

FLOWER-MYTHS: NARCISSUS, HYACINTH, ADONIS

The first story about the creation of the narcissus is told only in an early Homeric Hymn of the seventh or eighth century, the second I have taken from Ovid. There is an immense difference between the two poets, who are separated from each other not only by six or seven hundred years. But also by the fundamental difference between the Greek, and the Roman. The Hymn is written objectively, simply, without a touch of affectation. The poet is thinking of his subject. Ovid is as always thinking of his audience. But he tells this story well. The bit about the ghost trying to look at itself in the river of death is a subtle touch which is quite characteristic of him and quite unlike any Greek writer. Euripides gives the best account of the festival of Hyacinthus; Apollodorus and Ovid both tell his story. Whenever there is any vividness in my narrative it may be ascribed securely to Ovid. Apollodorus never deviates into anything like that. Adonis I have taken from two third-century poets, Theocritus and Bion. The tale is typical of the Alexandrian poets, tender, a little soft, but always in exquisite taste.

In Greece there are most lovely wild flowers. They would be beautiful anywhere, but Greece is not a rich and fertile country of wide meadows and fruitful fields where flowers seem at home. It is a land of rocky ways and stony hills and rugged mountains, and in such places the exquisite vivid bloom of the wild flowers,

A profusion of delight,

Gay, bewilderingly bright,

comes as a startling surprise. Bleak heights are carpeted in radiant colors; every crack and crevice of a frowning crag blossoms. The contrast of this laughing, luxuriant beauty with the clear-cut, austere grandeur all around arrests the attention sharply. Elsewhere wild flowers may be little noticed—but never in Greece.

That was as true in the days of old as it is now. In the faraway ages when the tales of Greek mythology were taking shape men found the brilliant blossoms of the Greek spring a wonder and a delight. Those people separated from us by thousands of years, and almost completely unknown to us, felt as we do before that miracle of loveliness, each flower so delicate, yet all together covering the land like a rainbow mantle flung over the hills. The first storytellers in Greece told story after story about them, how they had been created and why they were so beautiful.

It was the most natural thing possible to connect them with the gods. All things in heaven and earth were mysteriously linked with the divine powers, but beautiful things most of all. Often an especially exquisite flower was held to be the direct creation of a god for his own purpose. That was true of the narcissus, which was not like ours of that name, but a lovely bloom of glowing purple and silver. Zeus called it into being to help his brother, the lord of the dark underworld, when he wanted to carry away the maiden he had fallen in love with, Demeter's daughter, Persephone. She was gathering flowers with her companions in the vale of Enna, in a meadow of soft grass and roses and crocus and lovely violets and iris and hyacinths. Suddenly she caught sight of something quite new to her, a bloom more beautiful by far than any she had ever seen, a strange glory of a flower, a marvel to all, immortal gods and mortal men. A hundred blossoms grew up from the roots, and the fragrance was very sweet. The broad sky above and the whole earth laughed to see it and the salt wave of the sea.

Only Persephone among the maidens had spied it. The rest were at the other end of the meadow. She stole toward it, half fearful at being alone, but unable to resist the desire to fill her basket with it, exactly as Zeus had supposed she would feel. Wondering she stretched out her hands to take the lovely plaything, but before she touched it a chasm opened in the earth and out of it coal-black horses sprang, drawing a chariot and driven by one who had a look of dark splendor, majestic and beautiful and terrible. He caught her to him and held her close. The next moment she was being borne away from the radiance of earth in springtime to the world of the dead by the king who rules it.

This was not the only story about the narcissus. There was another as magical, but quite different. The hero of it was a beautiful lad, whose name was Narcissus. His beauty was so great, all the girls who saw him longed to be his, but he would have none of them. He would pass the loveliest carelessly by, no matter how much she tried to make him look at her. Heartbroken maidens were nothing to him. Even the sad case of the fairest of the nymphs, Echo, did not move him. She was a favorite of Artemis, the goddess of woods and wild creatures, but she came under the displeasure of a still mightier goddess, Hera herself, who was at her usual occupation of trying to discover what Zeus was about. She suspected that he was in love with one of the nymphs and she went to look them over to try to discover which. However, she was immediately

diverted from her investigation by Echo's gay chatter. As she listened amused, the others silently stole away and Hera could come to no conclusion as to where Zeus's wandering fancy had alighted. With her usual injustice she turned against Echo. That nymph became another unhappy girl whom Hera punished. The goddess condemned her never to use her tongue again except to repeat what was said to her. "You will always have the last word," Hera said, "but no power to speak first."

This was very hard, but hardest of all when Echo, too, with all the other lovelorn maidens, loved Narcissus. She could follow him but she could not follow him, but she could not speak to him. How then could she make a youth who never looked at a girl pay attention to her? One day, however, it seemed her chance had come. He was calling to his companions. "Is anyone here?" and she called back in rapture, "Here—Here." She was still hidden by the trees so that he did not see her, and he shouted, "Come!" —just what she longed to say to him. She answered joyfully, "Come!" and stepped forth from the woods with her arms outstretched. But he turned away in angry disgust. "Not so," he said; "I will die before I give you power over me." All she could say was, humbly, entreatingly, "I give you power over me," but he was gone. She hid her blushes and her shame in a lonely cave, and never could be comforted. Still she lives in places like that, and they say she has so wasted away with longing that only her voice now is left of her.

So Narcissus went on his cruel way, a scorner of love. But at last one of those he wounded prayed a prayer and it was answered by the gods: "May he who loves not others love himself." The great goddess Nemesis, which means righteous anger, undertook to bring this about. As Narcissus bent over a clear pool for a drink and saw there his own reflection, on the moment he fell in love with it. "Now I know," he cried, "what others have suffered from me, for I burn with love of my own self—and yet how can I reach that loveliness I see mirrored in the water? But I cannot leave it. Only death can set me free." And so it happened. He pined away, leaning perpetually over the pool, fixed in one long gaze. Echo was near him, but she could do nothing; only when, dying, he called to his image, "Farewell —farewell," she could repeat the words as a last good-by to him.

They say that when his spirit crossed the river that encircles the world of the dead, it leaned over the boat to catch a final glimpse of itself in the water.

The nymphs he had scorned were kind to him in death and sought his body to give it burial, but they could not find it. Where it had lain there was blooming a new and lovely flower, and they called it by his name. Narcissus.

Another flower that came into being through the death of a beautiful youth was the hyacinth, again not like the flower we call by that name, but lily-shaped and of a deep purple, or, some say, a splendid crimson. That was a tragic death, and each year it was commemorated by

The festival of Hyacinthus
That lasts throughout the tranquil night.
In a contest with Apollo
He was slain.
Discus throwing they competed,
And the god's swift cast
Sped beyond the goal he aimed at

and struck Hyacinthus full in the forehead a terrible wound. Lie had been Apollo's dearest companion. There was no rivalry between them when they tried which could throw the discus Farthest; they were only playing a game. The god was horrorstruck to see the blood gush forth and the lad, deathly pale, fall to the ground. He turned as pale himself as he caught him up in his arms and tried to staunch the wound. But it was too late. While he held him the boy's head fell back as a flower does when its stem is broken. He was dead and Apollo kneeling beside him wept for him, dying so young, so beautiful. He had killed him, although through no fault of his, and he cried, "Oh, if I could give my life for yours, or die with you." Even as he spoke, the bloodstained grass turned green again and there bloomed forth the wondrous flower that was to make the lad's name known forever. Apollo himself inscribed the petals—some say with Hyacinth's initial, and others with the two letters of the Greek word that means "Alas"; either way, a memorial of the god's great sorrow.

There is a story, too, that Zephyr, the West Wind, not Apollo, was the direct cause of the death, that he also loved this fairest of youths and in his jealous anger at seeing the god preferred to him he blew upon the discus and made it strike Hyacinth.



Such charming tales of lovely young people who, dying in the springtime of life, were fittingly changed into spring flowers, have probably a dark background. They give a hint of black deeds that were done in the far-distant past. Long before there were any stories told in Greece or any poems sung which have come down to us, perhaps even before there were storytellers and poets, it might happen, if the fields around a village were not fruitful, if the corn did not spring up as it should, that one of the villagers would be killed and his—or her—blood sprinkled over the barren land. There was no idea as yet of the radiant gods of Olympus who would have loathed the hateful sacrifice. Mankind had only a dim feeling that as their own life depended utterly on seedtime and harvest, there must be a deep connection between themselves and the earth and that their blood, which was nourished by the corn, could in turn nourish it at need. What more natural then, if a beautiful boy had thus been killed, than to think when later the ground bloomed with narcissus or hyacinths that the flowers were his very self, changed and yet living again? So they would tell each other it had happened, a lovely miracle which made the cruel death seem less cruel. Then as the ages passed and people no longer believed that the earth needed blood to be fruitful, all that was cruel in the story would be dropped and in the end forgotten. No one would remember that terrible things had once been done. Hyacinthus, they would say, died not slaughtered by his kinsfolk to get food for them, but only because of a sorrowful mistake.

Of these deaths and flowery resurrections the most famous was that of Adonis. Every year the Greek girls mourned for him and every year they rejoiced when his flower, the blood-red anemone, the windflower, was seen blooming again. Aphrodite loved him; the Goddess of Love, who pierces with her shafts the hearts of gods and men alike, was fated herself to suffer that same piercing pain.

She saw him when he was born and even then loved him and decided he should be hers. She carried him to Persephone to take charge of him for her but Persephone loved him too and would not give him back to Aphrodite, not even when the goddess went down to the underworld to get him. Neither goddess would yield, and finally Zeus himself had to judge between them. He decided that Adonis should spend half the year with each, the autumn and winter with the Queen of the Dead; the spring and summer with the Goddess of Love and Beauty.

All the time he was with Aphrodite she sought only to please him. He was keen for the chase, and often she would leave her swan-drawn car, in which she was used to glide at her ease through the air, and follow him along rough woodland ways dressed like a huntress. But one sad day she happened not to be with him and he tracked down a mighty boar. With his hunting dogs he brought the beast to bay. He hurled his spear at it, but he only wounded it, and before he could spring away, the boar mad with pain rushed at him and gored him with its great tusks. Aphrodite in her winged car high over the earth heard her lover's groan and flew to him. He was softly breathing his life away, the dark blood flowing down his skin of snow and his eyes growing heavy and dim. She kissed him, but Adonis knew not that she kissed him as he died. Cruel as his wound was, the wound in her heart was deeper. She spoke to him, although she knew he could not hear her:—

"You die. O thrice desired,
And my desire has flown like a dream.
Gone with you is the girdle of my beauty.
But I myself must live who am a goddess
And may not: follow you.
Kiss me yet once again, the last, long kiss,
Until I draw your soul within my lips
And drink down all your love."

The mountains all were calling and the oak trees answering,
Oh, woe, woe for Adonis. He is dead.
And Echo cried in answer, Oh, woe, woe for Adonis.
And all the Loves wept for him and all the Muses too.

But down in the black underworld Adonis could not hear them, nor see the crimson flower that sprang up where each drop of his blood had stained the earth.