

Orpheus and Eurydice

by Michael Gibson

IF Apollo was the greatest musician of the gods, Orpheus was supreme among the mortals. It was music from Orpheus's lyre which saved all but one of the Argonauts from the temptation of the Sirens. As a result, his fame had spread far and wide over the land of Thrace, where his father was king.

Orpheus was also a poet, whose inspiration came from the nine Muses, and a singer. At court, the people would listen spellbound as he sang the great sagas of his country, plucking the strings of his instrument in soft accompaniment. At times he would wander out into the countryside, playing as he went. The birds and wild beasts that roamed there would draw close to listen and to follow him. Even the trees swayed in time to the tunes he played.

It was while he was strolling alone through the woods that he met the beautiful dryad Eurydice and brought her back to the palace, to be his wife.

The dryads were nymphs of the trees and woods. Sometimes, when she was tired of her busy life at court, Eurydice would visit her former companions. They would sit on a grassy bank while she told them about her strange new city life, where there were hard, paved streets instead of the soft turf of the forest, and stone houses and temples instead of groves of trees. If Orpheus was with her, the nymphs would dance and sing as he played to them.

At other times, Eurydice used to walk by herself through the woods, enjoying the dappled light which came down through the leaves above her and listening to the songs of the birds. She would stoop to pick the pink and mauve cyclamen and wood sorrel which grew beneath the trees and make garlands of their blossoms for her hair. Sometimes she would rest on the bank of a stream and watch butterflies dancing over the water. In the winter months she loved the rustle of the fallen leaves under her feet and would pause to run her hand over the rough bark of her beloved trees.

At times it snowed in that part of Greece. When this happened, Eurydice could see clearly the tracks of rabbits, hares, deer, and the larger beasts which preyed on them. Everything

about her would be white. The familiar woods looked strange yet somehow even more beautiful. All around was silent; even the birds would stop singing. If, in the silence, a small gust of wind sent snow slithering down from the bare branches, Eurydice would start nervously.

One bright, warm summer's day when the sun was shining, she was watching a deer feeding in a grassy clearing when suddenly its ears pricked up and it raised its head. For a moment it stood like this, and then like a shadow it slipped away. A tall man whom Eurydice had never seen before strode from the trees into the clearing. He was handsome, but there was a cruel glint in his eyes which she did not like. He carried a bow and arrows across his back and stopped when he saw the girl standing there.

"I have heard of the nymphs of the Thracian woods, but you are the first I have seen," he said. "Everything that people say of their beauty is true if you are one of them."

Eurydice was not vain and did not like to hear such flattery from a stranger. "I thank you sir," she said, "but I suggest that you go on your way, for I have no wish to be disturbed."

"You may be beautiful, but by the gods you have a sharp tongue!" the man answered. "If you want to be rid of me, tell me first in which direction the deer I was stalking has gone. You must have seen it, for it came through here."

Eurydice shook her head. "No, sir," she said. "That I cannot tell you. It was too pretty to die."

The man frowned. "A nymph you may be but, by thunder, even the fairest nymphs do not defy a god! Tell me, I say!"

Stubbornly Eurydice shook her head. "A god you may be," she said, "though I somehow doubt it, for if you were you would not behave so rudely. Take care how you speak to me, for my husband is the king's son and will not take kindly to someone who does not respect his wife."

The stranger threw back his head and laughed. "The wife of Orpheus, the poet and singer!" he exclaimed. "I have heard he loves music more than battle. You threaten me with *him*? Clearly you do not know who I am."

"No, sir," Eurydice said, more calmly than she felt. "I do not, and I do not wish to."

"Nevertheless I will tell you," said the stranger. "Perhaps it will humble your proud spirit a little. I am Aristaëus, the god of hunters."

"Then you should be more gentle," answered Eurydice, "for was not your own mother the nymph Cyrene? I have heard the

story of how she was carried off from her home by Apollo and bore his son."

"Gentle? Yes, my mother was gentle. But I learned from my father, the great Apollo, to take what I want when I want it." The stranger paused and then added, gesturing to her: "Come here! I will have a kiss from Orpheus's wife! Then we will see if he dares defy me!" He strode forward, and Eurydice, terrified, turned and fled.

Swiftly she ran through the trees, dodging first right then left. The low boughs brushed her face as she ran and, where the trees grew less thickly, brambles tore at her tunic as if to hold her back. But his life as a hunter had made Aristaëus a fine athlete and he ran as fast as she, crashing through thickets like a wounded boar. Eurydice could hear him behind her. Once she stumbled and thought that she would fall, but she regained her balance and ran on. Her voice echoed through the woods as she cried out desperately for help, but there was no one near to hear. The only answer was a cruel laugh from behind her.

The chase continued through mossy clearings and over half-hidden streams of clear water where the fish swam unconcerned in the shadows under the banks. Eurydice's heart was pounding, but it seemed at last that she was drawing away from her pursuer. As the ground began to rise and the trees became fewer, Aristaëus's footsteps grew more faint.

Presently, she scrambled upwards into the sunlight over a rock-strewn slope. At last the footsteps had ceased. Eurydice could not be sure that she had escaped and she continued upwards until, at the summit of the higher ground, she threw herself down exhausted on a flat-topped rock. Below her and all around she could see the green tops of the trees. From here she would be able to see Aristaëus a long way away, so she decided to rest for a while.

Eurydice saw no more of Aristaëus, and after a while she dozed in the hot sun. The whole world seemed to be at peace and drowsing. Suddenly another sun-lover appeared—a deadly viper which lived on the stony ground surrounding the place where the girl lay. It moved slowly over the warm earth by the flat-topped rock, its forked tongue darting in and out. As it passed near her, Eurydice stirred and turned in her sleep. One of her slender legs now barred the viper's path. The snake hissed and coiled its body quickly, raising its head to strike. Its fangs sank deep, spreading their venom, but Eurydice did not wake. A bee droned lazily by and was gone, and then no more

sound was heard. The poison had done its deadly work.

Night came, and still Eurydice had not returned to the palace. At first Orpheus was not seriously worried, for no harm had ever come to his wife on her lonely wanderings in the woods where she was so much at home. But when midnight came, search parties were sent out to scour the surrounding countryside. Their calls echoed through the trees as they searched. Lights flickered here and there through the woods like phantoms. It was morning when they at last found her. Placing her body on a stretcher hastily made from saplings bound with creepers, the searchers carried her back to the palace with heavy hearts.

Orpheus was inconsolable. His father tried to comfort him, but it was no use. Orpheus sat alone, playing sad tunes on his lyre and thinking only of his lost love.

But Aristaeus had been wrong about Orpheus. He was a brave man, braver by far than most, and perhaps his desperation to win back Eurydice gave him a greater courage than he would normally have had. For he decided that he would enter Hades itself and fetch her back to earth from there. Everyone tried to dissuade him. "Not even in your wildest dreams should you consider going there" King Oeagrus told his son. "The dead are the dead and the living the living. You are mad to think you can change the way of the gods. Those who go to the Underworld can never return."

Nevertheless, Orpheus set out, his lyre slung from his shoulder, his mind full only of Eurydice. He journeyed overland to Aornum in Thesprotis, which borders the Ionian Sea. He had heard that a narrow passageway led from here, far beneath the earth, to the river Styx. The river was the only barrier to Hades itself. He found the passage and descended out of the sunlight into the gloom. Water dripped from the dank ceiling and rats scuttled away into the dark corners as he made his way bravely forward. At last the Styx was before him. Charon the ferryman sat there in his boat, waiting for his next cargo of the dead.

Orpheus knew it would not be easy to persuade Charon to take a living cargo but, trusting to the magical powers of his music, he struck a note on his lyre. A rare smile lit the stern face of the boatman. He leaned back in his seat and his eyes closed as the music enveloped him, its wonderful harmonies echoing back from the cavernous walls. Few could have resisted its appeal for long, and Charon succumbed to it completely.

"I can deny nothing to one who can play as you can," he said to Orpheus. "I will take you over the river, though I may pay for

it later when my master finds out what I have done." Charon moved to one side to let Orpheus clamber into the boat.

On the other bank stood the guard dog Cerberus, but Orpheus's playing soothed even this fierce animal and Cerberus, like Charon, allowed him to pass.

In due course, Orpheus was brought before Persephone, the queen of the Underworld. Before he spoke he once more played his lyre, and the shades of the dead clustered near to hear his music. Persephone's heart was touched by his story and his music and she agreed to let Eurydice return to earth.

"But on one condition only," she told Orpheus. "She must follow behind you as you go. If you turn round to see her before she reaches the upper air, she must return here for ever."

So Eurydice was brought to them, and the young couple embraced while Persephone looked on with a half-smile, as if she already doubted her decision. But she did not change her mind. The pair crossed the Styx safely and began the long climb up the passage to the surface of the earth. Orpheus never looked back, though he was greatly tempted to make sure that the footsteps he could hear behind him really were those of his beloved wife and not some trickery of the shades. Up and up they climbed, until presently daylight showed ahead of them.

A few minutes later, Orpheus was at the mouth of the cave, and the warmth of the sun was on his face. A great joy flooded through his whole being. What had been only a wild dream of happiness regained had actually come true. He turned to take Eurydice in his arms. However, less strong than he, she had lagged some way behind him in the climb. He saw her dimly coming towards him, still in the shadowy passage. But even as he looked she seemed to fade away and then was gone. He rushed forward but it was too late. She had returned to the shadowy world of the dead and was lost to him forever.