

CHAPTER XVII

THE GATE OF NICANOR

Another two hours went by, and the lengthening shadows cast through the stonework of the lattice told Miriam that the day was drawing to its end. Suddenly the bolts were shot and the door opened.

"The time is at hand," she said to herself, and at the thought her heart beat fast and her knees trembled, while a mist came before her eyes, so that she could not see. When it passed she looked up, and there before her, very handsome and stately, though worn with war and hunger, stood Caleb, sword in hand and clad in a breast plate dented with many blows. At the sight, Miriam's courage came back to her; at least before him she would show no fear.

"Are you sent to carry out my sentence?" she asked.

He bowed his head. "Yes, a while hence, when the sun sinks," he answered bitterly. "That judge, Simeon, who ordered you to be searched, is a man with a savage heart. He thought that I tried to save you from the wrath of the Sanhedrim; he thought that I----"

"Let be what he thought," interrupted Miriam, "and, friend Caleb, do your office. When we were children together often you tied my hands and feet with flowers, do you remember? Well, tie them now with cords, and

make an end."

"You are cruel," he said, wincing.

"Indeed! some might have thought that you are cruel. If, for instance, they had heard your words in that tower last night when you gave up my name to the Jews and linked it with another's."

"Oh! Miriam," he broke in in a pleading voice, "if I did this--and in truth I scarcely know what I did--it was because love and jealousy maddened me."

"Love? The love of the lion for the lamb! Jealousy? Why were you jealous? Because, having striven to murder Marcus--oh! I saw the fight and it was little better, for you smote him unawares, being fully prepared when he was not--you feared lest I might have saved him from your fangs. Well, thanks be to God! I did save him, as I hope. And now, officer of the most merciful and learned Sanhedrim, do your duty."

"At least, Miriam," Caleb went on, humbly, for her bitter words, unjust as they were in part, seemed to crush him, "at least, I strove my best for you to-day--after I found time to think."

"Yes," she answered, "to think that other lions would get the lamb which you chance to desire for yourself."

"More," he continued, taking no note. "I have made a plan."

"A plan to do what?"

"To escape. If I give the signal on your way to the gate where I must lead you, you will be rescued by certain friends of mine who will hide you in a place of safety, while I, the officer, shall seem to be cut down. Afterwards I can join you and under cover of the night, by a way of which I know, we will fly together."

"Fly? Where to?"

"To the Romans, who will spare you because of what you did yesterday--and me also."

"Because of what you did yesterday?"

"No--because you will say that I am your husband. It will not be true, but what of that?"

"What of it, indeed?" asked Miriam, "since it can always become true. But how is it that you, being one of the first of the Jewish warriors, are prepared to fly and ask the mercy of your foes? Is it because----"

"Spare to insult me, Miriam. You know well why it is. You know well that I am no traitor, and that I do not fly for fear."

"Yes," she answered, in a changed tone, for his manly words touched her,
"I know that."

"It is for you that I fly, for your sake I will eat this dirt and crown
myself with shame. I fly that for the second time I may save you."

"And in return you demand--what?"

"Yourself."

"That I will not give, Caleb. I reject your offer."

"I feared it," he answered huskily, "who am accustomed to such denials.
Then I demand this, for know that if once you pass your word I may trust
it: that you will not marry the Roman Marcus."

"I cannot marry the Roman Marcus any more than I can marry you, because
neither of you are Christians, and as you know well it is laid upon
me as a birth duty that I may take no man to husband who is not a
Christian."

"For your sake, Miriam," he answered slowly, "I am prepared to be
baptised into your faith. Let this show you how much I love you."

"It does not show that you love the faith, Caleb, nor if you did love it

could I love you. Jew or Christian, I cannot be your wife."

He turned his face to the wall and for a while was silent. Then he spoke again.

"Miriam, so be it. I will still save you. Go, and marry Marcus, if you can, only, if I live, I will kill him if I can, but that you need scarcely fear, for I do not think that I shall live."

She shook her head. "I will not go, who am weary of flights and hidings. Let God deal with me and Marcus and you as He pleases. Yet I thank you, and am sorry for the unkind words I spoke. Oh! Caleb, cannot you put me out of your mind? Are there not many fairer women who would be glad to love you? Why do you waste your life upon me? Take your path and suffer me to take mine. Yet all this talk is foolishness, for both are likely to be short."

"Yours, and that of Marcus the Roman, and my own are all one path, Miriam, and I seek no other. As a lad, I swore that I would never take you, except by your own wish, and to that oath I hold. Also, I swore that if I could I would kill my rival, and to that oath I hold. If he kills me, you may wed him. If I kill him, you need not wed me unless you so desire. But this fight is to the death, yes, whether you live or die, it is still to the death as between me and him. Do you understand?"

"Your words are very plain, Caleb, but this is a strange hour to choose

to speak them, seeing that, for aught I know, Marcus is already dead, and that within some short time I shall be dead, and that death threatens you and all within this Temple."

"Yet we live, Miriam, and I believe that for none of the three of us is the end at hand. Well, you will not fly, either with me or without me?"

"No, I will not fly."

"Then the time is here, and, having no choice, I must do my duty, leaving the rest to fate. If, perchance, I can rescue you afterwards, I will, but do not hope for such a thing."

"Caleb, I neither hope nor fear. Henceforth I struggle no more. I am in other hands than yours, or those of the Jews, and as They fashion the clay so shall it be shaped. Now, will you bind me?"

"I have no such command. Come forth if it pleases you, the officers wait without. Had you wished to be rescued, I should have taken the path on which my friends await us. Now we must go another."

"So be it," said Miriam, "but first give me that jar of water, for my throat is parched."

He lifted it to her lips and she drank deeply. Then they went. Outside the cloister four men were waiting, two of them those doorkeepers who

had searched her in the morning, the others soldiers.

"You have been a long while with the pretty maid, master," said one of them to Caleb. "Have you been receiving confession of her sins?"

"I have been trying to receive confession of the hiding-place of the Roman, but the witch is obstinate," he answered, glaring angrily at Miriam.

"She will soon change her tune on the gateway, master, where the nights are cold and the day is hot for those who have neither cloaks for their backs nor water for their stomachs. Come on, Blue Eyes, but first give me that necklet of pearls, which may serve to buy a bit of bread or a drink of wine," and he thrust his filthy hand into her breast.

Next instant a sword flashed in the red light of the evening to fall full on the ruffian's skull, and down he went dead or dying.

"Brute," said Caleb with an angry snarl, "go to seek bread and wine in Gehenna. The maid is doomed to death, not to be plundered by such as you. Come forward."

The companions of the fallen man stared at him. Then one laughed, for death was too common a sight to excite pity or surprise, and said:

"He was ever a greedy fellow. Let us hope that he has gone where there

is more to eat."

Then, preceded by Caleb, they marched through the long cloisters, passed an inner door, turned down more cloisters on the right, and, following the base of the great wall, came to its beautiful centre gate, Nicanor, that was adorned with gold and silver, and stood between the Court of Women and the Court of Israel. Over this gateway was a square building, fifty feet or more in height, containing store chambers and places where the priests kept their instruments of music. On its roof, which was flat, were three columns of marble, terminated by gilded spikes. By the gate one of the Sanhedrim was waiting for them, that same relentless judge, Simeon, who had ordered Miriam to be searched.

"Has the woman confessed where she hid the Roman?" he asked of Caleb.

"No," he answered, "she says that she knows nothing of any Roman."

"Is it so, woman?"

"It is so, Rabbi."

"Bring her up," he went on sternly, and they passed through some stone chambers to a place where there was a staircase with a door of cedar-wood. The judge unlocked it, locking it again behind them, and they climbed the stairs till they came to another little door of stone, which, being opened, Miriam found herself on the roof of the gateway.

They led her to the centre pillar, to which was fastened an iron chain about ten feet in length. Here Simeon commanded that her hands should be bound behind her, which was done. Then he brought out of his robe a scroll written in large letters, and tied it on to her breast. This was the writing on the scroll:

"Miriam, Nazarene and Traitress, is doomed here to die as God shall appoint, before the face of her friends, the Romans."

Then followed several signatures of members of the Sanhedrim, including that of her grandfather, Benoni, who had thus been forced to show the triumph of patriotism over kinship.

This done the end of the chain was made fast round her middle and riveted with a hammer in such fashion that she could not possibly escape its grip. Then all being finished the men prepared to leave. First, however, Simeon addressed her:

"Stay here, accursed traitress, till your bones fall piecemeal from that chain," he said, "stay, through storm and shine, through light and darkness, while Roman and Jew alike make merry of your sufferings, which, if my voice had been listened to, would have been shorter, but more cruel. Daughter of Satan, go back to Satan and let the Son of the carpenter save you if he can."

"Spare to revile the maid," broke in Caleb furiously, "for curses are

spears that fall on the heads of those that throw them."

"Had I my will," answered the Rabbi, "a spear should fall upon your head, insolent, who dare to rebuke your elders. Begone before me, and be sure of this, that if you strive to return here it shall be for the last time. More is known about you, Caleb, than you think, and perhaps you also would make friends among the Romans."

Caleb made no answer, for he knew the venom and power of this Zealot Simeon, who was the chosen friend and instrument of the savage John of Gischala. Only he looked at Miriam with sad eyes, and, muttering "You would have it so, I can do no more. Farewell," left her to her fate.

So there in the red light of the sunset, with her hands bound, a placard setting out her shame upon her breast, and chained like a wild beast to the column of marble, Miriam was left alone. Walking as near to the little battlement as the length of her chain would allow, she looked down into the Court of Israel, where many of the Zealots had gathered to catch sight of her. So soon as they saw her they yelled and hooted and cast a shower of stones, one of which struck her on the shoulder. With a little cry of pain she ran back as far as she could reach on the further side of the pillar. Hence she could see the great Court of Women, whence the Gate Nicanor was approached by fifteen steps forming the half of a circle and fashioned of white marble. This court now was nothing but a camp, for the outer Court of the Gentiles having been taken by the Romans, their battering rams were working at its walls.

Then the night fell, but brought no peace with it, for the rams smote continually, and since they were not strong enough to break through the huge stones of the mighty wall, the Romans renewed their attempt to take them by storm in the hours of darkness. But, indeed, it was no darkness, for the Jews lit fires upon the top of the wall, and by their light drove off the attacking Romans. Again and again, from her lofty perch, Miriam could see the scaling ladders appear above the crest of the wall. Then up them would come long lines of men, each holding a shield above his head. As the foremost of these scrambled on to the wall, the waiting Jews rushed at them and cut them down with savage shouts, while other Jews seizing the rungs of the ladder, thrust it from the coping to fall with its living load back into the ditch beneath. Once there were great cries of joy, for two standard-bearers had come up the ladders carrying their ensigns with them. The men were overpowered and the ensigns captured to be waved derisively at the Romans beneath, who answered the insult with sullen roars of rage.

So things went on till at length the legionaries, wearing of this desperate fighting, took another counsel. Hitherto Titus had desired to preserve all the Temple, even to the outer courts and cloisters, but now he commanded that the gates, built of great beams of cedar and overlaid with silver plates, should be fired. Through a storm of spears and arrows soldiers rushed up to them and thrust lighted brands into every joint and hinge. They caught, and presently the silver plates ran down their blazing surface in molten streams of metal. Nor was this all, for

from the gates the fire spread to the cloisters on either side, nor did the outworn Jews attempt to stay its ravages. They drew back sullenly, and seated in groups upon the paving of the Court of Women, watching the circle of devouring flame creep slowly on. At length the sun rose. Now the Romans were labouring to extinguish the fire at the gateway, and to make a road over the ruins by which they might advance. When it was done at last, with shouts of triumph the legionaries, commanded by Titus himself and accompanied by a body of horsemen, advanced into the Court of Women. Back before them fled the Jews, pouring up the steps of the Gate Nicanor, on the roof of which Miriam was chained to her pinnacle. But of her they took no note, none had time to think, or even to look at a single girl bound there on high in punishment for some offence, of which the most of them knew nothing. Only they manned the walls to right and left, and held the gateway, but to the roof where Miriam was they did not climb, because its parapet was too low to shelter them from the arrows of their assailants.

The Romans saw her, however, for she perceived that some of his officers were pointing her out to a man on horseback, clad in splendid armour, over which fell a purple cloak, whom she took to be Titus himself. Also one of the soldiers shot an arrow at her which struck upon the spiked column above her head and, rebounding, fell at her feet. Titus noted this, for she saw the man brought before him, and by his gestures gathered that the general was speaking to him angrily. After this no more arrows were shot at her, and she understood that their curiosity being stirred by the sight of a woman chained upon a gateway, they did

not wish to do her mischief.

Now the August sun shone out from a cloudless sky till the hot air danced above the roofs of the Temple and the pavings of the courts, and the thousands shut within their walls were glad to crowd into the shadow to shelter from its fiery beams. But Miriam could not escape them thus. In the morning and again in the afternoon she was able indeed, by creeping round it, to take refuge in the narrow line of shade thrown by the marble column to which she was made fast. At mid-day, however, it flung no shadow, so for all those dreadful hours she must pant in the burning heat without a drop of water to allay her thirst. Still she bore it till at length came evening and its cool.

That day the Romans made no attack, nor did the Jews attempt a sally. Only some of the lighter of the engines were brought into the Court of Women, whence they hurled their great stones and heavy darts into the Court of Israel beyond. Miriam watched these missiles as they rushed by her, once or twice so close that the wind they made stirred her hair. The sight fascinated her and took her mind from her own sufferings. She could see the soldiers working at the levers and pulleys till the strings of the catapult or the boards of the balista were drawn to their places. Then the darts or the stones were set in the groove prepared to receive it, a cord was pulled and the missile sped upon its way, making an angry humming noise as it clove the air. At first it looked small; then approaching it grew large, to become small again to her following sight as its journey was accomplished. Sometimes, the stones, which did

more damage than the darts, fell upon the paving and bounded along it, marking their course by fragments of shattered marble and a cloud of dust. At others, directed by an evil fate, they crashed into groups of Jews, destroying all they touched. Wandering to and fro among these people was that crazed man Jesus, the son of Annas, who had met them with his wild prophetic cry as they entered into Jerusalem, and whose ill-omened voice Miriam had heard again before Marcus was taken at the fight in the Old Tower. To and fro he went, none hindering him, though many thrust their fingers in their ears and looked aside as he passed, wailing forth: "Woe, woe to Jerusalem! Woe to the city and the Temple!" Of a sudden, as Miriam watched, he was still for a moment, then throwing up his arms, cried in a piercing voice, "Woe, woe to myself!" Before the echo of his words had died against the Temple walls, a great stone cast from the Court of Women rushed upon him through the air and felled him to the earth. On it went with vast bounds, but Jesus, the son of Annas, lay still. Now, in the hour of the accomplishment of his prophecy, his pilgrimage was ended.

All the day the cloisters that surrounded the Court of Women burned fiercely, but the Jews, whose heart was out of them, did not sally forth, and the Romans made no attack upon the inner Court of Israel. At length the last rays of the setting sun struck upon the slopes of the Mount of Olives, the white tents of the Roman camps, and the hundreds of crosses, each bearing its ghastly burden, that filled the Valley of Jehoshaphat and climbed up the mountain sides wherever space could be found for them to stand. Then over the tortured, famished city down fell

the welcome night. To none was it more welcome than to Miriam, for with it came a copious dew which seemed to condense upon the gilded spike of her marble pillar, whence it trickled so continually, that by licking a little channel in the marble, she was enabled, before it ceased, to allay the worst pangs of her thirst. This dew gathered upon her hair, bared neck and garments, so that through them also she seemed to take in moisture and renew her life. After this she slept a while, expecting always to be awakened by some fresh conflict. But on that night none took place, the fight was for the morrow. Meanwhile there was peace.

Miriam dreamed in her uneasy sleep, and in this dream many visions came to her. She saw this sacred hill of Moriah, whereon the Temple stood, as it had been in the beginning, a rugged spot clothed with ungrafted carob trees and olives, and inhabited, not of men, but by wild boars and the hyænas that preyed upon their young. Almost in its centre lay a huge black stone. To this stone came a man clad in the garb of the Arabs of the desert, and with him a little lad whom he bound upon the stone as though to offer him in sacrifice. Then, as he was about to plunge a knife into his heart, a glory shone round the place, and a voice cried to him to hold his hand. That was a vision of the offering of Isaac. It passed, and there came another vision.

Again she saw the sacred height of Moriah, and lo! a Temple stood upon it, a splendid building, but not that which she knew, and in front of this Temple the same black rock. On the rock, where once the lad had been bound, was an altar, and before the altar a glorious man clad

in priestly robes, who offered sacrifice of lambs and oxen and in a sonorous voice gave praise to Jehovah in the presence of a countless host of people. This she knew was the vision of Solomon the King.

It passed, and lo! by this same black rock stood another man, pale and eager-faced, with piercing eyes, who reproached the worshippers in the Temple because of the wickedness of their hearts, and drove them from before him with a scourge of cords. This she knew was a vision of Jesus, the Son of Mary, that Messiah Whom she worshipped, for as He drove out the people He prophesied the desolation that should fall upon them, and as they fled they mocked Him.

The picture passed, and again she saw the black rock, but now it lay beneath a gilded dome and light fell upon it through painted windows. About it moved many priests whose worship was strange to her, and so they seemed to move for ages. At length the doors of that dome were burst open, and upon the priests rushed fair-faced, stately-looking men, clad in white mail and bearing upon their shields and breastplates the symbol of the Cross. They slaughtered the votaries of the strange worship, and once more the rock was red with blood. Now they were gone in turn and other priests moved beneath the dome, but the Cross had vanished thence, and its pinnacles were crowned with crescents.

That vision passed, and there came another of dim, undistinguishable hordes that tore down the crescents and slaughtered the ministers of the strange faith, and gave the domed temple to the flames.

That vision passed, and once more the summit of Mount Moriah was as it had been in the beginning: the wild olive and the wild fig flourished among its desolate terraces, the wild boar roamed beneath their shade, and there were none to hunt him. Only the sunlight and the moonlight still beat upon the ancient Rock of Sacrifice.

That vision passed, and lo! around the rock, filling the Valley of Jehoshaphat and the valleys beyond, and the Mount of Olives and the mountains above, yes, and the empty air between earth and sky, further than the eye could reach, stood, rank upon rank, all the countless million millions of mankind, all the millions that had been and were yet to be, gazing, every one of them, anxiously and in utter silence upon the scarred and naked Rock of Sacrifice. Now upon the rock there grew a glory so bright that at the sight of it all the million of millions abased their eyes. And from the glory pealed forth a voice of a trumpet, that seemed to say:

"This is the end and the beginning, all things are accomplished in their order, now is the day of Decision."

Then, in her dream, the sun turned red as blood and the stars seemed to fall and winds shook the world, and darkness covered it, and in the winds and the darkness were voices, and standing upon the rock, its arms stretched east and west, a cross of fire, and filling the heavens above the cross, company upon company of angels. This last vision of judgment

passed also and Miriam awoke again from her haunted, horror-begotten sleep, to see the watch-fires of the Romans burning in the Court of Women before her, and from the Court of Israel behind her, where they were herded like cattle in the slaughterer's yard, to hear the groans of the starving Jews who to-morrow were destined to the sword.