

The Golden Age

by James Baldwin *from Old Greek Stories*

Jupiter and his Mighty Folk had not always dwelt amid the clouds on the mountain top. In times long past, a wonderful family called Titans had lived there and had ruled over all the world. There were twelve of them—six brothers and six sisters—and they said that their father was the Sky and their mother the Earth. They had the form and looks of men and women, but they were much larger and far more beautiful.

The name of the youngest of these Titans was Saturn; and yet he was so very old that men often called him Father Time. He was the king of the Titans, and so, of course, was the king of all the earth besides.

Men were never so happy as they were during Saturn's reign. It was the true Golden Age then. The springtime lasted all the year. The woods and meadows were always full of blossoms, and the music of singing birds was heard every day and every hour. It was summer and autumn, too, at the same time. Apples and figs and oranges always hung ripe from the trees; and there were purple grapes on the vines, and melons and berries of every kind, which the people had but to pick and eat.

Of course nobody had to do any kind of work in that happy time. There was no such thing as sickness or sorrow or old age. Men and women lived for hundreds and hundreds of years and never became gray or wrinkled or lame, but were always handsome and young. They had no need of houses, for there were no cold days nor storms nor anything to make them afraid.

Nobody was poor, for everybody had the same precious things -- the sunlight, the pure air, the wholesome water of the springs, the grass for a carpet, the blue sky for a roof, the fruits and flowers of the woods and meadows. So, of course, no one was richer than another, and there was no money, nor any locks or bolts; for everybody was everybody's friend, and no man wanted to get more of anything than his neighbors had.

When these happy people had lived long enough they fell asleep, and their bodies were seen no more. They flitted away through the air, and over the mountains, and across the sea, to a flowery land in the distant west. And some men say that, even to this day, they are wandering happily hither and thither about the earth, causing babies to smile in their cradles, easing the burdens of the toilworn and sick, and blessing mankind everywhere.

What a pity it is that this Golden Age should have come to an end! But it was Jupiter and his brothers who brought about the sad change.

It is hard to believe it, but men say that Jupiter was the son of the old Titan king, Saturn, and that he was hardly a year old when he began to plot how he might wage war against his father. As soon as he was grown up, he persuaded his brothers, Neptune and Pluto, and his sisters, Juno, Ceres, and Vesta, to join him; and they vowed that they would drive the Titans from the earth.

Then followed a long and terrible war. But Jupiter had many mighty helpers. A company of one-eyed monsters called Cyclopes were kept busy all the time, forging thunderbolts in the fire of burning mountains. Three other monsters, each with a hundred hands, were called in to throw rocks and trees against the stronghold of the Titans; and Jupiter himself hurled his sharp lightning darts so thick and fast that the woods were set on fire and the water in the rivers boiled with the heat.

Of course, good, quiet old Saturn and his brothers and sisters could not hold out always against such foes as these. At the end of ten years they had to give up and beg for peace. They were bound in chains of the hardest rock and thrown into a prison in the Lower Worlds; and the Cyclopes and the hundred-handed monsters were sent there to be their jailers and to keep guard over them forever.

Then men began to grow dissatisfied with their lot. Some wanted to be rich and own all the good things in the world. Some wanted to be kings and rule over the others. Some who were strong wanted to make slaves of those who were weak. Some broke down the fruit trees in the woods, lest others should eat of the fruit. Some, for mere sport, hunted the timid animals which had always been their friends. Some even killed these poor creatures and ate their flesh for food.

At last, instead of everybody being everybody's friend, everybody was everybody's foe.

So, in all the world, instead of peace, there was war; instead of plenty, there was starvation; instead of innocence, there was crime; and instead of happiness, there was misery.

And that was the way in which Jupiter made himself so mighty; and that was the way in which the Golden Age came to an end.

Questions

1. Briefly describe the Golden Age.
2. How long did Jupiter's war against the Titans last?
3. What is said that the happy people who had lived long enough still do today?
4. What does *foe* mean here: "everybody was everybody's foe"?

Vocabulary List

Each of the vocabulary words below are used in the reading passage. As you read the passage, pay attention to context clues that suggest the word's meaning.

1. meadow
2. wandering
3. persuade
4. burden
5. misery
6. reign
7. precious

Context Clues

Using context clues from the sentences in the passage, underline the correct meaning of the word in boldface.

1) “The woods and **meadows** were always full of blossoms...”

- a. forests b. grassy outdoor space c. desert-like outdoor space d. mountains

2) “Even to this day, they are **wandering** happily hither and thither about the earth...”

- a. moving toward a specific destination b. moving quickly c. moving slowly d. moving without direction

3) “He **persuaded** his brothers, Neptune and Pluto, and his sisters, Juno, Ceres, and Vesta, to join him;”

- a. asked b. encouraged c. forced d. captured

4) “They are wandering happily...easing the **burdens** of the toilworn and sick, and blessing mankind everywhere.”

- a. pressures or hardships b. confusions or uncertainties c. happiness or joy d. love or affection

5) “Instead of peace, there was war; instead of plenty, there was starvation; instead of innocence, there was crime; and instead of happiness, there was

misery.”

- a. shame b. sadness c. joy d. silence

6) “Men were never so happy as they were during Saturn's **reign.**”

a. rule b. orbit c. early years d. party

7) “Everybody had the same **precious** things -- the sunlight, the pure air, the wholesome water of the springs, the grass for a carpet, the blue sky for a roof,
the fruits and flowers of the woods and meadows.”

a. original or unique b. inexpensive or free c. colorful or decorative d. highly cherished or desired