

THE BRASS BUTTERFLY



William
Golding



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The Brass Butterfly

A Play in Three Acts

WILLIAM GOLDING

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FABER & FABER

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To
ALASTAIR SIM
in gratitude and affection

Characters

MAMILLIUS
CAPTAIN OF THE GUARD
POSTUMUS
EMPEROR
PHANOCLES
EUPHROSYNE
SERGEANT
ATTENDANTS, ETC.

First Performance

The first performance in Great Britain of THE BRASS BUTTERFLY was given at the New Theatre Oxford, on 24 February 1958. It was directed by Alastair Sim. The setting was designed by Edward Seago and the costumes and furniture by Hutchinson Scott. The cast was as follows:

MAMILLIUS	Jeremy Spenser
CAPTAIN	Jack Hedley
POSTUMUS	George Selway
EMPEROR	Alastair Sim
PHANOCLES	George Cole
EUPHROSYNE	Eileen Moore
SERGEANT	Geoffrey Matthews
ATTENDANTS, SLAVES, ETC.:	Stella Brett, Gillian Muir, Pauline Sutton, Hendrik Baker, Ron Scott-Dodd, Michael Gartred, Maitland Moss

ACT I

Scene I. *The EMPEROR'S villa on the island of Capri.*

Everything is on a large scale but in exquisite good taste. Perhaps the taste is the least bit too good—in any case the bust of a young and brutal-looking man, Back centre, is noticeable as the only sign of an exterior world where life is earnest, real and rather bloody-minded. The bust stands under an opening to the sky.

Entrances: Right, to depths of villa. Left, to the open.

Architect has cunningly suggested on the inside here, what a magnificent front door the EMPEROR has to his summer cottage. Bright sunlight.

Time: Late afternoon some time in the third century A.D. No one is going to be more specific. It is an unspecific-looking place, except for the bust.

MAMILLIUS, a man-boy?—is lying on his stomach on a couch Right centre. He is in the throes of a literary composition.

MAMILLIUS: “Darken the five bright windows of my mind,

My soul is stretched out rigid in her bed.

Admit the corpse within. Pull down the blind—”

Pull down the blind ...

(Sees bust—Springs up, flings cloak over it and returns to the couch.)

“Admit the corpse within. Pull down the blind.”

Pull down—pull down the blind—

(Pause. Then inspiration comes.)

“How long—”

(OFFICER OF THE GUARD is heard shouting, off.)

OFFICER: Halt. Into line. Left turn. By the right—dress! Guard and men with arms—order—arms!

Stand at—ease!

(CAPTAIN OF THE GUARD comes in, left. Halts. Draws his sword. Stands easy. MAMILLIUS pretends he is alone, but each time he paces towards the door the CAPTAIN comes to attention and reverts to at-ease as he turns away.)

MAMILLIUS: Tell me, Captain, must we continue to play this foolish game?

CAPTAIN: Game, sir?

MAMILLIUS: Moving your feet like that.

CAPTAIN: It's not a game, sir. Regulations.

MAMILLIUS: And without regulations the empire would totter.

CAPTAIN: Yes, sir.

MAMILLIUS: That would be exciting at least.

CAPTAIN: Yes, sir.

MAMILLIUS: I am new to the imperial scene, Captain. Tell me, do you jump about just so when my

grandfather comes near you?

CAPTAIN: ~~Oh no, sir. We stand to attention whenever the Emperor comes in sight.~~

MAMILLIUS: And when General Postumus—(*looking at cloak on bust which he has forgotten and which he now removes with elaborate unconcern*)—and when General Postumus comes in sight?

CAPTAIN: No, sir. Twenty paces for General Postumus—but we extend it a bit for the General, since he takes such a personal interest in discipline.

MAMILLIUS: I am neither the Emperor nor General Postumus; just make yourself as comfortable as the dreary uniform will allow you.

CAPTAIN: Sorry, sir. Regulations. Distance makes no difference now. “Whilst addressed by a member of the Imperial Family officers of the guard will remain at attention until dismissed or until the Imperial Personage indicates beyond all reasonable doubt that the officer is no longer the subject of his interest.”

MAMILLIUS: How bored I am! How bored you must be!

CAPTAIN: No, sir. Used to it.

MAMILLIUS: There’s only one Imperial Family.

CAPTAIN: Yes, sir. But the regulations are the same in the vicinity of the vestal virgins and at public executions.

MAMILLIUS: So I’m an Imperial Personage.

CAPTAIN: Yes, sir. Just, sir.

MAMILLIUS: Only just? How near do I have to come before you give that horrid little jump?

CAPTAIN: Five paces, sir.

MAMILLIUS: Because I’m a bastard?

CAPTAIN: (*shocked*). Oh no, sir. You’re not a bastard, sir. You’re the Emperor’s illegitimate grandson sir.

MAMILLIUS: Tell me, how does an Imperial Personage dismiss an officer?

CAPTAIN: The Emperor does it with one finger, like that, sir. Sorry, sir. I’m not here for you. I had to turn out the guard because General Postumus is coming to say good-bye to the Emperor. You’re just an accident, sir.

MAMILLIUS: A what?

CAPTAIN: Oh—er—what I meant was—well—I certainly didn’t mean what you probably thought I meant. (*Sees Postumus approaching.*) Excuse me, sir. Guard and men with arms! Shun! Slope arms!

(ENTER POSTUMUS.)

POSTUMUS: (*To Captain*). Take up position with the guard and stand them at ease.

CAPTAIN: Sir. (*Salutes and exits. Voice off*) Guard. Order arms! Stand at ease! Keep still in the back there.

POSTUMUS: Did you put him up to it?

MAMILLIUS: If you are talking about the Captain, he gets everything out of a book, Postumus.

POSTUMUS: I’m not talking about the Captain, you young fool. This other business. Someone let them get away. Did you do it?

MAMILLIUS: I’m too bored to do anything.

POSTUMUS: Give me a straight answer! (*Seizes his wrist.*) Did you help them escape or not?

MAMILLIUS: Let me go! Let me go! I shall go back to Sybaris. I shall complain to Grandfather. I warn you, Postumus. I warn you.

POSTUMUS: Don't think you'll get away with it, Mamillius. I know what sort of influence you've got
with him—

MAMILLIUS: A civilizing influence. Grandfather!

(ENTER THE EMPEROR ATTENDED.)

EMPEROR : Ah, there you are, Postumus. Saying good-bye to Mamillius? I'm so glad you get on
well together. Come and sit for a moment, and drink wine with me.

POSTUMUS: Caesar—(*Emperor halts him with a gesture and signs slaves to leave*). Someone gave them
a boat. Who was it? Did he?

MAMILLIUS: I haven't got a boat.

EMPEROR: No, of course he hasn't. Would you like one?

POSTUMUS: Caesar!

EMPEROR: He doesn't understand, you know. Mamillius, a dreadful thing has happened. The ends of
justice have been thwarted.

POSTUMUS: And I've been made to look a fool.

EMPEROR: Nothing could do that. Nothing shall do that. You are my Heir Designate, Postumus. Take
your fleet to Tripoli and extend the Empire. Go and give the blessing of civilization to the
Sahara.

POSTUMUS: I shall do so, and hope to show myself worthy of the imperial inheritance. But these three
men—I must be certain that my work here is completed.

EMPEROR: The Heir Designate, Mamillius, pausing here at Capri to pay his respects to the Emperor,
since the wind was contrary, occupied some days in examining the Imperial Household for
disaffected persons, of whom he found three.

POSTUMUS: The executions should have taken place this afternoon.

EMPEROR: But they got away.

MAMILLIUS: What was their crime?

POSTUMUS: They were Christians.

EMPEROR: Postumus is about the only man left to keep up the good old Roman customs.

MAMILLIUS: Why should he think I had anything to do with it? Christianity is horribly vulgar. I do not
care for vulgarity.

POSTUMUS: After the orders I gave, only a member of the Imperial Household could have got them a
boat.

MAMILLIUS: Perhaps they simply stole one.

EMPEROR: They would hardly do that, do you think?

POSTUMUS: And therefore I can only conclude—

MAMILLIUS: —that I gave them one?

(POSTUMUS rises.)

EMPEROR: (*intervening*). Postumus, the boy has only just heard about your Christians.

POSTUMUS: Where has he been these last two days?

EMPEROR: In Arcadia with the Muse of poetry. Postumus, you and I know so much more than he. We
live in a different world—the real one. Accept my assurances to quieten the thought lurking in
your head. The boy is, and will remain, a private person. Eh, Mamillius?

MAMILLIUS: Yes, Grandfather.

EMPEROR: He cares nothing for public affairs—does he, Mamillius?

MAMILLIUS: No, Grandfather.

EMPEROR: Have I ever deceived you, Postumus?

POSTUMUS: Yes.

EMPEROR: But in matters of moment?

POSTUMUS: Perhaps not. Or if you have, Caesar, you have concealed it very cleverly.

EMPEROR: Come, Postumus, you are too intelligent to be deceived; so you may accept my assurances.

(Pause)

POSTUMUS: (*suddenly*). Contrary wind or not, I must be going, or there will be none of the season left.

EMPEROR: You accept my word then?

POSTUMUS: I have your interests at heart—

EMPEROR: Because they are your interests too.

POSTUMUS: Let the boy remain your companion so long as he becomes nothing more important.

EMPEROR: Surely.

POSTUMUS: And find out who gave those Christians a boat.

EMPEROR: The enquiry could not be in safer hands. Goodbye, my dear Heir Designate. Come back with the usual laurels on your sword.

POSTUMUS: I shall try to do so.

EMPEROR: A last cup before you go?

POSTUMUS: No, no.

EMPEROR: Good-bye then. Our thoughts go with you and your gallant men. And remember, Postumus, shall keep you informed of everything that happens.

POSTUMUS: I shall keep myself informed. For the time being, good-bye, Caesar.

(EXIT POSTUMUS.)

EMPEROR: Good-bye! Good-bye!

OFFICER: (*off*). Guard shun! Slope arms! Present—arms!

(FANFARE)

EMPEROR: Good-bye! Good-bye! Death or victory! But victory for choice, of course!

OFFICER: (*off*). Slope—arms! Order arms! Turning right—dismiss!

EMPEROR: That was an affecting moment, eh, Mamillius? Good-bye! Good-bye!

OFFICER: (*distant*). Present—arms!

(FANFARE)

EMPEROR: My blessing etcetera. Good-bye! How many today? (*Turning to petitions*) Watch him go, Mamillius. It is a splendid ritual. Watch him, Mamillius. Mamillius!

MAMILLIUS: (*sulkily*). Caesar?

EMPEROR: Report his progress, will you? You might wave once or twice. Try to combine affectionate regret with boyish impetuosity.

MAMILLIUS: The Heir Designate is about to step down to the quay.

OFFICER: (*very distant*). Present—arms!

(FANFARE *distant*)

EMPEROR: It is very trying to a man of any musical sensibility to have to hear that same old fanfare over and over again. Not that Postumus minds, you know. So long as the instruments are all at the same angle he is perfectly happy.

MAMILLIUS: The Heir Designate is about to go aboard a boat.

EMPEROR: Why are you not waving?

MAMILLIUS: Why should I?

EMPEROR: Come away then, and let me.

(EMPEROR *gives some last courtly waves.*)

There. I think that will do. And now for these petitions. Will you help me?

MAMILLIUS: I looked at some. They bore me.

EMPEROR: They bore me, too. Forget him now, Mamillius. Postumus will be gone a long time.

MAMILLIUS: I shan't feel easy till he's off the island. There. At last he's seated in the boat.

EMPEROR: That will take him out to the fleet. How peaceful everything is!

MAMILLIUS: Too peaceful.

EMPEROR: Already? Let me think how you can be amused.

(*He lifts a finger. In the villa a EUNUCH begins to sing. MAMILLIUS listens for a while.*)

MAMILLIUS: No.

(EMPEROR *switches off EUNUCH.*)

Even your famous singing eunuch is not what he was.

EMPEROR: (*drily*). He would agree with you, Mamillius.

MAMILLIUS: Is there an imperial recipe for the cure of boredom?

EMPEROR: Millions of people must think that an emperor's grandson—even one on the left-hand side—is utterly happy.

MAMILLIUS: I have run through the sources of happiness.

EMPEROR: An hour ago you were eager to help me with these petitions.

MAMILLIUS: That was before I had begun to read them. Does the whole world think of nothing but cadging favours?

EMPEROR: Write some more of your exquisite verses. I particularly liked the ones to be inscribed on an eggshell. They appealed to the gastronome in me.

MAMILLIUS: I found someone had done it before. I shall not write on eggshells again.

EMPEROR: Try the other arts.

MAMILLIUS: Declamation? Gastronomy?

EMPEROR: You are too shy for the one and too young for the other.

MAMILLIUS: I thought you applauded my interest in cooking.

EMPEROR: You talk, Mamillius, but you do not understand. Gastronomy is not the pleasure of youth but the evocation of it.

MAMILLIUS: The Father of his Country is pleased to be obscure. And I am still bored.

EMPEROR: If you were not so wonderfully transparent I should prescribe senna.

MAMILLIUS: I am boringly regular.

EMPEROR: A woman?

MAMILLIUS: (*indignantly*). I hope I am more civilized than that!

(THE EMPEROR *rocks with laughter.*)

Am I so funny?

EMPEROR: I am sorry. Mamillius, you are so desperately up-to-date that you dare not enjoy yourself for fear of being thought old-fashioned.

MAMILLIUS: The trouble is, Grandfather, I do not even want to. There is nothing new under the sun.

Everything has been invented, everything has been written, everything has been done.

EMPEROR: Have you ever heard of China?

MAMILLIUS: No.

EMPEROR: I must have heard of China first twenty years ago. An island, I thought, beyond India. It would take Postumus years to get there with his fleet. Since then, odd fragments of information have filtered through to me. Do you know, Mamillius, that China is an empire bigger than our own?

MAMILLIUS: That is nonsense. A contradiction in nature.

EMPEROR: But true, none the less.

MAMILLIUS: Travellers' tales.

EMPEROR: I try to prove to you how vast and exciting life is.

MAMILLIUS: I do not care to go exploring.

EMPEROR: Stay home then, and amuse an old man who grows lonely.

MAMILLIUS: Thank you for allowing me to be your fool.

EMPEROR: Boy, go and get mixed up in a good, bloody battle!

MAMILLIUS: I leave that sort of thing to your *official* heir. Postumus is an insensitive bruiser. He can have all the battles he wants. Besides, a battle cheapens life, and I find life cheap enough already.

EMPEROR: Then the Father of his Country can do nothing for his own grandson.

MAMILLIUS: I am tired of twiddling my fingers.

EMPEROR: So soon? Have I been very foolish? Be careful, Mamillius. A condition of our unusual friendship is that you keep your fingers out of hot water. Go on twiddling them. I want you to have a long life, even if in the end you die of boredom. Do not become ambitious.

MAMILLIUS: I am not ambitious for power.

EMPEROR: Continue to convince Postumus of that. Leave the prospect of ruling to him. He likes it.

MAMILLIUS: Yet you would prefer—

EMPEROR: No.

MAMILLIUS: You would prefer—

EMPEROR: Be silent!

MAMILLIUS: —that I should inherit the gold fringe on your purple toga.

EMPEROR: What place do you think this is? Have you read no history? If his agents heard you we should neither of us live another six months. Never say such a thing again! It is an order! (*Pause.*) Listen.

MAMILLIUS: I am listening.

EMPEROR: Not to me. Do you hear nothing?

MAMILLIUS: I hear nothing. Yes, I do. Like the beating of a heart.

EMPEROR: It is indeed the beating of a heart, Mamillius—a thousand hearts. They cannot spread the sails, but Postumus is in a hurry. There is a drum in every ship and the slaves keep time to it. They are condemned to the oar as I am condemned daily to these merciless petitions. Life is not organized to make men happy, Mamillius.

MAMILLIUS: What have I to do with slaves?

EMPEROR: Nothing practical, of course; but your indifference to the idea of them argues a dislike of humanity.

MAMILLIUS: And you?

EMPEROR: I accept humanity.

MAMILLIUS: I avoid humanity.

EMPEROR: You must not do that, Mamillius. We must get Postumus to agree to my giving you a small
governorship. Egypt?

MAMILLIUS: Greece, if I must.

EMPEROR: Greece is booked, I am afraid—there is even a waiting list. It is our Roman passion for
second-hand culture.

MAMILLIUS: Egypt, then.

EMPEROR: A part of Egypt. If you go, Mamillius, it will be for your own sake. You would find nothing
of me on your return but ashes and a monument or two. Be happy then, if only to cheer an ageing
civil servant!

MAMILLIUS: What has Egypt to make me *happy*? There is nothing new, even out of Africa.

EMPEROR: Here is something new for you! They are two of your prospective subjects. You had better
see them.

(MAMILLIUS *takes the petition and turns so that he can read it in the sunset light.*)

MAMILLIUS: Oh, no! It can't be! But Grandfather—what does he mean?

EMPEROR: I hoped you would explain.

MAMILLIUS: But the diagram! Grandfather, it's indecent!

(*He giggles.*)

EMPEROR: Be careful Mamillius—you are harbouring old-fashioned ideas—

MAMILLIUS: No—but look at that! Really!

(*They laugh together.*)

MAMILLIUS: Otherwise, I suppose it *could* be some sort of a ship.

EMPEROR: I get the same impression. At least this one is literate, if somewhat incoherent.

MAMILLIUS: He's mad!

EMPEROR: They are. Frequently.

MAMILLIUS: Violent?

EMPEROR: Sometimes.

MAMILLIUS: I know what he wants.

EMPEROR: What?

MAMILLIUS: He wants to play at boats with Caesar!

(*They laugh.*)

EMPEROR: Oh, very good, Mamillius—very good! Yes—he wants to play at boats! Shall we see him?

MAMILLIUS: Oh, yes please, Grandfather.

EMPEROR: Very well.

(MAMILLIUS *strikes bell.*

ENTER CAPTAIN.)

MAMILLIUS: Captain—

CAPTAIN: Sir?

MAMILLIUS: The Emperor will—what will you do, Grandfather?

EMPEROR: Grant an audience, Captain.

CAPTAIN: Caesar!

(*He takes his station behind the EMPEROR'S chair with sword drawn.*)

MAMILLIUS: (*coldly official*). The Emperor grants an audience to the petitioners—what are they,
Grandfather?

EMPEROR: Phanocles and Euphrosyne.

MAMILLIUS: —to the petitioners Phanocles and Euphrosyne.

USHER: (*off*). The Emperor permits the petitioners Phanocles and Euphrosyne to approach him!

MAMILLIUS: What do I do?

EMPEROR: Show an interest in something.

(ENTER USHER. PHANOCLES *is bobbing behind him. As the USHER speaks PHANOCLES gets round him and explores the stage in search of the EMPEROR.*)

USHER: Caesar: The petitioners Phanocles and Euphrosyne!

(USHER *can find neither.*)

PHANOCLES: Caesar! Caesar!

EMPEROR: So you are Phanocles?

PHANOCLES: An Alexandrian, Caesar.

(ENTER EUPHROSYNE *balancing the model on her head. THE USHER, satisfied that he has now delivered both petitioners, withdraws.*)

EMPEROR: Mamillius—Mamillius!

MAMILLIUS: Caesar?

EMPEROR: Ah! I see. You are showing an interest, I believe.

MAMILLIUS: Yes, Caesar.

EMPEROR: You are guarding my chair, Captain—not eyeing my guests.

CAPTAIN: Caesar!

EMPEROR: And you, Phanocles?

PHANOCLES: Phanocles, Caesar—the son of Myron, an Alexandrian.

EMPEROR: Son of Myron? The Librarian?

PHANOCLES: Yes, Caesar.

EMPEROR: I remember him. Did your father finish his dictionary? He had reached B when I left some forty years ago.

PHANOCLES: He died seven years ago, Caesar. He reached F, but it was too much for him.

EMPEROR: And you will finish his life's work?

PHANOCLES: I was an assistant, Caesar—but then—something happened. Look at this, Caesar. (*He realizes he is without the model, then remembers, looks round, and discovers it on Euphrosyne's head. After some difficulty he manages to set it up on portable trestles.*)

EMPEROR: And you want to play boats with Caesar?

PHANOCLES: There was obstruction, Caesar, from top to bottom. I was wasting my time and public money, they said, and I was dabbling in black magic, they said, and they laughed. I am a poor man, and when the last of my father's money was spent—he left me a little, you understand—not much—and when I spent that—what are we to do, Caesar? There was obstruction and mockery, incomprehension, anger, persecution—

EMPEROR: How much did it cost you to see me today?

PHANOCLES: Three pieces of gold.

EMPEROR: That seems reasonable. I am not in Rome.

PHANOCLES: It was all I had.

EMPEROR: Mamillius, see that Phanocles does not lose by his visit. Mamillius!

MAMILLIUS: Caesar.

EMPEROR: And this lady? Is she your wife?

PHANOCLES: She is my sister.

EMPEROR: Your sister?

PHANOCLES: Euphrosyne, Caesar. A free woman and a virgin.

EMPEROR: Lady, let us see your face.

PHANOCLES: Caesar! She—

EMPEROR: You must accustom yourself to our western manners, Phanocles. We intend no discourtesy, lady. Modesty is the proper ornament of virginity. But let us see your face, so that we may know to whom we speak.

(EUPHROSYNE *with extreme reluctance lowers the veil.*)

Lady, you were well named for one of the Graces.

PHANOCLES: My sister!

MAMILLIUS: Phanocles, you bring us the tenth wonder of the world!

PHANOCLES: But Lord, I have not explained!

MAMILLIUS: “The speechless eloquence of beauty.”

EMPEROR: I have heard that somewhere before. Has no sculptor seen your sister?

PHANOCLES: Sculptor?

MAMILLIUS: She should be immortalized as Aphrodite!

PHANOCLES: Daaah! Forgive me, Caesar—she is too modest—she is too sensitive—she—she—

EMPEROR: Calm yourself. No harm is intended to you or to your sister. Mamillius, they are our guests!

MAMILLIUS: Oh, yes, Grandfather!

PHANOCLES: My model—

EMPEROR: So you are a sculptor too?

MAMILLIUS: Phanocles and the lady Euphrosyne are the Emperor’s guests!

(*During the ensuing speeches, EUPHROSYNE is removed in as much grave pomp as the company can muster.*)

PHANOCLES: My model!

MAMILLIUS: Take great care of her. Go with them, lady.

EMPEROR: Be happy, lady. You too, Phanocles.

MAMILLIUS: Farewell until a later hour!

EMPEROR: You speak verses. And now, Phanocles, come, sit down. A cup of wine to celebrate her—
your—arrival.

MAMILLIUS: A toast to beauty!

PHANOCLES: But my model! My working model!

EMPEROR: I divine your troubles, my dear Phanocles, and rest assured that they are all over. All, all, over. You shall have all the marble or bronze you want.

PHANOCLES: Marble is useless.

EMPEROR: Gold, perhaps.

MAMILLIUS: Warm, flesh-tinted alabaster.

EMPEROR: No, no. Pay no attention, Phanocles. Bronze. My dear boy, you are making me very happy!
rejoice with you.

MAMILLIUS: What is her voice like?

PHANOCLES: My sister’s voice?

MAMILLIUS: How does she speak?

PHANOCLES: She speaks very seldom, Lord, I cannot remember the quality of her voice.

MAMILLIUS: Men have built temples for objects of less beauty!

PHANOCLES: She is my sister!

EMPEROR: Have you promised her in marriage? Is she betrothed?

PHANOCLES: No, Caesar.

EMPEROR: But if you are so poor, Phanocles, has it never occurred to you that you might make a fortune by a brilliant connection?

PHANOCLES: (*blank*). What woman would you have me marry, Caesar?

MAMILLIUS: Has she an ambition?

EMPEROR: My dear Mamillius, a beautiful woman is her own ambition.

MAMILLIUS: She is all the reasons in the world for poetry!

PHANOCLES: (*angrily. Jumps up.*) I cannot follow you, Caesar. I cannot understand men. Of what importance is the bedding of individuals when there is such an ocean at our feet of eternal relationships to examine or confirm?

EMPEROR: Explain a little further.

PHANOCLES: If you let a stone drop from your hand it will fall.

EMPEROR: I hope we are following you.

PHANOCLES: Each substance has affinities of an eternal and immutable nature with every other substance. A man who understands them—this lord here—

EMPEROR: My grandson, the Lord Mamillius.

PHANOCLES: Lord, do you know much of law?

MAMILLIUS: It is my fate to be a Roman.

PHANOCLES: There then! You can move easily in the world of law. I can move easily in the world of substance and force because I credit the universe with at least a lawyer's intelligence. Just as you who know the law could have your way with me since I do not, so I can have my way with the universe.

EMPEROR: Confused, illogical, and extremely hubristic. Tell me, when you talk like this do people ever say you are mad?

PHANOCLES: Always, Caesar. That is why I severed my connection with the Library.

EMPEROR: I see. *Are* you a sculptor?

PHANOCLES: No. Am I mad?

EMPEROR: I think perhaps you are.

PHANOCLES: The universe is a mechanism.

MAMILLIUS: Are you a magician?

PHANOCLES: There is no magic.

MAMILLIUS: Your sister is the living proof and epitome of magic.

PHANOCLES: Then she is beyond Nature's legislation.

MAMILLIUS: That may well be. Is there any poetry in your universe?

PHANOCLES: That is how they all talk, Caesar—poetry, magic, religion—

EMPEROR: (*chuckling*). Be careful, Greek. You are talking to the High Pontiff of Jupiter.

PHANOCLES: Does Caesar believe in the things that the High Pontiff has to do?

EMPEROR: I prefer not to answer that question.

PHANOCLES: Lord Mamillius, do you believe in your very heart that there is an irrational and unpredictable force of poetry outside your rolls of paper?

MAMILLIUS: How dull your life must be!

PHANOCLES: Dull? My life is passed in a condition of ravished astonishment! Yet I am destitute. Without your help I must starve. With it I can change the universe.

EMPEROR: Are you a Christian?

PHANOCLES: Caesar—I swear—I am willing to sacrifice to you whenever you like—

EMPEROR: You believe in the gods then?

PHANOCLES: I—I am indifferent, Caesar, as I think you must be, together with all educated and thinking men.

EMPEROR: But you are not a Christian?

PHANOCLES: How should that contradictory mixture of hysterical beliefs appeal to such a man as I?

EMPEROR: Forgive me, Phanocles, but I like to be certain. I am getting old and perhaps foolish.

Executions distress me.

PHANOCLES: Executions?

EMPEROR: You were going to change the universe. Will you improve it?

MAMILLIUS: He is mad, Caesar.

EMPEROR: Phanocles, in my experience changes have seldom been for the better, since the universe does not seem to give something for nothing. Yet I entertain you for my—for your sister's sake. Be brief. What do you want?

PHANOCLES: With this ship you will be more famous than Alexander. Any one of the rich men I approached could have had that fame had they wanted it. Caesar!

EMPEROR: Ah, yes. Your ship. What is she called?

PHANOCLES: She has no name.

EMPEROR: A ship without a name? Find one, Mamillius.

MAMILLIUS: I do not care for her. Amphitrite, Grandfather, with your permission—

EMPEROR: I shall see you at dinner and further your education.

MAMILLIUS: I will ensure that our guest is comfortable.

EMPEROR: Do so. Mamillius!

MAMILLIUS: Grandfather—?

EMPEROR: I am sorry you are bored.

MAMILLIUS: Bored? I, bored? Yes, of course I am. Very, very, very.

(EXIT MAMILLIUS.)

EMPEROR: She is unseaworthy, flat-bottomed, with little sheer and bows like a corn barge. What are the ornaments? Have they a religious significance?

PHANOCLES: Hardly, Caesar.

EMPEROR: So after all you do want to play boats with me? If I were not charmed with your innocence should be displeased at your presumption.

PHANOCLES: I have three toys for you, Caesar. This is only the first.

EMPEROR: Man, I have tried for the equivalent of at least three normal audiences to understand you. What do you want?

PHANOCLES: Have you ever seen water boiling in a pot?

EMPEROR: I have.

PHANOCLES: There is much steam evolved which escapes into the air. If the pot were closed, what would happen?

EMPEROR: The steam could not escape.

PHANOCLES: The pot would burst. The force exerted by steam is titanic.

EMPEROR: (*interested*) Really? Have you ever seen a pot burst?

PHANOCLES: Beyond Syria there is a savage tribe. They inhabit a land full of natural oil and inflammable vapour. When they desire to cook they lead the vapour through pipes into stoves at the sides of their houses. The meat these natives eat is tough and must be cooked for a long time. They put one heavy dish on top of another, inverted. Now the steam builds up a pressure under the pot that penetrates the meat and cooks it thoroughly and quickly.

EMPEROR: Will not the steam burst the pot?

PHANOCLES: There is the ingenuity of the device. If the pressure becomes too great it will lift the dishes and allow the steam to escape. Steam could lift a weight that an elephant would balk at.

EMPEROR: (*excited*). And the flavour, Phanocles! It will be confined with the steam! The whole wonderful intention of the comestible will be preserved by magic!

PHANOCLES: Now in a ship—Let me light this lamp inside the model.

EMPEROR: (*disregarding him*). I have always been a primitive where meat is concerned. To taste meat in its exquisite simplicity would be a return to those experiences of youth that time has blunted. There should be a wood fire, a healthy tiredness in the limbs, a robust red wine; and if possible a sense of peril—(*pause*). Phanocles, we are on the verge of an immense discovery. What do the natives call their two dishes?

PHANOCLES: (*depressed*). A pressure cooker.

EMPEROR: How soon could you make me one? Or perhaps if we simply inverted one dish over another—Fish, do you think? Or fowl? I think on the whole one would detect the intensification most readily in fish.

PHANOCLES: Caesar!

EMPEROR: You must dine with me now and we will formulate a plan of action.

(THE EMPEROR *claps his hands*.)

ENTER VALET.)

PHANOCLES: But my boat, Caesar!

(PAUSE)

EMPEROR: Amphitrite? I could give you anything you want, Phanocles. But come, let us dine.

PHANOCLES: When the wind fails, what happens to a ship? (PAUSE—*then shrugs and signs to VALET*.)

EMPEROR: (*indulgently—he is now affable, seeing the value of PHANOCLES*). She waits for the next one. The master invokes a wind. Sacrifices and so on. Toga!

(VALET *starts the change of togas, rosewater, etc., with the help of another SLAVE*.)

PHANOCLES: But if he does not believe in a wind god?

EMPEROR: Then I suppose he does not get a wind.

PHANOCLES: But if the wind fails at a moment of crisis for your warships?

EMPEROR: The slaves row.

PHANOCLES: And when they tire?

EMPEROR: They are beaten.

PHANOCLES: But if they become so tired that beating is useless?

EMPEROR: Then they are thrown overboard. You have the Socratic method.

(PHANOCLES *groans.*)

~~You are tired and hungry. Have no fear for yourself or your sister. You have both become very precious to me and your sister shall be my ward.~~

PHANOCLES: I do not think of her.

EMPEROR: (*puzzled*). What do you want, then?

PHANOCLES: I have tried to say. I want to build you a warship after the pattern of Amphitrite.

EMPEROR: A warship is an expensive undertaking. I cannot treat you as though you were a qualified shipwright when you are only a librarian.

PHANOCLES: Then give me a hull—any hull. Give me an old corn barge if you will, and sufficient money to convert her after this fashion.

EMPEROR: Of course, my dear Phanocles, anything you like. I will give the necessary orders. Indeed, it will be the second boat I have given away lately. Now, let us dine.

PHANOCLES: And my other inventions?

EMPEROR: The pressure cooker?

PHANOCLES: No. What I have called an explosive.

EMPEROR: Something that claps out? How strange! What would be the use of that? What is the third invention?

PHANOCLES: I will keep it in reserve to surprise you.

EMPEROR: (*relieved*). Do so. Make your ship and your clapper-outer and then surprise me with the third invention. But first of all the pressure cooker. And now let us dine.

PHANOCLES: Shall I bring the working model with me, Caesar?

EMPEROR: Amphitrite? No, no. On the whole, I think not. Come, Phanocles.

PHANOCLES: I could explain the machinery—

EMPEROR: The circular contrivances?

PHANOCLES: I call them paddle-wheels—a mode of progression. That globe in the centre is a boiler.

EMPEROR: A pressure cooker? A tiny little pressure—

PHANOCLES: Oh, no! Caesar! Please try to understand. There is no *frivolity* here. My aim is to re-shape the whole future of humanity.

EMPEROR: Dear me. Then I had better give you an official position at once. Supposing I appoint you my Director-General of Experimental Studies—would that please you?

PHANOCLES: I? Caesar's Director-General? With leave to experiment?

EMPEROR: To your heart's content, my friend. But now we go to dine.

USHER: Caesar goes to dine!

(*Exit* EMPEROR.)

PHANOCLES: (*ecstatic, as he follows*) ... with leave to experiment:

(*EXIT PHANOCLES. Trumpets off. THE CAPTAIN is released by the trumpets. He comes down stage, sheathing his sword as he does so. Pauses. Looks down funnel. AMPHRITITE starts to go—Peep! Peep! chuffa, chuffa, Poop! Poop! CAPTAIN leaps away. Draws his sword.*)

CAPTAIN: Sentry! Turn out the guard!

(CURTAIN)

ACT II

Scene: *Same as Act I.*

PHANOCLES *is discovered making calculations with the aid of a portable abacus which EUPHROSYNE is holding for him. He also has some sort of sighting instrument along which he squints out to sea from time to time and notes readings and results, etc., on tablets. All this intersperses the rather spasmodic phrasing of the opening speech.*

(*Enter a SEAMAN.*)

SEAMAN: Director-General Phanocles, Sir.

PHANOCLES: What do you want?

SEAMAN: The Captain's compliments, Sir and beg to report that the magic ship is in all respects ready for sea.

(PHANOCLES NODS. EXIT SEAMAN.)

PHANOCLES: (*to EUPHROSYNE*). Is there anything more impenetrable than frivolity? How can I demonstrate the explosive here? Something that "claps out"! I tried to explain again. I was logical and precise; but he is like—I cannot tell what he is like;—what they are all like. Help me. In this mad race of men only you and I know true sanity; and yet sometimes you seem to know these people too. Would the young Lord Mamillius understand, do you think? Euphrosyne make them understand the heat, the boundless force, the sudden expansion—(*Pause. She shakes her head*). Why must I waste my time on them? If I could only brush them aside—or show them my new heaven and new earth!

(ENTER CAPTAIN OF THE GUARD.)

CAPTAIN: Director-General—Phanocles!

PHANOCLES: What do you want?

CAPTAIN: There is a casket for you outside the door.

PHANOCLES: Ah, yes, yes. Why are they waiting? Let them bring it in at once. The Emperor may be here at any moment.

CAPTAIN: I can hardly do that, Phanocles. If the Emperor wants such a thing brought into the villa he is entitled to. That presents no difficulty. "Guard will reverse arms and assume an attitude of dejection"—and so on. But where are my instructions? Suppose this is not a dead body?

PHANOCLES: A body?

CAPTAIN: Imagine the black I should put up if I reversed arms and assumed an attitude of dejection while those men carried in a concealed assassin. Before the casket comes through that door the body must be examined, and in my presence.

(*The light dawns on PHANOCLES.*)

PHANOCLES: You want to open—

CAPTAIN: Of course I shall have every respect shown whilst confirming the melancholy truth.

PHANOCLES: Look if you must. But please hurry!

CAPTAIN: With your permission then.

PHANOCLES: Yes, yes—Captain!—On no account touch the butterfly.

(EXIT CAPTAIN.)

CAPTAIN: (*off*). Guard and men with arms—shun! Reverse arms!

PHANOCLES: Power in the hands of man. How shall I make him understand? Be merciful, Euphrosyne!

What is a vow? You could be the link! You can choose for us—a new heaven and earth, or poverty again, and frustration.

(ENTER MAMILLIUS. *He stands contemplating EUPHROSYNE.*)

Lord Mamillius!—(*to EUPHROSYNE*). If only you would help me, Euphrosyne!

(PHANOCLES *approaches* MAMILLIUS.)

PHANOCLES: Lord Mamillius, what happens when lightning strikes a tree?

MAMILLIUS: If the tree is anywhere near the Imperial Precincts, my grandfather offers a sacrifice—

How unbelievably ignorant you are, Phanocles! Surely you know that?

PHANOCLES: Euphrosyne! Explain to him—

MAMILLIUS: Yes—let your sister explain.

PHANOCLES: No, no—of course she must not. There was a vow ...

MAMILLIUS: What does he mean, Euphrosyne?

PHANOCLES: Please let us be, Lord—(*He sees the FOUR SLAVES*). Ah!

(ENTER FOUR SLAVES *carrying an object which is as much like a coffin as the cast and the public will take.*)

Gently—carefully.... Round here. Lower that end. It must face this way.

(*He dismisses the slaves and examines the horrible box devoutly.*)

MAMILLIUS: How horrible! Lady, you should not be seen in company with so stark a reminder.

PHANOCLES: Lord, there is nothing to fear.

(PHANOCLES *removes the lid and reveals the black and yellow projectile standing on its stalk. It is the size of a man and more. It is very nasty.*)

MAMILLIUS: A new god!

PHANOCLES: Lord, this is my explosive. The whole mechanism is to be hurled from a catapult at what you wish to destroy. This will make your Empire irresistible.

MAMILLIUS: It is not my Empire!

PHANOCLES: Here is an arming vane. The pressure of the air makes it spin off—when this rod touches any solid object a compressive shock heats the explosive to the point where it catches fire. What happens then?

MAMILLIUS: Could your sister tell me?

PHANOCLES: The heat causes a sudden expansion. So what happens to the mechanism?

MAMILLIUS: It will become bigger.

PHANOCLES: No!

MAMILLIUS: Smaller?

PHANOCLES: No!

MAMILLIUS: Then, logically, Phanocles, it must remain the same size which is a pity. Any change would be for the better.

PHANOCLES: The mechanism changes—into vapour.

MAMILLIUS: You are a conjurer after all. Show me, sometime—but not now. I have a message for you.

—The Emperor is delayed by grave imperial business.

PHANOCLES: Delayed? You mean he's not coming? But my steamship! She is down there in the bay, waiting! He was to see her!

MAMILLIUS: No one could see much in this heat haze, Phanocles. We shall have thunder. Is your sister afraid of thunder?

PHANOCLES: This is—this was to be—one of the great days of the world—and he delays—he is signing—business—!

MAMILLIUS: Phanocles, I have just now remembered the second half of my grandfather's message. He wishes you to inspect the north wing of the villa; carefully; by yourself, Phanocles. He particularly wishes you to go by yourself.

PHANOCLES: What reason—?

MAMILLIUS: Reason?

PHANOCLES: But then—an Emperor does not always give a reason....

MAMILLIUS: No, indeed. He need not necessarily find a reason.

PHANOCLES: What must I do there?

MAMILLIUS: Do? Just stay there, I suppose.

PHANOCLES: (*naughty temper*). He made me Director-General of Experimental Studies. Any architect, any builder, any hodman—

MAMILLIUS: He asks you—please—to calculate the number of paving stones of different sizes in the corridors.

(PHANOCLES registers what might be anything or nothing!)

(*sticking to it*)—and give him your comments if you find any ... any significant mathematical relationships.

PHANOCLES: But my ship—my explosive—my sister—

MAMILLIUS: I will take care of them all. It is his Imperial Will, Phanocles.

PHANOCLES: This is madness! I am lost, Lord. People defeat me. (*Goes, muttering.*) Significant mathematical relationships.... *All* mathematical relationships are significant!

(EXIT PHANOCLES. MAMILLIUS gives a gasp of relief, looks furtively towards the EMPEROR'S apartments, and then moves cautiously towards EUPHROSYNE.)

MAMILLIUS: Are they, Lady? But not all human relationships. I have tried to follow you. Did you know that? Did you? (*She nods.*) Have I annoyed you? It would seem so. I cannot confuse this curious and obsessive interest with the enchantment of the blind god. Yet a glimpse of you walking the lawns—even the knowledge as I pace the long corridors that you are lying asleep behind this wall or this— ... I had a speech prepared, but now you stand near me the words have flown out of my head. This cannot be love; yet I cannot rest. I have written poetry—Greek, of course—and some whose judgement is of value think it good. But your magic fits no verses. I have written and erased till the wax melted. The ache, the frustration—my bewilderment—distil down from blown verses through the single line to one cold drop of truth—

“Euphrosyne is beautiful but dumb”.

Silence and mystery are merciless weapons. Cease to be the Egyptian Sphinx. Become a face, a voice with accent, tricks of speech—with laughter and opinion; become an ordinary woman, an either conquer me outright for your empire, or set me free! No words? Must our meeting be this half-measure? (*Pause*) Oh, Lady, have mercy! I have tried to be honest—(*She looks at him*

suddenly.)—a strange lower-middle-class word to hear spoken in an Emperor's villa! Your brother can change this mechanism into vapour. Could he change me too? I have it almost in my heart to wish he could!

(Goes to projectile.)

EUPHROSYNE: No!

MAMILLIUS: You spoke! Euphrosyne—you spoke to me! You said “No!” What did I do?

(He has left the box and gone to her. EUPHROSYNE has sunk back into silence, only shakes her head. After a second MAMILLIUS rushes back to the box.)

EUPHROSYNE: *(starting up)*. No!

MAMILLIUS: *(wreathed in delight)*. Oh, but yes!

(His hands fumble happily all over the explosive, keeping his eyes on EUPHROSYNE. She goes desperately over to between him and the box.)

EUPHROSYNE: The butterfly—the brass butterfly! It is outside your world. You will kill us all!

MAMILLIUS: Is there a curse on it?

EUPHROSYNE: Yes—No. Look. This is a charm. He has stored the lightning in this metal egg. Have you ever worn a charm?

MAMILLIUS: All men wear them—to keep off the evil eye or fever.

EUPHROSYNE: As long as the charm sits there the lightning will not wake; but when my brother hurls the whole mechanism from a catapult the butterfly spins off. Then a touch would make lightning come from the egg, that would push this villa over and throw it into the sea.

MAMILLIUS: Only a touch?

EUPHROSYNE: Write your verses, Lord. Leave the lightning alone.

MAMILLIUS: You are ... dawning on me.

EUPHROSYNE: You made me break a vow—

MAMILLIUS: You are so beautiful—

EUPHROSYNE: No more than you.

MAMILLIUS: How ignorant I was to think that hearing your voice would cure me of you! Euphrosyne! You said, “No more than you”! *(Pause)* I haunt you? We haunt each other. There is the honest truth. We are wonderful undiscovered country. Show me your face again.

EUPHROSYNE: I must go. Let me pass!

MAMILLIUS: I will see you—I must! Our haunting gives me the right to see you.

EUPHROSYNE: You are a prince.

MAMILLIUS: I? A prince? I am a poor bastard on a string! *(Pause)* And therefore what have I to lose? Show me your face. Come here. Closer. Your obedience is wonderful, and breaks my heart. Uncover your face.

(She uncovers her face and they look at each other. She is dazzling.)

I am lost. I am killed with kindness. Why would you not speak? Why did you hide this from me?

EUPHROSYNE: My vow.

MAMILLIUS: Euphrosyne, you are a person. You have been here and there. You have a history. There are things you like—

EUPHROSYNE: My voice and my face were to cure you.

MAMILLIUS: Do you begin to love me?

EUPHROSYNE: What good would it do to say yes?

MAMILLIUS: We shall spend our lives together.

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