

THEODORA

From Stage to Throne

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FROM the time when Eve slipped her shapely thigh out from under her fig-leaf apron, and then looked shyly up from under her eyelids to see if Adam was taking notice, down to our best known strip-tease artist on the modern stage, there has never been a time when man, old or young, was totally indifferent to feminine charms. Religion, of course, can make man ashamed of his thoughts, as when Saint Anthony of Padua rolled himself naked in a bed of nettles, or Saint Louis rose from his bed and paced the ice-cold corridors of his palace that he might keep his Lent without passion. But the thoughts and the wish, suppressed or given free rein, have ever been present. It is only the rare and the strong-minded Samsons who have not been as putty in the pretty and soft hands of a Delilah. Yet nowhere in all the pages of history is there a woman who was more famous in her profession of enticing men, or who used it to greater advantage, than Theodora of Byzantium, the city more commonly known as Constantinople.

Theodora was born in Cyprus somewhere around the year 500. Her father, Acacius, was a keeper of wild animals for the Greens, and her mother was an actress. To be an actress in those days meant also being a prostitute. Such was the law and custom

of the times. People did not so much deplore it as just take it for granted. One wonders, knowing her mother's profession, if Theodora got all her beauty and her brains from the stodgy old keeper of wild animals. But that is just plain guessing, as probably her mother herself could not have told us if she would.

II

HAVING just said that Theodora's father was a Green, it becomes necessary to pause a moment to say something about the Greens and also the Blues. Officially these were the colors worn by the chariot-eers in the races in the various hippodromes throughout the Roman world. But they were much more than that. They represented the divisions of the people, just as today a person may be a Democrat or a Republican, a Liberal or a Conservative, only they took their division much more seriously than even we do today. Also, at the beginning of the sixth century, people took their religion seriously; so the Blues were orthodox and the Greens Monophysite. The latter believed that when our Lord became man he had only one nature and that the Divine, while the orthodox believed that he was not only

wholly God but also wholly man. The religious divisions also corresponded to national aspirations, so that in the end color, politics, and religion were pretty well scrambled. Egypt, for instance, had always been Monophysite, and Egypt was even then drifting from the empire. Rome and the West had always been orthodox, but at that time that part of the world was looked upon as rather barbarous. Today the Coptic Church of Egypt, the Church of Ethiopia, and the Armenian Church are still Monophysite, but then we do not take our religion as seriously as they did in the sixth century.

TO Acacius, living in Cyprus, Constantinople was a long way off and a city of dreams. He was not quite sure where it was or what it was like, but he thought that if he got there he might be able to do a little better for himself and his family. He went to consult the leader of his party, namely the Greens, and through him got a position in the hippodrome at Constantinople similar to the one he held in Cyprus. Thus it was, when little Theodora was only four years old, the family moved to Constantinople. Arrived in the great city it was as easy to find the hippodrome as it would be for a stranger to locate Central Park in New York. Here Acacius took up his new duties. He soon found that he had bettered neither himself nor his family. He was given a room under the seats in the vast Arena. The animals he was to tend were farther down still. His job was much more difficult, for these were very different from the tired old cats he had shepherded in Cyprus. These lions, tigers, and so forth were really wild and took careful handling. Furthermore their cages, being so far down, got little or no sunlight. The hours of work were long and hard. The Cypriot Greek was none too strong, and within a year he sickened and died. Little Theodora was only five years old when she was thrown penniless and homeless on the mercy of a city that had no mercy for such as her. Her mother had one chance. Acacius' assistant would take her as his woman, if she could get him the job held by her late husband. She went on her knees to the man who had the

giving of the job, but unfortunately she had nothing to offer but her prayers, and another wished the job who could give a bribe, and that is what counted in Constantinople of that day. From the highest to the lowest appointments were rarely made without a price.

III

THEODORA'S mother had only one chance left, to appeal to the head of the party and the mercy of the crowd. She dressed and rehearsed the children carefully for the part they were to play. Between the chariot races she and they slipped into the hippodrome. They stopped before the box of the head of the Greens. The children fell on their knees and begged him not to let them starve. Unfortunately the man who had sold the position sat right behind his master, where he could whisper in his ear. Theodora and her sister were laughed at and ridiculed. They were withdrawing in confusion from the arena when the head of the Blues realized what was happening. His party was somewhat out of favor at that time because the emperor was a Green. Here was the chance to make an impression. He had the children called to his box and heard their petition.

"I shall give you justice denied you by the Greens," he said. "Your future stepfather shall have a position tending our wild animals. One thing I want you always to remember, the Blues are kind. They are not like the Greens." At least for the present Theodora and her sister would eat.

As Theodora grew up she was very beautiful. Hers was the typical Greek beauty. Her hair was raven black and curly. Her body was small, but exquisitely formed. When her older sister was fourteen she began to exercise her profession, and little Theodora accompanied her as her slave. By this means she was able to appeal to a higher clientele. Thus Theodora got her first lessons about men at a very early age.

A little later she went on the stage. It is necessary to pause a minute to say

something about the stage of that day. In the first place women did not go to the theatre. Moreover Constantinople, though nominally a Greek city, was really cosmopolitan. Men gathered there from every corner of the world. Most of them knew a little Greek, enough to do the ordinary business of the day, but not enough to understand or appreciate a Greek play. Theodora was a rather indifferent singer, and never was a good dancer. But she had something, which for her purposes was far better, a beautiful body. She invented an act which was unique to say the least. Stripped naked (no not quite naked because the law said no woman should appear naked on the stage, so to escape the censors she wore a narrow belt around her waist) she wrapped a sheet around her and lay down on the stage. Then a flock of geese were turned loose. The audience did not know that hidden in the folds of the sheet were kernels of grain. Looking for the grain the geese pulled at the sheet until . . . Need I go farther? The audience howled with delight. It was the best show that Constantinople had seen in many a long day. Before long Theodora was notorious if not famous.

She did well. Her act brought her money and also customers. The rest of the family fade from sight. Perhaps Theodora would have faded likewise except that, with a beautiful body, she had also a splendid brain. She got an opportunity to accompany a minor official abroad as his mistress. We hear of her in Alexandria and then in Antioch in Syria. She kept up her contact with the Blues, so could always go on the stage.

IV

ONE of the strange things about Theodora was that she was very religious. Another was that, though associated with the Blues, she was a Monophysite. Perhaps, knowing as she did only the worst side of men, she could not conceive of our Lord as truly human. Men were beasts. Then how could our Saviour be truly man?

The old Emperor Anastasius leaned to

the Monophysites for quite another reason; it was the best way, as he saw it, of holding the empire together. But he was logical, he was a Green. Theodora was a Blue by compulsion, but she was a Monophysite by conviction.

By the time she returned to Constantinople there was a new emperor. Old Anastasius had died practically without heirs. True he had a couple of nephews, but they had never been of much importance. The head eunuch, Amantius, was most anxious to keep the power he had wielded under Anastasius, so his idea was to bribe the palace military guard to elect a nonentity whom he could control. Now the head of the guard was one Justin, an old man who had come to Constantinople from Dalmatia as a boy of eighteen to enlist in the army. He was just a peasant's son with no formal education, but with plenty of inherent ability. He rose in his profession, so that now, an old man, he was General in charge. The education denied him he gave to his sister's son, Justinian, who seems throughout to have been his personal adviser.

It was to Justin that Amantius the eunuch gave the money to corrupt the guard. Justin used it to good purpose; namely to corrupt the guard for himself. He was raised on the shields of his comrades and the Roman Empire had a new emperor. Justin was sixty-nine years old when he ascended the throne, a Dalmatian peasant, ignorant but very shrewd. By his side stood his nephew who would undoubtedly be his heir. He was also shrewd, but with that he had the best education possible in his day.

JUSTINIAN had one love, work. He was now thirty-six, and women and other pleasures had played a small part in his life. When Theodora returned to Constantinople she had a letter of introduction to Justinian. She had a little money saved, not much, but she determined to stake everything on one turn of the wheel. She took a house in a quiet section of the city and lived a respectable life. She sent the letter to the prince with a short note of her own telling where she was living. Then she waited.

Justinian came. He who had hardly ever looked at women fell in love at first sight. He offered her the position of his mistress. He laid down only one condition, she must be his and his alone. To this she readily agreed and moved into the palace.

She and Justinian were radiantly happy from the first. He would have married her except for a law which forbade marriage between a noble and an actress. Also his aunt, the old empress was violently opposed. She had been Justin's concubine before she became his wife, so she had all the prejudices of her class against the ex-harlot, the lover of her nephew. But she was old, and finally, as most old people do, she died. At once Justinian had his uncle repeal the law, and, what is more, make Theodora a patrician. Then she and Justinian became man and wife. When, a little later the old emperor died Justinian and Theodora were crowned Emperor and Empress in the old Santa Sophia. The word "old" is deliberate for the church was destroyed in the Nika Riot.

V

IT is not the purpose of this narrative to trace Theodora to her tomb. Much rather leave her as the young and beautiful empress, just as she may be seen today in the mosaic in the partly ruined church in Classe in Italy. Still one or two episodes from her later life reveal the kind of an Empress Justinian had chosen for a partner to his throne. It might be imagined that she wanted all the world to forget that she had once been a harlot. Not she! She had a law passed that closed every house of prostitution where girls were held against their will. Nay more, up to that time there was little hope for women such as she had been. Now, on the Asiatic side, just across from Constantinople, she established the Convent of Repentance, where any woman could go who wished to leave a life of shame. The prostitute empress did not forget her class.

One story more and we can leave Theodora as empress of Byzantium. Constantinople had a regular rabbit warren of a

slum district. Even the police hardly dared to enter it. However, some kind of peace was kept, as the Emperor was either a Blue or a Green, and could look for some help from his party. The Emperor Anastasius had been a Green. When Justin came to the throne he was a Blue. The Dalmatian peasant was orthodox, for Dalmatia borders on the West. Besides, even at this early date Justinian had his eyes turned to the West, and to accomplish what he had in mind he would need the cooperation of the Pope at Rome. But as regards crime Justinian had tried to be neutral. Thus the Blues were both surprised and grieved to find criminals of their party punished just as if they had been Greens. Theodora, as we have seen, was a Blue by necessity, though she held some of the convictions of the Greens. This also tended to neutrality on her part. For the first time almost in history the Blues and Greens got together in a riot. Soon the whole city was in an uproar. Crowds marched through the streets, setting fire to buildings and shouting "*Nika*", that is to say "Victory". For this reason it is known as the Nika Riot. In a week more than half the city lay in ruins. The Emperor, shut up within his palace, lacked forces to quell the uprising. It was decided that he should flee. The grounds of the palace faced the water. Ships were being loaded with all the gold and jewels in the Emperor's possession. The last meeting of the council was being held. One after another of the emperor's advisers rose in their places and confirmed his action. They might be able later to fight their way back, but for the present flight was the only path. When each had spoken in turn it was time for the Empress. Being the only woman present she spoke last. That speech has rung down the ages word for word, because more than anything else it reveals to us the character of Theodora. She rose in her place and began;

"When safety only remains in flight still I will not flee. Those who have worn the crown should not survive its fall. I will never live to see the day when I shall no longer be saluted as Empress. Flee if you wish, Caesar; you have money, the ships

await you, the sea is unguarded. As for me I stay. I hold with the old proverb which says that the purple is a good winding sheet."¹

THE courtiers were stunned. They asked her if she had a plan. She had. First she would send a secret messenger into the city with a bag of gold. He should contact the leaders of the Blues; and, after a little judicious bribery, should remind them that after all the present Emperor was a Blue. The one they had chosen in his place, one of the nephews of Anastasius, was a Green. By siding with the Greens in the riot they were conniving at their own destruction. Moreover, just at present, the hippodrome was filled with the lowest of the city's rabble. There were only two gates. Why not have these quietly closed and guarded. Then the

¹ The translation is that of the *Cambridge Medieval History*.

soldiers could enter above through the emperor's box, which had a door connecting directly with the palace, and give them a lesson they should never forget.

NEXT day they dragged 30,000 corpses out of the hippodrome. The city was cleared of the worst of its criminals, and the riot was over. Justinian learned, if he did not know it before, that he had a wonderful Empress.

There let us leave her in the height of her glory, poring over the plans to rebuild the city greater than before; and also the plans for that new wonderful Santa Sophia to replace the one burned in the riot, which was to withstand the ages, which even today on the banks of the Bosphorus whispers the names of Justinian and Theodora.

The Right Path

There is undoubtedly a certain satisfaction to be had in having a lawn entirely carpeted with grass. But the pleasantest yards are those that show a little bare path worn somewhere between them and the neighbors'.

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