

Aristæus the Bee-Keeper

by Jean Lang

“... Every sound is sweet;
Myriads of rivers hurrying thro’ the lawn,
The moan of doves in immemorial elms,
And murmuring of innumerable bees.”

Tennyson.

In the fragrance of the blossom of the limes the bees are gleaning a luscious harvest. Their busy humming sounds like the surf on a reef heard from very far away, and would almost lull to sleep those who lazily, drowsily spend the sunny summer afternoon in the shadow of the trees. That line of bee-hives by the sweet-pea hedge shows where they store their treasure that men may rob them of it, but out on the uplands where the heather is purple, the wild bees hum in and out of the honey-laden bells and carry home their spoils to their own free fastnesses, from which none can drive them unless there comes a foray against them from the brown men of the moors.

How many of us who watch their ardent labours know the story of Aristæus—he who first brought the art of bee-keeping to perfection in his own dear land of Greece, and whose followers are those men in veils of blue and green, that motley throng who beat fire-irons and create a hideous clamour in order that the queen bee and her excited followers may be checked in their perilous voyagings and beguiled to swarm in the sanctuary of a hive.

Aristæus was a shepherd, the son of Cyrene, a water nymph, and to him there had come one day, as he listened to the wild bees humming amongst the wild thyme, the great thought that he might conquer these busy workers and make their toil his gain. He knew that hollow trees or a hole in a rock were used as the storage houses of their treasure, and so the wily shepherd lad provided for them the homes he knew that they would covet, and near them placed all the food that they most desired. Soon Aristæus became noted as a tamer of bees, and even in Olympus they spoke of his honey as a thing that was food for the gods. All might have gone well with Aristæus had there not come for him the fateful day when he saw the beautiful Eurydice and to her lost his heart. She fled before the fiery protestations of his love, and trod upon the serpent whose bite brought her down to the Shades. The gods were angry with Aristæus, and as punishment they slew his bees. His hives stood empty and silent, and no more did “the murmuring of innumerable bees” drowse the ears of the herds who watched their flocks cropping the red clover and the asphodel of the meadows.

Underneath the swift-flowing water of a deep river, the nymph who was the mother of Aristæus sat on her throne. Fishes darted round her white feet, and beside her sat her attendants, spinning the fine strong green cords that twine themselves round the throats of those who perish when their arms can no longer fight against the force of the rushing current. A nymph sang as she worked, an old, old song, that told one of the old, old tales of man’s weakness and the power of the creatures of water, but above her song those who listened heard a man’s voice, calling loudly and pitifully.

The voice was that of Aristæus, calling aloud for his mother. Then his mother gave command, and the waters of the river rolled asunder and let Aristæus pass down far below to where the fountains of the great rivers lie. A mighty roar of many waters dinned in his ears as the rivers started on the race

that was to bring them all at last to their restless haven, the Ocean. To Cyrene he came at length, and to her told his sorrowful tale:

“To men who live their little lives and work and die as I myself—though son of a nymph and of a god—must do,” he said, “I have brought two great gifts, oh my mother. I have taught them that from the grey olives they can reap a priceless harvest, and from me they have learned that the little brown bees that hum in and out of the flowers may be made slaves that bring to them the sweetest riches of which Nature may be robbed.”

“This do I already know, my son,” said Cyrene, and smiled upon Aristæus.

“Yet dost thou not know,” said Aristæus, “the doom that has overtaken my army of busy workers. No longer does there come from my city of bees the boom of many wings and many busy little feet as they fly, swift and strong, hither and thither, to bring back to the hives their honeyed treasure. The comb is empty. The bees are all dead—or, if not dead, they have forsaken me forever.”

Then spoke Cyrene. “Hast heard, my son,” she said, “of Proteus? It is he who herds the flocks of the boundless sea. On days when the South Wind and the North Wind wrestle together, and when the Wind from the East smites the West Wind in shame before him, thou mayst see him raise his snowy head and long white beard above the grey-green waves of the sea, and lash the white-maned, unbridled, fierce sea-horses into fury before him. Proteus only—none but Proteus—can tell thee by what art thou canst win thy bees back once more.”

Then Aristæus with eagerness questioned his mother how he might find Proteus and gain from him the knowledge that he sought, and Cyrene answered: “No matter how piteously thou dost entreat him, never, save by force, wilt thou gain his secret from Proteus. Only if thou canst chain him by guile as he sleeps and hold fast the chains, undaunted by the shapes into which he has the power to change himself, wilt thou win his knowledge from him.”

Then Cyrene sprinkled her son with the nectar of the deathless gods, and in his heart there was born a noble courage and through him a new life seemed to run.

“Lead me now to Proteus, oh my mother!” he said, and Cyrene left her throne and led him to the cave where Proteus, herdsman of the seas, had his dwelling. Behind the seaweed-covered rocks Aristæus concealed himself, while the nymph used the fleecy clouds for her covering. And when Apollo drove his chariot across the high heavens at noon, and all land and all sea were hot as molten gold, Proteus with his flocks returned to the shade of his great cave by the sobbing sea, and on its sandy floor he stretched himself, and soon lay, his limbs all lax and restful, in the exquisite joy of a dreamless sleep. From behind the rocks Aristæus watched him, and when, at length, he saw that Proteus slept too soundly to wake gently he stepped forward, and on the sleep-drowsed limbs of Proteus fixed the fetters that made him his captive. Then, in joy and pride at having been the undoing of the shepherd of the seas, Aristæus shouted aloud. And Proteus, awaking, swiftly turned himself into a wild boar with white tusks that lusted to thrust themselves into the thighs of Aristæus. But Aristæus, unflinching, kept his firm hold of the chain. Next did he become a tiger, tawny and velvet black, and fierce to devour. And still Aristæus held the chain, and never let his eye fall before the glare of the beast that sought to devour him. A scaly dragon came next, breathing out flames, and yet Aristæus held him. Then came a lion, its yellow pelt scented with the lust of killing, and while Aristæus yet strove against him there came to terrify his listening ears the sound of fire that lapped up and thirstily devoured all things that would stand against it. And ere the crackle of the flames and their great sigh of fierce desire had ceased, there

came in his ears the sound of many waters, the booming rush of an angry river in furious flood, the irresistible command of the almighty waves of the sea. Yet still Aristæus held the chains, and at last Proteus took his own shape again, and with a sigh like the sigh of winds and waves on the desolate places where ships become wrecks, and men perish and there is never a human soul to save or to pity them, he spoke to Aristæus.

“Puny one!” he said, “and puny are thy wishes! Because thou didst by thy foolish wooing send the beautiful Eurydice swiftly down to the Shades and break the heart of Orpheus, whose music is the music of the Immortals, the bees that thou hast treasured have left their hives empty and silent. So little are the bees! so great, O Aristæus, the bliss or woe of Orpheus and Eurydice! Yet, because by guile thou hast won the power to gain from me the knowledge that thou dost seek, hearken to me now, Aristæus! Four bulls must thou find—four cows of equal beauty. Then must thou build in a leafy grove four altars, and to Orpheus and Eurydice pay such funeral honours as may allay their resentment. At the end of nine days, when thou hast fulfilled thy pious task, return and see what the gods have sent thee.”

“This will I do most faithfully, O Proteus,” said Aristæus, and gravely loosened the chains and returned to where his mother awaited him, and thence travelled to his own sunny land of Greece.

Most faithfully, as he had said, did Aristæus perform his vow. And when, on the ninth day, he returned to the grove of sacrifice, a sound greeted him which made his heart stop and then go on beating and throbbing as the heart of a man who has striven valiantly in a great fight and to whom the battle is assured.

For, from the carcase of one of the animals offered for sacrifice, and whose clean white bones now gleamed in the rays of the sun that forced its way through the thick shade of the grove of grey olives, there came the “murmuring of innumerable bees.”

“Out of the eater came forth meat, out of the strong came forth sweetness.”

And Aristæus, a Samson of the old Greek days, rejoiced exceedingly, knowing that his thoughtless sin was pardoned, and that for evermore to him belonged the pride of giving to all men the power of taming bees, the glory of mastering the little brown creatures that pillage from the fragrant, bright-hued flowers their most precious treasure.

Source:

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