

CHAPTER XXI

THE CÆSARS AND PRINCE DOMITIAN

When the captain Gallus reached the outskirts of Rome he halted, for he did not desire that Miriam should be led through the streets in the daytime, and thus cause questions to be asked concerning her. Also he sent on a messenger bidding the man find out his wife, Julia, if she were still alive, since of this Gallus, who had not seen her for several years, could tell nothing, and inform her that he would be with her shortly, bringing with him a maiden who had been placed in his charge by Titus. Before nightfall, the messenger returned, and with him Julia herself, a woman past middle-age, but, although grey-haired, still handsome and stately.

Miriam saw their meeting, which was a touching sight, since this childless couple who had been married for almost thirty years, had now been separated for a long time. Moreover, a rumour had reached Julia that her husband was not only wounded, but dead, wherefore her joy and thankfulness at his coming were even greater than they would otherwise have been. One thing, however, Miriam noted, that whereas her friend and benefactor, Gallus, held up his hands and thanked the gods that he found his wife living and well, Julia on her part said:

"Aye, I thank God," touching her breast with her fingers as she spoke the words.

Presently the matron seemed to notice her, and, looking at her with a doubtful eye, asked:

"How comes it, husband, that you are in charge of this captive Jewess, if Jewess she be who is so fair?"

"By the orders of Titus Cæsar, wife," he answered, "to whom she must be delivered on his arrival. She was condemned to perish on the gate Nicanor as a traitress to the Jews and a Nazarene."

Julia started and looked at the girl over her shoulder.

"Are you of that faith, daughter?" she asked in a changed voice, crossing her hands upon her breast as though by chance.

"I am, mother," answered Miriam, repeating the sign.

"Well, well, husband," said Julia, "the maid's tale can wait. Whether she was a traitress to the Jews, or a follower of Christus, is not our affair. At least she is in your charge, and therefore welcome to me," and stepping to where Miriam stood with bowed head she kissed her on the forehead, saying aloud:

"I greet you, daughter, who are so sweet to see and in misfortune," adding beneath her breath, "in the Name you know."

Then Miriam was sure that she had fallen into the hands of a woman who was a Christian, and was thankful in her heart, for while the Cæsars sat upon the Roman throne the Christians of every clime, rank and race were one great family.

That evening, so soon as the darkness fell, they entered Rome by the Appian Gate. Here they separated, Gallus leading his soldiers to convoy the treasure to the safe keeping of that officer who was appointed to receive it, and afterwards to the camp prepared for them, while Julia, with Miriam and an escort of two men only, departed to her own home, a small dwelling in a clean but narrow and crowded street that overhung the Tiber between the Pons Ælius and the Porta Flamina. At the door of the house Julia dismissed the soldiers, saying:

"Go without fear, and take witness that I am bond for the safety of this captive."

So the men went gladly enough, for they desired to rest after the toils of their long journey, and the door of the house having been opened by a servant and locked again behind them, Julia led Miriam across a little court to the sitting-room that lay beyond. Hanging lamps of bronze burned in the room, and by their light Miriam saw that it was very clean and well, though not richly, furnished.

"This is my own house, daughter," she explained, "which my father left

me, where I have dwelt during all these weary years that my husband has been absent in the wars of the East. It is a humble place, but you will find peace and safety in it, and, I trust, comfort. Poor child," she added in a gentle voice, "I who am also a Christian, though as yet of this my husband knows nothing, welcome you in the Name of the Lord."

"In the Name of our Lord, I thank you," answered Miriam, "who am but a friendless slave."

"Such find friends," said Julia, "and if you will suffer it I think that I shall be one of them." Then at a sign from the elder woman they knelt down, and in silence each of them put up her prayer of thanksgiving, the wife because her husband had come back to her safe, the maiden because she had been led to a house ruled by a woman of her own faith.

After this they ate, a plain meal but well cooked and served. When it was done Julia conducted Miriam to the little whitewashed chamber which had been prepared for her. It was lighted from the court by a lattice set high in the wall, and, like all the house, very clean and sweet, with a floor of white marble.

"Once another maid slept here," said Julia with a sigh, glancing at the white bed in the corner.

"Yes," said Miriam, "she was named Flavia, was she not, your only child? Nay, do not be astonished. I have heard so much of her that I seem to

have known her well, who can be known no more--here."

"Did Gallus tell you?" asked Julia. "He used rarely to speak of her."

Miriam nodded. "Gallus told me. You see he was very good to me and we became friends. For all that he has done, may Heaven bless him, who, although he seems rough, has so kind a heart."

"Yes, may Heaven bless all of us, living and dead," answered Julia. Then she kissed Miriam and left her to her rest.

When Miriam came out of her bedchamber on the following morning, she found Gallus clad in his body armour, now new cleaned, though dented with many a blow, standing in the court and watching the water which squirted from a leaden pipe to fall into a little basin.

"Greeting, daughter," he said, looking up. "I trust that you have rested well beneath my roof who have sojourned so long in tents."

"Very well," she answered, adding, "If I might ask it, why do you wear your mail here in peaceful Rome?"

"Because I am summoned to have an audience of Cæsar, now within an hour."

"Is Titus come, then?" she asked hurriedly.

"Nay, nay, not Titus Cæsar, but Vespasian Cæsar, his father, to whom I must make report of all that was passing in Judæa when we left, of the treasure that I brought with me and--of yourself."

"Oh! Gallus," said Miriam, "will he take me away from your charge?"

"I know not. I hope not. But who can say? It is as his fancy may move him. But if he listens to me I swear that you shall stay here for ever; be sure of that."

Then he went, leaning on a spear shaft, for the wound in his leg had caused it to shrink so much that he could never hope to be sound again.

Three hours later he returned to find the two women waiting for him anxiously enough. Julia glanced at his face as he came through the door of the street wall into the vestibulum or courtyard where they were waiting.

"Have no fear," she said. "When Gallus looks so solemn he brings good tidings, for if they are bad he smiles and makes light of them," and advancing she took him by the hand and led him past the porter's room into the atrium.

"What news, husband?" she asked when the door was shut behind them so that none might overhear their talk.

"Well," he answered, "first, my fighting days are over, since I am discharged the army, the physicians declaring that my leg will never be well again. Wife, why do you not weep?"

"Because I rejoice," answered Julia calmly. "Thirty years of war and bloodshed are enough for any man. You have done your work. It is time that you should rest who have been spared so long, and at least I have saved while you were away, and there will be food to fill our mouths."

"Yes, yes, wife, and as it happens, more than you think, since Vespasian, being gracious and pleased with my report, has granted me half-pay for all my life, to say nothing of a gratuity and a share of the spoil, whatever that may bring. Still I grieve, who can never hope to lift spear more."

"Grieve not, for thus I would have had it, Gallus. But what of this maid?"

"Well, I made my report about her, as I was bound to do, and at first Domitian, Cæsar's son, being curious to see her, prompted Vespasian to order that she should be brought to the palace. Almost Cæsar spoke the word, then a thought seemed to strike him and he was silent, whereon I said that she had been very sick and still needed care and nursing, and that if it was his will, my wife could tend her until such time as Titus Cæsar, whose spoil she was, might arrive. Again Domitian interrupted,

but Vespasian answered, 'The Jewish maid is not your slave, Domitian, or my slave. She is the slave of your brother, Titus. Let her bide with this worthy officer until Titus comes, he being answerable in his person and his goods that she shall then be produced before him, she or proof of her death.' Then, waving his hand to show that the matter was done with, he went on to speak of other things, demanding details of the capture of the Temple and comparing my list of the vessels and other gear with that which was furnished by the treasurer, into whose charge I handed them yesternight. So, Maid Miriam, till Titus comes you are safe."

"Yes," answered Miriam with a sigh, "till Titus comes. But after that--what?"

"The gods alone know," he said impatiently. "Meanwhile, since my head is on it, I must ask your word of you that you will attempt no flight."

"I give it, Gallus," she answered smiling, "who would die rather than bring evil on you or yours. Also, whither should I fly?"

"I know not. But you Christians find many friends: the rats themselves have fewer hiding-places. Still, I trust you, and henceforth you are free, till Titus comes."

"Aye," repeated Miriam, "--till Titus comes."

So for hard upon six months, till midsummer, indeed, Miriam dwelt in the house of Gallus and his wife, Julia. She was not happy, although to them she became as a daughter. Who could be happy even in the sunshine of a peaceful present, that walked her world between two such banks of shadow? Behind was the shadow of the terrible past; in front, black and forbidding, rose the shadow of the future, which might be yet more terrible, the future when she would be the slave of some man unknown. Sometimes walking with Julia, humbly dressed and mingling with the crowd, her head-dress arranged to hide her face as much as might be, she saw the rich lords of Rome go by in chariots, on horseback, in litters, all sorts and conditions of them, fat, proud men with bold eyes; hard-faced statesmen or lawyers; war-worn, cruel-looking captains; dissolute youths with foppish dress and perfumed hair, and shuddering, wondered whether she was appointed to any one of these. Or was it, perhaps, to that rich and greasy tradesman, or to yon low-born freedman with a cunning leer? She knew not, God alone knew, and in Him must be her trust.

Once as Miriam was walking thus, gorgeously clad slaves armed with rods of office appeared, bursting a way through the crowded streets to an accompaniment of oaths and blows. After these came lictors bearing the fasces on their shoulders; then a splendid chariot drawn by white horses, and driven by a curled and scented charioteer. In it, that he might be the better seen, stood a young man, tall, ruddy-faced, and clad

in royal attire, who looked downward as though from bashfulness, but all the while scanned the crowd out of the corners of his dim blue eyes shaded by lids devoid of lashes. For a moment Miriam felt those eyes rest upon her, and knew that she was the subject of some jest which their owner addressed to the exquisite charioteer, causing him to laugh. Then a horror of that man took hold of her, and when he had gone by, bowing in answer to the shouts of the people, who, as it seemed to her, cheered from fear and not with joy, she asked Julia who he might be.

"Who but Domitian," she answered, "the son of one Cæsar and the brother of another, who hates both and would like to wear their crown. He is an evil man, and if he should chance to cross your path, beware of him, Miriam."

Miriam shuddered and said:

"As well, mother, might you bid the mouse that is caught abroad to beware of the cat it meets at night."

"Some mice find holes that cats cannot pass," answered Julia with meaning as they turned their faces homeward.

During all this time, although Gallus made diligent inquiry among the soldiers who arrived from Judæa, Miriam could hear nothing of Marcus, so that at last she came to believe that he must be dead, and with him the beloved and faithful Nehushta, and to hope that if this were so she

also might be taken. Still amongst all this trouble she had one great comfort. Under the mild rule of Vespasian, although their meeting-places were known, the Christians had peace for a while. Therefore, in company with Julia and many others of the brotherhood, she was able to visit the catacombs on the Appian Way by night, and there in those dismal, endless tombs to offer prayer and receive the ministrations of the Church. The great Apostles, St. Peter and St. Paul, had suffered martyrdom, indeed, but they had left many teachers behind them, and the chief of these soon grew to know and love the poor Jewish captive who was doomed to slavery. Therefore here also she found friends and consolation of spirit.

In time Gallus came to learn that his wife was also of the Faith, and for a while this knowledge seemed to cast him down. In the end, however, he shrugged his shoulders and said that she was certainly of an age to judge for herself and that he trusted no harm might come of it. Indeed, when the principles of the Christian hope were explained to him, he listened to them eagerly enough, who had lost his only child, and until now had never heard this strange story of resurrection and eternal life. Still, although he listened, and even from time to time was present when the brethren prayed, he would not be baptised, who said that he was too sunk in years to throw incense on a new altar.

At length Titus came, the Senate, which long before his arrival had decreed him a Triumph, meeting him outside the walls, and there, after some ancient formalities communicating to him their decision. Moreover, it was arranged that Vespasian, his father, should share in this

Triumph, because of the great deeds which he had done in Egypt, so that it was said everywhere that this would be the most splendid ceremony which Rome had ever seen. After this Titus passed to his palace and there lived privately for several weeks, resting while the preparations for the great event went forward.

One morning early Gallus was summoned to the palace, whence he returned rubbing his hands and trying to look pleased, with him, as Julia had said, a sure sign of evil tidings.

"What is it, husband?" she asked.

"Oh! nothing, nothing," he answered, "except that our Pearl-Maiden here must accompany me after the mid-day meal into the august presences of Vespasian and Titus. The Cæsars wish to see her, that they may decide where she is to walk in the procession. If she is held to be beautiful enough, they will grant to her a place of honour, by herself. Do you hear that, wife--by herself, not far in front of the very chariot of Titus? As for the dress that she will wear," he went on nervously, since neither of his auditors seemed delighted with this news, "it is to be splendid, quite splendid, all of the purest white silk with little discs of silver sewn about it, and a representation of the Gate Nicanor worked in gold thread upon the breast of the robe."

At this tidings Miriam broke down and began to weep.

"Dry your tears, girl," he said roughly, although the thickness of his voice suggested that water and his own eyes were not far apart. "What must be, must be, and now is the time for that God you worship to show you some mark of favour. Surely, He should do so, seeing how long and how often you pray to Him in burrows that a jackal would turn from."

"I think He will," answered Miriam, ceasing her sobs with a bold up-lifting of her soul towards the light of perfect faith.

"I am sure He will," added Julia, gently stroking Miriam's dark and curling hair.

"Then," broke in Gallus, driving the point to its logical conclusion, "what have you to fear? A long, hot walk through the shouting populace, who will do no harm to one so lovely, and after that, whatever good fate your God may choose for you. Come, let us eat, that you may look your best when you appear before the Cæsars."

"I would rather look my worst," said Miriam, bethinking her of Domitian and his bleared eyes. Still, to please Gallus, she tried to eat, and afterwards, accompanied by him and by Julia, was carried in a closed litter to the palace.

Too soon she was there, arriving a little before them, and was helped from the litter by slaves wearing the Imperial livery. Now she found herself alone in a great marble court filled with officers and nobles

awaiting audience.

"That is the Pearl-Maiden," said one of them, whereon they all crowded around her, criticising her aloud in their idle curiosity.

"Too short," said one. "Too thin," said another. "Too small in the foot for her ankle," said a third. "Fools," broke in a fourth, a young man with a fine figure and dark rings round his eyes, "what is the use of trying to cheapen this piece of goods thus in the eyes of the experienced? I say that this Pearl-Maiden is as perfect as those pearls about her own neck; on a small scale, perhaps, but quite perfect, and you will admit that I ought to know."

"Lucius says that she is perfect," remarked one of them in a tone of acquiescence, as though that verdict settled the matter.

"Yes," went on the critical Lucius, "now, to take one thing only, a point so often overlooked. Observe how fresh and firm her flesh is. When I press it thus," and he suited the action to the word, "as I thought, my finger leaves scarcely any mark."

"But my arm does," said a gruff voice beside him, and next moment this scented judge of human beings received the point of the elbow of Gallus between the eyes just where the nose is set into the forehead. With such force and skill was the blow directed that next instant the critic was sprawling on his back upon the pavement, the blood gushing from his

nostrils. Now most of them laughed, but some murmured, while Gallus said:

"Way there, friends, way there! I am charged to deliver this lady to the Cæsars and to certify that while she was in my care no man has so much as laid a finger on her. Way there, I pray you! And as for that whimpering puppy on his back, if he wishes it, he knows where to find Gallus. My sword will mark him worse than my elbow, if he wants blood-letting, that I swear."

Now with jests and excuses they fell back one and all. There were few of them who did not know that, lame as he might be now, old Gallus was still the fiercest and most dreaded swordsman of his legion. Indeed he was commonly reported to have slain eighteen men in single combat, and when young even to have faced the most celebrated gladiator of the day for sport, or to win a private bet, and given him life as he lay at his mercy.

So they passed on through long halls guarded by soldiers, till at length they came to a wide passage closed with splendid curtains, where the officer on duty asked them their business. Gallus told him and he vanished through the curtains, whence he returned presently, beckoning them to advance. They followed him down a corridor set with busts of departed emperors and empresses, to find themselves in a round marble chamber, very cool and lighted from above. In this chamber sat and stood three men: Vespasian, whom they knew by his strong, quiet face and

grizzled hair; Titus, his son, "the darling of mankind," thin, active, and æsthetic-looking, with eyes that were not unkindly, a sarcastic smile playing about the corners of his mouth; and Domitian, his brother, who has already been described, a man taller than either of them by half a head, and more gorgeously attired. In front of the august three was a master of ceremonies clad in a dark-coloured robe, who was showing them drawings of various sections of the triumphal procession, and taking their orders as to such alterations as they wished.

Also there were present, a treasurer, some officers and two or three of the intimate friends of Titus.

Vespasian looked up.

"Greeting, worthy Gallus," he said in the friendly, open voice of one who has spent his life in camps, "and to your wife, Julia, greeting also. So that is the Pearl-Maiden of whom we have heard so much talk. Well, I do not pretend to be a judge of beauty, still I say that this Jewish captive does not belie her name. Titus, do you recognise her?"

"In truth, no, father. When last I saw her she was a sooty, withered little thing whom Gallus yonder carried in his great arms, as a child might carry a large doll that he had rescued from the fire. Yes, I agree that she is beautiful and worthy of a very good place in the procession. Also she should fetch a large price afterwards, for that necklace of pearls goes with her--make a note of this, Scribe--and the reversion to

considerable property in Tyre and elsewhere. This, by special favour, she will be allowed to inherit from her grandfather, the old rabbi, Benoni, one of the Sanhedrim, who perished in the burning of the Temple."

"How can a slave inherit property, son?" asked Vespasian, raising his eyebrows.

"I don't know," answered Titus with a laugh. "Perhaps Domitian can tell you. He says that he has studied law. But so I have decreed."

"A slave," interrupted Domitian wisely, "has no rights and can hold no property, but the Cæsar of the East"--here he sneered--"can declare that certain lands and goods will pass to the highest bidder with the person of the slave, and this, Vespasian Cæsar, my father, is what I understand Titus Cæsar, my brother, has thought it good to do in the present instance."

"Yes," said Titus in a quiet voice, though his face flushed, "that, Domitian, is what I have thought it good to do. In such a matter is not my will enough?"

"Conqueror of the East," replied Domitian, "Thrower-down of the mountain stronghold called Jerusalem, to which the topless towers of Ilium were as nothing, and Exterminator of a large number of misguided fanatics, in what matter is not your will enough? Yet a boon, O Cæsar. As you are

great, be generous," and with a mocking gesture he bowed the knee to Titus.

"What boon do you seek of me, brother, who know that all I have is, or," he added slowly, "will be--yours?"

"One that is already granted by your precious words, Titus. Of all you have, which is much, I seek only this Pearl-Maiden, who has taken my fancy. The girl only, not her property in Tyre, wherever that may be, which you can keep for yourself."

Vespasian looked up, but before he could speak, Titus answered quickly:

"I said, Domitian, 'all I have.' This maid I have not, therefore the words do not apply. I have decreed that the proceeds of the sale of these captives is to be divided equally between the wounded soldiers and the poor of Rome. Therefore she is their property, not mine. I will not rob them."

"Virtuous man! No wonder that the legions love him who cannot withdraw one lot from a sale of thousands, even to please an only brother," soliloquised Domitian.

"If you wish for the maid," went on Titus, taking no heed of the insult, "the markets are open--buy her. It is my last word."

Suddenly Domitian grew angry, the false modesty left his face, his tall form straightened itself, and he stared round with his bleary, evil-looking eyes.

"I appeal," he shouted, "I appeal from Cæsar the Small to Cæsar the Great, from the murderer of a brave barbarian tribe to the conqueror of the world. O Cæsar, Titus here declared that all he has is mine. Yet when I ask him for the gift of one captive girl he refuses me. Command, I pray you, that he should keep his word."

Now the officers and the secretaries looked up, for of a sudden this small matter had become very important. For long the quarrel between Titus and his jealous brother had smouldered, now over the petty question of a captive it had broken into flame.

The face of Titus grew hard and stern as that of some statue of the offended Jove.

"Command, I pray you, father," he said, "that my brother should cease to offer insult to me. Command also that he should cease to question my will and my authority in matters great or small that are within my rule. Since you are appealed to as Cæsar, as Cæsar judge, not of this thing only but of all, for there is much between him and me that needs to be made plain."

Vespasian looked round him uneasily, but seeing no escape and that

beneath the quarrel lay issues which were deep and wide, he spoke out in his brave, simple-minded fashion.

"Sons," he said, "seeing that there are but two of you who together, or one after the other, must inherit the world, it is an evil-omened thing that you should quarrel thus, since on the chances of your enmity may hang your own fates and the fates of peoples. Be reconciled, I pray you. Is there not enough for both? As for the matter in hand--this is my judgment. With all the spoils of Judæa, this fair maid is the property of Titus. Titus, whose boast it is that he does not go back upon his word, has decreed that she shall be sold and her price divided between the sick soldiers and the poor. Therefore she is no longer his to give away, even to his brother. With Titus I say--if you desire the girl, Domitian, bid your agent buy her in the market."

"Aye, I will buy her," snarled Domitian, "but this I swear, that soon or late Titus shall pay the price and one that he will be loth to give." Then followed by his secretary and an officer, he turned and left the audience hall.

"What does he mean?" asked Vespasian, looking after him with anxious eyes.

"He means that----" and Titus checked himself. "Well, time and my destiny will show the world what he means. So be it. As for you, Pearl-Maiden, who, though you know it not, have cost Cæsar so dear,

well, you are fairer than I thought, and shall have the best of places in the pageant. Yet, for your sake, I pray that one may be found who, when you come to the market-place, may outbid Domitian," and he waved his hand to show that the audience was at an end.