

The Escape from Polyphemos

Of Odysseus is my story
And although some bits are gory,
It's a jolly yarn I tell of his escape.
While from Troy he was returning,
And for homeland he was yearning,
With a cyclops he got in a frightful scrape.

In the tale that I am telling
He had come to where were dwelling
Several giant one-eyed shepherds with their flocks.
Would they treat a needy stranger
As a guest, or was there danger
If one ventured to their land across the rocks?

Then with twelve of his companions
To a cave amid the canyons
Did Odysseus make his way to ask for aid;
For to those a journey going
Hospitality was owing;
'Twas a moral obligation Zeus had made.

But the Cyclopes respecting
Neither men nor gods, rejecting
All conventions handed down from long ago,
And as lawless shepherds living
With their herds, they were not giving
Any thought to gods or men or friend or foe.

But Odysseus and his crewmen
Did not find there any human
No nor cyclops - only kids and lambs all penned;
There were pans of whey and cheeses,
There were pails of milk; it pleases
Them to eat and rest and time at ease to spend.

Polyphemos when returning
Came with loads of wood for burning;
For 'twas he who owned the cave in which they hid.
Then his goats and sheep were brought in;
And to keep in safety aught in
His abode a rock across the door was slid.

Then his nanny-goats and ewes all
Did he duly milk as usual.
Then for supper he began to light his fire.
Looking up he bellowed "Strangers,
"Are you pirates fleeing dangers,
"Bringing troubles here which will inflame my ire?"

"We are suppliants," said Odysseus,
"And we beg you not to misuse
"The occasion; treat us kindly just as Zeus,
"The immortal son of Kronos,
"Has ordained; and look upon us
"With the pity that a kind heart would induce."

"Oh you fools," he roared with laughter,
"If it's kindness you are after!
"For the laws of gods and men concern me not."
Then he grabbed a pair of crewmen,
Dashed their brains out so to stew them;
Of their flesh and guts and bones he ate the lot.

Then the cyclops fell to sleeping,
But th' enormous stone was keeping
Bold Odysseus and his men imprisoned there.
Then at dawn the cyclops woke up
And his fire he did stoke up,
Then he milked his flocks in order and with care.

When he'd all his tasks completed
And his fire now was heated,
Then he snatched two men to roast for his repast.
Then he drove his flocks to grazing,
And that doorstone vast, amazing
He replaced and made it firm and fixed it fast.

But Odysseus and the crewmen
Were determined that th' inhuman
Polyphemos must be forced to let them go.
Soon a tree trunk that curmudgeon
Put aside to make a bludgeon
Was discovered which they shaped and fashioned so ...

It was rounded, smoothed and sharpened;
When the sharp end had been hardened
In the fire, 'twas hidden for their host's defeat.
Then the cyclops brought his flocks back,
Put the rock that served as locks back
Did his chores and snatched two crewmen for to eat.

Then some wine Odysseus offered
To the cyclops; what was proffered
Was so strong, delicious, setting wits adrift.
And the cyclops loved it greatly
And he uttered profligately:
"Give me more; tell me your name; I'll give a gift."

So Odysseus gave him two more
Brimming bowls and said "To humour
You, my name I'll tell. It's 'No One' that I'm called."
"My dear No One, I'm so happy,"
Did the cyclops say, "Good chappy,
"Know my gift's to eat you last," then flopped and sprawled.

With the cyclops deep in slumber
They retrieved their hidden lumber,
And its sharpened tip they heated till it glowed;
Then the glowing beam they thrust
In the cyclops' eye and busted
It as to and fro they turned their smould'ring load.

Then the cyclops woke up howling
And he cried with dreadful yowling
And his neighbours all came running with alarm.
"Polyphemos, what's the matter?
"Why this hue and cry and clatter?"
"It is No One," cried he, "No one does me harm."

"Well if no one's misbehaving,
They replied, "your cries and raving,
"Is a madness sent by Zeus; you'd better pray
"To Poseidon, he's your father.
"And do stop your blathering lather."
So they left and grumbling homeward made their way.

Then the cyclops loudly groaning
Rolled away the stone and, moaning,
Did sit down within the entrance, arms held wide
For to capture any whoso
Would attempt to slip on through so,
For he wanted that the crew remained inside.

But the crew inside were working
And not one of them was shirking
For with willow withies tied they rams in threes;
Neath the middle ram suspended
Was a crewman now defended
By the rams on either side of his trapeze.

But Odysseus held on clinging
Very tightly, never swinging,
To the largest ram in all the monster's flock.
And so as the rams were leaving
Did the cyclops feel each heaving
Back, perceiving not what hung beneath his stock.

So at last they had succeeded
And escaped thence unimpeded
With the livestock to their ship and then set sail.
Then far off Odysseus shouted
To Poseidon's son; undoubted
'Twas a fateful deed - but that's another tale.