

THE STORY OF
ACHILLĒS

Shortened from Homer's *Iliad*
translated into plain English

by
W. H. D. ROUSE

THOMAS NELSON & SONS LTD
LONDON AND EDINBURGH

The Teaching of English Series

THE STORY OF ACHILLES

No. 227

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There thou shalt hear and learn the secret power
Of harmony, in tones and numbers hit
By voice or hand, and various-measured verse,
Æolian charms and Dorian lyric odes,
And his who gave them breath, but higher sung,
Blind Melesigenes, thence Homer called,
Whose poem Phœbus challenged for his own.

MILTON, *Paradise Regained*, IV. 245.

First published January 1942
Reprinted 1946

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THE STORY OF ACHILLES

BOOK I

HOW ACHILLÈS AND AGAMEMNON QUARRELLED OVER
BRISÈIS, AND HOW THETIS PERSUADED ZEUS TO
SUPPORT HER SON

AN angry man—there is my story : the bitter rancour of Achillès which brought a thousand troubles upon the Achaian host. Many a strong soul it sent down to Hadès, and left the heroes themselves a prey to dogs and carrion birds, while the will of God moved on to fulfilment.

It began with a quarrel between my lord King Agamemnon and Prince Achillès.

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

“ My lords, and you their subjects, for you I pray that the gods may grant you success, and a happy return ; but my dear daughter—set her free, I beseech you, and accept this ransom, and respect Apollo Farshooter the son of Zeus ! ”

Then all the people said good words ; but Agamemnon told the priest to be off, and in harsh words too :

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“Don't let me find you here any more, you ; or else your staff and sacred wreaths may not protect you. The woman I will not release ! Begone now ! don't provoke me, or it will be the worse for you.”

The old man was afraid, and silent he passed along the shore of the murmuring sea. When he came home, he prayed earnestly to Apollo :

“Hear me, Silverbow ! thou who dost bestride Chrysé and holy Cilla, 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, may the Danaäns pay for my tears under thy shafts ! ”

Phoibos Apollo heard his prayer. Down from Olympos he strode, 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 arrows at the men, and each hit the mark.

Nine days the god's arrows fell on the camp ; on the tenth day Achillès summoned all to a conference. And when they were all gathered together, Achillès rose up and spoke.

“My lord King,” he said, “I think we shall look a nice lot of fools 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 ? ”

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, and he said :

“Prince Achillès ! you bid me explain the wrath of Lord Apollo Farshooter : therefore I will speak.

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Swear me an oath that you will defend me with all your might. For I think I shall provoke a man who rules all our people. 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 until he can pay it off."

Achillès answered :

" Fear nothing, but speak the word of God. For I swear by Apollo, to whom you pray, Calchas : no man while I live shall lay heavy hands on you, none of all the nation, not even if you name Agamemnon himself."

Then the seer took courage and spoke out :

" He finds no fault 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 Farshooter will not stay the noisome pestilence until the King gives back his daughter, unbought, unransomed, and sends a solemn sacrifice to Chrysé."

Then up rose my lord King Agamemnon in his majesty. 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. And now you get up and harangue the people with your oracles. So *that* is the reason why Farshooter sends trouble ! because of that girl Chryseïs ! because I would not accept the ransom—but I want to keep her myself ! Why, I like her better than my own wife Clytaimnestra. Never mind, I will give her back if that is better. I would rather have the people alive than dead. Only get a prize ready for me at once, or I shall be the only man without a prize ! "

Then Achillès answered :

" Your Majesty, gettings are keepings with you, there's no doubt about that. Pray how will our men give you a prize ? What we got has been divided,

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and you cannot expect people to collect it all again in a heap. For the present, then, give the girl up ; and we will pay you threefold if ever we sack the proud city of Troy."

King Agamemnon answered :

"None of that ; you may be a great man, Achillès, but you will neither cajole me nor persuade me. Do you want to keep your own prize, and tell me to sit forlorn without any ? If our men will give me a prize to make up, well and good ; but if not, then I will take—I'll come to you, or to Aias, or Odysseus, and away I'll go with my gettings ! Then it will be his turn to be angry. But for the time being, let us launch a good ship and put Chryseïs on board ; and let one of the princes be in charge, Aias or Idomeneus or Prince Odysseus, or yourself, my young friend, you terror of the world, *you shall pacify the Farshooter.*"

Achillès scowled at him, and said :

"Ha ! greedyheart, shamelessness in full dress ! How could any man be willing to obey you ? I cared nothing about the Trojans ; they had never lifted my cattle or horses, never destroyed my harvest. No, it was you I came for, shameless man ! to give you pleasure, to revenge Menelaos, and you too, dog-face ! You don't trouble about that ! And now you threaten to rob me of my prize. I never get a prize equal to yours if our men capture some town ; but most of the hard fighting is done by me. Only when sharing-time comes, you get most of the good things, and I have a scrap to comfort me—not much, but all I can get ! Now I will just go home to Phthia, since I don't think I shall fill my hold with riches if I stay here."

King Agamemnon answered :

"Do go, if that's what you want—I do not sink on my knees and beg you to stay. I have others in plenty. I hate you more than any prince on earth, for you are always quarrelling and fighting. If you

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are such a mighty man, God gave you that, I suppose. Go home and lord it over your Myrmidons, but I care nothing for you. I don't mind if you *are* in a rage. Now I give you fair warning : since Apollo robs me of Chryseïs, I will send her home ; but I will take your beautiful Briseïs, and I will come for her myself."

This pierced Achillès to the heart ; and he was of two minds, whether he should draw sword and strike down King Agamemnon, or whether he should calm his temper. But as he began to draw the great sword, Athena came down from heaven. She stood behind him, and held him back by his long red hair. No other man saw her, but Achillès alone. Achillès turned round startled—at once he knew Pallas Athenaia. He said :

" Why have you come again, daughter of Zeus Invincible ? To see the insult of my lord King Agamemnon ? I'll tell you what : his own high-handedness one day may be his death ! "

Athena replied, with her bright eyes glinting :

" I came to check your passion, if you will listen. Come, don't pull out that sword. Just give him a sound rating. For I declare to you that a time will come when you shall have a magnificent offer to make up for this insult."

Achillès answered :

" I must observe your bidding, goddess. What the gods command you, do, then the gods will listen to *you*."

So he drove back the sword into the sheath ; and she returned to Olympos.

But Achillès was angry still. Once more he addressed the King in violent words :

" You drunkard, with eyes like a bitch and heart like a fawn ! You never go out to battle—no pluck in you for that ! It is much better, isn't it, to stay in camp and rob anyone who tells the truth ! The king feeds on his people, for they are a worthless lot

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—or else, my lord, this would be your last outrage. But one thing I will tell you : as truly as this staff will never grow again, never again will put forth leaves and twigs, but now is held by men of judgment who guard the statutes of Zeus—hear my solemn oath to you : so truly a time shall come when Achillés will be missed by the nation ; then you shall not be able to help them. Then you shall tear your hair that you would not respect the best man of all.”

As he spoke, Achillés dashed down the staff, and took his seat again ; while Agamemnon fumed with rage. But Nestor rose : a famous orator he was, whose voice ran off his tongue sweeter than honey. He had seen already in Pylos two generations of men grow up before him and pass away, and he was king still over the third. He now spoke and said :

“ For shame, sirs ! Here is a great trouble for the Achaian land ! How glad Priam would be, how all Troy would be in jubilation, if they could only hear you two quarrelling ! Now listen to me. You are both younger than I am. Nay more, I have met even better men than you, and they never disregarded me. For never have I seen, and never shall I see, such men as Peirithoös, and Dryas, Caineus and Exadios and the noble Prince Polyphemos.¹ Yes, those men I knew well ; I travelled to visit them at their own request. And I fought by their side as a volunteer. Those were men whom no mortal now living on earth could fight ! And they heard my advice and took it too. Listen to me then, you also, and take my advice. You, sir, do not rob this man of the girl ; leave her alone, as the army gave her to him for his prize. And you, Achillés, do not provoke your king ; for greater honour belongs to a sceptred king, when Zeus has given him dignity.”

King Agamemnon answered :

“ Indeed, sir, all that you say is fair and right.

¹ Not the cannibal monster of the *Odyssey*.

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But this man wishes to order everyone about—and there is someone who will not obey, I think! If the gods have set him up as a warrior, does it follow that they have set him on to call ugly names? ”

Achillès frowned at him, and said :

“ Yes, for I should be called coward and outcast, if I yield to you in everything you choose to say. Lay your commands on others, don't order me about.”

They dismissed the assembly. Achillès with Patroclos and his friends returned to his quarters. Agamemnon launched a ship, and put on board the sacrifice, and brought Chryseïs ; Odysseus took charge and they set sail. Then Agamemnon ordered the people to purify themselves : they cast their peace-offerings into the sea, and slew bulls and goats on the shore to make full sacrifice to Apollo.

But Agamemnon did not forget the threats he had made. He called the heralds, Talthybios and Eurybatès, and gave them his orders :

“ Go to the quarters of Prince Achillès, take Briseïs by the hand and bring her here. If he will not give her up, I will come and take her myself, which will be more unpleasant for him.”

The envoys did not like their errand, but they went along the shore. They found Achillès sitting before his hut, and he was not pleased to see them. They indeed were both afraid and ashamed. They only stood, and said nothing ; but he understood what they wanted, and spoke :

“ Heralds, I greet you, for the envoy is held sacred by gods and men. Come near, I find no fault in you, but in Agamemnon, who has sent you. Here, Patroclos my friend, bring out the girl and let them take her away. Let them both be witnesses before the blessed gods and this hard-hearted king, if ever the people shall need me to stand between them and dire destruction ! ”

Patroclos brought out Briseïs, and handed her over

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to the envoys. Then they returned to their ships, and the woman followed them unwillingly. But Achillès burst into tears, and threw himself down by the grey salt sea, and stretched out his hands, calling loudly to his mother :

“ O my mother ! I was born to die young, it is true, but honour I was to have from Zeus Olympian ! And now he has not given me one little bit ! Yes, my lord King Agamemnon has insulted me ! ”

His divine mother heard his cry, as she sat in the depths of the sea. Quickly she shot up like a mist out of the grey sea, and sat down beside her weeping son ; she stroked him with her hand, and said :

“ My child, why do you weep ? What is your trouble ? ”

Achillès answered with a deep groan :

“ You know ! You know everything ! We attacked Thebê, Eëtion’s famous city. The spoil was divided, and they chose for Agamemnon a girl, Chryseïs. Chrysês the priest of Apollo came to our camp to ransom his daughter ; he made his prayer to the whole people, but especially to the two royal princes. All the people spoke good words ; but my lord Agamemnon told him to be off, and rudely too.

“ The old man went away very angry, and prayed to Apollo. The god heard him ; he shot us—the shafts fell all over our camp, the people died in heaps. Our prophet told us the Farshooter’s mind. I stood up at once and advised them to pacify the god ; but the king fell in a rage and threatened me, and now he has made good his threat. The heralds have just gone from my hut and taken away the girl Briseïs whom the people had given to me.

“ Do help your son, if you can ! Go to Olympos, pray to Zeus. How often have I heard you boasting how you saved Cronion Thundercloud from violence when there was a conspiracy in heaven ! The other Olympians wanted to tie him up ; but you saved

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him, by summoning old Hundredhand—he is stronger than his own father.¹ Hundredhand came in and sat down beside Zeus, triumphant—the blessed gods were frightened, and did not tie him up. Remind him of that, mother, clasp his knees—see if he will help the Trojans and drive the Achaians back to their ships. Let them enjoy their king! Let his gracious majesty King Agamemnon know his own delusion!”

Thetis answered, as the tears ran down her cheeks:

“O my poor child, why did I ever bring you up for such a dreadful fate? Why could not you have stayed behind? Why could not you have been spared? But now you have both a speedy doom and sorrow beyond all men!

“Very well, I will tell your story to Zeus Thunderer. Be sure now to stay here and be as angry as you like, but keep clear of battle. For Zeus went yesterday on a visit to the pious Ethiopians, for a feast, and all the other gods with him; but he will be back in twelve days, and then I will go at once and make my prayer. I think I can persuade him.”

And there she left him, brooding.

But Odysseus came safely to Chrysê with his holy offerings. They entered the deep harbour and furled the sails, and stowed them below; quickly they lowered the mast into the crutch, and rowed the ship to her moorings, where they dropt the anchor stones and made fast the hawsers. Then they landed, and carried out the offerings for Apollo Farshooter. Chryseïs landed also, and Odysseus led her to the altar and gave her into her father's arms with these words:

“Chrysês, my lord Agamemnon has sent me to bring your daughter back, with an offering for Phoibos; that we may propitiate the lord who has lately sent trouble upon the people.”

Chrysês received his daughter with joy; he lifted up his hands, and prayed aloud:

¹ Poseidon.

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“Hear me, Silverbow! thou who dost bestride Chrysê and holy Cilla, thou who art the mighty Lord of Tenedos! Verily thou has heard my prayer, and smitten hard the Achaian people: grant me now this boon, save them from this dire pestilence!”

So he prayed, and Phoibos Apollo heard his prayer. And when they all had prayed and cast the barley-grains, they first drew back the heads, and killed, and flayed, carved out the thigh-slices and rolled them between pieces of fat, and laid more raw flesh upon them: then the old priest burnt them upon sticks of wood, and poured sparkling wine over, while the young men held their five-pronged forks ready by his side. After the thigh-pieces were burnt and the inner parts were divided, they chopt up the rest and ran spits through the meat, roasted all properly and drew it off. This work done, they prepared their meal and enjoyed it. When they had all had enough, the lads served the wine after spilling the sacred drops.¹

When the sun set and darkness came they lay down to rest beside their moorings; but as soon as Dawn showed her rosy fingers through the mist, at once they rose and sailed for their own camp. They lifted the mast, and spread the sails; the wind filled the great sail, the purple wave swished and popped against the stem, the ship ran free over the waters. At last they arrived at their camp, and drew the ship ashore.

But Achillès brooded still. He never went to the meeting-place, never to the battlefield, but wore out his heart where he was, although he longed for war and battle.

When the twelfth day dawned, the gods returned to Olympos.

Thetis came out of the sea, and early in the morning she climbed to Olympos. She found Allseeing Cro-

¹ The server poured a few drops into each man's goblet, which he then spilled on the ground with a prayer; then the server filled the goblet, and passed on.