

## THE TWELVE LABORS OF HERACLES

Heracles suffered much during his life, but after his death he was allowed to hang out with the gods on Mount Olympus. His mother was Alcmena, his father was Zeus, and he was the strongest of all the heroes who lived in his time.

All through his life he was pursued by the hatred and jealousy of Hera, who tried to destroy him even in his cradle. She sent two great snakes to attack the sleeping baby, but Heracles awoke, grasped their necks in his hands, and strangled them both.

Before he was eighteen, he had done many famous deeds in the country of Thebes, and Creon, the king gave him his daughter in marriage. But he could not long escape the anger of Hera, who afflicted him with a sudden madness, so that he did not know what he was doing, and in a fit of frenzy killed both his wife and his children. When he came to his senses, in horror and shame at what he had done, he visited the great cliffs of Delphi where Apollo's mystical oracle is (the oracle could help mortals speak with the gods). There he asked how he could be purified of his sin, and he was told by the oracle that he must go to Mycenae and for twelve years obey all the commands of the cowardly king Eurystheus, his distant cousin. It seemed a hard and cruel sentence, but the oracle told him also that at the end of many labors, he would be received among the gods themselves.

Heracles therefore departed to the rocky fortress of Mycenae. He was skilled in the use of every weapon, having been educated by the wise centaur Chiron. He was tall and immensely powerful. When Eurystheus saw him, he was both terrified of him and jealous of his great powers. He began to devise labors that would seem impossible, yet Heracles accomplished them all.

Eurystheus was by no means stupid, but of a very ingenious turn of mind, and when the strongest man on earth came to him humbly prepared to be his slave, he devised a series of penances which from the point of view of difficulty and danger could not have been improved upon. It must be said, however, that he was helped and urged on by Hera. To the end of Heracles' life she never forgave him for being Zeus's son. The tasks Eurystheus gave him to do are called "the labors of Heracles." There were twelve of them and each one was all but impossible.

The first was to kill the lion of Nemea, a beast no weapons could wound. That difficulty Heracles solved by choking the life out of him. Then he heaved the huge carcass up on his back and carried it into Mycenae. After that, Eurystheus, a cautious man, would not let him inside the city. He gave him his orders from afar.

The second labor was to go to Lerna and kill a creature with nine heads called the Hydra, which lived in a swamp there. This was exceedingly hard to do, because one of the heads was immortal and the

others almost as bad, inasmuch as when Heracles chopped off one, two grew up instead. However, he was helped by his nephew Iolaus; who brought him a burning torch with which he seared the neck as he cut each head off so that it could not sprout again. When all had been chopped off he disposed of the one that was immortal by burying it securely under a great rock.

The third labor was to bring back alive a stag with horns of gold, sacred to Artemis, which lived in the forests of Cerynitia. He could have killed it easily, but to take it alive was another matter and he hunted it a whole year before he succeeded.

The fourth labor was to capture a great boar which had its lair on Mount Erymanthus. He chased the beast from one place to another until it was exhausted; then he drove it into deep snow and trapped it.

The fifth labor was to clean the Augean stables in a single day. Augeas had thousands of cattle and their stalls had not been cleared out for years. Heracles diverted the courses of two rivers and made them flow through the stables in a great flood that washed out the filth in no time at all.

The sixth labor was to drive away the Stymphalian birds, which were a plague to the people of Stymphalus because of their enormous numbers. He was helped by Athena to drive them out of their nests, and as they flew up he shot them.

The seventh labor was to go to Crete and fetch from there the frightening and savage bull that Poseidon had given Minos. Heracles mastered him, put him in a boat and brought him to Eurystheus.

The eighth labor was to get the man-eating horses of King Diomedes of Thrace. Heracles slew Diomedes first and then drove off the horses unopposed.

The ninth labor was to bring back the girdle of Hippolyta, the Queen of the Amazons. When Heracles arrived she met him kindly and told him she would give him the girdle, but Hera stirred up trouble. She made the Amazons think that Heracles was going to carry off their queen, and they charged down on his ship. Heracles, without a thought of how kind Hippolyta had been, without any thought at all, instantly killed her, taking it for granted that she was responsible for the attack. He was able to fight off the others and get away with the girdle.

The tenth labor was to bring back the cattle of Geryon, who was a monster with three bodies living on Erythia, a western island. On his way there Heracles reached the land at the end of the Mediterranean and he set up as a memorial of his journey two great rocks, called the Pillars of Heracles (now Gibraltar and Ceuta). Then he got the oxen and took them to Mycenae.

The eleventh labor was the most difficult of all so far. It was to bring back the golden apples of the Hesperides, and he did not know where they were to be found.

On his way to Atlas to ask him about the Golden Apples, Heracles came to the Caucasus Mountain peak, where he freed Prometheus, slaying the eagle that preyed on him.

Atlas, who bore the heavens and sky upon his shoulders, was the father of the Hesperides, so Heracles went to him and asked him to get the apples for him. He offered to take upon himself the burden of the sky while Atlas was away. Atlas, seeing a chance of being relieved forever from his heavy task, gladly agreed. He came back with the apples, but he did not give them to Heracles. He told Heracles he could keep on holding up the sky, for Atlas himself would take the apples to Eurystheus. On this occasion Heracles had only his wits to trust to; he had to give all his strength to supporting that mighty load. He was successful, but because of Atlas' stupidity rather than his own cleverness. He agreed to Atlas' plan, but asked him to take the sky back for just a moment so that Heracles could put a pad on his shoulders to ease the pressure. Atlas did so, and Heracles picked up the apples and ran off.

The twelfth labor was the worst of all. It took him down to the lower world; and it was then that he freed Theseus from the Chair of Forgetfulness. His task was to bring Cerberus, the three-headed dog, up from Hades. Hades gave him permission provided Heracles used no weapons to overcome him. He could use his hands only. Even so, he forced the terrible monster to submit to him. He lifted him and carried him all the way up to the earth and on to Mycenae. Eurystheus very sensibly did not want to keep him and made Heracles carry him back. This was his last labor.

When all the labors were completed and he had fully paid for the death of his wife and children, Heracles hoped to have an easy and relaxing life remaining ahead of him. But it wasn't to be that way. No part of the rest of his days on earth were either easy or relaxing.

But quite soon after he was freed from the labors, he decided to punish King Eurystheus for torturing him for all of those years with the Labors. He collected an army, captured the King's city and put him to death.

Before he completed the destruction of the city, Heracles sent home a band of captives from the war. One of these captives was an especially beautiful girl named Iole. The man who brought them to Heracles' hometown, told Heracles' new wife, Deianira, that her husband was madly in love with this Princess. This news was not as hard for Deianira as might be expected, because she believed she had a powerful love-charm which she had kept for years to use in just such a situation.

**<flashback>** During their honeymoon trip, when Heracles was taking her home, they had reached a river where the water was flowing too swiftly to safely cross. Luckily a passing centaur, Nessus, offered to help, and carried the young wife safely across the water. He took Deianira on his back and while midstream decided to kidnap her and take her as his

own wife. The centaur quickly bolted for the far woods with Heracles' wife screaming on his back. She shrieked and Heracles shot the creature as he reached the far bank. Before the half horse/half human died, he offered her an apology for his stupid decision. He told Deianira to take some of his blood and use it as a love potion for Heracles if ever she suspected he might love another woman more than her.

Now, years later, as Deianira heard about Iole, it seemed to her the time had come to use the centaur blood love potion, and she poured the vial onto a splendid robe and sent it to Heracles by the messenger.

As soon as the hero put on the robe sent to him by his wife, a fearful pain seized his entire body. It was as though he were in a burning fire. In his first agony he turned on Deianira's messenger, who was, of course, completely innocent, seized him and hurled him down into the sea, killing him instantly. It turned out the dying centaur's offer of help was actually a lie, for he knew his blood was poisoned with the Hydra's venom from Heracles' arrow. The love potion was actually a trap. The hydra's poisonous venom was powerful enough to slay most men, but it seemed that he himself could not die. The anguish he felt hardly weakened him.

What would certainly kill any other mortal man could not kill Heracles. He was in torture, but he lived and they brought him home.

Long before Heracles arrived back home, Deianira had heard what her gift had done to him, and she had killed herself out of guilt. In the end he did the same. Since death would not come to him being as that he was half-titan, he would choose to go to death. He ordered those around him to build a great mound of firewood and carry him to it. When at last he reached it he knew that now he could die and he was glad. "This is rest," he said. "This is the end." And as they lifted him to the pile of sticks he lay down on it and smiled.

He asked his friend, Philocetes, to hold the torch to set the wood on fire; and he asked his assembled friends to launch arrows at him while he burned. He hoped the combination of the three tortures – the poison, the flames and the arrows – would be enough to take him from this world. Then the flames rushed up and Heracles was seen no more on earth. He was taken to Mt. Olympus, where even Hera begged his forgiveness and allowed him to marry her daughter Hebe. And thus ends the mortal story of Heracles.