Phaeton and the Chariot of the Sun

By James Parks & Sally Corbett

In the ancient Ethiopia there lived a lad by name of Phaeton. His mother was an Ethiopian princess but Phaeton's father was the sun-god himself. One day Phaeton was playing with a friend he boasted that his father was Apollo, the sun-god. Phaeton's friend teased him by saying "Your father really isn't the Sun. Your mother just mad that up and you are foolish to believe such a story."

Phaeton went home confused and ashamed. He told his mother of the taunt and begged her to give him some proof that he really was the child of the Sun. His mother spoke softly but proudly, "My son, your father truly is the radiant Sun. but if you have doubts, then why not go to his palace and speak to him yourself? Go to the land of the far East and there in the high mountains you will find the glittering palace of your father, the Sun."

Phaeton was overjoyed at his mother's answer and mad himself ready for the long journey. He traveled in the lad of Persia and crossed the strange land of India. Finally he came to the gigantic mountains at the eastern end of the world. The boy climbed into the mountains and found a palace that he immediately knew must belong to Apollo. Although it was early in the morning and still dark, this tall palace of gold and bronze glowed like fiery coals. The entrance of the palace was through two huge gleaning silver doors. On these doors were carved intricate details of the gods and creatures of the world.

The boy walked through the doorway and came upon a dazzling sight. There stood a golden-haired young woman dressed in a bright green robe. She was covered with flowers that had been braided into her long yellow hair. Nearby was a dark haired woman dressed in emerald green, holding an armful of golden grain. Beside her was a man with auburn hair and dressed in a robe of orange, yellow, and red leaves. His hands were stained purple and he held a cluster of freshly harvested grapes. Last of all was an old man whose bluish white hair and beard looked like icicles. These were the four seasons and they stood in a half circle around the brilliant throne. It hurt Phaeton's eyes to gaze at this throne, for it was made of shimmering jewels and upon his throne, sat Apollo. The god's eyes blazed like fire and the crown on his head seemed to be made of pure radiant light.

Apollo spoke, "Why have you come here to the far ends of the earth, Phaeton?"

The boy replied, "Sir, I have come to find proof that you, great Apollo, are truly my father."

The Sun-god smiled and answered, "Your mother has spoken the truth. I am your father. As proof of this I will grant your one wish of your heart's desire."

No sooner had Apollo spoken when Phaeton blurted out, "I wish to drive your chariot, father."
The god of light quickly regretted giving his child a wish and pleaded, No, my child, choose something else. You ask for too dangerous of a gift. Even Zeus, the mighty god of thunder, will not drive the chariot of the Sun. The horses breathe out flames and the chariot itself is fiery hot. So powerful are the steeds that I, a full-grown god, can barely restrain them. What chance would a mortal boy have? The journey is steep and at times I have grown dizzy looking down from the great heights at the Earth below. The path through the stars leads near great, dangerous creatures. You would have top pass Taurus, the giant bull and by the fierce lion. If you succeed in getting past them you would face the Scorpion with its huge deadly stinger and the pinching claws of the great Crab. I beg you to pick some other gift. Think of all the riches in the world or pearls from the boundless sea. Ask for any of these and I shall gladly give it to you.

But Phaeton refused to change his mind and insisted on driving the chariot of the Sun. Apollo sighed and led the boy to the magnificent chariot. It was made of blazing gold, with golden wheels that had spokes of silver. The chariot was embedded with rubies and other precious gems. But unlike Earthly jewels, these gave off a dazzling glow. The horses were called and then brought forth by the Hours, goddesses who waited upon the sun.

At the time Aurora, goddess of the Dawn, opened the curtains of her splendid palace and the skies were filled with a rosy glow.

The sun-god spoke, "It is almost time for the chariot to begin its daily course. But there is still time for me to take your place. Heed my plea and let me go forth, my son."

But the lad still wanted to have his heart's desire. So his father anointed Phaeton's head with a magic oil and then placed the crown of light on the boy's head. Then he gave instruction, " Do not use the whip on the horses, my child, for the stallions have enough energy to speed forward on their own, Use the reins to restrain them since your must take the middle path through the heavens, That will be the safest for you and give the Earth the proper light and heat.

The glow from Aurora's palace had now turned golden and the morning star had set. Thus the day beckoned the horses of the Sun who were pawing the ground and letting out blasts of the fiery flames with each snort. wit a bolt, they charged forth. But their load was much lighter than what they were used to, so these steeds ran faster and wilder than usual.

poor Phaeton was terror-stricken and could barely hold the reins much less restrain the powerful horses. Higher and higher the stallions went and thus the rays of the Sun chariot grew distant from the Earth. The sky turned black as night, with the Sun only as a speck of light far above. The horses of the sun ran towards the pole star and in doing so came near the giant serpent. This serpent for ages had been sluggish and harmless since it was in the icy-cold regions of the pole star. But now the great heat from the sun chariot awoke the horrible snake and it hissed, exhaling poisonous breath.

As Pheaton looked down from this great height, his head grew dizzy and he felt sick in his stomach. With the furious horses of fire running madly before him, Phaeton wished he had never set foot in his father's chariot. Now the chariot was speeding head-long toward the gigantic
Scorpion. The huge monster raised its tail in an attempt to slash out with its stinger. Then the fear-struck boy completely dropped the reins and the unchecked horses galloped downwards.

Closer and closer the fiery chariot came to the Earth. Rivers began to dry up, cities and forest caught fire because of the great heat. Neptune raised his head from the sea and shook his trident angrily at the chariot of the sun. But the air was so hot that Neptune soon dove back into the seep blue sea. As the chariot crossed the continent of Africa it was so close that it set on fire the great Sahara forest. That wooded region of northern Africa was reduced to ashes and burning sands.

All creatures began to cry to Zeus for help because of the unbearable heat. The gods, the humans, the animals, and the Earth herself were afraid that everything would soon be burned up. Zeus listened to their plea and then he climbed on high. He was armed with a thunderbolt and he threw the deadly shaft at the chariot of the sun. The magic oil Apollo had put on Phaeton protected the boy from the heat and the flames of the chariot, but it could not save him from a thunderbolt of Zeus. There was a deafening crash as the lightning shattered the chariot and Phaeton fell wrapped in sizzling flames. The horses ran home while pieces of the wrecked chariot fell hissing into the sea.

Quickly the master craftsman of the gods, Vulcan, made a new golden chariot for the sun. But Apollo was so sad over his son's death that he refused to drive it. So the next day passed without sunlight. Zeus and the other gods then came and pleaded with Apollo, begging him not to leave the world in darkness. The sun god spoke bitterly of his son's death at the hand of Zeus.

But the chief of gods replied, "You have lost a son, true. But how many men on Earth were burned up? I had no choice but to blast the fiery chariot, otherwise every creature on Earth would have been destroyed."

With these words and those of the other gods, Apollo was finally persuaded to return to his rightful duty. He bridled his fiery horses to the Sun chariot the next day and the Sun once again traveled its correct course. It still gives proper light and heat to this very day.