



BOOK

THE TRUNK OF THE OLIVE TREE

TWENTY-THREE



360 Greathearted Odysseus, home at last,
 was being bathed now by Eurynome
 and rubbed with golden oil, and clothed again
 in a fresh tunic and a cloak. Athena
 lent him beauty, head to foot. She made him
 taller, and massive, too, with cringing hair
 365 in curls like petals of wild hyacinth
 but all red-golden. Think of gold infused
 on silver by a craftsman, whose fine art
 Hephaestus taught him, or Athena: one
 whose work moves to delight: just so she lavished
 370 beauty over Odysseus' head and shoulders.
 He sat then in the same chair by the pillar,
 facing his silent wife, and said:

“Strange woman,

375 the immortals of Olympus made you hard,
 harder than any. Who else in the world
 would keep aloof as you do from her husband
 if he returned to her from years of trouble,
 cast on his own land in the twentieth year?

360 **Eurynome** (yŏŏ-rĭn'ē-mē): a female servant.

368 **Hephaestus** (hĭ-fēs'tēs): the god of metalworking.

369 **lavished**: showered.

373 **immortals of Olympus**: the gods, who live on Mount Olympus.

WORDS
TO
KNOW

aloof (ə-lŏŏf') *adj.* distant; remote; standoffish

Nurse, make up a bed for me to sleep on.
Her heart is iron in her breast.”

Penelope

380 spoke to Odysseus now. She said:

“Strange man,

if man you are . . . This is no pride on my part
nor scorn for you—not even wonder, merely.
I know so well how you—how he—appeared
boarding the ship for Troy. But all the same . . .

385 Make up his bed for him, Eurycleia.
Place it outside the bedchamber my lord
built with his own hands. Pile the big bed
with fleeces, rugs, and sheets of purest linen.”

390 With this she tried him to the breaking point,
and he turned on her in a flash raging:

“Woman, by heaven you’ve stung me now!
Who dared to move my bed?
No builder had the skill for that—unless
a god came down to turn the trick. No mortal
395 in his best days could budge it with a crowbar.
There is our pact and pledge, our secret sign,
built into that bed—my handiwork
and no one else’s!

An old trunk of olive

400 grew like a pillar on the building plot,
and I laid out our bedroom round that tree,
lined up the stone walls, built the walls and roof,
gave it a doorway and smooth-fitting doors.
Then I lopped off the silvery leaves and branches,
405 hewed and shaped that stump from the roots up
into a bedpost, drilled it, let it serve
as model for the rest. I planed them all,
inlaid them all with silver, gold and ivory,
and stretched a bed between—a pliant web
of oxhide thongs dyed crimson.

There’s our sign!

410 I know no more. Could someone else’s hand
have sawn that trunk and dragged the frame away?”

380–384 Think about why Penelope might hold herself aloof from a man who claims to be the husband she hasn’t seen in 20 years and who has just killed more than 100 men in her banquet hall. Note the doubt she expresses in “if man you are.”

385–411 The bed symbolizes the lasting love between Odysseus and Penelope, and the way it was built is a secret only they know. Because one of the bedposts is the trunk of an olive tree still rooted in the ground, the bed is unmovable. Why do you think Penelope asks the servant to move a bed that she knows cannot be moved?

408–409 a pliant web . . . crimson: a network of ox-hide straps, dyed red, stretched between the sides of the bed to form a springy base for the bedding.

Their secret! as she heard it told, her knees
grew tremulous and weak, her heart failed her.
With eyes brimming tears she ran to him,
415 throwing her arms around his neck and kissed him,
murmuring:

“Do not rage at me, Odysseus!

No one ever matched your caution! Think
what difficulty the gods gave: they denied us
life together in our prime and flowering years,
420 kept us from crossing into age together.
Forgive me, don't be angry. I could not
welcome you with love on sight! I armed myself
long ago against the frauds of men,
impostors who might come—and all those many
425 whose underhanded ways bring evil on!
Helen of Argos, daughter of Zeus and Leda,
would she have joined the stranger, lain with him,
if she had known her destiny? known the Achaeans
in arms would bring her back to her own country?
430 Surely a goddess moved her to adultery,
her blood unchilled by war and evil coming,
the years, the desolation; ours, too.
But here and now, what sign could be so clear
as this of our own bed?
435 No other man has ever laid eyes on it—
only my own slave, Actoris, that my father
sent with me as a gift—she kept our door.
You make my stiff heart know that I am yours.”

440 Now from his breast into his eyes the ache
of longing mounted, and he wept at last,
his dear wife, clear and faithful, in his arms,
longed for

as the sunwarmed earth is longed for by a swimmer
spent in rough water where his ship went down
under Poseidon's blows, gale winds and tons of sea.
445 Few men can keep alive through a big surf
to crawl, clotted with brine, on kindly beaches
in joy, in joy, knowing the abyss behind:
and so she too rejoiced, her gaze upon her husband,
her white arms round him pressed as though forever.

413 **tremulous**: trembling;
quivering.

421–425 Like Odysseus, Penelope
proves to be an able trickster. Her
explanation here gives insight into
the troubles that she's had to
endure during Odysseus' long
absence.

426 **Argos** (är'gōs) . . . **Leda** (lē'də).

426–432 Penelope contrasts her
faithfulness with Helen's adultery,
which caused the Trojan War and
therefore the long separation
between Penelope and Odysseus.

436 **Actoris** (äk-tōr'īs).

442–449 In this epic simile,
Odysseus is compared to a person
who has suffered a shipwreck,
swum through rough seas, and
finally crawled ashore, covered
with sea salt (“clotted with brine”
but rejoicing to have survived the
ordeal.

WORDS
TO
KNOW

desolation (dēs'ə-lā'shən) *n.* lonely grief; misery