

BIRD LIVES!

A play for the moment

me pati poenas decet;
non esse poenam.

by
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1961

Characters

JULIAN, Roman Emperor

NETTY, a Priestess of Cybele

THE RAG TIME MAN OF ANTIOCH

SIMON ECCLES

PASQUALE

A Little Girl

(A battlement of the Roman Garrison in Antioch. 360 A. D.

A coppery-gold backdrop done in the spherical texturing Van Gogh used for the sky of The Starry Night. Silhouetted against the drop is a series of jagged black towers, so arranged as to give the impression that the playing area is protected - on the upstage side - by a massive fortress.

There is no other scenery.

At rise, NETTY is nailing something to the upstage battlement. A bedraggled stuffed goose at the end of a gold chain lies at her feet. She delivers the final stroke, steps aside, and looks approvingly at what she's just nailed up. It is - we are now able to see - a poster representing a grotesque and colorful Etruscan clown-face, beneath which are the words: IO SATURNALIA! As NETTY, arms akimbo, stands chuckling at the poster, a flaxen-haired, glumfaced little girl strides in; she is bare-foot and dressed in a gray robe with a black cross over her heart. The girl walks up to NETTY and - before NETTY is rightly aware of her presence - plucks the hammer from NETTY's hand.)

LITTLE GIRL

(clutching the cross on her robe; indignantly)

Christ is crucified - and dost thou laugh?

(Before NETTY can collect herself, the girl puts both hands to the poster and rips it slantwise, so that the inscription and lower part of the face are left on the wall. Poster and hammer in hand, the little girl runs out.)

NETTY

(to the Audience)

That child could not have been more than fourteen years old! Fourteen years old!

(She smooths out what is left of the poster; then takes up the goose's chain and winds it about her wrist, pacing and speaking as she does so. There is something vaguely Irish in her voice.)

He'd better be understanding, that's all I can say, he'd better be understanding. Well, they're that or they're

nothing, I suppose. Now if it was me - I get all huffy and spiteful, you know, I just **hit** out! Ah, but you couldn't be Emperor, you couldn't get through all the Emperors do get through, if you hadn't a great deal of understanding.

(coming to a halt; firmly)

Besides, he must see how it was: with so few of us left here, what was I to do? We wanted things really nice, of course we did! But the sobersides would none of it, oh, not they! We had to do ourselves up in sack-cloth just to get in to see the presbyters; and then, Lord! what carrying on before their worships consented - "in the interests of good order" - that one paganness and one goose might be on hand to receive His Majesty. This was for the King of the World, you understand; if it had been a procurator, I fancy they'd have sent the goose by itself!

It's sure to be a great disappointment to him.

Parading the Eastern Army in his train and Western Army in his train, he pulls up before our gates, cries "Good People of Antioch! Here is your Emperor come to pass the holiday among you. Drink we shall, and dance we shall, and who knows but we bring a smile to old Saturn's mouth." Then he'll be expecting flowers, cheers, pipe-music and the dance goes with it - only there won't be anything like that. Nasty old Simon Eccles will shove the gates open, snarling: birds flit about the piazza, there's nobody in the streets, nobody anywhere, just an old priestess of Cybele and

(kicking the goose)

this fool thing. Oh, he'll be so unhappy and disappointed! Here with all the towns in the world to pick from, he picks Antioch, and then we - oh, I don't mean "we", I'm sure! "They!" "They!" Those dirty disrespectful people. Only, he'll see me and he'll think - oh!...

(She breaks down in tears. Off-left, a snappy jazz rift on a trumpet.)

PASQUALE

(off-stage; with a strong Latin-American accent)

Ze Himperial Fohx-traht!

(NETTY starts, then prostrates herself in terror. PASQUALE strikes up a lively fox-trot on the trumpet. After a few measures, enter JULIAN and PASQUALE.)

JULIAN comes first. He wears a flowing robe and a matching miter inscribed with the emblem of the rising sun. As the robe trails behind and the miter slants ahead, he appears to be tilted forward slightly. PASQUALE is in full legionary attire, but on his head is a straw sun-hat, and around his throat a carelessly tied crimson kerchief.

At first, JULIAN marches with utter dignity, despite the catchy rhythms of PASQUALE's trumpet. But gradually, as they march about the stage, JULIAN falls into step, so that by their circuit, he is positively strutting. In this fashion he nearly trips over the prostrated NETTY, but at the last instant steps nimbly aside. JULIAN observes NETTY dubiously, signs PASQUALE to cut the music. After a moment, NETTY gives an almost inaudible groan; then another and another, louder and louder, till she is beating the stage with her fists and sobbing hysterically.)

NETTY

I didn't mean this! I meant none of this!

JULIAN

(who has been exchanging querulous glances with PASQUALE)

What's that you say?

NETTY

None of it, none of it!

JULIAN

I'm not going to ask what you mean. Whatever you want,
I can spare it. Whoever you are, I'm Roman Emperor.

NETTY

Oh, I know! Oh!...!

JULIAN

Do you? Well, it's the thing to know.

NETTY

My king: shield me, help me!

JULIAN

That I can do - and do handsomely.

NETTY

Maybe not now, but in a minute...

JULIAN

Hey?

NETTY

In a minute, I will be doing harm. Some kind of harm...

JULIAN

Yes, I know the sensation. Marching around Antioch just
now, I felt as if venom were dripping off my robe.

NETTY

(springs to her feet; indignantly)

They wouldn't dare to!

JULIAN

Eh? Because the streets I put behind me went grey, you know? Girls took in their flowers off the sill; one could hear latches being ~~made~~^{made} fast. Some kind of harm...

NETTY

Oh, it was them, it wasn't you! And no more is it I, I'd like to think. But for the moment it's all terribly upon me.

JULIAN

(annoyed)

Here, don't take on so! What's the matter?

NETTY

Abuse is the matter! Shameless daring is the matter!

JULIAN

Well, I was just going to take offense when I thought, "The Garrison! They've gone ahead to make me comfortable there." So I came here -

NETTY

Oh, my Emperor! Oh, Your Highness is about to do me such a wrong! But what's that to the wrong has been done Your Highness? Only - remember: I am a violated person, else Rome would take no shame by me, not for anything.

And yet, how ^{can} I ^{on} go about myself...?

(PASQUALE catches JULIAN's eye; they exchange a significant glance; JULIAN nods to PASQUALE, bends over ~~NETTY~~ NETTY, who has fallen to her knees again, to comfort her.)

Here, now, old lady, what was the name again?

NETTY

Netty, Your Grace, and I'm a priestess of Cybele.

JULIAN

Yes. Well, Netty, you're a nice old person, but - febrile. I understand your difficulty -

NETTY

Do you? Do you? If I could be sure ^{you} did!

JULIAN

Attention please! Now: I'm here for a big military reception.

(NETTY turns away in consternation.)

Flags, flowers, burning animals and music await me in there...!

NETTY

Who told Your Grace that?

JULIAN

Has one to be told? There is such a thing as the imperial programme, you see. Visiting Emperors are received... well, usually at the town gate, but if not there -

(irritably)

at the Garrison, I suppose - where else?

(NETTY, unable to speak, shrugs pathetically, and JULIAN recovers his good spirits.)

Now, little priestess Netty, please attend: I mean to enlist your services.

NETTY

If there were one thing I could do - !

JULIAN

There's any number of things you can do, and I mean for you to do them.

(NETTY makes as if to protest.)

I realize appointments have been made; I suppose every last detail of the pageant was fixed on months ago. Well and good. But I'm Great Pontiff to the Roman people, and if I see fit to advance you -

NETTY

Please don't think about me! Never mind me!

JULIAN

Not mind you? I make you partner in all the glory that's coming to me! I create you Priestess of the Imperial Welcome! Now go ahead in and tell the Flamen it's you I've chosen to perform the High Sacrifice, and you're to be given a free hand in disposing my reception.

(musing)

I couldn't really say why I'm doing this...

NETTY

Most Princely Julian - you've had your reception! I'm your reception.

(slight pause)

JULIAN

Oh? You mean, as celebrant, the entire ritual fastens about you...?

NETTY

No, no; before Your Grace made me what I am... I had been given this sentry post here -

JULIAN

Are the Antiochans so taken with my welcome that soldier's work falls to a woman?

NETTY

Oh, but I wasn't to keep watch - I - oh!

JULIAN

Really, with all the rest of it, they need not have come pestering you...

NETTY

The rest of it?

JULIAN

...you being an old lady and with your trouble. They could have dispensed - Lord, I could have dispensed -

(JULIAN turns around abruptly.)

Was that you, Pasquale?

(PASQUALE shrugs emphatically.)

Oh. I thought I heard a trumpet.

NETTY

The rest of it? Don't be looking for any more, there's nothing more! I'm all the welcome could be spared, d'you see; the songs, the flowers, the respect due -

(She shrugs despairingly. JULIAN turns away, shaken.)

This is worse than anything.

(pause)

JULIAN

(mastering himself)

I said I wouldn't, but I think I'm going to have to ask what you mean.

NETTY

(breaking down)

It's Christians, Julian, Christians, Christians! Everything I wanted to do, they said no. Every little pleasantness I thought of, they scratched it off. They're running things here and they're running things down. I wept and begged, but they left me for a mock, because it was worse than nothing. I never meant it! It's terrible! How did I get into this?

(She sobs loudly; pause)

JULIAN

I see. This has been known to happen before.

(angrily)

In point of fact, everywhere, all up and down the empire, everywhere you go!

NETTY

(through her sobs)

You ought to make an end of it, really you ought! There was Decius, of sainted memory - he strove mightily. Godly Diocletian fought the good fight. I don't have to remind you -

JULIAN

No, truly, you do not!

NETTY

Oh, gracious, I never meant -

JULIAN

Half my life goes for reading the old documents. A yellow sheet tells me: "Two score church-buildings fired at Ctesiphon, such and such a date, consulship of so and so": that is hands across the grave. Then the great tradition quivers below me like a stallion...

NETTY

Oh, Your Highness must think worse and worse of me! But there are those say, "Julian is last of Romans", but I say "Julian is first of Romans", and Lord knows I never meant Your Grace hadn't the vigor, and I couldn't have said -

JULIAN

Who do I see about this?

NETTY

There's my superior at the Cybelic Temple, if you still feel -

JULIAN

Not you; it's all right about you...Actually, it's tragic about you...But I mean the Christian impertinence. How do I proceed? Whom do I go about instructing?

NETTY

There's the Bishop...

JULIAN

Bishops, bishops! More bishops than cobblestones, everywhere you go! Haven't I any procurators left, haven't I any publicans left? I'm telling you...!

NETTY

I suppose the imperial staff might be turned out. They don't do much, as it happens.

JULIAN

Do they not?

NETTY

No, because it's a town of Januses, a Christian city. They don't want magistrates, what they want -

JULIAN

Be damned what they want! My people aren't here to supply their wants.

NETTY

(savoring his tone)

Rome is coming back to life in these streets!

(doubtfully)

But compulsion - well, compulsion...

JULIAN

I don't mean to compel anyone. Nor to entreat. I just want to give some instructions. That's the device of my reign:

(blocking off the device on the air)

"Instruct and Pervade"...Bring me somebody.

NETTY

Well, as you've no use for the Bishop -

JULIAN

(emphatically)

No bishop!

NETTY

That's what I say, no bishop. Hm...another one you could try would be...

JULIAN

Whom, whom?

NETTY

The Rag Time Man of Antioch!

JULIAN

(wincing)

There's a lot in that name!

(pause)

Well, get him out here.

NETTY

Yes, sir.

(She begins to leave, dragging the goose behind; then stops, turns.)

You know, he's not to be whistled for by just anyone.

JULIAN

Well, I'm Roman Emperor.

NETTY

Well, you are. You're Roman Emperor.

(pause)

I'll see what I can do.

(Exit NETTY. PASQUALE looks inquiringly at JULIAN; JULIAN nods, signs him to follow NETTY. PASQUALE dashes out.)

JULIAN claps his hands briskly and then raises them above his head; the stage darkens. A life-size Cross descends slowly over the right-center area and comes to rest in midair. JULIAN addresses the Cross.)

JULIAN

High, high, and several times most divine kreuze: in that it were a plane, which plane? How about those paths through the hedge, those labyrinths that give on meadows where it is all light, all common shame. Kyrie Eleison! Or take that rock garden - pursue! contend! - dogs nibbling at the sand, stones willfully to grate. Christe Eleison! Take Purple Dreamland - everything's stars there! -and you can feel the right reason under your legs. Kyrie Eleison! Christe Eleison! Lord have

mercy upon us. And Christ have mercy upon us. And somebody had better have mercy upon us.

Eli! Take up your weapon and let's go. You put one in mind of a fresh locale: the Quagmire of the Temporal Sensibility. Let's engage there and here's why: it's a sink-as-you-go, comprende? Strike your blow, drop a bit: knees, waist, mouth. You just get to be the battlefield, you come to an understanding. Eli! In that it were a plane. Only, it's loop the loop; it's one dab of paint then another. Eli, Eli, lama asabthani? That is "Lord, Lord, why hast Thou forsaken me?" What was the reason again?

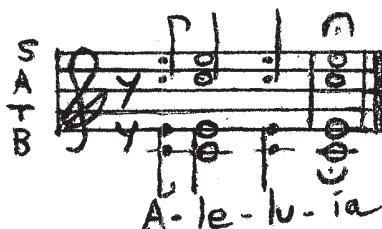
However, daughters of Jerusalem - back! It isn't He, I don't think. Oh, yes, there's that bird paddling around his head. Oh, yes, he has put the ceaseless dunes to rest. But where is He I have seen in the dreams of my sleep? Truly, truly, this may be the One. I'm not making ^{any} promises, though.

It's what I resent and why: there were other cultures to dismember and other moments. Cur? The pretensions of the ironist - was that it? Deus. But how beastly childish to drench the kindling, rip down the streamers, deride the processants. I do not confess the need for that particular Incarnation. Cur Deus Homo? I mean, why just then? Lord be a help. Have a heart, and we shall have hearts.

I cannot persuade you of the immensity of this question. Someone! Get the book off my knee. I am prepared to make all kinds of vows. You will say, "A Romantic", but no, not that, not merely. You do sums, do you not? Then where's the difficulty? Exaudite. It is difficult not to be a romantic. On the other hand, it is difficult not to be. Exaudite, Domine! Did you catch that?

Oh, comme la parole est ennuyeuse! Et le silence encore plus. "If with all your heart ye truly seek Him, ye shall ever surely find Him," saith the Lord; and that's the extent of His remarks. So we contrive ~~more~~ ^{more} language, on the track of more silence - and there's more silence about almost anything than almost anyone is prepared to admit, is it not so? By heaven, is it not - high, **high** and several times most divine kreuze?

(A shaft of light strikes the Cross, on the downbeat of the following phrase, which is sung off-stage:)



JULIAN

(Arms akimbo; looking over the illuminated Cross as the music fades; blandly)

That was predictable.

(In sharp contrast to the sonorous choral harmony, PASQUALE's trumpet is heard offstage. JULIAN gestures impatiently; the light on the Cross snaps off, and the Cross itself is hauled up in undignified haste.)

Enter PASQUALE, playing his trumpet cheerfully. After him, the RAG TIME OF ANTIOCH and SIMON ECCLES, arm in arm (i.e., the rigid right arm of one is pressed against the rigid left arm of the other, fingers interlocked). After them, NETTY. THE RAG TIME is studying PASQUALE, evidently trying to evaluate his rendition. SIMON ECCLES shuffles along, reluctant and sullen, eyes down; NETTY keeps her distance behind him and regards him with disgust.

The RAG TIME MAN is a light-skinned, solidly built young Negro; he wears a (contemporary) summer suit and a modish hat. SIMON ECCLES is bearded and naked, except for a dirty strip of burlap around the loins and a chafing-dish with live coals in it, which he wears strapped to his head.

As soon as JULIAN catches sight of SIMON ECCLES, JULIAN winces, turns away with his arm before his face.)

JULIAN

Out of my sight! Get him out of here!

NETTY

Really? After my chasing about, and you said -

JULIAN

Not him! The other - unclothed, and all that fire...

Get him away! I don't have to take that!

(SIMON ECCLES lifts his free arm as if to call down thunder on JULIAN)

Oh, he's a horror, that one -

(to RAG TIME MAN)

Don't think you do yourself any good bringing him!

RAG TIME MAN

No, I will do myself little good here. Again, this is not why I come.

NETTY

Could have something to do with my Lord Julian's
having sent?

RAG TIME MAN

(to JULIAN)

Yes. Something to do with your having sent.

JULIAN

(indicating SIMON ECCLES)

But not for him! Look at that - sweat and dirt running
down the breast; a rag round the hips; and fire, and
all ^{the} kinds of fire he has with him. No: I don't conduct
my affairs that way; you get him out!

RAG TIME MAN

(gently; sweetly)

He will stay, but from his stay infer no petulance in me.

(holds up the interlocked arms)

We are made whole.

JULIAN

(relieved)

Oh, that's negotiable!

(calling)

Pasqual' !

(PASQUALE crosses smartly to JULIAN, salutes.)

Pasquale', would you...

(JULIAN murmurs and gestures some intimate

instructions to PASQUALE, who nods avidly. PASQUALE begins to play Onward, Christian Soldiers on his muted trumpet. NETTY looks on knowingly. As he plays, in a grotesquely lush style, the RAG TIME MAN and SIMON ECCLES appear to go into a trance. Their upraised arms relax, disengage, and languidly fall away. Both men stand with hands at sides; PASQUALE stops playing. A moment later, the arms shoot upward, and seem to grope for each other - but without success - and again they go limp and fall. PASQUALE exits slowly, playing the hymn pianissimo. The RAG TIME MAN and SIMON ECCLES stare at each other as if trying to remember something.)

JULIAN

(extending his arm on the word "ties")

At this moment, new ties suggest themselves.

RAG TIME MAN

(raising his eyes, as if to shake off a daze)

I search the heavens...

(SIMON ECCLES looks from one to the other in incredulous panic. He scampers right up to JULIAN, stares him in the face. JULIAN ignores SIMON ECCLES, concentrates on the RAG TIME MAN.)

SIMON ECCLES

(muttering)

"New ties..."

(He turns out, slaps palm with fist to show he has an idea.)

It is my affair to inflame!

(Eyes blazing, he runs out. JULIAN and the RAG TIME MAN ignore his exit. NETTY looks after him, troubled.)

RAG TIME MAN

What do I here? What do I here longer?

JULIAN

I was coming to that. But isn't it good to be rid of the man - how do you call him?

NETTY

(contemptuously)

Simon Eccles.

JULIAN

That Simon Eccles, yes. Rid of him.

RAG TIME MAN

He would be always troubling one, you see; it was a problem I kept having.

JULIAN

(abruptly)

Why do they call you the Rag Time Man of Antioch?

RAG TIME MAN

Because I'm a fragment.

JULIAN

What? You're what?

RAG TIME MAN

I'm a fragment of the modern sensibility set loose in the ancient world.

JULIAN

Which is less queer than it might be...hm...

(abruptly)

Why wasn't I received?

(NETTY begins to appear anxious)

RAG TIME MAN

You mean here in Antioch?

(deprecatingly)

Oh...!

JULIAN

Yes, but I will not be put off!

RAG TIME MAN

Unchurched...Prince of this world...renegade...

JULIAN

Pooh! You must integrate. Keep a hold on!

RAG TIME MAN

Then: Julian, Prince of This World, Renegade from Holy Mother Church, thee I do name and proclaim "Apostate"; in sign whereof we bar Antioch against thee and foment derision about thee. Amen.

NETTY

Why would he say "Amen" there?

JULIAN

I can show you. Watch:

(abruptly, to the RAG TIME MAN)

How do you come to speak for the Antiochans?

RAG TIME MAN

Oh, there's no question of my speaking for them. The Bishop would do that - I'm scarcely an acolyte. No, I'm retained to have impressions, that's what they want.

JULIAN

All right, now let me tell you what I want -

RAG TIME MAN

Useless, useless!

JULIAN

There's some explanations I must have!

RAG TIME MAN

Oh, the bishop does explanations. But I wonder, Julian, can there be much you need explained? Do my Christian people puzzle you?

JULIAN

I'd like to think so.

RAG TIME MAN

But it's they, after all, require the explanations. You're making the difficulty.

JULIAN

It's what I want to do.

RAG TIME MAN

Well, you shan't go down as a persecutor - though I fancy you've done your stint at the rack.

JULIAN

This would be the tyranny approach?

RAG TIME MAN

Yes. Worse and more than tyrant - but that too, that too.

JULIAN

Well, I've never set up for a demophile. I can't - being what I am - I can't get through without my axes, my rods.

RAG TIME MAN

This might be Rome herself speaking!

JULIAN

Stay off that! We hold states together and shove 'em on ahead. You can't.

RAG TIME MAN

You make a desolation and call it peace!

JULIAN

You come upon our peace and call it desolation! With just a glance here and there, mind - you don't have to be asked twice. You strew pronouncements the way

Priestess Netty might strew flowers - and with as little regard for the victim. Is the judgment of men tyrannous? But whole civilizations get hailed before that bench of yours, strictest and most intent tyrants!

RAG TIME MAN

We're tyrants? We who exchange the kiss of peace with rapscallion and beggarman? We, chained past all recusation to the will of God?

JULIAN

When you invoke the God, you invoke the precedent. I say, 'twas Jehovah who in throwing Satan down gave the type of troublous polity. And I say, and I say. How do you deal with the separatist? we send ours to the slag-mine; you put your hell a little deeper. And I say, and I say. What's your organizational technique? To misapply ours. "It's just a convenience, though: diocesan synods don't mean provincial inequities." No? But I say, and I say, you have slipped in grace for grandeur and the apparatus sidles on. Now we come to objectives and ^{the} empire goes antiphonal: I give it you, you give it me - joy, joy, oecumenic joy. Ha! You want me to go on? I could, I could!

RAG TIME MAN

(who during the preceding speech has shown increasing fatigue and discouragement)

In my opinion, you do not align words with real things.

JULIAN

I'm speaking against you with all the pursuant charm of the ancient world. I'm speaking against the career of your spirit. I'm bringing up arguments and I'm dragging them out...

RAG TIME MAN

A moment - I've lost you -

JULIAN

But I'll say this much: if none but Roman faults afflicted, and ^{no} likeness but to Rome marked out Christ's Church - well, you could do worse. I think, as it is, you do worse.

RAG TIME MAN

What am I supposed to be inferring?

JULIAN

Oh, I'm making a few imputations - just a few, just a few...

RAG TIME MAN

(suddenly excited)

Oh, let me! Let me do that!

JULIAN

Eh? Do what?

RAG TIME MAN

Make your imputations for you. Which I enjoy - it's serviceable and penitential.

JULIAN

But why - ?

RAG TIME MAN

Really, I don't know why! But let me do that!

(JULIAN exchanges a puzzled glance with NETTY, signs the RAG TIME MAN to proceed.)

All right! In primo! Your Christians be simple folk, and they say, "Well, it's like this -" and even Socrates didn't say that - which argues pretensions, don't it?

JULIAN

(speaking and clapping time rhythmically)

Then there's the one,

Then there's the one,

RAG TIME MAN

Now this Jesu died a crook's death alongside crooks, and that must show something.

JULIAN

Then there's the one,

Then there's the one,

RAG TIME MAN

Christian doctrine confounds a fellow's best stay, scilicet, his Natural Reason. Examples: the triune balderdash and what happens to a piece of bread.

JULIAN

Then there's the one,

Then there's the one,

RAG TIME MAN

By their refusal to fall in with city life, Christians
put from them the social unit of the Ancient World -
which doesn't do Rome any good.

JULIAN

Then there's the one,
Then there's the one,

RAG TIME MAN

Christian sourfaces preach a fiery finale, and so fire
the rampageous townspeople - which doesn't do Rome any
good either.

JULIAN

Then there's the one,
Then there's the one,

RAG TIME MAN

The liturgical practice of the Church - blasts where
the communicants have it with their dams (to say nothing
of children dished up in bread crumbs) - these rituals
have, I say, well, something vaguely un-Roman about them.

JULIAN

Then there's the one,
Then there's the one,

RAG TIME MAN

Wanting that pinch of sweet dust so firmly abhorred,
the emperor-cults take to violence and road-work.

JULIAN

Then there's the one,

Then there's the one,

RAG TIME MAN

Finally, Christian people seem just not to care for the objectives and atmosphere of the ancient world.

JULIAN

(with deep melancholy)

Ah!

(pause)

Well, that was very nicely and elegantly put.

RAG TIME MAN

That was nothing. But I'm ready with my confutations.

I'll take 'em as I took 'em. All right?

(JULIAN, rather bewildered, nods.)

All right! In primo, (as your scholiasts say), in primo...

(He is faltering.)

NETTY

(helpfully)

Christians - a simple people. But they've got this idea...

RAG TIME MAN

Oh, yes! So! Here it is... Artisans - a wood-working family - the high, the low -

(The RAG TIME MAN has obviously forgotten his argument.)

JULIAN

(impatiently)

It goes like this, if you please: the powerful minds of antiquity dwelt all in humble carcasses: Socrates, Zeno. Such occasions of good sense in poor stock prefigger God incarnate in a craftsman.

RAG TIME MAN

(after reflecting a moment)

Well, you have the gist. Now I come to death on the Cross. Here it will be my endeavor to show -

JULIAN

That you don't get redeemed on a whim, that you have to put up with a little execration.

RAG TIME MAN

That's as much as to impugn Sacred Fancy! You don't mean quite that!

JULIAN

Guess not. Now, sir, you come on and hurdle the Natural Reason.

(pause)

I'm anxious to get your remarks.

RAG TIME MAN

(timidly)

Wouldn't you...?

JULIAN

Oh, sure: A bas la raison, we've mysteries now.

RAG TIME MAN

Yes, yes! New heaven, new earth! Only - qualify.
Liquify. Hedge round.

JULIAN

Take this dénouement flambé - why, didn't Philostratus
say as much?

RAG TIME MAN

That's no answer. It's more -

JULIAN

"Infamous rites" - pah! Signed with the spirit, we!
Leave the fuss to the Mithraics.

RAG TIME MAN

Here, now! We're always making fresh covenants; con-
trition keeps the inner altar supplied.

JULIAN

Or those emperors with their tripods snuffed out -
well, it's an offering to Commonsense. Men don't
divinify that well.

RAG TIME MAN

But you must say: Except under our circumstances. Ex-
cept under our circumstances.

JULIAN

And finally, Greece ~~and~~ ^{and} Rome - those accretions of deviltry! Now, what does your ancient world come down to? A heaving cortege of damned persons - this play of shadows upon ashes...

RAG TIME MAN

But so much more, you know! We'll take what we can use, we'll find out what we need. Octavian, go mate with Isiah - and welcome! We give out Tully for an esoteric gospeller. The seasonals want fixing, that's all. The res publica -

JULIAN

Now hold on! Look out! Watch out there! You're striking the set of my ancient world! Green land, blue sea, blue sky, white marble, white cloud are commonly reduced to ripped canvas. Behind I see brick, I see wire, I see rope and pullies and electric glare...

RAG TIME MAN

"Places!", then: to expand the repertoire, we run through a latter age. Did you suppose your piece would hold the boards?

JULIAN

How was one to doubt it? Effects so varied, effects so sure - Oh, the attractions I could serve up! Years to such a length; ring-walls and sensibilities that worked out; libations and a girl thinking -

RAG TIME MAN

It is not enough!

JULIAN

And you say, It is not enough. Life on life till there's something in the air -

RAG TIME MAN

Insufficient!

JULIAN

And you say, Insufficient. But I hadn't specified -

RAG TIME MAN

But you mayn't specify! Can that plain fact have got past you, got past this whole forespent culture of yours? Has never a man of you reasoned, "Silence before Our God is preferable to saying all the wrong things"?

JULIAN

I am nothing blasphemous. You could ^{say,} reverential.
^

RAG TIME MAN

Of what reverential? And then- blasphemy, prayer... only part your lips and you make the presumptive **Soilure**.

JULIAN

All gods to witness, was ever a man gave less trouble? Presumption! Presumption! I do just this one thing: I try to get back where I was; Look.

(He struts about as he did on entering. The music is conspicuous by its absence. Puzzled, he comes to a halt.)

I try to get back where I was...

RAG TIME MAN

There's presumption in the attempt, not to say madness. Ferret your past, would you? Lime the Great Bird, is that the idea? But she soars to assume her shadowy heaven, fog-swirls settle below, and look! a haze of memory twists by you there. Labor lost! Labor lost!

JULIAN

Nothing becomes a memory for me! As monks to their cloister, so all my days repair about this moment of time, and all my moments drop exhausted into one frighteningly rich moment.

(long pause)

RAG TIME MAN

It will go hardest with your kind. The Church can take any number of chances, but not that particular chance. What can I say? The persecutors don't matter, but you matter. As Judas himself you are unthinkable.

JULIAN

That's hard.

RAG TIME MAN

(angrily)

But as Judas you are like to suffer!

JULIAN

I can only turn back the whirlwind upon the whirlwind: It wasn't I put in your cornerstone, and I won't now answer for the masonry, d'you hear? - I will not be taken to task! Sitting here below rafters my hands have not secured, I mean to rant out dissociation till a loosed

tile break me.

RAG TIME MAN

You will be all the same broken!

JULIAN

There's the pity of it.

(NETTY is heard sobbing)

You can tell the Antiochans that.

RAG TIME MAN

What? That it's all in the lap of a rising god? Truly, your work is the only work I'm good for: Turn upon the light and shout it down, here's Time will pay the piper. And that's true, too...Meantime, I answer for the Antiochans.

(begins to leave; stops, turns)

Or were you giving an order?

(JULIAN makes an impatient movement.)

Then I pass among them. Plague-fashion. Julian-quite-alone: I answer for the Antiochans.

(Exit RAG TIME MAN OF ANTIOCH, slowly.)

JULIAN

(muses for a long moment; then, suddenly:)

Galilean! I have conquered!

(NETTY stops sobbing, looks inquiringly at JULIAN.)

"For the time." "In a manner of speaking." That's how my conquests are going to be. But there will be conquests. For the moment, one may say - "conquests".

(pause)

You know, Netty - !

NETTY

Yes, oh yes, Lord?

JULIAN

(checking himself)

It won't bear thinking of. "Priestess of the Imperial
Welcome" ...!

NETTY

(her face in her hands)

Oh, sir!

JULIAN

(blocking off the words on the air)

"Priestess of the Imperial Welcome"...That puts you at
the top of your profession.

NETTY

Yes, sir; it would have...

JULIAN

Would have? Condition scrapes the knee before Emperor's
will!

NETTY

But, Lord, without the reception -

JULIAN

Is this how you take my favors? A sacrifice was enjoined:
now you get on with it!

NETTY

Surely Your Grace won't shame me another time! I had told you -

JULIAN

About the want of preparation, yes. But it would be -

NETTY

And there's no temple hereabouts - they don't permit us
one inside the city. You have to go miles -

JULIAN

Of course, I didn't mean -

NETTY

And when you do get there, it isn't hardly a temple,
it's a kind of cenotaph -

JULIAN

Oh, you haven't taken my meaning at all! In the first
place, we needn't worry ourselves for a temple. You
have the victim;

(He indicates the goose.)

I have the knife.

(He pulls an ornate golden knife out of
his robe, flourishes it; NETTY gasps involuntarily.)

In fact, I'd like to do it myself! You wouldn't mind,
would you?

NETTY

Yourself! Oh!

JULIAN

I mean, there's no cult prohibition...?

NETTY

No, but you were just insisting -

JULIAN

(impatiently)

Will for deed, will for deed. Let me have the creature.

(NETTY holds out the chain; JULIAN takes the chain, jerks the goose over to him and examines it perplexedly.)

Where do you make the cut?

NETTY

In the throat. Only -

JULIAN

The throat. Hm...

(He prods the goose apprehensively with the point of his knife; then, gritting his teeth, he rather savagely plunges the blade into the goose's throat. Holding the goose outstretched and overturned, he looks ecstatically upward, speaks as if afraid to break his own mood.)

Now quick, the nicest prayer you know.

NETTY

(looking all the time nervously at the goose)

Prayer to Antiochan Chronos:

JULIAN

(putting down the goose; quite deflated)

But don't localize! "Antiochan Chronos!" There's no

reining that passionate god: He'll wind you and dump you
 ages short of Antioch. Or maybe that was what you meant.
 It's a brag anyway: we're all of us in the field and we
 lose endlessly. You can't have Time to yourself; you can
 only slap a little color into the cheek of the moment.
 But do that! Find ways...

(raising the goose; and collecting himself)

Well, go on.

NETTY

(her eyes always on the goose; shakily)

Prayer to Antiochan Chronos:

Shield me from the insanity of Time -

(Enter SIMON ECCLES, feverishly excited.)

SIMON ECCLES

Emperor: a **boy** would swim -

JULIAN

(annoyed and distracted; getting down
 the goose.)

What? What is this?

SIMON ECCLES

You listen! A boy -

JULIAN

Oh, a boy, a man, a young girl; child in the blankets,
 old men on the floor - you don't know about any of it!
 Not any of it!

(JULIAN signs to NETTY to resume the ritual.)

SIMON ECCLES

Now you hear this: A boy would swim, a ^{boy} reared in hot places, dry places, oppressive country. But, go here, go there, the soil is aflame; insects and dust drift upon the air. Much wandering, then, in radiance unspeakable - and the boy is at a river. Look! Look! Such a blue river! Chill water, living water in which to wash down the encrusted flesh; in which heat and dirt fall away and slide away down the fluent glitter. Joy!

But - "I dare not! I dare not!" cries the boy. "I am a child reared in hot places, dry places, oppressive country; the cunning of the fish is not in me. Despair - and the hot winds swirling.

But now this child takes tent-rope and moors himself to a gray stump rooted along the blue river. Now, now, he may prance among the chill waves; now wash clean! (The line is not felt as a constriction.)

But children pass, children of the river, and mock the boy, crying, "What angler left thee so for bait, thou pretty bobbler?" These children slip the boy's mooring and run off, in great scorn of him who had not the cunning of the fish.

Emperor! Conceive the terror upon this boy, pulling, pulling, but what surety in that slack rope...ghastly limp...adrift...?

(pause)

NETTY

And he was drowned, I expect, the poor lad?

SIMON ECCLES

(as though NETTY's were just the reaction
he'd been hoping for)

No! Learned to swim!

JULIAN

(looking up; nervously interested)

You say, learned to swim?

SIMON ECCLES

Like a fish! In that he had to.

(awkward pause)

NETTY

(crossing and taking up the goose)

Well, necessity, as they say...

SIMON ECCLES

Do they say that?

(to JULIAN)

Do you say that? If necessity sires virtues, then thrice-
blessed he who sires the necessity. Is it not so, Emperor?

JULIAN

It is a way of putting it. You're irritating.

SIMON ECCLES

Just so! I am the gad-fly but also the hand that beckons.
Push and pull, in the name of the Lord!

JULIAN

And you're circumlocutive.

SIMON ECCLES

(with an ironic bow)

It is the way of the prophet.

JULIAN

Is it? Now you listen to me -

SIMON ECCLES

No! That is not the way of the prophet! The elders of the Antiochan Church would have me listen to them, but I tell them, I say -

JULIAN

(alarmed)

You've been with the presbyters?

SIMON ECCLES

That have I!

NETTY

(as she freshens up the goose)

And been telling them fish stories, too, the old beasts?

SIMON ECCLES

No! I have refreshed and arrayed those good men. In brookwater, in spiritual steel.

JULIAN

(beginning to sense the truth)

What did that parable of the swimmer mean?

SIMON ECCLES

Understand, Emperor! I have been up and down this city
loosing ropes -

JULIAN

(out of patience with SIMON ECCLES'
figurative talk)

What? What? You what?

SIMON ECCLES

(angrily)

I have been unmooring Christian souls! Out there on the
waters of terror, beyond hope of thy deceptive shores,
free of thy civil snares, my Christian people will get
the fisherchild's cunning! "Ye have sinned," I preach,
"Oh, terribly sinned! Yet God the Lord, yet God God the
Lord will float ye."

JULIAN

You mean you've whipped the Antiochans to madness - is
that what you mean?

SIMON ECCLES

Even so. But the People of the City of God - they, oh,
they - !

JULIAN

That's enough!

(expostulating with himself)

Riots the man had to start with! Rebellion maybe;

(turning to SIMON ECCLES)

bloodshed certainly -

(calling)

Pasquale!

SIMON ECCLES

Oh, yes; the godless will die. Some of the godless.

JULIAN

Godly, godless - couldn't we have gone into that?
Couldn't that have been seen to? What do you think I
run this empire for? But you watch it, you watch it!
I've a wolf by the ears, so I don't make any promises.

SIMON ECCLES

Yea, the wolf of thy devilish fury -

JULIAN

No, the wolf of the Roman Army, so you watch it.

(calling)

Pasquale!

(PASQUALE runs in, trumpet in hand.)

PASQUALE

Un-huh?

JULIAN

Move out the third and sixth Pannonians - by cohorts.

At the ready for barricade-work.

PASQUALE

(genially)

Ho-K!

(PASQUALE sets down his trumpet, runs out.)

SIMON ECCLES

(too emphatically)

The Christian people does contemn thy beasts and thy fury!

JULIAN

There's a tradition of that. Oh, these sect~~m~~aries and their disdain^s!

SIMON ECCLES

Disdain, Emperor, is a pedestal any man ~~may~~^{may} mount.

JULIAN

Well, there's the ledge you mount at the street-john - that's a pedestal. And there's Roman Imperial Civilization - that's a pedestal.

SIMON ECCLES

The height of the figure can make all one. But "Rome the Pedestal" (yousaid it, Julian!) "Rome the Pedestal"... Well, what's wanting? What goes on top?

JULIAN

I go on top, my legions about me, our power, our speech.

SIMON ECCLES

Now I would say -

JULIAN

That it's all by way of preface to the Apostolic Romance. You would say that. But the Cunctator, I promise you, was not looking after the interests of your conventicle. Lord Augustus ~~may~~ ^{may} not have heard. Aurelius felt life was too brief, too brief...Aemelian Scipio had other fish to fry. Old Tiberius, sitting there, never gave a thought...

SIMON ECCLES

All the while, though, Holy God was giving a thought: this thought, that thought - thoughts and words turned flesh and spirit - What does it matter the generals didn't know?

JULIAN

Nothing else matters!

(A mob is heard, at some distance. JULIAN runs to a battlement, looks over, and turns back to SIMON ECCLES.)

There is this one tragedy: to find yourself a plaything, in whose hands so ever. Rome has moved the pieces too long to sit among the pawns. The ancient world is ours because we have fought it down and lived painstakingly through it.

SIMON ECCLES

Emperor, just for a moment, what have not we lived through?

(The mob noises get louder)

What field have we not bloodied in fight? True, we put no store in halberds, trenchers: our weapon is the throat.

Throats bared to steel, we drive you away confounded -
we, the unguessed-at triumphant.

JULIAN

When I was sowing my wild oats, there used to be a saying:
"Blessed are the peacemakers." Of course, I don't pretend --

SIMON ECCLES

Well, they are, they are...But blessed the warriors, too,
when they have to be.

(A flourish; cries and battle noises. SIMON
ECCLES runs to the battlement and looks over.)

Flesh to the blade, saints; and courage! Hodie in Paradiso!

(The tumult dies away.)

JULIAN

This violence...what use, I do not grasp to what use
you put this violence. When we have arbiters, when we
have this way of doing things...

SIMON ECCLES

I mock in the teeth -

JULIAN

Well, yes, you do; but you're without appreciations.
If you'd ever -

SIMON ECCLES

Spare me all I've never! I thank God down on knees
for every lacuna in the tale of my corruption.

(The Emperor turns away.)

Julian, Julian, you would have me such a fool and I am
none! Time past is what-you-will; and will you dress
altars to velleities? Oh, nostalgia, nostalgia - ugly,

sensuous Greek word!

JULIAN

Nostalgia, being a glad constancy, can distress none but the inconstant. I think that's fine; would you accept that, please?

(beckoning)

Netty -

(NETTY begins to move toward JULIAN, but SIMON ECCLES interposes.)

SIMON ECCLES

(pleading)

I've only so many voices and so much good will. Ever before me is the vision of the two cities, profligate and beatific.

JULIAN

I have defended myself against the man who mattered and we struck a bargain. As for you, what do I have to do - ?

SIMON ECCLES

(losing his thread)

Demonic and sainted - strange cities. There is a meaning in our cities God has not put there.

NETTY

What about this city, Antioch, right here?

JULIAN

(suddenly remembering)

My creature, my Rag Time Man! He's out with the Antiochans!

SIMON ECCLES

Apostate! They'll tear him apart, kick him to rags!

Apostate!

JULIAN

Are you rejoicing? Am I to understand you are rejoicing?

SIMON ECCLES

I exult, yea, the visitation and furor make me to exult!

Mob, unwrench that Rag Time Man; limb quit limb!

JULIAN

(uncomprehending; to NETTY)

You hear the man?

SIMON ECCLES

A Judas! I wish it to all Judases. All, Roman Emperor!

All the wheedlers and disclaimers and whirlabouts! All

the - inconstant!

NETTY

Oh, how could you ever understand anything His Highness

did? But that other fellow, your particular pal...!

SIMON ECCLES

(a little guiltily)

We were not meant for the same road.

(pointing to the hand which had been
clasped in the RAG TIME MAN'S)

He never let me go about, you see.

JULIAN

Oh, that's the limit! Out you go. Netty....

(NETTY more or less shoves out SIMON ECCLES. She looks after him for a moment, then comes back toward JULIAN, wiping her hands on her dress in disgust.)

NETTY

Rid of him. Faugh...!

(pause)

JULIAN

(musing)

Do you know what I'm like? I'm like a shore watchman has got word of the nearing storm. I run along the beach hitting my bell, but these generations sail too far out. They sprawl on radiant decks; the blueness of the sky is in their mind if anything is in their mind. Gulls shriek...

(pause; NETTY scrutinizes JULIAN)

NETTY

Lord, why did you come to Antioch this time?

JULIAN

(half smiling)

Oh, Antioch...

NETTY

I mean, with all the world's cities -

JULIAN

But, do you know, they're getting to be of a piece - each town shrunk to a cluster of staring faces would stare heaven down. And if you want particulars - "Look!" reply the faces, "Look!" reply the faces...Well, say you do - but it's those faces themselves you can't keep eyes off!

(pause)

Pity about the Rag Time Man...

NETTY

Would it be impertinent to say, I think Your Grace managed that very nicely?

JULIAN

No, it wouldn't be impertinent. It would be the sort of thing you might say...

Well, our faces to the earth! And may the earth's rich tedium be made out in them. That's my prayer for this generation -

(interrupting himself)

But our sacrifice - I was in the way of forgetting. We must get on with it.

NETTY

(startled)

You wouldn't!

JULIAN

I don't see why not. You keep suggesting I throw it up - you tell me why.

NETTY

Because of the Rag Time Man and the crackskull; because of the offense given -

JULIAN

Have a thought to my majesty. Have a thought to your

own piety. Then call back a reply which does credit to neither.

NETTY

I am an old-lady priestess. Respect my years - !

JULIAN

Oh, Netty, I respect your years!

NETTY

Respect a life spent by the altar; and do not send me before the god but in gladness!

JULIAN

Composure will have to do.

NETTY

I say, perfect gladness! Emperor -

JULIAN

Priestess, I would now have my gods by me, or when may I have them by me, and why should I not put them from me?

NETTY

At least give me a moment! I want to find some better victim. That bird there....!

JULIAN

Oh, have we been running on about a bird? Now I favor the good tight ritual -

NETTY

As you ought, surely.

JULIAN

However -

NETTY

If you would just hold off -

JULIAN

However, it is useless to flee a god among his own complexities.

NETTY

I could be there and back -

JULIAN

Irreverent and useless. Where is that goose?

(He begins to look about for it.)

NETTY

(trying to conceal the goose behind her)

There's a heifer I'll bring, white as her own milk -

(JULIAN spies the goose, grabs it.)

Oh!

(JULIAN examines the goose)

It won't do you any good, I'm sure of that. Oh, but you great ones, you great ones...!

JULIAN

A very bloodless goose. But the altar will take a stain: we have been bleeding the meanwhile.

(kneeling and raising the goose aloft as before: to NETTY)

Pray, pray!

NETTY

(eyes the goose apprehensively, her voice shaking so she can scarcely speak)

Prayer to Antiochan Chronos:

Shield me from the insanity of Time,
And from the several manifestations -

(Feathers begin to trickle out of the goose and flutter to the ground. NETTY starts.)

Oh!

JULIAN

Eh?

(He looks inquiringly at her, then at the goose; for a moment he does not understand. Then:)

Feathers! You've given me a stuffed goose!

(He throws the bird down; sternly:)

Cybelic priestess -

NETTY

It's the presbyters! It's the whole thing all over again!

JULIAN

(throwing aloft a handful of the feathers)

O Galilean: Oh, really!

(He reaches his hand in and feels through the goose.)

All feathers; no blood anywhere, no tissue...!

(He roughly tosses the goose to NETTY)

NETTY

Lord?

JULIAN

You will resume the service.

NETTY

(indicating the goose)

Only if it's stuffed -

JULIAN

Though it were a painted goose, we might hope for placation.

NETTY

This is sacrilege!

JULIAN

Not if they understand. And if they don't, it had as well be sacrilege.

(He hands NETTY the knife. NETTY kneels over the goose and begins to smooth it down. JULIAN watches her for a moment, then begins impatiently to walk up and down. The trumpet left by PASQUALE catches his eye. Curious, he picks it up, puts it to his mouth and blows. He succeeds only in producing a wheezy sputter.)

I can't seem to get a sound from it.

NETTY

Please Your Grace, I'm ready, I think.

JULIAN

Well, come ahead. I'm listening.

NETTY

Prayer to Antiochan Chronos:

(JULIAN kneels, upstage of NETTY and facing upstage he raises his arms in supplication, still holding the trumpet in one hand.)

Shield me from the insanity of Time
And from the several manifestations do thou shield me.
Shield me, shield me; close up my days
In the tegument of brass oblivion

And do thou shield me.

Suffer me to remember
How age and the vanity of age
How age and the vanity of age
Come close upon this red-robed fighter king,
Close upon that puller of truth from white stars

And do thou shield me.

Shield me, shield me
And do thou shield me:
The misery - the obscuration - the wrath.

(JULIAN remains motionless. NETTY, still on her knees, reaches out and gathers in the scattered feathers, begins to restuff the goose. JULIAN slowly sets down the trumpet, turns and rises. He watches NETTY for a few moments.)

JULIAN

Here, can I give you a hand with that?

(As he moves toward her, the curtain begins to fall. It has fallen before he reaches her.)