

ODYSSEUS' LAST VOYAGE

I have left Ithake for the last time. Here at Tartessos near the western edge of our world, I wait for tomorrow's dawn when I shall sail on my last voyage through the Pillars of Herakles and into the great Ocean beyond.

Certainly, these last thirty years here have been peaceful enough, so different from years of suffering that preceded them. It was nearly ten years we spent on the plains outside Troy – ten years of wearisome battle. I saw good men on both sides cruelly slain. Another ten years, it was, before I reached home, having lost all my men and barely surviving myself.

It is said that war was all over one woman – Helen, the bride of Menelaos, king of Sparta. Daughter of Zeus though she was, with something of a witch about her, she was not the cause – merely the excuse.

For years the rulers of Troy had been exerting their strength. You could not sail through the Hellespont without paying them taxes. And they were controlling more and more of the trade in the Aegean and the western lands of Asia. The Akhaians found their markets drying up and resentment was growing among many of the peoples of Asia; others, seeing the power of Troy, were allying themselves with her. Alliances were being formed on both sides, armies were being prepared, suspicion and fear were growing everywhere. It needed only one spark to unleash war, that spark was Helen.

You will recall that I had no mind to go to war. What has Ithake, our island on the west of Hellas, to do with Troy? Besides my son Telemakhos had only just been born. I wanted to stay there. You may recall that I even feigned madness to avoid the war. But Palamedes saw through this, tricked me and I was obliged to honour my oath to Menelaos.

Whose knows how long the war might have dragged on, with more and more pointless deaths. But in its tenth year I was allowed to try the stratagem of pretending to withdraw, leaving a giant wooden horse as offering to Athene. I have no doubt, you have heard this story before. It worked: we defeated the Trojans right enough – and the slaughter that followed was dreadful. The city was completely razed.

Troy could no longer cripple us with trade taxes; the Akhaians could sail freely through the Hellespont. But we had few ships then and next to nothing to trade. The war had drained our resources, and our leaders and their men returned to find that the land had been neglected and there was poverty everywhere.

Yes, our leaders soon made it home safely, except for me and Menelaos. After being stranded for seven years in Egypt, the gods at last allowed Menelaos to return to Sparta. Telemakhos visited him there not long before my return, and found Helen with him. She had persuaded Menelaos she had been taken to Troy against her will and that she had hated every moment there. Would a daughter of Zeus *really* have gone to Troy and remained there against her will? She has beguiled Menelaos. She reminds me of Kirke and Kalypso. The daughters of the gods are not to be trusted. My imprisonment on Kalypso's island was like a living death. I fear Menelaos' mind is dead also.

As for me, you know my story: how I incurred Poseidon's wrath. Yet how else was I to rescue my men and myself from Polyphemos? Should I have just watched him eat my men, waiting for my turn to be devoured? Even if I had known he was one of Poseidon's bastard sons, I could not have done that. And why was Poseidon so bitterly angry? It wasn't that I killed his son. I only blinded him so that we could escape. The gods can be so very cruel.

But Athene has been kind to me. She protected Penelope and young Telemakhos. She persuaded the gods to rescue me from Kalypso's long imprisonment. Even so, Poseidon did have a final attempt to thwart me, and I arrived naked and half-drowned among the Phaiakians, instead of reaching my beloved Ithake. They are a kindly people the Phaiakians, and none more so than King Alkinoös and his daughter, Nausikaä. Yes, I know she secretly loved me. I must confess I was very fond of her – but I respected her far too much to take advantage of her feelings.

When I did get back to Ithake, with Alkinoös' help, and had dealt with the suitors, purified the palace and things were straight again, Telemakhos visited Alkinoös to thank him. I am not surprised that Nausikaä fell in love with him and more than happy that he and Nausikaä married.

They now live in the palace, king and queen of Ithake. They have two sons, Ptoliporthes and Nausinoös, now both young men themselves, and a daughter, Nausithoe, who has all the stately bearing of her mother. All is peaceful and settled on our little island, thanks be to Athene.

But over on the mainland the Dorian peoples have been rising against their overlords. Many of the Akhaians moved eastward to find new lives on the seaboard of Asia and elsewhere. Peoples are still on the move; rebellion is everywhere. I heard that after old Nestor died, his palace at Pylos was taken and burnt. And there is a new metal they call 'iron' over on the mainland; Telemakhos brought back an iron sword not so long ago. It is a hard, cruel metal. Some say it matches the hearts of men now; and that nobility has gone. But were we 'men of bronze' really so noble? Terrible things were done in that war with Troy.

Ah well, the world has changed; a new age is coming. Telemakhos will, with Athene's help, rule well. Penelope will not now be troubled by suitors and she finds great comfort in her grandchildren. So I now make my last voyage. But, you ask, is not that foolish as it is prophesied that my death will come from the sea. Indeed, that was Teresias' prophecy. But on our island no one is ever far from the sea. In any case, the prophecy also said that my death would be peaceful.

I shall sail westward again, through the Pillars of Herakles and into the great Ocean beyond. I sailed into that Ocean once before; but then I turned northwards, past the land of the Kimmeroi, which is covered always in fog and mist, and on to the Land of the Dead to seek the aid of Teresias' ghost. Death holds no fear for one who has visited that land.

This time, however, when I pass through those pillars, I shall hold my course westward to where the sun sets. Some say that the Isle of the Blest is there. Who knows? In the past year I have had a recurring dream; I see a woman clothed in the westering sun with stars appearing in the twilight sky around her head. Sometimes she seems to be Penelope, at other times Athene herself; sometimes, in a way I cannot describe, she seems to be both at once and yet, perhaps, someone greater still. She sings in a language unknown to me; but her song conveys peace and rest and bliss.

I have visited many strange lands in my life and seen many marvellous things, more than most men see – but most have been evil. The sirens were evil; true, their song sounded beautiful and alluring; but its sweetness was cloying and one realized too late there was menace in the song as well. If my comrades had not tied me fast to the mast and stopped up their own ears, we would surely have all been lured to our deaths. The song of the Lady of the westering sun is so different; there is no menace, no allurement, no compulsion. Its beauty does not cloy.

I entrust Penelope, my family and Ithake to Athene, knowing well that she will protect them. With tomorrow's dawn I sail into the great Ocean and hold my course westward with the rising sun behind me. My mind and my soul are at peace; maybe as the day ends I shall meet the Lady of the westering sun and Teresias' prophecy will be fulfilled.

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