

CHAPTER IX

THE JUSTICE OF FLORUS

On the following morning, when the roll of the neophytes of the Essenes was called, Caleb did not appear. Nor did he answer to his name on the next day, or indeed ever again. None knew what had become of him until a while after a letter was received addressed to the Curators of the Court, in which he announced that, finding he had no vocation for an Essenic career, he had taken refuge with friends of his late father, in some place not stated. There, so far as the Essenes were concerned, the matter ended. Indeed, as the peasant who was concealed in the gully when the Jew was murdered had talked of what he had witnessed, even the most simple-minded of the Essenes could suggest a reason for this sudden departure. Nor did they altogether regret it, inasmuch as in many ways Caleb had proved himself but an unsatisfactory disciple, and already they were discussing the expediency of rejecting him from the fellowship of their peaceful order. Had they known that when he vanished he left behind him a drawn sword and one of his forefingers, their opinion on this point might have been strengthened. But this they did not know, although Miriam knew it through Nehushta.

A week went by, during which time Miriam and Marcus did not meet, as no further sittings were arranged for the completion of the bust. In fact, they were not needful, since she could work from the clay model, which she did, till, labouring at it continually, the marble was done and even

polished. One morning as the artist was putting the last touches to her labours, the door of the workshop was darkened and she looked up to see Marcus, who, except for his helmet, was clad in full mail as though about to start upon a journey. As it chanced, Miriam was alone in the place, Nehushta having gone to attend to household affairs. Thus for the first time they met with no other eyes to watch them.

At the sight of him she coloured, letting the cloth fall from her hand which remained about the neck of the marble.

"I ask your pardon, Lady Miriam," said Marcus, bowing gravely, "for breaking in thus upon your privacy; but time presses with me so that I lacked any to give notice to your guardians of my visit."

"Are you leaving us?" she faltered.

"Yes, I am leaving you."

Miriam turned aside and picked up the cloth, then answered, "Well, the work is done, or will be in a few minutes; so if you think it worth the trouble, take it."

"That is my intention. The price I will settle with your uncles."

She nodded. "Yes, yes, but if you will permit me, I should like to pack it myself, so that it comes to no harm upon the journey. Also with your

leave I will retain the model, which by right belongs to you. I am not pleased with this marble; I wish to make another."

"The marble is perfect; but keep the model if you will. I am very glad that you should keep it."

She glanced at him, a question in her eyes, then looked away.

"When do you go?" she asked.

"Three hours after noon. My task is finished, my report--which is to the effect that the Essenes are a most worthy and harmless people who deserve to be encouraged, not molested--is written. Also I am called hence in haste by a messenger who reached me from Jerusalem an hour ago. Would you like to know why?"

"If it pleases you to tell me, yes."

"I think that I told you of my uncle Caius, who was pro-consul under the late emperor for the richest province of Spain, and--made use of his opportunities."

"Yes."

"Well, the old man has been smitten with a mortal disease. For aught I know he may be already dead, although the physicians seemed to think

he would live for another ten months, or perhaps a year. Being in this case, suddenly he has grown fond of his relations, or rather relation, for I am the only one, and expressed a desire to see me, to whom for many years he has never given a single penny. He has even announced his intention--by letter--of making me his heir 'should he find me worthy,' which, to succeed Caius, whatever my faults, indeed I am not, since of all men, as I have told him in past days, I hold him the worst. Still, he has forwarded a sum of money to enable me to journey to him in haste, and with it a letter from the Cæsar, Nero, to the procurator Albinus, commanding him to give me instant leave to go. Therefore, lady, it seems wise that I should go."

"Yes," answered Miriam. "I know little of such things, but I think that it is wise. Within two hours the bust shall be finished and packed," and she stretched out her hand in farewell.

Marcus took the hand and held it. "I am loth to part with you thus," he said suddenly.

"There is only one fashion of parting," answered Miriam, striving to withdraw her hand.

"Nay, there are many; and I hate them all--from you."

"Sir," she asked with gentle indignation, "is it worth your while to play off these pretty phrases upon me? We have met for an hour; we

separate--for a lifetime."

"I do not see the need of that. Oh, the truth may as well out. I wish it least of all things."

"Yet it is so. Come, let my hand go; the marble must be finished and packed."

The face of Marcus became troubled, as though he were reasoning with himself, as though he wished to take her at her word and go, yet could not.

"Is it ended?" asked Miriam presently, considering him with her quiet eyes.

"I think not; I think it is but begun. Miriam, I love you."

"Marcus," she answered steadily, "I do not think I should be asked to listen to such words."

"Why not? They have always been thought honest between man and woman."

"Perhaps, when they are meant honestly, which in this case can scarcely be."

He grew hot and red. "What do you mean? Do you suppose----"

"I suppose nothing, Captain Marcus."

"Do you suppose," he repeated, "that I would offer you less than the place of wife?"

"Assuredly not," she replied, "since to do so would be to insult you. But neither do I suppose that you really meant to offer me that place."

"Yet that was in my mind, Miriam."

Her eyes grew soft, but she answered:

"Then, Marcus, I pray you, put it out of your mind, since between us rolls a great sea."

"Is it named Caleb?" he asked bitterly.

She smiled and shook her head. "You know well that it has no such name."

"Tell me of this sea."

"It is easy. You are a Roman worshipping the Roman gods; I am a Christian worshipping the God of the Christians. Therefore we are forever separate."

"Why? I do not understand. If we were married you might come to think like me, or I might come to think like you. It is a matter of the spirit and the future, not of the body and the present. Every day Christians wed those who are not Christians; sometimes, even, they convert them."

"Yes, I know; but in my case this may not be--even if I wished that it should be."

"Why not?"

"Because both by the command of my murdered father and of her own desire my mother laid it on me with her dying breath that I should take to husband no man who was not of our faith."

"And do you hold yourself to be bound by this command?"

"I do, without doubt and to the end."

"However much you might chance to love a man who is not a Christian?"

"However much I might chance to love such a man."

Marcus let fall her hand. "I think I had best go," he said.

"Yes."

Then came a pause while he seemed to be struggling with himself.

"Miriam, I cannot go."

"Marcus, you must go."

"Miriam, do you love me?"

"Marcus, may Christ forgive me, I do."

"Miriam, how much?"

"Marcus, as much as a woman may love a man."

"And yet," he broke out bitterly, "you bid me begone because I am not a Christian."

"Because my faith is more than my love. I must offer my love upon the altar of my faith--or, at the least," she added hurriedly, "I am bound by a rope that cannot be cut or broken. To break it would bring down upon your head and mine the curse of Heaven and of my parents, who are its inhabitants."

"And if I became of your faith?"

Her whole face lit up, then suddenly its light died.

"It is too much to hope. This is not a question of casting incense on an altar; it is a matter of a changed spirit and a new life. Oh! have done. Why do you play with me?"

"A changed spirit and a new life. At the best that would take time."

"Yes, time and thought."

"And would you wait that time? Such beauty and such sweetness as are yours will not lack for suitors."

"I shall wait. I have told you that I love you; no other man will be anything to me. I shall wed no other man."

"You give all and take nothing; it is not just."

"It is as God has willed. If it pleases God to touch your heart and to preserve us both alive, then in days to come our lives may be one life. Otherwise they must run apart till perchance we meet--in the eternal morning."

"Oh, Miriam, I cannot leave you thus! Teach me as you will."

"Nay, go, Marcus, and teach yourself. Am I a bait to win your soul? The path is not so easy, it is very difficult. Fare you well!"

"May I write to you from Rome?" he asked.

"Yes, why not, if by that time you should care to write, who then will have recovered from this folly of the desert and an idle moon?"

"I shall write and I shall return, and we will talk of these matters; so, most sweet, farewell."

"Farewell, Marcus, and the love of God go with you."

"What of your love?"

"My love is with you ever who have won my heart."

"Then, Miriam, at least I have not lived in vain. Remember this always, that much as I may worship you, I honour you still more," and kneeling before her he kissed first her hand, and next the hem of her robe. Then he turned and went.

That night, watching from the roof of her house by the light of the full moon, Miriam saw Marcus ride away at the head of his band of soldiers. On the crest of a little ridge of ground outside the village he halted, leaving them to go on, and turning his horse's head looked backward.

Thus he stood awhile, the silver rays of the moon shining on his bright armour and making him a point of light set between two vales of shadow. Miriam could guess whither his eyes were turned and what was in his heart. It seemed to her, even, that she could feel his loving thought play upon her and that with the ear of his spirit he could catch the answer of her own. Then suddenly he turned and was lost in the gloom of the night.

Now that he was gone, quite gone, Miriam's courage seemed to leave her, and leaning her head upon the parapet she wept tears that were soft but very bitter. Suddenly a hand was laid upon her shoulder and a voice, that of old Nehushta, spoke in her ear.

"Mourn not," it said, "since him whom you lose in the night you may find again in the daytime."

"In no day that dawns from an earthly sun, I fear me, Nou. Oh, Nou! he has gone, and taken my heart with him, leaving in its place a throbbing pain which is more than I can bear."

"He will come back; I tell you that he will come back," she answered, almost fiercely; "for your life and his are intertwined--yes, to the end--a single cord bearing a double destiny. I know it; ask me not how; but be comforted, for it is truth. Moreover, though it be sharp, your pain is not more than you can bear, else it would never be laid upon you."

"But, Nou, if he does come back, what will it help me, who am built in by this strict command of them that begat me, to break through which would be to sin against and earn the curse of God and man?"

"I do not know; I only know this, that in that wall, as in others, a door will be found. Trouble not for the future, but leave it in the hand of Him Who shapes all futures. Sufficient to the day is the evil thereof. So He said. Accept the saying and be grateful. It is something to have gained the love of such a one as this Roman, for, unless the wisdom which I have gained through many years is at fault, he is true and honest; and that man must be good at heart who can be reared in Rome and in the worship of its gods and yet remain honest. Remember these things, and I say be grateful, since there are many who go through their lives knowing no such joy, even for an hour."

"I will try, Nou," said Miriam humbly, still staring at the ridge whence Marcus had vanished.

"You will try, and you will succeed. Now there is another matter of which I must speak to you. When the Essenes received us it was solemnly decreed that if you lived to reach the full age of eighteen years you must depart from among them. That hour struck for you nearly a year ago, and, although you heard nothing of it, this decree was debated by the Court. Now such decrees may not be broken, but it was argued that the words 'full age of eighteen years,' meant and were intended to mean

until you reached your nineteenth birthday; that is--in a month from now."

"Then must we go, Nou?" asked Miriam in dismay, for she knew no other world but this village in the desert, and no other friends than these venerable men whom she called her uncles.

"It seems so, especially as it is now guessed that Caleb fought the Captain Marcus upon your account. Oh! that tale is talked of--for one thing, the young wild-cat left a claw behind him which the gardener found."

"I trust then it is known also that the fault was none of mine. But, Nou, whither shall we go who have neither friends, nor home, nor money?"

"I know not; but doubtless in this wall also there is a door. If the worst comes to the worst, a Christian has many brothers; moreover, with your skill in the arts you need never lack for a living in any great city in the world."

"It is true," said Miriam, brightening; "that is, if I may believe Marcus and my old master."

"Also," continued Nehushta, "I have still almost all the gold that the Phœnician Amram gave us when I fled with your mother, and added to it that which I took from the strong box of the captain of the galley on

the night when you were born. So have no fear, we shall not want; nor indeed would the Essenes suffer such a thing. Now, child, you are weary; go to rest and dream that you have your lover back again."

It was with a heavy heart that Caleb, defeated and shamed, shook the dust of the village of the Essenes off his feet. At dawn on the morning after the night that he had fought the duel with Marcus, he also might have been seen, a staff in his bandaged hand and a bag of provisions over his shoulder, standing upon the little ridge and gazing towards the house which sheltered Miriam. In love and war things had gone ill with him, so ill that at the thought of his discomfiture he ground his teeth. Miriam cared nothing for him; Marcus had defeated him at the first encounter and given him his life; while, worst of all, these two from whom he had endured so much loved each other. Few, perhaps, have suffered more sharply than he suffered in that hour; for what agonies are there like those of disappointed love and the shame of defeat when endured in youth? With time most men grow accustomed to disaster and rebuff. The colt that seems to break its heart at the cut of a whip, will hobble at last to the knacker unmoved by a shower of blows.

While Caleb looked, the red rim of the sun rose above the horizon, flooding the world with light and life. Now birds began to chirp, and beasts to move; now the shadows fled away. Caleb's impressionable nature answered to this change. Hope stirred in his breast, even the pain of

his maimed hand was forgotten.

"I will win yet," he shouted to the silent sky; "my troubles are done with. I will shine like the sun; I will rule like the sun, and my enemies shall wither beneath my power. It is a good omen. Now I am glad that the Roman spared my life, that in a day to come I may take his--and Miriam."

Then he turned and trudged onward through the glorious sunlight, watching his own shadow that stretched away before him.

"It goes far," he said again; "this also is a very good omen."

Caleb thought much on his way to Jerusalem; moreover he talked with all whom he met, even with bandits and footpads whom his poverty could not tempt, for he desired to learn how matters stood in the land. Arrived in Jerusalem he sought out the home of that lady who had been his mother's friend and who gave him over, a helpless orphan, to the care of the Essenes. He found that she was dead, but her son lived, a man of kind heart and given to hospitality, who had heard his story and sheltered him for his mother's sake. When his hand was healed and he procured some good clothes and a little money from his friend, without saying anything of his purpose, Caleb attended the court of Gessius Florus, the Roman procurator, at his palace, seeking an opportunity to speak with him.

Thrice did he wait thus for hours at a time, on each occasion to be

driven away at last by the guards. On his fourth visit he was more fortunate, for Florus, who had noted him before, asked why he stood there so patiently. An officer replied that the man had a petition to make.

"Let me hear it then," said the governor. "I sit in this place to administer justice by the grace and in the name of Cæsar."

Accordingly, Caleb was summoned and found himself in the presence of a small, dark-eyed, beetle-browed Roman with cropped hair, who looked what he was--one of the most evil rulers that ever held power in Judæa.

"What do you seek, Jew?" he asked in a harsh voice.

"What I am assured I shall find at your hands, O most noble Florus, justice against the Jews--pure justice"; words at which the courtiers and guards tittered, and even Florus smiled.

"It is to be had at a price," he replied.

"I am prepared to pay the price."

"Then set out your case."

So Caleb set it out. He told how many years before his father had been accidentally slain in a tumult, and how he, the son, being but an

infant, certain Jews of the Zealots had seized and divided his estate on the ground that his father was a partisan of the Romans, leaving him, the son, to be brought up by charity--which estate, consisting of tracts of rich lands and certain house property in Jerusalem and Tyre, was still in their possession or in that of their descendants.

The black eyes of Florus glistened as he heard.

"Their names," he said, snatching at his tablets. But as yet Caleb was not minded to give the names. First, he intimated that he desired to arrive at a formal agreement as to what proportion of the property, if recovered, would be handed over to him, the heir. Then followed much haggling; but in the end it was agreed that as he had been robbed because his father was supposed to favour the Romans, the lands and a large dwelling with warehouse attached, at Tyre, together with one-half the back rents, if recoverable, should be given to the plaintiff.

The governor, or as he put it, Cæsar, for his share was to retain the property in Jerusalem and the other half of the rents. In this arrangement Caleb proved himself, as usual, prescient. Houses, as he explained afterwards, could be burned or pulled down, but beyond the crops on it, land no man could injure. Then, after the agreement had been duly signed and witnessed, he gave the names, bringing forward good testimony to prove all that he had said.

Within a week those Jews who had committed the theft, or their descendants, were in prison, whence they did not emerge till they had

been stripped, not only of the stolen property, but of everything else that they possessed. Either because he was pleased at so great and unexpected a harvest, or perhaps for the reason that he saw in Caleb an able fellow who might be useful in the future, Florus fulfilled his bargain with him to the letter.

Thus it came about that by a strange turn of the wheel of chance, within a month of his flight from the colony of the Essenes, Caleb, the outcast orphan, with his neck in danger of the sword, became a man of influence, having great possessions. His sun had risen indeed.