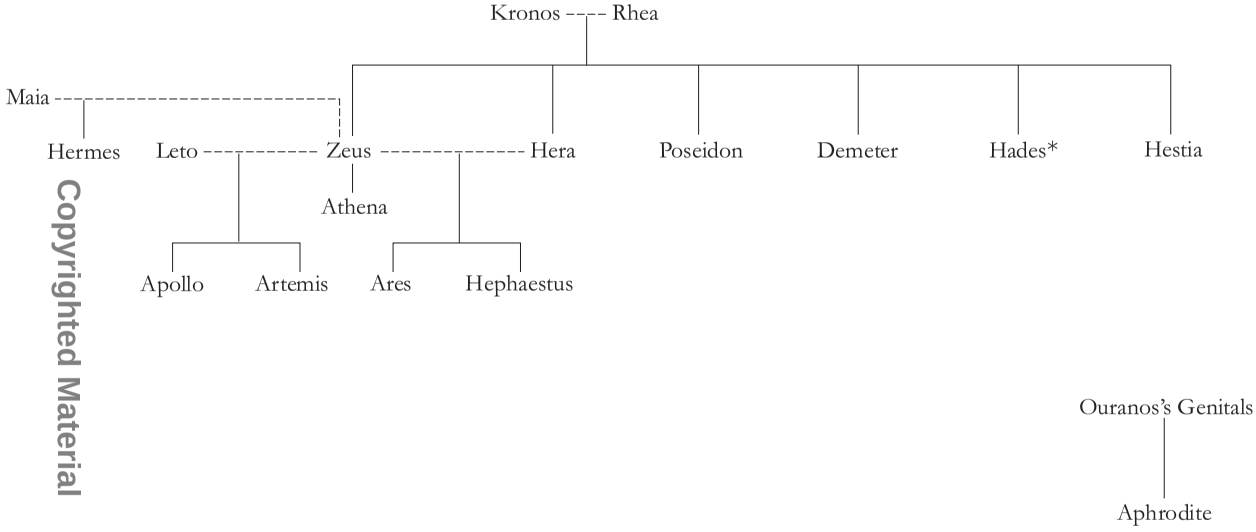
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The Olympians



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**Hades is not technically an Olympian, as he spent all of his time in the underworld.*

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INTRODUCTION

ZEUS sits on his throne. He rules the sky and the world. His sister-wife HERA rules him. Duties and domains in the mortal sphere are parcelled out to his family, the other ten Olympian gods. In the early days of gods and men, the divine trod the earth with mortals, befriended them, ravished them, coupled with them, punished them, tormented them, transformed them into flowers, trees, birds and bugs and in all ways interacted, intersected, intertwined, interbred, interpenetrated and interfered with us. But over time, as age has succeeded age and humankind has grown and prospered, the intensity of these interrelations has slowly diminished.

In the age we have entered now, the gods are still very much around, favouring, disfavouring, directing and disturbing, but PROMETHEUS's gift of fire has given humankind the ability to run its own affairs, build up its distinct city states, kingdoms and dynasties. The fire is real and hot in the world and has given mankind the power to smelt, forge, fabricate and make, but it is an inner fire too; thanks to Prometheus we are now endowed with the divine spark, the creative fire, the consciousness that once belonged only to gods.

The Golden Age has become an Age of Heroes – men and women who grasp their destinies, use their human qualities of courage, cunning, ambition, speed and strength to perform astonishing deeds, vanquish terrible monsters and establish great cultures and lineages that change the world. The divine fire stolen from heaven by their champion

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Prometheus burns within them. They fear, respect and worship their parental gods, but somewhere inside they know they are a match for them. Humanity has entered its teenage years.

Prometheus himself – the Titan who made us, befriended us and championed us – continues to endure his terrible punishment: shackled to the side of a mountain he is visited each day by a bird of prey that soars down out of the sun to tear open his side, pull out his liver and eat it before his very eyes. Since he is immortal the liver regenerates overnight, only for the torment to repeat the next day. And the next.

Prometheus, whose name means Forethought, has prophesied that now fire is in the world of man, the days of the gods are numbered. Zeus's rage at his friend's disobedience derives as much from a deep-buried but persistent fear that man will outgrow the gods as from his deep sense of hurt and betrayal.

Prometheus has also seen that the time will come when he will be released. A mortal human hero will arrive at the mountain, shatter his manacles and set the Titan free. Together they will save the Olympians.

But why should the gods need saving?

For hundreds of generations a deep resentment has smouldered beneath the earth. When KRONOS the Titan castrated his father, the primordial sky god OURANOS, and hurled his genitals across Greece, a race of giants sprang from where the drops of blood and seed fell. These 'chthonic' beings, these creatures sprung from the earth, believe that the time will come when they can wrest power from the arrogant upstart children of Kronos, the Olympian gods. The giants await the day when they can rise up to conquer Olympus and begin their own rule.

Prometheus squints into the sun and awaits his moment too.

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Mankind, meanwhile, gets on with the mortal business of striving, toiling, living, loving and dying in a world still populated with more or less benevolent nymphs, fauns, satyrs and other spirits of the seas, rivers, mountains, meadows, forests and fields, but bristling too with its share of serpents and dragons – many of them the descendants of the primordial GAIA, the earth goddess and TARTARUS, god of the depths beneath the earth. Their offspring, the monstrous ECHIDNA and TYPHON, have spawned a multitude of venomous and mutant creatures that ravage the countryside and oceans that humans are trying to tame.

To survive in such a world, mortals have felt the need to supplicate and submit themselves to the gods, to sacrifice to them and flatter them with praise and prayer. But some men and women are beginning to rely on their own resources of fortitude and wit. These are the men and women who – either with or without the help of the gods – will dare to make the world safe for humans to flourish. These are the heroes.

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HERA'S DREAM

Breakfast on Mount Olympus. Zeus sits at one end of a long stone table, sipping his nectar and considering the day ahead. One by one the other Olympian gods and goddesses drift in to take their seats. At last Hera enters and takes her place at the opposite end from her husband. Her face is flushed, her hair discomposed. Zeus glances up in some surprise.

'In all the years I have known you, you have never once been late for breakfast. Not once.'

'No, indeed,' says Hera. 'Accept my apologies, but I slept badly and feel unsettled. I had a disturbing dream last night. Most disturbing. Would you like to hear it?'

'Absolutely,' lies Zeus, who has, in common with us all, a horror of hearing the details of anyone else's dreams.

'I dreamt that we were under attack,' Hera says. 'Here on Olympus. The giants rose up, climbed the mountain and they assaulted us.'

'My, my . . .'

'But it was *serious*, Zeus. The whole race of them streamed up and attacked us. And your thunderbolts glanced as harmlessly off them as if they were pine needles. The giants' leader, the largest and strongest, came for me personally and tried to . . . to . . . impose himself.'

'Dear me, how very upsetting,' says Zeus. 'But it was after all only a dream.'

'Was it though? Was it? It was all so clear. It had more the feeling of a *vision*. A prophecy, perhaps. I have had them before. You know I have.'

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This was true. Hera's role as goddess of matrimony, family, decorum and good order made it easy to forget that she was also powerfully endowed with insight.

'How did it all end?'

'Strangely. We were saved by your friend Prometheus and . . .'

'He is *not* my friend,' snaps Zeus. Any mention of Prometheus is barred on Olympus. To Zeus the sound of his once dear friend's name is like lemon juice on a cut.

'If you say so, my dear, I am merely telling you what I dreamed, what I saw. You know, the strange thing is that Prometheus had with him a mortal man. And it was this human that pulled the giant off me, threw him down from Olympus and saved us all.'

'A man, you say?'

'Yes. A human. A mortal hero. And in my dream it was clear to me, I am not sure how or why, but it was clear, so clear, that this man was descended from the line of Perseus.'

'Perseus, you say?'

'Perseus. There could be no doubt about it. The nectar is at your elbow, my dear . . .'

Zeus passes the jar down the table.

Perseus.

There's a name he hasn't heard for a while.

Perseus . . .

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Perseus

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The Shower of Gold

ACRISIUS, ruler of Argos*, having produced no male heir to his kingdom, sought advice from the oracle at Delphi as to how and when he might expect one. The priestess's reply was disturbing:

King Acrisius will have no sons, but his grandson will kill him.

Acrisius loved his daughter and only child DANAË,† but he loved life more. It was clear from the oracle that he should do everything in his power to prevent any male of breeding age from getting close to her. To this end he ordered the construction of a bronze chamber beneath the palace. Locked up in this gleaming, impregnable prison, Danaë was given as many creature comforts and as much feminine company as she asked for. After all, Acrisius told himself, he was not flint-hearted.‡

He had sealed the bronze chamber against all invaders, but he had reckoned without the lusts of the all-seeing, all-cunning Zeus, whose eye had fallen on Danaë and who was even now considering how he might penetrate this sealed

---

* One of the most important of all Greek city states. The name given to its people, the Argives, was often used by Homer simply to mean 'Greek'. Philip II and his son Alexander the Great, although Macedonian, were said to originate from Argos.

† Often rendered as Danaë, so it should, I suppose, be pronounced 'Danaye'.

‡ The Roman poet Horace, in his *Odes*, changed the bronze room to a bronze tower, and thenceforward it has often been portrayed as just such a fairytale Rapunzel-like minaret. The earlier sources insist, however, that it was a room, with slits in the roof to let in light and air.

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chamber and take his pleasure. He liked a challenge. In his long, amorous career the King of the Gods had transformed himself into all kinds of exotic entities in his pursuit of desirable females and, from time to time, males. It was clear to him that to conquer Danaë he had to come up with something better than the usual bulls, bears, boars, stallions, eagles, stags and lions. Something a little more outré was required . . .

A shower of golden rain streamed down through the narrow slit of the skylight one night, poured itself into Danaë's lap and penetrated her.* It may have been an unorthodox form of coition, but Danaë became pregnant and in due time, with the help of her loyal female attendants, she gave birth to a healthy mortal boy, whom she named PERSEUS.

Along with the mortal healthiness of Perseus came a pair of very serviceable lungs, and try as they might neither Danaë nor her aides could stifle the wails and cries of the baby which made their way through the bronze walls of her prison all the way to the ears of her father two floors above.

His rage when confronted with the sight of his grandson was terrible to behold.

'Who dared break into your chamber? Tell me his name and I shall have him gelded, tortured and strangled with his own intestines.'

'Father, I believe it was the King of Heaven himself who came to me.'

'You are telling me – will someone please shut that baby up! – that it was Zeus?'

'Father, I cannot lie, it was.'

'A likely story. It was the brother of one of these damned maidservants of yours, wasn't it?'

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* We do not know whether or not Danaë enjoyed the experience. There are those, it is said, for whom the prospect of a golden shower is actually rather . . . well . . . quite.

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'No, father, it was as I said. Zeus.'

'If that brat doesn't stop screaming I'll smother him with this cushion.'

'He's just hungry,' said Danaë, putting Perseus to her breast.

Acrisius thought furiously. His threat with the cushion notwithstanding, he knew that there could be no greater crime than a blood killing. The murder of one's kin would provoke the Furies to rise up from the underworld and pursue him to the ends of the earth, scourging him with their iron whips until the very skin was flayed from his body. They wouldn't leave off until he was raving mad. Yet the oracle's prophecy meant that he could not suffer this grandson to live. Perhaps . . .

The next night, out of sight of gossiping townspeople, Acrisius had Danaë and the infant Perseus shut up in a wooden chest. His soldiers nailed down the lid and hurled the chest over the cliffs and into the sea.

'There,' said Acrisius, dusting off his hands as if to clear himself of all responsibility. 'If they perish, as perish they surely will, none can say that I was the direct cause. It will be the fault of the sea, the rocks and the sharks. It will be the fault of the gods. Nothing to do with me.'

With these weasel words of comfort, King Acrisius watched the chest bob out of sight.

The Wooden Chest

Tossed in the wild waves of the sea, the wooden box bounced and buffeted its way from island to island and coast to coast, neither breaking up on the rocks, nor beaching safely on the soft sands.

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Inside the darkness of the chest Danaë suckled her child and waited for the end to come. On the second day of their heaving, pitching voyage she felt a great lurch and then a terrible bang. After a few moments of stillness she heard the lid of the box creak and shift. All at once daylight poured in, accompanied by a strong smell of fish and the cry of gulls.

'Well, well,' said a friendly voice. 'Here's a catch!'

They had been caught in a fisherman's nets. The owner of the voice extended a strong hand to help Danaë out of the chest.

'Don't be frightened,' he said, though in truth he was the one who felt fear. What could all this portend? 'My name is Dictys* and these are my crewmen. We mean you no harm.'

The other fishermen crowded around, smiling shyly, but Dictys pushed them away. 'Let the lady breathe. Can't you see she's worn out? Some bread and wine.'

Two days later they landed on Dictys's home island of Seriphos. He took Danaë and Perseus to his small cottage behind the dunes.

'My wife died giving birth to a boy, so perhaps Poseidon has sent you to take their place – not that I mean . . .' he added in hasty confusion, 'I would not, of course, expect . . . I make no demands on you as a . . .'

Danaë laughed. The atmosphere of unaffected kindness and simplicity was just what she needed for rearing her child. Guileless amiability had been in short supply in her life. 'You are too kind,' she said. We accept your offer, don't we, Perseus?'

'Yes, mother, whatever you say.'

No, this is not the Miracle of the Talking Baby. Seventeen years have now passed on Seriphos. Perseus has grown into

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* Which simply means 'net'.

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a fine, strong young man. He is, thanks to his adopted father Dictys, a confident and skilled fisherman. Standing in a boat in swelling seas he can spear a darting swordfish, and he can flick up a trout from the fast waters of a stream with his fingers. He runs faster, throws further and jumps higher than any other young man on Seriphos. He wrestles, he rides wild asses, he can milk a cow and tame a bull. He is impulsive, perhaps a little boastful sometimes, but his mother Danaë is right to be proud of him and to believe him the best and bravest boy on the island.

The plainness of Dictys's home seemed all the more remarkable to Danaë when she discovered that this humble fisherman was the brother of Seriphos's king, POLYDECTES. The island's ruler was everything that Dictys was not: proud, cruel, dishonest, greedy, lascivious, extravagant and demanding. At first he had paid no particular attention to Dictys's houseguest. Over the last few years, however, his black heart had become more and more troubled with feelings of attraction for the beautiful mother of that boy, that impertinent boy.

Perseus had an instinctive way of interposing himself between his mother and the king that was most aggravating. Polydectes was in the habit of calling round when he knew that his brother would be out, but every time he did the pestilential Perseus would be there:

'Mum, mum, have you seen my running sandals?'

'Mum, mum! Come out to the rock pool and time me while I hold my breath underwater.'

It was too irritating.

At last Polydectes hit on a way of sending Perseus far away. He would exploit the youth's vanity, pride and bluster.

Messages were sent to all the young men of the island inviting them to the palace for a feast to celebrate Polydectes'

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resolution to seek the hand in marriage of HIPPODAMIA, daughter of King OENOMAUS of Pisa.* This was a bold and surprising move. Just as the oracle had prophesied that King Acrisius of Argos would be killed by a grandson, so it had told Oenomaus that he would be killed by a son-in-law. To prevent his daughter ever marrying, the king challenged every applicant for her hand to a chariot race, the loser to forfeit his life. Oenomaus was the finest charioteer in the land: so far, the heads of more than a dozen hopeful young men adorned the wooden stakes that fenced the racing field. Hippodamia was very beautiful, Pisa was very rich and the suitors kept coming.

Danaë was delighted to hear that Polydectes had thrown his hat into the ring. She had long felt uncomfortable in his presence and the surprising news that his heart was elsewhere came as a great relief. How gracious of him to invite her son to a feast and show that there were no hard feelings.

'It is an honour to be invited,' she told Perseus. 'Don't forget to thank him politely. Don't drink too much and try not to talk with your mouth full.'

Polydectes sat young Perseus in the seat of honour to his right, filling and refilling his cup with strong wine. He played the young man just as Perseus himself would have played a fish.

'Yes, this chariot race will certainly be a challenge,' he said. 'But the best families of Seriphos have each promised me a horse for my team. May I look to you and your mother to . . . ?'

Perseus flushed. His poverty had always been a source of

* Not the Italian Pisa of the Leaning Tower, but a city state in the northwestern Peloponnese. The quest for the hand of Hippodamia had repercussions that sounded down to the end of the mythic era and the aftermath of the Trojan War. But their details are for another time and place.

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mortification. The young men with whom he played at sports, wrestled, hunted and chased girls all had servants and stables. He still lived in a stone fisherman's cottage behind the dunes. His friend Pyrrho had a slave to fan him in his bed when the nights were warm. Perseus slept out on the sand and was more likely to be awoken by a nip from a crab than by a serving girl with a cup of fresh milk.

'I don't really have a horse as such,' said Perseus.

'A horse as such? I'm not sure I know what "a horse as such" might be.'

'I don't really own anything much more than the clothes I wear. Oh, I do have a collection of sea shells that I've been told might be quite valuable one day.'

'Oh dear. Oh dear. I quite understand. Of course I do.' Polydectes's sympathetic smile cut Perseus deeper than any sneer. 'It was too much to expect you to help me.'

'But I want to help you!' Perseus said, a little too loudly. 'Anything I can do for you I will. Name it.'

'Really? Well, there is one thing but . . .'

'What?'

'No, no, it's too much to ask.'

'Tell me what it is . . .'

'I've always hoped that one day someone would bring me . . . but I can't ask you, you're just a boy.'

Perseus banged the table. 'Bring you what? Say the word. I'm strong. I'm brave. I'm resourceful, I'm . . .'

'. . . just a little bit drunk.'

'I know what I'm saying . . .' Perseus rose unsteadily to his feet and said in a voice everyone in the hall could hear. 'Tell me what you want brought to you, my king, and I will bring it. Name it.'

'Well,' said Polydectes with a rueful shrug of defeat, as one forced into a corner. 'Since our young hero insists, there is

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one thing I've always wanted. Could you bring me the head of MEDUSA, I wonder?'

'No problem,' said Perseus. 'The head of Medusa? It's yours.'

'Really? You mean that?'

'I swear it by the beard of Zeus.'

A little while later Perseus stumbled home across the sands to find his mother waiting up for him.

'You're late, darling.'

'Mum, what's a "Medusa"?'

'Perseus, have you been drinking?'

'Maybe. Just a cup or two.'

'A hiccup or two, by the sound of it.'

'No, but seriously, what's a Medusa?'

'Why do you want to know?'

'I heard the name and wondered, that's all.'

'If you'll stop pacing around like a caged lion and sit down, I'll tell you,' said Danaë. 'Medusa, so they say, was a beautiful young woman who was taken and ravished by the sea god Poseidon.'*

'Ravished?'

'Unfortunately for her this took place on the floor of a temple sacred to the goddess Athena. She was so angry at the sacrilege that she punished Medusa.'

'She didn't punish Poseidon?'

'The gods don't punish each other, at least not very often. They punish us.'

'And how did Athena punish Medusa?'

'She transformed her into a Gorgon.'

'Blimey,' said Perseus, 'and what's a "Gorgon"?'

'A Gorgon is . . . Well, a Gorgon is a dreadful creature

* The description of the Gorgons in *Mythos* omits the idea of Medusa's separate creation as a mortal Gorgon. There are, of course, many different accounts. The story Danaë tells Perseus is perhaps the most popular.

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with boar's tusks instead of teeth, razor-sharp claws of brass and venomous snakes for hair.'

'Get away!'

'That's the story.'

'And what does "ravished" mean, exactly?'

'Behave yourself,' said Danaë, slapping his arm. 'There are only two others like her in the world, Stheno and Euryale, but they were born as Gorgons. They are immortal daughters of the ancient divinities of the sea, Phorcys and Ceto.'

'Is this Medusa immortal as well?'

'I don't think so. She was once human, you see...'

'Right . . . and if . . . say, for example . . . someone was to go hunting for her?'

Danaë laughed. 'They'd be a fool. The three of them live together on an island somewhere. Medusa has one special weapon worse even than her serpent hair, her tusks and her talons.'

'What would that be?'

'One glance from her will turn you to stone.'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean that if you were to meet her eyes for just one second you would be petrified.'

'Scared?'

'No, petrified means turned into stone. You'd be frozen for all eternity. Like a statue.'

Perseus scratched his chin. 'Oh. So *that's* Medusa? I'd rather hoped she might turn out to be some sort of giant chicken, or a pig, maybe.'

'Why do you want to know?'

'Well, I sort of promised Polydectes that I'd bring him her head.'

'You *what*?'

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'He wanted a horse, you see, and somehow this Medusa came up and I found myself saying I'd bring him her head . . .'

'You will go round to the palace first thing tomorrow morning and tell him that you will do no such thing.'

'But . . .'

'No buts. I absolutely forbid it. What was he thinking of? I've never heard of such a thing. Now, you go and sleep off that wine. In future you'll have no more than two cups in an evening, is that understood?'

'Yes, mum.'

Perseus sloped off to bed as commanded, but he awoke in a mutinous mood.

'I *will* leave the island and I *will* search for this Medusa,' he declared over breakfast and nothing Danaë said to him would make him change his mind. 'I made a promise in front of others. It's a matter of honour. I am of an age to travel. To have adventures. You know how swift and strong I am. How cunning and resourceful. There's nothing to be afraid of.'

'You speak to him, Dictys,' said Danaë, despairing.

Dictys and Perseus walked along the beach for most of the morning. Danaë was not pleased when they returned.

'It's like he says, Danaë. He's old enough to make his own decisions. He'll never find Medusa, of course. If she even exists. Let him go to the mainland and try out life for a while. He'll be back before long. He's well able to look after himself.'

The farewell between mother and son was all tears and distress on the one side and hand-patting and reassurance on the other.

'I'll be fine, mother. Ever seen anyone who can run faster? What harm can come to me?'

'I'll never forgive Polydectes, never.'

That at least, thought Dictys, was something.

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He took Perseus by boat to the mainland. 'Don't trust anyone who offers you anything for free,' he warned. 'There'll be plenty who'll want to befriend you. They might be trustworthy, they might not. Don't gaze around you as if it's the first time you've ever seen a busy port or a city. Look bored and confident. As if you know your way around. And don't be afraid to seek guidance from the oracles.'

How much of this excellent advice Perseus was likely to heed, Dictys could not tell. He was fond of the boy, and even fonder of his mother, and it grieved him to be complicit in so foolhardy an adventure. But, as he had told Danaë, Perseus was set on it and if they parted with hot words his absence would be all the harder to bear.

When they arrived on the mainland Perseus thought that Dictys' fishing boat looked very small and shabby beside the great ships moored at the harbour. The man he had called father since he had been able to speak suddenly looked very small and shabby, too. Perseus embraced him with fierce affection and accepted the silver coins slipped into his palm. He promised to try and send word to the island as soon as he had any news worth imparting and was patient enough to stand on the quayside and wave Dictys and his little boat goodbye, even though he was desperate to get going and explore the strange new world of mainland Greece.

The Two Strangers in the Oak Grove

Perseus was confounded and confused by the cosmopolitan clamour of the mainland. No one seemed to care who he was, unless it was to try and con him out of his few pieces of silver. It did not take him very long to see that Dictys was right:

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if he was going to return to Polydectes with the head of Medusa he would need guidance. The oracle of Apollo at Delphi was a long way to walk, but at least it was free to all.*

He joined the long queue of petitioners and after two long days found himself at last standing before the priestess.†

'What does Perseus wish to know?'

Perseus gave a little gasp. She knew who he was!

'I, well, I . . . I want to know how I can find and kill Medusa, the Gorgon.'

'Perseus must travel to a land where people subsist not on Demeter's golden corn but on the fruit of the oak tree.'

He stayed there hoping for further information, but not a word more was forthcoming. A priest pulled him away.

'Come along, come along, the Pythia has spoken. You're holding up the others.'

'I don't suppose you know what she meant?'

'I've got better things to do than listen to every pronouncement that comes from her mouth. You can be sure that it was wise and truthful.'

'But where do people subsist on the fruit of the oak?'

'Fruit of the oak? There's no such thing. Now please, move along.'

'I know what she meant,' said an old lady, who was one of the many regulars who came daily to sit on the grass and watch the line of supplicants shuffling along to hear their fortune. 'It was her way of telling you to visit the oracle at Dodona.'

'Another oracle?' Perseus's heart sank.

'The people there make flour from acorns that drop from

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* In later times a 'consultation tax' would have to be paid to the priestess, as well as the cost of the requisite sacrifices.

† The priestess, known as the PYTHIA, would hold on to a sacred tripod that connected her to the ground. She would receive her messages from clouds of sulphurous steam that rose (and still do) from under the earth at Delphi.

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oaks sacred to Zeus. I've heard tell the trees can speak. Dodona is a long way north, my love,' she wheezed. 'A very long way!'

A long way it was. His small supply of coins had gone and Perseus slept under hedgerows and subsisted on little more than wild figs and nuts as he travelled north. He must have presented a forlorn figure by the time he arrived, for the women of Dodona were kind. They ruffled his hair and served him delicious acorn-flour bread spread thick with sharp goats' curd and sweetened with honey.

'Go early in the morning,' they advised. 'The oaks are more talkative in the cool hours before the noontide sun.'

A mist hung over the countryside like a veil when Perseus set out for the grove at dawn the next day.

'Er, hello?' he called out to the trees, feeling remarkably stupid. The oaks were tall, stately and impressive enough, but they did not have mouths or faces with recognisable expressions.

'Who calls?'

Perseus started. Unquestionably a voice. Calm, soft, female, but strong and deeply authoritative.

'Here to help.'

Another voice! This one seemed to contain a hint of scorn.

'My name is Perseus. I have come . . .'

'Oh, we know who you are,' said a young man stepping forward from the shadows.

He was young, startlingly handsome and most unusually dressed. Aside from the loincloth around his waist, a narrow-brimmed hat that circled his brow and winged sandals at his ankles, he was quite naked.* Perseus noticed that two live snakes writhed about the staff that he was carrying.

A woman holding a shield emerged behind him. She was

* By our standards at least. For a Greek he was more than usually clothed . . .

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tall, grave and beautiful. When she raised her shining grey eyes to his, Perseus felt an extraordinary surge of something he could not quite define. He decided the quality was majesty and bowed his head accordingly.

'Don't be afraid, Perseus,' she said. 'Your father has sent us to help you.'

'My *father*?'

'He's our father too,' said the young man. 'The Cloud Gatherer and Bringer of Storms.'

'The Sky Father and King of Heaven,' said the shining woman.

'Z-Z-Zeus?'

'The same.'

'You mean it's really true, then? Zeus is my father?'

Perseus had never believed his mother's wild story about Zeus coming to her as a shower of golden rain. He had taken it for granted that his real father was some itinerant musician or tinker whose name she had never discovered.

'Quite true, brother Perseus,' said the tall woman.

'Brother?'

'I am Athena, daughter of Zeus and Metis.'

'Hermes, son of Zeus and Maia,' said the young man, bowing.

It was a lot for a youth of sheltered upbringing to take in. The two Olympians now told him that Zeus had been keeping an eye on him since his birth. He had guided the wooden chest into the net of Dictys. He had watched Perseus grow up into young manhood. He had seen him rise to Polydectes' challenge. He admired his boldness and had sent his two favourite children to assist their half-brother in his quest for the head of Medusa.

'You're going to help me?' said Perseus. This was so much more than he could have hoped for.

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'We can't slay the Gorgon for you,' said Hermes, 'but we can help tilt the odds a little in your favour. You might find these useful.' He looked down and addressed the sandals at his feet. 'To my brother Perseus,' he commanded. The sandals unwrapped themselves from the god's ankles and flew to Perseus. 'Take your own off, first.'

Perseus did so and at once the sandals attached themselves to his feet.

'You'll have plenty of time to get used to them,' said Athena, watching in some amusement as Perseus leapt in the air like a dancer.

'You're confusing them,' said Hermes. 'You don't have to flap your feet to fly. Just think.'

Perseus closed his eyes and strained.

'Not like you're taking a crap. Just picture yourself in the air. That's it! You've got it now.'

Perseus opened his eyes to discover that he had risen up into the air. He dropped down again with a jarring bump.

'Practice. That's the key. Now here is a hood from our uncle HADES. Wear this and no one will be able to see you.'

Perseus took the hood in his hands.

'I have something for you too,' said Athena.

'Oh,' said Perseus, putting the hood down and taking the object she was offering to him. 'A satchel?'

'You might find it useful.'

After flying sandals and a cap of invisibility, a plain brown leather satchel seemed something of a disappointment, but Perseus tried not to show it. 'That's very kind of you, I'm sure it will come in useful.'

'It will,' said Athena, 'but I have more for you. Take this . . .'

She passed him a short-bladed weapon, curved like a scythe.

'Be very careful, the blade is very sharp.'

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'You're not wrong!' said Perseus, sucking blood from his thumb.

'It is called a *harpe* and can cut through anything.'

'It is forged from adamantine,' Hermes added. 'A perfect replica of the great sickle Gaia made for Kronos.'

'And this shield is like no other,' said Athena. 'Its name is AEGIS. You must make sure its surface is always kept to a mirror shine like this.'

Perseus shaded his eyes from the flashing light of the rising sun that was reflecting from the polished bronze.

'Is the idea to dazzle Medusa with its glare?'

'You must work out for yourself how best to use it, but believe me, without this shield you will surely fail.'

'And die,' said Hermes. 'Which would be a pity.'

Perseus could hardly contain his excitement. The wings at his heels fluttered and he found himself rising up. He made some swishes with the *harpe*.

'This is all just amazing. So what do I do next?'

'There are limits to how much we can help. If you're to be a hero you must make your own moves and take your own –'

'I'm a hero?'

'You can be.'

Hermes and Athena were so fine. They shone. Everything they did was performed without any seeming effort. They made Perseus feel hot and clumsy.

As if reading his mind, Athena said, 'You will get used to Aegis, to the scythe, the sandals, the hood and the satchel. They are outwards things. If your mind and spirit are directed to your task, everything else will follow. Relax.'

'But focus,' said Hermes. 'Relaxation without focus leads to failure.'

'Focus without relaxation leads to failure just as surely,' said Athena.

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'So concentrate . . .' said Perseus.

'Exactly.'

'. . . but calmly?'

'Concentrate calmly. You have it.'

Perseus stood for a while inhaling and exhaling in a manner that he hoped was relaxed, yet focussed, concentrated, yet calm.

Hermes nodded. 'I think this young man has an excellent chance of success.'

'But the one thing these – wonderful – gifts can't help me with is finding the Gorgons. I have asked all over but no one seems to agree where they live. On an island somewhere, far out to sea, that's all I have been told. Which island? Which sea?'

'We cannot tell you that,' said Hermes, 'but have you heard of the PHORCIDES?'

'Never.'

'They are sometimes called the GRAEAE, or Grey Ones,' said Athena. 'Like their sisters, the Gorgons Stheno and Euryale, they are daughters of Phorcys and Ceto.'

'They're old,' said Hermes. 'So old they have only one eye and one tooth between them.'

'Seek them out,' said Athena. 'They know everything but tell nothing.'

'If they don't say anything,' said Perseus, 'what use are they? Do I threaten them with the sickle?'

'Oh no, you'll have to think of something subtler than that.'

'Something much craftier,' said Hermes.

'But what?'

'I'm sure it'll come to you. They can be found in a cave on the wild shores of Kisthene, that much is common knowledge.'

'We wish you good fortune, brother Perseus,' said Athena.

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'Relaxed but focussed, that's the key,' said Hermes.

'Goodbye . . .'

'Good luck . . .'

'Wait, wait!' cried Perseus, but the figures and forms of the gods had already begun to fade into the bright morning light and soon they had vanished entirely. Perseus stood alone in the grove of sacred oaks.

'This sickle is real at least,' said Perseus, looking at the cut on his thumb. 'This satchel is real, these sandals are real. Aegis is real . . .'

'Are you trying to blind me?'

Perseus swung round.

'Just watch how you flash that shield about,' came an irritated voice.

It seemed to be coming from the very heart of the oak tree closest to him.

'So you trees can talk after all,' said Perseus.

'Of course we can talk.'

'We usually choose not to.'

'There's so little worth saying.'

Voices came now from all parts of the wood.

'I understand,' said Perseus. 'But perhaps you wouldn't mind pointing me in the direction of Kisthene?'

'Kisthene? That's Aeolia.'

'More Phrygia, really,' another voice put in.

'I'd call it Lydia.'

'Well, it's certainly east.'

'North of Ionia but south of the Propontis.'

'Ignore them, young man,' boomed an older oak, rustling his leaves. 'They don't know what they're talking about. Fly over the isle of Lesbos and then up along the coast of Mysia. You can't miss the cave of the Grey Sisters. It's under a rock shaped like a weasel.'

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'Like a stoat, you mean,' squeaked a young sapling.

'An otter, surely?'

'I'd've said a pine marten.'

'The rock resembles a polecat and nothing else.'

'I said weasel and I meant weasel,' said the old one, quivering all over so that his leaves shook.

'Thanks,' said Perseus. 'I really must be going.'

Throwing his satchel over his shoulder, attaching the scythe to his belt and settling the shield firmly in his grip, Perseus frowned in on himself to awaken the sandals and with a great shout of triumph shot up into the blue of the sky.

'Good luck,' cried the oaks.

'Look out for a rock in the shape of a marmoset . . .'

The Graeae

By the time Perseus landed neatly, toes down, on the Mysian shore, outside a cave whose outer formation resembled, to his eyes at least, a squashed rat, the day was all but spent. Looking westwards he could see that HELIOS's sun-chariot was turning from copper to red as it neared the land of the HESPERIDES and the end of its daily round.

As Perseus approached the mouth of the cave he slipped on the cap that Hermes had given him, the Hood of Hades. The moment it was on his head, the long shadow that had been striding along the sand beside him disappeared. Everything was darker and a little misty with the hood over his eyes, but he could see well enough.

'I won't be needing these,' he said to himself, leaving the scythe, satchel and shield on the sand outside the cave.

He followed the murmur of voices and a glimmer of light

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through a long, winding passageway. The light grew brighter and the voices louder.

'It's my turn to have the tooth!'

'I've only just put it in.'

'Then PEMPHREDO should let me have the eye at least.'

'Oh, stop moaning, ENYO . . .'

As Perseus entered the chamber he saw, held in the flickering light of a lamp that hung over them, three fantastically old women. Their ragged clothes, straggling hair and sagging flesh were as grey as the stones of the cave. In the bare lower gum of one of the sisters jutted up a single yellow tooth. In the eye socket of another sister a solitary eyeball darted back and forth and up and down in the most alarming manner. It was just as Hermes had said, one eye and one tooth between them.

A pile of bones lay heaped on the floor. The sister with the tooth was gnawing the side of one, stripping it of its rotten flesh. The sister with the eye had picked up another bone and was inspecting it closely and lovingly. The third sister, with no eye and no tooth, raised her head with a jerk and sniffed the air sharply.

'I smell a mortal,' she shrieked, stabbing a finger in the direction of Perseus. 'Look, Pemphredo. Use the eye!'

Pemphredo, the sister with the eye, cast wild glances in all directions. 'There's nothing there, Enyo.'

'I tell you there is. A mortal. I smell it!' cried Enyo. 'Bite it, DINO.* Use your tooth. Bite! Bite it to death!'

Perseus stole silently closer, taking great care not to step on any cast-off bones.

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* The Graeae's names, as so often in Greek myth, have meanings. Pemphredo is 'she who guides the way', Enyo 'warlike' and Dino 'terrible' (as in *dinosaur*, which means 'terrible lizard'). Dino was sometimes called Persis 'the destroyer'. I've avoided that name on account of its similarity to Perseus. But it shows that Perseus and all the Pers- names carry 'destructive' meanings.

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'Give me the eye, Pemphredo! I swear to you I smell mortal flesh.'

'Here, take it.' Pemphredo took the eye from her socket and the one called Enyo stretched out her hand greedily to receive it. Stepping forward Perseus snatched up the eye himself.

'What was that? Who? What?'

Perseus had brushed Dino, the sister with the tooth. Taking advantage of her open-mouthed astonishment he plucked the tooth from her mouth and stepped back with a loud laugh.

'Good evening, ladies.'

'The tooth! The tooth, someone has taken the tooth!'

'Where is the eye? Who has the eye?'

'I have your tooth, sisters, and I have your eye too.'

'Give them back!'

'You have no right.'

'All in good time,' said Perseus. 'I could return this cloudy old eye and this rotten old tooth. I've no use for them. Of course, I could just as easily throw them into the sea . . .'

'No! No! We beg of you!'

'Beg . . .'

'It all depends on you,' said Perseus, walking round and round them. As he passed they shot out their bony arms to try and grab him, but he was always too quick.

'What do you want?'

'Information. You are old. You know things.'

'What would you have us tell you?'

'How to find your sisters, the Gorgons.'

'What do you want with them?'

'I'd like to take Medusa home with me. Part of her at least.'

'Ha! You're a fool. She will petrify you.'

'That's turn you to stone.'

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'I'm not ignorant. I know what "petrify" means,' said Perseus. 'You let me worry about all that, just tell me where to find the island where they live.'

'You mean our lovely sisters harm.'

'Tell me or I throw first the eye and then the tooth into the sea.'

'Libya!' cried the one called Enyo. 'The island is off the coast of Libya.'

'Are you satisfied?'

'They'll kill you and feast on your flesh and we shall hear of it and cheer,' screeched Dino.

'Now, give us our eye and our tooth.'

'Certainly,' said Perseus. These hags might be old, he told himself, but they have sharp claws and they are fierce and vengeful. I had better buy myself some time. 'Tell you what, let's make a game of it,' he said. 'Close your eyes and count to a hundred . . . Oh. Of course. No need to close your eyes. Just count to a hundred while I hide the tooth and eye. They'll be somewhere in this cave, I promise. No cheating. One, two, three, four . . .'

'Damn you, child of Prometheus!'

'May your flesh rot from your bones!'

Perseus moved swiftly round their chamber, counting with them. 'You should be thanking me . . . nineteen, twenty . . . not cursing me,' he said as they hurled fouler and filthier obscenities at him. 'Forty-five, forty-six . . . surely this is the most exciting thing to have happened to you for centuries . . . sixty-eight, sixty-nine . . . you will be talking about this day for ages and ages to come. Don't start looking till you reach a hundred, no cheating, now!'

As Perseus returned along the passageway towards the mouth of the cave and the open beach he heard the voices of the Graeae behind him squabbling, screaming and spitting.

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