

The First of May

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Greek

Easy
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ANASTO was the unhappiest of all the maidens in the village of Pyrgos, because she was the most beautiful. The other maidens were jealous of her. They would not talk to her or associate with her. They spoke evil of her. She lived in a little house apart from the rest, with her uncle who was too old to work. They were very poor.

Anasto was loved by Tassos, a shepherd on the hill slopes of Helmos. Tassos loved her with all his innocent heart. Anasto knew it and the people of Pyrgos knew it; even the hills and the wild birds of the hills knew it, because Tassos had whispered it to them. Tassos was handsome and the finest singer in all the village. When his voice rang out, rich and beautiful, from the hills, any of the maidens would have given all that she possessed if his song had been for her. But it was always to Anasto that he sang as he sat on the hillside a little way above her home.

The love of Tassos and her love for him were the only joys Anasto had, and even those were blighted by evil tongues in the village who said that Tassos kissed Anasto. They called her “phelemene,” kissed. Malamo, the sorceress, alone was kind to Anasto. She would say to the villagers:

“Well you know that Anasto is beautiful and on that account you are jealous of her. Naught but evil can come to a cruel people that accuses and makes miserable an innocent child like Anasto!” Many times Malamo said it, but the villagers would tell her to go back to her magic and her communion with fairies and leave mortals to their own ways.

One first of May, as is the custom, the maidens of Pyrgos went early in the twilight before dawn, singing and swinging empty flower baskets through the village. They met beside the stream Mauropotamo, Dark River, at the foot of the mountain Helmos. They did not notice that Anasto was not with them. They were in haste to perform the rites belonging to the first of May and be upon the hills before sunrise.

Each maiden held a silver coin in her right hand. Silver coins are rare in the villages and they are saved and laid away for this occasion—silver in harmony with the bright sky and the gleam upon the water. The maidens, standing on the bank, threw their coins into the stream. Only then might they dip their hands into the water. When they had washed their hands, so that they could touch fairy flowers without harm from the fairies, they chanted in unison:

“O kindly stream, may I partake
Of all your cool delights,
And may I be forever free
From the power of your sprites.”

The maidens joined hands and danced among the rocks along the shore of the Mauropotamo. As they saw the light in the east grow brighter, they broke away from each other and took the winding paths to the hills in search of flowers for their hair and for their baskets.

Last of all, Anasto came to the river alone. She stood looking into the bright water of the stream, but she had no coin to give. In a sad voice she began the familiar chant:

“O kindly stream, may I partake—”

But she broke off, sobbing. Her empty flower basket fell to the ground as she sank down at the river’s edge. Without the coin, the hymn was of no avail. She could not touch the water; she could not gather fairy flowers for a garland. She did not see the sun rise upon Helmos. She wept bitterly and her tears fell into the stream. The waters became dark and the waves moaned and cried:

“Anasto, your tears have embittered us!”

The wild flowers cried: “Anasto, your tears have poisoned the water that we drink and our petals are fading!”

And the wild birds cried: “Anasto, your tears have embittered the seeds that we eat and the fruits of the trees, and our hearts are embittered!”

But Anasto could not listen. She was weeping and her tears mingled with the waters of Mauropotamo. The sun climbed high and stood above the stream. It was mid-day, the hour of fairies. Anasto’s eyes were dim with tears and her senses dulled by weeping. She was not aware of the fairy hosts that suddenly appeared about her, nor did she hear the sound of strange music and fairy voices.

“How beautiful she is!” exclaimed one of the fairies. “She has cast no silver coin into the water,” said the fairy queen in anger.

“She is dropping her silver tears,” said another fairy tenderly.

“Her tears have darkened our stream and the waters are saddened!” cried the queen. “Seize her. She is in our power. Away with her to the Neraidospelo on the peak of Helmos!”

Anasto always wore for protection against evil a rare old amethyst which had come down to her from a remote ancestor. It hung, beneath her clothing, on a silken thread around her neck.

“A magic stone,” said the fairies when they discovered it.

“Touch it not,” commanded the queen. “We dare not touch it. We must leave this beautiful maiden. Come!”

The fairies abandoned Anasto in a high, rocky cave, where no mortal had ventured to set foot.

At sunset the maidens of Pyrgos came singing and dancing down from Helmos, crowned with wreaths and

carrying green branches and baskets of flowers. As each one reached her own house she hung flower garlands on the door and fastened the branches above it, so that the whole village looked like a garden bower.

From the hill slopes Tassos watched for Anasto to return with the maidens. Not seeing her among them, he went to the village. He saw all the doors hung with garlands, but upon Anasto's door no May flowers nor fairy flowers. He questioned some of the maidens, but they could tell him nothing. Through all the village Tassos found no trace of her, except her little empty flower basket at the edge of the river.

Holding it high and looking about in all directions, he called her name. Only the echo of his voice rang back to him from the rocks. He ran to the hills, crying, "Anasto, Anasto!" It grew dark, but he did not stop. All night he searched for her among the pines and firs and rocks, and did not find her. At dawn he came again to the Mauropotamo, calling, "Anasto, Anasto!" Looking into the stream, he groaned, "O cruel stream, where is my Anasto?" His tears, as they fell into the silvery waters, turned them dark and they moaned. Then Tassos looked toward Pyrgos and cried out curses upon the village that had made Anasto unhappy.

Even as he spoke, dark clouds were massing above it. In a moment the heavens were covered with them, so that the brightness of dawn was blotted out. Lightning and thunder followed and hail fell upon the land.

"Let Pyrgos be destroyed!" cried Tassos, leaping up in a fury of grief and anger. "Let it be wiped out! It has persecuted my Anasto!"

Then the old sorceress, Malamo, saw the doom of the village in the dark sky. Running out, she called to the villagers:

"The punishment for your cruelty is at hand. Your homes and all of you will be destroyed. Come, follow me, if you would save your village! Follow me to the stream, if you would not die! Bring a stone; we'll stone the stream, we'll stone the stream!"

Terror fell upon every heart. All the people of Pyrgos followed Malamo to the river banks. She cast her stone into the stream, the others did likewise. They pressed about her. "What shall we do?" they begged. "Tell us what to do."

"The fairies of the stream have taken away your Anasto," explained the sorceress, "and you have avenged yourselves upon them. The stream is stoned. Now let all the maidens search in the caves of Helmos, for in one of them Anasto is hidden. Let them not return without her, for if they do, great will be the evil upon this

village!”

Tassos, who had watched this scene, led the maidens, lighting their way by torches, up to the caves of Helmos. The dark clouds hovered ominously over Pyrgos. Frantically the maidens searched for the lost Anasto.

All day the search lasted. Finally on the peak of the mountain where none had dared to venture, they found Anasto in the Neraidospelo, fairy cave, alone. She could not move or speak. She made no sign that she saw them. At this the maidens wept and were in despair, but Tassos took Anasto in his arms and brought her out upon the mountainside. Suddenly the sky cleared. It was sunset and the last rays of the sun fell upon them. Anasto was aroused. She looked about, she smiled, she called them all by name.

Great was the rejoicing in the village of Pyros when the procession bringing the lost maiden came down from the hills. A wreath was upon Anasto’s head; her basket was full of flowers; other maidens were talking with her, holding her hands. For three days the village held festival with music, flowers and dancing to celebrate her return.

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