

CHAPTER VIII

MARCUS AND CALEB

On the morrow, as he had promised, Ithiel brought this question of whether or no Miriam was to be allowed to execute a bust of the centurion, Marcus, before the Court of the Curators of the Essenes, who were accustomed thus to consider questions connected with their ward's welfare in solemn conclave. There was a division of opinion. Some of them saw no harm; others, more strait-laced, held that it was scarcely correct that a Roman whose principles, doubtless, were lax, should be allowed to sit to the lady whom they fondly called their child. Indeed, it seemed dubious whether the leave would be given, until a curator, with more worldly wisdom than the rest, suggested that as the captain seemed desirous of having his picture taken in stone, under the circumstances of his visit, which included a commission to make a general report upon their society to the authorities, it might be scarcely wise to deny his wish. Finally, a compromise was effected. It was agreed that Miriam should be permitted to do the work, but only in the presence of Ithiel and two other curators, one of them her own instructor in art.

Thus it came about that when Marcus presented himself for the second time, at an hour fixed by Ithiel, he found three white-bearded and white-robed old gentlemen seated in a row in the workshop, and behind them, a smile on her dusky face, Nehushta. As he entered they rose and

bowed to him, a compliment which he returned. Now Miriam appeared, to whom he made his salutation.

"Are these," he said, indicating the elders, "waiting their turn to be modelled, or are they critics?"

"They are critics," said Miriam drily, as she lifted the damp cloths from the rude lump of clay.

Then the work began. As the three curators were seated in a line at the end of the shed, and did not seem to think it right to leave their chairs, they could see little of its details, and as they were early risers and the afternoon was hot, soon they were asleep, every one of them.

"Look at them," said Marcus; "there is a subject for any artist."

Miriam nodded, and taking three lumps of clay, working deftly and silently, presently produced to his delighted sight rough but excellent portraits of these admirable men, who, when they woke up, laughed at them very heartily.

Thus things went on from day to day. Each afternoon the elders attended, and each afternoon they sank to slumber in their comfortable chairs, an example that Nehushta followed, or seemed to follow, leaving Miriam and her model practically alone. As may be guessed, the model, who liked

conversation, did not neglect these opportunities. Few were the subjects which the two of them failed to discuss. He told her of all his life, which had been varied and exciting, omitting, it is true, certain details; also of the wars in which he had served, and the countries that he had visited. She in turn told him the simple story of her existence among the Essenes, which he seemed to find of interest. When these subjects were exhausted they discussed other things--the matter of religion, for instance. Indeed, Miriam ventured to expound to him the principles of her faith, to which he listened respectfully and with attention.

"It sounds well," he said at length with a sigh, "but how do such maxims fit in with this world of ours? See now, lady, I am not old, but already I have studied so many religions. First, there are the gods of Greece and Rome, my own gods, you understand--well, the less said of them the better. They serve, that is all. Then there are the gods of Egypt, as to which I made inquiry, and of them I will say this: that beneath the grotesque cloak of their worship seems to shine some spark of a holy fire. Next come the gods of the Phœnicians, the fathers of a hideous creed. After them the flame worshippers and other kindred religions of the East. There remain the Jews, whose doctrine seems to me a savage one; at least it involves bloodshed with the daily offering of blood. Also they are divided, these Jews, for some are Pharisees, some Sadducees, some Essenes. Lastly, there are you Christians, whose faith is pure enough in theory, but whom all unite against in hate. What is the worth of a belief in this crucified Preacher who promises that He

will raise those who trust in Him from the dead?"

"That you will find out when everything else has failed you," answered Miriam.

"Yes, it is a religion for those whom everything else has failed. When that chances to the rest of us we commit suicide and sink from sight."

"And we," she said proudly, "rise to life eternal."

"It may be so, lady, it may be so; but let us talk of something more cheerful," and he sighed. "At present, I hold that nothing is eternal--except perhaps such art as yours."

"Which will be forgotten in the first change of taste, or crumbled in the first fire. But see, he is awake. Come here, my master, and work this nostril, for it is beyond me."

The old artist advanced and looked at the bust with admiration.

"Maid Miriam," he said, "I used to have some skill in this art, and I taught you its rudiments; but now, child, I am not fit to temper your clay. Deal with the nostril as you will; I am but a hodman who bears the bricks, you are the heaven-born architect. I will not meddle, I will not meddle; yet perhaps----" and he made a suggestion.

"So?" said Miriam, touching the clay with her tool. "Oh, look! it is right now. You are clever, my master."

"It was always right. I may be clever, but you have genius, and would have found the fault without any help from me."

"Did I not say so?" broke in Marcus triumphantly.

"Sir," replied Miriam, "you say a great deal, and much of it, I think, you do not mean. Please be silent; at this moment I wish to study your lips, and not your words."

So the work went on. They did not always talk, for soon they found that speech is not necessary to true companionship. Once Miriam began to sing, and since she discovered that her voice pleased Marcus and soothed the slumbers of the elders, she sang often; quaint, sad songs of the desert and of the Jordan fishermen. Also she told him tales and legends, and when she had done Nehushta told others--wild stories of Libya, some of them very dark and bloody, others of magic, black or white. Thus these afternoons passed happily enough, and the clay model being finished, after the masons among the brethren had rough hewn it for her, Miriam began to fashion it in marble.

There was one, however, for whom these days did not pass happily--Caleb. From the time that he had seen Miriam walking side by side with Marcus he hated the brilliant-looking Roman in whom, his instinct warned him,

he had found a dangerous rival. Oh, how he hated him! So much, indeed, that even in the moment of first meeting he could not keep his rage and envy in his heart, but suffered them to be written on his face, and to shine like danger signals in his eyes, which, it may be remembered, Marcus did not neglect to note.

Of Miriam Caleb had seen but little lately. She was not angry with him, since his offence was of a nature which a woman can forgive, but in her heart she feared him. Of a sudden, as it were, the curtain had been drawn, and she had seen this young man's secret spirit and learned that it was a consuming fire. It had come home to her that every word he spoke was true, that he who was orphaned and not liked even by the gentle elders of the Essenes, loved but one being upon earth--herself, whereas already his bosom seethed with many hates. She was sure also that any man for whom she chanced to care, if such an one should ever cross her path, would, as Caleb had promised, go in danger at his hands, and the thought frightened her. Most of all did it frighten her when she saw him glower upon Marcus, although in truth the Roman was nothing to her. Yet, as she knew, Caleb had judged otherwise.

But if she saw little of him, of this Miriam was sure enough--that he was seldom far from her, and that he found means to learn from day to day how she spent her hours. Indeed, Marcus told her that wherever he went he met that handsome young man with revengeful eyes, who she had said was named Caleb. Therefore Miriam grew frightened and, as the issue will show, not without cause.

One afternoon, while Miriam was at work upon the marble, and the three elders were as usual sunk in slumber, Marcus said suddenly:

"I forgot. I have news for you, lady. I have found out who murdered that Jewish thief whose end, amongst other things, I was sent to investigate. It was your friend Caleb."

Miriam started so violently that her chisel gave an unexpected effect to one of Marcus's curls.

"Hush!" she said, glancing towards the sleepers, one of whom had just snored so loudly that he began to awake at the sound; then added in a whisper, "They do not know, do they?"

He shook his head and looked puzzled.

"I must speak to you of this matter," she went on with agitation, and in the same whisper. "No, not now or here, but alone."

"When and where you will," answered Marcus, smiling, as if the prospect of a solitary conversation with Miriam did not displease him, although this evil-doing Caleb was to be its subject. "Name the time and place, lady."

By now the snoring elder was awake, and rising from his chair with a

great noise, which in turn roused the others. Nehushta also rose from her seat and in doing so, as though by accident, overset a copper tray on which lay metal tools.

"In the garden one hour after sunset. Nehushta will leave the little lower door unlocked."

"Good," answered Marcus; then added in a loud voice, "Not so, lady. Ye gods! what a noise! I think the curl improved by the slip. It looks less as though it had been waxed after the Egyptian fashion. Sirs, why do you disturb yourselves? I fear that to you this long waiting must be as tedious as to me it seems unnecessary."

The sun was down, and the last red glow had faded from the western sky, which was now lit only by the soft light of a half-moon. All the world lay bathed in peace and beauty; even the stern outlines of the surrounding mountains seemed softened, and the pale waters of the Dead Sea and the ashen face of the desert gleamed like silver new cast from the mould. From the oleanders and lilies which bloomed along the edge of the irrigation channels, and from the white flowers of the glossy, golden-fruited orange trees, floated a perfume delicious to the sense, while the silence was only broken from time to time by the bark of a wandering dog or the howl of a jackal in the wilderness.

"A very pleasant night--to talk about Caleb," reflected Marcus, who had reached the appointed spot ten minutes before the time, as he strolled

from the narrow belt of trees that were planted along the high, outer wall, into the more open part of the garden. Had Marcus chanced to notice that this same Caleb, walking softly as a cat, and keeping with great care in the shadow, had followed him through the little door which he forgot to lock, and was now hidden among those very trees, he might have remembered a proverb to the effect that snakes hide in the greenest grass and the prettiest flowers have thorny stems. But he thought of no such thing, who was lost in happy anticipations of a moonlight interview with a lovely and cultured young lady, whose image, to speak truth, had taken so deep a hold upon his fancy, that sometimes he wondered how he would be able to banish it thence again. At present he could think of no better means than that which at this moment he was following with delight. Meetings in moonlit gardens tend proverbially to disenchantment!

Presently Marcus caught the gleam of a white robe followed by a dark one, flitting towards him through the dim and dewy garden, and at the sight his heart stood still, then began to beat again in a disorderly fashion. Had he known it, another heart a few yards behind him also stood still, and then began to beat like that of a man in a violent rage. It seems possible, also, that a third heart experienced unusual sensations.

"I wish she had left the old lady behind," muttered Marcus. "No, I don't, for then there are brutes who, if they knew, might blame her"; and, luckily for himself, he walked forward a few paces to meet the

white robe, leaving the little belt of trees almost out of hearing.

Now Miriam stood before him, the moonlight shining on her delicate face and in her tranquil eyes, which always reminded him of the blue depths of heaven.

"Sir," she began----

"Oh, I pray you," he broke in, "cease from ceremony and call me Marcus!"

"Captain Marcus," she repeated, dwelling a little on the unfamiliar name, "I beg that you will forgive me for disturbing you at so unseasonable an hour."

"Certainly I forgive you, Lady Miriam," he replied, also dwelling on her name and copying her accent in a fashion that made the grim-faced Nehushta smile.

She waved her hand in deprecation. "The truth is, that this matter of Caleb's----"

"Oh, may all the infernal gods take Caleb! as I have reason to believe they shortly will," broke in Marcus angrily.

"But that is just what I wish to prevent; we have met here to talk of Caleb."

"Well, if you must--talk and let us be done with him. What about Caleb?"

Miriam clasped her hands. "What do you know of him, Captain Marcus?"

"Know? Why, just this: a spy I have in my troop has found out a country fellow who was hunting for mushrooms or something--I forget what--in a gully a mile away, and saw this interesting youth hide himself there and shoot that Jewish plunderer with a bow and arrow. More--he has found another man who saw the said Caleb an hour or two before help himself to an arrow out of one of the Jew's quivers, which arrow appears to be identical with, or at any rate, similar to, that which was found in the fellow's gullet. Therefore, it seems that Caleb is guilty, and that it will be my duty to-morrow to place him under arrest, and in due course to convey him to Jerusalem, where the priests will attend to his little business. Now, Lady Miriam, is your curiosity satisfied about Caleb?"

"Oh," she said, "it cannot be, it must not be! The man had struck him and he did but return a blow for a blow."

"An arrow for a blow, you mean; the point of a spear for the push of its handle. But, Lady Miriam, you seem to be very deep in the confidence of Caleb. How do you come to know all this?"

"I don't know, I only guess. I daresay, nay, I am sure, that Caleb is quite innocent."

"Why do you take such an interest in Caleb?" asked Marcus suspiciously.

"Because he was my friend and playmate from childhood."

"Umph," he answered, "a strange couple--a dove and a raven. Well, I am glad that you did not catch his temper, or you would be more dangerous even than you are. Now, what do you want me to do?"

"I want you to spare Caleb. You, you, you--need not believe those witnesses."

"To think of it!" said Marcus, in mock horror. "To think that one whom I thought so good can prove so immoral. Do you then wish to tempt me from my duty?"

"Yes, I suppose so. At least the peasants round here are great liars."

"Lady," said Marcus, with stern conviction, "Caleb has improved upon his opportunities as a playmate; he has been making love to you. I thought so from the first."

"Oh," she answered, "how can you know that? Besides, he promised that he would never do it again."

"How can I know that? Why, because Caleb would have been a bigger fool

than I take him for if he had not. And if it rested with me, certainly he never would do it again. Now be honest with me, if a woman can on such a matter, and tell me true: are you in love with this Caleb?"

"I--I? In love with Caleb? Of course not. If you do not believe me, ask Nehushta."

"Thank you, I will be content with your own reply. You deny that you are in love with him, and I incline to believe you; but, on the other hand, I remember that you would naturally say this, since you might think that any other answer would prejudice the cause of Caleb with me."

"With you! What can it matter to you, sir, whether or no I am in love with Caleb, who, to tell you the truth, frightens me?"

"And that, I suppose, is why you plead so hard for him?"

"No," she answered with a sudden sternness, "I plead hard for him as in like case I would plead hard for you--because he has been my friend, and if he did this deed he was provoked to it."

"Well spoken," said Marcus, gazing at her steadily. Indeed, she was worth looking at as she stood there before him, her hands clasped, her breast heaving, her sweet, pale face flushed with emotion and her lovely eyes aswim with tears. Of a sudden as he gazed Marcus lost control of himself. Passion for this maiden and bitter jealousy of Caleb arose like

twin giants in his heart and possessed him.

"You say you are not in love with Caleb," he said. "Well, kiss me and I will believe you."

"How could such a thing prove my words?" she asked indignantly.

"I do not know and I do not care. Kiss me once and I will believe further that the peasants of these parts are all liars. I feel myself beginning to believe it."

"And if I will not?"

"Then I am afraid I must refer the matter to a competent tribunal at Jerusalem."

"Nehushta, Nehushta, you have heard. What shall I do?"

"What shall you do?" said Nehushta drily. "Well, if you like to give the noble Marcus a kiss, I shall not blame you overmuch or tell on you. But if you do not wish it, then I think you would be a fool to put yourself to shame to save Caleb."

"Yet, I will do it--and to save Caleb only," said Miriam with a sob, and she bent towards him.

To her surprise Marcus drew back, placing his hand before his face.

"Forgive me," he said. "I was a brute who wished to buy kisses in such a fashion. I forgot myself; your beauty is to blame, and your sweetness and everything that is yours. I pray," he added humbly, "that you will not think the worse of me, since we men are frail at times. And now, because you ask me, though I have no right, I grant your prayer. Mayhap those witnesses lied; at least, the man's sin, if sin there be, can be excused. He has naught to fear from me."

"No," broke in Nehushta, "but I think you have much to fear from him; and I am sorry for that, my lord Marcus, for you have a noble heart."

"It may be so; the future is on the knees of the gods, and that which is fated will befall. My Lady Miriam, I, your humble servant and friend, wish you farewell."

"Farewell," she answered. "Yes, Nehushta is right, you have a noble heart"; and she looked at him in such a fashion that it flashed across his mind that were he to proffer that request of his again, it might not be refused. But Marcus would not do it. He had tasted of the joy of self-conquest, who hitherto, after the manner of his age and race, had denied himself little, and, as it seemed to him, a strange new power was stirring in his heart--something purer, higher, nobler, than he had known before. He would cherish it a while.

Of all that were spoken there in the garden, Caleb, the watcher, could catch no word. The speakers did not raise their voices and they stood at a distance, so that although he craned his head forward as far as he dared in the shadow of the trees, sharp and trained as they were, naught save a confused murmur reached his ears. But if these failed him, his eyes fed full, so that he lost no move or gesture. It was a passionate love scene, this was clear, for Nehushta stood at a little distance with her back turned, while the pair poured out their sweet speeches to each other. Then at length, as he had expected, came the climax. Yes, oh! shameless woman--they were embracing. A mist fell upon Caleb's eyes, in which lights flashed like red-hot swords lifting and smiting, the blood drummed in his ears as though his raging, jealous heart would burst. He would kill that Roman now on the spot. Miriam should never kiss him more--alive.

Already Caleb had drawn the short-sword from its hiding-place in his ample robe; already he had stepped out from the shadow of the trees, when of a sudden his reason righted itself like a ship that has been laid over by a furious squall, and caution came back to him. If he did this that faithless guardian, Nehushta, who without doubt had been bought with Roman gold, would come to the assistance of her patron and thrust her dagger through his back, as she well could do. Or should he escape that dagger, one or other of them would raise the Essenes on him, and he would be given over to justice. He wished to slay, not to be slain. It would be sweet to kill the Roman, but if he himself were laid dead across his body, leaving Miriam alive to pass to some other man,

what would he be advantaged? Presently they must cease from their endearments; presently his enemy would return as he had come, and then he might find his chance. He would wait, he would wait.

Look, they had parted; Miriam was gliding back to the house, and Marcus came towards him, walking like a man in his sleep. Only Nehushta stood where she was, her eyes fixed upon the ground as though she were reasoning with herself. Still like a man in a dream, Marcus passed him within touch of his outstretched hand. Caleb followed. Marcus opened the door, went out of it, and pulled it to behind him. Caleb caught it in his hand, slipped through and closed it. A few paces down the wall--eight or ten perhaps--was another door, by which Marcus entered the garden of the guest-house. As he turned to shut this, Caleb pushed in after him, and they were face to face.

"Who are you?" asked the Roman, springing back.

Caleb, who by now was cool enough, closed the door and shot the bolt. Then he answered, "Caleb, the son of Hilliel, who wishes a word with you."

"Ah!" said Marcus, "the very man, and, as usual, unless the light deceives me, in an evil humour. Well, Caleb the son of Hilliel, what is your business with me?"

"One of life and death, Marcus the son of Emilius," he answered, in such

a tone that the Roman drew his sword and stood watching him.

"Be plain and brief, young man," he said.

"I will be both plain and brief. I love that lady from whom you have just parted, and you also love, or pretend to love, her. Nay, deny it not; I have seen all, even to your kisses. Well, she cannot belong to both of us, and I intend that in some future day she shall belong to me if arm and eye do not fail me now. Therefore one of us must die to-night."

Marcus stepped back, overcome not with fear, but with astonishment.

"Insolent," he said, "you lie! There were no kisses, and our talk was of your neck, that I gave to her because she asked it, which is forfeit for the murder of the Jew."

"Indeed," sneered Caleb. "Now, who would have thought that the noble Captain Marcus would shelter thus behind a woman's robe? For the rest, my life is my own and no other's to give or to receive. Guard yourself, Roman, since I would kill you in fair fight. Had I another mind you would be dead by now, never knowing the hand that struck you. Have no fear; I am your equal, for my forefathers were nobles when yours were savages."

"Boy, are you mad," asked Marcus, "to think that I, who have fought in

three wars, can fear a beardless youth, however fierce? Why, if I feared you I have but to blow upon this whistle and my guards would hale you hence to a felon's death. For your own sake it is that I pray you to consider. Setting aside my rank and yours, I will fight you if you will, and now. Yet think. If I kill you there is an end, and if by chance you should kill me, you will be hunted down as a double murderer. As it is, I forgive you, because I know how bitter is the jealousy of youth, and because you struck no assassin's blow when you might have done so safely. Therefore, I say, go in peace, knowing that I shall not break my word."

"Cease talking," said Caleb, "and come out into the moonlight."

"I am glad that is your wish," replied Marcus. "Having done all I can to save you, I will add that I think you a dangerous cub, of whom the world, the lady Miriam and I alike will be well rid. Now, what weapon have you? A short sword and no mail? Well, so have I. In this we are well matched. Stay, I have a steel-lined cap, and you have none. There it goes, to make our chances equal. Wind your cloak about your left arm as I do. I have known worse shields. Good foothold, but an uncertain light. Now, go!"

Caleb needed no encouragement. For one second they stood facing each other, very types of the Eastern and Western world; the Roman--sturdy, honest-eyed, watchful and fearless, his head thrown back, his feet apart, his shield arm forward, his sword hand pressed to his side from

which the steel projected. Over against him was the Jew, crouched like a tiger about to spring, his eyes half closed as though to concentrate the light, his face working with rage, and every muscle quivering till his whole flesh seemed to move upon his bones, like to that of a snake. Suddenly, uttering a low cry, he sprang, and with that savage onslaught the fight began and ended.

Marcus was ready; moreover, he knew what he would do. As the man came, stepping swiftly to one side, he caught the thrust of Caleb's sword in the folded cloak, and since he did not wish to kill him, struck at his hand. The blow fell upon Caleb's first finger and severed it, cutting the others also, so that it dropped to the ground with the sword that they had held. Marcus put his foot upon the blade, and wheeled round.

"Young man," he said sternly, "you have learnt your lesson and will bear the mark of it till your death day. Now begone."

The wretched Caleb ground his teeth. "It was to the death!" he said, "it was to the death! You have conquered, kill me," and with his bloody hand he tore open his robe to make a path for the sword.

"Leave such talk to play-actors," answered Marcus. "Begone, and be sure of this--that if ever you try to bring treachery on me, or trouble on the lady Miriam, I will kill you sure enough."

Then with a sound that was half curse and half sob, Caleb turned and

slunk away. With a shrug of the shoulder Marcus also turned to go, when he felt a shadow fall upon him, and swung round, to find Nehushta at his side.

"And pray where did you come from, my Libyan friend?" he asked.

"Out of that pomegranate fence, my Roman lord, whence I have seen and heard all that passed."

"Indeed. Then I hope that you give me credit for good sword-play and good temper."

"The sword-play was well enough, though nothing to boast of with such a madman for a foe. As for the temper, it was that of a fool."

"Such," soliloquised Marcus, "is the reward of virtue. But I am curious. Why?"

"Because, my lord Marcus, this Caleb will grow into the most dangerous man in Judæa, and to none more dangerous than to my lady Miriam and yourself. You should have killed him while you had the chance, before his turn comes to kill you."

"Perhaps," answered Marcus with a yawn; "but, friend Nehushta, I have been associating with a Christian and have caught something of her doctrines. That seems a fine sword. You had better keep it. Good-night."