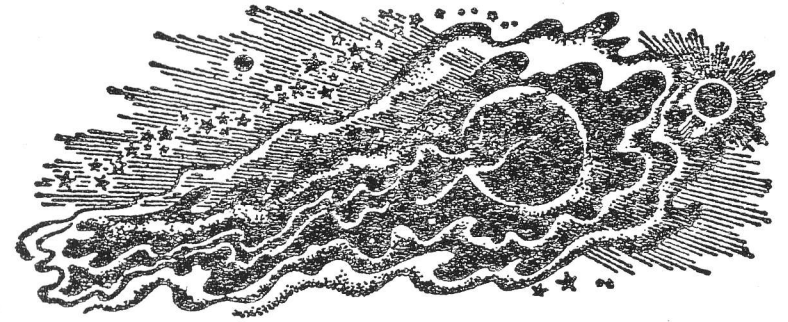


Mythology by Edith Hamilton

Part One, Chapter Three
"How the World and Mankind were Created"

Greek Mythology
pages 65-77



3 How the World and Mankind Were Created

With the exception of the story of Prometheus' punishment, told by Aeschylus in the fifth century, I have taken the material of this chapter chiefly from Hesiod, who lived at least three hundred years earlier. He is the principal authority for the myths about the beginning of everything. Both the crudity of the story of Cronus and the naïveté of the story of Pandora are characteristic of him.

First there was Chaos, the vast immeasurable abyss, Outrageous as a sea, dark, wasteful, wild.

These words are Milton's, but they express with precision what the Greeks thought lay back of the very first beginning of things. Long before the gods appeared, in the dim past, uncounted ages ago, there was only the formless confusion of Chaos brooded over by unbroken darkness. At last, but how no one ever tried to explain, two children were born to this shapeless nothingness. Night was the child of Chaos and so was Erebus, which is the unfathomable depth where death dwells. In the whole universe there was nothing else; all was black, empty, silent, endless.

And then a marvel of marvels came to pass. In some mysterious way, from this horror of blank boundless vacancy the best of all things came into being. A great playwright, the comic poet Aristophanes, describes its coming in words often quoted:—

... Black-winged Night
Into the bosom of Erebus dark and deep

Laid a wind-born egg, and as the seasons rolled
Forth sprang Love, the longed-for, shining, with
wings of gold.

From darkness and from death Love was born, and with its birth, order and beauty began to banish blind confusion. Love created Light with its companion, radiant Day.

What took place next was the creation of the earth, but this, too, no one ever tried to explain. It just happened. With the coming of love and light it seemed natural that the earth also should appear. The poet Hesiod, the first Greek who tried to explain how things began, wrote,

Earth, the beautiful, rose up,
Broad-bosomed, she that is the steadfast base
Of all things. And fair Earth first bore
The starry Heaven, equal to herself,
To cover her on all sides and to be
A home forever for the blessed gods.

In all this thought about the past no distinction had as yet been made between places and persons. Earth was the solid ground, yet vaguely a personality, too. Heaven was the blue vault on high, but it acted in some ways as a human being would. To the people who told these stories all the universe was alive with the same kind of life they knew in themselves. They were individual persons, so they personified everything which had the obvious marks of life, everything which moved and changed: earth in winter and summer; the sky with its shifting stars; the restless sea, and so on. It was only a dim personification: something vague and immense which with its motion brought about change and therefore was alive.

But when they told of the coming of love and light the early storytellers were setting the scene for the appearance of mankind, and they began to personify more precisely. They gave natural forces distinct shapes. They thought of them as the precursors of men and they defined them far more clearly as individuals than they had earth and heaven. They showed them acting in every way as human beings did; walking, for instance, and eating, as Earth and Heaven obviously did not. These two were set apart. If they were alive, it was in a way peculiar to them alone.

The first creatures who had the appearance of life were the children of Mother Earth and Father Heaven (Gaea and Ouranos). They were monsters. Just as we believe that the

earth was once inhabited by strange gigantic creatures, so did the Greeks. They did not, however, think of them as huge lizards and mammoths, but as somewhat like men and yet unhuman. They had the shattering, overwhelming strength of earthquake and hurricane and volcano. In the tales about them they do not seem really alive, but rather to belong to a world where as yet there was no life, only tremendous movements of irresistible forces lifting up the mountains and scooping out the seas. The Greeks apparently had some such feeling because in their stories, although they represent these creatures as living beings, they make them unlike any form of life known to man.

Three of them, monstrously huge and strong, had each a hundred hands and fifty heads. To three others was given the name of *Cyclops* (the Wheel-eyed), because each had only one enormous eye, as round and as big as a wheel, in the middle of the forehead. The Cyclopes, too, were gigantic, towering up like mighty mountain crags and devastating in their power. Last came the Titans. There were a number of these and they were in no way inferior to the others in size and strength, but they were not purely destructive. Several of them were even beneficent. One, indeed, after men had been created, saved them from destruction.

It was natural to think of these fearful creations as the children of Mother Earth, brought forth from her dark depths when the world was young. But it is extremely odd that they were also the children of Heaven. However, that was what the Greeks said, and they made Heaven out to be a very poor father. He hated the things with a hundred hands and fifty heads, even though they were his sons, and as each was born he imprisoned it in a secret place within the earth. The Cyclopes and the Titans he left at large; and Earth, enraged at the maltreatment of her other children, appealed to them to help her. Only one was bold enough, the Titan Cronus. He lay in wait for his father and wounded him terribly. The Giants, the fourth race of monsters, sprang up from his blood. From this same blood, too, the Erinyes (the Furies) were born. Their office was to pursue and punish sinners. They were called "those who walk in the darkness," and they were terrible of aspect, with writhing snakes for hair and eyes that wept tears of blood. The other monsters were finally driven from the earth, but not the Erinyes. As long as there was sin in the world they could not be banished.

From that time on for untold ages, Cronus, he whom as we have seen the Romans called Saturn, was lord of the uni-

verse, with his sister-queen, Rhea (Ops in Latin). Finally one of their sons, the future ruler of heaven and earth, whose name in Greek is Zeus and in Latin Jupiter, rebelled against him. He had good cause to do so, for Cronus had learned that one of his children was destined some day to dethrone him and he thought to go against fate by swallowing them as soon as they were born. But when Rhea bore Zeus, her sixth child, she succeeded in having him secretly carried off to Crete, while she gave her husband a great stone wrapped in swaddling clothes which he supposed was the baby and swallowed down accordingly. Later, when Zeus was grown, he forced his father with the help of his grandmother, the Earth, to disgorge it along with the five earlier children, and it was set up at Delphi where eons later a great traveler, Pausanias by name, reports that he saw it about 180 A.D.: "A stone of no great size which the priests of Delphi anoint every day with oil."

There followed a terrible war between Cronus, helped by his brother Titans, against Zeus with his five brothers and sisters—a war that almost wrecked the universe.

A dreadful sound troubled the boundless sea.
The whole earth uttered a great cry.
Wide heaven, shaken, groaned.
From its foundation far Olympus reeled
Beneath the onrush of the deathless gods,
And trembling seized upon black Tartarus.

The Titans were conquered, partly because Zeus released from their prison the hundred-handed monsters who fought for him with their irresistible weapons—thunder, lightning, and earthquake—and also because one of the sons of the Titan Iapetus, whose name was Prometheus and who was very wise, took sides with Zeus.

Zeus punished his conquered enemies terribly. They were

Bound in bitter chains beneath the wide-wayed earth,
As far below the earth as over earth
Is heaven, for even so far down lies Tartarus.
Nine days and nights would a bronze anvil fall
And on the tenth reach earth from heaven.
And then again falling nine days and nights,
Would come to Tartarus, the brazen-fenced.

Prometheus' brother Atlas suffered a still worse fate. He was condemned

To bear on his back forever
The cruel strength of the crushing world
And the vault of the sky.
Upon his shoulders the great pillar
That holds apart the earth and heaven,
A load not easy to be borne.

Bearing this burden he stands forever before the place that is wrapped in clouds and darkness, where Night and Day draw near and greet one another. The house within never holds both Night and Day, but always one, departing, visits the earth, and the other in the house awaits the hour for her journeying hence, one with far-seeing light for those on earth, the other holding in her hands Sleep, the brother of Death.

Even after the Titans were conquered and crushed, Zeus was not completely victorious. Earth gave birth to her last and most frightful offspring, a creature more terrible than any that had gone before. His name was Typhon.

A flaming monster with a hundred heads,
Who rose up against all the gods.
Death whistled from his fearful jaws,
His eyes flashed glaring fire.

But Zeus had now got the thunder and lightning under his own control. They had become his weapons, used by no one else. He struck Typhon down with

The bolt that never sleeps,
Thunder with breath of flame.
Into his very heart the fire burned.
His strength was turned to ashes.
And now he lies a useless thing
By Aetna, whence sometimes there burst
Rivers red-hot, consuming with fierce jaws
The level fields of Sicily,
Lovely with fruits.
And that is Typhon's anger boiling up,
His fire-breathing darts.

Still later, one more attempt was made to unseat Zeus: the Giants rebelled. But by this time the gods were very strong

and they were helped, too, by mighty Hercules, a son of Zeus. The Giants were defeated and hurled down to Tartarus; and the victory of the radiant powers of Heaven over the brutal forces of Earth was complete. From then on, Zeus and his brothers and sisters ruled, undisputed lords of all.

As yet there were no human beings; but the world, now cleared of the monsters, was ready for mankind. It was a place where people could live in some comfort and security, without having to fear the sudden appearance of a Titan or a Giant. The earth was believed to be a round disk, divided into two equal parts by the Sea, as the Greeks called it,—which we know as the Mediterranean,—and by what we call the Black Sea. (The Greeks called this first the Axine, which means the Unfriendly Sea, and then, perhaps as people became familiar with it, the Euxine, the Friendly Sea. It is sometimes suggested that they gave it this pleasant name to make it feel pleasantly disposed toward them.) Around the earth flowed the great river, Ocean, never troubled by wind or storm. On the farther bank of Ocean were mysterious people, whom few on earth ever found their way to. The Cimmerians lived there, but whether east, west, north or south, no one knew. It was a land cloud-wrapped and misty, where the light of day was never seen; upon which the shining sun never looked with his splendor, not when he climbed through the starry sky at dawn, nor when at evening he turned toward the earth from the sky. Endless night was spread over its melancholy people.

Except in this one country, all those who lived across Ocean were exceedingly fortunate. In the remotest North, so far away it was at the back of the North Wind, was a blissful land where the Hyperboreans lived. Only a few strangers, great heroes, had ever visited it. Not by ship nor yet on foot might one find the road to the marvelous meeting place of the Hyperboreans. But the Muses lived not far from them, such were their ways. For everywhere the dance of maidens swayed and the clear call of the lyre sounded and the ringing notes of flutes. With golden laurel they bound their hair and they feasted merrily. In that holy race, sickness and deathly old age had no part. Far to the south was the country of the Ethiopians, of whom we know only that the gods held them in such favor they would sit at joyful banquets with them in their halls.

On Ocean's bank, too, was the abode of the blessed dead. In that land, there was no snowfall nor much winter nor any

storm of rain; but from Ocean the West Wind sang soft and thrillingly to refresh the souls of men. Here those who kept themselves pure from all wrong came when they left the earth.

Their boon is life forever freed from toil.
No more to trouble earth or the sea waters
With their strong hands,
Laboring for the food that does not satisfy.
But with the honored of the gods they live
A life where there are no more tears.
Around those blessed isles soft sea winds breathe,
And flowers of gold are blazing on the trees,
Upon the waters, too.

By now all was ready for the appearance of mankind. Even the places the good and bad should go to after death had been arranged. It was time for men to be created. There is more than one account of how that came to pass. Some say it was delegated by the gods to Prometheus, the Titan who had sided with Zeus in the war with the Titans, and to his brother, Epimetheus. Prometheus, whose name means forethought, was very wise, wiser even than the gods, but Epimetheus, which means afterthought, was a scatterbrained person who invariably followed his first impulse and then changed his mind. So he did in this case. Before making men he gave all the best gifts to the animals, strength and swiftness and courage and shrewd cunning, fur and feathers and wings and shells and the like—until no good was left for men, no protective covering and no quality to make them a match for the beasts. Too late, as always, he was sorry and asked his brother's help. Prometheus, then, took over the task of creation and thought out a way to make mankind superior. He fashioned them in a nobler shape than the animals, upright like the gods; and then he went to heaven, to the sun, where he lit a torch and brought down fire, a protection to men far better than anything else, whether fur or feathers or strength or swiftness.

And now, though feeble and short-lived,
Mankind has flaming fire and therefrom
Learns many crafts.

According to another story, the gods themselves created men. They made first a golden race. These, although mortal, lived like gods without sorrow of heart, far from toil and

pain. The cornland of itself bore fruit abundantly. They were rich also in flocks and beloved of the gods. When the grave covered them they became pure spirits, beneficent, the guardians of mankind.

In this account of the creation the gods seemed bent on experimenting with the various metals, and, oddly enough, proceeding downward from the excellent to the good to the worse and so on. When they had tried gold they went to silver. This second race of silver was very inferior to the first. They had so little intelligence that they could not keep from injuring each other. They too passed away, but, unlike the gold race, their spirits did not live on after them. The next race was of brass. They were terrible men, immensely strong, and such lovers of war and violence that they were completely destroyed by their own hands. This, however, was all to the good, for they were followed by a splendid race of godlike heroes who fought glorious wars and went on great adventures which men have talked and sung of through all the ages since. They departed finally to the isles of the blessed, where they lived in perfect bliss forever.

The fifth race is that which is now upon the earth: the iron race. They live in evil times and their nature too has much of evil, so that they never have rest from toil and sorrow. As the generations pass, they grow worse; sons are always inferior to their fathers. A time will come when they have grown so wicked that they will worship power; might will be right to them, and reverence for the good will cease to be. At last when no man is angry any more at wrongdoing or feels shame in the presence of the miserable, Zeus will destroy them too. And yet even then something might be done, if only the common people would arise and put down rulers that oppress them.

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These two stories of the creation,—the story of the five ages, and the story of Prometheus and Epimetheus,—different as they are, agree in one point. For a long time, certainly throughout the happy Golden Age, only men were upon the earth; there were no women. Zeus created these later, in his anger at Prometheus for caring so much for men. Prometheus had not only stolen fire for men; he had also arranged that they should get the best part of any animal sacrificed and the gods the worst. He cut up a great ox and wrapped the good eatable parts in the hide, disguising them further by piling entrails on top. Beside this heap he put an-



Pandora lifted the lid and out flew plagues and sorrows for mankind

other of all the bones, dressed up with cunning and covered with shining fat, and bade Zeus choose between them. Zeus took up the white fat and was angry when he saw the bones craftily tricked out. But he had made his choice and he had to abide by it. Thereafter only fat and bones were burned to the gods upon their altars. Men kept the good meat for themselves.

But the Father of Men and of Gods was not one to put up with this sort of treatment. He swore to be revenged, on mankind first and then on mankind's friend. He made a great evil for men, a sweet and lovely thing to look upon, in the likeness of a shy maiden, and all the gods gave her gifts, silvery raiment and a brodered veil, a wonder to behold, and bright garlands of blooming flowers and a crown of gold—great beauty shone out from it. Because of what they gave her they called her *Pandora*, which means "the gift of all." When this beautiful disaster had been made, Zeus brought her out and wonder took hold of gods and men when they beheld her. From her, the first woman, comes the race of women, who are an evil to men, with a nature to do evil.

Another story about Pandora is that the source of all misfortune was not her wicked nature, but only her curiosity. The gods presented her with a box into which each had put something harmful, and forbade her ever to open it. Then they sent her to Epimetheus, who took her gladly although Prometheus had warned him never to accept anything from Zeus. He took her, and afterward when that dangerous thing, a woman, was his, he understood how good his brother's advice had been. For Pandora, like all women, was possessed of a lively curiosity. She *had* to know what was in the box. One day she lifted the lid—and out flew plagues innumerable, sorrow and mischief for mankind. In terror Pandora clapped the lid down, but too late. One good thing, however, was there—Hope. It was the only good the casket had held among the many evils, and it remains to this day mankind's sole comfort in misfortune. So mortals learned that it is not possible to get the better of Zeus or ever deceive him. The wise and compassionate Prometheus, too, found that out.

When Zeus had punished men by giving them women he turned his attention to the arch-sinner himself. The new ruler of the gods owed Prometheus much for helping him conquer the other Titans, but he forgot his debt. Zeus had his servants, Force and Violence, seize him and take him to the Caucasus, where they bound him

To a high-piercing, headlong rock
In adamantine chains that none can break,

and they told him,

Forever shall the intolerable present grind you down.
And he who will release you is not born.
Such fruit you reap for your man-loving ways.
A god yourself, you did not dread God's anger,
But gave to mortals honor not their due.
And therefore you must guard this joyless rock—
No rest, no sleep, no moment's respite.
Groans shall your speech be, lamentation your only words.

The reason for inflicting this torture was not only to punish Prometheus, but also to force him to disclose a secret very important to the lord of Olympus. Zeus knew that fate, which brings all things to pass, had decreed that a son should some day be born to him who would dethrone him and drive the gods from their home in heaven, but only Prometheus knew who would be the mother of this son. As he lay bound upon the rock in agony, Zeus sent his messenger, Hermes, to bid him disclose the secret. Prometheus told him:—

Go and persuade the sea wave not to break.
You will persuade me no more easily.

Hermes warned him that if he persisted in his stubborn silence, he should suffer still more terrible things.

An eagle red with blood
Shall come, a guest unbidden to your banquet.
All day long he will tear to rags your body,
Feasting in fury on the blackened liver.

But nothing, no threat, nor torture, could break Prometheus. His body was bound but his spirit was free. He refused to submit to cruelty and tyranny. He knew that he had served Zeus well and that he had done right to pity mortals in their helplessness. His suffering was utterly unjust, and he would not give in to brutal power no matter at what cost. He told Hermes:—

There is no force which can compel my speech.
So let Zeus hurl his blazing bolts,

And with the white wings of the snow,
With thunder and with earthquake,
Confound the reeling world.
None of all this will bend my will.

Hermes, crying out,

Why, these are ravings you may hear from madmen,

left him to suffer what he must. Generations later we know he was released, but why and how is not told clearly anywhere. There is a strange story that the Centaur, Chiron, though immortal, was willing to die for him and that he was allowed to do so. When Hermes was urging Prometheus to give in to Zeus he spoke of this, but in such a way as to make it seem an incredible sacrifice:—

Look for no ending to this agony
Until a god will freely suffer for you,
Will take on him your pain, and in your stead
Descend to where the sun is turned to darkness,
The black depths of death.

But Chiron did do this and Zeus seems to have accepted him as a substitute. We are told, too, that Hercules slew the eagle and delivered Prometheus from his bonds, and that Zeus was willing to have this done. But why Zeus changed his mind and whether Prometheus revealed the secret when he was freed, we do not know. One thing, however, is certain: in whatever way the two were reconciled, it was not Prometheus who yielded. His name has stood through all the centuries, from Greek days to our own, as that of the great rebel against injustice and the authority of power.

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There is still another account of the creation of mankind. In the story of the five ages men are descended from the iron race. In the story of Prometheus, it is uncertain whether the men he saved from destruction belonged to that race or the bronze race. Fire would have been as necessary to the one as to the other. In the third story, men are descended from a race of stone. This story begins with the Deluge.

All over the earth men grew so wicked that finally Zeus determined to destroy them. He decided

To mingle storm and tempest over boundless earth
And make an utter end of mortal man.

He sent the flood. He called upon his brother, the God of the Sea, to help him, and together, with torrents of rain from heaven and rivers loosed upon the earth, the two drowned the land.

The might of water overwhelmed dark earth,

over the summits of the highest mountains. Only towering Parnassus was not quite covered, and the bit of dry land on its very topmost peak was the means by which mankind escaped destruction. After it had rained through, nine days and nine nights, there came drifting to that spot what looked to be a great wooden chest, but safe within it were two living human beings, a man and a woman. They were Deucalion and Pyrrha—he Prometheus' son, and she his niece, the daughter of Epimetheus and Pandora. The wisest person in all the universe, Prometheus had well been able to protect his own family. He knew the flood would come, and he had bidden his son build the chest, store it with provisions, and embark in it with his wife.

Fortunately Zeus was not offended, because the two were pious, faithful worshipers of the gods. When the chest came to land and they got out, to see no sign of life anywhere, only a wild waste of waters, Zeus pitied them and drained off the flood. Slowly like the ebbing tide the sea and the rivers drew back and the earth was dry again. Pyrrha and Deucalion came down from Parnassus, the only living creatures in a dead world. They found a temple all slimy and moss-grown, but not quite in ruins, and there they gave thanks for their escape and prayed for help in their dreadful loneliness. They heard a voice. "Veil your heads and cast behind you the bones of your mother." The commands struck them with horror. Pyrrha said, "We dare not do such a thing." Deucalion was forced to agree that she was right, but he tried to think out what might lie behind the words and suddenly he saw their meaning. "Earth is the mother of all," he told his wife. "Her bones are the stones. These we may cast behind us without doing wrong." So they did, and as the stones fell they took human shape. They were called the Stone People, and they were a hard, enduring race, as was to be expected and, indeed, as they had need to be, to rescue the earth from the desolation left by the flood.