

LA SAINTE COURTISANE, or, THE WOMAN COVERED WITH JEW

Oscar Wilde

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[The scene represents a corner of the 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 the color 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 in 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 never 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 a woman?

SECOND MAN: We do not know.

MYRRHINA: Why do ye yourselves not look at me?

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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 at the face of woman? Has he a house of reeds or a house of burnt clay or does he lie on a 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 univorn knelt down and worshipped him. Many people saw it worshipping him.

FIRST MAN: I have talked with people who saw it.

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SECOND MAN: Some say he was a hewer of wood and worked for hire. But that may not be true.

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MYRRHINA: What gods 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?

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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 talking across a plain.

MYRRHINA: Once as I was passing through the market place I heard a sophist from Gilicia 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 toil 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 had offended had made him mad. We think he had 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.

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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 play-fellow . He came to me at night in a litter. He was pale as a narcissus, and his body was like honey.

The don 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

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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 wilt 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 till it can see God. Therefore, Myrrhina, repent of they sins. The robber who was crucified beside Him He brought into Paradise.

[Exit.]

MYRRHINA: How strangely he spake to me. And with what scorn he did regard me. I wonder why he spake to me so strangely.

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 of whom thou worshipped 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.

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