



Signet Classics

The
ODYSSEY

HOMER

TRANSLATED BY W. H. D. ROUSE

WITH A NEW INTRODUCTION
BY DEBORAH STEINER

BOOK I

What Went On in the House of Odysseus

THIS IS THE STORY OF A MAN, ONE WHO WAS NEVER AT a loss. He had travelled far in the world, after the sack of Troy, the virgin fortress; he saw many cities of men, and learnt their mind; he endured many troubles and hardships in the struggle to save his own life and to bring back his men safe to their homes. He did his best, but he could not save his companions. For they perished by their own madness, because they killed and ate the cattle of Hyperion the Sun-god, and the god took care that they should never see home again.

At the time when I begin, all the others who had not been killed in the war were at home, safe from the perils of battle and sea: but he was alone, longing to get home to his wife. He was kept prisoner by a witch, Calypso, a radiant creature, and herself one of the great family of gods, who wanted him to stay in her cave and be her husband. Well then, the seasons went rolling by, and when the year came, in which by the thread that fate spins for every man he was to return home to Ithaca, he had not yet got free of his troubles and come back to his own people. The gods were all sorry for him, except Poseidon, god of the sea, who bore a lasting grudge against him all the time until he returned.

But it happened that Poseidon went for a visit a long way off, to the Ethiopians; who live at the ends of the earth, some near the sunrise, some near the sunset. There he expected a fine sacrifice of bulls and goats, and there he was, feasting and enjoying himself mightily; but the other gods were all gathered in the palace of Olympian Zeus.

Then the Father of gods and men made them a speech; for his heart was angry against a man, Aigisthos, and Agamemnon's son Orestês, as you know, had just killed the man. So he spoke to the company as follows:

"Upon my word, just see how mortal men always put the blame on us gods! We are the source of evil, so they say—when they have only their own madness to thank if their miseries are worse than they ought to be. Look here, now: Aigisthos has done what he ought not to have done. Took Agamemnon's wedded wife for himself, killed Agamemnon when he came home, though he knew quite well it would be his own ruin! We gave him fair warning, sent our special messenger Hermês, and told him not to kill the man or to make love to his wife; their son Orestês would punish him, when he grew up and wanted his own dominions. Hermês told him plainly, but he could do nothing with Aigisthos, although it was for his own good. Now he has paid the debt in one lump sum."

Then up spoke Athena, with her bright eyes glinting:

"Cronidês our Father, King of Kings and Lord of Lords! I have nothing to say for Aigisthos, he richly deserved his ruin. So perish any one else who does a thing like that! But what about that clever Odysseus? I am anxious about him, poor fellow, kept from his friends all this while, in trouble and sorrow, in that island covered with trees, and nothing but the waves all round it, in the very middle of the sea! It is the home of one of ourselves, the daughter of Atlas, you remember, that creature of mischief, who knows all the depths of the sea; you know, he holds up the pillars which keep earth and heaven apart. It is his daughter who keeps the wretched man a prisoner. She is always coaxing him with soft deceitful words to forget Ithaca; but Odysseus would be happy to see as much as the smoke leaping up from his native land, and then to die. And you cannot spare him a thought, Olympian. Don't you owe him something for all those sacrifices which he used to offer in their camp on the plain of Troy? Why have you such an odd grudge against him, Zeus?"

Then Zeus Cloudgatherer answered:

"My child, what a word to let out between your teeth! How could I forget that fine fellow Odysseus, after all! He is almost one of us. Wise beyond mortal men, ready beyond all to offer sacrifice to the lords of the broad heavens. But Poseidon Earthholder bears him unrelenting hatred, because of the Cyclops whose eye he put out; I mean Polyphemos, who has our blood in his veins, the most powerful of all the Cyclopians.

"Thoösa was his mother, the daughter of Phorcys prince of the barren brine; Poseidon possessed her in a hollow cave. Ever since then, Poseidon has kept the man wandering about, although he does not kill him outright. Come now, let us all try to think how we can persuade Poseidon to abate his anger and let him go home to his native land. Surely he will not be able to stand out against all the immortals, and keep up a quarrel all by himself!"

Then Athena said:

"Cronidês our Father, King of Kings and Lord of Lords! If all the gods now agree that Odysseus shall return to his own home, then let us dispatch our messenger Hermês Argeiphontês to the island of Ogygia; and let him announce forthwith to the nymph our unchangeable will, that Odysseus, after all he has patiently endured, shall return home. And I will myself go to Ithaca, to put heart into his son and make him do something. He shall call the people to a meeting, and speak his mind to all the would-be bridegrooms who have been butchering his sheep and his cattle in heaps. And I will send him to Sparta and to sandy Pylos to inquire about his beloved father, if he can hear that he is on his way home. That will be some credit to him in the world."

So saying, she fastened under her feet those fine shoes, imperishable shoes of gold, which used to carry her over moist and dry to the ends of the earth, quick as the blowing of the breeze; down she went shooting from the peaks of Olympos, and stood in the town of Ithaca against the outer gates of Odysseus upon the threshold of the courtyard. In her hand she held a spear of bronze, and she took the form of a family friend, Mentês, the chief man of the Taphians.

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...is what scholars have called Homer's *Odyssey*, in addition to "the first novel," "the first expression of the mind in literary form," and "the best story ever written." Whether fans of suspense, fantasy, or human drama, readers of all ages thrill to Homer's vibrant picture of Odysseus on his decadelong journey as he meets the lotus-eaters, cunningly flees the Cyclops, angers his gods, resists the sexy Sirens, narrowly escapes Scylla and Charybdis, averts his eyes from Medusa, docks in exotic cities—all the while longing to return to his wife and son.

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