



The Tale of Atalanta

Contributed by Ron Fairweather and Fergus McNicol

Once, long ago in the time of the gods, in the land of Greece, there lived a king. Now although he had great riches and power there was one thing he desired... a son to become king after him. So when the queen announced that soon she would have a baby he was delighted. Yet, when the child was born and he saw that it was a girl, rather than the boy that he longed for, that joy turned to fury and the king did a wicked, terrible thing. He took his newborn daughter to the depths of a forest and left the defenceless child lying there under a tree. On his return to the palace he wept false tears and told how the baby had been snatched away by wolves.

Now it happened that a mother bear was passing through the forest that day and discovered the baby crying under the tree. And with a mother's instinct, the bear scooped up the babe and returned to her den with it, and there she raised the baby along with her own cubs. So it was that the child grew up with brother and sister bears, learning the language and ways of the animals of the forest. And as she grew, she lived happily with her bear family in the green forest.

The years passed and it so happened that one spring morning an old hunter came to the forest to set traps. But he was amazed when he saw a young woman running like the wind through the trees. She was as fast as any beast, faster than any person he had ever seen run! And so he set about trying to catch this mysterious girl. This he eventually managed to do, but when he returned home with her, she was wild and could not talk in the tongue of humans. She would spit out cooked food and tear off the clothes he dressed her in. But the hunter was kind and loving and the girl began to trust him. And so she learned to be human; to speak and eat like a person and dress in clothes. She grew to love the old man as a father and she told him of her life in the forest. And the old man gave her the name Atalanta.

Now, the old man saw how Atalanta still loved to run like the wind through the forest every day and an idea came to his mind. He entered her in a race against the finest runners in the land and she won easily. Together they visited the great games of Greece, Atalanta winning each and every race she entered. Her fame spread, as in those days it was only men who ran races, yet Atalanta beat them all with ease. And so it was that the bitter old king heard of this girl and her story, and, realising that this was the

baby he had abandoned in the forest, saw an opportunity to find an heir to his throne as he and the queen had no more children.

At the very next race the king stood forward and threw his arms around Atalanta, declaring that she was his child, lost all those years ago and that as a princess she would now take her rightful place in the palace. However, the king then declared that Atalanta would no longer run (as it was not becoming of a princess) and instead would be married. In this way he thought, "Because of her fame, only the finest of princes will want to marry her, then I will have the heir I have always wished for!"

But as you might guess, Atalanta was not happy with this plan!

"Well father," she said to the king, "I will only marry a man who can beat me in a race and those who fail shall forfeit their heads!"

"That is ridiculous!" spluttered the king.

"Then if you do not agree to these terms I shall run off... how will you stop me if I am the fastest runner in the land?"

And the king knew this was true and so he agreed to Atalanta's terms.

Now Atalanta did not wish to see young men lose their heads, you see she thought that no one would be stupid enough to try. How wrong she was! The land was full of young, arrogant princes who thought that beating a girl in a race would be simple... "How could I lose to a *girl*?" they would ask themselves.

So the games began, lose they did, and so they lost their heads too!

Huge crowds gathered to watch the bloody sight... at the end of each race the losers' heads were lifted high for the crowd to see. Atalanta wept, and preyed to the gods to send someone that might beat her so that the bloodshed might end, but all that came to race were more young foolish men.

Then one day, a brave young man called Melanion arrived. He did not intend to race but when he set eyes on Atalanta he fell hopelessly in love with her. As chance would have it (or perhaps it was the gods' doing) Atalanta looked his way, and as she did, she fell in love with Melanion.

"Tomorrow I will race, for I would rather lose my head than live without you," said Melanion.

Atalanta begged him not to race for even if she wanted to lose, she had to honour the bargain she had made with the king and run her best in each race.

"I do not know how I will win," said Melanion, "but win I will!"

That night Melanion preyed to the goddess of love, Aphrodite. Aphrodite heard his prayers and looked down from Mount Olympus, deciding to help Melanion. Then she appeared before him in a shimmering light.

"Melanion," she said, "take these three golden apples and listen now. Here is what to do tomorrow in order to win the race..."

And so the scene was set! And now, over to Ancient Greece for live commentary of the big race!

LIVE COMMENTARY

"Ladies and gentlemen, before the Gods of Olympus, we are about to begin the greatest race ever witnessed on this Earth! Crowds are packed along the racecourse, jostling for the best view of this race of love or death! And... here come the athletes!

To my right, wearing a golden toga, some say the greatest runner the world has ever seen, swifter than a diving hawk, sleeker than a speeding dolphin and faster than a dashing cheetah, I give you the one, the only, daughter of King Iasus...the magnificent ATALANTAAAAA!!!

And now, to my left, a runner whose fame is known all over Greece, he of the strong heart, he of the mighty lungs and legs of steel...I give you MELANION!

Runners! Take your marks, get set... Go!

And they're off! It's Melanion just in front as they reach the first bend with Atalanta closing... bumping and barging, Melanion begins to pull away... but not for long! For here comes Atalanta as fast as lightning on the nearside to pass Melanion!

BUT HOLD ON! MELANION HAS PULLED A OBJECT FROM HIS TOGA... IT'S A BEAUTIFUL GOLDEN APPLE AND HE'S TOSSED IT FAR IN FRONT OF HIM! Atalanta has spotted it rolling along the ground and she has stopped! ATALANTA HAS STOPPED TO PICK UP THE APPLE! THIS IS INCREDIBLE! The crowd are screaming at her to run! Melanion is powering away and now has a 40 length advantage as he rounds the lake, but the crowd is cheering wildly again now because here comes Atalantaaaaaaa!!!.

She's round the gnarled oak tree, up to the olive grove and begins to round the lake... she is only 3 lengths down now, 2 lengths, 1 length and she has passed Melanion! Atalanta is in the lead! But hold on...once again... Melanion has thrown another round object high in the air in front of Atalanta... **IT'S A SECOND GOLDEN APPLE!** There is a gasp from the crowd! The apple has landed in an olive tree and Atalanta has stopped again, this is incredible! She's climbing the tree to get the apple! Meanwhile Melanion has streaked ahead, 30, 40, 50, 60 lengths... but now she has the apple and is back hot on his heels! Look at her go, she truly is the fastest of mortals! She's catching him, she's catching him! She has him and she passes Melanion to open a 2 length lead... but Melanion is reaching into his bag again and has produced **ANOTHER GOLDEN APPLE!**

High through the air it travels, lands and it's rolling in front of Atalanta and it disappears down a rabbit hole but this time Atalanta runs straight on! NO! WAIT, NO! She's stopped again! THIS IS UNBELIEVABLE! She's lying down on the ground and is reaching into the rabbit hole scrabbling about for the apple!

Now Melanion streaks past the prone figure of Atalanta with the crowd roaring and opens up a *HUGE LEAD!* IT LOOKS LIKE MELANION HAS THIS RACE OF CHAMPOINS ALL SEWN UP!!! But I think I may have spoken too soon, BECAUSE HERE COMES ATALANTA!!!!!!

She's gaining on Melanion rapidly and with only a thousand metres to go she still has a great chance!

But it's Melanion! Still in the lead with 500 metres to go! He's still in the lead with 300 metres left! But here comes Atalanta, flying like the wind!!! With 100 metres to go it's neck and neck! Smoke is coming from their heels! They cross the line, and the winner is.....MELANION MELANION IS THE CHAMPION !!!!!

AND JUST LISTEN TO THAT CROWD GOING WILD! THEY ARE CHEERING TO THE GODS!!! WHAT A RACE! WHAT A RACE!

With the race over, Melanion and Atalanta held each other in their arms and smiled! So it was they were married and lived a long and happy life together. Eventually the father of the gods Zeus turned them into lions and together they ran side by side through the forests of Greece. And for all I know they are still running to this day!