

HERCULES

MUSCLES IN

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When the Strong Man of Peloponnesos Finds Himself in a Labor Daze,
Year-Leaper Pete Proves That a Brain and Brawn Trust Is Mightier Than
Zeus!

A Complete Pete Manx Novelet

CHAPTER I

Back to 700 B.C.

PETE MANX rubbed his bullet head reflectively, put the derby back upon it, and glanced at his companion in the taxicab.

"You just don't understand, Biggie," he said wearily. "Lots of guys have the same trouble."

Mr. Bigpig Callahan, one-time bronco-wrangler and currently a wrestler both owned and managed by Pete, looked glum. Or, at least, one supposed he did. It is difficult to detect emotion in a face like a slab of beef, slashed by a lipless gap, dotted by two tiny, glittering eyes, and fringed with bristling red hair and a couple of scalloped objects that were probably ears.

Bigpig's face had not always been thus. Raised in New York's East Side, he had brawled his way from Jersey to Montana, remaining in the latter place for six years learning how to punch cattle. Pete had a well-founded idea that a cow had once stepped on Big-pig's uncomely face, a process scarcely calculated to improve on nature. At any rate, it was neither a thing of beauty nor a joy forever.

"Flors," said Mr. Callahan. "Dey, git me."

Pete translated mentally. Roses, petunias, or tulips to Bigpig came under the classification of flors. But it was only goldenrod that was poison.

"You're allergic to the things," Pete pointed out. "See? It's like having hayfever."

"Alloigic, huh? Izzat good or bad?" "It's bad. And we get out here. The Doc'll fix you up. He's a smart fella.

He found out I was alloi—allergic to time traveling."

But this was utterly beyond Bigpig's comprehension. He could never have understood the principles of Mayhem's device that had more than once projected Pete Manx back into historical eras and long-past centuries. Once Pete's consciousness had been sent back to Rome to inhabit the body of a citizen of that interesting city; once he had visited Egypt.

But those days were gone forever for Pete. Every time he had visited an

ancient time-sector, he had got into trouble. Right now he was sitting pretty, or had been till lately. He'd given up his job as concessionaire at Coney Island, and instead was managing Bigpig Callahan, Mammoth of the Mat. And Bigpig was good—there was no doubt about that.

Built like an ox to begin with, his years of wrangling on the range had developed lightning-quick reactions in what Pete hopefully called his brain. The mauler had only two serious faults. He had fallen arches. On another man that might be unimportant, but Big-pig's arches reminded Pete vaguely of the Brooklyn Bridge. His other really dangerous weakness was his allergy.

Doctor Horatio Mayhem's scrawny figure appeared in the door in response to a ring. The scientist's mild eyes blinked at the callers.

"Ah. Hello, Pete," he greeted. "Come in."

THEY were ushered into Mayhem's laboratory, where wires, rheostats, converters, generators, and tubes made a baffling jigsaw puzzle. Two metal chairs, looking rather deadly, stood in the corner. Pete averted his gaze. He had sat in those chairs more than once, and each time he had been flung back into past centuries. They were part of Mayhem's time machine, that released the ego of the individual and sent it out to possess the body of some inhabitant of an ancient time-sector.

"This," said Pete, "is Bigpig Callahan." Swiftly he explained the situation, while Bigpig shifted unhappily from one foot to another.

"So we had a scrap scheduled for last night, Doc. And it was all fixed, only Biggie ran into some goldenrod in a florist's shop. He swelled up fit to bust and we forfeited the purse. He couldn't fight. He couldn't even talk."

"Allergy, eh?" Mayhem asked.

"Yeah. The Purple Python was a set-up for Biggie—but he lost the purse. It was winner take all."

"I'da moidered da bum," Mr. Callahan remarked at random. "I'da thrown him outa da ring."

"Sure," Pete soothed his fighter. "Just relax, Biggie. Don't bother us." Bigpig wandered away in a vague manner, while Mayhem and Manx went on talking.

"Some people are allergic to goldenrod pollen, of course," the doctor nodded. "But—"

"It hits Bigpig bad. His throat swells up so he can hardly breathe. Now look, Doc, you're smart. Can you cure Biggie so he won't be allergic any more?"

Instead of answering, Mayhem yelped sharply. He sprang forward, making frantic gestures.

"Stop! Don't do that! The current's turned on—"

"My feet hoit," explained Bigpig, and sank down in one of the metal chairs.

ELECTRICITY crackled. Mr. Callahan looked surprised, and then an expression of utter calm flooded his face. He ceased to breathe, and relaxed, to all appearances a large, uncomely, and repugnant corpse.

"Biggie!" Pete cried desperately. "Look out!"

Mayhem shut off the current, but he was too late. Bigpig Callahan was no longer among those present. Pete Manx clawed at the wrestler's shoulder.

"Wake up, you bird-brained dope! You can't do this to me! It ain't legal—"

The scientist drew Pete back.

"He isn't dead. He's just been sent into a past era."

"Oh ... oh, yeah. That's right. Well, what are we waiting for? Bring him back, Doc, will you?"

Mayhem hesitated.

"I'm afraid I can't, just yet. I was making some adjustments on my machine, and I'd dismantled part of the apparatus. The device only works one way now. Never mind, though," the doctor consoled. "I'll be able to wake your friend up in a week or so, maybe."

Pete writhed in anguish. "Where is he now?"

"Urn—let's see." Mayhem referred to various gauges. "Beyond 700 B. C. Maybe 800 B. C."

"Huh," said Pete unhappily. "Back to the dinosaurs, huh?"

"Oh, no. Ancient Greece—Peloponnesos—is where he's gone, I think. There was a culture there, you know."

Pete went off on a tangent.

"That dumb ox! All my dough tied up in him, and he goes visiting Greeks. He'll get in trouble. He's too dopey to keep out of it." A great inward struggle seemed to be taking place within Mr. Manx's soul, but at last virtue triumphed. "Doc!" Pete said suddenly. "I gotta look after that monkey. I know how this time racket works. Can you send me back to Greece too?"

Mayhem nodded.

"Yes. But I can't return you to our present time-sector for some time, until I've finished my repairs—"

"I'll get along. I can take care of myself—but Biggie can't. Okay. Shoot the works, Doc." And Pete seated himself in the second of the two chairs.

Mayhem went to the instrument board and pulled a lever. Pete was surprised to discover that it was the Fourth of July. His head had become a Roman candle.

Sssss—swish!

Pete Manx stopped breathing and relaxed. He was on his way to 700 B. C.!

CHAPTER II

Strong Man Fills Strong-Box

PETE opened his eyes to sunlight and a face. The face was unprepossessing, decorated with a bristling black beard and an assortment of scars. The man was wearing armor, and a plume waved from his bronze helmet.

He leaned over Pete and jabbed the prostrate man in the stomach with a spear.

"Hey!" said Mr. Manx. "Don't do that. It ain't friendly."

"No runaway slave can make a fool out of one of the King's Guard," the soldier growled, and used the spear again. Pete scrambled hurriedly to his feet, staring around.

He was in the midst of a fairly big city. This was seemingly the main stem, for a number of chariots were rolling past, filled with people heading for a masquerade. They wore an assortment of tunics, togas, pillow-slips, and armor, or so it seemed to Pete. He yelped and dodged the spear.

"Slave?" Pete said aggrievedly. "Where in Hellene am I?"

"In the city of Tiryns, of course, in the Peloponnesos, as if you didn't know," said the soldier. "And I was taking you to the king for judgment when you pretended sunstroke and fell down. Come along!"

Pete obeyed. There was nothing else he could do. He was, he decided, talking Greek, for his memory-center connected with speech had automatically hitched itself to the brain of the body he was inhabiting. Mayhem had once explained all this very carefully. The miserable luck that pursued Manx whenever he took a time tour had struck again. So he was a runaway slave this time. Pete swore softly at his ill fate. Glancing down, he suppressed a shout, a short, sharp cry of dismay. He seemed to be clad only in an inadequate pillow-slip.

"Oh-oh," Pete murmured. "First thing I gotta find myself a pair of pants—"

Haled through Tiryns at the point of a spear, he found himself wondering about Bigpig Callahan. He had not the slightest idea what Biggie would look like in his Hellenic incarnation.

They reached the palace. It was a dump, compared to the White House, Pete thought. They entered, presently finding themselves in the throne room, a big, chilly place with a raised dais at one end. It was filled with a motley throng, but Pete's eyes were riveted to the throne and the man who sat upon it.

The king was a husky old man with a long gray beard and a vicious gleam in his eye. Beside him stood a dapper, handsome officer in gilded armor, who occasionally leaned forward to whisper in the ruler's ear.

Before the dais stood a very giant of a man—a brawny figure clad in a dilapidated lion skin and nothing else. Mild blue eyes searched the room in a dazed manner.

Pete's captor dragged him into a corner. "We'll have to wait," he muttered. "Hercules is in trouble again, and I'll wager Nessus is responsible."

"Huh?" The guard turned away, scowling, but a friendlier soldier nearby answered Pete. "Nessus is the officer standing beside the throne. He used to be the city's chief hero, till Hercules came. But nobody looks at him now."

The name of the man in the lion-skin was vaguely familiar.

"Hercules, eh?" Pete said. "What's his racket?"

ANIMATION showed in the other's face. "You must be a stranger, not to know of Hercules. He's under bond to the throne, and King Eurystheus makes him do dirty jobs like cleaning the stables, but Hercules is a hero indeed. He killed Geryon—a human monster with three bodies—and brought his herd of red cattle to the king. And he slew the lion of Nemea—that's the skin he's wearing."

"A Frank Buck, huh?"

"I know not the name. He captured the man-eating horses of Diomedes, too. They're penned up now, of course, and malefactors are fed to them. Eurystheus doesn't like Hercules; he's afraid of his growing popularity with the people. But he doesn't dare kill him outright. He just gives him harder and harder tasks to perform.

Nessus bent toward the king and whispered again. Eurystheus smiled and stroked his beard. He stared at Hercules.

"It has come to our knowledge," the king rumbled, "that you struck a costermonger and dislocated his jaw. What was his offense?"

"Gosh," Hercules said plaintively, "he stepped on my corns. He was tryin' to sell me some goldenrod an' I can't stand the stuff. An' he wouldn't go away. I don't get this set-up, anyway—"

"Yipee!" The involuntary cry burst from Pete's lips. The guard made a frantic clutch as his captive sprang forward. A spear whizzed past Mr. Manx's head, and a soldier shouted, "An assassin! Slay him!"

But Pete wasn't heading toward the king. He was embracing Hercules. "Biggie! It's you!" Pete gurgled at the lion-skinned man.

"Hey—you sound like Pete !" Hercules said. "What'sa idea of this whacky get-up, anyhow? What—"

Pete scrambled to safety behind the hero's brawny legs as a soldier approached, waving a spear. But King Eurystheus lifted a hand.

"A friend of yours, Hercules? Who is this helot?"

"Manx is the name, your honor—"

"Silence!" Pete's guard bellowed. He bowed low before the king. "A runaway slave, your majesty. I caught him and brought him back for judgment."

"I see." Eurystheus scabbled in his beard. "Well, throw him to the man-eating horses. We can't have such goings-on in Tiryns. It's bad enough with the imperial treasury running at a deficit and the people objecting to our taxes, without slaves getting above themselves. To the man-eaters with him."

Two soldiers grabbed Pete, who clung frantically to Bigpig's pillarlike legs.

"Make 'em go 'way," Manx babbled. "Soak 'em, Biggie—quick!"

Mr. Callahan hesitated, scratched his head thoughtfully, and then swung immense arms. The soldiers described an irregular orbit across the room, ending up by folding around an impassive pillar. They slid down gently to the floor.

"Sedition!" Nessus cried, his thin, handsome face alight with malice. "Slay them both!"

"Hey, wait a minute," Biggie roared, suddenly getting the idea. "Pete's a pal of mine. You can't push him around."

There was a silence. Eurystheus leaned toward Nessus.

"I can't order Hercules killed," he whispered. "The people won't stand for it."

"Well, kill the slave," said Nessus, with what Pete thought an unnecessary enthusiasm.

But Biggie folded his arms and scowled.

"Pete's my pal. If anybody lays a finger on him—"

THERE was a silence. It was a deadlock, and no one realized this as well as Mr. Manx. From his experience with kings and Pharaohs, he knew how important it was for regents to keep face, and his mind was working furiously in an attempt to find an out. Maybe there was a way

"Now wait a minute, your majesty," he said, gulping. "I got an idea we can settle this out of court. You said the treasury was running in the red. Suppose I show you a way to clean up plenty—"

"Kill him!" Nessus snapped, but the king leaned forward interestedly.

"Eh? Are you talking about—"

"Money," Pete said enticingly. "Gold. Dinero. The long green."

Eurystheus shushed Nessus with a lifted hand.

"He may know where some treasure is hidden. Come forward, slave. I shall hear from you."

Pete glanced around.

"This has gotta be a private audience. Just you and me and—uh—Hercules here."

There was a little wrangle about this, but presently the courtroom was cleared. Nessus, however, remained, glaring at Pete and Hercules with vicious eyes.

"Now," said Eurystheus, "speak up, or my torturers will make you. Where is this treasure buried?"

By this time Pete had had time to consider possible angles. Somehow his mind had gone blank. What Tiryns needed was some up-to-date racket that would pay dividends—but what? Not knowing much about the culture and life of the Hellenic city, it was impossible to say. Pete cast back to what he had seen during his progress toward the palace. Chariots . . .

"Who owns all these two-wheel jalopies around here?" he asked.

"Don't change the subject," the king growled. "About this treasure—"

"It's on the main stem, just waiting to be picked up," Pete said hurriedly. "Your transportation system's lousy. No subways, no El's, no buses. It'd be tough to make those here in Tiryns, sure, but you've got a ready-made business here with these chariots. It's too hot to walk. What Tiryns needs are taxis. . . ."

It took an hour to explain the situation to Eurystheus, but Pete's glib tongue finally convinced the king.

"But I gotta get something out of it, King," he argued. "I'll fix up the whole business for you—take care of all the angles—but you gotta give me a franchise on the main stem. Only my cabs can run there. No competition. We can keep the fares up that way."

"A franchise?" The king pondered. "Well, you say you'll give me fifty per cent of all the profits. How long will this arrangement keep up?"

Nessus whispered in the royal ear. Eurystheus smiled and turned to Hercules.

"You vouch for this slave? Good. Then he is safe for your lifetime, Hercules. We are merciful. The franchise is valid as long as you live."

And, despite Pete's objections, so it was arranged.

WHEN Manx started something, he finished it. He got a moneylender to put up a small amount of gold, with Hercules' famous lion-skin as security, and with this as a basis, took an option on a few dozen cheap chariots. Creating taximeters was not too great a problem, once Pete understood the monetary exchange of the city. Cogged gears, connected with the chariot wheels, caused various dials to revolve, indicating the fare.

"You gotta put on a front," Pete explained to the wide-eyed Biggie. "Help me splash on some of this gilt paint." It wasn't long before the chariots

were finished. Nobody would have recognized them.

They gleamed like gold, and had striped awnings to protect the occupants from the heat of the sun. On the backs were stenciled glaring red signs:

PETROS MANKOS CABS

Six Can Ride for the Price of One

Why Walk? Ride in Cool Comfort

Pete had purposely bought small, light chariots, for he saw no reason to incur the expense of purchasing and caring for horses. Instead, it was easy, with a little labor, to transform the conveyances into rickshaws, which could be drawn easily by the drivers themselves.

"It worked at the Fair," Pete mused smugly, "so why not here?"

And it did work! For years the common people had enviously eyed the chariots which they could not afford to own. Now they paid gladly to ride briefly on a level with nobles. The nobles; however, didn't like it. They had a way of driving recklessly into Pete's cabs and overturning them.

Mr. Manx was equal to the occasion. Within a few days a new fleet of cabs made their appearance on the streets of Tiryns. They were purple, with golden spangles, and had bright orange awnings with tassels. Small fans, connected with the turning wheels, helped to keep the riders cool. The fare was double that of the plebian chariots, but these cabs modestly advertised the legend:

ULTRA LIMOUSINE SERVICE

For Those Who Can Afford the Best

Fans and Music Provided!

The limousine charioteers were specially picked and trained by Pete. In the absence of radios, he decided to depend on the human voice, and soon the limousine cabs were rolling along merrily, drawn by huskies who yodeled popular songs Pete taught them. "Wagon Wheels," "My Merry Oldsmobile," and "Heigh-Ho" were the favorites, until the charioteers got short of wind and threatened to strike for a ten-song-a-day minimum.

Pete installed a special seat at the back of the cabs, and placed on each one a neatly-uniformed blonde with a zither, who thereafter sang and played while the cabmen devoted their energies to pulling. The nobles, who heretofore had preferred their own private, horse-drawn chariots, now flocked to the Ultra Limousine Service. "Honey draws flies," Pete remarked sagely to Bigpig. "And honeys draw guys. Not bad, eh?"

CHAPTER III

Home on the Range

PETE found no difficulty in renewing the options on the chariots, and more were immediately added. Tiryns was a changed city. By the end of the

second week Pete was able to present King Eurystheus with three bags filled with gold. He was, however, distressed to find Nessus closeted with the king, obviously up to no good.

"I don't like that shavetail," he told Biggie—and his fears were justified when the pair were summoned to the palace the next day. Eurystheus showered them with compliments and praised the cut of Hercules' lion skin, which Pete had redeemed out of hock. "A mighty hero," he said tauntingly, glancing at Nessus. "How long has it been since you killed Geryon? A year? You must grow stale here with nothing to do. Suppose you trot off to Elis and clean the Augean stables."

"Suppose he don't?" Pete made the mistake of inquiring.

"Hercules is under bond to me," said the king. "In expiation of various crimes. If he fails to obey me and refuses the tasks I set him, he dies. But the mighty Hercules will obey, I am sure."

"Okay," said Pete, shrugging. "We're in. So we're stable-boys. But don't think I don't get the angle—"

He didn't finish. It wasn't necessary. But, later, he got Nessus aside and proceeded to insult the officer vigorously.

"You put the king up to this, shave-tail. My franchise is good as long as Hercules lives, but Eurystheus doesn't like the idea of splitting the take with us. If Hercules just happens to kick the bucket, I lose the franchise—"

"And will be flung to the man-eating horses," Nessus said nastily. "I'll make sure of that, slave."

Pete was feeling none too well when he and Bigpig arrived at the neighboring kingdom of Elis. King Augeias was a huge, fat man with a helpless air of incompetence whenever he ordered people executed, which he did far too often for Pete's peace of mind. Cleaning the Augean stables was no small task. They hadn't been cleaned for thirty years!

"Well, we'll be finished in thirty years, maybe," said Biggie, staring at the mess. Pete shook his head.

"Won't do. There's a time limit. There's gotta be an out—there always is, if you look hard enough. Though I dunno—"

"Can't you high-pressure the big shot into giving us some help?" Bigpig asked.

"No. We've got to do it ourselves—wait!" Pete's eyes widened. "High pressure—you said something that time, pal. I got an idea—and what an idea!"

He fled, dragging the bewildered Hercules with him. Pete had remembered that two great rivers—the Alpheios and the Peneios—flowed near the stables, and that higher up the slope was a natural lake. King Augeias was willing to provide Hercules with all the facilities he required, but not with any man-power. So Pete took advantage of the royal offer and laid a pipe-line from the lake down to the stables.

Force of gravity did the rest. When a valve was turned, a jet of water, hard as a bar of iron, thrust itself resistlessly out of the nozzle. It took all of Bigpig's Herculean strength to manipulate the hose, but the gadget worked! A deluge flooded the stables, and, even before Pete expected, the job was finished.

"Quicker than the WPA could have done it," Pete remarked cryptically. "Thanks," said King Augeias. "Come back in thirty years and do it again, eh?"

KING EURYSTHEUS nibbled his beard and Nessus cursed in vicious monotone when Pete and Hercules returned to Tiryns. The taxicab business was booming. Gold poured into the coffers. Half of it went to the king, but the latter wanted it all. Pete suspected that he was thinking up some even more difficult task for Hercules to perform.

Unexpectedly, trouble came from Bigpig himself. Ill at ease in this alien time-sector, he kept wandering about, picking fights and getting in jams until Pete was really worried. It was vital that Hercules keep the good will of the people, for that protected him from the king's malice.

"No," Mr. Manx said coldly. "You can't open a beer joint. Ain't the taxicab racket good enough for you?"

"I wisht I was back in Montana," Bigpig mourned. "If I had a cayuse between my legs—"

"Uh! That's an idea. It'll keep you out of trouble, anyway. Listen, Biggie; suppose I help you start a Dude Ranch?"

"Huh?"

"It'll clean up." Pete was rapidly becoming enthusiastic about his own project. "The people'll eat it up. . ."

Also it would keep Bigpig out of the king's icy eye, but that was not entirely dependable, with Nessus around. Nevertheless the plan went forward. Soon the streets of Tiryns were placarded with large, flaming signs. The chariot-cabs carried them, too.

HERCULES' DUDE RANCH

Mgr., Petros Mankos

Open to the Public on Next Saturn's Day

Big Free Show

Cow-punchers—bulldogging- bronco-busting

RODEO! Why go to the beach on your vacation?

Spend a week or two at

HERCULES' DUDE RANCH!

The grand opening was a huge success. Vast mobs attended. Celebrities

were brought free to the premiere in the Petros Mankos cabs for the occasion.

They all applauded loudly, and were conquered. Bigpig begged to be allowed to wear a pair of chaps like the other hands, whom he had trained, but Pete was adamant.

"That lion-skin's your trademark," he insisted. "Everybody knows it."

"Heck," said Mr. Callahan. "It smells."

Though this was undeniable, Bigpig knew Pete too well to argue further. As for the other Greek lads, they threw themselves into their duties with excited glee. Already good horsemen, they soon learned the western lore Pete and Bigpig taught them. There were, of course, no guitars, but the boys were provided with zithers, and managed to master some ballads. Around the campfire that night the crowds listened intently while, "Git along, little dogie," resounded dulcetly over the broad Hellenic plains.

There was a barbecue. The rodeo was overwhelmingly successful, especially when Hercules bulldogged a giant steer. He had taught the hands how to handle lariats, and there was an exhibition of lassoing that was a highlight of the day. By the time most of the crowd had left, success was assured. Already there were more reservations than Pete could handle.

"We'll build new bunk-houses," Manx told Bigpig. "These mugs are used to sleeping on anything. We'll cram 'em in like sardines and tell 'em they're roughing it. What a take! And we don't have to split a penny with old Sticky-whiskers."

JUST then a messenger arrived from old Sticky-whiskers. "A new labor for you, Hercules!" was the announcement. "The marshes of Arkadian Stymphalos are overrun with man-eating birds. King Eurystheus orders you to slay these demons."

A cheer went up from the remaining guests.

"Hercules! Son of Zeus! A new labor for Hercules!"

Pete cheered faintly with the rest, but his heart was descending rapidly. It thumped almost audibly into his sandals. Man-eating birds? Vultures? Eagles? Whatever they were, Hercules would have to obey the king—or else suffer unpleasant consequences. And, in the latter contingency, Pete himself would provide fodder for the man-eating horses.

"I always knew horses would ruin me," Mr. Manx moaned. "But not like this!"

However, two days later, Pete and Hercules marshaled the group of cowhands and rode toward the land of Arcady. A skeleton crew was left to take care of the ranch and the dudes; the taxicab business could take care of itself. But most of the punchers were with Pete and Bigpig, cantering on with lariats looped at their odd-looking saddles, armed with spears and short swords instead of six-guns.

The manufacture of a pistol was beyond Pete's capabilities, though he was

already making up a stock of fireworks for the next big rodeo.

"Nessus was behind this," Pete informed Hercules, who was writhing uncomfortably in the lion skin. "Stop scratching, will you?"

"Gosh—"

"Shut up. Nessus put the king up to setting you after these man-eating birds."

"Well, anyhow we know what they are," said Bigpig.

"Yeah. Somebody who'd seen 'em described 'em to me. Ostriches, that's what. How they got into this part of the country I dunno, but they did."

"How do you kill an ostrich, Pete?" For answer Mr. Manx grinned and patted the lariat at his saddle-horn. . . . It made a good story after they got back from Arkadian Stymphalos, after having fulfilled their errand. Centuries later the same story would be famous as one of Hercules' Twelve Labors; it would be written that the hero killed the birds one by one with his unerring arrows.

The actual incident was somewhat different. For one thing, Hercules played no part in it. He ran into a field of goldenrod and was incapacitated for several days. Pete and the punchers galloped after the ostriches, lassoed them, and killed the giant birds with their sharp blades. Thereafter, for a short time, Pete's taxi-drivers sold their customers ostrich-plumes at extremely exorbitant prices.

"Buy a feather for your girl friend's hair, buddy?" went the cry. And more money went into Pete's pockets, to the fury of Nessus and the king, whose plots once more had rebounded.

"What I can't figure out," Pete said bitterly as he sat on the corral and watched Hercules wash his lion skin, "is why you should be allergic to goldenrod now. You're not Bigpig. At least you haven't got his body. Your body belongs to Hercules."

"Maybe he was alloigic to goldenrod, too, huh?"

Pete shrugged.

"Maybe. Wish we could get back to Nineteen-forty. The king's bound to get us sooner or later. He's after that franchise, and Nessus is after our hides."

Two days later Pete found himself locked out of his office. A king's soldier was on guard, and he grinned at Manx unpleasantly.

"You can't come in," he said. "His Majesty's taken over."

Pete's jaw dropped.

"Huh? Why, he can't do that! It's unconstitutional!"

"What's a constitution?" the soldier asked interestedly.

PETE didn't answer. He was hastening toward the palace. The bitterest pill

of all was the fact that he had to pay to ride in one of his own taxicabs.

King Eurystheus and Nessus were, as usual, together. Pete burst into impassioned speech without preamble, but a spear jabbed into his midriff brought him to a halt.

"Be silent," the king said, stroking his beard. "Slaves are usually brought into the royal presence only for judgment."

"You can't swipe my business like this," Pete said stubbornly. "I got a franchise—" A horrible thought struck him. Two hours had passed since he had seen Bigpig. "Is Hercules okay?" he asked fearfully.

"As far as I know," was the response. "However, your franchise is worthless. We had forgotten, until today, that no slave can hold property in Tiryns. So, naturally, our agreement is invalid, and your company reverts to the crown."

Pete sputtered. Nessus grinned.

"I have given a new franchise to my faithful servant here," Eurystheus said, indicating the officer. "He now owns the—what is it—"

"The Nessus Cab Corporation," interjected the officer.

"I get it!" Manx's voice was bitter. "And you're giving the king a lot bigger rake-off than I did. Okay, shave-tail. You asked for it—and you're going to get it."

"We are merciful," said the king. "We allow you to live. Guards, throw this bum out." Eurystheus had picked up some of Pete's own picturesque language...

Mr. Manx wasted no time in giving his ready cash to Hercules who, being a freed man, could legally possess it. That done, he went into action. By this time he knew the ropes in Tiryns. He knew, for example, that the official who passed for chief of police was not above making a dishonest penny.

Thus it came about that Larsyas, this official, became extremely busy. Signs made their appearance in the streets. They said, "No Parking," "Parking Limit 100 Pulse-Beats," "Deliveries Only," and the like. Certain curbs were painted red. And, somehow, Nessus' taxi-drivers ran into trouble continually with the police force of Tiryns.

"I don't want a cent out of it," Pete explained to Larsyas. "I'm just showing you how to make yourself some dough. Maybe sometime you can do me a favor. Here's how it works. Whenever somebody gets a ticket, you fine 'em—see?"

"But—"

"And you need a speed limit. Make it different for each block, and keep the signs out of sight if you can. That's the way we work it back in the U. S. A."

Nessus blew up. He interviewed the bland Larsyas, who was already

counting his ill-gotten gains, but got nowhere.

"Law is law," said the chief of police. "Every good citizen should uphold it."

Nessus said something unprintable.

"You're fined fifty gold pieces for contempt of court," Larsyas smiled.

"What's that? Oh, you do, eh? That'll be fifty more."

Somehow the officer managed to choke back his retort. He turned to stride out.

"One moment," the chief called. "Something that will interest you. I'm making the—uh—main stem of Tiryns a one-way street hereafter."

"What?" Nessus turned green. "Why, you'll cut my fares in half!"

But Larsyas was drinking contentedly from a gilded bottle, filled with home-made brandy that Pete had distilled for him.

"Petros Mankos is behind this," Nessus choked. "I'm going to the king!"

CHAPTER IV

The Last Roundup

THE clays passed, while Pete gloated over the wreckage of what had been a thriving taxicab industry. The officers were well-trained. They arrested drivers on every possible pretext, and, if they could, egged them on to fury, so that the additional charge of resisting an officer could be brought. Nessus refused to pay the fines himself, until he found nobody would work for him. It was too expensive.

"That'll show him," Pete grinned, idly rolling a pair of dice he had made.

"We're cleaning up here at the dude ranch, and it's in your name. Nessus can go hang. We got the gravy."

"What if the big shot gets frisky again?" Bigpig asked.

"I found out something. You were bound out to Eurystheus for only twelve labors. The ostriches were the eleventh. One more, and you'll be free. The king won't be able to put the bee on you any more."

"Swell." Hercules was busy grinding charcoal. "Wait'll we pull off the next rodeo. It'll wow 'em, huh?"

It would, Pete thought. Everything was prepared for the second rodeo to advertise the ranch. This time there was an admission fee charged. Tiryns was placarded with announcements, cowboys in sandwich-boards rode about, and policemen energetically sold tickets to protesting taxi-drivers. The chef d'oeuvre of the affair was to be a fireworks display at night. For some time Pete had been busy manufacturing sparklers, Roman candles, crackers, and torpedoes. Saltpeter, willow charcoal, and sulphur were all he needed.

And then Tiryns heard of the hydra, a man-eating monster that laired in a

salt-marsh near the sea!

Nessus smiled darkly. King Eurystheus grinned in his beard and set the date. In three days Hercules must set out to slay the hydra. If he failed—he would die, for the monster was carnivorous. If Hercules refused to undertake the task, he would be stoned to death.

Pete was far more worried than Big-pig. The latter had almost come to believe in his heroic prowess. Moreover, he had been practicing with the Hellenic weapons, and mastered them fairly well. Bigpig could now handle a sword, spear, or bow almost as well as any Greek soldier. He told Pete not to worry, and that he'd chop the hydra into mincemeat.

"I'll moider da bum," he remarked. "In de foist round."

Against his better judgment, Pete almost allowed himself to be convinced. After all, the body of Hercules was gigantic. It would take a pretty big monster to overcome the son of Zeus. But—what was the hydra?

Stories conflicted, each one more incredible than the last. Pete finally decided it was a sea-snake, and felt better.

On the morning of the fatal day Big-pie rose and called for his lion skin. "Some rat swiped it," he declared. "I hoid somebody movin' around my room last night."

He went to the window.

"See? Footprints. Hey, Pete—"

"Here's the lion skin," Mr. Manx said wearily. "It was hanging out on the line. Dive into it and get going." Bigpig obeyed. He tied the paws together over his chest and beamed. "The boys are going to ride down to the swamp with me an' watch the kill-in'. You comin', Pete?"

"Sure. By the way, the king's got a lot of his soldiers camped on the plain a ways off. Wants to make sure you don't take a powder, I guess. Ready?"

THERE was no answer. Pete THERE at Bigpig, caught his breath.

"Biggie!" he yelled. "What the—" "Flors!" gasped the unfortunate Mr. Callahan. "Flors! Glup — I can't breathe!"

His face purpled. Pete slapped him on the back, and a cloud of dust rose from the lion skin. Goldenrod-pollen!

"Take it off, Biggie !" Pete's fingers were tearing at the garment. "Peel, quick!"

But it was too late. By the time the skin was thrown out the window, Hercules was suffering the worst effects of allergy. He lay in a corner, gasping and kicking.

Pete's lips tightened. So there had been an intruder last night! Sabotage—that's what it was. Somebody had discovered Bigpig's weakness, and had dusted the lion skin with the fatal goldenrod-pollen.

"Nessus," Pete gritted. "I'll bet he did it. That low-lifed rat!"

A cry came from without. "Hercules! Hasten! We wait!" But Hercules was beyond answering.

He lay prostrate, face swollen to twice its normal size, breathing hoarsely.

He would recover presently—but not for a while. In the meantime he needed rest.

"We'll be along in a few hours," Pete called.

There was silence. Then: "The king's soldiers say that if Hercules doesn't start out in ten minutes they'll come after him."

Manx cursed. For the Hellenes to discover their popular hero stricken by a "curse from the gods" would be fatal. Somehow, Hercules had to ride to the hydra's swamp. And he had to start within ten minutes.

"These things always happen to me," Pete moaned, and slipped off his pillow-slip. He recovered the lion skin and donned it. The pollen didn't effect him, of course, and at a distance he might be mistaken for Hercules. But—

He bent over Bigpig.

"Listen, Biggie. I'm riding to the swamp. As soon as you can make it, come after me and take over. I'll try and stall till you get there. Okay?"

"Glup . . . yeah, sure ... I'll moider da bum."

Pete went out by the back way. The ranch-hands were gathered there, and he explained part of the situation to them. They were ready to help in any way they could.

"Keep me screened from the troopers, see? We can't let 'em get too close. Let's see—where's the nag?"

Hercules' horse, a huge black stallion, was led up, ready. It was equipped with short-sword, javelins, bow and arrows, and a dozen lariats hanging around the saddle. Pete vaulted into place.

"Hightail it, boys," he yelled, setting the example. The fake Hercules and his followers galloped off, while the army of King Eurystheus, caught unprepared, milled in confusion. One small band of troopers broke from the rest and set out in pursuit. Looking back, Pete recognized the standard of Nessus—a golden centaur.

Hard and fast they rode. Perspiration covered them, and hours had passed before they reached the swamp, a low, desolate region of dark pools and quicksand, where a few thick, stunted trees grew. The troop of Nessus had reined in some distance back, unwilling to approach the lair of the monster.

Now the cowboys halted, looking askance at one another. Pete's heart sank. There was no sign of Hercules.

"Well," he said. "Guess I'll ride on a bit. Those Cossacks back there can still see me too plainly. Stick around, fellas."

SOMEBODY handed Pete a chunk of beef. "That'll draw the hydra if you throw it into the water," he was informed.

Manx dropped the meat as though it had been death itself.

"Hey! I'm just going to stall till Hercules gets here. I'm no stand-in stunt man!"

There was no answer. The cowhands sat motionless in their saddles and watched Pete ride on, to halt by a gnarled tree not too close to the water's edge. He sat uneasily for a time, waiting. No Hercules. What a spot!

Pete examined his weapons. Javelins. Bow and arrows. Lots of lariats. A saddlebag containing — what? He investigated. Fireworks. The childish-minded Hercules had stuffed an assorted conglomeration of fireworks into the bag, apparently intending to let them off at some appropriate moment.

"What a slap-happy stumble-bum!" Pete remarked, and then turned into ice.

He hadn't thrown the beef into the water. There was nothing to draw the monster out of the depths. But—The hydra was coming!

A ripple broke the surface. A snakelike object twisted up, heading straight for the shore where Pete stood in his stirrups frozen, his hands twisted in the reins. Three more snakes popped up, and the wake of a gigantic bulk swirled into view. The horse went crazy.

Never completely broken, it bucked and sunfished like the wild thing it was. Pete saw himself sailing over the horse's head into the water. He shut his eyes and clung frantically. Something had to give. The girths snapped.

Pete and saddle thumped together on the ground, while the mustang departed for safer climes. Simultaneously a coil wound itself around Mr. Manx's leg.

His hand touched a rope. He managed to get to his knees, and saw a dozen tentacles reaching out of the water toward him. The body of a giant squid was darkly visible under the surface—a sea monster that had been washed into the salt marshes by some freak tidal wave. The grip on Pete's ankle was inexorable. He was being pulled toward the water.

The stunted tree wasn't too far away. Pete whirled the rope around his head and let fly. If he missed

He didn't miss. The lasso settled and tightened over a stumpy, thick limb. Pete was pulled over backward, but managed to wind a coil of the rope about his waist. He took a timber hitch in it. The rope sang with strain.

Pete tried to pull himself free, but could not. Another tentacle curled about his thighs, binding his legs together. He got hold of a javelin and dug it again and again into the cold, slimy flesh, but without result. The baleful

eyes of the hydra glared at him unwinkingly through the water.

No use to yell for help. He'd get none. Nessus was probably laughing at the sight of his supposed enemy being devoured by the monster.

Pete started to get mad. Just then he saw the bag of fireworks.

His eyes lit up. Maybe— He had an idea.

Pete had manufactured matches long ago. He had some in his pocket. It was almost impossible to get them out, but at last he managed. Meanwhile the dragging strain was almost cutting him in two.

Roman candles! They were the things. Pete lit a handful and pointed them at the thick, cablelike tentacles. Red fire burst forth, sputtering and flaming angrily.

IT worked! Where steel hadn't daunted the monster, fire did. Or, at least, the hydra was surprised. The tentacles drew back from the searing flames, and Pete instantly sprang to his feet and ran like hell. He stopped only when the rope jerked him back.

He looked around. The squid lay with its tentacles waving, its huge body submerged. Out of its reach, Pete was safe. Then, cautiously, he gathered the other lariats.

The first loop he flung settled over a tentacle, but slipped free. The second try was more successful. One by one Pete lassoed the waving arms of the creature, anchoring them to the tree. Whether or not the ropes would hold he couldn't say; he could only wait. And, still clutching a Roman candle, he did.

The ropes drew taut. They sang and snapped—but held. Luckily, Pete had captured all of the squid's tentacles, and on this flat, shelving bottom, the monster could get no purchase grip to make use of its weight and strength.

The ropes held! The hydra was conquered!

Pete turned and yelled. The monster could be slain at leisure now, or simply left to starve to death. Right now he needed his cowboys, so he could get a horse and gallop back to the ranch before the deception was discovered.

The thunder of hoofs came to his ears. He saw Nessus bearing down on him, handsome face twisted in a gloating smile, eyes gleaming. Before Pete could stir, he was picked up bodily and thrown across the saddle in front of the Greek officer. The point of a dagger pricked his back.

"Don't move, Petros Mankos—impostor!" Nessus commanded. "We're going to the king—and I'll show him that it's you, not Hercules, who wears the lion's skin!"

Pete was acutely uncomfortable. The horse's gallop jarred him till he was nearly seasick, and sometimes the dagger would slip down painfully. He heard a cry.

"Ride 'im, cowboy!"

He looked back. The mustangs of the cowhands were racing in pursuit, dust rising from their heels. Beyond them, far behind, came the troop of Nessus. Could Pete's would-be rescuers reach him in time?

Nessus laughed and dug his spurs deep. The steed sprang forward with renewed speed. The officer bent low as an arrow whistled past.

"Hey!" Pete yelled. "You'll hit me!"

But the cowboys didn't care about that. As long as Hercules' reputation went untarnished, they'd be satisfied--; if they had to kill both Nessus and Pete to accomplish their ends. Their wails went up to the blue sky.

"Yippee! Ride 'im, cowboy! Yippee!"

In another moment, Pete knew, the arrows would find their mark. Nessus, grimly silent, drove the horse on. His dagger did not stir from the captive's back. Pete noticed, abruptly, that he held something in his hand. The Roman candle. . .

Somehow he got the matches out of his pocket without attracting Nessus' attention. How he lit the fuse he never knew, in that gusting wind. Arrows were singing viciously past him. The dust-clouds choked him. The thunder of hoofs deafened him. He lit the candle and aimed it

Swish! In front of the horse's nose a spurt of raving fire blasted! The horrified animal tried to turn inside out and start running the other way. It only succeeded in doing a somersault. But that was effective enough. Pete felt himself flying through the air, and fell heavily atop a body that whooped hoarsely once and was silent.

He got up dizzily from Nessus' prostrate form. The officer was out cold.

The cowhands came riding up. One of them extended a hand, and helped Pete vault to the saddle behind him. "Ride 'im, cowboy!"

They fled toward the ranch, hopelessly outdistancing the troop. Pete breathed again. Nessus' story would never be believed now. Hercules' reputation was safe—even enhanced. For the son of Zeus had slain the hydra!

Bang!

* * * * *

"Hello, Pete," said Doctor Mayhem. "How are you feeling ?"

"Wh-what?" Mr. Manx stared around at the laboratory. Greece had vanished.

The cowboys were gone. He was back in New York.

"I finally succeeded in repairing the machine," Dr. Mayhem said. "I brought back your wrestler friend, Bigpig, first."

Pete staggered erect.

"Where is he?"

"I sent him to the hospital. He had a bad case of—well, he must have run into some goldenrod. But he'll come around in a day or so. What happened, anyhow, Pete?"

IT was a long story, but at last it was finished, to Mayhem's intense satisfaction. He had been hanging on every word.

"Hercules, eh? That clears up so many mysteries. The man-eating birds—ostriches, you say? And the hydra was a squid? Amazing. Even the shirt of Nessus that was supposed to have killed Hercules—" Doctor Mayhem seemed amused.

"Yeah." Pete glanced at the door. "It seems to me I came here with the idea of asking you if you could cure Bigpig. That was quite a while ago, but I'd still like to know."

"I'm afraid not." The scientist's voice was regretful.

Manx sighed. "I guess I'll just have to keep him away from goldenrod, if I expect him to stay in condition for more fights, then," he said.

Mayhem slapped his hand to his forehead.

"Oh, I forget, Pete. Your friend told me to tell you he was finished with the wrestling profession. He said that when he got out of the hospital he was going back to Montana."

There was silence for two minutes. At length Pete drew himself together and made for the door.

"See you later, Doc," he said. "I've got something important to attend to, right away."

"You have? What?"

Mr. Manx's grin was enough to frighten babies.

"Oh, nothing much," he shrugged, as he closed the door behind him. "I just want to send Biggie some—flowers!"