

The Death of Patroclus

The Iliad, Book 16—This is a crucial book and a turning point. Zeus must sit idly by knowing his mortal son Sarpedon, king of one of Troy's allies, will be killed, and Achilles' friend Patroclus is also killed. Zeus knows that the death of Patroclus will force Achilles to fight for the Greeks (also collectively called Danaans and Achaians). This will allow Zeus to fulfill his promise to Achilles' mother, the water goddess Thetis, to give glory to Achilles.

Here, Patroclus is pleading with Achilles, who has been wronged by the Greek overlord Agamemnon, to help fend off a Trojan raid against the Greek ships and camp.

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“Don't be angry, Achilles my prince, our strong deliverer! Such misfortune has come on our people! There they are, all who used to be best in the field, lying wounded, shot or stabbed, somewhere among the ships! Diomedes Tydeides is wounded, Odysseus is wounded, Agamemnon is wounded, Eurypylos is wounded too—shot in the thigh with an arrow. They have the surgeons busy about them with all their medicines curing the wounds—but there's no curing you, Achilles! I pray I may never have such a grudge in my heart as you have. Curse your courage! What good will you be to any one from now to the end of the world, if you will not save the nation from destruction? Cruel man! your father was not Peleus nor your mother Thetis—you are a son of the green sea and stony rock, with that hard heart!

“If there is some prophecy you are afraid of which your mother told you from the lips of Zeus, let me go at least and take out our Myrmidons,¹ to see if there is any hope in that way! Put your armour upon my shoulders, and perhaps the Trojans may think it is you, and give a little rest to our tormented people. Little time to take your breath face to face with sudden death! And it will be easy for us coming into the battle fresh, to drive weary men from our camp away to their city!”

So he prayed, poor fool! for his prayer was destined to bring death and destruction for himself. Achilles replied in hot anger:

“Ah, what have you said, Patroclus, my dear friend! I care for no prophecy, if I do know any; my mother has told me none from the lips of Zeus. But I feel bitter grief in my heart, when here is a man who will rob his equal and take back his prize because he is the stronger. This is a terrible grief to me, and this has been my torment. The girl that the army chose out for my prize, whom I made my own by force of arms when I took that city—that girl my lord King Agamemnon tore from my hands as if I were a foreigner without any rights!...

“Never mind—fall on them and beat them, Patroclus! Save our ships, or they will burn them and we shall never see home again. But listen carefully while I tell you exactly what to do, that you may win honour and glory for me from the whole nation, and they may send back that lovely girl and handsome gifts besides.

“When you have cleared them away from the ships, come straight back. If after that the loud-thundering lord of Hera gives you a chance of triumph, never think of fighting on your own account without me, you will steal my honours in that way. Don't be excited by fighting and victory so as to lead our men as far the city walls, or one of the Olympian gods may meddle; Apollo Shootafar is very fond of them. You must turn back as soon as you have saved the ships, and let them ravage the plain...”

[Meanwhile Hector gets the better of those defending the ships and manages to start one of them on fire.]

¹ The contingent of Greeks led by Achilles, known as the fiercest of the Greeks.

And then Achilles slapped his two thighs, crying out:

“Hurry, Patroclus, my friend, be off with your horses! I see fire sweeping about the ships! I fear they may take the ships and then we shall never get away. On with your armour, and I will wake up the men!”

Patroclus lost no time. He put on his legs the greaves with silver anklets, next covered his chest with the star-bespangled corselet of Macias. Over his shoulders he slung the sword, with bronze blade and silver knob, and then the great strong shield. Upon his head he set the helmet with its plume nodding defiance. He took two lances that fitted his grip, but not the spear of Aiacides; for only Achilles could wield that huge heavy pike, not another man in the Achaian host. This was the strong ashen spear from Mount Pelion, which Cheiron had given his father to be the terror of his enemies.

The horses he put in charge of Automedon, whom he thought more of than any one except Achilles himself, and he trusted him best to be ready at his call in battle.... Meanwhile Achilles had got the men under arms and marshalled in their camp. They were like a pack of ravening wolves ready for the hunt....

As soon as Achilles had arranged them all in their ranks, he gave his last orders in these stern words:

“Myrmidons, do not forget all those threats of yours against the Trojans here in camp, and how you have reproached me while my resentment lasted. Would you not say—‘Hard-hearted man! You must have sucked bile from your mother’s breast! Cruel to keep us here against our will! At least let us sail away and go back home, since this poisonous bile is in your heart!’ How often you came crowding to talk at me like that. Now here is the great battle you were enamoured of, plain to see. Then let every man keep a stout heart and fight!”

As they heard this rousing speech from their King, they closed their ranks more firmly; helmets and shields were packed together, like the squared stones of a wall, which a man builds to keep the strong winds outside his house. Shield pressed on shield, helmet on helmet, man on man; the horsehair plumes on the shining horns nodded and touched so close the stood. In front of all two men made ready for battle, Patroclus and Automedon, two men with one mind, to lead the Myrmidons forward....

[Achilles prays to Zeus for successful defense of the ships and the safe return of Patroclus. Homer comments that only half of Achilles’s prayer was granted.]

Patroclus and his force marched on until they found the Trojans. They were like a swarm of wasps with a nest by the road, which boys have been teasing and poking in their way. The poor little fools only stir up trouble for everybody; and if a wayfarer disturbs the wasps by accident, they pour out fury and defend their home. Just as furious were the Myrmidons when they poured out of their camp with a great noise....

But when the Trojans saw Patroclus and his companions in their shining armour, they were amazed, and the ranks wavered; for they believed that Achilles had thrown off his resentment and made friends again. Every man looked about him for some escape from certain death....

[Patroclus kills the leader of those attacking the ships.]

The Trojans fled in rare confusion, leaving the half burnt ship, and the Danaans poured in among the ships with a deafening din.... Then the Danaans had time to breathe for a little, but the battle was not over; the Trojans still held their ground, although they had been forced to leave the ships, and they were not yet running pell-mell in rout....

[Several single-combat victories by the Greeks ensue, and in the fierceness of the Greeks’ attack the Trojans collapse.]

Patroclus cut off the front of the routed army, and then drove them back towards the ships. He would not let them get back to their city, but kept them in the space between the ships and the river and the city walls, charging and slaying, until he had exacted the price of many lives....

Sarpedon² saw his countrymen falling—he knew them by their dress, for they wore no loin-guard—and he called to them in reproach:

“Shame, Lycians! where are you running? Play up, men! I will meet this man myself, I want to know who he is that sweeps everything before him. Look how many good men and true he has killed!”

Then he jumped out of the car in his armour, and Patroclus when he saw did the same. They leapt at each other yelling, like a couple of vultures on a high rock shrieking and fighting with beak and claw. When Zeus saw them he said to Hera:

“This is very sad! Sarpedon, whom I love best of all men, is fated to be killed by Patroclus Menoitides. I really don’t know what to do. Shall I pick him up out of the battle alive, and put him down in his own country? Or shall I let him be killed by Menoitides?”

Hera said:

“O you dreadful creature, you mustn’t say that! A mortal man, doomed of old by fate, and you want to rescue him from death? Do as you like; but you cannot expect the rest of us gods to approve. Think for a moment: If you send Sarpedon home alive, some other god may want to take his son out of the battlefield. He loves his son too, you know! Many of the immortals have sons fighting before Troy, and you will hake them all very jealous....”

The Father of men and gods agreed that this was right. But he sent a shower of bloody raindrops upon the earth in honour of his dear son, whom Patroclus was destined to kill on Trojan soil, far from his native land.

When they were within reach, Patroclus struck Thrasymelos, Sarpedon’s man, in the lower belly, and brought him down. Sarpedon cast at Patroclus and missed, but he hit the horse Pedasos in the right shoulder....

The two men now came together again for their battle. Sarpedon cast, and the spear passed over Patroclus’s left shoulder without touching. Patroclus followed up, and there was no mistake about his cast: he struck where the midriff encloses the beating heart. Sarpedon fell, as an oak tree falls or a poplar, or a tall pine felled by a woodman to make a ship’s mast: so he lay in front of his horses and chariot, moaning and clutching at the bloody dust....

[Dying, Sarpedon charges his friend Glaucos to avenge him and prevent his body being stripped of his armor. Glaucos is wounded, but he prays to Apollo to be healed so he can fight for Sarpedon, and his prayer is granted.]

First Glaucos went round urging the Lycian leaders to fight for Sarpedon. Then he repaired at a good pace to the Trojans, Polydarnas and Panthoides and Agenor, Aeneas³ and Hector the mighty man himself, calling upon them in plain words:

“Look here, Hector! you have quite forgotten your allies. They wear themselves out for your sake, far from home and friends, and you will not help them. Sarpedon lies dead! the leader of the Lycian spearmen, who ruled his country with justice and his own strong arm. Brazen Ares has brought him down by the spear of Patroclus!

² Sarpedon is the mortal son of Zeus and king of Lycia, a region in southwest Anatolia allied with Troy. Here, his Lycian contingent is fighting the Greeks alongside the Trojans.

³ The Trojan Aeneas, or Aeneas, was identified much later by the Romans as the legendary founder of Rome.

Do stand by us, friends! Let your hearts be moved with indignation! Do not suffer the Myrmidons to strip him and maltreat his body, in revenge for the Danaans whom we have killed in fair fight beside their own ships!"...

[Hector leads the furious Trojans against the Greeks, but Patroclus rallies the Greeks into an equal passion.]

When both sides were there in force, Trojans and Lycians against Myrmidons and Achaeans, they joined battle with terrible shouts, and how their weapons crashed and smashed! Then Zeus drew a dreadful darkness over the conflict, that the battle for his son might be dreadful and desperate.

At first the Trojans drove back their enemies. For a man was struck down who was by no means the least among the Myrmidons—Epeigeus, the son of prince Agacles. Epeigeus once had been ruler of Budeion but he had killed one of his cousins and took refuge with Peleus and Thetis Silverfoot. They sent him to the war at Ilios along with Achilles. He was taking hold of the dead man, when Hector smashed skull and helmet with a large stone; he fell dead over the body.

Then Patroclus provoked by his comrade's loss rushed at him straight, like a hawk scattering daws and starlings....

[The Trojans fall back, only to wheel and pounce on the Greeks when they follow.]

Now not even a man who knew him well could have known the noble Sarpedon, smothered from head to foot in blood and dust and showers of shafts. The crowds of men struggled about the body, like a swarm of flies buzzing about a farmyard in spring-time, when the milk runs over the pails and the bowls are doused with milk.

And all the while Zeus did not turn away his eyes from the battle.... At last he thought it best that Patroclus should kill yet more; and drive Hector back to the city walls.

So first he made Hector's courage fail. Hector entered his car and turned to retreat, calling on the Trojans to follow—he knew the sacred scales of Zeus! Then not even the brave Lycians stood firm, but all fled away, now they had seen their king lying pierced through the heart in the heap of corpses—for many had fallen over him at the time when Cronion tightened the strife. But the others tore the shining armour from Sarpedon's shoulders, and Patroclus sent it away to the camp....

Now Patroclus ordered Automedon to drive him after the Trojans and Lycians. Poor fool! he was quite blinded. If he had done as Achilles told him, he could have escaped black death. But always the will of Zeus is stronger than man; and Zeus put that temper into his heart....

And then the Achaeans would have taken the proud city of Troy by the valour of Patroclus, for he went onwards like a storm: but Apollo stood on the wall to help the Trojans, intent upon Patroclus's death. Three times did Patroclus set his foot on a corner of the wall, three times Apollo dooled him back, rapping the shield with his immortal hands. When he tried the fourth time like one more than man, Apollo shouted at him and said in plain words:

"Back, prince Patroclus! It is not fated that proud Troy shall fall to your spear, nor to Achilles, who is a much better man than you."

Then Patroclus fell back a long way, in fear of the wrath of Apollo Shootafar.

But Hector checked his horses at the Scaian Gate; for he was in doubt whether to drive into battle again, or recall his army to take shelter within the walls. As he was considering, Apollo appeared by his side, in the form of a lusty young fellow Asios, who was Hector's own uncle, being brother of Heeabe, and the son of Dymas who lived near the Sangarios in Phrygia. Apollo said then, in the shape of this man:

"Why have you left the battle, Hector? You ought not to do it.... Hurry—make for Patroclus, and you may get him—Apollo may give you victory!"

As Apollo disappeared into the melee, Hector told Cebriones to whip the horses into battle. Apollo turned the Argives to flight and made the Trojans prevail; but Hector left the others alone and drove towards Patroclus. Then Patroclus leapt out of his car, holding the spear in his left hand; he picked up with his right a sharp shining stone just large enough to his hand. He did not try to keep clear of the fellow now—he threw with all his might, and his shot was not wasted, for it hit Cebriones (himself a bastard son of Priam) on the forehead, as he held the reins. The stone crushed both brows into one and smashed the bone, and both eyes fell down in the dust in front of him. He rolled out of the car like a tumbler, and Patroclus said in mockery:

"Blest my soul, there's a springheel! What a neat header he takes! If he were at sea he could fill many hungry bellies by diving for sea-urchins. He would jump overboard in any weather, to judge from that excellent dive overcar on land! I didn't know there were divers in Troy!"

He pounced on Cebriones like a lion which ravages the fold, until he is run through the chest and his own courage is his destruction: ah Patroclus, that was what came of your leap! And Hector leapt from his car to meet him: and there they fought as two lions fight over a deer's body, both hungry, both furious—there Patroclus Menoitiades and glorious Hector were ready to tear each other to pieces. Hector laid hold of the head and would not let go, Patroclus held fast by the foot—and the two armies behind them were fighting too. It was like the struggle of East Wind and South Wind to shake the trees in a mountain dimble—oak and ash and smooth-barked cornel. How they beat the long boughs together with rare great noise! What a crashing of cracking trunks! So Trojans and Danaans dashed together, dealing death, and neither thought of retreat. Round the body of Cebriones the sharp spears fell thick, the winged arrows flew from the string; showers of big stones battered the shields of the fighting men; and the dead man amid the whirlwind of dust lay grand in his own grandeur, forgetful of his horsemanship.

So long as the sun bestrode the middle sky those death-dealing showers went on from this side and that; but when the sun took his turn to ox-loosing time, the Achaians became stronger beyond measure. They dragged away the body of Cebriones, and stript his armour, and Patroclus turned upon the Trojans again. Thrice he leapt on them like another god of war with awful shouts, thrice nine men he killed: but at the fourth furious attack—ah then, Patroclus, the end of your life was in sight! for Phoibos Apollo was there in all his terrors.

Patroclus did not see him coming, for the god was hidden in Host. He stood behind Patroclus: his eyes rolled in rage, and he slapped him between the shoulders with the flat of the hand. The helmet was knocked from his head, and went rolling and rattling under the horses' feet; the plumes were dabbled in blood and dust.... Patroclus felt the spear in his hand broken to pieces; the great strong heavy-bladed spear, the tasselled shield with its belt fell from his shoulders; the corselet was stript off his body by the great son of Zeus. His mind was blinded, his knees crickled under him, he stood there dazed.

Then from behind a spear hit him between shoulders [*thrown by the Trojan Euphorbos*]....

When Hector saw him retreating and wounded, he came near and stabbed him in the belly: the blade ran through, he fell with a dull thud, and consternation took the Achaians.... And then he vaunted his victory without disguise:

"So Patroclus, you thought that you could sack our city! you thought you would rob our women of the day of freedom, and carry them off to your own country! Fool!... Ah, poor wretch, your Achilles is a good man, but he was no help to you, although no doubt he warned you earnestly when you started (and he stayed behind)—

'Don't come back to me, my brave Patroclus, until you have stript the blood-stained shirt from Hector's body!' No doubt he must have said that, and you thought you could do it—no more sense in you than that!"

Patroclus replied, half fainting:

"For this once, Hector, make your proud boast, for you are the victor, by help of Zeus Cronides and Apollo, who mastered me—an easy thing: they stript off my armour themselves. But if twenty men like you had confronted me, my spear would have slain them all on the spot. No, it was cruel fate that killed me, and Leto's son,⁴ and of men Euphorbos; you come third and take my armour. One thing I tell you, and you should lay it up in your mind: you have yourself not long to live. Already death and fate are beside you, and Achilles Aiacides shall lay you low."

Even as he spoke, the shadow of death covered him up. His soul left the body and went down to Hades, bewailing his lot, cut off in his manhood and strength. But Hector answered him though dead:

"What is this prophecy of certain death to me, Patroclus? Achilles may be the son of the divine Thetis, but who knows if I may not strike with my spear, and he may be the first to die!"

Then he set one foot upon the body, and treading it away from the spear, pulled out the spear, and went at once with the spear after the driver Automedon. He wanted to kill him too; but the immortal horses which the gods had given to Achilles's father Peleus were carrying him out of the way.

⁴ Leto is the mother of Apollo.