After being set adrift at sea in a box, Perseus and his mother, Danae, had been rescued by a kind fisherman. The fisherman’s brother was the evil king of the island of Seriphos. To show his thanks, Perseus accepted a dangerous mission given to him by the king. Hoping that Perseus would never return, the king sent him to kill a monster and return with its head. The story begins as Perseus starts his journey to slay the terrible Gorgon, Medusa.

Perseus feared he was more likely to become a stone image than to bring back the head of Medusa with its snaky locks. Knowing he had undertaken a dangerous task, Perseus left without saying a word to his mother. He took his shield and his sword, and crossed over from the island to the mainland. He sat down to gather his thoughts and heard a voice.

“Perseus,” said the voice, “why are you sad?”

He lifted his head from his hands, and there was a stranger. He was a brisk, intelligent, and remarkably shrewd-looking young man. He had on a strange-looking cap and shoes with little wings. Perseus wiped his eyes, and quickly answered the stranger.

“I am not so very sad,” said he, “only thoughtful about an adventure that I have undertaken.”
“Oho!” answered the stranger. “I have helped a good many young men through difficult adventures. Perhaps you may have heard of me. I have more names than one; but the name of Hermes suits me as well as any other. Tell me your troubles. We will talk the matter over, and see what can be done.”

After hearing Perseus’s story, Hermes exclaimed, “I am the very person to help you, if anybody can. My sister and I will do our utmost to bring you safely through your adventure.”

“Your sister?” repeated Perseus.

“Yes, my sister Athena,” said the stranger. “She is very wise, I promise you; and as for myself, I generally have all my wits about me. If you show yourself bold and cautious, and follow our advice, you need not fear being turned into a stone image. First of all, you must polish your shield until it shines like a mirror.”

Deciding that Hermes knew better than himself, Perseus immediately set to work. He scrubbed the shield and soon it shone like the moon at harvest time. Hermes looked at it with a smile. Then, taking off his own short and crooked sword, he gave it to Perseus to wear.

“No sword but mine will answer your purpose,” he stated. “The blade will cut through iron and brass as easily as through the slenderest twig. The next thing is to find the Three Gray Women, who will tell us where to find the Nymphs.”

“The Three Gray Women!” cried Perseus, “Pray who may the Three Gray Women be?”

“They are three very strange old ladies,” said Hermes, laughing. “They have but one eye among them, and only one tooth. Moreover, you must find them out by starlight, or in the dusk of the evening. They never show themselves by the light of the sun or the moon.”

He added, “There are other things to be done before you can find your way to the Gorgons. But after we meet the Three Gray Women, you may be sure that the Gorgons are not far away.”
They set out and walked at a brisk pace; so brisk, indeed, that Perseus found it rather difficult to keep up with his nimble friend Hermes. To say the truth, he had a suspicion that Hermes had a pair of wings on his cap along with wings on his shoes! When he looked straight at Hermes, he only saw an odd kind of cap. The twisted staff was evidently a great convenience to Hermes. It enabled him to proceed so fast, that Perseus, though a remarkably fit young man, began to feel out of breath.

“Here!” cried Hermes, at last, “take you the staff, for you need it a great deal more than I. Are there no better walkers than you in the island of Seriphos?”

“I could walk pretty well,” said Perseus, glancing slyly at his companion’s feet, “if only I had a pair of winged shoes.”

“We must see about getting you a pair,” answered Hermes.

The staff helped Perseus tremendously. In fact, the stick seemed to be alive in his hand, and to lend some of its life to Perseus.

They walked and talked until twilight. Suddenly Hermes whispered, “This is just the time and place to meet the Three Gray Women. Be careful that they do not see you before you see them. Though they have but a single eye among the three, it is as sharp-sighted as a half dozen common eyes.”

“But what must I do,” asked Perseus, “when we meet them?”

Hermes explained to Perseus how the Three Gray Women managed with their one eye. They were in the habit of changing it from one to another, as if it had been a pair of spectacles. At the instant when the eye was passing from hand to hand, none of the poor old ladies was able to see a wink. That was when Perseus was to act.
As Perseus looked earnestly through the evening dusk, he spotted the Three Gray Women. He discovered that they had long gray hair and, as they came nearer, he saw that two of them had but the empty socket of an eye, in the middle of their foreheads. In the middle of the third sister’s forehead, there was a very large, bright, and piercing eye, which sparkled like a great diamond.

“Sister! Sister Scarecrow!” cried one, “you have had the eye long enough. It is my turn now!”

“Let me keep it a moment longer, Sister Nightmare,” answered Scarecrow. “I thought I had a glimpse of something behind that thick bush.”

The other two sisters, Nightmare and Shakejoint, began to argue with Sister Scarecrow about the eye. To end the dispute, old Dame Scarecrow took the eye out of her forehead, and held it forth in her hand.

“Take it, one of you,” she cried, “and quit this foolish quarrelling. For my part, I shall be glad of a little thick darkness. Take it quickly, or I will clap it into my own head again!”

While the Three Gray Women were still scolding each other, Perseus leaped from behind the bushes and grabbed the eye. The Gray Women did not know what had happened. Each supposing that one of her sisters was in possession of the eye, they began their quarrel anew.

“My good ladies,” said he, “pray do not be angry with one another. I have the honor of holding your very brilliant and excellent eye!”

The sisters were terribly frightened. “Oh, what shall we do, sisters? What shall we do? We are all in the dark! Give us our eye! Give us our eye! You have two of your own! Give us our eye!”

Following Hermes’s advice, Perseus said patiently, “My dear, good, admirable old ladies, there is no occasion for putting yourselves into such a fright. You shall have back your eye, safe and sound, the moment you tell me where to find the Nymphs.”
“Goodness, we know nothing at all about them,” screamed Scarecrow. “We are three unfortunate old souls that go wandering about in the dusk.”

All this while the Three Gray Women were groping with their outstretched hands and trying their utmost to get hold of Perseus. He took good care to keep out of their reach.

“My respectable dames,” said he, “I shall keep the eye until you tell me where to find the Nymphs.”

Finding that there was no other way of recovering their eye, at last they told Perseus what he wanted to know. No sooner had they done so, than he immediately, and with the utmost respect, clapped it into the vacant socket in one of their foreheads.

He thanked them for their kindness, and bade them farewell.

Hermes and Perseus went on their way. The old dames had given them such specific directions that they quickly found the Nymphs. They proved to be very different from Nightmare, Shakejoint, and Scarecrow. Instead of being old, they were young and beautiful. Instead of one eye among the sisterhood, each Nymph had two exceedingly bright eyes of her own, with which she looked very kindly at Perseus. They seemed to be acquainted with Hermes. When he told them the adventure that Perseus had undertaken, they did not hesitate to give him what he needed. First, they brought out a small purse, made of deer skin, and curiously embroidered. They urged him to keep the magic wallet safe. The Nymphs next produced a pair of slippers with a nice little pair of wings at the heel of each.

“Put them on, Perseus,” said Hermes. “You will find yourself as light as a feather for the remainder of our journey.”
Then the Nymphs gave Perseus the helmet of invisibility. When he placed the helmet on his head, Perseus instantly disappeared! Even the helmet, which covered him with its invisibility, had vanished! Perseus and Hermes headed off to find the Gorgons. As the two companions flew onward, Perseus thought he could hear the rustle of a garment close by. It was on the side opposite of Hermes, yet only Hermes was visible.

“Whose garment keeps rustling close beside us in the breeze?” inquired Perseus.

“Oh, it is my sister’s!” answered Hermes. “Athena is coming along with us, as I told you she would. We could do nothing without the help of my sister. You have no idea how wise she is. She has such eyes, too! Why, she can see you, at this moment, just as distinctly as if you were not invisible. I’ll venture to say, she will be the first to discover the Gorgons.”

As they were flying over a great ocean, a voice spoke in the air close by Perseus. It seemed to be a woman’s voice, melodious, but not sweet. It was grave and mild.

“Perseus,” said Athena, “there are the Gorgons.”

“Where?” exclaimed Perseus. “I cannot see them.”

“On the shore of that island beneath you,” replied the voice. “A pebble, dropped from your hand, would strike in the midst of them.”

“I told you she would be the first to discover them,” commented Hermes, “and there they are!”

Straight downward, two or three thousand feet below him, Perseus perceived a small island, with the sea breaking into white foam all around its rocky shore. The enormous Gorgons lay fast asleep, soothed by the thunder of the sea. The moonlight glistened on their steely scales and on their golden wings. Their brazen claws were thrust out and clutched the wave-beaten fragments of rock. The snakes that served as hair likewise seemed to be asleep. Now and then, they would emit a drowsy hiss, and then fall back asleep.
Luckily for Perseus, their faces were completely hidden from him. Had he but looked one instant at them, he would have fallen heavily out of the air, his image in senseless stone.

“Now,” whispered Hermes, as he hovered by the side of Perseus, “now is your time to do the deed! Be quick; for, if one of the Gorgons should awake, you are too late!”

“Which one is Medusa?” asked Perseus.

Athena replied in a calm voice, “The Gorgon that is stirring in her sleep is Medusa. Do not look at her! The sight would turn you to stone! Look at the reflection of her face and figure in the bright mirror of your shield.”

Perseus now understood Hermes’s motive for telling him to polish his shield. In its surface he could safely look at the reflection of the Gorgon’s face. The snakes twisted themselves into tumultuous knots, without opening their eyes.

Perseus flew downward cautiously and lifted his sword. At that very instant, each separate snake upon the Gorgon’s head stretched threateningly upward, and Medusa opened her eyes! She awoke too late. The sword was sharp, and the stroke fell like a lightning flash. The head of the wicked Medusa tumbled from her body!

“Admirably done!” cried Hermes. “Make haste, and put the head into your magic wallet.”

To the astonishment of Perseus, the small, embroidered wallet instantly grew large enough to contain Medusa’s head. As quick as thought, he snatched it up, with the snakes still writhing upon it, and thrust it in.

“Your task is done,” said the calm voice of Athena.

“Now fly! For the other Gorgons will do their utmost to take vengeance for Medusa’s death.”
Perseus flew directly to the island of Seriphos to carry Medusa's head to King Polydectes. Not finding his mother at home, Perseus went straight to the palace and was immediately taken to the king. Polydectes was by no means happy to see him. He had felt certain, in his own evil mind, that Perseus would be killed by the Gorgons.

The king asked, "Have you performed your promise? Have you brought me the head of Medusa with the snaky locks?"

"Yes," answered Perseus with a casual tone. "I have brought you the Gorgon's head, snaky locks and all!"

"Indeed! Pray let me see it," cried King Polydectes.

"It must be a very curious spectacle, if all that travelers tell about it be true!"

Perseus persuaded the king to invite all of his subjects to see the terrible head of Medusa.

"Show us the head! Show us the head of Medusa with the snaky locks!" shouted the people.

A feeling of sorrow and pity came over the youthful Perseus. "O King Polydectes," cried he, "and ye many people, I am loath to show you the Gorgon's head!"

"Show me the Gorgon's head, or I will cut off your own!" proclaimed the king.

Perseus sighed and cried out in a voice like a trumpet, "Behold it then!"

Instantly the king and all of his subjects were turned into stone. Perseus thrust the head back into the wallet, and went to tell his dear mother that she need no longer be afraid of the wicked King Polydectes.