DULCITIUS

ARGUMENT

THE martyrdom of the holy virgins Agape, Chionia, and Irena. The Governor Dulcitius seeks them out in the silence of the night with criminal intent, but hardly has he entered their dwelling than he becomes the victim of a delusion, under which he mistakes for the objects of his passion the saucepans and frying-pans in the kitchen. These he embraces and covers with kisses until his face and clothes are black with soot and dirt. Later, by order of Diocletian, he hands the maidens over to the care of Sisinnius, who is charged with their punishment. Sisinnius in his turn is made the sport of the most strange delusions, but at length succeeds in getting Agape and Chionia burnt, and Irena shot to death with arrows.

CHARACTERS

THE EMPEROR DIOCLETIAN.
AGAPE.
CHIONIA.
IRENA.
DULCITIUS (*Governor of Thessalonica*).
SOLDIERS.
SISINNIUS.
WIFE TO DULCITIUS.
□*Ushers of the Imperial Palace*.
□*Ladies-in-Waiting on the Wife of Dulcitius*.

DULCITIUS

SCENE I

DIOCLETIAN. The pure and famous race to which you belong and your own rare beauty make it fitting that you should be wedded to the highest in our court. Thus we decree, making the condition that you first promise to deny your Christ and sacrifice to the gods.

AGAPE. We beg you not to concern yourself about us, and it is useless to make preparations for our marriage. Nothing can make us deny that Name which all should confess, or let our purity be stained.

DIOCLETIAN. What does this madness mean?

AGAPE. What sign of madness do you see in us?

DIOCLETIAN. It is clear enough.

AGAPE. In what way are we mad?

DIOCLETIAN. Is it not madness to give up practising an ancient religion and run after this silly new Christian superstition?

AGAPE. You are bold to slander the majesty of Almighty God. It is dangerous.

DIOCLETIAN. Dangerous? To whom?

AGAPE. To you, and to the state you rule.

DIOCLETIAN. The girl raves. Take her away.

CHIONIA. My sister does not rave. She is right.

DIOCLETIAN. This mænad seems even more violent than the other! Remove her also from our presence, and we will question the third.

IRENA. You will find her as rebellious and as determined to resist.

DIOCLETIAN. Irena, you are the youngest in years. Show yourself the oldest in dignity.

IRENA. Pray tell me how.

DIOCLETIAN. Bow your head to the gods, and set an example to your sisters. It may rebuke and save them.

IRENA. Let those who wish to provoke the wrath of the Most High prostrate themselves before idols! I will not dishonour this head which has been anointed with heavenly oil by abasing it at the feet of images.

DIOCLETIAN. The worship of the gods does not bring dishonour to those who practise it, but, on the contrary, the greatest honour.

IRENA. What could be more shameful baseness, what baser shame, than to venerate slaves as if they were lords?

DIOCLETIAN. I do not ask you to worship slaves, but the gods of princes and the rulers of the earth.

IRENA. A god who can be bought cheap in the market-place, what is he but a slave?

DIOCLETIAN. Enough of this presumptuous chatter. The rack shall put an end to it!

IRENA. That is what we desire. We ask nothing better than to suffer the most cruel tortures for the love of Christ.

DIOCLETIAN. Let these obstinate women who dare to defy our authority be laden with chains and thrown into a dungeon. Let them be examined by Governor Dulcitius.

SCENE II

DULCITIUS. Soldiers, produce your prisoners.

SOLDIERS. The ones you wanted to see are in there.

DULCITIUS. Ye Gods, but these girls are beautiful! What grace, what charm!

SOLDIERS. Perfect!

DULCITIUS. I am enraptured!

SOLDIERS. No wonder!

DULCITIUS. I'm in love! Do you think they will fall in love with me?

SOLDIERS. From what we know, you will have little success.

DULCITIUS. Why?

SOLDIERS. Their faith is too strong.

DULCITIUS. A few sweet words will work wonders!

SOLDIERS. They despise flattery.

DULCITIUS. Then I shall woo in another fashion—with torture!

SOLDIERS. They would not care.

DULCITIUS. What's to be done, then?

SOLDIERS. That is for you to find out.

DULCITIUS. Lock them in the inner room—the one leading out of the passage where the pots and pans are kept.

SOLDIERS. Why there?

DULCITIUS. I can visit them oftener.

SOLDIERS. It shall be done.

SCENE III

DULCITIUS. What can the prisoners be doing at this hour of night?

SOLDIERS. They pass the time singing hymns.

DULCITIUS. Let us approach.

SOLDIERS. Now you can hear their silver-sweet voices in the distance.

DULCITIUS. Take your torches, and guard the doors. I will go in and enjoy myself in those lovely arms!

SOLDIERS. Enter. We will wait for you here.

SCENE IV

AGAPE. What noise is that outside the door?

IRENA. It is that wretch Dulcitius.

CHIONIA. Now may God protect us!

AGAPE. Amen.

CHIONIA. There is more noise! It sounds like the clashing of pots and pans and fire-irons.

IRENA. I will go and look. Come quick and peep through the crack of the door!

AGAPE. What is it?

IRENA. Oh, look! He must be out of his senses! I believe he thinks that he is kissing us.

AGAPE. What is he doing?

IRENA. Now he presses the saucepans tenderly to his breast, now the kettles and frying-pans! He is kissing them hard!

CHIONIA. How absurd!

IRENA. His face, his hands, his clothes! They are all as black as soot. He looks like an Ethiope.

AGAPE. I am glad. His body should turn black—to match his soul, which is possessed of a devil.

IRENA. Look! He is going now. Let us watch the soldiers and see what they do when he goes out.

SCENE V

SOLDIERS. What's this? Either one possessed by the devil, or the devil himself. Let's be off!

DULCITIUS. Soldiers, soldiers! Why do you hurry away? Stay, wait! Light me to my house with your torches.

SOLDIERS. The voice is our master's voice, but the face is a devil's. Come, let's take to our heels! This devil means us no good.

DULCITIUS. I will hasten to the palace. I will tell the whole court how I have been insulted.

SCENE VI

DULCITIUS. Ushers, admit me at once. I have important business with the Emperor.

USHERS. Who is this fearsome, horrid monster? Coming here in these filthy rags! Come, let us beat him and throw him down the steps. Stop him from coming further.

DULCITIUS. Ye gods, what has happened to me? Am I not dressed in my best? Am I not clean and fine in my person? And yet everyone who meets me expresses disgust at the sight of me and treats me as if I were some foul monster! I will go to my wife. She will tell me the truth. But here she comes. Her looks are wild, her hair unbound, and all her household follow her weeping.

SCENE VII

WIFE OF DULCITIUS. My lord, my lord, what evil has come on you? Have you lost your reason, Dulcitius? Have the Christ-worshippers put a spell on you?

DULCITIUS. Now at last I know! Those artful women have made an ass of me!

WIFE OF DULCITIUS. What troubled me most, and made my heart ache, was that you should not know there was anything amiss with you.

DULCITIUS. Those impudent wenches shall be stripped and exposed naked in public. They shall have a taste of the outrage to which I have been subjected!

SCENE VIII

SOLDIERS. Here we are sweating like pigs and what's the use? Their clothes cling to their bodies like their own skin. What's more, our chief, who ordered us to strip them, sits there snoring, and there's no way of waking him. We will go to the Emperor and tell him all that has passed.

SCENE IX

DIOCLETIAN. I grieve to hear of the outrageous way in which the Governor Dulcitius has been insulted and hoaxed! But these girls shall not boast of having blasphemed our gods with impunity, or of having made a mock of those who worship them. I will entrust the execution of my vengeance to Count Sisinnius.

SCENE X

SISINNIUS. Soldiers, where are these impudent hussies who are to be put to the torture?

SOLDIERS. In there.

SISINNIUS. Keep Irena back, and bring the others here.

SOLDIERS. Why is one to be treated differently?

SISINNIUS. She is young, and besides she may be more easily influenced when not intimidated by her sisters.

SOLDIERS. That may be so.

SCENE XI

SOLDIERS. We have brought the girls you asked for.

SISINNIUS. Agape, and you, Chionia, take my advice.

AGAPE. And if we do, what then?

SISINNIUS. You will sacrifice to the gods.

AGAPE. We offer a perpetual sacrifice of praise to the true God, the eternal Father, to His Son, co-eternal, and to the Holy Ghost.

SISINNIUS. I do not speak of that sacrifice. That is prohibited on pain of the most severe penalties.

AGAPE. You have no power over us, and can never compel us to sacrifice to demons.

SISINNIUS. Do not be obstinate. Sacrifice to the gods, or by order of the Emperor Diocletian I must put you to death.

CHIONIA. Your Emperor has ordered you to put us to death, and you must obey, as we scorn his decree. If you were to spare us out of pity, you also would die.

SISINNIUS. Come, soldiers! Seize these blasphemers and fling them alive into the flames.

SOLDIERS. We will build a pyre at once. The fierceness of the fire will soon put an end to their insolence.

AGAPE. O Lord, we know Thy power! It would not be anything strange or new if the fire forgot its nature and obeyed Thee. But we are weary of this world, and we implore Thee to break the bonds that chain our souls, and to let our bodies be consumed that we may rejoice with Thee in heaven.

SOLDIERS. O wonderful, most wonderful! Their spirits have left their bodies, but there is no sign of any hurt. Neither their hair, nor their garments, much less their bodies, have been touched by the flames!

SISINNIUS. Bring Irena here.

SOLDIERS. There she is.

SCENE XII

SISINNIUS. Irena, take warning from the fate of your sisters, and tremble, for if you follow their example you will perish.

IRENA. I long to follow their example, and to die, that I may share their eternal joy.

SISINNIUS. Yield, yield!

IRENA. I will yield to no man who persuades me to sin.

SISINNIUS. If you persist in your refusal, I shall not grant you a swift death. I shall eke it out, and every day I shall increase and renew your torments.

IRENA. The greater my pain, the greater my glory!

SISINNIUS. You are not afraid of being tortured, I know, but I can use another means that will be abhorrent to you.

IRENA. By Christ's help I shall escape from all you can devise against me.

SISINNIUS. I can send you to a house of ill-fame, where your body will be abominably defiled.

IRENA. Better far that my body should suffer outrage than my soul.

SISINNIUS. When you are dishonoured and forced to live among harlots, you can no longer be numbered among the virgins.

IRENA. The wage of sin is death; the wage of suffering a crown. If the soul does not consent, there is no guilt.

SISINNIUS. In vain I try to spare her, and show pity to her youth!

SOLDIERS. We could have told you as much. She is not to be frightened, and nothing can make her worship the gods.

SISINNIUS. I will show her no more mercy.

SOLDIERS. That is the only way to deal with her.

SISINNIUS. Have no pity. Be rough with her, and drag her to the lowest brothel you can find.

IRENA. They will never take me there.

SISINNIUS. Indeed! What can prevent them?

IRENA. The power that rules the world.

SISINNIUS. We shall see.

IRENA. Yes! Sooner than you will like!

SISINNIUS. Soldiers, do not let the absurd prophecies of this woman interfere with your duty.

SOLDIERS. We are not likely to be frightened by a slip of a girl! We will carry out your orders at once.

SCENE XIII

SISINNIUS. Who are these men hurrying towards us? They cannot be the soldiers who took away Irena. Yet they resemble them. Yes, these are the men! Why have you returned so suddenly? Why are you panting for breath?

SOLDIERS. We ran back to find you.

SISINNIUS. Where is the girl?

SOLDIERS. On the crest of the mountain.

SISINNIUS. What mountain?

SOLDIERS. The mountain yonder, nearest this place.

SISINNIUS. O fools, madmen! Have you lost your senses?

SOLDIERS. What's the matter? Why do you look at us so threateningly, and speak with such anger?

SISINNIUS. May the gods crush you with their thunder!

SOLDIERS. What have we done? How have we offended? We have only obeyed your orders.

SISINNIUS. Fools! Did I not tell you to take this rebellious girl to a brothel?

SOLDIERS. That is so, but while we were on the way up came two young strangers and told us you had sent them to take Irena to the summit of the mountain.

SISINNIUS. I learn this for the first time from you.

SOLDIERS. So we see.

SISINNIUS. What were these strangers like?

SOLDIERS. They were gorgeously dressed and looked like people of rank.

SISINNIUS. Did you not follow them?

SOLDIERS. Yes, we followed them.

SISINNIUS. What did they do?

SOLDIERS. They placed themselves one on each side of Irena, and told us to hasten and tell you what we had seen.

SISINNIUS. Then there is nothing to do but for me to mount my horse and ride to the mountain to discover who has dared to play us this trick.

SOLDIERS. We will come too.

SCENE XIV

SISINNIUS. What has happened to me? These Christians have bewitched me. I wander blindly round this hill, and when I stumble on a path I can neither follow it nor return upon my steps.

SOLDIERS. We are all the sport of some strange enchantment. We are exhausted. If you let this mad-woman live an hour longer it will be the death of us all.

SISINNIUS. Take a bow one of you, bend it as far as you can, and loose a shaft that shall pierce this devilish witch.

SOLDIERS. That's the way!

IRENA. You wretched Sisinnius! Do you not blush for your shameful defeat? Are you not ashamed that you could not overcome the resolution of a little child without resorting to force of arms?

SISINNIUS. I accept the shame gladly, since now I am sure of your death.

IRENA. To me my death means joy, but to you calamity. For your cruelty you will be damned in Tartarus. But I shall receive the martyr's palm, and, adorned with the crown of virginity, I shall enter the azure palace of the Eternal King, to Whom be glory and honour for ever and ever!