

## CHAPTER III

OF THE COMING OF HARMACHIS TO THE PALACE; OF HOW HE DREW PAULUS THROUGH THE GATES; OF CLEOPATRA SLEEPING; AND OF THE MAGIC OF HARMACHIS WHICH HE SHOWED HER

Thus it came to pass that on the next day I arrayed myself in a long and flowing robe, after the fashion of a magician or astrologer. I placed a cap on my head, about which were broidered images of the stars, and in my belt a scribe's palette and a roll of papyrus written over with magic spells and signs. In my hand I held a wand of ebony, tipped with ivory, such as is used by priests and masters of magic. Among these, indeed, I took high rank, filling my knowledge of their secrets which I had learned at Annu what I lacked in that skill which comes from use. And so with no small shame, for I love not such play and hold this common magic in contempt, I set forth through the Bruchium to the palace on the Lochias, being guided on my way by my uncle Sepa. At length, passing up the avenue of sphinxes, we came to the great marble gateway and the gates of bronze, within which is the guard-house. Here my uncle left me, breathing many prayers for my safety and success. But I advanced with an easy air to the gate, where I was roughly challenged by the Gallic sentries, and asked of my name, following, and business. I gave my name, Harmachis, the astrologer, saying that my business was with the Lady Charmion, the Queen's lady. Thereon the man made as though to let me pass in, when a captain of the guard, a Roman named Paulus, came forward and forbade it. Now, this Paulus was a large limbed man, with a woman's

face, and a hand that shook from wine-bibbing. Still he knew me again.

"Why," he cried, in the Latin tongue, to one who came with him, "this is the fellow who wrestled yesterday with the Nubian gladiator, that same who now howls for his lost hand underneath my window. Curses on the black brute! I had a bet upon him for the games! I have backed him against Caius, and now he'll never fight again, and I must lose my money, all through this astrologer. What is it thou sayest?--thou hast business with the Lady Charmion? Nay, then, that settles it. I will not let thee through. Fellow, I worship the Lady Charmion--ay, we all worship her, though she gives us more slaps than sighs. And dost thou think that we will suffer an astrologer with such eyes and such a chest as thine to cut in the game?--by Bacchus, no! She must come out to keep the tryst, for in thou shalt not go."

"Sir," I said humbly and yet with dignity, "I pray that a message may be sent to the Lady Charmion, for my business will not brook delay."

"Ye Gods!" answered the fool, "whom have we here that he cannot wait? A Cæsar in disguise? Nay, be off--be off! if thou wouldst not learn how a spear-prick feels behind."

"Nay," put in the other officer, "he is an astrologer; make him prophesy--make him play tricks."

"Ay," cried the others who had sauntered up, "let the fellow show his art. If he is a magician he can pass the gates, Paulus or no Paulus."

"Right willingly, good Sirs," I answered; for I saw no other means of entering. "Wilt thou, my young and noble Lord"--and I addressed him who was with Paulus--"suffer that I look thee in the eyes; perhaps I may read what is written there?"

"Right," answered the youth; "but I wish that the Lady Charmion was the sorceress. I would stare her out of countenance, I warrant."

I took him by the hand and gazed deep into his eyes. "I see," I said, "a field of battle at night, and about it bodies stretched--among them is thy body, and a hyena tears its throat. Most noble Sir, thou shalt die by sword-thrusts within a year."

"By Bacchus!" said the youth, turning white to the gills, "thou art an ill-omened sorcerer!" And he slunk off--shortly afterwards, as it chanced, to meet this very fate. For he was sent on service and slain in Cyprus.

"Now for thee, great Captain!" I said, speaking to Paulus. "I will show thee how I will pass those gates without thy leave--ay, and draw thee through them after me. Be pleased to fix thy princely gaze upon the point of this wand in my hand."

Being urged by his comrades he did this, unwillingly; and I let him gaze till I saw his eyes grow empty as an owl's eyes in the sun. Then I suddenly withdrew the wand, and, shifting my countenance into the place

of it, I seized him with my will and stare, and, beginning to turn round and round, drew him after me, his fierce face drawn fixed, as it were, almost to my own. Then I moved slowly backwards till I had passed the gates, still drawing him after me, and suddenly jerked my head away. He fell to the ground, to rise wiping his brow and looking very foolish.

"Art thou content, most noble Captain?" I said. "Thou seest we have passed the gates. Would any other noble Sir wish that I should show more of my skill?"

"By Taranis, Lord of Thunder, and all the Gods of Olympus thrown in, no!" growled an old Centurion, a Gaul named Brennus, "I like thee not, I say. The man who could drag our Paulus through those gates by the eye, as it were, is not a man to play with. Paulus, too, who always goes the way you don't want him--backwards, like an ass--Paulus! Why, sirrah, thou needst must have a woman in one eye and a wine-cup in the other to draw our Paulus thus."

At this moment the talk was broken, for Charmion herself came down the marble path, followed by an armed slave. She walked calm and carelessly, her hands folded behind her, and her eyes gazing at nothingness, as it were. But it was when Charmion thus looked upon nothing that she saw most. And as she came the officers and men of the guard made way for her bowing, for, as I learned afterwards, this girl, next to Cleopatra's self, wielded more power than anyone about the palace.

"What is this tumult, Brennus?" she said, speaking to the Centurion, and

making as if she saw me not; "knowest thou not that the Queen sleeps at this hour, and if she be awakened it is thou who must answer for it, and that dearly?"

"Nay, Lady," said the Centurion, humbly; "but it is thus. We have here"--and he jerked his thumb towards me--"a magician of the most pestilent--um, I crave his pardon--of the very best sort, for he hath but just now, only by placing his eyes close to the nose of the worthy Captain Paulus, dragged him, the said Paulus, through the gates that Paulus swore the magician should not pass. By the same token, lady, the magician says that he has business with you--which grieves me for your sake."

Charmion turned and looked at me carelessly. "Ay, I remember," she said; "and so he has--at least, the Queen would see his tricks; but if he can do none better than cause a sot"--here she cast a glance of scorn at the wondering Paulus--"to follow his nose through the gates he guards, he had better go whence he came. Follow me, Sir Magician; and for thee, Brennus, I say, keep thy riotous crew more quiet. For thee, most honourable Paulus, get thee sober, and next time I am asked for at the gates give him who asks a hearing." And, with a queenly nod of her small head, she turned and led the way, followed at a distance by myself and the armed slave.

We passed up the marble walk which runs through the garden grounds, and is set on either side with marble statues, for the most part of heathen Gods and Goddesses, with which these Lagidæ were not ashamed to defile

their royal dwellings. At length we came to a beautiful portico with fluted columns of the Grecian style of art, where we found more guards, who made way for the Lady Charmion. Crossing the portico we reached a marble vestibule where a fountain splashed softly, and thence by a low doorway a second chamber, known as the Alabaster Hall, most beautiful to see. Its roof was upheld by light columns of black marble, but all its walls were panelled with alabaster, on which Grecian legends were engraved. Its floor was of rich and many-hued mosaic that told the tale of the passion of Psyche for the Grecian God of Love, and about it were set chairs of ivory and gold. Charmion bade the armed slave stay at the doorway of this chamber, so that we passed in alone, for the place was empty except for two eunuchs who stood with drawn swords before the curtain at the further end.

"I am vexed, my Lord," she said, speaking very low and shyly, "that thou shouldst have met with such affronts at the gate; but the guard there served a double watch, and I had given my commands to the officer of the company that should have relieved it. Those Roman officers are ever insolent, who, though they seem to serve, know well that Egypt is their plaything. But it is not amiss, for these rough soldiers are superstitious, and will fear thee. Now bide thou here while I go into Cleopatra's chamber, where she sleeps. I have but just sung her to sleep, and if she be awake I will call thee, for she waits thy coming." And without more words she glided from my side.

In a little time she returned, and coming to me spoke:

"Wouldst see the fairest woman in all the world, asleep?" she whispered; "if so, follow me. Nay, fear not; when she awakes she will but laugh, for she bade me be sure to bring thee instantly, whether she slept or woke. See, I have her signet."

So we passed up the beautiful chamber till we came to where the eunuchs stood with drawn swords, and these would have barred my entry. But Charmion frowned, and drawing the signet from her bosom held it before their eyes. Having examined the writing that was on the ring, they bowed, dropping their sword points and we passed through the heavy curtains brodered with gold into the resting-place of Cleopatra. It was beautiful beyond imagining--beautiful with many coloured marbles, with gold and ivory, gems and flowers--all art can furnish and all luxury can dream of were here. Here were pictures so real that birds might have pecked the painted fruits; here were statues of woman's loveliness frozen into stone; here were draperies fine as softest silk, but woven of a web of gold; here were couches and carpets such as I never saw. The air, too, was sweet with perfume, while through the open window places came the far murmur of the sea. And at the further end of the chamber, on a couch of gleaming silk and sheltered by a net of finest gauze, Cleopatra lay asleep. There she lay--the fairest thing that man ever saw--fairer than a dream, and the web of her dark hair flowed all about her. One white, rounded arm made a pillow for her head, and one hung down towards the ground. Her rich lips were parted in a smile, showing the ivory lines of teeth; and her rosy limbs were draped in so thin a robe of the silk of Cos, held about her by a jewelled girdle, that the white gleam of flesh shone through it. I stood astonished, and though

my thoughts had little bent that way, the sight of her beauty struck me like a blow, so that for a moment I lost myself as it were in the vision of its power, and was grieved at heart because I must slay so fair a thing.

Turning suddenly from the sight, I found Charmion watching me with her quick eyes--watching as though she would search my heart. And, indeed, something of my thought must have been written on my face in a language

that she could read, for she whispered in my ear:

"Ay, it is pity, is it not? Harmachis, being but a man, methinks that thou wilt need all thy ghostly strength to nerve thee to the deed!"

I frowned, but before I could frame an answer she touched me lightly on the arm and pointed to the Queen. A change had come upon her: her hands were clenched, and about her face, all rosy with the hue of sleep, gathered a cloud of fear. Her breath came quick, she raised her arms as though to ward away a blow, then with a stifled moan sat up and opened the windows of her eyes. They were dark, dark as night; but when the light found them they grew blue as the sky grows blue before the blushing of the dawn.

"Cæsarion?" she said; "where is my son Cæsarion?--Was it then a dream? I dreamed that Julius--Julius who is dead--came to me, a bloody toga wrapped about his face, and having thrown his arms about his child led him away. Then I dreamed I died--died in blood and agony; and one I



might not see mocked me as I died. Ah! who is that man?"

"Peace, Madam! peace!" said Charmion. "It is but the magician Harmachis, whom thou didst bid me bring to thee at this hour."

"Ah! the magician--that Harmachis who overthrew the giant? I remember now. He is welcome. Tell me, Sir Magician, can thy magic mirror call forth an answer to this dream? Nay, how strange a thing is Sleep, that wrapping the mind in a web of darkness, straightly compels it to its will! Whence, then, come those images of fear rising on the horizon of the soul like some untimely moon upon a midday sky? Who grants them power to stalk so lifelike from Memory's halls, and, pointing to their wounds, thus confront the Present with the Past? Are they, then, messengers? Does the half-death of sleep give them foothold in our brains, and thus upknit the cut thread of human kinship? That was Cæsar's self, I tell thee, who but now stood at my side and murmured through his muffled robe warning words of which the memory is lost to me. Read me this riddle, thou Egyptian Sphinx,[\*] and I'll show thee a rosier path to fortune than all thy stars can point. Thou hast brought the omen, solve thou its problem."

[\*] Alluding to his name. Harmachis was the Grecian title of the divinity of the Sphinx, as Horemkhu was the Egyptian.--  
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"I come in a good hour, most mighty Queen," I answered, "for I have some skill in the mysteries of Sleep, that is, as thou hast rightly guessed,

a stair by which those who are gathered to Osiris may from time to time enter at the gateways of our living sense, and, by signs and words that can be read of instructed mortals, repeat the echoes of that Hall of Truth which is their habitation. Yes, Sleep is a stair by which the messengers of the guardian Gods may descend in many shapes upon the spirit of their choice. For, O Queen, to those who hold the key, the madness of our dreams can show a clearer purpose and speak more certainly than all the acted wisdom of our waking life, which is a dream indeed. Thou didst see great Cæsar in his bloody robe, and he threw his arms about the Prince Cæsarion and led him hence. Harken now to the secret of thy vision. It was Cæsar's self thou sawest coming to thy side from Amenti in such a guise as might not be mistaken. When he embraced the child Cæsarion he did it for a sign that to him, and him alone, had passed his greatness and his love. When he seemed to lead him hence he led him forth from Egypt to be crowned in the Capitol, crowned the Emperor of Rome and Lord of all the Lands. For the rest, I know not. It is hid from me."

Thus, then, I read the vision, though to my sense it had a darker meaning. But it is not well to prophesy evil unto Kings.

Meanwhile Cleopatra had risen, and, having thrown back the gnat gauze, was seated upon the edge of her couch, her eyes fixed upon my face, while her fingers played with her girdle's jewelled ends.

"Of a truth," she cried, "thou art the best of all magicians, for thou readest my heart, and drawest a hidden sweet out of the rough shell of

evil omen!"

"Ay, O Queen," said Charmion, who stood by with downcast eyes, and I thought that there was bitter meaning in her soft tones; "may no rougher words ever affront thy ears, and no evil presage tread less closely upon its happy sense."

Cleopatra placed her hands behind her head and, leaning back, looked at me with half-shut eyes.

"Come, show us of thy magic, Egyptian," she said. "It is yet hot abroad, and I am weary of those Hebrew Ambassadors and their talk of Herod and Jerusalem. I hate that Herod, as he shall find--and will have none of the Ambassadors to-day, though I yearn a little to try my Hebrew on them. What canst thou do? Hast thou no new trick? By Serapis! if thou canst conjure as well as thou canst prophesy, thou shalt have a place at Court, with pay and perquisites to boot, if thy lofty soul does not scorn perquisites."

"Nay," I answered, "all tricks are old; but there are some forms of magic to be rarely used, and with discretion, that may be new to thee, O Queen! Art thou afraid to venture on the charm?"

"I fear nothing; go on and do thy worst. Come, Charmion, and sit by me. But, stay, where are all the girls?--Iras and Merira?--they, too, love magic."

"Not so," I said; "the charms work ill before so many. Now behold!" and, gazing at the twain, I cast my wand upon the marble and murmured a spell. For a moment it was still, and then, as I muttered, the rod slowly began to writhe. It bent itself, it stood on end, and moved of its own motion. Next it put on scales, and behold it was a serpent that crawled and fiercely hissed.

"Fie on thee!" cried Cleopatra, clapping her hands; "callest thou that magic? Why, it is an old trick that any wayside conjurer can do. I have seen it a score of times."

"Wait, O Queen," I answered, "thou hast not seen all." And, as I spoke, the serpent seemed to break in fragments, and from each fragment grew a new serpent. And these, too, broke in fragments and bred others, till in a little while the place, to their glamoured sight, was a seething sea of snakes, that crawled, hissed, and knotted themselves in knots. Then I made a sign, and the serpents gathered themselves round me, and seemed slowly to twine themselves about my body and my limbs, till, save my face, I was wreathed thick with hissing snakes.

"Oh, horrible! horrible!" cried Charmion, hiding her countenance in the skirt of the Queen's garment.

"Nay, enough, Magician, enough!" said the Queen: "thy magic overwhelms us."

I waved my snake-wrapped arms, and all was gone. There at my feet lay

the black wand tipped with ivory, and naught beside.

The two women looked upon each other and gasped with wonder. But I took up the wand and stood with folded arms before them.

"Is the Queen content with my poor art?" I asked most humbly.

"Ay, that I am, Egyptian; never did I see its like! Thou art Court astronomer from this day forward, with right of access to the Queen's presence. Hast thou more of such magic at thy call?"

"Yea, royal Egypt; suffer that the chamber be a little darkened, and I will show thee one more thing."

"Half am I afraid," she answered; "nevertheless do thou as this Harmachis says, Charmion."

So the curtains were drawn and the chamber made as though the twilight were at hand. I came forward, and stood beside Cleopatra. "Gaze thou there!" I said sternly, pointing with my wand to the empty space where I had been, "and thou shalt behold that which is in thy mind."

Then for a little space was silence, while the two women gazed fixedly and half fearful at the spot.

And as they gazed a cloud gathered before them. Very slowly it took shape and form, and the form it took was the form of a man, though as

yet he was but vaguely mapped upon the twilight, and seemed now to grow and now to melt away.

Then I cried with a loud voice:

"Spirit, I conjure thee, appear!"

And as I cried the Thing, perfect in every part, leapt into form before us, suddenly as the flash of day. His shape was the shape of royal Cæsar, the toga thrown about his face, and on his form a vestment bloody from a hundred wounds. An instant so he stood, then I waved my wand and he was gone.

I turned to the two women on the couch, and saw Cleopatra's lovely face all clothed in terror. Her lips were ashy white, her eyes stared wide, and all the flesh was shaking on her bones.

"Man!" she gasped; "man! who and what art thou who canst bring the dead before our eyes?"

"I am the Queen's astronomer, magician, servant--what the Queen wills," I answered, laughing. "Was this the form that was on the Queen's mind?"

She made no answer, but, rising, left the chamber by another door.

Then Charmion rose also and took her hands from her face, for she, too, had been stricken with dread.

"How dost thou these things, royal Harmachis?" she said. "Tell me; for of a truth I fear thee."

"Be not afraid," I answered. "Perchance thou didst see nothing but what was in my mind. All things are shadows. How canst thou, then, know their nature, or what is and what only seems to be? But how goes it? Remember, Charmion, this sport is played to an end."

"It goes well," she said. "By to-morrow morning's dawn these tales will have gone round, and thou wilt be more feared than any man in Alexandria. Follow me, I pray thee."