

The Girl with the Rose Red Slippers

In the last days of Ancient Egypt, not many years before the country was conquered by the Persians, she was ruled by a Pharaoh called Amasis. So as to strengthen his country against the threat of invasion by Cyrus of Persia, who was conquering all the known world, he welcomed as many Greeks as wished to trade with or settle in Egypt, and gave them a city called Naucratis to be entirely their own.

In Naucratis, not far from the mouth of the Nile that flows into the sea at Canopus, there lived a wealthy Greek merchant called Charaxos. His true home was in the island of Lesbos, and the famous poetess Sappho was his sister; but he had spent most of his life trading with Egypt, and in his old age he settled at Naucratis.

One day when he was walking in the marketplace he saw a great crowd gathered round the place where the slaves were sold. Out of curiosity he pushed his way into their midst, and found that everyone was looking at a beautiful girl who had just been set up on the stone rostrum to be sold.

She was obviously a Greek with white skin and cheeks like blushing roses, and Charaxos caught his breath - for he had never seen anyone so lovely.

Consequently, when the bidding began, Charaxos determined to buy her and, being one of the wealthiest merchants in all Naucratis, he did so without much difficulty.

"...she had been carried away by pirates"

When he had bought the girl, he discovered that her name was Rhodopis and that she had been carried away by pirates from her home in the north of Greece when she was a child. They had sold her to a rich man who employed many slaves on the island of Samos, and she had

grown up there, one of her fellow slaves being an ugly little man called Aesop who was always kind to her and told her the most entrancing stories and fables about animals and birds and human beings.

But when she was grown up, her master wished to make some money out of so beautiful a girl and had sent her to rich Naucratis to be sold.

Charaxos listened to her tale and pitied her deeply. Indeed very soon he became quite besotted about her. He gave her a lovely house to live in, with a garden in the middle of it, and slave girls to attend on her. He heaped her with presents of jewels and beautiful clothes, and spoiled her as if she had been his own daughter.

One day a strange thing happened as Rhodopis was bathing in the marble-edged pool in her secret garden. The slave-girls were holding her clothes and guarding her jeweled girdle and her rose-red slippers of which she was particularly proud, while she lazed in the cool water - for a summer's day even in the north of Egypt grows very hot about noon.

Suddenly when all seemed quiet and peaceful, an eagle came swooping down out of the clear blue sky - down, straight down as if to attack the little group by the pool. The slave-girls dropped everything they were holding and fled shrieking to hide among the trees and flowers of the garden; and Rhodopis rose from the water and stood with her back against the marble fountain at one end of it, gazing with wide, startled eyes.

But the eagle paid no attention to any of them. Instead, it swooped right down and picked up one of her rose-red slippers in its talons. Then it soared up into the air again on its great wings and, still carrying the slipper, flew away to the south over the valley of the Nile.

"Rhodopis wept at the loss of her rose-red slipper..."

Rhodopis wept at the loss of her rose-red slipper, feeling sure that she would never see it again, and sorry also to have lost anything that Charaxos had given to her.

But the eagle seemed to have been sent by the gods - perhaps by Horus himself whose sacred bird he was. For he flew straight up the Nile to Memphis and then swooped, down towards the palace.

At that hour Pharaoh Amasis sat in the great courtyard doing justice to his people and hearing any complaints that they wished to bring.

Down over the courtyard swooped the eagle and dropped the rose-red slipper of Rhodopis into Pharaoh's lap.

The people cried out in surprise when they saw, this, and Amasis too was much taken aback. But, as he took up the little rose-red slipper and admired the delicate workmanship and the tiny size of it, he felt that the girl for whose foot it was made must indeed be one of the loveliest in the world.

Indeed Amasis the Pharaoh was so moved by what had happened that he issued a decree:

"Let my messengers go forth through all the cities of the Delta and, if need be, into Upper Egypt to the very borders of my kingdom. Let them take with them this rose-red slipper which the divine bird of Horus has brought to me, and let them declare that her from whose foot this slipper came shall be the bride of Pharaoh!"

Then the messengers prostrated themselves crying, 'Life, health, strength be to Pharaoh! Pharaoh has spoken and his command shall be obeyed!'

So they set forth from Memphis and went by way of Heliopolis and Tanis and Canopus until they came to Naucratis. Here they heard of the rich merchant Charaxos and of how he had

bought the beautiful Greek girl in the slave market, and how he was lavishing all his wealth upon her as if she had been a princess put in his care by the gods.

So they went to the great house beside the Nile and found Rhodopis in the quiet garden beside the pool.

When they showed her the rose-red slipper she cried out in surprise that it was hers. She held out her foot so that they could see how well it fitted her; and she bade one of the slave girls fetch the pair to it which she had kept carefully in memory of her strange adventure with the eagle.

Then the messengers knew that this was the girl whom Pharaoh had sent them to find, and they knelt before her and said, 'The good god Pharaoh Amasis - life, health, strength be to him! - bids you come with all speed to his palace at Memphis. There you shall be treated with all honor and given a high place in his Royal House of Women: for he believes that Horus the son of Isis and Osiris sent that eagle to bring the rose-red slipper and cause him to search for you.'

Such a command could not be disobeyed. Rhodopis bade farewell to Charaxos, who was torn between joy at her good fortune and sorrow at his loss, and set out for Memphis.

And when Amasis saw her beauty, he was sure that the gods had sent her to him. He did not merely take her into his Royal House of Women, he made her his Queen and the Royal Lady of Egypt. And they lived happily together for the rest of their lives and died a year before the coming of Ambyses the Persian.