The Gorgon’s Head  
*from ancient Greece*  
Anne Terry White

"... none may look upon the Gorgons and live[.] The sight of them ... turns men to stone."

Acrisius,¹ King of Argos,² came home from Delphi³ with a heavy heart, for he had received a dreadful oracle.⁴

“No sons shall be born to you,” the priestess had told him. “But you shall have a grandson, and by his hand you shall die.”

Now the king had an only daughter, who was yet a maiden. So in his distress he thought: “I will evade my fate. I will shut Danae⁵ up away from the sight of men in a house of bronze all sunk underground.” And he carried out his cruel plan.

But Acrisius forgot to take the gods into account. Part of the roof of the house was open to the sky. And one day, as lovely Danae sat sadly looking up at the passing clouds, Zeus⁶ beheld the maiden. Changing himself into a shower of gold, he stormed into her chamber.

When afterwards a son was born to Danae, she hid him from her father’s sight. Nevertheless, the king discovered the baby and was more than ever filled with fear. He dared not kill the little Perseus⁷ directly lest the gods avenge the murder. Instead, he had a great chest built, placed Danae and her boy in it, and set them adrift upon the sea.

All day and all night the chest tossed upon the waves. Danae lulled her child with song, and he slept. But when dawn came, a great wave picked up the chest and carried it close to the tiny island of Seraphos.⁸

It happened that a fisherman, Dictys⁹ by name, saw the chest bobbing on the waves close to the shore. He dragged the box to land and opened it. When he beheld the pitiful mother with the helpless little child, his heart was moved. He took them both to his wife, for Dictys was childless, and there in the kindly fisherfolk’s humble home Perseus grew up.

Now Danae had been a beautiful maiden.

---

1. Acrisius (ə krɪs' ō əs)  
3. Delphi (del' fi): The site of the most famous oracle of Apollo. The ancient Greeks believed that Delphi was the middle of the earth.  
4. oracle (ō rr' ə kīl): A prophecy or message. Also, a person of great knowledge or wisdom.  
6. Zeus (zōs)  
7. Perseus (pər' sē us)  
9. Dictys (dik' tis)
And when Perseus was grown into a fine tall youth, she was still beautiful. So it was not strange that King Polydectes, who was Dictys’ brother, fell in love with her and made her his wife. But the King hated the youth—just because Danae doted on him—and sought some way to be rid of him.

At last Polydectes said to his stepson, “The time has come, Perseus, for you to win glory for yourself in some bold adventure.”

Young Perseus thought so, too. But what should the adventure be?

“I think,” the wily Polydectes said, “it would be a good idea for you to cut off the Medusa’s head. That would bring you the greatest fame.”

All unsuspecting, Perseus set off to find the Medusa, not knowing in the least how perilous an adventure he had undertaken. For the Medusa was one of the three Gorgons, terrible winged monsters who lived alone on an island. They had teeth like the tusks of a boar, hands of brass, and snakes instead of hair. Perseus did not know where to look for the Gorgons. Nor did he know which of them was Medusa. And this was important, for Medusa was the only one of the three that could be slain.

From place to place the prince went in his quest, getting more and more discouraged. Then one day he beheld a young man of great beauty, wearing winged sandals and a winged cap, and carrying in his hand a wand around which two golden serpents twined. Perseus knew at once that this was Hermes and was overjoyed when the god said:

“Perseus, I approve the high adventure you have in mind. But you must be properly equipped for it. Without the winged sandals, the magic wallet, and the helmet of invisibility which the Nymphs of the North possess, you can never succeed. Now, I cannot tell you where the Nymphs live, but I will take you to the Gray Women. You can find out from them.”

“And will they indeed tell me?” Perseus asked.

“Not willingly,” Hermes replied. “But you can make them do it. They have but one eye among the three. Snatch it from them as they pass it from one to another and none can see. And do not give it back till they tell you what you want to know.”

With that, Hermes gave Perseus a magnificent curved sword.

“You will need it,” he said, “for the Medusa’s scales are hard as metal.”

Perseus had just taken the sword when there was a sudden brightness in the sky, and he beheld the goddess Athene descending toward them.

“Of what use will your sword, my brother,” she said to Hermes, “when none may look on the Gorgons and live? The sight of them, as you well know, turns men to stone. Take my bright shield, Perseus. Look into it instead of at the monster as you approach to do battle, and you will see the Medusa reflected as in a mirror.”

So saying, the goddess disappeared, and the brightness with her.

On and on with his god-companion Perseus journeyed, farther than man had ever been. At last they came to the end of the

13. Nymphs (nimfz): Minor nature goddesses, thought of as beautiful maidens living in rivers, trees and so on.
14. Gray Women: Also called Graeae (gré’ é’). Three old sisters who act as guards for the Gorgons and have only one eye and one tooth to share among them.
15. Athene (á the’ ná): Goddess of wisdom, skills and warfare.
earth. There the weird Gray Women sat, passing their eye from one to another just as Hermes had said. Danae's son knew what to do. He left the god and crept quietly towards them. waited till one had taken the eye from her forehead, and snatched it away as she passed it to her sister.

The Gray Women raised a fearful clamor when they realized that a stranger had their eye. They howled and they threatened. But without the eye they were helpless, and in the end they grudgingly told Perseus the way to the Nymphs of the North.

So again Perseus went on. this time to find the happy beings who possessed the three priceless things he needed.

And when the Nymphs heard the reason he wanted them, they were willing to give him the winged shoes, the helmet that would make him invisible, and the magic wallet that would become the right size for whatever he wished to carry.

Fully equipped now, Perseus lightly sped through the air over land and over sea to the fearful island of the Gorgons. As he approached, he could see, scattered in the fields and along the roads, statues of men and beasts whom the sight of the Gorgons had turned to stone. And, at last, from high above, he beheld the monsters themselves reflected in his shield. Their scale-covered bodies glistened in the sun. their great wings were folded, the snakes that were their hair lay hideously coiled and inter-twined. The Gorgons were asleep.

But which of the three was Medusa? Perseus could see no
difference among them.

Suddenly he heard Athene's voice:

"Descend, Perseus, and strike! The Gorgon nearest the shore is Medusa."

Perseus swept down, and still gazing into the shield, boldly swung his blade. With one stroke he cut off the grisly head. Then, springing into the air, he thrust his prize, all writhing and hissing, into the magic wallet.

Up leaped the Gorgon sisters, for they heard the rattle of Medusa's scales as the severed body thrashed about. They turned their snaky heads and when they saw Perseus, they roared with fury. Flapping their great wings, they set off in pursuit. But they could not outstrip the winged sandals.

Over lands and peoples the hero flew, on and on. He had lost his way now, for Hermes had left him. Below, the Lybian\textsuperscript{16} desert stretched endlessly. Perseus did not know what those sands were, nor did he guess that the ruby drops falling from Medusa's head were turning into venomous snakes that would inhabit the desert forever. But now he saw a sight that made his heart beat fast with excitement and wonder.

Fastened by chains to a cliff by the sea was a beautiful maiden. Had it not been that a slight breeze stirred her hair and that tears flowed from her eyes, he would have thought her a statue. Perseus almost forgot to keep his winged sandals moving, so struck was he by her rare beauty.

"Lovely maiden, you should not wear such chains as these," he stammered out.

"but rather those which bind the hearts of lovers. I pray you, tell me your name and why you are bound like this."

At first the girl made no reply, so abashed was she before the youth. But when he urged her again and again to speak, she told him all her story.

"I am Andromeda,"\textsuperscript{17} she said, "daughter of Cepheus,\textsuperscript{18} King of the Ethiopians.\textsuperscript{19} The beautiful Cassiopeia\textsuperscript{20} is my mother. It is her beauty that has chained me here. For the gods are jealous, and in nothing may we mortals surpass them. Woe, woe the day my mother vaunted\textsuperscript{21} herself fairer than the daughters of Nereus!\textsuperscript{22} The sea god has sent a serpent to prey upon our people, and my death alone can appease his anger. So says the oracle."

She had scarcely finished speaking when the loud roaring of the waves announced that the monster was on his way. Andromeda shrieked. At her cry, her frantic father and mother came running. They clung to their daughter and lamented.\textsuperscript{23}

"Enough of tears!" Perseus said to them sternly. "I am Perseus, son of Zeus and Danae. Now I will make this contract with you—that Andromeda shall be mine if I save her from the serpent."

"Indeed, indeed,\textsuperscript{17} valourous youth, she

\textsuperscript{16.} Lybian (lī'bē an): In Lybia, a country in northern Africa, west of Egypt.

\textsuperscript{17.} Andromeda (an drām' odā)
\textsuperscript{18.} Cepheus (sē' fē us)
\textsuperscript{19.} Ethiopians (ē thē' ô' pē anz): Peoples of Ethiopia, a country in northeastern Africa.
\textsuperscript{20.} Cassiopeia (kas ē ô pē' ā)
\textsuperscript{21.} vaunted (vānt' ed) v.: Boasted or bragged.
\textsuperscript{22.} Nereus (nē' ré us): A god of great kindliness; also called the Old Man of the Sea and Nereus the Truthful. The father of the Nereids, the nymphs of the sea.
\textsuperscript{23.} lamented (lō men' tid) v.: Mourned for, as if for someone dead.
and when he looked, Andromeda already stood free beside her parents.

"I will take this fair maiden without dowry," Perseus said.

And that very day the wedding was celebrated. Torches were tossed in the air, incense was thrown on the flames. Garlands were hung from the palace roof. And everywhere the sound of lyres and pipes and singing was heard.

Now while the marriage feast was at its height, the door of the banquet hall was suddenly flung open, and in burst a mob of shouting, riotous men. Foremost stood Andromeda's uncle, Phineas, javelin in hand.

"Behold, I am here!" he cried. "I have come to avenge the theft of my promised bride."

"What are you doing, brother?" the fat

---

24. Phineas (fin' è us)
ther cried. "Do you, who stood by and watched while Andromeda was put in chains and did nothing to help her, dare to be indignant because another has snatched the prize? Let the man who rescued her have the reward he was promised! He has not been chosen in preference to you, but in preference to certain death."

Phineas said not a word. He looked from the king to Perseus, undecided at which to aim his weapon, then hurled it at the hero. The spear struck in Perseus' couch.

Perseus leaped up from the cushions, wrenched out the spear, and hurled it back at his foe. Had Phineas not taken refuge behind the altar, he would have perished. As it was, one of his followers received the weapon full in his forehead.

Then the rioters went wild. Weapons were hurled, and the feast turned into a battle. Thick as hail, javelins sped by Perseus' ears. He set his shoulders against a great stone column and struck down one man after another. But at last he realized that valor could not withstand the numbers against him.

"If I have any friends here, let them hide their faces!" he shouted.

With this he drew Medusa's head out of the wallet. One of the attackers was just preparing to cast his javelin, but before he could cast, he was turned to stone. Another, who was about to thrust his sword through Perseus, stood frozen with it in his hand. A third was turned to stone even as he uttered a taunt. Two hundred men became stony statues before Phineas yielded, crying:

"Put away your horrible weapon. Hide it! Grant me only my life and may the rest be yours!"

"What I can give you, most cowardly Phineas, I will!" Perseus replied. "You shall be a lasting monument here in the palace of my father-in-law."

The unhappy Phineas tried to turn away his eyes, but even as he did so, his flesh turned to stone.

When at the year's end, Perseus sailed home with Andromeda, Polydectes' hatred had in no way lessened. The King was furious that his stepson had returned, and refused to believe that he had actually slain the Medusa. With scornful taunts he upbraided the young man for having come home empty-handed.

It was more than Perseus could bear.

"I shall prove to you that what I say is true!" he cried. "Hide your eyes, all you who are my friends!" And he showed the Gorgon's head to cruel Polydectes.

That was the last time Perseus ever used the horrible head. He gave it most willingly to Athene, who kept it ever after.

Now that Polydectes was dead, Danae yearned to go home again and be reconciled to her father. So Perseus made the fisherman Dictys king of the island and sailed with his mother and Andromeda to Greece.

But it happened that when they came to Argos, King Acrisius was away from home. Games were being held in Larissa, and Perseus, hearing of them, decided to go there and take part. And there at the games it was that the oracle which Acrisius had received at Delphi was strangely fulfilled. For when it came Perseus' turn to throw the discus, he threw it so that it swerved to one side. It landed among the spectators and killed an old man. That old man was King Acrisius, who had gone to such cruel lengths to avoid the fate which the gods had ordained.

---

25. Larissa (lā ris' å): The acropolis—the fortified upper part of an ancient Greek city—at Argos.