

The Stops at Helios, Charibdis, and Calypso's Island

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 storm winds, 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 crawling, 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 seersman as it fell upon him. Next, Zeus struck us with his lightning bolts, shaking us so violently that 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 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 believe that a message from Zeus is what changed her mind.

