

CHAPTER XXIX

HOW MARCUS CHANGED HIS FAITH

Caleb was not the only one who heard the evil tidings of the ship Luna; it came to the ears of the bishop Cyril also, since little of any moment passed within the city of Rome which the Christians did not know.

Like Caleb, he satisfied himself of the truth of the matter by an interview with the captain of the Imperatrix. Then with a sorrowful heart he departed to the prison near the Temple of Mars. Here the warden told him that Marcus wished to see no one, but answering "Friend, my business will not wait," he pushed past the man and entered the room beyond. Marcus was standing up in the centre of it, in his hand a drawn sword of the short Roman pattern, which, on catching sight of his visitor, he cast upon the table with an exclamation of impatience. It fell beside a letter addressed to "The Lady Miriam in Tyre. To be given into her own hand."

"Peace be with you," said the bishop, searching his face with his quiet eyes.

"I thank you, friend," answered Marcus, smiling strangely, "I need peace, and--seek it."

"Son," asked the bishop, "what were you about to do?"

"Friend," answered Marcus, "If you desire to know, I was about to fall upon my sword. One more minute and I should have been dead. They brought it me with the cloak and other things. It was thoughtful of them, and I guessed their meaning."

Cyril lifted the sword from the table and cast it into a corner of the room.

"God be thanked," he said, "Who led my feet here in time to save you from this sin. Why, because it has pleased Him to take her life, should you seek to take your own?"

"Her life?" said Marcus. "What dreadful words are these. Her life! Whose life?"

"The life of Miriam. I came to tell you. She is drowned upon the seas with all her company."

For a moment Marcus stood swaying to and fro like a drunken man. Then he said:

"Is it so indeed? Well, the more reason that I should make haste to follow her. Begone and leave me to do the deed alone," and he stepped towards the sword.

Cyril set his foot upon the shining blade.

"What is this madness?" he asked. "If you did not know of Miriam's death, why do you desire to kill yourself?"

"Because I have lost more than Miriam. Man, they have robbed me of my honour. By the decree of Titus, I, Marcus, am branded as a coward. Yes, Titus, at whose side I have fought a score of battles--Titus, from whom I have warded many a blow--has banished me from Rome."

"Tell me of this thing," said Cyril.

So Marcus told him all. Cyril listened in silence, then said sternly:

"Is it for this that you would kill yourself? Is your honour lessened by a decree based upon false evidence, and given for reasons of policy? Do you cease to be honourable because others are dishonourable, and would you--a soldier--fly from the battle? Now, indeed, Marcus, you show yourself a coward."

"How can I live on who am so shamed?" he asked passionately. "My friends knew that I could not live, and that is why they wrapped a sword in yonder cloak and sent it me. Also Miriam, you say, is dead."

"Satan sent it to you, Marcus, desiring to fashion of your foolish

pride a ladder down which you might climb to hell. Cast aside this base temptation which wears the mask of false honour; face your trouble like a man, and conquer it by innocence--and faith."

"Miriam! What of Miriam?"

"Yes, what of Miriam? How would she welcome you yonder, who come to greet her with your blood upon your hands? Oh! son, do you not understand that this is the trial laid upon you? You have been brought low that you might rise high. Once the world gave you all it had to give. You were rich, you were a captain among captains; you were high-born; men called you 'The Fortunate.' Then Christ appealed to you in vain, you put Him by. What had you to do with the crucified carpenter of Galilee? Now by the plotting of your foes you have fallen. No longer do you rank high in your trade of blood. You are dismissed its service and an exile. The lesson of life has come home to you, therefore you seek to escape from life rather than bide in it to do your duty through good and ill, heedless of what men may say, and finding peace in the verdict of your own conscience. Let Him Whom you put by in your hours of pomp come to you now. Carry your cross with your shame as He carried His in His shame. In His light find light, in His peace find peace, and at the end her who has been taken from you awhile. Has my spirit spoken in vain with your spirit during all these many weeks, son Marcus? Already you have told me that you believe, and now at the first breath of trouble will you go back upon that which you know to be the Truth? Oh! once more listen to me, that your eyes may be opened before it is too

late."

"Speak on, I hear you," said Marcus with a sigh.

So Cyril pleaded with him in the passion of one inspired, and as Marcus hearkened his heart was softened and his purpose turned.

"I knew it all before, I believed it all before," he said at length, "but I would not accept your baptism and become a member of your Church."

"Why not, son?"

"Because had I done so she would have thought and you might have thought, and perhaps I myself should have thought that I did it, as once I offered to do, to win her whom I desired above all things on earth. Now she is dead and it is otherwise. Shrive me, father, and do your office."

So there in the prison cell the bishop Cyril took water and baptised the Roman Marcus into the body of the Christian Church.

"What shall I do now?" Marcus asked as he rose from his knees. "Once Cæsar was my master, now you speak with the voice of Cæsar. Command me."

"I do not speak, Christ speaks. Listen. I am called by the Church to go

to Alexandria in Egypt, whither I sail within three days. Will you who are exiled from Rome come with me? There I can find you work to do."

"I have said that you are Cæsar," answered Marcus. "Now it is sunset and I am free; accompany me to my house, I pray you, for there much business waits me in which I need counsel, who am overborne."

So presently the gates were opened as Titus had commanded, and they went forth, attended only by a guard of two men, walking unnoted through the streets to the palace in the Via Agrippa.

"There is the door," said the sergeant of the guard, pointing to the side entrance of the house. "Enter with your friend and, noble Marcus, fare you well."

So they went to the archway, and finding the door ajar, passed through and shut it behind them.

"For a house where there is much to steal this is ill guarded, son. In Rome an open gate ought to have a watchman," said Cyril as he groped his way through the darkness of the arch.

"My steward Stephanus should be at hand, for the jailer advised him of my coming--who never thought to come," began Marcus, then of a sudden stumbled heavily and was silent.

"What is it?" asked Cyril.

"By the feel one who is drunken--or dead. Some beggar, perhaps, who sleeps off his liquor here."

By now Cyril was through the archway and in the little courtyard beyond.

"A light burns in that window," he said. "Come, you know the path, guide me to it. We can return to this sleeper."

"Who seems hard to wake," added Marcus, as he led the way across the courtyard to the door of the offices. This also proved to be open and by it they entered the room where the steward kept his books and slept. Upon the table a lamp was burning, that which they had seen through the casement. Its light showed them a strange sight. An iron-bound box that was chained to the wall had been broken open and its contents rifled, for papers were strewn here and there, and on them lay an empty leathern money-bag. The furniture also was overturned as though in some struggle, while among it, one in the corner of the room and one beneath the marble table, which was too heavy to be moved, lay two figures, those of a man and a woman.

"Murderers have been here," said Cyril with a groan.

Marcus snatched the lamp from the table and held it to the face of the man in the corner.

"It is Stephanus," he said, "Stephanus bound and gagged, but living, and the other is the slave woman. Hold the lamp while I loose them," and drawing his short sword, he cut away the bonds, first of the one and then of the other. "Speak, man, speak!" he said, as Stephanus struggled to his feet. "What has chanced here?"

For some moments the old steward stared at him with round, frightened eyes. Then he gasped:

"Oh! my lord, I thought you dead. They said that they had come to kill you by command of the Jew Caleb, he who gave the evidence."

"They! Who?" asked Marcus.

"I know not, four men whose faces were masked. They said also that though you must die, they were commanded to do me and this woman no harm, only to bind and silence us. This they did, then, having taken what money they could find, went out to waylay you. Afterwards I heard a scuffle in the arch and well-nigh died of sorrow, for I who could neither warn nor help you, was sure that you were perishing beneath their knives."

"For this deliverance, thank God," said Cyril, lifting up his hands.

"Presently, presently," answered Marcus. "First follow me," and taking

the lamp in his hand, he ran back to the archway.

Beneath it a man lay upon his face--he across whom Marcus had stumbled, and about him blood flowed from many wounds. In silence they turned him over so that the light fell upon his features. Then Marcus staggered back amazed, for, behold! they were Caleb's, notwithstanding the blood and wounds that marred them, still dark and handsome in his death sleep.

"Why," he said to Stephanus, "this is that very man whose bloody work, as they told us, the murderers came to do. It would seem that he has fallen into his own snare."

"Are you certain, son?" asked Cyril. "Does not this gashed and gory cheek deceive you?"

"Draw that hand of his from beneath the cloak," answered Marcus. "If I am right the first finger will lack a joint."

Cyril obeyed and held up the stiffening hand. It was as Marcus had said.

"Caught in his own snare!" repeated Marcus. "Well, though I knew he hated me, and more than once we have striven to slay each other in battle and private fight, never would I have believed that Caleb the Jew would sink to murder. He is well repaid, the treacherous dog!"

"Judge not, that ye be not judged," answered Cyril. "What do you know of

how or why this man came by his death? He may have been hurrying here to warn you."

"Against his own paid assassins! No, father, I know Caleb better, only he was viler than I thought."

Then they carried the body into the house and took counsel what they should do. While they reasoned together, for every path seemed full of danger, there came a knock upon the archway door. They hesitated, not knowing whether it would be safe to open, till the knock was repeated more loudly.

"I will go, lord," said Stephanus, "for why need I fear, who am of no account to any one?"

So he went, presently to return.

"What was it?" asked Marcus.

"Only a young man, who said that he had been strictly charged by his master, Demetrius the Alexandrian merchant, to deliver a letter at this hour. Here is the letter."

"Demetrius, the Alexandrian merchant," said Marcus as he took it. "Why, under that name Caleb who lies there dead passed in Rome."

"Read the letter," said Cyril.

So Marcus cut the silk, broke the seal, and read:

"To the noble Marcus,

"In the past I have worked you evil and often striven to take your life. Now it has come to my ears that Domitian, who hates you even worse than I do, if for less reason, has laid a plot to murder you on the threshold of your own house. Therefore, by way of amends for that evidence which I gave against you that stained the truth, since no braver man ever breathed than you are, Marcus, it has come into my mind to visit the Palace Fortunate wrapped in such a cloak as you Roman captains wear. There, before you read this letter, perhaps we shall meet again. Still, mourn me not, Marcus, nor speak of me as generous, or noble, since Miriam is dead, and I who have followed her through life desire to follow her through death, hoping that there I may find a kinder fortune at her hands, or if not, forgetfulness. You who will live long, must drink deep of memory--a bitterer cup. Marcus, farewell. Since die I must, I would that it had been in open fight beneath your sword, but Fate, who has given me fortune, but no true favour, appoints me to the daggers of assassins that seek another heart. So be it. You tarry here, but I travel to Miriam. Why should I grumble at the road?

"Caleb.

"Written at Rome upon the night of my death."

"A brave man and a bitter," said Marcus when he had finished reading.

"Know, my father, that I am more jealous of him now than ever I was in his life's days. Had it not been for you and your preaching," he added angrily, "when he came to seek Miriam, he would have found me at her side. But now, how can I tell?"

"Peace to your heathen talk!" answered the bishop. "Is the land of spirits then such as your poets picture, and do the dead turn to each other with eyes of earthly passion? Yet," he added more gently, "I should not blame you who, like this poor Jew, from childhood have been steeped in superstitions. Have no fear of his rivalry in the heavenly fields, friend Marcus, where neither do they marry or are given in marriage, nor think that self-murder can help a man. What the end of all this tale may be does not yet appear; still I am certain that yonder Caleb will take no gain in hurrying down to death, unless indeed he did it from a nobler motive than he says, as I for one believe."

"I trust that it may be so," answered Marcus, "although in truth that another man should die for me gives me no comfort. Rather would I that he had left me to my doom."

"As God has willed so it has befallen, for 'man's goings are of the Lord; how then can a man understand his own way?'" replied Cyril with a

sigh. "Now let us to other matters, for time is short and it comes upon me that you will do well to be clear of Rome before Domitian finds that Caleb fell in place of Marcus."

Nearly three more months had gone when, at length, one night as the sun vanished, a galley crept wearily into the harbour of Alexandria and cast anchor just as the light of Pharos began to shine across the sea. Her passage through the winter gales had been hard, and for weeks at a time she had been obliged to shelter in harbours by the way. Now, short of food and water, she had come safely to her haven, for which mercy the bishop Cyril with the Roman Marcus and such other Christians as were aboard of her gave thanks to Heaven upon their knees in their little cabin near the forecastle, for it was too late to attempt to land that night. Then they went on deck and, as all their food was gone and they had no drink except some stinking water, leaned upon the bulwarks and looked hungrily towards the shore, where gleamed the thousand lights of the mighty city. Near to them, not a bowshot away indeed, lay another ship. Presently, as they stared at her black outline, the sound of singing floated from her decks across the still, starlit waters of the harbour. They listened to it idly enough at first, till at length some words of that song reached their ears, causing them to look at each other.

"That is no sailor's ditty," said Marcus.

"No," answered Cyril, "it is a Christian hymn, and one that I know well. Listen. Each verse ends, 'Peace, be still!'"

"Then," said Marcus, "yonder must be a Christian ship, else they would not dare to sing that hymn. The night is calm, let us beg the boat and visit it. I am thirsty, and those good folk may have fresh water."

"If you wish," answered Cyril. "There too we may get tidings as well as water."

A while later the little boat rowed to the side of the strange ship and asked leave to board of the watchman.

"What sign do you give?" asked the officer.

"The sign of the Cross," answered Cyril. "We have heard your hymn who are of the brotherhood of Rome."

Then a rope ladder was thrown down to them and the officer bade them make fast and be welcome.

They climbed upon the deck and went to seek the captain, who was in the afterpart of the ship, where an awning was stretched. In the space enclosed by this awning, which was lit with lanterns, stood a woman in a white robe, who sang the refrain of the hymn in a very sweet voice,

others of the company, from time to time, joining in its choruses.

"From the dead am I arisen" sang the voice, and there was something in the thrilling notes that went straight to the heart of Marcus, some tone and quality which were familiar.

Side by side with Cyril he climbed onwards across the rowing benches, and the noise of their stumbling footsteps reaching the singer's ears, caused her to pause in her song. Then stepping forward a little, as though to look, she came under the lantern so that its light fell full upon her face, and, seeing nothing, once more took up her chant:

"Oh ye faithless, from the dead am I arisen."

"Look, look!" gasped Marcus, clutching Cyril by the arm. "Look! It is Miriam, or her spirit."

Another instant and he, too, had come into the circle of the lamplight, so that his eyes met the eyes of the singer. Now she saw him and, with a little cry, sank senseless to the deck.

So the long story ended. Afterwards they learned that the tale which had been brought to Rome of the loss of the ship Luna was false. She had met the great gale, indeed, but had sheltered from it in a harbour,

where the skill of her captain, Hector, brought her safely. Then she made her way to Sicily, where she refitted, and so on to one of the Grecian ports, in which she lay for eight weeks waiting for better weather, till a favouring wind brought her somewhat slowly to Alexandria, a port she won only two days before the galley of Marcus. It would seem, therefore, that the vessel that had foundered in sight of the Imperatrix was either another ship also called the Luna, no uncommon name, or that the mariners of the Imperatrix had not heard her title rightly. It may have been even that the dying sailor who told it to them wandered in his mind, and forgetting how his last ship was called, gave her some name with which he was familiar. At the least, through the good workings of Providence, that Luna which bore Miriam and her company escaped the perils of the deep and in due time reached the haven of Alexandria.

Before they parted that happy night all their tale was told. Miriam learned how Caleb had kept the promise that he made to her, although when he thought her dead his fierce and jealous heart would suffer him to tell nothing of it to Marcus. She learned also how it came about that Marcus had been saved from death at his own hand by Cyril and entered the company of the Christian brotherhood. Very glad were both of them to think in the after years that he had done this believing her to be lost to him in death. Now none could say that he had changed his faith to win a woman, nor could their own consciences whisper to them that this was possible, though even at the time he knew it not.

So they understood how through their many trials, dangers, and temptations all things had worked together for good to them.

On the morrow, there in the ship Luna, Marcus and Miriam, whom the Romans called Pearl-Maiden, were wedded by the bishop Cyril, the Captain Gallus giving the bride in marriage, while the white-haired, fierce-eyed Nehushta stood at their side and blessed them in the name of that dead mother whose command had not been broken.