

MARGARET GEORGE

The *New York Times* bestselling author of *MARY, CALLED MAGDALENE*

A detailed marble bust of a woman's head and shoulders, shown in profile facing left. Her hair is styled in thick, wavy curls that cascade down. The sculpture is light-colored, possibly white or light grey marble. The background is a dark, almost black color, which makes the white marble stand out. In the bottom left corner, there is a stylized, hand-painted illustration of a large, yellow and black leaf or feather, possibly a peacock feather, with a textured, brush-stroke appearance.

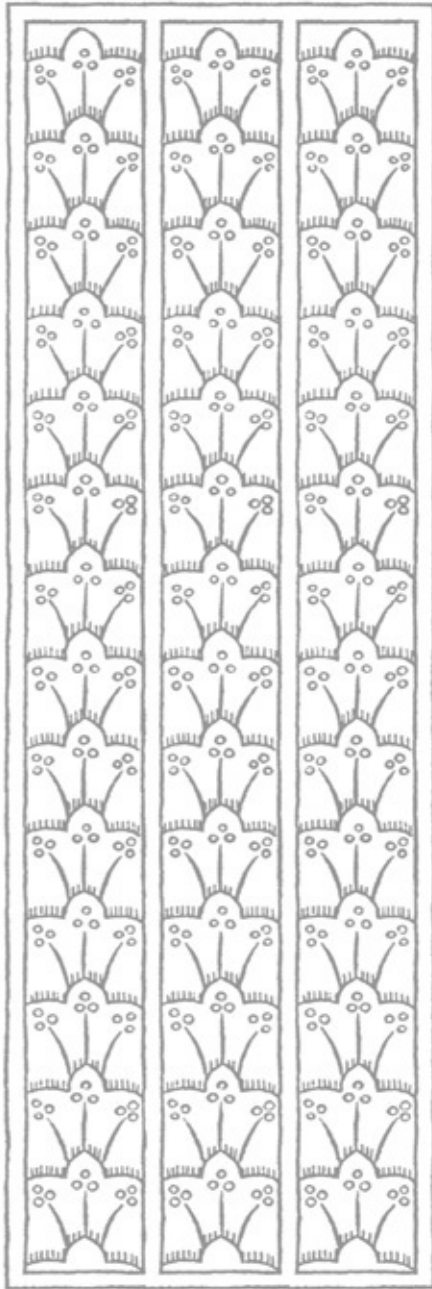
HELEN
of
TROY

a novel

HELEN of TROY



THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF HENRY VIII
MARY QUEEN OF SCOTLAND AND THE ISLES
THE MEMOIRS OF CLEOPATRA
MARY, CALLED MAGDALENE
LUCILLE LOST (Children's Book)



HELEN of TROY

MARGARET
GEORGE

VIKING

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Map by Jeffrey L. Ward

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Afterword

*To my daughter,
Alison Rachel,
dear friend and companion*

*And to her grandmother, my mother,
Margaret Dean,
a last great Southern belle*

Acknowledgments

My thanks to:

My thoughtful Greek friends—Artemios and Evie Kandarakis and Xenia Vletsa—who helped me at their country's archaeological sites, and in many other ways; Katie Broberg Foehl and Nikos and March Schweitzer, enthusiastic Graecophiles who were comrades in my quest; Brian and Mary Holmes, who helped me shape the story; and Jane and Bob Feibel, at home in the ancient world.

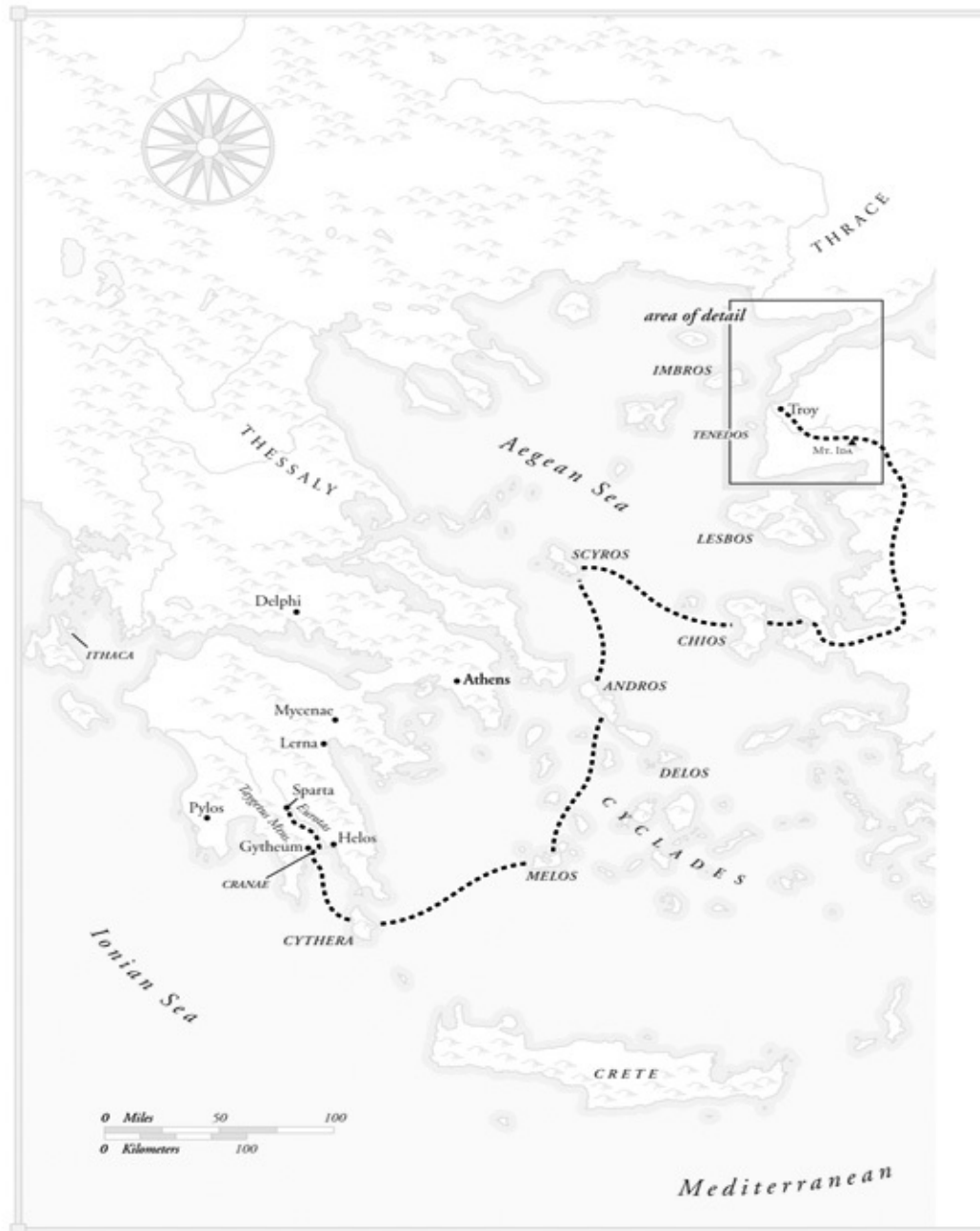
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. . . Troy, with walls still far from old

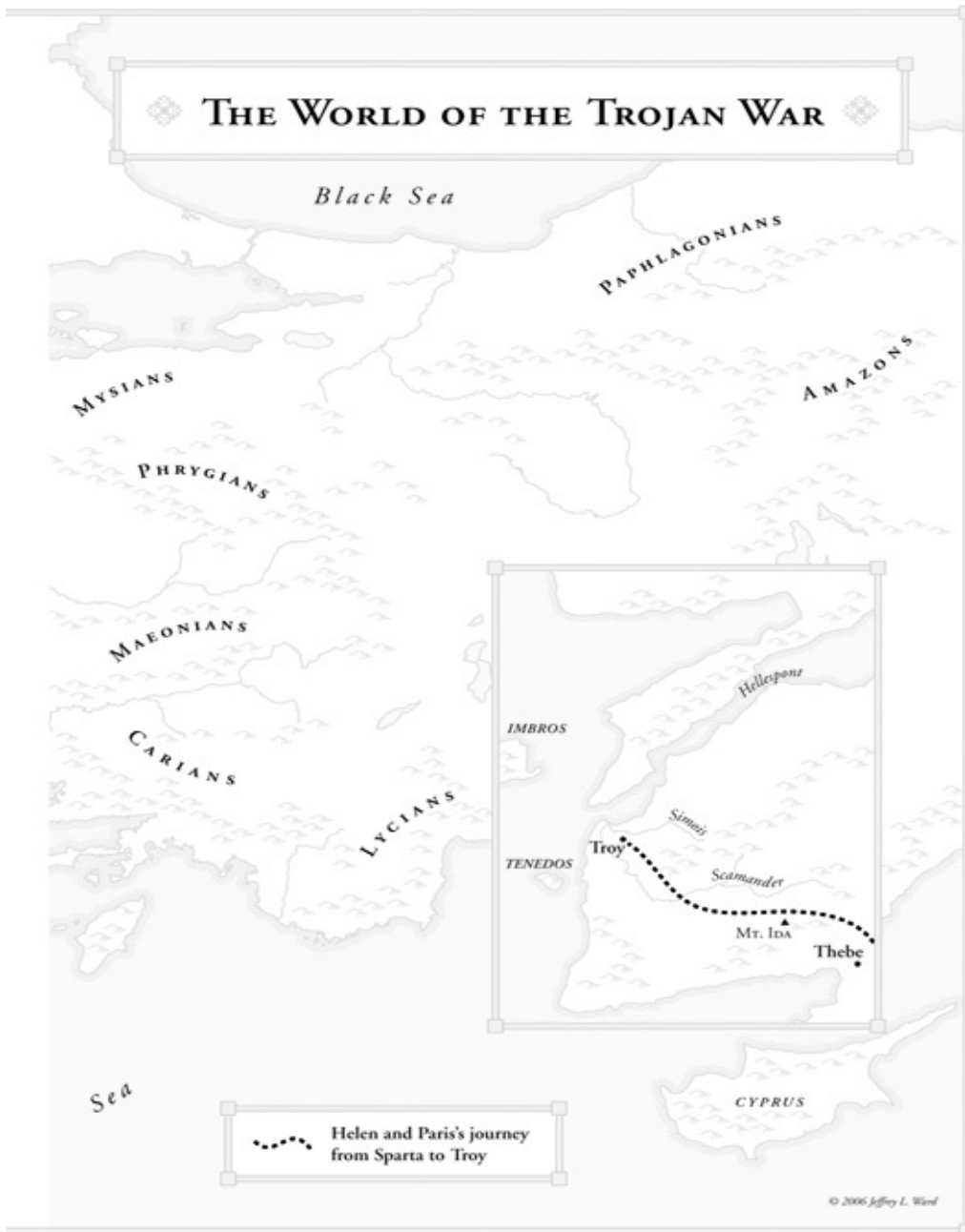
Had been destroyed, that noble, royal town
And many a man full worthy of renown
Had lost his life—that no man can gainsay—
And all for Helen, the wife of Menelay,


When a thing's done, it may then be no other.

John Lydgate, *Troy Book*, circa 1412–1420



THE WORLD OF THE TROJAN WAR



 Helen and Paris's journey from Sparta to Troy



PROLOGUE



I flew back to Troy. No, it was more like floating, for it was a steady flight, no dipping or soaring. I had no wings, although my arms were extended, but they served to steer me, not propel me.

I could feel the wind sliding between my fingers. I was lost in the wonder of being able to go to Troy, and so effortlessly. I could see the brilliant singing blue of the sea, passing over its sparkles and its white-foamed waves, over the islands that reared themselves like barren backs of beasts, shorn of their fur. They were brown, and their bones showed in the hills that were their spines.

Where were the ones Paris and I had visited on our way to Troy, our stepping-stones? From so high above it was impossible to tell.

A gull swooped near me, the wind from his flapping wings disturbing my flight. For an instant I felt myself falling, then I righted myself and floated serenely on. My gown ruffled out, wafting like smoke around me.

Far below I could see ships. Whither were they bound? Whom did they carry? Impossible to know, or, really, to care. This was how the gods viewed us—as trifling amusements. Now I understood. At long last, I understood.

The shore of Troy came up—so soon! I had only one concern, one burning drive: to behold Troy again. To enter its gates, to walk its streets, to touch the buildings, yes, even the buildings I had never cared for. Now they were all precious. I righted myself and set myself down gently just outside the south gate, the grandest one. When I had beheld it on my first entrance to Troy, its top seemed to reach the sky, but now that I had seen it from above, I knew it stopped far short of the clouds.

Oddly, when my feet touched down upon the soil, they raised no dust. But I was dazed with the heady joy of knowing I was back at Troy. I could hear the birds in the meadow around me, could smell the drowsy scent of fields at noonday. To my right I saw herds of dun-colored horses grazing, the famous horses of the Trojan plain. All was peaceful and ordered. In the distance I could see a small stone farmhouse, with a tiled roof, in a grove of trees. I wanted to go there, knock on its door. But it was far away, and I turned back to Troy.

Troy! The magic of Troy rose before my eyes, dancing against the blue of the sky. Its towers were the highest possible for man to build, its walls the strongest and the most beautiful, and inside it . . . ah, inside it lay all the glories of the world! Troy shimmered like a mirage, hovered teasingly, whispered its secrets, lured me toward it.

I walked toward the gate. To my surprise, it was open. The thick, bronze-sheathed doors were gaping wide, and beyond them the path up to the citadel lay broad and beckoning. I passed through the usually guarded gate and did not ask myself why there were no guards, no soldiers. Once inside, I found it was quiet—no sound of groaning wagons, no laughter, no voices at all.

I kept walking up toward the citadel, that cluster of palaces and temples crowning the top of Troy. I could see its glimmer in the distance, its white stone beckoning like a goddess.

It was utterly deserted, and now I began to listen for the echoes in the empty houses as I passed.

Where had the people gone?

I was seeking the citadel, where all my people would be. Priam and Hecuba would be in their palace. Hector and Andromache in theirs, the many sons and daughters of Priam and Hecuba in their own quarters behind the royal palace—fifty sons and twelve daughters, each with his or her own home. And between the temple of Athena and the palace of Hector would be mine and Paris's, standing high and proud.

It was there. It was perfect, as perfect as Paris and I had first imagined it, long before a single stone had been laid. When we had lain together on our fragrant bed and amused ourselves imagining our perfect palace. Here it was.

As it never was. The stones had not been exactly like this, no, we could not get the red ones from Phrygia and had had to substitute darker ones from Lesbos. Yet here were the red ones, mortared and in place. For an instant I was puzzled by this, and stood staring at it. *No, it was not like this, except in our minds*, I murmured, as if the stones would shimmer and rearrange themselves at my words. Yet they stubbornly remained as they were.

I shrugged. No matter. I entered the palace and made my way across the wide megaron and then up the stairs into the most private of our quarters, the rooms where Paris and I withdrew when the business of the day at last closed and we could be alone.

My footfalls echoed. Why was it so empty? It was as if a spell had seized it. Nothing stirred, no voice made itself heard.

I stood at the threshold of the chamber. Paris must be in there. He was waiting for me. He had returned from the fields, from exercising the wilder horses as he loved to do, and would now be taking a cup of wine and rubbing a bruise or two from today's work. He would look up and say, *Helen, the white horse I told you about . . .*

Resolutely I pushed the doors open. The chamber was dreadfully quiet. It also looked dark.

I walked in, the whispering of my gown around my feet the loudest noise. "Paris?" I said—the first word I had spoken.

In stories, people are turned to stone. But here they had vanished. I turned and turned, seeking someone in the rooms, but there was nothing. The shell of Troy remained, her palaces and walls and streets, but she had been stripped of what truly made her great—her people.

And Paris . . . where are you, Paris? If you are not here, in our home, where are you?

I saw sunlight and was thankful that someone had thrown the shutters open. Now Troy could begin to live again; now sunshine would flood her. The streets would fill with people again and spring back into life. It was not gone, merely sleeping. Now it could awaken.

"My lady, it is time." Someone was touching my shoulder. "You have slept overlong."

Still I clung to Troy, standing in the bedroom of my palace. Paris would be there now. Surely so! He would come!

“I know it is difficult, but you must rouse yourself.” It was the voice of the lady of the chamber. “~~Menelaus can be interred but once. And today is that day. My condolences, my lady. Be strong.~~”

Menelaus! I opened my eyes and gazed about me wildly. This room—it was not my room in Troy. the gods! I was in Sparta, and Menelaus was dead.

My Spartan husband Menelaus was dead. Trojan Paris was not there. He had not been there for thirty-odd years. Troy was gone. I could not even call it a smoking ruin, for its smoke had long disappeared into the sky. Troy was so dead even its ashes had been scattered.

It had all been a dream, my visit to Troy. Even what had remained in the kindly dream—the walls, the towers, the streets, and the buildings—was gone. There was nothing left. I wept.

A gentle hand on my shoulder. “I know you sorrow for him,” she said. “But still, you must—”

I swung my feet over the side of the bed. “I know. I must attend the funeral. Nay, more than that, I must preside over it.” I stood up, slightly dizzy. “I know my duty.”

“My lady, I did not mean—”

“Of course not. Please select my garments.” There, that would get rid of her.

I pressed my fingers to my temples. Menelaus dead. Yes. That was as it was. His confession to me, his plea—it was all one. I forgave him. It was so long ago. And Paris: *People yet unborn will make songs of us*, I had told him. What a young fool I had been. He had vanished. He was nowhere in my dream—and I knew it, now, for a dream. Paris and I were no more.

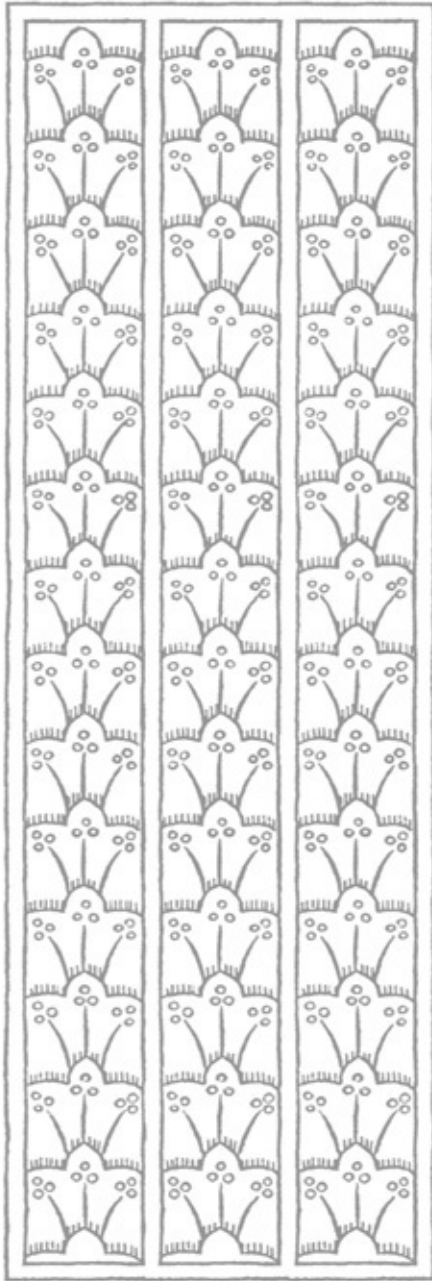
No matter. The dream had shown me the way. I would return to Troy after the funeral, after things were set right in Sparta. I must see it again, empty and ruined though it might be. It was where I had lived, most fully lived, where Helen truly took form as Helen, became Helen of Troy.

In life I had soared, if only for a brief time: in that the dream spoke true. Once there was a Helen and she had lived most fully in Troy. Make of that what you will. In my time I called forth hatred, war, and death. I was said to be the woman with a wreath of bronze swords framing her face rather than flowers.

Yet that was never my doing, never my intention. I lay that guilt at the feet of the men who pursued me.

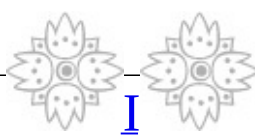
I speak of Helen as if you knew. But who is Helen?

Listen, and I shall tell you. Hold your breath, and you will hear her speak.



PART I

SPARTA



Helen. Before I could speak, I heard my name and learned that I was Helen. My mother whispered it to me but not sweetly; she whispered it as if it were an ugly secret. Sometimes she hissed it, close to my ear, and I could feel her hot breath tickling my skin. She never murmured it, and she never shouted it. Murmuring was for endearments, and shouting was for warning others. She did not want to call attention to me that way.

She had another pet name for me, Cygnet, and when she used it, she smiled, as if it pleased her. It was private, our little secret, for she never used it in front of anyone else.

Just as the mists that cling to hills gradually thin and disappear, and the solid form of the rocks and forests appear, just so a life takes form out of early memories, which burn away later. Out of the swirl of jumbled memories and feelings of my childhood, I remember being at a palace where my mother's family lived, and where she had grown up. My grandmother and grandfather were still alive, but when I try to recall their faces, I cannot. We had all gone there—fled there—because of trouble with my father's throne in Sparta. He had been driven from it, and now was a king in exile, living with his wife's family.

I know now that this was in Aetolia, although of course then I knew nothing of locations, places, names. I only knew that our palace in Sparta, high on its hill, was more open to the sun and the wind than this one, which was dark and boxlike. I did not like being there and wished I could return to my old room. I asked my mother when that might be, when we could go back home.

“Home?” she said. “This is home!”

I did not understand, and shook my head.

“This was my home, where I grew up. Sparta was never my home.”

“But it is mine,” I said. I tried not to cry at the thought I might never be able to return there. I thought I had stopped the tears at the corners of my eyes, but my trembling lip gave me away.

“Don't cry, you baby!” she said, gripping my arm. “Princesses do not cry, not even before their mothers!” I hated the way her face looked as she bent down and put it up to mine. It was long and narrow and when she frowned it seemed to grow even longer, stretching out to look like an animal's snout with a muzzle. “We will soon know how long we will be here, and where we are to go. Delphi will tell us. The oracle will reveal it.”

We were jouncing in a cart across land that was wild and forested. It did not look like the land around Sparta, cupped in its gentle green valley. Here rough hills, covered with scrub and scrawny trees, made our journey difficult. As we approached the mountain where the sacred site of Delphi hid itself, we had to abandon the carts and trudge along a rutted path that clung to the ascent. On each side of us, tall thin trees with trunks like needles sought the sky but gave no shade, and we had to skirt around boulders and clamber over obstacles.

“It makes the arrival all the more special,” said one of my brothers, Castor. He was some five years older than I, dark-haired like Mother, but of a friendly and light disposition. He was my best friend among my siblings, cheerful and heartening, amusing yet always thoughtful and watchful of me, the youngest. “If it were easy to find, it would not be the prize it is.”

“Prize?” Coming up beside us, puffing and thumping, was Castor’s twin, Polydeuces. He was as fast as Castor was dark, but he lived in the shadows of caution and doubt, belying his looks. “I see no prize, just a dry and dusty ascent up Mount Parnassus. And for what? For a seer to tell us what to do? You know if Mother does not like what she hears, she will just ignore it. So why bother to come, when she could just stay in her chambers, call a seer, and have a divining rite there?”

“It is Father who must know,” said Castor. “He will give weight to what the oracle says, even if Mother does not. It is his throne, after all, that is in question.”

“It is his brother who has driven him from it. Now, dear brother, let us clasp hands and vow to avoid such strife.”

“We can rule together. I see nothing to prevent it.” Castor laughed.

“If Father does not regain his throne, we will hardly be likely to follow him,” said Polydeuces.

“Well, then, we’ll make our way boxing and wrestling, win all the prizes, have lots of cattle and women—”

“You’ll always make your way, I am sure.” Suddenly the eldest was beside us, our sister Clytemnestra. “That is a great gift.” She turned to me. “Are you tired?”

I was, but would not admit it. “No, not at all!” I walked faster to prove it.

At sundown we reached Delphi at last. We had climbed and climbed, until we finally passed a spring where others—who seemed to have come from nowhere—were refreshing themselves, splashing water on their faces and filling their waterskins. The spring emptied into a pool, a pool shaded by overhanging trees, with dappled sun playing on its surface. It was very calm there, very restful, and I dipped my hands into the surprisingly cold water, letting it restore me.

It was too late to go to the oracle, and so we spent the night in the field that lay just below the sacred buildings. Many others were there as well, sleeping in the clear open air. The stars above us were bright and cold. I looked at them and promised myself to ask my brothers to tell me the stories about them. But this night we were so tired we all fell asleep instantly.

The sun hit my eyes and woke me up very early. It did not have to peek over a mountain, as in Sparta, but flooded the sky with light the instant it rose. All around me others were stirring, folding their blankets, stretching, eager to seek the secrets of Delphi.

Father was not himself. I could tell by the way he greeted the other pilgrims around us. He spoke to them but did not seem to hear their answers. And his response was vague, beside the point.

“We must hurry, so we are first at the oracle.” He looked around at all the others, taking their measure. ~~“Their concerns are everyday ones, not the very future of a throne.”~~ He pushed us to be on our way.

The oracle. The future. Omens. Prophecies. Until then, I was free. I was a child of no importance—on so I believed. After this, they ruled my life, the soothsayers, the fixed limits of the gods, the parameters that defined me.

Father was hurrying toward the oracle, leaning forward against the wind in his haste to get there first when suddenly a shriek rang out from a rock on the path. Perched on it was a crone, a woman who, in her dark robes and hood, looked more like a vulture or a raven than a person.

“You! You!” she—I swear it—cawed.

Father stopped. All of us stopped. He went over to her, stood on tiptoe to hear her as she leaned over on her rock and spoke to him. He scowled, then shook his head. He was arguing with her! I saw him gesturing. Then he came over to me and dragged me over to her.

I did not want to go. Why was he forcing me? I twisted and tried to get away.

“Child, child!” she cried in her ugly, high voice. Father lifted me, squirming and trying to escape, and held me fast. He thrust me up to her. She leaned forward and grabbed my head, and her voice changed. She began uttering strange, unearthly cries. Her hands felt like talons, gripping me so tightly I feared my head might burst open.

“Bring her up in Sparta, then!” Her voice was now a sound like the water in the pool we passed at the entrance to Delphi, distant and dim. “But she will be the ruin of Asia, the ruin of Europe, and because of her a great war will be fought, and many Greeks will die!”

“Let me go, let me go!” I cried. But Father held me fast, and the woman breathed in and out harshly, a horrible sound, half gasping and half roaring. Mother stood there, too, rooted and unmoving. My parents’ helplessness frightened me most of all. It was as though she had by some power paralyzed them.

“Troy,” she muttered. “Troy . . .”

Then suddenly the spell was broken. She stopped her labored breathing and released my head. My scalp tingled and I fell back into Father’s arms.

We continued the march up the path to the oracle, the famous one who sat in a secret place and breathed in fumes—or conversed with the god Apollo—and Father sought her out. But what she said do not know. I was still shaking after the assault of the woman.

“The Sibyl,” corrected Clytemnestra. “She is the Herophile Sybil and she wanders about giving

prophecies. She is more ancient than the oracle, more important.” Clytemnestra knew such things. She was six years older than I and made it her business to know such things. “What she says always comes true. Whereas what the oracle says—well, there are tricks to it. It does not always happen as people think.”

“Why did she grab Helen?” Polydeuces demanded.

Clytemnestra looked at him. “You know why,” she said.

“I don’t!” I said. “Please, please, tell me!”

“It is not for me to tell you,” she said. “Ask Mother!” At that, she gave a wild laugh almost as frightening as the Sibyl’s.

* * *

We hurried—or so it seemed—back to the palace of my grandparents. Mother and Father secluded themselves, conferring with the old king and queen, and I was left to wander about my barren chambers. Oh, I did not like them, and my scalp still hurt from the grip of the Sibyl. I touched it gingerly and felt the ridges of scabs there.

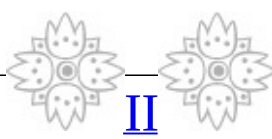
Great war . . . many Greeks will die . . . Troy . . . I did not know what it meant, but I knew it alarmed Mother and Father—and even Clytemnestra, who was usually fearless, the first to drive a chariot with unruly horses, the first to break a rule.

I picked up a mirror and tried to see the injury on my head. I turned the mirror this way and that, but the injury was too far back for me to see. Then Clytemnestra snatched the mirror from my hands.

“No!” she cried. There was real alarm in her voice.

“Can you see the top of my head?” I said. “I cannot. That is all I want to do.”

She parted my hair. “There are grooves there, but nothing deep.” She kept the mirror firmly clenched in her hand.



Thus it was that I learned I was forbidden to use a mirror. It was such a simple thing—a polished bronze surface that reflected back a poor image in any case. I had seen little when I held the mirror up to my head. The face I saw, fleetingly, was not the face I had imagined.

Can we envision our own face? I think not. I think we imagine ourselves invisible, with no face at all, able to blend perfectly with everything around us.

Mother looked at herself in a mirror often enough. It seemed that every time I came into her room she was peering into it, raising her eyebrows, turning her head to see a different side of her cheek, or licking her lips. Sometimes what she did brought a smile to her face, but more often it brought a frown, and a sigh. She always put the mirror down when she saw me, even going so far once as to sit on it so I could not take it up.

Was my mother pretty? Attractive? Alluring? Fair? Lovely? Beautiful? We have so many words to describe the exact degree in which a person pleases our senses. Yes, I would say she was all of these things. She had, as I have said, a long thin face, which made her unusual; in our family, the faces were round or oval. Her nose was a perfect thin blade that set off her wide-set, slanted eyes—that was what you noticed when you looked at her: those large slanted eyes, which never met yours directly, and dominated her face. The most arresting quality about her was her vivid coloring. She had very white skin, very dark hair, and cheeks that always seemed flushed and glowing. She had a long thin neck, too, very elegant. I would have thought she would be proud of that, but once when someone said she had a swan's neck she ordered her out of the room.

Her name was Leda, a lovely name, I thought. It meant “lady” and she was always dainty and graceful, so in choosing that name for her my grandparents had given her something to grow into.

My own name, Helen, was less certain. I asked Mother one day—when I had again come upon her peering in the mirror, and she hastily put it away—why I was named that, and what it meant.

“I know that Clytemnestra means ‘praiseworthy wooing,’ and since she is your firstborn, I thought that meant that Father’s wooing had won you.”

She threw back her head and gave a low, amused laugh. “Your father’s wooing was such as he is, political.” Seeing the puzzlement on my face, she said, “I mean by that he was in exile—again!—and took refuge with my mother and father. And they had a marriageable daughter, and he was eager to be married, so eager that he promised great gifts to them if they would surrender me, and so they did.”

“But what did you think of him, when you first saw him?”

She shrugged. “That he was not displeasing, and I could abide him.”

“Is that all a woman can look for?” I asked, very hesitant, and also a little shocked.

“Yes.” She looked hard at me. “Although in your case I think we can ask for more than that. Drive harder bargain. Now, as to the others’ names: Castor means ‘beaver,’ and indeed he has grown up to be very industrious, and Polydeuces means ‘much sweet wine.’ Your brother could use more wine, if you would serve to lighten his spirits.”

“But my name! My name!” Children are most interested in themselves. I was impatient to hear my story, the special story of myself from before I could remember, a mystery to which only Mother and Father held the key.

“Helen.” She took a great deep breath. “It was hard to choose your name. It had to be . . . it had to reflect . . .” She nervously began to twirl a lock of her hair, a habit she reverted to in times of uncertainty or agitation; I knew it well. “It means many things. ‘Moon,’ because you seemed touched by the goddess; ‘torch,’ because you brought light.”

“I was a baby. How could I have brought light?”

“Your hair was bright and shone like the sun,” she said.

“Moon—sun—I cannot be both!” Why was this so confusing?

“Well, you are,” she said. “Their light is different, but it is possible to be both. To have attributes of both.”

“But you also call me Cygnet. What does that mean?” I might as well have it all, have all my names explained.

“Cygnet means ‘little swan’—a tiny one, just out of the egg.”

“But why did I remind you of that? You don’t even like swans!” One day we had been walking near the lake at my grandparents’ and a flock of swans had made their way toward us. My mother had turned her back on them and hurried away, and Father had yelled and thrown stones at them. His face had turned red and he had yelled, “Get away, you filthy monsters!”

“Oh, I used to like them well enough,” she said. “They were my favorite birds when I was a little girl and living here with my own parents. I would go out to the lakeshore and feed them. I loved to watch them float on the water, with their lovely curved necks and their white feathers.”

“But why did you change your mind about them?”

“I learned more about them when I was grown up. My wonder at them fled.” Suddenly she bent down and took my face in her long thin hands—long and thin like her face. “Do not look too closely at something, do not come too near, or you might lose the wonder. That is what separates children from adults.” She stroked my cheek. “Believe in everything now. Later you cannot.” She gave one of her dazzling smiles. “Once I loved them, and I still love the swan in you.”

“Then I shall go and see the swans every day,” I said stoutly. “While I can still like them, before I find out . . . whatever it was that changed your mind.”

“Hurry, then. We will be leaving here soon. Your father has his throne back, and we return to Sparta. The swans come there only rarely. They do not live there, do not touch down often.”

Oh, it was good to be back! Back in our lovely sprawling palace, high on its hill above the valley of the Eurotas River, looking down over the city of Sparta on the plain. I had missed it so. I loved my chamber, with its paintings of birds and flowers on the white walls, and the old pear tree just outside my window. And all my toys were still safe in the chest, just where I had left them when we fled so

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