

CHAPTER III

THE GRAIN STORE

Having passed the outer terraces of the amphitheatre in safety, Nehushta turned down a side street, and paused in the shadow of the wall to think what she should do. So far they were safe; but even if her strength would stand the strain, it seemed impossible that she should carry her mistress through the crowded city and avoid recapture. For some months they had both of them been prisoners, and as it was the custom of the inhabitants of Cæsarea, when they had nothing else to do, to come to the gates of their jail, and, through the bars, to study those within, or even, by permission of the guards, to walk among them, their appearance was known to many. Doubtless, so soon as the excitement caused by the illness of the king had subsided, soldiers would be sent to hunt down the fugitives who had escaped from the amphitheatre. More especially would they search for her, Nehushta, and her mistress, since it would be known that one of them had stabbed the warden of the gate, a crime for which they must expect to die by torture. Also--where could they go who had no friends, since all Christians had been expelled the city?

No, there was but one chance for them--to conceal themselves.

Nehushta looked round her for a hiding-place, and in this matter, as in others on that day, fortune favoured them. This street in the old days, when Cæsarea was called Strato's Tower, had been built upon an inner

wall of the city, now long dismantled. At a distance of a few yards from where Nehushta had stopped stood an ancient gateway, unused save at times by beggars who slept under it, which led nowhere, for the outer arch of it was bricked up. Into this gateway Nehushta bore her mistress unobserved, to find to her relief that it was quite untenanted, though a still smouldering fire and a broken amphora containing clean water showed her that folk had slept there who could find no better lodging. So far so good; but here it would be scarcely safe to hide, as the tenants or others might come back. Nehushta looked around. In the thick wall was a little archway, beneath which commenced a stair. Setting Rachel on the ground, she ran up it, lightly as a cat. At the top of thirty steps, many of them broken, she found an old and massive door. With a sigh of disappointment, the Libyan turned to descend again; then, by an afterthought, pushed at the door. To her surprise it stirred. Again she pushed, and it swung open. Within was a large chamber, lighted by loopholes pierced in the thickness of the wall, for the use of archers. Now, however, it served no military purpose, but was used as a storehouse by a merchant of grain, for there in a corner lay a heap of many measures of barley, and strewn about the floor were sacks of skin and other articles.

Nehushta examined the room. No hiding-place could be better--unless the merchant chanced to come to visit his store. Well, that must be risked. Down she sped, and with much toil and difficulty carried her still swooning mistress up the steps and into the chamber, where she laid her on a heap of sacks.

Again, by an afterthought, she ventured to descend, this time to fetch the broken jar of water. Then she closed the door, setting it fast with a piece of wood, and began to chafe Rachel's hands and to sprinkle her face from the jar. Presently the dark eyes opened and her mistress sat up.

"Is it over, and is this Paradise?" she murmured.

"I should not call the place by that name, lady," answered Nehushta, drily, "though perhaps, in contrast with the hell that we have left, some might think it so. Drink!" and she held the water to her lips.

Rachel obeyed her eagerly. "Oh! it is good," she said. "But how came we here out of that rushing crowd?"

Before she answered, muttering "After the mistress, the maid," Nehushta swallowed a deep draught of water in her turn, which, indeed, she needed sorely. Then she told her all.

"Oh! Nou," said Rachel, "how strong and brave you are! But for you I should be dead."

"But for God, you mean, mistress, for I hold that He sent that knife-point home."

"Did you kill the man?" asked Rachel.

"I think that he died by a dagger-thrust as Anna foretold," she answered evasively; "and that reminds me that I had better clean the knife, since blood on the blade is evidence against its owner." Then drawing the dagger from its hiding-place she rubbed it with dust, which she took from a loop-hole, and polished it bright with a piece of hide.

Scarcely was this task accomplished to Nehushta's satisfaction when her quick ears caught a sound.

"For your life, be silent," she whispered, and laid her face sideways to a crack in the cement floor and listened. Well might she listen, for below were three soldiers searching for her and her mistress.

"The old fellow swore that he saw a Libyan woman carrying a lady down this street," said one of them, the petty officer in charge, to his companion, "and there was but a single brown-skin in the lot; so if they aren't here I don't know where they can be."

"Well," grumbled one of the soldiers, "this place is as empty as a drum, so we may as well be going. There'll be fun presently which I don't want to miss."

"It was the black woman who knifed our friend Rufus, wasn't it--in the theatre there?" asked the third soldier.

"They say so; but as he was trodden as flat as a roof-board, and they had to take him up in pieces, it is difficult to know the truth of that matter. Anyhow his mates are anxious to get the lady, and I should be sorry to die as she will, when they do, or her mistress either. They have leave to finish them in their own fashion."

"Hadn't we best be going?" said the first soldier, who evidently was anxious to keep some appointment.

"Hullo!" exclaimed the second, a sharp-eyed fellow, "there's a stair; we had better just look up it."

"Not much use," answered the officer. "That old thief Amram, the corn-merchant, has a store there, and he isn't one of the sort to leave it unlocked. Still, just go and see."

Then came the sound of footsteps on the stair, and presently a man could be heard fumbling at the further side of the door. Rachel shut her eyes and prayed; Nehushta, drawing the knife from her bosom, crept towards the doorway like a tigress, and placed her left hand on the stick that held it shut. Well it was that she did so, since presently the soldier gave a savage push that might easily have caused the wood to slip on the cemented floor. Now, satisfied that it was really locked, he turned and went down the steps.

With a gasp of relief Nehushta once more set her ear to the crack.

"It's fast enough," reported the man, "but perhaps it might be as well to get the key from Amram and have a look."

"Friend," said the officer, "I think that you must be in love with this black lady; or is it her mistress whom you admire? I shall recommend you for the post of Christian-catcher to the cohort. Now we'll try that house at the corner, and if they are not there, I am off to the palace to see how his godship is getting on with that stomach-ache and whether it has moved him to order payment of our arrears. If he hasn't, I tell you flatly that I mean to help myself to something, and so do the rest of the lads, who are mad at the stopping of the games."

"It would be much better to get that key from Amram and have a look upstairs," put in number two soldier reflectively.

"Then go to Amram, or to Pluto, and ask for the key of Hades for aught I care!" replied his superior with irritation. "He lives about a league off at the other end of the town."

"I do not wish for the walk," said the conscientious soldier; "but as we are searching for these escaped Christians, by your leave, I do think it would have been much better to have got that key from Amram and peeped into the chamber upstairs."

Thereon the temper of the officer, already ruffled by the events of the morning and the long watch of the preceding night, gave way, and he departed, consigning the Christians, escaped or recaptured, Amram and the key, his subordinate, and even the royal Agrippa who did not pay his debts, to every infernal god of every religion with which he was acquainted.

Nehushta lifted her head from the floor.

"Thanks be to God! They are gone," she said.

"But, Nou, will they not come back? Oh! I fear lest they should come back."

"I think not. That sharp-nosed rat has made the other angry, and I believe that he will find him some harder task than the seeking of a key from Amram. Still, there is danger that this Amram may appear himself to visit his store, for in these days of festival he is sure to be selling grain to the bakers."

Scarcely were the words out of her mouth when a key rattled, the door was pushed sharply, and the piece of wood slipped and fell. Then the hinges creaked, and Amram--none other--entered, and, closing the door behind him, locked it, leaving the key in the lock.

Amram was a shrewd-faced, middle-aged Phœnician and, like most

Phœnicians of that day, a successful trader, this corn-store representing only one branch of his business. For the rest he was clad in a quiet-coloured robe and cap, and to all appearance unarmed.

Having locked the door, he walked to a little table, beneath which stood a box containing his tablets whereon were entered the amounts of corn bought and delivered, to come face to face with Nehushta. Instantly she slid between him and the door.

"Who in the name of Moloch are you?" he asked, stepping back astonished, to perceive as he did so, Rachel seated on the heap of sacks; "and you," he added. "Are you spirits, thieves, ladies in search of a lodging, or--perchance those two Christians whom the soldiers are looking for in yonder house?"

"We are the two Christians," said Rachel desperately. "We fled from the amphitheatre, and have taken refuge here, where they nearly found us."

"This," said Amram solemnly, "comes of not locking one's office. Do not misunderstand me; it was no fault of mine. A certain apprentice is to blame, to whom I shall have a word to say. In fact, I think that I will say it at once," and he stepped towards the door.

"Indeed you will not," interrupted Nehushta.

"And pray, my Libyan friend, how will you prevent me?"

"My putting a knife into your gizzard, as I did through that of the renegade Rufus an hour or two ago! Ah! I see you have heard the story."

Amram considered, then replied:

"And what if I also have a knife?"

"In that case," said Nehushta, "draw it, and we will see which is the better, man or woman. Merchant, your weapon is your pen. You have not a chance with me, an Arab of Libya, and you know it."

"Yes," answered Amram, "I think I do; you desert folk are so reckless and athletic. Also, to be frank, as you may have guessed, I am unarmed. Now, what do you propose?"

"I propose that you get us safely out of Cæsarea, or, if you prefer it, that we shall all die here in this grain-store, for, by whatever god you worship, Phœnician, before a hand is laid upon my mistress or me, this knife goes through your heart. I owe no love to your people, who bought me, a king's daughter, as a slave, and I shall be quite happy to close my account with one of them. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly, perfectly. Why show such temper? The affair is one of business; let us discuss it in a business spirit. You wish to escape from Cæsarea; I wish you to escape from my grain-store. Let me go out

and arrange the matter."

"On a plank; not otherwise unless we accompany you," answered Nehushta.

"Man, why do you waste words with us. Listen. This lady is the only child of Benoni, the great merchant of Tyre. Doubtless you know him?"

"To my cost," replied Amram, with a bow. "Three times has he overreached me in various bargains."

"Very well; then you know also that he is rich and will pay him liberally who rescues his daughter from great peril."

"He might do so, but I am not sure."

"I am sure," answered Nehushta, "and for this service my mistress here will give you a bill for any reasonable sum drawn upon her father."

"Yes, but the question is--will he honour it? Benoni is a prejudiced man, a very prejudiced man, a Jew of the Jew, who--does not like Christians."

"I think that he will honour it, I believe that he will honour it; but that risk is yours. See here, merchant, a doubtful draft is better than a slit throat."

"Quite so. The argument is excellent. But you desire to escape. If you

keep me here, how can I arrange the matter?"

"That is for you to consider. You do not leave this place except in our company, and then at the first sign of danger I drive this knife home between your shoulders. Meanwhile my mistress is ready to sign any moderate draft upon her father."

"It is not necessary. Under the circumstances I think that I will trust to the generosity of my fellow trader Benoni. Meanwhile I assure you that nothing will give me greater happiness than to fall in with your views. Believe me, I have no prejudice against Christians, since those of them whom I have met were always honest and paid their debts in full. I do not wish to see you or your mistress eaten by lions or tortured. I shall be very glad to think that you are following the maxims of your peculiar faith to an extreme old age, anywhere, outside the limits of my grain-store. The question is, how can I help you do this? At present I see no way."

"The question is--how will you manage to keep your life in you over the next twelve hours?" answered Nehushta grimly. "Therefore I advise you to find a way"; and to emphasise her words she turned, and, having made sure that the door was locked, slipped its key into the bosom of her dress.

Amram stared at her in undisguised admiration. "I would that I were unmarried," he said, "which is not the case," and he sighed; "for

then, upon my word, I should be inclined to make a certain proposal to you----"

"Nehushta--that is my name----"

"Nehushta--exactly. Well, it is out of the question."

"Quite."

"Therefore I have a suggestion to make. To-night a ship of mine sails for Tyre. Will you honour me by accepting a passage on her?"

"Certainly," answered Nehushta, "provided that you accompany us."

"It was not my intention to go to Tyre this voyage."

"Then your intention can be changed. Look you, we are desperate, and our lives are at stake. Your life is also at stake, and I swear to you, by the Holy One we worship, that before any harm comes to my mistress you shall die. Then what will your wealth and your schemes avail you in the grave? It is a little thing we ask of you--to help two innocent people to escape from this accursed city. Will you grant it? Or shall I put this dagger through your throat? Answer, and at once, or I strike and bury you in your own corn."

Even in that light Amram turned visibly paler. "I accept your terms,"

he said. "At nightfall I will conduct you to the ship, which sails two hours after sunset with the evening wind. I will accompany you to Tyre and deliver the lady over to her father, trusting to his liberality for my reward. Meanwhile, this place is hot. That ladder leads to the roof, which is parapeted, so that those sitting or even standing there, cannot be seen. Shall we ascend?"

"If you go first; and remember, should you attempt to call out, my knife is always ready."

"Of that I am quite aware--you have said so several times. I have passed my words, and I do not go back upon my bargains. The stars are with you, and, come what may, I obey them."

Accordingly they ascended to the roof, Amram going first, Nehushta following him, and Rachel bringing up the rear. On it, projecting inward from the parapet, was a sloping shelter once made use of by the look-out sentry in bad or hot weather. The change from the stifling store below with its stench of ill-cured hides, to this lofty, shaded spot, where the air moved freely, was so pleasant to Rachel, outworn as she was with all she had gone through, that presently she fell asleep, not to wake again till evening. Nehushta, however, who did not go to sleep, and Amram, employed themselves in watching the events that passed in the city below. From this height they could see the great square surrounding the palace, and the strange scenes being enacted therein. It was crowded by thousands of people, for the most part seated on the ground, clad in

garments of sack-cloth and throwing dust upon the heads of themselves, their wives and children. From all this multitude a voice of supplication rose to heaven, which, even at that distance, reached the ears of Nehushta and her companion in a murmur of sound, constant and confused.

"They pray that the king may live," said Amram.

"And I pray that he may die," answered Nehushta.

The merchant shrugged his shoulders. "I care nothing either way, provided that the peace is not disturbed to the injury of trade. On the whole, however, he is a good king who causes money to be spent, which is what kings are for--in Judæa--where they are but feathers puffed up by the breath of Cæsar, to fall if he cease to blow. But look!"

As he spoke, a figure appeared upon the steps of the palace who made some communication to the crowd, whereon a great wail went up to the very skies.

"You have your wish," said Amram; "Herod is dead or dying, and now, I suppose, as his son is but a child, that we shall be ruled by some accursed thief of a Roman procurator with a pocket like a sack without a bottom. Surely that old bishop of yours who preached in the amphitheatre this morning, must have had a hint of what was coming, from his familiar spirit; or perhaps he saw the owl and guessed its errand. Moreover, I

think that troubles are brewing for others besides Herod, since the old man said as much.

"What became of him and the rest?" asked Nehushta.

"Oh! a few were trampled to death, and others the Jews stirred up the mob to stone, saying that they had bewitched the king, which they, who were disappointed of the games, did gladly. Some, however, are said to have escaped, and, like yourselves, lie in hiding."

Nehushta glanced at her mistress, now fast asleep, her pale face resting on her arm.

"The world is hard--for Christians," she said.

"Friend, it is hard for all, as, were I to tell you my own story, even you would admit," and he sighed. "At least you Christians believe in something beyond," he went on; "for you death is but a bridge leading to a glorious city, and I trust that you may be right. Is not your mistress delicate?"

Nehushta nodded.

"She was never very strong, and sorrow has done its work with her. They killed her husband at Berytus yonder, and--her trouble is very near."

"Yes, yes, I heard that story, also that his blood is on the hands of her own father, Benoni. Ah! who is so cruel as a bigot Jew? Not we Phœnicians even, of whom they say such evil. Once I had a daughter"--here his hard face softened--"but let be, let be! Look you, the risk is great, but what I can do I will do to save her, and you also, friend, since, Libyan or no, you are a faithful woman. Nay, do not doubt me. I have given my word, and if I break it willingly, then may I perish and be devoured of dogs. My ship is small and undecked. In that she shall not sail, but a big galley weighs for Alexandria to-night, calling at Apollonia and Joppa, and in it I will take you passages, saying that the lady is a relative of mine and that you are her slave. This is my advice to you--that you go straight to Egypt, where there are many Christians who will protect you for a while. Thence your mistress can write to her father, and if he will receiver her, return. If not, at least she will be safe, since no writ of Herod runs in Alexandria, and there they do not love the Jews."

"Your counsel seems good," said Nehushta, "if she will consent to it."

"She must consent who, indeed, is in no case to make other plans. Now let me go. Before nightfall I will return again with food and clothing, and lead you to the ship."

Nehushta hesitated.

"I say to you, do not fear. Will you not trust me?"

"Yes," answered Nehushta, "because I must. Nay, the words are not kind, but we are sadly placed, and it is strange to find a true friend in one whom I have threatened with a knife."

"I understand," said Amram gravely. "Let the issue prove me. Now descend that you may lock the door behind me. When I return I will stand in the open space yonder with a slave, making pretence to re-bind a burst bundle of merchandise. Then come down and admit me without fear."

When the Phœnician had gone Nehushta sat by her sleeping mistress, and waited with an anxious heart. Had she done wisely? Would Amram betray them and send soldiers to conduct them, not to the ship, but to some dreadful death? Well, if so, at least she would have time to kill her mistress and herself, and thus escape the cruelties of men. Meanwhile she could only pray; and pray she did in her fierce, half-savage fashion, never for herself, but for her mistress whom she loved, and for the child that, she remembered thankfully, Anna had foretold would be born and live out its life. Then she remembered also that this same holy woman had said that its mother's hours would be few, and at the thought Nehushta wept.