

13 · SPRINGING · THE · TRAP ·

Odyseus was woken by the sun shining on to his face. Already the suitors were gathered, feasting and drinking. He got up to his feet and made his way to the hall. He stepped on to the threshold stone, lifted the latch and pushed the door open. He went from table to table, his arms outstretched, begging for food.

One of the suitors said, 'Look, the old beggar is back!'

'Old man, come here,' said another, 'have some wine!' He offered a cup of wine. The beggar walked over, but as he reached to take it, the suitor drew back his hand and tipped the wine over the old man's head.

'Old man, have a piece of meat!' said another suitor. He picked up the shinbone of an ox and hurled it at the beggar, striking him on the forehead so that the red blood trickled down with the red wine. All the suitors threw back their heads and bellowed with laughter. But then, suddenly, their laughter stopped. Penelope was coming down the stairs from her bedchamber. She was dressed in bright silks, with

her hair hanging loose over her shoulders. Old Eurycleia was hobbling down behind her. When Penelope reached the bottom of the stairs, she stopped and turned to the suitors.

‘For years you have fastened on my husband’s hall as your place of perpetual feasting. Your excuse has always been that you want to win my hand in marriage, and now the time has come for me to put you to the test.’

She reached across and took the bow from its wooden peg on the wall.

‘Whoever comes closest to matching my husband in skill, whoever can draw a string across this bow and loose an arrow through the rings of twelve ceremonial axe handles, he will be the one that I take as a new husband. The time has come for me to bid farewell for ever to these walls that welcomed me as a wife all those years ago.’

Penelope turned and nodded to Eurycleia. Straight away the old woman set to work. She took the twelve axes from the wall. She set them one behind the other, the blades to the ground, the handles pointing upwards, the rings in a

row, just as she remembered Odysseus doing it all those years before.

When everything was ready, Penelope turned to the suitors again. 'Now, which one of you is man enough to win me?'

There was a great hubbub and discussion among the suitors then as to who should go first. They decided to take turns, following the direction that the wine jug took when it was passed from hand to hand. The first to try was called Leodes. He took the bow in his fat white hand, swollen from months of feasting. He set the foot of the bow on the floor at his feet. He began to try to bend it. It sprang out of his hand and clattered down on to the ground. A second suitor tried and fared no better. Each of them in turn tried to string the bow and not one of them could do it. Some came closer than others, but not one of them succeeded. So they warmed the bow in front of the fire and they rubbed beeswax into the wood to make it more supple. Each of them tried again and still not one of them could string the bow.

Penelope stood with her arms folded and she watched. She shook her head. 'Perhaps the day is not a lucky one,' she said. 'Perhaps the day is not auspicious.'

She turned and made her way back up the stairs. Eurycleia followed, hobbling up slowly behind.

As the old nursemaid climbed the stairs, the beggar, sitting among the shadows by the door, caught her eye. He winked and nodded. Eurycleia smiled. As soon as she was out of sight she made her way out of the hall by a back way. She hurried round to the threshold stone, and she pulled the bolts across the doors, locking them firmly from the outside.

Inside the hall there was silence, broken at last by Antinous. 'It's not so much losing the woman I mind. She's pretty enough, I grant you, but there are plenty of other fish in the sea. No! It's making ourselves seem such weaklings beside the memory of that cursed Odysseus!'

The other suitors nodded and spat on the ground. Then a voice came echoing from the shadows by the door. 'I was an archer once, in the days of my youth.'

Antinous turned and looked at the old beggar. He lifted his lip in a sneering smile. 'You might have been an archer once, but now you are nobody!'

The beggar continued, 'I was an archer in the days of my youth, and I wonder if there is still strength enough in these old, weather-beaten arms to draw a string across that bow.'

The suitors threw back their heads and laughed. A hail of bones and broken crockery flew across the feasting hall, but then Telemachus got up to his feet and raised his hand.

'Enough!' he said. 'Enough! Antinous, are you afraid that this old beggar will put you to shame?' He smiled at the beggar. 'Old man, show us what you can do!' He gave the bow to the old beggar. Odysseus felt the smooth familiar wood against his hands for the first time in nineteen years.

He set the foot of the bow on to the floor at his feet. Slowly, taking his time, he began to bend it. Slowly he drew the string across it. And then with one finger, as though he was playing the string of a lyre, he plucked the bowstring. It gave a beautiful clear note, like a swallow's song.

From high above the roof of the feasting hall there came an answering rumble of thunder. The suitors sat and they stared. Then the old beggar took an arrow and he fitted it to the bowstring.

He drew the bowstring back and loosed the arrow. It flew clean through the rings of the twelve ceremonial axe handles and lodged quivering in the wall beyond.

The suitors gaped google-eyed.

The old beggar smiled. 'That match is played and won! Now for the second!' He took another arrow, fitted it to the bowstring, drew the bowstring back and loosed the arrow. It flew straight through the throat of Antinous. He fell face down on the ground, his legs kicking. And then he was dead.

The suitors leaped to their feet.

The old beggar jumped up on to a table and Telemachus jumped up beside him. Athene, invisible, reached into the hall.

She touched the old beggar's shoulder. Straight away the hawk-like light came back to the eyes. The broad shoulders, the thick arms, the fine clothes and the dark curls returned. The suitors ran to the walls to grab weapons — but all the weapons were gone.

Odysseus and Telemachus loosed arrow after arrow after arrow. The suitors ran to the doors. They rattled

and shook them — but they were locked from the outside.

Again and again, father and son loosed their arrows. When all the arrows were spent each made his way across the hall, with a sword in one hand and a spear in the other, swinging and slicing like reapers in a field, gathering a grim harvest of death.