

The Wandering of Ulixes Son of Laertes

translated by Kuno Meyer

Table of Contents

<u>The Wandering of Ulixes Son of Laertes</u>	1
<u>translated by Kuno Meyer</u>	2

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Merugud Uilix Maicc Leirtis

After the capture and destruction of the chief town of the Trojans and the adventures of the Greeks, every one of these reached his own native land and country. Then Ulixes, the son of Laertes, also reached his land and country, and saw the mountains of his native land before him. "It is a grievous thing to us what we shall find there—viz., the beautiful, gentle queen whom we left there, with another man before our face, and another king over our territory, and our land in his possession, and old age on our own form, though it is we by right."

"Do not let this oppress thee," said his men to Ulixes, "for we shall all find the same evil."

Then a storm fell upon them, and they were again driven out into the wet of the open sea, and were thus astray for a year, until they came to a large island. And they found great big woolly sheep, and killed three of them. And they put up their tents over them, and placed their fires and prepared their sheep. Three days and three nights they were there. After that Ulixes spoke. "It is time for us to be starting," said he.

"It is not just what thou sayest," said they, "for here we have our fill of food to the day of judgment, in what there is here of sheep."

"This," he said, "I shall not do for your sake, to give up seeking to reach our native land."

"What thou art seeking," said they, "is that we may all perish in thy track, as all thy people were left before this."

Then they left the island, and went again in their ships, and were a year on the sea, until they reached another island. When they had gone on that island, they found a mountain of gold in its midst. "This is a good find," said his men to Ulixes.

"How do ye know that?" said he. "Did ye not get enough treasures out of Troy?" And they began to gather in the gold until they saw the Cyclops coming towards them. And he did not ask tidings of them, but as they were there, so he went among them. Where there was a hero or a battle-soldier he closed his arms around them, and broke and minced their bones and their flesh. Then after having killed a great number of them, he lifted up nine of them between his two arms, together with Ulixes, the son of Laertes. Now when Ulixes, the cunning right clever man, perceived that he was being carried off by force, he escaped between the elbows of his men down to the ground, and his men were carried away from him. Then he went to the ships, and related those tidings to the nine that were in the ships. And his people said to him:

"Let us put plenty of treasures in our vessels and proceed on our way."

"Not so," said he, "until it is found out how my men are taken from me; and it is sad and sore to me that they are carried off from me."

"Though it is sad," said they, "do not say so, for we deem it a sufficient honour that thou art among us."

Then Ulixes went to seek the big man; and he came to the door of the cave. There he saw the white-faced sad countenances of his men in the cave looking out at him. "Comrades," said he, "great is the danger in which ye are."

"Thou art right," said they, "and thou thyself wilt be out of it."

"Not so," said he; "not before I and the giant have met."

"What dost thou think?" said they. "What means hast thou to use against him? Thy spear is not so sharp nor thy arm so strong that the point of thy spear could touch a bone in his body."

"Can ye try to rise over him from behind?" said he.

"Alas!" said they, "there are three paces of each man of us between his two nipples."

"How do ye know," said he, "that the barbarous nature that is in his body may not be a heaviness which is easy to overcome when his body is asleep? Rise over him from behind," said he, "and raise your breaths in the top

The Wandering of Ulixes Son of Laertes

of your breast to lighten yourselves." They arose and went out over him, and there were three paces of every man of them between his two nipples as they stepped over him.

"Now let us go," said they.

"Not so," said he, "not until I and the giant have met." He went up to him, and into the one big eye that was in the front part of his forehead he put the point of his spear, between the two brows, and gave a thrust to the spear in his eye. And he had a difficult task to save himself from the broad and large loch of water that burst from it. However, the mountain shook and the cave resounded with the beating which the huge gigantic man made with his feet and his arms, as he sought for him who had done that outrage on him. And thereupon they went into their ship.

It is related that a man of the people of Ulixes went away, out of a hardy and idle mood, and this was the man who met Aeneas, the son of Anchises, when he was on his voyage of exile.

Now Ulixes was one year on the sea after leaving that island, and nine of his men only reached land with him, while the others found death through an unknown malady. Then Ulixes went on shore, and shepherds with their flocks met him. Now that man was very cunning, a clever right wise man, sharing in many a tongue, for he was wont to learn the tongue of every country to which he came, and to ask tidings of them in the language that they used.

And this is what he learnt from them, that the Judge of Right was lord in that country.

"What right is it that serves him?" asked Ulixes.

"Every man that gets instruction from him, he will reach his native land at once," said they.

"Why," said Ulixes, "should not I get instruction from him?"

"Thou hast not the means," said he who spoke with him; "for a single day's instruction is not given without (a payment of) thirty ounces of gold to him. And thou," said they, "who art thou?"

"One of the fugitives of the Trojans am I," said he. And he went from them towards his ship. And his men asked tidings from him. And he related to them as he had heard, and told them to get instruction. But they said that they had no desire to do so; "for our hairs have fallen out, and our eyes have grown dim, and our faces have become black, and our teeth yellow, and we have no great need to give away our gold or our possessions for instruction that would be of no use to us."

"Which is better for you," said he; "to leave it in the breaches of danger or at the gates of death, or to spend it for an instruction which will be profitable to you?"

Thereupon they went on their way to the fortress, and the man of the place met them on the meadow and asked tidings of them. And they related to him every hardship that they had encountered. And he asked them what they had come for. "We have come to learn from thee."

"Ye will get it, provided ye have the means for it."

"What at all are the means?" said they.

"I do not give a single day's instruction without thirty ounces of red gold."

"We shall find that for thee," said they. Then they were made welcome, and a separate bed-chamber was given to them, and meat and drink was taken into it for them, and all was got ready for them to bathe and to wash. And there they stayed that night.

Early on the morrow they arose and went to the place where the Judge of Right was. They weighed out thirty ounces of red gold to him, and he taught them. And this was the instruction: "Though ye nine had but one father and one mother amongst you, and though one man had killed your father and your mother, yet do ye resolve not to kill him before ye have held three counsels with yourselves about it, and before it is certain that ye all are of one mind for ever. And though it come upon one man of you only, nevertheless let him not do the deed until he has three times kept his breath and held counsel with his own mind. If that then is what his mind will bring away from the counsel, then let him do the deed."

"Say on," said they.

"No more for to-day but this," said he. Then they went to their house.

"That gold is thrown away," said his men to Ulixes.

They were there that night, and though the attendance they had the first night was good, it was better this night.

They rose early on the morrow, and went to the house of precept.

The Wandering of Ulixes Son of Laertes

Thirty ounces of gold were weighed out to him, and this is what he said:

"As to the road ye travel every day, do not follow a bypath or short cut, but follow the high road."

"Say on," said they.

"No more teaching to-day but this," said he.

Then they went to their house. "That gold is lost," said his men to Ulixes.

"Who knows but that ye will find its use?" said Ulixes. And though the attendance of the first two nights was good, it was better the third night.

They arose early in the morrow, and went to the house of precept.

And thirty ounces of red gold were weighed out, and this is what he said. "Do ye see the sun at this moment?"

"We do," said they.

"Let none of you leave his place or dwelling, how great soever his impatience may be, until the sun has reached the place where he is now."

"Say on," said they.

"No more teaching from me this turn, but that," said he. "And do not leave to-morrow before I have talked to you," said he.

They went to their house, and arose early the next morning, and went out on the meadow. And the man met them and bade him farewell, and they left their blessing with him.

"Take with thee," said the Judge, "this small box as a keepsake, and if thou open it, thou shalt never again reach thy native land."

"That is a small reward for us after we have reached our country."

And he gave them guidance how to reach their country by land.

Thereupon they went on their way, and it is not told here how long they were on the road.

But they reached a great march, and there was a public hostelry in that march: into that they went, like anybody else. Great numbers came from all quarters into that house. Everyone of them asked the other, "What direction are ye going tomorrow?"

"We are going into the border country," said they. However, the company that was in that hostelry arose. They went out from the house into the field.

Howbeit, Ulixes said: "Ill from me have gone my thirty ounces of gold, if I would not stay until the sun will rise to the place that he told us." Then he sat himself down.

"What is this?" said his people to him.

"I shall keep by my instruction," said Ulixes.

"This is what thou art seeking," said they, "that we all may perish in thy track; as the men of the eighty ships have perished that fell before Troy in thy track, so likewise shall we perish in thy track."

"Do ye intend to stay?" said a man of the company.

"Even so," said they.

"Are ye acquainted with the border-land?"

"We are not," said they.

"Do ye not see the field and the road?"

"We do," said they.

"Make for those," said he, "and if ye get across, ye will reach your country safe." Then that company went on their way, but Ulixes with his men waited till the sun had risen to the place that had been told them.

"Yonder," said they, "are the first of the company on the road, and if we were there now, we should reach home safely."

"It seems to me," said Ulixes, "your company is not yet round the field, nor will the wish be with you on the other side."

And suddenly they beheld the earth bursting open under the company, so that they saw not one man of them alive.

"Do ye see that?" said Ulixes.

"We see it," said they.

"Good is the profit of our thirty ounces of gold for you; and let us set out now," said he, "for they will have dispersed yonder after the deed."

The Wandering of Ulixes Son of Laertes

Then they went their way on the road until they reached the border-land, and came into a great wilderness. And they did not follow a path or road from the highway. Howbeit, two of his men went out on a bypath, and at once found their death.

The seven, however, that remained reached their native town, and came to the bower where the Queen was. And they saw her on a great throne upon the firm floor of the house, and a youth, the fairest in shape of the heroes of the world, at her shoulder. "I told you so," said Ulixes.

"We must needs brook it," said they.

"Ye good men there before me," said the Queen, whose name was Penelope, "who at all are ye?"

"Seafarers astray are we," said they.

"Go," said she, "into the guest-house." They were served that night till they went to their bed.

"Do ye know what I should like to do?" said Ulixes.

"We know not," said they.

"I had a subterranean cave of escape out of the town, and there is one entrance to it in the town yonder, with a closing door to it, and another entrance on the green outside, and the weight of a flagstone upon it. And what I want to do is to go through the outer door along the cave to the other end, until I reach their bed-chamber, and the place where they are together on the pillow; there will I slay them both with my sword."

"Evil is that counsel," said they. "But fitter it is for thee to go and seek the King of the Greeks, and to lament unto him thy sorrows; and just as thou didst go in his host, so let him go in thine host to contest thy native country for thee."

"May the gods we worship never allow that!" said Ulixes.

Then there was reproach and counter-reproach between his men and him. "It is thus we have all fallen in thy track," said they.

Then he arose from them to get into the town beyond, and he reached the bed-chamber, and heard the conversation of the two on the pillow. And he bared his sword on the spot, and raised his arm. "Ill is the profit of my instruction for me," said he, "if I do not first control my nature till I have kept my breath."

Thrice he raised his arm in order to strike with the edge of his sword at the neck of the two. The third time that he raised his arm, and wanted to do the deed, then spoke the Queen.

"Uch, tich, oh son," said she, "thy father has, appeared to me over our heads, and stoutly he was minded to strike off our heads, thinking that thou wert my fair leman. I swear by the gods I worship," said she, "that I do not know guilt from another man since he went away in the host of the Greeks; and he left me pregnant at the time he went, and thou wert born from that pregnancy. And I never let the body of another man into one bed with myself, but the blood of him and mine own blood have still preserved his honour."

When Ulixes heard that speech his spirit rejoiced within him.

Thereupon she arose and wept swift showers of tears, and he was listening to her until sleep fell upon him, even till the end of the night came. Then he arose and was greatly ashamed of that sleep. He went out and lay down among his men and told them what had happened. And he gave thanks to the gods for it.

On the morrow they arose and went into the same house.

"Ye good men," said the Queen, "who at all are ye?"

"Ulixes the son of Laertes am I," said he.

"Thou art not the Ulixes that we knew," said she.

"It is I in sooth," said he; "and I shall tell thee my tokens," said he.

And then he went into her sweet secrets and their talks together, and the things she hid in her heart.

"Where is thy form, and where are thy men," said she, "if thou art Ulixes?"

"They are gone to ruin," said he.

"What are the last tokens thou leftst with me?" said she.

"A golden brooch," said he, "and a head of silver was on it; and thy brooch I took with me when I went into the ship, and it was then thou didst turn away from us," said Ulixes.

"That is true," said she, "and if thou art Ulixes, I will ask thy dog."

"I did not expect her to be alive," said he.

"I made her the gruel of long life, for I had seen the great love that thou didst bear her. And what sort of a dog now is she?" said she.

The Wandering of Ulixes Son of Laertes

"Two shining white sides has she, and a light purple back and a jet-black belly, and a greenish tail," said Ulixes.

"That is the description of the dog," said she; "and, moreover, no man in the place dared to give her food but myself and thee and the steward."

"Let the dog be brought in," said Ulixes.

And four men got up for her, and brought the dog into the house.

And when she heard the sound of Ulixes' voice, she gave a pull at the chain, so that she sent the four men on their back through the house behind her, and she sprang to the breast of Ulixes and licked his face and his countenance.

When the people of Ulixes saw that, they sprang towards him. What man soever could not reach his skin, would kiss his garment with many kisses. And his wife did not go to him. "Thou art Ulixes," said she.

"I am," said he.

"Many are the Mighty Folk," said she, "and I shall keep my singleness until thy form come to thee." He was a week there before she recognized his form; and then they became one.

"I have a little box," said Ulixes, "which my good instructor gave me, and told me not to open it until I should give it to thee." They opened it on the spot. Ninety ounces—viz., what he had given for the instruction—that was what was in it, and a cover of gold on the top of it, to preserve their true amount for him.

So this is the wandering of Ulixes the son of Laertes, from beginning to end, so far.