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Opening extract from

The Usborne Illustrated Odyssey

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Published by

Usborne Publishing Ltd

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THE GODS TAKE ACTION

The clouds darkened and thunder rumbled over Mount Olympus. Zeus, the king of the gods, was having a grumble... "Men are fools," he complained. "They blame the gods for their misfortunes, even after ignoring our advice. They don't accept that their own foolish actions lead to their downfall."

"What about Odysseus?" demanded his daughter Athena, who was peering down at the world beneath them. "He hasn't ignored our advice, and he's certainly no fool. And yet every other survivor from the Trojan

War is home with his family. But Odysseus?

He's down there trapped on Calypso's island.

Every time he tries to leave, she brings him back."

Athena sighed. "She has no right to keep him as a plaything – goddess or not. His wife and son are in sore need of his return and they have have almost given up hope."

"You're right – Odysseus is a fine man... in fact the cleverest man alive," Zeus admitted. "It's your uncle, Poseidon's doing. He detests him... I myself have nothing against seeing Odysseus get home."

Athena saw an opportunity. "Mighty Father," she beamed, "if *you* will it, who shall stand in your way?" Grasping her spear, she got to her feet. "Could you send a messenger ordering Calypso to free Odysseus? I'll make sure he still has a home to return to..."

The goddess Athena flashed down, down, down, through the clouds to the realm of men. On the threshold of Odysseus's home, a palace on the isle of Ithaca, her shining form flickered and shifted, and she became a tattered old man.

A rap on the door brought a servant running. "I wish to see Telemachus, son of Odysseus," the old man said, and was shown inside.

The palace was in chaos. Men were sprawled everywhere, drinking and gambling, guffawing and feasting. In the corner sat a very young man, not much more than a boy. He was slumped in his chair,

his head in his hands, his mouth downturned.

Athena peered into the boy's thoughts...

Telemachus was imagining his long-lost father Odysseus, bursting into the hall like a hero, throwing men left and right. "If my father were here, he'd give these scoundrels what for." A glimmer of a smile touched his lips. But it soon faded. "Who am I fooling?" he muttered to himself. "My father's long dead. He'd be back by now if he were alive."

He looked up to see the ragged stranger standing over him. "Welcome to my home," Telemachus said, leaping to his feet to fetch a chair. "Please sit down and accept some refreshment. You can tell me what brings you here after you've eaten your fill."

The stranger nodded with approval. "You have your father's good grace."

"You know my father?" Telemachus asked eagerly.

"Odysseus and I are old friends," answered the stranger. He looked around at the men lounging about the hall. "Forgive my curiosity, but what are these people doing here? Is there some kind of celebration?"

Telemachus let out a bitter laugh. "Far from it. These men have been here night and day for over three years. My father has not returned from the war, and they all say he must be dead. It's hard to argue – everyone else who survived the war returned long ago. Our so-called guests are eating us out of house and home and yet they will not leave until my mother chooses one of them to marry."

He gazed sourly around the room, then turned back to the stranger. "She refuses to choose. Can you blame her? They are nothing but parasites. But what else can we do? My father's bones must be bleached and scattered on some far distant shore by now.

There's no hope of him saving us."

"Odysseus, dead? Never!" cried the stranger. "He's too clever and brave for that. You should not give up hope." He put his hand on Telemachus's arm. "Do you know what you should do?"

Telemachus shook his head.

"Sail to Sparta," urged the stranger. "Go and see King Menelaus. He was the last of the army to return home, so he may know what has become of your father. If you have word that he lives, you can come back and kick this lot out of your house. You are no longer a child, Telemachus, you must take action."

Telemachus seemed to grow taller listening to these words. "I will," he vowed. Then suddenly, so suddenly Telemachus couldn't really tell what had happened, the old, ragged man was gone – vanished – like a bird in the air.

None of the suitors or servants seemed to have noticed anything unusual. "Only a god could do such a thing," Telemachus realized. "And if the gods are on my side... well, there's hope yet."

Just then, a bard, hired by the suitors to entertain them, raised his voice in song. He told of the soldiers' return from the Trojan war. "Why torture me like this?" came a cry and Telemachus's mother, Penelope, entered the hall.

She had a beautiful face, but lines of sadness furrowed her brow, and her dark hair was streaked with white. "It is cruel to choose this very song, when my good husband has not returned from the war! If he had, things would be different." She burst into tears.

Telemachus rushed to her side. "Mother," he said quietly, "it's just a song. Don't let it upset you. Go back to your room and carry on with what you were doing.

"WHY TORTURE ME LIKE THIS?" CAME A CRY AND TELEMACHUS'S MOTHER, PENELOPE, ENTERED THE HALL.