

PAN'S FLUTE

Dusk was already falling. The beautiful sycamores extended enormous shadows over the river and the tall reeds. The yellow sun was seen setting and the moon rising, as pale as a silver cloud.

Lycaon savored the charming moment when the daughter and son of Latone occupied the edge of the horizon simultaneously. Covered in the dust of the roads, he was carrying a lyre of blackened wood, for he was an aede, having received the education of singers and philosophers under elegant porticoes, and the caresses of painted slaves on ivory beds, in the odor of aromatic plants, amid the harmony of musical instruments. He also remembered, both pleasantly and bitterly, industrious courtesans who knew the art of converting human sighs into gold.

And he was traveling through Hellas of the hundred cities in order to find his chimera. He sang as he went, on the agoras of cities and the edges of villages, and the kindly soil of Achaea gave him hospitality, clothing and amour in exchange. He knew how to relate the legends that please young women and how to draw the instruction therefrom that invites sensuality.

He had arrived at the Ladon of the grassy banks. In the divine half-light, he dreamed about the son of Laertes, the destroyer of ramparts, and Nausicaa with the white arms. How pleasant it would be to see her appear amid the willows of the river, with her semi-naked followers, laughing through their wet hair!

As he was thinking that, exhausted by fatigue, with his heart full of the charm of Eros, he heard silvery laughter that was prolonged amid the song of naiads. He stopped, and looked.

The red sun was about to disappear; the large moon resembled an immense mirror in which a hill was reflected. And among the slender trees, over the reeds and the lotus, he saw nymphs or mortals, scarcely clad in pure wool, who were letting their hair dry. In the crimson and white light they were as brilliant as the daughter of Antinous and her companions.

And one of them, who seemed coiffed in radiance and woven of lilies, made him think that peoples might not have been unready to suffer for her, as for Helen.

Meanwhile, he moved forward. The sparkling young women, finally perceiving him, got to their feet in order to flee across the meadows; but he raised his hands and shouted in a soft voice exercised by music and eloquence:

“Oh! Goddesses or mortals, luminous daughters of the earth, or naiads issued from the waters, have no fear of the solitary traveler. He cannot do you any harm. Rather listen to his voice...for I know stories of the men of old and the songs of good aedes. Would you not like me to relate for you the misfortune of Syrinx, daughter of this river of the transparent gulfs: Syrinx, who could only flee the hairy god with the goat's legs by becoming a slender reed? That story is charming on summer nights, and full of secret lessons.”

The young woman who seemed to be coiffed by radiance stopped, and then the others. They all approached the aede with the gestures of curious hinds with large starlit eyes, and one of them shouted: “Tell us the story of the nymph Syrinx, stranger. We will listen to it mingle with the voice of the river. But first take a cup of dark wine, gentle on the heart.”

She picked up a goatskin full of wine and poured a cupful for Lycaon. He raised the cup toward the sky, made a small libation to the river, and savored the beverage, the winged soul of which filled him with eloquence.

“Now I will tell you the story of Syrinx, issue of the river Ladon, and the terrible god who, prowling the woods and the meadows, renders the darkness more menacing.”

They sat down beside him. He respired the pleasant odor of their flesh, and saw their mouths shining crimson and silver in the light of Hecate. His breast palpitated with sensuality while he tuned his sonorous lyre; the largest of the stars came to mirror themselves in the water and in the eyes of the beautiful young

women, and a breath sometimes descended that seemed perfumed with the ambrosia of a god hovering in the crystalline twilight.

Lycaon first made audible the little euphonic nymphs that are captive in the strings of the lyre, and then he spoke.

So, the god Pan was hiding from the gods and from men; that is why old Hesiod did not know him. He hid in the noise of tempests, in the murmur of trees, and in the sudden voices that throw panic into livestock, travelers and armies in battle. He haunted the forests that moaned, he howled with the voice of invisible wolves, the anger of equinoxes and the resonance of the sea.

Now, the nymph Syrinx lived near the river, her father, in the scintillating meadows, on the shady islands and beside tranquil coves. She was tremulous and supple, she glided happily on moonbeams; she disappeared silently into the trunks of willows; she wove her red hair with fresh herbs. There was no immortal more fearful. A leaf curved by the wind caused her to flee; she was afraid of looking at her own image, and the song of frogs in the marsh troubled her dreams.

As soon as dusk fell, she took shelter among the branches; she listened to the darkness while curling herself up. And that was not without pleasure. She knew the little sensualities of the fear that gives a voice to things and brings the stones of paths to life. She did not detest the fact that the smallest insect seemed terrible.

One morning, she heard footfalls following her over the meadow. She turned round and saw nothing. But the next day, as she lay down in the shade of a sycamore, she felt a warm breath on her neck and in her hair. One evening, when she was about to go into a grotto, an invisible obstacle stopped her for some time; she saw the vapor of breath rising.

She uttered a scream, and the obstacle disappeared.

After that, she was followed incessantly. The trees sighed as she passed by, the water uttered a soft plaint in receiving her figure, and she no longer dared to look at her naked flesh, for hidden eyes were looking at it at the same time as her. In spite of her fear of the dark, she no longer bathed except in the secrecy of night.

She understood that a god was smitten with her, and was troubled, like hinds by Autumn. Was it Phoebus, king of light, or the great Zeus, perfumed with ambrosia? She lay down on the moss of the forest or on odiferous grass. She dreamed about the blue flesh of the firmament, and the clouds, the sons of Saturn. She did not know whether she was quivering with fear or desire.

It seemed to her that she would have liked to summon Eros, but that she did not dare. The breath came down; she sensed the invisible god beside her young body, palpitating for the eternal hymen, the objective of being. Sometimes, a soft arm embraced her, with the friction of a torso. She thought that she was about to see, but she saw nothing but a furtive radiance, a fleeing animal, or the slight of a black bird in the sky.

One day, she was arranging her hair with iris flowers and little lively herbs. She was mirroring her golden head in a spring. And she was smiling, vaguely, at her flexible grace, while foliage quivered beside her and began to speak. And it said, in a voice that resembled the murmur of waves:

“It is the god Pan who loves you, nymph issued from the beautiful river Ladon. He wants to create new beings with you, who have no peers on earth. You will give birth to chimerical animals: lion-men and swan-women. You will put into the woods and the meadows figures that are not accustomed to be there. And you will be glorious among the immortals, for nothing is more beautiful than to be the mother of unknown forms.”

The fearful nymph only understood what it said vaguely, but she found charm in the voice that quivered in the foliage, and she said, softly: “Has the god Pan no face, then, that he always speaks by means of the trees, the waters and echoes?”

The foliage replied: “The god Pan has many faces, for he is the king of all the beasts and all the satyrs who live among the trees...and who are modeled in his resemblance.”

But the nymph with the bright eyes still did not understand. She said in her turn: “What is the point of so many faces, if they cannot make themselves visible?”

As she spoke, the foliage started to laugh.

“Would you like to see Pan, innocent nymph?”

She trembled, but curiosity was stronger than fear.

“Yes.”

“Look!”

She saw a reflection, and then a large stag with ten branches. It threw its head back and pawed the grass with its cloven hoof. Its eyes sparkled like the red stars of Ares; ardor elevated its muscular flanks. It came toward the nymph and placed its warm mouth on her shoulder. She sensed the ardor of Eros in that agile guest of the forests, and wanted to recoil. But she found herself pressed against the vast trunk of an oak; the powerful beast caressed her white breast, and her shoulders, comparable to those of silver Hebe. Thus the wild bull on the Phoenician shore mingled its breath with that of the pale Europa.

Syrinx uttered a loud scream of fear. The stag looked at her then with its bright eyes, raised its branched horns and vanished like a cloud.

“You have seen one of the faces of the god Pan,” murmured the foliage. “But he can also take on human form.”

Syrinx was still shivering. The gaze of the stag was within her, like a fire in a hearth. Eternal life excited her to abandon herself, for the benefit of beings that were to be born in the future. She desired to see Pan in human form, and said so in a whisper to the foliage.

Then, in the blue shade, a human face appeared. It bore a forked beard, and horns on the head; his body was covered with unkempt hair, and his limbs were those of a goat. And his eyes were resplendent with the same red flame that had appeared in the stag’s eyes.

“Syrinx, tremulous daughter of the waters and the meadows, your destiny will be as sweet as Echo, to whom I gave Lynx, and Aega, who conceived Aegipan. I am the great god of the future. My descendants will populate the earth when those of Zeus, Poseidon and Phoebus are hidden in sad dwellings and disdained by men. Come, nymph with the beautiful tresses, we shall be happy on the profound moss. We shall unite in order to make the forest more mysterious.”

He spoke, but Syrinx disdained his hairy body and his horned head. She rose to her feet nimbly and tried to flee toward the river with the beautiful eddies; but the god barred her route. She raised her hands toward the heavens and prayed:

“Zeus, O Father who reigns from the heights of Ida, very great, very glorious, and you, Phoebus, conductor of light, and you, divine River who gave birth to me, have pity on me; do not let me fall into the hands of this brutal god.”

“Your prayer is vain, Syrinx,” said the god Pan, “for I am the master of nymphs born of rivers. It is insensate, for you are refusing happiness...”

“Change your face!” cried the nymph. “I cannot abide your goat’s feet and your hairy torso...”

“It is the form in which I desire to be a father...there is none more beautiful.”

She fled toward the hills. She bounded like a filly that has not yet known the human yoke; he followed her like a proud stallion, the king of herds. They ran over pastures, hills and plains where men live who nourish themselves on wheat. And when dusk fell, and the shadows of the trees were elongated, when they both returned toward the Ladon, whose bend they had cut across, Pan cried:

“Stop, Syrinx. Fear, in fleeing the decree of Eros, running to your doom. The River itself cannot protect you, and for having escaped destiny, you would be similar to a sterile herb.”

“I would rather be similar to a reed.” she replied, “than be the mother of a satyr...”

As she spoke, the river appeared, all red in the dusk. It appeared for a moment that Syrinx was finally about to reach it, but as she was already throwing herself into the water, Pan extended his arms and touched the fugitive nymph.

He was holding nothing but a long, flexible reed...

The aede stopped speaking; the young women remained silent. They were moved; their breasts were rising gently.

A violet light descended through the branches. The river scintillated among the reeds; the population of frogs sang in a melancholy fashion.

Lycaon went on: "The great god Pan cut the reed and made the amorous flute that it is so sweet to hear on fine evenings. Thus, the nymph who died for not having wanted amour took on the voice of amour, and the flute sings the eternal regret of young women who, like her, die sterile. For they are dead among the dead! It is necessary to love, virgins similar to the Immortals...even if the lover is animal as well as divine. He has caprine feet as well as starry eyes; his body is hairy but his action is magnificent. Those who have scorned him will never be anything but plaintive reeds..."

"It is said," he added, "that on beautiful evenings, when the air is tranquil and rivers sleep like living beings, that those who are ripe for Eros hear the sounds of the flute rising on the shores of lakes, rivers or marshes. That is the melancholy Syrinx, who is exhorting them not to be pitiless for themselves, and to savor the felicity of being conquered."

At those words, young ears were directed toward the river. Nothing could be heard but the slight movement of the waves, the noise of the batrachians and quivering foliage, but Agamede, crowned with radiance, turned her beautiful eyes toward the aede and murmured in an emotional voice:

"I can hear the voice of Syrinx..."

She had allowed her veil to fall, and her youthful cleavage was visible in the moonlight. She was listening, attentively, to the faint flute whose moaning she alone could hear.

Lycaon sensed the terrible soft flame for which generations of men live and perish, and which caused the black ships of the Achaeans to depart in order to recover the daughter of Leda from the Trojan horse-tamers.

He said:

"It's the voice of the god, charming young woman. Beware of resisting him..."

"I have no desire to resist him," she replied.

She stood up, happy to be submissive, already letting down her long hair made of light and gold. Her companions did not murmur, for they believed that they recognized the mysterious will that no more permits the disputation of the sacrifice of a young woman than the sacrifice of a dove.

And the aede prayed:

"Be propitious to us, god of the invincible arrows, who reigns ardently over Thespis, you who conducted me to these divine shores. I shall ornament your magnificent altar, in Samos or in Crete...but could I offer you a victim, more superb than this one, a priestess more splendid and better made to celebrate your glorious mysteries?"

The voice and the lyre fell silent. The aede carried his ravishing prey away.

While the aede united his mouth with unknown young lips, behind the willows, in the embalmed shade, where fireflies shone like little mortal stars, the Arcadian chorus sang the light hymn of Aphrodite; and the delicious soul of Hellas, which knew how to make beauty a glory and amour a virtue, floated over the silvery waters of the river, in an atmosphere so diaphanous that it seemed that the sky and all the stars were touching the crowns of the trees.