

“The Comedy of Errors” by William Shakespeare

The states of Syracuse and Ephesus being at variance, there was a cruel law made at Ephesus, ordaining that if any merchant of Syracuse was seen in the city of Ephesus he was to be put to death, unless he could pay a thousand marks for the ransom of his life.

Aegeon, an old merchant of Syracuse, was arrested in the streets of Ephesus and brought before the duke, either to pay the heavy fine or receive sentence of death. Aegeon had no money to pay the fine.

The duke, before he pronounced the sentence of death upon him, desired him to relate the history of his life and to tell for what cause he had ventured to come

to the city of Ephesus, which it was death for any Syracusan merchant to enter.

Aegeon did not fear to die for sorrow had made him weary of his life. A heavier task could not have been imposed upon him than to relate the events of his unfortunate life. He then began his own history, in the following words:

“I was born at Syracuse and brought up to the profession of a merchant. I married a lady with whom I lived very happily, but, being obliged to go to Epidamnum, I was detained there by my business six months. Finding I should be obliged to stay some time longer, I sent for my wife, who, as soon as she arrived, was brought to bed of two sons. What was very strange, they were both so exactly alike that it was impossible to

distinguish the one from the other. At the same time, a poor woman in the inn where my wife lodged was brought to bed of two sons. These twins were as much like each other as my two sons were. The parents of these children being exceeding poor, I bought the two boys and brought them up to attend upon my sons.

“My sons were very fine children, and my wife was not a little proud of the boys. She daily wishing to return home, I unwillingly agreed, and in an evil hour we got on shipboard. We had not sailed a league from Epidamnum before a dreadful storm arose which continued with such violence. The sailors, seeing no chance of saving the ship, crowded into the boat to save their own lives, leaving us alone in the ship, which we every

moment expected would be destroyed by the fury of the storm.

“The incessant weeping of my wife and the piteous complaints of the pretty babes, who, not knowing what to fear, wept for fashion, because they saw their mother weep, filled me with terror for them though I did not for myself fear death. My thoughts were bent to contrive means for their safety. I tied my youngest son to the end of a small spire mast, such as seafaring men provide against storms. At the other end I bound the youngest of the twin slaves. At the same time I asked my wife to fasten the other children in like manner to another mast. She, having the care of the eldest two children, and I of the younger two, we bound ourselves separately to these masts with the boys.