

CHAPTER XXII

THE TRIUMPH

Another week went by and the eve of the Triumph was at hand. On the afternoon before the great day sewing-women had come to the house of Gallus, bringing with them the robe that Miriam must wear. As had been promised, it was splendid, of white silk covered with silver discs and having the picture of the gate Nicanor fashioned on the breast, but cut so low that it shamed Miriam to put it on.

"It is naught, it is naught," said Julia. "The designer has made it thus that the multitude may see those pearls from which you take your name." But to herself she thought: "Oh! monstrous age, and monstrous men, whose eyes can delight in the disgrace of a poor unfriended maiden. Surely the cup of iniquity of my people is full, and they shall drink it to the dregs!"

That same afternoon also came an assistant of the officer, who was called the Marshal, with orders to Gallus as to when and where he was to deliver over his charge upon the morrow. With him he brought a packet, which, when opened, proved to contain a splendid golden girdle, fashioned to the likeness of a fetter. The clasp was an amethyst, and round it were cut these words: "The gift of Domitian to her who to-morrow shall be his."

Miriam threw the thing from her as though it were a snake.

"I will not wear it," she said. "I say that I will not wear it; at least to-day I am my own," while Julia groaned and Gallus cursed beneath his breath.

Knowing her sore plight, that evening there came to visit her one of the elders of the Christian Church in Rome, a bishop named Cyril, who had been the friend and disciple of the Apostle Peter. To him the poor girl poured out all the agony of her heart.

"Oh! my father, my father in Christ," she said, "I swear to you that were I not of our holy faith, rather than endure this shame I would slay myself to-night! Other dangers have I passed, but they have been of the body alone, whereas this----. Pity me and tell me, you in whose ear God speaks, tell me, what must I do?"

"Daughter," answered the grave and gentle man, "you must trust in God. Did He not save you in the house at Tyre? Did He not save you in the streets of Jerusalem? Did He not save you on the gate Nicanor?"

"He did," answered Miriam.

"Aye, daughter, and so shall He save you in the slave-market of Rome. I have a message for your ear, and it is that no shame shall come near to you. Tread your path, drink your cup, and fear nothing, for the Lord

shall send His angel to protect you until such time as it pleases Him to take you to Himself."

Miriam looked at him, and as she looked peace fell upon her soul and shone in her soft eyes.

"I hear the word of the Lord spoken through the mouth of His messenger," she said, "and henceforth I will strive to fear nothing, no, not even Domitian."

"Least of all Domitian, daughter, that son of Satan, whom Satan shall pay in his own coin."

Then going to the door he summoned Julia, and while Gallus watched without, the two of them prayed long and earnestly with Miriam. When their prayer was finished the bishop rose, blessed her, and bade her farewell.

"I leave you, daughter," he said, "but though you see him not, another takes my place. Do you believe?"

"I have said that I believe," murmured Miriam.

Indeed, in those days when men still lived who had seen the Christ and His voice still echoed through the world, to the strong faith of His followers, it was not hard to credit that His angel did descend to earth

to protect and save at their Master's bidding.

So Cyril, the bishop, went, and that night from many a catacomb prayers rose up to Heaven for Miriam in her peril. That night also she slept peacefully.

Two hours before the dawn, Julia awoke her and arrayed her in the glittering, hateful garments. When all was ready, with tears she bade her farewell.

"Child, child," she said, "you have become to me as my own daughter was, and now I know not how and when we shall meet again."

"Perhaps sooner than you think," Miriam answered. "But if not, if, indeed, I speak to you for the last time, why, then, my blessings on you who have played a mother's part to a helpless maid that was no kin of yours. Yes, and on you Gallus also, who have kept me safe through so many dangers."

"And who hopes, dear one, to keep you safe through many more. Since I may not swear by the gods before you, I swear it by the Eagles that Domitian will do well to have a care how he deals by you. To him I owe no fealty and, as has been proved before to-day, the sword of vengeance can reach the heart of princes."

"Aye, Gallus," said Miriam gently, "but let it not be your sword, nor, I

trust, shall you need to think of vengeance."

Then the litter was brought into the courtyard, with the guards that were sent to accompany it, and they started for the gathering-place beyond the Triumphal Way. Dark though it still was, all Rome was astir. On every side shone torches, from every house and street rose the murmur of voices, for the mighty city made herself ready to celebrate the greatest festival which her inhabitants had seen. Even now at times the press was so dense that the soldiers were obliged to force a way through the crowd, which poured outwards to find good places along the line of the Triumph, or to take up their station on stands of timber, and in houses they had hired, whose roofs, balconies and windows commanded the path of the pageant.

They crossed the Tiber. This Miriam knew by the roar of the water beneath, and because the crush upon the narrow bridge was so great. Thence she was borne along through country comparatively open, to the gateways of some large building, where she was ordered to dismount from the litter. Here officers were waiting who took charge of her, giving to Gallus a written receipt for her person. Then, either because he would not trust himself to bid her farewell, or because he did not think it wise to do so in the presence of the officers, Gallus turned and left her without a word.

"Come on, girl," said a man, but a secretary, looking up from his tablets, called to him:

"Gently there with that lot, or you will hear about it. She is Pearl-Maiden, the captive who made the quarrel between the Cæsars and Domitian, of which all Rome is talking. Gently, I tell you, gently, for many free princesses are worth less to-day."

Hearing this, the man bowed to Miriam, almost with reverence, and begged her to follow him to a place that had been set apart for her. She obeyed, passing through a great number of people, of whom all she could see in the gloom of the breaking dawn was that, like herself, they were captives, to a little chamber where she was left alone watching the light grow through the lattice, and listening to the hum of voices that rose without, mingled now and again with sobs and wails of grief. Presently the door opened and a servant entered with bread on a platter and milk in an earthenware vessel. These she took thankfully, knowing that she would need food to support her during the long day, but scarcely had she begun to eat when a slave appeared clad in the imperial livery, and bearing a tray of luxurious meats served in silver vessels.

"Pearl-Maiden," he said, "my master, Domitian, sends you greeting and this present. The vessels are your own, and will be kept for you, but he bids me add, that to-night you shall sup off dishes of gold."

Miriam made no answer, though one rose to her lips; but after the man had departed, with her foot she overset the tray so that the silver vases fell clattering to the floor, where the savory meats were

spilled. Then she went on eating the bread and milk till her hunger was satisfied.

Scarcely had she finished her meal, when an officer entered the cell and led her out into a great square, where she was marshalled amongst many other prisoners. By now the sun was up and she saw before her a splendid building, and gathered below the building all the Senate of Rome in their robes, and many knights on horses, and nobles, and princes from every country with their retinues--a very wonderful and gallant sight. In front of the building were cloisters, before which were set two ivory chairs, while to right and left of these chairs, as far as the eye could reach, were drawn up thousand upon thousands of soldiers; the Senate, the Knights and the Princes, as she could see from the rising ground whereon she stood, being in front of them and of the chairs. Presently from the cloisters, clad in garments of silk and wearing crowns of laurel, appeared the Cæsars, Vespasian and Titus, attended by Domitian and their staffs. As they came the soldiers saw them and set up a mighty triumphant shout which sounded like the roar of the sea, that endured while the Cæsars sat themselves upon their thrones. Up and up went the sound of the continual shouting, till at length Vespasian rose and lifted his hand.

Then silence fell and, covering his head with his cloak, he seemed to make some prayer, after which Titus also covered his head with his cloak and offered a prayer. This done, Vespasian addressed the soldiers, thanking them for their bravery and promising them rewards, whereon they

shouted again until they were marched off to the feast that had been made ready. Now the Cæsars vanished and the officers began to order the great procession, of which Miriam could see neither the beginning nor the end. All she knew was that before her in lines eight wide were marshalled two thousand or more Jewish prisoners bound together with ropes, among whom, immediately in front of her, were a few women. Next she came, walking by herself, and behind her, also walking by himself, a dark, sullen-looking man, clad in a white robe and a purple cloak, with a gilded chain about his neck.

Looking at him she wondered where she had seen his face, which seemed familiar to her. Then there rose before her mind a vision of the Court of the Sanhedrim sitting in the cloisters of the Temple, and of herself standing there before them. She remembered that this man was seated next to that Simeon who had been so bitter against her and pronounced upon her the cruel sentence of death, also that some one in the crowd had addressed him as Simon, the son of Gioras, none other than the savage general whom the Jews had admitted into the city to make way upon the Zealot, John of Gischala. From that day to this she had heard nothing of him till now they met again, the judge and the victim, caught in a common net. Presently, in the confusion they were brought together and he knew her.

"Are you Miriam, the grand-daughter of Benoni?" he asked.

"I am Miriam," she answered, "whom you, Simon, and your fellows doomed

to a cruel death, but who have been preserved----"

"----To walk in a Roman Triumph. Better that you had died, maiden, at the hands of your own people."

"Better that you had died, Simon, at your own hands, or at those of the Romans."

"That I am about to do," he replied bitterly. "Fear not, woman, you will be avenged."

"I ask no vengeance," she answered. "Nay, cruel as you are I grieve that you, a great captain, should have come to this."

"I grieve also, maiden. Your grandsire, old Benoni, chose the better part."

Then the soldiers separated them and they spoke no more.

An hour passed and the procession began its march along the Triumphal Way. Of it Miriam could see little. All she knew was that in front there were ranks of fettered prisoners, while behind men carried upon trays and tables the golden vessels of the Temple, the seven-branched candlestick and the ancient sacred book of the Jewish law. They were followed by other men, who bore aloft images of victory in ivory and gold. Then, although these did not join them till they reached the Porta

Triumphalis, or the Gate of Pomp, attended, each of them, by lictors having their fasces wreathed with laurel, came the Cæsars. First went Vespasian Cæsar, the father. He rode in a splendid golden chariot, to which were harnessed four white horses led by Libyan soldiers. Behind him stood a slave clad in a dull robe, set there to avert the influence of the evil eye and of the envious gods, who held a crown above the head of the Emperor, and now and again whispered in his ear the ominous words, *Respice post te, hominem memento te* ("Look back at me and remember thy mortality.")

After Vespasian Cæsar, the father, came Titus Cæsar, the son, but his chariot was of silver, and graved upon its front was a picture of the Holy House of the Jews melting in the flames. Like his father he was attired in the *toga picta* and *tunica palmata*, the gold-embroidered over-robe and the tunic laced with silver leaves, while in his right hand he held a laurel bough, and in his left a sceptre. He also was attended by a slave who whispered in his ear the message of mortality.

Next to the chariot of Titus, alongside of it indeed, and as little behind as custom would allow, rode Domitian, gloriously arrayed and mounted on a splendid steed. Then came the tribunes and the knights on horseback, and after them the legionaries to the number of five thousand, every man of them having his spear wreathed in laurel.

Now the great procession was across the Tiber, and, following its appointed path down broad streets and past palaces and temples, drew

slowly towards its object, the shrine of Jupiter Capitolinus, that stood at the head of the Sacred Way beyond the Forum. Everywhere the side paths, the windows of houses, the great scaffoldings of timber, and the steps of temples were crowded with spectators. Never before did Miriam understand how many people could inhabit a single city. They passed them by thousands and by tens of thousands, and still, far as the eye could reach, stretched the white sea of faces. Ahead that sea would be quiet, then, as the procession pierced it, it began to murmur. Presently the murmur grew to a shout, the shout to a roar, and when the Cæsars appeared in their glittering chariots, the roar to a triumphant peal which shook the street like thunder. And so on for miles and miles, till Miriam's eyes were dim with the glare and glitter, and her head swam at the ceaseless sound of shouting.

Often the procession would halt for a while, either because of a check to one of the pageants in front, or in order that some of its members might refresh themselves with drink which was brought to them. Then the crowd, ceasing from its cheers, would make jokes, and criticise whatever person or thing they chanced to be near. Greatly did they criticise Miriam in this fashion, or at the least she thought so, who must listen to it all. Most of them, she found, knew her by her name of Pearl-Maiden, and pointed out to each other the necklace about her throat. Many, too, had heard something of her story, and looked eagerly at the picture of the gate Nicanor blazoned upon her breast. But the greater part concerned themselves only with her delicate beauty, passing from mouth to mouth the gossip concerning Domitian, his quarrel with the

Cæsars, and the intention which he had announced of buying this captive at the public sale. Always it was the same talk; sometimes more brutal and open than others--that was the only difference.

Once they halted thus in the street of palaces through which they passed near to the Baths of Agrippa. Here the endless comments began again, but Miriam tried to shut her ears to it and looked about her. To her left was a noble-looking house built of white marble, but she noticed that its shutters were closed, also that it was undecorated with garlands, and idly wondered why. Others wondered too, for when they had wearied of discussing her points, she heard one plebeian ask another whose house that was and why it had been shut up upon this festal day. His fellow answered that he could not remember the owner's name, but he was a rich noble who had fallen in the Jewish wars, and that the palace was closed because it was not yet certain who was his heir.

At that moment her attention was distracted by a sound of groans and laughter coming from behind. She looked round to see that the wretched Jewish general, Simon, had sunk fainting to the ground, overcome by the heat, or the terrors of his mind, or by the sufferings which he was forced to endure at the hands of his cruel guards, who flogged him as he walked, for the pleasure of the people. Now they were beating him to life again with their rods; hence the laughter of the audience and the groans of the victim. Sick at heart, Miriam turned away from this horrid sight, to hear a tall man, whose back was towards her, but who was clad in the rich robes of an Eastern merchant, asking one of the marshals of

the Triumph, in a foreign accent, whether it was true that the captive Pearl-Maiden was to be sold that evening in the auction-mart of the Forum. The marshal answered yes, such were the orders as regarded her and the other women, since there was no convenient place to house them, and it was thought best to be rid of them and let their masters take them home at once.

"Does she please you, sir? Are you going to bid?" he added. "If so, you will find yourself in high company."

"Perhaps, perhaps," answered the man with a shrug of his shoulders.

Then he vanished into the crowd.

Now, for the first time that day, Miriam's spirit seemed to fail her. The weariness of her body, the foul talk, the fouler cruelty, the cold discussion of the sale of human beings to the first-comer as though they were sheep or swine, the fear of her fate that night, pressed upon and overcame her mind, so that she felt inclined, like Simon, the son of Gioras, to sink fainting to the pavement and lie there till the cruel rods beat her to her feet again. Hope sank low and faith grew dim, while in her heart she wondered vaguely what was the meaning of it all, and why poor men and women were made to suffer thus for the pleasure of other men and women; wondered also what escape there could be for her.

While she mused thus, like a ray of light through the clouds, a sense

of consolation, sweet as it was sudden, seemed to pierce the darkness of her bitter thoughts. She knew not whence it came, nor what it might portend, yet it existed, and the source of it seemed near to her. She scanned the faces of the crowd, finding pity in a few, curiosity in more, but in most gross admiration if they were men, or scorn of her misfortune and jealousy of her loveliness if they were women. Not from among these did that consolation flow. She looked up to the sky, half expecting to see there that angel of the Lord into whose keeping the bishop, Cyril, had delivered her. But the skies were empty and brazen as the faces of the Roman crowd; not a cloud could be seen in them, much less an angel.

As her eyes sank earthwards their glance fell upon one of the windows of the marble house to her left. If she remembered right some few minutes before the shutters of that window had been closed, now they were open, revealing two heavy curtains of blue embroidered silk. Miriam thought this strange, and, without seeming to do so, kept her eyes fixed upon the curtains. Presently, for her sight was good, she saw fingers between them--long, dark-coloured fingers. Then very slowly the curtains were parted, and in the opening thus made appeared a face, the face of an old woman, dark and noble looking and crowned with snow-white hair. Even at that distance Miriam knew it in an instant.

Oh, Heaven! it was the face of Nehushta, Nehushta whom she thought dead, or at least for ever lost. For a moment Miriam was paralysed, wondering whether this was not some vision born of the turmoil and excitement of

that dreadful day. Nay, surely it was no vision, surely it was Nehushta herself who looked at her with loving eyes, for see! she made the sign of the cross in the air before her, the symbol of Christian hope and greeting, then laid her finger upon her lips in token of secrecy and silence. The curtain closed and she was gone, who not five seconds before had so mysteriously appeared.

Miriam's knees gave way beneath her, and while the marshals shouted to the procession to set forward, she felt that she must sink to the ground. Indeed, she would have fallen had not some woman in the crowd stepped forward and thrust a goblet of wine into her hands, saying:

"Drink that, Pearl-Maiden, it will make your pale cheeks even prettier than they are."

The words were coarse, but Miriam, looking at the woman, knew her for one of the Christian community with whom she had worshipped in the catacombs. So she took the cup, fearing nothing, and drank it off. Then new strength came to her, and she went forward with the others on that toilsome, endless march.

At length, however, it did end, an hour or so before sunset. They had passed miles of streets; they had trodden the Sacred Way bordered by fanes innumerable and adorned with statues set on columns; and now marched up the steep slope that was crowned by the glorious temple of

Jupiter Capitolinus. As they began to climb it guards broke into their lines, and seizing the chain that hung about the neck of Simon, dragged him away.

"Whither do they take you?" asked Miriam as he passed her.

"To what I desire--death," he answered, and was gone.

Now the Cæsars, dismounting from their chariots, took up their stations by altars at the head of the steps, while beneath them, rank upon rank, gathered all those who had shared their Triumph, each company in its allotted place. Then followed a long pause, the multitude waiting for Miriam knew not what. Presently men were seen running from the Forum up a path that had been left open, one of them carrying in his hand some object wrapped in a napkin. Arriving in face of the Cæsars he threw aside the cloth and held up before them and in sight of all the people the grizzly head of Simon, the son of Gioras. By this public murder of a brave captain of their foes was consummated the Triumph of the Romans, and at the sight of its red proof trumpets blew, banners waved, and from half a million throats went up a shout of victory that seemed to rend the very skies, for the multitude was drunk with the glory of its brutal vengeance.

Then silence was called, and there before the Temple of Jove the beasts were slain, and the Cæsars offered sacrifice to the gods that had given them victory.

Thus ended the Triumph of Vespasian and Titus, and with it the record of the struggle of the Jews against the iron beak and claws of the Roman Eagle.