

REALMS  
*of*  
GOLD

A  
CORE KNOWLEDGE®  
READER



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## Virgil

*"How They Took the City"*

—FROM *The Aeneid*, Book II, Lines 1-397

THE ROOM fell silent, and all eyes were on him,  
As Father Aeneas from his high couch began:

"Sorrow too deep to tell, your majesty,  
You order me to feel and tell once more:  
How the Danaans leveled in the dust  
The splendor of our mourned-forever kingdom—  
Heartbreaking things I saw with my own eyes  
And was myself a part of. Who could tell them,  
Even a Myrmidon or Dolopian  
Or ruffian of Ulysses, without tears?  
Now, too, the night is well along, with dewfall  
Out of heaven, and setting stars weigh down  
Our heads toward sleep. But if so great desire  
Moves you to hear the tale of our disasters,  
Briefly recalled, the final throes of Troy,  
However I may shudder at the memory  
And shrink again in grief, let me begin.

Knowing their strength broken in warfare, turned  
Back by the fates, and years—so many years—  
Already slipped away, the Danaan captains  
By the divine handicraft of Pallas built  
A horse of timber, tall as a hill,  
And sheathed its ribs with planking of cut pine.  
This they gave out to be an offering  
For a safe return by sea, and the word went round.

But on the sly they shut inside a company  
Chosen from their picked soldiery by lot,  
Crowding the vaulted caverns in the dark—  
The horse's belly—with men fully armed.

Offshore there's a long island, Tenedos,  
Famous and rich while Priam's kingdom lasted,  
A treacherous anchorage now, and nothing more.  
They crossed to this and hid their ships behind it  
On the bare shore beyond. We thought they'd gone,  
Sailing home to Mycenae before the wind,  
So Teucer's town is freed of her long anguish,  
Gates thrown wide! And out we go in joy  
To see the Dorian campsites, all deserted,  
The beach they left behind. Here the Dolopians  
Pitched their tents, here cruel Achilles lodged,  
There lay the ships, and there, formed up in ranks,  
They came inland to fight us. Of our men  
One group stood marveling, gaping up to see  
The dire gift of the cold unbedded goddess,  
The sheer mass of the horse.

Thymoetes shouts  
It should be hauled inside the walls and moored  
High on the citadel—whether by treason  
Or just because Troy's fate went that way now.  
Capys opposed him; so did the wiser heads:  
'Into the sea with it,' they said, 'or burn it,  
Build up a bonfire under it,  
This trick of the Greeks, a gift no one can trust,  
Or cut it open, search the hollow belly!'

Contrary notions pulled the crowd apart.  
Next thing we knew, in front of everyone, »

Laocoön with a great company  
 Came furiously running from the Height,  
 And still far off cried out: 'O my poor people,  
 Men of Troy, what madness has come over you?  
 Can you believe the enemy truly gone?  
 A gift from the Danaans, and no ruse?  
 Is that Ulysses' way, as you have known him?  
 Achaeans must be hiding in this timber,  
 Or it was built to butt against our walls,  
 Peer over them into our houses, pelt  
 The city from the sky. Some crookedness  
 Is in this thing. Have no faith in the horse!  
 Whatever it is, even when Greeks bring gifts  
 I fear them, gifts and all.'

He broke off then

And rifled his big spear with all his might  
 Against the horse's flank, the curve of belly.  
 It stuck there trembling, and the rounded hull  
 Reverberated groaning at the blow.  
 If the gods' will had not been sinister,  
 If our own minds had not been crazed,  
 He would have made us foul that Argive den  
 With bloody steel, and Troy would stand today—  
 O citadel of Priam, towering still!

But now look: hillmen, shepherds of Dardania,  
 Raising a shout, dragged in before the king  
 An unknown Fellow with hands tied behind—  
 This all as he himself had planned,  
 Volunteering, letting them come across him,  
 So he could open Troy to the Achaeans.  
 Sure of himself this man was, braced for it  
 Either way, to work his trick or die.

From every quarter Trojans run to see him,  
 Ring the prisoner round, and make a game  
 Of jeering at him. Be instructed now  
 In Greek deceptive arts: one barefaced deed  
 Can tell you of them all.  
 As the man stood there, shaken and defenseless,  
 Looking around at ranks of Phrygians,  
 'Oh god,' he said, 'what land on earth, what seas  
 Can take me in? What's left me in the end,  
 Outcast that I am from the Danaans,  
 Now the Dardanians will have my blood?'

The whimpering speech brought us up short; we felt  
 A twinge for him. Let him speak up, we said,  
 Tell us where he was born, what news he brought,  
 What he could hope for as a prisoner.  
 Taking his time, slow to discard his fright,  
 He said:

'I'll tell you the whole truth, my lord,  
 No matter what may come of it. Argive  
 I am by birth, and will not say I'm not.  
 That first of all: Fortune has made a derelict  
 Of Sinon, but the bitch  
 Won't make an empty liar of him, too.  
 Report of Palamedes may have reached you,  
 Scion of Belus's line, a famous man  
 Who gave commands against the war. For this,  
 On a trumped-up charge, on perjured testimony,  
 The Greeks put him to death—but now they mourn him,  
 Now he has lost the light. Being kin to him,  
 In my first years I joined him as companion,  
 Sent by my poor old father on this campaign,  
 And while he held high rank and influence »

In royal councils, we did well, with honor.  
 Then by the guile and envy of Ulysses—  
 Nothing unheard of there!—he left this world,  
 And I lived on, but under a cloud, in sorrow,  
 Raging for my blameless friend's downfall.  
 Demented, too, I could not hold my peace  
 But said if I had luck, if I won through  
 Again to Argos, I'd avenge him there.  
 And I roused hatred with my talk; I fell  
 Afoul now of that man. From that time on,  
 Day in, day out, Ulysses  
 Found new ways to bait and terrify me,  
 Putting out shady rumors among the troops,  
 Looking for weapons he could use against me.

He could not rest till Calchas served his turn—  
 But why go on? The tale's unwelcome, useless,  
 If Achaeans are all one,  
 And it's enough I'm called Achaean, then  
 Exact the punishment, long overdue;  
 The Ithacan desires it; the Atridae  
 Would pay well for it.'

Burning with curiosity,  
 We questioned him, called on him to explain—  
 Unable to conceive such a performance,  
 The art of the Pelasgian. He went on,  
 Atremble, as though he feared us:

'Many times

The Danaans wished to organize retreat,  
 To leave Troy and the long war, tired out.  
 If only they had done it! Heavy weather  
 At sea closed down on them, or a fresh gale  
 From the Southwest would keep them from embarking,

Most of all after this figure here,  
 This horse they put together with maple beams,  
 Reached its full height. Then wind and thunderstorms  
 Rumbled in heaven. So in our quandary  
 We sent Eurypylus to Phoebus's oracle,  
 And he brought back this grim reply:

'Blood and a virgin slain  
 You gave to appease the winds, for your first voyage  
 Troyward, O Danaans. Blood again  
 And Argive blood, one life, wins your return.'

When this got round among the soldiers, gloom  
 Came over them, and a cold chill that ran  
 To the very marrow. Who had death in store?  
 Whom did Apollo call for? Now the man  
 Of Ithaca haled Calchas out among us  
 In tumult, calling on the seer to tell  
 The true will of the gods. Ah, there were many  
 Able to divine the crookedness  
 And cruelty afoot for me, but they  
 Looked on in silence. For ten days the seer  
 Kept still, kept under cover, would not speak  
 Of anyone, or name a man for death,  
 Till driven to it at last by Ulysses' cries—  
 By prearrangement—he broke silence, barely  
 Enough to designate me for the altar.  
 Every last man agreed. The torments each  
 Had feared for himself, now shifted to another,  
 All could endure. And the infamous day came,  
 The ritual, the salted meal, the fillets...  
 I broke free, I confess it, broke my chains,  
 Hid myself all night in a muddy marsh, »

Concealed by reeds, waiting for them to sail  
If they were going to.

Now no hope is left me  
Of seeing my home country ever again,  
My sweet children, my father, missed for years.  
Perhaps the army will demand they pay  
For my escape, my crime here, and their death,  
Poor things, will be my punishment. Ah, sir,  
I beg you by the gods above, the powers  
In whom truth lives, and by what faith remains  
Uncontaminated to men, take pity  
On pain so great and so unmerited!'

For tears we gave him life, and pity, too.  
Priam himself ordered the gyves removed  
And the tight chain between. In kindness then  
He said to him:

'Whoever you may be,  
The Greeks are gone; forget them from now on;  
You shall be ours. And answer me these questions:  
Who put this huge thing up, this horse?  
Who designed it? What do they want with it?  
Is it religious or a means of war?'

These were his questions. Then the captive, trained  
In trickery, in the stagecraft of Achaea,  
Lifted his hands unfettered to the stars.

'Eternal fires of heaven,' he began,  
'Powers inviolable, I swear by thee,  
As by the altars and blaspheming swords  
I got away from, and the gods' white bands  
I wore as one chosen for sacrifice,

This is justice, I am justified  
In dropping all allegiance to the Greeks—  
As I had cause to hate them; I may bring  
Into the open what they would keep dark.  
No laws of my own country bind me now.  
Only be sure you keep your promises  
And keep faith, Troy, as you are kept from harm  
If what I say proves true, if what I give  
Is great and valuable.

The whole hope  
Of the Danaans, and their confidence  
In the war they started, rested all along  
In help from Pallas. Then the night came  
When Diomedes and that criminal,  
Ulysses, dared to raid her holy shrine.  
They killed the guards on the high citadel  
And ripped away the statue, the Palladium,  
Desecrating with bloody hands the virginal  
Chaplets of the goddess. After that,  
Danaan hopes waned and were undermined,  
Ebbing away, their strength in battle broken,  
The goddess now against them. This she made  
Evident to them all with signs and portents.  
Just as they set her statue up in camp,  
The eyes, cast upward, glowed with crackling flames,  
And salty sweat ran down the body. Then—  
I say it in awe—three times, up from the ground,  
The apparition of the goddess rose  
In a lightning flash, with shield and spear atremble.  
Calchas divined at once that the sea crossing  
Must be attempted in retreat—that Pergamum  
Cannot be torn apart by Argive swords  
Unless at Argos first they beg new omens, »

Carrying homeward the divine power  
 Brought overseas in ships. Now they are gone  
 Before the wind to the fatherland, Mycenae,  
 Gone to enlist new troops and gods. They'll cross  
 The water again and be here, unforeseen.  
 So Calchas read the portents. Warned by him,  
 They set this figure up in reparation  
 For the Palladium stolen, to appease  
 The offended power and expiate the crime.  
 Enormous, though, he made them build the thing  
 With timber braces, towering to the sky,  
 Too big for the gates, not to be hauled inside  
 And give the people back their ancient guardian.  
 If any hand here violates this gift  
 To great Minerva, then extinction waits,  
 Not for one only—would god it were so—  
 But for the realm of Priam and all Phrygians.  
 If this proud offering, drawn by your hands,  
 Should mount into your city, then so far  
 As the walls of Pelops' town the tide of Asia  
 Surges in war: that doom awaits our children.'

This fraud of Sinon, his accomplished lying,  
 Won us over; a tall tale and fake tears  
 Had captured us, whom neither Diomedes  
 Nor Larisaean Achilles overpowered,  
 Nor ten long years, nor all their thousand ships.

And now another sign, more fearful still,  
 Broke on our blind miserable people,  
 Filling us all with dread. Laocoön,  
 Acting as Neptune's priest that day by lot,  
 Was on the point of putting to the knife

A massive bull before the appointed altar,  
 When ah—look there!  
 From Tenedos, on the calm sea, twin snakes—  
 I shiver to recall it—endlessly  
 Coiling, uncoiling, swam abreast for shore,  
 Their underbellies showing as their crests  
 Reared red as blood above the swell; behind  
 They glided with great undulating backs.  
 Now came the sound of thrashed seawater foaming;  
 Now they were on dry land, and we could see  
 Their burning eyes, fiery and suffused with blood,  
 Their tongues a-flicker out of hissing maws.  
 We scattered, pale with fright. But straight ahead  
 They slid until they reached Laocoön.  
 Each snake enveloped one of his two boys,  
 Twining about and feeding on the body.  
 Next they ensnared the man as he ran up  
 With weapons: coils like cables looped and bound him  
 Twice round the middle; twice about his throat  
 They whipped their back-scales, and their heads towered,  
 While with both hands he fought to break the knots,  
 Drenched in slime, his head-bands black with venom,  
 Sending to heaven his appalling cries  
 Like a slashed bull escaping from an altar,  
 The fumbled axe shrugged off. The pair of snakes  
 Now flowed away and made for the highest shrines,  
 The citadel of pitiless Minerva,  
 Where coiling they took cover at her feet  
 Under the rondure of her shield. New terrors  
 Ran in the shaken crowd: the word went round  
 Laocoön had paid, and rightfully,  
 For profanation of the sacred hulk  
 With his offending spear hurled at its flank. »

'The offering must be hauled to its true home,'  
They clamored. 'Votive prayers to the goddess  
Must be said there!'

So we breached the walls

And laid the city open. Everyone  
Pitched in to get the figure underpinned  
With rollers, hempen lines around the neck.  
Deadly, pregnant with enemies, the horse  
Crawled upward to the breach. And boys and girls  
Sang hymns around the towrope as for joy  
They touched it. Rolling on, it cast a shadow  
Over the city's heart. O' Fatherland,  
O Ilium, home of gods! Defensive wall  
Renowned in war for Dardanus's people.  
There on the very threshold of the breach  
It jarred to a halt four times, four times the arms  
In the belly thrown together made a sound—  
Yet on we strove unmindful, deaf and blind,  
To place the monster on our blessed height.  
Then, even then, Cassandra's lips unsealed  
The doom to come: lips by a god's command  
Never believed or heeded by the Trojans.  
So pitifully we, for whom that day  
Would be the last, made all our temples green  
With leafy festal boughs throughout the city.

As heaven turned, Night from the Ocean stream  
Came on, profound in gloom on earth and sky  
And Myrmidons in hiding. In their homes  
The Teucrians lay silent, wearied out,  
And sleep enfolded them. The Argive fleet,  
Drawn up in line abreast, left Tenedos  
Through the aloof moon's friendly stillnesses

And made for the familiar shore. Flame signals  
Shone from the command ship. Sinon, favored  
By what the gods unjustly had decreed,  
Stole out to tap the pine walls and set free  
The Danaans in the belly. Opened wide,  
The horse emitted men; gladly they dropped  
Out of the cavern, captains first, Thessandrus,  
Sthenelus and the man of iron, Ulysses;  
Hand over hand upon the rope, Acamas, Thoas,  
Neoptolemus and Prince Machaon,  
Menelaus and then the master builder,  
Epeos, who designed the horse decoy.  
Into the darkened city, buried deep  
In sleep and wine, they made their way,  
Cut the few sentries down,  
Let in their fellow soldiers at the gate,  
And joined their combat companies as planned.

That time of night it was when the first sleep,  
Gift of the gods, begins for ill mankind,  
Arriving gradually, delicious rest.  
In sleep, in dream, Hector appeared to me,  
Gaunt with sorrow, streaming tears, all torn—  
As by the violent car on his death day—  
And black with bloody dust,  
His puffed-out feet cut by the rawhide thongs.  
Ah god, the look of him! How changed  
From that proud Hector who returned to Troy  
Wearing Achilles' armor, or that one  
Who pitched the torches on Danaan ships;  
His beard all filth, his hair matted with blood,  
Showing the wounds, the many wounds, received  
Outside his father's city walls. I seemed »

Myself to weep and call upon the man  
In grieving speech, brought from the depth of me:

'Light of Dardania, best hope of Troy,  
What kept you from us for so long, and where?  
From what far place, O Hector, have you come,  
Long, long awaited? After so many deaths  
Of friends and brothers, after a world of pain  
For all our folk and all our town, at last,  
Boneweary, we behold you! What has happened  
To ravage your serene face? Why these wounds?'

He wasted no reply on my poor questions  
But heaved a great sigh from his chest and said:  
'Ai! Give up and go, child of the goddess,  
Save yourself, out of these flames. The enemy  
Holds the city walls, and from her height  
Troy falls in ruin. Fatherland and Priam  
Have their due; if by one hand our towers  
Could be defended, by this hand, my own,  
They would have been. Her holy things, her gods  
Of hearth and household Troy commends to you.  
Accept them as companions of your days;  
Go find for them the great walls that one day  
You'll dedicate, when you have roamed the sea.'

—TRANSLATED by Robert Fitzgerald

GREEK

MYTHS

ABOUT

LOVE

—as told by  
THOMAS BULFINCH