

One of Cleopatra's Nights

Theophile Gautier

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Translated by Lafcadio Hearn

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I

About eighteen hundred years ago from the moment we write these lines, a cange magnificently gilded and painted came down the Nile with all the rapidity which can be got from fifty long flat oars crawling on the scratched water like the feet of a gigantic scarabeus beetle.

This cange was narrow, elongated in shape, tilted at the two ends in the form of a crescent moon, slim in its proportions, and marvellously fashioned for speed; a ram's head surmounted by a golden ball armed the point of the prow, and showed that the craft belonged to a personage of royal rank.

In the centre of the boat was erected a cabin with a flat roof, a kind of naos, or tent of honour, coloured and gilded, with a moulding of palm leaves, and four little square windows.

Two rooms, covered in the same way with hieroglyphics, occupied the ends of the crescent; one of them, bigger than the other, had, juxtaposed, a story of less height, like the chateauxgaillards of those quaint galleys of the sixteenth century drawn by Della Bella; the smaller, which served as quarters for the pilot, ended in a triangular poop-rail.

The rudder was made of two immense oars, set on many-coloured posts, and trailing in the water behind the bark like the webbed feet of a swan; heads adorned with the pschent and wearing on the chin the allegorical horn, were sculptured by handfuls along those great oars which the pilot manœuvred standing erect on the roof of the cabin.

He was a sunburnt man, fawn-coloured like new bronze, with blue glistening high-lights, his eyes tilted at the corners, his hair very black and plaited into little strings, his mouth wide spread, his cheek-bones prominent, his ears sitting out from his skull, the Egyptian type in all its purity. A narrow loin-cloth tied on his hips, and five or six twists of glass beads and amulets, composed all his costume.

He seemed to be the only inhabitant of the cange, for the rowers, bent over their oars, and hidden by the gunwale, only made their presence divined by the symmetrical movement of the oar-blades, opening like the spokes of a fan on each flank of the bark, and falling again into the stream after a slight moment of suspension.

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No puff of air stirred the atmosphere, and the big triangular sail of the cange, rolled up and tied with a silken cord along the lowered mast, showed that all hope of the wind rising had been abandoned.

The midday sun discharged its leaden arrows; the ash-coloured ooze on the river's banks gave out flamboyant reflections; a hard light, dazzling and dusty because of its intensity, streamed down in torrents of flame; the azure of the sky was white with heat like metal in the furnace; a blazing reddish haze rose like smoke on the burning horizon. Not a cloud showed on that sky as unvarying and mournful as eternity.

The water of the Nile, dull and lustreless, seemed to be sleeping in its course, and to spread out in sheets of molten pewter. No breath wrinkled its surface, nor swayed on their stalks the flower cups of the lotus, as rigid as if they had been sculptured; only at distant intervals the leap of a bechir or a fahaka inflating the under part of his body, barely mirrored in the water a silver scale, and the oars of the cange seemed to tear with difficulty the fuliginous scum of the stagnant stream. The banks were deserted; a deep and solemn gloom weighed on that land which was never aught else than a mighty tomb, a land whose living inhabitants seemed never to have had any other occupation but that of embalming the dead. A sterile gloom, dry as pumice stone, without melancholy, without reverie, having no pearl-grey cloud to gaze at on the horizon, no secret spring in which to bathe its dusty feet; the gloom of the sphinx wearied with perpetually watching the desert, the sphinx who can never quit the granite pedestal on which it has sharpened its claws for twenty centuries.

The silence was so profound that one would have said that the whole world had become mute, or that the air had lost its power of conducting sound. The sole noise to be heard was the whispering and muffled laughter of the crocodiles, swooning with heat, who wallowed in the reeds of the river; or else some ibis who, tired of standing erect, one foot folded back under its body, his head between his shoulders, quitted his immobile station, and, roughly lashing the blue air with his white wings, went to perch anew on an obelisk or a palm-tree.

The cange shot like an arrow through the water of the river, leaving behind it a silvery furrow which soon closed up; and some bubbles of foam, coming to the surface to burst, were the sole witnesses of the passage of the bark that was already out of sight.

The steep banks of the river, salmon and ochre coloured, opened to the view like strips of papyrus between the double azure of the sky and the water, so alike in tone that the slim tongue of land which separated them seemed a pathway flung over an immense lake, so that it would have been difficult to decide if the Nile reflected the sky or if the sky reflected the Nile.

The spectacle changed every moment: now it was gigantic propylea that came to mirror in the river their shelving walls, set with large flat panels of quaint figures; pylons with splayed capitals, flights of stairs bordered with crouching sphinxes, caps with fluted lappets on their heads, and crossing over their pointed breasts their black basalt paws; inordinate palaces of which the severe horizontal lines of the entablature jutted out against the horizon, where the emblematic sphere opened its mysterious wings like an eagle with inordinate wing-spread; temples with enormous columns, thick like towers, on which, on a background of dazzling white, processions of hieroglyphic figures stood out conspicuously; all the marvellous creations of an architecture of Titans; now it was countrysides of desolating sterility; hills formed by little fragments of stone that had come from excavations and buildings, crumbs of that gigantic debauch of granite which lasted more than thirty centuries; mountains denuded of foliage by the heat, slashed and barred by black lines like the scars of a forest fire; mounds hunchbacked and misformed, squatting like the criocephalus of the tombs, their misshapen forms showing up against the edge of the sky; greenish clay, reddish ochre, tufa rock of a floury white, and from time to time, some steep slope of old rose-coloured marble in which gaped the black mouths of the quarries.

This sterility was tempered by nothing at all; no oasis of foliage refreshed the gaze; green seemed a colour unknown in this land; only at long intervals a scrawny palm-tree sprawled on the horizon like a vegetable crab; a thorny cochineal fig-tree brandished its steely leaves like bronze gloves; a safflower, finding a little humidity in

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the shade of a stump of a column, set off with a point of red the general uniformity.

After this rapid glance at the general aspect of the country, let us come back to the cange with its fifty rowers, and without announcing ourselves, let us enter without ceremony into the naos of honour.

The interior was painted in white with green arabesques, with nets of vermilion and gold flowers of fantastic shapes; a reed mat of extreme fineness covered the floor; at the end of the room stood a small bed with griffin feet, with a back arranged like a sofa or modern settee, a stool with four steps to ascend into it, and, a luxury singular enough according to our ideas of comfort, a kind of half circle of cedar wood, mounted on a pedestal, designed to encircle the back of the neck and to sustain the head of the person in bed.

On this strange pillow rested a very charming head, the head of a woman adored and divine, one look from whom lost half a world. She was the most complete woman who had ever lived, a type of wonder to whom the poets can add nothing, and whom dreamers find forever at the end of their dreams: there is no need to name Cleopatra.

Beside her Charmion, her favourite slave, waved a large fan of ibis feathers. A young girl sprinkled with a shower of scented water the little reed blinds with which the windows of the naos were furnished, so that the air might only enter there impregnated with freshness and perfumes.

Near the couch, in a vase of ribbon-like alabaster, with a slender neck, slim and sinuous in outline, recalling vaguely the profile of them a heron, was a bouquet of lotus flowers in water, some of them a celestial blue, others a delicate rose like the finger tips of Isis, the great goddess.

Cleopatra, this day, by caprice or policy, was not dressed in Grecian fashion: she had just been present at a panegyry, and she was returning to her summer palace in the cange, wearing the Egyptian costume that she had been wearing at the festival.

Our lady readers will perhaps be curious to know how Queen Cleopatra was dressed in returning from the Mammisi of Hermonthis, where were worshipped the trinity of the God Mandou, the Goddess Ritho, and their son Harphre; that is a satisfaction we can give them.

Queen Cleopatra had for head-dress a kind of very light gold helmet formed by the body and wings of the sacred sparrow-hawk; the wings, smoothed down fan-wise on each side of her head, covered her temples, and stretched almost to her neck, leaving free at a little opening an ear more rosy and more delicately folded than the shell whence sprang Venus whom the Egyptians name Hathor; the tail of the bird occupied the place where our ladies twist their rolls of hair; its body, covered with feathers imbricated and painted in different enamels, enveloped the top of her head, and its neck, gracefully bent towards the forehead, made up with the head a kind of horn sparkling with jewels; a symbolic crest in the shape of a tower completed this elegant, although bizarre head-dress. Hair, black as that of a night without stars, escaped from this helmet and flowed in long tresses down her fair shoulders, but a collar or gorget, ornamented with several rows of serpentine, of azerodrach, and of chrysoberyl, left, alas! only the commencement of those shoulders in sight; a linen robe with diagonal ribs, a mistlike cloth, woven from air, *ventus textilis* as Petronius says, swayed in white vapour round a beautiful body whose lines it softly shaded. This robe had half sleeves, fitting on the shoulders but cut away towards the elbow like our sabot sleeves, and showing a wonderful arm and a perfect hand, the arm clasped by six circles of gold and the hand adorned by a ring representing a scarabeus. A belt, of which the knotted ends hung down behind, marked the waist of this floating and free tunic; a short cloak with fringes completed the attire, and if some barbaric words do not affright the ears of Paris, we will add that this robe was called *schenti* and the short cloak *calasiris*.

As a last detail, let us say that Queen Cleopatra wore light sandals, very slim, bent back at the point and attached to the ankle like the shoes *a la poulaine* of the chaetelaines of the Middle Ages.

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All the same Queen Cleopatra had not the satisfied air of a woman sure that she is perfectly lovely and perfectly attired; she turned and twisted on her little couch, and her rather brusque movements deranged each moment the folds of her gauze conopeum which Charmion readjusted with inexhaustible patience and without ceasing to wield her fan.

'It is stifling in this room,' said Cleopatra, 'even if Phtha, the God of Fire, had set up his forges here, it wouldn't be hotter; the air is like a furnace.' And she passed over her lips the tip of her little tongue, then stretched out her hand like an invalid who feels about for an absent cup.

Charmion, ever attentive, clapped her hands: a black slave, clad in a straight gown pleated like the skirts of the Albanians, with a leopard skin thrown over his shoulder, entered with the rapidity of an apparition, holding balanced on his left hand a tray laden with cups and slices of water-melon, and in the right a long jug furnished with a spout like a tea-pot.

The slave filled one of the cups, pouring into it from a height with a marvellous dexterity, and put it before the queen. Cleopatra touched the beverage with her lips, put it down beside her, and turning towards Charmion, her beautiful black eyes unctuous and lustrous from the living sparkle of light in them:

'Oh, Charmion,' she said, 'I am bored.'

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Charmion, foreseeing a confidence, made a face of grievous assent, and came near her mistress.

'I am horribly bored,' went on Cleopatra, letting her arms hang loose as one discouraged and defeated, 'this Egypt destroys me and crushes me; this sky with its implacable blue is more sombre than the deep night of Erebus; never a cloud! never a shadow, and for ever this red, dripping sun which stares like the eye of a Cyclops! See, Charmion, I would give a pearl for a drop of rain! From the enflamed eyeball of this sky of bronze has never yet fallen a single tear on the desolation of the earth; it is a huge tombstone, a dome of a necropolis, a sky dead and dried up like the mummies it covers! it weighs on my shoulders like a too heavy coat! it irks me and distresses me; it seems to me as if I could not rise to my full height without bruising my forehead against it; and then, this country is really a fearful country; everything here is sombre, enigmatical, incomprehensible! Imagination here produces nothing but monstrous chimeras and inordinate monuments; this sort of architecture and art terrifies me; these colossi whose limbs fixed in stone, condemn them to rest eternally seated with their hands on their knees, tire me with their stupid immobility; they obsess my eyes and my horizon. When, then, will the giant come who will take them by the hand and relieve them from their twenty-century-long sentry duty? Granite itself wears out at last! What master do they await to leave the mountain that serves them for a seat, and to rise in token of respect? Of what invisible herd are those mighty sphinxes, crouching like watch-dogs, the guardians, that they never close an eyelid and hold for ever their claws at attention? What is the matter with them, then, that they fix so obstinately their eyes of stone on eternity and infinity? What strange secret do their tightly closed lips lock in their breasts? Right and left, on whatever side one turns, there are only monsters frightful to look on, dogs with men's heads, men with dogs' heads, chimeras begotten of hideous matings in the gloomy depths of the syrx bushes, Anubises, Typhons, Osirises, sparrow-hawks with yellow eyes that seem to look through you with their inquisitive regards, and to see beyond you things that cannot be told: a family of horrible animals and gods with scaly wings, with hooked beaks, with tearing claws, always ready to seize you and devour you, if you pass the threshold of the temple, and if you raise the corner of the veil!

'On the walls, on the columns, on the roofs, on the floors, on the palaces and on the temples, in the corridors and in the deepest pits of the cemeteries, down to the entrails of the earth where the light does not reach, where the torches go out for lack of air, and everywhere and always, interminable hieroglyphics, sculptured and painted,

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recounting in unintelligible language things that are no longer known, and which belong no doubt to creations that have vanished; prodigious buried buildings where a whole people is worn out to write the epitaph of a king! Mystery and granite, that is Egypt; a fine country for a young woman and a young queen!

'Only menacing and funereal symbols are to be seen, the pedom, the tau, allegorical globes, entwined serpents, balances where souls are weighed, the unknown, death, nothingness! For the only vegetation, pillars striped with bizarre characters; for alleys of trees, avenues of granite obelisks; for earth, immense paving stones of granite, so huge that each mountain could furnish only a single flagstone; for sky, roofs of granite; a palpable eternity, a bitter and perpetual sarcasm of the fragility and brevity of life! stairways made for strides of Titan, which the human foot cannot step over and which must be ascended with ladders; columns that a hundred arms could not encircle, labyrinths where one could walk a year without finding the exit! the vertigo of enormity, the intoxication of the gigantic, the inordinate effort of pride which would carve at all costs its name on the surface of the world!

'And besides, Charmion, I tell you, I have a thought that terrifies me; in other countries of the earth they bury their dead, and their ashes are soon mingled with the ground. Here one might say that the living have no other occupation than that of preserving the dead; powerful balms snatch them from destruction; all of them keep their form and their appearance; the soul evaporates, the mortal body remains; under this people are twenty peoples; each city has its feet on twenty layers of tombs; each generation that goes leaves a population of mummies in a city of darkness; under the father, you find the grandfather and the great-grandfather in his painted and gilded box, such as they were in their lifetime; and were you to excavate for ever you would for ever find more of them!

'When I think of those multitudes, swathed in their bands, of those myriads of dried-up spectres which fill the funeral pits and which have lain there for two thousand years, face to face, in their silence that nothing comes to trouble, not even the noise that the worm of the tomb makes in his crawling, and who will be found there untouched after another two thousand years, with their cats, their crocodiles, their ibises, all the things that lived at the same time as they did, spasms of terror seize me, and I feel shudders run up my skin. What do they say to each other, since they still have lips, and since their souls, if the fantasy seized them to return, would find their bodies in the state in which they left them?

'Egypt is truly a sinister kingdom and very little fitted for me who am fond of laughter and folly; everything here encloses a mummy; that is the heart and core of everything. After a thousand detours it is there you finish; the pyramids hide a sarcophagus. All that is nothingness and folly. Rip open the sky with gigantic triangles of stone, you will not add an inch to your corpse! How can one rejoice and live in such a land where one breathes as perfume only the bitter odour of naphtha, and the bitumen that boils in the embalmers' kettles, where the floor of your room sounds hollow because the corridors of the hypogeum and the funeral pits stretch even under your dressing-room? To be the queen of the mummies; to have as gossips those statues in their stiff, constrained poses, that's a lot of fun! And yet, if to lighten the gloom, I had some passion in my heart, an interest in life, if I were in love with somebody or something, if I were loved! But I am not.

'That is why I am bored, Charmion; with love this sterile, surly Egypt would seem to me more charming than Greece with its ivory gods, its temples of white marble, its oleander woods, and its fountains of spring water. I would not think of the grotesque countenance of Anubis, nor of the terrors of the underground cities.'

Charmion smiled with an air of incredulity. 'That shouldn't cause you much grief; for each of your glances pierces men's hearts like the golden arrows of Eros himself.'

'Can a queen,' went on Cleopatra, 'know if it is the diadem or the brow beneath that is loved in her? The beams of her sidereal crown dazzle men's eyes and hearts; were I to come down from the height of my throne, would I enjoy the celebrity and the popularity of Bacchide or Archenassa, of any chance courtesan from Athens or Miletus? A queen is something so far above men, something so lofty, so separated, so impossible! What presumption can flatter itself with hopes of success in such an enterprise? It is no longer a woman, it is an august

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and sacred figure that has no longer a sex, a being one adores on bended knees without loving, like the statue of a goddess. Who has ever been seriously in love with Hera of the snowy arms, with Pallas of the sea-green eyes? Who has ever tried to kiss the silver feet of Thetis, and the rosy fingers of Aurora? What lover of those divine beauties has ever taken wings to fly towards the golden palaces of heaven? Respect and terror freeze men's souls in our presence, and to be loved by our equals we must needs descend, to the cities of the dead that I was talking of just now.'

Although she put forward no objection to the reasoning of her mistress, a vague smile flitting about the lips of the Greek slave showed that she had no great belief in this inviolability of the royal person.

'Ah,' continued Cleopatra, 'I would like something to happen to me, a strange adventure, something unexpected. The song of the poets, the dance of the Syrian slaves, feasts crowned with roses and prolonged till daybreak, midnight races, Laconian dogs, tame lions, humpbacked dwarfs, members of the fellowship of the inimitable, combats in the circus, and ornaments, robes of byssus, matched strings of pearls, perfumes of Asia, the most exquisite elegances, the most senseless sumptuousness, nothing amuses me any more: everything is indifferent to me, everything is insupportable!'

'It is obvious,' murmured Charmion, 'that the queen hasn't had a lover or killed anybody for a month.'

Tired by such a long outburst, Cleopatra lifted again the cup placed beside her, moistened her lips in it, and, putting her head under her arm with a dove-like movement, settled herself as comfortably as possible to sleep. Charmion undid her sandals, and began softly to tickle the soles of her feet with the feathers of a peacock's quill; sleep did not tarry in flinging its golden powder over the lovely eyes of the sister of Ptolemy.

While Cleopatra is sleeping, let us mount again to the bridge of the cange, and enjoy the wonderful spectacle of the setting sun. A wide band of violet, strongly warmed by reddish tones towards the west, fills all the lower part of the sky; as it meets the azure zones, the violet tint melts into clear lilac, and is drowned in the blue in a half shade of rose; on the side where the sun, red like a buckler fallen from Vulcan's furnace, throws burning reflected light, the shades turn to pale lemon, and produce tints like those of turquoises. The water, rippled by an oblique beam, had the flat radiance of a mirror seen from the foil, or a damascened blade; the windings of the river, the reeds, and all the undulations of the bank stand out in firm black lines, which the whitish reflections throw into strong relief. Thanks to this twilight clarity you will see down there, like a grain of dust fallen on quicksilver, a little brown point which trembles in a network of shining threads. Is it a teal that is diving, a tortoise letting itself drift on the stream, a crocodile raising the end of his scaly snout to breathe the less burning evening air, the stomach of a hippopotamus stretching himself on the water's surface? or else indeed a rock left uncovered by the lowering of the river? for the old Hopi-Mou, Father of the Waters, has indeed need to fill his exhausted urn at the rains of the solstice in the Mountains of the Moon.

It is none of these. By the fragments of Osiris so happily sewn together! it is a man who seems to be walking and skating on the water; now the skiff that bears him can be seen, a real nutshell, a hollowed out fish, three bands of cork fitted together, one for the bottom and two for the sides, the whole solidly tied at the two ends by a cord daubed with bitumen. A man is standing upright, one foot on each side of this frail contrivance, which he guides by a single oar that serves at the same time as rudder, and although the royal cange flies rapidly along under the power of fifty oars, the little black skiff gains visibly upon it.

Cleopatra was wanting some strange incident, something unexpected; this little slim skiff, with its mysterious behaviour, has in our eyes all the appearance of bringing, if not an adventure, at least an adventurer. Perhaps it contains the hero of our story; the thing is not impossible.

It was, in any case, a handsome young man of twenty, with hair so black that it seemed blue, a skin fair as gold, and proportions so perfect that one would have said a bronze of Lysippus; although he had been rowing a long

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time, he betrayed no sign of fatigue, and on his brow was not a single bead of sweat.

The sun plunged beneath the horizon, and on its jagged disk was drawn the brown silhouette of a distant city that the eye could barely have discovered without this trick of lighting; soon it went down altogether, and the stars, those evening flowering blossoms of the night, opened their golden calices to the azure firmament. The royal cange, followed closely by the little skiff, stopped near a stairway of black marble, each step of which was supported by one of the sphinxes hated by Cleopatra. It was the landing stage of the summer palace.

Cleopatra, leaning on Charmion, passed rapidly like a glittering vision, between a double row of slaves carrying signal torches.

The young man took from the bottom of the boat a large lion skin, threw it on his shoulders, leaped lightly to the ground, drew the skiff up the steep bank, and made his way towards the palace.

III

Who is this young man who, standing on a bit of cork, dares to follow the royal cange, and who can race against fifty rowers of the country of Kush, naked to the waist, and rubbed with palm-tree oil? What motive urges him on and rouses his activity? That is what we are obliged to know in our quality of a poet gifted with the gift of intuition, for whom all men, and even all women, and that is more difficult, should have in their sides the window which Momus craved.

It is maybe not very easy to re-create the thoughts some two thousand years ago, of a young man of the land of Keme who followed the bark of Cleopatra, Queen and Goddess Euergetes, returning from the Mammisi of Hermonthis. We shall attempt it all the same.

Ammon, son of Mandouschopsh, was a young man of a strange character: nothing that touched the common run of mortals made any impression on him; he seemed of a higher race, and one might have named him the product of some divine adultery. His look had the radiance and the fixity of the sparrow-hawk's, and serene majesty sat on his brow as on a marble pedestal; a noble disdain arched his upper lip, and swelled his nostrils like those of a spirited steed; though he had almost the delicate grace of a young girl, and though Dionysus, that effeminate god, had not a more rounded or polished chest, he hid under this soft exterior nerves of steel and Herculean strength, that singular privilege of certain ancient natures of uniting the beauty of the woman with the strength of the man.

As to his colour, we are obliged to admit that he was tawny as an orange, a colour opposed to the white and rose idea we have of beauty; but that did not prevent him from being a very charming young man, much sought after by all sorts of women, yellow, red, copper-coloured, swarthy, golden, and even by more than one white Greek.

After that, don't go and imagine that Ammon was a lady-killer; the ashes of old Priam, the snows of Hippolytus himself were not more insensible or cold; the young neophyte in his white tunic, getting ready for the initiation to the mysteries of Isis, does not lead a more chaste life; the young girl who passes by in the glacial shadow of her mother has not his fearful purity.

The pleasures of Ammon, for a young man of such a shy temperament, were all the same of a singular nature; he set out tranquilly in the morning with his little buckler of hippopotamus hide, his harpe or sabre with a curved blade, his triangular bow and his quiver of serpent skin filled with barbed arrows; then he plunged into the desert, and set his mare, with her lean legs, her straight head, her dishevelled mane, to the gallop till he found the track of a lioness; it gave him great enjoyment to go and take the little lion cubs from under their mother's body. In everything he loved only the perilous or the impossible; he delighted in walking by impracticable paths, or swimming in raging waters, and he would have chosen for a bathe in the Nile precisely the spot where the

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cataracts are; the abyss called him.

Such was Ammon, son of Mandouschopsh.

For some time back his humour had become ever more unsociable; he buried himself for months at a time in the ocean of sand and only reappeared at rare intervals. His anxious mother hung vainly over the top of her terrace and questioned the road with a tireless eye. After a long wait, a little cloud of dust eddied on the horizon; soon the cloud burst and revealed Ammon covered with dust, on his mare, who was as thin as a wolf, her eye red and bloodshot, her nostrils trembling, with scars on her side, scars which were not the marks of the spur.

After having hung up in his room some hyena or lion skin, he set out again.

And yet no one could have been happier than Ammon; he was loved by Naphe, the daughter of the priest Afomouthis, the most beautiful girl in the nome of Arsine. One would have to be Ammon not to see that Naphe had charming eyes tilted at the corners with an indefinable expression of voluptuousness, a mouth round which sparkled a rosy smile, clear white teeth, arms exquisitely rounded, and feet more perfect than the jasper feet of the statue of Isis; assuredly there was not in all Egypt a smaller hand or longer hair. The charms of Naphe could have been surpassed only by those of Cleopatra. But who could dream of loving Cleopatra? Ixion, who was in love with Juno, clasped in his arms only a cloud, and he turns for ever on his wheel among the shades.

It was Cleopatra that Ammon loved!

He had at first tried to subdue this mad passion, he had struggled in hand-to-hand fight against it; but love is not throttled as one throttles a lion, and the most vigorous athletes can do nothing about it. The arrow was stuck in the wound and he dragged it about with him everywhere; the picture of Cleopatra, radiant and splendid under her diadem with golden points, standing alone in her imperial purple among a kneeling people, glittered in his waking moments and in his dreams; like a rash man who has looked at the sun and who sees always an intangible spot flicker before him, Ammon saw always Cleopatra. Eagles can contemplate the sun without being dazzled, but what eyeball of diamond can be fixed with impunity on a beautiful woman, on a beautiful queen?

His life consisted in wandering round the royal dwellings so as to breathe the same air as Cleopatra, so as to kiss on the sand a felicity, alas! too rare the half effaced imprint of her foot; he followed the sacred feasts and the panegyries, trying to snatch a beam from her eyes, to steal in passing one of the thousand aspects of her beauty. Sometimes shame came upon him at this senseless existence; he gave himself up to hunting with a redoubled fury, and tried to subdue by fatigue the heat of his blood and the tumult of his desires.

He had gone to the panegyry of Hermonthis, and, in the vague hope of seeing the queen again for an instant, when she disembarked at the summer palace, he had followed the cange in his skiff, without heeding the bitter stings of the sun in a heat enough to melt in lava-sweat the sphinxes panting on their reddened pedestals.

And then he understood that he had come to a supreme moment, that his life was about to be decided, and that he could not die with his secret in his heart.

It is a strange situation to love a queen; it is as if one loved a star, and still the star comes each night to shine in its place in the sky; it is a kind of mysterious rendezvous; you find her there, you see her, she is not angry at you for looking at her! Oh, misery! to be poor, unknown, obscure, seated at the very bottom of the ladder, and to feel your heart full of love for something solemn, sparkling, and splendid, for a woman whose meanest servant would have nothing to do with you! to have your eyes fixed on someone who does not see you, who will never see you, for whom you are nothing but a figure in the crowd like all the other figures, and who would meet you a hundred times without recognizing you! to have, if ever the opportunity for speaking arises, no reason to give for such a crazy audacity, neither a poet's talent, nor great genius, nor superhuman qualities, nothing but love; and in

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exchange for beauty, nobility, power, all the splendours of your dreams, to bring only passion or your youth, rare things indeed!

These ideas oppressed Ammon; lying prone on the sand, his chin on his hands, he let himself be carried away and uplifted on the flood of a never-failing reverie; he sketched out a thousand plans, each more insensate than the other. He realized quite clearly that he was striving for an impossible end, but he had not the courage to renounce it frankly, and perfidious hope came whispering at his ear some lying promise.

'Hathor, powerful goddess,' he said in a low voice, 'what have I done to you that you make me so unhappy! Are you avenging yourself for the disdain that I have for Naphe, the daughter of the priest Afomouthis? Are you angry with me for having repulsed Lamia, the hetaira of Athens, or Flora, the courtesan from Rome? Is it my fault if my heart is susceptible to the beauty of Cleopatra alone, your rival? Why have you sunk in my soul the poisoned arrows of impossible love? What sacrifices and what offerings do you demand? Must I raise a chapel of the rose marble of Syene with columns and gilded capitals, a ceiling in one piece, and hollow sculptured hieroglyphics by the best workmen of Memphis or Thebes? Answer me.'

Like all the gods and goddesses that man invokes, Hathor answered nothing. Ammon made a desperate resolve.

Cleopatra, on her side, also invoked the goddess Hathor; she asked of her a new pleasure, an unknown sensation; languidly lying on her bed, she mused that the number of senses is very limited, that the most exquisite refinements are very quickly followed by disgust, and that a queen has really a lot of trouble to fill in her day. Trying poisons on slaves, making men fight with tigers, or gladiators with one another, drinking melted pearls, squandering a province, all that is pointless and ordinary.

Charmion was reduced to her last expedient, and didn't know what to make of her mistress.

All at once a whizzing was heard, an arrow came and planted itself quivering in the cedar facing of the wall.

Cleopatra almost fainted with terror. Charmion rushed to the window, and only saw a flake of foam on the river. A roll of papyrus surrounded the wooden shaft of the arrow; it contained these words written in phonetic characters: 'I love you!'

IV

'I love you,' repeated Cleopatra, twisting between her frail white fingers the bit of papyrus rolled up like a scytale, 'that is the message I was asking for; what intelligent soul, what hidden genius has understood my desire so well?'

And thoroughly aroused from her languid torpor, she jumped down from her bed with the agility of a cat who scents a mouse, put her little ivory feet in her embroidered tatbebs, threw her byssus tunic over her shoulders, and ran to the window through which Charmion was still looking.

The night was clear and serene: the moon had already risen and sketched with great angles of light and shade the architectural masses of the palace, standing out boldly on a background of bluish transparency, and freezing to watered silver the water of the river in which its reflection streamed in a gleaming column; a light puff of wind, which could have been taken for the breath of the sleeping sphinxes, fluttered the reeds and set the azure bells of the lotus trembling; the cables of the small boats moored to the banks of the Nile groaned feebly, and the flood complained on its bed like a dove without its mate. A vague perfume of vegetation, sweeter than that of the aromatics that burn in the anschir of the priests of Anubis, drifted into the room. It was one of those enchanted nights of the East, more splendid than our most beautiful days, for our sun does not compare with that moon.

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'Don't you see down there, almost in the middle of the river, a man's head swimming? Look now, he is crossing the track of light, and is being lost in the shadow: he can't be seen any longer.' And, resting on Charmion's shoulder, she leaned half her beautiful body out of the window to try to find again the track of the mysterious swimmer. But a clump of Nile acacias, of doums and sayals, threw at that spot its shadow on the river and protected the flight of the audacious man. If Ammon had had the good wit to turn round, he would have seen Cleopatra, the sidereal queen, looking greedily for him across the night, for him, poor obscure Egyptian that he was, a wretched hunter of lions.

'Charmion! Charmion! bid Phrehipephbour, the chief of the rowers, come, and tell them to launch without delay two boats in pursuit of that man,' said Cleopatra, whose curiosity was excited to the highest degree.

Phrehipephbour appeared; he was a man of the race of the Nahasi, with broad hands, muscular arms, wearing a cap of a red colour on his head, rather like a Phrygian helmet, and clothed in a tight pair of drawers, striped diagonally white and blue. His bust, entirely bare, shone in the light of the lamp, black and polished like a ball of jade. He took the queen's orders and retired at once to execute them.

Two long barks, narrow, so light that the slightest forgetfulness of equilibrium must have capsized them, cleft at once the waters of the Nile, whistling under the strength of twenty vigorous rowers, but the search was useless. After having beaten the river in all directions, after having ransacked the smallest tuft of reeds, Phrehipephbour returned to the palace without any other result but that of having raised some heron, asleep erect on one leg, or troubled some crocodile in his digestion.

Cleopatra experienced such a strong resentment at this rebuff that she had a great desire to condemn Phrehipephbour to the grindstone or the beasts. Fortunately Charmion interceded for the wretch, who was all in a panic, paling with fear under his black skin. It was the only time in her life that one of her desires had not been granted as soon as formulated; so she felt an uneasy surprise, like a first doubt of her all-powerfulness.

She, Cleopatra, wife and sister of Ptolemy, proclaimed Goddess Euergetes, reigning Queen of the Lands Below and Above, Eye of the Sky, the Favourite of the Sun, as can be seen on the cartouches sculptured on the walls of temples, to meet an obstacle, to wish a thing that was not done, to have spoken and not been obeyed! One might as well be the wife of some poor paraschist who incised dead bodies, and melt soda in a kettle! It is monstrous, it is exorbitant, and one must be, in truth, a very kind and very clement queen, not to crucify this wretched Phrehipephbour.

You were wanting an adventure, something strange and unexpected; you have got just what you wished. You see that your realm is not so dead as you claimed. It is no stone arm from a statue that has sped that arrow, it is not from the heart of a mummy that these three words which have moved you so have come, you who see with a smile on your lips your poisoned slaves beating with their heels and their heads in the convulsions of agony your beautiful mosaic and porphyry pavements, you who applaud the tiger when he has stoutly buried his jaws in the side of a conquered gladiator.

You will have all that you wish, cars of silver starred with emeralds, four-wheeled chariots of griffins, tunics of thrice dyed purple, mirrors of steel framed with precious stones, so clear that you can see yourself therein as lovely as you are; robes come from the lands of the East, so fine, so thin that they can pass through the ring of your little finger; pearls of a perfect water, goblets wrought by Lysippus or Myron, parrots from India that speak like poets; you will get everything, even if you demand the cestus of Venus, or the pschent of Isis; but, in very truth, you will not have this evening the man who shot that arrow that trembles still in the cedar wood of your bed.

The slaves who will dress you to-morrow will have no easy task; they will be well advised to have a light hand; the golden toilet pins might well have for sheath the throat of the clumsy hair-waver, and the depilator runs a

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strong risk of being hung up to the ceiling by her feet.

'Who could have had the audacity to shoot that declaration fitted to an arrow? Is it the monarch Amoun–Ra who thinks himself handsomer than the Grecian Apollo? What do you think of him, Charmion? Or rather Cheapsiro, the commandant of Hermothybria, so proud of his combats in the country of Kush! Wouldn't it rather be young Sextus, the Roman debauchee who puts on rouge, rolls his r's in speaking and wears sleeves in the Persian mode?'

'Queen, it is none of these; although you are the loveliest lady in the world, these men flatter you and do not love you. The monarch Amoun–Ra has chosen an idol to whom he will always be faithful, and that is his own person; the warrior Cheapsiro, thinks only of relating his battles; as to Sextus, he is so seriously occupied with the composition of a new cosmetic that he can think of nothing else. Besides he has received some overcoats from Laconia, yellow tunics embroidered with gold, and some Asiatic children who are absorbing him entirely. None of these fine gentlemen would risk his neck in an enterprise so rash and so perilous; they do not love you enough for that.

'You were saying in your cage that dazzled eyes never dared aspire to you, and that men could only pale and fall at your feet asking pardon, and that there remained for you no other resource than to waken in his gilded coffin some old Pharaoh perfumed with bitumen. Now there is an ardent young heart which loves you. What will you do with it?'

That night Cleopatra had difficulty in sleeping; she turned on her bed, she called long in vain on Morpheus, brother of Death; she repeated several times that she was the most unhappy of queens, that every one made it their business to thwart her, and that her life was unendurable; huge grievances which affected Charmion rather lightly, though she put on an expression of sympathy with them.

Let us leave Cleopatra for a little, seeking the sleep that flies from her, and running over in her conjectures all the nobles of the court; let us go back to Ammon. More skilful than Phrehipephour the chief of the rowers, we shall certainly succeed in finding him.

Terrified by his own hardihood, Ammon flung himself into the Nile, and had reached swimming the little clump of doum–palms before Phrehipephour had launched the two barks in pursuit.

When he had got back his breath, and pushed behind his ears his long black hair, soaked with the foam of the river, he felt calmer and more at ease. Cleopatra had something which came from him. A connection existed between them now; Cleopatra was thinking of him, Ammon. Maybe it was a thought of wrath, but at least he had succeeded in arousing in her some sort of feeling, terror, anger, or pity; he had made her recognize his existence. It is true that he had forgotten to put his name on the strip of papyrus; but what more would the name convey to the queen; Ammon, son of Mandouschopsch!

A monarch or a slave were equal before her. A goddess does not abase herself more in taking as a lover a man of the people than a patrician or a king; from such a height nothing is seen in a man but his love.

The sentence that had been weighing on his breast like the knee of a bronze colossus, had at length emerged; it had crossed the air, it had arrived as far as the queen, the point of the triangle, the inaccessible summit! In that base soul it had set curiosity, an immense progress.

Ammon did not suspect that he had succeeded so well, but he was more tranquil, for he had sworn to himself by the mystic Bari, who guards the souls in Amenthi; by the sacred birds, Bennon and Ghenghen; by Typhon and by Osiris; by every formidable name that Egyptian mythology could offer, that he would be the lover of Cleopatra, were it only for a day, were it only for a night, were it only for an hour, though it cost him his body and his soul.

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How this love had come upon him for a woman that he had seen only from afar, and to whom he scarcely dared to raise his eyes, he who did not drop them before the yellow eyeballs of the lions, and how this little seed fallen by chance in his soul had sprung up there so quickly and thrown out such deep roots, is a mystery that we shall not explain; we have said above: the abyss called him.

When he was quite sure that Phrehiphebour had gone in with his rowers, he flung himself a second time in the Nile, and made his way again to the palace of Cleopatra whose lamp shone through a purple curtain, and seemed a painted star. Leander did not swim towards the tower of Sestos with more courage and vigour, and yet Ammon was not waited for by a Hero ready to pour on his head jars of perfumes to banish the odours of the sea, and the bitter kisses of the tempest.

Some shrewd blow of a lance or harpe was all that could happen to him at the best, and to tell the truth, it was hardly that of which he was afraid.

He skirted for some time the wall of the palace, whose marble feet bathed in the river, and stopped before a submerged opening, through which the water rushed in whirlpools. He dived two or three times unsuccessfully; at last he was more fortunate, hit on the passage and disappeared.

This arcade was a vaulted canal which led the waters of the Nile to Cleopatra's baths.

V

Cleopatra only fell asleep in the morning, at the hour when the dreams return that have flitted through the ivory gate. The illusion of sleep led her to see all sorts of lovers, swimming across rivers, clambering up walls to reach her, and, in memory of the night before, her dreams were riddled with arrows charged with declarations of love. Her little heels, fluttering in agitation, struck the breast of Charmion sleeping across the bed to serve as her cushion.

When she awoke, a gay sunbeam played in the window curtain, the web of which it pierced with a thousand points of light, and came familiarly to the bed to flit like a golden butterfly round her lovely shoulders which it skimmed in passing with a luminous kiss. Happy sunbeam that the gods might have envied!

Cleopatra asked to get up in an expiring voice like a sick child's; two of her women raised her in their arms and laid her precious on the ground on a huge tiger skin whose claws were of gold and whose eyes were carbuncles. Charmion wrapped her in a calasiris of linen whiter than milk, and put her feet in tatbebs of cork on the soles of which had been drawn, in token of contempt, two grotesque figures representing two men of the races of Nahasi and Nahmou, bound hand and foot, so that Cleopatra deserved literally the epithet of 'she who treads on the peoples' which the royal cartouches give her.

It was the hour for the bath. Cleopatra went there with her women.

Cleopatra's baths were built in vast gardens filled with mimosas, carob-trees, aloes, lemon-trees, Persian apple-trees, the luxuriant freshness of which made a delicious contrast with the sterility of the surroundings; immense terraces sustained groves of verdure, and raised the flowers up to the sky by gigantic stairways of rose granite; vases of Pentelic marble spread like huge lilies on the side of each step, and the plants they contained, seemed only their pistils; chimeras caressed by the chisels of the most able Greek sculptors, of a less repulsive appearance than the Egyptian sphinxes with their surly faces and their morose attitudes, were lying at ease on the turf all studded with flowers, like graceful white greyhounds on a drawing-room carpet; there were charming figures of women, their noses straight, their foreheads smooth, their mouths little, their arms delicately rounded, their throats round and pure, with ear-pendants, collars, and ornaments, capricious and adorable, bifurcating into

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a fish's tail like the woman of whom Horace spoke, unfurling on the wings of a bird, widening into the flanks of a lioness, twisting into a volute of foliage, according to the fantasy of the artist or the suitability of the architectural position: a double row of these delicious monsters bordered the alley that led from the palace to the bath-chamber.

At the end of this alley a large swimming pool was reached with four stairways of porphyry; through the transparency of the chrySTALLINE water the steps could be seen going down to the bottom sanded with powdered gold; women, ending in sheaths like caryatides, spouted from their breasts a stream of perfumed water, which fell into the pool in a silver dew, dimpling the clear mirror with little crackling drops. In addition to this use the caryatides had in addition the other of supporting on their heads an entablature adorned with nereids and tritons in bas-relief and supplied with a bronze ring to which to attach the silken cords of the awning. Beyond the gateway was seen greenery, damp and blue-tinted, shady bowers of coolness, a bit of the vale of Tempe transplanted into Egypt. The famous gardens of Semiramis were nothing compared to these.

We shall not speak of the seven or eight other chambers at different temperatures, with their hot and cold vapours, their boxes of perfume, their cosmetics, their oils, their pumice-stone, their horsehair gloves, and all the refinements of the ancient art of bathing pushed to such a high degree of voluptuousness and luxury.

Cleopatra arrived, her hand on Charmion's shoulder; she had walked at least thirty steps alone! a mighty effort! an enormous fatigue! A slight shade of rose, spreading under the transparent skin of her cheeks, freshened their passionate pallor; on her temples, fair as amber, was seen a network of blue veins; her level brow, low like the brows of the olden times, but perfect in its roundness and form, joined by an irreproachable line to a severe straight nose, like a cameo, intersected by rosy nostrils that palpitated at the least emotion like the nostrils of a tigress in love; the little mouth, round, very close to the nose, had its lip scornfully arched; but an unbridled voluptuousness, an incredible ardour for life, gleamed in the red splendour and the moist lustre of the lower lip. Her eyes had straight lids, the eyebrows narrow and almost without inflection. We shall not try to give an idea of them; it was a fire, a languor, a glittering limpidity, enough to turn the head of Anubis' dog himself; each look of her eyes was a poem finer than that of Homer or Mimnermus; an imperial chin, full of force and domination, worthily finished off this charming profile.

She stood erect on the first step of the pool, in an attitude full of grace and pride; slightly curving backwards, her foot raised like a goddess about to quit her pedestal whose eyes are still in the sky. Two superb folds hung from the points of her bosom, and flowed in a single line of the ground. Cleomenes, if he had been her contemporary, and if he could have seen her, would have broken his Venus in pieces in disgust.

Before entering the water, touched by a new whim, she asked Charmion to change her head-dress of silver net; she wanted rather a crown of lotus flowers and reeds, like a sea goddess. Charmion obeyed, her hair flowed free, and fell in black cascades on her shoulders, and hung in clusters like ripe grapes along her lovely cheeks.

Then the linen tunic, held only by a golden brooch, was loosened, slipped down her marble body, and lay collapsed in a white cloud at her feet like the swan at the feet of Leda.

And Ammon, where was he?

Oh, cruelty of fate! So many insensible objects were enjoying favours that would ravish a lover with joy. The wind that plays with perfumed locks or gives to fair lips kisses which it cannot appreciate, the water which is absolutely indifferent to this voluptuousness, and which covers with a single caress the lovely adored body, the mirror which reflects so many charming pictures, the cothurnus or the tatbeb which encloses a divine little foot; ah! how many lost happinesses!

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Cleopatra dipped her vermilion heel in the water, and descended several steps; the trembling water made her a girdle and bracelet of silver, and rolled in pearls on her breast and shoulders like an unstrung necklace; her long hair, uplifted by the water, spread behind her like a royal mantle: she was queen even in the bath. She came and went, diving and bringing up in her hands from the bottom handfuls of powdered gold which she threw laughing to some of her women; at other times she hung from the balustrade of the pool hiding and revealing her treasures, now letting no more than her polished, lustrous back be seen, now showing herself complete like Venus Anadyomene and varying ceaselessly the aspects of her beauty.

Suddenly she uttered a cry more sharp than that of Diana surprised by Acteon; she had seen through the foliage a burning eyeball gleam, yellow and phosphorescent like the eye of a crocodile or of a lion.

It was Ammon who, crouching on the earth, behind a tuft of leaves, more breathless than a fawn among the corn, was growing intoxicated with the dangerous good fortune of seeing the queen in her bath. Though he was courageous to the extent of temerity, the cry of Cleopatra entered his heart colder than the blade of a sword: a mortal sweat covered all his body; his arteries beat in his temples with a strident noise; the iron hand of anxiety pressed his throat and stifled him.

The eunuchs ran up, lance in hand. Cleopatra showed them the group of trees where they found Ammon, squat and cowering on the ground. Defence was impossible; he did not attempt it, and let himself be taken. They got ready to kill him with the cruel and stupid impassibility which characterizes eunuchs; but Cleopatra, who had had time to wrap herself in her calasiris, signed to them with her hand to stop and to bring the prisoner to her.

Ammon could only fall on his knees and stretch out suppliant hands to her as to the altar of the gods.

'Are you some assassin bribed by Rome; and what do you come to do in these sacred grounds where men are forbidden?' said Cleopatra with an imperious gesture of interrogation.

'May my soul be found light in the balances of Amenthi, and may Yme•, daughter of the Sun and goddess of Truth, punish me if ever I had against you, O Queen, an evil thought,' answered Ammon, still on his knees.

Sincerity and loyalty shone on his face in characters so transparent that Cleopatra immediately abandoned this thought, and fixed on the young Egyptian a less severe and irritated look; she found him handsome.

'Well, then, what reason drove you to a place where you could meet nothing but death?'

'I love you,' said Ammon in a low voice but distinctly; for his courage came back, as it does in all extreme situations which nothing can make worse.

'Ah!' said Cleopatra, leaning towards him and seizing his arm with a brusque and sudden movement. 'It is you who shot the arrow with the papyrus roll; by Oms, the god of the lower world, you are a very daring wretch! I recognize you now; for a long time I have seen you wandering like a plaintive shade round the spots I inhabit. You were at the procession of Isis, at the panegyry of Hermonthis; you followed the royal cange. Ah! you must have a queen! You have no mediocre ambitions; you expected doubtless to have your reward at once. Certainly I am going to love you. Why not?'

'Queen,' answered Ammon with an air of grave melancholy, 'do not jest. I am out of my wits, it is true. I have deserved death, that is true too; be human, kill me.'

'No, I have the whim to be merciful to-day. I give you your life.'

'What do you expect me to do with life? I love you.'

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'Well! you shall be satisfied; you shall die,' answered Cleopatra. 'You have dreamed a strange extravagant dream; your desires have passed in imagination an unapproachable threshold, you thought that you were Cesar or Mark Antony; you loved the queen! In certain hours of delirium you have believed that in the suite of circumstances that occur only once in a thousand years, Cleopatra would one day love you. Well, what you believed impossible is going to be accomplished; I am going to make your dream a reality; it pleases me, for once, to crown a mad hope. It is my wish to flood you with splendour, with sunbeams and lightning. It is my wish that your fortune be dazzling. You were at the bottom of the wheel, I am going to put you on top, brusquely, suddenly, without transition. I take you from nothingness: I make you the equal of a god, and I replunge you into nothingness; that's all, but do not come to me and call me cruel, implore my pity; do not weaken when the hour strikes. I am kind, I lend myself to your folly; I would have the right to have you killed at once; but you say that you love me; I shall have you killed to-morrow; your life for a night. I am generous, I buy it from you, I could have taken it. But what are you doing at my feet? Rise and give me your hand to go into the palace.'

VI

Our world is indeed small beside the old world, our feats are shabby beside the fearful sumptuousness of the Roman patricians and the princes of Asia; their ordinary meals would pass to-day for unlicensed orgies, and the whole of a modern city would live for a week on the dessert of Lucullus when he supped with some intimate friends. We, with our miserable habits, have difficulty in conceiving those enormous existences, that realized all recklessness, strangeness, and the most monstrous impossibilities that the imagination can invent. Our palaces are stables where Caligula would not have wanted to stable his horse; the richest of our constitutional kings does not keep up the state of a petty satrap or a Roman proconsul. The radiant suns that shone on the earth are for ever extinguished in the nothingness of uniformity; there rise no more on the black ant-heap of men those colossi in Titan's shape who crossed the world in three steps like Homer's horses; there are no more towers of Lylacq, no more giant Babels scaling the sky with infinite spirals, no more inordinate temples made with quarters of mountains, or royal terraces that each century and each people can only raise one layer higher, whence the prince, leaning meditatively on his elbow, can see the whole face of the world like an unrolled map; no more of those confused cities, composed of an inextricable heap of Cyclopean edifices, with their deep circumvallations, their circuses bellowing night and day, their reservoirs filled with sea water, and peopled with leviathans and whales, their colossal flights of stairs, their superimposed terraces, their towers with the coping bathed in clouds, their giant palaces, their aqueducts, their heaving cities and their gloomy necropolises! Alas, nothing more than hives of plaster are left us on a chequer-board of paving-stones!

People are astonished that men did not revolt against these confiscations of all the wealth and all the living force to the profit of a certain few privileged people, and that such exorbitant fantasies did not meet obstacles on their bloody way. The reason is, that these prodigious existences were the realization under the sun of the dream that all of us dream at night; the personification of the common thought, and that the people saw themselves living in symbol under one of these meteoric names which blaze inextinguishably in the night of the ages. To-day, deprived of this glowing spectacle of the all-powerful will, of this high contemplation of a human soul whose slightest desire is translated into unheard-of actions, into granite and bronze enormities, the world is absolutely and desperately bored; mankind is no longer represented in its imperial fantasy.

The story we are writing, and the great name of Cleopatra which figures in it, have plunged us into those reflections which displease a civilized ear. But the spectacle of the ancient world is something so overwhelming, so discouraging for imaginations that believe themselves unlicensed, and for spirits that imagine they have attained the last limits of fairy-like magnificence, that we could not refrain from registering here our complaints and regrets that we were not contemporary with Sardanapalus, with Tiglath-Pileser, with Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt, or even of Heliogabalus, Emperor of Rome and Priest of the Sun.

We have to describe a supreme orgy, a feast that threw Belshazzar's into the shade, a night with Cleopatra. How,

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in the French language, so chaste, so glacially prude, shall we describe this frantic outburst, this mighty, powerful debauch that was not afraid to mingle blood and wine, those two purples, and the furious transports of unsatisfied voluptuousness rushing to the impossible; all the fervour of the senses which the long fast of Christianity has not yet subdued?

The promised night must be a splendid one; it was necessary that all the possible joys of a human existence should be concentrated into a few hours; it was necessary to make of Ammon's life a potent elixir which he might drain in a single cup. Cleopatra wished to dazzle her voluntary victim, and to plunge him in a whirlpool of heady pleasures, to intoxicate him, to madden him with the wine of the orgy, so that death, although accepted, should come without being seen or comprehended.

Let us carry our readers into the banquet-hall.

Our present-day architecture offers few points of comparison with those immense buildings whose ruins bear more resemblance to the landslip of a mountain than to the debris of houses. It requires all the exaggeration of ancient life to people and fill those prodigious palaces whose rooms were so vast that they could have no other ceiling than the sky; a magnificent ceiling, and one well worthy of such architecture!

The banquet-hall had enormous Babylonian proportions; the eye could not penetrate its incommensurable depth! monstrous columns, short, squat, solid enough to support the pole, spread heavily out their splayed shafts on pedestals covered with many-coloured hieroglyphics, and sustained on their big-bellied capitals gigantic arcades of granite, advancing by layers like steps set upside-down. Between each pillar a colossal sphinx of basalt, topped by a pschent, stretched out its head with oblique eyes and horned chin, and cast on the hall a fixed mysterious gaze. On the second story, behind the first, the capitals of the columns, slimmer than the first, were replaced by four heads of women placed back to back, with the fluted lappets and the twists of the Egyptian head-dress; instead of sphinxes, idols with bull heads, impassive spectators of the nocturnal delirium and the orgiastic revels, were seated in seats of stone like patient guests who are waiting till the feast begins.

A third stage of a different order, with bronze elephants shooting scented water from their trunks, crowned the building; above that the sky opened like a blue gulf, and the curious stars leant over the frieze.

Prodigious stairways of porphyry, so polished that they reflected the body like a mirror, rose up and down in all directions and linked these huge masses of architecture together.

We are only tracing here a rapid sketch to give an idea of the composition of this formidable erection with its proportions beyond all human measure. It would require the brush of Martin, the great painter of vanished mightiness, and we have only a thin penstroke in place of the apocalyptic depth of the black style; but the imagination will fill the void; less lucky than the painter and the musician, we can only present objects one after another. We have only spoken of the banqueting-hall, leaving aside the guests: and at that, we have done no more than indicate it. Cleopatra and Ammon are waiting us; here they come.

Ammon was clothed in a linen tunic studded with stars, with a purple mantle and bands in his hair like an Oriental king. Cleopatra wore a pale sea-green robe, split at the side, and kept together by golden bees; round her bare arms played two rows of large pearls; on her head gleamed the crown with golden points. In spite of the smile on her lips, a preoccupied shadow lightly brooded over her lovely forehead, and occasionally her eyebrows drew together in a feverish movement. What subject was it that could vex the great queen? As to Ammon, he had the glowing, shining look of a man in ecstasy or seeing visions; sparkling emanations, radiating from his temples and his brow, made him a golden halo, like to one of the twelve great gods of Olympus.

A grave profound joy shone on all his features; he had grasped his chimera of the restless wings, and it had not flown away; he had attained the object of his life. He might live to the age of Nestor or Priam; he might see his

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temples veined and covered with white hairs like those of the high priest of Ammon; he would experience nothing new, he would learn nothing further. He had been satisfied so abundantly beyond his maddest hopes that the world had nothing more to give him.

Cleopatra made him sit beside her on a throne flanked by golden griffins, and clapped her little hands together. Suddenly lines of fire, twinkling ropes, traced out the projections of the architecture: the eyes of the sphinxes emitted phosphorescent lights, a fiery breath came from the idols' jaws; the elephants, instead of perfumed water, spouted out a reddish jet; bronze arms sprang from the walls with torches in their hands; in the sculptured heart of the lotus expanded glittering plumes.

Broad bluish flames quivered in the brass tripods, giant candelabras shook their dishevelled lights in a blazing mist; everything twinkled and glittered. Prismatic rainbows crossed and broke in the air; the facets of goblets, the angles of marbles and jaspers, the cut edges of vases became spangling, gleaming, or darting lights. Light flowed in torrents and fell from step to step like a waterfall on a stairway of porphyry; you would have said it was the reflection of a fire in a river; if the Queen of Sheba had stepped up there, she would have raised the hem of her dress, thinking she was walking on water as on Solomon's floor of glass. Through this shining fog, the monstrous figures of the colossi, the animals, the hieroglyphics seemed to move and live with a factitious life; the black granite rams grinned ironically and shook their golden horns, the idols breathed noisily through their panting nostrils.

The orgy was at its height; dishes of flamingos' tongues and parrot-fish liver, eels fattened on human flesh and prepared with garum, peacocks' brains, boars stuffed with living birds, and all the marvels of ancient feasts tenfold and a hundredfold, were heaped up on the three sections of the gigantic triclinium. Wines from Crete, from the Massicus and Falernum, foamed in golden bowls crowned with roses, filled by Asiatic pages whose beautiful floating hair served to wipe dry the hands of the guests. Musicians playing on the Egyptian timbrel, on the dulcimer, on the sambuca, and the harp of twenty-one strings, filled the upper balustrades and flung their harmonious rattle into the tempest of noise that floated round the feast; thunder would not have had a voice loud enough to make itself heard.

Ammon, his head leaning on Cleopatra's shoulder, felt his reason going from him; the banqueting-hall swayed round him like an immense architectural nightmare; he saw, through his bedazzlement, endless perspectives and colonnades; new zones of porticos were superimposed on the real ones, and soared into the skies to heights to which Babels have never attained. If he had not felt in his hand the soft cool hand of Cleopatra, he would have believed himself transported into a world of enchantment by a Thessalian sorcerer, or a Persian magician.

Towards the end of the repast, humpbacked dwarfs and morions executed grotesque dances and combats; the young Egyptian and Grecian girls, representing the black and the white hours, danced in the Ionian mode, a voluptuous dance performed with inimitable perfection.

Cleopatra herself rose from her throne, flung down her royal mantle, replaced her sidereal diadem by a garland of flowers, adjusted her golden castanets to her alabaster hands, and began to dance before Ammon, lost in ravishment. Her lovely arms, rounded like the handles of a marble vase, shook down above her head clusters of twinkling notes, and her castanets prattled with an ever-growing volubility. Raised on the vermilion tips of her little feet, she advanced quickly and came to brush the brow of Ammon with a kiss; then she recommenced her manoeuvres and flitted round him, sometimes curving backwards, her head thrown back, her eyes half-closed, her arms swooning and dead, her hair unbound and hanging like a bacchante's on Mount Menalus swayed by her god; sometimes gay, alert, laughing, fluttering, tireless, and more capricious in her meanders than a pillaging bee. The love of the heart, the voluptuousness of the senses, ardent passion, inexhaustible fresh youth, the promise of approaching felicity, she expressed them all.

One of Cleopatra's Nights

The shamefast stars looked no longer, their chaste golden eyeballs could not bear such a sight; the sky itself was hid, and a dome of inflamed mist covered the hall.

Cleopatra returned to seat herself near Ammon. The night wore on; the last of the black hours was about to fly away; the sky itself was hid; a bluish glimmer entered with perplexed step among this tumult of red lights, like a moonbeam that falls on a furnace: the high arcades grew softly blue; day was appearing.

Ammon took the horn vase that an Ethiopian slave of sinister aspect presented to him, a vase which contained a poison so potent that it would have shattered any other vessel. Throwing his life to his mistress in a last look, he carried to his lips the fatal cup where the poisoned liquor boiled and hissed.

Cleopatra grew pale, and put her hand on Ammon's arm to stay him. His courage touched her; she was going to say, 'Live on to love me; I desire it', when the blast of bugles was heard. Four heralds at arms entered on horseback into the banqueting-hall. It was Mark Antony's officers who preceded their master by a few steps. Silently she dropped Ammon's arm. A sunbeam came to play on Cleopatra's forehead as if to replace her absent diadem.

'You see that the moment has come; it is the hour when lovely dreams fly away,' said Ammon.

Then he drank at a single draught the fatal vase and fell as if struck by lightning. Cleopatra bent her head, and in the cup a burning tear, the only one she had shed in her life, went to join the melted pearl.

'By Hercules! my lovely queen, it was no use my making haste, I see that I have come too late,' said Mark Antony, as he entered the banqueting-hall: 'the supper is finished. But what is the meaning of this body lying on the flag-stones?'

'Oh, nothing,' said Cleopatra, smiling. 'It's a poison I was experimenting with to be ready for myself if Octavius took me a prisoner. Would it amuse you, my dear lord, to sit beside me and watch these Greek buffoons dance?'