

## **A Hero's Journey** *(Greek Mythology)*

Herakles was doomed from the beginning of his life. He was a son to Zeus and Alcmene. Hera was very jealous, and her husbands' infidelities made her angry. She went to extreme length to avenge her anger upon this child, Herakles. Hera had sent for two snakes to lay in Herakles' bed and hoped to kill this child at once. But, the child was born with enormous strength and strangled the snakes with his own two hands. When he grew older, yet still unaware of his more than mortal strength had a quarrel with his music professor. To avoid his teacher's outburst of anger, he blocked his master's blow. His teacher fell dead upon the impact. Herakles was banished into the mountains, where he grew taller, stronger and more muscular. During his exile, he saved herds of sheep, and killed dangerous lions and monsters near town.

Upon his return, he took a wife and lived by humble means. His wife bore him many children. But, Hera could not let go of her long-lasting hatred and finally bewitched him at last. During his trance, he killed his own children, and his wife rescued only one, as she interrupted him during this heinous crime. She hit him unconscious and once again; he had to stand trial for this awful deed.

Zeus, prompted by Hera, recommended that he must be expelled and succumb to a series of twelve very difficult labors. The gods knew of the twelve labors and took pity upon him. Each presented him with a gift for his protection as he began his task. Athena gave him a helmet, Hermes a sword, Zeus a shield, Apollo a bow and arrow and Poseidon provided a horse.

Off he went to slay, kill and liberate people from awful demons and monsters. The strenuous challenges led him into the worlds of the unknown, which were equally feared by mortals and gods. When he came to the twelfth labor he encountered Pluto, god of the death. Pluto made a pact with him: If you can penetrate the cave without harming the guarding beast, a three-headed dog, then two prisoners shall be set free. Herakles outsmarted the beast and successfully finished all twelve steps.

His crimes were forgiven and he was set free, however he loved adventures and continued to travel. His path led him to various places as he always accomplished many good deeds. He met many women - and one day - he fell in love with a girl, called Iole. Her father, a king, promised him her hand, but in the end, broke his word.

Upon his next encounter, he kills the girl's father and his three sons. That act rendered him disillusioned and he moves away to get married to another woman.

Many years later, he met Iole again and they both realized that their love for each other had never faded away. With that in mind, they asked Zeus to marry them. The rumors of this marriage reached Herakles' estranged wife, who sent him a magical blanket. However, the garment was poisoned and poor Herakles did not suspect any wrongdoing. He decides to wear his new garment and the moment he throws the wrap around him he feels a sharp pain. Consequently, the poison entered through his skin, scorching and scarring him from head to toe. Immediately, he knows death has come to meet him.

Herakles prepares a bed made of flammable wood to lie upon. His friend, Philoctetes, is to light fire to the wood for his passing. Zeus witnesses this whole ritual and decides that Herakles has suffered plenty of hardship and truly deserves to be venerated. Through the flame he passes into immortal status and enters the kingdom of gods. Hera finally abandons her hatred and offers him her daughter, Hebe, to be his wife.

The legend of Herakles became a very famous tale amongst fellow men, who were in search of answers. Thus, great philosophers took on the quest to explain the reasons for man's behavior and journeys into the unknown. Knowledge, control and honor are some of the attributes that made them travel far from home to explore their inner self. Gilgamesh looked for eternal life as he ventured far to dive down to the bottom of the sea to find a flower for eternal youth. Isis searched for life after death as she gathered Osiris' body parts

along the riverbanks to rebirth him. And Herakles defended honor and truth to transform through fire into immortal status.

### **Under Zeus' Shadow** *(Grecian Mythology)*

Greeks differed in their philosophy about gods and life on earth. Most of their myths reflected honor and glory. They either represented gods, or mortals, executing heroic deeds to receive a respectful placement amongst all gods.

The Greeks believed that in the beginning, the universe was shapeless space and ruled by Chaos, god of light. He had a wife, Nyx, goddess of darkness. But, their firstborn son, Erebus, dethroned his father and conceived more children with his mother. They were called Aether and Hemera, who in turn dethroned their father and mother. Also, they proceeded to have children and their names were Pontus and Gaea as in Sea and Earth. Gaea became a lovely goddess and admired the beauty of the earth.

However, to complete this miracle, she needed to create a sky, Uranus, god of heaven. Earth and Uranus got married and lived very happily on Mount Olympus. They conceived twelve children. Uranus very quickly realized that these children possessed incredible strength. He sent them into the abyss beneath the earth. They became strong and were referred to as Titans. As time passed, they grew tired of their exile and one devised a plan to seek freedom. He decided to conquer his mother's love and then overthrow his father, Uranus. Naturally, he would be the new ruler and agreed to share his New Kingdom with his brothers and sisters.

Cronus succeeded and became the next king. But not before Uranus was able to put a terrible curse on him: "One day, a child of yours will dethrone you, and then take your kingdom". He took a wife, who gave him many children. He didn't forget the curse and found himself to fear the loss of his newly gained power. So, he proceeded to devour each child at birth. Rhea could not tolerate her husband's behavior any longer and made arrangement to immediately hide her next child. That baby became Zeus and, as predicted, he overthrew his father's reign. But, before Zeus was to rule the earth, he too, had to fight the Titans. After years of war, he grew tired of battles and agreed to divide his fortune and to restore peace once again. His two brothers, Pluto, god of the world beneath the earth, and Neptune, god of the sea, were assigned specific tasks. Zeus, then, reigned over earth and his brothers' territories, while living with his wife, Hera, on Mount Olympus. He was the highest of all gods.

The gods enjoyed the company of mortal women and to their delight frequented their chambers. Even Zeus, although married to Hera, goddess of heaven, spared no expense to fancy other women and, thus, conceived many children.

Through remarkable acts some mortal men and women became heroes and raised above their fellow human beings. In fact, after death they were honored for their deeds and venerated into status of immortality. Zeus bestowed the honor upon his newcomers and gave each a position within his kingdom. As a prudent ruler, he devised various ways to test possible contenders, if indeed they were worthy of such positions. This is how the course of obstacles, which later became known as "the twelve labours of Herakles", was introduced as the passing test which could redeem their status.