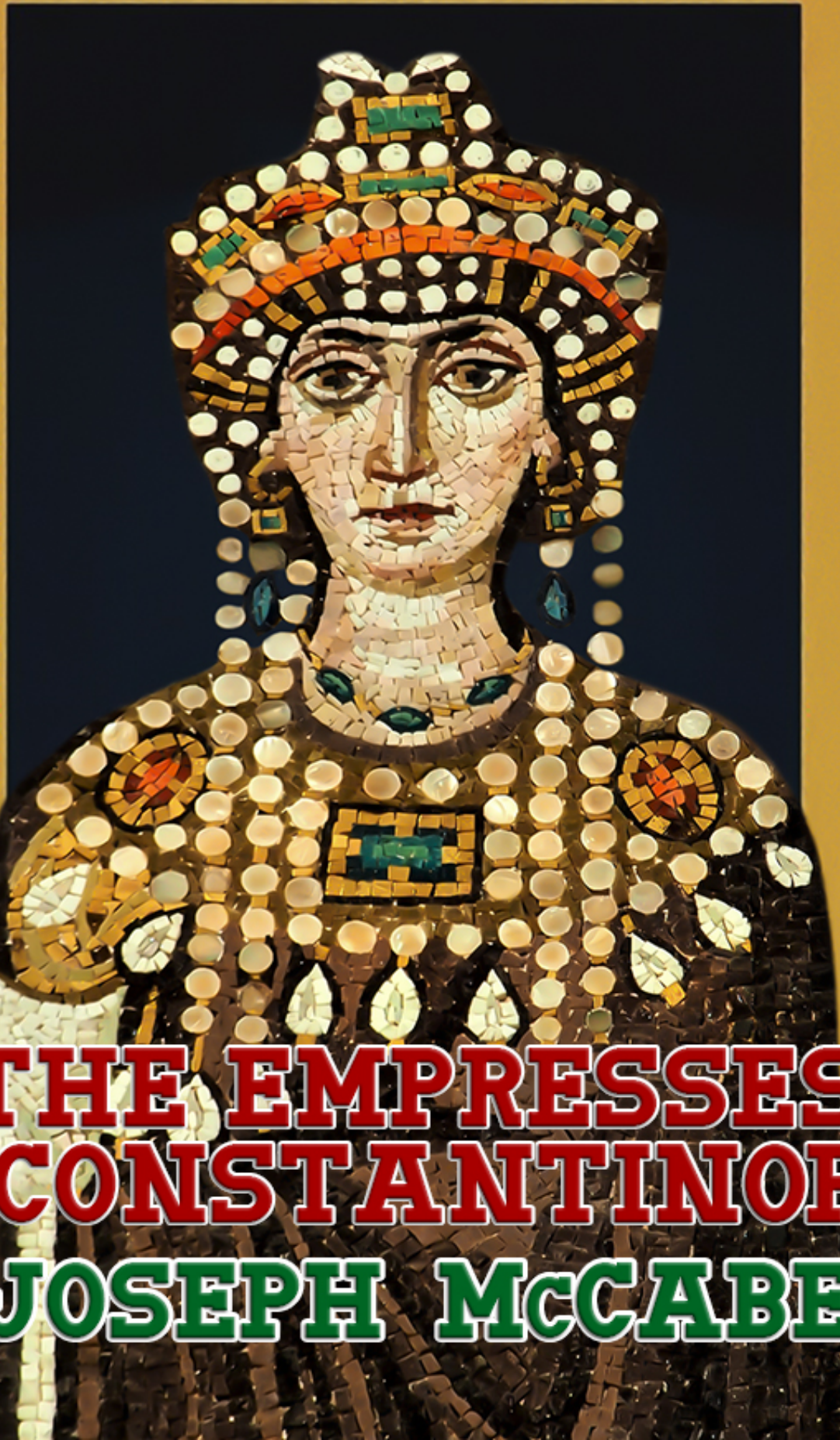


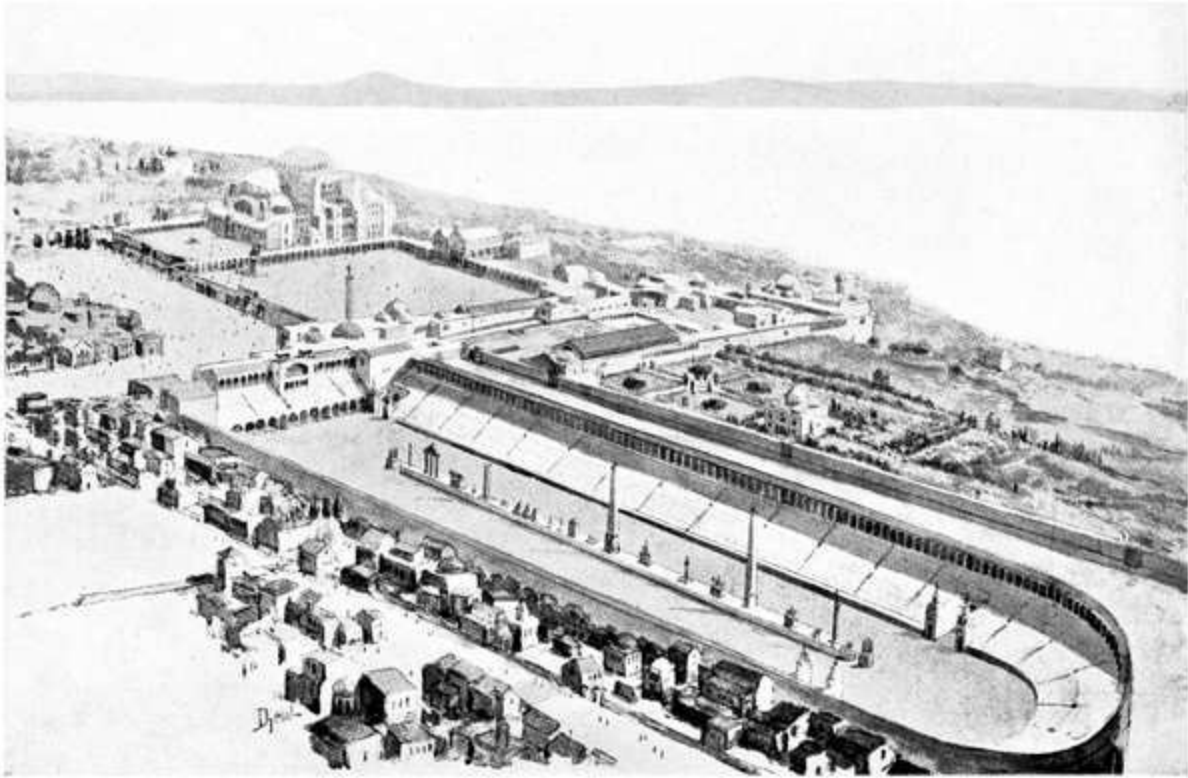
CLASSICS TO GO



**THE EMPRESSES
OF CONSTANTINOPE**
JOSEPH McCABE

The Empresses of Constantinople

Joseph McCabe



ANCIENT CONSTANTINOPLE, SHOWING THE HIPPODROME,
THE IMPERIAL PALACE, AND THE MOSQUE OF S. SOPHIA
FROM THE RECONSTRUCTION BY DJELAL ESSAD AFTER THE PLAN BY LABARTE

PREFACE

IN concluding an earlier volume on the mistresses of the western Roman Empire I observed that, as the gallery of fair and frail ladies closed, we stood at the door of “the long, quaint gallery of the Byzantine Empresses.” It seemed natural and desirable to pass on to this more interesting and less familiar series of the mistresses of the eastern Roman Empire, and the present volume will therefore tell the story of the Empresses, or Queens, as they preferred to be called, who occupied the throne set up by Constantine in New Rome, or ancient Byzantium, until the victorious Turk thrust it disdainfully aside to make way for his more spacious harem.

The eastern or Byzantine Empire has long been regarded in Europe as a world of far less interest than that which centred on the banks of the Tiber: a world of monotonous piety and little adventure or spirit, almost Chinese in its placid and unchanging adherence to traditional and very conventional forms. One is tempted to attribute this error, not merely to the longer concealment of Byzantine antiquities from our fathers and the superior attractiveness of Italy, but, in some measure, to the disproportion of Gibbon’s work. By the time the great historian has advanced only one or two centuries in the life of the East he finds that the superb generosity of his plan has committed him to an unachievable task, and he begins to compress whole chapters of the most vivid and adventurous history into a few disdainful pages; and as Finlay, the proper historian of the Greek civilization, not only lacks the charm which draws each generation with fresh wonder to the volumes of Gibbon, but shares and expresses the same disdain for his

subject, his work has not tended to redeem the Byzantine Empire from neglect. Of late years there has been some quickening of interest in the eastern Empire. Professor Bury in this country,¹ M. Diehl in France, Schlumberger in Germany, and other historians, have done much to draw attention to the extraordinary interest and the very lively character of Byzantine life.

When we confine our attention, as we do in this volume, to the Court life and the personality of the imperial women, the interest rises to the pitch of romance, and is often sustained at that height for many chapters. Few Courts in the world have, in their thousand years of history, witnessed so much adventure, intrigue, comedy and tragedy, as that of the Byzantine Empresses. From all quarters of the Empire, in the most varied ways, all sorts of women, from princesses to village girls, tavern girls or circus girls, make their way to the bronze-roofed palace and wear for a season the prodigious jewels and the glittering robes of an Empress of Constantinople; and, as there is no law or method of succession to the throne, the rise and fall of Emperors and Empresses gives a dramatic movement to the story. The notion that the eastern Empresses are enwrapped in a rigid piety and formalism, as they are in their stiff tunics of gold-cloth, is a ludicrous mistake. Their piety is usually external and superficial, and often they make not the least pretence of it; while, even when it is obviously sincere, it is associated with a skill in casuistry which allows a free play of their ambitions, their passions, and even their criminal impulses. Indeed, it is only fair to say at the outset that if a reader passes from the gallery of the "pagan" Empresses into that of the Empresses of Constantinople in the hope of encountering more restful, more virtuous and more domestic types of womanhood, he will be grievously disappointed. We may not find a Messalina among them, but irregularity of life is more evenly distributed than among the

Roman Empresses, ambition and intrigue are far more cultivated, and there is a strain of barbaric cruelty running through the greater part of the story which it would have been more pleasant, had it been consistent with truthfulness, to omit. But the biographer should not be a moralist. My simple purpose is to depict, as far as it is possible, the very varied types of womanhood which come into "the fierce light that beats about a throne" in that strange world where Greek and Roman and Syrian blood blend to produce a new character.

The difficulties of the task have been considerable, and may be urged in extenuation of some of the apparent defects of the story. Apart from sketches of the lives of five or six of the Byzantine Empresses, especially those in M. Diehl's fine "Figures Byzantines," the study is entirely new, and the material has had to be laboriously collected from the endless pages of the Greek chroniclers. These chroniclers are largely monks, and in nearly all cases they are little disposed to speak of the imperial women until they either misbehave themselves or come to wield a mastery over men. Their references to the Empresses are usually brief and scattered sentences which have to be gleaned with care, and in hardly any single case do even contemporary writers condescend to give us a portrait of an Empress. Seeing that, in addition, we have not (as in the case of Rome) any statues or portrait-busts of the Empresses, and the few representations of them which have survived (in miniatures, ivories, etc.) are lifeless and conventionalized pictures, it is not possible to bring them before the eye in as satisfactory a way as one could wish. In this, as in the preceding volume, I have utterly refused to follow the genial example of Roergas de Serviez, and allow imagination to come to the aid of fact. But I have carefully gathered and included all that is known about the eastern Empresses, and, lest it be thought that the less-known

Empresses might alter the balance of vice or virtue, I have inserted even the scanty references to these.

It remains only to explain the starting-point of the volume. In my "Empresses of Rome," which includes all Empresses down to the fall of Rome, I necessarily included the early Empresses of the eastern series, when east and west were branches of one dominion. It is therefore not necessary to repeat the story of the beautiful and languid Eudoxia, the daughter of a Frankish chief whom a palace intrigue raised to the purple, and who is one of the butts of St Chrysostom's fiery sermons; nor of Eudocia, the Athenian girl who set out to find her father's money and obtained a kingdom, who wrote poems in her native tongue and at last passed from the Court under a cloud of suspicion; nor of Pulcheria, the virgin-sister of Theodosius and rival of Eudocia, who ruled the Empire for her brother and, after his death, took to herself a nominal husband and, with Marcian, was governing the Eastern world at the time of the fall of Rome. I have adequately described her in the preceding volume, and the present story opens at her death in the year 453.

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

ANCIENT CONSTANTINOPLE, SHOWING THE HIPPODROME, THE IMPERIAL PALACE, AND THE MOSQUE OF ST SOPHIA	<i>Frontispiece</i>
From the reconstruction by Djelal Essad after the Plan by Labarte	
From "Les Imperatrices Byzantines de Constantinople." By permission of H. Laurens, Paris	
	FACING PAGE
THE EMPRESS THEODORA AND HER ATTENDANTS	40
Mosaic of the sixth century in St Vitale, Ravenna	
From a photograph by Alinari	
THE EMPRESS IRENE	88
From an Ivory Plaque in the National Museum, Florence	
From a photograph by Alinari	
EUDOCIA INGERINA, WIFE OF BASIL I	116
From Du Cange's "Historia Byzantina"	
THE EMPRESS HELENA	138
From Du Cange's "Historia Byzantina"	
THE EMPRESS ZOE	166
From "Constantinople," by E. A. Grosvenor By permission of Little, Brown & Co., Boston, U.S.A.	
EUDOCIA AND ROMANUS IV	186
From an Ivory in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris	
From a photograph by A. Giraudon, Paris	

THEODORA, WIFE OF MICHAEL VIII
From Du Cange's "Historia Byzantina"

CHAPTER I

VERINA AND HER DAUGHTERS

THE Empress's apartments in the sacred palace remained empty for four years after the virtuous Pulcheria had been laid in her marble sarcophagus. The Emperor Marcian was aged and feeble, and, as Pulcheria had guarded even in marriage the sanctity of her vow of chastity, there was none who might plausibly be regarded as heir to the throne. It was such a situation as Constantinople loved; and the thousands of soldiers, eunuchs, nobles and ladies who dwelt in the vast palace, and the tens of thousands of idlers who lounged under the arcades of the great square or chattered on the benches of the Hippodrome, had a large field for speculation.

Their fate, they knew, was in the hands of one man, the commander of the imperial guards, Asper. He was an Arian (or Unitarian), and could not hope to occupy the throne which would soon be at his disposal. The citizens of Constantinople were at least as wanton and passionate as those of Rome had been, but they were fiercely devoted to the sound doctrine of the Trinity, and they would have flung themselves against the bronze gates and marble walls of the palace if an Arian had ventured to don the purple. So Senators and Senators' wives indulged their conflicting hopes and paid their servile reverence to the dying monarch and the vigorous barbarian commander.

Marcian died in the year 457, not without a superfluous rumour of poison, and expectation rose to the height of fever when the worn frame was entombed with all the rich ceremony of the Eastern Court. Then there came the first of the long series of surprises and dramatic successions which

were to enliven Byzantine history for many a century. Asper announced that his steward Leo, a tribune, or subordinate officer, of the troops, was to receive the imperial crown. A barbaric soldier and his wife were to occupy the golden throne, and all the nobility of Constantinople hastened to kiss their purple slippers.

Leo the Isaurian is one of those quite unromantic figures which the restless waves of Roman life often washed into the world of romance: one of the many raw highlanders who had set out from Asia Minor to make their fortune in the glittering metropolis of the East. A few years of useful military service had won for him the rank of tribune and the confidence of the commander, and Asper thought that he could rely on the docility and gratitude of the big simple-featured soldier. Wholly illiterate, with no larger experience than the control of Asper's servants, a man of rough, hairy face, powerful frame and blunt ways, he suddenly found himself transferred to a throne that gleamed, as few thrones did, with "the sands of Indus and the adamant of Golconda."

His wife, the Empress Verina, shares alike the earlier obscurity and the sudden elevation to the extraordinary splendour of the Byzantine Court. We know nothing of her nationality or extraction; and, as the only relatives who gather about her when her hand dispenses the gold and the favours of a great empire are just as obscure as herself, we may be sure that her origin was humble enough. A soldier like Leo would select his mate in a lowly world, and we shall see later that Verina permitted no scruple to restrain either her passion or her ambition. But there was personality in the new Empress: an able and vigorous intelligence, a masterful ambition, a virile tenacity of purpose, and an equally virile disdain of scruples and of priests in the pursuit of her ambition. She must have been much younger than her husband, who was nearly sixty years old. She not only survived him for more than a decade, but she filled that

decade with the most spirited adventures, and she admitted, or attracted, a lover after the death of her husband in his seventy-fourth year.

It is one of the most singular features of Verina's story that she remains almost as obscure and insignificant during the seventeen years in which she reigned with her husband as she had been before her elevation, yet in her later years reveals a character of remarkable vigour and great interest. We have, therefore, little concern with the reign of Leo, and will rather make ourselves acquainted with the imperial world in which the Byzantine Empresses will move.

New Rome, or Constantinople, had been founded by Constantine on the site of the more ancient city of Byzantium, and is so faithfully replaced by the modern city that its situation needs little description. It spread over the triangular point of Europe which runs to a tongue between the Golden Horn and the Sea of Marmora, and was protected by a double wall from invasion on the land side; in fact, it was in time enclosed entirely within thirteen miles of stout wall.

The lower portion of this triangular area, a vast domain of more than half-a-million square yards, sloping gradually to the silver shores of the Sea of Marmora, was reserved for the imperial palaces and gardens. Running parallel with the imperial palace, to the north, was the Hippodrome, into which the story of the Empresses will repeatedly take us. Like the Great Circus at Rome, on the model of which it was built, it was the most commanding and venerated institution of the frivolous people. Its spacious long-drawn arena was flanked by tiers of seats which could accommodate tens of thousands of people—some authorities say a hundred thousand people. A lofty imperial gallery, the *kathisma*, surveyed the races and the spectators from the north-eastern end, and a great purple awning gave protection

from the burning sun. Beyond the Hippodrome and the palace was the chief square of the city, the Augusteum, which corresponded to the old Forum at Rome or the Agora at Athens. Under the shelter of the double colonnade which surrounded it the idlers of Constantinople held their endless fiery discussions of the last chariot race, the last heresy, or the last revolution: the studious bargained for books: the amorous made traffic in love. It was the heart of the city. On the south side of it was the great gate of the palace: on the north side the church, or cathedral, of St Sophia: the Senate House faced it on the east: and from its western side ran the main street of Constantinople, the Mese (or Middle Street), lined with colonnades, which passed more or less continuously along the central ridge of the triangular area which the city occupied. A city was, in those days, and for many a century afterwards, a palace and a cathedral: we can only say of the million citizens that they were packed into the spaces not occupied by Church or State, especially in the region between the Mese and the Golden Horn, where fire and pestilence periodically fed on their crowded tenements.

With the palace we need a closer acquaintance. Verina would be familiar with the massive iron gate on the south side of the square through which, as the Emperor rode in, one might catch a glimpse of the great bronze door of the palace. Through this gate the obscure woman of the people was now borne on her litter, to be crowned mistress of the world. The front part of the palace was burned by the people in 532, but we may assume that it had the general plan of the later structure which experts have reconstructed for us.² The door led into a spacious hall—known as the Chalke on account of its bronze roof—which was richly adorned with statues, marbles and mosaics. Constantine had despoiled the world to enrich his palace and city, and this entrance hall had a great store of treasures. Crossing the hall one

entered the apartments of the troops who guarded the palace and whose spacious quarters formed an immense and formidable approach to the imperial palace. More than three thousand selected troops, divided into three classes, formed this imperial bodyguard, and we shall more than once find their halls swimming with blood as some frantic mob or adventurous usurper seeks to penetrate to the palace. The palace grounds were, of course, surrounded by lofty and unscaleable walls.

Verina would pass first through the lines of the Scholarians, whose golden shields and lances, and gold helmets surmounted with red aigrettes, would form a glittering corridor. Ascending the marble steps at the far end of their hall, the purple curtains being drawn aside, she would pass between the Excubitors, a regiment of powerful warriors with two-edged axes, and the Candidates, or white-robed troops, gleaming with gold; the second and third lines of defence. At the end of these palatial barracks three ivory-plated doors, hung with curtains of purple silk, opened into the Consistorium, a large hall lined with marble and mosaic, in the floor of which were set porphyry slabs to indicate the successive spots where even kings must thrice prostrate themselves before approaching to kiss the feet of—Leo the Isaurian. A throne, covered with purple and heavily laden with gold and jewels, was raised under a golden dome at the upper end of the room.

Three pairs of steps and three bronze doors—for this wondrously elevated peasant and his obscure wife must not pass through the same door as ordinary mortals—then led to an unroofed terrace, lined with columns and precious statues, on one side of which was the chapel of the Saviour, and on the other the ancient gold-roofed banquet-room. Then at length Verina would find herself, probably for the first time, before the door of the palace proper, or the main palace, Daphne. Passing between the crowds of stewards,

secretaries, domestic officers and great ladies, with masses of subordinate servants behind, all bent in profound reverence, she would enter by the bronze doors into the Augusteum, or vestibule of the palace: a hall crowded with choice bronze and marble statues and mosaics. Fresh legions of servants—the population of the palace must have been more than five thousand even at this early date—and groups of pale eunuchs now crowded to do homage, and the fortunate woman surrendered herself to her tire-women, to don the gold-cloth tunic, the purple mantle and the heavy jewellery of an empress.

The coronation would probably take place in the church of St Stephen, within the palace, and it seems that Verina and Leo then crossed the gardens and terraces to receive the homage of the Senators and nobles in the outlying palace of Magnaura. We know it at a later date as a vast hall lined with coloured marbles from the most famous quarries of the world, its floors strewn thick with roses, its wonders lit by fourteen massive silver lamps which hung from heavy chains of silvered bronze between its marble columns. But the wonderful golden sparrows which piped their mechanical notes on golden trees, and the golden lions which lashed their tails and roared before the throne, and the organs of silver and gold, belong to a later date in Byzantine history. From Magnaura the royal procession returned to Daphne, and mounted the spiral stair which led to the royal lodge, with a small palace in its rear, overlooking the Hippodrome. There the men of Constantinople rang out their Greek cry of “Many years!” to the rustic tribune and his wife who had so suddenly been lifted to this giddy height, and were, no doubt, rewarded with chariot races. The coronation day would end, as was usual, with a banquet in the Triclinon, a dining-hall in the space between the apartments of the guards and the palace proper. Its lofty roof was of gold, and on its nineteen purple-

draped tables only golden vessels were set; some of them—at least, at a later date—were so heavy that they had to be lifted from their purple chariots to the table by machinery. And after such a banquet as only the palace could command, amidst some two hundred of the highest nobles of the greatest empire in the world, Verina would retire to her ivory or silver couch to brood over this prodigious turn of the wheel of her fortune. We shall find numbers of equally romantic elevations, and just as many tragic falls from splendour to obscurity, in the long story of the Byzantine Empresses.

Unfortunately, the coronation does not yet bring Verina plainly before us, and we must pass the seventeen years of her husband's reign almost in silence. To explain this obscurity it is not enough to say that it was the custom of the Byzantine Court to keep its women in seclusion. As long as the stream of imperial life flowed evenly they were, generally, content to idle the sunny hours behind the thick hedge of eunuchs and maids, in some sequestered palace or other in the vast gardens, where many fountains and the soft breath of the sea and leafy groves cooled the air. They did not even feel the exclusion of women from the tense sensations of the Hippodrome, for one could witness the thrilling races from the windows in the upper gallery of the church of St Stephen. But we shall see speedily enough that this ceremonious seclusion no more intimidated the imperial women, when they *were* imperial, from playing their part in public life than the pomp and display of the palace intimidated the people of Constantinople from talking to their monarch, when occasion arose, as if he were a village chief. Verina remained quiet and obscure because life flowed evenly and she had no cause to interfere with its course. The promptness with which she sought, or accepted, consolation after the death of her husband does not suggest that she was very deeply devoted to Leo. He was, however,

a shrewd and strong man, though rough and uncultivated, and he seems to have left little room for his wife's interference.

The Empress's quarters in the palace, or assemblage of palaces, are very imperfectly known to us. Daphne itself, the original palace, to which later Emperors would raise stupendous rivals, cannot have had very numerous apartments. It would assuredly not be possible to hide a bishop there for years, as the Empress Theodora afterwards hid a bishop in her apartments; to say nothing of the subterranean dungeons which Theodora is said to have filled with her prisoners. But there were several detached palaces in the grounds, and no doubt the Empress had the use of one of these, standing in its own gardens and groves, and protected by its army of eunuchs. Verina had had one daughter, Ariadne, before her elevation to the throne. A few years afterwards she again gave promise of motherhood, and adjourned for delivery, as custom demanded, to the Porphyra Palace by the sea, a small square mansion whose walls were lined with red, white-spotted porphyry. But it was another girl, Leontia, that she brought into the world, and who lay beside her under the sheets of gold-cloth to receive the homage of the notabilities.³

Many years of this placid existence pass before we catch another glimpse of Verina. The legendary life of St Daniel Stylites, the emulator or successor of the famous Simeon of the Pillar, says that the prayers of the holy dweller on a column procured for the Empress a boy in 462, but the effectiveness of his prayers seems to have been limited, as no such child has found its way into serious history. Leo was now ageing, and the question of the succession must have been keenly discussed. It is at this point that Verina, who seemed doomed to pass again into obscurity, begins to reveal her personality. Asper and his son still seemed to

dominate Constantinople, but their power was being silently undermined. Leo was filling the palace and the army with his own compatriots, and a conflict impended between the Isaurians and Goths, between Leo and Asper.

Amongst these Isaurians a young man named Trascallisseus—or something approaching it, for the Greeks make sad work of the Asiatic names—won the favour of Leo, and approached nearer to the throne. The orthodox chroniclers are severe on Trascallisseus, and depict him as “a veritable Pan”—dark, ugly, hairy, ungainly, heavy-footed and ignorant. The Isaurians were not a handsome race, nor had they the least ambition to adopt the culture of the Greeks, yet the portrait is probably overdrawn. Trascallisseus seems to have been a robust, sullen, illiterate, intriguing young man, with no apparent grace of body or character, but Leo was minded to marry him to Ariadne, and thus mark him for the throne.

Verina apparently desired the succession of her brother Basiliscus, and, as a vast fleet of more than a thousand vessels was about to be sent to wrest Roman Africa from the Vandals, she obtained the command of it for him. Verina could watch from the palace gardens the sailing of the great armada which was to win the purple for her brother. And in a few weeks a fugitive vessel returned with the terrible news that the expedition had failed, the navy had been burned, and the great army of a hundred thousand men sunk or scattered by Genseric. Basiliscus had fled shamefully at the first shock, and had retired to hide his disgrace in private life at Heraclea in Thrace.

It was the turn of Trascallisseus. His name was changed to Zeno, and he was married to Ariadne and promoted to the highest honours.⁴ Verina had now to resign herself to a hope that she would share the power with Zeno and her daughter, but the struggle of Isaurians and Goths had first

to be settled, and the settlement interests us. In less than two years the struggle ended with a victory of the Isaurians—a victory that has inscribed the name of the Emperor in the chronicles as “Leo the Butcher.” We do not know the course of the quarrel, but one day in the year 471 the marble and bronze palace rang with the clash of swords. Asper and his elder son were cut to pieces by the eunuchs within the palace. No doubt Verina and her family had their boats moored at the foot of the garden, as we shall find others doing, but the terrible axes of the Excubitors and the long swords of the Candidates held back the tide of Goths and covered the marble floors with their corpses. The Isaurians were masters of the Roman Empire.

Leo died three years afterwards. It is said that he wished to crown Zeno before he died, but that the people were bitterly opposed to it. He had, therefore, in order to secure the succession, associated his infant (or boyish) grandson Leo with his imperial power, and had died shortly afterwards. The mother and grandmother now came to an agreement with Zeno, and, when the father came to do humble homage to his imperial child, the boy, prompted by Ariadne and Verina, put the crown on the father’s head, and the Court applauded the succession of the Emperor Zeno. The sickly child died nine months afterwards (November 474), leaving Zeno in sole possession of the throne.

Here begin the adventures of Verina, and at length her virile character is revealed to us. Her second daughter Leontia was married to a son of the Western Emperor Anthemius—it was the period of ephemeral Emperors that preceded the extinction of the Western Empire—and a niece of hers was wedded to the Western Emperor Julius Nepos; though the latter connexion soon proved its tragic futility, the Emperor fleeing from Ravenna and falling by the hand of a bishop a few months after coronation. While promoting this apparent scheme for the reunion of the Roman Empire,

Verina began to assert her personality more vigorously at Constantinople. She still lived in the palace, and seems gradually to have won its officers: as venal and corrupt a body as ever adorned a court. The works of contemporary Greek historians survive only in tantalizing fragments, or summaries, or they would undoubtedly furnish a remarkable picture of Byzantine life in the next ten years, when three Empresses occupied the stage. We can but piece together with caution the fragments we find in the chronicles, and endeavour to deduce the character of the Empresses from their actions.

Verina now had a notorious lover named Patricius, and was eager to set him on the throne instead of Zeno. Her daughter Ariadne, a commonplace, docile woman, clung to her husband, and the palace divided into two hostile parties and awaited the result. It is piquant to remember that Constantinople was at the time an intensely religious city. Its patriarch overshadowed those of Alexandria and Rome; its populace divided its interest almost equally between chariot-racing, vice and the suppression of heresy; and to its great church of St Sophia, or to the numerous chapels within the area of the palace, were conducted with splendour the important relics which were constantly being "found" in Palestine. But the frivolous citizens ignored the practical enjoinders of their religion until the periodical fire, or plague, or earthquake threw them into a spasm of repentance, and the population of the palace seemed to hold themselves entirely dispensed from such common laws. Verina, at least, knew neither weakness nor scruple in the pursuit of her ambition.

In November 475 Zeno fled across the water to Chalcedon. Ships were kept for such emergencies at the foot of the gardens, so that an imperial family might be well on the way to the Asiatic shore before an enemy could break through the hedge of guards. Zeno, protesting that

his life was threatened by Verina's servants, fled precipitately, since he left Ariadne under the power of her mother. It seems that Verina virtually imprisoned her daughter, but Ariadne escaped and joined her husband. From the coast they travelled, in a common cart, to the wild fastnesses of Isauria, from which another turn of the wheel will presently recall them to the glittering palace.

Zeno had been morose and unpopular, and it had not been difficult for Verina to detach the Senators and troops from him. They had, however, no mind to accept the virtual rule of Verina herself by putting her paramour on the throne, and, to her great mortification, they summoned her discredited brother Basiliscus from his exile in Thrace, and clothed him with the purple. The change brings on the scene a third Empress, Zenonis, who was made "Augusta" by her husband as soon as he was crowned.

We have hardly time to make much acquaintance with Zenonis during the brief splendour of her husband's reign, but her momentary appearance is not without romance. Passionately devoted to the more philosophical religious sect, which maintained that there was but one nature in Christ, she pressed her husband to espouse its cause and restore its persecuted members. Constantinople was soon aflame with religious controversy. Zenonis secured the return from exile, and appointment as patriarch of Alexandria, of Timotheus Ælurus. Timotheus gathered "all the scum of Alexandria"—the orthodox historian says—that could be found in Constantinople, and conducted them in procession to the church of St Sophia. But how Timotheus fell off his ass, to the delight of Constantinople, and how Peter the Fuller was summoned to fill the see of Antioch, and how Basiliscus wrung money out of the wealthy orthodox churches, must be read in the pages of ecclesiastical history. Zenonis was impelling her husband to his doom.

A much less serious defect in Zenonis, from the Constantinopolitan point of view, was that she united with her zeal for the Monophysite faith a genial disregard of its moral implications. A nephew of her husband named Harmatius rapidly became one of the most luxurious fops of the city. His lavishly spent wealth, his lovely hair and pink cheeks and handsome person, and his reputation for gallantry, made him the idol of the frequenters of the Hippodrome. Basiliscus made him prefect of the city, and he delighted its lower populace by moving amongst them in the shining armour of Achilles. Duty frequently called him to Court, and his charms conquered the susceptible Empress. For some time they sighed and crossed fiery glances as they met in the open chambers or corridors, but at length the eunuch Daniel and the midwife Maria were bribed to facilitate their desire. Such, at least, was the belief of Constantinople, and the power of Basiliscus was further shaken.

His next fatal mishap was to quarrel with Verina. He had her lover Patricius assassinated, and the enraged Empress began at once to pay further gold to buy back the allegiance of Senators and officers to Zeno. The zeal of Basiliscus for his heresy had now completely alienated the people and embittered the clergy. He had ventured to send officers into the churches to proscribe the great Council of Chalcedon, which had condemned the heresy, and the city was profoundly agitated. Vast crowds of men, women and children shouted their orthodox hymns in the streets and filled the black-draped churches. When Basiliscus angrily left the city for a distant palace, the saintly Daniel descended from his pillar, followed him, and spoke to him in very plain language.

In these circumstances Verina was encouraged to further her plan, and the news soon reached Constantinople that Zeno had left the mountains of Isauria and was in command

of an army. Two generals, Illus and Trocundus, were sent against him, and were bought by him. The very meagre chronicles now indicate a desperate struggle between Basiliscus and his sister. The Emperor began to trace the plot and execute the plotters, and Verina fled for her life to the sanctuary of St Sophia. We shall see often enough how frail a protection the law of sanctuary afforded against the anger of an Emperor, but Harmatius, who seems to have despised his lover's husband, helped her to escape, and she seems either to have crossed to Asia or concealed herself. Harmatius himself was now sent against the rebels. Swearing the most solemn oath of fidelity to Basiliscus that the clergy could devise, he straightway sold his services to Zeno for the promise of a cæsarship for his son and the perpetual command of the armies for himself.

The career of the romantic Zenonis then came to a rapid and tragic close. As the troops of Zeno marched into the city Basiliscus and his Empress fled to the church of St Sophia, and endeavoured, by promises of undoing their heretical work, to induce the clergy to make Zeno respect the sanctuary. After a time an imperial officer came to the trembling wretches by the altar, and stripped them of all their imperial ensigns, to be taken to Zeno and Ariadne. Zeno scrupled to drag them from the altar, and they were at last induced to come forth on the solemn assurance that their lives would be spared. It was now their turn to sail for Asia. They were sent to an obscure village in Cappadocia, and imprisoned in a tower. One tradition reports that they were killed on the journey, but the more persistent and convincing report is that the door of the tower was sealed with masonry, and the brother of Verina and his Empress were doomed to a slow and horrible death by starvation. It was the second revolution in three years, and Verina had been an active element in both.

Exile had not improved the temper of Zeno, and the restoration of his rule was at once stained with murder. He reflected gloomily on the prestige of the handsome Harmatius, and easily persuaded himself that he who had been faithless to one master might be faithless to another. Soon afterwards the luxurious officer was cut to pieces as he ascended the spiral stair from the palace to the Hippodrome; his son was stripped of the robes and ensigns of Cæsar and was sent to take a minor order of the Church at Blachernæ. But for the intervention of the more humane Ariadne the youth would, like his father, have exchanged his high dignity for death.

Constantinople seems to have regarded the murder with indifference, but an avenger arose in the provinces and the two Empresses had soon grave cause for anxiety. For a time Constantinople trembled under the menace of the formidable barbarians, but they at length returned to Italy without having penetrated into the city. A more serious danger fell upon the palace in the following year, however, when the younger daughter of Verina joined for a moment in the conflict of ambitions. Leontia, it will be remembered, had married Marcian, son of the Western Emperor Anthemius. On the ground that she had been "born in the Porphyry," while her elder sister Ariadne had been born before the crowning of Leo, her husband demanded that the Empire should be assigned to him, and marched on Constantinople at the head of an army. He broke through the defences of the city, and some of the chroniclers actually assure us that he surprised the guard of the palace in their midday siesta. It is at least certain that Zeno and the Empresses fled in alarm, and a vigorous action would have put Verina's younger daughter on the throne. Marcian seems, however, to have postponed the occupation of the palace until the following day, and the commander Illus, secretly transporting fresh troops from Asia, restored the

balance in favour of Zeno and Verina. Marcian was visited with the more refined punishment of the Byzantine world—he was forced to enter the priesthood—and Leontia retired into obscurity.

But the romance of Verina and her daughters had already entered upon a fresh chapter. Verina had welcomed her returning son-in-law at the palace, and her earlier expulsion of him and Ariadne was overlooked in view of the important share she had had in securing their return. We can, however, well understand that Zeno regarded her with suspicion and distrust, and would welcome the first opportunity to remove her from the palace. The argument which he had applied so remorselessly to Harmatius plainly extended to his imperial mother-in-law. The writers of the time represent him as not taking a prominent part in the events that followed, but it is difficult to doubt that his secret commands directed the whole intrigue.

In the year 478 a soldier attempted to assassinate the commander Illus, and he confessed—under torture or bribery—that he had been instructed by Verina's steward Epinicius. The steward was given into the custody of Illus by the Emperor, and was sent under guard to a castle in Isauria. Illus followed, and easily induced the steward to impeach his mistress. Illus then returned to the city, and arranged with Zeno a plot for the capture of Verina. It is clear that the Empress-Mother had great power in Constantinople, and that they dare not openly touch her. Illus was to go to Isauria, and pretend that he feared danger from Zeno. The Emperor was then to ask Verina to take to Illus with her own hand a letter of indemnity, and, when she reached Isauria, she was to be imprisoned there. We should find it difficult to believe that so naïve a plot could entrap the virile and experienced Empress were we not expressly assured of it by the highest authorities. In a few weeks Verina was enraged to find herself imprisoned in a Papirian

fortress, one of the strongly fortified castles of remote Isauria. One authority observes that they first compelled her to take the vows of a nun, but we may decline to believe that they troubled to place so frail and so superfluous a chain on such a woman.

From the lonely hills of Isauria Verina at length found a means of communicating with Ariadne and securing her interest. Zeno, to whom Ariadne appealed, referred her to Illus, and, when that general was summoned to the Empress's apartments, and implored with tears to release her mother, he bluntly asked: "Do you want to be rid of your husband and wed another?" Ariadne returned stormily to her husband, and declared that either Illus or she must leave the palace. "If you can do anything, I'm with you," said the distracted Emperor, who was overshadowed by the vigorous commander. Presently, as Illus was mounting the spiral stair to the Hippodrome, a soldier in the pay of Ariadne's chamberlain fell upon him. Illus was saved, except for the loss of an ear, by his guards, but he prudently decided that Constantinople was injurious to his health and requested the Emperor for a change of air. He was appointed commander of the eastern troops, took with him the patrician Leontius and a distinguished company, and reached Antioch only to declare himself in rebellion and Leontius Emperor.

In the extraordinary confusion of events which the meagre chronicles transmit to us Verina had obtained her wish in an unexpected manner. A messenger came to her in her solitary prison to say that she was to crown Leontius at the city of Tarsus and join forces with him and Illus against Zeno. Verina was not the woman to hesitate. She crowned Leontius, a cultivated Syrian noble and excellent soldier, at Tarsus, and issued a characteristic letter to the officials and commanders of the Empire:

“Verina Augusta, greeting to our prefects and Christian peoples. You know that the Empire is ours, and that after the death of our husband Leo we, trusting to improve the condition of the commonwealth, raised to the throne Trascallisseus, who was afterwards called Zeno; now, however, since we perceive that he is deteriorating, and on account of his insatiable avarice, we have thought it needful to give you a Christian Emperor, adorned with piety and justice, that he may save the commonwealth and administer war with moderation and prudence. We have therefore bestowed the imperial crown on Leontius, most pious of Romans, who will guard us all with care and prudence.”

The throne of Leontius was set up at Antioch, and the aged Empress turned with her confederates to face Zeno's troops. It was to be the last act of the stirring drama of her life. Zeno acted with unaccustomed vigour, and in a few days Verina and her companions were flying to Isauria. They shut themselves in the Papirian fortress and prepared to sustain a long siege. In the middle of the siege Verina died, and was spared the humiliation of the final defeat. Four years afterwards the heads of Illus and Leontius were exhibited on poles at Constantinople, but the body of Verina was decently interred there by her daughter.

The loss of contemporary historians prevents us from obtaining the closer acquaintance with Verina which her romantic story leads us to desire. Of her personal appearance and nationality we know nothing. One is tempted to conceive her as a Syrian woman of the type of Zenobia or Julia Domna: a virile and masterful personality, ambitious and unscrupulous, subtle and astute rather than cultivated, paying no more than a merely external and superficial regard to the teaching of the new religion of the Roman world. It remains to say a few words about the

Empress Ariadne before we consider the next great Empress of the Byzantine world.

In the few peaceful years which followed the death of Verina life at the palace became sombre and painful. Zeno was morose, suspicious and unpopular, and increased the gloom by the usual device of executing, or murdering, suspects. Their only son came to a lamentable end. The officials in charge of his education felt that it would be more profitable to themselves to teach him vice and luxury rather than the manly arts which his parents required, and he was profoundly corrupted. His ostentatious vanity invited ridicule, and his indulgence in unnatural vice and intemperance ruined his constitution. He fell an early victim to dysentery, and his father plunged into deeper bitterness amid the splendours and pleasures of his palace. Ariadne must have awaited the end with impatience, and it is not improbable that she already chose a partner to share her throne. Popular rumour afterwards said that she buried Zeno alive. It was said that he used to fall into a kind of trance after his gluttonous meals, and that Ariadne in disgust bade the servants seal him in a tomb; the legend even represents him as recovering and crying in vain to be relieved, and one version pretends that, when the tomb was eventually opened, he was found to have eaten his boots and belt. The truth seems to be that he was subject to epileptic fits, one of which ended his life in April 491.

Ariadne at once nominated for the Empire a peasant of northern Greece who had a very subordinate position in the military service of the palace. A tall, handsome man—though one of his eyes was grey and the other almost black—of strong, quiet character, he seems to have been chosen by Ariadne as her future husband before Zeno died. He was unmarried, though past middle age. One of Ariadne's eunuchs secured the consent of the Senators to the strange nomination, and Anastasius obtained the applause of the

people by remitting their debts to the treasury. The only opposition came from the patriarch, or archbishop, who had in earlier years been compelled to prevent Anastasius from setting up an unofficial pulpit in the streets of the city and teaching his favourite heresy. Anastasius genially forswore his heresy for so high a price, was at once crowned Emperor, and married Ariadne on the fortieth day after the burial of Zeno. Docile and clinging as Ariadne had been in her earlier years, she fully reveals herself as the daughter of Verina in her middle life. But the twenty-five years of life which remained for her are years of obscurity, as far as the Empress is concerned, and we will not linger over them. Storm after storm broke over the palace, where she lived, but she seems to have taken no part in public events. The Isaurians marched on the city to demand the throne for the brother of Zeno, and a long struggle ended in the complete destruction of the power of the Isaurians. Then Anastasius returned to his Monophysite heresy, and the streets of the city and towns of the Empire rang with defiance and anathema. On one occasion, in 512, the mob burned the monasteries which Anastasius favoured, and so angrily assailed the palace that the ships were made ready at the quays to conduct Ariadne and her husband to Asia. Anastasius had been guilty of the additional indiscretion of attempting to reform the morals of Constantinople and forbidding contests with wild beasts in the arena.⁵ Ariadne lived until the year 515 or 516, when she must have been about seventy years old. So completely was she overshadowed by her second husband that the only reference we find to her in the chronicles is that on one occasion she begged Anastasius to make a certain appointment, and he refused.

CHAPTER II

THE EARLY LIFE OF THEODORA

THE next Empress to occupy the superb apartments in the palace, with their couches of ivory and silver and their regiments of fawning eunuchs and silk-clad ladies, was assuredly one of the most remarkable figures that ever sat on a throne. The Empress Euphemia hardly ever issues into the pages of history from the becoming seclusion of the women's quarters in the palace, but the few details which we have concerning her suggest the most incongruous figure that imagination could place in such a world, and a brief account of her romantic elevation is a necessary introduction to the equally remarkable and better-known story of the famous Empress Theodora. The Roman Empire seemed to be deterred by some faint recollection of its early democratic spirit from admitting the hereditary principle; but the absence of this arrangement for securing the succession, together with the complete lack of any really democratic arrangement, often threw it into a chaotic confusion when a ruler died, and made its internal history a thrilling succession of romances and tragedies, with an occasional page of comedy. In this case it is comedy.

Anastasius, after playing his successive parts as peasant, lay preacher, soldier and ruler of the world, had passed away, amid the derision and rejoicing of his people, in the year 518. His nephews had feeble pretensions to succeed him, but the most powerful man in the city, the Prefect Amantius, decided that the purple should pass to his friend Theocritus. He therefore sought the commander, or Count, of the Excubitors—the more formidable guards of the palace—and placed in his hands a large sum of money for