

The Knights

**from Aristophanes,
a long dead Greek playwright**

A Retelling by Michelle Copher

Illustrated by _____

About the Story

Long ago the Greeks held yearly festivals in each of their cities where plays would be entered and would win prizes . . . kind of like the Sundance film festival, only live action and with a chorus. The city of Athens held one of the best and anyone who was anyone wanted to enter their play in the Athens festival. Aristophanes was only about twenty years old when he entered The Knights. It won first place. But it wasn't the first time he'd won. An earlier play of his called Acharnians had won first place two years earlier when Aristophanes was still a teenager. That first play criticized the elected leader of the city who was named Creon. Creon, who was sitting in the audience during the play, was offended and sued Aristophanes for slander. The Athenians weren't necessarily enamored with free speech, but they were enamored with plays. Aristophanes got off scot-free.

This play, the Knights, steps it up and though it is still comedic and incredibly funny, is also seriously going after Creon in an effort to bring him down. Creon was so powerful and so much in the people's favor that the mask makers refused to make a mask of Creon for the play and the actors refused to play the part. Rumor has it that Aristophanes himself played the part of Creon in the play and dyed his face rather than wear a mask.

To set the stage, you should know that Creon had recently won an important battle in the ongoing Peloponnesian war, a battle that had been conceived, organized, and commenced by another general. Creon had come in just in time to take all the credit and use it for his political gain.

The characters in the play include an old, rich, cantankerous, selfish and superstitious merchant, named Demos. Demos is a word that means People in Greek and Aristophanes used this name to represent those citizens who had the right to vote – the old, rich, self-indulgent men of Athens. Two servants named Niceas and Demosthenes, actual names of naval Admirals of Aristophanes' day, are represented as brow beaten and used by the selfish overseer of Demos' property. The overseer is called Paphlagon and he represents Creon. The last character is called Sausageman and he is an everyday man of the working class of Athens – uneducated, poor, not with any political power at all; he is literally a maker and seller of sausages. The final element of the play is the chorus. The chorus in Greek plays can be a narrator or an actual actor in the play. It is always a group that represents someone or something. The Knights are the chorus and they represent the aristocracy of Athens, the old ruling class, who Aristophanes seems to think have more sense than the voting citizens.

The best part about the play though isn't what we learn about the Athenians, but what we learn about ourselves and human nature. That is why throughout the story in place of people of Aristophanes' time, I have left blanks for you to fill in with the names of current government and military officials. It makes no difference what the year is or who the current president is, you will be surprised at how very like Athenian politics, American politics are. It's a little creepy actually. And it will help you to understand how very audacious Aristophanes was to present this play with the powerful victim of his jibes sitting right in the audience.

_____ (Chief of Staff of the Navy) _____ was sore all over. He had just been given another beating by the horrible tyrant of an overseer, _____ (President) _____. He called out to his friend, _____ (Chief of Staff of the Army) _____, to complain of their treatment. The two of them blew and blathered and groaned and grouched. Finally they decided to do something about it. But what was to be done? They dithered and dawdled and finally _____ (Chief of Staff of the Army) _____ had an idea.

“Say daddle,” he told _____ (Chief of Staff of the Navy) _____.

“Daddle”, said _____ (Chief of Staff of the Navy) _____, not because he thought it would do any good, but because he wanted to see where _____ (Chief of Staff of the Army) _____ was going with this.

“Now say, *let's ske*”, said _____ (Chief of Staff of the Army) _____.

“Let's ske”

“Good, now say them in succession . . . daddle let's ske . . . daddle let's ske . . . now faster . . . daddle let's ske daddle let's ske daddle . . . let's skedaddle!”

_____ (Chief of Staff of the Navy) _____ thought this a very intriguing, but very dangerous idea. They could run away, but surely they would be caught, dragged back, and far worse than a mere beating would follow. No. Running was not the answer. But what was? Ah, ha! They would consult the oracle, the predictions for the future that _____ (President) _____ kept in his rooms.

The big boss was Joe People, a fat pompous, lazy, self-indulgent, superstitious man. He was shrewd, cunning and selfish. Besides all that he was fickle, high tempered, a little deaf, and easily flattered. That was how they ended up with a tyrant for an overseer in the first place. People had appointed _____ (President) _____ after he had ranted and raved and licked People's boots, in a manner of speaking. _____ (President) _____ knew just exactly how to flatter People enough to control him. _____ (President) _____ was also a consummate liar. He read facts and figures and predictions to flatter People and lull him into a feeling of complacency and satisfaction. Then, of course, he would go about among the other servants and demand they pay him or do favors for him in exchange for “protection” from People. He wasn't fooling them though; the servants all knew it was really protection from _____ (President) _____ they were buying.

The two servants stole into _____ (President's) _____ rooms and carried off the oracles while _____ (President) _____ was passed out in a drunken stupor. _____ (Chief of Staff of the Navy) _____ read the oracle. Lo and behold! It foretold how _____ (President) _____ would lose his position. The first Big Boss was a rope peddler, the second was a sheep peddler who was ousted by a hide peddler (that was our dear friend _____ (President) _____), but he was followed by another – a sausage peddler. Aha! All they must do was find this sausage peddler and help out _____ (President) _____ once and for all!

Well what do you know, a sausage peddler came pushing his sausage cart through the streets headed to the market! The two, _____ (Chief of Staff of the Navy) _____ and _____ (Chief of Staff of the Army) _____ accosted the sausageman and pointed out the beautiful city with its harbor and tall buildings, its beautiful temple and wealthy market. They told the sausageman his fate – that he was to be the ruler of all of this. Of course, the sausageman thought they were off their rockers and tried to continue on his way. But they persisted. The sausageman protested that he was not a gentleman, but low born, a mere guttersnipe.

“Heaven be praised, a most propitious start for politics!” exclaimed _____ (Chief of Staff of the Navy) _____.

Sausageman further protested that he had almost no education at all – only a little.

“Well your only handicap is that 'little'. No educated man can be Boss, these days, nor even a man of character, only an ignoramus and a rogue! Don't reject the blessings of the gods!” exclaimed _____ (Chief of Staff of the Navy) _____.

Sausageman was not convinced yet though. He wondered who would back him up in his claim he wondered how he would run a country when he had no idea how to do so.

Of course _____ (Chief of Staff of the Navy) _____ had an answer for this too, “Just do what you are doing now, Sausageman. Make a hash of things in general, sweetening up the mess to the public taste, with a dash of oratorical applesauce. As for support, the Knights, truly good men, will back you to the end.”

Just then _____ (President) _____ came walking up. Immediately, shrewd as he was, he saw what had been going on. He accused _____ (Chief of Staff of the Navy) _____ and _____ (Chief of Staff of the Army) _____ of plotting against him. Sausageman immediately took to his heels with _____ (Chief of Staff of the Navy) _____ calling after him to slow his flight. Finally, Sausageman was persuaded not by _____ (Chief of Staff of the Navy) _____, but by the odd troop of singing men, the knights, who came out chanting rhyming ditties about the evils of _____ (President) _____. I'd repeat the rhymes, but they were much too horrible to hear.

Sausageman was emboldened by the knights' support and their saucy answers and he even gave a few saucy retorts to _____ (President) _____ himself. It went back and forth between _____ (President) _____ and Sausageman. Each calling the other a liar, a thief, an embezzler, a friend of the enemy; on and on flew the insults.

Eventually Sausageman spat out, "Nothing but a tradesman spending all his lifetime in a shop, but we held him quite a hero when he reaped another's crop. And the many sheaves he garnered, though they weren't his own at all, He has kept in stock for drying, hoping thus to make a haul." He had flat out accused _____ (President) _____ of stealing the credit for the hard work of others!

Sausageman was of course referring to the recent war and the recently won battle which _____ (President) _____ had taken credit for, though the plans were laid and made on another's watch. _____ (President) _____ had ridden that win right into his current place of power, it having impressed People very much.

By now _____ (President) _____ had had enough and he challenged Sausageman to a public debate in front of the senate to decide who was the worthier. Sausageman, with much bravado, agreed to the debate, but in his heart he was secretly afraid. Did he have enough swagger? Could he convince? Could he lie well enough? He did not know.

Taking heart, he entered the senate chambers and began with a loud voice to announce, "I bring you happy tidings, Senators. For never have I seen since the war broke out, anchovies cheaper than they are today!"

At that the senators let out a loud cheer, for anchovies were, above all, their favorite luxury. Immediately the sausageman advised them to hurry now to the market to buy up every jar. The senators applauded and then rushed off to buy as many anchovies as they could get a hold of. Meanwhile, Sausageman ran to buy up all the seasonings to be put upon the anchovies. The senators, when they could find no seasonings, were grateful beyond measure to dear Sausageman who gave them seasonings for free. The senate voted unanimously to accept Sausageman as the new Boss.

But _____ (President) _____ had not given up. "People is as putty in my hands, to push and pull, open and shut at will," he told Sausageman.

"Jolly well own People don't you now?" retorted Sausageman.

"Because I know the pap to feed him on," said _____ (President) _____.

"And cheat them on," retorted Sausageman, "exactly like a nurse who chews the baby's food up nice and fine and bolts a good three-fourths of it herself!"

Just then Joe People himself walked up to see the argument. _____ (President) _____ began to whine about his poor treatment while Sausageman discredited and exposed _____ (President) _____'s lies and theft. People decided to test their stories before the courts to find out, if he could, who was lying and who truly had his interests at heart. On the way to the trial Sausageman and _____ (President) _____ went at each other again.

"I've been his savior, his champion!" said _____ (President) _____.

"Bah! His champion! You've kept him confined, unbearably jammed here in this city, to improve your chances to bleed him. When a chance for a truce came along, you scorned it and peace you rejected."

"It's for his own good, if he sticks out the war, he'll be greater than ever he's been," _____ (President) _____ said, "I tend People with tender care and make things easy and pleasant, somehow, fair or foul, I'm obliged to provide him with his fee as a present."

Sausageman said, "If People ever gets back home to his farm he'll learn that you cheated him out of his rights with your pittance of government money. You know it is true. That is why you deceive him with oracles and predictions, to hide what you do."

"Absurd! It's a lie!"

"What's more, you sought to divide the people by walling them off into classes, all while eating the bread from their sweat at your big bountiful banquets."

People was finally convinced of the sin and folly of his former favorite and ordered _____ (President) _____ to silence. _____ (President) _____ was not so desperate that he had given up yet. He continued to protest his innocence and reminded People again and again of all the good he had done him, but Sausageman cleverly turned all his words against him.

_____ (President) _____ growled below his breath, "I'll squeeze the villain till he cracks beneath a heavy income tax. To pay him out for all his airs, I'll bracket him with millionaires."

Sausageman declined to respond, taking the high road. People exclaimed his approval and declared Sausageman one of them, a common man for the common men! People fired _____ (President) _____ right then and there.

The oddly out of place singing knights appeared once again to croon their approbation and joy at this announcement. You would think that would be that and our tale would be over, but not so.

_____ (President) _____ began again to appeal to the oracles and read prophecy after prophecy, all interpreted for his benefit. But Sausageman countered with his own prophecies. Finally Joe People admitted, "I shall give the reins of government to the one who gives me the best spread on my table."

The knights accused People of being fickle and ignorant. He countered with, "You think I'm not all there? It's only that I want to live my life with ease. I love to be bottle fed and cry for my daily bread. You'll find me smart enough to call their bluff who think they are up to snuff, and I am the greenhorn. Whenever they rob me, I am watching them on the sly. They fancy they can fool Brer Fox, till probed by the ballot box, they're forced to give way to my demands and give up their own show."

This was all getting a little ridiculous so _____ (President) _____ and Sausageman decided to have a race. People sat back, smug as can be at the sight of these two competing so heatedly for his favor. It seemed that People did not care too much who won, so long as they gave him treats to compete for his good will. The race quickly turned into another race to bring gifts of food to People's table. In the end though, People never really chose one over the other. In the end it was the fates that led Sausageman to triumph over _____ (President) _____. President gave way to the oracles and the prophecy and admitted defeat.

And did People learn any lessons from this? He swore from this time forward to pay his soldiers on time, to refuse bribes, to seek peace rather than war, and most of all, he resolved to not give way to flattery and lies.

_____ (President) _____'s fate wasn't so bad either. He became a sausageman at the gate and worked for his living from then on.