

"I see the boat of the dead, and Charon standing with his hand upon the pole, who calleth me, saying, 'Hasten; thou delayest us'; and then again, 'A winged messenger of the dead looketh at me from under his dark eyebrows, and would lead me away. Dost thou not see him?'"

Then, after this, she seemed now ready to die, yet again she gathered strength, and said to the King:

"Listen, and I will tell thee before I die what I would have thee do. Thou knowest how I have given my life for thy life. For when I might have lived, and had for my husband any prince of Thessaly that I would, and dwelt here in wealth and royal state, yet could I not endure to be widowed of thee and that thy children should be fatherless. Therefore I spared not myself, though thy father and mother betrayed thee. But the gods have ordered all this after their own pleasure. So be it. Do thou therefore make this recompense, which indeed thou owest to me, for what will not a man give for his life? Thou lovest these children even as I love them. Suffer them then to be rulers in this house, and bring not a stepmother over them who shall hate them and deal with them unkindly. A son, indeed, hath a tower of strength in his father. But, O my daughter, how shall it fare with thee, for thy mother will not give thee in marriage, nor be with thee, comforting thee when a mother most showeth kindness and love. And now farewell, for I die this day. And thou, too, farewell, my husband. Thou lovest a true wife, and ye, too, my children, a true mother."

Then Admetus made answer:

"Fear not, it shall be as thou wilt. I could not find other wife fair and well born and true as thou. Never

more shall I gather revellers in my palace, or crown my head with garlands, or hearken to the voice of music. Never shall I touch the harp or sing to the Libyan flute. And some cunning craftsman shall make an image fashioned like unto thee, and this I will hold in my arms and think of thee. Cold comfort indeed, yet that shall ease somewhat of the burden of my soul. But oh! that I had the voice and melody of Orpheus, for then had I gone down to Hell and persuaded the Queen thereof or her husband with my song to let thee go; nor would the watch-dog of Pluto, nor Charon that ferrieth the dead, have hindered me but that I had brought thee to the light. But do thou wait for me there, for there will I dwell with thee; and when I die they shall lay me by thy side, for never was wife so true as thou."

Then said Alcestis:

"Take these children as a gift from me, and be as a mother to them."

"O me!" he cried, "what shall I do, being bereaved of thee?"

And she said:

"Time will comfort thee; the dead are as nothing."

But he said:

"Nay, but let me depart with thee."

But the Queen made answer:

"'Tis enough that I die in thy stead."

And when she had thus spoken she gave up the ghost.

Then the King said to the old men that were gathered together to comfort him:

"I will see to this burial. And do ye sing a hymn as is meet to the god of the dead. And to all my people I make this decree; that they mourn for this woman, and clothe themselves in black, and shave their heads, and

that such as have horses cut off their manes, and that there be not heard in the city the voice of the flute or the sound of the harp for the space of twelve months."

Then the old men sang the hymn as they had been bidden. And when they had finished, it befell that Hercules, who was on a journey, came to the palace and asked whether King Admetus was sojourning there.

And the old men answered:

"'Tis even so, Hercules. But what, I pray thee, bringeth thee to this land?"

"I am bound on an errand for King Eurystheus; even to bring back to him horses of King Diomed."

"How wilt thou do this? Dost thou not know this Diomed?"

"I know naught of him, nor of his land."

"Thou wilt not master him or his horses without blows."

"Even so, yet I may not refuse the tasks that are set to me."

"Thou art resolved then to do this thing or to die?"

"Ay; and this is not the first race that I have run."

"Thou wilt not easily bridle these horses."

"Why not? They breathe not fire from their nostrils."

"No, but they devour the flesh of men."

"What sayest thou? This is the food of wild beasts, not of horses."

"Yet 'tis true. Thou wilt see their mangers foul with blood."

"And the master of these steeds, whose son is he?"

"He is son of Ares, lord of the land of Thrace."

"Now this is a strange fate and a hard that maketh me fight ever with the sons of Ares, with Lycaon first

and with Cynus next, and now with this King Diomed. But none shall ever see the son of Alcmena trembling before an enemy."

And now King Admetus came forth from the palace. And when the two had greeted one another, Hercules would fain know why the King had shaven his hair as one that mourned for the dead. And the King answered that he was about to bury that day one that was dear to him.

And when Hercules inquired yet further who this might be, the King said that his children were well, and his father also, and his mother. But of his wife he answered so that Hercules understood not that he spake of her. For he said that she was a stranger by blood, yet near in friendship, and that she had dwelt in his house, having been left an orphan of her father. Nevertheless

Hercules would have departed and found entertainment elsewhere, for he would not be troublesome to his host. But the King suffered him not. And to the servant that stood by he said:

"Take thou this guest to the guest-chamber; and see that they that have charge of these matters set abundance of food before him. And take care that ye shut the doors between the chambers and the palace; for it is not meet that the guest at his meal should hear the cry of them that mourn."

And when the old men would know why the King, having so great a trouble upon him, yet entertained a guest, he made answer:

"Would ye have commended me the more if I had caused him to depart from this house and this city? For my sorrow had not been one whit the less, and I had lost the praise of hospitality. And a right worthy

host is he to me if ever I chance to visit the land of Argos."

And now they had finished all things for the burying of Alcestis, when the old man Pheres, the father of the King, approached, and servants came with him bearing robes and crowns and other adornments wherewith to do honour to the dead. And when he was come over against the bier whereon they laid the dead woman, he spake to the King, saying:

"I am come to mourn with thee, my son, for thou hast lost a noble wife. Only thou must endure, though this indeed is a hard thing. But take these adornments, for it is meet that she should be honoured who died for thee, and for me also, that I should not go down to the grave childless." And to the dead he said, "Fare thee well, noble wife, that hast kept this house from falling. May it be well with thee in the dwellings of the dead!"

But the King answered him in great wrath:

"I did not bid thee to this burial, nor shall this dead woman be adorned with gifts of thine. Who art thou that thou shouldest bewail her? Surely thou art not father of mine. For being come to extreme old age, yet thou wouldst not die for thy son, but sufferedst this woman, being a stranger in blood, to die for me. Her, therefore, I count father and mother also. Yet this had been a noble deed for thee, seeing that the span of life that was left to thee was short. And I, too, had not been left to live out my days thus miserably, bereaved of her whom I loved. Hast thou not had all happiness, thus having lived in kingly power from youth to age? And thou wouldst have left a son to come after thee, that thy house should not be spoiled by thine enemies. Have I not always done due reverence to thee and to

my mother? And, lo! this is the recompense that ye make me. Wherefore I say to thee, make haste and raise other sons who may nourish thee in thy old age, and pay thee due honour when thou art dead, for I will not bury thee. To thee I am dead."

Then the old man spake:

"Thinkest thou that thou art driving some Lydian and Phrygian slave that hath been bought with money, and forgettest that I am a freeborn man of Thessaly, as my father was freeborn before me? I reared thee to rule this house after me; but to die for thee, that I owed thee not. This is no custom among the Greeks that a father should die for his son. To thyself thou livest or diest. All that was thy due thou hast received of me; the kingdom over many people, and, in due time, broad lands which I also received of my father. How have I wronged thee? Of what have I defrauded thee? I ask thee not to die for me; and I die not for thee. Thou lovest to behold this light. Thinkest thou that thy father loveth it not? For the years of the dead are very long; but the days of the living are short yet sweet withal. But I say to thee that thou hast fled from thy fate in shameless fashion, and hast slain this woman. Yea, a woman hath vanquished thee, and yet thou chargest cowardice against me. In truth, 'tis a wise device of thine that thou mayest live forever, if marrying many times, thou canst still persuade thy wife to die for thee. Be silent, then, for shame's sake; and if thou lovest life, remember that others love it also."

So King Admetus and his father reproached each other with many unseemly words. And when the old man had departed, they carried forth Alcestis to her burial.

Heroines Every Child Should Know

But when they that bare the body had departed, there came in the old man that had the charge of the guest-chambers, and spake, saying:

"I have seen many guests that have come from all the lands under the sun to this palace of Admetus, but never have I given entertainment to such evil guest as this. For first, knowing that my lord was in sore trouble and sorrow, he forebore not to enter these gates. And then he took his entertainment in most unseemly fashion; for if he lacked aught he would call loudly for it; and then, taking a great cup wreathed with leaves of ivy in his hands, he drank of red wine untempered with water. And when the food had warmed him, he crowned his head with myrtle boughs, and sang in the vilest fashion. Then might one hear two melodies, this fellow's songs, which he sang without thought for the troubles of my lord and the lamentation wherewith we servants lamented our mistress. But we suffered not this stranger to see our tears, for so my lord had commanded. Surely this is a grievous thing that I must entertain this stranger, who surely is some thief or robber. And meanwhile they have taken my mistress

to her grave, and I followed not after her, nor reached my hand to her, that was as a mother to all that dwell in this place."

When the man had so spoken, Hercules came forth from the guest-chamber, crowned with myrtle, and his face flushed with wine. And he cried to the servant, saying:

"Ho, there! why lookest thou so solemn and full of care? Thou shouldst not scowl on thy guest after this fashion, being full of some sorrow that concerns thee not nearly. Come hither, and I will teach thee to be

wiser. Knowest thou what manner of thing the life of a man is? I trow not. Hearken therefore. There is not a man who knoweth what a day may bring forth. Therefore I say to thee: Make glad thy heart; eat, drink, count the day that now is to be thine own, but all else to be doubtful. As for all other things, let them be, and hearken to my words. Put away this great grief that lieth upon thee, and enter into this chamber. Right soon shall I ease thee of these gloomy thoughts. As thou art a man, be wise after the fashion of a man; for to them that are of a gloomy countenance, life, if only I judge rightly, is not life but trouble only."

Then the servant answered:

"All this I know; but we have fared so ill in this house that mirth and laughter ill beseem us."

"But they tell me that this dead woman was a stranger. Why shouldst thou be so troubled, seeing that they who rule this house yet live?"

"How sayest thou that they live? Thou knowest not what trouble we endure."

"I know it, unless thy lord strangely deceived me."

"My lord is given to hospitality."

"And should it hinder him that there is some stranger dead in the house?"

"A stranger, sayest thou? 'Tis passing strange to call her thus."

"Hath thy lord then suffered some sorrow that he told thee not?"

"Even so, or I had not loathed to see thee at thy revels. Thou seest this shaven hair and these black robes."

"What then? Who is dead? One of thy lord's children, or the old man, his father?"

"Stranger, 'tis the wife of Admetus that is dead."

"What sayest thou? And yet he gave me entertainment?"

"Yea, for he would not, for shame, turn thee from his house."

"O miserable man, what a helpmeet thou hast lost!"

"Ay, and we are all lost with her."

"Well I knew it; for I saw the tears in his eyes, and his head shaven, and his sorrowful regard; but he deceived me, saying that the dead woman was a stranger. Therefore did I enter the doors and make merry, and crown myself with garlands, not knowing what had befallen my host. But, come, tell me; where doth he bury her? Where shall I find her?"

"Follow straight along the road that leadeth to Larissa, and thou shalt see her tomb in the outskirts of the city."

Then said Hercules to himself:

"O my heart, thou hast dared many great deeds before this day; and now most of all must I show myself a true son of Zeus. Now will I save this dead woman Alcestis, and give her back to her husband, and make due recompense to Admetus. I will go, therefore, and watch for this black-robed king, even Death. Methinks

I shall find him nigh unto the tomb, drinking the blood of the sacrifices. There will I lie in wait for him, and run upon him, and throw my arms about him, nor shall anyone deliver him out of my hands, till he have given up to me this woman. But if it chance that I find him not there, and he come not to the feast of blood, I will go down to the Queen of Hell, to the land where the sun shineth not, and beg her of the Queen; and doubtless she will give her to me, that I may give her to

her husband. Right nobly did he entertain me, and drave me not from his house, for all that he had been stricken by such sorrow. Is there a man in Thessaly, nay in the whole land of Greece, that is such a lover of hospitality? I trow not. Noble is he, and he shall know that he is no ill friend to whom he hath done this thing."

So Hercules went his way. And when he was gone Admetus came back from the burying of his wife, a great company following him, of whom the elders sought to comfort him in his sorrow. And when he was come to the gates of his palace he cried:

"How shall I enter thee? how shall I dwell in thee? Once I came within thy gates with many pine-torches from Pelion, and the merry noise of the marriage song, holding in my hand the hand of her that is dead; and after us followed a troop that magnified her and me, so noble a pair we were. And now with wailing instead of marriage songs, and garments of black for white wedding robes, I go to my desolate couch."

But while he yet lingered before the palace Hercules came back, leading with him a woman that was covered with a veil. And when he saw the King, he said:

"I hold it well to speak freely to one that is a friend, and that a man should not hide a grudge in his heart. Hear me, therefore. Though I was worthy to be counted thy friend, yet thou saidst not that thy wife lay dead in thy house, but suffered me to feast and make merry. For this, therefore, I blame thee. And now I will tell thee why I am returned. I pray thee, keep this woman against the day when I shall come back from the land of Thrace, bringing the horses of King Diomed. And if it should fare ill with me, let her abide here and serve