

**THE
PERILOUS SEAT**

BY
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The untaught maid
Mounting the perilous high seat can, for the god
Speak wisdom kings will seek for, but herself
The god will soon destroy.

TO
MY SON
KARL SNEDEKER
WHOSE GREEK SCHOLARSHIP HAS
AIDED MY TASK, THIS STORY
OF OLD GREECE IS DEDICATED

PREFACE

The background and details of this story have been carefully authenticated. The founding of the colony Inessa, however, is not an actual event. It is the union of a number of colony traditions. It is therefore correct in character and spirit.

The tale was written at the MacDowell Colony at Peterborough, New Hampshire, and I am constantly mindful of the inspiration given to me by the beautiful and solitary surroundings in which I there worked.

BOOK I
AT THE

PYTHIAN FESTIVAL

CHAPTER I DRYAS WINS THE PRIZE

Dryas, the young Delphian, finished his song. As he did so he leaped impulsively to the sheer edge of the temple platform, leaning forward in the very attitude of the Archer God. The song was to Apollo. For a moment he seemed to be the young Apollo himself.

The final note was scarce heard for the surge of applause which met it. The people pelted the boy with flowers—snatched off their own garlands to throw to him—until he stood ankle deep in the bloom. He was blushing, shy, now that his song was finished. Awestruck, too, for he heard everywhere the shout:

“The Prize! The Prize!”

Thus ended the first day of the Pythian festival at Delphi. The crowds poured down through the Precinct, a very tumult of colour and motion. White-robed priests, purple-cloaked kings, Sybarites in cloth of gold, young athletes beautiful as the sunlight in which they moved; and upon every man’s head, rich or poor, his crown of flowers.

How freely they talked, how happily gave themselves to laughter! The truce of God was upon them—that peace which Apollo imposed upon the passionate, warring Greeks at festival time. Delphi itself, forbidding amid its beetling cliffs, seemed to lose

sternness at this festival. Out on the far-seen hillsides were the booths and bright-coloured tents of the visitors, the flash and glitter of things brought for sale. Even yet crowds of pilgrims were arriving, swarming up the steep winding roads as the bees were fabled of old to have swarmed thither to build the first temple in Delphi.

Dryas, his father, Nikander, and his brother, Lycophron, came down through the stirring Precinct, perhaps the happiest hearts of all the multitude.

The prize at Delphi! It was an immortal honour. The noblest poets of Greece would write hymns in his praise. Dryas's whole town would bask in the honour of it. Dryas's statue in bronze would be set up near the Precinct gate, and in future years his sons and sons' sons would recount the victory.

Neighbours, kinsfolk, strangers, halted them on their homeward way. No man in Hellas was too exalted to pause in humility and delight to greet the young victor with the crown yet fresh upon his head. But it was to the father, Nikander, rather than to Dryas that they addressed themselves, lingering to catch if it were but a reflection of the surprised joy in that father-face.

Nikander walked holding his boy's hand, or touching his shoulder as he presented him to some famous man.

"You liked it?" he would say, his sensitive face flushing almost as Dryas's own. "You liked the song? Yes, I, too, enjoyed it—that stern opening—the Dorian mode. It was as new in my hearing as in yours. The dear lad kept it so."

And Dryas's answering look showed the father's praise to be the most precious of all. It was no usual affection which bound these two together.

And now Pindar, the greatest poet, met them, outstretching both his hands.

"Nikander! Dryas! Kairos bless you both! You are tasting the heady joy of victory!"

"Eating victory rather," put in the elder brother, Lycophron, with a rough laugh. "Feasting on it in courses I should say."

At his father's hurt look he stopped and laid his hand upon the father's shoulder.

"Tut," he said, "I meant no harm." Then he turned to the poet: "Pindar, I hope you are coming to us to-night, speaking of feasts; a symposium in Dryas's honour."

Pindar frowned at the young man's forwardness but assented, then smiled again as he turned to Dryas.

"It was almost as good as your father's victor song years ago."

"Oh, better, much better," urged Nikander. At which Pindar moved onward, laughing, shaking his head. A lovable man, Pindar.

They arrived finally at their own door. All the slaves were there bowing and curtsying, Medon, the old pedagogue, at their head. He peered up eagerly to see if the boy really wore the laurel crown and, at sight of it, trembled visibly with joy.

"Little Dryas, little Dryas," he crooned, all love.

Nikander must needs stop to rehearse all his happiness to the old servant. And who so glad to hear as Medon!

“All Dryas’s songs have been good,” Nikander finished. “But, oh, this one to-day is in a new class! Do you know what the rascal did, Medon? Brought out an utterly new poem, different from any I ever heard. Imagine my amazement when he started out—and my delight!”

“Yes, Master, yes!” assented Medon.

As they talked, they had been moving slowly through the andron and now entered the women’s court.

Melantho, the mother, hearing them enter, came running down the stair to fold her son in her arms. Baltè, the old nurse, hobbled up. Nerea, Clito, and other slave girls came and kissed the hem of his robe.

But Nikander missed one member of the household.

“Where is Eleutheria?” he asked.

Then he caught sight of her standing in the far corner of the court—his daughter, tall, delicately flushed with that air between shyness and pride which is common to all new-flowering things.

“Daughter,” said Nikander, “we have come home with the crown!”

She bowed her dark head, fingering her distaff with its tangled threads.

“Come, my dear,” said Nikander, snapping his fingers to hasten her. “Come, greet your brother victor.”

Then she looked up—a face full of some strange startling emotion.

“No,” she half whispered.

“No? What on earth do you mean?”

“I cannot,” she spoke sharply. “I cannot praise him.”

“You are ill,” said Nikander, going to her. Indeed he feared some fever had deprived her of her wits.

“No, I am not ill.”

“Then what madness is this? What nonsense!” Nikander could hardly believe in this sudden quarrel darkening the brightness of his day of joy.

Dryas crossed over to her. He was ever the peacemaker.

“What has happened, Theria?” He began gently.

Her great eyes looked fearfully at him.

“You know perfectly well what has happened. How dare you ask!”

Nikander was now thoroughly angry.

“Theria,” he said, “greet your brother at once or go to your room. Your whims are unbearable.”

“Theria,” began Dryas again. But at his urging voice her anger took flame.

“I won’t praise you!” she cried wildly. “You know the song is mine, mine. I made it myself.”

“Great gods!” laughed Lycophron. “Here’s a pother for you!”

“No pother at all,” spoke Dryas quickly. “Who’ll believe her?”

“Nobody, nobody, my son,” sounded Nikander’s deep voice. “Now, Theria, go! I shall punish you myself for this!”

Here Melanthe lifted horrified hands. “What jealousy, Theria! Shame on you! Shame!”

Theria had already reached the stair-foot, but at this word she faced them again.

“I am not jealous, I can prove that I made it,” she said, her voice suddenly clear. “I can sing my song.”

As at sacrilege, Nikander answered:

“Indeed you will do no such thing. Do you suppose I would allow that perfect creation to be caricatured by you?”

“Father, she heard me sing it,” thus Dryas, pale with the hurt Theria had given. “She has a perfect memory.”

“My dear boy, do you suppose the matter needs argument?”

“Oh, let her try. Why not?” came the heavy voice of Lycophron. “Then we can finish the scene with a good laugh, anyway.”

“You will not laugh at me,” cried out Theria. “By Hermes, you will not laugh!” The look in her face, suddenly visionary and unafraid, found response in an unexpected quarter.

“Oh, let her try.” Lycophron spoke in a different tone. “Give the poor child a chance.”

“Surely you need no proof,” said the father.

“Be damned if I don’t,” responded the elder brother.

“Then have your proof. It will need few moments.”

Nikander swiftly took the lyre from Dryas’s slave and gave it into Thera’s hand. The girl received it with an almost hungry eagerness as though the song within her burned for expression. Every vestige of anger died from her. Something from within seemed to sweep her up into a mobile erectness, holding her delicately steady as a flame is held aloft.

She struck a deep chord from the lyre upon her hip and sang. To their astonishment, it was not Dryas’s song though haunted ever and again with bits of the Dryas melody. She tossed the melody from grave to gay with ease and in the changes swayed softly.

Wherefore, O Muse, dipping from highest heaven
Down through the ambient air
Com’st thou to *me* in my thick-walled shadowy chamber
To lay on *my* lips the honey of sweet song?

I am a woman, a spinner.
Not for such is the glory of singing;
Not for such the happiness free in the sunshine
of Pythian contests in song.

In answer the Muse
Inexorable goddess,
Drew with yet stronger cords my will and my spirit.
“Sing!” she commanded, “Sing!”

At this point the rhythm with an increasing purposeful tread marched into the very tune of Dryas. The ancient story of Apollo slaying the Python-snake and winning the place of the Oracle from which to speak to men. The song was greatly enhanced by its prelude:

Fair, fair on the mountains the feet of Apollo striding;
Swift is our God and stern.
Dark, dark in the valley, the snake coiling and sliding
Lone mid the Delphic fern.

Ha, old Dragoness, dost thou possess it—
Oracle meet for the voice of a God?
Nay, for our archer God comes to redress it.
Already are trod
The dear paths of Delphi by feet mysterious, divine.
Apollo, we shall be thine!

Coils of the Python lie over the place
Of Loxias's^{III} grace
The heartening word
Is choked in the depth,
Unheard.

Dark dark is Delphi,
Dark is the dell,
There in the murk the birds of ill-omen, softly horribly fly,
And like waters of hell
Castaly streams from her gorge and is lost in Castaly's well.

That *gleam* in the gorge!
That glint in Phaëdriades cleft!
Like a golden spool in the weft
Like a golden bird which flits
'Mong solemn crags of the ghostly place:

Before the God cometh, cometh his grace.

Ha! flash of silver bright as a bolt from the sky
A piercing cry
And straight to the heart of the monster
The arrows of Loxias fly!
Writhe, O Monster, lifting on high.
Now thou must die!

And now from Castaly's gorge like the beauty of day
Steppeth the God with bow bent broad to the fray

Drawing with lifted arm the shaft to the tip.

Paian, Paian, the pure!
Thou art here, thou art sure,
Immortally tall, fair tressed, crowned with bay.

God of the far-borne voice,
So dost thou capture with valiance the place of thy choice—
Delphi, murmuring, golden.

Hail to thee—God of Day!

[1] Loxias, Son of Leto, Archer God, Paian, son of Zeus—all are affectionate, worshipful names of Apollo.

To the end she sang it. Not with Dryas's sensitive handling but with a dramatic power, possessive, from within, making it inalienably her own.

Then she seemed to waken. She looked around. Her father stood with bowed head and hidden face. Melantho was weeping. Lycophron motioned a slave to shut the door lest someone come upon them, and Dryas sat gazing at the ground with an expression of misery and defeat which scattered the last vestige of Theria's creative joy.

Suddenly she would have given worlds not to have sung. All kept silence as if they were all guilty. And like a guilty thing, Theria gave the lyre back to the slave and went up the stair.

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