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Opening Extract from...

Penelope's Web

Written by Christopher Rush

Published by Polygon

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Christopher Rush

PENELOPE'S WEB

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For little Sam
and with a low sweeping bow
to Adam Nicolson
and a long libation
to the divine Bettany Hughes

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In my Dedication I have picked out the two scholars and explorers of the Ancient World who have inspired me most in recent years: Adam Nicolson and Bettany Hughes. I stand on their shoulders and see much further than I did before. If in places I have also leaned too heavily on either of them, I beg of each: grant me absolution.

In the editorial process I have been borne along by Sarah Ream, an editor so watchful and all-knowing I think she was sent by the gods, though I know she was hired by Neville Moir, my rod and staff at Polygon, together with the rest of that splendid team.

Turning back the page half a century and more to my school days at Waid Academy Anstruther, I want to thank two teachers in particular. Buggie Brown (I never discovered his first name) cheerfully taught me Greek for fun in the little steam puffer that chugged us to and from school each day between St Monans and Anstruther. 'Never fear the Greeks,' he used to say. 'Homer is their greatest gift to the world.' For relaxation he brought out the Greek New Testament.

I owe another huge debt to my English master, Alastair Mackie, poet and translator, who first inspired me to read and write about Odysseus. We shared translations, and our mutual musings bore fruit in a number of dramatic monologues, one of which forms the basis of Odysseus's last words in this book.

It is a book which has taken me five years to write, and which kept me from my family: Anna and Jenny, and more recently Sam. To them I apologise for the long hours spent with Odysseus and with those who have written about him and his world: Kazantzakis, Tennyson, du Bellay, Umberto Saba, Aeschylus, Rupert Brooke and all the usual suspects, not least Homer. At last it's over and I'm glad to be back in Ithaca. I hope the reader will think the voyage was worth it. Read and perpend.

Christopher Rush
MAY 2015

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Penelope's Web is the story of Odysseus, one of the heroes of *The Iliad* and the eponymous hero of *The Odyssey*. *The Iliad* is narrated throughout in the third person, the impersonal voice of Homer. So is *The Odyssey*, apart from a slender middle section in which Odysseus himself brings a listening audience up to speed on his adventures. Other Greek writers, ancient and modern, have followed Homer's example. In the present book, I have reversed this technique, allowing Odysseus to tell his own story in a blunt, soldierly, first-person voice that echoes the realities of war and peace, while Penelope re-invents her husband's experiences, drawing on myth, legend and Greek literature, to portray him as the hero who overcomes impossible odds – and a series of women – to return to her and to his home in Ithaca. Arching over these two accounts is that of the omniscient narrator, the invisible author, who sees all.

The constant voice-shifts are indicated by symbols – the Odysseus and Penelope icons, which represent him and her, and the Greek key icon, which represents the impersonal narrator. Penelope's is the voice not of the woman herself but of the myth-making weaver spinning on her loom the web of lies – and truths. Odysseus's voice is that of the soldier and sailor, finding his way in the field, charting a course through the sea of life, the aftermath of war. He is the man on the ground, as opposed to the stuff of myth. And yet Odysseus also dips in and out of myth and by his own admission is a slippery teller of the truth. Moreover, the voices sometimes merge and blur as truth shimmers like a mirage. The symbols are intended, therefore, as a general guide. I hope that the reader will find them helpful in the re-imagining of these old stories for our time.

C.R.

PROLEGOMENON

THE GRAND PLAN

From time to time the population of the earth becomes too much for it to bear, so certain methods are employed to thin out the density of its peoples and reduce numbers to a safe and acceptable level. Some say these steps are taken by nature, wisest of nurses. Or else human instinct is at work on an inscrutable level, a self-regulatory strategy scribbled deep into the genes. The religious sort say that the problem is addressed not by mortals, who are incapable of controlling themselves, but by the powers above us. Whichever way you look at it, it's a survival tactic for a human race too clueless consciously to look after its own affairs. Neutral nature or the benign and merciless gods: they're the same thing, really. It just depends on your choice of terminology, and that's naturally determined by your beliefs.

Let's go with myth then, for the moment. Let's occupy the ethical and imaginative high ground. Let's leave reason aside.

Once upon a time, as they say, there was a great race of men, a god-like race, a race of heroes. They were called Greeks. And there was another race, almost as illustrious, called Trojans. And these mortals, though separated by a wide and unpredictable sea called the Aegean, thronged the world to such an extent that Zeus, in his wisdom and his pity, hit on a plan to deliver the all too fruitful humans from themselves. That plan was war, an effective means of easing the squeeze on population. Specifically, the Trojan War, in which vast numbers of both Greeks and Trojans were killed, nature triumphed, the gods' will was done and the earth's burden was considerably relieved.

True, that's how some saw the war. It's how some people will always see a war – as anything other than what it is: blind, brutal destruction. The men who fought it knew different. Soldiers in the field always know different, and better. I was a soldier. On the ground we knew precisely what caused the war: greed. Wars are always about ideology or greed. Or both. And in spite of all the hot air, it was no ideology that took us to Troy.

But it's always tempting to imagine a grand plan, even to believe in one. Penelope liked the idea of the grand plan. And under her cunning hand, the gods saw the problem and reached for something they had kept hidden. That something was a woman. And there she lay, naked

and smirking in the lap of the gods, biding her time. You can see her in the opening scene of the web, wearing that salacious smile, the one that loosened so much sperm, so many nerves, knees, lives. She was the argument, the agent, the exterminating spark. She was the excuse. She was the weapon of mass destruction. And we were sent to Troy to find her.

PART ONE

BEFORE THE WAR

ONE

When I got back to Ithaca from a long tour of duty in Troy, plus other inconveniences I hadn't bargained for, you might think I'd have done what every soldier supposedly does after a long campaign and a hard homecoming – get stuck straight in between my wife's spread legs and smash pissers with her for an hour or two before the nightmares start up and the blackheads surround me for the hundredth fucking time in a three-sixty attack. The dreams of war. You might think that. And you might think that for all soldiers there's nothing like I&I, intoxication and intercourse, to put the war behind them. For as long as the Lethe limbo lasts.

If that's what you think, then you've never been a soldier – at least not in Troy. And you know nothing about what war does to a soldier, how it strips him of himself. It has to, if the chain of command is to operate effectively. There can be no individuals, no identities, only numbers. You're not there; inside that armour you don't exist. It's the anonymity that lets you kill, and every time you kill the more anonymous you become and the further away from home. The tide pulls you away from your wife and kids, your old folks, while the emotional undertow inside you is always trying to suck you back to what you left behind, what you hunger for in your heart of hearts. Or so you think.

Sometimes it works, the undertow. And sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes you're left feeling that only the dead have identity – they're always returning to us, after all – and that you'll never regain your own self until you too are gone. Somebody once said it: call no man happy until he is dead.

But that's another fucking lie. As the great Achilles found out. Home turns out to be as cruel as war – normal life has been put on hold at best, destroyed at worst, and things are what the ordinary soldier calls FUBAR. Fucked up beyond all recognition. Or repair.

You come back with a divided, displaced, dislocated feeling, a disquiet as loud as fucking thunder in your head. Your chest is never at rest. You've come home but you know you'll never feel at home. You know that in spite of what they say about the hell of war, life will never be as rich again, you'll never feel as close to anyone as you did to your

comrades in the field, you'll never feel the adrenalin kick in, the buzz of action that made you so intensely aware of being alive. Never again. You know that from now on there will be no hell like home.

That's not all. You know you've been brutalised and that you have to try to separate the killing instinct from the survival instinct. You also know for a fact that the two are inseparable in a soldier, yes, even though the brutality existed only to protect peace and defend civilisation – if you want to believe what your leaders have told you. The thing is, it's still there, the blood-lust is still there, you need it, you need to keep going over and over in your mind the actual enjoyment of enemy casualties, the kick and thrill of killing up close with blades, boulders, bare hands, anything, the sheer satisfaction of knowing that you rained fucking devastation on the bastards.

You know something else too. You know you'll never trust anyone like you did before, not even your wife. For months, years, you've relied on the man next to you, your comrade, your best friend, looking out for you as you looked out for him. And you've relied on yourself, on your wits, on your weapons. On discipline. And on your determination to overcome the enemy, and to survive. And now all that's gone. And all that's left is a big fucking empty.

A BFE. Even the remote and utterly worthless locations you've served your country in start to look like Elysium compared to what you've come back to. Even bumfuck Egypt calls you back. And you'd go like an arrow.

There are other ways of putting it. Our army docs, with nothing but a handful of herbs to combat it, refer to it as the peace adjustment syndrome. Peace is now your enemy. Or, with some humour, I suspect, and half an eye to the sexual difficulties encountered by returning soldiers, they call it the re-entry problem. Re-fucking-entry. That's a polite way of looking at your wife's fanny. The ordinary soldier naturally puts it more graphically: WABHAC. War's a bastard, home's a cunt.

Cunt, by the way, was the last thing on my mind when I got home and slaughtered the bastards who'd been offering to screw my wife in my absence. And cock wasn't high on Penelope's agenda either. What was she supposed to think, let alone feel, as she stood in her room, under orders, and a butcher walked through the door? Even without the blood on me, even ignoring the fresh stench of lopped body parts, I was hardly her husband, was I? What was I? A salt-bitten stranger from the sea. A war-torn wolf with the madness hard in his eyes, still glittering from the recent killing spree. I could have killed her next.

I could see her thinking it, her hand clutching her chest, breathless, terrified, wondering what the fuck I was going to do, what I was going to say, a soldier from the war returning, blood on his beard, from a hard campaign, a long bastard of a tour. Long? It had been fucking years.

Later she lied about it, as she lied about most things. Said she'd looked me over and that when I checked out and she was happy I was still her old fuck-stick, she'd lain back and we'd gone at it all night as we talked the stars round the sky till morning. The star thing was her very expression – not verbatim, not even made of words, but an image, among the first of hundreds stitched into her web. Art gets away with murder, the things language can't always handle, including lies, and there were plenty of lies in Penelope's web.

Not that I can talk. I've lived by lies. I've survived by them. And survived them. But to be clear about the stars – yes, there were stars by the thousands. Maybe a million. But sex? No, I didn't want it, didn't want sex with the wife I hadn't seen for years, not as we stood there staring at one another on either side of that white unbroken bed. What normal man would? And I wasn't even normal. Nor was she. How could she have been?

So we didn't break the bed. We had a lot of ice to break first, a whole frozen ocean. And we both knew it would take months to melt, maybe years. Maybe never. Maybe talk was the best first thing. That much was true. We did talk. We talked the stars round the sky, and when dawn fingered the east we were still talking.

I've known soldiers who can't talk about war, their war, after they've come home. They don't utter a word. They only scream – when the nightmares come. I've known men who can talk about nothing else. They're still talking, years later they're still talking, when they die, still talking. Mostly to themselves. The ones who can't talk and the ones who can't stop talking have one thing in common. They're all well and truly FUBAR.

And the wives? Each to his own, I suppose. Mine wanted to talk. And why not? Conversation is a first step to sex, unless it's rape you have in mind. Nothing much the matter with rape, as a weapon. Nothing much the matter with conversation either, as a weapon, so long as it stays in hand. It's when it gets out of hand that it becomes an end in itself, an endless prevarication, and you both have to admit that you don't want sex anyway. Not because you're strangers, but because you're strangers who used to be close. Big difference. You're strangers who used to be man and wife. And so now you do the only thing you can do. You talk.

Talk's easy, talk's cheap.

What to talk about? Can you guess what she wanted to know most?

Did I still love her?

No.

I don't mean no, I didn't love her, I mean no, that's not what she wanted to know most. What she wanted to know most of all was what she was like.

'What was who like?'

'Who do you think? Helen, of course, the cause of it all, the be-all and the end-all. Helen of Sparta. Helen of Troy. What was she like?'

I said it would take a century to tell her.

'Take your time,' she said. 'We have the rest of our lives.'

'Not long enough,' I said.

Right now I wasn't even sure what the rest of our lives would amount to.

'But there's one thing about Helen that might surprise you.'

'What's that?'

'She was like you in one way at least – she spent a lot of time at the loom.'

'The loom? That bitch-whore?'

'Whoring never stopped a woman from weaving, did it? Or weaving from whoring?'

'Hard to imagine.'

But she managed to imagine it when she set up her own web, her version of the war, its causes and effects. In Penelope's web, Helen sat in her apartments in Troy weaving a vast tapestry of her own life. The purple traders trod the seas for her, the fishermen spent years harvesting the sea-snails, carting them in tons to the city walls and into the palace, and the slaves dissected them and boiled them up in their own urine. They pissed and art prevailed. The snails gave up their essence for it. Into the weft went the dark red dye, staining her creation the colour of death with a blush of power. Around her the endless bloody struggle continued, stallion-breaking Trojans and Argives armed in bronze, coughing up their lives for her in the same colour while she wove on, depicting their suffering, tracing their tears. And her own. Don't forget, it was all for her.

'And where is that web now?'

'Nowhere. It's ash, my girl. It's dust. It's the dust of fucking Troy.'

Penelope's eyes were glittering slits. 'A pity. But it doesn't matter. I'll make my own web. I'll tell it my way. I'll unravel that slut-work.'

'Why bother?'

She looked hard at me, the smile cold on her mouth. 'I think you know what it's like, not being able to stop what you've been doing for years. Neither wanting to stop, nor even wanting to want to stop.'

I knew just what she was talking about. No man better.

'So now,' she said, 'tell me about Helen. Tell me about Troy.'

TWO

Troy and Helen. Was there ever a time when I could think of one without the other? If there was, it's been wiped from my mind, it's been so long. It seems there never was a Troy without a Helen. She was built into the walls. She was the heart of the citadel. Her abduction was eternal.

It's not true, of course. Troy invited attack long before Helen. Look and see. A glance at the map is all it takes. Agamemnon was telling the truth for a change when he addressed the army at Aulis, whipping up the hysteria, appealing to bellicosity, patriotism, piracy, selling us the war.

'The bastards are begging for it,' he said.

In that respect at least he was right. Troy was of no global consequence, little more than a local power, but regionally it was a peach of the east, standing strategically between two great seas, two worlds, east and west. The Trojans could have controlled all shipping between the two, and suppressed access to the Propontis and the Black Sea, except that they didn't even have a navy. Not a single fucking ship. Before Paris came to Sparta, he had to have one specially built. Amazingly, the Trojans weren't seafarers, they were horse-traders. They were also allies of the Hittite shites and therefore enemies of us seafaring Greeks. And they were straddling the trade routes into Anatolia from the Med.

A commanding position. One to die for. As many did. A plain sliced by two rivers, a citadel on a hill, and a lower city of six thousand, half of which were desirable females. Troy waves to traders, sailors, soldiers. It beckons to textiles, metals, merchandise, men wanting women, slaves. They might just as easily have hung out a flag on the walls. They might as well have bellowed out the message across the Aegean: come and assault us, we're here to be taken, kick our arses. Agamemnon just couldn't believe his luck when he was handed it on a golden plate, the golden excuse for responding to the call. So the truth is that Troy didn't need Helen to draw us east. Troy was her own reason for war. Troy was always going to be fucked.

That didn't suit Penelope's web. She wanted a scapegoat. And there was never a scapegoat like Helen. She was the bad girl, she fitted the part. She carried the war crimes of the world tucked tight between her legs.

And it's true that she collected most of the blame for the war. Everybody cursed her, especially soldiers' wives. And the soldiers. The brave lads had to have their say about Helen.

That slut has a cunt like the Hellespont – the whole world goes through it!

Understandable. But a sweeping exaggeration, and a slur. She stuck to the man who abducted her. The trouble is, she deserted the man she was married to. The abduction was no myth. It happened. And you won't have trouble telling fact from fiction in this report. I tell it as it was. Penelope tells it as it could have been, maybe even should have been, if life were art, or legend, or if life were fair, or moral, or beautiful, or all that stuff. So if myth is to your taste, listen to Penelope, follow the golden thread. It's all there in the web. But for now, let's stick with what's real.

Paris arrived in Sparta, long-haired, close-shaven, clean-jawed, his hairy medallioned chest matted with oil, his ears and fingers glittering with rings and trinkets. A right fucking mummy's boy he was, and an easy charmer. Easy with his arrow, easy under a leopard skin, easy at a distance, easy on wheels, easy with the women. An Anatolian archer, a battlefield butterfly, a gutless funk. He boarded his trim ship, newly fitted out, and homed in on Helen, scenting Spartan fanny all across the Aegean.

What really brought him to Sparta? If you want the truth he was a messenger boy. His father, Priam, sent him on an embassy to inquire after Paris's aunt, Hesione, who had married Telamon of Salamis. And it was in Sparta, at the court of Menelaus, that he met Helen. He was entertained in Sparta for nine days, and for not one of those days could he take his eyes off her. Everybody saw it, except Menelaus. But then he never saw much that wasn't up his own arse, which is where his head was most of the time. The rest of the time it was up Agamemnon's. That pair were true brothers, united by rectal cranial inversion, mutual and interchangeable. On the tenth day a message arrived for Menelaus. His mother's father, Catreus, had died in Crete and his presence was required at the funeral.

'I'll be back,' he told Helen, 'as soon as the obsequies are over. While I'm gone make sure you look after our guest. Carry on with the entertainment.'

But Menelaus had been set-up. When Paris swanned in, the Spartan leader had seen at a glance a pretty boy from a culture that made his palace look like some shack. That's what he was made to see, meant to see. Priam had primed his son and he'd oiled his way in with gifts

beyond belief: golden bowls, razors, goblets, golden beds inlaid with ivory, mirrors, earrings, necklaces, dresses, weapons, chariots. There was even a fucking monkey. All of which he stole back again when he left. Except for the monkey. He said he'd left that to save Menelaus looking in the mirror – which was just as well as he hadn't left a single one.

A sharper man than Menelaus might have suspected another agenda than a mere state visit. Priam was up to something. Whether Helen was really on the agenda is another matter. But the sweeteners did the trick. Trojans were not exactly allies but if they could pull down pearls from Olympia – and it looked as if they could – then they had to be sucked off. And Paris was a young man well worth sucking off. So Menelaus had had no qualms about leaving his clever queen in charge of state affairs while he buggered off to his funeral in Crete. She had been ordered to lay on the sparkling wine, the roast boar, the charm, the lot. Up to the hilt.

Up to the hilt. So to speak. They later claimed that they hadn't actually desecrated the bed of Menelaus – they'd waited for the nearest convenient island, Kranai, as it happened, to consummate their passion. An offshore lust, if you like. The maidservants told it differently. But they kept their mouths shut at the time. And the sentries were out for the count. Helen had spiked the wine that night. She was a dab hand at that device. So they got out of the palace unseen. And laden with loot.

The Spartan spears would have whistled past their arses if they'd been spotted. She dropped a sandal on the mad dash. It was all her husband had left of her to chew at in his fury. But it hadn't taken too much nerve, not on Paris's side at least. He was a spoiled little tosser who just assumed things would always go his way. And that night they did – long before the big bronze bell began to clang and the shit-scared guards came to. They knew Menelaus would slit their throats, once he'd finished spitting.

Which is exactly what happened.

'Fucking hell! I go to bury my grandfather, and my wife walks out of here under your fucking noses – and with the Trojan fucking ambassador between her legs! Take them out!'

He spread it about that it was an abduction, but privately he admitted the opposite to Agamemnon and his closest friends.

'Every cunt from Tiryns to Troy knows she fucked off with him.'

It didn't matter. Abduction or elopement, it was still politically an abduction and an act of aggression.

‘We don’t have to declare war on the bastards,’ he said, ‘they’ve declared it already.’

Agamemnon grinned at him. ‘What are you talking about, brother? Declaration? Of course you don’t have to make any fucking declaration, you just fucking turn up! And if the bastards are unprepared, so much the better!’

Well, that was the Greek way. And there was nothing unusual about abductions either. We lived by acts of aggression. We took women away from their homes all the time. So did the other side, whoever the other side happened to be. The Phoenicians came to Argos and abducted Io, the king’s daughter, took her off to Egypt. We retaliated by abducting their princess Europa. We abducted the King of Colchis’ daughter, Medea. Paris abducted Helen from Sparta. Though you could say he broke the rules. The others were all unmarried virgins and fair game. And they were only princesses.

‘Helen is a queen, for fuck’s sake!’ roared Menelaus. ‘And my fucking wife!’

Paris upset the status quo, but the truth is, nobody much cared about the status quo. The Myceneans certainly didn’t: they were keener on war than peace. And Agamemnon was a Mycenean, true bred. This was how things were. It was the scheme of things.

THREE

And in another scheme of things entirely, as Penelope has it in the web, Zeus lusted after the loveliest of the Nereids, the sea-goddess Thetis, and was all set to impregnate her until he found out from the Fates that the son of this sea-nymph would grow up to be more powerful than his father. Prometheus confirmed this under torture, chained to his rock. It took Zeus a thousand years to extract the information, but it was well worth the wait.

As soon as he knew what destiny had decreed for Thetis, Zeus lost no time at all. He married her off to a mere mortal, Peleus. It wasn't a random choice. Peleus was more than an admirer: he was a hero. He'd sailed with Jason and the Argonauts. He'd been on the famous quest for the golden fleece. So the even stronger son, sprung from such loins, was sure to prove a superhero, as destiny demanded. But at least he'd be no trouble to Zeus.

Understandably, Thetis had no wish to be matched with a mortal man. She had her own lusts, principally for Poseidon, and Peleus had quite a struggle to net and keep her. But he succeeded. And to pacify the nymph, Zeus threw a huge wedding party. All Olympia was invited and they all brought spectacular gifts. The celebrity guest list contained only one omission. The entire panoply of gods and goddesses was welcomed, except Eris. Nobody wants strife at a wedding.

'There's enough to follow,' said Zeus, 'in married life. Let them have their first day without it.'

And all Olympia shook with dutiful laughter at his joke. All except Eris, who came anyway, angry at her exclusion and ready to do what she was designed to do: sow discord. She brought along her own special gift, but not for the happy couple. It was a golden apple, inscribed 'For the fairest'. Simple words calculated to trigger cosmic disruption. Even so, it's hard to imagine those words causing so much suffering. But there were reputations at stake, the pride and vanity of three Olympian females: Hera, Pallas Athene and Aphrodite, three powerful players, and each one of them claiming the right to the apple. No sooner had Eris lobbed it into the nuptials, sending it rolling among the sandalled feet of the immortal guests, than all hell broke loose.

There's no hell like a cat-fight, and Zeus had three squalling cats with their claws out bitching blue on Olympia. They were all beautiful, naturally, but Hera pulled rank, Aphrodite argued that she was the official embodiment of beauty, and Athene claimed there could be no true beauty without wisdom, which she had in spades. Wisest of the gods, Zeus stayed out of it and ordered the contestants to be conducted to Mount Ida, where he would appoint the Trojan Paris to be judge of the greatest beauty contest of all time.

Why him? Why Paris? An obscure mountain shepherd and strummer. A son of Priam certainly, but Priam had fifty sons. He was short on bravery and not well endowed with brains either. All he had were his good looks. And he was an athlete between the sheets.

There was one other thing, though – he had a reputation for fairness and objectivity, attributes that had been put to the test when his favourite bull, a magnificent white specimen, had entered a contest with another. Paris himself had awarded victory to the outsider, which, unbeknown to him, happened to be none other than the god Ares, got up as a bull. So impartial Paris already had a good reputation among the gods. The fact that he was a flawed character didn't matter much to the Olympians, who were not exactly acclaimed for their morality.

That was the way Penelope liked to play it – to badmouth Helen and excuse Paris at every opportunity. The whole Paris history unfolded. His mother the queen had a nightmare just after he was born. In her dream, the child rushed through Troy like a Fury, setting it ablaze and pulling down its proud towers. When she woke up, she told her husband about her dream. Priam heard it with considerable alarm, called in his advisers, and immediately gave the baby to a servant, whose task was to expose the infant to die on Ida, near the den of a bear. If he didn't starve or freeze or shrivel up he'd be mauled and eaten.

Five days later the servant discovered the infant alive and well among the bear cubs. The boy was obviously destined not to die. So he brought him up as his own son, hunter and herd, and a handsome stripling too. The nymph Oenone fell in love with him and they married and had a son called Corythus. All three lived in a mountain cave, not far from the man Paris called father.

It was during that time that Ares took part in the prize bull affair. Priam happened to hear of the big white bull on Ida, and one year he sent up the mountain for it when he was holding the annual funeral games in memory of the son he still believed to be dead. The beast was to be brought down as one of the prizes in the competition. Paris was

heartbroken – the bull was his pride and joy. But the king wanted it, so he had no choice but to let the animal go with the old servant, who drove it down to Troy. The son still didn't know the king was his father. Paris didn't know he was Paris.

Angry, sad, but also curious, he followed the bull down the mountain, and on impulse and in the hope of winning it back, took part in his own funeral games. He won the chariot race, the foot race and the boxing match, open to all-comers. The real Paris couldn't punch his way out of a bathrobe, but this Paris, Penelope's Paris, swept the board and won the laurel crown. He was the man of the match. Every time. Two of his brothers, Hector and Deiphobus, were so furious at being outrun, outdriven and outboxed by this unknown Arcadian upstart that they drew their swords on him and would have hacked him down. But at that point the old servant flung himself at the king's feet and told all.

There were tears of joy all round – except from Cassandra, who wept tears of doom instead and foretold Troy's ruin. But she had been fated never to be believed and Paris was duly reinstated. Cassandra was right. He survived to fulfil both her prophecy and Hecuba's dream. To his credit, however, he still enjoyed spending time on Ida with Oenone and their son and his adoptive father, and the gods liked that. Such a man could surely be counted on to do the right thing, unswayed by self-interest.

'Furthermore,' said Zeus, 'he's handsome. Some say he's the most beautiful man alive. Who better qualified to assess the loveliest of the goddesses?'

The logic may have been bent, but Zeus hoped it would straighten out the quarrel between the famous three. They were all sent off to Ida for the contest.

In a beauty contest, each of the competitors is expected to say something, to prove that nature has bestowed on her more than mere looks, even if what she says is some subtle attempt to sway the judgement. There was nothing subtle said on Ida. None of the three had any qualms about the bribe she was offering.

Hera, goddess of Olympia, went first. She didn't say much. As the wife of Zeus she assumed she didn't have to.

'Choose me and you'll enjoy unrivalled political power. I'll make you lord of all Asia, Greece, give you power greater than any king.'

Paris looked at her and saw the beauty of sway and dominion. It was enough to kindle the ambition of any man – if he had any to kindle.

Athene read his eyes and weighed in.

'I'll give you wisdom. Kings will come to you for counsel, world leaders for your advice. That's real power, believe me. With this wisdom you will enjoy invincibility in the field. You will conquer and rule, and no one will question your right to do so. Complete military and intellectual supremacy is what I offer. Just think of it.'

He thought of it.

While he was thinking Aphrodite left the line of goddesses and stood in front of him, her breasts almost touching him.

'Forget power, politics, wisdom, war. What do you really want? What does any man really want? Choose me and I'll give you every man's dream, the world's desire. I'll give you the most beautiful woman on earth, as beautiful as myself. Well, almost. I'll make her want you. Look at me. She'll be yours. I'll be yours.'

What a choice. Political mastery, military impregnability, mind control, ultimate power. Or the perfect woman.

How long was the adjudication period? How long did it take him to reach a conclusion? He could have asked himself why a mountain shepherd would want to dabble in politics, why a contented countryman needed global influence, statesmanship, reputation, power. He could have asked himself why he'd want to leave behind his wife and child, his prize bull, leave a life of bucolic bliss, to go to war. What war? What war could he possibly want to wage, let alone win? War was something Paris never even dreamed of, until the day the Greeks kicked the door in . . .

'Are you looking at me?'

He couldn't take his eyes off her. Which was hardly surprising. Her garments were spun by the Graces and dyed in the flowers of spring, in crocus and hyacinth, in the shy violet and the rose's alluring bloom, narcissus and lily buds, redolent of heaven.

And her voice was soft and thrilling.

'The woman in question is my representative on earth. In taking her you are taking me. Take me and turn your back on cruel wars and the harsh cares of state. Who wants them? Forget the heavy staff, the flaring torch, the cold bronze. Who needs them?'

He could have said . . .

But he wasn't given the chance to say anything.

'Take me – and take these.' She let fall her robe to the waist, baring her famous breasts.

He stared open-mouthed.

'Take me – and take this.' The robe dropped all the way to the flowery ground. She stood naked among the rumpled embroidery.

Outrage from the other two.

'Swindler!'

'Slut!'

She'd cheated by showing all, clouding his judgement.

'This is your prize. It's what you will enjoy. I once destroyed a man simply by letting him see me like this. It wasn't even his fault. He didn't mean to. Oh, you are not just one of the chosen few, you are the man, the only man. Perfect beauty. This is what she is like. And she's all yours. Go on – taste and see.'

Paris drops to his knees in front of her, reaches out and holds her by the flanks, cups his trembling hands around her buttocks, buries his face in her bush.

The contest is over. The others turn away, disgusted, and two hot hates go storming back to Olympia. From now on it will be war, total war, and Troy is already a doomed city. Never mind that Paris never stood a chance. He was a pin-head, a peasant, an ignorant boor. She'd rigged it and he'd fallen for it. She places her hands on his handsome nuzzling head and suddenly she's in love with him herself. Her eyes close, her mouth opens.

'I will endow you,' she sighs, 'with irresistible sexual allure. She will see you and she will want you, only you. Nothing else in the world will satisfy her. She is yours and you hers. It's decided. You will take her home with you to Troy.'

History is written. Aphrodite has her apple, Paris his prize. He will launch his ship for Sparta. Nobody knows it yet, but the Trojan War is under way.