

The Trojan War

Helen ran away with Paris – and their destination was Troy. Her husband Menelaus convinced King Agamemnon to send a huge fleet of Greeks to take her back – and to destroy Troy once and for all.

The thousand ships carried a great host of fighting men and the Greek Army was very strong, but the Trojan City was strong, too. Priam, the King, and his Queen, Hecuba, had many brave sons to lead the attack and to defend the walls. One above all, Hector, than whom no man anywhere was nobler or more brave, and only one a greater warrior - the champion of the Greeks Achilles. Each knew that he would die before Troy was taken.

Achilles had been told by his mother: "Very brief is your lot. I wish that you could be free now from tears and troubles, for you shall not long endure, my child, short-lived beyond all men and to be pitied."

No divinity had told Hector, but he was equally sure. "I know well in my heart and in my soul," he said to his wife Andromache, "the day shall come when holy Troy will be laid low and Priam and Priam's people."

Both heroes fought under the shadow of certain death.

For nine years victory wavered, now to this side, now to that. Neither was ever able to gain any decided advantage. Then a quarrel flared up between two Greeks - Achilles and Agamemnon - and for a time it turned the tide in favor of the Trojans. Again, a woman was the reason: Chryseis, daughter of Apollo's priest, whom the Greeks had carried off and given to Agamemnon. Her father came to beg for her release, but Agamemnon would not let her go. Then the priest prayed to the mighty god he served and Phoebus Apollo heard him. From his sun-chariot, he shot fiery arrows down upon the Greek Army, and men sickened and died so that the funeral fires were burning continually.

At last Achilles called an assembly of the chieftains. He told them that they could not hold out against both the pestilence and the Trojans, and that they must either find a way to appease Apollo or else sail home.

Then the prophet Calchas stood up and said he knew why the god was angry, but that he was afraid to speak unless Achilles would guarantee his safety.

"I do so," Achilles answered, "even if you accuse Agamemnon himself."

Every man there understood what that meant; they knew how Apollo's priest had been treated. When Calchas declared that Chryseis must be given back to her father, he had all the chiefs

behind him; and Agamemnon, greatly angered, was obliged to agree.

"But if I lose her who was my prize of honor," he told Achilles, "I will have another in her stead." Therefore, when Chryseis had been returned to her father, Agamemnon sent two of his squires to Achilles' tent to take his prize of honor away from him - the maiden Briseis.

Most unwillingly they went and stood before the hero in heavy silence. But he, knowing their errand, told them it was not *they* who were wronging him. Let them take the girl without fear for themselves, but hear him first while he swore before gods and men that Agamemnon would pay dearly for the deed.

That night Achilles' mother, silver-footed Thetis the sea nymph, came to him. She was as angry as he. She told him to have nothing more to do with the Greeks, and with that, she went up to heaven and asked Zeus to give success to the Trojans.

Zeus was very reluctant. The war by now had reached Olympus. The gods were ranged against each other. Aphrodite, of course, was on the side of Paris. Equally, of course, Hera and Athena were against him. Ares, God of War, always took sides with Aphrodite; while Poseidon, Lord of the Sea, favored the Greeks, a sea people, always great sailors. Apollo cared for Hector and for his sake helped the Trojans, and Artemis, as his sister, did

so too. Zeus liked the Trojans best, on the whole, but he wanted to be neutral, because Hera was so disagreeable whenever he opposed her openly. However, he could not resist Thetis. He had a hard time with Hera, who guessed, as she usually did, what he was about. He was driven finally into telling her that he would lay hands upon her if she did not stop talking. Hera kept silence then, but her thoughts were busy as to how she might help the Greeks and circumvent Zeus.

The plan Zeus made was simple. He knew that the Greeks without Achilles were inferior to the Trojans, and he sent a lying dream to Agamemnon, promising him victory if he attacked. While Achilles stayed in his tent a fierce battle followed, the hardest yet fought.

Up on the wall of Troy the old King Priam and the other old men, wise in the ways of war, sat watching the contest. To them came Helen, the cause of all that agony and death, yet as they looked at her, they could not feel any blame. "Men must fight for such as she," they said to each other. "For her face was like to that of an immortal spirit."

She stayed by them, telling them the names of this and that Greek hero, until to their astonishment the battle ceased. The armies drew back on either side and in the space between, Paris and Menelaus faced each other. It was evident that the sensible

decision had been reached to let the two most concerned fight it out alone.

Paris struck first, but Menelaus caught the swift spear on his shield, then hurled his own. It tore Paris's tunic, but did not wound him. Menelaus drew his sword - his only weapon now - but as he did so it fell from his hand broken. Undaunted though unarmed he leaped upon Paris and seizing him by his helmet's crest swung him off his feet. He would have dragged him to the Greeks victoriously if it had not been for Aphrodite. She tore away the strap that kept the helmet on, so that it came away in Menelaus' hand. Paris himself, who had not fought at all except to throw his spear, she caught up in a cloud and took back to Troy.

Furiously, Menelaus went through the Trojan ranks seeking Paris, and not a man there but would have helped him - for they all hated Paris. But he was gone, no one knew how or where. So Agamemnon spoke to both armies, declaring that Menelaus was victor and bidding the Trojans give Helen back. This was just, and the Trojans would have agreed if Athena, at Hera's prompting, had not interfered. Hera was determined that the war should not end until Troy was ruined. Athena, sweeping down to the battlefield, persuaded the foolish heart of Pandarus, a Trojan, to break the truce and shoot an arrow at Menelaus. He did so and wounded him, only slightly, but the Greeks in rage at the treachery turned upon the Trojans and the battle was on again.

Terror and Destruction and Strife, whose fury never slackens, all friends of the murderous War-god, were there to urge men on to slaughter each other. Then the voice of groaning was heard and the voice of triumph from slayer and from slain, and the earth steamed with blood.