

The House of Atreus

by

Aeschylus

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Introductory Note	3
Agamemnon.....	4
The Libation-Bearers.....	65
The Furies	107

Introductory Note

Of the life of Aeschylus, the first of the three great masters of Greek tragedy, only a very meager outline has come down to us. He was born at Eleusis, near Athens, B. C. 525, the son of Euphorion. Before he was twenty-five he began to compete for the tragic prize, but did not win a victory for twelve years. He spent two periods of years in Sicily, where he died in 456, killed, it is said, by a tortoise which an eagle dropped on his head. Though a professional writer, he did his share of fighting for his country, and is reported to have taken part in the battles of Marathon, Salamis, and Plataea.

Of the seventy or eighty plays which he is said to have written, only seven survive: "The Persians," dealing with the defeat of Xerxes at Salamis; "The Seven against Thebes," part of a tetralogy on the legend of Thebes; "The Suppliants," on the daughters of Danaus; "Prometheus Bound," part of a trilogy, of which the first part was probably "Prometheus, the Fire-bringer," and the last, "Prometheus Unbound"; and the "Oresteia," the only example of a complete Greek tragic trilogy which has come down to us, consisting of "Agamemnon," "Choephorae" (The Libation-Bearers), and the "Eumenides" (Furies).

The importance of Aeschylus in the development of the drama is immense. Before him tragedy had consisted of the chorus and one actor; and by introducing a second actor, expanding the dramatic dialogue thus made possible, and reducing the lyrical parts, he practically created Greek tragedy as we understand it. Like other writers of his time, he acted in his own plays, and trained the chorus in their dances and songs; and he did much to give impressiveness to the performances by his development of the accessories of scene and costume on the stage. Of the four plays here reproduced, "Prometheus Bound" holds an exceptional place in the literature of the world. (As conceived by Aeschylus, Prometheus is the champion of man against the oppression of Zeus; and the argument of the drama has a certain correspondence to the problem of the Book of Job.) The Oresteian trilogy on "The House of Atreus" is one of the supreme productions of all literature. It deals with the two great themes of the retribution of crime and the inheritance of evil; and here again a parallel may be found between the assertions of the justice of God by Aeschylus and by the Hebrew prophet Ezekiel. Both contend against the popular idea that the fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge; both maintain that the soul that sinneth, it shall die. The nobility of thought and the majesty of style with which these ideas are set forth give this triple drama its place at the head of the literary masterpieces of the antique world.

Agamemnon

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

A WATCHMAN
A HERALD
CHORUS
AGAMEMNON
AEGISTHUS
CLYTEMNESTRA
CASSANDRA

The Scene is the Palace of Atreus at Mycenae. In front of the Palace stand statues of the gods, and altars prepared for sacrifices.

A Watchman

I pray the gods to quit me of my toils,
To close the watch I keep, this livelong year;
For as a watch-dog lying, not at rest,
Propped on one arm, upon the palace-roof
Of Atreus' race, too long, too well I know
The starry conclave of the midnight sky,
Too well, the splendours of the firmament,
The lords of light, whose kingly aspect shows--
What time they set or climb the sky in turn--
The year's divisions, bringing frost or fire.

And now, as ever, am I set to mark
When shall stream up the glow of signal-flame,
The bale-fire bright, and tell its Trojan tale--
Troy town is ta'en: such issue holds in hope
She in whose woman's breast beats heart of man.

Thus upon mine unrestful couch I lie,
Bathed with the dews of night, unvisited
By dreams--ah me!--for in the place of sleep
Stands Fear as my familiar, and repels
The soft repose that would mine eyelids seal.
And if at whiles, for the lost balm of sleep,
I medicine my soul with melody
Of trill or song--anon to tears I turn,
Wailing the woe that broods upon this home,
Not now by honour guided as of old.

But now at last fair fall the welcome hour
That sets me free, whene'er the thick night glow
With beacon-fire of hope deferred no more.
All hail!

[A beacon-light is seen reddening the distant sky.

Fire of the night, that brings my spirit day,
Shedding on Argos light, and dance, and song,
Greetings to fortune, hail!

Let my loud summons ring within the ears
Of Agamemnon's queen, that she anon
Start from her couch and with a shrill voice cry
A joyous welcome to the beacon-blaze,
For Ilion's fall; such fiery message gleams
From yon high flame; and I, before the rest,
Will foot the lightsome measure of our joy;
For I can say, My master's dice fell fair--
Behold! the triple sice, the lucky flame!
Now be my lot to clasp, in loyal love,
The hand of him restored, who rules our home:
Home--but I say no more: upon my tongue
Treads hard the ox o' the adage.

Had it voice,

The home itself might soothliest tell its tale;
I, of set will, speak words the wise may learn,
To others, nought remember nor discern.

[Exit. The chorus of old men of Mycenae enter, each leaning on a staff. During their song Clytemnestra appears in the background, kindling the altars.

CHORUS

Ten livelong years have rolled away,
Since the twin lords of sceptred sway,
By Zeus endowed with pride of place,
The doughty chiefs of Atreus' race,
Went forth of yore,
To plead with Priam, face to face,
Before the judgment-seat of War!

A thousand ships from Argive land
Put forth to bear the martial band,
That with a spirit stern and strong
Went out to right the kingdom's wrong--

Pealed, as they went, the battle-song,
Wild as the vultures' cry;
When o'er the eyrie, soaring high,
In wild bereaved agony,
Around, around, in airy rings,
They wheel with oarage of their wings,
But not the eyas-brood behold,
That called them to the nest of old;
But let Apollo from the sky,
Or Pan, or Zeus, but hear the cry,
The exile cry, the wail forlorn,
Of birds from whom their home is torn--
On those who wrought the rapine fell,
Heaven sends the vengeful fiends of hell.

Even so doth Zeus, the jealous lord
And guardian of the hearth and board,
Speed Atreus' sons, in vengeful ire,
'Gainst Paris--sends them forth on fire,
Her to buy back, in war and blood,
Whom one did wed but many woo'd!
And many, many, by his will,
The last embrace of foes shall feel,
And many a knee in dust be bowed,
And splintered spears on shields ring loud,
Of Trojan and of Greek, before
That iron bridal-feast be o'er!
But as he willed 'tis ordered all,
And woes, by heaven ordained, must fall--
Unsoothed by tears or spilth of wine
Poured forth too late, the wrath divine
Glares vengeance on the flameless shrine.

And we in gray dishonoured eld,
Feeble of frame, unfit were held
To join the warrior array
That then went forth unto the fray:
And here at home we tarry, fain
Our feeble footsteps to sustain,
Each on his staff--so strength doth wane,
And turns to childishness again.
For while the sap of youth is green,
And, yet unripened, leaps within,
The young are weakly as the old,
And each alike unmeet to hold
The vantage post of war!

And ah! when flower and fruit are o'er,
And on life's tree the leaves are sere,
Age wendeth propped its journey drear,
As forceless as a child, as light
And fleeting as a dream of night
Lost in the garish day!

But thou, O child of Tyndareus,
Queen Clytemnestra, speak! and say
What messenger of joy to-day
Hath won thine ear? what welcome news,
That thus in sacrificial wise
E'en to the city's boundaries
Thou biddest altar-fires arise?
Each god who doth our city guard,
And keeps o'er Argos watch and ward
From heaven above, from earth below--
The mighty lords who rule the skies,
The market's lesser deities,
To each and all the altars glow,
Piled for the sacrifice!
And here and there, anear, afar,
Streams skyward many a beacon-star,
Conjur'd and charm'd and kindled well
By pure oil's soft and guileless spell,
Hid now no more
Within the palace' secret store.

O queen, we pray thee, whatsoe'er,
Known unto thee, were well revealed,
That thou wilt trust it to our ear,
And bid our anxious heart be healed!
That waneth now unto despair--
Now, waxing to a presage fair,
Dawns, from the altar, Hope--to scare
From our rent hearts the vulture Care.

List! for the power is mine, to chant on high
The chiefs' emprise, the strength that omens gave!
List! on my soul breathes yet a harmony,
From realms of ageless powers, and strong to save!

How brother kings, twin lords of one command,
Led forth the youth of Hellas in their flower,
Urged on their way, with vengeful spear and brand,
By warrior-birds, that watched the parting hour.

Go forth to Troy, the eagles seemed to cry--
And the sea-kings obeyed the sky-kings' word,
When on the right they soared across the sky,
And one was black, one bore a white tail barred.

High o'er the palace were they seen to soar,
Then lit in sight of all, and rent and tare,
Far from the fields that she should range no more,
Big with her unborn brood, a mother-hare.

And one beheld, the soldier-prophet true,
And the two chiefs, unlike of soul and will,
In the twy-coloured eagles straight he knew,
And spake the omen forth, for good and ill.

(Ah woe and well-a-day! but be the issue fair!)

Go forth, he cried, and Priam's town shall fall.
Yet long the time shall be; and flock and herd,
The people's wealth, that roam before the wall.
Shall force hew down, when Fate shall give the word.

But O beware! lest wrath in Heaven abide,
To dim the glowing battle-forge once more,
And mar the mighty curb of Trojan pride,
The steel of vengeance, welded as for war!

For virgin Artemis bears jealous hate
Against the royal house, the eagle-pair,
Who rend the unborn brood, insatiate--
Yea, loathes their banquet on the quivering hare.

(Ah woe and well-a-day! but be the issue fair!)

For well she loves--the goddess kind and mild--
The tender new-born cubs of lions bold,
Too weak to range--and well the sucking child
Of every beast that roams by wood and wold.

So to the Lord of Heaven she prayeth still,
"Nay, if it must be, be the omen true!
Yet do the visioned eagles presage ill;
The end be well, but crossed with evil too!"

Healer Apollo! be her wrath controll'd,
Nor weave the long delay of thwarting gales,

To war against the Danaans and withhold
From the free ocean-waves their eager sails!

She craves, alas! to see a second life
Shed forth, a curst unhallowed sacrifice--
'Twixt wedded souls, artificer of strife,
And hate that knows not fear, and fell device.

At home there tarries like a lurking snake,
Biding its time, a wrath unreconciled,
A wily watcher, passionate to slake,
In blood, resentment for a murdered child.

Such was the mighty warning, pealed of yore--
Amid good tidings, such the word of fear,
What time the fateful eagles hovered o'er
The kings, and Calchas read the omen clear.

(In strains like his, once more,
Sing woe and well-a-day! but be the issue fair!)

Zeus--if to The Unknown
That name of many names seem good--
Zeus, upon Thee I call.
Thro' the mind's every road
I passed, but vain are all,
Save that which names thee Zeus, the Highest One,
Were it but mine to cast away the load,
The weary load, that weighs my spirit down.

He that was Lord of old,
In full-blown pride of place and valour bold,
Hath fallen and is gone, even as an old tale told!
And he that next held sway,
By stronger grasp o'erthrown
Hath pass'd away!
And whoso now shall bid the triumph-chant arise
To Zeus, and Zeus alone,
He shall be found the truly wise.
'Tis Zeus alone who shows the perfect way
Of knowledge: He hath ruled,
Men shall learn wisdom, by affliction schooled.

In visions of the night, like dropping rain,
Descend the many memories of pain
Before the spirit's sight: through tears and dole

Comes wisdom o'er the unwilling soul--
A boon, I wot, of all Divinity,
That holds its sacred throne in strength, above the sky!

And then the elder chief, at whose command
The fleet of Greece was manned,
Cast on the seer no word of hate,
But veered before the sudden breath of Fate--

Ah, weary while! for, ere they put forth sail,
Did every store, each minish'd vessel, fail,
While all the Achaean host
At Aulis anchored lay,
Looking across to Chalics and the coast
Where reflux waters welter, rock, and sway;
And rife with ill delay
From northern Strymon blew the thwarting blast--
Mother of famine fell,
That holds men wand'ring still
Far from the haven where they fain would be!--
And pitiless did waste
Each ship and cable, rotting on the sea,
And, doubling with delay each weary hour,
Withered with hope deferred th' Achaeans' warlike flower.

But when, for bitter storm, a deadlier relief,
And heavier with ill to either chief,
Pleading the ire of Artemis, the seer avowed,
The two Atridae smote their sceptres on the plain,
And, striving hard, could not their tears restrain!
And then the elder monarch spake aloud--
Ill lot were mine, to disobey!
And ill, to smite my child, my household's love and pride!
To stain with virgin Hood a father's hands, and slay
My daughter, by the altar's side!
'Twixt woe and woe I dwell--
I dare not like a recreant fly,
And leave the league of ships, and fail each true ally;
For rightfully they crave, with eager fiery mind,
The virgin's blood, shed forth to lull the adverse wind--
God send the deed be well!

Thus on his neck he took
Fate's hard compelling yoke;
Then, in the counter-gale of will abhorr'd, accursed,
To recklessness his shifting spirit veered--

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