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Tales of the Greek Heroes

Written by

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with an introduction by Rick Riordan

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ROGER LANCELYN GREEN

TALES OF THE GREEK HEROES



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CHAPTER ONE

The Coming of the Immortals

What forms are these coming
So white through the gloom?
What garments out-glistening
The gold-flower'd broom?

First hymn they the Father
Of all things; and then
The rest of Immortals,
The action of Men.

MATTHEW ARNOLD
Empedocles on Etna



1

If ever you are lucky enough to visit the beautiful land of Greece you will find a country haunted by more than three thousand years of history and legend.

The towering mountains slope steeply into the bluest of blue seas, and between the mountains lie valleys green and silver with the leaves of a million olive trees; golden with corn in the early summer, and then brown and white as the hot sun dries all up until the wide rivers become tinkling streams wandering in great courses of grey and yellow stones.

In winter and early spring the mountains are clothed

with snow; mist hides the higher lands, and the rivers are roaring torrents racing down into the great gulfs and bays which break up Greece into little divisions as surely as the mighty mountains do.

As you wander through Greece in the late spring you are back in those ancient days the moment you leave the towns behind. Up on the green slopes below the towering heights of the great mountains, of Parnassus or Taygetus or Cithaeron, you can sit and dream yourself back into the time when you might expect to meet an Immortal on the mountain, in the olive-groves, or in the lonely valleys.

Far away a shepherd pipes to his flock, magic notes stealing up through the warm silence: surely that is Pan, half-goat, half-human, who guarded the shepherds of old?

Among the olive leaves stand the broken columns of temples, grey, or white, or golden-yellow: every one has a tale to tell – a legend, a story, or an actual history.

Over the blue sea, with its streaks like purple wine, lie islands dotted away into the distance: and they too have each a tale to tell. It may be Delos, perhaps: no one lives on it now, but the ruins of cities and temples, harbours and theatres, cluster from the shore to the hilltop on which Apollo the Shining One and his sister Artemis the Maiden Huntress were born. Or it may be rocky, rugged Ithaca, from which Odysseus sailed to the siege of Troy, and found again after ten years' wandering over strange and dragon-haunted seas.

With all the breath-taking beauty of Greece round about them, it is hardly wonderful that the ancient Greeks felt that the mountains and the valleys, the woods and streams, the very sea itself, were peopled with Immortals. There were wood-nymphs among the trees and water-nymphs in the rivers – fairies of human size who did not die and had powers which mortals do not possess. There were sea-nymphs too – mermaids, though not all of them had tails – and strange sea-beings, who might be cruel and fierce even as the sea was fierce and cruel when the storms arose. And the sea must have a King, more powerful even than the nymphs, the Immortal called Poseidon who might come up through the waters in his chariot drawn by white horses, waving his trident – the three-pronged spear which was his sceptre, or sign of power.

On land also there were Immortal powers. Apollo, shining like the sun, who was also the lord of music and poetry; Artemis the Huntress who guarded all wild things; fierce Ares the warlord, whose terrible shout might ring across the field of battle when the spears were flying and the swords of bronze or iron clanged on the shields and helmets; Athena, Immortal Lady of wisdom; the kind Mother Goddess, Demeter, who caused the corn to grow and the young lambs to be born, with her lovely daughter Persephone who had to spend half the year in the kingdom of the dead when dark winter was spread over the earth.

Then there was Aphrodite, Immortal Lady of Beauty and Love, with Eros her son who shot the invisible arrows that made a young man or girl fall in love; there was Hephaestus, more skilled than any mortal man in working with bronze and gold and iron, whose forge was beneath the island of Lemnos, with a volcano as his furnace-chimney; there was Hermes of the winged heels, swift messenger, more cunning than any human; there was Dionysus who gave such power to the grapes that they could be brewed into wine to be a joy and a comfort to mankind; and there was the quiet Hestia, Lady of the home and guardian of the hearth – for the hearth was the heart of the home in the days when fire was difficult to make.

All these, and more, were the Immortals, and their powers were great. But they too must surely obey laws and have a ruler set over them – and this was Zeus, the King of Heaven and of Earth, who wielded the thunder-bolt, and was father of Mortals and of Immortals; and his Queen was Hera, Lady of Marriage and guardian of children. Zeus had power over all Immortals, though he seldom exercised it over his brothers, Poseidon, Lord of the Sea, and Hades, Lord of the Dead, whose kingdom of shadows was thought to be beneath the earth.

The Greeks called these Immortals the 'Gods', and worshipped them, making sacrifices to them at their

particular shrines: Zeus at Olympia, Apollo at Delphi, Athena at Athens, and so on. When they began to tell the stories about them they had very little idea of what gods should be, and quite naturally pictured them as very like themselves, but much more powerful, more beautiful, and more free. Nor did it seem wrong to them to imagine that gods and goddesses could be cruel, or mean, deceitful, selfish, jealous, or even wicked, according to our ideas, and as they themselves would have thought if ordinary men and women had done as the gods did.

Another trouble was that the Greeks in each of the little kingdoms and cities, and in the islands, made up different stories more or less without knowing what was being told over the sea, or beyond the mountains. Then, later, when minstrels travelled from place to place, and writing became more common, and people began to meet those from other parts of the Greek world, they found that many of the stories did not agree.

'Hera is the wife of Zeus,' the people of Argolis would say. 'Nonsense!' the Arcadians would answer. 'He married Maia, and they had a son called Hermes!' 'What are you talking about?' the people of Delphi or Delos would protest: 'The wife of Zeus is called Leto, and they had two children called Apollo and Artemis!'

Well, there was only one thing for it: they had to agree that Zeus must have had several wives! But Hera, as the most important of the Immortals, was obviously the real

Queen of Heaven – and, as a woman would be, she was jealous!

In the earliest days the Greeks themselves often had several wives, as the people of Egypt did, and as the Turks and the Indians did until quite recently. In Greece, however, there was usually one real wife, and the others were captives taken in war, who were treated more and more as mere slaves; well looked after, but obliged to do just as they were told.

So it was not difficult to think of Zeus or Apollo behaving in much the same way as such a King of Athens as Theseus: and of course, over in Asia, kings always had many wives. That was where Troy was, so naturally King Priam had fifty sons, and Hecuba, the Queen of Troy, was simply his chief wife.

Each of the little Greek kingdoms, or city-states, had its own Royal Family; and each Royal Family liked to trace its descent back to one of the gods. It was much the same in England a thousand years ago: Alfred the Great was said to be descended from Odin, who held just the same place among the Saxons and the Danes as Zeus did among the Greeks. Indeed, if we believe the old writers of the Middle Ages, our own Royal Family, right down to the present Queen herself, can trace its descent from Odin on the one hand, and from Antenor who was the cousin of Priam of Troy, on the other!

Certainly Hera had some reason to be jealous – and she

was very jealous indeed, or so the stories tell us – of Zeus's mortal wives: and he had one in nearly every kingdom, just as sailors were said to have a wife in every port!

When the Greeks began to tell stories of the gods and goddesses, they had not become very civilized, so the legends seemed quite normal and credible to them. But as time went on, and the Greeks thought and learned more and more, some at least of them began to wonder about many of the stories: they began to realize that there was only one real God, and that he was good – better than any man could be.

Surely, however, this God must be Zeus: therefore Zeus himself must have become better and better, and have learnt by suffering until he understood what Mercy really meant.

Then the story-tellers realized that this fitted in rather well with the oldest of the stories about the gods. For in the very early days, before Zeus came, there were other gods – terrible creatures who were hardly people at all – who were as cruel and as dreadful as a tempest or an earthquake, as a tidal wave or an erupting volcano. These, in the earliest stories of all, those made by savage ancestors ages before, were the children of the Sky and the Earth. They were Giants and Titans, terrible ogres and trolls with many hands, or snake-like tails; and the most terrible of them was called Cronos – and he was the father

of the real gods, of Zeus, Poseidon, Hades, and of the goddesses Hera, Hestia, and Demeter.

We need not try to imagine what Cronos was like. The Greeks who invented the stories about him cannot have done so. His name means Time – but it was only the Romans who began to picture him as kindly old Father Time, with his scythe and his hourglass.

The original Cronos was horribly different. He had a scythe, indeed, or rather a sickle – but he used it to cut pieces off his father Uranus, or Sky!

'You may be our ruler now!' Sky told him. 'But your children will treat you just as you have treated us and worse. They will bind you in a terrible prison, and one of them will rule instead of you!' And what Sky said, Earth said also, and Cronos knew that Earth cannot tell lies.

'We'll see about that!' roared Cronos, and he began to swallow his children as soon as they were born – just as Time swallows up the years, one after another.

First he swallowed Hestia, and then Demeter and Hera, and after them Hades and Poseidon.

This was too much for his wife, Rhea, although she was much the same kind of creature as Cronos; and as soon as her youngest son, Zeus, was born, she hid him away in a cave on the island of Crete.

'Where is the child?' demanded savage Cronos, and Rhea gave him a great stone wrapped in baby-clothes – and he swallowed that, thinking it was Zeus.

But Zeus was safe enough in Crete, guarded by the mountain-nymphs, the children of kindly Mother Earth.

When he was fully grown, Zeus sought counsel of the good Titaness Metis, or Thought, who gave him a magic herb which he put into Cronos's wine. It made Cronos very sick, and up came the swallowed children, still very much alive, and all very angry.

The stone came up too, and you may see it to this very day just where it fell, at Delphi. Beside it is another stone which Zeus placed there to mark the centre of the earth: for he let loose two eagles, one from either end of the world, and they met exactly over Delphi.

Then for ten years Zeus, with his brothers and sisters, fought against Cronos and the Titans, and at last beat them, with the aid of the Cyclopes. These were giants with only one eye each, which was in the middle of the forehead. They made thunderbolts which Zeus showered down on his foes; and they made the trident with which Poseidon stirred up the sea to drown his enemies; and they made a helmet of invisibility for Hades, who, when he wore it, could creep up unseen behind the Titans.

When the war was ended, Zeus shut up Cronos and the Titans in a fiery prison under the earth called Tartarus; and in after days the souls of the wicked were sent there to suffer with them.

Zeus and his brothers then cast lots to see which should rule the air, which the sea, and which under the earth:

and so Zeus became the King of Heaven, Poseidon ruled the waves, and Hades the realm of the dead.

Then there was peace, and Zeus caused the palaces of the gods to be built: but whether their golden home was on Mount Olympus in the north of Greece, or on some cloud-mountain high up in the heavens, the Greeks were not quite certain.

After this Zeus began to restore the bruised and battered earth, for the Titans had thrown great mountains about, and brought desolation wherever they went.

Not all the Titans had taken part in the war, for the stories say that Helios, who drove the chariot of the Sun, was a Titan, and so was Selene, the Moon, and so too was Ocean, the very sea itself. And there were Metis, or Thought, Themis, or Justice, and Mnemosyne, or Memory, the mother of the Nine Muses, who lived on Mount Helicon. The Muses, of course, attended to the Arts – History, Lyric Poetry, Comedy, Tragedy, Dancing, Love-Poetry, Hymns, Epic, and Astronomy; and they were the special companions of Apollo.

One of the Titans who were imprisoned in Tartarus was Iapetus. He had three sons, two of whom helped Zeus in many ways. The third son, the only one who *looked* like a Titan, was Atlas; who fought against Zeus, and for a punishment was made to stand on top of Mount Atlas in North Africa and hold up the sky on his shoulders.

The two helpful sons of Iapetus were Prometheus and Epimetheus; and the first of these was one of the most important figures in all Greek myth.