

PROMETHEUS AND THE STORY OF FIRE

When Chronos, the father of Zeus, had ruled the earth, summer had been the only season.

But after Hades' attempt to kidnap Persephone had stirred the anger of Demeter, winter was introduced into the world for the first time. This was a season that had never before been experienced on earth, and few were prepared to deal with it.

The titans did not suffer during these yearly cold spells, though. They warmed their houses, having the secret of fire. And the women of the race were weavers of cloth, so that the gods were clothed and defended from the north wind.

But winter was a harsh season for the humans down on earth. Without defense from the cold, they huddled with the animals. They complained against the gods, whom they must serve for what little comfort they might find of food and warmth. They scarcely believed the stories which their ancestors had handed down to them of a time when men had lived in endless summer weather.

Men became upset with the gods for letting them suffer, and they began to curse to Zeus and his family. For this reason the King of the Gods, seeing winter coming on again, determined to destroy the people of Earth and be done with their complaining. Then Prometheus, his chief advisor, sought to save this race of man from destruction.

"They quarrel among themselves," said Zeus angrily. "They start trouble in the fields. We must train up a new race of men who will learn more quickly what it means to serve the gods."

"They are worthless," Zeus was saying as if to himself. "Worthless," he repeated again, "the whole race. They complain of the winters. They are too weak a race for the climate of these times. Why should we continue to struggle with them? Better to be rid of them, every man and woman of the troublesome tribe."

"And then?" inquired Prometheus. "What if you create a new race to provide manpower for the farms and the bigger buildings? That race, too, will rebel while they can see and envy our knowledge and our power."

"Even so, I will destroy this race of humans," insisted Zeus stubbornly. "Men are our creatures. Let them learn to serve us, to do our will."

"Up here on your mountain," observed Prometheus thoughtfully, "you make men and destroy them. But what about the men themselves? How can they learn wisdom when, time after time, you visit them with destruction?"

"You have too much sympathy for them," answered Zeus in a sharp voice. "I believe you love these huddling, sheepish men."

"They have minds and hearts," replied Prometheus warmly, "and a courage that is worth admiring. They wish to live even as the gods wish to live. Don't we feed ourselves on nectar and ambrosia every day to preserve our lives?"

Prometheus was speaking rapidly. His voice was deep. "This is your way," he went on. "You won't look ahead. You won't be patient. You won't give men a chance to learn how to live. Over and over again, with floods or with cracking red thunderbolts, you destroy them."

"I have let you live, Prometheus," said Zeus in an ominous tone, "to advise me when you can. You are my cousin. But I am not your child to be scolded." Zeus was smiling, but there was thunder behind the smile.

Silently Prometheus turned away. This was not the first time Prometheus had heard thunder in the voice of Zeus. Prometheus knew that someday Zeus would turn against him, betray him, and punish him. Prometheus had the gift of reading the future. He could foresee the fate hidden and waiting for him and for others and even for Zeus himself.

He thought most often of the future, but the talk with Zeus just now had brought the past before him once again. He remembered once more the terrible way in which Zeus had seized the

kingship of the gods. He thought of the exile and imprisonment of Chronos, the father of Zeus. He remembered the Titans, his people, now chained in the black pit of Tartarus.

The great god Chronos himself, who had given peace to gods and men, where was he now? And the Titans, the magnificent engineers, builders of bridges and temples, where were they? All of them fallen, helpless, as good as dead.

Zeus had triumphed. Of the original Titans, only two now walked the upper earth—he, Prometheus, and Epimetheus, his brother.

And now, even now, Zeus was not content. It was not enough for his glory, it seemed, to have dethroned his own father, not enough to have driven the race of Titans from the houses of the gods. Now Zeus was plotting to kill the race of men.

Prometheus had endured the war against the Titans, his own people. He had even given help to Zeus. Having seen what was to come, he had thought, "Since Zeus must win, I'll guide him. I'll control his fierce anger and his greed for power."

But Prometheus could not submit to this latest plot of Zeus. He would use all his wits to save humans from destruction.

Why were they to be destroyed? Because they were cold and full of fears, huddled together in caves like animals. It was well enough in the warm months. They worked willingly in the fields of the gods and reared the horses and bulls and guarded the sheep. But when the cold days came, they grumbled against Olympus. They grumbled because they must eat and hunt like the animals and had no hoof nor claw nor heavy fur for protection.

What did they need? What protection would be better than hoof or claw? Prometheus knew. It was fire they needed—fire to cook with, to warm them, to harden metal for weapons. With fire they could frighten the wolf and the bear and the mountain lion.

Why did they lack the gift of fire? Prometheus knew that too. He knew how jealously the gods sat guard about their flame.

More than once he had told Zeus the need men had of fire. He knew why Zeus would not consent to teach men this secret of the gods. The gift of fire to men would be a gift of power. Hardened in the fire, the spears which men might make to chase the mountain lion might also, in time, be hurled against the gods. With fire would come comfort and time to think while the flames leaped up the walls of hidden caves.

"But men are worth the gift of fire," thought Prometheus, sitting against the roots of his favorite ash tree. Prometheus did not hesitate. By the fall of night his plans were accomplished. As the sun went down, his tall figure appeared on a sea beach. Above the sands were a hundred caves sheltering families of humans. To them the Titan was bringing this very night the secret of the gods.

He came along the pebble line of high water. In his hand he carried a hollow yellow stick. This curious yellow tube was made of metal, the most precious of the metals of the gods. And in it were coals from the gods' ever burning fire. Whenever the gods came down to earthy they would bring a burning coal inside a hollow stick like this and use it as a lighter upon a pile of dry sticks.

Prometheus knew that, though he was going only to the sea beach, he was in truth starting upon a journey. He knew the hatred of Zeus would follow him. He knew that now he, Prometheus, could never return to the house of the gods. From this night he must live his life among the men he wished to save.

While the stars came out, bright as they are on nights when winter will soon come on, Prometheus gathered together a heap of driftwood. Opening the metal stick, he set the flame of the gods in the waiting pile of sticks.

Eating into the wood, the fire leaped up, fanned in the night breeze. Prometheus sat down beside the fire he had made. He was not long alone.

Shadowy figures appeared at the mouths of caves. One by one, men, women, and children crept toward the blaze. The night was cold. North winds had blown that day. The winds had blown on the lands of men, even as they had blown on the head of Zeus in his palace above them. Now in the night they came, the people of men, to the warmth of the beckoning fire.

Hundreds of them showed up. Those nearest the tall fire-bringer, the Titan, were talking with him. They knew him well. It was not the first time Prometheus had come to talk with them. But never before had he come late, alone, and lighted a fire against the dark.

It was not the first time men had seen a fire or felt its warmth. More than once a god, walking the earth, had set a fire, lit from the coals he carried secretly. Men revered the slender magic wands with which, it seemed, the gods could call up flame. But never before had they stood so near a fire nor seen the "firewand".

Now men might hold in their own hands the mysterious yellow rod. They said, "Look" and "See" and, fingering the metal, "How wonderfully the gods can mold what is hard in the hands."

For a while Prometheus let them talk. He watched with pleasure the gleam of firelight in their shining eyes. Then quietly he took the metal stalk from the man who held it. With a swift gesture he threw it into the heap of burning wood.

The people groaned. The metal crumpled against the heat and melted in the blazing fire.

The people murmured among themselves, "Hasn't he taken away the secret now? Hasn't he destroyed before our eyes the source of fire?"

But then Prometheus showed them how to create fire themselves using sticks and light tree bark. By simply moving the sticks together in a hollowed out area in the sand and using patience, they too could create the wonderment of fire.

Whispers and murmuring first, then cries, then shouting. Men ran to scoop new hollows in the sand. The children, running from the beach to the caves and fields, hurried back with fists crammed full of straw and withered leaves to use as fuel.

The people of the caves were breathless with excitement. Here was no secret. The fire-wand did not breed the fire as they had thought. No nameless power of the gods bred the flame.

It was hard work, but with patience the humans were able to create their own flames that night. A dozen fires sprang up. Women and children ran with laden arms to feed each growing blaze.

The gods, from their distant houses, saw the glow. There to the south it shone, fighting against the starlight, the glare in the sky. Was it the end of the world? Would the terrible fire consume the earth again?

Hermes, the messenger, came at last with an answer to all their questions.

"Great Zeus," said Hermes gravely in the assembly of the gods, "Prometheus, your cousin, stands in the midst of those rising fires. He took coals from the central hearth as for a journey."

"So?" asked Zeus, nodding his head. Then, as if he were holding an argument with himself, he continued, saying, "But then? What then? The fire will die. It is not a crime for a god or for a Titan to light a fire for himself on a cold evening."

"But that fire will not die," interrupted Hermes. "That fire is not the fire of gods and Titans. Prometheus has taught men the source of fire. Those fires are their own, the fires of men. They've drilled flame out of hardwood with their own hands."

Then Zeus looked down from Olympus and saw everywhere on the broad earth the far-shining fires, and his anger against Prometheus knew no bounds. He sent two of his strong servants to bind the disobedient titan Prometheus to a mountainous rock in the Caucasus Mountains, where he lay for long ages stretched out, held down by his chains, exposed alike to hot sun and fierce winds and piercing cold. To increase his torments, Zeus sent a giant eagle to tear continually at his

liver; and because the Titan was immortal like Zeus himself, his sufferings were to be without end. There was still another reason for Zeus's cruelty, besides Prometheus's victories over him.

The Fates are three sisters, Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos, who sit in a cave spinning the thread of man's life. The first sister spins the thread, the second draws it out, and the third, the most dreaded, is she who cuts it off. Prometheus, who was admitted to their counsels, knew not only that Zeus was destined to hold the supreme power, but also that another was to come after him and seize the power in his turn. This successor was to be one of Zeus's many children- Zeus himself knew that much: It was Prometheus who kept the crucial secret of who would be the child's mother-her name, and whether she was goddess, nymph, or mortal woman. Like his father and his grandfather, Zeus lived in fear of his eventual overthrow and would have given anything to prevent it or put it off. Underestimating his old friend as he had done before, and forgetting that without Prometheus's help it would have taken him much longer to become lord of Olympus, he thought he could torture Prometheus into telling what he knew. But Prometheus with his superhuman endurance remained stubborn in his refusal to speak up.

Most stories agree that at last Prometheus was released from his mountaintop. The deed is ascribed to the greatest of the heroes, Zeus's son Heracles, who sailed to his rescue in a golden ship lent to him by the Sun. But that is a story for another day.

The Story of Pandora

Zeus's revenge did not stop with the punishment of Prometheus. Though he could not take the gift of fire away from men once it had been kindled in a thousand places on the earth, he was determined they should suffer for their possession of it.

When Zeus was angry with mankind, he devised the worst punishment he could think of, and invented a woman. Hephaestus, the smith of the gods, was instructed to form her from the earth and make her irresistibly beautiful, so he created her in the image of who he thought the most beautiful woman was: his wife. Each of the gods gave her a special gift or skill (Zeus gave her curiosity, Aphrodite gave beauty, Athena gave her wisdom, etc.), and from this she was called Pandora, "all-gifted." When she was perfected with every gift and arrayed in all her loveliness, this treacherous treasure was taken down to earth by Hermes, and given as a wife to Epimetheus.

Now before Prometheus was punished by Zeus on a mountain, he had warned his foolish brother never to accept anything from Zeus, even if it looked like a gift sent in friendship; but Epimetheus as usual acted first and thought afterward.

He accepted the maiden from Hermes and led her into his house, and with her came a great box (some say a jar or chest) which Zeus had sent with her, telling her to keep it safe but never think of opening it. But because of Zeus's earlier gift, this proved too much for a girl like Pandora, who among her many gifts from the Olympians was endowed with the first feminine curiosity.

After ignoring the jar for days and restraining the curiosity for a little while, she at last gave in and lifted the lid from the jar, and from this moment began the sorrows of mankind. For each of the gods had stored in it the worst thing he was able to give (Hera gave jealousy, Ares gave arrogance, Hermes gave greed, etc.), and wonderful as had been the gifts with which they endowed her, just as dreadful were the evils that rushed eagerly from the jar in a black stinking cloud -sickness and suffering, hatred and jealousy and greed, and all the other cruel things that freeze the heart and bring on old age.

Pandora tried to close the lid on the jar again, but it was too late. The happy childhood of mankind had gone forever, and with it the Golden Age when life was easy. From then on man had to suffer with a hard living by his own labor from the unfriendly ground. Only one good thing came to man in the jar and remains to comfort him in his distress, and that is the spirit of Hope (which Athena had snuck in instead of putting in an evil spirit for she foresaw what trickery Zeus was up to).