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Stories from the Iliad; Or, the siege of Troy



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CHAPTER I HOW ACHILLES AND AGAMEMNON FELL OUT

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Before the walls of Troy the Greeks set their camp, and day by day and night by night did they besiege it.

One day would the Greeks win the fight, and the next day the Trojans would be victors in the battle.

And so passed nine long years away. To the city of Chryse one day went part of the Greek host, sacked it, and brought back to their camp rich spoils and many prisoners.

Among the prisoners was a beautiful maiden, Chryseïs, daughter of the old priest of the Temple of Apollo. Her did Agamemnon choose as his part of the spoil, to be his slave.

From Chryse, seeking his daughter, came the old priest. With him he brought a rich ransom to buy the freedom of Chryseïs, and in his hands he bore a golden staff wrapped round with the garland worn by Apollo, to show that the god whose priest he was, was with him in craving a boon from Agamemnon, overlord of the Greeks.

'Take this ransom, I pray you, and set ye my dear child free,' pled Chryses, 'and the gods will grant you to lay waste the city of Troy, and to fare happily homeward.'

Then the Greeks gladly agreed that Chryseïs should go home with her father, and that the goodly ransom should be theirs. But Agamemnon, in great wrath, drove the old man away. 'Let me not find thee, old man, lingering here beside the ships, lest the golden staff and garland of the god help thee naught!' he cried. 'Your daughter shall grow old as my slave, and never more return to thy land. Get ye gone!'

Silently along the shore of the sounding sea walked Chryses the priest.

Alone he knelt down and prayed to Apollo, his god.

'Hear me, god of the silver bow!' he cried. 'If I have built thee a temple that is fair in thine eyes, and have offered unto thee there the flesh of bulls and goats, hear me! Let the Greeks be paid by thine arrows for my tears!'

High up amongst the peaks of Olympus Apollo heard the prayer of his priest, and great anger filled his heart.

As dark night falls upon the earth, so did the god come to where Agamemnon and his armies lay. A little apart from the ships he sat down, and drew back with a dreadful clang the string of his silver bow.

Mules and dogs fell at first before his arrows of death. Then he smote men.

For nine days did the Greeks fall dead at the will of the avenging god. For nine days did the black smoke from the funeral pyres of the Greek warriors roll out to sea.

On the tenth day Achilles, son of a mortal warrior and a goddess, fleetest of foot and bravest of all Greek heroes, called an assembly of the Greeks.



Achilles, fleetest of foot, and bravest of all Greek heroes (page 8)

'War and pestilence ravage us,' he said. 'Surely it is time to inquire of a priest or soothsayer why it is that Apollo is so wroth.'

Then Chalcas, wisest of soothsayers, arose and spoke.

'These woes have come upon us,' said he, 'for the wrong that Agamemnon hath done to Chryses, priest of Apollo. With his arrows of pestilence Apollo will not cease to slay until we have given the bright-eyed Chryseïs back to her father, unbought and unransomed, and have taken a

hundred beasts and offered them up at Chryse as a sacrifice to the angry god.'

So spake Chalcas, and sate him down.

There uprose then from his seat the great Agamemnon, black anger in his heart, and with eyes flashing fire.

'Ill prophet art thou indeed, Chalcas!' he cried. 'Naught but evil hast thou ever foretold to me! I would not take a goodly ransom for Chryseïs, because I love her even more than I love my own wedded wife. Yet will I give her back, rather than that my people should perish. But another prize must I have! Why should I alone, of all the Greeks, have my prize taken from me? It is not seemly that it should be so.'

'Nay, nay! most noble Agamemnon,' said Achilles. 'Too greedy art thou for gain. We have no common store of treasure with which to repay thee for that thou hast lost. What spoil we got from the cities we have taken hath already been divided. Nay, give back Chryseïs to her father, and when next we sack a city, thine shall be the richest spoil of all.'

'Dost seek to cheat me, Achilles?' answered the angry Agamemnon. 'Wouldst thou rob me of my prize and give me naught instead? If thou wilt not give me the reward my honour seeks, then will I seize it for myself—be it thine, or that of Odysseus, or the spoil of any other; wroth will be he to whomsoever I come. But of this hereafter. Now let us launch a black ship on the sea, and in it embark Chryseïs of the fair cheeks, and with her send an offering of beasts, that Apollo the Far-Darter may have his sacrifice.'

Then Achilles, with black brows, looked at Agamemnon.

'Shameless art thou!' he cried, 'shameless and crafty. For thy sake and that of Menelaus thy brother left I my home and fared across the seas to fight in Troyland. And now thou, dog-face! dost threaten to steal from me the spoil that I have won for myself by weary toil and by hard fighting. Home will I go, for I have no mind to fight for one who is greedy for riches and wealth, and cares not if I am dishonoured.'

'Flee, then, if thou wilt,' answered Agamemnon. 'Others I have as brave as thee, and ready to do me honour. Most hateful art thou to me, Achilles. Ever thou lovest strife and wars and fightings. I care not for thee and thy wrath; and this I tell thee: to thy hut I myself will go and take from thee Briseis, fairest of all thy slaves, that thou may'st know that I, Agamemnon, am thy lord and ruler.'

Mad with anger was Achilles at these words. His hand gripped his sword, and he would have slain Agamemnon, had not the goddess Athene stayed his hand.

'Why art thou come hither?' angrily asked Achilles, as he looked round and beheld the goddess at his side. 'Art thou come to see the insolence of Agamemnon? Yea, I tell thee, through pride shall he lose his life.'

Gently then did Athene speak to him.

'To stay thine anger I came from far Olympus,' said she. 'Goodly gifts shall come to thee hereafter, Achilles. Only stay thine hand and listen to me.'

Then said Achilles:

'Goddess, a man must needs listen to thee and do thy bidding, for the man who obeys the immortal gods will also be heard of them.'