We are forced to approach the historical period of Greece through a cloud-land of legend, in which atones of the gods are mingled with those of men, and the most marvellous of incidents are introduced as if they were everyday occurrences. The Argonautic expedition belongs to this age of myth, the vague vestibule of history. It embraces, as does the tale of the wanderings of Ulysses, very ancient ideas of geography, and many able men have treated it as the record of an actual voyage, one of the earliest ventures of the Greeks upon the unknown seas. However this be, this much is certain, the story is full of romantic and supernatural elements, and it was largely through these that it became so celebrated in ancient times.

The story of the voyage of the ship Argo is a tragedy. Pelias, king of Ioleus, had consulted an oracle concerning the safety of his dominions, and was warned to beware of the man with one sandal. Soon afterwards Jason (a descendant of AEolus, the wind god) appeared before him with one foot unsandalled. He had lost his sandal while crossing a swollen stream. Pelias, anxious to rid himself of this visitor, against whom the oracle had warned him, gave to Jason the desperate task of bringing back to Locus the Golden Fleece (the fleece of a speaking ram which had borne Phryxus and Helle through the air from Greece, and had reached Colchis in Asia Minor, where it was dedicated to Mars, the god of war).

Jason, young and daring, accepted without hesitation the perilous task, and induced a number of the noblest youth of Greece to accompany him in the enterprise. Among these adventurers were Hercules, Theseus, Castor, Pollux, and many others of the heroes of legend. The way to Colchis lay over the sea, and a ship was built for the adventurers named the Argo, in whose prow was inserted a piece of timber cut from the celebrated speaking oak of Dodona.

The voyage of the Argo was as full of strange incidents as those which Ulysses encountered in his journey home from Troy. Land was first reached on the island of Lemnos. Here no men were found. It was an island of women only. All the men had been put to death by the women in revenge for ill-treatment, and they held the island as their own. But these warlike matrons, who had perhaps grown tired of seeing only each other's faces, received the Argonauts with much friendship, and made their stay so agreeable that they remained there for several months.

Leaving Lemnos, they sailed along the coast of Thrace, and up the Hellespont (a strait which had received its name from Helle, who, while riding on the golden ram in the air above it, had fallen and been drowned in its waters). Thence they sailed along the Propontis and the coast of Mysia, not, as we may be sure, without adventures. In the country of the Bebrycians the giant king Amycus challenged any of them to box with him. Pollux accepted the challenge, and killed the giant with a blow. Next they reached Bithynia, where dwelt the blind prophet Phineus, to whom their coming proved a blessing.

Phineus had been blinded by Neptune, as a punishment for having shown Phryxus the way to Colchis. He was also tormented by the harpies, frightful winged monsters, who flew down from the clouds whenever he attempted to eat, snatched the food from his lips, and left on it such a vile odor that no man could come near it. He, being a prophet, knew that the Argonauts would free him from this curse. There were with them Zetes and Calias, winged sons of
Boreas, the god of the north winds; and when the harpies descended again to spoil the prophet's meal, these winged warriors not only drove them away, but pursued them through the air. They could not overtake them, but the harpies were forbidden by Jupiter to molest Phineus any longer.

The blind prophet, grateful for this deliverance, told the voyagers how they might escape a dreadful danger which lay in their onward way. This came from the Symplegades, two rocks between which their ships must pass, and which continually opened and closed, with a violent collision, and so swiftly that even a bird could scarce fly through the opening in safety. When the Argo reached the dangerous spot, at the suggestion of Phineus, a dove was let loose. It flew with all speed through the opening, but the rocks clashed together so quickly behind it that it lost a few feathers of its tail. Now was their opportunity. The rowers dashed their ready oars into the water, shot forward with rapid speed, and passed safely through, only losing the ornaments at the stern of their ship. Their escape, however, they owed to the goddess Minerva, whose strong hand held the rocks asunder during the brief interval of their passage. It had been decreed by the gods that if any ship escaped these dreadful rocks they should forever cease to move. The escape of the Argo fulfilled this decree, and the Symplegades have ever since remained immovable.

Onward went the daring voyagers, passing in their journey Mount Caucasus, on whose bare rock Prometheus, for the crime of giving fire to mankind, was chained, while an eagle devoured his liver. The adventurers saw this dread eagle and heard the groans of the sufferer himself. Helpless to release him whom the gods had condemned, they rowed rapidly away.

Finally Colchis was reached, a land then ruled over by King AEetes, from whom the heroes demanded the golden fleece, stating that they had been sent thither by the gods themselves. AEetes heard their request with anger, and told them that if they wanted the fleece they could have it on one condition only. He possessed two fierce and tameless bulls, with brazen feet and fire-breathing nostrils. These had been the gift of the god Vulcan. Jason was told that if he wished to prove his descent from the gods and their sanction of his voyage, he must harness these terrible animals, plough with them a large field, and sow it with dragons' teeth.

Perilous as this task seemed, each of the heroes was eager to undertake it, but Jason, as the leader of the expedition, took it upon himself. Fortune favored him in the desperate undertaking. Medea, the daughter of AEetes, who knew all the arts of magic, had seen the handsome youth and fallen in love with him at sight. She now came to his aid with all her magic. Gathering an herb which had grown where the blood of Prometheus had fallen, she prepared from it a magical ointment which, when rubbed on Jason's body, made him invulnerable either to fire or weapons of war. Thus prepared, he fearlessly approached the fire-breathing bulls, yoked them unharmed, and ploughed the field, in whose furrows he then sowed the dragons' teeth. Instantly from the latter sprang up a crop of armed men, who turned their weapons against the hero. But Jason, who had been further instructed by Medea, flung a great stone in their midst, upon which they began to fight each other, and he easily subdued them all.

Jason had accomplished his task, but AEetes proved unfaithful to his words. He not only withheld the prize, but took steps to kill the Argonauts and burn their vessel. They were invited to a banquet, and armed men were prepared to murder them during the night after the feast. Fortunately, sleep overcame the treacherous king, and the adventurers warned of their danger, made ready to fly. But not without the golden fleece. This was guarded by a dragon, but Medea prepared a potion that put this perilous sentinel to sleep, seized the fleece, and accompanied Jason in his flight, taking with her on the Argo Absyrtus, her youthful brother.

The Argonauts, seizing their oars, rowed with all haste from the dreaded locality. AEetes, on awakening, learned with fury of the loss of the fleece and his children, hastily collected an armed force, and pursued with such energy that the flying vessel was soon nearly overtaken. The safety of the adventurers was again due to Medea, who secured it by a terrible stratagem. This was, to kill her young brother, cut his body to pieces, and fling the bleeding fragments into the sea. AEetes, on reaching the scene of this tragedy, recognized these as the remains of his murdered son, and sorrowfully stopped to collect them for interment. While he was thus engaged the Argonauts escaped.

But such a wicked deed was not suffered to go unpunished. Jupiter beheld it with deep indignation, and in requital
condemned the Argonauts to a long and perilous voyage, full of hardship and adventure. They were forced to sail over all the watery world of waters, so far as then known. Up the river Phasis they rowed until it entered the ocean which flows round the earth. This vast sea or stream was then followed to the source of the Nile, down which great river they made their way into the land of Egypt.

Here, for some reason unknown, they did not follow the Nile to the Mediterranean, but were forced to take the ship Argo on their shoulders and carry it by a long overland journey to Lake Tritonis, in Libya. Here they were overcome by want and exhaustion, but Triton, the god of the region, proved hospitable, and supplied them with the much-needed food and rest. Thus refreshed, they launched their ship once more on the Mediterranean and proceeded hopefully on their homeward way.

Stopping at the island of AEaea, its queen Circe--she who had transformed the companions of Ulysses into swine--purified Medea from the crime of murder; and at Corecyra, which they next reached, the marriage of Jason and Medea took place. The cavern in that island where the wedding was solemnized was still pointed out in historical times.

After leaving Corecyra a fierce storm threatened the navigators with shipwreck, from which they were miraculously saved by the celestial aid of the god Apollo. An arrow shot from his golden bow crossed the billows like a track of light, and where it pierced the waves an island sprang up, on whose shores the imperilled mariners found a port of refuge. On this island, Anaphe by name, the grateful Argonauts built an altar to Apollo and instituted sacrifices in his honor.

Another adventure awaited them on the coast of Crete. This island was protected by a brazen sentinel, named Talos, wrought by Vulcan, and presented by him to King Minos to protect his realm. This living man of brass hurled great rocks at the vessel, and destruction would have overwhelmed the voyagers but for Medea. Talos, like all the invulnerable men of legend, had his one weak point. This her magic art enabled her to discover, and, as Paris had wounded Achilles in the heel, Medea killed this vigilant sentinel by striking him in his vulnerable spot.

The Argonauts now landed and refreshed themselves. In the island of AEgina they had to fight to procure water. Then they sailed along the coasts of Euboea and Locris, and finally entered the gulf of Pagasae and dropped anchor at Iolceus, their starting-point.

As to what became of the ship Argo there are two stories. One is that Jason consecrated his vessel to Neptune on the isthmus of Corinth. Another is that Minerva translated it to the stars, where it became a constellation.

So ends the story of this earliest of recorded voyages, whose possible substratum of fact is overlaid deeply with fiction, and whose geography is similarly a strange mixture of fact and fancy. Yet though the voyage is at an end, our story is not. We have said that it was a tragedy, and the denouement of the tragedy remains to be given.

Pelias, who had sent Jason on this long voyage to escape the fate decreed for him by the oracle, took courage from his protracted absence, and put to death his father and mother and his infant brother. On learning of this murderous act Jason determined on revenge. But Pelias was too strong to be attacked openly, so the hero employed a strange stratagem, suggested by the cunning magician Medea. He and his companions halted at some distance from Iolcus, while Medea entered the town alone, pretending that she was a fugitive from the ill-treatment of Jason.

Here she was entertained by the daughters of Pelias, over whom she gained great influence by showing them certain magical wonders. In the end she selected an old ram from the king’s flocks, cut him up and boiled him in a caldron with herbs of magic power. In the end the animal emerged from the caldron as a young and vigorous lamb. The enchantress now told her dupes that their old father could in the same way be made young again. Fully believing her, the daughters cut the old man to pieces in the same manner, and threw his limbs into the caldron, trusting to Medea to restore him to life as she had the ram.

Leaving them for the assumed purpose of invoking the moon, as a part of the ceremony, Medea ascended to the roof of the palace. Here she lighted a fire-signal to the waiting Argonauts, who instantly burst into and took possession of the
Having thus revenged himself, Jason yielded the crown of Iolcus to the son of Pelias, and withdrew with Medea to Corinth, where they resided together for ten years. And here the final act in the tragedy was played.

After these ten years of happy married life, during which several children were born, Jason ceased to love his wife, and fixed his affections on Glaucce, the daughter of King Creon of Corinth. The king showed himself willing to give Jason his daughter in marriage, upon which the faithless hero divorced Medea, who was ordered to leave Corinth. He should have known better with whom he had to deal. The enchantress, indignant at such treatment, determined on revenge. Pretending to be reconciled to the coming marriage, she prepared a poisoned robe, which she sent as a wedding-present to the hapless Glaucce. No sooner had the luckless bride put on this perilous gift than the robe burst into flames, and she was consumed; while her father, who sought to tear from her the fatal garment, met with the same fate.

Medea escaped by means of a chariot drawn by winged serpents, sent her by her grandfather Helios (the sun). As the story is told by Euripides, she killed her children before taking to flight, leaving their dead bodies to blast the sight of their horror-stricken father. The legend, however, tells a different tale. It says that she left them for safety before the altar in the temple of Juno; and that the Corinthians, furious at the death of their king, dragged the children from the altar and put them to death. As for the unhappy Jason, the story goes that he fell asleep under the ship Argo, which had been hauled ashore according to the custom of the ancients, and that a fragment of this ship fell upon and killed him.

The flight of Medea took her to Athens, where she found a protector and second husband in AEgeus, the ruler of that city, and father of Theseus, the great legendary hero of Athens.

(The end)

Charles Morris's short story: Voyage Of The Argonauts

By Charles Morris