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READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

The Deluge

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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, and 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 the 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.

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