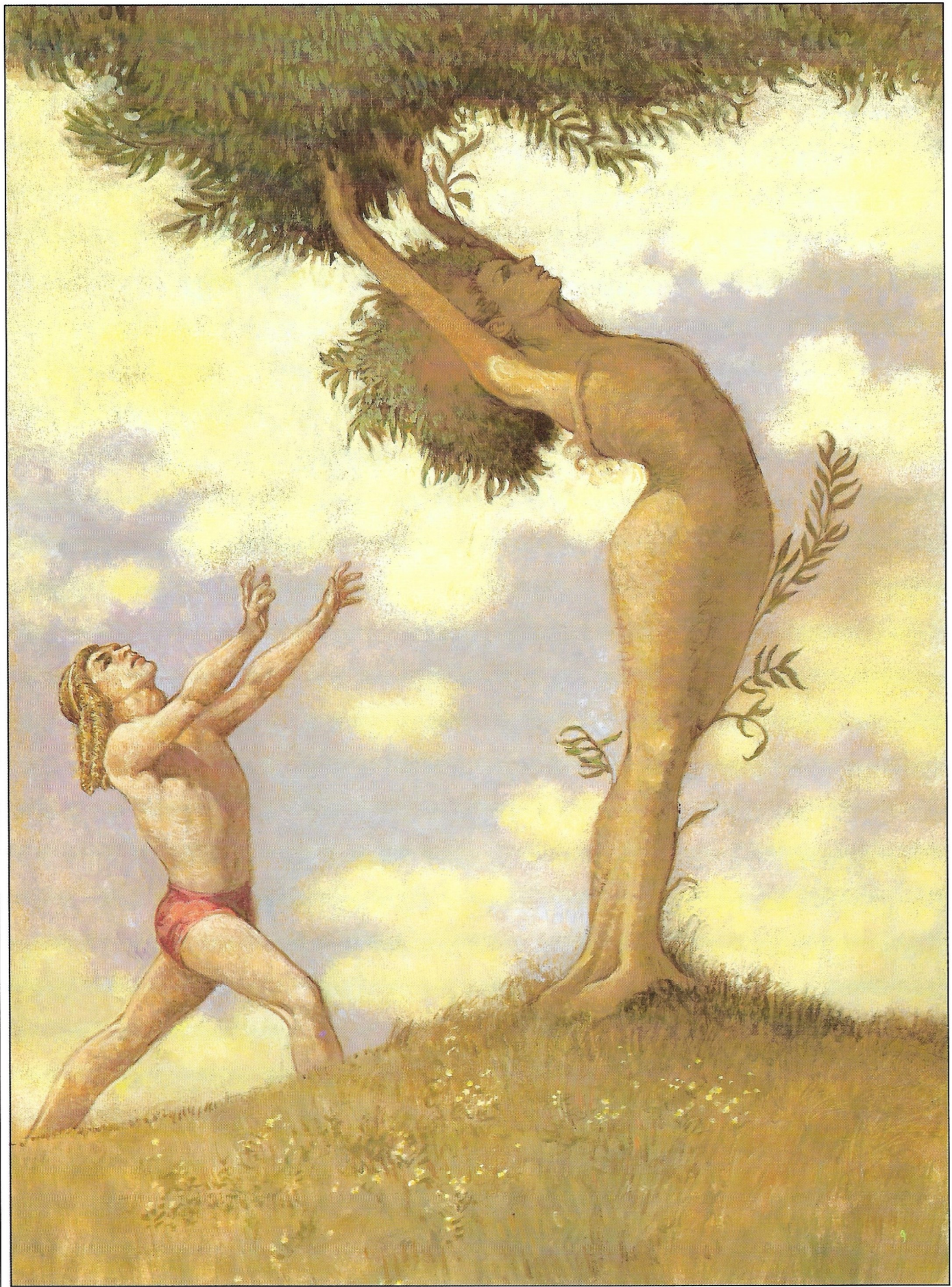




APOLLO'S TREE

The Story of Daphne and Apollo



ONE day when Apollo, the god of light and truth, was a young man, he came upon Cupid, the god of love, playing with one of his bows. "What are you doing with my bow?" Apollo asked angrily. "Don't try to steal my glory, Cupid! I've slain a great serpent with that weapon. Play with your own little bow and arrows!"

"Your arrows may slay serpents, Apollo," said the god of love, "but *my* arrows can do worse harm! Even you can be wounded by them!"

With that ominous threat, Cupid flew into the sky and landed on top of a high mountain. Then he pulled two arrows from his quiver: One had a blunt tip filled with lead. Whomever was hit by this arrow would run from anyone professing love. The second arrow was sharp and made of gold. Whomever was hit with this arrow would instantly fall in love.

Cupid aimed his first arrow at Daphne, a beautiful nymph hunting deep in the woods. Daphne was a follower of Diana, Apollo's twin sister and the goddess of wild things. Like Diana, Daphne loved her freedom, as she roamed the woods and fields

with her hair in wild disarray and her limbs bare to the sun and rain.

Cupid pulled the bowstring back and shot the blunt-tipped arrow at Daphne. When the arrow flew through the air, it became invisible. And when it pierced Daphne's heart, she felt a sharp pain, but knew not why.

Holding her hands over her wound, Daphne rushed to her father, the river god. "Father!" she shouted. "You must make me a promise!"

"What is it?" called the god who stood in the river, surrounded by water nymphs.

"Promise I will never have to get married!" Daphne cried.

The river god, confused by his daughter's frantic request, called back, "But I wish to have grandchildren!"

"No, Father! No! I *never* want to get married! Please, let me always be as free as Diana!"

"But I want you to marry!" cried the god.

"No!" screamed Daphne. And she beat the water with her fists, then rocked back and forth and sobbed.

"All right!" shouted the river god. "Do not grieve so, Daphne! I promise I'll never make you marry!"

"And promise you'll help me escape my suitors!" cried the huntress.

"I promise, I will!" called the river god.

After Daphne secured this promise from her father, Cupid aimed his second arrow — the sharp, gold-tipped one — at Apollo, who was wandering in the woods. Just as the young god came upon Daphne, Cupid pulled back the tight string of his bow and shot the golden arrow into Apollo's heart.

The god instantly fell in love with Daphne. Even though the huntress's hair was wild and she wore only rough animal skins,

Apollo thought she was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen.

"Hello!" he cried. But Daphne gave him a startled look, then bolted into the woods like a deer.

Apollo ran after her, shouting, "Stay! Stay!" But Daphne fled as fast as the wind.

"Don't run, please!" cried Apollo. "You flee like a dove flees an eagle. But I'm not your enemy! Don't run from me!"

Daphne continued to run.

"Stop!" Apollo cried.

Daphne did not slow down.

"Do you know who I am?" said the god. "I am not a farm boy or a shepherd. I am Lord of Delphi! Son of Jupiter! I've slain a great serpent with my arrow! But alas, I fear Cupid's weapons have wounded me worse!"

Daphne continued to run, her bare limbs lit by the sun and her soft hair wild in the wind.

Apollo grew tired of begging her to stop, so he began to pick up speed. On the wings of love, running more swiftly than he'd ever run before, the god of light and truth gave the girl no rest, until soon he was close upon her.

Her strength gone, Daphne could feel Apollo's breath on her hair. "Help me, Father!" she cried to the river god. "Help me!"

No sooner had she spoken these words, than her arms and legs grew heavy and turned to wood. Then her hair became leaves, and her feet became roots growing deep into the ground. She had become a laurel tree; and nothing was left of her, but her exquisite loveliness.

Apollo embraced the tree's branches as if they were Daphne's arms. He kissed her wooden flesh. Then he pressed his hands against the tree's trunk and wept.

"I feel your heart beating beneath this bark," Apollo said, tears

FAVORITE GREEK MYTHS

running down his face. "Since you can't be my wife, you'll be my sacred tree. I'll use your wood for my harp and for my arrows. I'll weave your branches into a wreath for my head. Heroes and scholars will be crowned with your leaves. You'll always be young and green — my first love, Daphne."

