

# Orpheus



*from D'Aulaires' Book of Greek Myths*

- 1 Orpheus' music was joyful and gay, for he was in love with Euridice, a sweet young maiden, and she loved him in return. On the day of their wedding, his songs swelled out, filled with happiness as his bride danced on light feet through the meadow. Suddenly, she trod on a snake and sank to the ground, dead of its poisonous bite. Hermes gently closed her eyes and led her away to the underworld. No more songs came from Orpheus' throat, no more tunes rang out from his lyre. All joy had gone out of his life. He had to have his Euridice back.
- 2 Weeping and grieving, Orpheus wandered about searching for an entrance to Hades, and when at the end of the world he found it, he did what no living man had ever done before: he went down to the realm of the dead to beg for the return of his beloved. His music had power to move hard rocks; it might also move the cold heart of Hades. Hope gave him back his songs, and playing and singing, he walked down the dark, steep path.
- 3 His silvery voice floated down through the dark like a gentle summer breeze and its magic moved the iron gates of Hades. They sprang open and let him in, and Cerberus, the three-headed watchdog, lay down at his feet and let him pass. The whole dark underworld stilled and listened to Orpheus' music as he entered the realm of the dead singing about his great love, begging to have his Euridice back. The fluttering souls hushed. Those condemned to eternal pains stopped groaning, and their torturers, the avenging furies, the Erinyes, dropped their whips and wept tears of blood.
- 4 Hades, the pitiless king of the dead, sat on his black marble throne with Queen Persephone at his side. Even he was so moved by the music that tears rolled down his sallow cheeks and cold Persephone sobbed. Her heart was so touched that she turned to her husband and begged him to let Euridice go back to the sunny world above. Hades gave his consent, but he made one condition: Orpheus must not look at his bride before they reached the realm of the living. She would walk behind him, but if he turned, and looked at her, she must return to the underworld.
- 5 Overcome with joy, Orpheus started up the dark path, and as his music faded into the distance, gloom again descended over the underworld. The way was long, and as Orpheus walked on and on, doubt began to creep into his mind. Had Hades deceived him? Were the sounds he heard behind him really Euridice's footsteps? He had almost reached the upper world, and could already see a dim light ahead, when he could bear his doubts no longer. He had to turn and see if she really was there. He saw her sweet face, but only for an instant, for again Hermes appeared at her side.

He turned her about and led her back to the dark gloom below. Faintly, Orpheus heard her whisper farewell. He had lost her forever through his lack of faith.

6 Orpheus never again found joy on earth. He wandered into the wilderness to grieve in solitude. He sang, but now his songs were so mournful that tears trickled down the cheeks of wild beasts and the willows wept.

7 A band of wild nymphs stormed through the woods shouting to Orpheus to join them. They yelled and carried on so loudly that they could not hear his silvery voice and were not touched by its magic. They wanted him to dance with them, but he had no heart for their revelry, and in a fury they threw themselves over him. They tore him to pieces and tossed his body into a river. The river stopped its gurgling to listen, for the haunting voice of Orpheus still issued forth from his dead lips as he floated down to the open sea.

8 The Muses grieved over him. They searched the sea till they found his body on the shores of the island of Lesbos. There they gave him a proper funeral, and at last he could rejoin his beloved Euridice as a flitting ghost in the underworld.