



## How Zeus and Hermes Went Visiting

Time went by and men settled down all over the earth as if it had always been theirs. And Zeus was pleased with what he saw as he looked down from Olympus, and busied himself setting the rest of the world to rights after the desolation made by the Titans.

Of course it was to Greece that he gave most of his attention, though he did not neglect the islands of the Aegean Sea which separates Greece from Asia Minor, nor that part of the mainland beyond which is called Troy.

When he was tired with his labours, Zeus would go southwards to the land of the Blessed Ethiopians, men of

the Silver Age who had not learnt the wickedness of the Titans, and who often entertained the Immortals at their banquets.

But the evils which Pandora had let loose from the golden casket found their way surely enough into the hearts of men, and some even in Greece became almost as wicked as those of the Silver Age whom Zeus had destroyed before Prometheus made Man as we know him out of clay.

Rumours of wickedness beyond belief came to Zeus, and he began to wonder whether he could destroy the people of the Bronze Age and make yet another race of men: but without Prometheus to help him, he hesitated. At last he decided to see for himself, and so he called to him his son Hermes and said:

'Let us take upon ourselves the form and likeness of men and go down into the land of Greece and seek entertainment as if we were poor travellers. And if we find that men are not fit to live upon the beautiful earth, I will destroy them utterly.'

Hermes, who loved mankind and had helped Prometheus, replied:

'Father Zeus, let us not be over hasty. If we visit three households, and find that two out of the three merit destruction, then let mankind perish. But if we find virtue and kindness in even two, however wicked the third may be, then spare the good. But bring whatever doom you like upon the wicked.'

This pleased Zeus, who had grown less cruel than in the days when he sent Prometheus to his terrible doom and made Pandora to be a plague to all mankind.

He agreed to what Hermes suggested, and the two Immortals began their wanderings in the land of Arcadia, Zeus disguised as an old man and Hermes as his grandson.

Now at that time the King of Arcadia was Lycaon, a fierce, savage man given to all manner of evil. He had fifty sons, and most of them were as bad as he was, and like him they were cannibals.

Zeus and Hermes entered King Lycaon's palace, and at first he refused to give them food, and even threatened to kill them. Hermes so young and handsome would make him an excellent feast; perhaps it was this which made him change his mind.

Certainly he bade Zeus sit down at his table: perhaps he considered Hermes already a prisoner being fattened up for a future banquet. Suddenly Lycaon realized that there was no fresh meat ready for that day; but this did not trouble him over much, since he had one son, Nyctimus, who was not as wicked as the rest, and always refused to eat human flesh. On this day he had dared to tell his father that to eat one of his guests was the wickedest thing a man could do.

'You're only fit for stewing!' snarled Lycaon; and so Nyctimus was killed, jointed, and put in the pot.

When this hideous meal was placed on the table, Zeus the all-seeing knew at once what the dish was which was set before him. Filled with rage he sprang to his feet, and a great light shone round him as Lycaon cowered away, realizing in a moment of terror that his guest was none other than the King of the Immortals.

‘Wretch!’ cried Zeus. ‘All that I have heard of you is true! You are not fit to be a man! Go forth into the wilderness and haunt the lonely mountains and dangerous valleys: be a wolf, and your impious sons with you!’

Then Lycaon tried to answer, but all he could utter was the howl of a wolf. He tried to fall upon his knees, only to find that he was already on all fours. So he fled away into the forests of Arcadia with his sons behind him, a wolf at the head of his pack.

Zeus restored Nyctimus to life and bade him rule justly and well. Then he and Hermes, once more in disguise, continued on their way.

‘You see,’ said Zeus presently. ‘Men are as wicked as I thought. Is there need of further search?’

‘Remember your promise,’ answered Hermes. ‘And this time, let us seek hospitality of a poor man: perhaps we may find a virtue among the humble which is lacking to a king such as Lycaon.’

So they went on across the world, passing at will over sea and land, and came in the evening to a mountain top near Tyana in Phrygia. Here stood a little cottage thatched

with straw, and the walls made of reeds and clay. There were no servants in this house, indeed its only inhabitants were an old man and his wife whose names were Philemon and Baucis.

Poor though they were, these two welcomed the travellers kindly, made up the fire with their last dry faggot, put on the pot to boil, and cut up their only joint of smoked bacon which hung from the beam.

They prepared a bed for their guests, the only bed in the house, and heaped all the rugs they possessed upon it. Then they laid the table and set the supper before the two strangers.

Besides the meat there were olives and cheese; eggs roasted in the warm embers, and what little store they had of dried figs, dates, and nuts. Old Baucis, her hands trembling with age, served the meal, while Philemon placed two wooden cups upon the table and poured into them wine from the only jar that remained to him.

All this they did with simple kindness, talking to their guests and making them welcome, without the slightest idea that they were anything but human travellers as poor as themselves.

But when Philemon came to re-fill the cups which he had seen his guests drain to the dregs, he found them both still full of wine – and of wine so sweet and fragrant that the delicious scent of it filled the whole cottage. Then he fell on his knees before the guests:

'Noble sirs,' he cried, holding up his hands in prayer, 'surely you are blessed gods come down from Olympus! Pardon us, I beg you, that our entertainment has been so poor, and the food so meagre. Indeed, we would have done better, if we possessed better: but we have given you all we had.'

Then Zeus smiled kindly on the two old people, and said:

'You have guessed truly: we are Zeus and Hermes, come down to test mankind – and in you we find nothing to blame. Come now, and see what we propose for you!'

He led the way out of the cottage, and scarcely had they left it when it began to grow and change as they watched it. The rough sticks which held up the roof turned into columns of white marble; the thatch grew yellower and yellower until it shone with pure gold, and the dark earthen floor grew hard and smooth with many-coloured mosaic.

'And now,' said Zeus, 'what gift do you desire for yourselves?'

Then Philemon and Baucis spoke together for a few moments, after which Philemon turned and said:

'Of all things we desire most to be your priest and priestess in the beautiful temple which you have made. And this also we beg, that since we have lived our lives together in such perfect harmony and happiness, we may both die at the same moment.'

'All this I grant,' cried Zeus, and the thunder rolled

across the sky in token of his gift. 'And, whatever may chance to the wicked among men, here on this sacred mountain top you will be safe. Moreover I make you young again: live your lives as virtuously as you have done, and when death comes to you, both on the instant shall be turned into trees that you may still stand here and bow your heads before my temple.'

So saying, Zeus turned away from Baucis and Philemon, and set out once more with Hermes, in the direction of Greece.

Soon they came to wooded Thessaly in the north of Greece, and here Zeus turned to Hermes and said:

'Son of Maia, we have found a virtuous and holy couple living in Asia, but here in our own land of Greece Lycaon the impious man-eater, the wolf-king. This our last visit will save or destroy mankind!'

Now it may be that Hermes knew, and led the way, or it may be that Zeus was anxious for an excuse to spare some at least of the race of men: but certain it is that the house in which they next sought shelter was that of Deucalion whom Prometheus had made from the clay of Panopeus, and his wife Pyrrha, the daughter of Epimetheus and Pandora.

They found these two everything that they could wish: kindly and pious, honouring the gods, living blameless lives, and practising diligently all the arts which Prometheus had taught.



'Now,' said Zeus, when he and Hermes had tested Deucalion's hospitality and found that a King of Thessaly could be as simple and kindly as an ancient peasant of Phrygia – 'Now I will return to Olympus, and let loose a great flood over the earth. All those who are not fit to live shall drown in that flood, and I will see to it that any who save themselves by climbing to the tops of mountains are worthy of life – and I fear there will be few indeed of them. As for you, noble Deucalion, make haste and build a ship; place a roof over the top of it, store food and clothes in it, and then enter it with your wife and children. In this ship you will be safe, and I will guide it to the land over which I purpose that you and your children shall rule.'

Then Deucalion did as he was bidden, and brought to the task all the skill which Prometheus had taught him. Soon the ship was finished, and as soon as he and Pyrrha were safely inside it, Zeus let loose the rain.

For nine days and nine nights the rain poured down upon the earth; and Poseidon stirred up the waves with his trident so that the sea flowed in over the land as well.

All was desolation: houses lay in ruins beneath the waters, the corn rotted and turned black, and the fishes swam in and out among the branches of the trees. Only the Sea-peoples, the Nymphs and the Dolphins, were happy, swimming about among the mountain tops, and

diving down to explore drowned cities beneath the waves.

At last the waters began to fall, and the ship came to rest on a slope of Mount Parnassus, near Apollo's shrine at Delphi. Praising the gods for their deliverance, Deucalion and Pyrrha stepped on shore and lay down to sleep.

In the morning a voice spoke to them out of the deep earth beneath Apollo's temple which was now hung with sea-weed and encrusted with shells:

'Deucalion and Pyrrha! Father Zeus does not mean to stamp out utterly the race of men. Therefore go down into the valley before you, cover your heads with your cloaks, and cast behind you the bones of your mother!'

For a long time they were puzzled by this command, for each of them had a different mother, and both were dead. But at last Deucalion hit upon the right answer:

'Surely,' he said, 'our mother is the Earth, for out of earth were men formed by our maker Prometheus. And the bones of earth must be the stones.'

So they went down into the river valley, covered their heads, and began to throw stones backwards over their shoulders. And presently as they threw they heard a murmur behind them, a murmur that swelled and swelled until at last they could restrain themselves no longer.

They turned round, and there was a multitude of men and women. And as they gazed they saw the last few stones which they had thrown swelling, changing, growing soft

and rising up into human shapes: the men from the stones which Deucalion had thrown and the women from those which fell behind Pyrrha.

In this way the land of Greece was re-peopled, and very soon new cities sprang up from the ruins of the old; the fields yielded rich corn once more, and the olive groves shimmered silver in the sunlight.

So earth was peopled anew, and the children of Deucalion and Pyrrha, with those who had survived the flood by climbing to the mountain tops, became the kings and queens of the various states of Greece; and the most famous of them, whose name was Hellen, gave his name to the whole country, which is often called Hellas to this very day, and its people the Hellenes.

Zeus was pleased with mankind now that the more evil of them had been destroyed, and he and the other Immortals wandered often through the lovely land of Hellas, and some married mortal brides whose children became kings and princes.

'This is the Age of the Heroes,' decreed Zeus, 'and the men in it shall be stronger and the women more beautiful than their descendants in times to come.' For Zeus remembered the prophecy of the Titan Prometheus, that when the Giants came to attack him and the other Immortals, they could only win the war if there was a mortal man strong and brave enough to fight at their side and kill the Giants when they had overthrown them.

So Zeus planned, hoping that the greatest Hero of all would be born in time to help him. The Heroic Age lasted until the contemporaries of the youngest son of that Hero had grown old and died, and among them was Odysseus, the last of the Heroes who fought at Troy.

But, without the wisdom of Prometheus to guide him, Zeus made a mistake which very nearly caused his doom and wrecked the world. For when Deucalion and Pyrrha had made men and women by casting stones over their shoulders, Zeus, eager to make Greece a pleasant dwelling-place for the Heroes, laid command upon Earth.

'Bring forth Animals!' he commanded, for all animal life had perished in the great flood, though the birds and the reptiles had been able to survive it.

Earth did as she was bidden, and animals of every kind came leaping and tumbling out of the ground, squeezing up between the rocks, and pushing their way through the ground just as a mole does. But she laughed to herself, deep down in the caverns where the Titans were imprisoned. And besides the animals, she made the Giants – though they did not come out of their caves for a long time yet to do battle with the Immortals. But in addition to the Giants, Earth produced the most fearful monster ever seen, who was called Typhon.