

Perseus and Andromeda

by Andrew Lang

Perseus flew where the wings bore him, over great mountains, and over a wilderness of sand. Below his feet the wind woke the sand storms, and beneath him he saw nothing but a soft floor of yellow grey, and when that cleared he saw islands of green trees round some well in the waste, and long trains of camels, and brown men riding swift horses, at which he wondered; for the Greeks in his time drove in chariots, and did not ride. The red sun behind him fell, and all the land was purple, but, in a moment, as it seemed, the stars rushed out, and he sped along in the starlight till the sky was grey again, and rosy, and full of fiery colours, green and gold and ruby and amethyst. Then the sun rose, and Perseus looked down on a green land, through which was flowing north a great river, and he guessed that it was the river Ægyptus, which we now call the Nile. Beneath him was a town, with many white houses in groves of palm trees, and with great temples of the gods, built of red stone. The shoes of swiftness stopped above the wide market-place, and there Perseus hung poised, till he saw a multitude of men pour out of the door of a temple.

At their head walked the king, who was like a Greek, and he led a maiden as white as snow wreathed with flowers and circlets of wool, like the oxen in Greece, when men sacrifice them to the gods. Behind the king and the maid came a throng of brown men, first priests and magicians and players on harps, and women shaking metal rattles that made a wild mournful noise, while the multitude lamented.

Slowly, while Perseus watched, they passed down to the shore of the great river, so wide a river as Perseus had never seen. They went to a steep red rock, like a wall, above the river; at its foot was a flat shelf of rock—the water just washed over it. Here they stopped, and the king kissed and embraced the white maiden. They bound her by chains of bronze to rings of bronze in the rock; they sang a strange hymn; and then marched back to the town, throwing their mantles over their heads. There the maiden stood, or rather hung forward supported by the chains. Perseus floated down, and, the nearer he came, the more beautiful seemed the white maid, with her soft dark hair falling to her white feet. Softly he floated down, till his feet were on the ledge of rock. She did not hear him coming, and when he gently touched her she gave a cry, and turned on him her large dark eyes, wild and dry, without a tear. 'Is it a god?' she said, clasping her hands.

'No god, but a mortal man am I, Perseus the slayer of the Gorgon. What do you here? What cruel men have bound you?'

'I am Andromeda, the daughter of Cepheus, king of a strange people. The lot fell on me, of all the maidens in the city, to be offered to the monster fish that walks on feet, who is their god. Once a year they give to him a maiden.'

Perseus thereon drew the sword *Herpê*, and cut the chains of bronze that bound the girl as if they had been ropes of flax, and she fell at his feet, covering her eyes with her hands. Then Perseus saw the long reeds on the further shore of the river waving and stirring and crashing, and from them came a monstrous fish walking on feet, and slid into the water. His long sharp black head showed above the stream as he swam, and the water behind him showed like the water in the wake of a ship.

'Be still and hide your eyes!' whispered Perseus to the maiden.

He took the goat-skin from his wallet, and held up the Gorgon's head, with the back of it turned towards him, and he waited till the long black head was lifted from the river's edge, and the forefeet of that fish were on the wet ledge of rock. Then he held the head before the eyes of the monster, and from the head downward it slowly stiffened. The head and forefeet and shoulders were of stone before the tail had ceased to lash the water. Then the tail stiffened into a long jagged sharp stone, and Perseus, wrapping up the head in the goat-skin, placed it in his wallet. He turned his back to Andromeda, while he did this lest by mischance her eyes should open and see the head of the Gorgon. But her eyes were closed, and Perseus found that she had fainted, from fear of the monster, and from the great heat of the sun. Perseus put the palms of his hands together like a cup, and stooping to the stream he brought water, and threw it over the face and neck of Andromeda, wondering at her beauty. Her eyes opened at last, and she tried to rise to her feet, but she dropped on her knees, and clung with her fingers to the rock. Seeing her so faint and weak Perseus raised her in his arms, with her beautiful head pillowed on his shoulder, where she fell asleep like a tired child. Then he rose in the air and floated over the sheer wall of red stone above the river, and flew slowly towards the town.

There were no sentinels at the gate; the long street was empty, for all the people were in their houses, praying and weeping. But a little girl stole out of a house near the gate. She was too young to understand why her father and mother and elder brothers were so sad, and would not take any notice of her. She thought she would go out and play in the street, and when she looked up from her play, she saw Perseus bearing the king's daughter in his arms. The child stared, and then ran into her house, crying aloud, for she could hardly speak, and pulled so hard at her mother's gown that her mother rose and followed her to the house door. The mother gave a joyful cry, her husband and her children ran forth, and they, too, shouted aloud for pleasure. Their cries reached the ears of people in other houses, and presently all the folk, as glad as they had been sorrowful, were following Perseus to the palace of the king. Perseus walked through the empty court, and stood at the door of the hall, where the servants came to him, both men and women, and with tears of joy the women bore Andromeda to the chamber of her mother, Queen Cassiopeia.

Who can tell how happy were the king and queen, and how gladly they welcomed Perseus! They made a feast for him, and they sent oxen and sheep to all the people, and wine, that all might rejoice and make merry. Andromeda, too, came, pale but smiling, into the hall, and sat down beside her mother's high seat, listening while Perseus told the whole story of his adventures. Now Perseus could scarcely keep his eyes from Andromeda's face while he spoke, and she stole glances at him. When their eyes met, the colour came into her face again, which glowed like ivory that a Carian woman has lightly tinged with rose colour, making an ornament for some rich king. Perseus remembered the message of Hermes, which Æglê had given him, that if he flew to the east and south he would find his happiness. He knew that he had found it, if this maiden would be his wife, and he ended his tale by repeating the message of Hermes.

'The gods speak only truth,' he said, 'and to have made you all happy is the greatest happiness to Perseus of Argos.' Yet he hoped in his heart to see a yet happier day, when the rites of marriage should be done between Andromeda and him, and the young men and maidens should sing the wedding song before their door.

Andromeda was of one mind with him, and, as Perseus must needs go home, her parents believed that she could not live without him who had saved her from such a cruel death. So with heavy hearts they made the marriage feast, and with many tears Andromeda and her father and mother said farewell. Perseus and his bride sailed down the great river Ægyptus in the king's own boat; and at every

town they were received with feasts, and songs, and dances. They saw all the wonderful things of Egypt, palaces and pyramids and temples and tombs of kings, and at last they found a ship of the Cretans in the mouth of the Nile. This they hired, for they carried with them great riches, gold, and myrrh, and ivory, gifts of the princes of Egypt.

Source:

Lang, Andrew. "Perseus and Andromeda." *Tales of Troy and Greece*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1907. 279 – 283. Electronic.