

## CHAPTER XIV

### THE ESSENES FIND THEIR QUEEN AGAIN

They went on towards the gates of the Temple, but many a long day was destined to go by ere Miriam reached them. The entrance by which they were told they must approach if they sought speech of the high priest, was one of the two Huldah Gates on the south side of the Royal Cloister, and thither they came across the valley of Tyropæon. As they drew near to them of a sudden that gate which stood most to the east was flung wide, and out of it issued a thousand or more of armed men, like ants from a broken nest, who, shouting and waving swords, rushed towards their company. As it chanced, at the moment they were in the centre of an open space that once had been covered with houses but was now cumbered with hundreds of blackened and tottering walls, for fire had devoured them.

"It is the men of John who attack us," cried a voice, whereon, moved by a common impulse, the little band turned and fled for shelter among the ruined houses; yes, even Caleb and Benoni fled.

Before they reached them, lo! from these crumbling walls that they had thought untenanted save by wandering dogs, out rushed another body of savage warriors, the men of Simon who held the Lower City.

After this, Miriam knew little of what happened. Swords and spears

flashed round her, the factions fell upon each other, slaughtering each other. She saw Caleb cut down one of the soldiers of John, to be instantly assaulted in turn by a soldier of Simon, since all desired to kill, but none cared whom they slew. She saw her grandfather rolling over and over on the ground in the grip of a man who looked like a priest; she saw women and children pierced with spears. Then Nehushta seized her by the hand, and plunging a knife into the arm of a man who would have stayed them, dragged her away. They fled, an arrow sang past her ear; something struck her on the foot. Still they fled, whither she knew not, till at length the sound of the tumult died away. But not yet would Nehushta stop, for she feared that they might be followed. So on they went, and on, meeting few and heeded by none, till at length Miriam sank to the ground, worn out with fear and flight.

"Up," said Nehushta.

"I cannot," she answered. "Something has hurt my foot. See, it bleeds!"

Nehushta looked about her, and saw that they were outside the second wall in the new city of Bezetha, not far from the old Damascus Gate, for there, to their right and a little behind them, rose the great tower of Antonia. Beneath this wall were rubbish-heaps, foul-smelling and covered over with rough grasses and some spring flowers, which grew upon the slopes of the ancient fosse. Here seemed a place where they might lie hid awhile, since there were no houses and it was unsavoury. She dragged Miriam to her feet, and, notwithstanding her complaints and swollen

ankle, forced her on, till they came to a spot where, as it is to-day, the wall was built upon foundations of living rock, roughly shaped, and lined with crevices covered by tall weeds. To one of these crevices Nehushta brought Miriam, and, seating her on a bed of grass, examined her foot, which seemed to have been bruised by a stone from a sling. Having no water with which to wash the bleeding hurt, she made a poultice of crushed herbs and tied it about the ankle with a strip of linen. Even before she had finished her task, so exhausted was Miriam that she fell fast asleep. Nehushta watched her a while, wondering what they should do next, till, in that lonely place bathed by the warm spring sun, she also began to doze.

Suddenly she awoke with a start, having dreamed that she saw a man with white face and beard peering at them from behind a rough angle of rock. She stared: there was the rock as she had dreamed of it, but no man. She looked upward. Above them, piled block upon gigantic block, rose the wall, towering and impregnable. Thither he could not have gone, since on it only a lizard could find foothold. Nor was he anywhere else, for there was no cover; so she decided that he must have been some searcher of the rubbish-heap, who, seeing them hidden in the tall grasses, had fled away. Miriam was still sound asleep, and in her weariness presently Nehushta again began to doze, till at length--it may have been one hour later, or two or three, she knew not--some sound disturbed her. Opening her eyes, once more behind that ridge of rock she saw, not one white-bearded face, but two, staring at her and Miriam. As she sat up they vanished. She remained still, pretending to sleep, and again they

appeared, scanning her closely and whispering to each other in eager tones. Suddenly one of the faces turned a little so that the light fell on it. Now Nehushta knew why in her dream it had seemed familiar, and in her heart thanked God.

"Brother Ithiel," she said in a quiet voice, "why do you hide like a coney in these rocks?"

Both heads disappeared, but the sound of whispering continued. Then one of them rose again among the green grasses as a man might rise out of water. It was Ithiel's.

"It is indeed you, Nehushta?" said his well-remembered voice.

"Who else?" she asked.

"And that lady who sleeps at your side?"

"Once they called her Queen of the Essenes; now she is a hunted fugitive, waiting to be massacred by Simon, or John, or Eleazer, or Zealots, or Sicarii, or any other of the holy cut-throats who inhabit this Holy City," answered Nehushta bitterly.

Ithiel raised his hands as though in thankfulness, then said:

"Hush! hush! Here the very birds are spies. Brother, creep to that rock

and look if any men are moving."

The Essene obeyed, and answered, "None; and they cannot see us from the wall."

Ithiel motioned to him to return.

"Does she sleep sound?" he asked of Nehushta, pointing to Miriam.

"Like the dead."

Then, after another whispered conference, the pair of them crept round the angle of the rock. Bidding Nehushta follow them, they lifted the sleeping Miriam, and carried her between them through a dense growth of shrubs to another rock. Here they moved some grass and pushed aside a stone, revealing a hole not much larger than a jackal would make. Into this the brother entered, heels first. Then Nehushta, by his directions, taking the feet of the senseless Miriam, with her help he bore her into the hole, that opened presently into a wide passage. Last of all Ithiel, having lifted the grasses which their feet had trodden, followed them, pulling the stone back to its place, and cutting off the light. Once more they were in darkness, but this did not seem to trouble the brethren, for again lifting Miriam, they went forward a distance of thirty or forty paces, Nehushta holding on to Ithiel's robe. Now, at length, the cold air of this cave, or perhaps its deep gloom and the motion, awoke Miriam from her swoon-like sleep. She struggled in their

hands, and would have cried out, had not Nehushta bade her to be silent.

"Where am I?" she said. "Is this the hall of death?"

"Nay, lady. Wait a while, all shall be explained."

While she spoke and Miriam clung to her affrighted, Ithiel struck iron and flint together. Catching the spark upon tinder he blew it to a flame and lighted a taper which burnt up slowly, causing his white beard and face to appear by degrees out of the darkness, like that of a ghost rising from the tomb.

"Oh! surely I am dead," said Miriam, "for before me stands the spirit of my uncle Ithiel."

"Not the spirit, Miriam, but the flesh," answered the old man in a voice that trembled with joy. Then, since he could restrain himself no longer, he gave the taper to the brother, and, taking her in his arms, kissed her again and again.

"Welcome, most dear child," he said; "yes, even to this darksome den, welcome, thrice welcome, and blessed be the eternal God Who led our feet forth to find you. Nay, do not stop to talk, we are still too near the wall. Give me your hand and come."

Miriam glanced up as she obeyed, and by the feeble light of the taper

saw a vast rocky roof arching above them. On either side of her also were walls of rough-hewn rock down which dripped water, and piled upon the floor or still hanging half-cut from the roof, boulders large enough to fashion a temple column.

"What awful place is this, my uncle?" she asked.

"The cavern whence Solomon, the great king, drew stone for the building of the Temple. Look, here are his mason's marks upon the wall. Here he fashioned the blocks and thus it happened that no sound of saw or hammer was heard within the building. Doubtless also other kings before and since his day have used this quarry, as no man knows its age."

While he spoke thus he was leading her onwards over the rough, stone-hewn floor, where the damp gathered in little pools. Following the windings of the cave they turned once, then again and yet again, so that soon Miriam was utterly bewildered and could not have found her way back to the entrance for her life's sake. Moreover, the air had become so hot and stifling that she could scarcely breathe.

"It will be better presently," said Ithiel, noticing her distress, as he drew her limping after him into what seemed to be a natural crevice of rock hardly large enough to allow the passage of his body. Along this crevice they scrambled for eight or ten paces, to find themselves suddenly in a tunnel lined with masonry, and so large that they could stand upright.

"Once it was a watercourse," explained Ithiel, "that filled the great tank, but now it has been dry for centuries."

Down this darksome shaft hobbled Miriam, till presently it ended in a wall, or what seemed to be a wall--for when Ithiel pressed upon a stone it turned. Beyond it the tunnel continued for twenty or thirty paces, leading them at length into a vast chamber with arched roof and cemented sides and bottom, which in some bygone age had been a water-tank. Here lights were burning, and even a charcoal fire, at which a brother was engaged in cooking. Also the air was pure and sweet, doubtless because of the winding water-channels that ran upwards. Nor did the place lack inhabitants, for there, seated in groups round the tapers, or watching the cooking over the charcoal fire, were forty or fifty men, still clad, for the most part, in the robes of the Essenes.

"Brethren," cried Ithiel, in answer to the challenge of one who was set to watch the entry, "I bring back to you her whom we lost a while ago, the lady Miriam."

They heard, and seizing the tapers, ran forward.

"It is she!" they cried, "our queen and none other, and with her Nehushta the Libyan! Welcome, welcome, a thousand times, dear lady!"

Miriam greeted them one and all, and before these greetings were



finished they brought her food to eat, rough but wholesome, also good wine and sweet water. Then while she ate she heard all their story. It seemed that more than a year ago the Romans, marching on Jericho, had fallen upon their village and put a number of them to death, seizing others as slaves. Thereon the remnant fled to Jerusalem, where many more perished, for, being peaceable folk, all the factions robbed and slew them. Seeing, at last, that to live at large in the city would be to doom themselves to extinction, and yet not daring to leave it, they sought a refuge in this underground place, of which, as it chanced, one of their brethren had the secret. This he had inherited from his father, so that it was known to no other living man.

Here by degrees they laid up a great store of provisions of all sorts, of charcoal for burning, and other necessaries, carrying into the place also clothes, bedding, cooking utensils and even some rough furniture. These preparations being made, the fifty of them who remained removed themselves to the vaults where now they had already dwelt three months, and here, so far as was possible, continued to practise the rules of their order. Miriam asked how they kept their health in this darkness, to which they replied that sometimes they went out by that path which she had just followed, and mingled with the people in the city, returning to their hole at night. Ithiel and his companion were on such a journey when they found her. Also they had another passage to the upper air which they would show her later.

When Miriam had finished eating, dressed her hurt, and rested a while,

they took her to explore the wonders of the place. Beyond this great cistern, that was their common room, lay more to the number of six or seven, one of the smallest of which was given to Nehushta and herself to dwell in. Others were filled with stores enough to last them all for months. Last of all was a cave, not very large, but deep, which always held sweet water. Doubtless there was a spring at the bottom of it, which, when the other rain-fed tanks grew dry, still kept it supplied. From this cistern that had been used for generations after the others were abandoned, a little stair ran upwards, worn smooth by the feet of folk long dead, who had come hither to draw water.

"Where does it lead?" asked Miriam.

"To the ruined tower above," answered Ithiel. "Nay, another time I will show you. Now your place is made ready for you, go, let Nehushta bathe your foot, and sleep, for you must need it sorely."

So Miriam went and laid herself down to rest in the little cemented vault which was to be her home for four long months; and being worn out, notwithstanding the sufferings she had passed and her fears for her grandfather, slept there as soundly as ever she had done in her wind-swept chamber at the palace of Tyre, or in her house at the village of the Essenes.

When she awoke and saw the darkness all about her, she thought that it must be night; then remembering that in this place it was always night,

called to Nehushta, who uncovered the little lamp that burned in a corner of the vault, and went out, to return presently with the news that according to the Essenes, it was day. So she rose and put on her robes, and they passed together into the great chamber. Here they found the Essenes at prayer and making their reverences to the sun which they could not see, after which they ate their morning meal. Now Miriam spoke to Ithiel, telling him of her trouble about her grandfather, who, if he himself still lived, would think that she was dead.

"One thing is certain," replied her great-uncle: "that you shall not go out to seek him, nor must you tell him of your hiding-place, since soon or late this might mean that all of us would be destroyed, if only for the sake of the food which we have hoarded."

Miriam asked if she could not send a message. He answered:

"No, since none would dare to take it." In the end, however, after she had pleaded with him long and earnestly, it was agreed that she should write the words, "I am safe and well, but in a place that I must not tell you of," and sign her name upon a piece of parchment. This letter Ithiel, who purposed to creep out into the city that evening disguised as a beggar, to seek for tidings, said he would take, and, if might be, bribe some soldier to deliver it to Benoni at the house of the high priest, if he were there.

So Miriam wrote the letter, and at nightfall Ithiel and another brother

departed, taking it with them.

On the following morning they returned, safe, but with a dreadful tale of the slaughters in the city and in the Temple courts, where the mad factions still fought furiously.

"Your tidings, my uncle?" said Miriam, rising to meet him. "Does he still live?"

"Be of good comfort," he answered. "Benoni reached the house of Mathias in safety, and Caleb also, and now they are sheltering within the Temple walls. This much I had from one of the high priest's guards, who, for the price of a piece of gold I gave him, swore that he would deliver the letter without fail. But, child, I will take no more, for that soldier eyed me curiously and said it was scarcely safe for beggars to carry gold."

Miriam thanked him for his goodness and his news, saying that they lifted a weight from her heart.

"I have other tidings that may perhaps make it lighter still," went on the old man, looking at her sideways. "Titus with a mighty host draws near to Jerusalem from Cæsarea."

"There is no joy in that tale," replied Miriam, "for it means that the Holy City will be besieged and taken."

"Nay, but among that host is one who, if all the stories are true," and again he glanced at her face, "would rather take you than the city."

"Who?" she said, pressing her hands against her heart and turning redder than the lamplight.

"One of Titus' prefects of horse, the noble Roman, Marcus, whom in byegone days you knew by the banks of Jordan."

Now the red blood fled back to Miriam's heart, and she turned so faint that had not the wall been near at hand she would have fallen.

"Marcus?" she said. "Well, he swore that he would come, yet it will bring him little nearer me;" and she turned and sought her chamber.

So Marcus had come. Since he sent the letter and the ring that was upon her hand, and the pearls which were about her throat, she had heard no more of him. Twice she had written and forwarded the writings by the most trusty messenger whom she could find, but whether they reached him she did not know. For more than two years the silence between them had been that of death, till, indeed, at times she thought that he must be dead. And now he was come back, a commander in the army of Titus, who marched to punish the rebellious Jews. Would she ever see him again? Miriam could not tell. Yet she knelt and prayed from her pure heart that if it were once only, she might speak with him face to face. Indeed,

it was this hope of meeting that, more than any other, supported her through all those dreadful days.

A week went by, and although the hurt to her foot had healed, like some flower in the dark Miriam drooped and languished in those gloomy vaults. Twice she prayed her uncle to be allowed to creep to the mouth of the hole behind the ridge of rock, there to breathe the fresh air and see the blessed sky. But this he would not suffer. The thing was too dangerous, he said; for although none knew the secret of their hiding-place, already two or three fugitives had found their way into the quarries by other entrances, and these it was very difficult to pass unseen.

"So be it," answered Miriam, and crept back to her cell.

Nehushta looked after her anxiously, then said:

"If she cannot have air I think that she will soon die. Is there no way?"

"One," answered Ithiel, "but I fear to take it. The staircase from the spring leads to an ancient tower that, I am told, once was a palace of the kings, but now for these many years has been deserted, for its entrance is bricked up lest thieves should make it their home. None can come into that tower, nor is it used for purposes of war, not standing upon any wall, and there she might sit at peace and see the sun; yet I

fear to let her do so."

"It must be risked," answered Nehushta. "Take me to visit this place."

So Ithiel led her to the cistern, and from the cistern up a flight of steps to a little vaulted chamber, into which they entered through a stone trap-door, made of the same substance as the paving of the chamber, so that, when it was closed, none would guess that there was a passage beneath. From this old store-room, for such it doubtless was, ran more steps, ending, to all appearance, in a blank wall. Coming to it, Ithiel thrust a piece of flat iron, a foot or more in length, into a crack in this wall, lifted some stone latch within, and pushed, whereon a block of masonry of something more than the height and width of a man, and quite a yard in thickness, swung outwards. Nehushta passed through the aperture, followed by Ithiel.

"See," he said, loosing his hold of the stone, which without noise instantly closed, so that behind them there appeared to be nothing but a wall, "it is well hung, is it not? and to come hither without this iron would be dangerous. Here is the crack where it must be set to lift the latch within."

"Whoever lived here guarded their food and water well," answered Nehushta.

Then Ithiel showed her the place. It was a massive tower of a square

of about forty feet, whereof the only doorway, as he told her, had been bricked up many years before to keep the thieves and vagabonds from sheltering there. In height it must have measured nearly a hundred feet, and its roof had long ago rotted away. The staircase, which was of stone, still remained, however, leading to four galleries, also of stone. Perhaps once there were floors as well, but if so these had vanished, only the stone galleries and their balustrades remaining. Ithiel led Nehushta up the stair, which, though narrow, was safe and easy. Resting at each story, at length they came to that gallery which projected from its sides within ten feet of the top of the tower, and saw Jerusalem and the country round spread like a map beneath. Then, as it was sunset, they returned. At the foot of the stair Ithiel gave Nehushta the piece of iron and showed her how to lift the secret latch and pull upon the block of hewn stone that was a door, so that it opened to swing to again behind them.

Next morning, before it was dawn in the world above, Miriam aroused Nehushta. She had been promised that this day she should be taken up the Old Tower, and so great was her longing for the scent of the free air and the sight of the blue sky that she had scarcely closed her eyes this night.

"Have patience, lady," said Nehushta, "have patience. We cannot start until the Essenes have finished their prayers to the sun, which, down in this black hole, they worship more earnestly than ever."



So Miriam waited, though she would eat nothing, till at length Ithiel came and led them past the cistern up the stairs to the store or treasure chamber, where the trap-door stood wide, since, except in case of some danger, they had no need to shut it. Next, they reached the door of solid stone which Ithiel showed her how to open, and entered the base of the massive building. There, far above her, Miriam saw the sky again, red from the lights of morning, and at the sight of it clapped her hands and called aloud.

"Hush!" said Ithiel. "These walls are thick, yet it is not safe to raise a voice of joy in Jerusalem, that home of a thousand miseries, lest, perchance, some should hear it through a cleft in the masonry, and cause search to be made for the singer. Now, if you will, follow me."

So they went up and up, till at last they reached the topmost gallery, where the wall was pierced with loopholes and overhanging platforms, whence stones and other missiles could be hurled upon an attacking force. Miriam looked out eagerly, walking round the gallery from aperture to aperture.

To the south lay the marble courts and glittering buildings of the Temple, whence, although men fought daily in them, the smoke of sacrifice still curled up to heaven. Behind these were the Upper and the Lower City, crowded with thousands of houses, packed, every one of them, with human beings who had fled hither for refuge, or, notwithstanding the dangers of the time, to celebrate the Passover. To the east was the

rugged valley of Jehoshaphat, and beyond it the Mount of Olives, green with trees soon to be laid low by the Romans. To the north the new city of Bezetha, bordered by the third wall and the rocky lands beyond. Not far away, also, but somewhat in front of them and to the left, rose the mighty tower of Antonia, now one of the strongholds of John of Gischala and the Zealots, while also to the west, across the width of the city, were the towers of Hippicus, Phasael and Mariamne, backed by the splendid palace of Herod. Besides these were walls, fortresses, gates and palaces without number, so intricate and many that the eye could scarcely follow or count them, and, between, the numberless narrow streets of Jerusalem. These and many other things Ithiel pointed out to Miriam, who listened eagerly till he wearied of the task. Then they looked downwards through the overhanging platforms of stone to the large market-place beneath and to the front, and upon the roofs of the houses, mostly of the humbler sort, that were built behind almost up to the walls of the Old Tower, whereon many people were gathered as though for safety, eating their morning meal, talking anxiously together, and even praying.

Whilst they were thus engaged, Nehushta touched Miriam and pointed to the road which ran from the Valley of Thorns on the northeast. She looked, and saw a great cloud of dust that advanced swiftly, and presently, through the dust, the sheen of spears and armour.

"The Romans!" said Nehushta quietly.

She was not the only one who had caught sight of them, for suddenly the

battlement of every wall and tower, the roof of every lofty house, the upper courts of the Temple, and all high places became crowded with thousands and tens of thousands of heads, each of them staring towards that advancing dust. In silence they stared as though their multitudes were stricken dumb, till presently, from far below out of the maze of winding streets, floated the wail of a single voice.

"Woe, woe to Jerusalem!" said the voice. "Woe, woe to the City and the Temple!"

They shuddered, and as it seemed to them, all the listening thousands within reach of that mournful cry shuddered also.

"Aye!" repeated Ithiel, "woe to Jerusalem, for yonder comes her doom."

Now on the more rocky ground the dust grew thinner, and through it they could distinguish the divisions of the mighty army of destroyers. First came thousands of Syrian allies and clouds of scouts and archers, who searched the country far and wide. Next appeared the road-makers and the camp-setters, the beasts of burden with the general's baggage and its great escort, followed by Titus himself, his bodyguard and officers, by pikemen and by horsemen. Then were seen strange and terrible-looking engines of war beyond count, and with them the tribunes, and the captains of cohorts and their guards who preceded the engines, and that "abomination of desolation," the Roman Eagles, surrounded by bands of trumpeters, who from time to time uttered their loud, defiant note.

After them marched the vast army in ranks six deep, divided into legions and followed by their camp-bearers and squadrons of horse. Lastly were seen the packs of baggage, and mercenaries by thousands and tens of thousands. On the Hill of Saul the great host halted and began to encamp. An hour later a band of horsemen five or six hundred strong emerged out of this camp and marched along the straight road to Jerusalem.

"It is Titus himself," said Ithiel. "See, the Imperial Standard goes before him."

On they came till, from their lofty perch, Miriam, who was keen-sighted, could see their separate armour and tell the colour of their horses. Eagerly she searched them with her eyes, for well she guessed that Marcus would be one of those who accompanied his general upon this service. That plumed warrior might be he, or that with the purple cloak, or that who galloped out from near by the Standard on an errand. He was there; she was sure he was there, and yet they were as far apart as when the great sea rolled between them.

Now, as they reconnoitred and were passing the Tower of Women, of a sudden the gate opened, and from alleys and houses where they had lain in ambush were poured out thousands of Jews. Right through the thin line of horsemen they pierced, uttering savage cries, then doubled back upon the severed ends. Many were cut down; Miriam could see them falling from their horses. The Imperial Standard sank, then rose and sank again to

rise once more. Now dust hid the combat, and she thought that all the Romans must be slain. But no, for presently they began to appear beyond the dust, riding back by the way they had come, though fewer than they were. They had charged through the multitude of Jews and escaped. But who had escaped and who were left behind? Ah! that she could not tell; and it was with a sick and anxious heart that Miriam descended the steps of the tower into the darkness of the caves.