



## II The Last Hours of Troy

THE conversation died away. All the company turned to Aeneas.

“Madam, you cannot realise how grim my story is. It’s late – perhaps your guests would prefer to hear it some other time?” But the Carthaginian nobles were keen to listen, and the Queen insisted.

“Well, if you are all so eager, I must begin the tale. As you know, the Greeks made a cruel attack on the city of Troy with one thousand ships and all the men they could raise. Their reason, they said, was just: to recover Helen, a shameless woman who happened to prefer our prince Paris to her weak-minded husband, Menelaus of Sparta. At the time, our sense of honour made us ready to fight for Helen – her name sticks in my throat now – and we seemed better off than the Greeks, since we had strong walls and friendly country all around. The gods kept their will hidden from us then.

For ten years, we stood up to their siege. Our Crown Prince, Hector, the finest man in Troy, fell at the hand of Achilles. Even Paris, whose talents were more suited to love than fighting, died like a soldier. But don’t think the

losses were all on our side. When the dreaded Achilles met his fate, we cheered at the news.

Every day we would rise at dawn and peer over our walls at the Greek camp, wondering whose turn it was that day to win, and whose to die. So can you imagine how we felt when one morning we saw the beach deserted and all the enemy ships gone?

For the first time in ten years we could walk freely on our own soil outside the city walls. We were cautious at first, suspecting a trap, but soon we flung open the gates and surged out in crowds to enjoy the clean, fresh space. A city during a long siege is not too pleasant. We ran about in aimless delight, many of us with grown children who, after ten years' siege, had never yet stepped outside the gates. We thronged the Greek camping ground, gaily pointing out to our sons the meeting-place of the enemy kings; we made jokes about Agamemnon and Ajax and crafty Ulysses.

You may think it incredible, but we were so absorbed in our good fortune that it was some time before anyone noticed that the beach was not entirely empty. Some distance from the silent camping-ground stood a massive wooden construction. It was in the likeness of an enormous horse. We gathered round, puzzled, and a little fearful. It cast a dark shadow on us. We stared up at its open eye-slits, and, for a while, no one knew what to say.

Then people started to have ideas. Some said it was a tribute from the enemy, who must have learned to respect us. Others thought it was a sacred image which should be placed in our city to bring us luck. Still others insisted it was a trap. The crowd was buzzing with excited talk, when a priest of Neptune, Laocoon by name, came racing angrily

down from the city and forced his way into our midst. 'Burn the horse! You mustn't trust it, people of Troy!' he roared. 'Never mind what it is. I dread the Greeks no less when I see them offering gifts!' Saying this, like a madman, Laocoon flung a spear at the horse's belly. It stuck there, quivering, and we held our breath, waiting for a sign from heaven.

The sound of a scuffle made us look round. We forgot Laocoon. Some of our soldiers had arrested a man in Greek dress, and were dragging him before King Priam. Here, we thought, was a way to get to the truth. The fellow took a good look at all of us, and then, stretching out his manacled hands to Priam, begged us to spare his life.

'My name is Sinon,' he said. 'I am a Greek – I don't deny it. Before you kill me – for I know you mean to do so – hear my wretched story. It won't take long. I first joined the army as a squire to Palamedes, a noble and worthy officer. If you have heard of him, you will know that he was against this war, and that he suffered cruelly from the plots of that slippery villain, Ulysses.

'Once my master was dead, I myself became the butt of Ulysses' malice. He worked to turn the minds of the others against me, and at last his great opportunity came. Our prophet Calchas declared that we would never make a safe return to Greece unless the gods received a sacrifice of human blood. He took his time. He didn't name me straight away. He waited for rumour to do its work. No one protested when I was seized, bound and garlanded like a sacrificial beast, and led to the holy place for slaughter. Well, a chance came, and I took it. I escaped to the marsh and hid there all night. When I dared to come out, the Greeks were gone.

'So now I have no country and no home. I can never return to Greece. And I can expect no mercy from you Trojans, for naturally you hate every Greek on earth.'

He sounded so pitiful that we forgot our hatred of anyone Greek. King Priam spoke for us all: 'Have no fear, friend. You may stay safe with us. Why should we spoil such a happy day? Untie his bonds. But tell us just one thing; what is the purpose of this huge horse? Do you know?'

Sinon rubbed at his wrists, and stretched his hands to the sky before he spoke: 'All you gods of heaven and earth and of the lower world, witness the truth of my words! There can be no sin now in telling the secrets of the Greeks. You may know, great King, that for some time now the Greeks have suffered the ill-will of the goddess Minerva. That's why they have gone back to Greece to renew their luck, to return with good omens and finish the war with the gods on their side. This horse they built as an offering to Minerva, so big that you could not possibly get it through your gates. They planned that if you harmed the horse, Minerva's anger would fall upon you. If you could take it inside your city, of course, then its luck would favour you instead of the Greeks.'

His words had already made up our minds, but something else happened, so horrible and unearthly that I must force myself to describe it to you.

From the sea there came suddenly two enormous snakes, with ghastly, blood-red crests and immense coils that seemed to swallow up the waves. We watched, helpless, as they neared the shore, slid over dry land with the same relentless motion, and headed straight for us. We could see their forked tongues darting from their fearsome jaws.



The priest Laocoon, standing near the shore with his two sons, was just beginning a sacred ritual. Our cries of warning were frozen in our throats: the monsters wrapped their dreadful forms about the three of them. Limbs were swallowed in a murderous embrace. In an instant all were gone, and the serpents slid away into Minerva's temple.

Obviously, we thought, Laocoon had been punished for his insult to the sacred horse. We decked it with garlands and flowers, our children joined hands to sing and dance around it, and with ropes and rollers we hauled it to the walls. As Sinon had said, the gates were too narrow: at once we tore down part of the walls we no longer needed and brought the huge trophy into the centre of Troy. Cassandra, Priam's crazy daughter, screamed a warning of doom, but, as usual, no one took any notice of her.

That night we feasted. That night was the happiest in ten years. That night, we could sleep. We could not know that the Greek fleet was sailing back to our shores, or that Sinon was opening the belly of the great horse to let out thirty picked Greek warriors who had been hidden inside all the time. We slept on, while he guided them through our streets.

To me, there came a warning; in a dream I saw Hector, our noblest hero, his face grimy and his hair matted with blood and filth. For the moment I forgot that he was dead, butchered long ago by Achilles, and I called out to him. 'What has happened, Hector? Where have you been all this time? How do you come to be in such a pitiful state?'

He did not answer me directly: 'Go, Aeneas!' he cried, 'Don't stay here. Troy is lost. The Greeks have broken in. Don't try to fight them. Even I, great Hector, failed to

drive them back. Save yourself, and the gods of our home! Escape to a new land across the seas.'

Startled and horrified, I reached towards him, but the figure faded and vanished. I ran to the porch. In every direction was flame. I stood transfixed. My neighbour's house crumbled into a glowing whirlwind of grit and smoke. I became aware of the commotion of running footsteps and screams that tore at my very nerves.

Now I moved quickly, I seized my weapons. I was no stranger to fighting, but never before had I been driven by such blind, heedless fury to rush out and kill, kill any Greeks I found, and drown my rage in their blood.

I met a friend, Panthus, leading his small grandson by the hand. 'No use, Aeneas!' he called, 'Troy is finished!' But I ignored him and rallied all those who would still fight. There were plenty of good, stout-hearted fellows who would not shrink from death, among them one Coroebus, who was engaged to the princess Cassandra.

At first we did well. We cut down a party of Greeks, and put on their armour as a disguise. Then, mingling with the enemy in the dark, we killed quite a number, while others ran in terror for their ships or hid in the Horse's belly. Poor Coroebus fell in a mad attempt to save Cassandra, when he saw her, eyes wild and hair flying, dragged off by the brawny lout, Ajax of Locris.

We forced our way to the citadel, the high fortress of old Troy, where the defenders were tearing up sections of the battlements and hurling them down on the heads of the Greeks. Here our disguise betrayed us; we found ourselves attacked from above by our own friends. My men were swept away; I, alone, slipped into the fortress by a back door.

I was now in the halls of King Priam's palace, once the home of a peaceful and prosperous court. After running from room to deserted room, I reached the inner courtyard. This place was open to the sky, dominated by a splendid tree which spread its branches protectively over an altar to the city's gods. Huddled about its great roots, like terrified birds, were Queen Hecuba and her daughters. The old King stood before them, absurdly dressed in the armour of his youth, which fitted loosely about his stooped and shrunken shoulders.

'Don't be silly, my love,' I heard the Queen coax, in a voice firm but resigned, 'Come, sit here with us. The gods will protect us. You're no match for young Pyrrhus.' But the old man fixed his eyes on the main door and, with a trembling right arm, raised his spear.

A gasping figure lurched through the doorway. I recognized Priam's youngest son, Polites. He was completely spent, sobbing for breath, and could only grope for the arms that stretched to him from the altar. A wound gaped in his back. Behind him gloated the dazzling form of Pyrrhus, son of Achilles.

Pyrrhus laughed to see the youth stumble towards his mother, slip, and die before her eyes. Then he turned his attention to the frail old man straining to balance the heavy spear, and stood, hands on hips, braying with hideous amusement. Priam made one effort, and the spear clattered feebly on the paving-stones at his feet.

'Monster!' cried the King. 'Even your father Achilles was a gentleman, compared with you. He treated me decently once, and gave me back Hector's body when I asked him. He did not amuse himself by murdering boys in front of their mothers.'

Pyrrhus laughed more loudly than ever, and then strode towards the King, and seized him by his thin white hair: 'So you knew my father; you can give him my regards when you meet him in the underworld. Be sure you let him know how soft and gentle I've become,' and, there, before the holy altar, he butchered noble Priam, King of Troy.

I did not wait any more. Priam reminded me of something I should have remembered before everything else: my own old, crippled father, my dear wife, Creusa, and my helpless little boy. You would think no power on earth could have made me stop then, as I sped through halls and passages. But suddenly I stood quite still when I saw *her*, skulking alone at the foot of an altar – Helen. Her beauty was still unmatched. Like a goddess, she was ever young and flawless.

I drew my sword and advanced on her. Now she would pay for the suffering she had caused to Greeks and Trojans alike. She had abandoned home and husband for a wild affair with Paris, the least heroic of all the sons of Priam. I would show her there was one Trojan she could not charm.

I can remember her eyes, pleading but somehow not cowardly. I remember that her skin seemed even lovelier because it was taut and pale. But I would have killed her all the same, if my goddess-mother had not appeared and plucked away my sword.

Venus reminded me of my real duty. 'Hurry, my son. Your family needs you. Waste no more time in killing. Look, I will open your eyes to the truth. See how the city is ringed by hostile gods. Neptune is shaking the foundations. Juno is leading the Greek troops herself, and there is Minerva, with the terrible Gorgon on her shield, roaring



the battle-cry. Save your own family, Aeneas! There is very little time left.'

Nothing could delay me now. In a moment I was inside the familiar rooms, with my son clutching at my knees, and Creusa's arms around my neck. 'It's all right,' I kept saying, 'We're leaving at once, all of us. We must trust the gods.'

I had not taken account of my father's stubborn will: 'Here I was born, and here I stay!' he thundered, 'No one is dragging me round the world at my age. If I die, I die – in my own house!'

I tried pleas, arguments, force – all useless. Leaving him to the Greeks was unthinkable. He was crippled and could not even stand to arms for a warrior's death. Only a sign from the gods, he said, would change his mind.

No sooner had he spoken, than the miracle occurred. Flames began to flicker over Iulus' head. Before we could even recover our senses, our terror had turned to amazement. For the child was quite unharmed, and smiled happily at us, while all round his hair shone a blazing ring of fire.

My father broke the silence: 'This is a sign. Let us bow to the will of heaven. Lead on, Aeneas, wherever the gods guide you.' And as he spoke there was a crash of thunder, and a comet streaked across the sky.

In relief I gasped out instructions to the servants to make their way, by separate routes, to a temple of Ceres near the city gates. All the time I was speaking, I was gathering a few possessions, and tying a lionskin about my shoulders. I signed to someone to fetch out the home-gods, and I handed the precious images to my father.

'Hold them tightly, sir!' I said, 'We have a long way to

go!' With a strange gladness I stooped and lifted the old man on to my shoulders. 'Come here, Ascanius,' I called to the child, using his pet-name, 'hold your father's hand. Creusa, stay close.' So we started on our way.

For many frantic hours, I had been roaming boldly about the stricken city. I had stormed through bands of blood-crazed Greeks without a thought of fear, and looked on the most horrible sights with a steady eye. But now I had my family with me. Nervous of every shadow, and startled at every distant sound, I stole carefully through back-alleys and deserted side-streets.

Suddenly there were running footsteps behind us. My father clutched at me and urgently hissed, 'Run, Aeneas, run! They've nearly got us!' For the first time that day, I panicked. I rushed blindly up streets and down, blood pounding behind my eyes. I could vaguely feel Iulus' fingers digging into my palm, and hear him plaintively crying that he could not keep up with me.

Somehow we reached the temple of Ceres. My faithful servants were there, and numbers of our friends. I set my father down, eased the stiffness from my shoulders, passed Iulus to his nurse, and looked round to smile at my wife. She was not there.

I remembered that moment of panic. Did I lose her then? I raced back to the spot, yelling her name, not caring who heard me. No sign of her. Like a beast in a maze I charged in and out of the streets. The fighting was mostly over. Piles of valuables looted from Trojan homes were heaped up here and there. The glow from a hundred dying fires revealed long lines of terrified women and bewildered children, rounded up for the slave-market. I only noticed that Creusa was not among them. I thought



of home. Perhaps she had found her way there? No use, the Greeks had broken in; the house was a silent ruin.

I don't know how long I would have gone on searching. I was about to drop in despair, when I heard her voice. She seemed to be standing before me, larger than life, but otherwise her usual calm, sweet self. 'Don't worry about me, darling. I am safe. The Greeks will never find me now. You must go on. The gods mean you to sail to a western land, the rich land by the River Tiber. This is to be your people's home. There you must marry a Latin princess, and found a race that will rule the earth. Stop thinking of Creusa now . . .'

I tried to hold her. I wanted to clasp her, to tell her that I did not want any foreign princess, that no new land could be mine without her. But her ghost slipped through my outstretched arms and was gone.

I went back to my friends, greeted a large number of new arrivals, comforted Iulus, and carried my father to a safe hiding-place in the hills."