



RANSOM FOR HECTOR

THE GODS sent for the lady Thetis, and bade her go tell her son that Zeus and all the gods of Olympus grew angry with him for his treatment of Hector's body, and that he must give it back to Priam his father, for the honourable ransom which the old king would pay.

And Achilles listened to his mother when she came beside him, her words reaching him through his grief as no one else's could have done.

At the same time the gods sent Iris, the Lady of the Rainbow, who often acted as their messenger, to Priam where he sat grieving in his palace with the dust and ashes of mourning on his head. They bade her tell him that now he should go to Achilles and offer the proper ransom for his son's body, telling him also that if he did so, Achilles would listen to him.

The old king went to his treasury and opened his chests of carved and scented wood, and brought out twelve fine robes and twelve white mantles and richly embroidered tunics. Ten bars of yellow gold he added to the pile, and gleaming cauldrons, and a beautiful golden cup, the pride of his heart, which had been given to him by the people of Thrace. Then he called for his remaining sons, Paris and Deiphobus and the rest, and, railing at them in his grief for being still alive when Hector was dead, he bade them make ready a waggon and load the ransom into it.

And when they had yoked the mules and loaded in the treasure as he bade them, he prayed and poured wine to the gods, and mounted into his chariot which had also been made ready for him. Alone, save for the drivers and a herald, he drove out through the Scaean Gate and away over the plain in the darkness, toward the ships.

But unknown to him, the god Hermes, Lord of Wayfaring, went with him, and with his winged rod cast sleep into the eyes of all who looked that way, so that no man saw them pass, the old king in his chariot and the piled treasure-waggon. So they passed unchallenged through the camp until they reached the reed-thatched hall of Achilles. Priam got down from the chariot and went in, while Achilles' men set about unloading the waggon, and the god was on his own way back to Olympus.

Achilles was in his hall, surrounded by his companions with the remains of supper in their midst. The old king went in and knelt down at the prince's feet, and took and kissed his hands according to the custom. Hands that seemed to him crimson and terrible with the death of so many of his sons beside the beloved Hector.

"Have pity on me and listen to the word of the gods and give me back my dead son," he begged. "Think of your own father, who is old and grieving, even as I; though for him there is still hope of his living son's return. Have pity on me; for my son's sake I have done what I did not think possible and kissed the hands that slew him and his brothers."

And Achilles thought of his own father, far away, who was indeed old, and who he knew would soon have as good cause as Priam for his grieving. He raised the old king from his knees and spoke kindly to him, and they wept, both of them together; Priam for his son, and Achilles for his father and for Patroclus his friend.

Then Achilles bade the women make Hector's body ready for burial and cover him with a white mantle, the finest that his father had brought in the treasure-waggon. And when that was done, and Hector's body laid in the now empty waggon, he sent for more food and wine, and he and the old king ate and drank together, before Priam set out with the ransomed body of his son, back across the dark plain to the waiting city of Troy.

All the people of the city came to meet them in the gate, lamenting and crying out for Hector. They carried his body into his own house and laid it on the bed in the high chamber. The women gathered round, keening for him, singing the death songs, tearing their bright hair.

Andromache led the lament, sitting at the head of the bed and holding his head between her hands. "My husband, you are gone from life too young, leaving me a widow in your house, and your son without a father. You did not die in your bed, holding out your hands to me, or speaking me some last word that I could remember through all the nights and days of the long years that I must weep for you."



Then Hecuba his mother took up the lament. "Hector, dearest to me by far of all my sons; when you were alive you were beloved of the gods, and surely they love you still, for they have allowed no mark nor blemish to show how you were dragged behind your slayer's chariot wheels. Save for the one red flower of your death-wound, you lie as though you slept."

Then rose Helen, the third to lead their lamentations, dark-robed and with white arms upflung. "Hector, nearest to my heart of all the brothers of my husband's house, in all the years since he brought me here – would that I had died before those years began – never did I hear a word from you that was bitter or ungentle, and when others upbraided me for my ill-doing, you would restrain them with your kind heart and gentle words. Oh woe to me, woe to me, for there is no one now in all Troy to stand my friend."

Then Priam the king bade the people yoke up the oxen and fetch wood for a funeral pyre, telling them that they need fear no Greek attack while they did so, for Achilles had granted eleven days' truce while they buried Hector. So they went out with their ox-carts, and for nine days they brought in wood and built a great pyre outside the city walls, and on the tenth day they laid Hector's body on the crest of it, and plunged torches deep into its heart.

And when the fire sank, they took the ashes and charred bones and wrapped them in fine purple cloth, weeping all the while. They put them in a golden box and laid the box in a chamber hollowed in the earth, and covered it with stones and piled a grave-mound over it in haste, keeping look-outs on all sides, for the eleven days of peace were almost up.

Then they went back into the city and held a great feast according to their proper custom.

Such was the burial that they gave to Hector, Tamer of Horses.

