

BOOK XXI.

ARGUMENT.

THE BENDING OF ULYSSES' BOW.

Penelope, to put an end to the solicitation of the suitors, proposes to marry the person who shall first bend the bow of Ulysses, and shoot through the ringlets. After their attempts have proved ineffectual, Ulysses, taking Eumaeus and Philaetius apart, discovers himself to them; then returning, desires leave to try his strength at the bow, which, though refused with indignation by the suitors, Penelope and Telemachus cause it to be delivered to his hands. He bends it immediately, and shoots through all the rings. Jupiter at the same instant thunders from heaven; Ulysses accepts the omen, and gives a sign to Telemachus, who stands ready armed at his side.

And Pallas now, to raise the rivals' fires,
With her own art Penelope inspires
Who now can bend Ulysses' bow, and wing
The well-aim'd arrow through the distant ring,
Shall end the strife, and win the imperial dame:
But discord and black death await the game!

The prudent queen the lofty stair ascends:
At distance due a virgin-train attends;
A brazen key she held, the handle turn'd,
With steel and polish'd elephant adorn'd:
Swift to the inmost room she bent her way,
Where, safe reposed, the royal treasures lay:
There shone high heap'd the labour'd brass and ore,
And there the bow which great Ulysses bore;
And there the quiver, where now guiltless slept
Those winged deaths that many a matron wept.

This gift, long since when Sparta's shore he trod,
On young Ulysses Iphitus bestowed:
Beneath Orsilochus' roof they met;
One loss was private, one a public debt;
Messena's state from Ithaca detains
Three hundred sheep, and all the shepherd swains;
And to the youthful prince to urge the laws,
The king and elders trust their common cause.
But Iphitus, employed on other cares,
Search'd the wide country for his wandering mares,
And mules, the strongest of the labouring kind;
Hapless to search; more hapless still to find!
For journeying on to Hercules, at length
That lawless wretch, that man of brutal strength,

Deaf to Heaven's voice, the social rites transgress'd;
And for the beauteous maids destroy'd his guest.
He gave the bow; and on Ulysses' part
Received a pointed sword, and missile dart:
Of luckless friendship on a foreign shore
Their first, last pledges! for they met no more.
The bow, bequeath'd by this unhappy hand,
Ulysses bore not from his native land;
Nor in the front of battle taught to bend,
But kept in dear memorial of his friend.

Now gently winding up the fair ascent,
By many an easy step the matron went;
Then o'er the pavement glides with grace divine
(With polish'd oak the level pavements shine);
The folding gates a dazzling light display'd,
With pomp of various architrave o'erlaid.
The bolt, obedient to the silken string,
Forsakes the staple as she pulls the ring;
The wards respondent to the key turn round;
The bars fall back; the flying valves resound;
Loud as a bull makes hill and valley ring,
So roar'd the lock when it released the spring.
She moves majestic through the wealthy room,
Where treasured garments cast a rich perfume;
There from the column where aloft it hung,

Reach'd in its splendid case, the bow unstrung;
Across her knees she laid the well-known bow,
And pensive sate, and tears began to flow.
To full satiety of grief she mourns,
Then silent to the joyous hall returns,
To the proud suitors bears in pensive state
The unbended bow, and arrows winged with fate.

Behind, her train the polish'd coffer brings,
Which held the alternate brass and silver rings.
Full in the portal the chaste queen appears,
And with her veil conceals the coming tears:
On either side awaits a virgin fair;
While thus the matron, with majestic air:

"Say you, when these forbidden walls inclose,
For whom my victims bleed, my vintage flows:
If these neglected, faded charms can move?
Or is it but a vain pretence, you love?
If I the prize, if me you seek to wife,
Hear the conditions, and commence the strife.
Who first Ulysses' wondrous bow shall bend,
And through twelve ringlets the fleet arrow send;
Him will I follow, and forsake my home,
For him forsake this loved, this wealthy dome,
Long, long the scene of all my past delight,

And still to last, the vision of my night!"

Graceful she said, and bade Eumaeus show
The rival peers the ringlets and the bow.
From his full eyes the tears unbidden spring,
Touch'd at the dear memorials of his king.
Philaetius too relents, but secret shed
The tender drops. Antinous saw, and said:

"Hence to your fields, ye rustics! hence away,
Nor stain with grief the pleasures of the day;
Nor to the royal heart recall in vain
The sad remembrance of a perish'd man.
Enough her precious tears already flow--
Or share the feast with due respect; or go
To weep abroad, and leave to us the bow,
No vulgar task! Ill suits this courtly crew
That stubborn horn which brave Ulysses drew.
I well remember (for I gazed him o'er
While yet a child), what majesty he bore!
And still (all infant as I was) retain
The port, the strength, the grandeur of the man."

He said, but in his soul fond joys arise,
And his proud hopes already win the prize.
To speed the flying shaft through every ring,

Wretch! is not thine: the arrows of the king
Shall end those hopes, and fate is on the wing!

Then thus Telemachus: "Some god I find
With pleasing frenzy has possess'd my mind;
When a loved mother threatens to depart,
Why with this ill-timed gladness leaps my heart?
Come then, ye suitors! and dispute a prize
Richer than all the Achaian state supplies,
Than all proud Argos, or Mycaena knows,
Than all our isles or continents inclose;
A woman matchless, and almost divine,
Fit for the praise of every tongue but mine.
No more excuses then, no more delay;
Haste to the trial--Lo! I lead the way.

"I too may try, and if this arm can wing
The feather'd arrow through the destined ring,
Then if no happier night the conquest boast,
I shall not sorrow for a mother lost;
But, bless'd in her, possess those arms alone,
Heir of my father's strength, as well as throne."

He spoke; then rising, his broad sword unbound,
And cast his purple garment on the ground.
A trench he open'd: in a line he placed.

The level axes, and the points made fast
(His perfect skill the wondering gazers eyed,
The game as yet unseen, as yet untried).
Then, with a manly pace, he took his stand:
And grasp'd the bow, and twang'd it in his hand.
Three times, with beating heart, he made essay:
Three times, unequal to the task, gave way;
A modest boldness on his cheek appear'd:
And thrice he hoped, and thrice again he fear'd.
The fourth had drawn it. The great sire with joy
Beheld, but with a sign forbade the boy.
His ardour straight the obedient prince suppress'd,
And, artful, thus the suitor-train address'd:

"O lay the cause on youth yet immature!
(For heaven forbid such weakness should endure!)
How shall this arm, unequal to the bow,
Retort an insult, or repel a foe?
But you! whom Heaven with better nerves has bless'd,
Accept the trial, and the prize contest."

He cast the bow before him, and apart
Against the polish'd quiver propp'd the dart.
Resuming then his seat, Eupithes' son,
The bold Antinous, to the rest begun:
"From where the goblet first begins to flow,

From right to left in order take the bow;
And prove your several strengths." The princes heard
And first Leiodes, blameless priest'd, appear'd:
The eldest born of Oenops' noble race,
Who next the goblet held his holy place:
He, only he, of all the suitor throng,
Their deeds detested, and abjured the wrong.
With tender hands the stubborn horn he strains,
The stubborn horn resisted all his pains!
Already in despair he gives it o'er:
"Take it who will (he cries), I strive no more,
What numerous deaths attend this fatal bow!
What souls and spirits shall it send below!
Better, indeed, to die, and fairly give
Nature her debt, than disappointed live,
With each new sun to some new hope a prey,
Yet still to-morrow falser than to-day.
How long in vain Penelope we sought!
This bow shall ease us of that idle thought,
And send us with some humbler wife to live,
Whom gold shall gain, or destiny shall give."

Thus speaking, on the floor the bow he placed
(With rich inlay the various floor was graced):
At distance far the feather'd shaft he throws,
And to the seat returns from whence he rose.

To him Antinous thus with fury said:
"What words ill-omen'd from thy lips have fled?
Thy coward-function ever is in fear!
Those arms are dreadful which thou canst not bear,
Why should this bow be fatal to the brave?
Because the priest is born a peaceful slave.
Mark then what others can." He ended there,
And bade Melanthius a vast pile prepare;
He gives it instant flame, then fast beside
Spreads o'er an ample board a bullock's hide.
With melted lard they soak the weapon o'er,
Chafe every knot, and supple every pore.
Vain all their art, and all their strength as vain;
The bow inflexible resists their pain.
The force of great Eurymachus alone
And bold Antinous, yet untired, unknown:
Those only now remain'd; but those confess'd
Of all the train the mightiest and the best.

Then from the hall, and from the noisy crew,
The masters of the herd and flock withdrew.
The king observes them, he the hall forsakes,
And, past the limits of the court, o'ertakes.
Then thus with accent mild Ulysses spoke:
"Ye faithful guardians of the herd and flock!

Shall I the secret of my breast conceal,
Or (as my soul now dictates) shall I tell?
Say, should some favouring god restore again
The lost Ulysses to his native reign,
How beat your hearts? what aid would you afford
To the proud suitors, or your ancient lord?"

Philaetius thus: "O were thy word not vain!
Would mighty Jove restore that man again!
These aged sinews, with new vigour strung,
In his blest cause should emulate the young."
With equal vows Eumaeus too implored
Each power above, with wishes for his lord.

He saw their secret souls, and thus began:
"Those vows the gods accord; behold the man!
Your own Ulysses! twice ten years detain'd
By woes and wanderings from this hapless land:
At length he comes; but comes despised, unknown,
And finding faithful you, and you alone.
All else have cast him from their very thought,
E'en in their wishes and their prayers forgot!
Hear then, my friends: If Jove this arm succeed,
And give yon impious revellers to bleed,
My care shall be to bless your future lives
With large possessions and with faithful wives;

Fast by my palace shall your domes ascend,
And each on young Telemachus attend,
And each be call'd his brother and my friend.
To give you firmer faith, now trust your eye;
Lo! the broad scar indented on my thigh,
When with Autolycus' sons, of yore,
On Parnass' top I chased the tusky boar."
His ragged vest then drawn aside disclosed
The sign conspicuous, and the scar exposed:
Eager they view'd, with joy they stood amazed
With tearful eyes o'er all their master gazed:
Around his neck their longing arms they cast,
His head, his shoulders, and his knees embraced;
Tears followed tears; no word was in their power;
In solemn silence fell the kindly shower.
The king too weeps, the king too grasps their hands;
And moveless, as a marble fountain, stands.

Thus had their joy wept down the setting sun,
But first the wise man ceased, and thus begun:
"Enough--on other cares your thought employ,
For danger waits on all untimely joy.
Full many foes and fierce, observe us near;
Some may betray, and yonder walls may hear.
Re-enter then, not all at once, but stay
Some moments you, and let me lead the way.

To me, neglected as I am I know
The haughty suitors will deny the bow;
But thou, Eumaeus, as 'tis borne away,
Thy master's weapon to his hand convey.
At every portal let some matron wait,
And each lock fast the well-compacted gate:
Close let them keep, whate'er invades their ear;
Though arms, or shouts, or dying groans they hear.
To thy strict charge, Philaetius, we consign
The court's main gate: to guard that pass be thine."

This said, he first return'd; the faithful swains
At distance follow, as their king ordains.
Before the flame Eurymachus now stands,
And turns the bow, and chafes it with his hands
Still the tough bow unmoved. The lofty man
Sigh'd from his mighty soul, and thus began:

"I mourn the common cause: for, oh, my friends,
On me, on all, what grief, what shame attends!
Not the lost nuptials can affect me more
(For Greece has beauteous dames on every shore),
But baffled thus! confess'd so far below
Ulysses' strength, as not to bend his bow!
How shall all ages our attempt deride!
Our weakness scorn!" Antinous thus replied:

"Not so, Eurymachus: that no man draws
The wondrous bow, attend another cause.
Sacred to Phoebus is the solemn day,
Which thoughtless we in games would waste away:
Till the next dawn this ill-timed strife forego,
And here leave fixed the ringlets in a row.
Now bid the sewer approach, and let us join
In due libations, and in rites divine,
So end our night: before the day shall spring,
The choicest offerings let Melanthius bring:
Let then to Phoebus' name the fatted thighs
Feed the rich smokes high curling to the skies.
So shall the patron of these arts bestow
(For his the gift) the skill to bend the bow."

They heard well pleased: the ready heralds bring
The cleansing waters from the limpid spring:
The goblet high with rosy wine they crown'd,
In order circling to the peers around.
That rite complete, uprose the thoughtful man,
And thus his meditated scheme began:

"If what I ask your noble minds approve,
Ye peers and rivals in the royal love!
Chief, if it hurt not great Antinous' ear

(Whose sage decision I with wonder hear),
And if Eurymachus the motion please:
Give Heaven this day and rest the bow in peace.
To-morrow let your arms dispute the prize,
And take it he, the favour'd of the skies!
But, since till then this trial you delay,
Trust it one moment to my hands to-day:
Fain would I prove, before your judging eyes,
What once I was, whom wretched you despise:
If yet this arm its ancient force retain;
Or if my woes (a long-continued train)
And wants and insults, make me less than man."

Rage flash'd in lightning from the suitors' eyes,
Yet mixed with terror at the bold emprise.
Antinous then: "O miserable guest!
Is common sense quite banish'd from thy breast?
Sufficed it not, within the palace placed,
To sit distinguish'd, with our presence graced,
Admitted here with princes to confer,
A man unknown, a needy wanderer?
To copious wine this insolence we owe,
And much thy betters wine can overthrow:
The great Eurytian when this frenzy stung,
Pirithous' roofs with frantic riot rung;
Boundless the Centaur raged; till one and all

The heroes rose, and dragg'd him from the hall;
His nose they shorten'd, and his ears they slit,
And sent him sober'd home, with better wit.
Hence with long war the double race was cursed,
Fatal to all, but to the aggressor first.
Such fate I prophesy our guest attends,
If here this interdicted bow he bends:
Nor shall these walls such insolence contain:
The first fair wind transports him o'er the main,
Where Echetus to death the guilty brings
(The worst of mortals, e'en the worst of kings).
Better than that, if thou approve our cheer;
Cease the mad strife and share our bounty here."

To this the queen her just dislike express'd:

"'Tis impious, prince, to harm the stranger-guest,
Base to insult who bears a suppliant's name,
And some respect Telemachus may claim.
What if the immortals on the man bestow
Sufficient strength to draw the mighty bow?
Shall I, a queen, by rival chiefs adored,
Accept a wandering stranger for my lord?
A hope so idle never touch'd his brain:
Then ease your bosoms of a fear so vain.
Far be he banish'd from this stately scene

Who wrongs his princess with a thought so mean."

"O fair! and wisest of so fair a kind!

(Respectful thus Eurymachus rejoin'd,)

Moved by no weak surmise, but sense of shame,

We dread the all-arraigning voice of Fame:

We dread the censure of the meanest slave,

The weakest woman: all can wrong the brave.

'Behold what wretches to the bed pretend

Of that brave chief whose bow they could not bend!

In came a beggar of the strolling crew,

And did what all those princes could not do.'

Thus will the common voice our deed defame,

And thus posterity upbraid our name."

To whom the queen: "If fame engage your views,

Forbear those acts which infamy pursues;

Wrong and oppression no renown can raise;

Know, friend! that virtue is the path to praise.

The stature of our guest, his port, his face,

Speak him descended from no vulgar race.

To him the bow, as he desires, convey;

And to his hand if Phoebus give the day,

Hence, to reward his merit, be shall bear

A two-edged falchion and a shining spear,

Embroider'd sandals, a rich cloak and vest,

A safe conveyance to his port of rest."

"O royal mother! ever-honour'd name!
Permit me (cries Telemachus) to claim
A son's just right. No Grecian prince but I
Has power this bow to grant or to deny.
Of all that Ithaca's rough hills contain,
And all wide Elis' courser-breeding plain,
To me alone my father's arms descend;
And mine alone they are, to give or lend.
Retire, O queen! thy household task resume,
Tend, with thy maids, the labours of thy loom;
The bow, the darts, and arms of chivalry,
These cares to man belong, and most to me."

Mature beyond his years, the queen admired
His sage reply, and with her train retired;
There in her chamber as she sate apart,
Revolved his words, and placed them in her heart.
On her Ulysses then she fix'd her soul;
Down her fair cheek the tears abundant roll,
Till gentle Pallas, piteous of her cries,
In slumber closed her silver-streaming eyes.

Now through the press the bow Eumaeus bore,
And all was riot, noise, and wild uproar.

"Hold! lawless rustic! whither wilt thou go?
To whom, insensate, dost thou bear the bow?
Exiled for this to some sequester'd den,
Far from the sweet society of men,
To thy own dogs a prey thou shalt be made;
If Heaven and Phoebus lend the suitors aid."
Thus they. Aghast he laid the weapon down,
But bold Telemachus thus urged him on:
"Proceed, false slave, and slight their empty words:
What! hopes the fool to please so many lords?
Young as I am, thy prince's vengeful hand
Stretch'd forth in wrath shall drive thee from the land.
Oh! could the vigour of this arm as well
The oppressive suitors from my walls expel!
Then what a shoal of lawless men should go
To fill with tumult the dark courts below!"

The suitors with a scornful smile survey
The youth, indulging in the genial day.
Eumaeus, thus encouraged, hastes to bring
The strifeful bow and gives it to the king.
Old Euryclea calling them aside,
"Hear what Telemachus enjoins (he cried):
At every portal let some matron wait,
And each lock fast the well-compacted gate;
And if unusual sounds invade their ear,

If arms, or shouts, or dying groans they hear,
Let none to call or issue forth presume,
But close attend the labours of the loom."

Her prompt obedience on his order waits;
Closed in an instant were the palace gates.
In the same moment forth Philaetius flies,
Secures the court, and with a cable ties
The utmost gate (the cable strongly wrought
Of Byblos' reed, a ship from Egypt brought);
Then unperceived and silent at the board
His seat he takes, his eyes upon his lord.

And now his well-known bow the master bore,
Turn'd on all sides, and view'd it o'er and o'er;
Lest time or worms had done the weapon wrong,
Its owner absent, and untried so long.
While some deriding--"How he turns the bow!
Some other like it sure the man must know,
Or else would copy; or in bows he deals;
Perhaps he makes them, or perhaps he steals."
"Heaven to this wretch (another cried) be kind!
And bless, in all to which he stands inclined.
With such good fortune as he now shall find."

Heedless he heard them: but disdain'd reply;

The bow perusing with exactest eye.
Then, as some heavenly minstrel, taught to sing
High notes responsive to the trembling string,
To some new strain when he adapts the lyre,
Or the dumb lute refits with vocal wire,
Relaxes, strains, and draws them to and fro;
So the great master drew the mighty bow,
And drew with ease. One hand aloft display'd
The bending horns, and one the string essay'd.
From his essaying hand the string, let fly,
Twang'd short and sharp like the shrill swallow's cry.
A general horror ran through all the race,
Sunk was each heart, and pale was every face,
Signs from above ensued: the unfolding sky
In lightning burst; Jove thunder'd from on high.
Fired at the call of heaven's almighty Lord,
He snatch'd the shaft that glitter'd on the board
(Fast by, the rest lay sleeping in the sheath,
But soon to fly the messengers of death).

Now sitting as he was, the cord he drew,
Through every ringlet levelling his view:
Then notch'd the shaft, released, and gave it wing;
The whizzing arrow vanished from the string,
Sung on direct, and threaded every ring.
The solid gate its fury scarcely bounds;

Pierced through and through the solid gate resounds,
Then to the prince: "Nor have I wrought thee shame;
Nor err'd this hand unfaithful to its aim;
Nor prov'd the toil too hard; nor have I lost
That ancient vigour, once my pride and boast.
Ill I deserved these haughty peers' disdain;
Now let them comfort their dejected train,
In sweet repast their present hour employ,
Nor wait till evening for the genial joy:
Then to the lute's soft voice prolong the night;
Music, the banquet's most refined delight."

He said, then gave a nod; and at the word
Telemachus girds on his shining sword.
Fast by his father's side he takes his stand:
The beamy javelin lightens in his hand.