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IMAGINATION OVER KNOWLEDGE

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Cupid and Psyche

Once upon a time there lived a king who had three daughters. The two oldest girls were very pretty, and they had many men interested in them, but the youngest was so beautiful that it was whispered in the city that she was even more beautiful than the goddess Aphrodite, and as she walked through the streets men bowed low to the ground, as if Aphrodite herself had passed by.

When Aphrodite heard about the beautiful Psyche, she became angry and thought of a plan. For the plan she needed her son, Cupid.

'Come with me,' she said, when Cupid came to her, 'I have something to show you'; and the two flew through the air together, till they reached the palace where Psyche was sleeping.

'That is the girl who men adore, but they should only adore me,' she whispered, while her grey eyes darted gleams like fire. 'I have brought you here so that you can avenge me by pricking her with an arrow that will fill her heart with love for one of the simplest men.' Cupid stared at the sleeping girl and quickly understood why all men adored her.

'I won't do it,' he murmured, 'I won't make you fall in love with a bad man. From me and my darts you are safe. But am I safe from yours?' And then he left.

If Aphrodite had not been a goddess, and had known a little more about the hearts of men, she might not have envied Psyche so much. Though all the men admired her beauty, none asked her for her hand in marriage. They all felt she was too beautiful for them. So while her sisters had homes and children of their own, Psyche remained alone in her father's palace.

The king got worried as months and years slipped by, and Psyche was past the age when Greek girls normally get married. He summoned some wise men to give him counsel, but they shook their heads, and advised him to consult the oracle of his fathers. So he went to the oracle.

Ten days later he returned to the city with bowed head and white face. The queen, with anxious heart, had been waiting for his arrival.

'What happened?' she said, as she greeted him.

'The oracle has spoken,' answered he, 'Psyche will be left on a rock and a hideous monster will eat her!'

That night a sad procession left the gates of the city, and in the midst was Psyche, clad in garments of black, and led by her father, while her mother followed weeping behind.

The sun was rising when they reached the bare rock on top of a high mountain where the oracle had directed that Psyche should be left to perish. Her father and mother took her in their arms for the last time, and, though they cried bitterly, she never shed a tear. What was the use? It was the will of the gods, and so it had to be!

Soon everybody left and Psyche leaned against the rock trembling with fear thinking about the monster. She was very tired, the road to the mountain had been long and she was exhausted by her grief. A deep sleep crept over her, and for a while her sorrows were forgotten.

While she was sleeping, Cupid, had been watching over her. He carried her down the mountain, and laid her on a bed of lilies in the valley.

While she slept, pleasant dreams floated through her mind, and her terrors and grief were forgotten. She awoke feeling happy, though she could not have told



why, for she was in a strange place and alone. In the distance, through some trees, the spray of a fountain glimmered white, and she rose and walked slowly towards it. By the fountain was a palace, finer by far than the one in which Psyche had lived, for that was built of stone, while this was all of ivory and gold. Filled with wonder mixed with a little

fear, she stepped through the door.

'This palace is as large as a city,' the girl said, as she passed from room to room; 'but how strange that there is no one here to enjoy these treasures, or to guard them!'

Out of the silence a voice answered her: 'The palace is yours, lady. You have only to command, and we obey you.'

Psyche wasn't scared anymore, and happily she took a bath and slept. When she opened her eyes, she saw a table covered with food and wine. And though she heard voices, she didn't see anyone.

The hours flew by, and the sun was sinking, when suddenly a veil of golden tissue was placed on her head, and at the same time a voice that she had not heard spoke: 'Dip your hands in this sacred water'; and Psyche obeyed, and, as her fingers sank into the basin she felt a light touch, as if other fingers were there also.

'Break this cake and eat half,' said the voice again; and Psyche did so, and she saw that the rest of the cake vanished bit by bit, as if someone else were eating it also.

'Now you are my wife, Psyche,' whispered the voice softly; 'but listen to what I say. Your sisters will come looking for you, but their love for you is not pure. If they find you here, do not answer their questions, or lift your eyes towards them.'

Psyche promised she would listen and the weeks slipped by, but one morning she suddenly felt lonely and started to cry at the thought of never seeing her sisters' faces again, or even tell them that she was alive.

'What is it?' her husband asked gently, and she felt soft fingers stroking her hair.

Then Psyche poured out all her woe. How could she be happy, even in this lovely place, when her sisters were grieving for her loss? If she might only see them once, if she might only tell them that she was safe, then she

would ask for nothing more. If not—it was a pity the monster had not devoured her.

'You shall do as you wish,' he said, 'though I fear that ill will come of it. Send for your sisters if you please, and give them anything that the palace contains. But once again let me remind you to not answer their questions, or we shall be parted for ever.'

'We won't be,' cried Psyche, embracing her husband.

'Whoever and whatever you may be, I will not give you up, even for the god Cupid. I will tell them nothing.'

The next morning the two sisters were seated on the rock. 'Psyche! Psyche,' they cried, and the mountains echoed 'Psyche! Psyche,' but no other sound answered them. Suddenly they felt themselves gently lifted from the earth, and wafted through the air to the door of the palace, where Psyche was standing.

'Psyche! Psyche!' they cried again, but this time with joy and wonder.

After her sisters told her everything they had to tell, Psyche invited them to see the palace. After seeing all these riches and splendour, envy began to arise in their hearts, and curiosity also. They looked at each other, and the glances of their eyes promised no good for Psyche.

'But where is your husband?' asked the eldest. 'Will we meet him?' asked the other.

Their questions reminded Psyche of the danger against which she had been warned, and she answered hastily:

'Oh, he is young and very handsome. But he spends much of his time in hunting.' The sisters spent some

hours together and then the two oldest were send home.

'Why has Fortune treated her so differently from us?' cried the eldest. 'Why should she have so much riches, and be married to a man who is young and handsome?'

'Yes, it's not fair,' groaned the other sister, 'let's not tell our father and mother of the honours Fate has heaped on her. Rather let us consider how best to humble her and bring her down.'

Meanwhile night had fallen, and Psyche's husband came to her side.

'Did you remember my warnings,' he asked, 'and refuse to answer the questions of your sisters?'

'Oh yes,' cried Psyche; 'I told them nothing that they wished to know. I said that you were young and handsome, and gave me the most beautiful things in the world, but that they could not see you today, for you were hunting in the mountains.'

'Very well' he sighed; 'but at this moment they are plotting how they will destroy you, by filling your heart with their own evil curiosity, so that one day you will ask to see my face. But the moment you do this I vanish for ever.'

'Ah, you do not trust me,' sobbed Psyche; 'yet I have shown you that I can be silent! Let me prove it again by bringing my sisters once more.'

Her husband refused to grant her what she asked, but at last, he told her that she could see them one more time. Eagerly they ran through the garden into the palace, and greeted Psyche with warm embraces.

As they were eating fruit under the trees by the fountain the elder sister spoke: 'It makes me sad that you're a victim of such deceit.'

'What do you mean?' asked Psyche. 'No one is deceiving me, and no goddess could be happier than I.'

'Your husband is not who you think he is. He is a huge serpent whose neck swells with venom, and whose tongue darts poison. The men who work in the fields have watched him swimming across the river as darkness falls.'

Their sobs and words, convinced Psyche, who fell for their trap.

'It is true,' she said, 'that I have never seen my husband's face. His words are always sweet and gentle, and his touch hardly resembles the skin of a serpent. It is not easy to believe; but if it's true, please help me.'

'That's why we're here,' answered the elder; 'and this is what you must do. This very night take a sharp knife and hide it. After the serpent is sound asleep, cut off his head.' And then her sisters left.

Left alone, Psyche thought that her sisters might be wrong after all. But her faith in them was strong, and as night approached she got ready.

When her husband came home, he soon laid himself down on the couch and fell sound asleep. Then Psyche got a candle and walked over to the couch, to her surprise she didn't see a huge and hideous serpent, but the most beautiful of all the gods, Cupid himself. In her surprise she dropped the candle and the hot wax fell on Cupid's shoulder.

Her presence and the pain woke Cupid and he fled. Psyche was heartbroken and sought eternal forgetfulness in the river. But the river carried her gently along and placed her on a bank of flowers. When she woke up she decided to wander night and day through the world till she would find her husband. With despair in her soul, Psyche wandered from one place to another, not knowing and not caring where her feet would lead her. Then one day she was tracked and seized by one of Aphrodite's servants, who dragged her by the hair to the goddess. Here she was beaten and ridiculed. Then she was given an impossible task to complete.

Psyche knew she couldn't complete the task and thought that she would certainly be killed, but death would be welcome; and she laid her weary body on the floor and slept. At that moment a tiny ant, which had been passing through the storehouse on his way to the fields, saw her, and went to fetch all his brothers, and bade them take pity on the damsel, and do the work that had been given to her.

By sunset every grain was sorted and placed in its own bag. Psyche waited trembling for Aphrodite, as she felt that nothing she could do would please her.

'Well, where are my seeds?' Aphrodite screamed. Psyche pointed silently to the row of bags against the wall. The goddess grew white with rage, and screamed loudly, 'Wretched creature, it is not your hands that have done this! You will not escape my anger so easily!'

The next morning the goddess had another task for the girl. 'Over there on the banks of a river, there's sheep

whose wool is soft as silk and as bright as gold. Before night I want you to return with as much of this wool as you need to make me a robe. And I do not think that you will find any one to perform your task this time!' So Psyche went towards the river, which looked so clear and cool that she stepped into the water to rest. But a reed sang to her, and its song said: 'O Psyche, hide yourself till evening, for the sheep are driven mad by the heat of the sun. But when the air grows colder they fall asleep, and you can gather all the wool you want.'

Psyche thanked the reed and brought the wool safely back to the goddess. Aphrodite was livid and ordered her to go to the top of a mountain and fill a crystal urn from a fountain of black water which spouted from between walls of smooth rock. And Psyche went willingly, thinking that this time surely she must die. But an eagle which was hovering over this awful place came to her aid, and took the urn from her and flew to the fountain which was guarded by two horrible dragons. It needed all his strength and skill to pass by them.

Joyfully the eagle brought back the urn to Psyche, who carried it back carefully. But Aphrodite was still unsatisfied. Again and again she found new errands for Psyche, and hoped that each one might lead her to her death, though every time birds or beasts had pity on her.

If Cupid had only known his mother's wicked schemes, he would have stopped her and helped Psyche. But the wound on his shoulder from the hot wax took long to

heal. At last the pain faded, and his first thought was to visit Psyche. She nearly fainting with joy at the sound of his voice and told him all that had happened since that dreadful night which had destroyed her happiness.

'Your punishment has been severe,' he said, 'and I have no power to save you from the task my mother has given you. But while you fulfil this I will fly to Olympus, and ask the gods to grant you forgiveness, and, more, a place among the immortals.'

And so the envy and malice of Aphrodite and the wicked sisters were brought to a halt, and Psyche left the earth, to sit enthroned on Olympus.