

Odysseus and The Cyclopes

By Homer

Next, we beached in the land of the Cyclopes. We'd put in at a little island off their coast. And since they don't know the first thing about sailing they'd left it uninhabited, though it teemed with wildlife.

We made a pleasant meal of wild goat, then next day I left everyone else behind and took my own crew over to the mainland. The first thing we saw was a big cave overlooking the beach. Inside were milking pens for goats and big cheeses aging on racks.

My men were for making off with the cheeses and the lambs that we found in the cave, but I wanted to see what manner of being made this his lair.

When the Cyclops -- Polyphemus was his name -- came home that afternoon, he blotted out the light in the doorway. He was as tall and rugged as an alp. One huge eye glared out of the center of his forehead.

He didn't see us at first, but went about his business. The first thing he did was drag a huge boulder into the mouth of the cave. Twenty teams of horses couldn't have budged it. Then he milked his ewes, separating out the curds and setting the whey aside to drink with his dinner. It was when he stoked his fire for the meal that he saw us.

'Who are you?' asked a voice like thunder.

'We are Greeks, blown off course on our way home from Troy,' I explained. 'We assume you'll extend hospitality or suffer the wrath of Zeus, protector of guests.'

'Zeus? We Cyclopes are stronger than Zeus. I'll show you hospitality.'

With that he snatched up two of my men and bashed their brains out on the floor. Then he ate them raw, picking them apart and poking them in his mouth, bones and guts and all. We cried aloud to Zeus, for all the good it did our comrades. The Cyclops washed them down with great slurps of milk, smacked his lips in satisfaction and went to sleep. My hand was on my sword, eager to stab some vital spot. But I realized that only he could unplug the mouth of the cave.

We passed a miserable night and then watched the Cyclops make breakfast of two more of our companions. When he went out to pasture his flock, he pulled the boulder closed behind him.

It was up to me to make a plan. I found a tree trunk that the Cyclops intended for a walking stick. We cut off a six-foot section, skinned it, put a sharp point on one end and hardened it in the fire. Then we hid it under a pile of manure.

When the Cyclops came home and made his usual meal, I spoke to him. 'Cyclops, you might as well take some of our liquor to savor with your barbarous feast.'

I'd brought along a skin of wine that we'd been given as a gift. It was so strong that we usually diluted it in water twenty to one. The Cyclops tossed it back and then demanded more.

'I like you, Greek,' he said. 'I'm going to do you a favor. What's your name?'

'My name is Nobody,' I told him.

It turned out that the favor he intended was to eat me last. But when the wine had knocked him out, I put my plan into effect. Heating the end of the pole until it was glowing red, we ran it toward the Cyclops like a battering ram, aiming it for his eye and

driving it deep. The thing sizzled like hot metal dropped in water while I twisted it like an auger.

Polyphemus came awake with a roar, tore the spike from his eye and began groping for us in his blindness. His screams of frustration and rage brought the neighboring Cyclopes to the mouth of the cave.

'What is it, brother?' they called inside. 'Is someone harming you?'

'It's Nobody!' bellowed Polyphemus.

'Then for the love of Poseidon pipe down in there!'

They went away, and Polyphemus heaved the boulder aside and spent the night by the open door, hoping we'd be stupid enough to try to sneak past him. Getting past him was the problem alright, but by morning I'd worked out a solution.

Tying goats together with ropes of willow, I hid a man under each group of three. When it was time to let them out to pasture, the Cyclops ran his hands over their backs but did not notice the men underneath. Myself, I clutched to the underbelly of the biggest ram.

'Why aren't you leading the flock as usual?' asked Polyphemus, detaining this beast at the door and stroking its fleece. 'I wish you could talk, so you could point out those Greeks.'

He let the ram go, and we beat it down to the ship as fast as our legs would carry us.

When we were a good way out to sea, I could not resist a taunt. I called out, and Polyphemus came to the edge of the seaside cliff. In his fury he tore up a huge boulder and flung it at us.

It landed in front of our bow, and the splash almost drove us back onto the beach. This time I waited until my panicked men had rowed a good bit further before I put my hands to my mouth to call out again. The men tried to hush me, but I was aquiver with triumph.

'If someone asks who did this, the name is Odysseus!'

That brought another boulder hurtling our way, but this one landed astern and only hastened our departure. The Cyclops was left howling on the cliff, calling out to his father Poseidon for vengeance.

Source: <<http://www.mythweb.com/odyssev/book09.html>>