

CHAPTER X

BENONI

A while later Caleb, no longer a solitary wanderer with only his feet to carry him, his staff to protect him, and a wallet to supply him with food, but a young and gallant gentleman, well-armed, clad in furs and a purple cloak, accompanied by servants and riding a splendid horse, once more passed the walls of Jerusalem. On the rising ground beyond the Damascus gate he halted and looked back at the glorious city with her crowded streets, her mighty towers, her luxurious palaces, and her world-famed temple that dominated all, which from here seemed as a mountain covered with snow and crowned with glittering gold.

"I will rule there when the Romans have been driven out," he said to himself, for already Caleb had grown very ambitious. Indeed, the wealth and the place that had come to him so suddenly, with which many men would have been satisfied, did but serve to increase his appetite for power, fame, and all good things. To him this money was but a stepping-stone to greater fortunes.

Caleb was journeying to Tyre to take possession of his house there, which the Roman commander of the district had been bidden to hand over to him. Also he had another object. At Tyre dwelt the old Jew, Benoni, who was Miriam's grandfather, as he had discovered years before; for when they were still children together she had told him all her story.

This Benoni, for reasons of his own, he desired to see.

On a certain afternoon in one of the palaces of Tyre a man might have been sitting in a long portico, or verandah as we should call it, which overlooked the Mediterranean, whose blue waters lapped the straight-scarped rock below--for this house was in the island city, not in that of the mainland where most of the rich Syrians dwelt.

The man was old and very handsome. His dark eyes were quick and full of fire, his nose was hooked like the beak of a bird of prey, his hair and beard were long and snowy white. His robes also were rich and splendid, and over them, since at this season of the year even at Tyre it was cold, he wore a cloak of costly northern furs. The house was worthy of its owner. Built throughout of the purest marble, the rooms were roofed and panelled with sweet-smelling cedar of Lebanon, whence hung many silver lamps, and decorated by statuary and frescoes. On the marble floors were spread rugs, beautifully wrought in colours, while here and there stood couches, tables and stools, fashioned for the most part of ebony from Libya, inlaid with ivory and pearl.

Benoni, the owner of all this wealth, having finished his business for that day--the taking count of a shipload of merchandise which had reached him from Egypt--had eaten his midday meal and now sought his couch under the portico to rest a while in the sun. Reclining on the

cushions, soon he was asleep; but it would seem that his dreams were unhappy--at the least he turned from side to side muttering and moving his hands. At last he sat up with a start.

"Oh, Rachel, Rachel!" he moaned, "why will you haunt my sleep? Oh! my child, my child, have I not suffered enough? Must you bring my sin back to me in this fashion? May I not shut my eyes even here in the sunlight and be at peace a while? What have you to tell me that you come thus often to stand here so strengthless and so still? Nay, it is not you; it is my sin that wears your shape!" and Benoni hid his face in his hands, rocking himself to and fro and moaning aloud.

Presently he sprang up. "It was no sin," he said, "it was a righteous act. I offered her to the outraged majesty of Jehovah, as Abraham, our father, would have offered Isaac, but the curse of that false prophet is upon me and mine. That was the fault of Demas, the half-bred hound who crept into my kennel, and whom, because she loved him, I gave to her as husband. Thus did he repay me, the traitor, and I--I repaid him. Ay! But the sword fell upon two necks. He should have suffered, and he alone. Oh, Rachel, my lost daughter Rachel, forgive me, you whose bones lie there beneath the sea, forgive me! I cannot bear those eyes of yours. I am old, Rachel, I am old."

Thus Benoni muttered to himself, as he walked swiftly to and fro; then, worn out with his burst of solitary, dream-bred passion, he sank back upon the couch.

As he sat thus, an Arab doorkeeper, gorgeously apparelled and armed with a great sword, appeared in the portico, and after looking carefully to see that his master was not asleep, made a low salaam.

"What is it?" asked Benoni shortly.

"Master, a young lord named Caleb wishes speech with you."

"Caleb? I know not the name," replied Benoni. "Stay, it must be the son of Hilliel, whom the Roman governor"--and turning, he spat upon the ground--"has brought to his own again. I heard that he had come to take possession of the great house on the quay. Bring him hither."

The Arab saluted and went. Presently he returned and ushered in Caleb, now a noble-looking young man clad in fine raiment. Benoni bowed to him and prayed him to be seated. Caleb bowed in return, touching his forehead in Eastern fashion with his hand, from which, as his host noticed, the forefinger was missing.

"I am your servant, sir," said Benoni with grave courtesy.

"Master, I am your slave," answered Caleb. "I have been told that you knew my father; therefore, on this, my first visit to Tyre, I come to make my respects to you. I am the son of Hilliel, who perished many years ago in Jerusalem. You may have heard his story and mine."

"Yes," answered Benoni scanning his visitor, "I knew Hilliel--a clever man, but one who fell into a trap at last, and I see that you are his son. Your face proves it; indeed, it might be Hilliel who stands before me."

"I am proud that you should say so," answered Caleb, though already he guessed that between Benoni and his father no love had been lost. "You know," he added, "that certain of our people seized my inheritance, which now has been restored to me--in part."

"By Gessius Florus the procurator, I think, who on this account, has cast many Jews--some of them innocent--into prison."

"Indeed! Is that so? Well, it was concerning this Florus that I came chiefly to ask your advice. The Roman has kept a full half of my property," and Caleb sighed and looked indignant.

"You are indeed fortunate that he has not kept it all."

"I have been brought up in the desert far from cities," pleaded Caleb. "Is there no law by which I may have justice of this man? Cannot you help me who are great among our people?"

"None," answered Benoni. "Roman citizens have rights, Jews what they can get. You can appeal to Cæsar if you wish, as the jackal appealed to the

lion. But if you are wise you will be content with half the carcass.
Also I am not great; I am but an old merchant without authority."

Caleb looked downfallen. "It seems that the days are hard for us Jews,"
he said. "Well, I will be content and strive to forgive my enemies."

"Better be content and strive to smite your enemies," answered Benoni.
"You who were poor are rich; for this much thank God."

"Night and morning I do thank Him," replied Caleb earnestly and with
truth.

Then there was silence for a while.

"Is it your intention to reside in Hezron's--I mean in your house--in
Tyre?" asked Benoni, breaking it.

"For a time, perhaps, until I find a tenant. I am not accustomed to
towns, and at present they seem to stifle me."

"Where were you brought up, sir?"

"Among the Essenes by Jericho. But I am not an Essene--their creed
disgusted me; I belong to that of my fathers."

"There are worse men," replied Benoni. "A brother of my late wife is an

Essene, a kindly natured fool named Ithiel; you may have known him."

"Oh, yes, I know him. He is one of their curators and the guardian of the lady Miriam, his great-niece."

The old man started violently, then, recovering himself, said:

"Forgive me, but Miriam was the name of my lost wife--one which it disturbs me to hear. But how can this girl be Ithiel's grand-niece? He had no relations except his sister."

"I do not know," answered Caleb carelessly. "The story is that the lady Miriam, whom they call the Queen of the Essenes, was brought to them nineteen or twenty years ago by a Libyan woman named Nehushta,"--here again Benoni started--"who said that the child's mother, Ithiel's niece, had been shipwrecked and died after giving birth to the infant, commanding that it should be brought to him to be reared. The Essenes consenting, he accepted the charge, and there she is still."

"Then is this lady Miriam an Essene?" asked Benoni in a thick, slow voice.

"No; she is of the sect of the Christians, in which faith she has been brought up as her mother desired."

The old man rose from his couch and walked up and down the portico.

"Tell me of the lady Miriam, sir," he said presently, "for the tale interests me. What is she like?"

"She is, as I believe, the most beautiful maiden in the whole world, though small and slight; also she is the most sweet and learned."

"That is high praise, sir," said Benoni.

"Yes, master, and perhaps I exaggerate her charms, as is but natural."

"Why is it natural?"

"Because we were brought up together, and I hope that one day she will be my wife."

"Are you then affianced to this maid?"

"No, not affianced--as yet," replied Caleb, with a little smile; "but I will not trouble you with a history of my love affairs. I have already trespassed too long upon your kindness. It is something to ask of you who may not desire my acquaintance, but if you will do me the honour to sup with me to-morrow night, your servant will be grateful."

"I thank you, young sir. I will come, I will come, for in truth," he added hastily, "I am anxious to hear news of all that passes at

Jerusalem, which, I understand, you left but a few days since, and I perceive that you are one whose eyes and ears are always open."

"I try both to see and to hear," said Caleb modestly. "But I am very inexperienced, and am not sure which cause a man who hopes to become both wise and good, ought to espouse in these troubled days. I need guidance such as you could give me if you wished. For this while, farewell."

Benoni watched his visitor depart, then once more began to wander up and down the portico.

"I do not trust that young man," he thought, "of whose doings I have heard something; but he is rich and able, and may be of service to our cause. This Miriam of whom he speaks, who can she be? unless, indeed, Rachel bore a daughter before she died. Why not? She would not have left it to my care who desired that it should be reared in her own accursed faith and looked upon me as the murderer of her husband and herself. If so, I who thought myself childless, yet have issue upon the earth--at least there is one in whom my blood runs. Beautiful, gifted--but a Christian! The sin of the parents has descended on the child--yes, the curse is on her also. I must seek her out. I must know the truth. Man, what is it now? Can you not see that I would be alone?"

"Master, your pardon," said the Arab servant, bowing, "but the Roman captain, Marcus, desires speech with you."

"Marcus? Oh, I remember the officer who was stationed here. I am not well, I cannot see him. Bid him come to-morrow."

"Master, he bid me say that he sails for Rome to-night."

"Well, well, admit him," answered Benoni. "Perchance he comes to pay his debt," he added.

The Arab departed, and presently the Roman was ushered in.

"Greetings, Benoni," he said, with his pleasant smile. "Here am I, yet alive, for all your fears; so you see your money is still safe."

"I am glad to hear it, my lord Marcus," answered the Jew, bowing low.

"But if it will please you to produce it, with the interest, I think," he added drily, "it may be even safer in my strongbox."

Marcus laughed pleasantly.

"Produce it?" he said. "What jest is this? Why, I come to borrow more to defray my costs to Rome."

Benoni's mouth shut like a trap.

"Nay," said Marcus, holding up his hand, "don't begin. I know it all."

The times are full of trouble and danger. Such little ready cash as you have at command is out at interest in safer countries--Egypt, Rome, and Italy; your correspondent at Alexandria has failed to make you the expected remittance; and you have reason to believe that every ship in which you are concerned is now at the bottom of the ocean. So would you be so good as to lend me half a talent of silver--a thousand shekels in cash and the rest in bills of exchange on your agents at Brundisium?"

"No," said Benoni, sternly.

"Yes," replied Marcus, with conviction. "Look you, friend Benoni, the security is excellent. If I don't get drowned, or have my throat slit between here and Italy, I am going to be one of the richest men in Rome; so this is your last chance of lending me a trifle. You don't believe it? Then read this letter from Caius, my uncle, and this rescript signed by Nero the Cæsar."

Benoni perused the documents and returned them.

"I offer you my congratulations," he said. "If God permits it and you will walk steadily, your future should be brilliant, since you are of a pleasant countenance, and when you choose to use it, behind that countenance lies a brain. But here I see no security for my money, since even if all things go right, Italy is a long way off."

"Man, do you think that I should cheat you?" asked Marcus hotly.

"No, no, but accidents might happen."

"Well, I will make it worth your while to risk them. For the half-talent write a talent charged upon my estate, whether I live or die. And be swift, I pray you, for I have matters to speak of, of more importance than this miserable money. Whilst I was commissioner among the Essenes on the banks of Jordan----"

"The Essenes! What of the Essenes?" broke in Benoni.

Marcus considered him with his grey eyes, then answered:

"Let us settle this little matter of business and I will tell you."

"Good. It is settled; you shall have the acknowledgment to sign and the consideration in cash and bills before you leave my house. Now what of these Essenes?"

"Only this," said Marcus; "they are a strange people who read the future, I know not how. One of them with whom I became friendly, foretold that mighty troubles were about to fall upon this land of yours--slaughter and pestilence, and famine, such as the world has not seen."

"That is an old prophecy of those accursed Nazarenes," broke in Benoni.

"Call them not accursed, friend," said Marcus, in an odd voice, "for you should do so least of all men. Nay, hear me out. It may be a prophecy of the Nazarenes, but it is also a prophecy of the Essenes, and I believe it, who watch the signs of the times. Now the elder told me this, that there will be a great uprising of the Jews against the strength of Cæsar, and that most of those who join in it shall perish. He even gave names, and among them was yours, friend Benoni. Therefore, because you have lent me money, although I am a Roman, I have come to Tyre to warn you to keep clear of rebellions and other tumults."

The old man listened quietly, but not as one who disbelieves.

"All this may be so," he said, "but if my name is written in that book of the dead, the angel of Jehovah has chosen me, and I cannot escape his sword. Moreover, I am aged, and"--here his eyes flashed--"it is a good end to die fighting one's country's enemies."

"How you Jews do love us to be sure!" said Marcus with a little laugh.

"The nation that sends a Gessius Florus, or even an Albinus, to rule its alien subjects must needs be loved," replied Benoni with bitter sarcasm.

"But let us be done with politics lest we grow angry. It is strange, but a visitor has just left me who was brought up among these Essenes."

"Indeed," said Marcus, staring vacantly into the sea.

"He told me that a young and beautiful woman resides with them who is named the Queen of the Essenes. Did you chance to see her, my lord?"

Instantly Marcus became very wide awake. "Oh, yes, I saw her; and what else did he tell you?"

"He told me that this lady was both beautiful and learned."

"That is true," said Marcus with enthusiasm. "To my mind, although she is small, I never saw one lovelier, nor do I know a sculptor who is her equal. If you will come with me to the ship I will open the case and show you the bust she made of me. But tell me, did this visitor of yours lack the forefinger on one hand--his right?"

"He did."

"Then I suppose that he is named Caleb."

"Yes; but how do you know that?"

"Because I cut off his forefinger," said Marcus, "in a fair fight, and," he added savagely, "he is a young rascal, as murderous as he is able, whose life I did ill to spare."

"Ah," said Benoni, "it seems that I have still some discernment, for

just so I judged him. Well, what more do you know of the lady?"

"Something, since in a way I am affianced to her."

"Indeed! Well, this is strange, for so, as he told me, is Caleb."

"He told you that?" said Marcus springing from his chair. "Then he lies, and would that I had time to prove it on his body! She rejected him; I have it from Nehushta; also I know it in other ways."

"Then she did accept you, my lord Marcus?"

"Not quite," he replied sadly; "but that was only because I am not a Christian. She loves me all the same," he added, recovering. "Upon that point there can be no doubt."

"Caleb seemed to doubt it," suggested Benoni.

"Caleb is a liar," repeated Marcus with emphasis, "and one of whom you will do well to beware."

"Why should I beware of him?"

Marcus paused a moment, then answered boldly:

"Because the lady Miriam is your granddaughter and the heiress of your

wealth. I say it, since if I did not Caleb would; probably he has done so already."

For a moment Benoni hid his face in his hands. Then he lifted it and said:

"I thought as much, and now I am sure. But, my lord Marcus, if my blood is hers my wealth is my own."

"Just so. Keep it if you will, or leave it where you will. It is Miriam I seek, and not your money."

"I think that Caleb seeks both Miriam and my money--like a prudent man. Why should he not have them? He is a Jew of good blood; he will, I think, rise high."

"And I am a Roman of better blood who will rise higher."

"Yes, a Roman, and I, the grandfather, am a Jew who do not love you Romans."

"And Miriam is neither Jew nor Roman, but a Christian, brought up not by you, but by the Essenes; and she loves me, although she will not marry me because I am not a Christian."

Benoni shrugged his shoulders as he answered:

"All of this is a problem which I must ponder on and solve."

Marcus sprang from his seat and stood before the old man with menace in his air.

"Look you, Benoni," he said, "this is a problem not to be solved by you or by Caleb, but by Miriam herself, and none other. Do you understand?"

"I understand that you threaten me."

"Ay, I do. Miriam is of full age; her sojourn with the Essenes must come to an end. Doubtless you will take her to dwell with you. Well, beware how you deal by her. If she wishes to marry Caleb of her own free will, let her do so. But if you force her to it, or suffer him to force her, then by your God, and by my gods, and by her God, I tell you that I will come back and take such a vengeance upon him and upon you, and upon all your people, that it shall be a story for generations. Do you believe me?"

Benoni looked up at the man who stood before him in his youth and beauty, his eyes on fire and his form quivering with rage, and looking, shrank back a little. He did not know that this light-hearted Roman had such strength and purpose at command. Now he understood for the first time that he was a true son of the terrible race of conquerors, who, if he were crossed, could be as merciless as the worst of them, one whose

very honesty and openness made him to be feared the more.

"I understand that you believe what you say. Whether when you are back at Rome, where there are women as fair as the Queen of the Essenes, you will continue to believe it, is another matter."

"Yes, a matter for me to settle."

"Quite so--for you to settle. Have you anything to add to the commands you are pleased to lay upon your humble creditor, Benoni the merchant?"

"Yes, two things. First, that when I leave this house you will no longer be my creditor. I have brought money to pay you off in full, principal and interest. My talk of borrowing was but a play and excuse to learn what you knew of Miriam. Nay, do not start, though it may seem strange to you that I also can be subtle. Foolish man, did you think that I with my prospects should be left to lack for a miserable half-talent? Why, there at Jerusalem I could have borrowed ten, or twenty, if I would promise my patronage by way of interest. My servants wait with the gold without. Call them in presently and pay yourself, principal and interest, and something for a bonus. Now for the second, Miriam is a Christian. Beware how you tamper with her faith. It is not mine, but I say--beware how you tamper with it. You gave her father and her mother, your own daughter, to be slaughtered by gladiators and to be torn by lions because, forsooth, they did not think as you do. Lift one finger against her and I will hale you into the amphitheatre at Rome, there

yourself to be slaughtered by gladiators, or to be torn by lions.

Although I am absent I shall know all that you do, for I have friends who are good and spies that are better. Moreover, I return here shortly. Now I ask you, will you give me your solemn word, swearing it by that God whom you worship, first, that you will not attempt to force your granddaughter Miriam into marriage with Caleb the Jew; and secondly, that you will shelter her, treating her with all honour, and suffering her to follow her own faith in freedom?"

Benoni sprang from his couch.

"No, Roman, I will not. Who are you who dare to dictate to me in my own house as to how I shall deal with my own grandchild? Pay what you owe and get you gone, and darken my doors no more. I have done with you."

"Ah!" said Marcus. "Well, perhaps it is time that you should travel. Those who travel and see strange countries and peoples, grow liberal-minded, which you are not. Be pleased to read this paper," and he laid a writing before him.

Benoni took it and read. It was worded thus:

"To Marcus, the son of Emilius, the captain, in the name of Cæsar, greetings. Hereby we command you, should you in your discretion think fit, to seize the person of Benoni, the Jewish merchant, a dweller in Tyre, and to convey him as a prisoner to Rome, there to answer charges

which have been laid against him, with the particulars of which you are acquainted, which said particulars you will find awaiting you in Rome, of having conspired with certain other Jews, to overthrow the authority of Cæsar in this his province of Judæa.

"(Signed) Gessius Florus, Procurator."

Benoni having read sank back upon his couch, gasping, his white face livid with surprise and fear. Then a thought seemed to strike him. Seizing the paper he tore it into fragments.

"Now, Roman," he said, "where is your warrant?"

"In my pocket," answered Marcus; "that which I showed you was but a copy. Nay, do not ring, do not touch that bell. See this," and he drew a silver whistle from his robe. "Outside your gate stand fifty soldiers. Shall I sound it?"

"Not so," answered Benoni. "I will swear the oath, though indeed it is needless. Why should you suppose that I could wish to force this maid into any marriage, or to work her evil on account of matters of her faith?"

"Because you are a Jew and a bigot. You gave her father and her mother to a cruel death, why should you spare her? Also you hate me and all my people; why, then, should you not favour my rival, although he is a

murderer whose life I have twice spared at the prayer of Miriam? Swear now."

So Benoni lifted his hand and swore a solemn oath that he would not force his granddaughter, Miriam, to marry Caleb, or any other man; and that he would not betray the secret of her faith, or persecute her because of it.

"It is not enough," said Marcus. "Write it down and sign."

So Benoni went to the table and wrote out his undertaking and signed it, Marcus signing also as a witness.

"Now, Benoni," he said, as he took the paper, "listen to me. That warrant leaves your taking to my discretion, after I have made search into the facts. I have made such search and it seems that I am not satisfied. But remember that the warrant is still alive and can be executed at any moment. Remember also that you are watched and if you lift a finger against the girl, it will be put in force. For the rest--if you desire that the prophecy of the Essene should not come true, it is my advice that you cease from making plots against the majesty of Cæsar. Now bid your servant summon him who waits in the antechamber, that he may discharge my debt. And so farewell. When and where we shall meet again I do not know, but be sure that we shall meet." Then Marcus left the portico.

Benoni watched him go, and as he watched, an evil look gathered on his face.

"Threatened. Trodden to the dirt. Outwitted by that Roman boy," he murmured. "Is there any cup of shame left for me to drink? Who is the traitor and how much does he know? Something, but not all, else my arrest could scarcely have been left to the fancy of this patrician, favourite though he be. Yes, my lord Marcus, I too am sure that we shall meet again, but the fashion of that meeting may be little to your taste. You have had your hour, mine is to come. For the rest, I must keep my oath, since to break it would be too dangerous, and might cut the hair that holds the sword. Also, why should I wish to harm the girl, or to wed her to this rogue Caleb, than whom, mayhap, even the Roman would be better? At least he is a man who does not cheat or lie. Indeed, I long to see the maid. I will go at once to Jordan."

Then he sounded his bell and commanded that the servant of the lord Marcus should be admitted.