

The Winning of the Golden Fleece

by Carolyn Sherwin Bailey

Jason was having a boat built in which he planned to set sail on a kind of pirate expedition. He was going as far as the eastern shore of the Black Sea to try and capture and bring home the Golden Fleece.

This golden fleece was a prize indeed, for it was a good deal like the magic carpet in a fairy tale. In very ancient times Mercury, the god with the winged shoes, had given the queen of Thessaly a ram whose fleece was of pure gold. There came a time when the queen found it necessary to send her son away from the kingdom for safety as quickly and secretly as possible. So she sent him on the back of this ram, who leaped into the air, crossed the strait that divides Europe and Asia, and landed the boy without accident in Colchis in the Black Sea.

Ever since then its fleece of gold had hung in a sacred grove of Colchis guarded by a dragon who never slept. It was said that the fleece could carry one through the air as far as he wished to go, and its gold was the finest and purest in the world. A great many adventurers had equipped expeditions for getting the golden fleece, but so far none of them had been successful. Jason had a different idea about it, however, than any youth of Greece who had set out for the fleece before. He felt that it was his right, in a way, because he was going to be a king if he could bring it home.

Jason's uncle, Pelias, was the king of a part of Thessaly. Because the golden fleece had belonged in Thessaly in the first place, Pelias had an idea that any king in Thessaly who could get it might keep it, and enjoy its magic powers. But Pelias did not want the trouble of going for it. He was willing to give up his throne to the lad, Jason, if he could bring the golden fleece home. And Jason was quite willing to be the head of such a pirate expedition with the promise of this advantage at the end.

Jason did not even build his ship, but paid a vast sum of money to have it done for him. It was a stupendous task in those days to make a boat that would weather a sea voyage. About the only boats that the Greeks had were small ones shaped like canoes and hollowed out from the trunks of trees. Jason had decided to take fifty of his friends with him, and that meant the building of a larger boat than had ever been launched before from Thessaly. A gigantic tree had to be cut down and gouged and shaped by hand. New looms had to be set working to weave wide enough cloth for the sails. For months the sound of axes and chisels echoed along the beach, until at last this great boat, the Argo, was finished and launched, and Jason brought his friends, whom he called the Argonauts, to board her.

Jason chose his crew well. They were all fine, well born youths of Greece, and everyone of them made a name for himself later on. Hercules was of the Argonauts, and there has never been any such strength as his. There was Theseus, who could move rocks and capture robbers single-handed. There was also Orpheus, the son of Apollo, who could tame wild beasts with the beautiful music of his lyre. Nestor, who grew up to be a famous warrior of Greece, went with them. They seated themselves with their leader, Jason, in the ship, a whistling breeze filled her sails, and they shot swiftly before the wind toward Colchis.

It was a long voyage, but they reached this foreign shore with no serious mishap, leaped onto the bank, and went at once to the king of Colchis, demanding from him the golden fleece. The Argonauts thought in the pride of their youth that no one could resist them or refuse them anything, but the king looked serious over the matter.

"You must earn the fleece, Jason," he said. "Nothing so valuable can be had for only the asking. Are you brave enough to yoke my bulls to a plough and plant a field full of dragon's teeth?"

Jason gasped. He knew these bulls of Colchis by reputation, although it had never occurred to him that he might be called upon to harness and drive them. They had brazen teeth and breathed fire from their nostrils that consumed whatever it touched. The sound of their breathing was like the roar of a furnace, and the smoke of their breath was suffocating.

In spite of his fear, though, Jason had another thought. The king had said that the fleece must be earned, that nothing so golden could be had for the asking. That was really true, Jason thought, and he began to feel a great courage. He was growing into the hero that he always had been at heart, being a youth of Greece.

"Send out your bulls," he said to the king of Colchis.

Something happened then that is very apt to happen when anyone makes up his mind to dare a seemingly impossible deed. Help came to Jason. Medea, the daughter of the king of Colchis, gave Jason a charm that protected him from fire. The bulls rushed into the field toward Jason, sending forth their burning breath like dragons, but Jason advanced boldly to meet them. His friends, the Argonauts, watched him in terror, but he went straight up to the bulls and his voice seemed to soothe their rage. He stroked their necks fearlessly, slipped on the yoke and harnessed them to the plough.

Dragons' teeth were a strange kind of seed to plant. As Jason ploughed straight furrows and dropped in the teeth, the people of the kingdom and the Argonauts gathered at the edge of the field to watch, and it came to his mind that perhaps the king was making a joke of him. There would have been some sense in having that pair of fiery bulls use their great strength to plough in corn and wheat, Jason thought, as he plodded up and down the field. But suddenly a cry from the crowd startled Jason and he looked back. A strange sight met his eyes.

The clods of earth that covered the teeth of the dragon began to stir, and the bright points of spears thrust their way up through to the surface. Helmets with nodding plumes appeared next, and after them came the shoulders and arms and limbs of men. In a moment the field was alive with armed warriors advancing upon Jason.

He was only one hero against all of this foe, but the sight put the same courage that had come to him into the heart of each one of the Argonauts and they rushed to help their leader. Jason led valiantly against the warriors, but there would have been no hope for him and the Greeks if his courage had not been rewarded a second time. Medea sent a charmed sword to the hero. He threw it into the ranks of the warriors and they suddenly ceased attacking the Greeks, fell to fighting among themselves, and were destroyed.

There was still another danger for Jason to face, the dragon who guarded the fleece with eyes that never closed. His new courage was equal to it. He entered the grove that sheltered the golden fleece, took the glittering blanket from the oak tree where it hung, escaped the dragon and embarked with the Argonauts for the return trip to Greece.

The people proclaimed Jason king when he and the rest of these young heroes of Greece landed in Thessaly. They chose him for his valor, not for his spoils, and it seemed to add to his new glory that he

had started out an adventurer and returned a victor in a great fight.

The strangest part of the story is that no one knows what became of the golden fleece after Jason and the Argonauts brought it home with them. No one seems to have ever heard of it again. Perhaps even such a treasure as that was grown dull and lost its value in comparison with the golden prize of courage in achievement that the Argonauts found and kept all the rest of their lives.

Source:

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