

## THE CATTLE OF THE SUN

Instead of landing on Thrinacia, as the crew expected, Ulysses dropped anchor and summoned his two underchiefs, Eurylochus and Perimedes, to take counsel.

He said, "You heard the warning of old Teiresias down in Tartarus. You heard him say that this island belongs to Hyperion, the Sun Titan, who uses it as a grazing land for his flocks. The warning was most dire: Whoever of our crew harms these cattle in any way will bring swift doom upon himself, and will never see his home again."

"We all heard the warning," said Eurylochus, "and everyone will heed it."

"How can you be so sure?" said Ulysses. "If this voyage has taught you nothing else, it should have proved to you that there is nothing in the world so uncertain as man's intentions, especially his good ones. No, fair sirs, what I propose is that we change our plans about landing here and seek another island, one where death does not pasture."

"It will never do," said Eurylochus. "The men are exhausted. There is a south wind blowing now, which means we would have to row. We simply do not have the strength to hold the oars."

"Our stores are exhausted too," said Perimedes. "The food that Circe gave us is almost gone. The water kegs are empty. We

must land here and let the men rest, and lay in fresh provisions."

"Very well," said Ulysses. "If it must be, it must be. But I am holding you two directly responsible for the safety of the sun-cattle. Post guards at night, and kill any man who goes near these fatal herds."

Thereupon the anchor was raised, and the ship put into harbor, Ulysses did not moor the ship off shore, but had the men drag it up on the beach. He sent one party out in search of game, another to fill the water kegs, and a third to chop down pine trees. From the wood was pressed a fragrant black sap, which was boiled in a big iron pot. Then he had the men tar the ship from stem to stern, caulking each crack.

The hunting party returned, downhearted. There seemed to be no game on the island, they told Ulysses, only a few wild pigs, which they had shot, but no deer, no bear, no rabbits, no game birds. Just the pigs, and great herds of golden cattle.

The water party returned triumphantly, barrels full.

The men were so weary that Ulysses stood guard himself that night. Wrapped in his cloak, naked sword across his knees, he sat hunched near the driftwood fire, brooding into the flames.

"I cannot let them rest here," he said to

himself. "If game is so scarce, they will be tempted to take the cattle. For hungry men the only law is hunger. No, we must put out again tomorrow and try to find another island."

The next morning he routed out the men. They grumbled terribly, but did not dare to disobey. However, they were not fated to embark. A strong south wind blew up, almost gale strength, blowing directly into the harbor. There was no sailing into the teeth of it, and it was much too strong to row against.

"Very well," said Ulysses, "scour the island for game again. We must wait until the wind drops."

He had thought it must blow itself out in a day or so, but it was not to be. For thirty days and thirty nights the south wind blew, and they could not leave the island. All the wild pigs had been killed. The men were desperately hungry. Ulysses used all his cunning to find food. He had the men fish in the sea, dig the beaches for shellfish and turtle eggs, search the woods for edible roots and berries. They tore the clinging limpets off rocks and shot gulls. A huge pot was kept boiling over the driftwood fire, and in it the men threw anything remotely edible—sea polyps, sea lilies, fish heads, sand crabs—vile broth. But most days they had nothing else. And they grew hungrier and hungrier.

For thirty days the strong south wind blew, keeping them beached. Finally, one night when Ulysses was asleep, Eurylochus secretly called the men together, and said, "Death comes to men in all sorts of ways. And however it comes, it is never welcome. But the worst of all deaths is to die of starvation. And to be forced to starve among herds

of fat beef is a hellish torture that the gods reserve for the greatest criminals. So I say to you men that we must disregard the warning of that meddling ghost, Teiresias, and help ourselves to this cattle. We can do it now while Ulysses sleeps. And if indeed the Sun Titan is angered and seeks vengeance—well, at least we shall have had one more feast before dying."

It was agreed. They went immediately into the meadow. Now, Hyperion's cattle were the finest ever seen on earth. They were enormous, sleek, broad-backed, with crooked golden horns, and hides of beautiful dappled gold and white. And when the men came among them with their axes, they were not afraid, for no one had ever offered them any harm. They looked at the men with their great plum-colored eyes, whisked their tails, and continued grazing.

The axes rose and fell. Six fine cows were slaughtered. Because they knew they were committing an offense against the gods, the men were very careful to offer sacrifice. Upon a makeshift altar they placed the fat thighbones and burned them as offerings. They had no wine to pour upon the blazing meat as a libation, so they used water instead, chanting prayers as they watched the meat burn.

But the smell of the roasting flesh overcame their piety. They leaped upon the carcasses like wild beasts, ripped them apart with their hands, stuck the flesh on spits, and plunged them into the open fires.

Ulysses awoke from a dream of food. He sniffed the air and realized it was no dream, that the smell of roasting meat was real. He lifted his face to the sky, and said, "O mighty

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The cattle of the sun. Caeretan Hydria from Italy, about 550 B.C. The Louvre, Paris. Photo by Erich Lessing

ones, it was unkind to let me fall into sleep. For now my men have done what they have been told they must not do.”

He drew his sword and rushed off to the light of the fire.

But just then Zeus was hearing a more powerful plea. For the Sun Titan had been informed immediately by the quick spies that serve the gods, and now he was raging upon Olympus.

“O, Father Zeus,” he cried, “I demand vengeance upon the comrades of Ulysses who have slaughtered my golden kine. If they are

spared, I will withdraw my chariot from the sky.<sup>5</sup> No longer will I warm the treacherous earth, but will go to Hades and shine among the dead.”

“I hear you, cousin,” said Zeus, “and promise vengeance.”

Ulysses dashed among the feasting crew, ready to cut them down even as they squatted there, eating.

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5. *withdraw my chariot from the sky.* The sun was thought to be Hyperion's chariot, which he drove daily from horizon to horizon.

"Wait," cried Eurylochus. "Hold your hand. These are not the Sun God's cattle. But six stags we found on the other side of the island."

"Stags?" roared Ulysses. "What kind of monstrous lie is this? You know there are no stags on this island."

"They were there," said Eurylochus. "And now they are here. Perhaps the gods relented, and sent them as food. Come, eat, dear friend, and do not invent misdeeds where none exist."

Ulysses allowed himself to be persuaded, and sat down among the men and began to eat with ravenous speed. But then a strange thing happened. The spitted carcasses turning over the fire began to low and moo as though they were alive, one of the flayed hides crawled over the sand to Ulysses, and he saw that it was dappled gold and white, and knew he had been tricked.

Once again he seized his sword and rushed toward Eurylochus.

"Wait!" cried Eurylochus. "Do not blame me. We have not offended the gods by our trickery. For the south wind has fallen—see? The wind blows from the north now, and we can sail away. If the gods were angry, Ulysses, would they send us a fair wind?"

"To the ship!" shouted Ulysses. "We sail immediately."

The men gathered up the meat that was left, and followed Ulysses to the beached ship. They put logs under it and rolled it down to the sea. Here they unfurled the sail, and slid out of the harbor.

Night ran out and the fires of dawn burned in the sky. The men hurried about their tasks, delighted to be well fed and sailing

again, after the starving month on Thrinacia.

But then Ulysses, observing the sky, saw a strange sight. The sun seemed to be frowning. He saw that black clouds had massed in front of it. He heard a rustling noise, and looked off westward, where he saw the water ruffling darkly.

"Down sail!" he shouted. "Ship the mast!"

Too late. A wild west wind came hurtling across the water and pounced on the ship. There was no time to do anything. Both fore-stays snapped. The mast split and fell, laying its white sail like a shroud over the ship. A lightning bolt flared from the blue sky and struck amidship. Great billows of choking yellow smoke arose. The heat was unbearable. Ulysses saw his men diving off the deck, garments and hair ablaze and hissing like cinders when they hit the water.

He was still shouting commands, trying to chop the sail free and fighting against the gale and fire. But he was all alone. Not one man was aboard. The ship fell apart beneath him. The ribs were torn from the keel. The ship was nothing but a mass of flaming timbers, and Ulysses swam among them. He held on to the mast, which had not burned. Pushing it before him, he swam out of the blazing wreckage. He found the keel floating free. The oxhide backstay was still tied to the head of the mast; with it he lashed mast and keel together into a kind of raft.

He looked about, trying to find someone to pull aboard. There was no one. He had no way of steering the raft, but had to go where the wind blew him. And now, to his dismay, he found the wind shifting again. It blew from the south, which meant that he would

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be pushed back toward the terrible strait.

All day he drifted, and all night. When dawn came, it brought with it a roaring sucking sound, and he saw that he was being drawn between Scylla and Charybdis. He felt the raft being pulled toward the whirlpool. It was the very moment when Charybdis took her first drink of the day. She swallowed the tide, and held it in her great bladder of a belly. The raft spun like a leaf in the outer eddies of the huge suction, and Ulysses knew that when he reached the vortex of the whirlpool, he and the raft would be drawn to the bottom, and that he must drown.

He kept his footing on the raft until the very last moment, and just as it was pulled into the vortex, he leaped as high as he could upon the naked face of the rock, scrabbling for a handhold. He caught a clump of lichen, and clung with all his strength. He could climb no higher on the rock; it was too slippery for a foothold. All he could do was cling to the moss and pray that his strength would not give out. He was waiting for Charybdis to spit forth the tide again.

The long hours passed. His shoulders felt as though they were being torn apart by red-hot pincers. Finally he heard a great tumult of waters and saw it frothing out of the cave. The waves leaped toward his feet. And then he saw what he was waiting for—his raft came shooting up like a cork.

He dropped upon the timbers. Now he would have some hours of quiet water, he knew, before Charybdis drank again. So he kept to that side of the strait, holding as far from Scylla as he could, for he well remembered the terrible reach of her arms.

He passed safely beyond the rocks and out

of the strait. For nine days he drifted under the burning sun, nine nights under the indifferent moon. With his knife he cut a long splinter from the timbers, and shaped it into a lance for spearing fish. He did not get any. Then he lay on his back, pretending to be dead, and gulls came to peck out his eyes. He caught them, and wrung their necks. He ate their flesh and drank their blood, and so stayed alive.

On the tenth day he found himself approaching another island.

He was very weak. The island grew dim as he looked at it. A black mist hid the land, which was odd because the sun was shining. Then the sky tilted, and the black mist covered him.

## CALYPSO

When Ulysses awoke he found himself lying on a bed of sweet-smelling grass. The sun shone hotly, but he was in a pool of delicious cool shade under a poplar tree. He was still dizzy. The trees were swaying, and bright flowers danced upon the meadow. He closed his eyes, thinking, "I am dead then. The god that hunts me took pity and shortened my hard life, and I am now in the Elysian Fields."

A voice answered, "You have not died. You are not in the Elysian Fields. You have come home."

He opened his eyes again. A woman was bending over him. She was so tall that he knew she was no mortal woman, but nymph or naiad or demigoddess. She was clad in a short tunic of yellow and purple. Her hair was yellow, and long and thick.