



VI Aeneas in the Land of the Dead

AENEAS wept for his friend, Palinurus, beside the broken tiller, but he held the ship on course. Neptune kept his promise to Venus, and in return for Palinurus' life brought the Trojans to their goal. Straight ahead, the hills of Italy stood grey against the dawn. Aeneas murmured a prayer of thanks, and shouted "Land! Land ahead!"

Very soon excited Trojans were tumbling out onto the welcoming shore. Like children they ran this way and that, exclaiming when they found running streams, or glimpsed forest animals, or spied the precious flintstones they needed for making fire.

Aeneas left them to explore. True to his father's command, he made his way at once to the temple of Apollo where, at the entrance to a black and bottomless cave, the Sibyl guarded her frightening secrets. The temple was a fine building, adorned with carved scenes from ancient tales, but Aeneas could not stop for long to admire it. "Slay seven bullocks and seven sheep, all perfect and unblemished – before you enter this holy place," came a command from within. As soon as the sacrifice had been performed, the Sibyl appeared and beckoned. An aged, shrivelled creature with reddened eyes, she seemed born of shadows and dank places.

Aeneas followed her to the inner part of the temple. There he found himself in a huge cave, in which the walls and vaulted roof were pitted with a hundred black and gaping mouths. "The god! I feel the god!" the Sibyl screamed. Her hair flew wildly about her head, she gasped for breath and her face turned livid. In a voice far different from her former rasping whine, she proclaimed, "Speak now, Aeneas of Troy! Make your prayer. So may you open the lips of the god and learn your fate."

Chilled and shivering with awe, Aeneas could only whisper, "Apollo, you have always been good to us. In Troy your hand guided the fatal arrow, when Paris shot the hateful Achilles dead. Be good to us, now that we are in Italy at last. O you gods and goddesses who stood against Troy's ancient city, set aside your malice, and spare us in this new land." He paused, shuddering at memories of Troy. "Holy priestess," he now addressed the Sibyl, "I ask for a safe home in Italy for my people and our home-gods. Speak, I pray, gracious lady."

The Sibyl was still struggling to control the powerful force that was exhausting her; she rocked from side to side, her face twisted with frenzy. When at last she opened her lips to speak, a hundred voices boomed at once from the hundred stony mouths, hurling the words across the cavern, until Aeneas was spinning in a whirl of clashing sound: "The dangers of the sea are past; the dangers of the land await you. You will come to the soil of Latium, children of Troy, but you will not be glad. I see the land bristling with war, the Tiber flowing with blood. Another Achilles is waiting to savage you. Juno is still your foe. Many deaths are caused by a foreign marriage. But be bold, Aeneas, wherever fortune takes you. Seek friends

among the Greeks, and, whatever losses you may suffer, do not weaken."

As the re-echoing voices ceased, the Sibyl grew calmer, and finally her frenzy passed away. Then Aeneas addressed her again, "Lady, I have one more request, a serious one. They say that this is the entrance to the Underworld. I wish to travel to that place of death to visit my father, noble Anchises. I carried him from the flames of Troy; he was my guide and inspiration for so many years, but then the gods took him from me. In visions and dreams he has commanded me to make this journey. Please, holy priestess, help us to meet once more. I would not be the first — I have heard stories of Orpheus and Hercules and Theseus, all heroes who visited Pluto's kingdom while still alive. My right is no less than theirs; I, too, am born of the gods."

The Sibyl answered with a sad smile, "It is easy to reach the Land of Death, Aeneas of Troy, but steep and hard is the journey back to the light. Listen now. Search in the woods for a tree that bears a single golden bough. If the gods are with you in this venture, you will find the bough and pluck it easily from the tree. It will be a token, a passport through the Underworld, a tribute to Pluto's queen. Two further tasks — give solemn burial to your friend who, at this very moment, lies dead upon the shore, and sacrifice black sheep to the powers of the lower world. Then come."

Sick with worry, Aeneas made a speedy return to the ships. He soon saw the truth of the Sibyl's words. A circle of tearful Trojans surrounded the lifeless form of brave Misenus, a man who had fought side-by-side with Hector in Troy. Aeneas looked long at his friend's body and, biting

back his sorrow, said, "Poor Misenus! We will always remember how bravely he blew his trumpet on the plains of Troy. Come, friends, let us give him the honour he deserves." Following their leader's example, the Trojans began to fell trees for a funeral pyre. Reverently they set out oil and incense, and dressed the dead warrior in polished armour.

"Misenus proved the Sibyl true," Aeneas said to himself, "I must trust her words, and search for the golden bough that she described. I only wish it could appear before me this instant." His musing was interrupted by a sudden fluttering and cooing. Two doves had landed on the ground in front of him. He smiled to see them, for doves were the favourite birds of his mother, the goddess Venus. As he watched, the doves rose into the air again, calling insistently. They flew a little way further into the wood, and landed on a tall tree. Aeneas gazed after them, and then exclaimed in wonder, for amid the dark leaves was an unmistakable glimmer of gold. One quick wrench, and the magic bough was in his hand.

The Sibyl was waiting for his return. Without a word she pointed to an opening in the rock, so deep, so high and, somehow, so pitiless, that it drained the surrounding scene of all movement and life. No birds flew near that place, where withered leaves drifted onto the stagnant lake, and the stench of decay waited for a breeze that never blew.

Together, the Sibyl and Aeneas made sacrifices to the gods of the Underworld, to Hecate, the witch-queen, to Night and Earth, to Pluto, king of the dead, and Proserpina, his bride. All night they performed the rites, offering black bullocks, a lamb with black fleece, and a barren cow. At dawn, when the air was chill and

the altar-fires were dying to a glow, they felt the ground shake with the witch-queen's tread, and heard the eerie howling of her dogs.

"Stand back, stand back," the Sibyl pronounced solemnly, "unless you share this mystery! Draw your sword, Aeneas, and prove your courage!" She sank into the darkness of the cave; without hesitation the hero followed.

The path was dim and shadowy; strange patterns flickered back and forth in a pale, joyless dance; their footsteps echoed in the empty chambers. They felt presences they could not see: the spirits of Grief, Disease, Old Age, Fear, Hunger and Poverty, Death and its brother Sleep, mad Passion, and deadly War – figures that leered at them through the shadows.

As the path opened out, a huge tree loomed before them, its branches crammed with deceiving dreams. A frightful hissing and screeching came from a number of vaults around the tree. From den after den a fearsome creature lunged: a Centaur, human face grinning, horse-tail swishing, the six-headed Scylla, Chimaera, the fire-breathing lion-goat-dragon, the snake-haired Gorgon, and a nameless, three-bodied Thing.

"Put away your sword, Aeneas," the Sibyl urged the trembling hero, "these monsters were all killed long ago; they are harmless to us now."

The path was becoming slippery underfoot. Groping for the rocky wall, Aeneas' fingers touched a slimy dampness. He became aware of a sound of slow bubbling not far ahead. "We are near the dismal marsh of the Styx," the Sibyl said. "Soon we shall see the place of crossing."

Aeneas had no need to ask her to explain, for they had arrived at the bank of the most unlovely river he had ever



seen. Its sluggish current gurgled through the reeds that bristled across its surface, clotted with stinking mud. The bank was thronged with human shapes, all stretching out their arms and moaning pitifully – children, mothers, warriors, brides, every age and type of the human race was represented there.

“What do they want? Why do they sound so desperate?” Aeneas asked.

“They are the souls of the dead whose bodies lie unburied,” the Sibyl answered. “They are not allowed to cross the river Styx until one hundred years have passed, but must haunt this cheerless bank. That boat you see there is the only means of crossing, and the boatman is Charon, who selects those who may lawfully pass.”

Now Aeneas could see that a dingy, rust-coloured punt with ragged sails lay alongside the bank; within it stood an aged boatman, with filthy, matted beard and blazing eyes. Sternly he waved back the horde of imploring spirits, and chose one or two who climbed thankfully aboard.

“Palinurus,” Aeneas suddenly cried out, “Oh, tell me, what has become of you?”

The drifting shade that had once been the Trojan steersman turned, and recognised his captain. “Is it really you, sir, alive in this hellish place? Oh, help me to find rest! I was washed overboard, tiller and all, by a monstrous wave. I swam to shore, worried out of my mind about the ship, only to be butchered by natives as soon as I touched land. Sir, the gods must be helping you to make this dreaded journey – put in a word for me! Take me with you across the river!”

Before Aeneas could reply to his wretched friend, the Sibyl interposed, “How dare you try to break the eternal

laws of the gods? No unburied soul may cross the Styx, however much it may plead. But rest assured, good man, your body will be honoured with a fitting tomb, and the region around it will bear your name."

An aged grating voice called from the boat, "Who comes to my river in arms? This land is for the dead, for shades and sleep, not for so-called heroes who come to plunder!"

"No fear of plunder," answered the Sibyl, "We mean no harm. This is Aeneas of Troy, true of heart and staunch in war, who comes to pay respect to his honoured father. See, we bring a token." She pulled the golden bough from the folds of her robe.

Charon said no more. Sweeping the moaning ghosts from his boat, he allowed Aeneas and the Sibyl to climb aboard, shaking his head ruefully as the boat creaked and dipped under the unusual weight.

Hardly had they stepped onto the opposite bank when a tremendous barking broke out. Cerberus, Pluto's enormous watch-dog, crouched in its lair, its three mouths showing three sets of wicked fangs. The Sibyl simply tossed it a biscuit soaked in a sleeping-potion, and in a moment, the creature lay prone on the floor, its three necks splayed out in a drugged slumber.

Aeneas breathed hard in relief: "Where are we now? Surely that can't be a baby crying?"

"Not just one baby," the Sibyl replied. "Here are the souls of all the infants who die at birth. Listen to them, doomed to cry for their mothers to the end of time."

Aeneas could not stop to comment; other extraordinary sights and sounds were crowding upon him. "What is this court-room here?"

"These are new trials for those unjustly condemned to

death. Those fretting souls you see over there are suicides. And now, look there, the Fields of Sorrow, the haunt of those who died for love."

Aeneas stared in the direction of the Sibyl's pointing hand, and broke into a run. "Dido!" he cried after a figure straying through the trees. "Dido, wait! I swear I did not want to leave! The gods, the same gods who made me come to this dreaded place forced me to leave you. How could I think that you would . . . Don't turn away!" She had stopped, her eyes on the ground, showing no sign of recognition. Now she turned and vanished into the wood, where the ghost of her husband Sychaeus was waiting to comfort her. Aeneas stood stiff with hopeless longing and unspeakable grief.

The path led on. They came to the most distant fields of the region, set apart for warriors who had met a noble death. Immediately, Aeneas was the centre of a jostling swarm of eager ghosts. Trojan after Trojan he greeted, as they thrust their fleshless hands at him, clamouring in thin, wavering voices. In a silent, separate group, the Greek warriors watched the scene of reunion. As Aeneas drew near them, some turned and fled in terror, while others opened their mouths to roar a war-cry that came out faint and distant.

Among the Trojans Aeneas noticed one who did not press forward, but kept his distance. His body showed the marks of dreadful wounds, and when he moved, his face revealed the most hideous and pitiful disfigurement. For all this, he was recognizable. Aeneas stared in horror at the mangled features of Deiphobus, son of Priam, one of great Hector's brothers. "Who did this to you, Deiphobus?"

Aeneas said at last. "Who in all the world could hate you so much?"

"My wife, Aeneas, that wonderful Helen I married after Paris was killed. You probably know that she betrayed us, signalling to the Greek fleet from our towers, dancing around the wooden horse with a blazing firebrand. I was asleep that happy night, alone in our bed; she hid my weapons, and opened the door to that blustering fool Menelaus, her first husband. Ulysses was with him; you can see what they did then. But enough about me; what brings you to this place?"

They could have talked for hours, but the Sibyl urged Aeneas to hurry on. "It is nearly night; we have no time to spare."

Before them the path divided. Aeneas paused, and looked to the priestess for guidance. "We take the road on the right," she said, "which leads to the Fields of Blessed Happiness, called Elysium. The left road leads to Tartarus, the place of torment and damnation."

As they went on, the Sibyl described to Aeneas the horrible fate of those condemned to suffer for their sins in Tartarus. They were surrounded by a triple wall and moat of fire; the only entrance was a gate so strong that even the gods could not break it down. The place itself was an enormous pit, twice as deep as Mount Olympus was high. For each sinner the gods had devised a separate form of torture: one lay spreadeagled over nine acres, his innards forever being torn by a vulture; another rolled a huge boulder uphill but it always slipped back; one starved in agony before tables of delicious food; another spun round and round, tied to a whirling wheel of fire.

This grim catalogue of tortures lasted them to the very

gates of Pluto's palace, where Aeneas set down the golden bough as an offering to Proserpina, queen of the Underworld. Then they entered the Fields of Happiness.

The first thing Aeneas noticed was the light. All their journey, up to this point, had taken place in semi-darkness, as one might expect in a place cut off from the sun. But Elysium was a land of miracles: it had its own sky, where a sun shone by day and stars sparkled by night. Rich, rolling grasslands were bounded by clear rivers and groves of shady trees. Sleek horses, free of harness, grazed peacefully. This was the home of those who had served their country well by their courage, their conduct, or their talents, or those who were fondly remembered for their good deeds. Here they were free to play games, and sing, and listen to music and poetry.

Aeneas found his father in a deep, lush valley, counting over a long procession of spirits not yet born: these were his descendants, one day to be the Roman race. As soon as Anchises saw Aeneas, he left the task and stretched out his arms to his son, tears rolling down his faded cheeks.

"I knew you would be true, Aeneas. I know you would come at last, daring even the most dreaded of all journeys to visit me. Let me look at you properly. I have been so worried about you, my son, especially when you were in Carthage."

Aeneas, sobbing freely, tried three times to hug his father. But Anchises belonged now to the world of dreams and shadows; his spirit glided like a puff of wind through the clutching arms of his son.

For a while they simply walked and talked, Aeneas asking many questions about Elysium, and particularly the

thousands of spirits who clustered like bees about the banks of a river. His father explained that these were souls about to be re-born into the world above. "All of us bear an immortal spark within us, a force of eternal fire that is Life and Soul and Mind. When we die, our earthly bodies rot away but our spirits escape. Here in the lower world our souls are cleansed of sin. At last, a few of us, the lucky ones, are allowed to enter this happy place. The river is called Lethe; the crowds you see on its banks have waited for a thousand years. One sip of Lethe's water washes away all memories, and makes them ready for another life."

Anchises paused to allow Aeneas to digest what he had heard, and then beckoned him to a grassy bank. From this point they could observe a long procession passing below.

"Listen and watch with close attention, my son," Anchises began, "for these are the great men of Trojan blood, your descendants, who will one day rule the world. You will marry an Italian princess, Lavinia by name, and that young man who leads the parade is your youngest son – look at him, Aeneas. His name is Silvius, father of the royal dynasty of Alba Longa, a new city founded by your children. The next in line are his successors, king after noble king. Now do you see the man with two plumes on his helmet? Take good note of him. His mother is a princess of Alba Longa, his father none less than the god Mars. His name is Romulus, who shall build a city on seven hills, and call it Rome.

"Now turn, Aeneas, and look this way. These are the heroes of Rome, your Rome. And this one here is the greatest of all, the man whose rule will be a Golden Age,

whose power will stretch to the ends of the earth – Augustus Caesar, divine in blood.

"These are the kings of infant Rome, the hated Tarquins, a tyrant family who will be driven out of your city by this man, Brutus, founder of the republic and champion of free government. See, a line of valiant warriors! Their deeds of bravery will shine throughout the world. But look, Caesar and Pompey, Romans both, facing each other with hostile swords. No, children of mine: don't tear your country apart with civil wars! Aeneas, look at these, their names shall be the building-blocks of history – Cato, the Gracchi, the Scipios, and Quintus Fabius, known as the Delayer."

Anchises now turned to his son, placed his shadowy hands about Aeneas' shoulders, and looked him full in the face. "You are a Roman. You must remember the noble gift that is yours alone. Not art, nor literature, nor science, but government! Spare the conquered, crush the proud; for your task it is to tame the world and bring it peaceful rule."

It was nearly time to part. They wandered for a little while longer around the green fields of Elysium, Anchises now speaking of the dangers that Italy would bring to his son. He described the city of King Latinus, and explained what steps Aeneas should take to make his settlement successful.

They were drawing near the two gates that lead out from the Underworld. They are known as the Gates of Sleep, one made of horn, the other of ivory. Anchises waved his son and the Sibyl through the portals of the ivory gate, and stood looking after them.

Aeneas hurried back to his ships, and the Trojans sailed northwards along the coast to seek the mouth of the river Tiber, and the land of Latium.