

# Tales from Ancient Greece

## 2. ORPHEUS AND EURYDICE

**HERMES** Ah! I could listen to the music of the lyre all day! I'm Hermes, messenger of the gods, but even if I'm flying on a really important mission, if I hear a lyre playing, I just have to stop and listen!

Mind you, I can never hear a lyre without remembering one particular player. And I'm not going to blub, but I wish I could have helped him more, stopped him making the terrible mistake he did. Let me tell you...

His name was Orpheus and he was the best lyre player ever. When he played, even the animals and birds would come and listen - all hypnotised by his music. As for the woodland nymphs - the spirits of the pools and trees - well, they all agreed:

**THE SPIRITS** Orpheus's music is the most beautiful in all the world!

**HERMES** One day, I saw Orpheus sit by a waterfall. I thought I'd go and have a private listen before all the animals turned up - and oh the music he played then was well, words fail me, which isn't something that happens very often. He was sitting under an oak tree that overhung the water, and suddenly I saw him look up. He was peering through the branches as if he'd seen something...

**EURYDICE** Play on, handsome youth, play on!

**HERMES** And there, sitting high up on a branch, half hidden, was the nymph of the oak tree.

**ORPHEUS** Who calls?

**EURYDICE** One who loves your music!

**ORPHEUS** Who might she be?

**EURYDICE** One who longs to hear it more! Play on!

**ORPHEUS** I'll play - if you come a little closer.

## 2: Orpheus and Eurydice

- HERMES                So she did. Down she came and sat on the lowest branch, her long hair, gold and bronze, woven with green oak leaves.
- ORPHEUS             What's your name?
- EURYDICE            Eurydice. And you are Orpheus, I know. Every nymph in the mountains knows you and the playing of your lyre. Play on - just for me!
- HERMES               Well you can guess what happened: he went back to the waterfall every day for a month and played for her...and before long, they were well and truly in love. On the first day of spring, they married and all nature seemed to celebrate.
- But spring gave way to summer and that's when it all went wrong. One baking hot day, Eurydice left Orpheus and went down to a river to bathe in the cool water. Hovering beneath a bristling pine was a swarm of bees...and I knew for certain who that would be - the god Aristeus. He's a clever god, is Aristeus, but a bit of a trouble-maker. Anyway, it was the bees that gave him away. As soon as I saw them I knew Aristeus was around, and I knew that would mean trouble. And suddenly...
- EURYDICE            Oh!!
- HERMES               ...the bees - Aristeus, that is - were swarming round her.
- EURYDICE            Get away! Ah!
- ARISTEUS            Perzzz! Zephzzz! Zzzzonezzzz!
- EURYDICE            Get off me! Orpheus, help!
- HERMES               But Orpheus was too far away to hear. So she did the only thing she could: she dived under the water and swam to the other side, thinking the bee-swarm wouldn't follow her. But as she clambered out on the other bank...Aristeus was already there...
- ARISTEUS            There'zzzz no ezzzcaped!
- EURYDICE            Ah!
- HERMES               She started running, trying to escape the bee-swarm and then I - because I was there - well, I was a bit of a hero, actually! Before he could catch her, I flew at the bee-swarm and thrashed it with my swift, winged boots. Aristeus was not best pleased...



- ARISTEUS Ah, Hermezzz! You've alwayzzz been a pezzzt! Curzezzz!
- HERMES By the time I'd finished with him, Eurydice was nowhere to be seen. So I let Aristeus buzz off, so to speak -
- ARISTEUS Curzzz you, Hermezzz! I'll get you for thizzz!
- HERMES - while I flew on to see if Eurydice was all right. I quickly spotted her hiding behind a rock...
- Oh no!
- But still she wasn't safe!
- EURYDICE Hermes, has it gone?
- HERMES The bee-swarm, yes, but look behind you!
- EURYDICE Ah!!!
- HERMES A venomous snake, small and shining black, was slithering over the stones with jaws spread wide!
- EURYDICE Help me!
- HERMES And before even I could get to it, it sank its fangs into her heel.
- EURYDICE Aaah!!!
- HERMES Eurydice!!!
- The snake was gone in a flash - vanished down a hole - and Eurydice oh, I knew at once. She collapsed and lay lifeless in the dust.
- EURYDICE Oh, Hermes I can feel the poison flowing to my heart! Tell my beloved Orpheus that my last thought was for the beauty of his music.
- ORPHEUS Eurydice!
- HERMES He's coming!
- ORPHEUS Eurydice, what's happened?
- EURYDICE Oh, Orpheus! Too late!



## 2: Orpheus and Eurydice

- ORPHEUS            Eurydice? No! Hermes, help her!
- HERMES            It's a snake-bite, it's deadly, there's nothing I can do.
- EURYDICE           My love.
- ORPHEUS           No! Eurydice!
- HERMES            After all the wonders of being alive, it's hard to find a bright side to being dead. The underworld's not a patch on this one - and that's where Eurydice was headed, straight to the dark lord, Hades, in the underworld, the land of the dead. There was only one thing to be done - and it was Orpheus, not me, who'd have to do it.
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- HERMES            So, Orpheus sat there, gazing through his tears at Eurydice, dead from the snake-bite.
- ORPHEUS           How can I live without her, Hermes? What will I do?
- HERMES            Make music. In time it will soothe your sorrow.
- ORPHEUS           You think I'll ever play music again, now that she's gone? My lyre will be as dead as my love! I'll throw it in the river!
- HERMES            Not so fast - you'll be needing it on your journey.
- ORPHEUS           What journey?
- HERMES            To the underworld. Go there yourself and bring Eurydice back.
- ORPHEUS           What?
- HERMES            Listen: Hades sends back Persephone - for part of the year at least. Plead with him to let Eurydice back, too. Maybe you can move him with your music.
- ORPHEUS           Move the god of the dead?
- HERMES            It's a long shot, I grant you, but you never know.



So, I talked Orpheus round and saw him on his way, lyre in hand, to start the journey to the underworld. I decided to go with him to help him out if I could - 'cause it wasn't going to be an easy ride.

First off, to get to the gate of the underworld, he'd have to cross the River Styx, which is guarded by a ferryman called Charon. He's a very old man, all scrawny and wizened, with a manky beard and a slobbery, toothless mouth; but don't be fooled - he's no push-over.

- CHARON           What brings you here, young man?
- ORPHEUS        I need your boat, good ferryman, to carry me to the other side.
- CHARON        You don't look very dead to me. And only the dead can cross the River Styx.
- HERMES         No, he is dead, honest - he's just taking a while to go off.
- CHARON        Who asked you? And what are you doing here, Hermes? Push off.
- HERMES         There's no need to be like that. I'm here to give positive vibes: he's a bit depressed about being dead.
- CHARON        Has he got his obol?
- HERMES         I beg your pardon.
- CHARON        His obol. Anyone who dies pays me an obol to ferry 'em across - that's the fare.
- HERMES         Ah, no, now, listen. He may not have an obol, but he's got something much better. You see his lyre?
- CHARON        What about it?
- HERMES         Well, you would not believe the sound he makes. If he played a tune for you, would you ferry him across?
- CHARON        You're havin' a laugh.
- HERMES         No, no, he's really good!
- CHARON        Are you seriously expectin' me to..? That - is -
- HERMES         The most beautiful sound you've ever heard?
- CHARON        It's, it's -
- HERMES         Indescribably wonderful?



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- CHARON            It's -
- HERMES           Even better than an obol?
- CHARON           Ye-e-e-eah...
- HERMES           Charon was in a trance. We jumped in his boat and he started rowing us across the River Styx. And when we hit the other bank, we hopped straight out before Charon realised what had happened.
- ORPHEUS          Thanks, good ferryman!
- CHARON           What? Here - how'd you manage that?
- HERMES           There was nothing he could do: we were on the other side! But the problems had only just begun: now we were faced with the gates to the underworld.
- ORPHEUS          They're wide open!
- HERMES           Oh yes, they're always open, always ready to welcome the dead.
- ORPHEUS          Come on, then!
- HERMES           The only trouble is -
- ORPHEUS          Oh!
- HERMES           Cerberus, the savage hound of Hades - king of the underworld - that guards the entrance to his kingdom. That racket might sound like three dogs, but actually it's only one. Which is puzzling, till you realise Cerberus has got three heads and that's an awful lot of teeth.
- ORPHEUS          Hermes! What are we going to do?
- HERMES           Play your lyre!
- ORPHEUS          What?
- HERMES           Well it worked before, on Charon. Maybe it'll work again!
- ORPHEUS          That's amazing! I think I've got a friend for life!



HERMES Nice, but watch out - with three tongues he might lick you to death. Come on!

And on we went - down, down into the underworld. Whatever was going to confront us next?!

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HERMES So there we were, Orpheus and I in the underworld, the gloomy land of the dead. It seemed even worse than the last time I was there. Even more dead spirits drifting around in the darkness, lost and sighing, but on we walked, all the way through the gloomy caverns, till we came to the great hall where Hades, king of the dead, sat on his dark throne. And Eurydice was sitting at his side.

EURYDICE Orpheus!

ORPHEUS Eurydice!

EURYDICE Oh, Orpheus! Listen to him, Hades. Listen to the music: the sounds of sun, and sky, and water, and laughter!

HERMES Orpheus began to play again and it was amazing: his music even got to Hades as well.

HADES Stop! No more! It's too beautiful for this dreadful place!

HERMES I saw tears streaming down his cheeks! And he looked at Eurydice sitting there heart-broken and she didn't need to say another word.

HADES Take her! Take Eurydice back to the world where she belongs!

EURYDICE / ORPHEUS Thank you! / Thank you, lord Hades!

HERMES But then I saw Hades' face darken, because it's never straight forward with him remember? And he said:

HADES On one condition.

ORPHEUS Lord?

HADES Eurydice will **follow** you out of the underworld.

ORPHEUS Follow me?



## 2: Orpheus and Eurydice

- HADES Yes. You will go ahead and lead the way and she will be behind. And you must not look back, or speak to her, until you are both once more in the world of the living.
- ORPHEUS Thank you, merciful lord!
- HADES Thank me? Perhaps! Remember: you must not turn to look at her until you reach the sunlight.
- ORPHEUS Follow me, Eurydice.
- EURYDICE I'll be behind you - don't look back!
- HERMES So, we started on our way, Orpheus leading through the dark, empty passageways - Eurydice behind - and me at his shoulder, making sure he didn't turn round. But he would keep on trying.
- Keep looking forward! She'll be there, don't worry!
- ORPHEUS But I can't hear her steps!
- HERMES Of course not - till we're back in the world, she's just a spirit - the ghost of Eurydice.
- ORPHEUS Perhaps Hades has deceived me - perhaps it's all a trick!
- HERMES It's no good thinking that - look forward and keep going! On we tramped, on and on up the winding passage...
- ORPHEUS Is she still there?
- HERMES Of course she is! Don't look!
- It seemed to be taking forever. But at last...
- ORPHEUS Ah! I can see a gleam of light!
- HERMES We're nearly there - keep going.
- ORPHEUS Is she really with us?
- HERMES She will be - don't look back!





ORPHEUS I can smell the air!

HERMES A few more steps and you'll be out!

ORPHEUS I'm there! The sun on my back, the wind in my hair!

HERMES She's still here in the passage - don't talk to her yet and don't look back.

ORPHEUS We're here, my love, in the living world!

HERMES No! Orpheus! Don't turn around!

ORPHEUS Give me your hand, Eurydice!

EURYDICE Orpheus, no!

HERMES Turn back! Quick!

EURYDICE Oh, Orpheus! What's happening? What have you done?

ORPHEUS Eurydice!

EURYDICE You've lost me now. I'm summoned back to the dark forever!

ORPHEUS No!!

HERMES And I saw her, there at the tunnel's mouth, almost in touching distance of his hand. But as he reached out -

ORPHEUS Eurydice!

HERMES - her eyelids closed, her arms fell limp -

EURYDICE Orpheus..!

HERMES - and like a shadow, she drifted back, deep, deep down into the dark



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ORPHEUS

Oh Hermes, what have I done?

HERMES

He'd lost her. She was gone forever - and all because he couldn't help looking back. He never played his lyre again...and never loved again. All Orpheus could think of was Eurydice.

All good and faithful, you might say. But you humans have only one life to live and the world is full of wonders. So I say, if the gods are against you and misfortune strikes, keep playing your music and keep looking forward.

