

Melliflua and the Fauns

by Geoffrey Fox

In the land of Nebbia, the mistiest part of Etruria, it was the month of Agnosto, when anything can happen, and Melliflua was pondering what to do about the fauns. For in Agnosto almost all the boys, even the nicest, turned at least partway into goats. And some of them even went way too far and became goats entirely, with wispy beards and wet noses and hair all over their bodies. That was because they were so eager to pester girls like Melliflua.

Of course every Agnosto she too went through some changes. That was when she became a nymph, which meant she was full of light and energy and her body glowed. But she didn't change shape. She didn't grow hairy goats' legs like the boys, or sprout those nasty little horns on top of her head or grow a perky tail. Fauns, she snorted, were truly disgusting.

As a nymph she could prance so swiftly and lightly through the woods that the leaves never rustled and the pine needles never even pricked her feet. Because, as of course you know, in Nebbia in those days nobody ever wore any clothes, especially in the month of Agnosto. In fact Melliflua was a little sorry that there were only two times in the year that she ever got to dress up at all. One was in the month of Ombra, when the living wrapped themselves in charcoal-colored cloaks to visit the dead, who were always very glad to see them. The other was on the Ides of Gravitumbra, when everybody played at being very serious and they wore white when they elected the new king and queen of Etruria and red for the very formal ceremonies when they promoted or demoted the gods, depending on how well they had behaved.

But those are other stories, of other months. Right now it was Agnosto, and Melliflua's problem was those pesky fauns, who loved to chase nymphs through the woods. If they caught one, they would

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try to prick her with their sharp little horns and rub their hairy, scratchy bodies against her skin. They thought this was hilarious. Melliflua thought it was disgusting. If they only played fair, they would be no problem, because she could outrun any of them, even if the long hair on their legs didn't keep getting caught in the brambles. But they would gang up, three at a time, coming at her from different directions, to try to trap her. Some of the nymphs she knew liked getting caught. But not Melliflua. She decided that she was going to have to learn some shape shifting of her own. Surprise them.

Carefully and slowly pushing apart the leafy branches, she peered out to the misty meadow and watched the leaves on the trees around it. Fauns tended to be clumsy, carelessly crashing into bushes that a nymph knew how to pass without a tremor. She inhaled slowly, deeply. But she saw no telltale movement of leaves, and her nostrils caught none of that rank goat-stink that always surrounded the fauns. The way was clear.

She burst from her hiding place and dashed — or rather flashed, because all you would have seen was the quick glow of the sun on her skin, and that for only a moment, because she moved so fast — through the meadow and into the bower beyond. She heard a goat's bleat, but he was too late — she was already too far ahead for him to catch her. And if it was just one, and one of the little ones, it didn't matter if he did catch her. She would just turn and kick him until he ran away squealing. But they usually traveled in groups.

She ran so silently that she could hear the wind rushing by her ears. Then another noise, and another. They had spotted her. But if she had calculated her route properly, she would soon be safe.

She slowed her pace, deliberately. And soon she heard someone crashing through the woods, close behind her. She pretended to hesitate, as though willing to get caught, and her pursuer bleated

and snorted with joy, calling to his comrades. Barely running now, she let him get so close that she felt his hot breath on her shoulder and sensed the shadow as his arm thrust out to grab her. But she was gone! She sprang to the side and kept just a few paces ahead of him. He bellowed and wheeled around in pursuit. Each time she let him get very, very close then sprang away before he could close his grasp.

“Stop that!” he shouted, bleating like a goat but with enough of a boy's voice left that she recognized him.

“You are making me very angry, you naughty nymph!” he bleated again. “And you know what happens to naughty nymphs!”

But he didn't know what happened to nasty fauns, she thought. Now she heard more crashing through the woods, from different directions. Uh oh! His buddies had caught up with him. Now it was time to act. She let him get very close this time, then twisted to the right so that as he grabbed for her he was off balance on his little goat's hooves, then she twisted around to the left and leapt over a ravine. The faun — it was Irsuto, who had been a pest already last month, even before he turned into a faun — plunged after her, slipped on his hooves and went crashing and sliding and bumping down into the slimy muddy ravine. Melliflua turned to laugh, and saw the two others, Schifo and Fetore, stopped at the edge of the ravine and shouting and bleating. She disappeared into the woods, and beyond the woods, into the Sacred Grotto where no male dared to enter.

She had come to see the Old Woman. Well, not really to see her, because nobody she knew had actually seen the Old Woman. One could just feel her presence.

The Old Woman was so old, so very old, that “old” didn't even seem the right word. She had just always been. Why, she was as old as the

rocks themselves and as old as the waterfall that started high up and sparkled and splashed into the grotto. The grotto was narrow and so densely shaded by umbrella trees that Melliflua heard the waterfall before she saw it.

She bumped into something and gasped and looked up at a huge, muscular centaur whose club was raised and ready to crush her. But then she exhaled, for it was only a big rock, a great rock in the shape of a centaur. His club had grown into an oak tree, its roots embedded in what might have been the centaur's fist.

Then, as Melliflua looked around — for this was the first time she had dared to come here — she realized that the Old Woman must be even older than the rocks, because many of the rocks had the shapes of men or beasts that had been turned into stone. In the old days, long, long ago, before they learned better, men and fauns and centaurs and other male creatures used to come here to challenge the Old Woman and break her spell. It wasn't that they needed the grotto for anything, it was just that they couldn't stand for there to be a place controlled by an old woman where they couldn't enter. They thought they had to be lords of everything. And as soon as they threatened her, the Old Woman had turned them into stone!

"Old Woman?" she called. "Old Woman? Are you here? It's me, Melliflua, and I need your help! Old Woman?"

Her voice reverberated against the stones. "Wo-Wo-Wo-man-man-man."

I can't tell you exactly what happened next, because it is one of the Mysteries. Even Melliflua wasn't sure what happened next. At one moment she thought she saw the Old Woman, but when she approached, it turned out to be a shadow in the rocks, from which flew suddenly a little sparrow, that turned into an owl. She thought the owl was speaking to her, but she couldn't be sure. And then she found herself just outside the grotto, and something made her look

at her hand, where she found a ring on her finger. And that was odd, because it was the only thing she was wearing, and she couldn't remember how it got there.

And then she heard the fauns. They were waiting for her, right outside the entrance to the grotto. The bird, either the sparrow or the owl, must have said something to her, even though she couldn't remember the words, because she had an idea what to do.

As the three goat-boys lunged for her she turned herself into a sparrow, and flew between their grasping fingers and just over the tousled, horned heads. They snorted and bleated and pranced around in circles, grabbing at her. Then she resumed her nymph-form and stood before them, and they grinned, with that sly naughty grin of fauns that are about to get what they're after. She danced around them, and they laughed, and backed into one another, until the three of them were back to back and grinning as she danced a little closer, and just as one of them started to reach for her, she turned back into a bird and flew between him and the next one and, quick as the wind, tied their three tails together with her little sparrow's beak and claws. Then she flew back out and once again became herself.

This time when the faun — Schifo, this time — lunged at her he was stopped abruptly, not knowing why, because they had not yet realized that their tails were all tied.

Then she danced in front of the next one, Fetore, who also was stopped in mid lunge because his tail was tied to those of Schifo and Irsuto. Bolder now, she jumped forward and, darting in and out of range, tickled each one in the belly until they were laughing and raising their arms in joy. And then, when she had them all giggly and standing on the tippy-toes of their little goats' hooves, Melliflua stepped back and frowned and rubbed her ring.

You can see them today. Irsuto, Schifo and Fetore, their tails tied together, their arms held high, and with silly grins on their faces, all turned to stone. Many years later someone found them like that, and today they stand on their little goats' hooves in the Secret Cabinet in the Archeological Museum of Naples, not far from Nebbia where it all began. As for Melliflua, well, I think you will have to look for her in the Sacred Grotto, where she helps out and sometimes substitutes for the Old Woman.

