E Q U A L L O V E By Michael Field

CHARACTERS

JUSTINIAN . . Emperor of the East and West

THEODORA . . . His Empress
ZUHAIR . . . An Arab Boy

Antonia . . . Wife of Belisarius, attending on Theodora

PHOCAS . . . Keeper of the Prisons

A MAGE

GUARDS and ATTENDANTS

Scene—A private apartment of the royal palace, Byzantium.

It is surrounded by golden columns, from which purple curtains are hung, drawn back so as to discover the walls of the apartment that are inlaid with mosaics of formal blossoming shrubs on a golden ground. To the right, there is a door leading to the Empress's bedchamber; to the left, a little private door. The narrow aisle, running between the walls and columns, is continued in front of a row of windows at the back: they command a view of Byzantium and the Straits. Oriental Arabesques cover the ceiling; the floor is paved with green marble. In front, at the extreme right, a bronze statue of Ariadne Sleeping is placed opposite a bronze Saint Chrysostom, with gilded mouth, that stands on the left. A little table of silver and pearl in the middle of the room supports an incense-burner; near it stretches a throne-like couch, resting on peacocks, wrought in precious stones. A cradle, covered with a pall, has been placed toward the farther end of the room, close to another table on which are flowers and leaves.

Antonia [as she binds a wreath] The child is dead, Justinian's sickly daughter—it is well. The mother never kissed it, though sometimes She would steal in, and ask me with sharp looks If it were grown: it should have been a boy! But she is timorous and pitiful Beside it; and I fear to let her see How small it looks and pinched, now it is dead. The charge was irksome to me; but a mistress Like Theodora must not be denied.

¹ The real name of this woman was Antonina.

[Enter THEODORA]

THEODORA Is the child still asleep?

ANTONIA [moving between Theodora and the cradle] You must not look.

THEODORA Why are the doors ajar?

Why is the room so chill? Why have you put The food away? And you are binding flowers!

Give me the violet wreath. [She goes towards the cradle with wreath, stops, turns back, and tosses it to Antonia].

No; take it, girl,

I cannot look on death.

Antonia Be comforted.

It was a babe almost to put away,

Ill-shapen and a girl; the emperor scarcely

Had cared to own such issue.

THEODORA It was mine!

The little sighing breath, and the soft head Against my breast. You think the courtesan

Still lives on in the mother?

ANTONIA No, the pride

Of a great empress: you had quickly hidden My feeble nursling within convent walls. I would not be a girl, born of your blood, Denied your freedom—there is such a force

Of nature in you. It died quietly,

Without a struggle.

THEODORA Is there no more hope,

Antonia, is there no more hope for me?

The midwife said—you put your hand across
Her mouth; but, oh, I heard it as a curse—
She said I should not bear a child to live.

If that be so—

Antonia But once, there is a rumour

That once you bore a son.

THEODORA A living son;

Ay, ay, a living son. And what is this?

A masque, an effigy, an alien,

That gives no answer to the quivering Wild cries and ecstasies within my flesh,

That disenchants me.

ANTONIA You will soon forget.

THEODORA Those grips, those wanton fondlings?

ANTONIA In a while,

When you are more yourself.

THEODORA Yes, but the fever

So clings about me.

ANTONIA When the milk is gone

You will grow tranquil. You have evil dreams; Last night you woke me, talking in your sleep.

THEODORA Talking !- Of what?

Antonia

That night before the games. . . .

You raved and bit the sheets.

THEODORA Oh, I remember!

I must indeed be sick, so to be haunted By those tremendous days of revelry In the arena.

Antonia Come, those days were good
As any days in youth. Why be ashamed
To speak of them? We had so many lovers,
We did not stay to choose.

Sweet Cyprian, now,

When I beheld you, fragrant from the bath, On the low bed you love, shaded by plumes Of jewelled peacocks, with pearl-braided linen, And that dull mantle sewn with golden bees, I picture to myself how I have seen you, After some signal triumph at the games, Wiping the sweat from forehead and from lips, To give and take fresh kisses. Mother Ida, Those were the days that smacked of very life; We may not hope to mend them.

THEODORA I have never
Dreamed of that past till just two months ago,
After my baby's birth. I hear the cries
Of ribaldry, the stillness, the applause,
The leaps of laughter. You must hear these dreams;
I cannot keep them to myself. . . . Zuhair!—

ANTONIA You speak of him?

THEODORA Yes, in the dream.

The wretch

Who turned you out of doors?

THEODORA Oh, how I hate him!

Hate, hate! I have been hating all my life The lovers—

ANTONIA Who rejected you?

THEODORA Not those;

All who enjoyed my favours, hating them,
Wishing them ill. But do you say Zuhair,
That Eastern youth I met in Africa,
Abandoned me? He drove me from his house
In a mad pang of jealousy. My child
Remained with him. You say, a living son:
But, doubtless, he has perished—how my breasts
Ache with the milk!—for they would let him starve
When I was driven forth.

The dream begins:

I was half-dead with hunger, and the night
Was drawing on; it was a desert place,
Lonely as Egypt in its solitudes,
When suddenly there came a cry; I heard—
I lying there in Africa—my name
Borne on in triumph by a shouting crowd.
Oh, it was breath of life to me! I woke
So chill and lonely. . . . And my babe is dead!
Give me the violet crown.

The eyes were dark-

Do you remember?

Antonia Theodora, fair,

Fair as your own.

THEODORA Then I have quite forgotten. . . .

A little thing of yesterday, a rose How sweet!

Antonia Oh, fie! you will forget its sweetness;
The past is nothing.

THEODORA While the summer lasts:

Oh, nothing, nothing! How I loved the child!

[Looking up with a strange illumination on her face]

My daughter! Ay, the perfect Theodora,

Born in the purple: there had been romance
To me in everything she did or said,
Saw or enjoyed. You see this little cap
Studded with jewels, so I had it stitched,
Pearl crushing pearl, to take revenge on fate
For all the misery thrust on my pride
When first I found my body beautiful,
My raiment poor and vile. Antonia, once—
How children suffer!—I was in such rags
I crept to a lone garden, where great boughs
Of yellow roses glittered on a wall,
And stript myself, and wreathed them in such garlands
Round waist, and neck, and shoulders, that my breasts
Took the light shadows of the leaves. The perfume,
The splendour!

ANTONIA But it was not poverty Caused you the pain; I rather think a power Wrought in you, craving for expansion, such A power as gives a man by miracle Grip over hostile kingdoms. I remember The day I saw you first, an orphan child, Sent with your sister Comito to beg For bread in the arena. Both the factions— At least, the hated faction of the Greens— Broke into laughter at the little maids. Comito wept, and hid her face; but you Said you would entertain the crowd, and after, Ask for their coins. You cleared a little space, Then, saying when your father kept the beasts That you had learnt their antics, set to gambol Like the young lions, gave the languid sprawl Of dozing tigers, and the jackal's laugh; Or grew into a serpent, one of those With eyes so dead they draw you close to them To see if they be very death indeed. And then . . .

THEODORA Yes, then the *Blues* broke in acclaim, Poured coin on me; I called to Comito

To pick it up, but I pressed to their midst

And asked for kisses. Oh, to be caressed By very strangers, to be found so sweet Just in myself! I never had an art To sing or dance; but this pure mimicry, This daring to become ridiculous, Putting the charms that other women guard So jealously to any monstrous use—Oh, it worked spells with men!

Antonia You need applause,
The breath of many lovers. Would you listen
To me, you would not pine to be a mother,
Diverting interest to a younger race;
You would again grow beautiful that way
You cannot master when you give no love,
Delicious as the ripening fruit to those
For whom it ripens: drag your worshippers
From those deep prison-cells to which you fling them,
For just a glance with speech in it, a breath
Too hot upon your hand. You must recall them,
To feed your beauty, or Justinian's eyes
Will mark these wrinkles. I, too, have a husband
I honour to the full; yet, in his absence—

THEODORA I know how you deceive him. But Justinian—Simply to say his name brings back the dream For which I live, the dream that he possesses Of a pure consort brought him from the gods, Herself a deity.

Was he befooled?

I swear he was not. From the hour he sought My love, and laid that awful hand on me God lays upon the sinner that he dooms To suffer his redemption, I have sinned No carnal sin.

And now I fall away,
And now I feel a riot in my blood,
Questions that will not be put by, and murmurs
That breed and breed. It is this motherhood
Baulked in me. Oh, I fear! A great temptation,

That I was free to plunge into and live, Cut from me in an instant.

[Enter JUSTINIAN]

JUSTINIAN

Theodora!

THEODORA [standing between him and the cradle] Hush, do not look beyond, the babe is dead.

JUSTINIAN [formally blessing the child]

My child, my daughter. [To THEODORA] Dearest!

THEODORA

No; you seem

Dead like the child; you cannot comfort me. I have grown jealous, lonely; a new passion Has crept into my nature.

JUSTINIAN

All the city

Will mourn with us.

THEODORA Pshaw! If Byzantium mourn

In any wise—what should a city care
Save for its own prosperity!—but if
It can conceive of anything beyond,
It mourns that you, wedding a courtesan,
Ay, so you treat me, I am that to you,
If you imagine me incapable
Of plumbing my own misery; it mourns
That I, your empress, who by day and night,
Brood on your hopes, conceive your policy,
Maiming your enemies, and binding fast
The nations of your rule, am now the means

Of drawing your great empire to its close.

JUSTINIAN You do these things, you are the deity
Bringing these things to pass: our laws will live,

Men will obey them.

THEODORA Is it possible

That can content you? And you do not think How soon when we are dead——

JUSTINIAN [enfolding her] Think of the future?

And you are here, the future!

THEODORA Emperors wed,

To found great empires.

JUSTINIAN And I wedded you Not even to be great, though I had ruled,

Save for the joy you bring me and the force, With faltering ambition; wedded you, To found a rapture in my life, a glory, To travel with the sun. You speak of children, Of gifts—

THEODORA I do. How righteously your mother Opposed our marriage, and foretold this doom Of sickly offspring, or the barren curse. My majesty is gone.

JUSTINIAN Your majesty
Is in my worship, in our constant love.
Theodora, let us speak of those first days
We met each other, not as virgin souls,
As weary, cynical.

THEODORA You speak of them?

I will not let you speak. My youth is buried Entire, as in an instant, by a shock

Of earthquake a whole city in the gulf.

I have no past. Justinian, it becomes

[looking wildly at the cradle, and then out towards the sea]

Almost necessity I should look out, On to the future.

JUSTINIAN Talk to me of love,
Our love; while that endures there is no time
Save for the terror that to-day should end.
Augusta!

THEODORA Oh, that name!

JUSTINIAN We met in God:
The day is precious to me as to saint
The day of his conversion. From a troop
Of libertines, who boasted of your love,
I heard praise of your beauty, and I came
Coldly to take my pleasure.

When I saw you

I wept, and bowed my head.

THEODORA How tremulous
The air grew! There was passing of a wind
That moved like fire between us, and I cried

Go from me! As you passed, my soul rose up Strong as a fiend to follow you.

IUSTINIAN

That look!

THEODORA My women found me senseless on the floor;

And when at last the light flowed back on me,

I watched it resting on the vulgar walls,

The vulgar statues, on the tapestries,

With all their jaded colour, on my flesh-

Oh, you are pitiless! I turned and fled

From my polluted house.

JUSTINIAN

To find that cell,

A holy hermit's cell, half ruinous . . .

THEODORA Where I took refuge.

JUSTINIAN

Where my life began.

THEODORA It was without the city. I could see

The ring of sombre verdure, the deep curve

Of palaces and temples: when the lights

Flashed out, the torch processions, ay, even then,

I looked on to the sea, and in my heart

I said, except he find me, there I find

The grave and fathomless oblivion.

Oh, I had quickly died-

IUSTINIAN

As I, beloved,

If my mad quest had failed.

THEODORA

These weary hours

Of fasting, diligence, and solitude!

I bought great bales of wool, I learnt to spin:

At eventide, when my appointed task

Was done, I looked forth on the glittering domes

And tried to pray.

As Danae in her tower

I prayed, I was shut up.—Deliverer!

JUSTINIAN That hermit's cell! Love, we will build a church

Above the sacred spot where I was guided

By Him who guides the stars, where solemnly

I took you for my wife, planting in you

My hope, my honour, drawing from your love

The peace man draws when he is told of God

He is become His servant.

THEODORA Give me more,

More of this miracle!

JUSTINIAN

One joy remained

In store for me—to make you fellow-ruler

With me of half the world. As one who builds

A temple of rich stones, and in the magic

Of strange new lights and perfumes pours his prayer,

I, through the purple and the diadem

It is my glory to invest you with,

Find in my faith fresh splendour, further scope For adoration.

THEODORA [lying back] You have given me pleasure:

Dressed delicately, sleeping the long sleeps

I love, in sunny leisure by the sea

Idling my hours away— IUSTINIAN

But vigilant

Each instant for my welfare.

THEODORA

What! no more

Than that scant praise, no more than vigilant? And I have cleansed my love each day as gold Is cleansed. Oh, you are dull!

JUSTINIAN

To apprehend

All you have suffered?

THEODORA

All that you enjoy.

Mine is a convert's strength: most converts fall Into strange lapses; I have never lapsed.

JUSTINIAN Never. What ails you now?

THEODORA

Antonia, take

The child and bury it. . . . There! How your wish Is my most living will,

[Attendants are summoned, and carry out the body of the child followed by ANTONIA]

JUSTINIAN [looking at THEODORA with an expression of intense pride]

You cannot fail.

I am as sure of you as in campaign Of Belisarius; but this victory Won in my sight—

THEODORA

Beloved!

JUSTINIAN

Emboldens me

To pray that you at once should leave these chambers Haunted by death. At noon there is a council; But it is still fresh morning. . . . Come with me, Come with me to our rooms, and let us work At the great laws together.

THEODORA

I will come.

[She looks round the room; her eyes rest on the child's jewelled cap]

Lift me, I am not strong. Oh, what a toy To take such hold of me! It is not that. . . . I need the air—a voyage. How the sails Flitter along! There is a little one Just on the verge far off. You cannot see. . . .

JUSTINIAN Theodora, it is well the child is dead.

THEODORA You think it would have brought me back to nature? Doubtless! To look out on the future now, Is looking on a sea that has no sail.

JUSTINIAN The future is not sudden, nor of chance, Nor like those gusty waters that are crossed As tempests may determine. You and I Shall rule on as they cannot rule who put Their hope in offspring; rule on as the gods Who never derogate. We can ourselves Write on the brows of time, Earth's wisest sons

Interpreting our wisdom.

So I dream,

THEODORA So I have always dreamed. But you must keep me Close to your side.

[Re-enter Antonia]

ANTONIA Madam, there is a youth-No, a mere boy, almost a child, so slight Across the shoulders—who has forced his way Far on into the palace and persists That he must see you.

What! a boy, a child, THEODORA

Antonia? ANTONIA Yes; I caught him by the head,

And put my arms right round him; for the guards

204

Had bruised, had even pricked him with their spears. His cheek was bleeding.

THEODORA And that frightened you—

You cannot look on blood.

Antonia He did not hear
Their angry shouts, but from between my hands

Stared up intently in my face, then smiled.

'No, you are not the Empress; you must promise To give me sight of her.'

JUSTINIAN The lad is crazed.

Have him removed.

Antonia [appealing to Theodora] But yet to quiet him—And I have promised.

JUSTINIAN You had other charge—

With spices to prepare for burial—

THEODORA Enough! Antonia, I will see the lad.

[Exit ANTONIA

What need of all this violence? I have quelled The angriest street tumult as I passed By just an instant drawing back my veil.

Leave us, Justinian; you are grown impatient.

Those laws! I will be with you in an hour.

We left off at a knotty point concerning

The marriage-contract. There must be more freedom For women, as I urged. You will return And lock me in your study?

JUSTINIAN In an hour.

THEODORA I almost wish I had gone back with him
To the dear common life where, with our books
And thoughts and love—yes, with our very whims
And spites and jealousies, we were so happy.
There is no occupation in the world
That is not ours. What wars we fight! In those
I am the general. He is architect
Of St. Sophia from the base to dome.
And in theology—the heresies
I make alluring. But the laws, the laws!
Those mornings that I cannot wake my soul
When he arouses his, what narrow edicts

Are made, what cautious limitations set!
And then my inroad and the burst of light. . .
I will not be a fool and let mere nature
Hold me in slavery.

[Antonia returns with the boy]

THEODORA You kiss my feet;

You force your way to me. You have some courage!

[Eyeing him more closely]

Or are you clinging to me for protection?

I cannot give protection. If your crime

Offend the state, or if you have intruded

Into my palace to fulfil some vow

And boast that you have touched an Empress' robe,

You shall live long-I will not take your life-

Beneath those chambers where my prisons stretch.

Now, answer me! [To Antonia] He does not even listen—

Not hear me—he is mad.

Antonia It is your beauty

Holds him in awe: be patient.

THEODORA [trying not to meet the boy's eyes]

He is mad.

Young children sometimes utter prophecies,

And sometimes they are sent with words of doom

Their innocence makes awful. Take him off!

I am too weak to bear this. [To the boy] What! you shed

Free tears, you let them trickle down your cheek,

Taking no shame to hide them? Are you wronged?

I can be gentle. If you are an orphan-

ANTONIA He sobs!

THEODORA Believe me, half those tears are false;

The shame hurts and the hunger. Have him fed.

ANTONIA Speak, child!

ZUHAIR I cannot.

THEODORA [as if in the past] But some eyes were kind

That day I begged; and some one praised my hair-

Rich silky hair like his. [Stooping over the child and taking his chin]

You are an orphan?

Come, now—your story?

ZUHAIR

I have none.

THEODORA .

Then why-?

[Suddenly softening] Child, you are welcome!

ZUHAIR Ah, at last I hear

The golden voice! Far off in Araby
I heard its praise. I was a lonely lad,
Ill-used, neglected; when I joined in talk
With other boys, I found they were ambitious
To dive for pearls, to see the pyramids,
To conquer Italy. I only thought
Of seeing you. What mystery of rose
Flushes across your cheek!

THEODORA

You do not mark

My gems, my palace.

ZUHAIR For I did not hear,

O Empress, of Byzantium; I heard Of a sweet woman with a silver laugh,

Like Venus' laughter.

THEODORA Who should speak of this?

Zuhair A stranger who had seen you at the games Long years ago. It seemed so wonderful That he had heard your laughter. A free girl, He said, you stood and simply shook your sides With laughter and the whole world echoed it: But afterward, when each man had returned Into his house, the music came again And rippled down his memory. No flute—

And yet it was not that so much—

O Empress!
THEODORA What is it? Let me look at you? You come,

You say, on some great errand.

ZUHAIR Pity me;

I have no lying words. Give me some comfort, Some strength, as if I were your very son. I have no mother: I have stood and watched How mothers kiss their sons, stood by the tent And sobbed and turned away.

THEODORA I have no son;

But if I had—now tell me all the rest.

Yes, you may put your arms quite round my neck And sit beside me.

ZUHAIR When my father died,
He drew me to him and he said such things
Down in my ear, I could not understand;
If he were raving—

You unloose your clasp!

Oh then, I dare not speak.

THEODORA [rising] Why should I care
What any madman says? You are my son;
We do not need a slave in evidence:
This silky hair, and all this mystery
Of rose that flushes, fades across the cheek!
You are my son. Is this the news you bring
Touching the Emperor's honour?
ZHHAIR I am yours,

ZUHAIR Your child, O mother!

[Re-enter Justinian]

THEODORA

And I give you up.

[She violently flings ZUHAIR from her and addresses JUSTINIAN]

I have unbosomed him, an innocent Conspirator who comes to claim our throne Because I am his mother. It is true; I am his mother.

ZUHAIR But it is not true

That I am come to ask for anything

That is not mine of right. You loved the Empress

Before she was the Empress; so I love her,

So I would fight for her, so die to serve her;

My life is in her hands.

JUSTINIAN

It is well said.

The Empress shall determine if your life
Is for her honour and our empire's peace.

Theodora, you are judge of this.

THEODORA How judge?

I do not judge, I cannot. You, like God,
Can put my past away.

208

IUSTINIAN

Surrounding you

With its most live temptations.

THEODORA

You are cruel.

How white you stand, like marble. Take your victim; I will not flinch.

JUSTINIAN

My victim. Had you been As other women, had you felt the instincts

And honour of my wife, you had not suffered

My eyes upon the bastard.

THEODORA [defiantly, as she takes the boy by the hand and scrutinises him

He inherits

My beauty, I am proud of him—those brows,

Wide as the rim of ocean on the verge . . .

My brows! And, oh, those eyes of mine, before

The world had darkened them! You lose your senses

In jealousy; but, if you had true sight,

You would behold in him the very prince

The kingdom craves for, fashioned line by line.

JUSTINIAN His fate is in your hands.

THEODORA

You will not sentence:

That were too great an honour. Then you leave

The harlot to determine if this piece

Of lovely flesh and blood shall drink the air

And ripen in the sun.

You hurt the boy,

You bring the quick blood to his cheeks; he winces.

He cannot suffer shame about his life,

He is too like his mother.

IUSTINIAN

Shame! She speaks

Of shame as unendurable!

THEODORA [dragging ZUHAIR to JUSTINIAN'S feet]

Remove him!

I give him up. Justinian, on my knees

I pray you send him to some distant province,

Train him a soldier, test the make of him,

Let the young Arab perish, if he must,

Unknown, on some far field where there are kingdoms

Still in revolt.

ZUHAIR [flushing] To fight, to earn my death On the wide plains a free man!

JUSTINIAN [to THEODORA] Excellent!

Acutely reasoned. From my sombre wars

I should return to find Byzantium

Ablaze in celebration of some slight

Advantage won on Transylvanian hills

Over the Gepidae; or, worse, be met

By Theodora abject in petition

I should adopt her son.

THEODORA You injure me.

JUSTINIAN Then learn the simple truth: one absent look,

One glance of roving interest in your eyes, If once I should surprise it, were enough . . .

THEODORA Yes; I have failed to act my part but once,

Once in my life. I cannot be forgiven:

I know the custom—hoot me from the stage,

Heap shame upon me!

JUSTINIAN Still you speak of shame,

You who have brought me in estate more low

Than if I had been drawn on through the streets

Of my own city by a jeering crowd.

THEODORA Oh, if you wake my hatred, I am back

In the arena! I have seen such things,

As once—a tigress with one paw across

Her last, unravished cub. Ah, there indeed

Was majesty! [Throwing her arms round ZUHAIR]

And I can mimic fools,

Who threaten and do nothing. I could make

Byzantium laugh by just presenting you

Judicial and so lofty. [To ZUHAIR]

Trust to me.

[As she continues, JUSTINIAN stands rigid with clenched hands, then turns his back on her and walks through the corridor with a beckoning gesture. In a few moments he returns with his guards]

THEODORA I hate to see you standing there and making
No motion for your life. You do not know
You have a power—the Emperor standing there

With his fixed eyes and sullen, vacant face, Cannot conceive. Oh, you were safe with me, If you would try your arts. Ask for your life, I prompt you—ask!

ZUHAIR [in a low voice] I do not wish to live:

If I might choose the manner of my death—

THEODORA A boon! Why, so!—Gods, anything! [He whispers in her ear]

My child!

[Her manner suddenly loses its elasticity, and she says mechanically]
Remove him, guards; let him be kept in prison,
The deepest prison, where the jailer feels
About to find his captive, gropes and gropes
And murders in a blindness.

Antonia [throwing herself before Justinian]

Never, never!

Rather despatch him quickly. Oh, my lord! My mistress is still weak, delirious, Full of repining that her babe is dead.

THEODORA What babe? His babe? I had forgotten it—
JUSTINIAN [pointing to the guard, and addressing THEODORA]
They wait for your command.

THEODORA [taking the boy by the shoulders and advancing towards the guards] Remove him, guards!

But, if a hair of his be harmed—

[Passing her hand over the boy's body, and speaking to him in a low, excited voice]

You mean-

You dare this?

ZUHAIR Oh, be

Oh, be great!

THEODORA With my own hands?

They tingle—what, to handle you myself!

[The boy is borne off: she looks after him, a covetous frenzy in her face]

O Mother Ida! I am shaken through

As by the clash of cymbals!

Ecstasy!

Ay, so to mutilate myself. [Suddenly, in a loud voice, to ANTONIA]
Oh, see

That he is safe; he is my only hope,

The apple of my eye.

[Exit ANTONIA

JUSTINIAN [rising] So you have chosen.
THEODORA Chosen!

Oh, kill me, kill me, make an end!

I can do nothing.

JUSTINIAN Then we are divorced.

THEODORA Impossible! Divorced? That shall not be,

That were annihilation. You may kill

And bear me as a thorn about your heart,

Long as you live; I have no fear of death:

But if you dis-espouse me, have you thought

How I must perish? There will be grey hell

About me everywhere. And you-divorced!

JUSTINIAN I shall go forth to solitary rule.

THEODORA Forgetting me?

JUSTINIAN No: for my shame is branded—

Cursing the day we met, razing the churches

You built, the convents for the prostitutes

You thought to cleanse; destroying in my empire

And home each record of you.

THEODORA [wringing her hands] But what more

Could I have done?

JUSTINIAN Is there no more to do?

THEODORA Kill me—I fail you.

JUSTINIAN No, you do not fail,

You bring my life to failure—I break up.

I cannot kill you. It has been mirage,

This dream of mine. I thought you were a gift

As veritable and as fresh from God

As Eve herself.

THEODORA [crouching close to JUSTINIAN] You thought—say everything

Before we are divorced: to punish me,

Say all.

JUSTINIAN I will. I thought you were a woman

So tempered, so acute she wove the visions

For unborn eyes to see; a woman swift

As an archangel to dissever truth

From heresy, miraculously guided

In her intelligence, and of a beauty

Thrilling the air as a dove's holy wings-

A woman chosen to present to men,

Mysteriously, an image of the Church

Christ waits to greet in Paradise.

[THEODORA rises, holding his hand, and absorbed by his words]
All this

I dared to think.

THEODORA [retaining his hands and kissing them]

Would you but give me time-

Justinian, I am weak, you leave me free?

If you believed that I could do this thing,

It would be so much easier.

[Bowing her head on his arm]

God, divorced!

[Looking up] Promise, you never will abandon me;

Never, if I should fail.

JUSTINIAN

I cannot pardon;

There is such justice in me.

THEODORA

That is well;

For now I do not doubt that I shall live

Through all this day and on through many years,

Live, by your side, your Empress. [To Attendants] Bid them bring

The boy back to my presence. [To JUSTINIAN] Do not touch me:

'Tis I myself; you cannot give me help-

JUSTINIAN No help; I shall not even pray for you,

As if I feared you would not do this thing

You will not fail, you cannot.

Theodora,

How great I am in you!

THEODORA

Lay me some weapon

For use, beside the throne.

[Re-enter ANTONIA with ZUHAIR]

What! they have bound him!

Trust me, you shall not see his face again!

But leave us.

JUSTINIAN As I leave you with the crowds

Of courtiers who adore you: you are free

And in your freedom the security

You will not fail, you cannot; my worst foe

Dare not assail my honour.

[JUSTINIAN lays his sword by the throne and goes out]

THEODORA [turning toward ZUHAIR, and beckoning him to approach]

O my boy,

How your eyes follow me! Is this the welcome

After so long a journey? Do the chains

Gall these young wrists? How soft you are to touch,

How sweet! Do you rebel?

ZUHAIR

Strike off these bonds,

I will not let you fawn upon a slave.

THEODORA No: as a lioness her netted cubs,

I fondle you and you are helpless. There! [Loosing his chains]

Now you can give me free caresses, cling

Close, close. You thought I should have azure eyes?

And mine, you see, are grey. I cannot move you:

What shall I do with you in all the world?

Why, I might banish you. Arabia-

The sun itself basks there. Will you return?

ZUHAIR Arabia!

THEODORA Does it seem a thousand years

Back in your life? You sigh so wearily;

So much has happened since the morning sun.

ZUHAIR So much must happen.

THEODORA

I have lost a child,

And my wide realms are left without an heir

If-

Yet I were a fool to banish you;

For, if I let you go, this blood of mine Would never filter through the arid plains

And lose itself. The kingdoms would grow dark

One day about my borders with the pressure

Of alien tribes and a usurper's sword.

[Perceiving the passion in Zuhair's face]

What, part with you! put you away! Your name—

I mean the name before you were a prince;

You shall be re-baptized.

ZUHAIR

Then you must choose

My name, you are my mother; and to-day

My life begins. I have not lived before.

218

THEODORA Can you feel that?

Antonia, take the boy,

Give him rich clothing and that broidered cap Starry with sapphires.

ANTONIA

That I begged of you

In vain.

THEODORA Well, he may wear it.

[Exeunt ZUHAIR with ANTONIA

Why, he has

My very soul—can take new dignities
As easily as I. He must not come
In his young royalties to dazzle me,
Or I shall hail him THEODORUS—give him
To one of our great generals to train
Into a soldier.

[Going to a secret door and calling] Phocas!

[He enters stealthily]

Are the prisons

Quite empty?

PHOCAS Madam, there are still a few Sick prisoners it would be more merciful To execute at once.

THEODORA There is the sea!

I know that secret passage to the cliff
And the blue hollow at the end. Despatch
Those prisoners: light the passage—I may have
Myself some business there.

PHOCAS

With those offenders, they should find their graves
Within their cells. The stain across the water
Sometimes betrays.

THEODORA Go forth and murder them.

I would I had your task. One as another,
What are these captives to you? Do you ever
Pause at their cries and tremble?

PHOCAS [with a deep inclination] I obey.

THEODORA [pacing the room distractedly]
With my own hands! He craved it as a boon;
I will not falter. I will take him down

Through the dark rocky fissure to the sea
And bid him leap! But if his corse should rise?
Oh, it were best——

Phocas, for all I said,
Do nothing suddenly. Remain at hand.
This evening, after I have left my rooms
Search them. When all you have to do is done,
Alter the tapestries, let lamps be lit.
With my own hand! This deed must be my own;
I have been left sole mistress of myself
Since I have been myself.

[Exit PHOCAS

ANTONIA [Re-enter ANTONIA]

The boy is lovely,

Drest in the colours that you love and wearing Simply for ornament that broidered cap. His one thought is to please you. While I sorted His suit of raiment, he was full of talk—Oh, your Zuhair, he is the sweetest lad Was ever born!

THEODORA Zuhair, is that his name? ANTONIA The youth you loved And prayed to, doting.

THEODORA How I hate Zuhair!
I will not see the boy; how dare he breathe
A word to any one but me!

ANTONIA I asked

His name and kissed him.

THEODORA I have done that too, And kissed him after for so sweet a name. ANTONIA Do not be jealous.

THEODORA He shall die to-night, ANTONIA He shall not. Theodora, are you mad? THEODORA Since you have spurred me on! ANTONIA Come now, what need

Is there to murder him? I have a son, A son my husband has no mind to slay, Though he is not his father.

THEODORA Do not speak
Of those old shameful days.

220

ANTONIA

Why, they are here

In living evidence.

THEODORA

The sea will wash

All clean to-night: you have condemned the boy.

You think I have such weakness! Do not come

About me any more.

[Exit Antonia, as if some new thought had struck her: Theodora opens the secret door

Phocas, I said

Not till to-night; be vigilant and still.

Is the Mage in the palace?

VOICE OF PHOCAS

On the spot.

[THEODORA follows PHOCAS an instant, then returns]

THEODORA—This Mage, who always has predicted woe

And peril to the Emperor, if his kingdom

Should ever find an heir.

[Re-enter Antonia with Zuhair]

ANTONIA Madam, the prince

Prays to attend you.

ZUHAIR

Empress!

[He kneels, she holds him up in her arms, going over every point of his dress as she speaks to him]

THEODORA

Have you heard

I keep my courtiers in dark ante-rooms, Patient for days, before I summon them

Into my presence?

ZUHAIR

But I enter it.

Oh, I have been with you so often, seen you On your great days of state, or when the factions

Were hostile to you. I have heard report

Of your great courage—

THEODORA

Has that passed to you?

Do you inherit that?

ZUHAIR

How you had rather

Die than survive your honour; how you find The throne a glorious sepulchre for kings.

Yes, I inherit all your qualities,

But chief your courage.

THEODORA What! you do not mean—

It is not possible! So mere a boy. . . .

[Re-enter PHOCAS with MAGE]

ZUHAIR Mother, your son!

[Glancing toward MAGE.] Is there no privacy?

I would enjoy a little time with you.

Let us dismiss these mutes.

THEODORA

Take all your will.

ZUHAIR [to MAGE] Leave us!

MAGE

But I am summoned by the Empress.

ZUHAIR And I, the Empress' son, dismiss you—go!

MAGE The Empress' son—then that calamity,

Foretold by mystic science, that the throne

Should be imperilled by a bastard . . .

THEODORA

Stay!

I will not bear the insult.

ZUHAIR

Comes to pass.

We will avert the danger. [Going up reverently to the MAGE]

By all spells,

All magic influence, make the coming hour

Propitious to the sacrifice. [Exit MAGE. ZUHAIR goes straight up

to the Empress and kisses her

We lose

Together our ill names when I am dead.

Be firm: ere evening you must be restored

To the great Emperor's love. I have no fear,

I die, not by the executioner,

Not secretly, for we two take together

An open, frank farewell. We have been spoiled

As son and mother; I am just the victim,

And you the priest—the god.

[Leading her towards her chamber]

I have learnt little

Of any faith; I knew that for great deeds

One must be still and arm oneself: prepare!

[He lifts the arras—their eyes meet. THEODORA passes out]

How terrible it is to be alone

In these wide palaces, I almost shriek

Now I have let her go from me.

For ever,

For ever she is gone; and I am left Beside these golden columns. Araby, With the black tents I love, the neighing horses, With Gamul, my own horse. . . . What brought me here I am quite sure she called me in a dream Across the desert, for I knew her voice Soon as she spoke; she will not speak again, She is grown dumb for ever. Oh, to rush One instant to the shore and feel the wind! She is so long in coming.

[Re-enter ANTONIA]

Are you there,

My good Antonia?

ANTONIA

Why?

ZUHAIR

There is a service

That you must do for me.

ANTONIA

My mistress is—

ZUHAIR Within: go to her.

ANTONIA

But I dare not go:

She has forbidden me about her person. ZUHAIR Go to her, quick! It is so terrible

To be alone.

But you are gasping.

ANTONIA ZUHAIR

Go!

I dare not. ANTONIA

Dare not! Say I have a boon, ZUHAIR

That she should dress herself in all her state, As she comes forth to greet the Emperor, Her crown a ruby fire, and all her gems. It is my will.

ANTONIA [panic-struck] Give me another message. Are you a baby, longing to be dazzled By crowns and gems? When Theodora wears them They are lost sight of. She becomes a stranger, Soon as her hand is on her purple robes, The kind of stranger that one dare not question Lest he should be a god. You must not do it; You cannot face her in her strength and live.

Exit

You think because you dared the guard, and fought Your way through to the palace—

ZUHAIR [steadily] I am changed.

Go to her.

ZUHAIR

ANTONIA [with a cry] Oh, my child!

How I am kindled.

And yet how weak I am; how mere a mortal Waiting to be consumed. I can but pray That there may be a moment of clear sight Before my blood rush in and cover all.

[Re-enter ANTONIA]

Where is she? I am dazed.

Antonia [hurriedly] She cannot come; She cannot give you up; you must escape With me, it is her will. Phocas will swear He flung you from the rocks.

[She struggles with ZUHAIR; he resists]

ZUHAIR

She laid no charge

Upon me to keep silence?

ANTONIA Not a word!

She is not thinking now about herself,

Her honour.—Oh, she loves you!

ZUHAIR

Then you lied,

Saying she bade me fly.

ANTONIA She has not spoken

Except now to dismiss me.

ZUHAIR On what errand?

No base one-I am glad.

ANTONIA She has no weapon— Prince, if you would not kill her, down the stair!

ZUHAIR [going to the centre table]

Here is a weapon. Take it to the Empress;

Tell her, I chose.

Antonia This is Justinian's sword.

ZUHAIR Then this is best.

[Re-enter Theodora in imperial array. She stands by the columns rigid. Zuhair, turning round sharply, perceives her]

Oh, stay! she is resolved.

[She advances. He looks up at her with one look of terrified worship, then presents the sword]

Now we meet worthily.

[THEODORA takes the sword and stabs him. ANTONIA falls down, and hides her face against the couch]

THEODORA How fast the blood

Keeps flowing, flowing! . . . Now the eyes are blind;

There is a spasm.—Was it not his voice

Cried out a moment back, 'Justinian's sword'?

[Taking the sword from the wound]

It is dyed deep.

What! do the eyes unclose,

Does speech flow through them?

[She bends over him; he dies; she rises]

I have fixed a smile

In the dead face. Antonia, cover him!

[Theodora watches Antonia till she has entirely covered the corpse with a rich mantle that has been lying on the couch; then she speaks]

THEODORA

Summon the Emperor!

[Exit ANTONIA

So at last Zuhair

The infidel has perished.

[She stands at the right of the corpse. Re-enter JUSTINIAN. She presents the sword]

JUSTINIAN

O my strength,

My empire's strength—ours is an equal love.