

ORPHEUS IN THE UNDERWORLD

AMONG the Argonauts who sailed with Jason in pursuit of the fabled Golden Fleece, there had been one hero who carried neither sword nor shield, neither spear nor bow. His name was Orpheus, and he was famed throughout ancient Greece as a poet and musician. When Orpheus sang, people stopped whatever they were doing and smiled in wonderment. Wild animals became tame. Even the trees and the stones would move from where they stood in order to be nearer to the sound.

Orpheus was the son of a Thracian king. His mother was one of the nine Muses: Calliope, the spirit of poetry and eloquence. His lyre had been given to him by Apollo himself, and with the Muses as his teachers he had learned to play music in a way that is beyond description. But if you had ever heard him, it is a sound you would never have forgotten.

After his return from the kingdom of Aetes (where Jason was able to steal the Golden Fleece only after Orpheus had lulled the dragon that guarded it to sleep) he decided to settle down and get married. His young wife was named Eurydice. She was a nymph whom he loved very dearly, and for a long time the two of them were as happy as two people can possibly be.

But then came the day when a friend named Aristaeus came to stay and took Eurydice for a walk in the fields. This Aristaeus was a famous huntsman, a beekeeper, and the father

of Actaeon. It was a warm, sunny day. Orpheus had stayed in the house to practice a new tune. The two of them were alone.

They had reached a quiet spot where the field dipped down beside a wood when Aristaeus suddenly seized hold of Eurydice, kissed her passionately, and told her that he had come only in the hope of persuading her to run away with him. At first Eurydice thought he was joking. Then, when she saw the madness in his eyes, she called out for help. But nobody heard. Finally she managed to break free, and with Aristaeus close behind her, she raced back toward the house.

She might well have gotten there safely, for already Aristaeus regretted what he had done. Even as he ran after her, he shouted for her forgiveness. But Eurydice wouldn't listen. His cries only made her run all the faster, barely looking where she was going. And so it was that she failed to see an emerald snake twisting through the grass. Her sandaled foot trod on its tail. It coiled around and sank its fangs into her ankle. In her panic, Eurydice hardly felt the pain but continued to run until she became giddy. A numbing coldness spread through her body. The ground rushed up at her, and the light of the sun shimmered and went out. By the time Aristaeus caught up with her, she was dead.

When Orpheus was told what had happened, a terrible pallor came into his face as though part of him had died as well. For three days he stayed in his house, refusing both food and water. On the fourth day he appeared again, dressed in the same clothes he had worn on his adventures with the Argonauts, his lyre in his hands. It was dawn when he left the house. Nobody saw him as he walked down the path and crossed the very field where his beloved Eurydice had fallen. For many months, nobody saw him again.

His journey took him to the very edge of the world, through countries so strange and distant that they had yet to be given names. He climbed mountains and crossed deserts. Neither hunger nor thirst could stop him, neither burning sun nor freezing snow. He came to a great ocean and set sail in a fragile

boat, trusting to the wind to blow him even farther to the West. He sailed for a long, long time. He sailed until the day and the night merged into an unbroken grayness and time lost its meaning. But at last he arrived on the other side and found himself on the shores of Hades, the home of the dead.

Nothing grew there. The poplar trees that lined the shore were black, their leaves as dry as dust. The soil was barren, the land cloaked in perpetual night. Not a breath of wind touched Orpheus as he walked through the immense silence toward the single mountain that dominated the coast. He alone was alive, and being alive had no place there.

He came to a pair of gates a mile high, the spiked points rising higher than the mountain, brushing the very clouds. The gates were made of black iron, with iron skulls set between the twisting bars. A brazier burned on each side, the flames as cold as ice. Behind the gates he could just make out an enormous cavern, a great circle of darkness. This was the entrance to Hades. And it was guarded.

A dog lumbered out of the shadows, growling softly at Orpheus, with not one but three heads. Its three mouths hung open, black venom dripping over needle-sharp teeth. Its six eyes blinked poisonously. The dog was huge, bigger than a horse. Its black fur hung in knots off its deformed body as if it had rolled in tar. Now it squatted, preparing to pounce. One of the heads began to howl, the horrible sound rising to a pitch and threatening to crack open the mountain itself. The other heads snapped at the air, the necks straining, the eyes bulging with hatred and fear.

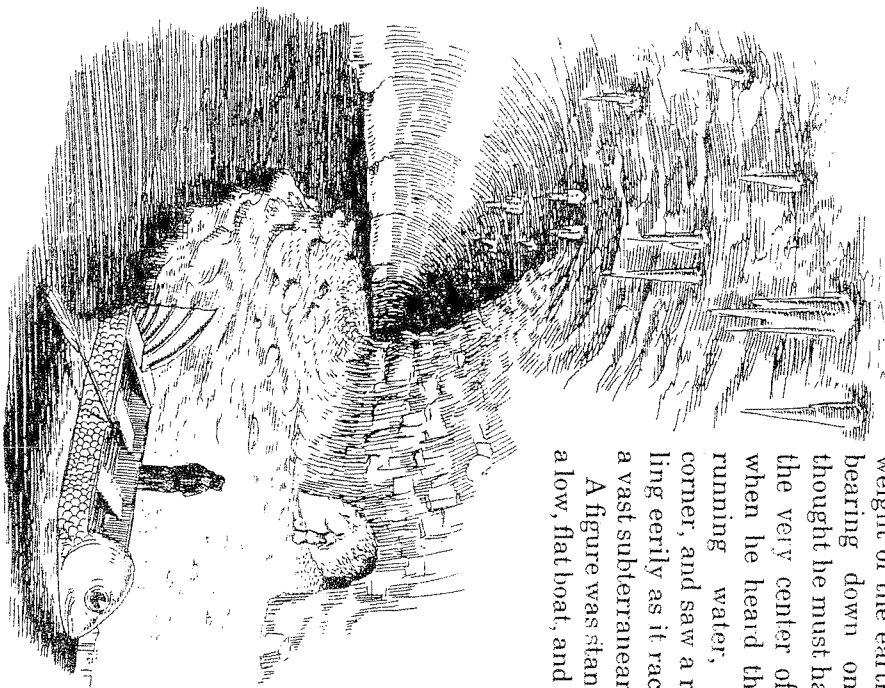
Slowly, Orpheus lifted the lyre. The howling stopped. One of the heads sniffed at him suspiciously. Orpheus began to play.

The sound was tiny, lost in that eternal wilderness, but still the dog heard it. It fell silent, and the muscles in its neck relaxed. One of the heads made a last protest, barking feebly, but at once the other two turned on it, tearing at its ears and cheeks with their teeth. It yelped, then listened quietly. Orpheus continued to play, louder now, the music swelling up like a blossom opening. Never had such a sound been heard at the gateway of Hades. The dog sank to the ground. Something

close to pleasure flickered in its yellow eyes. Two of the heads nodded and fell asleep. The third sighed, then joined them. Orpheus played until he reached the end of the song. By then the dog was sound asleep, its tail twitching, its three heads snoring in unison. Gently, he stepped around it. The gates opened and he passed through.

A wide, sandy road led from the mouth of the cave, sloping ever more steeply downhill with every step. The way was lit by silver flames burning in cone-shaped braziers attached to the walls. The farther Orpheus went, the more heavily he felt the weight of the earth and stone bearing down on him. He thought he must have reached the very center of the world when he heard the sound of running water, turned a corner, and saw a river sparkling eerily as it raced through a vast subterranean cavern.

A figure was standing beside a low, flat boat, and as Orpheus



drew nearer he saw that it was an old man with spectacles, dressed in a threadbare gray coat and woolen mittens. The boat was shaped like a fish, with a head at one end and a tail at the other. The oars had been painted to look like the wings of a dragonfly.

"Who are you?" the old man demanded, taking off his spectacles and wiping them on his sleeve. "I wasn't told anyone was coming today—not that anyone tells me anything, of course. Wait a minute!" He put the glasses back on and peered at Orpheus with bloodshot eyes. "You're not even dead!" he exclaimed. "Really, this is most irregular. You're not dead! At least, you don't look dead." He reached out with a finger and poked Orpheus. "Yes! You're alive! Ugh! Really! Well! And he sat down in a heap.

Orpheus bent over him. "Who are you?" he asked. "Charon," the old man said. "I run the ferry to Hades. This is the river Acheron and that is my ferry. But I only take dead people. It's in my contract. There must be some mistake, you know." He looked up sharply. "How did you get past Cerberus?" "Cerberus?" Orpheus asked.

"The dog. The three-headed dog! I bet he wasn't pleased to see you."

"He wasn't."

"Well of course he wasn't. If you'd have been dead, he'd have been delighted to see you. Happy to let you in, not so happy to let you out—that's Cerberus. Now, what do you want?"

"Will you take me over the Acheron?" Orpheus said.

"Certainly not! You're alive."

"But I want to cross all the same."

"Against the rules. I'd be fired in an instant. Sorry. Good-bye!"

Orpheus looked at the river. He would have swum, but the water was flowing far too swiftly. He turned back to Charon.

"I'll tell you what," he said. "If I can make you smile, then will you take me across?"

"Smile?" Charon sniffed. "I haven't smiled for seven thousand years—and then it was only due to a misunderstanding. If you can make me smile, I'll take you across for nothing, and that's

something I never do. One obol is what it costs. One obol for a one-way ticket. But I'll take you for nothing."

So once again Orpheus lifted his lyre. This time he chose a song that he knew would appeal to the old miser, a song about King Midas, whose touch turned anything to gold. At first Charon merely yawned and scratched under his chin. But as the music continued, the edges of his mouth began to twitch. He shook his head and pretended to pick his teeth, but it was useless. When Orpheus sang how King Midas almost starved because all his food turned to gold before he could eat it, Charon let out a sound that was something between a grunt and a cough, and he smiled from ear to ear.

"And now you must keep your promise," Orpheus said when he had finished.

"All right!" The smile faded rapidly from Charon's lips. "You win. But it'll cost you one obol."

"You said you'd take me for nothing," Orpheus reminded him.

"Did I? I must have been crazy. And you didn't make me smile all that much. A grin, perhaps. A mere simper. But if you insist . . ."

The old man moaned a great deal more, but he did take Orpheus across the river in his boat. He was still muttering to himself after he had dropped his passenger on the other side and was making the journey back.

"It was only a smirk, really. A nervous twitch. A wobble . . ."

Meanwhile, Orpheus continued along the path, leaving the river Acheron behind him. It was strange, for although he had descended many miles into the bowels of the earth, he now seemed to be outside again. He could see clouds above him where there should have been rock, and the landscape, lit by a mysterious gray light, stretched far away to a distant horizon. He could just make out what looked like a castle on the very edge of the plateau and turned his steps in that direction.

Many were the strange sights Orpheus passed. Deep valleys crawling with strange hellish creatures. Farther on, there was a man standing in a river beneath a fruit tree whose branches were heavy with sweet-smelling apples. The man was named

Tantalus. Once he had been a king and had invited the gods to a cannibal feast. Now he suffered eternal hunger and thirst in Hades. For when he tried to reach the water to drink, it flowed away from his cupped hands. When he tried to pick the fruit, the branches lifted just out of his reach. Now he was a skeleton, his bones glistening behind his transparent skin.

There was the giant Tityus, stretched out on the ground, his arms and legs securely fastened. He had once attempted to make love to the mother of Zeus and had been cruelly punished for his presumption. Every day two vultures landed on him, tore out his liver and ate it raw while the giant screamed in endless agony.

There was Sisyphus, who had betrayed Zeus and was now forced to push a huge stone up a steep hill, only to see it slip through his hands and roll all the way back to the bottom whenever he got anywhere near the top. There was Ixion, spinning in the air on a burning wheel because he had tried to seduce Hera, the queen of the gods. And there were the Danaids, fifty women who had all killed their husbands. They had been condemned to fill a bottomless barrel with sand, a task that would take them to the end of time.

Orpheus saw many sights as cruel and as strange as these before he finally reached the castle. The doors opened as he approached, and he passed through into a circular chamber paved with black marble, bare but for two silver thrones. A man and a woman sat facing him. Both were dressed in black, their skin as pale as ivory, their eyes hidden behind masks of shadow.

"Who are you?" the man demanded. His voice echoed in the empty chamber.

"My name is Orpheus."

"Do you know who I am?"

"No."

The man raised a hand. His fingers were long and elegant. "I am Hades, king of the Underworld. And beside me is my wife, Persephone. It is rare for one who is alive to come into our presence. If that life is precious to you, tell us your purpose here in the Underworld."



"I have come for my wife," Orpheus said.

"Your wife?"

"The nymph Eurydice. For many years we lived together, happily married. Then a snake bit her. Death took her from me, but I have come to claim her back."

"That is impossible." Hades' words rang out irrevocably. "None has ever left our kingdom."

"Your Majesty," Orpheus pleaded, "I have traveled to the very extremities of the world and have crossed the last ocean to reach your land. I have suffered many hardships and sacrificed many years of my life. I have confronted Cerberus, argued with Charon, and endured the sight of much pain in the land around this castle. Now, I beg you, give me what I have come for: Eurydice. . . I love her."

"Love?" Hades' voice was cold. "What is love? Tell me about love, Orpheus. For how can love mean anything to death?"

"Very well, Your Majesty," Orpheus said. "I will tell you about love."

For a third time, Orpheus played his lyre, singing about love. And although the king's face remained as emotionless as a

statue, Persephone was less able to hide her feelings. When Orpheus finished, her cheeks were wet with tears, and she leaned over to whisper to her husband.

"Orpheus," Hades said, and there was a strange huskiness in his voice, "your music has moved my wife. And in truth, it has affected me. I am inclined to be merciful. Eurydice is near here, not in the plain that you have crossed—which we call Tartarus—but in the Elysian Fields, where her soul has been at rest.

"You may take her with you, back to the land of the living. Play your lyre and she will follow you, guided by the sound. But we make one condition. You are not to look on her until you both stand once again beneath the sun. You are not to turn around. Mark our words well, Orpheus. If you turn before you reach your world, Eurydice will be gone and you will never see her again."

Orpheus thanked the king and the queen and left the castle, playing his lyre as he went. He played as he crossed the plain of Tartarus, looking neither behind him nor at the poor victims of Hades' wrath on either side. But even as he went, he began to wonder if Hades hadn't lied to him. Perhaps the king's show of kindness had been nothing more than a cruel trick, designed to make him leave the Underworld alone. How could he be sure that Eurydice was behind him? He listened hard, hoping to make out the sound of her footfall, but all was silent.

He reached the Acheron river, and his doubts grew. Charon was waiting to ferry him across, but he neither heard Eurydice climb into the boat after him nor felt it tip in the water with her extra weight. And what of Cerberus? The ferryman had told him that the dog allowed nobody to leave. It had to be a trick. If he took just one quick glance over his shoulder he would know. If . . .

But he forced himself to continue staring ahead. The muscles in his neck were hurting, so great was the temptation to turn his head. His fingers also ached, but he went on playing. He had no choice.

"*You are not to look on her . . .*"
Now he climbed the path up toward the gates of Hades. To have come so far and to lose her now would be ridiculous. And

yet suppose she wasn't there? Suppose he left the Underworld and the gates closed behind him. He might not be able to get back in. He stepped out into the sun. Cerberus was still asleep. Or perhaps he was pretending to be asleep. Was Eurydice there?

"*. . . until you both stand once again beneath the sun.*"

He looked back.

The sun didn't shine on that side of the ocean. He glimpsed Eurydice, pale and entranced, no more than a few feet away from him. And then there was a rustle of wind. She opened her mouth. The wind took her, and at once she disappeared, swept away like an autumn leaf.

The gates of the Underworld clanged shut. Orpheus fell to his knees. He had lost her forever.

