

Amphitryon

By

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Prologue

MERCURY, on a cloud; NIGHT, in a chariot drawn by two horses

MERC. Wait! Gentle Night; deign to stay awhile: Some help is needed from you. I have two words to say to you from Jupiter.

NIGHT. Ah! Ah! It is you, Seigneur Mercury! Who would have thought of you here, in that position?

MERC. Well, feeling tired, and not being able to fulfil the different duties Jupiter ordered me, I quietly sat down on this cloud to await your coming.

NIGHT. You jest, Mercury: you do not mean it; does it become the Gods to say they are tired?

MERC. Are the Gods made of iron?

NIGHT. No; but one must always have a care for divine decorum. There are certain words the use of which debases this sublime quality, and it is meet that these should be left to men, because they are unworthy.

MERC. You speak at your ease, fair lady, from a swiftly rolling chariot, in which, like a dame free from care; you are drawn by two fine horses wherever you like. But it is not the same with me. Such is my miserable fate that I cannot bear the poets too great a grudge for their gross impertinence in having, by an unjust law, which they wish to retain in force, given a separate conveyance to each God, for his own use, and left me to go on foot: me, like a village messenger, though, as everyone knows, I am the famous messenger of the sovereign of the Gods, on the earth and in the heavens. Without any exaggeration, I need more than any one else the means of being carried about, because of all the duties he puts upon me.

NIGHT. What can one do? The poets do what pleases them. It is not the only stupidity we have detected in these gentlemen. But surely your irritation against them is wrong, for the wings at your feet are a friendly gift of theirs.

MERC. Yes; but does going more quickly tire oneself less?

NIGHT. Let us leave the matter, Seigneur Mercury, and learn what is wanted.

MERC. Jupiter, as I have told you, wishes the dark aid of your cloak for a certain gallant adventure, which a new love affair has furnished him. His custom is not new to you, I believe: often does he neglect the heavens for the earth; and you are not ignorant that this master of the Gods loves to take upon himself the guise of man to woo earthly beauties.

He knows a hundred ingenious tricks to entrap the most obdurate. He has felt the darts of Alcmena's eyes; and, whilst Amphitryon, her husband, commands the Theban troops on the plains of Boeotia, Jupiter has taken his form, and assuaged his pains, in the possession of the sweetest of pleasures. The condition of the couple is propitious to his desire: Hymen joined them only a few days ago; and the young warmth of their tender love suggested to Jupiter to have recourse to this fine artifice. His stratagem proved successful in this case; but with many a cherished object a similar disguise would not be of any use: it is not always a sure means of pleasing, to adopt the form, of a husband.

NIGHT. I admire Jupiter, and I cannot imagine all the disguises which come into his head.

MERC. By these means he wishes to taste all sorts of conditions: that is the act of a God who is not a fool. However mortals may regard him, I should think very meanly of him if he never quitted his redoubtable mien, and were always in the heavens, standing upon his dignity. In my opinion, there is nothing more idiotic than always to be imprisoned in one's grandeur; above all, a lofty rank becomes very inconvenient in the transports of amorous ardour. Jupiter, no doubt, is a connoisseur in pleasure, and he knows how to descend from the height of his supreme glory. So that he can enter into everything that pleases him, he entirely casts aside himself, and then it is no longer Jupiter who appears.

NIGHT. I could overlook seeing him step down from his sublime stage to that of men, since he wishes to enter into all the transports which their natures can supply, and join in their jests, if, in the changes which take his fancy, he would confine himself to nature. But I do not think it fitting to see Jupiter as a bull, a serpent, a swan, or what not, and it does not astonish me that it is sometimes talked about.

MERC. Let all the busybodies talk; such changes have their own charms and surpass people's understanding. The God knows what he does in this affair as in everything else: in the movements of their tender passions, animals are not so loutish as one might think.

NIGHT. Let us return to the lady whose favours he enjoys. If, by his stratagem, his pursuit is successful, what more can he wish? What can I do?

MERC. He wishes that you would slacken the pace of your horses, to satisfy the passion of his amorous heart, and so make of a delightful night the longest night of all; that you would give him more time for his transports, and retard the birth of day since it will hasten the return of him whose place he occupies.

NIGHT. Really the employment which the great Jupiter reserves for me is a worthy one! The service he requires of me passes under a very respectable name.

MERC. You are somewhat old-fashioned for a young goddess! Such an employment is not debasing except among people of mean birth. When one has the happiness of belonging to lofty rank, whatever one does is always right and good; things change their names to suit what one may be.

NIGHT. You know more about such matters than I do; I will trust to your enlightened views and accept this employment.

MERC. Come, come, now, Madam Night, a little gently, I beseech you. The world gives you the reputation of not being so scrupulous. In a hundred different climes you are made the confidant of many gallant adventures; and, if I may speak candidly, we do not owe each other anything.

NIGHT. Let us cease these reproaches and remain what we are. Let us not give men cause to laugh by telling each other the truth.

MERC. Adieu. I am going there to play my part in this business, promptly to strip myself of the form of Mercury and to take in its place the figure of Amphitryon's valet.

NIGHT. I am going to keep station in this hemisphere with my sombre train.

MERC. Good day, Night.

NIGHT. Adieu, Mercury.

(Mercury descends from his cloud to the earth, and Night goes away in her chariot.)

END OF THE PROLOGUE.

ACT I

SCENE I

SOSIE

Who goes there? Eh? My fear grows with every step. Gentlemen, I am a friend to all the world. Ah! What unparalleled boldness, to be out at this hour! My master is crowned with fame, but what a villainous trick he plays me here! What? If he had any love for his neighbour, would he have sent me out in such a black night? Could he not just as well have waited until it was day before sending me to announce his return and the details of his victory? To what servitude are thy days subjected, Sosie! Our lot is far more hard with the great than with the mean. They insist that everything in nature should be compelled to sacrifice itself for them. Night and day, hail, wind, peril, heat, cold, as soon as they speak we must fly. Twenty years of assiduous service do not gain us any consideration from them. The least little whim draws down upon us their anger.

Notwithstanding this, our infatuated hearts cling to the empty honour of remaining near them, contented with the false idea, which every one holds, that we are happy. In vain reason bids us retire; in vain our spite sometimes consents to this; to be near them is too powerful an influence on our zeal, and the least favour of a caressing glance immediately re-engages us. But at last, I see our house through the darkness, and my fear vanishes.

I must prepare some thought-out speech for my mission. I must give Alcmene warlike description of the fierce combat which put our enemies to flight. But how the deuce can I do this since I was not there? Never mind; let us talk of cut and thrust, as though I were an eyewitness. How many people describe battles from which they remained far away! In order to act my part without discredit, I will rehearse it a little.

This is the chamber into which I am ushered as the messenger: this lantern is Alcmene, to whom I have to speak. (He sets his lantern on the ground and salutes it.) 'Madam, Amphitryon, my master and your husband, ... (Good! that is a fine beginning!) whose mind is ever full of your charms, has chosen me from amongst all to bring tidings of the success of his arms, and of his desire to be near you.' 'Ah! Really, my poor Sosie, I am delighted to see you back again.' 'Madam, you do me too much honour: my lot is an enviable one.' (Well answered!)

'How is Amphitryon?' 'Madam, as a man of courage should be, when glory leads him.' (Very good! A capital idea!) 'When will my heart be charmed and satisfied by his return?' 'As soon as possible, assuredly, Madam, but his heart desires a speedier return.' (Ah!) 'In what state has the war left him? What says he? What does he? Ease my anxiety.' He says less than he does, Madam, and makes his enemies tremble.' (Plague! where do I get all these fine speeches?) 'What are the rebels doing? Tell me, what is their condition?' 'They could not resist our efforts, Madam; we cut them to pieces, put their chief, Pterelas, to death, took Telebos by assault; and now the port rings with our prowess.' 'Ah! What a

success! Ye Gods! Who could ever have imagined it? Tell me, Sosie, how it happened.' 'I will, gladly, Madam; and, without boasting, I can tell you, with the greatest accuracy, the details of this victory. Imagine, therefore, Madam, that Telebos is on this side. (He marks the places on his hand, or on the ground.) It is a city really almost as large as Thebes. The river is, say, there. Here, our people encamped; and that space was occupied by our enemies. On a height, somewhere about here, was their infantry; and, lower down, on the right side, was their cavalry. After having addressed prayers to the Gods, and issued all the orders, the signal was given. The enemy, thinking to turn our flank, divided their horse soldiers into three platoons; but we soon chilled their warmth, and you shall see how. Here is our vanguard ready to begin work; there, were the archers of our king, Creon; and here, the main army (some one makes a slight noise), which was just going to . . . Stay; the main body is afraid'; I think I hear some noise.

SCENE II

MERCURY, SOSIE

MERC. (Under the form of Sosie.) Under this mask which resembles him, I will drive away the babbler from here. His unfortunate arrival may disturb the pleasures our lovers are tasting together.

SOS. My heart revives a little; perhaps it was nothing. Lest anything untoward should happen, however, I will go in to finish the conversation.

MERC. I shall prevent your doing that unless you are stronger than Mercury.

SOS. This night seems to me unusually long. By the time I have been on the way, either my master has taken evening for morning, or lovely Phoebus slumbers too long in bed through having taken too much wine.

MERC. With what irreverence this lubber speaks of the Gods! My arm shall soon chastise this insolence; I shall have a fine game with him, stealing his name as well as his likeness.

SOS. Ah! upon my word, I was right: I am done for, miserable creature that I am! I see a man before our house whose mien bodes me no good. I will sing a little to show some semblance of assurance.

(He sings; and, when Mercury speaks, his voice weakens, little by little.)

MERC. What rascal is this, who takes the unwarrantable licence of singing and deafening me like this? Does he wish me to curry his coat for him?

SOS. Assuredly that fellow does not like music.

MERC. For more than a week, I have not found any one whose bones I could break; my arm will lose its strength in this idleness. I must look out for some one's back to get my wind again.

SOS. What the deuce of a fellow is this? My heart thrills with clutching fear. But why should I tremble thus? Perhaps the rogue is as much afraid as I am, and talks in this way to hide his fear from me under a feigned audacity. Yes, yes, I will not allow him to think me a goose. If I am not bold, I will try to appear so. Let me seek courage by reason; he is alone, even as I am; I am strong, I have a good master, and there is our house.

MERC. Who goes there?

SOS. I.

MERC. Who, I?

SOS. I. Courage, Sosie!

MERC. Tell me, what is your condition?

SOS. To be a man, and to speak.

MERC. Are you a master, or a servant?

SOS. As fancy takes me.

MERC. Where are you going?

SOS. Where I intend to go.

MERC. Ah! This annoys me.

SOS. I am ravished to hear it.

MERC. By hook or by crook, I must definitely know all about you, you wretch; what you do, whence you come before the day breaks, where you are going, and who you may be.

SOS. I do good and ill by turns; I come from there; I go there; I belong to my master.

MERC. You show wit, and I see you think to play the man of importance for my edification. I feel inclined to make your acquaintance by slapping your face.

SOS. Mine?

MERC. Yours; and there you get it, sharp. (Mercury gives him a slap.)

SOS. Ah! Ah! This is a fine game!

MERC. No; it is only a laughing matter, a reply to your quips.

SOS. Good heavens! Friend, how you swing out your arm without any one saying anything to you.

MERC. These are my lightest clouts, little ordinary smacks.

SOS. If I were as hasty as you, we should have a fine ado.

MERC. All this is nothing as yet: it is merely to fill up time; we shall soon see something else; but let us continue our conversation.

SOS. I give up the game. (He turns to go away.)

MERC. Where are you going?

SOS. What does it matter to you?

MERC. I want to know where you are going.

SOS. I am going to open that door. Why do you detain me?

MERC. If you dare to go near it, I shall rain down a storm of blows on you.

SOS. What? You wish to hinder me from entering our own house by threats?

MERC. What do you say, your house?

SOS. Yes, our house.

MERC. O, the scoundrel! You speak of that house?

SOS. Certainly. Is not Amphitryon the master of it?

MERC. Well! What does that prove?

SOS. I am his valet.

MERC. You?

SOS. I.

MERC. His valet?

SOS. Unquestionably.

MERC. Valet of Amphitryon?

SOS. Of Amphitryon himself.

MERC. Your name is?

SOS. Sosie.

MERC. Eh? What?

SOS. Sosie.

MERC. Listen: do you realise that my fist can knock you spinning?

SOS. Why? What fury has seized you now?

MERC. Tell me, who made you so rash as to take the name of Sosie?

SOS. I do not take it; I have always borne it.

MERC. O what a monstrous lie! What confounded impudence! You dare to maintain that Sosie is your name?

SOS. Certainly; I maintain it, for the good reason that the Gods have so ordered it by their supreme power. It is not in my power to say no, and to be any one else than myself.

(Mercury beats him.) **MERC.** A thousand stripes ought to be the reward of such audacity.

SOS. Justice, citizens! Help! I beseech you.

MERC. So, you gallows-bird, you yell out?

SOS. You beat me down with a thousand blows, and yet do not wish me to cry out?

MERC. It is thus that my arm . . .

SOS. The action is unworthy. You gloat over the advantage which my want of courage gives you over me; that is not fair treatment. It is mere bullying to wish to profit by the poltroonery of those whom one makes to feel the weight of one's arm. To thrash a man who does not retaliate is not the act of a generous soul; and to show courage against men who have none merits condemnation.

MERC. Well! Are you still Sosie? What say you?

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