



Wild Horses of the Sun

The two young boys had been wrestling, boxing, and shooting arrows at a tree stump all day long. The black-haired boy was a son of Zeus. The yellow-haired one, named Phaeton, was a son of Apollo. But, as it happened, neither of them had ever met his father.

When the boys grew tired of the games, they sat down on the edge of a cliff, dangling their legs over the blue sea, and began boasting and lying to each other. This was a very long time ago and most things have changed — but not boys.

“My father is Zeus,” said the black-haired boy. “He’s the chief god, lord of the mountain, king of the sky.”

"My father is lord of the sun," said Phaeton.

"My father is called the thunderer," replied the other. "When he is angry, the sky grows black and the sun hides. His spear is a lightning bolt. That's what he kills people with. He can hurl it a thousand miles and never miss."

"Without my father there would be no day," said Phaeton. "It would always be night. Each morning he drives the golden chariot of the sun across the sky, bringing the daytime. Then he dives into the ocean, boards a golden ferryboat, and sails back to his eastern palace. Then it is nighttime."

"When I visit my father," said the black-haired boy, "he gives me presents. Do you know what he gave me last time? A thunderbolt—a little one, but just like his. And he taught me how to throw it. I killed three vultures, scared a fishing boat, and started a forest fire. Next time I go to see him, I'll throw it at more things. Do you visit your father?"

Phaeton never had, but he wasn't going to admit it. "Certainly," he said. "All the time. And he teaches me things too."

"What kinds of things? Has he taught you to drive the sun chariot?"

"Oh, yes. He taught me how to handle the horses of the sun, how to make them go, and how

to make them stop. They're huge wild horses and they breathe fire."

"I bet you made all that up," said the black-haired boy. "I don't believe there is a sun chariot. There's the sun, look at it. It's not a chariot."

"What you see is just one of the wheels," said Phaeton. "There's another wheel on the other side, and the body of the chariot is slung between them. That is where my father stands and drives his horses."

"All right, so it's a chariot," said the black-haired boy. "But I still don't believe your father would let you drive it. In fact, I don't think Apollo would know you if he saw you. Maybe he isn't even your father. People like to say they're descended from the gods—but how many of us are there, really?"

"I'll prove it to you," cried Phaeton, scrambling to his feet. "I'll go to the palace of the sun right now and hold my father to his promise."

"What promise?"

"He said that the next time I visited him he would let me drive the sun chariot all by myself, because I was getting so good at it. I'll show you. I'll drive the sun right across the sky."

"That's easy for you to say," said the other. "But how will I know if you're driving the sun? I won't be able to see you from down here."

"You'll know me," said Phaeton. "I'll come down close and drive in circles over the village. Just watch the sky tomorrow."

Phaeton went off then. He traveled day and night, not stopping for food or rest, guiding himself by the stars, heading always east. He walked on and on and on until, finally, he had lost his way completely.

While Phaeton was making his journey, Apollo was sitting in his great throne room. It was the quiet hour before dawn, when night had dropped its last coolness upon the earth. At this hour, Apollo always sat on his throne. He wore a purple cloak embroidered with golden stars, and a crown made of silver and pearls. Suddenly a bird flew in the window and perched on his shoulder. This bird had sky-blue feathers, a golden beak, golden claws, and golden eyes. It was one of Apollo's sun hawks, whose job it was to fly here and there gathering information. Sometimes they were called spy birds.

Now the bird spoke to Apollo. "I have seen your son," she said.

"Which son?"

"Phaeton. He was coming to see you. But he lost his way and lies exhausted at the edge of a wood. The wolves will surely kill him."

"Then we'd better get to him before the wolves do," said Apollo. "Round up some of your flock and bear Phaeton here in a manner that befits the son of a god."

The sun hawk then seized the softly glowing rug at the foot of the throne and flew away with it. She called to three other hawks to each hold a corner of the rug. They flew over a river and a mountain and a wood and finally came to the field where Phaeton lay. They flew down among the howling wolves, among the burning eyes set in a circle about the sleeping boy. They rolled Phaeton onto the rug, and then each took a corner of the rug in her beak again, and flew away.

Phaeton felt himself being lifted into the air. The cold wind woke him up, and he sat up straight. The people below saw a boy, with folded arms, sitting on a carpet that was rushing through the cold bright moonlight far above their heads. And that is why we hear tales of flying carpets even to this day.

Phaeton remembered lying down on the grass to sleep, and now, he knew, he was dreaming. And when he saw the great cloud castle on top of the mountain, all made of snow and rosy in the early light, he was surer than ever that he was dreaming. He saw sentries in flashing golden armor, carrying golden spears. In the courtyard he

saw enormous woolly dogs with fleece like cloud-drift guarding the gate.

Over the wall flew the carpet, over the courtyard, through the huge doors. And it wasn't until the sun hawks gently let down the carpet in front of the throne that Phaeton began to think that this dream might be very real. He raised his eyes shyly and saw a tall figure sitting on the throne—taller than anyone Phaeton had ever seen, with golden hair and stormy blue eyes and a strong laughing face. Phaeton fell on his knees.

"Father!" he cried. "I am Phaeton, your son!"

"Rise, Phaeton. Let me look at you."

The boy stood up. His legs were trembling.

"Well, boy, what brings you here?" said Apollo. "Don't you know that you should wait for an invitation before visiting a god — even your father?"

"I had no choice, Father. I was jeered at by a son of Zeus. He was bragging about his father, so I did a little bragging and lying too. I would have thrown him over the cliff, and myself after him, if I hadn't decided to make my lies come true."

"Well, you're my son, all right," said Apollo. "Proud, rash, taking every dare, refusing no adventure. Speak up, then. What is it you wish? I will do anything in my power to help you."

"Anything, Father?"

"Anything in my power. I swear by the River Styx, an oath sacred to the gods."

"I wish to drive the sun across the sky. All by myself. From dawn till night."

Apollo's roar of anger shattered every crystal goblet in the great castle.

"Impossible!" he cried. "No one can drive those horses but me. They are tall as mountains and wild as tigers. They are stronger than the tides, stronger than the winds. It is all that I can do to hold them in check. How could your puny grip control them? They will race away with the chariot, scorching the poor earth to a cinder."

"You promised, Father. You swore by the River Styx!"

"You must not hold me to my oath. If you do, it will be a death sentence for earth... a poor charred cinder floating in space... just what the Fates have said would happen. But I did not know it would be so soon, so soon."

"It is almost dawn, Father. Can we harness the horses?"

"Please, Phaeton. Ask me anything else and I will grant it. But do not ask me this."

"I have asked, Sire, and you have given your oath. The horses grow restless."

"I will do as you ask," said Apollo. "Come."

He led Phaeton to the stable of the sun where

the giant horses were being harnessed to the golden chariot. Huge they were. Red and gold and fire-maned, with golden hooves and hot yellow eyes. When they neighed, the sound rolled across the sky. Their breath was flame.

The sun chariot was an open shell of gold. Each wheel was the flat round disc of the sun, as it is seen in the sky. Phaeton looked very small as he stood in the chariot. The reins were thick as bridge cables, much too large for him to hold, so Apollo tied them around his son's waist. Then Apollo stood at the head of the team, gentling the horses, speaking softly to them.

"Good horses, go easy today. Go at a slow trot, my swift ones, and do not leave the path. You have a new driver today."

The great horses dropped their heads to Apollo's shoulder, and whinnied softly, for they loved him. Phaeton saw the flame of their breath play about his father's head. He saw Apollo's face shining out of the flame. But Apollo was not harmed, for he was a god and could not be hurt by physical things.

Then Apollo came to Phaeton and said, "Listen to me, my son. You are about to start a terrible journey, and by the obedience you owe me as a son, by the faith you owe a god, by my oath that cannot be broken, and your pride that will not

bend, I ask you this. Keep to the middle way. If you go too high the earth will freeze. If you go too low it will burn. Keep to the middle way. Give the horses their heads; they know the path — the blue middle course of day. Don't drive them too high or too low, and above all do not stop. If you do, you will fire the air about you, charring the earth and blistering the sky. Will you heed me?"

"I will, I will!" cried Phaeton. "Stand away, Sire. The dawn grows old and day must begin! Go, horses, go!"

And Apollo stood watching as the horses of the sun, pulling behind them the golden chariot, climbed the eastern slope of the sky.

At first things went well for Phaeton. The great steeds trotted easily across the high blue meadow of the sky. Phaeton thought to himself, "I can't understand why my father made such a fuss. This is easy. There is nothing to it."

When he looked over the edge of the chariot, he could see tiny houses far below, specks of trees, and a dark blue puddle that was the sea. The coach was trundling across the sky. The great sun wheels were turning, casting light, warming and brightening the earth, chasing away the shadows of night.

"Just imagine," Phaeton thought, "people are

looking up at the sky, praising the sun, hoping the weather stays fair. How many are watching me?" Then he thought, "But I'm too small for them to see, too far away. And the light of the sun is too bright. For all they know, I could be Apollo making his usual run. How will they know it's me, *me*, *me*, if I can't go closer? Especially Zeus' son — how will *he* know? I'll go home tomorrow, and tell him what I did, and he'll laugh at me and say I'm lying, just as he did before. No! I must show him that I am driving the chariot of the sun. Apollo said not to drive too close to earth, but how will he know? I won't stay long. I'll just dip down toward our village and circle it a few times until everyone recognizes me."

When they were over the village where Phaeton lived, he jerked on the reins, pulling the horses' heads down. They whinnied angrily, and tossed their heads, but he jerked the reins again.

"Down!" he cried. "Down! Down!"

The horses plunged down through the bright air, their golden hooves twinkling, their golden manes flying. They pulled the great glittering chariot over the village in a long flaming swoop. Phaeton was horrified to see the houses burst into fire. The trees burned like torches. And people rushed about screaming, their loose clothing on fire.

Phaeton could not see because of the smoke. Had he burned his own home — and his mother and sisters? He threw himself backward in the chariot, pulling at the reins with all his might, shouting "Up! Up!"

The horses, made furious by the smoke, reared on their hind legs. They leaped upward, galloping through the smoke, pulling the chariot up, up.

Swiftly the earth fell away beneath them until the village was just a smudge of smoke. Again Phaeton saw the pencil-stroke of mountain, the inkblot of sea. "Whoa!" he cried. "Turn now! Forward on your path!"

But he could no longer handle the horses. They were galloping, not trotting. They had taken the bit in their teeth. They did not turn toward the path of the day — across the meadow of the sky — but galloped up and up. And the people on earth saw the sun shooting away until it was no larger than a star.

Then darkness came, and cold. The earth froze hard. Rivers froze, and the oceans too. Boats were caught fast in the ice, and it snowed in the jungle. Marble buildings cracked. It was impossible for anyone to speak, for their breath froze on their lips. In villages and cities, in fields and in woods, people died of the cold. Their bodies were piled up like firewood.

Still Phaeton could not hold the horses, and still they galloped upward dragging light and warmth away from the earth. Finally, they had gone so high that the air was too thin for them to breathe. Phaeton saw the flame of their breath, which had been red and yellow, burn blue in the thin air. He himself was gasping for breath, and he felt the marrow of his bones freezing.

The horses, maddened by the feeble hand on the reins, swung around and dived toward earth again. As they galloped downward, all the ice melted, causing great floods. Whole villages were swept away by a solid wall of water. Trees were uprooted and forests were torn away. Still the horses swooped lower and lower. Now the water began to boil — great billowing clouds of steam arose.

Phaeton could not see; the steam was too thick. He untied the reins from his waist, for they would have cut him in two. He had no control over the horses at all. They galloped upward again, out of the steam, taking at last the middle way in the sky. But they raced wildly, using all their tremendous strength. They circled the earth in a matter of minutes, smashing across the sky from horizon to horizon. They made the day flash on and off, like someone playing with a lantern. And the people who were left alive were bewildered by

day and night following each other so swiftly.

Up high on Olympus, the gods in their cool garden heard the clamor of grief from below. Zeus looked down on earth and saw the runaway horses of the sun and the hurtling chariot. He saw the dead and the dying, the burning forests, the floods, the strange frost. Then he looked again at the chariot and saw that it was not Apollo who was driving, but someone he did not know. He stood up, drew back his arm, and hurled a thunderbolt.

It stabbed through the air, striking Phaeton and killing him instantly. The boy was knocked out of the chariot, and his body, flaming, fell like a star. The horses of the sun, knowing themselves driverless now, galloped homeward toward their stables at the eastern edge of the sky.

Since that day, no one has been allowed to drive the chariot of the sun except the sun god himself. But there are still traces on earth of Phaeton's reckless ride. The ends of the earth are still covered with ice caps. Mountains still rumble, trying to spit out the fire that was started in their bellies by the diving sun. And where the horses of the sun swung too close to earth, are the great scorched places called deserts.