Sea Pursuit (a story of Jason and the Argonauts)

*Neil Foster Macphail*

T

hree days in, and the pursuit continued. The *Argo* (whose name means “fast” in Greek) had been running full out for three days. As fast as the *Argo* was, King Aetes, furious over the loss of the magical Golden Fleece, had despatched his son Absyrtus, and two entire fleets of incredibly fast ships.

The *Argo* was a fast ship filled with heroes, but now it was pursued by two whole Colchian fleets, each of which had so many ships it looked like clouds of birds were following the *Argo*.

King Aetes told Absyrtus that if he didn’t bring back the Fleece, Absyrtus’ half-sister Medea, and Jason’s head, he was not to come back at all, on pain of death.

Jason told Ancaeus, wrapped tightly against a chill wind in his black bearskin, to take the fleeing *Argo* up the Ister (also called the Danube) river, to try to confuse their pursuers. Ancaeus did this. One Colchian fleet followed them into the Ister. The other, Telamon told Jason, was most likely trying to head them off by looping around through the Propontis.

Soon the pursuing ships came into arrow range. At first, only Philoctetes was hawk-eyed enough and had a strong enough bow to have any hope of landing arrows in the approaching ships. He sighted carefully and slowly, and sent arrows out of the sight of regular folk, and grunted with satisfaction if he saw a Colchian fall over, arrow through an eye or neck.

Before long, the fleet that followed them had drawn close enough that Atalanta and some other Argonauts could help out, and arrows started hissing past one another in both directions. Jason stood in the bow and shouted instructions back to Anacaeus. He was keeping his eyes open for the first sign of the second fleet blocking their escape. To try to confuse the second Colchian fleet, Jason had Ancaeus bear east into the Sea of Chronus, instead of continuing on down the Ister.

The *Argo’s* best bowmen were Philocetes, Atalanta and Telamon, so they took up the best archery positions at the stern of the ship behind Anceus, and tried to hit the tiny figures of men on the pursuing Colchian ships. As the range continued to decrease, the three Argonaut bowmen brought down soldier after soldier, but still the fleet behind gained on them. They suspected that around the next bend in the river they’d encounter the lead ships of the second fleet, sent to head them off and trap them between the two fleets.

Soon the flagship of the Colchian fleet was coming up so close behind them that it looked like they were going to try to ram the *Argo*.

Tragedy struck suddenly. A figure ran to the bow of the flagship and hurled a javelin with all his might. The javelin arched through the air and into the *Argo*, ending up sticking three feet out Atalanta’s back.

Atalanta gasped weakly and fell to the desk in an awkward sideways heap, sweat matting her curly brown hair, dark eyes filled with pain and shock. The javelin had gone through just under her ribcage. She lay on the deck bleeding out, and Euphemus knelt by her, crying openly, holding tightly to her limp hand. “Atalanta! I don’t know what I’ll do if you pass away...” he gasped out.

Peleus knelt behind them with a shield to catch any stray arrows that might land where they were.

“Euphemus…” Atalanta managed to whisper. “We never… But I always…”

Suddenly Medea was at Euphemus’ side, dark robes and hair tossing in the sea breeze, heedless of the arrows that whipped back and forth through the air. Kneeling, she shoved Euphemus out of the way and grabbed Atalanta’s shoulder. Medea’s eyes rolled back in her head as she yanked the javelin all the way through Atalanta’s abdomen and threw it over the side, abruptly worsening the bleeding.

She tore open Atalanta’s tunic to expose the wound area. Then she sprinkled something from her sleeves all around Atalanta and began chanting in a low, guttural tone. Her eyelids fluttered and only the whites of her eyes could be seen as her arms traced intricate patterns around the wounded Argonette. Medea’s chanting grew louder as arrows and javelins landed all around them. Two arrows embedded themselves in Peleus’ shield, one right after the other. Peleus swore and ducked lower behind it.

Eventually the magic started to work. Atalanta’s bleeding stopped and colour started to return to her cheeks slightly. She seemed to be in a deep sleep. The tunic remained torn and soaked with blood, but the wound in her body healed in front of their eyes. Eventually, only a fine white scar remained.

“Get her below!” Medea shouted at Euphemus and Peleus, coming out of the trance she’d put herself into. “She must sleep for days now, to heal fully.”

“Yes. Get her…below,” Jason echoed absently, still looking ahead of them up the river. He was still scanning for signs of the second Colchian fleet.

As Euphemus and Peleus carried Atalanta belowdecks, iron grapples from the Colchian flagship behind them clanged onto the deck of the *Argo*, and the men on the Colchian ship pulled the ropes tied to the hooks taut, until the Colchian flagship and the *Argo* were lashed together.

The Colchian flagship dropped anchors and brought both ships to an eventual stop. The lead ships of the first Colchian fleet caught up and took up position behind the *Argo*, bowmen on every ship drawing arrows back to their earlobes.

A lean, dark figure, imposingly tall, leaped the gap between the ships and made his way to the rear of the *Argo*. He has straight black hair, a small trimmed beard, and dark, empty eyes. His vivid blue robes, hemmed in gold, fluttered in the stiff North wind that had not quite been able to drive the *Argo* out of Absyrtus’ reach.

“Jason! Give me the Fleece. You are coming back with us,” Absyrtus said, his tones level.

Jason stood in the bow without moving, and Absyrtus walked up to him. The two men stood, looking warily at each other.

“This Fleece is going back to Thessaly,” Jason said.

“It’s useless, Jason of Thessaly. You have been wily and brave, but this is over,” Absyrtus told him, almost kindly. “My men and I are sworn to not return to Colchis without bringing the Golden Fleece, my half-sister Medea, and your head. If you come with me now, I will return you to my father Aetes with your head still sitting right where it should be. Perhaps he will let you live. He loves to collect oddities, and you are rapidly becoming one.”

Jason’s mind was racing at this point, though his face remained calm. He saw no sign of the second fleet yet. Was it coming at all? Was their escape route blocked, or had the second fleet gotten lost in the river mouths?

Absurdly, he noticed that Absyrtus had continued talking and that he’d zoned out. “Where is my half-sister? Where is the Golden Fleece?” the man asked Jason calmly, his eyes intense but empty.

“I am here, brother,” said Medea, walking to his side, the sack holding the Golden Fleece in her hands. She smiled warmly at Absyrtus.

Jason felt his heart drop into his feet. It looked like Idas had been right about Medea after all.

“Now the Fleece will return to the oak in our palace courtyard. Look at how lovely it is. Look how it glows,” said Medea, taking the Golden Fleece from the grain sack and placing it into her half-brother’s arms, then stepping back from him, hands in her huge sleeves.

Absyrtus was still holding the Fleece and looking at its molten gold glow when Medea cut his throat from ear to ear and shoved him over the side of the ship. Jason grabbed the Golden Fleece and held onto it as Absyrtus fell into the sea and was gone.

A wail of dismay went up from the Colchian flagship as Peleus and Telamon’s short swords slashed through the ropes that bound the two ships together, and the *Argo* pulled away in a hail of arrows, heading as quick as the North wind across the sea of Chronus.