

THE ACHILLES HEEL

THIS is the story of the greatest of all the Greek heroes. Achilles the fierce. Achilles the strong. Achilles the most courageous man who ever lived. It is also a story of that most terrible time in the history of ancient Greece – about fourteen hundred years before the birth of Christ – when so many of its noblest princes were to fall in the nine years of war at Troy.

You must imagine the city, vast and impregnable, its massive walls facing out toward a black, tormented sea. Overhead, the sky is thick with the smoke that pours out of the funeral pyres and from the forges where the blacksmiths work day and night, hammering at swords and shields, sharpening spears and arrowheads, fashioning the weapons of death. It is cold. A wind sweeps across the fields and a remorseless drizzle falls, stabbing at the pools that have formed in the mud, the water swirling around suddenly red as it mixes with the blood from the day's fighting. Between the city of the Trojans and the tents of the Greeks nothing moves. Both sides are sleeping.

This is the scene that was to shape the legend of the life of Achilles. This was where he was to meet his death.

The Parents of Achilles

Achilles' mother was Thetis, a Nereid – one of the fifty nymphs of the sea who come to the aid of sailors – and an immortal. His father was Peleus, king of the Myrmidons, but a mortal. The difference between the parents was to be the ruin of the marriage, for Thetis had been forced to marry Peleus against her own wishes. There had been a time when Zeus had loved Thetis but she had coldly rejected him. In revenge, Zeus had decreed that she should never marry an immortal, a command that had infuriated the proud Thetis.

"How can I live with a mere mortal?" she had cried. "See what happens to mortal men with the passing of years. Their skin withers and their bellies sag. Their hair turns gray and their eyes become weak. No more can they run and fight. The passion within them grows cold. Am I to live with a decrepit, senile old man when I remain young and beautiful? Am I to see my children grow old and die when I remain alive? It is unjust! It is an outrage!"

The marriage went ahead, but when her first child was born she stole it away and, holding it by the heel, dipped it in the chill water of the River Styx which winds its way through the Underworld. In this way did she make her child immortal. But she made one mistake, a mistake that was one day to prove fatal. For she forgot to immerse the heel itself and that part of the baby remained mortal.

When Peleus found out what his wife had done, he was furious. A mortal himself, he had wanted his son to grow up the same way. He therefore snatched the baby away – before Thetis had even had time to breast-feed it. For this reason, because his lips had never touched his mother's breast, the baby was called Achilles, which means "no lips."

The Childhood of Achilles

Peleus and Thetis parted company immediately after this, Thetis returning to her home in the sea. Achilles was then entrusted to the care of Cheiron, to be brought up among the

olive trees on the slopes of Mount Pelion. Cheiron was a centaur, half-man and half-horse – but unlike many of the centaurs, he was both gentle and wise.

Cheiron loved Achilles as though he were his own son. He fed the boy on the flesh of lions to give him courage and on sweet honeycombs to make him run swiftly. Who better was there to teach him how to ride and how to hunt? He also taught him the arts of pipe playing and healing, and the immortal Calliope, one of the nine Muses, visited the cave to teach him how to sing. Soon Achilles had grown into a youth of extraordinary beauty as well as great skill. His body was broad-shouldered and muscular. His hair tumbled down around his neck in a mass of golden curls. It is said that at the age of six he could outrun a full-grown stag and kill it with his own hands.

But while Achilles played in the sun on Mount Pelion, the clouds of war were gathering. It had been at the wedding of his own parents that Eris, goddess of discord, had sown the first seeds of disaster in the form of the golden apple that she had presented "to the fairest." Already Paris had made his choice and stolen Helen away as his prize. And throughout Greece, warriors and princes were coming together, forming the great army that would soon sail to Troy.

Now Thetis had been given a prophecy. The prophecy stated simply that, were Achilles to sail for Troy, he would never return. Although she had allowed Peleus to steal her child, she was still devoted to him and now she hurried to Mount Pelion in an attempt to save him from his fate that was as vain as it was desperate. Dressing him up as a woman, she took him to the court of Lycomedes, king of Scyros, hoping that he would be able to hide there, safe from the searching eyes of the Greek kings. Alas, it wasn't to be.

Achilles Goes to War

While Achilles wasted his days among the women of Scyros, the main protagonists of the Trojan war were coming together and traveling the country in search of warriors prepared to fight – and die – with them.

There was Menelaus, king of Sparta and the leader of the Greek forces. For Helen had been his wife and it had been his honor that had been assailed when Paris had stolen her. With him was his brother Agamemnon, king of Mycenae. Nobody would fight more valiantly in the Trojan war. Nobody would die more treacherously after it. And there was Odysseus, who had himself feigned madness to try to avoid going to Troy and who would be condemned to wander for ten years before he saw his home again.

It was Odysseus who came to Scyros in search of Achilles, for a soothsayer had warned that Troy could not be taken without him. Faced with the bland smiles of the king and a palace that was filled – on the face of it – only with women, Odysseus was forced to resort to a trick. First he presented the women with a great heap of gifts; jewels, perfumes and beautiful dresses, but also one sword and one shield. Then, while they argued over who got what, he gave the signal for his soldiers outside the palace to sound their trumpets and shout as if an army had just attacked. At once, one of the “women” threw off her wig and seized the shield and sword, and in this way was Achilles discovered and recruited to the army.

And so Achilles set out for Troy, taking with him a magic spear that only he could wield – a gift from Cheiron – and also a chest inlaid with ivory and jewels, and packed with blankets, tunics and cloaks to protect him against the wind – a present from his grieving mother. He was accompanied by his cousin Patroclus, who was older than him but neither as skillful nor as well born. Achilles loved him more than anyone else in the entire world.

Achilles at Troy

Achilles was the second Greek to leap onto the Trojan coast. He would have been the first had Thetis not warned him that the first to land would also be the first to die. This honor, if so it can be called, was taken by one Protesilaus who was promptly run through by Hector, the prince of Troy.

The first battle was fought on the beach and Achilles, leading

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his father's faithful Myrmidons, soon proved that he deserved his reputation for valor. In the heat of the fighting, he found himself confronted by Cycnus, the son of Poseidon, and a ferocious warrior. In the first twenty minutes of the battle Cycnus had killed no fewer than a hundred Greeks and their blood coated every inch of his armor and dripped out of his hair.

Achilles threw himself at Cycnus and the two fought furiously. Cycnus was more like a beast than a man, snarling in anger, his eyes wide with blood lust. And he was seemingly invincible. Achilles would slash at him with his sword, but either his opponent moved faster than the eye could see or the blade passed straight through him without so much as breaking his skin. He thrust his spear at him, but Cycnus caught the point in his bare hands and, with a horrible laugh, turned it aside.

At last Achilles managed to force him back, using the hilt of his sword to bludgeon him on the side of the head. Cycnus staggered and tripped over. At once, Achilles was on top of him, straddling him with his legs. Cycnus screamed in anger. Achilles tore off his helmet and forced the strap round the Trojan's neck, squeezing with all his strength. While the Greek army forced the Trojans back off the beach to win their first victory, Cycnus groaned and breathed his last.

In the weeks that followed, Achilles added victory to victory, death to death, until his name was the most feared in the entire Greek army. Priam, the king of Troy lost no less than three of his sons to Achilles. His beloved Troilus had been chased into the temple of Apollo and speared on the very altar itself. With the Myrmidons behind him, Achilles ravaged the countryside, seizing the Trojan herds of cattle and sacking the city of Lyrnessus. It was here that he discovered the beautiful princess Briseis. Her father had died in the fighting and Achilles, who had fallen in love with her, took her back to his tent to be his serving maid.

The Wrath of Achilles

It was at this time (in the spring) that Achilles had his second argument with King Agamemnon. They had almost come to

blows once when Achilles had suggested that the king of Mycenae had only entered the war out of a sense of guilt and didn't really want to fight at all. Agamemnon had retorted by reminding Achilles of the time he had spent disguised as a girl and after that the two had never been friends.

This new, much more serious, argument concerned Briseis. Agamemnon had found himself an equally beautiful captive but had been forced to send her back to Troy when it was discovered that she was a priestess. So now the king seized Briseis for himself, which angered Achilles so much that he stormed off into his tent, refusing to have anything more to do with the war.

At first nobody believed that so great a warrior could behave in such a way, but as the days passed and Achilles failed to appear, they realized he meant just what he said. The Trojans, when their spies reported the news, returned to the battlefield with renewed vigor. This was virtually their first piece of good fortune since the Greeks had landed.

The morale of an army can win a war and suddenly it seemed that the Trojans had gained the upper hand. A daring sortie was led by Hector, the eldest son of King Priam, and the Greek lines were broken. Both Agamemnon and Odysseus were wounded in the fighting and, while the Greeks scattered in panic, Hector pressed on towards their fleet. If he were able to burn their ships and cut the supply lines, he might well end the whole enterprise — but still Achilles refused to fight.

It was Patroclus who saved the day. The flames were already devouring the first ship, black smoke curling up the masts and brilliant sparks cascading onto the water, when Patroclus ran forward, wearing the armor of Achilles, and hurled his spear into the mass of Trojans. He would have been cut down where he stood but for the fact that he so resembled Achilles that the Trojans mistook him for his cousin and fled. Then, while Greek soldiers put out the fire, Patroclus regrouped the rest of the army and chased the fleeing Trojans toward the walls of the great city.

Patroclus had lived his whole life in the shadow of Achilles. Where his cousin had been exalted, he had been ignored. Where

his cousin was famous, he was unknown. Now, for the first and last time, he found himself the undisputed leader of the suddenly fearless Greek forces and a hero in his own right. He chased the Trojans right back to the walls, while Achilles, hearing what was happening, hastily assembled his Myrmidons. But Patroclus relied on luck as much as skill and now his luck ran out. A chance blow caught him between the shoulder blades. His helmet was torn off and, at the same moment, his spear splintered. Blinded, he staggered away from the wall of Troy, then screamed and twisted round as a sword was driven into his chest. Dying, he tried to lift himself out of the mud. That was how Hector found him. One blow and it was over.

When Achilles came upon the body of his cousin, the Greek soldiers were fighting furiously to protect it. With a cry of anger and grief he threw himself into the battle, striking out left and right, forming a bloody circle around the corpse. At last, as the sun was setting, the Trojans retired and Achilles was able to pick up the body of Patroclus and carry it back to the Greek ships that he had saved.

Patroclus was buried with full honors beside the sea, the dying sun casting a scarlet banner across the water. Agamemnon, though wounded, came from his tent, bringing Briseis, to make his peace with Achilles. And Achilles, standing beside his cousin's grave, swore revenge on the man who had killed him.

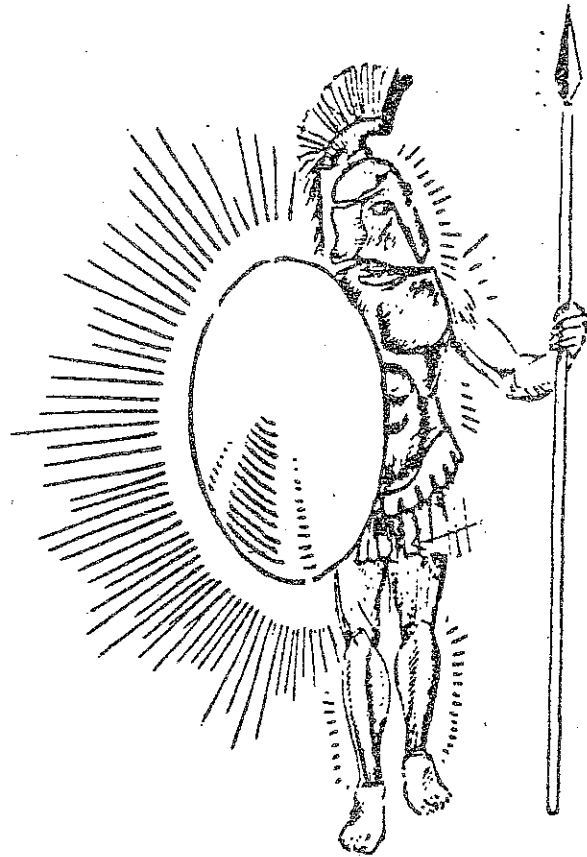
Achilles and Hector

If Achilles was the pride of the Greek army, then Hector was his equivalent in the Trojan. The two men were natural opponents. They were even physical opposites, with Hector's jet-black hair and dark skin contrasted to Achilles' fairness. Moreover, although the two had yet to encounter one another on the field, a deep hatred existed between them. Each sought revenge on the other, Achilles for the death of Patroclus, Hector for the loss of three brothers, Troilus and Mestor killed and Lycaon captured and sold into slavery for the price of a silver bowl.

Hector had challenged Achilles to single combat once, but that had been at the time when Achilles was refusing to fight.

Now he accepted and for one day the war was suspended, both sides standing back to watch the confrontation.

It was a brilliant morning. The waves, hurrying towards the field of combat, seemed to throw precious stones onto the sand as they crashed against the shore. A soft breeze brushed across the Greek camp, tussling the hair of the waiting soldiers. There was a murmur as the gates of Troy swung open and a single figure stepped out, dressed in black and silver armor, a sword in one hand, a spear in the other. Then the flaps of Achilles' tent were pulled back and the murmur became a gasp. Thetis had visited her son that night, bringing with her new armor forged by the immortal Hephaestus himself. Now, as Achilles stood in the sunlight, he seemed to be carved out of solid gold, and the reflection of the sun around him was almost blinding.



Perhaps Hector knew at that moment that he was doomed. Achilles was relentless, unstoppable. Saying nothing, he approached the Trojan, his feet pounding in the dust. As soon as he was within range, Hector hurled his spear. Achilles raised his shield and the spear clattered uselessly to one side. Then Hector ran, not because he was afraid but because he hoped to tire his enemy. Three times he circled the walls of Troy but when he stopped and looked round, Achilles was still the same distance from him, barely out of breath.

Then, with the shouts of the Trojan forces above them and the Greek forces all around them, the two men joined in combat. So ferociously did they fight that when sword struck sword the spark could be seen a mile away. Hector was perhaps the stronger. But Achilles was the faster and, watching from the walls, the Trojans let out a great cry when he dodged one blow, carried his sword in low and ran their prince through the heart.

Hector crumpled to his knees.

"Achilles!" he whispered, the blood curtaining over his lip. "Let my parents have my body. Let me be buried honorably."

"Never!" Achilles cried. He twisted his sword and watched the light in Hector's eyes go out.

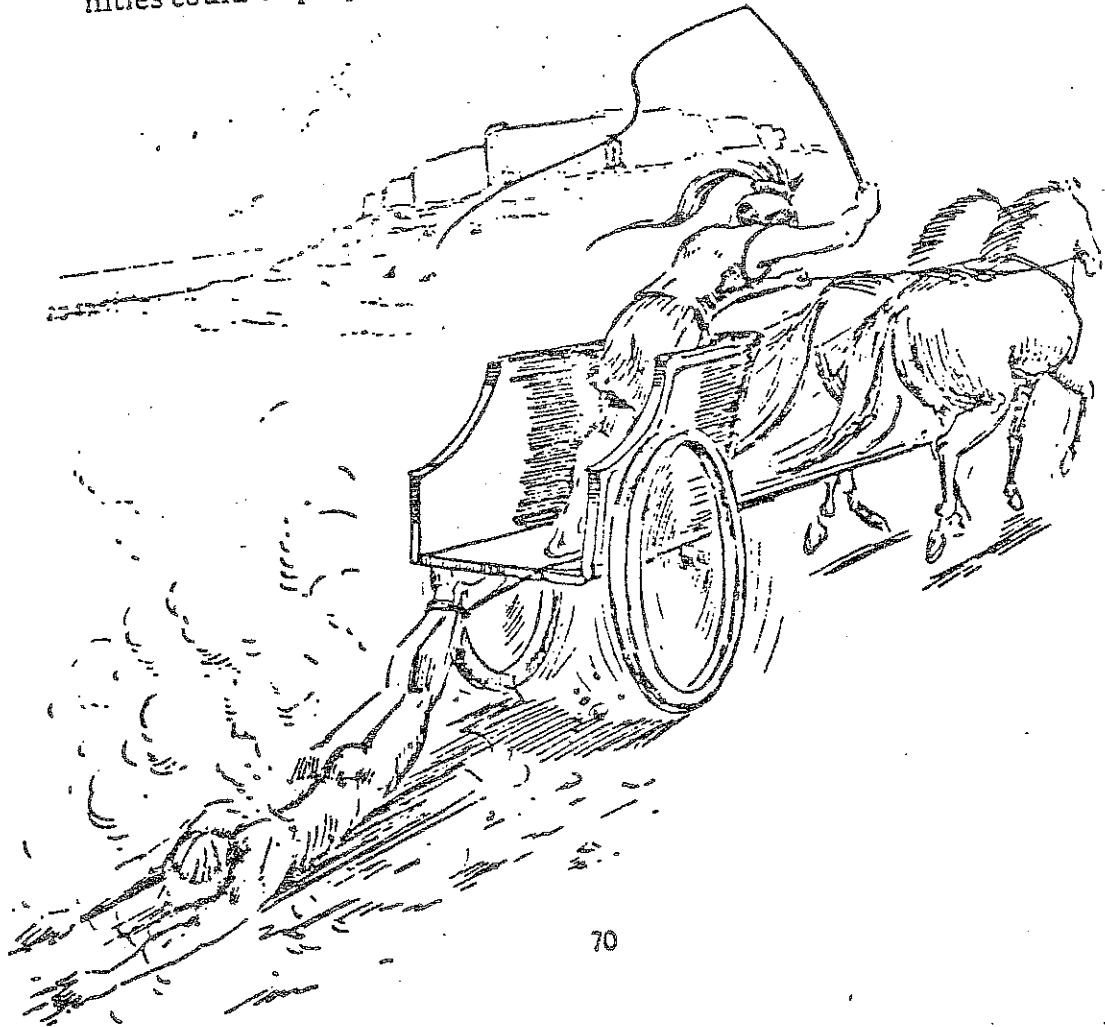
Then he took the body and, while King Priam looked on, helpless and in horror, he fastened it by the feet to his chariot and rode off around the city. Three more times he circled Troy, dragging Hector behind him. At last he rode back to his camp, taking the body with him. But the ordeal was not yet over for the Trojans. Although they offered their prince's weight in gold for the return of the corpse, Achilles refused. And every day at dawn he would taunt them with it, whipping up his horses to race around the walls, dragging his enemy in a cloud of dust behind him.

Every day for a week Achilles did the same thing, deaf to the lamentations of the Trojans and even to the pleas of his own mother. Such was his grief at the loss of Patroclus. At last, the gates of Troy opened and King Priam himself rode out, accompanied only by one young soldier and by four servants carrying a litter. Under the flag of truce, he proceeded to the

tent of Achilles and there threw himself onto the ground.

"Achilles!" the old man wept. "You have proved yourself a great warrior, but have you the compassion to prove yourself a great man? You have killed my eldest child, the son I most loved and in whom I had most pride. What times are these that fine soldiers and princes must perish in the bloom of their youth! Now, I beg you, show pity to an old man. See - I bring you Hector's weight in gold. Will you not be moved by a father's tears? Think on your own father and let me lay the remains of Troy's noblest prince to rest. Let me bury my son."

Then Achilles wept too - for his cousin Patroclus, for the futility of war and for the cruel man he had almost become. He gave orders for the body of Hector to be carried back to Troy and called for a truce of twelve days in which the funeral solemnities could be prepared.



The Death of Achilles

The war dragged on. Among those who died were, on the Trojan side, Penthesileia, queen of the Amazons and one of the few heroines of mythology, and Memnon, the Ethiopian leader whose skin was as black as ebony and who was said to be the handsomest man alive. The Greeks had their losses too. Antilochus, young, swift and courageous, died at the hand of Memnon, and Thersites, the ugliest soldier at Troy, was actually slain by Achilles himself as the result of an argument.

But for Achilles too, time was drawing in.

After the death of Hector, he had fought as bravely as ever, the differences between him and Agamemnon forgotten. On many occasions he routed the Trojans, often coming close to breaching the walls of the city itself. But he had made himself the target of too many enemies, and not all of them were human ones. Poseidon, the sea god, still demanded vengeance for the death of his son Cycnus, while Apollo continued to be enraged by the killing of Troilus, which had taken place in his very own temple.

So one day in the thick of the fighting, Poseidon whispered to Paris – the man who, more than any other, had begun the war – that Achilles was not invulnerable, and Apollo guided his hand. For the gods remembered how Thetis had held him when she dipped him in the Styx, and now Paris let loose a poisoned arrow which struck Achilles in the heel.

At once Achilles fainted and had to be carried off the field by his Myrmidons. Doctors were called but already the poison had spread through his blood, and that night, with Thetis beside him and the stars blazing silver in the sky, he died.

The Greek army mourned for seventeen days and seventeen nights, and the nine Muses themselves came down into the world to sing his dirge. On the eighteenth day his body was burned on a great pyre beside the sea.

And as the smoke rose over the crashing waves, the two armies clashed once again in a war which was tainted by gray despair, a war which was suddenly less glorious and less heroic than it had once seemed.