

The Twelve Labors of HERACLES



Heracles is better known by his Roman name, *Hercules*. He was the son of Zeus and Princess Alcmena. Born brave and incredibly strong, Heracles was also destined for trouble. But the difficulties he faced weren't his fault; in fact, Heracles' problems began even before he was born.

Zeus' wife, Hera, was terribly jealous of the other women that Zeus fell in love with. The mortal Alcmena was one of these women, and when she had Zeus' child, Hera was furious. Alcmena named the baby Heracles, which means "Hera's glory." She hoped that this gesture would satisfy Hera, but it didn't.

When Heracles was a small baby, Hera sent two fierce and deadly serpents to kill him in his crib. But Heracles surprised everyone with his amazing strength and strangled them both.

As he grew older, Heracles became famous for his strength and bravery. He met and married Megara and they had a family. But after all those years, Hera was still angry and jealous. To punish him she drove him mad. She made him believe that his wife and children were actually beasts, so he killed them all. Then Hera returned his sanity.

In despair over what he had done, Heracles asked the Oracle at Delphi how he could make up for what he'd done and overcome his guilt. The Oracle told him to offer himself as a slave to his cousin, Eurystheus, King of Mycenae.

Hera was pleased to see Heracles in such despair. "Promise him forgiveness and immortality if he completes ten tasks in ten years," she told King Eurystheus. "And I will help you devise tasks that no mortal could survive."

The weak and timid king agreed. He commanded Heracles to rid Greece of dangerous monsters, risk the immortals' wrath, and risk near-certain death. Heracles, miserable and desperate, agreed.

The Nemean Lion

“First you must kill the dreaded lion that lives in the Nemea valley,” King Eurystheus instructed Heracles. Heracles paled as he considered the difficulty of the task. The huge Nemean lion had a hide so tough it couldn’t be pierced with any mortal weapon. “And to prove that you killed the lion, you must bring its skin to me,” Eurystheus said.

Heracles traveled to the Nemea valley, where he watched the lion from afar. He considered how best to kill it. Would his strength be enough to strangle it? With a sudden shout, Heracles chased the beast from its lair and squeezed it to death with his bare hands. He skinned the lion with its own claws, as the lion’s tough hide broke Heracles’ knife at the hilt. With a great heave, Heracles lifted the hide onto his back and wore it as a cloak all the way back to Eurystheus’ kingdom.

When King Eurystheus saw a bloody lion striding toward him, he shuddered with fear and jumped into a brass urn to hide from the animal.

“It’s me, Heracles,” shouted his cousin into the urn. “The Nemean lion is dead, and my first task is complete.”

The Hydra

“Now you must kill the hydra who lives in the swamp of Lerna,” King Eurystheus ordered Heracles. Heracles nodded, and began the long chariot ride to the swamp. As he rode to the Lernean swamp, he thought about the nine-headed hydra, a monster so poisonous that even the fumes of its breath were fatal to anyone who breathed them.

Heracles left his chariot at the edge of the swamp. He took a deep breath, deeper than any other mortal could manage, and attacked the hydra. He used his club to knock off first one head and then another. But as each head rolled to the marshy earth, two new heads grew from each empty neck.

“Bring me my firebrand,” Heracles called to his chariot driver as he struggled with the monster. When the driver handed him the burning torch, Heracles was able to sear each empty neck closed, so no new heads could grow.

From Mount Olympus, Hera watched Heracles’ victory and was filled with anger. In an attempt to stop him, she sent a giant crab to earth to pinch his heels. With a swift kick, Heracles sent the crab flying. Then he spilled some of the hydra’s blood onto the ground and dipped his arrows in the puddle, making them as poisonous as the hydra itself. Satisfied, Heracles turned to his chariot driver:

“Back to the king,” he directed his driver. “And on to the next task.”

The Sword-Tusked Boar

Hera visited King Eurystheus in his palace. She strode toward him angrily.

"Make Heracles' tasks harder!" she shouted. "They're too easy for him now. Make him labor through this punishment. And if he should meet a monster he can't defeat . . ." Hera laughed bitterly. "So much the better!"

Timid King Eurystheus nodded and listened to Hera's suggestions. When Heracles returned to the palace, Eurystheus offered the most difficult challenge yet.

"Now you must trap the Erymanthian boar," he told Heracles. Heracles nodded and traveled to the slopes of Mount Erymanthus. There lived a wild boar whose tusks were as sharp as the finest swords. To approach the wily animal directly would mean certain death.

Heracles peered into the animal's cave. Covering his ears, he shouted a terrible shout that echoed throughout the cave. Terrified, the boar ran outside. Heracles chased it to the snowy top of the mountain, where he drove it into a snowbank. Stuck in the snowbank with its own tusks, the beast couldn't move. Heracles chained the boar by its middle and dragged it to the gates of King Eurystheus' palace. The boar's deafening roars scared the king, who hid again in the brass urn until he was ready to send Heracles away on the next task.

The Brass Birds

Lake Stymphalus was home to a swarm of deadly birds. Although they resembled cranes, the Stymphalides had razorlike claws and beaks that the birds used to tear apart and eat mortal flesh. Their pointed brass feathers were so sharp that if one feather fell from a bird in flight, it killed anyone standing below it.

"Get rid of those birds," King Eurystheus demanded of Heracles.

Heracles set off for Lake Stymphalus, covering himself completely with the skin of the Nemean lion that he still wore as a cloak. When the flock of birds saw Heracles, they stared hungrily at him. As if they were one huge bird, the flock swooped down upon him. Their claws slid from the slick lion's fur and their swordlike beaks failed to penetrate the lion's thick skin. Frustrated, the birds cried louder and louder and tried again and again to reach the mortal they knew to be hidden under the fur.

Suddenly, Heracles gave a gigantic roar that first silenced and then terrified the birds. Scared of the noisy invader, the birds flew away from Lake Stymphalus, never to return. Heracles returned to Mycenae to learn of his next labor.

The Sacred Deer

From her throne on Mount Olympus, Hera watched Heracles' success with growing frustration. "Harder, more dangerous labors!" she cried to herself. When her eye fell on Artemis, the goddess of the hunt, she had a brilliant idea. She descended from Mount Olympus to whisper it in King Eurystheus' ear.

When Heracles next greeted King Eurystheus, he noticed the steely glint in his cousin's eye and knew the next task might be impossible.

"Artemis has a herd of sacred deer," began the king.

Heracles nodded. Like all mortals, he knew of Artemis' deep devotion to her animals and the dreadful punishments she inflicted on those who hurt them.

"Bring the stag back to me," ordered King Eurystheus, "alive."

Heracles traveled many weeks to the Ceryneia forest where Artemis' herd of sacred deer roamed. When he found them, Heracles spent many more weeks simply watching the deer. King Eurystheus hoped that Heracles' brute strength would harm a deer and call Artemis' wrath down upon him. Heracles knew this, so he waited patiently before he approached the animals.

Among the herd, standing taller than the rest, was the Cerynean stag. Heracles knew him by his golden antlers and brazen hooves. Slowly, Heracles approached the stag. When the stag was accustomed to Heracles, the man and the deer ran together through the forest to the gates of King Eurystheus' palace.

Eurystheus had not expected to see Heracles alive again. After a glance at his cousin's startled face, Heracles led the animal back to its herd in the forest. Then he returned to Mycenae to learn the next labor.

Cleaning the Augean Stables

Eurystheus wanted to shame Heracles into giving up the labors, so he devised a task that he hoped would humble his cousin. King Augeas, who lived across the mountains to the west, in the land of Elis, had a herd of 3,000 cattle whose stables had not been cleaned in 30 years.

"You have one day to clean the Augean stables," Eurystheus told Heracles with a laugh. The king was certain that the stables couldn't be cleaned in a year and so was Augeas. When he greeted Heracles at the stable door, Augeas laughed at Heracles, too.

"If you can clean these stables in one day," said King Augeas, flinging open the stable doors, "I'll give you one tenth of my herd of cattle."

Heracles stared in dismay at the mountains of dung—30 years' worth—that filled the stable. The two kings were right: no mortal man could clean the stable alone, not in one day, maybe not in a lifetime. So Heracles needed to find another way.

Heracles walked to the place where the Alpheus and the Peleus rivers met. Using his enormous strength, Heracles held back the water with one hand while he pushed the rivers' banks with the other. He pushed again and again until the course of the two rivers ran straight through King Augeas's stables. Heracles released the water he had held back and watched as it surged into and then out of the stables, washing away the mounds of dung.

Satisfied, Heracles washed himself in the rivers and returned to his cousin's palace.

Visit to the Amazons

For his next labor, Eurystheus decided to send Heracles far away.

"Heracles," he instructed his cousin, "travel east to the land of the Amazons. From there, you must bring me the golden girdle of Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons." The girdle was a belt that signified her status as queen.

The Amazons were a tribe of women who waged war more skillfully than any group of mortals. They were known to dislike men. King Eurystheus and Heracles both knew that it would take more than brute strength to survive a visit to the Amazons.

Heracles traveled many weeks to reach the tribe's land east of Phrygia. He hoped to approach the Amazons as a guest and fellow warrior. How he would get Hippolyta's girdle, though, he didn't know.

To his surprise, the great Queen Hippolyta greeted Heracles warmly as a warrior equal to herself. She admired his strength and offered him her girdle willingly. Hippolyta even agreed to marry Heracles, but watchful Hera intervened. Disguised as an Amazon, Hera spread a rumor among the tribe that Heracles had come to kidnap the queen. The Amazons attacked Heracles. Skillful warrior that he was, Heracles was able to escape with the girdle. Sadly, Queen Hippolyta had been killed in battle, and Heracles returned to Mycenae alone to give the girdle to the king.

Diomedes' Horses

King Eurystheus, who was growing weary of Heracles, decided to send him even farther away.

"Go to Thrace, a kingdom far north of here," Eurystheus ordered Heracles. "There, King Diomedes keeps his man-eating horses. Bring them back to me alive."

Heracles traveled to Thrace, where he found the four mares who were famous for feeding on human flesh. They bared their blood-stained teeth at him when Heracles approached. Heracles knew that only an evil man could breed such evil horses, so he slew Diomedes and fed his remains to the four horses. Suddenly, the horses became so tame that Heracles was able to ride them back to Mycenae.

Eurystheus was surprised by Heracles' swift return and he was scared of the horses. He leaped into his brass urn to hide. From within the urn, he ordered his servants to dedicate the horses to Hera. Hera set them free on Mount Olympus. Now too tame to defend themselves, the mares were eaten by Apollo's wild beasts. In the meantime, King Eurystheus was thinking of an even more dangerous task for his cousin.

A Fire-Breathing Bull

Eurystheus sent Heracles south for his next task. "Capture the Cretan Bull," he commanded his cousin. "Bring it back alive or don't come back at all."

Heracles traveled to King Minos's kingdom on the island of Crete, far to the south of Mycenae. There he saw the gigantic Cretan Bull. It was a fierce, fire-breathing creature that Poseidon had given to King Minos as a gift and a curse.

"Even we," the Cretans told Heracles, "skilled bullfighters that we are, can't capture this bull."

Heracles ignored them and seized the angry bull by its great horns. He flung it to the ground and dragged it many miles until it was tame. Then he rode it back to King Eurystheus' palace in Mycenae.

When he saw his cousin riding the gigantic bull, the cowardly king hid again in his brass urn.

"Take that animal away," he bellowed.

Heracles hauled the bull to the plains of Marathon, where he allowed it to roam freely. It became known as the Marathonian Bull and was later killed by the warrior Theseus.

The Monster's Cattle

"Bring me the cattle of Geryon," shouted King Eurystheus from within his brass urn. Heracles knew that the large, red cows lived at Gades, an island in the middle of the seas. The island and the cattle were guarded by the three-headed monster named Geryon and his two-headed dog, Eurythion. Eurystheus was certain that Heracles couldn't possibly reach the island, let alone survive an encounter with the monster.

But Heracles traveled quickly to the end of the known world, where he spied the golden boat of Helios, the sun, floating in the ocean. With his powerful bow and poisoned arrow, Heracles took aim at the sun and called to Helios.

"If you don't lend me your ship I will shoot you from the sky," Heracles shouted at the sky. The frightened sun agreed.

As Heracles prepared to sail to Geryon's island, he raised the mountains Abiya and Calpe to serve as landmarks on his return trip.

As he sailed to Gades, waves threatened to overturn Heracles' ship. Again, Heracles raised his bow and arrow. The scared waves subsided and Heracles reached the island.

He began to load the cattle onto his boat immediately. When Geryon attacked him, Heracles sent a poisoned arrow through all three of the monster's heads.

When Heracles reached the mainland, Hera attacked the cattle with a swarm of gadflies that chased the herd all over Greece. But Heracles patiently rounded them up and brought them to King Eurystheus.

Exhausted from his labors, Heracles demanded food, rest, and his freedom.

"You may eat with the servants," said King Eurystheus, "and then I will release you."

Heracles ate and waited to be freed.

Hera Gets Involved Again

King Eurystheus sacrificed the cattle of Geryon to Hera. As he did so, the goddess appeared to him.

"Heracles' labors are complete," said King Eurystheus wearily. "I must grant him forgiveness and release him from service, just as the Oracle foretold."

"You will not do any such thing," Hera exclaimed. "Didn't Heracles have help from his chariot driver when he killed the hydra? And Heracles didn't clean the stables; the rivers did! He has two more labors to perform, and I have saved the hardest for last."

King Eurystheus agreed to assign Heracles two more labors, but he sent a servant to inform his cousin. When Heracles confronted the king, he found Eurystheus once again hiding in his urn.

"I will do two more of your foolish errands," said Heracles angrily. "Not to please you, but because I still seek the gods' forgiveness for my madness. And my labors have won me great glory all over Greece, which pleases the gods."

Eurystheus sighed with relief from within his urn and prepared to send Heracles on his next labor.

Three Golden Apples

"In the garden of the Hesperides," said King Eurystheus, "you will find the apple tree that Mother Earth gave to Hera when she married Zeus. Bring me three apples from that tree."

Heracles set off uncertainly, for no mortal knew where the garden was located. At last, Heracles met Nereus, the Old Man of the Sea, who knew the secret. Heracles used his great strength to squeeze the secret out of Nereus: "The garden, which is owned by the Titan Atlas, lies west of the setting sun."

On the way to the garden, Heracles found the Titan Prometheus chained to the Caucasus Mountains. Heracles released Prometheus, and Prometheus warned him that the apples would be fatal to any mortal who tried to pick them.

When Heracles reached the garden, he saw Atlas holding up the sky. "That looks very heavy," Heracles remarked. Zeus had long ago sentenced Atlas to hold the sky on his shoulders as a punishment. "I would be happy to hold Earth for a while if you will pick me three apples," Heracles said, as if he had just thought of the idea.

"I'll do it," said Atlas enthusiastically, for Earth was a heavy burden. He handed Earth to Heracles and picked three golden apples from Hera's tree.

"Maybe I'll keep these apples for myself," said Atlas, walking away from Heracles. Heracles realized that, now that he was free of the heavy Earth, Atlas would never return.

"Fine," said Heracles hastily. "Hold the sky while I make a pad for my shoulders from this lion skin. Then I will hold Earth again."

Atlas agreed, and when he again shouldered Earth, Heracles picked up the apples and ran to Mycenae.

Heracles gave the apples to his cousin, who gave them to Athena. She returned them to the garden of the Hesperides, since they would shrivel and rot in the mortal world.

Capturing Cerberus

“Capture Cerberus from the underworld and bring him here alive,” Eurystheus ordered Heracles. The king dreaded the sight of the three-headed watchdog of Hades, but Hera had commanded him to assign Heracles this most dangerous labor.

Heracles searched Earth until he found an entrance to the underworld far in the west, near Helios’s evening palace. To capture the monstrous dog, Heracles twisted the features of his face into a hideous expression and walked into the underworld. Hades was so frightened by the sight of Heracles’ face that he handed him the dog.

“Treat Cerberus well,” begged Hades, as Heracles left the underworld. Cerberus allowed Heracles to drag him into the upper world and as far as the gates of King Eurystheus’ palace.

Again hiding in his urn, King Eurystheus shouted to his cousin. “You are free from my service and forgiven for your madness. Now take the beast away.”

Heracles was relieved to be finished with his labors, but he still feared the gods. Mindful of what Hades had asked, Heracles dragged Cerberus all the way back home to the underworld. Then, after 10 years and 12 labors, Heracles was free.

What Happened Next to Heracles?

At the end of his labors, Heracles was only 28 years old. He had a long life ahead of him. For many years, he traveled around Greece performing heroic deeds.

Unfortunately, Hera was still angry at Heracles and she again made him insane. Heracles killed many men and again had to atone for his misdeeds. This time Zeus determined Heracles’ punishment and sentenced him to serve three years as the queen of Lydia’s slave. Queen Omphale dressed Heracles in women’s clothes and commanded him to spin and sew while she wore his lion skin and used his weapons. When Heracles was released, he again traveled through Greece performing feats of strength and daring.

Heracles suffered terribly when he was stabbed by his own arrow and poisoned by the hydra’s blood. Too strong to be killed by the poison, he ordered his friends to build a funeral pyre where he could lie down and die. Heracles gave away his weapons and climbed onto the fire. As the flames touched his feet, his servants heard sudden thunder and saw Heracles disappear. Zeus had called Heracles to Mount Olympus, where he became an immortal.

The gods welcomed Heracles, for the fates had predicted an attack from a terrible enemy. When the 50-legged giants surrounded Mount Olympus, Heracles cast them into the dark pit of Tartarus. This was Heracles’ final heroic deed; afterward, he lived in happiness, married to Hebe, the goddess of eternal youth.