

10 · FATHER · AND · SON ·

Meanwhile, Odysseus, in the shape of an old beggar, was climbing the hill towards the hut of Eumaeus the swineherd. When Eumaeus saw the beggar he threw open the door of his hut.

‘It has been decreed by mighty Zeus that anyone approaching one’s threshold in peace should be welcomed. Old man, come inside, sit down.’ The swineherd welcomed the beggar and showed him where he could sit. Then he slaughtered a fatted hog. When he had made sacrifices to the mighty Gods and Goddesses he roasted the meat over the flames of the fire. He gave the best cut to the beggar.

Gratefully the old beggar ate. Eumaeus settled down beside him and told him story after story about the outrages that had been committed by the suitors in Odysseus’s feasting hall. As he listened, Odysseus felt the bile rising in his throat and his heart pounding against his ribs. But he bit his lip and swallowed and said nothing. When at last the swineherd fell silent, the old beggar turned to his host and said,

'In my travels from city to city and from port to port, I have heard rumours in many places that Odysseus is now on his way home, and that he sails with chests filled with treasure.'

Eumaeus shook his head.

'Old man, I can see you are trying to win your way into my heart with tittle-tattle and half-remembered gossip. No, Odysseus is dead. I feel it in my bones. His body is rolling somewhere deep beneath the blue waves of the sea.'

For three days Odysseus stayed with the swineherd. Every morning, when Eumaeus took his pigs to graze and root for truffles, he wandered the island. In the shape of an old beggar he climbed Mount Neriton. He wandered the vineyards, the terraced hills, the cliffs and the beaches. His heart sang for joy to feel Ithacan soil against the soles of his feet. He watched his people at work. He even watched his own father, old Laertes, harvesting grapes. No one took any notice of him. To them he was just another ragged old man who had had more than his share of bad luck. Sometimes out of pure pity someone would give him a cup of water or some bread and cheese.

It was on the morning of the fourth day that Telemachus returned. The swineherd was preparing breakfast. The old beggar was sitting on a stool by the fire. Suddenly the door swung open and standing framed in the doorway was a young man with his first beard on his chin. Eumaeus dropped the bowl he was holding.

‘Telemachus! By the mighty Gods, you are safely home!’ He ran across and threw his arms around the young man’s neck. He kissed his forehead, his left eye, his right eye, his lips, his left hand, his right hand — the swineherd honoured his prince like a father honouring his son.

Odysseus, sitting on the stool by the fire, saw his son for the first time for nineteen years. He said nothing. He slowly got up to his feet and offered his stool. Telemachus shook his head.

‘No, no, old man, you are a guest here. To me this is more of a second home. Sit down, sit down!’

The old beggar sat down again. Telemachus walked across and squatted in front of the fire, warming the palms of his hands. Eumaeus prepared breakfast for the three of them. They sat at the wooden table and ate. As they were eating Telemachus told them about his journey to

Sparta, about his encounter with red-haired Menelaus and beautiful Helen and about the visit he had received from the Goddess. When the food was finished he turned to Eumaeus. 'My mother, sweet Penelope, will have heard of these plans to murder me on my return. Her heart will be wrung with worry for me. Please, I beg you, go and tell her that I am safely home.'

The swineherd nodded and strapped on his sandals. He made his way across the floor of the hut and pushed open the door. It was at that moment that Odysseus saw Athene, her grey eyes blazing with light. Unseen by the swineherd she was standing outside the hut, beckoning urgently.

As soon as the swineherd was gone, the old beggar stood up and nodded to Telemachus. He hobbled through the door and closed it behind him. Athene whispered, 'Odysseus, the time has come for you to reveal yourself to your son.'

She reached forward and touched his shoulder with her hand. At once the light came back into his eyes, his thick

curls returned, his arms thickened. The beautiful cloak of King Alcinous hung over his broad shoulders. He turned and pushed open the door.

Telemachus got up to his feet in astonishment.

‘Who are you? You are not the man you were before! Are you one of the mighty Gods who rule over the broad skies?’

Odysseus shook his head. ‘Telemachus, I am no God. Look into my face and tell me, do you not see something of yourself?’

Telemachus came across and peered into the stranger’s eyes. Suddenly his face lit up with joy.

‘It’s you! My father, you are home at last! When did you get here? How long have you been here? How did you get home?’

Odysseus’s eyes filled with tears. ‘Telemachus, my son!’

He reached and held his son in his arms. They sat down together in front of the fire and all that day Odysseus told Telemachus about his adventures on the fields of Troy and

his great journey across the broad face of the world. When the afternoon shadows were beginning to lengthen he said, 'And now my story draws to its end, though whether it is a comedy or a tragedy lies in the lap of the mighty Gods and Goddesses. Telemachus, don't tell anybody that I am home, not even your own mother. Tomorrow, I will go to my feasting hall and see what truth there is in these tales that I have been told. And you, my son, you must go there also. You can be sure the cowardly suitors will not dare to harm you in broad daylight!'

Telemachus nodded. At that moment they heard the sound of the

swineherd returning home. Athene, invisible, reached into the hut. She touched Odysseus's shoulder. Straight away he was an old beggar again, dressed in rags. The door opened and Eumaeus entered. He prepared supper for the three of them. They sat and ate and talked until deep into the night. Then they wrapped themselves in their cloaks, lay on the floor in the firelight, and slept.