

CHAPTER IV

THE BIRTH OF MIRIAM

The time passed slowly, but none came to disturb them. Three hours after noon Rachel awoke, refreshed but hungry, and Nehushta had no food to give her except raw grain, from which she turned. Clearly and in few words she told her mistress all that had passed, asking her consent to the plan.

"It seems good as another," said Rachel with a little sigh, "and I thank you for making it, Nou, and the Phœnician, if he is a true man. Also I do not desire to meet my father--at least, for many years. How can I, seeing the evil which he has brought upon me?"

"Do not speak of that," interrupted Nehushta hastily, and for a long while they were silent.

It was an hour before sunset, or a little less, when at length Nehushta saw two persons walk on to the patch of open ground which she watched continually--Amram and a slave who bore a bundle on his head. Just then the rope which bound this bundle seemed to come loose; at least, at his master's command, the man set it down and they began to retie it, then advanced slowly towards the archway. Now Nehushta descended, unlocked the door and admitted Amram, who carried the bundle.

"Where is the slave?" she asked.

"Have no fear, friend; he is trusty and watches without, not knowing why. Come, you must both of you be hungry, and I have food. Help me loose this cord."

Presently the package was undone, and within it appeared, first, two flagons of old wine, then meats more tasty than Nehushta had seen for months, then rich cloaks and other garments made in the Phœnician fashion, and a robe of white with coloured edges, such as was worn by the body-slaves of the wealthy among that people. Lastly--and this Amram produced from his own person--there was a purse of gold, enough to support them for many weeks. Nehushta thanked him with her eyes, and was about to speak.

"There, say nothing," he interrupted. "I passed my word, and I have kept it, that is all. Also on this money I shall charge interest, and your mistress can repay it in happier days. Now listen: I have taken the passages, and an hour after sunset we will go aboard. Only I warn you, do not let it be known that you are escaped Christians, for the seamen think that such folk bring them bad luck. Come, help me carry the food and wine. After you have eaten you can both of you retire here and robe yourselves."

Presently they were on the roof.

"Lady," said Nehushta, "we did well to put faith in this man. He has come back, and see what he has brought us."

"The blessing of God be on you, sir, who help the helpless!" exclaimed Rachel, looking hungrily at the tempting meats which she so sorely needed.

"Drink," said Amram cheerfully, as he poured wine and water into a cup; "it will hearten you, and your faith does not forbid the use of the grape, for have I not heard you styled the society of drunkards?"

"That is only one bad name among many, sir," said Rachel, as she took the cup.

Then they ate and were satisfied, and afterwards descended into the corn-store to wash with the remainder of the water, and clothe themselves from head to foot in the fragrant and beautiful garments that might have been made for their wear, so well had Amram judged their sizes and needs.

By the time that they were dressed the light was dying. Still, they waited a while for the darkness; then, with a new hope shining through their fears, crept silently into the street, where the slave, a sturdy, well-armed fellow, watched for them.

"To the quay," said Amram, and they walked forward, choosing those

thoroughfares that were most quiet. It was well for them that they did this, for now it was known that Agrippa's sickness was mortal, the most of the soldiers were already in a state of mutiny, and, inflamed with wine, paraded the market-places and larger streets, shouting and singing obscene songs, and breaking into the liquor shops and private houses, where they drank healths to Charon, who was about to bear away their king in his evil bark. As yet, however, they had not begun killing those against whom they had a grudge. This happened afterwards, though it has nothing to do with our story.

Without trouble or molestation the party reached the quay, where a small boat with two Phœnician rowers was waiting for them. In it they embarked, except the slave, and were rowed out to the anchorage to board a large galley which lay half a mile or more away. This they did without difficulty, for the night was calm, although the air hung thick and heavy, and jagged clouds, wind-breeders as they were called, lay upon the horizon. On the lower deck of the galley stood its captain, a sour-faced man, to whom Amram introduced his passengers, who were, as he declared, relatives of his own proceeding to Alexandria.

"Good," said the captain. "Show them to their cabin, for we sail as soon as the wind rises."

To the cabin they went accordingly, a comfortable place stored with all that they could need; but as they passed to it Nehushta heard a sailor, who held a lantern in his hand, say to his companion:

"That woman is very like one whom I saw in the amphitheatre this morning when they gave the salute to King Agrippa."

"The gods forbid it!" answered the other. "We want no Christians here to bring evil fortune on us."

"Christians or no Christians, there is a tempest brewing, if I understand the signs of the weather," muttered the first man.

In the cabin Amram bade his guests farewell.

"This is a strange adventure," he said, "and one that I did not look for. May it prove to the advantage of us all. At the least I have done my best for your safety, and now we part."

"You are a good man," replied Rachel, "and whatever may befall us, I pray again that God may bless you for your kindness to His servants. I pray also that He may lead you to a knowledge of the truth as it was declared by the Lord and Master Whom we serve, that your soul may win salvation and eternal life."

"Lady," said Amram, "I know nothing of these doctrines, but I promise you this: that I will look into them and see whether or no they commend themselves to my reason. I love wealth, like all my people, but I am not altogether a time-server, or a money-seeker. Lady, I have lost those

whom I desire to find again."

"Seek and you will find."

"I will seek," he answered, "though, mayhap, I shall never find."

Thus they parted.

Presently the night breeze began to flow off the land, the great sail was hoisted, and with the help of oars, worked by slaves, the ship cleared the harbour and set her course for Joppa. Two hours later the wind failed so that they could proceed only by rowing over a dead and oily sea, beneath a sky that was full of heavy clouds. Lacking any stars to steer by, the captain wished to cast anchor, but as the water proved too deep they proceeded slowly, till about an hour before dawn a sudden gust struck them which caused the galley to lean over.

"The north wind! The black north wind!" shouted the steersman, and the sailors echoed his cry dismally, for they knew the terrors of that wind upon the Syrian coast. Then the gale began to rage. By daylight the waves were running high as mountains and the wind hissed through the rigging, driving them forward beneath a small sail. Nehushta crawled out of the cabin, and, in the light of an angry dawn, saw far away the white walls of a city built near the shore.

"Is not that Appolonia?" she asked of the captain.

"Yes," he answered, "it is Appolonia sure enough, but we shall not anchor there this voyage. Now it is Alexandria for us or nothing."

So they rushed past Appolonia and forward, climbing the slopes of the rising seas.

Thus things went on. About mid-day the gale became a hurricane, and do what they would they were driven forward, till at length they saw the breakers forming on the coast. Rachel lay sick and prostrate, but Nehushta went out of the cabin to watch.

"Are we in danger?" she asked of a sailor.

"Yes, accursed Christian," he replied, "and you have brought it on us with your evil eye."

Then Nehushta returned to the cabin where her mistress lay almost senseless with sea-sickness. On board the ship the terror and confusion grew. For a while they were able to beat out to sea until the mast was carried away. Then the rudder broke, and, as the oars could not be worked in that fearful tempest, the galley began to drive shorewards. Night fell, and who can describe the awful hours that followed? All control of the vessel being lost, she drove onwards whither the wind and the waves took her. The crew, and even the oar-slaves, fled to the wine with which she was partly laden, and strove to drown their terrors in

drink. Thus inflamed, twice some of them came to the cabin, threatening to throw their passengers overboard. But Nehushta barred the door and called through it that she was well armed and would kill the first man who tried to lay a hand upon her. So they went away, and after the second visit grew too drunken to be dangerous.

Again the dawn broke over the roaring, foaming sea and revealed the fate that awaited them. Not a mile away lay the grey line of shore, and between them and it a cruel reef on which the breakers raged. Towards this reef they were driving fast. Now the men grew sober in their fear, and began to build a large raft of oars and timber; also to make ready the boat which the galley carried. Before all was done she struck beak first, and was lifted on to a great flat rock, where she wallowed, with the water seething round her. Then, knowing that their hour was come, the crew made shift to launch the boat and raft on the lee side, and began to clamber into them. Now Nehushta came out of the cabin and prayed the captain to save them also, whereon he answered her with an oath that this bad luck was because of them, and that if either she or her mistress tried to enter the boat, they would stab them and cast them into the sea as an offering to the storm-god.

So Nehushta struggled back to the cabin, and kneeling by the side of her mistress, with tears told her that these black-hearted sailors had left them alone upon the ship to drown. Rachel answered that she cared little, but only desired to be free of her fear and misery.

As the words left her lips, Nehushta heard a sound of screaming, and crawling to the bulwarks, looked forth to see a dreadful sight. The boat and the raft, laden with a great number of men who were fighting for places with each other, having loosed from the lee of the ship, were come among the breakers, which threw them up as a child throws a ball at play. Even while Nehushta gazed, their crafts were overturned, casting them into the water, every one there to be dashed against the rocks or drowned by the violence of the waves, so that not a man of all that ship's company came living to the shore.

Like tens of thousands of others on this coast in all ages, they perished, every one of them--and that was the reward of their wickedness.

Giving thanks to God, Who had brought them out of that danger against their wills, Nehushta crept back to the cabin and told her mistress what had passed.

"May they find pardon," said Rachel, shuddering; "but as for us, it will matter little whether we are drowned in the boat or upon the galley."

"I do not think that we shall drown," answered Nehushta.

"How are we to escape it, Nou? The ship lies upon the rock, where the great waves will batter her to pieces. Feel how she shakes beneath their blows, and see the spray flying over us."

"I do not know, mistress; but we shall not drown."

Nehushta was right, for after they had remained fast a little longer they were saved, thus: Suddenly the wind dropped, then it rose again in a last furious squall, driving before it a very mountain of water. This vast billow, as it rushed shorewards, caught the galley in its white arms and lifted her not only off the rock whereon she lay, but over the further reefs, to cast her down again upon a bed of sand and shells, within a stone's throw of the beach, where she remained fast, never to shift more.

Now also, as though its work were done, the gale ceased, and, as is common on the Syrian coast, the sea sank rapidly, so that by nightfall it was calm again. Indeed, three hours before sunset, had both of them been strong and well, they might have escaped to the land by wading. But this was not to be, for now what Nehushta had feared befell, and when she was least fitted to bear it, being worn out with anguish of mind and weariness of body, pain took sudden hold of Rachel, of which the end was that, before midnight, there, in that broken vessel upon a barren coast where no man seemed to live, a daughter was born to her.

"Let me see the child," said Rachel. So Nehushta showed it to her by the light of a lamp which burned in the cabin.

It was a small child, but very white, with blue eyes and dark hair that

curled. Rachel gazed at it long and tenderly. Then she said, "Bring me water while there is yet time."

When the water was brought she dipped her trembling hand into it, and made the sign of the Cross upon the babe's forehead, baptising her with the name of Miriam, after that of her own mother, to the service and the company of Jesus the Christ.

"Now," she said, "whether she live an hour or an hundred years, this child is a Christian, and whatever befalls, should she come to the age of understanding, see to it, Nou, who are henceforth the foster-mother of her body and her soul, that she does not forget the rites and duties of her faith. Lay this charge on her also as her father commanded, and as I command, that should she be moved to marriage, she wed none who is not a Christian. Tell her that such was the will of those who begat her, and that if she be obedient to it, although they are dead, and as it seems strengthless, yet shall their blessing be upon her all her life's days, and with it the blessing of the Lord she serves."

"Oh!" moaned Nehushta, "why do you speak thus?"

"Because I am dying. Gainsay me not. I know it well. My life ebbs from me. My prayers have been answered, and I was preserved to give this infant birth; now I go to my appointed place and to one who waits for me, and to the Lord in Whose care he is in Heaven, as we are in His care on earth. Nay, do not mourn; it is no fault of yours, nor could any

physician's skill have saved me, whose strength was spent in suffering, and who for many months have walked the world, bearing in my breast a broken heart. Give me of that wine to drink--and listen."

Nehushta obeyed and Rachel went on: "So soon as my breath has left me, take the babe and seek some village on the shore where it can be nursed, for which service you have the means to pay. Then when she is strong enough and it is convenient, travel, not to Tyre--for there my father would bring up the child in the strictest rites and customs of the Jews--but to the village of the Essenes upon the shores of the Dead sea. There find out my mother's brother, Ithiel, who is of their society, and present to him the tokens of my name and birth which still hang about my neck, and tell him all the story, keeping nothing back. He is not a Christian, but he is a good and gentle-hearted man who thinks well of Christians, and is grieved at their persecution, since he wrote to my father reproving him for his deeds towards us and, as you know, strove, but in vain, to bring about our release from prison. Say to him that I, his kinswoman, pray of him, as he will answer to God, and in the name of the sister whom he loved, to protect my child and you; to do nothing to turn her from her faith, and in all things to deal with her as his wisdom shall direct--for so shall peace and blessing come upon him."

Thus spoke Rachel, but in short and broken words. Then she began to pray, and, praying, fell asleep. When she woke again the dawn was breaking. Signing to Nehushta to bring her the child, for now she could no longer speak, she scanned it earnestly in the new-born light, then

placed her hand upon its head and blessed it. Nehushta she blessed also, thanking her with her eyes and kissing her. Then again she seemed to fall asleep, and presently, when Nehushta looked at her, Rachel was dead.

Nehushta understood and gave a great and bitter cry, since to her after the death of her first mistress, this woman had been all her life. As a child she had nursed her; as a maiden shared her joys and sorrows; as a wife and widow toiled day and night fiercely and faithfully to console her in her desolation and to protect her in the dreadful dangers through which she had passed. Now, to end it all, it was her lot to receive her last breath and to take into her arms her new-born infant.

Then and there Nehushta swore that as she had done by the mother she so would do by the child till the day when her labours ended. Were it not for this child, indeed, they would have ended now, Christian though she was, since she was crushed with bitter sorrow and her heart seemed void of hope or joy. All her days had been hard--she who was born to great place among her own wild people far away, and snatched thence to be a slave, set apart by her race and blood from those into whose city she was sold; she who would have naught to do with base men nor become the plaything of those of higher birth; she who had turned Christian and drunk deep of the tribulations of the faith; she who had centred all her eager heart upon two beloved women, and lost them both. All her days had been hard, and here and now, by the side of her dead mistress, she would have ended them. But the child remained, and while it lived, she would

live. If it died, then perhaps she would die also.

Meanwhile Nehushta had no time for grief, since the babe must be fed, and within twelve hours. Yet, as she could not bury her, and would not throw her to the sharks, she was minded to give her mistress a royal funeral after the custom of her own Libyan folk. Here was flame, and what pyre could be grander than this great ship?

Lifting the body from its couch, Nehushta carried it to the deck and laid it by the broken mast, closing the eyes and folding the hands. Then she loosened from about the neck those tokens of which Rachel had spoken, made some food and garments into a bundle, and, carrying the lamp with her, went into the captain's cabin amidships. Here a money-box was open, and in it gold and some jewels which this man had abandoned in his haste. These she took, adding them to her own store and securing them about her. This done she fired the cabin, and passing to the hold, broke a jar of oil and fired that also. Then she fled back again, knelt by her dead mistress and kissed her, took the child, wrapping it warmly in a shawl, and by the ladder of rope which the sailors had used, let herself down into the quiet sea. Its waters did not reach higher than her middle, and soon she was standing on the shore and climbing the sandhills that lay beyond. At their summit she turned to look, and lo! yonder where the galley was, already a great pillar of fire shot up to heaven, for there was much oil in the hold and it burnt furiously.

"Farewell!" she cried, "farewell!"

Then, weeping bitterly, Nehushta walked on inland.