

# The Story of Phaethon

The palace of the sun god, Helios, was a radiant place. It shone with gold and gleamed with ivory and sparkled with jewels. Everything inside of it flashed and glowed and glittered. It was always high noon there. Shadowy twilight never dimmed the brightness. Darkness and night were unknown. Few among mortals could have long endured that unchanging brilliancy of light, but few had ever found their way there.

Nevertheless, one day a youth, mortal on his mother's side, dared to approach. Often he had to pause and clear his dazzled eyes, but the mission which had brought him was so urgent that his purpose held fast and he pressed on, up to the palace, through the golden doors, and into the throne room where surrounded by a blinding, blazing splendor the sun god sat. There the lad was forced to stop. He could bear no more for the god's brilliant hat was so bright that he could not take another step.

Nothing escapes the eyes of the Sun. He saw the boy instantly and he looked at him very kindly. "What brought 'you here?" he asked.

"I have come," the other answered boldly, "to find out if you are my father or not. My mother said you were, but the boys at school laugh when I tell them I am your son. They will not believe me. I told my mother, and she said I had better go and ask you."

Smiling gently, Helios took off his crown of burning light so that the boy could look at him without distress. "Come here, Phaethon," he said. "You are my son. Clymene told you the truth. I expect you will not doubt my word too? But I will give you evidence of my word. You may ask anything you want of me and you shall have it. I call the Styx to be witness to my promise, the river of the oath of the gods."

No doubt Phaethon had often watched the Sun riding through the heavens and had told himself with a feeling, half awe, half excitement, "It is my father up there." And then he would wonder what it would be like to be in that chariot, guiding the steeds along that dizzy course, giving light to the world. Now at his father's words this wild dream had become possible. Instantly he cried, "I choose to take your place, Father. That is the only thing I want. Just for a day, a single day, let me have your chariot to drive."

Helios realized his own mistake. Why had he taken that fatal oath and bound himself to give in to anything that happened to enter a boy's rash young head? "Dear son," he said, "this is the only thing I would have refused you. I know I cannot refuse. I have sworn by the Styx. I must give in if you persist. But I do not believe you will. Listen while I tell you why this is not what you want. You are Clymene's son as well as mine. You are mortal and no mortal could drive my chariot. Indeed, no god except myself can do that. The ruler of the gods cannot. Consider the road. It rises up from the sea so steeply that the horses can hardly climb it, fresh though they are in the early morning. In mid heaven it is so high that even I do not like to look down. Worst of all is the descent, it is so steep that the sea gods waiting to receive me wonder how I can avoid falling from my chariot into their arms. To guide the horses, too, is a continual struggle. Their fiery spirits grow hotter as they climb and they scarcely suffer my control. What would they do with you?"

"Are you imagining that there are all sorts of wonders up there, cities of the gods full of beautiful things? There is nothing of the kind. You will have to pass beasts, fierce beasts of prey, and they are all that you will see. The Bull, the Lion, the Scorpion, the great Crab, each will try to harm you. Be persuaded. Look around you. See all the goods the rich world holds. Choose from them your heart's desire and it shall be yours. If what you want is to be proved my son, my fears for you are proof enough that I am your father."

But none of all this wise talk meant anything to the boy. A glorious future opened up before him. He saw himself proudly standing in that wondrous car, his hands triumphantly guiding those steeds which Jove himself could not master. He did not give a thought to the dangers his father detailed. He felt not a quiver of fear, not a doubt of his own powers. At last the Sun gave up trying to dissuade him. It was hopeless, as he saw. Besides, there was no time. The moment for starting was at hand. Already the gates of the east glowed purple, and Dawn had opened her courts full of rosy light. The stars were leaving the sky; even the lingering morning star was dim.

There was need for haste, but all was ready. The Seasons, the gatekeepers of Olympus, stood waiting to fling the doors wide. The horses had been bridled and yoked to the chariot. Proudly and joyously Phaethon mounted it and they were off. He had made his choice. "Whatever came of it he could not change now. Not that he wanted to in that first exhilarating rush through the air, so swift that the East Wind was outstripped and left far behind. The horses' flying feet went through the low banked clouds near the ocean as through a thin sea mist and then up and up in the clear air, climbing the height of heaven. For a few ecstatic moments Phaethon felt himself the lord of the sky. But suddenly there was a change. The chariot was swinging wildly to and fro; the pace was faster; he had lost control. Not he, but the horses were directing the course. That light weight in the car, those feeble hands clutching the reins, had told them their own driver was not there. They were the masters then. No one else could command them. They left the road and rushed where they chose, up, down, to the right, to the left. They nearly wrecked the chariot against the Scorpion; they brought up short and almost ran into the Crab. By this time the poor charioteer was half fainting with terror and he let the reigns fall.

That was the signal for still more mad and reckless running. The horses soared up to the very top of the sky and then, plunging headlong down, they set the world on fire. The highest mountains were the first to burn, Ida and Helicon, where the Muses dwell, Parnassus, and heaven-piercing Olympus. Down their slopes the flame ran to the low-lying valleys and the dark forest lands, until all things everywhere were ablaze. The springs turned into steam; the rivers shrank. It is said that it was then the Nile fled and hid his head, which still is hidden. And as the sun chariot passed close by the earth, its heat charred the people of Africa forever darkening their skin.

In the car Phaethon, hardly keeping his place there, was wrapped in thick smoke and heat as if from a fiery furnace. He wanted nothing except to have this torment and terror ended. He would have welcomed death. Mother Earth, too, could bear no more. She uttered a great cry which reached up to the gods. Looking down from Olympus they saw that they must act quickly if the world was to be saved. Zeus seized his thunderbolt and hurled it at the rash, and silly driver. It struck him dead, shattered the chariot, and made the maddened horses rush down into the sea.

Phaethon all on fire fell from the car through the air to the earth. The mysterious river Eridanus, which no mortal eyes have ever seen, received him and put out the flames and cooled the body. The naiads in pity for him, so bold and so young to die, buried him and carved upon the tomb:

*Here Phaethon lies who drove the sun god's car.  
Greatly he failed, but he had greatly dared.*

His sisters, the Heliades, the daughters of Helios, the Sun, came to his grave to mourn for him.