

The Labours of Heracles (the end of the myth)

“Now I have completed my ten labours, 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 garden of the Hesperides. Off you go!”

And off Heracles went, although he did not like it much.

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 wandering 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 gave up and said,

“So what do you want from me?”

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.”

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 labour too far, so he said slyly to Atlas,

“Before you go, just take the world for a moment while I adjust my cloak. It’s ruffled up onto my shoulder.” Atlas did as Heracles suggested. As soon as he was free from the world, Heracles picked up the apples and ran off. His trick had worked.

When Heracles had presented the three divine apples to Eurystheus, he had only one more task remaining. He hoped it would be one he could get done quickly.

“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, the three-headed dog that guards the souls of the dead.”

“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.

Cerberus, the Guard Dog of the Underworld

Heracles set off to look for advice on what he could do. He visited Eleusis, where the priests specialised in the cult of the dead and the underworld. There he was told the mysteries of Hades, and he learned where the river Styx flows down into the Underworld. Not far from there was the opening of a cave where he must begin his descent. Heracles met with Hades, the pale faced king of the Underworld. Hades agreed to let him borrow Cerberus as long as 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 tied up and whimpering like a puppy.

When he brought him to display to Eurystheus, 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. When he emerged back up to the light of the world, he rejoiced in his heart, for now he had his freedom.