

Cleopatra — Volume 09 eBook

Cleopatra — Volume 09 by Georg Ebers

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CHAPTER XXIII.

After accompanying Dion to the harbour, the architect had gone to the Forum to converse with the men he met there, and learn what they feared and expected in regard to the future fate of the city.

All news reached this meeting-place first, and he found a large number of Macedonian citizens who, like himself, wished to discuss passing events in these decisive hours.

The scene was very animated, for the most contradictory messages were constantly arriving from the fleet and the army.

At first they were very favourable; then came the news of the treason, and soon after of the desertion of the cavalry and foot soldiers.

A distinguished citizen had seen Mark Antony, accompanied by several friends, dashing down the quay. The goal of their flight was the little palace on the Choma.

Grave men, whose opinion met with little opposition, thought that it was the duty of the Emperor—now that Fate had decided against him, and nothing remained save a life sullied by disgrace—to put himself to death with his own hand, like Brutus and so many other noble Romans. Tidings soon came that he had attempted to do what the best citizens expected.

Gorgias could not endure to remain longer in the Forum, but hastened to the Choma, though it was difficult to force his way to the wall, where a breach had been made. He had found the portion of the shore from which the promontory ran densely crowded with people—from whom he learned that Antony was no longer in the palace—and the sea filled with boats.

A corpse was just being borne out of the little palace on the Street of the King and, among those who followed, Gorgias recognized one of Antony's slaves. The man's eyes were red with weeping. He readily obeyed the architect's sign and, sobbing bitterly, told him that the hapless general, after his army had betrayed him, fled hither. When he heard in the palace that Cleopatra had preceded him to Hades, he ordered his body-slave Eros to put an end to his life also. The worthy man drew back, pierced his own breast with his sword, and sank dying at his master's feet; but Antony, exclaiming that Eros's example had taught him his duty, thrust the short sword into his breast with his own hand. Yet deep and severe as was the wound, it did not destroy the tremendous vitality of the gigantic Roman. With touching entreaties he implored the bystanders to kill him, but no one could bring himself to commit the deed. Meanwhile Cleopatra's name, coupled with the wish to follow her, was constantly on the lips of the Emperor.



At last Diomedes, the Queen's private secretary, appeared, to bring him, by her orders, to the mausoleum where she had taken refuge.

Antony, as if animated with fresh vigour, assented, and while being carried thither gave orders that Eros should have a worthy burial. Even though dying, it would have been impossible for the most generous of masters to permit any kindness rendered to pass unrequited.

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The slave again wept aloud as he uttered the words, but Gorgias hastened at once to the tomb. The nearest way, the Street of the King, had become so crowded with people who had been forced back by Roman soldiers, between the Theatre of Dionysus and the Corner of the Muses, that he had been compelled to reach the building through a side street.

The quay was already unrecognizable, and even in the other streets the populace showed a foreign aspect. Instead of peaceful citizens, Roman soldiers in full armour were met everywhere. Instead of Greek, Egyptian, and Syrian faces, fair and dark visages of alien appearance were seen.

The city seemed transformed into a camp. Here he met a cohort of fair-haired Germans; yonder another with locks of red whose home he did not know; and again a vexil of Numidian or Pannonian horsemen.

At the Temple of the Dioscuri he was stopped. A Hispanian maniple had just seized Antony's son Antyllus and, after a hasty court-martial, killed him. His tutor, Theodotus, had betrayed him to the Romans, but the infamous fellow was being led with bound hands after the corpse of the hapless youth, because he was caught in the act of hiding in his girdle a costly jewel which he had taken from his neck. Before his departure for the island Gorgias heard that the scoundrel had been sentenced to crucifixion.

At last he succeeded in forcing a passage to the tomb, which he found surrounded on all sides by Roman lictors and the Scythian guards of the city, who, however, permitted him, as the architect, to pass.

The numerous obstacles by which he had been delayed spared him from becoming an eye-witness of the most terrible scenes of the tragedy which had just ended; but he received a minute description from the Queen's private secretary, a well-disposed Macedonian, who had accompanied the wounded Antony, and with whom Gorgias had become intimately acquainted during the building of the mausoleum.

Cleopatra had fled to the tomb as soon as the fortune of war turned in favour of Octavianus. No one was permitted to accompany her except Charmian and Iras, who had helped her close the heavy brazen door of the massive building. The false report of her death, which had induced Antony to put an end to his life, had perhaps arisen from the fact that the Queen was literally in the tomb.

When, borne in the arms of his faithful servants, he reached the mausoleum, mortally wounded, the Queen and her attendants vainly endeavoured to open the heavy brazen portal. But Cleopatra ardently longed to see her dying lover. She wished to have him near to render the last services, assure him once more of her devotion, close his eyes, and, if it was so ordered, die with him.



So she and her attendants had searched the place, and when Iras spoke of the windlass which stood on the scaffold to raise the heavy brass plate bearing the bas-relief of Love conquering Death, the Queen and her friends hastened up the stairs, the bearer below fastened the wounded man to the rope, and Cleopatra herself stood at the windlass to raise him, aided by her faithful companions.



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Diomedes averred that he had never beheld a more piteous spectacle than the gigantic man hovering between heaven and earth in the agonies of death and, while suffering the most terrible torture, extending his arms longingly towards the woman he loved. Though scarcely able to speak, he tenderly called her name, but she made no reply; like Iras and Charmian, she was exerting her whole strength at the windlass in the most passionate effort to raise him. The rope running over the pulley cut her tender hands; her beautiful face was terribly distorted; but she did not pause until they had succeeded in lifting the burden of the dying man higher and higher till he reached the floor of the scaffolding. The frantic exertion by which the three women had succeeded in accomplishing an act far beyond their strength, though it was doubled by the power of the most earnest will and ardent longing, would nevertheless have failed in attaining its object had not Diomedes, at the last moment, come to their assistance. He was a strong man, and by his aid the dying Roman was seized, drawn upon the scaffolding, and carried down the staircase to the tomb in the first story.

When the wounded general had been laid on one of the couches with which the great hall was already furnished, the private secretary retired, but remained on the staircase, an unnoticed spectator, in order to be at hand in case the Queen again needed his assistance. Flushed from the terrible exertion which she had just made, with tangled, dishevelled locks, gasping and moaning, Cleopatra, as if out of her senses, tore open her robe, beat her breast, and lacerated it with her nails. Then, pressing her own beautiful face on her lover's wound to stanch the flowing blood, she lavished upon him all the endearing names which she had bestowed on their love.

His terrible suffering made her forget her own and the sad fate impending. Tears of pity fell like the refreshing drops of a shower upon the still unwithered blossoms of their love, and brought those which, during the preceding night, had revived anew, to their last magnificent unfolding.

Boundless, limitless as her former passion for this man, was now the grief with which his agonizing death filled her heart.

All that Mark Antony had been to her in the heyday of life, all their mutual experiences, all that each had received from the other, had returned to her memory in clear and vivid hues during the banquet which had closed a few hours ago. Now these scenes, condensed into a narrow compass, again passed before her mental vision, but only to reveal more distinctly the depth of misery of this hour. At last anguish forced even the clearest memories into oblivion: she saw nothing save the tortures of her lover; her brain, still active, revealed solely the gulf at her feet, and the tomb which yawned not only for Antony, but for herself.



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Unable to think of the happiness enjoyed in the past or to hope for it in the future, she gave herself up to uncontrolled despair, and no woman of the people could have yielded more absolutely to the consuming grief which rent her heart, or expressed it in wilder, more frantic language, than did this great Queen, this woman who as a child had been so sensitive to the slightest suffering, and whose after-life had certainly not taught her to bear sorrow with patience. After Charmian, at the dying man's request, had given him some wine, he found strength to speak coherently, instead of moaning and sighing.

He tenderly urged Cleopatra to secure her own safety, if it could be done without dishonour, and mentioned Proculejus as the man most worthy of her confidence among the friends of Octavianus. Then he entreated her not to mourn for him, but to consider him happy; for he had enjoyed the richest favours of Fortune. He owed his brightest hours to her love; but he had also been the first and most powerful man on earth. Now he was dying in the arms of Love, honourable as a Roman who succumbed to Romans.

In this conviction he died after a short struggle.

Cleopatra had watched his last breath, closed his eyes, and then thrown herself tearlessly on her lover's body. At last she fainted, and lay unconscious with her head upon his marble breast.

The private secretary had witnessed all this, and then returned with tearful eyes to the second story. There he met Gorgias, who had climbed the scaffolding, and told him what he had seen and heard from the stairs. But his story was scarcely ended when a carriage stopped at the Corner of the Muses and an aristocratic Roman alighted. This was the very Proculejus whom the dying Antony had recommended to the woman he loved as worthy of her confidence.

"In fact," Gorgias continued, "he seemed in form and features one of the noblest of his haughty race. He came commissioned by Octavianus, and is said to be warmly devoted to the Caesar, and a well-disposed man. We have also heard him mentioned as a poet and a brother-in-law of Maecenas. A wealthy aristocrat, he is a generous patron of literature, and also holds art and science in high esteem. Timagenes lauds his culture and noble nature. Perhaps the historian was right; but where the object in question is the state and its advantage, what we here regard as worthy of a free man appears to be considered of little moment at the court of Octavianus. The lord to whom he gives his services intrusted him with a difficult task, and Proculejus doubtless considered it his duty to make every effort to perform it—and yet——If I see aright, a day will come when he will curse this, and the obedience with which he, a free man, aided Caesar. But listen.

"Erect and haughty in his splendid suit of armour, he knocked at the door of the tomb. Cleopatra had regained consciousness and asked—she must have known him in Rome—what he desired.



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“He had come, he answered courteously, by the command of Octavianus, to negotiate with her, and the Queen expressed her willingness to listen, but refused to admit him into the mausoleum.

“So they talked with each other through the door. With dignified composure, she asked to have the sons whom she had given to Antony—not Caasarion—acknowledged as Kings of Egypt.

“Proculejus instantly promised to convey her wishes to Caesar, and gave hopes of their fulfilment.

“While she was speaking of the children and their claims—she did not mention her own future—the Roman questioned her about Mark Antony’s death, and then described the destruction of the dead man’s army and other matters of trivial importance. Proculejus did not look like a babbler, but I felt a suspicion that he was intentionally trying to hold the attention of the Queen. This proved to be his design; he had been merely waiting for Cornelius Gallus, the commander of the fleet, of whom you have heard. He, too, ranks among the chief men in Rome, and yet he made himself the accomplice of Proculejus.

“The latter retired as soon as he had presented the new-comer to the hapless woman.

“I remained at my post and now heard Gallus assure Cleopatra of his master’s sympathy. With the most bombastic exaggeration he described how bitterly Octavianus mourned in Mark Antony the friend, the brother-in-law, the co-ruler and sharer in so many important enterprises. He had shed burning tears over the tidings of his death. Never had more sincere ones coursed down any man’s cheeks.

“Gallus, too, seemed to me to be intentionally prolonging the conversation.

“Then, while I was listening intently to understand Cleopatra’s brief replies, my foreman, who, when the workmen were driven away by the Romans, had concealed himself between two blocks of granite, came to me and said that Proculejus had just climbed a ladder to the scaffold in the rear of the monument. Two servants followed, and they had all stolen down into the hall.

“I hastily started up. I had been lying on the floor with my head outstretched to listen.

“Cost what it might, the Queen must be warned. Treachery was certainly at work here.

“But I came too late.

“O Dion! If I had only been informed a few minutes before, perhaps something still more terrible might have happened, but the Queen would have been spared what now threatens her. What can she expect from the conqueror who, in order to seize her alive,

condescends to outwit a noble, defenceless woman, who has succumbed to superior power?



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“Death would have released the unhappy Queen from sore trouble and horrible shame. And she had already raised the dagger against her life. Before my eyes she flung aloft her beautiful arm with the flashing steel, which glittered in the light of the candles in the many-branched candelabra beside the sarcophagi. But I will try to remain calm! You shall hear what happened in regular order. My thoughts grow confused as the terrible scene recurs to my memory. To describe it as I saw it, I should need to be a poet, an artist in words; for what passed before me happened on a stage—you know, it was a tomb. The walls were of dark stone—dark, too, were the pillars and ceiling—all dark and glittering; most portions were smoothly polished stone, shining like a mirror. Near the sarcophagi, and around the candelabra as far as the vicinity of the door, where the rascally trick was played, the light was brilliant as in a festal hall. Every blood-stain on the hand, every scratch, every wound which the desperate woman had torn with her own nails on her bosom, which gleamed snow-white from her black robes, was distinctly visible. Farther away, on the right and left, the light was dim, and near the side walls the darkness was as intense as in a real tomb. On the smooth porphyry columns, the glittering black marble and serpentine—here, there, and everywhere—flickered the wavering reflection of the candlelight. The draught kept it continually in motion, and it wavered to and fro in the hall, like the restless souls of the damned. Wherever the eye turned it met darkness. The end of the hall seemed black—black as the anteroom of Hades—yet through it pierced a brilliant moving bar; sunbeams which streamed from the stairway into the tomb and amid which danced tiny motes. How the scene impressed the eye! The home of gloomy Hecate! And the Queen and her impending fate. A picture flooded with light, standing forth in radiant relief against the darkness of the heavy, majestic forms surrounding it in a wide circle. This tomb in this light would be a palace meet for the gloomy rule of the king of the troop of demons conjured up by the power of a magician—if they have a ruler. But where am I wandering? ‘The artist!’ I hear you exclaim again, ‘the artist! Instead of rushing forward and interposing, he stands studying the light and its effects in the royal tomb.’ Yes, yes; I had come too late, too late—far too late! On the stairs leading to the lower story of the building I saw it, but I was not to blame for the delay—not in the least!

“At first I had been unable to see the men—or even a shadow; but I beheld plainly in the brightest glare of the light the body of Mark Antony on the couch and, in the dusk farther towards the right, Iras and Charmian trying to raise a trapdoor. It was the one which closed the passage leading to the combustible materials stored in the cellar. A sign from the Queen had commanded them to fire it.



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The first steps of the staircase, down which I was hastening, were already behind me—then— then Proculejus, with two men, suddenly dashed from the intense darkness on the other side. Scarcely able to control myself, I sprang down the remaining steps, and while Iras's shrill cry, 'Poor Cleopatra, they will capture you!' still rang in my ears, I saw the betrayed Queen turn from the door through which, resolved on death, she was saying something to Gallus, perceive Proculejus close behind her, thrust her hand into her girdle, and with the speed of lightning—you have already heard so—throw up her arm with the little dagger to bury the sharp blade in her breast. What a picture! In the full radiance of the brilliant light, she resembled a statue of triumphant victory or of noble pride in great deeds accomplished; and then, then, only an instant later, what an outrage was inflicted!

“Like a robber, an assassin, Proculejus rushed upon her, seized her arm, and wrested the weapon from her grasp. His tall figure concealed her from me. But when, struggling to escape from the ruffian's clutch, she again turned her face towards the hall, what a transformation had occurred! Her eyes—you know how large they are—were twice their usual size, and blazed with scorn, fury, and hatred for the traitor. The cheering light had become a consuming fire. So I imagine the vengeance, the curse which calls down ruin upon the head of a foe. And Proculejus, the great lord, the poet whose noble nature is praised by the authors on the banks of the Tiber, held the defenceless woman, the worthy daughter of a brilliant line of kings, in a firm grasp, as if it required the exertion of all his strength to master this delicate embodiment of charming womanhood. True, the proud blood of the outwitted lioness urged her to resist this profanation, and Proculejus—an enviable honour—made her feel the superior strength of his arm. I am no prophet, but Dion, I repeat, this shameful struggle and the glances which flashed upon him will be remembered to his dying hour. Had they been darted at me, I should have cursed my life.

“They blanched even the Roman's cheeks. He was lividly pale as he completed what he deemed his duty. His own aristocratic hands were degraded to the menial task of searching the garments of a woman, the Queen, for forbidden wares, poisons or weapons. He was aided by one of Caesar's freedmen, Epaphroditus, who is said to stand so high in the favour of Octavianus.

“The scoundrel also searched Iras and Charmian, yet all the time both Romans constantly spoke in cajoling terms of Caesar's favour; and his desire to grant Cleopatra everything which was due a Queen.

“At last she was taken back to Lochias, but I felt like a madman; for the image of the unfortunate woman pursued me like my shadow. It was no longer a vision of the bewitching sovereign nay, it resembled the incarnation of despair, tearless anguish, wrath demanding vengeance. I will not describe it; but those eyes, those flashing,



threatening eyes, and the tangled hair on which Antony's blood had flowed-terrible, horrible! My heart grew chill, as if I had seen upon Athene's shield the head of the Medusa with its serpent locks.



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“It had been impossible for me to warn her in time, or even to seize the traitor’s arm—I have already said so—and yet, yet her shining image gazed reproachfully at me for my cowardly delay. Her glance still haunts me, robbing me of calmness and peace. Not until I gaze into Helena’s pure, calm eyes will that terrible vision of the face, flooded by light in the midst of the tomb, cease to haunt me.”

His friend laid his hand on his arm, spoke soothingly to him, and reminded him of the blessings which this terrible day—he had said so himself—had brought.

Dion was right to give this warning; for Gorgias’s bearing and the very tone of his voice changed as he eagerly declared that the frightful events had been followed by more than happy ones for the city, his friend, and Barine.

Then, with a sigh of relief, he continued: “I pursued my way home like a drunken man. Every attempt to approach the Queen or her attendants was baffled, but I learned from Charmian’s clever Nubian that Cleopatra had been permitted, in Caesar’s name, to choose the palace she desired to occupy, and had selected the one at Lochias.

“I did not make much progress towards my house; the crowd in front of the great gymnasium stopped me. Octavianus had gone into the city, and the people, I heard, had greeted him with acclamations and flung themselves on their knees before him. Our stiff-necked Alexandrians in the dust before the victor! It enraged me, but my resentment was diminished.

“The members of the gymnasium all knew me. They made way and, ere I was aware of it, I had passed through the door. Tall Phryxus had drawn my arm through his. He appears and vanishes at will, is as alert as he is rich, sees and hears everything, and manages to secure the best places. This time he had again succeeded; for when he released me we were standing opposite to a newly erected tribune.

“They were waiting for Octavianus, who was still in the hypostyle of Euergetes receiving the homage of the epitrop, the members of the Council, the gymnasiarch, and I know not how many others.

“Phryxus said that on Caesar’s entry he had held out his hand to his former tutor, bade him accompany him, and commanded that his sons should be presented. The philosopher had been distinguished above every one else, and this will benefit you and yours; for he is Berenike’s brother, and therefore your wife’s uncle. What he desires is sure to be granted. You will hear at once how studiously the Caesar distinguishes him. I do not grudge it to the man; he interceded boldly for Barine; he is lauded as an able scholar, and he does not lack courage. In spite of Actium and the only disgraceful deed with which, to my knowledge, Mark Antony could be reproached—I mean the surader of Turullius—Arius remained here, though the Imperator might have held the friend of Julius Caesar’s nephew as a hostage as easily as he gave up the Emperor’s assassin.



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“Since Octavianus encamped before the city, your uncle has been in serious danger, and his sons shared his peril. Surely you must know the handsome, vigorous young Ephebi.

“We were not obliged to wait long in the gymnasium ere the Caesar appeared on the platform; and now—if your hand clenches, it is only what I expect—now all fell on their knees. Our turbulent, rebellious rabble raised their hands like pleading beggars, and grave, dignified men followed their example. Whoever saw me and Phryxus will remember us among the kneeling lickspittles; for had we remained standing we should certainly have been dragged down. So we followed the example of the others.”

“And Octavianus?” asked Dion eagerly.

“A man of regal bearing and youthful aspect; beardless face of the finest chiselling, a profile as beautiful as if created for the coin-maker; all the lines sharp and yet pleasing; every inch an aristocrat; but the very mirror of a cold nature, incapable of any lofty aspiration, any warm emotion, any tenderness of feeling. All in all, a handsome, haughty, calculating man, whose friendship would hardly benefit the heart, but from whose enmity may the immortals guard all we love!

“Again he led Arius by the hand. The philosopher’s sons followed the pair. When he stood on the stage, looking down upon the thousands kneeling before him, not a muscle of his noble face—it is certainly that —betrayed the slightest emotion. He gazed at us like a farmer surveying his flocks and, after a long silence, said curtly in excellent Greek that he absolved the Alexandrians from all guilt towards him: first—he counted as if he were summoning individual veterans to reward them—from respect for the illustrious founder of our city, Alexander, the conqueror of the world; secondly, because the greatness and beauty of Alexandria filled him with admiration; and, thirdly—he turned to Arius as he spoke —to give pleasure to his admirable and beloved friend.

“Then shouts of joy burst forth.

“Every one, from the humblest to the greatest, had had a heavy burden removed from his mind, and the throng had scarcely left the gymnasium when they were again laughing saucily enough, and there was no lack of biting and innocent jests.

“The fat carpenter, Memnon—who furnished the wood-work for your palace—exclaimed close beside me that formerly a dolphin had saved Arius from the pirates; now Arius was saving marine Alexandria from the robbers. So the sport went on. Philostratus, Barine’s first husband, offered the best butt for jests. The agitator had good reason to fear the worst; and now, clad in black mourning robes, ran after Arius, whom but a few months ago he persecuted with the most vindictive hatred, continually repeating this shallow bit of verse:



“If he is a wise man, let the wise aid the wise.’

“Reaching home was not easy. The street was swarming with Roman soldiers. They fared well enough; for in the joy of their hearts many a prosperous citizen who saw his property saved invited individual warriors, or even a whole maniple, to the taverns or cook-shops, and the stock of wine in Alexandrian cellars will be considerably diminished to-night.

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“Many, as I have already said, had been quartered in the houses, with orders to spare the property of the citizens; and it was in this way that the misfortune with which I commenced my narrative befell the grandmother. She died before my departure.

“All the gates of the city will now stand open to you, and the niece of Arius and her husband will be received with ovations. I don’t grudge Barine the good fortune; for the way in which your noble wife, who had cast her spell over me too, flung aside what is always dear to the admired city beauty and found on the loneliest of islands a new world in love, is worthy of all admiration and praise. For yourself, I dread new happiness and honours; if they are added to those which Fate bestowed upon you in such a wife and your son Pyrrhus, the gods would not be themselves if they did not pursue you with their envy. I have less reason to fear them.”

“Ungrateful fellow!” interrupted his friend. “There will be numerous mortals to grudge you Helena. As for me, I have already felt many a slight foreboding; but we have already paid by no means a small tribute to the divine ones. The lamp is still burning in the sitting-room. Inform the sisters of their grandmother’s death, and tell them the pleasant tidings you have brought us, but reserve until the morning a description of the terrible scenes you witnessed. We will not spoil their sleep. Mark my words! Helena’s silent grief and her joy at our escape will lighten your heart.”

And so it proved. True, Gorgias lived over again in his dreams the frightful spectacle witnessed the day before; but when the sun of the 2d day of August rose in full radiance over Alexandria and, early in the morning, boat after boat reached the Serpent Island, landing first Berenike and her nephews, the sons of the honoured philosopher Arius, then clients, officials, and friends of Dion, and former favourite guests of Barine, to greet the young pair and escort them from the refuge which had so long sheltered them back to the city and their midst, new and pleasant impressions robbed the gloomy picture of a large portion of its terrors.

“Tall Phryxus” had rapidly spread the news of the place where Dion and Barine had vanished, and that they had long been happily wedded. Many deemed it well worth a short voyage to see the actors in so strange an adventure and be the first to greet them. Besides, those who knew Barine and her husband were curious to learn how two persons accustomed to the life of a great capital had endured for months such complete solitude. Many feared or expected to see them emaciated and careworn, haggard or sunk in melancholy, and hence there were a number of astonished faces among those whose boats the freedman Pyrrhus guided as pilot through the shallows which protected his island.

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The return of this rare couple to their home would have afforded an excellent opportunity for gay festivities. Sincerely as the majority of the populace mourned the fate of the Queen, and gravely as the more thoughtful feared for Alexandria's freedom under Roman rule, all rejoiced over the lenient treatment of the city. Their lives and property were safe, and the celebration of festivals had become a life habit with all classes. But the news of the death of Didymus's wife and the illness of the old man, who could not bear up under the loss of his faithful companion, gave Dion a right to refuse any gay welcome at his home.

Barine's sorrow was his also, and Didymus died a few days after his wife, with whom he had lived in the bonds of love for more than half a century —people said, "of a broken heart."

So Dion and his young wife entered his beautiful palace with no noisy festivities. Instead of the jubilant hymenaeus, the voice of his own child greeted him on the threshold.

The mourning garments in which Barine welcomed him in the women's apartment reminded him of the envy of the gods which his friend had feared for him. But he often fancied that his mother's statue in the tablinum looked specially happy when the young mistress of the house entered it.

Barine, too, felt that her happiness as wife and mother in her magnificent home would have been overwhelming had not a wise destiny imposed upon her, just at this time, grief for those whom she loved.

Dion instantly devoted himself again to the affairs of the city and his own business. He and the woman he loved, who had first become really his own during a time of sore privation, had run into the harbour and gazed quietly at the storms of life. The anchor of love, which moored their ship to the solid earth, had been tested in the solitude of the Serpent Island.

CHAPTER XXIV.

The fisherman and his family had watched the departure of their beloved guests with sorrowful hearts, and the women had shed many tears, although the sons of Pyrrhus had been dismissed from the fleet and were again helping their father at home, as in former times.

Besides, Dion had made the faithful freedman a prosperous man, and given his daughter, Dione, a marriage dowry. She was soon to become the wife of the captain of the Epicurus, Archibius's swift galley, whose acquaintance she had made when the vessel, on several occasions, brought Charmian's Nubian maid to the island. Anukis's



object in making these visits was not only to see her friend, but to induce him to catch one of the poisonous serpents in the neighbouring island and keep it ready for the Queen.



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Since Cleopatra had ascertained that no poison caused a less painful death than the fangs of the asp, she had resolved that the bite of one of these reptiles should release her from the burden of life. The clever Ethiopian had thought of inducing her friend Pyrrhus to procure the adder, but it had required all Aisopion's skill in persuasion, and the touching manner in which she understood how to describe the Queen's terrible situation and severe suffering, to conquer the reluctance of the upright man. At last she succeeded in persuading him to measure a queen by a different standard from a woman of the people, and inducing him to arrange the manner and time of conveying the serpent into the well-guarded palace. A signal was to inform him when the decisive hour arrived. After that he was to be ready with the asp in the fish-market every day. Probably his service would soon be claimed; for Octavianus's delay was scarcely an indication of a favourable decision of Cleopatra's fate.

True, she was permitted to live in royal state at Lochias, and had even been allowed to have the children, the twins, and little Alexander sent back to her with the promise that life and liberty would be granted them; but Caesarion—whose treacherous tutor Rhodon lured him from the journey southward back to Alexandria by all sorts of representations, among them the return of Barine—was held prisoner in his father's temple, where he had sought refuge. This news, and the fact that Octavianus had condemned to death the youth who bore so striking a resemblance to Caesar, had not remained concealed from the unhappy mother. She was also informed of the words in which the philosopher Arius had encouraged Caesar's desire to rid himself of the son of his famous uncle. They referred to the Homeric saying concerning the disadvantage of having many rulers.

Everything which Cleopatra desired to know concerning events in the city reached her ears; for she was allowed much liberty—only she was closely watched day and night, and all the servants and officials to whom she granted an audience were carefully searched to keep from her all means of self-destruction.

True, it was very evident that she had closed her account with life. Her attempt to take no food and die of starvation must have been noticed. Threats directed against the children, through whom she could be most easily influenced, finally induced her to eat again. Octavianus was informed of all these things, and his conduct proved his anxiety to keep her from suicide.

Several Asiatic princes vied with each other in the desire to honour Mark Antony by a magnificent funeral, but Octavianus had allowed Cleopatra to provide the most superb obsequies. In the time of her deepest anguish it afforded her comfort and satisfaction to arrange everything herself, and even perform some offices with her own hands. The funeral had been as gorgeous as the dead man's love of splendour could have desired.

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Iras and Charmian were often unable to understand how the Queen—who, since Antony's death, had suffered not only from the wounds she had inflicted upon herself in her despair, but also after her baffled attempt at starvation from a slow fever—had succeeded in resisting the severe exertions and mental agitation to which she had been subjected by Antony's funeral.

The return of Archibius with the children, however, had visibly reanimated her flagging energy. She often went to Didymus's garden, which was now connected with the palace at Lochias, to watch their work and share whatever interested their young hearts.

But the gayest of mothers, who had understood how to enter so thoroughly into her children's pursuits, had now become a sorrowful, grave monitor. Though the lessons she urged upon them were often beautiful and wise, they were little suited to the ages of Archibius's pupils, for they usually referred to death and to questions of philosophy not easily understood by children.

She herself felt that she no longer struck the right key; but whenever she tried to change it and jest with them as usual, she could endure the forced gaiety only a short time; a painful revulsion, frequently accompanied by tears, followed, and she was obliged to leave her darlings.

The life her foe granted her seemed like an intrusive gift, an oppressive debt, which we desire to pay a troublesome creditor as soon as possible. She seemed calmer and apparently content only when permitted to talk with the companions of her youth concerning bygone days, or with them and Iras of death, and how it would be possible to put an end to an unwelcome existence.

After such conversations Iras and Charmian left her with bleeding hearts. They had long since resolved to share the fate of their royal mistress, whatever it might be. Their common suffering was the bond which again united them in affection. Iras had provided poisoned pins which had speedily destroyed the animals upon which they had been tried. Cleopatra knew of their existence, but she herself preferred the painless death bestowed by the serpent's bite, and it was long since her friends had seen the eyes of their beloved sovereign sparkle so brightly as when Charmian told her that away had been found to obtain the uraeus serpent as soon as it was needed. But it was not yet imperative to adopt the last expedient. Octavianus wished to be considered lenient, and perhaps might still be prevailed upon to grant the Queen and her children a future meet for their royal birth.

Cleopatra's reply was an incredulous smile, yet a faint hope which saved her from despair began to bud in her soul.



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Dolabella, an aristocratic Roman, a scion of the noble Cornelius family, was in the Caesar's train, and had been presented to the Egyptian Queen. In former years his father was a friend of Cleopatra; nay, she had placed him under obligations by sending him, after the murder of Julius Caesar, the military force at her command to be used against Cassius. True, her legions, by messengers from Dolabella himself, were despatched in another direction; but Cleopatra had not withdrawn her favour from Dolabella's father on that account. The latter had known her in Rome before the death of Caesar, and had enthusiastically described the charms of the bewitching Egyptian sovereign. Though the youth found her only a mourning widow, ill in body and mind, he was so strongly attracted and deeply moved by her beauty, her brilliant intellect, her grace of bearing, her misfortunes and sufferings, that he devoted many hours to her, and would have considered it a happiness to render her greater services than circumstances permitted. He often accompanied her to the children, whose hearts had been completely won by his frank, cheerful nature; and so it happened that he soon became one of the most welcome guests at Lochias. He confided without reserve every feeling that stirred his soul to the warm-hearted woman who was so many years his senior, and through him she learned many things connected with Octavianus and his surroundings. Without permitting himself to be used as a tool, he became an advocate for the unfortunate woman whom he so deeply esteemed.

In intercourse with her he made every effort to inspire confidence in Octavianus, who favoured him, enjoyed his society, and in whose magnanimity the youth firmly believed.

He anticipated the best results from an interview between the Queen and the Caesar; for he deemed it impossible that the successful conqueror could part untouched, and with no desire to mitigate her sad fate, from the woman who, in earlier years, had so fascinated his father, and whom he himself, though she might almost have been his mother, deemed peerless in her bewitching and gracious charm.

Cleopatra, on the contrary, shrank from meeting the man who had brought so much misfortune upon Mark Antony and herself, and inflicted upon her insults which were only too well calculated to make her doubt his clemency and truth. On the other hand, she could not deny Dolabella's assertion that it would be far less easy for Octavianus to refuse her in person the wishes she cherished for her children's future than through mediators. Proculejus had learned that Antony had named him to the Queen as the person most worthy of her confidence, and more keenly felt the wrong which, as the tool and obedient friend of Octavianus, he had inflicted upon the hapless woman. The memory of his unworthy deed, which history would chronicle, had robbed the sensitive man, the author and patron of budding Roman poetry, of many an hour's sleep, and therefore he also now laboured zealously to oblige the Queen and mitigate her hard fate. He, like the freedman Epaphroditus, who by Caesar's orders watched carefully to prevent any attempt upon her life, seemed to base great hopes on such an interview, and endeavoured to persuade her to request an audience from the Caesar.

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Archibius said that, even in the worst case, it could not render the present state of affairs darker. Experience, he said to Charmian, proved that no man of any feeling could wholly resist the charm of her nature, and to him at least she had never seemed more winning than now. Who could have gazed unmoved into the beautiful face, so eloquent in its silent suffering, whose soul would not have been deeply touched by the sorrowful tones of her sweet voice? Besides, her sable mourning robes were so well suited to the slight tinge of melancholy which pervaded her whole aspect. When the fever flushed her cheeks, Archibius, spite of the ravages which grief, anxiety, and fear had made upon her charms, thought that he had never seen her look more beautiful. He knew her thoroughly, and was aware that her desire to follow the man she loved into the realm of death was sincere; nay, that it dominated her whole being. She clung to life only to die as soon as possible. The decision which, after her resolve to build the monument, she had recognized in the temple of Berenike as the right one, had become the rule of conduct of her life. Every thought, every conversation, led her back to the past. The future seemed to exist no longer. If Archibius succeeded in directing her thoughts to approaching days she occupied herself wholly with her children's fate. For herself she expected nothing, felt absolved from every duty except the one of protecting herself and her name from dishonour and humiliation.

The fact that Octavianus, when he doomed Caesarion to death, permitted the other children to return to her with the assurance that no harm should befall them, proved that he made a distinction between them and his uncle's son, and had no fears that they threatened his own safety. She might expect important results in their favour from an interview with Octavianus, so she at last authorized Proculejus to request an audience.

The Emperor's answer came the very same day. It was his place to seek her—so ran the Caesar's message. This meeting must decide her fate. Cleopatra was aware of this, and begged Charmian to remember the asp.

Her attendants had been forbidden to leave Lochias, but Epaphroditus permitted them to receive visitors. The Nubian's merry, amusing talk had made friends for her among the Roman guards, who allowed her to pass in and out unmolested. On her return, of course, she was searched with the utmost care, like every one who entered Lochias.

The decisive hour was close at hand. Charmian knew what she must do in any event, but there was still one desire for whose fulfilment she longed. She wished to greet Barine and see her boy.

To spare Iras, she had hitherto refrained from sending for Dion's wife. The sight of the mother and child might have reopened wounds still unhealed, and she would not inflict this sorrow upon her niece, who for a long time had once more been loyally devoted to her.



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Octavianus did not hasten to fulfil his assurance. But, at the end of a week, Proculejus brought the news that he could promise a visit from the Caesar that afternoon. The Queen was deeply agitated, and desired before the interview to pay a visit to her tomb. Iras offered to accompany her, and as Cleopatra intended to remain an hour or longer, Charmian thought it a favourable opportunity to see Barine and her boy.

Dion's wife had been informed of her friend's wish, and Anukis, who was to take her to Lochias, did not wait long for the mother and child.

Didymus's garden—now the property of the royal children—was the scene of the meeting. In the shade of the familiar trees the young mother sank upon the breast of her faithful friend, and Charmian could not gaze her fill at the boy, or weary of tracing in his features a resemblance to his grandfather Leonax.

How much these two women, to whom Fate had allotted lives so widely different, found to tell each other! The older felt transported to the past, the younger seemed to have naught save a present rich in blessing and a future green with hope. She had good news to tell of her sister also. Helena had long been the happy wife of Gorgias who, however, spite of the love with which he surrounded the young mistress of his house, numbered among his most blissful hours those which were devoted to overseeing the progress of the work on the mausoleum, where he met Cleopatra.

Time flew swiftly to the two women, and it was a painful surprise when one of the eunuchs on guard announced that the Queen had returned. Again Charmian embraced her lover's grandson, blessed him and the young mother, sent messages of remembrance to Dion, begged Barine to think of her affectionately when she had passed from earth and, if her heart prompted her to the act, to anoint or adorn with a ribbon or flower the tombstone of the woman who had no friend to render her such a service.

Deeply moved by the firmness with which Charmian witnessed the approach of death, Barine listened in silence, but suddenly started as the sharp tones of a well-known voice called her friend's name and, as she turned, Iras stood before her. Pallid and emaciated, she looked in her long, floating black robes the very incarnation of misery.

The sight pierced the heart of the happy wife and mother. She felt as if much of the joy which Iras lacked had fallen to her own lot, and all the grief and woe she had ever endured had been transferred to her foe. She would fain have approached humbly and said something very kind and friendly; but when she saw the tall, haggard woman gazing at her child, and noticed the disagreeable expression which had formerly induced her to compare her to a sharp thorn, a terrible dread of this woman's evil eye which might harm her boy seized the mother's heart and, overwhelmed by an impulse beyond control, she covered his face with her own veil.

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Iras saw it, and after Barine had answered her question, "Dion's child?" in the affirmative, with a glance beseeching forbearance, the girl drew up her slender figure, saying with arrogant coldness "What do I care for the child? We have more important matters on our hearts."

Then she turned to Charmian to inform her, in the tone of an official announcement, that during the approaching interview the Queen desired her attendance also.

Octavianus had appointed sunset for the interview, and it still lacked several hours of the time. The suffering Queen felt wearied by her visit to the mausoleum, where she had implored the spirit of Antony, if he had any power over the conqueror's heart, to induce him to release her from this torturing uncertainty and promise the children a happy fate.

To Dolabella, who had accompanied her from the tomb to the palace, she said that she expected only one thing from this meeting, and then won from him a promise which strengthened her courage and seemed the most precious boon which could be granted at this time.

She had expressed the fear that Octavianus would still leave her in doubt. The youth spoke vehemently in Caesar's defence, and closed with the exclamation, "If he should still keep you in suspense, he would be not only cool and circumspect—"

"Then," Cleopatra interrupted, "be nobler, be less cruel, and release your father's friend from these tortures. If he does not reveal to me what awaits me and you learn it, then—you will not say no, you cannot refuse me—then you, yes, you will inform me?"

Promptly and firmly came the reply: "What have I been able to do for you until now? But I will release you from this torture, if possible." Then he hastily turned his back, that he might not be compelled to see the eunuchs stationed at the palace gate search the garments of the royal captive.

His promise sustained the failing courage of the wearied, anxious Queen, and she reclined upon the cushions of a lounge to recover from the exhausting expedition; but she had scarcely closed her eyes when the pavement of the court-yard rang under the hoofs of the four horses which bore the Caesar to Lochias. Cleopatra had not expected the visit so early.

She had just been consulting with her attendants about the best mode of receiving him. At first she had been disposed to do so on the throne, clad in her royal attire, but she afterwards thought that she was too ill and weak to bear the heavy ornaments. Besides, the man and successful conqueror would show himself more indulgent and gracious to the suffering woman than to the princess.



There was much to palliate the course which she had pursued in former days, and she had carefully planned the defence by which she hoped to influence his calm but not unjust nature. Many things in her favour were contained in the letters from Caesar and Antony which, after her husband's death, she had read again and again during so many wakeful nights, and they had just been brought to her.



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Both Archibius and the Roman Proculejus had counselled her not to receive him entirely alone. The latter did not express his opinion in words, but he knew that Octavianus was more readily induced to noble and lenient deeds when there was no lack of witnesses to report them to the world. It was advisable to provide spectators for the most consummate actor of his day.

Therefore the Queen had retained Iras, Charmian, and some of the officials nearest to her person, among them the steward Seleukus, who could give information if any question arose concerning the delivery of the treasure.

She had also intended, after she had somewhat recovered from the visit to the tomb, to be robed in fresh garments. This was prevented by the Caesar's unexpected arrival. Now, even had time permitted, she would have been unable to have her hair arranged, she felt so weak and yet so feverishly excited.

The blood coursed hotly through her veins and flushed her cheeks. When told that the Caesar was close at hand, she had only time to raise herself a little higher on her cushions, push back her hair, and let Iras, with a few hasty touches, adjust the folds of her mourning robes. Had she attempted to advance to meet him, her limbs would have failed to support her.

When the Caesar at last entered, she could greet him only by a wave of her hand; but Octavianus, who had uttered the usual salutations from the threshold, quickly broke the painful silence, saying with a courteous bow:

"You summoned me—I came. Every one is subject to beauty—even the victor."

Cleopatra's head drooped in shame as she answered distinctly, yet in a tone of modest denial: "I only asked the favour of an audience. I did not summon. I thank you for granting the request. If it is dangerous for man to bow to woman's charms, no peril threatens you here. Beauty cannot withstand tortures such as those which have been imposed on me—barely can life remain. But you prevented my casting it from me. If you are just, you will grant to the woman whom you would not permit to die an existence whose burden will not exceed her power to endure."

The Caesar again bowed silently and answered courteously:

"I intend to make it worthy of you."

"Then," cried Cleopatra impetuously, "release me from this torturing uncertainty. You are not one of the men who never look beyond to-day and to-morrow."

"You are thinking," said Octavianus harshly, "of one who perhaps would still be among us, if with wiser caution—"



Cleopatra's eyes, which hitherto had met the victor's cold gaze with modest entreaty, flashed angrily, and a majestic: "Let the past rest!" interrupted him.

But she soon mastered the indignation which had stirred her passionate blood, and in a totally different tone, not wholly free from gentle persuasion, she continued:

"The provident intellect of the man whose nod the universe obeys grasps the future as well as the present. Must not he, therefore, have decided the children's fate ere he consented to see their mother? The only obstacle in your path, the son of your great uncle—"



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“His doom was a necessity,” interrupted the conqueror in a tone of sincere regret. “As I mourned Antony, I grieve for the unfortunate boy.”

“If that is true,” replied Cleopatra eagerly, “it does honour to the kindness of your heart. When Proculejus wrested the dagger from my grasp he blamed me because I attributed to the most clement of conquerors harshness and implacability.”

“Two qualities,” the Caesar protested, “which are wholly alien to my nature.”

“And which—even if you possessed them—you neither could nor ought to use,” cried Cleopatra, “if you really mean the beautiful words you so often utter that, as the nephew and heir of the great Julius Caesar, you intend to walk in his footsteps. Caesarion—there is his bust—was the image in every feature of his father, your illustrious model. To me, the hapless woman now awaiting my sentence from his nephew’s lips, the gods granted, as the most precious of all gifts, the love of your divine uncle. And what love! The world knew not what I was to his great heart, but my wish to defend myself from misconception bids me show it to you, his heir. From you I expect my sentence. You are the judge. These letters are my strongest defence. I rely upon them to show myself to you as I was and am, not as envy and slander describe me.—The little ivory casket, Iras! It contains the precious proofs of Caesar’s love, his letters to me.”

She raised the lid with trembling hands and, as these mementoes carried her back to the past, she continued in lower tones:

“Among all my treasures this simple little coffer has been for half a lifetime my most valued jewel. He gave it to me. It was in the midst of the fierce contest here at the Bruchium.”

Then, while unfolding the first roll, she directed Octavianus’s attention to it and the remainder of the contents of the little casket, exclaiming:

“Silent pages, yet how eloquent! Each one a peerless picture, the powerful thinker, the man of action, who permits his restless intellect to repose, and suffers his heart to overflow with the love of youth! Were I vain, Octavianus, I might call each one of these letters a trophy of victory, an Olympic garland. The woman to whom Julius Caesar owned his subjugation might well hold her head higher than the unhappy, vanquished Queen who, save the permission to die—”

“Do not part with the letters,” said Octavianus kindly. “Who can doubt that they are a precious treasure—”

“The most precious and at the same time the advocate of the accused,” replied Cleopatra eagerly; “on them—as you have already heard—rests my vindication. I will commence with their contents. How terrible it is to make what is sacred to us and

intended only to elevate our own hearts serve a purpose, to do what has always been repugnant to us! But I need an advocate and, Octavianus, these letters will restore to the wretched, suffering beggar the dignity and



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majesty of the Queen. The world knows but two powers to which Julius Caesar bowed—the thrall of the pitiable woman on this couch, and of all-conquering death. An unpleasant fellowship—but I do not shrink from it; for death robbed him of life, and from my hand—I ask only a brief moment. How gladly I would spare myself my own praises, and you the necessity of listening to them! Yes, here it is: ‘Through you, you irresistible woman,’ he writes, ‘I learned for the first time, after youth was over, how beautiful life can be.’”

Cleopatra, as she spoke, handed Caesar the letter. But while she was still searching hastily for another he returned the first, saying:

“I understand only too well your reluctance to allow such confidential effusions to play the part of defender. I can imagine their purport, and they shall influence me as if I had read them all. However eloquent they may be, they are needless witnesses. Is any written testimony required in behalf of charms whose magic is still potent?”

A bewitching smile, which seemed like a confirmation of the haughty young conqueror’s flattering words, flitted over Cleopatra’s face. Octavianus noticed it. This woman indeed possessed enthralling charms, and he felt the slight flush that suffused his cheeks.

This unhappy captive, this suffering supplicant, could still draw into her net any man who did not possess the cool watchfulness which panoplied his soul. Was it the marvellous melody of her voice, the changeful lustre of her tearful eyes, the aristocratic grace of the noble figure, the exquisite symmetry of the hands and feet, the weakness of the prostrate sufferer, strangely blended with truly royal majesty, or the thought that love for her had found earth’s greatest and loftiest men with indissoluble fetters, which lent this fragile woman, who had long since passed the boundaries of youth, so powerful a spell of attraction?

At any rate, however certain of himself he might be, he must guard his feelings. He understood how to bridle passion far better than the uncle who was so greatly his superior.

Yet it was of the utmost importance to keep her alive, and therefore to maintain her belief in his admiration. He wished to show the world and the Great Queen of the East, who had just boasted of conquering, like death, even the most mighty, its own supremacy as man and victor. But he must also be gentle, in order not to endanger the object for which he wanted her. She must accompany him to Rome. She and her children promised to render his triumph the most brilliant and memorable one which any conqueror had ever displayed to the senate and the people. In a light tone which, however, revealed the emotion of his soul, he answered: “My illustrious uncle was

known as a friend of fair women. His stern life was crowned with flowers by many hands, and he acknowledged these favours verbally and perhaps—as he



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did to you in all these letters—with the reed. His genius was greater, at any rate more many-sided and mobile, than mine. He succeeded, too, in pursuing different objects at the same time with equal devotion. I am wholly absorbed in the cares of state, of government, and war. I feel grateful when I can permit our poets to adorn my leisure for a brief space. Overburdened with toil, I have no time to yield myself captive, as my uncle did in these very rooms, to the most charming of women. If I could follow my own will, you would be the first from whom I would seek the gifts of Eros. But it may not be! We Romans learn to curb even the most ardent wishes when duty and morality command. There is no city in the world where half so many gods are worshipped as here; and what strange deities are numbered among them! It needs a special effort of the intellect to understand them. But the simple duties of the domestic hearth!—they are too prosaic for you Alexandrians, who imbibe philosophy with your mothers' milk. What marvel, if I looked for them in vain? True, they would find little satisfaction—our household gods I mean—here, where the rigid demands of Hymen are mute before the ardent pleadings of Eros. Marriage is scarcely reckoned among the sacred things of life. But this opinion seems to displease you.”

“Because it is false,” cried Cleopatra, repressing with difficulty a fresh outburst of indignation. “Yet, if I see aright, your reproach is aimed only at the bond which united me to the man who was called your sister’s husband. But I will I would gladly remain silent, but you force me to speak, and I will do so, though your own friend, Proculejus, is signing to me to be cautious. I—I, Cleopatra, was the wife of Mark Antony according to the customs of this country, when you wedded him to the widow of Marcellus, who had scarcely closed his eyes. Not she, but I, was the deserted wife—I to whom his heart belonged until the hour of his death, not the unloved consort wedded—” Here her voice fell. She had yielded to the passionate impulse which urged her to express her feelings in the matter, and now continued in a tone of gentle explanation: “I know that you proposed this alliance solely for the peace and welfare of Rome—”

“To guard both, and to spare the blood of tens of thousands,” Octavianus added with proud decision. “Your clear brain perceived the true state of affairs. In spite of the grave importance of these motives, you— But what voices would not that of the heart silence with you women! The man, the Roman, succeeded in closing his ears to its siren song. Were it otherwise, I would never have chosen for my sister a husband by whom I knew her happiness would be so ill-guarded—I would, as I have already said, be unable to master my own admiration of the loveliest of women. But I ought scarcely to boast of that. I fear that a heart like yours opens less quickly to the



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modest Octavianus than to a Julius Caesar or the brilliant Mark Antony. Yet I may be permitted to confess that perhaps I might have avoided conducting this unhappy war against my friend to the end under my own guidance, and appearing myself in Egypt, had I not been urged by the longing to see once more the woman who had dazzled my boyish eyes. Now, in my mature manhood, I desired to comprehend those marvellous gifts of mind, that matchless sagacity—”

“Sagacity!” interrupted the Queen, shrugging her shoulders mournfully. “You possess a far greater share of what is commonly called by that name. My fate proves it. The pliant intellect which the gods bestowed on me would ill sustain the test in this hour of anguish. But if you really care to learn what mental power Cleopatra once possessed, relieve me of this terrible burden of uncertainty, and grant me a position in life which will permit my paralyzed soul to move freely once more.”

“It depends solely on yourself,” Octavian eagerly responded, “to make your future life, not only free from care, but beautiful.”

“On me?” asked Cleopatra in astonishment. “Our weal and woe are in your hands alone. I am modest and ask nothing save to know what you intend for our future, what you mean by the lot which you term beautiful.”

“Nothing less,” replied the Caesar quietly, “than what seems to lie nearest to your own heart—a life of that freedom of soul to which you aspire.”

The breath of the agitated Queen began come more quickly and, no longer able to control the impatience which overpowered her, she exclaimed, “With the assurance of your favour on your lips, you refuse to discuss the question which interests, me beyond any other—for which, if any you must have been prepared when you came here—”

“Reproaches?” asked Octavianus with a feigned surprise. “Would it not rather be my place to complain? It is precisely because I am thoroughly sincere in the friendly disposition which you read aright from my words, that some of your measures cannot fail to wound me. Your treasures were to be committed to the flames. It would be unfair to expect tokens of friendship from the vanquished; but can you deny that even the bitterest hatred could scarcely succeed in devising anything more hostile?”

“Let the past rest! Who would not seek in war to diminish the enemy’s booty?” pleaded the Queen in a soothing tone. But as Octavianus delayed his answer, she continued more eagerly: “It is said that the ibex in the mountains, when in mortal peril, rushes upon the hunter and hurls him with it down the precipice. The same impulse is natural to human beings, and praiseworthy, I think, in both. Forget the past, as I will try to do, I repeat with uplifted hands. Say that you will permit the sons whom I gave to Antony to



ascend the Egyptian throne, not under their mother's guardianship, but that of Rome, and grant me freedom wherever I may live, and I will gladly transfer to you, down to the veriest trifles, all the property and treasures I possess."



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She clenched her little hand impatiently under the folds of her robe as she spoke; but Octavianus lowered his eyes, saying carelessly: "In war the victor disposes of the property of the vanquished; but my heart restrains me from applying the universal law to you, who are so far above ordinary mortals. Your wealth is said to be vast, though the foolish war which Antony, with your aid, so greatly prolonged, devoured vast sums. In this country squandered gold seems like the grass which, when mowed, springs up anew."

"You speak," replied Cleopatra, more and more deeply incensed, with proud composure, "of the treasures which my ancestors, the powerful monarchs of a wealthy country, amassed during three hundred years for their noble race and for the adornment of the women of their line. Parsimony did not accord with the generosity and lofty nature of an Antony, yet avarice itself would not deem the portion still remaining insignificant. Every article is registered."

While speaking, she took a manuscript from the hand of Seleukus and passed it to Octavianus who, with a slight bend of the head, received it in silence. But he had scarcely begun to read it when the steward, a little corpulent man with twinkling eyes half buried in his fat cheeks, raised his short forefinger, pointed insolently at the Queen, and asserted that she was trying to conceal some things, and had ordered him not to place them on the list. Every tinge of colour faded from the lips and cheeks of the agitated and passionate woman; tortured by feverish impatience and no longer able to control her emotions, she raised herself and, with her own dainty hand, struck the accuser—whom she had lifted from poverty and obscurity to his present high position—again and again in the face, till Octavianus, with a smile of superiority, begged her, much as the man deserved his punishment, to desist.

The unfortunate woman, thus thrown off her guard, flung herself back on her couch and, panting for breath, with tears streaming from her eyes, sobbed aloud, declaring that in the presence of such unendurable insult, such contemptible baseness, she fairly loathed herself. Then pressing her clenched hands upon her temples, she exclaimed "Before the eyes of the foe my royal dignity, which I have maintained all my life, falls from me like a borrowed mantle. Yet what am I? What shall I be to-morrow, what later? But who beneath the sun who has warm blood in his veins can preserve his composure when juicy grapes are held before his thirsting lips to be withdrawn, as from Tantalus, ere he can taste them? You came hither with the assurance of your favour; but the flattering words of promise which you bestowed upon the unhappy woman were probably only the drops of poppy-juice given to soothe the ravings of fever. Was the favour which you permitted me to see and anticipate for the future merely intended to delude a miserable—"

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But she went no further; Octavianus, with dignified bearing and loud, clear tones, interrupted "Whoever believes the heir of Caesar capable of shamefully deceiving a noble woman, a queen, the object of his illustrious uncle's love, insults and wounds him; but the just anger which overmastered you may serve as your apology. Ay," he added in a totally different tone, "I might even have cause to be grateful for this indignation, and to wish for another opportunity to witness the outbreak of passion though in its unbridled fierceness—the royal lioness is scarcely aware of her own beauty when the tempest of wrath sweeps her away. What must she be when it is love that constrains the flame of her glowing soul to burst into a blaze?"

"Her glowing soul!" Cleopatra eagerly repeated, and the desire awoke to subjugate this man who had so confidently boasted of his power of resistance. Though he might be stronger than many others, he certainly was not invincible. And aware of her still unbroken sway over the hearts of men, her eyes sparkled with the alluring radiance of love, and a bewitching smile brightened her face.

The young Emperor's heart began to chafe under the curb and to beat more quickly, his cheeks flushed and paled by turns. How she gazed at him! What if she loved the nephew as she had once loved the uncle who, through her, had learned what bliss life can offer? Ay, it must be happiness to kiss those lips, to be clasped in those exquisite arms, to hear one's own name tenderly spoken by those musical tones. Even the magnificent marble statue of Ariadne, which he had seen in Athens, had not displayed to his gaze lines more beautiful than those of the woman reclining on yonder pillows. Who could venture to speak in her presence of vanished charms? Ah, no! The spell which had conquered Julius Caesar was as vivid, as potent as ever. He himself felt its power; he was young, and after such unremitting exertions he too yearned to quaff the nectar of the noblest joys, to steep body and soul in peerless bliss.

So, with a hasty movement, he took one step towards her couch, resolved to grasp her hands and raise them to his lips. His ardent gaze answered hers; but surprised by the power which, though so heavily burdened with physical and mental suffering, she still possessed over the strongest and coldest of men, she perceived what was passing in his soul, and a smile of triumph, blended with the most bitter contempt, hovered around her beautiful lips. Should she dupe him into granting her wishes by feigning love for the first time? Should she yield to the man who had insulted her, in order to induce him to accord the children their rights? Should she, to gratify her lover's foe, relinquish the sacred grief which was drawing her after him, give posterity and her children the right to call her, instead of the most loyal of the loyal, a dishonoured woman, who sold herself for power?

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To all these questions came a prompt denial. The single stride which Octavianus had made towards her, his eyes aflame with love, gave her the right to feel that she had vanquished the victor, and the proud delight of triumph was too plainly reflected in her mobile features to escape the penetrating, distrustful gaze of the subjugated Caesar.

But he had scarcely perceived what threatened him, and remembered her words concerning his famous uncle's surrender only to her and to death, when he succeeded in conquering his quickly kindled senses. Blushing at his own weakness, he averted his eyes from the Queen, and when he met those of Proculejus and the other witnesses of the scene, he realized the abyss on whose verge he stood. He had half succumbed to the danger of losing, by a moment's weakness, the fruit of great sacrifices and severe exertions.

His expressive eyes, which had just rested rapturously upon a beautiful woman, now scanned the spectators with the stern glance of a monarch and, apparently wishing to moderate an excess of flattering recognition which might be misinterpreted, he said in an almost pedagogical tone:

“Yet we would rather see the noble lioness in the majestic repose which best suits all sovereigns. It is difficult for a calm, deliberate nature like mine to understand an ardent, quickly kindling heart.”

Cleopatra had watched this sudden transition with more surprise than disappointment. Octavianus had half surrendered to her, but recovered his self-command in time, and a man of his temperament does not readily succumb twice to a danger which he barely escaped. And this was well! He should learn that he had misunderstood the glance which fired his heart; so she answered distantly, with majestic dignity:

“Misery such as mine quenches all ardour. And love? Woman's heart is ever open to it, save where it has lost the desire for power and pleasure. You are young and happy, therefore your soul still yearns for love—I know that—though not for mine. To me, on the contrary, one suitor only is welcome, he with the lowered torch, whom you keep aloof from me. With him alone is to be found the boon for which this soul has longed from childhood—painless peace! You smile. My past gives you the right to do so. I will not lessen it. Each individual lives his or her own life. Few understand the changes of their own existence, far less those of a stranger's. The world has witnessed how Peace fled from my path, or I from hers, and yet I see the possibility of finding the way. I am safe from the only things which would debar me from those joys—humiliation and disgrace.” Here she hesitated; then, as if in explanation, continued in the sweetest tones at her command: “Your generosity, I think, will guard from these two foes the woman whom just now—I did not fail to see it—you considered worthy of a more than gracious glance. I shall treasure it among memories which will never fade. But now, illustrious Imperator! tell me, what is your decision concerning me and the children? What may we hope from your favour?”



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“That Octavianus will be more and more warmly animated by the desire to accord you and yours a worthy destiny, the more firmly you expect that he will attest his generosity.”

“And if I fulfil this desire and expect from you everything that is great and noble—the condition is not difficult—what proofs of your graciousness will then await us?”

“Paint them with all the fervour of that vivid power of imagination which interpreted even my glance in your favour, and devised the marvels by which you rendered the greatest and most brilliant man in Rome the happiest of mortals. But—by Zeus!—it is the fourth hour after noonday!”

A glance from the window had caused the exclamation. Then, pressing his hand upon his heart, he continued in a tone of the most sincere regret “How gladly I would prolong this fascinating conversation, but important matters which, unfortunately, cannot be deferred, summon me—”

“And your answer?” cried Cleopatra, panting for breath and gazing at him with eyes full of expectation.

“Must I repeat it?” he asked with impatient haste. “Very well, then. In return for implicit confidence on your part, favour, forgiveness, cordiality, every consideration which you can justly desire. Your heart is so rich in warmth of feeling, grant me but a small share of it and ask tangible gifts in return. They are already bestowed.” Then greeting her like a friend who is reluctant to say farewell, he hastily left the apartment.

“Gone—gone!” cried Iras as the door closed behind him. “An eel that slips from the hand which strives to hold him.”

“Northern ice,” added Cleopatra gloomily as Charmian aided her to find a more comfortable position. “As smooth as it is cold; there is nothing more to hope.”

“Yes, my royal mistress, yes,” Iras eagerly protested. “Dolabella is waiting for him in the Philadelphus court-yard. From him—you have his promise—we shall learn what Octavianus has in store for you.”

In truth, the Caesar did find the youth at the first gate of the palace, inspecting his superb Cyrenean horses.

“Magnificent animals!” cried Octavianus; “a gift from the city! Will you drive with me?—A remarkable, a very remarkable woman!”

“Isn’t she?” asked Dolabella eagerly.

“Undoubtedly,” replied the Caesar. “But though she might almost be your mother, an uncommonly dangerous one for youths of your age. What a melting voice, what



versatility, what fervour! And yet such regal grace in every movement! But I wish to stifle, not to fan, the spark which perhaps has already fallen into your heart. And the play, the farce which she just enacted before me in the midst of most serious matters!”

He uttered a low, short laugh; but Dolabella exclaimed expectantly: “You rarely laugh, but this conversation—apparently—excites your mirth. So the result was satisfactory?”



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“Let us hope so. I was as gracious to her as possible.”

“That is delightful. May I know in what manner your kindness and wisdom have shaped her future? Or, rather, what did you promise the vanquished Queen?”

“My favour, if she will trust me.”

“Proculejus and I will continue to strengthen her confidence. And if we succeed—?”

“Then, as I have said, she will have my favour—a generous abundance of favour.”

“But her future destiny? What fate will you bestow on her and her children?”

“Whatever the degree of her confidence deserves.”

Here he hesitated, for he met Dolabella’s earnest, troubled gaze, which was blended with a shade of reproach.

Octavianus desired to retain the enthusiastic admiration of the youth, who perhaps was destined to lofty achievements, so he continued in a confidential tone: “To you, my young friend, I can venture to speak more frankly. I will gladly grant the most aspiring wishes of this fascinating and, I repeat, very remarkable woman, but first I need her for my triumph. The Romans would have cause to reproach me if I deprived them of the sight of this Queen, this peerless woman, in many respects the first of her time. We shall soon set out for Syria. The Queen and her children I shall send in three days to Rome. If, in the triumphal procession there, she creates the sensation I anticipate from a spectacle so worthy of admiration, she shall learn how I reward those who oblige me.”

Dolabella had listened in silence. When the Caesar entered the carriage, he requested permission to remain behind.

Octavianus drove alone eastward to the camp where, in the vicinity of the Hippodrome, men were surveying the ground on which the suburb of Nikopolis—city of victory—was to be built to commemorate for future generations the victory of the first Emperor over Antony and Cleopatra. It grew, but never attained any great importance.

The noble Cornelius gazed indignantly after his sovereign’s fiery steeds; then, drawing up his stately figure to its full height, he entered the palace with a firm step. The act might cost him his life, but he would do what he believed to be his duty to the noble woman who had honoured him with her friendship. This rare sovereign was too good to feast the eyes of the rabble.

A few minutes later Cleopatra knew her impending ignominy.



CHAPTER XXV.

The next morning the Queen had many whispered conversations with Charmian, and the latter with Anukis. The day before, Archibius's gardener had brought to his master's sister some unusually fine figs, which grew in the old garden of Epicurus. This fruit was also mentioned, and Anukis went to Kanopus, and thence, in the steward's carriage, with a basket of the very best ones to the fish-market. There she had a great deal to say to Pyrrhus, and the freedman went to his boat with the figs.



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Shortly after the Nubian's return the Queen came back to the palace from the mausoleum. Her features bore an impress of resolution usually alien to them; nay, the firmly compressed lips gave them an expression of actual sternness. She knew what duty required, and regarded her approaching end as an inevitable necessity. Death seemed to her like a journey which she must take in order to escape the most terrible disgrace. Besides, life after the death of Antony was no longer the same; it had been only a tiresome delay and waiting for the children's sake.

The visit to the tomb had been intended, as it were, to announce her coming to her husband. She had remained a long time in the silent hall, where she had garlanded the coffin with flowers, kissed it, talked to the dead man as if he were still alive, and told him that the day had come when what he had mentioned in his will as the warmest desire of his heart—to rest beside her in the same tomb—would be fulfilled. Among the thousand forms of suffering which had assailed her, nothing had seemed so hard to bear as to be deprived of his society and love.

Then she had gone into the garden, embraced and kissed the children, and entreated them to remember her tenderly. Her purpose had not been concealed from Archibius, but Charmian had told him the menace of the future, and he approved her decision. By the exertion of all his innate strength of will, he succeeded in concealing the grief which rent his faithful heart. She must die. The thought of seeing her adorn the triumphal procession of Octavianus was unbearable to him also. Her thanks and entreaties to be an affectionate guardian to the children were received with an external calmness which afterwards seemed to him utterly incomprehensible.

When she spoke of her approaching meeting with her lover, he asked whether she had entirely abandoned the teachings of Epicurus, who believed that death absolutely ended existence.

Cleopatra eagerly assented, saying: "Absence of pain has ceased to appear to me the chief earthly blessing, since I have known that love does not bring pleasure only, since I have learned that pain is the inseparable companion of love. I will not give it up, nor will I part from my lover. Whoever experiences what fate has allotted to me has learned to know other gods than those whom the master described as dwelling happily in undisturbed repose. Rather eternal torture in another world, united to the man I love, than painless, joyless mere existence in a desolate, incomprehensible, unknown region! You will be the last to teach the children to yearn for freedom from pain—"

"Because, like you," cried Archibius, "I have learned how great a blessing is love, and that love is pain."

As he spoke he bent over her hand to kiss it, but she took his temples between her hands and, bending hastily, pressed her lips on his broad brow.

Then his self-control vanished, and, sobbing aloud, he hurried back to the children.



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Cleopatra gazed after him with a sorrowful smile, and leaning on Charmian's arm, she entered the palace.

There she was bathed and, robed in costly mourning garments, reclined among her cushions to take breakfast, which was usually served at this hour. Iras and Charmian shared it.

When dessert was carried in, the Nubian brought a basket filled with delicious figs. A peasant, she told Epaphroditus, who was watching the meal, had given them to her because they were so remarkably fine. Some had already been snatched by the guards.

The Queen and her companions ate a little of the fruit, and Proculejus, who had come to greet Cleopatra, was also persuaded to taste one of the finest figs.

At the end of the meal Cleopatra wished to rest. The Roman gentlemen and the guards retired. At last the women were alone, and gazed at each other silently.

Charmian timidly lifted the upper layer of the fruit, but the Queen said mournfully:

"The wife of Antony dragged through the streets of Rome behind the victor's chariot, a spectacle for the populace and envious matrons! "Then, starting up, she exclaimed: "What a thought! Was it too great for Octavianus, or too petty? He who so loudly boasts his knowledge of mankind expects this impossibility from the woman who revealed her inmost soul to him as fully as he concealed his from her. We will show him how small is his comprehension of human nature, and teach him modesty."

A contemptuous smile flitted over her beautiful lips as, with rapid movements, she flung handful after handful of figs on the table, till she saw some thing stirring under the fruit, and with a sigh of relief exclaimed under her breath:

"There it is!" as with hasty resolution she held out her arm towards the asp, which hissed at her.

While gazing intently at the movements of the viper, which seemed afraid to fulfil the dread office, she said to her attendants:

"I thank you—thank you for everything. Be calm. You know, Iras, it will cause no pain. They say it is like falling asleep." Then she shuddered slightly, adding: "Death is a solemn thing; yet it must be. Why does the serpent delay? There, there; I will keep firm. Ambition and love were the moving forces of my life. Men shall praise my memory.—I follow you, Mark Antony!" Charmian bent over the left arm of her royal mistress, which hung loosely at her side, and, weeping aloud, covered it with kisses, while Cleopatra, watching the motions of the asp still more closely, added:



“The peace of our garden of Epicurus will begin to-day. Whether it will be painless, who can tell? Yet—there I agree with Archibius—life’s greatest joy—love—is blended with pain, as yonder branch of exquisite roses from Dolabella, the last gift of friendship, has its sharp thorns. I think you have both experienced this. The twins and my little darling—When they think of their mother and her end, will not the children—”



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Here she uttered a low cry. The asp had struck its fangs into the upper part of her arm like an icy flash of lightning, and a few instants later Cleopatra sank back upon her pillows lifeless.

Iras, pale but calm, pointed to her, saying "Like a sleeping child. Bewitching even in death. Fate itself was constrained to do her will and fulfil the last desire of the great Queen, the victorious woman, whom no heart resisted. Its decree shatters the presumptuous plan of Octavianus. The victor will show himself to the Romans without thee, thou dear one."

Sobbing violently, she bent over the inanimate form, closed the eyes, and kissed the lips and brow. The weeping Charmian did the same.

Then the footsteps of men were heard in the anteroom, and Iras, who was the first to notice them, cried eagerly:

"The moment is approaching! I am glad it is close at hand. Does it not seem to you also as if the very sun in the heavens was darkened?" Charmian nodded assent, and whispered, "The poison?"

"Here!" replied Iras calmly, holding out a plain pin. "One little prick, and the deed will be done. Look! But no. You once inflicted the deepest suffering upon me. You know—Dion, the playmate of my childhood —It is forgiven. But now—you will do me a kindness. You will spare my using the pin myself. Will you not? I will repay you. If you wish, my hand shall render you the same service."

Charmian clasped her niece to her heart, kissed her, pricked her arm lightly, and gave her the other pin, saying:

"Now it is your turn. Our hearts were filled with love for one who understood how to bestow it as none other ever did, and our love was returned. What matters all else that we sacrificed? Those on whom the sun shines need no other light. Love is pain," she said in dying, "but this pain—especially that of renunciation for love's sake—bears with it a joy, an exquisite joy, which renders death easy. To me it seems as if it were merely following the Queen to—Oh, that hurt!" Iras's pin had pricked her.

The poison did its work quickly. Iras was seized with giddiness, and could scarcely stand. Charmian had just sunk on her knees, when some one knocked loudly at the closed door, and the voices of Epaphroditus and Proculejus imperiously demanded admittance.

When no answer followed, the lock was hastily burst open.

Charmian was found lying pale and distorted at the feet of her royal mistress; but Iras, tottering and half stupefied by the poison, was adjusting the diadem, which had slipped

from its place. To keep from her beloved Queen everything that could detract from her beauty had been her last care.



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Enraged, fairly frantic with wrath, the Romans rushed towards the women. Epaphroditus had seen Iras still occupied in arranging Cleopatra's ornaments. Now he endeavoured to raise her companion, saying reproachfully, "Charmian, was this well done?" Summoning her last strength, she answered in a faltering voice, "Perfectly well, and worthy a descendant of Egyptian kings." Her eyes closed, but Proculejus, the author, who had gazed long with deep emotion into the beautiful proud face of the Queen whom he had so greatly wronged, said: "No other woman on earth was ever so admired by the greatest, so loved by the loftiest. Her fame echoed from nation to nation throughout the world. It will continue to resound from generation to generation; but however loudly men may extol the bewitching charm, the fervour of the love which survived death, her intellect, her knowledge, the heroic courage with which she preferred the tomb to ignominy—the praise of these two must not be forgotten. Their fidelity deserves it. By their marvellous end they unconsciously erected the most beautiful monument to their mistress; for what genuine goodness and loveliness must have been possessed by the woman who, after the greatest reverses, made it seem more desirable to those nearest to her person to die than to live without her!"

[The Roman's exclamation and the answer of the loyal dying Charmian are taken literally from Plutarch's narrative.]

The news of the death of their beloved, admired sovereign transformed Alexandria into a house of mourning. Obsequies of unprecedented magnificence and solemnity, at which many tears of sincere grief flowed, honoured her memory. One of Octavianus's most brilliant plans was frustrated by her death, and he had raved furiously when he read the letter in which Cleopatra, with her own hand, informed him of her intention to die. But he owed it to his reputation for generosity to grant her a funeral worthy of her rank. To the dead, who had ceased to be dangerous, he was ready to show an excess of magnanimity.

The treatment which he accorded to Cleopatra's children also won the world's admiration. His sister Octavia received them into her own house and intrusted their education to Archibius.

When the order to destroy the statues of Antony and Cleopatra was issued, Octavianus gave his contemporaries another proof of his disposition to be lenient, for he ordered that the numerous statues of the Queen in Alexandria and Egypt should be preserved. True, he had been influenced by the large sum of two thousand talents paid by an Alexandrian to secure this act of generosity. Archibius was the name of the rare friend who had impoverished himself to render this service to the memory of the beloved dead.

In later times the statues of the unfortunate Queen adorned the places where they had been erected.

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The sarcophagi of Cleopatra and Mark Antony, by whose side rested Iras and Charmian, were constantly heaped with flowers and offerings to the dead. The women of Alexandria, especially, went to the tomb of their beloved Queen as if it were a pilgrimage; but in after-days faithful mourners also came from a distance to visit it, among them the children of the famous lovers whom death here united—Cleopatra Selene, now the wife of the learned Numidian Prince Juba, Helios Antony, and Alexander, who had reached manhood. Their friend and teacher, Archibius, accompanied them. He taught them to hold their mother's memory dear, and had so reared them that, in their maturity, he could lead them with head erect to the sarcophagus of the friend who had confided them to his charge.

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