

CHAPTER V

MIRIAM IS ENTHRONED

Presently Nehushta found herself out of sight of the sea and among cultivated land, for here were vines and fig trees grown in gardens fenced with stone walls; also patches of ripening barley and of wheat in the ear, much trodden down as though horses had been feeding there. Beyond these gardens she came to a ridge, and saw beneath her a village of many houses of green brick, some of which seemed to have been destroyed by fire. Into this village she walked boldly, and there the first sight that met her eyes was that of sundry dead bodies, upon which dogs were feeding.

On she went up the main street, till she saw a woman peeping at her over a garden wall.

"What has chanced here?" asked Nehushta, in the Syrian tongue.

"The Romans! the Romans! the Romans!" wailed the woman. "The head of our village quarrelled with the tax-gatherers, and refused to pay his dues to Cæsar. So the soldiers came a week ago and slaughtered nearly all of us, and took such sheep and cattle as they could find, and with them many of the young folk, to be sold as slaves, so that the rest are left empty and desolate. Such are the things that chance in this unhappy land. But, woman, who are you?"

"I am one shipwrecked!" answered Nehushta, "and I bear with me a new-born babe--nay, the story is too long to tell you; but if in this place there is any one who can nurse the babe, I will pay her well."

"Give it me!" said the woman, in an eager whisper; "my child perished in the slaughter; I ask no reward."

Nehushta looked at her. Her eyes were wild, but she was still young and healthy, a Syrian peasant.

"Have you a house?" she asked.

"Yes, it still stands, and my husband lives; we hid in a cave, but alas! they slew the infant that was out with the child of a neighbour. Quick, give me the babe."

So Nehushta gave it to her, and thus Miriam was nurtured at the breast of one whose offspring had been murdered because the head of the village had quarrelled with a Roman tax-collector. Such was the world in the days when Christ came to save it.

After she had suckled the child the woman led Nehushta to her house, a humble dwelling that had escaped the fire, where they found the husband, a wine-grower, mourning the death of his infant and the ruin of his town. To him she told as much of her story as she thought well, and

proffered him a gold piece, which, so she swore, was one of ten she had about her. He took it gladly, for now he was penniless, and promised her lodging and protection, and the service of his wife as nurse to the child for a month at least. So there Nehushta stayed, keeping herself hid, and at the end of the month gave another gold piece to her hosts, who were kindly folk that never dreamed of working her evil or injustice. Seeing this, Nehushta found yet more money, wherewith the man, blessing her, bought two oxen and a plough, and hired labour to help him gather what remained of his harvest.

The shore where the infant was born upon the wrecked ship, was at a distance of about a league from Joppa and two days' journey from Jerusalem, whence the Dead Sea could be reached in another two days. When Nehushta had dwelt there for some six months, as the babe thrived and was hearty, she offered to pay the man and his wife three more pieces of gold if they would travel with her to the neighbourhood of Jericho, and, further, to purchase a mule and an ass for the journey, which she would give to them when it was accomplished. The eyes of these simple folk glistened at the prospect of so much wealth, and they agreed readily, promising also to stay three months by Jericho, if need were, till the child could be weaned. So a man was hired to guard the house and vines, and they started in the late autumn, when the air was cool and pleasant.

Of their journey nothing need be said, save that they accomplished it without trouble, being too humble in appearance to attract the notice of

the thieves who swarmed upon the highways, or of the soldiers who were set to catch the thieves.

Skirting Jerusalem, which they did not enter, on the sixth day they descended into the valley of the Jordan, through the desolate hills by which it is bordered. Camping that night outside the town, at daybreak on the seventh morning they started, and by two hours after noon came to the village of the Essenes. On its outskirts they halted, while Nehushta and the nurse, bearing with them the child, that by now could wave its arms and crow, advanced boldly into the village, where it would appear men dwelt only--at least no women were to be seen--and asked to be led to the Brother Ithiel.

The man to whom they spoke, who was robed in white, and engaged in cooking outside a large building, averted his eyes in answering, as though it were not lawful for him to look upon the face of a woman. He said, very civilly, however, that Brother Ithiel was working in the fields, whence he would not return till supper time.

Nehushta asked where these fields were, since she desired to speak with him at once. The man answered that if they walked towards the green trees that lined the banks of Jordan, which he pointed out to them, they could not fail to find Ithiel, as he was ploughing in the irrigated land with two white oxen, the only ones they had. Accordingly they set out again, having the Dead Sea on their right, and travelled for the half of a league through the thorn-scrub that grows in this desert. Passing the

scrub they came to lands which were well cultivated and supplied with water from the Jordan by means of wheels and long poles with a jar at one end and a weight at the other, which a man could work, emptying the contents of the jar again and again into an irrigation ditch.

In one of these fields they saw the two white oxen at their toil, and behind them the labourer, a tall man of about fifty years of age, bearded, and having a calm face and eyes that were very deep and quiet. He was clad in a rough robe of camel's hair, fastened about his middle with a leathern girdle, and wore sandals on his feet. To him they went, asking leave to speak with him, whereon he halted the oxen and greeted them courteously, but, like the man in the village, turned his eyes away from the faces of the women. Nehushta bade the nurse stand back out of hearing, and, bearing the child in her arms, said:

"Sir, tell me, I pray you, if I speak to Ithiel, a priest of high rank among this people of the Essenes, and brother to the dead lady Miriam, wife of Benoni the Jew, a merchant of Tyre?"

At the mention of these names Ithiel's face saddened, then grew calm again.

"I am so called," he answered; "and the lady Miriam is my sister, who now dwells in the happy and eternal country beyond the ocean with all the blessed"--for so the Essenes imagined that heaven to which they went when the soul was freed from the vile body.

"The lady Miriam," continued Nehushta, "had a daughter Rachel, whose servant I was."

"Was?" he interrupted, startled from his calm. "Has she then been put to death by those fierce men and their king, as was as her husband Demas?"

"Nay, sir, but she died in childbirth, and this is the babe she bore"; and she held the sleeping little one towards him, at whom he gazed earnestly, yes, and bent down and kissed it--since, although they saw so few of them, the Essenes loved children.

"Tell me that sad story," he said.

"Sir, I will both tell it and prove it to be true"; and Nehushta told him all from the beginning to the end, producing to his sight the tokens which she had taken from the breast of her mistress, and repeating her last message to him word for word. When she had finished, Ithiel turned away and mourned a while. Then, speaking aloud, he put up a prayer to God for guidance--for without prayer these people would not enter upon anything, however simple--and came back to Nehushta, who stood by the oxen.

"Good and faithful woman," he said, "who it would seem are not fickle and light-hearted, or worse, like the multitude of your sex--perchance because your dark skin shields you from their temptations--you have set

me in a cleft stick, and there I am held fast. Know that the rule of my order is that we should have naught to do with females, young or old; therefore how can I receive you or the child?"

"Of the rules of your order, sir, I know nothing," answered Nehushta sharply, since the words about the colour of her skin had not pleased her; "but of the rules of nature I do know, and something of the rules of God also, for, like my mistress and this infant, I am a Christian. These tell me, all of them, that to cast out an orphan child who is of your own blood, and whom a cruel fortune has thus brought to your door, would be an evil act, and one for which you must answer to Him who is above the rules of any order."

"I may not wrangle, especially with a woman," replied Ithiel, who seemed ill at ease; "but if my first words are true, this is true also, that those same rules enjoin upon us hospitality, and above all, that we must not turn away the helpless or the destitute."

"Clearly, then, sir, least of any must you turn away this child whose blood is your blood, and whose dead mother sent her to you, that she might not fall into the power of a grandfather who has dealt so cruelly with those he should have cherished, to be brought up among Zealots as a Jew and taught to make offering of living things, and be anointed with the oil and blood of sacrifice."

"No, no, the thought is horrible," answered Ithiel, holding up his

hands. "It is better, far better that she should be a Christian than one of that fanatic and blood-spilling faith." This he said, because among the Essenes the use of oil was held to be unclean. Also above all things, they loathed the offering of life in sacrifice to God; who, although they did not acknowledge Christ--perhaps because He was never preached to them, who would listen to no new religion--practised the most of His doctrines with the greatest strictness.

"The matter is too hard for me," he went on. "I must lay it before a full Court of the hundred curators, and what they decide, that will be done. Still, this is our rule: to assist those who need and to show mercy, to accord succour to such as deserve it, and to give food to those in distress. Therefore, whatever the Court, which it will take three days to summon, may decide, in the meanwhile I have the right to give you, and those with you, shelter and provision in the guest-house. As it chances, it is situated in that part of the village where dwell the lowest of our brethren, who are permitted to marry, so there you will find company of your own sex."

"I shall be glad of it," answered Nehushta drily. "Also I should call them the highest of the brethren, since marriage is a law of God, which God the Father has instituted, and God the Son has blessed."

"I may not wrangle, I may not wrangle," replied Ithiel, declining the encounter; "but certainly, that is a lovely babe. Look. Its eyes are open and they are beautiful as flowers"; and again he bent down and

kissed the child, then added with a groan of remorse, "Alas! sinner that I am, I am defiled; I must purify myself and do penance."

"Why?" asked Nehushta shortly.

"For two reasons: I have touched your dress, and I have given way to earthly passion and embraced a child--twice. Therefore, according to our rule, I am defiled."

Then Nehushta could bear it no more.

"Defiled! you puppet of a foolish rule! It is the sweet babe that is defiled! Look, you have fouled its garments with your grimy hand and made it weep by pricking it with your beard. Would that your holy rule taught you how to handle children and to respect honest women who are their mothers, without whom there would be no Essenes."

"I may not wrangle," said Ithiel, nervously; for now woman was appearing before him in a new light; not as an artful and a fickle, but as an angry creature, reckless of tongue and not easy to be answered. "These matters are for the decision of the curators. Have I not told you so? Come, let us be going. I will drive the oxen, although it is not time to loose them from the plough, and do you and your companion walk at a distance behind me. No, not behind--in front, that I may see that you do not drop the babe, or suffer it to come to any harm. Truly it is sweet to look at, and, may God forgive me, I do not like to lose sight of its

face, which, it seems to me, resembles that of my sister when she was also in arms."

"Drop the babe!" began Nehushta; then understanding that this victim of a rule already loved it dearly, and would suffer much before he parted with it, pitying his weakness, she said only, "Be careful that you do not frighten it with your great oxen, for you men who scorn women have much to learn."

Then, accompanied by the nurse, she stalked ahead in silence, while Ithiel followed after at a distance, leading the cattle by the hide loops about their horns, lest in their curiosity or eagerness to get home, they should do some mischief to the infant or wake it from its slumbers. In this way they proceeded to the lower part of the village, till they came to a good house--empty as it chanced--where guests were accommodated in the best fashion that this kind and homely folk could afford. Here a woman was summoned, the wife of one of the lower order of the Essenes, to whom Ithiel spoke, holding his hand before his eyes, as though she were not good to look at. To her, from a distance, he explained the case, bidding her to provide all things needful, and to send a man to bring in the husband of the nurse with the beasts of burden, and attend to his wants and theirs. Then, warning Nehushta to be very careful of the infant and not to expose it to the sun, he departed to report the matter to the curators, and to summon the great Court.

"Are all of them like this?" asked Nehushta of the woman,

contemptuously.

"Yes, sister," she answered, "fools, every one. Why, of my own husband I see little; and although, being married, he ranks but low among them, the man is forever telling me of the faults of our sex, and how they are a snare set for the feet of the righteous, and given to the leading of these same righteous astray, especially if they be not their own husbands. At times I am tempted indeed to prove his words true. Oh! it would not be difficult for all their high talk; I have learned as much as that, for Nature is apt to make a mock of those who deny Nature, and there is no parchment rule that a woman cannot bring to nothing. Yet, since they mean well, laugh at them and let them be, say I. And now come into the house, which is good, although did women manage it, it would be better."

So Nehushta went into that house with the nurse and her husband, and there for several days dwelt in great comfort. Indeed, there was nothing that she or the child, or those with them, could want which was not provided in plenty. Messages reached her even, through the woman, to ask if she would wish the rooms altered in any way, and when she said that there was not light enough in that in which the child slept, some of the elders of the Essenes arrived and pierced a new window in the wall, working very hard to finish the task before sunset. Also even the husband of the nurse was not allowed to attend to his own beasts, which were groomed and fed for him, till at length he grew so weary of doing nothing, that on the third day he went out to plough with the Essenes

and worked in the fields till dark.

It was on the fourth morning that the full Court gathered in the great meeting-house, and Nehushta was summoned to appear before it, bringing the babe with her. Thither she went accordingly, to find the place filled with a hundred grave and reverend men, all clad in robes of the purest white. In the lower part of that large chamber she sat alone upon a chair, while before her upon benches ranged one above the other, so that all could see, were gathered the hundred curators.

It seemed that Ithiel had already set out the case, since the President at once began to question her on various points of her story, all of which she was able to explain to the satisfaction of the Court. Then they debated the matter among themselves, some of them arguing that as the child was a female, as well as its nurse, neither of them could properly be admitted to the care of the community, especially as both were of the Christian faith, and it was stipulated that in this faith they should remain. Others answered that hospitality was their first duty, and that he would be weak indeed who was led aside from their rule by a Libyan woman of middle age and an infant of a few months. Further, that the Christians were a good people, and that there was much in their doctrines which tallied with their own. Next, one made a strange objection--namely, that if they adopted this child they would learn to love it too much, who should love God and their order only. To this another answered, Nay, they should love all mankind, and especially the helpless.

"Mankind, not womankind," was the reply; "for this infant will grow into a woman."

Now they desired Nehushta to retire that they might take the votes. Before she went, however, holding up the child that all could see it as it lay smiling in her arms, she implored them not to reject the prayer of a dead woman, and so deprive this infant of the care of the relative whom that departed lady had appointed to be its guardian, and of the guidance and directing wisdom of their holy Order. Lastly, she reminded them that if they thrust her out, she must carry the infant to its grandfather, who, if he received it at all, would certainly bring it up in the Jewish faith, and thereby, perhaps, cause it to lose its soul, the weight of which sin would be upon their heads.

After this Nehushta was led away to another chamber and remained there a long while, till at length she was brought back again by one of the curators. On entering the great hall her eyes sought the face of Ithiel, who had not been allowed to speak, since the matter having to do with a great-niece of his own, it was held that his judgment might be warped. Seeing that he smiled, and evidently was well pleased, she knew her cause was won.

"Woman," said the President, "by a great majority of this Court we have come to an irrevocable decision upon the matter that has been laid before it by our brother Ithiel. It is, for reasons which I need not

explain, that on this point our rule may be stretched so far as to admit the child Miriam to our care, even though it be of the female sex, which care is to endure until she comes to a full age of eighteen years, when she must depart from among us. During this time no attempt will be made to turn her from her parents' faith in which she has been baptised. A house will be given you to live in, and you will be supplied with the best we have for the use of our ward Miriam and yourself. Twice a week a deputation of the curators will visit the house, and stay there for an hour to see that the health of the infant is good, and that you are doing your duty by it, in which, if you fail, you will be removed. It is prayed that you will not talk to these curators on matters which do not concern the child. When she grows old enough the maid Miriam will be admitted to our gatherings, and instructed also by the most learned amongst us in all proper matters of letters and philosophy, on which occasions you will sit at a distance and not interfere unless your care is required.

"Now, that every one may know our decision, we will escort you back to your house, and to show that we have taken the infant under our care, our brother Ithiel will carry it while you walk behind and give him such instruction in this matter as may be needful."

Accordingly a great procession was formed, headed by the President and ended by the priests. In the centre of the line marched Ithiel bearing the babe Miriam, to his evident delight, and Nehushta, who instructed him so vigorously that at length he grew confused and nearly let it

fall. Thereon, setting this detail of the judgment at defiance, Nehushta snatched it from his arms, calling him a clumsy and ignorant clown only fit to handle an ox. To this Ithiel made no answer, nor was he at all wroth, but finished the journey walking behind her and smiling foolishly.

Thus was the child Miriam, who afterwards came to be called the Queen of the Essenes, royally escorted to her home. But little did these good men know that it was not a house which they were giving her, but a throne, built of the pure gold of their own gentle hearts.