

Ten Years Later

Alcinoos, King of the Phaeaceans, first among the thirteen lords who ruled the island of Scheria, looked at his guest. The man had inclined his head, hiding his face in the folds of his scarlet cloak. It was a beautiful garment, a gift of Queen Arete to the stranger who had come to her feet as a suppliant two days before.

The man had arrived at the island naked, weather-beaten, steeped in salty water, gnarled and parched like driftwood. It was the king's daughter, the princess Nausicaa who had found him, half-dead, on the beach near the mouth of the river, where she and her handmaids had been washing her dowry linen. Nausicaa offered him clothes, food and wine. Then, decent and fed, he regained enough strength to walk all the way to town and supplicate her queen mother for help.

The stranger had told the queen that he had been away from home for twenty whole years, the last seven of them stranded on Ogygia, an island in the middle of the ocean, the guest and captive of a fairy goddess. The gods had certainly willed him his freedom, he said, otherwise he could not explain why the fairy Calypso all of a sudden had made up her mind to let him go. She had even helped him build his raft, and had waved goodbye. For seventeen days he had been journeying on the raft, but as the eighteenth day was dawning, just as he was approaching their island, the wrath of Poseidon tore the vessel to pieces.

He battled with the waves for two days and two nights until he managed to swim his way to the shore, near the mouth of the river, where the princess found him. And now he waited for evening to come. Then he would board another boat - a gift of the Phaeacians, hospitable people who honoured all guests on their island. The boat, laden with hospitality gifts according to the old custom, would then take him home. And now the table was set in honour of the stranger, and all the lords of the island were gathered in the great hall of the palace. Demodocus, the blind singer, was caressing his lyre with his long fingers; he was singing of Trojans and Greeks

and of the great war that had brought so much glory to Agamemnon and his army, and so much suffering and loss, too.

Everyone was listening with rapt attention, bringing their goblets of wine to their lips now and then. Only the guest of honour - the stranger - seemed to have lost all interest in drink and song and company. His face was invisible, still hidden behind the folds of his cloak, but king Alcinoos was convinced that his guest was in tears again.

The same thing exactly had happened only that very morning, again during Demodocus's performance, a song about Achilles and Odysseus and all the great heroes who had fought at Troy.

Obviously the stranger had fought in that war. At least that is the impression everyone got about him as they watched him at the games organized in his honour, in accordance with the old hospitality laws. Some young men had challenged the man to a discus competition, and he had chosen the largest discus and thrown it much further than even the strongest Phaeacean men. He would be happy to participate in more games, he said, in wrestling, in archery - nobody had ever beaten him in archery except Philoctetes back in Troy. But he would not compete in running; he was afraid he would be dishonoured, as his legs were still weak from his long battle with the sea.

They had all been impressed with his calm demeanour and the dignified manner in which he had responded to the young men's provocations. Overall he had given them the impression of a shrewd, prudent man, who knew how to behave and how to rule.

Yes, it was certainly the fault of Troy and of the song of Demodocus; they were sure to be bringing back sad memories. This would explain the stranger's unusual behavior. But it was he who had had asked Demodocus to sing to them about the Greek conquest of the citadel of King Priam, and indeed he had offered the blind singer the best cut of meat from the table with his own hands.

Now the song was at the point where crafty Odysseus jumps out of the belly of the wooden horse, and like Ares the god of war he attacks the city guards and dashes through the city streets and palaces, with the rest of the Greeks following suit.

Everyone in the great hall listened, entranced. But the stranger was not listening: he was weeping.

King Alcinoos was concerned. He rose and said in a decisive tone:

‘My lords, I don’t mean to spoil your pleasure, but I think it is now time for our singer Demodocus to stop. Obviously his song is causing our guest much distress.’

The blind singer stopped at once. Astonished, the lords of the Phaeaceans turned their eyes towards the stranger, who had now lifted his head and was looking at them all with those eyes that had impressed them; the eyes of a man who had seen much, and most of it unpleasant, but had not been depleted of his power because of it. In spite of all he had been through, he did not seem to be an ordinary man. The strong lines of his weather-beaten face did not manage to hide a gentle physiognomy; the tears on his eyes did not make him seem less powerful than when he had been throwing the discus further than any Phaeacean hero.

Alcinoos sat back down and, eager to dispel the general awkwardness, he turned politely to the guest:

‘Now that there is no more song to sadden the heart, I believe it is time to ask our honourable guest his name and his place of origin,’ he said softly. ‘It is getting dark, and soon his boat will be ready to take him away. But in order to know of the itinerary, a destination should be named.’

The king paused. He could not ignore his guest’s weeping any more.

‘And if our guest is willing,’ he added, hesitating a little, ‘let him tell us what it was that made him so sad when the war of Greeks and Trojan was mentioned in song. He surely must have lost someone he truly loved in that war, if his heart is to bleed so much ten years later.’

In the great hall of King Alcinoos’ palace the fire in the hearth spread its sweet warmth, but the guest looked as if he was shivering under the scarlet cloak, the queen’s gift. It was time for him to speak now, to tell the truth to all those richly-clad lords who listened to the deeds of Odysseus and envied his glory, without having any idea how much he envied their happiness.

The guest thought that his words would surely sound strange in that hall where everything was impeccable: the food, the wine, the small talk of a feast. But it

was now the time for him to speak. His host had more than fulfilled his duty to the god of hospitality, the great Zeus himself, offering food and shelter and gifts without even asking who the stranger was. But before the guest left for home, he had to speak his name, because from now on the bond that would tie host and guest together - the bond of exchange of hospitality and gifts - would be as sacred and strong as the bond between brothers.

The guest looked around him. He had a duty to speak to the Phaeaceans and to their king, he knew. He was decided to fulfill it.

‘That man about whom Demodocus was singing just now - Odysseus - that man is now in front of you,’ he said quietly. ‘But even if the singer was not blind, he wouldn’t have recognized me, so much have I been altered by my woes and sufferings.’

He paused to take a deep breath.

‘The man who fought bravely along with the other Greeks in Troy, the man thanks to whose wit Troy fell, could not escape all the troubles the gods had in store for him. I had twelve boats before I set out to return, laden with rich spoils; I had shipmates whom I loved. But it was all taken from me - friends and fortune alike - and I ended up all alone, with nothing, a castaway on your island. I, Odysseus, son of Laertes, King of Ithaca.

For a moment nobody moved and nothing was said in the brightly decorated hall of the Phaeacean palace. There was only silence, as thick as mist covering the snow-capped mountain peaks in wintertime.

King Alcinoos stared at his guest. He had been right to surmise that this was no ordinary man washed up on the shores of his island. There was nothing ordinary about his: his bearing, his strong body, his royal movements, his words, but most of all his eyes, which, although quiet and even meek, seemed to be sparkling with light from within every time he was looking at his interlocutor. Now Alcinoos could see the pain inside that proud man, shrewdest of all the kings who fought at Troy.

The other Phaeacean lords seem to feel exactly the same way. Soon urgent and astonished whispers broke up the silence in the great hall. So the stranger was Odysseus! The King of Ithaca! The hero whose feats were sung by poets all over the

world! But what...? How ...? The whispers got louder and louder, chasing the silence away. What had happened to Odysseus since his triumphant departure from Troy? He had mentioned something about his wit not saving him from the wrath of the gods. What had turned the brave, fiercely intelligent king of Ithaca from victor of Troy to castaway on their island?

Odysseus was still seated in his seat of honour next to King Alcinoo. The least he could do for the kind Phaeaceans, as a token of appreciation for their hospitality, was to answer their questions. This would also help him to remove all this weight from his chest, those ten long years of errors, of tribulations, of deaths. For it seemed to him that all that was heroic and noble had ended for him at Troy.

‘What can I say? Where do I begin? How do I stop once I start telling you about all my woes that lie so heavy upon my heart? And how can I make your own hearts heavy with my tears that will surely come once I begin to remember?’

There was silence in the hall again. But this was a different kind of silence, a fragile one, ready to be shattered as the words of Odysseus set sail and took them all beyond the silver lintel of King Alcinoo’s palace, outside the bronze walls, away with him on his travels...

The blind poet stood up groping the column he had been sitting against. His glazed eyes turned towards the voice of stranger, the guest of his king and queen. He was burning up with the desire that must be so obvious in the eyes of those who could see. He longed to hear and absorb everything. It was his sacred duty, gifted and blessed by the gods: he had to turn into song and music all the stories the King of Ithaca was now about to tell the gathering of the lords. And it was he, the blind poet of the Phaeaceans, who would set it all in song for the generations to come. Odysseus took another deep breath.

‘The gods had many trials set in store for me during my return,’ he sighed. ‘The joy of victory only lasted for as long as I could still see the ruined, smoking citadel of King Priam, and the seashore where he used to reign once...’

And Odysseus was drawn into the tale of his own life, unfurling the narrative skein from the very beginning. Ten years earlier. On the day that he and his mates left Troy, setting out on their journey home.