



## The Mysterious Box

Zeus brooded. He could not forget how Prometheus had dared to break his law and teach man the use of fire. After the lord of the sky had punished Prometheus with an endless torment for giving man fire, he began to plan how to punish man for accepting the gift. He thought and brooded, and finally he hit upon a plan.

"A good scheme," he told himself. "It will give me vengeance and entertainment as well. Of course there is always a chance that the girl will resist temptation and save mankind. But I'll take that risk."

He ordered the fire god to mold a girl out of clay. Then Zeus breathed life into the clay girl.

The clay turned to flesh, and a maiden lay sleeping before him. Then he called the gods together, and asked them each to give her a special gift, and told them what he wanted those gifts to be.

Apollo taught her to sing and play the lyre. Athena taught her to spin. Ceres taught her how to plant seeds and make things grow. Venus gave her the gift of beauty and taught her to dance. Neptune gave her the power to change herself into a mermaid so that she could swim in the stormiest seas without drowning. Mercury gave her a beautiful golden box. But he told her she must never, never open it. And, finally, Hera gave her the tricky gift of curiosity.

Mercury took her by the hand and led her down the slope of Mount Olympus. He led her to the brother of Prometheus and said, "Father Zeus regrets the disgrace which has fallen upon your family. And to show you that he doesn't blame you for your brother's crime, he offers you this girl to be your wife. She is the fairest maid in all the world. Her name is Pandora, the all-gifted."

So the brother of Prometheus married Pandora. She spun and baked and tended her garden, and played the lyre and danced for her husband. For a while they were the happiest young couple on earth.

But from the first Pandora could not help

thinking about the golden box. She was very proud of it. She kept it on the table and polished it every day. But the box sparkled in the sunlight and seemed to be winking at her. She could not help wondering what was inside.

She began to talk to herself in this way: "Mercury must have been teasing. He's always making jokes; everyone knows that. Yes, he was teasing me, telling me never to open his gift. If it is so beautiful outside, what a treasure there must be inside! Diamonds and sapphires and rubies more lovely than anyone has ever seen. After all, it is a gift from the hand of a god. If the box is so rich, the gift inside must be even more splendid. Perhaps Mercury really expects me to open the box and tell him how delighted I am with his gift. Perhaps he's waiting for me to thank him. He probably thinks I'm ungrateful."

But even as she was telling herself all this, she knew in her heart that it was not so. The box must *not* be opened. She *must* keep her promise.

Finally, she knew she had to do something to stop herself from thinking about the box. She took it from the table, and hid it in a dusty little storeroom. But it seemed to be burning there in the shadows. It scorched her thoughts wherever she went. She kept passing that room and stepping into it and making excuses to dawdle there.

Once she took the box from its hiding place and stroked it — then quickly shoved it out of sight and rushed from the room.

After some days of this torment, she locked the golden box in a heavy oak chest. She put great bolts on the chest, and dug a hole in her garden. Then she put the chest in the hole and covered it over — and rolled a boulder on top of it. When her husband came home that night, her hair was wild and her hands were bloody, and her tunic was torn and stained. But all she would tell him was that she had been working in the garden.

That night the moonlight blazed in the room. Pandora could not sleep. She sat up in bed and looked around. All the room was swimming in moonlight. Everything was different. There were deep shadows and bright patches of silver, all mixed, all moving. She arose quietly and tiptoed from the room.

She went out into the garden. The trees were swaying. The whole world was adance in the magic white fire of moonlight. She felt full of wild strength. She walked over to the rock and pushed. The rock rolled away as lightly as a pebble. Then she took a shovel and dug down to the chest. She unfastened the bolts and drew out the golden box. It was cold, cold! The coldness burned her hand to the bone. She trembled, not

with cold, but with fear. She felt that the box held the very secret of life. She must look inside or die.

Pandora took a little golden key from her tunic, fitted it into the keyhole, and gently opened the lid. There was a swarming, a wild throbbing, a nameless rustling, and a horrid sickening smell. Out of the box, as she held it up in the moonlight, swarmed small, scaly, lizardlike creatures with bat wings and burning red eyes.

They flew out of the box, circled her head once, clapping their wings and screaming thin little jeering screams. Then they flew off into the night, hissing and cackling.

Half fainting, Pandora sank to her knees. With her last bit of strength she clutched the box and shut down the lid, catching the last little monster just as it was wriggling free. It shrieked and spat and clawed her hand, but she thrust it back into the box and locked it in. Then she dropped the box and fainted away.

What were those loathsome creatures that flew out of the golden box? They were all the ills that trouble mankind; the spites and jealousies, disease of every kind, old age, famine, drought, poverty, war, and all the evils that bring grief and misery. After they flew out of the box, they scattered. They flew into every home, and swung

from the rafters, waiting. And even today, when their time comes, they swoop down and sting, bringing pain and sorrow and death to men and women everywhere.

But bad as they were, things could have been worse. For the creature that Pandora managed to shut in the box was the worst of all. It was Foreboding, the knowledge of misfortune to come. If it had flown free, people would know ahead of time every terrible thing that was to happen to them throughout their lives. Hope would have died. And that would have been the death of man as well. For people can bear endless trouble, but they cannot live without hope.