

Herakles' Labors Limericked

Once Herakles driven quite mad
By Hera did something quite bad:
 Both his son and his daughter
 He put to the slaughter;
Each died by the hand of their dad.

When Herakles learnt what he'd done –
That he'd killed both his daughter and son –
 Then contrite and chastened
 To Delphi he hastened
And said to the priestess he'd shun,

All the pleasures of life to pursue
Whate'er tasks she might ask him to do
 To atone for his sin;
 Through thick and through thin
He'd persist and complete what was due.

To Eurystheus the king did she bind him;
To twelve years of slav'ry resigned him;
 Each year of confinement
 A daunting assignment
Eurystheus with malice designed him.

Eurystheus had Herakles sent
Where a lion of deadly intent
 In Némea dwelt;
 Its invuln'nable pelt
All attempts on its life did prevent.

So remarkably sharp were its claws
They could cut, oh so swift without pause,
 Through the toughest of metal.
 The beast in fine fettle
Much death and destruction did cause.

"I can't use my arrows; instead
"With my club I will whack the beast's head."
 So Herakles smote,
 Then grabbed the beast's throat
And squeezed till it fell down dead.

He pierced the beast's pelt with its claws,
And skinned the dead lion because
 Its invincible hide
 Would armor provide
With a helmet of head and of jaws.

And then to the swamps of Lake Lernë
Did Herakles next make his journey
 The Hydra to slay
 Or else be its prey;
For this was an unequal tourney.

For the beast had more than one head;
But cut off a neck and instead
 Of leaving a stump
 There grew from the lump
Two heads where just one had been shed.

"Oh no, I will not be outplayed,"
Said Herakles, "I will seek aid.
 "My nephew's at hand;
 "With fiery brand
"He can sear every stump as it's made."

So with sickle and brand did the twain
The death of the Hydra obtain.
 In the venomous crud
 Of the beast's deadly blood
Did the hero his arrowheads stain.

Eurystheus was feeling perplexed
What task to set Herakles next.
 So Hera suggested
 Our hero be tested
With a task to make Artemis vexed.

Keryneia is where one would find
That Artemis kept a great hind
 With antlers of gold,
 And hooves, we are told,
Of bronze which for speed were designed.

But Herakles wished for no harm
To befall the hind, so with charm
 To Artemis prayed
 Who his troubles allayed.
This caused poor Eurystheus alarm.

When our hero returned with the hind
Which he had been bidden to find.
 The hind unconcerned
 To its mistress returned,
And Hera's intrigue undermined.

"On Mount Erymanthos a boar
"Is dwelling which surely will gore
 "Through Herakles' side,
 "And open him wide,
""Twill do, I should think, for task four."

So Eurystheus thought in his heart,
Then bade the great hero depart.
 "And you must make sure
 "The boar to secure,
"Unless he has ripped you apart!"

To the mountain did Herakles go
And there within very deep snow
 The boar he entrapped,
 Which securely enwrapped
He carried as living cargo.

With this he returned to the king,
Who shrieked upon seeing the thing.
 His knees were a-shaking,
 With fear he was quaking
And into a barrel did spring.

From inside the tub came a shout:
"Away with the boar, you great lout!
 "And having done so,
 "To Elis then go
"Where stables require mucking out.

"There three thousand cattle you'll find
"And everyone's been disinclined
 "For thirty odd years,
 "Or so it appears,
"To remove any dung there consigned.

"The stench is so great, so they say,
"But you must the dung take away
 "And leave the floors clean
 "With no pooh to be seen,
"And accomplish it all in one day."

To Elis did Herakles go
And diverted two rivers to flow
 Through the stables instead
 Of their custom'ry bed,
To whoosh all the dung away so

The stables were cleansed in one day.
In fury Eurystheus did say:
 "The venomous herds
 "Of man-eating birds
With beaks made of bronze shall him flay!"

To Stýmphalos Herakles went
But it marshes and swamps did prevent
 Any further advance.
 He hoped that perchance
Some stratagem might him present.

Athene then came to his aid;
A rattle Hephaistos had made
 She gave him to scare
 The birds from their lair,
So his arrows they could not evade.

Envenomed was each arrowhead,
So our hero returned with birds dead.
 Eurystheus did cry:
 "To Crete you must hie
"And bring back the bull they all dread."

To Crete then did Herakles sail
And told old king Minos his tale.
 The king was delighted
 For Crete had been blighted
By the bull o'er which none could prevail.

So Herakles soon the bull found,
And wrestled it down to the ground;
 Now docile and tame,
 With the hero it came
And was brought to Eurystheus unbound.

"Oh no," did Eurystheus exclaim,
"I don't care if he's docile and tame.
 "To the Black Sea with you,
 "And take the bull too.
"Diomédes' proud mares you must claim."

To Marathon's plain he did send
The bull as he onward did wend
 His way to the giant
 Who, far from compliant,
Defended the mares he had penned.

Though long and protracted the fight,
Our hero the giant did smite,
 And marveled to see
 The mares full of glee
Devoured their master outright.

Once flesh of us humans as diet
Made them crazy and ready to riot;
 With their master devoured
 Docility flowered;
The mares became calm and so quiet.

"Hippólyte, Amazon Queen,
"Has a girdle of aureate sheen;
 "This splendid attire,"
 Said Eurystheus, "acquire,
"For to wear it my daughter is keen."

Then Herakles peaceful means used,
As he flattered the queen and excused
 His impertinent quest.
 The queen was impressed;
And the girdle - it was not refused.

But Hera, aggrieved at no strife,
Ensured evil rumors were rife
 And confusion did reign,
 And several were slain,
Yet our hero escaped with his life.

"Erytheia's your next destination,"
Said Eurystheus, "and 'tis the location
 "Of splendid red cattle,
 "For which you must battle
"With guardians of strange transmutation."

Arriving there Herakles found
He was met by a two-headed hound;
 The hound he did drub
 With his olive-wood club
And left it quite dead on the ground.

Eurytion the herdsman likewise
From olive-wood met his demise;
 Then fearing disaster
 Along came the master,
Three-bodied of gigantic size.

But Herakles brought him down dead
With an arrow that hydra-blood spread
 Through the gigantic frame;
 The cattle then came
And off to Eurystheus were led.

"In th' Hesperides' garden you'll see
"In the midst there is standing a tree
 "With apples of gold;
 "Of some just get hold,"
Said Eurystheus, "and bring them to me."

The hundred-eyed serpent, he thought,
That guarded the tree really ought
 To prevent any theft.
 But a shot very deft
To the serpent a fatal wound brought.

With fruit did our hero return;
With anger Eurystheus did burn.
 "To the Land of the Dead
 "Now go," the king said,
"For I to see Kérberos yearn."

So he lied; for he thought nevermore
One returned after crossing the shore
 Of the Stygian lake.
 But he'd made a mistake
For Herakles knew secret lore.

In Demeter's deep myst'ries was he
An initiate of Greater Degree.
 Dear listeners, accept,
 That as an adept
He accomplished this task and was free.

Now Herakles, carefree and hale,
With Jason and crew did set sail.
 But I've had enough
 Of this limerick stuff,
And that is a whole diff'rent tale.