PLAYS OF OSCAR WILDE

A FLORENTINE TRAGEDY

By
OSCAR WILDE

OPENING SCENE
BY STURGE MOORE

1908
JOHN W. LUCE & COMPANY
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Play of Oscar Wilde, Volume I

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PREFACE

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

THE contents of this volume require some explanation of an historical nature. It is scarcely realised by the present generation that Wilde's works on their first appearance, with the exception of *De Profundis*, were met with almost general condemnation and ridicule. The plays on their first production were grudgingly praised because their obvious success could not be ignored; but on their subsequent publication in book form they were violently assailed. That nearly all of them have held the stage is still a source of irritation among certain journalists. *Salomé* however enjoys a singular career. As every one knows, it was prohibited by the Censor when in rehearsal by Madame Bernhardt at the Palace Theatre in 1892. On its publication in 1893 it was greeted with greater abuse than any other of Wilde's works, and was consigned to the usual irrevocable oblivion. The accuracy of the French was freely canvassed, and of course it is obvious that the French is not that of a Frenchman. The play was passed for press, however, by no less a writer than Marcel Schwob whose letter to the Paris publisher, returning the proofs and mentioning two or three slight alterations, is still in my possession. Marcel Schwob told me some years afterwards that he thought it would have spoiled the spontaneity and character of Wilde's style if he had tried to harmonise it with the diction

demanded by the French Academy. It was never composed with any idea of presentation. Madame Bernhardt happened to say she wished Wilde would write a play for her; he replied in jest that he had done so. She insisted on seeing the manuscript, and decided on its immediate production, ignorant or forgetful of the English law which prohibits the introduction of Scriptural characters on the stage. With his keen sense of the theatre Wilde would never have contrived the long speech of Salomé at the end in a drama intended for the stage, even in the days of long speeches. His threat to change his nationality shortly after the Censor's interference called forth a most delightful and good-natured caricature of him by Mr. Bernard Partridge in *Punch*.

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

During May 1905 the play was produced in England for the first time at a private performance by the New Stage Club. No one present will have forgotten the extraordinary tension of the audience on that occasion, those who disliked the play and its author being hypnotised by the extraordinary power of Mr. Robert Farquharson's Herod, one of the finest pieces of

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

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

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

scarcely think it ever existed, though Wilde used to recite proposed passages for it.

Some years after Wilde's death I was looking over the papers and letters rescued from Tite Street when I came across loose sheets of manuscript and typewriting, which I imagined were fragments of *The Duchess of Padua*; on putting them together in a coherent form I recognised that they belonged to the lost *Florentine Tragedy*. I assumed that the opening scene, though once extant, had disappeared. One day, however, Mr. Willard wrote that he possessed a typewritten fragment of a play which Wilde had submitted to him, and this he kindly forwarded for my inspection. It agreed in nearly every particular with what I had taken so much trouble to put together. This suggests that the opening scene had never been written, as Mr. Willard's version began where mine did. It was characteristic of the author to finish what he never began.

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

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

In a stylistic sense Mr. Sturge Moore has accomplished a feat in reconstruction, whatever opinions may be held of *A Florentine Tragedy* by Wilde's admirers or detractors. The achievement is particularly remarkable because Mr. Sturge Moore has nothing in common with Wilde other than what is shared by all real poets and dramatists: He is a landed proprietor on Parnassus, not a trespasser. In England we are more familiar with the poachers. Time and Death are of course necessary before there

can come any adequate recognition of one of our most original and gifted singers. Among his works are *The Vinedresser and other Poems* (1899), *Absalom*, *A Chronicle Play* (1903), and *The Centaur's Booty* (1903). Mr. Sturge Moore is also an art critic of distinction, and his learned works on Dürer (1905) and Correggio (1906) are more widely known (I am sorry to say) than his powerful and enthralling poems.

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

ROBERT ROSS

A FLORENTINE TRAGEDY
WITH OPENING SCENE BY T. STURGE MOORE

This play is only a fragment and was never completed. For the purposes of presentation, the well-known poet, Mr. T. Sturge Moore, has written an opening scene which is here included. Wilde's work begins with the entrance of Simone.

A private performance was given by the Literary Theatre Club in 1906. *The first public presentation was given by the New English Players at the Cripplegate Institute, Golden Lane, E.C., in* 1907. *German, French and Hungarian translations have been presented on the Continental stage.*

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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.

A FLORENTINE TRAGEDY

[*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 curtseyed
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.

* * * * *

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