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# THE HOUSE OF ATREUS

RETOLD FROM THE GREEK DRAMATISTS

BY

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MADRAS

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# THE HOUSE OF ATREUS

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## CHAPTER I

If you have read Euripides' "Alcestis", you have read one of the noblest specimens of a single Greek tragedy—that is, a tragedy whose story is complete as it stands. Sometimes, however, the old Greek dramatists competed for the annual prize at Athens, not with a single play, but with a group of three, called a Trilogv: which three, though separate plays, developed a single story, and followed one from another.

This system suited Greek ideas very well; for the theme which the old Greek dramatists most loved, was to trace the slow working-out of the gods' justice upon men; and often enough, a man's misdeeds were not atoned by his race until a later generation; so, in a trilogy, the poet was able to develop the full story from father to son, and to show how good deeds or ill deeds at last reaped their reward. And sometimes the story was so long, and contained so many different incidents, that it supplied material enough for even more than a trilogy, and was used by more poets than one.

Such was the story of the ill-fated house of Atreus, whose sons Agamemnon and Menelaus led the Greek hosts against Troy. The tale of Agamemnon's terrible crime, and of the long-drawn woes that followed it, was treated by all three of the

great dramatists : by Aeschylus in a trilogy, which we possess complete (“ Agamemnon,” “ The Choephorae,” and “ The Eumenides ”) ; by Sophocles in the tragedy of “ Electra,” Agamemnon’s daughter : and by Euripides in a second “ Electra,” and in three plays about Iphigenia, and Orestes, Agamemnon’s other daughter and son. These plays are the originals of the story which you are about to read.

It opens at Aulis, a little sea-port town on the east coast of Greece, where a vast host of men and countless ships are assembled. They are the united forces of all the kingdoms of Greece ; and they are ready to embark upon a warlike voyage against Troy, which lies beyond the Aegean Sea, two hundred miles to the east. The cause of their muster is as follows.

Years before, when the great heroes came from far and near to woo Helen, the loveliest girl in Greece, her father grew afraid lest such keen rivalry should breed bitter quarrels. So he called to him all the suitors, and made them take a great oath to abide by the girl’s own choice : and to support her chosen husband afterwards, if any rival should attempt to steal Helen away. To this they all agreed. Helen then chose Menelaus, one of Atreus’ two sons, of whom you have heard already ; he took her off to Sparta, where he was king ; the rest kept faithfully to their oath, and all seemed to be well.

Yet sorrow came to Menelaus, from a quarter whence he had not suspected it. One summer when Menelaus was away, a wandering stranger

reached Sparta. This was young Paris, son of the king of Troy ; and the Goddess of Love had promised him that he should wed the fairest woman in Greece. No sooner had he met Helen, than he knew he had found the woman he sought, he fell deeply in love with her ; and Helen, unluckily, fell as deeply in love with him. Before the absent Menelaus knew what was happening, she had fled far across the sea with Paris to Troy, where he lived.

You may imagine with what rage and grief Menelaus learned the bad news. Then he recalled the old oath that he and all the suitors of Helen had sworn ; so he set out, and journeyed up and down through all the kingdoms of Greece, calling on all the kings and princes to redeem their promise. They did so ; and now after some delay, their vast host was assembled. The chief command was given to Agamemnon, out of respect to Menelaus ; for Agamemnon was his elder brother, and was wedded to Helen's sister Clytemnestra in his kingdom of Argolis. Each prince, in all that host, had ships enough to carry his own folk across. Their plans were all complete, and they were just about to go aboard when an unforeseen accident stopped them.

The wind, which had been blowing steadily towards Troy as the troops gathered, fell suddenly, and was succeeded by a dead calm which showed no sign of breaking. In vain they waited idle, the soldiers chafing at the delay and even beginning to mutiny. Nothing could be done.

Among them all, there was no man more wretched and impatient than King Agamemnon,

who had the care and charge of everything on his hands. He would pace restlessly along the shore, or linger before his quarters, as he stared out across that calm and unruffled sea. One morning he called out his old body-servant, even before it was light.

“What star is that?” he asked, pointing.

“Sirius” the old man replied, “riding midway on his course, near the seven Pleiads.” Sirius was the star in whose season the weather was oftenest still and hot.

King Agamemnon groaned. “Not a sound of birds, nor sea! And the winds are still hushed.”

The old man shook his head. For indeed, the weather was unchanged, and he wondered why the king had roused him. “Why does my lord rush from his tent? All is quiet, and the sentries stand motionless at their posts. Let us go in.”

“I envy thee, old man” sighed the king. “I envy all who pass their lives in quiet safety, unknown to the world and to fame. But the great ones, I envy not!”

“Greatness brings honour, O king.”

“Yet that honour is unsafe. There is joy in pursuing glory, but disquiet when it is won. Sometimes the gods, not worshipped fitly, bring ruin upon us; or sometimes the strife and discontent of men break our peace.”

The old fellow rebuked him gently. “Thou art a man, though a great king. Thou must know sorrow as well as joy; for so the gods decree for all mortals, whether they like it or not.” And then

he added curiously, recalling certain strange actions of the king not long before: "When thou didst light thy lamp just now, and write that letter which is still in thy hand, and seal it and open it again, and cast it from thee—the tears fell from thine eyes, and thou wast as one driven near to madness by grief. O my lord, what new care attacks thee? Tell it me, share it with me; for thou art speaking to one who has served thee in faith and honesty, since the day when the father of thy bride sent me to thee, as part of his wedding gift."

And at last Agamemnon, who loved the old faithful slave and knew how discreet he was, disclosed the cause of his grief: "Thou knowest how long we have sat idle here, unable to sail on our great venture till gods grant us a wind: and how the soldiers are beginning to murmur, and to say that if there is to be no fighting, they will return home. But now at last old Calchas, the prophet of the gods, has told me their will. The goddess Artemis, he says, is barring our way; nor will she let us sail, till I have sacrificed to her a most dear sacrifice—" the king groaned deeply—"even Iphigenia, my virgin daughter."

A cry of horror burst from the old servant at these words. But Agamemnon went on: "If I do this, the wind shall fill our sails, and Troy shall be overthrown. If not, we are doomed to fail... But I refused. I bade the prophet send my herald, to dismiss all this host; for my daughter should not die. Then came my brother Menelaus, and argued long with me, reminding me of the oath to which we were all sworn; till at last he persuaded me to endure this fate. I wrote then a letter to my wife, bidding her

send Iphigenia here, that I might give her in marriage to Prince Achilles; and added many words in praise of the prince, that she might do as I wished. She consented, the more because I assured her that Achilles would not sail with us until Iphigenia was his. None knew of this deceit, save Menelaus, Calchas, Ulysses and myself. But my heart fails me now. I will not do so wicked a thing. This letter, which thou didst see me seal and unseal again, is to retract my command. Take it now, bear it to my home in haste. For thou art faithful to my wife and to me."

"First read it to me" requested the old man, "that I may add my words to thy message."

And the king read: "Whatever my first letter charged thee, I now bid thee not to send our daughter to Aulis. For I desire her marriage to be deferred to some later time."

"Will not Achilles be angry, if he is robbed of his bride?" asked the servant. "And dost thou not fear that his wrath may work harm to us all?" But the king shook his head.

"Achilles knows nothing of this matter" he explained. "Neither of Calchas' prophecy, nor of the pretended marriage. We used his name, but told him nothing."

"A bold and perilous scheme" commented the old man, "to name thy daughter as his bride, and then slay her for the Greeks!"

"I dare no longer think of it" Agamemnon groaned. "But, away! Forget thy age, make haste. Stay not to rest by any shady stream, nor to sleep."

“Think not so ill of me!”

“And take heed” the king went on “that on the way, where roads divide, thou miss not my daughter’s carriage, if perchance she has already started on her journey to Aulis.”

“I shall take heed” the other assured him.

“Then haste away. And if thou meet her on the road, be sure that thou send her back home to Mycenae.” For Mycenae was capital of Argolis, and the king’s palace was there. So the old man stayed only to receive the king’s seal (in order to confirm the truth of his message, if he met Clytemnestra and the girl) and at once took his leave.

Dawn was now breaking over the Euboean Strait, as the careworn king returned to the privacy of his tent. And he had hardly disappeared before two companies of girls came dancing along the shore. They were from Chalcis in Euboea (that long narrow island, which screens Aulis from the open Aegean Sea) and they had made a visit to the mainland, that they might see the Greeks’ huge camp and perhaps catch a glimpse of some of the famous heroes who led them. The two bands met not far from Agamemnon’s tent, and at once with excited cries began to tell each other their news.

“We long to see the whole host” one party of them cried. “The camp and fleet, and the heroes who will carry war across to Troy in their thousand ships. For Paris stole Menelaus’ bride—but indeed Helen had been promised to him by the goddess of Love, on the day when he judged that goddess fairer than her sisters.”

“But we will see the shrine as well” replied the other party: “the sacred grove of Artemis, where her victims are sacrificed. The camp and horses we have already visited, and the rampart of shields. And there we espied the hero Ajax, son of Telamon, and the other Ajax, son of Oileus, where they were sitting with Protesilaus, dicing to pass the time away. But Palamedes, Neptune’s son, was hurling the quoit with Merion. We have seen Ulysses too, and Nireus the fairest of the Greeks.”

And their comrades answered, not to be outdone: “We have seen Achilles! Swift as a bird he is; the goddess Thetis was his mother, and by Cheiron the Centaur was he trained. In full armour we saw him flash across the plain in a race with a chariot. Eumelus drove it; we could hear his cries, and see his beauteous steeds with their golden bits. But Achilles kept pace with them.”

“But, ah! see the fleet!” exclaimed the other band of girls, looking along the shore. “There on the right wing are the fifty ships of the Myrmidons—Achilles’ own folk; with Achilles’ arms, a sea-nymph, carved on each gilded prow—”

“And next them the Argive ships, whose captain is bold Sthenelus. Then the Athenians’ sixty vessels, armed.”

“And there, the Boeotian squadron” the other band pointed. “Their figure-head recalls the glory of their city, Thebes; for it is Cadmus, their first king, who stands carved on each prow, holding a golden dragon. Next them, the Phocians and the Locrians, whom Ajax, son of Oileus, command.”

“From high Mycenæ’s towers” their comrades went on, “towers which the toiling Cyclops built, the son of Atreus comes. A hundred ships King Agamemnon brought with him; and by his side I saw his injured brother Menelaus, for whose sake Greece has risen in vengeance. Old Nestor is come from Pylos; the god Alpheus is his figure-head, in the shape of a bull, seeming to spurn the sands.”

Many more horses and their ships had these maidens seen—from Elis, from Salamis, and from all quarters of Greece: a mighty fleet, which if the Trojans dared to meet at sea, they must surely be scattered and sunk. And full of these wondrous sights, the girls passed on their way.

But they had not gone very far before they paused to mark two figures, who were approaching hastily towards Agamemnon’s tent. One of them they knew; it was none other than King Menelaus himself; the other, unknown to them, was the old servant who had lately been sent towards Mycenæ; but Mycenæ was eighty miles away, and he had certainly not made his double journey in so short a time. He was protesting angrily to Menelaus, as they hurried along.

“This thing is wrong, Menelaus! Thou shouldst not do it!”

“Ay, thou art faithful to thy master!” Menelaus sneered.

“That is an honour to me, not a reproach” retorted the old man.

“Thou shalt rue it, none the less, if thou dost what thou shouldst not” Menelaus threatened him.

“Thou hast no right to open the letter I bear” the servant persisted.

“Thou hast no right to bear it, to the harm of all Greece.”

But the old man still clutched Agamemnon’s letter. “That is not for me to judge. Leave it alone!” he cried.

“I will not let it go—”

“Nor I!” And although Menelaus threatened to brain him with the royal staff which he carried, the old servant maintained his grip.

“A slave, to dispute with me!” Menelaus stormed. “Let go, I say!” and at last he wrenched the letter from him.

But now they were close beside Agamemnon’s tent, and the old fellow called lustily: “Master, I am wronged! Thy letter he hath torn by force from my hands, in despite of justice!”

Roused by their angry voices, Agamemnon appeared. “What means this shameful tumult at doors?” he asked sternly.

“Look at me, if thou darest” retorted his brother; but Agamemnon’s eyes were fixed on the letter, which Menelaus had just read. “Dost thou see this?” the latter continued fiercely. “This base message?”

“I see it” was the cold reply. “Give it back to me.”

“Not till I have shown it to all Greece, to shame thee for thy baseness!”

“Where didst thou take it?”

“Watching the Argos road, for thy daughter’s carriage.”

“Spying, then!” Agamemnon sneered. “And thou dost talk of baseness!”

“I am not thy slave” retorted his brother.

“May I not rule in my own house?” Agamemnon demanded. But Menelaus ignored this, and began reproaching him bitterly:

“How base it is to change one’s mind, and to betray one’s friends! Let me remind thee of the truth; and attempt not, in thy pride, to deny it. Thou knowest, when thou didst long to be made chief of this host, how keen was thy secret wish, but how humble thy manner. Then didst thou press the hand of every man; thy door was open to all; and thou didst talk with all men, even the meanest—even those who cared little to hear thy words. So didst thou hope, by smooth manners, to attain thy desire. But once the supreme command was given to thee, how soon did thy manners change! No longer wert thou the same to thy friends, no longer might men approach thee. Oh, it is ill done for a man to change thus, when raised to greatness! The honest man should then show himself most true to his friends, when he has gained new power to help them. It was not so with thee; and this I urge against thee, as my first charge of baseness.’

“Well, then thou camest to Aulis” Menelaus went on, “with the armed host of Greeks. And at once, when the gods gave thee no fair wind, this first

misfortune laid thee low and thou wert helpless. How pale wast thou then, how sick at heart, when the Greeks clamoured to be dismissed! How thou didst fear to lose command of thy thousand ships! Then didst thou come to me, in sorrow: ‘What shall I do, to hold this high honour still?’ But when old Calchas sacrificed, and told thee that if Iphigenia were slain, all would be well, thou wast filled with joy. Willingly didst thou promise her, and of thy own accord didst send for her to thy wife, pretending that she should wed Achilles. But too soon, thy mind did change. Secretly thou didst write this letter, that thy daughter might not die... Oh, thou art not the first to promise some great thing freely” Menelaus resumed, “and then basely to break thy word! But how wretched is Greece, how shamed, if after threatening a grim vengeance on the barbarous Trojans, she lets them escape and mock her—thanks to thy daughter and thee! Never would I appoint a man to lead an army for his wealth, if his wisdom were so poor!”

From a distance, the company of girls watched this quarrel in dismay. “How dreadful, when fierce disputes spring up between brothers!” they murmured.

But Agamemnon answered, more quietly: “I will rebuke thee but not angrily, since thou art my brother. Why dost thou rage against me? Who injures thee? What dost thou wish? A happy marriage? It is not in my power to give thee that. Thou hadst it, but didst let it go. Am I to blame for thy weakness? Or art thou jealous of my command?”

Thou dost wish nothing but thy lost wife, though she has basely betrayed thee. Go to her former suitors; they are bound by their oath not I. I will not slay my child for the sake of thy worthless wife."

"Alas! Then I have no friends" exclaimed Menelaus bitterly.

"Friends enough, if thou wilt not destroy them."

"Thou art my brother, thou shouldst help me in my distress."

"Be like a brother to me then, and forget this madness."

But Menelaus would not be reconciled. "Thou art proud in thy kingship" he replied, "and betrayest me. But I will seek friends elsewhere—" And he was turning angrily away, when a newcomer interrupted them.

He had approached the tent, panting and exhausted as though he had run a long way. "Great king" he gasped, "I am sent before, to announce that thy wife and daughter are close at hand: with them, thy little son Orestes, to bring joy to thine eyes after thy long absence. Now they are resting, weary from their long journey, at a fountain by the way. But already the news runs through the camp that the fair Iphigenia is at hand; and the Greeks are hastening forth to meet her. Is she brought here to make some noble marriage, they ask? Or has the great king sent for her through grief at her absence? Haste then, make haste to welcome her with music and dancing, for she will soon be here."

"It is well" said the king curtly. His plan had failed, through the miscarriage of the letter; now he

must instantly decide what to do. He could see little hope now of saving Iphigenia from death; for he thought Calchas' prophecy was sure to become known. Yet how should he greet his wife and his little son Orestes? He dismissed the messenger, and turned to Menelaus. "Thou hast conquered" he told him bitterly. "Ah, wretched man that I am!" He had not meant that Clytemnestra should come.

But Menelaus clasped his hand. "By our father Atreus, I swear, that what I shall now say to thee comes from my heart. Since I beheld thy tears, I have pitied thee, and have been near weeping myself. Forget what I have said! I bear thee no more ill-will, but fell as thou dost. Thou shalt not slay thy daughter, nor shalt thou put my happiness before thine. It is not right that thou shouldst grieve while I prosper. Nay, I could find some other nobler wife, if I wished. And shall I ruin thee, to regain what is better lost? I was a fool to long for her; but I see now how bitter a thing it is for a man to lose his child. Besides, thy unhappy girl is near kin to me. I pity her, coming here to find a husband, and finding death. What is Helen to her? Let the troops all depart from Aulis: and do thou, brother, weep no more. I renounce my claim. My cruel thoughts are changed, and a brother's love takes their place. I will be base no longer!"

But Agamemnon shook his head sadly. "Nay, brother, I must needs go on. There is no escape!"

"Why, who can force thee to slay Iphigenia?" asked Menelaus in surprise.

"The whole armed host of Greece."

“Not if thou send her home again.”

“Ay, if I send her secretly. But all must be known.”

“By whom? Do not fear the host.”

“Calchas will not keep silent—”

“Unless he die?” suggested the other meaningly. “That would be easy—and prophets are useless folk!”

“But dost thou not understand, Ulysses knows all?”

Menelaus smiled. “Ulysses will never harm us.”

“He has great skill to lead and persuade the host.”

Agamemnon doubted.

“Suppose he stands forth before the troops, and tells them of Calchas’ oracle? Suppose he tells how I had pledged myself to sacrifice my child to Artemis, and then broke my word? He will soon rouse them to revolt, to slay me and thee, and then to sacrifice the maid after all, since she will be in their hands—” For the Greeks hated the barbarian Trojans; and Agamemnon knew that they were longing for war, even without the excuse of getting back Helen for Menelaus. “Only take heed” he warned his brother “that Clytemnestra is told nothing as she comes through the camp, until the sacrifice is performed so may I suffer my hard fate with as few tears as need be. And you strangers” he added, turning towards

the women who had crept nearer during this time, "I charge you to keep silent."

But the women had not been near enough to hear the dreadful truth. Still ignorant of the fate threatened Iphigeneia, they began talking in low tones among themselves. Their theme was the power of love; and they wished for themselves a quieter, happier love than the mad passion which had wrecked Menelaus' home. In awe, they recalled the tale of Paris' visit to Greece, whence all this trouble had sprung:

"His eyes inspired the flame of love; and Helen, gazing into them, was consumed by that flame. Hence came madness, uncontrolled; hence discord and war! With countless ships and spears, the Greeks press on against walled Troy to take vengeance." But at this moment, sounds of music came to their ears, and they turned to behold the train of Clytemnestra and her children approaching. Its splendour overwhelmed them. "How proudly these great ones ride! Noble are their ancestors, and their glory surpasses the glory of other folk. They are like gods. Let us stand near and welcome them, as they step from their chariot to the ground."

The procession now halted near Agamemnon's tent, and the royal lady alighted, smiling to see the courteous welcome prepared for her, and little knowing the grim discussion that had just taken place on the spot where she stood.

"As a good omen I accept your courtesy" she said: "An omen which foretells happiness for the marriage that brings us here. Receive these wedding

gifts, which I have brought with my child, and bear them carefully within. And now receive my daughter with your hands; for she is young, and the road has been wearisome." And when Iphigenia had been conducted towards the pavilion, the queen entrusted them with Orestes in turn. "Take him in your arms, he is a child still. Dost thou sleep, son? Wake happily, for thy sister's wedding-day is at hand. Noble thyself, thou shalt gain a noble ally in Prince Achilles." Then, turning to Iphigenia again: "Come, daughter, stand near me, that these strangers may behold how blest I am in thee; and hail thy father when he comes."

"Oh, may I run and throw myself in his arms?" asked the maid. But at that moment the tent-curtains were drawn aside, and the king appeared. Clytemnestra stretched out her hands.

"My honoured lord! We are here, as thou hast commanded." But the girl ran forward eagerly and flung her arms round his neck. "O father, with joy I see thee! I have missed thee so long!"

"And I thee" replied the king with a heavy heart.

"Thou hast done well to call me to thee" went on the child—for though she was his eldest, she was hardly more than a child.

"Well or ill, who can say?" her father murmured.

Iphigenia's quick eyes marked the shadow of grief on his face. "There is some trouble behind thy joy at seeing me?" she enquired.

“A king has many cares” Agamemnon replied.

“But let me hold thee now, and forget the cares” she entreated. And her father sighed :

“Thou hast all of me. All my thoughts are of thee. But thy absence after this will seem long.”

“Then stay at home, father, with thy children.”

“I wish I might. But alas, that may not be !”

“A curse on this war ” ! the child cried.

“Ay, many will feel that curse — as I reel it now.”

“How long thou dost tarry here at Aulis, father !”

“There is something that still detains me, and my host ” Agamemnon replied.

“Would that I might sail with thee !”

“Thou shalt go where thou shalt remember me ” said the king heavily, as he thought of the bitter journey to the underworld that his little daughter must make.

“Alone ? Or my mother too ? ” Iphigenia persisted.

“Alone. Neither thy father nor thy mother may go with thee there.”

“Why, wilt thou place me in some other household ? ”

But the king could endure her innocent questions no longer. “Ask me not — !” And then, tearing himself away from her, he went on : “I have a sacrifice to make; and thou art happier than I, in thy ignorance. But go in ! Alas, alas ! Those cheeks, those golden tresses ! What bitter sorrow hath Helen brought on us ! I cannot speak for tears. Go in !”

The child obeyed ; and as she entered the tent, Agamemnon turned to his wife who was watching them in surprise. "Forgive me, wife, if my grief masters me, because I must so soon deliver her to Achilles. It is happy to place her thus ; and yet a father's heart must sorrow at his loss."

"Be sure, I feel an equal grief" Clytemnestra replied. "But time will cure all." And then she began to question him about Achilles, to whom their daughter must be given.

"Zeus was the founder of his house" Agamemnon told her. "Peleus, his father, rules in the Phthian land. There he will take her, doubtless, when the auspicious season of the moon brings his wedding-day."

"Thou hast made sacrifices?" Clytemnestra enquired.

"They shall be made, soon enough" replied the king heavily. Then he went on to his wife a most strange request, as she thought : since it was contrary to the marriage-customs of the Greeks. "My brother and I, before the assembled host, will give Achilles his bride ; but do thou return home meanwhile, to take charge of my house."

"And leave my daughter?" Clytemnestra exclaimed in surprise. "Then who shall hold the marriage-torch ? Custom forbids that anyone should hold it but I ; nor wouldst thou think it right—"

"It is not right that thou shouldst mix with the rough troops" Agamemnon protested, "nor leave our younger daughter alone in our house. Be persuaded, then."

“By the goddess of Argos, no!” the queen cried. “Take charge of what else thou wilt, outside. But to prepare the bride and bring her to the wedding, is *my* care!” And without further argument, she went indignant into the tent.

The king remained where he stood, in utter despair. He had hoped (since it was too late to prevent his wife’s presence at Aulis) that he at least might persuade her to return home in ignorance, before the dreadful sacrifice should be made. But he saw now that this hope was vain. At last he decided to ask Calchas, the aged prophet, what he should do; and went sadly off in search of him.

And still the band of girls, lingering near the tent, had guessed no more of the awful truth than had Clytemnestra herself. As the king disappeared, they began chattering again about the coming war, and the city whither this huge host was presently to sail. “To Simois River, whose stream winds over the Trojan plain, the avenging fleet shall bear them. They shall see Ilion’s high embattled towers, and Troy town which Phoebus loved. The Trojans shall throng to their high walls at the war-god’s summons. But the grim god shall hew them with his sword, and shake Troy’s proud towers into dust. Then shall the women shriek aloud, and Helen shall beat her breast as her lover is torn from her arms. Ah, may heaven shield us from the fate that Troy’s women will suffer on that day!”

Then suddenly, they broke off; for another warrior was approaching. It was none other than the noble Achilles himself, gleaming in his famous

armour, who was now on his way to Agamemnon's tent with an angry message from his men. For the Myrmidons, whom he led, were growing more and more impatient. Some had come forth to make this war before they were wedded; others had left their wives before any children were born to them; so eager had they been to humble the pride of Troy. But they chafed at the king's delay. "Why tarry we here, Achilles?" they kept asking the prince. "If thou wilt have us do great deeds, let us do them now. If not, lead us home again." So Achilles was seeking Agamemnon, to tell him what the soldiers had said.

To his surprise, however, his summons brought out an unexpected figure—a lady, whom he had never seen. It was Queen Clytemnestra who, on hearing that Achilles was at the door, made no doubt that he had come to speak with her concerning his marriage. So she hailed him by name.

Achilles hailed her courteously, astonished at seeing one who was so clearly a great lady in this camp of soldiers; but he confessed he had no idea who she was.

"I am the daughter of Leda, and Agamemnon's queen" she replied; and then, advancing with outstretched hands, she greeted Achilles lovingly and said: "Join thy right hand to mine, in pledge of thy happy marriage."

But Achilles stared at her in amazement; he could only think the queen must have gone mad, since she seemed to be asking him to marry her. "I should do Agamemnon wrong, if I did so" he stammered.

“Nay, it is right for thee to take my hand, since soon thou shalt wed my daughter” returned the queen with a smile.

The prince became more amazed than ever. He could find nothing to say; at first the queen ascribed his hesitation to modesty; but presently, when he persisted that he knew nothing of such a marriage, she began to suspect some strange plot, and to feel angry and ashamed in his presence. Achilles, who was noble and generous, was trying to put her at her ease and to treat the whole thing as some foolish joke, when a slave hurriedly approached them. It was the old man, by whom Agamemnon had tried to send his second letter: and who had been given to Agamemnon long ago by Clytemnestra’s father, at the time of their marriage. We have seen how attached to Agamemnon this faithful old servant was; but he was even more attached to Clytemnestra, because he had been born and bred in her father’s house. Now he looked round him cautiously, as though fearful of being overheard, and begged to be allowed to speak. “Thou knowest, O queen, that I am faithful to thy children and thee?” he whispered.

“Thou hast been always so” Clytemnestra replied. “Say what thou wilt.”

The old man lowered his voice still further. “The king intends to slay thy daughter, with his own hand” he faltered.

“What! Thou art mad!”

“Nay, it is true. He will strike her white neck with the sword.”

Clytemnestra turned pale. "But why? What Fury has driven him to this?"

"Calchas, and Calchas' oracle — so that the host may sail" the old slave replied. And he explained how Calchas said that Artemis would grant no fair wind, unless Iphigenia were sacrificed.

"Then this false tale of marriage was no more than a bait, to entice us from home?" Clytemnestra exclaimed. "Alas, then we have come to our ruin! But how dost thou know, old man?"

"Because thy husband changed his mind, and charged me with a letter to thee, bidding thee keep the child at home and think no more of his first message. But Menelaus prevented me; it is to him what we owe this sorrow."

"Alas, Prince Achilles, don't thou hear this?" the queen groaned.

"I hear, and grieve for thee. And for myself, I find it hard to endure that thy husband should use my name thus" replied Achilles fiercely. Clytemnestra fell on her knees before him.

"Dear prince, I will not blush to be thy suppliant, since thy mother was divine; and sore is my daughter's need! Ah, protect her, since she was called thy bride. She has no help but thee. Thou hearest what cruelty King Agamemnon has planned, thou seest my daughter and myself alone in this camp of men. If thou wilt not help us, we are lost indeed!"

And Achilles answered quietly: "I owe my duty to the sons of Atreus, when they command in honour; but where they show no honour, I shall not obey."

I will protect thee; nor shall the king make plots in my name; for if so, I should be culpable of thy daughter's death. Let Calchas hold his peace! He shall have no sacrifice. For what is a prophet? He is a man who, when chance favours him, speaks one truth amongst many lies. And the king wrongs me, promising this marriage in my name. He shall win no support from *me!*"

The queen clasped his knees gratefully. "How shall I praise thee for thy words! I am ashamed to seek thy aid, in a sorrow that is none of thine. And yet it is a lovely and noble thing, when a good man is willing to help a stranger in distress. Pity me; for I grieve now the more, that my hopes of receiving thee as a son-in-law are in vain. Wilt thou have my daughter bless thee too, falling at thy knees? Timid and modest she is; yet she shall come, if I call."

"Nay, do not frighten her. Let her stay within" Achilles replied. "There is no need for her to sue to me, to obtain my service; and in the camp men might jest and slander her, if they saw her with me. I have already promised my aid."

"O, be thou blest for it!" the queen cried.

"But let us take counsel what to do" the prince resumed. "We must persuade her father to change his mind."

"He fears the host too much" answered Clytemnestra.

"Yet reason may prevail. Go to him, beg him not to slay his own child. If thou succeed, there is no more to be done; if not, come to me. But let us try

persuasion before violence, lest the host think that I have done the king wrong."

"Whatever seems right to thee, I will do. But if I fail, where shall I find thee?"

"I will be close at hand" Achilles promised. "Only, walk not alone through the host, lest men think shame of thee. Wait here, till the king returns." And with these words, Prince Achilles withdrew.

The troop of girls stared after him, admiring his knightly action; for they had heard all. Then they recalled his noble lineage, and how his famous father Peleus had been married on Mount Pelion, long ago. "Zeus' own cup-bearer was there, the lovely Gany-mede: sea-nymphs, and the huge Centaurs waving their spears of pine as their hoofs thundered across the ground. Phoebus came, and prophesied: 'A son shalt thou have, bright and beautiful, who with his Myrmidons shall help destroy the towers of the Trojans, splendid in armour which the god Vulcan himself shall forge.'" Then, their thoughts turning to Iphigenia, they went on: "But thou, unhappy maid, shalt be led forth before the Grecian altar, crowned with flowers. Thy mother decked thee as a bride, but in vain. Injustice reigns, virtue availeth nothing. Yet none foresees the danger, the vengeance of heaven that this cruel act shall bring!"

They ceased, for at last King Agamemnon was seen returning. Clytemnestra came out from the pavilion to meet him; and he advanced to her, little knowing that his secret had been betrayed. "I would' speak with thee here alone" he began heavily.

“For I have words to say which our young daughter, soon to be a bride, must not hear.”

“Speak, then” the queen replied.

“I pray thee, give up our daughter to my charge” said the king. “Now all is ready for the marriage-rites, and for the sacrifice which must first be made.”

“Thy words are gracious” answered the queen darkly. “But for thy deeds, who shall speak? Yet come forth, my daughter” she called: “for thy father’s purpose is known to thee. And bring thy little brother Orestes, wrapped in thy shawl.....See, she is here.”

Iphigenia had come out of the tent, pale and in tears. “Why dost thou weep?” asked Agamemnon, cut to the heart. And then in quick suspicion, seeing how his wife and daughter clung to each other: “Why stand you thus, terrified?”

“Answer me truly what I ask” Clytemnestra replied.

The king’s heart misgave him. “Speak” he said.

“Dost thou not mean to slay my daughter and thine?”

“Alas, what an evil question!” stammered the king.

“Yet answer it.”

“Ask what is more meet to ask, and thou shalt be answered.”

“I ask only this.”

Then Agamemnon, seeing that his purpose was known, burst out into wild laments. “Alas, my dread fate, my cruel doom!”

“I have heard all” Clytemnestra told him. “Thy groans are vain ; nor is there any need of words.”

“I will be silent, then. I will not lie to thee. It is true.” And the king covered his head.

“Hear me” Clytemnestra said, “for I will speak plainly. And the first deed for which I will reproach thee, is this: thou didst wed me against my will, seizing me by force ; my husband Tantalus was slain by thee ; my infant son, torn roughly from my arms, was by thee dashed against the ground to his death. My brothers, sons of Zeus, ran at thee in gleaming armour ; but my old father Tyndarus saved thee from them, as thou didst crouch in prayer at his knees. So didst thou win me as a bride. Thou shalt thyself bear witness how, in time, forgetting old wrongs, I became reconciled to thee and thy house, and guarded thy honour loyally. Thou hadst delight in me, and happiness. Three daughters I bore thee, and this little son. Now thou wilt rob me of one of them. Should someone ask, why thou must kill thy daughter, what wouldst thou say?”

But the king bowed his head and remained silent.

“Then I will speak for thee” Clytemnestra went on. “It is, that Menelaus may win Helen again ! So that we may redeem what most we hate, with what is dearest to us ! While thou art long away at Troy, think what my grief must be, to see the empty chair of my child and her room where none dwells. Alone I shall sit, lamenting her : ‘Thy father hath slain thee, O my child ! Even he that gave thee birth, none other ! This hath he done for his house !’ O, by the gods, do-

not compel me to think ill of thee, nor treat me so ill! What prayers canst thou ever make to heaven, when thou hast sacrificed thy child? What blessing canst thou hope, to attend on thee? Thou who dost sail in such dishonour to 'his accursed war? Am I to pray for thy success? Nay, I should think naught of the wisdom of the gods, if they showed favour to a man who willingly defiled his hands with such blood. Wilt thou embrace thy children, on returning home? Thou hast no right to them. Which of them will endure to look on thy face, knowing what thou hast done? And now I ask thee this: since the Greeks' choice appointed thee alone to rule them and lead them to war, shouldst thou not thus have spoken to them in justice: 'It is your will to sail to Troy; then cast lots, whose daughter must be slain for your sake!' This had been equal justice to all the host; nor hadst thou then been singled out alone, to give thy daughter for Greece. Or Menelaus should have slain his child, since the cause is his. But no, it is I, the faithful wife, who must be robbed of my child, in order that Helen who hath brought all this sorrow on us may possess her own daughter with joy!" And then she challenged him: "Answer, if I have spoken aught but the truth? But if my words are just, O, slay not thy child and mine; and so prove thy wisdom!"

"O, hear her!" the listening women exclaimed. "Common justice bids that a man should preserve his own. Who can deny it?"

And suddenly, Iphigenia spoke: "O father, had I the skill of Orpheus to sway men with words, I would use it now. I have no eloquence but the tears which I shed. O father, I clasp thy knees and pray thee,

kill me not in my youth! The light of day is sweet, send me not into darkness. I was the first to call thee father, thy eldest child. I was the first to sit playing on thy knees. Thou wast wont to say to me: 'Shall I ever see thee, child, in some fair house of thy own, happy and prosperous in the love of some husband who shall carry on my honour?' And I would answer, leaning against thy cheek which I now touch with my hand: "And when that day shall come, what shall I do for thee? I will receive thee in my house when thou art old, cheer thee with loving kindness, and repay thy care lavished on me when I was little." Such was our talk, and well I remember it. But thou hast forgotten, and wilt slay me. O, by thy father Atreus I implore thee—by my mother here, who bore me in pain—let her not suffer bitter pangs again for my sake! Let me not die! If Paris hath stolen Helen, what fault is that of mine? Why must he destroy me?" And as her father still sat silent, and bowed with grief, she went on: "Look on me, father. Give me a smile, a kiss, that if my words cannot move thee I may yet have this happy memory of thy love as I die." And turning to the child Orestes: "Little brother, small help canst thou give thy friends. Yet let thy tears speak for thy sister now, that she may not perish. Even infants have a sense what injustice is; and see, father, he sues to thee, though he cannot speak! Be gentle to me, have pity, thy two children entreat it! O, I will sum up all my prayer in these last words: sweet is it for mortals to behold the sun's light, but beneath the earth there is none. No one dies willingly; for life, however hard and cruel it be, is better than to go down into darkness!"

She ceased, and the watching women cried out in grief. "O wretched Helen! What bitter strife and woe has thy passion brought on the house of Atreus!"

The king spoke at last. "Pity! Alas, I know where pity is due! I am a man, and love my children. Fearful it is to me to dare this cruel deed: and fearful not to dare it. Need drives me. See this mighty camp, and its princes arrayed in arms! They may not stir against Troy's towers, unless I give thee up as a victim to Artemis. So Calchas decrees. They are denied their victory. But their proud hearts are mad with rage against Priam's house, to avenge the shame and insult which it has wrought on the Greeks. They will slay all at home in Argos—me, thee, and all our kin—if I offend the goddess and hold her oracle in contempt. It is not Menelaus, my child, that has forced me to this, nor do I bow to his will; but all Greece compels me to yield thee up, whether I will or no. I have no power here to defy them, I must submit. Ay, and in thee and me it lies to free Greece from shame; nor must her sons bow tamely to the insult of foreigners!" And so saying, he turned abruptly into his pavilion and left them.

"Alas, thy father will desert thee in thy peril!" Clytemnestra cried bitterly. "How wretched are we in thy death! Thy father saves himself, betraying thee to thy doom!"

"Dear mother!" wept the child, who had turned from Agamemnon in despair as she saw that his mind was made up against her. "One dirge shall be raised for us both. No more shall the joyous light of day

shine on me, no more!" And bitterly in her urn, recalling the old and ill-fated happenings that had led to this misery, she thought of the forests on Mount Ida above Troy, where Paris had been exposed in infancy, since his father Priam had not wished him to live. But he had grown up among shepherds there, helping them tend their flocks. Till at last, one ill-omened day, three goddesses appeared to him in the heart of the woods. They were Athene, goddess of Wisdom: Hera, Zeus' wife: and Aphrodite the goddess of Love. They had come there to settle a dispute which arose, as to which of them was the fairest; and they bade Paris decide. For a long while he hesitated, listening to the promises with which each goddess tried to sway him. Athene promised her own gift, the power which springs from wisdom; Hera offered worldly pomp and king-ship, that he might rule over men; but Aphrodite said: 'Choose me: and thou shalt win the fairest wife in all Greece.' So Paris judged in favour of Aphrodite; the fairest woman in Greece was Helen, Menelaus's wife; Paris, wandering through the world, won her and carried her off; and from that theft sprang countless sorrows and injustices, of which Iphigenia's death must be one.

Yet the most bitter thought of all, was that her father had forsaken her. "He, to whom I owe my birth, betrays me and saves himself" she lamented. "O, cruel fate! And O, accursed Helen, whose love brings me to my death! Would that the fleet had never gathered here, in the winding bay of Aulis! Or would that Zeus himself had sent a fair wind, to bear the warriors to Troy! Unequal are his gifts. To some men he grants success and favouring gales, to others

delay and sorrow. Those whom he favours leave the harbour in pride, and haste across the sea; yet, since men are born to suffering, why should they haste to seek their destiny sooner than they need?"

The women, meanwhile, were lamenting among themselves, and cursing the name of Helen, when the sounds of a distant tumult reached their ears. It came from the direction of the camp, and grew louder each minute. Then running figures appeared; and before long they discerned Achilles in his bright armour, making swiftly towards them, his great speed easily outrunning the rabble that followed far behind.

"O unhappy queen!" he cried out, as he reached Clytemnestra. "Dost thou hear the clamour of the Greeks?"

"Ah, what does it mean?" gasped Clytemnestra; and the young Iphigenia clung to her, awaiting the prince's words. She had tried to slip back into the tent as Achilles approached, for she was filled with shame at the thought of how her father had treated him; but her mother bade her stay, and hear his news.

"Calchas has told the people of his oracle" Achilles replied. "Now they are raging, clamouring that the sacrifice of this child shall be made!"

"And did none speak against it?" Clytemnestra cried. For she knew well that Prince Achilles would not break word, nor let Iphigenia die if it were possible to save her.

Achilles bowed his head, and the two women saw that he was bleeding from some ugly cuts, which

looked as though stones had made them. "I did. But all in vain. I have been mobbed and stoned."

"For trying to save her?" the queen exclaimed. "O, who dared to touch thee—!"

"The full crowd of Greeks" he said.

"But were thine own folk not at hand to help thee? Thy Myrmidon warriors?"

Achilles laughed harshly. "They were the first to raise their hands against me" he replied. "For they cried out that I had been turned from our purpose by a woman's tongue."

Clytemnestra looked at her daughter in despair. "Alas, child, we are lost!" she groaned. And to Achilles: "And how didst thou answer them?"

"I swore that I would never suffer her, who has come here destined to be my bride, to be harmed by them. I told them, the king her father had named her mine—"

"Ay, and had her brought here by his express command, from her home in Argos—"

"But I cried out at them in vain" Achilles resumed. "Their shouts and threats drowned my words."

"Evil is the mob" said Clytemnestra grimly. "Headstrong, and always wrong!"

"Yet I will help thee, in spite of them" Achilles promised earnestly.

"But alas, how? Thou canst not fight alone against all the host!"

“Thou seest these men-at-arms” he answered, pointing to some of Agamemnon’s bodyguard who were stationed not far away—picked men, chosen out of all the army for their proved loyalty to the king.

“O, may thy plan succeed !” Clytemnestra cried.

“It shall !” he swore.

“And my child shall not die ?”

“Never, while I can raise a hand to prevent it.”

“But will none come to try and take her by force ?” doubted the queen, looking anxiously towards the camp, at whose edge the horde of shouting soldiers was massing more thickly each moment.

“Ay, they will come, the whole mob of them ! Ulysses will lead them here.”

Clytemnestra turned paler still as she heard those words; for she had often heard of Ulysses’ cunning skill in persuading men to obey him. “Is it his own wish to lay hands on her ?” she enquired. “Or have the mob appointed him as their leader ?”

“They have appointed him. But he was willing and eager for the work. Yet I will make him keep his distance” Achilles promised, touching his great sword.

“Ah, surely he would not dare to seize the king’s daughter by force ?” Clytemnestra cried. The danger frightened her the more, because at home her husband was a great king whose word no man dared dispute; but now she was beginning to understand, that there are limits even to the might of a king: and that if all the host united against him, not even Agamemnon himself could resist them.

“Indeed he would” Achilles answered grimly. “He would be ready enough to drag her hence by the hair, if he had his way.”

“Then what shall I do?”

“Take courage. Keep thy daughter within doors.”

“And she shall not be slain?”

“He has not taken her, as yet!” Achilles replied.

But now, quite suddenly, a fresh voice broke in on them. For Iphigenia herself stepped forward, and spoke. “Mother, hear my words! I see thee angry against my father; but thy anger is vain. For where force rules, it is useless for us to struggle. Let us give thanks to this most noble stranger for his goodwill; yet have a care, lest thou awake the wrath of the host, and bring destruction upon him. Nay, hear me, for I am resolved what to do. It is decreed that I must die. Then let me die with honour, not resisting my fate. The eyes of all Greece are on me now; on me depends their success—the sailing of their fleet, the destruction of Troy; it is for me to ensure that never again shall foreigners insult Greece, stealing our women by force; which they will never do, if Paris’ theft of Helen is now avenged. By my death shall this vengeance be made possible; and I shall be forever held in honour, as the saviour of Greece. Since, then, these things are so, it would be base in me to hold my own life too dear! And thou, mother, didst bear me not for thyself alone, but for all Greece, that I might be a blessing to my native-land. Shall thousands take up arms for her: shall thousands, toiling at the oar, sweep forth to die for her in battle

round Troy, and shall I alone frustrate them? There can be but one answer to that! Nay more, it is not right that noble Achilles should face all this host, and be slain by them, for a woman's sake. He is more worthy to behold the light of day than a thousand women. If the goddess Artemis be willing to accept me, who am I to oppose her will? I should not dare. For Greece I will give my life. Slay me, and let the ruin of Troy be my monument for ever. It is very right that Greece should be mistress of the foreigner; Nature has made them to be slaves, and the Greeks to be free."

At these noble words, Achilles looked at her in reverence and in awe. "O daughter of Agamemnon" he exclaimed, "I should count myself blest indeed, if the gods gave me thee for my wife! Nobly hast thou spoken, and hast shown thyself worthy of thy native land. For in refusing to resist the goddess' will, thou hast thought more of Greece's welfare than of thy own. Thy generous spirit makes me long all the more to win thee for my bride. Yet ponder well! I have no more eager wish than to rescue thee, and lead thee safe to my home; and, by my mother's name, if I stood by and left thee as a prey to the Greeks, I should hate myself. Think well, before thou shalt decide; death is an awful thing."

But she answered only: "Therefore, die not for me, nor stain thy sword with blood. There shall be war and death enough for Helen's sake. But let me save my country."

"O, glorious courage!" Achilles exclaimed. "Since thou hast made this high resolve, I can say no more.

Yet know, that I will take my stand, in arms, near the altar of Artemis; then, shouldst thou change thy mind, I shall be ready to aid thee; nor shalt thou be bound past remedy by this swift and rash decision—"For he believed that when the young girl saw the knife at her throat, she would repent of her high purpose; and he resolved that he would still be ready to fulfil his promise, even at the last moment. "I will wait near the temple till thou shalt come" he told her, and so took his leave.

Iphigenia now turned to comfort her mother, who stood weeping silently. "Weep not" she begged "or thou wilt make my courage to fail. And grant me what I shall ask."

"I will perform thy every wish" the wretched Clytemnestra answered. She had now little hope of Iphigenia's life; for she knew<sup>1</sup> the girl's proud spirit, and was convinced that she would carry out her resolve.

"Do not clip thy hair" Iphigenia begged, "nor put on the black raiment of sorrow—" these being the usual signs of mourning in Greece.

"What sayest thou, child? Am I to show no signs of grief, when thou art gone!"

"Not gone, but preserved for ever" the girl replied. "And thou too shalt be famous for my death."

"And shall that make me mourn thee any the less?"

"Mourn me not at all. No tomb shall be raised for me."

"What, wilt thou die without burial?"

“My tomb shall be the altar of Artemis,” said Iphigenia proudly; and for all her grief, Clytemnestra’s heart swelled with triumph at those noble words.

“Well hast thou spoken, child” she cried. I will obey.”

“And think of me as one blest, in doing good for Greece.”

“What message shall I take home to thy sisters?” the queen next asked.

“See that they too wear no mourning robes for me. And take them my last farewell. And O, tend little Orestes here with thy loving care, till he come to manhood!”

“Embrace him” wept Clytemnestra, “for thou shalt never see him again.”

Iphigenia did so: saying to him softly and lovingly, though he did not understand—“Thou didst help me so far as thou wast able, little one.”

The queen now asked if there was anything that Iphigenia wished her to do for her, when she returned to Argos; and the girl’s answer came at once—for she knew well how bitterly the queen was blaming Agamemnon—“Hate not my father, and thy husband.”

But the stricken mother was less willing to promise this. “He must endure my fierce reproaches for thy sake” she cried.

The girl shook her head.” “He yields me to death unwillingly, for our country’s good.”

“No, basely! Treacherous he is, unworthy of his father Atreus!”

Iphigenia saw that it was useless to reason with the queen in her present anguish. "Who goes with me to the place of sacrifice" she asked, "before I am dragged there by force?"

"I will go with thee."

"No. That may not be."

"I will hang on thy robes" the unhappy mother exclaimed.

"No, mother, stay, as I have entreated thee. This will bring greater honour to us both. Let one of my father's servants lead me to the sacred ground where I shall fall a victim to Artemis."

Then Clytemnestra's courage failed, and she broke into loud laments. "O my child, wilt thou go indeed, wilt thou leave me for ever? O, forsake me not!" But Iphigenia answered:

"Let none weep. But you, maidens, raise the hymn of praise to Artemis, and pray for the triumph of the Greeks. Come, begin the rites, kindle the sacred flame; and let my father stretch out his right hand to the altar; for I am come to save my country, and to bring success to her arms. Bind my brow with garlands, place vessels of holy water around. Raise high your voices in the chant to blessed Artemis. For the fates call upon my aid; I obey their dread power, and die!"

The women were all in tears: not so much for Iphigenia now—since her heroic deed was too high for tears—as for the mother left desolate. "O loved queen, we weep for thee" they cried, "while we may weep unchecked; for when the sacrifice is made we must not break silence!"

"Praise be to Artemis!" Iphigenia went on, "Praise be to the Queen of Aulis, on whose shore the warriors await their release! O Argos! O Mycenae, where I was born! My lamp of life was raised in thee. Gladly now I sink into darkness."

"O maid" the women chanted "thy name shall be famous for ever!"

And now the king and his attendants came forth, with the procession of priests and captains. All was prepared for the great sacrifice. Iphigenia took her place, and turned to stretch out her hands for the last time to the light of the sun.

"O, thou lamp of day, bright son of Zeus, farewell! Another world awaits me now, a new life elsewhere: Farewell, dear lovely light! Farewell!"

Clytemnestra sank senseless to the ground, overwhelmed by her grief. The procession moved forward. The women were chanting a triumphal hymn; for in accordance with the maid's last wish, they put away their grief, and were filled only with the joy and pride of the great sacrifice that was taking place before their eyes. "See, see, she goes!" they chanted. "She goes in glory, to win triumph for Greece! The garlands are on her brow, the fatal knife is prepared. To the altar her father takes his way, obeying the will of heaven; while the Greek host in glittering arms makes ready to embark. To Artemis, to Artemis let us sing, that she may crown them with victory! Dread goddess, waft them safe to the Phrygian shore, where Troy's towers stand. Help them, O help them! Let glory and victory be theirs!"

Then, in a dead silence unbroken by any ill-omened word, the procession reached the altar. A knife gleamed bright in the sun.....

A few moments later, while the queen still lay motionless where she had fallen, a west wind arose and began blowing steadily towards the Phrygian shore. With cries of eager joy, the Greeks were running towards their ships.

The great sacrifice was accomplished.

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## CHAPTER II

The story now goes on, many years later. Iphigenia's death had given the Greeks their passage to Troy, as the goddess had promised; but victory had been slow in coming. For ten full years there was war on the Trojan plain, fortune inclining now this way, now that, as each group of gods and goddesses persuaded Father Zeus to favour their own side; but the Greeks, confident in their oracles, still kept their faith that they would win in the end. Meanwhile their wives and children remained at home, looking after the absent warriors' interests as best they could; and at Mycenae, the kingdom of Argos was ruled by Queen Clytemnestra.

So sure was Agamemnon of victory, that he had laid a chain of beacons all the way to Greece, which men should light to flash the news whenever Troy should fall. Each night a watchman stood upon the palace-roof at Mycenae, his eyes fixed on the point where the nearest beacon was laid. But for ten years he had seen only darkness.

it to resist the will of the goddess, harder still to obey. To slay his darling child, his life, his joy, and stain his hands with the blood of his own daughter! 'Shall I betray the host?' cried he, 'and break the oath I have sworn?' All men demand that the will of heaven be done. And heaven must be obeyed by all. So, let her die!' Thus he endured fate's cruel burden, bowing his head to the gods. The dreadful deed had his consent. He gave his child's blood as the price of victory in a woman's war."

"In vain the maiden prayed" another went on. "In vain she called on his name. His ears were closed to her, and the fierce chiefs had no pity for her youth. There stood the father; and, when prayer had been made, 'Take her' he said 'as she lies helpless. Fold her in her loose robes, and lay her on the altar. Yet gag her lovely mouth, lest she breathe out a curse upon our enterprise, in the anguish of death.' But as they led her to her doom, her eyes wrung pity even from those hard hearts. Like some fair picture she was, that seems to speak but is dumb. Oft had they heard her voice, in happier days, when she did sing her father's praise at the royal banquet. But now that sweet voice was stilled."

The last speaker ceased, nor did any venture to describe the maid's death. "Calchas spoke truly" one said. "The gods' slow Justice lies in wait, to teach men wisdom by suffering. Destiny must be fulfilled. Men dare not guess what woe the morrow may bring; but we, left here as sole protectors of our land, pray heaven that good may befall!"

At this moment the palace-doors were opened, and at the top of the steps Queen Clytemnestra appeared. The old men hailed her with a cry, and asked what good news had caused her to summon them.

“Ye shall hear news beyond your utmost hopes” she cried proudly. “The Greeks have taken Troy!”

“Troy fallen? Ah, if we dared believe —”

“The Greeks have taken Troy” Clytemnestra repeated.

The old men wept for joy. “What proof hast thou?” they exclaimed.

“Proof enough, unless the gods are deceiving me.”

“Thou hast heard some swift rumour?” they asked, still hardly daring to believe that the news could be true. “How was Troy taken? And when?”

“Last night the proud city fell.”

“But how canst thou know? What runner could come so swiftly?”

“The God of Fire” answered the queen. “From Mount Ida he shot a spark; and soon the flaming messenger leaped from hill to hill.\* Lemnos first took the tidings from Mount Ida. Mount Athos flung it on. From point to point the great bonfires shone in flaming glory, like the sun. Macistus, Messapus, Euripus, Asopus and Cithaeron passed the news along: till it had streamed, a mighty beard of flame, across the Saronic Gulf, for Arachne to show it to our eyes. Such was the bright procession of my heralds, each

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\* Look up these places in your classical map.

kindling from the next with the happy news—the news that my lord hath sent me, that Troy is no more!”

“O, let us praise the gods!” the old citizens cried. “But tell us more of this wonder.”

“This day, Troy is humbled to the ground” resumed the queen. “To seem to see her ruin. A clamour of voices rings through her terrified streets—the victors’ shout, the groaning of dying men, the shriek of captives. The spoilers rush through the darkness, spurred by hunger and greed. They lodge in the palaces of Trojan princes. Ah, may they reverence the shrines of the gods, and spare the sacred fanes! Much hardship awaits them still; they have run half their race, but must endure the second half ere they reach home again. Their ships must brave the sea. And even then, if any of them sinned—” Clytemnestra spoke grimly now, as though hinting at more than she was willing to say—“if any hath sinned, the gods may still punish him; for vengeance never sleeps, till blood is atoned!”

The old men made no reply to these last words. For they could not forget the ancient tale of that unhallowed sacrifice, and of the bitterness that had sprung up between their queen and her lord. They hoped that old quarrel was healed; yet their joy at the news of Agamemnon’s return was mixed with uneasy forebodings. So, instead of answering, they broke at once into a hymn of praise to Zeus, for the king’s victory.

“O Zeus, avenger of wrongs, we bow to thee! Long ago, Paris earned thy wrath; and now with sure-

aim, and in the fullness of time, thou hast struck him down.

“Some men have said the gods are blind, and care not to punish sin. But it is not so. The fathers’ folly shall be avenged on the sons, and he who outrages Justice shall be cast down into hell.

“So now the punishment of Zeus overtakes false Paris, who came to the house of Menelaus as a guest, and stole away his bride. She went; but the dowry she brought with her was destruction and death.

“For, in the country which she left, swords flashed and oars were carried down to the sea. ‘Woe is come to the house of Atreus!’ the prophets cried. ‘Marriage is defiled!’ But Menelaus stood silent, scarce able to believe the news. The phantom of Helen haunted him, the statues looked down at him with pitiless smiling eyes. In vain he slept, dreaming of her and waking to find her gone.

“Nor has sorrow come to Menelaus alone. Greece grieves today, and many an Argive home is mourning; for thousands went to Troy, and how few return! At the city-gates the mothers await their sons; but alas, not men but dust is brought back to them! The War-God trades in bodies, and gives dust for gold—poor ashes, a light burden to those that bring them home, but heavy for those that receive them to endure. A mourning cry is heard, wailing for this one who was a great spear-man, or for that one who died nobly in an ignoble cause, for a strange woman’s sake. In silence the parents suffer, hating Atreus’ sons.

“A nation’s hate is hard to endure, and it is ill when kings are cursed by their own folk. My heart

is sorrowful, I fear lest bad may become worse. For the gods watch the return of those, whose hands are red with blood. What though the foolish rabble cheer them as they enter the city? Their glory soon shall fade. May it be thy fortune to live soberly: neither to spoil the cities of other men, nor endure the ruin of my own!"

And now the queen appeared on the steps again, and the old men pressed forward. "Soon we shall know for sure" they said "if the beacons were true." For they had spied a herald running from the harbour, with an olive-branch, the sign of peace, in his hand. They waited eagerly to hear his first words. Soon he had reached them.

"All hail, dear land of Argos!" he cried. "Now after ten years I return, saving from countless wrecks this one dear hope at the last." And with that he called on the gods of Argos, blessing and thanking them for his home-coming. "For Agamemnon is at hand, like the sun in triumph. Greet him, as one who with the spade of Justice hath dug up the roots of Troy, and hath caused her children to perish. No longer may Paris boast of his unpunished crime; for he hath paid the penalty, he and his city with him."

"Hail, soldier!" the old men exclaimed. "How dost thou fare?"

"So well" the herald answered "that I could bless heaven and die!"

"Hast thou missed Greece so sorely?"

"I weep for joy, seeing her dear shore again. And you? Have you missed those of us who have been so long away?"

“Our hearts have been darkened by our sorrow” the old men replied. “But we have learned to endure all things in silence.”

“Yet now, all ends in happiness” the herald answered them. “It were too long and grim a tale, to tell all that we have suffered; hard work, hard lodging, little sleep were ours, on the voyage to Troy; and when we landed at last, our sorrows increased. For we slept out, beneath the enemy’s walls, in marshy fields where we were drenched with the dew. Our clothes were rotted by the rain, we became like wild beasts. We endured long bitter months of snow in the winters, and in summer the scorching heat of the sun. But those days are past! We shall forget them, we who still survive; for our reward has surpassed our sufferings. Our host has captured Troy! Now we shall hang up all the spoils of war in the temples of our gods, that our children may possess them forever. Men shall rejoice, and praise us and our generals, and Zeus who gave strength to our arms.”

Clytemnestra still waited on the steps, drinking in the man’s words. “I was the first to raise the cry of triumph” she declared, “when the fire gleaming through the night told the doom of Troy. Men mocked my faith, and told me I was deceived; but I made haste to sacrifice, and spread the news through the streets; so, at a woman’s word, there arose hymns of praise and thanksgiving, and the smell of incense. And now thy words prove me right. My lord himself shall tell me the full story; but meanwhile I go, that I may make all ready to welcome him with the honour he hath earned. For what more joyous day has any

woman, than the day when she welcomes her king home from the war? O, let him hasten back! Tell him his wife awaits him, faithful as when he left: like a true watch-dog, loyal to him and his friends, but fierce to his enemies. Tell him, such treasures as he left sealed bear his seals still. And for myself, I am unswayed by praise or blame from any other man, like true brass that will take no stain."

Then the old men began to question the messenger. "And is Menelaus safe too?" But the soldier looked troubled.

"I dare not lie to you" he said, "for the truth will too soon be known."

"Nay, tell us the truth, however harsh it may be. Truth and happiness too seldom agree!"

"He is missing from the host" the herald told them gravely. "He and his ship have not been seen."

"Did he not sail with you, or did storms part you on the way? Is he alive or dead? What news have you heard?"

"The sun alone knows what is become of him; yet what I can, I will tell." Then he related how, as the fleet sailed from Troy, a terrible storm had sprung up out of Thrace and had thrown all their ships into confusion. When the sun rose again, they saw the Aegean Sea strewn with many a wreck. Agamemnon's own squadron had come safely to port; but they had no assurance that the rest had been equally fortunate. "Yet they must fear the same for us" he ended, "if they have been saved. Let us hope for the best, and make all ready for Menelaus' return."

If he still lives, he will win home again; more than this I dare not say." And so, his message given, he followed Clytemnestra into the palace.

Once more the old men's thoughts turned to Helen, the cause of all the sorrows that the Greeks had endured. "Well was she named" they sighed. "Surely some far-seeing fate guided her parents' choice. For she has proved the Hell of ships, the Hell of men, the Hell of cities.\* From her pleasant home and from her marriage she fled, to be escorted by armed men far across the sea. But their fair booty was to bring destruction upon them. The sons of Priam sang with joy, praising the bride from Greece; but now the old city weeps, cursing both Paris and the woman that he won; for she has drenched their wide streets in blood.

"He who has caught a lion-cub, and brings it back to his home, finds it tame at first. His children play with it, it is nursed like a babe, it seems harmless and licks his hand. But as it grows, its native fierceness grows with it; it roams, it robs the sheep-fold, and at last stains its captor's floor with his children's blood. Even so did the Trojans bring home ruin for themselves.

"In the old time men said—and it is true today—that if man's fortune grows too great it must end in sorrow, and sons must inherit the woes that their fathers were spared. I know that ugly deeds beget ugly deeds. Yet I would fain believe that the just man shall prosper for ever, though his wealth flow like a stream.

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\* This pun on Helen's name occurs in the original Greek.

“Yet a proud heart breeds pride. And sometimes an ancient crime will come to life again, even in the Children’s children—” The old men’s voices were hushed now, in awe. Perhaps they were speaking only of Iphigenia’s death; or perhaps they were thinking of an older crime—a certain terrible deed that had been done in Atreus’ family long ago, but that no Argive dared mention publicly; what it was, you shall hear by and by. “Sometimes a man enacts again the sins of his ancestors, and crowns the iniquity of his house. Then Justice will turn against him, rich though he be.”

But now a great blare of trumpets and a shouting of folk was heard; and the old citizens, turning towards the harbour, saw the triumphal pomp of Agamemnon coming up the hill. “Ah, king!” they muttered beneath their breath, while he was still some way off: “We thought thee rash and wrong, when thou didst lead so many thousands to their death just for Helen’s sake. But now all that is past, and loyally we welcome thee home.” And they added meaningly, in still lower tones: “Thou shalt know soon enough who are thy true friends, and who did evil in thy name whilst thou wert away!”

Agamemnon now reached the palace-gate, followed by his captains and slaves; and in Greek fashion, his first greeting was addressed to the gods of Argos—“Ye gods who knew our cause was just, and who gave us the victory. who taught our hands to fight and our brains to plan, until the fatal horse disgorged our fierce warriors in the heart of Troy.\*

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\* Alluding to the famous Wooden Horse, inside which a band of Greeks had hidden, and were dragged into Troy by the Trojans themselves.

As for you, old friends, I greet you, well knowing your worth; we will take counsel with one another, you and I, for the city's good, when time serves. But now I salute my home and thank the gods for my safety. May victory, gained at last, dwell here for evermore!"

Clytemnestra came out to greet him; and when she had done so she said to them all! "I will not blush to proclaim my love before all! Alone I stayed, while he camped far away on the plain of Troy; and as if this were not enough to bear, there came rumours to torture me. My lord must have been pierced as full of holes as a net, had he received as many wounds as these rumours told: he must have had three lives, like Geryon, were the reports of his death true. Tormented thus, I was oft fain to hang myself in despair, had my friends allowed. And I had lost Orestes too, the pledge of our love: placing him in the care of a good friend, for his safety's sake. Ah, many a lamplit night have I watched through, my thoughts only on thee!" she went on with every sign of passionate love, as she gazed down at Agamemnon in his chariot below. "But having endured so much, I greet thee now with joy, thou pillar of my house: as the sailor greets land when he has lost all hope, or as the thirsty traveller greets the sight of a spring. But come, leave thy chariot and enter thy home... Haste, haste, ye slaves! Is your task not yet done? Spread purple for the feet of the king—" And the slaves, running forward as Agamemnon rose, laid a long purple carpet up the stairs to the gate. Then the king answered, not yet setting foot on the stair, but erect in his chariot:

“O queen, beware of too great pride in me, and let others praise me! Nor let me be received in barbaric style, with low obeisances and with purple—” For the Greeks used to pride themselves on their simple way of living, and to despise the foreigners of Asia Minor for their pomp and display. So that the noble Agamemnon shrank from a welcome, which would have been more suited to the princes he had just conquered, than to a Greek. Also, perhaps, he had in mind the old Greek belief, that pride goes before a fall, and that to make a show of one’s good fortune is the sure way to lose it. “Such honours are for the gods” he reminded her. “Let me be received as a man. My fame shall be no less, if I tread the common earth. A modest heart is best beloved by the gods; nor dare one boast that any man’s life has been happy, till he is dead.”

“Nay, but to please me—!” Queen Clytemnestra urged him.

“I like it not, even so” answered Agamemnon, looking at the carpet with distaste.

“If Priam had conquered thee, how would he have come home?” she asked.

“On purple, doubtless” said the king in contempt.

“What Priam would do, thou mayest. Nor shouldst thou fear the people’s envy; for they always envy the great. Yield to me, for this once; for once, let me be the conqueror of the king!”

“So be it!” Agamemnon answered with a smile; for he felt, after his long absence, that he could refuse her nothing. But he bade one of his attendants to untie his sandals, thinking that if he trod the purple

barefooted, he would be less likely to incur the gods' anger for his pride. Then turning, he pointed to a captive girl, who had sat all this while unheeded in another chariot. "Receive this stranger kindly" he said to his wife, "for the gods love those who are merciful. She fell to my lot, choicest of all the spoil—" And then, alighting from his car, he ascended the stairs.

Clytemnestra received him proudly at the gates, smiling at his fears. "The sea flows endlessly" she cried, "nor shall it ever cease to yield us its purple dye. Thy house is rich; the gods have given us enough and to spare. Welcome home!" And as he passed into the palace before her, the queen looked up to heaven and breathed a swift prayer: "O Zeus, that dost accomplish all things—accomplish what I desire!"

Left alone with the attendants and captive Trojans, the old men were once more full of vague doubts and fears. "Do our hearts prophesy?" they whispered among themselves, "or why do these omens seem so ill? Our fears arose, when the host loosed their cables and set sail towards Troy; long years have passed, and we fear still. Hope fails us, we feel the evil creeping near. When a proud ship in mid-career strikes a reef, she is lost; and yet one hope remains; for if her crew are wise, and fling their treasures into the greedy sea, she may still escape. But ah! when blood stains the ground and a man lies dead, what avails? In olden times, lived one \* who could raise the dead; but Zeus struck him

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\* Apollo's son, Aesculapius.

down, and he perished. We are hushed; we fear, but are dumb!"

For Clytemnestra had now reappeared, and stood looking down fiercely at the captive girl whom the king had committed to her care. "Come in, thou!" she cried harshly. "Thou maid, I mean: Cassandra! Zeus hath not sent thee here to share our rejoicings. Step down, and humble thyself. What must be, must be: think thyself fortunate that thou hast come to serve in an ancient house; for those who grow rich suddenly are ever the most harsh to their slaves."

But the girl made no answer at all. One of the old men spoke to her, advising her to obey; and the queen went on angrily: "Foreigner though she be, she shall hear my voice. But I have little time to waste on her; the altars blaze, the sacrifices are prepared, the banquet is served. Hear, thou! If thou canst not speak our tongue, answer my sign with thy hand!" But still the slave-girl sat motionless, and at last Clytemnestra turned away in impatient contempt. "She is mad; she has not yet learned to endure what she must endure—" And with a look which boded ill for the girl, when there should be more time to attend to her, Clytemnestra returned to the house.

"Poor maid, we pity thee" said the old men when the queen had gone. "Come, leave thy seat. For need drives, and thou must obey."

And then at last, the girl broke out suddenly into wild cries of anguish. "Ah, woe! Woe! Woe! Apollo, Apollo!"

They wondered why she should call upon Apollo, who was a joyous god and not one of those to whom

one would appeal in distress. For they did not know that this poor slave Cassandra was a prophetess, once highly honoured in her land: and that Apollo was the god who was wont to inspire her. But soon they began to understand; for she kept calling on his name, foretelling terrible things. "Thou hast destroyed me, O Apollo! Whither hast thou brought me? What place is this?"

"It is the house of Atreus" one of the old men said; and at once the girl burst out into still more terrible cries.

"Alas, the godless house of Atreus! I know it well! I know the dagger and the rope, and the red blood on the floor! I know this house of death—" And presently, in a wild frenzy, she went on: "See, see those weeping children! Their red wounds bleed! Their father is eating their flesh! I know this house of murder!"

The old man shrank back, aghast that this stranger should know all the shameful secrets of Atreus' house. For they had no doubt what she meant; she was alluding to a hideous tale, that they had had in mind just now, but had not dared to utter—the tale of how Atreus, long ago, quarrelled with his brother Thyestes who had stolen his wife: and how, pretending to be reconciled, he had bidden Thyestes to a banquet, at which he served to him the chopped-up bodies of his two murdered sons. This awful deed had set a curse on his house, which had descended to his own sons Agamemnon and Menelaus. Even now, no citizen of Argos dared to repeat the grim tale; so you may imagine how shocked the old men were,

to find that this stranger knew it. "We want no prophets here!" they muttered in awe.

But still Cassandra went on, and more strangely still: turning from old tales to new horrors, which they could not understand. "Alas, what is the woman plotting now?" she exclaimed. "A new woe for the house of Atreus, that none may cure!" Alas, wilt thou dare such a crime? Thy mate, the sharer of thy house—is he to find his death in the warm bath? See, she puts forth her red hand!"

The old men listened, awestruck; her words filled them with fear, but now they could no longer guess what she meant.

"O, sight of blood!" the raving woman went on. "The net of Hell is spread for her lord and mate. The Furies howl for vengeance on Atreus' house. Ah see! The cruel work is begun! Keep back the cow from the bull! Lo, she has seized him by the horns and wraps him in death! She strikes! Into the bath he falls. The bath, the bath!" she screamed again and again. "In the bath murder dwells!"

"I am no prophet" one of the old men muttered, "but I scent evil in these words. For indeed prophets always foretell sorrow, and not joy. Some god possesses her, and raves in her soul. Like the poor nightingale she chants her song of disaster."

"Ah, but the nightingale weeps not in earnest" Cassandra cried. "For the gods granted her to fly where she wished, and a life of sweet singing: but to me, a sharp sword of death!" And she went on with her lament again, seeming now to address Agamemnon: "Why hast thou brought me captive from old

Troy, to sing thy dirge and to die with thee? Alas for Paris' marriage, and the evil he wrought on his friends! Alas for Scamander River, where I played as a child! Soon I shall sing my dirge on the River of Hell. Old Troy lies ruined, and never will rise again. In vain hath my father sacrificed to turn away the wrath of the gods. As Troy sinks, so shall I, and shall shed my life-blood on the ground." And then, her voice rising shrilly, she resumed: "No more shall my prophecy be veiled, like a modest bride. And ye shall bear witness I speak truly, first, when I look back into the past and trace the dread crimes of old days. There is a curse upon this place, a curse fattened on human blood; the Furies shriek from the housetop the old sin from which the curse began—the sin of the brother against his brother's marriage. Speak! Do I tell the truth, or am I like a false prophet babbling for hire? Witness that I know well the ancient evils that cling round this house."

And the old men could not deny it. "We are amazed that thou, a stranger from distant lands, dost know our city so well."

"Apollo has inspired me to know all."

"Was the god thy lover, then?" they asked in awe.

"Indeed he strove for my love, and showered his gifts upon me, so that I foretold all my country's sorrows."

"Did not this anger the god?"

"It did—" And then Cassandra told them the strange punishment that Apollo had sent on her—

namely, that though she always should prophesy the truth, no one should ever believe her. But even while she spoke, the frenzy seized her again; her eyes rolled, and she began to foam at the mouth, in the terrible agony of body which always preceded her prophecies. "Ah, see where they sit!" she pointed wildly: "the phantoms of those two innocent babes whom their uncle slew! They carry their entrails in their hands, and their father eats them! But the foul deed shall be avenged. Little guesses the admiral of ships, the conqueror of Troy, how a woman plots his ruin! Where shall the like of such a monster as this woman be found? For when the fight went against the Greeks, she rejoiced in her heart; though now she welcomes her lord with a smooth tongue..... Ye do not trust my words?" Cassandra broke off, staring at the old men. "I am well used to that. Yet soon enough ye shall know and see how true they are!"

They did not know what to think. They thought it strange and horrible that she should have known the old tale of Atreus and Thyestes; but they shrank from imagining what her other words might mean. "Hush! Cease these ill-omened prophecies!" they cried, shuddering. "What must be, will be. But let us pray heaven to relent!"

She mocked them. "Ay, pray! And the killer will have the more time for the deed!"

"Hush, woman! What man would dare so dreadful a thing?"

"Ye are deceived. I spoke not of a man!" the prophetess answered. Then, madly raving, she

went on: "Alas! The lioness mated with a wolf, while the noble lion roamed abroad. And she shall slay me too. No more shall I prophesy, I who am mocked and scorned and disbelieved by all men. Yet we shall be avenged, he and I; for the gods one day shall send back a son to murder a mother; the wanderer shall return, and set the coping-stone on these woes. The gods have sworn it! As for me, I am in the net; here is my end ordained." As she spoke she alighted from the chariot, and turned towards the palace; but at the threshold she hung back, and uttered a terrible cry. "Murder drips from this house! Yet I must go in, to wail for Agamemnon and for myself. You shall see my words fulfilled, when for the death of me, a woman, another woman shall be slain: and a man for a man. Farewell!"

Slowly she mounted the long flight of stairs, where the purple carpet spread for Agamemnon still lay. She disappeared into the palace, leaving the old men confused and terrified at the words she had said. But they had waited only a few moments when a cry reached them from within. It was a man's voice, in agony:

"O, I am struck by a death-blow!"

"Hush! Whose voice was that—?" they exclaimed.

"O, a second blow! I die!"

It was the voice of Agamemnon himself; they could not mistake it. Helpless they waited, huddling close together, not knowing what to do—whether to run down to the city and raise the alarm, or to enter the palace. No more cries came; and they were

moving forward doubtfully towards the stairs, when the huge doors were suddenly flung open, and a horrid sight met their eyes. There on the marble pavement lay King Agamemnon, dead and covered with blood, and the dead body of Cassandra beside him. Queen Clytemnestra stood over them, leaning on a dripping axe. As the old men shrank back in horror, she stepped forward and spoke.

“What I have done, I have done for my old hatred’s sake, in the fullness of time. I have sent him to hell, and I rejoice in my deed. Rejoice with me : or if ye will not, I still exult alone ; for if ever a death was earned, he has earned his he who filled up the cup of curses to the brim, and has now himself drunk them !”

“Bold art thou, to boast of thy husband’s murder !” the old men exclaimed fiercely ; but they dared lay no hands on her, for she was still their queen.

“Your praise or blame are alike to me” Clytemnestra replied. “Do you curse me ? And yet you had no curses to throw at him, when he spared all the flocks of Greece that he might have sacrificed, and slaughtered my best-beloved child ! Why did your wrath not break out then, and hound him from Greece ? Threaten me if you will ; but know, that if I triumph in the end, you will repent of your threats too late.”

“Time shall take vengeance on thee, though !” the old men muttered with Cassandra’s last words

still fresh in their minds. "Thou shalt bear stroke, when thy friends are not there to help thee."

The queen laughed proudly. "Nay! I shall know no fear, I swear thee, while Aegisthus lives. He hath been my friend and still is!"

The old man had no answer to that. Their worst suspicions were confirmed. For this Aegisthus, whom the queen proclaimed as her friend, was Agamemnon's cousin, being the son of that Thyestes whom Atreus had so bitterly wronged. Aegisthus had stayed at home in Argos during the Trojan War, and had helped the queen to rule. Men whispered that he was Clytemnestra's lover; and the old citizens had now no doubt, that he had plotted Agamemnon's murder with her. Once more they recalled Cassandra's words; for who but Aegisthus was the 'wolf' who had mated with the lioness, while the noble lion roamed abroad? Against so mighty a pair they dared do nothing; but they still muttered angrily among themselves, cursing Helen once again for all the harm she had done, invoking the justice of the gods, and above all lamenting their dear master, slain while he lay defenceless in his bath and at the very moment of his triumphal return from Troy.

At last the queen spoke again. "In vain ye mourn" she said. "He paid no heed to my tears, when I besought him to spare my child. Now he hath reaped what he sowed in that evil day. By my hand he fell, and my hands shall bury him; but there shall be no funeral pomp in the Argive streets. Rather let Iphigenia greet him in the underworld, and guide him through hell. Now, therefore, cease your

tears. The score is paid at last; let the Fury which haunts this house go and brood elsewhere!"

"Ay, for the gods are just!" a voice cried behind her. It was Aegisthus, coming from the palace to take his place by the queen. "This man hath paid his debt to me, for the old evil which his father wrought against mine, long ago—" And once again he recalled to them the dreadful tale of Thyestes' unhallowed feast. "So perish all the race of Agamemnon, that vengeance may be mine!"

But now one of the old men spoke up stoutly; for to Aegisthus at any rate he owed no allegiance. "Thou dost boast of this crime, but I will not praise thee. And mark me, the people's curse shall fall on thee in the end."

"Dost thou speak thus to *me*?" the usurper threatened him. "Have a care! Rebel not, or thou shalt repent of thy words."

"A fine king shalt *thou* be to rule in Argos!" the other taunted him recklessly. "Thou who wast vile enough to plan this deed, but not bold enough to perform it!"

"I shall have strength enough to gag thy mutiny, none the less!" Aegisthus swore.

"Yet remember, thou coward, that young Orestes still lives. Some day shall Justice give him strength to strike both you murderers down!"

Aegisthus snatched his sword. The old men drew their daggers. And it seemed likely that more bloodshed would ensue, when the queen stepped between them.

"Peace!" she commanded. "There has been slaughter enough. Go home, old men, before misfor-

tune overtake you, and be content if the gods add no more to the burden we bear."

"Ay, let them rant and rave at me!" the cowardly Aegisthus sneered. "Yet know, ye old fools, that if it were not for your grey hairs and the queen's command, you should taste the bitterness of my power."

"Argos shall never flatter a coward, crowned though he be!" they replied.

"Ay, fling your words at me. Some day, my deeds shall answer!"

"Unless some god shall first bring the young Orestes home again" was their parting threat.

But the queen's order carried weight, and they began to disperse. "Heed them not" Clytemnestra said to her lover. "While they sit mumbling in their homes, thou and I shall rule. Come!"

So they turned back into the palace, and the huge doors were closed. Angry and muttering, the old men wound their way down the narrow street towards the town. But in another city, far away, the boy Orestes lived in the care of the good friend who had harboured him, till the slow justice of the gods should at last be fulfilled.

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## CHAPTER III

You will remember how, when Agamemnon went to Troy, his friends had sent the little prince Orestes into a far country; for they feared lest the enemies of Argos might hurt him, while the king was away.

But after Agamemnon had come home to his death, the boy still remained abroad. Perhaps the wicked queen was content that he should do so: we are not sure that she ever sent for him. Some legends say that she did: but that his sister Electra made haste to smuggle him away again. Electra certainly distrusted the cruel queen, and still more Aegisthus. So young Orestes grew to manhood in a foreign land; and when he was old enough, the story of his father's terrible end was related to him.

A strange and bitter fortune, for a young man to endure! In due time, Orestes visited an oracle of the god Apollo; and there this advice was given him—that he should secretly return to his old home: and there, with his own hands and with no army to help him, should wreak vengeance on the slayers of his father.

So, after many years, three travellers approached the city of Mycenae one summer morning. Their guide was an old man—none other than the faithful friend who had sheltered Orestes in exile; the other two were young—Orestes himself, and his friend Pylades. They halted near the palace, on the very spot where the purple carpet had been spread for King Agamemnon, on that ill-fated day long ago.

"This is the place" the old man said. "You must take counsel what to do."

But Orestes had his plans ready. "Stay here" he said to the old man, "and watch thy chance to enter the house. There is no fear that anyone will know thee, after so many years. So thou mayest say thou art a Phocian traveller; and when they ask thy errand to the palace, tell them thou bringest word of Orestes' death. Thou mayest say that I was hurled from my chariot, racing in the Pythian Games."

"And you two—?" asked the old man.

"While thou art in the palace" Orestes said, "I must go and pay honour to my father's tomb, as Apollo has commanded me. I must make offerings there, and leave upon the tomb a lock of my hair, in sign of mourning. Later, we shall return to the palace gate, and bring with us an urn: in which, as we shall say, the ashes of Orestes are. This will bear out thy story. And thou shalt have learned, meanwhile, who is in the palace: what number of guards there are, and whether Aegisthus and my mother are both to be found here. So shall we know how to act."

The old man nodded, but rather doubtfully. For it was sometimes thought unlucky to speak of a living man as though he were dead. But Orestes held firmly to his plan.

"What harm is it to me to be dead in word, when I am alive in fact?" he cried. "Before this, I have known men to be reported dead, who have returned home in due time and have won the more honour. So shall it be with me. But oh, my father's land and gods!" he prayed "receive me and help me now! For I come home with justice in my hands,

to cleanse this place. Go in, old man; and soon we two shall be here again."

So saying, Orestes turned away with Pylades, and the old man was preparing to mount the wide steps, when a cry of grief arrested them. "A woman's voice!" said the old man. It seemed to come from the palace; and the thought crossed Orestes' mind, that it might be his sister Electra, who had lived all this while in Mycenae with her mother and step-father. He wondered whether to wait, and make sure if it were she; but his old friend advised him first to visit the tomb, since Apollo had charged him to do this before anything else when he should reach Mycenae. And, that he might not miss his way, the old man decided to take him and Pylades thither, before knocking at the gates of the palace himself. So the three went off together.

A few moments later, the huge doors were opened from within. It was indeed Electra whom Orestes had heard; now she came out into the fresh summer dawn, with some of her waiting-women. Her face was pale and stained with tears; for she had never ceased to lament for her father's death; and though she was not allowed to leave her home and seek Orestes, she hated the big palace with its cruel history, and had prayed day by day that her young brother might return in due time, and wreak vengeance.

"How many nights have heard my groans!" she sighed: "how many dawns seen my tears! For ten years my father fought abroad, and the war-god never claimed him; but he came back to be struck

down in his own home, like a noble oak, with an axe. Folly was he slain! Yet no one dares pity him but myself. Never will I cease to mourn for him, and to call on the gods of hell for vengeance on his murderers. Send back my brother, ye avenging gods! I can no longer endure this grief and loneliness."

Her women tried to comfort her. "O princess, will you weep for ever?" they sighed. "It is long since your father met his cruel end. But wee too, if we dared, would call down curses on the villains by whom he perished."

"I know you wish to comfort me" Electra replied. "Yet I must still weep for him."

"Yet neither tears nor prayers will raise him to life" they reminded her. "And art thou alone unhappy? Is there not one who also mourns—thy brother Orestes? Who, though he lives in exile now, shall some day return in manhood to claim his kingdom."

"Aye, I have waited for Orestes, unwedded and unhappy here; but he has forgotten me. From time to time, word comes to me that he is longing to return; but I am cheated by such messages, for he never comes."

"O princess, take heart! For great Zeus still rules in heaven, and sees all things. Commit thy cause to him. Be sure, that he has not forgotten Orestes, and will bring about his return."

But Electra wept still. "My life is wasted in despair, I have no more strength, nor is there anyone to help me; but like a foreign slave I live in my father's house, ill-dressed, ill-treated—"

“Ah, piteous was the cry, when the great axe-head fell on him!” shuddered her women. “By cunning and lust was he slain! That was the cruellest day that ever dawned on the world.”

“May Zeus torment my father’s murderers!” cried Electra. “May they be smitten by his punishment, and have no more joy for ever!”

“Hush, hush! Remember who may overhear. O princess, your own grief has brought harsher treatment on you; for it is vain to strive with those who are high in power.”

“Aye, I have made my own lot harder, and well I know it. Yet while I live, I will never cease to reproach them. Let me be, let me be! My sorrow is past remedy, it can be no worse.”

“But we must beg you, in all love, not to increase your enemies’ malice.”

“What! Would you counsel me to forget the dead? Never may I be honoured, nor know joy, if I cease to mourn for my father! For if he lies forgotten in his grave, and his murder goes unrebuked, then shame and reverence have perished from the earth. And how can my troubles be increased? I am forced to live here with my father’s slayers; the very food I eat, I must receive from them; I must endure to see Aegisthus on my father’s throne, wearing my father’s royal robes, and offering sacrifice on the very hearth where they slew him. I must endure to see my mother wedded to him. She fears no vengeance of the gods, so hardened is she; but she has ordered that the day on which he died shall be kept as a holiday, with dances and offerings. When I see this, I have to creep away and weep in secret; since even

tears are forbidden me, by that accursed pair. My mother reproaches me aloud: 'Thou hateful thing, hast thou alone lost a father? Is there no sorrow in the world, except thine? Grieve then, and die of grief!' Such insults she heaps on me. But if she hears from someone that Orestes still lives, and may return, she breaks out in mad rage: 'This is thy doing! Thou didst help to steal him away, snatching him from my hands. But thou shalt pay dearly for that!' While foul Aegisthus, standing by her, joins his insults to hers—that coward, who calls upon a woman to fight for him... But now I am losing heart. I have kept hoping that Orestes will return, but my hope is vain. He delays still, I can no longer trust in him. Then can you wonder that I am overwhelmed in grief and despair?"

The women had listened to her in fear; for they were terrified that either the king or queen might come out and hear her. "Ah, take heed! Is Aegisthus in the palace?" they faltered.

"No, he has gone forth. If he were here, do you think I should be at liberty? He is outside the city, on some affairs—"

The women drew nearer to her. "Then we may speak with you more freely. We have a question to ask."

"Ask it. What would you know?"

"What is the last news of Orestes?" enquired the women, pressing round her. "Is there any further message that he may return. Ah, we long to know!"

“I have told you already” answered Electra hopelessly. “He sends me word that he will come. But his promises are not kept.”

“Remember though, the risk that he runs is great. He must act cautiously. You must not be too ready to blame him for the delay.”

Electra smiled bitterly. “Did I delay, when I hurried him away to save him from Aegisthus? If I had, he would not now be alive.”

“But take courage!” the women persisted. “He has a noble heart. He will not neglect his friends.”

“I know it. I have trust in him still, despite his delay; or I should not have gone on living.”

“Hush now!” the women warned her. “Your sister is coming from the house—”

As they spoke, another girl appeared at the head of the stairs. It was Electra’s sister, Chrysothemis; and she was carrying such offerings as the Greeks used to make to the spirits of their dead. The waiting-women guessed that she was slipping out in secret to Agamemnon’s tomb, while King Aegisthus was away; for she was less bold than her sister, and more cautious. Like Electra, she grieved for her father’s cruel death; but she had learned to conceal her grief, for fear of her mother and Aegisthus; and she was always dreading that Electra’s better defiance would bring fresh trouble on them both. She had heard Electra’s voice from within the palace, and ran forward to interrupt her.

“O sister, wilt thou never learn to hide thy feelings?” she besought. “Art thou not to cry aloud at the gates? I sorrow too, at our hard fate; and had

I the power, I should fight against it. But of what use are words? We must suffer,—and obey!”

Electra turned on her angrily. “Thou art his daughter too; but thou hast forgotten him! And now thou comest here to quieten me, and to win our mother’s praise. Thou sayest that thou wouldst fight. Thou coward! *I* fight, and I have no help from thee. It is true that I cannot hurt them; yet I can vex them by defiance; and to vex them must please the dead, if there is any pleasure to be had in the under-world.”

“We have to live with them” her sister reminded her. “For where else can we go?”

“*Thou* mayest be happy, living with his murderers” mocked Electra. “But I shall never be so. Nor would I choose to be dishonoured in men’s eyes by such cowardice.”

The waiting-women intervened. “Ah, do not quarrel! For you would both be well-advised to learn from each other.”

“I am used to her bitter words” said Chrysothemis. “Nor would I interfere today, had I not heard some evil news of a fresh trouble which threatens her.”

“Tell it!” Electra taunted her. “If it is worse than those I have already, I will dispute with thee no longer.”

“I will tell all I know” Chrysothemis said. “They are plotting against thee: and they intend, if thou dost still persist in mourning for our father, to shut thee up in some grim prison, far away, where thou shalt mourn in endless darkness. Take heed, then, and do not blame me afterwards, if this comes to pass. For now is the time to be wise!”

Electra stared at her. "They have settled this?"

"They have indeed. Aegisthus has gone about it. When he returns, thou wilt be taken away."

"Then let him return with speed!" cried Electra loudly.

Chrysothemis stood looking at her in amazement. "Poor wretch, what mad prayer is this?"

"Let him come, let him come!" her sister repeated.

"And banish thee! How canst thou utter such a wish?"

"I wish for nothing better, than to be far away from you all" Electra assured her bitterly.

"But think—! Thy life here—"

"Is my life here so happy that one might envy it?" mocked Electra.

"It might be happy enough, if thou wouldst only be wise—"

"And act basely!"

"I do not ask thee to act basely" Chrysothemis reasoned with her: "but to submit to those who are more strong than ourselves. It is mere folly to bring ruin on oneself."

"I would bring ruin on myself with joy" Electra answered proudly "if by so doing I could avenge our father!"

"Thou wilt not be persuaded, then?"

"Never! I have not so base a mind as thou."

"Then I will go upon my errand" said Chrysothemis; for she saw that there was no hope of persuading her sister to agree with her.

"What errand?" demanded Electra, looking at the offerings which Chrysothemis bore in her hands.

“To our father’s tomb. Our mother has sent me to make offerings there.”

“Our mother—!” Electra uttered a cry of angry surprise; for, like the waiting-women, she had supposed that Chrysothemis was visiting the tomb on her own behalf. “Our mother—doing honour to the man she most hated?” She was amazed; she could think of no reason for so strange an act. “But why? Why?”

“Last night, she was frightened by some dream” Chrysothemis began to explain. But her sister broke in on her with a cry of triumph.

“O ye gods, help me now at last! What was her dream, Chrysothemis? Tell me quickly!”

“I hardly know. But it is whispered that she saw the ghost of our father, returning to earth. He took and planted on the hearth his ancient sceptre, which Aegisthus now bears; and from it a great tree grew, which overshadowed all Mycenae. I know no more than that; but it is for the dream’s sake that she sends me with these offerings. But O my sister, be warned in time by what I told thee before!”

Electra, however, had now no thought for Aegisthus’ plot against her. Her sister’s errand to the tomb had driven this from her mind, and she cried out: “O sister, do not take these offerings, I beg thee! It is not right that thou shouldst bring presents to our father, on the behalf of one who was his bitterest foe. O, throw them from thee—or, better, bury them deep in the ground, that not one of them may ever reach his sacred tomb! She is the most shameless of women, or she would not be making such gifts. And how dost thou think our

father would welcome them—gifts from his enemy, who murdered him in treachery and wiped her blood-stained hands on his head? Or dost thou hope, that by obeying her and taking these gifts for her thou wilt free her from guilt? Nay, that can never be. Throw the offerings away!”

Chrysothemis was silent, for she knew her sister was right. And Electra went on, still more eagerly:

“Lay on the tomb, instead, a lock of hair from each of us; and kneel and pray his spirit to come back to earth, as he did in this dream, and to help us against our enemies; and pray that Orestes may return and claim his crown and his revenge.”

“I will do so” Chrysothemis agreed. “For it is wrong that we two should quarrel over a sacred duty. But let not our mother know of it, I beg you, or thou wilt bring punishment on us both.”

With these words, Chrysothemis hastened away; and at once the waiting-women began to discuss the dream of Clytemnestra, which she had reported to them. “It is a sign!” they whispered. “Justice is on its way at last. The dead man’s curse is not forgotten; the fierce Fury lies in wait for the shedders of blood. If dreams have any meaning at all, this surely is what last night’s vision foretells. And so fresh trouble is in store for this ill-starred house, which has never been free from bloodshed.”

But suddenly, their whispering voices were hushed. Footsteps were crossing the marble floor of the palace above them; a moment later a tall figure appeared on the threshold, and the harsh voice of Queen Clytemnestra was heard.

“So thou art loose again?” she called down to Electra angrily. “Now that Aegisthus is away, there is none to restrain thee from disgracing thy friends. Doubtless thou hast come out here to complain against *me*—saying that I insult thee and treat thee harshly..... Yet I have no wish to be harsh, Electra; if I have been, it is because thou hast spoken so much ill of me.”

Electra listened in surprise. It was not Clytemnestra's custom, to defend herself; but her last words seemed meant for a defence; her manner was anxious and uneasy; Electra guessed that the strange dream had frightened her, as the queen went on:

“Thou dost accuse me of thy father's death—and in truth, I killed him. But I had justice on my side; and if thy own mind had been less perverse, thou wouldst have helped me. For he alone in Greece—this father whom thou dost constantly lament—he alone had the heart to sacrifice his own child. And for what reason? For the army's sake? The army had no claim on her. But if he slew her to please Menelaus, then surely he deserved to die at my hands. Had not Menelaus two children, who should have served as victims rather than mine: since it was for *their* parents' sake that the war began? Or did the gods of Hell desire my child, more than Helen's? Or did this cruel and heartless father love Menelaus' children more than his own? O, I did right to punish him, Electra: nor do I repent of it! If thy own judgment were not blind, thou wouldst think so too.”

But Electra answered, quietly: “This time, thou canst not say that I began a quarrel, by first attacking

thee with harsh words. But if thou wilt allow me, I will speak for my father, and for my dead sister too."

The queen was surprised, in turn, by her daughter's gentleness. "Speak on" she said. "If thou didst always utter such words as these, thou wouldst not be so bitter to hear."

"Thou dost confess to slaying my father, then," Electra began. "Could any confession be more shameful—whether or not thou hadst justice on thy side? But indeed, it was not justice that persuaded thee to so foul a deed: but a bad man, with whom thou still livest. Then again, hast thou forgotten why the goddess Artemis kept the fleet at Aulis? My father, so men say, once uttered some rash boast about a fawn which he had killed; and Artemis, hearing him, vowed that she would not let his army sail till his own daughter was sacrificed. From this curse there was no release; neither to Troy nor back homeward could the Greeks go. And for the sake of all of them, not for Menelaus alone, Iphigenia was slain."

But now, Electra's self-control was beginning to give away. More and more angrily, she went on:

"Even if he slew her for Menelaus's sake, as thou sayest—does that give thee the right to slay him? Beware of setting up a law, that blood should answer for blood; for under such a law, thou thyself wouldst perish first! Or, granted that thou slewest him for Iphigenia's sake—is it for her sake that thou livest now with Aegisthus, and hast turned against thy own remaining children? Is it in honour of Iphigenia that I am ill-treated here, and Orestes is in exile? Thou hast accused me of sending him away, that some day

I may be avenged on thee. And so I would, had I the power. For this thou mayest call me base, ungrateful and shameless; if I am so, at least I have proved true to my mother's character!"

The waiting-women had shrunk back, at these bitter words; for, though Electra had begun quietly, they saw that she was losing her temper now. The queen turned on them, calling them to witness what Electra had said. "Is she not shameless to rail thus at her mother? Is there any deed she would not do?"

"I feel shame indeed" Electra answered, controlling herself again. "I know that what I do is unbecoming to my age. But thy own deeds compel me, and one baseness grows another."

"Thou shalt be punished for this insolence, when Aegisthus returns. I swear it by Artemis" the queen threatened her.

"Thou art mad with passion" answered Electra in contempt. "Thou didst give me leave to speak—but thou canst not endure to listen."

"Well, thou hast spoken enough. Wilt thou not even let me sacrifice in a holy silence?"

They noticed then, that Clytemnestra had brought with her the fruits and vessels of sacrifice. They thought at first that she had changed her mind, and meant to go herself to the tomb of Agamemnon; but her next words told them that they were wrong. It was on Apollo, god of prophecy, that the queen now called, moving a little away from them, so that they heard nothing more than the cry of "Apollo!" with which she began. "O Apollo, hear my secret

prayer' she implored. "If last night's dream was good, let it be fulfilled; but if evil, let the ill-luck fall back on our foes! If they are plotting my overthrow, let them not succeed; but grant that I reign here, unharmed still, and live in happiness with my friends, and with those of my children who feel no hatred against me!"

While the queen stood apart and prayed, a stranger had drawn near the gates of the palace, and now accosted the waiting-women. "Ladies, can you tell me if this is the palace of King Aegisthus?" It was the old man who had led Orestes to Mycenae; but now, in accordance with their plan, he spoke and looked about him like one who had never been there before.

"You are right, sir; it is" the women told him.

"Then perhaps that is the king's wife?" pursued the old man, looking at Clytemnestra: "for she seems to me like a queen—" And when the others confirmed this too, he advanced and hailed Clytemnestra, who had now finished her prayer. "O queen, I come with good news for thee, from a friend."

"Good news is ever welcome" answered the queen. "But say who sent thee, old man?"

"Phanoteus the Phocian, to bring news which, he said, was of great import to thee and to King Aegisthus."

"Speak it; thou shalt be well entertained, coming from such a friend."

"In brief, then, it is this—that Orestes is dead."

A sharp cry behind him caused him to turn

round; he saw a young girl, white-faced and trembling, who leaned on the waiting-women for support. But at once, the queen's harsh voice recalled him to face her. "Do not heed her, sir! But come—this news? Tell me more!" The queen too was trembling, but with an unholy joy. Was this the meaning of her dream—this news which seemed to come as a direct answer to her prayer? Orestes dead! She could not hide her excitement. The old messenger repeated his words:

"Orestes—he is dead, O queen."

"O, grief! I am lost. I am lost!" cried Electra wildly. But the queen, striding to her in a fury, bade her hold her peace; then she turned back to the stranger.

"Tell me the whole tale, quickly. Tell me how he died!"

"Truly,—for that is why I have been sent" nodded the old man. "Know, then, that he had come to attend the great Games, which are the pride of all Greece. He first stepped forth when the herald called on those who wished to run in the foot-race; and while all men watched him in admiration, he won the first prize. Other races followed; he was victor in all. When evening came, his name was cried aloud by the heralds—Orestes, son of that Agamemnon who once led the armies of Greece. Next day the chariot-races were begun, and again Orestes took part. Many drivers were ranged against him, when they lined up at the starting-point—two Libyans, one Achaen, one from Sparta; others were an Aetolian, a Magnesian, an Athenian, a Boeotian, and an Aenian with a team of white horses—making ten in all. There

they stood, as the umpires ordered them; and when the trumpet sounded, forth they all streamed. The course was filled with rattling cars, the dust hung in the air. Each time they turned the pillar at the end of the course, Orestes' axle grazed it. For awhile, all strove together; then suddenly, the fierce horses of the Aenian ran away! As they completed their sixth lap they swerved round and dashed their heads against the wheels of a rival. From this mishap came ruin. One crashed against another, till the course was strewn with wrecked cars. Seeing this the Athenian, skilled driver as he was, drew aside while the storm raged past him, and so survived. Orestes, too, was holding his mares back; but when he saw that there was none but the Athenian ahead of him, he shook his whip and started in swift pursuit. Side by side they raced—now one, now the other leading. But in the last lap young Orestes, alas, turned the corner too closely! His wheel had struck the pillar. His axle broke. Then down he fell, and was dragged by the reins behind his galloping steeds. The crowd shrieked, as they saw him whirled down the course; till at last other drivers, checking Orestes' team, took him up dead and drenched with blood, so that his friends hardly knew him. They burned his body on a funeral-pyre; from which his ashes have been saved in an urn, that they may find burial at last in his native land. Such is my tale, O queen—piteous to hear, and the most evil sight that my eyes ever beheld!”

He ceased. The waiting-women wept. Clytemnestra stood motionless. “O Zeus, what shall I say!” she whispered. “Good news, or terrible—?”

“Art thou so grieved to hear it?” asked the old man.

“Motherhood is strange” the queen murmured, shaking her head. “Not even when he has injured her, can a woman hate her son. Orestes, born of me, lived in exile and hated me, holding me guilty of his father’s death. My own life he threatened always, so that I could not sleep. But now—from this day, I need fear him no longer; and as for her who has dwelt here with me, from this day her threats too are vain!”

“Ah, wretched me!” Electra wailed. “Now must I mourn for thee too, brother, since our mother insults thee in death! Avenging spirits, hear me!”

“They have heard” Clytemnestra mocked her. “And they have answered, bringing all my fears to an end!” Then, turning towards the old man: “Thou wouldst deserve even better of me, stranger, if thou couldst end this girl’s clamouring! But go in, that I may treat thee as beseems my honour, and the honour of him who sent thee. Leave her to wail alone!” And without taking any further notice of Electra, she led the old man into the house.

Electra turned to the women. “Does this wretch seem to you like one that mourns for her son? Nay, she has mocked us, dear Orestes, and I am ruined by thy death! Now there is no more hope that thou mayst come, to avenge thy father and myself. I am alone, the slave of those whom I most hate—my father’s murderers. Nay, but I never will serve them again. Rather will I lie here outside the gate, and pine my life away!” And she sank to the ground.

“Where are the thunderbolts of Zeus, if he beholds such things and does not strike?” the women cried.

“Ah, do not mock me with false hopes!” wailed Electra. “For you only add to my pain!”

“And yet the gods, ere this, have punished the wicked” they reminded her. “The woman perished, by whom King Amphiaraus was betrayed—”

“Ay, for King Amphiaraus had an avenger. But my father has none. So talk no more to me of hope, since Orestes is dead.”

“All men must die” they said.

“What! In a chariot-race, and before their due time?”

The women were silent then; much as they wished to comfort her, they knew that their words were in vain. But at this moment they heard running footsteps, and turned round to see Chrysothemis on her way back from the tomb.

“Dear sister, joy has sent me back in this haste” she panted. “I bring strange news, and a relief from our misery!”

“What news? And what relief can there ever be?” Electra groaned. Her sister clutched her eagerly.

“Orestes! Ah, listen—he is here! Orestes is here!”

“What! Thou art mad. Thou mockest!”

“Nay, by our father’s hearth I swear—he is close at hand!”

But Electra could only stare at her in grief, knowing that she could not yet have heard the ill news that the old man had brought them. “Poor girl! Who told

thee such a tale, to raise thy hopes so vainly?" she said at last.

"By the gods, hear me out, before thou dost think me mad! When I came to our father's tomb, I saw that someone had set on it fresh offerings—a bowl of milk, a wreath of many flowers: I looked around in fear, lest any of our foes should be watching; but all was peaceful there, and I drew nearer. Then I beheld, upon the edge of the tomb, a freshly-cut lock of hair! At once, the thought of our dear brother Orestes came into my mind; for I felt sure that none but he could have left such a token! I raised it in my hands; joy filled my eyes with tears."

"Orestes—?" gasped Electra.

"Who else could pay this honour to our father, except ourselves? It was not I; nor couldst thou have been there, for thou art not allowed to leave this place—not even to pray to the gods. And certainly our mother would not leave such a gift! Nay, it must be Orestes—none but he! Take courage, dear one; ill-luck cannot always endure. We have known sorrow in the past, but it may be that this day will bring forth many blessings!"

"Alas, I pity thee!" Electra sighed. "Thou art so easily convinced—but in vain!"

"Thou dost not believe me then?"

"Thou knowest not what has happened. I have heard news, too."

"How can I doubt what my own eyes have seen at the tomb?"

"He is dead, sister, he is dead! Look not to him for help. Our hopes of safety are over."

Chrysothemis gave a bitter cry. "Alas, who has told thee so?"

"One who was here just now—one who saw him perish. He is within the palace, welcomed by our mother as you may guess!"

"Alas—! But who placed the offerings on the tomb?"

"I suppose, one of those who brought the news of his death" Electra replied. "The gifts have been set there in his memory."

Chrysothemis wept. "Ah me, and I was hastening here in joy with my news, not knowing what fresh evil had befallen us! Now I hear this, added to our former sorrows!"

But Electra rose to her feet. "Hearken to me, sister. For there remains one way, by which we can throw off the burden that oppresses us."

"What! Can we raise the dead to life again?"

"That is not what I mean. I am not so foolish."

"What dost thou bid me do, then? What *can* we do?"

"Thou canst take heart, and dare what I shall advise" answered Electra quietly.

"If thou hast any good advice, I will help thee" her sister promised.

"Hear me, then. And remember, nothing prospers without effort."

"I will help thee" repeated Chrysothemis, wondering more and more what the other had in her mind.

“Thou knowest we have no longer any friends to help us. The grave has taken them; we alone are left. So long as I had word that our brother was alive, I hoped that he would some day come himself, and avenge our father. But, now that he is gone, I must look to thee—” She spoke slowly and earnestly, as though in doubt how Chrysothemis would receive what she said. Then, looking about her cautiously, she went on: “O sister, I will no longer hide from thee what I plan. We must act, thou and I. Thou mayst not shrink from helping me. We must slay Aegisthus!”

“We—slay Aegisthus!” the other gasped.

“Thou grievest, dost thou not, that thou must still live here unhonoured, and unwed? But dost thou think Aegisthus is so rash, that he will ever let a child of thine or mine grow up to avenge us? Help me, and thou shalt gain two things: first, thou shalt earn the praise of our dead father and brother, in the world below; and secondly, thou shalt be free, and shalt win a noble husband—for men love brave deeds. If we succeed, who will not praise us in this city, and abroad? ‘These sisters’ men will cry ‘saved their father’s house; for they feared not to slay their foes who ruled there in triumph.’ Aye, all men will so speak of us! And whether we live or die, our glory shall not fade. Nay sister, be persuaded! Help me—help thyself! For it is shameful to live any longer as we do.”

But the other sister had drawn back from her in dismay, and even the faithful waiting-women uttered a cry of fear. “Thou hast gone mad!”

exclaimed Chrysothemis. "What hope is this, that bids thee dare such a deed, and call on me to help thee? Thou art a woman, without strength; thy foes are enthroned on high. Have we not sorrow enough? Beware, lest we bring about our utter destruction! O sister, say no more: as for what thou hast said already, I will speak of it to none!"

The waiting-women joined in this request; but Electra drew away from them scornfully. "I had expected such an answer" she cried. "I knew well thou wouldst not dare to help me. I must act alone!"

"Alas!" Chrysothemis taunted her. "If only thou hadst been so brave, when our father was slain—"

"I had the same mind then, but less strength of will" Electra said.

"Then train thyself, to remain as thou wast before."

"Thou givest me this advice because thou darest not help me!"

"Aye, call me coward! I care not, whether thou praise me or blame."

"Leave me! Thou useless one!" Electra stormed at her. "Go, tell our mother all that I have said!"

But Chrysothemis shook her head. "I think that thou art wrong and foolish" she replied; "but I am far from hating thee so much, that I would betray thee."

"Then why dost thou advise me to endure dishonour?"

“I advise caution for thy own sake—that is all.”

“And must I be led by thee?”

“Yes, for thou art mad. When thou art wise again, thou shalt guide us both.”

But even now, Electra still tried to reason with her. “Is not this plan of mine a just one?” she asked.

“It may be. But there are times when such justice is dangerous,” was the reply.

“I do not care to live on such base conditions” cried Electra.

“Yet thou mayst live to thank me for my advice—”

“I do not thank thee: and I scorn thy advice! Thou art a coward, and I hate thee for that.”

“Then I will leave thee” said Chrysothemis, moving towards the palace, “since we cannot agree. Go thy own way; but when thou hast fallen in the midst of evils, thou wilt remember what I said!” And with these parting words, she turned from her angry sister and ran up the steps out of sight.

For a short while Electra remained where she was, deep in thought. Then, slowly, she followed Chrysothemis into the palace. The waiting-women, left alone, looked in despair at one another. “Why are we not as the birds above us” they sighed, “loving their own kin? We do not so; and therefore are we chastised by the lightnings of Zeus. Ah, let some voice go down to the underworld, and tell a piteous tale to the sons of Atreus—how their home is afflicted, and their young children strive with one another in sharp enmity! Electra, left alone, mourns

for her father like the nightingale, caring not though death may overtake her, if she can avenge the old evil. What daughter is there living, so noble as she? For this is nobleness, to be unwilling that one's fair name should be stained by dishonour. So thou hast chosen a hard lot, dear child, even though thou winnest for thyself the name of a loving daughter. But I pray still for thy success, that thou mayst rise as high above thy foes as thou art now beneath them!"

But now one of the women warned the rest to be silent, for two young strangers were approaching. Orestes and his friend Pylades, following out the plan which they had made, now made their way towards the gates; Orestes carrying an urn, such as was used by the old Greeks to hold the ashes of their dead. Orestes hailed them.

"Pray tell us, ladies, if we have found our way aright to the home of Aegisthus?" And when the woman had told him that this was so, he went on to ask if one of them would announce his arrival. "Say that two Phocians crave an audience with the king" he requested. And then the women, turning towards the palace, saw that Electra herself had heard the strangers' voices, and was standing in the doorway looking down at them. "This lady" they informed him, "is one of the royal household; and you may deliver your message to her."

"Ye are Phocians?" Electra said. "Can it be that ye come with proofs of the rumour we have heard?"

"I know not what that rumour is" Orestes replied. "But we are sent with a message about Orestes."

Electra came slowly down to them, pale and trembling. "What message, sir?"

"We bear his ashes in this urn" Orestes explained to her.

"Alas, then the news is true! The proof is before my eyes—"

Orestes, looked at her curiously. "Thou dost weep for Orestes, lady?" he asked, wondering who she was. For by Aegisthus' orders, she was poorly dressed, and the young man had no suspicion that she was his sister. She held out her hands.

"Sir, I entreat thee by the gods to let me take the urn, that I may weep for myself and for all my race together."

Orestes passed the little urn to the waiting-women. "Let her hold it, whoever she is; for she speaks as a friend, or even as one of his kin."

"O, relic of him whom I loved best!" Electra murmured, taking it. "This was not what I hoped, when I sent him forth! Ah, would that I had died ere I stole him from his foes, and sent him away to a far country to save him! And would that he too had died on that evil day, and had gone to be at rest with his father! But now he has perished miserably, in exile, far from me; nor could my loving hands perform the last rites for him; but he was left, poor boy, to the mercy of strangers, to be sent home again by them in this little urn. Alas for the fond care that I spent on him, now all wasted! I loved him more than his own mother, more than all his kin. But now death like a whirlwind has swept all that away. O Orestes, art thou gone? Our enemies now mock me,

and our mother rejoices. Many a message didst thou secretly send to me, that thou wouldst return and take vengeance ; but thy hard fate and mine hath ruled otherwise, and thou returnest as dust. Alas, alas ! The pity of thy long wanderings, and of this sad end ! Now let me die, and join thee below for ever ! For indeed when thou wert alive we shared all things equally : and now I long only not to lose my share in thy tomb. For surely the dead have peace !”

She ceased ; and now Orestes could not doubt who was standing before him. The tears welled into his eyes ; yet, on account of the listening women, he dared not yet reveal himself.

“Alas” he murmured, “What shall I say to thee ? For my grief overpowers me—”

“*Thy* grief ?” asked Electra, wondering. “What dost thou mean ?”

“Art not thou Electra ?”

“To my sorrow, I am. But why shouldst thou weep for me ?”

“Alas for thy bitter life ! How little I knew of thy misfortunes. But now I see how things are with thee—”

“Thou seest only a few of the woes I bear ” she told him.

“Why, what worse things canst thou endure than this news I bring ?”

“To live with murderers” answered Electra grimly.

“With whose murderers” On account of the listening women again, Orestes had still to keep up the pretence that he was a stranger.

“My father’s murderers—whom I serve as a slave.”

“Why, who can force thee to endure such a fate?”

“My mother—for so she is called: but not like a mother to me.”

“And is there none to help thee, or to curb their insults?”

“There was once; but today thou hast brought me his ashes.”

Orestes grew more and more distressed. “O hapless one, how deeply I have pitied thee all this while!” he exclaimed.

“Thou art the only one who has ever pitied me, then.”

“Aye! For I alone have the same sorrows to endure.”

Electra looked at him in surprise, “Surely thou art not some distant kinsman of mine?” she asked wondering more than ever who this young friend could be.

“I will tell thee” Orestes whispered then; “If these girls can be trusted not to reveal what I say?”

“They are my loyal friends” Electra assured him “Thou needst not fear to speak before them, whatever thou hast to say.”

Orestes touched the urn which she held to her breast. “Then give this back to me, and I will tell thee the truth.” But the girl shrank away from him.

“By heaven, I beg thee not to ask such a thing!” she cried.

“Nay, obey me— thou shalt not regret it.” And now he was gently trying to take the urn from her. “I would not have thee cherish it any longer” he urged.

But she resisted still. For the urn, as she thought, held the one thing which was left to her, the one relic which she still held dear. “Alas, shall I not be suffered even to bury him—?”

“It is not right that thou shouldst say such things” Orestes insisted.

“Am I unworthy of the dead?” she cried, not understanding him.

“Indeed, thou art not unworthy!” he exclaimed lovingly. “But this urn does not hold thy brother Orestes—”

“Ah, where is he buried, then?”

“Nowhere. The living are not buried” he told her gently.

“Thou meanest—? *What!* Can Orestes be still alive?”

“If I live, he does.”

“Oh, gods! Thou—thou art he—?”

“Look on this seal—our father’s” Orestes said. “Then thou wilt know if I am speaking the truth—” And he showed her dead Agamemnon’s ring. Electra flung herself into her brother’s arms.

“O, happy day! Thou art come! Orestes, Orestes!”

And Orestes, embracing her, sighed happy:  
“The gods grant, that we may never again be parted!”

The waiting-women stood looking on, amazed, with tears of joy in their eyes. But there was no time to be lost; for at any moment, someone might come out of the palace and discover them, “Be silent now” Orestes warned them. “We may be overheard—”

“Nay, I fear them no longer!” exulted Electra. “And indeed no one is within but my mother and her women—a worthless crew!”

“Yet remember, there is a fierceness even in women” he reminded her; for his mother’s dreadful crime was never long absent from his thoughts.

“Have I forgotten that? Can I ever forget? But now I am free to speak!”

“But beware, lest thou throw away thy freedom by speaking too soon. Now thou art overwhelmed by joy. Yet take care—” For he saw that his sister, in her passion of happiness, was forgetting what great peril still threatened them, if they made themselves known too rashly.

But his words calmed her a little. “O my friends!” she wept, “I have seen what I never hoped to see, and it is hard to keep silent!”

“Yet waste no time in telling me of old sorrows” he urged her. “Say not how base our mother is, nor how Aegisthus squanders our father’s wealth in his pride. Say rather what we are to do at this moment,—whether to lie in ambush, or to show ourselves openly, that we may bring the laughter of our foes to an end. If thou dost enter, let not our mother read the joy in thy face. But mourn, as for

the lying tale of my death. We shall have time enough for joy when our task is done."

"I will do all thou shalt command, dear brother" she promised. "For all my joy comes from thee! But thou knowest, surely, how things are in the palace? Thou hast heard that Aegisthus is away, and our mother within? Ah, never fear that she shall see my eyes bright with joy! Hatred has stamped its mark on me; and indeed I am weeping still, though I weep for happiness. So strange thy coming is, that if I saw my father himself come to life, I should not marvel at all! Lead on! Let us go in together! For I tell thee, this very day, had I been left alone, I should have either taken vengeance unaided, or died in the attempt!"

They turned towards the steps. And then Orestes caught her arm and stayed her, as they heard someone coming out. One of the great doors moved, and the old man slipped out into the sunshine.

"Ye fools!" he whispered as they met face to face. "Have you so little care for your own lives, that you stand hemmed in by such dangers and take no heed? If I had not been keeping watch by this door, your plans might have been betrayed. Cease, cease this talk and these loud cries of joy, and go in. For we must act; delay is most perilous!"

"What news from within the palace?" Orestes hurriedly asked.

"The best. For first, no one knows thee now—"

"Thou hast told them that I am dead?"

"Dead long ago, in the belief of all who dwell here."

“Do they rejoice at it, or what do they say?”

“If there were time, I would tell thee. But **hasten**, all is well—”

Electra interrupted them. “Brother, who is **this**?” she whispered.

“Thou dost not remember him?”

“Not at all.”

“Hast thou forgotten to whose hands thou didst once entrust me?” asked her brother. “By whom I was carried off in secret to the Phocians’ land? This is he — he who alone was faithful to us, when our father was slain.”

Electra clasped his hands. “O, saviour of our house, is it thou? How didst thou come here? Ah, to think that I knew thee not, when thou didst stand below just now, and didst break my heart with thy news! In this one day, I have hated thee and loved thee with all my soul!”

But the old man hastily silenced her. “There will be days and nights enough to hear my story, Electra; but ask not to hear it now. Now is the time to act! The queen is within these walls, and no man is with her; if ye delay, ye will have stronger and more cunning foes to fight.”

Orestes turned to Pylades. “Come, then! We have talked enough. Let us salute the gods upon this threshold, and enter!” And without further words, the two young men slipped quietly into the house.

Alone by the great doors, Electra raised her hands to the god Apollo. “O, speed them, lord! And **hear** my prayer too, remembering all the offerings that I have made to thee. I beg thee, I implore thee,

favour our plan: that the whole world of men may know how the gods punish impiety!"

And from below, the waiting-room watched, huddled on the stair. "See how the god of death draws nigh!" they whispered. "For now the hounds, have entered in—the hounds that none can escape, the avengers of crime; soon we shall know how they fare! The dead man's friend has gone into the house, soft of foot; he has returned to the old home of his father, with sharp death in his hands; and the god Hermes leads him swiftly to the place where he would be!"

"Hush, friends!" Electra warned them. "They are doing the deed—" She was still crouching by the half-open door, peering in. And while the women waited, breathless with suspense, she told what she saw. "The queen is making ready for the burial of her son—but the son stands by, watching her, unseen—!"

"Why dost thou lurk here?" they whispered.

"To keep watch, lest Aegisthus should return without warning—"

Then suddenly, a shrill cry rang out.

"Alas! friends, guards! There is murder in the house—!"

It was Clytemnestra's voice!

"Hear her, hear her!" Electra cried. And the women answered, shuddering:

"We hear, and tremble!"

Then a second shriek was heard: "Aegisthus, where art thou? Ah, me!"

“Again!” the daughter exulted.

“O my son, pity me!” they heard Clytemnestra wail.

“He had no pity from thee!” cried Electra harshly. “Nor had the father that begat him!”

“I am wounded—ah!” the shrill voice in the house went on.

“Strike again!” shrieked Electra.

“Ah! Ah!”

“If only Aegisthus were here too!” Electra prayed.

The waiting-women crouched near her, awed by those dreadful cries. “The curses are fulfilled” they whispered, terrified. “He who was slain long since now drinks the blood of his slayer! And lo, the young men come forth again, their hands red with slaughter!”

For now Orestes and his friend had emerged, and stood triumphant at the head of the stairs. “Is all well?” Electra cried.

“Aye, never fear that she will insult thee again” her brother answered. But as he spoke, there came a muttered warning from the women below. “Aegisthus—!”

“Back, back!” Electra exclaimed.

The young men stood hidden in the porch’s deep shadow. “Is it the king?” they whispered.

“Aye, he comes home rejoicing! He is at our mercy now!” And then she pushed them hastily into the palace. “Hide! Leave this to me!”

Aegisthus now approached; and when he saw Electra, cried out in a harsh voice: "Where are these Phocians—who, I hear, have brought word that Orestes is dead? Thee I ask—yes, thee, thou insolent one: since this news concerns thee most." And he hastened up the steps.

"They are within" she told him: adding in bitter irony, whose meaning he could not guess, "and they have made their way to the heart of their hostess."

"The news is true, then? He is dead?"

"They have brought proof. The corpse is there for thee to see, when thou shalt enter."

Aegisthus laughed mockingly. "Thou dost not often tell me to rejoice! But thou art telling me now."

"Rejoice—if thou thinkest thou hast cause for rejoicing" she answered. Then, turning suddenly, she flung open the great doors, so that the hall was revealed. There on the pavement lay a lifeless form, with a cloak covering it; the two young men stood over it; one on either side.

Aegisthus sprang forward, hardly attempting to hide his joy. "So! Let me see his face" he ordered; and added, in sham piety: "It is right that I mourn for him, even I; for he was my kinsman."

"Uncover the face thyself" said Orestes quietly.

The king stooped down. "Let someone call for Clytemnestra" he ordered. But Orestes answered him:

"There is no need to call for her. She is here!"

At the very moment when he heard these words, Aegisthus drew aside the cloak from Clytemnestra's

dead body, and realised the truth. His terror found utterance in a shrill cry—

“Alas! What is this—? Ah me, into what trap have I fallen—?”

“Thou knowest then who is alive, though he was thought to be dead!”

“Orestes—!” Aegisthus trembled.

“Aye, thou hast learnt the truth at last!”

Aegisthus cowered before him, helpless, and paralysed with fear. “Death faces me! Yet let me speak—”

“No more!” cried Electra fiercely from the gateway. “Slay him, slay him! Oh, hasten!”

Orestes pointed sternly towards the inner part of the house. “Go in! Thy time has come—”

“In there—?” The murderer knelt at Orestes’ feet.

“Aye—where thou didst slay my father. On the same spot thou shalt die—”

And then the end came swiftly. The watchers saw Orestes drive the murderer before him, into the house. A moment later, terrible cries rang out. Then Orestes returned—alone.

The curse had been fulfilled. King Agamemnon’s murderers were no more. At last, vengeance was accomplished.

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## CHAPTER IV

We have now seen how Agamemnon's murder was avenged by Orestes, in his punishment of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra. What happened directly after this, can be told in few words. Electra was married to her brother's staunch friend, Pylades; and happy at last, after all the bitter sorrows she had endured, she went to live with him at his home in Achaëa. We shall meet Pylades again, later on; Electra, safe and well-beloved in her new home, now drops out of the story.

But the case of Orestes was more difficult. Greek religion taught, that the killing of one's near kin (such as wife, husband, or parent) was the most dreadful of crimes. It was no sin, in view of Agamemnon's death, for Orestes to kill his cousin Aegisthus; but for Orestes to kill Clytemnestra (even though ordered to do so by the god Apollo) was a crime which aroused against him a most terrible curse. Orestes, therefore, was in a cruel plight. His mother had deserved no mercy, for she had murdered her lord; Orestes, being next-of-kin, was the proper person to avenge him; and yet not even this could lessen Orestes' guilt in killing Clytemnestra. He was accursed, an outlaw from heaven's justice; and the agents of the curse, now striving to punish him, were a fierce band of demons called the Furies.

These Furies, so the old Greeks held, were the daughters of Night, and were let loose from hell to chase and harass anyone who shed his own parent's blood. They were pursuing Orestes now, from one land to another, as he fled vainly from Mycenæ to

escape their vengeance ; but at last he was ordered by the god Apollo to make his way to Athens, and there to appeal to the great goddess Athena, that the justice of his case might be judged.

Meanwhile, we must suppose that we are in Apollo's temple at Delphi, whither Orestes has fled in his wanderings. The aged priestess of Apollo appears. She finds some pilgrims, waiting to consult the god. So, after uttering a prayer, she turns back into the temple that she may put their questions before him.

But she returns at once, in horror. "O fearful sight!" she cries. "A murderer crouches by the altar! In one hand he holds a dripping sword; in the other an olive-branch, in token that he implores the help of the god. And all round him, stretched in ghastly sleep, his pursuers are resting—the Furies, that have hunted him hither. There on the sacred seats they lie, the daughters of hell! But the god will protect his shrine from outrage. I call on him: Apollo, hear me!"

She had left the great doors of the temple open; and Orestes could now be seen in the twilight of the shrine, clinging to the altar, with the dark shapes of the Furies all round him. But the prayer was heard. Apollo himself appeared, standing near Orestes.

"Trust me, I am thy friend" he said. "Come, while thine enemies, sleep! I will protect thee, even though they pursue thee by land and sea. Thy fate has been a bitter one, but take courage. For I bid thee to fly hence swiftly, to Athena's city: there, clasp her ancient statue. Thy cause shall be heard by

righteous judges, and thou shalt be delivered from thy woe; I will help thee, since it was I that bade thee punish thy mother."

Orestes knelt before him in awe. "O lord Apollo, justice is in the gods' hands. Grant me thy justice, king!"

But the god smiled on him, and once more told him to hope. Then he called Hermes, messenger of the gods, and bade him lead Orestes to Athens. So the two started on their way, and at once Apollo vanished.

Meanwhile the Furies still lay sleeping, since Apollo had so willed. But they were not to rest for long. Slowly, a strange and ghastly figure rose from the earth. It was the ghost of Clytemnestra, thirsting for Orestes' blood.

"What, asleep!" it wailed. "Up, up! I died by my son's hand, dishonoured—and have ye forgotten? Behold these wounds! Have I not prayed to you? I, Clytemnestra—once famous, but now a dream!"

The sleeping Furies groaned; but Apollo's spell still held them. And the ghost went on:

"Ye moan; but your prey hath fled, and seeks help from my enemies. Up, rouse yourselves! Awake!"

Struggling against the spell, the sleepers broke out into fresh groans and shrill cries.

"Ye dream of blood!" the ghost called to them. "Up, up! Follow! Chase him to his death! He is gone!"

Clytemnestra vanished. And now the Furies, starting up in dismay, began to rouse one another.

“Shame, sisters!” they clamoured wildly. “Shame! Orestes hath fled. We are cheated by Apollo; we are robbed! The god hath tricked us, even here in his shrine. Awake!” Now roused, and raging at their loss, the hideous forms came streaming from the doors into the court of the temple, looking on all sides for Orestes, and complaining bitterly against Apollo. “Shameless are all the younger gods!” they howled. “For they upset heaven’s justice, and grant men forbidden favours. This place, once holy, is polluted with blood. And thou thyself, O prophet of the gods, art accursed! Thou hast crossed in us our fierce work, thou darest to challenge Fate! We hate thee! God though thou art, we hate thee and will call thee to account—”

But suddenly, the god himself appeared before them in majesty, and their harsh cries were stilled. “Begone!” he ordered sternly. “Leave this sacred place! Lest a shaft from my golden bow teach you in agony that these halls are not for you. Hell is your kingdom, or wherever men are tortured and slain; hold your horrid revels there, for they are loathed by the gods; and pollute not my temple!”

“Yet, lord Apollo, hear us speak” they howled. “It is thou—thou alone—that hast been the cause of our coming here.”

“I! How so?” the god challenged them, indignant.

“Do we not follow Orestes? And who bade Orestes kill his mother, if it was not thou?”

“I bade him avenge his father’s murder” Apollo corrected them sternly.

“And thou didst welcome him when he fled here, though his hands dripped blood—”

“He came here at my request—”

“Oho! And we came after him! For our task is to follow wherever he goes.”

“Follow, then. But set not your impious feet in this holy place.”

“Holy or not” the Furies reminded him, “all places are open to us, when a murderer leads the way.”

“You know well, she who was murdered had first murdered her lord—” And facing them angrily, Apollo went on: “*That* was the first crime, and the greater—the sin against marriage. How was it that ye did not haunt Clytemnestra? Ye are unjust, ye favour one and harass another. Athena, the wise, shall judge this matter, I tell you!”

“She shall not. He is ours, he is ours—!” And rushing past the god with wild cries, they streamed forth to follow Orestes on his journey to Athens.

“Yet I will save him!” muttered Apollo as he watched them go. “He has appealed to me, nor shall I betray him—!”

Meanwhile, Orestes made the best use of the start which he had gained on his pursuers; and though the journey took some time, he arrived finally at the temple of Athena, in Athens, before the Furies could come up with him. Weary and travel-worn, he climbed the steps and flung himself down beside the statue of the goddess, whose power was such that even the Furies could not touch him there, without her leave.

He had done well to hasten; for they were close at his heels. Into the courtyard of the temple they streamed, like hounds on a scent, and cast about with frightful threats and curses till they caught sight of him where he lay. Then a great howl went up from them; but he faced them fiercely.

“Nay, I am purified since entering this place” he warned them. “Ye cannot touch me—I appeal to the goddess!” And calling upon Athena, he pledged himself to be her servant henceforward, and invoked her judgment.

Baffled, the Furies gathered at the foot of the steps, still shrieking curses at him and assuring him that not even Athena should save him. “Thou shalt be ours, forsaken by gods and men! No sinner shall escape us, go where he will.” And then they began to invoke their mother, Night, reminding her that she had charged them with the duty of pursuing and punishing murderers. “Apollo has sheltered him” they howled: “but let not Apollo prevail! What have the gods to do with us? It is our sacred duty to avenge the shedding of blood. Let the gods stand aloof, and not meddle with us.”

Orestes watched them from the doorway of the temple, saying nothing, but knowing that he was safe from them at least till Athena should appear and give judgment. And the howling band below, chafing at this delay, burst out into wilder and wilder cries:

“With scourge and torture we will ravage him who is guilty of blood! Though he be fleet of foot, he shall not outrun us; though he be strong, his strength shall not prevail. So let none hinder us in

our work. In hell he shall learn our might, though the high gods have banished us from sharing their heaven. For, though the chase be long, he must stumble at last and be caught. Then shall we trample on him, till he writhes in anguish. Ah, what avails it though a man be strong and proud on the earth? In hell he is ours, he is ours—in the dark pit, whence rise vainly the lament of the damned. Or what avails it, though men seem to go unpunished for their crimes? We have seen all, we have remembered all. Ruin is prepared for them, and in due time our vengeance falls. Then shall their prayers be shrieked in vain; for from the kingdom of the lost, no prayers find their way to heaven. So men have feared us since the world began, and shall fear us for ever!”

Then, suddenly, the cries of the Furies were hushed. For a great radiance shone in the dim temple, as the goddess Athena appeared. Summoned by Orestes’ prayer, she had come home from afar—from the banks of the river Scamander, where the ruined city of Troy had once stood. For a little while she paused, standing near her own statue, looking in turn at the haggard fugitive and at the fierce band below.

“Who are ye?” her deep voice asked. “I speak to both—to thee, who does lie here clasping my statue with thy arms, and to you other wild ones gathered before my gates. Whence come ye? What is your will?”

The Furies answered first. “O goddess, we are the bringers of the Curse, the daughters of ancient Night.”

“I know you” the goddess replied. “But what is your errand here? What curse do ye bring?”

“The curse of split blood, hunting the guilty slayer from his home.”

“And this man, whom ye pursue—?”

“He hath dared the worst of all foul crimes. He hath slain his own mother.”

“What fear, what terrible compulsion, drove him to such a sin?”

“Ah, what indeed?” they howled, pointing fiercely at Orestes. “Thou mayest well ask! What cause could any man have for such impious murder?”

But the wise Athena saw that they were keeping something back, and had not answered her last question. She turned towards Orestes, who had still said nothing. “There are two parties here” she said. “But only one hath spoken.”

“He dares not speak” they all clamoured wildly: “nor dares he acknowledge what we have said.”

But Athena answered them quietly: “I see that ye love the forms and phrases of the Law—but not the Law itself.”

“How? What does thou mean?”

“That oaths prove nothing” Athena reminded them. “Oaths do not make the wrong the right.”

“Then, do thou judge between us” the Furies invited her.

“I will” the goddess replied. Then, calling upon Orestes: “Stranger, it is for thee to defend thyself. Whence comest thou, and what is thy parentage? Tell what hath befallen thee. And then answer this

charge that they bring. I stand prepared to hear, since thou hast taken refuge here by my sacred altar. Speak!"

Orestes raised himself. "O lady Athena, fear not that I pollute thy altar by touching it; for I have purified myself, performing those sacred rites which are commanded to the shedder of blood. As for my parentage, I am an Argive; and my father was Agamemnon the king, who led the host which thou thyself didst help to sack Priam's ancient city. But bitter was his home-coming! For with black treachery my mother slew him, taking him on the bath when there was none to aid him. For long years I lived abroad in exile; till returning at last—I do not deny the deed—I slew my mother, that my father's murder might be avenged in hers. If I am blamed for this, I share the blame with Apollo; for he foretold that misery would ensue, if I allowed the slayer to go unpunished. Such is my story! Judge thou, if my action were just or unjust. I am content that thou, goddess, shalt decide!"

For a short while, Athena made no answer. Then, raising her head, she spoke. "No mortal man may judge such a case as this. Nor may even I—so finely balanced is the issue. Thou hast come to my temple, purified, to invoke my aid; I am already thy protector, then, and I may not judge thee. And yet, the claim of these avenging spirits must not be ignored; far if I drive them off, refusing to hear them, their curse will breed plague in my land. But since this matter must needs be judged, and judged quickly—hear my word! I shall appoint sworn judges—a

wise council, who shall decide such cases of blood-guilt in this city for ever. Meanwhile prepare your evidence and your proofs, that the truth may be known; I will seek out the most righteous of my citizens, and they shall swear to deal justly with you both."

So saying, she passed between them and made her way towards the city. And as she went, the Furies, who had been hoping she would yield Orestes to them at once, broke out into loud cries again. "If he who slew his mother is pardoned" they shrieked, "then shall all ancient justice fail on earth, and right and wrong be confounded! Murder shall rage unchecked, and sons pursue their parents, sword-in-hand, for ever! No more shall the slayer shrink from our threatened vengeance, no more shall heaven listen to the prayers of the slain. Justice shall fall in ruin, if this man be set free!

"Shall such things come to pass? Shall the wicked man, knowing no more fear, do such crimes as he pleases? Shall parents have no reverence paid to them, shall the guest be wronged?

"But no, the wicked man shall never escape his doom! Though he has boasted in his pride, yet justice shall overtake him; and the high gods shall laugh, to see him perish!"

As the Furies ended their wild chant, Athena could be seen returning from the city, with a herald preceding her. "Now sound thy brazen trumpet" she ordered him: "and when the judges take their seats, let all men hear my eternal law. But let these parties—" she turned towards the Furies and Orestes—"await the verdict in silence."

But now a newcomer appeared. It was the god Apollo, who had hastened from Delphi when his divine fore-knowledge warned him that he would be needed; and he stepped forward now to plead for Orestes, in Athena's court. The Furies set up a great outcry when they saw him; they had not forgiven him for helping Orestes to escape them at Delphi. "Rule thou in thine own place!" they clamoured angrily. "What business hast thou here?"

The god saluted Athena. "I come as witness of the truth," he cried. "This man sought refuge in my shrine, and it was I who purified him from blood. For if the slaying of his mother was a crime, then I share the blame of it."

Athena accepted him as Orestes' champion! The judges took their seats—chief citizens of Athens, chosen by the goddess for their wisdom and virtue. And then Athena, turning to the Furies, bade them to begin. "For so the law ordains—that the plaintiffs speak first, and set forth their charges in order."

The Furies needed no second bidding. Their leader stood out before the court, and at once undertook to put three questions to Orestes. "Answer first—art thou the murderer of thy mother?"

"I am" Orestes replied.

"Hear him!" the Furies cried. "The first victory is ours. When he has given three such answers, he shall be condemned!"

"Boast not" Orestes said "till thou seest me fall. I still stand to answer."

"How didst thou slay her?" was the next question asked.

“I smote her in the neck with my dagger—thus!”

The third question followed swiftly. “And who bade thee dare such a deed?”

“The god who gives advice to men” said Orestes. “There he stands as my witness!”

“What! A god ordered thee to murder?”

“He did. And I blame him not.”

“Thou wilt blame him soon enough” cried the Fury fiercely, “when the votes decree thy doom!”

“My murdered father will help me, from the grave” Orestes answered.

“Dost thou call on the dead? Call on thy dead mother, then!” the Fury taunted him.

“Two foul crimes brought my vengeance on her” cried Orestes. “She killed her husband—and my father.”

“And if she died for such a crime, why art thou still alive?” demanded the Fury; but Orestes countered this with another question:

“If thou didst not pursue her for such a crime, why dost thou pursue me?”

“The man she slew was not her kinsman—”

“What! Then am I my mother’s kinsman, and not my father’s? Speak for me, O Apollo, if the death of my mother was just! I killed her, I have not denied it. And thou knowest with what reason. Teach me how to reply!”

Apollo now stood forward. “O judges” he began “I speak only the truth; for never has any answer or advice been given from my shrine, save

by the will of Zeus. Zeus is my father, binding me more strongly than any oath."

"And did Zeus bid thee tell Orestes, that he should avenge his father's death by slaying his mother?" the Fury sneered.

"Agamemnon was no common father" the god replied. "He was a king, appointed by the gods. She hailed him in treacherous welcome, as he returned from his victory; and she smote him shamefully, unawares."

"Even though all this be so" the Fury insisted, "shall he who slew his mother rule in Argos, and join in the worship of the gods?"

"Hear me!" Apollo replied. "She whom we call the mother, begets not the child; she is but the nurse; it is the father who creates. In proof of which, I call Athena herself as my witness. For she was born of Zeus himself, from no mother's womb!" This indeed was a point in Apollo's favour. For the Greeks held that the goddess Athena had had no mother, but that she sprang full-grown and fully armed from the brain of Zeus.

Both sides had now finished speaking. Athena turned to the judges. "Here on this sacred Hill of Ares\*" she warned them solemnly "ye sit in judgment—here, where the Amazons once attacked your city in vain. And here shall my council sit, so long as my justice endures. So ponder well, that the fair name of Athens and Athenian law may remain unsullied for ever. Now give your votes!"

One by one, then, the judges rose; each gave his verdict, by dropping into one or other of two urns

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\* Ares was the god of war.

the pebble which he held in his hand. As they did so, the Fury and Apollo addressed them again, by turns: reminding them how serious was the issue, and how grave the consequence of not judging aright. Apollo quoted the authority of his father Zeus; the Fury tried to belittle Apollo's argument, and threatened Athens with her curse if the judgment should go against her. At last the pebbles were all in, and the counting began. Orestes watched, trembling.

But when the count was done, it was found that the votes were equal. Athena herself stepped forward. She had not voted yet; but now she dropped the last and decisive pebble—into Orestes' urn!

“Hear the verdict!” she cried. “This man is free. By my vote I acquit him!”

Orestes threw himself at her feet. “O goddess, saviour of my house, I bless and praise thy name! And ere I go, I leave here an oath behind me. Never shall any king of Argos attack this land; for if he should dare, I shall know of it in my grave and send misfortune upon him! But if he helps this city, I shall fight on his side. Farewell now, Athena and thy people. May the gods prosper thee, and confound thy foes! Farewell.”

And so Orestes took his leave, and set out for Mycenae. But the Furies, mad with rage, sprang up and began to invoke their bitterest curses on the place. “Ye younger gods, that tread down ancient laws, may ye be accursed! May plague and famine scourge this Athenian land, since ye have made a mock of the daughters of Night!”

In vain Athena pointed out to them that the case had been fairly tried ; in vain she tried to ward off their imprecations by friendly words. They howled their curses again, and reproached her with their dishonour.

“Ye shall have no dishonour” she promised them. “Vent not your spite against this land, for Zeus himself shall protect it.” But they still kept crying out at her, and would not be appeased. So at last, the goddess made them a splendid offer. “Ye are my elders” she exclaimed. “I blame not your wrath. But if ye leave this land in anger, and make your home elsewhere, what good shall you do yourselves? Will ye not rather dwell here and be worshipped here, ruling the city with me? Ye are strong” she flattered them: “then use your strength wisely! Hear ye the promise I make!”

“What! Dwell with thee?” they howled—but their cries were dying down a little. “What advice is this?”

“Hear again!” she said. “And ye shall never complain that ye were driven hence without honour. Stay and be worshipped here, if ye will; but if ye refuse, think not that ye will ever have the right to head evil on this city.”

“Why, dost thou offer us a home here?” they demanded.

“A home, and happiness.”

“And shall we be honoured in thy city?”

“Aye, for no house of it shall prosper, without your blessing.”

“This is thy promise, for all time?”

“I promise, and I will perform” the goddess swore.

At these words, the Furies began to relent; for it was no small solace to their pride, that they should be worshipped in the city of Athens with Athena herself. So at last, they came to terms—Athena giving them a home and reverence, the Furies promising to bless the city, and to help her to keep it holy and free from sin. “O Athens” the goddess said to herself, “I have done thee good service this day! For if thou hast these dread Powers on thy side, thy blessings shall be increased. Woe to the wretch within thy walls, who incurs their wrath! They shall hound him to his doom, and thou shalt stand pure and sinless... Take up your task, dread maidens” she said aloud. “Watch over my happy land, and we shall reign here together!”

So the old feud was ended, and a new love and fellowship begun. It remained only for the Furies to be escorted in triumph to the place which Athena set apart for them—a mighty cavern, underneath the ground on which Athens stood. This was to be their shrine, where they were destined to be worshipped by the people of Athens for many a hundred years. “Come, citizens” proclaimed the goddess. “Light torches, and with pomp and honour lead them to their new home. They are no longer strangers, but your good friends!”

As evening fell, the torches were kindled in Athena’s temple, and the procession with her priests at its head wound its way down the hillside. Peace had come at last, and the long feud and curse that

had afflicted the house of Atreus seemed to be at an end.

And elsewhere, along the quiet country road that led from Athens to Argos, young Orestes fared forth to claim his kingdom.

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## CHAPTER V

You might think that the young Orestes, after passing through so much hardship, had earned the right to live quietly. But his troubles were not yet over. For the god Apollo, his protector and friend, had now laid a strange task on him.

Far away to the east—so far that Agamemnon's voyage to Troy was but a short distance, compared with it—lay the land of the Tauri, ruled by a barbarous king. It was on the north coast of the Euxine, which we now call the Black Sea. Its modern name is The Crimea; and at a city now known as Balaclava, King Thoas had his capital. King Thoas worshipped the Greek goddess Artemis, of whom you have already heard so much; but he worshipped her in a very cruel way. He had made it a law, that all Greek travellers landing on his coast were at once sacrificed to the goddess; he had built her a strongly-guarded temple there, in which was kept a little statue of her, which men said had fallen from heaven; and the priestess in charge of it was herself a Greek, with a band of Greek captive-women to serve her.

Strange tales were told about this priestess. She was of noble birth, men whispered, being connected

with the royal house of Atreus; but now one of her duties was to prepare for sacrifice any of her hapless countrymen who were unlucky enough to arrive there. She did not sacrifice them herself; but she was none the less in charge of the last rites, which preceded their death.

The task which Apollo had laid upon Orestes was connected with this temple. He was to journey to King Thoas' land, and to steal thence by force or fraud the well-guarded statue, bringing it back to Athens. Apollo gave Orestes no reason for this deed, but he had promised that, by doing it, Orestes should at last win peace.

It was a dangerous errand. Orestes knew well enough, by report, what happened to Greeks who visited King Thoas, even when they came as friends; so he had no false hopes that he would find it easy to secure the statue. In his trouble he asked his old friend Pylades to help him; and Pylades, who had stood by him so loyally before, at once undertook to go on this journey too. After a long voyage, then, the two reached King Thoas' country. They beached their ship on a lonely part of the coast, where they hoped it would not be seen, and made their way on foot to the king's city. They dared not ask their way; but there was no mistaking the great temple with its high walls; and now they had paused in front of it, scanning it cautiously to try and find some safe way of entering.

“Keep watch for us” muttered Orestes. “This must be the place—and lo, there stands the altar, surely, on which our fellow-Greeks have been slain?”

“Aye, for their spoils hang on the battlements” Pylades showed him. “And the altar is red with blood!”

“But what shall we do? The walls are high; if we climb them, we must be seen. Or are we to force those doors? We know not how strong they are—but we know death awaits us, if we are caught in the attempt—” The task now seemed so hard, that Orestes was tempted to return at once to the ship, and sail home again. But Pylades opposed this.

“It has never been our wont to flee from danger” he reminded his friend. “Nor dare we disobey the commands of the god. Let us retire, though, to the shore and lie hid in some cave till night. There is a space between the columns, high up there, by which we can creep in; but the attempt is best made in darkness.”

“Thou art right” Orestes agreed. “We have not come so far, to abandon our task; and Apollo must be obeyed. He will not let us fail. Then, tonight let it be!” So saying, he slipped away in safety with his friend, to lie hid till evening.

Soon after this, the Priestess issued from the temple with the band of Greek women who served her. They were singing a hymn to Artemis; but presently the Priestess began to tell them of a strange dream which had disturbed her rest. She had dreamed that she saw the ancient palace of Atreus fall in ruins; only one pillar remained standing; and from its cornice seemed to wave a long tress of hair, which spoke to her with a human voice. She could not tell what the dream meant; but she feared that it must portend

some disaster to the House of Atreus. King Agamemnon, she divined, must have been slain—and maybe Orestes too? (For, living so far away, she had had no news from her native-land for a number of years.) Now she was making ready to pour out an offering to Artemis—wine, honey and the blood of a slaughtered heifer—an offering on behalf of the spirits of the dead.

“The House of Atreus is no more” she groaned: “Who shall now rule in Mycenae?” Sadly, she called to mind the awful crimes that made up the old story, and wondered what tragedy had befallen at last, to bring the royal race to an end. But she was interrupted, presently, by her attendant women, who pointed to a shepherd hastening from the shore. “Strange news!” he panted as he ran.

“What has happened?” they asked him.

“Two strangers—two young men—have lately landed on our beach! Make haste, prepare the sacred vessels. For they have fallen into our hands, and must be sacrificed to the goddess!”

“From what land?”

“From Greece.”

“And their names?”

“One called the other Pylades. But I know no more.”

“How did you see them?” asked the Priestess. “And what have shepherds to do with the sea-shore?” For though she served the goddess, she always hated having to take part in the sacrifice of her countrymen. “Why, we had driven our flocks down from the hills, to wash them in the sea. There is a cleft bet-

ween the rocks, and the waves have hollowed out a cavern. One of our number spied two youths lurking there—so fair, that he crept back to us in awe, thinking that they were gods. But another, harder-hearted and less reverent, scoffed at his words. ‘They are wrecked sailors,’ he exclaimed ‘hiding there in terror, since they have heard that all strangers are sacrificed in this land!’ By his advice, we ran down to capture them. One of them rushed forth from the cave, and with drawn sword made at us. It was then that we heard him name his friend; for he cried: ‘We shall die, Pylades—yet let us die with honour!’ We had no weapons, save the stones which we hurled; and by the miracle of some god, as it seemed, not one stone found its mark! But we were many, against two; they grew weary in the fight; till at last we could hem them in, and beat the swords from their hands. Now we have borne them to the king: who, after seeing them, is sending them straight to thee to be sacrificed. So, prepare!”

“It is well” answered the Priestess heavily. “Bring them to the temple.” But in secret her gentle heart was grieved. Yet she recalled her dream: and told herself, that if the House of Atreus were extinct, there was no longer any Greek for whose death she need mourn. “Let them perish!” she cried bitterly. “And if this people is to blame for slaying innocent strangers, then let the blame be cast on Artemis, by whose orders they die. For the goddess can do no wrong!”

Her women now began to make ready for the sacrifice; but they could not help wondering who the strangers were, and why they had voyaged so far.

“Was it for love of gain that they ventured forth? For hope is sweet to men, though it oft leads to misfortune. How did they pass the perilous rocks, and the savage coasts on their way? Ah, would that Helen had been sent in their stead! That her blood, flowing at this altar, might atone for all the harm she hath brought upon men! Or would that some mighty hero of the Greeks could sail here, to deliver us!”

“Silence!” the Priestess ordered. “For this shepherd hath spoken the truth, and the victims approach—”

The two young men were now in view, loaded with chains. But the Priestess’ first order was that these should be taken off. “They are hallowed to the goddess” she declared “and may not be bound.” Then she went with one or two attendants into the temple to prepare for the sacrifice; and while they set about this task, she began to question Orestes, asking him from what part of Greece he came, and lamenting that he must return there no more. But Orestes was not disposed to answer such questions; he thanked her for pitying him, but pointed out that since he had to die, it could no longer greatly matter to him whether he were pitied or not. “Mourn not for us” he answered quietly. “We know your custom here; we must endure our fate.”

But the Priestess still pressed him to reply. “Which of you is named Pyllades?” she enquired.

“He” said Orestes, pointing to his friend. “If it gives thee any pleasure to know it.”

“And are you brothers? From what state do you come?”

“ Brothers only in friendship, lady ” Orestes said.

“ What is *thy* name ? ” she asked him.

“ Thou mayst call me, Unhappy ” he answered.

“ Dost thou refuse to tell me ? Why art thou so proud ? ”

“ Thou mayst kill my body—not my name ” he told her.

“ But this much I will say, that I come from the land of Argos.”

The Priestess uttered a cry. “ By the gods ! Sayest thou so ? ”

“ I was born in Mycenae—a once-blessed city.”

“ Art thou exiled from it ? ”

“ Nay, I left it of my own free-will—and yet my will is not free ” Orestes added, remembering how it was Apollo’s command that had brought him to this plight.

“ Ah, wilt thou tell me what I most wish to know ? ” she exclaimed. Orestes was surprised at her emotion ; and answered her more gently, touched by her sympathy for his fate :

“ I will tell thee anything that does not concern myself. It is no pleasure to me to have been caught in this place ; but if my coming hath brought thee any gain, thou art welcome to enjoy it ! ”

“ Thou knowest the tale of Troy ? ”

“ Aye—to my bitter cost ! ”

“ They say the city has been destroyed. Has Helen returned to Greece ? ”

“ Aye, and now dwells with Menelaus in Sparta. Sore grief has that marriage brought to me ! ”

“And to me too!” returned the Priestess fiercely. “But the other Greeks? Have they gone home again? Hath the prophet Calchas?”

“Calchas is dead.”

“Thanks to the goddess for that! And Ulysses—?”

“Still lives, they say: but has not yet found his way home.”

“Ah, may he never find it!” the Priestess cried bitterly.

“But the king—whom men called the Blessed? What of him?”

“Whom meanest thou? I know of no king whom I might call blessed” was the sad reply.

“Agamemnon?”

“He is dead.” said Orestes briefly.

“Dead? Ah, wretched me!”

“Murdered—by a woman. Ask me no more of him.”

“Only this—doth his queen survive?”

“Nay. Her son slew her.”

“Alas! Why?”

“To avenge his father’s murder.”

“An ill deed—but a just one!” the Priestess faltered, much moved. Then she went on to question him about Iphigenia and Electra, whose names she seemed to know; lastly, about Orestes.

“He is in exile” was the answer: “a fugitive from his home.”

The Priestess was silent for awhile. Then, drawing closer to Orestes, she began to speak to him still more earnestly. "Listen, youth! For this talk hath put a thought into my mind. If I shall set thee free, wilt thou take back a message for me, to my friends in Argos? Thou hast given me gentle answers; now, in reward for the light task of carrying my letter, thou canst win thy escape. Only thy friend must die alone, since the laws of this land require a sacrifice."

But Orestes shook his head. "Lady, thou makest a fair offer. But it was I who led him hither, he came only to help me. Therefore let him take back thy letter, and let me be the victim; he is my dear friend; I should be base indeed, to save myself at his cost!"

These noble words commanded the Priestess' respect, and she began to pity the young man more than ever. "If thou wilt have it so" she told him, "so must it be. Yet since thou art from Argos, I will do all that is within my power to see that thou hast due honour; I will set offerings on thy tomb, and perform every rite. I will go now into the temple for my letter. But O, young man, bear me no ill-will for this! I am not free, I must perform this sacrifice as I am commanded!" Then she called to the guards who had brought the victims to her: "Guard them well, but without chains, till I shall return."

So the two friends were left to talk together. "Who can this lady be?" Orestes wondered. "How keenly she asked news of Troy and the Greeks! How tenderly she mourned for my father's death, what questions she asked about his children! She is an

Argive, surely, or she would not so greatly long to send this letter of hers to Mycenae, and to learn how the state fares!"

But Pylades' thoughts were elsewhere. "It cannot be" he urged "that thou shalt die for me, and I return in safety. What a reproach shall I incur, doing this! Nay, men will think that I betrayed thee to save myself,—or slew thee, perhaps; that I might seize thy kingdom, being thy sister's lord. I will not risk such shame! Rather will I die with thee, like a friend."

"Nay, let this be!" Orestes answered. "I am afflicted by the gods, I find death not unwelcome. But thou art happy, and thy home is undefiled. If thou returnest, and hast sons by my sister, then my father's house still survives. Ah, leave her not desolate, she has no friend but thee! But bid her raise a mound for me, and make offerings there, and say: 'By an Argive woman's hand he died!' Farewell, dear Pylades! For I have found thee truest of all my friends. But Apollo hath deceived me, prophet though he be; at his bidding I slew my mother; and now he hath sent me far from Greece, to meet my own doom!"

"O my friend" wept Pylades, "I will do as thou sayest. But blame not Apollo, even now; for sometimes, even at the latest moment, the gods have brought men's sore troubles to a joyous end—"

Before he could say more, the Priestess appeared again from the temple, with the letter in her hand. She sent the guards away, to help those who were making ready for the sacrifice;

then, coming close to the young men, she spoke. "Let thy friend swear an oath" she said to Orestes "that he will deliver this letter faithfully—not leaving his promise unperformed, as men have sometimes done when once they were clear of danger."

"And thou wilt swear in return, to send him from this cruel land safely?" Orestes demanded.

"Surely! For how else should he carry my letter?"

"But will the king give his consent?"

"I shall persuade him, never fear! And I myself shall put thy friend on board ship."

"Then swear, both" Orestes said. And the Priestess and Pylades each made a solemn oath, the Priestess swearing by the goddess Artemis whom she served, and Pylades by Zeus. Then Pylades added:

"One thing I ask: that if my ship be wrecked, and I swim naked to the shore without thy letter, my Oath shall not bind me?" For the Greeks held an oath in such esteem, that not even such an accident would free Pylades, unless this condition had been made.

"I have borne that in mind" the Priestess said. "So I will tell thee what is in the letter, and thou shalt learn it by heart: that my message may not fail."

"Say then, to whom shall I take it in Mycenae?" asked Pylades. "And what message shall I learn?"

"To Orestes, son of Agamemnon—" the Priestess began.

"Orestes!" the young men gasped in surprise.

And the Priestess went on: "Tell him, I look to him to come and rescue me from this land, where I must sacrifice my fellow-countrymen; for here he shall find me still alive—me whom men thought to have been slain at Aulis: his sister, Iphigenia—"

"O, ye gods!" Orestes cried in a trembling voice.

"Why dost thou call upon the gods?" asked the Priestess. But her brother was speechless; and she went on: "Tell him, that when my father was about to plunge the knife in my breast, the goddess Artemis saved me; for she put there instead of me a hind in my shape, and carried me off to this land. But this strange miracle was never revealed—not even to my father himself."

Both the young men had been struck dumb by these astounding words. But now Pylades, recovering a little, cried between laughter and tears: "O, but how easy is my oath! See, I perform it now. I bear a letter from thy sister, Orestes—lo, here I hand it to thee!" And he passed the letter to his friend.

But Orestes thrust it aside unopened, and caught his sister in his arms. "Iphigenia! Ah, turn not away from thy dear brother—I am he!"

"My brother!" she faltered. "Thou—?"

The other women, standing a little way off, beheld their Priestess in the stranger's arms and cried out in horror at the sacrilege; but the two paid no heed. And Iphigenia, still unable to believe the good news, began to question Orestes. "Ah, is this true! By what token shall I know thee?" she cried.

“Surely—since such a deed could not be hidden from him.”

Orestes glanced round at the attendant women, doubtfully. “Is there no fear lest these may betray us?” he whispered.

Iphigenia smiled. “Are they not women like myself, who love me? Are they not captives here: are they not Greeks—as I am? Speak, friends! Would ye have me lose my brother again? Would ye see me perish with him?”

But the women thronged round her eagerly, bidding her to secure her escape by whatever means she could, and calling on Father Zeus to witness that they would never betray her.

“O, may the gods reward you for your loyalty!” Iphigenia cried. “Hasten, then! Go into the temple. For soon the king will appear, to find if the stranger-victims have yet been slain.” And then she prayed to the statue of Artemis: “O goddess, who once didst rescue me from my father’s hand, in the cruel bay of Aulis! Save me now—save us all! That the commands of thy brother Apollo may be held in honour by men, and that thou mayest thyself return to Athens with us, out of this barbarous land!”

Meanwhile the women were already climbing the steps, chanting a hymn to Artemis. They sang of the sore grief of their captivity, and of their longing to return to their native land. “Help us, great Artemis! And we will send thee home, to a land where thy worship is less cruel than here—to a land where thy priestess is not forced against her will to shed human blood. The Argive ship awaits

thee; Apollo shall be thy guide. O Artemis, help us in our need!"

So chanting, they were about to follow their priestess into the temple, when they heard the tramp of armed men. It was King Thoas and his body-guard, coming as Iphigenia had foreseen to enquire about the sacrifice. "Where is the Priestess?" he called up to them. "Has she performed her opening rites, to prepare the strangers for death? Are they already slain?"

"She is here, King" they answered. "We will tell thee all."

But to the king's surprise, when the Priestess came out of the temple she was carrying the statue of Artemis in her arms. And as he moved towards her, she warned him to stand back. "Ill-omened things have happened" she informed him gravely. "For the two victims, whom thou didst lately send to me, are defiled."

King Thoas drew back in dismay. For he knew well that a polluted offering was an offence to the goddess. "How didst thou learn this?" he faltered.

"The goddess herself warned me," Iphigenia replied. "For she fell backwards from her pedestal as the victims were brought near, and closed her eyes."

"But for what reason? Are they—?"

"Murderers!" answered Iphigenia.

"Of whom? Of some peasant on the shore?"

"Nay, worse. For they slew their own mother."

King Thoas listened to these words in horror. Not even in his wild land had he ever known such a crime. And the Priestess went on to warn him that such a stain of guilt could be cleansed only in the sea.

“The sea lies close at hand” said the king, pointing to where the waves were lapping round the base of the rocks, on which the temple-buildings stood.

“Not here, so near the city, can the stain be cleansed” answered the Priestess. “My task needs solitude.”

“Take them where thou wilt” King Thoas at once agreed; for, as everyone knew, the Virgin-Goddess was worshipped with certain rites which none but women might witness. So he suspected nothing, when the Priestess asked leave to take her victims away to a lonelier part of the shore.

“Let them be chained” she next requested him, “and let a few of these thy guards bear my women company.” This she said, to disarm the king’s suspicions still further. She added one more request—that the rest of the bodyguard should be sent through the city, warning the people to remain within-doors, so as to avoid pollution: and that the king himself should stay and have the temple cleansed.

To all this the king agreed without question: promising further, that however long the rites on the shore might take, he would wait the Priestess’ return. Then, at a sign from her, the victims were let out from the temple. Behind them followed such things as the Priestess had prepared for the cleansing rites—

the sacred ornaments, the lambs for sacrifice, and the lit torches. So the procession moved slowly on towards the outskirts of the town. The women chanted, and the king stood by with averted eyes lest he should be polluted. Soon the procession had passed out of sight, and the whole city was stilled.

For a long while the women waited idle, in the court of the temple. King Thoas had gone inside, with those who were cleansing it. The procession did not return. But at last they saw someone running in the distance, and shouting as he ran. It was a soldier—one of the king's bodyguard, who had gone with the procession to the shore.

"The king, the king" he clamoured. "Where is the king? Open these doors, and call him!"

"Why?" challenged the women, as they still barred his way.

"The young men—the statue—the cunning Priestess—!" gasped the messenger.

"The king is not here" they lied to him. But he would not believe them.

"You have a share in this!" he shouted, furious. And at that moment the temple-doors were flung open and King Thoas himself appeared.

"Who is it that dares to make such uproar in this sacred place?" he demanded. But the messenger, saluting him, plunged at once into his story:

"O king" he cried, "they have escaped—thy own priestess helping them! The statue—the cleansing—it was all a cunning plot—"

Amazed and furious, King Thoas commanded him to tell what he knew. And the soldier, still

panting from his journey, obeyed. It was a strange tale that he had to tell. At first, nothing had seemed amiss; for when the procession neared the shore, the Priestess had bade the guards deliver the prisoners to her, and stand far off while she went forward to perform the sacred rites of cleansing. So the guards waited where they were, and presently heard a sound of chanting, as though the ritual had begun. Then a long silence followed—so long, that they began to fear the victims must have broken loose from the Priestess. At last, despite her orders that they were not to approach, they had resolved to move forward and to see if the Priestess needed help. But when they reached the cliff's edge and looked down on the bay, a strange sight surprised them.

There lay a full-rigged ship, close in! On the long benches sat her fifty rowers, ready to bend their oars; and on her poop stood the two young men, free, and the Priestess with the statue in her arms. In desperate haste the soldiers clambered down the rocks—for they were not yet too late—and laid hold of the mooring-ropes. They even managed to grasp the Priestess herself, demanding angrily by what right the strange crew were taking her away. So a fierce fight began.

Neither side had arms. They fought with fists and stones till at last the sailors, having the advantage of the height of the bulwarks, forced King Thoas' men to stand off. In vain did the soldiers hurl great stones from the cliff! One of the young men had recovered the Priestess and the statue, and bore her in triumph  
aboard

“The archers were shooting flights of arrows now” the messenger went on. “The rowers strained at their long oars, the ship moved forward. But they were not yet away; for as they reached the open water at the mouth of the bay, great waves began to drive them back against the rocks of the headland. The rowers strove, the Priestess prayed aloud to Artemis to help them. Even so, the ship drove against a reef, while some were shaking out the sails and others, leaping into the waves, dragged at the mooring-ropes that hung from the sides. My comrades sent me back—Make haste, O king! They are ours still, unless the waves die down—!”

But King Thoas was already shouting his orders. The guards leapt to obey; some snatched up ropes and chains; and they were thronging from the temple towards the beach when a great light shone over them, dazzling their eyes. In terror, they halted cowering. Then from the centre of the light an awful voice was heard, calling the king by name.

“King Thoas! Cease! It is the goddess Athena who commands thee! This is the gods’ will, that Prince Orestes should come hither to take his sister away, and to bear back my sacred image to Athens. Resist not, nor hope that thou shalt see them again! For already the sea-god hath calmed the waves for them, and they are far from thy shores. Be content, therefore; strive not against heaven’s will. And see that thou send back these my women to their native land!”

King Thoas was on his knees. “O great Athena, I obey. I will not follow them nor seek for them, and

these women shall go in peace, since it is thy command."

And so at last, the long misfortunes of the House of Atreus came to an end. Athena gave the fugitives a prosperous voyage back to Greece. Pylades came safely home to his own land, and to his wife Electra. The captive maidens, dispatched with all honour by King Thoas, soon followed. Orestes built a temple to Artemis in the Athenian land, in which the statue was set up, with Iphigenia as its priestess. And Orestes himself, his crime now wiped out and forgiven, returned to rule the ancient kingdom of the Argives in royal Mycenae.

So the old curse at length was laid to rest, and the story ends.













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