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THE STORY OF ACHILLES



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Chapter I

The Greeks March against Troy — Agamemnon Quarrels with Achilles

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Troy was a small portion of that section of Asia Minor which was later called Phrygia. Its northern coast touched the entrance to the Hellespont. It was very densely populated and had, besides many little plantations, villages, and settlements of farmers or herdsmen, a large city with a strong wall, towers, and gates. Homer never called the city Troy, but always Ilios or Ilium. The surroundings he calls Troy and the inhabitants Trojans, after an ancestor named Tros, who was said to have founded the city. He describes them as a bold, enterprising people, who lived in a high degree of comfort and practised many arts of which the Europeans of that time were ignorant.

The Achaians, as Homer calls the inhabitants of Greece, and the Trojans, engaged in mutual depredations upon each other's property, — until at last the long-standing national hatred broke out violently through the fault of the Trojans. Alexandras, or Paris, one of the sons of the old Trojan king, Priam, sailed across to Europe and paid a visit to King Menelaus, ruler over several cities in Sparta. He was hospitably received and entertained for many days, but repaid his good host with most shameless ingratitude. He persuaded the queen, the beautiful Helen, to forget her duty and flee with him. Menelaus sought revenge and called

upon his brother Agamemnon, ruler over Mycenae, old Nestor of Pylos, Ulysses of Ithaca, and many other valiant princes to ally themselves with him. A number of young lords who had long been wishing to take part in some glorious enterprise, like the expedition of the Argonauts, of which their fathers had so much to tell, offered their services with innumerable followers.

News of the mighty campaign which was being arranged spread throughout Greece, causing great rejoicing. Everyone looked upon it as a great opportunity and an event in which it would be shameful not to take part. A whole year passed in preparing the equipments. In the meanwhile Nestor and Ulysses travelled about everywhere to persuade the princes of Greece and its neighboring islands, who had hesitated hitherto, not to miss their share in the honors and spoils which so brilliant a campaign was sure to afford. For the object was nothing less than the destruction of the celebrated city of Troy, and the booty which was to be expected from such a rich people was incalculable. They had excellent success on this recruiting expedition, calling upon Peleus, father of Achilles in Thessalia, King Idomeneus in Crete, old Telamon in Salamis, and others.

The harbor of Aulis in Boeotia was selected for the place of meeting and at the appointed time more than one thousand ships assembled, with men from all parts of Greece. They agreed to offer the command to Agamemnon, one of the foremost among the princes, partly because he had brought the largest following and partly because he and his brother had organized the campaign. He was, besides, a

clever and honorable man and a brave warrior, although considerably inferior in physical strength to Achilles, the invincible.

All was ready for departure, but the ships waited in vain for a favorable wind. It was supposed that some god was delaying the voyage and that he must be propitiated by an offering, so the priest Calchas was commanded to consult the oracle. After observing the usual signs he announced that Agamemnon had slain a sacred animal in the chase, thereby offending Artemis, who now demanded a human sacrifice in the shape of Agamemnon's eldest daughter, Iphigenia. She was accordingly brought to the altar, but Artemis relented at the moment when the fatal stroke was about to be given, removed the trembling maiden in a dense cloud, and put an animal in her place. When Iphigenia awoke from her swoon, she found herself in the temple of Artemis in Taurus, where she served for a long time as priestess.

The same day, after this sacrifice, a favorable wind swelled the sails and the impatient heroes boarded their ships. In a few days the fleet arrived at Troy. On the way they had stopped to plunder a few cities on the islands of Scyros and Lesbos, had killed the men, and taken the women on board as slaves. After landing they proceeded in the same manner in the country about Troy. At the end of the war the godlike Achilles boasted that he alone with his Myrmidons had conquered twelve rich cities by sea and eleven by land in the Trojan territory. The booty which each skirmishing party brought in to camp was divided and the chief always received the best of everything. The

inhabitants of the capital were safe behind their walls, and as the Greek forces were seldom united, the Trojans were often able, by a sudden sortie, to repulse the attacking parties which ventured too near the gates. This desultory warfare continued for several years, until many of the Achaians began to long for home. But they were ashamed to depart thus, without having accomplished their object. The leaders concentrated their men and began the siege in earnest.

The Trojans now took measures for more careful defence and sent to the neighboring peoples to demand their aid. Many princes responded to the call with their followers, until they had formed an alliance equal in strength to the Achaians. In the tenth year of the siege fortune seemed to have turned her back on the Greeks, for besides the hardships of war, they had to contend with a pestilence, and finally were nearly destroyed by the Trojans, while their two mightiest chiefs, Agamemnon and Achilles, were quarrelling.

Agamemnon had plundered a city and had taken Chryseis, daughter of a priest of Apollo, for his slave. In the same way Achilles had become possessed of a maid named Briseïs, to whom he became so attached that he wished to keep her always with him. After a time the priest appeared in the Greek camp with rich presents to ransom his daughter, but Agamemnon did not wish to give up the maiden and returned a harsh answer. The Greeks urged him to release the maid out of respect for the priest and for fear of Apollo's wrath, but the obstinate man refused to listen to reason and bade the father depart on pain of chastisement. With loud lamentations the old man retired to the sea-coast

and prayed to Apollo. The legend tells us that Apollo at once left Olympus, seated himself at some distance from the ships, and began to shoot his arrows into the Greek camp. Whatever was struck died a sudden death by the plague. First the donkeys and dogs and then the men fell victims. The pestilence raged for nine days, during which the funeral pyres burned incessantly.

This filled the leaders with great apprehension, so that on the tenth day Achilles summoned a folk assembly and advised the people to call upon the seer Calchas to discover what fault of the army had brought this woe upon them and by means of what sacrifice the god might be appeased. Calchas hesitated, but at length answered that he knew the reason, but feared to give it until the bravest among the heroes had sworn to protect him in case a man of great power among the Achaians should be angry at his decree. Then Achilles stood up and made a public vow to protect him, even though the man he meant were Agamemnon, mightiest of the Greeks. "Very well, then," replied Calchas, "I will declare the truth. Yes, it is Agamemnon with whom Apollo is angry, for he has dishonored his priest and has refused to restore his daughter to him. Therefore hath he sent this punishment upon us and we cannot escape it until the maiden shall be returned freely to her father and a rich sacrifice has been offered to the god upon his holy altar."

Agamemnon, trembling with rage, cried: "Miserable seer, must I do penance for the people's sins? The maiden is wise and well trained in feminine tasks. I prize her above my spouse, Clytemnestra, and must I give her up? Let it be so; take her! I will bear even more than this for the people's

good. But I tell you, ye must provide another gift in her place, for she was my share of the booty.”

“Avaricious, insatiable man,” answered Achilles, “what dost thou demand? I knew not that we had treasures in reserve. Therefore be patient until the gods aid us to conquer rich Troy. Then thou mayst replace thy treasure many times over.”

Although this speech was just, the angry man imagined that it was intended in mockery and he cried: “Not so, Achilles; strong and brave as thou art, thou shalt not intimidate me! Dost thou expect to keep thy spoils and the others theirs, while mine is taken from me? I tell thee, if I receive no compensation, I will myself take it from thy tent or those of Ulysses or of Ajax, or wherever I please, and let him whom I despoil avenge himself. Take now the maiden, put her aboard the ship, together with the sacrificial steer, and row her to Chryse, where her father lives, that the god may no longer be angry with us.”

This speech infuriated Achilles and he cried angrily: “What! Thou wouldst take away my prize? Did we march against the Trojans for our own sakes? Not I, indeed! They never injured me, nor ever robbed me of a horse or cow, nor pillaged my newly sown fields. I was well protected by wooded hills and the broad sea and never thought of Troy in my Phthian home. It was solely on thy account, thou selfish, shameless man, that I came hither to avenge thine and thy brother’s sullied honor. And this hast thou so speedily forgotten and threatenest even to take away the spoils which the Achaians have unanimously accorded me and which I have honestly earned? Have I not hitherto borne the

chief burden of the war? Who has fought as much as I? Let him appear! And when have I received prizes like thine? Thou hast always taken the best of everything, while I have contented myself with little. Very well! Thou mayest fight alone! I return to Phthia!”

“Fly, if thy heart bids thee!” flashed forth Agamemnon in anger. “Truly I shall not beg thee to remain. There are other warriors here through whom Jupiter will help me to achieve honor. Thou hast been obnoxious to me from the beginning. Thou hast ever loved quarrelling and strife and hast never kept peace. Thy strength hath been given thee by the gods and thou dost pride thyself altogether too much upon it. Thou mayest sail away with all thy followers and rule peacefully over thy Myrmidons. Thy wrath is nothing to me. But I tell thee, that as Phœbus Apollo has taken Chryses’ daughter from me, I shall take from thee the rosy daughter of Briseus, thy prize, so that thou mayest learn how much more powerful I am than thou, and that no other in future shall dare to defy me as thou hast done.”

In a rage Achilles drew his shining sword from its scabbard to cut down Agamemnon. Suddenly, unseen by all the rest, the goddess Athena stood behind him and whispered to him not to draw his sword against the king, but that he might scold as much as he pleased. “Thy word I must obey, oh goddess,” answered Achilles, “though anger fills my heart. The gods attend those who follow their counsel.” With these words he returned his sword to its scabbard, but turning to Agamemnon he cried: “Thou miserable drunkard, with the look of a dog and the courage of a hare! Never hast thou dared to risk a decisive battle or

to lie in ambush with the other nobles; but it is more comfortable to take away his prize from the single man who opposes thee. I swear that thou shalt never again see me raise my arm against the Trojans, though all thy Achaians should perish and thou shouldst beseech me on thy knees to save thee.”

Thus he spake, and dashing his sceptre upon the ground, sat down in silence. Agamemnon was preparing to answer this passionate speech when up rose old Nestor, revered like a father by everyone for his age, wisdom, and experience. When it was seen that he wished to speak all were quiet. Even Agamemnon bridled his anger, and the well-meaning old man began: “Dear friends, what are you about! What an unhappy fate do ye bring upon us all! How Priam, his sons, and the whole Trojan people will rejoice when they hear that the foremost Achaians are quarrelling. Listen to me, for ye are all much younger than I. However much power the Achaians have given thee, Agamemnon, do not abuse it. Let Achilles keep the prize with which the Achaians have rewarded him. And thou, Achilles, do not defy the king, for never has Jupiter crowned a king with such honor as this one. Though thou art stronger than he and boastest thyself of divine ancestry, he is the more powerful and all the people obey him.”

“Truly, honorable father,” answered Agamemnon, “thou hast spoken worthily. But this man is unreasonable; he wishes to be above all others, to rule all, to make laws for all.”

Achilles interrupted him. “Indeed I should be a coward did I submit to all thy insults. I will keep the vow I have

sworn. One thing I will say — if the Achaians wish the maiden they have given me, they may have her. But woe to thee if thou layest hands upon my other spoils.”

Agamemnon insisted on taking the maiden, and he had the power to carry out his threats. Wisdom counselled Achilles to surrender what he was not strong enough to hold. He withdrew from the quarrel with more dignity than his unjust enemy, and his threat of abandoning the war gave him ample satisfaction. The result proved his value. He had thus far been the only one able to vanquish Hector, Priam’s most valiant son; and now that he had withdrawn, it was the Trojans, day after day, who were the victors. It seemed as though a god had doomed the Greeks to destruction.

Agamemnon first sent Ulysses to conduct his slave and the appointed animals for the sacrifice to her father’s home. Next he called upon two heralds to fetch the beautiful Briseïs from Achilles’ tent. They obeyed his command in fear and trembling. But Achilles banished their fears, saying: “Come hither, ye sacred messengers and peace be with ye. For ye are not to blame, but he who sends ye. He shall have the maid. Go, Patroclus, and fetch her out. Ye are all witnesses before gods and men that I have sworn never to lift a hand again for Agamemnon against Troy.”

They received the maid from the hands of his friend, Patroclus, and she went reluctantly away with them, often glancing sorrowfully backward toward the tent of her former beloved master.

Chapter II

Thetis Promises to Aid the Angry Achilles and Begs Jupiter's Assistance— Juno is Angry— Agamemnon and the Other Princes Summon the Greeks to Battle

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Achilles gazed gloomily after the men, then arose quickly and seated himself far from his companions on the beach, looking moodily out over the dark waters. He bethought him of his mother, Thetis, who lived in the blue depths of the sea, spread out his arms, and prayed to her for aid. She heard him and hastened to appear. Floating over the sea like a cloud, she seated herself beside her weeping son and tenderly caressed him. "Dear son, why dost thou weep?" she asked. "What troubles thee? Speak! Conceal nothing from me." With deep sighs he related what had happened to him, begging his mother to avenge his wrongs and to intercede for him with Jupiter.

It was early on the twelfth day since Achilles had retired from the fray when Thetis rose from the dark waves and ascended the heights of Olympus. She found the mighty Jupiter seated on the summit of the mountain, apart from the other gods, bowed herself before him, embraced his knees with her left hand, and caressed his chin with her right hand. "Father Jupiter," she said coaxingly, "if thou lovest me, grant me a boon and show favor to my son, who has but a short life to live. Give him redress against