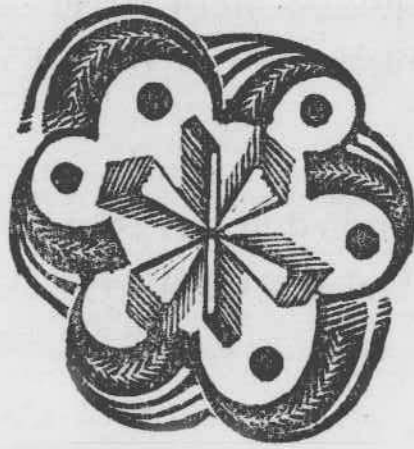


THE HEROES



CHARLES KINGSLEY

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EDITOR'S NOTE

CHARLES KINGSLEY'S book, *The Heroes*, was not written in Eversley Rectory, but in a house in the neighbourhood. We read in his *Life*, that as the winter of 1855 approached, "the damp obliged him, on his wife's account, to leave the rectory again; but not his people, to his and their great joy. He took a house for six months on Farley Hill, a high and dry spot in the next parish." In the intervals of his other work he there wrote "a book of Greek fairy tales for his children, which came out at Christmas as *The Heroes*, dedicated to 'Rose, Maurice, and Mary.'" This was his second book for children; *Glaucus, or The Wonders of the Shore*, had appeared earlier in that year.

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INTRODUCTION

WITH THE STORY OF THE TWELVE LABOURS OF HERCULES

IT is an enchanted world that this Book of Heroes leads us into ; almost a fairy world, but not quite, because it is more fresh and day-light than fairy-worlds are apt to be. When we look back into the far past to discover the early world of the Greek heroes, it is not into the darkness we have to look, but into a bright land where the sun shines much and often, where the meadows are green and sprinkled with flowers, where the small shining rivers flow merrily down to the sea, and the beautiful mountains rise up into the violet sky. This lovely land is set in the Mediterranean Sea, or the Sea of the Middle of the Earth. From East and West and South the travellers come to the wonderful harbours of Greece that wind so securely in from the sea ; all these travellers' tales of the splendid East this wise and simple people hearken to and are made wiser by ; till, at last, they themselves build up a state which, though so small, is

nobler and greater than any that are to be found in the East.

In the days of the first heroes, the towns are very small and close walled about: the people all through the land are full of fancies and great weavers of tales. There is no end to the wonders that surround them. Every forest tree has its nymph that makes her home within it and sometimes looks out from among the branches, or wanders along the forest paths, fleeing back to her shelter the moment a strange foot is heard. Every river has its water-spirit that comes leaping cheerily down from the mountains and runs with the ripples on their way to the sea. The rainbow is Iris, a fair maiden, the messenger between heaven and earth. The dawn is also a maiden, Eos: she drives a rose-coloured chariot, drawn by white horses. She sets out before the sun, he following after: night and sleep fly before her, and the stars disappear.

The great sea has its greater spirit, the god Poseidon, "the mighty shaker of the shores:" "the azure-haired," called so because the blue waves leap about his head as he rises from the sea; in his hand he bears his trident, or three-pronged fork, with which he rules the waves.

The greater gods live upon Mount Olympus.

Those who have climbed this tall mountain say that the snow lies unmelted on its top even in the heats of July: but the old Greeks said that an eternal spring reigned there; and there dwelt a marvellous company of gods and goddesses who ruled the fates of men. Father of them all was Zeus or Jupiter, whose voice was the thunder and whose weapon was the lightning. He was supposed to sit on an ivory throne with an eagle at his feet. The queen of heaven was called Hera. She was a beautiful and often an angry queen. When she wished to punish or to help one of her favourites among men she would rush down from the heavens like a falling star. The beautiful Phœbus Apollo was the god of music and poetry, and all the arts that go to make life beautiful. He was much loved of the Greeks. Then there was the goddess of love and the noble goddess of wisdom, the god of wine and merriment, and many more, about whom Charles Kingsley has written in his book. Indeed it might be said that for every strong feeling of the heart and mind the Greeks imagined a radiant living spirit from whom it proceeded. The spirits of awe, love, anger, beauty, wisdom, and many more were given a human form and fairy powers. Gods and goddesses these wonderful creatures were

called, and on Mount Olympus was their home, whence they ruled the affairs of men. There they sat in their eternal spring, never growing older, feasting on nectar and ambrosia, the sweetest of food and drink; often laughing, often angry and quarrelsome, and often behaving in a very queer way indeed.

These were the beliefs of the very first of all the heroes, the mighty Hercules (or Heracles, as it is spelt in the Greek) about whom I am going to tell you, and whose story is one of the most wonderful in the world. Charles Kingsley intended to tell it one day in another book, but never did.

Try now and imagine a Grecian hall, the hall of a chieftain in the dusk of a winter evening. The hall is built with a foundation of stone, in which are grooved sockets holding the smooth round trunks of pine trees that stand like pillars down the centre of the hall, and at the sides, lean towards the centre-beam. In the middle of the hall is the open hearth, on which a fire of logs is kindled, smelling sweet and burning bright. How much the Greeks loved the hearth and the hearth-fire it is hard for us now to tell. They revered the spirit of the hearth, and the hours passed around it were the sweetest in their lives. Picture them now seated about it; the chil-

dren have had their supper of cakes and goats' milk and honey ; for then as now the bees of Greece were busy, and there was plenty of honey to be had. The children have bright eager faces, they are hardy and strong, trained to bear pain bravely, tanned from the open air, boys and girls alike used to running, and racing ; and the boys besides trained to use the bow and dart the spear, trained to ride and to speak and sing. Round about the fire sit the elders, grown men and women, youths and maidens, and the boys and girls sit or lie at their parents' feet. They are brightly clad in robes and tunics, home-woven and home-dyed in good bright colours ; the servants are there too, listening as well as the rest, and all the women have the distaff in their hand and spin as they listen.

The children's eyes are fixed on the bard or minstrel, whose head is a storehouse of wonderful tales. He wears a beard, and perhaps he is blind, as was old Homer, the greatest minstrel of them all. With him is his companion, a youth who holds in his hand a small harp, and whose fingers are already playing skilfully among the strings.

"Tell us the story of Hercules," cry the children, and the blind minstrel rises and

lifts his hand ; the harper sounds his strings, and in a sweet, sonorous voice the minstrel begins to chant.

*THE STORY OF THE TWELVE
LABOURS OF HERCULES*

HERCULES, son of Alcmena and of the mighty Zeus himself, was born to a noble house of Thebes. Such a babe for strength and beauty had never before been seen: the goddess Hera was jealous of him, and in anger she sent two snakes to devour him. Hercules and his brother Iphiclus lay in the cradle in the hall, when silently the two bright, scaly snakes came gliding towards them, their heads lifted up, their forked tongues darting from their open mouths.

The children started at the sight, and Iphiclus filled the hall with his shrieks ; but the babe Hercules felt no fear, nor was fear ever destined to meet him in the way ; in his two fists he seized the necks of the two snakes and strangled them, while they wreathed themselves about him. From all sides of the house the attendants came running, alarmed by the shrieks of Iphiclus, and before their

eyes was the awful sight, the child in his triumph.

After this act it was the belief of all that a great destiny lay before the boy. No one that saw his size and strength and beauty but was amazed; and for wit and daring there was none that came near him. Knowing then his greatness, in nothing did his mother spare to prepare him for the hero's life. Castor taught him how to fight, Eurytus how to shoot with a bow and arrows, Autolycus to drive a chariot, Linus to play on the lyre, and Eumolpus to sing. As soon as he was a youth grown he became the pupil of the Centaur Cheiron; his companions were the sons of princes, the greatest in the land, but he outstripped them all.

Hardly was he seventeen years of age when he came to his strength. Then he left Cheiron, his master, and became his own man. With his own hand he slew dangerous beasts, and helped the weak against the strong, so that everywhere his name was spoken of.

But a hard fate was now coming fast upon the hero. At the time of his birth, Zeus his father had promised the angry Hera that Hercules should be subject to the will of Eurystheus.

Eurystheus was Prince of Mycenæ, a rich

man, and jealous. When he heard of the great deeds of the young Hercules he was half angry and half fearful, dreading his rising power. Therefore he sent a message to Hercules, bidding him to appear before him, and perform the labours he had a right to command of him.

Hercules, when he received the message, was sorely taken aback. Proud of his strength, he returned word that he would not come at any man's bidding, neither would he perform the labours that were asked of him.

He thought himself safe: but the angry goddess Hera, who wished to see him humbled, heard his proud words. Quickly she darted from her home on Mount Olympus, and laying her hand upon him, smote him with madness. Then in his madness and strength he laid about him, dreaming all who came near were the friends and kinsmen of Eurystheus, and fearful were his deeds. Men, women, and children fled before him and wherever he came, that place was soon emptied of all save himself.

In time the madness passed away, and Hercules came to himself. When men told him of the deeds that he had done, sorrow seized upon him. He went and hid himself from men and wandered in the desert: not

yet could he bring himself to bend his proud spirit, to obey the will of the gods and serve Eurystheus.

One day, while passing through a wild oak wood, he came upon a small temple sacred to Phœbus Apollo. Bowed down by the sufferings brought upon him by his rebellion, Hercules entered and prostrated himself. The priest who had charge of the temple was amazed to see so huge a figure of a man thus cast down before him. He drew near and spoke to him.

Now this priest was old and white-bearded, and had great knowledge of the hearts of men. In two days' time, when Hercules departed from him, he was become another man. His many-clustered locks were combed, his limbs bathed and refreshed. He wore a tunic of white linen, and upon his head was a crown of the leaves of the white poplar. At his shoulder was his bow and quiver of arrows and in his right hand he carried his knotted club. He had determined to obey the will of Zeus by submitting himself to Eurystheus.

THE NEMEAN LION

EURYSTHEUS, Prince of Thebes, sat in his hall. The watcher at the city gates had

brought him word that the greatest man that had ever been seen was upon the road and coming towards the city. He wore no mantle, said the watcher, and carried a knotted club in his hand. By the club Eurystheus knew the man. In haste he sat himself in his carved chair and called the stoutest men of his guard about him.

Albeit in his own hall and well defended, the heart of Eurystheus melted within him when he saw the huge shoulders and limbs of Hercules, and marked the flashing of his eye and his stalking gait as he advanced.

Half in fear and half in hatred, Eurystheus looked upon him, and Hercules, gazing upon the Prince in his carved chair, liked not his countenance. Neither greeted the other in kindness, and without more ado Hercules spoke.

"Zeus is the master of all men," said he, "and I have found it ill to fight against him. Now I am come hither to perform any labour that may be laid upon me."

"Cousin," said Eurystheus, "since the will of Zeus falls upon all alike, needs must that I lay some task upon you. And now I bethink me of a labour by which you may win great worship and renown. In the land of Argolis there is a wood in which hides a lion huge

and fierce, a terror to the land. No shepherd is safe upon the hills, the flocks are destroyed, the very children are taken from their fathers' doors. Go then and destroy me this lion, and so fulfil the will of Zeus."

Without a word Hercules turned from the presence of Eurystheus and stalked from the hall and out of the city gates. And Eurystheus laughed behind his hand as he went, for he knew that bow and arrow and spear were of no avail against the Nemean lion, so tough and mighty was his hide, so cunning was he in his ambushes.

Hercules travelled swiftly till he came within sight of the wood of Nemea; then, because the noon-day sun was hot, he asked for shelter and a draught of milk in a peasant's hut and room to lay himself down to sleep.

"By Zeus," said the peasant, staring, "shelter you may have with a right good will, and a draught of milk I will not refuse you: nay, you shall have a pailful and welcome: but for room to lay yourself down, in good faith, you shall not have that, unless it will content you to lay your feet out of door and your head out of window."

Hercules laughed a mighty laugh, and stooping his head low he entered the cool shelter. He drank the milk and ate some

oaten cakes, and propping his back against the wall he stretched his legs along the floor and fell asleep. When he awoke the sun was low in the heavens and there was a small noise of talking within the hut. The peasant man was sitting by the crossed logs on the hearth, his elbows were on his knees, and his head on his hands, and he seemed to be weeping and complaining, and an old woman stood by his side that seemed to try to give him comfort. "Nay, nay, be a man, son," she said. "Never take on so for a maiden. There are others as fair as Callista."

But the peasant man only groaned, but made no answer. Seeing him so heavy and sorrowful, Hercules raised himself up. "What ails you, friend?" said he. The man only stared, but the old woman answered, "My son has lost his bride, lord," she said. "It is now two moons since she went out to bring her two white heifers from the hill; but she has never come back."

"She will never come again," said the man, "never. Her eyes were as bright as the morning, and she was but sixteen years old. My double curse on the beast that took her life."

"What beast?" said Hercules. "The lion, lord," answered the woman. "Up yonder in

the wood of Nemea is his den. Every evening he is hunting, and every night not one but many fall his prey. Men, women, and children, we do all quake for fear. The very sheep and bullocks will not fatten for the sound of his roars at evening."

"I am come hither to destroy him," said Hercules, rising up in his might. As they, too, rose up in amazement and stood staring upon him, evening came up and veiled the sky.

Hercules walked without the hut, and the man and woman followed, crying upon him to let them serve and tend him and bathe his feet and bring him wine. But Hercules would not stay; no longer did he think of Eurystheus, nor of the burden that Zeus had laid upon him. The desire of a great deed was come upon him. To free the suffering people from this beast, this was work for a hero.

Above his head the stars were appearing in the purple sky. He went along paths that led through vineyards upwards towards the wood of Nemea. Of a sudden he stood still. In his ear was a muttering like the distant sea on the stones of the shore: it was the far-away roaring of the lion. At the sound Hercules laughed, and standing still he took his bow from his shoulder, strung it, and tried the string, and fitted an arrow and slung his

club from his neck by a loop. Then he went on and upwards till he came to the borders of the wood. Then, coming to a standstill, he leaned his shoulders against an oak tree and stood still to listen, waiting for the moon to rise. For long he stood and heard no sound; then silently a shadow crossed the moonlight and before him Hercules saw the lion of Nemea, a monstrous beast, black and tawny, his nose snuffing in the air, his tail to the ground, his head turning this way and that. Hercules had fitted his heaviest arrow to his bow, quickly he drew it with his full strength, and the arrow sped towards the lion. It struck him full on the flank, but glided, shivering, off that tough and seasoned hide. The lion turned his head to look at his side and then smelt at the arrow. Hercules fitted another arrow that he called Swift Sailor to his bow, and sent that one humming upon the air towards the lion. As before, the arrow was broken and fell harmless to the ground. This time the lion uttered a roar that shook the air and bounded sideways, looking on his enemy. The joy of battle filled the heart of Hercules; with a shout he sprang from his hiding and ran towards the lion; for a moment the two enemies, the greatest of beasts and the greatest of men, glared upon each other, then the lion