

THE GOLDEN FLEECE

Jason of Iolcus (**Eye-Ole-Cuss**) was as strong and well bred as he was handsome, for he had been raised by the wise centaur Chiron (**Chur-Ron**). Jason's father, Aristo, had brought the boy to the centaur and had asked him to bring him up, for he feared that his own brother, Pelias (**Pell-Eye-Us**), who had taken from him the throne of Iolcus, might harm his heir. In Chiron's lonely mountain cave young Jason was raised to be a hero, skilled in all manly sports. When he was grown he left his foster father to go to Iolcus and reclaim his father's throne.

Hera, who was paying a visit to earth, saw the handsome youth as he walked down from the mountain. His golden hair hung to his shoulders and his strong body was wrapped in a leopard skin. Hera was taken by his fine looks. She quickly changed herself into an old woman and stood helplessly at the edge of a swollen stream as if she did not dare to wade across. Jason offered politely to carry her and lifted her on his strong shoulders. He started to wade and at first she was very light. But with each step she grew heavier, and when he reached midstream, she was so heavy that his feet sank deep into the mud. He lost one of his sandals, but struggled bravely on, and when he reached the other side, the old woman revealed herself as the goddess Hera.

"Lo," she said. "You are a mortal after my liking; I shall stand by you and help you win back your throne from your uncle Pelias." This was a promise the goddess gladly gave, for she had a grudge against Pelias, who had once forgotten to include her when he sacrificed to the gods.

Jason thanked her and went on his way in high spirits. When he arrived in Iolcus, people crowded around him, wondering who the handsome stranger might be, but when King Pelias saw him, his cheeks paled. An oracle had predicted that a youth with only one sandal would lead to his eventual overthrow as king. Pelias pretended to be great friends with Jason when the boy said who he was and why he had come, but underneath he held dark thoughts and planned to do away with his guest. Pelias threw a great feast for Jason and flattered him and promised him the throne as soon as he had performed a heroic deed to prove himself worthy of being a king.

"In the kingdom of Colchis(**Kol-Kiss**), at the shores of the Black Sea," said Pelias, "on a branch in a dark grove, there hangs a golden fleece shining as brightly as the sun. Bring the fleece to me and the throne shall be yours."

The Golden Fleece was once the skin of a flying ram, sent by Zeus to save the life of young Prince Phrixus (**Fricks-Us**) of Thessaly (**Thess-Uh-Lee**). The crops had failed and Phrixus' evil stepmother had convinced the boy's father that he must sacrifice his son to save his country from a famine. Sadly the king built an altar and put his son on it, but Zeus hated human sacrifice, and as the king lifted his knife, a golden ram swooped down from the skies and flew off with Phrixus on his back. They flew far to the east and landed in the kingdom of Colchis; The King of Colchis understood that Phrixus had been sent by the gods. He gave him his daughter in marriage and sacrificed the ram. Its glittering fleece was hung

in a sacred grove and it was the greatest treasure of the country for it had the power to heal any wound. By placing the fleece around an injured or dying person, that person would be brought back to full life.

King Pelias was certain that Jason would not return alive, for he knew that the warlike king of Colchis would not part with the fleece and that a many-headed dragon was guarding it. But Pelias did not know that Jason had Hera's help.

"Give me timber and men to build for me a sturdy ship and I shall sail off at once," said Jason. The king gave him what he asked for and a great ship, the Argo, was built. It was the most seaworthy ship ever seen. Athena herself, prodded by Hera, put a piece of magical oak wood in the front part of the boat. The oak had the power to speak in time of danger and advise Jason what to do.

With a ship like that it was not hard for Jason to gather a crew of heroes. Even Heracles came with his young friend Hylas (**High-Lass**). Calais (**Kall-Lass**) and Zetes (**Zete-Ees**), winged sons of the North Wind, joined, and Orpheus (**Orf-E-Us**) came along to inspire the crew with his music. Soon each of the fifty oars of the ship was manned by a hero who swore to stand by Jason through all dangers.

Before they set sail, the heroes who called themselves the Argonauts (**Argo-Nots**), sacrificed richly to the gods and made sure to forget no one. Poseidon was in a good mood. He called for the West Wind and under full sail the Argo sped toward the east. When the wind grew tired and died down, the Argonauts put out their oars and rowed with all their might. Orpheus beat out the time with his lyre and the ship cut through the waves like an arrow. One after the other the heroes grew tired and pulled in their oars. Only Heracles and Jason were left rowing, each trying to outlast the other. Jason finally fainted, but just as he slumped forward, Heracles' huge oar broke in two, so the contest was considered to be a tie.

The Argonauts landed at a wooded coast so Heracles could cut himself a new oar. While Heracles searched for a suitable tree, his young friend Hylas went to a pool to fill his bucket with fresh water. When the water nymph (**Nimph**) of the pool saw the handsome boy bending down, she fell in love with him. She pulled him down with her to the bottom of the pool and Hylas vanished forever without leaving a trace.

Heracles went out of his mind with grief when he could not find his friend. He ran through the woods, calling for Hylas, beating down whatever was in his way. The Argonauts, brave as they were, all feared Heracles when he was full of anger. They hastily boarded the ship and sailed away without him, leaving him alone on the island.

On toward the east the Argonauts sailed until they came to a country ruled by a king who was known for his knowledge and wisdom. They went ashore to ask the way to Colchis, but the king was so weak that he could barely answer their questions. He was so thin that only his skin held his bones together. Whenever food was set before him, three disgusting Harpies, fat, nasty birds with women's heads, swooped down and

devoured it. What they did not eat they left so foul and filthy that it was not fit to be eaten. No one in his kingdom could keep the Harpies away.

The Argonauts felt sorry for the starving king. They told him to have his table set, and when the Harpies swooped down again, Zetes and Calais, the sons of the North Wind, took to their wings. They could fly faster than the Harpies, and when they caught them, they whipped the evil pests so hard that they barely escaped with their lives. The Harpies flew to the south, never to be seen again. At last the starving king could eat in peace. He could not thank the Argonauts enough and told them how to set their course and what dangers they would encounter.

He told them that no ship had yet been able to reach the shores of Colchis, for the passage to the Black Sea was blocked by two moving rocks. The rocks rolled apart and clashed together, crushing whatever came between them. But if a ship could move as fast as a bird in flight, it might get through. He gave Jason a dove and told him to send the bird ahead of the ship. If the dove came through alive, they had a chance, he said. If not, they had better give up and turn back.

The Argonauts took leave of the king and sailed toward the clashing rocks. From afar they could hear the noise of them and the heroes trembled, but as the rocks rolled apart, Jason released the dove and the bird flew between them like a dart. Only the very tips of its tail feathers were clipped off when the rocks clashed together.

"All men to the oars!" Jason shouted. Orpheus grasped his lyre and played and his music inspired the heroes to row as never before. The Argo shot ahead like an arrow when the rocks rolled apart, and only the very end of its stern was crushed as they clashed together. Again the rocks rolled apart and stood firmly anchored. The spell was broken, and from then on ships could safely sail in and out of the Black Sea.

The Black Sea was a dangerous sea to sail upon, and Hera had her hands full, guiding the Argonauts through perils. But with her help Jason brought his ship safely through raging storms, past pirate shores and cannibal islands, and the Argonauts finally arrived in Colchis.

King Aetes (**Ahh-Eee-Tease**), of Colchis, was a very inhospitable king. In fact he was so unfriendly that he killed all foreigners who came to his country. When he saw the Argo landing he was furious, and when Jason led his men to his palace and said that they were all great heroes and had come to offer the king their services in return for the Golden Fleece, he fumed with rage. "Very well," he said to Jason. "Tomorrow, between sunrise and sunset, you must harness my fire breathing bulls, plow up a field, and plant it with dragon's teeth. You must then battle the 'bone warriors' that shall rise from those teeth. If you succeed, the Golden Fleece is yours. But if you fail, I shall cut out the tongues and lop off the hands of you and all your great heroes." King Aetes knew well that no man could withstand the searing heat that blew from the bulls' nostrils. What he did not know was that Hera was helping Jason.

Hera knew that the king's daughter, Medea (**Mid-Dee-Yuh**), who stood at her father's side with modestly downcast eyes, was the only one who could save Jason. She was a lovely young sorceress, a priestess of the witch-goddess Hecate (**Heh-Cot-Ee**), and must be made to fall in love with Jason. So Hera asked Aphrodite to send her little son Eros to shoot one of his arrows of love into Medea's heart. Aphrodite promised Eros a beautiful shiny ball, and he shot an arrow into Medea's heart just as she lifted up her eyes and saw Jason. Her golden

eyes gleamed; never had she seen anyone so handsome. She just had to use her magic and save him from her cruel father; there was nothing she would not do to save Jason's life. She went to Hecate's temple and begged the witch-goddess to help her and, guided by the witch-goddess, she created a magic lotion so powerful that for one day neither iron nor fire could harm the one who was covered with it.

In the dark of the night, Medea sent for Jason. When he came to the temple, she blushing told him that she loved him so much she would betray her own father to save him. She gave him the magic lotion and told him that he could go up to the fire-breathing bulls without fear. Jason took the young sorceress in his arms and swore by all the gods of Olympus to make her his queen and love her to his dying day. Hera heard him and nodded, very pleased.

When the sun rose in the morning, Jason went straight up to the fire-breathing bulls. They bellowed and belched flames at him, but with Medea's ointment he was invulnerable and so strong that he harnessed the bulls and drove them back and forth till the whole field was plowed. Then he seeded the dragon's teeth, and right away a host of skeletal warriors sprang up from the plowed fields.

With a spark of genius, he threw a rock among them and watched from afar as they killed one another. The skeletons in a fit of fury attacked each other in an attempt to discover who had thrown the offending stone. Before the sun had set, they all lay dead.

Jason had fulfilled his task, but King Aetes had no intention of keeping his part of the bargain. He called his men together and ordered them to seize the Argo and kill the foreigners at daybreak. In secrecy, Medea went to Jason and told him that he must take the Golden Fleece, now rightfully his, and flee from Colchis before dawn.

Under cover of night she led him to the dark grove where the Golden Fleece, shining like the sun, hung on a branch of a tree. Around the trunk of the tree lay coiled the never-sleeping dragon. But Medea chanted and murmured magical incantations and bewitched the dragon. She stared at it with her golden eyes and it fell into a deep magic sleep. Quickly Jason took the Golden Fleece and ran with Medea to the waiting Argo, and quietly they slipped out to sea.

At daybreak, when the king's men were to attack the ship, they found it was gone. So were the Golden Fleece and the king's daughter, Medea. Red-faced with fury, Aetes set off in pursuit with his great fleet of Colchian warships. He wanted the Golden Fleece back and he wanted to punish his daughter. The fastest of his ships, steered by one of his sons, soon overtook the Argo.

The Argonauts thought themselves lost, but again Medea would save them.

She called to her brother, who stood at the helm of his ship, and told him she was sorry for what she had done. She said she would go home with him if he would meet her alone on a nearby island.

At the same time, she whispered to Jason to lie in wait and kill her brother when he came upon the island to meet her. She knew that her proud father would have to stop the pursuit to give his son a proper funeral. This would allow the Argonauts enough time to make their escape.

And this is how Medea and Jason were able to get back to Iolcus to reclaim his rightful throne.

