

Echo and Narcissus

by E. F. Buckley

THE nymphs, who were hand-maidens of the great goddess Hera, lived on the lower slopes of a mountain near Olympus. When they were not on duty, they sang and played and danced beside the streams and sparkling waterfalls and in the wooded glades. Amongst them all Echo was the gayest and her laugh the merriest, while in story-telling none could touch her. So, when her sisters planned secret fun or mischief, and sometimes even when Zeus sought other company, Echo would be sent to amuse Hera, craftily to hold her attention with some long tale so that the goddess would forget to be jealous and watchful.

The nymph was one of Hera's favorites, and when she looked down at Echo, her stern gaze softened and she would smile and say, "Well, fair nymph, what tale hast thou to tell, or how else wilt thou entertain me today?" And Echo, sitting at Hera's feet, would begin a tale. Sometimes she told a new story, sometimes an old one, embroidering it with her own fancies, and sometimes she would just talk about herself and her doings. Her stories and her chatter were always irresistible and the time would slip away unnoticed, while Hera listened and Echo's companions enjoyed themselves without fear of interruption or of their mistress's anger.

But at last the black day of reckoning came when Hera found out the trick Echo had so often played upon her, and the fire of her wrath flashed forth like lightning.

"The gift with which thou hast deceived me shall be thine no more," she cried. "Henceforward thou shalt be dumb till someone else hath spoken, and then, even if thou wilt, thou shalt not hold thy tongue, but must needs repeat the last words thou hast heard."

"Alas! Alas!" cried the nymphs in chorus.

"Alas! Alas!" cried Echo after them, and could say no more, though she longed to speak to Hera and to beg her forgiveness. And so it was that Echo's voice became useless to her. She could not speak when she would and yet she was compelled to say what others put into her mouth, whether she wished it or no. She left the happy groves where her sisters still played, and retreated, sorrowful and lonely, to the high forest slopes of the mountain.

Now, it chanced one day that a youth, named Narcissus, became separated from his companions in the hunt, and when he tried to find them he only wandered farther into deep woods on the mountainside. He was in the bloom of young manhood, and fair as a flower in spring. But, though his face was smooth, and soft as any maiden's, his heart was hard as steel. When he was born, the blind seer Teiresias had made a strange prophecy concerning him. "So long as he knows not himself, he shall live and be happy."

Narcissus grew up seeking nothing but his own pleasure; and because he was so handsome that all who saw him loved him, he found it easy to get from others what he would. Although he was loved by many youths and by many maidens he spurned them all, and himself knew nothing of love, and therefore but little of grief; for love at the best brings joy and sorrow hand in hand, and if unreturned, it brings only pain.

When Echo saw Narcissus wandering alone through the woods, she fell in love with him and followed him wherever he went, hiding behind the trees and rocks so that he should not see her. At last, when he found he had really lost his way, he began to shout for his companions. "Ho, there! Where are you?" he cried.

"Where are you?" answered Echo.

At the sound of her voice, Narcissus stopped and listened, but he heard nothing more. Then he called again. "I am here in the wood—Narcissus."

"In the wood—Narcissus," said she.

"Come hither," he cried.

"Come hither," she answered.

Wondering at the strange voice which answered him, he looked all about, but could see no one.

"Are you close at hand?" he asked.

"Close at hand," answered Echo.

Wondering the more at seeing no one, he went forward in the direction of the voice. Echo, when she found he was coming towards her, fled farther, so that when next he called, her voice sounded far away. But wherever she was, he still followed, and she saw that she could not escape; for if he called, she had to answer, and so brought him to her hiding-place. By now they had come to an opening in the trees, where the green sloped down to a clear pool in the hollow. Here by the margin of the water she stood, with her back to the tall, nodding bulrushes, and as Narcissus came out of the trees she wrung her hands,

and the salt tears dropped from her eyes; for she longed to speak loving words to him, and she could not. When he saw her he stopped.

"Are you she who calls me?" he asked.

"Who calls me?" she answered.

"I have told you, Narcissus," he said.

"Narcissus," she cried, and held out her arms to him.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"Who are you?" said she.

"Have I not told you?" he said impatiently. "Narcissus!"

"Narcissus," she said again, and still held out her hands beseechingly.

"Tell me," he cried, "who are you and why do you call me?"

"You call me?" said she.

Then he grew angry.

"Maiden, whoever you are, you have led me a pretty dance through the woods, and now face to face you only mock me."

"Only mock me," said she.

At this he became yet more angry, and began to abuse her, while she could say nothing of her love, and was forced to echo his cruel words. At last, having had enough of this profitless argument, exhausted by the distance he had covered in his wanderings on the mountain, Narcissus threw himself on the grass by the pool, and would not look at Echo nor speak to her. For a time she stood beside him weeping, and then in misery she left him, and went and hid behind a rock close by. After a while, when his anger had somewhat cooled, Narcissus noticed for the first time the clear pool beside him, and bent over the edge of the bank to drink. As he held out his hand to take the water, there looking up towards him was the fairest face he had ever seen. Narcissus, who had never yet known the pangs of love, at last fell in love, and his heart was set on fire by the face in the pool. With a sigh he held out both arms, and the figure also held out its two arms to him, and Echo from the rock sighed in answer to his sigh. When Narcissus saw the figure stretching out towards him and heard the sigh, he thought that his love was returned, and he bent closer to the water and whispered, "I love you."

"I love you," softly answered Echo from the rock.

At these words he reached down and tried to clasp the figure in his arms. But when he broke the surface of the water the figure vanished. The youth drew back, thinking he had been over-hasty,

and waited a while. Then the ripples died away and the face appeared again as clear as before, looking up at him longingly from the water. Once again he bent and tried to clasp the figure, and once again it fled from his embrace. Time after time he tried, and always the same thing happened, and at last he gave up in despair, and sat looking down into the water. Teardrops fell from his eyes, and the face in the pool looked up weeping and in seeming longing and despair. The longer he looked, the more fiercely did the flame of love burn in his breast, till at length Narcissus could bear no more. Determined to reach the desire of his heart or die, he threw himself from the bank into the pool, thinking that in the depths, at any rate, he would find his love. But what he found, among the weeds and stones at the bottom of the pool, was death, and he knew not that it was his own face he had seen reflected in the water below him. Thus were the words of the blind prophet fulfilled: "So long as he knows not himself he shall live and be happy."

Echo, watching from behind the rock, saw all that had happened, and when Narcissus cast himself into the pool she rushed forward, but was too late to stop him. When she found that he had disappeared beneath the surface of the water she sank down on the grass at the edge of the pool and wept and wept. And there she stayed, weeping and sorrowing for her lost love until she wasted away; her body dissolved into air and her bones became stone at the water's edge. But although the nymph herself vanished the power of Hera's curse remained.

To this day, invisible Echo haunts the domed forest clearings, the rocky hillsides, and caves, and vaults, and lofty halls, repeating the words she hears, answering when another calls.

The body of Narcissus was never recovered by his companions, but beside the mountain pool, among the grasses watered by sad Echo's tears, there grew up in the Spring, white and golden flowers which spread—a sweet-scented mass—all round the pool, in memory of the fair youth who had fallen in love with his own beauty.