Atropos, the daughters of Night, who sit in a cave spinning the thread of man’s life. The first sister spins the thread, the second draws it out, and the third, the most dreaded, is she who cuts it off. Prometheus, who was admitted to their counsels, knew not only that Zeus was destined to hold the supreme power, but also that another was to come after him and seize the power in his turn. This successor was to be one of Zeus’s many sons—Zeus himself knew that much: It was Prometheus who kept the crucial secret of who would be the child’s mother—her name, and whether she was goddess, nymph, or mortal woman. Like his father and his grandfather, Zeus lived in fear of his eventual overthrow and would have given anything to prevent it or put it off. Underestimating his old friend as he had done before, and forgetting that without Prometheus’s help it would have taken him much longer to become lord of Olympus, he thought he could torture Prometheus into telling what he knew. But Prometheus with his superhuman endurance remained steadfast.

Most stories agree that last Prometheus was released from his mountaintop. The deed is ascribed to the greatest of the heroes, Zeus’s son Heracles, who sailed to his rescue in a golden cup lent to him by the Sun. Prometheus never told Zeus who was to be the mother of his destroyer, but he did warn him not to marry the sea nymph Thetis, as his heart was set on doing, because she was destined to bear a son who would be greater than his father. Zeus prudently changed his mind and bestowed the lady on a minor hero named Peleus.

Thetis, however, had all the tricky character of her native element, and Peleus did not win her easily. He seized her one day as she slept on the seashore, whereupon she awoke in a fright and changed herself into all kinds of creatures—a bird, a tree, a tigress, a raging fire—in her struggle to escape him. But the hero held her fast, and at length she returned to her proper form and agreed to become his wife. Zeus gave the couple a famous wedding which was attended by a great throng of gods and men. Their son was Achilles, the hero of the Trojan war, a greater man than his father Peleus but a mortal like other men, not a contender for the throne of heaven.

Pandora’s Box

Zeus’s revenge did not stop with the punishment of Prometheus. Though he could not take the gift of fire away from men once it had been kindled in a thousand places on the earth, he was determined they should suffer for their possession of it.

This story agrees with the story of the Golden Age: At first the life of man on earth was happier than it is now, and then miseries and discontents gradually crept in. It seems that Prometheus and Epimetheus created men only, not women. When Zeus was angry with mankind, he devised the worst punishment he could think of, and invented woman. Hephaestus, the smith of the gods, was instructed to form her from the earth and make her irresistibly beautiful. Each of the gods gave her his own special gift or skill, and from this she was called Pandora, “all-gifted.” When she was perfected with every gift and arrayed in all her loveliness, this treacherous treasure was taken down to earth by Hermes, the messenger-god who wears winged helmet and sandals to speed his flight, and given to Prometheus’s foolish brother Epimetheus. Now Prometheus had warned his brother not to accept anything from Zeus, even if it looked like a gift sent in friendship; but Epimetheus as usual acted first and thought afterward. He accepted the maiden from Hermes and led her into his house, and with her a great jar—some say a box or chest—which the gods had sent with her, telling her to keep it safely but never never think of opening it. This was too much for a lively girl like Pandora, who among her gifts was endowed with the first feminine curiosity. After restraining it for a little while, she at last gave in and lifted the lid from the jar, and from that moment began the sorrows of mankind. For each of the gods had stored in it the worst thing he was able to give, and wonderful as had been the gifts with which they endowed her, just as dreadful were the evils that rushed eagerly from the jar in a black stinking cloud like pestilent insects—sickness and suffering, hatred and jealousy and greed, and all the other cruel things that freeze the heart.

2. Hephaestus (hi-fes’tas).
and bring on old age. Pandora tried to clap the lid on the jar again, but it was too late. The happy childhood of mankind had gone forever, and with it the Golden Age when life was easy. From then on man had to wrest a hard living by his own labor from the unfriendly ground. Only one good thing came to man in his distress, and that is the spirit of Hope.

**Deucalion’s Flood**

One more story is told of the early ages of the world. As time went on mankind became less and less noble, and evil and crime walked in open daylight on the face of the earth. When Cronus wounded his father Uranus, two new kinds of creature sprang from the blood where it had dripped down on the earth. One group was the three sisters called Erinyes or Furies, terrible to look at, who track down and punish the wicked, especially those who murder their own kin. The other was the race of Giants, cruel and bloody-natured, who at last grew so arrogant that they resolved to conquer the stronghold of the gods. To do this they piled Mount Pelion on top of Mount Ossa as a base from which to reach Olympus; but when they had got that far, Zeus hurled at them one of his thunderbolts, so that the mountains came crashing down, overwhelming the Giants in their fall, and the Earth received the blood of her sons in torrents. So that they should not be forgotten, she breathed life into the blood where it had mixed with the ground, and formed a new race of men, violent and cruel in their turn. These intermarried with the race already on the earth and further corrupted their nature; and so it was that evil and crime walked abroad, while Shame and the maiden Justice departed from mankind.

The gods seeing this became greatly perturbed, and Zeus resolved to visit the earth in disguise and take a closer look. Asking here and there for hospitality as a weary traveler, he was so unkindly received that he lost patience, and hastening back to Olympus he called a council of the gods. Before all the assembled divinities of earth and sky and sea, he announced his decision to destroy mankind and replace them with a better race who would honor the gods. At first his intention was to launch a flight of thunderbolts against the earth; but remembering an old prophecy that the whole universe would eventually be consumed by fire, he laid his thunderbolts aside and chose instead to let the heavens open and destroy man with a flood. Accordingly he sent forth Notus the south wind to drive the rain out of the clouds onto the earth. At Zeus’s request Poseidon called together the rivers and sent them out to break down their banks and spread themselves as far as possible over the land; then he struck the earth with his trident, and torrents of water gushed up from under the ground. The floods rushed triumphantly toward the sea, carrying before them crops.