

Arachne

From *A Book of Myths*

By Jean Lang

The hay that so short a time ago was long, green grass, with fragrant meadow-sweet and gold-eyed flowers growing amongst it in the green meadow-land by the river, is now dry hay—fragrant still, though dead, and hidden from the sun's warm rays underneath the dark wooden rafters of the barn. Occasionally a cat on a hunting trip comes into the barn to look for mice, or to nestle cozily down into purring slumber. Now and then a hen comes tip-toeing through the open door and makes for itself a secret nest. Sometimes children come in, chasing cat or hen, or merely to tumble each other over the soft hay, and when they have gone away, a little more of the sky can be seen through the little window in the roof, and through the wooden bars of the window lower down. Yet, whatever other living creatures may come or go, near those windows of the barn, and high up on its dark rafters, there is always one living creature working, ceaselessly working. When, through the skylight, the sun-god drives a golden sunbeam, the web of the unresting worker can also to be seen, for the window is hung with shimmering grey cloths made by Arachne, the spider, and from rafter to rafter her threads are suspended with matchless skill.



She was a girl once, they say—the daughter of Idmon the dyer, of Colophon, a city of Lydia. In all Lydia there was no one who could weave as well as the beautiful Arachne. To watch her brush the wool of the white-fleeced sheep until in her fingers it grew like the soft clouds that hang round the hill tops, was pleasure enough to draw a crowd from all over. And when she drove her swift weaving shuttle here and there, the crowd would catch its breath. Magical was the growth of the cloth through her darting fingers, and yet more magical the exquisite images that she then embroidered upon them. For birds and flowers and butterflies and pictures of all the beautiful things on earth were created by Arachne, and old tales grew alive again under her creative needle.

One day, Athené, goddess of craftsmen, heard news that there was a girl whose skill rivaled that of the goddess herself, and she, always jealous, disguised herself a woman bent with age, and, leaning on her cane, joined the little crowd that so often hung round Arachne as she did her busy work with the needle. As the crowd watched, woven flowers sprang up under Arachne's fingers, just as real as the flowers that spring from the ground. Despite herself, Athené marveled at the magic skill of the fair Arachne.

Gently she spoke to the girl, and, with the words of a wise old woman, and warned her that she must not let her ambition soar too high. “Be careful girl, there is no better craftswomen than the goddess Athené, and were you to dream that one day you might equal her...that would indeed be a crime for any god to punish.”

Glancing up for a moment from the picture whose perfect colors grew fast under her slim fingers, Arachne fixed scornful eyes on the old woman and gave a merry laugh.

“Did you say *equal* Athené? Old woman,” she said. “You must be from the far-off hills where the goat-herds live, otherwise, you would not speak to

me, Arachne, of *equaling* the work of Athené; *excelling* is the better word.”

Athené flushed with anger at the bold words of the girl.

“Be careful what you say child, there may indeed be punishment with time.” The old woman croaked.

Laughing still, Arachne replied, “I don’t fear Athené.” And turning to the crowd who, half afraid, listened to her daring words, she said: “You who watch me day by day, you know well that I am not just boasting. My skill is as great as that of Athené, and greater still it shall be. Let Athené compete with me if she dare! Well do I know who will be the victor.”

Enraged at the girl’s bold words and her challenge, Athené cast off her disguise. The crowd cowered as before them stood the radiant goddess with eyes that blazed with anger and insulted pride.

“Athené is here,” she said, and crowd fell on their knees before her, humbly adoring. Arachne alone was unabashed. Her cheeks showed how fast her heart was beating. From rosy red to white went the color in them, yet, in firm, low voice she spoke.

“I have spoken truth,” she said. “Not woman, nor goddess, can weave like me. I am ready to abide by what I have said, and if I did boast, by my boast I stand. If you will agree, great goddess, to try your skill against mine and you win, I will gladly pay the price.”

The grey-eyes of Athené the goddess, grew dark as the sea when a thunder-cloud hangs over it and a mighty storm is coming. Not for one moment did she delay, but took her place by the side of Arachne. On the

loom they stretched out two webs with a fine yarn, and quickly set to work.

Athené and Arachne began their weaving, covering the splendid cloths with pictures such as no skilled worker of tapestry has ever since dreamed of accomplishing. Under the fingers of Athené grew up scenes so real and so perfect that the crowd could not tell whether the goddess was indeed creating life. And each picture was one that told of the power of the gods and of the doom that came upon those humans who had dared to struggle as equals with them.

Arachne glanced up from her web and looked with eyes that glowed with the love of beautiful things at the creations of Athené. Yet, unafraid, her fingers still sped on, and the goddess saw, with a look that grew yet more clouded, how a mere girl had chosen for subjects the tales that showed the weaknesses of the gods. One after another the living pictures grew beneath her hand, and the crowd held their breath in mingled fear and excitement at Arachne's godlike skill and daring.

It was impossible to choose between the work of the goddess and the girl.

Darker and yet more dark grew the eyes of Athené as they looked on the magical beauty of the pictures, each one of which was an insult to the gods.

Then at last the storm broke, and with a scream, the enraged goddess shredded the Arachne's weaving, the beautiful pictures were torn into rags and ribbons.

Arachne, shamed to the dust, knew that life for her was no longer worth living. She had aspired, in the pride of her splendid genius, to compete with a god, and knew now that such a contest can never be won.

Athené looked at her and smiled with icy kindness. “Oh guilty and shameless Arachne! For evermore you and your descendants will live and weave as you did today so that men will never forget the punishment of those dare to rival a god.”

Even as Athené spoke, Arachne’s fair form dried up and withered. Her straight limbs grew grey and crooked and wiry, and her smooth white arms were no more. Eight legs sprouted and her body shrank. And then just as suddenly as it had started, there was silence. Tiny beside the loom, where just moments before the beautiful weaver of Lydia had stood, crawled a creature that few love and many fear.



The sun has not long enough shown his face to dry up the dew in the garden, and look at the little clipped tree of boxwood, a great wonder! For in and out, and all over its twigs and leaves, Arachne has woven her web, and on the web the dew has dropped a million diamond drops. And, suddenly, all the colors in the sky are mirrored dazzlingly on the grey tapestry of her making. Arachne has come to her own again.