

## CHAPTER XV

### OF THE FEAST OF CLEOPATRA; OF THE MELTING OF THE PEARL; OF THE SAYING OF HARMACHIS; AND OF CLEOPATRA'S VOW OF LOVE

On the third night the feast was once more prepared in the hall of the great house that had been set aside to the use of Cleopatra, and on this night its splendour was greater even than on the nights before. For the twelve couches that were set about the table were embossed with gold, and those of Cleopatra and Antony were of gold set with jewels. The dishes also were all of gold set with jewels, the walls were hung with purple cloths sewn with gold, and on the floor, covered with a net of gold, fresh roses were strewn ankle-deep, that as the slaves trod them sent up their perfume. Once again I was bidden to stand, with Charmion and Iras and Merira, behind the couch of Cleopatra, and, like a slave, from time to time call out the hours as they flew. And there being no help, I went wild at heart; but this I swore--it should be for the last time, since I could not bear that shame. For though I would not yet believe what Charmion told me--that Cleopatra was about to become the Love of Antony--yet I could no more endure this ignominy and torture. For from Cleopatra now I had no words save such as a Queen speaks to her slave, and methinks it gave her dark heart pleasure to torment me.

Thus it came to pass that I, the Pharaoh, crowned of Khem, stood among eunuchs and waiting-women behind the couch of Egypt's Queen while the feast went merrily and the wine-cup passed. And ever Antony sat, his eyes fixed upon the face of Cleopatra, who from time to time let her

deep glance lose itself in his, and then for a little while their talk died away. For he told her tales of war and of deeds that he had done--ay, and love-jests such as are not meet for the ears of women. But she took offence at nothing; rather, falling into his humour, she would cap his stories with others of a finer wit, but not less shameless.

At length, the rich meal being finished, Antony gazed at the splendour around him.

"Tell me, then, most lovely Egypt," he said; "are the sands of Nile compact of gold, that thou canst, night by night, thus squander the ransom of a King upon a single feast? Whence comes this untold wealth?"

I bethought me of the tomb of the Divine Menkau-ra, whose holy treasure was thus wickedly wasted, and looked up so that Cleopatra's eye caught mine; but, reading my thoughts, she frowned heavily.

"Why, noble Antony," she said, "surely it is nothing! In Egypt we have our secrets, and know whence to conjure riches at our need. Say, what is the value of this golden service, and of the meats and drinks that have been set before us?"

He cast his eyes about, and hazarded a guess.

"Maybe a thousand sestertia."[\*]

[\*] About eight thousand pounds of English money.--Editor.

"Thou hast understated it by half, noble Antony! But such as it is I will give it thee and those with thee as a free token of my friendship. And more will I show thee now: I myself will eat and drink ten thousand sestertia at a draught."

"That cannot be, fair Egypt!"

She laughed, and bade a slave bring her white vinegar in a glass. When it was brought she set it before her and laughed again, while Antony, rising from his couch, drew near and set himself at her side, and all the company leant forward to see what she would do. And this she did. She took from her ear one of those great pearls which last of all had been drawn from the body of the Divine Pharaoh; and before any could guess her purpose she let it fall into the vinegar. Then came silence, the silence of wonder, and slowly the priceless pearl melted in the strong acid. When it was melted she lifted the glass and shook it, then drank the vinegar, to the last drop.

"More vinegar, slave!" she cried; "my meal is but half finished!" and she drew forth the second pearl.

"By Bacchus, no! that shalt thou not!" cried Antony, snatching at her hands; "I have seen enough;" and at that moment, moved to it by I know not what, I called aloud:

"The hour falls, O Queen!--the hour of the coming of the curse of

Menkau-ra!"

An ashy whiteness grew upon Cleopatra's face, and she turned upon me furiously, while all the company gazed wondering, not knowing what the words might mean.

"Thou ill-omened slave!" she cried. "Speak thus once more and thou shalt be scourged with rods!--ay, scourged like an evildoer--that I promise thee, Harmachis!"

"What means the knave of an astrologer?" asked Antony. "Speak, sirrah! and make clear thy meaning, for those who deal in curses must warrant their wares."

"I am a servant of the Gods, noble Antony. That which the Gods put in my mind that must I say; nor can I read their meaning," I answered humbly.

"Oh, oh! thou servest the Gods, dost thou, thou many-coloured mystery?" This he said having reference to my splendid robes. "Well, I serve the Goddesses, which is a softer cult. And there's this between us: that though what they put in my mind I say, neither can I read their meaning," and he glanced at Cleopatra as one who questions.

"Let the knave be," she said impatiently; "to-morrow we'll be rid of him. Sirrah, begone!"

I bowed and went; and, as I went, I heard Antony say: "Well, he may be

a knave--for that all men are--but this for thy astrologer: he hath a royal air and the eye of a King--ay, and wit in it."

Without the door I paused, not knowing what to do, for I was bewildered with misery. And, as I stood, someone touched me on the hand. I glanced up--it was Charmion, who in the confusion of the rising of the guests, had slipped away and followed me.

For in trouble Charmion was ever at my side.

"Follow me," she whispered; "thou art in danger."

I turned and followed her. Why should I not?

"Whither go we?" I asked at length.

"To my chamber," she said. "Fear not; we ladies of Cleopatra's Court have small good fame to lose; if anyone by chance should see us, they'll think that it is a love-tryst, and such are all the fashion."

I followed, and, presently, skirting the crowd, we came unseen to a little side entrance that led to a stair, up which we passed. The stair ended in a passage; we turned down it till we found a door on the left hand. Charmion entered silently, and I followed her into a dark chamber. Being in, she barred the door and, kindling tinder to a flame, lit a hanging lamp. As the light grew strong I gazed around. The chamber was not large, and had but one casement, closely shuttered. For the rest, it

was simply furnished, having white walls, some chests for garments, an ancient chair, what I took to be a tiring table, on which were combs, perfumes, and all the frippery that pertains to woman, and a white bed with a brodered coverlid, over which was hung a gnat-gauze.

"Be seated, Harmachis," she said, pointing to the chair. I took the chair, and Charmion, throwing back the gnat-gauze, sat herself upon the bed before me.

"Knowest thou what I heard Cleopatra say as thou didst leave the banqueting-hall?" she asked presently.

"Nay, I know not."

"She gazed after thee, and, as I went over to her to do some service, she murmured to herself: 'By Serapis, I will make an end! I will wait no longer: to-morrow he shall be strangled!'"

"So!" I said, "it may be; though, after all that has been, I can scarce believe that she will murder me."

"Why canst thou not believe it, thou most foolish of men? Dost forget how nigh thou wast to death there in the Alabaster Hall? Who saved thee then from the knives of the eunuchs? Was it Cleopatra? Or was it I and Brennus? Stay, I will tell thee. Thou canst not yet believe it, because, in thy folly, thou dost not think it possible that the woman who has but lately been as a wife to thee can now, in so short a time, doom thee to

be basely done to death. Nay, answer not--I know all; and I tell thee this: thou hast not measured the depth of Cleopatra's perfidy, nor canst thou dream the blackness of her wicked heart. She had surely slain thee in Alexandria had she not feared that thy slaughter being noised abroad might bring trouble on her. Therefore has she brought thee here to kill thee secretly. For what more canst thou give her? She has thy heart's love, and is wearied of thy strength and beauty. She has robbed thee of thy royal birthright and brought thee, a King, to stand amidst the waiting-women behind her at her feasts; she has won from thee the great secret of the holy treasure!"

"Ah, thou knowest that?"

"Yes, I know all; and to-night thou seest how the wealth stored against the need of Khem is being squandered to fill up the wanton luxury of Khem's Macedonian Queen! Thou seest how she has kept her oath to wed thee honourably. Harmachis--at length thine eyes are open to the truth!"

"Ay, I see too well; and yet she swore she loved me, and I, poor fool, I believed her!"

"She swore she loved thee!" answered Charmion, lifting her dark eyes: "now I will show thee how she loves thee. Knowest thou what was this house? It was a priest's college; and, as thou wottest, Harmachis, priests have their ways. This little room aforetime was the room of the Head Priest, and the chamber that is beyond and below was the gathering-place of the other priests. The old slave who keeps the house

told me all this, and also she revealed what I shall show thee. Now, Harmachis, be silent as the dead, and follow me!"

She blew out the lamp, and by the little light that crept through the shuttered casement led me by the hand to the far corner of the room. Here she pressed upon the wall, and a door opened in its thickness. We entered, and she closed the spring. Now we were in a little chamber, some five cubits in length by four in breadth; for a faint light struggled into the closet, and also the sound of voices, I knew not whence. Loosing my hand, she crept to the end of the place, and looked steadfastly at the wall; then crept back and, whispering "Silence!" led me forward with her. Then I saw that there were eyeholes in the wall, which pierced it, and were hidden on the farther side by carved work in stone. I looked through the hole that was in front of me, and I saw this: six cubits below was the level of the floor of another chamber, lit with fragrant lamps, and most richly furnished. It was the sleeping-place of Cleopatra, and there, within ten cubits of where we stood, sat Cleopatra on a gilded couch, and by her side sat Antony.

"Tell me," Cleopatra murmured--for this place was so built that every word spoken in the room below came to the ears of the listener above--"tell me, noble Antony, wast pleased with my poor festival?"

"Ay," he answered in his deep soldier's voice, "ay, Egypt, I have made feasts, and been bidden to feasts, but never saw I aught like thine; and I tell thee this, though I am rough of tongue and unskilled in pretty sayings such as women love, thou wast the richest sight of all that



splendid board. The red wine was not so red as thy beauteous cheek, the roses smelt not so sweet as the odour of thy hair, and no sapphire there with its changing light was so lovely as thy eyes of ocean blue."

"What! Praise from Antony! Sweet words from the lips of him whose writings are so harsh! Why, it is praise indeed!"

"Ay," he went on, "it was a royal feast, though I grieve that thou didst waste that great pearl; and what meant that hour-calling astrologer of thine, with his ill-omened talk of the curse of Menkau-ra?"

A shadow fled across her glowing face. "I know not; he was lately wounded in a brawl, and methinks the blow has crazed him."

"He seemed not crazed, and there was that about his voice which rings in my ears like some oracle of fate. So wildly, too, he looked upon thee, Egypt, with those piercing eyes of his, like one who loved and yet hated through the love."

"He is a strange man, I tell thee, noble Antony, and a learned. Myself, at times, I almost fear him, for he is deeply versed in the ancient arts of Egypt. Knowest thou that the man is of royal blood, and once he plotted to slay me? But I won him over, and slew him not, for he had the key to secrets that I fain would learn; and, indeed, I loved his wisdom, and to listen to his deep talk of all hidden things."

"By Bacchus, I grow jealous of the knave! And now, Egypt?"

"And now I have sucked his knowledge dry, and have no more cause to fear him. Didst thou not see that I have made him stand these three nights a slave amid my slaves, and call aloud the hours as they fled in festival. No captive King marching in thy Roman triumphs can have suffered pangs so keen as that proud Egyptian Prince when he stood shamed behind my couch."

Here Charmion laid her hand on mine and pressed it, as though in tenderness.

"Well, he shall trouble us no more with his words of evil omen," Cleopatra went on slowly; "to-morrow morn he dies--dies swiftly and in secret, leaving no trace of what his fate has been. On this is my mind fixed; of a truth, noble Antony, it is fixed. Even as I speak the fear of this man grows and gathers in my breast. Half am I minded to give the word even now, for I breathe not freely till he be dead," and she made as though to rise.

"Let it be till morning," he said, catching her by the hand; "the soldiers drink, and the deed will be ill done. 'Tis pity too. I love not to think of men slaughtered in their sleep."

"In the morning, perchance, the hawk may have flown," she answered, pondering. "He hath keen ears, this Harmachis, and can summon things to aid him that are not of the earth. Perchance, even now he hears me in the spirit; for, of a truth, I seem to feel his presence breathing

round me. I could tell thee--but no, let him be! Noble Antony, be my tiring-woman and loose me this crown of gold, it chafes my brow. Be gentle, hurt me not--so."

He lifted the uræus crown from her brows, and she shook loose her heavy weight of hair that fell about her like a garment.

"Take back thy crown, royal Egypt," he said, speaking low, "take it from my hand; I will not rob thee of it, but rather set it more firmly on that beauteous brow."

"What means my Lord?" she asked, smiling and looking into his eyes.

"What mean I? Why then, this: thou camest hither at my bidding to make answer of the charges laid against thee as to matters politic. And knowest thou, Egypt, that hadst thou been other than thou art thou hadst not gone back to queen it on the Nile; for of this I am sure, the charges against thee are true in fact. But, being what thou art--and look thou! never did Nature serve a woman better!--I forgive thee all. For the sake of thy grace and beauty I forgive thee that which had not been forgiven to virtue, or to patriotism, or to the dignity of age! See now how good a thing is woman's wit and loveliness, that can make kings forget their duty and cozen even blindfolded Justice to peep ere she lifts her sword! Take back thy crown, O Egypt! It is now my care that, though it be heavy, it shall not chafe thee."

"These are royal words, most notable Antony," she made answer; "gracious

and generous words, such as befit the Conqueror of the world! And touching my misdeeds in the past--if misdeeds there have been--I say this, and this alone--then I knew not Antony. For, knowing Antony, who could sin against him? What woman could lift a sword against one who must be to all women as a God--one who, seen and known, draws after him the whole allegiance of the heart, as the sun draws flowers? And what more can I say and not cross the bounds of woman's modesty? Why, only this--set that crown upon my brow, great Antony, and I will take it as a gift from thee, by the giving made doubly dear, and to thy uses I will guard it.

"There, now I am thy vassal Queen, and through me all old Egypt that I rule does homage to Antony the Triumvir, who shall be Antony the Emperor of Rome and Khem's Imperial Lord!"

And, having set the crown upon her locks, he stood gazing on her, grown passionate in the warm breath of her living beauty, till at length he caught her by both hands and drawing her to him kissed her thrice, saying:

"Cleopatra, I love thee, Sweet--I love thee as I never loved before."

She drew back from his embrace, smiling softly; and as she did so the golden circlet of the sacred snakes fell, being but loosely set upon her brow, and rolled away into the darkness beyond the ring of light.

I saw the omen, and even in the bitter anguish of my heart knew its evil import. But these twain took no note.

"Thou lovest me?" she said, most sweetly; "how know I that thou lovest me? Perchance it is Fulvia whom thou lovest--Fulvia, thy wedded wife?"

"Nay, it is not Fulvia, 'tis thou, Cleopatra, and thou alone. Many women have looked favourably upon me from my boyhood up, but to never a one have I known such desire as to thee, O thou Wonder of the World, like unto whom no woman ever was! Canst thou love me, Cleopatra, and to me be true, not for my place or power, not for that which I can give or can withhold, not for the stern music of my legion's tramp, or for the light that flows from my bright Star of Fortune; but for myself, for the sake of Antony, the rough captain, grown old in camps? Ay, for the sake of Antony the reveller, the frail, the unfix'd of purpose, but who yet never did desert a friend, or rob a poor man, or take an enemy unawares? Say, canst thou love me, Egypt? Oh! if thou wilt, why, I am more happy than though I sat to-night in the Capitol at Rome crowned absolute Monarch of the World!"

And, ever as he spoke, she gazed on him with wonderful eyes, and in them shone a light of truth and honesty such as was strange to me.

"Thou speakest plainly," she said, "and thy words are sweet to mine ears--they would be sweet, even were things otherwise than they are, for what woman would not love to see the world's master at her feet? But things being as they are, why, Antony, what can be so sweet as thy sweet words? The harbour of his rest to the storm-tossed mariner--surely that is sweet! The dream of Heaven's bliss which cheers the poor ascetic

priest on his path of sacrifice--surely that is sweet! The sight of  
Dawn, the rosy-fingered, coming in his promise to glad the watching  
Earth--surely that is sweet! But, ah! not one of these, nor all dear  
delightful things that are, can match the honey-sweetness of thy words  
to me, O Antony! For thou knowest not--never canst thou know--how drear  
my life hath been, and empty, since thus it is ordained that in love  
only can woman lose her solitude! And I have never loved--never might  
I love--till this happy night! Ay, take me in thy arms, and let us swear  
a great vow of love--an oath that may not be broken while life is in  
us! Behold! Antony! now and for ever I do vow most strict fidelity unto  
thee! Now and for ever I am thine, and thine alone!"

Then Charmion took me by the hand and drew me thence.

"Hast seen enough?" she asked, when we were once more within the chamber  
and the lamp was lit.

"Yea," I answered; "my eyes are opened."