

CHAPTER VII

MARCUS

That night those of the curators who were engaged in prayer and fasting were disturbed by the return of an officer of those Jews that had robbed them, who complained violently that a man of his company had been murdered by one of the Essenes. They asked how and when, and were told that the man had been shot down with an arrow, in a gully upon the road to Jericho, by a person unknown. They replied that robbers sometimes met with robbers, and asked to see the arrow, which proved to be of a Roman make, such as these men carried in their own quivers. This the Essenes pointed out, and at length, growing angry at the unreasonableness of a complaint made by persons of the worst character, drove him and his escort from their doors, bidding them take their story to the high priest Ananos, with the goods which they had stolen, or, if they preferred it, to that still greater thief, the Roman procurator, Albinus.

This they did not neglect to do, with the result that presently the Essenes were commanded to send some of their head men to appear before Albinus to answer the charges laid against them. Accordingly they dispatched Ithiel and two others, who were kept waiting three months at Jerusalem before they could even obtain a hearing. At length the cause came on, and after some few minutes of talk was adjourned, being but a petty matter. That same evening Ithiel was informed by an intermediary

that if his Order would pay a certain large sum of money to Albinus, nothing more would be heard of the question. This the Essenes refused to do, as it was against their principles, saying that they demanded nothing but justice, which they were not prepared to buy. So they spoke, being ignorant that one of their neophytes, Caleb, had in fact aimed the fatal arrow.

Then Albinus, wearying of the business and finding that there was no profit to be made out of the Essenes, commanded them to be gone, saying that he would send an officer to make inquiry on the spot.

Another two months went by, and at length this officer arrived, attended by an escort of twenty soldiers.

As it chanced, on a certain morning in the winter season, Miriam with Nehushta was walking on the Jericho road, when suddenly they saw approaching towards them this little body of armed men. Perceiving that they were Romans, they turned out of the path to hide themselves among the thorns of the desert. Thereon he who seemed to be the officer spurred his horse forward to intercept them.

"Do not run--stand still," said Nehushta to Miriam, "and show no sign of fear."

So Miriam halted and began to gather a few autumn flowers that still bloomed among the bushes, till the shadow of the officer fell upon

her--that shadow in which she was destined to walk all her life-days.

"Lady," said a pleasant voice in Greek, spoken with a somewhat foreign accent--"lady, pardon, and I pray you, do not be alarmed. I am a stranger to this part of the country, which I visit on official business. Will you of your kindness direct me to the village of a people called Essenes, who live somewhere in this desert?"

"Oh, sir!" answered Miriam, "do you, who come with Roman soldiers, mean them any harm?"

"Not I. But why do you ask?"

"Because, sir, I am of their community."

The officer stared at her--this beautiful, blue-eyed, white-skinned, delicate-featured girl, whose high blood proclaimed itself in every tone and gesture.

"You, lady, of the community of the Essenes! Surely then those priests in Jerusalem lie more deeply than I thought. They told me that the Essenes were old ascetics who worship Apollo, and could not bear so much as the sight of a woman. And now you say you are an Essene--you, by Bacchus! you!" and he looked at her with an admiration which, although there was nothing brutal or even rude about it, was amusingly undisguised.

"I am their guest," she said.

"Their guest? Why, this is stranger still. If these spiritual outlaws--the word is that old high priest's, not mine--share their bread and water with such guests, my sojourn among them will be happier than I thought."

"They brought me up, I am their ward," Miriam explained again.

"In truth, my opinion of the Essenes rises, and I am convinced that those priests slandered them. If they can shape so sweet a lady, surely they must themselves be good and gentle"; and he bowed gravely, perhaps to mark the compliment.

"Sir, they are both good and gentle," answered Miriam; "but of this you will be able to judge for yourself very shortly, seeing that they live near at hand. If you will follow us over yonder rise we will show you their village, whither we go."

"By your leave, I will accompany you," he said, dismounting before she could answer; then added, "Pardon me for one moment--I must give some orders," and he called to a soldier, who, with his companions, had halted at a little distance.

The man advanced saluting, and, turning aside, his captain began to talk

with him, so that now, for the first time, Miriam could study his face. He was young--not more than five or six and twenty years of age--of middle height, and somewhat slender, but active in movement and athletic in build. Upon his head, which was round and not large, in place of the helmet that hung at his saddle-bow, he wore a little cap, steel lined and padded as a protection against the sun, and beneath it she could see that his short, dark brown hair curled closely. Under the tan caused by exposure to the heat, his skin was fair, and his grey eyes, set rather wide apart, were quick and observant. For the rest, his mouth was well-shaped, though somewhat large, and the chin clean-shaved, prominent and determined. His air was that of a soldier accustomed to command, but very genial, and, when he smiled, showing his regular white teeth, even merry--the air of one with a kind and generous heart.

Miriam looked at him, and in an instant was aware that she liked him better than any man--that is any young man--she had ever seen. This, however, was no great or exclusive compliment to the Roman, since of such acquaintances she had but few, if, indeed, Caleb was not the only one. However, of this she was sure, she liked him better than Caleb, because, even then and there, comparing them in her thoughts, this truth came home to her; with it, too, a certain sense of shame that the newcomer should be preferred to the friend of her childhood, although of late that friend had displeased her by showing too warm a friendship.

Having given his instructions, the captain dismissed the orderly, commanding him to follow at a distance with the men. Then saying, "Lady,

I am ready," he began to walk forward, leading his horse by the bridle.

"You will forgive me," he added, "if I introduce myself more formally. I am called Marcus, the son of Emilius--a name which was known in its day," and he sighed, "as I hope before I have done with it, mine will be. At present I cannot boast that this is so, who, unless it should please my uncle Caius to debase and leave me the great fortune he squeezes out of the Spaniards--neither of which things he shows any present intention of doing--am but a soldier of fortune: an officer under the command of the excellent and most noble procurator Albinus," he added sarcastically. "For the rest," he went on, "I have spent a year in this interesting and turbulent but somewhat arid land of yours, coming here from Egypt, and am now honoured with a commission to investigate and make report on a charge laid at the door of your virtuous guardians, the Essenes, of having murdered, or been privy to the murder of, a certain rascally Jew, who, as I understand, was sent with others to steal their goods. That, lady, is my style and history. By way of exchange, will you be pleased to tell me yours?"

Miriam hesitated, not being sure whether she should enter on such confidences at so short a notice. Thereon, Nehushta, who was untroubled by doubts, and thought it politic to be quite open with this Roman, a man in authority, answered for her.

"Lord, this maiden, whose servant I am, as I was that of her grandmother and mother before her----"

"Surely you cannot be so old," interrupted Marcus. He made it a rule to be polite to all women, whatever their colour, having noticed that life went more easily with those who were courteous to the sex.

Nehushta smiled a little as she answered--for at what age does a woman learn to despise a compliment?--"Lord, they both died young"; then repeated, "This maiden is the only child of the high-born Græco-Syrian of Tyre, Demas, and his noble wife, Rachel----"

"I know Tyre," he interrupted. "I was quartered there till two months ago"; adding in a different tone, "I understand that this pair no longer live."

"They died," said Nehushta sadly, "the father in the amphitheatre at Berytus by command of the first Agrippa, and the mother when her child was born."

"In the amphitheatre at Berytus? Was he then a malefactor?"

"No, sir," broke in Miriam proudly; "he was a Christian."

"Oh! I understand. Well, they are ill-spoken of as enemies of the human race, but for my part I have had to do with several Christians and found them very good people, though visionary in their views." Here a doubt struck him and he said, "But, lady, I understand that you are an

Essene."

"Nay, sir," she replied in the same steady voice, "I also am a Christian, who have been protected by the Essenes."

He looked at her with pity and replied, "It is a dangerous profession for one so young and fair."

"Dangerous let it be," she said; "at least it is mine from the beginning to the end."

Marcus bowed, perceiving that the subject was not to be pursued, and said to Nehushta, "Continue the story, my friend."

"Lord, the father of my lady's mother is a very wealthy Jewish merchant of Tyre, named Benoni."

"Benoni," he said, "I know him well, too well for a poor man!--a Jew of the Jews, a Zealot, they say. At least he hates us Romans enough to be one, although many is the dinner that I have eaten at his palace. He is the most successful trader in all Tyre, unless it be his rival Amram, the Phœnician, but a hard man, and as able as he is hard. Now I think of it, he has no living children, so why does not your lady, his grandchild, dwell with him rather than in this desert?"

"Lord, you have answered your own question. Benoni is a Jew of the

Jews; his granddaughter is a Christian, as I am also. Therefore when her mother died, I brought her here to be taken care of by her uncle Ithiel the Essene, and I do not think Benoni knows even that she lives. Lord, perhaps I have said too much; but you must soon have heard the story from the Essenes, and we trust to you, who chance to be Benoni's friend, to keep our secret from him."

"You do not trust in vain; yet it seems sad that all the wealth and station which are hers by right should thus be wasted."

"Lord, rank and station are not everything; freedom of faith and person are more than these. My lady lacks for nothing, and--this is all her story."

"Not quite, friend; you have not told me her name."

"Lord, it is Miriam."

"Miriam, Miriam," he repeated, his slightly foreign accent dwelling softly on the syllables. "It is a very pretty name, befitting such a----" and he checked himself.

By now they were on the crest of the rise, and, stopping between two clumps of thorn trees, Miriam broke in hastily:

"See, sir, there below lies the village of the Essenes; those green

trees to the left mark the banks of Jordan, whence we irrigate our fields, while that grey stretch of water to the right, surrounded by a wall of mountain, is the Dead Sea."

"Is it so? Well, the green is pleasant in this desert, and those fields look well cultivated. I hope to visit them some day, for I was brought up in the country, and, although I am a soldier, still understand a farm. As for the Dead Sea, it is even more dreary than I expected. Tell me, lady, what is that large building yonder?"

"That," she answered, "is the gathering hall of the Essenes."

"And that?" he asked, pointing to a house which stood by itself.

"That is my home, where Nehushta and I dwell."

"I guessed as much by the pretty garden." Then he asked her other questions, which she answered freely enough, for Miriam, although she was half Jewish, had been brought up among men, and felt neither fear nor shame in talking with them in a friendly and open fashion, as an Egyptian or a Roman or a Grecian lady might have done.

While they were still conversing thus, of a sudden the bushes on their path were pushed aside, and from between them emerged Caleb, of whom she had seen but little of late. He halted and looked at them.

"Friend Caleb," said Miriam, "this is the Roman captain Marcus, who comes to visit the curators of the Order. Will you lead him and his soldiers to the council hall and advise my uncle Ithiel and the others of his coming, since it is time for us to go home?"

Caleb glared at her, or rather at the stranger, with sullen fury; then he answered:

"Romans always make their own road; they do not need a Jew to guide them," and once more he vanished into the scrub on the further side of the path.

"Your friend is not civil," said Marcus, as he watched him go. "Indeed, he has an inhospitable air. Now, if an Essene could do such a thing, I should think that here is a man who might have drawn an arrow upon a Jewish tax-gatherer," and he looked inquiringly at Miriam.

"That lad!" put in Nehushta. "Why, he never shot anything larger than a bird of prey."

"Caleb," added Miriam in excuse, "does not like strangers."

"So I see," answered Marcus; "and to be frank, lady, I do not like Caleb. He has an eye like a knife-point."

"Come, Nehushta," said Miriam, "this is our road, and there runs that

of the captain and his company. Sir, farewell, and thank you for your escort."

"Lady, for this while farewell, and thank you for your guidance."

Thus for that day they parted.

The dwelling which many years before had been built by the Essenes for the use of their ward and her nurse, stood next to the large guest-house. Indeed, it occupied a portion of the ground which originally belonged to it, although now the plot was divided into two gardens by an irrigation ditch and a live pomegranate fence, covered at this season of the year with its golden globes of fruit. That evening, as Miriam and Nehushta walked in the garden, they heard the familiar voice of Ithiel calling to them from the other side of this fence, and presently above it saw his kindly face and venerable white head.

"What is it, my uncle?" asked Miriam running to him.

"Only this, child; the noble Roman captain, Marcus, is to stay in the guest-house during his visit to us, so do not be frightened if you hear or see men moving about in this garden--If, indeed, Romans care to walk in gardens. I am to bide here also, to play host to him and see that he lacks nothing. Also I do not think that he will give you any trouble, since, for a Roman, he seems both courteous and kindly."

"I am not afraid, my uncle," said Miriam; "indeed," she added, blushing a little in spite of herself, "Nehushta and I have already become acquainted with this captain"; and she told him of their meeting beyond the village.

"Nehushta, Nehushta," said Ithiel reprovingly, "have I not said to you that you should not walk so far afield without some of the brethren as an escort? You might, perchance, have met thieves, or drunken men."

"My lady wished to gather some flowers she sought," answered Nehushta, "as she has done without harm for many a year; and being armed, I did not fear thieves, if such men are to be found where all are poor."

"Well, well, as it chances, no harm has happened; but do not go out unattended again, lest the soldiers should not be so courteous as their captain. They will not trouble you by the way, since, with the exception of a single guard, they camp yonder by the streamlet. Farewell for this night, my child; we will meet to-morrow."

Then Miriam went to rest and dreamed of the Roman captain, and that he, she, and Nehushta made a journey together and met with many great adventures, wherein Caleb played some strange part. In that dream the captain Marcus protected them from all these dangers, till at length they came to a calm sea, on which floated a single white ship wherein they must embark, having the sign of the Cross woven in its sails. Then she awoke and found that it was morning.

Of all the arts she had been taught, Miriam was fondest of that of modelling in clay, for which she had a natural gift. Indeed, so great had her skill become, that these models which she made, after they had been baked with fire, were, at her wish, sold by the Essenes to any who took a fancy to them. As to the money which they fetched, it was paid into a fund to be distributed among the poor.

This art Miriam carried on in a reed-thatched shed in the garden, where, by an earthen pipe, water was delivered into a stone basin, which she used to damp her clay and cloths. Sometimes also, with the help of masons and the master who had taught her, now a very old man, she copied these models in marble, which the Essenes brought to her from the ruins of a palace near Jericho. At the time that the Romans came she was finishing a work more ambitious than any which she had undertaken as yet; namely, a life-sized bust cut from the fragment of an ancient column to the likeness of her great-uncle, Ithiel. On the afternoon following the day that she met Marcus, clad in her white working-robe, she was occupied in polishing this bust, with the assistance of Nehushta, who handed her the cloths and grinding-powder. Suddenly shadows fell upon her, and turning, she beheld Ithiel and the Roman.

"Daughter," said Ithiel, smiling at her confusion, "I have brought the captain Marcus to see your work."

"Oh, my uncle!" she replied indignantly, "am I in a state to receive

any captain?" and she held out her wet hands and pointed to her garments begrimed with clay and powder. "Look at me."

"I look," said Ithiel innocently, "and see naught amiss."

"And I look, lady," added Marcus in his merry voice, "and see much to admire. Would that more of your sex could be found thus delightfully employed."

"Alas, sir," she replied, adroitly misunderstanding him, for Miriam did not lack readiness, "in this poor work there is little to admire. I am ashamed that you should look on the rude fashionings of a half-trained girl, you who must have seen all those splendid statues of which I have been told."

"By the throne of Cæsar, lady," he exclaimed in a voice that carried a conviction of his earnestness, staring hard at the bust of Ithiel before him, "as it chances, although I am not an artist, I do know something of sculpture, since I have a friend who is held to be the best of our day, and often for my sins have sat as model to him. Well, I tell you this--never did the great Glaucus produce a bust like that."

"I daresay not," said Miriam smiling. "I daresay the great Glaucus would go mad if he saw it."

"He would--with envy. He would say that it was the work of one of the

glorious Greeks, and of no modern."

"Sir," said Ithiel reprovingly, "do not make a jest of the maid, who does the best she can; it pains her and--is not fitting."

"Friend Ithiel," replied Marcus, turning quite crimson, "you must indeed think that I lack manners who would come to the home of any artist to mock his work. I say what I mean, neither more nor less. If this bust were shown in Rome, together with yourself who sat for it, the lady Miriam would find herself famous within a week. Yes," and he ran his eye quickly over various statuettes, some of them baked and some in the raw clay, models, for the most part, of camels or other animals or birds, "yes, and it is the same with all the rest: these are the works of genius, no less."

At this praise, to them so exaggerated, Miriam, pleased as she could not help feeling, broke into clear laughter, which both Ithiel and Nehushta echoed. Now, so wroth was he, the face of Marcus grew quite pale and stern.

"It seems," he said severely, "that it is not I who mock. Tell me, lady, what do you with these things?" and he pointed to the statuettes.

"I, sir? I sell them; or at least my uncles do."

"The money is given to the poor," interposed Ithiel.

"Would it be rude to ask at what price?"

"Sometimes," replied Ithiel with pride, "travellers have given me as much as a silver shekel.[*] Once indeed, for a group of camels with their Arabian drivers, I received four shekels; but that took my niece three months to do."

[*] About 2s. 6d. of English money.

"A shekel! Four shekels!" said Marcus in a voice of despair; "I will buy them all--no, I will not, it would be robbery. And this bust?"

"That, sir, is not for sale; it is a gift to my uncle, or rather to my uncles, to be set up in their court-room."

An idea struck Marcus. "I am here for a few weeks," he said. "Tell me, lady, if your uncle Ithiel will permit it, at what price will you execute a bust of myself of the same size and quality?"

"It would be dear," said Miriam, smiling at the notion, "for the marble costs something, and the tools, which wear out. Oh, it would be very dear!" This she repeated, wondering what she could ask in her charitable avarice. "It would be----" yes, she would venture it--"fifty shekels!"

"I am poor enough," replied Marcus quietly, "but I will give you two

hundred."

"Two hundred!" gasped Miriam. "It is absurd. I could never accept two hundred shekels for a piece of stonework. Then indeed you might say that you had fallen among thieves on the banks of Jordan. No. If my uncles will permit it and there is time, I will do my poor best for fifty--only, sir, I advise you against it, since to win that bad likeness you must sit for many weary hours."

"So be it," said Marcus. "As soon as I get to any civilised place I will send you enough commissions to make the beggars in these parts rich for life, and at a very different figure. Let us begin at once."

"Sir, I have no leave."

"The matter," explained Ithiel, "must be laid before the Court of Curators, which will decide upon it to-morrow. Meanwhile, as we are talking here, I see no harm if my niece chooses to work a lump of clay, which can be broken up later should the Court in its wisdom refuse your request."

"I hope for its own sake that the Court in its wisdom will not be such a fool," muttered Marcus to himself; adding aloud, "Lady, where shall I place myself? You will find me the best of sitters. Have I not the great Glaucus for a friend--until I show him this work of yours?"

"If you will, sir, be seated on that stool and be pleased to look towards me."

"I am your servant," said Marcus, in a cheerful voice; and the sitting began.