BERNARD EVSLIN

THE TROJAN WAR

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THE PEDDLER

THE MAN STOOPED UNDER a huge bale. He passed through the castle gates and climbed the broad stone stairs that led to the women's quarters. The brass-helmeted sentries stood silently watching him go. Ordinarily they did a little playful torturing of peddlers before allowing them in—beat them a bit about the shoulders with their spear-shafts, plucked their beards, and scattered their wares. They weren't really cruel, these sentries, they were fighting men, but it had been a long time between wars, and they were bored. For some reason they had not bothered this red-headed fellow. Perhaps it was that his shoulders were so broad and his arms so knotted with muscle—and he had lifted the great bale of goods so easily off his white donkey. His grin was servile enough, and he had tipped them a greasy little bow like all peddlers. Nevertheless, they let him pass through the gates and across the courtyard without tormenting him.

And it was strange, too, that the great guard dogs, the brindle mastiffs with their spiked brass collars, did not charge the stranger, nor even growl.

The peddler flung down his bale and knelt on the stone-flagged floor, pulling out garment after shining garment as the tall daughters of King Scyros crowded about him, chattering and laughing and shrieking with greed. For they loved clothes, these daughters of the king, and Scyros was such a remote island, they felt themselves falling far behind the fashions. Besides … they had a visitor to impress: the tall yellow-headed silent girl—a country cousin who had been with them for three months now without ever telling them anything about herself. She listened to all they had to say, smiling her curious thin-lipped smile, but never told any secrets in return.

“Spread out your wares, man,” cried Calyx, the eldest princess. “Don’t pull them out one by one. Spread them so we can see them all.”

“Yes, princess,” said the peddler.

With a sweep of his arm he spread his goods upon the stone floor. Silks and furs and garments of wonderfully woven flax, dyed with the colors of mountain sunset. Jewels flashed—rings, bracelets, anklets, necklaces. And, on a long cloak of black wool, were couched a lance and a sword. Unjewelled were these weapons, made for battle use not ceremony; their blades were heavy and sharp, newly honed. The hilt of the sword was bull-horn; the haft of the throwing lance of polished ash, its head of bronze. With gull-cries of greed the girls fell upon the garments—all except their visitor. She leaped across the chamber and snatched up the weapons. Flexed her long legs in a fighting stance, and whipped the sword through the air, decapitating a horde of imaginary foes.

The princesses fell silent, stared at their cousin, eyes huge. The peddler smiled. He arose. His stoop was gone, gone the little servile selling-grin. He stood there massively, smiling, and watched as the princesses’ yellow-headed cousin shadow-duelled—whirling, ducking, stabbing.

“It is well,” said the peddler. And his voice was different too. “By your choices shall you be known. I have come a long way for you, Achilles. And now you must come back with me.”

“Achilles!” shrieked the maidens.

“Achilles,” said the peddler.

He approached the tall girl, seized the shoulder of her tunic, and ripped it away, baring her to the waist, and disclosing not another maiden, but a young man muscled like the statue of a god.

“A man,” murmured the princesses. “She’s a man.”

The young man said nothing, but seized the peddler by the beard and raised his sword.

"Softly, Achilles," said the peddler. "I too am unlike what I seem. We are kinsmen far back, you and I. I am Ulysses, King of Ithaca."

"Ulysses? You?"

Achilles let his hand fall.

"Ulysses," echoed the princesses.

And, indeed, even before the Trojan War was fought this name was known the length and breadth of Hellas as that of the boldest pirate-king of the Inner Sea, a master of strategy on land and water.

"But why do you seek me, cousin?" said Achilles. "My mother bade me dress in maiden's garb and hide myself in this court in obedience to some oracle or other. She said she would call me back when the Fates had been satisfied—a matter of weeks. But now you come first to fetch me away. By what right?"

"Oh, you may abide here among the maidens and wait for your mother," said Ulysses. "But I think I should tell you that there's a war on."

"A war?" shouted Achilles, snatching up his sword. "A real war?"

"Very real. With Troy. Against some of the most fearsome warriors of this age or any other."

"Why do we stand here conversing?" cried Achilles. "Let's go!"

Ulysses bowed to the princesses. "You may keep these garments, fair maidens. They are my gift to you. Accept too my apologies for the slight deceit I was forced to practice."

"Farewell, cousins," said Achilles. "Gentle maids, farewell. After this war is over, I shall return—in my own guise, and attempt to thank you for your hospitality."

The two men passed from the chamber, and left the courtyard. The princesses watched from the embrasures; saw them disappear through the gates and then appear again around the corner of the cliff where the road dipped to the sea. And that night nine of them dreamed of Achilles, and three, of Ulysses. But in the middle darkness their dreams crossed, and by dawn there was no counting.

Ulysses led the young man aboard his ship. They lifted anchor and set sail for Aulis where the war fleet was gathering. They sat on deck in the golden weather, and Ulysses told of how enmity was born between Greece and Troy.

SEEDS OF WAR

"ACTUALLY, YOU AND THIS war were meant for each other," he said to Achilles. "Your seeds were planted on the same night—the night your mother and father were wed—at a wedding feast given by the gods themselves on Mt. Olympus. Know you, Achilles, that your father, Peleus, was the most renowned warrior of his day, and your mother, Thetis, the most beautiful naiad who ever rose naked and dripping from the tides of the moon to trouble man's sleep?"

"I'm aware of my own pedigree, man," snapped Achilles. "Get to the war."

"Patience, young friend, the war comes soon enough. Now, whoever it was of the High Ones who made out the invitation list to the wedding feast, neglected to include the Lady of Discord herself. Eris, queen of Harpies, sister to the War-god, who rides beside him in his chariot delighting in the cries of the wounded and the smell of blood, was not invited to the feast and, oh, Achilles, what a terrible omission it was.

"When the rejoicing was at its height and the stars reeled on their crystal axes, shaken by the laughter of the gods, then it was that Eris made herself invisible, entered the great banquet hall, and rolled upon the table a gleaming, heavy apple of solid gold. Upon the apple were written the words: 'To the most beautiful.' It glowed there like the heart of flame, and was immediately claimed by Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite. The festivities were immediately rent by their quarreling as they shrieked like fishwives over a beached mackerel. The feast was ruined. Gentle Hestia, Goddess of the Hearth, and protector of feasts, wept great tears. Eris stood among the shadows, chuckling. Hestia begged Zeus to settle things by awarding the

apple to whoever he considered to be the most beautiful. But Father Zeus was much too wise to be caught in a trap like that. Hera happened to be his sister and his wife, Athena his daughter, and Aphrodite a kind of half-sister —and, it is said, even more.

" 'Peace, good company!' boomed Zeus. 'The question of choosing among three such enchanting beauties is too difficult to be undertaken by anyone who knows them well and has been exposed to their potent charms. We must therefore seek beyond our own small circle for a just decision. I shall search among the mortals of the earth for him of coolest judgment and most exquisite taste. Give me a few days to find him. In the meantime, I bid you cease your quarreling, my three fair claimants, and let the festivities resume. As for this little gem of contention, I shall just keep it myself until judgment is made.' And his huge hand closed lovingly about the golden apple."

"The war, man! The war!" cried Achilles. "Enough of parents, weddings, and high vanities! When will your tale tell of war?"

"Hark, now. These events I relate are the living seeds, and they will bear bloody fruit, I promise. And you, my boy, will be there for the harvesting. Where was I?"

"Zeus was seeking one wise among mortals to give judgment upon the claims of the goddesses."

"He chose Paris. Paris, secret prince of Troy, Priam's youngest son, thought to have been killed at birth because an oracle had warned that his deeds would destroy Troy."

"Reason enough for the king to drown him like a kitten. How is it he survived?"

"Oh, some plot of Hecuba's, no doubt. A mother's heart cherishes her sons, even those who endanger the state. It is said Queen Hecuba instructed

her serving man to smuggle the babe out of the castle and give it to a certain shepherd to raise as his own. He grew up to be very beautiful. It's a handsome family anyway, and he is the fairest by far, they say, of Priam's fifty sons. The shepherd maids trailed him up and down the slopes. But he was too young; he spurned the maidens. And this, of course, recommended him to uneasy husbands and lovers, giving them a great opinion of his wisdom and moderation. So it was that he was called upon to mediate their disputes, to fix grazing rights, judge the points of cattle, and so forth. When Zeus bent his ear to earth to hear of a man of judgment, why the strongest word came from Mt. Ida, speaking the name, Paris …"

The hot silver of a flying fish scudded suddenly out of the water followed by the black-silver hump of a broaching dolphin. For half a breath they hung in the air—long enough for Achilles to uncoil from the deck with a fluency that delighted the warrior heart of Ulysses. Swiftly, Achilles hurled a short lance through the air transfixing the winged fish so that it fell heavily before the dolphin—which drew out the lance, swam to the boat, and tossed the weapon aboard with a flick of its head, grinning up at the men like a dog. Then it turned and swam back for its meal.

"Well thrown," said Ulysses.

"It thirsts for blood," said Achilles, wiping his lance-head. "I must appease it with hunting till it can drink of the enemy upon the beaches of Troy. Unless, of course, I am lucky enough to fall in with a private quarrel."

"Strictly forbidden," said Ulysses. "There's a war on. Private quarrels must wait. We have all taken an oath, and you must too."

"Tell the tale, King of Ithaca. It shortens the journey."

THE JUDGMENT OF PARIS

THEY WERE FIGHTING A headwind out of Scyros, and Ulysses saw that it would take some days to reach Aulis. So he told the story in the old bardic way with many a trill and flourish, and taking every byroad. But we will shorten it …

In those days it was customary to bribe judges, which shows how far we have come since. And so Paris was offered bribes.

Hera offered him power. "Great fleets shall sail at your nod," she told him. "Armies shall march when you raise your hand. Dominion shall be yours over land and sea. All men shall be as slaves to you. Your smile will quicken them, your frown kill. And power is wealth. Your slaves will delve the earth for gold and jewels. Your galleys will plunder far places and sail back with cargoes beyond dreams of piracy to stuff your vaults. All this shall be yours if you award me the apple.

"Reverence, you will agree, is the highest wisdom. How can you judge more wisely than by conforming to the judgment of Father Zeus, master of choices, who of all living creatures chose me, me, me as his wife? A more serious choice, you understand, than among you mortals, for neither of us can die and he must keep me to wife through all eternity.

"Be reverent then, Paris. Be rich and powerful. Choose me, Hera. Let the apple be mine."

Athena spoke next. "Father Zeus, remember, has appointed you judge, meaning that he throws his own divine power behind your judgment. Otherwise he would have judged for himself. As for Hera's argument, it signifies nothing. Anyone acquainted with affairs on Olympus knows that it is godly to keep titles within the immediate family—that is the only reason

Zeus married his sister. And it has been amply proved that he finds others more attractive than his wife.

"As for her offer, I can overbid that too. I offer you wisdom. Born from Zeus' head, I am Patroness of Intellectual Activities, you know, and wisdom is uniquely mine to offer. And without wisdom power loses its potence and wealth grows poor. I can teach you to know, to penetrate the innermost secrets of man's soul, and disclose to you certain divine secrets which men call nature. With such knowledge you will have mastery over other men and, more important, mastery over yourself. As for Hera's glittering promises, remember this: I am also Mistress of Strategy. Before battle, captains pray to me for tactics. Give me that apple and I will make you the greatest soldier of the age—and everyone knows that power and wealth depend finally on victory in war. Be wise, Paris, choose the Goddess of Wisdom."

All Aphrodite said was: "Come closer …"

When he approached, she touched him, and the world changed. The sun dived into the sea and made it boil, and his blood boiled too. He felt himself going red-hot like a poker in the fire. Then she touched him with her other hand and a delicious icy coolness washed over him. He forgot everything but the touch of her hands, her fragrance, the music of her voice, saying:

"I am Aphrodite, Goddess of Love. I give you the first of two gifts now, and ask no promise. This gift is your own body, instrument of pleasure, wherein is contained the only true wealth, the only true power, the only wisdom. You shall receive the second gift after you have delivered judgment. There is a mortal woman on earth said to rival me in beauty. She is Helen, Queen of Sparta, and I hereby promise her to you."

Without hesitation, Paris awarded the apple to Aphrodite.

Screaming like Harpies, Athena and Hera flew back to Olympus and flung themselves before Zeus, trying to get Aphrodite disqualified for illegal use of hands. But Zeus laughed at them. He agreed with Paris' choice, and was thankful that it would be the young shepherd prince, and not himself, who would attract the savage reprisals of the goddesses.

Aflame with Aphrodite's touch, drunk with her promise, Paris dropped his role of shepherd and returned to Troy. He stormed into the great throne-room and swept the astounded Priam and Hecuba into his embrace, demanding they recognize him as their son. All their hesitations and fears were burned away in the blaze of his beauty, and they received him with great joy. His forty-nine brothers were a bit more dubious, remembering what the oracle had warned, but Priam was king and his wish was law. Besides, things had been dull and peaceful for some time and the prospect of danger was not unwelcome.

Then Paris asked that a ship be fitted out so that he might make an embassy to the kingdom of Sparta.

"I can tell you no more, Venerable Majesty. I must speak no further, brothers. The purpose of my voyage is a secret between me and the gods. But I promise you this: When I return I shall bring with me a cargo such as no ship has ever carried—and with it undying fame for us all. Thus a goddess has assured me in secret, and that secret is my destiny."

A small fleet was fitted out, and Paris sailed away for Sparta. In a few weeks' time he returned, bringing Helen with him. There, before all Troy, he declared her his wife, admitting that she was encumbered with a prior husband, but considering this detail beneath consideration. When Menelaus came to Troy, as come he must, then he, Paris, would engage the husband in single combat, and with one thrust of his spear make Helen half a widow and wholly a wife.

Priam and Hecuba, and Paris' forty-nine brothers and fifty sisters fully understood what was happening: Paris had not only stolen another man's wife but, even worse, committed a breach of hospitality, a much more serious sacrilege. They knew Troy would shortly be plunged into a bloody war with the most powerful chieftains of Achaea, Helles, Boetia, Sparta, Athens, and that entire warlike peninsula not yet called Greece.

But when Helen smiled at them they forgot all their fears. "It's true," they whispered to each other. "She's as beautiful as Aphrodite. Surely the gods will allow us to protect such a treasure."

The only dissenting voice was that of Cassandra, Priam's youngest daughter. Apollo had wooed her one summer past. His sunstroke caress left her with visions; the future painted itself in smoky pictures for her to read. But she had tired of the sun-god's touch, and Apollo, maddened, had said:

"Wicked girl, you shall choke with frustration even as I do now. I have given you the gift of prophecy, and now I make that gift a punishment. The more accurate your prediction, the less you shall be believed. And the colder the disbelief, the more ardent your forecast."

Now, even as Paris introduced Helen to the court, and the tall lovers stood in a blaze of acceptance and love, with Priam's fifty sons beating their spear-shafts on their shields and bawling defiance at the Greeks, even then Cassandra lifted her voice in prophecy:

"Hear me, Trojans, hear me. Return Helen; she brings death. Your fair city will be rent stone from stone, your young men slaughtered, your ancients shamed, and your women and children taken into slavery. Ship her back to Sparta before it is too late … too late … too late …"

Helen, hearing only her name spoken, smiled at the girl. And the crowd, seeing her smile, went wild with enthusiasm. Cassandra's words were heeded no more than if they had been the small wind rattling the

leaves. The girl fell silent, moaning softly as the thwarted vision dug its fangs into her head.

"And that is why we're off to Troy now," said Ulysses to Achilles. "The events I have related to you, young falcon, are the roots of this war."

"All this to retrieve a runaway bride?" said Achilles. "One reason to fight is as good as another, so long as you fight, but I would have expected a great war to have a greater cause."

"You haven't seen the lady," said Ulysses.

"Oh, I understand what you tell me, that she's enough to send the Trojans mad. But then they're half-mad to begin with."

"I repeat, you haven't seen the lady, or you wouldn't talk like that. She's enough to send more than Trojans mad. She's maddened some very hard-headed Greeks that I know of … all of us, to be sure. We were all her suitors—every prince and chieftain of the Peloponnese and its islands—so many of us and such a fierce brawling crew that her foster father, Tyndareus, didn't dare give her to any one for fear he might offend the others. So he kept fobbing us off with one excuse after another until we were all ready to fly at each other's throats. Finally, I came up with a little plan: that each suitor take an oath to abide by Helen's own choice of husband and forbear from attacking the lucky man—or Tyndareus. Further, we would all swear to a binding alliance, so that if anyone else attacked her husband and attempted to rob him of Helen, we would band together and punish the interloper. We swore a most sacred oath on the quartered carcass of a horse. And that is why we must all go now to the aid of Menelaus, and pursue Paris even into Troy itself."

"Are they good fighters, the Trojans?" asked Achilles.

"The best—next to us. And, in their own minds, they have no such reservation. There will be keen fighting, never doubt it. We all wish to help

Menelaus, of course, but each of us also sees something in it for himself. Fame. A chance to use our swords before they grow rusty. Also slaves. And mountains of loot. Troy is a very rich city, far richer than any of ours. And there is something else. The city stands upon a headland commanding the straits which lead into the Black Sea and to the rich land of Scythia, where there are boundless opportunities for trade and slave-raids, piracy, and other commercial traffic. But while Troy stands, our fleets can never enter those straits, nor can we penetrate the lands of the Black Sea nor the further mysterious reaches of Asia, whose east winds fairly reek of wealth. These are considerations too, lad."

"All I want to do is fight," said Achilles. "I'll leave the reasons to you."

"Well, you should get your stomachful. Our forces are to be led by Agamemnon, King of Mycenae, and brother to Menelaus. He is a bold, practical leader, very aggressive, very ruthless. He is married to Helen's elder sister, Clytemnestra, and so has a double motive for adopting his brother's blood-feud with the royal family of Troy."

What Ulysses did not tell Achilles was that he himself had tried a little draft-dodging before coming to Scyros. An oracle had said that if Ulysses went off to fight at Troy it would be twenty years before he could come home and, when he did so, it would be as a penniless vagabond, recognized by no one. So, when Agamemnon and Palamedes, King of Euboea, came to Ithaca to demand his aid against Troy, he tried to evade his vow by feigning madness. He put on a tall, pointed fool's hat and harnessed a bull and a goat to his plow, sowing his furrow with salt instead of seed. But, after watching him for a bit, Palamedes, who was almost as crafty as Ulysses, decided to give him a sanity test. He plucked Ulysses' infant son from his nurse's arms

and set him on the ground in the path of the oncoming plow. Ulysses reined his animals short, and snatched the babe out of danger.

"You're fit for fighting," said Palamedes. "Drop the bluff, and come along."

"A parent's instinct is stronger than reason—I mean unreason," said Ulysses. "But I assure you my wits are deranged."

"Nonsense," growled Agamemnon. "How sane do you have to be to make war? In this affair a touch of madness may help. You have the right sort of wits for us, Ulysses. So keep your oath, and come away."

THE EVENTS AT AULIS

THEY FOUND A THOUSAND ships at Aulis and the greatest gathering of heroes since the beginning of time. Their commander was Agamemnon, an angry bull of a man, burly as the stump of an oak, with a dark red face and eyes as cold and hard as chunks of lava—until he became enraged, when they glowed like hot coals. His voice of command was like the bellowing of a bull.

Now when Achilles smelled a fight his blood did not heat, nor did excitement take him. A delicious chill prickled over all his body, sweet cold airs wrapped themselves about his limbs, cool fingers stroked his hair, and in his mouth was a taste like honey. He fought with gleaming chest and flashing arm and marvellously thewed leg, and he smiled his lipless smile all the while. He did not shout, except when summoning his men, but uttered a low crooning sound like a love song. Men, fighting him, felt his blade at their throats like an act of deliverance.

Now when he saw the bull-man, Agamemnon, he felt that delicious chill touch his neck, and he knew that in all the world this man was his archenemy, even though they were fighting on the same side, and that his main problem in the war to come would be how to refrain from attacking his Commander.

And Agamemnon gazed at Achilles with no great favor when Ulysses led the young man over to present him.

"Hail, great Agamemnon," said Ulysses. "I wish you to meet Achilles, and to value him as I do. For, according to prophecy, it is his courage and skill that will bring us to victory in the war to come."

“Oracles take delight in riddling,” said Agamemnon. “They never speak straight any more. I welcome you, young man, and look forward to seeing you display that courage and skill of which the oracle speaks.”

“Thank you,” said Achilles.

“The oracle holds also that you will not survive this war,” said Agamemnon. “I suppose that is why your mother hid you away among the maidens of Scyros.”

“I suppose so,” said Achilles. “But you know how parents are. How devouring their love can be.”

Ulysses snorted with laughter. The blood flamed in Agamemnon’s face. This was a shrewd rejoinder of Achilles’ relating to a scandal in Agamemnon’s family. Agamemnon’s father, Atreus, had committed one of the most unsavory crimes in history. He had butchered his nephews and served them up in a stew to their father, his brother, Tryestes, all so that he could seize the throne of Mycenae and rule unchallenged, the same throne that Agamemnon had inherited.

Ulysses eyed Agamemnon closely. He knew that the man was seething with rage, and was only a hairbreadth from striking out at Achilles.

And he saw that Achilles, lightly balancing on the balls of his feet, ready to move in any direction, was smiling his little lip-less smile.

But Agamemnon mastered himself, and said: “Truly, Achilles, if your sword is as sharp as your tongue you should do great damage to the Trojans. In the meantime—welcome. We shall converse again when your Myrmidons arrive. Then you may report for instructions about their quartering, forage for the horses, sailing order, and so forth.”

“Very good, sir,” said Achilles. “Thank you for your courtesy.”

Thus, bloodshed was averted upon that first meeting. But the note of hatred struck between them was to devil the efforts of the Greeks and

almost lead to their defeat.

Next, Ulysses took the young man about the encampment and introduced him to the other great chieftains. He met Palamedes, King of Euboea, most skilled artificer since Daedalus; and Diomedes, King of Argos, a man, it was said, who had never known fear. He was presented to the two warriors named Ajax. One was Ajax of Salamis, strongest mortal since Hercules, head and shoulders taller than Achilles. And again, the young man, measuring the giant with his eyes, felt a breath of that sweet combative chill. But he could work up no fighting wrath. For the huge man grinned down at him, and said: "Stop puffing your chest like a rooster. You and I are going to be friends, and fight only Trojans."

He clapped his great meaty paw on Achilles' shoulder—a blow hard enough to cripple an ordinary man. Achilles accepted it as a friendly tap, and nodded gravely back at Ajax.

Now all the tested warriors received the young man with marks of esteem even though he had not yet proved himself in battle. They had heard startling reports of him from his old tutor, Phoenix—a man much feared by foemen—who was there at Aulis as a member of the War Council. Phoenix had told how he had managed the education of the young Achilles. He had taken him and his elder cousin, Patroclus, onto the wild slopes of Mt. Pelion, Achilles being seven years old then, and Patroclus twelve. He had fed the younger boy on the bloody meat of courage itself, restricting his diet to the entrails of bear and wolf and lion, which Achilles had eaten greedily, but Patroclus had refused. He told how he had recruited the centaur, Cheiron, to help raise the boys, and how Cheiron had taught Achilles to run more swiftly than a staghound, how to hunt down the wild boar without the use of hounds, and to split a willow wand with his spear at a hundred yards.

Patroclus he had tutored in the softer arts, the use of herbs and music in healing, and how to play the pipe and psaltery. At the age of thirteen, Achilles had singlehandedly slaughtered a robber band that, for years, had terrified the villagers on Mt. Pelion. He had been wounded in thigh and shoulder in this fight, and Patroclus had tended him and nursed him back to health. With such tales had Phoenix stuffed the other leaders at Aulis, so it was little wonder they were ready to extend a hearty welcome to Achilles.

And the young warrior was overjoyed to meet his old tutor in this place, and was even happier to learn that his dear cousin and playmate, Patroclus, was sailing toward Aulis at the head of the Myrmidons.