The Story of Hercules

Long ago, two baby twin boys were asleep in a nursery. Their mother was a mortal. But their father was the mighty Zeus, king of all the gods. Right from the beginning, Hera, Zeus' wife, was very jealous of the children. And so, she tried all kinds of ways to kill them. One cool afternoon, she sent two snakes slithering through their nursery door, towards their beds. The larger of the two children stretched and yawned. The viper who was nearest stuck out his tongue and hissed. It reared its head, to see if it could reach the top of the mattress. That was the last thing it did, because the boy shot out his hand and grabbed it by the neck. The other snake slid swiftly across the floor towards him, but the child grabbed that one too and began to shake it. The nurse heard the commotion and came rushing into the nursery, but it was too late. The boy, Hercules, had killed them both. Even as a baby, he was incredibly strong.

Zeus loved his little son. He figured that sooner or later Hera might actually find a way to kill little Hercules. To keep his small son safe from attack, Zeus sent him to live with a mortal family on earth. The boy grew into a teenager, and he was without doubt the strongest human who ever walked on the face of the Earth. Still young, he was a handsome sight, with his towering height and his rippling muscles. Oh how the Theban girls loved him and oh how he loved the girls of Thebes. When other Greeks attacked the City of Thebes, Heracles always quickly sent them away. As a reward, Kreon, King of Thebes, married Heracles to his daughter, Megara.

Hercules grew up loved and noble. But he didn't fit in on Earth. Although he had every reason to be happy, Heracles was miserable, and strangely fearful. He spent most of his day asleep in his room. Megara consulted the Oracle of Delphi, and she explained that Hera had planted the seeds of madness inside the mind of her husband.

Heracles took the cure that was prescribed by the Oracle. For his tasks, Hercules presented himself to his cousin, Eurystheus, who was king of a little village and an evil man. Eurystheus thought everyone wanted to steal his crown, especially Hercules. One day, while Hera chatting about their mutual hatred for Hercules, Hera came up with a plan to kill Hercules. She was sure this one would work. Hera helped Eurystheus design 12 impossible labors that Hercules had to complete. When Hercules had completed the 12 labors, Hera promised he would earn his immortality.

Hercules was no fool. He asked [the Oracle at Delphi](http://greece.mrdonn.org/greekgods/oracles.html), who agreed. The oracle had said, "If you complete 12 Labors, immorality will be yours,” but she never explained what she meant by "immortality" - would he live forever in legend or for real?

**Labor #1: The Nemean Lion**

Eurystheus told Heracles about a lion that was the cause of suffering in the land of Nemea. It was attacking not only animals, but people. Heracles’ first task was to hunt and kill the Nemean Lion. The strongman travelled to Nemea, and the local shepherds soon pointed him in the direction of the lion’s cave. He hid behind a boulder, and waited for it to come out. Towards evening the lion emerged. It was indeed a tremendous beast that would strike fear into most men. Heracles pulled an arrow and set it in his bow. It was a powerful weapon, and it took immense strength just to pull back the string and flex it ready to fire. Heracles took aim and let loose the arrow. It flew towards the lion and caught it in the chest – but instead of piercing is skin, the arrow merely bounced off. Heracles quickly shot another arrow, and it was just as useless as the one before. Now he understood why the task was all but impossible. The hide of the Nemean Lion was impervious to weapons. The lion looked with curiosity at his bold attacker. Who was this fellow? No ordinary human for sure. Seeing that Heracles was as strong and fierce as himself, he decided to err on the side of caution and retreated into his cave.

The Nemean lion was not only strong, but he was cunning as well. His vast cave had many tunnels and two openings. If anyone ever pursued him through one entrance, he could always escape out of the other. Heracles had been warned of this by the shepherds. He walked around the mountain and found the lion’s escape hole. He uprooted a tree, and used its trunk to lever a huge boulder into the opening. Now it was sealed. Heracles went back to the first entrance, and crept into the lion’s cave. Inside, he caught sight of its green gleaming eyes. The lion did not expect a human to pounce on him, but that’s what Heracles did. He grappled and wrestled with the man-eating beast and finally defeated it, and killed it with his bare hands.

If you have ever seen a picture of Heracles, you will know that he liked to wear a lion skin over his shoulders, and that its mane was a kind of hood over his head. The ancient world was full of pictures of Heracles, most of them on vases. The lion skin that he wore was, of course, that of the Nimeon Lion. When he reported back to Eurystheus, he was wearing his new uniform. He was such a terrifying site, that the king hid inside a giant jug, and spoke to the hero from within it. After that, he forbade him to ever come into the city again. In future, he must stand outside the walls and display his trophies.

**Labor #2: The Lernaean Hydra**
Heracles’ next task was to fight another terrible creature. This one lurked in the swamps of Lerna, and it was known as the Lernaean Hydra. It was giant snake with multiple heads. If you cut off one of its heads, two more would grow in its place. It was indeed a fierce opponent. Even Heracles did not think he could fight this monster on his own. He enlisted the help of his nephew, Iolaus. Heracles fought the Hydra with his sword, and each time he lopped off one of its heads, Iolaus jumped in with a torch and burnt the stump before it could sprout a new one. Hera looked down on this struggle to the death, and thought, “Two humans against one monster! That’s hardly fair!” so she sent a giant crab to join in the fight. Heracles and Iolaus stood back to back and fought off both these supernatural beasts. After defeating them in battle, Heracles collected some of the hydra’s blood to use as poison on his arrows.

He returned to Eurystheus with news of his victory, but the king was not satisfied. “You did not fight the Hydra on your own,” he said, “And so the labor does not count.” Heracles shook his giant fist at the king, but Eurystheus, who was feeling safe at the top of his tower, shouted down: “It’s no use arguing. You’ve still got nine more labors to do, Heracles. And your next task is to bring me the sacred deer of Artemis – you’ll find it roaming the hills of Ceryneia. You will know it when you see it. It has little horns, made of gold.”

**Labor #3: The Ceryneian Hind**
The deer was illusive, and swift on its feet. Heracles was strong, but not so fast. He spent a year tracking the graceful creature over the hills of Ceryneia. Artemis, the goddess of hunting, did not approve of humans tracking her deer. When Heracles fired an arrow at her sacred deer, she was angry. But even though she was a goddess, she feared the strength in the arms of the son of Zeus. She brought Apollo along for moral support. The golden god of light appeared before Heracles and said:

“What’s all this? Shooting the sacred deer of Artemis is not allowed. It’s a good thing you did not kill the Cerneian Hind with your arrow, just now.”

“Well,” said Heracles unphased, “I am commanded by Heaven to perform these deeds, so although you are a god, you must let me do it.”

Apollo knew very well that Heracles was no ordinary man, but the son of Zeus. He consulted with Artemis and they agreed on a compromise. He could take the sacred deer to Eurystheus alive, but then he must let it go. And that was how Heracles completed his third labor and reported back to the king.

**Labor #4: The Erymanthian Boar**

“That was an easy one,” said Eurystheus, “The deer wasn’t a threat to anyone. Now you must take on a more dangerous foe. A wild boar is terrorizing the people of Erymanthia. Your fourth task is to defeat the Erymanthian Boar. But since you are going a bit soft, and don’t like killing animals anymore, you must bring back the bad piggy to me alive.”

And so Heracles set of once more across the part of Greece that is called the Peloponnese. It is the land where the wonderful civilization of the Mycenaeans was based. Later on the people of the Peloponnese were called the Spartans. But in the time of heroes, there were many more small city-states. Heracles’ journey took him through Pholoe, which was home to the centaurs. Centaurs were strange hybrids, half horse, half human. There he was entertained by a centaur called Pholus. His host offered him raw meat, but Heracles was a fussy eater, and said he preferred it cooked on the fire. Then he called for wine. Pholus was afraid to open the wine jar, because it was owned by all the centaurs in common. Heracles laughed and told him not to be so timid. And so the two opened the jar and drank the wine. When the other centaurs smelt roast meat, they came to see which human was visiting their land. They found Heracles and Pholus drinking their favorite wine and they were angry. Soon a mob of centaurs was hurling rocks and fur trees at the pair. But Heracles easily fought them off, and chased the hooligan horses as far Malea, before letting them go.

After the little diversion with the centaurs and the wine, he resumed his labor. He found the Erymanthian Boar, and backed it into a hollow. The cornered creature tried to charge Heracles with its tusks, but that was a mistake. The hero bopped it on the head with a rock and knocked it out. He then trussed up the unconscious pig, and carried it back to Mycenae.

**Labor #5: The Augean Stables**
While Heracles was away, King Eurystheus was busy searching for more impossible tasks. Next, he came up with something that made him smile. It was not so very dangerous, but it was delightfully disgusting. Heracles must clean out the Augean Stables and do it in just one day. Augeas was king of Elis, and he had many head of cattle. They were famous for the volume and the stink of their dung. When Hercules was given this smelly job, he was furious – cleaning out stables was not work fit for a son of Zeus. When he came before Augeas, he demanded to be paid for the task. The king agreed to give him a herd of cattle. Heracles managed to get the job done without dirtying his big hands. He diverted two rivers to run through the stables and flush them out.

But when King Eurystheus heard from his spies that Heracles had been paid for cleaning out the stables, he ruled that the labor would not count. He angrily told Heracles that his orders were to work for free. And that was how hero ended up doing twelve, instead of ten, labors.

**Labor #6:The Stymphalian Birds**For his sixth task, Heracles had to rid the lake of Stymphalos of some very nasty birds. A strange, feathered flock was eating the other birds, and all the fish in the lake. The local people, who made their living from the water, were going hungry. Heracles’ problem was that the birds were all hidden in the reeds. How could hunt down an entire flock? The goddess Athena came to his rescue. She leant him her castanets, which he clacked in his hands to make a divine din. The noise terrified the birds and they took flight. Once they were in the air, Heracles could shoot them down with his quick firing arrows.

**Labor #7: The Cretan Bull**
Eurystheus did not let up. He sent Heracles straight back to work on his sixth labor. For this one, he had to travel further afield than before. He set sail to the island of Crete, where king Minos was king. You may know the story of how the Ariadne, the daughter of Minos, helped Theseus to defeat the half-man, half bull, known as the Minotaur. But this was a different beast. It had come out of the sea – and the sea god Poseidon claimed it for his own. He demanded that King Minos make a sacrifice of the bull on the beach.

When Minos saw how beautiful the bull was, he played a sneaky trick – he took a different bull down to the beach and sacrificed that one instead. But it is foolish to try and deceive the gods. Poseidon was angry, and he sent his bull trampling all over the island. Its hooves were so heavy that they made the ground shake and buildings fall down. Heracles wrestled the Cretan Bull, tied it up, and brought it back as another living exhibit for Eurystheus. The king saw the beautiful bull from the top of his tower. He called down to Heracles and ordered him to set it free:

“Oh, King, I advise against that!” called back Heracles.

At this Eurystheus grew angry: “Slave, do not disobey me, or I shall strike this labor off and it shall not count,” replied the King. And so Heracles did as he was told. The bull set off over the hills, and trampled the fields making the walls of the city tremble and the people were afraid that their roofs would fall in. The strongman impassively awaited his next order from the King.

**Labor #9: The Belt of Hippolyte**

Heracles’ ninth labor was a more delicate mission. The daughter of King Eurystheus was going to be 18 years old, and he had promised her a very special birthday present – a particularly beautiful belt studded with precious stones. The only problem was that this belt belonged to Hippolyte, the Queen of the Amazons. The Amazons were a fierce tribe of women fighters who lived on the shores of the Black Sea. The belt had been given to Hippolyte by her own father, Ares the god of war. King Eurystheus would never have promised such a gift to his daughter if he did not have Heracles to fetch it for him.

Now, Heracles might have been a strongman, but he was not stupid. He understood that it is always better to try diplomacy before war. He met Queen Hippolyte on her royal barge, and he turned on all his charm. The warlike queen took a liking to the man of muscle, and she agreed to give him her belt. Hera – as always – was keen to cause trouble for Heracles – so she thought that this was all way too easy. She appeared among the Amazon guards and called out that Heracles was trying to kidnap their queen. They rushed in with their swords drawn and Heracles did not get away without a fight that he had not wished for. He took the belt back to Eurystheus in time for his daughter’s birthday. She was very pleased with her present.

**Labor #10: The Cattle of Geryon**

Heracles’ labors were getting further and further away from home. For his next task, he had to cross the Libyan desert to get to the other side of Africa. His orders were to get the cattle of Geryon, a three-headed monster. But the getting there was worse than the deed itself. The rays of the sun were more irksome to our thick-skinned hero than a cloud of Amazonian arrows. He wasn’t used to taking punishment without giving as good as he got, and so Heracles fired one of his own arrows up into the sun. Apollo, the god of the sun, was so impressed that appeared in his chariot and drove Heracles to the shore of the sea. There he gave him his golden cup, which floated like a boat, and Heracles rowed out to the island where Geryon and his cattle lived.

As he came onto the beach, a double-headed guard dog charged at him. He bopped first one, then the other head of the mutt with his club. Then three-headed Geryon came at him, with three swords and three shields, all growing out of one body. He did not bother Heracles much – our hero shot the triplicate monster with one of his poison arrows – and that was the end of him. He loaded the cattle onto a ship, and sailed them back to the mainland – but once on land, he had more trouble. Hera sent gadfly to torment the cattle and they stampeded and got away from him. He spent an entire year rounding them up again before he could return to Mycenae with his prize.

“Now I have completed my ten labors, and you must set me free,” said Heracles to King Eurystheus.

“You are forgetting,” replied the King, “Two of them didn’t count. You broke the rules. You had help slaying the Lernaean Hydra and you were paid for cleaning out the Augean stables. You still owe me two more tasks. Now you must steal the apples of the Hesperides. Off you go ” And off he went, although he did not like it much.

**Labor #11: The Apples of the Hesperides.**

The task was tougher than it seemed. Heracles did not even know where to begin looking for the garden. He set off wondering the world in search of the apples. Fortunately, as he was crossing a river, a nymph gave him a good tip. She told him to capture Nereus, the Old man of the Sea, because he knew the secret of the apples. Heracles found Nereus sleeping on a rock by the beach. He caught him by the foot, and the old man immediately changed shape, first into a giant fish, then a massive piece of seaweed, into a dolphin, and finally a crab with pincers – but Heracles held tightly on to him. The old man relented and said:

“So what do you want from me?”And Heracles explained that he needed information about the Apples of the Hesperides.

“Well,” said the old man, “Hera gave them to Zeus on their wedding day. They grow on trees in a blissful garden in North Africa. The garden is tended to by three nymphs, the Hesperides. The walls are patrolled by an immortal dragon with 100 heads. Even you should not attempt to fight the dragon, Heracles. The only person who can get those apples is Atlas, for he is the father of the Hesperides. They will surely give them to him without a fight.”

And so instead of going directly to the garden, Heracles dropped by to see Atlas, a giant of a god whose feet stood on the bottom of the universe, and whose shoulders carried the weight of the world. Heracles offered to change places with him, and to hold up the world while Atlas went to fetch the apples. As you can imagine, Atlas, who had been holding up the world for millions of years, was pleased to be offered a break. He gladly let Heracles take the world on his shoulders while he visited his daughters. Some weeks later he returned with the three divine apples. But he did not want to take back his old job.

“Stay there, Heracles,” he said, “I’ll take these apples to Eurystheus for you.”

Heracles understood that he would be holding up the world for the rest of all time. That was one labor too far. And so he said slyly to Atlas, “Sure, but before you go, just take the world for a moment while I adjust my cloak. It’s ruffled up on my shoulder.” And Atlas naively did as Heracles suggested. As soon as he was free from the world, Heracles picked up the apples and ran off. The episode shows that our hero was more than a muscle man – he had brains too.

And so, when he had presented the three divine apples to Eurystheus, Heracles had only one more task remaining. He hoped it would be one he could get done swiftly. “Well done, you are almost there,” said Eurystheus. “Your last task is a simple matter for a man like you. All you have to do is pop down to the Underworld and fetch me Cerberus.”

“What?” said Heracles, “No mortal can visit the realm of the dead and return back to the light.”

“Well you must, if you want to be free,” replied the king.

**Labor #12: Cerberus, The Guard Dog of the Underworld**

And so Heracles, muttering to himself that there were different degrees of “impossible”, set off to look for advice on what he could do. He visited Eleusis, where the priests specialized in the cult of the dead and the underworld. There he was initiated in the mysteries of Hades, and he learned where the river Styx flows down into the the Underworld. Not far from there was the opening of a cave where he must begin his decent. In this way, Heracles was the first living mortal to travel down to Hades. After him Orpheus and Odysseus made the same journey, but they had not yet been born. There he met Theseus, who had been imprisoned for trying to kidnap Persephone, the queen of the Underworld. His leg was tied to a table by a snake that had turned to stone. Heracles broke his serpentine chain and set his fellow hero free. Then Heracles had an audience with Hades, the pale-faced king of the Underworld. He agreed to let him borrow Cerberus provided that he could overpower the three-headed dog without using weapons. This was the sort of work Heracles was used to doing. He soon had the fierce guard dog of the dead trussed up and whimpering like a puppy.

And when he brought him to display to Eurystheus, I have to say that for once, the task-master was truly impressed. He told Heracles he could be free once he had returned Cerberus to his owner, and so Heracles had to go down to the Underworld a second time. But when he emerged back up to the light of the world, he rejoiced in his heart, for now he had his liberty.