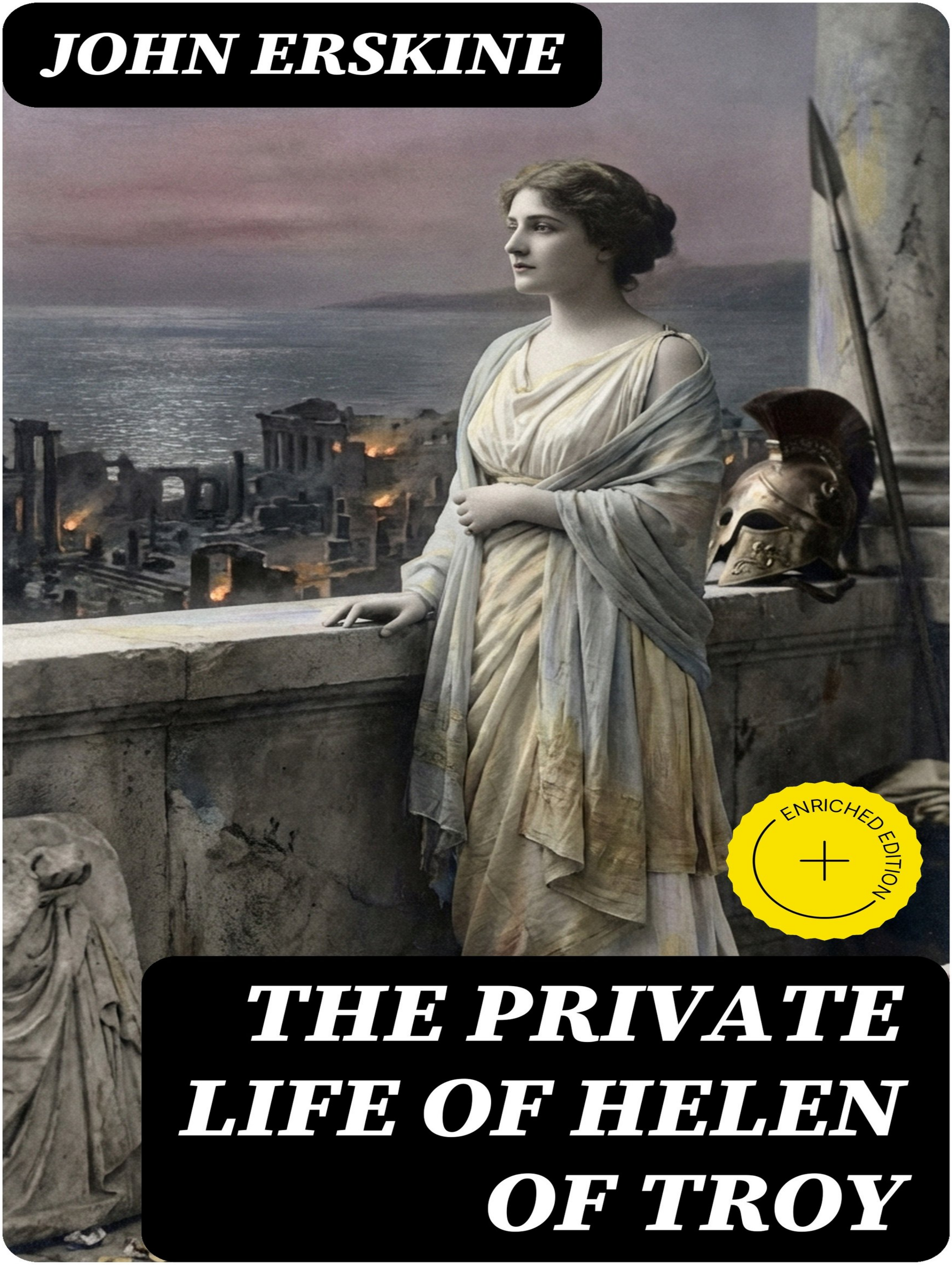
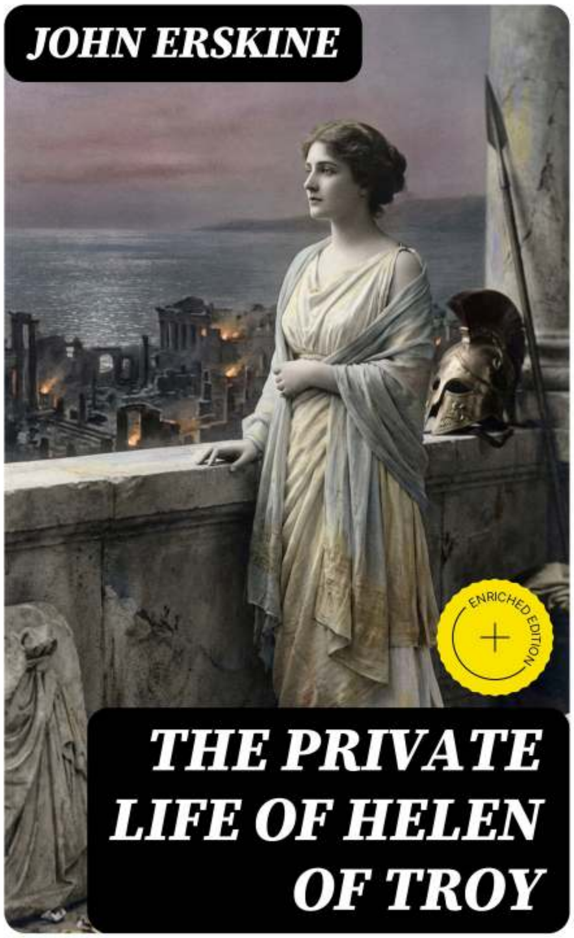
JOHN ERSKINE


ENRICHED EDITION

THE PRIVATE LIFE OF HELEN OF TROY


JOHN ERSKINE
ENRICHED EDITION
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The Private Life of Helen of Troy

Enriched edition.

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Introduction

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At the heart of The Private Life of Helen of Troy lies the clash between the legend people recite and the life a woman must actually live. John Erskine's novel approaches antiquity not through battles and sieges but through the intimate arena of home, conversation, and choice. This refocusing turns a world-famous myth into a study of wit, resilience, and the politics of reputation. The book invites readers to listen as characters debate love, loyalty, and self-determination, all while navigating the gossip that trails a notorious beauty. The result is a tale that feels both classical in scope and modern in sensibility.

First published in 1925, The Private Life of Helen of Troy is a comic novel of ideas that reimagines Greek myth in the aftermath of the Trojan War. Its setting is primarily Sparta and the surrounding Greek world, but its perspective is domestic rather than martial, attending to households, civic expectations, and the theater of social life. Erskine, an American author steeped in classical learning, frames the material as a lively social satire rather than an epic. The mid-1920s context matters: the book speaks in a brisk, urbane idiom, reflecting contemporary curiosity about independence, marriage, and the reshaping of moral authority.

The premise begins where many retellings end: the war is over, and Helen returns to Sparta with Menelaus to resume ordinary life under extraordinary scrutiny.

Neighbors, friends, and family weigh in on what her past should mean for her present, often with more zeal than understanding. The narrative unfolds through scenes of conversation, visits, and festivities that gradually expose competing ideas of duty and desire. Readers encounter a spirited heroine and an ensemble who treat mythic events as living memory rather than sacred script. Without leaning on spectacle, the novel builds momentum through argument, confession, and the quiet comedy of manners.

Erskine’s voice intertwines elegance and mischief. The prose favors quick exchanges, clean narration, and an assured rhythm that sends ancient figures gliding through a recognizably human world. Anachronistic touches of attitude —never heavy-handed—let the dialogue sparkle with contemporary energy while remaining anchored in classical names and places. The tone is humane and ironic, amused by social pretenses yet alert to the costs of conformity. Scenes often turn on a character’s keen observation or a sudden reversal in debate, inviting readers to test their own assumptions. This makes the book both entertaining and argumentative, a conversation piece posing as a love story.

Running beneath the comedy are serious themes. The novel tests competing models of marriage—contract and companionship, duty and desire—alongside questions of personal autonomy. It probes the double standards that judge women more harshly than men, especially when beauty and fame blur into public property. Reputation becomes currency, storytelling a weapon, and forgiveness a civic act as much as a private choice. The aftermath of war shadows everything, not through carnage but through the problem of rebuilding trust, households, and common rules. Erskine’s Helen insists on the right to define herself, pressing the myth to yield a more candid moral accounting.

For contemporary readers, that insistence feels strikingly current. The novel anticipates debates about agency, consent, and the pressures of celebrity culture, showing how a community manages scandal and how a woman resists being reduced to headline and symbol. It also speaks to any era learning to live after upheaval, when new freedoms and old loyalties collide. Erskine’s playful classicism invites us to read myths as tools rather than relics, revealing how stories steer behavior and how revising them can open ethical possibilities. In its nimble way, the book asks what fairness looks like when everyone thinks they already know the truth.

Approach The Private Life of Helen of Troy as a spirited salon in which antiquity argues with modernity, and let the pleasures of talk carry you. The plot concerns ordinary choices—home, partnership, reputation—made urgent by a history too famous to ignore, and it rewards attention to nuance rather than spectacle. Erskine offers wit without cynicism and sympathy without sentimentality, trusting readers to draw conclusions as the characters test their ideals. Without requiring expert knowledge of the myths, the novel opens the old story to fresh air, leaving its heroine not as a symbol to interpret, but as a mind to meet.

Synopsis

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John Erskine’s The Private Life of Helen of Troy opens after the fall of Troy, with Helen returning to Sparta beside Menelaus and confronted by the world her legend has unsettled. Rather than rehearsing battles, the novel turns inward, presenting a witty, urbane Helen who insists that private motives and domestic arrangements matter as much as public glory. As courtiers and neighbors take stock of the homecoming, Helen measures her past against the life she intends to lead. Erskine frames familiar myth with conversations about responsibility, desire, and pride, and he places a notorious beauty within the ordinary rhythms of household rule.

Their arrival sharpens old grievances and new expectations. Menelaus wants peace, taxes collected, and Spartan order restored; Helen faces scrutiny from those who fought or waited through the war. The city whispers about culpability, forgiveness, and the price of reconciliation. Helen does not apologize in the terms expected of her; she articulates a consistent defense of choice, insisting that affection and truth, not convention, give marriage its meaning. Erskine advances the narrative through lucid debates rather than spectacle, letting domestic scenes, errands, and court audiences reveal shifting loyalties. The war remains background noise while the characters negotiate how to live afterward.

Much of the story rests on the couple’s attempt to redesign their marriage without ceremonies or oaths. Menelaus’s pride is real, but so is his dependence on his wife’s tact and intelligence. Helen contests double standards, arguing that men’s adventures are praised while women’s are punished, and she asks for equal candor in their household. The king’s practical burdens—property disputes, attendants, the temper of allies—give the conversations stakes beyond sentiment. Their exchanges are wry, sometimes tender, sometimes sharp, and Erskine uses them to test whether affection can survive reputation. In this retelling, dignity emerges from dialogue rather than decree.

Hermione, their daughter, becomes the most sensitive barometer of what is at stake. Young, admired, and courted, she wonders whether love is a duty, an accident, or a craft to be learned. Helen’s counsel to her is unconventional, emphasizing self-respect and clear-eyed choice over melodrama. Suitors’ proposals and family arrangements place Hermione at the center of negotiations that echo broader Greek anxieties about lineage and honor. The household turns into a classroom where rivals present arguments as much as gifts, and where a young woman’s prospects are weighed against the community’s need for stability. Ideals meet practical consequences at table.

Beyond the palace walls, Erskine sketches a society recovering from campaign life—heroes turned administrators, sailors turned farmers, and storytellers fixing blame. Banquets, embassies, and gossip provide stages for Helen’s poise, and for Menelaus’s balancing act between mercy and custom. Visitors arrive with grievances or pride, and their manners expose the limits of victory. Helen’s wit troubles those who prefer silence from women but also wins unlikely allies among the pragmatic. The novel’s comedy springs from the mismatch between grand reputations and ordinary appetites, and its pathos from the difficulty of making a life in the shadow of celebrated ruin.

As pressures mount, small slights risk becoming public scandals, and private misgivings threaten to harden into policy. Rumor tests the couple’s resolve; political actors press for examples to deter license; and the younger generation complicates neat verdicts with inconvenient attachments. Menelaus must decide how far reconciliation can extend without undermining authority. Helen uses candor to reclaim dignity, showing that explanation need not be apology, and that trust is actionable rather than sentimental. Erskine gathers these strands toward a decision point that weighs family loyalty against public expectations, and the future’s possibilities against the comfort of familiar penalties.

Without overturning myth, the novel reframes it, suggesting that the real drama lies where law, reputation, and affection meet. Its enduring interest comes from rendering a legendary figure as a thoughtful actor in a shared household, speaking to questions still argued: what marriages are for, how much the past should govern the present, and whether beauty makes freedom easier or harder. Erskine’s light touch and urbane irony keep the narrative buoyant even as it tests conviction. The Private Life of Helen of Troy endures as a humane, slyly modern meditation on rebuilding a life after spectacle, while keeping its final turns discreet.

Historical Context

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John Erskine’s The Private Life of Helen of Troy appeared in 1925 in the United States, amid the social ferment of the Roaring Twenties. The war’s end had accelerated urban growth, consumer culture, and a national conversation about modern manners. American universities were expanding enrollments, and mass-circulation publishers fostered large audiences for fiction. Against this backdrop, Erskine offered a light, witty reimagining of Greek myth. Setting his narrative after the Trojan War and centering it in Sparta, he shifts attention from armies and heroes to household, marriage, and civic propriety, using the domestic aftermath as his stage while drawing on well-known classical traditions.

Erskine’s ancient framework is grounded in recognizable sources. Homer’s Odyssey (Book 4) places Menelaus and Helen back in Sparta after the war, hosting Telemachus and recounting the past; Euripides and other dramatists had also revisited Helen’s reputation. The Greek oikos—the household as the core social and economic unit—organized status, inheritance, and marriage under patriarchal authority. Public honor, reputation, and kinship alliances were central concerns in myth and history. By selecting the peacetime household as his arena, Erskine stages conversations that echo the literary tradition while foregrounding the tensions between personal desire, marital duty, and the expectations of a polis-conscious society.

Contemporary readers met Helen at a moment of rapid change in gender norms. The Nineteenth Amendment (1920) enfranchised American women; enrollment of women in higher education was rising; and urban fashions associated with the flapper signaled new public freedoms. Divorce rates increased in the early twentieth century, and debates over companionate marriage, courtship, and marital consent circulated in newspapers, magazines, and lecture halls. Popularized psychoanalysis offered new vocabularies for desire and personality. These developments formed the cultural horizon for Erskine's audience, priming readers to recognize arguments about autonomy, fidelity, and respectability even when voiced by characters drawn from the Greek heroic age.

Classical antiquity occupied a lively place in interwar culture. Modernist writers mined myth for contemporary meaning—James Joyce's Ulysses (1922) and T. S. Eliot's The Waste Land (1922) offered high-profile examples—while educators promoted close reading of canonical texts. At Columbia University, where Erskine taught, his General Honors course (inaugurated in 1919) became an influential model for Great Books curricula that linked ancient works to present ethical questions. Erskine's fiction grew from this pedagogical impulse. He recast canonical figures with colloquial wit, inviting readers to test inherited moral codes against modern experience—an approach that makes his Helen's domestic dialogues feel at once classical and up-to-date.

American publishing in the 1920s benefited from national advertising, inexpensive reprints, and an expanding middleclass readership. Erskine’s novel found a broad audience and consolidated his reputation beyond academia. Its accessibility and topical humor made it adaptable across media; in 1927, a silent film version directed by Alexander Korda brought the story to cinema audiences, illustrating the decade’s easy traffic between popular literature and film. The speed of adaptation underscored the market’s appetite for playful engagements with the classics. The book’s success thus belongs to a larger commercial pattern that rewarded works connecting familiar cultural touchstones to contemporary social conversation.

Shifting public policy sharpened the era’s focus on women’s roles. The Sheppard–Towner Act (1921) funded maternal and infant health programs nationwide, while activists such as Margaret Sanger pressed for broader access to birth control information despite restrictive state and federal laws. Professional organizations debated marriage, sexuality, and family stability; sociologists surveyed domestic life; and judges and commentators proposed reforms to align law with modern expectations. In this climate, a protagonist who articulates her reasons, negotiates reputation, and argues for personal latitude resonated with many readers. Erskine’s Helen channels these controversies into talk about choice, responsibility, and the uses of tradition.

John Erskine (1879–1951) was a prominent American educator, novelist, and essayist. At Columbia he taught English and championed rigorous engagement with primary texts; his essay The Moral Obligation to Be Intelligent (1915) articulated a civic-minded humanism. He later served as the first president of the Juilliard School of Music from 1928 to 1937, helping to shape a modern conservatory curriculum. Alongside academic work, he published a series of novels reinterpreting classical and biblical figures for general readers. This dual career grounds The Private Life of Helen of Troy: it combines a scholar’s comfort with sources and a popular storyteller’s feel for dialogue and satire.

By placing a famed mythic beauty in ordinary civic and marital predicaments, Erskine aligns classical material with the 1920s’ preoccupation with modern behavior. The novel’s brisk, ironic conversations reflect a culture comfortable testing authority, whether academic, legal, or marital, while its sympathetic attention to a woman’s reasoning mirrors contemporary debates about female agency and public reputation. Without disputing the ancient setting, the book treats tradition as a resource rather than a command. It thus embodies a characteristic interwar attitude: reverence for the classics tempered by pragmatic, humorous scrutiny, and a willingness to use old stories to examine new social arrangements.

THE PRIVATE LIFE OF HELEN OF TROY

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PART I

HELEN'S RETURN

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I

The point of the story is that Paris gave the prize to Aphrodite[1], not because she bribed him, but because she was beautiful. After all, it was a contest in beauty, though Athena and Hera started a discussion about wisdom and power. It was they who tried to bribe him. They had their merits and they had arguments, but Aphrodite was the thing itself[1q].

Her remark, that he would some day marry Helen, interested him as a divine experiment in prophecy. It might happen or it might not. Very likely the goddess did not mean it as he thought; a wise man, even though he believed the oracle, would always wait and see.

Meanwhile he did wonder what Helen looked like. He needed travel. He might as well visit Sparta as any other place. Cassandra[2] told him not to, but she always did. Œnone warned him, but she was his wife.

When he came to the house of Menelaus, the gatekeeper let him in, and since he was a stranger they wouldn't ask his name nor his errand till he had had food and rest. Menelaus put off a journey he had thought of, and practised the sacrament of hospitality. But when he found out who it was, he told Paris to make himself free in the house, and after polite excuses went down to Crete, as he had planned.

So they all intended well. But Paris saw Helen, face to face**[2q]**.

II

When the war ended in Troy, with the fall of the city, Menelaus went looking for Helen, with a sword in his hand. He was undecided whether to thrust the blade through her alluring bosom, or to cut her swan-like throat. He hadn't seen her for some time. She was waiting, as though they had appointed the hour. With a simple gesture she bared her heart for his vengeance, and looked at him. He looked at her. The sword embarrassed him. "Helen," he said, "it's time we went home." They tell the story another way, too. Menelaus was not alone, they say, when he came on Helen in that inner room; Agamemnon was there, and others, to witness the final justice of the long war. Several who had never seen Helen, crowded in for a first and last look at the beauty for which they had fought. When Menelaus saw Helen standing there, he was conscious of his escort. Anger and strength oozed out of him, but those sympathetic friends were at hand, to see a husband do his duty. He raised the sword--slowly--not slowly enough. Then he heard Agamemnon's voice.

"Your wrath might as well stop here, Menelaus; you've got your wife back--why kill her? Priam's city is taken, Paris is dead, you have your revenge. To kill Helen would confuse those who ask what caused the war. Sparta had no share in the guilt; it was Paris entirely, he came as a guest and violated your hospitality."

Menelaus understood why his brother was called the king of men. But later in the evening he was heard to say he would have killed Helen if Agamemnon hadn't interfered.

He had to take her to the ships for the night, with the other prisoners, but he couldn't make up his mind in what order they should set out. Not side by side, of course. He in front, perhaps. That idea he gave up before they reached the street. The emphasis on the procession seemed misplaced. He sent her on ahead to take unprotected whatever insults the curious army might care to hurl at her. But the men gazed in silence, or almost so. They didn't notice him. He heard one say she looked like Aphrodite, caught naked in the arms of Ares, when Hephaistos**[3]**, her ridiculous husband, threw a net over the lovers and called the other gods to see her shame. A second man said he felt like the other gods on that occasion, who expressed a willingness to change places any time with Ares, net and all.

III

Some other men, that night when Troy was sacked, having less cause for violence than Menelaus, showed less restraint. Ajax found Cassandra in Athena's temple, where she served as priestess--a girl lovely enough for Apollo to desire, but of no such beauty as protected Helen. There, as it were in the very presence of the goddess, he violated her, and went on to other business in the riot. Afterwards when Athena's anger was clear enough, he admitted he had injured the woman, but asserted that he had not desecrated the temple, for Odysseus had already stolen away the sacred image, and the room, therefore, if a shrine at all, was an abandoned one. But the distinction was not likely to commend itself to the deity, and Agamemnon announced at once that the fleet would delay its homeward sailing until prolonged and thorough sacrifices had been offered, due rituals of introspection and repentance, lest the goddess should wash their sins away in cold water. Agamemnon was tender in the matter from the moment the prizes were distributed. Cassandra fell to him.

All day he stood by the priest while the flames were fed on the altars, in the midst of the respectful army, and Menelaus stood beside him--the two kings without a rival, now that Achilles was gone. At dusk they let the offerings burn down and smoulder, the soldiers kindled supper-fires, and the priest said the omens so far were good.

"The sacrifices are well begun," said Agamemnon.

"For me," said Menelaus, "they are ended. It wasn't our own sins that brought us to Troy, but as you said last evening, the sins of others. Whatever errors we have fallen into since we arrived, we've had reason to regret as they occurred. If anything was overlooked, through pride or ignorance, this day of sacrifice must have made up for it, and something more. I sail for Sparta tomorrow."

"When I think of sailing," said Agamemnon, "I remember Aulis**[4]**. Our setting out from that harbour cost the life of my child, offered to appease the gods. You did not object to excessive sacrifices then. It was all for you, my brother. My quarrel with Achilles I atoned for long ago, since I was in the wrong. But since at other times I may have been wrong when I thought I was right, I must now satisfy even the unsuspected angers of Zeus and Athena before this host of mine can face wind and wave and what lies between us and our homes."

"What you really fear," said Menelaus, "is your wife."

"Your wife is with you," said Agamemnon, "and your daughter is safe in Sparta, no doubt looking after your affairs. We've all been looking after them. Now I must care for my people. What I really fear is the vengeance of Athena on every one of them, on you and me, on the meanest that row in the ships, for the theft of her image and the outrage to her priestess."

"Odysseus stole the image," said Menelaus, "but only because the city couldn't be taken while the image was there. For that and for some other measures in which he proved helpful, he should perhaps offer many sacrifices. As to what happened to Cassandra, I look upon it as justice, though rather crude. Paris was her brother. The fault of Ajax was haste. She might have been his in the partition of prizes, to take home and treat as he chose, beyond the criticism of the gods and secure from the wrath of mankind, for he has no wife waiting for him."

"My wife," said Agamemnon, "has caused no scandal in the family as yet. In some respects she differs from her sister. How many men have captured Helen, or been captured by her? Theseus, before your time, and you of course, and Paris, and Deiphobus--and wasn't there something between Achilles and her? Did Hector admire her, or was it only she that thought of him? Our special philosophies, brother, are evolved that we may live peaceably with our own past. You are in no position, I can see, to condemn the work of Ajax. Cherish your philosophy; you will need it."

"As I was saying," said Menelaus, "I sail for home to-morrow. I'm sorry we part in this mood of dispute. If staying here would do you any good, out of gratitude I'd stay. But the will of the gods is common sense, I think--or essentially so; and if your whim for prolonged sacrifices had really to do with religion, I should argue that the gods who enabled us to burn up Troy, never intended us to live here."

"You go to your fate," said Agamemnon. "I shall not see you again."

"Another mistake on your part, I prefer to think," said Menelaus, "and calling, I hope, for no ceremonial repentance."

Helen was sitting in the tent, motionless by the flickering lamp. The scented flame and smoke of the tripod went up before her face, and made him think of goddesses and altar-fires. Why was she there? Had she been there all day? Out at the sacrifices he had imagined her humbled among the other captives, feeling at last the edge of retribution. She might have stood up when he came in.

"To-morrow we sail for Sparta."

"So soon?"

"Is it too soon? You prefer Troy?"

"Not now," said Helen, "and you remember I never had much preference for places. But so many ships and men to get ready in a day! You were longer in starting when you came--with more reason for haste, I should have thought. Why, there must be sacrifices, there are gods to think of, the wide dark ocean, the ghosts of so many dead to quiet before we go."

"The dead are at peace and the gods are satisfied," said Menelaus; "we've given the whole day to sacrificing. The ocean remains wide and dark. Agamemnon will continue the sacrifices for that and for some other things prayer cannot change. We have had words about it and parted. He and the host will stay a while longer, I go home to-morrow with my men and my captives."

With her, he meant. He didn't know how to say it. Not "with my wife and my captives." He hadn't the courage to say "you and my other captives."

"Menelaus," she said, "of course I shall share the journey with you, however unwisely you undertake it. But you are wrong, and your brother is right. Those who are conscious of wrong-doing need time for regret and for remorse, and those of us who are conscious of no wrong-doing, we most of all should offer sacrifices against our pride. You have your old common sense, Menelaus, an immediate kind of wit, but you still lack vision. If you had more vision you would be more conventional."

"If I hear you," said Menelaus, "you are advising me not to depart from established rules of conduct?"

"That is my advice," said Helen.

"I am overtired and my brain refuses to work," said Menelaus. "Will you return to--whatever place you have just come from, or shall I leave this tent to you? We start early in the morning."

IV

The wind was against them, and the men were at the oars. Menelaus sat near the helmsman, and Helen before him, her face bare to the wind. The rowers looked up at her, not as in anger at one who had brought on them war and labour, but curiously at first, then with understanding and awe, as though there were a blessing in the boat. Menelaus watched the change in their gaze, and wondered why he had come to Troy--and remembered why.

Helen shifted her position, for the first time in hours, and looked in his eyes. The oarsmen looked up at him, too; they forgot to row.

"Menelaus," she said, "you should have offered sacrifices. There is something very strange about this boat."

"On the contrary," he replied, "the boat is perhaps the only thing here that is beyond criticism. The wind is unfavourable, but the men row well, except when you distract them."

"In Troy at this moment, or somewhere along the shore," she said, "Agamemnon offers up prayers which I dare say will be effective; he will doubtless reach home. Our own prospect seems to me uncertain. You know my point of view--I have no love for adventure unless I know where I'm going."

"We are going to Sparta," he said.

"I fear we are not," said Helen.

"We will hold to the course," said her husband, "and unless the stars are disarranged in this much troubled world, we shall arrive in Sparta in a week. That will be excellent time, don't you think?" he asked the helmsman.

"It took us longer to reach Troy on the way out," said the helmsman.

"When I went to Troy," said Helen, "it took only three days, but that was an exceptional voyage."

Thereafter the rowers bent to the oars and the helmsman read the sun and the stars. At first Helen would look at Menelaus from time to time, serene enough, but as though she could say something if it were worth while to do so. After many days she only sat motionless, gazing far ahead across the sea, and the oarsmen kept their patient eyes on her, as though she and they were faithful to something Menelaus could not understand. He passed the time feeling lonely, and wondering whether the water and the food would hold out.

"Ah, there is Sparta at last," he said.

"I doubt it," said Helen.

As a matter of fact it was Egypt. Helen walked ashore on the narrow bridge the sailors held for her, as though one always landed in Egypt. The wind died completely. The weary men set up the king's tent and shelters for themselves, and went to sleep. Menelaus could not remember that he had given orders for disembarking, but he wasn't sure and didn't like to ask.

"This famous land is more interesting than I had thought," said Helen some weeks later. "In my afternoon walks I have met several of the natives, and they seem to have reached here an average of culture somewhat above our best in Sparta, don't you think?"

"Helen, you exasperate me," said Menelaus. "I'm not here to tour the country nor to compare civilisations."

"Of course you aren't, nor I either," said Helen, "and when you are ready to sail you have only to tell me. Meanwhile, Polydamna, the wife of that substantial man who sold you the food for our next voyage, is teaching me her skill in herbs and medicines--a good skill to have in any house, and here they all seem to have it. Unless you offer

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1 Aphrodite is the ancient Greek goddess of love, beauty, and sexual desire, one of the Olympian deities; in myth she is central to the story of Paris awarding her the prize of beauty (the ‘Judgement of Paris’).

2 Cassandra is a Trojan princess and prophetess in Greek myth who was given the gift of prophecy but cursed (by Apollo in most versions) so that no one would believe her true predictions.

3 Hephaistos (often Latinized Hephaestus) is the Greek god of fire, metalworking, and craftsmanship, traditionally described as the husband of Aphrodite and the divine smith who forges weapons and metalwork for the gods.

4 Aulis is a coastal town/harbour in ancient Greece (Boeotia) where the Greek fleet gathered before sailing for Troy; in the traditional myth the expedition’s departure from Aulis is associated with the sacrifice of Agamemnon’s daughter Iphigenia to secure favorable winds.

5 Hecatombs refers to very large public sacrifices in ancient Greek religion, originally denoting the ritual slaughter of a hundred cattle but later used more generally for large-scale offerings to the gods.

6 Pharos is a small island off the Egyptian coast near Alexandria, later famed for the Hellenistic Pharos (lighthouse) built in the 3rd century BCE; it is a long-standing geographic name used in classical and later literature.

7 Orestes is a figure of Greek myth, son of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, who is traditionally known for avenging his father’s murder by killing his mother and her lover; his story is a major theme in several ancient Greek tragedies.

8 A minor attendant or gate-keeper in Menelaus’s household who appears in Homeric tradition and here functions as a servant who reports gossip and local news.

9 A figure from Greek myth who becomes the companion of Clytemnestra and seizes power in Agamemnon’s absence; in many versions he is implicated in the murder or usurpation of Agamemnon’s household.

10 Wife of Agamemnon in classical Greek tradition, often portrayed as taking Ægisthus as a lover during Agamemnon’s absence and as central to the later cycle of revenge in her family.

11 King of Mycenae and commander of the Greek forces at Troy in Greek myth; his return from the Trojan War and the fate of his household are major themes in ancient epic and tragedy.

12 Daughter of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra in the myths, commonly depicted as Orestes’ sister who supports or incites him in plans to avenge their father.

13 A daughter of Agamemnon who, in many ancient versions, was offered or sacrificed at Aulis to secure favourable winds for the Greek fleet bound for Troy; later traditions sometimes vary about her fate.

14 Also known as Neoptolemus, traditionally the son of Achilles who fought at Troy and appears in later myths as a prominent warrior and dynastic figure.

15 The principal Greek hero of the Trojan War and the Iliad, famed for his unmatched prowess in battle and his passionate, often tragic, temperament.

16 A woman captured in war and awarded to Achilles in the Iliad; the quarrel over her (and Agamemnon’s prize Chryseis) is a central cause of the conflict between Achilles and Agamemnon in the epic.

17 In Homeric tradition the captive daughter of a priest of Apollo taken as Agamemnon’s prize; her return to her father triggers the dispute between Agamemnon and Achilles in the Iliad.

18 Polyxena was a Trojan princess who, in some versions of the myths, was slain and offered at the tomb of Achilles after Troy's fall; accounts and motives for her death vary among ancient sources.

19 Andromache was the wife of the Trojan hero Hector; after Troy's fall she is depicted in later stories as taken captive and given to Pyrrhus (Neoptolemus) and in some accounts bears him a child.

20 A neighbor and recurring character in the scene who disapproves of Helen's household; in this chapter she is the mother of Damastor and is portrayed as conventional and critical.

21 A mythological king of Sparta and husband of Helen, here portrayed as head of the household grappling with family and social dilemmas.

22 Helen of Troy, a central figure from Greek myth famed for her role in the Trojan War and here depicted as a complex hostess and mother.

[23] A young woman in Helen's household who becomes pregnant by Damastor and whose situation provokes social anxiety in the family.

[24] The daughter of Helen and Menelaus (a figure from classical myth), shown here as morally serious and emotionally invested in Orestes.

[25] A reference to episodes from the fall of Troy—most notably the assault on Cassandra attributed to Ajax the Lesser—used here to evoke wartime brutality toward women.

[26] A small household shrine or hearth used for private family devotions and sacrifices in ancient practice; the text uses it as the place where Ægisthus performed morning rites.

[27] An old folkloric expression cited in the text to evoke a bygone belief told to children (like the more common 'storks brought babies'), used here to mark generational differences in attitudes toward childhood and innocence.

[28] Paris is the Trojan prince who, according to myth, took Helen to Troy and thus triggered the Trojan War; he is mentioned in the narrative as Helen's famous lover from the traditional stories.

[29] Troy is the ancient city in Anatolia central to the Trojan War narratives of Greek myth; references to Troy in the chapter allude to the war and its long consequences for the characters.

[30] Sparta was a prominent ancient Greek city-state traditionally ruled by Menelaus in the legends; in the story Menelaus and Helen's household is located there or associated with Spartan identity.