

A FLORENTINE TRAGEDY
(A Fragment)

Enter the husband.

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

(MORE)

SIMONE (cont'd)

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.

(MORE)

SIMONE (cont'd)

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

(MORE)

SIMONE (cont'd)

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?

(MORE)

SIMONE (cont'd)

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

(MORE)

SIMONE (cont'd)

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,

(MORE)

BIANCA (cont'd)

Shake with some palsy; and his stammering mouth
Blurts out a foolish froth of empty words
Like water from a conduit.

GUIDO

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

BIANCA

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

SIMONE

(turning round)

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

(Takes up a lute)

But what is this, my lord?
Why, you have brought a lute to play to us.
Oh! play, sweet Prince. And, if I am too bold,
Pardon, but play.

GUIDO

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

(To Bianca)

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

SIMONE

Nay, but my lord!
 Nay, but I do beseech you. For I have heard
 That by the simple fingering of a string,
 Or delicate breath breathed along hollowed reeds,
 Or blown into cold mouths of cunning bronze,
 Those who are curious in this art can draw
 Poor souls from prison-houses. I have heard also
 How such strange magic lurks within these shells
 That at their bidding casements open wide
 And Innocence puts vine-leaves in her hair,
 And wantons like a maenad. Let that pass.
 Your lute I know is chaste. And therefore play:
 Ravish my ears with some sweet melody;
 My soul is in a prison-house, and needs
 Music to cure its madness. Good Bianca,
 Entreat our guest to play.

BIANCA

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

GUIDO

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

SIMONE

You flatter her.
 She has her virtues as most women have,
 But beauty in a gem she may not wear.
 It is better so, perchance. Well, my dear lord,
 If you will not draw melodies from your lute
 To charm my moody and o'er-troubled soul
 You'll drink with me at least?

(Motioning Guido to his own place)

Your place is laid.
 Fetch me a stool, Bianca. Close the shutters.
 Set the great bar across. I would not have
 The curious world with its small prying eyes
 To peer upon our pleasure. Now, my lord,
 Give us a toast from a full brimming cup.

(Starts back)

(MORE)

SIMONE (cont'd)

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.

(MORE)

SIMONE (cont'd)

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

(MORE)

SIMONE (cont'd)

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

(MORE)

SIMONE (cont'd)

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 corpse
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