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CLEOPATRA

By Georg Ebers

Volume 5.

CHAPTER XII.

Barine had been an hour in the palace. The magnificently furnished room to which she was conducted was directly above the council chamber, and sometimes, in the silence of the night, the voice of the Queen or the loud cheers of men were distinctly heard.

Barine listened without making the slightest effort to catch the meaning of the words which reached her ears. She longed only for something to divert her thoughts from the deep and bitter emotion which filled her soul. Ay, she was roused to fury, and yet she felt how completely this passionate resentment contradicted her whole nature.

True, the shameless conduct of Philostratus during their married life had often stirred the inmost depths of her placid, kindly spirit, and afterwards his brother Alexas had come to drive her, by his disgraceful proposals, to the verge of despair; rage was added to the passionate agitation of her soul, and for this she had cause to rejoice--but for this mighty resentment during the time of struggle she might have, perhaps, succumbed from sheer weariness and the yearning desire to rest.

At last, at last, she and her friends, by means of great sacrifices, had succeeded in releasing her from these tortures. Philostratus's consent to liberate her was purchased. Alexas's persecution had ceased long before; he had first been sent away as envoy by his patron Antony, and afterwards been compelled to accompany him to the war.

How she had enjoyed the peaceful days in her mother's house! How quickly the bright cheerfulness which she had supposed lost had returned to her soul!--and to-day Fate had blessed her with the greatest happiness life had ever offered. True, she had had only a few brief hours in which to enjoy it, for the attack of the unbridled boys and the wound inflicted upon her lover had cast a heavy shadow on her bliss.

Her mother had again proved to be in the right when she so confidently predicted a second misfortune which would follow the first only too soon.

Barine had been torn at midnight from her peaceful home and her wounded lover's bedside. This was done by the Queen's command, and, full of

angry excitement, she said to herself that the men were right who cursed tyranny because it transformed free human beings into characterless chattels.

There could be nothing good awaiting her; that was proved by the messengers whom Cleopatra had sent to summon her at this unprecedented hour. They were her worst enemies: Iras, who desired to wed her lover-- Dion had told her so after the assault--and Alexas, whose suit she had rejected in a way which a man never forgives.

She had already learned Iras's feelings. The slender figure with the narrow head, long, delicate nose, small chin, and pointed fingers, seemed to her like a long, sharp thorn. This strange comparison had entered her head as Iras stood rigidly erect, reading aloud in a shrill, high voice the Queen's command. Everything about this hard, cold face appeared as sharp as a sting, and ready to destroy her.

Her removal from her mother's house to the royal palace had been swift and simple.

After the attack--of which she saw little, because, overpowered by fear and horror, she closed her eyes--she had driven home with her lover, where the leech had bandaged his injuries, and Berenike had quickly and carefully transformed her own sleeping chamber into a sick-room.

Barine, after changing her dress, did not leave Dion's side. She had attired herself carefully, for she knew his delight in outward adornment. When she returned from her grandparents, before sunset, she was alone with him, and he, kissing her arm, had murmured that wherever the Greek tongue was spoken there was not one more beautiful. The gem was worthy of its loveliness. So she had opened her baggage to take out the circlet which Antony had given, and it again enclasped her arm when she entered the sick-room.

Because Dion had told her that he deemed her fairest in the simple white robe she had worn a few days before, when there were no guests save himself and Gorgias, and she had sung until after midnight his favourite songs as though all were intended for him alone, her choice had fallen upon this garment. And she rejoiced that she had worn it--the wounded man's eyes rested upon her so joyously when she sat down opposite to him.

The physician had forbidden him to talk, and urged him to sleep if possible. So Barine only held his hand in silence, whispering, whenever he opened his eyes, a tender word of love and encouragement.

She had remained with him for hours, leaving her place at his side merely to give him his medicine, or, with her mother's aid, place poultices on his wounds.

When his manly face was distorted by suffering, she shared his pain; but during most of the time a calm, pleasant sense of happiness pervaded her mind. She felt safe and sheltered in the possession of the man whom she loved, though fully aware of the perils which threatened him, and,

perhaps, her also. But the assurance of his love completely filled her heart and cast every care entirely into the shade. Many men had seemed estimable and agreeable, a few even desirable husbands, but Dion was the first to awaken love in her ardent but by no means passionate soul. She regarded the experiences of the past few days as a beautiful miracle. How she had yearned and pined until the most fervent desire of her heart was fulfilled! Now Dion had offered her his love, and nothing could rob her of it.

Gorgias and the sons of her uncle Arius had disturbed her a short time. After they had gone with a good report, Berenike had entreated her daughter to lie down and let her take her place. But Barine would not leave her lover's couch, and had just loosed her hair to brush it again and fasten the thick, fair braids around her head, when, two hours after midnight, some one knocked loudly on the window shutters. Berenike was in the act of removing the poultice, so Barine herself went into the atrium to wake the doorkeeper.

But the old man was not asleep, and had anticipated her. She recognized, with a low cry of terror, the first person who entered the lighted vestibule--Alexas. Iras followed, her head closely muffled, for the storm was still howling through the streets. Last of all a lantern-bearer crossed the threshold.

The Syrian saluted the startled young beauty with a formal bow, but Iras, without a greeting or even a single word of preparation, delivered the Queen's command, and then read aloud, by the light of the lantern, what Cleopatra had scrawled upon the wax tablet.

When Barine, pallid and scarcely able to control her emotion, requested the messengers who had arrived at so late an hour to enter, in order to give her time to prepare for the night drive and take leave of her mother, Iras vouchsafed no reply, but, as if she had the right to rule the house, merely ordered the doorkeeper to bring his mistress's cloak without delay.

While the old man, with trembling knees, moved away, Iras asked if the wounded Dion was in the dwelling; and Barine, her self-control restored by the question, answered, with repellent pride, that the Queen's orders did not command her to submit to an examination in her own house.

Iras shrugged her shoulders and said, sneeringly, to Alexas:

"In truth, I asked too much. One who attracts so many men of all ages can scarcely be expected to know the abode of each individual."

"The heart has a faithful memory," replied the Syrian in a tone of correction, but Iras echoed, contemptuously, "The heart!"

Then all were silent until, instead of the doorkeeper, Berenike herself came hurrying in, bringing the cloak. With pallid face and bloodless lips she wrapped it around her daughter's shoulders, whispering, amid floods of tears, almost inaudible words of love and encouragement, which

Iras interrupted by requesting Barine to follow her to the carriage.

The mother and daughter embraced and kissed each other, then the closed equipage bore the persecuted woman through the storm and darkness to Lochias.

Not a word was exchanged between Barine and the Queen's messengers until they reached the room where the former was to await Cleopatra; but here Iras again endeavoured to induce her to speak. At the first question, however, Barine answered that she had no information to give.

The room was as bright as if it were noonday, though the lights flickered constantly, for the wind found its way through the thin shutters closing the windows on both sides of the corner room, and a strong, cold draught swept in. Barine wrapped her cloak more closely around her; the storm which howled about the sea-washed palace harmonized with the vehement agitation of her soul. Whether she had looked within or without, there was nothing which could have soothed her save the assurance of being loved--an assurance that held fear at bay. Now, indignation prevented dread from overpowering her, yet calm consideration could not fail to show her that danger threatened on every hand. The very manner in which Iras and Alexas whispered together, without heeding her presence, boded peril, for courtiers show such contempt only to those whom they know are threatened with the indifference or resentment of the sovereign. Barine, during her married life with a man devoid of all delicacy of feeling, and with a disposition as evil as his tongue was ready, had learned to endure many things which were hard to bear; yet when, after a remark from Iras evidently concerning her, she heard Alexas laugh, she was compelled to exert the utmost self-restraint to avoid telling her enemy how utterly she despised the cowardly cruelty of her conduct. But she succeeded in keeping silent. Still, the painful constraint she imposed on herself must find vent in some way, and, as the tortured anguish of her soul reached its height, large tears rolled down her cheeks.

These, too, were noticed by her enemy and made the target of her wit; but this time the sarcasm failed to produce its effect upon the Syrian, for, instead of laughing, he grew grave, and whispered something which seemed to Barine a reproof or a warning. Iras's reply was merely a contemptuous shrug of the shoulders.

Barine had noticed long before that her mother, in her fear and bewilderment, had brought her own cloak instead of her daughter's, and this circumstance also did not seem to her foe too trivial for a sneer.

But the childish insolence that seemed to have taken possession of one who usually by no means lacked dignity, was merely the mask beneath which she concealed her own suffering. A grave motive was the source of the mirth by which she affected to be moved at the sight of her enemy's cloak. The grey, ill-fitting garment disfigured Barine, and she desired that the Queen should feel confident of surpassing her rival even in outward charms. No one, not even Cleopatra, could dispense with a protecting wrap in this cold draught, and nothing suited her better than the purple mantle in whose delicate woollen fabric black and gold dragons

and griffins were embroidered. Iras had taken care that it lay ready. Barine could not fail to appear like a beggar in comparison, though Alexas said that her blue kerchief was marvellously becoming.

He was a base-minded voluptuary, who, aided by rich gifts of mind and wide knowledge, had shunned no means of ingratiating himself with Antony, the most lavish of patrons. The repulse which this man, accustomed to success, had received from Barine had been hard to forget, yet he did not resign the hope of winning her. Never had she seemed more desirable than in her touching weakness. Even base natures are averse to witnessing the torture of the defenceless, and when Iras had aimed another poisoned shaft at her, he ventured, at the risk of vexing his ally, to say, under his breath:

"Condemned criminals are usually granted, before their end, a favourite dish. I have no cause to wish Barine anything good; but I would not grudge that. You, on the contrary, seem to delight in pouring wormwood on her last mouthful."

"Certainly," she answered, her eyes sparkling brightly. "Malice is the purest of pleasures; at least to me, when exercised on this woman."

The Syrian, with a strange smile, held out his hand, saying: "Keep your good-will towards me, Iras."

"Because," she retorted with a sneer, "evil may follow my enmity. I think so, too. I am not especially sensitive concerning myself, but whoever dares"--here she raised her voice--"to harm one whom I--Just listen to the cheers! How she carries all hearts with her! Though Fate had made her a beggar, she would still be peerless among women. She is like the sun. The clouds which intrude upon her pathway of radiance are consumed and disappear."

While uttering the last sentence she had turned towards Barine, whose ear the sharp voice again pierced like a thorn, as she commanded her to prepare for the examination.

Almost at the same moment the door, caught by the wind, closed with a loud bang. The "introducer"--[Marshal of the court.]--had opened it, and, after a hasty glance, exclaimed:

"The audience will not be given in this meeting place for all the winds of heaven! Her Majesty desires to receive her late visitor in the Hall of Shells."

With these words he bowed courteously to Barine, and ushered her and her two companions through several corridors and apartments into a well-heated anteroom.

Here even the windows were thoroughly protected from the storm. Several body-guards and pages belonging to the corps of the "royal boys" stood waiting to receive them.

"This is comfortable." said Alexas, turning to Iras. "Was the winter we have just experienced intended to fill us with twofold gratitude for the delights of the mild spring in this blessed room?"

"Perhaps so," she answered sullenly, and then added in a low tone: "Here at Lochias the seasons do not follow their usual course. They change according to the pleasure of the supreme will. Instead of four, the Egyptians, as you know, have but three; in the palaces on the Nile they are countless. What is the meaning of this sudden entry of summer? Winter would have pleased me better."

The Queen--Iras knew not why--had changed her arrangements for Barine's reception. This vexed her, and her features assumed a gloomy, threatening expression as the young beauty, casting aside her cloak and kerchief, stood awaiting Cleopatra in a white robe of fine material and perfect fit. The thick, fair braids, wound simply around her shapely head, gave her an appearance of almost childish youth, and the sight made Iras feel as if she, and Cleopatra also, were outwitted.

In the dimly lighted atrium of the house near the Paneum garden, she had noticed only that Barine wore something white. Had it been merely a night robe, so much the better. But she might have appeared in her present garb at the festival of Isis. The most careful deliberation could have selected nothing more suitable or becoming. And did this vain woman go to rest with costly gold ornaments? Else how did the circlet chance to be on her arm? Each of Cleopatra's charms seemed to Iras, who knew them all, like a valuable possession of her own. To see even the least of them surpassed by another vexed her; and to behold in yonder woman a form which she could not deny was no less beautiful, enraged, nay, pierced her to the heart.

Since she had known that because of Barine she could hope for nothing more from the man to whose love she believed she possessed a claim dating from their childhood, she had hated the young beauty. And now to the many things which contributed to increase her hostile mood, was added the disagreeable consciousness that during the last few hours she had treated her contemptibly. Had she only seen earlier what her foe's cloak concealed, she would have found means to give her a different appearance. But she must remain as she was; for Chairman had already entered. Other hours, however, would follow, and if the next did not decide the fate of the woman whom she hated, future ones should.

For this purpose she did not need the aid of Charmian, her uncle Archibius's sister, who had hitherto been a beloved associate and maternal friend. But what had happened? Iras fancied that her pleasant features wore a repellent expression which she had never seen before. Was this also the singer's fault? And what was the cause?

The older woman's manner decided the question whether she should still bestow upon her returned relative the love of a grateful niece. No, she would no longer put any restraint upon herself. Charmian should feel that she (Iras) considered any favour shown to her foe an insult. To work against her secretly was not in her nature. She had courage to show

an enemy her aversion, and she did not fear Charmian enough to pursue a different course. She knew that the artist Leonax, Barine's father, had been Charmian's lover; but this did not justify her favouring the woman who had robbed her niece of the heart of the man whom she--as Charmian knew--had loved from childhood.

Charmian had just had a long conversation with her brother, and had also learned in the palace that Barine had been summoned to the Queen's presence in the middle of the night; so, firmly persuaded that evil was intended to the young woman who had already passed through so many agitating scenes of joy and sorrow, she entered the waiting-room, and her pleasant though no longer youthful face, framed in smooth, grey hair, was greeted by Barine as the shipwrecked mariner hails the sight of land.

All the emotions which had darkened and embittered her soul were soothed. She hastened towards her friend's sister, as a frightened child seeks its mother, and Charmian perceived what was stirring in her heart.

It would not do, under existing circumstances, to kiss her in the palace, but she drew Leonax's daughter towards her to show Iras that she was ready to extend a protecting hand over the persecuted woman. But Barine gazed at her with pleading glances, beseeching aid, whispering amid her tears: "Help me, Charmian. She has tortured, insulted, humiliated me with looks and words--so cruelly, so spitefully! Help me; I can bear no more."

Charmian shook her kind head and urged her in a whisper to calm herself. She had robbed Iras of her lover; she should remember that. Cost what it might, she must not shed another tear. The Queen was gracious. She, Charmian, would aid her. Everything would depend on showing herself to Cleopatra as she was, not as slander represented her. She must answer her as she would Archibius or herself.

The kindly woman, as she spoke, stroked her brow and eyes with maternal tenderness, and Barine felt as if goodness itself had quelled the tempest in her soul. She gazed around her as though roused from a troubled dream, and now for the first time perceived the richly adorned room in which she stood, the admiring glances of the boys in the Macedonian corps of pages, and the bright fire blazing cheerily on the hearth. The howling of the storm increased the pleasant sense of being under a firm roof, and Iras, who had whispered to the "introducer" at the door, no longer seemed like a sharp thorn or a spiteful demon, but a woman by no means destitute of charm, who repulsed her, but on whom she had inflicted the keenest pang a woman's heart can suffer. Then she again thought of her wounded lover at home, and remembered that, whatever might happen, his heart did not belong to Iras, but to her alone. Lastly, she recalled Archibius's description of Cleopatra's childhood, and this remembrance was followed by the conviction that the omnipotent sovereign would be neither cruel nor unjust, and that it would depend upon herself to win her favour. Charmian, too, was the Queen's confidante; and if the manner of Iras and Alexas had alarmed her, Charmian's might well inspire confidence.

All these thoughts darted through her brain with the speed of lightning. Only a brief time for consideration remained; for, even as she bowed her head on the bosom of her friend, the "introducer" entered the room, crying, "Her illustrious Majesty will expect those whom she summoned in a few minutes!"

Soon after a chamberlain appeared, waving a fan of ostrich feathers and, preceded by the court official, they passed through several brilliantly lighted, richly furnished rooms.

Barine again breathed freely and moved with head erect; and when the wide, lofty folding doors of ebony, against whose deep black surface the inlaid figures of Tritons, mermaids, shells, fish, and sea monsters were sharply relieved, she beheld a glittering, magnificent scene, for the hall which Cleopatra had chosen for her reception was completely covered with various marine forms, from the shells to coral and starfish.

A wide, lofty structure, composed of masses of stalactites and unhewn blocks of stone, formed a deep grotto at the end of the hall, whence peered the gigantic head of a monster whose open jaws formed the fireplace of the chimney. Logs of fragrant Arabian wood were blazing brightly on the hearth, and the dragon's ruby glass eyes diffused a red light through the apartment which, blended with the rays of the white and pink lamps in the shape of lotus flowers fastened among gold and silver tendrils and groups of sedges on the walls and ceiling, filling the spacious apartment with the soft light whose roseate hue was specially becoming to Cleopatra's waxen complexion.

Several stewards and cup-bearers, the master of the hunt, chamberlains, female attendants, eunuchs, and other court officials were awaiting the Queen, and pages who belonged to the Macedonian cadet corps of royal boys stood sleepily, with drooping heads, around the small throne of gold, coral, and amber which, placed opposite to the chimney, awaited the sovereign.

Barine had already seen this magnificent hall, and others still more beautiful in the Sebasteum, and the splendour therefore neither excited nor abashed her; only she would fain have avoided the numerous train of courtiers. Could it be Cleopatra's intention to question her before the eyes of all these men, women, and boys?

She no longer felt afraid, but her heart still throbbed quickly. It had beat in the same way in her girlhood, when she was asked to sing in the presence of strangers.

At last she heard doors open, and an invisible hand parted the heavy curtains at her right. She expected to see the Regent, the Keeper of the Seal, and the whole brilliantly adorned train of attendants who always surrounded the Queen on formal occasions, enter the magnificent hall. Else why had it been selected as the scene of this nocturnal trial?

But what was this?

While she was still recalling the display at the Adonis festival, the curtains began to close again. The courtiers around the throne straightened their bowed figures, the pages forgot their fatigue, and all joined in the Greek salutation of welcome, and the "Life! happiness! health!" with which the Egyptians greeted their sovereign.

The woman of middle height who now appeared before the curtain, and who, as she crossed the wide hall alone and unattended, seemed to Barine even smaller than when surrounded by the gay throng at the Adonis festival, must be the Queen. Ay, it was she!

Iras was already standing by her side, and Charmian was approaching with the "introducer." The women rendered her various little services thus Iras took from her shoulders the purple mantle, with its embroidery of black and gold dragons. What an exquisite masterpiece of the loom it must be!

All the dangers against which she must defend herself flashed swiftly through Barine's mind; yet, for an instant, she felt the foolish feminine desire to see and handle the costly mantle.

But Iras had already laid it on the arm of one of the waiting maids, and Cleopatra now glanced around her, and with a youthful, elastic step approached the throne.

Once more the feeling of timidity which she had had in her girlhood overpowered Barine, but with it came the memory of the garden of Epicurus, and Archibius's assurance that she, too, would have left the Queen with her heart overflowing with warm enthusiasm had not a disturbing influence interposed between them.

Yet, had this disturbing influence really existed? No. It was created solely by Cleopatra's jealous imagination. If she would only permit her to speak freely now, she should hear that Antony cared as little for her as she, Barine, for the boy Caesarion. What prevented her from confessing that her heart was another's? Iras had no one to blame save herself if she spoke the truth pitilessly in her presence.

Cleopatra now turned to the "introducer," waving her hand towards the throne and those who surrounded it.

Ay, she was indeed beautiful. How bright and clear was the light of her large eyes, in spite of the harassing days through which she had passed and the present night of watching!

Cleopatra's heart was still elated by the reception of her bold idea of escape, and she approached Barine with gentler feelings and intentions. She had chosen a pleasanter room for the interview than the one Iras had selected. She desired a special environment to suit each mood, and as soon as she saw the group of courtiers who surrounded the throne she ordered their dismissal.

The "introducer," to carry out the usual ceremonial, had commanded their

presence in the audience chamber, but their attendance had given the meeting a form which was now distasteful to the Queen. She wished to question, not to condemn.

At so happy an hour it was a necessity of her nature to be gracious. Perhaps she had been unduly anxious concerning this singer. It even seemed probable; for a man who loved her like Antony could scarcely yearn for the favour of another woman. This view had been freshly confirmed by a brief conversation with the chief Inspector of Sacrifices, an estimable old man, who, after hearing how Antony had hurried in pursuit of her at Actium, raised his eyes and hands as if transported with rapture, exclaiming: "Unhappy Queen! Yet happiest of women! No one was ever so ardently beloved; and when the tale is told of the noble Trojan who endured such sore sufferings for a woman's sake, future generations will laud the woman whose resistless spell constrained the greatest man of his day, the hero of heroes, to cast aside victory, fame, and the hope of the world's sovereignty, as mere worthless rubbish."

Posterity, whose verdict she dreaded--this wise old reader of the future was right--must extol her as the most fervently beloved, the most desirable of women.

And Mark Antony? Even had the magic power of Nektanebus's goblet forced him to follow her and to leave the battle, there still remained his will, a copy of which--received from Rome--Zeno, the Keeper of the Seal, had showed to her at the close of the council. "Wherever he might die," so ran the words, "he desired to be buried by the side of Cleopatra." Octavianus had wrested it from the Vestal Virgins, to whose care it had been entrusted, in order to fill the hearts of Roman citizens and matrons with indignation against his foe. The plot had succeeded, but the document had reminded Cleopatra that her heart had given this man the first of its flowers, that love for him had been the sunshine of her life. So, with head erect, she had crossed the threshold where she was to meet the woman who had ventured to sow tares in her garden. She intended to devote only a short time to the interview, which she anticipated with the satisfaction of the strong who are confident of victory.

As she approached the throne, her train left the hall; the only persons who remained were Charmian, Iras, Zeno, the Keeper of the Seal, and the "introducer."

Cleopatra cast a rapid glance at the throne, to which an obsequious gesture of the courtier's hand invited her; but she remained standing, gazing keenly at Barine.

Was it the coloured rays from the ruby eyes of the dragon in the fireplace which shed the roseate glow on Cleopatra's cheeks? It certainly enhanced the beauty of a face now only too frequently pallid and colourless, when rouge did not lend its aid; but Barine understood Archibius's ardent admiration for this rare woman, when Cleopatra, with a faint smile, requested her to approach.

Nothing more winning could be imagined than the frank kindness, wholly untinged by condescending pride, of this powerful sovereign.

The less Barine had expected such a reception the more deeply it moved her; nay, her eyes grew dim with grateful emotion, which lent them so beautiful a lustre, she looked so lovely in her glad surprise, that Cleopatra thought the months which had elapsed since her first meeting with the singer had enhanced her charms. And how young she was! The Queen swiftly computed the years which Barine must have lived as the wife of Philostratus, and afterwards as the attractive mistress of a hospitable house, and found it difficult to reconcile the appearance of this blooming young creature with the result of the calculation.

She was surprised, too, to note the aristocratic bearing whose possession no one could deny the artist's daughter. This was apparent even in her dress, yet Iras had roused her in the middle of the night, and certainly had given her no time for personal adornment.

She had expected lack of refinement and boldness, in the woman who was said to have attracted so many men, but even the most bitter prejudice could have detected no trace of it. On the contrary, the embarrassment which she could not yet wholly subdue lent her an air of girlish timidity. All in all, Barine was a charming creature, who bewitched men by her vivacity, her grace, and her exquisite voice, not by coquetry and pertness. That she possessed unusual mental endowments Cleopatra did not believe. Barine had only one advantage over her--youth.

Time had not yet robbed the former of a single charm, while from the Queen he had wrested many; their number was known only to herself and her confidantes, but at this hour she did not miss them.

Barine, with a low, modest bow, advanced towards the Queen, who commenced the conversation by graciously apologizing for the late hour at which she had summoned her. "But," she added, "you belong to the ranks of the nightingales, who during the night most readily and exquisitely reveal to us what stirs their hearts--"

Barine gazed silently at the floor a moment, and when she raised her eyes her voice was faint and timid. "I sing, it is true, your Majesty, but I have nothing else in common with the birds. The wings which, when a child, bore me wherever I desired, have lost their strength. They do not wholly refuse their service, but they now require favourable hours to move."

"I should not have expected that in the time of your youth, your most beautiful possession," replied the Queen. "Yet it is well. I too--how long ago it seems!--was a child, and my imagination outstripped even the flight of the eagle. It could dare the risk unpunished. Now---Whoever has reached mature life is wise to let these wings remain idle. The mortal who ventures to use them may easily approach too near the sun, and, like Icarus, the wax will melt from his pinions. Let me tell you this: To the child the gift of imagination is nourishing bread. In later years we need it only as salt, as spice, as stimulating wine. Doubtless

it points out many paths, and shows us their end; but, of a hundred rambles to which it summons him, scarcely one pleases the mature man. No troublesome parasite is more persistently and sharply rebuffed. Who can blame the ill-treated friend if it is less ready to serve us as the years go on? The wise man will keep his ears ever open, but rarely lend it his active hand. To banish it from life is to deprive the plant of blossoms, the rose of its fragrance, the sky of its stars."

"I have often said the same things to myself, though in a less clear and beautiful form, when life has been darkened," replied Barine, with a faint blush; for she felt that these words were doubtless intended to warn her against cherishing too aspiring wishes. "But, your Majesty, here also the gods place you, the great Queen, far above us. We should often find existence bare indeed but for the fancy which endows us with imaginary possessions. You have the power to secure a thousand things which to us common mortals only the gift of imagination pictures as attainable."

"You believe that happiness is like wealth, and that the happiest person is the one who receives the largest number of the gifts of fortune," answered the Queen. "The contrary, I think, can be easily proved. The maxim that the more we have the less we need desire, is also false, though in this world there are only a certain number of desirable things. He who already possesses one of ten solidi which are to be divided, ought really to desire only nine, and therefore would be poorer by a wish than another who has none. True, it cannot be denied that the gods have burdened or endowed me with a greater number of perishable gifts than you and many others. You seem to set a high value upon them. Doubtless there may be one or another which you could appropriate only by the aid of the imagination. May I ask which seems to you the most desirable?"

"Spare me the choice, I beseech you," replied Barine in an embarrassed tone. "I need nothing from your treasures, and, as for the other possessions I lack many things; but it is uncertain how the noblest and highest gifts in the possession of the marvellously endowed favourite of the gods would suit the small, commonplace ones I call mine, and I know not--"

"A sensible doubt!" interrupted the Queen. "The lame man, who desired a horse, obtained one, and on his first ride broke his neck. The only blessing--the highest of all--which surely bestows happiness can neither be given away nor transferred from one to another. He who has gained it may be robbed of it the next moment."

The last sentence had fallen from the Queen's lips slowly and thoughtfully, but Barine, remembering Archibius's tale, said modestly, "You are thinking of the chief good mentioned by Epicurus--perfect peace of mind."

Cleopatra's eyes sparkled with a brighter light as she asked eagerly, "Do you, the granddaughter of a philosopher, know the system of the master?"

"Very superficially, your Majesty. My intellect is far inferior to yours. It is difficult for me thoroughly to comprehend all the details of any system of philosophy."

"Yet you have attempted it?"

"Others endeavoured to introduce me into the doctrines of the Stoics. I have forgotten most of what I learned; only one thing lingered in my memory, and I know why--because it pleased me."

"And that?"

"Was the wise law of living according to the dictates of our own natures. The command to shun everything contradictory to the simple fundamental traits of our own characters pleased me, and wherever I saw affectation, artificiality, and mannerism I was repelled, while from my grandfather's teaching I drew the principle that I could do nothing better than to remain, so far as life would permit, what I had been as a child ere I had heard the first word of philosophy, or felt the constraint which society and its forms impose."

"So the system of the Stoics leads to this end also!" cried the Queen gaily, and, turning to the companion of her own studies, she added: "Did you hear, Charmian? If we had only succeeded in perceiving the wisdom and calm, purposeful order of existence which the Stoics, amid so much that is perverse, unhealthy, and provocative of contradiction, nevertheless set above everything else! How can I, in order to live wisely, imitate Nature, when in her being and action I encounter so much that is contradictory to my human reason, which is a part of the divine?"

Here she hesitated, and the expression of her face suddenly changed.

She had advanced close to Barine and, while standing directly in front of her, her eyes had rested on the gem which adorned her arm above the elbow.

Was it this which agitated Cleopatra so violently that her voice lost its bewitching melody, as she went on in a harsh, angry tone?--"So that is the source of all this misfortune. Even as a child I detested that sort of arbitrary judgment which passes under the mask of stern morality. There is an example! Do you hear the howling of the storm? In human nature, as well as in the material world, there are tempests and volcanoes which bring destruction, and, if the original character of any individual is full of such devastating forces, like the neighbourhood of Vesuvius or Etna, the goal to which his impulses would lead him is clearly visible. Ay, the Stoic is not allowed to destroy the harmony and order of things in existence, any more than to disturb those which are established by the state. But to follow our natural impulses wherever they lead us is so perilous a venture, that whoever has the power to fix a limit to it betimes is in duty bound to do so. This power is mine, and I will use it!"

Then, with iron severity, she asked: "As it seems to be one of the

demands of your nature, woman, to allure and kindle the hearts of all who bear the name of man, even though they have not yet donned the garb of the Ephebi, so, too, you seem to appear to delight in idle ornaments. Or," and as she spoke she touched Barine's shoulder"--or why should you wear, during the hours of slumber, that circlet on your arm?"

Barine had watched with increasing anxiety the marked change in the manner and language of the Queen. She now beheld a repetition of what she had experienced at the Adonis festival, but this time she knew what had roused Cleopatra's jealousy. She, Barine, wore on her arm a gift from Antony. With pallid face she strove to find a fitting answer, but ere she could do so Iras advanced to the side of the incensed Queen, saying: "That circlet is the counterpart of the one your august husband bestowed upon you. The singer's must also be a gift from Mark Antony. Like every one else in the world, she deems the noble Imperator the greatest man of his day. Who can blame her for prizing it so highly that she does not remove it even while she sleeps?"

Again Barine felt as if a thorn had pierced her; but though the resentment which she had previously experienced once more surged hotly within her heart, she forced herself to maintain seemingly external composure, and struggled for some word in answer; but she found none suitable, and remained silent.

She had told the truth. From early youth she had followed the impulses of her own nature without heeding the opinion of mortals, as the teachings of the Stoics directed, and she had been allowed to do so because this nature was pure, truthful, alive to the beautiful, and, moreover, free from those unbridled, volcanic impulses to which the Queen alluded. The cheerful patience of her soul had found ample satisfaction in the cultivation of her art, and in social intercourse with men who permitted her to share their own intellectual life. Today she had learned that the first great passion of her heart had met with a response. Now she was bound to her lover, and knew herself to be pure and guiltless, far better entitled to demand respect from sterner judges of morality than the woman who condemned her, or the spiteful Iras, who had not ceased to offer her love to Dion.

The sorrowful feeling of being misunderstood and unjustly condemned, mingled with fear of the terrible fate to which she might be sentenced by the omnipotent sovereign, whose clear intellect was clouded by jealousy and the resentment of a mother's wounded heart, paralyzed her tongue. Besides, she was confused by the angry emotion which the sight of Iras awakened. Twice, thrice she strove to utter a few words of explanation, defence, but her voice refused to obey her will.

When Charmian at last approached to encourage her, it was too late; the indignant Queen had turned away, exclaiming to Iras: "let her be taken back to Lochias. Her guilt is proved; but it does not become the injured person, the accuser, to award the punishment. This must be left to the judges before whom we will bring her."

Then Barine once more recovered the power of speech. How dared Cleopatra

assert that she was convicted of a crime, without hearing her defence?

As surely as she felt her own innocence she must succeed in proving it, and with this consciousness she cried out to the Queen in a tone of touching entreaty: "O your Majesty, do not leave me without hearing me! As truly as I believe in your justice, I can ask you to listen to me once more. Do not give me up to the woman who hates me because the man whom she--"

Here Cleopatra interrupted her. Royal dignity forbade her to hear one woman's jealous accusation of another, but, with the subtle discernment with which women penetrate one another's moods, she heard in Barine's piteous appeal a sincere conviction that she was too severely condemned. Doubtless she also had reason to believe in Iras's hate, and Cleopatra knew how mercilessly she pursued those who had incurred her displeasure. She had rejected and still shuddered at her advice to remove the singer from her path; for an inner voice warned her not to burden her soul now with a fresh crime, which would disturb its peace. Besides, she had at first been much attracted by this charming, winning creature; but the irritating thought that Antony had bestowed the same gift upon the sovereign and the artist's daughter still so incensed her, that it taxed to the utmost her graciousness and self-control as, without addressing any special person, she exclaimed, glancing back into the hall: "This examination will be followed by another. When the time comes, the accused must appear before the judges; therefore she must remain at Lochias and in custody. It is my will that no harm befalls her. You are her friend, Charmian. I will place her in your charge. Only"--here she raised her voice--"on pain of my anger, do not allow her by any possibility to leave the palace, even for a moment, or to hold intercourse with any person save yourself."

With these words she passed out of the hall and went into her own apartments. She had turned the night into day, not only to despatch speedily matters which seemed to her to permit of no delay, but even more because, since the battle of Actium, she dreaded the restless hours upon her lonely couch. They seemed endless; and though before she had remembered with pleasure the unprecedented display and magnificence with which she had surrounded her love-life with Antony, she now in these hours reproached herself for having foolishly squandered the wealth of her people. The present appeared unbearable, and from the future a host of black cares pressed upon her.

The following days were overcrowded with business details.

Half of her nights were spent in the observatory. She had not asked again for Barine. On the fifth night she permitted Alexas to conduct her once more to the little observatory which had been erected for her father at Lochias, and Antony's favourite knew how to prove that a star which had long threatened her planet was that of the woman whom she seemed to have forgotten as completely as she had ignored his former warning against this very foe.

The Queen denied this, but Alexas eagerly continued: "The night after

your return home your kindness was again displayed in its inexhaustible and--to us less noble souls--incomprehensible wealth. Deeply agitated, we watched during the memorable examination the touching spectacle of the greatest heart making itself the standard by which to measure what is petty and ignoble. But ere the second trial takes place the wanderers above, who know the future, bid me warn you once more; for that woman's every look was calculated, every word had its fixed purpose, every tone of her voice was intended to produce a certain effect. Whatever she said or may yet say had no other design than to deceive my royal mistress. As yet there have been no definite questions and answers. But you will have her examined, and then----What may she not make of the story of Mark Antony, Barine, and the two armlets? Perhaps it will be a masterpiece."

"Do you know its real history?" asked Cleopatra, clasping her fingers more closely around the pencil in her hand.

"If I did," replied Alexas, smiling significantly, "the receiver of stolen goods should not betray the thief."

"Not even if the person who has been robbed--the Queen--commands you to give up the dishonestly acquired possession?"

"Unfortunately, even then I should be forced to withhold obedience; for consider, my royal mistress, there are but two great luminaries around which my dark life revolves. Shall I betray the moon, when I am sure of gaining nothing thereby save to dim the warm light of the sun?"

"That means that your revelations would wound me, the sun?"

"Unless your lofty soul is too great to be reached by shadows which surround less noble women with an atmosphere of indescribable torture."

"Do you intend to render your words more attractive by the veil with which you shroud them? It is transparent, and dims the vision very little. My soul, you think, should be free from jealousy and the other weaknesses of my sex. There you are mistaken. I am a woman, and wish to remain one. As Terence's Chremes says he is a human being, and nothing human is unknown to him, I do not hesitate to confess all feminine frailties. Anubis told me of a queen in ancient times who would not permit the inscriptions to record 'she,' but 'he came,' or 'he, the ruler, conquered.' Fool! Whatever concerns me, my womanhood is not less lofty than the crown. I was a woman ere I became Queen. The people prostrate themselves before my empty litters; but when, in my youth, I wandered in disguise with Antony through the city streets and visited some scene of merrymaking, while the men gazed admiringly at me, and we heard voices behind us murmur, 'A handsome couple!' I returned home full of joy and pride. But there was something greater still for the woman to learn, when the heart in the breast of the Queen forgot throne and sceptre and, in the hours consecrated to Eros, tasted joys known to womanhood alone. How can you men, who only command and desire, understand the happiness of sacrifice? I am a woman; my birth does not exalt me above any feeling of my sex; and what I now ask is not as Queen but as woman."

"If that is the case," Alexas answered with his hand upon his heart, "you impose silence upon me; for were I to confess to the woman Cleopatra what agitates my soul, I should be guilty of a double crime--I would violate a promise and betray the friend who confided his noble wife to my protection."

"Now the darkness is becoming too dense for me," replied Cleopatra, raising her head with repellent pride. "Or, if I choose to raise the veil, I must point out to you the barriers--"

"Which surround the Queen," replied the Syrian with an obsequious bow. "There you behold the fact. It is an impossibility to separate the woman from the princess. So far as I am concerned, I do not wish to anger the former against the presumptuous adorer, and I desire to yield to the latter the obedience which is her due. Therefore I entreat you to forget the armlet and its many painful associations, and pass to the consideration of other matters. Perhaps the fair Barine will voluntarily confess everything, and even add how she managed to ensnare the amiable son of the greatest of men, and the most admirable of mothers, the young King Caesarion."

Cleopatra's eyes flashed more brightly, and she angrily exclaimed: "I found the boy just now as though he were possessed by demons. He was ready to tear the bandage from his wound, if he were refused the woman whom he loved. A magic potion was the first thought, and his tutor of course attributes everything to magic arts. Charmian, on the contrary, declares that his visits annoyed and even alarmed Barine. Nothing except a rigid investigation can throw light upon this subject. We will await the Emperor's return. Do you think that he will again seek the singer? You are his most trusted confidant. If you desire his best good, and care for my favour, drop your hesitation and answer this question."

The Syrian assumed the manner of a man who had reached a decision, and answered firmly: "Certainly he will, unless you prevent him. The simplest way would be--"

"Well?"

"To inform him, as soon as he lands, that she is no longer to be found. I should be especially happy to receive this commission from my royal sun."

"And do you think it would dim the light of your moon a little, were he to seek her here in vain?"

"As surely as that the contrary would be the case if he were always as gratefully aware of the peerless brilliancy of his sun as it deserves. Helios suffers no other orb to appear so long as he adorns the heavens. His lustre quenches all the rest. Let my sun so decree, and Barine's little star will vanish."

"Enough! I know your aim now. But a human life is no small thing, and

this woman, too, is the child of a mother. We must consider, earnestly consider, whether our purpose cannot be gained without proceeding to extremes. This must be done with zeal and a kindly intention--But I-- Now, when the fate of this country, my own, and the children's is hanging in the balance, when I have not fifteen minutes at my command, and there is no end of writing and consulting, I can waste no time on such matters."

"The reflective mind must be permitted to use its mighty wings unimpeded," cried the Syrian eagerly. "Leave the settlement of minor matters to trustworthy friends."

Here they were interrupted by the "introducer," who announced the eunuch Mardion. He had come on business which, spite of the late hour, permitted no delay.

Alexas accompanied the Queen to the tablinum, where they found the eunuch. A slave attended him, carrying a pouch filled with letters which had just been brought by two messengers from Syria. Among them were some which must be answered without delay. The Keeper of the Seal and the Exegetus were also waiting. Their late visit was due to the necessity of holding a conference in relation to the measures to be adopted to calm the excited citizens. All the galleys which had escaped from the battle had entered the harbour the day before, wreathed with garlands as if a great victory had been won. Loud acclamations greeted them, yet tidings of the defeat at Actium spread with the swiftness of the wind. Crowds were now gathering, threatening demonstrations had been made in front of the Sebasteum, and on the square of the Serapeum the troops had been compelled to interfere, and blood had flowed.

There lay the letters. Zeno remarked that more papers conferring authority were required for the work on the canal, and the Exegetus earnestly besought definite instruction.

"It is much--much," murmured Cleopatra. Then, drawing herself up to her full height, she exclaimed, "Well, then, to work!"

But Alexas did not permit her to do this at once. Humbly advancing as she took her seat at the large writing-table, he whispered: "And with all this, must my royal mistress devote time and thought to the destroyer of her peace. To disturb your Majesty with this trifle is a crime; yet it must be committed, for should the affair remain unheeded longer, the trickling rivulet may become a mountain torrent--"

Here Cleopatra, whose glance had just rested upon a fateful letter from King Herod, turned her face half towards her husband's favourite, exclaiming curtly, with glowing cheeks, "Presently."

"Then she glanced rapidly over the letter, pushed it excitedly aside, and dismissed the waiting Syrian with the impatient words: "Attend to the trial and the rest. No injustice, but no untimely mildness. I will look into this unpleasant matter myself before the Emperor returns."

"And the authority?" asked the Syrian, with another low bow.

"You have it. If you need a written one, apply to Zeno. We will discuss the affair further at some less busy hour."

The Syrian retired; but Cleopatra turned to the eunuch and, flushed with emotion, cried, pointing to the King of Judea's letter: "Did you ever witness baser ingratitude? The rats think the ship is sinking, and it is time to leave it. If we succeed in keeping above water, they will return in swarms; and this must, must, must be done, for the sake of this beloved country and her independence. Then the children, the children! All our powers must now be taxed, every expedient must be remembered and used. We will hammer each feeble hope until it becomes the strong steel of certainty. We will transform night into day. The canal will save the fleet. Mark Antony will find in Africa Pinarius Scarpus with untouched loyal legions. The gladiators are faithful to us. We can easily make them ours, and my brain is seething with other plans. But first we will attend to the Alexandrians. No violence!"

This exclamation was followed by order after order, and the promise that, if necessary, she would show herself to the people.

The Exegetus was filled with admiration as he received the clear, sagacious directions. After he had retired with his companions, the Queen again turned to the Regent, saying: "We did wisely to make the people happy at first with tidings of victory. The unexpected news of terrible disaster might have led them to some unprecedented deed of madness. Disappointment is a more common pain, for which less powerful remedies will suffice. Besides, many things could be arranged ere they knew that I was here. How much we have accomplished already, Mardion! But I have not even granted myself the joy of seeing my children. I was forced to defer the pleasure of the companionship of my oldest friends, even Archibius. When he comes again he will be admitted. I have given the order. He knows Rome thoroughly. I must hear his opinion of pending negotiations."

She shivered as she spoke, and pressing her hand upon her brow, exclaimed: "Octavianus victor, Cleopatra vanquished! I, who was everything to Caesar, beseeching mercy from his heir. I, a petitioner to Octavia's brother! Yet, no, no! There are still a hundred chances of avoiding the horrible doom. But whoever wishes to compel the field to bear fruits must dig sturdily, draw the buckets from the well, plough, and sow the seed. To work, then, to work! When Antony returns he must find all things ready. The first success will restore his lost energy. I glanced through yonder letter while talking with the Exegetus; now I will dictate the answer."

So she sat reading, writing, and dictating, listening, answering, and giving orders, until the east brightened with the approach of dawn, the morning star grew pale, and the Regent, utterly exhausted, entreated her to consider her own health and his years, and permit him a few hours' rest.

Then she, too, allowed herself to be led into her darkened chamber, and this time a friendly, dreamless slumber closed her weary eyes and held her captive until roused by the loud shouts of the multitude, who had heard of the Queen's return and flocked to Lochias.

ETEXT EDITOR'S BOOKMARKS:

Without heeding the opinion of mortals

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