

The Cupbearer

By Richard Garnett

The minister Photinius had fallen, to the joy of Constantinople. He had taken sanctuary in the immense monastery adjoining the Golden Gate in the twelfth region of the city, founded for a thousand monks by the patrician Studius, in the year 463. There he occupied himself with the concoction of poisons, the resource of fallen statesmen. When a defeated minister of our own day is indisposed to accept his discomfiture, he applies himself to poison the public mind, inciting the lower orders against the higher, and blowing up every smouldering ember of sedition he can discover, trusting that the conflagration thus kindled, though it consume the edifice of the State, will not fail to roast his own egg. Photinius's conceptions of mischief were less refined; he perfected his toxicological knowledge in the medical laboratory of the monastery, and sought eagerly for an opportunity of employing it; whether in an experiment upon the Emperor, or on his own successor, or on some other personage, circumstances must determine.

The sanctity of Studius's convent, and the strength of its monastic garrison, rendered it a safe refuge for disgraced courtiers, and in this thirtieth year of the Emperor Basil the Second (reckoning from his nominal accession) it harboured a legion of ex-prime ministers, patriarchs, archbishops, chief secretaries, hypati, anthypati, silentiarii, protospatharii, and even spatharocandidati. And this small army was nothing to the host that, maimed or blinded or tonsured or all three, dragged out their lives in monasteries or in dungeons or on rocky islets; and these again were few in comparison with the spirits of the traitors or the betrayed who wailed nightly amid the planes and cypresses of the Aretae, or stalked through the palatial apartments of verdantique and porphyry. But of those comparatively at liberty, but whose liberty was circumscribed by the hallowed precincts of Studius, every soul was plotting. And never, perhaps, in the corrupt Byzantine Court, where true friendship had been unknown since Theodora quarrelled with Antonia, had so near an approach to it existed as in this asylum of villains. A sort of freemasonry came to prevail in the sanctuary: every one longed to know how his neighbour's plot throve, and grudged not to buy the knowledge by disclosing a little corner of his own. Thus rendered communicative, their colloquies would travel back into the past, and as the veterans of intrigue fought their battles over again, the most experienced would learn things that made them open their eyes with amazement. "Ah!" they would hear, "that is just where you were mistaken. You had bought Eromenus, but so had I, and old Nicephorus had outbid us both." "You deemed the dancer Anthusa a sure card, and knew not of her secret infirmity, of which I had been apprised by her waiting woman." "Did you really know nothing of that sliding panel? And were you ignorant that whatever one says in the blue chamber is heard in the green?" "Yes, I thought so too, and I spent a mint of money before finding out that the dog whose slaver that brazen impostor Panurgiades pretended to sell me was no more mad than he was." After such rehearsals of future dialogues by the banks of Styx, the fallen statesmen were observed to appear exceedingly dejected, but the stimulus had become necessary to their existence. None gossiped so freely or disclosed so much as Photinius and his predecessor Eustathius, whom he had himself displaced—probably because Eustathius, believing in nothing in heaven or earth but gold, labouring under an absolute privation of that metal, was regarded even by himself as an extinct volcano.

“Well,” observed he one day, when discoursing with Photinius in an unusually confidential mood, “I am free to say that for my own part I don’t think over much of poison. It has its advantages, to be sure, but to my mind the disadvantages are even more conspicuous.”

“For example?” inquired Photinius, who had the best reason for confiding in the efficacy of a drug administered with dexterity and discretion.

“Two people must be in the secret at least, if not three,” replied Eustathius, “and cooks, as a rule, are a class of persons entirely unfit to be employed in affairs of State.”

“The Court physician,” suggested Photinius.

“Is only available,” answered Eustathius, “in case his Majesty should send for him, which is most improbable. If he ever did, poison, praised be the Lord! would be totally unnecessary and entirely superfluous.”

“My dear friend,” said Photinius, venting at this favourable moment on a question he had been dying to ask ever since he had been an inmate of the convent, “would you mind telling me in confidence, did *you* ever administer any potion of a deleterious nature to his Sacred Majesty?”

“Never!” protested Eustathius, with fervour. “I tried once, to be sure, but it was no use.”

“What was the impediment?”

“The perverse opposition of the cupbearer. It is idle attempting anything of the kind as long as she is about the Emperor.”

“*She!*” exclaimed Photinius.

“Don’t you know *that?*” responded Eustathius, with an air and manner that plainly said, “You don’t know much.”

Humbled and ashamed, Photinius nevertheless wisely stooped to avow his nescience, and flattering his rival on his superior penetration, led him to divulge the State secret that the handsome cupbearer Helladius was but the disguise of the lovely Helladia, the object of Basil’s tenderest affection, and whose romantic attachment to his person had already frustrated more conspiracies than the aged plotter could reckon up.

This intelligence made Photinius for a season exceedingly thoughtful. He had not deemed Basil of an amorous complexion. At length he sent for his daughter, the beautiful and virtuous Euprepia, who from time to time visited him in the monastery.

“Daughter,” he said, “it appears to me that the time has now arrived when thou mayest with propriety present a petition to the Emperor on behalf of thy unfortunate father. Here is the document. It is, I flatter myself, composed with no ordinary address; nevertheless I will not conceal from thee that I place my hopes rather on thy beauty of person than on my beauty of style. Shake down thy hair and dishevel it, so!—that is excellent. Remember to tear thy robe some little in the poignancy of thy woe, and to lose a sandal. Tears and sobs of course thou hast always at command, but let not the frenzy of thy grief render thee wholly inarticulate. Here is a slight memorandum of what is most fitting for thee to say: thy old nurse’s instructions will do the rest. Light a candle for St. Sergius, and watch for a favourable opportunity.”

Euprepia was upright, candid, and loyal; but the best of women has something of the actress in her nature; and her histrionic talent was stimulated by her filial affection. Basil was for a moment fairly carried away by the consummate fact of her performance and the genuine feeling to her appeal; but he was himself again by the time he had finished perusing his late minister’s long-winded and mendacious memorial.

“What manner of woman was thy mother?” he inquired kindly.

Euprepia was eloquent in praise of her deceased parent’s perfections of mind and person.

“Then I can believe thee Photinius’s daughter, which I might otherwise have doubted,” returned Basil. “As concerns him, I can only say, if he feels himself innocent, let him come out of sanctuary, and stand his trial. But I will give thee a place at Court.”

This was about all that Photinius hoped to obtain, and he joyfully consented to his daughter’s entering the Imperial court, exulting at having got in the thin edge of the wedge. She was attached to the person of the Emperor’s sister-in-law, the “Slayer of the Bulgarians” himself being a most determined bachelor.

Time wore on. Euprepia’s opportunities of visiting her father were less frequent than formerly. At last she came, looking thoroughly miserable, distracted, and forlorn.

“What ails thee, child?” he inquired anxiously.

“Oh, father, in what a frightful position do I find myself!”

“Speak,” he said, “and rely on my counsel.”

“When I entered the Court,” she proceeded, “I found at first but one human creature I could love or trust, and he—let me so call him—seemed to make up for the deficiencies of all the rest. It was the cupbearer Helladius.”

“I hope he is still thy friend,” interrupted Photinius. “The good graces of an Imperial cupbearer are always important, and I would have bought those of Helladius with a myriad of bezants.”

“They were not to be thus obtained, father,” said she. “The purest disinterestedness, the noblest integrity, the most unselfish devotion, were the distinction of my friend. And such beauty! I cannot, I must not conceal that my heart was soon entirely his. But—most strange it seemed to me then—it was long impossible for me to tell whether Helladius loved me or loved me not. The most perfect sympathy existed between us: we seemed one heart and one soul: and yet, and yet, Helladius never gave the slightest indication of the sentiments which a young man might be supposed to entertain for a young girl. Vainly did I try every innocent wile that a modest maiden may permit herself: he was ever the friend, never the lover. At length, after long pining between despairing fondness and wounded pride, I myself turned away, and listened to one who left me in no doubt of the sincerity of his passion.”

“Who?”

“The Emperor! And, to shorten the story of my shame, I became his mistress.”

“The saints be praised!” shouted Photinius. “O my incomparable daughter!”

“Father!” cried Euprepia, blushing and indignant. “But let me hurry on with my wretched tale. In proportion as the Emperor’s affection became more marked, Helladius, hitherto so buoyant and serene, became a visible prey to despondency. Some scornful beauty, I deemed, was inflicting on him the tortures he had previously inflicted upon me, and, cured of my unhappy attachment, and entirely devoted to my Imperial lover, I did all in my power to encourage him. He received my comfort with gratitude, nor did it, as I had feared might happen, seem to excite the least lover-like feeling towards me on his own part.”

“‘Euprepia,’ he said only two days ago, ‘never in this Court have I met one like thee. Thou art the soul of honour and generosity. I can safely trust thee with a secret which my bursting heart can no longer retain, but which I dread to breathe even to myself. Know first I am not what I seem, I am a woman!’ And opening his vest “

“We know all about that already,” interrupted Photinius. “Get on!”

“If thou knowest this already, father,” said the astonished Euprepia, “thou wilt spare me the pain of entering further into Helladia’s affection for Basil. Suffice that it was impassioned beyond description, and vied with whatever history or romance records. In her male costume she had accompanied the conqueror of the Bulgarians in his campaigns, she had fought in his battles;

a gigantic foe, in act to strike him from behind, had fallen by her arrow; she had warded the poison-cup from his lips, and the assassin's dagger from his heart; she had rejected enormous wealth offered as a bribe for treachery, and lived only for the Emperor. 'And now,' she cried, 'his love for me is cold, and he deserts me for another. Who she is I cannot find, else on her it were, not on him, that my vengeance should alight. Oh, Euprepia, I would tear her eyes from her head, were they beautiful as thine! But vengeance I must have. Basil must die. On the third day he expires by my hand, poisoned by the cup which I alone am trusted to offer him at the Imperial banquet where thou wilt be present. Thou shalt see his agonies and my triumph, and rejoice that thy friend has known how to avenge herself.'

"Thou seest now, father, in how frightful a difficulty I am placed. All my entreaties and remonstrances have been in vain: at my threats Helladia merely laughs. I love Basil with my whole heart. Shall I look on and see him murdered? Shall I, having first unwittingly done my friend the most grievous injury, proceed further to betray her, and doom her to a cruel death? I might anticipate her fell purpose by slaying her, but for that I have neither strength nor courage. Many a time have I felt on the point of revealing everything to her, and offering myself as her victim, but for this also I lack fortitude. I might convey a warning to Basil, but Helladia's vengeance is unsleeping, and nothing but her death or mine will screen him. Oh, father, father! what am I to do?"

"Nothing romantic or sentimental, I trust, dear child," replied Photinius.

"Torture me not, father. I came to thee for counsel."

"And counsel shalt thou have, but it must be the issue of mature deliberation. Thou mayest observe," continued he with the air of a good man contending with adversity, "how weak and miserable is man's estate even in the day of good fortune, how hard it is for purblind mortals to discern the right path, especially when two alluring routes are simultaneously presented for their decision! The most obvious and natural course, the one I should have adopted without hesitation half-an-hour ago, would be simply to let Helladia alone. Should she succeed—and Heaven forbid else!—the knot is loosed in the simplest manner. Basil dies—"

"Father!"

"I am a favourite with his sister-in-law," continued Photinius, entirely unconscious of his daughter's horror and agitation, "who will govern in the name of her weak husband, and is moreover thy mistress. She recalls me to Court, and all is peace and joy. But then, Helladia may fail. In that case, when she has been executed—"

"Father, father!"

"We are exactly where we were save for the hold thou hast established over the Emperor, which is of course invaluable. I cannot but feel that Heaven is good when I reflect how easily thou mightest have thrown thyself away upon a courtier. Now there is a much bolder game to play, which, relying on the protection of Providence, I feel half disposed to attempt. Thou mightest betray Helladia."

"Deliver my friend to the tormentors!"

"Then," pursued Photinius, without hearing her, "thy claim on the Emperor's gratitude is boundless, and if he has any sense of what is seemly—and he is what they call chivalrous—he will make thee his lawful consort. I father-in-law of an Emperor! My brain reels to think of it. I must be cool. I must not suffer myself to be dazzled or hurried away. Let me consider. Thus acting, thou puttest all to the hazard of the die. For if Helladia should deny everything, as of course she would, and the Emperor should foolishly scruple to put her to the rack, she might probably persuade him of her innocence, and where wouldst thou be then? It might almost be

better to be beforehand, and poison Helladia herself, but I fear there is no time now. Thou hast no evidence but her threats, I suppose? Thou hast not caught her tampering with poisons? There can of course be nothing in writing. I daresay I could find something, if I had but time. Canst thou counterfeit her signature?"

But long ere this Euprepia, dissolved in tears, her bosom torn by convulsive sobs, had become as inattentive to her parent's discourse as he had been to her interjections. Photinius at last remarked her distress: he was by no means a bad father.

"Poor child," he said, "thy nerves are unstrung, and no wonder. It is a terrible risk to run. Even if thou saidest nothing, and Helladia under the torture accused thee of having been privy to her design, it might have a bad effect on the Emperor's mind. If he put thee to the torture too—but no! that's impossible. I feel faint and giddy, dear child, and unable to decide a point of such importance. Come to me at daybreak to-morrow."

But Euprepia did not reappear, and Photinius spent the day in an agony of expectation, fearing that she had compromised herself by some imprudence. He gazed on the setting sun with uncontrollable impatience, knowing that it would shine on the Imperial banquet, where so much was to happen. Basil was in fact at that very moment seating himself among a brilliant assemblage. By his side stood a choir of musicians, among them Euprepia. Soon the cup was called for, and Helladia, in her masculine dress, stepped forward, darting a glance of sinister triumph at her friend. Silently, almost imperceptibly to the bulk of the company, Euprepia glided forward, and hissed rather than whispered in Helladia's ear, ere she could retire from the Emperor's side.

"Didst thou not say that if thou couldst discover her who had wronged thee, thou wouldst wreak thy vengeance on her, and molest Basil no further?"

"I did, and I meant it."

"See that thou keepest thy word. I am she!" And snatching the cup from the table, she quaffed it to the last drop, and instantly expired in convulsions.

We pass over the dismay of the banqueters, the arrest and confession of Helladia, the general amazement at the revelation of her sex, the frantic grief of the Emperor.

Basil's sorrow was sincere and durable. On an early occasion he thus addressed his courtiers:

"I cannot determine which of these two women loved me best: she who gave her life for me, or she who would have taken mine. The first made the greater sacrifice; the second did most violence to her feelings. What say ye?"

The courtiers hesitated, feeling themselves incompetent judges in problems of this nature. At length the youngest exclaimed:

"O Emperor, how can we tell thee, unless we know what thou thinkest thyself?"

"What!" exclaimed Basil, "an honest man in the Court of Byzantium! Let his mouth be filled with gold immediately!"

This operation having been performed, and the precious metal distributed in fees among the proper officers, Basil thus addressed the object of his favour:

"Manuel, thy name shall henceforth be Chrysostomus, in memory of what has just taken place. In further token of my approbation of thy honesty, I will confer upon thee the hand of the only other respectable person about the Court, namely, of Helladia. Take her, my son, and raise up a race of heroes! She shall be amply dowered out of what remains of the property of Photinius."

"Gennadius," whispered a cynical courtier to his neighbour, "I hope thou admirest the magnanimity of our sovereign, who deems he is performing a most generous action in presenting

Manuel with his cast-off mistress, who has tried to poison him, and with whom he has been at his wits' end what to do, and in dowering her at the expense of another."

The snarl was just; but it is just also to acknowledge that Basil, as a prince born in the purple, had not the least idea that he was laying himself open to any such criticism. He actually did feel the manly glow of self-approbation which accompanies the performance of a good action: an emotion which no one else present, except Chrysostomus, was so much as able to conceive. It is further to be remarked that the old courtier who sneered at Chrysostomus was devoured by envy of his good fortune, and would have given his right eye to have been in his place.

"Chrysostomus," pursued Basil, "we must now think of the hapless Photinius. That unfortunate father is doubtless in an agony of grief which renders the forfeiture of the remains of his possessions indifferent to him. Thou, his successor therein, mayest be regarded as in some sort his son-in-law. Go, therefore, and comfort him, and report to me upon his condition."

Chrysostomus accordingly proceeded to the monastery, where he was informed that Photinius had retired with his spiritual adviser, and could on no account be disturbed.

"It is on my head to see the Emperor's orders obeyed," returned Chrysostomus, and forced the door. The bereaved parent was busily engaged in sticking pins into a wax effigy of Basil, under the direction of Panurgiades, already honourably mentioned in this history.

"Wretched old man!" exclaimed Chrysostomus, "is this thy grief for thy daughter?"

"My grief is great," answered Photinius, "but my time is small. If I turn not every moment to account, I shall never be prime minister again. But all is over now. Thou wilt denounce me, of course. I will give thee a counsel. Say that thou didst arrive just as we were about to place the effigy of Basil before a slow fire, and melt it into a caldron of bubbling poison."

"I shall report what I have seen," replied Chrysostomus, "neither more nor less. But I think I can assure thee that none will suffer for this mummery except Panurgiades, and that he will at most be whipped."

"Chrysostomus," said Basil, on receiving the report, "lust of power, a fever in youth, is a leprosy in age. The hoary statesman out of place would sell his daughter, his country, his soul, to regain it: yea, he would part with his skin and his senses, were it possible to hold office without them. I commiserate Photinius, whose faculties are clearly on the decline; the day has been when he would not have wasted his time sticking pins into a waxen figure. I will give him some shadow of authority to amuse his old days and keep him out of mischief. The Abbot of Catangion is just dead. Photinius shall succeed him."

So Photinius received the tonsure and the dignity, and made a very tolerable Abbot. It is even recorded to his honour that he bestowed a handsome funeral on his old enemy Eustathius.

Helladia made Chrysostomus an excellent wife, a little over-prudish, some thought. When, nearly two centuries afterwards, the Courts of Love came to be established in Provence, the question at issue between her and Euprepia was referred to those tribunals, which, finding the decision difficult, adjourned it for seven hundred years. That period having now expired, it is submitted to the British public.