

# 20

## Prelude to the Crisis

### Book Twenty

*The night before the storm. Odysseus lies sleepless, growling like a watchdog at the treachery under his roof, forcing his heart to endure a little longer; upstairs his wife prays for death. Day breaks on the feast of Apollo the Archer, and the signs crowd in – thunder from a clear sky, a curse from the mill, an eagle on the left, and a seer's terrible vision of blood on the walls and ghosts in the porch. The suitors only laugh. They have one day left.*

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**SET**

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## BOOK TWENTY

# Prelude to the Crisis

*The last uneasy night and morning before the reckoning: omens, a loyal cowherd, a final insult, and a seer's vision of the hall awash with blood.*

## WHAT HAPPENS

- Odysseus lies awake, mastering his anger at the disloyal maids; Athene reassures him, and Penelope prays for death.
- He asks Zeus for a sign and receives two – thunder from a clear sky and a mill-woman's curse on the suitors.
- The loyal cowherd Philoetius arrives; the suitors' murder-plot is checked by an omen on the left.
- At the feast of Apollo, Ctesippus throws a cow's hoof at the beggar and Telemachus rebukes him.
- Athene drives the suitors into hysterical laughter, and Theoclymenus sees the hall filled with blood and ghosts before walking out.

## WHO WE MEET

**Odysseus**

holding his fury in check on the eve of vengeance

**Philoetius**

the faithful cowherd, a second Eumaeus

**Theoclymenus**

the seer who alone sees the doom

**Ctesippus**

the suitor who throws the last insult

## WHY IT MATTERS FOR ESSAYS

Book 20 is a study in gathering doom: portents thick on the ground (thunder, the mill-woman, the eagle, Athene's madness, Theoclymenus' vision), Odysseus' supreme self-control, and the last sorting of loyal and faithless servants on the feast-day of Apollo the Archer. **Unprescribed**: read for the story and its essay background, not examined in context.



## Prelude To The Crisis

### — A SLEEPLESS NIGHT

The good Odysseus now lay down to sleep in the portico. He spread an untanned oxhide on the floor and piled it up with plenty of fleeces, from sheep that the Suitors slaughtered daily; and Eurynome put a blanket over him when he had settled down. As he lay there

5 wide awake brewing trouble for his rivals, a group of women, the Suitors' regular mistresses, came trooping out of the house giggling and joking among themselves. Odysseus' anger rose in him. For a long time he debated in his mind and heart what to do. Should he leap up and put them all to death; or should he let them spend this one last

10 night in the arms of the arrogant Suitors? His heart growled within him *as a bitch growls standing guard over her helpless pups*, ready to fight when she sees a stranger. In the same way he growled inside himself in outrage at their wickedness. But, striking his chest, he called his heart to order and said: 'Patience, my heart! You had

15 something far more ignominious than this to endure when the invincible Cyclops devoured your brave comrades. And yet you managed to hold out, till your cunning notion got you clear of the cave where you had thought your end had come.'

### — ENDURE, MY HEART

But though Odysseus was able by such self-rebuke to quell all mutiny

20 in his heart and steel it to endure steadily, nevertheless he could not help twisting and turning *just as a paunch stuffed with fat and blood* is turned this way and that in the blaze of the roaring fire by a man who wants to get it quickly roasted. Twisting and turning, he pondered how, single-handed against such odds, he could get his

25 hands on the shameless Suitors, when Athene descended from heaven and approached him in the form of a woman. She stood above his head and spoke to him: 'Sleepless again, Odysseus, most ill-fated of mortals? And why? This house is your home, your wife is inside, and so is your son, a youth whom any man might wish to have for a

30 son.'

'Goddess,' replied Odysseus, the master-schemer, 'all that you say is true. And yet my heart is in some perplexity. How am I to get my hands on these shameless Suitors? I am alone, whereas they are always together in a crowd when they are here. And there's another

35 and still more perplexing matter on my mind. If by Zeus' will and yours I kill them, where could I go to escape vengeance? I ask you to consider these problems.'

'You really are incorrigible!' exclaimed the bright-eyed goddess. 'Most people are content to put their trust in far inferior allies, mere

#### LINE 11

*as a bitch growls standing guard over her helpless pups* A snarling **simile**: as Odysseus watches the disloyal maids sneak off to the suitors, his angry heart 'growls like a bitch standing over her pups'. He longs to strike, but holds back.

#### LINE 21

*just as a paunch stuffed with fat and blood* He masters his fury with the famous self-command 'Endure, my heart', yet still tosses sleeplessly – caught in a homely **simile**, turning 'like a paunch of fat and blood roasted this way and that on the fire'.



40 mortals entirely devoid of cunning such as mine. But I who have never ceased to watch over you in all your adventures am a goddess. I will make my meaning plain: you and I could be surrounded by fifty companies of men-at-arms, all thirsting for our blood, but you would still drive away their cows and sheep. Come now, go to sleep. It is  
45 wearying to lie awake and keep watch the whole night through; and presently you'll rise above your troubles.' With which the lady goddess closed his eyes in sleep and returned to Olympus.

#### — PENELOPE'S PRAYER

But no sooner had sleep come to Odysseus, resolving all his cares as it relaxed his limbs, than his faithful wife awoke, and sitting up in her  
50 soft bed gave way to tears; then, tired of weeping, she made a special prayer to Artemis: 'Artemis, Lady Goddess, Daughter of Zeus, O for an arrow from your bow to pierce my heart and take away my spirit in this very hour! Or let the Storm-wind snatch me up and carry me down the misty ways to drop me where the stream of Ocean circles  
55 back on itself, just as **the daughters of Pandareus were carried away** by the Demons of the Storm! The gods had killed their parents and left them orphaned in their home; but the divine Aphrodite nourished them on cheese, sweet honey and mellow wine; Hera made them beautiful and wise beyond all other women; chaste  
60 Artemis made them tall; and Athene taught them the skills to make beautiful things. But there came a day when the divine Aphrodite went to high Olympus to ask Zeus the Thunderer, who knows everything that is destined or not destined for mankind, to grant these girls a happy marriage, and on that very day the Storm-Fiends  
65 snatched them up and handed them over to the tender mercies of the Avenging Furies, the dreaded Erinyes. Gods of Olympus, annihilate me like that; or strike me dead, Artemis of the beautiful hair, so that I may sink underneath the hateful earth with Odysseus' image in my heart, rather than delight the heart of a lesser man.

70 '**Grief is endurable when one weeps** with an ache in the heart during the day but can at least sleep at night and forget everything, good and bad, once one's eyelids close. But all that a god sends me are bad dreams. This very night again I thought I saw Odysseus by me in bed, looking exactly as he looked when he sailed away with his  
75 army, and my heart leapt up, because I took it for no dream but reality.'

Close on her words golden-throned Dawn appeared. The noble Odysseus caught the sound of her weeping, and as he mused about it he imagined he could see her beside him with the light of  
80 recognition in her eyes. He took the blanket and sheepskins from his bed and put them on a chair, carried the oxhide out and laid it down, then lifted up his hands in prayer: 'O Father Zeus, if it is true

#### LINE 55

**the daughters of Pandareus were carried away** In her despair Penelope wishes the storm-winds would snatch her away as they did the **daughters of Pandareus** – orphan girls carried off by the Storm-Fiends. She would sooner vanish than wed a lesser man.

#### LINE 70

**Grief is endurable when one weeps** Upstairs **Penelope** wakes in tears and prays for death rather than a second marriage. Husband and wife lie awake a wall apart, grieving the same grief.



that after all your persecution you gods willed to bring me home over dry land and sea to my own country, let someone in the palace where  
 85 they are waking now utter a word of good omen for me and let some other sign outside the palace be given.'

#### — THE TWO OMENS

That was his prayer. Far above the clouds Zeus the Counsellor heard it and **thundered in the clear sky**. Noble Odysseus rejoiced; and close upon this, from within the palace, there came the words he  
 90 wanted, from a female slave in a building nearby, where the King's hand-mills stood. Twelve women had to toil away at these mills, grinding barley and wheat for nourishing bread. At the moment they had all ground their share and gone no off to sleep, all except one not so vigorous as the rest, who had not yet finished her task. This  
 95 woman stopped her mill now and uttered the words of omen for her master: 'Zeus, lord of gods and men, how loudly you thundered from a starry sky! And never a cloud in sight! You must have meant it as a sign for someone. Listen to poor me too, and let my wish come true. Let today's be the very last of the Suitors' sumptuous feasts in  
 100 Odysseus' palace. My knees have grown weak from the heartbreaking drudgery of grinding corn for the Suitors. May this be their last dinner, say I.'

The woman's words of omen combined with the clap of thunder to make Odysseus a happy man. He felt that a crushing revenge on the  
 105 sinners was assured.

#### — THE HOUSE WAKES

By this time the other maids were stirring in Odysseus' fine palace and making up the fire which never quite died down on the hearth. Telemachus got up from his bed looking like a young god, and put on his clothes. He slung his sharp sword from his shoulder, bound a  
 110 beautiful pair of sandals on his glistening feet, picked up his great bronze-pointed spear, and made his way to the threshold of the hall, where he spoke to Eurycleia.

'Nurse dear,' he said, 'did you women attend properly to our visitor here, in the matter of food and bedding? Or did he sleep as best he  
 115 could? That would be just like my mother, who for all her wisdom is far too ready to make much of a lesser man and send a better man packing.'

'Come, my child,' said the level-headed Eurycleia. 'I wish you wouldn't blame your mother when there is no cause. The man sat and drank as  
 120 long as he wanted; as for food, he said he had no appetite for more. Your mother asked him; and when the time came to think of sleep, she told the servants to make him a proper bed. But like a poor fellow

#### LINE 88

**thundered in the clear sky** Odysseus asks Zeus for a sign and gets two at once: **thunder from a cloudless sky**, and the words of a slave-woman toiling at the mill, who curses the suitors and prays this may be their last feast. Both point to the reckoning.



utterly down on his luck, he refused to sleep between blankets on a bed, and lay down instead on an undressed hide and some  
 125 sheepskins in the portico. It was we who spread a blanket over him.'

That was her account. Telemachus set out from the hall, spear in hand, escorted by two hunting-dogs, and made his way to the assembly-place to join his fellow-countrymen. Meanwhile the daughter of Ops, Peisenor's son, the excellent Eurycleia, issued her  
 130 orders to the maids.

'To work!' she called. 'You there, sweep and sprinkle the floors. Look sharp about it, and spread the purple coverings on those special chairs. And you, sponge all the tables down, and wash the wine-bowls and those precious two-handled cups. And you others, run off  
 135 to the well and fetch us some water as quick as you can. We shall soon have the Suitors in the hall. They're coming early: today's a festival.'

The girls heard and obeyed. Twenty went off to draw water from the dark waters of the well, while the rest got on efficiently with the  
 140 work indoors. The haughty men-servants next appeared, and chopped up the firewood in a neat and businesslike manner. The maids soon came back from the well, and after them came the swineherd, who drove up three fatted hogs, the pick of all his beasts. He left the animals to root around for food in the spacious courtyard,  
 145 and came up to Odysseus, whom he greeted affably: 'Well, friend, are the Suitors behaving better towards you, or do they still treat you like dirt?'

'Ah, Eumaeus,' answered the resourceful Odysseus, 'how I hope that the gods may some day pay the villains out for their insults and  
 150 outrageous behaviour in another man's house! They don't feel a spark of shame.'

#### — MELANTHIUS AGAIN

While the two were talking together, up came **Melanthius the goatherd**, driving in the choice goats from his flocks for the Suitors' table. There were two other herdsmen with him. They tethered the  
 155 goats under the echoing portico, and Melanthius began baiting Odysseus once more: 'What, you still here? Still set on begging from the gentlemen and upsetting the whole house, rather than pack yourself off? I fancy that you and I will have to sample each other's fists before we say goodbye. I don't like your way of begging. And  
 160 anyhow this house is not the only one where people dine.' To this crafty Odysseus made no reply. He merely shook his head in silence, though his heart brooded on revenge.

#### LINES 152–153

**Melanthius the goatherd** Melanthius the goatherd swaggers in and abuses the beggar yet again – the household's faithless servants gathering on the wrong side.



## — PHILOETIUS THE COWHERD

A third new arrival was **the master-cowherd Philoetius**, who was driving in a heifer and some fatted goats for the Suitors. These  
 165 beasts had been brought over from the mainland by the ferry-men who take across any travellers who arrive. Philoetius carefully tethered his animals under the echoing portico, and came up to the swineherd and asked: 'Who is this stranger that has just come to our house? Who does he say his people are? Where is his family, and what  
 170 is his native land? He seems down on his luck, and yet he has the bearing of a king. But even kings are allotted misery in their lives – as for mere wandering beggars, the gods completely submerge them.'

With this, he went up to Odysseus, proffered his hand and greeted him with winged words. 'A welcome to you, old friend! You are in  
 175 deep trouble now; but here's to your future happiness! Father Zeus, you are the cruellest of gods. You have no compunction about dealing out misfortunes, misery and suffering to us men; yet it was you who caused us to be born. My friend, when I caught sight of you just now, the sweat broke out on me and my eyes are still filled with tears,  
 180 because you bring Odysseus to my mind; for I reckon that he too, in just such rags as you have on, must be a wanderer on the face of the earth, if indeed he is alive and can see the sunshine still.

'If not, if he is dead and gone to Hades' Halls, then here's a sigh for Odysseus, that marvellous man who put me in charge of his cattle in  
 185 the Cephallenian country when I was only a youth. And now those broad-browed herds of mine are too many to count, like ears of ripening corn; never could any mere mortal man's cattle breed better. But now these outsiders order me to bring them in, just for themselves to eat, not caring for his son's presence in the house or  
 190 fearing the wrath of a god. Indeed the King has been away so long that nothing will content them now but to share out his goods. And what a quandary for me! I keep turning it over and over in my mind. With a son of his alive, it seems quite wrong for me to take myself and all my herds to foreign parts and strange people. Yet it's more  
 195 difficult still to stay here and live a life of hardship tending cattle that have passed to other hands. I'd have run away long ago and found some great prince to protect me, since things have come to such a pass that I can't bear it; but I still have hopes of my unhappy master; I still think he may turn up from somewhere and drive these Suitors  
 200 headlong through the palace.'

'Cowherd,' replied the quick-witted Odysseus, 'you are clearly an honourable and thoughtful man, and I can tell you are a man who can be trusted. So here's a piece of news for you which I vouch for with my solemn oath. I swear by Zeus before all other gods and by the  
 205 hospitable table and hearth of the good Odysseus which I have

## LINE 163

**the master-cowherd Philoetius** Philoetius, the loyal cowherd, arrives and greets the beggar kindly. With Eumaeus he makes the pair of faithful herdsmen who will stand by Odysseus in the fight – the counterweight to Melanthius and Melantho.



reached, that before you leave Ithaca Odysseus will be back, and if you wish, you shall see with your own eyes the killing of these Suitors who play the part of master here.'

'Stranger,' said the cowherd in reply, 'may Zeus grant that all you say may happen! You'd soon know my mettle and what I can do with my right arm!' And Eumaeus added a prayer to all the gods that the wise Odysseus might come back home again.

#### — THE OMEN ON THE LEFT

While they were talking the Suitors were once again devising schemes for Telemachus' murder, when a bird of omen appeared on their left, **a soaring eagle with a trembling dove** in its talons. Amphinomus rose and said, 'Friends, our plot to kill Telemachus won't succeed. Let's think about the feast.' His suggestion pleased them and they adjourned to the noble Odysseus' palace, where they threw down their cloaks on seats and chairs and proceeded to slaughter the large sheep, the fatted goats and pigs, and a cow from the herd. They roasted and served the inner parts and mixed the wine in the bowls; the swineherd laid a cup for each man; the master-herdsman Philoetius served them with bread in fine dishes; Melanthius went round with the wine; and they helped themselves to the good food spread before them.

Telemachus with clever calculation chose for Odysseus a place by the stone threshold, just within the great hall, where he placed a battered stool for him and a diminutive table. He helped him to the entrails, poured him some wine in a golden cup, and said: 'Now sit and drink with the company. I will protect you from any insolence or blows from them. This is not an inn but the palace of Odysseus, which I inherited from him. And you Suitors, refrain from all provocation and violence, so that we may have no brawls or wrangling here.'

**It amazed them that Telemachus** should have the audacity to address them in this style. They all bit their lips, and the only comment came from Antinous, Eupheithes' son, who said: 'Well, sirs, offensive as it is, I suppose we must put up with this demand from Telemachus; his tone was certainly menacing. Zeus has obviously frustrated us, otherwise we would have silenced him here, shrill and vociferous though he is.' Antinous had his say. But Telemachus took not the slightest notice of him.

#### — THE FEAST OF APOLLO

Meanwhile, in the town, the beasts destined for sacrifice on this holy day were being led by heralds through the streets; and the long-haired Achaean townsfolk were congregating in **the shady grove of**

#### LINE 215

##### **a soaring eagle with a trembling dove**

Another **bird-omen**: an eagle clutching a dove appears on the suitors' left (the unlucky side) just as they plot Telemachus' murder. Even Amphinomus takes the hint and calls the plot off.

#### LINE 235

##### **It amazed them that Telemachus** **Telemachus**

now seats and defends the beggar and speaks to the suitors with a boldness that astonishes them.

#### LINES 245–246

**the shady grove of Apollo the Archer** It is a feast-day of **Apollo the Archer** – a pointed detail, for the contest of the bow (Apollo's own weapon) is about to decide everything, and the killing will fall on the god's festival.



**Apollo the Archer.** But the party in the palace, after the outer flesh had been roasted, taken off the spits, and carved up, devoted themselves to the pleasures of the table. The serving-men gave Odysseus his fair share, which was the same as they got themselves, in accordance with the instructions of his son Telemachus. But Athene had no intention of letting the arrogant Suitors abandon their caustic insults: she wished the anguish to bite deeper yet into the heart of Laertes' son Odysseus.

#### — CTESIPPUS' INSULT

They had among them a man with no sense of right and wrong, whose name was Ctesippus. He lived in Same, and he too, confident in his fabulous wealth, was courting the wife of the long-absent King. He now addressed the high and mighty Suitors:

'My noble lords, listen to me; I have something to say. Our guest has already been served with a fair share, as is only proper, for it would be neither good manners nor common decency to stint any friends of Telemachus who come to the house. But look! I am going to make him a present worthy of a guest, so that he may have something valuable to pass on to the bath attendant or one of the other servants in the palace of the good Odysseus.'

With this, **he laid his great hand on a cow's hoof** that was in the bowl and hurled it at him. But Odysseus avoided it by tilting his head slightly to one side, and the only sign of his anger, as the missile struck the solid wall, was a grim sardonic smile. Telemachus rounded on Ctesippus at once: 'It was lucky for you, Ctesippus, that my guest dodged and you didn't hit him. For if you had, I'd have run you through with my spear, and your father would have held a funeral here instead of a wedding. Understand, I won't have this disgraceful behaviour from anyone in my house. I have learnt to use my brains by now and to know right from wrong: my childhood is a thing of the past. And although I must, and do, put up with the sight of all this, the slaughtered sheep, the wine and bread consumed, since I could hardly stop you all single-handed, refrain from these wicked and malicious acts against me. But if you are all set now to murder me, well, I should prefer it so and think it a far better thing to die than day after day to look on while disgraceful things like this are done, my guests are maltreated, and my maids are hauled about this lovely house for your foul purposes.'

No one moved; a long silence followed Telemachus' outburst. It was broken at last by Agelaus, son of Damastor.

'My friends,' he remarked, 'when the right thing has been said, carping criticism and resentment are out of place. Let nobody maltreat this stranger or any of the noble Odysseus' household. And

#### LINE 265

**he laid his great hand on a cow's hoof** The suitor **Ctesippus** hurls a cow's hoof at the beggar – the third time a suitor throws something at Odysseus (after the two stools). He dodges it with a 'grim sardonic smile', and Telemachus rounds on the thrower.



now I have a friendly suggestion to make to Telemachus and his mother, in the hope that both will accept it. As long, Telemachus, as  
 290 you and your mother could still cherish the hope that the noble Odysseus would one day come home, no one could be angry with you for holding back and keeping the Suitors waiting. It was in your interest – had Odysseus really succeeded in finding his way back. But it is obvious by now that he is not destined to do so. So go and  
 295 sit by your mother and tell her to marry the man among us who is most distinguished and most generous with wedding presents: and then you will enjoy your inheritance at ease, with plenty to eat and drink, while she looks after her new husband's house.'

'I swear to you, Agelaus,' the thoughtful Telemachus replied, 'I swear  
 300 by Zeus and by the sufferings of my father, who I suppose is a long way from Ithaca, and either dead or lost, that I am certainly not delaying my mother's marriage, that I am urging her to make her choice and marry again, and that I promise her a most generous settlement. But I'd feel ashamed to drive her from the house against  
 305 her will. May the gods save me from that!'

#### — MADNESS IN THE HALL

Pallas Athene **had fuddled the Suitors' wits** to such effect that they greeted Telemachus' reply with peal after peal of uncontrollable laughter. But before long their laughing faces took on a strained and alien look. Blood was spattered on the food they ate. Their eyes were  
 310 filled with tears, their hearts with forebodings of grief.

#### — THEOCLYMENUS' VISION

And now the voice of the godlike prophet Theoclymenus was heard.

'Unhappy men,' he cried, 'what horror is this that has descended on you? Your heads, your faces and your knees are veiled in night. The air is ablaze with lamentation; cheeks are streaming with tears. **The**  
 315 **walls and lovely alcoves are splashed with blood.** The porch is filled with ghosts. So is the court – ghosts hurrying down to darkness and to the Underworld. The sun is blotted out from heaven and a foul mist has crept upon the world.'

They laughed at him. They laughed delightedly, with one accord; and  
 320 Polybus' son, Eurymachus, got up and shouted: 'Our new friend from abroad is out of his mind. Quick, you fellows, show him out and direct him to the assembly-place: he imagines it is night in here.'

'Eurymachus,' the godlike Theoclymenus retorted, 'I want no help from you to find my way. I have eyes and ears and two feet of my  
 325 own, and a sound enough head on my shoulders – quite enough to get me through those doors, where I am going now. For I see advancing on you all a catastrophe which you cannot hope to survive

#### LINE 306

**had fuddled the Suitors' wits** Athene now unhinges the suitors: they burst into wild, uncontrollable laughter that curdles into something ghastly – blood on their food, tears on their faces. The gods are readying them for slaughter.

#### LINES 314–315

**The walls and lovely alcoves are splashed with blood** The seer **Theoclymenus** sees the truth beneath the merriment: the hall veiled in night, the walls running with blood, the porch thronged with ghosts bound for Hades, the sun blotted from the sky. A vision of the slaughter to come, which the suitors merely laugh at.



or shun, no, not a single one of you with your brutal acts and reckless plots here in the home of godlike Odysseus.' And with that he strode  
330 from the splendid palace and sought out Peiraeus, who gave him a warm welcome.

But the Suitors, after exchanging glances, all began to bait Telemachus by holding up his guests to ridicule. 'Telemachus,' said  
335 one young man, and his sneer was typical of the rest, 'there never was a man so unfortunate with his guests. First you drag in this grubby tramp. All he wants is food and drink. He has never heard of a hard day's work; in fact he is just a burden on the earth. And now up jumps another to play the prophet. You'd much better take my advice: let's clap these friends of yours on board a fast ship to Sicily, where  
340 you could sell them for a profit.'

Telemachus ignored these comments. He kept his mouth shut and his eyes fixed on his father, watching for the moment when Odysseus would be ready to attack the shameless Suitors.

The prudent Penelope, Icarius' daughter, had placed her beautiful  
345 chair where she was able to hear every word spoken by the men in the hall. They had slaughtered cattle freely, and amid shouts of laughter had prepared a delicious and appetizing midday meal. But as for their supper, nothing less palatable could be imagined than the fare which a goddess and a strong man were soon to spread before  
350 them; but it was their villainy that had started it all.

