Cleopatra

ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA. ACT 1, SC 5.

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CLEOPATRA.

THIS world-renowned princess was the daughter of Ptolemy Auletes, king of Egypt, at whose death, she, with her brother, ascended the throne. The *motif* of Shakspeare's play, of which she is the heroine, consists of the episode, with its final catastrophe, of her intrigue with Mark Antony, the Roman hero—commencing with his first visit to Alexandria, whither he had followed Cleopatra after that triumphant excursion to Tarsus, so glowingly described in the text:

> The barge she sat in, like a burnish'd throne,
> Burn'd on the water: the poop was beaten gold;
> Purple the sails, and so perfumed that
> The winds were love-sick with them; the oars were silver,
> Which to the tune of flutes kept stroke, and made
> The water, which they beat, to follow faster,
> As amorous of their strokes. For her own person,
> It beggar'd all description: she did lie
> In her pavilion, (cloth of gold, of tissue,)
> O'er-picturing that Venus, where we see
> The fancy outwork nature; on each side her
> Stood pretty dimpled boys, like smiling Cupids,
> With divers-color'd fans, whose wind did seem
> To glow the delicate cheeks which they did cool,
> And what they undid, did.

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Her gentlewomen, like the Nereides,
So many mermaids, tended her i' the eyes,
And made their bends adornings; at the helm
A seeming mermaid steers; the silken tackle
Swell with the touches of those flower-soft hands,
That yarely frame the office. From the barge
A strange invisible perfume hits the sense
Of the adjacent wharfs.

Here, in the palace of the Ptolemies, abandoning himself to the fascinations of his imperial mistress, and the bewildering revels with which she besotted and enchained him, the "triple pillar of the world" forgot his glory, his wife, and his country. One day, however, in the midst of his ignoble ease, messengers from Rome arrived at the Egyptian court, with tidings for Antony of internal wars at home, and of the death of his wife, Fulvia. This intelligence awakening his patriotism and his remorse, he shook off his sensual sloth and returned at once to Rome, to find Octavius Cæsar, one of his associate triumvirs, highly incensed by the rumors which had reached them of his dishonorable self-indulgence, while his wife, Fulvia, "to have him out of Egypt" at any cost, had been waging war against Cæsar. In a spirit of true penitence, Antony acknowledged his criminal remissness; and, to renew their friendly relations the more securely, he married the virtuous Octavia, Cæsar's sister.

But internal jealousies soon again divided their interests; and Octavia having left her husband to visit her brother in Rome, for the purpose of reconciling them once more, Antony rejoined Cleopatra in Alexandria, with imposing ceremonials bestowed upon her a large addition to her dominions, and proclaimed his sons by her "the kings of kings."

War between Antony and Cæsar was now hotly waged, to be

finally decided by a naval contest at Actium; where, by a mere accident, Antony lost the day, and fled to Egypt. He offered various terms of capitulation to Cæsar; but that victorious hero would content himself with nothing less than the death of the man who had outraged his sister's honor, and scoffed at his avenging power; he, however, sent secret messages to Cleopatra, assuring her of his protection if she would give up her lover. The artful queen pretended to receive these advances with humble gratitude, and Antony, apprised of her conduct, suspected and accused her of treachery toward himself.

To dissipate his doubts of her constancy, Cleopatra betook herself, with her women, to a tower, which she had erected as her monument, and, as a final stroke of coquetry, caused it to be reported that she had killed herself. Antony, in despair at the news of her death, threw himself upon his sword, just as Cleopatra, fearful of the effect of her artifice, had sent to contradict the dangerous tidings; he ordered his attendants to bear him into her presence, and died in her arms.

Cæsar, thus robbed of half his triumph, resolved to secure Cleopatra as a captive and a trophy, to glorify his return to Rome. Through her maternal pride and affection he prevented her from starving herself; but when she found that he was proof against her charms, and learned beyond doubt for what ignominious purpose she was spared, she procured an asp, and died of its venomous bite—her faithful attendants sharing her fate.

Eternal and unfading as the glory of her Egyptian skies, this "serpent of old Nile" shall unwind her coils from about the hearts of men, only when Time shall cease to be. Her spells, as potent

to-day as when she reigned, a score of centuries since, survive the subtle enchantress from whom they emanated, to mock us with something of her own imperial coquetry, when we fain would shut our eyes against their dazzling charms, and bring our steady reason to bear upon her intrinsic claims to admiration and respect.

The very faults of Cleopatra, emblazoned with all the mystic extravagance of Eastern story, constitute her most fatal fascination; they bewilder one's moral sense, overwhelm it with kaleidoscopic brilliancies, tinge its grave conclusions with the spirit of their maddest intoxication, till, like Mark Antony, we find ourselves wondering, applauding, paying participating tribute, where we had thought to sit in austere judgment.

Complexity, contradiction, "infinite variety," instantaneous transmutations, are the exponents of Cleopatra's character; she is consistent only in being inconsistent—each particular idiosyncrasy, keen, flashing, meteoric, is "like the lightning, which doth cease to be, ere we can say It lightens." With towering, audacious consciousness of power, she one moment challenges our contempt, by the coarse wrangling of a vixenish temper, only the more absolutely to compel our recognition of her royal elegance and classic grace, the next; she unites in herself all that is luxurious in voluptuousness, unscrupulous in the gratification of passion, reckless in the procurement of debasing pleasure, and insolent in self-assertion, with rare intellect, superior attainments, and elegant accomplishments, a lively and intense imagination, magnificent tastes, a grand, self-reliant spirit, a warm, generous heart, and a perfection in the art of coquetry never attained by woman before or since—this last being the more remarkable, in that she was not possessed of extraordinary beauty.

The Cleopatra of Shakspeare—among a multitude of abortive creations which have taken her name in vain—is, alone, the faithful reflection of that Oriental Circe who holds our imaginations captive in "her strong toil of grace;" only she realizes to one's senses the glowing ideal suggested by her very name. In delineating her, Shakspeare employed to the utmost his wonderful faculty of perfectly identifying himself for the time with the character he was in the act of portraying; his sublime insight alone, unaided by fancy or invention, was concerned in bringing out this living portrait; for even the minutest dramatic effect he adhered strictly to historical facts, "spreading over the whole a richness like the overflowing of the Nile."

The most characteristic display of Cleopatra's antithetical peculiarities is afforded by the scenes immediately following her lover's departure: First, where, "feeding herself with most delicious poison," she lolls in restless, longing, luxurious languor, calling for drugged draughts, that she may "sleep out this great gap of time her Antony is away"—teasing her attendants with her lovesick petulance, beguiling the heavy hours with passionate fancies:

Cleo. O Charmian,
Where think'st thou he is now? Stands he, or sits he?
Or does he walk? or is he on his horse?
O happy horse, to bear the weight of Antony!
Do bravely, horse! for wot'st thou whom thou mov'st?
The demi-Atlas of this earth, the arm
And burgonet of men.—He's speaking now,
Or murmuring, *Where's my serpent of old Nile?*
For so he calls me;
* * * * * * * *
Met'st thou my posts?
Alex. Ay, madam, twenty several messengers:
Why do you send so thick?
Cleo. Who's born that day
When I forget to send to Antony,
Shall die a beggar.—Ink and paper, Charmian.—