

Heracles traveled over land and over sea, and at last he came to the garden of the Hesperides. Nearby stood the Titan Atlas, and Heracles offered to hold up the sky for him if he would pick three golden apples from Hera's tree. Atlas said he would be glad to be rid of his heavy burden for a while, but he feared the dragon Ladon, which lay under the tree watching it with all the eyes of his hundred heads. A hundred-headed dragon could not frighten Heracles. He drew his bow and shot it. Then he took the sky on his shoulders, and Atlas reached out and picked the apples. The three little nymphs who tended the tree wept bitter tears, but they could not stop Atlas, now that the watchful dragon was dead.

Heracles' knees started to buckle, so heavy was the weight of the sky, but Atlas stretched himself, enjoying his freedom.

"I might as well take these apples to Eurystheus myself," said the Titan, and started to walk away. Heracles well understood that Atlas had no intention of ever coming back, but he pretended to agree.

"Very well," he said, "just hold the sky while I make a pad of my lion skin, the sky is hard on my shoulders."

This sounded reasonable to Atlas. He put down the golden apples and braced himself against the vault of the sky.

"Thank you for picking the apples," said Heracles, and hurried homeward.

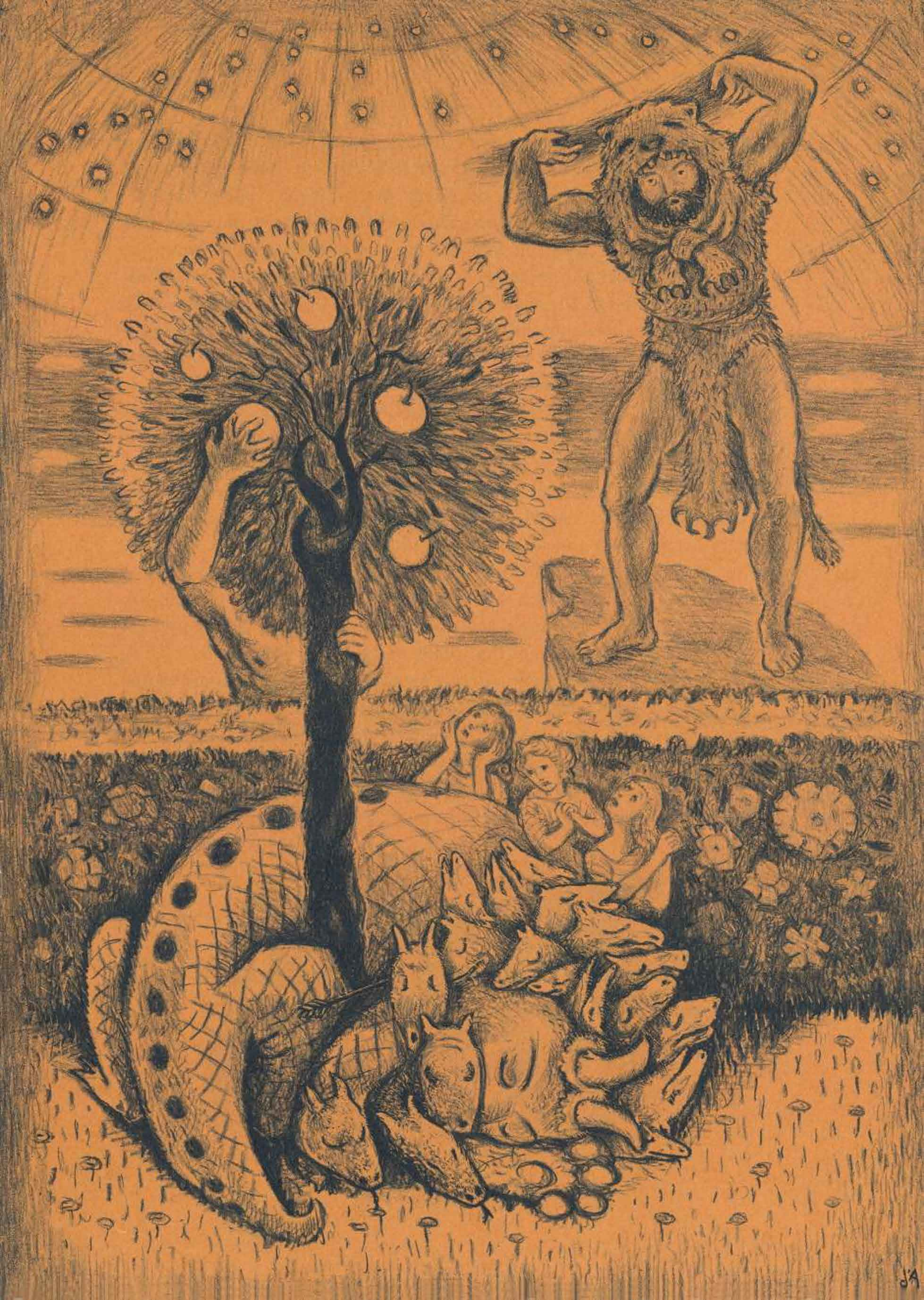
On his way to Mycenae, Heracles was stopped by the giant wrestler Antaeus. He lived in a hut beside the road, and forced all travelers to wrestle with him. He was a son of Mother Earth and could not die as long as he touched her, so he always won and had built his hut of the skulls and bones of his victims. When Heracles threw the giant to the ground, thinking he was dead, but saw him springing up revived, he understood what was happening. Seizing Antaeus, he held him in the air until he had squeezed all life out of him.

Heracles hurried on to Mycenae and gave the golden apples to Eurystheus. But Eurystheus did not dare to keep them. He gave them to Athena, who took them back to Hera's garden, where they belonged.

For his twelfth labor Heracles had to go to the underworld, capture Cerberus, the snarling, three-headed watchdog of Hades, and bring him to Mycenae.

Heracles searched far and wide till at last he found an entrance to the underworld near Helios' evening palace, far to the west. Setting his







face in a terrible scowl, he walked straight down to Hades. The fluttering souls trembled and Hades himself was so frightened at the sight that he told him to take the dog, only please not to treat it too roughly. Cerberus growled and lashed out with his spiked tail, but Heracles threw his arms around him and squeezed him till the dog's three tongues hung out. Whining, Cerberus let Heracles drag him to the upper world and all the way to the gates of Mycenae. When Eurystheus saw the fearful hound, once again he dived into the urn and cowered there, not daring to make a sound. Heracles did not know what to do with the dog, so he dragged Cerberus all the way back down to Hades.

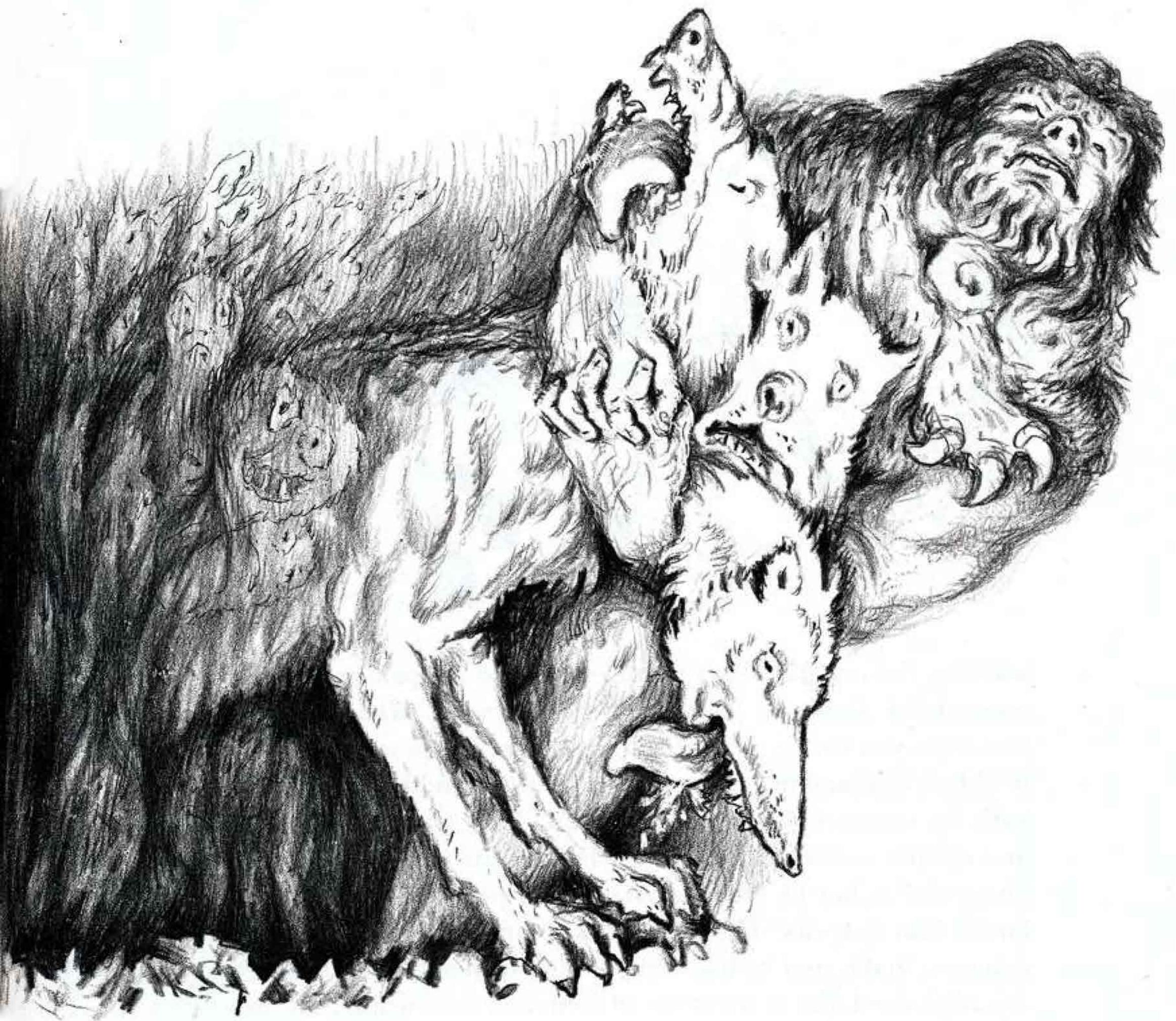
Now Heracles was free. He had performed not only ten but twelve labors. He had atoned for his sins and Zeus was very pleased with his strong son. He was pleased with Hera, too, for she had unknowingly helped Heracles win more glory and fame than any other hero on earth. Admired by everyone, Heracles traveled all over Greece, performing more heroic deeds and making many friends.

But Hera, still relentless, again made him insane and he swatted men down like flies. When he recovered his senses, he once more had to atone for his sins, and this time it was his father, Zeus, who meted out his punishment, seeing to it that there was no glory to be won.

Zeus sentenced Heracles to serve for three years as the slave of Queen Omphale of Lydia. She dressed him in woman's clothes and made the strongest man in the world sit at her feet, spinning and sewing with his huge hands, while she herself donned his lion skin and brandished his club. Heracles grumbled and groaned, but he did as he was ordered. When his three years at last were over, he had learned his lesson of humility.

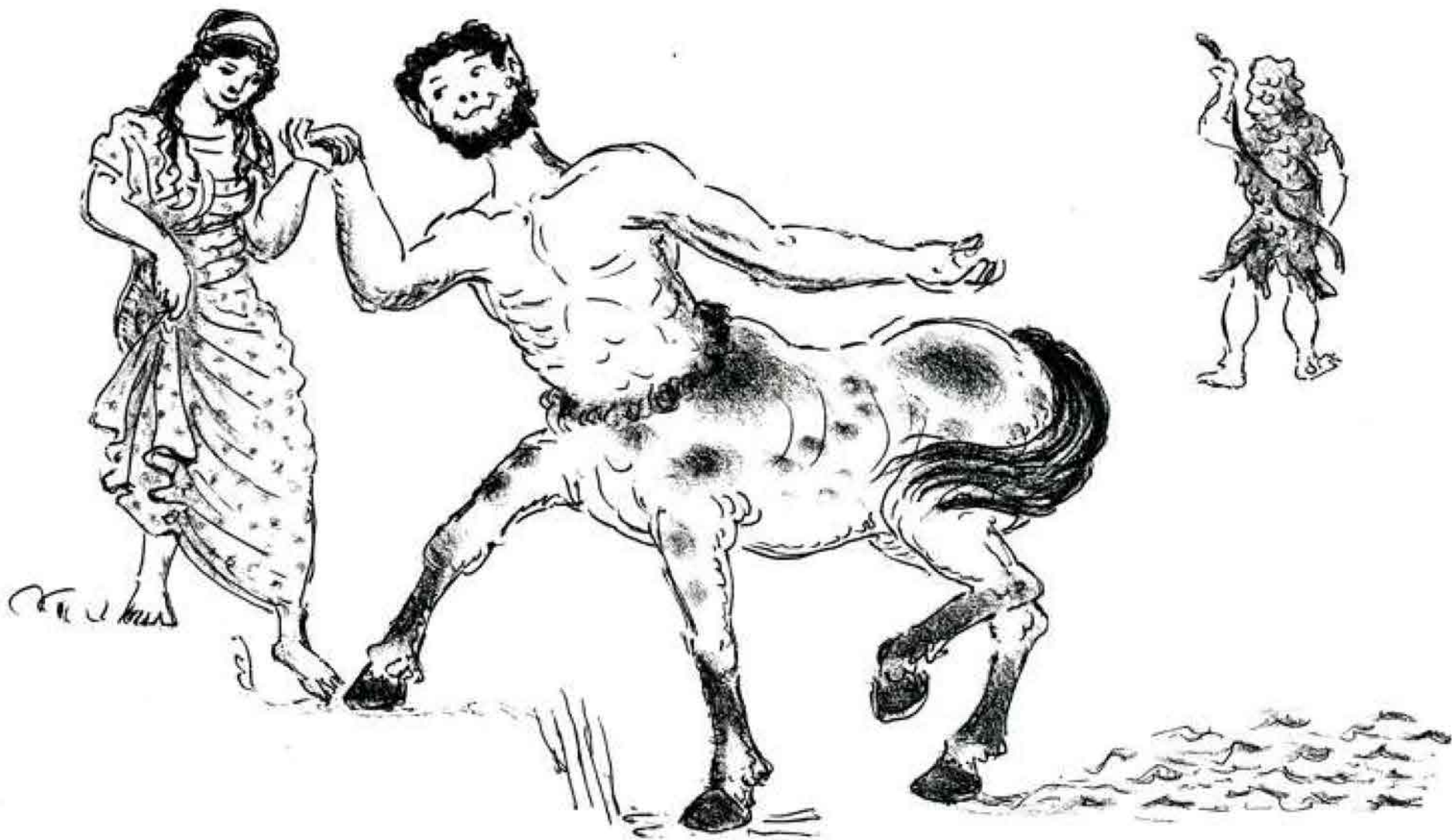






Again he performed heroic deeds and his friends were glad to see him back. One of his great friends was Admetus, King of Thessaly, under whom Apollo once had served when he was a slave on earth. To thank Admetus for his kindness, Apollo had persuaded the Fates not to cut his thread of life when his time to die had come, as long as Admetus could find someone else willing to die in his stead. That would be easy, thought the king. His faithful men were always saying that his life was dearer to them than their own. King Admetus had always been afraid of dying early, for he was very happy with his beautiful queen, Alcestis. The king and the queen were both fond of Heracles and always welcomed him





warmly. But one day when Heracles came to the palace, King Admetus greeted him alone. He looked sad and downcast. When Heracles asked him what was wrong, he said nothing except that a woman of the household had died and he must go to her funeral. And he left Heracles alone with the servants. They too looked sad. They waited on him in silence and did not answer his questions. Heracles ate, drank, and made merry alone and at last he grew impatient, grasped one of the servants, and forced him to speak. The servant told him that the time had come for Admetus to die, and he had turned to his men and asked one of them to die in his stead. But now not one of them had been willing. Admetus then went to his parents, who were old and weary of life, and asked them to die in his stead. They too refused. But when he returned to his palace, he found Queen Alcestis setting off for the realm of the dead. She loved him so much, she said, she would gladly give her life for him, and the king was so fond of his own life that he let his queen depart. Now the king and all the household were mourning for Alcestis.

Heracles shed big tears when he heard this sad story, but, being a man of action, he seized his club and strode off to the underworld to force Hades to give Alcestis back. Such a loving wife should not be allowed to die.

Heracles did not have to use his club. Cerberus slunk out of the way





as he stormed into the palace of Hades. The lord of the dead, himself, had a cold, unloving queen and he was so moved when Heracles told him of Alcestis' devotion that he let her go.

Heracles brought Queen Alcestis back to King Admetus and the grief in the palace changed to great joy. Now they all ate, drank, and made merry together and Alcestis grew famous far and wide as the most devoted wife who ever lived.

Heracles too wanted a wife and he chose Deianira, a Caledonian princess, for his bride. Deianira had already been promised to the river-god Achelous, but she dreaded the thought of being married to a river-god, who could change his shape at will. She would never know in which shape her husband would come home at night. She would rather marry the great hero Heracles. The two suitors agreed to wrestle, the victor to have the Princess Deianira. Of course, Heracles won. The river-god rushed at him in the shape of a bull, and Heracles seized him by a horn, wrenched it off, and threw him to the ground before he had time to change into something else. So Heracles and Deianira were married and were very happy together.

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One day as they were out traveling, they came to a swollen stream. Heracles forded it with ease, but Deianira was afraid and stood on the bank. Along came the centaur Nessus and politely offered to carry her



across. But Nessus, like all centaurs, was fond of pretty girls and before he had reached midstream he had made up his mind to carry her off. Once on the other side, he galloped off with her. Deianira screamed for help, Heracles shot a poisoned arrow at the centaur and Nessus fell to the ground. Before he died he whispered to Deianira, "Take some of my blood and save it. If you ever fear that you are losing your husband's love, paint some of the blood on his tunic and he will love you again."

Deianira carefully saved the drops of blood, for she knew well that many a girl would like to steal her magnificent husband.

One day as Heracles was away at war, he won a great victory and sent a messenger home for his best tunic. He wanted to celebrate with his men, but Deianira thought he wanted to make himself handsome for a girl. She painted some of Nessus' blood on the tunic. As soon as Heracles put it on, he felt as though a thousand fires were burning him. It was not a love potion that Nessus had given Deianira, but the deadly poison of the Hydra from Heracles' arrow, mixed with Nessus' blood. Heracles was so strong that the poison could not kill him, but his sufferings were unbearable. He ordered his men to build a funeral pyre, spread his lion skin over the top, and lay down on it. Then he gave his bow and deadly arrows to his young friend, Philoctetes, as a parting gift. As the flames rose around him, a loud thunderclap was heard, and Heracles, by the order of Zeus, rose up to Olympus, reclining on his lion skin.

The gods all welcomed Heracles and were glad to have him with them, for the Fates had predicted that Olympus would be attacked by a fearful enemy and the Olympians could be saved only if the strongest man ever born fought on their side. The prediction soon came to pass. In a last effort to defeat the mighty thunder-god Zeus, Mother Earth had given birth to fifty snake-legged giants, who surrounded Olympus and tried to storm the palace. They seemed unconquerable, for, like Antaeus, whom Heracles had fought on earth, they sprang up again revived as soon as they touched Mother Earth. Heracles knew what to do, and with his help the gods won over the giants and cast them down into the dismal pit of Tartarus. Heracles was now the hero of Mount Olympus, beloved by all the gods. Even Hera begged him to forgive her and gave him her daughter Hebe, goddess of eternal youth, for his Olympian bride. From then on Heracles lived in eternal bliss, forever a joy to the gods. His father Zeus was very pleased.



