

Pearl-Maiden

By

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PEARL-MAIDEN

A Tale Of The Fall of Jerusalem

By H. Rider Haggard

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TO

GLADYS CHRISTIAN

A DWELLER IN THE EAST THIS EASTERN TALE IS DEDICATED BY HER OWN
AND HE FATHER'S FRIEND

THE AUTHOR

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PEARL-MAIDEN

CHAPTER I

THE PRISON AT CÆSAREA

It was but two hours after midnight, yet many were wakeful in Cæsarea on the Syrian coast. Herod Agrippa, King of all Palestine--by grace of the Romans--now at the very apex of his power, celebrated a festival in honour of the Emperor Claudius, to which had flocked all the mightiest in the land and tens of thousands of the people. The city was full of them, their camps were set upon the sea-beach and for miles around; there was no room at the inns or in the private houses, where guests slept upon the roofs, the couches, the floors, and in the gardens. The great town hummed like a hive of bees disturbed after sunset, and though the louder sounds of revelling had died away, parties of feasters, many of them still crowned with fading roses, passed along the streets shouting and singing to their lodgings. As they went, they discussed--those of them who were sufficiently sober--the incidents of that day's games in the great circus, and offered or accepted odds upon the more exciting events of the morrow.

The captives in the prison that was set upon a little hill, a frowning building of brown stone, divided into courts and surrounded by a

high wall and a ditch, could hear the workmen at their labours in the amphitheatre below. These sounds interested them, since many of those who listened were doomed to take a leading part in the spectacle of this new day. In the outer court, for instance, were a hundred men called malefactors, for the most part Jews convicted of various political offences. These were to fight against twice their number of savage Arabs of the desert taken in a frontier raid, people whom to-day we should know as Bedouins, mounted and armed with swords and lances, but wearing no mail. The malefactor Jews, by way of compensation, were to be protected with heavy armour and ample shields. Their combat was to last for twenty minutes by the sand-glass, when, unless they had shown cowardice, those who were left alive of either party were to receive their freedom. Indeed, by a kindly decree the King Agrippa, a man who did not seek unnecessary bloodshed, contrary to custom, even the wounded were to be spared, that is, if any would undertake the care of them. Under these circumstances, since life is sweet, all had determined to fight their best.

In another division of the great hall was collected a very different company. There were not more than fifty or sixty of these, so the wide arches of the surrounding cloisters gave them sufficient shelter and even privacy. With the exception of eight or ten men, all of them old, or well on in middle age, since the younger and more vigorous males had been carefully drafted to serve as gladiators, this little band was made of women and a few children. They belonged to the new sect called Christians, the followers of one Jesus, who, according to report, was

crucified as a troublesome person by the governor, Pontius Pilate, a Roman official, who in due course had been banished to Gaul, where he was said to have committed suicide. In his day Pilate was unpopular in Judæa, for he had taken the treasures of the Temple at Jerusalem to build waterworks, causing a tumult in which many were killed. Now he was almost forgotten, but very strangely, the fame of this crucified demagogue, Jesus, seemed to grow, since there were many who made a kind of god of him, preaching doctrines in his name that were contrary to the law and offensive to every sect of the Jews.

Pharisees, Sadducees, Zealots, Levites, priests, all called out against them. All besought Agrippa that he would be rid of them, these apostates who profaned the land and proclaimed in the ears of a nation awaiting its Messiah, that Heaven-born King who should break the Roman yoke and make Jerusalem the capital of the world, that this Messiah had come already in the guise of an itinerant preacher, and perished with other malefactors by the death of shame.

Wearied with their importunities, the King listened. Like the cultivated Romans with whom he associated, Agrippa had no real religion. At Jerusalem he embellished the Temple and made offerings to Jehovah; at Berytus he embellished the temple and made offerings there to Jupiter. He was all things to all men and to himself--nothing but a voluptuous time-server. As for these Christians, he never troubled himself about them. Why should he? They were few and insignificant, no single man of rank or wealth was to be found among them. To persecute them was easy,

and--it pleased the Jews. Therefore he persecuted them. One James, a disciple of the crucified man called Christ, who had wandered about the country with him, he seized and beheaded at Jerusalem. Another, called Peter, a powerful preacher, he threw into prison, and of their followers he slew many. A few of these were given over to be stoned by the Jews, but the pick of the men were forced to fight as gladiators at Berytus and elsewhere. The women, if young and beautiful, were sold as slaves, but if matrons or aged, they were cast to the wild beasts in the circus.

Such was the fate, indeed, that was reserved for these poor victims in the prison on this very day of the opening of our history. After the gladiators had fought and the other games had been celebrated, sixty Christians, it was announced, old and useless men, married woman and young children whom nobody would buy, were to be turned down in the great amphitheatre. Then thirty fierce lions, with other savage beasts, made ravenous by hunger and mad with the smell of blood, were to be let loose among them. Even in this act of justice, however, Agrippa suffered it to be seen that he was gentle-hearted, since of his kindness he had decreed that any whom the lions refused to eat were to be given clothes, a small sum of money, and released to settle their differences with the Jews as they might please.

Such was the state of public feeling and morals in the Roman world of that day, that this spectacle of the feeding of starved beasts with live women and children, whose crime was that they worshipped a crucified man and would offer sacrifice to no other god, either in the Temple

or elsewhere, was much looked forward to by the population of Cæsarea. Indeed, great sums of money were ventured upon the event, by means of what to-day would be called sweepstakes, under the regulations of which he who drew the ticket marked with the exact number of those whom the lions left alive, would take the first prize. Already some far-seeing gamblers who had drawn low numbers, had bribed the soldiers and wardens to sprinkle the hair and garments of the Christians with valerian water, a decoction which was supposed to attract and excite the appetite of these great cats. Others, whose tickets were high, paid handsomely for the employment of artifices which need not be detailed, calculated to induce in the lions aversion to the subject that had been treated. The Christian woman or child, it will be observed, who was to form the corpus vile of these ingenious experiments, was not considered, except, indeed, as the fisherman considers the mussel or the sand-worm on his hook.

Under an arch by themselves, and not far from the great gateway where the guards, their lances in hand, could be seen pacing up and down, sat two women. The contrast in the appearance of this pair was very striking. One, who could not have been much more than twenty years of age, was a Jewess, too thin-faced for beauty, but with dark and lovely eyes, and bearing in every limb and feature the stamp of noble blood. She was Rachel, the widow of Demas, a Græco-Syrian, and only child of the high-born Jew Benoni, one of the richest merchants in Tyre. The other was a woman of remarkable aspect, apparently about forty years of age. She was a native of the coasts of Libya, where she had been

kidnapped as a girl by Jewish traders, and by them passed on to Phœnicians, who sold her upon the slave market of Tyre. In fact she was a high-bred Arab without any admixture of negro blood, as was shown by her copper-coloured skin, prominent cheek bones, her straight, black, abundant hair, and untamed, flashing eyes. In frame she was tall and spare, very agile, and full of grace in every movement. Her face was fierce and hard; even in her present dreadful plight she showed no fear, only when she looked at the lady by her side it grew anxious and tender. She was called Nehushta, a name which Benoni had given her when many years ago he bought her upon the market-place. In Hebrew Nehushta means copper, and this new slave was copper-coloured. In her native land, however, she had another name, Nou, and by this name she was known to her dead mistress, the wife of Benoni, and to his daughter Rachel, whom she had nursed from childhood.

The moon shone very brightly in a clear sky, and by the light of it an observer, had there been any to observe where all were so occupied with their own urgent affairs, could have watched every movement and expression of these women. Rachel, seated on the ground, was rocking herself to and fro, her face hidden in her hands, and praying. Nehushta knelt at her side, resting the weight of her body on her heels as only an Eastern can, and stared sullenly at nothingness.

Presently Rachel, dropping her hands, looked at the tender sky and sighed.

"Our last night on earth, Nou," she said sadly. "It is strange to think that we shall never again see the moon floating above us."

"Why not, mistress? If all that we have been taught is true, we shall see that moon, or others, for ever and ever, and if it is not true, then neither light nor darkness will trouble us any more. However, for my own part I don't mean that either of us should die to-morrow."

"How can you prevent it, Nou?" asked Rachel with a faint smile. "Lions are no respecters of persons."

"Yet, mistress, I think that they will respect my person, and yours, too, for my sake."

"What do you mean, Nou?"

"I mean that I do not fear the lions; they are country-folk of mine and roared round my cradle. The chief, my father, was called Master of Lions in our country because he could tame them. Why, when I was a little child I have fed them and they fawned upon us like dogs."

"Those lions are long dead, Nou, and the others will not remember."

"I am not sure that they are dead; at least, blood will call to blood, and their company will know the smell of the child of the Master of Lions. Whoever is eaten, we shall escape."

"I have no such hope, Nou. To-morrow we must die horribly, that King Agrippa may do honour to his master, Cæsar."

"If you think that, mistress, then let us die at once rather than be rent limb from limb to give pleasure to a stinking mob. See, I have poison hidden here in my hair. Let us drink of it and be done: it is swift and painless."

"Nay, Nou, it would not be right. I may lift no hand against my own life, or if perchance I may, I have to think of another life."

"If you die, the unborn child must die also. To-night or to-morrow, what does it matter?"

"Sufficient to the day is the evil thereof. Who knows? To-morrow Agrippa may be dead, not us, and then the child might live. It is in the hand of God. Let God decide."

"Lady," answered Nehushta, setting her teeth, "for your sake I have become a Christian, yes, and I believe. But I tell you this--while I live no lion's fangs shall tear that dear flesh of yours. First if need be, I will stab you there in the arena, or if they take my knife from me, then I will choke you, or dash out your brains against the posts."

"It may be a sin, Nou; take no such risk upon your soul."

"My soul! What do I care about my soul? You are my soul. Your mother was kind to me, the poor slave-girl, and when you were an infant, I rocked you upon my breast. I spread your bride-bed, and if need be, to save you from worse things, I will lay you dead before me and myself dead across your body. Then let God or Satan--I care not which--deal with my soul. At least, I shall have done my best and died faithful."

"You should not speak so," sighed Rachel. "But, dear, I know it is because you love me, and I wish to die as easily as may be and to join my husband. Only if the child could have lived, as I think, all three of us would have dwelt together eternally. Nay, not all three, all four, for you are well-nigh as dear to me, Nou, as husband or as child."

"That cannot be, I do not wish that it should be, who am but a slave woman, the dog beneath the table. Oh! if I could save you, then I would be glad to show them how this daughter of my father can bear their torments."

The Libyan ceased, grinding her teeth in impotent rage. Then suddenly she leant towards her mistress, kissed her fiercely on the cheek and began to sob, slow, heavy sobs.

"Listen," said Rachel. "The lions are roaring in their dens yonder."

Nehushta lifted her head and hearkened as a hunter hearkens in the

desert. True enough, from near the great tower that ended the southern wall of the amphitheatre, echoed short, coughing notes and fierce whimperings, to be followed presently by roar upon roar, as lion after lion joined in that fearful music, till the whole air shook with the volume of their voices.

"Aha!" cried a keeper at the gate--not the Roman soldier who marched to and fro unconcernedly, but a jailor, named Rufus, who was clad in a padded robe and armed with a great knife. "Aha! listen to them, the pretty kittens. Don't be greedy, little ones--be patient. To-night you will purr upon a full stomach."

"Nine of them," muttered Nehushta, who had counted the roars, "all bearded and old, royal beasts. To hearken to them makes me young again. Yes, yes, I smell the desert and see the smoke rising from my father's tents. As a child I hunted them, now they will hunt me; it is their hour."

"Give me air! I faint!" gasped Rachel, sinking against her.

With a guttural exclamation of pity Nehushta bent down. Placing her strong arms beneath the slender form of her young mistress, and lifting her as though she were a child, she carried her to the centre of the court, where stood a fountain; for before it was turned to the purposes of a jail once this place had been a palace. Here she set her mistress on the ground with her back against the stonework, and dashed water in

her face till presently she was herself again.

While Rachel sat thus--for the place was cool and pleasant and she could not sleep who must die that day--a wicket-gate was opened and several persons, men, women, and children, were thrust through it into the court.

"Newcomers from Tyre in a great hurry not to lose the lions' party," cried the facetious warden of the gate. "Pass in, my Christian friends, pass in and eat your last supper according to your customs. You will find it over there, bread and wine in plenty. Eat, my hungry friends, eat before you are eaten and enter into Heaven or--the stomach of the lions."

An old woman, the last of the party, for she could not walk fast, turned round and pointed at the buffoon with her staff.

"Blaspheme not, you heathen dog!" she said, "or rather, blaspheme on and go to your reward! I, Anna, who have the gift of prophecy, tell you, renegade who were a Christian, and therefore are doubly guilty, that you have eaten your last meal--on earth."

The man, a half-bred Syrian who had abandoned his faith for profit and now tormented those who were once his brethren, uttered a furious curse and snatched a knife from his girdle.

"You draw the knife? So be it, perish by the knife!" said Anna.

Then without heeding him further the old woman hobbled on after her companions, leaving the man to slink away white to the lips with terror. He had been a Christian and knew something of Anna and of this "gift of prophecy."

The path of these strangers led them past the fountain, where Rachel and Nehushta rose to greet them as they came.

"Peace be with you," said Rachel.

"In the name of Christ, peace," they answered, and passed on towards the arches where the other captives were gathered. Last of all, at some distance behind the rest, came the white-haired woman, leaning on her staff.

As she approached, Rachel turned to repeat her salutation, then uttered a little cry and said:

"Mother Anna, do you not know me, Rachel, the daughter of Benoni?"

"Rachel!" she answered, starting. "Alas! child, how came you here?"

"By the paths that we Christians have to tread, mother," said Rachel, sadly. "But sit; you are weary. Nou, help her."

Anna nodded, and slowly, for her limbs were stiff, sank down on to the step of the fountain.

"Give me to drink, child," she said, "for I have been brought upon a mule from Tyre, and am athirst."

Rachel made her hands into a cup, for she had no other, and held water to Anna's lips, which she drank greedily, emptying them many times.

"For this refreshment, God be praised. What said you? The daughter of Benoni a Christian! Well, even here and now, for that God be praised also. Strange that I should not have heard of it; but I have been in Jerusalem these two years, and was brought back to Tyre last Sabbath as a prisoner."

"Yes, Mother, and since then I have become both wife and widow."

"Whom did you marry, child?"

"Demas, the merchant. They killed him in the amphitheatre yonder at Berytus six months ago," and the poor woman began to sob.

"I heard of his end," replied Anna. "It was a good and noble one, and his soul rests in Heaven. He would not fight with the gladiators, so he was beheaded by order of Agrippa. But cease weeping, child, and tell me your story. We have little time for tears, who, perhaps, soon will have

done with them."

Rachel dried her eyes.

"It is short and sad," she said. "Demas and I met often and learned to love each other. My father was no friend to him, for they were rivals in trade, but in those days knowing no better, Demas followed the faith of the Jews; therefore, because he was rich my father consented to our marriage, and they became partners in their business. Afterwards, within a month indeed, the Apostles came to Tyre, and we attended their preaching--at first, because we were curious to learn the truth of this new faith against which my father railed, for, as you know, he is of the strictest sect of the Jews; and then, because our hearts were touched. So in the end we believed, and were baptised, both on one night, by the very hand of the brother of the Lord. The holy Apostles departed, blessing us before they went, and Demas, who would play no double part, told my father of what we had done. Oh! mother, it was awful to see. He raved, shouted and cursed us in his rage, blaspheming Him we worship. More, woe is me that I should have to tell it: When we refused to become apostates he denounced us to the priests, and the priests denounced us to the Romans, and we were seized and thrown into prison; but my husband's wealth, most of it except that which the priests and Romans stole, stayed with my father. For many months we were held in prison here in Cæsarea; then they took my husband to Berytus, to be trained as a gladiator, and murdered him. Here I have stayed since with this beloved servant, Nehushta, who also became a Christian and shared our

fate, and now, by the decree of Agrippa, it is my turn and hers to die to-day."

"Child, you should not weep for that; nay, you should be glad who at once will find your husband and your Saviour."

"Mother, I am glad; but, you see my state. It is for the child's sake I weep, that now never will be born. Had it won life even for an hour all of us would have dwelt together in bliss until eternity. But it cannot be--it cannot be."

Anna looked at her with her piercing eyes.

"Have you, then, also the gift of prophecy, child, who are so young a member of the Church, that you dare to say that this or that cannot be? The future is in the hand of God. King Agrippa, your father, the Romans, the cruel Jews, those lions that roar yonder, and we who are doomed to feed them, are all in the hand of God, and that which He wills shall befall, and no other thing. Therefore, let us praise Him and rejoice, and take no thought for the morrow, unless it be to pray that we may die and go hence to our Master, rather than live on in doubts and terrors and tribulations."

"You are right, mother," answered Rachel, "and I will try to be brave, whatever may befall; but my state makes me feeble. The spirit, truly, is willing, but oh! the flesh is weak. Listen, they call us to partake of

the Sacrament of the Lord--our last on earth"; and rising, she began to walk towards the arches.

Nehushta stayed to help Anna to her feet. When she judged her mistress to be out of hearing she leaned down and whispered:

"Mother, you have the gift; it is known throughout the Church. Tell me, will the child be born?"

The old woman fixed her eyes upon the heavens, then answered, slowly:

"The child will be born and live out its life, and I think that none of us are doomed to die this day by the jaws of lions, though some of us may die in another fashion. But I think also that your mistress goes very shortly to join her husband. Therefore it was that I showed her nothing of what came into my mind."

"Then it is best that I should die also, and die I will."

"Wherefore?"

"Because I go to wait upon my mistress?"

"Nay, Nehushta," answered Anna, sternly, "you stay to guard her child, whereof when all these earthly things are done you must give account to her."