

BOOK 13



Two Tricksters

After he finished, all were silent, spellbound,
sitting inside the shadowy hall. At last,
Alcinous said,

"Now, Odysseus,
since you have been my guest, beneath my roof,
you need not wander anymore. You have
endured enough; you will get home again.
And all you regulars, my honored friends
who always drink red wine here in my house
and listen to my singer: heed my words.
Our guest has clothes packed up inside a trunk,
and other gifts that we have given him.
Each of us now should add a mighty tripod
and cauldron. I will make the people pay
a levy, so that none of us will suffer
from unrewarded generosity."

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BOOK 13: TWO TRICKSTERS

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bloomed, and they hurried back towards the ship
bringing heroic gifts of bronze. The king
embarked and stowed them underneath the beams,
to leave room for the crew when they were rowing.
Then all the men went back with him to eat.
The holy king killed sacrificial meat—
a cow to Zeus of dark clouds, son of Cronus,
who rules the world. They burned the thighs and feasted
in happiness. The well-respected singer
Demodocus made music in their midst.
But all the while Odysseus kept turning
his head towards the shining sun, impatient
for it to set. He longed to leave. As when
a man is desperate for dinner time
after he spends the whole day with his oxen
dragging the jointed plow across the field,
and welcomes sunset, when he can go home
to eat; his legs are aching on the way—
just so Odysseus was glad of sunset.
At once he told the seafaring Phaeacians,
especially Alcinous,

"Great king,
and all of you, please send me safely home
with offerings, and thank you. I am grateful
to you for giving me my heart's desire:
a passage home, with gifts. I hope the gods
maintain my luck. When I am home, I pray
to find my wife still faultless, and my loved ones
safe. And may you Phaeacians live to bring
joy to your wives and children—every blessing.
I pray there is no trouble for your people."

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The king's words pleased them all. They went back home
to rest. Then Dawn was born again: her fingers

They praised his words and said that they must help
their guest go home, since he had spoken well.
Alcinous addressed his right-hand man.

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"Pontonous, now mix a bowl of wine;
serve drinks to everybody in the hall,
so we may pray to Zeus and help our guest
back to his homeland."

So the steward mixed

a cheering bowl of wine and served them all
in turn. Still in their seats, they poured libations
to all the blessed gods that live in heaven.

Godlike Odysseus stood up and put
a double-handled cup into the hands
of Arete. His words flew out to her.

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"Bless you forever, queen, until old age
and death arrive for you, as for us all.
I will leave now. Be happy in your home
and children, and your people, and your king."

With that, the noble hero crossed the threshold.

Alcinous sent out his steward with him
to guide him to the swift ship on the shore.

Arete sent some slave girls too. One brought
a freshly laundered cloak and tunic; one
carried the well-carved chest; the third brought bread
and red wine. When they reached the ship, the guides
took all the food and drink and packed it neatly
inside the hold. They spread a sheet and blanket
out on the stern-deck of the hollow ship
so he could sleep there soundly. Climbing on,

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he lay there quietly. The rowers sat
down on the benches calmly, and then loosed
the cable from the mooring stone. They pulled,
leaning back hard; the oar blades splashed the water.
A sound sweet sleep fell on his eyes, like death;
he did not stir. As four fine stallions
rush at the whip and race their chariot
across the track, heads high, an easy canter—
so was the ship's prow raised. The seething waves
of sounding purple sea rushed round the stern
as she sped straight ahead. The swiftest bird,
a hawk, could never overtake; she sailed
so fast, and cleaved the waves. She bore a man
whose mind was like the gods', who had endured
many heartbreaking losses, and the pain
of war and shipwreck. Now he slept in peace,
and he remembered nothing of his pain.

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But when the brightest star that carries news
about the coming Dawn rose up the sky,
the seaborne ship neared land. There is a harbor
of Phorcys, ancient sea god, in the district
of Ithaca. On either side of it

there are sheer cliffs that jut across the bay;
they shelter it and keep big waves outside
when storm winds blow. The ships remain in harbor
without a tether, once they cross its bounds.

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At the bay's head there grows a long-leaved olive,
and near it is a beautiful dark cave,
a holy place of sea-nymphs—Nereids.
Inside are bowls and amphorae of stone,
and buzzing bees bring honey. There are looms,
also of stone; the Nymphs weave purple cloth,

sea-purple—it is marvelous to see.

Water is always flowing through. There are two entrances. The north one is for humans; the south is sacred. People cannot enter that way—it is the path of the immortals.

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They rowed inside the bay; they knew the place of old. Their arms were pulling at top speed; the ship was traveling so fast that when she reached dry land, she beached for half her length. They disembarked, and lifted from the ship Odysseus, wrapped up in sheets and blankets. They set him on the sand, still fast asleep. They unpacked all the presents he was given by the Phaeacian lords to take back home, thanks to Athena's care. They heaped the things beside the olive tree, so no one passing would do them any damage while their owner was sleeping. Then they rowed away, back home.

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Poseidon, Lord of Earthquakes, still remembered his hatred of Odysseus; he asked Zeus what he meant to do.

"O Father Zeus!

I will lose all my standing with the gods, since mortals fail to honor me, though these Phaeacians are my very own descendants! I always said Odysseus would reach

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home in the end. I did not take away that privilege from him, no, not at all, since you had promised it with your own nod. Their swift ship carried him across the ocean, and they have set him down in Ithaca

with a magnificent array of gifts: bronze, heaps of gold and fine-spun clothes, far more spoils than he ever would have won at Troy if he had got out safely."

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Storm God Zeus

exclaimed, "Earth-Shaker! How absurd! The gods do not dishonor you; it would be hard to disrespect an elder so high-ranking. If willful humans fail to show respect, then punish them; you always have that power. Do as you wish!"

Poseidon answered, "Lord

of Dark Clouds, I have always wanted to. I held back out of deference to you.

But now, when that fine ship of those Phaeacians comes back from helping him across, I want to smash it in the sea, and overwhelm their city with a mountain, to prevent them from ever guiding travelers again."

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The Cloud Lord Zeus said, "Brother, I suggest that while the people in the city watch, you turn the ship arriving into stone, still looking like a ship. They will all be shocked. Then you can surround their town with a huge mountain."

Hearing this, Poseidon

went to Phaeacian Scheria, and waited.

As the ship sped towards the shore, the god moved near it, turned it all to stone, and slapped his palm to make it rooted to the seabed.

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He vanished, and the people of Phaeacia,
known for their oars and famous ships, began
to ask each other,

"What? Who fixed that ship
firm in the sea as she was rushing home?
We saw it all!" They could not understand it.
Alcinous addressed the crowd and spoke.

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"So it is true! My father long ago
said that Poseidon hates us for our habit
of helping travelers get home again;
we got away with it, but he foretold
that one day great Poseidon would destroy
a ship on her return from such a journey;
the god would hide our city with a mountain.
And now the old man's words are coming true.
So all of you must listen to me now.
Stop helping visitors to travel onward.
We have to sacrifice twelve bulls, handpicked
for Lord Poseidon, so he may show mercy,
and not enfold our city in a mountain."

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At this, they were afraid, and they prepared
the bulls, and all the leaders of Phaeacia
prayed to Poseidon, standing round the altar.

Meanwhile Odysseus, who had been sleeping
in his own native land of Ithaca
woke up, but did not recognize the place
from which he had been absent for so long.
Pallas Athena cast a mist upon it,
so she could tell him how things stood, and make him
unrecognizable to his own wife

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and family and neighbors, till he paid
the suitors back for how they misbehaved.
The friendly harbors and the winding paths
and leafy trees were all quite unfamiliar
to their own king. He leapt up to his feet
and looking at his native land, he groaned
and smacked his thighs, and sobbed,

"Where am I now?
Are those who live here violent and cruel?
Or are they kind to strangers, folks who fear
the gods? Where can I carry all my treasure?
And where can I go wandering? If only
I had remained there in Phaeacia, till
I went on to some other mighty king
who might have been my friend and helped me home.
Where can I leave my things? Not here for sure;
they will be stolen. Those Phaeacian lords
were not so trustworthy! They promised me
that they would bring me home to Ithaca.
They broke their word and brought me somewhere else.
May Zeus who helps the needy make them pay!
Zeus watches everyone, and punishes
the sinner. Let me count my treasure now—
they may have stolen some when they sailed off."

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He counted all the tripods, cauldrons, gold
and cloth, but none was missing. Then he paced
beside the loud resounding sea, hunched up
with homesickness and sobbing in his grief.
Athena came towards him; she looked like
a shepherd, young and soft-skinned as a prince,
wearing a folded mantle of fine cloth
across her shoulders; on her tender feet

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were sandals, and she held a javelin.

Odysseus was overjoyed to see her.

He cried,

"Oh, friend! You are the very first

person that I have met here. Greetings! Please,

be kind, protect my treasure and myself.

I pray to you and supplicate, as if

you were a god. I touch your knees; please help me!

And tell me, please, what is this place? An island?

Or is it a peninsula that slopes

towards the sea from fertile mainland fields?

Who lives here?"

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And with twinkling eyes the goddess

said, "Stranger, you must be a foreigner

from distant parts, or foolish, since you ask

about this famous country. Many people

know it, from those who live towards the east

under the rising sun, to those out west

in lands of gloomy dusk. This is rough country,

not fit for grazing horses, and not spacious,

but not infertile; corn and wine abound here.

The land is always wet with rain and dew.

There are fine water holes, and it is good

for raising goats and cattle, and the trees

are varied. Foreigner, I think the name

of Ithaca is even known in Troy,

a land they say is far away from Greece."

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Odysseus, who had endured so much,

so long, was overjoyed, to hear from her

that he was in his own dear native land.

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His words took wings and flew, but he did not
tell her the truth; he bit his story back.

His mind was always full of clever schemes.

"Yes, I have heard of Ithaca, although

I come from distant Crete. Now I am here

with all this wealth; I left an equal share

of riches for my children back at home.

I am in exile. On the fields of Crete

I killed Orsilochnus, the speedy sprinter,

the son of Idomeneus, the king.

I had refused to serve or help his father

at Troy; I led my own men. So the son

wanted to steal the Trojan spoils for which

I worked so hard, in war and long sea journeys.

I hid beside the road with one companion,

and as he came back from the countryside,

I ambushed him, and hit him with my spear.

The sky was dark that night, and no one saw me

kill him with my sharp sword of bronze. And after

I murdered him, I quickly rowed away

to visit the Phoenicians, and I gave them

a share of loot, which made them very glad.

I told them they should transport me to Pylos,

or famous Elis, ruled by the Epeians.

But storm winds drove them off away from there

against their will: they did not mean to trick me.

So swept off course, we came here in the night.

We rowed at top speed into harbor, hungry,

but none of us took any thought of dinner.

We disembarked and all lay down right there.

Sweet sleep enfolded me. I was exhausted.

They took my treasure from the ship and set it

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beside me as I slept upon the sand.
And then they sailed away to well-built Sidon,
and I was left here grieving."

At his words,

Athena smiled into his eyes. She took
his hand, and changed her body to a woman's:
beautiful, tall, and skilled in all the arts.
Her words were light as feathers.

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"To outwit you

in all your tricks, a person or a god
would need to be an expert at deceit.

You clever rascal! So duplicitous,
so talented at lying! You love fiction
and tricks so deeply, you refuse to stop
even in your own land. Yes, both of us

are smart. No man can plan and talk like you,
and I am known among the gods for insight
and craftiness. You failed to recognize me:

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I am Athena, child of Zeus. I always
stand near you and take care of you, in all
your hardships. I made sure that you were welcomed
by the Phaeacians. I have come here now
to weave a plan with you and hide the treasure
which, thanks to me, they gave you to take home.
I will reveal the challenges you face
at home. This is your fate, and you must bear it
bravely, not telling any man or woman
that you have finished wandering and come back.
Suffer in silence, bear their brutal treatment."

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Odysseus, still wary, answered, "Goddess,
even the smartest man may find it hard

to recognize you. You disguise yourself
so many ways. I do know that you helped me
during the Trojan War, so long ago.

But when we Greeks had sacked the town of Priam,
and we embarked, and gods dispersed our fleet,
I did not see you there on board my ship,
daughter of Zeus. You gave me no protection.
Lost and confused, I waited for the gods
to free me from my pain. I met you later,
in rich Phaeacia, and you spoke to me
comforting words, and led me to the city.
Please, by your father Zeus! I cannot think
that this is Ithaca. I must be elsewhere.
You want to fool me and make fun of me.
Tell me the truth! Is this my own dear home?"

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She said

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With glowing eyes she said, "You always have
such keen intelligence, and that is why
I cannot leave you when you need my help.
You have such intuition and such focus.
An ordinary man would rush straight home
to see his wife and children when he reached
his country, after such a journey. You
decided not to even ask about them,
until you test your wife. She sits at home,
passing each night in misery, each day
in tears. For my part, I have never doubted.
I felt sure in my heart you would get home,
after the loss of all your men. But I
did not want conflict with my father's brother,
Poseidon, who resented you because
you blinded his beloved son. Now I
will show you Ithaca, so you believe.
This is the bay of Phorcys, ancient sea god

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and at the head there is an olive tree
with long leaves, and nearby, the shady cave
sacred to nymphs called Nereids, to whom
you sacrificed so many hundred cattle.
And here is Neriton, the wooded mountain."

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With that, the goddess made the mist disperse.
The land was visible. Odysseus,
after so long a wait and so much pain,
was filled with happiness at last. In joy
he kissed the fertile earth of his own country,
then lifted high his arms and prayed,

"O Nymphs!

I never thought I would come back to you,
daughters of Zeus. Accept my loving prayers,
and I will give you gifts, as in the past,
if my commander, child of Zeus, is kind
and lets me live and raise my son."

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Athena

looked straight into his eyes and said, "Be brave.
You need not worry. Let us hurry now
to hide the treasure safely in the cave.
And then we must make plans."

The goddess went

down in the murky cave, and looked around
for hiding spots. Odysseus brought in
the presents the Phaeacians gave him—gold,
and tireless bronze and finely woven cloth.
Athena set them all inside, and fixed
the door-stone up, and then the two sat down
against the sacred olive and they planned

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how to destroy the suitors. Eyes aglow,
Athena said,

"Great king, Laertes' son,
master of plots and plans, Odysseus,
think how to strike the suitors. For three years
they have been lording in your house and courting
your godlike wife with gifts. She always longs
for your return, and grieves. She leads them on
with promises and messages to each,
but her mind moves elsewhere."

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Odysseus

cried, "Oh! I would have died like Agamemnon
in my own house, if you had not explained
exactly how things stand. So, goddess, now
weave me a strategy to pay them back.
Stand by me, give me courage and the drive
to fight as when I broke the shining crown
of Troy. If you will join me with that zeal
and help me, goddess-queen, I could do battle
against three hundred men at once."

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Athena

looked straight at him, clear-eyed. She said, "I will
be with you, truly. Know I stand beside you
as we begin our work. I do believe
the suitors who devour your livelihood
will spatter your broad floors with blood and brains.
But now I will disguise you, so no human
can recognize you. I will shrivel up
the fine skin of your supple arms and legs,
ruin your hair, and dress you up in rags,
so everyone will shudder seeing you."

400

And I will cloud your eyes, to make you seem
 ugly to all the suitors, and your wife
 and to the son you left at home. Now visit
 the swineherd who, though he is just a slave,
 adores your son and wise Penelope
 and is your friend. Go look for him among
 the sows who root beside the Corax rock
 and near the spring of Arethusa, drinking
 black water, eating good nutritious acorns,
 which fatten pigs. Stay there and sit with him,
 and ask him everything. And I will go
 to Sparta, where the girls are beautiful,
 to fetch Telemachus, the boy you love.
 He went to Menelaus, to find out
 if you are still alive."

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He asked her sharply,
 "But why did you not tell him? You must know
 everything. Did you want him suffering
 like me, lost out at sea, while others eat
 his whole inheritance?"

With shining eyes

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Athena answered, "Come now, do not worry
 about the boy. I guided him myself
 so that he might win glory by his journey.
 He is not suffering. He is away,
 sitting and banqueting with Menelaus.
 The suitors do indeed desire to kill him,
 and wait in ambush for him in their ship.
 But they will not succeed, I think. The earth
 will cover one or more of those who eat
 your property."

Then with her wand Athena
 tapped him; his handsome body withered up;
 his limbs became arthritic. She bleached out
 his hair, and made his skin look old and wrinkled,
 and dimmed his fine bright eyes. She turned his clothes
 into a tattered cloak and ragged tunic,
 dirty with soot. She wrapped around his shoulders
 a massive leather deerskin, and she gave him
 a threadbare tote bag and a walking stick.
 Their plans were set; they parted. She went off
 to Sparta, to go fetch Telemachus.