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The Cyclops Maid

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Abstract

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Additional Keywords

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THE CYCLOPS MAID

by C.R. Schabel

Being born on the right side of the right bed fulfilled all requirements for my family titles; honors so easily obtained are insignificant to me. But the rights of chivalry, the privilege of being called 'Sir' Gwenth, and the respect due the holder of the sixth rank among the Montford knights, all had to be earned with many years of training and travail, and they are invaluable to me.

In the service of my position, I was sent out to quest for Count Beloscoff, a warlock of the First Discipline who had been terrorizing helpless villagers with his malignant magic. I was to present the malefactor with two options: either he was to meet with the judge in Montford for fair trial, or he was to meet with me in the field of honor for fair combat.

Though the Count's powers could intimidate a weaponless farmer, a fully-armed, well trained knight should prevail against him.

Beloscoff was easy to find, for he made no attempt to run or hide. I came upon him lurching about beneath the broken battlements of his castle ruins and immediately introduced myself, announced the charges against him and told him his options, trial or fight.

"I will fight you young knight," he wheezed.

I was surprised. The old man was not half my size, had a hump in his back and a limp. So I said: "Count Beloscoff, I give you leave to select a champion to fight in your stead."

"No need for that, Sir Gwenth. I have the means to defeat you."

Either the old man was well into dotage and believed he could defeat me, or there was treachery afoot. I wondered if he had enough magic to overcome my skills in battle.

"I will also yield to you on choice of weapons."

"My staff will serve me well enough," he said.

Upon such words my suspicions pounced; his staff was obviously a talisman of some sort. So to neutralize his trick, I went to a nearby copse of trees and cut two staves of equal length and weight. I gave one to Beloscoff for his weapon and snatched his own away from him. Then asked him again if he was willing to fight.

He grimaced, but still wanted to continue.

I had seen through his scheme and could easily defeat him, yet he was more willing to take his chances with me than the judge at Montford.

After removing my armor and sword, I braced myself to meet him: "You may strike first, Count."

The old man's eyes brimmed with cunning. He dropped his staff and held out his hand on which he wore a large bronze ring. This he began to twist around

his finger.

He started growing. Shocked for a moment, I knew neither to race at him with only a stick, to bludgeon him down before he became too big for such a weapon, or to run for my steed, who bore more lethal arms. My brief indecision gave Beloscoff the time to grow into a giant, twenty feet tall!

"Now we fight," he laughed.

His speed and strength increased beyond the proportions of his enlargement, for he was on me with hare-like quickness. He stretched forth his huge right hand to seize me, I bashed him across the knuckles with my staff, but turned my back to his left hand doing so. He slapped me down so hard I thought my spine had splintered. I was dazed, for the next thing I recollect was being carried in the giant wizard's arms, as if no more than a babe. My struggles were useless, for I had neither enchantments or weapons to fight the monster.

"What are you going to do with me?" I asked.

The giant wet his lips; his tongue whipped out of his mouth like a great, blue slug. He exposed his toothless gums in a hideous grin, wrinkling the stretched, transparent skin around his dull, yellowed eyes. His enlargement had exaggerated all the deformities of his long, evil life. Festers and carbuncles, as large as my fist, decorated his nose and chin, and a wart, with hairs as thick as wire, sprouted from his cheek. His breath fell on me with all the rank odor of an open sludge-pit. He held me tight against his chest, nearly smothering me. The vermin that inhabited his unwashed clothes and fed on his ancient blood had grown with him. A flea, at least twice the size of the largest spider, leaped on me, and since my hands were pinioned in the wizard's grip, the parasite was free to plunge his dagger-like proboscis through my shoulder and drank its fill of my vital fluid before leaping away. Whatever the titanized Count fated for me could scarce be worse than that.

He stopped before a deep well and turned me around so that I could look down it. At the dry bottom, dozens of hungry little eyes stared up at me.

"Here we are little fellow. This be your new home." He bellowed with laughter and held me up-side-down over the gaping hole. "I fear that you'll have to share lodges sir, the hundred or so rats down there have priority over you. But they are courteous, they've even awaited dinner for you."

I cocked back my neck and looked down the deep, cavernous mouth of the well and saw that a tree root, about a yard long and inch thick, had pushed through the crumpled mortar about a third of the way to the bottom; I hoped it was strong enough to stop my fall.

"Fare-thee-well knight!" he said, then dropped me.

As in battle all things move fast but seem slow. I saw the saving root, felt myself fall, surged for it and caught the very tip solidly with my left hand. The root stretched and vibrated like a bow-string, but it held. The rats hissed and jumped at me, gaunt with hunger, desperation adding to their strength. My feet scraped against the rough wall of the well and I was able to climb far enough up the tree root to grip it with both hands and wrap my legs around it.

"Damn!" the wizard exclaimed, "it's not a clean kill! Ah, but it doesn't matter all I have to do is drop a stone..."

Just as he said "stone" there was a loud thud. The old warlock moaned, drops of blood fell down on me. I caught glimpses of him lolling back and forth by the top of the well, until he crashed to earth like a fallen tree. He groaned a few more times then became still.

I heard soft, heavy footsteps approach the well. Then I saw the shadow of someone looking down at me, a shadow nearly as big as the wizard's had been.

"Hold on a moment longer sir," said a deep, feminine voice, "I cannot quite reach you with my hand, so I will send down my bow-string."

"A bow-string is too thin to grip," I said, "Pass me the bow instead."

"My bow is far too thick for your hands sir," she said, "You must be prepared for when you see me sir. I'm very large and most strange in appearance to you."

"You've snatched me from death's jaws, my lady. Right now, you're the most beautiful person in the world." I said, and meant it. But her warning still concerned me.

The bow-string my rescuer passed to me seemed more a rope. I gripped it comfortably and was hauled from the dark, dreadful hole.

When I first emerged from the well, my eyes were blinded by the sun, and I saw the giantess as only a shadow. She was stooping over the fallen wizard, her back to me. Gradually, as my sight adjusted I saw her in more detail. Her clothing was no more than a simple tunic of skins that just reached her upper thigh, most immodest. She was at least fifteen feet tall, but her proportions were like those of a comely young maid, after her first bloom of womanhood. She had slightly broad hips, lovely long legs and beautifully shaped feet, though they were large for her. If I had been her size, she would have been perfect in my estimation.

Then she turned towards me and noticed my shock when I saw her face.

She had only one eye; huge, round and centrally located in her forehead.

Otherwise her face was lovely. Her nose was relatively small and straight, her lips shaped a perfect Cupid's bow. She had a strong yet feminine chin and high, prominent cheek-bones. It was cruel of nature to

have destroyed her near perfect face with such a drastic deformity.

She drew her seven-foot long arrow from the dead wizard, stood, and looked down at me thoughtfully.

The growth spell broken by death, Beloscoff's body had shrunk back to normal size.

She pointed to the fallen warlock. "Centuries ago he helped destroy my people, now they are avenged. Do you think it wicked of me to have slain him?"

"You've done a boon to all humankind," I replied, "and to me particularly, considering that the villain was about to feed me to a pit full of rats."

"What will others of your kind say of it?" she asked nervously, "I'm considered a monster by them, and they would need little reason to mass together and kill me."

I pondered her words. Many in the district were fearful of strangers, even if the newcomers were of the same race. How then would they feel towards a single-eyed giantess? I concluded that she needed my help.

"Where are you going," I asked.

"Towards the eastward mountains, to seek another of my kind."

"I offer you my sword for protection on your journey dear lady," I told her. "As a high-ranking Knight of Montford, I have some status hereabouts. None would dare do violence to you under my protection."

"I owe you my life," I continued, "and I would forfeit my existence in your defense."

She brightened at my words. "Thank you, sir knight. I will be forever in your debt."

"No, it is I who am indebted to you," I said, walking hard to keep up with her long strides. "I am Sir Gwenth. May I know your name?"

"I fear sir, that I'm a poor orphan and know not my true name. The clan of mountain giants who raised me called me Scylla."

"A fair name for a fair maid," I said, beginning to pant from having to trot alongside her. "Would you tarry awhile here? I need to send word back to Montford and retrieve my horse."

She agreed and sat beneath a high-limbed tree.

I went to fetch my steed and found the roan stallion grazing beneath the battlements of Count Beloscoff's castle. Before remounting, I donned my mail, helm and buckled on my good sword. As a knight, I felt naked without them.

I sent a message back to Montford: that Count Beloscoff was dead. Then I rode on to Scylla.

Two things concerned me as I approached her: first, how would Fire-mane, my horse, brave as he was in battle against men, respond to a giant, and second, how would she respond to me bearing arms?

When my steed saw her, he snorted, pawed the ground and tried to turn around; I held tightly and

encouraged him on. Scylla saw this and knelt down to greet him, as a human would do for a fearful dog. She spoke softly, and soon Fire-mane forgot his shyness and even took a carrot from her hand.

"Once horses get used to how big I am, we get along well," she said, "I only wish I could ride one."

She stood up slowly, petted Fire-mane one more time, then tied her long black hair back with a leather thong.

"How do you know there are others like you in the lands east of here?" I asked.

"I've heard tales of a one-eyed giant living there," she answered. "Evil stories I'm afraid, this giant is said to have assaulted travelers and has even killed some of them, But, I hope that where there are bad Cyclops can also be where there are good ones."

"That is the name of your race, Cyclops?"

"Yes, and one mostly to be proud of," she said, "We were smiths to the gods, and aided them in the Titan wars. It was Cyclops masons who helped Apollo and Poseidon to build the famous walls of Troy. For many centuries we excelled all in the working of stone and metal." She sighed. "Despite this, we are depicted as uncivilized barbarians because of the one among us who was most evil, Polyphemus, son of the Sea-god."

I had little joy in my lessons of letters, but I did remember a story of someone trapped in a cave by a huge Cyclops and escaping by blinding him.

"Homer depicted the whole race of Cyclops badly because of the savagery of Polyphemus, who thought of himself as being above the law and terrorized all, including the other Cyclops. It is said in our history, which I was most privileged to read, that all the other Cyclops celebrated when Odysseus left that great bully blinded."

"He bullied someone your size?" I asked.

"Polyphemus was as much larger than me as I am larger than you," Scylla said, "and had the strength to lift mountains."

"I see." I was enjoying our talk. "What became of the Cyclops after that?"

She grew sad in her recollections: "One good thing about Polyphemus was that he could fight tremendously well. We shared our land with several tribes of ogres, who, though not so big as the Cyclops, were far more numerous. There had been simmering hostilities between the ogres and Cyclops for some time, and when they found out what happened to Polyphemus, they attacked the Cyclops openly. The many tribes of ogres became united under one ruler who called himself Ogre-khan. And though the Cyclops were outnumbered five to one, they managed to hold the enemy at bay; until the ogres got help from count Beloscoff."

"Wasn't this a war fought centuries ago?" I asked; she nodded. "Then how could Beloscoff have anything to do with it?"

"The old warlock knew many enchantments," she said. "For two of them: the growth ring, and another to give him an extended life-span, he needed Cyclops blood. By helping the ogres defeat my people, Beloscoff got what he needed, and then some."

"And so, after a thousand years, the destruction of the Cyclops has finally been avenged." She shivered; I guessed her to be in the throes of rage.

After such an emotional story, I deemed it wise to remain silent. We plodded through the hot afternoon and made camp at sundown, talking sparsely.

Scylla prepared a generous dinner and afterwards we reclined about the fire. Then it was her turn to be curious.

"Sir Gwenth," she asked. "do you have a wife?"

"No." I lit my pipe and settled back against a stump.

"That's a pity," she said, "you're good looking for someone so small."

"And for one with paired eyes, you should say," I laughed, ignorant of the remark's insensitivity.

I knew immediately that she was hurt, and wished that God would put a knot in my tongue for saying something so stupid.

After a silence she spoke softly. "All beings I have ever seen have had paired eyes. I find the trait less strange and more beautiful than my own absurd ocular arrangement. At times I wish to embrace blindness rather than see this hideous wheel-eye of mine reflected back at me in a still pool or mirror."

As fate would have it, my shield lay near the fire, which was polished so brightly that it reflected, but distorted, the image of someone looking at it. Scylla saw her eye in the shield; she shuddered, like someone bearing a large weight, then stared into the fire for a few moments, her mouth tightened with pain; and then she grabbed a coal-tipped brand from the fire and thrust it towards her own eye!

I threw my whole body across her huge arm, pinned it down momentarily and cut the red-hot tip from it with my sword before she could pull her arm free.

"Fool, idiot!" I screamed at her, "do you have any idea how precious vision is? How could you survive, let alone complete your mission without the guidance of sight?"

Then the tears came, more than anyone with a dozen eyes could have wept. She threw herself prone and sobbed into her bed-mat.

"I have no hope for a husband, or even a lover," she sobbed. "I'm doomed to wander forever, an oversized, one-eyed freak!"

"Why did you leave the mountain giants?" I asked. "They're no Cyclops, but at least they're your size."

She took a moment to compose herself.

"Giants," she said. "I didn't even know why they were called that until I saw men like you. By my tenth birthday, I was taller than any of them. And besides,

they had no real love for me; even the family that took me in was most interested in how hard I could work. So, when I heard tales of a great, tall giant, who also had only one eye, I left my loveless home to seek him out."

"Then you came across Beloscoff by accident?" I asked, trying to keep her talking.

"One night, after a few weeks of travel, while hidden in a copse of trees," she continued, "I overheard two shepherds mention Count Beloscoff and where he lived. So, I decided to make a side trip to seek him out. I found him at the well, and you know the rest."

"Lucky for me that you did find Beloscoff," I said, "or I'd be rat-droppings by now."

My attempt at humor brightened her up some. She sniffed back further tears, sat up, went to her pack, got out a huge tome, then started reading by the firelight.

"Is that the history of the Cyclops?" I asked.

"Yes, reading it helps me relax."

I watched her, as intent as any scholar, studying her book. And it struck me, she was, in all ways to me, an extremely beautiful woman. She had courage and caring, intelligence and grace. It was unfortunate that because of her size and 'ocular arrangement' she was trapped in the body of a monster.

After an hour's reading, she laid down again and was soon snoring. I stayed up awhile, banked the fire, and despite my best efforts not to, I kept staring at her legs.

As the fashion of my times dictated floor-length skirts, I had only such views of woman's legs when intimate with them; and none I had seen before were as beautifully contoured as Scylla's. The sight of such casually bare limbs (though they were eight feet long) was most disturbing. Particularly since I had taken a vow of chastity before my quest for Count Beloscoff and been long from the 'grateful embrace'.

Somehow, I managed to fall asleep that night.

When I awoke, the sun was just coloring the east horizon a deep rose, and Scylla was already about preparing breakfast. She ate about what would be expected of someone her size, but served me portions that were beyond generous, beyond gluttonous. I ate what my innards could hold and bid her save the rest for lunch. And, though I assured her that the meal was delicious (no exaggeration), she expressed disappointment that I was unable to finish it.

We set out at full light, which was already uncomfortably warm for full armor. By mid-afternoon Scylla, Fire-mane and myself were all dripping and smelling with sweat.

"The mountains I grew up in never got this warm," she said, "though, from my readings, I know that the Cyclopes' homeland could become outrageously hot."

Presently we came upon a small lake, fed by a waterfall. With a girlish jump and a look of unfettered

glee on her face, Scylla ran towards the water. I marveled at how fast she could move, how dainty her footfalls were and how far she could leap when she plunged into the lake.

She waded into the clear water up to mid-thigh. Then, as I watched, she lifted her tunic off, the only clothing she wore!

If the sight of her bare legs by firelight was enough to force erotic thoughts upon me, then her virginal, almost womanly, charms, completely revealed under the blazing sun, were enough to start my too passion-prone mind spinning.

"Come swim with me," she said innocently, splashing about in the lake, making no attempt to conceal herself from my eyes. "The water is beautifully cool."

The rippling heat made a bath most desirable. But I feared that if I drew near the charming, nude Cyclops maid that I'd find it difficult to resist touching her.

Ridiculous! She was perhaps the last of a race of giant, wheel-eyed, one-eyed cannibals!

And yet, she did save my life.

Her ancestors ate the flesh of hapless sailors, they were the enemies of all humankind.

The only act of violence Scylla had done was to slay Count Beloscoff, when the evil warlock was going to kill me. Scylla had a fine mind, deep, sensitive feelings, and, from the sight of her bathing, a most lovely body.

"Aren't you coming in?" she asked again. "If you are shy, I'll turn my back until you're in the water."

The heat made her offer irresistible, so I began to strip off my clothes. But the sly minx betrayed me. She turned around swiftly as I approached the water, as naked as she was.

"You're well made, sir knight," she grinned.

"In my profession a lack of strength or endurance would be fatal." I answered, rushing into the water.

"Physical prowess didn't help you deal with Count Beloscoff," she reminded me, dipping down in the pool one more time before emerging.

"He used magic," I said, watching her stretch out in the grass to sun herself.

We spent the rest of the hot afternoon resting by the cool water, traveled a mile or two more by moonlight, then made camp. The next morning we set out before dawn. Progress was easier during the mildly warm morning and evenings than during the hot afternoons.

Finally, after a fortnight of twilight trekking, we arrived at the foothills of the mountain range Scylla had sought. After an uncomfortable, sweaty climb, we found relief in the high country.

"It always puzzled me that the air becomes cooler the higher up you go," I asked. "Aren't we closer to the sun now than when we were below, shouldn't that make it warmer?"

"The earth converts the sun's light into heat," she

explained, "and radiates it upward. Therefore, the higher you go, the further you are from the heat-radiating ground and the cooler it gets."

"Oh?" I somewhat understood her. "You're very smart."

"Polyphemus's tragedy taught us that intelligence can overwhelm the greatest strength," she said.

"Ah, but strength guided by intelligence is the greatest power of all," I said.

"Strength of numbers, I would add. Else we Cyclops would have overcome the ogres, and even men. For, individually, we are wiser and stronger than any. Even the gods fear us."

"I see." My Christian teachings bid me debate with her. "Not 'gods', God. There is only one God. To believe otherwise is blasphemous, wicked, and assures damnation."

"I believe in many gods," she said, looking down at me sternly. "Your man-on-the-cross doesn't frighten me with his tales of eternal lakes of fire."

I drew Fire-mane around and lowered my lance. "I bid you show respect for our Savior."

"And I bid you respect my beliefs."

Her bow was unstrung, my weapons were at hand; that gave me the advantage. We were on the crest of a hill with little room to maneuver a horse; that gave her the advantage.

She braced herself for assault, but then loosened her stance.

With her hand outstretched in peace she said, "How would it be if we both allow the other their own religious views? Wars have been fought over such things, so it would be best if we don't talk about them."

"Agreed." I lowered my lance. "You saved my life. And, though you worship demons, you're a noble woman; and one I'm glad to have as a friend."

She frowned, perhaps annoyed at having her 'gods' referred to in their proper way, but said nothing; only nodded her head.

We walked down into a green valley then back up the ridge on the other side. There, at the foot of a mountain, Scylla saw some thing.

"It walks on two legs," she was excited, "and is far too large for a man."

"Where? I don't see anything."

She ignored me, then proceeded to do a curious thing. She sighted the object of her interest, way in the distance, then took a few steps to one side and sighted it again.

"What are you doing?"

She looked like a mother answering a child's silly question. "I'm getting depth perception on the being I see across the valley."

"Depth perception?"

"You, who have two eyes and natural ability to

judge distances don't appreciate or understand how it works," she huffed.

"What do you mean?"

"You have two eyes but see only one of everything, correct."

"Yes."

"If you close one eye, you still see the same number of objects in your plane of vision, right?"

"Sure."

"Whether you see something with either eye or both of them, you still see only one object. Have you ever wondered how that works?"

"No."

"Well, it's because your eyes turn a little in, they both aim at the same thing, focus on one object. The closer an object is to you, the more your eyes have to turn in so that both see it. That tells you how distant it is from you, hence depth perception."

"Now I, having only one eye, am without a natural mechanism for judging distance. Therefore, in order for me to tell how far an object is, I have to look at it at least twice, from two different angles."

"Where did you learn about this 'depth perception'?"

"It's in my 'History of the Cyclops'. Lacking your two-eyed ability to judge distances, we Cyclops have taught ourselves to do it by multiple views with one eye. For shorter distances we can simply rock our head back and forth. I'm surprised you haven't noticed me doing that all the time you've been with me."

"I thought you were just keeping your balance," I said.

"No," she continued, "but for greater distances, it's better to take a few steps in each direction to triangulate on the object."

"You triangulate on an object I can't even see."

She smiled. "It seems that what we Cyclops lack in quantity, we make up for in quality."

"Come, I judged the giant to be about my size and nearly five miles away. I couldn't make out how many eyes it had however."

She trotted down into the valley, I urged Fire-mane to follow.

"It's an irony of nature," she said while walking "that we Cyclops should depend so heavily on vision when, more than any other creature in nature, we are so vulnerable to losing it."

I recalled the night by the fire when she almost blinded herself. "A knight wouldn't be much good without his eyes."

"Using your vision to guide your arm in battle can hardly be compared to the way we Cyclops used ours to study the universe," she said. "We can see animals one hundredth the size of a flea, when we examine a drop of water, and we can see another planet, beyond

Saturn, when we look into the sky and have even plotted its course around the sun."

"Around the earth," I corrected her, "the moon, sun, planets and stars all revolve around the earth."

"Yes, how careless of me to have forgotten," she giggled, "I must keep in mind the bizarre way you little-two-eyes see the universe."

I didn't answer, feeling put off by her calling me 'Little-two-eyed'. I hoped that this new Cyclops we were going to meet wasn't such a know-it-all as Scylla.

I knew that I should be happy that the young maid might finally meet someone of her own kind, but I wasn't. A knight must know his own mind, have no delusions about his feelings and at that moment, I felt jealous.

We reached the base of the valley and she scanned the cliffs opposite us. "I no longer see the giant, perhaps because it went into a cave or behind some brush."

"I suppose you can't see through wood or stone?" I said.

"Don't be ridiculous," she answered.

As we passed by a line of trees and thick brush that grew along the base of the cliffs, Scylla suddenly stopped. Fire-mane grunted, whinnied, pawed the ground, reared up and tried to turn and run. It took all my strength to keep him from bolting.

Then, from out of the brush it had crouched in, pounced a scale-covered monster, a creature nearly as tall as Scylla and far heavier in build. It was armed with tusks, talons and devil-like horns, weapons long and sharp enough to be fatal, even to her. This was the one-eyed giant she had sought, but it was no Cyclops; it was an Ogre, missing its left eye.

"A Cyclops Maid," it snarled, "and a comely one at that, and I in the mood for a good, long battering-ram."

Scylla backed off in horror and tripped on a log behind her. I leveled my lance and bid Fire-mane to close with the ogre. My stallion obeyed quickly, but we were too close to the monster for good lance work and the ogre swept me and my mount aside with his huge arm before we could build up speed.

Fire-mane bore the full blunt of its blow and was stunned; I just managed to get out from under him before the stallion fell over on me.

Ignoring me, the creature lunged at Scylla, who had recovered her stance, but had no time to string her bow. She flashed a quick look at me, concern in her expression, then she raised her fists to meet the ogre.

I knew then that she could have run away, could have used her longer legs to out-distance the monster, but she couldn't leave me to its nonexistent mercy.

Scylla took a pugilist's stance and used her longer reach to ward off the ogre's charge with short, crisp punches to its face and head, blows that sounded harder than any I could have delivered with a leaded mace.

Yet, it hardly knocked the sweat off the monster's brow. The ogre was able to block one of her fists, and then, with a quickness inconsistent to its bulk, it caught hold of her.

I drew my sword and ran up behind the ogre, then, using a jump for additional leverage, struck the small of its back with every ounce of strength. The blade was turned aside by the creature's scales. I drew back and hacked at it again, this time chipping through its protection. The third blow drew blood, forcing the monster to release Scylla and sweep me away with a backhand blow that sent me tumbling.

Though my armor protected me from serious hurt, I was still dazed. I could do little but watch the fight until my balance and wind returned to me.

Scylla had gained the advantage. She was leaning into her punches, throwing her weight behind them, so that they hit with the force of catapult stones.

I recovered my strength and retrieved my sword, ran up behind the monster and struck him on the back of his knee, on the leg that bore his weight, just as Scylla smashed him hard on the jaw and he fell.

It was far from finished however, the ogre rolled with the fall and got up, first on all fours, then to its hoof-like feet, then it charged us again.

The Cyclops maid had strung her bow, but hadn't fitted an arrow when her enemy closed with her again. I had jumped to one side to avoid being knocked useless by it. It grasped her, pinning her arms to her sides, and they both tumbled to the ground. The ogre was on top.

"Ha, the girl has fire!" it grinned, pinning her firmly down, her arms trapped under his knees. It drew back its gnarled fist and pummeled her face with hard blows. "I don't mind what ya look like up top, s'long as ya looks good down under."

He continued to pound her face without mercy.

I was frantic! My sword only angered the beast, my lance was broken. Without a weapon powerful enough to deal with the fiend, how was I to save Scylla from it!

Fire-mane had regained consciousness and struggled to his feet. He snorted and pawed the ground, his fighting spirit aroused by the ogre's brutality. Few stallions had such heart!

I feared it would do little good without my lance. Then I saw Scylla's bow, strung, and a few of her razor-tipped arrows scattered on the ground. It was much too big for me to use, but it gave me an idea. I hoisted the heavy bow over my shoulder along with several of her seven-foot long arrows and brought them over to an old tree-stump, that was about three feet high and twenty yards behind the ogre. I drove a dagger into the stump, using the flat side of my sword like a hammer, until only about an inch of the knife's handle protruded above it, enough to catch the bow as I drew it back, but not enough to impede the arrow's flight. I fitted the bow atop the stump so that the middle

was held by the dagger's handle, then notched an arrow's flight. I fitted the bow atop the stump so that the middle was held by the dagger's handle, then notched an arrow. I tried to pull it back but couldn't bend it. So, I bid Fire-mane back to it and tied his saddle horn to the bow-string with leather thongs, then urged him to pull. It was a struggle for the powerful stallion, but he bent the bow almost as much as Scylla could. When Fire-mane was resisted to the end of his strength, leaning forward, all muscles taunt, I adjusted his stance so the aim was accurate, then cut the thongs, knowing that if this one shot from my slap-dash ballista missed, I would have no time to set it up again if the ogre charged.

But the arrow found its mark, right through the ogre's spine. The monster arched backward, groaned, then slumped forward and fell motionless over Scylla. The Cyclops maid took a moment to summon the strength to push the dead beast off her; then she struggled to a sitting position. Her face was lumped and bruised but not seriously hurt. I feared that her eye might have been damaged, it being, as she had said, the most vulnerable part of her. But her singular source of vision, though blacked, proved tough enough to withstand the ogre's fists (consider that it took a red-hot, sharply pointed log to blind Polyphemus).

Scylla gasped for breath, drew her tunic back up and looked around dazed.

I walked up to her, wondering how she was going

to respond to her quest's result.

"I guess I'm all alone in the world." She swayed back and forth, brought her hands up to her face and wept into them.

Before I could think of anything to say, she jumped to her feet, wiped the tears from her cheeks and dashed away.

Fear clutched at me! I quickly mounted Fire-mane and galloped off after her. She was running towards a high cliff.

I screamed for her to stop, but she kept going. Just as she reached the edge of the fatal fall, she stopped and looked down, serious, fearful.

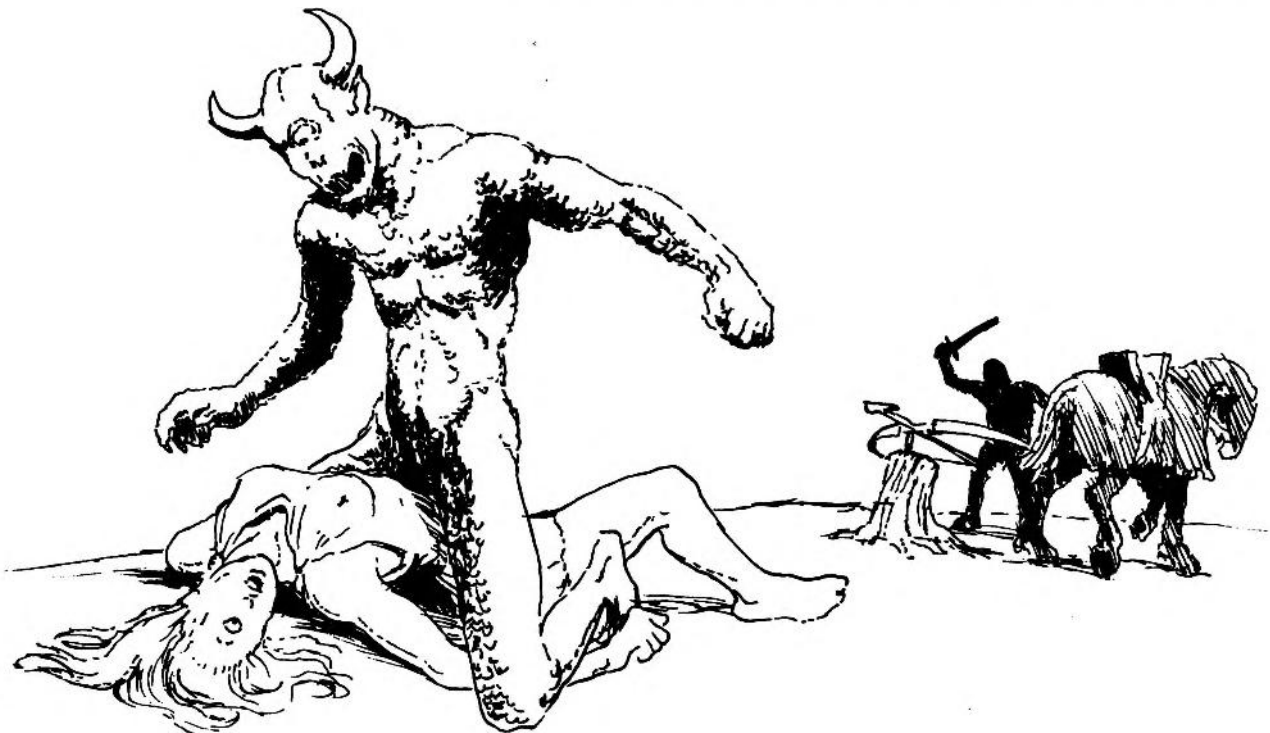
"Scylla, please, come back with me and make camp." I was afraid of saying the wrong thing. "The cliff will be here tomorrow and perhaps you won't want to use it then. After a fight like that, and disappointed as you must be, you're not going to think right."

"I came looking for one of my kind, to be a friend and perhaps a husband to me," she said, gulping back tears, "but instead I find one of my people's ancient enemies who tries to rape and kill me."

"The ogre is dead; you should be happy about that."

"He wasn't a Cyclops, or even a compatible giant..."

"Wait!" I called out; she had inched closer to the edge. "I cannot get you a Cyclops, but I can get you a giant, one that loves you and is willing to stay with you forever."



"Don't be absurd. I'm no child to be swayed by..."

"Just promise me that you'll wait here until I return, and I'll promise that within a fortnight I'll bring you a giant who'll love you forever. Whatever pains you suffer, you can bear them for one more fortnight."

"Agreed," she said, then sat down.

And I left her.

I reached Count Beloscoff's castle without incident, Fire-mane making exemplary time. It was a grewsome task, getting the bronze ring off of his rotting corpse, but a knight is hardened against such things. I took my prize and went back to Scylla.

I arrived just at twilight; she had been busy making her dinner. She looked past me eager, then disappointed.

"So it was just a story," she said.

I smiled, then began to twist the ring about my finger. The fire, the boulders and trees around us and particularly Scylla all seemed to shrink. My feet spread the earth beneath them as I grew. My clothes, my armor enlarged in proportion to me. I saw Scylla step towards me. When I was even to her in height, I stopped growing.

Her expression was a contrast of feelings, awe, surprise, perhaps joy. Before she could say a word, I dropped to one knee and began my well rehearsed speech.

"Scylla, the loveliness of your form, the brilliance of your mind and, most of all, the valor and goodness of your heart have smitten me with love for you. I can only pray that you have some of these feelings for me, unworthy though I am.

"Scylla, will you marry me?"

At first her face brightened, and she opened her mouth as if to say yes, but then she was checked by a second thought.

"You still have the ring of Count Beloscoff," she said.

"That means you can return to normal size if you should choose to leave me."

"I'll throw it into the sea," I answered and took the ring off.

"No, don't, she smiled, "we may need it."

She paced back and forth awhile, deep in thought.

"What of religion? In what faith shall our marriage be performed; what will our children be told to believe?"

Here I took pause.

For most of the night we discussed what to do about our religious differences. Finally she conceded, since the Christian faith was more pervasive, and her polytheistic religion all but extinct, she would go through a baptism and be married in a Christian ceremony, and if our union was blessed with children, that they would also be of my faith.

Being a giant has its advantages. We had very little trouble overcoming a priest's natural reluctance to per-

form the necessary rites; after which I enjoyed my first kiss with Scylla and my first night as her husband.

And it was the beginning of many wonderful nights with her.

(To the readers: 1) is there any way that Gwenth and Scylla could use Count Beloscoff's ring so that they both were human sized? 2) How many eyes should their children have?)