A FLORENTINE TRAGEDY

Oscar Wilde

A Florentine Tragedy, La Sainte Courtisane (fragments)

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A Florentine Tragedy--A Fragment La Sainte Courtisane--A Fragment

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Oscar Wilde Miscellaneous

A Florentine Tragedy--A Fragment La Sainte Courtisane--A Fragment

by Oscar Wilde

May, 1998 [Etext #1308]

Project Gutenberg's Etext of Oscar Wilde Miscellaneous by Oscar Wilde
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Oscar Wilde Miscellaneous

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PREFACE BY ROBERT ROSS

'As to my personal attitude towards criticism, I confess in brief the following:- "If my works are good and of any importance whatever for the further development of art, they will maintain their place in spite of all adverse criticism and in spite of all hateful suspicions attached to my artistic intentions. If my works are of no account, the most gratifying success of the moment and the most enthusiastic approval of as augurs cannot make them endure. The waste-paper press can devour them as it has devoured many others, and I will not shed a tear . . . and the world will move on just the same."'--RICHARD STRAUSS.

The contents of this volume require some explanation of an historical nature. It is scarcely realised by the present generation that Wilde's works on their first appearance, with the exception of De Profundis, were met with almost general condemnation and ridicule. The plays on their first production were grudgingly praised because their obvious success could not be ignored; but on their subsequent publication in book form they were violently assailed. That nearly all of them have held the stage is still a source of irritation among certain journalists. Salome however enjoys a singular career. As every one knows, it was prohibited by the Censor when in rehearsal by Madame Bernhardt at the Palace Theatre in 1892. On its publication in 1893 it was greeted with greater

abuse than any other of Wilde's works, and was consigned to the usual irrevocable oblivion. The accuracy of the French was freely canvassed, and of course it is obvious that the French is not that of a Frenchman. The play was passed for press, however, by no less a writer than Marcel Schwob whose letter to the Paris publisher, returning the proofs and mentioning two or three slight alterations, is still in my possession. Marcel Schwob told me some years afterwards that he thought it would have spoiled the spontaneity and character of Wilde's style if he had tried to harmonise it with the diction demanded by the French Academy. It was never composed with any idea of presentation. Madame Bernhardt happened to say she wished Wilde would write a play for her; he replied in jest that he had done so. She insisted on seeing the manuscript, and decided on its immediate production, ignorant or forgetful of the English law which prohibits the introduction of Scriptural characters on the stage. With his keen sense of the theatre Wilde would never have contrived the long speech of Salome at the end in a drama intended for the stage, even in the days of long speeches. His threat to change his nationality shortly after the Censor's interference called forth a most delightful and good- natured caricature of him by Mr. Bernard Partridge in Punch.

Wilde was still in prison in 1896 when Salome was produced by Lugne Poe at the Theatre de L'OEuvre in Paris, but except for an account in the Daily Telegraph the incident was hardly mentioned in England. I gather that the performance was only a qualified success, though Lugne Poe's triumph as Herod was generally acknowledged. In 1901, within a year of the author's death, it was produced in Berlin; from that moment it has held the European stage. It has run for a longer consecutive period in Germany than any play by any Englishman, not excepting Shakespeare. Its popularity has extended to all countries where it is not prohibited. It is performed throughout Europe, Asia and America. It is played even in Yiddish. This is remarkable in view of the many dramas by French and German writers who treat of the same theme. To none of them, however, is Wilde indebted. Flaubert, Maeterlinck (some would add Ollendorff) and Scripture, are the obvious sources on which he has freely drawn for what I do not hesitate to call the most powerful and perfect of all his dramas. But on such a point a trustee and executor may be prejudiced because it is the most valuable asset in Wilde's literary estate. Aubrey Beardsley's illustrations are too well known to need more than a passing reference. In the world of art criticism they excited almost as much attention as Wilde's drama has excited in the world of intellect.

During May 1905 the play was produced in England for the first time at a private performance by the New Stage Club. No one present will have forgotten the extraordinary tension of the audience on that occasion, those who disliked the play and its author being hypnotised by the extraordinary power of Mr. Robert Farquharson's Herod, one of the finest pieces of acting ever seen in this country. My friends the dramatic critics (and many of them are personal friends) fell on Salome with all the vigour of their predecessors twelve years before. Unaware of what was taking place in Germany, they spoke of the play as having been 'dragged from obscurity.' The Official Receiver in Bankruptcy and myself were, however, better informed. And much pleasure has been derived from reading those criticisms, all carefully preserved along with the list of receipts which were simultaneously pouring in from the German performances. To do the critics justice they never withdrew any of their printed opinions, which were all trotted out again when the play was produced privately for the second time in England by the Literary Theatre Society in 1906. In the Speaker of July 14th, 1906, however, some of the iterated misrepresentations of fact were corrected. No attempt was made to controvert the opinion of an ignorant critic: his veracity only was impugned. The powers of vaticination possessed by such judges of drama can be fairly tested in the career of Salome on the European stage, apart from the opera. In an introduction to the English translation published by Mr. John Lane it is pointed out that Wilde's confusion of Herod Antipas (Matt. xiv. 1) with Herod the Great (Matt. ii. 1) and Herod Agrippa I. (Acts xii. 23) is intentional, and follows a mediaeval convention. There is no attempt at historical accuracy or archaeological exactness. Those who saw the marvellous decor of Mr. Charles Ricketts at the second English production can form a complete idea of what Wilde intended in that respect; although the stage management was clumsy and amateurish. The great opera of Richard Strauss does not fall within my province; but the fag ends of its popularity on the Continent have been imported here oddly enough through the agency of the Palace Theatre, where Salome was originally to have been performed. Of a young lady's dancing, or of that of her rivals, I am not qualified to speak. I note merely that the critics who objected to the horror of one incident in the drama lost all self-control on seeing that incident repeated in dumb show and accompanied by fescennine corybantics. Except in 'name and borrowed notoriety' the music-hall sensation has no relation whatever to the drama which so profoundly moved the whole of Europe and the greatest living musician. The adjectives of contumely are easily transmuted into epithets of adulation, when a prominent ecclesiastic succumbs, like King Herod, to the fascination of a dancer.

It is not usually known in England that a young French naval officer, unaware that Dr. Strauss was composing an opera on the theme of Salome, wrote another music drama to accompany Wilde's text. The exclusive musical rights having been already secured by Dr. Strauss, Lieutenant Marriotte's work cannot be performed regularly. One presentation, however, was permitted at Lyons, the composer's native town, where I am told it made an extraordinary impression. In order to give English readers some faint idea of the world-wide effect of Wilde's drama, my friend Mr. Walter Ledger has prepared a short bibliography of certain English and Continental translations.

At the time of Wilde's trial the nearly completed MS. of La Sainte Courtisane was entrusted to Mrs. Leverson, the well-known novelist, who in 1897 went to Paris on purpose to restore it to the author. Wilde immediately left the only copy in a cab. A few days later he laughingly informed me of the loss, and added that a cab was a very proper place for it. I have explained elsewhere that he looked on his works with disdain in his last years, though he was always full of schemes for writing others. All my attempts to recover the lost work failed. The passages here reprinted are from some odd leaves of a first draft. The play is, of course, not unlike Salome, though it was written in English. It expanded Wilde's favourite theory that when you convert some one to an idea, you lose your faith in it; the same motive runs through Mr. W. H. Honorius the hermit, so far as I recollect the story, falls in love with the courtesan who has come to tempt him, and he reveals to her the secret of the love of God. She immediately becomes a Christian, and is murdered by robbers. Honorius the hermit goes back to Alexandria to pursue a life of pleasure. Two other similar plays Wilde invented in prison, AHAB AND ISABEL and PHARAOH; he would never write them down, though often importuned to do so. Pharaoh was intensely dramatic and perhaps more original than any of the group. None of these works must be confused with the manuscripts stolen from 16 Tite Street in 1895--namely, the enlarged version of Mr. W. H., the second draft of A Florentine Tragedy, and The Duchess of Padua (which, existing in a prompt copy, was of less importance than the others); nor with The Cardinal of Arragon, the manuscript of which I never saw. I scarcely think it ever existed, though Wilde used to recite proposed passages for it.

Some years after Wilde's death I was looking over the papers and letters rescued from Tite Street when I came across loose sheets of manuscript and typewriting, which I imagined were fragments of The Duchess of Padua; on putting them together in a coherent form I recognised that they belonged to the lost Florentine

Tragedy. I assumed that the opening scene, though once extant, had disappeared. One day, however, Mr. Willard wrote that he possessed a typewritten fragment of a play which Wilde had submitted to him, and this he kindly forwarded for my inspection. It agreed in nearly every particular with what I had taken so much trouble to put together. This suggests that the opening scene had never been written, as Mr. Willard's version began where mine did. It was characteristic of the author to finish what he never began.

When the Literary Theatre Society produced Salome in 1906 they asked me for some other short drama by Wilde to present at the same time, as Salome does not take very long to play. I offered them the fragment of A Florentine Tragedy. By a fortunate coincidence the poet and dramatist, Mr. Thomas Sturge Moore, happened to be on the committee of this Society, and to him was entrusted the task of writing an opening scene to make the play complete. {1} It is not for me to criticise his work, but there is justification for saying that Wilde himself would have envied, with an artist's envy, such lines as -

We will sup with the moon, Like Persian princes that in Babylon Sup in the hanging gardens of the King.

In a stylistic sense Mr. Sturge Moore has accomplished a feat in reconstruction, whatever opinions may be held of A Florentine Tragedy by Wilde's admirers or detractors. The achievement is particularly remarkable because Mr. Sturge Moore has nothing in common with Wilde other than what is shared by all real poets and dramatists: He is a landed proprietor on Parnassus, not a trespasser. In England we are more familiar with the poachers. Time and Death are of course necessary before there can come any adequate recognition of one of our most original and gifted singers. Among his works are The Vinedresser and other Poems (1899), Absalom, A Chronicle Play (1903), and The Centaur's Booty (1903). Mr. Sturge Moore is also an art critic of distinction, and his learned works on Durer (1905) and Correggio (1906) are more widely known (I am sorry to say) than his powerful and enthralling poems.

Once again I must express my obligations to Mr. Stuart Mason for revising and correcting the proofs of this new edition.

ROBERT ROSS

A FLORENTINE TRAGEDY--A FRAGMENT

CHARACTERS:

GUIDO BARDI, A Florentine prince SIMONE, a merchant BIANNA, his wife

The action takes place at Florence in the early sixteenth century.

[The door opens, they separate guiltily, and the husband enters.]

SIMONE. My good wife, you come slowly; were it not better To run to meet your lord? Here, take my cloak. Take this pack first. 'Tis heavy. I have sold nothing: Save a furred robe unto the Cardinal's son, Who hopes to wear it when his father dies, And hopes that will be soon.

But who is this? Why you have here some friend. Some kinsman doubtless, Newly returned from foreign lands and fallen Upon a house without a host to greet him? I crave your pardon, kinsman. For a house Lacking a host is but an empty thing And void of honour; a cup without its wine, A scabbard without steel to keep it straight, A flowerless garden widowed of the sun. Again I crave your pardon, my sweet cousin.

BIANCA. This is no kinsman and no cousin neither.

SIMONE. No kinsman, and no cousin! You amaze me. Who is it then who with such courtly grace Deigns to accept our hospitalities?

GUIDO. My name is Guido Bardi.

SIMONE. What! The son Of that great Lord of Florence whose dim towers Like shadows silvered by the wandering moon I see from out my casement every night! Sir Guido Bardi, you are welcome here, Twice welcome. For I trust my honest wife, Most honest if uncomely to the eye, Hath not with foolish chatterings wearied you, As is the wont of women.

GUIDO. Your gracious lady, Whose beauty is a lamp that pales the stars And robs Diana's quiver of her beams Has welcomed me with such sweet courtesies That if it be her pleasure, and your own, I will come often to your simple house. And when your business bids you walk abroad I will sit here and charm her loneliness Lest she might sorrow for you overmuch. What say you, good Simone?

SIMONE. My noble Lord, You bring me such high honour that my tongue Like a slave's tongue is tied, and cannot say The word it would. Yet not to give you thanks Were to be too unmannerly. So, I thank you, From my heart's core.

It is such things as these That knit a state together, when a Prince So nobly born and of such fair address, Forgetting unjust Fortune's differences, Comes to an honest burgher's honest home As a most honest friend.

And yet, my Lord, I fear I am too bold. Some other night We trust that you will come here as a friend; To-night you come to buy my merchandise. Is it not so? Silks, velvets, what you will, I doubt not but I have some dainty wares Will woo your fancy. True, the hour is late, But we poor merchants toil both night and day To make our scanty gains. The tolls are high, And every city levies its own toll, And prentices are unskilful, and wives even Lack sense and cunning, though Bianca here Has brought me a rich customer to-night. Is it not so, Bianca? But I waste time. Where is my pack? Where is my pack, I say? Open it, my good wife. Unloose the cords. Kneel down upon the floor. You are better so. Nay not that one, the other. Despatch, despatch! Buyers will grow impatient oftentimes. We dare not keep them waiting. Ay! 'tis that, Give it to me; with care. It is most costly. Touch it with care. And now, my noble Lord - Nay, pardon, I have here a Lucca damask, The very web of silver and the roses So cunningly wrought that they lack perfume merely To cheat the wanton sense. Touch it, my Lord. Is it not soft as water, strong as steel? And then the roses! Are they not finely woven? I think the hillsides that best love the rose, At Bellosguardo or at Fiesole, Throw no such blossoms on the lap of spring, Or if they do their blossoms droop and die. Such is the fate of all the dainty things That dance in wind and water. Nature herself Makes war on her own loveliness and slays Her children like Medea. Nay but, my Lord, Look closer still. Why in this damask here It is summer always, and no winter's tooth Will ever blight these blossoms. For every ell I paid a piece of gold. Red gold, and good, The fruit of careful thrift.

GUIDO. Honest Simone, Enough, I pray you. I am well content; To-morrow I will send my servant to you, Who will pay twice your price.

SIMONE. My generous Prince! I kiss your hands. And now I do remember Another treasure hidden in my house Which you must see. It is a robe of state: Woven by a Venetian: the stuff, cut-velvet: The pattern, pomegranates: each separate seed Wrought of a pearl: the collar all of pearls, As thick as moths in summer streets at night, And whiter than the moons that madmen see Through

prison bars at morning. A male ruby Burns like a lighted coal within the clasp The Holy Father has not such a stone, Nor could the Indies show a brother to it. The brooch itself is of most curious art, Cellini never made a fairer thing To please the great Lorenzo. You must wear it. There is none worthier in our city here, And it will suit you well. Upon one side A slim and horned satyr leaps in gold To catch some nymph of silver. Upon the other Stands Silence with a crystal in her hand, No bigger than the smallest ear of corn, That wavers at the passing of a bird, And yet so cunningly wrought that one would say, It breathed, or held its breath.

Worthy Bianca, Would not this noble and most costly robe Suit young Lord Guido well?

Nay, but entreat him; He will refuse you nothing, though the price Be as a prince's ransom. And your profit Shall not be less than mine.

BIANCA. Am I your prentice? Why should I chaffer for your velvet robe?

GUIDO. Nay, fair Bianca, I will buy the robe, And all things that the honest merchant has I will buy also. Princes must be ransomed, And fortunate are all high lords who fall Into the white hands of so fair a foe.

SIMONE. I stand rebuked. But you will buy my wares? Will you not buy them? Fifty thousand crowns Would scarce repay me. But you, my Lord, shall have them For forty thousand. Is that price too high? Name your own price. I have a curious fancy To see you in this wonder of the loom Amidst the noble ladies of the court, A flower among flowers.

They say, my lord, These highborn dames do so affect your Grace That where you go they throng like flies around you, Each seeking for your favour.

I have heard also Of husbands that wear horns, and wear them bravely, A fashion most fantastical.

GUIDO. Simone, Your reckless tongue needs curbing; and besides, You do forget this gracious lady here Whose delicate ears are surely not attuned To such coarse music.

SIMONE. True: I had forgotten, Nor will offend again. Yet, my sweet Lord, You'll buy the robe of state. Will you not buy it? But forty thousand crowns--'tis

but a trifle, To one who is Giovanni Bardi's heir.

GUIDO. Settle this thing to-morrow with my steward, Antonio Costa. He will come to you. And you shall have a hundred thousand crowns If that will serve your purpose.

SIMONE. A hundred thousand! Said you a hundred thousand? Oh! be sure That will for all time and in everything Make me your debtor. Ay! from this time forth My house, with everything my house contains Is yours, and only yours.

A hundred thousand! My brain is dazed. I shall be richer far Than all the other merchants. I will buy Vineyards and lands and gardens. Every loom From Milan down to Sicily shall be mine, And mine the pearls that the Arabian seas Store in their silent caverns.

Generous Prince, This night shall prove the herald of my love, Which is so great that whatsoe'er you ask It will not be denied you.

GUIDO. What if I asked For white Bianca here?

SIMONE. You jest, my Lord; She is not worthy of so great a Prince. She is but made to keep the house and spin. Is it not so, good wife? It is so. Look! Your distaff waits for you. Sit down and spin. Women should not be idle in their homes, For idle fingers make a thoughtless heart. Sit down, I say.

BIANCA. What shall I spin?

SIMONE. Oh! spin Some robe which, dyed in purple, sorrow might wear For her own comforting: or some long-fringed cloth In which a new-born and unwelcome babe Might wail unheeded; or a dainty sheet Which, delicately perfumed with sweet herbs, Might serve to wrap a dead man. Spin what you will; I care not, I.

BIANCA. The brittle thread is broken, The dull wheel wearies of its ceaseless round, The duller distaff sickens of its load; I will not spin to-night.

SIMONE. It matters not. To-morrow you shall spin, and every day Shall find you at your distaff. So Lucretia Was found by Tarquin. So, perchance, Lucretia Waited for Tarquin. Who knows? I have heard Strange things about men's wives. And now, my lord, What news abroad? I heard to-day at Pisa That certain of the

English merchants there Would sell their woollens at a lower rate Than the just laws allow, and have entreated The Signory to hear them.

Is this well? Should merchant be to merchant as a wolf? And should the stranger living in our land Seek by enforced privilege or craft To rob us of our profits?

GUIDO. What should I do With merchants or their profits? Shall I go And wrangle with the Signory on your count? And wear the gown in which you buy from fools, Or sell to sillier bidders? Honest Simone, Wool-selling or wool-gathering is for you. My wits have other quarries.

BIANCA. Noble Lord, I pray you pardon my good husband here, His soul stands ever in the market-place, And his heart beats but at the price of wool. Yet he is honest in his common way. [To Simone] And you, have you no shame? A gracious Prince Comes to our house, and you must weary him With most misplaced assurance. Ask his pardon.

SIMONE. I ask it humbly. We will talk to-night Of other things. I hear the Holy Father Has sent a letter to the King of France Bidding him cross that shield of snow, the Alps, And make a peace in Italy, which will be Worse than a war of brothers, and more bloody Than civil rapine or intestine feuds.

GUIDO. Oh! we are weary of that King of France, Who never comes, but ever talks of coming. What are these things to me? There are other things Closer, and of more import, good Simone.

BIANCA [To Simone]. I think you tire our most gracious guest. What is the King of France to us? As much As are your English merchants with their wool.

* * * * *

SIMONE. Is it so then? Is all this mighty world Narrowed into the confines of this room With but three souls for poor inhabitants? Ay! there are times when the great universe, Like cloth in some unskilful dyer's vat, Shrivels into a handbreadth, and perchance That time is now! Well! let that time be now. Let this mean room be as that mighty stage Whereon kings die, and our ignoble lives Become the stakes God plays for.

I do not know Why I speak thus. My ride has wearied me. And my horse stumbled thrice, which is an omen That bodes not good to any.

Alas! my lord, How poor a bargain is this life of man, And in how mean a market are we sold! When we are born our mothers weep, but when We die there is none weeps for us. No, not one. [Passes to back of stage.]

BIANCA. How like a common chapman does he speak! I hate him, soul and body. Cowardice Has set her pale seal on his brow. His hands Whiter than poplar leaves in windy springs, Shake with some palsy; and his stammering mouth Blurts out a foolish froth of empty words Like water from a conduit.

GUIDO. Sweet Bianca, He is not worthy of your thought or mine. The man is but a very honest knave Full of fine phrases for life's merchandise, Selling most dear what he must hold most cheap, A windy brawler in a world of words. I never met so eloquent a fool.

BIANCA. Oh, would that Death might take him where he stands!

SIMONE [turning round]. Who spake of Death? Let no one speak of Death. What should Death do in such a merry house, With but a wife, a husband, and a friend To give it greeting? Let Death go to houses Where there are vile, adulterous things, chaste wives Who growing weary of their noble lords Draw back the curtains of their marriage beds, And in polluted and dishonoured sheets Feed some unlawful lust. Ay! 'tis so Strange, and yet so. YOU do not know the world. YOU are too single and too honourable. I know it well. And would it were not so, But wisdom comes with winters. My hair grows grey, And youth has left my body. Enough of that. To-night is ripe for pleasure, and indeed, I would be merry as beseems a host Who finds a gracious and unlooked-for guest Waiting to greet him. [Takes up a lute.] But what is this, my lord? Why, you have brought a lute to play to us. Oh! play, sweet Prince. And, if I am too bold, Pardon, but play.

GUIDO. I will not play to-night. Some other night, Simone.

[To Bianca] You and I Together, with no listeners but the stars, Or the more jealous moon.

SIMONE. Nay, but my lord! Nay, but I do beseech you. For I have heard That by the simple fingering of a string, Or delicate breath breathed along hollowed reeds, Or blown into cold mouths of cunning bronze, Those who are curious in this art can draw Poor souls from prison-houses. I have heard also How such strange magic lurks within these shells That at their bidding casements open

wide And Innocence puts vine-leaves in her hair, And wantons like a maenad. Let that pass. Your lute I know is chaste. And therefore play: Ravish my ears with some sweet melody; My soul is in a prison-house, and needs Music to cure its madness. Good Bianca, Entreat our guest to play.

BIANCA. Be not afraid, Our well-loved guest will choose his place and moment: That moment is not now. You weary him With your uncouth insistence.

GUIDO. Honest Simone, Some other night. To-night I am content With the low music of Bianca's voice, Who, when she speaks, charms the too amorous air, And makes the reeling earth stand still, or fix His cycle round her beauty.

SIMONE. You flatter her. She has her virtues as most women have, But beauty in a gem she may not wear. It is better so, perchance.

Well, my dear lord, If you will not draw melodies from your lute To charm my moody and o'er-troubled soul You'll drink with me at least?

[Motioning Guido to his own place.]

Your place is laid. Fetch me a stool, Bianca. Close the shutters. Set the great bar across. I would not have The curious world with its small prying eyes To peer upon our pleasure.

Now, my lord, Give us a toast from a full brimming cup. [Starts back.] What is this stain upon the cloth? It looks As purple as a wound upon Christ's side. Wine merely is it? I have heard it said When wine is spilt blood is spilt also, But that's a foolish tale.

My lord, I trust My grape is to your liking? The wine of Naples Is fiery like its mountains. Our Tuscan vineyards Yield a more wholesome juice.

GUIDO. I like it well, Honest Simone; and, with your good leave, Will toast the fair Bianca when her lips Have like red rose-leaves floated on this cup And left its vintage sweeter. Taste, Bianca.

[BIANCA drinks.]

Oh, all the honey of Hyblean bees, Matched with this draught were bitter! Good Simone, You do not share the feast.

SIMONE. It is strange, my lord, I cannot eat or drink with you, to-night. Some humour, or some fever in my blood, At other seasons temperate, or some thought That like an adder creeps from point to point, That like a madman crawls from cell to cell, Poisons my palate and makes appetite A loathing, not a longing. [Goes aside.]

GUIDO. Sweet Bianca, This common chapman wearies me with words. I must go hence. To-morrow I will come. Tell me the hour.

BIANCA. Come with the youngest dawn! Until I see you all my life is vain.

GUIDO. Ah! loose the falling midnight of your hair, And in those stars, your eyes, let me behold Mine image, as in mirrors. Dear Bianca, Though it be but a shadow, keep me there, Nor gaze at anything that does not show Some symbol of my semblance. I am jealous Of what your vision feasts on.

BIANCA. Oh! be sure Your image will be with me always. Dear Love can translate the very meanest thing Into a sign of sweet remembrances. But come before the lark with its shrill song Has waked a world of dreamers. I will stand Upon the balcony.

GUIDO. And by a ladder Wrought out of scarlet silk and sewn with pearls Will come to meet me. White foot after foot, Like snow upon a rose-tree.

BIANCA. As you will. You know that I am yours for love or Death.

GUIDO. Simone, I must go to mine own house.

SIMONE. So soon? Why should you? The great Duomo's bell Has not yet tolled its midnight, and the watchmen Who with their hollow horns mock the pale moon, Lie drowsy in their towers. Stay awhile. I fear we may not see you here again, And that fear saddens my too simple heart.

GUIDO. Be not afraid, Simone. I will stand Most constant in my friendship, But to-night I go to mine own home, and that at once. To-morrow, sweet Bianca.

SIMONE. Well, well, so be it. I would have wished for fuller converse with you, My new friend, my honourable guest, But that it seems may not be.

And besides I do not doubt your father waits for you, Wearying for voice or

footstep. You, I think, Are his one child? He has no other child. You are the gracious pillar of his house, The flower of a garden full of weeds. Your father's nephews do not love him well So run folks' tongues in Florence. I meant but that. Men say they envy your inheritance And look upon your vineyards with fierce eyes As Ahab looked on Naboth's goodly field. But that is but the chatter of a town Where women talk too much.

Good-night, my lord. Fetch a pine torch, Bianca. The old staircase Is full of pitfalls, and the churlish moon Grows, like a miser, niggard of her beams, And hides her face behind a muslin mask As harlots do when they go forth to snare Some wretched soul in sin. Now, I will get Your cloak and sword. Nay, pardon, my good Lord, It is but meet that I should wait on you Who have so honoured my poor burgher's house, Drunk of my wine, and broken bread, and made Yourself a sweet familiar. Oftentimes My wife and I will talk of this fair night And its great issues.

Why, what a sword is this. Ferrara's temper, pliant as a snake, And deadlier, I doubt not. With such steel, One need fear nothing in the moil of life. I never touched so delicate a blade. I have a sword too, somewhat rusted now. We men of peace are taught humility, And to bear many burdens on our backs, And not to murmur at an unjust world, And to endure unjust indignities. We are taught that, and like the patient Jew Find profit in our pain.

Yet I remember How once upon the road to Padua A robber sought to take my pack-horse from me, I slit his throat and left him. I can bear Dishonour, public insult, many shames, Shrill scorn, and open contumely, but he Who filches from me something that is mine, Ay! though it be the meanest trencher-plate From which I feed mine appetite--oh! he Perils his soul and body in the theft And dies for his small sin. From what strange clay We men are moulded!

GUIDO. Why do you speak like this?

SIMONE. I wonder, my Lord Guido, if my sword Is better tempered than this steel of yours? Shall we make trial? Or is my state too low For you to cross your rapier against mine, In jest, or earnest?

GUIDO. Naught would please me better Than to stand fronting you with naked blade In jest, or earnest. Give me mine own sword. Fetch yours. To-night will settle the great issue Whether the Prince's or the merchant's steel Is better

tempered. Was not that your word? Fetch your own sword. Why do you tarry, sir?

SIMONE. My lord, of all the gracious courtesies That you have showered on my barren house This is the highest.

Bianca, fetch my sword. Thrust back that stool and table. We must have An open circle for our match at arms, And good Bianca here shall hold the torch Lest what is but a jest grow serious.

BIANCA [To Guido]. Oh! kill him, kill him!

SIMONE. Hold the torch, Bianca. [They begin to fight.]

SIMONE. Have at you! Ah! Ha! would you?

[He is wounded by GUIDO.]

A scratch, no more. The torch was in mine eyes. Do not look sad, Bianca. It is nothing. Your husband bleeds, 'tis nothing. Take a cloth, Bind it about mine arm. Nay, not so tight. More softly, my good wife. And be not sad, I pray you be not sad. No; take it off. What matter if I bleed? [Tears bandage off.]

Again! again! [Simone disarms Guido] My gentle Lord, you see that I was right My sword is better tempered, finer steel, But let us match our daggers.

BIANCA [to Guido] Kill him! kill him!

SIMONE. Put out the torch, Bianca.

[Bianca puts out torch.]

Now, my good Lord, Now to the death of one, or both of us, Or all three it may be. [They fight.]

There and there. Ah, devil! do I hold thee in my grip? [Simone overpowers Guido and throws him down over table.]

GUIDO. Fool! take your strangling fingers from my throat. I am my father's only son; the State Has but one heir, and that false enemy France Waits for the ending

of my father's line To fall upon our city.

SIMONE. Hush! your father When he is childless will be happier. As for the State, I think our state of Florence Needs no adulterous pilot at its helm. Your life would soil its lilies.

GUIDO. Take off your hands Take off your damned hands. Loose me, I say!

SIMONE. Nay, you are caught in such a cunning vice That nothing will avail you, and your life Narrowed into a single point of shame Ends with that shame and ends most shamefully.

GUIDO. Oh! let me have a priest before I die!

SIMONE. What wouldst thou have a priest for? Tell thy sins To God, whom thou shalt see this very night And then no more for ever. Tell thy sins To Him who is most just, being pitiless, Most pitiful being just. As for myself. . .

GUIDO. Oh! help me, sweet Bianca! help me, Bianca, Thou knowest I am innocent of harm.

SIMONE. What, is there life yet in those lying lips? Die like a dog with lolling tongue! Die! Die! And the dumb river shall receive your corse And wash it all unheeded to the sea.

GUIDO. Lord Christ receive my wretched soul to-night!

SIMONE. Amen to that. Now for the other.

[He dies. Simone rises and looks at Bianca. She comes towards him as one dazed with wonder and with outstretched arms.]

BIANCA. Why Did you not tell me you were so strong?

SIMONE. Why Did you not tell me you were beautiful?

[He kisses her on the mouth.]

CURTAIN

LA SAINTE COURTISANE OR, THE WOMAN COVERED WITH JEWELS

The scene represents the corner of a valley in the Thebaid. On the right hand of the stage is a cavern. In front of the cavern stands a great crucifix.

On the left [sand dunes].

The sky is blue like the inside of a cup of lapis lazuli. The hills are of red sand. Here and there on the hills there are clumps of thorns.

FIRST MAN. Who is she? She makes me afraid. She has a purple cloak and her hair is like threads of gold. I think she must be the daughter of the Emperor. I have heard the boatmen say that the Emperor has a daughter who wears a cloak of purple.

SECOND MAN. She has birds' wings upon her sandals, and her tunic is of the colour of green corn. It is like corn in spring when she stands still. It is like young corn troubled by the shadows of hawks when she moves. The pearls on her tunic are like many moons.

FIRST MAN. They are like the moons one sees in the water when the wind blows from the hills.

SECOND MAN. I think she is one of the gods. I think she comes from Nubia.

FIRST MAN. I am sure she is the daughter of the Emperor. Her nails are stained with henna. They are like the petals of a rose. She has come here to weep for Adonis.

SECOND MAN. She is one of the gods. I do not know why she has left her temple. The gods should not leave their temples. If she speaks to us let us not answer, and she will pass by.

FIRST MAN. She will not speak to us. She is the daughter of the Emperor.

MYRRHINA. Dwells he not here, the beautiful young hermit, he who will not look on the face of woman?

FIRST MAN. Of a truth it is here the hermit dwells.

MYRRHINA. Why will he not look on the face of woman?

SECOND MAN. We do not know.

MYRRHINA. Why do ye yourselves not look at me?

FIRST MAN. You are covered with bright stones, and you dazzle our eyes.

SECOND MAN. He who looks at the sun becomes blind. You are too bright to look at. It is not wise to look at things that are very bright. Many of the priests in the temples are blind, and have slaves to lead them.

MYRRHINA. Where does he dwell, the beautiful young hermit who will not look on the face of woman? Has he a house of reeds or a house of burnt clay or does he lie on the hillside? Or does he make his bed in the rushes?

FIRST MAN. He dwells in that cavern yonder.

MYRRHINA. What a curious place to dwell in!

FIRST MAN. Of old a centaur lived there. When the hermit came the centaur gave a shrill cry, wept and lamented, and galloped away.

SECOND MAN. No. It was a white unicorn who lived in the cave. When it saw the hermit coming the unicorn knelt down and worshipped him. Many people saw it worshipping him.

FIRST MAN. I have talked with people who saw it.

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SECOND MAN. Some say he was a hewer of wood and worked for hire. But that may not be true.

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MYRRHINA. What gods then do ye worship? Or do ye worship any gods? There are those who have no gods to worship. The philosophers who wear long beards and brown cloaks have no gods to worship. They wrangle with each other in the porticoes. The [ ] laugh at them.

FIRST MAN. We worship seven gods. We may not tell their names. It is a very dangerous thing to tell the names of the gods. No one should ever tell the name of his god. Even the priests who praise the gods all day long, and eat of their food with them, do not call them by their right names.

MYRRHINA. Where are these gods ye worship?

FIRST MAN. We hide them in the folds of our tunics. We do not show them to any one. If we showed them to any one they might leave us.

MYRRHINA. Where did ye meet with them?

FIRST MAN. They were given to us by an embalmer of the dead who had found them in a tomb. We served him for seven years.

MYRRHINA. The dead are terrible. I am afraid of Death.

FIRST MAN. Death is not a god. He is only the servant of the gods.

MYRRHINA. He is the only god I am afraid of. Ye have seen many of the gods?

FIRST MAN. We have seen many of them. One sees them chiefly at night time. They pass one by very swiftly. Once we saw some of the gods at daybreak. They were walking across a plain.

MYRRHINA. Once as I was passing through the market place I heard a sophist from Cilicia say that there is only one God. He said it before many people.

FIRST MAN. That cannot be true. We have ourselves seen many, though we are but common men and of no account. When I saw them I hid myself in a bush. They did me no harm.

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MYRRHINA. Tell me more about the beautiful young hermit. Talk to me about the beautiful young hermit who will not look on the face of woman. What is the story of his days? What mode of life has he?

FIRST MAN. We do not understand you.

MYRRHINA. What does he do, the beautiful young hermit? Does he sow or reap? Does he plant a garden or catch fish in a net? Does he weave linen on a loom? Does he set his hand to the wooden plough and walk behind the oxen?

SECOND MAN. He being a very holy man does nothing. We are common men and of no account. We toll all day long in the sun. Sometimes the ground is very hard.

MYRRHINA. Do the birds of the air feed him? Do the jackals share their booty with him?

FIRST MAN. Every evening we bring him food. We do not think that the birds of the air feed him.

MYRRHINA. Why do ye feed him? What profit have ye in so doing?

SECOND MAN. He is a very holy man. One of the gods whom he has offended has made him mad. We think he has offended the moon.

MYRRHINA. Go and tell him that one who has come from Alexandria desires to speak with him.

FIRST MAN. We dare not tell him. This hour he is praying to his God. We pray thee to pardon us for not doing thy bidding.

MYRRHINA. Are ye afraid, of him?

FIRST MAN. We are afraid of him.

MYRRHINA. Why are ye afraid of him?

FIRST MAN. We do not know.

MYRRHINA. What is his name?

FIRST MAN. The voice that speaks to him at night time in the cavern calls to him by the name of Honorius. It was also by the name of Honorius that the three lepers who passed by once called to him. We think that his name is Honorius.

MYRRHINA. Why did the three lepers call to him?

FIRST MAN. That he might heal them.

MYRRHINA. Did he heal them?

SECOND MAN. No. They had committed some sin: it was for that reason they were lepers. Their hands and faces were like salt. One of them wore a mask of linen. He was a king's son.

MYRRHINA. What is the voice that speaks to him at night time in his cave?

FIRST MAN. We do not know whose voice it is. We think it is the voice of his God. For we have seen no man enter his cavern nor any come forth from it.

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MYRRHINA. Honorius.

HONORIUS (from within). Who calls Honorius?

MYRRHINA. Come forth, Honorius.

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My chamber is ceiled with cedar and odorous with myrrh. The pillars of my bed are of cedar and the hangings are of purple. My bed is strewn with purple and the steps are of silver. The hangings are sewn with silver pomegranates and the steps that are of silver are strewn with saffron and with myrrh. My lovers hang garlands round the pillars of my house. At night time they come with the flute players and the players of the harp. They woo me with apples and on the pavement of my courtyard they write my name in wine.

From the uttermost parts of the world my lovers come to me. The kings of the earth come to me and bring me presents.

When the Emperor of Byzantium heard of me he left his porphyry chamber and set sail in his galleys. His slaves bare no torches that none might know of his coming. When the King of Cyprus heard of me he sent me ambassadors. The two Kings of Libya who are brothers brought me gifts of amber.

I took the minion of Caesar from Caesar and made him my playfellow. He came

to me at night in a litter. He was pale as a narcissus, and his body was like honey.

The son of the Praefect slew himself in my honour, and the Tetrarch of Cilicia scourged himself for my pleasure before my slaves.

The King of Hierapolis who is a priest and a robber set carpets for me to walk on.

Sometimes I sit in the circus and the gladiators fight beneath me. Once a Thracian who was my lover was caught in the net. I gave the signal for him to die and the whole theatre applauded. Sometimes I pass through the gymnasium and watch the young men wrestling or in the race. Their bodies are bright with oil and their brows are wreathed with willow sprays and with myrtle. They stamp their feet on the sand when they wrestle and when they run the sand follows them like a little cloud. He at whom I smile leaves his companions and follows me to my home. At other times I go down to the harbour and watch the merchants unloading their vessels. Those that come from Tyre have cloaks of silk and earrings of emerald. Those that come from Massilia have cloaks of fine wool and earrings of brass. When they see me coming they stand on the prows of their ships and call to me, but I do not answer them. I go to the little taverns where the sailors lie all day long drinking black wine and playing with dice and I sit down with them.

I made the Prince my slave, and his slave who was a Tyrian I made my lord for the space of a moon.

I put a figured ring on his finger and brought him to my house. I have wonderful things in my house.

The dust of the desert lies on your hair and your feet are scratched with thorns and your body is scorched by the sun. Come with me, Honorius, and I will clothe you in a tunic of silk. I will smear your body with myrrh and pour spikenard on your hair. I will clothe you in hyacinth and put honey in your mouth. Love -

HONORIUS. There is no love but the love of God.

MYRRHINA. Who is He whose love is greater than that of mortal men?

HONORIUS. It is He whom thou seest on the cross, Myrrhina. He is the Son of God and was born of a virgin. Three wise men who were kings brought Him

offerings, and the shepherds who were lying on the hills were wakened by a great light.

The Sibyls knew of His coming. The groves and the oracles spake of Him. David and the prophets announced Him. There is no love like the love of God nor any love that can be compared to it.

The body is vile, Myrrhina. God will raise thee up with a new body which will not know corruption, and thou shalt dwell in the Courts of the Lord and see Him whose hair is like fine wool and whose feet are of brass.

MYRRHINA. The beauty. . .

HONORIUS. The beauty of the soul increases until it can see God. Therefore, Myrrhina, repent of thy sins. The robber who was crucified beside Him He brought into Paradise. [Exit.]

MYRRHINA. How strangely he spake to me. And with what scorn did he regard me. I wonder why he spake to me so strangely.

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HONORIUS. Myrrhina, the scales have fallen from my eyes and I see now clearly what I did not see before. Take me to Alexandria and let me taste of the seven sins.

MYRRHINA. Do not mock me, Honorius, nor speak to me with such bitter words. For I have repented of my sins and I am seeking a cavern in this desert where I too may dwell so that my soul may become worthy to see God.

HONORIUS. The sun is setting, Myrrhina. Come with me to Alexandria.

MYRRHINA. I will not go to Alexandria.

HONORIUS. Farewell, Myrrhina.

MYRRHINA. Honorius, farewell. No, no, do not go.

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I have cursed my beauty for what it has done, and cursed the wonder of my body for the evil that it has brought upon you.

Lord, this man brought me to Thy feet. He told me of Thy coming upon earth, and of the wonder of Thy birth, and the great wonder of Thy death also. By him, O Lord, Thou wast revealed to me.

HONORIUS. You talk as a child, Myrrhina, and without knowledge. Loosen your hands. Why didst thou come to this valley in thy beauty?

MYRRHINA. The God whom thou worshippest led me here that I might repent of my iniquities and know Him as the Lord.

HONORIUS. Why didst thou tempt me with words?

MYRRHINA. That thou shouldst see Sin in its painted mask and look on Death in its robe of Shame.

Footnotes:

{1} Thomas Sturge Moore's opening is not included in this Project Gutenberg eText for copyright reasons.

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