Daedalus (DEED-uh-lus or DED-uh-lus)

Builder of the Labyrinth for King Minos of Crete. Daedalus was a renowned craftsman and inventor. Before his time statues had their arms fixed stiffly to their sides - Daedalus gave them naturalistic poses and, some say, the power of movement. Daedalus claimed to have invented the saw, but credit instead went to his nephew, whom Daedalus consequently murdered in a fit of professional jealousy. Because of this homicide, he fled his native Athens for the court of King Minos on the island of Crete.

King Minos was a notorious ingrate. One day when his son Glaucus turned up missing, he sought the aid of the seer Polyeidus, hoping to draw on the latter's powers of prophesy and inner vision. Polyeidus was the same seer who had advised Bellerophon on how to tame the flying horse Pegasus. True to his reputation, he soon found the boy, smothered headfirst in a huge jar of honey. In thanks for this service, Minos locked Polyeidus in a room with the dead boy, telling him that he'd be released when he had returned Glaucus to life.

Polyeidus, a visionary not a magician, hadn't an inkling what to do, until a snake crawled into the room and died. Its mate slithered away and returned moments later with an herb, which it rubbed on the body. The first snake was brought back to life. Polyeidus applied the same herb to Glaucus and it did the trick. Reasonably expecting thanks and a reward, he was stunned to be told by Minos that he couldn't even go home again until he had taught Glaucus all his mystical powers. Resignedly, this he did. And in the end, with his freedom in sight, he bid King Minos farewell. "One last thing," he said to young Glaucus. "Spit into my mouth."

With what distaste may be imagined, Glaucus did as instructed - and instantly forgot everything he had been taught.

King Minos behaved with similar ingratitude to Daedalus. In return for numerous services, notably the building of the Labyrinth, Minos had Daedalus imprisoned, either in his workroom or the Labyrinth itself. Admittedly, Daedalus had been compelled to design the Labyrinth in the first place owing to an indiscretion on his part. Minos's queen, Pasiphae, had fallen in love with a bull - through no fault of her own but in consequence of divine vengeance on Minos for - you guessed it - ingratitude to the gods. To help the queen, Daedalus fashioned a lifelike hollow cow inside which Pasiphae could approach the bull. As a result she gave birth to the Minotaur, half-man, half-bull.

The Labyrinth was invented by Daedalus in order to confine the Minotaur and, some say, Pasiphae and her accomplice. But there was no cooping up a genius like Daedalus. Having been locked up in his own architectural masterpiece, the great inventor knew better than to attempt the portal. Naturally Minos had placed this under heavy guard, knowing that if anyone could negotiate the twisting passages to the exit it was the creator of the Labyrinth himself. So Daedalus gave thought to other means of escape.

Minos had been kind enough to provide him with a room with a view, looking out over the Cretan landscape many stories below. The king was quite confident that his prisoner would not be leaping to his freedom. What he had overlooked was the probability that the caged bird might fly. Indeed, Daedalus might well have been inspired by the soaring flight of the birds outside his window. It is certain that there were in fact birds in the vicinity because Daedalus managed to possess himself of a goodly supply of feathers. Like the great Leonardo da Vinci many centuries yet in the future, he sketched out on his drafting table a winglike framework to which these feathers might be applied. Building a wooden lattice in the shape of an outsized wing and covering it with the feathers, he set to testing his prototype.

It must have created quite a stir in the dank passages of the Labyrinth when Daedalus began waving this monumental feather duster around. The trials were important, though, for the ultimate invention would be freighted with the risk not just of his own life but that of his son Icarus as well. For Minos had wickedly imprisoned the guiltless boy together with his father.

At last the day was at hand to take to the skies. As he attached one pair of wings to Icarus and another to himself, Daedalus cautioned his son repeatedly.

"Remember all the trouble I had getting these feathers to stick?" he said for the sixth or seventh time. "The binding agent I resorted to is unstable," he pointed out as Icarus fidgeted impatiently. "I had to heat it to make it work. If it gets heated again - by the sun, say - it'll give way and the feathers will come loose. Do you understand, boy?"

To judge by Icarus's expression, he felt his father was belaboring the point. As it turned out, he might have given his old dad more credit for a caution worth repeating. For as soon as they had leapt from the windowsill and caught an updraft which bore them high into the sky about Mount Juktas, Icarus became giddy with exhilaration. Now he knew what a falcon felt like, dipping and soaring at will.

Perhaps with some notion of going down in the annals of aviation with the first high-altitude record, he started flapping with a vengeance. And as he climbed into the thinner air aloft, the sun's proximity began to work as Daedalus had anticipated. The feathers came loose, and Icarus plunged headlong into the sea, which - scant consolation - henceforth bore his name.