

BOOK XII



ÆSACUS' father, Priam, not knowing that his son had acquired wings and was still alive, mourned him as one dead. Hector too, and his other brothers, made offerings at an empty tomb that bore his name. One brother, Paris, was absent from this mournful ceremony, but not long afterwards he returned to his country, bringing with him the wife he had stolen, and in her train a protracted war. A thousand ships, leagued together, sailed in pursuit, carrying on board the whole host of the Greeks. Vengeance would not have been long delayed, had not savage gales made the seas impassable, so that the ships, eager though they were to be on their way, were detained in Boeotia, at Aulis, where the waters teem with fishes.

Here, the Greeks had prepared a sacrifice to Jupiter in accordance with their naive custom, and the ancient altar was glowing with kindled flames, when they saw a dark gleaming serpent wriggling into a plane tree near the place where the sacrifice had been begun. There was a nest at the top of the tree, containing eight fledgelings. The serpent seized the little birds, and their mother too, who was hovering round her doomed chicks, and devoured them in its greedy jaws. Everyone stood in stunned silence, but the seer, Thestor's son, divined the truth and cried, 'We shall be victorious! Rejoice, people of Greece, for Troy shall fall: but the end of our struggles will be long postponed!' — and he interpreted the nine birds as nine years of war. The serpent, as it twined itself round the green branches of the tree, was turned to stone, and, as a statue, preserved the appearance of a climbing snake.

Nereus continued to display his wrath amid the Aonian waters, and did not allow the expedition to continue its crossing. Some believed that Neptune was sparing Troy, because he had built the city walls,

but the son of Thestor was not one of these. He well knew, and proclaimed aloud, that the anger of the maiden goddess must be appeased by the blood of a maiden. So the claim of the common good prevailed over private affection, and the duty of a king conquered a father's feelings. Surrounded by weeping priests, Iphigenia stood before the altar, to offer her pure blood in sacrifice. The goddess was won over: she cast a veil of cloud over the eyes of the assembled company and, amid the bustle and confusion of the ceremony, and the din of suppliant voices, substituted a stag in place of the princess from Mycenae. Thus, when Diana was appeased by this more fitting victim, the wrath of the sea subsided along with that of the goddess and, after many adventures on the way, the thousand ships, with the winds behind them, reached the Phrygian shore.

In the centre of the world, situated between earth and sky and sea, at the point where the three realms of the universe meet, is a place from which everything the world over can be seen, however far away, and to its listening ears comes every sound. There Rumour lives, in a home she has chosen for herself on a hilltop. Night and day the house lies open, for she has given it a thousand apertures and countless entrances, with never a door to barricade her thresholds. The whole structure is of echoing brass, and is full of noises, repeating words and giving back the sounds it hears. There is no quiet within, no silence in any part, and yet there is no loud din, but only murmured whisperings, like the sound of the sea's waves, heard at a distance, or the last rumbles of thunder when Jupiter has crashed dark clouds together. A whole host inhabits these halls: they come and go, a shadowy throng, and a thousand rumours, false mixed with true, stray this way and that, while confused words flit about. Some of them pour their stories into idle ears, others carry off elsewhere the tales they have been told, the story grows, and each new teller adds something to what he has heard. Here live Credulity, and hot-headed Error, groundless Joy and craven Fears, Sedition newly-born, and Whispers whose origin no one knows. Rumour herself sees everything that goes on in heaven, in earth, and on the sea, and seeks information the world over.

She had made it known that Greek ships, with a strong army on board, were approaching Troy, and so, when the armed enemy appeared, they were not unexpected. The Trojans defended their shore,