

From
The Iliad
Part Two

Menelaus and Paris agree to end the war with a duel. What will the gods think about this solution?

The Duel

Now the two armies approached each other, the Trojans shouting like a huge flock of cranes, the Greeks in grim silence. About six feet the dust rose, thick as mist in the mountains when a man can see no farther than a stone's throw.

As the forces came close enough to do battle, out from the Trojan ranks stepped Prince Paris. He offered to meet any Greek in single combat, man to man. With a panther skin flung over his back, a curved bow and sword hanging from his shoulders, and two sharp, bronze-headed spears in his hand, he made a godlike figure.

Then Menelaus saw that it was Paris, he was filled with joy, like a hungry lion sighting his prey. Now was his chance for revenge on the man who had wronged him! So down he stepped from his chariot, with all his armor shining.

Paris saw Menelaus come forward, and his heart failed him. He stepped back, like a man who sees a snake in the woods.

When Hector turned on his brother with

"Paris, you handsome weakling, I wish you had never been born. Or I wish you had died before you found a wife. What a joke you must seem to the Greeks, with nothing to you but good looks. Can you be the man who sailed the seas and brought home with you the beautiful queen of a warlike land? And now you are too cowardly to stand up to the brave man you wronged. We Trojans should have stoned you long ago for all the trouble you have caused."

"All you say is true enough, Hector," Paris replied. "If you insist on my fighting this duel, have all the troops sit down, and I will fight him between the armies. Let us fight for Helen and her wealth. The one who wins gets both lady and goods, and the rest can have peace at last."

This pleased Hector well enough. He stepped forward through the Trojan lines and made this proposal to all.

"One of us must die, it is certain," said Menelaus, "and it is well that the rest should have peace. Let Priam come then, to make solemn sacrifices to the Earth and Sun, and swear an oath to give Helen to the winner, that afterward there may be peace."

Greeks and Trojans were all delighted by a chance to end the war. They arranged the chariots in order and unyoked the horses. Then, between the heaps of armor they had put down, they cleared a space for the duel.

Hector sent heralds back to the city for King Priam. But meanwhile Iris disguised herself as a daughter of Priam and brought Helen the news. She found Helen in her palace, weaving a great web of purple, double width, in which she was picturing battle scenes from the great war fought for her sake.

When Helen heard the news of the duel, a longing swept over her—a longing for her parents, for her home and child, and for the husband she had left. Putting a white veil over her head, she ran, with tears glistening in her eyes, to the tower above the Scaean Gate, from which the fighting could be seen.

There Priam sat with the old men who could no longer fight. They chirped together like grasshoppers in the sun, and as they saw Helen walking toward them, one said to another, "It is no wonder the Greeks and Trojans have fought all these years for this woman's sake. Her beauty is like that of the immortal gods. Yet it would be better for her to sail away than to stay and bring ruin on our children and our homes."

Priam called her to him kindly, for he did not blame her. He asked her to point out to him Agamemnon and Odysseus. Helen also pointed out old Nestor, towering Ajax, and other leaders of the Greeks. Then the heralds came from Hector to say that Priam was wanted to offer the sacrifice for the duel.

Priam sighed when he heard the news. He cared for the safety of his son. But he set out his chariot, made the sacrifices, and swore

the most solemn oaths for peace. Then he rode back into the city, for he could not bear to watch the duel.

Now Hector and Odysseus measured off the ground. Then into a helmet they put two lots, made of pieces of broken pottery. One lot was marked for Menelaus, one for Paris. The helmet would be shaken, and the lot that leaped out would show which man would cast the first spear.

The watching armies lifted up their hands and prayed. One prayer served them both, for it was a prayer of peace.

Then Hector shook the helmet, looking away, until one lot leaped out. It was marked for Paris.

The troops sat down in rows, and Paris put on his armor—splendid greaves with silver ankle clips on his legs, a breastplate on his chest. Over his shoulders went a silver-studded sword and a great tough shield. On his head he set a helmet with a nodding horsehair plume. In his hands he grasped a spear well suited to his grip. Meanwhile, Menelaus armed himself in the very same way.

Clanking their weapons and glaring fiercely, the two stepped out onto the cleared ground. It was Paris who had won the first cast. His long spear shot out and landed squarely on Menelaus' shield, but did not pierce it; the strong point bent.

Menelaus raised his spear and offered a prayer for revenge to Zeus. His spear went straight through Paris' shield, through the breastplate on his breast, through his tunic—but he swerved aside, and so was saved from death.

Then Menelaus drew his silver-set sword and brought it down with a mighty crash on

Paris' helmet. But the blade broke to splinters and fell from his hand.

"O Zeus! How spiteful you are!" cried Menelaus. He hurled himself upon the stunned Paris, dragging him by the chin strap of his helmet back toward the Greek lines. That would have been the end of Paris, but Aphrodite was watching over her favorite. She caused the strap to break, and Menelaus got only an empty helmet. He threw it back to his friends and went after Paris with a spear. But Aphrodite carried Paris off to his own bedroom in Troy. And while Menelaus stormed, searching through the ranks, Paris rested safely there.

At last Agamemnon spoke to the Trojans. "It is clear," he said, "that Menelaus is the conqueror. Now it is up to you to return Helen and her goods."

At this the Greeks applauded loudly. And ad Zeus willed it, the Trojan war might have ended then.

The Fatal Arrow

Now, the gods had gathered in the golden-roofed palace of Zeus. And while they drank nectar from their golden goblets, they looked down to see what was going on in Troy.

Zeus stroked his beard and smiled to himself as he thought of a way to tease Queen Hera.

"I know we have here two supporters of the Greeks," he said, "in the Lady Hera and Athena. But they sit calmly by while Aphrodite has saved her favorite, Paris, from certain death. Still, there is no doubt that Menelaus has won the duel, so if you approve he will

take his Helen home, and the city of Priam will stand."

These words angered both Hera and Athena, who were set on having Troy destroyed. Athena held her tongue, but Hera could not.

"Zeus," she cried, "how can you suggest such a thing? Have I gone to all that trouble for nothing, getting myself and my horses in a sweat from rushing around Greece, gathering the armies? And now you say Troy is to escape! Do as you like, but don't expect me to approve."

Now Zeus was angry too. "What harm have Priam and his sons ever done to you that you should be so determined to ruin their lovely town? It happens that of all the cities of the world, Troy is the dearest to my heart."

"All I ask," said Hera, "is that you let Athena go down to the battlefield and arrange for the Trojans to break the truce. Surely I deserve that much consideration, as a goddess and your wife."

To this Zeus agreed, since it was also his wish.

Down to earth Athena swooped like a shooting star. The watching men on the plain below knew she brought a message from the gods. But what would it be—peace or war?

Athena knew the answer. She put on the disguise of a Trojan warrior and sought out Pandarus, a fine archer.

"Pandarus, why not win the thanks of all the Trojans," she suggested, "by making an end of Menelaus with a single arrow from your bow? Paris will surely give you a very handsome gift. Come, fit an arrow to the string, pray to Apollo, the god of archers, and the deed is done."

Foolish Pandarus let himself be persuaded. He took down his great bow, sixteen hands long, made of the horns of an ibex. He strung the bow, then laid it down. Hiding behind his companions' shields, he took from his quiver a new feathered arrow and fitted it to the string.

With a prayer to Apollo, he drew back arrow and string until the string was near his breast. When the bow was bent in a great circle, he let the arrow go, with a twang of the bow and a singing of the string.

Through the crush of men, straight to Menelaus, the arrow found its way. Through the golden buckle of his belt, through the folds of his corselet, even through the tunic it went. But Athena had not forgotten Menelaus. She turned aside the arrow's point so that, though the purple blood gushed out, no vital spot was hit.

Agamemnon shuddered when he saw the dark blood flow. For how could he go home to Argos without his brother at his side?

But Menelaus comforted him. "The wound is nothing," he insisted, "and will soon be cured."

So Agamemnon sent for the surgeon Machaon, who took out the arrow, undid belt and corselet, and sucked out the blood from the wound. Then he applied some healing ointments.

While Machaon was attending to Menelaus, the Trojans began to advance under arms. So the Greeks once more put on their armor, and with gray-eyed Athena to help them, they again turned their thoughts to war.

No one could make light of that battle. Many a warrior went down to darkness, and the Trojans and Greeks fought like wolves for the armor of the fallen men. Many were the

Greeks and Trojans who lay in the dust side by side that day, paying with their lives for the broken truce.

Hector the Brave

The treachery of Pandarus put new fury into the Greek fighters. The Trojans were about to be forced back into their city, defeated and disgraced. But Helenus, a son of Priam and the best prophet in Troy, sought out Hector at this moment.

"It is up to you to make a stand," he said. "You are the best of all our leaders. Keep the men away from the gates, or they will go running in to the women and give our enemies the victory. Once you have the ranks in order, we will stand and fight, weary though we are, for we can do nothing else.

"Then go to our mother, Queen Hecuba, and ask her to offer to Athena the largest finest robe she has. And let her promise the goddess twelve heifers if she will spare our wives and children and have pity on our town."

Hector at once leaped down from his chariot. Swinging his spears, he moved among the men. He put such new heart into their fighting that the Greeks thought some god must be fighting for Troy, and many of them turned away.

Then Hector walked back into the city, with the rim of his black shield slung behind him, tapping at his ankles and neck. When he reached the great oak tree at the Scaean gates, Trojan wives and daughters swarmed about him, pleading for news of their men. "Pray to the gods," he told them all, for the news he had for many was sad.

On he went to Priam's handsome palace,
with its doorways and columns of polished
stone. Here his mother came out to meet him,
and clasped his hand.

"Why have you left the battle?" she asked.
The Greeks must be pressing you hard.
Come, make your sacrifice to Zeus, and have
some refreshment for yourself."

"No, mother," said Hector, "I cannot offer
sacrifice with the blood and grime of battle
on my hands. But you and the older women go
to Athena. Offer her the finest robe you have:
place it on her knees, and promise her twelve
young heifers if she will spare our wives and
children and hold off the Greeks from Troy."
The queen made the sacrifice and placed on
Athena's knees a great robe of the finest
needlework, shining like a star. But Athena
answered her prayers.

Then Hector left and went to his own
house.

"My place is with the army," he said to
himself. "But first I must go home for one
moment to my wife and little boy. For I cannot tell
whether I shall ever see them again."

Andromache, his wife, was not at home.
From the maids he learned that she had gone
to the wall, upset by the news that the
city was going badly for Troy.

Hector hurried back through the streets
until he reached the Scaean gates. There his
wife came running to meet him. The
children followed with their little boy in her
arms—a merry little boy, his father's darling
and the hope of Troy. Hector smiled when he
saw his son, but Andromache burst into tears.
"My dear, can you do nothing but fight?"
she cried. "Have you no thought for your little
boy or for your unhappy wife, who will be a



Hector and Andromache, 1917, GIORGIO de CHIRICO.
The Mattioli Collection, Milan. Scala/Art Resource, New York.

widow soon? If I lose you, I do not want to
live, for I have no one but you. You are father
and mother and brother to me, as well as my
dearly loved husband."

"I have not forgotten that, dear wife," said
Hector, "but I could not show my face in Troy
if I hid like a coward from danger."

He said, "My dearest, do not grieve too
much. We cannot escape our fate, but no one
will send me down to Hades before my
appointed time."

Then Hector took up his helmet and spear,
and Andromache went on her way home,
turning again and again to look back, while
her tears flowed fast.

