

## The Youth of Hercules\*

Hercules [HER-kue-leez] was the greatest hero of Greece. He was, in fact, a demigod by birth (the child of a god and a mortal). His father was Zeus [ZOOS], and his mother was Alcmena [alk-MEEN-ee], a princess of Thebes. He grew up in the royal palace. When only a baby he showed his uncommon strength. Already he had an enemy, Hera [HEE-ruh], who was always resentful and jealous. The queen of the gods sent two big snakes after the child as he lay in his little bed. Hercules, who was not even two years old, woke up just in time. With his tough little hands he grabbed each serpent by the neck and strangled them. The royal household, which had heard the commotion, came rushing in. They were astonished. Clearly, this child was someone special. The prophet, Teiresias [tie-REE-see-uhs], predicted great things for him.

As Hercules grew, he received the finest education, though he was a slow learner and not very bright. The best masters taught him boxing, wrestling, and archery. He learned how to read and write—not common in those days even for princes—and all about music, both singing and playing. He learned horsemanship and how to drive a chariot. And as he grew older he learned battle tactics and the use of weapons and how to lead men in war.

One day when he was eighteen, he was walking along the road and saw two women approaching, one behind the other. The first one ran ahead to reach him first. He could see that she was tall and attractive, with painted cheeks and lips. She said, in a sweet, caressing voice, "Young man, you look like you don't know where you're going or what you're up to. Come see me sometime. I'll be good to you and show you a pleasant life. You won't have to work very hard, and you'll always have a good time."

Hercules asked, "Who are you?" She replied her name was Pleasure, but people who disapproved of her



**The jealous goddess Hera made life difficult for Hercules.**

*Hercules = Heracles(Gk)*

*Zeus = Jupiter, Jove*

*Hera = Juno*

\*Although these stories about Hercules are mostly from Greek sources, the Roman name, Hercules, is used here because it is more familiar to most people.

called her Vice.

Then the second woman came up. She was completely different, tall and beautiful, too, but with no rouge or lipstick. She was dressed modestly and simply in white. She had an air of nobility and truth. She spoke courteously but with dignified firmness: "I know of you, my dear sir. You come of a good family and many good things have been said about great deeds you might do. I'm not going to deceive you, just tell you the truth. Good things, the greatest things, don't come easily. They come through work and suffering and hardship. If you want to raise crops, you have to plow the land, sow seeds, fight weeds, reap the harvest, and toil in the sweat of your brow. If you want a strong body, you have to train it and make it serve your mind. You mustn't fear work and sweat. You must offer prayers to the gods if you need their help; you must humbly atone for your faults. You must love your country and fight for it. Men were born to pray and work hard. If you can learn these truths and apply them in your life and experience, you can become great and happy in the best way." Hercules, meek and bashful,

asked her name. She replied, "It is Virtue."

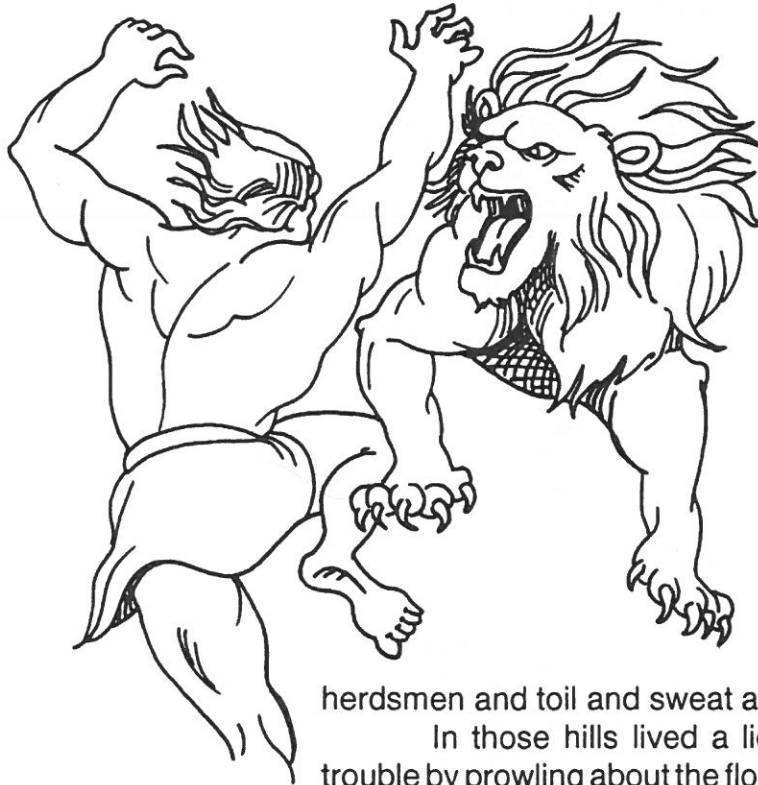
At this point Pleasure tried to distract him, but Virtue won. Hercules made a resolution to follow the hard way, wherever it led. He would pay the price for that choice, but he would have his reward.

But it would be a long, hard fight for the hero. First of all, he had to conquer himself—his own unruly temper. One day he was having a music lesson. His teacher scolded him for carelessness and tried to punish him. Hercules, in a rage, lifted his lute and smashed it over the teacher's head, killing him. Of course, Hercules had never intended this; he simply wasn't aware of his own strength. But now he was considered dangerous. He was banished to the hills to live with rough

herdsmen and toil and sweat among the sheep and cattle.

In those hills lived a lion who had caused the herdsmen much trouble by prowling about the flocks and herds and, now and then, killing the stock. Hercules went after the beast and killed it with his bare hands; he was a master of the stranglehold, as he had proved years before with the serpents. When he came back carrying the great beast, he won the respect and even the love of the herdsmen. That was the beginning of his rehabilitation, though he would continue to slip and stumble from time to time.

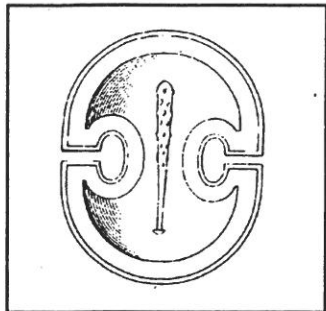
Eventually, Hercules married a princess, Megara [MEG-uh-ruh], and they had two sons. But Hera still could not forgive him for being the son



**Hercules used his bare hands to kill the lion that had been threatening the countryside.**

of her husband and another woman; her malice always pursued him. So she caused something terrible to happen. The cruel goddess drove him temporarily mad. In this fit of insanity he went wild and killed Megara and his two sons. When he recovered his wits he could not understand what had happened. Filled with remorse, he sought atonement, if there was atonement for such a dreadful thing. The Delphi oracle told him he must leave Thebes and go to the south of Greece and serve the King of Mycenae, Eurystheus [yur-EES-thee-uhs].

On his way south he stopped at Athens. His friend, the good Theseus [THEE-see-uhs], welcomed him and tried to help him. He tried to point out that a mad man is not responsible for his acts, that some jealous god was behind the terrible deed. But poor Hercules could not reason things out that way. He knew he had done wrong, that he must be punished and undergo a long penance. That was why he accepted the Twelve Labors imposed on him by the King of Mycenae.



## ***The Twelve Labors of Hercules: Part One***

After killing his family in an insane rage induced by Hera [HEE-ruh], Hercules [HER-kue-leez] went to Eurystheus [yur-EES-thee-uhs], the king of Mycenae, and offered to be his slave. He was prepared to accept the most difficult tasks as punishment for his crime. Eurystheus invented twelve tasks, known as the Twelve Labors. They were all nearly impossible to accomplish, even for the strongest man on earth.

*Hera = Juno  
Hercules = Heracles*

The First Labor was to kill the Nemean Lion. In the Nemean Valley near Mycenae, a terrible lion ranged. Hercules went there, taking his bow and quiver of arrows and the big club he always had with him. He found the lion's den, but the beast was out hunting, so Hercules waited. At the end of the day the lion came back licking its slavering chops, spotted with the blood of its prey. Hercules shot an arrow, but it bounced off the beast's hide, for this was a special lion—it could not be killed with conventional weapons. Only Hercules' incredible strength could conquer the beast. He slammed his club over the lion's head; the club splintered but momentarily stunned the beast. Hercules jumped on its back, worked down the hind legs with his feet, grabbed the lion's neck with his hands, drew back the head, and strangled him. He cut off the tawny hide with the lion's own claws and took it back with him, but would not give it up to Eurystheus. He had won it as a trophy of war in a fair fight, which none could deny, and he wore it afterwards with the head on his own head like a helmet.

The Second Labor concerned the Lernaean Hydra. This was a beast, a big snake, with nine heads. The Hydra lived way off in the swamps and marshes of Argos, near the sea. Hercules rode to the place in his chariot, driven by his nephew Iolaus [i-oh-LAY-uhs]. When they got there, the hero tried several weapons: arrows, his club, and a sickle. He cut off one head after another, but whenever he had severed one, two more grew in its place.

A huge crab came to help the Hydra, and young Iolaus ran up to help



**Hercules used his intelligence to defeat the Hydra by coming up with the idea of cauterizing the necks of the beast.**

his uncle. But the heroes, though holding their own, were not getting anywhere until Hercules suddenly became inspired. He told his nephew to build a fire and set up torches. As his uncle lopped off a Hydra head, Iolaus cauterized the neck with fire to close it so that no new head could grow. After cutting off the last head and searing the neck with fire, they buried the head under a rock. The marsh still breeds snakes, but they are just ordinary ones, mean but not monsters. The heroes killed the Hydra's crab ally, too, and it became a constellation in the sky, part of the zodiac group that terrified Phaethon [FAY-eh-thon].

The Third Labor was to capture the Arcadian Deer. This deer was female, a doe, but it bore antlers of gold and had feet of bronze. Being sacred to Artemis [AR-tem-is], she wandered free all over wooded Arcady,

*Artemis = Diana*



**Artemis was angry with Hercules for capturing the Arcadian Deer.**

and it took Hercules a year of hunting before he caught her. On the return trip, with the live deer strapped to his back, he ran into Artemis, who angrily asked what he was doing with *her* doe. Hercules answered meekly that he had no choice; it was the will of Zeus expressed through the oracle that as a penance he obey Lord Eurystheus in all things. So he made his peace with Artemis, who was not easily appeased.

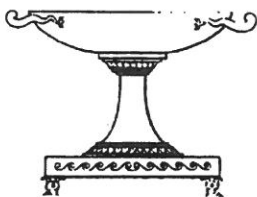
In the Fourth Labor, Hercules took on the Erymanthian Boar. This beast was a menace to the whole country: people, livestock, and crops. Hercules' task was to capture the boar and take it to King Eurystheus.

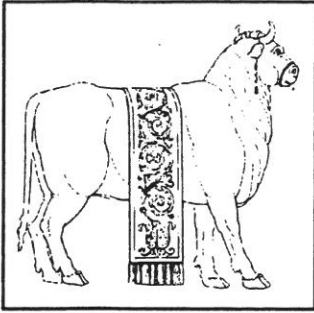
On his way to find the boar, Hercules had to pass through the land of the Centaurs, those rather engaging creatures with a man's

head and shoulders and a horse's body. They had the strength and speed of horses and the wisdom of men, but most of them were more beasts than men. There was one, however, Pholus [FOH-luhs] by name, who was friendly. When Hercules arrived, Pholus invited him into his cave for a drink of punch and a good meal. The hero thanked the Centaur for his hospitality and went in. Pholus served him the punch; it was delicious. Hercules had never tasted anything like it before. The aroma spread near and far, and the other Centaurs came galloping up. When they discovered Hercules enjoying their special punch, they attacked him. Pholus, scared nearly to death, ran off, so Hercules had to take on these wild beasts alone. They went at him

with torn up trees, big boulders, torches, and axes. Their mother, a big storm cloud, poured down a gray fog like pea soup that blinded Hercules and made the cave floor so slippery he could hardly stand up. But he persisted in the fight, wiping out a good many of the Centaurs and driving the rest away.

Hercules continued his search for the wild boar. When he found the boar he chased it all around the bushes in the snow until the brute died of pure exhaustion. Hercules threw it across his back like a large rucksack and tramped into the hall where king Eurystheus was waiting, always ready with more work for him to do.





## The Twelve Labors of Hercules: Part Two

The Fifth Labor, the chore of cleaning out the Augean stables, was less dangerous than some of the others, but in its way even more arduous. Augeas [oh-JEE-uhs] was king of neighboring Elis. His stable, with thousands of cattle, had not been cleaned for thirty years, so it was incredibly filthy. Hercules [HER-kue-leez] was told to clean it all up in a single day. Hercules for once was shrewd. He said he'd do the job, but Augeas would have to give him one-tenth of the cattle. Augeas agreed.

*Hercules = Heracles*

Now Hercules proved himself to be a clever engineer, a master of hydraulics. There were two rivers nearby, one on each side of the stable. Hercules knocked out parts of the stable walls at either end and diverted the course of both rivers toward the upper end of the barn. Following the natural line of gravity, the rivers ran downhill, converged, and ripped through the stalls, washing away all of the dirt and filth.

Augeas, however, went back on his promise of the cows. Hercules did not argue; he was still consumed with working out his penance. But later he took his revenge by seizing riches from Elis, which he used to found the ancient Olympic games.

The Sixth Labor was to eliminate the Stymphalian birds. These were man-eating birds with claws, beaks, and wings of bronze. They came out of Lake Stymphalus in Arcadia, swarmed down on the fields, and destroyed

**Hercules watches  
as the rivers  
clean the Augean  
stables for him.**

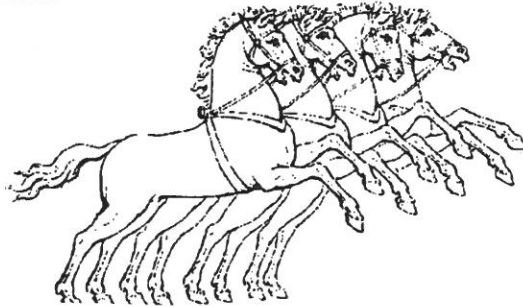


*Athena = Minerva***Athena**

crops like locusts. For this task, Hercules received help from the goddess Athena [uh-THEEN-uh], who respected him for his manliness and good heart. She gave him a big brass rattle that sounded like a whole band of cymbals. Assaulted by the tremendous noise, the bronze birds flew off, and Hercules shot them with his poisoned arrows.

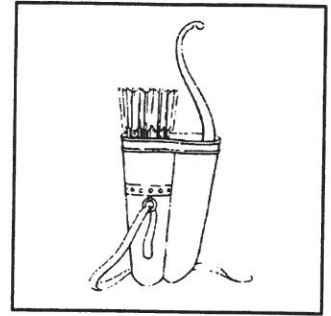
The Seventh Labor was to deliver the Cretan bull to King Eurystheus [yur-EES-thee-uhs]. The Cretan bull belonged to King Minos [MY-nohs] of Crete. It was a beautiful creature, but it had gone crazy, and King Minos was anxious to get rid of it. Hercules went to Crete, captured the mad bull, and took it back to Mycenae.

The next Labor, the Eighth, was to capture the wild mares of Diomedes [die-oh-MEE-deez], a barbarian king of Thrace. His horses were man eaters and so wild that Diomedes had to tether them to their brass mangers with chains of iron. Hercules organized a troop of young men and led them to Thrace, where they made a massive assault on Diomedes' citadel, which soon fell. They captured the cruel and savage king, and the horses, no longer threatened by this evil man, calmed down and were easily led to Eurystheus.





## The Twelve Labors of Hercules: Part Three



*Hercules = Heracles*

Labor Number Nine involved the beautiful belt of Hippolyta [hip-PAW-lit-uh], Queen of the Amazons, a tribe of women warriors who fought on horseback. Hercules [HER-kue-leez] raised another army of volunteers and led it across the Aegean Sea into Asia Minor. At first he tried tough diplomacy and simply demanded the belt. Surprisingly, Hippolyta seemed willing to give it up; she may have been impressed by this brisk and brusque young soldier. The other Amazons, however, thought their queen was being taken captive, so they attacked the Greeks. It was quite a battle: Europe against Asia, men against women! But Hercules' men won, and Hercules brought the broad belt back.

The Tenth Labor involved the longest journey, to an island, Erythia, located off the Spanish Coast, where there lived a dreadful monster, Geryon [GAIR-ee-on], who had three bodies joined at the waist. Another, lesser, monster guarded his cattle, along with a two-headed dog. These beasts were laying waste to all the lands in the area, creating a state of disorder without any effective government. Hercules' job was to bring back Geryon's cattle.

On his way to battle the monster, Hercules built two gigantic pillars, one on either side of the straits that are now called Gibraltar, where the Mediterranean Sea meets the Atlantic Ocean. For thousands of years these pillars were called the Pillars of Hercules.

When he arrived on the island, he killed the two-headed dog with his club, then killed the guardian monster and shot the three-bodied Geryon with arrows. He drove the cattle back by a land route through Europe. He also taught the people of the island the ways of law and stable government—a great accomplishment for a man who had been



**Amazons were fierce women warriors who lived in Asia Minor.**

a slow learner in school!

The Eleventh Labor was to fetch the Golden Apples of the Hesperides, guarded by the three fair daughters of Atlas [AT-luhs] along with a great dragon. This task was even more difficult because he did not know exactly



where the Hesperides were, so he had to hunt all over the known world and even into the unknown world. At first, he went the wrong way, to the east, as far as the Caucasus Mountains, where Prometheus [pro-MEE-thee-uhs], the great Titan who gave fire to mankind, was still bound to the icy rock, still suffering terrible torments. Here the anger of Hercules at the Titan's unjust fate was a righteous anger, and here perhaps he did his greatest deed, though it is not officially ranked with the Twelve. He set Prometheus free. Only the strongest man in the world—not even a god—could have done that. Hercules even proved to be a successful diplomat—he persuaded Zeus to take Prometheus back again and treat him kindly and receive him well at Olympus.

Prometheus wished to return the favor as best he could. He counseled Hercules to find Atlas, his brother, and ask him where the apples were, since the Hesperides were his daughters. Hercules did so. He found the old Titan on his mountain in northwest Africa, holding up the sky. Hercules, in a friendly way, greeted him and asked directions. Atlas said, regretfully, that the exact location of the garden was a secret. "But," he said, "just hold up the sky for me, and I'll get the apples for you." Hercules agreed and took the skies on his shoulders, while Atlas, delighted to be free, ran off to fetch the apples. Holding up the heavens was a tough chore even for Hercules, and he began to wonder if perhaps he had made a mistake. But Atlas was true to his word; he brought the apples back. A little wistfully, he asked if he might deliver them to Eurystheus [yur-EES-thee-uhs]. But

**While Atlas went to find the Golden Apples of the Hesperides, Hercules held up the sky.**

Hercules was afraid that if Atlas went off with the apples he would never come back, and then Hercules would have to hold up the skies until the end of time. So he asked the giant to hold up the sky for just a minute while he eased his shoulders. "After all," he told him, "even strong men need to rest." Atlas was not smart like his brother, Prometheus—he had no foresight. So he agreed. Hercules put the sky back on the Titan's shoulders, picked up the apples, and took them back to Eurystheus.

For his Twelfth Labor, Hercules was required to go down to Hades and fetch up Cerberus [SER-ber-uhs], the three-headed dog who guarded the door. Pluto [PLOO-toh] was willing to loan out his dog for awhile, but forbade Hercules to use weapons. So the hero grabbed the dog in his hands and gave him several good squeezes until he was tamed. Then he carried him to the upper world, showed him to Eurystheus, and brought him back. With that, Hercules' labors were done.

*Pluto = Hades*



