

Psyche and Eros



Once upon a time there was a king of Greece who had three beautiful daughters, but the youngest, Psyche, was the most beautiful of all. The fame of her lovely face and the charm of her whole being were so great that strangers from the neighboring countries came in crowds to enjoy the sight and they paid Psyche the homage of love that was due to Aphrodite herself. Aphrodite's temple was deserted and, as Psyche passed by, the people sang her praises and strewed her way with flowers and wreaths.

Aphrodite had a son, Eros, also sometimes called Cupid, who was dearer to her than any other being on earth. Like every mother, Aphrodite had great ambitions for the future of her son, but she was not always able to keep track of him, for Eros had wings and a golden bow and arrows which he often used to playfully trick mortals. When Aphrodite discovered that Eros had lost his heart to Psyche, the lovely maiden of earth, the goddess' wrath was white-hot! Just like a fairy story in which a prince marries a peasant girl and may not bring her home to the palace because of her low birth, Aphrodite quite refused to recognize Psyche or award her a place in the honored family of the gods.

Eros and Psyche had a very wonderful earthly palace in which to live. Golden pillars supported the vaulted roof, and the walls were richly carved and hung

with embroidered tapestries of many colors. When Psyche wished food, all she had to do was to seat herself in an alcove and a table heaped with rare fruits and rich honeycakes immediately appeared via Zephyrus, Eros' western wind that quietly delivered all he wished. When she longed for music, she had a feast of it played by invisible lutes and a chorus of harmonious voices. But Psyche was not happy in this life of luxury, for she had to be alone so much of the time. Aphrodite could not take Eros away from his bride altogether, so she allowed him to be with Psyche only in the hours of darkness. He always fled before the dawn.

There had been a direful prophecy in Psyche's family of which her sisters had continually reminded her. When she was a child, an oracle had told her father that the beautiful girl would never marry and only a terrible monster would be her mate. The memory of this prophecy began to fill Psyche's heart with fear. Her sisters came to visit her and increased her fear. They asked all manner of questions about Eros, and Psyche was obliged to confess that she could not exactly describe him because she had never seen him in the light of day. Her jealous sisters, delivered to and from the palace by the light winds of Zephyrus, began at once to fill Psyche's mind with dark suspicions.

"How do you know," they asked, "that your husband is not a terrible and venomous serpent, who feeds you for a while with all these dainties that he may devour you in the end? Take our advice. Provide yourself with a lamp well filled with oil and tonight, when this villain returns and sleeps, go into his chamber and see whether or not the prophecy is true."

Psyche tried to resist her sisters, but at last their urging and her own curiosity were too much. She filled her lamp, and when her husband had fallen into his deep sleep, she went silently to his bedside and held the light above him.

There lay Eros, the most beautiful of all the gods! His golden ringlets were a crown above his snowy forehead and crimson cheeks, and the two wings that sprang from his shoulders were like the soft white blossoms of the orchard. In her joy at finding no cause for her fears, Psyche leaned over, accidentally tipping the lamp, that she might look more closely at Eros' face. As she bent down, a drop of the burning oil fell on the god's shoulder. He opened his eyes, startled, and looked up at Psyche. Then, without saying a word, he spread his wide wings and flew out of the window.

Psyche tried to follow him, but she had no wings and could not leave the ground. For one brief moment, Eros stayed his flight and turned to see her standing there below him in the dust.

“Foolish Psyche,” he said, “why did you repay my love in this way? After having disobeyed my mother’s commands and making you my wife, could you not trust me? I will inflict no further punishment upon you than this, that I leave you forever, for love cannot live with suspicion.” And with these words, Eros flew out of Psyche’s sight.

That was the beginning of the long road of trouble Psyche had to follow. She wandered day and night, without food or rest, in search of Eros. One day, she saw a magnificent temple set upon the brow of a lofty hill and she toiled the long way up to it, saying to herself, “Perhaps my love inhabits here.”

When Psyche reached the top of the hill and entered the temple, she saw heaps of corn, some in sheaves and others in loose ears, and there was barley mingled with it. There were sickles and rakes and all the other instruments of the harvest scattered about in great confusion as if the reapers, at the end of the sultry day, had left them in this disorder. In spite of her sorrow, Psyche could not bear to see this disarray and she began trying to set the place in order. She worked so busily that she did not see Demeter, whose temple it was, enter. Turning at last, Psyche saw the goddess of the harvest, wearing her fruit trimmed garments and standing at her side.

“Poor Psyche!” she said pityingly. “It is possible, you know, for you to find a way to the abode of the gods where Eros has made his new home. Go and surrender yourself to Aphrodite and try by your own works to win her forgiveness and, perhaps, her favor.”

So Psyche obeyed this command of Demeter, although it took a great deal of courage, and she travelled to the temple of Aphrodite in Thebes where the goddess received her in anger.

“The only way by which you can merit the favor of the gods, unfortunate Psyche,” Aphrodite barked, “is by your own efforts. I, myself, am going to make a trial of your housewifely skill to see if you are industrious and diligent enough to be worthy of my son.”

With these words, Aphrodite conducted Psyche to a storehouse connected to her temple where there was an enormous quantity of grain laid in piles; beans, lentils, barley, wheat and the tiny seeds of the millet which Aphrodite had stored to feed her pigeons.

“Separate all these grains,” the goddess said to Psyche, “putting those of the same kind in a pile, and see that you finish before evening.” Then she left Psyche who was in consternation at the impossible task spread before her.

Psyche dipped her fingers into the golden heap gathering up a handful to sort the grains, but it took her a long time and the grain lay about her on every side like a yellow river. The grains she held were less than a drop taken from its surface.

“I shall not be able to finish. I shall never see my husband again!” Psyche moaned.

Still she worked on steadily and at last a little ant, a native of the fields, crawled across the floor and took compassion on the toiling Psyche. The ant was the king in his own domain and was followed by a host of his little red subjects. Grain by grain, they separated the seeds, helping to put them in their own piles, and when the work was accomplished they vanished as quickly as they had appeared.

When evening came, Aphrodite returned, breathing odors of nectar and crowned with roses from a banquet of the gods. When she saw that Psyche’s task was done, she scarcely believed her eyes.

“You must have had assistance,” she said. “Tomorrow you shall try a more difficult undertaking. Beyond my temple you will see a grassy meadow which



stretches along the borders of the water. There you will find a flock of sheep with golden shining fleeces on their backs and grazing without a shepherd. Bring me a sample of their precious wool that you gather from each of the fleeces.”

Psyche once more obeyed, but this was a test of her life as well as of her endurance. As she reached the meadow, a river god, whispering to her through the rushes, warned her.

“Do not venture among the flock while the sun shines on them,” he told her. “In the heat of the rising sun, the rams burn with a cruel rage to destroy mortals with their sharp teeth. Wait until twilight, when you will find their woolly gold sticking to the bushes and the trunks of the trees.”

The compassion of the river god helped Psyche to do as Aphrodite had commanded and she returned to the temple in the evening with her arms full of golden fleece.

Still Aphrodite was not satisfied.

“I have a third task for you,” she told the weary Psyche. “Take this box to the realm of Hades and give it to Persephone saying to her, ‘My mistress, Aphrodite, desires you to send her a little of your beauty, for in tending her son whom Psyche burned she has lost some of her own.’ And make all possible haste, for I must use it before I appear next in the circle of the gods on Mount Olympus.”

Psyche felt that now her destruction was surely at hand. It was a dangerous road that led to the dark, underground kingdom of Hades and there were deadly dangers on the way. But Psyche was finding a new courage with each of the difficulties that she had to encounter, and she set out with the box. She passed safely by Cerberus, Hades’ three-headed watch dog. She prevailed upon Charon, the ferryman, to take her across the black river and wait for her while she successfully begged Persephone to fill the box. Then she started back to the light again.

All would have gone well with Psyche if she had not grown curious. Having come so far with her dangerous task, she ached to open the box.

“I would take only the least bit of this beauty from Aphrodite,” Psyche thought, “to make myself more fair for Eros if I ever behold him again.”

So she carefully opened the box, but there was no beauty in it at all. Instead, vapors from a potion filled the air, causing Psyche to fall beside the road in a sleep which seemed to have no waking. She did not stir nor even seem to breathe.

It was there that love, in the form of Eros, found Psyche. He had been healed of his oil wound, and he could not bear the absence of his wife any longer. He flew through a crack in the window of the palace of Aphrodite and made his way to earth, straight to the spot where Psyche lay. He gathered the deadly sleep vapors from her body and the air, putting them fast inside the box again. Then he touched her lightly with one of his arrows and she woke.

“Again you have almost perished because of your curiosity, my foolish Psyche,” he said as she reached her arms to him. “But finish this task which my mother has asked of you, deliver this box, and I will attend to the rest.”

Then Eros, as swift as a bird flies, returned to Mount Olympus and pleaded with Zeus to welcome Psyche. Zeus consented at last to have this daughter of earth admitted to the family of the gods and Hermes was sent to bring her and offer her the cup of ambrosial nectar that would make her one of the immortals.

It is said that at the moment when Psyche completed her tasks and took her departure to Mount Olympus, a winged creature, the butterfly, that had never before been seen on earth arose from a garden and flew on golden wings up toward the sun. So it was thought that the story of Psyche was the story of the butterfly who bursts from its gray house of the cocoon and rises, with a new beauty and the power of wings, toward the sky. And the Greeks had still another name for Psyche whom neither her troubles or the sleep of Hades could keep from the house of the gods when Love pleaded for her. They spoke of her as the Soul.

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