



The Gift of Fire

Prometheus was a bold young giant who insisted on finding things out for himself. He feared no one, not even Zeus, who ruled the gods on Mount Olympus and the men on earth, and kept everyone frightened with his mighty thunderbolt. Prometheus knew how much the powerful god hated questions about his rule, but the young giant asked them anyway when there was something he wanted to know.

One morning he walked up to Zeus and said, "Oh, thunderer, I do not understand. You have put men on earth, but you keep them in fear and darkness."

"Perhaps you had better leave all matters con-

cerning man to me," said Zeus in a warning tone. "Their fear, as you call it, is simply respect for the gods. The 'darkness' is the peaceful shadow of my law. Man is happy now. And he will remain happy — unless someone tells him he is *unhappy*. Let us not speak of this again."

But Prometheus persisted. "Look at man!" he said. "Look below. There he crouches in cold dark caves. He is at the mercy of the beasts and the weather. He even eats his meat raw. Tell me why you refuse to give man the gift of fire."

Zeus answered, "Don't you know, Prometheus, that every gift has a price? And the cost of the gift is usually more than it is worth. Man does not have fire, true. He has not learned the crafts which go with fire. But he is lucky all the same. He does not suffer disease, or warfare, or old age, or that inward sickness called worry. He is quite happy without fire. And so, I say, he shall remain."

"Man is happy the way animals are happy," retorted Prometheus. "What was the sense of creating this race called man if he must live like the beasts, without fire? He doesn't even have any fur to keep him warm."

"He is different from the beasts in other ways," said Zeus. "Man needs someone to worship. And we gods need someone to worship us. That is why man was made."

"But wouldn't fire and the things that fire can do for him make him more interesting?"

"More interesting, perhaps, but much more dangerous. Like the gods, man is full of pride. It would take very little to make this pride swell to giant size. If I improve man's lot, he will forget the very thing which makes him so pleasing to us: his need to worship and obey. He will become poisoned with pride and begin to fancy that he himself is a god. Before we know it he will be storming Mount Olympus. You have said enough, Prometheus. I have been patient with you. Do not try me too far. Go now, and trouble me no more with your questions."

But Prometheus was not satisfied. All that night he lay awake making plans. When dawn came he left his bed and, standing tiptoe on Olympus, stretched his arm to the eastern horizon, where the first faint flames of the sun were flickering. In his hand he held a reed filled with dry fiber. He thrust it into the sunrise until a spark smoldered. Then he put the reed in his tunic and came down from the mountain.

At first, men were frightened by his gift. It was so hot, so quick. It bit sharply when you touched it, and set the shadows dancing. The men thanked Prometheus, but they asked him to take away his gift.

But instead Prometheus took the haunch of a

newly killed deer and held it over the fire. When the meat began to sear and sputter, filling the cave with the rich smell of roasting venison, the people went mad with hunger. They flung themselves on the meat, and ate greedily, burning their tongues.

"That which cooked the meat is called fire," Prometheus told them. "It is an ill-natured spirit, a little brother of the sun, but if you handle it carefully it can change your whole life. You must feed it with twigs — but only until it is big enough to roast your meat or heat your cave. Then you must stop, or it will eat everything in sight, and you too. If it escapes, use this magic — water. If you touch it with water it will shrink to the right size again."

Prometheus left the fire burning in the first cave, and the children stared at it, wide-eyed. Then he went to every cave in the land, bringing his gift of fire.

For some time afterward, Zeus was kept busy with the affairs of the gods. Then, one day, he looked down from Mt. Olympus, and was amazed. Everything had changed. Zeus saw woodsmen's huts, farmhouses, villages, walled towns, even a castle or two. He saw men cooking their food and carrying torches to light their way at night. He saw forges blazing, men beating out

ploughs, keels, swords, spears. They were making ships and raising white winds of sails, daring to use the fury of the winds for their journeys. They were even wearing helmets, and riding out to do battle — like the gods themselves.

Zeus was very angry. He seized his largest thunderbolt. "So men want fire," he said to himself. "I'll give them fire — more than they can use. I'll burn their miserable little ball of earth to a cinder."

But then another thought came to him and he lowered his arm. "No," he said to himself. "I'll attend to these mortals later. My first business is with Prometheus. And when I finish with him no one else — man, god, or giant — will dare to disobey me."

Zeus then called his guards and had them seize Prometheus. He ordered them to drag him off to the far north. There they bound Prometheus to a mountain peak with great chains specially forged by the god of fire. These chains were so strong that even a giant could not break them, no matter how hard he struggled. When the friend of man was bound to the mountain, Zeus sent two vultures to hover about him forever, tearing at his vitals, and eating his liver.

Men knew that a terrible thing was happening on the mountain, but they did not know what it

was. They could hear the wind shriek like a giant in torment, and sometimes like fierce birds.

For centuries Prometheus lay there helpless — until another hero was born, brave enough to defy the gods. He climbed the mountain peak, struck the chains from Prometheus, and killed the vultures. His name was Hercules.

And so, at last, man was able to repay Prometheus for his great gift — the gift of fire.