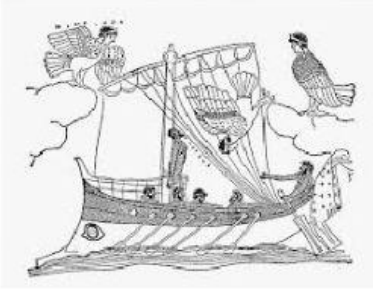


CHAPTER 5 OF HOMER'S "THE ODYSSEY"

Chapter 5 - [Book 12-14]



We sailed back to Circe's island to bury one of my men, who had fallen to his death as we were leaving on our journey to the Underworld. The fair-haired goddess welcomed us again and said, You are valiant men to have entered the kingdom of Hades. All other mortals need to face death but once. So take your fill of food and drink, and when Dawn next shines forth upon gods and mortals, I shall send you on your way.

Then Circe said to me, Listen while I explain the course of your journey so that you will know how to proceed without further suffering. First of all, you will come upon the two Sirens. Anyone who is foolish enough to approach them will never return. They sit upon their island and tempt those who sail nearby with their beautiful songs, and anyone who cannot resist them becomes their victim.

She joins the decaying bodies and mounds of bones that surround them.

Before your swift ship comes upon the Sirens, you must fit soft wax into the ears of all of your men so they cannot hear the Sirens' sweet voices as they row past. If you wish to hear their songs yourself, stand with your back against the mast of your black ship and command your companions to tie your hands and your feet to it, fastening the ropes to the ends of the mast beyond your reach. Tell them that when you plead with them to untie you, they must instead bind you even more securely.

Once you have passed the Sirens, Circe continued, you will be faced with a difficult and dangerous choice. One way will take you between the clashing rocks, where mighty waves rush this way and that as they crash into the steep cliffs that line the narrow channel. Not even birds can survive a flight between these crags.

With one exception, no ship has ever escaped destruction there, for the tossing waves tear apart the timbers of the strongest ship and send the bodies of those on board headlong into the fearsome waters, where they quickly perish. It is true that Jason's ship, the Argo, passed safely through on its return with the Golden Fleece, but it too, would have been smashed upon the mighty rocks had not the goddess Hera loved Jason and saved his ship.

Circe then said, the other way will take you through another very narrow channel. On one side, a mountain rises so high above the water that its sharp peak is always shrouded in clouds. No mortal can set foot upon its cliffs, for the rock has been worn smooth and slick. Halfway up the cliff is a cave where the hideous monster Scylla lives. The sound of her dog-like bark is enough to terrify anyone who hears it, and her appearance is even more horrifying.

She has twelve dangling legs and six heads. Each head contains a mouth filled with three rows of sharp teeth, and can reach out with ease to claim its victims, for it rests upon a very long neck. Scylla hides her feet in her hollow cave, but her snake-like necks permit her to extend her heads away from the mountainside and out into the middle of the narrow channel. There she fishes for dolphins and any other food that the waves toss within the reach of her gaping mouth.

Circe added, Scylla's cave is high enough above the salt sea that the arrow of even the strongest and most skilled mortal could not approach it. Therefore, she lives in safety. However, I cannot say as much for those who sail by her. Not even the swiftest ship passes her way without losing at least six men to her gnashing teeth.

Now I will tell you about the problem with the other side of the channel, the fair-haired goddess said. An arrow's flight across from Scylla, a huge fig tree grows upon another, lower cliff. Its heavy branches reach out above the whirlpool called Charybdis. Three times each day Charybdis swallows the black water, and three times each day she spits it out again. If you should happen to be there when Charybdis is sucking in the water, not even Poseidon could save you from disaster! So I advise you to sail past Scylla instead. It is better to lose six of your companions to monstrous Scylla than to lose everyone to Charybdis.

I replied, Both of your choices are dreadful, Circe! Tell me, is there not some way I can fight off Scylla and also escape the clutches of Charybdis?

No, Odysseus. To flee from Scylla is the best thing that you can do. She is a powerful and evil enemy, and she is immortal. You cannot use a weapon against her, and the longer you remain nearby, the more often she will reach out and seize six of you at a time. So your only defense is to row past her with as much speed as your strength will permit.

Finally, Circe concluded, after you have passed Scylla and Charybdis, you will come to the island where Helios, lord of the sun, pastures his immortal cattle and sheep. Do not harm them, and all of you will reach Ithaca safely. However, if you injure any of Helios' animals, your ship will be destroyed, your companions will die, and you will return home only after many years and much suffering.

When rosy-fingered Dawn made the new day light, my companions and I set forth once more upon our journey. As my men sat upon their benches and rowed over the wine-dark sea, Circe sent a good wind to hasten us along our way. I repeated to my companions the advice that the fairhaired goddess had given me. I had just finished when the wind quieted down, and the water became so calm that it seemed as if a god had put the waves to sleep. We were approaching the island of the Sirens.

As my men furled and stowed the sail and then started rowing, I used my sharp, bronze sword to cut a large round of wax into many small pieces. I softened the pieces of wax and placed them in the ears of all of my companions, and they tied me to the mast as the goddess had counseled.

The Sirens noticed our swift black ship when we were about a shout's distance from their island. Come to us, noble Odysseus, honored one among the long-haired Greeks! Listen to our song and become a wiser man, for we sing about things yet to come as well as about things that are past.

As I heard their lovely voices, I motioned with my head for my companions to untie me, but instead two of my men bound me more closely with other ropes, while the rest rowed steadily past the Sirens. Once I could no longer hear their singing, I motioned for my men to remove the wax pieces from their ears. When they had done this, they removed my bonds. We finished just in time, for I could see that our next problem lay just ahead of us.

The smoke and sound of the crashing waves so terrified my companions that they stopped their rowing. I walked among them and tried to encourage each one. Surely what lies ahead of us now is no worse than what we lived through when the Cyclops, Polyphemus, confined us in his hollow cave! My intelligence and advice saved us then, and they will save us now. So listen well to my counsel.

Rowers, stay seated and row with as much strength and speed as you can, I commanded. Steersman, keep our hollow ship close to the sheer cliff that rises across from the smoke and the crashing waves. Let us hope that Zeus will permit us to escape this danger!

I did not dare tell my companions about Scylla, for I was certain that they would be so terrified they would stop rowing and simply sit crouched together in the hold of our hollow ship. However, in spite of Circe's advice, I put on my glorious armor. Then, armed with a spear in each hand, I searched the misty mountain for the monstrous creature. I looked until my eyes became weary, but I could not see her anywhere.

So we ventured up the narrow channel. We kept our eyes upon the far side, where Charybdis was actively stirring up the salt sea. Whenever she spewed forth the water she had swallowed, she would first boil and bubble like the contents of a cauldron over a high fire. Then she would burst forth with such strength that a misty spray would drench the clifftops on both sides of the channel.

Her eruption was frightening enough, but our hearts overflowed with terror as we watched her such into herself all the surrounding sea. The sheer cliffs resounded with a mighty roar as the loud-sounding sea rushed inward upon itself, revealing the black, sandy earth at the bottom of the channel. As our minds were fixed upon the hope that Charybdis would not swallow our hollow ship, Scylla's mouths fastened upon my six strongest companions. In desperation, they cried out for my help. But by the time I noticed them, their arms and legs were waving high above me, and my bronze spears were useless.

As a fisherman standing on a rocky ledge lowers his long pole into the sea to attract small fish, then gets a bite and tosses the squirming fish behind him upon the shore, so Scylla caught my six companions, lifted them up to her den, and threw their writhing bodies behind her into her hollow cave. Even as they screamed and reached toward me with their hands, begging me to the last to save them, I watched the



monster sit in the doorway of her den and devour them. In all of my wanderings upon the salt sea, that was the most pitiful sight I ever saw!

Once we had left Charybdis and Scylla behind, we reached the island where Helios, who gives joy to mortals, keeps his immortal herds of cattle and flocks of sheep. We heard the animals long before we saw them, and I remembered the warnings of the blind prophet Teiresias and of fair-haired Circe.

When I told my men of the counsel I had received and suggested that we row our swift black ship past the island of Helios, Eurylochus responded with great anger.

Clearly, Odysseus, you are much stronger than any other mortal, for your arms do not tire. Your heart, too, must be made of iron since you will not permit your companions, weary as they are with hard work and fatigue, to set foot on Helios' land. Black night is quickly coming upon us. We will be safer on shore than at the mercy of the loud-sounding sea if mighty stormwinds, which are destroyers of ships, come upon us in the darkness.

When all of my companions agreed with Eurylochus, I became certain that one of the gods was plotting against us. I will consent, I replied, only if each of you swears a sacred oath that you will not harm any of Helios' cattle or sheep, and will eat only the food fair-haired Circe has given us.

When they agreed, we anchored our well-built ship in the hollow harbor of Helios' island near a spring of sweet water. In the middle of that night Zeus, the Cloud-Gatherer, sent a mighty wind upon us and covered the salt sea and the island with clouds. At dawn we dragged our swift black ship ashore and sheltered it in a hollow cave. Then I reminded my companions, Let us eat and drink from the stores upon our ship and do no harm to the cows and sheep of Helios, who sees and hears all things.



My men agreed, and they kept their word as long as our stores of grain and wine could feed us, for they did not want to endanger their lives. However, the South Wind blew upon us continuously for a month, and in time we consumed all the food we had brought with us. Then their hunger forced my companions to search Helios' island for whatever sources of wild food they could find -- fish, fowl, and game. Meanwhile, I

found a place to pray to the deathless gods for help, but instead of sending a source of food, they put me to sleep.

While I was asleep, Eurylochus counseled my men. No one wants to die, but the worst form of death is starvation. So let us capture the best of Helios' cattle and sacrifice them to the gods. If we ever reach Ithaca, we will build a fine temple for Helios. But if the lord of the sun wishes to destroy us, I would rather drown quickly in the loud-sounding sea than waste away slowly from starvation.

My companions agreed with him and proceeded to make the sacrifice. They were roasting the meat when I awakened.

Later Calypso told me that Helios had complained to the immortals on Mount Olympus and then threatened them. I expect you to punish Odysseus' companions for killing my cattle, he announced. If you refuse to do so, I shall leave this world and shine upon the shades of the dead in Hades' dark kingdom instead of upon the grain-giving earth.

To these words, Zeus had replied, Have no concern, for I shall destroy the swift ship of these men with my thunderbolt when they are far out on the wine-dark sea.

When I returned to my companions, I chided them for what they had done, but I could not bring Helios' cattle back to life. The gods made sure my men did not enjoy their six-day feast with fearless hearts. While the meat was roasting, we could hear the sound of cattle lowing, the hides crawled, and the meat upon the spits bellowed as if it were still alive.

During those six days the storm winds blew upon us continuously, but when rosy-fingered Dawn made the seventh day light, we were able to set sail upon the loud-sounding sea. When we could see nothing but the salt sea and the sky, Zeus sent a black cloud hovering above our swift black ship. Then the mighty West Wind attacked us, screaming in its fury as it broke our mast, which crushed the steersman as it fell upon him. Next, Zeus struck us with his lightning bolt, shaking us so violently that most of my comrades tumbled to their deaths from our blackened, shattered ship.

I lashed the broken mast to the keel and hung on as the South Wind came and pushed me back to Scylla and Charybdis. At dawn I could see that the tireless wind was driving me into Charybdis' whirlpool. Just

as Charybdis was about to swallow the salt sea, and the remains of my ship and crew with it, I gathered all my strength and jumped.

With my arms outstretched, I leaped toward the closest overhanging branch of the large fig tree that grew upon the top of the cliff. I grabbed it and clung with my hands and feet, swinging back and forth like a bat. The branch extended so far from the trunk of the tree that I could not safely climb upon it. I could only hope that my arms and legs were strong enough to support my weight until Charybdis spewed forth the remains of my swift ship.

My heart overflowed with joy when the wreckage reappeared with the surge of the loud-sounding sea. I dropped from the branch and fell into the salty water not far from the keel of my ship. Climbing upon it, I rowed away, using my hands as oars. The lord of Olympus kindly did not let Scylla see me, for if she had, I never could have escaped her. I drifted in this manner for nine days.

I reached Calypso's island on the tenth night. This fair-haired goddess rescued me and welcomed me into her home. She would have made me immortal if I had chosen to remain with her. But my heart constantly longed for my homeland and my dear wife, Penelope. Even so, I was forced to remain with Calypso for seven long years. When the eighth year arrived, the goddess suddenly decided to let me go. She even sent me forth on my raft with food, wine, clothing, and a soft breeze. I do not know whether a message from Zeus, lord of Olympus, changed her heart, but it would not surprise me if that were so.

This ends the tale of my wanderings over the wine-dark sea.

The words of Odysseus were greeted with silence and awe in the Phaeacian palace.

