

Chapter Thirteen

The Secret of the King's Bed

THE SILENCE WAS broken by Ctesippus throwing aside the bench that stood between him and Odysseus. He came on with his fists clenched to either side of his body, like a rolling, growling bear, and flung himself forward with such force that Telemachus's spear bent in his hands as he thrust it home into Ctesippus's chest. Then Odysseus's arrows flew. The suitors let out one roar between the fifty of them—a roar as loud as Polyphemus gave as he was plunged into darkness—as they reached for their swords and shields and spears and found they had been tricked.

Melanthius heard the yell—Melanthius the servant, who had played an unwitting part in the downfall of the suitors—Melanthius who had grown rich doing favors for the suitors—Melanthius who had been promised a golden chariot by Eurymachus if he won the queen. "Melanthius! Give us our weapons!" yelled Eurymachus.

Two against fifty; fifty against two. Melanthius thought once, thought twice, grabbed up an armful of

swords and spears, and ran to the gallery, from where he flung the weapons down to the suitors below. A dozen were already sprawled facedown, faceup, spiny with arrows.

Telemachus saw the treacherous servant at the gallery rail. "We're betrayed, father!"

Odysseus snorted with contempt. "What? Did the gods preserve my life for twenty years, did they rob Poseidon of his revenge, for a handful of wine-sodden wasters to cut me down in front of my own fire? No! I call on you, Athene, goddess of the gray and furious eyes, to shake your silver spear in the faces of these leeches!"

The size of his voice was enough to strike doubt into the suitors as they struggled with one another for the too-few swords. But when a wind stirred round the roof, and smoke from the fire was forced back down from the ceiling and swirled in choking clouds round them, they were thrown into panic. Like sheep, they panicked—one starting to run and another to follow and two more to follow the leaders. Round and round the table they ran, falling over the dead suitors, falling over the fallers, trampling on live and dead alike. And all the time the bowstring of the royal hunting bow twanged like the bass string of a harp striking the rhythm of a storyteller's poetry.

At the dark end of River Ocean, in the Realm of Shadows, the ancient spirits were jostled by a tumbling-in of strangers. White and ragged strangers somersaulted like

acrobats into the halls of the Underworld, with the astonishment of death in their eyes. But no one greeted them. The ancient spirits drifted by without astonishment, nursing their own memories for all Eternity.

"Spare me, Odysseus!" cried a fat and wheezing suitor, throwing himself down at the king's feet and clasping his knees. "I never did any harm! I always told the others that you'd be coming back! Here! Take my sword!"

Odysseus knotted his hand in the man's hair and, looking at his son, asked, "Is it true?"

"He sailed to Asteris with the others to lie in wait for me. And he prayed to Poseidon for your death, while he butchered the finest of your bulls," said Telemachus.

So Odysseus took the fat suitor's sword and cut off his head with one sharp slash.

"Spare me, Odysseus!" cried a thin and hollow-eyed youth, rolling from under the table to clasp the king's feet. "I am only a bard, a storyteller in search of history and truth. I never did you any wrong! Look, I have no sword!"

Odysseus knotted his hand in the lad's hair and, looking at his son, asked, "Is it true?"

"It's true. He's lived on grain gruel rather than eat your beef, and he sang laments when the suitors were too drunk to stop him, and he comforted my mother with stories."

So Odysseus pushed the boy back under the table and, wielding the sword over his head, he leaped down to do battle with Eurymachus, hand to hand.

For weeks, upon months, upon years, Odysseus had suffered at the hands of giants, magicians, the lesser Immortals, and the greatest gods. Now his sword was as murderous as the hands of the Cyclops, the fish spears of the Laestrygonians, the white fists of Poseidon. Eurymachus and every other suitor were hurled nameless into the Realm of Shadows. Only the traitor Melanthius he did not kill in hot blood . . . but afterward, while his blood ran cold with fury.

Silence fell over the dining hall. Even the wind outside abated, and the smoke rose in a clean column once more, through the roof. The only sound was of Telemachus and Odysseus breathing hard after the violence of the battle.

Telemachus saw his father's eye turn toward the gallery, beyond which Queen Penelope waited. The king went to the foot of the stairs, but halted and turned back and seated himself in a chair by the fire. "You tell her, Telemachus. I've been gone for so long. I can't think what to say. I can't tell how she will feel about me. It's been so many years. . . ."

Telemachus climbed the stairs and knocked on the locked chamber door of Queen Penelope. "You may come out now, Mother. The matter of the suitors is settled."

The door opened a crack, and his mother's face, small and anxious, appeared. "I heard fighting."

Telemachus could not keep from smiling for another

moment. "Yes, Mother! The suitors are all dead! Odysseus killed them. He's come home, Mother! He's come home!" He waited for the laughter to break in her eyes, but she only blinked slowly and her lips narrowed.

"What nonsense is this you're telling me?"

"See for yourself!" cried Telemachus.

Penelope looked over the gallery rail at the figure sitting hunched in thought beside the fire. Telemachus saw her fingers tighten on the rail and her knuckles whiten, but still she did not smile. Sadly and slowly and with queenly poise, she descended the staircase and picked her way between the bodies of the dead suitors. Odysseus rose to greet her.

"Sit down, my lord. You must be weary," she said quietly and seated herself on the other side of the fire, her back erect and her eyes on the flames. Odysseus sank back into his chair. "I shall send a waiting woman to wash your feet and have a bed prepared for you," said Penelope.

Odysseus bit his lip and said timidly, "I would prefer to sleep in my own bed—the bed I carved with my own hands before we were married. It's a thought I clung to while I lay shipwrecked on strange beaches and while monsters ate my companions from round about me and while I lay in my tent below the walls of Troy and while I was washed on a plank of wood across the world-encircled sea."

Penelope slowly nodded her head. "Then I shall have



the bed carried into the great west chamber. You will be comfortable there. I myself will sleep in the eastern-facing chamber. I would prefer it. Is that satisfactory, my lord?"

Telemachus could not believe his ears. "Mother! What is all this? Why are you so cold with him? This is Odysseus! While he was gone your eyes were never dry of tears; not a day passed without you telling us how much you loved Odysseus!"

But Odysseus held up his hand. "Quiet, boy. It must be as your mother chooses. But may I be permitted to ask you one question, Lady?"

"By all means, sir," said Penelope coldly.

"How exactly do you intend to move that bed? I carved it myself out of the crown of an ancient olive tree, and that olive tree grows in the center of Pelicata Palace with its roots still sunk in the Earth and its branches holding up the roof. Forgive my insolence, Lady, but if you can move that bed of mine, I shall cheerfully sleep in the great west chamber or in the pig run or in the yard itself forever and a day."

Then Penelope leaped out of her chair—like a little dapple-coated deer, she leaped over the hearth and into Odysseus's arms, covering his face and hands with kisses.

"Forgive me, my lord! But I was so certain that you were some impostor sent by the gods to break my heart! In twenty years you have hardly changed! I expected a stranger, gray and cruel and covered in scars. I didn't dare to believe that your face could be as lovely as the

day you set sail for Troy! Say you forgive me! Say you do!”

Odysseus replied, “My dearest Penelope, if you had not thought up some trick to put me to the test, you would not be a fit wife for Odysseus. The gods made us both quick of hand, but quicker still of wit. And now may I go to bed in the bed of my own making?” And he took Penelope his queen by the hand and led her upstairs to the chamber and to the huge bed of olive wood carved in the crown of a tree.

Sap still flowed in the trunk of the ancient olive, and, here and there, spring leaves were unfolding along the boughs.

After one day, after two days, the feasting and celebrations were over. The dining hall was empty; the house at night lay sunk in sleep; the suitors lay in their graves, more still and silent than sleepers.

Then, at midnight on the third day, out from under the table crawled the thin, young singer of songs whose life Odysseus had spared. He crept out of the palace and down to the harbor. He climbed aboard the smallest of the boats, slipped anchor, and sailed out to sea, ahead of a gentle breeze. Wind and current and rowing carried him, in time, past Cephalonia and little wooded Zante, across the open sea, close by a narrow, stony island the shape of a ship, and into the harbor of Scheria. Here, his old blind father sang stories in the court of King Alcinous.



Father and son sat under sunlight and starlight and talked in soft voices, sharing their separate songs.

Their stories they interwove into a new song, and they sang their song at the marriage of Princess Nausicaa. They sang of a king—an ordinary man, not a magician nor one of the Immortals—who had fought under the walls of Troy and whose journeys had taken him from shore to shore of the world-encircled sea. They told how he had escaped death at the hands of monsters, giants, and whirlpools; how he had heard the Sirens' song and been loved by nymphs as lovely as the dawn, with braided golden hair. They told how, finally, he had returned home, to rid his palace of a plague of vermin with the help of his full-grown son.

When they had finished, the bride Nausicaa leaned forward and said, "So, Odysseus's travels are over. Now he can sit under his vines and grow old in the shady places of Pelicata Palace."

"Oh, no, Lady," said the younger bard. "Odysseus has left Ithaca again already, and Penelope sleeps alone in the great olive-wood bed."

"Why?" cried King Alcinous. "In the name of all the gods, where has he gone this time?"

"He's gone with Telemachus, carrying an oar from one of his brightly painted boats. He's set sail for the northern shores of the world-encircled sea, and when he beaches there, he means to travel across the dry land to a place so far from the sea that no sea bird can reach it

from any direction—a place where there's no grain of salt in the earth and where no inhabitant has ever heard the name Poseidon. And there he'll plant his brightly painted oar in the saltless earth and make a sacrifice of the finest of his black sheep to the great Earth-Shaker, the Sea-Shifter, the Earthquake-Maker himself. Perhaps then god and man can be at peace again, and the island kingdom of Ithaca will be safe from the vengeance of Poseidon."

The guests at Nausicaa's wedding looked at one another and shook their heads.

"Such a journey!"

"Does such a place exist?"

"How long will he be traveling?"

"Will he ever come back?"

The two bards, father and son, shrugged their shoulders and stroked their hands over their harps to strum small, thoughtful, and harmonious tunes.

Nausicaa got up and stood by the window, looking out at the never-shrinking sea. The waves below her father's palace broke gently against the beetling cliffs and caressed the sharp pinnacles of rock. As one wave arrived, another was always drawing back again, out to sea, out to the open sea that is always traveling, always traveling, always traveling.