THE MUSES SANG about handsome Jason and his quest for the Golden Fleece.

Jason of Iolcus was as strong and well bred as he was handsome, for he had been raised by the wise centaur Chiron. Jason’s father had brought the boy to the centaur and had asked him to bring him up, for he feared that his own brother, Pelias, 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 crone and stood helplessly at the brink 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
sandal, but struggled bravely on, and when he reached the other side, the old crone 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 be his undoing. Pelias feigned great friendship when Jason said who he was and why he had come, but underneath he held dark thoughts and planned to do away with his guest. Pelias feasted 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, 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 coat of a flying ram, sent by Zeus to save the life of young Prince Phrixus of Thessaly. The crops had failed and Phrixus' evil stepmother had convinced his father that he must sacrifice his son to save his country from 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.

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 never-sleeping 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 sacred oak in its prow. 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. Calaïs and Zetes, winged sons of the North Wind, joined, and Orpheus 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, 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 equal glory was won by them both.

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 jar with fresh water. When the nymph 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 struck with folly. They hastily boarded the ship and sailed away without him.

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 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
Calaïs, 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 famished 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. No ship had yet been able to reach the shores of Colchis, he said, 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 din 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 island, and the Argonauts finally arrived in Colchis.

Aëtës, King of Colchis, a son of Helios, the sun, was a very inhospitable king. In fact he was so inhospitable 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 sow it with dragon’s teeth as Cad-
mus did at Thebes. 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 Aëtes knew well that no man could withstand the scaring 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, 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, 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 enamel 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 implored the witch-goddess to help her and, guided by the witch-goddess, she concocted a magic salve 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 blushingly told him that she loved him so much she would betray her own father to save him. She gave him the magic salve and told him to 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 salve 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 warriors sprang up from the furrows. As Cadmus had done, he threw a rock among them and watched from afar as they killed one another. Before the sun had set, they all lay dead.

Jason had fulfilled his task, but King Aëtes 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 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, Aeëtes 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 saved them.

She called to her brother, who stood at the helm of his ship, and pretended to be 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. She knew that her father would have to stop the pursuit to give his son a funeral.

Hera and all the gods looked in horror at Medea, stained with her brother’s blood. No mortal could commit a worse crime than to cause the death of his own kin. Zeus in anger threw thunderbolts. Lightning flashed, thunder roared, and the sea foamed. Then the sacred piece of oak in the bow of the Argo spoke. “Woe,” it said, “woe to you all. Not a one among you will reach Greece unless the great sorceress Circe consents to purify Medea and Jason of their sin.”

Tossed about by howling winds and towering waves, the Argonauts sailed in search of Circe’s dwelling. At long last, off the coast of Italy, they found her palace. Medea warned the Argonauts not to leave the ship, for Circe was a dangerous sorceress who amused herself by changing men who came to her island into the animal nearest the nature of each man. Some became lions, some rabbits, but most of them were changed into pigs and asses. Medea took Jason by the hand so no harm would befall him, and went ashore.
Circe was Medea's aunt. Like all the descendants of Helios, the sun, she had a golden glint in her eyes, and the moment she saw Medea, she recognized her as her kin. But she was not happy to see her niece, for through her magic she knew what Medea had done. Still she consented to sacrifice to Zeus and ask him to forgive Medea and Jason for their crime. The scented smoke of her burnt offering of sweetmeats and cakes reached Zeus and put him in a good humor. He listened to Circe's words and again smiled down upon Medea and Jason.

They thanked Circe and rushed back to the ship. The Argonauts rejoiced. Now they could set sail for Greece. But still they had to pass through dangerous and bewitched waters. Soon they came to the island of the Sirens. The Sirens were half birds, half women, not loathsome like the Harpies, but enchanting creatures. They sat on a cliff, half hidden by sea spray, and sang so beautifully that all sailors who heard them dived into the sea and tried to swim to them, only to drown or pine to death at the Sirens' feet. When the alluring voices of the Sirens reached the ears
of the Argonauts, Orpheus grasped his lyre and sang so loudly and sweetly that all other sounds were drowned out, and not one of the Argonauts jumped overboard.

After a while the *Argo* had to sail through a narrow strait that was guarded by two monsters. On one side lurked the monster Scylla. From her waist up she looked like a woman, but instead of legs, six furious, snarling dogs grew out from her hips, and they tore to pieces whatever came close to them. The monster Charybdis lived on the other side of the strait. She was forever hungry and sucked into her gullet all ships that ventured within her reach.

Helplessly, the *Argo* drifted between the two monsters, and the Argonauts again gave themselves up for lost, when up from the bottom of the sea rose the playful Nereids. They had come at Hera’s bidding and they lifted up the *Argo* and threw it from hand to hand over the dangerous waters until it reached the open sea beyond. Poseidon called for the West Wind and the *Argo* sped homeward under full sail.
A loud cheer rang out from the valiant crew when they sighted the shore of Greece. They had been away for many long years and were homesick. But as the Argo neared the port of Iolcus, the ship was hailed by a fisherman who warned Jason that King Pelias had heard of his safe return and had made plans to kill him. Jason was downcast at his uncle’s treachery, but Medea, her eyes flashing, asked to be set ashore alone. Once again she wanted to save his life.

Disguised as an old witch, she entered Iolcus, saying that she had magic herbs to sell that would make old creatures young again. The people crowded around her, wondering from where the witch had come. King Pelias himself came out from his palace and asked her to prove that what she said was true, for he felt he was growing old.

“Bring me the oldest ram in your flock and I will show you the magic of my herbs,” said Medea.

An old ram was brought to her and she put it into a caldron full of water. On top she sprinkled some of her magic herbs, and lo! the water in the caldron boiled and out of the steam and bubbles sprang a frisky young lamb.

Now King Pelias asked Medea to make him young too. She answered that only his daughters could do that, but she would gladly sell them her magic herbs. But the herbs she gave them had no magic at all, and so King Pelias found his death in the boiling caldron at his own daughters’ hands.

Now the throne of Iolcus was Jason’s, but again Medea had committed a terrible crime. She had tricked innocent daughters into killing their own father. The gods turned from her and she changed from a lovely young sorceress into an evil witch. The people of Iolcus refused to accept her for their queen and took another king in Jason’s stead. With the loss of his throne, Jason also lost his love for Medea. He forgot that he had sworn to love her till his dying day and that she had committed her crimes for his sake. He asked her to leave so he could marry the Princess of Corinth and inherit her father’s kingdom.

Medea, scorned and furious, turned more and more to evil sorcery. To revenge herself on Jason, she sent a magic robe to his new bride. It was a beautiful gown, but the moment the bride put it on she went up in flames and so did the whole palace. Then Medea disappeared into a dark cloud, riding in a carriage drawn by two dragons.
Jason found no more happiness, for when he broke his sacred oath to Medea, he lost Hera's good will. His good looks left him and so did his luck and his friends. Lonesome and forgotten, he sat one day in the shade of his once glorious ship, the *Argo*, now rotting on the beach of Corinth. Suddenly the sacred piece of oak in the prow broke off, fell on him, and killed him.

The Golden Fleece was hung in Apollo's temple in Delphi, a wonder for all Greeks to behold and a reminder of the great deeds of Jason and the Argonauts.