

CHAPTER XVIII

THE DEATH-STRUGGLE OF ISRAEL

Now the light began to grow, but that morning no sun rose upon the sight of the thousands who waited for its coming. The whole heaven was dark with a gray mist that seemed to drift up in billows from the sea, bringing with it a salt dampness. For this mist Miriam was thankful, since had the sun shone hotly she knew not how she would have lived through another day. Already she grew very weak, who had suffered so much and eaten so little, and whose only drink had been the dew, but she felt that while the mist hid the sun her life would bide with her.

To others also this mist was welcome. Under cover of it Caleb approached the gateway, and although he could not ascend it, as the doors were locked and guarded, he cast on to its roof so cleverly, that it fell almost at Miriam's feet, a linen bag in which was a leathern bottle containing wine and water, and with it a mouldy crust of bread, doubtless all that he could find, or buy, or steal. Kneeling down, Miriam loosed the string of the bag with her teeth and devoured the crust of bread, again returning thanks that Caleb had been moved to this thought. But from the bottle she could not drink, for her hands being bound behind her, she was able neither to lift it nor to untie the thong that made fast its neck. Therefore, as, notwithstanding the dew which she had lapped, she needed drink sorely and longed also for the use of her hands to protect herself from the tormenting attacks of stinging

gnats and carrion flies, she set herself to try to free them.

Now the gilt spike that crowned her pillar was made fast with angle-irons let into the marble and the edge of one of these irons projected somewhat and was rough. Looking at it the thought came into Miriam's mind that it might serve to rub through the cord with which her hands were bound. So standing with her back to the pillar she began her task, to find that it must be done little by little, since the awkward movement wearied her, moreover, her swollen arms chafing against the marble of the column became intolerably sore. Yet, although the pain made her weep, from time to time she persevered. But night fell before the frayed cord parted.

In the mist also the Romans came near to the gate, notwithstanding the risk, for they were very curious about her, and called to her asking why she was bound there. She replied in the Latin language, which was understood by very few of the Jews, that it was because she had rescued a Roman from death. Before they could speak again those who questioned her were driven back by a shower of arrows discharged from the wall, but in the distance she thought that she saw one of them make report to an officer, who on receipt of it seemed to give some orders.

Meanwhile, also under cover of the mist, the Jews were preparing themselves for battle. To the number of over four thousand men they gathered silently in the Court of Israel. Then of a sudden the gates were thrown open, and among them that of Nicanor. The trumpets blew a

signal and out they poured into the Court of Women, driving in the Roman guards and outposts as sticks and straws are driven by a sudden flood. But the legionaries beyond were warned, and locking their shields together stood firm, so that the Jews fell back from their iron line as such a flood falls from an opposing rock. Yet they would not retreat, but fought furiously, killing many of the Romans, until at length Titus charged on them at the head of a squadron of horse and drove them back headlong through the gates. Then the Romans came on and put those whom they had captured to the sword, but as yet they did not attempt the storming of the gates. Only officers advanced as near to the wall as they dared and called to the Jews to surrender, saying that Titus desired to preserve their Temple and to spare their lives. But the Jews answered them with insults, taunts, and mockery, and Miriam, listening, wondered what spirit had entered into these people and made them mad, so that they chose death and destruction rather than peace and mercy. Then she remembered her strange visions of the night, and in them seemed to find an answer.

Having repulsed this desperate sally the Roman officers set thousands of men to work to attempt to extinguish the flaming cloisters, since, notwithstanding the answer of the Jews, Titus still desired to save the Temple. As for its defenders, beyond guarding the walls of the Court of Israel, they did no more. Gathering in such places as were most protected from the darts and stones thrown by the engines, they crouched upon the ground, some in sullen silence, some beating their breasts and rending their robes, while the women and children wailed in their

misery and hunger, throwing dust upon their heads. The Gate of Nicanor, however, was still held by a strong guard, who suffered none to approach it, nor did any attempt to ascend to its roof. That Caleb still lived Miriam knew, for she had seen him, covered with dust and blood, driven back by the charge of Roman horse up the steps of the gateway. This, indeed, he was one of the last to pass before it was closed and barred to keep out the pursuing Romans. After that she saw no more of him for many a month.

So that day also, the last of the long siege, wore away. At nightfall the thick mist cleared, and for the last time the rich rays of sunset shone upon the gleaming roof and burning pinnacles of the Temple and were reflected from the dazzling whiteness of its walls. Never had it looked more beautiful than it did in that twilight as it towered, still perfect, above the black ruins of the desolated city. The clamour and shouting had died away, even the mourners had ceased their pitiful cries; except the guards, the Romans had withdrawn and were eating their evening meal, while those who worked the terrible engines ceased from their destroying toil. Peace, an ominous peace, brooded on the place, and everywhere, save for the flames that crackled among the cedar-wood beams in the roofs of the cloisters, was deep silence, such as in tropic lands precedes the bursting of a cyclone. To Miriam who watched, it seemed as though in the midst of this unnatural quiet Jehovah was withdrawing Himself from the house where His Spirit dwelt and from the people who worshipped Him with their lips, but rejected Him in their hearts. Her tormented nerves shuddered with a fear that was not of the

body, as she stared upwards at the immense arch of the azure evening sky, half expecting that her mortal eyes would catch some vision of the departing wings of the Angel of the Lord. But there she could see nothing except the shapes of hundreds of high-poised eagles. "Where the carcass is there shall the eagles be gathered together," she muttered to herself, and remembering that these four birds were come to feast upon the bones of the whole people of the Jews and upon her own, she shut her eyes and groaned.

Then the light died on the Temple towers and faded from the pale slopes of the mountains, and in place of the wheeling carrion birds bright stars shone out one by one upon the black mantle of the night.

Once again, setting her teeth because of the agony that the touch of the marble gave to her raw and swollen flesh, Miriam began to fret the cords which bound her wrists against the rough edge of the angle-iron. She was sure that it was nearly worn through, but oh! how could she endure the agony until it parted? Still she did endure, for at her feet lay the bottle, and burning thirst drove her to the deed. Suddenly her reward came, and she felt that her arms were free; yes, numbed, swollen and bleeding, they fell against her sides, wrenching the stiffened muscles of her shoulders back to their place in such a fashion that she well-nigh fainted with the pain. Still they were free, and presently she was able to lift them, and with the help of her teeth to loose the ends of the cord, so that the blood could run once more through her blackened wrists and hands. Again she waited till some feeling had come back into

her fingers, which were numb and like to mortify. Then she knelt down, and drawing the leather bottle to her, held it between her palms, while, with her teeth, she undid its thong. The task was hard, for it was well tied, but at length the knots gave, and Miriam drank. So fearful was her thirst that she could have emptied the bottle at a draught, but this she, who had lived in the desert, was too wise to do, for she knew that it might kill her. Also when that was gone there was no more. So she drank half of it in slow sips, then tied the string as well as she was able and set it down again.

Now the wine, although it was mixed with water, took hold of her who for so long had eaten nothing save a mouldy crust, so that strange sounds drummed in her ears, and sinking down against the column she became senseless for a while. She awoke again, feeling somewhat refreshed and, though her head seemed as though it did not belong to her, well able to think. Her arms also were better and her fingers had recovered their feeling. If only she could loose that galling chain, she thought to herself, she might escape, for now death, however strong her faith, was very near and unlovely; also she suffered in many ways. To die and pass quick to Heaven--that would be well, but to perish by inches of starvation, heat, cold, and cramped limbs, with pains within and without and a swimming sickness of the head, ah! it was hard to bear. She knew that even were she free she could not hope to descend the gateway by its staircase, since the doors were locked and barred, and if she passed them it would be but to find herself among the Jews in the vaulted chambers beneath. But, so she thought, perhaps she could drop from the

roof, which was not so very high, on to the paving in front of the first stair, and then, if she was unhurt, run or crawl to the Romans, who might give her shelter.

So Miriam tried to undo the chain, only to find that as well might she hope to pull down the Gate Nicanor with her helpless hands. At this discovery she wept, for now she grew weak. Well for Miriam was it that she could not have her wish, for certainly had she attempted to drop down from the gateway to the marble paving, or even on to the battlements of the walls which ran up to it on either side, her bones would have been shattered like the shell of an egg and she must have perished miserably.

While she grieved thus, Miriam heard a stir in the Court of Israel, and by the dim starlight saw that men were gathering, to do what she knew not. Presently, as she wondered, the great gates were opened very softly and out poured the Jews upon their last sally. Miriam was witnessing the death-struggle of the nation of Israel. At the foot of the marble steps they divided, one-half of them rushing towards the cloister on the right, and the other to that upon the left. Their object, as it seemed to her, was to slay those Roman soldiers, who, by the command of Titus, were still engaged in fighting the flames that devoured these beautiful buildings, and then to surprise the camp beyond. The scheme was such as a madman might have made, seeing that the Romans, warned by the sortie of the morning, had thrown up a wall across the lower part of the Court of Women, and beyond that were protected by every safeguard known to the

science of ancient war. Also the moment that the first Jew set his foot upon the staircase, watching sentries cried out in warning and trumpets gave their call to arms.

Still, they reached the cloisters and killed a few Romans who had not time to get away. Following those who fled, they came to the wall and began to try to force it, when suddenly on its crest and to the rear appeared thousands of those men whom they had hoped to destroy, every one of them wakeful, armed and marshalled. The Jews hesitated, and, like a living stream of steel, the Roman ranks poured over the wall. Then, of a sudden, terror seized those unhappy men, and, with a melancholy cry of utter despair, they turned to flee back to the Court of Israel. But this time the Romans were not content with driving them away, they came on with them; some of them even reached the gate before them. Up the marble steps poured friend and foe together; together they passed the open gate, in their mad rush sweeping away those who had stayed to guard it, and burst into the Court of Israel. Then leaving some to hold the gate and reinforced continually by fresh companies from the camps within and without the Temple courts, the Romans ran on towards the doors of the Holy House, cutting down the fugitives as they went. Now none attempted to stand; there was no fight made; even the bravest of the Jewish warriors, feeling that their hour was come and that Jehovah had deserted His people, flung down their weapons and fled, some to escape to the Upper City, more to perish on the Roman spears.

A few attempted to take refuge in the Holy House itself, and after these

followed some Romans bearing torches in their hands. Miriam, watching terrified from the roof of the Gate Nicanor, saw them go, the torches floating on the dusky air like points of wind-tossed fire. Then suddenly from a certain window on the north side of the Temple sprang out a flame so bright that from where she stood upon the gate, Miriam could see every detail of the golden tracery. A soldier mounted on the shoulders of another and not knowing in his madness that he was a destroying angel, had cast a torch into and fired the window. Up ran the bright, devouring flame spreading outwards like a fan, so that within some few minutes all that side of the Temple was but a roaring furnace. Meanwhile the Romans were pressing through the Gate Nicanor in an unending stream, till presently there was a cry of "Make way! Make way!"

Miriam looked down to see a man, bare-headed and with close-cropped hair, white-robed also and unarmoured, as though he had risen from his couch, riding on a great war-horse, an ivory wand in his hand and preceded by an officer who bore the standard of the Roman Eagles. It was Titus himself, who as he came shouted to the centurions to beat back the legionaries and extinguish the fire. But who now could beat them back? As well might he have attempted to restrain the hosts of Gehenna burst to the upper earth. They were mad with the lust of blood and the lust of plunder, and even to the voice of their dread lord they paid no heed.

New flames sprang up in other parts of the vast Temple. It was doomed. The golden doors were burst open and, attended by his officers, Titus passed through them to view for the first and last time the home of

Jehovah, God of the Jews. From chamber to chamber he passed, yes, even into the Holy of Holies itself, whence by his command were brought out the golden candlesticks and the golden table of shewbread, nor, since God had deserted His habitation, did any harm come to him for that deed.

Now the Temple which for one thousand one hundred and thirty years had stood upon the sacred summit of Mount Moriah, went upwards in a sheet of flame, itself the greatest of the sacrifices that had ever been offered there; while soldiers stripped it of its gold and ornaments, tossing the sacred vessels to each other and tearing down the silken curtains of the shrine. Nor were victims lacking to that sacrifice, for in their blind fury the Romans fell upon the people who were crowded in the Court of Israel, and slew them to the number of more than ten thousand, warrior and priest, citizen and woman and child together, till the court swarm with blood and the Rock of Offering was black with the dead who had taken refuge there. Yet these did not perish quite unavenged, for many of the Romans, their arms filled with priceless spoils of gold and silver, the treasures of immemorial time, sank down overcome by the heat, and where they fell they died.

From the Court of Israel went up one mighty wail of those who sank beneath the sword. From the thousands of the Romans went up a savage shout of triumph, the shout of those who put them to the sword. From the multitude of the Jews who watched this ruin from the Upper City went up a ceaseless scream of utter agony, and dominating all, like the accompaniment of some fearful music, rose the fierce, triumphant roar of

fire. In straight lines and jagged pinnacles the flames soared hundreds of feet into the still air, leaping higher and ever higher as the white walls and gilded roofs fell in, till all the Temple was but one gigantic furnace, near which none could bide save the dead, whose very garments took fire as they lay upon the ground. Never, was such a sight seen before; never, perhaps, will such a sight be seen again--one so awesome, yet so majestic.

Now every living being whom they could find was slain, and the Romans drew back, bearing their spoil with them. But the remainder of the Jews, to the number of some thousands, escaped by the bridges, which they broke down behind them, across the valley into the Upper City, whence that piercing, sobbing wail echoed without cease. Miriam watched till she could bear the sight no longer. The glare blinded her, the heat of the incandescent furnace shrivelled her up, her white dress scorched and turned brown. She crouched behind the shelter of her pinnacle gasping for breath. She prayed that she might die, and could not. Now she remembered the drink that remained in the leathern bottle, and swallowed it to the last drop. Then she crouched down again against the pillar, and lying thus her senses left her.

When they came back it was daylight, and from the heap of ashes that had been the Temple of Herod and the most glorious building in the whole world, rose a thick cloud of black smoke, pierced here and there by

little angry tongues of fire. The Court of Israel was strewn so thick with dead that in places the soldiers walked on them as on a carpet, or to be rid of them, hurled them into the smouldering ruins. Upon the altar that stood on the Rock of Sacrifice a strange sight was to be seen, for set up there was an object like the shaft of a lance wreathed with what seemed to be twining snakes and surmounted by a globe on which she stood a golden eagle with outspread wings. Gathered in front of it were a vast number of legionaries who did obeisance to this object. They were offering worship to the Roman standards upon the ancient altar of the God of Israel! Presently a figure rode before them attended by a glittering staff of officers, to be greeted with a mighty shout of "Titus Imperator! Titus Imperator!" Here on the sense of his triumph his victorious legions named their general Cæsar.

Nor was the fighting altogether ended, for on the roofs of some of the burning cloisters were gathered a few of the most desperate of the survivors of the Jews, who, as the cloisters crumbled beneath them, retreated slowly towards the Gate Nicanor, which still stood unharmed. The Romans, weary with slaughter, called to them to come down and surrender, but they would not, and Miriam watching them, to her horror saw that one of these men was none other than her grandfather, Benoni. As they would not yield, the Romans shot at them with arrows, so that presently every one of them was down except Benoni, whom no dart seemed to touch.

"Cease shooting," cried a voice, "and bring a ladder. That man is brave

and one of the Sanhedrim. Let him be taken alive."

A ladder was brought and reared against the wall near the Gate Nicanor and up it came Romans. Benoni retreated before them till he stood upon the edge of the gulf of advancing fire. Then he turned round and faced them. As he turned he caught sight of Miriam huddled at the base of her column upon the roof of the gate, and thinking that she was dead, wrung his hands and tore his beard. She guessed his grief, but so weak and parched was she, that she could call no word of comfort to him, or do more than watch the end with fascinated eyes.

The soldiers came on along the top of the wall till they feared to approach nearer to the fire, lest they should fall through the burning rafters.

"Yield!" they cried. "Yield, fool, before you perish! Titus gives you your life."

"That he may drag me, an elder of Israel, in chains through the streets of Rome," answered the old Jew scornfully. "Nay, I will not yield, and I pray God that the same end which you have brought upon this city and its children, may fall upon your city and its children at the hands of men even more cruel than yourselves."

Then stooping down he lifted a spear which lay upon the wall and hurled it at them so fiercely, that it transfixed the buckler of one of the

soldiers and the arm behind the buckler.

"Would that it had been your heart, heathen, and the heart of all your race!" he screamed, and lifting his hands as though in invocation, suddenly plunged headlong into the flames beneath.

Thus, fierce and brave to the last, died Benoni the Jew.

Again Miriam fainted, again to be awakened. The door that led from the gate chambers to its roof burst open and through it sped a figure bare-headed and dishevelled, his torn raiment black with blood and smoke. Staring at him, Miriam knew the man who Simeon--yes, Simeon, her cruel judge, who had doomed her to this dreadful end. After him, gripping his robe indeed, came a Roman officer, a stout man of middle age, with a weather-beaten kindly face, which in some dim way seemed to be familiar to her, and after him again, six soldiers.

"Hold him!" he panted. "We must have one of them to show if only that the people may know what a live Jew is like," and the officer tugged so fiercely at the robe that in his struggles to be free, for he also hoped to die by casting himself from the gateway tower, Simeon fell down.

Next instant the soldiers were on him and held him fast. Then it was for the first time that the captain caught sight of Miriam crouched at the

foot of her pillar.

"Why," he said, "I had forgotten. That is the girl whom we saw yesterday from the Court of Women and whom we have orders to save. Is the poor thing dead?"

Miriam lifted her wan face and looked at him.

"By Bacchus!" he said, "I have seen that face before; it is not one that a man would forget. Ah! I have it now." Then he stooped and eagerly read the writing that was tied upon her breast:

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

"Miriam," he said, then started and checked himself.

"Look!" cried one of the soldiers, "the girl wears pearls, and good ones. Is it your pleasure that I should cut them off?"

"Nay, let them be," he answered. "Neither she nor her pearls are for any of us. Loosen her chain, not her necklet."

So with much trouble they broke the rivets of the chain.

"Can you stand, lady?" said the captain to Miriam.

She shook her head.

"Then I needs must carry you," and stooping down he lifted her in his strong arms as though she had been but a child, and, bidding the soldiers bring the Jew Simeon with them, slowly and with great care descended the staircase up which Miriam had been taken more than sixty hours before.

Passing through the outer doors into the archway where the great gate by which the Romans had gained access to the Temple stood wide, the captain turned into the Court of Israel, where some soldiers who were engaged in dividing spoil looked up laughing and asked him whose baby he had captured. Paying no heed to them he walked across the court, picking his way through the heaps of dead to a range of the southern cloisters which were still standing, where officers might be seen coming and going. Under one of these cloisters, seated on a stool and employed in examining the vessels and other treasures of the Temple, which were brought before him one by one, was Titus. Looking up he saw this strange procession and commanded that they should be brought before him.

"Who is it that you carry in your arms, captain?" he asked.

"That girl, Cæsar," he answered, "who was bound upon the gateway and whom you have orders should not be shot at."

"Does she still live?"

"She lives--no more. Thirst and heat have withered her."

"How came she there?"

"This writing tells you, Cæsar."

Titus read. "Ah!" he said, "Nazarene. An evil sect, worse even than these Jews, or so thought the late divine Nero. Traitress also. Why, the girl must have deserved her fate. But what is this? 'Is doomed to die as God shall appoint before the face of her friends, the Romans.' How are the Romans her friends, I wonder? Girl, if you can speak, tell me who condemned you."

Miriam lifted her dark head from the shoulder of the captain on which it lay and pointed with her finger at the Jew, Simeon.

"Is that so, man?" asked Cæsar. "Now tell the truth, for I shall learn it, and if you lie you die."

"She was condemned by the Sanhedrim, among whom was her own grandfather, Benoni; there is his signature with the rest upon the scroll," Simeon answered sullenly.

"For what crime?"

"Because she suffered a Roman prisoner to escape, for which deed," he added furiously, "may her soul burn in Gehenna for ever and aye!"

"What was the name of the prisoner?" asked Titus.

"I do not remember," answered Simeon.

"Well," said Cæsar, "it does not greatly matter, for either he is safe or he is dead. Your robes, what are left of them, show that you also are one of the Sanhedrim. Is it not so?"

"Yes. I am Simeon, a name that you have heard."

"Ah! Simeon, here it is, written on this scroll first of all. Well, Simeon, you doomed a high-born lady to a cruel death because she saved, or tried to save, a Roman soldier, and it is but just that you should drink of your own wine. Take him and fasten him to the column on the gateway and leave him there to perish. Your Holy House is destroyed, Simeon, and being a faithful priest, you would not wish to survive your worship."

"There you are right, Roman," he answered, "though I should have been better pleased with a quicker end, such as I trust may overtake you."

Then they led him off, and presently Simeon appeared upon the gateway

with Miriam's chain about his middle and Miriam's rope knotted afresh about his wrists.

"Now for this poor girl," went on Titus Cæsar. "It seems that she is a Nazarene, a sect of which all men speak ill, for they try to subvert authority and preach doctrines that would bring the world to ruin. Also she was false to her own people, which is a crime, though one in this instance whereof we Romans cannot complain. Therefore, if only for the sake of example it would be wrong to set her free; indeed, to do so, would be to give her to death. My command is, then, that she shall be taken good care of, and if she recovers, be sent to Rome to adorn my Triumph, should the gods grant me such a thing, and afterwards be sold as a slave for the benefit of the wounded soldiers and the poor. Meanwhile, who will take charge of her?"

"I," said that officer who had freed Miriam. "There is an old woman who tends my tent, who can nurse her in her sickness."

"Understand, friend," answered Titus, "that no harm is to be done to this girl, who is my property."

"I understand, O Cæsar," said the officer. "She shall be treated as though she were my daughter."

"Good. You who are present, remember his words and my decree. In Rome, if we live to reach it, you shall give account to me of the captive

lady, Miriam. Now take her away, for there are greater matters to be dealt with than the fortunes of this girl."