

## The Labours of Heracles (part 1)

Long ago, a baby boy was asleep in a nursery. The door was open to let the cool breeze waft into the room. However, it was not just the air that could enter the room. First one, and then a second snake slithered in through the gap. They had been sent by the goddess Hera, Queen of Heaven. It's hard to understand how anyone, even a goddess, could hold anything against innocent children, but her immortal heart was filled with hatred for the baby boy. His mother was a human woman, but his father was none other than Zeus, Lord of Heaven, and husband of Hera. In short, Hera was jealous. The snakes slid towards the bed. The baby stretched and yawned. The viper who was out in front 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 violently. The nurse heard the commotion came rushing into the nursery, but it was too late – for the snakes. The boy, whose name was Heracles, had killed them both.

The boy grew into a teenager, and he was without doubt the strongest human who had ever walked on the face of the Earth. Still young, he was a formidable sight, with his towering height and his huge muscles. Oh how the Theban girls loved him! And how he loved the girls of Thebes. When other Greeks attacked the City of Thebes, Heracles sent the enemies packing. As a reward, Kreon, King of Thebes, married Heracles to his daughter, Megara.

Though he had every reason to be happy, Heracles was miserable, and strangely fearful. He spent most of his days 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. To free himself of the curse, he must perform ten impossible labours to help the people of Greece.

Heracles went to see Eurystheus, king of Tiryns in Mycenae, who was to set his ten impossible tasks.

### 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's hearts. Heracles pulled an arrow from his quiver, 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 his skin, the arrow just 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 skin of the lion could never be pierced by an arrow.

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 chased 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 blocked it with a boulder. 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 wrestled with the man-eating beast and finally defeated it, killing it with his bare hands.

Heracles took the lion skin and wore it as a cloak. He wore its mane as a hood. When he reported back to Eurystheus, he was wearing his new uniform. He was such a terrifying sight that the king hid inside a giant jug, and spoke to the hero from within it. After that, he forbade Heracles to ever come into the city again. In future, he must stand outside the walls to display his trophies.

### 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 a 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 chopped off one of its heads, Iolaus jumped in with a torch and burned the stump before it grew any new heads. Hera looked down on this struggle to the death, and thought, "Two humans against one monster! That's hardly fair!" and 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 labour 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 labours to do, Heracles. Your next task is to bring me the sacred hind (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."

### The Ceryneian Hind

The deer was elusive 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 was afraid of what Zeus would do if she harmed Heracles. She agreed on a compromise. Heracles could take the sacred deer to Eurystheus alive, but then he must let it go. That was how Heracles completed his third labour and reported back to the king of Tiryns.

### 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 terrorising the people of Erymanthia. Your fourth task is to defeat the Erymanthian Boar. You must bring him back alive."

And so Heracles set off once more across Greece. He found the Erymanthian Boar, and backed it into a corner in a forest. The cornered creature tried to charge Heracles with its tusks, but that was a mistake. The hero hit it on the head with a rock and knocked it out. He then tied up the unconscious pig, and carried it back to Mycenae.

### The Augean Stables

Next, Heracles was told to clean out the Augean Stables and do it in just one day. Augeas was king of Elis, and he had many herds of cattle. They were famous for the volume and the stink of their dung. When Heracles was given this 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 changed the course of two rivers to run through the stables and flush them out.

When King Eurystheus heard from his spies that Heracles had been paid for cleaning out the stables, he ruled that the labour would not count. He angrily told Heracles that his orders were to work for free.

### The Stymphalian Birds

For his sixth task, Heracles had to rid the lake of Stymphalos of some very nasty birds. A strange feathered flock that were 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 he hunt down an entire flock? The goddess of wisdom, Athena, came to his rescue. She lent him her castanets (a musical instrument), which he clacked in his hands to make a loud noise. 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.

### The Cretan Bull

Eurystheus did not give up. He sent Heracles straight back to work on his sixth labour. 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 Ariadne, the daughter of Minos, helped Theseus to defeat the half-man, half bull, known as the Minotaur. Now 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 labour 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 waited for his next order from the King.