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Opening extract from

Flight of the Fire Thief

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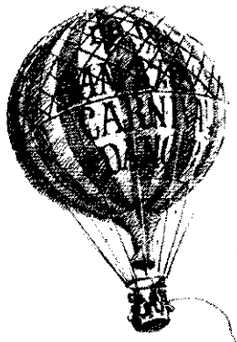
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Flight of the Fire Thief



TERRY DEARY

KINGFISHER



ONE

GREECE – ABOUT 4,000 YEARS AGO

I wasn't there myself but I met someone who knows exactly what went on in those days. You will have to trust me when I tell you every word of this story is true... probably. All right, a LOT of it is true. Other bits I may have made up to fill in the gaps so it all makes sense. Yes, you'll see that I tell a lot of lies. But liars are the only people you CAN trust in this world.

Zeus sat on a cloud.

You can do that sort of thing when you're a Greek god. But YOU shouldn't try it. You would need a very long ladder to get up to the clouds and as soon as you stepped off you would probably fall clean through the cloud. This can be very messy – especially if someone is walking underneath you.

Only special people like me and my pa could sail up and over the clouds. How could I do that? Wait and see.

Where was I? Oh, yes, Zeus on his cloud. He wore wings and was the most beautiful thing you've ever seen – so beautiful ordinary people (like you and me) couldn't bear to look at him.[1]

Next to Zeus sat his wife Hera and she was not so beautiful because she had a scowl on her face. Her nose crinkled like a caterpillar's back and her lips were as thin as an ant's leg.

"You promised me a holiday," she snapped.

"This is a holiday, dearest," Zeus smiled. "A sparkling blue sea and miles of sandy beach."

"The beach is covered with human corpses!" she screeched.

"There's a war on, my lovely," her husband shrugged. "We can sit and watch it just as those humans watch their little plays in the theatre."

Hera pouted. "I wouldn't know. You never take me to the theatre."

1 "Aha!" you cry. "Last week I was starving and a cheese sandwich was the most beautiful thing I've ever seen! More beautiful than a Greek god." All I can say is this: if you keep crying out like that I'll never get on with my story. So stop arguing and listen.

"This is real life – much more fun," he argued. "We can even join in."

"You are too mean to take me to the theatre. You're so mean you'd steal a dead fly from a blind spider."

"Only if you were feeling hungry," he muttered.

Hera didn't hear. Just as well.

"The town stinks," she said. "Humans stink. I don't know why you don't just send down a thunderbolt and burn it to the ground. A good fire would clean it up."

"Ah, fire," Zeus nodded. "They don't need my fire. The humans can make fire for themselves."

Hera turned to him with a face as sharp as a shrew. "And who *gave* them the power of fire?"

"I know," Zeus sighed.

Hera slapped and plumped up the cloud to make herself more comfortable. "I asked you a question, Zeus. Who gave them fire?"

"My cousin Prometheus," Zeus said and closed his eyes. He was wishing he hadn't mentioned it.

"Yes, your cousin Theus! He stole fire from the gods and gave it to those creeping little, fighting little, *stinking* little humans."

"Don't get on at me. I have punished him..." Zeus began.

"Oh, you *punished* him. You had him chained to a rock. And every day the Avenger came down in the shape of an eagle and ripped out his liver. What sort of punishment is that?" Hera snapped and thundery sparks crackled in the cloud.

"Every night the liver grew back so he had to suffer the agony every day for two hundred years..." Zeus argued and grew angry as the cloud grew dark.

"But what happened? Eh? What happened?" Hera sneered. "You let him escape!"

"I didn't exactly *let* him..."

"All right. You let Heracles *rescue* him. Same difference. And where is Theus now? Hiding. He's travelled through time and space and he could be anywhere. The poor little Avenger has worn out its wings seeking for him!"

"*Poor*? *Little*? It's a blooming great bird with the sharpest beak this side of Mount Olympus. Its talons can rip a rhino's skin..."

"Don't argue with me, Zeus. You always lose," Hera said with a shake of her head. "Theus gave fire to the humans and he got away with it. I only hope the Avenger finds him one day. It's still out there searching!"

Zeus propped himself up on an elbow. "I *did* make Theus a promise, my dear. I gave him a challenge. I said that if he could find one true human hero I'd forgive him!"

Hera snorted... then her nose twitched as the stink from the city slipped into her nostrils. "He'll fail. He'll never find a human hero. The Avenger will find Theus first."

"The Avenger will be a bit busy, my dear," Zeus said and peered over the edge of the cloud to the city by the sea below. "There will be a lot of warriors here who need to be taken down to Hades and the Underworld. I'm tired of this Troy."

"You're like a baby," Hera laughed bitterly. "You soon get tired of a toy."

"I said *Troy*, not *toy*," Zeus sniffed. "The Greeks have been trying to take the city for *ten years* now – *that's* not getting tired *quickly*! Ten *years*!"

Hera rolled over and lay on her stomach next to her husband. The gods gazed down.

Inside the city the ragged Trojans trudged the streets, thin and weary from the endless war. With secret tunnels, and hidden doors, enough food had slipped into the city to keep them going for ten years.

Bottomless wells of sweet water would last them forever. But the spirit of the people was as threadbare as their clothes. They longed for freedom. Freedom from a city that had become a prison – freedom from the fear that their prison walls would fall and let in sharp, slicing, stabbing death.

There were no rats in the city of Troy. They'd all been eaten long ago.

Outside the city a thousand Greek ships rested and rotted on the hot shore. Tattered tents stood, faded and patched, flapping in the warm wind that blew over the soft sands. Slouching soldiers sat on rocks, polished their worn weapons for the three-thousand and six-hundredth time and longed for home.

"So, what are you going to do about it, husband?" Hera asked.

"Put an end to it," Zeus said.

Hera nodded. "And would you like me to tell you who is going to win?"

Zeus's shoulders dropped. "You are going to anyway."

Hera gave a small smile like a cat that's cornered a bowl of milk. "The Greeks are going to enter Troy. They are going to kill the pathetic Prince Paris

and his hideous Helen."

"I thought you might say that," Zeus muttered. Hera held a big grudge against Paris and Helen. Ten years ago the goddesses held a beauty contest and Prince Paris was the judge. Hera offered the judge power over all of Asia. Athena, goddess of war, offered him victory wherever he fought. Aphrodite, goddess of love, offered him the gift of the most beautiful woman in the world. And everyone knew that was Helen of Sparta.

Paris chose Aphrodite as the winner and won the hand of Helen. Hera chose to sulk.

"I hate Helen! Hate her, *hate her, HATE HER*!" she cried.

"You don't like her then?" Zeus smiled.

"I can't TELL you how much I hate her," she screamed and the cloud shivered and shook out a storm of raindrops onto the dusty heads of the Trojans underneath. "She is *not* the most beautiful woman in the world – her hair is too straight, her nose is too short and as for her ears... well, what can I say about a woman with ears like that?"

"And she's married to Menelaus, of course," Zeus added, stoking up his wife's rage.

"Ooooh! Yes! A faithless woman. Married to poor King Menelaus and still she ran off with Paris of Troy." Hera pulled back her lips in a savage sneer. "Her Troy boy!" she said and looked pleased with her little joke. "And just look at the trouble she's caused," she added with a sweep of her hand at the scene below. "A thousand ships and fifty thousand soldiers sent to take her back to Greece. Me? I'd leave her to rot in Troy. From the smell of the place it is rotting already."

Zeus sniffed and nodded.

Hera turned quickly to Zeus. "So? Whose side are you going to join? If you let *Troy* win then I will make you wish you lived in Hades with all the tortures the humans suffer there after death."

Zeus held up his mighty hands. "Oh, don't worry, wife. Troy will *lose* because the old curse says Paris will bring about the destruction of the city. We can't go against the old curses," Zeus said.

"The old curse also says the Greek hero Achilles will die at Troy." She jabbed a finger at the Greek tents on the plains of Troy. "He's still alive."[2]

2 Hera and Zeus could SEE Achilles wandering round the camp because they had incredible eyesight. If you could fly, like me, you would see people on the ground like ants. But the gods had eyes like telescopes (binoculars?). Amazing but true.

Zeus rubbed his eyes tiredly. "Yes, there's so much to do. I don't know where to start."

"Send for the Avenger," Hera told him. "It'll be handy to have it around when Achilles and Paris are killed. The Avenger can take them straight to Hades."

Zeus nodded, placed his fingers to his lips and gave a whistle that shook the walls of Troy. It also made Hera's ears ring.

"Must you?"

"I have to send for Hermes, our messenger."

"Right. *Then* you need to arrange for Achilles to die... and *then* you have to make sure the Greeks get into Troy and kill Paris."

Zeus nodded slowly. "Yes, that's what I need to do," he agreed.

Hera puffed out her cheeks and blew with pride – that caused a sandstorm on the beach and tattered the tents again. "Phoo! I honestly don't know *what* you'd do without me, Zeus," she said.

"I'd like a chance to find out," he muttered under his breath.

"What was that?"

"I said, dear, I think you've blown some fires out!"

"Fires out? What are you on about Zeus?"

"Nothing, dear," the great god said then turned as he heard a fluttering of wings. A young man landed on the cloud, wearing a satchel at his waist. He held a wooden rod with snakes twined around it. There were wings on his sandals and wings on his helmet and a spoilt look on his face. "Ah, here's Hermes," Zeus said.

"What do you want this time, my foul father?" Hermes sighed.

Zeus took a deep breath and kept his temper. It wasn't easy.

"I want you to find the Avenger and bring it to Troy."

Hermes threw down his rod and the shocked snakes hissed their surprise. "Ooh! He wants me to find the Avenger. Just like that? I say, just like that?"

Zeus punched the cloud in anger... but punching clouds doesn't do you much good. He began to speak quickly in a low, angry voice. "Hermes, you are the messenger of the gods and it is your job to take messages. So will you please stop complaining about it and get on with what you are paid to do?"

Hermes blinked. "Paid? When have you ever *paid* me. I am rushed off my winged feet, morning to night and night to morning. And not *only* do I not get paid

but I don't even get any *thanks*. All I get is shouted at!" He pulled at the hem of his tunic and blew his nose on it.

"You've made Hermes cry now," Hera groaned. "Say you're sorry, Zeus."

"You're sorry, Zeus," the god growled then turned back to the snivelling messenger. "Hermes. *Please* do this small thing for me and I will be so very grateful I will never shout at you again."

"Promise?" Hermes sniffed.

"Promise," Zeus said. "The Avenger is travelling through time looking for cousin Theus. Theus and the Avenger were last seen in a place called Eden city in a time they call 1858."

"Time? I have to travel through time!" Hermes screeched.

"We'll be *so-o* very grateful," Hera told him. "We'll have a special party for you when you get back."

Hermes's face lit up. "A party? With fairy cakes?"

"Yes, dear," Hera said. She picked up the hissing rod and handed it to him. "Now, off you go, through time. Tell the Avenger we're at Troy."

As Hermes's wings began to beat like a humming bee Zeus waved, "Have a nice *time*!"

Hera rubbed her hands. "That's that problem solved. Now... *how* are you going to kill Achilles?" she asked.

Zeus smirked. "I have a rather neat little plan, my dear. A brilliant plan, a work of a genius, even if I do say so myself."

"Hmm!" Hera said. "We'll see."

Somewhere, just beyond the farthest star, the Greek demi-god Prometheus drifted on white wings.

It was lonely out there. He headed for home.