



Pelops and the Chariot Race

Long ago, there was a hero named Pelops who lived in Greece. Pelops was the grandson of Zeus, and he was famous throughout the land as a brilliant chariot racer. In fact, he was so good in these races that even Poseidon the sea god, was impressed, and he gave Pelops a special chariot with very fast horses as a reward.

For a long while, Pelops was happy with his life, and he kept competing in races and becoming more and more famous. After a while, however, he decided that he should get married, since he wanted to have children who would rule after him.

One day, he heard about a very beautiful and clever woman named Hippodameia, the daughter of King Oenomaus who ruled on the island of Elis, in a city called Pisa. This King was a very nasty man, who ruled over his people cruelly and wouldn't let his daughter marry anyone. Only a few knew that this was because, when Hippodameia was born, an oracle had visited and told Oenomaus that one day he would be killed by his son-in-law. At first, Oenomaus tried to put this out of his mind, but over the years he became obsessed with the idea and slowly went mad, determined to prevent this from happening.

Of course, Hippodameia had plenty of suitors – men came from all over Greece to beg the King to meet her and to ask for her hand in marriage, but time and again Pelops refused them, keeping Hippodameia locked in the palace and miserable.

Over the years, the King became even more cruel and irritated with the suitors asking to meet Hippodameia, so he came up with an evil plan to rid himself of these young men once and for all. He sent word to all the suitors who had gathered in the city that there would be a great contest, a chariot race. Everyone flocked to the palace to see the race, and to see Hippodameia who – it was rumoured – would be there with her father. Oenomaus addressed the group of suitors and all the spectators: 'Welcome to Elis, young men. For years you have tried to persuade me to let one of you marry my daughter, who you all see before you now. So – I will give you a chance. Whoever can beat me in this chariot race can marry Hippodameia.'

The suitors were delighted – cheers went up through the crowd.

'BUT,' he roared, cutting short the celebrations, 'whoever does not beat me will die. Now you must choose.'

At this, the crowds were stunned into a shocked silence. Some of the young men fled the palace, unwilling to risk their lives. Most of them, however, stayed –



Oenomaus was an old man, they thought, and they were each the best in their own land at chariot racing. They would win easily.

What they didn't know was that Oenomaus had a secret. Many years ago, Ares – the fearsome god of war – had given him special horses that were so fast that no mortal horse could outrun them. So, when the race started, Oenomaus swept round, overtaking suitor after suitor, and throwing his spear to hit each one as he passed. By the end of the race, he had killed thirteen men, and he went back to his palace, laughing evilly, and dragging Hippodameia with him.

Now, when Pelops heard about all this, he couldn't resist the chance to rescue Hippodameia and overthrow the evil king. He arrived in Elis one evening when, as chance would have it, Hippodameia was out for a walk with her servants. The two caught sight of each other across the road and fell instantly in love. Pelops rushed to Hippodameia, eager to explain that he would defeat her father in the race and rescue her, sure of Poseidon's gift to him.

Hippodameia wasn't so sure. 'You'll die just like the others! There is no way to beat my father: he has horses from Ares and cheats in the race with them. Even if you did somehow win he would surely kill you. Please, go, save yourself.'

But Pelops would not be put off: 'help me, then. You must know something that can even the odds.' Hippodameia thought for a long time: 'you need to make sure that you win and that my father can't finish the race... You would have to damage his chariot in some way.' With these words, she turned and ran back to the palace, before any of her father's guards could see her talking to a stranger.

Pelops stayed up for many hours, praying to Poseidon for help and thinking of how he could make sure to win. He wandered the city during the night, hoping to find inspiration. As he approached the marketplace, he saw a cart stopped by the side of the road with its wheel several metres behind it, and a plan worked its way into his mind.

He snuck round to the back of the palace and found his way to the stables. By now it was 3am and the night guards were sleepy and bored, so the hero was able to slip inside without attracting attention. Once inside, he saw Pelops' magnificent chariot and his magical horses, and set about loosening the bolts which fixed the wheels to the chariot. He thought for a moment about releasing the horses, too, but he didn't want to get on Ares' bad side – especially not before the coming conflict! Then he went back to his camp and waited until morning...

The next day, Pelops joined the small crowd gathered outside the palace and waited for Oenomaus to come and address the people. Sure enough, the king came



out dragging Hippodameia with him, and set his conditions for the race again. This time there were far fewer suitors, since so many had died the first time.

The racers got into position and waited; Pelops prayed again to Poseidon and got ready for the race of his life. Suddenly a horn sounded, and off they went! Without looking back, Pelops rushed his horses on and quickly got into first place. Behind him, he could hear shouts and cries as, one by one, Oenomaus overtook the other men. When he could hear the magical horses right behind him, Pelops finally turned to look – there was Oenomaus, lifting his spear, ready to attack! Pelops felt a jolt of fear, and the audience fell into total silence.

At that moment, though, something changed – there was a slight popping noise and the bolts on both of the king's wheels came flying off! The chariot began to shake and weave, and the king roared in fury as his wheels fell away from the chariot, sending him and it flying forward. Pelops finished the race and rushed back to see Oenomaus, as the audience cheered and whooped – happy that Hippodameia would finally be happy and that their tyrant had been defeated.

As it turned out, Oenomaus had tried at the last moment to throw his spear at Pelops (just as Hippodameia had predicted) but Poseidon had intervened to protect his favourite. The sea god had prevented the king from making his throw, and so Oenomaus, the evil tyrant of Elis, met his end by falling on his own spear. The prophecy therefore came true after all...

Soon after this, Pelops and Hippodameia got married in a huge ceremony, and they invited all the people of Elis to celebrate with them. In the years that followed, they had many children and grandchildren and even great-grandchildren, one of whom you might have heard of – a boy called Hercules.