

CHAPTER IV

OF THE WAYS OF CHARMION; AND OF THE CROWNING OF HARMACHIS AS THE KING OF LOVE

On the following day I received the writing of my appointment as Astrologer and Magician-in-Chief to the Queen, with the pay and perquisites of that office, which were not small. Rooms were given me in the palace, also, through which I passed at night to the high watch-tower, whence I looked on the stars and drew their auguries. For at this time Cleopatra was much troubled about matters political, and not knowing how the great struggle among the Roman factions would end, but being very desirous to side with the strongest, she took constant counsel with me as to the warnings of the stars. These I read to her in such manner as best seemed to fit the high interest of my ends. For Antony, the Roman Triumvir, was now in Asia Minor, and, rumour ran, very wroth because it had been told him that Cleopatra was hostile to the Triumvirate, in that her General, Serapion, had aided Cassius. But Cleopatra protested loudly to me and others that Serapion had acted against her will. Yet Charmion told me that, as with Allienus, it was because of a prophecy of Dioscorides the unlucky that the Queen herself had secretly ordered Serapion so to do. Still, this did not save Serapion, for to prove to Antony that she was innocent she dragged the General from the sanctuary and slew him. Woe be to those who carry out the will of tyrants if the scale should rise against them! And so Serapion perished.

Meanwhile all things went well with us, for the minds of Cleopatra and those about her were so set upon affairs abroad that neither she nor they thought of revolt at home. But day by day our party gathered strength in the cities of Egypt, and even in Alexandria, which is to Egypt as another land, all things being foreign there. Day by day, those who doubted were won over and sworn to the cause by that oath which cannot be broken, and our plans of action more firmly laid. And every other day I went forth from the palace to take counsel with my uncle Sepa, and there at his house met the Nobles and the great priests who were for the party of Khem.

I saw much of Cleopatra, the Queen, and I was ever more astonished at the wealth and splendour of her mind, that for richness and variety was as a woven cloth of gold throwing back all lights from its changing face. She feared me somewhat, and therefore wished to make a friend of me, asking me of many matters that seemed to be beyond the province of my office. I saw much of the Lady Charmion also--indeed, she was ever at my side, so that I scarce knew when she came and when she went. For she would draw nigh with that soft step of hers, and I would turn to find her at hand and watching me beneath the long lashes of her downcast eyes. There was no service that was too hard for her, and no task too long; for day and night she laboured for me and for our cause.

But when I thanked her for her loyalty, and said it should be had in mind in that time which was at hand, she stamped her foot, and pouted with her lips, like an angry child, saying that, among all the things which I had learned, this had I not learned--that Love's service asked

no payment, and was its own guerdon. And I, being innocent in such matters, and, foolish that I was, holding the ways of women as of small account, read her sayings in the sense that her services to the cause of Khem, which she loved, brought with them their own reward. But when I praised so fine a spirit, she burst into angry tears and left me wondering. For I knew nothing of the trouble at her heart. I knew not then that, unsought, this woman had given me her love, and that she was rent and torn by pangs of passion fixed like arrows in her breast. I did not know--how should I know it, who never looked upon her otherwise than as an instrument of our joint and holy cause? Her beauty never stirred me--no, not even when she leaned over me and breathed upon my hair, I never thought of it otherwise than as a man thinks of the beauty of a statue. What had I to do with such delights, I who was sworn to Isis and dedicate to the cause of Egypt? O ye Gods, bear me witness that I am innocent of this thing which was the source of all my woe and the woe of Khem!

How strange a thing is this love of woman, that is so small in its beginning and in its ends so great! See, at the first it is as the little spring of water welling from a mountain's heart. And at the last what is it? It is a mighty river that floats argosies of joy and makes wide lands to smile. Or, perchance, it is a torrent to wash in a flood of ruin across the fields of Hope, bursting in the barriers of design, and bringing to tumbled nothingness the tenement of man's purity and the temples of his faith. For when the Invisible conceived the order of the universe He set this seed of woman's love within its plan, that by its most unequal growth is doomed to bring about equality of law. For now

it lifts the low to heights untold, and now it brings the noble to the level of the dust. And thus, while Woman, that great surprise of nature, is, Good and Evil can never grow apart. For still She stands, and, blind with love, shoots the shuttle of our fate, and pours sweet water into the cup of bitterness, and poisons the wholesome breath of life with the doom of her desire. Turn this way and turn that, She is at hand to meet thee. Her weakness is thy strength, her might is thy undoing. Of her thou art, to her thou goest. She is thy slave, yet holds thee captive; at her touch honour withers, locks open, and barriers fall. She is infinite as ocean, she is variable as heaven, and her name is the Unforeseen. Man, strive not to escape from Woman and the love of woman; for, fly where thou wilt, She is yet thy fate, and whate'er thou buildest thou buildest it for her!

And thus it came to pass that I, Harmachis, who had put such matters far from me, was yet doomed to fall by the thing I held of no account. For, see, this Charmion: she loved me--why, I know not. Of her own thought she learned to love me, and of her love came what shall be told. But I, knowing naught, treated her like a sister, walking as it were hand in hand with her towards our common end.

And so the time passed on, till, at length, all things were made ready.

It was the night before the night when the blow should fall, and there were revellings in the palace. That very day I had seen Sepa, and with him the captains of a band of five hundred men, who should burst into the palace at midnight on the morrow, when I had slain Cleopatra the

Queen, and put the Roman and the Gallic legionaries to the sword. That very day I had suborned the Captain Paulus who, since I drew him through the gates, was my will's slave. Half by fear and half by promises of great reward I had prevailed upon him, for the watch was his, to unbar that small gate which faces to the East at the signal on the morrow night.

All was made ready--the flower of Freedom that had been five-and-twenty years in growth was on the point of bloom. Armed companies were gathering in every city from Abu to Athu, and spies looked out from their walls, awaiting the coming of the messenger who should bring tidings that Cleopatra was no more and that Harmachis, the royal Egyptian, had seized the throne.

All was prepared, triumph hung in my hand as a ripe fruit to the hand of the plucker. Yet as I sat at the royal feast my heart was heavy, and a shadow of coming woe lay cold within my mind. I sat there in a place of honour, near the majesty of Cleopatra, and looked down the lines of guests, bright with gems and garlanded with flowers, marking those whom I had doomed to die. There before me lay Cleopatra in all her beauty, which thrilled the beholder as he is thrilled by the rushing of the midnight gale, or by the sight of stormy waters. I gazed on her as she touched her lips with wine and toyed with the chaplet of roses on her brow, thinking of the dagger beneath my robe that I had sworn to bury in her breast. Again, and yet again, I gazed and strove to hate her, strove to rejoice that she must die--and could not. There, too, behind her--watching me now, as ever, with her deep-fringed eyes--was the

lovely Lady Charmion. Who, to look at her innocent face, would believe that she was the setter of that snare in which the Queen who loved her should miserably perish? Who would dream that the secret of so much death was locked in her girlish breast? I gazed, and grew sick at heart because I must anoint my throne with blood, and by evil sweep away the evil of the land. At that hour I wished, indeed, that I was nothing but some humble husbandman, who in its season grows and in its season garners the golden grain! Alas! the seed that I had been doomed to sow was the seed of Death, and now I must reap the red fruit of the harvest!

"Why, Harmachis, what ails thee?" said Cleopatra, smiling her slow smile. "Has the golden skein of stars got tangled, my astronomer? or dost thou plan some new feat of magic? Say what is it that thou dost so poorly grace our feast? Nay, now, did I not know, having made inquiry, that things so low as we poor women are far beneath thy gaze, why, I should swear that Eros had found thee out, Harmachis!"

"Nay, that I am spared, O Queen," I answered. "The servant of the stars marks not the smaller light of woman's eyes, and therein is he happy!"

Cleopatra leaned herself towards me, looking on me long and steadily in such fashion that, despite my will, the blood fluttered at my heart.

"Boast not, thou proud Egyptian," she said in a low voice which none but I and Charmion could hear, "lest perchance thou dost tempt me to match my magic against thine. What woman can forgive that a man should push us by as things of no account? It is an insult to our sex which Nature's

self abhors," and she leaned back again and laughed most musically. But, glancing up, I saw Charmion, her teeth on her lip and an angry frown upon her brow.

"Pardon, royal Egypt," I answered coldly, but with such wit as I could summon, "before the Queen of Heaven even stars grow pale!" This I said of the moon, which is the sign of the Holy Mother whom Cleopatra dared to rival, naming herself Isis come to earth.

"Happily said," she answered, clapping her white hands. "Why, here's an astronomer who has wit and can shape a compliment! Nay, such a wonder must not pass unnoted, lest the Gods resent it. Charmion, take this rose-chaplet from my hair and set it upon the learned brow of our Harmachis. He shall be crowned King of Love, whether he will it or not."

Charmion lifted the chaplet from Cleopatra's brows and, bearing it to where I was, with a smile set it upon my head yet warm and fragrant from the Queen's hair, but so roughly that she pained me somewhat. She did this because she was wroth, although she smiled with her lips and whispered, "An omen, royal Harmachis." For though she was so very much a woman, yet, when she was angered or suffered jealousy, Charmion had a childish way.

Having thus fixed the chaplet, she curtsied low before me, and with the softest tone of mockery named me, in the Greek tongue, "Harmachis, King of Love." Then Cleopatra laughed and pledged me as "King of Love," and

so did all the company, finding the jest a merry one. For in Alexandria they love not those who live straitly and turn aside from women.

But I sat there, a smile upon my lips, and black wrath in my heart. For, knowing who and what I was, it irked me to think myself a jest for the frivolous nobles and light beauties of Cleopatra's Court. But I was chiefly angered against Charmion, because she laughed the loudest, and I did not then know that laughter and bitterness are often the veils with which a sore heart wraps its weakness from the world. "An omen" she said it was--that crown of flowers--and so it proved indeed. For I was fated to barter the Double Diadem of the Upper and the Lower Land for a wreath of passion's roses that fade before they fully bloom, and Pharaoh's ivory bed of state for the pillow of a faithless woman's breast.

"King of Love!" they crowned me in their mockery; ay, and King of Shame! And I, with the perfumed roses on my brow--I, by descent and ordination the Pharaoh of Egypt--thought of the imperishable halls of Abouthis and of that other crowning which on the morrow should be consummate.

But still smiling, I pledged them back, and answered with a jest. For rising, I bowed before Cleopatra and craved leave to go. "Venus," I said, speaking of the planet that we know as Donaou in the morning and Bonou in the evening, "was in the ascendant. Therefore, as new-crowned King of Love, I must now pass to do my homage to its Queen." For these barbarians name Venus Queen of Love.

And so amidst their laughter I withdraw to my watch-tower, and, dashing that shameful chaplet down amidst the instruments of my craft, made pretence to note the rolling of the stars. There I waited, thinking on many things that were to be, until Charmion should come with the last lists of the doomed and the messages of my uncle Sepa, whom she had seen that evening.

At length the door opened softly, and she came jewelled and clad in her white robes, as she had left the feast.