BOOK 23

Now to the upstairs chamber the old dame, cackling, ascended, bearing her mistress the news that her much loved husband was inside. Nimby her knees rushed on, though her feet underneath kept stumbling. Standing above her head, she spoke these words and addressed her:

“Come now, awake, dear daughter Penelope, so with your eyes you finally see for yourself what all of your days you have longed for: noble Odysseus has come and arrived home, late though his coming. Yes, he has killed the presumptuous suitors, who always disturbed this palace of his, insulted his son, and devoured his possessions.”

Prudent Penelope then spoke answering words and addressed her:

“Mamma dear, you have been driven insane by the gods, who are able, even if one is a sensible person, to make her quite senseless; those who are simple of mind they set on the way of discretion. Now even you they derange, though before your mind was well balanced.

Why are you mocking me, who have a heart so heavy with sorrow, telling me this nonsense and awakening me from the pleasant sleep that was holding me fast after covering over my eyelids? Never have I slept such good sleep from the time that Odysseus parted to see Evilion, that place not to be mentioned.

But come now, go away and return to the hall of the palace. If it were anyone else of the women belonging to me who came with a message like this and awoke me out of my slumber, swiftly and hatefully I would have sent her away to return back down to the hall; but in this, old age is for you an advantage.”

Speaking to her made answer the much loved nurse Eurykleía: “I do not mock you at all, dear daughter, but really and truly noble Odysseus has come and arrived home, just as I told you: he is the stranger and guest whom all in the palace insulted. Yes, and Telémachos has for a long time known he was inside but in his thoughtful discretion concealed the design of his father,
Eurykleia tells a skeptical Penelope about Odysseus

so that the violent deeds of the arrogant men he could pay back.”

So she spoke, and the lady rejoiced, jumped out of her bed, then
35 gladly embraced the old woman and let tears fall from her eyelids;
raising her voice she spoke, and in these winged words she addressed her:

“Come, dear mamma, if you can indeed say this to me truly,
if he has really arrived back here in his house, as you tell me,
how has he managed to set his hands on the shameless suitors,
being but one, while they in the house stayed always together?”

Speaking to her made answer the much loved nurse Eurykleía:

40 “I did not see it or learn it, but I heard only the groans of
men being killed, while deep in a nook of the well-built chambers
we sat stricken with terror; the well-fitted doors were enclosing
us right up to the moment your son Telémachos called me
out of the room, for his father himself had sent him to call me.

Then I discovered Odysseus among dead bodies of slain men
standing, and they quite covered the hard-stamped floor all around him,
heaped up one on another—your heart would have warmed to behold him
spattered and fouled with the blood and the battle gore, much like a lion.
Now in fact they are all outside by the doors of the courtyard,

50 lying together; the beautiful house he is fuming with sulfur,
with a great fire that he kindled; and he sent me here to call you.
But come, follow along, so that both of you go on the way of
happiness deep in your hearts, since many the ills you have suffered.
Finally now this long-felt wish and desire is accomplished:

55 he has himself come back to his hearth still living and found both
you and his son in the halls; although they have done to him many
evils, on all of the suitors he took his revenge in his palace.”

Prudent Penelope then spoke answering words and addressed her:

60 “Mamma dear, do not exult at it yet so greatly, nor cackle;
you are aware that to all in the house he would be most welcome
when he appeared, above all to myself and the son that we brought forth.
Nevertheless, this story is not the real truth, as you tell it—
no, some immortal it is who has slaughtered the valorous suitors,
angered at their heart-anguishing crimes and iniquitous actions;

65 for to no person who lives on the earth they showed any honor,
neither the base nor the noble, whatever man might have approached them;
so for their recklessness they suffer this evil; Odysseus
far from Achaia has lost his return and himself is lost also.”

Speaking to her then answered the much loved nurse Eurykleía:

70 “Oh my child, what a word has escaped from the fence of your teeth now,
when you say that your husband who sits inside at the hearth will
never return to his home! Your spirit is ever mistrustful.
Come now, something besides I will tell you, a manifest token,
it is a scar that a boar inflicted on him with its white tusk,
which as I washed him off I noticed, and wanted to tell it
also to you yourself, but he covered my mouth with his hands in
great and resourceful astuteness and did not allow me to tell you.
But come, follow me now—my life I will hazard upon it—
if I am lying to you, by a death most piteous kill me.”

Prudent Penelope then spoke out to her, giving an answer:
“Mamma dear, it is a difficult matter for you to interpret—
though you are most wise-minded—the schemes of the gods who live always.
Nevertheless, let us go to my son, so that I may behold those
dead men who were my suitors, as well as the person who killed them.”

So she spoke, and went down from the upstairs room, in her heart much
pondering whether to stay well away as she questioned her husband
or to stand near him to kiss his head and his hands and to clasp them.
Finally, when she entered the chamber and crossed the stone threshold,
she sat then in the gleam of the firelight, across from Odysseus,
close to the opposite wall; he was sitting beside a tall pillar,
casting his eyes down, waiting to see if his virtuous wife would
say to him anything when with her own eyes she could behold him.
Long in silence she sat, and a daze came over her spirit;
sometimes full in the face she would gaze at him, thinking she knew him,
sometimes failing to know him who wore foul clothes on his body.
Scolding, Telémachos spoke to her these words, calling upon her:

“Mother of mine, harsh mother, with unreconcilable spirit,
why do you thus withdraw from my father, and why are you not now
sitting beside him, asking him questions and making inquiry?

Other than you, no woman would thus with an obstinate spirit
stand so far from her husband, who suffering many afflictions
came in the twentieth year back home to the land of his fathers;
always in you is a heart that is more unyielding than stone is.”

Prudent Penelope then spoke answering words and addressed him:

“Oh my child, in my bosom the spirit is full of amazement,
nor am I able to say any word to him nor to ask questions,
no, nor to look at him straight in the face. If really and truly
he is Odysseus and he has arrived back home, we will surely
know one another, and that even better—for us there are tokens
which we, both of us, know of, but which are a secret from others.”
So she spoke, and he smiled, much-suffering noble Odysseus;
straightway in these winged words to Telémachos he began speaking:
“Well then, Telémachos, let your mother examine and make her
trial of me in the halls: she quickly will understand better.

Now because I am so dirty and wear foul clothes on my body,
she dishonors me still and will not yet say that I am he.

Straightway now let us think of the best way matters could happen.
For somebody who kills but a single man while in the district,
even a man who does not have many avengers thereafter,

flees into exile, leaving his kin and the land of his fathers;
we have destroyed the supports of the city, the best of the young men
dwelling in Ithaka now; it is this I urge you to think of.”

Thoughtful Telémachos then spoke out to him, giving an answer:
“Look to these matters yourself, dear father, for yours is the finest
mind among men in cunning, as it is reported, nor is there
anyone else among men who are mortal who might be a rival.
We will be eagerly following you, for I do not imagine
we will lack courage at all, so far as we have any power.”

Speaking to him then answered Odysseus of many devices:
“Well then, I will now tell you the way I think is the best one.
Start out first by washing yourselves, then putting on tunics;
order the handmaids here in the palace to dress in clean garments;
next then, holding his clear-toned lyre must the godlike singer
furnish us rhythmical guidance in dance for a festival revel,

so that whoever was outside hearing would think it a wedding,
either a man who was walking the road or else one of the neighbors,
so that the widespread news not get to the town of the death of
these men who were the suitors, until we have made our departure
out of the house to our well-wooded farm; there, after arriving,

we will take thought of the schemes the Olympian then may provide us.”

So he spoke, and they carefully listened to him and obeyed him.
First they started by washing themselves, then putting on tunics;
also the women arrayed themselves; and the godlike singer
took up the hollow lyre, and he stirred up longing among them
both for the sweetness of song and the blameless pleasure of dancing.
Now the great palace about them resounded aloud with the feet of
men who were festively dancing and women in beautiful girdles.
Thus would say one of those who listened outside of the palace:
“Certainly, someone has married the queen who has been so much courted.

Miserable wretch! She did not hold out for the husband she wedded,
steadily keeping the great house up until he could return home.”

So would one of them say, as they did not know what had happened. Straightway the housekeeper, old Eurýnomê, there in his own house bathed greathearted Odysseus and rubbed him with oil of the olive, then threw garments about him, a beautiful cloak and a tunic.

Over his head did Athena suffuse great beauty and made him taller to see than before, more mighty; the hair on his head she made flow down in thick curls that resembled a hyacinth flower. As when a man well-skilled at the task lays gold over silver—

one who was taught his craft by Hephaistos and Pallas Athena, every sort of technique—and the work he achieves is delightful, so upon him did she now pour grace, on his head and his shoulders. He came forth from the basin, in form most like the immortals.

Then he again sat down on the armchair whence he had risen, facing his wife as before, and he spoke these words and addressed her:

“You strange woman, the gods who inhabit Olympian dwellings gave you a heart that beyond any womanly nature is stubborn. Other than you, no woman would thus with an obstinate spirit stand so far from her husband, who suffering many affictions came in the twentieth year back home to the land of his fathers. But come, Mamma, and spread out a bed for me, so that alone I may lie down, for the heart in the breast of this woman is iron.”

Prudent Penelope then spoke answering words and addressed him:

“You strange man, I am not being proud, nor at all do I slight you, nor am I overimpressed; I know very well what you looked like when you departed from Ithaka once on the long-oared galley. But come, make up the stout bedstead for the man, Eurykleia, outside the well-built chamber, the one that the master himself built; there, after bringing the stout bedstead, put bedding upon it, fleece beneath, then mantles and covers of shimmering fabric.”

So she spoke to make proof of her husband; but straightway Odysseus angrily spoke and addressed his devoted and virtuous bedmate:

“These are indeed, my wife, heart-anguishing words you have spoken! Who can have put my bed in another place? Even for someone very expert, it would be quite hard, unless one of the gods came personally, who could easily put it elsewhere if he wished to. No one of mortals who now are alive, even one in full vigor, ever could easily change its position, because in the well-wrought bed a great token was fixed—I worked on it; nobody else did.

Growing inside of the court was the long-leaved trunk of an olive
tree in the prime of its vigor, and it was as stout as a pillar. So around this I constructed the chamber until I was finished, building with close-set stones, and above I skillfully roofed it, also put on the doors, well-jointed and fitting exactly.

Finally then I cut off the crown of the long-leaved olive, trimmed the stump up from the root, then smoothed it around with a brazen adze expertly and well, and I trued it straight to a chalk line, fashioning it as a bedpost, and bored all the holes with an augur. Starting from that, I worked on the bedstead until I was finished, added adornments of gold and of silver and ivory inlays, stretched on the bedframe a strapping of oxhide, shining with purple. This is the token that I have declared to you: I do not know now whether it still stands firm for me, woman, or whether already someone has put it elsewhere, first cutting the trunk of the olive."

So he spoke; and the limbs and the heart inside her were loosened, as she perceived to be certain the tokens Odysseus had shown her. Starting to weep, she ran straight up to him then, and she threw her arms on the neck of Odysseus and kissed his head and addressed him: “Do not be angry at me now, Odysseus, for otherwise you are far the most thoughtful of men; our afflictions the gods have assigned us, those who begrudged it to us to remain here always together taking our joy in our youth, then reaching the threshold of old age. So do not now be angry with me over this nor resent it, that when I saw you first I did not greet you as I now do.

For it is true that the dear heart deep in my bosom was always chill with the fear that a man might someday come and beguile me merely by speaking—for many men meditate evil devices. Neither in fact would Helen of Argos, the offspring of Zeus, have mingled in love and in bed with a man from an alien people if she had known that the warlike sons of Achaians would bring her back once more to her home, to the much loved land of her fathers. It was a god who aroused her to do so shameful an action; never before she had laid in her heart such hateful and reckless folly, from which first came to us also affliction and sorrow.

Now, since you have already related a manifest token as to our nuptial bed—which no other man has seen ever, but you only and I and as well just one of the handmaids, Aktoris, whom my father had given to me when I came here, she who used to stand guard at the doors of the strong-built chamber— you have persuaded my heart, although it indeed has been stubborn.”
They embrace; Athena prolongs the night; they talk

She spoke, stirring in him yet greater desire for lamenting; he wept, holding his wife so virtuous, lovely, devoted. Just as appears most welcome the mainland to men who are swimming, those whose well-made galley Poseidon has smashed on the open sea after it has been pounded by stormwinds and powerful billows—few are the men who escape from the silvery sea to the mainland swimming, and much salt scurf from the brine has encrusted their bodies; then most welcome they go on the mainland, escaping from evils—so most welcome to her as she looked on him was her husband;

neither at all from his neck she loosed the embrace of her white arms. Now would the Dawn have shone forth rose-fingered as they were lamenting, were other things not devised by the goddess bright-eyed Athena. Keeping the course of the long night lingering, Dawn of the gold throne she held away at the bounds of the Ocean, and she would not let her harness the swift-footed horses that carry the daylight to people, Lampos and Phaëthon, radiant colts who bring on the Morning. Then to his wife thus uttered Odysseus of many devices:

“Not yet we have arrived, dear wife, at the limits of all our trials, but still there is left for the future a measureless labor,

long and enormous and hard: all this I am bound to accomplish. For it was prophesied thus by the seer Teirésias’ spirit, on that day I descended and entered the dwelling of Hades, looking to find a return back home for myself and my comrades. But come, let us to bed, dear wife, so that finally we while lying together may take our delight in the sweetness of slumber.”

Prudent Penelope then spoke answering words and addressed him:

“There will indeed be a bed for you finally, when in your spirit you should desire, since it is the gods who have caused you to come back here to your well-built house, back here to the land of your fathers.

But since you have perceived and a god put it into your spirit, come, tell me of the trial, since later at least, I am certain, I will be hearing, and it is no worse to be told of it straightway.”

Speaking to her then answered Odysseus of many devices:

“You strange woman, and why do you urge me so strongly and bid me speak of it? Nevertheless I will tell you and I will hide nothing. Not in the least will your heart feel joy in it—neither do I feel joy myself, so many the towns of mankind that he bade me go among, bearing an oar in my hands, well-fitted for rowing, traveling till I arrive at a place where the people have never heard of the sea, and they eat no food that is mingled with sea salt;
nor in fact do they know anything about purple-checked galleys
nor of the well-fitted oars which serve as the wings of a galley.
This unmistakable sign he told me, and I will not hide it:
when on the road I am met by another wayfarer who says that
it is a winnowing fan I hold on my glistening shoulder,
straightway, when in the earth, he said, my oar I had planted,
making oblation of excellent victims to lordly Poseidon,
burning a ram and a bull and a sow-mounting boar in his honor,
then I should go back homeward and sacred hecatombs offer
there to the deathless gods, the immortals who hold the broad heaven,
all of them, one by one; then out of the sea will a death come
over me, ever so gently and easily; this it will be which
kills me, tired in a sleek old age; and around me the people
all will be happy and blesséd; he said this will all be accomplished.”

Prudent Penelope then spoke answering words and addressed him:
“If it is true that the gods bring forth an old age that is better,
then there is hope that for you there will be an escape from afflictions.”
Such things then they spoke and addressed each one to the other;
meanwhile Eurýnomê and the old nurse made ready the bed with
soft bed coverings, under the light of the radiant torches.
When they had spread out thick soft bedding with speed and adroitness,
then back into her chamber to lie down went the old woman,
while Eurýnomê, serving as maid of the bedroom, conducted
them as they went to their bed; in her hand she was holding a torch up.
When to the room she had led them, she went back in; and the two then
came to the place most welcome in which was their bed of the old days.
Then did Telémachos straightway, as well as the oxherd and swineherd,
stop their feet from the dancing; the women they made stop also;
then they went to their beds all over the shadowy palace.

Those two, when of delectable love they had taken their pleasure,
pleased themselves with the stories that they now told to each other—
how much she had endured in the halls, that splendor of women,
as she beheld the detestable company there of the suitors,
those men who for her sake had slaughtered his cattle and fat sheep,
many of them; there was much wine too drawn out of the wine jars.
Then Zeus-nourished Odysseus related the many distresses
he caused men, and the many he suffered himself in his sorrow.
All he related, and she was delighted to hear, nor did slumber
fall on her eyelids before he had told her of all that had happened.
So he began how first he had quelled the Kikonians, then had
gone to the fertile land of the men who feed on the lotus;
all that the Cyclopes had done, then how he had taken revenge on
him for the valiant companions he ate, and he showed no pity;
how he had reached Aiolos, who received him kindly and sent him
onward, but he was not destined as yet to arrive in his own dear
fatherland; rather again did a stormwind, seizing upon him,
carry him over the fish-thronged seaway, heavily groaning;
then how to Laistrygion Tlepleylos he had journeyed—
they had destroyed his galleys as well as his well-greaved comrades,
all of them; only Odysseus in his black ship had escaped them.
Then he related the guile and the many devices of Circe;
how he had then gone into the moldering palace of Hades,
seeking prophetic advice of the Theban Teiresias' spirit,
gone in his galley of numerous oarlocks and seen all his comrades,
also his mother, who bore him and nurtured him when he was little;
how to the voice of the Sirens of echoing song he had listened;
how he had come to the Wandering Rocks and to dreaded Charyybdis,
Skylla as well, whom never a man has escaped uninjured;
then too how his companions had slaughtered the cows of the sun god;
how high-thundering Zeus with a smoldering bolt of his lightning
struck at the hollow ship and the noble companions had perished,
all at one time; he alone had escaped from the terrible doomsday;
how he had reached the Ogygian isle and Kalypso the nymph who
kept on holding him fast—she wanted to make him her husband—
there in her spacious cavern, and gave him nurture, and told him
she would make him immortal and ageless forever and ever;
nevertheless, she never persuaded the heart in his bosom;
how after suffering much he had reached the Phaiakian people—
they in their hearts as if he were a god then honored him greatly,
sent him away with a ship to the much loved land of his fathers,
giving him treasures of bronze and of gold in abundance and garments.
This was the last of the tales he told, when the sweetness of slumber,
loosing his limbs, came upon him, releasing the cares from his spirit.
Then other things were devised by the goddess bright-eyed Athena:
finally, when she supposed that Odysseus had taken his pleasure
deep in his heart, of the bed of his wife and as well of his slumber,
straightway out of the Ocean the one born early at daybreak,
golden-enthroned, she aroused, to bring light among men, and Odysseus
out of his soft bed rose, and a word he spoke to enjoin her:
“Dear wife, we have already been glutted with manifold trials,
both of us—over my painful return back home were you weeping here in the house, while Zeus and the other gods ever detained me, wishing to come, in pains faraway from the land of my fathers.

Now since both of us thus have arrived in the bed that we longed for, you for your part take care of the goods I have in the palace; as for those cattle of mine that the arrogant suitors have ravaged, many will I get back through raids; the Achaians will give me others, until they have filled up every one of the steadings. Now however will I go out to the well-wooded farm to visit my excellent father, for he incessantly mourns me.

This is the charge I lay on you, wife, though you are sagacious: since right away when the sun comes up will the rumor begin its rounds about all those suitors, the men I killed in the palace, going upstairs to your chamber along with your women attendants, sit there and do not see anybody nor ask any questions.”

Thus, and his beautiful armor he put on over his shoulders, wakened Telémachos straightway, as well as the oxherd and swineherd, ordered them all to take up in their hands their weapons of battle. They did not disobey him but armed themselves in bronze armor, opened the door leaves, and went outside, and Odysseus was leading. Light already was over the earth, but Athena, concealing them in a night gloom, guided them rapidly out of the city.