

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE LAMP

If Domitian at length slackened in his fruitless search for Miriam, Caleb, whose whole heart was in the hunt, proved more diligent. Still, he could find no trace of her. At first he made sure that if she was in Rome she would return to visit her friends and protectors, Gallus and his wife, and in the hope of thus discovering her, Caleb caused a constant watch to be kept on their abode. But Miriam never came there, nor, although their footsteps were dogged from day to day, did they lead him to her, since in truth Julia and Miriam met only in the catacombs, where he and his spies dared not venture. Soon, however, Gallus discovered that his home was kept under observation and its inmates tracked from place to place. It was this knowledge indeed which, more than any other circumstance, brought him to make up his mind to depart from Rome and dwell in Syria, since he said that he would no longer live in a city where night by night he and his were hunted like jackals. But when he left for Ostia, to wait there till the ship Luna was ready, Caleb followed him, and in that small town soon found out all his plans, learning that he meant to sail with his wife in the vessel. Then, as he could hear nothing of Miriam, he returned to Rome.

After all it was by chance that he discovered her and not through his own cleverness. Needing a lamp for his chamber he entered a shop where such things were sold, and examined those that the merchant offered to

him. Presently he perceived one of the strange design of two palms with intertwining trunks and feathery heads nodding apart, having a lamp hanging by a little chain from the topmost frond of each of them. The shape of the trees struck him as familiar, and he let his eye run down their stems until it reached the base, which, to support so tall a piece, was large. Yes, the palms grew upon a little bank, and there beneath the water rippled, while between bank and water was a long, smooth stone, pointed at one end. Then in a flash Caleb recognised the place, as well he might, seeing that on many and many an evening had he and Miriam sat side by side upon that stone, angling for fish in the muddy stream of Jordan. There was no doubt about it, and, look! half hidden in the shadow of the stone lay a great fish, the biggest that ever he had caught--he could swear to it, for its back fin was split.

A mist came before Caleb's eyes and in it across the years he saw himself a boy again. There he stood, his rod of reed bent double and the thin line strained almost to breaking, while on the waters of Jordan a great fish splashed and rolled.

"I cannot pull him in," he cried. "The line will never bear it and the bank is steep. Oh! Miriam, we shall lose him!"

Then there was a splash, and, behold! the girl at his side had sprung into the swiftly running river. Though its waters, reaching to her neck, washed her down the stream, she hugged to her young breast that great, slippery fish, yes, and gripped its back fin between her teeth, till

with the aid of his reed rod he drew them both to land.

"I will buy that lamp," said Caleb presently. "The design pleases me. What artist made it?"

The merchant shrugged his shoulders.

"Sir, I do not know," he answered. "These goods are supplied to us with many others, such as joinery and carving, by one Septimus, who is a contractor and, they say, a head priest among the Christians, employing many hands at his shops in the poor streets yonder. One or more of them must be designers of taste, since of late we have received from him some lamps of great beauty."

Then the man was called away to attend to another customer and Caleb paid for his lamp.

That evening at dusk Caleb, bearing the lamp in his hand, found his way to the workshop of Septimus, only to discover that the part of the factory where lamps were moulded was already closed. A girl who had just shut the door, seeing him stand perplexed before it, asked civilly if she could help him.

"Maiden," he answered, "I am in trouble who wish to find her who moulded

this lamp, so that I may order others, but am told that she has left her work for the day."

"Yes," said the maiden, looking at the lamp, which evidently she recognised. "It is pretty, is it not? Well, cannot you return to-morrow?"

"Alas! no, I expect to be leaving Rome for a while, so I fear that I must go elsewhere."

The girl reflected to herself that it would be a pity if the order were lost, and with it the commission which she might divide with the maker of the lamp. "It is against the rules, but I will show you where she lives," she said, "and if she is there, which is probable, for I have never seen her or her companion go out at night, you can tell her your wishes."

Caleb thanked the girl and followed her through sundry tortuous lanes to a court surrounded by old houses.

"If you go in there," she said, pointing to a certain doorway, "and climb to the top of the stairs, I forget whether there are three or four flights, you will find the makers of the lamp in the roof-rooms--oh! sir, I thank you, but I expected nothing. Good-night."

At length Caleb stood at the head of the stairs, which were both steep,

narrow, and in the dark hard to climb. Before him, at the end of a rickety landing, a small ill-fitting door stood ajar. There was light within the room beyond, and from it came a sound of voices. Caleb crept up to the door and listened, for as the floor below was untenanted he knew that none could see him. Bending down he looked through the space between the door and its framework and his heart stood still. There, standing full in the lamplight, clothed in a pure white robe, for her rough working dress lay upon a stool beside her, was Miriam herself, her elbow leaning on the curtained window-place. She was talking to Nehushta, who, her back bent almost double over a little charcoal fire, was engaged in cooking their supper.

"Think," she was saying, "only think, Nou, our last night in this hateful city, and then, instead of that stifling workshop and the terror of Domitian, the open sea and the fresh salt wind and nobody to fear but God. Luna! Is it not a beautiful name for a ship? I can see her, all silver----"

"Peace," said Nehushta. "Are you mad, girl, to talk so loud? I though I heard a sound upon the stairs just now."

"It is only the rats," answered Miriam cheerfully, "no one ever comes up here. I tell you that were it not for Marcus I could weep with joy."

Caleb crept back to the head of the stairs and down several steps, which he began to re-ascend noisily, grumbling at their gloom and steepness.

Then, before the women even had time to shut the door, he thrust it wide and walked straight into the room.

"Your pardon," he began, then added quietly, "Why, Miriam, when we parted on the gate Nicanor, who could have foretold that we should live to meet again here in a Roman attic? And you, Nehushta. Why, we were separated in the fray outside the Temple walls, though, indeed, I think that I saw you in a strange place some months ago, namely, the slave-ring on the Forum."

"Caleb," asked Miriam in a hollow voice, "what is your business here?"

"Well, Miriam, it began with a desire for a replica of this lamp, which reminds me of a spot familiar to my childhood. Do you remember it? Now that I have found who is the lamp's maker----"

"Cease fooling," broke in Nehushta. "Bird of ill-omen, you have come to drag your prey back to the shame and ruin which she has escaped."

"I was not always called thus," answered Caleb, flushing, "when I rescued you from the house at Tyre for instance, or when I risked my life, Miriam, to throw you food upon the gate Nicanor. Nay, I come to save you from Domitian----"

"And to take her for yourself," answered Nehushta. "Oh! we Christians also have eyes to see and ears to hear, and, black-hearted traitor

that you are, we know all your shame. We know of your bargain with the chamberlain of Domitian, by which the body of the slave was to be the price of the life of her buyer. We know how you swore away the honour of your rival, Marcus, with false testimony, and how from week to week you have quartered Rome as a vulture quarters the sky till at length you have smelt out the quarry. Well, she is helpless, but One is strong, and may His vengeance fall upon your life and soul."

Suddenly Nehushta's voice, that had risen to a scream, died away, and she stood before him threatening him with her bony fists, and searching his face with her burning eyes, a vengeance incarnate.

"Peace, woman, peace," said Caleb, shrinking back before her. "Spare your reproaches; if I have sinned much it is because I have loved more----"

"And hate most of all," added Nehushta.

"Oh! Caleb," broke in Miriam, "if as you say you love me, why should you deal thus with me? You know well that I do not love you after this sort, no, and never can, and even if you keep me from Domitian, who does but make a tool of you, what would it advantage you to take a woman who leaves her heart elsewhere? Also I may never marry you for that same reason that I may not marry Marcus, because my faith is and must remain apart from yours. Would you make a base slave of your old playmate, Caleb? Would you bring her to the level of a dancing-girl? Oh! let me go

in peace."

"Upon the ship Luna," said Caleb sullenly.

Miriam gasped! So he knew their plans.

"Yes," she replied desperately, "upon the ship Luna, to find such a fate as Heaven may give me; at least to be at peace and free. For your soul's sake, Caleb, let me go. Once years ago you swore that you would not force yourself upon me against my will. Will you break that oath to-day?"

"I swore also, Miriam, that it should go ill with any man who came between you and me. Shall I break that oath to-day? Give yourself to me of your own will and save Marcus. Refuse and I will bring him to his death. Choose now between me and your lover's life."

"Are you a coward that you should lay such a choice upon me, Caleb?"

"Call me what you will. Choose."

Miriam clasped her hands and for a moment stood looking upwards. Then a light of purpose grew upon her face and she answered:

"Caleb, I have chosen. Do your worst. The fate of Marcus is not in my hands, or your hands, but in the hands of God; nor, unless He wills it,

can one hair of his head be harmed by you or by Domitian. For is it not written in the book of your own Law that 'the King's heart is in the hand of the Lord, he turneth it whithersoever he will.' But my honour is my own, and to stain it would be a sin for which I alone must answer to Heaven and to Marcus, dead or living--Marcus, who would curse and spit upon me did I attempt to buy his safety at such a price."

"Is that your last word, Miriam?"

"It is. If it pleases you by false witness and by murder to destroy the man who once spared you, then if such a thing be suffered, have your will and reap its fruits. I make no bargain with you, for myself or for him--do your worst to both of us."

"So be it," said Caleb with a bitter laugh, "but I think that the ship Luna will lack her fairest passenger."

Miriam sank down upon a seat and covered her face with her hands, a piteous sight in her misery and the terror which, notwithstanding her bold words, she could not conceal. Caleb walked to the door and paused there, while the white-haired Nehushta stood by the brazier of charcoal and watched them both with her fierce eyes. Presently Caleb glanced round at Miriam crouched by the window and a strange new look came into his face.

"I cannot do it," he said slowly, each word falling heavily from his

lips like single rain-drops from a cloud, or the slow blood from a mortal wound.

Miriam let her hands slip from her face and stared at him.

"Miriam," he said, "you are right; I have sinned against you and this man Marcus. Now I will expiate my sin. Your secret is safe with me, and since you hate me I will never see you more. Miriam, we look upon each other for the last time. Further, if I can, I will work for the deliverance of Marcus and help him to join you in Tyre, whither the Luna is bound--is she not? Farewell?"

Once again he turned to go, but it would seem that his eyes were blinded, or his brain was dulled by the agony that worked within. At least Caleb caught his foot in the ancient uneven boards, stumbled, and fell heavily upon his face. Instantly, with a low hiss of hate and a spring like that of a cat, Nehushta was upon him. Thrusting her knees upon his back she seized the nape of his neck with her left hand and with her right drew a dagger from her bosom.

"Forbear!" said Miriam. "Touch him with that knife and we part forever. Nay, I mean it. I myself will hand you to the officer, even if he hales me to Domitian."

Then Nehushta rose to her feet.

"Fool!" she said, "fool, to trust to that man of double moods, whose mercy to-night will be vengeance to-morrow. Oh! you are undone! Alas! you are undone!"

Regaining his feet Caleb looked at her contemptuously.

"Had you stabbed she might have been undone indeed," he said. "Now, as of old, there is little wisdom in that gray head of yours, Nehushta; nor can your hate suffer you to understand the intermingled good and evil of my heart." Then he advanced to Miriam, lifted her hand and kissed it. With a sudden movement she proffered him her brow.

"Nay," he said, "tempt me not, it is not for me. Farewell."

Another instant and he was gone.

It would seem that Caleb kept his word, for three days later the vessel Luna sailed unmolested from the port of Ostia in the charge of the Greek captain Hector, having on board Miriam, Nehushta, Julia, and Gallus.

Within a week of this sailing Titus at length returned to Rome. Here in due course the case of Marcus was brought before him by the prisoner's friends, together with a demand that he should be granted a new and open

trial for the clearing of his honour. Titus, who for his own reasons refused to see Marcus, listened patiently, then gave his decision.

He rejoiced, he said, to learn that his close friend and trusted officer was still alive, since he had long mourned him as dead. He grieved that in his absence he should have been put upon his trial on the charge of having been taken captive, living, by the Jews, which, if Marcus upon his arrival in Rome had at once reported himself to him, would not have happened. He dismissed all accusations against his military honour and courage as mere idle talk, since he had a hundred times proved him to be the bravest of men, and knew, moreover, something of the circumstances under which he was captured. But, however willing he might be to do so, he was unable for public reasons to disregard the fact that he had been duly convicted by a court-martial, under the Prince Domitian, of having broken the command of his general and suffered himself to be taken prisoner alive. To do so would be to proclaim himself, Titus, unjust, who had caused others to suffer for this same offence, and to offer insult to the prince, his brother, who in the exercise of his discretion as commander in his absence, had thought fit to order the trial. Still, his punishment should be of the lightest possible. He commanded that on leaving his prison Marcus should go straight to his own house by night, so that there might be no public talk or demonstration among his friends, and there make such arrangement of his affairs as seemed good to him. Further, he commanded that within ten days he should leave Italy, to dwell or travel abroad for a period of three years, unless the time should be shortened by some special decree. After the lapse

of these three years he would be free to return to Rome. This was his judgment and it could not be altered.

As it chanced, it was the chamberlain Saturius who first communicated the Imperial decree to Marcus. Hurrying straight from the palace to the prison he was admitted into the prisoner's chamber.

"Well," said Marcus, looking up, "what evil tidings have you now?"

"None, none," answered Saturius. "I have very good tidings, and that is why I run so fast. You are only banished for three years, thanks to my secret efforts," and he smiled craftily. "Even your property is left to you, a fact which will, I trust, enable you to reward your friends for their labours on your behalf."

"Tell me all," and the rogue obeyed, while Marcus listened with a face of stone.

"Why did Titus decide thus?" he asked when it was finished. "Speak frankly, man, if you wish for a reward."

"Because, noble Marcus, Domitian had been with him beforehand and told him that if he reversed his public judgment it would be a cause of open quarrel between them. This, Cæsar, who fears his brother, does not seek. That is why he would not see you, lest his love for his friend should overcome his reason."

"So the prince is still my enemy?"

"Yes, and more bitter than before, since he cannot find the Pearl-Maiden, and is sure that you have spirited her away. Be advised by me and leave Rome quickly, lest worse things befall you."

"Aye," said Marcus, "I will leave Rome quickly, for how shall I abide here who have lost my honour. Yet first it may please your master to know that by now the lady whom he seeks is far across the sea. Now get you gone, you fox, for I desire to be alone."

The face of Saturius became evil.

"Is that all you have to say?" he asked. "Am I to win no reward?"

"If you stay longer," said Marcus, "you will win one which you do not desire."

Then Saturius went, but without the door he turned and shook his fist towards the chamber he had left.

"Fox," he muttered. "He called me fox and gave me nothing. Well, foxes may find some pickings on his bones."

The chamberlain's road to the palace ran past the place of business of

the merchant Demetrius. He stopped and looked at it. "Perhaps this one will be more liberal," he said to himself, and entered.

In his private office he found Caleb alone, his face buried in his hands. Seating himself he plunged into his tale, ending it with an apology to Caleb for the lightness of the sentence inflicted upon Marcus.

"Titus would do no more," he said; "indeed, were it not for the fear of Domitian, he could have not have been brought to do so much, for he loves the man, who has been a prefect of his bodyguard, and was deeply grieved that he must disgrace him. Still, disgraced he is, aye, and he feels it; therefore I trust that you, most generous Demetrius, who hate him, will remember the service of your servant in this matter."

"Yes," said Caleb quietly, "fear not, you shall be well paid, for you have done your best."

"I thank you, friend," answered Saturius, rubbing his hands, "and, after all, things may be better than they seem. That insolent fool let out just now that the girl about whom there is all this bother has been smuggled away somewhere across the seas. When Domitian learns that he will be so mad with anger that he may be worked up to take a little vengeance of his own upon the person of the noble Marcus, who has thus contrived to trick him. Also Marcus shall not get the Pearl-Maiden, for the prince will cause her to be followed and brought back--to you,

worthy Demetrius."

"Then," answered Caleb, slowly, "he must seek for her, not across the sea, but in its depths."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I have tidings that Pearl-Maiden escaped in the ship Luna hard upon a month ago. This morning the captain and some mariners of the galley Imperatrix arrived in Rome. They report that they met a great gale off Rhegium, and towards the end of it saw a vessel sink. Afterwards they picked up a sailor clinging to a piece of wood, who told them that the ship's name was Luna and that she foundered with all hands."

"Have you seen this sailor?"

"No; he died of exhaustion soon after he was rescued; but I have seen the men of the galley, who brought me note of certain goods consigned to me in her hold. They repeated this story to me with their own lips."

"So, after all, she whom so many sought was destined to the arms of Neptune, as became a pearl," reflected Saturius. "Well, well, as Domitian cannot be revenged upon Neptune he will be the more wroth with the man who sent her to that god. Now I go to tell him all these tidings and learn his mind."

"You will return and acquaint me with it, will you not?" asked Caleb, looking up.

"Certainly, and at once. Our account is not yet balanced, most generous Demetrius."

"No," answered Caleb, "our accounts are not yet balanced."

Two hours later the chamberlain reappeared in the office.

"Well," said Caleb, "how does it go?"

"Ill, very ill for Marcus, and well, very well for those who hate him, as you and I do, friend. Oh! never have I seen my Imperial master so enraged. Indeed, when he learned that Pearl-Maiden had escaped and was drowned, so that he could have no hope of her this side the Styx, it was almost dangerous to be near to him. He cursed Titus for the lightness of his sentence; he cursed you; he cursed me. But I turned his wrath into the right channel. I showed him that for all these ills Marcus, and Marcus alone, is to blame, Marcus who is to pay the price of them with a three years' pleasant banishment from Rome, which doubtless, will be remitted presently. I tell you that Domitian wept and gnashed his teeth at the thought of it, until I showed him a better plan--knowing that it would please you, friend Demetrius."

"What plan?"

Saturius rose, and having looked round to see that the door was fastened, came and whispered into Caleb's ear.

"Look you, after sunset to-night, that is within two hours, Marcus is to be put out of his prison and conducted to the side door of his own house, that beneath the archway, where he is ordered to remain until he leaves Rome. In this house is no one except an old man, the steward Stephanus, and a slave woman. Well, before he gets there, certain trusty fellows, such as Domitian knows how to lay his hands upon, will have entered the house, and having secured the steward and the woman, will await the coming of Marcus beneath the archway. You can guess the rest. Is it not well conceived?"

"Very well," answered Caleb. "But may there not be suspicion?"

"None, none. Who would dare to suspect Domitian? A private crime, doubtless! The rich have so many enemies."

What Saturius did not add was that nobody would suspect Domitian because the masked bravoes were instructed to inform the steward and the slave when they had bound and gagged them, that they were hired to do the deed of blood by a certain merchant named Demetrius, otherwise Caleb the Jew, who had an ancient quarrel against Marcus, which, already, he had tried to satisfy by giving false evidence before the court-martial.

"Now," went on Satrius, "I must be going, for there are one or two little things which need attention, and time presses. Shall we balance that account, friend Demetrius?"

"Certainly," said Caleb, and taking a roll of gold from a drawer he pushed it across the table.

Satrius shook his head sadly. "I laid it at twice as much," he said. "Think how you hate him and how richly your hate will be fed. First disgraced unjustly, he, one of the best soldiers and bravest captains in the army, and then hacked to death by cutthroats in the doorway of his own house. What more could you want?"

"Nothing," answered Caleb. "Only the man isn't dead yet. Sometimes the Fates have strange surprises for us mortals, friend Satrius."

"Dead? He will be dead soon enough."

"Good. You shall have the rest of the money when I have seen his body. No, I don't want any bungling and that's the best way to make certain."

"I wonder," thought Satrius, as he departed out of the office and this history, "I wonder how I shall manage to get the balance of my fee before they have my Jewish friend by the heels. But it can be arranged--doubtless it can be arranged."

When he had gone, Caleb, who, it would seem, also had things which needed attention and felt that time pressed, took pen and wrote a short letter. Next he summoned a clerk and gave orders that it was to be delivered two hours after sunset--not before.

Meanwhile, he enclosed it in an outer wrapping so that the address was not seen. This done, he sat still for a time, his lips moving, almost as though he were engaged in prayer. Then, seeing that it was the hour of sunset, he rose, wrapped himself in a long dark cloak, such as was worn by Roman officers, and went out.