

Homer, the Blind Poet

ALISON WITTING



READING FROM HOMER 1885 Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema



The meal was finished. The Greek warriors and lords leaned back on their couches and took up deep cups of wine mixed with honey, as the great hall grew darker before the oncoming night. Torches, oil-lamps, and the flames from a huge fireplace illuminated the smoky interior of the hall with leaping tongues of light and shadow. All members of the household—servants, women, and those children who had begged to stay up or managed to slip out of bed—began to assemble quietly about the fireplace, for tonight was a very special night: among the guests at table was a bard,

a singer of tales, who would entertain the company with hours of song in return for their hospitality. Presently the lord at the head of the table spoke courteously to his guest: “Friend, if you are now well rested and have eaten your fill, will you honor us with a song?”

The bard stood up. He was a strong-looking, middle-aged man, attended by a boy who handed him his harp and led him to a seat—for the poet was blind. He sat awhile and tightened the strings of his instrument, thinking of the tale he would sing and the words he would use to sing it. Then, striking his harp, he began a story of war waged for the sake of a beautiful woman and of the battles of heroic men on either side: of the noble prince Hector who fought to defend his walled city Troy from the Greek invaders, and of the Greek lord Menelaus, whose lovely wife Helen was stolen from his home by a Trojan

boy. In particular he sang of the Greek hero Achilles, of his nobility and his anger, his quarrel with the Greek commander Agamemnon, the brother of Menelaus, and the consequences of this quarrel.

He chanted his story for a long while, so long that everyone forgot the time and the fire died down to glowing logs before he had finished for the night. The story he sang was well-known to everyone, but the way in which the bard told it brought life and color and passion to the old legends. The battles of Greek and Trojan, and the flaming towers of Troy, were as vivid and real to these Greeks as the battles they themselves had fought.

Who was this Greek poet? Legend says that his name was Homer, that he was blind, and that he composed the two earliest works of Western literature, the *Iliad*, about the Trojan war, and the *Odyssey*, concerning the wanderings of the Greek general Odysseus after the fall of Troy. We do not know whether Homer really existed. The important thing is that there were poets like Homer who sang for their living and wandered from city to city, receiving welcome, hospitality, and a crowd of eager listeners wherever they went.

These poets did not write down their songs, although writing had been invented, the alphabet used was about three times as large as the later Greek alphabet, and writing was a very slow, awkward process, good for bookkeeping but hopelessly unsuited to heroic poetry. Nor did the bard memorize the lines of his poems—he would compose and sing in the same breath, never breaking the meter¹ of his poem, never losing the action of his story. It is a manner of story-telling that has almost disappeared from the modern world, for books, radio, television, movies, and the automobile offer so much entertainment to us now that story-telling has ceased to be the art that it was.

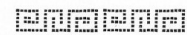
But to the Mycenaean Greeks of the 8th century B.C., it was storytellers such as Homer who brought beauty, interest, and the Greek ideals of courage and excellence into their everyday lives. ∞



¹ meter: rhythm

Odysseus

W.H.D. ROUSE



At last the Trojan war was over; it is a long story, well worth your hearing, but I cannot tell it all now. I must tell you, however, of the adventures of one of the men who went home.

This was Odysseus of Ithaca. Now Ithaca is a small and rocky island, which lies in the sea west of Greece, not far south of Corfu. All the islands in this group once belonged to England, only [they] gave them back to the King of Greece after the Greeks made themselves free of the Turks. It is a lovely island, full of flowers, and the people are kind, and still very proud of their great man, Odysseus, after three thousand years.

Odysseus had left behind him his wife, named Penelope, whom he loved so much that all he wanted was to go home again and be at peace. When he bade good-bye to her, and his baby son Telemachos, he said, "My wife, I may be killed in the war. If I die, bring up our son to be a good man, and when he is old enough to manage the house, I hope you will marry again and be happy." But she said, "My husband, I want no one but you." He was away for twenty years: the siege lasted for ten years, and he took ten years to get home, but when he arrived, he found her waiting for him. And this is the story.

Odysseus set sail from Troy with his countrymen of Ithaca and the islands round about, twelve ships in all. They were blown far away to the west of the Mediterranean Sea, and when the wind fell, they came to land in a lovely country. The people welcomed those who went on shore, and gave them to eat of the fruit of the country, the lotus, which they lived on, sweet as honey. Anyone who ate of it wished never to come away, but only to go on forever eating the sweet lotus. It seemed to be

always afternoon, and nobody wanted to do any more work for ever and ever. But Odysseus would not have that. He carried off the lazy men, and tied them down under the benches, until the ships were well away.

By and by the wind took them to a little wild island, and Odysseus went off with one ship to explore. As he came near the mainland, he saw an enclosure upon the hillside, full of sheep and goats; so he took a few men with him, and climbed up to the place. They found a great cave within the walls of the enclosure. There were pens for lambs, and pens for kids: rows and rows of cheeses, pans and jars full of whey¹ or milk. They helped themselves to milk and cheese, and roasted a lamb, and enjoyed themselves.

By and by a horrible monster approached, big and hairy, and they ran and hid in the cave. He milked all the sheep and goats, and curdled the milk: then he lit a fire, and saw the men.

"Who are you, stranger?" he asked.

Odysseus said, "Sir, we are strangers from Troy; have pity on us, for Zeus is the god of strangers."

"Pooh, pooh!" he said—"Zeus! We care nothing for Zeus, or any gods: we are stronger than they are."

He stretched out his hands, and caught two of the men, and dashed them like puppies on the ground, so that their brains ran out. Then he carved them limb from limb, and ate them for his supper, and slept.

This monster was a Cyclops, named Polyphemos. You remember that dreadful brood of creatures, and the three who were guardians of fire in the early days.

Next morning, the Cyclops killed and ate two more men, and went about his work. But he rolled a huge stone in front of the cave, so that no one could get out.

But Odysseus was never at a loss for a plan. He picked up a sapling of olive wood which lay in the cave, and smoothed it, and made it ready; and he chose out four good men to help him, when the night should come.

In the evening, the Cyclops drove in all his rams, and rolled the great stone in front of the door; next, as before, he killed and ate two more men for supper. Then Odysseus came up to him, bearing a skin of wine which he had brought from the ship, and he said, "Cyclops, here, have a drink after your supper!"

He drank it, and it pleased him so much that he said, "Another,

¹ whey: watery part of milk, most often used to make cheese

please!" Odysseus gave him another, and another still, and he said, "Indeed, this is fine stuff, better than our wine! I must give you a stranger's gift for this. What is your name?"

"My name," said Odysseus, "is Noman."

"Very well, Noman, your gift shall be, that I will eat you last of all."

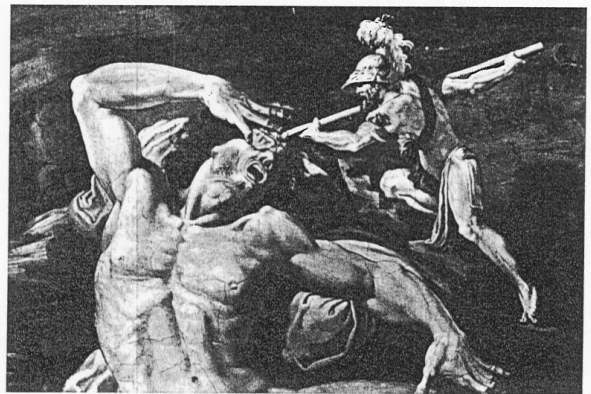
Then he lay down, and went to sleep, grunting and growling.

There was Odysseus, and there were his men, shut up in the cave, and they could not get out; for the stone was too heavy for them to move. But Odysseus had his plan ready.

He took the olive-sapling, and buried it under the ashes; and when it was red hot, he made his four men hold it straight, while he pushed the point hard into the eye of the Cyclops; for he has only one eye, as you remember, in the middle of his forehead, with a thick bushy eyebrow running right across his face. The red-hot point burnt the eyeball, which sizzled like fat in the fire.

The Cyclops roared aloud, and pulled out the stake, and threw it from him, and the men ran off and hid in the corners of the cave. The Cyclops made such a noise, that all the other Cyclopes came running up to the cave, and called out, "Why are you making all that noise? Is anyone killing you?" Polyphemos replied, "Noman is killing me!" Then they said,

ULYSSES BLINDING POLYPHEMUS Pellegrino Tibaldi



"If no man is killing you, you must just pray to God; what is the use of waking us all out of our sleep?" And they went away, but Odysseus laughed to himself at the success of his trick.

Then he caught up the long withies² that lay on the floor in a heap, and tied his men each under one of the fleecy rams, with another ram tied to this ram on each side. He picked the biggest ram of all for himself, and waited for morning.

In the morning, the Cyclops rolled back the stone from the door of the cave, and let his rams out, holding out his hands, and feeling their backs; but he did not feel underneath, so the men all got safely out, fastened together in threes. Odysseus came last, hanging on underneath the biggest ram of all. And so they escaped from the Cyclops. But this Cyclops was a son of Poseidon, and ever afterwards Poseidon hated Odysseus and did his best to destroy him.

They all sailed away, until they reached the island of Aiolos, the steward of the winds. Aiolos wished to help Odysseus on his way; so he bottled up all the winds in a leather bag, except the West Wind, which was to blow them home. They went bowling along for nine days, until they actually came in sight of Ithaca, their home; and then Odysseus, tired out, fell asleep.

While he was asleep, the sailors eyed this bag, and one said to another, "I wonder what Aiolos gave him. Gold and silver, to be sure! let us see." So they opened the mouth of the bag, and all the winds poured out, and began to blow together, north, south, east, and west, and blew them far away. They had many adventures, which I cannot tell of now, but after a long time they came to land in a pleasant island, and Odysseus sent some of his men to explore.

They found a fine house among the trees; and as they came near, what should they see but all sorts of animals, lions and tigers, leopards and wild boars, which did them no harm; they just ran up, wagging their tails, and barking in a friendly way. The men all went in, except one, who remained to watch.

Within the hall was a woman, singing sweetly as she plied the loom. She gave them welcome, and provided a good feast; and when they had eaten, she tapped each with her stick, and said, "Away to the sty with you!" At once their hair changed into bristles, and they turned into pigs, and ran away into the sty.

² withies: twigs or branches

The watcher reported to Odysseus that the others had all disappeared; and Odysseus himself went to explore. On the way, he met the god Hermes, who gave him a magic root which would protect him against enchantments. So when he came to the house of Circe—that was the witch's name—she had no power over him, and he compelled her to change his men back to their proper shape.

Circe was a good friend to them after this, and helped them with advice, and gave them all they wanted. Odysseus had to visit the dark Kingdom of Hades, where he received directions for his homeward voyage. And on the way back he had many other dangers to face.

He had to pass by the island of the Sirens. These were witches who looked like birds; they sang so sweetly, that everyone who heard them felt obliged to land. There they sat in a meadow, singing, and all round them were the shrivelled bodies of the men who had come to hear, and sat down and listened, until they died. Odysseus was warned of this by Circe; and before he came to the island, he plugged up all the ears of all his men with wax, so that they should not hear. But he wanted to hear himself, yet not to be hurt; so he told his men to tie him to the mast, and not to let him loose, whatever happened.

Then they rowed on. Soon the lovely song of the Sirens was heard, and Odysseus struggled to get free, and shouted to his men to let him loose; but they rowed on, until they were safe out of hearing.

Next they had to pass between Scylla and Charybdis. On one side of a strait was Charybdis, where a whirlpool three times a day sucked up the water, and spouted it out again: no ship could live in that whirlpool. On the other side was a rock, and on this rock in a cave lived a monster, Scylla, with twelve legs, and six long necks with heads like dogs; and if a ship passed by, she curled down her six necks, and caught up a sailor with each head. This is what she did to Odysseus and his crew.

After this, all his ships were destroyed in a frightful storm, but Odysseus himself was saved, and washed up on another island. On this island lived another witch, Calypso, who saved him, and kept him there for seven long years. She wanted him for a husband, and she offered to make him immortal; but he refused, because all he wanted was to return to his beloved wife Penelope. And he did return, and did find his wife waiting for him, although he had to fight a terrible battle with his enemies before he won her again. But after all his troubles, he spent with his wife a peaceful and quiet old age. ∞