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The Death of Socrates, 399 BC ✓

Plato

*Socrates had been condemned to death for 'corruption of the young' and 'neglect of the gods'. He remained in prison for a month after sentence until the sacred ship had returned from Delos: during its absence no execution could take place. Xanthippe was Socrates' wife: he had three sons by her. Plato was not an eye-witness of the death, but was in close touch with those who were.*

I will try to tell you everything from the beginning. On the previous days I and the others had always been in the habit of visiting Socrates. We used to meet at daybreak in the court where the trial took place, for it was near the prison; and every day we used to wait about, talking with each other, until the prison was opened, for it was not opened early; and when it was opened, we went in to Socrates and passed most of the day with him. On that day we came together earlier; for the day before, when we left the prison in the evening we heard that the ship had arrived from Delos. So we agreed to come to the usual place as early in the morning as possible. And we came, and the gaoler who usually answered the door came out and told us to wait and not go in until he told us. 'For', he said, 'the eleven are releasing Socrates from his fetters and giving directions how he is to die today.' So after a little delay he came and told us to go in. We went in then and found Socrates just

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released from his fetters, and Xanthippe – you know her – with his little son in her arms, sitting beside him. Now when Xanthippe saw us, she cried out and said the kind of thing that women always do say: 'Oh Socrates, this is the last time now that your friends will speak to you or you to them.' And Socrates glanced at Crito and said, 'Crito, let somebody take her home.' And some of Crito's people took her away wailing and beating her breast. But Socrates sat up on his couch and bent his leg and rubbed it with his hand, and while he was rubbing it, he said, 'What a strange thing, my friends, that seems to be which men call pleasure! How wonderfully it is related to that which seems to be its opposite, pain, in that they will not both come to a man at the same time, and yet if he pursues the one and captures it, he is generally obliged to take the other also, as if the two were joined together in one head. And I think', he said, 'if Aesop had thought of them, he would have made a fable telling how they were at war and god wished to reconcile them, and when he could not do that, he fastened their heads together, and for that reason, when one of them comes to anyone, the other follows after. Just so it seems that in my case, after pain was in my leg on account of the fetter, pleasure appears to have come following after.'

When he had finished speaking, Crito said, 'Well, Socrates, do you wish to leave any directions with us about your children or anything else – anything we can do to serve you?'

'What I always say, Crito,' he replied, 'nothing new. If you take care of yourselves you will serve me and mine and yourselves, whatever you do, even if you make no promises now; but if you neglect yourselves and are not willing to live following step by step, as it were, in the path marked out by our present and past discussions, you will accomplish nothing, no matter how much or how eagerly you promise at present.'

'We will certainly try hard to do as you say,' he replied. 'But how shall we bury you?'

'However you please,' he replied, 'if you can catch me and I do not get away from you.' And he laughed gently, and looking towards us, said, 'I cannot persuade Crito, my friends, that the Socrates who is now conversing and arranging the details of his argument is really I; he thinks I am the one whom he will presently see as a corpse, and he asks how to bury me. And though I have

been saying at great length that after I drink the poison I shall no longer be with you, but shall go away to the joys of the blessed you know of, he seems to think that was idle talk uttered to encourage you and myself. So,' he said, 'give security for me to Crito, the opposite of that which he gave the judges at my trial; for he gave security that I would remain, but you must give security that I shall not remain when I die, but shall go away, so that Crito may bear it more easily, and may not be troubled when he sees my body being burned or buried, or think I am undergoing terrible treatment, and may not say at the funeral that he is laying out Socrates, or following him to the grave, or burying him. For, dear Crito, you may be sure that such wrong words are not only undesirable in themselves, but they infect the soul with evil. No, you must be of good courage, and say that you bury my body – and bury it as you think best and as seems to you most fitting.'

When he had said this, he got up and went into another room to bathe; Crito followed him, but he told us to wait. So we waited, talking over with each other and discussing the discourse we had heard, and then speaking of the great misfortune that had befallen us, for we felt that he was like a father to us and that when bereft of him we should pass the rest of our lives as orphans. And when he had bathed and his children had been brought to him – for he had two little sons and one big one – and the women of the family had come, he talked with them in Crito's presence and gave them such directions as he wished; then he told the women to go away, and he came to us. And it was now nearly sunset; for he had spent a long time within. And he came and sat down fresh from the bath. After that not much was said, and the servant of the eleven came and stood beside him and said 'Socrates, I shall not find fault with you, as I do with others, for being angry and cursing me, when at the behest of the authorities, I tell them to drink the poison. No, I have found you in all this time in every way the noblest and gentlest and best man who has ever come here, and now I know your anger is directed against others, not against me, for you know who are to blame. Now, for you know the message I came to bring you, fare you well and try to bear what you must as easily as you can.' And he burst into tears and turned and went away. And Socrates looked up at him and said, 'Fare you well, too; I will do as you say.' And then he said to us, 'How charming the man is! Ever since I have been here he has been coming to see me and talking with me from time to

time, and has been the best of men, and now how nobly he weeps for me! But come, Crito, let us obey him, and let someone bring the poison, if it is ready; and if not, let the man prepare it.' And Crito said, 'But I think, Socrates, the sun is still upon the mountains and has not yet set; and I know that others have taken the poison very late, after the order has come to them, and in the meantime have eaten and drunk and some of them enjoyed the society of those whom they loved. Do not hurry; for there is still time.'

And Socrates said, 'Crito, those whom you mention are right in doing as they do, for they think they gain by it; and I shall be right in not doing as they do; for I think I should gain nothing by taking the poison a little later. I should only make myself ridiculous in my own eyes if I clung to life and spared it, when there is no more profit in it. Come,' he said, 'do as I ask and do not refuse.'

Thereupon Crito nodded to the boy who was standing near. The boy went out and stayed a long time, then came back with the man who was to administer the poison, which he brought with him in a cup ready for use. And when Socrates saw him, he said, 'Well, my good man, you know about these things; what must I do?' 'Nothing,' he replied, 'except drink the poison and walk about till your legs feel heavy; then lie down, and the poison will take effect of itself.'

At the same time he held out the cup to Socrates. He took it, and very gently, Echecrates, without trembling or changing colour or expression, but looking up at the man with wide open eyes, as was his custom, said, 'What do you say about pouring a libation to some deity from this cup? May I, or not?' 'Socrates,' said he, 'we prepare only as much as we think is enough.' 'I understand,' said Socrates; 'but I may and must pray to the gods that my departure hence be a fortunate one; so I offer this prayer, and may it be granted.' With these words he raised the cup to his lips and very cheerfully and quietly drained it. Up to that time most of us had been able to restrain our tears fairly well, but when we watched him drinking and saw that he had drunk the poison, we could do so no longer, but in spite of myself my tears rolled down in floods, so that I wrapped my face in my cloak and wept for myself; for it was not for him that I wept, but for my own misfortune in being deprived of such a friend. Crito had got up and gone away even before I did, because he could not restrain his tears. But Apollodorus, who had been weeping all the time before, then wailed aloud in his grief and

made us all break down, except Socrates himself. But he said, 'What conduct is this, you strange men! I sent the women away chiefly for this very reason, that they might not behave in this absurd way; for I have heard that it is best to die in silence. Keep quiet and be brave.' Then we were ashamed and controlled our tears. He walked about and, when he said his legs were heavy, lay down on his back, for such was the advice of the attendant. The man who had administered the poison laid his hands on him and after a while examined his feet and legs, then pinched his foot hard and asked if he felt it. He said 'No'; then after that, his thighs; and passing upwards in this way he showed us that he was growing cold and rigid. And again he touched him and said that when it reached his heart, he would be gone. The chill had now reached the region about the groin, and uncovering his face, which had been covered, he said - and these were his last words - 'Crito, we owe a cock to Aesculapius. Pay it and do not neglect it.' 'That', said Crito, 'shall be done; but see if you have anything else to say.' To this question he made no reply, but after a little while he moved; the attendant uncovered him; his eyes were fixed. And Crito when he saw it, closed his mouth and eyes.

Such was the end, Echecrates, of our friend, who was, as we may say, of all those of his time whom we have known, the best and wisest and most righteous man.

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