

Virgil, Titus Lucretius Carus



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Orpheus and Eurydice

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P. VIRGILII MARONIS Georgicon, Bk. IV. vv. 453-527

This is the tale old Proteus by the sea
Erst told of Orpheus and Eurydice.
Virgil at Parthenope overheard,
And has resung it, if not word by word.

Orpheus had been espoused but one short hour,
And went to gather roses for the bower,
When a rejected wooer, mad with love,
Sprang upon the light-footed nymph, and strove
For an embrace; she, heeding nought, alas!
Trode on a serpent sleeping in the grass;
And when on the instant, answering her cries,
Her Bridegroom knelt there, kissing her closed eyes,
Half fainting with the sense of all her charms,
Sudden he woke, a dead Bride in his arms!
Not his alone the woe and misery;
Nor he sole mourner for Eurydice;
From Rhodope to Pangæa's peaks, above
The cave where Boreas hid his Attic love,
Through the fierce realm of Rhesus, echo bore
The wail to the wild Getes, to the shore
Of Hebrus, while in forest, hill, and dale
The tuneful Dryads told the tearful tale.
But how conjure by the best ordered show
Of grief an irremediable woe!
Orpheus fled Pity, and neighbourly Care;

All human fellowship but his despair.
With but that and his lyre communion still
He held, from dawn to sunset, then until
The planets rose and sank, banishing sleep,
Keeping sad vigils by the moaning deep,
Thinking each shadow on the desert shore
Was his lost Bride restored to life once more.

And was it days, weeks, months, or years?—at last
From the ghost-haunted waters coastward passed—
Whether Goddess, or Woman—a pale shape,
That beckoned to the far Laconian Cape
Of Tænarus, where the dread cavern draws
Each generation down its hungry jaws.
At the first touch of his lyre opened wide
The lofty gates of Hell; he paced inside
The grove impenetrable by but him;
A darkness that might be felt, stark, and grim,
Where bide the awful ministers of Dis,
With hearts that never beat at prayer but his.
And still the notes rose bravely; and still he
Came, calling on his lost Eurydice;
On her, sole burden of his love-lorn cries—
One theme informing countless melodies.
At the sweet sorrowing, awhile a hush—
Amazement—throughout Hades; then a rush—
A quick rustling rather, as when a flight
Of birds seeks where to sleep at fall of night,
Or, cow'ring, courts, against an icy breeze,
Multitudinous foliage of trees.
Thus—for the jailers ceased from watch and ward,

Witched themselves by the wailing, wandering bard—
Flocked, from the unamiable swamp, which feeds
Nothing on its black slime but grisly reeds—
Where steams and groans Cocytus, and Styx holds
Prisoners within its nine coils and folds—
A legion of the newly dead, entombed
In Limbo, till ripe to be tried and doomed;
A fearful gathering, bodies stripped of life,
Yet moving; some in pairs, husband and wife,
Girls who had virgins died, and beardless youths,
With parents' kisses warm upon their mouths;
And some though freed from flesh ignorant where
Their dwelling fixed, sad phantoms, thin as air.
Each waiting judgment; now forgetting all
Griefs in a greater, in the musical
Challenge to Dis to yield its prey; while, on
And on, the chant rolled, till its way it won
Past the black realms of ancient Erebus,
Past too the torture cells of Tartarus,
Where cold-blue snakes, the Furies' locks that tied,
By the trespassing strain, charmed, stupefied,
Drew in their fangs, Ixion's wheel made pause,
And, one shocked wide gape, stood Cerberus's triple
jaws.

At last, at last! a Palace flaming high
With angry flashes from a mocking sky;
And, seated on twin thrones, the King and Queen,
Garbed in life-which-is-death's Infernal sheen;
Both silent; but, as whispered soft and low
The lyre, stern Proserpine remembered how

A girl plucked flowers. As nursery rhymes
On dying ears, returned old happy times,
Sunshine, and the sweet thought, if mixed with pain,
A mother's toil to have her child again.
Paradise for Hell's Queen once more to know
That She had heart to feel for others' woe!—
For her Lord to see, transfigured, ere a crown
Burned on her brow, the maid he had brought down
To Hell; and she answering his eyes, cried:
"Minstrel, depart in peace, and with thy Bride!"
The Manes registered the high decree,
Adding that, since no mortal eyes may see
Spirit take flesh, Orpheus must be resigned,
Till Earth was reached, never to look behind.
And as they wrote and sealed what their Queen spoke,
From unseen instruments weird music broke,—
An owlet's hooting, a swan's dying cry—
A rapture near akin to agony.

Orpheus turned, or was led; more felt than heard—
Passing the gates—as when a babe has stirred,
Dreaming—a sigh; but, venturing no glance
Anywhere, or speech, walked as in a trance.
Save, as if strings snapt, the lyre stammered out
A spasm of jarred notes wandering about,
Nor glad nor sad; the harper scarce aware
Of the music that he made; or how far
He had gone, through what scenes of bale or bliss,
Since he quitted the royal halls of Dis;
Trembling only lest the whole dream might take
Flight, like his rapt girl-Bride, and he awake

To find himself, widowed, lost, as before,
Companionless upon the wild sea-shore.
And yet. Was it not breath, a woman's breath,
Fanning his cheeks? Could even unkind Death
Have the heart to cheat, with the goal so near?
Was not the light he saw day's, warm and clear?
And, sure, the landscape spread before his view
Was of meadows and woods, all which he knew?
Phantoms, begone! Here was his spring-tide come,
And his Bride with him, out of Hades, home!
Sudden, an avalanche—compound—Earth, Hell—
Long chained—irresistible passion—fell,
Defying thought, fear! his hand left the string
But just caressed; his throat forbore to sing—
That he might clasp and kiss;—one look behind!
A world of travail scattered to the wind!

Heav'n forgives seven sins if love the cause;
The plea doubles guilt when Hell's the brok'n laws.
Hark how the grinning host of demons howls!
And oh! the crash pealing over Hell's pools!
Naught heard he, but that cried Eurydice,—
Regained, re-lost:
“Alas! for Me and Thee!
I feel hands, the inexorable Fates,
Speeding back within the Infernal gates;
My swimming eyes, just tasting of Earth's light,
I know are being sealed by a large Night.
See! how I stretch vain arms around, and grope
For thee in darkness, hoping without hope!
E'en now how lightly should I life resign,

Could I remember I had once been thine!"
Silence! From sight, hearing, passed she apart,
Leaving measureless void within his heart.
He ran, striving to clutch a ghost in vain;
Pursuing with vain words; never again
Looked he upon her; nor could he prevail
Upon Hell's Ferryman to let him scale
The walls, swimming the moat, and again win,
By weeping, or by music, his way in,
Then move or force its warders to restore
His stolen Bride to his fond arms once more.
Poor Ghost! No third time destined she to float
Over foul Styx in Charon's crazy boat!
But, hapless, doomed to swell the cavalcades
Of lifeless bodies, and of fleshless shades;
Nor one, nor other she; just borne along,
Drift on the tide—refrain to an old song—
Yet, flickering, like shadows on a wall,
Or rainbow gleaming from a water-fall,
A throb, a thrill, a joy though set in dole—
For Lethe could not wash away the whole—
That she reward had been of each sharp pang
By Orpheus borne, theme of each song he sang.

Conscious if voiceless, she. And he? The lyre
Which, while its master hoped, had quenched its fire,
Was ever confidant of his despair,
The instrument commissioned to declare
His wrongs. They tell who know, that in a cave
Humid and bare, desolate as new grave,
At the foot of a tall cliff, hung with ice,

By Strymon's gloomy waters, for full twice
A hundred days and nights, singing he wept;
Like a nightingale cruelly bereft
Of all her young ones in the poplar grove,
With nothing for her any more to love,
Or live for, but to gaze upon her nest,
And mourn, the night through, all she once possessed,
Till overflows the wood where she complains,
With the sweet melancholy of her strains.
So longed he, and so played; changing at times
To lands yet lonelier, and harsher climes;
Arctic ice-fields crossed, forded snowy Don,
Camped on Scythian heaths, where yews keep-on
Eternal pall of frost;—always in quest
Of postern into Hell, whence he might wrest
Audience of its Lords, and with his tale
Of unreal gifts, all pre-ordained to fail,
Oblige them to repeat for very shame
A boon Hell granted only to reclaim.
No more than this? This his one hope and theme?
This, sum of his powers? And this a dream!
A dream? And yet the key—magic of Art!—
Which could unlock at will a tiger's heart,
And, as notes rose and fell in cadence, made
Triumphal arches of each sylvan glade;
For true passion a hearing eye commands,
And speaks a tongue all Nature understands.
No more than that it had killed care to bless
More than one life, and left a wilderness!
And that it fell on Virgil to recall

A legend—would that it lied!—how, when all
The land's women, Bacchus-fired, and distraught
By hymns that Orpheus in glad days had taught,
Had pressed him into the wild dance they led
Nightly through torch-lit forests, and he fled
In horror, as at treason to his love,
They, infuriate more the more he strove,
Followed, reckless of all but the mad chase,
Down to the Hebrus from the hills of Thrace,
And tore him limb from limb: but still the tongue,
As the wild current rolled the head along,
Called on "Eurydice"; and till the sea
Received it, bank to bank returned "Eurydice"!

Pardon, my Master, if I've dared re-think
A thought, or, standing on the outer brink
Of a deep pool, would with a pebble thrown
Measure your depth of feeling by my own.
But You the cause, the tempter;—who could read
A tale like yours, and not pursue each deed
From impulse to the act—complete a scene
With such small details as there may have been?
So cunningly you made romance to live—
I trespassed on your stage; You must forgive!