

## Chapter 13: Cleopatra Takes a Chance

THE ladies of the club were reclining comfortably upon the cushioned divans of Cleopatra's private roof garden, waiting for their hostess to begin the discussion of the evening. Because of a sudden and most unusual drop in temperature, some of the members wore furs.

"Chilly, don't you think?" observed the Queen of Sheba, nestling back into her sable neckpiece. "What do you suppose Satan is up to now?"

"Haven't you heard?" replied Eve, giving her summer-ermine figleaf a more rakish slant. "He's been trying for weeks to discover a suitable punishment for apartment house janitors who refuse to give their tenants proper heat. I understand he has finally decided on electric refrigeration. The Old Boy is nothing if not pro-

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gressive. Well, Cleo darling, we're waiting."

The Mistress of the Nile, stretched at length upon a magnificent tiger-skin rug, glanced about with a rather bored smile.

"When I said the other night," she began, "*a propos* of Salome's inexcusable pun, that all men are easy marks, I meant of course to a woman who understands her business."

"To just what business do you refer, dearie?" inquired Delilah airily. "My experience as a manicure——"

"The business of being a woman, of course," Cleopatra interrupted, regarding the friend of Samson with a tolerant smile. "That embraces everything in one delightful whole. It has even been dignified by the name of a profession and dates from the remotest antiquity."

"It is *my* experience," observed Queen Scheherazade, "that the rules for attracting men are absurdly simple."

"They are," Cleopatra continued. "And so are the men. Having twisted both slaves and Cæsars around my finger with equal facility, I am prepared to say that under similar conditions their actions and reactions are precisely the

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same. Provided, of course, they are real men."

"But how is a woman to tell?" asked Sappho, who was thinking of Phaon.

"Quite easily. First you lead a man on. Then, at the critical moment, you tell him to stop."

"Well?" Sappho asked again.

"Well, if he does, you know he is either a sentimentalist or a fool, and therefore not worth bothering about." Cleopatra's voice held a note of contempt.

"But he might be in love with someone else," Sappho objected.

"Impossible, my dear, or he wouldn't be trying to make love to you. I have tried my little rule hundreds of times and have never known it to fail.

"I remember a young man from Carthage I once met who used to take me galley riding up the Nile, nights. The very first time we were out together I tested his ardor by slapping his face. He told me to walk home.

"If you mean that," I said, looking him in the eye, "why have you equipped your pleasure barge with life preservers?"

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“He saw the point at once and threw them overboard.

“‘My mistake,’ he laughed. ‘I took you for a perfect angel.’

“‘I do not even wear water wings,’ I murmured.”

“Your first rule, Cleo dear,” smiled Helen of Troy, “could scarcely be improved upon as a means of determining whether or not you are dealing with a gentleman. Hector was one. I couldn’t bear him. Forever talking about his duty toward his brother. What other little methods did you use, may I ask?”

“My second rule,” Cleopatra continued, “was always to get rid of my lovers the moment I grew tired of them. I usually fed my failures to the crocodiles.”

“I should have thought,” murmured Sappho romantically, “that memories of past joys would have made you sorry for them.”

“Nonsense, my dear!” Cleopatra exclaimed. “Mere sentimental nonsense, unworthy of a real woman. But I admit, when I realized what dead ones some of my lovers were, that I felt sorry for the crocodiles. The poor dears had an es-



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pecial fondness for young Greeks, but of course a girl can never tell where her next sweetheart is coming from.”

“I always buried *my* mistakes,” Lucrezia Borgia murmured. “There is nothing quite so dead as a dead lover.”

“My third and last rule,” announced Cleopatra, lighting a scented cigarette, “was to get the man I wanted in spite of any and all obstacles. When my mind was once made up I left no stone unturned to gain my ends. Take my affair with Cæsar, for example.

“When Julius came down to Alexandria to decide whether my brother Ptolemy or I should be placed on the throne of Egypt, everybody bowed in the dust before him and said he was the greatest man in the world.

“‘Men are only men, after all,’ I said to myself, ‘even if they do happen to be Cæsars, and the greater they are, the more so. And while even a queen may stoop to conquer, she should be careful to do so at the right moment.’ So instead of throwing myself at Cæsar’s head—or feet—I invited him to dinner.

“He declined, of course. I didn’t think he

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would come, when I asked him. But I succeeded in arousing his curiosity, just at a time when he had about made up his mind to turn the throne of Egypt over to Ptolemy, instead of making *me* queen.

“‘Julius, old dear,’ I said to myself, ‘you may be a great general, but to-night you are going to lose a battle.’ Then I had my maids wrap me up in the skin of a tiger—the very one I’m lying on now.

“‘Carry me to Cæsar’s tent,’ I told them, ‘and say to him that you have brought a little birthday gift from Cleopatra.’

“Everything turned out exactly as I had planned. When Julius unwrapped the bundle there I lay at his feet, tiger skin and all, ready to prove to him that I was every inch a queen.”

“Just to look at you, darling,” observed Delilah, regarding Cleopatra’s recumbent figure with a smile, “convinces me that Julius was in no position to dispute it.”

“Naturally not, my dear. He succumbed to my charms at once. By morning I was not only Queen of Egypt, but of Rome itself—by proxy, at least. Only the treachery of Brutus

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and his friends ended our delightful romance.

“It was some years after Cæsar’s death that I met Antony. When I heard he was on his way to Egypt with an army to conquer me I went to meet him. It always pays, I think, if you are looking for trouble, to meet it half way. So I sailed out in my royal barge and invited Mark to supper.

“Being of a more ardent and impetuous nature than Julius, he came. As soon as he saw me reclining on my well-known tiger skin he leaned over and kissed me.

“‘Isn’t this rather sudden?’ I said, pushing him away. ‘We scarcely know each other.’

“‘Time will remedy that,’ he laughed, kissing me again. ‘Most people know each other too well.’

“‘Why put off the evil day?’ I whispered. ‘Time was made for slaves. I prefer to know the worst at once. And before you start any trouble here in Egypt, why should we not arrange a private peace between us and thus save a great many innocent lives. If you feel that you must do any conquering I may as well inform you that I am ready to capitulate at once



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and to share my kingdom and anything else I may have with you on a mutually satisfactory basis, including my tiger-skin rug, which I consider a very fair offer for any queen situated as I am to make.'

" 'Nothing could be fairer, my love,' Antony said, 'and I am ready to accept your offer, including a share of your rug, as soon as you move over.'

" 'They tell me,' I said, when everything had been agreeably adjusted, 'that you are a married man. Don't you feel, under the circumstances, that you are going rather far?'

" 'I would go to Hell with you, darling,' Mark muttered, 'if I were sure Mrs. Antony wouldn't be there. I would rather face the devil himself than my wife.'

" 'Where is she now?' I asked, feeling somewhat nervous.

" 'In Rome, I hope. I haven't heard from her since I left, but they say no news is good news.'

" 'In that case,' I laughed, 'there seems to be no reason why you should not go as far as you like.'

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“The next morning, while we were eating breakfast, I turned to him with a smile.

“‘Mark dear,’ I said, ‘as a conqueror you have more than lived up to my expectations, since in one night you have made yourself master of the best part of Egypt, but I confess to a feeling of surprise that you, a bluff soldier, whose life has been devoted to the sword, should be so proficient in the art of making love.’

“‘My ability as a swordsman,’ Mark laughed, ‘is a natural gift, not uncommon in men of my robust physique. As for my skill in the art of love-making, I gained that at night school. It pleases me greatly to know that you admire the combination.’

“‘I admire it so much, my dear Mark,’ I told him, ‘that I have come to the conclusion I need a man of your unusual abilities to help me in ruling Egypt. Instead of going back to Rome, why do you not stay in Alexandria, so that I may have the benefit of your large experience. Not only are the foreign relations of my unhappy kingdom in need of a strong man, but I feel that in my domestic affairs I can make constant use of your services.’

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“Antony seemed rather pleased with the idea, at first but I could see that something was troubling him.

“‘Mrs. Antony has very powerful connections in Rome,’ he muttered after a time. ‘I’m afraid it’s impossible.’

“‘Nothing is impossible,’ I told him, but he only laughed and said I ought to see his wife.”

“‘Husbands are all alike,’ snapped Mrs. Potiphar. ‘Perfect devils. You’d think marriage would change them.’”

“‘Misfortune is supposed to have a sobering effect,’ Eve smiled. ‘You and Antony never married, did you, Cleo?’”

“‘No. We remained lovers to the end. When Mark committed suicide I killed myself.’”

“‘Perfectly nonsensical!’” Mrs. Potiphar remarked, turning up her small Egyptian nose.

Sappho stared at her, her poetic eyes blazing.

“‘Naturally *you* wouldn’t appreciate such a romantic ending,’ she said.

“‘I should think not.’” The expression on Mrs. Potiphar’s countenance was decidedly cynical. “‘Do I look like a woman who would kill herself?’”

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"I don't see why not, darling," Salome remarked sweetly. "If I had a face like yours I'd seriously consider it."

Mrs. Potiphar rose angrily to her feet.

"At least!" she exclaimed, "I have more to my credit than the head of an unfortunate Jewish prophet!"

"Have you, dearie?" Salome's voice became even more sweet. "Well, prophets, even Jewish prophets, help any girl to get ahead. And in spite of all you may say to the contrary I am still convinced that your affair with Joseph was a total loss——"

"Ladies—ladies!" Eve cried. "We must have order!"

"Don't mind me," said Cleopatra disdainfully, selecting a pomegranate from the bowl of fruit at her side. "If the dear girls want to continue the argument——"

"Not at all!" Eve glanced furiously at the two enraged members. "If we have any further interruptions of this sort I will see that the guilty persons are expelled. Please go on, my dear Cleo. Why did Antony commit suicide, with a woman like you to live for?"

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“It was his wife’s fault. Octavian, Antony’s chief rival, was her brother. When Mark decided to help me rule Egypt, Octavian started a war about it and we were defeated. When we saw that all was lost we decided to die in each other’s arms.

“We should have, too, if Octavian hadn’t heard of it. As soon as he did he had me locked up in the palace and sent Antony word that I had killed myself. The poor fellow believed it and fell on his sword. When Octavian offered to take his place I refused. I was tired of Roman emperors, and still loved Mark. So finding an asp in a basket of fruit one of my slaves had smuggled in to me, I decided to follow him to the Under World.

“I was a fool. When I found him he was in the midst of an affair with a Hindoo circus performer, from Delhi. A dreadful little creature, a snake charmer, or sword swallower or something of the sort. It was a terrible blow to my pride.”

“I can sympathize with you, my dear,” said Eve. “I felt much the same way myself, when I caught Adam with that dreadful creature

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Lilith. But I've gotten over it. Time works wonders, you know. You've only been in Hades a couple of thousand years. When you've lived here as long as I have you will find out that no man is really worth worrying about."

As she spoke, a violent peal of thunder shook the house and brought the members of the club to their feet. In the center of the roof stood Satan, surrounded by a blazing cloud of brimstone.