

**Chapter 7 - [Book 17 - 18]**

When rosy-fingered Dawn next shone forth upon gods and mortals, wise Telemachus returned to the city. Shortly thereafter, the swineherd led Odysseus, in his form as a raggedy old beggar, into the city also. When they approached Odysseus' palace, he said to the swineherd, You go inside, and I will stay here. I have suffered so much from the war and the waves of the salt sea that no matter how I am treated, I shall endure it.



As Odysseus spoke these words, an old dog that lay in the courtyard of the palace lifted his head and pricked up his ears. Odysseus had raised Argos but then had gone off to Troy, and the dog had patiently waited twenty years for his master's return. At first, young men used to take him with them when they went off to hunt wild goats, rabbits, and deer. But, soon, without his master to care for him, he lay ignored among the piles of mule and cattle dung that always littered the courtyard until slaves collected it to fertilize the fields.

Argos recognized Odysseus immediately. He wagged his tail but was too weak to approach his master. Realizing that to pet his dog would reveal his identity, Odysseus turned away from the swineherd to wipe the tears from his eyes. Then black Death took Argos, for he had lived beyond his years to see his master's safe return.

Odysseus followed the swineherd to the palace and sat down in the doorway. Once he had finished the bread Telemachus passed to him, bright-eyed Athena counseled him to walk among the suitors and beg for more food. When the man of many schemes came to Antinous, the leader of the suitors, he asked, How about a gift from you, my friend? You appear to be the best of the suitors here, in bearing even like a king, so you should give me the best gift of all.

Indeed I shall give you a gift that is fitting and proper! Antinous replied. He grabbed his footstool and threw it at Odysseus, hitting him in the shoulder.

The man of long suffering stood firm as a rock and then silently returned to the doorway. Antinous has struck me because I am a beggar, Odysseus murmured. If the gods protect those who are forced to beg for their food, may Death come for him before he marries.

Soon another beggar arrived at the palace, one known throughout the city for his endless appetite. Although he possessed little strength, he appeared impressive, for he was a very large man.

Get away from the doorway, old man! he shouted. You are blocking my way!

Clearly there is room for both of us, Odysseus replied. Do not provoke me unless you want a fight.

If you want to fight a younger man, said the beggar, I shall spatter your teeth upon the ground as if they were kernels of corn scattered by some pig!

Antinous, hearing this exchange of words, announced, As a prize, the beggar who wins the fight will always eat with us. The loser will have to beg somewhere else.

Long-suffering Odysseus replied, Only an empty stomach encourages an old man like me to fight a younger one. Swear that none of you will interfere between us.

Have no fear, wise Telemachus said. If your mind and your heart lead you to take on this beggar, any suitor who strikes you will have to contend with me!

Odysseus then arranged his tattered clothing so that his great arms and mighty thighs were free. The suitors marveled at the stranger's apparent strength, which his rags had concealed. The young beggar was sorry that he had ever opened his mouth. Odysseus debated whether to kill the young beggar with a mighty blow or simply knock him out with a lighter punch. He decided on the weaker blow, for then the suitors would not be too impressed with his strength.

So the man of many schemes struck the young beggar upon the neck, driving him to the ground. He dragged him by the feet into the courtyard of the palace and leaned his body against the wall by the gates. Now, frighten away the dogs and pigs! Odysseus said. Then, he returned to the doorway of the great hall and sat down again.

The suitors cheerfully called out, Stranger, may Zeus and the other deathless gods grant what you most wish, since you have gotten rid of that bothersome beggar.

When the suitors had returned to their homes for the night, wise Penelope asked to speak with the stranger, even though he was a beggar. Who are you? she asked him. And where are you from?

Ask me anything else, Lady, Odysseus replied, but these questions fill my heart with sorrow, and I do not want to weep in your house.

The steadfast Penelope replied, My heart, too, overflows with sorrow as I long for the return of my husband. While these suitors have pressed marriage upon me, I have fought them off by scheming against them. Some god put the thought in my mind to set up a great loom in my hall and to weave a large robe with very fine thread.



I said to them, Since my lord, Odysseus, is dead, I am weaving this shroud for Laertes, his father, so that Death will not find him without a suitable covering. Although I know you are eager to marry me, just be patient until I finish this wrap.'

The suitors agreed, Penelope continued, so every day I wove the shroud, and every night by torchlight I unraveled what I had woven that day. Thus I have tricked my suitors for the three years they have sat in the great hall. But then one of my maidservants told the suitors my secret, and they caught me unraveling the thread. So I have had to complete the shroud, and now I can think of no other way to postpone choosing one of the suitors to marry.

Now, tell me about yourself, she concluded. Surely your parents are mortal and not some oak tree or stone.

Odysseus proceeded to tell his loyal wife one of his fabulous tales about his life in Crete. He incorporated into the story the fact that he had heard of Odysseus' return. He even went so far as to describe the episode with Helios' cattle and Odysseus' arrival in Phaeacia.

You may stop your weeping, he counseled Penelope, for I have heard that Odysseus is nearby. He would have been here by now, but he is wandering about gathering more riches. In fact, I shall swear a sacred oath by Zeus, lord of Olympus, that Odysseus will return to Ithaca within this month.

May your words come true, wise Penelope responded, but I have no confidence in my heart that they will. However, even if we cannot welcome you as we would if the lord of this house were here, my maidservants will still bathe your feet and prepare a fine bed for you.

My lady, Odysseus replied, I have no interest in a fine bed. However, if you have some great-hearted maidservant who has lived long enough to have suffered as much as I, if you wish, she may wash my feet.

Penelope answered, I have such a servant, an old woman whose heart overflows with understanding. She nursed my husband on the day his mother gave birth to him, and she has loved him ever since then. As old as she is, she will wash your feet.

The old nurse rose and prepared to do as Penelope had asked. As she studied the stranger, she said to him, We have welcomed many strangers in these halls, but you look and sound more like great-hearted Odysseus than any man I have ever seen. Even your feet are like his!

Everyone who has seen the two of us remarks that we are very similar, replied the man of many schemes.

Suddenly the thought occurred to him that, as the old nurse was washing his feet, she might notice the scar of an old wound located just above his knee. Then she surely would know him. So he seated himself away from the light of the fire and turned his face toward the dark part of the room.

Just as Odysseus had feared, as soon as the old nurse took his leg in her hands to wash it, her hands felt the scar and recognized it even in the dark. Remembering the wound Odysseus had once received from the tusk of an enormous wild boar, she abruptly dropped his leg. The bronze basin tipped over, and the water spilled upon the floor.

With tears in her eyes, the old nurse placed her hand under the stranger's chin and said, You are indeed Odysseus, my dear child, although I did not recognize you until I took your leg in my hands.

As she spoke, the old nurse looked toward Penelope, hoping to signal to her, but Athena had turned Penelope's thoughts to other matters.

Odysseus clapped his hand over the nurse's mouth and said, You will surely be the death of me unless you keep silent! My presence in this house must be kept a secret.

You know how strong I am, she replied. I shall remain as silent as a rock or a piece of iron.

When the old nurse had finished bathing his feet, Odysseus pulled his chair close to the fire once again and arranged his tattered garments to cover his scar.

Wise Penelope then said to him, The time is coming when I will have to hold a contest to determine which suitor I shall have to marry. I plan to use the twelve ceremonial axes that Odysseus liked to use for practice with his great bow. Telemachus will line up the axes in a row with their handles upright, as his father did, so that the hole in the handle of each axe will be in line with all the others.

First, I shall have the suitors compete against one another to see who can string my lord's bow most easily. Then they will compete to see who can shoot an arrow from a great distance through the holes in all of the axe handles.

The man of many schemes replied, I see no reason for you to postpone this contest any longer, for Odysseus will be in your house before these suitors can even string his polished bow!

