

Homer's Iliad—Condensed by William F. Harris

THE Greeks were princes of story-telling, and Homer was their king, who he was and where he lived is one of the unanswered questions of history. Seven cities and more claimed him as their greater source of pride. The most we can be sure of is that to us have come down two of the many poems that bear his name, the Iliad and the Odyssey.

Like the Hebrew Bible, they have become part of the heritage of universal humanity. Each has a story of its own; in the Iliad it is the wrath of Achilles against King Agamemnon; in the Odyssey it is the wanderings of Odysseus on his way back from the wars at Troy. Back of them both as remote cause is the tale of the fatal beauty of Helen. In each are innumerable short stories, which have been stored-



houses of romance for writers ever since first they became known. It is one of the marvels of the Greeks that they step out of the mist of unrecorded history with a highly developed civilization, portrayed in two of the world's masterpieces of literature. The Greeks in later years wrote "lives" of Homer with great exactness, a detail which they knew no more about the "blind bard" than do we. Indeed, they were not even sure that one poet wrote both tales. But that the stories were of supreme genius they were as sure as have been all men since their day who have read them.

Homer was the Greek's "best seller"; they thronged in thousands to hear them recited; their religion, their thought, their education were all based on him, under whose name is told the great story of their heroes.

The elders of the Trojans from their seats upon the Scaean Gate looked down upon the hosts of Greeks and Trojans marshalled in the plain. For nine long years the armies had contended. Why had Agamemnon brought the men of cities to fight around the walls of Priam's Troy? What was it all about?

Homer sings of the wrath of Achilles, but the beginning of all the trouble goes far back of that, to the tale of a princely shepherd on a night surprised as he watched his flocks upon Mount Ida. The goddesses Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite makes him choose one of the world-old wishes; the judgment of Paris is for a fair face and love. To fulfill her promise Aphrodite leads him to King Menelaus' court in Sparta. Back to Troy Paris brings Queen Helen and great treasure. A hue and cry follow throughout Greece; Menelaus calls to his help the great overlord, his brother Agamemnon, Achilles the sacker of cities, wily Odysseus, venerable and genial Nestor, and all the chivalry of the land with men and ships to make war on Troy.

Others must pay for the wrong doing of Paris—old King Priam of the Ashen Spear, his venerable wife Andromache, his little son Astyanax, Cassandra, and all the rest whom the toil of war involves. Other stories of the many Greek epics, now lost, bring the tale of warring years up to the death, where the Iliad begins. Hector is the leader of the Trojans; Achilles has been the great fighting force of the Greeks, though now he has withdrawn in anger to his tent because of a slight put upon his honor by King Agamemnon.

The hostile hosts are advancing to the battle; a dramatic moment brings Menelaus and Paris in sight of one another. The wrath of Hector blazes out against Paris for all the evil and shame his theft of woman and wealth have brought. The gay and debonair Paris, however, can show splendid moments. "Hector, they taunt is just. But throw not at me the lovely gifts of golden Aphrodite. The glorious gifts that the gods give are not to be flung away, no man could take them by mere willingness. But if thou dost wish me to battle and fight, make all the rest of the Trojans and Achaeans sit down, and put me in the midst with warlike Menelaus to fight for Helen and all her goods, to see which shall conquer and which the better man; let the rest conclude a friendship of trusty oaths; may ye dwell in fertile Troyland, and the others go back to Argos, nurse of steeds, and Achaea for fair women."

So it was that the hosts sat in high expectation in the plain, and Priam and the Trojan elders were

gathered on the Scaean gate. And Priam, who bore no grudge against Helen for all the misery her fair face had brought to him and Troy—for he saw the hands of the gods in it all—called her to his side to tell him of the chiefs among whom she had once lived. Then those elders, who had long since seen their fighting days, paid the finest compliment a woman's beauty has ever received—how many thousand years ago—as they saw Helen advancing. "No cause for anger that Trojans and well-greaved Achaeans for such a woman long time should suffer sorrow." Not another word! But those old men upon the wall have drawn for you and me a picture of the world's desire. "But even so," they continued, "let her go home upon the ships and stay not as a source of sorrow to us and to our children after us."

The high hopes raised of settling all the troubles by the duel of the Hector of the glancing helm had gone to the citadel. And there he said farewell to Andromache, his wife, and to his little boy, a picture of the world's desire.

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ture that has never been surpassed for true tenderness—although it was so many hundred years ago. He smiled and looked upon the little boy in silence. "Ah, Hector," she cried, "stay here upon the wall! Thou art to me father and mother and brother, too, as well as lord. The foe will attack thee alone!" "I know the day shall come," he answered, "when holy Ilios shall perish, and Priam and the folk of Priam of the goodly Ashen Spear. But thought of him, of my mother, of my brothers, does not trouble me so much as that some warrior of the Achaeans shall rob thee of the day of freedom." He stretched out his hand to the little boy, who shrunk back to his nurse's breast in fear of the bronze and the horse-hair crest that nodded dreadfully from the top of the helm. Straightaway Hector took off the helm and placed

it on the ground. And when he had kissed his son and tossed him in his arms, he spoke in prayer to Zeus and the rest of the gods: "Grant, ye gods, that this son of mine prove foremost among the Trojans, a good and mighty king. And as he comes back from battle may many a man say of him 'A far better man than his father,' and may his mother rejoice in heart." And then he handed him back to his mother, who received him smiling through her tears, and so departed to the battle with words of high cheer.

There follow many scenes of varied action—the Iliad is one of the great collections of short stories in the world's literature—in which is given a perfect picture of the life of that lordly society so long ago. The plain people play little part, although their champion Thersites

is the first democrat mentioned in literature. Mighty deeds of derring-do, high adventure, love of lords and ladies, the pranks of merry children—are all preserved as it were in amber, and the sentiment for the most part is so modern that it is almost impossible to believe that we are reading of people who lived many hundreds of years before Christ was born.

But over all impends one dreadful fate. It is a Greek tale—yet Hector, prince and leader of the foe, is the hero of the story. Of course he is not quite so strong, not quite so great a fighter as Achilles, the Greek champion, and all know that in the end Achilles will win. The great scenes are worked up to with consummate artistry. Achilles is still sulking in his tent; Hector is pressing the Greeks hard; Patroclus, Achilles' dearest friend, begs his chief to let him don his lord's armor and save his people; he has his way and Hector slays him. Achilles' anger blazes forth in all its passion. What now a petty slight? The great scene of the battle between the two inspires the poet to all his

noblest power. They fight; Achilles pursues Hector, thrice around the walls of Troy; Zeus weighs in golden scales the fates of the two; Hector is doomed to die; inexorable destiny may not be stayed. Achilles slays Hector and every heart but that of the victor is wrung with the pity of it all. And in the end, even Achilles' heart is moved. For old King Priam can neither sleep nor eat while his son's body lies dead in the camp of the foe. Against the will of all that was dearest to him he gathered great store of ransom and made his way by night under the kindly guidance of the gods to Achilles' tent and sought for the body of his dear son. It is a scene of love and pity, of chivalry and greatness of heart that all the years since then have never seen surpassed. "Be not angry with me, Patroclus," prayed Achilles, "if thou shalt learn in Hades' house that I have given back noble Hector to his dear father." And Patroclus, one may be sure, shared the pity of all brave men and all true women ever since.

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