

"It is interesting that Shakespeare seems to find the whole story of the Iliad contemptible. He retells it in his play, Troilus and Cressida. . . . But the Iliad is epic tragedy. It is the same war story as Troilus, but with one crucial difference. Shakespeare has taken out the gods, whereas it is the gods who make the Iliad grand and terrible.

"For Homer's Hector and Achilles are caught in a squabble of the Greek deities. The gods take sides. They come down into the dust of the battlefield to intervene. They turn aside weapons hurled straight to kill. They appear in disguises to make trouble or to pull their favorites out of jams. An honorable contest of arms becomes a mockery, a game of wits among supernatural, invisible magicians. The fighting men are mere helpless pieces of the game."

Natalie glances over her shoulder at the listeners. No audiences like these! Famished for diversion, for light, for a shred of consolation, they hang on a literary talk in Theresienstadt, as elsewhere people do on a great concert artist's recital, or on a gripping film.

In the same level pedantic way, Jastrow reviews the background of the Iliad: Paris's awarding of the golden apple for beauty to Aphrodite; the hostilities on Olympus that ensue; the kidnapping by Paris of Helen, the world's prettiest woman, Aphrodite's promised reward; and the inevitable war, since she is a married Greek queen and he a Trojan prince. Splendid men on both sides, who care nothing for the cuckold, the whore, or the kidnapper, become embroiled. For them, once it is war, honor is at stake.

"But in this squalid quarrel, what gives the heroes of the Iliad their grandeur? Is it not their indomitable will to fight, despite the shifting and capricious meddling of the gods? To venture their lives for honor, in an unfair and unfathomable situation where bad and stupid men triumph, good and skilled men fall, and strange accidents divert and decide battles? In a purposeless, unfair, absurd battle, to fight on, fight to the death, fight like men? It is the oldest of human problems, the problem of senseless evil, dramatized on the field of battle. This is the tragedy Homer perceived and Shakespeare passed over."

Jastrow pauses, turns a page, and looks straight at the audience, his emaciated face dead pale, his eyes large in the sunken sockets. If the audience has been silent before, it is now as quiet as so many corpses.

"The universe of the Iliad, in short, is a childish and despicable trap. The glory of Hector is that in such a trap he behaves so nobly that an Almighty God, if He did exist, would weep with pride and pity.