

EQUAL LOVE

By MICHAEL FIELD

CHARACTERS

JUSTINIAN	. . . . .	<i>Emperor of the East and West</i>
THEODORA	. . . . .	<i>His Empress</i>
ZUHAIR	. . . . .	<i>An Arab Boy</i>
ANTONIA ¹	. . . . .	<i>Wife of Belisarius, attending on Theodora</i>
PHOCAS	. . . . .	<i>Keeper of the Prisons</i>

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 disenchant 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.

ANTONIA

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

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

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—

JUSTINIAN 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!

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 ?

ZUHAIR I am yours,
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.

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 object 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 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.

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 If you would trust me
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

[*Re-enter* ANTONIA]

ANTONIA The boy is lovely,
 Drest in the colours that you love and wearing
 Simply for ornament that brodered 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.

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.

ANTONIA But you are gasping.

ZUHAIR Go !

ANTONIA I dare not.

ZUHAIR *Dare not !* Say I have a boon,
 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.

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

ZUHAIR [*steadily*] I am changed.

Go to her.

ANTONIA [*with a cry*] Oh, my child!

[*Exit*

ZUHAIR 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.