

LAMPROCLES

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The first man he had brought death to was his father. He brought it to him in a dirty golden goblet, stained purple with the earthy poison it often held. His mother had tried to take this burden, to go in his stead, but Athenian law was clear. Only Lamprocles, the firstborn son, could fulfill his family's duty to the city. Today, that duty was to supply the poison for his father's execution. Thus was Lamprocles, the fittest of his family, reduced to Death's delivery-boy.

He was not a very fast courier: the large, uneven steps leading to the city center were difficult for his juvenile legs to surmount and he was in no hurry. With the goblet in his left hand and dawn in his eyes, Lamprocles fell into sun-bleached dreams and a rhythmic tread.

He imagined that he had already laid down his life. He had taken the hemlock himself as soon as he acquired it and was now floating above the city, disembodied. He saw his body delivered to his home and his younger brother pulling furiously at his limp hand, unable to accept reality. He saw his mother in unending sobs, crying over his body so loudly that the entire city knew her grief. The Archons were overwhelmed with shame and canceled his father's execution. Even as Lamprocles' ethereal spirit was pulled down to Hades, he saw his father released from prison surrounded by friends and revelry. Lamprocles' ghost passed before the crowd and he saw a glimmer of recognition in his father's eyes. His father stopped mid-stride and, for the first time, Lamprocles saw tears stain his father's face.

A small crack in the stone widened as he stepped on it and Lamprocles found his daydream and his balance both overthrown. He leaned forward and threw himself against the lip of a higher step. It bruised his ribs but restored his balance and kept the goblet level.

Lamprocles tried to massage the pain away with his free hand. Indulgent self-pity. Childish. His lifeless body would not soften any hearts or save any lives. He had thought it over endlessly the previous night: there was no way out. His body's only use was to deliver the contents he had been entrusted with.

Lamprocles was not yet a man, but at his father's trial he had begun to understand what it was that would make him so. He looked at the foul mixture

as it settled in the goblet and knew he had a duty to deliver it. A virtuous man did the right thing, no matter the pain it caused him. That was the lesson behind his father's actions, this was why the man had chosen to accept death.

Lamprocles tried to keep his father's lessons in mind as he finished his climb and entered the city square. The city center was not what it once had been. The Tyrants had made their last stand here among what small stone buildings they could find. The riots had left the plaza with scars, scattered mounds of splintered stone and shredded wood. The temples too, once marble monuments of unwavering lines, were still disfigured with the effacing rage of the oppressed. The marketplace was laced with sunlight and citizens, yet Lamprocles saw only the necrotic body underneath.

It wasn't working; he had not absorbed the lesson. He saw Athenians leaving the morning's assembly, trading disgusting jokes about their rivals. He saw jurors from his father's trial standing by and laughing as their children chased each other through teetering piles of gold-embroidered Persian silks.

He wanted to run at them, throw the goblet at their feet and dare them to pick it up, to kill his father themselves if they hated him so. He wanted to leave the poison there on the ground, dry and harmless.

His mother would understand. She would console him as she did his brother and whisper that he was right to be angry, that she would hold him until his tears surrendered and the pain became only the melancholy of a hollow surname.

His father would not. His father would see him enter the prison cell without the poison. He would wait patiently for Lamprocles' face to rise and meet his gaze. No words or tears would hide the truth. He would know that he was going to die and that even his son had learned nothing about virtue or honor. There would be no anger, no words. His father would swing back as smoothly as a door closing and converse only with his friends and visitors.

That could not happen today. Lamprocles needed his father to listen, to grant him one last request.

Lamprocles approached the colonnades of the jail, passing into shadowy relief as the surrounding hills and looming citadel restrained the sun's light. He greeted the guard with a low nod and walked into the jail, heading towards the distinctive blue of his mother's formal tunic.

Xanthippe's head was erect, her brass hair short and rigid like the horsehair atop a hoplite's helm. She cast a red-eyed glance at Lamprocles as

her bare shoulder continued to muffle the teary hiccups of his younger brother. Leaving the poison on the dais, Lamprocles moved to join his mother but did not sit down beside her.

“Greetings mother. My task is done — How are you?” he asked, trying to stand as straight and formal as he could.

“Tired,” she sighed. “The benches here hurt my back and your poor brother is inconsolable.” She brushed Sophroniscos’ matted hair. “He starts crying as soon as he leaves my arms.”

Lamprocles nodded. “I can stay with him. Why don’t you go and try to find father?”

Xanthippe frowned and stopped stroking her son. “It seems I have to. It’s been hours; I don’t think your father will acknowledge us unless I go to him.” She rose, kissing Lamprocles on the brow as she did. “I’ll be back for you soon my little lambs.”

Lamprocles sat on the bench aside his brother. Sophroniscos was four years younger than Lamprocles and had to look up to meet his brother’s face.

“She’ll find him, right?” asked Sophroniscos “He’s not... he wouldn’t be already...”

“Don’t worry, she will,” assured Lamprocles listening down the hall. He heard nothing.

“It’s not fair!” Sophroniscos was crying again.

“Calm down. Being upset helps no one, least of all yourself.”

No effect. Lamprocles could not tell if his brother was even listening. He tried to ignore the clamor and listen for voices further down the granite hallway. There was the dull echo of an amused voice. Lamprocles stood up immediately; his father was coming. Sophroniscos heard it too and stopped sobbing.

“Oh, what new foolishness is this?” said Lamprocles’ father, his voice getting closer. “Crito my friend, are you responsible for this? Do you think that by calling my family you will move my heart to cowardice?”

A woman’s voice, Xanthippe’s, cut in. “Crito didn’t call us, we’ve been here since the sun rose. I don’t know why I tried. You didn’t give us any thought at your trial, why would you now?”

“My dear, let us consider this fairly. Would I be here now if I truly gave you no consideration? And if I were a selfish braggart with no concern for you, would I have accepted death? Or rather would I have chosen to escape the trial and have Crito’s well-placed friends stealthily sail me to Thessaly? There I could loudly proclaim my wisdom and the foolishness of the Athenian people.” Lamprocles’ father laughed. “My pride would be gorged indeed. Yet, my wife would be left behind with her own family, shamed and mocked as the wife of a coward and a hypocrite. But this would not bother me, since I give her no consideration. My sons, too, I could easily dismiss, for though I would raise them in a city without the beauty and law of Athens, they would still be there to waste their youth caring for me in old age. Does not death seem a more considerate choice after all? Is it not possible that I have accepted this sentence partially for the benefit of you and our sons?”

“No. I won’t do this with you, not after the trial, not anymore. No more philosophy, no more debate. You play with arguments like toys, posing them and hoarding them. If you won’t put the arguments away and speak with me honestly, will you at least come and speak with your own children?”

“Of course, my dear, of course. I can spare some time for the boys.” Lamprocles craned his neck in anticipation and saw his father just as he rounded the corner of the hallway. Xanthippe made no appearance.

Seeing their father approach, Sophroniscos broke the silence and ran headlong into their father’s legs, crying.

Lamprocles stayed seated. He watched his father and brother exchange their last words and rehearsed what he would say. He had spent most of the previous night running the words of his request over his lips again and again, until the argument lived on his tongue as much as it did in his mind.

Eventually Lamprocles’ father gave Sophroniscos a gentle pat and motioned to the exit. Xanthippe emerged from the hall and took Sophroniscos’ hand as the family disintegrated. Sophroniscos complained loudly and fought the pull, but his father had already turned away. Xanthippe picked Sophroniscos up and held him so tightly that her arms began to grow pale and bloodless. They both cried now: Xanthippe silently, Sophroniscos with the loud wail of an infant.

They finally exited and Lamprocles rose to complete his delivery. He brought the goblet to his father and tugged at his arm to draw his attention away from the dialogue he had rejoined. The pull was effective and as Lamprocles gave up possession of the poison, he launched into his request.

“Father, I have long considered what action would be most proper — most educating — at this important time. I think, while you are... or are about to...”

His father blinked at him as if he were lost.

“... farewell life,” Lamprocles recovered, “I think I would like to be there.”

“Whatever for? The deathbed is no place for a child. I know you feel sadness, my son, but crying and grieving is not what I wish to see in my last moments. If I must die today, I want to be surrounded by what I love: philosophy and great debate. I’m sorry Lamprocles, no.”

His father turned to rejoin the discussion, but Lamprocles jerked at his arm so heavily the poison almost spilled there and then.

“Please!” cried Lamprocles, his rehearsal evaporating, “I promise! I won’t cry. I just want to listen. I just want to understand. I tried, I tried really hard to understand the trial but I couldn’t. I’m sorry. Please, let me stay, let me try again. Before you go, I just want to understand.”

His father made no reaction, he seemed to have already returned his ear to the dialogue.

Lamprocles felt his face flush with embarrassment and rage. It had fallen apart. The rehearsal had been useless, he had failed again.

Then his father shrugged. “I suppose there is no harm. Phaedo and a few others came here for a final exchange, they are not so much older than you. Very well, keep your reason about you and you can stay.”

Lamprocles nodded vigorously, then restrained himself to a solemn bow. His father had already turned away and Lamprocles quickly followed his sandaled footsteps.

Lamprocles found a space in the dim prison cell and sat across from his father. The room was warm and crowded with so many adults that Lamprocles could barely be seen. He minded his posture and leaned forward to follow the dialogue between his father and another man named Phaedo.

It was nothing like the trial. There was some argument, but laughter and stories too. Lamprocles recognized some of them from years past. His father had told him of the “purer earth underneath us, whence flow all oceans and souls” to dispel Lamprocles’ nightmares of the underworld and the slobbering three-headed hound that patrolled it.

But the biggest difference was in the faces around him. The expressions at the trial had been as severe as the sentence. Here, in a cell smelling of mold and crammed bodies, delight danced from face to face, leaping to the cadence of his father's voice. Lamprocles followed along, desperate to grasp that melody – but the faces and tune changed too quickly.

As the sun reached its peak and the discourse catechized to its conclusion, Lamprocles' father drank the poison, pouring it into his mouth from above, as if in libation. The rhetorical spell lost its effect at once, and the gathered students began to cry. Plato, the youngest of the assembly, was the first to descend into a mournful clamor, his face collapsing into his arms. Even Crito, his countenance normally sturdy with age, soon followed, sobbing for his childhood friend.

“What is this, you strange fellows?” cried his father. “It is mainly for this reason that I sent the woman away, to avoid such unseemliness. One should die in a good-omened silence. Control yourselves!” Suddenly, his voice faded to a whisper and he reclined onto his bed. “Here it is; the numbness crawls into my chest.”

Lamprocles held his father's gaze, even as the hemlock undid life's work and turned veins white in front of him. Lamprocles would not cry. He could not blink.

His open eyes began to burn from dryness; motes of dust floating slowly into them. Still, Lamprocles could not look away. A slow change was happening. His father's face paled to the monochrome of marble and his lips lost the violet stains the poison had left. Even his pupils became the blank white circles of an unpainted bust.

Men began to move around Lamprocles. There was talking, and the vagaries of hushed discussion. Plato made declarations that were met with subdued cheer. No one remarked on the face.

Lamprocles could not stop himself anymore, he blinked.

Colorless eyes still met his. The marble face was still there.

Lamprocles understood. It would always be there for him; it was an eternal truth. His father had accepted execution to prove that death for the sake of honor could be beautiful and here it was, the proof manifest, as clear as if the face had spoken to him aloud.

The tears Lamprocles had so feared would shame him, no longer writhed behind his eyes. He captured them with a breath and now they bubbled in his chest, transmuting.

Lamprocles jumped from his seat and embraced the marble face, laughter rocking his small body. He held the pallid head to his bare chest as he laughed. The other mourners stared in concern as the boy cradled dead flesh, but Lamprocles was unaffected. Shame was a child's doll of virtue. Here, in his hands, he could cherish the thing itself.

Lamprocles pressed his cheek against the marble chill of his father's face as if listening to a dead whisper. His father had received such revelation, a Daemon that whispered to him when he strayed from the virtuous path. To heed this call, Socrates had rejected everything: his city, his family and life itself. Lamprocles would do the same. His father would tell him how.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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