Caesar and Cleopatra - Act IV

di George Bernard Shaw (1901)

ACT IV

Cleopatra's sousing in the east harbor of Alexandria was in October 48 B. C. In March 47 she is passing the afternoon in her boudoir in the palace, among a bevy of her ladies, listening to a slave girl who is playing the harp in the middle of the room. The harpist's master, an old musician, with a lined face, prominent brows, white beard, moustache and eyebrows twisted and horned at the ends, and a consciously keen and pretentious expression, is squatting on the floor close to her on her right, watching her performance. Ftatateeta is in attendance near the door, in front of a group of female slaves. Except the harp player all are seated: Cleopatra in a chair opposite the door on the other side of the room; the rest on the ground. Cleopatra's ladies are all young, the most conspicuous being Charmian and Iras, her favorites. Charmian is a hatchet faced, terra cotta colored little goblin, swift in her movements, and neatly finished at the hands and feet. Iras is a plump, goodnatured creature, rather fatuous, with a profusion of red hair, and a tendency to giggle on the slightest provocation.

CLEOPATRA: Can I--

FTATATEETA: *insolently, to the player.* Peace, thou! The Queen speaks. *The player stops.*

CLEOPATRA: *to the old musician.* I want to learn to play the harp with my own hands. Caesar loves music. Can you teach me?

MUSICIAN: Assuredly I and no one else can teach the Queen. Have I not discovered the lost method of the ancient Egyptians, who could make a pyramid tremble by touching a bass string? All the other teachers are quacks: I have exposed them repeatedly.

CLEOPATRA: Good: you shall teach me. How long will it take?

MUSICIAN: Not very long: only four years. Your Majesty must first become proficient in the philosophy of Pythagoras.

CLEOPATRA: Has she *indicating the slave* become proficient in the philosophy of Pythagoras?

MUSICIAN: Oh, she is but a slave. She learns as a dog learns.

CLEOPATRA: Well, then, I will learn as a dog learns; for she plays better than you. You shall give me a lesson every day for a fortnight. *The musician hastily scrambles to his feet and bows profoundly.* After that, whenever I strike a false note you shall be flogged; and if I strike so many that there is not time to flog you, you shall be thrown into the Nile to feed the crocodiles. Give the girl a piece of gold; and send them away.

MUSICIAN: *much taken aback.* But true art will not be thus forced.

FTATATEETA: *pushing him out.* What is this? Answering the Queen, forsooth. Out with you.

He is pushed out by Ftatateeta, the girl following with her harp, amid the laughter of the ladies and slaves.

CLEOPATRA: Now, can any of you amuse me? Have you any stories or any news?

IRAS: Ftatateeta--

CLEOPATRA: Oh, Ftatateeta, Ftatateeta, always Ftatateeta. Some new tale to set me against her.

IRAS: No: this time Ftatateeta has been virtuous. *All the ladies laugh--not the slaves.* Pothinus has been trying to bribe her to let him speak with you.

CLEOPATRA: *wrathfully.* Ha! You all sell audiences with me, as if I saw whom you please, and not

whom I please. I should like to know how much of her gold piece that harp girl will have to give up before she leaves the palace.

IRAS: We can easily find out that for you.

The ladies laugh.

CLEOPATRA: *frowning.* You laugh; but take care, take care. I will find out some day how to make myself served as Caesar is served.

CHARMIAN: Old hooknose! *They laugh again.*

CLEOPATRA: *revolted.* Silence. Charmian: do not you be a silly little Egyptian fool. Do you know why I allow you all to chatter impertinently just as you please, instead of treating you as Ftatateeta would treat you if she were Queen?

CHARMIAN: Because you try to imitate Caesar in everything; and he lets everybody say what they please to him.

CLEOPATRA: No; but because I asked him one day why he did so; and he said "Let your women talk; and you will learn something from them." What have I to learn from them? I said. "What they ARE," said he; and oh! you should have seen his eye as he said it. You would have curled up, you shallow things. *They laugh. She turns fiercely on Iras* At whom are you laughing--at me or at Caesar?

IRAS: At Caesar.

CLEOPATRA: If you were not a fool, you would laugh at me; and if you were not a coward you would not be afraid to tell me so. *Ftatateeta returns.* Ftatateeta: they tell me that Pothinus has offered you a bribe to admit him to my presence.

FTATATEETA: *protesting.* Now by my father's gods--

CLEOPATRA: *cutting her short despotically.* Have I not told you not to deny things? You would spend the day calling your father's gods to witness to your virtues if I let you. Go take the bribe; and bring in Pothinus. *Ftatateeta is about to reply.* Don't answer me. Go.

Ftatateeta goes out; and Cleopatra rises and begins to prowl to and fro between her chair and the door, meditating. All rise and stand.

IRAS: *as she reluctantly rises.* Heigho! I wish Caesar were back in Rome.

CLEOPATRA: *threateningly.* It will be a bad day for you all when he goes. Oh, if I were not ashamed to let him see that I am as cruel at heart as my father, I would make you repent that speech! Why do you wish him away?

CHARMIAN: He makes you so terribly prosy and serious and learned and philosophical. It is worse than being religious, at OUR ages. *The ladies laugh.*

CLEOPATRA: Cease that endless cackling, will you. Hold your tongues.

CHARMIAN: *with mock resignation.* Well, well: we must try to live up to Caesar.

They laugh again. Cleopatra rages silently as she continues to prowl to and fro. Ftatateeta comes back with Pothinus, who halts on the threshold.

FTATATEETA: *at the door.* Pothinus craves the ear of the--

CLEOPATRA: There, there: that will do: let him come in.

CLEOPATRA: *She resumes her seat. All sit down except Pothinus, who advances to the middle of the room. Ftatateeta takes her former place.* Well, Pothinus: what is the latest news from your rebel friends?

POTHINUS: *haughtily.* I am no friend of rebellion. And a prisoner does not receive news.

CLEOPATRA: You are no more a prisoner than I am--than Caesar is. These six months we have been besieged in this palace by my subjects. You are allowed to walk on the beach among the soldiers. Can I go further myself, or can Caesar?

POTHINUS: You are but a child, Cleopatra, and do not understand these matters.

The ladies laugh. Cleopatra looks inscrutably at him.

CHARMIAN: I see you do not know the latest news, Pothinus.

POTHINUS: What is that?

CHARMIAN: That Cleopatra is no longer a child. Shall I tell you how to grow much older, and much, MUCH wiser in one day?

POTHINUS: I should prefer to grow wiser without growing older.

CHARMIAN: Well, go up to the top of the lighthouse; and get somebody to take you by the hair and throw you into the sea. *The ladies laugh.*

CLEOPATRA: She is right, Pothinus: you will come to the shore with much conceit washed out of you. *The ladies laugh. Cleopatra rises impatiently.* Begone, all of you. I will speak with Pothinus alone. Drive them out, Ftatateeta. *They run out laughing. Ftatateeta shuts the door on them.* What are YOU waiting for?

FTATATEETA: It is not meet that the Queen remain alone with--

CLEOPATRA: *interrupting her.* Ftatateeta: must I sacrifice you to your father's gods to teach you that I am Queen of Egypt, and not you?

FTATATEETA: *indignantly.* You are like the rest of them. You want to be what these Romans call a New Woman. *She goes out, banging the door.*

CLEOPATRA: *sitting down again.* Now, Pothinus: why did you bribe Ftatateeta to bring you hither?

POTHINUS: *studying her gravely.* Cleopatra: what they tell me is true. You are changed.

CLEOPATRA: Do you speak with Caesar every day for six months: and YOU will be changed.

POTHINUS: It is the common talk that you are infatuated with this old man.

CLEOPATRA: Infatuated? What does that mean? Made foolish, is it not? Oh no: I wish I were.

POTHINUS: You wish you were made foolish! How so?

CLEOPATRA: When I was foolish, I did what I liked, except when Ftatateeta beat me; and even then I cheated her and did it by stealth. Now that Caesar has made me wise, it is no use my liking or disliking; I do what must be done, and have no time to attend to myself. That is not happiness; but it is greatness. If Caesar were gone, I think I could govern the Egyptians; for what Caesar is to me, I am to the fools around me.

POTHINUS: *looking hard at her.* Cleopatra: this may be the vanity of youth.

CLEOPATRA: No, no: it is not that I am so clever, but that the others are so stupid.

POTHINUS: *musingly.* Truly, that is the great secret.

CLEOPATRA: Well, now tell me what you came to say?

POTHINUS: *embarrassed.* I! Nothing.

CLEOPATRA: Nothing!

POTHINUS: At least--to beg for my liberty: that is all.

CLEOPATRA: For that you would have knelt to Caesar. No, Pothinus: you came with some plan that depended on Cleopatra being a little nursery kitten. Now that Cleopatra is a Queen, the plan is upset.

POTHINUS: *bowing his head submissively.* It is so.

CLEOPATRA: *exultant.* Aha!

POTHINUS: *raising his eyes keenly to hers.* Is Cleopatra then indeed a Queen, and no longer Caesar's prisoner and slave?

CLEOPATRA: Pothinus: we are all Caesar's slaves--all we in this land of Egypt--whether we will or no. And she who is wise enough to know this will reign when Caesar departs.

POTHINUS: You harp on Caesar's departure.

CLEOPATRA: What if I do?

POTHINUS: Does he not love you?

CLEOPATRA: Love me! Pothinus: Caesar loves no one. Who are those we love? Only those whom we do not hate: all people are strangers and enemies to us except those we love. But it is not so with Caesar. He has no hatred in him: he makes friends with everyone as he does with dogs and children. His kindness to me is a wonder: neither mother, father, nor nurse have ever taken so much care for me, or thrown open their thoughts to me so freely.

POTHINUS: Well: is not this love?

CLEOPATRA: What! When he will do as much for the first girl he meets on his way back to Rome? Ask his slave, Britannus: he has been just as good to him. Nay, ask his very horse! His kindness is not for anything in ME: it is in his own nature.

POTHINUS: But how can you be sure that he does not love you as men love women?

CLEOPATRA: Because I cannot make him jealous. I have tried.

POTHINUS: Hm! Perhaps I should have asked, then, do you love him?

CLEOPATRA: Can one love a god? Besides, I love another Roman: one whom I saw long before Caesar--no god, but a man--one who can love and hate--one whom I can hurt and who would hurt me.

POTHINUS: Does Caesar know this?

CLEOPATRA: Yes

POTHINUS: And he is not angry.

CLEOPATRA: He promises to send him to Egypt to please me!

POTHINUS: I do not understand this man?

CLEOPATRA: *with superb contempt.* YOU understand Caesar! How could you? *Proudly* I do--by instinct.

POTHINUS: *deferentially, after a moment's thought.* Your Majesty caused me to be admitted to-day. What message has the Queen for me?

CLEOPATRA: This. You think that by making my brother king, you will rule in Egypt, because you are his guardian and he is a little silly.

POTHINUS: The Queen is pleased to say so.

CLEOPATRA: The Queen is pleased to say this also. That Caesar will eat up you, and Achillas, and my brother, as a cat eats up mice; and that he will put on this land of Egypt as a shepherd puts on his garment. And when he has done that, he will return to Rome, and leave Cleopatra here as his viceroy.

POTHINUS: *breaking out wrathfully.* That he will never do. We have a thousand men to his ten; and we will drive him and his beggarly legions into the sea.

CLEOPATRA: *with scorn, getting up to go.* You rant like any common fellow. Go, then, and marshal your thousands; and make haste; for Mithridates of Pergamos is at hand with reinforcements for Caesar. Caesar has held you at bay with two legions: we shall see what he will do with twenty.

POTHINUS: Cleopatra--

CLEOPATRA: Enough, enough: Caesar has spoiled me for talking to weak things like you. *She goes out. Pothinus, with a gesture of rage, is following, when Ftatateeta enters and stops him.*

POTHINUS: Let me go forth from this hateful place.

FTATATEETA: What angers you?

POTHINUS: The curse of all the gods of Egypt be upon her! She has sold her country to the Roman, that she may buy it back from him with her kisses.

FTATATEETA: Fool: did she not tell you that she would have Caesar gone?

POTHINUS: You listened?

FTATATEETA: I took care that some honest woman should be at hand whilst you were with her.

POTHINUS: Now by the gods--

FTATATEETA: Enough of your gods! Caesar's gods are all powerful here. It is no use YOU coming to Cleopatra: you are only an Egyptian. She will not listen to any of her own race: she treats us all as children.

POTHINUS: May she perish for it!

FTATATEETA: *balefully.* May your tongue wither for that wish! Go! send for Lucius Septimius, the slayer of Pompey. He is a Roman: may be she will listen to him. Begone!

POTHINUS: *darkly.* I know to whom I must go now.

FTATATEETA: *suspiciously.* To whom, then?

POTHINUS: To a greater Roman than Lucius. And mark this, mistress. You thought, before Caesar came, that Egypt should presently be ruled by you and your crew in the name of Cleopatra. I set myself against it.

FTATATEETA: *interrupting him--wrangling.* Ay; that it might be ruled by you and YOUR crew in the name of Ptolemy.

POTHINUS: Better me, or even you, than a woman with a Roman heart; and that is what Cleopatra is now become. Whilst I live, she shall never rule. So guide yourself accordingly. *He goes out.*

It is by this time drawing on to dinner time. The table is laid on the roof of the palace; and thither Rufio is now climbing, ushered by a majestic palace official, wand of office in hand, and followed by a slave carrying an inlaid stool. After many stairs they emerge at last into a massive colonnade on the roof. Light curtains are drawn between the columns on the north and east to soften the westering sun. The official leads Rufio to one of these shaded sections. A cord for pulling the curtains apart hangs down between the pillars.

THE OFFICIAL: *bowing.* The Roman commander will await Caesar here.

The slave sets down the stool near the southernmost column, and slips out through the curtains.

RUFIO: *sitting down, a little blown.* Pouf! That was a climb. How high have we come?

THE OFFICIAL: We are on the palace roof, O Beloved of Victory!

RUFIO: Good! the Beloved of Victory has no more stairs to get up.

A second official enters from the opposite end, walking backwards.

THE SECOND OFFICIAL: Caesar approaches.

Caesar, fresh from the bath, clad in a new tunic of purple silk, comes in, beaming and festive, followed by two slaves carrying a light couch, which is hardly more than an elaborately designed bench. They place it near the northmost of the two curtained columns. When this is done they slip out through the curtains; and the two officials, formally bowing, follow them. Rufio rises to receive Caesar.

CAESAR: *coming over to him.* Why, Rufio! *Surveying his dress with an air of admiring astonishment* A new baldrick! A new golden pommel to your sword! And you have had your hair cut! But not your beard--? Impossible! *He sniffs at Rufio's beard.* Yes, perfumed, by Jupiter Olympus!

RUFIO: *growling.* Well: is it to please myself?

CAESAR: *affectionately.* No, my son Rufio, but to please me--to celebrate my birthday.

RUFIO: *contemptuously.* Your birthday! You always have a birthday when there is a pretty girl to be flattered or an ambassador to be conciliated. We had seven of them in ten months last year.

CAESAR: *contritely.* It is true, Rufio! I shall never break myself of these petty deceits.

RUFIO: Who is to dine with us--besides Cleopatra?

CAESAR: Apollodorus the Sicilian.

RUFIO: That popinjay!

CAESAR: Come! the popinjay is an amusing dog--tells a story; sings a song; and saves us the trouble of flattering the Queen. What does she care for old politicians and campfed bears like us? No: Apollodorus is good company, Rufio, good company.

RUFIO: Well, he can swim a bit and fence a bit: he might be worse, if he only knew how to hold his tongue.

CAESAR: The gods forbid he should ever learn! Oh, this military life! this tedious, brutal life of action! That is the worst of us Romans: we are mere doers and drudgers: a swarm of bees turned into men. Give me a good talker--one with wit and imagination enough to live without continually doing something!

RUFIO: Ay! a nice time he would have of it with you when dinner was over! Have you noticed that I am before my time?

CAESAR: Aha! I thought that meant something. What is it?

RUFIO: Can we be overheard here?

CAESAR: Our privacy invites eavesdropping. I can remedy that. *(He claps his hands twice. The curtains are drawn, revealing the roof garden with a banqueting table set across in the middle for four persons, one at each end, and two side by side. The side next Caesar and Rufio is blocked with golden wine vessels and basins. A gorgeous major-domo is superintending the laying of the table by a staff of slaves. The colonnade goes round the garden at both sides to the further end, where a gap in it, like a great gateway, leaves the view open to the sky beyond the western edge of the roof, except in the middle, where a life size image of Ra, seated on a huge plinth, towers up, with hawk head and crown of asp and disk. His altar, which stands at his feet, is a single white*

stone.) Now everybody can see us, nobody will think of listening to us. *He sits down on the bench left by the two slaves.*

RUFIO: *sitting down on his stool.* Pothinus wants to speak to you. I advise you to see him: there is some plotting going on here among the women.

CAESAR: Who is Pothinus?

RUFIO: The fellow with hair like squirrel's fur--the little King's bear leader, whom you kept prisoner.

CAESAR: *annoyed.* And has he not escaped?

RUFIO: No.

CAESAR: *rising imperiously.* Why not? You have been guarding this man instead of watching the enemy. Have I not told you always to let prisoners escape unless there are special orders to the contrary? Are there not enough mouths to be fed without him?

RUFIO: Yes; and if you would have a little sense and let me cut his throat, you would save his rations. Anyhow, he WON'T escape. Three sentries have told him they would put a pilum through him if they saw him again. What more can they do? He prefers to stay and spy on us. So would I if I had to do with generals subject to fits of clemency.

CAESAR: *resuming his seat, argued down.* Hm! And so he wants to see me.

RUFIO: Ay. I have brought him with me. He is waiting there *jerking his thumb over his shoulder* under guard.

CAESAR: And you want me to see him?

RUFIO: *obstinately.* I don't want anything. I daresay you will do what you like. Don't put it on to me.

CAESAR: *with an air of doing it expressly to indulge Rufio.* Well, well: let us have him.

RUFIO: *calling.* Ho there, guard! Release your man and send him up. *Beckoning* Come along!

Pothinus enters and stops mistrustfully between the two, looking from one to the other.

CAESAR: *graciously.* Ah, Pothinus! You are welcome. And what is the news this afternoon?

POTHINUS: Caesar: I come to warn you of a danger, and to make you an offer.

CAESAR: Never mind the danger. Make the offer.

RUFIO: Never mind the offer. What's the danger?

POTHINUS: Caesar: you think that Cleopatra is devoted to you.

CAESAR: *gravely.* My friend: I already know what I think. Come to your offer.

POTHINUS: I will deal plainly. I know not by what strange gods you have been enabled to defend a palace and a few yards of beach against a city and an army. Since we cut you off from Lake Mareotis, and you dug wells in the salt sea sand and brought up buckets of fresh water from them, we have known that your gods are irresistible, and that you are a worker of miracles. I no longer threaten you.

RUFIO: *sarcastically.* Very handsome of you, indeed.

POTHINUS: So be it: you are the master. Our gods sent the north west winds to keep you in our hands; but you have been too strong for them.

CAESAR: *gently urging him to come to the point.* Yes, yes, my friend. But what then?

RUFIO: Spit it out, man. What have you to say?

POTHINUS: I have to say that you have a traitress in your camp. Cleopatra.

THE MAJOR-DOMO: *at the table, announcing.* The Queen! *Caesar and Rufio rise.*

RUFIO: *aside to Pothinus.* You should have spat it out sooner, you fool. Now it is too late.

Cleopatra, in gorgeous raiment, enters in state through the gap in the colonnade, and comes down past the image of Ra and past the table to Caesar. Her retinue, headed by Ftatateeta, joins the staff at the table. Caesar gives Cleopatra his seat, which she takes.

CLEOPATRA: *quickly, seeing Pothinus.* What is HE doing here?

CAESAR: *seating himself beside her, in the most amiable of tempers.* Just going to tell me something about you. You shall hear it. Proceed, Pothinus.

POTHINUS: *disconcerted.* Caesar-- *He stammers.*

CAESAR: Well, out with it.

POTHINUS: What I have to say is for your ear, not for the Queen's.

CLEOPATRA: *with subdued ferocity.* There are means of making you speak. Take care.

POTHINUS: *defiantly.* Caesar does not employ those means.

CAESAR: My friend: when a man has anything to tell in this world, the difficulty is not to make him tell it, but to prevent him from telling it too often. Let me celebrate my birthday by setting you free. Farewell: we'll not meet again.

CLEOPATRA: *angrily.* Caesar: this mercy is foolish.

POTHINUS: *to Caesar.* Will you not give me a private audience? Your life may depend on it. *Caesar rises loftily.*

RUFIO: *aside to Pothinus.* Ass! Now we shall have some heroics.

CAESAR: *oratorically.* Pothinus--

RUFIO: *interrupting him.* Caesar: the dinner will spoil if you begin preaching your favourite sermon about life and death.

CLEOPATRA: *priggishly.* Peace, Rufio. I desire to hear Caesar.

RUFIO: *bluntly.* Your Majesty has heard it before. You repeated it to Apollodorus last week; and he thought it was all your own. *Caesar's dignity collapses. Much tickled, he sits down again and looks roguishly at Cleopatra, who is furious. Rufio calls as before* Ho there, guard! Pass the prisoner out. He is released. *To Pothinus* Now off with you. You have lost your chance.

POTHINUS: *his temper overcoming his prudence.* I WILL speak.

CAESAR: *to Cleopatra.* You see. Torture would not have wrung a word from him.

POTHINUS: Caesar: you have taught Cleopatra the arts by which the Romans govern the world.

CAESAR: Alas! They cannot even govern themselves. What then?

POTHINUS: What then? Are you so besotted with her beauty that you do not see that she is impatient to reign in Egypt alone, and that her heart is set on your departure?

CLEOPATRA: *rising.* Liar!

CAESAR: *shocked.* What! Protestations! Contradictions!

CLEOPATRA: *ashamed, but trembling with suppressed rage.* No. I do not deign to contradict. Let him talk. *She sits down again.*

POTHINUS: From her own lips I have heard it. You are to be her catspaw: you are to tear the crown from her brother's head and set it on her own, delivering us all into her hand--delivering yourself also. And then Caesar can return to Rome, or depart through the gate of death, which is nearer and surer.

CAESAR: *calmly.* Well, my friend; and is not this very natural?

POTHINUS: *astonished.* Natural! Then you do not resent treachery?

CAESAR: Resent! O thou foolish Egyptian, what have I to do with resentment? Do I resent the wind when it chills me, or the night when it makes me stumble in the darkness? Shall I resent youth when it turns from age, and ambition when it turns from servitude? To tell me such a story as this is but to tell me that the sun will rise to-morrow.

CLEOPATRA: *unable to contain herself.* But it is false--false. I swear it.

CAESAR: It is true, though you swore it a thousand times, and believed all you swore. *She is convulsed with emotion. To screen her, he rises and takes Pothinus to Rufio, saying* Come, Rufio: let us see Pothinus past the guard. I have a word to say to him. *Aside to them* We must give the Queen a moment to recover herself. *Aloud* Come. *He takes Pothinus and Rufio out with him, conversing with them meanwhile.* Tell your friends, Pothinus, that they must not think I am opposed to a reasonable settlement of the country's affairs-- *They pass out of hearing.*

CLEOPATRA: *in a stifled whisper.* Ftatateeta, Ftatateeta.

FTATATEETA: *hurrying to her from the table and petting her.* Peace, child: be comforted--

CLEOPATRA: *interrupting her.* Can they hear us?

FTATATEETA: No, dear heart, no.

CLEOPATRA: Listen to me. If he leaves the Palace alive, never see my face again.

FTATATEETA: He? Poth--

CLEOPATRA: *striking her on the mouth.* Strike his life out as I strike his name from your lips. Dash him down from the wall. Break him on the stones. Kill, kill, KILL him.

FTATATEETA: *showing all her teeth.* The dog shall perish.

CLEOPATRA: Fail in this, and you go out from before me forever.

FTATATEETA: *resolutely.* So be it. You shall not see my face until his eyes are darkened.

Caesar comes back, with Apollodorus, exquisitely dressed, and Rufio.

CLEOPATRA: *to Ftatateeta.* Come soon--soon. *Ftatateeta turns her meaning eyes for a moment on her mistress; then goes grimly away past Ra and out. Cleopatra runs like a gazelle to Caesar.* So you have come back to me, Caesar. *Caressingly* I thought you were angry. Welcome, Apollodorus. *She gives him her hand to kiss, with her other arm about Caesar.*

APOLLODORUS: Cleopatra grows more womanly beautiful from week to week.

CLEOPATRA: Truth, Apollodorus?

APOLLODORUS: Far, far short of the truth! Friend Rufio threw a pearl into the sea: Caesar fished up a diamond.

CAESAR: Caesar fished up a touch of rheumatism, my friend. Come: to dinner! To dinner! *They move towards the table.*

CLEOPATRA: *skipping like a young fawn.* Yes, to dinner. I have ordered SUCH a dinner for you, Caesar!

CAESAR: Ay? What are we to have?

CLEOPATRA: Peacocks' brains.

CAESAR: *as if his mouth watered.* Peacocks' brains, Apollodorus!

APOLLODORUS: Not for me. I prefer nightingales' tongues. *He goes to one of the two covers set side by side.*

CLEOPATRA: Roast boar, Rufio!

RUFIO: *gluttonously.* Good! *He goes to the seat next Apollodorus, on his left.*

CAESAR: *looking at his seat, which is at the end of the table, to Ra's left hand.* What has become of my leathern cushion?

CLEOPATRA: *at the opposite end.* I have got new ones for you.

THE MAJOR-DOMO: These cushions, Caesar, are of Maltese gauze, stuffed with rose leaves.

CAESAR: Rose leaves! Am I a caterpillar? *He throws the cushions away and seats himself on the leather mattress underneath.*

CLEOPATRA: What a shame! My new cushions!

THE MAJOR-DOMO: *at Caesar's elbow.* What shall we serve to whet Caesar's appetite?

CAESAR: What have you got?

THE MAJOR-DOMO: Sea hedgehogs, black and white sea acorns, sea nettles, beccaficoes, purple shellfish--

CAESAR: Any oysters?

THE MAJOR-DOMO: Assuredly.

CAESAR: BRITISH oysters?

THE MAJOR-DOMO: *assenting.* British oysters, Caesar.

CAESAR: Oysters, then. *The Major-Domo signs to a slave at each order; and the slave goes out to execute it.* I have been in Britain--that western land of romance--the last piece of earth on the edge of the ocean that surrounds the world. I went there in search of its famous pearls. The British pearl was a fable; but in searching for it I found the British oyster.

APOLLODORUS: All posterity will bless you for it. *To the Major-Domo* Sea hedgehogs for me.

RUFIO: Is there nothing solid to begin with?

THE MAJOR-DOMO: Fieldfares with asparagus-

CLEOPATRA: *interrupting.* Fattened fowls! Have some fattened fowls, Rufio.

RUFIO: Ay, that will do.

CLEOPATRA: *greedily.* Fieldfares for me.

THE MAJOR-DOMO: Caesar will deign to choose his wine? Sicilian, Lesbian, Chian--

RUFIO: *contemptuously.* All Greek.

APOLLODORUS: Who would drink Roman wine when he could get Greek? Try the Lesbian, Caesar.

CAESAR: Bring me my barley water.

RUFIO: *with intense disgust.* Ugh! Bring ME my Falernian. *The Falernian is presently brought to him.*

CLEOPATRA: *pouting.* It is waste of time giving you dinners, Caesar. My scullions would not condescend to your diet.

CAESAR: *relenting.* Well, well: let us try the Lesbian. *The Major-Domo fills Caesar's goblet; then Cleopatra's and Apollodorus's.* But when I return to Rome, I will make laws against these extravagances. I will even get the laws carried out.

CLEOPATRA: *coaxingly.* Never mind. To-day you are to be like other people: idle, luxurious, and kind. *She stretches her hand to him along the table.*

CAESAR: Well, for once I will sacrifice my comfort *kissing her hand* there! *He takes a draught of wine.* Now are you satisfied?

CLEOPATRA: And you no longer believe that I long for your departure for Rome?

CAESAR: I no longer believe anything. My brains are asleep. Besides, who knows whether I shall return to Rome?

RUFIO: *alarmed.* How? Eh? What?

CAESAR: What has Rome to show me that I have not seen already? One year of Rome is like another, except that I grow older, whilst the crowd in the Appian Way is always the same age.

APOLLODORUS: It is no better here in Egypt. The old men, when they are tired of life, say "We have seen everything except the source of the Nile."

CAESAR: *his imagination catching fire.* And why not see that? Cleopatra: will you come with me and track the flood to its cradle in the heart of the regions of mystery? Shall we leave Rome behind us--Rome, that has achieved greatness only to learn how greatness destroys nations of men who are not great! Shall I make you a new kingdom, and build you a holy city there in the great unknown?

CLEOPATRA: *rapturously.* Yes, Yes. You shall.

RUFIO: Ay: now he will conquer Africa with two legions before we come to the roast boar.

APOLLODORUS: Come: no scoffing, this is a noble scheme: in it Caesar is no longer merely the conquering soldier, but the creative poet-artist. Let us name the holy city, and consecrate it with Lesbian Wine--and Cleopatra shall name it herself.

CLEOPATRA: It shall be called Caesar's Gift to his Beloved.

APOLLODORUS: No, no. Something vaster than that--something universal, like the starry firmament.

CAESAR: *prosaically.* Why not simply The Cradle of the Nile?

CLEOPATRA: No: the Nile is my ancestor; and he is a god. Oh! I have thought of something. The Nile shall name it himself. Let us call upon him. *To the Major-Domo* Send for him. *The three men stare at one another; but the Major-Domo goes out as if he had received the most matter-of-fact order.* And *to the retinue* away with you all.

The retinue withdraws, making obeisance.

A priest enters, carrying a miniature sphinx with a tiny tripod before it. A morsel of incense is smoking in the tripod. The priest comes to the table and places the image in the middle of it. The light begins to change to the magenta purple of the Egyptian sunset, as if the god had brought a strange colored shadow with him. The three men are determined not to be impressed; but they feel curious in spite of themselves.

CAESAR: What hocus-pocus is this?

CLEOPATRA: You shall see. And it is NOT hocus-pocus. To do it properly, we should kill something to

please him; but perhaps he will answer Caesar without that if we spill some wine to him.

APOLLODORUS: *turning his head to look up over his shoulder at Ra.* Why not appeal to our hawkheaded friend here?

CLEOPATRA: *nervously.* Sh! He will hear you and be angry.

RUFIO: *phlegmatically.* The source of the Nile is out of his district, I expect.

CLEOPATRA: No: I will have my city named by nobody but my dear little sphinx, because it was in its arms that Caesar found me asleep. *She languishes at Caesar; then turns curtly to the priest.* Go, I am a priestess, and have power to take your charge from you. *The priest makes a reverence and goes out.* Now let us call on the Nile all together. Perhaps he will rap on the table.

CAESAR: What! Table rapping! Are such superstitions still believed in this year 707 of the Republic?

CLEOPATRA: It is no superstition: our priests learn lots of things from the tables. Is it not so, Apollodorus?

APOLLODORUS: Yes: I profess myself a converted man. When Cleopatra is priestess, Apollodorus is devotee. Propose the conjuration.

CLEOPATRA: You must say with me "Send us thy voice, Father Nile."

ALL FOUR: *holding their glasses together before the idol.* Send us thy voice, Father Nile.

The death cry of a man in mortal terror and agony answers them. Appalled, the men set down their glasses, and listen. Silence. The purple deepens in the sky. Caesar, glancing at Cleopatra, catches her pouring out her wine before the god, with gleaming eyes, and mute assurances of gratitude and worship. Apollodorus springs up and runs to the edge of the roof to peer down and listen.

CAESAR: *looking piercingly at Cleopatra.* What was that?

CLEOPATRA: *petulantly.* Nothing. They are beating some slave.

CAESAR: Nothing!

RUFIO: A man with a knife in him, I'll swear.

CAESAR: *rising.* A murder!

APOLLODORUS: *at the back, waving his hand for silence.* S-sh! Silence. Did you hear that?

CAESAR: Another cry?

APOLLODORUS: *returning to the table.* No, a thud. Something fell on the beach, I think.

RUFIO: *grimly, as he rises.* Something with bones in it, eh?

CAESAR: *shuddering.* Hush, hush, Rufio. *He leaves the table and returns to the colonnade: Rufio following at his left elbow, and Apollodorus at the other side.*

CLEOPATRA: *still in her place at the table.* Will you leave me, Caesar? Apollodorus: are you going?

APOLLODORUS: Faith, dearest Queen, my appetite is gone.

CAESAR: Go down to the courtyard, Apollodorus; and find out what has happened.

Apollodorus nods and goes out, making for the staircase by which Rufio ascended.

CLEOPATRA: Your soldiers have killed somebody, perhaps. What does it matter?

The murmur of a crowd rises from the beach below. Caesar and Rufio look at one another.

CAESAR: This must be seen to. *(He is about to follow Apollodorus when Rufio stops him with a hand on his arm as Ftatateeta comes back by the far end of the roof, with dragging steps, a drowsy*

satiety in her eyes and in the corners of the bloodhound lips. For a moment Caesar suspects that she is drunk with wine. Not so Rufio: he knows well the red vintage that has inebriated her.)

RUFIO: *in a low tone.* There is some mischief between those two.

FTATATEETA: The Queen looks again on the face of her servant.

Cleopatra looks at her for a moment with an exultant reflection of her murderous expression. Then she flings her arms round her; kisses her repeatedly and savagely; and tears off her jewels and heaps them on her. The two men turn from the spectacle to look at one another. Ftatateeta drags herself sleepily to the altar; kneels before Ra; and remains there in prayer. Caesar goes to Cleopatra, leaving Rufio in the colonnade.

CAESAR: *with searching earnestness.* Cleopatra: what has happened?

CLEOPATRA: *in mortal dread of him, but with her utmost cajolery.* Nothing, dearest Caesar. *With sickly sweetness, her voice almost failing* Nothing. I am innocent. *She approaches him affectionately* Dear Caesar: are you angry with me? Why do you look at me so? I have been here with you all the time. How can I know what has happened?

CAESAR: *reflectively.* That is true.

CLEOPATRA: *greatly relieved, trying to caress him.* Of course it is true. *He does not respond to the caress.* You know it is true, Rufio.

The murmur without suddenly swells to a roar and subsides.

RUFIO: I shall know presently. *He makes for the altar in the burly trot that serves him for a stride, and touches Ftatateeta on the shoulder.* Now, mistress: I shall want you. *He orders her, with a gesture, to go before him.*

FTATATEETA: *rising and glowering at him.* My place is with the Queen.

CLEOPATRA: She has done no harm, Rufio.

CAESAR: *to Rufio.* Let her stay.

RUFIO: *sitting down on the altar.* Very well. Then my place is here too; and you can see what is the matter for yourself. The city is in a pretty uproar, it seems.

CAESAR: *with grave displeasure.* Rufio: there is a time for obedience.

RUFIO: And there is a time for obstinacy. *He folds his arms doggedly.*

CAESAR: *to Cleopatra.* Send her away.

CLEOPATRA: *whining in her eagerness to propitiate him.* Yes, I will. I will do whatever you ask me, Caesar, always, because I love you. Ftatateeta: go away.

FTATATEETA: The Queen's word is my will. I shall be at hand for the Queen's call. *She goes out past Ra, as she came.*

RUFIO: *following her.* Remember, Caesar, YOUR bodyguard also is within call. *He follows her out.*

Cleopatra, presuming upon Caesar's submission to Rufio, leaves the table and sits down on the bench in the colonnade.

CLEOPATRA: Why do you allow Rufio to treat you so? You should teach him his place.

CAESAR: Teach him to be my enemy, and to hide his thoughts from me as you are now hiding yours.

CLEOPATRA: *her fears returning.* Why do you say that, Caesar? Indeed, indeed, I am not hiding anything. You are wrong to treat me like this. *She stifles a sob.* I am only a child; and you turn into stone because you think some one has been killed. I cannot bear it. *(She purposely breaks down*

and weeps. He looks at her with profound sadness and complete coldness. She looks up to see what effect she is producing. Seeing that he is unmoved, she sits up, pretending to struggle with her emotion and to put it bravely away.) But there: I know you hate tears: you shall not be troubled with them. I know you are not angry, but only sad; only I am so silly, I cannot help being hurt when you speak coldly. Of course you are quite right: it is dreadful to think of anyone being killed or even hurt; and I hope nothing really serious has-- *Her voice dies away under his contemptuous penetration.*

CAESAR: What has frightened you into this? What have you done? *A trumpet sounds on the beach below.* Aha! That sounds like the answer.

CLEOPATRA: *sinking back trembling on the bench and covering her face with her hands.* I have not betrayed you, Caesar: I swear it.

CAESAR: I know that. I have not trusted you. *He turns from her, and is about to go out when Apollodorus and Britannus drag in Lucius Septimius to him. Rufio follows. Caesar shudders.* Again, Pompey's murderer!

RUFIO: The town has gone mad, I think. They are for tearing the palace down and driving us into the sea straight away. We laid hold of this renegade in clearing them out of the courtyard.

CAESAR: Release him. *They let go his arms.* What has offended the citizens, Lucius Septimius?

LUCIUS: What did you expect, Caesar? Pothinus was a favorite of theirs.

CAESAR: What has happened to Pothinus? I set him free, here, not half an hour ago. Did they not pass him out?

LUCIUS: Ay, through the gallery arch sixty feet above ground, with three inches of steel in his ribs. He is as dead as Pompey. We are quits now, as to killing--you and I.

CAESAR: *shocked.* Assassinated!--our prisoner, our guest! *He turns reproachfully on Rufio* Rufio--

RUFIO: *emphatically--anticipating the question.* Whoever did it was a wise man and a friend of yours *Cleopatra is greatly emboldened;* but none of US had a hand in it. So it is no use to frown at me. *Caesar turns and looks at Cleopatra.*

CLEOPATRA: *violently--rising.* He was slain by order of the Queen of Egypt. I am not Julius Caesar the dreamer, who allows every slave to insult him. Rufio has said I did well: now the others shall judge me too. *She turns to the others.* This Pothinus sought to make me conspire with him to betray Caesar to Achillas and Ptolemy. I refused; and he cursed me and came privily to Caesar to accuse me of his own treachery. I caught him in the act; and he insulted me--ME, the Queen! To my face. Caesar would not revenge me: he spoke him fair and set him free. Was I right to avenge myself? Speak, Lucius.

LUCIUS: I do not gainsay it. But you will get little thanks from Caesar for it.

CLEOPATRA: Speak, Apollodorus. Was I wrong?

APOLLODORUS: I have only one word of blame, most beautiful. You should have called upon me, your knight; and in fair duel I should have slain the slanderer.

CLEOPATRA: *passionately.* I will be judged by your very slave, Caesar. Britannus: speak. Was I wrong?

BRITANNUS: Were treachery, falsehood, and disloyalty left unpunished, society must become like an arena full of wild beasts, tearing one another to pieces. Caesar is in the wrong.

CAESAR: *with quiet bitterness.* And so the verdict is against me, it seems.

CLEOPATRA: *vehemently.* Listen to me, Caesar. If one man in all Alexandria can be found to say that I

did wrong, I swear to have myself crucified on the door of the palace by my own slaves.

CAESAR: If one man in all the world can be found, now or forever, to know that you did wrong, that man will have either to conquer the world as I have, or be crucified by it. *The uproar in the streets again reaches them.* Do you hear? These knockers at your gate are also believers in vengeance and in stabbing. You have slain their leader: it is right that they shall slay you. If you doubt it, ask your four counselors here. And then in the name of that RIGHT *He emphasizes the word with great scorn.* shall I not slay them for murdering their Queen, and be slain in my turn by their countrymen as the invader of their fatherland? Can Rome do less then than slay these slayers too, to show the world how Rome avenges her sons and her honor? And so, to the end of history, murder shall breed murder, always in the name of right and honor and peace, until the gods are tired of blood and create a race that can understand. *Fierce uproar. Cleopatra becomes white with terror.* Hearken, you who must not be insulted. Go near enough to catch their words: you will find them bitterer than the tongue of Pothinus. *Loftily wrapping himself up in an impenetrable dignity.* Let the Queen of Egypt now give her orders for vengeance, and take her measures for defense; for she has renounced Caesar. *He turns to go.*

CLEOPATRA: *terrified, running to him and falling on her knees.* You will not desert me, Caesar. You will defend the palace.

CAESAR: You have taken the powers of life and death upon you. I am only a dreamer.

CLEOPATRA: But they will kill me.

CAESAR: And why not?

CLEOPATRA: In pity--

CAESAR: Pity! What! Has it come to this so suddenly, that nothing can save you now but pity? Did it save Pothinus?

She rises, wringing her hands, and goes back to the bench in despair. Apollodorus shows his sympathy with her by quietly posting himself behind the bench. The sky has by this time become the most vivid purple, and soon begins to change to a glowing pale orange, against which the colonnade and the great image show darklier and darklier.

RUFIO: Caesar: enough of preaching. The enemy is at the gate.

CAESAR: *turning on him and giving way to his wrath.* Ay; and what has held him baffled at the gate all these months? Was it my folly, as you deem it, or your wisdom? In this Egyptian Red Sea of blood, whose hand has held all your heads above the waves? *Turning on Cleopatra* And yet, When Caesar says to such an one, "Friend, go free," you, clinging for your little life to my sword, dare steal out and stab him in the back? And you, soldiers and gentlemen, and honest servants as you forget that you are, applaud this assassination, and say "Caesar is in the wrong." By the gods, I am tempted to open my hand and let you all sink into the flood.

CLEOPATRA: *with a ray of cunning hope.* But, Caesar, if you do, you will perish yourself.

Caesar's eyes blaze.

RUFIO: *greatly alarmed.* Now, by great Jove, you filthy little Egyptian rat, that is the very word to make him walk out alone into the city and leave us here to be cut to pieces. *Desperately, to Caesar* Will you desert us because we are a parcel of fools? I mean no harm by killing: I do it as a dog kills a cat, by instinct. We are all dogs at your heels; but we have served you faithfully.

CAESAR: *relenting.* Alas, Rufio, my son, my son: as dogs we are like to perish now in the streets.

APOLLODORUS: *at his post behind Cleopatra's seat.* Caesar, what you say has an Olympian ring in it: it must be right; for it is fine art. But I am still on the side of Cleopatra. If we must die, she shall not

want the devotion of a man's heart nor the strength of a man's arm.

CLEOPATRA: *sobbing.* But I don't want to die.

CAESAR: *sadly.* Oh, ignoble, ignoble!

LUCIUS: *coming forward between Caesar and Cleopatra.* Hearken to me, Caesar. It may be ignoble; but I also mean to live as long as I can.

CAESAR: Well, my friend, you are likely to outlive Caesar. Is it any magic of mine, think you, that has kept your army and this whole city at bay for so long? Yesterday, what quarrel had they with me that they should risk their lives against me? But to-day we have flung them down their hero, murdered; and now every man of them is set upon clearing out this nest of assassins--for such we are and no more. Take courage then; and sharpen your sword. Pompey's head has fallen; and Caesar's head is ripe.

APOLLODORUS: Does Caesar despair?

CAESAR: *with infinite pride.* He who has never hoped can never despair. Caesar, in good or bad fortune, looks his fate in the face.

LUCIUS: Look it in the face, then; and it will smile as it always has on Caesar.

CAESAR: *with involuntary haughtiness.* Do you presume to encourage me?

LUCIUS: I offer you my services. I will change sides if you will have me.

CAESAR: *suddenly coming down to earth again, and looking sharply at him, divining that there is something behind the offer.* What! At this point?

LUCIUS: *firmly.* At this point.

RUFIO: Do you suppose Caesar is mad, to trust you?

LUCIUS: I do not ask him to trust me until he is victorious. I ask for my life, and for a command in Caesar's army. And since Caesar is a fair dealer, I will pay in advance.

CAESAR: Pay! How?

LUCIUS: With a piece of good news for you.

Caesar divines the news in a flash.

RUFIO: What news?

CAESAR: *with an elate and buoyant energy which makes Cleopatra sit up and stare.* What news! What news, did you say, my son Rufio? The relief has arrived: what other news remains for us? Is it not so, Lucius Septimius? Mithridates of Pergamos is on the march.

LUCIUS: He has taken Pelusium.

CAESAR: *delighted.* Lucius Septimius: you are henceforth my officer. Rufio: the Egyptians must have sent every soldier from the city to prevent Mithridates crossing the Nile. There is nothing in the streets now but mob--mob!

LUCIUS: It is so. Mithridates is marching by the great road to Memphis to cross above the Delta. Achillas will fight him there.

CAESAR: *all audacity.* Achillas shall fight Caesar there. See, Rufio. *(He runs to the table; snatches a napkin; and draws a plan on it with his finger dipped in wine, whilst Rufio and Lucius Septimius crowd about him to watch, all looking closely, for the light is now almost gone.)* Here is the palace *pointing to his plan:* here is the theatre. You *to Rufio* take twenty men and pretend to go by THAT street *pointing it out;* and whilst they are stoning you, out go the cohorts by this and this. My

streets are right, are they, Lucius?

LUCIUS: Ay, that is the fig market--

CAESAR: *too much excited to listen to him.* I saw them the day we arrived. Good! *He throws the napkin on the table and comes down again into the colonnade.* Away, Britannus: tell Petronius that within an hour half our forces must take ship for the western lake. See to my horse and armor. *Britannus runs out.* With the rest I shall march round the lake and up the Nile to meet Mithridates. Away, Lucius; and give the word.

Lucius hurries out after Britannus.

RUFIO: Come: this is something like business.

CAESAR: *buoyantly.* Is it not, my only son? *He claps his hands. The slaves hurry in to the table.* No more of this mawkish reveling: away with all this stuff: shut it out of my sight and be off with you. *The slaves begin to remove the table; and the curtains are drawn, shutting in the colonnade.* You understand about the streets, Rufio?

RUFIO: Ay, I think I do. I will get through them, at all events.

The bucina sounds busily in the courtyard beneath.

CAESAR: Come, then: we must talk to the troops and hearten them. You down to the beach: I to the courtyard. *He makes for the staircase.*

CLEOPATRA: *rising from her seat, where she has been quite neglected all this time, and stretching out her hands timidly to him.* Caesar.

CAESAR: *turning.* Eh?

CLEOPATRA: Have you forgotten me?

CAESAR: *indulgently.* I am busy now, my child, busy. When I return your affairs shall be settled. Farewell; and be good and patient.

He goes, preoccupied and quite indifferent. She stands with clenched fists, in speechless rage and humiliation.

RUFIO: That game is played and lost, Cleopatra. The woman always gets the worst of it.

CLEOPATRA: *haughtily.* Go. Follow your master.

RUFIO: *in her ear, with rough familiarity.* A word first. Tell your executioner that if Pothinus had been properly killed--IN THE THROAT--he would not have called out. Your man bungled his work.

CLEOPATRA: *enigmatically.* How do you know it was a man?

RUFIO: *startled, and puzzled.* It was not you: you were with us when it happened. *(She turns her back scornfully on him. He shakes his head, and draws the curtains to go out. It is now a magnificent moonlit night. The table has been removed. Ftatateeta is seen in the light of the moon and stars, again in prayer before the white altar-stone of Ra. Rufio starts; closes the curtains again softly; and says in a low voice to Cleopatra)* Was it she? With her own hand?

CLEOPATRA: *threateningly.* Whoever it was, let my enemies beware of her. Look to it, Rufio, you who dare make the Queen of Egypt a fool before Caesar.

RUFIO: *looking grimly at her.* I will look to it, Cleopatra. *He nods in confirmation of the promise, and slips out through the curtains, loosening his sword in its sheath as he goes.*

ROMAN SOLDIERS: *in the courtyard below.* Hail, Caesar! Hail, hail!

Cleopatra listens. The bucina sounds again, followed by several trumpets.

CLEOPATRA:*wringing her hands and calling.* Ftatateeta. Ftatateeta. It is dark; and I am alone. Come to me. *Silence.* Ftatateeta. *Louder.* Ftatateeta. *Silence. In a panic she snatches the cord and pulls the curtains apart.*

Ftatateeta is lying dead on the altar of Ra, with her throat cut. Her blood deluges the white stone.

Le note di scena sono tra parentesi *quadre* o *(tonde).*

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