

18 (Leander to Hero)

He of Abydos sends to you, Maid of Sestos, the greetings he would rather bring, if the waves of the sea should fall. If the gods are kindly toward me, if they favour me in my love, you will read with unwilling eye these words of mine. But they are not kindly; for why do they delay my vows, nor suffer me to haste through the well-known waters? You yourself see how the heavens are blacker than pitch, and the straits turbid with winds, and how the hollowed ships can scarce set sail upon them. One seaman only, and he a bold one—he by whom this letter is brought to you—has put out from the harbour; I had embarked with him, but that, as he loosed the cables from the prow, Abydos all was looking down on him. I could not evade my parents, as before, and the love we wish to keep hid would have come to light.

xForthwith writing these words, “Go, happy letter!” I said; “soon she will reach forth for thee her beautiful hand. Perchance thou wilt even be touched by her approaching lips as she seeks to break thy bands with her snowy tooth.” Speaking such words as these in lowest murmur, the rest I let my right hand say upon the sheet. But ah! how much rather would I have it swim than write, and eagerly bear me through the accustomed waves! It is more fit, I grant, for plying the stroke upon the tranquil deep; yet also apt minister of what I feel.

It is now the seventh night, space longer than a year to me, that the troubled sea has been boiling with hoarse-voiced waters. If in all these nights I have had sleep soothe my breast, may I be long kept from you by the raging deep! Sitting upon some rock, I look sadly on your shores, carried in my thoughts to where in body I cannot go. Nay, my vision even sees—or thinks it sees—lights waking in the topmost of your tower. Thrice have I laid down my garments upon the dry sand; thrice, naked, have I tried to enter on the heavy way—the swollen billows opposed the bold attempts of youth, and as I swam, my head was covered by the fronting surge.

But thou, most ungentle of the sweeping winds, why art thou bent on waging war with me? It is I, O Boreas, if thou dost not know, and not the waves, against whom thou ragest! What wouldst thou do, were it not that love is known to thee? Cold as thou art, canst thou yet deny, base wind that of yore thou wert aflame with Actaeon fires? If, when eager to seek thy joys, someone were to close to thee the paths of air, in what wise wouldst thou endure it? Have mercy on me, I pray; be mild, and stir a more gentle breeze—so may the child of Hippotes lay upon thee no harsh command!

Vain is my petition; my prayers are met by his murmurings, and the waves tossed up by him he nowhere curbs. Now would that Daedalus could give me his daring wings—though the Icarian strand is not far hence! Whatever might be I would endure, so I could only raise into air the body that oft has hung upon the dubious wave.

Meantime, while wind and wave deny me everything, I ponder in my heart the first times I stole to you. Night was but just beginning—for the memory has charm for me—when I left my father’s doors on the errand of love. Nor did I wait, but, flinging away my garments, and with them my fears, I struck out with pliant arm upon the liquid deep. The moon for the most shed me a tremulous light as I swam, like a duteous attendant watchful over my path. Lifting to her my eyes, “Be gracious to me, shining deity,” I said, “and let the rocks of Latmos rise in thy mind! Endymion will not have thee austere of heart. Bend, O I pray, thy face to aid my secret loves. Thou, a goddess, didst glide from the skies and seek a mortal love; ah, may it be allowed me to say the truth!—she I seek is a goddess too. To say naught of virtues worthy of heavenly breasts, beauty like hers falls to none but the true divine. After the beautiful face of Venus, and thine own, there is none before hers; and, that thou mayst not need to trust my words, look thou thyself! As much as all the stars are less than thy bright fires when thy silvery gleam goes forth with pure rays, so much more fair is she than all the fair. If thou dost doubt it, Cynthia, thy light is blind.”

These words I spake, or words at least not differing much from these, and was borne along through waters that made way readily before my stroke. The wave was radiant with the image of the reflected moon, and there was a splendour as of day in the silent night; no note came anywhere to

my ears, no sound but the murmur of the waters my body thrust aside. The Halcyons only, their hearts still true to beloved Ceyx, I heard in what seemed to me some sweet lament.

And now my arms grow tired below the shoulder-joint, and with all my strength I raise myself aloft on the summit of the waters. Beholding, far off, a light, "It is my love shines in yonder flame," I cried; "it is my light yon shores contain!" And straight the strength came back to my wearied arms, and the wave seemed easier to me than before. To keep me from the chill of the cold deep, love lends his aid, hot in my eager breast. The nearer I approach, and the nearer draw the shores, and the less of the way remains, the greater my joy to hasten on. When in truth I can be seen as well as see, by your glance you straightway give me heart, and make me strong. Now, too, I strain in my course to pleasure my lady, and toss my arms in the stroke for you to see. Your nurse can scarce stay you from rushing down into the tide—for I saw this, too, and I was not mistaken. However, though she held you as you went, she could not keep you from wetting your foot at the water's edge. You welcome me with your embrace, share happy kisses with me—kisses, O ye great gods, worth seeking across the deep!—and from your own shoulders you strip the robes to give them over to me, and dry my hair all dripping with the rain of the sea.

For the rest—night knows of that, and ourselves, and the tower that shares our secret, and the light that guides me on my passage through the floods. The joys of that dear night may no more be numbered than the weeds of the Hellespontic sea; the briefer the space that was ours for the theft of love, the more we made sure it should not idly pass.

And now Aurora, the bride of Tithonus, was making ready to chase the night away, and Lucifer had risen, forerunner of the dawn; in haste we ply our kisses, all disorderly, complaining that the night allows brief lingering. So, tarrying till the nurse's bitter warnings bid me go, I leave the tower and make for the chilly shore. We part in tears, and I return to the Maiden's sea, looking ever back to my lady while I can. Believe me, it is true: going hence, I seem a swimmer, but, when I return, a shipwrecked man. This too, is true, will you but believe: toward you, my way seems ever inclined; away from you, when I return, it seems a steep of lifeless water. Against the wish of my heart I regain my own land—who could believe? Against the wish of my heart I tarry now in my own town.

Ah me! why are we joined in soul and parted by the wave; two beings of one mind, but not of one land? Either let your Sestos take me, or my Abydos you; your land is as dear to me as mine is dear to you. Why must my heart be troubled as oft as the sea is troubled? Why must the wind, slight cause, have power to hinder me? Already the curving dolphins have learned our loves, and I think the very fishes know me. Already my accustomed path through the waters is well trod, like to the road pressed on by many a wheel. That there was no other way open than this was my complaint before; but now, because of the winds, I complain that this way, too, has failed. The sea of Athamas' child is foaming white with immense billows, and scarcely safe is the keel that remains in its own harbour; such were these waters, I judge, when first they got from the drowned maid the name they bear. This place is of evil fame enough for the loss of Helle, and, though it spare me, its name reproaches it.

I envy Phrixus, whom the ram with gold in its woolly fleece bore safely over the stormy seas; yet I ask not the office of ram or ship, if only I may have the waters to cleave with my body. There is nothing I lack; if only I may swim, I will be at once ship, seaman, passenger! I guide myself neither by Helice, nor by Aretos, the leading-star of Tyre; my love will none of the stars in common use. Let another fix his eyes on Andromeda and the bright Crown, and upon the Parrhasian Bear that gleams in the frozen pole; but for me, I care not for the loves of Perseus, and of Liber and Jove, to point me on my dubious way. There is another light, far surer for me than those, and when it leads me through the dark my love leaves not its course; while my eyes are fixed on this, I could go to Colchis or the farthest bounds of Pontus, and where the ship of Thessalian pine held on its course; and I could surpass the young Palaemon in my swimming, and him whom the tasting of a herb made suddenly a god.

Often my arms grow heavy from the unceasing stroke, and scarce can drag their weary way through the endless floods. When I say to them: "No slight reward for toil shall be yours, for soon you shall

have my lady's neck to hang about," forthwith they take on strength, and stretch forward to the winning of their prize, like the swift steed let go from the Elean starting-chamber. And so I myself keep eyes on the love that burns me, and guide myself by you, maid worthy rather of the skies. For worthy of the skies you are —yet tarry still on earth, or tell me where I also may find a way to the gods above! You are here, yet your wretched lover has but small part in you, and when the sea grows turbid my heart is turbid, too. Of what avail to me that the billows are not broad that sunder us? Is this brief span of waters less an obstacle to me? I almost would that I were distant from you the whole world, so that my hopes were far removed, together with my lady. Now, the nearer you are, the nearer is the flame that kindles me, and hope is always with me, not always she I hope for. I can almost touch her with my hand, so near is she I love; but oft, alas! this "almost" starts my tears. What else than this was the catching at elusive fruits, and pursuing with the lips the hope of a retreating stream?

Am I, then, never to embrace you except when the wave so wills, and shall no tempest see me happy? and, though nothing is less certain than the wind and wave, must winds and water ever be my hope? And yet it still is summer. What when the seas have been assailed by the Pleiad, and the guardian of the Bear, and the Goat of Olenos? Either I know not how rash I am, or even then a love not cautious will send me forth on the deep. And, lest you deem I promise this because the time is not yet come, I will give you no tardy pledge of what I promise. Let the sea be swollen still for these few nights, and I shall essay to cross despite the waves; either happy daring shall leave me safe, or death shall be the end of my anxious love! Yet I shall pray to be cast up on yonder shores, and that my shipwrecked limbs may come into your haven; for you will weep over me, and not disdain to touch my body, and you will say: "Of the death he met, I was the cause!"

You are hurt, no doubt, by this omen of my death, and my letter in this part stirs your displeasure. I cease—no more complain; but, that the sea, too, may end its anger, add, I beseech, your prayers to mine. I need a brief space of calm until I cross to you; when I shall have touched your shore, let the storm rage on! Yonder with you is an apt ship-yard for my keel, and in no waters rests my bark more safe. There let Boreas shut me in, where tarrying is sweet! Then will I be slow to swim, then will I be ware, nor cast revilement on the unhearing floods again, nor complain that the sea is rough when I fain would swim. Let me be stayed alike by the winds and your tender arms, and let there be double cause to keep me there!

When the storm permits, I shall make use of the oarage of my arms; do you only keep ever the beacon-light where I shall see! Meanwhile, my letter in my stead be with you throughout the night. I pray to follow it myself with least delay!

19 (Hero to Leander)

That I may enjoy in very truth the greeting you have sent in words, Leander, O come! Long to me is all delay that defers our joys. Forgive me what I say—I cannot be patient for love! We burn with equal fires, but I am not equal to you in strength; men, methinks, must have stronger natures. As the body, so is the soul of tender women frail—delay but a little longer, and I shall die!

You men, now in the chase, and now husbanding the genial acres of the country, consume long hours in the varied tasks that keep you. Either the market-place holds you, or the sports of the supple wrestling-ground, or you turn with bit the neck of the responsive steed; now you take the bird with the snare, now the fish with the hook; and the later hours you while away with the wine before you. For me who am denied these things, even were I less fiercely aflame, there is nothing left to do but love. What there is left, I do; and you, O sole delight of mine, I love with even greater love than could be returned to me! Either with my aged nurse I whisper of you, and marvel what can keep you from your way; or, looking forth upon the sea, I chide the billows stirred by the hateful wind, in words almost your own; or, when the heavy wave has a little laid aside its fierce mood, I complain that you indeed could come, but will not; and while I complain tears course from the eyes that love you, and the ancient dame who shares my secret dries them with tremulous hand.

Often I look to see whether your footprints are on the shore, as if the sand would keep the marks impressed on it; and, that I may inquire about you, and write to you, I still am asking if anyone has come from Abydos, or if anyone is going to Abydos. Why tell how many times I kiss the garments you lay aside when making ready to stem the waters of the Hellespont?

Thus, when the light is done and night's more friendly hour has driven out day and set forth the gleaming stars, straightway I place in the highest of our abode my watchful lamps, the signals to guide you on the accustomed way. Then, drawing with whirling spindle the twisted thread, with woman's art we beguile the slow hours of waiting.

What, meanwhile, I say through so long a time, you ask? Naught but Leander's name is on my lips." Do you think my joy has already come forth from his home, my nurse? or are all waking, and does he fear his kin? Now do you think he is putting off the robe from his shoulders, and now rubbing the rich oil into his limbs? "She signs assent, most likely; not that she cares for my kisses, but slumber creeps upon her and lets nod her ancient head. Then, after slightest pause, "Now surely he is setting forth on his voyage," I say," and is parting the waters with the stroke of his pliant arms." And when I have finished a few strands and the spindle has touched the ground, I ask whether you can be mid way of the strait. And now I look forth, and now in timid tones I pray that a favouring breeze will give you an easy course; my ears catch at uncertain notes, and at every sound I am sure that you have come.

When the greatest part of the night has gone by for me in such delusions, sleep steals upon my wearied eyes. Perhaps, false one, you yet pass the night with me, though against your will; perhaps you come, though yourself you do not wish to come. For now I seem to see you already swimming near, and now to feel your wet arms about my neck, and now to throw about your dripping limbs the accustomed coverings, and now to warm your bosom clasped to mine—and many things else a modest tongue should say naught of, whose memory delights, but whose telling brings a blush. Ah me! brief pleasures these, and not the truth; for you are ever wont to go when slumber goes. O more firmly let our eager loves be knit, and our joys be faithful and true! Why have I passed so many cold and lonely nights? Why, O tardy loiterer, are you so often away from me? The sea, I grant, is not now fit for the swimmer; but yesternight the gale was gentler. Why did you let it pass? Why did you fear what was not to come? Why did so fair a night go by for naught, and you not seize upon the way? Grant that like chance for coming be given you soon; this chance was the better, surely, since 'twas the earlier.

But swiftly, you may say, the face of the tranquil deep was changed. Yet you often come in less time, when you are in haste. Overtaken here, you would have, methinks, no reason to complain, and while you held me close no storm would harm you. I surely should hear the sounding winds with joy, and should pray for the waters never to be calm. But what has come to pass, that you are grown more fearful of the wave, and dread the sea you before despised? For I call to mind your coming once when the flood was not less fierce and threatening—or not much less; when I cried to you: "Be ever rash with such good fortune, lest wretched I may have to weep for your courage!" Whence this new fear, and whither has that boldness fled? Where is that mighty swimmer who scorned the waters?

But no, be rather as you are than as you were wont to be before; make your way when the sea is placid, and be safe—so you are only the same, so we only love each other, as you write, and that flame of ours turn not to chill ashes. I do not fear so much the winds that hinder my vows as I fear that like the wind your love may wander—that I may not be worth it all, that your perils may outweigh their cause, and I seem a reward too slight for your toils.

Sometimes I fear my birthplace may injure me, and I be called no match, a Thracian maid, for a husband from Abydos. Yet could I bear with greater patience all things else than have you linger in the bonds of some mistress's charms, see other arms clasped round your neck, and a new love end the love we bear. Ah, may I rather perish than be wounded by such a crime, may fate overtake me ere you incur that guilt! I do not say these words because you have given sign that such grief will come to me, or because some recent tale has made me anxious, but because I fear everything—for who that loved was ever free from care? The fears of the absent, too, are multiplied by distance.

Happy they whom their own presence bids know the true charge, and forbids to fear the false! Me wrongs imaginary fret, while the real I cannot know, and either error stirs equal gnawings in my heart. O, would you only come! or did I only know that the wind, or your father—at least, no woman—kept you back! Were it a woman, and I should know, I should die of grieving, believe me; sin against me at once, if you desire my death!

But you will not sin against me, and my fears of such troubles are vain. The reason you do not come is the jealous storm that beats you back. Ah, wretched me! with what great waves the shores are beaten, and what dark clouds envelop and hide the day! It may be the loving mother of Helle has come to the sea, and is lamenting in down-pouring tears the drowning of her child—or is the step-dame, turned to a goddess of the waters, vexing the sea that is called by her step-child's hated name? This place, such as 'tis now, is aught but friendly to tender maids; by these waters Helle perished, by them my own affliction comes. Yet, Neptune, wert thou mindful of thine own heart's flames, thou oughtst let no love be hindered by the winds—if neither Amymone, nor Tyro much bepraised for beauty, are stories idly charged to thee, nor shining Alcyone, and Calyce, child of Hecataeon, nor Medusa when her locks were not yet twined with snakes, nor golden-haired Laodice and Celaeno taken to the skies, nor those whose names I mind me of having read. These, surely, Neptune, and many more, the poets say in their songs have mingled their soft embraces with thine own. Why, then, dost thou, who hast felt so many times the power of love, close up with whirling storm the way we have learned to know? Spare us, impetuous one, and mingle thy battles out upon the open deep! These waters, that separate two lands, are scant. It befits thee, who art mighty, either to toss about the mighty keel, or to be fierce even with entire fleets; 'tis shame for the god of the great sea to terrify a swimming youth—that glory is less than should come from troubling any pond. Noble he is, to be sure, and of a famous stock, but he does not trace his line from the Ulysses thou dost not trust. Have mercy on him, and save us both! It is he who swims, but the limbs of Leander and all my hopes hang on the selfsame wave.

My lamp has sputtered, see!—for I am writing with it near—it has sputtered and given us favouring sign. Look, nurse is pouring drops into auspicious fires. “To-morrow,” she says, “we shall be more,” and herself drinks of the wine. Ah, do make us more, glide over the conquered wave, O you whom I have welcomed to all my inmost heart! Come back to camp, deserter of your ally love; why must I lay my limbs in the mid space of my couch? There is naught for you to fear! Venus' self will smile upon your venture; child of the sea, the paths of the sea she will make smooth. Oft am I prompted myself to go through the midst of the waves, but 'tis the wont of this strait to be safer for men. For why, though Phrixus and Phrixus' sister both rode this way, did the maiden alone give name to these wide waters?

Perhaps you fear the time may fail you for return, or you may not endure the effort of the twofold toil. Then let us both from diverse ways come together in mid sea, and give each other kisses on the waters' crest, and so return again each to his own town; 'twill be little, but more than naught! Would that either this shame that compels us to secret loving would cease, or else the love that fears men's speech. Now, passion and regard for men, two things that ill go together, are at strife. Which I shall follow is in doubt; the one becomes, the other delights. Once had Jason of Pagasae entered Colchis, and he set the maid of the Phasis in his swift ship and bore her off; once had the lover from Ida come to Lacedaemon, and he straight returned together with his prize. But you, as oft as you seek your love, so oft you leave her, and whene'er 'tis peril for boats to go, you swim. Yet, O my young lover, though victor over the swollen waters, so spurn the sea as still to be in fear of it! Ships wrought with skill are overwhelmed by the wave; do you think your arms more powerful than oars? What you are eager for, Leander—to swim—is the sailor's fear; 'tis that follows ever on the wreck of ships. Ah, wretched me! I am eager not to persuade you to what I urge; may you be too strong, I pray, to yield to my admonition—only so you come to me, and east about my neck the wearied arms oft beaten by the wave!

But, as often as I turn my face toward the dark blue wave, my fearful breast is numbed by some hidden chill. Nor am I the less perturbed by a dream I had yesternight, though I have cleared myself of its threat by sacrifice. For, just before dawn, when my lamp was already dying down, at the time

when dreams are wont to be true, my fingers were relaxed by sleep, the threads fell from them, and I laid my head down upon the pillow to rest. There in vision clear I seemed to see a dolphin swimming through the wind-tossed waters; and after the flood had cast it forth upon the thirsty sands, the wave, and at the same time life, abandoned the unhappy thing. Whatever it may mean, I fear; and you—nor smile at my dreams, nor trust your arms except to a tranquil sea! If you spare not yourself, spare the maid beloved by you, who never will be safe unless you are so! I yet have hope that the tiredness of the waves means that peace is near; do you cleave their paths while placid with all your might! Meanwhile, since the billows will not let the swimmer come, let the letter that I send you soften the hated hours of delay.