

EPISODE IN BYZANTIUM

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AND IS YOUR PATIENT NOW, Asterides,
So strong I may at last converse with him?
Fear not: I will recall what you have said
And not provoke him to a futile rage,
Prisoner though he be. May heaven grant
That I may have such skill to take away
Hate from his heart as you the surgeon used
In altering his body! You shall have
From me such gratitude and deserved reward
As an Imperial Chamberlain bestows.
Wait within call here in this anteroom
Ready with cooling potions, should he still
Flare into fever at the sight of me.

... So, Anatolius, had you ever dreamed,
When you roused Cappadocia to war
Against your Emperor, two short months ago,
Or, in your own self-justifying words,
When you would shake from off your people's neck
Taxation's crushing load—had you, I ask,
The least foreboding in your high young mind
That you would be . . . what we have made of you?

No, do not dart such hatred from your eyes:
I have not come to gloat, and, if I had,
So were it but a trifling recompense
For that wild speech wherewith you flouted me
When all you rebel leaders were brought in
For us to sentence. Your confederates
Fell abject, each vociferous to exchange

Betrayals for pardon, but you lunged at me
 Far as the chain that held you would allow,
 And spat, so that the hot drops stung my face,
 "Gelding and slave!" Well, in that moment you
 Determined what your punishment should be
 —Punishment? No, a word too fierce and hard:
 I merely vowed you should be equalised
 With me before I sought you for a friend;
 For this, that you deem outrage, is my way
 Of salutation to your gallant pride,
 My safeguard that so spirited a foe
 Be rendered—oh, no, not innocuous!
 No statesman calls one human being that—
 More readily assimilable, say,
 As valued helpmate in this world of mine.

You see, I am as little moved by hate
 As by a weak compassion: when I reap
 An enemy's field, it is my wont to store
 Good golden grain within my barn, and throw
 The tares out to the inexorable flame.
 So, when the Emperor's tribunal passed
 Doom on your fellow-leaders, I would not
 Let one man of those craven hypocrites
 Be partner of your present state—and mine.
 No, they retain a tethered stallionhood
 To exacerbate their life-captivity
 Through the bleak blinded thumbless years they serve
 In island-monasteries, where the chill
 Sweep from the Euxine whistles night and day.
 Their maleness I contemptuously allow
 To haunt them while they, with their nostrils slit,
 Convert the sea-wind into litanies
 And snuffle praise to the Theotokos.

But if I Demades have kidnapped you
 Over the frontier of my sexless world,
 Confess, at least, that it was gently done.

I made the wise Asterides your guard
Against all danger and superfluous pain.
His slotted bowl and thin looped sweeping wire
Are luxury, soft and delicate, compared
With the brute surgery of the Saracens
Whose ship once captured mine. Your dignity
Has been respected as a sacred thing
—Oh, yes, it has! Does any servant here,
Mine or Asterides', show you contempt
Because your body has been modified
To what long palace-history has proved
The fittest form for those who counsel kings?
But I, head downward, swinging like a beast
From outspread ankles in the pirate-ship,
Was ripped from manhood by the hands of men
Who cared not greatly if I lived or died
But for the knowledge they could ask for me
A higher price than offered for a male
In the slave-market of some Christian town;
Whereas I know that old Asterides
Looks on you tenderly because he made
You one of us with no such agony
As he himself knew, fifty years ago.
Remember this: and do not think that we
By some foul appetite are forced to feed
On men's humiliation and their pain.

Here I come, drawn by strange respect for you
And hope of friendship, but one warning word
Must first be said: I cannot let you fall
Victim to cruel superstitious shame
And by self-murder slip away from me.
You will not rush along the coward's way
Out to the wastes of darkness when you learn
That I shall hold, as hostages for you,
Ten men, whose names I will not tell you now,
Ten loyal followers who trusted you
In your revolt and who are doomed to die

Should you lay violent hands upon yourself:
 But, if for three months in this palace you
 Accept your lot, they go unharmed and free;
 And, after that, I have no cause for dread.

Not that I wish to play at cat-and-mouse,
 But for the moment I must needs be stern:
 I knew the Cappadocian taxes weighed
 A heavy burden, and had almost won
 From the Treasury some lightening of the load
 When your revolt undid the work of years.
 But, if you love your people—and you do—,
 You yet may serve them better at my side
 And in the peaceful silken robe achieve
 More than your armoured folly threw away.

. . . Come, now: you no more hate me as you did.
 Not as your jailer must you think of me,
 But rather as the opener of a gate
 When you emerge on an adventurous road.

Yes, your rebellion was a senseless thing,
 Wasting the force that we so sorely need
 To guard the Empire from its savage foes,
 Arab and Slav and Bulgar and, no less,
 The Frank, that robber and fanatic too.
 But, as I say, you have it in your power
 To make a reparation fifty-fold.
 Here is dominion, high intelligence
 Fighting at bay against a brutishness
 That smashes all it cannot comprehend
 And menaced by more deadly foes within:
 Dynastic traitors, and the idle mob
 That lives for pageantry and argument,
 For donatives and heady scent of blood;
 The bigots with their crazed theology
 That herds the Godhead to their private pen;
 The generals who can never lift their eyes,
 Even on the day of battle, from the book

That they themselves composed on strategy
Till the barbarian noose is on their neck;
And, deadlier in high places more than these,
Irrational, unpredictable caprice
That pays a fortress for a concubine,
Or cannot, will not, look beyond the glow
Of panegyric to the things that are.
Ah, you, when you become a counsellor,
Must listen, watch, remember, nor ignore
What loungers mutter in the Hippodrome,
Tirewomen's gossip, nor the rumbled growl
Of the Varangians belching at their beer
—Listen, but use as master, not as slave.

But I anticipate: you have time to learn
Statecraft when you are stronger, and today
My coming was to win your trust in me
And end the bitterness that in your mind
Whispers, corrosive, "I can never be
Husband or father: man has cast me out,
And woman will not own me"—yes, I know.
Consider, Anatolius: you are not
Some shaggy nomad of the Scythian plains
Who needs must be reminded of his worth
By counting on his foul misshapen paws
What squalls or suckles in his smoky den.

No, to the truly human, neither male
Nor female means as much as civilised.
Two long processions walk to right and left
Of mankind's winding highroad to the grave,
And our way is the narrow path between.
Here you, as kin to both these companies
Granted a closer view of either band
Than each has of the other—you are free,
Undazzled by the amorous fantasies,
To share with each, and draw from each, in turn,
All that is deep and human. Presently,

When you are launched upon your training here,
And women in their guarded porticoes
Chatter around you with no more concern
Than if you had been born a woman too,
Then, as you bear the mantle to the bath
Or aid some novice with her tangled skein,
Recall, and without rancour, how you once
Lay in the bivouac underneath the stars,
Or how you felt your charger's panting sides
Thrill to that one last desperate trumpet-call.
Later, when throned, high in the judgement-seat,
Flanked by the grim assessors, you decide
On dooms that you have power to impose,
Your justice will not suffer if your heart
Flees for a moment from austerity
And punishment to some time when you held
Within your arms a child too young to know
Whether a man's or woman's bosom fed
The welcoming warmth wherein it snuggled down.

... Well, Anatolius, tell me: have I here
Won what I sought? Dare you start life anew
And be my helper, so when I am gone
You in your turn may try to show to men
That in our lonely circle of mankind
Is more than spite, or greed, or pettiness?
Here is my hand. And you accept it? Son ...