

## CHAPTER XI

### THE ESSENES LOSE THEIR QUEEN

The Court of the Essenes was gathered in council debating the subject of the departure of their ward, Miriam. She must go, that was evident, since not even for her, whom they loved as though each of them had been in truth her father or her uncle, could their ancient, sacred rule be broken. But where was she to go and how should she be supported as became her? These were the questions that troubled them and that they debated earnestly. At length her great-uncle Ithiel suggested that she should be summoned before them, that they might hear her wishes. To this his brethren agreed, and he was sent to fetch her.

A while later, attended by Nehushta, Miriam arrived, clad in a robe of pure white, and wearing on her head a wimple of white, edged with purple, and about her waist a purple scarf. So greatly did the Essenes love and reverence this maid, that as she entered, all the hundred of the Court rose and remaining standing until she herself was seated. Then the President, who was sorrowful and even shamefaced, addressed her, telling her their trouble, and praying her pardon because the ordinance of their order forced them to arrange that she should depart from among them. At the end of this speech he asked her what were her wishes as regarded her own future, adding that for her maintenance she need have no fear, since out of their revenues a modest sum would be set aside annually which would suffice to keep her from poverty.

In answer Miriam, also speaking sadly, thanked them from her heart for all their goodness, telling them she had long known this hour of separation to be at hand. As to where she should dwell, since tumults were so many in Jerusalem, she suggested that she might find a home in one of the coast cities, where perhaps some friend or relative of the brethren would shelter Nehushta and herself.

Instantly eight or ten of those present said that they knew such trusty folk in one place or another, and the various offers were submitted to the Court for discussion. While the talk was still going on there came a knock upon the door. After the usual questions and precautions, a brother was admitted who informed them that there had arrived in the village, at the head of a considerable retinue, Benoni, the Jewish merchant of Tyre. He stated that he desired speech with them on the subject of his granddaughter Miriam, who, he learned, was, or had been recently, in their charge.

"Here may be an answer to the riddle," said the President. "We know of this Benoni, also that he purposed to demand his granddaughter of us, though until he did so it was not for us to speak." Then he put it to the Court that Benoni should be admitted.

To this they agreed, and presently the Jew came, splendidly attired, his long white beard flowing down a robe that glittered with embroideries of gold and silver. Entering the dim, cool hall, he stared in amazement at

the long half-circles of venerable, white-robed men who were gathered there. Next his quick eyes fell upon the lovely maiden who, attended by the dark-visaged Nehushta, sat before them on a seat of honour; and looking, he guessed that she must be Miriam.

"Little wonder," reflected Benoni to himself, "that all men seem to love this girl, since at the first sight of her my own heart softens."

Then he bowed to the President of the Court and the President bowed back in answer. But not one of the rest so much as moved his head, since already every man of them hated this stranger who was about to carry away her whom they called their Queen.

"Sirs," said Benoni breaking the silence, "I come here upon a strange errand--namely, to ask of you a maid whom I believe to be my granddaughter, of whose existence I learned not long ago, and whom, as it seems, you have sheltered from her birth. Is she among you here?" and he looked at Miriam.

"The lady Miriam sits yonder," said the President. "You are right in naming her your granddaughter, as we have known her to be from the beginning."

"Then why," said Benoni, "did I not know it also?"

"Because," answered the President quietly, "we did not think it fitting

to deliver a child that was committed to our charge, to the care of one who had brought her father, and tried to bring her mother, his own seed, to the most horrible of deaths."

As he spoke he fixed his eyes indignantly upon Benoni; as did every man of all that great company, till even the bold-faced Jew dropped his head abashed.

"I am not here," he said, recovering himself, "to make defence of what I have done, or have not done in the past. I am here to demand that my grandchild, now as I perceive a woman grown, may be handed over to me, her natural guardian."

"Before this can be considered," answered the President, "we who have been her guardians for so many years, should require guarantees and sureties."

"What guarantees, and what sureties?" asked Benoni.

"These among others--That money sufficient for her support after your death should be settled upon her. That she shall be left reasonable liberty in the matter of her daily life and her marriage, if it should please her to marry. Lastly, that as we have undertaken not to meddle with her faith, or to oppress her into changing it, so must you undertake also."

"And if I refuse these things?" asked Benoni.

"Then you see the lady Miriam for the first and last time," answered the President boldly, while the others nodded approval. "We are men of peace, but, merchant, you must not, therefore, think us men without power. We must part with the lady Miriam, who to every one of us is as a daughter, because the unbreakable rule of our order ordains that she, who is now a woman grown, can no longer remain among us. But wherever she dwells, to the last day of her life our love shall go with her and the whole strength of our Order shall protect her. If any harm is attempted to her, we shall be swift to hear and swifter to avenge. If you refuse our conditions, she will vanish from your sight, and then, merchant, go, search the world, the coasts of Syria, the banks of Egypt, and the cities of Italy--and find her if you can. We have spoken."

Benoni stroked his white beard before he answered.

"You talk proudly," he said. "Did I shut my eyes I might fancy that this voice was the voice of a Roman procurator speaking the decrees of Cæsar. Still, I am ready to believe that what you promise you can perform, since I for one am sure that you Essenes are not mere harmless heretics who worship angels and demons, see visions, prophesy things to come by the help of your familiars, and adore the sun in huts upon the desert." He paused, but the President, without taking the slightest notice of his insults or sarcasms, repeated merely:

"We have spoken," and as with one voice, like some great echo, the whole hundred of them cried, "We have spoken!"

"Do you hear them, master?" said Nehushta in the silence that followed. "Well, I know them. They mean what they say, and you are right--what which they threaten they can perform."

"Let my grandchild speak," said Benoni. "Daughter, is it your wish that such dishonouring bonds should be laid upon me?"

"Grandsire," replied Miriam, in a pure, clear voice, "I may not quarrel with that which is done for my own good. For the wealth I care little, but I would not become a slave in everything save the name, nor do I desire to set my feet in that path my parents trod. What my uncles say--all of these"--and she waved her hand--"speaking in the name of the thousands that are without, that I do, for they love me and I love them, and their mind is my mind and their words are my words."

"Proud-spirited, and well spoken, like all her race," muttered Benoni. Still he stroked his beard and hesitated.

"Be pleased to give your answer," said the President, "that we may finish our discussion before the hour of evening prayer. To help you to it, remember one thing--we ask no new conditions." Benoni glanced up quickly and the President added: "Those of which we have received a copy, that you swore to and signed in the presence of Marcus the Roman,

are enough for us."

Now it was Miriam's turn to look, first up and then down. As for her grandfather, he turned white with anger, and broke into a bitter laugh.

"Now I understand----"

"----that the arm of the Essenes is longer than you thought, since it can reach from here to Rome," said the President.

"Ay! that you can plot with Romans. Well, be careful lest the sword of these Romans prove longer than you thought and reach even to your hearts, O you peaceful dwellers in the desert!" Then, as though he feared some answer, he added quickly, "I am minded to return and leave this maiden with you to dispose of as you think fit. Yet I will not do so, for she is very fair and gracious, and with the wealth that I can give her, may fill some high place in the world. Also--and this is more to me--I am old and draw near my end and she alone has my blood in her veins. Therefore I will agree to all your terms, and take her home with me to Tyre, trusting that she may learn to love me."

"Good," said the President. "To-morrow the papers shall be prepared and signed. Meanwhile we pray you to be our guest."

Next evening signed they were accordingly, Benoni agreeing without demur to all that the Essenes asked on behalf of her who had been their

ward, and even assigning to her a separate revenue during his lifetime. Indeed, now that he had seen her, so loth was he to part with this new-found daughter, that he would have done still more had it been asked of him, lest she should be spirited from his sight, as, did he refuse, might well happen.

Three days later Miriam bade farewell to her protectors, who accompanied her by hundreds to the ridge above the village. Here they stopped, and seeing that the moment of separation was at hand, Miriam's tears began to flow.

"Weep not, beloved child," said Ithiel, "for though we part with you in body, yet shall we always be with you in the spirit, now in this life, and as we think, after this life. Moreover, by night and day, we shall watch over you, and if any attempt to harm you--" here he glanced at Benoni, that brother-in-law to whom he bore but little love--"the very winds will bear us tidings, and in this way or that, help will come."

"Have no fear, Ithiel," broke in Benoni, "my bond, which you hold, is good and it will be backed by love."

"That I believe also," said Miriam; "and if it be so, grandsire, I will repay love for love." Then she turned to the Essenes and thanked them in broken words.

"Be not downhearted," said Ithiel in a thick voice, "for I hope that



even in this life we shall meet again."

"May it be so," answered Miriam, and they parted, the Essenes returning sadly to their home, and Benoni taking the road through Jericho to Jerusalem.

Travelling slowly, at the evening of the second day they set their camp on open ground not far from the Damascus gate of the Holy City, but within the new north wall that had been built by Agrippa. Into the city itself Benoni would not enter, fearing lest the Roman soldiers should plunder them. At moonrise Nehushta took Miriam by the hand and led her through the resting camels to a spot a few yards from the camp.

There, standing with her back to the second wall, she pointed out to her a cliff, steep but of no great height, in which appeared little caves and ridges of rock that, looked at from this distance, gave to its face a rude resemblance to a human skull.

"See," she said solemnly. "Yonder the Lord was crucified."

Miriam heard and sank to her knees in prayer. As she knelt there the grave voice of her grandfather spoke behind her, bidding her rise.

"Child," he said, "it is true. True is it also that signs and wonders happened after the death of that false Messiah, and that for me and mine He left a curse behind Him which it may well be is not done with yet. I

know your faith, and I have promised to let you follow it in peace. Yet I beseech of you, do not make prayers to your God here in public, where with malefactors He suffered as a malefactor, lest others less tolerant should see you and drag you to your father's death."

Miriam bowed her head and returned to the camp, nor at that time did any further words pass between them on this matter of her religion. Thenceforward, however, she was careful to do nothing which could bring suspicion on her grandfather.

Four days later they came to the rich and beautiful city of Tyre, and Miriam saw the sea upon which she had been born. Hitherto, she had fancied that its waters were much like those of the Dead Lake, upon whose shores she had dwelt so many years; but when she perceived the billows rushing onwards, white-crested, to break in thunder against the walls of island Tyre, she clapped her hands with joy. Indeed, from that day to the end of her life she loved the sea in all its moods, and for hours at a time would find it sufficient company. Perhaps this was because the seethe of its waves was the first sound that her ears had heard, while her first breath was salted with its spray.

From Jerusalem, Benoni had sent messengers mounted on swift horses bidding his servants make ready to receive a guest. So it came about that when she entered his palace in Tyre, Miriam found it decked as though for a bride, and wandered in amazement--she who had known nothing better than the mud-houses of the Essenes--from hall to hall of the

ancient building that in bygone generations had been the home of kings and governors. Benoni followed her steps, watching her with grave eyes, till at length all was visited save the gardens belonging to him which were on the mainland.

"Are you pleased with your new home, daughter?" he asked presently.

"My grandfather, it is beautiful," she answered. "Never have I dreamed of such a place as this. Say, may I work my art in one of these great rooms?"

"Miriam," he answered, "of this house henceforth you are the mistress, as in time to come you will be its owner. Believe me, child, it was not needed that so many and such different men should demand from me sureties for your comfort and your safety. All I have is yours, whilst all you have, including your faith and your friends, of whom there seem to be many, remains your own. Yet, should it please you to give me in return some small share of your love, I who am childless and friendless shall be grateful."

"That is my desire," answered Miriam hurriedly; "only, grandsire, between you and me----"

"Speak it not," he said, with a gesture almost of despair, "or rather I will speak it--between you and me runs the river of your parents' blood. It is so, yet, Miriam, I will confess to you that I repent me of that

deed. Age makes us judge more kindly. To me your faith is nothing and your God a sham, yet I know now that to worship Him is not worthy of death--at least not for that cause would I bring any to their death to-day, or even to stripes and bonds. I will go further; I will stoop even to borrow from His creed. Do not His teachings bid you to forgive those who have done you wrong?"

"They do, and that is why Christians love all mankind."

"Then bring that law into this home of ours, Miriam, and love me who sorrow for what I did in the blind rage of my zeal, and who now in my old age am haunted by its memory."

Then for the first time Miriam threw herself into the old man's arms and kissed him on the brow.

So it came about that they made their peace and were happy together.

Indeed, day by day Benoni loved her more, till at length she was everything to him, and he grew jealous of all who sought her company, and especially of Nehushta.