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Opening extract from

The Odyssey

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Sites Traditionally Identified With The Wanderings Of Odysseus





THE ENCHANTRESS

On sailed Odysseus and the survivors of his band, until they came upon another island. Again they brought their ship into a sheltered bay; and for two days and nights they lay on a beach close beside the galley, too spent and weary to do anything more.

But when the third morning came, Odysseus took his sword and spear, and leaving the rest, struck inland in search of a vantage point from which he might see the lie of the land. Soon he came to a hill, and climbing to its crest, found himself looking out over the forest that clothed most of the island like a dark fleece, to the sea that washed its shores on every side. No sign of farmed land, no roof of any dwelling-place that he could see. But from the very heart of the island, where the trees crowded most densely together, rose a single thread of reddish smoke.

He was on the edge of pushing on to discover the meaning of that smoke, but he bethought him of the dangers of the other islands. Better maybe to return to the ship, get his men fed, and then send out a strong scouting party.

So he turned back the way he had come. And on the bank of a stream he came upon a red deer drinking under the shade of low-hanging branches. That took care of the problem of feeding his men, at all events. He speared the stag even as it took fright and leapt away; and binding its feet together with a rope of twisted withies, slung the carcass round his neck and, using his spear as a staff, set off again for the ship.

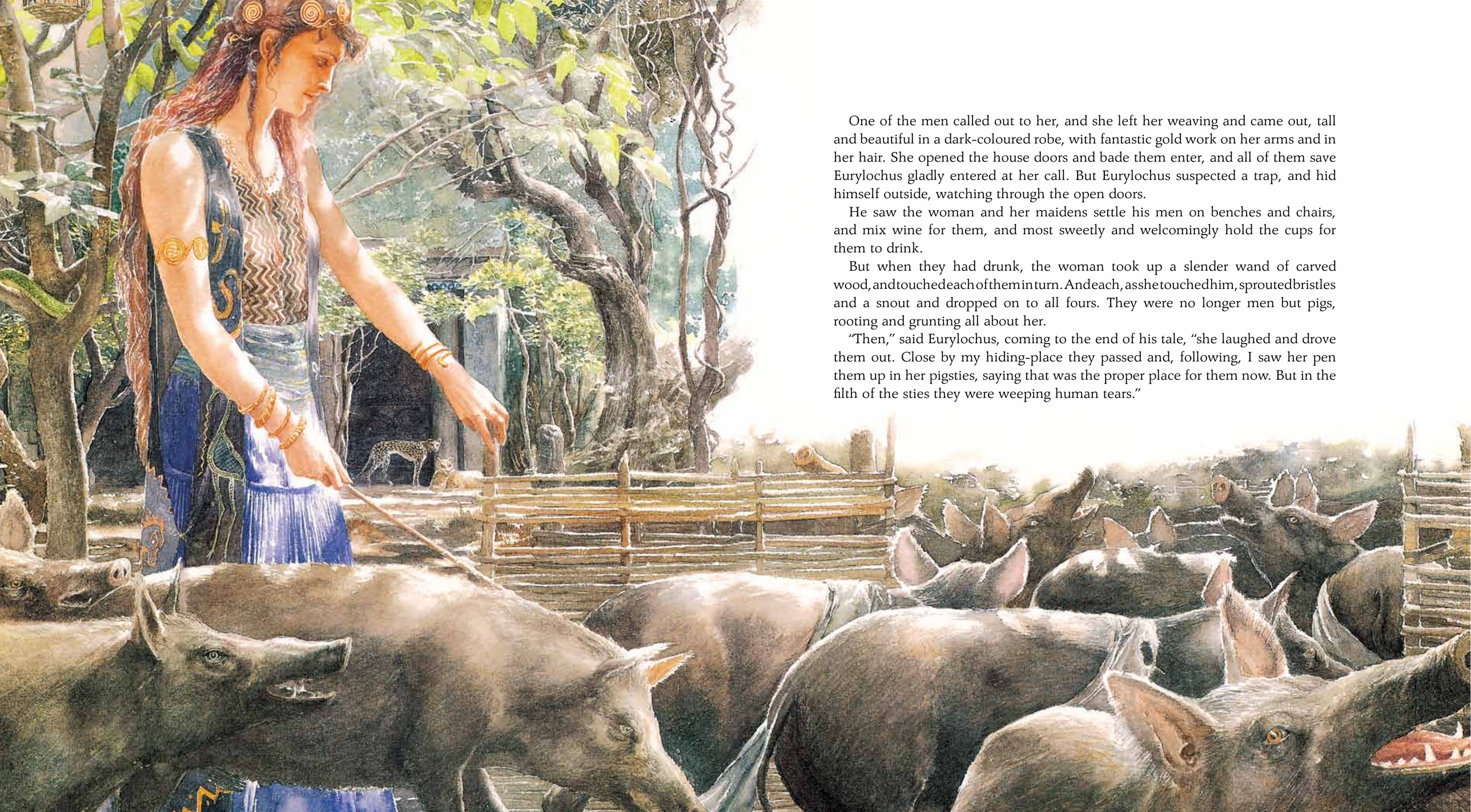
When he reached it, he found his men sitting and lying round about it, still too exhausted to care what became of them; and he flung the deer down into their midst, saying, "Hearts up! Our death day is not yet; and while there's food and drink to be had, let's feast, instead of dying of starvation!"

So they made a fire and supped that night on roast venison, and lay down to sleep with lightened hearts and full bellies.

Next morning, Odysseus divided his men into two companies and, taking command of one himself, gave the other to Eurylochus, a distant kinsman of his. And they scratched their marks on two slips of wood and put them into a helmet, shaking them up to decide which of them should go to find out the meaning of the distant feather of smoke. Eurylochus' slip leapt out, and so he set off with his two-and-twenty men into the forest, leaving Odysseus and the rest to wait with the ship.

At the day's end Eurylochus returned. He was alone, shaking and weeping, and at first he could not speak, for horror of what he had seen. But at last he grew calmer and managed to tell them what had happened.

They had come to a beautiful stone-built house at the dark heart of the forest. Tame wolves and lions were loose all around it, which came and fawned on them like hounds, or reared up to set their paws on their shoulders and lick their faces. And within the pillared foreporch they glimpsed a woman moving to and fro before her loom, and heard her voice, for she was singing softly and sweetly as she wove the delicate web.



One of the men called out to her, and she left her weaving and came out, tall and beautiful in a dark-coloured robe, with fantastic gold work on her arms and in her hair. She opened the house doors and bade them enter, and all of them save Eurylochus gladly entered at her call. But Eurylochus suspected a trap, and hid himself outside, watching through the open doors.

He saw the woman and her maidens settle his men on benches and chairs, and mix wine for them, and most sweetly and welcomingly hold the cups for them to drink.

But when they had drunk, the woman took up a slender wand of carved wood, and touched each of them in turn. And each, as she touched him, sprouted bristles and a snout and dropped on to all fours. They were no longer men but pigs, rooting and grunting all about her.

"Then," said Eurylochus, coming to the end of his tale, "she laughed and drove them out. Close by my hiding-place they passed and, following, I saw her pen them up in her pigsties, saying that was the proper place for them now. But in the filth of the sties they were weeping human tears."

When Odysseus had heard him, he slung on his sword belt, and took his bow, and bade his kinsman come back with him to the house of the enchantress. But Eurylochus crouched to his knees, weeping afresh. "I cannot – Lord, I cannot go back to that place! And do not you go there either. The men are beyond rescue, and you will never return!"

And in the end Odysseus left him with the rest, and set out through the forest alone.

But on the way he was met by Hermes, the messenger of the gods, in the likeness of a beautiful young man, who took him by the hand, saying, "Here you come through the woods alone, bent on rescuing your comrades from the pigsties of the witch Circe. But truly I think that you too will join them, but for the aid that I can give you." And he picked a plant growing at his feet and held it out, the root as black as night and the flower as white as milk. It was a plant which cannot be picked by mortal men; but to the gods all things are easy.

"Take this herb, keep it with you," said Hermes, "and the cup of enchantment which Circe will brew for you will have no power to rob you of your human shape; nor will the touch of her wand. But when she strikes you with it, you must draw your sword and leap at her as though you meant to cut her down. She will fall at your feet in terror, for no man has ever before withstood her magic, and will beg you for your goodwill and friendship; this you must grant her kindly, but not until you have made her swear to undo what she has done and work no more evil against you or your comrades."

And so saying, he was gone on his shining way back to Olympus, the home of the gods.

Odysseus thrust the plant into the breast of his tunic, where it lay cool against his skin, and went on his way. He came to the house of Circe and heard her singing at her loom, and called to her, standing in the portico with the lions and wolves fawning about him. She came out and bade him enter, and seated him in a fine chair enriched with silver and with a stool for his feet. Then she made him a posset of wine sprinkled with cheese and barley-meal and honey, and she dripped something into it from a flask she kept hidden in the hollow of her hand.

She gave the cup to Odysseus, saying, "Drink, and be welcome under my roof." And, trusting to the white-flowered plant in the breast of his tunic, he drank and set the cup down.

Then she picked up her slender wand and flicked him with it, smilingly bidding him go and join his friends in the sties outside.

But Odysseus drew his sword and made as though to run her through. With a shriek, she slipped below the blade and dropped at his feet, crying out, "Who are you, that my magic cannot touch you? Surely you must be that Odysseus who, the god Hermes once told me, would come this way in his black ship following the sea-ways home from Troy. Pray you, put up your sword, that we may learn to trust each other and be friends!"

Odysseus stood over her, still holding his sword naked in his hands. "First swear by all the gods that you will work no more evil upon me or my men. Then it may be that there can be friendship between us."

Weeping still, Circe the enchantress swore by all the gods, and Odysseus sheathed his sword.

Then her four maidens, daughters of the springs and the trees, spread fine purple rugs over the chairs, and set golden dishes on the silver tables and mixed wine in a silver bowl. They heated water and bathed Odysseus, sluicing his head and shoulders until all his weariness was washed away; and they dressed him in fine new garments and led him to the table, bidding him eat and drink.

But he sat silent, not touching the food and wine, until Circe asked him what was amiss. "Do you still doubt me?" said she. "You need have no fear. I have sworn to do you no harm."

Odysseus said, "But what of my comrades? How can I eat and be merry while they are still captive in the swine-shapes you have set upon them, and held fast in your sties?"

Then Circe went out from her hall and down to the sties, with Odysseus walking close behind her. She opened the gate and called out the swine huddled within, and touched each in turn with her wand; and as she touched them they became men again, just as they had been before, and came swiftly to their captain, flinging their arms about him and each other and weeping for joy.



THE LAND OF THE DEAD

They feasted and slept soft and feasted again, and the days passed pleasantly enough; and no one, not even Odysseus, noticed how they went by, for on Circe's enchanted island time seemed to matter less than in the world of men. But when a whole year had gone by, and the flowers that had scented the woodland clearings when first they came that way opened their petals again, his men came to him saying, "Lord, if ever we are to leave this place and return to our own homes, it is time that you began to think of Ithaca once more."

So that night, when the men were sleeping as usual in the darkened hall, Odysseus went to speak alone with Circe in her own apartments.

And Circe, combing her long dark hair, said to him, "Go then, in all kindness. But even I cannot tell you all the things you need to know if you are to come at last over the sea-ways to your own land."

"Who then can tell us these things?" asked Odysseus.

Still the lady Circe combed her hair. "You must go to the Land of the Dead, to the dark halls of Hades and Persephone. There you must call up the ghost of the blind prophet Tiresias of Thebes. He alone has the knowledge that you need."

Then Odysseus' heart sank within him, for how should he, a living man, go down to the Land of the Dead, and return again?

But Circe told him the ways that he must go and the things that he must do, and gave him a black ram and a black ewe for sacrifices when the right time came.

And next day he called his crew together, and led them down to the ship. All save one: Elpenor, the youngest of them, had got very drunk the night before, and gone to sleep by himself on the flat roof for the sake of the cool air. When the bustle of departure roused him, he came hurrying, still half-asleep, missed his footing on the ladder and fell to the ground, breaking his neck.

The rest of the crew, who had thought that they were sailing for Ithaca and their own homes, flung themselves down by the ship and wept when Odysseus told them of the dark voyage that they must make first. But there was no help in weeping, and sorrowfully they ran the ship down into the shallows and loaded the gear on board, together with the black ram and ewe. Then they set sail, and a wind sent by Circe bore them where it would.

It bore them for maybe a day and maybe many days, out of the light and into the dark, to the deep-flowing river Oceanus which girdles the earth, and on to a land that is forever cloaked in mist and never sees the sun, to the sad grove of poplars and willows that is Persephone's own. And there they beached the ship, and went on foot, following the Oceanus' banks to the place where the two rivers of the Dead come together.

There they dug out a trench, and poured into it honey mixed with milk and wine which Circe had sent with them for the purpose, praying as they did so to the ghosts of the dead. Then Odysseus sacrificed the ram and the ewe as Circe had bidden, and let their red blood run into the trench.

And the pale ghosts came, eager to sniff the blood. Shades of brides who had died long ago, and youths and unhappy old men, and warriors who had fallen in battle, their spears shadowy in their hands, their wounds still upon them. And Odysseus, with fear clamped cold in his belly, bade his men flay the sheep and burn the sacred portions to Hades and Persephone. And while they did so, he sat by the trench with his drawn sword across his knees, that no spirit before Tiresias might come at the fresh blood.

The first to come up was the shade of young Elpenor, begging Odysseus to burn his body, for until that was done he might not mingle with his fellow shades. And Odysseus promised to burn his body as soon as he returned to Circe's island. Then came the shade of his own mother, who had died since he left home, but despite his grief, he would not let even her come near the blood until Tiresias had tasted it.

And then, at last, came the shade of the blind prophet and begged Odysseus to let him drink the blood of the sacrifice; and Odysseus sheathed his sword and stood back.

When Tiresias had tasted the blood and drawn strength from it, he spoke out with the true voice of the seer. "Poseidon, Lord of the Sea, is still wroth with you for the blinding of his son, and will make your voyage a hard one. Nevertheless, you and your men may still come safe to your own landing-beach if you listen now to my warning.

"You will come in your voyaging to the island of Thrinacia, and there you will find the cattle of Hyperion the Sun Lord grazing on rich pastureland. Leave them to graze in peace, and all may yet be well with your homecoming. But harm them in any way and I see destruction for your ship and your crew; and for you, if maybe you escape the fate of your men, I see a lone homecoming in a stranger's ship to a house full of strife and sorrow. Proud men are laying waste your possessions and pressing marriage upon your wife, Penelope, who believes you long since lost to her."

"So be it, if that is what the gods decree," Odysseus said. And seeing the shade of his mother still hovering close by, he asked how he might have speech with her.



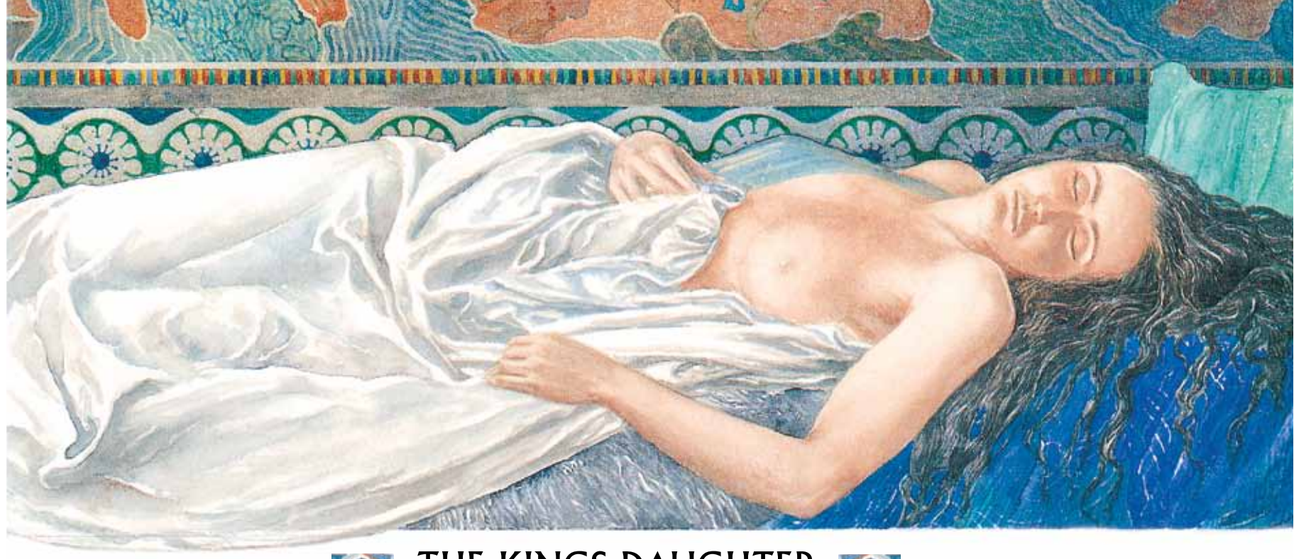
And she was gone, back into the deeps whence she had come.

In that instant a mountainous wave hurtled down, scattering the timbers of the boat. Odysseus scrambled on to one of the beams and sitting astride it, dragged off his sodden clothes and bound the veil about his waist. Then he flung himself into the water and began to swim. And now bright-eyed Athene came to his aid, quenching all the winds except the wind from the north that would help him toward the distant land.

For two days and nights Athene's north wind carried him in the right direction. On the third day the land was very near, and the wind sank to a flat calm, and Odysseus began to swim for the rocky shore. But soon he was engulfed in a terrible surf that crashed and pounded on the rocks; and he would have been broken like a bit of driftwood, but that he managed to grasp a jagged rock-spur and cling to it until the savage backwash dragged him out again. Three times he clung to the rock, and three times he was dragged out again by the undertow. And at last he gave up trying to land there, and struck out along the coast outside the line of breakers looking for a better place, until he came to quieter water where a broad river flowed into the sea, and his feet found shelving sand.

He staggered clear of the water and up the beach, pitched forward on his face and knew no more for a while.

When he came back to himself, he unbound Ino's veil from his waist and flung it far out, turning his head away as she had bidden him. He pushed inland a little way, following the bank of the river. But he had not the strength to get far. When he came to two ancient and twisted olive trees growing close together, whose crowding stems and interwoven branches made a shelter from the wind, he crept between them, and finding the ground there thick with fallen leaves, covered himself with them until a faint warmth stirred in him. And Athene closed his eyes in sleep.



THE KINGS DAUGHTER

Now, while Odysseus slept under his covering of olive leaves on the river bank, up in the high palace of the king of that country the Princess Nausicaa slept also. And in her sleep, Pallas Athene came to her in the guise of a friend of hers, a sea-captain's daughter.

She stood beside the bed, seeming half-vexed and half-laughing, saying, "Nausicaa, how does your mother come to have such a heedless daughter? Look at all the beautiful clothes you leave lying about neglected, though you may soon be married – you with every young noble in the land in love with you – and have need of them for your marriage-chest and for guest-presents! Let us go down to the river and do some washing in the morning, with a cart to carry the garments."

When she woke in the morning, Nausicaa remembered what she thought was her dream; and she went to her father the king and asked him for a mule-cart, that she might take her linen down to the river for washing.



And her father lent her a smooth-running cart with a pair of mules harnessed to it. The servants piled in the bright-coloured garments, and the queen her mother caused food and wine to be packed in also, and gave her a flask of the softest olive oil, that she and her maidens might go bathing and anoint themselves afterwards. And Nausicaa climbed into the cart and took up the reins and drove off toward the river, not too fast, because of all her maidens following on foot.

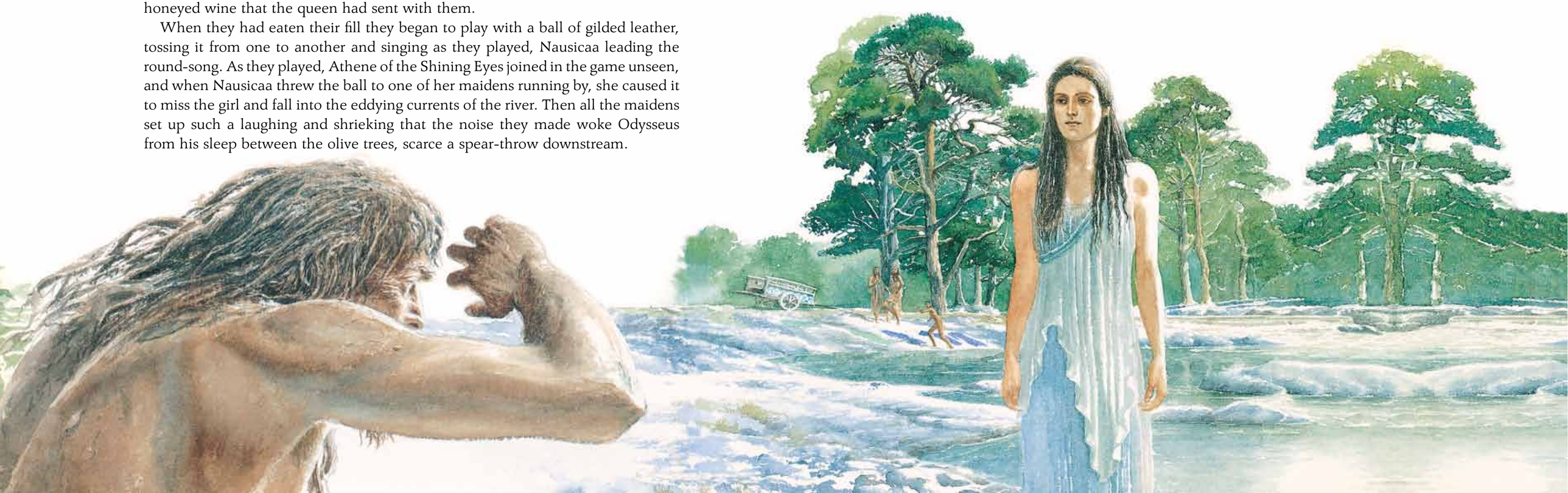
They came to the river and to the clear shallow pool that was the best place for washing clothes; and there they turned the mules loose to graze. Then they began to wash the garments they had brought, treading them down in the water-slides over the broad stones, and, when they were rinsed clean, spreading them out to dry in the sun and wind along the bank.

While the clothes dried, the girls bathed and rubbed themselves with olive oil and, pulling on their loose tunics again, feasted on the fruit and little cakes and honeyed wine that the queen had sent with them.

When they had eaten their fill they began to play with a ball of gilded leather, tossing it from one to another and singing as they played, Nausicaa leading the round-song. As they played, Athene of the Shining Eyes joined in the game unseen, and when Nausicaa threw the ball to one of her maidens running by, she caused it to miss the girl and fall into the eddying currents of the river. Then all the maidens set up such a laughing and shrieking that the noise they made woke Odysseus from his sleep between the olive trees, scarce a spear-throw downstream.

For a few heartbeats of time he lay still, half-roused, and thinking by the screams that some nearby village was being attacked by an enemy, or a cruel master was beating his women slaves. But as he woke more fully, the sounds changed in his ears to the squealing of girls at play. Maybe if he asked them, they would give him the help he so sorely needed. He hauled himself to his knees, then to his feet, and, breaking off a branch of wild olive to cover his nakedness, he dragged himself slowly and stiffly out from the riverside scrub.

But his feet were bare and bleeding and his face wild with all that he had suffered, and his matted hair and beard rimed with sea-salt. To the playing girls he looked as fearsome as a lion breaking out of a thicket, and they screamed in good earnest and ran this way and that, all save the Princess Nausicaa, who stood and awaited his coming with wide grave eyes.





THE ARCHERY CONTEST

Odysseus passed the rest of the night on piled sheepskins in the portico, where he lay wakeful, his head racing with plans for overcoming his enemies, until the Lady Athene brought him the sleep he sorely needed.

In the morning he rose early, and prayed to Zeus the All-Father for a sign of his favour. Scarce was his prayer finished than Zeus sent him a peal of thunder out of a clear sky. Then he heard the voice of a woman grinding corn close by, that the suitors might have their fill of fresh bread; grinding still though all her fellows had finished, because she was old and weak and had not yet filled her allotted number of baskets. "Lord Zeus," she said, "surely that thunder was a sign of your favour to some lucky man. Let me share in his good fortune. Grant that this be the last time I grind for the young lords who make merry in my master's hall, and who have worn me out with grinding for them! May this be their last feast!"

And at the thunderclap and the woman's words, Odysseus' heart lifted and grew strong within him.

Soon the servants had started work, sweeping and sprinkling the earthen floors and spreading purple coverings on the chairs, sponging down the tables and cleaning the wine-cups under the watchful eye of Eurynome the housekeeper, while others went to fetch water from the well.

Then Eumaeus appeared with pigs from the farm, and hailed Odysseus like an old friend; while they chatted together, Melanthius the goatherd arrived with beasts for slaughter, and greeted Odysseus in his own insolent fashion. "What, still here? Best take yourself off, before I have to help you on your way!"

Then came Philoetius the cowherd with cattle for the table, who, hearing what ill-treatment the strange beggar had had from the suitors, marched straight up to him and caught his hand, saying, "Here's a welcome to you, old fellow. You have come on hard times, but luck changes; you may go up any day, just as these lordlings who guzzle my best cattle may go down."

Lastly came the suitors themselves, like a noisy gaggle of geese, crowding in to the morning meal, and Telemachus with a couple of his favourite hounds at heel and a hunting-spear in his hand, who bade Odysseus take his seat just within the hall and ordered the servants to give him a fair share of the food.

Ctesippus, one of the suitors, said, "His fair share he has had already, but I will give him something extra," and threw an ox-foot at Odysseus with all his might. But the beggar only leaned aside, and the ox-foot struck the wall where he had been.

Telemachus protested furiously at this, though he was only one against their many, and he did not forget his orders to keep the peace until the right moment came.

In the hall, Eumaeus was carrying the bow to Odysseus, but the suitors made such a threatening clamour that he paused halfway and would have laid it down, fearing for his life. But Telemachus shouted to him above the hubbub, "Get on with that bow, old fellow. You cannot obey all of us, and since I am your master it had better be me!"

And Eumaeus gathered his courage and walked on down the hall, and laid the great bow together with its quiver in Odysseus' hands. Then, on a private word from his old master, he went and bade Eurycleia lock the door of the women's quarters, and when he had seen it done, returned to the hall. Meanwhile Philoetius had made fast the courtyard gates, securing them with a ship's rope that was lying in the colonnade. Then he too returned to the hall, and rejoined the swineherd close to Odysseus, who, heedless of the suitors' mockery and insults, was turning the bow this way and that, making sure that it was in good condition, and that the ibex horns of which it was made were free from worm.

When he was satisfied, he set the butt under his instep, and bent the bow and strung it as easily as a minstrel restringing his lyre. A murmur of angry dismay rose from the crowded hall. He tried the string, hearing the twang of it like the call-note of a swallow. He took up the arrow that he had already drawn from the quiver beside him, and nocked it to the string, and, not rising from the stool on which he sat, raised the bow and drew and loosed all in one swift movement.

And the arrow sped on its way, passing cleanly through all twelve axe-rings.

"Your beggarly guest has done no dishonour to your father's bow," he said to Telemachus. "But now, if we wish to feast again in the king's hall, it is time that we hunted and made the kill." And so saying, he got up from the stool, giving his shoulders a little shake, like a man getting ready for action.

And Telemachus came up the hall to stand beside him, his hunting spear ready in his hand.

