

Zuni



Southwest



The Hero Twins and the Swallower of Clouds

To the American Indian people of the dry Southwest, few things are more important than rain.

The people speak of different kinds of rain: the *male rain*, which strikes hard on the Earth and washes away; the *female rain*, which falls gently and steadily, soaking the soil. Many stories are told of the rain, and songs relate to the coming of the rain. One of the corn-grinding songs of the Zuni people praises the mountains, from which the clouds come:

Clouds come rising out of my beautiful mountain.
Up in the sky, the rain makers are sitting.
One after another rain clouds are coming.
Over there the flowers are coming.
Here the young corn is growing.

The clouds are powerful and benevolent, connected to the kachinas, those helping spirits of the ancestors. So when the Zuni tell the story of the giant, Swallower of Clouds, they tell of a very terrible monster indeed.

When the world was young, they say, a giant lived in the cliffs above Cañon de Chelly. The food he lived on was human beings, and he caught the clouds and squeezed them into his mouth for drink. The people called him Swallower of Clouds, and the bravest of the men tried to destroy him. However, anyone who went out to kill the giant was never seen again. Before long, because he was swallowing all the clouds, the snow stopped falling to the north. Because he was swallowing all the clouds, the rain no longer came from the west. Because he was swallowing all the clouds, the mist above the mountains to the east disappeared. Because he was swallowing all the clouds, the springs to the south dried up. The crops dried up and died. The people were suffering and some began to die.

The Hero Twins saw what was happening.

"We will go and kill Swallower of Clouds," they said. Then they started on their way to the cliffs where he lived. But as they were following the path to the cliffs, they saw a spider web next to the trail.

"Grandmother Spider," they said, greeting the maker of webs, "Are you well?"

"I am well, Grandchildren," said the spider. "Where are you going?"

"We are going to kill the giant, Swallower of Clouds," they said.

"That is good," Grandmother Spider said, "but first let me warn you. The giant has a trick. He stretches himself out on top of the cliffs. He pretends to be sleeping and then tells whoever comes to pass under his legs, which are arched over the trail. As soon as someone passes under, though, he grabs them and throws them over the cliff."

"Grandmother," said the Hero Twins, "what should we do?"

"Let me go ahead of you," said Grandmother Spider. "Wait for a while and then follow." Then Grandmother Spider set out. She did not go far before she came to the giant. He was stretched out on top of the cliff with his legs over the trail. He was as huge as a hill and his legs were bigger than tree trunks. He pretended to sleep, for he had heard the Hero Twins were coming to fight him. Grandmother Spider, though, was so small the giant did not see her. She climbed up a rock behind him and then let herself down on his forehead with a strand of silk. While he kept his eyes closed, pretending to sleep, she wove her web across his eyes so that he could not open them up.

Now the Hero Twins, having waited for a while, started on their way. When they came close to the place where Swallower of Clouds lay, they began to sing a war song.

"Who is that?" said Swallower of Clouds as the Hero Twins came closer, "I am old and tired, too old and tired to move out of the way. Just pass under my legs."

But when the Hero Twins came close to the giant, they split up. One ran to the right and one ran to the left. The giant tried to open his eyes to see what they were doing, but he was blinded by the spider web.

"Where are you, Little Ones?" he said, striking at them and missing. "Just pass under my legs."

Swallower of Clouds struck again at the Hero Twins, but he could not see them and he missed. Then the Twins leaped up and struck him with their clubs. One struck him in the head. The other struck him in the stomach. They killed Swallower of Clouds with their clubs. Then they threw him over the same cliffs where he had thrown all the people he had killed. Now the clouds were able to pass again through the mountains. The snow returned to the north. The rain came again from the west. The mists formed once more above the mountains to the east. The springs to the south flowed once more. Again the crops of the people grew and the people were well and happy.

It is said that when the giant fell, he struck so hard that his feet drove into the Earth. He still stands there to this day with his blood dried red all along his great stiff body. Though some call that great stone by other names, the Zunis know it is the Swallower of Clouds. When they see it they are thankful for the deed of the Hero Twins and the life-giving rain.