ONE OF CLEOPATRA'S NIGHTS

AND

OTHER FANTASTIC ROMANCES

BY

THEOPHILE GAUTIER

Table of Contents

TO THE READER
ONE OF CLEOPATRA'S NIGHTS
    CHAPTER I
    CHAPTER II
    CHAPTER III
    CHAPTER IV
    CHAPTER V
    CHAPTER VI
CLARIMONDE[1]
ARRIA MARCELLA
A SOUVENIR OF POMPEII
THE MUMMY'S FOOT
OMPHALE: A ROCOCO STORY
KING CANDAULES
    CHAPTER I
    CHAPTER II
    CHAPTER III
    CHAPTER IV
    CHAPTER V
ADDENDA

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 "Pompeiian 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 sepultured 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 *pshents*, 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 sky-line; 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,[1] 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 collarette, 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 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!"

[1] *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.)

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