



The Twelve Labors of Hercules: Part One

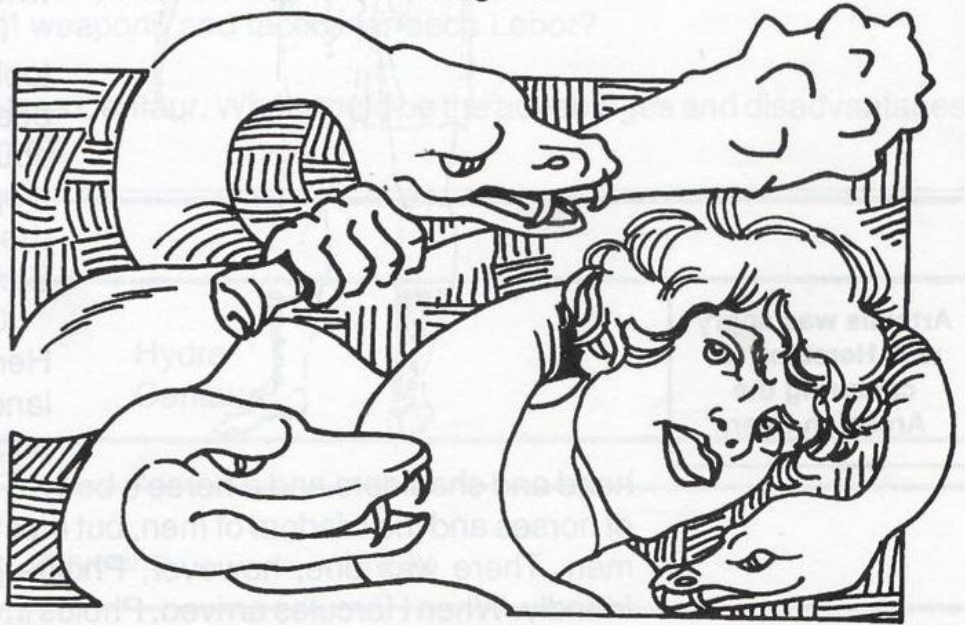
After killing his family in an insane rage induced by Hera [HEE-ruh], Hercules [HER-kue-leez] went to Eurystheus [yur-EES-thee-uhs], the king of Mycenae, and offered to be his slave. He was prepared to accept the most difficult tasks as punishment for his crime. Eurystheus invented twelve tasks, known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

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

Hera = Juno
Hercules = Heracles



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.

