

Chapter 7: Salome Succeeds in Getting Ahead

IT had been so insufferably hot in Hell for the past month that Salome was glad of the opportunity to receive the ladies of the club in her garden.

There was usually a breeze to be found on the terrace facing the swimming pool, and the darkness would be relieved by the ruddy glow which hung like a cloud above the mouth of the distant Pit.

Unlike Eve, Salome did not affect the fashionable section of Gehenna immediately adjoining His Majesty's Headquarters. She was not interested in society, she said, and much preferred the more restful atmosphere of the suburbs. Still, her villa at Jezebel Farms, a rambling structure in the late Hollywood period, had been both designed and furnished by a motion picture director of her acquaintance, and

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was so distinctively *rococo* in its architectural eccentricities that it was pointed out to strangers as one of the most remarkable sights to be found anywhere in Hades.

Helen of Troy and Cleopatra were the first to arrive, the lady who had launched a thousand ships, becomingly attired in a simple string of moonstones, making her companion, in her broad Egyptian collarette, seem almost overdressed.

Salome, who was standing on the marble edge of the pool glanced beyond them.

"Will you look at Sallie Potiphar in her new red wig!" she whispered. "Did you ever see anything so funny? These Egyptian fashions certainly are the limit."

"Do you think so," replied Cleopatra who being from the Nile country herself resented Salome's criticism. "I don't see anything funny about them. At least they have the merit of simplicity. I remember that Antony once had the bad taste to say he didn't care for one of *my* costumes. I just laughed it off. Personally I think Mrs. Potiphar's get-up is charming. What could be cooler on a night like this?"

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"Nothing," Salome grinned, regarding her reflection in the water.

"That depends very largely upon the individual," Cleopatra retorted. "In some cases that I could name a judicious concealment might tend to enhance rather than detract from what seems to me in certain respects decidedly lacking——"

"I hear," said Helen of Troy, who thought it time to change the subject, "that dear Lucrezia is going to have her face lifted."

Salome gave the pride of the Borgias a critical look.

"I could suggest a more sensible operation," she exclaimed. "Imagine anyone going about in long skirts in all this heat! Hello, girls!" She called to Scheherazade and the Queen of Sheba as the two oriental ladies came across the lawn, looking very cool indeed in their peacock-plumed fans.

But it was Eve herself, in a Babylonian indoor sports suit of cut glass beads who carried off the honors as the best dressed woman of the evening.

"I think I promised," she announced, as she

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took the chair, "to find out the identification number of that young man in whom my maid, Marie, is so much interested. It is—" she consulted her notes—"882,493,721—AR—Sphere 6—Circle 44—Section 19—Department 8—Heaven. Here, Lucrezia darling—I've put it down for you so you can write to your renowned father, and ask him to have a talk with the fellow. I *do* hope we shall succeed in having these two young lovers reunited."

"How on earth—in Hell I should say," asked Mrs. Potiphar, "did you manage to get the man's address? With Satan so opposed to all communication between the Upper and the Lower Regions? He claims, you know, that it only creates dissatisfaction both ways."

"Well"—Eve indulged in a rather broad smile—"I don't believe, my dear, that I had better answer *that* question. It involves a young friend of mine—a clerk in the Recording Angel's office—who might get into trouble if I mentioned his name."

"Do I understand that this girl is ready to join her lover in Heaven," Thais asked, "in case we can arrange for a transfer?"

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“She doesn’t care where she joins him,” Eve laughed, “so long as they are together. Hell would be Heaven, you know, with some one you love, and *vice versa*. The old story.”

“How deliciously *naïve*,” murmured Delilah softly. “I haven’t heard it for ages. I *do* hope the young man feels the same way.”

“Well—Lucrezia will find out. Suppose we come to order, while Salome tells us the truth about her much-advertised dance before Herod. I don’t wish to seem disparaging but I have always felt that certain features of the affair have been very much exaggerated. Take the chair, Salome darling, and let us hear how you sold yourself to the public. I am hoping to get some pointers on publicity methods from you, now that Satan has finally decided to go into the picture business.”

“What is he going into the picture business for?” grumbled Mrs. Potiphar. “Aren’t the ones they are making now bad enough?”

“Don’t you know, dearie?” Eve laughed. “To advertise Hell, of course. Point out to the world its many advantages. Ample hotel accommodations—interesting society—low taxes—hot

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baths—salubrious climate—pretty girls—the ideal all-the-year-round resort.”

“To judge by the present rush of visitors,” remarked Delilah, “it wouldn’t surprise me to see a big slump in Celestial real estate.”

Helen of Troy raised her aristocratic chin and regarded the lady from Gaza with a look of scorn.

“Personally,” she said, “I’m terribly sorry to see Hell becoming so overcrowded. I always hoped it might be kept rather exclusive, if you understand what I mean. On a higher social plane, so to speak. I trust I am not a snob, but it is really too bad to see the place being overrun by a horde of bootleggers, bolshevists, United States Congressmen, ministerial murderers, college youths and flappers. Such people! Disgusting!”

“You are right, my dear,” agreed Lucrezia Borgia. “In my day it really meant something to be immoral. Only persons of consequence attempted it. The common herd was kept in order by its pastors. Nowadays it seems that any half-baked young idiot with a bottle of gin in one hand and a copy of the *American Mercury*

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in the other is ready to crash the gates of Hell just to see what the place is like! Sorry, Salome—I didn't mean to make a speech."

"Well," Salome said, "I'm not very good at making speeches myself, but I do want to tell you about my dance before Herod. You may not realize it, but that was the greatest piece of publicity work in the history of the world. Two thousand years ago, almost, and they haven't stopped talking about it yet."

"Herod, you know, was governor of Judea at the time, and Mamma's second husband. Naturally he treated me like a stepchild. Said it was a young girl's place to sit at home in the palace and do embroidery work, or play in the garden with the swans."

"Dangerous playmates—swans," Sappho chuckled. "You remember what happened to Leda."

"Can't say I do, dearie. I never was very good at history. To me the birds only seemed tiresome. So I got one of Mamma's ladies in waiting, who came from Damascus, to teach me some of those delicious oriental dances—you know—the kind you do standing still.

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“My dears, I practiced those dances so hard I almost gave myself a permanent wave. Figuratively speaking, I mean. At the end of six months my friends said I shook the wickedest bead in Antioch.

“Naturally I didn’t take up dancing just to practice before a mirror. There wouldn’t have been any profit in that. What I wanted to do was to appear in public. A girl with ambition has got to express herself in some form and I decided that mine was peculiarly well suited to the stage.

“So when some of my society friends got up an amateur show in the interests of charity—a benefit performance for the Home For Crippled Camels, I think it was—I asked them to put me on the program.

“If it hadn’t been for that I never would have gotten into so much trouble with John the Baptist. We called him Jokanaan, in Antioch, and he was a sort of traveling prophet who came to town and started a series of revival meetings, telling everybody that if they didn’t reform the place would be destroyed like Sodom and Gomorrah. A good man in every way, my dears,

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although some people thought him crazy. I never had a thing against him myself, in spite of what happened later on.

“The night we gave our show he was in the audience, although I didn’t know it, then. But the next day he preached a sermon about me that would have ripped the clothes off my back, if there had been any to rip. Said I was a child of Satan, a daughter of Babylon, a scarlet woman, flaunting myself before the public in the guise of charity, in order to tempt the youth of Antioch from the straight and narrow path! It was terrible!

“I wasn’t the only one he damned, either. He took a few hot shots at dear Mamma, and her somewhat variegated past. When he had finished, he called for volunteers to throw cobble stones at both of us, the next time we appeared on the streets. And all because I was trying to save a few crippled camels. Or was it anemic cats? I’ve forgotten, for the moment, although I remember very well that when all expenses were paid we turned over nearly twenty shekels to the fund. Jokanaan said we would have done better to have given the money we wasted on

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our costumes to the poor, but I guess he didn't mean mine."

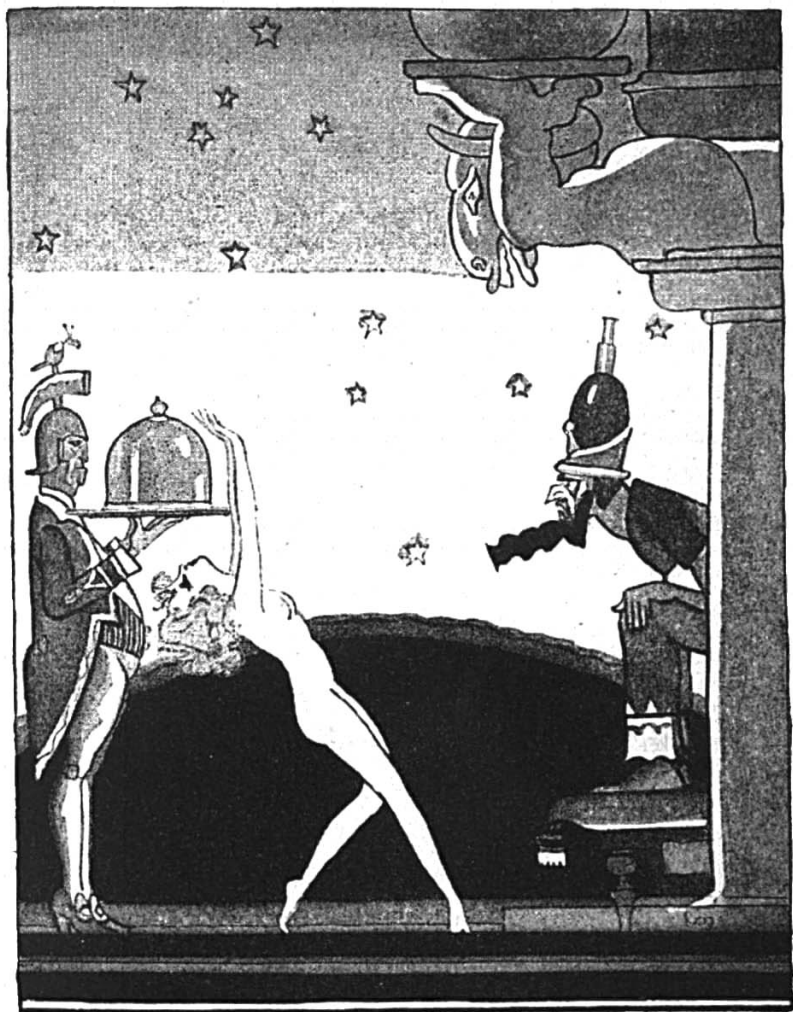
"I don't wonder you were annoyed," observed Thais.

"But I wasn't. Don't you see? Jokanaan really helped to make me famous. Why, the very next day I had offers to dance from the best cabarets in town. I was so grateful I went to one of his open-air meetings—veiled, of course—and put fifty shekels in the hat.

"About that time my stepfather, Herod, who had been spending a few months in Rome, seeing the sights, came back to town. And somebody told him about my dance.

"'I hear your angel child has been doing her bit to uphold the traditions of the family,' he said to Mamma. 'A chip off the old block, it appears.'

"'Well,' Mamma told him, 'I may have been a trifle indiscreet in my younger days, especially between husbands, but you know, darling, that your own record would not make nice reading for the home circle. No one can disapprove more than I do of exhibiting family skeletons in public but at least you must admit that Sa-



"Wait a minute, darling," Herod exclaimed. "Since all you want is to get ahead, I will see that your wishes are gratified."

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lome's is very decently—I suppose you would say indecently—covered.'

“‘That is a matter, my dear,’ Herod said, ‘about which I cannot speak from personal knowledge. Unfortunately I was not here to see her dance. And I object to these public demonstrations.’

“‘It seems to me,’ Mamma snapped back at him, ‘that it is rather to the child’s credit to try to make a name for herself, instead of being content to sit at home and sponge on her relatives.’

“‘From what I hear,’ Herod laughed, ‘she certainly has succeeded. In fact, she has made several names for herself, and they are not the sort of names we use in polite society, except in the privacy of the boudoir. I also understand this Hebrew prophet has made some rather nasty remarks about you.’

“‘He certainly has,’ Mamma sniffed. ‘and if you were a man instead of a human jellyfish you would do something about it. I am only a poor weak woman, and I suppose it makes no difference to you if I am called a painted Jezebel in public, but Salome is a sensitive girl and cannot endure such abuse. Instead of listen-

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ing to all the mean things this prophet has said about her most artistic performance, why not see it yourself?"

"That, my love," Herod replied, "is exactly what I intend to do. I have seen very little of your charming daughter for the past two or three years, being busy with other matters, and the last time we met she was just an awkward youngster with her hair down her back, but as I am giving a birthday party to-morrow night and am obliged to do something to entertain that batch of assorted Roman senators I brought home with me, I think it would be very nice to ask Salome in after dinner to do her dance. As a siren she seems to have created quite an uproar, if you get what I mean."

"I will see how she feels about it," Mamma said, "but I do not think you should expect her to dance for nothing with all the cabarets in town willing to pay her money. On the allowance you have been handing out it is hard work to keep her in clothes."

"So I have been given to understand," Herod said. "Find out how much she wants for a real show. I paid that Egyptian who danced on my

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birthday last year a thousand shekels. And just to show you that I am a regular husband, as well as to prevent my party from being raided, I am going to have this prophet Jokanaan locked up.'

"Mamma told me all about the conversation that night.

" 'This is your big opportunity, dearie,' she said. 'Publicity is what counts, and with all those prominent senators present you stand a very good chance of being asked to dance before Cæsar. Antioch is a nice little town in its way, but anybody who wants to get ahead in the show business has first got to make a hit in Rome. I will tell Herod he can expect you, and as for what you are to receive for your performance, leave that to me. I see an excellent opportunity to kill two birds with one stone.' "

"Your mother was evidently a good business woman," Mrs. Potiphar remarked, smiling. "Did I understand you to say she came from Jerusalem?"

"No. She was a Greek. But it's very much the same. Only it wasn't business Mamma had in mind. She wanted to get even with Jokanaan for the things he had said about her,

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although I didn't know that until afterwards."

"The next night, when I appeared at the banquet hall, the party was just getting good. Herod had sent out for another truck load of wine, and the Roman senators, having all made long speeches and toasted everybody they could think of from Cæsar down were displaying their versatility by throwing pomegranates at each other's heads, just to see them burst. The pomegranates, I mean. Their heads were one hundred per cent proof.

"When Herod saw me coming he got up.

"'Friends, Romans and countrymen,' he said, 'meet my attractive little stepdaughter Salome, who is about to favor us with the dance of the seven veils and those who have seen it tell me that nothing more interesting has been pulled off in our fair city of Antioch for years. Step up on the table, my dear, so that we may all have a good view.'

"Well, girls, I really do not like to boast but my act was a sensation. You should have seen the dignified old senators scrambling for my veils. When I took off the seventh a fat Roman general fell head-first into the punch bowl.

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“‘Am I seeing things?’ he gasped, coming up for air.

“‘If you mean what *I* mean,’ Herod replied, ‘you certainly are. Salome darling, your dance is a knockout and I would willingly give you half my kingdom in return for it if I had not already put the property in your mother’s name. Anything else I have, ask for it.’

“‘I didn’t pay any attention to this. Herod was always getting drunk and promising somebody something he couldn’t deliver.

“‘Your praise sufficiently repays me, step-papa,’ I said, ‘and will help me in my career. I am just a poor but honest working girl, trying to get ahead.’

“‘When I said that, Mamma leaned over and whispered something in Herod’s ear. She was smiling merrily and whenever I see that merry smile on dear Mamma’s face I know that she is up to something disagreeable. Herod was smiling, too.

“‘Herodias, old thing,’ he said, ‘you are priceless. I have only been waiting for a good excuse. Alcibiades’—he called the Chief Butler—‘just run down to the basement, will you,

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and hand the Royal Executioner this ring.'

"I was about to jump from the table when Herod stopped me.

"'Wait a moment, darling,' he laughed. 'Since all you want is to get ahead, I am going to see that your wishes are gratified.' So I stood there, and a few moments later the Chief Butler returned, carrying a silver dish. On it was Jokanaan's head. I almost fainted.

"At that Herod took me in his arms and started to carry me to my room, but Mamma pulled him back into his chair.

"'It is quite enough,' she grumbled, 'for Jokanaan to lose his head without you becoming careless with yours. Salome is over eighteen and does not need anybody to tuck her in bed. And as you are almost ready to be carried upstairs yourself why not go ahead and make a good job of it? Otherwise your guests from Rome are going to witness a family argument.' Which finished Herod for the rest of the evening."

Thais, who was regarding Salome with an incredulous stare, began to laugh.

"Do you really mean to say," she asked, "that

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you didn't know, beforehand, what you were to be given for that dance?"

"I did not," Salome replied indignantly. "I never thought of such a thing. It was all Mamma's doings, of course. And Herod's. But the affair made such a sensation that I became the talk of the empire. Cæsar, the moment he heard of it, invited me to come to Rome as his personal guest. Mamma went along, as chaperon."

"One night, after we had been there about a week, she came into the imperial dining room rather suddenly. The emperor and I had just finished supper."

"How are things going, dearie?" she asked.

"They could not be better," I said. "I am on the top of the world." Which, as I was sitting on Cæsar's lap at the time, I thought rather good, and only goes to show what the right kind of publicity will do for a girl."

Lucrezia Borgia sprang to her feet.

"Of course," she snapped, "if notoriety is all you want, I suppose it is natural to boast about such things as murders. As for me, I always preferred to keep my little going-away parties

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a secret. Everyone is cursed with a lot of friends and relatives they would be glad to get rid of. I saw to it that mine made their exits gracefully, without unnecessary gossip and fuss. I even went so far as to maintain my own private burying ground. Expensive, of course, but it annoyed me to have so many family antiques cluttering up the house."

"I think it would be delightful, Lucrezia darling," Eve said, "if you would tell us about some of your housecleaning efforts at our next meeting. Life's Little Tragedies, as it were. Salome my love, please do not think me rude but how about supper? Adam insisted on our lunching to-day at that new sea-food place Jonah has just opened—Tumble Inn, he calls it—and the food simply reeked of whale oil. I'm almost famished."