

12 · SETTING · THE · TRAP ·

Odyseus looked up and saw his wife. He saw his wife for the first time in nineteen years. His heart soared for joy but he bit his lip, swallowed and said nothing. He got to his feet and followed her up the stairs to her bedchamber.

‘Old man,’ she said, ‘old man, sit down. I would like to speak with you. I have heard about you from my faithful swineherd Eumaeus. He tells me that you have heard rumours that my husband, Odyseus, is on his way home, with chests filled with treasure.’

The old beggar shook his head. ‘Rumours, madam, nothing but rumours.’

‘I have heard nothing but rumours for nineteen long years,’ Penelope said. ‘Now the time has come for me to choose a new husband and bid farewell for ever to these walls that welcomed me as a wife all those years ago.’

The old beggar sighed. ‘Madam, I can see your sorrows match my own. But tell me, which one of these wretched suitors will you choose? And how will you choose him?’

‘Old man, I have been thinking about it all day and I have a plan. Years ago, before he went to fight in distant Troy, my husband’s favourite sport was archery. Sweet Odysseus would take his bow, which still hangs from a wooden peg on the wall of the feasting hall, and he would draw a bowstring across it. Then twelve axes would be set in a row the length of the feasting hall: twelve ceremonial axes, one behind the other, with their blades to the ground, their handles pointing upwards, and the rings of their handles in a row. When everything had been made ready, Odysseus — I can see him now as though it was yesterday — would take an arrow and fit it to the bowstring. He would draw the bowstring back and loose the arrow through the rings of all twelve ceremonial axe handles. Nobody could match him.

‘I will set the suitors the same task and whoever comes closest to Odysseus in skill I will take as a new husband.

‘But, old man, it wasn’t to pour my heart out to you that I invited you up here this evening. I have had a dream and often you travelling people are skilled at reading such things.’

‘Then, madam, tell me your dream,’ the old beggar said to Penelope.

‘In my dream I kept a flock of fat white geese. I kept them in my husband’s hall and every day I fed them with my own hands. Then, in my dream, an eagle swooped down from the mountains, flew through the door of the hall, slaughtered all the fat white geese, then sat on a rafter and sang.’

The old beggar chuckled. ‘Madam, that dream is easily understood. The geese are the suitors who feast in your husband’s hall. The eagle is Odysseus and one day he will return and kill all of them!’

‘Yes, yes, yes, old man, I know that. But dreams come to us through two gates: either through a gate of ivory or through a gate of horn. Those dreams that come to us through the curved and decorated gate of ivory are mere fancies, fantasies. But the dreams that come to us through the burnished gate of horn carry the truth. Which gate did my dream come through, old man?’

recognised it instantly as a scar that Odysseus had received from the tusk of a wild boar when he was a boy. She looked up into the old beggar's face.

'It's you! You are home at last!'

The old beggar reached down and pressed his hand over her mouth. 'Shh, woman! If you love me, hold your tongue! Say nothing!' The old nursemaid nodded, her wrinkled face beaming with delight. She hobbled off, fetched a warm woollen cloak, and gave it to the old beggar. He threw it over his shoulder and he winked at Eurycleia. She smiled fondly back at him.

Odysseus made his way downstairs to the dark, silent feasting hall. He saw Telemachus sitting alone. He whispered, 'My son, come here. Listen to me and do exactly what I tell you. Take all the weapons that are hanging from the walls and hide them in a locked chamber. If anybody asks you where they are, tell them they've become tarnished and smoke-blackened and they've gone to be cleaned and sharpened. Leave only my own bow hanging from its wooden peg and the twelve ceremonial axes. Then, when everything is ready, hide a bow for yourself among the shadows by the