

Hercules' Quest

an excerpt from *The Three Golden Apples*

by Nathaniel Hawthorne

The myths of ancient Greece and Rome are stories of powerful gods and goddesses, courageous human heroes, and monster-like creatures. All of these characters play a part in dramatic journeys and adventures. The hero in the following passage is one of the most important figures in Greek and Roman mythology. His name is Hercules (Heracles in Greek mythology), and he is a demi-god: the son of the Roman god Jupiter (Zeus in Greek mythology) and a mortal mother. Hercules is known for his incredible strength and courage. Later, after he commits a terrible crime, he is sentenced to twelve tasks or "labors" to atone for his actions. One of these labors is to retrieve a treasure of three golden apples, guarded by nymphs called Hesperides and a many-headed giant dragon. Hercules travels a long way and goes through many trials on his quest to get the golden apples. He also gets help from Atlas, the leader of the Titans, a race of Giants.

*Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804–1864) was an American novelist and short story writer. One of his most celebrated novels is *The Scarlet Letter*.*

1 Hercules, in order to complete his quest, had to get three golden apples. He asked the giant, Atlas, about the apples and how he might get them.

2 "No one but myself can go into the garden of the Hesperides, and gather the golden apples. If it were not for this little business of holding up the sky, I would make half a dozen steps across the sea, and get them for you," said Atlas.

3 "You are very kind," replied Hercules. "Can't you rest the sky upon a mountain?"

4 "None of them are quite high enough," said Atlas, shaking his head. "You seem to be a fellow of some strength. What if you should take my burden on your shoulders, while I do your errand for you?"

5 Now Hercules was a remarkably strong man. If any mortal was capable of holding up the sky, it was Hercules. Nevertheless, it seemed so difficult an undertaking, that, for the first time in his life, he hesitated.

6 "Is the sky very heavy?" he inquired.

7 "Why, not particularly so, at first," answered the giant, shrugging his shoulders. "But it gets to be a little burdensome, after a thousand years!"

8 "And how long a time," asked the hero, "will it take you to get the golden apples?"



9 "O, that will be done in a few moments," cried Atlas. "I shall take ten or fifteen miles at a stride, and be at the garden and back again before your shoulders begin to ache."

10 "Well, then," answered Hercules, "I will climb the mountain behind you there, and relieve you of your burden."

11 So without more words, the sky was shifted from the shoulders of Atlas, and placed upon those of Hercules.

12 When this was safely accomplished, the first thing that the giant did was to stretch himself. Next, he slowly lifted one of his feet out of the forest that had grown up around it, and then, the other. Then, all at once, he began to caper, and leap, and dance, for joy at his freedom. When his joy had a little subsided, he stepped into the sea.

13 Hercules watched the giant, as he still went onward until at last the gigantic shape faded entirely out of view. And now Hercules began to consider what he should do, in case Atlas should be drowned in the sea. Or, if he were to be stung to death by the dragon with the hundred heads, which guarded the golden apples of the Hesperides. If any such misfortune were to happen, how could he ever get rid of the sky?

14 "I really pity the poor giant," thought Hercules. "If it wearies me so much in ten minutes, how must it have wearied him in a thousand years!"

15 Finally, Hercules beheld the huge shape of the giant, like a cloud, on the far-off edge of the sea. At his nearer approach, Atlas held up his hand, in which Hercules could perceive three magnificent golden apples, as big as pumpkins, all hanging from one branch.

16 "I am glad to see you again," shouted Hercules, when the giant was within hearing. "So you have got the golden apples?"

17 "Certainly, certainly," answered Atlas; "and very fair apples they are. I took the finest that grew on the tree, I assure you."



18 "I heartily thank you for your trouble. And now, as I have a long way to go, and am rather in haste—and as the king, my cousin, is anxious to receive the golden apples—will you be kind enough to take the sky off my shoulders again?" asked Hercules.

19 "Why, as to that," said the giant, chucking the golden apples into the air, twenty miles high, or thereabouts, and catching them as they came down, "as to that, my good friend, I consider you a little unreasonable. Cannot I carry the golden apples to the king, your cousin, much quicker than you could? As his majesty is in such a hurry to get them, I promise you to take my longest strides. And, besides, I have no fancy for burdening myself with the sky, just now."

20 Here Hercules grew impatient, and gave a great shrug of his shoulders. It being now twilight, you might have seen two or three stars tumble out of their places. Everybody on earth looked upward in affright, thinking that the sky might be going to fall next.

21 "O, that will never do!" cried Giant Atlas, with a great roar of laughter. "I have not let fall so many stars within the last five centuries. By the time you have stood there as long as I did, you will begin to learn patience!"

22 "What!" shouted Hercules, very wrathfully, "do you intend to make me bear this burden forever?"



23 "We will see about that, one of these days," answered the giant. "At all events, you ought not to complain, if you have to bear it the next hundred years, or perhaps the next thousand. I bore it a good while longer, in spite of the backache. Well, then, after a thousand years, if I happen to feel in the mood, we may possibly shift about again. You are certainly a very strong man, and can never have a better opportunity to prove it. Posterity will talk of you, I warrant it!"

24 "Pish!" cried Hercules, with another hitch of his shoulders. "Just take the sky upon your head one instant, will you? I want to make a cushion of my lion's skin, for the weight to rest upon. It really chafes me, and will cause unnecessary inconvenience in so many centuries as I am to stand here."

Notes

25 "That's no more than fair, and I'll do it!" replied the giant. For Atlas had no unkind feeling towards Hercules, and was merely acting with a too selfish consideration of his own ease. "For just five minutes, then, I'll take back the sky. Only for five minutes! I have no idea of spending another thousand years as I spent the last. Variety is the spice of life, say I."

26 Ah, the thick-witted old rogue of a giant! He threw down the golden apples, and received back the sky, from the head and shoulders of Hercules, upon his own, where it rightly belonged. And Hercules picked up the three golden apples. They were as big or bigger than pumpkins, and straightway set out on his journey homeward. He moved on without paying the slightest heed to the thundering tones of the giant, who bellowed after him to come back. Another forest sprang up around the giant's feet, and grew ancient there. And again might be seen oak-trees, of six or seven centuries old, that had waxed thus again betwixt his enormous toes.



27 And there stands the giant, to this day. Or, at any rate, there stands a mountain as tall as he, and which bears his name, Atlas. And when the thunder rumbles about its summit, we may imagine it to be the voice of Giant Atlas, bellowing after Hercules!

28 *Hercules completed his twelve labors successfully. He met all the challenges with courage and bravery. As a result, his honor was restored. In Roman and Greek mythology, he is the only mortal to sit with gods on Mount Olympus.*

