



IX Turnus Attacks the Trojan Camp

IRIS glided to earth on her rainbow wings, and dropped neatly beside Turnus. "Why not attack the Trojans now?" she whispered. "Aeneas is far away. One quick move, and their camp is yours!"

Juno, watching from above, smiled as her message was delivered. She knew Turnus would not delay.

The Trojan camp was protected by a wooden stockade set on top of a ramp of firmly-packed earth. A watch-tower stood at each corner. It was from one of these that a sentry noticed a thin, but spreading, smudge on the horizon. To his trained eyes it had only one possible meaning.

"Sound the alarm!" ordered Mnestheus, the camp commander, as soon as he heard the sentry's report.

Many of the Trojans were outside the defences, some hunting, some drawing water from the river, others working on the ships. The repeated blare of trumpets brought them to the gates at a run. Aeneas had left very clear orders. If the enemy attacked, no one was to venture out to fight in the open. So the gates were barricaded, the guard-posts and catwalks were manned, and the Trojans waited.

The enemy drew closer. Turnus, with his triple-plumed gold helmet, could easily be distinguished from the rest.

especially when he suddenly galloped ahead of the line. He threw back his head to roar a challenge, so that the menacing helmet-plumes jerked and nodded, and hurled a spear towards the camp. This was the official declaration of war. His troops responded in chorus with a oath, and a well-drilled flourish of glittering weapons. The Trojans remained still.

The Latin ranks halted, just out of bowshot, but Turnus advanced alone, heedless of danger. A spear-length from the gate he reined his horse so sharply that it reared in protest. He shouted above its frantic neighing: "Come out and fight, you cowards!" There was no response from the defenders.

Turnus wheeled and skirted the ramp, eyeing the sturdy barrier. Frustrated, he wheeled again, and set off at full tilt in the opposite direction. There was no way into the camp. He stopped once more. Latins and Trojans watched the tossing plumes and the powerful arms that held the plunging horse in check.

Then, "Burn their ships!" Turnus roared and galloped away to the river-mouth. The Trojan fleet lay moored to the bank where the Tiber met the sea. Small watch-fires flickered by the water's edge, and here and there were scattered piles of rope, planking, tar and iron rivets.

Turnus leaned down and caught hold of a stout piece of wood. Behind him he heard the shouts of some of his Rutulian troops. With another yell of "Burn the ships!" he passed the stake through a bucket of tar and made for the nearest fire. The others were quick to follow his example. Triumphant waving their flaming fire-brands, they crowded the bank, waiting for the word of command.

And there and then, as they drew back their arms to

throw, a blinding light flashed from the sky, a cloud appeared from nowhere, and a deafening crash, like the sound of giant cymbals, shattered the very air. From the centre of the cloud rang a female voice: "How dare you, Turnus? These ships are formed from the sacred pines of Mount Ida. I, the Great Mother, gave a loan of my living trees, until such time as the Trojans should reach their promised land. The time has come. Go, my lovely children, swim fast and free!"

The mooring-ropes snapped. The ships drifted a few yards, then dived prow-first, into the current. At the edge of the sea they surfaced, shooting up like dolphins, but they were not dolphins. Each ship was now a beautiful maiden, a nymph of the sea. They dived again in unison, and vanished.

Turnus was at a loss, but only for a moment. "You see!" he cried to his trembling, pale-faced warriors. "Even their ships are terrified of us!" One man giggled nervously, as if expecting a vengeful blow from the sky. But the strange cloud was gone, and the other soldiers joined in a roar of laughter that was, perhaps, a little too hearty.

"Well, men," Turnus continued, "we can say that was an omen. But make no mistake, that omen was on our side. The gods have cut off the Trojans' only way of escape and presented them to us, trapped in their camp. You have all heard the story of Troy. A mighty city that was – and what happened to it? Burned to the ground. Look at this camp – a pile of dirt with a fence on top! Do we need a Wooden Horse to break in?"

The ripple of answering laughter was confident now. "We'll let them stew until tomorrow. Then we'll fire the camp and smoke the cowards out!"

The main body of the Latin army were soon pitching tents on the plain, while fourteen hand-picked Rutulian officers, each with a hundred men, stood guard around the Trojan camp. They lit a ring of watch-fires, and prepared to wait through the night.

Inside the camp there was furious activity, as the Trojans tried to make the most of the few hours they had. Beams, planks and even furniture were brought to strengthen the walls; extra men were assigned to the weakest points, and the crack troops were stationed at the gates.

At one gate stood Nisus and Euryalus, the two comrades who had run in the foot-race in Sicily. Nisus, always hot-tempered, found the tense hours of darkness more than he could bear. "This is ridiculous," he stormed. "Look at them, just waiting till it's convenient to come in and finish us off. There's not a doubt in their minds – I saw them issuing wine to the guards. They don't even think we are worth staying sober for."

"They're singing," commented Euryalus, peering at the flickering fires.

"Soon they'll be out cold. What a chance for us! But no: we must just wait meekly till they wake up, ready to kill us!"

"We can't possibly attack them," Euryalus, always more realistic, reminded him. "There are thousands of them out there. Even if we killed the pickets, which is risky enough in the dark, the whole of the army would come down on us. If they take the camp, they've got us. We have nowhere to hide. We have to wait for Aeneas, and hope he comes soon, with reinforcements."

"We can hope," Nisus retorted, "but how is Aeneas to know what's going on here? He's probably feasting and swapping stories with the Arcadians, forgetting about us."

"Aeneas never forgets about us," Euryalus said. "Still, I wish he would hurry back."

"That's it!" Nisus exclaimed. "Aeneas has to be told. Listen, it's quiet out there. I bet they're all asleep. I'm going to slip through their lines and run to Pallanteum to find Aeneas."

"Nisus!" his friend exclaimed, "Not by yourself!"

"It's safer alone. One man could sneak through the lines and be away before they heard."

"So could two. It's a risk, and I doubt if our commanders will approve, but if you go, then so do I."

"Euryalus, don't be a fool! There's no point in both of us risking our lives. Besides, there's your mother – the only old lady who refused to stay in Sicily – did she come all this way just to lose her son?"

"She could lose him any time, and she knows it," Euryalus replied calmly. "Let's get someone to relieve us, and pay a call on the high command."

They found the senior officers in conference, among them Iulus, whose boyish features had hardened a good deal since the time of that unfortunate hunt. Nisus saluted, and without waiting for permission to speak, launched into his proposal: ". . . and we have often been hunting up the course of the river, and know the way to Pallanteum well, even in the dark," he concluded.

The first to respond was old Aletes. "May the gods bless you both! The spirit of old Troy is strong in men like you. If you can bring this off, I'll say you deserve the highest rewards heaven and earth can supply!"

Iulus agreed: "Yes! If you can get through to my father, and bring him back in time to save us, I promise you enough gold to make you rich for the rest of your lives."

And if we beat Turnus, I'll see that you, Nisus, get his horse, his helmet and his shield to keep for yourself. And you, Euryalus – you're only a bit older than me – you will be my best friend and my comrade-in-arms!"

Euryalus, greatly moved, could only stammer, "Just one favour, sir. My mother – you know her, she's the only old lady in the camp – will you look after her? I don't want to tell her I'm going. She would make a fuss, sir. But if I knew she was going to be all right . . ."

"Don't worry," Iulus broke in. "I'll treat her like my own mother, I swear it. Now you must take my sword for luck."

They slipped out of the gate facing the river, and made for the nearest watch-fire, now only a peaceful glow in the darkness. They could hear the heavy breathing of drunken sleepers, and smelt the sweat of their huddled bodies. Nisus drew his sword, and whispered, "This is it. We have to cut our way through." Euryalus saw him dimly by the sinking firelight, stooping over a snoring figure and thrusting with his right arm. The figure gave a grunt and dropped back. Nisus moved ahead, and another heavy form slumped to the ground. Euryalus gritted his teeth, stepped over an outstretched leg, and collided with a crouching soldier who was wide awake. He struck, and the Rutulian dropped before he could utter his cry of alarm.

The next few moments were grim. Finally, Nisus gasped, "We're through. Quick, it's nearly light! We can run for it now." Euryalus snatched up a plumed helmet belonging to the chieftain Messapus, and bolted after his friend, putting on the trophy as he ran.

Suddenly they heard galloping hooves and a shout of command. They froze, aware that they were still in the



open. "Despatch-riders for Turnus," muttered Nisus. "They'll mow us down. Count to three, and then run for the cover in those trees."

"Halt! Who goes there?" The leader had seen the gleam of Euryalus' prize helmet. "After them!"

The Trojans darted into the safety of the wood. Nisus, who knew the path well, ran at full speed through the narrow clearing. Euryalus, still fumbling with the strap of his new helmet, fell behind, tripped over some brambles, lost the path, and crashed in confusion through the thick undergrowth, announcing his presence clearly.

Running furiously, Nisus reached the outskirts of the wood. He leaned on his spears and swayed forward, gulping hungrily for air. Then he realized that he was alone. Reeling with exhaustion and shock, he turned to stumble back. A pale light had begun to filter through the leaves. The wood that had been a dark and comforting haven was now full of treacherous, ghostly shadows.

He dared not call out, not even in a whisper. But all at once the wood filled with noise: shouts of alarm, hooves trampling the bushes, and the unmistakable clash of metal on metal. Nisus' quick footsteps were drowned by the din.

He had guessed, but now he saw. Nine or ten horsemen, leaping from their mounts, had closed with Euryalus, who, backed against a tree, was defending himself with sword and shield. Nisus flung a spear at the nearest enemy, a broad-shouldered fellow who was raising his sword to strike. The spear caught him in the back; he lurched forward and fell. At once his companions spun round, and a second spear struck one of them full in the face, killing him instantly.

"We'll soon fix your friend!" a third soldier snarled, and

plunged his blade through the breastplate of Euryalus. Nisus screamed a warning – too late – and hurled himself on his friend's killer. There was a short, fierce duel; the Rutulian, at last, sank to his knees, dying. But by now Nisus was utterly spent; wounded many times, he collapsed on to his friend's body, and lay still.

In the light of early morning, Turnus reviewed a line of bodies, laid out in a gruesome parade of death. No fewer than fourteen soldiers had been killed outside the camp, and, in addition, three despatch-riders. Turnus looked at the two young Trojans who lay side by side, Euryalus still wearing the helmet he had been so proud to capture. "Give Messapus back his helmet," he snapped, "and tell him to take better care of it in future. As for these two, we'll fix their heads on spears, and march them round the Trojan camp to discourage any other heroics."

No one told the mother of Euryalus, but she, noticing that everyone seemed to be out, left her quarters and joined the crowd lining the walls. "What's all that shouting?" she asked a soldier. "I can't quite see. Are they trying to frighten us with their noisy parade?"

The soldier looked at her, and, without answering, moved aside and pointed. The old lady peered intently at the column of Latins, chanting as they paraded their grisly trophies. Then she let out a wail so piercing that even the marching troops broke off their chant and stared up at the wall.

Her cry rang out again and again. She called her son's name, she cursed the war, the Fates and the enemy, and pleaded with the gods to strike her dead. The Trojan officers, headed by Iulus, rushed to console her, but she pushed them aside and went on screaming. Ilioneus,

worried that her grief might spread panic, gave brisk orders, and two burly soldiers picked up the old woman and carried her away from the crowd.

From the main body of the Latin army the war-trumpets sounded; an answering blare came from the ranks of Turnus' hand-picked troops. The Trojans on the walls tested their bows, checked their stockpiles of heavy boulders, and braced themselves for the onslaught.

A troop of Latins charged at the gates in a tight square, each man holding his shield above his head, like a vast tortoise-shell. The defenders heaved down rock after rock, but most of these bounced off the roof of shields, until finally a huge boulder shattered the "tortoise", rolling the men in all directions.

The camp was under attack from every side. Mezentius, the ex-tyrant of the Etruscans, hurled firebrands at the wooden stockade, and peppered the Trojans with deadly slingshots. Others rushed up with ladders and attempted to climb over the wall to fight on the catwalks. A watch-tower caught alight and collapsed, crushing its defenders to death. The air was thick with missiles and the groans of the wounded.

Amid all the commotion, Turnus' brother-in-law, a big warrior by the name of Numanus, was strutting about importantly and bawling insults at the Trojans: "Cowards! Wife-stealers! Make way for the second Fall of Troy!"

Iulus had been glaring at this braggart for some time. Officially, the prince was too young to fight, and was supposed to be hiding with the women and children. In fact, he was in the front-line of defenders, firing rapidly with his hunting-bow. The loud voice and insolent gait of Numanus were too much for him. He notched a fresh

arrow, paused to whisper a vow to Jupiter, and drew the bowstring back to his ear. With a twang that rumbled like thunder from heaven, the arrow sped from his bow and passed clean through the braggart's grinning face.

"A present from Troy!" Iulus shouted. The Trojans cheered, and fought on with renewed determination. Although Iulus was eager to prove himself further, the senior officers, knowing his life to be most precious, urged him to retire to safety: "The god of archers, Apollo himself, would not wish you to risk your life. Without you, the future of our race is lost."

The wooden wall and the ramp outside it were now swarming with Trojans and Latins, grappling hand-to-hand. Men as well as missiles were flying from the walls, their yells breaking through the whine of the arrows and rattle of slingshots. The blare of trumpets never ceased. The battle throbbed with its own horrid pulse – the steady clash of metal and the low-pitched, grumbling war-drum. Still the defences held.

At one of the gates two Trojan brothers, Pandarus and Bitias, had beaten off a heavy attack. They were thrilled with the taste of victory. "Give our regards to Turnus!" Pandarus jeered after retreating troops. "Tell him to send men next time!"

Bitias would not be outdone. "Here, not so fast!" he called. "Why such a rush to get away? Look, we'll give you an easy chance – try again, girls!" With a peal of confident laughter, he drew the bar and swung back the gate.

At this a small band of Latins turned and rushed for the opening. The two brothers, still laughing, picked them off with their spears, and blocked the entrance with their

bodies. Other Latins, however, took up the cry, "The gate! The gate!" and surged forward in crowds.

The call reached Turnus. He made for the gate at once, brandishing his deadly pair of spears. His temper rose high when he saw the impudent brothers, poised on top of the gateposts, inviting attack. It took only a moment to aim. The mighty weapon caught Bitias in the chest; he reeled, and crashed to the ground in a heap of jangling armour.

The fall of Bitias gave the enemy courage. As one they stormed the gate, Turnus in the lead, while Trojan soldiers dropped into their midst and joined the turmoil of writhing, straining bodies. Pandarus, now regretting his rashness, pushed sharply at the gate and banged it shut, leaving a number of Trojans outside with the enemy, and Turnus, the Latin hero, alone inside the camp.

Pandarus stood facing his brother's killer. "You've made a mistake, Turnus," he spat, "This is not Queen Amata's guest-room. It's the Trojan camp." He flung his spear; it missed, and stuck fast in the gate.

"What a shame!" mocked Turnus, and lifting his sword high in both hands, brought it down on the young man's head.

That was only the beginning. Turnus, crazy for Trojan blood, did not think of opening the gate and letting his soldiers in. He hacked left and right, strewing the ground with mangled bodies and driving a shock of fear through the Trojan ranks. Man after man he killed, while the defenders scattered in panic at his advance.

Mnestheus hurried to the scene. "What's the matter with you all?" he cried above the tumult. "There's only one man here, and he's mortal. Aeneas would be ashamed to see you now!"

Then the Trojans closed in, and Turnus was forced to give ground. Inch by inch, he backed closer to the wall, parrying with his huge shield the blows that rained down on him. Twice he lunged forward and slashed with his deadly sword. But Mnestheus was in the lead now, fighting with cold determination. Turnus' head was ringing with the blow that had cracked his gaudy helmet; his limbs were drenched in sweat, and his breath was failing. With a final effort he swung up to a platform overlooking the Tiber, and, with a roar of defiance, threw himself fully-armed into the water below.

The current was kind; it bathed his wounds, and restored him, still unconquered, to his anxious troops.