OLD GREEK FOLK STORIES TOLD ANEW

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TOLD ANEW

BY

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YESTERDAY'S CLASSICS

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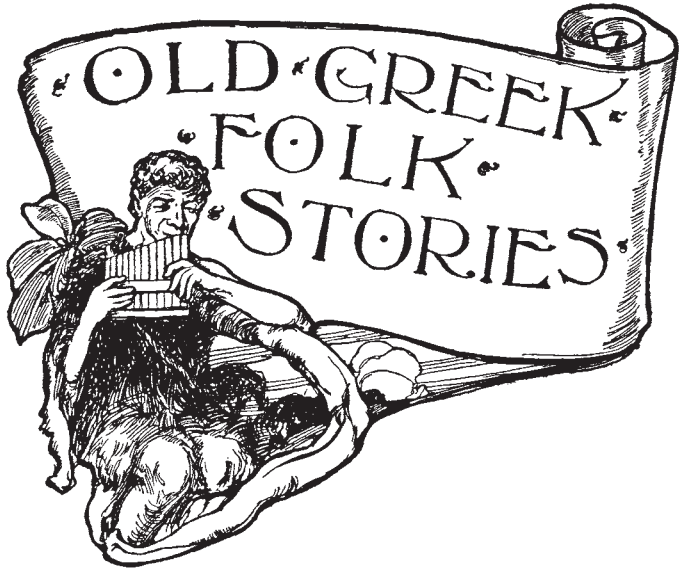
Once upon a time, men made friends with the Earth. They listened to all that woods and waters might say; their eyes were keen to see wonders in silent country places and in the living creatures that had not learned to be afraid. To this wise world outside the people took their joy and sorrow; and because they loved the Earth, she answered them.

It was not strange that Pan himself sometimes brought home a shepherd's stray lamb. It was not strange, if one broke the branches of a tree, that some fair life within wept at the hurt. Even now, the Earth is glad with us in spring-time, and we grieve for her when the leaves go. But in the old days there was a closer union, clearer speech between men and all other creatures, Earth and the stars about her.

Out of the life that they lived together, there have come down to us these wonderful tales; and, whether they be told well or ill, they are too good to be forgotten.



THE WOOD-FOLK

PAN led a merrier life than all the other gods together. He was beloved alike by shepherds and countrymen, and by the fauns and satyrs, birds and beasts, of his own kingdom. The care of flocks and herds was his, and for home he had all the world of woods and waters; he was lord of everything out-of-doors! Yet he felt the burden of it no more than he felt the shadow of a leaf when he danced, but spent the days in laughter and music among his fellows. Like him, the fauns and satyrs had furry, pointed ears, and little horns that sprouted above their brows; in fact, they were all enough like wild creatures to seem no strangers to anything untamed. They slept in the sun, piped in the shade, and lived on wild grapes and the nuts that every squirrel was ready to share with them.

The woods were never lonely. A man might wander away into those solitudes and think himself friendless; but here and there a river knew, and a tree could tell, a story of its own. Beautiful creatures they were, that for one reason or another had left off human shape. Some had been transformed against their will, that they might do no more harm to their fellow-men. Some were changed through the pity of the gods, that they might share the simple life of Pan, mindless of mortal cares, glad in rain and sunshine, and always close to the heart of the Earth.

There was Dryope, for instance, the lotus-tree. Once a careless, happy woman, walking among the trees with her sister Iole and her own baby, she had broken a lotus that held a live nymph hidden, and blood dripped from the wounded plant. Too late, Dryope saw her heedlessness; and there her steps had taken root, and there she had said good-bye to her child, and prayed Iole to bring him sometimes to play beneath her shadow. Poor mother-tree! Perhaps she took comfort with the birds and gave a kindly shelter to some nest.

There, too, was Echo, once a wood-nymph who angered the goddess Juno with her waste of words, and was compelled now to wait till others spoke, and then to say nothing but their last word, like any mocking-bird. One day she saw and loved the youth Narcissus, who was searching the woods for his hunting companions. "Come hither!" he called, and Echo cried "Hither!" eager to speak at last. "Here am I,—come!" he repeated, looking about for the voice. "I come," said Echo, and she stood before him. But the youth, angry at such mimicry,

only stared at her and hastened away. From that time she faded to a voice, and to this day she lurks hidden and silent till you call.

But Narcissus himself was destined to fall in love with a shadow. For, leaning over the edge of a brook one day, he saw his own beautiful face looking up at him like a water-nymph. He leaned nearer, and the face rose towards him, but when he touched the surface it was gone in a hundred ripples. Day after day he besought the lovely creature to have pity and to speak; but it mocked him with his own tears and smiles, and he forgot all else, until he changed into a flower that leans over to see its image in the pool.

There, too, was the sunflower Clytie, once a maiden who thought nothing so beautiful as the sun-god Phœbus Apollo. All the day long she used to look after him as he journeyed across the heavens in his golden chariot, until she came to be a fair rooted plant that ever turns its head to watch the sun.

Many like were there. Daphne the laurel, Hyacinthus (once a beautiful youth, slain by mischance), who lives and renews his bloom as a flower,—these and a hundred others. The very weeds were friendly. . . .

But there were wise, immortal voices in certain caves and trees. Men called them Oracles; for here the gods spoke in answer to the prayers of folk in sorrow or bewilderment. Sometimes they built a temple around such a befriending voice, and kings would journey far to hear it speak.

As for Pan, only one grief had he, and in the end a glad thing came of it.

One day, when he was loitering in Arcadia, he saw the beautiful wood-nymph Syrinx. She was hastening to join Diana at the chase, and she herself was as swift and lovely as any bright bird that one longs to capture. So Pan thought, and he hurried after to tell her. But Syrinx turned, caught one glimpse of the god's shaggy locks and bright eyes, and the two little horns on his head (he was much like a wild thing, at a look), and she sprang away down the path in terror.

Begging her to listen, Pan followed; and Syrinx, more and more frightened by the patter of his hoofs, never heeded him, but went as fast as light till she came to the brink of the river. Only then she paused, praying her friends, the water-nymphs, for some way of escape. The gentle, bewildered creatures, looking up through the water, could think of but one device.

Just as the god overtook Syrinx and stretched out his arms to her, she vanished like a mist, and he found himself grasping a cluster of tall reeds. Poor Pan!

The breeze that sighed whenever he did—and oftener—shook the reeds and made a sweet little sound,—a sudden music. Pan heard it, half consoled.

"Is it your voice, Syrinx?" he said. "Shall we sing together?"

He bound a number of reeds side by side; to this day, shepherds know how. He blew across the hollow pipes and they made music!

THE JUDGMENT OF MIDAS

PAN came at length to be such a wonderful piper with his syrinx (for so he named his flute) that he challenged Apollo to make better music if he could. Now the sun-god was also the greatest of divine musicians, and resolving to punish the vanity of the country-god, and so he consented to the test. For judge they chose the mountain Tmolus, since no one is so old and wise as the hills. And, since Tmolus could not leave his home, to him went Pan and Apollo, each with his followers, oreads and dryads, fauns, satyrs, and centaurs.

Among the worshippers of Pan was a certain Midas, who had a strange story. Once a king of great wealth, he had chanced to befriend Dionysus, god of the vine; and when he was asked to choose some good gift in return, he prayed that everything he touched might be turned into gold. Dionysus smiled a little when he heard this foolish prayer, but he granted it. Within two days, King Midas learned the secret of that smile, and begged the god to take away the gift that was a curse. He had touched everything that belonged to him, and little joy did he have of his possessions! His palace was as yellow a home as a dandelion to a bee, but not half so

sweet. Row upon row of stiff golden trees stood in his garden; they no longer knew a breeze when they heard it. When he sat down to eat, his feast turned to treasure uneatable. He learned that a king may starve, and he came to see that gold cannot replace the live, warm gifts of the Earth. Kindly Dionysus took back the charm, but from that day King Midas so hated gold that he chose to live far from luxury, among the woods and fields. Even here he was not to go free from misadventure.

Tmolus gave the word, and Pan uprose with his syrinx, and blew upon the reeds a melody so wild and yet so coaxing that the squirrels came, as if at a call, and the birds hopped down in rows. The trees swayed with a longing to dance, and the fauns looked at one another and laughed for joy. To their furry little ears, it was the sweetest music that could be.

But Tmolus bowed before Apollo, and the sun-god rose with his golden lyre in his hands. As he moved, light shook out of his radiant hair as raindrops are showered from the leaves. His trailing robes were purple, like the clouds that temper the glory of a sunset, so that one may look upon it. He touched the strings of his lyre, and all things were silent with joy. He made music, and the woods dreamed. The fauns and satyrs were quite still; and the wild creatures crouched, blinking, under a charm of light that they could not understand. To hear such a music cease was like bidding farewell to father and mother.

With one accord they fell at the feet of Apollo,

and Tmolus proclaimed the victory his. Only one voice disputed that award.

Midas refused to acknowledge Apollo lord of music—perhaps because the looks of the god dazzled his eyes unpleasantly, and put him in mind of his foolish wish years before. For him there was no music in a golden lyre!

But Apollo would not leave such dull ears unpunished. At a word from him they grew long, pointed, furry, and able to turn this way and that (like a poplar leaf),—a plain warning to musicians. Midas had the ears of an ass, for every one to see!

For a long time the poor man hid this oddity with such skill that we might never have heard of it. But one of his servants learned the secret, and suffered so much from keeping it to himself that he had to unburden his mind at last. Out into the meadows he went, hollowed a little place in the turf, whispered the strange news into it quite softly, and heaped the earth over again. Alas! a bed of reeds sprang up there before long, and whispered in turn to the grass-blades. Year after year they grew again, ever gossiping among themselves; and to this day, with every wind that sets them nodding together, they murmur, laughing, "Midas has the ears of an ass: Oh, hush, hush!"

PROMETHEUS

IN the early days of the universe, there was a great struggle for empire between Zeus and the Titans. The Titans, giant powers of heaven and earth, were for seizing whatever they wanted, with no more ado than a whirlwind. Prometheus, the wisest of all their race, long tried to persuade them that good counsel would avail more than violence; but they refused to listen. Then, seeing that such rulers would soon turn heaven and earth into chaos again, Prometheus left them to their own devices, and went over to Zeus, whom he aided so well that the Titans were utterly overthrown. Down into Tartarus they went, to live among the hidden fires of the earth; and there they spent a long term of bondage, muttering like storm, and shaking the roots of mountains. One of them was Enceladus, who lay bound under Ætna; and one, Atlas, was made to stand and bear up the weight of the sky on his giant shoulders.

Zeus was left King of gods and men. Like any young ruler, he was eager to work great changes with his new power. Among other plans, he proposed to destroy the race of men then living, and to replace it with some new order of creatures. Prometheus alone

heard this scheme with indignation. Not only did he plead for the life of man and save it, but ever after he spent his giant efforts to civilise the race, and to endow it with a wit near to that of gods.

In the Golden Age, men had lived free of care. They took no heed of daily wants, since Zeus gave them all things needful, and the earth brought forth fruitage and harvest without asking the toil of husbandmen. If mortals were light of heart, however, their minds were empty of great enterprise. They did not know how to build or plant or weave; their thoughts never flew far, and they had no wish to cross the sea.

But Prometheus loved earthly folk, and thought that they had been children long enough. He was a mighty workman, with the whole world for a workshop; and little by little he taught men knowledge that is wonderful to know, so that they grew out of their childhood, and began to take thought for themselves. Some people even say that he knew how to make men,—as we make shapes out of clay,—and set their five wits going. However that may be, he was certainly a cunning workman. He taught men first to build huts out of clay, and to thatch roofs with straw. He showed them how to make bricks and hew marble. He taught them numbers and letters, the signs of the seasons, and the coming and going of the stars. He showed them how to use for their healing the simple herbs that once had no care save to grow and be fragrant. He taught them how to till the fields; how to tame the beasts, and set them also to work; how to build ships that ride the

water, and to put wings upon them that they may go faster, like birds.

With every new gift, men desired more and more. They set out to see unknown lands, and their ambitions grew with their knowledge. They were like a race of poor gods gifted with dreams of great glory and the power to fashion marvellous things; and, though they had no endless youth to spend, the gods were troubled.

Last of all, Prometheus went up secretly to heaven after the treasure of the immortals. He lighted a reed at the flame of the sun, and brought down the holy fire which is dearest to the gods. For with the aid of fire all things are possible, all arts are perfected.

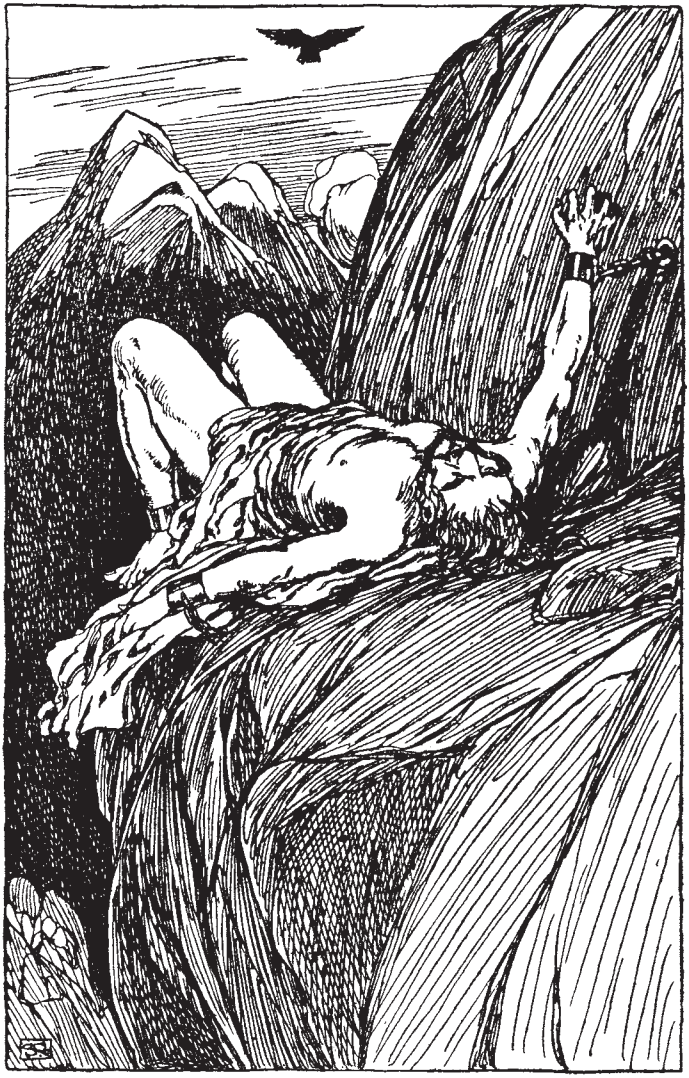
This was his greatest gift to man, but it was a theft from the immortal gods, and Zeus would endure no more. He could not take back the secret of fire; but he had Prometheus chained to a lofty crag in the Caucasus, where every day a vulture came to prey upon his body, and at night the wound would heal, so that it was ever to suffer again. It was a bitter penalty for so noble-hearted a rebel, and as time went by, and Zeus remembered his bygone services, he would have made peace once more. He only waited till Prometheus should bow his stubborn spirit, but this the son of Titans would not do. Haughty as rock beneath his daily torment, believing that he suffered for the good of mankind, he endured for years.

One secret hardened his spirit. He was sure that the empire of Zeus must fall some day, since he knew of a danger that threatened it. For there was a certain

beautiful sea-nymph, Thetis, whom Zeus desired for his wife. (This was before his marriage to Queen Juno.) Prometheus alone knew that Thetis was destined to have a son who should be far greater than his father. If she married some mortal, then, the prophecy was not so wonderful; but if she were to marry the King of gods and men, and her son should be greater than he, there could be no safety for the kingdom. This knowledge Prometheus kept securely hidden; but he ever defied Zeus, and vexed him with dark sayings about a danger that threatened his sovereignty. No torment could wring the secret from him. Year after year, lashed by the storms and scorched by the heat of the sun, he hung in chains and the vulture tore his vitals, while the young Oceanides wept at his feet, and men sorrowed over the doom of their protector.

At last that earlier enmity between the gods and the Titans came to an end. The banished rebels were set free from Tartarus, and they themselves came and besought their brother, Prometheus, to hear the terms of Zeus. For the King of gods and men had promised to pardon his enemy, if he would only reveal this one troublous secret.

In all heaven and earth there was but one thing that marred the new harmony,—this long struggle between Zeus and Prometheus; and the Titan relented. He spoke the prophecy, warned Zeus not to marry Thetis, and the two were reconciled. The hero Heracles (himself an earthly son of Zeus) slew the vulture and set Prometheus free.



PROMETHEUS

But it was still needful that a life should be given to expiate that ancient sin,—the theft of fire. It happened that Chiron, noblest of all the Centaurs (beings who are half horses and half men), was wandering the world in agony from a wound that he had received by strange mischance. For, at a certain wedding-feast among the Lapithæ of Thessaly, one of the turbulent Centaurs had attempted to steal away the bride. A fierce struggle followed, and in the general confusion, Chiron, blameless as he was, had been wounded by a poisoned arrow. Ever tormented with the hurt and never to be healed, the immortal Centaur longed for death, and begged that he might be accepted as an atonement for Prometheus. The gods heard his prayer and took away his pain and his immortality. He died like any wearied man, and Zeus set him as a shining archer among the stars.

So ended a long feud. From the day of Prometheus, men spent their lives in ceaseless enterprise, forced to take heed for food and raiment, since they knew how, and to ply their tasks of art and handicraft. They had taken unresting toil upon them, but they had a wondrous servant at their beck and call,—the bright-eyed fire that is the treasure of the gods.

THE DELUGE

EVEN with the gifts of Prometheus, men could not rest content. As years went by, they lost all the innocence of the early world; they grew more and more covetous and evil-hearted. Not satisfied with the fruits of the Earth, or with the fair work of their own hands, they delved in the ground after gold and jewels; and for the sake of treasure nations made war upon each other and hate sprang up in households. Murder and theft broke loose and left nothing sacred.

At last Zeus spoke. Calling the gods together, he said: "Ye see what the Earth has become through the baseness of men. Once they were deserving of our protection; now they even neglect to ask it. I will destroy them with my thunderbolts and make a new race."

But the gods withheld him from this impulse. "For," they said, "let not the Earth, the mother of all, take fire and perish. But seek out some means to destroy mankind and leave her unhurt."

So Zeus unloosed the waters of the world and there was a great flood.

The streams that had been pent in narrow channels, like wild steeds bound to the ploughshare, broke

away with exultation; the springs poured down from the mountains, the air was blind with rain. Valleys and uplands were covered; strange countries were joined in one great sea; and where the highest trees had towered, only a little greenery pricked through the water, as weeds show in a brook.

Men and women perished with the flocks and herds. Wild beasts from the forest floated away on the current with the poor sheep. Birds, left homeless, circled and flew far and near seeking some place of rest, and, finding none, they fell from weariness and died with human folk, that had no wings.

Then for the first time the sea-creatures—nymphs and dolphins—ventured far from their homes, up, up through the swollen waters, among places that they had never seen before,—forests whose like they had not dreamed, towns and deluged farmsteads. They went in and out of drowned palaces, and wondered at the strange ways of men. And in and out the bright fish darted, too, without a fear. Wonderful man was no more. His hearth was empty; and fire, his servant, was dead on earth.

One mountain alone stood high above this ruin. It was Parnassus, sacred to the gods; and here one man and woman had found refuge. Strangely enough, this husband and wife were of the race of the Titans,—Deucalion, a son of Prometheus, and Pyrrha, a child of Epimetheus, his brother; and these alone had lived pure and true of heart.

Warned by Prometheus of the fate in store for the

Earth, they had put off from their home in a little boat, and had made the crest of Parnassus their safe harbor.

The gods looked down on these two lonely creatures, and, beholding all their past lives clear and just, suffered them to live on. Zeus bade the rain cease and the floods withdraw.

Once more the rivers sought their wonted channels, and the sea-gods and the nymphs wandered home reluctantly with the sinking seas. The sun came out; and they hastened more eagerly to find cool depths. Little by little the forest trees rose from the shallows as if they were growing anew. At last the surface of the world lay clear to see, but sodden and deserted, the fair fields covered with ooze, the houses rank with moss, the temples cold and lightless.

Deucalion and Pyrrha saw the bright waste of water sink and grow dim and the hills emerge, and the earth show green once more. But even their thankfulness of heart could not make them merry.

"Are we to live on this great earth all alone?" they said. "Ah! if we had but the wisdom and cunning of our fathers, we might make a new race of men to bear us company. But now what remains to us? We have only each other for all our kindred."

"Take heart, dear wife," said Deucalion at length, "and let us pray to the gods in yonder temple."

They went thither hand in hand. It touched their hearts to see the sacred steps soiled with the

water-weeds,—the altar without fire; but they entered reverently, and besought the Oracle to help them.

"Go forth," answered the spirit of the place, "with your faces veiled and your robes ungirt; and cast behind you, as ye go, the bones of your mother."

Deucalion and Pyrrha heard with amazement. The strange word was terrible to them.

"We may never dare do this," whispered Pyrrha. "It would be impious to strew our mother's bones along the way."

In sadness and wonder they went out together and took thought, a little comforted by the firmness of the dry earth beneath their feet. Suddenly Deucalion pointed to the ground.

"Behold the Earth, our mother!" said he. "Surely it was this that the Oracle meant. And what should her bones be but the rocks that are a foundation for the clay, and the pebbles that strew that path?"

Uncertain, but with lighter hearts, they veiled their faces, ungirt their garments, and, gathering each an armful of the stones, flung them behind, as the Oracle had bidden.

And, as they walked, every stone that Deucalion flung became a man; and every one that Pyrrha threw sprang up a woman. And the hearts of these two were filled with joy and welcome.

Down from the holy mountain they went, all those new creatures, ready to make them homes and to go about human work. For they were strong to endure,

fresh and hardy of spirit, as men and women should be who are true children of our Mother Earth.