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The Death of Hylas

by O. F. SIMPSON

Just returned from the Golden Fleece Expedition, Lynceus, chief lookout man of the *Argo*, famous for his long sight, is speaking.

Well, that's about all I can tell you about our eighteen months' adventures. You poets have a way of embroidering on the facts and adding your own sentimental fancies because you think your listeners like it that way, so I don't suppose much of what I've told you will get handed down the way I've told it, but there it is. It's good to be back home, and you won't catch me going to sea again for years and years.

... Now I come to think of it, there is one other incident which might be of interest to you, and as I alone know the truth of the matter, I would like to tell you if you have time. It is to do with the death of the boy Hylas on the island of Ceos in the early months of the expedition. It is an old story, and no doubt Hercules is back by now and has circulated his own version of the affair; but I repeat, I alone saw it happen and know the truth, and indeed was personally involved.

Hylas was an attractive boy — fair curls, a rather unusual light brown skin and a good tough body, fifteen or sixteen summers, just coming along into manhood. Hercules told us he'd picked the boy up in the course of a punitive raid against the Dryopes in Thessaly. Hylas' father Theiodamas had been killed in this raid, and later Hercules came on the boy in the thick of the battle staggering along under his father's heavy shield and laying about him with the best. At the end Hercules had the boy brought to his tent and asked him to sign on for a year or two as his page. Hylas, still furious about his father, refused the offer at first, but Hercules gradually brought him round. And so this curiously assorted pair found themselves joining our Golden Fleece expedition together.

Well, we were a hundred strong on the *Argo*, all grown men working hard and cooped up on the ship with that one boy. I don't suppose there were many of us who hadn't importuned him at one time or another for his favours. He gave his strong young body calmly and with dignity, as man to man. Everyone loved him; while he himself, as time went on, began to make it clear that he loved not Hercules but me.

This was largely because by a strange accident he shared with me a passion for seashells, of which he already had a large collection in a sheepskin bag to which he added wherever we went ashore in the Aegean. It so happens that I have devoted some study to the pigmentation of oyster shells, and my observations and demonstrations on this subject have often entertained and instructed philosophers who visit us at home. It was therefore to me that Hylas used to bring his samples, and sit at my feet while I told him what they were and something about the creatures that had lived inside them. Many was the evening we spent together up in the prow; the difficult dusk watch I always took myself, and it was pleasant to have the strain of the job lightened by Hylas' company and his talk. Sometimes as he stood beside me in his green tunic, legs planted firmly on deck to offset the roll of the ship, I would look down on his serious, intent face, and my knees would turn to water for love of his good looks and sweetness. Then I would gladly have let the ship founder on a rock

for another quick, honeyed kiss from him — though somehow I never quite did.

Our ripening affection soon came to the attention of Hercules, and it was the day before we came to Ceos that he first attempted to «warn me off» Hylas on the grounds that the boy was found by him and was his «property». In his most pompous manner — and Hercules certainly could be pompous — he told me he would tolerate no interference from me with any boy he had chosen for his own bed. Being on watch at the time, I just told him to go and boil himself.

But the quarrel worried me and when we got ashore on Ceos. I spoke to Jason about it. His reply was prompt, sensible and typical: «Go and fight Hercules for ownership of the boy — it's the only language he understands.» Then his eyes softened towards me — we were close friends and felt we had a joint responsibility for the success of the voyage — «You know a lot about wrestling and I think you might win. Hope you do. Hercules is a bit of an ass. Good luck anyway.»

Expecting to wrestle Hercules and win was not quite so mad an idea as it obviously seems to you. My elder brother Idas was nearly Hercules' size and we had spent most of our boyhood scrapping about together, during which time I had come to learn the weak points of these very heavy men — their slow reaction time, weak sense of balance, short wind, unwillingness to change tactics, and so on. I had beaten Idas often by my superior knowledge of these things, and I expected to beat Hercules in the same way.

Idas was with us in the *Argo*. When I told him what I was about to do, like the hot-tempered, impetuous chap he is, he at once wanted to go and fight Hercules himself on my behalf; and it was only with difficulty I got him to understand it was my private quarrel and it was his place to come and «second» me at the wrestling. He then set to obediently massaging me all over with his huge, strong hands; and when he had finished oiling me, and I looked down at my bare body glistening in the morning sun, I was rather pleased by what I saw. Dreams of humbling the mighty Hercules began to chase each other round my mind, all the more delightful because the humiliation was to be a public one — most of the men had nothing to do but lie about and rest all the morning, and they had grouped themselves in a circle round us ready to see the fun, Hylas among them.

I have never in my life tempted fate in a more presumptuous manner. From the moment Hercules and I first gripped wrists the bout lasted perhaps two minutes, just so long as the oil on our bodies remained slippery so that I could wriggle out of that bear-like grasp. When the oil however got mixed with sand, I found that whatever my successes with Idas in the past, I could not even heave this particular mountain of a man off the ground at all. He on the other hand soon encircled my chest with his huge arms, swung me over his hips and dashed me on the ground as if he was flailing wheat and my legs were the loose end of the flail. I lay in agony for a moment, quite certain both my thighs were broken, and then felt his whole vast weight straddled across my waist and his thumbs coming up under my eyes meaning to blind me there and then. He was extremely angry and in a split second I decided — forgive me if you think it weak and unmanly of me — that even the possession of a beautiful boy was not worth the loss of both eyes, and I quickly tapped Hercules' thigh three times in token of submission. He got up off me at once, kicked me in the groin

contemptuously and walked off down the beach in triumph with Hylas, his thick brown arm tight round the boy's slim waist. One of the men shouted after them an obscene jest related to the vast difference in size between the two of them, and that was the last I remember before I fainted away.

I came to about an hour later in the shade of a big oak tree at the back of the beach, where Idas had carried me. He had scraped and dressed me and was quietly massaging me again, like the good fellow he is; the honest smile on his face when he saw my eyes open was worth a lot to me. I found to my surprise that nothing seemed seriously amiss apart from aches and bruises. Then I looked farther afield and saw Hylas sitting all by himself behind a rock some way down the beach, so I went over to him.

«Well, I wasn't much good, was I?» I tried to speak lightly. «Well and truly beaten, eh?»

«Ye-es,» Hylas spoke hesitatingly, and then in a moment turned to me in a sudden storm of passionate weeping: «But it's you I love, Lynceus, you. I hate him, I hate him. Lynceus, don't give me to him.»

He threw his arms round me and began to kiss me ardently, his tears hot on my cheek, his whole body stiff and racked with sobs. I comforted him as one does comfort a passionate boy, so that in time he quietened down and lay almost calm at my side looking up at the sky. Wishing at all costs to project his thoughts forward away from the past, I promised him — to his great delight — that after the midday meal, which we could already smell the cooks preparing down the beach, we would give the others the slip and go off together on another shell hunting trip.

And this we did. The duty cooks were a good lot that day. (Jason meant us to have a proper rest and never neglected details like that.) They had killed about 20 of the rather scraggy sheep we found on the island and roasted them with local herbs collected from the forest; so we all had too much to eat and were most of us fit for nothing afterwards but to lie about and sleep it off. At a sign from me Hylas nipped off quite unobserved, and I left later, making for the forest at the back of the beach so that if I was seen no suspicion would be aroused. Almost the last sound I heard was Hercules snoring — like everything he did, his snores were louder and longer than anyone else's.

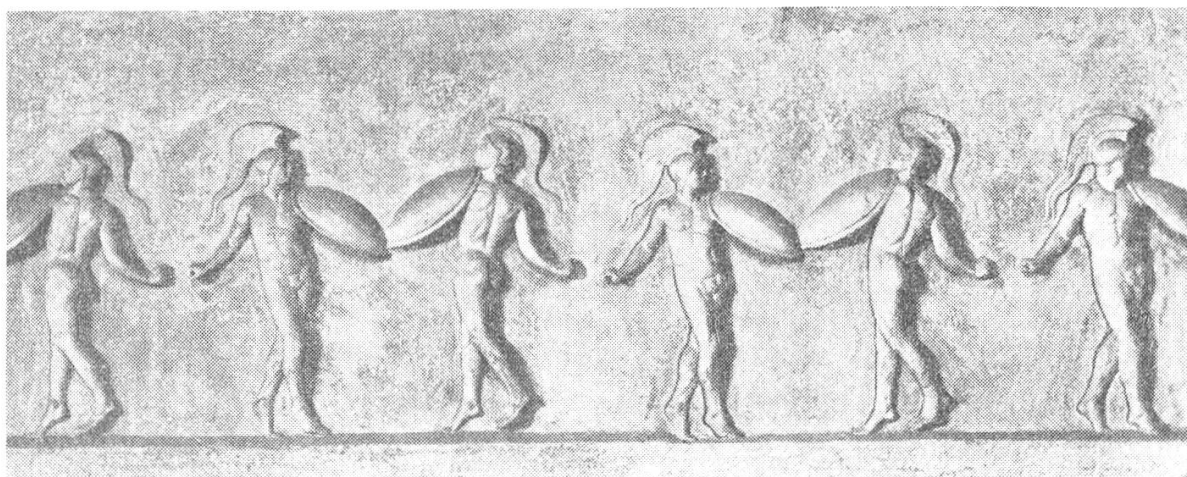
Hylas' beautifully moulded legs were not merely wonderful to look at; they were hard with muscle and he could run with them — in fact he was faster across difficult ground than most of us grown men, as I had observed on previous jaunts of this kind. What with this, his keenness to find new shells, the need for me to make a detour, and the fact I still felt a bit lame after my fight, he forged a long way ahead of me, and soon I could only just see his golden curls at the extreme limit of my vision away across the sand — and I can see further than most men. He had stripped and ran naked, holding only the sheepskin bag for carrying the shells.

Suddenly as I looked up once more to keep him in view, I saw he was no longer running upright but lying on his back on the sand threshing and kicking with his arms and legs with all his might. For a while I thought he must be playing a game, but then a faint cry of terror came to me across the sand, his legs seemed actually to disappear into the ground, and it dawned on me that he had stumbled into a quicksand. In this, within the space of about half a minute, before my very eyes I had to watch him being swallowed up. There was not the slightest chance of my covering the distance between us in time to be of any help.

I am not ashamed to admit to you that as the full horror of the situation broke in on me and the pitiful thought of that lovely ripe young body, which had so often received and returned my own tenderest caresses, now struggling in the sand's foul, clammy embrace, my heart turned to lead and I sat down and wept. But men do not weep for long, and I began to see that at least the occasion of the boy's death was a happy and an innocent one, in the active pursuit of his hobby; I also saw at once that I should have to keep completely silent about it — had I told the truth to the others that afternoon, I should never have been believed. It would merely be thought I had done away with the lad myself out of jealousy, or to spite Hercules. Accordingly I took care to return unseen to the camp, where I gave out I had been lying up in the forest shade all the time to recover from the exertions of my morning fight.

In fact Hylas' absence was not noticed at all till the evening, when it was time to fill our goatskins with fresh water and float them back to the ship off shore. Jason meant us to sleep aboard and to weigh anchor at first light the next day. All the late afternoon Hercules had been entertaining the others with his muscle tricks, he was fully occupied thinking about himself and the success he was having, and it was not till late that someone said casually «Where's young Hylas got to?» Then of course there was a fuss indeed. Hercules' groans and self-reproaches were much louder than either natural or necessary, and when he finally said of course he must stay behind and look for the boy, we all laughed, no one believed he meant it. Perhaps he didn't; but when we laughed, he got angry, and after that he had to stay. Jason who had always found Hercules a bit of a handful, gave his permission for this after a well put on show of reluctance, and the next morning we sailed without him. I wondered what passed through his mind as he stood on the beach watching our departure. Of course he was in no danger; ships pass that way often and he had only to light a signal fire to get himself taken off. Indeed I hear he has been back on the mainland for some time now — with his own highly garbled and self-glorifying version of the story, I feel sure.

Well, I hardly expect you to hand on a story like that just as I have told it. You poets like picturesque and romantic explanations for things, and you'll be saying that the Hamadryads spirited Hylas away into the woods, or that Zeus was dazzled by his beauty — and well he might have been too — and caught him up to Olympus. The *truth*, after all, is what you can get people to believe. But if you happen to be curious about the *facts* of this matter, they are as I have given them to you for listening.



Vatican-Museum, Rome

Dance of the Gladiators