

Icarus

by James Baldwin *from Old Greek Stories*

In this version of a Greek myth, Daedalus is a great builder employed by King Minos. He became famous for designing and building the Labyrinth of Crete which held the Minotaur, a great monster.

Daedalus was guilty of a deed which angered the king very greatly; and had not Minos wished him to build other buildings for him, he would have put him to death and no doubt have served him right.

"Hitherto," said the king, "I have honored you for your skill and rewarded you for your labor. But now you shall be my slave and shall serve me without hire and without any word of praise."

Then he gave orders to the guards at the city gates that they should not let Daedalus pass out at any time, and he set soldiers to watch the ships that were in port so that he could not escape by sea. But although the wonderful artisan was thus held as a prisoner, he did not build any more buildings for King Minos; he spent his time in planning how he might regain his freedom.

"All my inventions," he said to his son Icarus, "have hitherto been made to please other people; now I will invent something to please myself."

So, all through the day he pretended to be planning some great work for the king, but every night he locked himself up in his chamber and wrought secretly by candle light. By and by he had made for himself a pair of strong wings, and for Icarus another pair of smaller ones; and then, one midnight, when everybody was asleep, the two went out to see if they could fly. They fastened the wings to their shoulders with wax, and then sprang up into the air. They could not fly very far at first, but they did so well that they felt sure of doing much better in time.

The next night Daedalus made some changes in the wings. He put on an extra strap or two; he took out a feather from one wing, and put a new feather into another; and then he and Icarus went out in the moonlight to try them again. They did finely this time. They flew up to the top of the king's palace, and then they sailed away over the walls of the city and alighted on the top of a hill. But they were not ready to undertake a long journey yet; and so, just before daybreak, they flew back home. Every fair night after that they practiced with their wings, and at the end of a month they felt as safe in the air as on the ground, and could skim over the hilltops like birds.

Early one morning; before King Minos had risen from his bed, they fastened on their wings, sprang into the air, and flew out of the city. Once fairly away from the island, they turned towards the west, for Daedalus had heard of an island named Sicily, which lay hundreds of miles away, and he had made up his mind to seek a new home there.

All went well for a time, and the two bold flyers sped swiftly over the sea, skimming along only a little above the waves, and helped on their way by the brisk east wind. Towards noon the sun shone very warm, and

Daedalus called out to the boy who was a little behind and told him to keep his wings cool and not fly too high. But the boy was proud of his skill in flying, and as he looked up at the sun he thought how nice it would be to soar like it high above the clouds in the blue depths of the sky.

"At any rate," said he to himself, "I will go up a little higher. Perhaps I can see the horses which draw the sun car, and perhaps I shall catch sight of their driver, the mighty sun master himself."

So he flew up higher and higher, but his father who was in front did not see him. Pretty soon, however, the heat of the sun began to melt the wax with which the boy's wings were fastened. He felt himself sinking through the air; the wings had become loosened from his shoulders. He screamed to his father, but it was too late. Daedalus turned just in time to see Icarus fall headlong into the waves. The water was very deep there, and the skill of the wonderful artisan could not save his child. He could only look with sorrowing eyes at the unpitying sea, and fly on alone to distant Sicily. There, men say, he lived for many years, but he never did any great work, nor built anything half so marvelous as the Labyrinth of Crete. And the sea in which poor Icarus was drowned was called forever afterward by his name, the Icarian Sea.

Questions

1. What does *wrought* mean here: "but every night he locked himself up in his chamber and wrought secretly by candle light"?
2. Why did Daedalus make wings for himself and his son?
3. Where were Daedalus and Icarus flying to?
- 4 . Why did Icarus fall into the sea?