

Chapter 12: Alexander, the Great Lover

IN spite of the fact that she was to receive the ladies of the club at eight o'clock Thais still lingered over her dinner.

The famous Macedonian siren, as a result of many years spent traveling with Alexander the Great throughout the east, had acquired a decidedly oriental taste in dress; she now wore a close-fitting Arabian dance girdle of matched pearls, to which a huge cabochon ruby, appropriately placed, gave just that touch of *diablerie* which is demanded by the well-dressed woman of fashion.

Thais was not dining alone. At her right sat that brilliant if somewhat erratic American financier and statesman, Alexander Hamilton, very smart in ruffled shirt and bottle-green small-clothes. The place at her left was occupied by the newly-arrived but eminently distinguished

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French philosopher and wit, Anatole France.

"You are adorable to-night, my dear," Mr. Hamilton whispered, with his accustomed gallantry. "In this climate I imagine it is not easy to preserve so perfect a complexion."

"Mademoiselle is an *artiste*," smiled Monsieur France.

"Well," said Thais, glancing in her mirror, "When a girl is as old as I am—over two thousand years, remember—she naturally has to make up a little for lost time. Have some more champagne. It isn't bad. Although we do have a great deal of trouble getting the river imps to smuggle it in."

The distinguished Frenchman raised his glass, and gave his hostess an ocular caress.

"Had I realized while on Earth," he said, "that Hell was such a delightful place I should have put more faith in the teachings of religion. As it was, I actually doubted its existence. A foolish error, *cherie*. I am pleased to say that you have converted me completely."

"I, too," observed Mr. Hamilton, helping himself to wine, "was something of an unbeliever in my time, and while never quite an

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atheist, like my arch-enemy Jefferson, I was still inclined to look upon Satan as merely a myth. Imagine my satisfaction to find him ruling a monarchy! You know I spent the greater part of my earthly existence fighting Mr. Jefferson and his absurd democratic ideas and now look at the damn country! Run by morons!"

Thais began to laugh.

"Satan is not only a monarch—he is a despot," she said. "No stupid Congressmen passing idiotic laws to bother him. He runs everything himself, just like Mussolini. You'd be surprised at the amount of time he devotes to the smallest details. I am told he spends hours daily in the boiling rooms alone, seeing that each new arrival receives a proper welcome."

"I shall never forget mine," Mr. Hamilton remarked, shuddering. "He stood for half an hour looking us over, while the furnace demons shoveled. Some day I hope to meet the fellow who said a watched pot never boils."

"There have been a great many improvements, since your day," Thais smiled. "One of the latest is a complete oil-heating system."

"At least we poor sinners won't have any coal

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bills to worry about!" Monsieur France chuckled. "Even Hell, I perceive, is becoming more humane. I trust you like it here, Mr. Hamilton?"

"Very much," the distinguished statesman replied. "I am conscious of a most unusual feeling of freedom, if you grasp what I mean. I miss my wife, of course, but it consoles me to know that she is in Heaven, far removed from any such scenes as this."

"The sentiment does you credit," agreed Monsieur France. "Hell is one place, at least, to which a man may go without making excuses to his wife. That famous compatriot of yours, who said 'give me liberty or give me death' was undoubtedly married."

"Aren't you a little hard on our sex, Anatole dear?" Thais murmured. "Where would you men be, without women?"

"In the Garden of Eden, of course," laughed the famous Frenchman, "having a restful time."

"And wishing," added Alexander Hamilton, "for someone to lead us astray."

"Very likely. Our sinful natures ever tor-

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ment us. What, mademoiselle, may I ask, are you doing this evening?"

"Oh—I've promised to make a speech before our club."

"A literary club, I presume," remarked Mr. Hamilton.

"Why—yes—if you call love stories literary. We girls tell each other about our experiences while on Earth."

"Love stories are the very backbone of modern literature," Monsieur France remarked cynically. "I am informed that in America, for example, nine-tenths of the population read only confession magazines. How people do love to sin—by proxy."

"Well," Thais said, "I have yet to find a more interesting plot than the one Eve cooked up about herself and Adam and the serpent. The Eternal Triangle. I consider her the greatest literary genius of all time."

"I admit my debt to her, fictional and otherwise," said Monsieur France.

"And we are not always lowbrow at our club, either," Thais went on. "Last month Sappho read us some delightful poems. It was a most

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successful meeting. My costume made the hit of the evening."

"I should not have supposed," observed Mr. Hamilton dryly, "after what I have seen of Hades, that you ladies were particularly concerned about dress."

"I admit," Thais said, adjusting her girdle, "that in this climate it is largely a matter of form. But you can't blame us girls for wanting to show off our jewels. How do you like my ruby?"

"Exquisite." Monsieur France adjusted his eyeglasses. "And how well it sets off your—er—figure."

"Are you indulging, may I ask," Thais murmured, "in a figure of speech?"

"Perhaps. But in either case it is adorable. Do you not think so, Mr. Hamilton?"

The celebrated American statesman roused himself from a contemplation of his hostess's charms.

"I'm psychic, you know," Thais laughed, "and can read your thoughts."

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself," Mr. Hamilton retorted. "I've been wondering

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whether, even in Hades, an occasional moral—or should I say immoral—slip——”

“Hardly worth while, my dear man,” interrupted the lady from Macedon, “with nowhere to fall. One of Hell’s most subtle penalties. Still, our imaginations are left to us, even though our contacts are largely spiritual. But I mustn’t forget my club.”

“It would be a privilege to attend,” remarked Monsieur France.

“We don’t allow men at our meetings,” Thais said.

“How unkind,”—the noted Frenchman made an expressive gesture—“to deprive our sex of your most charming society.”

“We had nothing to do with it,” explained Thais regretfully. “Satan arranged that. Knowing what radical ideas Eve and the rest of us have, on certain questions, he makes us hold our meetings in private.”

“Then free speech is not allowed in Hell!” Monsieur France raised incredulous shoulders. “I am amazed!”

“You shouldn’t be, Anatole dear,” Thais continued. “Think for a moment. Hell is a

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theory, based on certain well-established if somewhat old-fashioned moral laws. If you break those laws, you are sent here to be punished for it. Naturally you can't criticize, make fun of them, or the whole idea of Hell becomes absurd. Satan couldn't possibly permit it, and continue to hold his position. Suppose you were to go about advocating free love, for instance. You'd upset the entire place. Think what you please, my dear fellow, but don't express your ideas publicly or you will find yourself in hot water—and I assure you I am speaking quite literally."

"Satan is right," remarked Mr. Hamilton with spirit. "The public should never be told the truth—they wouldn't understand it. That is why I have never been in favor of democracy. I held rather broad views about love myself, while on Earth, although I never aspired, like my friend Mr. Washington, to become in any sense the father of my country." He took up his hat. "They tell me Helen of Troy is a member of your club. She is one woman I have always wanted to meet."

"I'll introduce you, some time," Thais smiled. "You'll adore Helen. An aristocrat, like your-



*"Where would you men be, without women?" murmured Thais.
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self, and very critical about associating with some of our more recent arrivals. She says the moral tone of Hades should be elevated. Salome, who laughs at everything, says it is just Helen's way of raising Hell."

"Delicious," Mr. Hamilton murmured, kissing Thais's hand. "As we go along I shall ask Monsieur Anatole to tell me more of your history. You were the heroine of one of his most famous books, were you not—and of a grand opera as well?"

"No." Monsieur France shook his head. "The Thais I wrote about was a fictional character—a dancer of Alexandria who turned nun. There is nothing fictional about the lady before us, as anyone can readily perceive. In fact, she was once the mistress of the world."

"Flatterer!" Thais whispered, tapping Monsieur France with her fan.

"Not at all. While your friend Alexander was sighing for more worlds to conquer, you conquered *him*. How like a woman. So eminently practical. Mademoiselle, I salute you."

"Why don't you two walk over to the Civic Center?" Thais said as they left. "I understand

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that Satan is giving a crowd of prohibition agents the third degree by dipping them in hot rum punches. You might find it amusing."

"I wish he would let me select punishments for a few critics I could name," muttered Monsieur France, as he and Mr. Hamilton strolled out through the garden.

Thais found the ladies of the club gathered in the drawing-room of her popular Persian caravansery.

"Sorry to be late, girls," she exclaimed, "but I had guests."

"Who?" Eve asked.

"Two very distinguished gentlemen."

"Since you decline to tell us their names," smiled Eve, "I conclude you have something on your conscience."

"Possibly, my dear," Thais laughed. "No matter how freely I may exhibit my other good points, I usually manage to keep something on my conscience. It never pays to show too much to the public."

"I fancy you are right, my love. But that is after all a metaphysical question, and we came to-night to hear about your friend, Alexander. I

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have met him at parties, now and then, but I found him rather tiresome. All he seemed able to talk about were his famous battles with the Persians.”

“He should have told you about his battles with his wives,” Thais laughed. “They were far more exciting. Take Statira for instance—old King Darius’s daughter. How that woman did love to argue. Many’s the time I’ve seen her chase the conqueror of the world down the palace steps with a battle-ax. If the Persians had had a few more like her they would have won the war.

“Then there was Roxana, the Pearl of the East. A whole string of pearls, believe me, and each one a tear. I have never seen such a weeper. That woman’s idea of a costume for a fancy dress ball would have been a wet blanket. Between Statira’s lectures and Roxana’s tears, Alexander needed a lot of consoling.”

“It’s a wonder,” remarked the Queen of Sheba, “that they allowed you about.”

“Oh, they had to. I was his private secretary, which gave me privileges. Many a time we worked half the night together straightening out

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the affairs of the nation. It's no easy task, ruling the world, but Alexander had his own system. As soon as twelve o'clock came he would hang his crown on the imperial bedpost and send for the keeper of the wine cellar.

“‘Why waste time making any more laws?’ he would say. ‘There are too many already. Let's have a party.’

“One evening, when we were sitting on the roof of the big summer palace the Persian kings had built for themselves at Persepolis, my boy friend turned to me with a smile.

“‘Why is it, sweetness,’ he said, ‘that my wives are so much more trouble to me than my empire?’

“‘Have you ever thought,’ I replied, ‘that it may be because you have such an accommodating secretary? Not every girl is willing to work nights.’

“‘There is certainly something about you,’ he laughed, pulling me down on his lap, ‘that makes Roxy and Statira very jealous.’

“‘I see there is,’ I told him, glancing down at his arm. ‘If you aren't careful you are likely to be paying your wives alimony.’

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“‘I would rather spend the money on you,’ he said.

“‘In that case,’ I whispered, ‘you might buy me a couple of new dresses. I haven’t a thing to wear.’

“Alexander pulled me a little closer.

“‘I cannot say that your argument appeals to me especially,’ he laughed.

“‘It ought to,’ I told him. ‘Clothes are getting higher all the time. This little thing I have on now cost me every cent I earned last month. Why don’t you raise my wages?’

“‘I intend to,’ Alexander replied promptly. ‘When a man has as versatile a secretary as you are, my dear, he should do his best to keep her satisfied. Ho, slaves! More wine!’

“‘If I were you, darling,’ I said, straightening my back hair, ‘I would go a little slower with the grape juice. Do you realize that you have finished two gallons already, since dinner? No wonder you feel so badly in the morning. And have so much trouble with your digestion. I wish you would see a doctor.’

“‘What’s the use,’ Alexander grumbled. ‘Doctors are all alike. They disagree about

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everything—except how much they are going to charge you. Why shouldn't I drink if I want to? I seem to have downed everything else in sight.'

"'Conquering the world is one thing,' I told him, 'but if you think you can win any victories over old Mr. Bacchus you are foolish, my love.' Which was very good advice, and if he had followed it he would not have ended his career at the ripe old age of thirty-three."

"It has always astonished me," the Queen of Sheba said, "that any man should think himself equal to the task of defeating the well-known Demon Rum."

"And especially the poisoned kind they are drinking right now in America," added Lucrezia Borgia. "What a pity I did not live a few hundred years later—I could have been such a help to the prohibition cause."

"You would certainly have been in your element," Thais said. "But to return to Alexander. After dinner he began to act restless. Which was, I imagine, quite natural. When a man has made himself master of three such cities as Babylon, Susa and Persepolis in one season,

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he is apt to find the conquering business something of a bore.

“I did not feel in a very good humor myself. Alexander had said that our expedition to Persepolis was to be a pleasure trip but so far he had gotten all the pleasure. For three days he had done nothing but attend receptions and banquets in his honor while I stayed in the palace and played with the goldfish. It was not my idea of an exciting time and I told him so.

“He drank another glass of wine and sat staring out over the roofs of the city.

“‘I don’t doubt there are any number of amusing wine shops and the like down there,’ he said, ‘where it would be possible to have a good time, but if I were to put my foot in one of them, they would think the place had been raided. That is one of the troubles about being an emperor—you have got to be on dress parade all the time. Ho—hum. What a life! What a life!’

“‘Too bad you didn’t bring your harem with you, old dear,’ I said, feeling rather annoyed. ‘You really should have something to amuse you.’

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“Alexander gave me a nasty look.

“‘I left the girls in Babylon on purpose,’ he muttered, ‘but perhaps it was a mistake. Even a wife can start something, if only an argument.’

“‘If that is all you are looking for,’ I snapped, ‘why not marry me?’

“He began to laugh, at that.

“‘I could not think of spoiling such a perfect secretary,’ he said. ‘I shall keep you as you are, my dear—at least until I find a better-looking one?’

“‘Thanks for your kind remarks,’ I told him, ‘and heaven knows I am not anxious to sign up for a lifelong argument with any man. But just the same, if I had been your wife, instead of only your private secretary I could have gone to some of these parties you have been attending, instead of having to sit around this forty-acre palace for three days, looking at a lot of Persian antiques.’

“‘What you say is doubtless true, my love,’ Alexander laughed, pouring out another goblet of wine, ‘but even so it would be foolish for us to marry, when we are getting along so well

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as we are. And when I think of all the wedding presents my friends have had to buy me, I am afraid they might not like it if I asked them to come across with any more.'

"'No doubt you think you are funny,' I snapped, getting angrier every minute, 'but unless you start something more amusing than sitting there making wise-cracks I am going home. You may like this Persepolis place, but as far as I am concerned it is cold.'

"For a moment Alexander continued to stare out over the roof-tops. Then he sprang to his feet.

"'If this town has been cold to you, darling,' he cried, hurling an empty wine jug over the roof edge, 'I shall make it my business to warm it up! Ho—Belshazzar!'—he called to one of the guards—'Tell the Head Palanquin Driver to bring around the Royal Ethiopian Eight at once!' He turned to me. 'Put on your hat, my love. We are going out to see the town. And since it seems to me somewhat lacking in bright lights I intend to illuminate it in a way no city of its size has ever been lit up before. After this, never say that I do not love you.'

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“ ‘After what?’ I asked, staring at him. ‘And how do you propose to convince me of your love?’

“Instead of answering me he took one of the torches from a wall bracket and tossed it on top of the awning under which we had been sitting. In a moment the whole roof was ablaze.

“ ‘Let’s go, sweetness,’ he laughed. ‘Since you do not like this palace, it’s out!’

“ ‘Out,’ I gasped, as we struggled down the stairs. ‘The whole Persian Fire Department couldn’t put it out.’

“ ‘Well,’ he grinned, ‘you asked me to start something, so I did. To the Rhododendron Roof, James!’ he told the Head Palanquin Driver. ‘We want to get a good view of the fireworks. And from the way things look now, I rather think there will be a hot time in the old town to-night!’ ”

“Do you mean to say,” exclaimed Queen Scheherazade, “that he actually burned down a royal palace on your account? What a frightful waste!”

“Why so?” Thais’s eyes held a hard glitter. “Men have sacrificed more valuable things than

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that, to prove their love. It was a wonderful sight; the whole country for miles around was lit up—even more so than Alexander himself, which is saying a great deal.”

“He probably regretted it in the morning,” remarked Mrs. Potiphar sourly.

“Oh, no. He was much too ill to regret anything in the morning, except that last gallon of wine. Later on, when Roxana, who had heard that I was at the bottom of the affair, took him to task he said he had burned the place to be revenged on the Persians for the way Xerxes burned Athens. Statira, who knew his habits, said he must have been drinking. Poor Alexander! He started even a worse party than that, one night, after he got back to Babylon, and passed out cold.”

“While you, I suppose,” murmured the romantic Sappho, “died of grief on his grave.”

“No—not precisely.” A cool smile played about Thais’s lovely lips. “As a matter of fact I went to Egypt and found myself another king. But not as a secretary this time. I married old Ptolemy, and raised a family of children.”

“If one must marry,” said Helen of Troy,

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"I suppose children are a legitimate excuse."

"Not always," observed Phryne. "I once knew a woman in Athens——"

The sudden ringing of the telephone bell interrupted Phryne's remarks. Thais handed the receiver to Eve.

"For you, darling," she said. "It sounded like Satan's voice."

"It *was* Satan," Eve murmured a moment later, as she hung up the receiver. "As you all know, I've been after him ever since our last meeting, trying to get permission for that young American aviator to land here in Hell. I've just gotten a final answer. The fellow can't come in."

"What do you suppose he will do?" said Sappho. "Imagine spending eternity flying round and round in space like a comet!"

"Talk about your man without a country," Delilah gasped.

"The poor youngsters certainly are having a hard time of it," Eve said. "She's not good enough for Heaven and he's not bad enough for Hell. Well, I don't see what more we can do. Cleopatra, darling, we are counting on you

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to tell us all about your affair with Antony, at our next meeting.”

“I have a friend who’s met him,” Salome grinned. “She says he’s a dreadfully easy mark, if you’ll pardon the pun.”

“Did you ever know a man who wasn’t?” Cleopatra asked disdainfully. “All a woman has to do is to let nature take its course. Thais, my dear, I’d like awfully to have a drink. Satan asked me to help entertain some of his tired-business-men’s classes this afternoon and I’m worn out with the struggle.”