

When Apollo was Herdsman

by Caroyln Sherwin Bailey

Apollo had incurred the anger of his father, Jupiter, and for the very good reason that this god of light had interfered with Jupiter's will.

It was Jupiter's privilege to throw thunderbolts about whenever he wished and to strike down anyone he chose. He kept the Cyclopes busy night and day forging his bolts down under the mountains so that he might have a never-failing supply. One day a thunderbolt directed by Jove hit Aesculapius, a man of the Greeks who could heal almost any sickness among mortals by means of his herbs. Apollo looked upon this physician as an adopted son, because his art of healing brought so much joy and light to men. He resented the injury done him by Jupiter's hand and he did what even mortals do when they are angry; Apollo vented his wrath on whoever was handiest. He aimed his arrows at those innocent workmen, the Cyclopes, and wounded several.

Jupiter could not have his authority put aside in this way and he knew that he must punish Apollo. So he commanded him to descend to the earth and offer his services as herdsman to Admetus, the king of Thessaly.

It was very humble work for a god to wear a shepherd's dark cloak and pasture his flocks in the meadows outside of Thessaly, particularly a god who was used to living in the sumptuous palace of the sun. Apollo's slender hands were little suited to the work of ploughing, sowing and reaping, but he took excellent care of his ewes and lambs and grew to enjoy his task. In his leisure time he found an empty tortoise-shell and stretched some cords tightly across it. Then he ran his slender finger tips across the cords and drew from them most beautiful music. That was the first lute, and Apollo played on it every day. King Admetus heard his music and came out to listen to the tunes his herdsman played, sitting beside Apollo on a mossy bank, but he looked very sorrowful. The sweet strains seemed to have no power to cheer him, or even rouse him from his sadness.

"Why do you mourn, O King?" Apollo asked Admetus at last.

"I long for the hand of the fair Alcestis, the princess of a neighboring kingdom, that I may make her my queen," King Admetus explained, "but she has expressed a strange desire. She demands that her suitor appear before her in a chariot drawn by lions and bears in which she will ride home with him. In no other way will Alcestis come to my court and it is impossible for me to harness wild beasts to any one of my chariots."

Apollo could not help but be amused at the foolish whim of this wayward princess, but he had a desire to bring happiness wherever he went so he decided to humor her. He went with his lute to the edge of the forest that lay just next to his pasture and he played a tune upon it so sweet as to tame any wild beasts. Then out of the forest came two lions and two bears, as quietly as if they had been sheep. The king fastened them to a gilded chariot and drove off for Alcestis with great rejoicing. And Apollo had the pleasure of seeing the two return and Alcestis crowned as the queen of Thessaly.

It seemed as if Admetus were destined to enjoy a long and prosperous reign, but shortly after he brought his queen home he fell ill of a very deadly plague. Aesculapius, the physician, was no longer able to come to the king's aid and it seemed as if there was no hope for him. But his celestial herdsman,

Apollo, again befriended him. Apollo was not able to entirely remove the plague but he decreed that the king should live if someone, who cared enough for him, would die in his stead.

Admetus was full of joy at this hope. He remembered the vows of faith and attachment that bound all his courtiers to him and he expected that a score would at once offer themselves, willing to sacrifice their lives for their king. But not one was to be found. The bravest warrior, who would willingly have given his life for his king on the battlefield, had not the courage to die for him on a sick-bed. Old servants, who had known the king's bounty and that of his father from the days of their childhood, were not willing to give up the rest of their few days for their sovereign. Each subject wished someone else to make the sacrifice.

"Why do not the parents of Admetus give their lives for their son?" was asked, but these aged people felt that they could not bear to be parted from him for even a short time, and looked to others.

What was to be done about it. It was an irrevocable decree on the part of Apollo that he had wrested only by means of much persuasion from the Fates. There was no remedy for Admetus except this sacrifice.

Then a very strange and wonderful thing happened. Queen Alcestis, the fair princess who had wanted to ride behind lions and bears when she was a girl in her own kingdom, had grown very wise and gracious since she had attained to the throne of Thessaly. It had never for an instant entered the minds of anyone that she could be offered to the gods in the place of the king. But Queen Alcestis offered herself to save Admetus, and as she sickened the king revived and was restored to his old health and vigor.

Apollo was, of all the mourners of Thessaly, the saddest to see Alcestis so ill. She had often found her way to the pastures where he led his flock and had sat on a bank twining wreaths of wild flowers that she liked better to wear than a crown, while he entertained her with the music of his lute. And, for once, Apollo did not know what to do, banished as he was from the council of the gods for a while, and unable to summon the physician, Aesculapius, to his aid.

He knew that only great strength could bring Alcestis back from the stupor in which she now lay, neither moving or speaking, and with her rosy cheeks pale and her eyes closed. He knew, too, that of all the heroes Hercules was the strongest. Hercules had performed feats that no one had believed possible. Would he attempt to keep Alcestis safe from death, Apollo wondered, particularly when he was entreated by a lowly herdsman?

Hercules assented, however. He took his station at the gates of the palace and wrestled with Death, throwing him, just as he was about to enter and claim Alcestis. She lost her weakness, opened her eyes, the color came again to her cheeks and she was restored to Admetus by this last labor of Hercules.

So the matter which had bade fair to be so disastrous for a good many people turned out very well after all. Apollo returned to Mount Olympus when the period of his exile on the earth was up and he delighted the Muses much with the sweet tones of his lyre. He even pleaded with his father, Jupiter, to take pity on Aesculapius and the god at last made a place for the physician on the road of stars that leads across the sky.

Source:

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