

The Story of Marsyas (MAHR-see-uhs)

One day, the goddess Athena found the beautiful, long thighbone of a deer. It was a pleasing object, and she wanted to make something both attractive and useful from it. She soon decided what she would make and began to work on the bone with great care and art. She cut off both ends, cleaned it out well inside, and then drilled holes down its length. Finally, she fashioned a handsome mouthpiece at the top. When she had finished, she placed the mouthpiece between her lips and began to blow, placing her fingers up and down on the holes. Lovely sounds came from the instrument she had created. It was the world's first flute.

The goddess was enchanted with her new creation and never tired of playing it. On one occasion, however, when she was playing for the other gods of Olympus, she noticed that Hera and Aphrodite were staring at her and exchanging secret giggles.

"If only you could see your face when you blow into that thing, you'd understand why we're laughing," replied the two goddesses.

"They must be jealous of me," muttered Athena, and she went off to play her flute by the banks of a river where she could see her own reflection as she blew. When she saw how her cheeks puffed out and her lovely face became distorted by the effort of blowing, she realized that Hera and Aphrodite could not be blamed for laughing behind their hands. In a sudden burst of anger, she hurled the flute away, shouting, "Miserable toy! Because of you I am insulted. A curse on anyone who picks you up and puts you to his lips."

The flute that Athena had thrown away was found by Marsyas.

Suspecting nothing of the curse, he picked the flute up, liked the look of it, and decided to keep it. In time, he grew fond of the flute and learned to play it so well that whoever heard him said that not even Apollo could play so beautifully. How was unlucky Marsyas to know that the curse of Athena hung over him? He had never been one to boast, but now he began to tell everyone that he could make music even better than golden-haired Apollo.

It was not long before the great god of music appeared before the unlucky satyr. Apollo was magnificently attired, and under his arm he carried his golden lyre. The nine Muses accompanied the shining god. "How dare you call yourself a better player than I?" Apollo demanded. "Can there be anyone in the world, god or mortal, whose skill in music is a match for mine?"

"All we need to do is put it to the test," replied Marsyas coolly. "Let your nine sisters judge which of us plays better. But whoever wins may impose any punishment he wishes upon the loser."

"Foolish Marsyas, what rash words were these? Did you imagine that a mere satyr could pit his poor skills against a mighty god? And did you not know that immortals are not to be insulted and are cruel beyond belief when they wish to exact punishment?" Apollo's answer was swift and terrible. "I shall defeat you and skin you alive for your insolence!" he screamed, as his face flushed with rage. But Marsyas seemed quite unconcerned and, putting the flute to his lips, began to play. The muses stood listening in awe. Even Apollo thought his ears were deceiving him. For the music that flowed from Marsyas's flute

was so perfect that neither god nor man could better it. Next, it was Apollo's turn. Though his music was as good as Marsyas' in every way, it was not better. And so the Muses were unable to declare either of them the winner.

By now Apollo was boiling with rage. He was determined to be revenged on the satyr who had belittled him—by means fair or foul.

"Very well," he snarled, "now we shall play with our instruments upside down!"

And holding his lyre the other way up, he played it as superbly as before. But a flute, alas, cannot be played with its mouthpiece pointing downward, and poor Marsyas could not coax a single note from his instrument.

And so the Muses declared Apollo the winner.

The god's revenge came down on Marsyas like a thunderbolt, and the poor satyr died in hideous agony because he had dared to challenge an immortal.

The wood nymphs wept for Marsyas and buried him by a river. The muses felt sorry for the unlucky satyr and begged Zeus to take pity on him. The ruler of gods and men listened to their pleas, so Marsyas did not descend to the dark depths of Hades. Instead, his spirit was released into the waters of the river that flowed as musically as if the river were indeed playing a flute, and people listen to its song with pleasure. But when the river remembers Apollo's cruel revenge, its waters swell with wrath and roar wild threats, spreading fears and sorrow in their paths.