The hero of this myth is half human and half god.

The Labors of Heracles

Retold by Robert Graves

Heracles, whom the Romans called Hercules, was Zeus' son by Alcmene, a Theban princess. Hera, angry that Zeus had made another of his marriages with a mortal woman, sent two tremendous snakes to kill Heracles while still a baby. He and his twin brother Iphicles were lying asleep in a shield, used as a cradle, when the snakes crawled hissing towards them across the floor. Iphicles screamed and rolled out of the shield. But Heracles, an immensely strong child, caught the snakes by their throats, one in each hand, and strangled them.

As a boy, Heracles took far more interest in fighting than in reading, writing, or music. He also preferred roast meat and barley bread to honey cakes and fruit pies. Soon he became the best archer, the best wrestler, and the best boxer alive. Because Linus, his music teacher, beat him for not taking enough trouble over his scales, Heracles knocked Linus dead with a lyre. Accused of murder, Heracles said simply, "Linus hit me first. All I did was to defend myself." The judges let him off.

Eurystheus, the High King of Greece, wanted to banish Amphitryon, King of Thebes, now Heracles' stepfather; but Heracles nobly offered to be his slave for ninety-nine months if Amphitryon might stay and keep his throne. Hera advised Eurystheus: "Agree, but set Heracles the ten most dangerous Labors you can possibly choose, all to be performed in those ninety-nine months. I want him killed."

The First Labor that Eurystheus set Heracles was to kill the Nemean Lion, an enormous beast, with a skin proof against stone, brass, or iron. It lived in a mountain cave. When the arrows that Heracles shot at the lion bounced off harmlessly, he took his great club of wild olive wood and hit it on the head, but only smashed the club. The lion shook its head, because of the singing noise in its ears, then yawned and went back to its cave. This cave had two entrances. Heracles netted the smaller with a brass net and, going in by the larger, caught the lion by the throat. Though it bit off the middle finger of his left hand, he managed to get its head under his right arm and squeeze it to death. Heracles skinned the lion by using one of its own claws for a knife, and afterwards wore the skin. Then he cut himself a second club of wild olive wood and reported to Eurystheus.

The Second Labor was far more dangerous: to kill the monstrous Hydra in the marshes of Lerna. She had a huge body like a dog's and eight snake heads on long necks. Heracles fired flaming arrows at the Hydra as she came out from her hole under the roots of a plane tree. Then he rushed forward and battered at the eight heads. As fast as he crushed them, others grew in their places.

1. Hera, wife of Zeus, queen of the gods.
2. lyre (lir): a small strunged instrument of the harp family.
Up scurried a crab, sent by Hera, and bit his foot. Heracles broke its shell with a kick. At the same time he drew his sharp, gold-hilted sword and called for Iolaus, his chariot driver. Iolaus hurriedly brought a torch and, after Heracles had cut off each head, singed the neck to prevent a new one from sprouting. That was the end of the Hydra. Heracles dipped his arrows in her poisonous blood. Whoever they struck would die painfully.

The Third Labor was to capture the Ceryneian Hind, a white deer with brass hooves and golden horns, belonging to the Goddess Artemis. It took Heracles a whole year to catch the hind. He chased her up hill and down dale all over Greece, until at last he shot an unpoisoned arrow at her as she ran past him. The arrow went between the sinew and bone of her forelegs, without drawing a drop of blood, and pinned them together. As she stumbled and fell, Heracles seized her, drew out the arrow, and carried her on his shoulders to Eurystheus. Artemis would have been furious if he had killed her pet hind, but forgave him because she admired his clever shooting. Eurystheus then set the hind free.

The Fourth Labor was to capture the Erymanthian Boar, a huge creature with tusks like an elephant’s, and an arrow-proof skin. Heracles chased it to and fro across the mountains in winter, until it stuck in a deep snowdrift. There he jumped in after it and tied its hind legs to its forelegs. When Eurystheus saw Heracles carrying the boar on his back up the palace avenue, he ran off and hid in a big brass jar.

The Fifth Labor was to clean King Augeas’ filthy cattle yard in a single day. Augeas owned many thousands of cattle and never troubled to

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3. Artemis: the goddess of the moon, wild animals, and hunting.
get rid of the messes they made. Eurystheus set this task just to annoy Heracles, hoping that he would cover himself with filth as he loaded the dung in baskets and carried them away. Augeas stood and sneered at Heracles: "I bet you twenty cows to one, that you cannot clean the yard in a day."

"Done," said Heracles.

He swung his club, knocked down the yard wall, then borrowed a mattock and quickly dug deep channels from two nearby rivers. The river water, rushing through the yard, washed it clean in a very short time.

As his Sixth Labor, Eurystheus told Heracles to free the Stymphalian Marsh of its brass-feathered, man-eating birds. They looked like cranes, but had beaks that would pierce an iron breastplate. Heracles could not swim through the marsh because it was too muddy, nor walk across it because the mud would not bear his weight; and when he shot at the birds, his arrows glanced off their feathers.

The Goddess Athene appeared and handed him a brass rattle. "Shake that!" she ordered. Heracles shook the rattle. The birds rose into the air, mad with terror. He shot and killed scores of them as they flew off towards the Black Sea, for they had no brass feathers on the undersides of their bodies. None ever returned.

The Seventh Labor was to capture a bull, the terror of Crete. It chased farmers and soldiers, battered down huts and barns, trampled cornfields flat, frightened women and children. This bull had first appeared when Europa's son Minos told the Cretans, "I am King of this island. Let the gods send me a sign to prove it!" As he spoke,

4. mattock (mat' ak): a tool like a pickax.
the Cretans saw a snow-white bull with golden horns swimming in from the sea. But instead of sacrificing this beautiful beast to the gods, as he should have done, Minos kept it and sacrificed another. Zeus punished him by let the bull escape and make trouble all over Crete.

Heracles tracked the bull to a wood. There he climbed a tree, waited for it to pass, and jumped on its back. After a hard struggle, he managed to clip a ring through the bull’s nose and take it safely across the sea to Eurystheus.

The Eighth Labor was to capture the four savage mares of the Thracian King Diomedes. Diomedes fed these mares on the flesh of strangers who visited his kingdom. Heracles sailed to Thrace, landed near the palace, went straight to Diomedes’ stables, chased away the grooms, and drove the mares plunging and kicking down to the seashore. Alarmed by the noise, Diomedes called the palace guards and hurried in pursuit. Heracles left the mares in charge of his groom Abderus and turned to fight. The battle was short. He stunned Diomedes with his club, and allowed the mares to eat him alive—as they had unfortunately also eaten Abderus, who could not control them. Before he left, Heracles instituted annual funeral games in Abderus’ honor. But finding his ship too small for all four mares, he harnessed them to Diomedes’ chariot, left the ship behind, and drove home by way of Macedonia.

The Ninth Labor was to get a famous golden girdle from Hippolyte, Queen of the Amazons, who lived on the southern coast of the Black Sea, and bring it back as a present for Eurystheus’ daughter. Heracles reached Amazonia without danger. There Queen Hippolyte fell in love with him, and he could have had the girdle as a gift. However, the Goddess Hera spitefully disguised herself as an Amazon and spread the rumor that Heracles had come to kidnap Hippolyte and carry her away to Greece. The angry Amazons jumped on their horses and rode to rescue her, shooting arrows at Heracles as they went. Though Heracles beat off the attack, Hippolyte was killed in the confusion of battle; so he took the girdle from her dead body, and sailed sadly away. He would have liked to marry Hippolyte, and hated giving the girdle to Eurystheus’ daughter.

The Tenth Labor was to steal a herd of red cows from King Geryon, who lived on an island near the Ocean Stream. Geryon had three bodies, but only one pair of legs. Hera hoped that Heracles would fail in this last Labor, or else not have time to finish it before the ninety-nine months were up. When he reached the western end of the Mediterranean Sea, where Spain and Africa were joined together in those days, he cut a channel between them; the cliffs on either side are still called “The Pillars of Heracles.” Then he sailed out into the Ocean in a golden boat lent him by the Sun, using his lion-skin for a sail. As he landed on Geryon’s island, a two-headed dog attacked him; he struck it dead with a swing from his club, and did the same to Geryon’s herdsman. Lastly, Geryon himself rushed from his palace, like a row of three men. The Goddess Hera tried to help him by flashing a mirror in Heracles’ eyes, but he dodged and killed Geryon with an arrow shot sideways through all his three bodies. Then he shot at Hera, too, wounding her in the shoulder. She flew off, screaming for Apollo and Artemis to draw out the arrow and make her well again.

Heracles drove the red cows across the Pyrenees and along the south coast of France. At the Alps, however, a messenger of Hera’s misdirected him, on purpose. He turned right and went all the way down to the Straits of Messina before he realized that this was Italy, not Greece.

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Angrily he turned back, and wasted still more time when he reached what is now Trieste, because Hera sent her gadfly, which stung the cows in their tenderest parts. They stampeded eastward, and Heracles had to follow their tracks for five or six hundred miles, as far as the Crimea. There an ugly, snake-tailed woman promised to round them up, on condition that he kissed her three times. He did so, though grudging every kiss, and at last came safely home to Greece with the cows, just as the ninety-nine months ended.

Heracles should now have been set free but, on Hera's advice, Eurystheus said, "You did not perform my Second Labor properly, because you called in your friend Iolaus to help kill the Hydra. And you did not perform my Fifth Labor properly either, because Augeas paid you for cleaning his cattle yard."

"How unfair!" cried Heracles. "I called Iolaus because Hera interfered: she sent a crab to bite my foot. And though Augeas certainly betted me twenty cows to one that I could not clean the cattle yard in a day, I would have performed the Labor anyhow."

"No argument, please! You made the bet; so instead of working for me alone, you got twenty cows from another man."

"Nonsense! Augeas refused to pay me. He claimed that I had not cleaned the yard myself—the River-god did it."

"He was quite right. The Labor should not count as your own work. You must perform two more, but you may take your time over them."

"Agreed," said Heracles, "and if I live to complete them, it will be the worse for your family."

Eurystheus had thought of two very dangerous extra Labors. The first was to fetch the Golden Apples of the Hesperides from the Far West. These apples were the fruit of a tree once given by Mother Earth to Hera as a wedding present. The Hesperides, the Titan Atlas' daughters, tended the tree; and Ladon, an unsleeping dragon, coiled around it.

Heracles visited the Caucasus to ask Prometheus' advice. Prometheus welcomed him, saying, "Please, drive off that vulture. It prevents me from thinking clearly." Heracles not only drove away the vulture, but shot it dead and begged Zeus to forgive Prometheus. Zeus, who felt that the punishment had lasted quite long enough, kindly allowed Heracles to break the chains. However, he ordered Prometheus always to wear an iron finger ring, as a reminder of his slavery. This was how rings first came into fashion.

Prometheus now warned Heracles not to pick the apples himself, because any mortal who did so would drop dead at once. "Persuade some immortal to pick them for you," he suggested. After a farewell feast, Heracles sailed toward Morocco. On reaching Tangier, he walked inland to where Atlas, the rebellious Titan, was holding up the Heavens. Heracles asked: "If I take on your duty for an hour, will you be willing to pick me three apples from your daughters' tree?"

"Certainly," said Atlas, "if you first kill the unsleeping dragon."

Heracles drew his bow and shot Ladon over the garden wall. Then he stood behind Atlas and, straddling his legs wide apart, took the weight of the Heavens on his own head and shoulders. Atlas climbed the wall, greeted his daughters, stole the apples, and shouted to Heracles, "Be good enough to stay there just a little longer, while I carry these apples to Eurystheus. With my huge legs I should be back here in an hour's time."

Though Heracles knew that Atlas would

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5 Prometheus: a Titan who stole fire from heaven to benefit mankind, in punishment, Zeus chained him to a rock where a vulture ate away at his liver.
never deliver the apples, but go off to rescue the other Titans instead, and start a new rebellion, he pretended to trust him. "With pleasure," he answered, "if you will please take the weight from me again for one moment more, while I fold up this lion-skin to make a comfortable head pad."

Atlas laid down the apples and did as Heracles asked. Heracles then took the apples and walked away. "You tried to trick me," he said, laughing, "but I have tricked you. Goodbye!"

As Heracles went through Libya, a gigantic son of Mother Earth, by name Antaeus, challenged him to a wrestling match. Heracles oiled himself all over, so that Antaeus could not get a firm grip on him; Antaeus, on the contrary, rubbed himself with sand. Every time Heracles threw Antaeus hard to the ground, he was surprised to see him rise again stronger than ever because touching Mother Earth renewed his strength. Realizing what he must do, Heracles lifted Antaeus off the ground, cracked his ribs, and held him aloft out of Mother Earth's reach, until he died. A month later Heracles brought the apples safely to Eurystheus.

The last and worst Labor was to capture the dog Cerberus, and drag him up from Tartarus. On receiving this order, Heracles went for purification to Eleusis, where Demeter's Mysteries were held; and now, cleansed of all defilement, boldly descended to Tartarus. Charon refused to ferry a live mortal across the Styx.

"I will wreck your boat," Heracles threatened, "and fill you as full of arrows as a hedgehog is full of prickles."

Charon shivered in terror and ferried him across. Hades afterwards punished Charon for his cowardice.

Heracles saw Theseus and Peirithous stuck to Hades' bench, and being whipped by the Furies. He gave Theseus an enormous tug and wrenched him free, though a large part of his back stayed behind. But finding it impossible to release Peirithous, except with an ax, he left him there.

Persephone darted from the palace and took Heracles by both hands. "Can I help you, dear Heracles?" she asked.

"Be kind enough to lend me your watchdog for a few days, Your Majesty. He can run home again as soon as I have shown him to Eurystheus."

Persephone turned to King Hades: "Please, Husband, grant Heracles what he asks. This is a task set him on your sister-in-law Hera's advice. He promises not to keep our dog Cerberus."

Hades answered, "Very well, and he may take that fool Theseus back, too, while he is about it. Still, I must make it a rule that he masters Cerberus without the use of club or arrows."

Hades thought this a safe condition, but Heracles' lion-skin was proof against the blows of Cerberus' barbed tail; and his strong hands squeezed Cerberus' throat until all three heads turned black. Cerberus fainted, and let himself be dragged up on earth. Unfortunately, the only tunnel wide enough for him was one that came out near Mariandyne, beside the Black Sea; so Heracles had a long and difficult journey. Before

6. Cerberus: the three-headed dog guarding the gate of Hades, the underworld.
7. Demeter: the goddess of agriculture, the Mysteries were religious rites in her honor.
8. Charon: the boatman who ferried souls of the dead across the river to Hades.
11. Furies: three female spirits who punished evildoers.
12. Persephone: the daughter of Zeus and Demeter, abducted by Hades to be his wife in the lower world.

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starting, he took a branch of the white poplar with him for a trophy, and wore it as a wreath.

Eurystheus was nearly scared to death when Heracles appeared, dragging Cerberus behind him on a leash. "Thank you, noble Heracles," he said, "you are now free of your Labors. But please send that brute back at once."

Heracles returned to Thebes, where his mother Alcmene welcomed him joyfully. Then Hera thought of a clever plot. She told Autolycus to steal a herd of dappled mares and foals from a man named Iphitus, change their color, and sell them to Heracles. Iphitus tracked the herd all the way to Tiryns by their footprints, and asked Heracles whether he had taken them by any chance. Heracles led Iphitus to the top of a high tower, and said, grimly, "Look around you! Can you see any dappled mares in my pastures?"

"No," answered Iphitus. "But I know that they are somewhere about."

Heracles, losing his temper at being thought a thief and a liar, flung Iphitus over the battlements.

The gods sentenced Heracles to be the slave of Queen Omphale of Lydia; the money he fetched at his sale, which Hermes had arranged, went to Iphitus' orphan children. Omphale, who did not know who Heracles was, asked him what he could do. "Anything you like, madam," he answered readily. So she made him dress as a woman, in a yellow petticoat, handed him a distaff, and showed him how to spin wool. Heracles found the work very restful. One day a gigantic dragon started eating Omphale's Lydian subjects, and she said to Heracles: "You look a strong man. Dare you fight the dragon?"

"At your service, madam."

Dragons were nothing to Heracles. He shot a poisoned arrow between this dragon's jaws, and Omphale gratefully gave him his freedom.

Later, Heracles married a princess named Deianeira, a daughter of the God Dionysus, and founded the Olympic Games, which were to be held every four years as long as the world should last. He ruled that the winners of each event were to be given wreaths, instead of the usual valuable prizes, because he had not been paid for his Labors either. No man dared wrestle against

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Heracles, which disappointed the spectators. However, King Zeus kindly came down from Olympus. He and Heracles had a wonderful tussle together. The match ended in a draw, and everyone cheered.

Heracles now took vengeance on kings who had treated him scornfully while he was performing his Labors, including Augeas, and killed three of Eurystheus’ sons. Zeus forbade him to attack Eurystheus himself. That would set a bad example to other freed slaves. The River-god Achelous challenged Heracles to a fight, but lost a horn in the struggle. Heracles also fought the God Ares and sent him hobbling back to Olympus.

One day a Centaur named Nessus offered to carry Heracles’ wife, Deianeira, across a flooded river for a small fee. Heracles paid the money, but Nessus, having reached the farther bank, galloped off with Deianeira in his arms. Heracles shot Nessus, at a distance of half a mile, using one of the arrows dipped in the Hydra’s blood. The dying Nessus whispered to Deianeira: “Collect a little of my blood in this small oil jar. Then, if Heracles ever loves a woman more than you, here is a sure charm to use. The oil will keep my blood from drying up. Spread it on his shirt. He will never be unfaithful again. Goodbye!” Deianeira did as Nessus advised.

While still serving Eurystheus, Heracles had taken part in an archery contest proposed by King Eurytus of Oechalia, the prize of which was his daughter Iole. Eurytus boasted himself the best archer in Greece, and felt very cross at being beaten by Heracles. He shouted, “My daughter is a princess. I cannot possibly marry her to Eurystheus’ slave. The competition is void.” Remembering this insult some years later, Heracles sacked Oechalia, killed Eurytus, and took away Iole, with her two sisters, to scrub floors and cook. Deianeira feared he might fall in love with Iole, who was very beautiful. When he sent a messenger home, asking Deianeira for his best embroidered shirt, she thought, “He wants to wear it when he marries Iole.” So she smeared some of Nessus’ blood on the red embroidery of the shirt, where it would not show, and handed it to the messenger.

Heracles really needed the shirt for a thanksgiving sacrifice to Zeus, after the capture of Oechalia. He put it on, and was pouring wine on the altar when he suddenly felt as though he were being bitten by scorpions. The heat of his body had melted the Hydra’s poison in Nessus’ blood. He yelled, bellowed, shrieked, knocked over the altar, and tried to rip off the shirt; but great lumps of flesh came away too. His blood hissed with the poison. Then he jumped into a stream; the poison burned him worse than before. Heracles knew that he was doomed.

He begged his friends in an unsteady voice, “Please, carry me to Mount Oeta, and build a pyre of oak and wild-olive.” They obeyed, weeping. Heracles climbed to the platform at the top, and calmly lay down on his lion-skin, using his club for a pillow. He let himself be burned to death; the fire hurt far less than the Hydra’s poison.

Zeus felt proud of his brave son. He told the Olympians, “Heracles will be our porter, and marry my daughter Hebe, the Goddess of Youth. If anyone objects, I shall start throwing thunderbolts. Rise, noble soul of Heracles! Welcome to Olympus!”

Zeus looked so fierce that Hera dared say nothing. Heracles’ immortal soul ascended on a cloud, and Athene was soon introducing him to the other gods. Only Ares turned his back, but when Demeter begged him not to be a fool he too shook hands with Heracles—rather rudely.

Deianeira, hearing that she had caused Heracles’ death, took a sword and stabbed herself.

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13. Centaur: any of a race of monsters with a man’s head, trunk, and arms, and a horse’s body and legs.