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Helen of Troy

Read by Natasha. Duration 13.5 Minutes.

A long time ago, in the age of heroes, when gods and goddesses still took a close interest in human affairs, a great wedding was planned between a famous warrior called Peleus and a lovely sea-nymph whose name was Thetis. All the kings and queens of the day were invited to the wedding feast, as well as all the immortal ones who live on Mount Olympus – all, that is, except for one. For no invitation was sent to Eris, the goddess of strife. Now strife is when people argue, and it was generally thought a bad idea to invite strife to a wedding party, in case she caused the happy couple to quarrel. Eris was extremely annoyed about being overlooked, and as revenge, she decided to play a spiteful trick on the wedding guests. Just as the celebrations were at their height, she appeared in the banqueting hall dressed as a serving girl. A silver plate was in her hands, and on it an apple on which she had written the words, “For the Fairest of them all”. This she placed on the table where the three loveliest goddesses were sitting. Their names were Hera, Athena and Aphrodite. Immediately that they

saw the words on the apple, a quarrel broke out between the three goddesses. Hera said to the others, “I am the queen of all the immortal gods, and it follows that I must be far fairer than either of you two. So therefore the apple belongs to me”

“My dear Hera,” said Athena, “You might be queen, but I am the goddess of wisdom, and therefore I know absolutely everything that is worth knowing. You must believe me when I say that you are quite mistaken. Wisdom is beauty, and beauty is wisdom. They are one and the same thing. So therefore the apple belongs to me.

“Darlings,” purred Aphrodite. “It’s quite obvious that the apple belongs to me. I possess the power of love because, to put it quite simply, I am so much more beautiful than anybody else.”

The goddesses carried on arguing continuously for years after the wedding was over – for time means nothing to the immortal ones. The king of all the gods, mighty, thundering Zeus, became quite fed up with listening to their bickering. When, at length, he was at his wit’s end, he suggested to the three lovely goddesses that they resolve the question once and for all with a beauty contest. And that is exactly what they did.

The three goddesses agreed on one thing: that the most handsome and fashionably dressed mortal who

walked on the face of the earth was Paris, Prince of Troy. They decided to surprise him. One day when Paris was out hunting on the foothills of Mount Ida, he discovered three lovely goddesses standing beneath a tree. In all his life he had never seen such dazzling beauty. For a moment, he stood amazed. Then Hermes, who was the winged messenger of the gods, flew up to Paris and spoke to him as follows.

“ Hail Paris! Prince of Magnificent Troy. Lord Zeus, the King of all the gods, sends you his greetings. He wishes to bestow upon you a great honor. He asks that you give this apple to the fairest goddess of them all.”

Paris, who normally had a keen eye for beauty, found it hard to choose. Each goddess was so beautiful. Hera had the most lovely milky white skin ever seen. Athena had the most dazzling, dancing eyes. And Aphrodite had the most charming smile. Which should he pick?

At length, seeing that he was at a loss, Hera said to him:

“Prince Paris. Give the apple to me, and I will give you the gift of great power.”

Athene, not to be outdone by this offer, said, “Prince Paris, Give the apple to me, and I will give you the gift of great wisdom.”

But Aphrodite laughed and said. “Paris my dear, Don’t you listen to those two silly goddesses. What fun would you have with power or wisdom? Give the apple to me, and I will give you a gift that is much more to your liking. I shall give you the love of the most beautiful woman on earth.”

Now Paris no longer found the choice so hard to make. He had long been in love with the most beautiful woman on earth, whose name was Helen. It so happened, that Helen was married to King Menelaus, and Paris had thought up until that moment, that the possibility of his winning her love, was beyond all hope. But, now, he understood that his chances could be greatly improved.

And so Paris gave the apple to Aphrodite. She giggled with delight, but the other two goddesses were furious and flew directly back to Mount Olympus in a great huff, where they complained long and bitterly to Zeus about the unfairness of the competition. Zeus had a dark feeling that there was trouble in store for human kind.

Paris set sail for the land of Sparta where Menelaus was king and lived with his beautiful queen Helen. Menelaus welcomed the famous prince into his palace, and while the two sat talking about the affairs of the world, Queen Helen came down from her perfumed room, looking as lovely as a goddess. The maid-servants brought her a seat and covered it

with a soft lamb's wool rug, and she sat before her silver work box. But before she began to embroider, she glanced over at the visiting prince, and questioned her husband:

“Shall I guess the name of this prince who has come to visit us? Let us see if I am right or wrong? I have heard tell of a prince from far-off Troy who is famous the world over for his looks and fashionable style. Is it he, Paris, Prince of Troy who has come to stay with us?”

“My dear wife,” said Menelaus, “As always, you are quite right. It is indeed, Paris, Prince of Troy who is paying us the honour of his visit.”

And Paris acknowledged queen Helen with a nod of his head.

At dinner that night, Helen added a special potion into the wine ,so that anyone who drank it would forget all his cares, and be happy for the rest of the evening. They feasted and made merry, and while Menelaus was busy laughing and joking with one of his generals, Paris spoke softly to Helen.

“Most beautiful queen,” he said, “I beg you, meet me tonight in the orchard beneath the palace walls, and we shall sail away together in my ship, and head directly for Troy, the most magnificent city in all the world.”

And because the goddess of love, Aphrodite, had wished it so, Helen could not help herself, and agreed to his suggestion.

When King Menelaus awoke in the morning, and he discovered that his guest and his wife had run away together, he flew into a rage, kicking the furniture and punching the walls of his chamber. He swore before all the Gods that that his revenge would be truly terrible. And so he went to see his elder brother, King Agamemnon of Argos, and spoke to him as follows:

“My dear brother. The honor of our family has been besmirched by this foreign peacock, this perfumed playboy, this prancing prince of Troy. Let us gather together all the kings of Greece and combine our armies into the greatest force that has ever been seen since the dawn of history. And let us sail to the far off city of Troy, and teach Prince Paris some manners”

But Agamemnon was wise, and he knew that it is always a terrible mistake to rush headlong into conflict. He suggested first that they send an ambassador to Troy to request the return of Queen Helen, whom he was sure had been abducted against her will. He knew that Paris’s father, King Priam of Troy was a good man, and we was sure that he would order his son to release her. And so they sent a message to Troy in the name of peace and

reconciliation, but Helen did not wish to go home, and Prince Paris refused to return the lovely Queen to her husband, saying that they had been brought together by the Goddess of Love, Aphrodite herself.

And so that meant War. King Agamemnon, the brother of the wronged Menelaus, summoned all the Kings of Greece and prepared a navy of a thousand ships, the greatest military force to ever set sail. And that is the story of how Great war between the Greeks and the Trojans was started by Prince Paris and Queen Helen.