

Apollo and Daphne

by Jean Lang

“I espouse thee for my tree:
Be thou the prize of honour and renown;
The deathless poet, and the poem, crown;
Thou shalt the Roman festivals adorn,
And, after poets, be by victors worn.”

OVID (*Dryden's translation*).

Conqueror of all conquerable earth, yet not always victorious over the heart of a maid was the golden-locked Apollo.

As mischievous Eros played one day with his bow and arrows, Apollo beheld him and spoke to him mockingly.

“What hast thou to do with the weapons of war, saucy lad?” he said. “Leave them for hands such as mine, that know full well how to wield them. Content thyself with thy torch, and kindle flames, if indeed thou canst, but such bolts as thy white young arms can drive will surely not bring scathe to god nor to man.”

Then did the son of Aphrodite answer, and as he made answer he laughed aloud in his glee. “With thine arrows thou mayst strike all things else, great Apollo, a shaft of mine shall surely strike thy heart!”

Carefully, then, did Eros choose two arrows from his quiver. One, sharp-pointed and of gold, he fitted carefully to his bow, drew back the string until it was taut, and then let fly the arrow, that did not miss its mark, but flew straight to the heart of the sun-god. With the other arrow, blunt, and tipped with lead, he smote the beautiful Daphne, daughter of Peneus, the river-god. And then, full joyously did the boy-god laugh, for his roguish heart knew well that to him who was struck by the golden shaft must come the last pangs that have proved many a man's and many a god's undoing, while that leaden-tipped arrow meant to whomsoever it struck, a hatred of Love and an immunity from all the heart weakness that Love can bring. Those were the days when Apollo was young. Never before had he loved.

But as the first fierce storm that assails it bends the young, supple tree with its green budding leaves before its furious blast, so did the first love of Apollo bend low his adoring heart. All day as he held the golden reins of his chariot, until evening when its fiery wheels were cooled in the waters of the western seas, he thought of Daphne. All night he dreamed of her. But never did there come to Daphne a time when she loved Love for Love's sake. Never did she look with gentle eye on the golden-haired god whose face was as the face of all the exquisite things that the sunlight shows, remembered in a dream. Her only passion was a passion for the chase. One of Diana's nymphs was she, cold and pure and white in soul as the virgin goddess herself.

There came a day when Apollo could no longer put curbing hands on his fierce longing. The flames from his chariot still lingered in reflected glories on sea and hill and sky. The very leaves of the budding trees of spring were outlined in gold. And through the dim wood walked Daphne, erect and

lithe and living as a sapling in the early spring.

With beseeching hands, Apollo followed her. A god was he, yet to him had come the vast humility of passionate intercession for the gift of love to a little nymph. She heard his steps behind her and turned round, proud and angry that one should follow her when she had not willed it.

“Stay!” he said, “daughter of Peneus. No foe am I, but thine own humble lover. To thee alone do I bow my head. To all others on earth am I conqueror and king.”

But Daphne, hating his words of passionate love, sped on. And when his passion lent wings to his feet and she heard him gaining on her as she fled, not as a lover did Daphne look on deathless Apollo, but as a hateful foe. More swiftly than she had ever run beside her mistress Diana, leaving the flying winds behind her as she sped, ran Daphne now. But ever did Apollo gain upon her, and almost had he grasped her when she reached the green banks of the river of which her father, Peneus, was god.

“Help me, Peneus!” she cried. “Save me, oh my father, from him whose love I fear!”

As she spoke the arms of Apollo seized her, yet, even as his arms met around her waist, lissome and slight as a young willow, Daphne the nymph was Daphne the nymph no longer. Her fragrant hair, her soft white arms, her tender body all changed as the sun-god touched them. Her feet took root in the soft, damp earth by the river. Her arms sprouted into woody branches and green leaves. Her face vanished, and the bark of a big tree enclosed her snow-white body. Yet Apollo did not take away his embrace from her who had been his dear first love. He knew that her cry to Peneus her father had been answered, yet he said, “Since thou canst not be my bride, at least thou shalt be my tree; my hair, my lyre, my quiver shall have thee always, oh laurel tree of the Immortals!”

So do we still speak of laurels won, and worn by those of deathless fame, and still does the first love of Apollo crown the heads of those whose gifts have fitted them to dwell with the dwellers on Olympus.

Source:

Lang, Jean. “Apollo and Daphne.” *A Book of Myths*. New York: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1914. 42 – 45. Electronic.