

Catullus 68

To Manlius

That you, weighed down as you are by fortune and bitter chance, should send me this letter written with tears, to bid me succour a shipwrecked man cast up by the foaming waters of the sea, and restore him from the threshold of death, whom neither does holy Venus suffer to rest, deserted in his widowed bed, nor do the Muses charm him with the sweet poetry of ancient writers, when his mind keeps anxious vigil;—this is grateful to me, since you call me your friend, and come to me for the gifts of the Muses and of Love.

But, dear Manlius, that my troubles may not be unknown to you, and that you may not think I am tired of the duty of a friend, let me tell you what are the waves of fortune in which I too am whelmed; so will you not again require gifts of happiness from one who is unblest.

15 At the time when first a white dress was given to me, when my youth in its flower was keeping jocund spring-time, I wrote merry poems enough; not unknown am I to the goddess who mingles with her cares a sweet bitterness.

19 But all care for this is gone from me by my brother's death. Ah me unhappy, who have lost you, my brother! You, brother, you by your death have destroyed my happiness; with you all my house is buried. With you all my joys have died, which your sweet love cherished, while yet you lived. By reason of your death, I have banished from all my mind these thoughts and all the pleasures of my heart.

27 And so, when you write that it is a shame for Catullus to be in Verona, where all the young men of the upper class must warm their limbs in an empty bed, that is, Manlius, not so much a shame as a sorrow. Pardon me then if I do not, because I cannot, present you with those gifts which grief has snatched away.

33 For as for my not having plenty of authors at hand, that is because I live at Rome: that is my home, that is my abode, there my life is spent; when I come here only one small box out of many attends me. And since this is so, I would not have you judge that it is due to niggardly mind or ungenerous temper, that you have not received a full supply of what you ask of each kind: I would have offered it unasked, if I had any such resources.

LXVIIIa

To Allius

I cannot, O ye goddesses, refrain from telling what the matter was in which Allius helped me, and how greatly he helped me by his services, lest time flying with forgetful ages hide in blind night this kindly zeal of his. But to you I will tell it; do you hand on the tale to many thousands, and let the paper speak this in its old age, so that he may continue to live on in my verses even after his death, and indeed, when dead, become more and more renowned; and let not the spider who weaves her thin web aloft spread her work over the neglected name of Allius.

For how much sorrow of heart the wily goddess of Amathus gave me, ye know, and in what fashion she scorched me, when I was burning as hotly as the Trinacrian rock and the Malian water at Oetea Thermopylae, when my sad eyes never rested from wasting with perpetual tears, nor my cheeks from streaming with a flood of sorrow. As at the top of a lofty mountain a bright stream leaps forth from a moss-grown rock, and gushing headlong down the steep valley crosses the mid way thronged by the people, a sweet solace in his labour to the weary wayfarer when sultry heat makes the parched fields to gape; and as to mariners tossed by the black storm comes a favouring breeze with gentler breath, sought by prayer now to Pollux, now to Castor;—such an aid to me was Allius; he opened a broad track across the fenced field, he gave me access to a house and its mistress, under whose roof we should together enjoy each our own love. Thither my fair goddess delicately

stepped, and set the sole of her shining foot on the smooth threshold, as she pressed on her slender¹ sandal: even as once Laodamia came burning with love to the house of Protesilaus, that house begun in vain, [76ff] since not yet had a victim's sacred blood appeased the Lords of heaven. Lady of Rhamnus, never may that please me which is undertaken amiss without the will of our Lords.

79 How much the starved altar craves for the blood of pious sacrifices, Laodamia learnt by the loss of her husband, forced to loose her arms from the neck of her new spouse, before the coming of one and then a second winter with its long nights should content her passionate love, that she might endure to live, though her husband was taken from her; and this the Fates knew would come in no long time, if once he went as a soldier to the walls of Ilium.

For then it was, because of the rape of Helen, that Troy began to summon against herself the chieftains of the Argives, Troy—O horror!—the common grave of Europe and Asia, Troy the untimely tomb of all heroes and heroic deeds: Troy brought pitiable death to my brother also; alas! my brother, taken from me unhappy, alas! dear light of my eyes, taken from thy unhappy brother: with thee now is all my house buried; all my joys have perished together with thee, which while thou wert alive thy sweet love cherished. Thee now far, far away, not among familiar graves, nor laid to rest near the ashes of thy kinsfolk, but buried in hateful Troy, ill-omened Troy, a foreign land holds in a distant soil.

101 To Troy at that time all the youth of Greece is said to have hastened together, deserting their hearths and homes, that Paris might not enjoy undisturbed leisure in a peaceful chamber, rejoicing in the rape of his paramour.

105 By that sad chance then, fairest Laodamia, wast thou bereft of thy husband, sweeter to thee than life and soul; so strong the tide of love, so whelming the eddy that bore thee to the sheer abyss, deep as that gulf which (say the Greeks) near Cyllenian Pheneus drains away the swamp, and dries up the rich soil which of old the false-fathered son of Amphitryon is said to have dug out, cutting away the heart of the hill, what time with sure shaft he hit the monsters of Stympalus at the bidding of a meaner lord, that the door of heaven might be frequented by more gods, and that Hebe might not long be unmated. But deeper than that gulf was thy deep love, which taught thee though untamed to bear the yoke.

119 Not so dear to her age-stricken parent is the head of the late-born grandchild which his only daughter nurses, who, scarce at length appearing as an heir to ancestral wealth, and having his name brought into the witnessed tablets, puts an end to the unnatural joy of the kinsman, now in his turn derided, and drives away the vulture that waits for the hoary head; nor did ever dove delight so much in her snowy mate, though the dove bites and bills and snatches kisses more wantonly than any woman, be she amorous beyond others' measure. You alone surpassed the passion of these, when once you were matched with your golden-haired husband.

131 Even so kind, or but little less, was she, my bright one, who came into my arms; and often around her flitting hither and thither Cupid shone fair in vest of saffron hue. And though she is not content with Catullus alone, I will bear the faults, for few they are, of my modest mistress, lest we become as tiresome as jealous fools. Juno, too, greatest of the heavenly ones, has often beaten down her anger for her husband's fault, as she learns the many loves of all-amorous Jove. Yet it is not reasonable that men should be compared with gods ... away, then, with this unpleasant fussiness of an anxious father. And after all she did not come for me led by her father's hand into a house fragrant with Assyrian odours, but gave me in the wondrous night sweet stolen gifts, taken from the very bosom of her husband himself. Wherefore it is enough if to me alone is granted the day which she marks with a whiter stone.

149 This gift—'twas all I could—set forth in verse is returned to you, Allius, for many kind offices; lest this and that day, and another and another should touch your name with corroding rust. To this the gods will add those countless gifts which Themis of old was wont to give to pious men of ancient time.

May ye be happy, both you, and with you your dear Life, and the house in which you and I sported, and its mistress, and he who first gave you to me, from whom first all those good things had their springing for me. And far before all, she who is dearer to me than myself, my Light, whose life alone makes it sweet to me to live.