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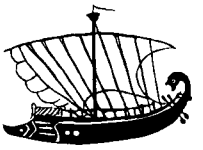

BOOK 21

Then did the goddess bright-eyed Athena put into the mind of
noble Ikários' daughter Penelope, thoughtful and prudent,
now to set up for the suitors the bow and the silver-gray iron,
there in Odysseus' halls, as a contest, starting the slaughter.
So she descended the steep high stairway, down from her quarters,
when in her large strong hand she had taken the beautiful brazen
well-curved key of the door, on which was an ivory handle.
She set forth with her women attendants to go to the inmost
storeroom—it was in there that her lord's possessions were lying:
treasures of bronze and of gold and of iron, laborious metal.
Therein also were lying a back-springing bow and a quiver,
holder of shafts, in which there were many maleficent arrows—
gifts given him by a friend who in Lakedaímon had met him,
Íphitos, Eúrytos' scion, a man who was like the immortals.
These two men in Messénè already had met one another,
while in the house of sagacious Ortílochos. There had Odysseus
gone in pursuit of a debt which all of the people had owed him:
for out of Ithaka men of Messénè had stolen and borne off
sheep, three hundred, and shepherds, in galleys of numerous oarlocks.
It was for them that Odysseus had gone a long way on his mission,
while still a boy, for his father and others, the elders, had sent him.
Íphitos came there searching for horses, the twelve of his females
which he had lost, at their teats young mule-colts, patient in labor.
They were the ones which later would be for him death and disaster
when he came to the dwelling of Zeus' son powerful-hearted
Herakles, who was a man well practiced in monstrous actions:
he in his own house murdered the man, though a guest and a stranger.
Cruel, he neither respected the gods' oversight nor the table
which he himself set near him; and afterward, when he had killed him,
he kept hold of the mares with the powerful hooves in his palace.

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Seeking them, Íphitos met with Odysseus and gave him the bow which
in times past great Eúrytos carried and which he had later
left to his son at the time he died in his high-built palace.
Him had Odysseus given a sharp sword then and a strong spear;
it was the start of a firm close friendship; but never at table
they entertained each other; before that, Zeus' son murdered
Íphitos, Eúrytos' scion, a man who was like the immortals,
him who had given the bow; but afterward noble Odysseus
when to the war he went on the dark-hued galleys would never
take it along, but he left it to lie in his halls, a reminder
there of a well-loved friend, and he carried it when in his country.

Finally then, when the splendor of women arrived at the chamber,
she went over the threshold carved out of wood that a workman
once had skillfully planed, made straight by stretching a chalk line,
fitting the doorposts and putting upon them shimmering door leaves;
straightway then from the hook she quickly unfastened the bolt strap,
then inserted the key, and the bar of the door struck upward,
pushing it out of the latch; and the doors groaned loud as a bull which
feeds on the grass of a meadow—so loud did the beautiful doors now
sound when struck by the key—then quickly were they spread open.
She stepped up on the high-raised platform; there were the coffers
standing, and inside these sweet-scented apparel was lying.
Reaching from where she stood, she lifted the bow from its hanger,
taking the bow case too, a resplendent one that enclosed it.
There on the spot she sat, then putting it down on her knees, she
plaintively, stridently wailed while taking the bow of her lord out.
But then, when she had taken her comfort in tearful lamenting,
she set forth to the hall to go join the illustrious suitors,
holding in hand that bow, back-springing, as well as the quiver,
holder of shafts, in which there were many maleficent arrows.
Handmaids carried a basket for her, in which there was iron
lying aplenty, and bronze, all prizes acquired by the master.
When she had come down there to the suitors, the splendor of women
stood by the pillar supporting the roof beams, stoutly constructed,
holding in front of her cheeks as a veil her shimmering head scarf;
standing with her there, one at each side, were the virtuous handmaids.
Straightway then to the suitors she spoke; these words she addressed them:

"Listen to me now, valorous suitors, who always are vexing
this house, using it up, incessantly eating and drinking,
while my husband is absent a long time; nor is there any

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other account you are able to make in the way of a pretext,
only that you are desiring to marry me, take me as bedmate.
But come, suitors, and act, since this is a prize that appears now:
for as a test I will set the great bow of the godlike Odysseus.
He who is nimblest at bending the bow with his hands to the bowstring,
then through all twelve axes is able to shoot the one arrow,
him I will follow as spouse, so leaving behind me the house where
I was a bride, so lovely, so full of the goods of existence—
I feel sure I will always remember it, even when dreaming."
So she spoke, and she bade Eumaíos, the excellent swineherd,
now to set up for the suitors the bow and the silver-gray iron.
Then as he wept Eumaíos received them, setting them down there;
also the oxherd wailed, as he looked on the bow of his master.
Then Antínoös jeered and said these words, calling upon them:
"Childish yokels, who think of no more than the day that is passing!
Miserable men, why now do you pour out tears, and the woman's
heart in her breast why stir to commotion? Enough as it is her
heart lies low in affliction because she has lost her dear husband.
But now sit there in silence devouring your dinner, or else go
out of the house and lament, while leaving the bow in its place to
be a decisive test for the suitors, for I do not think this
well-polished bow can at all be easily bent to the bowstring.
For among all these men in the house there is certainly no man
such as Odysseus was—I saw him myself, with my own eyes;
well I remember the time, though I was a boy and still childish."
So he spoke, but the heart in his breast yet hoped for success in
bending the bow to the bowstring and shooting a shaft through the iron.
But in fact, it was he who would first be tasting an arrow
out of the hands of the faultless Odysseus, the man he was slighting
now as he sat in the palace and stirred up all of the comrades.
Thus did the sacred strength of Telémachos speak and address them:
"Oh! Zeus scion of Kronos has made me utterly witless!
It is my own dear mother who says, although she is prudent,
that some other man she will now follow, forsaking this palace.
Yet in the witlessness of my heart I laugh and am happy!
But come, suitors, and act, since this is a prize that appears now—
no such woman as she now exists in the land of Achaia,
neither in sacred Pylos nor Argos nor yet in Mykénè,
neither in Ithaka island itself, nor upon the dark mainland.
This you yourselves know well; what need have I, praising my mother?

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But come, do not evade it with pretexts nor turn away from
stringing the bow any longer, that we may observe what happens.
Yes, even I myself might make an attempt at the bow now;
should I manage to string it and shoot my shaft through the iron,
then I would not be pained if the lady my mother should leave me
here in the palace to go with another, as I would be left here
able to win already my father's beautiful prizes."

He spoke; then from his shoulders he took his mantle of purple
as he jumped up, and his sharp sword also he took from his shoulders.
Then to begin he stood up the axes, for all of them digging
one long trench though the hall, and he made it straight with a chalk line,
tamping the earth around them; and amazement seized all, observing
how he stood them in order, for never before had he seen it.
He stepped onto the threshold and stood there trying the bow out:
thrice he caused it to quiver as he kept straining to bend it;
thrice he slackened his strength—in his heart he ever was hopeful
that he could fasten the bowstring and shoot his shaft through the iron.
Pulling it now with his strength for the fourth time, he would have strung it
but that Odysseus nodded and stopped him, though he was eager.
Then did the sacred strength of Telémachos speak and address them:
"Oh what shame! I will turn out, surely, a coward and weakling;
else I am still too young and cannot yet trust to my hands for
keeping away any man when he first starts doing me outrage.
But come, you who in strength are in fact more able than I am,
make an attempt at the bow now, and let us accomplish the contest."

So did he say, then putting the bow from himself on the ground, he
leaned it against the two wings of the door, well-planed and close-fitted;
there also on the beautiful handle he leaned the swift arrow;
then he again sat down on the armchair whence he had risen.
Then among them thus spoke Antínoös son of Eupeíthes:
"All of you comrades rise, from the left to the right in order,
starting at once from the place where wine is poured out by the server."

So Antínoös spoke, and his words found favor among them.
It was Leiódes who first stood up now, the scion of Oinops;
he was their sacrifice augur and sat by the beautiful wine bowl
always, away in a corner; and only to him were their reckless
follies detestable—all of the suitors he used to admonish.
He was the first man then who took up the bow and swift arrow.
He stepped onto the threshold and stood there trying the bow out,
nor did he string it, for sooner than that, by pulling he tired his

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hands, unhardened and tender; and then he spoke to the suitors:
"Friends, I cannot string this—let somebody else now take it.
This is a bow that is soon to bereave many excellent men of
spirit and life breath, since it is certainly better by far to
die than to go on living and miss the one thing for whose sake we
always are gathering here, that we every day are expecting.
Even at this time now, someone still hopes in his spirit,
keeps on wanting to marry Penelope, wife of Odysseus.
When however the bow has been seen as it is and attempted,
then let him turn to another among all the fair-robed Achaians,
woo her and seek her with courtship presents; and she would in that case
marry the man who gave her the most and came destined to wed her."

Such were the words he spoke; then putting the bow from himself, he
leaned it against the two wings of the door, well-planed and close-fitted;
there also on the beautiful handle he leaned the swift arrow;
then he again sat down on the armchair whence he had risen.
Then Antínoös jeered and said these words, calling upon him:
"What is this word, Leiódes, escaping the fence of your teeth now!
It is a wretched and terrible one—I am outraged to hear it—
if this bow is indeed to bereave many excellent men of
spirit and life breath, since you yourself are not able to string it.
For it was no such man you were born to the lady your mother
as to be capable ever of drawing the bow and the arrows;
but soon others among the illustrious suitors will string it."

So he spoke, and he called to Melánthios, herder of goat flocks:
"Come now, Melánthios, kindle a fire for us inside the palace,
then put near it a good long bench and upon it some fleeces;
bring out a great round cake of the tallow that lies in the storeroom,
so when the young men have heated it up and have rubbed it with suet,
we might make an attempt on the bow and accomplish the contest."

He spoke; Melánthios kindled a weariless fire very quickly,
then brought in and put near it a bench and upon it some fleeces,
brought out too a great round of the tallow that lay in the storeroom.
Heating it up, the youths made their attempt at the bow, but they were not
able to fasten the string—they were far too weak to achieve it.
Still Antínoös held back and godlike Eurýmachos also;
they were the chiefs of the suitors and best by far in their prowess.

Meanwhile two of the men had departed together, as comrades,
out of the palace—the oxherd and swineherd of godlike Odysseus.
After them noble Odysseus himself came out of the palace.

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But then, when they were all outside of the doors and the courtyard,
raising his voice, he addressed them in words mollifying and gentle:
"Oxherd and you too, swineherd—shall I now speak to you something
or keep it to myself? My spirit is bidding me say it.
How would you make a defense for Odysseus if he were to come here
all of a sudden from somewhere and some god guided him homeward?
Then would it be for the suitors you fought or instead for Odysseus?
Speak out now in the way that your heart and your spirit command you."
Speaking to him then answered the herdsman, tender of cattle:
"Zeus our father, if only you bring this wish to fulfillment—
let that man come back; let a god lead him to his homeland!—
then you would learn what strength I have and what hands to employ it!"
So in like fashion Eumaíos was praying to all of the gods for
various-minded Odysseus to come back home to his palace.
But when he had determined that these men's minds were unfailing,
then he at once made answer, and in these words he addressed them:
"I am home—yes, it is I, since, having endured many evils,
I have returned in the twentieth year to the land of my fathers.
Now I discover as I come back that of all of the servants,
only the two of you wished it; for I have heard none of the others
praying for me to return once more and arrive in the palace.
What it will be for you both, I will now speak fully and truly:
if a god under my hand brings down the illustrious suitors,
then for the two of you I will get wives and provide you possessions,
houses as well, built close to my own; and to me in the future
you will be comrades, friends of Tèlémachos, even his brothers.
Come now, something besides I will show you, a manifest token,
so that you know me for certain and so in your hearts you can trust me:
it is a scar that a boar inflicted on me with its white tusk
when with the sons of Autólykos once I went to Parnassos."
So having spoken, he drew his tatters away from the huge scar.
Those two, when they had seen it and each thing well had considered,
burst out weeping and threw their arms around skillful Odysseus,
giving affectionate welcome by kissing his head and his shoulders.
So also were their heads and their hands then kissed by Odysseus.
Now would the light of the sun have gone down on the lamentation
had not Odysseus himself restrained them, addressing them these words:
"Stop this wailing and lamentation, lest somebody see it
as he is leaving the palace and then tell those who are inside.
Go in, rather, one after another and not all together;

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I will go first, you after. And let this serve as the signal:
all of the others within, those who are illustrious suitors,
will not allow that to me be given the bow and the quiver;
still, you carry the bow through the hall then, noble Eumaíos,
putting it into my hands, then bidding the women attendants
onto the close-fitting doors of the hall put bars to secure them;
even if any of them should within hear groaning or noises
made by the men inside of these walls of ours, then not at all should
she go out, but remain right there at her work in silence.
Noble Philoítios, you I order to close up the courtyard
doors with a bar, then speedily fasten the binding around it."

So having said, he entered the house well-built as a dwelling;
then he went and sat down on the bench whence he had arisen.
Inside too went both of the servants of godlike Odysseus.

Now was Eurýmachos wielding the bow in his hands already,
heating it this side and that in the blaze of the fire, but he could not
fasten the string even so, and his valorous heart swelled hugely.
Wrathfully thus he spoke and said these words, calling upon them:
"Oh shame! Here is a woe for myself and for all of the suitors;
though I am grieved, it is not so much for the marriage I sorrow,
since there are numerous other Achaians, the women in this same
sea-girt Ithaka first, then those in the rest of the cities;
no, it is rather if we are deficient so far in the strength of
godlike Odysseus that we are incapable even of stretching
string on his bow—a disgrace for the men of the future to hear of!"

Answering him then spoke Antínoös, son of Eupeíthes:
"It will not be that way, Eurýmachos; you yourself know it.
For just now is the festival day of the god in the district,
holy indeed—who would string bows then? No, peaceably rather
put it away; but it might be as well to leave all of the axes
standing in place, for I do not think anyone will be coming
into the hall of Odysseus the son of Laërtes to steal them.
But come now, let the wine server pour the first drops in the goblets,
so we can make libation and then put away the great curved bow;
early at daybreak summon Melánthios, herder of goats, and
bid him to bring she-goats, far the best among all of the goat flocks,
so having offered the thighs to Apollo the glorious archer,
we might make an attempt on the bow and accomplish the contest."

So Antínoös spoke, and his words found favor among them.
Heralds at once poured over their hands clean water for washing;

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young men filled to the brim great wine bowls, ready for drinking,
then poured wine into all of the cups to begin the observance.
When they had made libation and drunk whatever their hearts wished,
then with a trick in his mind said Odysseus of many devices:
"Listen to me, you who of the glorious queen are the suitors,
so I can say such things as the heart in my breast is demanding.
Now of Eurýmachos first and of godlike Antínoös also
do I entreat—since he too has said words fitting and proper—
let the bow be for the present; entrust to the gods what will happen;
then in the morning the god will give strength to whomever he wishes.
But come, give me the well-polished bow now, so that among you
I may try out my hands and my strength, to discover if I still
have such force in my flexible limbs as I had in the past or
whether by roaming and lack of good care I already am ruined."
So he spoke, and they all were exceedingly vexed and reproachful,
fearing that he might bend that well-polished bow to the bowstring.
Then Antínoös jeered and said these words, calling upon him:
"Miserable stranger, in you is no mind, not even a little;
are you not satisfied how at your ease you are dining among us
highborn men, nor are wanting for dinner, but even can hear what
we are discussing and how we are saying it? There is no other
stranger, and surely no beggar, who listens to what we are saying.
It is the honey-sweet wine which brings you to grief, as it injures
others as well who take it in gulps, not drinking in measure.
It was the wine which made Eurýtion, glorious Centaur,
maddened against greathearted Peiríthoös once in his palace,
when he had come to the Lapiths; with wine in his mind he was maddened,
then in his frenzy he wrought great harm in Peiríthoös' palace;
grief took hold of the heroes, and leaping upon him they dragged him
outside, out through the forecourt, and then with the pitiless bronze they
cut off his ears and his nostrils; and he, become mad in his spirit,
went on bearing about in his volatile heart a great madness.
Out of it came the contention between those men and the Centaurs,
but it was first for himself, when heavy with wine, he found evil.
So I declare for you too great trouble if ever you put that
string on the bow; for indeed no courtesy you will encounter
here in this country of ours; in a black ship then we will send you
to King Échetos, worker of ruin to all who are mortal,
quickly—from there you would not be saved. No, quietly stay here
drinking; do not seek quarrels with men who are younger than you are."

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Prudent Penelope then spoke answering words and addressed him:
"It is not noble or just, Antínoös, so to be treating
guests of Telémachos lightly, whoever may come to this dwelling.
Do you expect, if the stranger should fasten the string on the mighty
bow of Odysseus, in confidence both of his hands and his power,
he would then take me away to his home, there make me his bedmate?
Certainly it is not what he himself in his breast is expecting.
Let not any of you on that account grieve in your spirit
while you are banqueting here, since not in the least is it seemly."
Speaking to her then answered Eurýmachos, Pólybos' scion:
"Noble Ikários' daughter Penelope, thoughtful and prudent,
we do not think he will take you away with him; it is not seemly.
But it is shame we feel at the gossip of men and of women,
lest some other Achaian of meaner descent should be saying,
'Far inferior men are now courting the wife of the faultless
man and cannot even bend his well-polished bow to the bowstring;
rather another, a beggar and wandering man who arrived here,
easily fastened the string to the bow, then shot through the iron.'
So they will say; and to us such words will be shame and dishonor."
Prudent Penelope then spoke answering words and addressed him:
"No, Eurýmachos, there is no way that the men who dishonor,
eating it up, this house of a man so noble will have good
fame here among our people—so why take this as a censure?
Now this stranger is both very large in stature and well built;
as to descent, he claims to be son of a wellborn father.
But come, give him the well-polished bow now, that we may observe him.
For I say to you plainly, and this thing will be accomplished:
if he should fasten the string and Apollo should give him the glory,
I will attire him in mantle and tunic, the finest apparel,
and a sharp javelin give him, from men and from dogs a protection,
also a two-edged sword; for his feet I will furnish the sandals;
then I will send him wherever his heart and his spirit command him."
Thoughtful Telémachos then spoke out to her, giving an answer:
"Mother mine, as to the bow, no man of Achaia has greater
power than I have to give and deny it to any I wish to—
no, not those who in rock-strewn Ithaka govern the people,
nor those ruling the islands towards horse-pasturing Elis;
none of the men will prevent me against my will, if I wish to
give this bow outright to be carried away by the stranger.
But go back to your room and devote more care to your own work,

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weaving and spinning, the loom and the distaff, bidding your handmaids
busy themselves with their labor; the men will attend to the bow now,
all of them, I above all, since mine is the rule of the household."
Struck with astonishment then, she went back up to her chamber,
for to her heart she had taken the thoughtful remarks of her offspring.
Going upstairs to her chamber along with her women attendants,
there she lamented Odysseus, the husband she loved, till a pleasant
slumber was cast down over her lids by bright-eyed Athena.
Now the curved bow had the excellent swineherd taken and carried,
but in the hall then all of the suitors were shouting together.
Such are the words which one of the arrogant youths would have spoken:
"Where are you taking the curved bow now, you miserable swineherd,
madman? Soon swift dogs that you raised yourself will be eating
you amid swine, quite alone and forsaken of men, if Apollo
shows us his favor, as well as the rest of the gods who live always."
So they spoke; and he took it and put it again in the same place,
fearful because in the hall so many were shouting together.
Quickly Telémachos, threatening him from the other side, shouted:
"Papa, keep bringing the bow; you will not do well to heed all men;
take care lest, though younger, I chase you away to the pastures,
showering you with stones; in strength I am greatly your better.
Would that above all these who are here in the palace the suitors,
both in my hands and my vigorous strength I were that much better!
Then I would soon send each of them wretchedly off on a journey
out of this palace of ours, since they are devising us evils."
So he spoke, and at him they all began merrily laughing,
all of the suitors, and so gave over the furious wrath they
felt for Telémachos; taking the bow through the palace, the swineherd
placed it in skillful Odysseus' hands while standing beside him.
Calling her out of her room, he spoke to the nurse Eurykleía:
"Thus does Telémachos bid you to do now, wise Eurykleía:
onto the close-fitting doors of the hall put bars to secure them;
even if any of them should within hear groaning or noises
made by the men inside of these walls of ours, then not at all should
she go out, but remain right there at her work in silence."
So he spoke; and in her was the word unwinged for an answer;
she put bars on the doors of the house well-built as a dwelling.
Then in silence Philoítios hurried outside of the palace,
there straightway he barred up the gates of the strong-walled courtyard.
Under the porch there was lying a tractable galley's papyrus

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cable, with which he fastened the gates; then he himself entered.
There he went and sat down on the bench whence he had arisen,
keeping his eye on Odysseus, who now kept handling the great bow,
turning it every direction and testing one side and the other,
fearing that worms could have eaten the horn while the master was absent.
Thus would one of them say as he looked at another beside him:
"He is for sure an admirer of bows—yes, even an expert.
No doubt either in his own house there are such things lying
or else he is intending to make one, so in his hands he
turns it one side and the other, the vagabond practiced in evils."
Thus would somebody else of the arrogant young men answer:
"Would that he might encounter success to as great a degree as
now he ever is able to bend this bow to the bowstring!"
So those suitors were saying; Odysseus of many devices,
once he had taken the great bow up and had looked it all over—
as when a man who has talent and skill at the lyre and at singing
easily stretches a string to a peg just recently fitted,
tightening both of the ends of the twisted and flexible sheep gut—
so did Odysseus fasten the string on the bow without effort.
Taking it up in his right hand then, he tested the bowstring;
pleasantly under his hand it sang like the voice of a swallow.
Great grief then came over the suitors; the skin of them all turned
color; and Zeus began mightily thundering, showing his portents;
then much-suffering noble Odysseus rejoiced at the omen
he had been sent by the scion of Kronos of crooked devices.
He picked up a swift arrow that lay nearby on the table,
naked and loose—for the others were lying inside of the hollow
quiver: of these the Achaians were soon to be given a trial.
Putting it up to the bridge, he drew back the string and the notches;
right from the bench he was sitting upon he fired off the arrow,
aiming it straight towards them, and of all of the axes he did not
miss any helve hole right from the first; but the bronze-heavy arrow
went straight out through the end; to Tèlémachos then he said these words:
"Never, Tèlémachos, does this stranger who sits in your palace
cause you shame—not a whit of my aim I missed, nor a long time
labored at stringing the bow; even yet my strength remains steadfast,
not as the suitors have said, dishonoring me with their insults.
Now is the time too that the Achaians command that a meal be
made in the daylight and then take pleasure with other amusements,
singing and playing the lyre, since these are adornments of dining."

The Odyssey of Homer by Homer, Translated by Rodney Merrill
http://www.press.umich.edu/titleDetailDesc.do?id=17219
The University of Michigan Press, 2002

Thus; with his brows he nodded; about him then was a sharp sword
girt by Telémachos, much loved scion of godlike Odysseus;
onto his spear then casting his hand, he took his position
close to him there by the armchair, equipped with the glittering bronze arms.