

CHAPTER XIII

WOE, WOE TO JERUSALEM

Two more years went by, two dreadful, bloody years. In Jerusalem the factions tore each other. In Galilee let the Jewish leader Josephus, under whom Caleb was fighting, do what he would, Vespasian and his generals stormed city after city, massacring their inhabitants by thousands and tens of thousands. In the coast towns and elsewhere Syrians and Jews made war. The Jews assaulted Gadara and Gaulonitis, Sebaste and Ascalon, Anthedon and Gaza, putting many to the sword. Then came their own turn, for the Syrians and Greeks rose upon them and slaughtered them without mercy. As yet, however, there had been no blood shed in Tyre, though all knew that it must come. The Essenes, who had been driven from their home by the Dead Sea and taken refuge in Jerusalem, sent messengers to Miriam warning her to flee from Tyre, where a massacre was being planned; warning her also not to come to Jerusalem, which city they believed to be doomed, but to escape, if possible over sea. Nor was this all, for her own people, the Christians, besought her to fly for her life's sake with them to the city of Pella, where they were gathering from Jerusalem and all Judæa. To both Miriam answered that what her grandsire did, that she must do. If he fled, she would fly; if he stayed at Tyre, she would stay; if he went to Jerusalem, she would go; for he had been good to her and she had sworn that while he lived she would not desert him. So the Essene messengers went back to Jerusalem, and the Christian elders prayed with her, and

having blessed her and consigned her to the care of the Most High and His Son, their Lord, departed to Pella, where, as it was fated, through all those dreadful times not a hair of their heads was touched.

When she had parted from them, Miriam sought out her grandfather, whom she found pacing his chamber with a troubled air.

"Why do you look so sad, Miriam?" he asked. "Have some of your friends warned you that new sorrows are afoot?"

"Yes, grandfather," and she told him all.

"I do not believe them," he said passionately. "Say, do you? Where is their authority? I tell you that we shall triumph. Vespasian is now Emperor in Rome, and there will forget this little land; and the rest, those enemies who are of our own house and those without it, we will conquer and kill. The Messiah will come, the true Messiah. Many signs and wonders declare that he is at hand. Ay! I myself have had a vision concerning him. He will come, and he will conquer, and Jerusalem shall be great and free and see her desire upon her enemies. I ask--where is your authority for these croakings?"

Miriam drew a roll from her robe and read: "But when ye see Jerusalem compassed with armies, then know that her desolation is at hand. Then let them which are in Judæa flee unto the mountains; and let them which are in the midst of her depart out; and let not them that are in the

country enter therein. For these are days of vengeance, that all things that are written may be fulfilled. Woe to them that are with child and to them that give suck in those days! for there shall be great distress upon the land and wrath unto this people. And they shall fall by the edge of the sword, and shall be led captive into all the nations; and Jerusalem shall be trodden down of the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled."

Benoni listened patiently until she had done. Then he answered with contempt:

"So says the book of your Law, but mine tells me otherwise. Well, child, if you believe it and are afraid, begone with your friends, the Christians, and leave me to meet this storm alone."

"I do believe it," she answered quietly, "but I am not afraid."

"That is strange," he said, "since you must then believe also that you will come to a cruel death, which has terrors for the young and fair."

"Not so, grandfather, for this same writing promises that in these troubles not one of us Christians shall perish. It is for you that I fear, not for myself, who will go where you go, and bide where you bide. Therefore, once more, and for the last time, I pray you to be wise and fly--who otherwise must be slain"; and as Miriam said the words her blue eyes filled with tears.

Benoni looked at her and for a moment his courage was shaken.

"Of your book I take no account," he said, "but in the vision of your pure spirit I am tempted to believe. Perhaps the things that you foresee will happen, so, child, fly. You will not lack an escort and I can give you treasure."

She shook her head. "I have said that I will not go without you."

"Then I fear that you here must bide, for I will not leave my wealth and home, even to save my life, and still less will I desert my people in their holy war. Only, Miriam, if things fall out ill for us, remember that I entreated you to depart, and do not reproach me."

"That I shall never do," she answered, smiling, and coming to the old man kissed him tenderly.

So they abode on in Tyre, and a week later the storm burst.

For many days it had not been safe for Jews to show themselves in the streets of the city, since several who crept out about their business, or to fetch water or provisions, had been set upon and beaten to death by the mob, stirred up to the work by Roman emissaries. This time Benoni had employed in putting his house, which was part of an ancient fortress that had stood many a siege, into a state of defence, and in supplying

it with an ample store of victuals. Also he sent messengers to Caleb, who was said to be in command of the Jewish force at Joppa, telling him of their peril. Because it was so strong many of the principal Jews in Tyre, to the number of over a hundred indeed, had flocked into Benoni's palace-fortress, together with their wives and children, since there was no other place in their power in the town which could be so easily defended. Lastly, in the outer courts and galleries were stationed fifty or more faithful servants and slaves who understood the use of arms.

Thus things remained, the Syrians threatening them through the gates or from the windows of high houses, and no more, till one night Miriam was awakened by a dreadful sound of screaming. She sprang from her bed and instantly Nehushta was at her side.

"What happens?" she gasped as she dressed herself hastily.

"Those Syrian dogs attack the Jews," answered Nehushta, "on the mainland and in the lower city. Come to the roof, whence we can see what passes," and hand in hand they ran to the sea-portico and up its steep steps.

The dawn was just breaking, but looking from the walled roof they had no need of its light, since everywhere in the dim city below and in Palætyrus on the mainland, houses flared like gigantic torches. In their red glare they could see the thousands of the attackers dragging out their inmates to death, or thrusting them back into the flames, while the night was made horrible with the shouts of the maddened mob, the

cries of the victims and the crackling roar of burning houses.

"Oh! Christ have mercy on them," sobbed Miriam.

"Why should He?" asked Nehushta. "They slew Him and rejected Him; now they pay the price He prophesied. May He have mercy on us, His servants."

"He would not have spoken thus," said Miriam indignantly.

"Nay, but justice speaks. Those who take the sword shall perish by the sword. Even so have these Jews done to the Greeks and Syrians in many of the cities--they who are blind and mad. Now it is their hour, and mayhap ours. Come, lady, these are no sights for you, though you might do well to learn to bear them, since if you escape you may see many such. Come, and if you wish we will pray for these Jews, especially for their children, who are innocent, and for ourselves."

That day at noon, most of the poorer and least protected Jews of the city having been killed, the Syrians began their attack upon the fortified palace of Benoni. Now it was that the defenders learned that they had to deal with no mere rabble, but with savage hordes, many thousands strong, directed by officers skilled in war. Indeed these men might be seen moving among them, and from their armour and appearance it was easy to guess that they were Romans. This, in fact, was the case, since Gessius Florus, the wicked, and after him other officers, made it

part of their policy to send Romans to stir up the Syrians against the Jews and to assist them in their slaughter.

First an attack was made upon the main gates, but when it was found that these were too strong to be taken easily, the assailants retreated with a loss of a score of men shot by the defenders from the wall. Then other tactics were adopted, for the Syrians, possessing themselves of the neighbouring houses, began to gall the garrison with arrows from the windows. Thus they drove them under cover, but did little more, since the palace was all of marble with cemented roofs, and could not be fired with the burning shafts they sent down upon it.

So the first day passed, and during the night no attack was made upon them. When dawn came they learned the reason, for there opposite to the gates was reared a great battering-ram; moreover, out at sea a huge galley was being rowed in as close to their walls as the depth of water would allow, that from her decks the sailors might hurl stones and siege arrows by means of catapults and thus break down their defences and destroy them.

Then it was that the real fight began. The Jews posted on the roof of the house poured arrows on the men who strove to work the ram, and killed many of them, till they were able to push the instrument so close that it could no longer be commanded. Now it got to work and with three blows of the great baulk of timber, of which the ram was fashioned, burst in the gates. Thereon the defenders, headed by old Benoni himself,

rushed out and put those who served it to the sword; then before they could be overcome, retreated across the ditch to the inner wall, breaking down the wooden bridge behind them. Now, since the ram was of no further use, as it could not be dragged through the ditch, the galley, that was anchored within a hundred paces, began to hurl huge stones and arrows at them, knocking down the walls and killing several, including two women and three children.

Thus matters went on till noon, the besiegers galling them with their arrows from the land side and the galley battering them from the sea, while they could do little or nothing in return, having no engines. Benoni called a council and set out the case, which was desperate enough. It was evident, he said, that they could not hold out another day, since at nightfall the Syrians would cross the narrow protecting ditch and set up a battering-ram against the inner wall. Therefore, they must do one of two things--sally out and attempt to cut their way through and gain open country, or fight on and at the last kill the women and children and rush out, those that were left of them, to be hacked down by the besieging thousands. As the first plan gave no hope, since, cumbered as they were with helpless people, they could not expect to escape the city, in their despair they decided on the second. All must die, therefore they would perish by each other's hands. When this decision was known, a wail went up from the women and the children began to scream with fright, those of them who were old enough to understand their doom.

Nehushta caught Miriam by the arm.

"Come to the highest roof," she said; "it is safe from the stones and arrows, and thence, if need be, we can hurl ourselves into the water and die an easy death."

So they went and crouched there, praying, for their case was desperate. Suddenly Nehushta touched Miriam and pointed to the sea. She looked and saw another galley approaching fast as oars and sails could bring her.

"What of it?" she asked heavily. "It will but hasten the end."

"Nay," replied Nehushta, "this ship is Jewish; she does not fly the Eagles, or a Phœnician banner. Behold! the Syrian vessel is getting up her anchors and preparing for fight."

It was true enough, for now the oars of the Syrian shot out and she forged ahead towards the newcomer. But just then the current caught her, laying her broadside on, whereon the Jewish ship, driven by the following wind, shifted her helm and, amidst a mighty shouting from sea and shore, drove down upon her, striking her amidships with its beak so that she heeled over. Then there was more tumult, and Miriam closed her eyes to shut out the horrid sight.

When she opened them again the Syrian galley had vanished, only the water was spotted with black dots which were the heads of men.

"Gallantly done!" screamed Nehushta. "See, she anchors and puts out her boats; they will save us yet. Down to the water-gate!"

On their way they met Benoni coming to seek them, and with him won the steps which were already crowded with fugitives. The two boats of the galley drew near and in the bow of the first of them stood a tall and noble-looking figure.

"It is Caleb," said Miriam, "Caleb who has come to save us."

Caleb it was indeed. At a distance of ten paces from the steps he halted his boat and called aloud:

"Benoni, Lady Miriam and Nehushta, if you still live, stand forward."

They stood forward.

"Now wade into the sea," he cried again, and they waded out until the water reached their armpits, when they were seized one by one and dragged into the boat. Many followed them and were also dragged in, until that boat and the other were quite full, whereon they turned and were rowed to the galley. Having embarked them, the two boats went back and again were filled with fugitives, for the most part women and children.

Again they went, but as they laded for the third time, the ends of ladders appeared above the encircling walls of the steps, and Syrians could be seen rushing out upon the portico, whence they began to lower themselves with ropes. The end of that scene was dreadful. The boats were full, till the water indeed began to overflow their gunwales, but many still remained upon the steps or rushed into the water, women screaming and holding their children above their heads, and men thrusting them aside in the mad rush for life. The boats rowed off, some who could swim following them. For the rest, their end was the sword. In all, seventy souls were rescued.

Miriam flung herself downwards upon the deck of the galley and burst into tears, crying out:

"Oh! save them! Can no one save them?" while Benoni seated at her side, the water running from his blood-stained garment, moaned:

"My house sacked; my wealth taken; my people slain by the Gentiles!"

"Thank God Who has saved us," broke in old Nehushta, "God and Caleb; and as for you, master, blame yourself. Did not we Christians warn you of what was to come? Well, as it has been in the beginning, so it shall be in the end."

Just then Caleb appeared before them, proud and flushed with triumph, as he well might be who had done great things and saved Miriam from the

sword. Benoni rose and, casting his arms about his neck, embraced him.

"Behold your deliverer!" he said to Miriam, and stooping down, he drew her to her feet.

"I thank you, Caleb. I can say no more," she murmured; but in her heart she knew that God had delivered her and that Caleb was but His instrument.

"I am well repaid," answered Caleb gravely. "For me this has been a fortunate day, who on it have sunk the great Syrian galley and rescued the woman--whom I love."

"Oath or no oath," broke in Benoni, bethinking him of what he had promised in the past, "the life you saved is yours, and if I have my way you shall take her and such of her heritage as remains."

"Is this a time to speak of such things?" said Miriam, looking up. "See yonder," and she pointed to the scene in progress on the seashore. "They drive our friends and servants into the sea and drown them," and once more she began to weep.

Caleb sighed. "Cease from useless tears, Miriam. We have done our best and it is the fortune of war. I dare not send out the boats again even if the mariners would listen to my command. Nehushta, lead your lady to the cabin and strip her of these wet garments lest she take cold in this

bitter wind. But first, Benoni, what is your mind?"

"To go to my cousin Mathias, the high priest at Jerusalem," answered the old man, "who has promised to give me shelter if in these days any can be found."

"Nay," broke in Nehushta, "sail for Egypt."

"Where also they massacre the Jews by thousands till the streets of Alexandria run with their blood," replied Caleb with sarcasm; adding, "Well, to Egypt I cannot take you who must bring this ship to those who await her on this side of Joppa, whence I am summoned to Jerusalem."

"Whither and nowhere else I will go," said Benoni, "to share in my nation's death or triumph. If Miriam wills it, I have told her she can leave me."

"What I have said before I say again," replied Miriam, "that I will never do."

Then Nehushta took her to the cabin, and presently the oars began to beat and the great galley stood out of the harbour, till in the silence of the sea the screams of the victims and the shouts of the victors died away, and as night fell naught could be seen of Tyre but the flare from the burning houses of the slaughtered Jews.

Save for the sobs and cries of the fugitives who had lost their friends and goods the night passed in quiet, since, although it was winter, the sea was calm and none pursued their ship. At daybreak she anchored, and coming from the cabin with Nehushta, in the light of the rising sun Miriam saw before her a ridge of rocks over which the water poured, and beyond it a little bay backed by a desolate coast. Nehushta also saw and sighed.

"What is this place?" asked Miriam.

"Lady, it is the spot where you were born. On yonder flat rock lay the vessel, and there I burned her many years ago. See those blackened timbers half buried in the sand upon the beach; doubtless they are her ribs."

"It is strange that I should return hither, and thus, Nou," said Miriam sighing.

"Strange, indeed, but mayhap there is a meaning in it. Before you came in storm to grow to womanhood in peace; now, perchance, you come on a peaceful sea to pass through womanhood in storm."

"Both journeys began with death, Nou."

"As all journeys end. Blackness behind and blackness in front, and between them a space of sunshine and shadow--that is the law. Yet have

no fear, for dead Anna, who had the gift of prophecy, foretold that you should live out your life, though with me, whose days are almost done, it may be otherwise."

Miriam's face grew troubled.

"I fear neither life nor death, Nou, who am willing to meet either as may chance. But to part with you--ah! that thought makes me fear."

"I think that it will not be yet awhile," said Nehushta, "for although I am old, I still have work to do before I lay me down and sleep. Come, Caleb calls us. We are to disembark while the weather holds."

So Miriam entered the boat with her grandfather and others who had escaped, for the faces of all of them were set towards Jerusalem, and was rowed to the shore over that very rock where first she drew her breath. Here they found Jews who had been watching for the coming of the galley. These men gave them a kind reception, and, what they needed even more, food, fire and some beasts of burden for their journey.

When all were gathered on the beach Caleb joined them, having handed over the galley to another Jew, who was to depart in her with those that waited on the shore, upon some secret mission of intercepting Roman corn-ships. When these men heard what he had done at Tyre, at first they were inclined to be angry, since they said that he had no authority to risk the vessel thus, but afterwards, seeing that he had succeeded, and

with no loss of men, praised him and said that it was a very great deed.

So the galley put about and sailed away, and they, to the number of some sixty souls, began their journey to Jerusalem. A little while later they came to a village, the same where Nehushta had found the peasant and his wife, whose inhabitants, at the sight of them, fled, thinking that they were one of the companies of robbers that hunted the land in packs, like wolves, plundering or murdering all they met. When they learnt the truth, however, these people returned and heard their story in silence, for in those days such tales were common enough. As it came to an end a withered, sunburned woman advanced to Nehushta, and, laying one hand upon her arm, pointed with the other at Miriam, saying:

"Tell me, friend, is that the babe I suckled?"

Then Nehushta, knowing her to be the nurse who had travelled with them to the village of the Essenes, greeted her, and answered "Yea," whereupon the woman cast her arms about Miriam and embraced her.

"Day by day," she said, "have I thought of you, little one, and now that my eyes have seen you grown so sweet and fair, I care not--I whose husband is dead and who have no children--how soon they close upon the world." Then she blessed her, and called upon her angel to protect her yonder in Jerusalem, and found her food and an ass to ride; and so they parted, to meet no more.

As it happened, they were fortunate upon that journey, since, with the armed guard of twenty men who accompanied Caleb, they were too strong a party to be attacked by the wandering bands of thieves, and, although it was reported that Titus and his army had already reached Cæsarea from Egypt, they met no Romans. Indeed, their only enemy was the cold, which proved so bitter that when, on the second night, they camped upon the heights over against Jerusalem, having no tents and fearing to light fires, they were obliged to walk about till daylight to keep their blood astir. Then it was that they saw strange and terrible things.

In the clear sky over Jerusalem blazed a great comet, in appearance like a sword of fire. It was true that they had seen it before at Tyre, but never before had it shown so bright. Moreover, there it had not the appearance of a sword. This they thought to be an ill omen, all of them except Benoni, who said that the point of the sword stretched out over Cæsarea, presaging the destruction of the Romans by the hand of God. Towards dawn, the pale, unnatural lustre of the comet faded, and the sky grew overcast and stormy. At length the sun came up, when, to their marvelling eyes, the fiery clouds took strange shapes.

"Look, look!" said Miriam, grasping her grandfather by the arm, "there are armies in the heavens, and they fight together."

They looked, and, sure enough, it seemed as though two great hosts were there embattled. They could discern the legions, the wind-blown standards, the charging chariots, and the squadrons of impetuous horse.

The firmament had become a battle-ground, and lo! it was red as with the blood of the fallen, while the air was full of strange and dreadful sounds, bred, perhaps, of wind and distant thunder, that came to them like the wail of the vanquished and the dull roar of triumphant armies. So terrified were they at the sight, that they crouched upon the ground and hid their faces in their hands. Only old Benoni standing up, his white beard and robes stained red by the ominous light, cried out that this celestial scene foretold the destruction of the enemies of God.

"Ay!" said Nehushta, "but which enemies?"

The tall Caleb, marching on his round of the camp, echoed:

"Yes, which enemies?"

Suddenly the light grew, all these fantastic shapes melted into a red haze, which sank down till Jerusalem before them seemed as though she floated in an ocean of blood and fire. Then a dark cloud came up and for a while the holy Hill of Zion vanished utterly away. It passed, the blue sky reappeared, and lo! the clear light streamed upon her marble palaces and clustered houses, and was reflected from the golden roofs of the Temple. So calm and peaceful did the glorious city look that none would have deemed indeed that she was already nothing but a slaughter-house, where factions fought furiously, and day by day hundreds of Jews perished beneath the knives of their own brethren.

Caleb gave the word to break their camp, and with bodies shivering in the cold and spirits terrified by fear, they marched across the rugged hills towards the Joppa gate, noting as they passed into the valley that the country had been desolated, for but little corn sprang in the fields, and that was trodden down, while of flocks and herds they saw none. Reaching the gate they found it shut, and there were challenged by soldiers, wild-looking men with ferocious faces of the army of Simon of Gerasa that held the Lower City.

"Who are you and what is your business?" these asked.

Caleb set out his rank and titles, and as these did not seem to satisfy them Benoni explained that the rest of them were fugitives from Tyre, where there had been a great slaughter of the Jews.

"Fugitives always have money; best kill them," said the captain of the gate. "Doubtless they are traitors and deserve to die."

Caleb grew angry and commanded them to open, asking by what right they dared to exclude him, a high officer who had done great service in the wars.

"By the right of the strong," they answered. "Those who let in Simon have to deal with Simon. If you are of the party of John or of Eleazer go to the Temple and knock upon its doors," and they pointed mockingly to the gleaming gates above.

"Has it come to this, then," asked Benoni, "that Jew eats Jew in Jerusalem, while the Roman wolves raven round the walls? Man, we are of no party, although, as I think, my name is known and honoured by all parties--the name of Benoni of Tyre. I demand to be led, not to Simon, or to John, or to Eleazer, but to my cousin, Mathias, the high priest, who bids us here."

"Mathias, the high priest," said the captain; "that is another matter. Well, this Mathias let us into the city, where we have found good quarters, and good plunder; so as one turn deserves another, we may as well let in his friends. Pass, cousin of Mathias the high priest, with all your company," and he opened the gate.

They entered and marched up the narrow streets towards the Temple. It was the hour of the day when all men should be stirring and busy with their work, but lo! the place was desolate--yes, although so crowded, it still was desolate. On the pavement lay bodies of men and women slain in some midnight outrage. From behind the lattices of the windows they caught sight of the eyes of hundreds peeping at them, but none gave them a good-morrow, or said one single word. The silence of death seemed to brood upon the empty thoroughfares. Presently it was broken by a single wailing voice that reached their ears from so far away that they could not catch its meaning. Nearer and nearer it came, till at length in the dark and narrow street they caught sight of a thin, white-bearded figure, naked to the waist as though to show the hideous scars and

rod-weals with which its back and breast were scored, still festering, some of them. This was the man who uttered the cries, and these were the words he spoke:

"A voice from the East! a voice from the West! a voice from the four Winds! a voice against Jerusalem and against the Temple! a voice against the bridegrooms and the brides! a voice against the whole people! Woe, woe to Jerusalem!"

Now he was upon them, yes, and marching through them as though he saw them not, although they shrank to one side and the other of the narrow street to avoid the touch of this ominous, unclean creature who scarcely seemed to be a man.

"Fellow, what do these words mean?" cried Benoni in angry fear. But, taking no heed, his pale eyes fixed upon the heavens, the wanderer answered only, "Woe, woe to Jerusalem! Woe to you who come up to Jerusalem!"

So he passed on, still uttering those awful words, till at length they lost sight of his naked form and the sound of his crying grew faint and died away.

"What a fearful greeting is this!" said Miriam, wringing her hands.

"Ay!" answered Nehushta, "but the farewell will be worse. The place is

doomed and all in it."

Only Caleb said, striving to look unconcerned:

"Have no fear, Miriam. I know the man. He is mad."

"Where does wisdom end and madness begin?" asked Nehushta.

Then they went on towards the gates of the Temple, always through the same blood-stained, empty streets.