

How Orion Found His Sight

by Carolyn Sherwin Bailey

Neptune, the burly old god of the sea, had a son named Orion who was almost as fond of the woods as he was of the ocean. From the time when Orion was old enough to catch a sea horse and ride on its back to shore he was gone from his home in the depths of the sea for days at a time. When Neptune blew his conch-shell to call the runaway home, Orion would return regretfully with the tales of the bear he had seen in the forest or the comb of wild honey he had found in an old oak tree.

Neptune wanted Orion to be happy, so he bestowed upon him at last the power of wading as far and in as deep water as he liked. No one had ever been able to wade right through the fathomless ocean before, but Orion could be seen any day, his dark head showing above the surface of the waters, and his feet paddling beneath without touching the bottom. He was not obliged to depend any more upon his father's chariot or the dolphins or the sea horses to carry him to shore.

So Orion began to spend a good deal of his time on land, and as he grew up to be a youth he became a mighty hunter. His arrows seemed to have been charmed by Diana, so swift and sure they were. And every day Orion bagged great spoils of game and deer.

He was making his way through the forest one day with a mighty bear that he had just slain over his shoulder when he came suddenly upon a clearing and in its midst there stood a fair white castle, its towers reaching above the pine trees toward the sky. It was surrounded by a great wall, and when Orion approached and asked the gatekeeper why it was so fortified, he was told that the king of that country who lived in it was in constant terror, day and night, of wild beasts.

"He would give half of his kingdom to whoever could rid the forest of its ravaging beasts," the gatekeeper told Orion.

As Orion listened, he glanced up at a window of one of the castle towers and there he saw the face of the king's daughter, Merope, looking down at him. Hers was a bright face, the blue eyes and smiling lips framed in her hair which fell in a golden shower and wrapped her about like a cloak. Orion delighted in the thought that Merope was smiling at him, although her eyes were really looking beyond this uncouth son of the sea and as far as the shores of Corinth where the heroes set sail for their adventures.

"Would the king, by any chance, do you think, give his daughter, Merope, to that hunter who rids the forest of wild beasts?" Orion asked.

The gatekeeper looked at Orion's shaggy hair, his bare feet and his mantle, made of a lion's skin. He turned away to conceal a smile as he answered.

"One could ask the king," he said.

Orion returned to the deep places where the night was made terrible by the crying of those beasts of prey that hunted for men, and Neptune did not see his son for many moons. Orion shot lions and wrestled single-handed with bears. He strangled great snakes with his own brawny hands and he hunted the wolf and the tiger with his spear. When the forest was rid of the pest of these man-eating

creatures, Orion returned to the castle in the clearing, not waiting even to wash the gore of his mighty hunting from his hands and garments, and he presented himself to the king.

"The forest is free of wild beasts that kill, O King," Orion said. "You may tear down your ramparts and walk in safety among the trees. As my reward for the great deed I have done, I ask the hand of your daughter, Merope. I would take her home with me to my palace of coral and shell in Neptune's kingdom. And if you refuse her to me, I will take her by force."

The king was speechless at first. Then, when he realized the boon that this son of the sea was asking, he seemed to have no words with which to express his scorn. He raised his sceptre in anger and struck Orion's eyes.

"Begone from my court, boaster," he commanded.

Orion rose from his place where he had been kneeling at the foot of the king's throne and he put his hands to his eyes, for the room seemed suddenly as dark as night. He tried to find the door but he stumbled, groping for it, until the attendants of the court had to take his hands and lead him outside. They mocked at him as they pushed him through the palace gate and watched this mighty hunter, who had the strength of the sea in his limbs, stagger down the road like a blind beggar.

Orion was now sightless. The king, for his presumption in asking for Merope, had struck him blind.

Without sun by day or moon by night, Orion wandered up and down the earth, asking of whoever he met the way he must take to find the light again.

Once he came to a spot in the woods where he heard the sound of many soft footsteps dancing on the moss to the sound of merry piping. Orion stretched out his arms as he felt his way nearer to the Hamadryads, those gay creatures of the forest who played all day long with Pan and his tunes for company.

"Can you, by any chance, direct me to Apollo who drives the chariot of the sun?" Orion asked.

"Oh, no," the Hamadryads answered, scattering at the sight of the blind wayfarer. "We seldom see Apollo, for he doesn't like the music Pan plays on his pipes."

So Orion stumbled on, and he heard in the course of his wanderings the clash and din of battle as two armies met in mortal combat on the edge of a city. War chariots crashed by him, and he heard the din of shield striking shield, and the groans of those heroes who fell wounded to death.

"These fighters must know the way to take to the light," Orion thought and, sheltering himself from the combat beside a column that still stood, he cried out to one of the warriors,

"Have you seen Apollo, driving the chariot of the sun, pass this way lately?"

"No," the man replied. "Apollo avoids the battle field. We cannot direct you to the god of light."

So Orion wandered on in his darkness until he came at last to the island of Lemnos and as he stumbled along a rocky road the sharp ringing of hammers beating on metal came to his ears.

"There must be a smithy close by," Orion thought, "a place as black and ugly as the world my blindness makes for me. I have heard tales of the Cyclopes, with only one eye apiece, who spend all their lives under the mountains shaping thunderbolts at their forges. Their master is the ill-shaped Vulcan, the despised of the gods. There is little use in my following the sound of a hammer."

But, against his will, Orion kept on. There was a call in the ringing of the hammer that drew him on faster than the merrymaking of Pan had, or the sound of battle. Before long the heat of the forge fire touching his face told Orion that he had reached the doorway of Vulcan's smithy at the foot of the mountain, and he asked again,

"Can you tell me the way to Apollo, who drives the chariot of the sun?"

How surprised he was to hear Vulcan reply,

"Apollo is here. We are sending some forgings of gold to his palace and he will take you with him to the sun, blind Orion."

That was a thrilling ride for Orion, away from the darkness he had walked in so long on the earth, and up along the road of stars that led to the sun. Apollo drove the chariot himself, and when they came to the stately gold columns that guarded the entrance to his palace, he told Orion to look straight at the blazing light of the sun. As he looked, Orion's blindness passed. He opened his eyes and could see again.

The myths say that Orion never left the sky after that. The gods changed him into a giant, with a wide hunting belt, a sword, a lion's-skin mantle and a club made all of stars. And they even brought Sirius, his faithful hunting dog, to follow his master forever through the heavens.

Source:

Bailey, Carolyn Sherwin. "How Orion Found His Sight." *Wonder Stories*. Springfield: Milton Bradley Company, 1920. 48 – 55. Electronic.