

EPISODE 5 – The Duel

CD 1 tracks 13-15
total running time: 17:13

Paris lays down a challenge (⌚ 7:43)

Up onto the white sand the Greeks dragged their high, proud ships. They arranged them in rows, one behind the other. Beside each ship they built a hut of wood and reeds and mounded earth. Around the ships they built a tall, wooden wall – a stockade, a palisade. A great pair of gates was built. A deep trench was dug, a trench that stretched from river to river.

- 5 This was a camp as big as a city. Each region of Greece had its own district of the camp, its own shops and stables and streets and secret alleys, exercise areas, burial places. In the centre of the camp, an empty place, a meeting place where debates were held, where altars to the mighty gods and goddesses were reared.

In front of the camp, the fields, the farms, the vineyards, the cattle grazing, all unknowing. Four
10 hours' walk it was between the Greek camp and the ramparts of Ilium.

And from those ramparts, from the high city walls, from the turrets and the towers, the people of Troy watched the Greeks. They watched the building of the camp. They watched the smoke of fires curling up into the sky. They watched the digging of the great trench from the River Scamander to the River Xanthus. They watched the lifting of the palisade. And they watched
15 the Greeks themselves, like flies around the cowsheds in the spring, when the pails are creamy-white with milk, busy about their business.

And then, one morning as the dawn took her golden throne, they saw the gates of the palisade swinging open. And, through the gates, they saw tens, hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands of warriors, rank upon rank, file upon file, foot soldiers, charioteers, pouring out
20 of the camp and taking their places across the plain, stretching from one river to the other; each man with a bronze helmet on his head, a bronze shield on his arm, a bronze breastplate glinting in the sunlight; each man staring at the city walls of Troy with hatred in his heart.

And they watched the Greek kings, moving among the ranks and the files, like stallions moving among the mares and the fawns of a great herd of horses. And the Trojans wasted no time. The
25 bronze Scaean gates of the city were thrown open. The Trojan army poured out of the city. They took their places across the plain, one army facing the other army.

And the two armies would have fallen upon one another there and then if Paris had not stepped into the space between the two armies. Godlike Paris stepped into no man's land. Over his shoulders, a leopard-skin cloak. Across his back a bow of polished wood. In each
30 hand he held a bronze-tipped spear. He threw back his head and he bellowed, "I challenge any Greek warrior to fight me now, man to man, hand to hand, down to the last drop of blood!"

And there in the Greek army was Menelaus, red-haired Menelaus, king of Sparta. And when he saw Paris, when he saw the man he hated above all others, when he heard the voice of the man who had stolen his wife, he began to tremble with fury. He leapt down from his chariot,

35 bristling with weapons. He pushed through the ranks and the files until he was standing in front of Paris.

And when Paris saw it was Menelaus who had accepted his challenge, he backed away from him, as though he had seen a venomous snake in his path and his soldiers closed around him.

And then Paris felt a weight on his shoulder and he turned and he looked. And there was his
40 older brother, Hector. And Hector said, "Paris, how the Greeks must laugh to see us fighting a war for the sake of some pretty prince! What use is a pretty face? What use are broad shoulders and shapely legs if a man has not courage?"

And Paris said, "Hector, do not mock me for my beauty. I did not choose it. It was a gift
45 of the mighty gods. I know that you are strong and stalwart, as the brazen axe with which a shipbuilder fells timber, but I will show you now that I do not lack courage. Go and tell Menelaus that I will fight him, man to man, hand to hand, down to the last drop of blood. And whoever wins the fight will take Helen and all the treasures of Sparta."

And Hector nodded. And he went forwards into the space between the two armies. He threw
50 down his spear and his helmet and his shield, and he raised both arms and he said, "My brother, Paris, will fight Menelaus, and whoever wins the fight will take Helen and all the treasures of Sparta, and you Greeks can return to your ships. You can sail home to your farms, your families, your wives, your hearths. And this ground between my feet need know nothing but the blade of the plough and the hooves of shambling cattle."

And there was a great cheer from the soldiers of both armies and a clattering as shields were
55 thrown onto the ground and men squatted on their hunkers, leaning on their spears, staring into the space between the two armies, where Menelaus and Paris had stepped forwards.

First of all they made sacrifices. Menelaus sacrificed a horse, a great stallion, to owl-eyed
Athene, the goddess of war and wisdom and to Hera, the ox-eyed queen of heaven. And Paris
sacrificed a bull, a huge hillocky bull, to Aphrodite, the goddess of love and to golden Apollo,
60 the founder of the city of Troy, golden Apollo who loved Troy. And then the two men turned and they faced one another.

Aphrodite to the rescue (☉ 4:31)

Those who were there wondered how Helen could have loved two such different men. On the
one side, swaggering, beautiful in his prime, Paris. On the other side, Menelaus. The years
of sleepless nights had not been kind to him. His face was coarse, stunted. It was as though
his features were half finished. It was as though his face were the side of a mountain that had
5 been withered, weathered by the wind and the rain. It was as though the gaze of Helen gave a
kind of beauty to the one she loved and, when she chose to look away, age ravaged the one
she'd left behind.

But bitter hurt brings strength. Menelaus had waited for this moment. He had played it out
in his mind time and again, and he was not about to waste it. Paris threw his spear first.

10 Menelaus dodged it easily and, with a whispered prayer, he threw his own. And his aim was true. Paris was lifted off his feet. He flew backwards. He fell with a crash and a cloud of dust. The spear had broken through his shield, through his breastplate and grazed the skin of his chest.

Before Paris could stand, Menelaus was over him, lunging at him with his sword. Paris had to
15 wriggle in the dust to dodge every thrust. Then Menelaus stopped. He lifted the sword above his head. He brought it down for the deathblow, but a strange thing happened. The blade shattered like a brittle icicle against Paris' armour. Menelaus gasped. He threw down the handle of the sword. He pushed his fingers under the chinstrap of Paris' helmet, and he turned and ran, dragging the flailing Paris towards the Greek army.

20 A thousand arms stretched out towards their king. Joyfully, he reached out towards them but then he fell. He tripped over nothing. A fog fell over the field of battle. He could see nothing, no one. He lifted up the helmet. The chinstrap had snapped! The helmet was empty. Paris had vanished! Aphrodite, seeing her precious Paris in mortal danger had shattered the sword, snapped the chinstrap, brought down the fog. And now she was lifting Paris tenderly in her
25 arms. She lifted him high and high above the Trojan plain. She carried him over the city walls. She carried him into his palace. She laid him down tenderly on his bed.

And then the goddess of love changed her shape so that to all the world she looked like an old woman. And she went scuttling through the streets of Troy, until she found Helen. And Helen was leaning over the walls. She was looking into the fog. She was rubbing her eyes, she was
30 looking again. She was trying to work out what had happened to Paris. And suddenly she felt a tugging at her skirt, and she turned and she looked and there was an old woman she'd never seen before. And the old woman said, "Helen, your lover is in his bedchamber. He's lying on his bed. He's waiting for you. He calls your name over and over. Go to him, now!"

And the old woman had vanished and there was a smell left hanging on the air. And Helen,
35 she breathed it in, a smell of musk and honey. And she was filled with spirit and awe, in the knowledge that she'd been in the presence of one of the mighty goddesses. And she hurried through the streets to Paris' palace. She ran up the stairs. She pushed open the door of his bedchamber. And there he was, lying on his bed, still dressed in his armour, still smeared with the dust of the battlefield.

40 And Helen ran across and she said, "Paris, Paris, never have I been filled with such longing for you, not since we first lay down together on the soft grass on the island of Cranae." And she kissed his eyes and she kissed his cheek and she kissed his mouth. And they lay down together, locked in one another's arms.

***Hostilities resume* (☺ 4:59)**

Out on the battlefield the fog had lifted. The Trojan prince, Hector, stepped forward. He showed the Greeks his open hands. He said, "I swear to you, I swear to you Greeks by the

broad skies, I swear to you Greeks by the dark waters of the river Styx, I have searched my armies and my brother has vanished! Surely some god or goddess intervened, brought
5 down that fog, plucked my brother from the field of battle? Before the duel it was agreed that the victor would take Helen and all the treasures of Sparta. Every one of us here knows you, Menelaus, defeated my brother. Therefore you Greeks are the victors. Therefore all the treasures that were taken from you will be returned to you. Helen will be restored to you and you will soon sail home to see your hearths, your fields, your farms, your families again.”

10 And there was a great cheer from the Greek ranks. But up above, owl-eyed Athene, the goddess of war and wisdom, was watching and listening. The war was about to end. Troy was still standing and Paris was still alive. This was very disappointing! She’s never at a loss for a plan. In the time it would take you or me to blink, she flashed down from the sky. Soundless, invisible, she moved among the Trojan armies until she found a stupid, shallow man, whose
15 mind she could bend to her will.

She whispered in his ear, “Pandarus, look. Menelaus has dropped his shield. He has no weapons now. With a single arrow you could win this war for Troy. You’d be the hero of the city. Look at that neck, the baggy folds of flesh. Kill Menelaus!”

Without a second thought, without a second breath, Pandarus put an arrow to his bow. He
20 loosed the arrow. If we could see the way the gods and goddesses can see, we would have seen Athene reach down and touch the tail of the arrow as it flew through the air so that it struck not Menelaus’ neck – it struck his breastplate. It struck and stuck and knocked him to the ground. He was winded but he was unharmed.

His men looked. They saw the arrow protruding out of his breastplate and they were sure that
25 he was dead. These treacherous Trojans had broken the truce. They surged forwards into the Trojan ranks and, at their forefront, severing heads with every stroke of his sword, the swift-runner Achilles. The Trojans, stunned by the suddenness of the attack, they turned and they fled. They dropped their weapons; they ran through the bronze Scaean gates. The Greeks tried to follow but the Trojan bowmen, on top of the walls, they loosed their arrows and drove
30 the Greeks back.

The Greeks were jubilant. They drank around fires until late into the night. Next morning they set off to sack this city. But, as soon as they came within bowshot of the walls, the Trojan archers loosed their arrows. A black rain came.

It was that way from then on. If the Greek and Trojan armies met in open battle, thanks to
35 Achilles and his black-armoured Myrmidons, the Greeks were unstoppable. But, as soon as the Trojans retreated close to the walls of their city, the Greeks could do no more. Those walls were impregnable.

Hector, prince of Troy, decreed the Trojans would not set forth from their city. Instead they would wait, within the walls, as long as it took until the Greeks gave up and went home. There
40 were plenty of secret ways off Mount Ida through which their allies could bring food. And so the siege of Troy began.