

CHAPTER XX.

PERSEUS.

THE life of Acrisius, King of Argos, had been a burden to him ever since the unfortunate day when an oracle had predicted that he would be killed by his grandson. Until then the king had been very fond of his only child, Danae, and until then, too, had thought with pride of the time when he would bestow her hand in marriage upon the noblest of all who came to woo.

Now his plans were all changed, and his only wish was to keep her unmated,—a somewhat difficult task, for the maiden was very fair, and Acrisius knew that the wily God of Love would endeavor to find some way to outwit him and bring his plans to naught. After much thought, Acrisius decided to lock Danae up in a brazen tower, around which he stationed guards to prevent any one from even approaching the captive princess.

But, although safely concealed from the eyes of men, Danae was plainly seen by the everlasting gods; and Jupiter, looking down from Olympus, beheld her in all her loveliness and in all her loneliness. She was seated on top of her brazen tower, her eyes wistfully turned toward the city, where girls of her age enjoyed freedom, and were allowed to marry when they pleased.

Jupiter, pitying her isolation and admiring her beauty, resolved to go down and converse with her for a little while. To avoid being seen, he changed himself into a golden shower, and gently dropped down on the turret beside her, where his presence and spirited conversation soon won the maiden's heart.

Acrisius and Danae.

The shower of gold.

“Danae, in a brazen tower
Where no love was, loved a shower.”

SHELLEY.

This first successful visit was frequently repeated, and Danae no longer felt lonely and deserted, for Jupiter spent most of his time with her, pursuing his courtship most diligently, and finally winning her to a secret marriage, to which no one offered the slightest objection, as no one suspected his visits, which he continued quite unmolested.

But one morning the guards rushed in terror to Acrisius' palace to announce that Danae, his daughter, had given birth to a son, who, on account of his beauty, was called Perseus. The king no sooner learned this astonishing news, than he flew into a great rage, vowed that mother and child should perish, and dispatched the guards to fetch the unfortunate victims.

Acrisius, however, was not cruel enough to stain his own hands with his child's blood, or to witness her execution: so he ordered that she should be placed in an empty cask with her helpless infant, and exposed to the fury of the waves. These orders were speedily executed; and Danae's heart sank with terror when she felt the cask buffeted about by the great waves far out of sight of land, and out of all reach of help. Clasp- ing her babe close to her bosom, she fervently prayed the gods to watch over them both, and bring them in safety to some hospitable shore.

“When round the well-fram'd ark the blowing blast
Roar'd, and the heaving whirlpools of the deep
With rough'ning surge seem'd threatening to o'erturn
The wide-tost vessel, not with tearless cheeks
The mother round her infant gently twined
Her tender arm, and cried, 'Ah me! my child!
What sufferings I endure! thou sleep'st the while,
Inhaling in thy milky-breathing breast
The balm of slumber.'”

SIMONIDES (Elton's tr.).

Birth of Perseus.

Her piteous prayer was evidently heard, for, after much tossing, the cask was finally washed ashore on the Island of Seriphus, where Polydectes, the king, kindly received Danae at Seriphus. and child. Here Perseus, the golden-haired, grew to manhood, and here made his first appearance in games and combats.

In the mean while, Polydectes had fallen in love with Danae, and expressed his desire to marry her; but Danae did not return his affections, and would not consent. Angry at her persistent refusal of his proposals, Polydectes wished to compel her to obey, and thereby incurred the wrath of young Perseus, who loudly declared that none should dare force his mother as long as he were there to defend her. This boast did not at all allay the monarch's wrath; and, hoping to get rid of the young boaster, he bade him go forth and slay Medusa, if he wished to convince people that his bravery was real.

This Medusa was one of the three Gorgons. Her sisters, Euryale and Stheno, although immortal, had never had any claims to beauty; but Medusa, when only a girl, had been considered very handsome indeed. Her home, in a land where the sun never shone, was very distasteful to her, so she entreated Minerva to let her go and visit the beautiful sunny south.

But when Minerva refused to grant her wish, she reviled the goddess, and declared that nothing but a conviction that mortals would no longer consider her beautiful if they but once beheld Medusa, could have prompted this denial. This presumptuous remark so incensed Minerva, that, to punish her for her vanity, she changed her beautiful curling locks into hissing, writhing serpents, and decreed that one glance into her still beautiful face would suffice to change the beholder into stone.

“Fatal Beauty! thou didst seem
The phantom of some fearful dream.
Extremes of horror and of love
Alternate o'er our senses move,

As, rapt and spellbound, we survey
The horrid coils which round thee play,
And mark thy wild, enduring smile,
Lit by no mortal fire the while,
Formed to attract all eyes to thee,
And yet their withering blight to be;
Thy power mysterious to congeal
And from life's blood its warmth to steal,
To petrify the mortal clay
In its first gleam of wild dismay,
Is a dread gift to one like thee,
Cursed with a hateful destiny.”

MRS. ST. JOHN.

The gods, who had carefully watched over Perseus through his childhood and youth, now decided to lend him their aid, so that he might successfully accomplish the great task of slaying Medusa. Pluto lent him a magic helmet, which made the wearer invisible at will; Mercury attached his own winged sandals to the youth's heels, to endow him with great rapidity of flight; while Minerva armed him with her own mirrorlike shield, the dreadful Ægis.

“Minerva thus to Perseus lent her shield;
Secure of conquest, sent him to the field:
The hero acted what the queen ordain'd,
So was his fame complete.”

PRIOR.

Thus equipped, Perseus flew northward until he came to the land of perpetual darkness, the home of the Grææ, three horrible sisters, who possessed but one eye and one tooth, which they handed about and used in turn, and who were the only living beings cognizant of the place where Medusa dwelt.

Invisible by virtue of his magic helmet, Perseus drew near the cave without fear of detection, and intercepted the eye while on its way from one sister to another. As soon as it was safe in his possession, he spoke to them, promising to restore it if they would

only give him accurate directions for finding Medusa. The sisters, eager to recover the treasured eye, immediately gave the desired information; and Perseus, having honorably fulfilled his share of the contract, departed in search of Medusa.

Perseus at last perceived the Gorgons' home in the dim distance; and, as he was fully aware of Medusa's petrifying proclivities, he advanced very cautiously, holding his shield before him at such an angle that all surrounding objects were clearly reflected on its smooth, mirrorlike surface.

He thus discovered Medusa asleep, raised his sword, and, without looking at anything but her mirrored form, severed her head from her body, seized it in one hand, and, holding it persistently behind his back, flew away in great haste, lest the two remaining Gorgons should fall upon him and attempt to avenge their sister's death.

Perseus then swiftly winged his way over land and sea, carefully holding his ghastly trophy behind him; and as he flew, Medusa's blood trickled down on the hot African sand, where it gave birth to a race of poisonous reptiles destined to infest the region in future ages, and cause the death of many an adventurous explorer. The drops which fell into the sea were utilized by Neptune, who created from them the famous winged steed called Pegasus (p. 154).

Death of
Medusa.

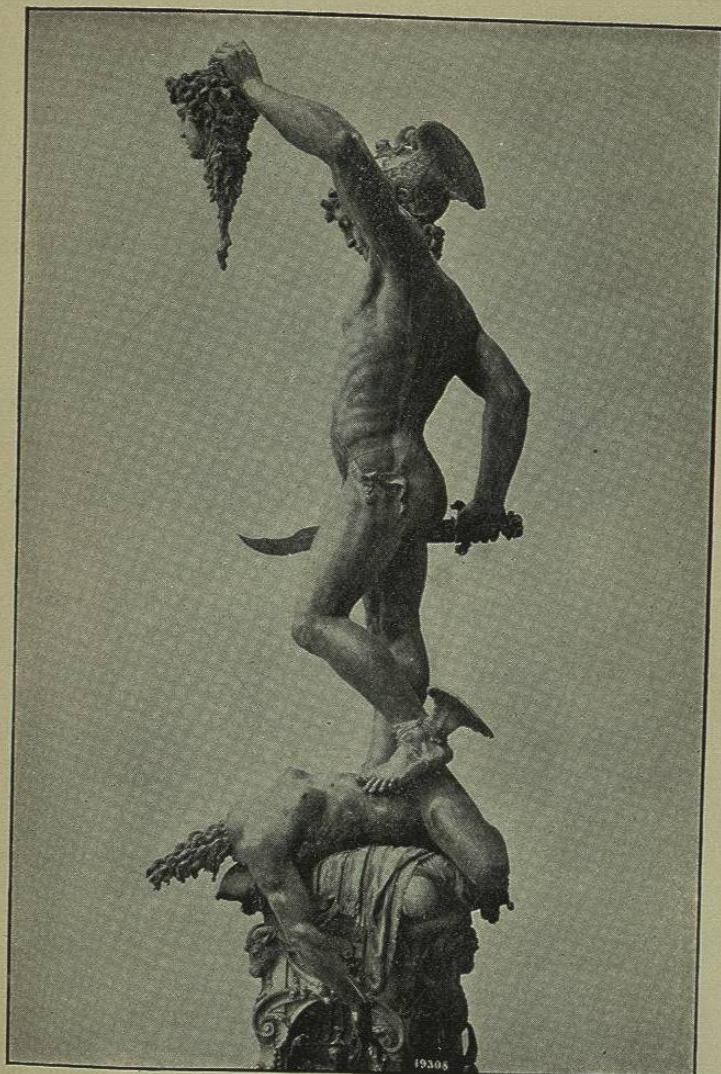
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“And the life drops from thy head
On Libyan sands, by Perseus shed,
Sprang a scourging race from thee —
Fell types of artful mystery.”

Mrs. St. John.

The return journey was long and wearisome, and on his way the hero had many adventures. Once, when flying high above a mountainous country, he caught a glimpse of Atlas, his pale face turned up to the heavens, whose weight he had patiently borne for many a long year, — a burden which seemed all the more grievous after the short taste of freedom he had enjoyed while Hercules stood in his place, (pp. 228-9), —



PERSEUS.—Cellini.
(Loggia de' Lanzi, Florence.)

(245)

“Supporting on his shoulders the vast pillar
Of Heaven and Earth, a weight of cumbrous grasp.”

ÆSCHYLUS (Potter's tr.)

When Atlas saw Perseus flying toward him, hope revived, for he remembered that Fate had decreed that it was this hero who was to slay the Gorgon; and he thought, that, if he could but once gaze upon her stony face, he would be free from pain and weariness forever. As soon as the hero was within hearing, Atlas therefore addressed him as follows:—

Atlas
petrified.

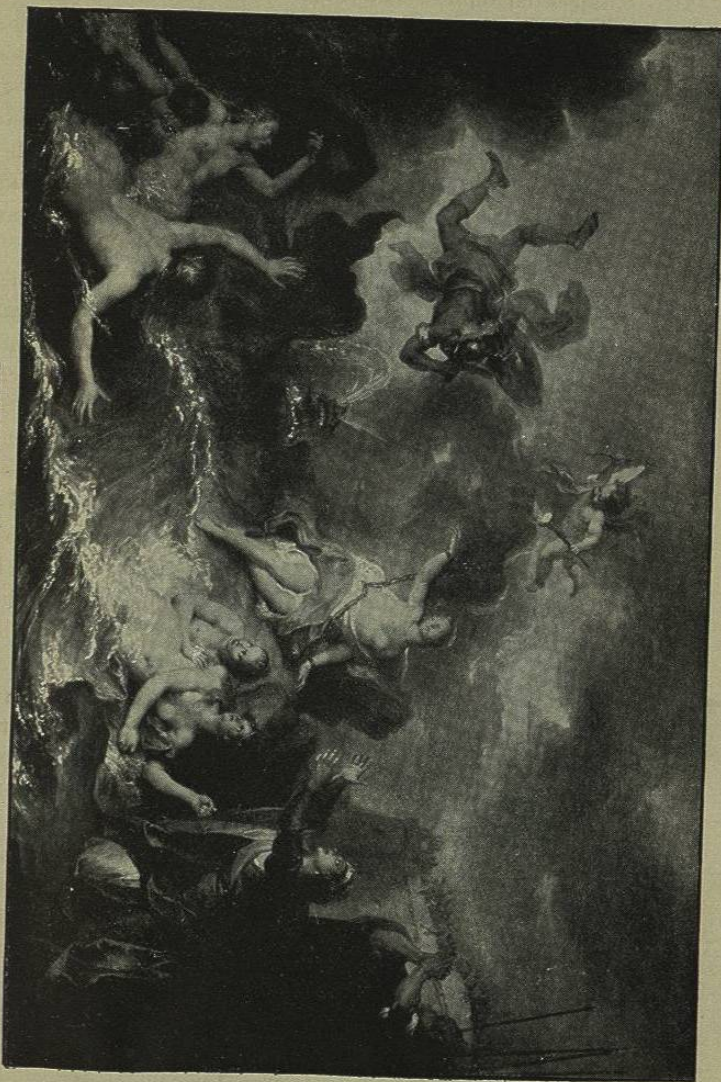
“Hasten now, Perseus, and let me look upon the Gorgon's face, for the agony of my labor is well-nigh greater than I can bear.’ So Perseus hearkened unto the word of Atlas, and he unveiled before him the dead face of Medusa. Eagerly he gazed for a moment on the changeless countenance, as though beneath the blackness of great horror he yet saw the wreck of her ancient beauty and pitied her for her hopeless woe. But in an instant the straining eyes were stiff and cold; and it seemed to Perseus, as he rose again into the pale yellow air, that the gray hairs which streamed from the giant's head were like the snow which rests on the peak of a great mountain, and that in place of the trembling limbs he saw only the rents and clefts on a rough hill-side.”

Thus the mere sight of Medusa changed Atlas into the rugged mountains which have since borne his name; and, as their summits are lost in the clouds, the ancients supposed they sustained the full weight of the heavenly vault.

Thence Perseus flew on until he reached the seashore, where a strange sight greeted him. Away down on the “rock-bound

Story of
Andromeda.

coast,” so near the foaming billows that their spray continually dashed over her fair limbs, a lovely maiden was chained fast to an overhanging rock. This maiden was the Princess Andromeda. To atone for the vanity of her mother, Cassiopeia, who claimed she was fairer than any of the sea nymphs, she had been exposed there as prey for a terrible sea monster sent to devastate the homes along the coast.



PERSEUS AND ANDROMEDA.—Coytel.

An oracle, when consulted, declared that the monster would not depart until Andromeda was sacrificed to his fury; and Perseus could even now perceive the receding procession which had solemnly accompanied her to the appointed place of sacrifice, and chained her fast.

At the same time, too, he saw the waters below the maiden lashed to foam by the monster's tail, and the scales of his hideous body slowly rising up out of the water. Fascinated by this horrible sight, the maiden's eyes were fixed on the monster. She did not see the rapid approach of her deliverer, who, dauntless, drew his sword from its scabbard, and, swooping down, attacked the monster, cheered by the shouts of the people, who had seen him, and now rushed back to witness the slaying of their foe.

"On the hills a shout
Of joy, and on the rocks the ring of mail;
And while the hungry serpent's gloating eyes
Were fixed on me, a knight in casque of gold
And blazing shield, who with his flashing blade
Fell on the monster. Long the conflict raged,
Till all the rocks were red with blood and slime,
And yet my champion from those horrible jaws
And dreadful coils was scathless."

LEWIS MORRIS.

Of course, this fierce struggle could have but one conclusion; and when Perseus had slain the monster, freed Andromeda from her chains, and restored her to the arms of her overjoyed parents, they immediately offered any reward he might be pleased to claim. When he, therefore, expressed a desire to marry the maiden he had so bravely rescued, they gladly gave him her hand, although in early youth the princess had been promised to her uncle Phineus.

Preparations for the marriage were immediately begun; and the former suitor, who had been too cowardly to venture a single blow to deliver her from the monster, prepared to fight the rival who was about to carry off his promised bride. Unbidden he

came to the marriage feast with a number of armed followers, and was about to carry off Andromeda, when Perseus suddenly bade his adherents stand behind him, unveiled the Medusa head, and, turning its baleful face toward Phineus and his followers, changed them all into stone.

The interrupted marriage feast was now resumed; and when it was over, Perseus took his bride to Seriphus. There, hearing that Polydectes had dared to ill treat his mother because she still refused to accede to his wishes and become his wife, he changed the importunate king into a rock by showing him his Medusa trophy, gave the kingdom to the king's brother, and, accompanied by wife and mother, returned to his native land. The borrowed helmet, sandals, and shield were all duly restored to their respective owners, and the Medusa head was given to Minerva in token of gratitude for her help. Greatly pleased with this gift, the goddess set it in the center of her terrible Ægis, where it retained all its petrifying power, and served her in many a fight.

Arrived at Argos, Perseus discovered that a usurper had claimed his grandfather's throne. To hurl the unlawful claimant from his exalted seat, and compel him to make full restitution and atonement, was but a trifle for the hero who had conquered Medusa; and Acrisius, now old and weak, was taken from the prison where he languished, and restored to his wonted honors, by the very youth he had been taught to fear.

But the gods' decree was always sure to be fulfilled sooner or later; and one day, when Perseus was playing quoits, he accidentally killed his grandfather. To remain at Argos, haunted by the memory of this involuntary crime, was too painful for him: so he exchanged his kingdom for another, that of Mycenæ, which he ruled wisely and well. When Perseus died, after a long and glorious reign, the gods, who had always loved him, placed him among the stars, where he can still be seen, with his wife Andromeda, and mother-in-law Cassiopeia.