



VII The Trojans Come to Latium

NOT far from the mouth of the River Tiber the Laurentes lived in a walled city, peaceful, prosperous and strong. They were ruled by old King Latinus, whose word was respected throughout that part of Italy known as Latium. King Latinus was descended, they said, from the ancient god Saturn, father of Jupiter, for Saturn had once lived in that fertile and blessed country.

The king had devoted his life to the city and its people, and it was his dearest wish to leave his kingdom to a worthy successor. He had only one child, a daughter called Lavinia. Because Lavinia's husband would one day become king of the Laurentes, many local chieftains were eager to marry her. Lavinia herself was content to leave the choice of a suitable husband to her parents. King Latinus had not yet made a final decision, but his wife, Amata, was very clear in her views. She strongly favoured a relation of hers, Turnus, a proud young chieftain of the Rutulian tribe, and did all she could to persuade her husband to accept him.

Now in the central courtyard of the palace grew an ancient laurel tree, much treasured by the king, who had named his people "Laurentes" in its honour. Near the tree

were altars to the gods, where the king and his household would gather to perform sacrifices and recite prayers.

It was during a ceremony of this kind that a miracle occurred. A large swarm of bees suddenly flew into the courtyard and clustered among the leaves of the laurel tree, buzzing loudly and insistently. At this unusual sight a priest exclaimed, "A sign from heaven! These bees foretell a swarm of strangers, settling in the heart of this land!" Before the king could answer, there was a shriek from the princess. Lavinia was standing in a shower of sparks; her hair was ablaze, and the jewelled crown she wore encircled her head with flame. And yet, despite this, she remained unharmed.

The king, greatly alarmed, hurried to a secret grove in the forest, a place set apart for the worship of his own father, Faunus, a god of the Italian countryside. Latinus made the ritual offerings, and waited. From the depths of the wood he heard a deep, commanding voice: "Listen and obey, my son. Do not give your child Lavinia to any man of Latium; no Latin is destined to be her husband. Expect a suitor from a foreign land; him she must marry, and their children will be a race famous for all time. They will rule the earth in glory from ocean to ocean."

King Latinus returned to his palace, and, despite his wife's urgent pleading, postponed the choice of a husband for his daughter. Turnus returned to his own people, disappointed and impatient, for he had come to look upon Lavinia as his promised bride.

Meanwhile the Trojans, knowing little of Latium and its inhabitants, were pulling in to the mouth of the river Tiber. In the early-morning sunlight the landing-place looked perfect – a forest close to the shore, thickly-wooded and

sparkling with bird-song; and through the mass of green wound the river, its yellowish stream spreading out to embrace the Trojan ships. Iulus remarked that it was as though the Tiber flowed out to welcome them.

Their first meal in the new land was simple. Lying in the soft, shaded grass, they piled fresh fruit onto large, flat loaves that were to serve as plates, table-linen, and tables. After eating the fruit, they finished off their meal with the bread, too hungry to leave a morsel uneaten.

"Chewing up the dining-tables," said Iulus, chuckling at his own wit. The Trojans laughed, but Aeneas did not join in. Achates, noticing his friend's frown of concentration, asked, "Is there something wrong?"

"No, nothing wrong. This is a sign from the gods. It is time to begin our settlement. My father Anchises once told me, long ago, that when we reached our promised land we would set about chewing our tables."

"I'm sure I have heard those words somewhere, myself," Achates said and, after a moment's thought: "Of course. Don't you remember the curse Celaeno, the Harpy, screamed at us? Her very words were, 'You will be forced to chew your own tables!' Well, Prince Ascanius is right – here we are chewing our tables. So much for her terrible curse on our settlement!"

Next morning Aeneas sent scouts to explore the countryside. They reported on the direction of the river, the position of the various villages, the name and location of the chief city. "Now we must make formal contact," Aeneas pronounced. "One hundred of you shall act as our ambassadors; Ilioneus is to be in charge. You will carry olive boughs as a symbol of peace, and take gifts for the king. Meanwhile the rest of us will pitch camp here – our

first settlement in Italy. May the gods look on it with favour!"

King Latinus received the Trojan deputation in his huge throne-room. The walls were lined with trophies – shields, swords, axes, helmets, even chariots and the prows of ships, all captured from defeated enemies. Statues of gods and heroes gazed down at the newcomers as they stared at so much unexpected grandeur.

"Come, friends," King Latinus began, "you say you are Trojans? Then you are not completely strange to our land. I have heard tales of your ancestor, Dardanus, who was born here in Italy. What has brought you so far? Did you lose your course at sea? Has some disaster driven you to our shore?"

The moment had come for Ilioneus to speak. He chose his words carefully, knowing how much depended on the impression he made: "Great king, our mother city, Troy, once the centre of a mighty nation, no longer exists. It perished in a terrible war with the Greeks, a war in which the heavenly gods themselves took their part. I'm sure you've heard the story, for by now it has reached the ends of the earth.

"Those of us who have journeyed to this western land have been following the command of Jupiter himself. Our leader is Aeneas, son of Venus and royal Anchises of Troy. We were guided by Apollo's oracles to make for this land, once the home of our founder, Dardanus, to end here our years of wandering and establish a new settlement for our weary people. We come in peace. And we ask of you, your majesty, no more than a plot of land so that we may carry out the decrees of fate. As a token of friendship we offer you these gifts."

Ilioneus signed to some of the Trojans, who placed before the king priceless relics rescued from Troy – King Priam’s own crown, sceptre and ceremonial robe, and a gold dish used by Anchises for making sacred offerings to the gods.

There was a long silence. King Latinus did not appear much interested in the gifts, but sat staring at the floor, lost in thought. A few of the Trojans exchanged uneasy glances.

“May the gods bless this beginning,” the king’s voice suddenly boomed through the hall. He rose and beckoned to the startled Ilioneus. “Tell your leader that I grant his request, but I wish him to appear before me in person. I am delighted to greet him, and not only as an ally. I have a daughter, Lavinia, who, it is foretold, must marry a foreign suitor. Your prince Aeneas must surely be the man!”

No rules of etiquette could suppress the excitement of the Trojan contingent and, no less, of the king’s own courtiers. The murmuring grew to a babbling, but the king did not seem affronted. Smiling broadly, he shook hands with Ilioneus, and ordered gifts for all the embassy: a splendid war-horse decked out in gold harness for each of the hundred men, and for Aeneas himself, a chariot drawn by two immortal, fire-breathing steeds, bred in the Sun-god’s magical stables.

The success of the embassy delighted Aeneas. Over and over Ilioneus had to repeat the king’s words, and each time the Trojans cheered and applauded. Aeneas decided to visit the Laurentes the following morning, and set his servants to polishing his armour and laying out his finest clothes.

He never gave a thought to Juno. Always watchful,

always bitter, the queen of the gods had observed the happy landing, and the joyful spirits of the Trojans in their camp. “This time I will succeed!” she swore. “Those Trojans have escaped every trap I set, in Troy, Carthage, Sicily and on the stormy seas. They laugh at me; they mock my vengeance! Very well, if my heavenly power is too weak, I’ll use the forces of hell! If I can’t prevent this settlement, if Aeneas must marry this Latin bride, then at least I will mark these happy events with bloodshed, havoc and war!” Juno plunged down to the earth, and summoned, from the black depths of the Underworld, a screaming, spitting creature of evil.

Allecto was the creature’s name. She was one of the Furies, a loathsome sisterhood born of Night, whose bluish hair was intertwined with venomous snakes, and whose business was violence and bloody destruction.

“Do this for me!” Juno urged, though even her spiteful nature shrank from the hideous demon before her. “Shatter the peace in Latium! You know a thousand ways of stirring up hatred and quarrels. I need your skill. Sow strife in Italy, and make the Trojans bleed!”

As the goddess spoke, Allecto’s fangs grinned from her jaws. The task pleased her. Swooping invisible into King Latinus’ palace, she hovered about windows and doorways, waiting for a chance. She listened intently as Queen Amata pleaded with her husband to bestow his daughter’s hand on Turnus, and she followed the disappointed mother as she retired weeping at the king’s stubborn refusal.

The Fury saw her chance. She plucked a hissing snake from her hair and cast it at the Queen. The creature glided over Amata’s skin, and began to work its venom deep into

her heart. The queen sighed and rose. She would try once more to persuade her husband.

"What is it now, my dear?" the king asked, as patiently as he could.

"Our daughter's marriage. Now, don't groan at me like that. Believe me, I only want the best for her."

"Haven't we discussed this already, Amata? I have given you my answer."

"You haven't thought about it properly," the queen retorted. "You say Lavinia must marry a foreigner – that such is the will of the gods. Do you seriously think the gods intend our daughter to marry an outcast, a landless beggar? You have heard the story of Paris – don't you see, these Trojans are well-known for stealing women and carrying them off across the sea. How do you know they mean to settle here in Italy? We may never see Lavinia again!"

"Enough, woman!" groaned the king, putting his hands over his ears. "What do you know of the gods' will?"

"I know that the gods often speak in riddles, and mislead men. A foreigner? What is a foreigner? Someone from another city. Turnus is a Rutulian, not one of us. In fact, if you go back in history, his family is Greek, an old Mycenaean race. That's 'foreign' enough to satisfy the oracle."

"Stop!" The king had risen now. Exasperation had turned to anger. "Not another word! I am still king of the Laurentes. Woman, attend to your household!"

Amata fled. Now the poison from Allecto's snake had spread through her system, and she no longer knew what she did or where she was. She uttered a piercing howl, and, seizing a torch in each hand, began to sway and twirl like a drunken worshipper at the wine-god's orgies.

"Bacchus calls! Bacchus calls! Hail, Bacchus!" She swung the torches to and fro before the faces of her horrified ladies, until they too caught the rhythm and began to roll their eyes and lurch from side to side.

"Hail, great Bacchus!" the women cried in chorus, and, as if at a signal, plucked torches from the wall-hooks and danced after the frenzied queen. Up and down the passages swayed the maddened line, gathering more and more of the palace women. The queen's voice rose shrill above the rest. "Sing a wedding-hymn! Hail, great god Bacchus! Sing to Lavinia and noble Turnus! Sing a wedding-hymn!"

Faster and faster spun the dance. The queen caught her daughter by the arm, and wrenched her into the twirling line. "A bride!" she screamed. "A bride for Turnus! A bride for Bacchus! Hail, hail, great Bacchus!"

Into the courtyard, into the streets, into the forest they danced. The men of the city watched helpless as their wives and daughters joined the hectic band. When the last of the dancers had vanished into the woods, the men knew they could only wait till the spell subsided. It was foolish to interfere with the rites of Bacchus.

The Fury Allecto had been following the women with delight, adding her shrieks to the general din, and increasing the commotion with her evil magic. Now she saw that her work among the Laurentes was complete. At nightfall she flew to Ardea, the home of Turnus.

Turnus was asleep. Disguised as an elderly priestess of Juno, the Fury invaded the young man's dreams: "Turnus, are you sleeping while King Latinus cheats you of your promised bride? Are you a man? Will you allow Lavinia to marry a Trojan upstart? What are you waiting for? The

Trojans are at your mercy. Burn their ships, and put them to the sword! This is the will of gracious Juno."

Turnus stirred in his sleep, and murmured, "Go away, old woman; mind your own business, and leave matters of war to men!"

At this Allecto shed her disguise, and towered above the sleeping warrior, her eyes blazing red, her snaky hair writhing and rearing, a whip in one hand, a firebrand in the other: "Foolish old woman, am I? Then look again, Turnus, and tremble!" She hurled the torch deep into his heart, so that he woke in a fervour, raging for blood and revenge. In a matter of hours, the young men of Ardea were reporting for battle, echoing Turnus' vows of death to the Trojans and punishment for King Latinus.

Meanwhile Allecto had just one more visit to make. Spying on the Trojan camp, she saw young Iulus and his friends setting out for a hunt. Chattering in excitement, they began to lay snares and discuss the game. Their hounds ran barking around them. Perched in a tree, Allecto glimpsed the antlers of a handsome stag, cooling itself in the river.

The stag roaming the forest was the pet of a village girl called Silvia. Her brothers had found it as a tiny fawn. Now fully grown, still tame and very attached to its mistress, it wandered freely by day, and pawed at the door of her house every evening. All the village people knew Silvia's pet, and took care not to hunt it by mistake.

Now Allecto dropped close to the stag. It sensed her presence, and froze, quivering with terror. The Fury drew breath, and blew a long, strident blast of air. The scent of the frightened stag was borne through the forest, and reached the keen nostrils of the Trojan hounds.



In a second the dogs were yelping furiously and bounding through the trees. "A scent!" shouted Iulus, and raced in pursuit, notching his arrow as he ran. The sight of the splendid beast thrilled him with excitement. What a trophy to show his father! His aim was true. The arrow stuck fast in the animal's flank.

Crazed with pain, the stag kicked aside the attacking hounds and ran for the village. Whimpering and squealing, it pounded with its hooves on Silvia's door, and collapsed at her feet. The girls' cries brought the villagers rushing to the house. "Who did this?" demanded one of her brothers.

There was no need to search. Iulus, at the head of his band, had appeared from the woods, panting from the chase. With a roar, Silvia's brother set upon him, brandishing his woodcutter's axe.

Allecto observed the spreading brawl with glee. Seizing a shepherd's horn, she blew it again and again with all her might, so that all round the countryside men snatched up weapons and ran to answer the call to arms. The Trojans, too, heard the sound of alarm, and made for the village with all speed to rescue Iulus.

The clash of steel and roar of battle-cries were music to the Fury Allecto. She called triumphantly to Juno, "See, lady, I have done it! If you wish, I'll spread this war up and down the whole length of Italy."

"No, no," protested Juno, recoiling from the Fury's greedy lust for blood. "Enough! You have served me well. Now go back to your proper place. The rest I shall manage myself. Go quickly!" With a cackling yell that rang from the clifftops, Allecto dived, the snakes streaming from her head, straight through a cleft in the rock. A distant crash shook the base of the mountain, and she was gone.

There was strife in Latium. The angry band of villagers, carrying their dead and wounded, met Turnus and his advancing troops. Together they surrounded the palace of Latinus, and demanded an all-out war against the Trojan settlers. A crowd of citizens joined the turmoil. Their wives were still under the spell of Bacchus.

"Fight! Fight!" came the cry of the mob, pounding and battering at the palace doors. "War against the Trojans! Drive them from our shore! Turnus will lead us – we want Turnus! Turnus will fight!"

"We can't hold the doors, sir," gasped a terrified guard to King Latinus. "You must answer them."

The old king flung up his hands and appealed to the gods. "No guilt of mine! My pledge to the Trojans is firm. If Turnus sheds their blood, let the guilt be his alone." Then he added wearily, "Tell them they can do as they like."

It was enough. Juno's own hand swung back the massive iron gates that were opened only in time of war. The blare of trumpets summoned men to arms. All over Latium blacksmiths worked feverishly; horses were yoked to chariots and galloped back and forth across the plain; in the empty fields the ploughs were left to rust and rot.

Twelve powerful allies came to join Turnus, each with a menacing army. First came Mezentius, a bitter and twisted character. His own people, the Etruscans, had expelled him because of his unspeakable acts of cruelty. He was followed by Aventinus, a son of Hercules, wearing the famous lion-skin of his father. Twin brothers came next, warriors both, and a king called Caeculus, whose troops fought light-armed, with slings and slingshots of lead. Messapus, son of Neptune, brought the horses he was

famous for training, and Clausus of the Sabine tribe marched after him with a huge battalion. Then came a man with good reason to hate the Trojans, Halaesus, son of the Greek king, Agamemnon, who had led the destruction of ancient Troy; Oebalus, leading troops who wore helmets made from bark; Ufens, whose tribe lived by plunder; Umbro, a magician and snake-charmer; and the handsome Virbius brought the number of allied armies to eleven.

The twelfth was a Volscian force, all cavalry. Their leader was a maiden warrior, Camilla, dressed in a royal cloak, her hair held in a clasp of gold, a quiver of arrows on her back and a spear in her hand.

Turnus himself was the tallest of all, his noble stature heightened by a helmet with three plumes, shaped like a frightening monster, which nodded and shook as he moved.

This was the army that gathered to slaughter the Trojans.