Caesar and Cleopatra - Act V

di George Bernard Shaw (1901)

ACT V

High noon. Festival and military pageant on the esplanade before the palace. In the east harbor Caesar's galley, so gorgeously decorated that it seems to be rigged with flowers, is along-side the quay, close to the steps Apollodorus descended when he embarked with the carpet. A Roman guard is posted there in charge of a gangway, whence a red floorcloth is laid down the middle of the esplanade, turning off to the north opposite the central gate in the palace front, which shuts in the esplanade on the south side. The broad steps of the gate, crowded with Cleopatra's ladies, all in their gayest attire, are like a flower garden. The facade is lined by her guard, officered by the same gallants to whom Bel Affris announced the coming of Caesar six months before in the old palace on the Syrian border. The north side is lined by Roman soldiers, with the townsfolk on tiptoe behind them, peering over their heads at the cleared esplanade, in which the officers stroll about, chatting. Among these are Belzanor and the Persian; also the Centurion, vinewood cudgel in hand, battle worn, thick-booted, and much outshone, both socially and decoratively, by the Egyptian officers.

Apollodorus makes his way through the townsfolk and calls to the officers from behind the Roman line.

APOLLODORUS: Hullo! May I pass?

CENTURION: Pass Apollodorus the Sicilian there! *The soldiers let him through.*

BELZANOR: Is Caesar at hand?

APOLLODORUS: Not yet. He is still in the market place. I could not stand any more of the roaring of the soldiers! After half an hour of the enthusiasm of an army, one feels the need of a little sea air.

PERSIAN: Tell us the news. Hath he slain the priests?

APOLLODORUS: Not he. They met him in the market place with ashes on their heads and their gods in their hands. They placed the gods at his feet. The only one that was worth looking at was Apis: a miracle of gold and ivory work. By my advice he offered the chief priest two talents for it.

BELZANOR: *appalled.* Apis the all-knowing for two talents! What said the chief priest?

APOLLODORUS: He invoked the mercy of Apis, and asked for five.

BELZANOR: There will be famine and tempest in the land for this.

PERSIAN: Pooh! Why did not Apis cause Caesar to be vanquished by Achillas? Any fresh news from the war, Apollodorus?

APOLLODORUS: The little King Ptolemy was drowned.

BELZANOR: Drowned! How?

APOLLODORUS: With the rest of them. Caesar attacked them from three sides at once and swept them into the Nile. Ptolemy's barge sank.

BELZANOR: A marvelous man, this Caesar! Will he come soon, think you?

APOLLODORUS: He was settling the Jewish question when I left.

A flourish of trumpets from the north, and commotion among the townsfolk, announces the approach of Caesar.

PERSIAN: He has made short work of them. Here he comes. *He hurries to his post in front of the Egyptian lines.*

BELZANOR: *following him.* Ho there! Caesar comes.

The soldiers stand at attention, and dress their lines. Apollodorus goes to the Egyptian line.

CENTURION: *hurrying to the gangway guard.* Attention there! Caesar comes.

Caesar arrives in state with Rufio: Britannus following. The soldiers receive him with enthusiastic shouting.

RUFIO: *at his left hand.* You have not yet appointed a Roman governor for this province.

CAESAR: *Looking whimsically at him, but speaking with perfect gravity.* What say you to Mithridates of Pergamos, my reliever and rescuer, the great son of Eupator?

RUFIO: Why, that you will want him elsewhere. Do you forget that you have some three or four armies to conquer on your way home?

CAESAR: Indeed! Well, what say you to yourself?

RUFIO: *incredulously.* I! I a governor! What are you dreaming of? Do you not know that I am only the son of a freedman?

CAESAR: *affectionately.* Has not Caesar called you his son? *Calling to the whole assembly* Peace awhile there; and hear me.

ROMAN SOLDIERS: Hear Caesar.

CAESAR: Hear the service, quality, rank and name of the Roman governor. By service, Caesar's shield; by quality, Caesar's friend; by rank, a Roman soldier. *The Roman soldiers give a triumphant shout.* By name, Rufio. *They shout again.*

RUFIO: *kissing Caesar's hand.* Ay: I am Caesar's shield; but of what use shall I be when I am no longer on Caesar's arm? Well, no matter-- *He becomes husky, and turns away to recover himself.*

CAESAR: Where is that British Islander of mine?

BRITANNUS: *coming forward on Caesar's right hand.* Here, Caesar.

CAESAR: Who bade you, pray, thrust yourself into the battle of the Delta, uttering the barbarous cries of your native land, and affirming yourself a match for any four of the Egyptians, to whom you applied unseemly epithets?

BRITANNUS: Caesar: I ask you to excuse the language that escaped me in the heat of the moment.

CAESAR: And how did you, who cannot swim, cross the canal with us when we stormed the camp?

BRITANNUS: Caesar: I clung to the tail of your horse.

CAESAR: These are not the deeds of a slave, Britannicus, but of a free man.

BRITANNUS: Caesar: I was born free.

CAESAR: But they call you Caesar's slave.

BRITANNUS: Only as Caesar's slave have I found real freedom.

CAESAR: *moved.* Well said. Ungrateful that I am, I was about to set you free; but now I will not part from you for a million talents. *He claps him friendly on the shoulder. Britannus, gratified, but a trifle shamefaced, takes his hand and kisses it sheepishly.*

BELZANOR: *to the Persian.* This Roman knows how to make men serve him.

PERSIAN: Ay: men too humble to become dangerous rivals to him.

BELZANOR: O subtle one! O cynic!

CAESAR: *seeing Apollodorus in the Egyptian corner and calling to him.* Apollodorus: I leave the art of Egypt in your charge. Remember: Rome loves art and will encourage it ungrudgingly.

APOLLODORUS: I understand, Caesar. Rome will produce no art itself; but it will buy up and take away whatever the other nations produce.

CAESAR: What! Rome produces no art! Is peace not an art? Is war not an art? Is government not an art? Is civilization not an art? All these we give you in exchange for a few ornaments. You will have the best of the bargain. *Turning to Rufio* And now, what else have I to do before I embark? *Trying to recollect* There is something I cannot remember: what CAN it be? Well, well: it must remain undone: we must not waste this favorable wind. Farewell, Rufio.

RUFIO: Caesar: I am loath to let you go to Rome without your shield. There are too many daggers there.

CAESAR: It matters not: I shall finish my life's work on my way back; and then I shall have lived long enough. Besides: I have always disliked the idea of dying: I had rather be killed. Farewell.

RUFIO: *with a sigh, raising his hands and giving Caesar up as incorrigible.* Farewell. *They shake hands.*

CAESAR: *waving his hand to Apollodorus.* Farewell, Apollodorus, and my friends, all of you. Aboard!

The gangway is run out from the quay to the ship. As Caesar moves towards it, Cleopatra, cold and tragic, cunningly dressed in black, without ornaments or decoration of any kind, and thus making a striking figure among the brilliantly dressed bevy of ladies as she passes through it, comes from the palace and stands on the steps. Caesar does not see her until she speaks.

CLEOPATRA: Has Cleopatra no part in this leave taking?

CAESAR: *enlightened.* Ah, I KNEW there was something. *To Rufio* How could you let me forget her, Rufio? *Hastening to her* Had I gone without seeing you, I should never have forgiven myself. *He takes her hands, and brings her into the middle of the esplanade. She submits stonily.* Is this mourning for me?

CLEOPATRA: NO.

CAESAR: *remorsefully.* Ah, that was thoughtless of me! It is for your brother.

CLEOPATRA: No.

CAESAR: For whom, then?

CLEOPATRA: Ask the Roman governor whom you have left us.

CAESAR: Rufio?

CLEOPATRA: Yes: Rufio. *She points at him with deadly scorn.* He who is to rule here in Caesar's name, in Caesar's way, according to Caesar's boasted laws of life.

CAESAR: *dubiously.* He is to rule as he can, Cleopatra. He has taken the work upon him, and will do it in his own way.

CLEOPATRA: Not in your way, then?

CAESAR: *puzzled.* What do you mean by my way?

CLEOPATRA: Without punishment. Without revenge. Without judgment.

CAESAR: *approvingly.* Ay: that is the right way, the great way, the only possible way in the end. *To Rufio* Believe it, Rufio, if you can.

RUFIO: Why, I believe it, Caesar. You have convinced me of it long ago. But look you. You are sailing

for Numidia to-day. Now tell me: if you meet a hungry lion you will not punish it for wanting to eat you?

CAESAR: *wondering what he is driving at.* No.

RUFIO: Nor revenge upon it the blood of those it has already eaten.

CAESAR: No.

RUFIO: Nor judge it for its guiltiness.

CAESAR: No.

RUFIO: What, then, will you do to save your life from it?

CAESAR: *promptly.* Kill it, man, without malice, just as it would kill me. What does this parable of the lion mean?

RUFIO: Why, Cleopatra had a tigress that killed men at bidding. I thought she might bid it kill you some day. Well, had I not been Caesar's pupil, what pious things might I not have done to that tigress? I might have punished it. I might have revenged Pothinus on it.

CAESAR: *interjects.* Pothinus!

RUFIO: *continuing.* I might have judged it. But I put all these follies behind me; and, without malice, only cut its throat. And that is why Cleopatra comes to you in mourning.

CLEOPATRA: *vehemently.* He has shed the blood of my servant Ftatateeta. On your head be it as upon his, Caesar, if you hold him free of it.

CAESAR: *energetically.* On my head be it, then; for it was well done. Rufio: had you set yourself in the seat of the judge, and with hateful ceremonies and appeals to the gods handed that woman over to some hired executioner to be slain before the people in the name of justice, never again would I have touched your hand without a shudder. But this was natural slaying: I feel no horror at it.

Rufio, satisfied, nods at Cleopatra, mutely inviting her to mark that.

CLEOPATRA: *pettish and childish in her impotence.* No: not when a Roman slays an Egyptian. All the world will now see how unjust and corrupt Caesar is.

CAESAR: *taking her handy coaxingly.* Come: do not be angry with me. I am sorry for that poor Totateeta. *She laughs in spite of herself.* Aha! You are laughing. Does that mean reconciliation?

CLEOPATRA: *angry with herself for laughing.* No, no, NO!! But it is so ridiculous to hear you call her Totateeta.

CAESAR: What! As much a child as ever, Cleopatra! Have I not made a woman of you after all?

CLEOPATRA: Oh, it is you, who are a great baby: you make me seem silly because you will not behave seriously. But you have treated me badly; and I do not forgive you.

CAESAR: Bid me farewell.

CLEOPATRA: I will not.

CAESAR: *coaxing.* I will send you a beautiful present from Rome.

CLEOPATRA: *proudly.* Beauty from Rome to Egypt indeed! What can Rome give ME that Egypt cannot give me?

APOLLODORUS: That is true, Caesar. If the present is to be really beautiful, I shall have to buy it for you in Alexandria.

CAESAR: You are forgetting the treasures for which Rome is most famous, my friend. You cannot buy

THEM in Alexandria.

APOLLODORUS: What are they, Caesar?

CAESAR: Her sons. Come, Cleopatra: forgive me and bid me farewell; and I will send you a man, Roman from head to heel and Roman of the noblest; not old and ripe for the knife; not lean in the arms and cold in the heart; not hiding a bald head under his conqueror's laurels; not stooped with the weight of the world on his shoulders; but brisk and fresh, strong and young, hoping in the morning, fighting in the day, and reveling in the evening. Will you take such an one in exchange for Caesar?

CLEOPATRA: *palpitating.* His name, his name?

CAESAR: Shall it be Mark Antony? *She throws herself in his arms.*

RUFIO: You are a bad hand at a bargain, mistress, if you will swap Caesar for Antony.

CAESAR: So now you are satisfied.

CLEOPATRA: You will not forget.

CAESAR: I will not forget. Farewell: I do not think we shall meet again. Farewell. *He kisses her on the forehead. She is much affected and begins to sniff. He embarks.*

ROMAN SOLDIERS: *as he sets his foot on the gangway.* Hail, Caesar; and farewell!

He reaches the ship and returns Rufio's wave of the hand.

APOLLODORUS: *to Cleopatra.* No tears, dearest Queen: they stab your servant to the heart. He will return some day.

CLEOPATRA: I hope not. But I can't help crying, all the same. *She waves her handkerchief to Caesar; and the ship begins to move.*

ROMAN SOLDIERS: *drawing their swords and raising them in the air.* Hail, Caesar!

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

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