

## CHAPTER XXIII

### THE SLAVE-RING

Had Miriam chanced to look out of her litter as she passed the Temple of Isis, escorted by Gallus and the guards before dawn broke upon that great day of the Triumph, and had there been light to enable her to see, she might have beheld two figures galloping into Rome as fast as their weary horses would carry them. Both rode after the fashion of men, but one of them, wrapped in an Eastern garment that hid the face, was in fact a woman.

"Fortune favours us, Nehushta," said the man in a strained voice. "At least, we are in time for the Triumph, who might so easily have been too late. Look, yonder they gather already by Octavian's Walks," and he pointed to the companies of soldiers who hurried past them to the meeting-place.

"Yes, yes, my lord Marcus, we are in time. There go the eagles and here comes their prey," and in her turn Nehushta pointed to a guarded litter--had they but known it, the very one that carried the beloved woman whom they sought. "But whither now? Would you also march in the train of Titus?"

"Nay, woman, it is too late. Also I know not what would be my welcome."

"Your welcome? Why, you were his friend, and Titus is faithful to his friends."

"Aye, but perhaps not to those who have been taken prisoner by the enemy. Towards the commencement of the siege that happened to a man I knew. He was captured with a companion. The companion the Jews slew, but as he was about to be beheaded upon the wall, this man slipped from the hands of the executioner, and leaping from it escaped with little hurt. Titus gave him his life, but dismissed him from his legion. Why should I fare better?"

"That you were taken was no fault of yours, who were struck senseless and overwhelmed."

"Maybe, but would that avail me? The rule, a good rule, is that no Roman soldier should yield to an enemy. If he is captured while insensible, then on finding his wits he must slay himself, as I should have striven to do, had I awakened to find myself in the hands of the Jews. But things fell out otherwise. Still, I tell you, Nehushta, that had it not been for Miriam, I should not have turned my face to Rome, at any rate until I had received pardon and permission from Titus."

"What then are your plans, lord Marcus?"

"To go to my own house near the Baths of Agrippa. The Triumph must pass there, and if Miriam is among the captives we shall see her. If not,

then either she is dead or already sold, or perchance given as a present to some friend of Cæsar's."

Now they ceased talking, for the people were so many that they could only force their way through the press riding one after the other. Thus, Nehushta following Marcus, they crossed the Tiber and passed through many streets, decorated, most of them, for the coming pageant, till at length Marcus drew rein in front of a marble mansion in the Via Agrippa.

"A strange home-coming," he muttered. "Follow me," and he rode round the house to a side-entrance.

Here he dismounted and knocked at the small door for some time without avail. At length it was opened a little way, and a thin, querulous voice, speaking through the crack, said:

"Begone, whoever you are. No one lives here. This is the house of Marcus, who is dead in the Jewish war. Who are you that disturb me?"

"The heir of Marcus."

"Marcus has no heir, unless it be Cæsar, who doubtless will take his property."

"Open, Stephanus," said Marcus, in a tone of command, at the same time pushing the door wide and entering. "Fool," he added, "what kind of a

steward are you that you do not know your master's voice?"

Now he who had kept the door, a withered little man in a scribe's brown robe, peered at this visitor with his sharp eyes, then threw up his hands and staggered back, saying:

"By the spear of Mars! it is Marcus himself, Marcus returned from the dead! Welcome, my lord, welcome."

Marcus led his horse through the deep archway, and when Nehushta had followed him into the courtyard beyond, returned, closed and locked the door.

"Why did you think me dead, friend?" he asked.

"Oh! my lord," answered the steward, "because all who have come home from the war declared that you had vanished away during the siege of the city of the Jews, and that you must either be dead or taken prisoner. Now I knew well that you would never disgrace your ancient house, or your own noble name, or the Eagles which you serve, by falling alive into the hands of the enemy. Therefore, I was sure that you were dead."

Marcus laughed bitterly, then turning to Nehushta, said:

"You hear, woman, you hear. If such is the judgment of my steward and freedman, what will be that of Cæsar and my peers?" Then he added, "Now,

Stephanus, that what you thought impossible--what I myself should have thought impossible--has happened. I was taken prisoner by the Jews, though through no fault of mine."

"Oh! if so," said the old steward, "hide it, my lord, hide it. Why, two such unhappy men who had surrendered to save their lives and were found in some Jewish dungeon, have been condemned to walk in the Triumph this day. Their hands are to be tied behind them; in place of their swords they must wear a distaff, and on their breasts a placard with the words written: 'I am a Roman who preferred dishonour to death.' You would not wish their company, my lord."

The face of Marcus went first red, then white.

"Man," he said, "cease your ill-omened talk, lest I should fall upon my sword here before your eyes. Bid the slaves make ready the bath and food, for we need both."

"Slaves, my lord? There are none here, save one old woman, who attends to me and the house."

"Where are they then?" asked Marcus angrily.

"The most part of them I have sent into the country, thinking it better that they should work upon your estates rather than live here idle, and others who were not needed I have sold."

"You were ever careful, Stephanus." Then he added by an afterthought, "Have you any money in the house?"

The old steward looked towards Nehushta suspiciously and seeing that she was engaged with the horses out of earshot, answered in a whisper: "Money? I have so much of it that I know not what to do. The strong place you know if is almost full of gold and still it comes. There are the rents and profits of your great estates for three years; the proceeds of the sale of slaves and certain properties, together with the large outstanding amount that was due to my late master, the Lord Caius, which I have at length collected. Oh! at least you will not lack for money."

"There are other things that I could spare less readily," said Marcus, with a sigh; "still, it may be needed. Now tie up those horses by the fountain, and give us food, what you have, for we have ridden these thirty hours without rest. Afterwards you can talk."

It was mid-day. Marcus, bathed, anointed, and clad in the robes of his order, was standing in one of the splendid apartments of his marble house, looking through an opening in the shutters at the passing of the Triumph. Presently old Nehushta joined him. She also was clad in clean, white robes which the slave woman had found for her.

"Have you any news?" asked Marcus impatiently.

"Some, lord, which I have pieced together from what is known by the slave-woman, and by your steward, Stephanus. A beautiful Jewish captive is to walk in the Triumph and afterwards to be sold with other captives in the Forum. They heard of her because it is said that there has been a quarrel between Titus and his brother Domitian, and Vespasian also, on account of this woman."

"A quarrel? What quarrel?"

"I, or rather your servants, know little of it, but they have heard that Domitian demanded the girl as a gift, whereon Titus told him that if he wished for her, he might buy her. Then the matter was referred to Vespasian Cæsar, who upheld the decree of Titus. As for Domitian, he went away in a rage, declaring that he would purchase the girl and remember the affront which had been put upon him."

"Surely the gods are against me," said Marcus, "if they have given me Domitian for a rival."

"Why so, lord? Your money is as good as his, and perhaps you will pay more."

"I will pay to my last piece, but will that free me from the rage and

hate of Domitian?"

"Why need he know that you were the rival bidder?"

"Why? Oh! in Rome everything is known--even the truth sometimes."

"Time enough to trouble when trouble comes. First let us wait and see whether this maid be Miriam."

"Aye," he answered, "let us wait--since we must."

So they waited and with anxious eyes watched the great show roll by them. They saw the cars painted with scenes of the taking of Jerusalem and the statues of the gods fashioned in ivory and gold. They saw the purple hangings of the Babylonian brodered pictures, the wild beasts, and the ships mounted upon wheels. They saw the treasures of the temple and the images of victory, and many other things, for that pageant seemed to be endless, and still the captives and the Emperors did not come.

One sight there was also that caused Marcus to shrink as though fire had burned him, for yonder, set in the midst of a company of jugglers and buffoons that gibed and mocked at them, were the two unhappy men who had been taken prisoners by the Jews. On they tramped, their hands bound behind them, clad in full armour, but wearing a woman's distaff where the sword should have been, and round their necks the placards which



proclaimed their shame. The brutal Roman mob hooted them also, that mob which ever loved spectacles of cruelty and degradation, calling them cowards. One of the men, a bull-necked, black-haired fellow, suffered it patiently, remembering that at even he must be set free to vanish where he would. The other, who was blue-eyed and finer-featured, having gentle blood in his veins, seemed to be maddened by their talk, for he glared about him, gnashing his teeth like a wild beast in a cage. Opposite to the house of Marcus came the climax.

"Cur," yelled a woman in the mob, casting a pebble that struck him on the cheek. "Cur! Coward!"

The blue-eyed man stopped, and, wheeling round, shouted in answer:

"I am no coward, I who have slain ten men with my own hand, five of them in single combat. You are the cowards who taunt me. I was overwhelmed, that is all, and afterwards in the prison I thought of my wife and children and lived on. Now I die and my blood be on you."

Behind him, drawn by eight white oxen, was the model of a ship with the crew standing on its deck. Avoiding his guard, the man ran down the line of oxen and suddenly cast himself upon the ground before the wooden-wheeled car, which passed over his neck, crushing the life out of him.

"Well done! Well done!" shouted the crowd, rejoicing at this unexpected

sight. "Well done! He was brave after all."

Then the body was carried away and the procession moved forward. But Marcus, who watched, hid his face in his hands, and Nehushta, lifting hers, uttered a prayer for the passing soul of the victim.

Now the prisoners began to go past, marching eight by eight, hundreds upon hundreds of them, and once more the mob shouted and rejoiced over these unfortunates, whose crime was that they had fought for their country to the end. The last files passed, then at a little distance from them, tramping forward wearily, appeared the slight figure of a girl dressed in a robe of white silk blazoned at its breast with gold. Her bowed head, from which the curling tresses fell almost to her waist, was bared to the fierce rays of the sun, and on her naked bosom lay a necklace of great pearls.

"Pearl-Maiden, Pearl-Maiden!" shouted the crowd.

"Look!" said Nehushta, gripping the shoulder of Marcus with her hand.

He looked, and after long years once more beheld Miriam, for though he had heard her voice in the Old Tower at Jerusalem, then her face was hidden from him by the darkness. There was the maid from whom he had parted in the desert village by Jordan, the same, and yet changed.

Then she had been a lovely girl, now she was a woman on whom sorrow and suffering had left their stamp. The features were finer, the deep,

patient eyes were frightened and reproachful; her beauty was such as we see in dreams, not altogether that of earth.

"Oh! my darling, my darling," murmured Nehushta, stretching out her arms towards her. "Christ be thanked, that I have found you, my darling."

Then she turned to Marcus, who was devouring Miriam with his eyes, and said in a fierce voice:

"Roman, now that you see her again, do you still love her as much as of old time?"

He took no note and she repeated the question. Then he answered:

"Why do you trouble me with such idle words. Once she was a woman to be won, now she is a spirit to be worshipped."

"Woman or spirit, or woman and spirit, beware how you deal with her, Roman," snarled Nehushta still more fiercely, "or----" and she left her hand fall upon the knife that was hidden in her robe.

"Peace, peace!" said Marcus, and as he spoke the procession came to a halt before his windows. "How weary she is, and sad," he went on speaking to himself. "Her heart seems crushed. Oh! that I must stay here and see her thus, who dare not show myself! If she could but know! If she could but know!"

Nehushta thrust him aside and took his place. Fixing her eyes upon Miriam she made some effort of the will, so fierce and concentrated that beneath the strain her body shook and quivered. See! Her thought reached the captive, for she looked up.

"Stand to one side," she whispered to Marcus, then unlatched the shutters and slowly pushed them open. Now between her and the air was nothing but the silken curtains. Very gently she parted these with her hands, for some few seconds suffering her face to be seen between them. Then laying her fingers on her lips she drew back and they closed again.

"It is well," she said, "she knows."

"Let her see me also," said Marcus.

"Nay, she can bear no more. Look, look, she faints."

Groaning in bitterness of spirit they watched Miriam, who seemed about to fall. Now a woman gave her the cup of wine, and drinking she recovered herself.

"Note that woman," muttered Marcus, "that I may reward her."

"It is needless," answered Nehushta, "she seeks no reward."

"She is more than a Roman, she is a Christian. As she passed it she made

a sign of the cross with the cup."

The waggons creaked; the officers shouted; the procession moved forward. From behind the curtain the pair kept their eyes fixed upon Miriam until she vanished in the dust and crowd. When she had gone they seemed to see little else; even the sight of the glorious Cæsars could not hold their eyes.

Marcus summoned the steward, Stephanus.

"Go forth," he said, "and discover when and where the captive Pearl-Maiden is to be sold. Then return to me swiftly. Be secret and silent, and let none suspect whence you come or what you seek. Your life hangs upon it. Go."

The sun was sinking fast, staining the marble temples and colonnades of the Forum blood-red with its level beams. For the most part the glorious place was deserted now, since, the Triumph over at length, the hundreds of thousands of the Roman populace, wearied out with pleasure and excitement, had gone home to spend the night in feasting. About one of the public slave-markets, however, a round of marble enclosed with a rope and set in front of a small building, where the slaves were sheltered until the moment of their sale, a mixed crowd was gathered, some of them bidders, some idlers drawn thither by curiosity. Others

were in the house behind examining the wares before they came to the hammer. Presently an old woman, meanly clad with her face veiled to the eyes, and bearing on her back a heavy basket such as was used to carry fruit to market, presented herself at the door of the house.

"What do you want?" asked the gatekeeper.

"To inspect the slaves," she answered in Greek.

"Go away," he said roughly, "you are not a buyer."

"I may be if the stuff is good enough," she replied, slipping a gold coin into his hand.

"Pass in, old lady, pass in," and in another second the door had closed behind her, and Nehushta found herself among the slaves.

In this building the light was already so low that torches were burning for the convenience of visitors. By the flare of them Nehushta saw the unfortunate captives--there were but fifteen--seated upon marble benches, while slave women moved from the one to the other, washing their hands and feet and faces in scented water, brushing and tying their hair and removing the dust of the procession from their robes, so that they might look more comely to the eyes of the purchasers. Also there were present a fair number of bidders, twenty or thirty of them, who strolled from girl to girl discussing the points of each and at

times asking them to stand up, or turn round, or show their arms and ankles, that they might judge of them better. At the moment when Nehushta entered one of these, a fat man with greasy curls who looked like an Eastern, was endeavouring to persuade a dark and splendid Jewess to let him see her foot. Pretending not to understand she sat still and sullen, till at length he stooped down and lifted her robe. Then in an instant the girl dealt him such a kick in the face that amidst the laughter of the spectators he rolled backwards on the floor, whence he rose with a cut and bloody forehead.

"Very good, my beauty, very good," he muttered in a savage voice, "before twelve hours are over you shall pay for that."

But again the girl sat sullen and motionless, pretending not to understand.

Most of the public, however, were gathered about Miriam, who sat upon a chair by herself, her hands folded, her head bent down, a very picture of pitiful, outraged modesty. One by one as their turns came and the attendant suffered them to approach, the men advanced and examined her closely, though Nehushta noted that none of them were allowed to touch her with their hands. Placing herself at the end of the line she watched with all her eyes and listened with all her ears. Soon she had her reward. A tall man, dressed like a merchant of Egypt, went up to Miriam and bent over her.

"Silence!" said the attendant. "I am ordered to suffer none to speak to the slave who is called Pearl-Maiden. Move on, sir, move on."

The man lifted his head, and although in that gloom she could not see his face, Nehushta knew its shape. Still she was not sure, till presently he moved his right hand so that it came between her and the flame of one of the torches, and she perceived that the top joint of the first finger was missing.

"Caleb," she thought to herself, "Caleb, escaped and in Rome! So Domitian has another rival." Then she went back to the door-keeper and asked him the name of the man.

"A merchant of Alexandria named Demetrius," he said.

Nehushta returned to her place. In front of her two men, agents who bought slaves and other things for wealthy clients, were talking.

"More fit for a sale of dogs," said one, "after sunset when everybody is tired out, than for that of one of the fairest women who ever stood upon the block."

"Pshaw," answered the other, "the whole thing is a farce. Domitian is in a hurry, that's all, so the auction must be held to-night."

"He means to buy her?"



"Of course. I am told that his factor, Saturius, has orders to go up to a thousand sestertia if need be," and he nodded towards a quiet man dressed in a robe of some rich, dark stuff, who stood in a corner of the place watching the company.

"A thousand sestertia! For one slave girl! Ye gods! a thousand sestertia!"

"The necklace goes with her, that is worth something, and there is property at Tyre."

"Property in Tyre," said the other, "property in the moon. Come on, let us look at something a little less expensive. As I wish to keep my head on my shoulders, I am not going to bid against the prince in any case."

"No, nor anyone else either. I expect he will get his fancy pretty cheap after all."

Then the two men moved away, and a minute afterwards Nehushta found that it was her turn to approach Miriam.

"Here comes a curious sort of buyer," said one of the attendants.

"Don't judge the taste of the fruit by the look of the rind, young man," answered Nehushta, and at the sound of that voice for the first time

Pearl-Maiden lifted her head, then dropped it quickly.

"She is well enough," Nehushta said aloud, "but there used to be prettier women when I was young; in fact, though dark, I was myself," a statement at which those within hearing, noting her gaunt and aged form bent beneath the heavy basket, tittered aloud. "Come, lift up your head, my dear," she went on, trying to entice the captive to consent by encouraging waves of her hand.

They were fruitless; still, had any thought of it there was meaning in them. On Nehushta's finger, as it chanced, shone a ring which Miriam ought to know, seeing that for some years she had worn it on her own.

It would seem that she did know it, at any rate her bosom and neck grew red and a spasm passed across her face which even the falling hair did not suffice to hide.

The ring told Miriam that Marcus lived and that Nehushta was his messenger. This suspense at least was ended.

Now the door-keeper called a warning and the buyers flocked from the building. Outside, the auctioneer, a smooth-faced, glib-tongued man, was already mounting the rostrum. Calling for silence he began his speech. On this evening of festival, he said, he would be brief. The lots he had to offer to the select body of connoisseurs he saw before him, were the property of the Emperor Titus, and the proceeds of the sale, it was

his duty to tell them, would not go into Cæsar's pocket, but were to be equally divided between the poor of Rome and deserving soldiers who had been wounded or had lost their health in the war, a fact which must cause every patriotic citizen to bid more briskly. These lots, he might say, were unique, being nothing else than the fifteen most beautiful girls, believed all of them to be of noble blood, among the many thousands who had been captured at the sack of Jerusalem, the city of the Jews, especially selected to adorn the great conqueror's Triumph. No true judge, who desired a charming memento of the victory of his country's arms, would wish to neglect such an opportunity, especially as he was informed that the Jewish women were affectionate, docile, well instructed in many arts, and very hard-working. He had only one more thing to say, or rather two things. He regretted that this important sale should be held at so unusual an hour. The reason was that there was really no place where these slaves could be comfortably kept without risk of their maltreatment or escape, so it was held to be best that they should be removed at once to the seclusion of their new homes, a decision, he was sure, that would meet the wishes of buyers. The second point was that among them was one lot of surpassing interest; namely, the girl who had come to be generally spoken of as Pearl-Maiden.

This young woman, who could not be more than three or four-and-twenty years of age, was the last representative of a princely family of the Jews. She had been found exposed upon one of the gates of the holy house of that people, where it would seem she was sentenced to perish for some offence against their barbarous laws. As the clamours of the populace

that day had testified, she was of the most delicate and distinguished beauty, and the collar of great pearls which she wore about her neck gave evidence of her rank. If he knew anything of the tastes of his countrymen the price which would be paid for her must prove a record even in that ring. He was aware that among the vulgar a great, almost a divine name had been coupled with that of this captive. Well, he knew nothing, except this, that he was certain that if there was any truth in the matter the owner of the name, as became a noble and a generous nature, would wish to obtain his prize fairly and openly. The bidding was as free to the humblest there--provided, of course, that he could pay, and he might remark that not an hour's credit would be given except to those who were known to him--as to Cæsar himself. Now, as the light was failing, he would order the torches to be lit and commence the sale. The beautiful Pearl-Maiden, he might add, was Lot No. 7.

So the torches were lit, and presently the first victim was led out and placed upon a stand of marble in the centre of the flaring ring. She was a dark-haired child of about sixteen years of age, who stared round her with a frightened gaze.

The bidding began at five sesteria and ran up to fifteen, or about £120 of our money, at which price she was knocked down to a Greek, who led her back into the receiving house, paid the gold to a clerk who was in attendance, and took her away, sobbing as she went. Then followed four others, who were sold at somewhat better prices. No. 6 was the dark and splendid Jewess who had kicked the greasy-curled Eastern in the face. As

soon as she appeared upon the block, this brute stepped forward and bid twenty sestertia for her. An old grey-bearded fellow answered with a bid of twenty-five. Then some one bid thirty, which the Eastern capped with a bid of forty. So it went on till the large total of sixty sestertia was offered, whereon the Eastern advanced two more, at which price, amidst the laughter of the audience, she was knocked down to him.

"You know me and that the money is safe," he said to the auctioneer. "It shall be paid to you to-morrow; I have enough to carry without lading myself up with so much gold. Come on, girl, to your new home, where I have a little score to settle with you," and grasping her by the left wrist he pulled her from the block and led her unresisting through the crowd and to the shadows beyond.

Already No. 7 had been summoned to the block and the auctioneer was taking up his tale, when from out of these shadows rose the sound of a dreadful yell. Some of the audience snatched torches from their stands and ran to the spot whence it came. There, on the marble pavement lay the Eastern dead or dying, while over him stood the Jewess, a red dagger, his own, which she had snatched from its scabbard, in her hand, and on her stately face a look of vengeful triumph.

"Seize her! Seize the murdering witch! Beat her to death with rods," they cried, and at the command of the auctioneer slaves ran up to take her.

She waited till they were near, then, without a word or a sound, lifted her strong, white arm and drove the knife deep into her own heart. For a moment she stood still, till suddenly she stretched her hands wide and fell face downwards dead upon the body of the brute who had bought her.

The crowd gasped and was silent. Then one of them, a sickly looking patrician, called out:

"Oh! I did well to come. What a sight! What a sight! Blessings on you, brave girl, you have given Julius a new pleasure."

After this there was tumult and confusion while the attendants carried away the bodies. A few minutes later the auctioneer climbed back into his rostrum and alluded in moving terms to the "unfortunate accident" which had just happened.

"Who would think," he said, "that one so beautiful could also be so violent? I weep when I consider that this noble purchaser, whose name I forget at the moment, but whose estate, by the way, is liable for the money, should have thus suddenly been transferred from the arms of Venus to that of Pluto, although it must be admitted that he gave the woman some provocation. Well, gentlemen, grief will not bring him to life again, and we who still stand beneath the stars have business to attend. Bear me witness, all of you, that I am blameless in this affair, and, slaves, bring out that priceless gem, the Pearl-Maiden."