

Chapter II: Sappho's Burning Passion

SAPPHO, the well-known Lesbian poetess, leaned forward in her chair and regarded the ladies of the club with a somewhat melancholy smile.

"If we were only back in my old home on the Island of Lesbos," she said, "instead of here in Hades, I could have entertained you girls properly. Glorious, vine-clad Lesbos! What visions it brings of graceful marble temples, of sapphire seas, of limpid pools concealed by clusters of wild olive and pomegranate, of beds of sweet violets and hyacinths on which you could dance, divinely nude, in the sunlight, or lie love-wrapped beneath the lambent moon. Hell seems so different, somehow."

"I'll say it does," remarked Thais, removing a cactus thorn from her foot. "Particularly in the matter of vegetation. I cannot imagine a

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night of love on a bed of snakeroot, toadstools and poison ivy.”

“Don’t ever try it,” Salome grinned. “I have. The results were far from good.”

The ladies were gathered in Sappho’s Grecian garden, a modest courtyard surrounded by slender columns, with a wide, deep pool at its center.

At one end of the pool stood the seat of honor, now occupied by the lady from Lesbos herself. Before her chair, which was elevated somewhat above the surrounding terrace, stretched a semi-circular row of marble benches on which sat her guests, with the exception of Salome and Thais, who reclined at greater ease upon the marble edge of the pool.

The evening was sultry, even for Hades, and the prospect of a swim had caused most of the ladies to appear in appropriate costume; with the exception of a few odd bits of jewelry they wore one-piece bathing suits of the kind guaranteed by an all-wise Providence neither to run nor shrink.

“It has occurred to me,” said Sappho, striking a few gentle chords upon her lyre, “that

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possibly you girls might like to hear some of my poems."

"I knew it," Salome whispered, giving her companion a dig in the ribs. "I've never met an author yet who didn't insist on reading you his stuff."

"Well," Thais whispered back, "if she's the wicked warbler they say she is, her poems ought to be good."

"Before you go ahead," remarked Cleopatra, feeding a fly to her pet asp, "I should like to ask if your works were ever suppressed? I've always understood that they were rather—ah—unprintable."

"Really, my dear, I never heard so," Sappho replied. "We had no printing presses in my day, you know, nor censors either, for that matter. The only way anybody could have suppressed *my* things would have been by suppressing *me*, but no one ever attempted it. Love was considered a very respectable emotion, when I was on earth. It made life one long, delicious song."

"A duet, I presume," observed Lucrezia Borgia, with an amused smile. "They've al-

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ways been popular, ever since our darling Eve first started the fashion. I did quite a bit of singing myself, in my time."

"So did your lovers, I hear," Mrs. Potiphar remarked dryly. "Swan songs, mostly, weren't they?"

"At least," Lucrezia exclaimed, springing to her feet, "they did not turn me down, the way a certain person did you!"

"They didn't dare to," sneered Mrs. Potiphar, "knowing how handy you were with the poisoned perfume-pot!"

"I always supposed you were a lady!" Lucrezia cried.

"I made the same error about *you*," cried Mrs. Potiphar.

"Girls—girls!" Eve protested, rising. "Instead of airing your mistakes in public why not give Sappho a chance?"

The poetess of passion touched the strings of her lyre, supremely unconscious of the storm which raged about her.

"One of the best things I ever did," she murmured, "was my Hymn to Venus—or Aphrodite, as we Greeks called her. It went like this;

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*“Aphrodite, cloud-enthroned,
With thy triple girdle zoned,
Gifts I ask, for Love's desire
Burns me with consuming fire.
Grant me beauty—grant me grace,
For my lover's quick embrace—
Golden ankles, silver thighs,
Breasts of ivory—jeweled eyes—
Gracious goddess, grant me these,
That my lover I may please.”*

For a brief moment the ladies of the club sat staring at one another in silence. Then Delilah laughed.

“Well, darling,” she said, “rigged up like that you should have pleased almost anybody, especially if they happened to be in the jewelry business. Golden ankles—silver thighs——”

“One would have thought,” remarked Sappho icily, “that even *you* had heard of poetic license. But I suppose an ordinary manicure——”

“You'd need a license of some sort, I should think,” the lady from Gaza retorted, “to get away with anything like that. And while I may not have heard of ivory breasts, I *have* heard of

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ivory domes, which is something you might try on your ukulele!”

Sappho, in spite of a chorus of suppressed giggles, remained calm.

“I wrote a song to Love, once,” she went on, turning up her perfect Grecian nose, “that people liked. Intelligent people, of course, capable of appreciating such things, not morons. I’ll recite it.

*“Love, the limb-dissolving King,
Smites, and leaves me quivering.
As a wind on mountain oaks
Stormy passion he evokes—”*

“Oh, mamma!” Salome whispered, but Sappho pretended not to hear her and went on with her song.

*“Climbing shepherds’ careless feet
Crush wild flowers, tender-sweet.
So let me to earth be pressed,
By my lover all-possessed.
Phaon, quench my raging fire
Ere I die of Love’s desire.”*

“H-m,” observed the Queen of Sheba, waving her gorgeous peacock-plumed fan. “That

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is a very nice song, my dear. But I detect a note of melancholy. Weren't there any men on the Island of Lesbos? I seem to have heard somewhere that you had a peculiar *penchant*——”

“There were plenty of men, of course,” Sappho remarked hastily, “but only one that I wanted. His name was Phaon. I wrote most of my poems to him. Here is a little thing I always liked.

*“In silver sheen the moon has set,
The sky with starry tears is wet,
And midnight comes. Alone I lie.
Dear Phaon, hear my stricken cry.
Come quickly, come, lest Love be gone,
Before the golden-sandaled dawn.”*

Cleopatra leaned back in her chair and loosened her jeweled girdle.

“I must say,” she remarked, “that you did not leave your friend Phaon in the dark so far as your feelings were concerned. I trust he responded to your stricken cry.”

“No,” Sappho remarked sadly, “he didn't.”

“What was the matter with him?” Scheherazade asked.

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"He didn't love me. In spite of all the poems I wrote him. Not even when I told him my love was platonic."

"If that is platonic love you have been singing about, my dear," observed Mrs. Potiphar quietly, "I should hate to hear you get started on the real thing. Who was this Phaon, anyway? To hear you talk, one might suppose him a god."

"No. Only the ferryman who ran the boat between my home town, Mytilene, and the opposite shore. But he was as handsome as Apollo. I was mad about him.

"My people didn't like him, and said the way I threw myself at his head was a disgrace to the family. Mother, particularly, couldn't bear the sight of him. She said he made her think of father, before he got fat and bald. And father, who possessed a coarse sense of humor, said I at least ought to have a husband who could read, if only to double the circulation of my poems. He wanted me to marry a young gladiator, from Troy.

"He was a nice enough fellow, in his way, but I didn't care for him. Someone told him I was

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fond of poetry, so he set out to win me by singing love songs under my bedroom window every night. It was rather a wet summer, and after a month or so he gave up and went back to Troy. There was no sense, he said, in getting his best suit of armor all rusted up from standing out in the rain singing songs to a girl who didn't even bother to listen to them.

"I was glad when he went. All I could think of was Phaon. Every morning I would go down to the shore where he kept his boat and take a swim, just to be near him, but it did no good—not even when I said I was dying of love. He only laughed and said I looked in very good shape to him. I never could get Phaon to take me seriously. He even laughed at my poems, although I wrote him five or six a day. But I refused to become discouraged.

"Sometimes, when he had a passenger, I would get on his boat and ride across the bay with him. On the way back, about midstream, I would recite him a poem. Sometimes two or three. He had to listen, of course. Or else throw me overboard. But I could see he wasn't fond of poetry. It put too much strain on the

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imagination, he said, and did not exactly go with the ferry business.

“I remember one day quoting him some lines I had dashed off that morning before breakfast.

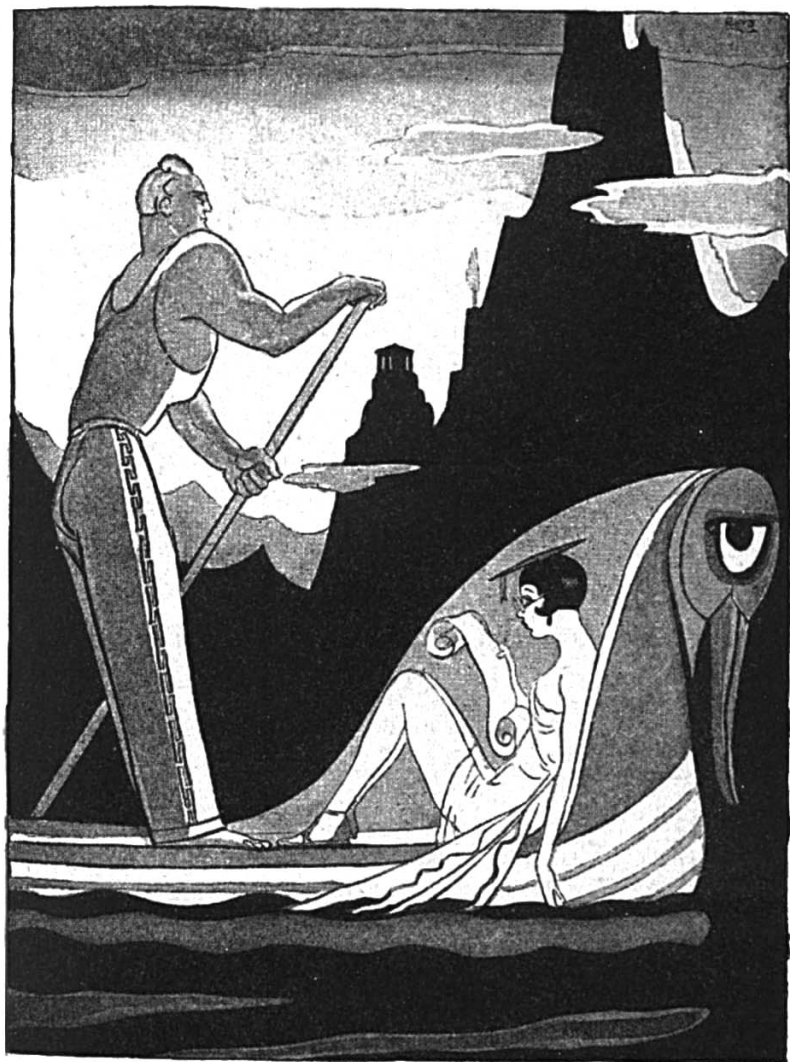
*“I ache—I burn! Love’s subtle flame
Runs like a poison through my frame.”*

“You might have thought that would have appealed to any man, but Phaon only looked worried and asked me to let him see my tongue.

“‘Maybe you’ve eaten something you shouldn’t,’ he said. ‘I have heard that the juice of a lemon, mixed with the oil of the castor oil bean, is very good for fevers.’ Imagine it! I could have slapped him!

“‘Phaon,’ I whispered, ‘I haven’t eaten anything I shouldn’t. In fact I haven’t eaten anything at all for days, on your account. Or slept, either. I lay awake all last night thinking of you. This morning I wrote a poem. When you have heard it, you will understand how I feel.’ So I sang him this.

*“O lovely youth, scarce more than tender boy,
Now is the time that lovers should enjoy.”*



*"On the way back," said Sappho, "I would recite Phaon a poem.
He had to listen. Or else throw me overboard."*

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*Thou art my only care, my dear delight,
My daily longing and my dream by night.
Come, round your neck my wanton arms I'll twine,
While you, with yours, as fondly circle mine.
A thousand tender offerings we'll make—
A thousand tender kisses give and take,
Then fiercer joys——'”*

A loud shriek interrupted Sappho's words, followed by a splash as Salome fell into the pool. Helen of Troy took off her golden crown.

“Perhaps you had better not go any further, my love,” she gasped. “I'm almost overcome with the heat as it is. I trust the young man showed a proper appreciation of your feelings.”

“He didn't,” Sappho murmured. “All he said was that he had an engagement to ferry a load of pigs over to Pergamum in ten minutes and couldn't tell when he'd be back. He had been thinking for some time, he said, of making a journey to Sicily, for his health.”

“Great Zeus!” Phryne exclaimed. “What an icicle! I wish we had him here to-night. I haven't felt such heat since the time Nero came down, and I guess you all remember the party Satan gave *him*. If you didn't win your boy

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friend, Sappho dear, it certainly wasn't because of any coolness on *your* part."

"I did the best I could, but it was hopeless. Phaon was forever finding absurd meanings to my most innocent remarks. I remember telling him one day how fond I was of birds—just as a flock of storks flew by. He grew quite red and declared that birds didn't interest him at all, especially storks. They were one kind of bird, he said, that he absolutely refused to get up any excitement about.

"Another time—a perfect night—when we were sitting out in the back yard, I happened to remark that the moon always made me think of a gorgeous big solitaire diamond, set in a circlet of pearls. Phaon sat quite still for a few moments and then told me he considered it very poor taste for a young girl to wear jewelry."

"Hopeless," Cleopatra murmured. "The only man like that I ever met was head nurse in a harem."

"When I began to tell him my ideas about free love," Sappho continued, "he stopped me. The subject didn't interest him. All the free love that had ever come his way, he said, had

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turned out in the end to be frightfully expensive. Then he left me."

"Walked out on you, as it were," laughed Thais.

"No. He ran. Father was just coming around the corner of the woodshed with an ax. Poor Phaon. He was so stupid. Poetry, he said, was all very well in its way, but he thought what I really needed was exercise. People who stayed indoors too much got queer ideas in their heads, he said. It was just then that father appeared with the ax. Phaon went immediately."

"I'm not at all surprised," murmured Scheherazade, smiling her quaint oriental smile. "No woman ever won a lover with poetry. The idea of trying to appeal to men with your brain! Ridiculous! Their tastes always run to lower things, no matter what they may say."

Sappho wiped away her tears.

"You may be right, my dear. Phaon's ran to food. He was far more interested in his meals than he was in me. When I found my love for him was hopeless I decided to kill myself."

"What an idea!" Lucrezia Borgia exclaimed,

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leaning back in her seat with a laugh. "There never was a man yet worth dying for. Most of them aren't even worth living for."

"Phaon was," protested Sappho. "I adored him."

"Merely a complex, my dear, as they say nowadays. In my time, when people called a spade a spade, we had another name for it."

"The real trouble," resumed Sappho sadly, "was that Phaon loved someone else. An empty-headed little fool named Lydia, the daughter of the village sandal maker. She was pretty, in a vulgar sort of a way, and had a nice figure, but poetry meant nothing to her. She didn't even know the difference between a *strophe* and an *iambic*!"

"Fancy that now," whispered Thais to Delilah. "I don't myself, but it never seemed to make any difference to my friend Alexander."

"There is more real poetry in a pair of good-looking legs," laughed Salome, waving her own in the air, "than in all the verses in the world. Did you ever hear of a writer being offered half a kingdom for a poem? Well, everybody knows that's what Herod offered me for my dance."

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Don't waste verses on men. The poetry of motion is what gets them."

"I suppose it *was* foolish," Sappho admitted, "to read Phaon all those poems. In the end, when I heard he was engaged to Lydia, I went up to the temple of Apollo, which stood on a high cliff, and threw myself into the sea."

"What a fatal mistake!" cried Lucrezia Borgia. "You should have thrown Lydia in."

"It *was* a mistake," Sappho whispered, "the way things turned out. But I wasn't quite as foolish as you think. I told everybody in town what I was going to do, beforehand, so Phaon would hear about it. His boat was anchored right near the foot of the cliff, and I expected he would row out and rescue me. But he didn't. As I went down for the last time I saw him on the bank making love to Lydia! They were too busy even to notice me! And everybody in town looking over the edge of the hill, waiting to see what would happen! I could have swum ashore myself, if I had wanted to, but I was too mortified to care! The next thing I knew, Charon was ferrying me across the Styx!"

"Brute!" the ladies groaned.

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“What became of him?” Eve asked. “I’ve never heard of anybody named Phaon down here.”

“I’ve been told he married Lydia and had eighteen children,” whispered Sappho.

“Well,” Mrs. Potiphar laughed, “he apparently got over his aversion to storks. And went to Heaven, of course. Any man with eighteen children who doesn’t commit at least *one* murder is a holy martyr, and deserves the best harp in St. Peter’s collection, to say nothing of a full jeweled crown. I suppose you still love him.”

“Yes.” Sappho burst into fresh tears. “That’s what makes Hell Hell, for me. Although I don’t see what I ever did, to be sent here.”

“You forget your poems, my dear,” remarked Eve. “They are quite enough to condemn you, with the Judgment Board feeling the way it does about writers. Particularly those who deal frankly with sex. Hell is crowded with them. And the reform element is getting so strong that even on Earth some of the world’s greatest classics are being suppressed. I’ve always

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claimed that geniuses have got to come to Hell in order to be appreciated. Naturally, with their works banned in Heaven and on Earth, where else are they going to find an audience? You ought to hear Ovid on the subject. Or Will Shakespeare. Or Rabelais. My dears, it's rich."

Helen of Troy rose from her seat and removed her silver breastplates.

"What *do* you suppose makes it so hot?" she asked.

"Haven't you heard?" Eve said, smiling. "Some efficiency expert from Chicago has persuaded Satan he can show him, by using mechanical stokers, how to handle two victims in the same time the old-fashioned Pitchfork Brigade is now wasting on one. He's got every furnace in the place white hot, trying the thing out. Why not adjourn to the pool?" With a quick movement she began to unclasp her figleaf, but stopped as a masculine figure burst into the garden.

It was Adam. In one hand he clutched a clay tablet. With the other he nursed a large lump on the top of his head.

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“Look here!” he cried angrily, paying no attention to the ladies of the club, “love letters may be all right, under some circumstances, but not when they are written on brickbats and dropped on my head!”

“What do you mean, darling?” Eve asked.

“This.” He held out the tablet. “It’s a message to your French maid, Marie, from that crazy American lover of hers. I was out in the back yard about nine o’clock, tying up the dog, when I heard a whirring noise, and something dropped from the sky and almost brained me. Look at the lump it’s raised. I’d like to see these two young people happy, but I wish they would stop sending their love letters through me!”

Eve took the tablet and read the message scrawled upon it.

“Dear Marië,” it said. “Have left Heaven on account of some difficulty over a red-haired angel whose husband has just got in. Want to join you in Hell but can’t find a place to land. Heat something terrible. Tail-feathers badly scorched. Try

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to arrange with Satan for suitable landing place and send up flares.

Bobo."

"I suppose I'll have to see His Majesty about this," Eve said, as Adam stumped angrily off. "Although I'm afraid it won't do much good. Having refused to let Marie out, I don't suppose he will let her lover in. Our only hope is to get the Boosters for a Bigger and Better Hell on our side. They would take in the Angel Gabriel himself to help increase the population. No use in trying to see Satan to-night, though. He's much too busy. And I intend to have my swim." She turned to Thais. "May we count on you, darling, to speak at our next meeting?"

Thais, who was poised on the edge of the pool, smiled over her shoulder.

"I'll give you the lowdown on my boy friend, Alexander," she said, as she flashed gracefully into the water.