



Signet Classics

The
I LIAD

HOMER

TRANSLATED BY W. H. D. ROUSE

WITH A NEW INTRODUCTION
BY SETH L. SCHEIN

BOOK I

*How Achillês and Agamemnon quarrelled over
Briseïs, and how Thetis persuaded Zeus to
support her son*

AN ANGRY MAN—THERE IS MY STORY: THE BITTER RANCOUR of Achillês, prince of the house of Peleus, which brought a thousand troubles upon the Achaian host. Many a strong soul it sent down to Hadês, and left the heroes themselves a prey to dogs and carrion birds, while the will of God moved on to fulfilment.

It began first of all with a quarrel between my lord King Agamemnon of Atreus' line and the Prince Achillês.

What god, then, made the feud between them? Apollo, son of Leto and Zeus. The King had offended him: so he sent a dire pestilence on the camp and the people perished. Agamemnon had affronted his priest Chrysês, when the priest came to the Achaian fleet, bringing a rich treasure to ransom his daughter. He held in his hand a golden staff, twined about with the sacred wreaths of Apollo Shootafar, and made his petition to the Achaian people in general but chiefly to the two royal princes of Atreus' line:

"My lords, and you their subjects, for you I pray that the gods who dwell in Olympos may grant you to sack Priam's city, and to have a happy return home! but my dear daughter—set her free, I beseech you, and accept this ransom, and respect Apollo Shootafar the son of Zeus!"

Then all the people said good words, and bade them respect the priest and accept the ransom; but my lord

King Agamemnon was not well pleased. He told the priest to be off, and in harsh words too:

"Don't let me find you here any more, you; don't stay now and don't come again, or else your staff and sacred wreaths may not protect you. The woman I will not release! She shall live to old age in our house, far away in Argos, working the loom and lying in my bed. Begone now! don't provoke me, or it will be the worse for you."

The old man was afraid, and did as he was told. Silent he passed along the shore of the murmuring sea; and when he came home, he prayed earnestly to Apollo:

"Hear me, Silverbow! thou who dost bestride Chrysê and holy Cilla, thou who art the mighty lord of Tenedos, O Smintheus! If I have ever built a temple to thy pleasure, if I have ever burnt for thee fat slices of bulls or of goats, bestow on me this boon: may the Danaäns pay for my tears under thy shafts!"

Phoibos Apollo heard his prayer. Down from Olympos he strode, angry at heart, carrying bow and quiver: the arrows rattled upon his shoulders as the angry god moved on, looking black as night. He sank upon his heel not far from the ships, and let fly a shaft; terrible was the twang of the silver bow. First he attacked the mules and dogs, then he shot his keen arrows at the men, and each hit the mark: pyres of the dead began to burn up everywhere and never ceased.

Nine days the god's arrows fell on the camp; on the tenth day Achillês summoned all to a conference. The goddess Hera put this in his mind, for she was distressed to see the Danaäns dying. And when they were all gathered together, Achillês rose up and spoke.

"My lord King," he said, "I think we shall seem just foiled adventurers when we get home—if indeed we get off with our lives, now you see war and pestilence allied to beat us. Come then, let us inquire of some prophet or priest, or even a diviner of dreams—for God, it seems, doth send our dreams—and let him tell us what has made Phoibos Apollo so angry. Does he find fault with us for prayer or for sacrifice? Does he desire the savour of sheep or goats without blemish, that he may spare us this pestilence?"

He said his say, and sat down. Then up rose Calchas o' Thestor, most excellent diviner of dreams, who knew what is and what will be, and what has been in ancient days; he had guided the fleet to Ilios by the divination which Phoibos Apollo had taught him. He spoke to them from an honest heart, and said:

"Prince Achillês, whom Zeus delights to honour! you bid me explain the wrath of Lord Apollo Shootafar: therefore I will speak. Mark what I say, and swear me an oath that you will defend me with all your might in word and deed. For I think I shall provoke a man who rules all our people, one whom all the people obey. A king when angry always can be stronger than a common man; even if he smothers his anger for the day, yet indeed he keeps a grudge long in his heart until he can pay it off. Consider then if you will hold me safe."

Achillês answered:

"Fear nothing, but speak the word of God which you know. For I swear by Apollo, whom Zeus delights to honour, to whom you pray, Calchas, when you declare God's word to the nation: no man while I live and see the light shall lay heavy hands on you in this fleet, none of all the nation, not even if you name Agamemnon, who now claims to be first and best of us all."

Then the seer took courage and spoke out:

"He finds no fault with us then, for prayer or sacrifice, but for his priest, whom Agamemnon affronted, when he would not accept a ransom and set his daughter free. For his sake Shootafar has sent us trouble, and will send. Nor will he stay the noisome pestilence among our people, until the King gives back to the father his lovely girl, unbought, unransomed, and sends a solemn sacrifice to Chrysê: then we may trust that the god will be appeased."

No sooner had he sat down, than up rose my lord King Agamemnon in his majesty. He was displeased, the dark places in his heart were full of resentment, his eyes were like flashing fire; and he began by rating Calchas:

"Prophet of evil, you have never had a decent word for me! It is always your delight to prophesy evil, but good you have never said and never done! And now you

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In his “plain English” translation, W. H. D. Rouse makes a point to keep the language as colloquial as Homer's original was, never pedantic, high-flown, or clichéd. In fact, it is the nearest contemporary English equivalent to the epic Homer's audience heard at their banquets.

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