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Opening extract from
The Orchard Book of Greek Myths

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THE ORCHARD BOOK OF
GREEK MYTHS



GERALDINE McCAUGHREAN



ILLUSTRATED BY EMMA CHICHESTER CLARK



ORCHARD



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FOREWORD

WHEN THESE STORIES WERE FIRST TOLD, THREE THOUSAND YEARS AGO, they were much, much more than stories. They were, for the Ancient Greeks, a way of making sense of the world – how it began, why summer gives way to autumn and the leaves fall, why some people are lucky and some are not, what becomes of man after he dies . . .

The Ancient Greeks believed that high up, on the top of the highest mountain in the country, sat a family of gods. One was in charge of the sea, whipping up storms and frightening sailors. Another ripened the harvest in the fields. One could shoot arrows of love into the stoniest heart. Another decided the winning side in a war. In fact, every aspect of life was looked after by one of those immortal gods living on Mount Olympus.

But far from being perfect and full of wisdom, the gods in the Greek heaven were just as silly as us. They squabbled, they fell in love, they played tricks on each other and on the people in their care. They chased pretty women, helped handsome heroes, and dressed up in all kinds of disguises. They were vain, jealous, spiteful, bad-tempered – even lonely. And mixed in with stories of these gods were others – half-remembered adventures of legendary Greeks whose deeds grew in the telling into adventures worthy of any immortal god.

So why, when we no longer believe there are gods living at the top of Mount Olympus, are we still telling their stories? Because they are full of the things that fascinate anyone, in any country, at any time. There are adventures and jokes, fables and fairy stories, thrills and happy endings. In short, the Greek myths are just too good to forget.

GERALDINE McCAUGHREAN



IN THE BEGINNING AND PANDORA'S BOX



AT THE VERY BEGINNING, THE GODS RULED OVER AN EMPTY WORLD. From their home on Mount Olympus, where they lived in halls of sunlight and cloud, they looked out over oceans and islands, woodland and hill. But nothing moved in the landscape because there were no animals or birds or people.

Zeus, king of the gods, gave Prometheus and his brother Epimetheus the task of making living creatures, and he sent them down to live on Earth. Epimetheus made turtles and gave them shells; he made horses and gave them tails and manes. He made anteaters and gave them long noses and longer tongues; he made birds and gave them the gift of flight. But although Epimetheus was a wonderful craftsman, he was not nearly as clever as his brother. So Prometheus watched over his brother's work and, when all the animals and birds, insects and fishes were made, it was Prometheus who made the very last creature of all. He took soil and mixed it into mud, and out of that he moulded First Man.

"I'll make him just like us gods – two legs, two arms and upright – not crawling on all fours. All the other beasts spend their days looking at the ground, but Man will look at the stars!"

When he had finished, Prometheus was very proud of what he had made. But when it came to giving Man a gift, there was nothing left to give!

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“Give him a tail,” said Epimetheus. But all the tails had gone. “Give him a trunk,” Epimetheus suggested. But the elephant already had that. “Give him fur,” said Epimetheus, but all the fur had been used up.

Suddenly Prometheus exclaimed, “I know what to give him!” He climbed up to heaven – up as high as the fiery chariot of the sun. And from the rim of its bright wheel he stole one tiny sliver of fire. It was such a very small flame that he was able to hide it inside a stalk of grass and hurry back to the earth without any of the gods seeing what he was up to.

But the secret could not be kept for long. Next time Zeus looked down from Mount Olympus, he saw something glimmering red and yellow under a column of grey smoke.

“Prometheus, what have you done? You’ve given the secret of fire to those . . . those . . . mud-men! Bad enough that you make them look like gods, now you go sharing our belongings with them! So! You put your little mud-people before us, do you? I’ll make you sorry you ever made them! I’ll make you sorry you were ever made yourself!”

And he tied Prometheus to a cliff and sent eagles to peck at him all day long. You or I would have died. But the gods can never die. Prometheus knew that the pain would never end, that the eagles would never stop and that his chains would never break. A terrible hopelessness tore at his heart and hurt him more than the eagles could ever do.



Zeus was just as angry with Man for *accepting* the gift of fire, but you would never have thought so. He was busy making him another wonderful present.

With the help of the other gods, he shaped First Woman. Venus gave her beauty, Mercury gave her a clever tongue, Apollo taught her how to play sweet music. Finally Zeus draped

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a veil over her lovely head and named her Pandora.

Then, with a grin on his face, he sent for Epimetheus (who was not quite clever enough to suspect a trick).

"Here's a bride for you, Epimetheus – a reward for all your hard work making the animals. And here's a wedding present for you both. But whatever you do, don't open it."

The wedding present was a wooden chest, bolted and padlocked and bound with bands of iron. When he reached his home at the foot of Mount Olympus, Epimetheus set the chest down in a dark corner, covered it with a blanket, and put it out of his mind. After all, with Pandora for a bride, what more could a man possibly want?

In those days the world was a wonderful place to live. No one was sad. Nobody ever grew old or ill. And Epimetheus married Pandora; she came to live in his house, and everything she wanted he gave her. But sometimes, when she caught sight of the chest, Pandora would say, "What a strange wedding present. Why can't we open it?"

"Never mind why. Remember, you must never touch it," Epimetheus would reply sharply. "Not touch at all. Do you hear?"

"Of course I won't touch it. It's only an old chest. What do I want with an old chest? . . . What do you think is inside?"

"Never mind what's inside. Put it out of your mind."





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And Pandora did try. She really did. But one day, when Epimetheus was out, she just could not forget about the chest and somehow she found herself standing right beside it.

"No!" she told herself. "I expect it's full of cloth – or dishes – or papers. Something dull." She bustled about the house. She tried to read. Then . . .

"Let us out!"

"Who said that?"

"Do let us out, Pandora!"

Pandora looked out of the window. But in her heart of hearts she knew that the voice was coming from the chest. She pulled back the blanket with finger and thumb. The voice was louder now: "Please, please *do* let us out, Pandora!"

"I can't. I mustn't." She crouched down beside the chest.

"Oh, but you *have* to. We *want* you to. We *need* you to, Pandora!"

"But I promised!" Her fingers stroked the latch.

"It's easy. The key's in the lock," said the little voice – a purring little voice.

It was. A big golden key.

"No. No, I mustn't," she told herself.

"But you do *want* to, Pandora. And why shouldn't you? It was your wedding present too, wasn't it? . . . Oh, all right, don't let us out. Just peep inside. What harm can that do?"

Pandora's heart beat faster.

Click. The key turned.

Clack. Clack. The latches were unlatched.

BANG!

The lid flew back and Pandora was knocked over by an icy wind full of grit.



It filled the room with howling. It tore the curtains and stained them brown. And after the wind came slimy things, growling snarling things, claws and snouts, revolting things too nasty to look at, all slithering out of the chest.

"I'm Disease," said one.

"I'm Cruelty," said another.

"I'm Pain, and she's Old Age."

"I'm Disappointment and he's Hate."

"I'm Jealousy and that one there is War."

"AND I AM DEATH!" said the smallest purring voice.

The creatures leapt and scuttled and oozed out through the windows, and at once all the flowers shrivelled, and the fruit on the trees grew mouldy. The sky itself turned a filthy yellow, and the sound of crying filled the town.

Mustering all her strength, Pandora slammed down the lid of the chest. But there was one creature left inside.

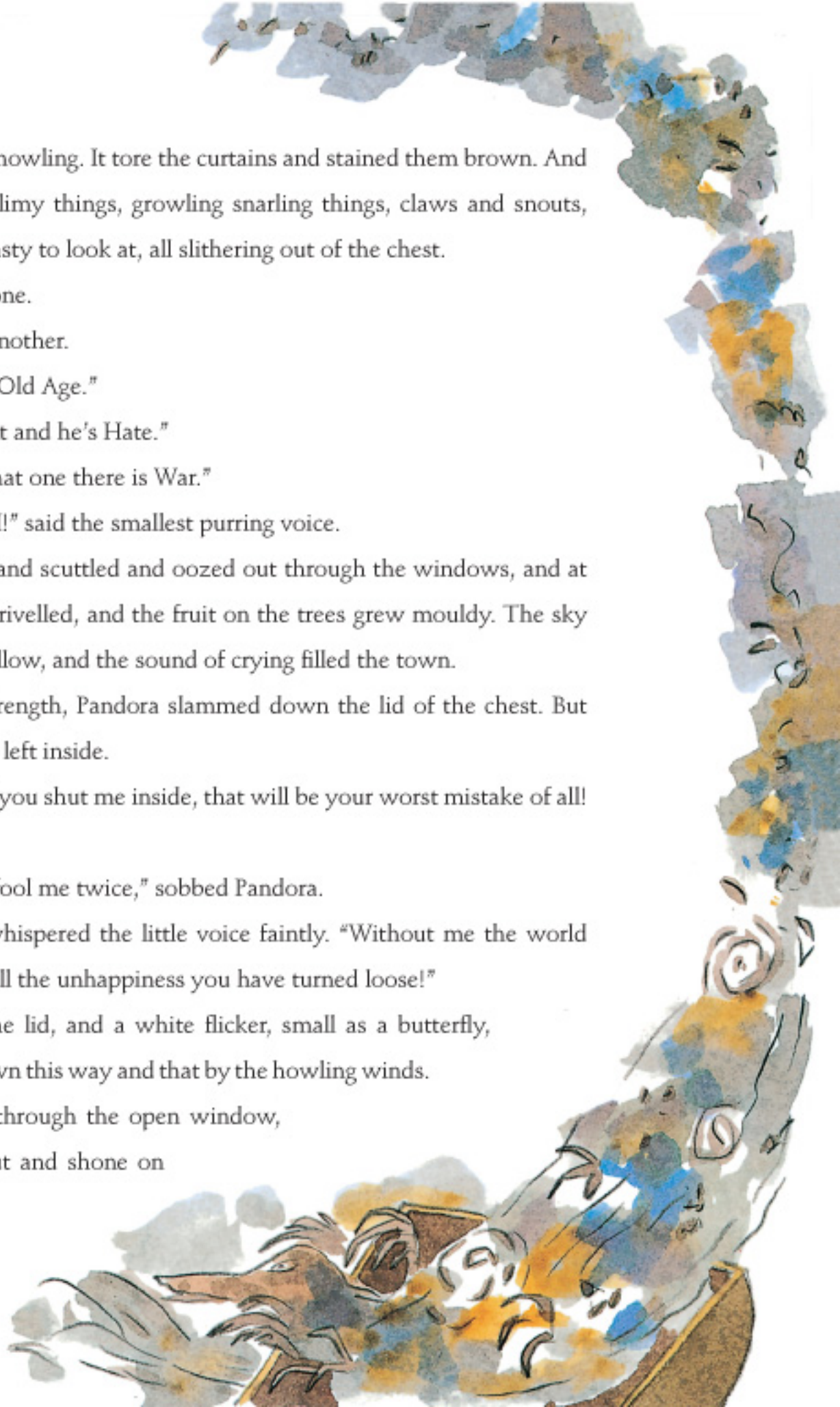
"No, no, Pandora! If you shut me inside, that will be your worst mistake of all! Let me go!"

"Oh, no! You don't fool me twice," sobbed Pandora.

"But I am Hope!" whispered the little voice faintly. "Without me the world won't be able to bear all the unhappiness you have turned loose!"

So Pandora lifted the lid, and a white flicker, small as a butterfly, flitted out and was blown this way and that by the howling winds.

And as it fluttered through the open window, a watery sun came out and shone on the wilted garden.



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Chained to his cliff, Prometheus could do nothing to help the little mud-people he had made. Though he writhed and strained, there was no breaking free. All around him he could hear the sound of crying. Now that the snarling creatures had been let loose, there would be no more easy days or peaceful nights for men and women! They would be unkind, afraid, greedy, unhappy. And one day they must all die and go to live as ghosts in the cold dark Underworld. The thought of it almost broke Prometheus' heart.

Then, out of the corner of his eye, he glimpsed a little white flicker of light and felt something, small as a butterfly, touch his bare breast. Hope came to rest over his heart.

He felt a sudden strength, a sort of courage. He was sure that his life was not over. "No matter how bad things are today, tomorrow may be better," he thought. "One day someone may come this way – take pity on me – break these chains and set me free. One day!"

The eagles pecked at the fluttering shred of light but were too slow to catch it in their beaks. Hope fluttered on its way, blowing round the world like a single tiny tongue of flame.

