

11 • THE BEGGAR •

The next morning it was Telemachus who was the first to make the journey across the island and up the hill to the feasting hall. Already the suitors were enjoying themselves at Odysseus's expense: feasting, drinking, talking, laughing, singing. Telemachus came to the door. He stepped on to the threshold stone, lifted the latch and pushed the door open.

The suitors fell silent. They stared at him. Telemachus smiled grimly. 'Yes, it is me. I am home. Perhaps it was my corpse you were hoping to see, carried through these doors and laid out on one of the tables. Or maybe my ghost, my shade, walking through the closed doors. But no, it is me — skin, flesh, bone and beating heart.'

He made his way across the hall, threading between the tables and up the stairs to his mother's lonely bedchamber. When Penelope saw Telemachus she ran across and threw her arms around his neck. She soaked his shoulder with her tears. Telemachus told her about his journey to Sparta. He told her how he had met red-haired Menelaus and

beautiful Helen. He told her how Menelaus had explained that Odysseus was being held captive by a nymph called Calypso on an island far, far, far across the blue waves of the sea. Penelope shook her head.

‘If he was going to come home I feel sure he would have returned by now. And now the time has come for me to choose a new husband. But which one to choose? And how to choose him?’

Telemachus swallowed the urge to tell his mother the joyful news that Odysseus had indeed returned home.

Meanwhile Odysseus, in the shape of an old beggar, was crossing the island. He came to the hill and began to follow the winding path that led up to his hall. Everything was exactly as he remembered it, except for the sounds of rowdy feasting coming through the closed doors of the hall. As he climbed the hill he passed a dung heap. Lying

on top of it there was an ancient dog. When the old dog saw the beggar, it lifted its head and sniffed at the air. Its thin, leathery tail began to wag. It pulled itself up on to its spindly legs, hobbled across and licked the old beggar's hand. Odysseus looked down and he recognised Argos his faithful dog, whom he had trained as a puppy all those long years before.

But in the moment of the old dog's happiness death struck. Argos suddenly crumpled and fell lifeless on to the ground at his feet. Odysseus reached down and lifted the dog gently in his arms. He picked it up and laid it tenderly on the soft grass. As he looked down at the dead dog, he remembered the welcome he had once imagined for himself as he sailed away from the shores of Troy.

He wiped away a tear and carried on climbing the hill. He stepped on to the threshold stone. He lifted the latch

and pushed open the door of his hall. His ears were filled with the sounds of drunken laughter, and his nostrils with the smell of sweat and smoke, spilled wine and roasting meat. He entered and made his way from table to table, his arms outstretched, begging for food.

Not one of the suitors, not one of the revellers, took any notice of the old beggar until he came to the back of the hall. Sitting at a table covered with wooden dishes of sliced meat and half-empty wineskins was a suitor whose name was Antinous. When he saw the old beggar he shouted, 'Go away! Take your filthy, flea-bitten, moth-eaten carcass elsewhere before we throw you to the dogs!'

It was at that moment that Telemachus came down from his mother's bedchamber.

'Antinous,' he said, 'not only do you eat us out of house and home, you also



break the sacred laws of hospitality in my father's feasting hall. Old man, come, sit down.'

With great kindness and consideration Telemachus showed the old beggar where he could sit. He fetched meat, bread and wine. He broke the bread with his own hands and gave it to the beggar.

Gratefully Odysseus ate and drank. When his plate was empty he got to his feet and went back to the table where Antinous was sitting. He stretched out his hands once more. 'Perhaps now you will think again, or do you begrudge an old beggar the crumbs from another man's table?' Antinous glared at him.

'I'll give you something. I'll give you something and no mistake!' He picked up a stool. He drew back his hand and with all the strength of his arm he hurled the stool at the old beggar. The stool struck Odysseus hard on the shoulder,

but he didn't falter or fall to the ground. He stood firm and the stool clattered on to the floor at his feet. The suitors watched the old beggar turn and walk across the feasting hall without saying a word. They watched as he sat down among the shadows by the door and brooded in silence. Then they shrugged and laughed and resumed their drunken feasting.

The story of the old beggar and the stool spread from the servants to maidservants. From the maidservants the story reached the ears of Penelope, upstairs in her lonely bedchamber.

That night she came quietly down the stairs. The suitors had either staggered drunkenly homewards or were sleeping with their cheeks in pools of spilled wine on the tabletops. Except for the occasional grunt or snore, everything in the hall was silent. The old beggar was still sitting among the shadows by the door. Penelope whispered, 'Old man, old man, come upstairs, I would like to speak with you.'