

Did Helen fall in love with Paris and agree to elope with him? Or was she kidnapped and kept a prisoner in Troy for ten years?

Neither, according to one myth. This odd version states that though Helen was kidnapped, she never made it to Troy. On the way, Paris and Helen stopped in Egypt. A king there rescued Helen and kept her safely in his country for ten years. Finally, at the end of the war, her husband retrieved her.

Meanwhile, Paris continued on to Troy with a phantom Helen. So the great Trojan War wasn't even fought over a real woman!

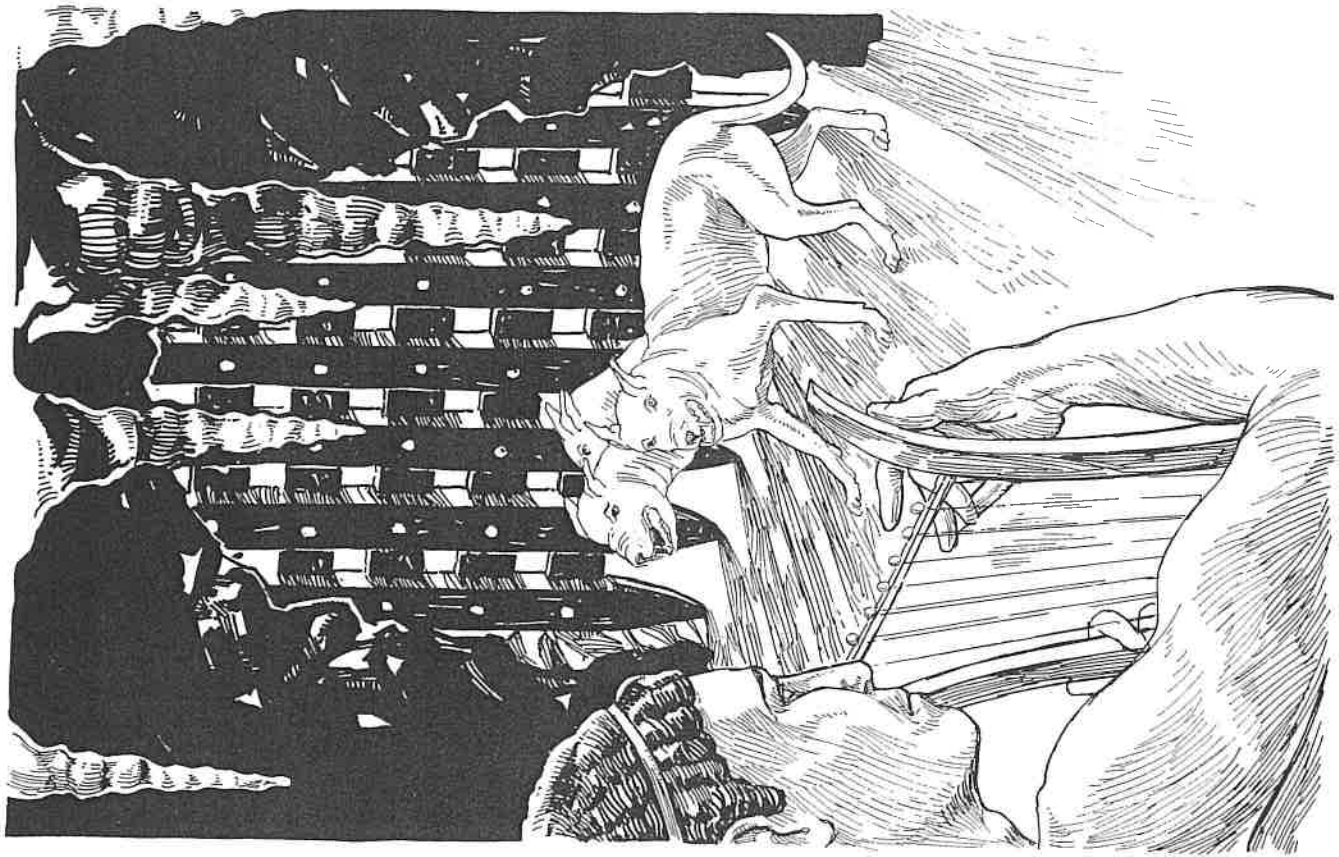
The story above is also said to explain Homer's blindness. Legends say that Homer was the poet who put *The Iliad*—the story of the Trojan War—into final form. In Homer's version, Helen willingly goes with Paris to Troy. Some Greeks who argued that she had been kidnapped said Homer was struck blind for this lie.

ORPHEUS AND EURYDICE

VOCABULARY PREVIEW

Below is a list of words that appear in the story. Read the list and get to know the words before you start the story.

captivated—charmed; fascinated
compelling—forceful; persuasive; moving
console—comfort; cheer up
decreed—ordered; ruled
doom—death or fate
irrational—unreasonable; crazy
irresistible—tempting; overpowering
mesmerized—hypnotized; entranced
mourned—felt sorrow; cried over
omen—sign; warning
rerieved—given relief
reverie—daydream
riddled—pierced
shun—avoid; deliberately ignore
slither—glide; slip and slide
spite—offend; irritate
surly—unfriendly; grouchy
treacherous—dangerous; unsafe
vile—disgusting; unpleasant
woeful—sad; heartbreaking



ORPHEUS *and* EURYDICE

*How far would you go
to save someone you loved?
To hell and back?*

*That's the choice the young husband
in this story faces.*

*Yet while he may conquer his fear,
he can't conquer something
more likely to defeat him:
his undying love.*

On a hillside in Thrace,
Orpheus sang happily to the
world.¹

*Sing streams! My bride approaches.
Sing hills! Shake out your folds.
Sing woods! Dance for my lady.
Sing sun! Spread your robe of gold.
Sing all! Eurydice² is mine!*

¹(thrās) (or' fūs or or' fē us)

²(ū rīd' i sē)

As he sang, the trees lifted up their branches to hear him. A clear stream bubbled up in response. All the wild animals nearby stopped to listen.

Orpheus was famous for his charming music and enchanting voice. It is no surprise that he developed such talents. His goddess mother, Calliope,³ was the guardian of poetry. She was also known for her lovely voice.

Orpheus' father was Oeagrus,⁴ king of Thrace. But some people hinted that he was really the son of Apollo,⁵ the god of music and poetry. In any case, the great Apollo gave the infant Orpheus a splendid lyre.⁶

As Orpheus grew, he learned to sing and play wonderful melodies. In fact, every person, animal, and thing in nature loved him for his music. No wonder the nymph⁷ Eurydice fell in love with him. And Orpheus found Eurydice just as irresistible. She was so beautiful, kind, and faithful. It wasn't long before they set a date for their wedding.

The day of the joyful event arrived. A huge crowd gathered to witness the wedding. Everywhere, a sweet odor of incense and flowers filled the air.

After the ceremony, the wedding feast began. The beaming groom and bride moved among the guests, trading happy words.

Then Orpheus noticed Hymen,⁸ the god of marriage, standing apart from the crowd. "Eurydice," said Orpheus, "Hymen is here. Shall we greet him?"

Eurydice stared at the god. "He doesn't look happy, my love. Maybe we should leave him alone."

"Of course not!" exclaimed Orpheus. "It would be bad manners for us to **shun** him. He might be angry if we avoided him."

³ (ka lī' ō pē)

⁴ (ē' a grus)

⁵ (a pol' lō)

⁶ A lyre is a small, hand-held harp.

⁷ (nimf) A nymph is a female spirit that can take many forms, including human form. Nymphs live in the forests and waters.

⁸ (hī' men)

So hand in hand, the newlyweds approached the god. As they drew closer, Hymen held up his bridal torch. The glare startled the couple, but they did not turn away. Still, they gripped each other's hands more tightly.

"Greetings, wise god," Orpheus said respectfully.

"What blessings have you brought us?" Eurydice asked as cheerfully as she could. Yet she suspected something was wrong.

The god said nothing. Instead, he stared at the couple with a hopeless look.

Suddenly Hymen's torch began smoking. It filled the air with a burning cloud, bringing tears to the couple's eyes. Then Hymen spoke. "I am sorry to bring you this unlucky omen. I fear it means your time together on earth will last but a brief moment."

The god waved his torch and then disappeared.

Eurydice gazed sadly at her husband. In her heart, she felt that the god's warning was true.

Orpheus guessed what Eurydice was feeling. Softly he stroked her hair and tried to console her.

"The god must be mistaken," he said. "And if he is not, I will ask the great Apollo for help. Besides, our love is strong. We can overcome any tragedy."

"Perhaps you are right," Eurydice said as calmly as possible. "Well, for now, let's put all sad thoughts aside. Our friends are waiting."

Eurydice said these words bravely, but she didn't really believe them. She felt certain Hymen's prophecy would come to pass.

The newlyweds returned to the feast. They received many blessings from their guests. Then the wine flowed, and everyone celebrated loudly. With all the merriment, the couple seemed to forget the god's words.

In the following days, neither Orpheus nor Eurydice mentioned the omen. In fact, Orpheus did not ask Apollo for help. But just as Hymen predicted, tragedy struck.

It happened one day not long after the wedding. Eurydice

was walking in the meadows near her home. Aristaeus,⁹ son of a water nymph, was also out in the meadows. He was tending a herd of cattle when he spied Eurydice.

Aristaeus stared in wonder at Eurydice. Her beauty left him breathless. He was **captivated** by her graceful movements as she stepped lightly with bare feet.

"Such beauty!" Aristaeus exclaimed. "She must be mine!" He immediately ran after Eurydice.

Eurydice heard the noise behind her and turned. When she saw a man following, panic seized her. At once she fled for home.

The graceful Eurydice quickly left Aristaeus behind. But in her fright, she forgot that her feet were bare. She did not remember to look where she ran.

Even as Eurydice neared home, she felt a painful sting on one foot. When she looked down, she gasped. On the ground, she saw a dreadful snake **slither** away.

The poison from the snake's bite quickly spread through poor Eurydice's body. Too weak even to walk, she slumped among the flowers. "Orpheus, my love," she whispered. Then death took her.

Evening came, and Orpheus grew worried about Eurydice's long absence. He set out to search for his wife. All too soon he discovered her lifeless body in the meadows.

Orpheus was overcome with grief. He brought his wife's body home and **mourned** for days. No one could console him. Even at Eurydice's funeral, Orpheus hardly spoke to his friends who offered support. Instead, he let his lyre speak for him. He played a hauntingly sad song that brought everyone to tears.

But after the funeral, Orpheus put his lyre away and refused to play. For a long time, he suffered in miserable silence. He even thought of taking his own life. Yet how could he be sure that in death he would rejoin his beloved Eurydice?

Then one day, a thought struck him. "I'll go to the Under-

⁹(ar'is tē'us)

world!" he cried out. "I'll bring Eurydice back!"

Orpheus decided to set out at once. He was determined to see the king and queen of the Lower Regions. Surely Pluto and his wife Proserpina would return Eurydice to him.¹⁰ Even the mightiest of gods respected the power of love.

Before starting out the door, Orpheus paused. Then he turned to a small chest and drew out his lyre. Orpheus well knew how dangerous his journey would be. Even a sword would probably be useless. But the power of his music could tame every creature on earth. Perhaps it would serve him in the Underworld as well.

The descent to the Lower Regions was terrifying. Orpheus entered a cave and made his way down a dark, gloomy passage. At the end of the passage stood the great, heavy gates of the Underworld. There a fierce, three-headed dog stood guard. From his mouth flowed a **vile**, black liquid. Cerberus!¹¹

Orpheus knew he would be attacked if he did not take quick action. The only thing he could think to do was to play a soothing song. So he took up his lyre and plucked it softly.

The tune quickly **mesmerized** the dog-monster. He relaxed and lay down to rest.

"Good night, pup," Orpheus said. He patted Cerberus on the back and hurriedly entered the gates of Pluto's kingdom.

Soon Orpheus found himself at the edge of a misty river. On the bank stood dozens of moaning and wailing souls.

"Charon,¹² won't you take me now!" one soul cried.

"Help me, Charon. Let me join my family on the other side!" another soul pleaded.

Orpheus turned and looked in the direction they were shouting. He saw an old man in a boat come into view on the river.

¹⁰(plū' tō) (pro ser' pi na)

¹¹(ser' ber us)

¹²(ka' ron)

"So this is Charon," thought Orpheus. "So this is the famous ferryman who took spirits across the river, deeper into the Underworld."

"Fools! You know I cannot take you yet!" Charon yelled. Indeed, he could not. These poor souls had not been properly buried. So each had to wait a hundred years before crossing. Such was the law Pluto had decreed.

With his strong voice, Orpheus managed to make his own words heard. "But you will take *me* now, Charon," he said boldly. "I am the son of a goddess. I come from the land of the living to see Pluto and Proserpina."

"I have no duty to take you!" Charon shouted back. "You people from earth come here too often, asking too much. Now I have work to do. I must take across the souls who rightfully belong in the Underworld. Go back to your home! You'll return here soon enough, anyway, mortal. For once and for all."

"Perhaps so. But I still wish to cross," replied Orpheus. "Perhaps if I paid you with a tune?"

At that, Orpheus took out his lyre and played an enchanting melody. For a moment, the poor souls on the bank forgot their sorrow. Even Charon's heart melted. The **surly** old man took Orpheus across the river without another protest.

"Thank you, old man," Orpheus said when they reached the shore. "I shall always remember this."

"You are quite welcome. Good luck on your quest," Charon replied.

Orpheus hurried on deeper into the land of the dead. Though he had heard rumors of the mysteries here, he was still astonished. In a place called the Elysian¹³ Fields, he found a glorious paradise. Orpheus anxiously peered through the gates, searching for Eurydice among those happy souls. But he couldn't spot her there.

As Orpheus continued on his way, some terrible cries came to his ears. Ah, he could guess who those unhappy

¹³(e lizh' i an)

souls were! He knew they must be the damned. These mortals and gods had committed crimes or foolishly angered the gods. They were all now confined in Tartarus,¹⁴ the blackest place in the Lower Regions.

As he passed this place of horror, Orpheus saw Tantalus.¹⁵ This evil king had committed several crimes to **spite** the gods. He had even dared kill his own son and serve the boy's flesh to the Olympians.¹⁶

Now Tantalus stood in a lake of water, surrounded by trees of tempting fruit. Yet whenever he tried to pick some fruit, the branches pulled away. And when he bent down to drink water, a wave drew it back. The miserable man looked sadly at Orpheus as he passed by.

Orpheus next came to a hill where he saw Sisyphus.¹⁷ This crafty man had stolen, raped, and murdered. He'd also insulted and betrayed the gods. For these crimes, he was sentenced to roll a heavy stone up a hill over and over again.

Another mortal who murdered and schemed against the gods was King Ixion. Ixion foolishly tried to rape Juno, queen of the gods.¹⁸ His punishment was to be tied to an endlessly spinning wheel and whipped with snakes.

Orpheus also saw the Danaids.¹⁹ He knew the story of these forty-nine sisters, who had all married on the same day. These hard-hearted women had then murdered their husbands that night.

In the Underworld, the sisters were punished by having to carry water in jars **riddled** with holes. Theirs was an endless task since the water ran out as fast as the jars were filled.

Orpheus finally arrived at the throne of King Pluto and Queen Proserpina.

¹⁴(tar' tar us)

¹⁵(tan' ta lus)

¹⁶(ō lim' pi anz) The twelve major Greek gods were known as the Olympians after the place where many of them lived: Mt. Olympus.

¹⁷(sis' i fus)

¹⁸(ik si' on) (jū' nō)

¹⁹(dan' ā idz)

"Please, my king and queen," Orpheus addressed the astonished pair. "Please listen to me. My name is Orpheus and this is my story."

With that he played a **woeful** song about Eurydice's death and his own suffering.

*O mighty gods of the Underworld,
We mortals live on earth but a day.
Yet even that fleeting moment grows long
When loved ones are taken away.*

*Dear gods, my Eurydice left the cup untouched.
The sweet bud was cut before she bloomed.
Now I sleep, between tears and sighs,
Dreaming of my love and her cruel doom.*

*King Pluto, you know the pain of longing
When fair Proserpina leaves your side.²⁰
So return my bride to me for a while.
Bathe my wounded heart in a joyous tide.*

As Orpheus sang, some wonderful things happened. The Danaids paused to listen, and the water in their jars stopped flowing. Ixion's wheel ground to a halt. Sisyphus' stone stopped rolling. For the first time in years he rested. Tantalus, too, was **retrieved**. The water in the lake stood still at long last, allowing him to drink. Even the Furies, the goddesses of revenge, wept for Orpheus.

Orpheus' song also touched the hearts of Pluto and Proserpina. "Your song is **compelling**," mighty Pluto said. "I cannot ignore such suffering, my friend. Eurydice is yours."

Orpheus could hardly believe what he was hearing. His sadness gave way to joy. But as he sprang forward to bless the god, Pluto held up a hand.

²⁰ Proserpina remained in the Lower Regions only part of the year. Her return to the upper world every year marked the beginning of spring. Her departure for the Underworld, on the other hand, signaled the start of winter.

"Eurydice is yours, but only under one condition," the god warned. "You may look once at her here. Then you must not look at her again until you lead her into the upper world. Do you think you can do this?"

"Oh yes, of course!" Orpheus agreed.

Eurydice was soon brought to Orpheus. The two lovers embraced and thanked the rulers of the Underworld. Then they set out on their journey to earth. Eurydice silently followed her faithful husband. Both were too overjoyed for words. They had actually overcome Hymen's prophecy! They quickly passed Tartarus and the Elysian Fields. Once at the river, Charon ferried them across without any protests. Orpheus was careful to sit in the front of the boat, while Eurydice sat at the back. In this way, he could not see his bride.

At the gates of Pluto's kingdom, Orpheus played his lyre for Cerberus. The dog-monster cheerfully let the happy couple pass.

Orpheus thought, "We only need to travel the dark passage up to earth now." His heart was bursting with gladness. In silence, he and Eurydice made their way through the **treacherous** tunnel.

Finally a ray of light from the earth shone on Orpheus. "At last!" he thought. "At last my wife and I will be together in the land of the living!" Then he stepped into the upper world.

Orpheus turned to take Eurydice's hand. Alas, in his eagerness, he forgot Pluto's words. For Eurydice was still in the passage and had not yet set foot on earth.

Orpheus immediately saw his mistake. "What have I done?" he cried.

Eurydice knew the sad answer to that. Lovingly, she held out her arms. Oh, if she could just hold her dear husband one last time! But she only grasped the air.

"Goodbye, my Orpheus. I'll always love you," Eurydice called out. But Orpheus barely heard her call his name. Already her spirit was being pulled back to the Underworld.

To the skies, Orpheus shouted, "No! Please, it can't be! Give me another chance!"

He turned and rushed back down the dark passage, straight back to the gates. This time, though, he could not get through. Cerberus threatened to attack him, his three vicious heads snapping at once. The dog would not be calmed, even though Orpheus played his lyre.

For seven days Orpheus tried to persuade the gods to let him pass through the gates. But they would not listen.

At last poor Orpheus returned to his home in Thrace. Day after day, he grieved. No one heard the sound of his lovely voice or lyre. He simply sat, mourning his dead wife. He knew he could never love another woman.

However, there were many women in Thrace who were attracted to Orpheus. Now that he had no wife, some of them hoped to marry him.

One of those who loved Orpheus was a Bacchante. The Bacchantes were female followers of Bacchus, the god of wine.²¹ They worshipped the god by drinking so much wine that they became crazy.

The Bacchante who loved Orpheus was determined to have him. She thought time would heal Orpheus' grief and make him ready to love again. "One day he will be mine!" she told another follower.

The Bacchante's chance came one day when Orpheus went to the hillsides. Orpheus took his lyre because he thought he might make music once again. When he came to a lovely spot, he sat down and thought of Eurydice. Before he knew it, he was playing a song for her.

Suddenly his song was interrupted by loud noises. Orpheus turned and saw a group of drunken Bacchantes dancing wildly nearby. Among them was the lovestruck Bacchante. And it wasn't long before she spied Orpheus.

She rushed at him madly. "At last, my love! I have waited weeks for you to appear," she shouted.

Orpheus was startled by this horrid, drunken woman. She

²¹(bak' kan tē) (bak' kus)

stank from too much wine.

"Please," Orpheus begged. "Respect my grief. Leave me alone with my thoughts."

"Your thoughts!" the woman shouted. "All you ever think of is your dead wife. But I can make you forget her," she said, grasping his arms.

Orpheus moved away. "Never! Until my dying days, she shall be the only woman for me. Now leave," Orpheus said firmly.

The woman became quite angry. And because she was drunk, she was very **irrational**. "You'll pay for this insult!" she hissed. Then she rushed away.

Orpheus was rid of her. Or at least so he believed. His thoughts drifted back to Eurydice. Again he began to play a song for her. Soon he was deep in **reverie**, happily playing his music. That is why he never noticed the Bacchante return with her friends until too late.

Under the angry Bacchante's directions, the women gathered in a circle. Then they began throwing spears and stones at Orpheus. But none of these missiles hurt Orpheus because his music protected him. The objects simply fell harmlessly around him.

The Bacchantes began to curse and scream angrily. "Who do you think you are?" yelled one.

"You cannot insult our sister like this!" shouted another. "You think you're quite a catch. But you're nothing!" called another.

Now their cries drowned out Orpheus' music. And the stones they threw began to hit him. Soon he was weak and bloody.

"O gods, save me from these mad women!" Orpheus gasped.

But it was too late. The savage Bacchantes closed in on Orpheus and tore his limbs from his body. Then they cut off his head and threw it, along with his lyre, into the river. From there, the head and lyre were carried to the island of

Lesbos.²² The Bacchantes also scattered his limbs and body in the hills near Thrace.

The Muses,²³ goddesses of the arts, soon heard of this tragic event. To honor the great musician, they rescued his lyre and placed it among the stars. To this day, it still shines brightly there.

Next, the Muses gathered Orpheus' body parts. Then they took him to Mount Olympus, home of the gods, for burial. There a nightingale is said to sing sweetly over his grave.

From such a shocking and sad end came happiness. Because the Muses had buried him properly, Orpheus' spirit was quickly admitted to see Pluto.

"Orpheus, you have been a faithful husband," the king said. "Now you and Eurydice shall be reunited forever in paradise."

As before, Eurydice was brought to Orpheus. They clung to each other, and Eurydice spoke. "My love, I knew you would return soon. Let us go now to the Elysian Fields."

So together, the lovers entered paradise. And there they will remain forever.

INSIGHTS

The myth of Orpheus and Eurydice is clearly from the Greeks. However, no Greek versions of the myth exist. Some of the first recorded versions are from the great Roman poets Ovid and Virgil.

But since its first appearance, the myth has been retold many times by artists. It has been especially popular in opera. Interestingly enough, many of these operas end happily. One—Offenbach's *Orpheus in the Underworld*—even treats the whole story in a comic way.

The Orpheus myth has also served as the subject for plays and movies. Tennessee Williams' version, *Orpheus Descending*, has been staged and filmed. A more strange production is Cocteau's *Orpheus*. This retelling features a motorcycle gang, a mysterious lady in black, and a mirror that is a doorway to Hell.

At one time, Orpheus became the center of a religious cult. In this cult, which lasted until the fourth century A.D., Orpheus served as a savior. In the form of a fisherman, he used a fishing line to take people on a trip through water. The trip helped awaken a person's mind and spirit. T.S. Eliot built his famous poem "The Waste Land" around this legend of Orpheus.

The religious cult still survives—in our vocabulary. The word *orphic* now means *mystical*.

continued

²² (les' bos)

²³ (müz' ez)