

STORY OF ARACHNE AND ATHENA

Arachne was famous not for her birth or for her city, but only for her skill. Her father was a dyer of wool; her mother also was of no great family. She lived in a small village whose name is scarcely known. Yet her skill in weaving made her famous through all the great cities of Lydia. To see her wonderful work the nymphs of Tmolus would leave their vineyards, the nymphs of Pactolus would leave the golden waters of their river. It was a delight not only to see the cloth that she had woven, but to watch her at work, there was such beauty in the way she did it, whether she was winding the rough skeins into balls of wool, or smoothing it with her fingers, or drawing out the fleecy shiny wool into threads, or giving a twist to the spindle with her quick thumb, or putting in embroidery with her needle. You would think that she had learned the art from Athena herself, the goddess of weaving.

Arachne, however, when people said this, would be offended at the idea of having had even so great a teacher as Athena. "Let her come," she used to say, "and weave against me. If she won, she could do what she liked with me."

Athena heard her words and put on the form of an old woman. She put false gray hair on her head, made her steps weak and tottering, and took a staff in her hand. Then she said to Arachne: "There are some advantages in old age. Long years bring experience. Do not, then, refuse my advice. Seek all the fame you like among men for your skill, but allow the goddess to take first place, and ask her forgiveness, you foolish girl, for the words which you have spoken. She will forgive you if you ask her."

Arachne dropped the threads from her hand and looked angrily at the old woman. She hardly kept her hands off her, and her face showed the anger that she felt. Then she spoke to the goddess in disguise: "Stupid old thing, what is wrong with you is that you have lived too long. Go and give advice to your daughters, if you have any. I am quite able to look after myself. As for what you say, why does not the goddess come here herself? Why does she avoid a contest with me?"

"She has come," Athena replied, and she put off the old woman's disguise, revealing herself as a god in human form. The nymphs bowed down to worship her and the women also who were there. Arachne alone showed no fear. Nevertheless she started, and a sudden blush came to her unwilling face and then faded away again, as the sky grows crimson at the moment of sunrise and then again grows pale. She persisted in what she had said already, and stupidly longing for the desired victory, rushed headlong to her fate.

Athena no longer refused the contest and gave no further advice. At once they both set up their looms and stretched out on them the delicate warp. The web was fastened to the beam; reeds separated the threads and through the threads went

the sharp shuttles which their quick fingers sped. Quickly they worked, with their clothes tucked up round themselves, their skilled hands moving backward and forward like lightning, not feeling the work since they were both so good at it. In their weaving they used all the colors that are made by the merchants--purple of the oyster and every other dye, each shading into each, so that the eye could scarcely tell the difference between the finer shades, though the extreme colors were clear enough. So, after a storm of rain, when a rainbow spans the sky, between each color there is a great difference, but still between each an insensible shading. And in their work they wove in stiff threads of gold, telling ancient stories by pictures.

Athena, in her weaving, showed the ancient citadel of Athens and the story of the old quarrel between her and Poseidon, god of the sea, over the naming of this famous land. There you could see the twelve gods as witnesses, and there Poseidon striking with his huge trident the barren rock from which leaped a stream of sea water. And there was Athena herself, with shield and spear and helmet. As she struck the rock there sprang up a green olive tree, and the victory was hers. Athens was her city.

As for Arachne, the pictures which she wove were of the evil loves of the gods. There was Europa, carried away by a bull over the sea. You would have thought it a real bull and real waves of water. Then she wove Zeus tricking Danae into an affair while disguised as a golden shower, tricking Aegina while hiding as a flame, and even tricking Mnemosyne mother of the Muses, while in the disguise of a shepherd. There was Poseidon too, disguised as a dolphin, a horse, or a ram. Every scene was different, and each scene had the surroundings that it ought to have. Round the edge of the web ran a narrow border filled with designs of flowers and sprays of ivy intertwined.

Neither Athena nor Envy itself could find any fault with Arachne's work. Furious at the success of the mortal girl, Athena tore to pieces the gorgeous web with its stories of the crimes of the gods. With the hard boxwood spindle that she held, she struck Arachne on the head over and over again.

Arachne could not bear such treatment. In her injured pride she put a noose round her neck and hung herself. As she dangled from the rope, Athena, in pity, lifted her body and said: "You may keep your life, you rude and arrogant girl, but you and all your descendants will still hang."

Then, as she went out, she sprinkled over her some magic powders, and immediately her hair felt the poison it fell off; so did her nose and ears; her head became tiny and all her body shrunk; her slender fingers were joined onto her body as legs; everything else was stomach and now, turned into a spider, she still spins threads out of her own stomach and everywhere still exercises her old craft of weaving.