

Persephone

by Ann Pilling

AT the beginning of time, when the gods defeated the giants, the world was divided into three by the casting of lots. Zeus won the sky, and his brother Poseidon the sea. The underworld was left to Hades. He was a brooding, lonely god, and he begged Zeus to give him a wife from the land above. He had fallen in love with Persephone, the daughter of Demeter.

Demeter was the most powerful of all the goddesses; she ruled over every living thing on earth, and without her nothing would grow. Zeus knew that she would never agree to let her daughter marry Hades, and he feared her anger if he dared ask such a question. But the king of the underworld was determined that Persephone would be his wife, and he decided to carry her off by force.

For many days he waited and watched. Then, one morning, he heard that she was out in the meadows on the slopes of Mount Etna, picking flowers with the Daughters of Ocean. These nymphs were very beautiful, but none of them so beautiful as the radiant Persephone. She outshone them as day outshines night.

Zeus had conspired with Hades to help him trap her, and now, at her feet, she saw a most marvelous plant appear from nowhere. It was a white narcissus with a hundred flowers growing from its root, a thing so lovely and so fragrant that not only mortals but the gods themselves wondered at it.

Persephone bent down to pick the flower. But, as her fingers closed on it, the mountain split open with a terrible roaring noise, and from the depths came Hades riding on his black chariot, pulled by huge black horses. With a cry of triumph he swept the terrified Persephone up into the chariot and galloped away, down to the underworld.

Two others knew about this cruel thing. One was old Hecate, the witch goddess, who had heard how the girl cried out in terror. The other was Helios, god of the sun, who had seen the enormous black chariot rise up from the gash in the earth, and the greedy fingers of Hades, snatching the girl away. But he was driving his sun horses across the sky and could not cease in his labors until the day was done.

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Demeter also heard the echo of her daughter's voice, from far away, on Mount Parthenia, and she set off at once to find her, wandering over the earth, not stopping to eat or drink, and taking no rest. On the ninth day she met old Hecate, who told her she had heard the girl cry out on Mount Etna. Then she met Helios, who confessed that he too knew what had happened, and that Zeus had plotted to help his brother Hades by setting the white flower at Persephone's feet.

When she heard this, Demeter's grief turned to rage. She left Mount Olympus, where the gods lived, disguised herself as an old woman, and went to Eleusis, where she built a temple and spent long days there, mourning and weeping for her lost daughter.

And she turned her back upon the earth and all that she must do there to make things grow. For a whole year the land sent up no shoots, and cattle pulled plows across the fields in vain. The white barley seed fell useless from the sower's hand and rotted where it lay.

People began to starve, and in alarm Zeus sent Iris, the goddess of the rainbow, down to earth to plead for mercy from the goddess of grain. But Demeter refused to listen to her, nor would she listen to Zeus's other messengers. Day after day she sat alone in her temple at Eleusis, vowing that she would never return to Olympus, or allow any green thing to grow upon earth, until Persephone was restored to her.

At last Zeus sent his own son, Hermes, to plead with the god of the underworld. He knew the way well, for it was his task to lead the dead from earth down to hell. Sadfaced, he stood before Hades' throne, having taken off his winged sandals and set aside the gold rod with which he pointed the way. And the tragic Persephone, so small on her great black throne, listened in silence as he pleaded with her husband.

"Great Hades," he said. "Upon earth people are dying because Demeter has put a curse on all her crops. Release Persephone, I beg you. If you do not, Zeus will soon have no subjects to rule over. This kingdom too will die, for the world will be empty." And the tears ran down his face.

Hades thought for a moment, then rose, and put his queen's hand into that of Hermes. "Go," he said, "since Zeus commands it. But do not forget me, Persephone. I have been kind to you. Remember too that all the souls here remain your subjects, wherever you may be." And he turned away sadly, into his dark kingdom.

So they returned joyously to earth, and Persephone was restored to her mother's arms. But then the goddess drew back,

for the stain of a fruit was upon the girl's mouth. "Did you eat in the underworld?" she asked fearfully.

"Only a few seeds from a pomegranate," answered the innocent Persephone. Then Demeter knew that Hades had tricked them, for whoever eats food in the kingdom of the dead cannot ever escape from it.

So Zeus made a pact with his brother, and for three months of the year Persephone has to live with her dark king, under the earth. In those short, hard days, nothing grows upon earth. Demeter mourns for her daughter in a dress of frost and snow.

When the girl is restored to her, Demeter's heart grows light again. Spring comes, and blossoms. After this the summer opens out in glory, and then the rich harvest appears. Only when Hades claims his queen again does the year begin to sicken and die.

Then people remember Persephone, and they remember too that the dark and cold are only for a season and that the winter woods always contain the promise of a new spring.