

EPISODE 11 – Setting the Trap

total running time: 13:35

Penelope's dream (⊕ 5:34)

Antinous picked up a stool and he threw it at the old beggar, striking him on the shoulder. But the beggar didn't falter or fall to the ground. He stood firm and the stool clattered onto the floor at his feet. And the beggar walked across and sat down among the shadows by the door of the feasting hall, and he said nothing. He brooded in silence.

5 And the story of the old beggar spread from servant to maidservant, and from the maidservants the story reached the ears of Penelope, upstairs in her bedchamber. And that night, when the suitors had either staggered drunken homewards or they were sleeping with their cheeks in pools of spilt wine on the table tops, when everything was quiet, Penelope came down the stairs. And there was the old beggar sitting silently by the door, still. And
10 Penelope said, "Old man, old man, come upstairs, I would like to speak with you."

And Odysseus saw his wife. He saw his wife for the first time in nineteen years and he bit his lip and he swallowed and he said nothing. And he got up to his feet and he followed her up the stairs to her bedchamber. She said, "Old man, old man, sit down. I would like to speak with you. I have heard something of you from my faithful swineherd Eumaeus. And he has told me
15 that you have heard stories that my husband, Odysseus, is on his way home, with chests filled with treasure."

And the old beggar shook his head, "Rumours, madam, stories, nothing but rumours."

And she said, "I have heard nothing but stories and rumours for nineteen long years. And now the time has come for me to choose a new husband and bid farewell forever to these walls that
20 welcomed me as a wife, all those years ago."

And the old beggar said, "Madam, I can see your sorrows match my own. But tell me, which one of these suitors will you choose? And how will you choose him?"

And Penelope said, "Old man, I have been thinking about it all day and I have a plan. You see, years ago before he went to fight in distant Troy, it was my husband's, sweet Odysseus', it was
25 his favourite sport to take his bow, his great bow which still hangs from a wooden peg on the wall of the feasting hall. He would take that bow and he would draw the bow string across it. And 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, the rings of the axe handles in a row. And when everything was ready, Odysseus – I can see him
30 now in my mind's eye – he would take an arrow and he would fit it to the bow string, and he would draw the bow string back, and he would loose the arrow through the rings of the twelve ceremonial axe handles. There was nobody who could match him. I will set the suitors the same task and whichever one comes closest to matching my husband in skill, him 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
35 this evening. You see, I have had a dream and often you travelling people are skilled at reading such things."

And the old beggar said, "Then madam, tell me your dream."

"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. And in my dream an eagle swooped down from the mountains,
40 slaughtered all of the geese, sat on a rafter and sang."

And the old beggar said, "Madam, that dream is easily read. 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!"

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

And the old beggar looked at the floor between his feet and he said, "I wish I knew. I wish I
50 knew."

***The nurse's discovery* (☹ 2:58)**

And Penelope nodded and she turned and she called over her shoulder, "Eurycleia, Eurycleia!"
And the door opened and in came old Eurycleia, an ancient servant. And Odysseus recognised her instantly. Old Eurycleia, who had suckled him when he was a baby and looked after him when he was a child. And Penelope said, "Eurycleia, take this old man, wash his feet,
5 and give him a new warm woollen cloak for his old shoulders!"

And the old woman nodded her head up and down and she said, "Old man, come with me, come with me, come with me!" And she led the old beggar out of the bedchamber and she showed him a bench where he could sit. And she went and she fetched a bowl of steaming water and she took off the old beggar's sandals and she washed his feet, and she washed his
10 ankles, and she washed his calves, and she washed his knees and then the old woman stopped and she stared. Up the inside of the old beggar's thigh she saw a scar, a jagged scar, and she recognised it instantly as a scar that Odysseus had received when he was a boy from the tusk of a wild boar. And she looked up into the old beggar's face and she said, "It's you! It's you! You're home at last!"

15 And the old beggar reached out and caught her by the throat, "Shh, woman. If you love me, hold your tongue! Say nothing!"

And the old woman nodded her head up and down. And she hobbled off and she fetched a cloak and she gave it to the old beggar and he threw it over his shoulder and he winked at Eurycleia.

20 And then he made his way downstairs and there was his son Telemachus. And Odysseus said, "Telemachus, Telemachus, come here, listen to me, do exactly what I tell you. All the weapons that are hanging from the walls of this feasting hall – take them and hide them in a locked

chamber. If anybody asks you where they are, tell them they have become tarnished and smoke-blackened and they have gone to be cleaned and sharpened. Leave only my own bow
25 hanging from its wooden peg on the wall and the twelve ceremonial axes. And when everything is ready, among the shadows by the door, hide a bow for yourself, two quivers full of arrows, two swords and two spears. And when everything is ready, go to old Eurycleia. She alone has recognised me and knows my secret. Tell her that tomorrow, when I signal to her, she is to make her way out of the hall and round, and she is to lock all the doors from the
30 outside.”

And straightaway Telemachus set to work. And Odysseus went out of the hall and he lay down on some soft grass and he wrapped himself in his cloak, and he fell into the sweet oblivious balm of sleep.

To win a queen’s hand (☉ 5:03)

And he was woken by the sun shining onto his face. And he got up to his feet. Already the suitors were gathered, feasting and drinking. He made his way to the door of the hall, he lifted the latch, he pushed it open and he went from table to table, his arms outstretched, begging for food. One of the suitors said, “Look, the old beggar’s back!” And another one said, “Old
5 man, come here, have some wine!” and he offered a cup of wine. And the beggar came across but as he reached to take the cup, the suitor drew back his hand and he tipped the wine over the old beggar’s head. And another one said, “Old man, have a piece of meat!” and he picked up the shin bone of an ox and he hurled it at the beggar, striking him on the forehead. So the red blood trickled down with the red wine, and all the suitors threw back their heads and they
10 bellowed with laughter.

But then suddenly their laughter stopped because, coming down the stairs from her bedchamber, was Penelope dressed in bright silks, with her hair hanging loose over her shoulders. And hobbling down behind her, old Eurycleia. When Penelope came to the bottom of the stairs she stopped, and she looked at the suitors and she said, “For years you have
15 fastened on my husband’s hall as your place of perpetual feasting. And 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.”

And she reached and she took the bow from its wooden peg on the wall. And she said, “Whichever one of you comes closest to matching my husband’s skill in drawing a string
20 across this bow, and loosing an arrow through the rings of twelve ceremonial axe handles, him I will take as a new husband and bid farewell forever to these walls that welcomed me as a wife all those years ago.”

And she turned and she nodded to Eurycleia. And Eurycleia set to work. She took the axes from the wall. She set them on the ground, one behind the other, the blades to the ground, the
25 handles pointing upwards, the rings in a row – twelve axes, just as she remembered Odysseus doing it all those years before.

And when everything was ready, Penelope turned to the suitors and she said, "Now, which one of you is man enough to win me!" And there was a great hubbub and discussion among the suitors then as to who should go first. And at last they decided to take it in turns, following the
30 direction that the wine jug took when it was passed from hand to hand. And the first of the suitors to try his hand to the bow was called Leodes. He took it in his fat, white fingers, swollen from months of feasting. He set the foot of it to the floor at his own feet, and he began to try to bend the bow, but it sprang out of his hand and clattered onto the floor.

And so the second suitor tried and fared no better. And each of them in turn tried to string the
35 bow and not one of them could do it. Some came closer than others, but not one of them could string that bow. And so they began to warm it in front of the fire and rubbed beeswax into it, and each of them tried again and still not one of them could do it.

And Penelope stood with her arms folded and she watched and she shook her head and she said, "Perhaps the day is not a lucky one. Perhaps the day is not auspicious." And she turned
40 and she made her way up the stairs and old Eurycleia followed her, hobbling up the stairs. And as the old nursemaid climbed the stairs, the beggar sitting among the shadows by the door, caught her eye and he winked and he nodded. And the nursemaid smiled. And as soon as she was out of sight she made her way out and down and round, and she locked all the doors to the feasting hall, from the outside.