

## PENELOPE'S SECRET

Pan was the son of Penelope and all the suitors.  
(*Schol. de Lycophron*)<sup>1</sup>

### I

The day after the massacre of the suitors and the happy recognition, Ulysses quit his bed at dawn, gently moving aside the tapering leg with which Penelope was enlacing him familiarly, in the unconsciousness of sleep.

A host of anxious reflections clouded his mind, and the gracious spectacle of nascent spring that awaited him when he emerged from his dwelling could not distract him. Ulysses avoided old Laertes, occupied in tilling the soil, and scarcely cast a glance at his nurse, who had been the first to recognize him on his return to Ithaca.

Having arrived on the shore, he sat down on a rock green with algae and devoted himself to long meditations. The waves came to unfurl and die away at his feet, accompanying his thoughts with their mysterious music.

*Joys are ephemeral*, he said to himself. *They disperse and vanish like the marine foam that dies almost as soon as it is formed. Yesterday, after the bloody battle, finding myself king again in my reconquered island, I felt my heart inundated with happiness and pride. But a suspicion has sufficed for my tranquility to be disturbed and for the poison of doubt to penetrate and corrode me.*

Leaning toward Argus, his dog, who had followed him and appeared to be respiring delightedly in proximity with his master, he stroked him, passing his hand over his muzzle, and naming him in a tender voice. His thoughts having led him to suspect the sincerity of humans, it was pleasant for him to be able at least to place his confidence in that humble proven companion.

Gradually, while trying to untangle the thread of his anxieties, Ulysses became more confused. Aggravated, his suspicions attained a sort of baleful certainty. Soon, shadowed by sorrow, he thought that the sun was paling before him and that spring was darkening.

Suddenly, a hand posed on his shoulder and the hero, raising his head again, saw Penelope, who was smiling at him amicably, having arrived with slow steps.

“Why have you fled our bed so soon, valorous Ulysses? You have not even tried to renew in the morning the gentle and powerful caresses of which I have been deprived for so many years.”

And, as Ulysses did not seem disposed to reply, Penelope, gazing at him attentively, perceived his sadness and the shadows of the preoccupations projected on his face.

“What’s the matter, then?” she asked. “What dolor has transformed you so promptly? Yesterday, you were radiant with contentment, and youth seemed to be haunting your features again. Now you are dejected, as if plunged in darkness. I implore you by Minerva, your protectress, to confide your troubles to me, in order that I can share them with you.” And as Ulysses raised his hand, sketching a mute and fleeting response, she added: “Have you forgotten our affection? How can you nourish cares jealously and, in a fashion, prolong our separation by hiding them from me?”

Then Ulysses, with the swift rapidity that always presided over his actions, made the resolution to speak sincerely. He therefore replied to Penelope: “O wife, it is you who are the cause of my preoccupations. Having heard your fidelity praised, and proud of your exemplary constancy, I trembled

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<sup>1</sup> This statement was allegedly attributed to Lycophron by Duris the Samian, according to the Byzantine poet John Tzetzes’ *Scholiast* [i.e. Commentary] *on Lycophron*, but there might have been a mistranslation somewhere along the line. Pan is more commonly alleged to have been fathered by Hermes/Mercury.

with emotion yesterday evening when, after having got rid of our enemies, I was finally able to resume my place in our bed and feel the soft warmth of your body. But how can I describe my surprise and my perplexity before the unexpected novelty of your kisses?

“I had visited, during my long voyages, the beds of many goddesses, and before that, I had already lavished my caresses on the beautiful captives of proud Ilium. However, I retained, vividly and brightly, the memory of your virginal modesty, your charming gaucherie. I had not forgotten the inexperience with which you once responded to the impetuosity of my desires, and when, before Troy, in the days of destruction, I saw the frail Cassandra emerging polluted and ashamed from the violent hands of Ajax, that sight reminded me of your chaste countenance, the timid distraction you showed in amour.

“Yesterday, however, climbing on to the high bed and enlacing you, I felt myself suddenly seized and forcefully imprisoned by your bold and intrepid arms. Your once-*puerile* body now showed itself expert and inexhaustible, drawing upon the voluptuous secrets of all the carnal artifices. The sensual Circe, who burned with inexhaustible fires and succeeded in rapidly drawing from me all my voluptuous sap, was truly only a schoolgirl by comparison with you. What she dispensed in passion and in charm in order to inflame me, you deployed yourself, as if in play, yesterday evening.

“Although your science and your experience fulfilled my body, they could not help awakening a great anguish in my mind. For I began to wonder whence came that marvelous transformation, and how, in your long and pure widowhood, retired to your cold bed, you succeeded in learning so many amorous artifices and acquiring such a warm and vibrant virtuosity.”

At these words, Penelope’s face was colored with the redness of the dawn. She avoided her husband’s gaze and, bowing her head, she remained silent.

“Respond to my question,” Ulysses went on, “and dispense with lies. All the Achaeans know that nothing remains hidden from me and that my subtlety thwarts the ruses of men. I can already see your confusion, and I hold it as certain henceforth, that you are culpable. Only sincerity can save you now and reunite us.”

Then, trying to suppress the tumult of her heart, Penelope dared to raise her fearful gaze to Ulysses, and she replied: “You are right. Who would dare to deceive you? You are equal to the divinities and you visit the innermost recesses of the heart. I will therefore hide nothing from you, and I hope that you will recognize that Necessity was the only instigator of my sins, and that it was the will of the Immortals that prepared my defeat irresistibly. You can, moreover, punish me or absolve me as you wish, and everything coming from you will appear just to me. I only beg you to contain yourself until the end of my story and to listen to me calmly.”

Not without uttering a long sigh, the queen continued: “It was during the seventh year of your absence that my courage received a first affront. Until then I had retained faithful to your memory and, imposing silence on my senses, I lived isolated, entirely attentive to following the vigorous growth of our son. The suitors, encouraged by the reverses of the Achaeans and believing you doomed, were emboldened. But they pressed me in vain, using flatteries and promises, to choose a husband; I believed unshakably in your return and avoided any pronouncement.

“One night, however, a dream came to trouble me. For I saw Minerva, your protectress, who predicted to me that a child, almost divine, would soon be born of my loins, and that all the suitors would contribute to it. When I awoke I tried to forget that dream and rebelled against the will of the goddess. I knew, in any case, that malign and deceptive spirits often usurp a divine aspect, and sow deceptive dreams in order to torment mortals.

“A few nights later, however, the irreparable occurred. It is necessary to tell you that I had adopted the habit of hiding myself, at nightfall, in the depths of my palace. I left the suitors banqueting noisily and gorging themselves on meat and wine in the rooms downstairs. My five maidservants, sleeping at the entrance to my apartments, guarded my retreat and ensured that it was respected. In taking those precautions, however, I had not thought of the impudence and cunning of the beggar Iras. In fact, that wretch, whom you have justly punished by breaking his jaw, had reached an understanding with my maidservants. Employing flatteries and corruption by turns, he succeeded in putting them to sleep one night by the usage of wine, and subsequently putting me at the discretion of the suitors.

“That night, therefore I was abruptly woken up in my bed, sensing a pressure and an unaccustomed warmth around my body. I believed at first, while still asleep, that a fly was prowling around and lingering on my lips. On opening my eyes, however, I perceived with stupor, by the light of a torch, that I was in the arms and beneath the body of a powerful warrior. I recognized him. It was Eurymachus, the son of Polybus, a man still young, well-proportioned and intrepid. The infamous Iras, his accomplice, was standing next to him, ready to support him in his enterprise.

“I had the intention then of crying out, struggling and defending myself; but the idea of your honor and my reputation, kept intact for so long and provoking the admiration of all the Achaeans, stopped me. In any case, the injurious attempt was already entirely perpetrated. Repressing my horror and my anger, therefore, and wanting to avoid any noise and outburst, I closed my eyes again. I pretended to be unaware of what, amid his joyous transports, kisses, sighs and tender appellations, the valorous Eurymachus was doing to my body. When he was satisfied, without my wanting to share his satisfaction, he left, followed by Iras.

“I remained alone, dazed, utterly stirred up, thinking about, trying to compose myself and console myself. Finally, the struggle I had endured enabled me to find sleep again. And it was with a new surprise that I woke up, again sensing a man in my bed, and then feeling arms, more ardent, if I dare say so, than those of Eurymachus. This time, it was the illustrious Agelaus, king of Zacynthus. Iras followed him. I saw that I was doomed, that Minerva’s prediction was being realized, and that a second suitor was pressing irresistibly the body that I wanted to keep pure of all soiling, virgin of any foreign embrace.

“As, henceforth, I could only accept destiny, I consoled myself by thinking that there is always some advantage to be obtained from the worst misfortunes. *Since I cannot succeed in keeping my girdle intact for my husband, I said to myself, it is better if, at least, he cannot specify the object of his resentment, or have a determined rival. Serving several, my body will not belong especially to anyone, like a hostelry that, sheltering various individuals, can boast of having no master.*

“Thus, it was almost with joy and relief that I awoke again, still warm from the embrace of Agelaus, I saw the son of the famous Polyctor enter,<sup>2</sup> who was still beardless and had a divine form and strength. He slipped into the bed, very impatient, and embraced me with such a naïve and impetuous ardor that I could not help smiling at him.....

“Why am I lingering, in any case, in this story? That night and the following night the visits continued. The hundred suitors succeeded one another. I always greeted them, I swear by the gods, with closed eyes and a modest attitude, making a semblance of being asleep. They did not have the satisfaction of seeing on my face the abundant joy that they were giving me.

“As they were from various countries, of different temperaments, and their demands were as various as their complexions and their habits, and as there were very lustful and very industrious individuals among their number, who revealed unknown secrets to me unintentionally, their obligatory commerce ended up transfiguring me and serving unwittingly as a voluptuous education. Nothing remained unknown to me of everything that Amour and Desire inspire in men.

“Such is my fatal sin, O Ulysses, and the dream that warned me of it proves to you that the gods were no strangers to it. Not only the perversity of Iras, but an Olympian design was to conduct that entire population of kings—and, I can say, almost every man carrying a scepter—to my bed. Now, judge me, and if you think that I failed voluntarily, and that my conduct was inappropriate to your interests and my reputation, apply to me the punishment that you think necessary.”

While his wife was speaking, anger rose, dilating Ulysses’ nostrils. He was on the point of becoming prey to dementia and imitating Ajax on the day when the latter killed the sacred flocks. When Penelope had confessed that a second suitor succeeded the first in her bed the hero had raised his arm to kill her, but he had killed so abundantly the day before and had steeped his hands so constantly in blood while exterminating the suitors and their concubines that the act of slaying had become insupportable to him.

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<sup>2</sup> Two of Polyctor’s sons are listed among Penelope’s suitors, but this one is evidently Peisander, as the other, Eurymachus, was the father of Polybus.

In any case, during his long existence, Ulysses had seen so many men getting carried away, and accomplishing irreparable acts during their fury, that he had become prudent and had learned to dominate his anger. He therefore restrained himself.

Having need of calm in order to be able to behave appropriately in the new situation that was opening up before him, he turned to his wife and said to her: "Go away, bitch! Return to the palace quickly and await your salary."

At those words, accompanied by a terrible gesture, Penelope went away, sobbing. Ulysses began to wander aimlessly, and without respite, as if pursued by the Erinnyes. He passed unconsciously over the sandy beach where once, by sowing salt and feigning madness, he had tried to discourage the Achaeans who wanted to drag him into their expedition against Troy. Then he retraced his steps, pursuing his errant course at random, only desiring in reality to be alone, in order to be able to abandon himself to his reflections.

He had become just like all the rest—him, the most docile of the Achaeans, whose name was allied in human memory with skill and subtlety! Now he was like Vulcan and Menelaus, obtuse and wretched husbands whose conjugal misfortunes, sung by the aedes, enlivened the banquets of kings! His shame might even be judged incomparable, since neither Venus nor Helen could boast of having attracted and satisfied such numerous and varied lovers as the infamous Penelope.

*I can say, he thought, that all my glory is effaced and annihilated. All that I did admirably, in attracting Achilles and Philoctetes to Troy, inventing the Wooden Horse and visiting unknown lands, my wife has overtaken by means of the gigantic work of her bed. After having been the tamer of Ilium, the voyager supreme, the man who successively undertook all terrestrial labors and exhausted human knowledge, I will only remain in the memory of men for the excellence of my shame. The future will only recognize in me the husband whose fabulous misfortunes attained the summit of derision.*

Ideas of vengeance assailed Ulysses again, obsessively and tumultuously. He thought about running to the palace, dragging the infidel far from the hearth and, after having pierced her with a hundred wounds—as many wounds as she had experienced furtive joys—attaching it behind his chariot and delivering the polluted body to the impetuous ardor of his horses. Afterwards, he would abandon his disastrous kingdom, his rediscovered father and his faithful nurse, and he would go to resume the adventurous life in his hollow ship, braving the tempests and the pirates...

Ulysses was descending the hills of his island, fortified in his homicidal design, incessantly nourishing his unappeased anger. Already, the ancestral palace founded by Ithacus had appeared to his sight, reanimating his frightful memories. But at that moment, the air that surrounded him seemed to thicken and become colored, and the goddess with the blue eyes, Minerva, his faithful source of inspiration, took on a body of flesh and loomed up before him.

"Where are you going, Laertide, and what violent projects are filling your mind?" asked the daughter of Jupiter, in her clear and imperious voice.

On recognizing the redoubtable and propitious Minerva, Ulysses remained nonplussed, without having the strength to reply.

"I know what you have learned and the thoughts that are agitating in your mind," the goddess went on. "Beware, unhappy man, of behaving inconsiderately, and remember that it is the will of the Immortals that directs human action; Penelope was right to attribute her sin to fatality. If she has soiled your bed, it is in order that an almost immortal child would be born from her loins."

"One man would have been sufficient for that! Did it need a hundred to engender him?"

"That child, who will be called Pan—which is to say, *born of a total effort*—is destined to epitomize the fecund forces that animate the universe. It was therefore necessary that all human saps collaborate in his creation and be confounded in order to form him."

"I respect the will of the immortals; but it is cruel to think, O goddess, that my bed has groaned under the weight of an entire people."

"Of those men who have obtained Penelope's favors, not one remains alive. You have killed them all with your own hands. That supreme punishment has washed away the insult."

"And Penelope?"

“Contain the desire to avenge yourself on her,” said Minerva, severely. “Otherwise, the secret of her sin, which has perished with the suitors, will burst forth and will be delivered to the knowledge of all.”

“How can I bear to share my bed with that woman, who had welcomed there all the ardors of Dulichium, Samos and green Zacynthus? How can I resist repudiating her and shaming her?”

“Avoid even thinking about it,” said Minerva, alarmed. “Penelope is sacred. Such as she emerges from the multiple embraces of the suitors, she still remains the symbol of fidelity. Helen, Clytemnestra, Andromache, Cassandra, all the queens and all the princesses, flying from lover to lover, have cast dishonor on their sex. The world laughs or turns away from their misbehavior, and only takes consolation from fortifying example in the virtue of Penelope. She is the one who incarnates Achaean honor. She must remain unsuspected. Cease, therefore, to nurture your insensate projects, and remember that the will of the Olympians protects your spouse.”

Saddened, Ulysses remained silent for a long time. Then, softened, he said: “Your orders will be respected. Who would dare recklessly to oppose the decisions of the Immortals?”

“Go, then, and try to rise above human miseries,” said Minerva.

She wanted to fly away, but Ulysses, tormented by a final suspicion, stopped her.

“Since you honor me with your favor and you protect me, tell me, O goddess, whether, in addition to the suitors, any other man has entered Penelope’s bed during my absence.”

“A god, taking the form of a goat, also enjoyed her favors,<sup>3</sup> but that was necessary in order that the child should be born with cloven hooves and able to participate in animal vigor.”

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<sup>3</sup> Hermes/Mercury is said by numerous Classical sources to have assumed the form of a goat in order to father Pan.