GREEK GODS AND HEROES

ROBERT GRAVES

I

The Palace of Olympus

The twelve most important gods and goddesses of ancient Greece, called the Olympians, belonged to the same large, quarrelsome family. Though thinking little of the smaller, old-fashioned gods over whom they ruled, they thought even less of mortals. All the Olympians lived together in an enormous palace, set well above the usual level of clouds at the top of Mount Olympus, the highest mountain in Greece. Great walls, too steep for climbing, protected the Palace. The Olympians' masons, gigantic one-eyed Cyclopes, had built them on much the same plan as royal palaces on earth.

At the southern end, just behind the Council Hall, and looking towards the famous Greek cities of Athens, Thebes, Sparta, Corinth, Argos, and Mycenae, were the private apartments of King Zeus, the Father-god, and Queen Hera, the Mother-goddess. The northern end of the Palace,

looking across the valley of Tempe towards the wild hills of Macedonia, consisted of the kitchen, banqueting hall, armoury, workshops, and servants' quarters. In between came a square court, open to the sky, with covered cloisters and private rooms on each side, belonging to the other five Olympian gods and the other five Olympian goddesses. Beyond the kitchen and servants' quarters stood cottages for smaller gods, sheds for chariots, stables for horses, kennels for hounds, and a sort of zoo where the Olympians kept their sacred animals. These included a bear, a lion, a peacock, an eagle, tigers, stags, a cow, a crane, snakes, a wild boar, white bulls, a wild cat, mice, swans, herons, an owl, a tortoise, and a tank full of fish.

In the Council Hall the Olympians met at times to discuss mortal affairs—such as which army on earth should be allowed to win a war, and whether they ought to punish some king or queen who had been behaving proudly or disgustingly. But for the most part they were too busy with their own quarrels and lawsuits to take much notice of mortal affairs.

King Zeus had an enormous throne of polished black Egyptian marble, decorated in gold. Seven steps led up to it, each of them enamelled with one of the seven colours of the rainbow. A bright blue covering above showed that the whole sky belonged to Zeus alone; and on the right arm of

his throne perched a ruby-eyed golden eagle clutching jagged strips of pure tin, which meant that Zeus could kill whatever enemies he pleased by throwing a thunderbolt of forked lightning at them. A purple ram's fleece covered the cold seat. Zeus used it for magical rainmaking in times of drought. He was a strong, brave, stupid, noisy, violent, conceited god, and always on the watch lest his family should try to get rid of him; having once himself got rid of his wicked, idle, cannibalistic father Cronus, King of the Titans and Titanesses. The Olympians could not die, but Zeus, with the help of his two elder brothers, Hades and Poseidon, had banished Cronus to a distant island in the Atlantic—perhaps the Azores, perhaps Torrey Island, off the coast of Ireland. Zeus, Hades, and Poseidon then drew lots for the three parts of Cronus's kingdom. Zeus won the sky; Poseidon, the sea; Hades, the Underworld; they shared the earth between them. One of Zeus's emblems was the eagle, another was the woodpecker.

Cronus managed at last to escape from the island in a small boat and, changing his name to Saturn, settled quietly among the Italians, and behaved very well. In fact, until Zeus discovered his escape and banished him again, Saturn's reign was known as the Golden Age. Mortals in Italy lived without work or trouble, eating only acorns, wild fruit, honey, and pig-nuts, and drinking only milk

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