

Prometheus the Fire-Thief

RETOLD BY KENNETH McLEISH

Greek mythology tells a story of Prometheus, who, like Odin, created mankind. Prometheus is a well-intentioned but bumbling sort of god, who wants to do what he can for his creatures. When they face their first winter, he does his best for them...

Down on earth, the first snow was falling. Softly, silently, it whispered across forests and fields and hills. It settled gently on the branches like a soft, white death. It slipped soundlessly into cracks between the rocks, and choked the gullies where sheep huddled and died. In gaunt lakes and the still, grey sea snowflakes disappeared and died. There was no sound.

Here and there, in caves in the rocks or under trees, men gathered. They were naked, their skin putty-coloured and pitted with cold. They cowered together in groups for warmth. With gentle, mindless eyes they looked out at the falling snow. They saw it, but could not understand or wonder at it. Without intelligence, they saw no link between the white drifts and the cold that dulled their bones. Like sheep, they huddled and watched, and died.

Up above, in the palace halls of Olympus, the gods were feasting. Iron fire-baskets glowed on the dusty floor and threw flickering shadows on the walls. The pillars gleamed and shone in the warmth, and the gods lolled at their ease, laughing and talking without a single care.

Only Prometheus sat silent. He looked into the heart of the fire and shivered. His heart burned with pity for mankind in the world below. His creation, chilled by their own ignorance, withering with cold. If they could once understand, if once the spark of knowledge glowed, their minds would thaw and they would learn the secrets of nature, the secrets of the gods.

But knowledge — fire — was not his to give. Any god could create, breathe life into lifeless things; but intelligence was allowed by Zeus alone.



And Zeus had been tricked. He had planned to create a perfect, sinless race. But Prometheus had tricked him and blocked his plans. Zeus could not uncreate what another god had made. But he could stand by, do nothing, while nature ran its course. The cold would finish men. Mindless and ignorant, they would perish soon enough. All Zeus had to do was forbid them fire.

Prometheus stood up. Wrapped in his dark cloak, he blended with the shadows. No one noticed as he went out. Sweating, laughing, joking, the gods continued with their feast.

Wrapped in his cloak, soaring like a nightbird, Prometheus passed from the home of gods to the home of men. He made his way deep under the earth, to the caverns of Sicily. Here, in the searing heat below the earth's crust,

Hephaistos the blacksmith-god ruled. His servants, the brutish Cyclôpes, sweated and toiled, shaping the iron bones of the earth into thunderbolts for Zeus himself. The fires flickered and roared; the hammers thudded and the anvils groaned; waste rock, white hot, flowed out through vent holes on the surface, the volcanoes of Sicily.

Unseen, Prometheus knelt by a stream of glowing fire. From his belt he took a stalk of green fennel. He split it open. The inside was hollow and damp. It would keep a glowing coal alive for the time he needed it. Quickly he took a coal, slipped it inside the stalk and drew back into the shadows.

There was a jar of silence, a single moment's pause in the lava-flow. The Cyclôpes looked up. Something was gone: a fragment of the god's fire was missing. Hephaistos heaved himself up on his twisted, withered legs and limped across the cavern.

But there was nothing. No one was there. The work began again.

Outside, on the earth's surface, falling snowflakes sizzled against Prometheus' seared, charred skin. His lungs were scorched, his flesh burned raw, his strength withered. But in his belt, in the fennel-stalk, was a fragment of Zeus' all-powerful fire. He bent, and blew on it till the coal glowed alive and red.

Fire! Prometheus' last gift to men. The fire of intelligence, to save them from death and teach them the gods' secrets.

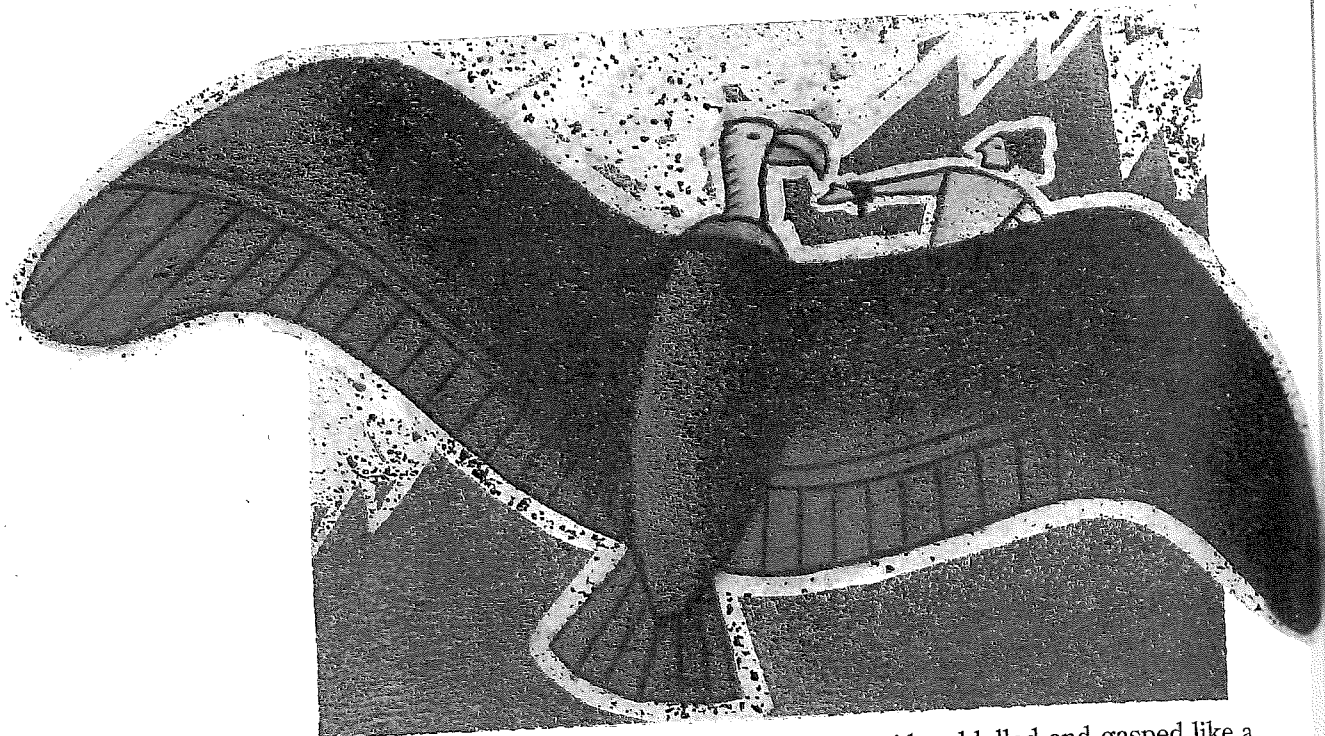
Years, generations later, the time came for Zeus to survey the world, to check that cold and storm had rid the gods' garden of Prometheus' doll-creation forever.

But the world had changed. From every part of it, pencils of smoke rose up from the wink and glint of cooking-fires. Men hurried about, eager and purposeful. They wore clothes now, animal skins and woven cloth. They had learned farming, sailing, a thousand crafts and skills. They were busy with houses and markets and parliaments. They were fishing, hunting, harvesting. Above all, they had learned speech: a hum of voices, a bee-swarm of languages, rose up and drowned the murmur of the sea, the rustle of the wind.

Zeus' anger was a lightning-storm, a rolling cloud, a rumble of thunder. The sky darkened; the earth shook; the gods flinched.

For Prometheus, Fire-Thief, there was no escape. There was the hiss of a thunderbolt as it found him out, a flare of light, an eruption of agony that filled his body and ripped his mind. Black, greasy smoke; a stench of charred flesh; silence.

There was more to come. For a fallen angel, an immortal, punishment is immortal too. Might and Force, servants of the gods, gathered up his tattered body. Hermes the Messenger led them, and Hephaistos limped beside them



with chains of unbreakable steel. Prometheus' head lolled and gasped like a gaffed fish, as he was carried to the place they chose for him.

On a high mountain peak, a jagged tooth of rock stands gaunt and black. Cloud coils round it, dank as corpse-breath. No trees; no animals; no life. Only a needle of stone in the thin, cold air.

This rock was Prometheus' place. Here Might and Force stretched him on tiptoe, and held his arms high above his head while Hephaistos chained him to the rock. Unbreakable steel. Forever.

Their job done, the gods went back to the warmth of Olympus. Prometheus was left alone. He could see nothing, hear nothing. His charred skin stuck to the icy rock; his muscles locked hard with cramp; his wrists and ankles were raw where he writhed against the chains.

Then suddenly, in the echoing silence, he heard a whirr of wings. A black shape loomed over him, dark in the cloud. There was a searing, stabbing pain as a curved beak tore into his ribs, stripping its way past bone and sinew till it found his liver.

The vulture of Zeus. All day it gouged and tore his flesh. At night it rested, and ragged wounds healed ready for the next day's pain. Prometheus, Fire-Thief, was locked in an eternity of suffering. He knew before he stole that this would be his punishment. He knew it, and chose it. To save his own creation, he chose to destroy himself.