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Pomona and Vertumnus

Unknown writer

Long ago in sunny Italy, children would see the hillside vineyards heavy with purple grapes and the orchard branches bending under their fruit. They would clap their hands and cry, "Look, Pomona's gifts!" Then they thanked the wood nymph whose careful tending had brought it all to harvest.

Pomona walked up the hillside with a curved knife in her right hand, quick and quiet, trimming the stray shoots from the low vines. She cut away every withered branch, so her orchards stayed green and tidy and the trees put all their strength into their fruit.

She loved her work so much that she hardly noticed the many suitors hoping to win her. A madcap satyr danced beside her orchard to catch her eye, and danced in vain. Pan played sweetly on his reed pipes, and Pomona never even looked up.

Among her admirers was a young man named Vertumnus, who watched over gardens and the changing seasons. Again and again he planned to meet her among her fruit and vines. Each time she answered with such cool indifference that he was baffled. At last he decided to try disguises, to catch her attention and to find out whether she cared for him at all.

One day he came as a plowman, whip in hand, as if he had just unyoked the tired oxen from a neighboring field. Another day he was a woodcutter with a pruning knife and a ladder. Then he was a sturdy reaper with a basket of golden grain. He tried fruit-gatherer, soldier, and fisherman too. Whatever he became, Pomona's attention stayed on her orchards and vineyards.

Then one day, as Pomona was checking the ripening fruit, an old woman leaning on a staff appeared beside her. "Your patient care will earn a wonderful harvest," said the old woman. "I have never seen such fruit. Tell me, fair nymph, does some strong young man help you tend these orchards and vineyards?"

Pomona shook her head. "No one is steady enough to love the orchards as dearly as I do."



"There is one whose steadiness cannot be questioned," said the old woman, "though you have turned him away. Many times he has told you how gladly he would work beside you, for nothing in the world delights him more than a golden harvest of ripe fruit."

"You mean Vertumnus," said the nymph. After a moment she added, "He is, indeed, worthy of your praise."

Suddenly the old woman straightened her bent back and threw off her disguise. There stood Vertumnus himself, no longer in any doubt about Pomona's feelings.

In the autumn sunshine, under boughs heavy with ripening fruit, Pomona and Vertumnus promised themselves to each other. They agreed to share the work of bringing the gifts of orchard and vineyard to perfection.

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