

The Labours of Hercules

“See that cousin of mine,” said Hercules, settling down to his tea, “See him, that Eurystheus? He’s got it in for me, you know that? I’ll clock him one day, I will. Honest. Clock him and then I’ll tell him what he can do with his job!” He stabbed at the sausages which his landlady had placed in front of him, and it was clear he meant no good to either them or his cousin.

“Oh, he can’t be that bad, though?” said Mrs. McHarrie, his long-suffering landlady. “Try some of that bacon, Hercules, it’s fresh from the butcher this morning.” In an attempt to appease her angry lodger, she selected two large rashers of bacon and piled them on his plate.

“Course he’s that bad, Mrs. M,” retorted Hercules, by no means placated by his supper. He shook the ketchup bottle wildly, spattering the tablecloth with tomato sauce. His landlady quietly dabbed at the spots with the edge of her apron - good thing it was a plastic cloth. “Look,” said Hercules, laying down his knife and fork, the better to emphasise his point. “First thing Yuri gets me to do is capture that Nemean Lion, and skin it - that was no joke.”

“I remember that,” nodded Mrs McHarrie; how could she not? - her lodger had come home with the skin and asked her to make it up into a donkey-jacket for him. It stank fearfully - but still, Hercules had paid her a fair price for her work. All the extra money helped, of course, now that the other lodgers had quietly slipped away, offering one thin excuse after another - seems they were a bit scared of Hercules and his reputation.

“Then,” said Hercules, counting them off on his fingers, “then there was that Hydra - had to get young Joey to help me out with that one. I was muddy for days, wasn’t I?”

Mrs McHarrie nodded - she had spent whole days mopping up after her lodger and there were still stains on her best settee where the two of them had come home exhausted and settled down in front of the TV to watch *Strictly Come Dancing* with two six-packs, without bothering to change their clothes or have a bath. “But that’s a nice boy, that Joey,” she murmured, remembering angel-faced Iolaus with some fondness - like a wee laddie really.

But Hercules had already moved on. “Then he sets me after the Cerynian Hind. How long was I away on that trip, eh? It was a full year, wasn’t it? And no sooner was I back than I was sent out after the Boar on Mount Erymanthus - filthy beast that was, I’ll tell you.” Hercules took a deep and moody swallow of his beer, and Mrs McHarrie seized the opportunity to pile some more bacon on his plate. Hercules eyed them distractedly, thinking of the Boar, and then decided to eat them. The landlady smiled to herself - her lodger certainly had a decent appetite to him; she liked that in a man.

“What was next?” asked the Greek hero, looking in confusion at his enormous fingers. He had lost count.

“Wasn’t it those nasty dirty stables?” prompted Mrs McHarrie.

Hercules scowled at the table. “That was it - you’d have thought he’d have given me a break after that one, wouldn’t you? But no, not him. I still had six to do, says he. And all because - all because -” He stopped, a lump suddenly in his throat.

Mrs McHarrie patted Hercules quietly on his shoulder, which had slumped dramatically. She knew the whole sad story - poor man, had killed his wife and kids, given himself up straight away, done time, which was only right; but he’d served his sentence, paid his debt, and a man should be forgiven and allowed to find his place in

Society again, shouldn't he? After all, he had gone straight ever since, and he was not about to marry and have more kids, was he? Got himself a steady job at his cousin's business - although that Yuri didn't seem to be entirely on the level: she worried about Hercules sometimes, whether he might get in with a bad lot and end up in trouble through no fault of his own.

Hercules hauled a handkerchief from his pocket, dabbed his eyes and blew his nose. There was silence for a while. In the kitchen, the whistle on the kettle made itself known and Mrs McHarrie hastened away in her slippers to make a large pot of tea: her lodger always like a cuppa or three after his supper, lots of milk and sugar. A few minutes later, she returned to the dining-room, and deposited a tray with all the necessaries, including a packet of biscuits, at the end of the table. She settled down to serve it.

"You know what that kettle sounded like?" asked Hercules, raising his face. "Sounds like those Stymphalian Birds, that's what."

"Oh, I remember them," exclaimed his landlady. "Nasty pieces of work, weren't they?"

"Very nasty indeed, Mrs M." confirmed Hercules, before he rammed the last of the sausage and egg into his mouth, followed it down with a large piece of sliced white bread, and the remains of his pint of beer. "Very nasty indeed. Not even that Bull last week was as nasty. And that was another thing, that Bull - Yuri has me going all the way to Crete, Easy Jet along with a plane-load of drunken Mancunians heading for the sun, and then my suitcase got lost." He shook his head. "Don't suppose the airport phoned while I was out today, did they? Found my luggage?"

"Not a peep, Mr Hercules," advised the good lady.

"Didn't think so," said the hero gloomily. "Never likely to, what's more. I'll never see that suitcase again, nor those beach-shorts I packed special, thinking I might get a free holiday out of Eurystheus. That's the trouble with flying bargain basement - the cheapskate that he is! And what's more, the airline wouldn't let me bring the Bull back with me - Cretins!" Moodily, Hercules accepted the cup of tea and two chocolate digestives he was offered and was silent for a while which he munched away.

He brightened up after a while. "But I showed them - can't take the Bull with me, so I let it loose in the airport. Gave them something to think about." He chuckled for a few seconds; then his brow clouded over. "And now he's at me again. Calls me into the Portakabin this afternoon, from the yard, where I was exercising the Alsatians -"

"Oh!" exclaimed Mrs McHarrie, "don't mention those Alsatians to me, Mr Hercules - you know I get nervous of big dogs. Oh, but I do!"

Hercules patted his landlady's arm comfortingly. "Don't you worry about them, Mrs M.," he said, "I've got them well-trained. They wouldn't harm any friend of mine. The biggest one - he's called Cerberus - just a kitten at heart."

Mrs McHarrie gave him a maternal look and topped up his teacup.

"So he's sitting there as usual, playing with all that bling he's got round his neck and on his fingers, while that tarty secretary of his, Lyra, primps herself in the mirror, all the while giving me the glad eye when Yuri's not looking."

"We don't approve of that," said the landlady forcefully.

"We certainly do not," agreed Hercules. "She's just a tart, and I don't have any time for tarts at all. So anyway, there's my no-good cousin sitting there, with a big chart behind him on the wall. 'The Labours of Hercules' is what he's written above it and keeps a track of what I've been up to with big red and blue pens. He pulls me in, gives me that smile of his which means I'm in trouble, and he's pointing at the next

one on the list.” Hercules paused, looking balefully at the TV in the corner, which was switched on but mute, showing another episode of *Wire In The Blood* - tame stuff, that.

“And?” asked his landlady, unable to bear the tension.

“The Man-eating Mares of Thrace, that’s all. Just the Man-eating Mares,” announced Hercules. His landlady stifled a scream, her eyes went quite round.

Hercules nodded in agreement. “My feelings exactly. ‘Yuri,’ I says, ‘you can’t mean it?’ ‘Oh, but I do,’ says Yuri: ‘we got the contract, so now you’re going to round them up. Don’t want the family name sullied by breach of contract, do we now?’ And so I’ve got to go out on Friday night to get them,” he added, “soon as it gets dark. There’ll be a horse-box waiting at the end of the road. So that’ll mean a late supper, Mrs M., if you can manage it?”

“Of course,” said the landlady, “I’ll keep it hot in the oven - fish and chips, just as usual.”

“Make sure it’s cod, though, not Hydra,” joked Hercules. It was the usual one whenever fish was mentioned.

“But you’ll be careful, won’t you?” Mrs McHarrie regarded Hercules almost as the son she’d never had. Or more accurately, not the son she’d actually had, a waster who was living in Cardiff with a woman twice his age and never ever called home, didn’t even come to Mr M’s funeral five years ago.

“I’ll be careful,” Hercules assured her. He wondered whether he ought to tell her of the task which he’d seen appeared next but one on Yuri’s famous ‘Gantt Chart’ - maybe not: Girdle of Queen Hippolyte, is what it said. In fact, probably best if he didn’t tell her about that one at all, even after he’d one it. He’d make something up, maybe - shouldn’t be too difficult, after what he’d been through already.