

CHAPTER XVI

THE SANHEDRIM

The Jewish soldiers haled Miriam roughly through dark and tortuous streets, bordered by burnt-out houses, and up steep stone slopes deep with the débris of the siege. Indeed, they had need to hasten, for, lit with the lamp of flaming dwellings, behind them flowed the tide of war. The Romans, driven back from this part of the city by that day's furious sally, under cover of the night were re-occupying in overwhelming strength the ground that they had lost, forcing the Jews before them and striving to cut them off from their stronghold in the Temple and that part of the Upper City which they still held.

The party of Jews who had Miriam in their charge were returning to the Temple enclosure, which they could not reach from the north or east because the outer courts and cloisters of the Holy House were already in possession of the Romans. So it happened that they were obliged to make their way round by the Upper City, a long and tedious journey. Once during that night they were driven to cover until a great company of Romans had marched past. Caleb wished to attack them, but the other captains said that they were too few and weary, so they lay hid for nearly three hours, then went on again. After this there were other delays at gates still in the hands of their own people, which one by one were unbolted to them. Thus it was not far from daylight when at length they passed over a narrow bridge that spanned some ravine and through

massive doors into a vast dim place which, as Miriam gathered from the talk of her captors, was the inner enclosure of the Temple. Here, at the command of that captain who had ordered her to be slain, she was thrust into a small cell in one of the cloisters. Then the men in charge of her locked the door and went away.

Sinking exhausted to the floor, Miriam tried to sleep, but could not, for her brain seemed to be on fire. Whenever she shut her eyes there sprang up before them visions of some dreadful scene which she had witnessed, while in her ears echoed now the shouts of the victors, now the pitiful cry of the dying, and now again the voice of the wounded Marcus calling her "Most Beloved." Was this indeed so, she wondered? Was it possible that he had not forgotten her during those years of separation when there must have been so many lovely ladies striving to win him, the rich, high-placed Roman lord, to be their lover or their husband? She did not know, she could not tell: perhaps, in such a plight, he would have called any woman who came to save him his Most Beloved, yes, even old Nehushta, and even then and there she smiled a little at the thought. Yet his voice rang true, and he had sent her the ring, the pearls and the letter, that letter which, although she knew every word of it, she still carried hidden in the bosom of her robe. Oh! she believed that he did love her, and, believing, rejoiced with all her heart that it had pleased God to allow her to save his life, even at the cost of her own. She had forgotten. There was his wound--he might die of it. Nay, surely he would not die. For her sake, the Essenes who knew him would treat him well, and they were skilful healers; also, what better

nurse than Nehushta could be found? Ah! poor Nou, how she would grieve over her. What sorrow must have taken hold of her when she heard the rock door shut and found that her nursling was cut off and captured by the Jews.

Happy, indeed, was it for Miriam that she could not witness what had chanced at the further side of that block of stone; that she could not see Nehushta beating at it with her hands and striving to thrust her thin fingers to the latch which she had no instrument to lift, until the bones were stripped of skin and flesh. That she could not hear Marcus, come to himself again, but unable to rise from off his knees, cursing and raving with agony at her loss, and because she, the tender lady whom he loved, for his sake had fallen into the hands of the relentless Jews. Yes, that she could not hear him cursing and raving in his utter helplessness, till at length the brain gave in his shattered head, and he fell into a fevered madness, that for many weeks was unpierced by any light of reason or of memory. All this, at least, was spared to her.

Well, the deed was done and she must pay the price, for without a doubt they would kill her, as they had a right to do, who had saved a Roman general from their clutches. Or if they did not, Caleb would, Caleb whose bitter jealousy, as her instinct told her, had turned his love to hate. Never would he let her live to fall, perchance, as his share of the Temple spoil, into the hands of the Roman rival who had escaped him.

It was not too great a price. Because of the birth doom laid upon her,

even if he sought it, and fortune brought them back together again, she could never be a wife to Marcus. And for the rest she was weary, sick with the sight and sound of slaughter and with the misery that in these latter days, as her Lord had prophesied, was come upon the city that rejected him and the people who had slain Him, their Messiah. Miriam wished to die, to pass to that home of perfect and eternal peace in which she believed; where, mayhap, it might be given to her in reward of her sufferings, to watch from afar over the soul of Marcus, and to make ready an abode for it to dwell in through all the ages of infinity. The thought pleased her, and lifting his ring, she pressed it to her lips which that very night had been pressed upon his lips, then drew it off and hid it in her hair. She wished to keep that ring until the end, if so she might. As for the pearls, she could not hide them, and though she loved them as his gift--well, they must go to the hand of the spoiler, and to the necks of other women, who would never know their tale.

This done Miriam rose to her knees and began to pray with the vivid, simple faith that was given to the first children of the Church. She prayed for Marcus, that he might recover and not forget her, and that the light of truth might shine upon him; for Nehushta, that her sorrow might be soothed; for herself, that her end might be merciful and her awakening happy; for Caleb, that his heart might be turned; for the dead and dying, that their sins might be forgiven; for the little children, that the Lord of Pity would have pity on their sufferings; for the people of the Jews, that He would lift the rod of His wrath from off them; yes, and even for the Romans, though for these, poor maid, she

knew not what petition to put up.

Her prayer finished, once more Miriam strove to sleep and dozed a little, to be aroused by a curious sound of feeble sighing, which seemed to come from the further side of the cell. By now the dawn was streaming through the stone lattice work above the doorway, and in its faint light Miriam saw the outlines of a figure with snowy hair and beard, wrapped in a filthy robe that had once been white. At first she thought that this figure must be a corpse thrust here out of the way of the living, it was so stirless. But corpses do not sigh as this man seemed to do. Who could he be, she wondered? A prisoner like herself, left to die, as, perhaps, she would be left to die? The light grew a little. Surely there was something familiar about the shape of that white head. She crept nearer, thinking that she might be able to help this old man who was so sick and suffering. Now she could see his face and the hand that lay upon his breast. They were those of a living skeleton, for the bones stood out, and over them the yellow skin was drawn like shrivelled parchment; only the deep sunk eyes still shone round and bright. Oh! she knew the face. It was that of Theophilus the Essene, a past president of the order indeed, who had been her friend from earliest childhood and the master who taught her languages in those far-off happy years which she spent in the village by the Dead Sea. This Theophilus she had found dwelling with the Essenes in their cavern home, and none of them had welcomed her more warmly. Some ten days ago, against the advice of Ithiel and others, he had insisted on creeping out to take the air and gather news in the city. Then he was a stout and hale old man, although

pale-faced from dwelling in the darkness. From that journey he had not returned. Some said that he had fled to the country, others that he had gone over to the Romans, and yet others that he had been slain by some of Simon's men. Now she found him thus!

Miriam came and bent over him.

"Master," she said, "what ails you? How came you here?"

He turned his hollow, vacant eyes upon her face.

"Who is it that speaks to me thus gently?" he asked in a feeble voice.

"I, your ward, Miriam."

"Miriam! Miriam! What does Miriam in this torture-den?"

"Master, I am a prisoner. But speak of yourself."

"There is little to say, Miriam. They caught me, those devils, and seeing that I was still well-fed and strong, although sunk in years, demanded to know whence I had my food in this city of starvation. To tell them would have been to give up our secret and to bring doom upon the brethren, and upon you, our guest and lady. I refused to answer, so, having tortured me without avail, they cast me in here to starve, thinking that hunger would make me speak. But I have not spoken. How

could I, who have taken the oath of the Essenes, and been their ruler?
Now at length I die."

"Oh! say not so," said Miriam, wringing her hands.

"I do say it and I am thankful. Have you any food?"

"Yes, a piece of dried meat and barley bread, which chanced to be in my robe when I was captured. Take them and eat."

"Nay, Miriam, that desire has gone from me, nor do I wish to live, whose days are done. But save the food, for doubtless they will starve you also. And, look, there is water in that jar, they gave it me to make me live the longer. Drink, drink while you can, who to-morrow may be thirsty."

For a time there was silence, while the tears that gathered in Miriam's eyes fell upon the old man's face.

"Weep not for me," he said presently, "who go to my rest. How came you here?"

She told him as briefly as she might.

"You are a brave woman," he said when she had finished, "and that Roman owes you much. Now I, Theophilus, who am about to die, call down the

blessing of God upon you, and upon him also for your sake, for your sake. The shield of God be over you in the slaughter and the sorrow."

Then he shut his eyes and either could not or would not speak again.

Miriam drank of the pitcher of water, for her thirst was great. Crouched at the side of the old Essene, she watched him till at length the door opened, and two gaunt, savage-looking men entered, who went to where Theophilus lay and kicked him brutally.

"What would you now?" he said, opening his eyes.

"Wake up, old man," cried one of them. "See, here is flesh," and he thrust a lump of some filthy carrion to his lips. "Smell it, taste it," he went on, "ah! is it not good? Well, tell us where is that store of food which made you so fat who now are so thin, and you shall have it all, yes, all, all."

Theophilus shook his head.

"Bethink you," cried the man, "if you do not eat, by sunrise to-morrow you will be dead. Speak then and eat, obstinate dog, it is your last chance."

"I eat not and I tell not," answered the aged martyr in a voice like a hollow groan. "By to-morrow's sunrise I shall be dead, and soon you

and all this people will be dead, and God will have judged each of us according to his works. Repent you, for the hour is at hand."

Then they cursed him and smote him because of his words of ill-omen, and so went away, taking no notice of Miriam in the corner. When they had gone she came forward and looked. His jaw had fallen. Theophilus the Essene was at peace.

Another hour went by. Once more the door was opened and there appeared that captain who had ordered her to be killed. With him were two Jews.

"Come, woman," he said, "to take your trial."

"Who is to try me?" Miriam asked.

"The Sanhedrim, or as much as is left of it," he answered. "Stir now, we have no time for talking."

So Miriam rose and accompanied them across the corner of the vast court, in the centre of which the Temple rose in all its glittering majesty.

As she walked she noticed that the pavement was dotted with corpses, and that from the cloisters without went up flames and smoke. They seemed to be fighting there, for the air was full of the sound of shouting, above which echoed the dull, continuous thud of battering rams striking against the massive walls.

They took her into a great chamber supported by pillars of white marble, where many starving folk, some of them women who carried or led hollow-cheeked children, sat silent on the floor, or wandered to and fro, their eyes fixed upon the ground as though in aimless search for they knew not what. On a dais at the end of the chamber twelve or fourteen men sat in carved chairs; other chairs stretched to the right and left of them, but these were empty. The men were clad in magnificent robes, which seemed to hang ill upon their gaunt forms, and, like those of the people in the hall, their eyes looked scared and their faces were white and shrunken. These were all who were left of the Sanhedrim of the Jews.

As Miriam entered one of their number was delivering judgment upon a wretched starving man. Miriam looked at the judge. It was her grandfather, Benoni, but oh! how changed. He who had been tall and upright was now drawn almost double, his teeth showed yellow between his lips, his long white beard was ragged and had come out in patches, his hand shook, his gorgeous head-dress was awry. Nothing was the same about him except his eyes, which still shone bright, but with a fiercer fire than of old. They looked like the eyes of a famished wolf.

"Man, have you aught to say?" he was asking of the prisoner.

"Only this," the prisoner answered. "I had hidden some food, my own food, which I bought with all that remained of my fortune. Your hyæna-men caught my wife, and tormented her until she showed it them.

They fell upon it, and, with their comrades, ate it nearly all. My wife died of starvation and her wounds, my children died of starvation, all except one, a child of six, whom I fed with what remained. Then she began to die also, and I bargained with the Roman, giving him jewels and promising to show him the weak place in the wall if he would convey the child to his camp and feed her. I showed him the place, and he fed her in my presence, and took her away, whither I know not. But, as you know, I was caught, and the wall was built up, so that no harm came of my treason. I would do it again to save the life of my child, twenty times over, if needful. You murdered my wife and my other children; murder me also if you will. I care nothing."

"Wretch," said Benoni, "what are your miserable wife and children compared to the safety of this holy place, which we defend against the enemies of Jehovah? Lead him away, and let him be slain upon the wall, in the sight of his friends, the Romans."

"I go," said the victim, rising and stretching out his hands to the guards, "but may you also all be slain in the sight of the Romans, you mad murderers, who, in your lust for power, have brought doom and agony upon the people of the Jews."

Then they dragged him out, and a voice called--"Bring in the next traitor."

Now Miriam was brought forward. Benoni looked up and knew her.

"Miriam?" he gasped, rising, to fall back again in his seat, "Miriam, you here?"

"It seems so, grandfather," she answered quietly.

"There is some mistake," said Benoni. "This girl can have harmed none. Let her be dismissed."

The other judges looked up.

"Best hear the charge against her first?" said one suspiciously, while another added, "Is not this the woman who dwelt with you at Tyre, and who is said to be a Christian?"

"We do not sit to try questions of faith, at least not now," answered Benoni evasively.

"Woman, is it true that you are a Christian?" queried one of the judges.

"Sir, I am," replied Miriam, and at her words the faces of the Sanhedrim grew hard as stones, while someone watching in the crowd hurled a fragment of marble at her.

"Let it be for this time," said the judge, "as the Rabbi Benoni says, we are trying questions of treason, not of faith. Who accuses this woman,

and of what?"

A man stepped forward, that captain who had wished to put Miriam to death, and she saw that behind him were Caleb, who looked ill at ease, and the Jew who had guarded Marcus.

"I accuse her," he said, "of having released the Roman Prefect, Marcus, whom Caleb here wounded and took prisoner in the fighting yesterday, and brought into the Old Tower, where he was laid till we knew whether he would live or die."

"The Roman Prefect, Marcus?" said one. "Why, he is the friend of Titus, and would have been worth more to us than a hundred common men. Also, throughout this war, none has done us greater mischief. Woman, if, indeed, you let him go, no death can repay your wickedness. Did you let him go?"

"That is for you to discover," answered Miriam, for now that Marcus was safe she would tell no more lies.

"This renegade is insolent, like all her accursed sect," said the judge, spitting on the ground. "Captain, tell your story, and be brief."

He obeyed. After him that soldier was examined from whose hand Miriam had struck the lantern. Then Caleb was called and asked what he knew of the matter.

"Nothing," he answered, "except that I took the Roman and saw him laid in the tower, for he was senseless. When I returned the Roman had gone, and this lady Miriam was there, who said that he had escaped by the doorway. I did not see them together, and know no more."

"That is a lie," said one of the judges roughly. "You told the captain that Marcus had been her lover. Why did you say this?"

"Because years ago by Jordan she, who is a sculptor, graven a likeness of him in stone," answered Caleb.

"Are artists always the lovers of those whom they picture, Caleb?" asked Benoni, speaking for the first time.

Caleb made no answer, but one of the Sanhedrim, a sharp-faced man, named Simeon, the friend of Simon, the son of Gioras, the Zealot, who sat next to him, cried, "Cease this foolishness; the daughter of Satan is beautiful; doubtless Caleb desires her for himself; but what has that to do with us?" though he added vindictively, "it should be remembered against him that he is striving to hide the truth."

"There is no evidence against this woman, let her be set free," exclaimed Benoni.

"So we might expect her grandfather to think," said Simeon, with

sarcasm. "Little wonder that we are smitten with the Sword of God when Rabbis shelter Christians because they chance to be of their house, and when warriors bear false witness concerning them because they chance to be fair. For my part I say that she is guilty, and has hidden the man away in some secret place. Otherwise why did she dash the light from the soldier's hand?"

"Mayhap to hide herself lest she should be attacked," answered another, "though how she came in the tower, I cannot guess."

"I lived there," said Miriam. "It was bricked up until yesterday and safe from robbers."

"So!" commented that judge, "you lived alone in a deserted tower like a bat or an owl, and without food or water. Then these must have been brought to you from without the walls, perhaps by some secret passage that was known to none, down which you loosed the Prefect, but had no time to follow him. Woman, you are a Roman spy, as a Christian well might be. I say that she is worthy of death."

Then Benoni rose and rent his robes.

"Does not enough blood run through these holy courts?" he asked, "that you must seek that of the innocent also? What is your oath? To do justice and to convict only upon clear, unshaken testimony. Where is this testimony? What is there to show that the girl Miriam had any

dealings with this Marcus, whom she had not seen for years? In the Holy Name I protest against this iniquity."

"It is natural that you should protest," said one of his brethren.

Then they fell into discussion, for the question perplexed them sorely, who, although they were savage, still wished to be honest.

Suddenly Simeon looked up, for a thought struck him.

"Search her," he said, "she is in good case, she may have food, or the secret of food, about her, or," he added--"other things."

Now two hungry-looking officers of the court seized Miriam and rent her robe open at the breast with their rough hands, since they would not be at the pains of loosening it.

"See," cried one of them, "here are pearls, fit wear for so fine a lady. Shall we take them?"

"Fool, let the trinkets be," answered Simeon angrily. "Are we common thieves?"

"Here is something else," said the officer, drawing the roll of Marcus's cherished letter from her breast.

"Not that, not that," the poor girl gasped.

"Give it here," said Simeon, stretching out his lean hand.

Then he undid the silk case and, opening the letter, read its first lines aloud. "'To the lady Miriam, from Marcus the Roman, by the hand of the Captain Gallus.' What do you say to that, Benoni and brethren? Why, there are pages of it, but here is the end: 'Farewell, your ever faithful friend and lover, Marcus.' So, let those read it who have the time; for my part I am satisfied. This woman is a traitress; I give my vote for death."

"It was written from Rome two years ago," pleaded Miriam; but no one seemed to heed her, for all were talking at once.

"I demand that the whole letter be read," shouted Benoni.

"We have no time, we have no time," answered Simeon. "Other prisoners await their trial, the Romans are battering our gates. Can we waste more precious minutes over this Nazarene spy? Away with her."

"Away with her," said Simon the son of Gioras, and the others nodded their heads in assent.

Then they gathered together discussing the manner of her end, while Benoni stormed at them in vain. Not quite in vain, however, for they

yielded something to his pleading.

"So be it," said their spokesman, Simon the Zealot. "This is our sentence on the traitress--that she suffer the common fate of traitors and be taken to the upper gate, called the Gate Nicanor, that divides the Court of Israel from the Court of Women, and bound with the chain to the central column that is over the gate, where she may be seen both of her friends the Romans and of the people of Israel whom she has striven to betray, there to perish of hunger and of thirst, or in such fashion as God may appoint, for so shall we be clean of a woman's blood. Yet, because of the prayer of Benoni, our brother, of whose race she is, we decree that this sentence shall not be carried out before the set of sun, and that if in the meanwhile the traitress elects to give information that shall lead to the recapture of the Roman prefect, Marcus, she shall be set at liberty without the gates of the Temple. The case is finished. Guards, take her to the prison whence she came."

So they seized Miriam and led her thence through the crowd of onlookers, who paused from their wanderings and weary searching of the ground to spit at or curse her, and thrust her back into her cell and to the company of the cold corpse of Theophilus the Essene.

Here Miriam sat down, and partly to pass the time, partly because she needed it, ate the bread and dried flesh which she had left hidden in the cell. After this sleep came to her, who was tired out and the worst being at hand, had nothing more to fear. For four or five hours she

rested sweetly, dreaming that she was a child again, gathering flowers on the banks of Jordan in the spring season, till, at length, a sound caused her to awake. She looked up to see Benoni standing before her.

"What is it, grandfather?" she asked.

"Oh! my daughter," groaned the wretched old man, "I am come here at some risk, for because of you and for other reasons they suspect me, those wolf-hearted men, to bid you farewell and to ask your pardon."

"Why should you ask my pardon, grandfather? Seeing things as they see them, the sentence is just enough. I am a Christian, and--if you would know it--I did, as I hope, save the life of Marcus, for which deed my own is forfeit."

"How?" he asked.

"That, grandfather, I will not tell you."

"Tell me, and save yourself. There is little chance that they will take him, since the Jews have been driven from the Old Tower."

"The Jews might re-capture the tower, and I will not tell you. Also, the lives of others are at stake, of my friends who have sheltered me, and who, as I trust, will now shelter him."

"Then you must die, and by this death of shame, for I am powerless to save you. Yes, you must die tied to a pinnacle of the gateway, a mockery to friend and foe. Why, if it had not been that I still have some authority among them, and that you are of my blood, girl though you be, they would have crucified you upon the wall, serving you as the Romans serve our people."

"If it pleases God that I should die, I shall die. What is one life among so many tens of thousands? Let us talk of other things while we have time."

"What is there to talk of, Miriam, save misery, misery, misery?" and again he groaned. "You were right, and I have been wrong. That Messiah of yours whom I rejected, yes, and still reject, had at least the gift of prophecy, for the words that you read me yonder in Tyre will be fulfilled upon this people and city, aye, to the last letter. The Romans hold even the outer courts of the Temple; there is no food left. In the upper town the inhabitants devour each other and die, and die till none can bury the dead. In a day or two, or ten--what does it matter?--we who are left must perish also by hunger and the sword. The nation of the Jews is trodden out, the smoke of their sacrifices goes up no more, and the Holy House that they have builded will be pulled stone from stone, or serve as a temple for the worship of heathen gods."

"Will Titus show no mercy? Can you not surrender?" asked Miriam.

"Surrender? To be sold as slaves or dragged a spectacle at the wheels of Cæsar's triumphal car, through the shouting streets of Rome? No, girl, best to fight it out. We will seek mercy of Jehovah and not of Titus. Oh! I would that it were done with, for my heart is broken, and this judgment is fallen on me--that I, who, of my own will, brought my daughter to her death, must bring her daughter to death against my will. If I had hearkened to you, you would have been in Pella, or in Egypt. I lost you, and, thinking you dead, what I have suffered no man can know. Now I find you, and because of the office that was thrust upon me, I, even I, from whom your life has sprung, must bring you to your doom."

"Grandfather," Miriam broke in, wringing her hands, for the grief of this old man was awful to witness, "cease, I beseech you, cease. Perhaps, after all, I shall not die."

He looked up eagerly. "Have you hope of escape?" he asked. "Perchance Caleb----"

"Nay, I know naught of Caleb, except that there is still good in his heart, since at the last he tried to save me--for which I thank him. Still, I had sooner perish here alone, who do not fear death in my spirit, whatever my flesh may fear, than escape hence in his company."

"What then, Miriam? Why should you think----?" and he paused.

"I do not think, I only trust in God and--hope. One of our faith, now

long departed, who foretold that I should be born, foretold also that I should live out my life. It may be so--for that woman was holy, and a prophetess."

As she spoke there came a rolling sound like that of distant thunder, and a voice without called:

"Rabbi Benoni, the wall is down. Tarry not, Rabbi Benoni, for they seek you."

"Alas! I must begone," he said, "for some new horror is fallen upon us, and they summon me to the council. Farewell, most beloved Miriam, may my God and your God protect you, for I cannot. Farewell, and if, by any chance, you live, forgive me, and try to forget the evil that, in my blindness and my pride, I have brought upon yours and you, but oh! most of all upon myself."

Then he embraced her passionately and was gone, leaving Miriam weeping.