

THE GOLDEN BOOK MAGAZINE*

for January, 1931

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Dialogue of the Dead

By LUCIAN



Gustave Doré

Charon ever returns alone.

Lucian is the wittiest of Greek writers, known as "the blasphemer" because of the fun he poked at pagan gods. He was born in Asia Minor about 125 A.D., became a lawyer and then a professional orator in Athens, and died a procurator in Egypt at a ripe old age.

CHARON—Now listen to me, good people—I'll tell you how it is. The boat is but small, as you see, and somewhat rotten and leaky withal: and if the weight gets to one side, over we go: and here you are crowding in all at once, and with lots of luggage, every one of you. If you come on board here with all that lumber, I suspect you'll repent of it afterwards—especially those who can't swim.

MERCURY—What's best for us to do then, to get safe across?

CHARON—I'll tell you. You must all strip before you get in, and leave all those encumbrances on shore: and even then the boat will scarce hold you all. And you take care, Mercury, that no soul is admitted that is not in light marching order, and who has not left all his encumbrances, as I say, behind. Just stand at the gangway and overhaul them, and don't let them get in till they've stripped.

MERCURY—Quite right; I'll see to it. Now, who comes first here?

MENIPPUS—I—Menippus. Look—I've pitched my wallet and staff into the lake; my coat, luckily, I didn't bring with me.

MERCURY—Get in, Menippus—you're a capital fellow. Take the best seat there, in the stern-sheets, next the steersman, and watch who gets on board. Now, who's this fine gentleman?

CHARMOLAUS—I'm Charmolaus of Megara—a general favorite. Many a lady would give fifty guineas for a kiss from me.

MERCURY—You'll have to leave your pretty face, and those valuable lips, and your long curls and smooth skin behind you, that's all. Ah! now you'll do—you're all right and tight now: get in. But you, sir, there, in the purple and the diadem, who are you?

LAMPICHUS—Lampichus, king of Gelo.

MERCURY—And what d'ye mean by coming here with all that trumpery?

LAMPICHUS—How? Would it be seemly for a king to come here unrobed?

MERCURY—Well, for a king, perhaps not—but for a

dead man, certainly. So put it all off.

LAMPICHUS—There—I've thrown my riches away.

MERCURY—Yes—and throw away your pride too, and your contempt for other people. You'll infallibly swamp the boat if you bring all that in.

LAMPICHUS—Just let me keep my diadem and mantle.

MERCURY—Impossible—off with them too.

LAMPICHUS—Well—anything more? Because I've thrown them all off, as you see.

MERCURY—Your cruelty—and your folly—and your insolence—and bad temper—off with them all!

LAMPICHUS—There, then—I'm stripped entirely.

MERCURY—Very well—get in. And you fat fellow, who are you, with all that flesh on you?

DAMASIAS—Damasias, the athlete.

MERCURY—Aye, you look like him: I remember having seen you in the games.

DAMASIAS (*smiling*)—Yes, Mercury: take me on board—I'm ready stripped, at any rate.

MERCURY—Stripped? Nay, my good sir, not with all that covering of flesh on you. You must get rid of that, or you'll sink the boat the moment you set your other foot in. And you must take off your garlands and trophies too.

DAMASIAS—Then—now I'm really stripped, and not heavier than these other dead gentlemen.

MERCURY—All right—the lighter the better: get in. . . . Who's this pompous and conceited personage, to judge from his looks—he with the knitted eyebrows there, and lost in meditation—that fellow with the long beard?

MENIPPUS—One of those philosophers, Mercury—or rather those cheats and charlatans: make him strip too; you'll find some curious things hid under that cloak of his.

MERCURY—Take your habit off, to begin with, if you please—and now all that you have there—great

Jupiter! what a lot of humbug he was bringing with him—and ignorance, and disputatiousness, and vain-glory, and useless questions, and prickly arguments, and involved statements—aye, and wasted ingenuity, and solemn trifling, and quips and quirks of all kinds! Yes—by Jove! and there are gold pieces there, and impudence and luxury and debauchery—oh! I see them all, though you are trying to hide them! And your lies, and pomposity, and thinking yourself better than everybody else—away with all that, I say! Why, if you bring all that aboard, a fifty-oared galley wouldn't hold you!

PHILOSOPHER—Well, I'll leave it all behind then.

MENIPPUS—But make him take his beard off too. Master Mercury; it's heavy and bushy, as you see.

MERCURY—You're right. Take it off, sir!

PHILOSOPHER—But who is there who can shave me?

MERCURY—Menippus there will chop it off with the boat-hatchet—he can have the gunwale for a chopping-block.

MENIPPUS—Nay, Mercury, lend us a saw—it will be more fun.

MERCURY—Oh, the hatchet will do! So that's well; now you've got rid of your goatishness, you look something more like a man.

MENIPPUS—Shall I chop a bit off his eyebrows, too?

MERCURY—By all means; he has stuck them up on his forehead, to make himself look grander, I suppose. What's the matter now? You're crying, you rascal, are you—afraid of death? Make haste on board.

MENIPPUS—He's got something now under his arm.

MERCURY—What is it, Menippus?

MENIPPUS—Flattery it is, Mercury—and a very profitable article he found it, while he was alive.

PHILOSOPHER (*in a fury*)—And you, Menippus—leave your lawless tongue behind you, and your cursed independence, and mocking laugh.

MERCURY (*laughing*)—No, no, Menippus—they're very light, and take little room; besides, they are good things on a voyage. But you, Mr. Orator there, throw away your rhetorical flourishes, and antitheses, and parallelisms, and barbarisms, and all that heavy wordy gear of yours.

ORATOR—There, then—alas! there they all go!

MERCURY—All right. Now then, slip the moorings. Haul that plank aboard—up anchor, and make sail. Mind your helm, master! And a good voyage to us! What are you howling about, you fools? You, Philosopher, specially? Now that you've had your beard cropped?

PHILOSOPHER—Because, dear Mercury, I always thought the soul had been immortal.

MENIPPUS—He's lying! It's something else that troubles him, most likely.

MERCURY—What's that?

MENIPPUS—That he shall have no more expensive suppers—nor, after spending all the night in debauchery, profess to lecture to the young men on moral philosophy in the morning, and take pay for it. That's what vexes him.

PHILOSOPHER—And you, Menippus—are you not sorry to die?

MENIPPUS—How should I be, when I hastened to death without any call to it? But, while we are talking, don't you hear a noise as of some people shouting on the earth?

MERCURY—Yes, I do—and from more than one quarter. There's a public rejoicing yonder for the death of Lampichus; and the women have seized his wife, and the boys are stoning his children. Yes—and there is Damasia's mother wailing for him amongst her women. But there's not a soul weeping for you, Menippus—you're lying all alone.

MENIPPUS—Not at all—you'll hear the dogs howling over me presently, and the ravens mournfully flapping their wings, when they gather to my funeral.

MERCURY—Stoutly said. But here we are at the landing-place. March off, all of you, to the judgment-seat straight; I and the ferryman must go and fetch a fresh batch.

MENIPPUS—A pleasant trip to you, Mercury. So we'll be moving on. Come, what are you all dawdling for? You've got to be judged, you know; and the punishments, they tell me, are frightful—wheels, and stones, and vultures. Every man's life will be strictly inquired into, I can tell you.