

RESTES

BY AESCHYLUS

525 ~ 456 B.C.

A CLASSIC
IN A PAGE

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As Aeschylus was the father of the Greek tragic drama, so he may be regarded as the greatest of the Greek tragic poets. He was a soldier before he became a poet, and fought and died at Marathon. When he turned his attention to peaceful times in literature, he took the old allegorical representations of the Dioscuri and whatever else there was of those iconoclastic attempts at portraying of history ideas or myths by "make-believe" which spring up amid all primitive peoples—and upon them founded the Greek drama. His gift was new form and a fresh impetus to Greek literature and achieved at once a fame which has become immortal. Although seventy titles of the plays of Aeschylus have survived the centuries, only seven of his tragedies are extant. Chiefest among these is the Oresteia, a trilogy divided into three parts, which deal with the murder of Agamemnon and the revenge of Orestes. It is a play full of gorgeous verse and of high and stately thoughts, but a trifle bloodily—even for a Greek tragedy. Certainly the critic of today would say that Aeschylus was not happy in his choice of a subject. But as in Greek tragedy all the murdering takes place behind the scenes; perhaps the ancient Athenian audience did not find the play too gory for their tastes. They were not particularly squeamish

of his brother—all except Aegisthus, the eldest, who has escaped with his father. Weary, worn, broken, penitence, Thyestes had come back to Argos to plead for forgiveness. Atrous had received him like a brother and invited him to a great feast of reconciliation. But Atrous had more than political pretensions against Thyestes. He had discovered that before his flight he had seduced the queen, Atrous wife. So when the great banquet was spread Atrous had served up to his brother as food his own children, slain and cooked. Then he had driven him forth again to die an exile. But Agamemnon did not continue the feud of his father, and forbade not Aegisthus to live at his court.

Then there was that other bloody episode, the sacrifice of Iphigenia, which took place before the Grecian fleet sailed for the Trojan war. The ships-of-the-allies had assembled at Aulis, but were there becalmed so long that the soldiers and sailors sickened, the ropes rotted and the ships began to rot also. The priest, Calchas, decried the only way to remove the spell which hung over the fleet was for Agamemnon to sacrifice to the gods his daughter, Iphigenia. Placing the welfare of Greece before his private feelings, Agamemnon had ordered the sacrifice. It was a sad business, and people shook their heads

covered the way from the outer gate to the palace door with splendid tapestries and cloths of purple. "Daughter of Leda," said Agamemnon, "thy talk is almost as long as my campaign; pray do not strew my pathway with thy woman's gear nor lie there groveling like some barbarian slave. This pomp may be but an allurement to snare my feet from treading other paths. Honor me as a man—my fame cries loud enough. Call me not blessed—call no man blessed until he is dead. Well, well, undo my sandals—I will tread your purple path—and then we have many matters to talk of." Then, turning to the people, the King added that in thanksgiving for his safe arrival home, he would, the first thing he did, go into the palace altars and offer sacrifice.

With the returning conqueror was a woman of middle age, proud of bearing and not uncomely of face. Her eyes were dark and piercing and occasionally flashed with a wild light, which betokened inspiration—or insanity. It was Cassandra, the prophetess, daughter of the fallen Priam, King of Troy. Early in life she had devoted herself to the service of the altar and had come to believe herself possessed of prophetic power. But Cassandra had prophesied with more truth than the priestess, and it had been her hard fate that while she

And help there is none, far or near. Ah, wretch, what wilt thou do? The lord of thy bed, fresh from his cleansing butchery. And what things does this woman devise? What strange devices to wound her nearest unto death!

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"HERE, YES," SAID HE TO THE PEOPLE WHO CROWDED AROUND HIM. "I KNOW NOT THE END OF ALL THIS. I AM AS ONE WHOSE HORSES HAVE RUN AWAY WITH THE CHARIOT AND WHIRLED HIM WHITHER THEY WILL."

in such matters, anyway.

A watchman on the roof of the royal palace at Argos kept nightly outlook for the firing of a watchtower upon a distant hill which should signal the downfall of Troy and the victory of the Greeks under King Agamemnon. The great king's queen, Clytemnestra, had arranged a system of signals a year before, and now the night came when, from island, cape to cape, down the blue Aegean Sea, through the Cyclades to the Jordan Mountains which looked down upon the Argive capital, point after point caught up the blaze and told that the war of ten years was over and Ilion was no more.

Loud and joyfully did the watchman blow his trumpet, and all the city and the palace awoke to rejoice that the long struggle was ended and that once more Agamemnon would tread his native soil. Clytemnestra came forth from her apartments strong, masculine, determined and pretending to rejoice with her court and her subjects at the prospect of a speedy return of her lord. She did, indeed, eagerly desire that return. But not for love. Hate, hate dark and terrible, dwelt in her heart. That deadly curse of blood which had attached itself to the race of the Atreides was not lifted, and the unquenchable streams were yet to flow before the royal strain was purged of its criminal taint.

It was regarded as an ill omen by many that while Agamemnon had been away to the wars the Prince Aegisthus, his cousin, had been much about the court. That prince had a deep and lasting feud with the Atreides and though he had his counsel well, it was thought he plotted revenge. The words which flowed from the palace to the market places also hinted that he stood too well in the favor of Queen Clytemnestra.

When old King Pelops died his sons, Atreus and Thyestes, had struggled for the crown. Atreus had won and driven his brother back to the country. Atreus had moved upon the children

and whispered apart over it. Ten years had not sufficed to wear away the memory of the cruel death of that fair and innocent young princess.

But now the war was over, the King was returning and all the altars of Argos were wreathed with garlands and blazing with sacrifices, while up at the palace great and gorgeous preparations were making to receive the victorious monarch. At length the great day came; the ships of Agamemnon anchored in the Argolic Gulf, and the King made a triumphal march across the five miles which lay between the bay and his capital. Clytemnestra, arrayed in her most splendid royal robes and accompanied by her maidens and all the court, received him at the portico.

"Elders of Argos," she cried, as her husband approached, "I cannot tell you all my heart's desire for this my husband. The rumors of his wounds have made me bleed; the reports of his death, which came now and then, would have been my death had they not been quickly denied. Welcome to these arms my King; nor marvel that my son, the keeper of our slighted ovens, stands not here to join in my welcome. So great has been my agitation and uncertainty that I have sent him to be kept safe in the court of our ally, Strophilus of Phocis, fearing that should you fall before the walls of Troy, for men are fain to lift their hands against the fallen. I, could I have seen for joy to see these hands again, had not my front of tears been drained to the last drop in weeping for your absence. And now, sweetheart, descended from the chariot; but set not that foot on earth that trod on Ilion."

Agamemnon had looked the Queen's welcome with something of coldness. Thyestes, had reached him in the camp before Troy which disappointed him and doubt he had seen in his mind concerning the faithfulness of Clytemnestra. "What news, not yet told? When I return for joy to see these hands again, had not my front of tears been drained to the last drop in weeping for your absence. And now, sweetheart, descended from the chariot; but set not that foot on earth that trod on Ilion."

always foretold coming events with accuracy her predictions never found believers. This, the ancient legends have it, was because she had rejected the advances of Apollo, god of the silver bow, who had taught her the art of prophecy when, enamored of her youth, in the sack of fallen Troy Agamemnon rescued Priam's daughter from the rabble and had taken her under his protection to his home in Argos. "Give this stranger maid a courteous welcome," said he to his wife, indicating Cassandra, "she has suffered much misfortune; I would have her treated as becomes her birth—for she is Priam's daughter. God's face inclines to him whose hand is light in victory."

Thus speaking, Agamemnon entered into his palace, the queen all the while calling upon Zeus to witness her great joy at seeing her husband home again. Turning to Cassandra, who still remained in the chariot, the queen bade her descend and, since fate had sent her there, to follow into the palace. The prophetess gazed with a strange, fixed look at the queen, but spoke not. "I will not dally with you," said the queen. "There, by our household altars, the sheep are standing ready for the sacrifice and the flames leap high. If you do not understand my speech, can talk in some but some barbaric, chattering tongue—you can at least understand signs. Descend and enter."

But Cassandra still gazed wildly at the queen and her face took on a look of unutterable horror. "Oh, she is mad," cried Clytemnestra, "or some moody spell is on her. She flouts me; I will waste no more words upon her." Then suddenly, and in tones which made the hearers' blood run cold, the Trojan prophetess cried out: "Woe! Woe! Avenge! Avenge! Apollo! Are you crying woe on the god of the silver bow?" cried Clytemnestra. "Such sounds affront the god." But Cassandra continued to call upon Apollo and maintain: "The end of days. Once last night, no time and story, what way had they led me. The

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