

BOOK XXIII.

ARGUMENT.

Euryclea awakens Penelope with the news of Ulysses' return, and the death of the suitors. Penelope scarcely credits her; but supposes some god has punished them, and descends from her department in doubt. At the first interview of Ulysses and Penelope, she is quite unsatisfied. Minerva restores him to the beauty of his youth; but the queen continues incredulous, till by some circumstances she is convinced, and falls into all the transports of passion and tenderness. They recount to each other all that has passed during their long separation. The next morning Ulysses, arming himself and his friends, goes from the city to visit his father.

Then to the queen, as in repose she lay,
The nurse with eager rapture speeds her way:
The transports of her faithful heart supply
A sudden youth, and give her wings to fly.

"And sleeps my child? (the reverend matron cries)

Ulysses lives! arise, my child, arise!

At length appears the long-expected hour!

Ulysses comes! the suitors are no more!
No more they view the golden light of day!
Arise, and bless thee with the glad survey?"

Touch'd at her words, the mournful queen rejoin'd:

"Ah! whither wanders thy distemper'd mind?
The righteous powers, who tread the starry skies,
The weak enlighten, and confound the wise,
And human thought, with unresisted sway,
Depress or raise, enlarge or take away:
Truth, by their high decree, thy voice forsakes,
And folly with the tongue of wisdom speaks.
Unkind, the fond illusion to impose!
Was it to flatter or deride my woes?
Never did I sleep so sweet enjoy,
Since my dear lord left Ithaca for Troy.
Why must I wake to grieve, and curse thy shore,
O Troy?--may never tongue pronounce thee more!
Begone! another might have felt our rage,
But age is sacred, and we spare thy age."

To whom with warmth: "My soul a lie disdains;
Ulysses lives, thy own Ulysses reigns:
That stranger, patient of the suitors' wrongs,
And the rude license of ungovern'd tongues!
He, he is thine! Thy son his latent guest

Long knew, but lock'd the secret in his breast:
With well concerted art to end his woes,
And burst at once in vengeance on the foes."

While yet she spoke, the queen in transport sprung
Swift from the couch, and round the matron hung;
Fast from her eye descends the rolling tear:
"Say, once more say, is my Ulysses here?
How could that numerous and outrageous band
By one be slain, though by a hero's hand?"

"I saw it not (she cries), but heard alone,
When death was busy, a loud dying groan;
The damsel-train turn'd pale at every wound,
Immured we sate, and catch'd each passing sound;
When death had seized her prey, thy son attends,
And at his nod the damsel-train descends;
There terrible in arms Ulysses stood,
And the dead suitors almost swam in blood:
Thy heart had leap'd the hero to survey,
Stern as the surly lion o'er his prey,
Glorious in gore, now with sulphureous fire
The dome he purges, now the flame aspires;
Heap'd lie the dead without the palace walls--
Haste, daughter, haste, thy own Ulysses calls!
Thy every wish the bounteous gods bestow;

Enjoy the present good, and former woe.
Ulysses lives, his vanquish'd foes to see;
He lives to thy Telemachus and thee!"

"Ah, no! (with sighs Penelope rejoin'd,)
Excess of joy disturbs thy wandering mind;
How blest this happy hour, should he appear,
Dear to us all, to me supremely dear;
Ah, no! some god the suitors death decreed,
Some god descends, and by his hand they bleed;
Blind! to contemn the stranger's righteous cause,
And violate all hospitable laws!
The good they hated, and the powers defied!
But heaven is just, and by a god they died.
For never must Ulysses view this shore;
Never! the loved Ulysses is no more!"

"What words (the matron cries) have reach'd my ears?
Doubt we his presence, when he now appears!
Then hear conviction: Ere the fatal day
That forced Ulysses o'er the watery way,
A boar, fierce rushing in the sylvan war,
Plough'd half his thigh; I saw, I saw the scar,
And wild with transport had reveal'd the wound;
But ere I spoke, he rose, and check'd the sound.
Then, daughter, haste away! and if a lie

Flow from this tongue, then let thy servant die!"
To whom with dubious joy the queen replies:
"Wise is thy soul, but errors seize the wise;
The works of gods what mortal can survey?
Who knows their motives, who shall trace their way?
But learn we instant how the suitors trod
The paths of death, by man, or by a god."
Thus speaks the queen, and no reply attends,
But with alternate joy and fear descends;
At every step debates her lord to prove;
Or, rushing to his arms, confess her love!
Then gliding through the marble valves, in state
Opposed, before the shining sire she sate.
The monarch, by a column high enthroned,
His eye withdrew, and fix'd it on the ground;
Curious to hear his queen the silence break:
Amazed she sate, and impotent to speak;
O'er all the man her eyes she rolls in vain,
Now hopes, now fears, now knows, then doubts again.
At length Telemachus: "Oh, who can find
A woman like Penelope unkind?
Why thus in silence? why with winning charms
Thus slow to fly with rapture to his arms?
Stubborn the breast that with no transport glows,
When twice ten years are pass'd of mighty woes;
To softness lost, to spousal love unknown,

The gods have formed that rigid heart of stone!"
"O my Telemachus! (the queen rejoin'd,)
Distracting fears confound my labouring mind;
Powerless to speak. I scarce uplift my eyes,
Nor dare to question; doubts on doubts arise.
Oh deign he, if Ulysses, to remove
These boding thoughts, and what he is, to prove!"
Pleased with her virtuous fears, the king replies:
"Indulge, my son, the cautions of the wise;
Time shall the truth to sure remembrance bring:
This garb of poverty belies the king:
No more. This day our deepest care requires,
Cautious to act what thought mature inspires.
If one man's blood, though mean, distain our hands,
The homicide retreats to foreign lands;
By us, in heaps the illustrious peerage falls,
The important deed our whole attention calls."

"Be that thy care (Telemachus replies)
The world conspires to speak Ulysses wise;
For wisdom all is thine! lo, I obey,
And dauntless follow where you led the way;
Nor shalt thou in the day of danger find
Thy coward son degenerate lag behind."

"Then instant to the bath (the monarch cries),

Bid the gay youth and sprightly virgins rise,
Thence all descend in pomp and proud array,
And bid the dome resound the mirthful lay;
While the sweet lyrist airs of rapture sings,
And forms the dance responsive to the strings,
That hence the eluded passengers may say,
'Lo! the queen weds! we hear the spousal lay!
The suitor's death, unknown, till we remove
Far from the court, and act inspired by Jove."

Thus spoke the king: the observant train obey,
At once they bathe, and dress in proud array:
The lyrist strikes the string; gay youths advance,
And fair-zoned damsels form the sprightly dance.
The voice, attuned to instrumental sounds,
Ascends the roof, the vaulted roof rebounds;
Not unobserved: the Greeks eluded say,
"Lo! the queen weds, we hear the spousal lay!
Inconstant! to admit the bridal hour."
Thus they--but nobly chaste she weds no more.

Meanwhile the wearied king the bath ascends;
With faithful cares Eurynome attends,
O'er every limb a shower of fragrance sheds;
Then, dress'd in pomp, magnificent he treads.
The warrior-goddess gives his frame to shine

With majesty enlarged, and grace divine.
Back from his brows in wavy ringlets fly
His thick large locks of hyacinthine dye.
As by some artist to whom Vulcan gives
His heavenly skill, a breathing image lives;
By Pallas taught, he frames the wondrous mould,
And the pale silver glows with fusile gold:
So Pallas his heroic form improves
With bloom divine, and like a god he moves!
More high he treads, and issuing forth in state,
Radiant before his gazing consort sate.
"And, O my queen! (he cries) what power above
Has steel'd that heart, averse to spousal love?
Canst thou, Penelope, when heaven restores
Thy lost Ulysses to his native shores,
Canst thou, O cruel! unconcern'd survey
Thy lost Ulysses, on this signal day?
Haste, Euryclea, and despatchful spread
For me, and me alone, the imperial bed,
My weary nature craves the balm of rest.
But Heaven with adamant has arm'd her breast."

"Ah no! (she cries) a tender heart I bear,
A foe to pride: no adamant is there;
And now, e'en now it melts! for sure I see
Once more Ulysses my beloved in thee!

Fix'd in my soul, as when he sailed to Troy,
His image dwells: then haste the bed of joy,
Haste, from the bridal bower the bed translate,
Fram'd by his hand, and be it dress'd in state!"

Thus speaks the queen, still dubious, with disguise
Touch'd at her words, the king with warmth replies
"Alas for this! what mortal strength can move
The enormous burden, who but Heaven above?
It mocks the weak attempts of human hands!
But the whole earth must move if Heaven commands
Then hear sure evidence, while we display
Words seal'd with sacred truth and truth obey:
This hand the wonder framed; an olive spread
Full in the court its ever verdant head.
Vast as some mighty column's bulk, on high
The huge trunk rose, and heaved into the sky;
Around the tree I raised a nuptial bower,
And roof'd defensive of the storm and shower;
The spacious valve, with art inwrought conjoins;
And the fair dome with polished marble shines.
I lopp'd the branchy head: aloft in twain
Sever'd the bole, and smoothed the shining grain;
Then posts, capacious of the frame, I raise,
And bore it, regular, from space to space:
Athwart the frame, at equal distance lie

Thongs of tough hides, that boast a purple dye;
Then polishing the whole, the finished mould
With silver shone, with elephant, and gold.
But if o'erturn'd by rude, ungovern'd hands,
Or still inviolate the olive stands,
'Tis thine, O queen, to say, and now impart,
If fears remain, or doubts distract thy heart."

While yet he speaks, her powers of life decay;
She sickens, trembles, falls, and faints away.
At length recovering, to his arms she flew,
And strain'd him close, as to his breast she grew.
The tears pour'd down amain, and "O (she cries)
Let not against thy spouse thine anger rise!
O versed in every, turn of human art,
Forgive the weakness of a woman's heart!
The righteous powers, that mortal lot dispose,
Decree us to sustain a length of woes.
And from the flower of life the bliss deny
To bloom together, fade away, and die.
O let me, let me not thine anger move,
That I forbore, thus, thus to speak my love:
Thus in fond kisses, while the transport warms
Pour out my soul and die within thine arms!
I dreaded fraud! Men, faithless men, betray
Our easy faith, and make our sex their prey:

Against the fondness of my heart I strove:
'Twas caution, O my lord! not want of love.
Like me had Helen fear'd, with wanton charms
Ere the fair mischief set two worlds in arms;
Ere Greece rose dreadful in the avenging day;
Thus had she fear'd, she had not gone astray.
But Heaven, averse to Greece, in wrath decreed
That she should wander, and that Greece should bleed:
Blind to the ills that from injustice flow,
She colour'd all our wretched lives with woe.
But why these sorrows when my lord arrives?
I yield, I yield! my own Ulysses lives!
The secrets of the bridal bed are known
To thee, to me, to Actoris alone
(My father's present in the spousal hour,
The sole attendant on our genial bower).
Since what no eye hath seen thy tongue reveal'd,
Hard and distrustful as I am, I yield."

Touch'd to the soul, the king with rapture hears,
Hangs round her neck, and speaks his joy in tears.
As to the shipwreck'd mariner, the shores
Delightful rise, when angry Neptune roars:
Then, when the surge in thunder mounts the sky,
And gulfd in crowds at once the sailors die;
If one, more happy, while the tempest raves,

Outlives the tumult of conflicting waves,
All pale, with ooze deform'd, he views the strand,
And plunging forth with transport grasps the land:
The ravish'd queen with equal rapture glows,
Clasps her loved lord, and to his bosom grows.
Nor had they ended till the morning ray,
But Pallas backward held the rising day,
The wheels of night retarding, to detain
The gay Aurora in the wavy main;
Whose flaming steeds, emerging through the night.
Beam o'er the eastern hills with streaming light.

At length Ulysses with a sigh replies:
"Yet Fate, yet cruel Fate repose denies;
A labour long, and hard, remains behind;
By heaven above, by hell beneath enjoin'd:
For to Tiresias through the eternal gates
Of hell I trode, to learn my future fates.
But end we here--the night demands repose,
Be deck'd the couch! and peace awhile, my woes!"

To whom the queen: "Thy word we shall obey,
And deck the couch; far hence be woes away:
Since the just gods, who tread the starry plains,
Restore thee safe, since my Ulysses reigns.
But what those perils heaven decrees, impart;

Knowledge may grieve, but fear distracts the heart."

To this the king: "Ah, why must I disclose
A dreadful story of approaching woes?
Why in this hour of transport wound thy ears,
When thou must learn what I must speak with tears?
Heaven, by the Theban ghost, thy spouse decrees,
Torn from thy arms, to sail a length of seas;
From realm to realm, a nation to explore
Who ne'er knew salt, or heard the billows roar,
Nor saw gay vessel storm the surgy plain,
A painted wonder, flying on the main:
An oar my hand must bear; a shepherd eyes
The unknown instrument with strange surprise,
And calls a corn-van; this upon the plain
I fix, and hail the monarch of the main;
Then bathe his altars with the mingled gore
Of victims vow'd, a ram, a bull, a boar;
Thence swift re-sailing to my native shores,
Due victims slay to all the ethereal powers.
Then Heaven decrees, in peace to end my days
And steal myself from life by slow decays!
Unknown to pain, in age resign my breath,
When late stern Neptune points the shaft of death;
To the dark grave retiring as to rest;
My people blessing, by my people bless'd.

Such future scenes the all-righteous powers display
By their dread seer, and such my future day."

To whom thus firm of soul: "If ripe for death,
And full of days, thou gently yield thy breath;
While Heaven a kind release from ills foreshows,
Triumph, thou happy victor of thy woes?"

But Euryclea, with dispatchful care,
And sage Eurynome, the couch prepare;
Instant they bid the blazing torch display
Around the dome and artificial day;
Then to repose her steps the matron bends,
And to the queen Eurynome descends;
A torch she bears, to light with guiding fires
The royal pair; she guides them, and retires
The instant his fair spouse Ulysses led
To the chaste love-rites of the nuptial bed.

And now the blooming youths and sprightly fair
Cease the gay dance, and to their rest repair;
But in discourse the king and consort lay,
While the soft hours stole unperceived away;
Intent he hears Penelope disclose
A mournful story of domestic woes,
His servants' insults, his invaded bed,

How his whole flocks and herds exhausted bled,
His generous wines dishonour'd shed in vain,
And the wild riots of the suitor-train.
The king alternate a dire tale relates,
Of wars, of triumphs, and disastrous fates;
All he unfolds; his listening spouse turns pale
With pleasing horror at the dreadful tale;
Sleepless devours each word; and hears how slain
Cicons on Cicons swell the ensanguined plain;
How to the land of Lote unblest'd he sails;
And images the rills and flowery vales!
How dash'd like dogs, his friends the Cyclops tore
(Not unrevenged), and quaff'd the spouting gore;
How the loud storms in prison bound, he sails
From friendly Aeolus with prosperous gales:
Yet fate withstands! a sudden tempest roars,
And whirls him groaning from his native shores:
How on the barbarous Laestrigonian coast,
By savage hands his fleet and friends lie lost;
How scarce himself survived: he paints the bower,
The spells of Circe, and her magic power;
His dreadful journey to the realms beneath,
To seek Tiresias in the vales of death;
How in the doleful mansions lie survey'd
His royal mother, pale Anticlea's shade;
And friends in battle slain, heroic ghosts!

Then how, unharm'd, he pass'd the Syren-coasts,
The justling rocks where fierce Charybdis raves,
And howling Scylla whirls her thunderous waves,
The cave of death! How his companions slay
The oxen sacred to the god of day.
Till Jove in wrath the rattling tempest guides,
And whelms the offenders in the roaring tides:
How struggling through the surge lie reach'd the shores
Of fair Ogygia and Calypso's bowers;
Where the bay blooming nymph constrain'd his stay,
With sweet, reluctant, amorous delay;
And promised, vainly promised, to bestow
Immortal life, exempt from age and woe:
How saved from storms Phaeacia's coast he trod,
By great Alcinous honour'd as a god,
Who gave him last his country to behold,
With change of raiment, brass, and heaps of gold

He ended, sinking into sleep, and shares
A sweet forgetfulness of all his cares.

Soon as soft slumber eased the toils of day,
Minerva rushes through the aerial way,
And bids Aurora with her golden wheels
Flame from the ocean o'er the eastern hills;
Uprose Ulysses from the genial bed,

And thus with thought mature the monarch said:

"My queen, my consort! through a length of years
We drank the cup of sorrow mix'd with tears;
Thou, for thy lord; while me the immortal powers
Detain'd reluctant from my native shores.
Now, bless'd again by Heaven, the queen display,
And rule our palace with an equal sway.
Be it my care, by loans, or martial toils,
To throng my empty folds with gifts or spoils.
But now I haste to bless Laertes' eyes
With sight of his Ulysses ere he dies;
The good old man, to wasting woes a prey,
Weeps a sad life in solitude away.
But hear, though wise! This morning shall unfold
The deathful scene, on heroes heroes roll'd.
Thou with thy maids within the palace stay,
From all the scene of tumult far away!"

He spoke, and sheathed in arms incessant flies
To wake his son, and bid his friends arise.
"To arms!" aloud he cries; his friends obey,
With glittering arms their manly limbs array,
And pass the city gate; Ulysses leads the way.
Now flames the rosy dawn, but Pallas shrouds
The latent warriors in a veil of clouds.