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IMAGINATION OVER KNOWLEDGE

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## Timon Of Athens

Four hundred years before the birth of Christ, a man lived in Athens whose generosity was not only great, but absurd. He was very rich, but no worldly wealth was enough for a man who spent and gave like Timon. If anybody gave Timon a horse, he received from Timon twenty better horses. If anybody borrowed money of Timon and offered to repay it, Timon was offended. If a poet had written a poem and Timon had time to read it, he would be sure to buy it; and a painter had only to hold up his canvas in front of Timon to receive double its market price.

Flavius, his steward, looked with dismay at his reckless mode of life. When Timon's house was full of noisy lords drinking and spilling costly wine, Flavius would sit in a cellar and cry. He would say to himself, "There are ten thousand candles burning in this house, and each of those singers braying in the concert-room costs a poor man's yearly income a night;" and he would remember a terrible thing said by Apemantus, one of his master's friends, "O what a number of men eat Timon, and Timon sees them not!"



Of course, Timon was much praised.

A jeweler who sold him a diamond pretended that it was not quite perfect till Timon wore it. "You mend the jewel by wearing it," he said. Timon gave the diamond to a lord called Sempronius, and the lord exclaimed, "O, he's the very soul of bounty." "Timon is infinitely dear to me," said another lord, called Lucullus, to whom he gave a beautiful horse; and other Athenians paid him compliments as sweet.

But when Apemantus had listened to some of them, he said, "I'm going to knock out an honest Athenian's brains."

"You will die for that," said Timon.

"Then I shall die for doing nothing," said Apemantus.

And now you know what a joke was like four hundred years before Christ.

This Apemantus was a frank despiser of mankind, but a healthy one, because he was not unhappy. In this mixed world anyone with a number of acquaintances knows a person who talks bitterly of men, but does not shun them, and boasts that he is never deceived by their fine speeches, and is inwardly cheerful and proud.

Apemantus was a man like that.

Timon, you will be surprised to hear, became much worse than Apemantus, after the dawning of a day which we call Quarter Day.

Quarter Day is the day when bills pour in. The grocer, the butcher, and the baker are all thinking of their debtors on that day, and the wise man has saved enough money to be ready for them. But Timon had not;

and he did not only owe money for food. He owed it for jewels and horses and furniture; and, worst of all, he owed it to money-lenders, who expected him to pay twice as much as he had borrowed.

Quarter Day is a day when promises to pay are scorned, and on that day Timon was asked for a large sum of money. "Sell some land," he said to his steward. "You have no land," was the reply. "Nonsense! I had a hundred, thousand acres," said Timon. "You could have

spent the price of the world if you had possessed it," said Flavius.



"Borrow some then," said Timon; "try Ventidius." He thought of Ventidius because he had once got Ventidius out of prison by paying a creditor of this

young man. Ventidius was now rich. Timon trusted in his gratitude. But not for all; so much did he owe! Servants were despatched with requests for loans of money to several friends:

One servant (Flaminius) went to Lucullus. When he was announced Lucullus said, "A gift, I warrant. I dreamt of a silver jug and basin last night." Then, changing his tone, "How is that honorable, free-hearted, perfect gentleman, your master, eh?"

"Well in health, sir," replied Flaminius.

"And what have you got there under your cloak?" asked Lucullus, jovially.

"Faith, sir, nothing but an empty box, which, on my master's behalf, I beg you to fill with money, sir."

"La! la! la!" said Lucullus, who could not pretend to mean, "Ha! ha! ha!" "Your master's one fault is that he is too fond of giving parties. I've warned him that it was expensive. Now, look here, Flaminius, you know this is no time to lend money without security, so suppose you act like a good boy and tell him that I was not at home. Here's three solidares for yourself."

"Back, wretched money," cried Flaminius, "to him who worships you!"

Others of Timon's friends were tried and found stingy. Amongst them was Sempronius.

"Hum," he said to Timon's servant, "has he asked Ventidius? Ventidius is beholden to him."

"He refused."

"Well, have you asked Lucullus?"

"He refused."

"A poor compliment to apply to me last of all," said Sempronius, in affected anger. "If he had sent to me at first, I would gladly have lent him money, but I'm not going to be such a fool as to lend him any now."

"Your lordship makes a good villain," said the servant.

When Timon found that his friends were so mean, he took advantage of a lull in his storm of creditors to invite Ventidius and Company to a banquet. Flavius was horrified, but Ventidius and Company, were not in the least ashamed, and they assembled accordingly in

Timon's house, and said to one another that their princely host had been jesting with them.

"I had to put off an important engagement in order to come here," said Lucullus; "but who could refuse Timon?"

"It was a real grief to me to be without ready money when he asked for some," said Sempronius. "The same here," chimed in a third lord.

Timon now appeared, and his guests vied with one another in apologies and compliments. Inwardly sneering, Timon was gracious to them all.

In the banqueting hall was a table resplendent with covered dishes. Mouths watered. These summer-friends loved good food.

"Be seated, worthy friends," said Timon. He then prayed aloud to the gods of Greece. "Give each man enough," he said, "for if you, who are our gods, were to borrow of men they would cease to adore you. Let men love the joint more than the host. Let every score of guests contain twenty villains. Bless my friends as much as they have blessed me. Uncover the dishes, dogs, and lap!"

The hungry lords were too much surprised by this speech to resent it. They thought Timon was unwell,



and, although he had called them dogs, they uncovered the dishes.

There was nothing in them but warm water.

"May you never see a better feast," wished Timon "I wash off the flatteries with which you plastered me and sprinkle you with your villainy." With these words he threw the water into his guests' faces, and then he pelted them with the dishes. Having thus ended the banquet, he went into an outhouse, seized a spade, and quitted Athens for ever.

His next dwelling was a cave near the sea.

Of all his friends, the only one who had not refused him aid was a handsome soldier named Alcibiades, and he had not been asked because, having quarreled with the Government of Athens, he had left that town. The thought that Alcibiades might have proved a true friend did not soften Timon's bitter feeling. He was too weak-minded to discern the fact that good cannot be far from evil in this mixed world. He determined to see nothing better in all mankind than the ingratitude of Ventidius and the meanness of Lucullus.

He became a vegetarian, and talked pages to himself as he dug in the earth for food.

One day, when he was digging for roots near the shore, his spade struck gold. If he had been a wise man he would have enriched himself quickly, and returned to Athens to live in comfort. But the sight of the gold vein gave no joy but only scorn to Timon. "This yellow slave," he said, "will make and break religions. It will make

black white and foul fair. It will buy murder and bless the accursed."

He was still ranting when Alcibiades, now an enemy of Athens, approached with his soldiers and two beautiful women who cared for nothing but pleasure.

Timon was so changed by his bad thoughts and rough life that Alcibiades did not recognize him at first.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"A beast, as you are," was the reply.

Alcibiades knew his voice, and offered him help and money. But Timon would none of it, and began to insult the women. They, however, when they found he had discovered a gold mine, cared not a jot for his opinion of them, but said, "Give us some gold, good Timon. Have you more?"

With further insults, Timon filled their aprons with gold ore.

"Farewell," said Alcibiades, who deemed that Timon's wits were lost; and then his disciplined soldiers left without profit the mine which could have paid their wages, and marched towards Athens.

Timon continued to dig and curse, and affected great delight when he dug up a root and discovered that it was not a grape.

Just then Apemantus appeared. "I am told that you imitate me," said Apemantus.

"Only," said Timon, "because you haven't a dog which I can imitate."

"You are revenging yourself on your friends by punishing yourself," said Apemantus. "That is very silly,



for they live just as comfortably as they ever did. I am sorry that a fool should imitate me."



"If I were like you," said Timon, "I should throw myself away."  
"You have done so," sneered Apemantus. "Will the cold brook make you a good morning drink, or an east wind

warm your clothes as a valet would?"

"Off with you!" said Timon; but Apemantus stayed a while longer and told him he had a passion for extremes, which was true. Apemantus even made a pun, but there was no good laughter to be got out of Timon. Finally, they lost their temper like two schoolboys, and Timon said he was sorry to lose the stone which he flung at Apemantus, who left him with an evil wish. This was almost an "at home" day for Timon, for when Apemantus had departed, he was visited by some robbers. They wanted gold.

"You want too much," said Timon. "Here are water, roots and berries."

"We are not birds and pigs," said a robber.

"No, you are cannibals," said Timon. "Take the gold, then, and may it poison you! Henceforth rob one another."

He spoke so frightfully to them that, though they went away with full pockets, they almost repented of their trade. His last visitor on that day of visits was his good steward Flavius. "My dearest master!" cried he.

"Away! What are you?" said Timon.

"Have you forgotten me, sir?" asked Flavius, mournfully.

"I have forgotten all men," was the reply; "and if you'll allow that you are a man, I have forgotten you."

"I was your honest servant," said Flavius.

"Nonsense! I never had an honest man about me," retorted Timon.

Flavius began to cry.

"What! shedding tears?" said Timon. "Come nearer, then. I will love you because you are a woman, and unlike men, who only weep when they laugh or beg."

They talked awhile; then Timon said, "Yon gold is mine. I will make you rich, Flavius, if you promise me to live by yourself and hate mankind. I will make you very rich if you promise me that you will see the flesh slide off the beggar's bones before you feed him, and let the debtor die in jail before you pay his debt."

Flavius simply said, "Let me stay to comfort you, my master."

"If you dislike cursing, leave me," replied Timon, and he turned his back on Flavius, who went sadly back to Athens, too much accustomed to obedience to force his services upon his ailing master.

The steward had accepted nothing, but a report got about that a mighty nugget of gold had been given him by his former master, and Timon therefore received more visitors. They were a painter and a poet, whom he had patronized in his prosperity.

"Hail, worthy Timon!" said the poet. "We heard with astonishment how your friends deserted you. No whip's large enough for their backs!"

"We have come," put in the painter, "to offer our services."

"You've heard that I have gold," said Timon.

"There was a report," said the painter, blushing; "but my friend and I did not come for that."

"Good honest men!" jeered Timon. "All the same, you shall have plenty of gold if you will rid me of two villains."

"Name them," said his two visitors in one breath. "Both of you!" answered Timon. Giving the painter a whack with a big stick, he said, "Put that into your palette and make money out of it." Then he gave a whack to the poet, and said, "Make a poem out of that and get paid for it. There's gold for you."

They hurriedly withdrew.

Finally Timon was visited by two senators who, now that Athens was threatened by Alcibiades, desired to have on their side this bitter noble whose gold might help the foe.

"Forget your injuries," said the first senator. "Athens offers you dignities whereby you may honorably live."

"Athens confesses that your merit was overlooked, and wishes to atone, and more than atone, for her forgetfulness," said the second senator.

"Worthy senators," replied Timon, in his grim way, "I am almost weeping; you touch me so! All I need are the eyes of a woman and the heart of a fool."

But the senators were patriots. They believed that this bitter man could save Athens, and they would not quarrel with him. "Be our captain," they said, "and lead Athens against Alcibiades, who threatens to destroy her."

"Let him destroy the Athenians too, for all I care," said Timon; and seeing an evil despair in his face, they left him.

The senators returned to Athens, and soon afterwards trumpets were blown before its walls. Upon the walls they stood and listened to Alcibiades, who told them that wrong-doers should quake in their easy chairs. They looked at his confident army, and were convinced that Athens must yield if he assaulted it, therefore they used the voice that strikes deeper than arrows.

"These walls of ours were built by the hands of men who never wronged you, Alcibiades," said the first senator.

"Enter," said the second senator, "and slay every tenth man, if your revenge needs human flesh."

"Spare the cradle," said the first senator.

"I ask only justice," said Alcibiades. "If you admit my army, I will inflict the penalty of your own laws upon any soldier who breaks them."

At that moment a soldier approached Alcibiades, and said, "My noble general, Timon is dead." He handed Alcibiades a sheet of wax, saying, "He is buried by the sea, on the beach, and over his grave is a stone with letters on it which I cannot read, and therefore I have impressed them on wax."

Alcibiades read from the sheet of wax this couplet--  
"Here lie I, Timon, who, alive, all living men did hate. Pass  
by and say your worst; but  
pass, and stay not here your  
gait."

"Dead, then, is noble Timon,"  
said Alcibiades; and he entered  
Athens with an olive branch  
instead of a sword.

So it was one of Timon's friends  
who was generous in a greater  
matter than Timon's need; yet

are the sorrow and rage of Timon remembered as a  
warning lest another ingratitude should arise to turn  
love into hate.

