

# GAUTIER THÉOPHILE

ONE OF CLEOPATRA'S  
NIGHTS AND OTHER  
FANTASTIC ROMANCES

Théophile Gautier

**One of Cleopatra's Nights and  
Other Fantastic Romances**

«Public Domain»

**Gautier T.**

One of Cleopatra's Nights and Other Fantastic Romances /  
T. Gautier — «Public Domain»,

## Содержание

TO THE READER	6
ONE OF CLEOPATRA'S NIGHTS	8
CHAPTER I	8
CHAPTER II	12
CHAPTER III	15
CHAPTER IV	18
CHAPTER V	21
CHAPTER VI	24
CLARIMONDE 7	28
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	31

# **Théophile Gautier**

## **One of Cleopatra's Nights and Other Fantastic Romances**

*The love that caught strange light from death's own eyes,  
And filled death's lips with fiery words and sighs,  
And, half asleep, let feed from veins of his  
Her close, red, warm snake's-mouth, Egyptian-wise:*

*And that great night of love more strange than this,  
When she that made the whole world's bale and bliss  
Made king of the whole world's desire a slave  
And killed him in mid-kingdom with a kiss.*

*SWINBURNE.*

*"Memorial verses on the death of Théophile Gautier."*

## TO THE READER

The stories composing this volume have been selected for translation from the two volumes of romances and tales by Théophile Gautier respectively entitled *Nouvelles* and *Romans et Contes*. They afford in the original many excellent examples of that peculiar beauty of fancy and power of painting with words which made Gautier the most brilliant literary artist of his time. No doubt their warmth of coloring has been impoverished and their fantastic enchantment weakened by the process of transformation into a less voluptuous tongue; yet enough of the original charm remains, we trust, to convey a just idea of the French author's rich imaginative power and ornate luxuriance of style.

The verses of Swinburne referring to the witchery of the novelette which opens the volume, and to the peculiarly sweet and strange romance which follows, sufficiently indicate the extraordinary art of these tales. At least three of the stories we have attempted to translate rank among the most remarkable literary productions of the century.

These little romances are characterized, however, by merits other than those of mere literary workmanship; they are further remarkable for a wealth of erudition – picturesque learning, we might say – which often lends them an actual archæologic value, like the paintings of some scholarly artist, some Alma Tadema, who with fair magic of color-blending evokes for us eidolons of ages vanished and civilizations passed away.

Thus one finds in the delightful fantasy of *Arria Marcella* not only a dream of "Pompeiiian Days," pictured with an idealistic brilliancy beyond the art of Coomans, but a rich knowledge, likewise, of all that fascinating lore gleaned by antiquarian research amid the ashes of the sepulchred city – a knowledge enriched in no small degree by local study, and presented with a descriptive power finely strengthened by personal observation. It is something more than the charming imagination of a poetic dreamer which paints for us the blue sea "unrolling its long volutes of foam" upon a beach as black and smooth as sifted charcoal; the fissured summit of Vesuvius, out-pouring white threads of smoke from its crannies "as from the orifices of a perfuming pan;" and the far-purple hills "with outlines voluptuously undulating, like the hips of a woman."

And throughout these romances one finds the same evidences of archæologic study, of artistic observation, of imagination fostered by picturesque fact. The glory of the Greek kings of Lydia glows goldenly again in the pages of *Le Roi Candaule*; the massive gloom and melancholy weirdness of ancient Egypt is reflected as in a necromancer's mirror throughout *Une Nuit de Cléopâtre*. It is in the Egyptian fantasies, perhaps, that the author's peculiar descriptive skill appears to most advantage; the still fresh hues of the hierophantic paintings, the pictured sarcophagi, and the mummy-gilding seem to meet the reader's eye with the gratification of their bright contrasts; a faint perfume of unknown balm seems to hover over the open pages; and mysterious sphinxes appear to look on "with that undefinable rose-granite smile that mocks our modern wisdom."

Excepting *Omphale* and *La Morte Amoureuse*, the stories selected for translation are mostly antique in composition and coloring; the former being Louis-Quinze, the latter mediæval rather than aught else. But all alike frame some exquisite delineation of young love-fancies; some admirable picture of what Gautier in the *Histoire du Romantisme* has prettily termed "the graceful *succubi* that haunt the happy slumbers of youth."

And what dreamful student of the Beautiful has not been once enamoured of an Arria Marcella, and worshipped on the altar of his heart those ancient gods "who loved life and youth and beauty and pleasure"? How many a lover of mediæval legend has in fancy gladly bartered the blood of his veins for some phantom Clarimonde? What true artist has not at some time been haunted by the image of a Nyssia, fairer than all daughters of men, lovelier than all fantasies realized in stone – a Pygmalion-wrought marble transmuted by divine alchemy to a being of opalescent flesh and ichor-throbbing veins?

Gautier was an artist in the common acceptation of the term, as well as a poet and a writer of romance; and in those pleasant fragments of autobiography scattered through the *Histoire du Romantisme* we find his averment that at the commencement of the Romantic movement of 1830 he was yet undecided whether to adopt literature or art as a profession; but, finding it "easier to paint with words than with colors," he finally decided upon the pen as his weapon in the new warfare against "the hydra of classicism with its hundred peruked heads." As a writer, however, he remained the artist still. His pages were pictures, his sentences touches of color; he learned, indeed, to "paint with words" as no other writer of the century has done; and created a powerful impression, not only upon the literature of his day, but even, it may be said, upon the language of his nation.

Possessed of an almost matchless imaginative power, and a sense of beauty as refined as that of an antique sculptor, Gautier so perfects his work as to leave nothing for the imagination of his readers to desire. He insists that they should behold the author's fancy precisely as the author himself fancied it with all its details; the position of objects, the effects of light, the disposition of shadow, the material of garments, the texture of stuffs, the interstices of stonework, the gleam of a lamp upon sharp angles of furniture, the whispering sound of trailing silk, the tone of a voice, the expression of a face – all is visible, audible, tangible. You can find nothing in one of his picturesque scenes which has not been treated with a studied accuracy of minute detail that leaves no vacancy for the eye to light upon, no hiatus for the imagination to supply. This is the art of painting carried to the highest perfection in literature. It is not wonderful that such a man should at times sacrifice style to description; and he has himself acknowledged an occasional abuse of violent coloring.

Naturally, a writer of this kind pays small regard to the demands of prudery. His work being that of the artist, he claims the privilege of the sculptor and the painter in delineations of the beautiful. A perfect human body is to him the most beautiful of objects. He does not seek to veil its loveliness with cumbrous drapery; he delights to behold it and depict it in its "divine nudity;" he views it with the eyes of the Corinthian statuary or the Pompeiian fresco-painter; he idealizes even the ideal of beauty: under his treatment flesh becomes diaphanous, eyes are transformed to orbs of prismatic light, features take tints of celestial loveliness. Like the Hellenic sculptor, he is not satisfied with beauty of form alone, but must add a vital glow of delicate coloring to the white limbs and snowy bosom of marble.

It is the artist, therefore, who must judge of Gautier's creations. To the lovers of the loveliness of the antique world, the lovers of physical beauty and artistic truth, of the charm of youthful dreams and young passion in its blossoming, of poetic ambitions and the sweet pantheism that finds all Nature vitalized by the Spirit of the Beautiful – to such the first English version of these graceful fantasies is offered in the hope that it may not be found wholly unworthy of the original.

L.H.

NEW ORLEANS, 1882.

# ONE OF CLEOPATRA'S NIGHTS

## CHAPTER I

Nineteen hundred years ago from the date of this writing, a magnificently gilded and painted cangia was descending the Nile as rapidly as fifty long, flat oars, which seemed to crawl over the furrowed water like the legs of a gigantic scarabæus, could impel it.

This cangia was narrow, long, elevated at both ends in the form of a new moon, elegantly proportioned, and admirably built for speed; the figure of a ram's head, surmounted by a golden globe, armed the point of the prow, showing that the vessel belonged to some personage of royal blood.

In the centre of the vessel arose a flat-roofed cabin – a sort of *naos*, or tent of honor – colored and gilded, ornamented with palm-leaf mouldings, and lighted by four little square windows.

Two chambers, both decorated with hieroglyphic paintings, occupied the horns of the crescent. One of them, the larger, had a second story of lesser height built upon it, like the *châteaux gaillards* of those fantastic galleys of the sixteenth century drawn by Della-Bella; the other and smaller chamber, which also served as a pilot-house, was surmounted with a triangular pediment.

In lieu of a rudder, two immense oars, adjusted upon stakes decorated with stripes of paint, which served in place of our modern row-locks, extended into the water in rear of the vessel like the webbed feet of a swan; heads crowned with *psheuts*, and bearing the allegorical horn upon their chins, were sculptured upon the handles of these huge oars, which were manœuvred by the pilot as he stood upon the deck of the cabin above.

He was a swarthy man, tawny as new bronze, with bluish surface gleams playing over his dark skin; long oblique eyes, hair deeply black and all plaited into little cords, full lips, high cheek-bones, ears standing out from the skull – the Egyptian type in all its purity. A narrow strip of cotton about his loins, together with five or six strings of glass beads and a few amulets, comprised his whole costume.

He appeared to be the only one on board the cangia; for the rowers bending over their oars, and concealed from view by the gunwales, made their presence known only through the symmetrical movements of the oars themselves, which spread open alternately on either side of the vessel, like the ribs of a fan, and fell regularly back into the water after a short pause.

Not a breath of air was stirring; and the great triangular sail of the cangia, tied up and bound to the lowered mast with a silken cord, testified that all hope of the wind rising had been abandoned.

The noonday sun shot his arrows perpendicularly from above; the ashen-hued slime of the river banks reflected the fiery glow; a raw light, glaring and blinding in its intensity, poured down in torrents of flame; the azure of the sky whitened in the heat as a metal whitens in the furnace; an ardent and lurid fog smoked in the horizon. Not a cloud appeared in the sky – a sky mournful and changeless as Eternity.

The water of the Nile, sluggish and wan, seemed to slumber in its course, and slowly extend itself in sheets of molten tin. No breath of air wrinkled its surface, or bowed down upon their stalks the cups of the lotus-flowers, as rigidly motionless as though sculptured; at long intervals the leap of a bechir or fabaka expanding its belly scarcely caused a silvery gleam upon the current; and the oars of the cangia seemed with difficulty to tear their way through the fuliginous film of that curdled water. The banks were desolate, a solemn and mighty sadness weighed upon this land, which was never aught else than a vast tomb, and in which the living appeared to be solely occupied in the work of burying the dead. It was an arid sadness, dry as pumice stone, without melancholy, without reverie, without one pearly gray cloud to follow toward the horizon, one secret spring wherein to lave one's dusty feet; the sadness of a sphinx weary of eternally gazing upon the desert, and unable to detach herself from the granite socle upon which she has sharpened her claws for twenty centuries.

So profound was the silence that it seemed as though the world had become dumb, or that the air had lost all power of conveying sound. The only noises which could be heard at intervals were the whisperings and stifled "chuckling" of the crocodiles, which, enfeebled by the heat, were wallowing among the bullrushes by the river banks; or the sound made by some ibis, which, tired of standing with one leg doubled up against its stomach, and its head sunk between its shoulders, suddenly abandoned its motionless attitude, and, brusquely whipping the blue air with its white wings, flew off to perch upon an obelisk or a palm-tree. The cangia flew like, an arrow over the smooth river-water, leaving behind it a silvery wake which soon disappeared; and only a few foam-bubbles rising to break at the surface of the stream bore testimony to the passage of the vessel, then already out of sight.

The ochre-hued or salmon-colored banks unrolled themselves rapidly, like scrolls of papyrus, between the double azure of water and sky so similar in tint that the slender tongue of earth which separated them seemed like a causeway stretching over an immense lake, and that it would have been difficult to determine whether the Nile reflected the sky, or whether the sky reflected the Nile.

The scene continually changed. At one moment were visible gigantic propylæa, whose sloping walls, painted with large panels of fantastic figures, were mirrored in the river; pylons with broad-bulging capitals; stairways guarded by huge crouching sphinxes, wearing caps with lappets of many folds, and crossing their paws of black basalt below their sharply projecting breasts; palaces, immeasurably vast, projecting against the horizon the severe horizontal lines of their entablatures, where the emblematic globe unfolded its mysterious wings like an eagle's vast-extending pinions; temples with enormous columns thick as towers, on which were limned processions of hieroglyphic figures against a background of brilliant white – all the monstrosities of that Titanic architecture. Again the eye beheld only land-scapes of desolate aridity – hills formed of stony fragments from excavations and building works, crumbs of that gigantic debauch of granite which lasted for more than thirty centuries; mountains exfoliated by heat, and mangled and striped with black lines which seemed like the cauterizations of a conflagration; hillocks humped and deformed, squatting like the criocephalus of the tombs, and projecting the outlines of their misshapen attitude against the skyline; expanses of greenish clay, reddle, flour-white tufa; and from time to time some steep cliff of dry, rose-colored granite, where yawned the black mouths of the stone quarries.

This aridity was wholly unrelieved; no oasis of foliage refreshed the eye; green seemed to be a color unknown to that nature; only some meagre palm-tree, like a vegetable crab, appeared from time to time in the horizon; or a thorny fig-tree brandished its tempered leaves like sword blades of bronze; or a carthamus-plant, which had found a little moisture to live upon in the shadow of some fragment of a broken column, relieved the general uniformity with a speck of crimson.

After this rapid glance at the aspect of the landscape, let us return to the cangia with its fifty rowers, and, without announcing ourselves, enter boldly into the *naos* of honor.

The interior was painted white with green arabesques, bands of vermilion, and gilt flowers fantastically shaped; an exceedingly fine rush matting covered the floor; at the further end stood a little bed, supported upon griffin's feet, having a back resembling that of a modern lounge or sofa; a stool with four steps to enable one to climb into bed; and (rather an odd luxury according to our ideas of comfort) a sort of hemicycle of cedar wood, supported upon a single leg, and designed to fit the nape of the neck so as to support the head of the person reclining.

Upon this strange pillow reposed a most charming head, one look of which once caused the loss of half a world; an adorable, a divine head; the head of the most perfect woman that ever lived; the most womanly and most queenly of all women; an admirable type of beauty which the imagination of poets could never invest with any new grace, and which dreamers will find forever in the depths of their dreams – it is not necessary to name Cleopatra.

Beside her stood her favorite slave Charmion, waving a large fan of ibis feathers; and a young girl was moistening with scented water the little reed blinds attached to the windows of the *naos*, so that the air might only enter impregnated with fresh odors.

Near the bed of repose, in a striped vase of alabaster with a slender neck and a peculiarly elegant, tapering shape, vaguely recalling the form of a heron, was placed a bouquet of lotus-flowers, some of a celestial blue, others of a tender rose-color, like the finger-tips of Isis the great goddess.

Either from caprice or policy, Cleopatra did not wear the Greek dress that day. She had just attended a panegyris,<sup>1</sup> and was returning to her summer palace still clad in the Egyptian costume she had worn at the festival.

Perhaps our fair readers will feel curious to know how Queen Cleopatra was attired on her return from the Mammisi of Hermonthis whereat were worshipped the holy triad of the god Mandou, the goddess Ritho, and their son, Harphra; luckily we are able to satisfy them in this regard.

For headdress Queen Cleopatra wore a kind of very light helmet of beaten gold, fashioned in the form of the body and wings of the sacred partridge. The wings, opening downward like fans, covered the temples, and extending below, almost to the neck, left exposed on either side, through a small aperture, an ear rosier and more delicately curled than the shell whence arose that Venus whom the Egyptians named Athor; the tail of the bird occupied that place where our women wear their chignons; its body, covered with imbricated feathers, and painted in variegated enamel, concealed the upper part of the head; and its neck, gracefully curving forward over the forehead of the wearer, formed together with its little head a kind of horn-shaped ornament, all sparkling with precious stones; a symbolic crest, designed like a tower, completed this odd but elegant headdress. Hair dark as a starless night flowed from beneath this helmet, and streamed in long tresses over the fair shoulders whereof the commencement only, alas! was left exposed by a collarete, or gorget, adorned with many rows of serpentine stones, azodrachs, and chrysoberyls; a linen robe diagonally cut – a mist of material, of woven air, *ventus textilis* as Petronius says, undulated in vapory whiteness about a lovely body whose outlines it scarcely shaded with the softest shading. This robe had half-sleeves, tight at the shoulder, but widening toward the elbows like our *manches-à-sabot*, and permitting a glimpse of an adorable arm and a perfect hand, the arm being clasped by six golden bracelets, and the hand adorned with a ring representing the sacred scarabæus. A girdle, whose knotted ends hung down in front, confined this free-floating tunic at the waist; a short cloak adorned with fringing completed the costume; and, if a few barbarous words will not frighten Parisian ears, we might add that the robe was called *schenti*, and the short cloak, *calisiris*.

Finally, we may observe that Queen Cleopatra wore very thin, light sandals, turned up at the toes, and fastened over the instep, like the *Souliers-à-la-poulaine* of the mediæval *chatelaines*.

But Queen Cleopatra did not wear that air of satisfaction which becomes a woman conscious of being perfectly beautiful and perfectly well dressed. She tossed and turned in her little bed, and her sudden movements momentarily disarranged the folds of her gauzy *conopeum*, which Charmion as often rearranged with inexhaustible patience, and without ceasing to wave her fan.

"This room is stifling," said Cleopatra; "even if Pthah the God of Fire established his forges in here, he could not make it hotter; the air is like the breath of a furnace!" And she moistened her lips with the tip of her little tongue, and stretched out her hand like a feverish patient seeking an absent cup.

Charmion, ever attentive, at once clapped her hands. A black slave clothed in a short tunic hanging in folds like an Albanian petticoat, and a panther-skin thrown over his shoulders, entered with the suddenness of an apparition; with his left hand balancing a tray laden with cups, and slices of watermelon, and carrying in his right a long vase with a spout like a modern teapot.

The slave filled one of these cups, pouring the liquor into it from a considerable height with marvellous dexterity, and placed it before the queen. Cleopatra merely touched the beverage with

---

<sup>1</sup> *Panegyris*; pl., *panegyreis*, – from the Greek [ ], – signifies the meeting of a whole people to worship at a common sanctuary or participate in a national religious festival. The assemblies at the Olympic, Pythian, Nemean, or Isthmian games were in this sense *panegyreis*. See Smith's Dict. Antiq. – (Trans.)

her lips, laid the cup down beside her, and turning upon Charmion her beautiful liquid black eyes, lustrous with living light, exclaimed:

"O Charmion, I am weary unto death!"

## CHAPTER II

Charmion, at once anticipating a confidence, assumed a look of pained sympathy, and drew nearer to her mistress.

"I am horribly weary!" continued Cleopatra, letting her arms fall like one utterly discouraged. "This Egypt crushes, annihilates me; this sky with its implacable azure is sadder than the deep night of Erebus; never a cloud, never a shadow, and always that red, sanguine sun, which glares down upon you like the eye of a Cyclops. Ah, Charmion, I would give a pearl for one drop of rain! From the inflamed pupil of that sky of bronze no tear has ever yet fallen upon the desolation of this land; it is only a vast covering for a tomb – the dome of a necropolis; a sky dead and dried up like the mummies it hangs over; it weighs upon my shoulders like an over-heavy mantle; it constrains and terrifies me; it seems to me that I could not stand up erect without striking my forehead against it. And, moreover, this land is truly an awful land; all things in it are gloomy, enigmatic, incomprehensible. Imagination has produced in it only monstrous chimeras and monuments immeasurable; this architecture and this art fill me with fear; those colossi, whose stone-entangled limbs compel them to remain eternally sitting with their hands upon their knees, weary me with their stupid immobility; they trouble my eyes and my horizon. When, indeed, shall the giant come who is to take them by the hand and relieve them from their long watch of twenty centuries? For even granite itself must grow weary at last! Of what master, then, do they await the coming, to leave their mountain-seats and rise in token of respect? Of what invisible flock are those huge sphinxes the guardians, crouching like dogs on the watch, that they never close their eyelids, and forever extend their claws in readiness to seize? Why are their stony eyes so obstinately fixed upon eternity and infinity? What weird secret do their firmly locked lips retain within their breasts? On the right hand, on the left, whithersoever one turns, only frightful monsters are visible – dogs with the heads of men; men with the heads of dogs; chimeras begotten of hideous couplings in the shadowy depths of the labyrinths; figures of Anubis, Typhon, Osiris; partridges with great yellow eyes that seem to pierce through you with their inquisitorial gaze, and see beyond and behind you things which one dare not speak of – a family of animals and horrible gods with scaly wings, hooked beaks, trenchant claws, ever ready to seize and devour you should you venture to cross the threshold of the temple, or lift a corner of the veil.

"Upon the walls, upon the columns, on the ceilings, on the floors, upon palaces and temples, in the long passages and the deepest pits of the necropoli, even within the bowels of the earth where light never comes, and where the flames of the torches die for want of air, forever and everywhere are sculptured and painted interminable hieroglyphics, telling in language unintelligible of things which are no longer known, and which belong, doubtless, to the vanished creations of the past – prodigious buried works wherein a whole nation was sacrificed to write the epitaph of one king! Mystery and granite – this is Egypt! Truly a fair land for a young woman, and a young queen.

"Menacing and funereal symbols alone meet the eye – the emblems of the *pedum*, the *tau*, allegorical globes, coiling serpents, and the scales in which souls are weighed – the Unknown, death, nothingness. In the place of any vegetation only *stelæ* limned with weird characters; instead of avenues of trees, avenues of granite obelisks; in lieu of soil, vast pavements of granite for which whole mountains could each furnish but one slab; in place of a sky, ceilings of granite – eternity made palpable, a bitter and everlasting sarcasm upon the frailty and brevity of life – stairways built only for the limbs of Titans, which the human foot cannot ascend save by the aid of ladders; columns that a hundred arms cannot encircle; labyrinths in which one might travel for years without discovering the termination – the vertigo of enormity, the drunkenness of the gigantic, the reckless efforts of that pride which would at any cost engrave its name deeply upon the face of the world.

"And, moreover, Charmion, I tell you a thought haunts me which terrifies me. In other lands of the earth, corpses are burned, and their ashes soon mingle with the soil. Here, it is said that the living

have no other occupation than that of preserving the dead. Potent balms save them from destruction; the remains endure after the soul has evaporated. Beneath this people lie twenty peoples; each city stands upon twenty layers of necropoli; each generation which passes away leaves a population of mummies to a shadowy city. Beneath the father you find the grandfather and the great-grandfather in their gilded and painted boxes, even as they were during life; and should you dig down forever, forever you would still find the underlying dead.

"When I think upon those bandage-swathed myriads – those multitudes of parched spectres who fill the sepulchral pits, and who have been there for two thousand years face to face in their own silence, which nothing ever breaks, not even the noise which the graveworms make in crawling, and who will be found intact after yet another two thousand years, with their crocodiles, their cats, their ibises, and all things that lived in their lifetime – then terrors seize me, and I feel my flesh creep. What do they mutter to each other? For they still have lips, and every ghost would find its body in the same state as when it quitted it, if they should all take the fancy to return.

"Ah, truly is Egypt a sinister kingdom and little suited to me, the laughter-loving and merry one. Everything in it encloses a mummy; that is the heart and the kernel of all things. After a thousand turns you must always end there; the Pyramids themselves hide sarcophagi. What nothingness and madness is this! Disembowel the sky with gigantic triangles of stone – you cannot thereby lengthen your corpse an inch. How can one rejoice and live in a land like this, where the only perfume you can respire is the acrid odor of the naphtha and bitumen which boil in the caldrons of the embalmers, where the very flooring of your chamber sounds hollow because the corridors of the hypogea and the mortuary pits extend even under your alcove? To be the queen of mummies, to have none to converse with but statues in constrained and rigid attitudes – this is, in truth, a cheerful lot. Again, if I only had some heartfelt passion to relieve this melancholy, some interest in life; if I could but love somebody or something; if I were even loved; but I am not.

"This is why I am weary, Charmion. With love, this grim and arid Egypt would seem to me fairer than even Greece with her ivory gods, her temples of snowy marble, her groves of laurel, and fountains of living water. There I should never dream of the weird face of Anubis and the ghastly terrors of the cities underground."

Charmion smiled incredulously. "That ought not, surely, to be a source of much grief to you, O queen; for every glance of your eyes transpierces hearts, like the golden arrows of Eros himself."

"Can a queen," answered Cleopatra, "ever know whether it is her face or her diadem that is loved? The rays of her starry crown dazzle the eyes and the heart. Were I to descend from the height of my throne, would I even have the celebrity or the popularity of Bacchis or Archianassa, of the first courtesan from Athens or Miletus? A queen is something so far removed from men, so elevated, so widely separated from them, so impossible for them to reach! What presumption dare flatter itself in such an enterprise? It is not simply a woman, it is an august and sacred being that has no sex, and that is worshipped kneeling without being loved. Who was ever really enamoured of Hera the snowy-armed or Pallas of the sea-green eyes? Who ever sought to kiss the silver feet of Thetis or the rosy fingers of Aurora? What lover of the divine beauties ever took unto himself wings that he might soar to the golden palaces of heaven? Respect and fear chill hearts in our presence, and in order to obtain the love of our equals, one must descend into those necropoli of which I have just been speaking."

Although she offered no further objection to the arguments of her mistress, a vague smile which played about the lips of the handsome Greek slave showed that she had little faith in the inviolability of the royal person.

"Ah," continued Cleopatra, "I wish that something would happen to me, some strange, unexpected adventure. The songs of the poets; the dances of the Syrian slaves; the banquets, rose garlanded, and prolonged into the dawn; the nocturnal races; the Laconian dogs; the tame lions; the hump-backed dwarfs; the brotherhood of the Inimitables; the combats of the arena; the new dresses; the byssus robes; the clusters of pearls; the perfumes from Asia; the most exquisite of luxuries; the

wildest of splendors – nothing any longer gives me pleasure. Everything has become indifferent to me, everything is insupportable to me."

"It is easily to be seen," muttered Charmion to herself, "that the queen has not had a lover nor had anyone killed for a whole month."

Fatigued with so lengthy a tirade, Cleopatra once more took the cup placed beside her, moistened her lips with it, and putting her head beneath her arm, like a dove putting its head under its wing, composed herself for slumber as best she could. Charmion unfastened her sandals and commenced to gently tickle the soles of her feet with a peacock's feather, and Sleep soon sprinkled his golden dust upon the beautiful eyes of Ptolemy's sister.

While Cleopatra sleeps, let us ascend upon deck and enjoy the glorious sunset view. A broad band of violet color, warmed deeply with ruddy tints toward the west, occupies all the lower portion of the sky; encountering the zone of azure above, the violet shade melts into a clear lilac, and fades off through half-rosy tints into the blue beyond; afar, where the sun, red as a buckler fallen from the furnace of Vulcan, casts his burning reflection, the deeper shades turn to pale citron hues, and glow with turquoise tints. The water, rippling under an oblique beam of light, shines with the dull gleam of the quicksilver side of a mirror, or like a damascened blade. The sinuosities of the bank, the reeds, and all objects along the shore are brought out in sharp black relief against the bright glow. By the aid of this crepuscular light you may perceive afar off, like a grain of dust floating upon quicksilver, a little brown speck trembling in the network work of luminous ripples. Is it a teal diving, a tortoise lazily drifting with the current, a crocodile raising the tip of his scaly snout above the water to breathe the cooler air of evening, the belly of a hippopotamus gleaming amidstream, or perhaps a rock left bare by the falling of the river? For the ancient Opi-Mou, Father of Waters, sadly needs to replenish his dry urn from the solstitial rains of the Mountains of the Moon.

It is none of these. By the atoms of Osiris so deftly resewn together, it is a man, who seems to walk, to skate, upon the water! Now the frail bark which sustains him becomes visible, a very nutshell of a boat, a hollow fish; three strips of bark fitted together (one for the bottom and two for the sides), and strongly fastened at either end by cord well smeared with bitumen. The man stands erect, with one foot on either side of this fragile vessel, which he impels with a single oar that also serves the purpose of a rudder; and although the royal cangia moves rapidly under the efforts of the fifty rowers, the little black bark visibly gains upon it.

Cleopatra desired some strange adventure, something wholly unexpected. This little bark which moves so mysteriously seems to us to be conveying an adventure, or, at least, an adventurer. Perhaps it contains the hero of our story; the thing is not impossible.

At any rate he was a handsome youth of twenty, with hair so black that it seemed to own a tinge of blue, a skin blonde as gold, and a form so perfectly proportioned that he might have been taken for a bronze statue by Lysippus. Although he had been rowing for a very long time he betrayed no sign of fatigue, and not a single drop of sweat bedewed his forehead.

The sun half sank below the horizon, and against his broken disk figured the dark silhouette of a far distant city, which the eye could not have distinguished but for this accidental effect of light. His radiance soon faded altogether away, and the stars, fair night-flowers of heaven, opened their chalices of gold in the azure of the firmament. The royal cangia, closely followed by the little bark, stopped before a huge marble stairway, whereof each step supported one of those sphinxes that Cleopatra so much detested. This was the landing-place of the summer palace.

Cleopatra, leaning upon Charmion, passed swiftly, like a gleaming vision, between a double line of lantern-bearing slaves.

The youth took from the bottom of his little boat a great lion-skin, threw it across his shoulders, drew the tiny shell upon the beach, and wended his way toward the palace.

## CHAPTER III

Who is this young man, balancing himself upon a fragment of bark, who dares follow the royal cangia, and is able to contend in a race of speed against fifty strong rowers from the land of Kush, all naked to the waist, and anointed with palm-oil? What secret motive urges him to this swift pursuit? That, indeed, is one of the many things we are obliged to know in our character of the intuition-gifted poet, for whose benefit all men, and even all women (a much more difficult matter), must have in their breasts that little window which Momus of old demanded.

It is not a very easy thing to find out precisely what a young man from the land of Kemi, who followed the barge of Cleopatra, queen and goddess Evergetes, on her return from the Mammisi of Hermonthis two thousand years ago, was then thinking of. But we shall make the effort notwithstanding.

Meïamoun, son of Mandouschopsh, was a youth of strange character; nothing by which ordinary minds are affected made any impression upon him. He seemed to belong to some loftier race, and might well have been regarded as the offspring of some divine adultery. His glance had the steady brilliancy of a falcon's gaze, and a serene majesty sat on his brow as upon a pedestal of marble; a noble pride curled his upper lip, and expanded his nostrils like those of a fiery horse. Although owning a grace of form almost maidenly in its delicacy, and though the bosom of the fair and effeminate god Dionysos was not more softly rounded or smoother than his, yet beneath this soft exterior were hidden sinews of steel and the strength of Hercules – a strange privilege of certain antique natures to unite in themselves the beauty of woman with the strength of man.

As for his complexion, we must acknowledge that it was of a tawny orange color, a hue little in accordance with our white-and-rose ideas of beauty; but which did not prevent him from being a very charming young man, much sought after by all kinds of women – yellow, red, copper-colored, sooty-black, or golden skinned, and even by one fair, white Greek.

Do not suppose from this that Meïamoun's lot was altogether enviable. The ashes of aged Priam, the very snows of Hippolytus, were not more insensible or more frigid; the young white-robed neophyte preparing for the initiation into the mysteries of Isis led no chaster life; the young maiden benumbed by the icy shadow of her mother was not more shyly pure.

Nevertheless, for so coy a youth, the pleasures of Meïamoun were certainly of a singular nature. He would go forth quietly some morning with his little buckler of hippopotamus hide, his *harpe* or curved sword, a triangular bow, and a snake-skin quiver filled with barbed arrows; then he would ride at a gallop far into the desert, upon his slender-limbed, small-headed, wild-maned mare, until he could find some lion-tracks. He especially delighted in taking the little lion-cubs from underneath the belly of their mother. In all things he loved the perilous or the unachievable. He preferred to walk where it seemed impossible for any human being to obtain a foothold, or to swim in a raging torrent, and he had accordingly chosen the neighborhood of the cataracts for his bathing place in the Nile. The Abyss called him!

Such was Meïamoun, son of Mandouschopsh.

For some time his humors had been growing more savage than ever. During whole months he buried himself in the Ocean of Sands, returning only at long intervals. Vainly would his uneasy mother lean from her terrace and gaze anxiously down the long road with tireless eyes. At last, after weary waiting, a little whirling cloud of dust would become visible in the horizon, and finally the cloud would open to allow a full view of Meïamoun, all covered with dust, riding upon a mare gaunt as a wolf, with red and bloodshot eyes, nostrils trembling, and huge scars along her flanks – scars which certainly were not made by spurs.

After having hung up in his room some hyena or lion skin, he would start off again.

And yet no one might have been happier than Meïamoun. He was beloved by Nephthe, daughter of the priest Afomouthis, and the loveliest woman of the Nome Arsinoïtes. Only such a being as Meïamoun could have failed to see that Nephthe had the most charmingly oblique and indescribably voluptuous eyes, a mouth sweetly illuminated by ruddy smiles, little teeth of wondrous whiteness and transparency, arms exquisitely round, and feet more perfect than the jasper feet of the statue of Isis. Assuredly there was not a smaller hand nor longer hair than hers in all Egypt. The charms of Nephthe could have been eclipsed only by those of Cleopatra. But who could dare to dream of loving Cleopatra? Ixion, enamoured of Juno, strained only a cloud to his bosom, and must forever roll the wheel of his punishment in hell.

It was Cleopatra whom Meïamoun loved.

He had at first striven to tame this wild passion; he had wrestled fiercely with it; but love cannot be strangled even as a lion is strangled, and the strong skill of the mightiest athlete avails nothing in such a contest. The arrow had remained in the wound, and he carried it with him everywhere. The radiant and splendid image of Cleopatra, with her golden-pointed diadem and her imperial purple, standing above a nation on their knees, illumined his nightly dreams and his waking thoughts. Like some imprudent man who has dared to look at the sun and forever thereafter beholds an impalpable blot floating before his eyes, so Meïamoun ever beheld Cleopatra. Eagles may gaze undazzled at the sun, but what diamond eye can with impunity fix itself upon a beautiful woman, a beautiful queen?

He commenced at last to spend his life in wandering about the neighborhood of the royal dwelling, that he might at least breathe the same air as Cleopatra, that he might sometimes kiss the almost imperceptible print of her foot upon the sand (a happiness, alas! rare indeed). He attended the sacred festivals and *panegyreis*, striving to obtain one beaming glance of her eyes, to catch in passing one stealthy glimpse of her loveliness in some of its thousand varied aspects. At other moments, filled with sudden shame of this mad life, he gave himself up to the chase with redoubled ardor, and sought by fatigue to tame the ardor of his blood and the impetuosity of his desires.

He had gone to the panegyris of Hermonthis, and, in the vague hope of beholding the queen again for an instant as she disembarked at the summer palace, had followed her cangia in his boat – little heeding the sharp stings of the sun – through a heat intense enough to make the panting sphinxes melt in lava-sweat upon their reddened pedestals.

And then he felt that the supreme moment was nigh, that the decisive instant of his life was at hand, and that he could not die with his secret in his breast.

It is a strange situation truly to find one-self enamoured of a queen. It is as though one loved a star; yet she, the star, comes forth nightly to sparkle in her place in heaven. It is a kind of mysterious rendezvous. You may find her again, you may see her; she is not offended at your gaze. Oh, misery! to be poor, unknown, obscure, seated at the very foot of the ladder, and to feel one's heart breaking with love for something glittering, solemn, and magnificent – for a woman whose meanest female attendant would scorn you! – to gaze fixedly and fatefully upon one who never sees you, who never will see you; one to whom you are no more than a ripple on the sea of humanity, in nowise differing from the other ripples, and who might a hundred times encounter you without once recognizing you; to have no reason to offer should an opportunity for addressing her present itself in excuse for such mad audacity – neither poetical talent, nor great genius, nor any superhuman qualification – nothing but love; and to be able to offer in exchange for beauty, nobility, power, and all imaginable splendor only one's passion and one's youth – rare offerings, forsooth!

Such were the thoughts which overwhelmed Meïamoun. Lying upon the sand, supporting his chin on his palms, he permitted himself to be lifted and borne away by the inexhaustible current of reverie; he sketched out a thousand projects, each madder than the last. He felt convinced that he was seeking after the unattainable, but he lacked the courage to frankly renounce his undertaking, and a perfidious hope came to whisper some lying promises in his ear.

"Athor, mighty goddess," he murmured in a deep voice, "what evil have I done against thee that I should be made thus miserable? Art thou avenging thyself for my disdain of Nephthe, daughter of the priest Afomouthis? Hast thou afflicted me thus for having rejected the love of Lamia, the Athenian hetaira, or of Flora, the Roman courtesan? Is it my fault that my heart should be sensible only to the matchless beauty of thy rival, Cleopatra? Why hast thou wounded my soul with the envenomed arrow of unattainable love? What sacrifice, what offerings dost thou desire? Must I erect to thee a chapel of the rosy marble of Syene with columns crowned by gilded capitals, a ceiling all of one block, and hieroglyphics deeply sculptured by the best workmen of Memphis and of Thebes? Answer me."

Like all gods or goddesses thus invoked, Athor answered not a word, and Meïamoun resolved upon a desperate expedient.

Cleopatra, on her part, likewise invoked the goddess Athor. She prayed for a new pleasure, for some fresh sensation. As she languidly reclined upon her couch she thought to herself that the number of the senses was sadly limited, that the most exquisite refinements of delight soon yielded to satiety, and that it was really no small task for a queen to find means of occupying her time. To test new poisons upon slaves; to make men fight with tigers, or gladiators with each other; to drink pearls dissolved; to swallow the wealth of a whole province all these things had become commonplace! and insipid.

Charmion was fairly at her wit's end, and knew not what to do for her mistress.

Suddenly a whistling sound was heard, and an arrow buried itself, quivering, in the cedar wainscoting of the wall.

Cleopatra well-nigh fainted with terror. Charmion ran to the window, leaned out, and beheld only a flake of foam on the surface of the river. A scroll of papyrus encircled the wood of the arrow. It bore only these words, written in Phœnician characters, "I love you!"

## CHAPTER IV

"I love you," repeated Cleopatra, making the serpent-coiling strip of papyrus writhe between her delicate white fingers. "Those, are the words I longed for. What intelligent spirit, what invisible genius has thus so fully comprehended my desire?"

And thoroughly aroused from her languid torpor, she sprang out of bed with the agility of a cat which has scented a mouse, placed her little ivory feet in her embroidered *tatbebs*, threw a byssus tunic over her shoulders, and ran to the window from which Charmion was still gazing.

The night was clear and calm. The risen moon outlined with huge angles of light and shadow the architectural masses of the palace, which stood out in strong relief against a background of bluish transparency; and the waters of the river, wherein her reflection lengthened into a shining column, were frosted with silvery ripples. A gentle breeze, such as might have been mistaken for the respiration of the slumbering sphinxes, quivered among the reeds and shook the azure bells of the lotus flowers; the cables of the vessels moored to the Nile's banks groaned feebly, and the rippling tide moaned upon the shore like a dove lamenting for its mate. A vague perfume of vegetation, sweeter than that of the aromatics burned in the *anschir* of the priests of Anubis, floated into the chamber. It was one of those enchanted nights of the Orient, which are more splendid than our fairest days; for our sun can ill compare with that Oriental moon.

"Do you not see far over there, almost in the middle of the river, the head of a man swimming? See, he crosses that track of light, and passes into the shadow beyond! He is already out of sight!" And, supporting herself upon Charmion's shoulder, she leaned out, with half of her fair body beyond the sill of the window, in the effort to catch another glimpse of the mysterious swimmer; but a grove of Nile acacias, dhoom-palms, and sayals flung its deep shadow upon the river in that direction, and protected the flight of the daring fugitive. If Meïamoun had but had the courtesy to look back, he might have beheld Cleopatra, the sidereal queen, eagerly seeking him through the night gloom – he, the poor obscure Egyptian, the miserable lion-hunter.

"Charmion, Charmion, send hither Phrehiphebour, the chief of the rowers, and have two boats despatched in pursuit of that man!" cried Cleopatra, whose curiosity was excited to the highest pitch.

Phrehiphebour appeared, a man of the race of Nahasi, with large hands and muscular arms, wearing a red cap not unlike a Phrygian helmet in form, and clad only in a pair of narrow drawers diagonally striped with white and blue. His huge torso, entirely nude, black and polished like a globe of jet, shone under the lamplight. He received the commands of the queen and instantly retired to execute them.

Two long, narrow boats, so light that the least inattention to equilibrium would capsize them, were soon cleaving the waters of the Nile with hissing rapidity under the efforts of the twenty vigorous rowers, but the pursuit was all in vain. After searching the river banks in every direction, and carefully exploring every patch of reeds, Phrehiphebour returned to the palace, having only succeeded in putting to flight some solitary heron which had been sleeping on one leg, or in troubling the digestion of some terrified crocodile.

So intense was the vexation of Cleopatra at being thus foiled, that she felt a strong inclination to condemn Phrehiphebour either to the wild beasts or to the hardest labor at the grindstone. Happily, Charmion interceded for the trembling unfortunate, who turned pale with fear, despite his black skin. It was the first time in Cleopatra's life that one of her desires had not been gratified as soon as expressed, and she experienced, in consequence, a kind of uneasy surprise; a first doubt, as it were, of her own omnipotence.

She, Cleopatra, wife and sister of Ptolemy – she who had been proclaimed goddess Evergetes, living queen of the regions Above and Below, Eye of Light, Chosen of the Sun (as may still be read within the cartouches sculptured on the walls of the temples) – she to find an obstacle in her path,

to have wished aught that failed of accomplishment, to have spoken and not been obeyed! As well be the wife of some wretched Paraschistes, some corpse-cutter, and melt natron in a caldron! It was monstrous, preposterous! and none but the most gentle and clement of queens could have refrained from crucifying that miserable Phrehiphebour.

You wished for some adventure, something strange and unexpected. Your wish has been gratified. You find that your kingdom is not so dead as you deemed it. It was not the stony arm of a statue which shot that arrow; it was not from a mummy's heart that came those three words which have moved even you – you who smilingly watched your poisoned slaves dashing their heads and beating their feet upon your beautiful mosaic and porphyry pavements in the convulsions of death-agony; you who even applauded the tiger which boldly buried its muzzle in the flank of some vanquished gladiator.

You could obtain all else you might wish for – chariots of silver, starred with emeralds; griffin-quadrigeræ; tunics of purple thrice-dyed; mirrors of molten steel, so clear that you might find the charms of your loveliness faithfully copied in them; robes from the land of Serica, so fine and subtly light that they could be drawn through the ring worn upon your little finger; Orient pearls of wondrous color; cups wrought by Myron or Lysippus; Indian paroquets that speak like poets – all things else you could obtain, even should you ask for the Cestus of Venus or the *pshent* of Isis, but most certainly you cannot this night capture the man who shot the arrow which still quivers in the cedar wood of your couch.

The task of the slaves who must dress you to-morrow will not be a grateful one. They will hardly escape with blows. The bosom of the unskilful waiting-maid will be apt to prove a cushion for the golden pins of the toilette, and the poor hairdresser will run great risk of being suspended by her feet from the ceiling.

"Who could have had the audacity to send me this avowal upon the shaft of an arrow? Could it have been the Nomarch Amoun-Ra who fancies himself handsomer than the Apollo of the Greeks? What think you, Charmion? Or perhaps Cheâpsiro, commander of Hermothybia, who is so boastful of his conquests in the land of Kush? Or is it not more likely to have been young Sextus, that Roman debauchee who paints his face, lisps in speaking, and wears sleeves in the fashion of the Persians?"

"Queen, it was none of those. Though you are indeed the fairest of women, those men only natter you; they do not love you. The Nomarch Amoun-Ra has chosen himself an idol to which he will be forever faithful, and that is his own person. The warrior Cheâpsiro thinks of nothing save the pleasure of recounting his victories. As for Sextus, he is so seriously occupied with the preparation of a new cosmetic that he cannot dream of anything else. Besides, he had just purchased some Laconian dresses, a number of yellow tunics embroidered with gold, and some Asiatic children which absorb all his time. Not one of those fine lords would risk his head in so daring and dangerous an undertaking; they do not love you well enough for that.

"Yesterday, in your cangia, you said that men dared not fix their dazzled eyes upon you; that they knew only how to turn pale in your presence, to fall at your feet and supplicate your mercy; and that your sole remaining resource would be to awake some ancient, bitumen-perfumed Pharaoh from his gilded coffin. Now here is an ardent and youthful heart that loves you. What will you do with it?"

Cleopatra that night sought slumber in vain. She tossed feverishly upon her couch, and long and vainly invoked Morpheus, the brother of Death. She incessantly repeated that she was the most unhappy of queens, that every one sought to persecute her, and that her life had become insupportable; woeful lamentations which had little effect upon Charmion, although she pretended to sympathize with them.

Let us for a while leave Cleopatra to seek fugitive sleep, and direct her suspicions successively upon each noble of the court. Let us return to Meïamoun, and as we are much more sagacious than Phrehiphebour, chief of the rowers, we shall have no difficulty in finding him.

Terrified at his own hardihood, Meïamoun had thrown himself into the Nile, and had succeeded in swimming the current and gaining the little grove of dhoum-palms before Phrehiphebour had even launched the two boats in pursuit of him.

When he had recovered breath, and brushed back his long black locks, all damp with river foam, behind his ears, he began to feel more at ease, more inwardly calm. Cleopatra possessed something which had come from him; some sort of communication was now established between them. Cleopatra was thinking of him, Meïamoun. Perhaps that thought might be one of wrath; but then he had at least been able to awake some feeling within her, whether of fear, anger, or pity. He had forced her to the consciousness of his existence. It was true that he had forgotten to inscribe his name upon the papyrus scroll, but what more of him could the queen have learned from the inscription, *Meïamoun, Son of Mandouschopsh*? In her eyes the slave and the monarch were equal. A goddess in choosing a peasant for her lover stoops no lower than in choosing a patrician or a king. The Immortals from a height so lofty can behold only love in the man of their choice.

The thought which had weighed upon his breast like the knee of a colossus of brass had at last departed. It had traversed the air; it had even reached the queen herself, the apex of the triangle, the inaccessible summit. It had aroused curiosity in that impassive heart; a prodigious advance, truly, toward success.

Meïamoun, indeed, never suspected that he had so thoroughly succeeded in this wise, but he felt more tranquil; for he had sworn unto himself by that mystic Bari who guides the souls of the dead to Amenthi, by the sacred birds Bermou and Ghenghen, by Typhon and by Osiris, and by all things awful in Egyptian mythology, that he should be the accepted lover of Cleopatra, though it were but for a single night, though for only a single hour, though it should cost him his life and even his very soul.

If we must explain how he had fallen so deeply in love with a woman whom he had beheld only from afar off, and to whom he had hardly dared to raise his eyes – even he who was wont to gaze fearlessly into the yellow eyes of the lion – or how the tiny seed of love, chance-fallen upon his heart, had grown there so rapidly and extended its roots so deeply, we can answer only that it is a mystery which we are unable to explain. We have already said of Meïamoun, – The Abyss called him.

Once assured that Phrehiphebour had returned with his rowers, he again threw himself into the current and once more swam toward the palace of Cleopatra, whose lamp still shone through the window curtains like a painted star. Never did Leander swim with more courage and vigor toward the tower of Sestos; yet for Meïamoun no Hero was waiting, ready to pour vials of perfume upon his head to dissipate the briny odors of the sea and banish the sharp kisses of the storm.

A strong blow from some keen lance or *harpe* was certainly the worst he had to fear, and in truth he had but little fear of such things.

He swam close under the walls of the palace, which bathed its marble feet in the river's depths, and paused an instant before a submerged archway into which the water rushed downward in eddying whirls. Twice, thrice he plunged into the vortex unsuccessfully. At last, with better luck, he found the opening and disappeared.

This archway was the opening to a vaulted canal which conducted the waters of the Nile into the baths of Cleopatra.

## CHAPTER V

Cleopatra found no rest until morning, at the hour when wandering dreams reenter the Ivory Gate. Amid the illusions of sleep she beheld all kinds of lovers swimming rivers and scaling walls in order to come to her, and, through the vague souvenirs of the night before, her dreams appeared fairly riddled with arrows bearing declarations of love. Starting nervously from time to time in her troubled slumbers, she struck her little feet unconsciously against the bosom of Charmion, who lay across the foot of the bed to serve her as a cushion.

When she awoke, a merry sunbeam was playing through the window curtain, whose woof it penetrated with a thousand tiny points of light, and thence came familiarly to the bed, flitting like a golden butterfly over her lovely shoulders, which it lightly touched in passing by with a luminous kiss. Happy sunbeam, which the gods might well have envied.

In a faint voice, like that of a sick child, Cleopatra asked to be lifted out of bed. Two of her women raised her in their arms and gently laid her on a tiger-skin stretched upon the floor, of which the eyes were formed of carbuncles and the claws of gold. Charmion wrapped her in *calasiris* of linen whiter than milk, confined her hair in a net of woven silver threads, tied to her little feet cork *tatbebs* upon the soles of which were painted, in token of contempt, two grotesque figures, representing two men of the races of Nahasi and Nahmou, bound hand and foot, so that Cleopatra literally deserved the epithet, "Conculcatrice of Nations,"<sup>2</sup> which the royal cartouche inscriptions bestow upon her.

It was the hour for the bath. Cleopatra went to bathe, accompanied by her women.

The baths of Cleopatra were built in the midst of immense gardens filled with mimosas, aloes, carob-trees, citron-trees, and Persian apple-trees, whose luxuriant freshness afforded a delicious contrast to the arid appearance of the neighboring vegetation. There, too, vast terraces uplifted masses of verdant foliage, and enabled flowers to climb almost to the very sky upon gigantic stairways of rose-colored granite; vases of Pentelic marble bloomed at the end of each step like huge lily-flowers, and the plants they contained seemed only their pistils; chimeras caressed into form by the chisels of the most skilful Greek sculptors, and less stern of aspect than the Egyptian sphinxes, with their grim mien and moody attitudes, softly extended their limbs upon the flower-strewn turf, like shapely white leverettes upon a drawing-room carpet. These were charming feminine figures, with finely chiselled nostrils, smooth brows, small mouths, delicately dimpled arms, breasts fair-rounded and daintily formed; wearing earrings, necklaces, and all the trinkets suggested by adorable caprice; whose bodies terminated in bifurcated fishes' tails, like the women described by Horace, or extended into birds' wings, or rounded into lions' haunches, or blended into volutes of foliage, according to the fancies of the artist or in conformity to the architectural position chosen. A double row of these delightful monsters lined the alley which led from the palace to the bathing halls.

At the end of this alley was a huge fountain-basin, approached by four porphyry stairways. Through the transparent depths of the diamond-clear water the steps could be seen descending to the bottom of the basin, which was strewn with gold-dust in lieu of sand. Here figures of women terminating in pedestals like Caryatides<sup>3</sup> spurted from their breasts slender jets of perfumed water, which fell into the basin in silvery dew, pitting the clear watery mirror with wrinkle-creating drops. In addition to this task these Caryatides had likewise that of supporting upon their heads an entablature decorated with Nereids and Tritons in bas-relief, and furnished with rings of bronze to which the silken cords of a velarium might be attached. From the portico was visible an extending expanse of

---

<sup>2</sup> *Conculcatrice des peuples*. From the Latin *conculcare*, to trample under foot: therefore, the epithet literally signifies the "Trampler of nations." (Trans.)

<sup>3</sup> The Greeks and Romans usually termed such figures Hermæ or Termini. Caryatides were, strictly, entire figures of women. – (Trans.)

freshly humid, bluish-green verdure and cool shade, a fragment of the Vale of Tempe transported to Egypt. The famous gardens of Semiramis would not have borne comparison with these.

We will not pause to describe the seven or eight other halls of various temperature, with their hot and cold vapors, perfume boxes, cosmetics, oils, pumice stone, gloves of woven horsehair, and all the refinements of the antique balneatory art brought to the highest pitch of voluptuous perfection.

Hither came Cleopatra, leaning with one hand upon the shoulder of Charmion. She had taken at least thirty steps all by herself. Mighty effort, enormous fatigue! A tender tint of rose commenced to suffuse the transparent skin of her cheeks, refreshing their passionate pallor; a blue network of veins relieved the amber blondness of her temples; her marble forehead, low like the antique foreheads, but full and perfect in form, united by one faultless line with a straight nose, finely chiselled as a cameo, with rosy nostrils which the least emotion made palpitate like the nostrils of an amorous tigress; the lips of her small, rounded mouth, slightly separated from the nose, wore a disdainful curve; but an unbridled voluptuousness, an indescribable vital warmth, glowed in the brilliant crimson and humid lustre of the under lip. Her eyes were shaded by level eyelids, and eyebrows slightly arched and delicately outlined. We cannot attempt by description to convey an idea of their brilliancy. It was a fire, a languor, a sparkling limpidity which might have made even the dog-headed Anubis giddy. Every glance of her eyes was in itself a poem richer than aught of Homer or Mimnermus. An imperial chin, replete with force and power to command, worthily completed this charming profile.

She stood erect upon the upper step of the basin, in an attitude full of proud grace; her figure slightly thrown back, and one foot in suspense, like a goddess about to leave her pedestal, whose eyes still linger on heaven. Her robe fell in two superb folds from the peaks of her bosom to her feet in unbroken lines. Had Cleomenes been her contemporary and enjoyed the happiness of beholding her thus, he would have broken his Venus in despair.

Before entering the water she bade Charmion, for a new caprice, to change her silver hair-net; she preferred to be crowned with reeds and lotos-flowers, like a water divinity. Charmion obeyed, and her liberated hair fell in black cascades over her shoulders, and shadowed her beautiful cheeks in rich bunches, like ripening grapes.

Then the linen tunic, which had been confined only by one golden clasp, glided down over her marble body, and fell in a white cloud at her feet, like the swan at the feet of Leda...

And Meïamoun, where was he?

Oh cruel lot, that so many insensible objects should enjoy the favors which would ravish a lover with delight! The wind which toys with a wealth of perfumed hair, or kisses beautiful lips with kisses which it is unable to appreciate; the water which envelops an adorably beautiful body in one universal kiss, and is yet, notwithstanding, indifferent to that exquisite pleasure; the mirror which reflects so many charming images; the buskin or *tatbeb* which clasps a divine little foot – oh, what happiness lost!

Cleopatra dipped her pink heel in the water and descended a few steps. The quivering flood made a silver belt about her waist, and silver bracelets about her arms, and rolled in pearls like a broken necklace over her bosom and shoulders; her wealth of hair, lifted by the water, extended behind her like a royal mantle; even in the bath she was a queen. She swam to and fro, dived, and brought up handfuls of gold-dust with which she laughingly pelted some of her women. Again, she clung suspended to the balustrade of the basin, concealing or exposing her treasures of loveliness – now permitting only her lustrous and polished back to be seen, now showing her whole figure, like Venus Anadyomene, and incessantly varying the aspects of her beauty.

Suddenly she uttered a cry as shrill as that of Diana surprised by Actæon. She had seen gleaming through the neighboring foliage a burning eye, yellow and phosphoric as the eye of a crocodile or lion.

It was Meïamoun, who, crouching behind a tuft of leaves, and trembling like a fawn in a field of wheat, was intoxicating himself with the dangerous pleasure of beholding the queen in her bath. Though brave even to temerity, the cry of Cleopatra passed through his heart, coldly piercing as the

blade of a sword. A death-like sweat covered his whole body; his arteries hissed through his temples with a sharp sound; the iron hand of anxious fear had seized him by the throat and was strangling him.

The eunuchs rushed forward, lance in hand. Cleopatra pointed out to them the group of trees, where they found Meïamoun crouching in concealment. Defence was out of the question. He attempted none, and suffered himself to be captured. They prepared to kill him with that cruel and stupid impassibility characteristic of eunuchs; but Cleopatra, who, in the interim, had covered herself with her *calasiris*, made signs to them to stop, and bring the prisoner before her.

Meïamoun could only fall upon his knees and stretch forth suppliant hands to her, as to the altars of the gods.

"Are you some assassin bribed by Rome, or for what purpose have you entered these sacred precincts from which all men are excluded?" demanded Cleopatra with an imperious gesture of interrogation.

"May my soul be found light in the balance of Amenti, and may Tmeï, daughter of the Sun and goddess of Truth, punish me if I have ever entertained a thought of evil against you, O queen!" answered Meïamoun, still upon his knees.

Sincerity and loyalty were written upon his countenance in characters so transparent that Cleopatra immediately banished her suspicions, and looked upon the young Egyptian with a look less stern and wrathful. She saw that he was beautiful.

"Then what motive could have prompted you to enter a place where you could only expect to meet death?"

"I love you!" murmured Meïamoun in a low, but distinct voice; for his courage had returned, as in every desperate situation when the odds against him could be no worse.

"Ah!" cried Cleopatra, bending toward him, and seizing his arm with a sudden brusque movement, "so, then, it was you who shot that arrow with the papyrus scroll! By Oms, the Dog of Hell, you are a very foolhardy wretch!.. I now recognize you. I long observed you wandering like a complaining Shade about the places where I dwell... You were at the Procession of Isis, at the Panegyris of Hermonthis. You followed the royal cangia. Ah! you must have a queen?.. You have no mean ambitions. You expect, without doubt, to be well paid in return... Assuredly I am going to love you... Why not?"

"Queen," returned Meïamoun with a look of deep melancholy, "do not rail. I am mad, it is true. I have deserved death; that is also true. Be humane; bid them kill me."

"No; I have taken the whim to be clement to-day. I will give you your life."

"What would you that I should do with life? I love you!"

"Well, then, you shall be satisfied; you shall die," answered Cleopatra. "You have indulged yourself in wild and extravagant dreams; in fancy your desires have crossed an impassable threshold. You imagined yourself to be Cæsar or Mark Antony. You loved the queen. In some moment of delirium you have been able to believe that, under some condition of things which takes place but once in a thousand years, Cleopatra might some day love you. Well, what you thought impossible is actually about to happen. I will transform your dream into a reality. It pleases me, for once, to secure the accomplishment of a mad hope. I am willing to inundate you with glories and splendors and lightnings. I intend that your good fortune shall be dazzling in its brilliancy. You were at the bottom of the ladder. I am about to lift you to the summit, abruptly, suddenly, without a transition. I take you out of nothingness, I make you the equal of a god, and I plunge you back again into nothingness; that is all. But do not presume to call me cruel or to invoke my pity; do not weaken when the hour comes. I am good to you. I lend myself to your folly. I have the right to order you to be killed at once; but since you tell me that you love me, I will have you killed to-morrow instead. Your life belongs to me for one night. I am generous. I will buy it from you; I could take it from you. But what are you doing on your knees at my feet? Rise, and give me your arm, that we may return to the palace."

## CHAPTER VI

Our world of to-day is puny indeed beside the antique world. Our banquets are mean, niggardly, compared with the appalling sumptuousness of the Roman patricians and the princes of ancient Asia. Their ordinary repasts would in these days be regarded as frenzied orgies, and a whole modern city could subsist for eight days upon the leavings of one supper given by Lucullus to a few intimate friends. With our miserable habits we find it difficult to conceive of those enormous existences, realizing everything vast, strange, and most monstrously impossible that imagination could devise. Our palaces are mere stables, in which Caligula would not quarter his horse. The retinue of our wealthiest constitutional king is as nothing compared with that of a petty satrap or a Roman proconsul. The radiant suns which once shone upon the earth are forever extinguished in the nothingness of uniformity. Above the dark swarm of men no longer tower those Titanic colossi who bestrode the world in three paces, like the steeds of Homer; no more towers of Lylacq; no giant Babel scaling the sky with its infinity of spirals; no temples immeasurable, builded with the fragments of quarried mountains; no kingly terraces for which successive ages and generations could each erect but one step, and from whence some dreamfully reclining prince might gaze on the face of the world as upon a map unfolded; no more of those extravagantly vast cities of cyclopæan edifices, inextricably piled upon one another, with their mighty circumvallations, their circuses roaring night and day, their reservoirs filled with ocean brine and peopled with whales and leviathans, their colossal stairways, their superimposition of terraces, their tower-summits bathed in clouds, their giant palaces, their aqueducts, their multitude-vomiting gates, their shadowy necropoli. Alas! henceforth only plaster hives upon chessboard pavements.

One marvels that men did not revolt against such confiscation of all riches and all living forces for the benefit of a few privileged ones, and that such exorbitant fantasies should not have encountered any opposition on their bloody way. It was because those prodigious lives were the realizations by day of the dreams which haunted each man by night, the personifications of the common ideal which the nations beheld living symbolized under one of those meteoric names that flame inextinguishably through the night of ages. To-day, deprived of such dazzling spectacles of omnipotent will, of the lofty contemplation of some human mind whose least wish makes itself visible in actions unparalleled, in enormities of granite and brass, the world becomes irredeemably and hopelessly dull. Man is no longer represented in the realization of his imperial fancy.

The story which we are writing, and the great name of Cleopatra which appears in it, have prompted us to these reflections, so ill-sounding, doubtless, to modern ears. But the spectacle of the antique world is something so crushingly discouraging, even to those imaginations which deem themselves exhaustless, and those minds which fancy themselves to have conceived the utmost limits of fairy magnificence, that we cannot here forbear recording our regret and lamentation that we were not cotemporaries of Sardanapalus; of Teghathphalazar; of Cleopatra, queen of Egypt; or even of Elagabalus, emperor of Rome and priest of the Sun.

It is our task to describe a supreme orgie – a banquet compared with which the splendors of Belshazzar's feast must pale – one of Cleopatra's nights. How can we picture forth in this French tongue, so chaste, so icily prudish, that unbounded transport of passions, that huge and mighty debauch which feared not to mingle the double purple of wine and blood, those furious outbursts of insatiate pleasure, madly leaping toward the Impossible with all the wild ardor of senses as yet untamed by the long fast of Christianity?

The promised night should well have been a splendid one, for all the joys and pleasures possible in a human lifetime were to be concentrated into the space of a few hours. It was necessary that the life of Meïamoun should be converted into a powerful elixir which he could imbibe at a single draught. Cleopatra desired to dazzle her voluntary victim, and plunge him into a whirlpool of dizzy

pleasures; to intoxicate and madden him with the wine of orgie, so that death, though freely accepted, might come invisibly and unawares.

Let us transport our readers to the banquet-hall.

Our existing architecture offers few points for comparison with those vast edifices whose very ruins resemble the crumbings of mountains rather than the remains of buildings. It needed all the exaggeration of the antique life to animate and fill those prodigious palaces, whose halls were too lofty and vast to allow of any ceiling save the sky itself – a magnificent ceiling, and well worthy of such mighty architecture.

The banquet-hall was of enormous and Babylonian dimensions; the eye could not penetrate its immeasurable depth. Monstrous columns – short, thick, and solid enough to sustain the pole itself – heavily expanded their broad-swelling shafts upon socles variegated with hieroglyphics, and sustained upon their bulging capitals gigantic arcades of granite rising by successive tiers, like vast stairways reversed. Between each two pillars a colossal sphinx of basalt, crowned with the *pshent*, bent forward her oblique-eyed face and horned chin, and gazed into the hall with a fixed and mysterious look. The columns of the second tier, receding from the first, were more elegantly formed, and crowned in lieu of capitals with four female heads addorsed, wearing caps of many folds and all the intricacies of the Egyptian headdress. Instead of sphinxes, bull-headed idols – impassive spectators of nocturnal frenzy and the furies of orgie – were seated upon thrones of stone, like patient hosts awaiting the opening of the banquet.

A third story, constructed in a yet different style of architecture, with elephants of bronze spouting perfume from their trunks, crowned the edifice; above, the sky yawned like a blue gulf, and the curious stars leaned over the frieze.<sup>4</sup>

Prodigious stairways of porphyry, so highly polished that they reflected the human body like a mirror, ascended and descended on every hand, and bound together these huge masses of architecture.

We can only make a very rapid sketch here, in order to convey some idea of this awful structure, proportioned out of all human measurements. It would require the pencil of Martin,<sup>5</sup> the great painter of enormities passed away, and we can present only a weak pen-picture in lieu of the Apocalyptic depth of his gloomy style; but imagination may supply our deficiencies. Less fortunate than the painter and the musician, we can only present objects and ideas separately in slow succession. We have as yet spoken of the banquet-hall only, without referring to the guests, and yet we have but barely indicated its character. Cleopatra and Meïamoun are waiting for us. We see them drawing near...

Meïamoun was clad in a linen tunic constellated with stars, and a purple mantle, and wore a fillet about his locks, like an Oriental king. Cleopatra was apparelled in a robe of pale green, open at either side, and clasped with golden bees. Two bracelets of immense pearls gleamed around her naked arms; upon her head glimmered the golden-pointed diadem. Despite the smile on her lips, a slight cloud of preoccupation shadowed her fair forehead, and from time to time her brows became knitted in a feverish manner. What thoughts could trouble the great queen? As for Meïamoun, his face wore the ardent and luminous look of one in ecstasy or vision; light beamed and radiated from his brow and temples, surrounding his head with a golden nimbus, like one of the twelve great gods of Olympus.

A deep, heartfelt joy illumined his every feature. He had embraced his restless-winged chimera, and it had not flown from him; he had reached the goal of his life. Though he were to live to the age of Nestor or Priam, though he should behold his veined temples hoary with locks whiter than

---

<sup>4</sup> Does not this suggest the lines which DeQuincey so much admired?—"A wilderness of building, sinking far,And self-withdrawn into a wondrous depthFar sinking into splendor, without end.Fabric it seemed of diamond, and of gold,With alabaster domes and silver spires,And blazing terrace upon terrace, highUplifted. Here serene pavilions bright,In avenues disposed; their towers begirtWith battlements that on their restless frontsBore stars."

<sup>5</sup> John Martin, the English painter, whose creations were unparalleled in breadth and depth of composition. His pictures seem to have made a powerful impression upon the highly imaginative author of these Romances. There is something in these descriptions of antique architecture that suggests the influence of such pictured fantasies as Martin's "Seventh Plague;" "The Heavenly City;" and perhaps, especially, the famous "Pandemonium," with its infernal splendor, in Martin's illustrations to "Paradise Lost." – (Trans.)

those of the high priest of Ammon, he could never know another new experience, never feel another new pleasure. His maddest hopes had been so much more than realized that there was nothing in the world left for him to desire.

Cleopatra seated him beside her upon a throne with golden griffins on either side, and clapped her little hands together. Instantly lines of fire, bands of sparkling light, outlined all the projections of the architecture – the eyes of the sphinxes flamed with phosphoric lightnings; the bull-headed idols breathed flame; the elephants, in lieu of perfumed water, spouted aloft bright columns of crimson fire; arms of bronze, each bearing a torch, started from the walls, and blazing aigrettes bloomed in the sculptured hearts of the lotos flowers.

Huge blue flames palpitated in tripods of brass; giant candelabras shook their dishevelled light in the midst of ardent vapors; everything sparkled, glittered, beamed. Prismatic irises crossed and shattered each other in the air. The facets of the cups, the angles of the marbles and jaspers, the chiselling of the vases – all caught a sparkle, a gleam, or a flash as of lightning. Radiance streamed in torrents and leaped from step to step like a cascade, over the porphyry-stairways. It seemed the reflection of a conflagration on some broad river. Had the Queen of Sheba ascended thither she would have caught up the folds of her robe, and believed herself walking in water, as when she stepped upon the crystal pavements of Solomon. Viewed through that burning haze, the monstrous figures of the colossi, the animals, the hieroglyphics, seemed to become animated and to live with a factitious life; the black marble rams bleated ironically, and clashed their gilded horns; the idols breathed harshly through their panting nostrils.

The orgie was at its height: the dishes of phenicopters' tongues, and the livers of scarus fish; the eels fattened upon human flesh, and cooked in brine; the dishes of peacock's brains; the boars stuffed with living birds; and all the marvels of the antique banquets were heaped upon the three table-surfaces of the gigantic triclinium. The wines of Crete, of Massicus, and of Falernus foamed up in cratera wreathed with roses, and filled by Asiatic pages whose beautiful flowing hair served the guests to wipe their hands upon. Musicians playing upon the sistrum, the tympanum, the sambuke, and the harp with one-and-twenty strings filled all the upper galleries, and mingled their harmonies with the tempest of sound that hovered over the feast. Even the deep-voiced thunder could not have made itself heard there.

Meïamoun, whose head was lying on Cleopatra's shoulder, felt as though his reason were leaving him. The banquet-hall whirled around him like a vast architectural nightmare; through the dizzy glare he beheld perspectives and colonnades without end; new zones of porticoes seemed to uprear themselves upon the real fabric, and bury their summits in heights of sky to which Babel never rose. Had he not felt within his hand the soft, cool hand of Cleopatra, he would have believed himself transported into an enchanted world by some witch of Thessaly or Magian of Persia.

Toward the close of the repast hump-backed dwarfs and mummers engaged in grotesque dances and combats; then young Egyptian and Greek maidens, representing the black and white Hours, danced with inimitable grace a voluptuous dance after the Ionian manner.

Cleopatra herself arose from her throne, threw aside her royal mantle, replaced her starry diadem with a garland of flowers, attached golden *crotali*<sup>6</sup> to her alabaster hands, and began to dance before Meïamoun, who was ravished with delight. Her beautiful arms, rounded like the handles of an alabaster vase, shook out bunches of sparkling notes, and her *crotali* prattled with ever-increasing volubility. Poised on the pink tips of her little feet, she approached swiftly to graze the forehead of Meïamoun with a kiss; then she recommenced her wondrous art, and flitted around him, now backward-leaning, with head reversed, eyes half closed, arms lifelessly relaxed, locks uncurled and loose-hanging like a Bacchante of Mount Mænalus; now again, active, animated, laughing, fluttering, more tireless and capricious in her movements than the pilfering bee. Heart-consuming love, sensual

---

<sup>6</sup> Antique castanets. – (Trans.)

pleasure, burning passion, youth inexhaustible and ever-fresh, the promise of bliss to come – she expressed all...

The modest stars had ceased to contemplate the scene; their golden eyes could not endure such a spectacle; the heaven itself was blotted out, and a dome of flaming vapor covered the hall.

Cleopatra seated herself once more by Meïamoun. Night advanced; the last of the black Hours was about to take flight; a faint blue glow entered with bewildered aspect into the tumult of ruddy light as a moonbeam falls into a furnace; the upper arcades became suffused with pale azure tints – day was breaking.

Meïamoun took the horn vase which an Ethiopian slave of sinister countenance presented to him, and which contained a poison so violent that it would have caused any other vase to burst asunder. Flinging his whole life to his mistress in one last look, he lifted to his lips the fatal cup in which the envenomed liquor boiled up, hissing.

Cleopatra turned pale, and laid her hand on Meïamoun's arm to stay the act. His courage touched her. She was about to say, "Live to love me yet, I desire it!.." when the sound of a clarion was heard. Four heralds-at-arms entered the banquet-hall on horseback; they were officers of Mark Antony, and rode but a short distance in advance of their master. Cleopatra silently loosened the arm of Meïamoun. A long ray of sunlight suddenly played upon her forehead, as though trying to replace her absent diadem.

"You see the moment has come; it is daybreak, it is the hour when happy dreams take flight," said Meïamoun. Then he emptied the fatal vessel at a draught, and fell as though struck by lightning. Cleopatra bent her head, and one burning tear – the only one she had ever shed – fell into her cup to mingle with the molten pearl.

"By Hercules, my fair queen! I made all speed in vain. I see I have come too late," cried Mark Antony, entering the banquet-hall, "the supper is over. But what signifies this corpse upon the pavement?"

"Oh, nothing!" returned Cleopatra, with a smile; "only a poison I was testing with the idea of using it upon myself should Augustus take me prisoner. My dear Lord, will you not please to take a seat beside me, and watch those Greek buffoons dance?"

## CLARIMONDE <sup>7</sup>

Brother, you ask me if I have ever loved. Yes. My story is a strange and terrible one; and though I am sixty-six years of age, I scarcely dare even now to disturb the ashes of that memory. To you I can refuse nothing; but I should not relate such a tale to any less experienced mind. So strange were the circumstances of my story, that I can scarcely believe myself to have ever actually been a party to them. For more than three years I remained the victim of a most singular and diabolical illusion. Poor country priest though I was, I led every night in a dream – would to God it had been all a dream! – a most worldly life, a damning life, a life of Sardanapalus. One single look too freely cast upon a woman well-nigh caused me to lose my soul; but finally by the grace of God and the assistance of my patron saint, I succeeded in casting out the evil spirit that possessed me. My daily life was long interwoven with a nocturnal life of a totally different character. By day I was a priest of the Lord, occupied with prayer and sacred things; by night, from the instant that I closed my eyes I became a young nobleman, a fine connoisseur in women, dogs, and horses; gambling, drinking, and blaspheming, and when I awoke at early daybreak, it seemed to me, on the other hand, that I had been sleeping, and had only dreamed that I was a priest. Of this somnambulistic life there now remains to me only the recollection of certain scenes and words which I cannot banish from my memory; but although I never actually left the walls of my presbytery, one would think to hear me speak that I were a man who, weary of all worldly pleasures, had become a religious, seeking to end a tempestuous life in the service of God, rather than an humble seminarist who has grown old in this obscure curacy, situated in the depths of the woods and even isolated from the life of the century.

Yes, I have loved as none in the world ever loved – with an insensate and furious passion – so violent that I am astonished it did not cause my heart to burst asunder. Ah, what nights – what nights!

From my earliest childhood I had felt a vocation to the priesthood, so that all my studies were directed with that idea in view. Up to the age of twenty-four my life had been only a prolonged novitiate. Having completed my course of theology I successively received all the minor orders, and my superiors judged me worthy, despite my youth, to pass the last awful degree. My ordination was fixed for Easter week.

I had never gone into the world. My world was confined by the walls of the college and the seminary. I knew in a vague sort of a way that there was something called Woman, but I never permitted my thoughts to dwell on such a subject, and I lived in a state of perfect innocence. Twice a year only I saw my infirm and aged mother, and in those visits were comprised my sole relations with the outer world.

I regretted nothing; I felt not the least hesitation at taking the last irrevocable step; I was filled with joy and impatience. Never did a betrothed lover count the slow hours with more feverish ardor; I slept only to dream that I was saying mass; I believed there could be nothing in the world more delightful than to be a priest; I would have refused to be a king or a poet in preference. My ambition could conceive of no loftier aim.

I tell you this in order to show you that what happened to me could not have happened in the natural order of things, and to enable you to understand that I was the victim of an inexplicable fascination.

At last the great day came. I walked to the church with a step so light that I fancied myself sustained in air, or that I had wings upon my shoulders. I believed myself an angel, and wondered at the sombre and thoughtful faces of my companions, for there were several of us. I had passed all the night in prayer, and was in a condition well-nigh bordering on ecstasy. The bishop, a venerable

---

<sup>7</sup> "La Morte Amoureuse."

old man, seemed to me God the Father leaning over his Eternity, and I beheld Heaven through the vault of the temple.

You well know the details of that ceremony – the benediction, the communion under both forms, the anointing of the palms of the hands with the Oil of Catechumens, and then the holy sacrifice offered in concert with the bishop.

Ah, truly spake Job when he declared that the imprudent man is one who hath not made a covenant with his eyes! I accidentally lifted my head, which until then I had kept down, and beheld before me, so close that it seemed that I could have touched her – although she was actually a considerable distance from me and on the further side of the sanctuary railing – a young woman of extraordinary beauty, and attired with royal magnificence. It seemed as though scales had suddenly fallen from my eyes. I felt like a blind man who unexpectedly recovers his sight. The bishop, so radiantly glorious but an instant before, suddenly vanished away, the tapers paled upon their golden candlesticks like stars in the dawn, and a vast darkness seemed to fill the whole church. The charming creature appeared in bright relief against the background of that darkness, like some angelic revelation. She seemed herself radiant, and radiating light rather than receiving it.

I lowered my eyelids, firmly resolved not to again open them, that I might not be influenced by external objects, for distraction had gradually taken possession of me until I hardly knew what I was doing.

In another minute, nevertheless, I reopened my eyes, for through my eyelashes I still beheld her, all sparkling with prismatic colors, and surrounded with such a purple penumbra as one beholds in gazing at the sun.

Oh, how beautiful she was! The greatest painters, who followed ideal beauty into heaven itself, and thence brought back to earth the true portrait of the Madonna, never in their delineations even approached that wildly beautiful reality which I saw before me. Neither the verses of the poet nor the palette of the artist could convey any conception of her. She was rather tall, with a form and bearing of a goddess. Her hair, of a soft blonde hue, was parted in the midst and flowed back over her temples in two rivers of rippling gold; she seemed a diademed queen. Her forehead, bluish-white in its transparency, extended its calm breadth above the arches of her eyebrows, which by a strange singularity were almost black, and admirably relieved the effect of sea-green eyes of unsustainable vivacity and brilliancy. What eyes! With a single flash they could have decided a man's destiny. They had a life, a limpidity, an ardor, a humid light which I have never seen in human eyes; they shot forth rays like arrows, which I could distinctly *see* enter my heart. I know not if the fire which illumined them came from heaven or from hell, but assuredly it came from one or the other. That woman was either an angel or a demon, perhaps both. Assuredly she never sprang from the flank of Eve, our common mother. Teeth of the most lustrous pearl gleamed in her ruddy smile, and at every inflection of her lips little dimples appeared in the satiny rose of her adorable cheeks. There was a delicacy and pride in the regal outline of her nostrils bespeaking noble blood. Agate gleams played over the smooth lustrous skin of her half-bare shoulders, and strings of great blonde pearls – almost equal to her neck in beauty of color – descended upon her bosom. From time to time she elevated her head with the undulating grace of a startled serpent or peacock, thereby imparting a quivering motion to the high lace ruff which surrounded it like a silver trellis-work.

She wore a robe of orange-red velvet, and from her wide ermine-lined sleeves there peeped forth patrician hands of infinite delicacy, and so ideally transparent that, like the fingers of Aurora, they permitted the light to shine through them.

All these details I can recollect at this moment as plainly as though they were of yesterday, for notwithstanding I was greatly troubled at the time, nothing escaped me; the faintest touch of shading, the little dark speck at the point of the chin, the imperceptible down at the corners of the lips, the velvety floss upon the brow, the quivering shadows of the eyelashes upon the cheeks, I could notice everything with astonishing lucidity of perception.

And gazing I felt opening within me gates that had until then remained closed; vents long obstructed became all clear, permitting glimpses of unfamiliar perspectives within; life suddenly made itself visible to me under a totally novel aspect. I felt as though I had just been born into a new world and a new order of things. A frightful anguish commenced to torture my heart as with red-hot pincers. Every successive minute seemed to me at once but a second and yet a century. Meanwhile the ceremony was proceeding, and I shortly found myself transported far from that world of which my newly-born desires were furiously besieging the entrance. Nevertheless I answered "Yes" when I wished to say "No," though all within me protested against the violence done to my soul by my tongue. Some occult power seemed to force the words from my throat against my will. Thus it is, perhaps, that so many young girls walk to the altar firmly resolved to refuse in a startling manner the husband imposed upon them, and that yet not one ever fulfils her intention. Thus it is, doubtless, that so many poor novices take the veil, though they have resolved to tear it into shreds at the moment when called upon to utter the vows. One dares not thus cause so great a scandal to all present, nor deceive the expectation of so many people. All those eyes, all those wills seem to weigh down upon you like a cope of lead; and, moreover, measures have been so well taken, everything has been so thoroughly arranged beforehand and after a fashion so evidently irrevocable, that the will yields to the weight of circumstances and utterly breaks down.

As the ceremony proceeded the features of the fair unknown changed their expression. Her look had at first been one of caressing tenderness; it changed to an air of disdain and of mortification, as though at not having been able to make itself understood.

With an effort of will sufficient to have uprooted a mountain, I strove to cry out that I would not be a priest, but I could not speak; my tongue seemed nailed to my palate, and I found it impossible to express my will by the least syllable of negation. Though fully awake, I felt like one under the influence of a nightmare, who vainly strives to shriek out the one word upon which life depends.

She seemed conscious of the martyrdom I was undergoing, and, as though to encourage me, she gave me a look replete with divinest promise. Her eyes were a poem; their every glance was a song.

She said to me:

"If thou wilt be mine, I shall make thee happier than God Himself in His paradise. The angels themselves will be jealous of thee. Tear off that funeral shroud in which thou art about to wrap thyself. I am Beauty, I am Youth, I am Life. Come to me! Together we shall be Love. Can Jehovah offer thee aught in exchange? Our lives will flow on like a dream, in one eternal kiss.

## **Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.**

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.