

Zeus and the Creation of Mankind

by Alice Low

WHEN it was time for man to be created, Zeus gave this important work to Prometheus and Epimetheus, the two Titans who had helped him in his battle against Cronus and the other Titans. Zeus also assigned them the task of giving men and animals gifts that would insure their survival.

Prometheus, whose name means "forethought," was an inventor and exceedingly wise. His brother, Epimetheus, whose name means "afterthought," was just the opposite, exceedingly rash.

Epimetheus decided that *he* would give the gifts to the animals, and Prometheus set about creating the first man. He wanted man to be nobler than the animals, and he sat by the ocean for a long time, thinking. Finally he took a handful of earth and added water to it, so that it would hold together when he shaped it. Then, slowly and carefully, he modeled the first man in the image of the gods. Prometheus gave him two feet on which to stand, so that he could look up to heaven and the stars, not down at the earth as the animals did.

Meanwhile Epimetheus was handing out gifts to the animals, which, until that time, had had no means of defense and looked very different from the way they do today. Epimetheus gave claws to the tigers, wings to the birds, and horns to the cattle. And then he gave some of the animals swiftness, others cunning and courage, and still others strength. He even gave many of them fur to keep them warm in winter.

Epimetheus was very pleased with himself. But then Prometheus ran up to him, shouting, "Look, brother. My man has come to life. Is he not wonderful? Let us give the greatest gift to him, for he is by far the finest creation on earth."

Epimetheus hung his head and said, "But I have already given all of the greatest gifts to the animals. I am sorry, brother. I did not stop to think."

When Prometheus heard what his brother had done, he was angry. "Now there is nothing precious to give to man. I must think of some superior and special gift to help man survive."

Prometheus was quick-witted, and soon he thought of a remarkable gift—fire! With fire man could keep warm, cook food, and have light at night. He could also forge tools to plow the earth, and weapons to defend himself against animals. But how was Prometheus to obtain fire, which belonged only to the gods?

He asked the goddess Athena to help him gain entrance to heaven, and she guided him to the blazing chariot of the sun. There Prometheus lighted a torch and then, unseen, sped back to earth to give his precious gift to mankind.

Zeus was enraged when he looked down at the earth and saw fires glowing. "Prometheus has stolen fire, which belongs to the gods alone," he roared. "And he has given our fire to man! It may make man too powerful, more powerful even than the gods. I must punish Prometheus."

Zeus acted swiftly. He had his servants Force and Violence seize Prometheus and chain him to a rock, high in the Caucasus Mountains. There, day after day, a vulture swooped down and ate his liver, which grew back daily, only to be eaten again.

But Prometheus suffered in silence, for though his body was bound, his mind and spirit were free. He did not regret his deed. He knew that not only had he fashioned a wonderful creation—man—but he also had given him a gift that would change him from a helpless creature to master of his surroundings.