

# FRIEDRICH VON SCHILLER

TURANDOT: THE CHINESE  
SPHINX

Friedrich Schiller

**Turandot: The Chinese Sphinx**

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# **Friedrich Schiller**

## **Turandot: The Chinese Sphinx**

### **Personages**

ALTOUM, Khan of the Celestial Empire.  
PANTALOON, his Prime Minister.  
TARTAGLIA, Lord Chancellor.  
TRUFFALDIN, Keeper of the Harem.  
BRIGHELLA, Captain of the Imperial Black Guards.  
KALAF, Prince of Tartary.  
BARAK, his former Tutor.  
ISHMAEL.  
DOCTORS of THE DIVAN.

### **Courtiers, Guards, Priests, Slaves of the Harem**

TURANDOT, Heiress to the Celestial throne: generally known as "The Chinese Sphinx."  
SKIRINA, her attendant, wife to Barak.  
ADELMA, Princess of Keicobad, slave to Turandot.

### **Female slaves of the Harem**

**SCENE.** —*Peking and its environs*

## ACT I

**SCENE. – Outskirts of Peking. L. View of town gate, above which are reared long poles, bearing turbaned and shorn heads, symmetrically disposed so as to form a kind of architectural ornament. R. Small suburban dwellings, from one of which issues PRINCE KALAF, dressed in a fantastic Tartar warrior's costume**

### KALAF

The Gods be thanked, at last by patient seeking,  
I've found a lodging in this crowded Peking.

(Enter BARAK, in Persian costume; sees KALAF and starts, surprised.)

### BARAK

Prince Kalaf? 'tis not possible. He's dead!  
Yet, sure 'tis he – his eyes – his legs – his head, —  
My Lord!

### KALAF

What – Barak! here – alive?

### BARAK

And kicking.  
But how escaped you from that fatal licking  
The Bey of Tefflis gave us all in battle?  
Your father's troops were slaughtered off like cattle,  
And you, my Prince, we thought, were slain or taken;  
So off I fled to save, at least, *my* bacon.  
I found a refuge in this queer old city;  
A widow married me for love – or pity.  
We live like happy doves in yonder cot, —  
My only grief, – the thought of your sad lot.

**KALAF**

We never thought to meet again, dear Tutor, —  
In China too!

**BARAK**

For years I've taken root here.  
But, dearest Prince, how was it, tell me, pray,  
You 'scaped the perils of that dreadful day?

**KALAF**

Breathe not my name! A price is on my head;  
I've roamed from land to land; have toiled for bread.  
As slave I served the Shah of Keicobad;  
This King a fair and gracious daughter had,  
Who guessed my birth, and offered me her heart.  
Her haughty father bade me quick depart;  
With horse and arms he furnished me. I'm here  
T' enlist myself as Chinese volunteer;  
I hope to serve the Son of Moon and Stars  
In some crack regiment of Light Hussars.  
But what's the meaning of the crowds that flood  
Each caravanserah? Refused I stood  
By all, till in yon house I found, at least  
Accommodation for myself and beast.

**BARAK**

In that trim cottage lives my wife. 'Tis lucky  
She proved herself in house-letting so plucky.

**KALAF**

I give you joy, old friend; you're married snugly,  
Your wife (for a Chinese) is not so ugly,  
And kind as kind can be, though somewhat droll,

Adieu, – I'll through the city take a stroll.  
And then proceed to visit the great Khan,  
And beg him to engage me as his man.

### **BARAK**

Stay, Prince, how rash! – you do not know your danger:  
'Tis evident to Peking you're a stranger.  
To-day a horrid deed will be enacted, —  
A cruel death, by Turandot exacted.  
Have you not heard that Turandot the fair  
Has filled this land with bloodshed and despair?

### **KALAF**

'Tis true I heard, in distant Keicobad,  
Accounts of Turandot, so strange, so sad,  
That I believed them false, – exaggerated.  
'Twas said the Prince of Keicobad, ill-fated,  
Had met his death by Turandot's command;  
His father, in revenge, assailed this land,  
But lost his life; my patroness, his daughter,  
By chance escaped unhurt the gen'ral slaughter,  
And slave was made to haughty Turandot:  
All this I heard, but credited it not.

### **BARAK**

Too true is all you've heard through common rumour,  
The Princess Turandot's ferocious humour  
Has many princes caused to lose their life  
In seeking to obtain her as a wife.  
Her beauty is so wonderful, that all  
As willing victims to her mandate fall;  
In vain do various painters daily vie  
To limn her rosy cheek, her flashing eye,  
Her perfect form, and noble, easy grace,  
Her flowing ebon locks and radiant face.  
Her charms defy all portraiture: no hand  
Can reproduce her air of sweet command.  
Yet e'en such counterfeits, from foreign parts  
Attract fresh suitors, – win all hearts.

But she, whose outward semblance thus appears  
To be Love's temple, such fierce hatred bears  
To all marital sway, or marriage tie,  
That rather than submit to man, she'd die.  
Great kings and princes, all have sued in vain,  
One glance of love or pity to obtain.

### **KALAF**

In Keicobad I heard this oft-told tale,  
But thought it paradoxical – and stale.

### **BARAK**

'Tis true. Her poor old father's in despair,  
For China's throne is now without an heir;  
He longs for her to wed some prince or other,  
And not perplex him with continual bother.  
He's of an age to live in peace and quiet,  
And not be plagued with wars and civil riot;  
He's tried all means his daughter's mind to soften,  
Has often sternly threatened – coaxed as often;  
Used prayers for such a monarch *infra dig*—  
But all in vain; she's headstrong as a pig.  
At length she said she'd make a compromise,  
The Khan consented – (he's not over-wise!)  
His artful daughter wheedled him to swear,  
By great Fo-hi, that she should never wear  
The hateful Hymeneal yoke, unless  
Some suitor for her hand should rightly guess  
Three difficult conundrums by herself composed:  
But if the man who for her hand proposed  
Should fail to solve her problems – then his pate  
Should be struck off, and grace the city-gate.

### **KALAF**

Why, what a tigress must this Princess be!  
I never heard such cruelty – Bless me!

**BARAK**

Already kings and princes by the dozen  
She's managed by her subtlety to cozen;  
For she's so clever that she always diddles  
The keenest wits by her confounding riddles.

**KALAF**

As wife, decidedly I should decline her,  
She's made of dragon-pattern stony China.  
What fools her suitors are, their hearts to fix on  
So termagant and bloodthirsty a vixen!

**BARAK**

So fascinating is she, none withstand her,  
All men for her do nothing but philander.  
Behold on yonder gate the ghastly row  
Of livid heads set up in dismal show.  
All these belonged to men who dared to hope  
With Turandot in subtlety to cope.  
To-day a prince is led to execution,  
Who failed to give her riddles due solution.  
That is the reason of the noise you hear,  
Pray go not to the town.

**KALAF**

What should I fear?

**BARAK**

The bloody spectacle your nerves might shake;  
The severed head is fastened to a stake.

*(Gong sounds within the city walls.)*

But hark! yon tantan's loud infernal dinning,  
Tells that the tragedy is now beginning.

**KALAF**

A monster like this princess should be strangled,  
Her body by wild horses torn and mangled.

**BARAK**

To all she is not cruelly inclined,  
'Tis Man she hates; to women she's most kind.  
Within her royal hareem serves my wife,  
And with her mistress leads a happy life.  
The only fault of Turandot is pride, —  
Her many virtues cannot be denied.

**KALAF**

Who comes this way?

**BARAK**

'Tis Ishmael, the friend  
Of him who just has met his tragic end.

*Enter ISHMAEL, weeping.*

**ISH**

His life is o'er! Ah, would the cruel knife  
Had struck my worthless self, and spared his life.

**BARAK**

Bear up, good friend, I pity you sincerely,

Your master for his love has paid too dearly.  
Why did you not dissuade him from the trial —

**ISH**

My prayers he met with kind, but firm denial.  
His dying words still echo in mine ear —  
"Good friend," he said, "to die I do not fear;  
My life's a blank if without *her* I live.  
Speed to my father, – beg him to forgive  
His hapless son, who staked his life on one  
Whose face is fair, whose heart is cold as stone.  
Shew him this portrait: (*takes a miniature from his breast*) when its  
charms he views,  
My frenzied love, my rashness he'll excuse."  
This said, he clasped the portrait to his breast,  
Fond kisses on its icy beauty pressed;  
Then bent his head, and closed his eyes,  
The death blow fell, and sent him to the skies.

(*Dashes the portrait to the ground.*)

Away, thou false deceit! thou cause of woe,  
Th' original I'd trample even so.  
To dust I'd grind her tiger heart; – her soul,  
I'd send to Eblis' region dark and foul! (*Exit.*)

**BARAK**

Are you convinced?

**KALAF**

I'm perfectly amazed.  
How can a painted semblance thus have crazed  
So sensible a prince? (*Stoops to pick it up.*)

**BARAK**

For heaven's sake,

Avoid that picture as you would a snake.

**KALAF** (*smiling*).

No harm will happen, dear old tutor, sure  
From picking up a picture from the floor.  
No woman yet has caused my heart to throb, —  
Shall painted lines my soul of freedom rob?

*(Barak endeavours to prevent Kalaf from beholding the miniature; Kalaf puts him aside, and gazes on it for some time in silence.)*

Ye gods! an angel's face. Oh ecstasy!

**BARAK**

Now, there; he's caught. I knew how it would be!

**KALAF**

Beneath this beaming smile, these lustrous eyes,  
There cannot lurk a cruel heart of ice.

**BARAK**

I tell you she's the wickedest of creatures;  
Oh, gaze not on the Syren's fatal features,  
More baneful than the Gorgon head, Medusa.

**KALAF**

Hush, hush, I will not hear you thus abuse her,  
I never saw a face and form diviner;  
Her's is not mortal clay, but porcelain China,  
Some magic power, some demon, I know not,  
Enchains my soul to beautiful Turandot.

*(Gazes enraptured on the miniature.)*

These eyes to meet, these rosy lips to kiss,

Who would not hazard all to win such bliss?  
My senses reel, my veins are all afire!  
Good Barak, help me to my heart's desire.  
Her stern ordeal I'll undergo – to solve  
Her problems or to die, is my resolve.

**BARAK**

Desist from your intention, I conjure you,  
Let my remonstrance of this madness cure you.

**KALAF**

You speak in vain. My fortune now or never,  
Shall be ensured for aye, or lost for ever.  
One stroke will end my life, or I shall gain  
The fairest woman e'er beheld, and reign  
An Emperor of Chang's celestial state.  
O smile upon my hopes, benignant Fate!

*(During this speech, a Chinese executioner has appeared on the city gate, bearing a pole upon which is fixed a turbaned head: he places it in the row, and disappears.)*

But tell me, Barak, shall I in divan  
Behold the lovely daughter of the Khan?

**BARAK**

A spectacle more thrilling now behold,  
That head just smitten off. My blood runs cold,  
To think that yours may be thus closely shaven.

**KALAF**

Nay, fear is not for princes – I'm no craven.

*(Contemplates the head with compassion.)*

Poor youth, deserving of a better fate.

**BARAK**

Sweet prince, renounce th' attempt.

**KALAF**

Too late, too late!

**BARAK**

I fear you'll fail to guess the Sphinx's riddles.

**KALAF**

I'll cut the Gordian knots right down their middles!  
I'm not so stupid as some folks suppose;  
'Twill not be easy my quick wit to pose.  
I fancy I shall come off with *éclat*;  
But if I fail, it does not matter, pshaw!  
If in this enterprise I lose my life,  
Present my compliments to your good wife;  
My horse be hers, in payment of her trouble.  
Heigho! this world's a dream, and life's a bubble!

*(Going. Enter SKIRINA from the cottage.)*

Reveal my name to none. Nay, do not cry,  
You've wept me once before as dead. Goodbye.

**SKIR**

Why, what's the matter? You are melancholy.

**BARAK**

Oh, help me, wife, restrain this youth's mad folly;  
He's off to Peking – means to dare the Sphinx!

**SKIR**

He's sure to die – my heart within me sinks!  
What put such silly nonsense in your head?  
You've got brain fever; bless you, go to bed.

**KALAF**

Pray save your breath. My fever needs no nurse  
But Turandot's fair hand. Here, take my purse,  
I have no farther need of money; for  
I either die, or shall become an Emperor.

*(Exit hastily into the city gate.)*

**BARAK** (*following him*)

Dear master, hear me; stay; all, all in vain;  
I ne'er shall see his blessèd face again!

**SKIR**

You know my stranger-guest? how very funny,  
Let's try to catch him, and return his money.

**BARAK**

Wife, be not curious; no questions ask,  
He's gifted with such mental powers, the task  
Of coping with the Sphinx he may achieve —  
His doom unto the gods we now must leave.

**SKIR**

We'll sacrifice a pig to great Fo-hi,  
He'll perhaps contrive your handsome friend shan't die.

*(Exeunt into the cottage.)*

**END OF ACT I**

## ACT II

**SCENE.** —*Grand saloon of the Divan. L. Doors leading to the Emperor's apartment. R. Doors leading to TURANDOT's Harem. Black slaves discovered, engaged in setting the saloon in order; TRUFFALDIN majestically directing them*

**TRUF**

Come, look alive! His Majesty's Divan  
Will soon assemble. Now, look sharp, my man!  
A carpet for this throne; here sits her Highness;  
Bring brooms, and sweep up all this horrid dry mess.

*(Enter BRIGHELLA, looking around wonderingly.)*

**BRIG**

I say, Truffaldin, what's this grand array?  
The high Divan again – twice in one day?

**TRUF.** *(without minding him)*

Eight seats here for the doctors!  
They're all muffs,  
But look imposing in their brocade stuffs.

**BRIG**

Truffaldin, do you hear? What is the matter?

**TRUF**

How dare you make such a confounded clatter?  
You stupid, don't you know the whole Divan  
Are called to meet as quickly as they can?  
Another suitor for my mistress' heart

Is anxious from his silly head to part.

**BRIG**

For shame! Three hours ago one victim fell.

**TRUF**

This new pretender seems a precious swell.  
His curly poll will grace the hangman's pole,  
A charming barber's block, upon my soul!  
'Twill cut a figure in our "*Rotten Row*;"  
I think that jest is witty – Ho, ho, ho!

**BRIG**

Your soul in blackness with your visage vies —  
You grin whene'er a fellow-creature dies.

**TRUF**

You jackanapes! None of your paltry spite;  
My heart's not black, – your liver 'tis that's white;  
So hold your jaw. Why should I grieve to see  
That men for love such arrant fools can be?  
The more the merrier; for on each day,  
Our Princess 'scapes a husband's dreaded sway;  
She gives us all a good jollification,  
Besides munificent gratification.

**BRIG**

How barbarous.

**TRUF**

Now, don't you be so silly.  
Her suitors are not dragged here willy-nilly;  
They know the journey here their heads may cost 'em,  
But 'tis no loss; for they've already lost 'em.  
Perhaps that's why the riddles they can't guess,  
And always fall into a hideous mess.  
I'm sure my charming mistress is most lenient  
To have devised a method so convenient  
To rid herself, and China, of such geese;  
Much harder tasks, – to fetch the golden fleece —  
Or singing water – or the talking bird —  
Were formerly exacted, as I've heard.  
My lovely Highness is not so inhuman,  
She only tests her sweethearts' fine acumen;  
And if she must submit to husband's rule,  
At least she'll not be governed by a fool.

*(March music is heard.)*

**BRIG**

The royal trumpets sound. Hark, don't you hear 'em.

**TRUF**

I'll run t'escort my Princess from her hareem.  
Be off! and guard the palace portals,  
Let none pass thro' but Mandarin-born mortals.

*(Exeunt severally.)*

*(Enter guards and musicians; then eight doctors pedantically dressed; PANTALOON and TARTAGLIA in characteristic costumes; then the KHAN ALTOUM, in extravagantly rich attire, he ascends his throne, PANT. and TART. station themselves near it. At his entrance, all prostrate themselves, their foreheads to the ground, and remain thus until he is seated. At a sign from PANTALOON, the march ceases.)*

**ALT**

Good folk, behold your monarch much perplexed,  
I must confess I'm seriously vexed.

My daughter's obstinacy quite unnerves me,  
Such unforeseen and jaded tricks she serves me.  
One charming prince was killed this morn, at six;  
Another's just arrived, – I'm in a fix,  
And worried to death by constant butch'ry,  
Of lovers caught by my fair daughter's witch'ry;  
But yet I cannot break my oath. Fo-hi  
Has heard my vow; his wrath I dar'n't defy.  
Prime Minister, can't you some project form  
And be your monarch's rudder thro' this storm?

**PANT**

Celestial Majesty —

**ALT**

What do you say?

**PANT. (*aside.*)**

The loudest bawling's all time thrown away!  
He's deaf as any post – a perfect dummy —  
It's no use preaching wisdom to a mummy.  
I wish I were in Venice back again!  
I had to fly her happy shores, on pain  
Of being hanged, or losing liberty,  
Because the bigwigs thought my tongue too free.  
I hoped, as minister, I was secure  
To fatten in an easy sinecure;  
Instead of which, I've not one moment's leisure;  
No carnival, nor any Christian pleasure.  
But constant squabbles, tears, and imprecations,  
Divans, beheadings, sphinxes, – I've lost patience!  
I'll quit this land of pigtailed, gongs, and teas;  
Return to Italy, and live at ease.

**ALT**

I *see* you're talking; speak a little louder.

**PANT.** (*aside.*)

He wouldn't hear the bursting of gunpowder.

**ALT**

Tartaglia, have you seen this poor young fellow?

TART. (*stammering, until he speaks Italian very glibly*) —

Y-y-your h-hi-high-ness, y-y-es, a-and f-f-found h-hi-him —*molto bello*

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