

CHAPTER VI

CALEB

It may be wondered whether any girl who was ever born into the world could boast a stranger or a happier upbringing than Miriam. She was, it is true, motherless, but by way of compensation Fate endowed her with several hundred fathers, each of whom loved her as the apple of his eye. She did not call them "Father" indeed, a term which under the circumstances they thought incorrect. To her, one and all, they went by the designation of "Uncle," with their name added if she happened to know it, if not as Uncle simply. It cannot be said, however, that Miriam brought peace to the community of the Essenes. Indeed, before she had done with them she rent it with deep and abiding jealousies, to the intense but secret delight of Nehushta, who, although she became a person of great importance among them as the one who had immediate charge of their jewel, could never forgive them certain of their doctrines or their habit of persistent interference.

The domiciliary visits which took place twice a week, and, by special subsequent resolution passed in full Court, on the Sabbath also, were, to begin with, the subject of much covert bitterness. At first a standing committee was appointed to make these visits, of whom Ithiel was one. Before two years had gone by, however, much murmuring arose in the community upon this matter. It was pointed out in language that became vehement--for an Essene--that so much power should not be left in

the hands of one fixed set of individuals, who might become careless or prejudiced, or, worst of all, neglectful of the welfare of the child who was the guest not of them only, but of the whole order. It was demanded, therefore, that this committee should change automatically every month, so that all might serve upon it in turn, Ithiel, as the blood-relation of Miriam, remaining its only permanent member. This proposal was opposed by the committee, but as no one else would vote for them the desired alteration was made. Further, to be removed temporarily, or for good, from its roster was thenceforth recognised as one of the punishments of the order.

Indeed, the absurdities to which its existence gave rise, especially as the girl grew in years, sweetness and beauty, cannot be numbered. Thus, every visiting member must wash his whole person and clothe himself in clean garments before he was allowed to approach the child, "lest he should convey to her any sickness, or impure substance, or odour." Then there was much trouble because some members were discovered to be ingratiating themselves with Miriam by secretly presenting her with gifts of playthings, some of them of great beauty, which they fashioned from wood, shells, or even hard stones. Moreover, they purveyed articles of food such as they found the child loved; and this it was that led to their detection, for, having eaten of them, she was ill. Thereupon Nehushta, enraged, disclosed the whole plot, using the most violent language, and, amidst murmurs of "Shame on them!" designating the offenders by name. They were removed from their office, and it was decreed that henceforth any gifts made to the child must be offered to

her by the committee as a whole, and not by a single individual, and handed over in their name by Ithiel, her uncle.

Once, when she was seven years old, and the idol of every brother among the Essenes, Miriam fell ill with a kind of fever which often strikes children in the neighbourhood of Jericho and the Dead Sea. Among the brethren were several skilful and famous physicians, who attended her night and day. But still the fever could not be abated, and at last, with tears, they announced that they feared for the child's life. Then indeed there was lamentation among the Essenes. For three days and three nights did they wrestle in constant prayer to God that she might be spared, many of them touching nothing but water during all that time. Moreover, they sat about at a distance from her house, praying and seeking tidings. If it was bad they beat their breasts, if good they gave thanks. Never was the sickbed of a monarch watched with more care or devotion than that of this little orphan, and never was a recovery--for at length she did recover--received with greater thankfulness and joy.

This was the truth. These pure and simple men, in obedience to the strict rule they had adopted, were cut off from all the affections of life. Yet, the foundation-stone of their doctrine being Love, they who were human must love something, so they loved this child whom they looked upon as their ward, and who, as there was none other of her age and sex in their community, had no rival in their hearts. She was the one joy of their laborious and ascetic hours; she represented all the

sweetness and youth of this self-renewing world, which to them was so grey and sapless. Moreover, she was a lovely maid, who, wherever she had been placed, would have bound all to her.

The years went by and the time came when, in obedience to the first decree, Miriam must be educated. Long were the discussions which ensued among the curators of the Essenes. At length three of the most learned of their body were appointed to this task, and the teaching began. As it chanced, Miriam proved an apt pupil, for her memory was good, and she had a great desire to learn many things, more especially history and languages, and all that has to do with nature. One of her tutors was an Egyptian, who, brought up in the priests' college at Thebes, when on a journey to Judæa had fallen sick near Jericho, been nursed by the Essenes and converted to their doctrine. From him Miriam learnt much of their ancient civilisation, and even of the inner mysteries of the Egyptian religion, and of its high and secret interpretations which were known only to the priests. The second, Theophilus by name, was a Greek who had visited Rome, and he taught her the tongues and literature of those countries. The third, all his life long had studied beasts and birds and insects, and the workings of nature, and the stars and their movements, in which things he instructed her day by day, taking her abroad with him that examples of each of them might be before her eyes.

Lastly, when she grew older, there was a fourth master, who was an artist. He taught Miriam how to model animals, and even men, in the clay of the Jordan, and how to carve them out in marble, and something of the

use of pigments. Also this man, who was very clever, had a knowledge of singing and instrumental music, which he imparted to her in her odd hours. Thus it came about that Miriam grew learned and well acquainted with many matters of which most girls of her day and years had never even heard. Nor did she lack knowledge of the things of her own faith, though in these the Essenes did not instruct her further than its doctrines tallied with their own. Of the rest, Nehushta told her something; moreover, on several occasions Christian travellers or preachers visited this country to address the Essenes or the other Jews who dwelt there. When they learned her case, these showed themselves very eager to inform her of the Christian doctrine. Among them was one old man who had heard the preaching of Jesus Christ, and been present at His Crucifixion, to all of which histories the girl listened with eagerness, remembering them to the last hour of her life.

Further, and perhaps this was the best part of her education, she lived in the daily company of Nature. But a mile or two away spread the Dead Sea, and along its melancholy and lifeless shores, fringed with the white trunks of trees that had been brought down by Jordan, she would often walk. Before her day by day loomed the mountains of Moab, while behind her were the fantastic and mysterious sand-hills of the desert, backed again by other mountains and that grey, tormented country which stretches between Jericho and Jerusalem. Quite near at hand also ran the broad and muddy Jordan, whose fertile banks were clothed in spring with the most delicious greenery and haunted by kingfishers, cranes, wildfowl, and many other birds. About these banks, too, stretching into

the desert land beyond, the flowers of the field grew by myriads, at different periods of the year carpeting the whole earth with various colours, brilliant as are those of the rainbow. These it was her delight to gather, and even to cultivate in the garden of her house.

Thus wisdom, earthly and divine, was gathered in Miriam's heart till very soon its light began to shine through her eyes and face, making them ever more tender and beautiful. Nor did she lack charm and grace of person. From the first, in stature she was small and delicate, pale also in complexion; but her dark hair was plenteous and curling, and her eyes were large and of a deep and tender blue. Her hands and feet were very slender, and her every gesture quick and agile as that of a bird. Thus she grew up loving all things and beloved by all; for even the flowers which she tended and the creatures that she fed, seemed in her to find a friend.

Now of so much learning and all this system of solemn ordered hours, Nehushta did not approve. For a while she bore with it, but when Miriam was about eleven years of age, she spoke her mind to the Committee and through them to the governing Court of Curators.

Was it right that a child should be brought up thus, she asked, and turned into a grave old woman whilst, quite heedless of such things, others of her age were occupied with youthful games? The end of it might be that her brain would break and she would die or become crazy, and then what good would so much wisdom do her? It was necessary that

she should have more leisure and other children with whom she could associate.

"White-bearded hermits," she added with point, "were not suitable as sole companions to a little maid."

Thereon followed much debate and consultation with the doctors, who agreed that friends of her own years should be found for the child. This, however, proved difficult, since among these Essenes were no other girls. Therefore those friends must be of the male sex. Here too were difficulties, as at that time, of the lads adopted by this particular community which they were destined to join in after days, there was but one of equal birth with Miriam. Now so far as concerned their own order the Essenes thought little of social distinctions, or even of the differences of blood and race. But Miriam was not of their order; she was their guest, no more, to whom they stood in the place of parents, and who would go from them out into the great world. Therefore, notwithstanding their childlike simplicity, being, many of them, men experienced in life, they did not think it right that she should mix with those of lower breeding.

This one lad, Caleb by name, was born in the same year as Miriam, when Cuspius Fadus became governor on the death of Agrippa. His father was Jew of very high rank named Hilliel, who, although he sided from time to time with the Roman party, was killed by them, or perished among the twenty thousand who were trampled to death at the Feast of the Passover

at Jerusalem, when Cumanus, the Procurator, ordered his soldiers to attack the people. Thereon the Zealots, who considered him a traitor, managed to get possession of all his property, so that his son Caleb, whose mother was dead, was brought in a destitute condition by one of her friends to Jericho. There, as she could not dispose of him otherwise, he was given over to the Essenes, to be educated in their doctrine, and, should he wish it, to enter their order when he reached full age. This lad, it was now decreed, should become the playmate of Miriam, a decision that pleased both of them very well.

Caleb was a handsome child with quick, dark eyes that watched everything without seeming to watch, and black hair which curled upon his shoulders. He was clever also and brave; but though he did his best to control his temper, by nature very passionate and unforgiving. Moreover, that which he desired he would have, if by any means it could be obtained, and was faithful in his loves as in his hates. Of these hates Nehushta was one. With all the skill of a Libyan, whose only book is that of Nature and men's faces, she read the boy's heart at once and said openly that he might come to be the first in any cause--if he did not betray it--and that when God mixed his blood of the best, lest Cæsar should find a rival He left out the salt of honesty and filled up the cup with the wine of passion. When these sayings were repeated to Caleb by Miriam, who thought them to be a jest fit to tease her playmate with, he did not fly into one of his tempers, as she had hoped, but only screwed up his eyelids after his fashion in certain moods, and looked black as the rain-storm above Mount Nebo.

"Did you hear, Caleb?" asked Miriam, somewhat disappointed.

"Oh, yes! Lady Miriam," for so he had been ordered to call her. "I heard. Do you tell that old black woman that I will lead more causes than she ever thought of, for I mean to be the first everywhere. Also that whatever God left out of my cup, at least He mixed it with a good memory."

When Nehushta heard this, she laughed and said that it was true enough, only he that tried to climb several ladders at once generally fell to the ground, and that when a head had said good-bye to its shoulders, the best of memories got lost between the two.

Miriam liked Caleb, but she never loved him as she did the old men, her uncles, or Nehushta, who to her was more than all. Perhaps this may have been because he never grew angry with her whatever she might say or do, never even spoke to her roughly, but always waited on her pleasure and watched for her wish. Still, of all companions he was the best. If Miriam desired to walk by the Dead Sea, he would desire the same. If she wanted to go fishing in the Jordan, he would make ready the baits or net, and take the fishes off the hook--a thing she hated. If she sought a rare flower, Caleb would hunt it out for days, although she knew well that in himself he did not care for flowers, and when he had found it, would mark the spot and lead her there in triumph. Also there was this about him, as she was soon quick enough to learn: he worshipped her.

Whatever else might be false, that note in his nature rang true. If one child could love another, then Caleb loved Miriam, first with the love of children, then as a man loves a woman. Only--and this was the sorrow of it--Miriam never loved Caleb. Had she done so both their stories would have been very different. To her he was a clever companion and no more.

What made the thing more strange was that he loved no one else, except, mayhap, himself. In this way and in that the lad soon came to learn his own history, which was sad enough, with the result that if he hated the Romans who had invaded the country and trampled it beneath their heel, still more did he hate those of the Jews who looked upon his father as their enemy and had stolen all the lands and goods that were his by right. As for the Essenes who reared and protected him, so soon as he came to an age when he could weigh such matters, he held them in contempt, and because of their continual habit of bathing themselves and purifying their garments, called them the company of washer-women. On him their doctrines left but a shallow mark. He thought, as he explained to Miriam, that people who were in the world should take the world as they found it, without dreaming ceaselessly of another world to which, as yet, they did not belong; a sentiment that to some extent Nehushta shared.

Wishing, with the zeal of the young, to make a convert, Miriam preached to him the doctrine of Christianity, but without success. By blood Caleb was a Jew of the Jews, and could not understand or admire a God who

would consent to be trodden under foot and crucified. The Messiah he desired to follow must be a great conqueror, one who would overthrow the Cæsars and take the throne of Cæsar, not a humble creature with his mouth full of maxims. Like the majority of his own, and, indeed, of every generation, to the last day of his life, Caleb was unable to divine that mind is greater than matter, while spirit is greater than mind; and that in the end, by many slow advances and after many disasters seemingly irremediable, spirituality will conquer all. He looked to a sword flashing from thrones, not to the word of truth spoken by lowly lips in humble streets or upon the flanks of deserts, trusting to the winds of Grace to bear it into the hearts of men and thus regenerate their souls.

Such was Caleb, and these things are said of him here because the child is father to the man.

Swiftly the years went by. There were tumults in Judæa and massacres in Jerusalem. False prophets such as Theudas, who pretended that he could divide Jordan, attracted thousands to their tinsel standards, to be hewn down, poor folk! by the Roman legions. Cæsars rose and fell; the great Temple was at length almost completed in its glory, and many events happened which are remembered even to this day.

But in the little village of the Essenes by the grey shores of the Dead Sea, nothing seemed to change, except that now and again an aged brother died, and now and again a new brother was admitted. They rose before

daylight and offered their invocation to the sun; they went out to toil in the fields and sowed their crops, to reap them in due season, thankful if they were good, still thankful if they were bad. They washed, they prayed, they mourned over the wickedness of the world, and wove themselves white garments emblematic of a better. Also, although of this Miriam knew nothing, they held higher and more secret services wherein they invoked the presence of their "angels," and by arts of divination that were known to them, foretold the future, an exercise which brought them little joy. But as yet, however evil might be the omens, none came to molest their peaceful life, which ran quietly towards the great catastrophe as often deep waters swirl to the lip of a precipice.

At length when Miriam was seventeen years of age, the first stroke of trouble fell upon them.

From time to time the high priests at Jerusalem, who hated the Essenes as heretics, had made demands upon them that they should pay tithe for the support of the sacrifices in the Temple. This they refused to do, since all sacrifices were hateful to them. So things went on until the day of the high priest Ananos, who sent armed men to the village of the Essenes to take the tithes. These were refused to them, whereon they broke open the granary and helped themselves, destroying a great deal which they could not carry away. As it chanced, on that day Miriam, accompanied by Nehushta, had visited Jericho. Returning in the afternoon they passed through a certain torrent bed in which were many rocks, and

among them thickets of thorn trees. Here they were met by Caleb, now a noble-looking youth very strong and active, who carried a bow in his hand and on his back a sheath of six arrows.

"Lady Miriam," he said, "well met. I have come to seek you, and to warn you not to return by the road to-day, since on it you will meet presently those thieves sent by the high priest to plunder the stores of the Order, who, perhaps, will offer you insult or mischief, for they are drunk with wine. Look, one of them has struck me," and he pointed to a bruise upon his shoulder and scowled.

"What then shall we do?" asked Miriam. "Go back to Jericho?"

"Nay, for there they will come too. Follow up this gully till you reach the footpath a mile away, and by it walk to the village; so you will miss these robbers."

"That is a good plan," said Nehushta. "Come, lady."

"Whither are you going, Caleb?" asked Miriam, lingering, since she saw that he did not mean to accompany them.

"I? Oh, I shall hide among the rocks near by till the men are passed, and then go to seek that hyena which has been worrying the sheep. I have tracked him down and may catch him as he comes from his hole at sunset. That is why I have brought my bow and arrows."

"Come," broke in Nehushta impatiently, "come. The lad well knows how to guard himself."

"Be careful, Caleb, that you get no hurt from the hyena," said Miriam, doubtfully, as Nehushta seized her by the wrist and dragged her away. "It is strange," she added as they went, "that Caleb should choose this evening to go hunting."

"Unless I mistake, it is a human hyena whom he hunts," answered Nehushta shortly. "One of those men struck him, and he desires to wash the wound with his blood."

"Oh, surely not! Nou. That would be taking vengeance, and revenge is evil."

Nehushta shrugged her shoulders. "Caleb may think otherwise, as I do at times. Wait, and we shall see."

As it chanced, they did see something. The footpath by which they returned to the village ran over a high ridge of ground, and from its crest, although they were a mile or more away, in that clear desert air they could easily discern the line of the high priest's servants straggling along, driving before them a score or so of mules, laden with wine and other produce which they had stolen from the stores. Presently the company of them descended into that gully along which the road ran,

whence a minute or two later rose a sound of distant shouting. Then they appeared on the further side, running, or riding their beasts hither and thither, as though in search of some one, while four of them carried between them a man who seemed to be hurt, or dead.

"I think that Caleb has shot his hyena," said Nehushta meaningly; "but I have seen nothing, and if you are wise, you will say nothing. I do not like Caleb, but I hate these Jewish thieves, and it is not for you to bring your friend into trouble."

Miriam looked frightened but nodded her head, and no more was said of the matter.

That evening, as Miriam and Nehushta stood at the door of their house in the cool, by the light of the full moon they saw Caleb advancing towards them down the road, a sight that made Miriam glad at heart, for she feared lest he might have come into trouble. Catching sight of them, he asked permission to enter through the door, which he closed behind them, so that now they stood in the little garden within the wall.

"Well," said Nehushta, "I see that you had a shot at your hyena; did you kill it?"

"How do you know that?" he asked, looking at her suspiciously.

"A strange question to put to a Libyan woman who was brought up among

bowmen," she replied. "You had six arrows in your quiver when we met you, and now I count but five. Also your bow was newly waxed; and look, the wax is rubbed where the shaft lay."

"I shot at the beast, and, as I think, hit it. At least, I could not find the arrow again, although I searched long."

"Doubtless. You do not often miss. You have a good eye and a steady hand. Well, the loss of a shaft will not matter, since I noticed, also, that this one was differently barbed from the others, and double feathered; a true Roman war-shaft, such as they do not make here. If any find your wounded beast you will not get its hide, since it is known that you do not use such arrows." Then, with a smile that was full of meaning, Nehushta turned and entered the house, leaving him staring after her, half in wrath and half in wonder at her wit.

"What does she mean?" he asked Miriam, but in the voice of one who speaks to himself.

"She thinks that you shot at a man, not at a beast," replied Miriam; "but I know well that you could not have done this, since that would be against the rule of the Essenes."

"Even the rule of the Essenes permits a man to protect himself and his property from thieves," he answered sulkily.

"Yes, to protect himself if he is attacked, and his property--if he has any. But neither that faith nor mine permits him to avenge a blow."

"I was one against many," he answered boldly. "My life was on the hazard: it was no coward's act."

"Were there, then, a troop of these hyenas?" asked Miriam, innocently.

"I thought you said it was a solitary beast that took the sheep."

"It was a whole company of beasts who took the wine, and smote those in charge of it as though they were street dogs."

"Hyenas that took wine like the tame ape whom the boys make drunken over yonder----"

"Why do you mock me," broke in Caleb, "who must know the truth? Or if you do not know it, here it is. That thief beat me with his staff, and called me the son of a dog, and I swore that I would pay him back. Pay him back I did, for the head of that shaft which Nehushta noted, stands out a span beyond his neck. They never saw who shot it; they never saw me at all, who thought at first that the man had fallen from his horse. By the time they knew the truth I was away where they could not follow. Now go and tell the story if you will, or let Nehushta, who hates me, tell it, and give me over to be tortured by the servants of the high priest, or crucified as a murderer by the Romans."

"Neither Nehushta nor I saw this deed done, nor shall we bear witness against you, Caleb, or judge you, who doubtless were provoked by violent and lawless men. Yet, Caleb, you told me that you came out to warn us, and it grieves me to learn that the true wish of your heart was to take the life of a man."

"It is false," he answered angrily; "I said that I came to warn you, and afterwards to kill a hyena. To make you safe--that was my first thought, and until you were safe my enemy was safe also. Miriam, you know it well."

"Why should I know it? To you, Caleb, I think revenge is more than friendship."

"Perhaps; for I have few friends who am a penniless orphan brought up by charity. But, Miriam, to me revenge is not more than--love."

"Love," she stammered, turning crimson to her hair and stepping back a pace; "what do you mean, Caleb?"

"What I say, neither more nor less," he answered sullenly. "As I have worked one crime to-day, I may as well work two, and dare to tell the lady Miriam, the Queen of the Essenes, that I love her, though she loves not me--as yet."

"This is madness," faltered Miriam.

"Mayhap, but it is a madness which began when first I saw you--that was soon after we learned to speak--a madness which will continue until I cease to see you, and that shall be soon before I grow silent forever. Listen, Miriam, and do not think my words only those of a foolish boy, for all my life shall prove them. This love of mine is a thing with which you must reckon. You love me not--therefore, even had I the power, I would not force myself upon you against your will; only I warn you, learn to love no other man, for then it shall go ill either with him or with me. By this I swear it," and, snatching her to him, Caleb kissed her on the forehead, then let her go, saying, "Fear not. It is the first and last time, except by your own will. Or if you fear, tell the story to the Court of the Essenes, and--to Nehushta, who will right your wrongs."

"Caleb," she gasped, stamping her foot upon the ground in anger, "Caleb, you are more wicked than I dreamed, and," she added, as though to herself--"and greater!"

"Yes," he answered, as he turned to go, "I think that you are right. I am more wicked than you dreamed and--greater. Also, Miriam, I love you as you will never be loved again. Farewell!"