

BOOK III--THE VENGEANCE OF HARMACHIS

CHAPTER I

OF THE ESCAPE OF HARMACHIS FROM TARSUS; OF HIS BEING CAST FORTH AS AN OFFERING TO THE GODS OF THE SEA; OF HIS SOJOURN IN THE ISLE OF CYPRUS; OF HIS RETURN TO ABOUTHIS; AND OF THE DEATH OF AMENEMHAT

I made my way down the stair in safety, and presently stood in the courtyard of that great house. It was but an hour from dawn, and none were stirring. The last reveller had drunk his fill, the dancing-girls had ceased their dancing, and silence lay upon the city. I drew near the gate, and was challenged by an officer who stood on guard, wrapped in a heavy cloak.

"Who passes," said the voice of Brennus.

"A merchant, may it please you, Sir, who, having brought gifts from Alexandria to a lady of the Queen's household, and, having been entertained of the lady, now departs to his galley," I answered in a feigned voice.

"Umph!" he growled. "The ladies of the Queen's household keep their guests late. Well; it is a time of festival. The pass-word, Sir Shopkeeper? Without the pass-word you must needs return and crave the

lady's further hospitality."

"'Antony,' Sir; and a right good word, too. Ah! I've wandered far, and never saw I so goodly a man or so great a general. And, mark you, Sir! I've travelled far, and seen many generals."

"Ay; 'Antony's the word! And Antony is a good general in his way--when it is a sober way, and when he cannot find a skirt to follow. I've served with Antony--and against him, too; and know his points. Well, well; he's got an armful now!"

And all this while that he was holding me in talk, the sentry had been pacing to and fro before the gate. But now he moved a little way to the right, leaving the entrance clear.

"Fare thee well, Harmachis, and begone!" whispered Brennus, leaning forward and speaking quickly. "Linger not. But at times bethink thee of Brennus who risked his neck to save thine. Farewell, lad, I would that we were sailing North together," and he turned his back upon me and began to hum a tune.

"Farewell, Brennus, thou honest man," I answered, and was gone. And, as I heard long afterwards, when on the morrow the hue and cry was raised because the murderers could not find me, though they sought me everywhere to slay me, Brennus did me a service. For he swore that as he kept his watch alone an hour after midnight he saw me come and stand upon the parapet of the roof, that then I stretched out my robes

and they became wings on which I floated up to Heaven, leaving him astonished. And all those about the Court lent ear to this history, believing in it, because of the great fame of my magic; and they wondered much what the marvel might portend. The tale also travelled into Egypt, and did much to save my good name among those whom I had betrayed; for the more ignorant among them believed that I acted not of my will, but of the will of the dread Gods, who of their own purpose wafted me into Heaven. And thus to this day the saying runs that "When Harmachis comes again Egypt shall be free." But alas, Harmachis comes no more! Only Cleopatra, though she was much afraid, doubted her of the tale, and sent an armed vessel to search for the Syrian merchant, but not to find him, as shall be told.

When I reached the galley of which Charmion had spoken, I found her about to sail, and gave the writing to the captain, who conned it, looking on me curiously, but said nothing.

So I went aboard, and immediately we dropped swiftly down the river with the current. And having come to the mouth of the river unchallenged, though we passed many vessels, we put out to sea with a strong favouring wind that before night freshened to a great gale. Then the sailor men, being much afraid, would have put about and run for the mouth of Cydnus again, but could not because of the wildness of the sea. All that night it blew furiously, and by dawn our mast was carried away, and we rolled helplessly in the trough of the great waves. But I sat wrapped in a

cloak, little heeding; and because I showed no fear the sailors cried out that I was a wizard, and sought to cast me into the sea, but the captain would not. At dawn the wind slackened, but ere noon it once more blew in terrible fury, and at the fourth hour from noon we came in sight of the rocky coast of that cape in the island of Cyprus which is called Dinaretum, where is a mountain named Olympus, and thither-wards we drifted swiftly. Then, when the sailors saw the terrible rocks, and how the great waves that smote on them spouted up in foam, once more they grew much afraid, and cried out in their fear. For, seeing that I still sat unmoved, they swore that I certainly was a wizard, and came to cast me forth as a sacrifice to the Gods of the sea. And this time the captain was over-ruled, and said nothing. Therefore, when they came to me I rose and defied them, saying, "Cast me forth, if ye will; but if ye cast me forth ye shall perish."

For in my heart I cared little, having no more any love of life, but rather a desire to die, though I greatly feared to pass into the presence of my Holy Mother Isis. But my weariness and sorrow at the bitterness of my lot overcame even this heavy fear; so that when, being mad as brute beasts, they seized me and, lifting me, hurled me into the raging waters, I did but utter one prayer to Isis and made ready for death. But it was fated that I should not die; for, when I rose to the surface of the water, I saw a spar of wood floating near me, to which I swam and clung. And a great wave came and swept me, riding, as it were, upon the spar, as when a boy I had learned to do in the waters of the Nile, past the bulwarks of the galley where the fierce-faced sailors clustered to see me drown. And when they saw me come mounted on the

wave, cursing them as I came, and saw, too, that the colour of my face had changed--for the salt water had washed away the pigment, they shrieked with fear and threw themselves down upon the deck. And within a very little while, as I rode toward the rocky coast, a great wave poured into the vessel, that rolled broadside on, and pressed her down into the deep, whence she rose no more.

So she sank with all her crew. And in that same storm also sank the galley which Cleopatra had sent to search for the Syrian merchant. Thus all traces of me were lost, and of a surety she believed that I was dead.

But I rode on toward the shore. The wind shrieked and the salt waves lashed my face as, alone with the tempest, I rushed upon my way, while the sea-birds screamed about my head. I felt no fear, but rather a wild uplifting of the heart; and in the stress of my imminent peril the love of life seemed to waken again. And so I plunged and drifted, now tossed high toward the lowering clouds, now cast into the deep valleys of the sea, till at length the rocky headland loomed before me, and I saw the breakers smite upon the stubborn rocks, and through the screaming of the wind heard the sullen thunder of their fall and the groan of stones sucked seaward from the beach. On! high-throned upon the mane of a mighty billow--fifty cubits beneath me the level of the hissing waters; above me the inky sky! It was done! The spar was torn from me, and, dragged downwards by the weight of the bag of gold and the clinging of my garments, I sank struggling furiously.

Now I was under--the green light for a moment streamed through the waters, and then came darkness, and on the darkness pictures of the past. Picture after picture--all the long scene of life was written here. Then in my ears I only heard the song of the nightingale, the murmur of the summer sea, and the music of Cleopatra's laugh of victory, following me softly and yet more soft as I sank away to sleep.

Once more my life came back, and with it a sense of deadly sickness and of aching pain. I opened my eyes and saw a kind face bending over me, and knew that I was in the room of a builded house.

"How came I hither?" I asked faintly.

"Of a truth, Poseidon brought thee, Stranger," answered a rough voice in barbarous Greek; "we found thee cast high upon the beach like a dead dolphin and brought thee to our house, for we are fisher-folk. And here, methinks, thou must lie a while, for thy left leg is broken by the force of the waves."

I strove to move my foot and could not. It was true, the bone was broken above the knee.

"Who art thou, and how art thou named?" asked the rough-bearded sailor.

"I am an Egyptian traveller whose ship has sunk in the fury of the gale,

and I am named Olympus," I answered, for these people called a mountain that we had sighted Olympus, and therefore I took the name at hazard. And as Olympus I was henceforth known.

Here with these rough fisher-folk I abode for the half of a year, paying them a little out of the sum of gold that had come safely ashore upon me. For it was long before my bones grew together again, and then I was left somewhat of a cripple; for I, who had been so tall and straight and strong, now limped--one limb being shorter than the other. And after I recovered from my hurt, I still lived there, and toiled with them at the trade of fishing; for I knew not whither I should go or what I should do, and, for a while, I was fain to become a peasant fisherman, and so wear my weary life away. And these people entreated me kindly, though, as others, they feared me much, holding me to be a wizard brought hither by the sea. For my sorrows had stamped so strange an aspect on my face that men gazing at me grew fearful of what lay beneath its calm.

There, then, I abode, till at length, one night as I lay and strove to sleep, great restlessness came upon me, and a mighty desire once more to see the face of Sihor. But whether this desire was of the Gods or born of my own heart, not knowing, I cannot tell. So strong was it, at the least, that before it was dawn I rose from my bed of straw and clothed myself in my fisher garb, and, because I had no wish to answer questions, thus I took farewell of my humble hosts. First I placed some pieces of gold on the well-cleaned table of wood, and then taking a pot of flour I strewed it in the form of letters, writing:

"This gift from Olympus, the Egyptian, who returns into the sea."

Then I went, and on the third day I came to the great city of Salamis, that is also on the sea. Here I abode in the fishermen's quarters till a vessel was about to sail for Alexandria, and to the captain of this vessel, a man of Paphos, I hired myself as a sailor. We sailed with a favouring wind, and on the fifth day I came to Alexandria, that hateful city, and saw the light dancing on its golden domes.

Here I might not abide. So again I hired myself out as a sailor, giving my labour in return for passage, and we passed up the Nile. And I learned from the talk of men that Cleopatra had come back to Alexandria, drawing Antony with her and that they lived together with royal state in the palace on the Lochias. Indeed, the boatmen already had a song thereon, which they sang as they laboured at the oar. Also I heard how the galley that was sent to search for the vessel which carried the Syrian merchant had foundered with all her crew, and the tale that the Queen's astronomer, Harmachis, had flown to Heaven from the roof of the house at Tarsus. And the sailors wondered because I sat and laboured and would not sing their ribald song of the loves of Cleopatra. For they, too, began to fear me, and mutter concerning me among themselves. Then I knew that I was a man accursed and set apart--a man whom none might love.

On the sixth day we drew nigh to Abouthis, where I left the craft, and the sailors were right glad to see me go. And, with a breaking heart, I walked through the fertile fields, seeing faces that I knew well. But in

my rough disguise and limping gait none knew me. At length, as the sun sank, I came near to the great outer pylon of the temple; and here I crouched down in the ruins of a house, not knowing why I had come or what I was about to do. Like a lost ox I had strayed from far, back to the fields of my birth, and for what? If my father, Amenemhat, still lived, surely he would turn his face from me. I dared not go into the presence of my father. I sat hidden there among the broken rafters, and idly watched the pylon gates, to see if, perchance, a face I knew should issue from them. But none came forth or entered in, though the great gates stood wide; and then I saw that herbs were growing between the stones, where no herbs had grown for ages. What could this be? Was the temple deserted? Nay; how could the worship of the eternal Gods have ceased, that for thousands of years had, day by day, been offered in the holy place? Was, then, my father dead? It well might be. And yet, why this silence? Where were the priests: where the worshippers?

I could bear the doubt no more, but as the sun sank red I crept like a hunted jackal through the open gates, and on till I reached the first great Hall of Pillars. Here I paused and gazed around me--not a sight, not a sound, in the dim and holy place! I went on with a beating heart to the second great hall, the hall of six-and-thirty pillars where I had been crowned Lord of all the Lands: still not a sight or a sound! Thence, half fearful of my own footfall, so terribly did it echo in the silence of the deserted Holies, I passed down the passage of the names of the Pharaohs towards my father's chamber. The curtain still swung over the doorway; but what would there be within?--also emptiness? I lifted it, and noiselessly passed in, and there in his carven chair

at the table on which his long white beard flowed, sat my father, Amenemhat, clad in his priestly robes. At first I thought that he was dead, he sat so still; but at length he turned his head, and I saw that his eyes were white and sightless. He was blind, and his face was thin as the face of a dead man, and woeful with age and grief.

I stood still and felt the blind eyes wandering over me. I could not speak to him--I dared not speak to him; I would go and hide myself afresh.

I had already turned and grasped the curtain, when my father spoke in a deep, slow voice:

"Come hither, thou who wast my son and art a traitor. Come hither, thou Harmachis, on whom Khem builded up her hope. Not in vain, then, have I drawn thee from far away! Not in vain have I held my life in me till I heard thy footfall creeping down these empty Hobbies, like the footfall of a thief!"

"Oh! my father," I gasped, astonished. "Thou art blind: how knowest thou me?"

"How do I know thee?--and askest thou that who hast learned of our lore? Enough, I know thee and I brought thee hither. Would, Harmachis, that I knew thee not! Would that I had been blasted of the Invisible ere I drew thee down from the womb of Nout, to be my curse and shame, and the last woe of Khem!"

"Oh, speak not thus!" I moaned; "is not my burden already more than I can bear? Am I not myself betrayed and utterly outcast? Be pitiful, my father!"

"Be pitiful!--be pitiful to thee who hast shown so great pity? It was thy pity which gave up noble Sepa to die beneath the hands of the tormentors!"

"Oh, not that--not that!" I cried.

"Ay, traitor, that!--to die in agony, with his last poor breath proclaiming thee, his murderer, honest and innocent! Be pitiful to thee, who gavest all the flower of Khem as the price of a wanton's arms!--thinkest thou that, labouring in the darksome desert mines, those noble ones in thought are pitiful to thee, Harmachis? Be pitiful to thee, by whom this Holy Temple of Abouthis hath been ravaged, its lands seized, its priests scattered, and I alone, old and withered, left to count out its ruin--to thee, who hast poured the treasures of Her into thy leman's lap, who hast forsworn Thyself, thy Country, thy Birthright, and thy Gods! Yea, thus am I pitiful: Accursed be thou, fruit of my loins!--Shame be thy portion, Agony thy end, and Hell receive thee at the last! Where art thou? Yea, I grew blind with weeping when I heard the truth--sure, they strove to hide it from me. Let me find thee that I may spit upon thee, thou Renegade! thou Apostate! thou Outcast!"--and he rose from his seat and staggered like a living Wrath toward me, smiting the air with his wand. And as he came with outstretched arms, awful to

see, suddenly his end found him, and with a cry he sank down upon the ground, the red blood streaming from his lips. I ran to him and lifted him; and as he died, he babbled:

"He was my son, a bright-eyed lovely boy, and full of promise as the Spring; and now--and now--oh, would that he were dead!"

Then came a pause and the breath rattled in his throat.

"Harmachis," he gasped, "art there?"

"Yea, father."

"Harmachis, atone!--atone! Vengeance can still be wreaked--forgiveness may still be won. There's gold; I've hidden it--Atoua--she can tell thee--ah, this pain! Farewell!"

And he struggled faintly in my arms and was dead.

Thus, then, did I and my holy father, the Prince Amenemhat, meet together for the last time in the flesh, and for the last time part.