

Eugenius and the Rich Young Noble

Marisa Sankey

The land of Epirus was affluent and prosperous, its citizens generally charitable and benevolent. In the imposing city of Apollonia, inside of a lush and lavish mansion, dwelt a rich young noble. This young man, whose name was Alexander Demetrius, was, at this time, feasting with the other nobles and statesmen of the area. The walls of the mansion's great halls were covered with tapestries of vibrant colors, depicting scenes of great men in battle and the conquering of nations. In one corner of the room a group of musicians played a merry tune on their harps, flutes, and lyres, while the immense dining table was loaded with fine foods and rich delicacies. Alexander Demetrius was, indeed, the very image of wealth and prosperity as he sat, surrounded by other men of wealth and stature, at the head of the table. He appeared to be enjoying himself as ardently as the others, laughing and conversing with those around him.

In the midst of the lively scene, a servant came and, leaning down, whispered in Demetrius's ear, "There is a beggar at the door who seeks your permission to enter and make a request of you, my lord."

Young Demetrius, greatly annoyed at the interruption, was sorely tempted to send the man away unheard. However, desiring to make a favorable impression upon his guests, he commanded, instead, that the beggar be admitted. Presently the elderly man entered and the young noble asked imperiously, "Well? What is your request, man? Speak out at once."

The man stated humbly, "Dear Sir, I am exceedingly sorry to interrupt your joyful entertainment. My name is Eugenius, from the land of Phocis, and I am rather broken down by trials and tribulations that I have met with along my journey to your beautiful city. I once knew your father, the lord Demetrius, for we fought side by side in the battle of Troy and, during one of the battles, I managed to save your father from certain death. In return, your father promised me a

portion of his lands to call my own someday. Alas, he is dead now, a valiant warrior who died with a sword in his hand. I come now to ask that his promise may be fulfilled. I would not have come with such presumption except that, as I have already mentioned, upon my return from the battlefield the fates have dealt harshly with me, and all the things that I once called dear have been lost to me forever. Thus I have been sadly reduced to this sorry state.” Eugenius carefully omitted the immediate reason for making his request in so unexpected a manner. He wished to see for himself if young Alexander Demetrius was as generous and compassionate as his father. “I have brought with me a note, written by your father’s own hand, in order to prove that all I say is true.” Reaching into a worn satchel, which appeared to be the only item he owned apart from the tattered clothes on his back, Eugenius drew out a wrinkled document and handed it to a nearby servant, who presented it to the ireful young noble.

A moment’s perusal of the faded handwriting was sufficient to convince Demetrius of the identity of its author. Struck with fear at the thought of losing a part of his immense wealth, Demetrius rose with an air of coolness and declared loudly enough for all to hear, “A fine story that is, stranger; however, I am not as gullible as you might think. You shall have to come up with something more believable than *that* if you wish to rob me of my inheritance!”

Suddenly a sage soothsayer among them stood up and proclaimed, “This man speaks the truth! He was, indeed, a friend to Lord Demetrius and rescued him from the very gates of death, for I witnessed it myself. Should our young noble choose to refuse the request of our guest, he would be risking the divine judgment of the gods.” Secretly burning with rage, the young noble consented to give his father’s friend a portion of the land as promised and retired soon afterward, lamenting over his fate. However, the land he bestowed was the most invaluable piece of land that he owned, which lay outside of the city’s gates. In fact, it was one of the very worst plots of soil in the entire country and was so unfertile as to barely be fit for

farming. Even so, Eugenius said not a word in complaint but settled down quietly, determined to be content with his lot.

Now the great goddess Athena, ever watchful, looked down upon this scene with wrathful indignation towards the young arrogant noble and his injustice. Upon approaching her father, Zeus, she pleaded, “Oh, my dear father, grant me the pleasure of taking into my hands the punishment of this vain young aristocrat, for he has wronged my humble servant greatly.”

At this, Zeus replied to Athena, “You are right in saying that Demetrius has done a great wrong toward this good and worthy man. I give you my permission to do as you wish; however, for the sake of his father before him, who was a faithful servant of the gods, you may not take away his life.”

After giving the matter some thought, Athena hatched a plan and flew down to earth disguised as a beggar.

A few weeks after making his request in Alexander Demetrius’s halls, Eugenius was busily exerting all his efforts to plow the rigid and rocky ground that was his home. Wiping the sweat from his brow, he squinted up at the bright sun and perceived that it was nearly noontime. As his stomach began to growl with hunger, the indigent old man decided to take a brief respite from his labors and have a bite to eat before heading out again. Eugenius had hardly prepared the meal for himself before a knock sounded at his door. Immediately rising from the seat he had taken, he opened the door to find a poor old beggar standing there. His heart was touched at the pitiful sight, for the man’s clothes were ragged and torn and his body was thin and gaunt from lack of nutrition.

“Oh, sir, if you would only be so kind as to give an old man a bit of food, for I have been wandering the countryside for days, and I am growing terribly weary and travel-worn,” the stranger requested.

“Why, come in out of the hot sun and take a seat!” exclaimed Eugenius, who could not bear the sight of a fellow human being in

need. "Of course, you are welcome to whatever I can give you. I only wish I had more to offer."

Thus saying, he directed the man to the seat he had recently vacated, poured him wine, and provided for him the best of his meager fare. Athena, for that was indeed who the destitute beggar was, felt a warm compassion toward the generous man, and thanked him kindly at the conclusion of the meal.

"Now, if you will excuse me, I must get back to my work; however, you are more than welcome to stay the night and wait until morning before you set out again," Eugenius offered. Athena consented, touched once again by the man's compassion.

That night the "beggar" slept in Eugenius's own bed, while the owner of the small cottage slept outside beneath the stars. When morning came, Athena slipped out of the door and passed unnoticed into the city, unbeknownst to Eugenius, who had been at work in the fields once again at the crack of dawn.

Some time later young Demetrius was sitting down to his afternoon repast in an unusually cantankerous mood, having gotten little sleep the night before, and snapping at anyone unfortunate enough to come near. He had been hosting a party into the wee hours of the morning and had retired at an unusually late hour. Not long after he had commenced his meal, a servant entered the room. Alexander Demetrius looked up in annoyance.

"Well?" he asked imperiously. "What issue is so paramount that you insist on interrupting my meal?"

"There is a beggar at the door, my lord," the servant informed him nervously, "who pleads for a morsel from your bountiful table."

At this the young noble's mood erupted and, pushing back his chair, he strode towards the door, muttering wrathfully, "Indeed, the nerve of the man, coming here not two weeks after the last one, as if I were some sort of benefactor. He will soon learn that I am not to be taken advantage of in this way!"

Upon reaching the door, Demetrius halted and looked down upon the unfortunate man, ignorant of the fact that it was really the goddess Athena who stood there disguised in rags. The beggar was a pitiful sight; so emaciated was he that his appearance could have melted a heart of stone. However, the noble's foul mood would not be calmed. His usual ill humor, bolstered by lack of sleep, gave way and, voice shaking with rage, he burst out, "You disgusting wretch! Get off my property or I swear that I will throw you into the streets myself. Do not darken this doorstep again, or you will have grave cause to regret it!"

At this, Athena's indignation rose but she said pleadingly, "Oh, kind sir, I beg you not to leave me here to die! I have been to every house and cottage in the town but no one has been charitable enough to grant me even a crumb to eat."

"I warned you, but you would not listen!" exclaimed Demetrius angrily. "Now you shall pay for it!"

So saying, he made a move as if he meant to carry out his threat, but his eyes widened and he fell back as Athena threw off her disguise, growing so tall and bright that a mortal eye could scarcely behold her brilliance. "You ungracious dog!" she thundered. "Not only have you been unjust to your father's friend, Eugenius, but you have offended and wished harm on an innocent old man. Now you are the one who shall pay for your actions!"

Suddenly Demetrius found himself shrinking; his soft hands, which had never before known a single day's work, became feeble and gnarled, the fair hair on his head faded white, and his clothing, so richly tailored a moment before, turned to rags.

Demetrius stared down in horror at the transformation. With a bitter cry, he collapsed at Athena's feet, saying, "Oh, Divine Goddess, have mercy on me! I was not aware of whom I was speaking with!"

Glowering down at him, Athena coldly replied, "Where was your benevolence when I pleaded for it so bitterly? You have brought all of

this upon yourself. Now you shall live the life of those you have mocked and despised, forever dependent upon the mercy of others.”

Athena withdrew from the now-humbled Demetrius all of his possessions – his lands, his servants, and his house, and offered them to the worthy Eugenius. However, Eugenius declined them all, asserting, “I have lived in poverty for so long that I would not part with it for any amount of wealth. I am content to remain as I have lived – a humble farmer.”

Athena was pleased with his answer and because of the venerable man’s humility, his land became more fertile than any other on the earth, and from that time on Eugenius was blessed each year with a bountiful harvest until the end of his days.