

## CHAPTER XII

### THE RING, THE NECKLACE AND THE LETTER

So Miriam came to Tyre, where, for many months, her life was peaceful and happy enough. At first she had feared meeting Caleb, who she knew from her grandfather was dwelling there; but as it chanced, he had left the city upon business of his own, so for the while she was free of him. In Tyre were many Christians with whom she made friends and worshipped, Benoni pretending to know nothing of the matter. Indeed, at this time and place it was the Jews rather than the Christians who were in danger at the hands of the Syrians and Greeks, who hated them for their wealth and faith, threatening them continually with robbery and massacre. But as yet that storm did not burst, and in its brewing the Christians, who were few, humble, and of all races, escaped notice.

Thus it came about that Miriam dwelt in quiet, occupying herself much with her art of modelling and going abroad but little, since it was scarcely safe for her, the grandchild of the rich Jew merchant, to show her face in the streets. Though she was surrounded by every luxury, far more than she needed, indeed, this lack of liberty irked her who had been reared in the desert, till at times she grew melancholy and would sit for hours looking on the sea and thinking. She thought of her mother who had sat thus before her; of her father, who had perished beneath the gladiators' swords; of the kindly old men who had nurtured her, and of the sufferings of her brothers and sisters in the faith in Rome and at

Jerusalem. But most of all she thought of Marcus, her Roman lover, whom, strive as she would, she could never forget--no, not for a single hour. She loved him, that was the truth of it, and between them there was a great gulf fixed, not of the sea only, which ships could sail, but of that command which the dead had laid upon her. He was a pagan and she was a Christian, and they might not wed. By now, too, it was likely that he had forgotten her, the girl who took his fancy in the desert. At Rome there were many noble and lovely women--oh! she could scarcely bear to think of it. Yet night by night she prayed for him, and morn by morn his face arose before her half-awakened eyes. Where was he? What was he doing? For aught she knew he might be dead. Nay, for then, surely, her heart would have warned her. Still, she craved for tidings, and alas! there were none.

At length tidings did come--the best of tidings. One day, wearying of the house, with the permission of her grandfather, and escorted by servants, Miriam had gone to walk in the gardens that he owned to the north of that part of the city on the mainland, which was called Palætyrus. They were lovely gardens, well watered and running down to the sea-edge, and in them grew beautiful palms and other trees, with fruitful shrubs and flowers. Here, when they had roamed a while, Miriam and Nehushta sat down upon the fallen column of some old temple and rested. Suddenly they heard a footstep, and Miriam looked up to see before her a Roman officer, clad in a cloak that showed signs of sea-travel, and, guiding him, one of Benoni's servants.

The officer, a rough but kindly looking man of middle age, bowed to her, asking in Greek if he spoke to the lady Miriam, the granddaughter of Benoni the Jew, she who had been brought up among the Essenes.

"Sir, I am she," answered Miriam.

"Then, lady, I, who am named Gallus, have an errand to perform"; and drawing from his robe a letter tied with silk and sealed, and with the letter a package, he handed them to her.

"Who sends these?" she asked, hope shining in her eyes, "and whence come they?"

"From Rome, lady, as fast as sails could waft them and me. And the sender is the noble Marcus, called the Fortunate."

"Oh!" said Miriam, blushing to her eyes, "tell me, sir, is he well?"

"Not so well but that such a look as that, lady, would better him, or any other man, could he be here to see it," answered the Roman, gazing at her with admiration.

"Did you then leave him ill? I do not understand."

"Nay, his health seemed sound, and his uncle Caius being dead his wealth can scarce be counted, or so they say, since the old man made him his

heir. Perhaps that is why the divine Nero has taken such a fancy to him that he can scarce leave the palace. Therefore I cannot say that Marcus is well to-day, since sometimes Nero's friends are short-lived. Nay, be not frightened, I did but jest; your Marcus is safe enough. Read the letter, lady, and waste no time. As for me, my mission is fulfilled. Thank me not; it is reward enough to have seen that sweet face of yours. Fortunate indeed is the star of Marcus, and, though I am jealous of the man, for your sake I pray that it may lead him back to you. Lady, farewell."

"Cut the silk, Nou," said Miriam when the Captain Gallus had gone.

"Quick. I have no knife."

Nehushta obeyed smiling and the letter was unrolled. It, or those parts of it which concern us, ran thus:

"To the lady Miriam, from Marcus the Roman, her friend, by the hand of the Captain Gallus.

"Dear friend and lady, greeting. Already since I came here I have written you one letter, but this day news has reached me that the ship which bore it foundered off the coast of Sicily. So, as Neptune has that letter, and with it many good men, although I write more ill than I do most things, I send you another by this occasion, hoping, I who am vain, that you have not forgotten me, and that the reading of it may even give you pleasure. Most dear Miriam, know that I accomplished my voyage to

Rome in safety, visiting your grandsire on the way to pay him a debt I owed. But that story you will perhaps have heard.

"From Tyre I sailed for Italy, but was cast away upon the coasts of Melita, where many of us were drowned. By the favour of some god, however--ah! what god I wonder--I escaped, and taking another ship came safely to Brundisium, whence I travelled as fast as horses would carry me to Rome. Here I arrived but just in time, for I found my uncle Caius very well. Believing, moreover, that I had been drowned in the shipwreck at Melita, he was about to make a will bequeathing his property to the Emperor Nero, but by good fortune of this he had said nothing. Had he done so I should, I think, be as poor to-day as when I left you, dear, and perhaps poorer still, for I might have lost my head with my inheritance.

"As it was I found favour in the sight of my uncle Caius, who a week after my arrival executed a formal testament leaving to me all his land, goods, and moneys, which on his death three months later I inherited. Thus I have become rich--so rich that now, having much money to spend, by some perversity which I cannot explain, I have grown careful and spend as little as possible. After I had entered into my inheritance I made a plan to return to Judæa, for one reason and one alone--to be near to you, most sweet Miriam. At the last moment I was stayed by a very evil chance. That bust which you made of me I had managed to save from the shipwreck and bring safe to Rome--now I wish it was at the bottom of the sea, and you shall learn why.

"When I came into possession of this house in the Via Agrippa, which is large and beautiful, I set it in a place of honour in the antechamber and summoned that sculptor, Glaucus, of whom I have spoken to you, and others who follow the art, to come and pass judgment upon the work. They came, they wondered and they were silent, for each of them feared lest in praising it he should exalt some rival. When, however, I told them that it was the work of a lady in Judæa, although they did not believe me, since all of them declared that no woman had shaped that marble, knowing that they had nothing to fear from so distant an artist whoever he might be, they began to praise the work with one voice, and all that evening until the wine overcame them, talked of nothing else. Also they continued talking on the morrow, until at length the fame of the thing came to the ears of Nero, who also is an artist of music and other things. The end of it was that one day, without warning, the Emperor visited my house and demanded to see the bust, which I showed to him. For many minutes he examined it through the emerald with which he aids his sight, then asked:

"What land had the honour to bear the genius who wrought this work?"

"I answered, 'Judæa,' a country, by the way, of which he seemed to know little, except that some fanatics dwelt there, who refused to worship him. He said that he would make that artist ruler of Judæa. I replied that the artist was a woman, whereon he answered that he cared nothing--she should still rule Judæa, or if this could not be managed he

would send and bring her to Rome to make a statue of him to be set up in the Temple at Jerusalem for the Jews to worship.

"Now I saw that I had been foolish, and knowing well what would have been your fate, my Miriam, had he once set eyes on you, I sighed and answered, that alas! it was impossible, since you were dead, as I proved to him by a long story with which I will not trouble you. Moreover, now that he was sure that you were dead, I showed him the little statuette of yourself looking into water, which you gave me. Whereon he burst into tears, at the thought that such an one had departed from the earth, while it was still cursed with so many who are wicked, old and ugly.

"Still he did not go, but remained admiring the bust, till at length one of his favourites who accompanied him, whispered in my ear that I must present it to the Emperor. I refused, whereon he whispered back that if I did not, assuredly before long it would be taken, and with it all my other goods, and, perhaps, my life. So, since I must, I changed my mind and prayed him to accept it; whereon he embraced, first the marble and then me, and caused it to be borne away then and there, leaving me mad with rage.

"Now I tell you all this silly story for a reason, since it has hindered and still hinders me from leaving Rome. Thus: two days later I received an Imperial decree, in which it was stated that the incomparable work of art brought from Judæa by Marcus, the son of Emilius, had been set up in a certain temple, where those who would please their Emperor were

desired to present themselves and worship it and the soul of her by whom it was fashioned. Moreover, it was commanded that I, Marcus, whose features had served as a model for the work, should be its guardian and attend twice weekly in the temple, that all might see how the genius of a great artist is able to make a thing of immortal beauty from a coarse original of flesh and blood. Oh, Miriam, I have no patience to write of this folly, yet the end of it is, that except at the cost of my fortune and the risk of my life, it is impossible for me to leave Rome. Twice every week, or by special favour, once only, must I attend in that accursed temple where my own likeness stands upon a pedestal of marble, and before it a marble altar, on which are cut the words: 'Sacrifice, O passer-by, to the spirit of the departed genius who wrought this divine work.'

"Yes, there I sit, I who am a soldier, while fools come in and gaze first at the marble and then at me, saying things for which often I long to kill them, and casting grains of incense into the little fire on the altar in sacrifice to your spirit, whereby I trust it may be benefited. Thus, Miriam, are we ruled in Rome to-day.

"Meanwhile, I am in great favour with Nero, so that men call me 'the Fortunate,' and my house the 'Fortunate House,' a title of ill-omen.

"Yet out of this evil comes some good, since because of his present affection for me, or my bust, I have now and again for your sake, Miriam, been able to do service, even to the saving of their lives,

to those of your faith. Here there are many Christians whom it is an amusement to Nero to persecute, torture, and slay, sometimes by soaking them in tar and making of them living torches to illuminate his gardens, and sometimes in other fashions. The lives of sundry of these poor people he has given to me, when I begged them of him. Indeed, he has done more. Yesterday Nero came himself to the temple and suggested that certain of the Christians should be sacrificed in a very cruel fashion here as an offering to your spirit. I answered that this could give it little pleasure, seeing that in your lifetime you also were a Christian. Thereon he wrung his hands, crying out, 'Oh! what a crime have I committed,' and instantly gave orders that no more Christians should be killed. So for a little while, thanks to your handiwork, and to me who am called 'the Model,' they are safe--those who are left of them.

"I hear that there are wars and tumults in Judæa, and that Vespasian, a great general, is to be sent to quell them. If I can I will come with him, but at present--such is the madness of my master--this is too much to hope, unless, indeed, he wearies suddenly of the 'Divine Work' and its attendant 'Model.'

"Meanwhile I also cast incense upon your altar, and pray that in these troubles you may come to no harm.

"Miriam, I am most unhappy. I think of you always and yet I cannot come to you. I picture you in many dangers, and I am not there to save you. I even dare to hope that you would wish to see me again; but it is the

Jew Caleb, and other men, who see you and make offerings to your sweet beauty as I make them to your spirit. I beseech you, Miriam, do not accept the offerings, lest in some day to come, when I am once more a soldier, and have ceased to be a custodian of busts, it should be the worse for those worshippers, and especially for Caleb.

"What else have I to tell you? I have sought out some of the great preachers of your faith, hoping that by the magic whereof they are said to be masters, they would be able to assure me of your welfare. But to my sorrow they gave me no magic--in which it seems they do not deal--only maxims. Also, from these I bought for a great sum certain manuscripts written by themselves containing the doctrines of your law, which I intend to study so soon as I have time. Indeed, this is a task which I wish to postpone, since did I read I might believe and turn Christian, to serve in due course as a night-light in Nero's gardens.

"I send you a present, praying that you will accept it. The emerald in the ring is cut by my friend, the sculptor Glaucus. The pearls are fine and have a history which I hope to tell you some day. Wear them always, beloved Miriam, for my sake. I do not forget your words; nay, I ponder them day and night. But at least you said you loved me, and in wearing these trinkets you break no duty to the dead. Write to me, I pray you, if you can find a messenger. Or, if you cannot write, think of me always as I do of you. Oh, that we were back together in that happy village of the Essenes, to whom, as to yourself, be all good fortune! Farewell.

"Your ever faithful friend and lover,

"Marcus."

Miriam finished her letter, kissed it, and hid it in her bosom. Then she opened the packet and unlocked the ivory box within by a key that hung to it. Out of the casket she took a roll of soft leather. This she undid and uttered a little cry of joy, for there lay a necklace of the most lovely pearls that she had ever seen. Nor was this all, for threaded on the pearls was a ring, and cut upon its emerald bezel the head of Marcus, and her own head taken from the likeness she had given him.

"Look! Now, look!" said Miriam, showing her the beautiful trinkets.

"A sight to make old eyes glisten," answered Nehushta handling them. "I know something of pearls, and these are worth a fortune. Happy maid, to whom is given such a lover."

"Unhappy maid who can never be a happy wife," sighed Miriam, her blue eyes filling with tears.

"Grieve not; that still may change," answered Nehushta, as she fastened the pearls about Miriam's neck. "At least you have heard from him and he still loves you, which is much. Now for the ring--the marriage finger--see, how it fits."

"Nay, I have no right," murmured Miriam; still she did not draw it off again.

"Come, let us be going," said Nehushta, hiding the casket in her ample robe, "for the sun sinks, and to-night there are guests to supper."

"What guests?" asked Miriam absently.

"Plotters, every one," said Nehushta, shrugging her shoulders. "The great scheme to drive the Romans from the Holy City ripens fast, and your grandsire waters its root. I pray that we may not all of us gather bitter grapes from that vine. Have you heard that Caleb is back in Tyre?"

"Caleb!" faltered Miriam, "No."

"Well, he is. He arrived yesterday and will be among the guests to-night. He has been fighting up in the desert there, and bravely, for I am told that he was one of those who seized the fortress of Masada and put its Roman garrison to the sword."

"Then he is against the Romans?"

"Yes, because he hopes to rule the Jews, and risks much to gain more."

"I do not wish to meet him," said Miriam.

"Nay, but you must, and the sooner the better. Why do you fear the man?"

"I know not, but fear him I do, now and always."

When Miriam entered the supper chamber that night, the guests to the number of twelve were already seated on their couches, waiting for the feast to begin. By her grandfather's command she was arrayed in her richest robes fashioned and broidered after the Grecian fashion, having her hair gathered into coils upon her head and held with a golden net. Round her waist was a girdle of gold set with gems, about her throat the necklace of pearls which Marcus had sent her, and on her hand a single ring--that with his likeness and her own. As she entered the great chamber, looking most lovely, notwithstanding her lack of height, her grandfather came forward to meet her and present her to the guests, who rose in greeting. One by one they bowed to her and one by one she searched their faces with her eyes--faces for the most part stern and fierce. Now all had passed and she sighed with relief, for among them there was no Caleb. Even as she did so a curtain swung aside and Caleb entered.

It was he, of that there could be no doubt; but oh! how changed since last she had seen him two years before. Then he had been but a raw,

passionate youth; now he was a tall and splendid young man, very handsome in his dark fashion, very powerful of frame also and quick of limb. His person was matched by his attire, which was that of an Eastern warrior noble, and his mien was proud and conquering. As he advanced the guests bowed to him in respect, as to a man of great and assured position who may become greater still. Yes, even Benoni showed him this respect, stepping forward to greet him. All these greetings Caleb acknowledged lightly, even haughtily, till of a sudden he saw Miriam standing somewhat in the shadow, and heedless of the other guests pushed his way towards her.

"Thus we meet again, Miriam," he said, his proud face softening as he spoke and his eyes gazing on her with a sort of rapture. "Are you pleased to see me?"

"Surely, Caleb," she answered. "Who would not be well pleased to meet the playfellow of her childhood?"

He frowned, for childhood and its play were not in his thoughts. Before he could speak again Benoni commanded the company to be seated, whereon Miriam took her accustomed place as mistress of the house.

To her surprise Caleb seated himself beside her on the couch that should have been reserved for the oldest guest, who for some moments was left a wanderer and wrathful, till Benoni, seeing what had passed, called him to his side. Then, golden vessels of scented water having been handed

by slaves to each guest in turn, the feast began. As Miriam was about to dip her fingers in the water she remembered the ring upon her left hand and turned the bezel inwards. Caleb noted the action, but said nothing.

"Whence come you, Caleb?" she asked.

"From the wars, Miriam. We have thrown down the gate to Rome, and she has picked it up."

She looked at him inquiringly and asked, "Was it wise?"

"Who can tell?" he answered. "At least it is done. For my part I hesitated long, but your grandfather won me over, so now I must follow my fate."

Then he began to tell her of the taking of Masada and of the bloody struggles of the factions in Jerusalem.

After this he spoke of the Essenes, who still occupied their village, though in fear, for all about them was much fighting; and of their childish days together--talk which pleased her greatly. Whilst they spoke thus, a messenger entered the room and whispered something into the ear of Benoni, who raised his hands to Heaven as though in gratitude.

"What tidings?" asked one.

"This, my friends. Cestius Gallus the Roman has been hunted from the walls of Jerusalem and his army is destroyed in the pass of Beth-horon."

"God be praised!" said the company as though with one voice.

"God be praised," repeated Caleb, "for so great and glorious a victory! The accursed Romans are fallen indeed."

Only Miriam said nothing.

"What is in your mind?" he asked looking at her.

"That they will spring up again stronger than before," she replied, then at a signal from Benoni, rose and left the feast.

From the supper chamber Miriam passed down a passage to the portico and there seated herself, resting her arms upon the marble balustrade and listening to the waves as they lapped against the walls below.

That day had been disturbed, different, indeed, from all the peaceful days which she was wont to spend. First had come the messenger bearing her lover's gifts and letter which already she longed to read again; then hard upon his heels, like storm upon the sunshine, he who, unless she was mistaken, still wished to be her lover--Caleb. How curious was the lot of all three of them! How strangely had they been exalted! She,

the orphan ward of the Essenes, was now a great and wealthy lady with everything her heart could desire--except one thing, indeed, which it desired most of all. And Marcus, the debt-saddled Roman soldier of fortune, he also, it seemed, had suddenly become great and wealthy, poms that he held at the price of playing some fool's part in a temple to satisfy the whimsy of an Imperial madman.

Caleb, too, had found fortune, and in these tumultuous times risen suddenly to place and power. All three of them were seated upon pinnacles, but as Miriam felt, they were pinnacles of snow, which for aught she knew, might be melted by the very sun of their prosperity. She was young, she had little experience, yet as Miriam sat there watching the changeful sea, there came upon her a great sense of the instability of things, and an instinctive knowledge of their vanity. The men who were great one day, whose names sounded in the mouths of all, the next had vanished, disgraced or dead. Parties rose and parties fell, high priest succeeded high priest, general supplanted general, yet upon each and all of them, like the following waves that rolled beneath her, came dark night and oblivion. A little dancing in the sunshine, a little moaning in the shade, then death, and after death----

"What are you thinking of, Miriam?" said a rich voice at her elbow, the voice of Caleb.

She started, for here she believed herself alone, then answered:

"My thoughts matter nothing. Why are you here? You should be with your fellow----"

"Conspirators. Why do you not say the word? Well, because sometimes one wearies even of conspiracy. Just now we triumph and can take our ease. I wish to make the most of it. What ring is that you wear upon your finger?"

Miriam straightened herself and grew bold.

"One which Marcus sent me," she answered.

"I guessed as much. I have heard of him; he has become a creature of the mad Nero, the laughing-stock of Rome."

"I do not laugh at him, Caleb."

"No, you were ever faithful. But, say, do you laugh at me?"

"Indeed not; why should I, since you seem to fill a great and dangerous part with dignity?"

"Yes, Miriam, my part is both great and dangerous. I have risen high and I mean to rise higher."

"How high?"

"To the throne of Judæa."

"I think a cottage stool would be more safe, Caleb."

"Mayhap, but I do not like such seats. Listen, Miriam, I will be great or die. I have thrown in my lot with the Jews, and when we have cast out the Romans I shall rule."

"If you cast out the Romans, and if you live. Caleb, I have no faith in the venture. We are old friends, and I pray of you to escape from it while there is yet time."

"Why, Miriam?"

"Because He Whom your people crucified and Whom I serve prophesied its end. The Romans will crush you, Caleb. His blood lies heavy upon the head of the Jews, and the hour of payment is at hand."

Caleb thought a while, and when he spoke again the note of confidence had left his voice.

"It may be so, Miriam," he said, "though I put no faith in the sayings of your prophet; but at least I have taken my part and will see the play through. Now for the second time I ask you to share its fortunes. I have not changed my mind. As I loved you in childhood and as a youth, so I

love you as a man. I offer to you a great career. In the end I may fall, or I may triumph, still either the fall or the triumph will be worth your sharing. A throne, or a glorious grave--both are good; who can say which is the better? Seek them with me, Miriam."

"Caleb, I cannot."

"Why?"

"Because it is laid upon me as a birthright, or a birth-duty, that I should wed no man who is not a Christian. You know the story."

"Then if there were no such duty would you wed me, Miriam?"

"No," she answered faintly.

"Why not?"

"Because I love another man whom also I am forbid to wed, and until death I am pledged to him."

"The Roman, Marcus?"

"Aye, the Roman Marcus. See, I wear his ring," and she lifted her hand, "and his gift is about my throat," and she touched the necklet of pearls. "Till death I am his and his alone. This I say, because it is

best for all of us that you should know the truth."

Caleb ground his teeth in bitter jealousy.

"Then may death soon find him!" he said.

"It would not help you, Caleb. Oh! why cannot we be friends as we were in the old times!"

"Because I seek more than friendship, and soon or late, in this way or in that, I swear that I will have it."

As the words left his lips footsteps were heard, and Benoni appeared.

"Friend Caleb," he said, "we await you. Why, Miriam, what do you here? To your chamber, girl. Affairs are afoot in which women should have no part."

"Yet as I fear, grandfather, women will have to bear the burden," answered Miriam. Then, bowing to Caleb, she turned and left them.