

ALEXANDRIA



ABBOTT AND COSTELLO MEET CLEOPATRA

A short story by Phillip Chandler

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The Alexandria sun, a relentless golden hammer, beat down on Lou Costello's bald spot, making him squint. Beside him, Bud Abbott, ever the picture of long-suffering patience, adjusted his fez, which was already askew. They had arrived in Egypt with nothing but a vague notion of opportunity, two suitcases full of unwearable clothes, and a collective three drachmas.

"Bud," Lou whined, wiping sweat from his brow with a suspiciously stained handkerchief. "My stomach thinks my throat's been cut. And my feet think they've been trampled by a stampede of very small, angry scarabs."

"We're looking for honest work, Lou, in an honest city," Bud replied, trying to sound optimistic, though his own stomach was rumbling a mournful dirge. "And honest work pays honest wages. We just gotta find it."

Their search had led them past bustling bazaars filled with exotic spices and even more exotic smells, past towering obelisks, and alongside the shimmering, impossibly blue Mediterranean. They'd tried selling sand to tourists (unsuccessful), offering guided tours of places they'd never seen (catastrophic), and even attempting to teach a camel to play poker (the camel won their last drachma).

Then, like a mirage in the desert of their despair, they saw it: a papyrus scroll nailed to a date palm. Its hieroglyphs were indecipherable, but beneath them, a scrawled message in Greek, painstakingly translated by a helpful but bewildered street urchin, declared: "Royal Gardeners Wanted. Inquire at the Vizier's Palace. Urgent."

"Gardeners, Lou!" Bud exclaimed, a spark in his eye. "We can do that! We've seen gardens. They have plants. We can water them."

Lou looked doubtful. "But Bud, the only thing I've ever successfully grown is a beard, and that was by accident."

"Details, Lou, details! This is our chance! Think of the food, the lodging, the... not being hungry!"

The Vizier's Palace was less a palace and more a fortress built of solid, intimidating granite. Inside, the Vizier himself, a man named Horemheb, sat behind a massive, elaborately carved desk, his expression perpetually fixed in a scowl that suggested he'd just bitten into a particularly sour date. He wore robes of severe black, embroidered with silver scarabs, and his eyes, as sharp as desert hawks, assessed them with a mix of suspicion and profound weariness.

"You are the applicants for the royal gardening position?" Horemheb's voice was a gravelly rumble.

"That's us, Your Honor... uh... Your Excellency... sir!" Bud declared, trying to straighten his fez which promptly tipped over his eyes.

"Gardening," Horemheb repeated slowly, as if the word itself was offensive. "Do you possess knowledge of Egyptian flora? The propagation of lotus blossoms, perhaps? The meticulous care of the Royal Papyrus groves? The feeding of the Nile Crocus?"

"Oh, flora!" Lou chirped, elbowing Bud. "Bud here knows all about Flora. Don't you, Bud? She was our landlady back in Brooklyn. Mean old gal, but she had a nice pet goldfish."

Bud winced. "No, Lou, he means plants! We're very good with plants, sir. We... uh... we talk to them. They respond well to our... conversational style."

Horemheb pinched the bridge of his nose. "And your experience? Have you cultivated a garden of significant size? Perhaps a royal estate?"

"Well, no, sir, not a royal one," Bud admitted. "But we once helped a fellow plant a window box. It was a very... compact operation. And we watered it every day, sometimes twice!"

"And the results?" Horemheb asked, his voice dangerously even.

"The petunias," Lou interjected, waving his hands, "they were... spirited! They tried to escape the box, Bud. Right over the edge! We had to lasso 'em."

Horemheb stared at them. Then, he let out a sigh that seemed to deflate the very air in the room. "And your names?"

"I'm Abbott," Bud announced proudly. "And he's Costello."

"Costello," Horemheb mused. "And what precisely is your role, Costello, when tending to the royal gardens?"

"Oh, I'm the... uh... the 'Who' man," Lou said, puffing out his chest.

Horemheb blinked. "The 'Who' man?"

"Yeah! Like, if you say, 'Who's going to prune the roses?' That'd be me! Or, 'Who's gonna weed the Nile Crocus?' Also me!"

"But if I said, 'Who isn't here today?' Who would that be?"

Lou thought hard. "Well, if you said, 'Who isn't here today,' and 'Who' is supposed to be pruning the roses, then 'Who' would be here, but not pruning the roses."

Horemheb's face turned several shades of crimson. "Are you deliberately trying to vex me, you... you garden gnomes?"

"No, sir, not gnomes!" Bud interjected quickly. "We're human! Mostly! We promise we'll be the best gardeners! We're very good at digging, sir! And pushing wheelbarrows!"

Horemheb stood up abruptly. "Enough! I have never in my career interviewed two such... individuals. Your qualifications are nonsensical, your experience nonexistent, and your grasp of basic conversation an enigma. However," he paused, glancing at a stack of applications that seemed to have been rejected for centuries, "the Queen requires gardeners. Today. And you are... here. Against my better judgment, you are hired. Start immediately. And if so much as a single petunia tries to escape, I shall have you both fed to the royal crocodiles."

Lou gasped. "They have crocodiles? Do they eat plants?"

"No, Lou!" Bud hissed. "They eat people."

Lou swallowed hard. "Well, then, we'll be extra careful with the petunias, won't we, Bud?"

And so, Abbott and Costello found themselves the newest additions to Cleopatra's gardening staff. Their tenure began with predictable chaos. Lou mistook a rare hybrid lily for a weed and tried to yank it out, only to be stopped by a horrified head gardener. Bud accidentally pruned a valuable fruit tree into the shape of a charging hippopotamus, much to the amusement of a passing eunuch. They spilled more water than they delivered to the plants, tripped over every irrigation ditch, and mistook a sleeping royal cat for a decorative cushion.

One sweltering afternoon, as they were supposedly clearing a patch of particularly stubborn weeds – which, in Lou’s case, involved mostly sitting on them – they heard voices. Two distinct voices, growing closer.

“Quick, Lou!” Bud whispered, pulling his partner behind a thick cluster of flowering oleanders. “It’s the Queen! And General Aethelred!”

Cleopatra, majestic in flowing silks, walked slowly, her voice clear and resonant. “General, the timeline for the northern shipment is critical. Three months, you say?”

General Aethelred, a burly man with a booming voice, nodded grimly. “Indeed, Your Majesty. Logistics are being finalized. A great force will be necessary, coming from the north. We must ensure the path is clear for their... passage.”

Cleopatra frowned. “And the Romans? Have they been informed of our... intentions?”

“A preliminary message has been sent, Your Majesty,” Aethelred replied. “They must understand the scale of what is to descend upon us.”

“And the cost?” Cleopatra added, her voice dropping slightly. “This endeavor will require considerable resources. We cannot afford any... resistance.”

Lou’s eyes, wide as saucers, found Bud’s. “Bud! Did you hear that? ‘Northern shipment’! ‘Three months’! ‘Great force’! ‘Romans’!”

Bud, initially confused, began to piece together Lou’s misinterpretations with growing horror. “And ‘descend upon us’! They’re talking about an invasion, Lou! The Romans are coming!”

“In three months!” Lou squeaked, practically vibrating with panic. “We gotta warn somebody, Bud! The Queen! The Vizier! The crocodiles!”

“The crocodiles, Lou, are not on our side in this,” Bud muttered, pulling him further into the foliage as the royal pair passed by. “We have to tell Cleopatra!”

Convincing Cleopatra, however, proved to be a task more daunting than facing a legion of gladiators. Their first attempt involved bursting into the royal dining hall, where Cleopatra was enjoying a quiet meal of roasted quail and figs.

“Your Majesty!” Bud blurted, making a sweeping bow that ended with his fez falling into a fruit bowl. “We have urgent news! Terrible news!”

Lou, meanwhile, grabbed a fig from the bowl and hastily devoured it. “The Romans are coming!” he shouted, bits of fig spraying from his mouth. “In three months! With a great force!”

Cleopatra, gracefully dabbing her lips with a linen napkin, raised an elegant eyebrow. “Indeed? And how, pray tell, did my esteemed gardeners acquire this classified intelligence?”

“We overheard it, Your Majesty!” Bud declared, retrieving his fez. “From General Aethelred himself! And it sounded very... invading!”

The Vizier, Horemheb, who was standing nearby, strode forward, his face a thundercloud. "Your Majesty, these two imbeciles are a menace! They are disruptive, incompetent, and now, apparently, delusional! I beg you, allow me to have them flogged and thrown into the Nile!"

"Flogged?" Lou whimpered, clutching Bud's arm. "But we just told her the Romans are coming! Don't you want to be flogged by the Romans, Bud?"

"No, Lou, I don't want to be flogged by anybody!" Bud insisted.

Cleopatra, surprisingly, did not immediately order their demise. A flicker of amusement danced in her eyes. "Horemheb, calm yourself. While their methods are... unorthodox, their enthusiasm is commendable. Tell me, gentlemen, if indeed the Romans are planning such an audacious strike, where is your proof? Where are the battle plans, the spy reports, the intercepted missives?"

"Uh... we don't have those, Your Majesty," Bud admitted. "We just heard it."

"Exactly!" Horemheb roared. "They heard nothing but the rustle of their own empty heads!"

"But we can find them, Your Majesty!" Lou piped up, suddenly bold, perhaps due to the fig's energizing properties. "We'll find all the proofs! We'll find the... the Roman blueprints! And the Roman packing slips for the invasion boats!"

Cleopatra leaned back in her chair, a faint smile playing on her lips. The notion was absurd, utterly preposterous. Yet, something about the sheer, unadulterated idiocy of these two men, their earnest belief in their own misunderstanding, held a bizarre fascination. Besides, it would keep them occupied and out of her flowerbeds.

"Very well," she said, her voice dripping with mock seriousness. "I shall grant you a royal commission. You, Abbott and Costello, are hereby tasked with uncovering irrefutable evidence of this impending Roman invasion. You have one week. Fail, and you will not merely be flogged, but also made to listen to Horemheb's poetry reading."

Lou gasped, his eyes wide. "Poetry? That's worse than the crocodiles, Bud!"

"We'll find it, Your Majesty!" Bud declared, bowing so low his fez scraped the floor. "Consider the Romans already exposed!"

Their search for evidence plunged Alexandria into a state of delightful, if localized, pandemonium. Their first target was the Roman Quarter, a bustling district filled with Roman merchants, soldiers on leave, and the occasional senator on a diplomatic mission.

"Okay, Lou," Bud whispered, hiding behind a stall selling imported olives. "We need to find a Roman spy. Someone shifty. Someone looking guilty."

Lou pointed. "How about him, Bud? He's shifty! He's trying to buy three pounds of dates, but he keeps looking over his shoulder!"

The man, a portly Roman merchant, was indeed looking over his shoulder, but only because he was trying to haggle down the price of the dates with an exceptionally stubborn vendor. Bud and Lou, mistaking his furtive glances for espionage, decided to follow him. The merchant led them on a circuitous route through the market, past a bathhouse, and finally into a bustling Roman tavern.

"He's got to be meeting someone, Lou," Bud whispered, peeking through a gap in the tavern's wooden door. "A secret rendezvous!"

Inside, the merchant met another Roman, who looked equally innocuous. Bud and Lou pressed their ears to the door, straining to hear.

"...and the legions are absolutely demanding more grain," the second Roman said loudly. "Our quartermaster is beside himself. If we don't get a new shipment in three months, there'll be mutiny!"

Lou's eyes lit up. "Mutiny! See, Bud? They're getting ready! 'Grain' must be code for 'soldiers'! And 'quartermaster' is probably a general!"

They burst into the tavern, Bud brandishing a decorative olive branch he'd snatched from the stall, and Lou holding a fig like a grenade. "Aha! We've caught you! The grain! The mutiny! It's all a plot!"

The two Roman merchants stared at them, bewildered. The tavern went silent. Then, the first merchant, recognizing them as the two inexplicable foreigners who'd caused a scene in the market earlier, simply sighed and threw a denarius to a bouncer. "Get rid of them."

Bud and Lou were unceremoniously ejected, landing in a heap in a pile of spilled vegetables.

Undeterred, they moved on. They spotted a group of Roman architects discussing blueprints for a new temple. "Plans!" Lou shrieked, pointing. "They're building something! A giant siege engine, Bud!"

They attempted to "confiscate" the blueprints, leading to a comedic chase through the city streets, ending with Bud inadvertently tipping over a water cart and creating an impromptu – and very muddy – slip-and-slide.

Their next "breakthrough" came at a Roman training ground, where gladiators practiced their combat. "Look, Bud! They're training for the invasion! See the swords? And the nets?"

"That's just, gladiators, Lou," Bud sighed, trying to pull him away. "They do that all the time."

But Lou, ever the enthusiast, decided to "infiltrate" their ranks. He snuck into the changing rooms, emerging moments later in an ill-fitting tunic and a ridiculously oversized helmet. He grabbed a wooden practice sword and tried to join the drills, mistaking a lunge-and-parry exercise for a secret Roman signal. He ended up accidentally tripping a burly gladiator, who then chased him around the arena, much to the amusement of the actual Romans, who thought it was a new form of comedic wrestling. Bud had to drag Lou, still in his gladiator gear, away before he was permanently retired from comedy.

Their "evidence" collection grew: a receipt for twenty tunics (Lou believed it was for uniforms for their secret invasion force), a deflated children's ball (a miniature siege weapon prototype), and a highly detailed drawing of a pigeon (Lou swore it was a new Roman drone for reconnaissance).

One morning, exhausted and covered in various market produce remnants, they returned to Cleopatra's palace. They were led to the Queen, who sat with the Vizier, both looking distinctly apprehensive.

"Your Majesty," Bud announced, emptying a sack onto the marble floor. The contents clattered out: the tunic receipt, the deflated ball, the pigeon drawing, a handful of olives, and a single, wilted lotus blossom. "We have found the proof!"

"Behold, Your Majesty!" Lou exclaimed, picking up the pigeon drawing. "This is a Roman spy bird! It's got very shifty eyes!"

Horemheb practically vibrated with rage. "This is preposterous! Your Majesty, these lunatics have wasted royal time, caused disturbances across the city, and brought nothing but... refuse!"

Cleopatra picked up the drawing, a faint smile on her face. "A pigeon, you say? It looks suspiciously like my nephew's art project."

"And this, Your Majesty!" Bud held up the tunic receipt. "Twenty tunics! For the invading army!"

"Or," Horemheb interjected, his voice strained, "for the annual Roman Quarter toga party, which, you may recall, is in three months."

Lou's jaw dropped. "Toga party?"

"And the 'great force coming from the north'?" Cleopatra asked, turning to Bud, her eyes twinkling. "General Aethelred, if you recall, was referring to the annual grain shipment from the northern provinces. And the discussion of 'Romans' and 'resistance' was merely about negotiating the transit tariffs."

Bud blinked. "Grain shipment? Not soldiers?"

"And the 'mutiny'?" Lou asked weakly.

"The legions were indeed threatening mutiny," Horemheb supplied, a triumphant sneer on his face, "if their grain supply was not replenished soon. A very common occurrence, I assure you."

Abbott's shoulders slumped. He looked at Lou, who was slowly stuffing the deflated ball into his mouth. "Lou... we were wrong. It wasn't an invasion."

"So, no flogging?" Lou asked, his voice muffled by the rubber.

Cleopatra burst into laughter, a melodic, surprising sound that filled the room. Even Horemheb looked startled. "No, gentlemen, no flogging. Though I admit, the thought of you enduring Horemheb's poetry was tempting."

She rose and approached them, her gaze filled with an unexpected warmth. "You may not be the most competent gardeners, nor the most accurate intelligence gatherers. But you are, undoubtedly, the most amusing. Alexandria has not had such entertainment in years."

"Your Majesty, their presence is an affront!" Horemheb spluttered.

Cleopatra waved a dismissive hand. "Nonsense, Vizier. They bring... a certain vitality. Consider your royal commission complete, gentlemen. And your employment, continued. Not as gardeners, however. You are now... my Royal Purveyors of Merriment. Your task is to keep me, and indeed the entire court, suitably entertained."

Bud's face split into a wide grin. "Entertainers, Lou! We got a job!"

Lou, still chewing the ball, managed a small, happy burp. "So we don't have to weed anymore?"

Cleopatra smiled. "No, Costello. You can leave the weeding to the actual gardeners. But be warned: if you ever mistake my personal papyrus for a weed again, I assure you, the crocodiles will be reconsidering their dietary choices."

Bud and Lou, still slightly bewildered but immensely relieved, bowed deeply. As they backed out of the throne room, Lou accidentally tripped over a priceless urn, sending it crashing to the floor.

"Oops," Lou mumbled, picking up a shard. "Is this evidence of something, Bud?"

Bud just sighed, a happy, weary sigh. Life in Alexandria, it seemed, was never going to be boring. And for Abbott and Costello, that was just fine.