

What Was the End of the Heroes

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Greek

Advanced
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And now I wish that I could end my story pleasantly; but it is no fault of mine that I cannot. The old songs end it sadly, and I believe that they are right and wise; for though the heroes were purified at Malea, yet sacrifices cannot make bad hearts good, and Jason had taken a wicked wife, and he had to bear his burden to the last.

And first she laid a cunning plot to punish that poor old Pelias, instead of letting him die in peace.

For she told his daughters, "I can make old things young again; I will show you how easy it is to do." So she took an old ram and killed him, and put him in a cauldron with magic herbs; and whispered her spells over him, and he leapt out again a young lamb. So that "Medeia's cauldron" is a proverb still, by which we mean times of war and change, when the world has become old and feeble, and grows young again through bitter pains.

Then she said to Pelias's daughters, "Do to your father as I did to this ram, and he will grow young and strong again." But she only told them half the spell; so they failed, while Medeia mocked them; and poor old Pelias died, and his daughters came to misery. But the songs say she cured Æson, Jason's father, and he became young, and strong again.

But Jason could not love her, after all her cruel deeds. So he was ungrateful to her, and wronged her: and she revenged herself on him. And a terrible revenge she took—too terrible to speak of here. But you will hear of it yourselves when you grow up, for it has been sung in noble poetry and music; and whether it be true or not, it stands forever as a warning to us not to seek for help from evil persons, or to gain good ends by evil means. For if we use an adder even against our enemies, it will turn again and sting us.

But of all the other heroes there is many a brave tale left, which I have no space to tell you, so you must read them for yourselves;—of the hunting of the boar in Calydon, which Meleager killed; and of Heracles's twelve famous labours; and of the seven who fought at Thebes; and of the noble love of Castor and Polydeuces, the twin Dioscourai—how when one died, the other would not live without him, so they shared their immortality between them; and Zeus changed them into the two twin stars, which never rise both at once.

And what became of Cheiron, the good immortal beast? That, too, is a sad story; for the heroes never saw him more. He was wounded by a poisoned arrow, at Pholoe among the hills, when Heracles opened the fatal wine-jar, which Cheiron had warned him not to touch. And the Centaurs smelt the wine, and flocked to it, and fought for it with Heracles; but he killed them all with his poisoned arrows, and Cheiron was left alone. Then Cheiron took up one of the arrows, and dropped it by chance upon his foot; and the poison ran like fire along his veins, and he lay down and longed to die; and cried, "Through wine I perish, the bane of all my race. Why should I live forever in this agony? Who will take my immortality, that I may die?"

Then Prometheus answered, the good Titan, whom Heracles had set free from Caucasus, "I will take your immortality and live forever, that I may help poor mortal men." So Cheiron gave him his immortality, and died, and had rest from pain. And Heracles and Prometheus wept over him, and went to bury him on Pelion; but Zeus took him up among the stars, to live forever, grand and mild, low down in the far southern sky.

And in time the heroes died, all but Nestor, the silver-tongued old man; and left behind them valiant sons, but

not so great as they had been. Yet their fame, too, lives till this day; for they fought at the ten years' siege of Troy: and their story is in the book which we call Homer, in two of the noblest songs on earth—the Iliad, which tells us of the siege of Troy, and Achilles' quarrel with the kings; and the Odyssey, which tells the wanderings of Odysseus, through many lands for many years; and how Alcinous sent him home at last, safe to Ithaca his beloved island, and to Penelope his faithful wife, and Telemachus his son, and Euphorbus the noble swineherd, and the old dog who licked his hand and died. We will read that sweet story, children, by the fire some winter night. And now I will end my tale, and begin another and a more cheerful one, of a hero who became a worthy king, and won his people's love.

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