Name: _____ Date: _____

The Hard Jobs of Hercules

Reading level 8 (4th grade) · 734 words

Long ago in Greece, there was a hero called Hercules. He was the son of Zeus, the king of the gods, and he was the strongest man in the world. He could pull up a whole tree. He could throw a spear across a valley.

His cousin, King Eurystheus, was a small, nervous man. He was afraid of almost everything, and most of all of Hercules. He did not like anyone stronger than he was. So he made a plan. He would give Hercules jobs so hard that no one could finish them.

"Your first job," said the king, "is to bring me the skin of the great lion of Nemea." Everyone in the hall went quiet. Hercules found the lion's cave in the hills, and he went in alone. It was quiet in there for a long, long time.

At last Hercules walked out, with the lion's golden skin on his shoulders like a cloak. When the king saw him coming, he jumped into a big bronze jar and hid. From then on, Hercules had to give his news from outside the city gate.

The next job was meant to make Hercules look silly. Three thousand cows lived in the stables of King Augeas, and nobody had cleaned them for thirty years. "Clean them in one day," said King Eurystheus, with a sly smile. He thought it was a good joke.

Hercules looked at the stables, and then at the two rivers nearby. Hercules did not touch a shovel. Hercules had a better idea. Instead he cut a long channel from each river. Then he knocked a hole in the wall at each end.

The water came rushing through with a roar. The mess of thirty years went out the far side and down the valley. By sunset the stables sparkled, and the cows blinked in surprise. It was the dirtiest job in the world, and Hercules did not get dirty.

Another job was a deer with horns of gold. It belonged to the goddess Artemis, and it ran faster than an arrow. Hercules had promised not to hurt it. So he followed the deer through the forest and over the mountains for a whole year.

At last the tired deer stopped to drink, and Hercules lifted it gently in his arms. The goddess was cross at first. But when she saw how carefully he carried her deer, she let him show it to the king and then set it free.

Then the king said, "I want three golden apples from the garden at the edge of the world." Hercules did not know where that garden was. He walked for a long time. At last he came to a mountain where a giant named Atlas stood.

Atlas was holding the whole sky on his shoulders. "I will gladly get the apples," he said. "But

who will hold the sky while I am gone?" Hercules bent his back and took the sky on his own shoulders. No mountain was ever so heavy.

Atlas came back with three shining apples. "What a lovely walk!" he said. "I think I will take these to your king myself. You can stay here." Hercules was stuck, but he did not lose his temper. He stayed calm and thought.

"Of course," he said, in a polite voice. "Only hold the sky for a little while, while I make a pad from my lion skin for my shoulders." Atlas set down the apples and took back the sky. Hercules picked up the apples and strolled off.

The last job was the strangest. Hercules had to go down under the earth, to the dark home of Hades, and bring back Cerberus, the dog with three heads. "You may borrow my dog," said Hades, "if you carry no weapon." So Hercules put down his club.

Cerberus growled with all three mouths, but Hercules held him gently and would not let go. He carried the big dog up into the sunlight. The king saw three heads and dived back into his jar. "Send it back!" he cried. "I have no more jobs for you!"

So Hercules carried Cerberus home and gave him a pat on each head. People still call a big job a Herculean task. But Hercules had needed more than strength. He had needed patience for the deer, a clever plan for the stables, and a calm head for the giant.

Questions

1. Who gave Hercules his jobs?

A. Atlas
B. King Eurystheus
C. Hades

2. How did Hercules clean the stables?

A. He sent two rivers through them
B. He used a huge broom
C. He asked the cows

3. Why did Hercules follow the deer for a whole year?

A. He was lost
B. He liked the forest
C. He had promised not to hurt it

4. What did Atlas try to do with the apples?

A. Hide them in a jar
B. Give them to the cows
C. Take them to the king himself

5. In this story, what does "polite" mean?

A. Angry and loud

B. Careful to be kind and well-mannered

C. Fast and strong

6. What does the story show about Hercules?

A. He solved hard jobs with brains as well as strength

B. He never got tired

C. He was afraid of the king

Words to know

nervous: easily frightened

patience: calm waiting

sly: tricky

polite: well-mannered

weapon: fighting tool

Answer key: The Hard Jobs of Hercules

1. B. King Eurystheus
2. A. He sent two rivers through them
3. C. He had promised not to hurt it
4. C. Take them to the king himself
5. B. Careful to be kind and well-mannered
6. A. He solved hard jobs with brains as well as strength