The golden apple was marked, "For the Fairest," and every goddess believed the apple was rightfully hers.

THE JUDGMENT OF PARIS

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MORE THAN a thousand years before Christ, near the eastern end of the Mediterranean was a great city, very rich and powerful, second to none on Earth. The name of it was Troy, and even today no city is more famous. The cause of this long-lasting fame was a war told of in one of the world's greatest poems, the Iliad, and the cause of the war went back to a dispute between three jealous goddesses.

The evil goddess of discord, Eris, was naturally not popular in Olympus, and when the gods gave a banquet, they were apt to have her out. Resenting this deeply, she determined to make trouble—and she succeeded very well indeed. At an important marriage, that of King Pelus and the sea nymph Thetis, to which she alone of all the divinities was not invited, she threw into the banquet hall a golden apple marked "For the Fairest." Of course, all the goddesses wanted it, but in the end the choice was narrowed down to three: Aphrodite, Hera, and Pallas. They asked Zeus to judge between them, but very wisely he refused to have anything to do with the matter. He told them to go to Mount Ida, near Troy, where the young prince, Paris, also called Alexander, was keeping his father's sheep. He was an excellent judge of beauty, Zeus told them. Paris, though a royal prince, was doing shepherd's work because his father, Priam, the king of Troy, had been warned that this prince would someday be the ruin of his country, and so had sent him away. At the moment Paris was living with a lovely nymph named Oeneis.

His amazement can be imagined when there appeared before him the wondrous forms of the three great goddesses. He was not asked, however, to gaze at the radiant divinities and choose which of them seemed to him the fairest, but only to consider the bristles each offered, and choose which seemed to him best worth taking. Nevertheless, the choice was not easy. What man can care for most was set before him. Hera promised to make him lord of Europe and Asia; Athena, that he would lead the Trojans to victory against the Greeks and lay Greece in ruins; Aphrodite, that the fairest woman in all the world should be his. Paris, a weakling and something of a coward, too, as later events showed, chose the last. He gave Aphrodite the golden apple.

1 Pallas: This title is thought to refer to Athena's having slain a giant named Pallas.


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That was the judgment of Paris, famed everywhere as the real reason why the Trojan War was fought.

The fairest woman in the world was Helen, the daughter of Zeus and Leda and the sister of Castor and Pollux.1 Such was the report of her beauty that not a young prince in Greece but wanted to marry her. When her suitors assembled in her home to make a formal proposal for her hand, they were so many and from such powerful families that her reputed father, King Tyndareus, her mother’s husband, was afraid to select one among them, fearing that the others would unite against him. He therefore exacted first a solemn oath from all that they would champion the cause of Helen’s husband, whoever he might be, if any wrong was done to him through his marriage. It was, after all, to each man’s advantage to take the oath, since each was hoping he would be the person chosen, so they all bound themselves to punish to the uttermost anyone who carried or tried to carry Helen away. Then Tyndareus chose Menelaus,2 the brother of Agamemnon,3 and made him King of Sparta as well.

So matters stood when Paris gave the golden apple to Aphrodite. The goddess of love and beauty knew very well where the most beautiful woman on earth was to be found. She led the young shepherd, with never a thought of Oenone left behind, straight to Sparta, where Menelaus and Helen received him graciously as their guest. The ties between guest and host were strong. Each was bound to help and never harm the other. But Paris broke that sacred bond. Menelaus, trusting completely to it, left Paris in his home and went off to Crete. Then, Paris, who coming

Entered a friend’s kind dwelling,
Shamed the hand there that gave him food,
Stealing away a woman.

Menelaus got back to find Helen gone,
and he called upon all Greece to help him.

The chieftains responded, as they were bound to do. They came eager for the great enterprise, to cross the sea and lay mighty Troy in ashes. Two, however, of the first rank were missing: Odysseus,4 king of the island of Ithaca, and Achilles, the son of Peleus and the sea nymph Thetis. Odysseus, who was one of the shrewdest and most sensible men in Greece, did not want to leave his house and family to embark on a romantic adventure overseas for the sake of a faithless woman. He pretended, therefore, that he had gone mad, and when a messenger from the Greek army arrived, the king was plowing a field and sowing it with salt instead of seed. But the messenger was shrewd too. He seized Odysseus’ little son and put him directly in the way of the plow. Instantly the king turned the plow aside, thus proving that he had all his wits about him. However reluctant, he had to join the army.

Achilles was kept back by his mother.

The sea nymph knew that if he went to Troy, he was fated to die there. She sent him to the court of Lycomedes, the king who had treacherously killed Theseus,5 and made him wear women’s clothes and hide among the maidens. Odysseus was

1 Castor and Pollux: twins worshipped as gods.
2 Menelaus: μενελαος.
3 Agamemnon: αγαμημονος.
4 Odysseus: οδυσσευς.
5 Theseus: legendary hero famous for killing the man-eating Minotaur, a bull-slay monster.
dispatched by the chieftains to find him out. Disguised as a peddler, he went to the court where the lad was said to be, with gay ornaments in his pack such as women love, and also some fine weapons. While the girls flocked around the trinkets, Achilles fingered the swords and daggers. Odysseus knew him then, and he had no trouble at all in making him disregard what his mother had said and go to the Greek camp with him.

So the great fleet made ready. A thousand ships carried the Greek host. They met at Aulis, a place of strong winds and dangerous tides, impossible to sail from as long as the north wind blew. And it kept on blowing, day after day.

It broke men's hearts,
Spare not ship nor cable.
The time dragged,
Doubting itself in passing.

The army was desperate. At last the soothsayer, Calchas, declared that the gods had spoken to him: Artemis was angry. One of her beloved wild creatures, a hare, had been slain by the Greeks, together with her young, and the only way to calm the wind and ensure a safe voyage to Troy was to appease her by sacrificing to her a royal maiden, Iphigenia, the eldest daughter of the commander in chief, Agamemnon. This was terrible to all, but to her father hardly bearable:

"If I must stay
The joy of my house, my daughter"

A father's hands
Stained with dark streams flowing
From blood of a girl
Slaughtered before the altar.

Nevertheless, he yielded. His reputation with the army was at stake, and his ambition to conquer Troy and exalt Greece.

He dived the deed,
Slaying his child to help a war.

He sent home for her, writing his wife that he had arranged a great marriage for her, to Achilles, who had already shown himself the best and greatest of all the chieftains. But when she came to her wedding, she was carried to the altar to be killed.

And all her prayers, cries of "Father, Father,
Her maiden life—
These they held as nothing.
The savage warriors, battle-mad.

She died, and the north wind ceased to blow and the Greek ships sailed out over a quiet sea, but the evil price they had paid was bound someday to bring evil down upon them.

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FOR DISCUSSION

1. How did Paris decide which goddess was to receive the golden apple? Why was he given the task of judging the three?

2. Why did all the chieftains of Greece respond so angrily when Paris carried Helen away to Troy?

3. The Greeks set out for Troy to bring Helen back. At first it seemed that they were extremely chivalrous, to go to war for the sake of a woman. Yet soon it is obvious that it was war and pride, not human life that interested them. What incident suggests their real motives?