

The Argo

by Padraic Colum

The heroes went the next day through the streets of Iolcus down to where the ship lay. The ways they went through were crowded; the heroes were splendid in their appearance, and Jason amongst them shone like a star.

The people praised him, and one told the other that it would not be long until they would win back to Iolcus, for this band of heroes was strong enough, they said, to take King Æetes's city and force him to give up to them the famous Fleece of Gold. Many of the bright-eyed youths of Iolcus went with the heroes who had come from the different parts of Greece.

As they marched past a temple a priestess came forth to speak to Jason; Iphias was her name. She had a prophecy to utter about the voyage. But Iphias was very old, and she stammered in her speech to Jason. What she said was not heard by him. The heroes went on, and ancient Iphias was left standing there as the old are left by the young.

The heroes went aboard the Argo. They took their seats as at an assembly. Then Jason faced them and spoke to them all.

"Heroes of the quest," said Jason, "we have come aboard the great ship that Argus has built, and all that a ship needs is in its place or is ready to our hands. All that we wait for now is the coming of the morning's breeze that will set us on our way for far Colchis.

"One thing we have first to do—that is, to choose a leader who will direct us all, one who will settle disputes amongst ourselves and who will make treaties between us and the strangers that we come amongst. We must choose such a leader now."

Jason spoke, and some looked to him and some looked to Heracles. But Heracles stood up, and, stretching out his hand, said:

"Argonauts! Let no one amongst you offer the leadership to me. I will not take it. The hero who brought us together and made all things ready for our going—it is he and no one else who should be our leader in this voyage."

So Heracles said, and the Argonauts all stood up and raised a cry for Jason. Then Jason stepped forward, and he took the hand of each Argonaut in his hand, and he swore that he would lead them with all the mind and all the courage that he possessed. And he prayed the gods that it would be given to him to lead them back safely with the Golden Fleece glittering on the mast of the Argo.

They drew lots for the benches they would sit at; they took the places that for the length of the voyage they would have on the ship. They made sacrifice to the gods and they waited for the breeze of the morning that would help them away from Iolcus.

And while they waited Æson, the father of Jason, sat at his own hearth, bowed and silent in his grief. Alcimide, his wife, sat near him, but she was not silent; she lamented to the women of Iolcus who were gathered around her. "I did not go down to the ship," she said, "for with my grief I would not be a

bird of ill omen for the voyage. By this hearth my son took farewell of me—the only son I ever bore. From the doorway I watched him go down the street of the city, and I heard the people shout as he went amongst them, they glorying in my son's splendid appearance. Ah, that I might live to see his return and to hear the shout that will go up when the people look on Jason again! But I know that my life will not be spared so long; I will not look on my son when he comes back from the dangers he will run in the quest of the Golden Fleece."

Then the women of Iolcus asked her to tell them of the Golden Fleece, and Alcimide told them of it and of the sorrows that were upon the race of Aeolus.

Cretheus, the father of Æson, and Pelias, was of the race of Aeolus, and of the race of Aeolus, too, was Athamas, the king who ruled in Thebes at the same time that Cretheus ruled in Iolcus. And the first children of Athamas were Phrixus and Helle.

"Ah, Phrixus and ah, Helle," Alcimide lamented, "what griefs you have brought on the race of Aeolus! And what griefs you yourselves suffered! The evil that Athamas, your father, did you lives to be a curse to the line of Aeolus!

"Athamas was wedded first to Nephele, the mother of Phrixus and Helle, the youth and maiden. But Athamas married again while the mother of these children was still living, and Ino, the new queen, drove Nephele and her children out of the king's palace.

"And now was Nephele most unhappy. She had to live as a servant, and her children were servants to the servants of the palace. They were clad in rags and had little to eat, and they were beaten often by the servants who wished to win the favor of the new queen.

"But although they wore rags and had menial tasks to do, Phrixus and Helle looked the children of a queen. The boy was tall, and in his eyes there often came the flash of power, and the girl looked as if she would grow into a lovely maiden. And when Athamas, their father, would meet them by chance he would sigh, and Queen Ino would know by that sigh that he had still some love for them in his heart. Afterward she would have to use all the power she possessed to win the king back from thinking upon his children.

"And now Queen Ino had children of her own. She knew that the people revered the children of Nephele and cared nothing for her children. And because she knew this she feared that when Athamas died Phrixus and Helle, the children of Nephele, would be brought to rule in Thebes. Then she and her children would be made to change places with them.

"This made Queen Ino think on ways by which she could make Phrixus and Helle lose their lives. She thought long upon this, and at last a desperate plan came into her mind.

"When it was winter she went amongst the women of the countryside, and she gave them jewels and clothes for presents. Then she asked them to do secretly an unheard-of thing. She asked the women to roast over their fires the grains that had been left for seed. This the women did. Then spring came on, and the men sowed in the fields the grain that had been roasted over the fires. No shoots grew up as the spring went by. In summer there was no waving greenness in the fields. Autumn came, and there was no grain for the reaping. Then the men, not knowing what had happened, went to King Athamas and told him that there would be famine in the land.

"The king sent to the temple of Artemis to ask how the people might be saved from the famine. And the guardians of the temple, having taken gold from Queen Ino, told them that there would be worse and worse famine and that all the people of Thebes would die of hunger unless the king was willing to make a great sacrifice.

"When the king asked what sacrifice he should make he was told by the guardians of the temple that he must sacrifice to the goddess his two children, Phrixus and Helle. Those who were around the king, to save themselves from famine after famine, clamored to have the children sacrificed. Athamas, to save his people, consented to the sacrifice.

"They went toward the king's palace. They found Helle by the bank of the river washing clothes. They took her and bound her. They found Phrixus, half naked, digging in a field, and they took him, too, and bound him. That night they left brother and sister in the same prison. Helle wept over Phrixus, and Phrixus wept to think that he was not able to do anything to save his sister.

"The servants of the palace went to Nephele, and they mocked at her, telling her that her children would be sacrificed on the morrow. Nephele nearly went wild in her grief. And then, suddenly, there came into her mind the thought of a creature that might be a helper to her and to her children.

"This creature was a ram that had wings and a wonderful fleece of gold. The god of the sea, Poseidon, had sent this wonderful ram to Athamas and Nephele as a marriage gift. And the ram had since been kept in a special fold.

"To that fold Nephele went. She spent the night beside the ram praying for its help. The morning came and the children were taken from their prison and dressed in white, and wreaths were put upon their heads to mark them as things for sacrifice. They were led in a procession to the temple of Artemis. Behind that procession King Athamas walked, his head bowed in shame.

"But Queen Ino's head was not bowed; rather she carried it high, for her thought was all upon her triumph. Soon Phrixus and Helle would be dead, and then, whatever happened, her own children would reign after Athamas in Thebes.

"Phrixus and Helle, thinking they were taking their last look at the sun, went on. And even then Nephele, holding the horns of the golden ram, was making her last prayer. The sun rose and as it did the ram spread out its great wings and flew through the air. It flew to the temple of Artemis. Down beside the altar came the golden ram, and it stood with its horns threatening those who came. All stopped in surprise. Still the ram stood with threatening head and great golden wings spread out. Then Phrixus ran from those who were holding him and laid his hands upon the ram. He called to Helle and she, too, came to the golden creature. Phrixus mounted on the ram and he pulled Helle up beside him. Then the golden ram flew upward. Up, up, it went, and with the children upon its back it became like a star in the day-lit sky.

"Then Queen Ino, seeing the children saved by the golden ram, shrieked and fled away from that place. Athamas ran after her. As she ran and as he followed hatred for her grew up within him. Ino ran on and on until she came to the cliffs that rose over the sea. Fearing Athamas who came behind her she plunged down. But as she fell she was changed by Poseidon, the god of the sea. She became a seagull. Athamas, who followed her, was changed also; he became the sea eagle that, with beak and talons ever ready to strike, flies above the sea.

"And the golden ram with wings outspread flew on and on. Over the sea it flew while the wind whistled around the children. On and on they went, and the children saw only the blue sea beneath them. Then poor Helle, looking downward, grew dizzy. She fell off the golden ram before her brother could take hold of her. Down she fell, and still the ram flew on and on. She was drowned in that sea. The people afterward named it in memory of her, calling it 'Hellespont'—'Helle's Sea.'

"On and on the ram flew. Over a wild and barren country it flew and toward a river. Upon that river a white city was built. Down the ram flew, and alighting on the ground, stood before the gate of that city. It was the city of Aea, in the land of Colchis.

"The king was in the street of the city, and he joined with the crowd that gathered around the strange golden creature that had a youth upon its back. The ram folded its wings and then the youth stood beside it. He spoke to the people, and then the king—Æetes was his name—spoke to him, asking him from what place he had come, and what was the strange creature upon whose back he had flown.

"To the king and to the people Phrixus told his story, weeping to tell of Helle and her fall. Then King Æetes brought him into the city, and he gave him a place in the palace, and for the golden ram he had a special fold made.

"Soon after the ram died, and then King Æetes took its golden fleece and hung it upon an oak tree that was in a place dedicated to Ares, the god of war. Phrixus wed one of the daughters of the king, and men say that afterward he went back to Thebes, his own land.

"And as for the Golden Fleece it became the greatest of King Æetes's treasures. Well indeed does he guard it, and not with armed men only, but with magic powers. Very strong and very cunning is King Æetes, and a terrible task awaits those who would take away from him that Fleece of Gold."

So Alcimide spoke, sorrowfully telling to the women the story of the Golden Fleece that her son Jason was going in quest of. So she spoke, and the night waned, and the morning of the sailing of the Argo came on.

And when the Argonauts beheld the dawn upon the high peaks of Pelion they arose and poured out wine in offering to Zeus, the highest of the gods. Then Argo herself gave forth a strange cry, for the beam from Dodona that had been formed into her prow had endued her with life. She uttered a strange cry, and as she did the heroes took their places at the benches, one after the other, as had been arranged by lot, and Tiphys, the helmsman, went to the steering place. To the sound of Orpheus's lyre they smote with oars the rushing sea water, and the surge broke over the oar blades. The sails were let out and the breeze came into them, piping shrilly, and the fishes came darting through the green sea, great and small, and followed them, gamboling along the watery paths. And Chiron, the king-centaur, came down from the Mountain Pelion, and standing with his feet in the foam cried out, "Good speed, O Argonauts, good speed, and a sorrowless return."

Source:

Colum, Padraic. "The Argo." *The Golden Fleece and the Heroes Who Lived Before Achilles*. 1921. Electronic.