

From
The Iliad
Part Three

Victory seems close at hand for the Trojans. Yet Achilles still does not return to battle. Can his close friends persuade him to fight for the Greeks before it's too late?

The Scales of Victory

Now Zeus had the horses harnessed to his chariot, swift, bronze-hoofed horses with manes of gold. Robed all in gold, and flicking his golden whip, Zeus mounted the chariot and flew away to Mount Ida. There he hid his horses in a cloud and sat himself down near his altar on the hilltop, looking down at the city and the ships.

As the day wore on, with men clashing and dying, Zeus laid out his golden scales. Into each pan he put the sentence of death, one for the Greeks and one for the Trojans. Then he raised the balance at the middle. Down sank the beam on the side of the Greeks, spelling a day of doom. Up to the sky went the Trojan side. Then Zeus thundered loud from Mount Ida, and sent a flash of lightning down among the Greeks, which struck terror into every man.

Now neither Odysseus nor Agamemnon could stand his ground, nor could the two Ajaxes, great warriors though they were. Even old Nestor, King of Pylos, was in danger, when Paris struck one of his chariot horses, throwing the team into confusion. The old man would have lost his life had not

Diomedes, another hero, seen him and gone to his rescue.

As Diomedes and Nestor raced back toward the ships, Hector cried out to his men:

"Trojans! Now is the time to prove your valor. Zeus has granted us a great victory, and a great disaster for our foes. Look at the wretched wall they have raised—it will be no defense. And as for their ditch, our horses will jump it. Then on to the ships, and let the watchword be Fire! I want to burn the ships and kill the men as they stagger in the smoke."

Zeus gave the Trojans such courage that they drove the Greeks straight back to their trench, with Hector leading the way. He hung on the heels of the Greeks, striking down whoever was in the rear as they ran. At last the troops crossed both ditch and fence, though many fell along the way. Closed in among the ships, they lifted their hands and prayed to heaven. And Hector, relentless, wheeled his horses back and forth, glaring like the god of war.

Now the bright sun set in the ocean, drawing darkness behind it across the earth. The Trojans were sorry to see the light go, but to the Greeks it brought more-than-welcome relief.

Agamemnon's Apology

While the Trojans kept their watch on the plain, panic gripped the men in the camp of the Greeks. Agamemnon wandered about, crushed by pain and grief. When his leaders met in a gloomy assembly, he faced them with tears running down his cheeks.

"My friends, Zeus has been most cruel to me. He once promised that I should bring down the walls of Troy. But now he has managed it so that I must go home defeated to Argos, after losing so many lives. Well, if this is the will of the gods, let us be off on our ships while we can, for surely Troy will never fall to us."

The soldiers listened in downcast silence, until Diomedes rose to speak.

"My lord," he said, "I must tell you in public assembly that your advice is foolish. You may run away if you wish. There is the sea, there are the ships—the whole great fleet you brought from Mycenae. But the rest of the Greeks will stay here till we sack Troy. And even if the rest wish to go, my charioteer and I will stay to work out the will of heaven!"

Everyone cheered Diomedes, and Nestor rose up to make the peace.

"Good advice is what we need most," he said, "that and a good meal. Let us eat, for we have stores in plenty, and then let us make our plans."

When they had all eaten, Nestor spoke to Agamemnon.

"My lord, there is something you could do. Even at this late hour you could make peace with Achilles, in whom the gods delight. By giving in to your proud temper, you drove him

away. You could win him back with soft words and gifts."

"You speak the truth," Agamemnon agreed. "I was mad indeed, I do not deny. And now it is my only wish to make peace with him. This is what I will offer Achilles now: seven new tripods, ten ingots of gold, twenty fine cauldrons, twelve splendid race horses, and seven women skilled in handwork whom we captured in Lesbos. I will return to him the girl Briseis, and if we capture the city of Troy, he shall have his pick of the spoils.

"All this I will do if he will only serve with me again. For surely one man whom the gods love so much is worth an army of others."

Nestor spoke again. "Lord Agamemnon, such gifts as yours surely no one could despise. Now let us choose envoys to take them. Let us send great Ajax and wise Odysseus."

This choice was approved by all.

As they walked together beside the sounding sea, Ajax and Odysseus offered many a prayer to Poseidon, god of the earth-circling waters, that they might successfully persuade the strong-willed one.

When they reached the huts of the Myrmidons,¹ they found Achilles playing on a beautiful lyre with a silver bridge. He was singing songs of great heroes for his friend Patroclus and himself.

As the two envoys approached, Odysseus in the lead, Achilles sprang to his feet. He greeted them warmly, and led them to purple-covered chairs in his hut.

1. Myrmidons, soldiers who went with Achilles, their king, to the Trojan War.

"Now, Patroclus," he cried, "bring out bigger bowls and better wine, for of all the Greeks these are my two best friends."

Patroclus did as his friend bade him. And on a big bench in the firelight he laid out good meat, too, and spitted it, and laid it over the coals. When it was nicely browned, he handed around baskets of bread, while Achilles himself served the meat.

After they had all had enough, Odysseus spoke.

"Your health, Achilles!" he began. "Surely we have never had a better feast at the board of Agamemnon himself. But tonight our business is not feasting, but life and death for all our troops. Unless you will come back to fight with us, we stand no more than an even chance of coming off with our lives. The Trojans are at this very moment camped by their watch fires on the plain, planning tomorrow to burn our ships and slaughter us beside them. So rise up now, I beg you, if you wish to save your people.

"Remember your father, when you left home, warned you against quarrels and pride of heart. It is not too late to change, for we come from Agamemnon to offer you the richest gifts, if you will forgive him." And then Odysseus listed the gifts, the gold and the horses, the women skilled in handwork, and all the rest.

But Achilles was not moved by such promises.

"I must tell you two exactly how I feel," he said. "I hate this man with all my heart. I am tired of sleepless nights and days of battle, all for his profit and his sake. Why must the Greeks make war on the Trojans? For Helen?

Are Agamemnon and Menelaus the only men here who love their wives? Does not every right-minded man love his wife? And are not the Trojans, too, fighting only for their homes and womenfolk?

"Not if he offered me all the riches in the treasure houses of Delphi or Thebes would Agamemnon move me. For to me life is worth more than all the world's wealth. You may capture cattle, and buy gold and horses, but to win back a man's life, once the breath has passed from his lips, that no one can do.

"My mother Thetis offered me two roads—either to stay here at Troy and die, winning deathless fame, or to live out a long, quiet life at home. Now that is what I shall do. What is more, I advise you to go, too. For Zeus holds this city under his loving hand, and you will never find your way into Troy's hilly streets.

"No, go back and take this message to your princes, and let them find some better plan than this, if they wish to save their ships and men."

When Achilles had finished, the envoys each offered wine to the gods from a two-handled cup. Then they made their way back along the line of ships, with Odysseus in the lead.

When they reached Agamemnon's quarters, everyone sprang to his feet, toasting them from golden cups, then asked for the news.

"Your majesty," Odysseus said, "Achilles refuses all your gifts. He is further than ever from giving in. He threatens to put to sea at dawn, and advises us to do the same."

A long silence followed this heavy blow. But at last Diomedes broke it, as before.

"Let him go, to stay or sail as he likes. But

for our part, let us have a good night's sleep, and at the first light of dawn let us lead our men into battle, and by our example inspire them to noble deeds!"

Everyone applauded this heartily, and so they went off to sleep.

The Battle Before the City

As Dawn arose from her bed to bring light to men and gods, Zeus sent down the Spirit of Battle to the ships of the Greeks. She stood on the black hull of Odysseus' ship and uttered a loud and dreadful cry. It could be heard to the ends of the camp and filled the men with bravery.

Agamemnon himself shouted the call to arms. Then he buckled on his own fine greaves, and put on his breast the corselet which had been sent him by the King of Cyprus when he heard of the expedition to Troy. Over his shoulder he slung his great sword, knobbed with gold on the end, and cased in a silver sheath. His huge shield was made of ten circles of bronze, studded with knobs of white tin. On his head he put a two-horned helmet with a dreadful, nodding horsehair plume. With two spears of glittering bronze in his hands, the King of Golden Mycenae started off to war.

The two hosts were like lines of reapers before whom the rich grain falls. So the Trojans and Greeks leaped at each other, cutting down men in swaths. All through the morning, while the sun was climbing, the arrows flew from both sides and the men fell evenly. But, about the time when a woodsman in the

mountains tires of felling trees and wants a bite to eat, about then the Greeks broke through the enemy ranks with a triumphant shout.

In the thickest of the fighting was Agamemnon, with his men backing him up. Now foot soldiers fell on foot soldiers, charioteers on charioteers, while the thundering hooves of the horses kicked up a great cloud of dust. Agamemnon slew and slew, like a forest fire blown on by the wind. As the trees topple over before the flames, so the Trojans fell before the king.

Past the ancient tomb of Ilos, past the wild fig tree which marked the middle of the plain, on toward the city, Agamemnon pushed the Trojans, with his hands dripping blood. When they came near the Scaean gates and the great oak, both armies made a stand. And the Trojans would have been pushed to their very walls, had not Zeus sent a message down to Hector by Iris, goddess of the rainbow.

"Tell Hector that as long as Agamemnon is dealing out death at the head of his army, he is to keep away himself. But when Agamemnon, wounded by some spear or arrow, mounts his chariot to retreat, I will give Hector the victory, to drive them to their ships until darkness falls."

So spoke Zeus to Iris.

As soon as Iris had delivered the message and sped swiftly away, Hector leaped down from his chariot. He rallied his men with a great rattling of spears. But he avoided Agamemnon, as Zeus had warned.

Agamemnon, as always, was at the front. And when he was pulling his spear from the throat of a Trojan victim, another warrior of



Dying Gaul, about 200 B.C. Roman copy of a Greek bronze. Capitolino Museum, Rome. Scala/Art Resource, New York.

Troy stabbed him broadside, below the elbow, straight through the flesh of the arm. Agamemnon shuddered at the blow, but fought sternly on.

As long as the blood flowed from his wound, Agamemnon could still fight. But when it began to dry, the stabbing pains came strongly, and Agamemnon mounted his chariot, crying to his friends to carry on. Then he told the driver to hurry to the ships, for he was in great pain.

Hector saw that Agamemnon was retreating, wounded, and shouted for all to hear:

“Trojans, allies! He is gone, their best man! Zeus has given us the victory, so drive straight for the ships!”

Thus Hector, son of Priam, like the war god himself spurred the Trojans on. And he flung himself into the battle like a whirlwind from the upper air sweeping down on the sea. Who

fell first and last to the mighty Hector? There were too many to name.

Now complete disaster threatened the Greeks, who were being pushed back against their ships. For all their leaders were hard hit. Diomedes was caught square in the foot with an arrow from Paris' bow. A Trojan spear pierced the shield of Odysseus, pierced his belt, and tore away the flesh from his flank. Mighty Ajax, too, at last had to make a stubborn retreat to the ships.

As a final blow from the gods, one of Paris' arrows put Machaon, the great surgeon, out of the fight. Nestor saw him wounded, and went to his rescue at once. Soon Nestor's horses, sweating and steaming, brought the two to the camp beside the hollow ships.

Achilles was standing on the high stern of his ship, watching the rout of the Greeks. When he saw Nestor's chariot come in, he

called Patroclus, his good friend, to him.

"Now at last I shall have the Greeks on their knees before me," he said, "for they are in a bad way. Go to Nestor and ask who is the wounded man he has just brought in. He looked to me like Machaon, but I could not clearly see his face. I want to know, for a surgeon who can heal an arrow wound is worth many fighting men."

Patroclus set off at a run through the huts and ships. By this time Nestor's chariot had reached his hut. The two men got out and, after standing on the beach to dry their sweaty tunics, they went inside.

Just then Patroclus appeared in the doorway. Nestor rose to invite him to join them, but Patroclus declined.

"Achilles asked me to find out who the wounded man was. Now that I see it is the honorable Machaon, I must hurry to tell him, for you know how hot-tempered he is!"

"I cannot see why Achilles is so concerned over one wounded man," said Nestor, "when

our whole army is in such distress. Our best men are wounded—Agamemnon, Diomedes, Odysseus. Yet Achilles is not concerned about that, brave fighter that he is! Is he waiting for our ships to go up in flames?

"You should remember, Patroclus, what your own father said, when he sent you off to the war. 'My son,' he said, 'Achilles is of nobler blood than you, and also is stronger. But you are older. You must give him good advice and set him a noble example.' That was your father's bidding. Have you forgotten?"

"You are Achilles' great friend. Perhaps you can still persuade him. Or perhaps he will give you his Myrmidons, and his own armor to wear. Then the Trojans, seeing fresh troops in the field, and thinking Achilles is leading them, may fall back and give our weary men a rest."

Patroclus was moved by Nestor's words, and as he hurried back to the hut of Achilles, his mind was busy with sober thoughts all the while.

Developing Comprehension Skills

1. How does Zeus decide the outcome of the present battle between the Greeks and the Trojans?
2. Why is Agamemnon at first willing to give up and go home in defeat? What makes him change his mind?
3. Why does Agamemnon agree to make peace with Achilles? Does this indicate that Agamemnon has changed in any way? Explain your answer.
4. How does Achilles respond to Agamemnon's offer of peace? What reasons does he give for deciding as he does? Are these reasons good ones?
5. How do the gods affect the battle before the city?
6. What does Nestor ask Patroclus to do? Why is Patroclus the most logical choice for this mission?
7. What is your opinion of Agamemnon and Achilles at this point in the story? How has your opinion changed since the story began?