

ICARUS AND DAEDALUS

Among all those mortals who grew so wise that they learned the secrets of the gods, none was more cunning than Daedalus.

He once built, for King Minos of Crete, a wonderful Labyrinth of winding ways so cunningly tangled up and twisted around that, once inside, you could never find your way out again without a magic clue. But the king's favor veered with the wind, and one day he had his master architect imprisoned in a tower. Daedalus managed to escape from his cell; but it seemed impossible to leave the island, since every ship that came or went was well guarded by order of the king.

At length, watching the sea-gulls in the air,—the only creatures that were sure of liberty,—he thought of a plan for himself and his young son Icarus, who was captive with him.

Little by little, he gathered a store of feathers great and small. He fastened these together with thread, moulded them in with wax, and so fashioned two great wings like those of a bird. When they were done, Daedalus fitted them to his own shoulders, and after one or two efforts, he found that by waving his arms he could winnow the air and cleave it, as a swimmer does the sea. He held himself aloft, wavered this way and that with the wind, and at last, like a great fledgling, he learned to fly.

Without delay, he fell to work on a pair of wings for the boy Icarus, and taught him carefully how to use them, bidding him beware of rash adventures among the stars. "Remember," said the father, "never to fly very low or very high, for the fogs about the earth would weigh you down, but the blaze of the sun will surely melt your feathers apart if you go too near."

For Icarus, these cautions went in at one ear and out by the other. Who could remember to be careful when he was to fly for the first time? Are birds careful? Not they! And not an idea remained in the boy's head but the one joy of escape.

The day came, and the fair wind that was to set them free. The father bird put on his wings, and, while the light urged them to be gone, he waited to see that all was well with Icarus, for the two could not fly hand in hand. Up they rose, the boy after his father. The hateful ground of Crete sank beneath them; and the country folk, who caught a glimpse of them when they were high above the tree-tops, took it for a vision of the gods,—Apollo, perhaps, with Cupid after him.

At first there was a terror in the joy. The wide vacancy of the air dazed them,—a glance downward made their brains reel. But when a great wind filled their wings, and Icarus felt himself sustained, like a halcyon-bird in the hollow of a wave, like a child uplifted by his mother, he forgot everything in the world but joy. He forgot Crete and the other islands that he had passed over: he saw but vaguely that winged thing in the distance before him that was his father Daedalus. He longed for one draught of flight to quench the thirst of his captivity: he stretched out his arms to the sky and made towards the highest heavens.

Alas for him! Warmer and warmer grew the air. Those arms, that had seemed to uphold him, relaxed. His wings wavered, drooped. He fluttered his young hands vainly,—he was falling,—and in that terror he remembered. The heat of the sun had melted the wax from his wings; the feathers were falling, one by one, like snowflakes; and there was none to help.

He fell like a leaf tossed down the wind, down, down, with one cry that overtook Daedalus far away. When he returned, and sought high and low for the poor boy, he saw nothing but the bird-like feathers afloat on the water, and he knew that Icarus was drowned.

The nearest island he named Icaria, in memory of the child; but he, in heavy grief, went to the temple

of Apollo in Sicily, and there hung up his wings as an offering. Never again did he attempt to fly.

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 Aetna; 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 civilize 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.

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 (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 Lapithae 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.

Source:

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