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THE GORGON'S HEAD

Greek



There was once a king called Polydectes who ruled over a small but very attractive island called Seriphos. In fact, it must be said, one of the least attractive things on the island was the king himself. Like many rulers in Ancient Greece, he was cruel and thoughtless and took what he wanted without considering anyone else.

And one of the things that he wanted was a woman who happened to live in his palace. Her name was Danaë, and as well as being very beautiful she was also very vulnerable as she was a foreigner who had come here quite by chance while he, of course, was the king. Danaë was in fact the victim of a shipwreck. She has been washed up on the island a few years before with no money and no one to support her apart from a young son, Perseus. The king had given Danaë a room in the palace and had forced Perseus to become a soldier in his army. That way he had them both where he wanted them.

For Polydectes had fallen in love with

Danaë and was determined to make her his wife. Unfortunately, Danaë didn't quite have the same feelings about Polydectes. This was hardly surprising. The king was overweight. He had a foul temper. But worst of all, he had very bad breath. It was said that his breath could stop a Cyclops at ten paces – and don't forget that for a Cyclops ten paces is a very long way indeed.

Left to himself, Polydectes would have forced Danaë to marry him, but of course there was Perseus to consider. The boy was strong, afraid of nothing and very quick-tempered . . . in short, just the sort to let fly with a sword if anyone laid a finger on his mother. Worse still, he was very popular on the island, and there would have been an uproar if something horrible had 'accidentally' happened to him.

The king thought about it for a time and at last he came up with a plan. He announced his marriage, but pretended that he was going to marry the daughter of a friend of his.

He then threw a great banquet and invited everyone in the neighbourhood.

Of course, everybody brought gifts. And of course, the gifts (like so many wedding presents) were completely useless. He got no fewer than fifteen goblets and seven wine jugs, for example, and he already had more goblets and wine jugs than he knew what to do with.

Nonetheless, there was no mistaking the value of the presents, which were all made of gold or silver or onyx or the finest marble. Everyone had done their best to show how loyal they were to the king and how much they valued his friendship. Everyone, that is, with one exception.

Poor Perseus couldn't possibly have afforded anything made of gold or silver, even if it had been very small. The soldier's salary that he received barely paid for a pot of sword polish – and he was expected to keep his weapons bright and shiny whenever he went on parade. It was as much as he could


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do to dress up smartly for the occasion. Even a new robe and a decent pair of sandals took a great chunk out of his savings. Of course, Polydectes knew this. It was all part of his plan.

'What, no wedding present?' he shouted, when Perseus presented himself at the wedding feast.

There were gasps of surprise around the banqueting tables.

'I'm very sorry, Your Majesty . . .' Perseus began.

'Don't you know that it is a tradition to bring your sovereign a present when he decides to get married?'

'I'm afraid I don't have any money.'

'That's no excuse. You could have borrowed money. You could have stolen money . . . from one of our enemies, of course. Coming here empty-handed is an outrage. It's nothing short of treason!'

'I really didn't mean to insult you, sire. And you can have anything you want for

your wedding present. You only have to name it.'

'Anything?' Polydectes asked, raising an eyebrow.

'Anything,' Perseus said.

'Anything?' Polydectes insisted, raising the other eyebrow.

'Anything in the world,' said Perseus.

This was exactly what the king had planned. He knew that putting Perseus on the spot in front of the other guests would fluster him and that he would make a promise he couldn't keep. In other words, he had designed a noose and young Perseus had put his head right into it.

'All right,' he exclaimed, 'Then what I would like for my wedding present is the Gorgon's head. If you want to prove your loyalty to me, bring me the head of the Gorgon.'

There was a stunned silence in the room. The wedding guests, stretched out at the tables (which was the way in Ancient Greek

banquets), gasped. Nobody moved.

'Very well, Your Majesty,' Perseus said. 'If the head of the Gorgon is what you want, the head of the Gorgon is what you shall have.'

And with that, Perseus turned on his heel and stormed out of the room. The king waited until he was sure he had gone, then grabbed hold of his mother. 'I want you to come to my wedding,' he announced.

'It's my pleasure, Your Majesty,' Danaë muttered.

'Of course it's your pleasure, darling. You're the one I'm marrying!'

The Three Gorgons

Of all the beasts, giants, dragons and demi-gods in Ancient Greece, the Gorgons were perhaps the most terrifying. They petrified people – quite literally.

There were three Gorgons. Stheno and Euryate and Medusa. The first two were

immortal, meaning they would live forever. The third and most fearsome, Medusa, was not. She was the only one that Perseus had any chance of being able to kill.

Strangely, the Gorgons had once been three very attractive young girls.

Medusa, in particular, had been quite lovely, with fair hair, blue eyes and a gorgeous smile. Unfortunately, she had chosen to fall in love with Poseidon, the god of the sea, and as if this wasn't bad enough (mortals were always unwise to get too close to the gods) she had slept with him in the temple of Athene, the Goddess of Wisdom. This had been hugely unwise. To punish her for behaving improperly in her temple, Athene had turned her – and her sisters with her – into the Gorgons. Gone were the white dresses, the daisies and the ponytails. A single wave of the hand and they were monsters.

Hideous monsters. Instead of teeth they had sharp tusks like wild boars. Their hands


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were made of bronze and golden wings sprouted from their shoulders. But what was most remarkable about the horrors that they had become was their hair. It was made of living snakes, slimy green and silver, with hissing tongues and gleaming eyes. There were dozens of them, sprouting out of the Gorgons' skulls, writhing over their foreheads, curling round their necks and twisting over their shoulders.

If anyone ever had the misfortune to set eyes on a Gorgon . . . they did nothing. For this was the cruellest part of the trick that King Polydectes had played on Perseus. Everyone who saw the face of the Gorgon became so frightened that they instantly turned to stone, and he knew that Perseus would never get anywhere near them. Just one glance in their direction and he would be doomed.