

THE HERALD

a socratic dialog

The characters: Socrates, Joseph K, Laryngitis & some of Socrates's other close friends, the executioner, two heralds.

The scene: Athens, cell of the condemned.

[Sounds of running footsteps outside, herald's voice calling out, breathless from running.]

Herald Hail! Hail! Freedom for Joseph K! O! where is the ill-fated cell, the forelorn man? Feets, lead me not astray, or it may be my good tidings come too late. Hail! Hail! Stay thy lips, drink naught! O! unlucky man, sorely tried, where be-est thou? So soon in shade, or still in light?

[He bursts into the cell; Socrates and Joseph K have the cups to their lips, poised to drink; they look up and the herald mistakenly addresses Socrates.]

Herald Hail! Hail! if thou be-est the condemned man, stay thy hand, thy lips, thy esophagus--I bring tidings full worth waiting to hear. Or is it perhaps you have already drained the fatal draught and the poison is even now working its numbness into your senses?

[The Herald stares intently, searchingly, into Socrates' face.]

Socrates: [*blinks, perhaps insensibly*]

[The Herald shoots a glance at the executioner, who indicates the cup, still full, undrained, but still poised on Socrates's lips--K's, too, though the herald has not yet noticed K's presence.]

Herald Merciful fates, and Hermes and Prometheus, too, speed me in time to save this life, so nearly lost--so dearly lost [*he swings a glance around, embracing Socrates's friends with obviously practised histrionics*] --lost to infernal shades, and all for naught. We do Thy biddings, O! Necessity, whether we will or no--'tis by You alone that things come out well for us, or ill. Why then, O! why, should I have these wings on my ankles if t'were to be a swallow too late, but a swallow too late? We learn nothing save through ignorance.

[Laryngitis, beginning to catch on, moves to put his hand over Socrates' cup so that he cannot drink, and beseeches the herald to get to the point.]

Herald Life! Freedom! Pardon! The sentence is reversed! All a mistake!

[He throws his arms up in great excitement at the revelation this news ought to bring.]

Socrates For whom?

Herald For you, if you be Joseph K!

Socrates Sorry, wrong man. That's him. *[points]*

[The herald is crushed; he turns now to K, stoop-shouldered, spent, exhausted.]

Herald You're Joseph K? The court sends it's apologies. All a mistake. Sorry.

K *[fidgety]* A 'mistake'? But how? How is it possible?

Herald The charges were dropped. *[He is sweating profusely.]*

K *[fidgety]* Charges? What charges?

Herald The charges on which you were condemned, of course.

K Oh. *[Evidently he does not know what the charges were.]*

Herald Also, the witnesses recanted.

K *[fidgety]* Witnesses? What witnesses? No witnesses accused me.

Herald Uh, well, ... it must mean the witnesses who ... were to have been the witnesses who ... uh ... recanted.

K I see. *[Long pause, dead silence; you could hear the herald sweating.]*

K But surely if wrong has been committed, it matters not whether anyone else had the bad fortune to witness it. Wrong is wrong and must be righted. *[more fidgeting]*

Herald Of course, but-- but--don't you understand? You're free. Now. You can just walk out of here, go home. The court reversed itself--I'm charged to tell you. The court came to doubt whether the act was ever actually committed at all, and so, not wishing to do something terrible, and irreversable and rash, has set you free. *Free!*

[All eyes are rivetted on K; he starts to lower the cup, but seeing the eyes fixed on him, he falters; they are all, all but Socrates, about to break into wild joy at this sudden turn. But K hesitates.]

K You say there was a doubt in the case...

[K now addresses Socrates, Laryngitis, and the other friends.]

K Are we to suppose that this--this--*interruption*--changes our argument, which we all just now agreed to in all its points--changes things one iota? Are we now, in the fateful moment, to abandon our reason and allow our passions and desires and hopes and friends to carry us down a path which, only in the present moment and only out of fear for our lives, appears the better? Laryngitis, I am astonished at you! Would you have me leave with this herald? and leave our very principles behind? Have you forgotten everything so quickly? My friends, doesn't what we just now proved, beyond all doubt, further entail that if there is a doubt in the case, if wrong may have been done, then the one really, truly, terrible, rash and irreversable thing would be to leave this possible wrong unrighted, to leave this taint festering in one's soul until it erupted in certain and still worse defilement? Is it not better to be sure at once and purge this terrible possibility?

[He makes to drink; the others, including the herald and the executioner--all but Socrates--are dumbfounded, flabbergasted, flummoxed; all make to rush him and snatch away the cup, but all are stiff with confusion.]

Larry *[Stammering, trying to pick up the thread of the agrument]* B-- bu-- but-- you said yourself you never knew what the crime was; and surely if it had been such a terrible crime as to deserve the death sentence, you would feel this terrible taint in your heart. You would know if there were anything to purge out.

K In my heart I might or might not feel this taint; but the soul is a dark cave, Larry. It harbors many things which only later come to light. Who can say whether this taint is not in my soul, though in my heart I feel blameless? My very feeling of blamelessness is a further condemnation of me, if this taint *is* in my soul--a further proof, as if that were needed, of my corruption and depravity. If Socrates is right, and we all agreed that he is, that the soul is the most important thing there is, and that no one voluntarily makes his soul bad, then it follows that one must seek out any purgative which may hold any hope of removing any taint which may possibly be there. Anything less is to risk everything.

[He makes again to drink the fatal brew.]

Herald Wait! Listen, man! They're not even sure it was a crime!--whether or not you did it. There isn't any law about it--not exactly. And no one was claiming any damages. You're free. *GO!*

[Laryngitis and the other friends are by now seething with self-mastery; all but Socrates and K, who sit quite still and relaxed.]

K Ah, but the law may yet come to realize that a wrong had been committed, that it ought to have been righted there and then, and that it was remiss for not having done so. So, if I were to escape my rightful punishment on a mere doubt, I would not only have committed the first crime, but two additional ones as well: illegal flight, and causing the law to fail of its proper execution. That would indeed be terrible and rash and irreversable. No. No, I cannot do it. If the law has made a mistake, so be it. But I shall not make myself the occasion for the law ever to say of itself that this reversal was the real mistake! No, indeed! The argument stands, fully well-proven: nothing is so bad, so utterly unthinkable, as to taint one's own soul--nor so risky as risking this--nor so remiss as missing any opportunity to purge it. And so, my friends--dear Socrates...

[K raises his cup, in salute; Socrates does the same; they drink.]

Larry [Pleading] Socrates! Say something! Refute this anti-logic! If the purgative kills the patient, how can it cure him?

Socrates Ask me a little later.

[Sounds of footsteps running, pounding down the corridor outside; second herald's voice, shouting, panting.]

2d Herald Hail, hail! Freedom for Socrates! O! feets, do not fail me now; speed me directly to the ill-fated cell, lest I come too late to deliver my welcome news, most-welcomed news, methinks, ever yet delivered. Hail, hail, make no rash moves in there! O! death cell, where be-est thou? I am blundering in my haste.

[He charges into the cell; everyone is crying, except Socrates and K, who are dying.]

2d Herald [To all collectively] Hail, hail! Glad tidings! I know only what, and to whom--not where! Quick, quick, is this the death chamber?!

Herald Sorry, wrong room. Next corridor on the left.

[Exit second herald.]

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