

**La Sainte Courtisane  
or, The Woman Covered With  
Jewels**

**By**

**Oscar Wilde**

***Freeditorial*** 

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.

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

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.

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.

Myrrhina. Honorius.

Honorius (from within). Who calls Honorius?

Myrrhina. Come forth, Honorius.

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 Cæsar from Cæsar 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 Præfect 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.

## **A FLORENTINE TRAGEDY**

### **CHARACTERS**

GUIDO BARDI, A Florentine prince.

SIMONE, a merchant.

BIANNA, his wife.

MARIA, a tire-woman.

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

[The scene represents a tapestried upper room giving on to a balcony or loggia in an old house at Florence. A table laid for a frugal meal, a spinning-wheel, distaff, etc., chests, chairs and stools.]

As the Curtain rises enter Bianca, with her Servant, Maria.

Maria. Certain and sure, the sprig is Guido Bardi,

A lovely lord, a lord whose blood is blue!

Bianca. But where did he receive you?

Maria. Where, but there

In yonder palace, in a painted hall!—

Painted with naked women on the walls,—

Would make a common man or blush or smile

But he seemed not to heed them, being a lord.

Bianca. But how know you 'tis not a chamberlayne,

A lackey merely?

Maria. Why, how know I there is a God in heaven?

Because the angels have a master surely.

So to this lord they bowed, all others bowed,

And swept the marble flags, doffing their caps,

With the gay plumes. Because he stiffly said,

And seemed to see me as those folk are seen

That will be never seen again by you,

'Woman, your mistress then returns this purse

Of forty thousand crowns, is it fifty thousand?

Come name the sum will buy me grace of her.'

Bianca. What, were there forty thousand crowns therein?

Maria. I know it was all gold; heavy with gold.

Bianca. It must be he, none else could give so much.

Maria. 'Tis he, 'tis my lord Guido, Guido Bardi.



Bianca. What said you?

Maria. I, I said my mistress never  
Looked at the gold, never opened the purse,  
Never counted a coin. But asked again  
What she had asked before, 'How young you looked?  
How handsome your lordship looked? What doublet  
Your majesty had on? What chains, what hose  
Upon your revered legs?' And curtsyed  
I, . . .

Bianca. What said he?

Maria. Curtseyed I, and he replied,  
'Has she a lover then beside that old  
Soured husband or is it him she loves, my God!  
Is it him?'

Bianca. Well?

Maria. Curtseyed I low and said  
'Not him, my lord, nor you, nor no man else.  
Thou art rich, my lord, and honoured, my lord, and she  
Though not so rich is honoured . . .'

Bianca. Fool, you fool,

I never bid you say a word of that.

Maria. Nor did I say a word of that you said;  
I said, 'She loves him not, my lord, nor loves  
Any man else. Yet she might like to love,  
If she were loved by one who pleased her well;  
For she is weary of spinning long alone.  
She is not rich and yet she is not poor; but young  
She is, my lord, and you are young.

[Pauses smiling.]

Bianca. Quick, quick!

Maria. There, there! 'Twas but to show you how I smiled  
Saying the lord was young. It took him too;  
For he said, 'This will do! If I should call  
To-night to pay respect unto your lovely—  
Our lovely mistress, tell her that I said,  
Our lovely mistress, shall I be received?'  
And I said, 'Yes.' 'Then say I come and if  
All else is well let her throw down some favour  
When as I pass below.' He should be there!  
Look from the balcony; he should be there!—  
And there he is, dost see?

Bianca. Some favour. Yes.

This ribbon weighted by this brooch will do.  
Maria, be you busy near within, but, till  
I call take care you enter not. Go down  
And let the young lord in, for hark, he knocks.

[Exit Maria.]

Great ladies might he choose from and yet he  
Is drawn . . . ah, there my fear is! Was he drawn  
By love to me—by love's young strength alone?  
That's where it is, if I were sure he loved,  
I then might do what greater dames have done  
And venge me on a husband blind to beauty.  
But if! Ah if! he is a wandering bee,  
Mere gallant taster, who befools poor flowers . . .

[Maria opens the door for Guido Bardi, and then withdraws.]

My lord, I learn that we have something here,  
In this poor house, which thou dost wish to buy.  
My husband is from home, but my poor fate  
Has made me perfect in the price of velvets,

Of silks and gay brocades. I think you offered  
Some forty thousand crowns, or fifty thousand,  
For something we have here? And it must be  
That wonder of the loom, which my Simone  
Has lately home; it is a Lucca damask,  
The web is silver over-wrought with roses.  
Since you did offer fifty thousand crowns  
It must be that. Pray wait, for I will fetch it.  
Guido. Nay, nay, thou gracious wonder of a loom  
More cunning far than those of Lucca, I  
Had in my thought no damask silver cloth  
By hunch-back weavers woven toilsomely,  
If such are priced at fifty thousand crowns  
It shames me, for I hoped to buy a fabric  
For which a hundred thousand then were little.  
Bianca. A hundred thousand was it that you said?  
Nay, poor Simone for so great a sum  
Would sell you everything the house contains.  
The thought of such a sum doth daze the brains  
Of merchant folk who live such lives as ours.  
Guido. Would he sell everything this house contains?  
And every one, would he sell every one?  
Bianca. Oh, everything and every one, my lord,  
Unless it were himself; he values not  
A woman as a velvet, or a wife  
At half the price of silver-threaded woof.  
Guido. Then I would strike a bargain with him straight,  
Bianca. He is from home; may be will sleep from home;  
But I, my lord, can show you all we have;  
Can measure ells and sum their price, my lord.

Guido. It is thyself, Bianca, I would buy.

Bianca. O, then, my lord, it must be with Simone

You strike your bargain; for to sell myself

Would be to do what I most truly loathe.

Good-night, my lord; it is with deep regret

I find myself unable to oblige

Your lordship.

Guido. Nay, I pray thee let me stay

And pardon me the sorry part I played,

As though I were a chapman and intent

To lower prices, cheapen honest wares.

Bianca. My lord, there is no reason you should stay.

Guido. Thou art my reason, peerless, perfect, thou,

The reason I am here and my life's goal,

For I was born to love the fairest things . . .

Bianca. To buy the fairest things that can be bought.

Guido. Cruel Bianca! Cover me with scorn,

I answer born to love thy priceless self,

That never to a market could be brought,

No more than winged souls that sail and soar

Among the planets or about the moon.

Bianca. It is so much thy habit to buy love,

Or that which is for sale and labelled love,

Hardly couldst thou conceive a priceless love.

But though my love has never been for sale

I have been in a market bought and sold.

Guido. This is some riddle which thy sweet wit reads

To baffle mine and mock me yet again.

Bianca. My marriage, sir, I speak of marriage now,

That common market where my husband went

And prides himself he made a bargain then.

Guido. The wretched chapman, how I hate his soul.

Bianca. He was a better bidder than thyself,

And knew with whom to deal . . . he did not speak

Of gold to me, but in my father's ear

He made it clink: to me he spoke of love,

Honest and free and open without price.

Guido. O white Bianca, lovely as the moon,

The light of thy pure soul and shining wit

Shows me my shame, and makes the thing I was

Slink like a shadow from the thing I am.

Bianca. Let that which casts the shadow act, my lord,

And waste no thought on what its shadow does

Or has done. Are youth, and strength, and love

Balked by mere shadows, so that they forget

Themselves so far they cannot be recalled?

Guido. Nobility is here, not in the court.

There are the tinsel stars, here is the moon,

Whose tranquil splendour makes a day of night.

I have been starved by ladies, specks of light,

And glory drowns me now I see the moon.

Bianca. I have refused round sums of solid gold

And shall not be by tinsel phrases bought.

Guido. Dispute no more, witty, divine Bianca;

Dispute no more. See I have brought my lute!

Close lock the door. We will sup with the moon

Like Persian princes, that, in Babylon

Sup in the hanging gardens of the king.

I know an air that can suspend the soul

As high in heaven as those towered-gardens hang.

Bianca. My husband may return, we are not safe.

Guido. Didst thou not say that he would sleep from home?

Bianca. He was not sure, he said it might be so.

He was not sure—and he would send my aunt

To sleep with me, if he did so decide,

And she has not yet come.

Guido [starting] Hark, what's that?

[They listen, the sound of Maria's voice in anger with some one is faintly heard.]

Bianca. It is Maria scolds some gossip crone.

Guido. I thought the other voice had been a man's.

Bianca. All still again, old crones are often gruff.

You should be gone, my lord.

Guido. O, sweet Bianca!

How can I leave thee now! Thy beauty made

Two captives of my eyes, and they were mad

To feast them on thy form, but now thy wit,

The liberated perfume of a bud,

Which while a bud seemed perfect, but now is

That which can make its former self forgot:

How can I leave the flower who loved the leaf?

Till now I was the richest prince in Florence,

I am a lover now would shun its throngs,

And put away all state and seek retreat

At Bellosguardo or Fiesole,

Where roses in their fin'st profusion hide

Some marble villa whose cool walls have rung

A laughing echo to Decameron,

And where thy laughter shall as gaily sound.

Say thou canst love or with a silent kiss

Instil that balmy knowledge on my soul.

Bianca. Canst tell me what love is?

Guido. It is consent,

The union of two minds, two souls, two hearts,

In all they think and hope and feel.

Bianca. Such lovers might as well be dumb, for those

Who think and hope and feel alike can never

Have anything for one another's ear.

Guido. Love is? Love is the meeting of two worlds

In never-ending change and counter-change.

Bianca. Thus will my husband praise the mercer's mart,

Where the two worlds of East and West exchange.

Guido. Come. Love is love, a kiss, a close embrace.

It is . . .

Bianca. My husband calls that love

When he hath slammed his weekly ledger to.

Guido. I find my wit no better match for thine

Than thou art match for an old crabbed man;

But I am sure my youth and strength and blood

Keep better tune with beauty gay and bright

As thine is, than lean age and miser toil.

Bianca. Well said, well said, I think he would not dare

To face thee, more than owls dare face the sun;

He's the bent shadow such a form as thine

Might cast upon a dung heap by the road,

Though should it fall upon a proper floor

Twould be at once a better man than he.

Guido. Your merchant living in the dread of loss

Becomes perforce a coward, eats his heart.

Dull souls they are, who, like caged prisoners watch

And envy others' joy; they taste no food  
But what its cost is present to their thought.  
Bianca. I am my father's daughter, in his eyes  
A home-bred girl who has been taught to spin.  
He never seems to think I have a face  
Which makes you gallants turn where'er I pass.  
Guido. Thy night is darker than I dreamed, bright Star.  
Bianca. He waits, stands by, and mutters to himself,  
And never enters with a frank address  
To any company. His eyes meet mine  
And with a shudder I am sure he counts  
The cost of what I wear.  
Guido. Forget him quite.  
Come, come, escape from out this dismal life,  
As a bright butterfly breaks spider's web,  
And nest with me among those rosy bowers,  
Where we will love, as though the lives we led  
Till yesterday were ghoulish dreams dispersed  
By the great dawn of limpid joyous life.  
Bianca. Will I not come?  
Guido. O, make no question, come.  
They waste their time who ponder o'er bad dreams.  
We will away to hills, red roses clothe,  
And though the persons who did haunt that dream  
Live on, they shall by distance dwindled, seem  
No bigger than the smallest ear of corn  
That cowers at the passing of a bird,  
And silent shall they seem, out of ear-shot,  
Those voices that could jar, while we gaze back  
From rosy caves upon the hill-brow open,



And ask ourselves if what we see is not  
A picture merely,—if dusty, dingy lives  
Continue there to choke themselves with malice.

Wilt thou not come, Bianca? Wilt thou not?

[A sound on the stair.]

guido. What's that?

[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.

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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 mænad. 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



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