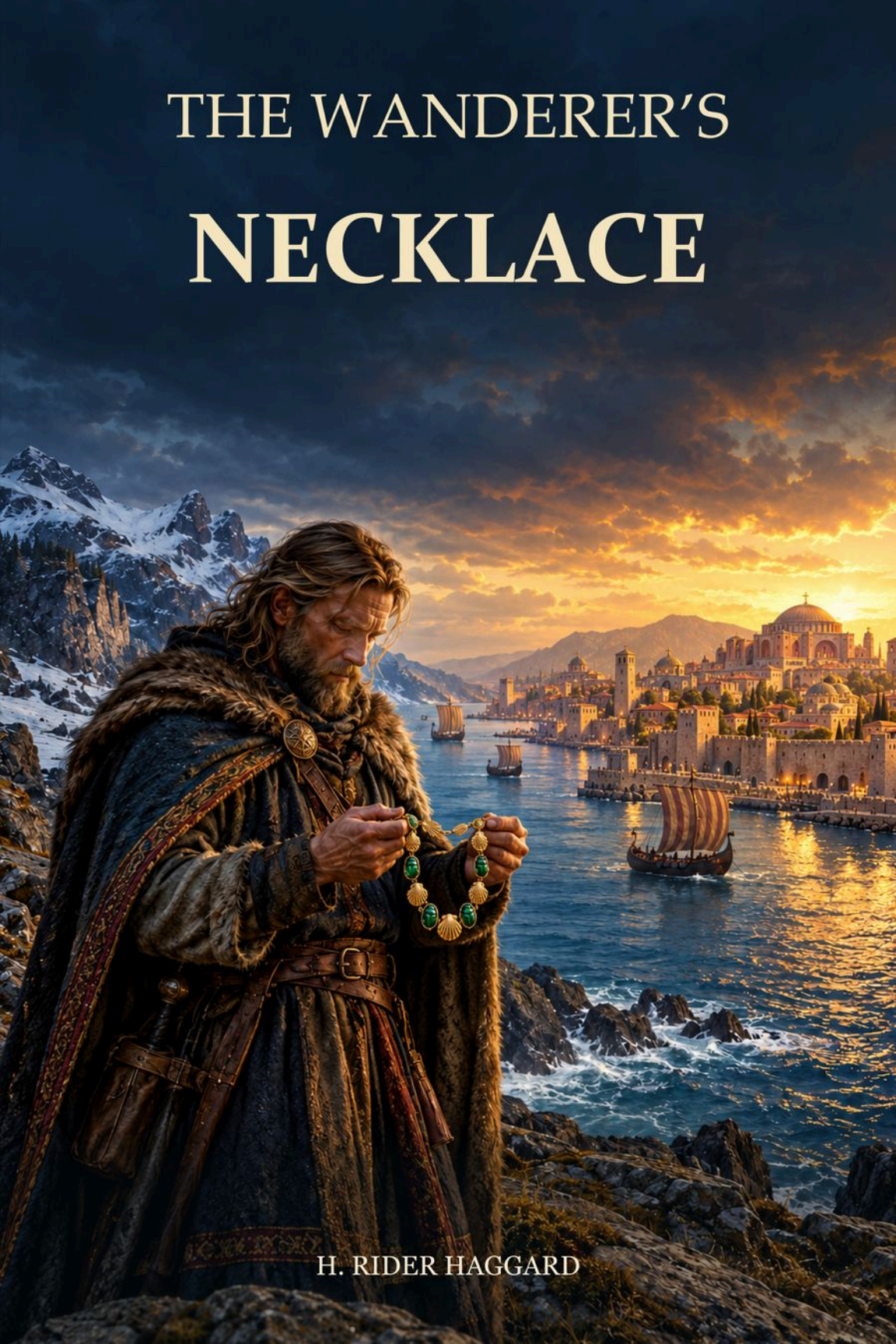
THE WANDERER'S NECKLACE



H. RIDER HAGGARD

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1856 - 1925

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

H. Rider Haggard

Henry Rider Haggard was an English novelist whose adventure stories helped establish the lost-world tradition. Born in Norfolk, he travelled to southern Africa as a young man to work in colonial administration. The region became a lasting presence in his imagination and supplied settings for much of his fiction.

After returning to England, Haggard studied law while beginning to publish. *King Solomon's Mines*, issued in 1885, brought him a wide readership. *She* and the continuing adventures of Allan Quatermain further developed a mixture of exploration, ancient history and the supernatural that became characteristic of his work.

His stories often place travellers before remnants of earlier civilisations. Ruins, inherited legends and encounters with the apparently impossible turn a physical journey into an encounter with the past. These narratives also carry the assumptions and inequalities of the imperial world in which Haggard lived; their historical setting is part of how they should be read.

Haggard's interests extended beyond fiction. He wrote about farming and rural conditions, participated in public enquiries and became involved in questions of land use and agricultural reform. He was knighted for public service in 1912. His enduring literary influence lies in the vivid settings and speculative possibilities of his adventure narratives.

Biographical and portrait references are retained in the edition archive. Portrait source: Bain News Service photograph, Library of Congress, ggbain.06516.

DEDICATION

In memory of Oodnadatta and many wanderings oversea I offer these pictures from the past, my dear Vincent, to you, a lover of the present if an aspirant who can look upon the future with more of hope than fear. Your colleague,

H. Rider Haggard. To Sir Edgar Vincent, K.C.M.G.

Ditchingham,

November, 1913.

NOTE BY THE EDITOR

It chances that I, the Editor of these pages—for, in truth, that is my humble function—have recovered a considerable knowledge of a bygone life of mine. This life ended in times that are comparatively recent, namely, early in the ninth century, as is fixed by the fact that the Byzantine Empress, Irene, plays a part in the story.

The narrative, it will be observed, is not absolutely consecutive; that is to say, all the details are not filled in. Indeed, it has returned to me in a series of scenes or pictures, and although each scene or picture has to do with every other, there are sometimes gaps between them. To take one example among several—the journey of Olaf (in those days my name was Olaf, or Michael after I was baptised) from the North to Constantinople is not recorded. The curtain drops at Aar in Jutland and rises again in Byzantium. Only those events which were of the most importance seem to have burned themselves into my subconscious memory; many minor details have vanished, or, at least, I cannot find them. This, however, does not appear to me to be a matter for regret. If every episode of a full and eventful life were painted in, the canvas would be overloaded and the eye that studied it bewildered.

I do not think that I have anything more to say. My tale must speak for itself. So I will but add that I hold it unnecessary to set out the exact method by which I have been able to dig it and others from the quarry of my past. It is a gift which, although small at first, I have been able gradually to develop. Therefore, as I wish to hide my present identity, I will only sign myself

The Editor.

THE WANDERER'S NECKLACE

BOOK I
AAR

CHAPTER I
THE BETROTHAL OF OLAF

Of my childhood in this Olaf life I can regain but little. There come to me, however, recollections of a house, surrounded by a moat, situated in a great plain near to seas or inland lakes, on which plain stood mounds that I connected with the dead. What the dead were I did not quite understand, but I gathered that they were people who, having once walked about and been awake, now laid themselves down in a bed of earth and slept. I remember looking at a big mound which was said to cover a chief known as "The Wanderer," whom Freydisa, the wise woman, my nurse, told me had lived hundreds or thousands of years before, and thinking that so much earth over him must make him very hot at nights.

I remember also that the hall called Aar was a long house roofed with sods, on which grew grass and sometimes little white flowers, and that inside of it cows were tied up. We lived in a place beyond, that was separated off from the cows by balks of rough timber. I used to watch them being milked through a crack between two of the balks where a knot had fallen out, leaving a convenient eyehole about the height of a walking-stick from the floor.

One day my elder and only brother, Ragnar, who had very red hair, came and pulled me away from this eyehole because he wanted to look through it himself at a cow that always kicked the girl who milked it. I howled, and Steinar, my foster-brother, who had light-coloured hair and blue eyes, and was much bigger and stronger than I, came to my help, because we always loved each other. He fought Ragnar and made his nose bleed, after which my mother, the Lady Thora, who was very beautiful, boxed his ears. Then we all

cried, and my father, Thorvald, a tall man, rather loosely made, who had come in from hunting, for he carried the skin of some animal of which the blood had run down on to his leggings, scolded us and told my mother to keep us quiet as he was tired and wanted to eat.

That is the only scene which returns to me of my infancy.

The next of which a vision has come to me is one of a somewhat similar house to our own in Aar, upon an island called Lesso, where we were all visiting a chief of the name of Athalbrand. He was a fierce-looking man with a great forked beard, from which he was called Athalbrand Fork-beard. One of his nostrils was larger than the other, and he had a droop in his left eye, both of which peculiarities came to him from some wound or wounds that he had received in war. In those days everybody was at war with everybody else, and it was quite uncommon for anyone to live until his hair turned grey.

The reason of our visit to this chief Athalbrand was that my elder brother, Ragnar, might be betrothed to his only surviving child, Iduna, all of whose brothers had been killed in some battle. I can see Iduna now as she was when she first appeared before us. We were sitting at table, and she entered through a door at the top of the hall. She was clothed in a blue robe, her long fair hair, whereof she had an abundance, was arranged in two plaits which hung almost to her knees, and about her neck and arms were massive gold rings that tinkled as she walked. She had a round face, coloured like a wild rose, and innocent blue eyes that took in everything, although she always seemed to look in front of her and see nothing. Her lips were very red and appeared to smile. Altogether I thought her the loveliest creature that ever I had looked on, and she walked like a deer and held her head proudly.

Still, she did not please Ragnar, who whispered to me that she was sly and would bring mischief on all that had to do with her. I, who at the time was about twenty-one years of age, wondered if he had gone mad to talk thus of this beautiful creature. Then I remembered that just before we had left home I had caught Ragnar kissing the daughter of one of our thralls behind the shed in which the calves were kept. She was a brown girl, very well made, as her rough robe, fastened beneath her breast with a strap, showed plainly, and she had big dark eyes with a sleepy look in them. Also, I never saw anyone kiss quite so hard as she did; Ragnar himself was outpassed.

I think that is why even the great lady, Iduna the Fair, did not please him. All the while he was thinking of the brown-eyed girl in the russet robe. Still, it is true that, brown-eyed girl or no, he read Iduna aright.

Moreover, if Ragnar did not like Iduna, from the first Iduna hated Ragnar. So it came about that, although both my father, Thorvald, and Iduna's father, Athalbrand, stormed and threatened, these two declared that they would have nothing to do with each other, and the project of their marriage came to an end.

On the night before we were to leave Lesso, whence Ragnar had already gone, Athalbrand saw me staring at Iduna. This, indeed, was not wonderful, as I could not take my eyes from her lovely face, and when she looked at me and smiled with those red lips of hers I became like a silly bird that is bewitched by a snake. At first I thought that he was going to be angry, but suddenly some idea seemed to strike him so that he called my father, Thorvald, outside the house. Afterwards I was sent for, and found the two of them seated on a three-cornered, flat stone, talking in the moonlight, for it was summer-time, when everything looks blue at night and the sun and the moon ride in the sky together. Near by stood my mother, listening.

"Olaf," said my father, "would you like to marry Iduna the Fair?"

"Like to marry Iduna?" I gasped. "Aye, more than to be High King of Denmark, for she is no woman, but a goddess."

At this saying my mother laughed, and Athalbrand, who knew Iduna when she did not seem a goddess, called me a fool. Then they talked, while I stood trembling with hope and fear.

"He's but a second son," said Athalbrand.

"I have told you there is land enough for both of them, also the gold that came with his mother will be his, and that's no small sum," answered Thorvald.

"He's no warrior, but a skald," objected Athalbrand again; "a silly half-man who makes songs and plays upon the harp."

"Songs are sometimes stronger than swords," replied my father, "and, after all, it is wisdom that rules. One brain can govern many men; also, harps make merry music at a feast. Moreover, Olaf is

brave enough. How can he be otherwise coming of the stock he does?"

"He is thin and weedy," objected Athalbrand, a saying that made my mother angry.

"Nay, lord Athalbrand," she said; "he is tall and straight as a dart, and will yet be the handsomest man in these parts."

"Every duck thinks it has hatched out a swan," grumbled Athalbrand, while with my eyes I implored my mother to be silent.

Then he thought for awhile, pulling at his long forked beard, and said at last:

"My heart tells me no good of such a marriage. Iduna, who is the only one left to me, could marry a man of more wealth and power than this rune-making stripling is ever likely to be. Yet just now I know none such whom I would wish to hold my place when I am gone. Moreover, it is spread far and wide throughout the land that my daughter is to be wed to Thorvald's son, and it matters little to which son. At least, I will not have it said that she has been given the go-by. Therefore, let this Olaf take her, if she will have him. Only," he added with a growl, "let him play no tricks like that red-headed cub, his brother Ragnar, if he would not taste of a spear through his liver. Now I go to learn Iduna's mind."

So he went; as did my father and mother, leaving me alone, thinking and thanking the gods for the chance that had come my way—yes, and blessing Ragnar and that brown-eyed wench who had thrown her spell over him.

Whilst I stood thus I heard a sound, and, turning, saw Iduna gliding towards me in the blue twilight, looking more lovely than a dream. At my side she stopped and said:

"My father tells me you wish to speak with me," and she laughed a little softly and held me with her beautiful eyes.

After that I know not what happened till I saw Iduna bending towards me like a willow in the wind, and then—oh, joy of joys!—felt her kiss upon my lips. Now my speech was unsealed, and I told her the tale that lovers have always told. How that I was ready to die for her (to which she answered that she had rather that I lived, since ghosts were no good husbands); how that I was not worthy of her (to which she answered that I was young, with all my time before me,

and might live to be greater than I thought, as she believed I should); and so forth.

Only one more thing comes back to me of that blissful hour. Foolishly I said what I had been thinking, namely, that I blessed Ragnar. At these words, of a sudden Iduna's face grew stern and the lovelight in her eyes was changed to such as gleams from swords.

"I do not bless Ragnar," she answered. "I hope one day to see Ragnar——" and she checked herself, adding: "Come, let us enter, Olaf. I hear my father calling me to mix his sleeping-cup."

So we went into the house hand in hand, and when they saw us coming thus, all gathered there burst into shouts of laughter after their rude fashion. Moreover, beakers were thrust into our hands, and we were made to drink from them and swear some oath. Thus ended our betrothal.

I think it was on the next day that we sailed for home in my father's largest ship of war, which was named the *Swan*. I went unwillingly enough, who desired to drink more of the delight of Iduna's eyes. Still, go I must, since Athalbrand would have it so. The marriage, he said, should take place at Aar at the time of the Spring feast, and not before. Meanwhile he held it best we should be apart that we might learn whether we still clung to each other in absence.

These were the reasons he gave, but I think that he was already somewhat sorry for what he had done, and reflected that between harvest and springtime he might find another husband for Iduna, who was more to his mind. For Athalbrand, as I learned afterwards, was a scheming and a false-hearted man. Moreover, he was of no high lineage, but one who had raised himself up by war and plunder, and therefore his blood did not compel him to honour.

The next scene which comes back to me of those early days is that of the hunting of the white northern bear, when I saved the life of Steinar, my foster-brother, and nearly lost my own.

It was on a day when the winter was merging into spring, but the coast-line near Aar was still thick with pack ice and large floes which had floated in from the more northern seas. A certain fisherman who dwelt on this shore came to the hall to tell us that he had seen a great white bear on one of these floes, which, he believed, had swum from it to the land. He was a man with a club-foot, and I can recall a vision

of him limping across the snow towards the drawbridge of Aar, supporting himself by a staff on the top of which was cut the figure of some animal.

"Young lords," he cried out, "there is a white bear on the land, such a bear as once I saw when I was a boy. Come out and kill the bear and win honour, but first give me a drink for my news."

At that time I think my father, Thorvald, was away from home with most of the men, I do not know why; but Ragnar, Steinar and I were lingering about the stead with little or nothing to do, since the time of sowing was not yet. At the news of the club-footed man, we ran for our spears, and one of us went to tell the only thrall who could be spared to make ready the horses and come with us. Thora, my mother, would have stopped us—she said she had heard from her father that such bears were very dangerous beasts—but Ragnar only thrust her aside, while I kissed her and told her not to fret.

Outside the hall I met Freydisa, a dark, quiet woman of middle age, one of the virgins of Odin, whom I loved and who loved me and, save one other, me only among men, for she had been my nurse.

"Whither now, young Olaf?" she asked me. "Has Iduna come here that you run so fast?"

"No," I answered, "but a white bear has."

"Oh! then things are better than I thought, who feared lest it might be Iduna before her time. Still, you go on an ill errand, from which I think you will return sadly."

"Why do you say that, Freydisa?" I asked. "Is it just because you love to croak like a raven on a rock, or for some good reason?"

"I don't know, Olaf," she answered. "I say things because they come to me, and I must, that is all. I tell you that evil will be born of this bear hunt of yours, and you had better stop at home."

"To be laughed at by my brethren, Freydisa? Moreover, you are foolish, for if evil is to be, how can I avoid it? Either your foresight is nothing or the evil must come."

"That is so," answered Freydisa. "From your childhood up you had the gift of reason which is more than is granted to most of these fools about us. Go, Olaf, and meet your fore-ordained evil. Still, kiss me before you go lest we should not see each other again for a while. If the bear kills you, at least you will be saved from Iduna."

Now while she said these words I was kissing Freydisa, whom I loved dearly, but when I understood them I leapt back before she could kiss me again.

"What do you mean by your talk about Iduna?" I asked. "Iduna is my betrothed, and I'll suffer no ill speech of her."

"I know she is, Olaf. You've got Ragnar's leavings. Although he is so hot-headed, Ragnar is a wise dog in some ways, who can tell what he should not eat. There, begone, you think me jealous of Iduna, as old women can be, but it's not that, my dear. Oh! you'll learn before all is done, if you live. Begone, begone! I'll tell you no more. Hark, Ragnar is shouting to you," and she pushed me away.

It was a long ride to where the bear was supposed to be. At first as we went we talked a great deal, and made a wager as to which of the three of us should first drive a spear into the beast's body so deep that the blade was hidden, but afterwards I grew silent. Indeed, I was musing so much of Iduna and how the time drew near when once more I should see her sweet face, wondering also why Ragnar and Freydisa should think so ill of her who seemed a goddess rather than a woman, that I forgot all about the bear. So completely did I forget it that when, being by nature very observant, I saw the slot of such a beast as we passed a certain birch wood, I did not think to connect it with that which we were hunting or to point it out to the others who were riding ahead of me.

At length we came to the sea, and there, sure enough, saw a great ice-floe, which now and again tilted as the surge caught its broad green flank. When it tilted towards us we perceived a track worn deep into the ice by the paws of the prisoned bear as it had marched endlessly round. Also we saw a big grinning skull, whereon sat a raven picking at the eye-holes, and some fragments of white fur.

"The bear is dead!" exclaimed Ragnar. "Odin's curse be on that club-footed fool who gave us this cold ride for nothing."

"Yes, I suppose so," said Steinar doubtfully. "Don't you think that it is dead, Olaf?"

"What is the good of asking Olaf?" broke in Ragnar, with a loud laugh. "What does Olaf know about bears? He has been asleep for the last half-hour dreaming of Athalbrand's blue-eyed daughter; or perhaps he is making up another poem."

“Olaf sees farther when he seems asleep than some of us do when we are awake,” answered Steinar hotly.

“Oh yes,” replied Ragnar. “Sleeping or waking, Olaf is perfect in your eyes, for you’ve drunk the same milk, and that ties you tighter than a rope. Wake up, now, brother Olaf, and tell us: Is not the bear dead?”

Then I answered, “Why, of course, a bear is dead; see its skull, also pieces of its hide?”

“There!” exclaimed Ragnar. “Our family prophet has settled the matter. Let us go home.”

“Olaf said that *a* bear was dead,” answered Steinar, hesitating.

Ragnar, who had already swung himself round in his quick fashion, spoke back over his shoulder:

“Isn’t that enough for you? Do you want to hunt a skull or the raven sitting on it? Or is this, perchance, one of Olaf’s riddles? If so, I am too cold to guess riddles just now.”

“Yet I think there is one for you to guess, brother,” I said gently, “and it is: Where is the live bear hiding? Can’t you see that there were two bears on that ice-head, and that one has killed and eaten the other?”

“How do you know that?” asked Ragnar.

“Because I saw the slot of the second as we passed the birch wood yonder. It has a split claw on the left forefoot and the others are all worn by the ice.”

“Then why in Odin’s name did you not say so before?” exclaimed Ragnar angrily.

Now I was ashamed to confess that I had been dreaming, so I answered at hazard:

“Because I wished to look upon the sea and the floating ice. See what wondrous colours they take in this light!”

When he heard this, Steinar burst out laughing till tears came into his blue eyes and his broad shoulders shook. But Ragnar, who cared nothing for scenery or sunsets, did not laugh. On the contrary, as was usual with him when vexed, he lost his temper and swore by the more evil of the gods. Then he turned on me and said:

“Why not tell the truth at once, Olaf? You are afraid of this beast, and that’s why you let us come on here when you knew it was in the wood. You hoped that before we got back there it would be too dark to hunt.”

At this taunt I flushed and gripped the shaft of my long hunting spear, for among us Northmen to be told that he was afraid of anything was a deadly insult to a man.

“If you were not my brother——” I began, then checked myself, for I was by nature easy-tempered, and went on: “It is true, Ragnar, I am not so fond of hunting as you are. Still, I think that there will be time to fight this bear and kill or be killed by it, before it grows dark, and if not I will return alone to-morrow morning.”

Then I pulled my horse round and rode ahead. As I went, my ears being very quick, I heard the other two talking together. At least, I suppose that I heard them; at any rate, I know what they said, although, strangely enough, nothing at all comes back to me of their tale of an attack upon a ship or of what then I did or did not do.

“It is not wise to jeer at Olaf,” said Steinar, “for when he is stung with words he does mad things. Don’t you remember what happened when your father called him ‘niddering’ last year because Olaf said it was not just to attack the ship of those British men who had been driven to our coast by weather, meaning us no harm?”

“Aye,” answered Ragnar. “He leapt among them all alone as soon as our boat touched her side, and felled the steersman. Then the British men shouted out that they would not kill so brave a lad, and threw him into the sea. It cost us that ship, since by the time we had picked him up she had put about and hoisted her large sail. Oh, Olaf is brave enough, we all know that! Still, he ought to have been born a woman or a priest of Freya who only offers flowers. Also, he knows my tongue and bears no malice.”

“Pray that we get him home safe,” said Steinar uneasily, “for if not there will be trouble with your mother and every other woman in the land, to say nothing of Iduna the Fair.”

“Iduna the Fair would live through it,” answered Ragnar, with a hard laugh. “But you are right; and, what is more, there will be trouble among the men also, especially with my father and in my own heart. After all there is but one Olaf.”

At this moment I held up my hand, and they stopped talking.

CHAPTER II
THE SLAYING OF THE BEAR

Leaping from their horses, Ragnar and Steinar came to where I stood, for already I had dismounted and was pointing to the ground, which just here had been swept clear of snow by the wind.

"I see nothing," said Ragnar.

"But I do, brother," I answered; "who study the ways of wild things while you think I am asleep. Look, that moss has been turned over; for it is frozen underneath and pressed up into little mounds between the bear's claws. Also that tiny pool has gathered in the slot of the paw; it is its very shape. The other footprints do not show because of the rock."

Then I went forward a few paces behind some bushes and called out: "Here runs the track, sure enough, and, as I thought, the brute has a split claw; the snow marks it well. Bid the thrall stay with the horses and come you."

They obeyed, and there on the white snow which lay beyond the bush we saw the track of the bear stamped as if in wax.

"A mighty beast," said Ragnar. "Never have I seen its like."

"Aye," exclaimed Steinar, "but an ill place to hunt it in," and he looked doubtfully at the rough gorge, covered with undergrowth, that some hundred yards farther on became dense birch forest. "I think it would be well to ride back to Aar, and return to-morrow morning with all whom we can gather. This is no task for three spears."

By this time I, Olaf, was springing from rock to rock up the gorge, following the bear's track. For my brother's taunts rankled in me and I was determined that I should kill this beast or die and thus show Ragnar that I feared no bear. So I called back to them over my shoulder:

"Aye, go home, it is wisest; but I go on for I have never yet seen one of these white ice-bears alive."

"Now it is Olaf who taunts in his turn," said Ragnar with a laugh. Then they both sprang after me, but always I kept ahead of them.

For the half of a mile or more they followed me out of the scrub into the birch forest, where the snow, lying on the matted boughs of the trees and especially of some firs that were mingled with the birch, made the place gloomy in that low light. Always in front of me ran the huge slots of the bear till at length they brought me to a little forest glade, where some great whirling wind had torn up many trees which had but a poor root-hold on a patch of almost soilless rock.

These trees lay in confusion, their tops, which had not yet rotted, being filled with frozen snow. On the edge of them I paused, having lost the track. Then I went forward again, casting wide as a hound does, while behind came Ragnar and Steinar, walking straight past the edge of the glade, and purposing to meet me at its head. This, indeed, Ragnar did, but Steinar halted because of a crunching sound that caught his ear, and then stepped to the right between two fallen birches to discover its cause. Next moment, as he told me afterwards, he stood frozen, for there behind the boughs of one of the trees was the huge white bear, eating some animal that it had killed. The beast saw him, and, mad with rage at being disturbed, for it was famished after its long journey on the floe, reared itself up on its hind legs, roaring till the air shook. High it towered, its hook-like claws outstretched.

Steinar tried to spring back, but caught his foot, and fell. Well for him was it that he did so, for otherwise the blow which the bear struck would have crushed him to a pulp. The brute did not seem to understand where he had gone—at any rate, it remained upreared and beating at the air. Then a doubt took it, its huge paws sank until it sat like a begging dog, sniffing the wind. At this moment Ragnar came back shouting, and hurled his spear. It stuck in the beast's chest and hung there. The bear began to feel for it with its paws, and, catching the shaft, lifted it to its mouth and champed it, thus dragging the steel from its hide.

Then it bethought it of Steinar, and, sinking down, discovered him, and tore at the birch tree under which he had crept till the splinters flew from its trunk. Just then I reached it, having seen all. By now the bear had its teeth fixed in Steinar's shoulder, or, rather, in his leathern garment, and was dragging him from under the tree. When it saw me it reared itself up again, lifting Steinar and holding him to its breast with one paw. I went mad at the sight, and charged

it, driving my spear deep into its throat. With its other paw it struck the weapon from my hand, shivering the shaft. There it stood, towering over us like a white pillar, and roared with pain and fury, Steinar still pressed against it, Ragnar and I helpless.

"He's sped!" gasped Ragnar.

I thought for a flash of time, and—oh! well do I remember that moment: the huge beast foaming at the jaws and Steinar held to its breast as a little girl holds a doll; the still, snow-laden trees, on the top of one of which sat a small bird spreading its tail in jerks; the red light of evening, and about us the great silences of the sky above and of the lonely forest beneath. It all comes back to me—I can see it now quite clearly; yes, even the bird flitting to another twig, and there again spreading its tail to some invisible mate. Then I made up my mind what to do.

"Not yet!" I cried. "Keep it in play," and, drawing my short and heavy sword, I plunged through the birch boughs to get behind the bear. Ragnar understood. He threw his cap into the brute's face, and then, after it had growled at him awhile, just as it dropped its great jaws to crunch Steinar, he found a bough and thrust it between them.

By now I was behind the bear, and, smiting at its right leg below the knee, severed the tendon. Down it came, still hugging Steinar. I smote again with all my strength, and cut into its spine above the tail, paralysing it. It was a great blow, as it need to be to cleave the thick hair and hide, and my sword broke in the backbone, so that, like Ragnar, now I was weaponless. The forepart of the bear rolled about in the snow, although its after half was still.

Then once more it seemed to bethink itself of Steinar, who lay unmoving and senseless. Stretching out a paw, it dragged him towards its champing jaws. Ragnar leapt upon its back and struck at it with his knife, thereby only maddening it the more. I ran in and grasped Steinar, whom the bear was again hugging to its breast. Seeing me, it loosed Steinar, whom I dragged away and cast behind me, but in the effort I slipped and fell forward. The bear smote at me, and its mighty forearm—well for me that it was not its claws—struck me upon the side of the head and sent me crashing into a tree-top to the left. Five paces I flew before my body touched the boughs, and there I lay quiet.

I suppose that Ragnar told me what passed after this while I was senseless. At least, I know that the bear began to die, for my spear had pierced some artery in its throat, and all the talk which followed, as well as though I heard it with my ears. It roared and roared, vomiting blood and stretching out its claws after Steinar as Ragnar dragged him away. Then it laid its head flat upon the snow and died. Ragnar looked at it and muttered:

"Dead!"

Then he walked to that top of the fallen tree in which I lay, and again muttered: "Dead! Well, Valhalla holds no braver man than Olaf the Skald."

Next he went to Steinar and once again exclaimed, "Dead!"

For so he looked, indeed, smothered in the blood of the bear and with his garments half torn off him. Still, as the words passed Ragnar's lips he sat up, rubbed his eyes and smiled as a child does when it awakes.

"Are you much hurt?" asked Ragnar.

"I think not," he answered doubtfully, "save that I feel sore and my head swims. I have had a bad dream." Then his eyes fell on the bear, and he added: "Oh, I remember now; it was no dream. Where is Olaf?"

"Supping with Odin," answered Ragnar and pointed to me.

Steinar rose to his feet, staggered to where I lay, and stared at me stretched there as white as the snow, with a smile upon my face and in my hand a spray of some evergreen bush which I had grasped as I fell.

"Did he die to save me?" asked Steinar.

"Aye," answered Ragnar, "and never did man walk that bridge in better fashion. You were right. Would that I had not mocked him."

"Would that I had died and not he," said Steinar with a sob. "It is borne in upon my heart that it were better I had died."

"Then that may well be, for the heart does not lie at such a time. Also it is true that he was worth both of us. There was something more in him than there is in us, Steinar. Come, lift him to my back, and if you are strong enough, go on to the horses and bid the thrall bring one of them. I follow."

Thus ended the fight with the great white bear.

Some four hours later, in the midst of a raging storm of wind and rain, I was brought at last to the bridge that spanned the moat of the Hall of Aar, laid like a corpse across the back of one of the horses. They had been searching for us at Aar, but in that darkness had found nothing. Only, at the head of the bridge was Freydisa, a torch in her hand. She glanced at me by the light of the torch.

"As my heart foretold, so it is," she said. "Bring him in," then turned and ran to the house.

They bore me up between the double ranks of stabled kine to where the great fire of turf and wood burned at the head of the hall, and laid me on a table.

"Is he dead?" asked Thorvald, my father, who had come home that night; "and if so, how?"

"Aye, father," answered Ragnar, "and nobly. He dragged Steinar yonder from under the paws of the great white bear and slew it with his sword."

"A mighty deed," muttered my father. "Well, at least he comes home in honour."

But my mother, whose favourite son I was, lifted up her voice and wept. Then they took the clothes from off me, and, while all watched, Freydisa, the skilled woman, examined my hurts. She felt my head and looked into my eyes, and laying her ear upon my breast, listened for the beating of my heart.

Presently she rose, and, turning, said slowly:

"Olaf is not dead, though near to death. His pulses flutter, the light of life still burns in his eyes, and though the blood runs from his ears, I think the skull is not broken."

When she heard these words, Thora, my mother, whose heart was weak, fainted for joy, and my father, untwisting a gold ring from his arm, threw it to Freydisa.

"First the cure," she said, thrusting it away with her foot. "Moreover, when I work for love I take no pay."

Then they washed me, and, having dressed my hurts, laid me on a bed near the fire that warmth might come back to me. But Freydisa would not suffer them to give me anything save a little hot milk which she poured down my throat.

For three days I lay like one dead; indeed, all save my mother held Freydisa wrong and thought that I was dead. But on the fourth day I opened my eyes and took food, and after that fell into a natural sleep. On the morning of the sixth day I sat up and spoke many wild and wandering words, so that they believed I should only live as a madman.

"His mind is gone," said my mother, and wept.

"Nay," answered Freydisa, "he does but return from a land where they speak another tongue. Thorvald, bring hither the bear-skin."

It was brought and hung on a frame of poles at the end of the niche in which I slept, that, as was usual among northern people, opened out of the hall. I stared at it for a long while. Then my memory came back and I asked:

"Did the great beast kill Steinar?"

"No," answered my mother, who sat by me. "Steinar was sore hurt, but escaped and now is well again."

"Let me see him with my own eyes," I said.

So he was brought, and I looked on him. "I am glad you live, my brother," I said, "for know in this long sleep of mine I have dreamed that you were dead"; and I stretched out my wasted arms towards him, for I loved Steinar better than any other man.

He came and kissed me on the brow, saying:

"Aye, thanks to you, Olaf, I live to be your brother and your thrall till the end."

"My brother always, not my thrall," I muttered, for I was growing tired. Then I went to sleep again.

Three days later, when my strength began to return, I sent for Steinar and said:

"Brother, Iduna the Fair, whom you have never seen, my betrothed, must wonder how it fares with me, for the tale of this hurt of mine will have reached Lesso. Now, as there are reasons why Ragnar cannot go, and as I would send no mean man, I pray you to do me a favour. It is that you will take a boat and sail to Lesso, carrying with you as a present from me to Athalbrand's daughter the skin of that white bear, which I trust will serve her and me as a bed-covering in winter for many a year to come. Tell her, thanks be to the gods and to the skill of Freydisa, my nurse, I live who all

thought must die, and that I trust to be strong and well for our marriage at the Spring feast which draws on. Say also that through all my sickness I have dreamed of none but her, as I trust that sometimes she may have dreamed of me."

"Aye, I'll go," answered Steinar, "fast as horses' legs and sails can carry me," adding with his pleasant laugh: "Long have I desired to see this Iduna of yours, and to learn whether she is as beautiful as you say; also what it is in her that Ragnar hates."

"Be careful that you do not find her too beautiful," broke in Freydisa, who, as ever, was at my side.

"How can I if she is for Olaf?" answered Steinar, smiling, as he left the place to make ready for his journey to Lesso.

"What did you mean by those words, Freydisa?" I asked when he was gone.

"Little or much," she replied, shrugging her shoulders. "Iduna is lovely, is she not, and Steinar is handsome, is he not, and of an age when man seeks woman, and what is brotherhood when man seeks woman and woman beguiles man?"

"Peace to your riddles, Freydisa. You forget that Iduna is my betrothed and that Steinar was fostered with me. Why, I'd trust them for a week at sea alone."

"Doubtless, Olaf, being young and foolish, as you are; also that is your nature. Now here is the broth. Drink it, and I, whom some call a wise woman and others a witch, say that to-morrow you may rise from this bed and sit in the sun, if there is any."

"Freydisa," I said when I had swallowed the broth, "why do folk call you a witch?"

"I think because I am a little less of a fool than other women, Olaf. Also because it has not pleased me to marry, as it is held natural that all women should do if they have the chance."

"Why are you wiser, and why have you not married, Freydisa?"

"I am wiser because I have questioned things more than most, and to those who question answers come at last. And I am not married because another woman took the only man I wanted before I met him. That was my bad luck. Still, it taught me a great lesson, namely, how to wait and meanwhile to acquire understanding."

"What understanding have you acquired, Freydisa? For instance, does it tell you that our gods of wood and stone are true gods which rule the world? Or are they but wood and stone, as sometimes I have thought?"

"Then think no more, Olaf, for such thoughts are dangerous. If Leif, your uncle, Odin's high priest, heard them, what might he not say or do? Remember that whether the gods live or no, certainly the priest lives, and on the gods, and if the gods went, where would the priest be? Also, as regards these gods—well, whatever they may or may not be, at least they are the voices that in our day speak to us from that land whence we came and whither we go. The world has known millions of days, and each day has its god—or its voice—and all the voices speak truth to those who can hear them. Meanwhile, you are a fool to have sent Steinar bearing your gift to Iduna. Or perhaps you are very wise. I cannot say as yet. When I learn I will tell you."

Then again she shrugged her shoulders and left me wondering what she meant by her dark sayings. I can see her going now, a wooden bowl in her hand, and in it a horn spoon of which the handle was cracked longways, and thus in my mind ends all the scene of my sickness after the slaying of the white bear.

The next thing that I remember is the coming of the men of Agger. This cannot have been very long after Steinar went to Lesso, for he had not yet returned. Being still weak from my great illness, I was seated in the sun in the shelter of the house, wrapped up in a cloak of deerskins—for the northern wind blew bitter. By me stood my father, who was in a happy mood now he knew that I should live and be strong again.

"Steinar should be back by now," I said to him. "I trust that he has come by no ill."

"Oh no," answered my father carelessly. "For seven days the wind has been high, and doubtless Athalbrand fears to let him sail from Lesso."

"Or perhaps Steinar finds Athalbrand's hall a pleasant place to bide in," suggested Ragnar, who had joined us, a spear in his hand, for he had come in from hunting. "There are good drink and bright eyes there."

I was about to answer sharply, since Ragnar stung me with his bitter talk of Steinar, of whom I knew him to be somewhat jealous, because he thought I loved my foster-brother more than I did him, my brother. Just then, however, three men appeared through trees that grew about the hall, and came towards the bridge, whereon Ragnar's great wolfhounds, knowing them for strangers, set up a furious baying and sprang forward to tear them. By the time the beasts were caught and quelled, these men, aged persons of presence, had crossed the bridge and were greeting us.

"This is the hall of Thorvald of Aar, is it not? And a certain Steinar dwells here with him, does he not?" asked their spokesman.

"It is, and I am Thorvald," answered my father. "Also Steinar has dwelt here from his birth up, but is now away from home on a visit to the lord Athalbrand of Lesso. Who are you, and what would you of Steinar, my fosterling"

"When you have told us the story of Steinar we will tell you who we are and what we seek," answered the man, adding: "Fear not, we mean him no harm, but rather good if he is the man we think."

"Wife," called my father, "come hither. Here are men who would know the story of Steinar, and say that they mean him good."

So my mother came, and the men bowed to her.

"The story of Steinar is short, sirs," she said. "His mother, Steingerdi, who was my cousin and the friend of my childhood, married the great chief Hakon, of Agger, two and twenty summers gone. A year later, just before Steinar was born, she fled to me here, asking shelter of my lord. Her tale was that she had quarrelled with Hakon because another woman had crept into her place. Finding that this tale was true, and that Hakon had treated her ill indeed, we gave her shelter, and here her son Steinar was born, in giving birth to whom she died—of a broken heart, as I think, for she was mad with grief and jealousy. I nursed him with my son Olaf yonder, and as, although he had news of his birth, Hakon never claimed him, with us he has dwelt as a son ever since. That is all the tale. Now what would you with Steinar?"

"This, Lady. The lord Hakon and the three sons whom that other woman you tell of bore him ere she died—for after Steingerdi's death

he married her—were drowned in making harbour on the night of the great gale eighteen days ago."

"That is the day when the bear nearly killed Steinar," I interrupted.

"Well for him, then, young sir, that he escaped this bear, for now, as it seems to us, he is the lord of all Hakon's lands and people, being the only male left living of his issue. This, by the wish of the head men of Agger, where is Hakon's hall, we have come to tell him, if he still lives, since by report he is a goodly man and brave—one well fitted to sit in Hakon's place.

"Is the heritage great?" asked my father.

"Aye, very great, Lord. In all Jutland there was no richer man than Hakon."

"By Odin!" exclaimed my father, "it seems that Steinar is in Fortune's favour. Well, men of Agger, enter and rest you. After you have eaten we will talk further of these matters."

It was just then that, appearing between the trees on the road that ran to Fladstrand and to the sea, I saw a company mounted upon horses. In front was a young woman, wrapped in a coat of furs, talking eagerly to a man who rode by her. Behind, clad in armour, with a battle-axe girt about him, rode another man, big and fork-bearded, who stared about him gloomily, and behind him again ten or twelve thralls and seamen.

One glance was enough for me. Then I sprang up, crying:

"Iduna's self, and with her my brother Steinar, the lord Athalbrand and his folk. A happy sight indeed!" And I would have run forward to meet them.

"Yes, yes," said my mother; "but await them here, I pray you. You are not yet strong, my son." And she flung her arms about me and held me.

Presently they were at the bridge, and Steinar, springing from his horse, lifted Iduna from her saddle, a sight at which I saw my mother frown. Then I would no longer be restrained, but ran forward, crying greetings as I came, and, seizing Iduna's hand, I kissed it. Indeed, I would have kissed her cheek also, but she shrank back, saying:

"Not before all these folk, Olaf."

"As you will," I answered, though just then a chill struck me, which, I thought to myself, came doubtless from the cold wind. "It will be the sweeter afterwards," I added as gaily as I could.

"Yes," she said hurriedly. "But, Olaf, how white and thin you are. I had hoped to find you well again, though, not knowing how it fared with you, I came to see with my own eyes."

"That is good of you," I muttered as I turned to grasp Steinar's hand, adding: "I know well who it was that brought you here."

"Nay, nay," she said. "I came of myself. But my father waits you, Olaf."

So I went to where the lord Athalbrand Fork-beard was dismounting, and greeted him, lifting my cap.

"What!" grumbled Athalbrand, who seemed to be in an ill temper, "are you Olaf? I should scarcely have known you again, lad, for you look more like a wisp of hay tied on a stick than a man. Now that the flesh is off you I see you lack bone, unlike some others," and he glanced at the broad-shouldered Steinar. "Greeting to you, Thorvald. We are come here through a sea that nearly drowned us, somewhat before the appointed time, because—well, because, on the whole, I thought it best to come. I pray Odin that you are more glad to see us than I am to see you."

"If so, friend Athalbrand, why did you not stop away?" asked my father, firing up, then adding quickly: "Nay, no offence; you are welcome here, whatever your humour, and you too, my daughter that is to be, and you, Steinar, my fosterling, who, as it chances, are come in a good hour."

"How's that, Lord?" asked Steinar absently, for he was looking at Iduna.

"Thus, Steinar: These men"—and he pointed to the three messengers—"have but just arrived from Agger with the news that your father, Hakon, and your half-brothers are all drowned. They say also that the folk of Agger have named you Hakon's heir, as, indeed, you are by right of blood."

"Is that so?" exclaimed Steinar, bewildered. "Well, as I never saw my father or my brothers, and they treated me but ill, I cannot weep for them."

“Hakon!” broke in Athalbrand. “Why, I knew him well, for in my youth we were comrades in war. He was the wealthiest man in Jutland in cattle, lands, thralls and stored gold. Young friend, your luck is great,” and he stared first at Steinar, then at Iduna, pulling his forked beard and muttering words to himself that I could not catch.

“Steinar gets the fortune he deserves,” I exclaimed, embracing him. “Not for nothing did I save you from the bear, Steinar. Come, wish my foster-brother joy, Iduna.”

“Aye, that I do with all my heart,” she said. “Joy and long life to you, and with them rule and greatness, Steinar, Lord of Agger,” and she curtsied to him, her blue eyes fixed upon his face.

But Steinar turned away, making no answer. Only Ragnar, who stood by, burst into a loud laugh. Then, putting his arm through mine, he led me into the hall, saying:

“This wind is over cold for you, Olaf. Nay, trouble not about Iduna. Steinar, Lord of Agger, will care for her, I think.”

That night there was a feast at Aar, and I sat at it with Iduna by my side. Beautiful she was indeed in her garment of blue, over which streamed her yellow hair, bright as the gold rings that tinkled on her rounded arms. She was kind to me also, and bade me tell her the story of the slaying of the bear, which I did as best I could, though afterwards Ragnar told it otherwise, and more fully. Only Steinar said little or nothing, for he seemed to be lost in dreams.

I thought that this was because he felt sad at the news of the death of his father and brethren, since, although he had never known them, blood still calls to blood; and so, I believe, did most there present. At any rate my father and mother tried to cheer him and in the end bade the men of Agger draw near to tell him the tale of his heritage.

They obeyed, and set out all their case, of which the sum was that Steinar must now be one of the wealthiest and most powerful men of the northern lands.

“It seems that we should all take off our caps to you, young lord,” said Athalbrand when he heard this tale of rule and riches. “Why did you not ask me for my fair daughter?” he added with a half-drunken laugh, for all the liquor he had swallowed had got a hold of his brain. Recovering himself, he went on: “It is my will, Thorvald, that Iduna

and this snipe of an Olaf of yours should be wed as soon as possible. I say that they shall be wed as soon as possible, since otherwise I know not what may happen."

Then his head fell forward on the table and he sank to sleep.

CHAPTER III
THE WANDERER'S NECKLACE

On the morrow early I lay awake, for how could I sleep when Iduna rested beneath the same roof with me—Iduna, who, as her father had decreed, was to become my wife sooner than I had hoped? I was thinking how beautiful she looked, and how much I loved her; also of other things that were not so pleasant. For instance, why did not everybody see her with my eyes? I could not hide from myself that Ragnar went near to hating her; more than once she had almost been the cause of a quarrel between us. Freydisa, too, my nurse, who loved me, looked on her sourly, and even my mother, although she tried to like her for my sake, had not yet learned to do so, or thus it appeared to me.

When I asked her why, she replied that she feared the maid was somewhat selfish, also too fond of drawing the eyes of men, and of the adornment of her beauty. Of those who were dearest to me, indeed, only Steinar seemed to think Iduna as perfect as I did myself. This, so far as it went, was well; but, then, Steinar and I had always thought alike, which robbed his judgment of something of its worth.

Whilst I was pondering over these things, although it was still so early that my father and Athalbrand were yet in bed sleeping off the fumes of the liquor they had drunk, I heard Steinar himself talking to the messengers from Agger in the hall. They asked him humbly whether he would be pleased to return with them that day and take possession of his inheritance, since they must get back forthwith to Agger with their tidings. He replied that if they would send some or come themselves to escort him on the tenth day from that on which they spoke, he would go to Agger with them, but that until then he could not do so.

"Ten days! In ten days who knows what may happen?" said their spokesman. "Such a heritage as yours will not lack for claimants, Lord, especially as Hakon has left nephews behind him."

"I know not what will or will not happen," answered Steinar, "but until then I cannot come. Go now, I pray you, if you must, and bear

my words and greetings to the men of Agger, whom soon I hope to meet myself."

So they went, as I thought, heavily enough. A while afterwards my father rose and came into the hall, where from my bed I could see Steinar seated on a stool by the fire brooding. He asked where the men of Agger were, and Steinar told him what he had done.

"Are you mad, Steinar?" he asked, "that you have sent them away with such an answer? Why did you not consult me first?"

"Because you were asleep, Foster-father, and the messengers said they must catch the tide. Also I could not leave Aar until I had seen Olaf and Iduna married."

"Iduna and Olaf can marry without your help. It takes two to make a marriage, not three. I see well that you owe love and loyalty to Olaf, who is your foster-brother and saved your life, but you owe something to yourself also. I pray Odin that this folly may not have cost you your lordship. Fortune is a wench who will not bear slighting."

"I know it," answered Steinar, and there was something strange in his voice. "Believe me, I do not slight fortune; I follow her in my own fashion."

"Then it is a mad fashion," grumbled my father, and walked away.

It comes back to me that it was some days after this that I saw the ghost of the Wanderer standing on his grave mound. It happened thus. On a certain afternoon I had been riding alone with Iduna, which was a great joy to me, though I would sooner have walked, for then I could have held her hand, and perhaps, if she had suffered it, kissed her. I had recited to her a poem which I had made comparing her to the goddess Iduna, the wife of Bragi, she who guarded the apples of immortal youth whereof the gods must eat or die, she whose garment was the spring, woven of the flowers that she put on when she escaped from winter's giant grasp. I think that it was a very good poem of its own sort, but Iduna seemed to have small taste for poetry and to know little of the lovely goddess and her apples, although she smiled sweetly and thanked me for my verses.

Then she began to talk of other matters, especially of how, after we were wed, her father wished to make war upon another chieftain and to seize his land. She said that it was for this reason that he had

been so anxious to form an alliance with my father, Thorvald, as such an alliance would make him sure of victory. Before that time, she told me that he, Athalbrand, had purposed to marry her to another lord for this very reason, but unhappily this lord had been killed in battle.

"Nay, happily for us, Iduna," I said.

"Perhaps," she answered with a sigh. "Who knows? At any rate, your House will be able to give us more ships and men than he who is dead could have done."

"Yet I love peace, not war," I broke in, "I who hate the slaying of those who have never harmed me, and do not seek to die on the swords of men whom I have no desire to harm. Of what good is war when one has enough? I would be no widow-maker, Iduna, nor do I wish that others should make you a widow."

Iduna looked at me with her steady blue eyes.

"You talk strangely, Olaf," she said, "and were it not known to be otherwise, some might hold that you are a coward. Yet it was no coward who leapt alone on board the battle ship, or who slew the great white bear to save Steinar's life. I do not understand you, Olaf, you who have doubts as to the killing of men. How does a man grow great except upon the blood of others? It is that which fats him. How does the wolf live? How does the kite live? How does Odin fill Valhalla? By death, always by death."

"I cannot answer you," I said; "yet I hold that somewhere there is an answer which I do not know, since wrong can never be the right."

Then, as she did not seem to understand, I began to talk of other things, but from that moment I felt as though a veil swung between me and Iduna. Her beauty held my flesh, but some other part in me turned away from her. We were different.

When we reached the hall we met Steinar, who was lingering near the door. He ran forward and helped Iduna to dismount, then said:

"Olaf, I know that you must not overtire yourself as yet, but your lady has told me that she desires to see the sunset from Odin's Mount. Have I your leave to take her there?"

"I do not yet need Olaf's leave to walk abroad, though some few days hence it may be different," broke in Iduna, with a merry laugh,

before I could answer. “Come, lord Steinar, let us go and see this sunset whereof you talk so much.”

“Yes, go,” I said, “only do not stay too long, for I think a storm comes up. But who is that has taught Steinar to love sunsets?”

So they went, and before they had been gone an hour the storm broke as I had foreseen. First came wind, and with it hail, and after that thunder and great darkness, lit up from time to time by pulsing lightning.

“Steinar and Iduna do not return. I am afraid for them,” I said at last to Freydisa.

“Then why do you not go to seek them?” she asked with a little laugh.

“I think I will,” I said.

“If so, I will come with you, Olaf, for you still need a nurse, though, for my part, I hold that the lord Steinar and the lady Iduna can guard themselves as well as most folk. No, I am wrong. I mean that the lady Iduna can guard herself and the lord Steinar. Now, be not angry. Here’s your cloak.”

So we started, for I was urged to this foolish journey by some impulse that I could not master. There were two ways of reaching Odin’s Mount; one, the shorter, over the rocks and through the forest land. The other, the longer, ran across the open plain, between the many earth tombs of the dead who had lived thousands of years before, and past the great mound in which it was said that a warrior of long ago, who was named the Wanderer, lay buried. Because of the darkness we chose this latter road, and presently found ourselves beneath the great mass of the Wanderer’s Mount. Now the darkness was intense, and the lightning grew rare, for the hail and rain had ceased and the storm was rolling away.

“My counsel is,” said Freydisa, “that we wait here until the moon rises, which it should do soon. When the wind has driven away the clouds it will show us our path, but if we go on in this darkness we shall fall into some pit. It is not cold to-night, and you will take no harm.”

“No, indeed,” I answered, “for now I am as strong again as ever I was.”

So we stayed till the lightning, flashing for the last time, showed us a man and a woman standing quite close to us, although we had not heard them because of the wind. They were Steinar and Iduna, talking together eagerly, with their faces very near to each other. At the same moment they saw us. Steinar said nothing, for he seemed confused, but Iduna ran to us and said:

"Thanks be to the gods who send you, Olaf. The great storm caught us at Odin's temple, where we were forced to shelter. Then, fearing that you would grow frightened, we started, and lost our way."

"Is it so?" I answered. "Surely Steinar would have known this road even in the dark. But what matter, since I have found you?"

"Aye, he knew as soon as we saw this grave mound. But Steinar was telling me that some ghost haunts it, and I begged him to stay awhile, since there is nothing I desire so much as to see a ghost, who believe little in such things. So he stayed, though he says he fears the dead more than the living. Freydisa, they tell me that you are very wise. Cannot you show me this ghost?"

"The spirit does not ask my leave to appear, lady," answered Freydisa in her quiet voice. "Still, at times it does appear, for I have seen it twice. So let us bide here a little on the chance."

Then she went forward a few steps and began to mutter to herself.

Some minutes later the clouds broke and the great moon was seen riding low down in a clear sky, illumining the grave mound and all the plain, save where we stood in the shadow of the mount.

"Do you see aught?" asked Freydisa presently. "If not, let us be gone, for when the Wanderer comes at all it is at the rising of the moon."

Steinar and Iduna answered, "No," but I, who did see something, said:

"Look yonder among the shadows. Mayhap it is a wolf stirring. Nay, it is a man. Look, Iduna."

"I look and find nothing," she answered.

"Look again," I said. "He reaches the top of the mount and stands there staring towards the south. Oh! now he turns, and the moonlight shines upon his face."

"You dream, Olaf," said Steinar. "If you do not dream, tell us of the likeness of this spirit."

"Its likeness," I answered, "is that of a tall and noble man, worn as though with years and sorrows. He wears strange rich armour that is dinted and soiled; on his head is a cap of mail with two long ear-pieces, beneath which appears his brown hair lined with grey. He holds a red-coloured sword which is handled with a cross of gold. He points the sword at you, Steinar. It is as though he were angry with you, or warned you."

Now, when Steinar heard these words he shook and groaned, as I remembered afterwards. But of this I took no note at the time, for just then Iduna cried out:

"Say, Olaf, does the man wear a necklace? I see a necklace hanging in the air above the mount, but naught else."

"Yes, Iduna, he wears a necklace above his mail. How does it appear to you?"

"Oh, beautiful, beautiful!" she answered. "A chain of pale gold, and hanging from it golden shells inlaid with blue, and between them green jewels that hold the moon."

"That is what I see also," I said, as indeed I did. "There! All is gone."

Freydisa returned and there was a strange smile on her dark face, for she had heard all our talk.

"Who sleeps in that mound, Freydisa?" asked Iduna.

"How can I tell, Lady, seeing that he was laid there a thousand years ago, or mayhap more? Yet a story, true or false, remains of him that I have heard. It is that he was a king of these parts, who followed a dream to the south. The dream was of a necklace, and of one who wore it. For many years he wandered, and at length returned again to this place, which had been his home, wearing the necklace. But when he saw its shore from the sea he fell down and his spirit left him. What happened to him in his wanderings none know, for the tale is lost. Only it is said that his people buried him in yonder mound still wearing his armour and the necklace he had won. There, as Olaf has seen, or thinks that he has seen but now, he stands at moonrise ere trouble comes to any of his race, and stares towards the south—always towards the south."

“Is the necklace yet in the mound?” asked Iduna eagerly.

“Without doubt, Lady. Who would dare to touch the holy thing and bring on him the curse of the Wanderer and his gods, and with it his own death? No man that ever sailed the seas, I think.”

“Not so, Freydisa, for I am sure I know one who would dare it for my sake. Olaf, if you love me, bring me that necklace as a marriage gift. I tell you that, having once seen it, I want it more than anything in all the world.”

“Did you hear what Freydisa said?” I asked. “That he who wrought this sacrilege would bring upon himself evil and death?”

“Yes, I heard; but it is folly, for who need fear dead bones? As for the shape you saw, why, it is strengthless for good or ill, a shadow drawn from what has been by the magic moon, or perchance by Freydisa’s witchery. Olaf, Olaf, get me that necklace or I will never kiss you more.”

“That means you will not marry me, Iduna?”

“That means I will only marry the man who gives me that necklace. If you fear the deed, perhaps there are some others by whom it might be tried.”

Now when I heard these words a sudden rage seized me. Was I to be taunted thus by the fair woman whom I loved?

“Fear is an ill word to use to me,” I said sternly. “Know, Iduna, that if it is put to me thus I fear nothing in life or death. You shall have the necklace if it can be found in yonder earth, chance what may to the searcher. Nay, no more words. Steinar will lead you home; I must talk of this matter with Freydisa.”

It was midnight, I know not on what day, since all these things come back to me in vivid scenes, as flashes of lightning show a landscape, but are separated from each other by dense darkness. Freydisa and I stood by the Wanderer’s grave, and at our feet lay digging tools, two lamps, and tinder to light them. We were setting about our grim task at dead of night, for fear lest the priests should stay us. Also, I did not wish the people to know that I had done this thing.

“Here is work for a month,” I said doubtfully, looking up at the great mass of the mound.

“Nay,” replied Freydisa, “since I can show you the door of the grave, and perchance the passage still stands. Yet, will you really enter there?”

“Why not, Freydisa? Must I bear to be taunted by the woman I am to wed? Surely it would be better to die and have done. Let the ghost slay me if he will. It comes upon me that if so I shall be spared trouble.”

“No bridegroom’s talk,” said Freydisa, “however true it may be. Yet, young Olaf, do you take heart, since I think that this ghost has no desire for your blood. I am wise in my own fashion, Olaf, and much of the past comes to me, if little of the future, and I believe that this Wanderer and you have more to do with each other than we can guess. It may be even that this task is appointed to you and that all these happenings, which are but begun, work to an end unseen. At the least, try your fortune, and if you die—why, I who was your nurse from your mother’s knee, love you well enough to die with you. Together we’ll descend to Hela’s halls, there to seek out the Wanderer and learn his story.”

Then, throwing her arms about my neck, she drew me to her and kissed me on the brow.

“I was not your mother, Olaf,” she went on, “but, to be honest, I would have been could I have had my fancy though, strangely enough, I never felt thus towards Ragnar, your brother. Now, why do you make me talk foolishness? Come hither, and I will show you the entrance to the grave; it is where the sun first strikes upon it.”

Then she led me to the east of the mound, where, not more than eight or ten feet from its base, grew a patch of bushes. Among these bushes was a little hollow, as though at this spot the earth had sunk in. Here, at her bidding, I began to dig, and with her help worked for the half of an hour or more in silence, till at length my spade struck against a stone.

“It is the door-stone,” said Freydisa. “Dig round it.”

So I dug till I made a hole at the edge of the stone large enough for a man to creep through. After this we paused to rest a while and to allow the air within the mound to purify.

“Now,” she said, “if you are not afraid, we will enter.”

“I am afraid,” I answered. Indeed, the terror which struck me then returns, so that even as I write I feel fear of the dead man who lay, and for aught I know still lies, within that grave. “Yet,” I added, “never will I face Iduna more without the necklace, if it can be found.”

So we struck sparks on to the tinder, and from them lit the two lamps of seal oil. Then I crept into the hole, Freydisa following me, to find myself in a narrow passage built of rough stones and roofed with flat slabs of water-worn rock. This tunnel, save for a little dry soil that had sifted into it through the cracks between the stones, was quite clear. We crawled along it without difficulty till we came to the tomb chamber, which was in the centre of the mound, but at a higher level than the entrance. For the passage sloped upwards, doubtless to allow for drainage. The huge stones with which it was lined and roofed over, were not less than ten feet high and set on end side by side. One of these upright stones was that designed for the door. Had it been in place, we could not have entered the chamber without great labour and the help of many men; but, as it chanced, either it had never been set up after the burial, or this was done so hastily that it had fallen.

“We are in luck’s way,” said Freydisa, when she noticed this. “No, I will go first, who know more of ghosts than you do, Olaf. If the Wanderer strikes, let him strike me,” and she clambered over the fallen slab.

Presently she called back, saying:

“Come; all is quiet here, as it should be in such a place.”

I followed her, and sliding down the end of the stone—which I remember scratched my elbow and made it bleed—found myself in a little room about twelve feet square. In this place there was but one thing to be seen: what appeared to be the trunk of a great oak tree, some nine feet in length, and, standing on it, side by side, two figures of bronze under a foot in height.

“The coffin in which the Wanderer lies and the gods he worshipped,” said Freydisa.

Then she took up first one and next the other of the bronze figures and we examined them in the light of the lamps, although I feared to touch them. They were statues of a man and a woman.

The man, who wore a long and formal beard, was wrapped in what seemed to be a shroud, through an opening in which appeared his hands. In the right hand was a scourge with a handle, and in the left a crook such as a shepherd might use, only shorter. On his head was what I took to be a helmet, a tall peaked cap ending in a knob, having on either side of it a stiff feather of bronze, and in front, above the forehead, a snake, also of bronze.

The woman was clad in a straight and narrow robe, cut low beneath her breast. Her face was mild and beautiful, and in her right hand she held a looped sceptre. Her hair descended in many long plaits on to her shoulders. For head-dress she wore two horns, supporting between them a burnished disc of gold like to that of the moon when it is full.

"Strange gods!" I muttered.

"Aye," answered Freydisa, "yet maybe true ones to those who worship them. But we will talk of these later; now for their servant."

Then she dropped the figures into a pouch at her side, and began to examine the trunk of the oak tree, of which the outer sap wood had been turned to tinder by age, leaving the heart still hard as iron.

"See," she said, pointing to a line about four inches from the top, "the tree has been sawn in two length-ways and the lid laid on. Come, help."

Then she took an iron-shod staff which we had brought with us, and worked its sharp point into the crack, after which we both rested our weight upon the staff. The lid of the coffin lifted quite easily, for it was not pegged down, and slid of its own weight over the side of the tree. In the cavity beneath was a form covered with a purple cloak stained as though by salt water. Freydisa lifted the cloak, and there lay the Wanderer as he had been placed a thousand or more of years before our time, as perfect as he had been in the hour of his death, for the tannin from the new-felled tree in which he was buried had preserved him.

Breathless with wonder, we bent down and examined him by the light of the lamps. He was a tall, spare man, to all appearance of between fifty and sixty years of age. His face was thin and fine; he wore a short, grizzled beard; his hair, so far as it could be seen beneath his helmet, was brown and lightly tinged with grey.

“Does he call anyone to your mind?” asked Freydisa.

“Yes, I think so, a little,” I replied. “Who is it, now? Oh! I know, my mother.”

“That is strange, Olaf, since to me he seems much like what you might become should you live to his years. Yet it was through your mother’s line that Aar came to your race many generations gone, for this much is known. Well, study him hard, for, look you, now that the air has got to him, he melts away.”

Melt he did, indeed, till presently there was nothing left save a skull patched here and there with skin and hair. Yet I never forgot that face; indeed, to this hour I see it quite clearly. When at length it had crumbled, we turned to other things, knowing that our time in the grave must be measured by the oil in the simple lamps we had. Freydisa lifted a cloth from beneath the chin, revealing a dinted breastplate of rich armour, different from any of our day and land, and, lying on it, such a necklace as we had seen upon the ghost, a beauteous thing of inlaid golden shells and emerald stones shaped like beetles.

“Take it for your Iduna,” said Freydisa, “since it is for her sake that we break in upon this great man’s rest.”

I seized the precious thing and tugged at it, but the chain was stout and would not part. Again I tugged, and now it was the neck of the Wanderer that broke, for the head rolled from the body, and the gold chain came loose between the two.

“Let us be going,” said Freydisa, as I hid away the necklace. “The oil in the lamps burns low, and even I do not care to be left here in the dark with this mighty one whom we have robbed.”

“There’s his armour,” I said. “I’d have that armour; it is wonderful.”

“Then stop and get it by yourself,” she answered, “for my lamp dies.”

“At least, I will take the sword,” I exclaimed, and snatched at the belt by which it was girt about the body. The leather had rotted, and it came away in my hand.

Holding it, I clambered over the stone after Freydisa, and followed her down the passage. Before we reached the end of it the lamps went out, so that we must finish our journey in the dark. Thankful

enough were both of us when we found ourselves safe in the open air beneath the familiar stars.

"Now, how comes it, Freydisa," I asked, when we had got our breath again, "that this Wanderer, who showed himself so threateningly upon the crest of his grave, lies patient as a dead sheep within it while we rob his bones?"

"Because we were meant to take it, as I think, Olaf. Now, help me to fill in the mouth of that hole roughly—I will return to finish this to-morrow—and let us away to the hall. I am weary, and I tell you, Olaf, that the weight of things to come lies heavy on my soul. I think wisdom dwells with that Wanderer's bones. Yes, and foresight of the future and memories of the past."

CHAPTER IV
IDUNA WEARS THE NECKLACE

I lay sleeping in my bed at Aar, the sword of the Wanderer by my side and his necklace beneath my pillow. In my sleep there came to me a very strange and vivid dream. I dreamed that I was the Wanderer, no other man, and here I, who write this history in these modern days, will say that the dream was true.

Once in the far past I, who afterwards was born as Olaf, and who am now—well, never mind my name—lived in the shape of that man who in Olaf's time was by tradition known as the Wanderer. Of that Wanderer life, however, for some reason which I cannot explain, I am able to recover but few memories. Other earlier lives come back to me much more clearly, but at present the details of this particular existence escape me. For the purpose of the history which I am setting down this matters little, since, although I know enough to be sure that the persons concerned in the Olaf life were for the most part the same as those concerned in the Wanderer life, their stories remain quite distinct.

Therefore, I propose to leave that of the Wanderer, so far as I know it, untold, wild and romantic as it seems to have been. For he must have been a great man, this Wanderer, who in the early ages of the northern world, drawn by the magnet of some previous Egyptian incarnation, broke back to those southern lands with which his informing spirit was already so familiar, and thence won home again to the place where he was born, only to die. In considering this dream which Olaf dreamed, let it be remembered, then, that although a thousand, or maybe fifteen hundred, of our earthly years separated us from each other, the Wanderer, into whose tomb I broke at the goading of Iduna, and I, Olaf, were really the same being clothed in different shapes of flesh.

To return to my dream. I, Olaf, or, rather, my spirit, dwelling in the Wanderer's body, that body which I had just seen lying in the grave, stood at night in a great columned building, which I knew to be the temple of some god. At my feet lay a basin of clear water; the moonlight, which was almost as bright as that of day, showed me my reflection in the water. It was like to that of the Wanderer as I had

seen him lying in his oak coffin in the mound, only younger than he had seemed to be in the coffin. Moreover, he wore the same armour that the man in the coffin wore, and at his side hung the red, cross-handled sword. There he stood in the temple alone, and looked across a plain, green with crops, on which sat two mighty images as high as tall pines, looked to a great river on whose banks grew trees such as I had never beheld: tall, straight trees, surmounted by a stiff crown of leaves. Beyond this river lay a white, flat-roofed city, and in it were other great columned temples.

The man in whom I, Olaf the Dane, seemed to dwell in my dream turned, and behind him saw a range of naked hills of brown rock, and in them the mouth of a desolate valley where was no green thing. Presently he became aware that he was no longer alone. At his side stood a woman. She was a very beautiful woman, unlike anyone I, Olaf, had ever seen. Her shape was tall and slender, her eyes were large, dark and soft as a deer's, her features were small and straight, save the mouth, of which the lips were somewhat full. The face, which was dark-hued, like her hair and eyes, was sad, but wore a sweet and haunting smile. It was much such a face as that upon the statue of the goddess which we had found in the Wanderer's tomb, and the dress she wore beneath her cloak was like to the dress of the goddess. She was speaking earnestly.

"My love, my only love," she said, "you must begone this very night; indeed, the boat awaits you that shall take you down the river to the sea. All is discovered. My waiting-lady, the priestess, but now has told me that my father, the king, purposes to seize and throw you into prison to-morrow, and thereafter to put you on your trial for being beloved by a daughter of the royal blood, of which, as you are a foreign man, however noble you may be, the punishment is death. Moreover, if you are condemned, your doom will be my own. There is but one way in which to save my life, and that is by your flight, for if you fly it has been whispered to me that all will be forgotten."

Now, in my dream, he who wore the Wanderer's shape reasoned with her, saying at length that it was better they both should die, to live on in the world of spirits, rather than part for ever. She hid her face on his breast and answered,

"I cannot die. I would stay to look upon the sun, not for my own sake, but because of our child that will be born. Nor can I fly with

you, since then your boat will be stopped. But if you go alone, the guards will let it pass. They have their commands."

After this for a while they wept in each other's arms, for their hearts were broken.

"Give me some token," he murmured; "let me wear something that you have worn until my death."

She opened her cloak, and there upon her breast hung that necklace which had lain upon the breast of the Wanderer in his tomb, the necklace of gold and inlaid shells and emerald beetles, only there were two rows of shells and emeralds, not one. One row she unclasped and clasped it again round his neck, breaking the little gold threads that bound the two strands together.

"Take this," she said, "and I will wear the half which is left of it even in my grave, as you also shall wear your half in life and death. Now something comes upon me. It is that when the severed parts of this necklace are once more joined together, then we two shall meet again upon the earth."

"What chance is there that I shall return from my northern home, if ever I win so far, back to this southern land?"

"None," she answered. "In this life we shall kiss no more. Yet there are other lives to come, or so I think and have learned through the wisdom of my people. Begone, begone, ere my heart breaks on yours; but never let this necklace of mine, which was that of those who were long before me, lie upon another woman's breast, for if so it will bring sorrow to the giver, and to her to whom it is given no good fortune."

"How long must I wait before we meet again?" he asked.

"I do not know, but I think that when all that jewel once more grows warm above my immoral heart, this temple which they call eternal will be but a time-eaten ruin. Hark, the priestess calls. Farewell, you man who have come out of the north to be my glory and my shame. Farewell, until the purpose of our lives declares itself and the seed that we have sown in sorrow shall blossom into an everlasting flower. Farewell. Farewell!"

Then a woman appeared in the background beckoning, and all my dream vanished away. Yet to my mind came the thought that it was to the lady who gave the necklace that Death stood near, rather than

to him to whom it was given. For surely death was written in her sad and longing eyes.

So that dream ended. When I, Olaf, awoke in the morning, it was to find that already everyone was astir, for I had overslept myself. In the hall were gathered Ragnar, Steinar, Iduna and Freydisa; the elders were talking together elsewhere on the subject of the forthcoming marriage. I went to Iduna to embrace her, and she proffered me her cheek, speaking all the while over her shoulder to Ragnar.

"Where were you last night, brother, that you came in near the dawn, all covered with mud?" asked Ragnar, turning his back on Iduna, without making any answer to her words.

"Digging in the Wanderer's grave, brother, as Iduna challenged me to do."

Now all three of them turned on me eagerly, save Freydisa, who stood by the fire listening, and with one voice asked if I had found anything.

"Aye," I replied. "I found the Wanderer, a very noble-looking man," and I began to describe him.

"Peace to this dead Wanderer," broke in Iduna. "Did you find the necklace?"

"Yes, I found the necklace. Here it is!" And I laid the splendid thing upon the board.

Then suddenly I lost my speech, since now for the first time I saw that, twisted round the chain of it, were three broken wires of gold. I remembered how in my dream I had seen the beautiful woman break such wires ere she gave half of the jewel to the man in whose breast I had seemed to dwell, and for a moment grew so frightened that I could say no more.

"Oh!" exclaimed Iduna, "it is beautiful, beautiful! Oh! Olaf, I thank you," and she flung her arms about me and kissed me, this time in earnest.

Then she seized the necklace and fastened it round her throat.

"Stay," I said, awaking. "I think you had best not touch those gems. Iduna, I have dreamed that they will bring no luck to you or to any woman, save one."

Here the dark-faced Freydisa looked up at me, then dropped her eyes again, and stood listening.

"You have dreamed!" exclaimed Iduna. "I care little what you have dreamed. It is for the necklace I care, and not all the ill-luck in the world shall stay me from the keeping of it."

Here again Freydisa looked up, but Steinar looked down.

"Did you find aught else?" asked Ragnar, interrupting.

"Aye, brother, this!" and from under my cloak I produced the Wanderer's sword.

"A wondrous weapon," said Ragnar when he had examined it, "though somewhat heavy for its length, and of bronze, after the fashion of those that are buried in the grave mounds. It has seen much wear also, and, I should say, has loosed many a spirit. Look at the gold work of the handle. Truly a wondrous weapon, worth all the necklaces in the world. But tell us your story."

So I told them, and when I came to the images that we had found standing on the coffin, Iduna, who was paying little heed, stopped from her fondling of the necklace and asked where they were.

"Freydisa has them," I answered. "Show them the Wanderer's gods, Freydisa."

"So Freydisa was with you, was she?" said Iduna.

Then she glanced at the gods, laughed a little at their fashion and raiment, and again fell to fingering the necklace, which was more to her than any gods.

Afterwards Freydisa asked me what was the dream of which I had spoken, and I told it to her, every word.

"It is a strange story," said Freydisa. "What do you make of it, Olaf?"

"Nothing save that it was a dream. And yet those three broken wires that are twisted round the chain, which I had never noted till I saw the necklace in Iduna's hand! They fit well with my dream."

"Aye, Olaf, and the dream fits well with other things. Have you ever heard, Olaf, that there are those who say that men live more than once upon this earth?"

"No," I answered, laughing. "Yet why should they not do so, as they live at all? If so, perhaps I am that Wanderer, in whose body I

seemed to be, only then I am sure that the lady with the golden shells was not Iduna." And again I laughed.

"No, Olaf, she was not Iduna, though perchance there was an Iduna, all the same. Tell me, did you see aught of that priestess who was with the lady?"

"Only that she was tall and dark, one of middle age. But why waste words on this midnight madness? Yet that royal woman haunts me. I would that I could see her again, if only in a dream. Also, Freydisa, I would that Iduna had not taken the necklace. I fear lest it should bring misfortune. Where is she now? I will tell her again."

"Wandering with Steinar, I think, and wearing the necklace. Oh! Olaf, like you I fear it will bring woe. I cannot read your dream—as yet."

It was the day before that of my marriage. I see them moving about, the shapes of all those long-forgotten men and women, arrayed in their bravest garments and rude ornaments of gold and silver, for a great company had been bidden, many of whom came from far. I see my uncle, Leif, the dark-browed priest of Odin, passing between the hall and the temple where on the morrow he must celebrate the marriage rites in such a fashion as would do honour to the god. I see Iduna, Athalbrand and Steinar talking together apart. I see myself watching all this life and stir like one who is mazed, and I know that since I had entered the Wanderer's grave all things had seemed unreal to me. Iduna, whom I loved, was about to become my wife, and yet between me and Iduna continually was thrust a vision of the woman of my dream. At times I thought that the blow from the bear's paw had hurt my brain; that I must be going mad. I prayed to the gods that this might not be so, and when my prayers availed me nothing I sought the counsel of Freydisa.

She listened to my story, then said briefly,

"Let be. Things will go as they are fated. You are no madder than the rest of men. I can say no more."

It was the custom of that time and land that, if possible, the wife to be should not pass the night before her marriage under the same roof as her future husband. Therefore Athalbrand, whose mood had been strange of late, went with Iduna to sleep in his beached ship. At

my request Steinar went with them, in order that he might see that they were brought back in good time in the morning.

"You will not fail me in this, Steinar?" I said, clasping his hand.

He tried to answer something, but the words seemed to choke in his throat and he turned away, leaving them unspoken.

"Why," I exclaimed, "one might think you were going to be married, not I."

"Aye," broke in Iduna hurriedly. "The truth is that Steinar is jealous of me. How is it that you can make us all love you so much, Olaf?"

"Would that I were more worthy of your love," I answered, smiling, "as in years to come I hope to show myself."

Athalbrand, who was watching, tugged at his forked beard and muttered something that sounded like an oath. Then he rode off, kicking his horse savagely and not noting my outstretched hand, or so it seemed. Of this, however, I took little heed, for I was engaged in kissing Iduna in farewell.

"Be not sad," she said, as she kissed me back on the lips. "Remember that we part for the last time." Again she kissed me and went, laughing happily.

The morning came. All was prepared. From far and near the guests were gathered, waiting to do honour to the marriage feast. Even some of the men of Agger were there, who had come to pay homage to their new lord. The spring sun shone brightly, as it should upon a marriage morn, and without the doors the trumpeters blew blasts with their curved horns. In the temple the altar of Odin was decorated with flowers, and by it, also decorated with flowers, the offering awaited sacrifice. My mother, in her finest robe, the same, in truth, in which she herself had been wed, stood by the door of the hall, which was cleared of kine and set with tables, giving and returning greetings. Her arm was round me, who, as bridegroom, was clothed in new garments of woven wool through which ran a purple streak, the best that could be made in all the land. Ragnar came up.

"They should be here," he said. "The hour is over past."

"Doubtless the fair bride has been long in decking herself," answered my father, looking at the sun. "She will come presently."

Still time went on, and the company began to murmur, while a strange, cold fear seemed to grip my heart. At length a man was seen riding towards the hall, and one cried,

"At last! Here comes the herald!"

Another answered: "For a messenger of love he rides slowly and sadly." And a silence fell on all that heard him.

The man, a stranger to us, arrived and said:

"I have a message for the lord Thorvald from the lord Athalbrand, which I was charged to deliver at this hour, neither before nor after. It is that he sailed for Lesso at the rising of the moon last night, there purposing to celebrate the marriage of his daughter, the lady Iduna, with Steinar, lord of Agger, and is therefore grieved that he and the lady Iduna cannot be present at your feast this day."

Now, when I heard these words I felt as though a spear had been thrust through me. "Steinar! Oh! surely not with my brother Steinar," I gasped, and staggered against the door-post, where I stood like one who has been struck helpless.

Ragnar sprang at the messenger, and, dragging him from his horse, would have killed him had not some stayed his hand. My father, Thorvald, remained silent, but his half-brother, the dark-browed priest of Odin, lifted his hands to heaven and called down the curse of Odin upon the troth-breakers. The company drew swords and shouted for vengeance, demanding to be led against the false Athalbrand. At length my father called for silence.

"Athalbrand is a man without shame," he said. "Steinar is a viper whom I have nursed in my breast, a viper that has bitten the hand which saved him from death; aye, you men of Agger, you have a viper for your lord. Iduna is a light-of-love upon whom all honest women should spit, who has broken her oath and sold herself for Steinar's wealth and rule. I swear by Thor that, with your help, my friends and neighbours, I will be avenged upon all three of these. But for such vengeance preparations must be made, since Athalbrand and Steinar are strong. Moreover, they lie in an island, and can only be attacked by sea. Further, there is no haste, since the mischief is done, and by now Steinar the Snake and Iduna the Light-of-love will have drunk their marriage-cup. Come, eat, my friends, and not too sadly, seeing that if my house has suffered shame, it has escaped

worse shame, that of welcoming a false woman as a bride of one of us. Doubtless, when his bitterness is past, Olaf, my son, will find a better wife."

So they sat down and ate the marriage feast. Only the seats of the bride and bridegroom were empty, for I could not take part in that feast, but went alone to my sleeping-place and drew the curtains. My mother also was so overcome that she departed to her own chamber. Alone I sat upon my bed and listened to the sounds of that marriage feast, which more resembled such a one as is given at funerals. When it was finished I heard my father and Ragnar and the head men and chiefs of the company take counsel together, after which all departed to their homes.

So soon as they were gone Freydisa came to me, bringing food and drink.

"I am a shamed man, Freydisa," I said, "and can no longer stay in this land where I have been made one for children to mock at."

"It is not you who are shamed," answered Freydisa hotly. "It is Steinar and that——," and she used a harsh word of Iduna. "Oh! I saw it coming, and yet I dared not warn you. I feared lest I might be wrong and put doubts into your heart against your foster-brother and your wife without cause. May Odin destroy them both!"

"Speak not so roughly, Freydisa," I said. "Ragnar was right about Iduna. Her beauty never blinded him as it did me, and he read her truly. Well, she did but follow her nature; and as for Steinar, she fooled him as she has the power to do by any man, save Ragnar. Doubtless he will repent bitterly ere all is done. Also I think that necklace from the grave is an evil magic."

"It is like you, Olaf, to find excuse even for sin that cannot be forgiven. Not but what I hold with you that Steinar has been led away against his will, for I read it in his face. Well, his life must pay the price of it, for surely he shall bleed on Odin's altar. Now, be a man. Come out and face your trouble. You are not the first that a woman has fooled, nor will you be the last. Forget love and dream of vengeance."

"I cannot forget love, and I do not wish for vengeance, especially against Steinar, who is my foster-brother," I answered wearily.

CHAPTER V
THE BATTLE ON THE SEA

On the morrow Thorvald, my father, sent messengers to the head men of Agger, telling them of all that he and his House had suffered at the hands of Steinar, whereof those of their folk who had been present at the feast could bear witness. He added that if they stood by Steinar in his wickedness and treachery, thenceforward he and the men of the North would be their foes and work them mischief by land and sea.

In due course these messengers returned with the tale that the head men of Agger had met together and deposed Steinar from his lordship over them, electing another man, a nephew of Steinar's father. Also they sent a present of gold rings in atonement for the wrong which had been done to the house of Thorvald by one of their blood, and prayed that Thorvald and the northern men would bear them no ill will for that in which they were blameless.

Cheered by this answer, which halved the number of their foes, my father, Thorvald of Aar, and those Over-men of whom he was the High-lord, began to make their preparations to attack Athalbrand on his Island of Lesso. Of all these things Athalbrand learned by his spies, and later, when the warships were being prepared and manned, two messengers came from him, old men of repute, and demanded to see my father. This was the substance of his message, which was delivered in my hearing.

That he, Athalbrand, was little to blame for what had happened, which was due to the mad passions of two young people who had blinded and misled him. That no marriage had taken place between Steinar and his daughter, Iduna, as he was prepared and able to prove, since he had refused to allow any such marriage. That, therefore, he was ready to outlaw Steinar, who only dwelt with him as an unwelcome guest, and to return his daughter, Iduna, to me, Olaf, and with her a fine in gold rings as compensation for the wrong done, of which the amount was to be ascertained by judges to be agreed upon.

My father entertained the messengers, but would give them no answer till he had summoned a council of the Under-lords who stood with him in this business. At that council, where I was present, some said that the insult could only be washed out with blood. At length I was called upon to speak as the man most concerned. While all listened I rose and said:

"These are my words. After what has chanced, not for all the wealth in Denmark would I take Iduna the Fair to be my wife. Let her stay with Steinar, whom she has chosen. Still, I do not wish to cause the blood of innocent men to be spent because of my private wrong. Neither do I wish to wreak vengeance upon Steinar, who for many years was my brother, and who has been led away by a woman, as may chance to any one of us and has chanced to many. Therefore I say that my father should accept Athalbrand's fine in satisfaction of the insult to our House, and let all this matter be forgotten. As for myself, I purpose to leave my home, where I have been put to shame, and to seek my fortune in other lands."

Now, the most of those present thought this a wise saying and were ready to abide by it. Yet, unluckily enough, it was made of no account by what had slipped from my lips at its end. Although many held me strange and fey, all men loved me because I had a kind heart and gentleness, also because of the wrongs that I had suffered and for something which they saw in me, which they believed would one day make of me a great skald and a wise leader. When she heard me announce thus publicly that I was determined to leave them, Thora, my mother, whispered in the ears of Thorvald, my father, and Ragnar and others also said to each other that this might not be. It was Ragnar, the headlong, who sprang up and spoke the first.

"Is my brother to be driven from us and his home like a thrall caught in theft because a traitor and a false woman have put him to shame?" he said. "I say that I ask Athalbrand's blood to wash away that stain, not his gold, and that if need be I will seek it alone and die upon his spears. Also I say that if Olaf, my brother, turns his back upon this vengeance, I name him niddering."

"No man shall name me that," I said, flushing, "and least of all Ragnar."

So, amidst shouts, for there had been long peace in the land, and all the fighting men sighed for battle, it was agreed that war should

be declared on Athalbrand, those present pledging themselves and their dependents to follow it to the end.

"Go back to the troth-breaker, Athalbrand," said my father to the messengers. "Tell him that we will not accept his fine of gold, who come to take all his wealth, and with it his land and his life. Tell him also that the young lord Olaf refuses his daughter, Iduna, since it has not been the fashion of our House to wed with drabs. Tell Steinar, the woman-thief, that he would do well to slay himself, or to be sure that he is killed in battle, since if we take him living he shall be cast into a pit of vipers or sacrificed to Odin, the god of honour. Begone!"

"We go," answered the spokesman of the messengers; "yet before we go, Thorvald, we would say to you that you and your folk are mad. Some wrong has been done to your son, though perhaps not so much as you may think. For that wrong full atonement has been offered, and with it the hand of friendship on which you spit. Know then that the mighty lord Athalbrand does not fear war, since for every man you can gather he numbers two, all pledged to him until the death. Also he has consulted the oracle, and its answer is that if you fight with him, but one of your House will be left living."

"Begone!" thundered my father, "lest presently you should stay here dead."

So they went.

That day my heart was very heavy, and I sought Freydisa to take counsel with her.

"Trouble hovers over me like a croaking raven," I said. "I do not like this war for a woman who is worth nothing, although she has hurt me sorely. I fear the future, that it may prove even worse than the past has been."

"Then come to learn it, Olaf, for what is known need no more be feared."

"I am not so sure of that," I said. "But how can the future be learned?"

"Through the voice of the god, Olaf. Am I not one of Odin's virgins, who know something of the mysteries? Yonder in his temple mayhap he will speak through me, if you dare to listen."

"Aye, I dare. I should like to hear the god speak, true words or false."

“Then come and hear them, Olaf.”

So we went up to the temple, and Freydisa, who had the right of entry, unlocked its door. We passed in and lit a lamp in front of the seated wooden image of Odin, that for unnumbered generations had rested there behind the altar. I stood by the altar and Freydisa crouched herself before the image, her forehead laid upon its feet, and muttered runes. After a while she grew silent, and fear took hold of me. The place was large, and the feeble light of the lamp scarcely reached to the arched roof; all about me were great formless shadows. I felt that there were two worlds, one of the flesh and one of the spirit, and that I stood between the two. Freydisa seemed to go to sleep; I could no longer hear her breathing. Then she sighed heavily and turned her head, and by the light of the lamp I noted that her face was white and ghastly.

“What do you seek?” her lips asked, for I saw them moving. Yet the voice that issued from them was not her own voice, but that of a deep-throated man, who spoke with a strange accent.

Next came the answer in the voice of Freydisa.

“I, your virgin, seek to know the fate of him who stands by the altar, one whom I love.”

For a while there was quiet; then the first voice spoke, still through the lips of Freydisa. Of this I was sure, for those of the statue remained immovable. It was what it had always been—a thing of wood.

“Olaf, the son of Thorvald,” said the deep voice, “is an enemy of us the gods, as was his forefather whose grave he robbed. As his forefather’s fate was, so shall his be, for in both of them dwells the same spirit. He shall worship that which is upon the hilt of the sword he stole from the dead, and in this sign shall conquer, since it prevails against us and makes our curse of none effect. Great sorrow shall he taste, and great joy. He shall throw away a sceptre for a woman’s kiss, and yet gain a greater sceptre. Olaf, whom we curse, shall be Olaf the Blessed. Yet in the end shall we prevail against his flesh and that of those who cling to him preaching that which is upon the sword but not with the sword, among whom thou shalt be numbered, woman—thou, and another, who hast done him wrong.”

The voice died away, and was followed by a silence so deep that at length I could bear it no more.

"Ask of the war," I said, "and of what shall happen."

"It is too late," answered the voice of Freydisa. "I sought to know of you, Olaf, and you alone, and now the spirit has left me."

Then came another long silence, after which Freydisa sighed thrice and awoke. We went out of the temple, I bearing the lamp and she resting on my arm. Near the door I turned and looked back, and it seemed to me that the image of the god glared upon me wrathfully.

"What has chanced?" asked Freydisa when we stood beneath the light of the friendly stars. "I know nothing; my mind is a blackness."

I told her word for word. When I had finished she said,

"Give me the Wanderer's sword."

I gave it to her, and she held it against the sky by the naked blade.

"The hilt is a cross," she said; "but how can a man worship a cross and preach it and conquer thereby? I cannot interpret this rede, yet I do not doubt but that it shall all come true, and that you, Olaf, and I are doomed to be joined in the same fate, whatever it may be, and with us some other who has wronged you, Steinar perchance, or Iduna herself. Well, of this at least I am glad, for if I have loved the father, I think that I love the son still more, though otherwise." And, leaning forward, she kissed me solemnly upon the brow.

After Freydisa and I had sought the oracle of Odin, three long ships of war sailed by the light of the moon from Fladstrand for Athalbrand's Isle of Lesso. I do not know when we sailed, but in my mind I can still see those ships creeping out to sea. In command of the first was Thorvald, my father; of the second, Ragnar, my brother; and of the third myself, Olaf; and on each of these ships were fifty men, all of them stout fighters.

The parting with Thora, my mother, had been sad, for her heart foreboded ill of this war, and her face could not hide what her heart told her. Indeed, she wept bitterly, and cursed the name of Iduna the Fair, who had brought this trouble on her House. Freydisa was sad also. Yet, watching her opportunity, she glided up to me just before I embarked and whispered to me,

"Be of good cheer, for you will return, whoever is left behind."

“It will give me little comfort to return if certain others are left behind,” I answered. “Oh, that the folk had hearkened to me and made peace!”

“Too late to talk of that now,” said Freydisa, and we parted.

This was our plan: To sail for Lesso by the moonlight, and when the moon went down to creep silently towards the shores of the island. Then, just at the first break of dawn, we proposed to beach the ships on a sandy strand we knew, and rush to attack Athalbrand’s hall, which we hoped to carry before men were well awake. It was a bold scheme and one full of dangers, yet we trusted that its very boldness would cause it to succeed, especially as we had put it about that, owing to the unreadiness of our ships, no attack would be made until the coming of the next moon.

Doubtless all might have gone well with us but for a strange chance. As it happened, Athalbrand, a brave and skilful captain, who from his youth had seen much war by sea and land, had a design of his own which brought ours to nothing. It was that he and his people should sail to Fladstrand, burn the ships of Thorvald, my father, that he knew were fitting out upon the beach, which he hoped to find unguarded, or at most only watched by a few men, and then return to Lesso before he could be fallen upon. By ill luck he had chosen this very night for his enterprise. So it came about that just as the moon was sinking our watchmen caught sight of four other ships, which by the shields that hung over their bulwarks they knew must be vessels of war, gliding towards them over the quiet sea.

“Athalbrand comes to meet us!” cried one, and in a minute every man was looking to his arms. There was no time for plans, since in that low light and mist the vessels were almost bow to bow before we saw each other. My father’s ship ran in between two of Athalbrand’s that were sailing abreast, while mine and that of Ragnar found themselves almost alongside of the others. On both sides the sails were let down, for none had any thought of flight. Some rushed to the oars and got enough of them out to work the ships. Others ran to the grappling irons, and the rest began to shoot with their bows. Before one could count two hundred from the time of sighting, the war cry of “*Valhalla! Valhalla! Victory or Valhalla!*” broke upon the silence of the night and the battle had begun.

It was a very fierce battle, and one that the gathering darkness made more grim. Each ship fought without heed to the others, for as the fray went on they drifted apart, grappled to their foes. My father, Thorvald's, vessel fared the worst, since it had an enemy on either bulwark. He boarded one and cleared it, losing many men. Then the crew of the other rushed on to him as he regained his own ship. The end of it was that my father and all his folk were killed, but only after they had slain the most of their foes, for they died fighting very bravely.

Between Ragnar's ship and that of Athalbrand himself the fray was more even. Ragnar boarded Athalbrand and was driven back. Athalbrand boarded Ragnar and was driven back. Then for the second time Ragnar boarded Athalbrand with those men who were left to him. In the narrow waist of Athalbrand's ship a mighty battle was fought, and here at last Ragnar and Athalbrand found themselves face to face.

They hacked at each other with their axes, till at length Ragnar, with a fearful blow, drove in Athalbrand's helmet and clove his skull in two, so that he died. But even as he fell, a man, it may have been friend or foe, for the moon was sinking and the darkness grew dense, thrust a spear into Ragnar's back, and he was carried, dying, to his own vessel by those who remained to him.

Then that fight ceased, for all Athalbrand's people were dead or wounded to the death. Meanwhile, on the right, I was fighting the ship that was commanded by Steinar, for it was fated that we two should be thrown together. Here also the struggle was desperate. Steinar and his company boarded at the prow, but I and my men, charging up both boards, drove them back again. In that charge it is true that I, Olaf, fighting madly, as was my wont when roused, killed three of the Lesso folk with the Wanderer's sword. Still I see them falling one by one. Followed by six of my people, I sprang on to the raised prow of Steinar's ship. Just then the grapnels parted, and there we were left, defending ourselves as best we could. My mates got their oars and once more brought our boat alongside. Grapple they could not, because the irons were lost. Therefore, in obedience to the order which I shouted to them from the high prow of the enemy's ship, they began to hurl their ballast stones into her, and thus stove out her bottom, so that in the end she filled and sank.

Even while she was down the fray went on. Nearly all my people were down; indeed but two remained to me when Steinar, not knowing who I was, rushed up and, having lost his sword, gripped me round the middle. We wrestled, but Steinar, who was the stronger, forced me back to the bulwarks and so overboard. Into the sea we went together just as the ship sank, drawing us down after her. When we rose Steinar was senseless, but still clinging to me as I caught a rope that was thrown to me with my right hand, to which the Wanderer's sword was hanging by a leathern loop.

The end of it was that I and the senseless Steinar were both drawn back to my own ship just as the darkness closed in.

An hour later came the dawn, showing a sad sight. My father, Thorvald's, ship and one of Athalbrand's lay helpless, for all, or nearly all, their crews were dead, while the other had drifted off and was now half a mile away.

Ragnar's ship was still grappled to its foe. My own was perhaps in the best case, for here over twenty men were left unhurt, and another ten whose wounds were light. The rest were dead or dying.

I sat on a bench in the waist of the ship, and at my feet lay the man who had been dragged from the sea with me. I thought that this man was dead till the first red rays of dawn lit upon his face, whereon he sat up, and I saw that he was Steinar.

"Thus we meet again, my brother," I said in a quiet voice. "Well, Steinar, look upon your work." And I pointed to the dead and dying and to the ships around, whence came the sound of groans.

Steinar stared at me and asked in a thick voice:

"Was it with you, Olaf, that I fell into the sea?"

"Even so, Steinar."

"I knew it not in the darkness, Olaf. If I had known, never would I have lifted sword against you."

"What did that matter, Steinar, when you had already pierced my heart, though not with a sword?"

At these words Steinar moaned aloud, then said:

"For the second time you have saved my life."

"Aye, Steinar; but who knows whether I can do so for a third time? Yet take comfort, for if I may I will, for thus shall I be best avenged."

“A white vengeance,” said Steinar. “Oh, this is not to be borne.” And drawing a knife he wore at his girdle, he strove to kill himself.

But I, who was watching, snatched it away, then gave an order.

“Bind this man and keep him safe. Also bring him drink and a cloak to cover him.”

“Best kill the dog,” grumbled the captain, to whom I spoke.

“I kill that one who lays a finger on him,” I replied.

Someone whispered into the captain’s ear, whereon he nodded and laughed savagely.

“Ah!” he exclaimed, “I am a thickhead. I had forgotten Odin and his sacrifice. Yes, yes, we’ll keep the traitor safe.”

So they bound Steinar to one of the benches and gave him ale and covered him with a blood-stained cloak taken from a dead man.

I also drank of the ale and drew a cloak about me, for the air was keen. Then I said,

“Let us go to the other ships and see what has chanced there.”

They got out the oars and rowed to Ragnar’s vessel, where we saw men stirring.

“How went it with you?” I asked of one who stood upon the prow.

“Not so ill, Olaf,” he answered. “We won, and but now, with the new light, have finished the game. They are all quiet yonder,” he added, nodding at the vessel of Athalbrand, to which they were still grappled.

“Where is Ragnar?” I asked.

“Come on board and see,” answered the man.

A plank was thrust out and I ran across it, fear gripping at my heart. Resting against the mast sat Ragnar, dying.

“Good morrow to you, Olaf,” he gasped. “I am glad you live, that there may be one left to sit at Aar.”

“What do you mean, my brother?”

“I mean, Olaf, that our father, Thorvald, is dead. They called it to us from yonder.” And he pointed with his red sword to our father’s ship, that lay side by side with one of Athalbrand’s. “Athalbrand is dead, for I slew him, and ere the sun is well clear of the sea I also shall be dead. Oh, weep not, Olaf; we have won a great fight, and I travel to Valhalla with a glorious company of friends and foes, there

to await you. I say that had I lived to be old, never could I have found a better death, who then at last might have died like a cow. Get the ships to Fladstrand, Olaf, and gather more men to put all Lesso to the sword. Give us good burial, Olaf, and build a great mound over us, that we may stand thereon at moonrise and mock the men of Lesso as they row past, till Valhalla is full and the world dies. Is Steinar dead? Tell me that Steinar is dead, for then I'll speak with him presently."

"No, Ragnar, I have taken Steinar captive."

"Captive! Why captive? Oh, I understand; that he may lie on Odin's altar. Friends, swear to me that Steinar shall lie on Odin's altar, Steinar, the bride-thief, Steinar the traitor. Swear it, for I do not trust this brother of mine, who has woman's milk in his breasts. By Thor, he might spare him if he had his way. Swear it, or I'll haunt your beds o' nights and bring the other heroes with me. Swift now, while my ears are open."

Then from both ships rose the cry of

"We swear! Fear not, Ragnar, we swear."

"That's well," said Ragnar. "Kiss me now, Olaf. Oh! what is it that I see in your eyes? A new light, a strange light! Olaf, you are not one of us. This time is not your time, nor this place your place. You travel to the end by another road. Well, who knows? At that end we may meet again. At least I love you."

Then he burst into a wild war song of blood and vengeance, and so singing sank down and died.

Afterwards, with much labour, I and the men who were left roped together our vessels, and to them those that we had captured, and when a favouring wind arose, sailed back for Fladstrand. Here a multitude awaited us, for a fishing-boat had brought tidings of the great sea battle. Of the hundred and fifty men who had sailed in my father, Thorvald's, ships sixty were dead and many others wounded, some of them to death. Athalbrand's people had fared even worse, since those of Thorvald had slain their wounded, only one of his vessels having escaped back to Lesso, there to tell the people of that island and Iduna all that had happened. Now it was a land of widows and orphans, so that no man need go wooing there for long, and of Aar and the country round the same song was sung. Indeed, for

generations the folk of those parts must have told of the battle of Lesso, when the chiefs, Thorvald and Athalbrand, slew each other upon the seas at night because of a quarrel about a woman who was known as Iduna the Fair.

On the sands of Fladstrand my mother, the lady Thora, waited with the others, for she had moved thither before the sailing of the ships. When mine, the first of them, was beached, I leapt from it, and running to her, knelt down and kissed her hand.

"I see you, my son Olaf," she said, "but where are your father and brother?"

"Yonder, mother," I answered, pointing to the ships, and could say no more.

"Then why do they tarry, my son?"

"Alas! mother, because they sleep and will never wake again."

Now Thora wailed aloud and fell down senseless. Three days later she died, for her heart, which was weak, could not bear this woe. Once only did she speak before she died, and then it was to bless me and pray that we might meet again, and to curse Iduna. Folk noted that of Steinar she said nothing, either good or ill, although she knew that he lived and was a prisoner.

Thus it came about that I, Olaf, was left alone in the world and inherited the lordship of Aar and its subject lands. No one remained save my dark-browed uncle, Leif, the priest of Odin, Freydisa, the wise woman, my nurse, and Steinar, my captive foster-brother, who had been the cause of all this war.

The dying words of Ragnar had been noised abroad. The priest of Odin had laid them before the oracle of the gods, and this oracle declared that they must be fulfilled without change.

So all the folk of that land met together at my bidding—yes, even the women and the children. First we laid the dead in the largest of Athalbrand's ships, his people and Athalbrand himself being set undermost. Then on them we set the dead of Thorvald, Thorvald, my father, and his son Ragnar, my brother, bound to the mast upon their feet. This done, with great labour we dragged the ship on to high ground, and above it built a mighty mound of earth. For twenty days we toiled at the task, till at last it was finished and the dead

were hidden beneath it for ever. Then we separated to our homes and mourned a while.

But Steinar was carried to the temple of Odin at Aar, and there kept in the prison of the temple.

CHAPTER VI
HOW OLAF FOUGHT WITH ODIN

It was the eve of the Spring Feast of Odin. It comes back to me that at this feast it was the custom to sacrifice some beast to Odin and to lay flowers and other offerings upon the altars of certain other gods that they might be pleased to grant a fruitful season. On this day, however, the sacrifice was to be of no beast, but of a man—Steinar the traitor.

That night I, Olaf, by the help of Freydisa, the priestess of the god, won entrance to the dungeon where Steinar lay awaiting his doom. This was not easy to do. Indeed, I remember that it was only after I had sworn a great oath to Leif and the other priests that I would attempt no rescue of the victim, nor aid him to escape from his prison, that I was admitted there, while armed men stood without to see that I did not break my word. For my love of Steinar was known, and in this matter none trusted me.

That dungeon was a dreadful place. I see it now. In the floor of the temple was a trap-door, which, when lifted, revealed a flight of steps. At the foot of these steps was another massive door of oak, bolted and barred. It was opened and closed behind me, who found myself in a darksome den built of rough stone, to which air came only through an opening in the roof, so small that not even a child could pass it. In the far corner of this hole, bound to the wall by an iron chain fastened round his middle, Steinar lay upon a bed of rushes, while on a stool beside him stood food and water. When I entered, bearing a lamp, Steinar sat up blinking his eyes, for the light, feeble as it was, hurt them, and I saw that his face was white and drawn, and the hand he held to shade his eyes was wasted. I looked at him and my heart swelled with pity, so that I could not speak.

"Why have you come here, Olaf?" asked Steinar when he knew me. "Is it to take my life? If so, never were you more welcome."

"No, Steinar, it is to bid you farewell, since to-morrow at the feast you die, and I am helpless to save you. In all things else men will obey me, but not in this."

"And would you save me if you could?"

"Aye, Steinar. Why not? Surely you must suffer enough with so much blood and evil on your hands."

"Yes, I suffer enough, Olaf. So much that I shall be glad to die. But if you are not come to kill me, then it is that you may scourge me with your tongue."

"Not so, Steinar. It is as I have said, only to bid you farewell and to ask you a question, if it pleases you to answer me. Why did you do this thing which has brought about such misery and loss, which has sent my father, my brother, and a host of brave men to the grave, and with them my mother, whose breasts nursed you?"

"Is she dead also, Olaf? Oh! my cup is full." He hid his eyes in his thin hands and sobbed, then went on: "Why did I do it? Olaf, I did not do it, but some spirit that entered into me and made me mad—mad for the lips of Iduna the Fair. Olaf, I would speak no ill of her, since her sin is mine, but yet it is true that when I hung back she drew me on, nor could I find the strength to say her nay. Do you pray the gods, Olaf, that no woman may ever draw you on to such shame as mine. Hearken now to the great reward that I have won. I was never wed to Iduna, Olaf. Athalbrand would not suffer it till he was sure of the matter of the lordship of Agger. Then, when he knew that this was gone from me, he would suffer it still less, and Iduna herself seemed to grow cold. In truth, I believe he thought of killing me and sending my head as a present to your father Thorvald. But this Iduna forbade, whether because she loved me or for other reasons, I cannot say. Olaf, you know the rest."

"Aye, Steinar, I know the rest. Iduna is lost to me, and for that perhaps I should thank you, although such a thrust as this leaves the heart sore for life. My father, my mother, my brother—all are lost to me, and you, too, who were as my twin, are about to be lost. Night has you all, and with you a hundred other men, because of the madness that was bred in you by the eyes of Iduna the Fair, who also is lost to both of us. Steinar, I do not blame you, for I know yours was a madness which, for their own ends, the gods send upon men, naming it love. I forgive you, Steinar, if I have aught to forgive, and I tell you, so weary am I of this world, which I feel holds little that is good, that, if I might, I'd yield up my life instead of yours, and go to seek the others, though I doubt whether I should find them, since I think that our roads are different. Hark! the priests call me. Steinar,

there's no need to bid you to be brave, for who of our Northern race is not? That's our one heritage: the courage of a bull. Yet it seems to me that there are other sorts of courage which we lack: to tread the dark ways of death with eyes fixed on things gentler and better than we know. Pray to our gods, Steinar, since they are the best we have to pray to, though dark and bloody in their ways; pray that we may meet again, where priests and swords are not and women work no ruin, where we may love as we once loved in childhood and there is no more sin. Fare you well, my brother Steinar, yet not for ever, for sure I am that here we did not begin and here we shall not end. Oh! Steinar, Steinar, who could have dreamed that this would be the last of all our happy fellowship?"

When I had spoken such words as these to him, I flung my arms about him, and we embraced each other. Then that picture fades.

It was the hour of sacrifice. The victim lay bound upon the stone in the presence of the statue of the god, but outside of the doors of the little temple, that all who were gathered there might see the offering.

The ceremonies were ended. Leif, the head priest, in his robe of office, had prayed and drunk the cup before the god, dedicating to him the blood that was about to fall, and narrating in a chant the crimes for which it was offered up and all the tale of woe that these had brought about. Then, in the midst of an utter silence, he drew the sacrificial sword and held it to the lips of Odin that the god might breathe upon it and make it holy.

It would seem that the god did breathe; at least, that side of the sword which had been bright grew dull. Leif turned it to the people, crying in the ancient words:

"Odin takes; who dare deny?"

All eyes were fixed upon him, standing in his black robe, and holding aloft the gleaming sword that had grown dull. Yes, even the patient eyes of Steinar, bound upon the stone.

Then it was that some spirit stirred in my heart which drove me on to step between the priest and his prey. Standing in the doorway of the chapel, a tall, young shape against the gloom behind, I said in a steady voice:

"I dare deny!"

A gasp of wonderment went up from all who heard, and Steinar, lifting himself a little from the stone, stared at me, shook his head as if in dissent, then let it fall again, and listened.

"Hearken, friends," I said. "This man, my foster-brother, has committed a sin against me and my House. My House is dead—I alone remain; and on behalf of the dead and of myself I forgive him his sin, which, indeed, was less his than another's. Is there any man among you who at some time has not been led aside by woman, or who has not again and again desired to be so led aside? If such a one there be, let him say that he has no forgiveness in his heart for Steinar, the son of Hakon. Let him come forward and say it."

None stirred; even the women drooped their heads and were silent.

"Then, if this is so," I went on, "and you can forgive, as I do, how much more should a god forgive? What is a god? Is he not one greater than man, who must know all the weakness of man, which, for his own ends, he has bred into the flesh of man? How, then, can he do otherwise than be pitiful to what he has created? If this be so, how can the god refuse that which men are willing to grant, and what sacrifice can please him better than the foregoing of his own vengeance? Would a god wish to be outdone by a man? If I, Olaf, the man can forgive, who have been wronged, how much more can Odin the god forgive, who has suffered no wrong save that of the breaking of those laws which will ever be broken by men who are as it has pleased him to fashion them? On Odin's behalf, therefore, and speaking as he would speak, could he have voice among us, I demand that you set this victim free, leaving it to his own heart to punish him."

Now, some whom my simple words had touched, I suppose because there was truth in them, although in those days and in that land none understood such truths, and others, because they had known and loved the open-handed Steinar, who would have given the cloak from his back to the meanest of them, cried:

"Aye, let him go free. There has been enough of death through this Iduna."

But more stood silent, lost in doubt at this new doctrine. Only Leif, my uncle, did not stand silent. His dark face began to work as

though a devil possessed him, as, indeed, I think one did. His eyes rolled; he champed his jaws like an angry hog, and screamed:

"Surely the lord Olaf is mad, for no sane man would talk thus. Man may forgive while it is within his power; but this traitor has been dedicated to Odin, and can a god forgive? Can a god spare when his nostrils are opened for the smell of blood? If so, of what use is it to be a god? How is he happier than a man if he must spare? Moreover, would ye bring the curse of Odin upon you all? I say to you—steal his sacrifice, and you yourselves shall be sacrificed, you, your wives, your children, aye, and even your cattle and the fruit of your fields."

When they heard this, the people groaned and shouted out:

"Let Steinar die! Kill him! Kill him that Odin may be fed!"

"Aye," answered Leif, "Steinar shall die. See, he dies!"

Then, with a leap like to that of a hungry wolf, he sprang upon the bound man and slew him.

I see it now. The rude temple, the glaring statue of the god, the gathered crowd, open mouthed and eyed, the spring sunshine shining quietly over all, and, running past the place, a ewe calling to the lamb that it had lost; I see the dying Steinar turn his white face, and smile a farewell to me with his fading eyes; I see Leif getting to his horrible rites that he might learn the omen, and lastly I see the red sword of the Wanderer appear suddenly between me and him, and in my hand. I think that my purpose was to cut him down. Only a thought arose within me.

This priest was not to blame. He did no more than he had been taught. Who taught him? The god he served, through whom he gained honour and livelihood. So the god was to blame, the god that drank the blood of men, as a thrall drinks ale, to satisfy his filthy appetite. Could such a monster be a god? Nay, he must be a devil, and why should free men serve devils? At least, I would not. I would cast him off, and let him avenge himself upon me if he could. I, Olaf, would match myself against this god—or devil.

I strode past Leif and the altar to where the statue of Odin sat within the temple.

"Hearken!" I said in such a voice that all lifted their eyes from the scene of butchery to me. "You believe in Odin, do you not?"

They answered “Aye.”

“Then you believe that he can revenge himself upon one who rejects and affronts him?”

“Aye,” they answered again.

“If this be so,” I went on, “will you swear to leave the matter between Odin and me, Olaf, to be settled according to the law of single combat, and give peace to the victor, with promise from all harm save at the hands of his foe?”

“Aye,” they answered, yet scarcely understanding what they said.

“Good!” I cried. “Now, God Odin, I, Olaf, a man, challenge you to single combat. Strike you first, you, Odin, whom I name Devil and Wolf of the skies, but no god. Strike you first, bloody murderer, and kill me, if you can, who await your stroke!”

Then I folded my arms and stared at the statue’s stony eyes, which stared back at me, while all the people gasped.

For a full minute I waited thus, but all that happened was that a wren settled on the head of Odin and twittered there, then flew off to its nest in the thatch.

“Now,” I cried, “you have had your turn, and mine comes.”

I drew the Wanderer’s sword, and sprang at Odin. My first stroke sunk up to the hilt in his hollow belly; my next cut the sceptre from his hand; my third—a great one—hewed the head from off him. It came rattling down, and out of it crawled a viper, which reared itself up and hissed. I set my heel upon the reptile’s head and crushed it, and slowly it writhed itself to death.

“Now, good folk,” I cried, “what say you of your god Odin?”

They answered nothing, for all of them were in flight. Yes, even Leif fled, cursing me over his shoulder as he went.

Presently I was alone with the dead Steinar and the shattered god, and in that loneliness strange visions came to me, for I felt that I had done a mighty deed, one that made me happy. Round the wall of the temple crept a figure; it was that of Freydisa, whose face was white and scared.

“You are a great man, Olaf,” she said; “but how will it end?”

“I do not know,” I answered. “I have done what my heart told me, neither more nor less, and I bide the issue. Odin shall have his

chance, for here I stay till dark, and then, if I live, I leave this land. Go, get me all the gold that is mine from the hall, and bring it here to me by moonrise, and with it some garments and my armour. Bring me also my best horse."

"You leave this land?" she said. "That means that you leave me, who love you, to go forth as the Wanderer went—following a dream to the South. Well, it is best that you should go, for whatever they have promised you but now, it is sure that the priests will kill you, even if you escape the vengeance of the god." And she looked askance at the shattered statue which had sat in its place for so many generations that none knew who had set it there, or when.

"I have killed the god," I answered, pointing to the crushed viper.

"Not quite, Olaf, for, see, its tail still moves."

Then she went, leaving me alone. I sat myself down by the murdered Steinar, and stared at him. Could he be really dead, I wondered, or did he live on elsewhere? My faith had taught me of a place called Valhalla where brave men went, but in that faith and its gods I believed no more. This Valhalla was but a child's tale, invented by a bloody-minded folk who loved slaughter. Wherever Steinar and the others were, it was not in Valhalla. Then, perhaps, they slept like the beasts do after these have been butchered. Perhaps death was the end of all. It might be so, and yet I did not believe it. There were other gods besides Odin and his company, for what were those which we had found in the Wanderer's tomb? I longed to know.

Yes, I would go south, as the Wanderer went, and search for them. Perhaps there in the South I should learn the secret truth—and other things.

I grew weary of these thoughts of gods who could not be found, or who, if found, were but devils. My mind went back to my childhood's days, when Steinar and I played together on the meads, before any woman had come to wreck our lives. I remembered how we used to play until we were weary, and how at nights I would tell him tales that I had learned or woven, until at length we sank to sleep, our arms about each other's necks. My heart grew full of sorrow that in the end broke from my eyes in tears. Yes, I wept over Steinar, my brother Steinar, and kissed his cold and gory lips.

The evening gathered, the twilight grew, and, one by one, the stars sprang out in the quiet sky, till the moon appeared and gathered all their radiance to herself. I heard the sound of a woman's dress, and looked up, thinking to see Freydisa. But this woman was not Freydisa; it was Iduna! Yes, Iduna's self!

I rose to my feet and stood still. She also stood still, on the farther side of the stone of sacrifice whereon that which had been Steinar was stretched between us. Then came a struggle of silence, in which she won at last.

"Have you come to save him?" I asked. "If so, it is too late. Woman, behold your work."

She shook her beautiful head and answered, almost in a whisper:

"Nay, Olaf, I am come to beg a boon of you: that you will slay me, here and now."

"Am I a butcher—or a priest?" I muttered.

"Oh, slay me, slay me, Olaf!" she went on, throwing herself upon her knees before me, and rending open her blue robe that her young breast might take the sword. "Thus, perchance, I, who love life, may pay some of the price of sin, who, if I slew myself, would but multiply the debt, which in truth I dare not do."

Still I shook my head, and once more she spoke:

"Olaf, in this way or in that doubtless my end will find me, for, if you refuse this office, there are others of sterner stuff. The knife that smote Steinar is not blunted. Yet, before I die, who am come here but to die, I pray you hear the truth, that my memory may be somewhat less vile to you in the after years. Olaf, you think me the falsest of the false, yet I am not altogether so. Hark you now! At the time that Steinar sought me, some madness took him. So soon as we were alone together, his first words were: 'I am bewitched. I love you.'

"Olaf, I'll not deny that his worship stirred my blood, for he was goodly—well, and different to you, with your dreaming eyes and thoughts that are too deep for me. And yet, by my breath, I swear that I meant no harm. When we rode together to the ship, it was my purpose to return upon the morrow and be made your wife. But there upon the ship my father compelled me. It was his fancy that I should break with you and be wed to Steinar, who had become so

great a lord and who pleased him better than you did, Olaf. And, as for Steinar—why, have I not told you that he was mad for me?"

"Steinar's tale was otherwise, Iduna. He said that you went first, and that he followed."

"Were those his words, Olaf? For, if so, how can I give the dead the lie, and one who died through me? It seems unholy. Yet in this matter Steinar had no reason left to him and, whether you believe me or no, I tell the truth. Oh! hear me out, for who knows when they will come to take me, who have walked into this nest of foes that I may be taken? Pray as I would, the ship was run out, and we sailed for Lesso. There, in my father's hall, upon my knees, I entreated him to hold his hand. I told him what was true: that, of you twain, it was you I loved, not Steinar. I told him that if he forced this marriage, war would come of it that might mean all our deaths. But these things moved him nothing. Then I told him that such a deed of shame would mean the loss of Steinar's lordship, so that by it he would gain no profit. At last he listened, for this touched him near. You know the rest. Thorvald, your father, and Ragnar, who ever hated me, pressed on the war despite all our offerings of peace. So the ships met, and Hela had her fill."

"Aye, Iduna, whatever else is false, this is true, that Hela had her fill."

"Olaf, I have but one thing more to say. It is this: Only once did those dead lips touch mine, and then it was against my will. Aye, although it is shameful, you must learn the truth. My father held me, Olaf, while I took the betrothal kiss, because I must. But, as you know, there was no marriage."

"Aye, I know that," I said, "because Steinar told me so."

"And, save for that one kiss, Olaf, I am still the maid whom once you loved so well."

Now I stared at her. Could this woman lie so blackly over dead Steinar's corpse? When all was said and done, was it not possible that she spoke the truth, and that we had been but playthings in the hands of an evil Fate? Save for some trifling error, which might be forgiven to one who, as she said, loved the worship that was her beauty's due, what if she were innocent, after all?

Perhaps my face showed the thoughts that were passing through my mind. At the least, she who knew me well found skill to read them. She crept towards me, still on her knees; she cast her arms about me, and, resting her weight upon me, drew herself to her feet.

"Olaf," she whispered, "I love you, I love you well, as I have always done, though I may have erred a little, as women wayward and still unwed are apt to do. Olaf, they told me yonder how you had matched yourself against the god, with his priests for judges, and smitten him, and I thought this the greatest deed that ever I have known. I used to think you something of a weakling, Olaf, not in your body but in your mind, one lost in music and in runes, who feared to put things to the touch of war; but you have shown me otherwise. You slew the bear; you overcame Steinar, who was so much stronger than you are, in the battle of the ships; and now you have bearded Odin, the All-father. Look, his head lies there, hewn off by you for the sake of one who, after all, had done you wrong. Olaf, such a deed as that touches a woman's heart, and he who does it is the man she would wish to lie upon her breast and be her lord. Olaf, all this evil past may yet be forgotten. We might go and live elsewhere for awhile, or always, for with your wisdom and my beauty joined together what could we not conquer? Olaf, I love you now as I have never loved before, cannot you love me again?"

Her arms clung about me; her beautiful blue eyes, shimmering with moonlit tears, held my eyes, and my heart melted beneath her breath as winter snows melt in the winds of spring. She saw, she understood; she cast herself upon me, shaking her long hair over both of us, and seeking my lips. Almost she had found them, when, feeling something hard between me and her, something that hurt me, I looked down. Her cloak had slipped or been thrown aside, and my eye caught the glint of gold and jewels. In an instant I remembered—the Wanderer's necklace and the dream—and with those memories my heart froze again.

"Nay, Iduna," I said, "I loved you well; there's no man will ever love you more, and you are very fair. Whether you speak true words or false, I do not know; it is between you and your own spirit. But this I do know: that betwixt us runs the river of Steinar's blood, aye, and the blood of Thorvald, my father, of Thora, my mother, of Ragnar, my brother, and of many another man who clung to us, and

that is a stream which I cannot cross. Find you another husband, Iduna the Fair, since never will I call you wife."

She loosed her arms from round me, and, lifting them again, unclasped the Wanderer's necklace from about her breast.

"This it is," she said, "which has brought all these evils on me. Take it back again, and, when you find her, give it to that one for whom it is meant, that one whom you love truly, as, whatever you may have thought, you never have loved me."

Then she sank upon the ground, and resting her golden head upon dead Steinar's breast, she wept.

I think it was then that Freydisa returned; at least, I recall her tall form standing near the stone of sacrifice, gazing at us both, a strange smile on her face.

"Have you withstood?" she said. "Then, truly, you are in the way of victory and have less to fear from woman than I thought. All things are ready as you commanded, my lord Olaf, and there remains but to say farewell, which you had best do quickly, for they plot your death yonder."

"Freydisa," I answered, "I go, but perchance I shall return again. Meanwhile, all I have is yours, with this charge. Guard you yonder woman, and see her safe to her home, or wherever she would go, and to Steinar here give honourable burial."

Then the darkness of oblivion falls, and I remember no more save the white face of Iduna, her brow stained with Steinar's life-blood, watching me as I went.

BOOK II
BYZANTIUM

CHAPTER I
IRENE, EMPRESS OF THE EARTH

A gulf of blackness and the curtain lifts again upon a very different Olaf from the young northern lord who parted from Iduna at the place of sacrifice at Aar.

I see myself standing upon a terrace that overlooks a stretch of quiet water, which I now know was the Bosphorus. Behind me are a great palace and the lights of a vast city; in front, upon the sea and upon the farther shore, are other lights. The moon shines bright above me, and, having naught else to do, I study my reflection in my own burnished shield. It shows a man of early middle life; he may be thirty or five-and-thirty years of age; the same Olaf, yet much changed. For now my frame is tall and well-knit, though still somewhat slender; my face is bronzed by southern suns; I wear a short beard; there is a scar across my cheek, got in some battle; my eyes are quiet, and have lost the first liveliness of youth. I know that I am the captain of the Northern Guard of the Empress Irene, widow of the dead emperor, Leo the Fourth, and joint ruler of the Eastern Empire with her young son, Constantine, the sixth of that name.

How I came to fill this place, however, I do not know. The story of my journey from Jutland to Byzantium is lost to me. Doubtless it must have taken years, and after these more years of humble service, before I rose to be the captain of Irene's Northern Guard that she kept ever about her person, because she would not trust her Grecian soldiers.

My armour was very rich, yet I noted about myself two things that were with me in my youth. One was the necklace of golden shells, divided from each other by beetles of emeralds, that I had taken from the Wanderer's grave at Aar, and the other the cross-hilted bronze sword with which this same Wanderer had been girded in his grave. I know now that because of this weapon, which was of a metal

and shape strange to that land, I had the byname of Olaf Red-Sword, and I know also that none wished to feel the weight of this same ancient blade.

When I had finished looking at myself in the shield, I leaned upon the parapet staring at the sea and wondering how the plains of Aar looked that night beneath this selfsame moon, and whether Freydisa were dead by now, and whom Iduna had married, and if she ever thought of me, or if Steinar came to haunt her sleep.

So I mused, till presently I felt a light touch upon my shoulder, and swung round to find myself face to face with the Empress Irene herself.

"Augusta!" I said, saluting, for, as Empress, that was her Roman title, even though she was a Greek.

"You guard me well, friend Olaf," she said, with a little laugh. "Why, any enemy, and Christ knows I have plenty, could have cut you down before ever you knew that he was there."

"Not so, Augusta," I answered, for I could speak their Greek tongue well; "since at the end of the terrace the guards stand night and day, men of my own blood who can be trusted. Nothing which does not fly could gain this place save through your own chambers, that are also guarded. It is not usual for any watch to be set here, still I came myself in case the Empress might need me."

"That is kind of you, my Captain Olaf, and I think I do need you. At least, I cannot sleep in this heat, and I am weary of the thoughts of State, for many matters trouble me just now. Come, change my mind, if you can, for if so I'll thank you. Tell me of yourself when you were young. Why did you leave your northern home, where I've heard you were a barbarian chief, and wander hither to Byzantium?"

"Because of a woman," I answered.

"Ah!" she said, clapping her hands; "I knew it. Tell me of this woman whom you love."

"The story is short, Augusta. She bewitched my foster-brother, and caused him to be sacrificed to the northern gods as a troth-breaker, and I do not love her."

"You'd not admit it if you did, Olaf. Was she beautiful, well, say as I am?"

I turned and looked at the Empress, studying her from head to foot. She was shorter than Iduna by some inches, also older, and therefore of a thicker build; but, being a fair Greek, her colour was much the same, save that the eyes were darker. The mouth, too, was more hard. For the rest, she was a royal-looking and lovely woman in the flower of her age, and splendidly attired in robes broidered with gold, over which she wore long strings of rounded pearls. Her rippling golden hair was dressed in the old Greek fashion, tied in a simple knot behind her head, and over it was thrown a light veil worked with golden stars.

"Well, Captain Olaf," she said, "have you finished weighing my poor looks against those of this northern girl in the scales of your judgment? If so, which of us tips the beam?"

"Iduna was more beautiful than ever you can have been, Augusta," I replied quietly.

She stared at me till her eyes grew quite round, then puckered up her mouth as though to say something furious, and finally burst out laughing.

"By every saint in Byzantium," she said, "or, rather, by their relics, for of live ones there are none, you are the strangest man whom I have known. Are you weary of life that you dare to say such a thing to me, the Empress Irene?"

"Am I weary of life? Well, Augusta, on the whole I think I am. It seems to me that death and after it may interest us more. For the rest, you asked me a question, and, after the fashion of my people, I answered it as truthfully as I could."

"By my head, you have said it again," she exclaimed. "Have you not heard, most innocent Northman, that there are truths which should not be mentioned and much less repeated?"

"I have heard many things in Byzantium, Augusta, but I pay no attention to any of them—or, indeed, to little except my duty."

"Now that this, this—what's the girl's name?"

"Iduna the Fair," I said.

"——this Iduna has thrown you over, at which I am sure I do not wonder, what mistresses have you in Byzantium, Olaf the Dane?"

"None at all," I answered. "Women are pleasant, but one may buy sweets too dear, and all that ever I saw put together were not worth my brother Steinar, who lost his life through one of them."

"Tell me, Captain Olaf, are you a secret member of this new society of hermits of which they talk so much, who, if they see a woman, must hold their faces in the sand for five minutes afterwards?"

"I never heard of them, Augusta."

"Are you a Christian?"

"No; I am considering that religion—or rather its followers."

"Are you a pagan, then?"

"No. I fought a duel with the god Odin, and cut his head off with this sword, and that is why I left the North, where they worship Odin."

"Then what are you?" she said, stamping her foot in exasperation.

"I am the captain of your Imperial Majesty's private guard, a little of a philosopher, and a fair poet in my own language, not in Greek. Also, I can play the harp."

"You say 'not in Greek,' for fear lest I should ask you to write verses to me, which, indeed, I shall never do, Olaf. A soldier, a poet, a philosopher, a harpist, one who has renounced women! Now, why have you renounced women, which is unnatural in a man who is not a monk? It must be because you still love this Iduna, and hope to get her some day."

I shook my head and answered,

"I might have done that long ago, Augusta."

"Then it must be because there is some other woman whom you wish to gain. Why do you always wear that strange necklace?" she added sharply. "Did it belong to this savage girl Iduna, as, from the look of it, it might well have done?"

"Not so, Augusta. She took it for a while, and it brought sorrow on her, as it will do on all women save one who may or may not live to-day."

"Give it me. I have taken a fancy to it; it is unusual. Oh! fear not, you shall receive its value."

"If you wish the necklace, Augusta, you must take the head as well; and my counsel to you is that you do neither, since they will bring you no good luck."

"In truth, Captain Olaf, you anger me with your riddles. What do you mean about this necklace?"

"I mean, Augusta, that I took it from a very ancient grave——"

"That I can believe, for the jeweller who made it worked in old Egypt," she interrupted.

"——and thereafter I dreamed a dream," I went on, "of the woman who wears the other half of it. I have not seen her yet, but when I do I shall know her at once."

"So!" she exclaimed, "did I not tell you that, east or west or north or south, there *is* some other woman?"

"There was once, Augusta, quite a thousand years ago or more, and there may be again now, or a thousand years hence. That is what I am trying to find out. You say the work is Egyptian. Augusta, at your convenience, will you be pleased to make another captain in my place? I would visit Egypt."

"If you leave Byzantium without express permission under my own hand—not the Emperor's or anybody else's hand; mine, I say—and are caught, your eyes shall be put out as a deserter!" she said savagely.

"As the Augusta pleases," I answered, saluting.

"Olaf," she went on in a more gentle voice, "you are clearly mad; but, to tell truth, you are also a madman who pleases me, since I weary of the rogues and lick-spittles who call themselves sane in Byzantium. Why, there's not a man in all the city who would dare to speak to me as you have spoken to-night, and like that breeze from the sea, it is refreshing. Lend me that necklace, Olaf, till to-morrow morning. I want to examine it in the lamplight, and I swear to you that I will not take it from you or play you any tricks about it."

"Will you promise not to wear it, Augusta?"

"Of course. Is it likely that I should wish to wear it on my bare breast after it has been rubbing against your soiled armour?"

Without another word I unhooked the necklace and handed it to her. She ran to a little distance, and, with one of those swift movements that were common to her, fastened it about her own

neck. Then she returned, and threw the great strings of pearls, which she had removed to make place for it, over my head.

"Now have you found the woman of that dream, Olaf?" she asked, turning herself about in the moonlight.

I shook my head and answered:

"Nay, Augusta; but I fear that *you* have found misfortune. When it comes, I pray you to remember that you promised not to wear the necklace. Also that your soldier, Olaf, Thorvald's son, would have given his life rather than that you should have done so, not for the sake of any dream, but for your sake, Augusta, whom it is his business to protect."

"Would, then, it were your business either to protect me a little more, or a little less!" she exclaimed bitterly.

Having uttered this dark saying, she vanished from the terrace still wearing the string of golden shells.

On the following morning the necklace was returned to me by Irene's favourite lady, who smiled as she gave it to me. She was a dark-eyed, witty, and able girl named Martina, who had been my friend for a long while.

"The Augusta said that you were to examine this jewel to see that it has not been changed."

"I never suggested that the Augusta was a thief," I replied, "therefore it is unnecessary."

"She said also that I was to tell you, in case you should think that it has been befouled by her wearing of it, that she has had it carefully cleaned."

"That is thoughtful of her, Martina, for it needed washing. Now, will you take the Augusta's pearls, which she left with me in error?"

"I have no orders to take any pearls, Captain Olaf, although I did notice that two of the finest strings in the Empire are missing. Oh! you great northern child," she added in a whisper, "keep the pearls, they are a gift, and worth a prince's ransom; and take whatever else you can get, and keep that too."[*]

[*] I have no further vision concerning these priceless pearls and do not know what became of them. Perhaps I was robbed of them during my imprisonment, or perhaps I gave them to Heliodore or to Martina. Where are they now, I wonder?—Editor.

Then, before I could answer her, she was gone.

For some weeks after this I saw no more of the Augusta, who appeared to avoid me. One day, however, I was summoned to her presence in her private apartments by the waiting-lady Martina, and went, to find her alone, save for Martina. The first thing that I noticed was that she wore about her neck an exact copy of the necklace of golden shells and emerald beetles; further, that about her waist was a girdle and on her wrist a bracelet of similar design. Pretending to see nothing, I saluted and stood to attention.

"Captain," she began, "yonder"—and she waved her hand towards the city, so that I could not fail to see the shell bracelet—"the uncles of my son, the Emperor, lie in prison. Have you heard of the matter, and, if so, what have you heard?"

"I have heard, Augusta, that the Emperor having been defeated by the Bulgarians, some of the legions proposed to set his uncle, Nicephorus—he who has been made a priest—upon the throne. I have heard further that thereon the Emperor caused the Cæsar Nicephorus to be blinded, and the tongues of the two other Cæsars and of their two brothers, the *Nobilissimi*, to be slit."

"Do you think well of such a deed, Olaf?"

"Augusta," I answered, "in this city I make it my business not to think, for if I did I should certainly go mad."

"Still, on this matter I command you to think, and to speak the truth of your thoughts. No harm shall come to you, whatever they may be."

"Augusta, I obey you. I think that whoever did this wicked thing must be a devil, either returned from that hell of which everyone is so fond of talking here, or on the road thither."

"Oh! you think that, do you? So I was right when I told Martina that there was only one honest opinion to be had in Constantinople and I knew where to get it. Well, most severe and indignant judge, suppose I tell you it was I who commanded that this deed should be done. Then would you change your judgment?"

"Not so, Augusta. I should only think much worse of you than ever I did before. If these great persons were traitors to the State, they should have been executed. But to torment them, to take away the sight of heaven and to bring them to the level of dumb beasts, all that

their actual blood may not be on the tormentors' hand—why, the act is vile. So, at least, it would be held in those northern lands which you are pleased to call barbarian."

Now Irene sprang from her seat and clapped her hands for joy.

"You hear what he says, Martina, and the Emperor shall hear it too; aye, and so shall my ministers, Stauracius and Aetius, who supported him in this matter. I alone withstood him; I prayed him for his soul's sake to be merciful. He answered that he would no longer be governed by a woman; that he knew how to safeguard his empire, and what conscience should allow and what refuse. So, in spite of all my tears and prayers, the vile deed was done, as I think for no good cause. Well, it cannot be undone. Yet, Olaf, I fear that it may be added to, and that these royal-born men may be foully murdered. Therefore, I put you in charge of the prison where they lie. Here is the signed order. Take with you what men you may think needful, and hold that place, even should the Emperor himself command you to open. See also that the prisoners within are cared for and have all they need, but do not suffer them to escape."

I saluted and turned to go, when Irene called me back.

At that moment, too, in obedience to some sign which she made, Martina left the chamber, looking at me oddly as she did so. I came and stood before the Empress, who, I noted, seemed somewhat troubled, for her breast heaved and her gaze was fixed upon the floor now. It was of mosaic, and represented a heathen goddess talking to a young man, who stood before her with his arms folded. The goddess was angry with the man, and held in her left hand a dagger as though she would stab him, although her right arm was stretched out to embrace him and her attitude was one of pleading.

Irene lifted her head, and I saw that her fine eyes were filled with tears.

"Olaf," she said, "I am in much trouble, and I know not where to find a friend."

I smiled and answered:

"Need an Empress seek far for friends?"

"Aye, Olaf; farther than anyone who breathes. An Empress can find flatterers and partisans, but not a single friend. Such love her only for what she can give them. But, if fortune went against her, I

say that they would fall away like leaves from a tree in a winter frost, so that she stood naked to every bitter blast of heaven. Yes, and then would come the foe and root up that tree and burn it to give them warmth and to celebrate their triumph. So I think, Olaf, it will be with me before all is done. Even my son hates me, Olaf, my only child for whose true welfare I strive night and day."

"I have heard as much, Augusta," I said.

"You have heard, like all the world. But what else of ill have you heard of me, Olaf? Speak out, man; I'm here to learn the truth."

"I have heard that you are very ambitious, Augusta, and that you hate your son as much as he hates you, because he is a rival to your power. It is rumoured that you would be glad if he were dead and you left to reign alone."

"Then a lie is rumoured, Olaf. Yet it is true that I am ambitious, who see far and would build this tottering empire up afresh. Olaf, it is a bitter thing to have begotten a fool."

"Then why do you not marry again and beget others, who might be no fools, Augusta?" I asked bluntly.

"Ah! why?" she answered, flashing a curious glance upon me. "In truth, I do not quite know why; but from no lack of suitors, since, were she but a hideous hag, an empress would find these. Olaf, you may have learned that I was not born in the purple. I was but a Greek girl of good race, not even noble, to whom God gave a gift of beauty; and when I was young I saw a man who took my fancy, also of old race, yet but a merchant of fruits which they grow in Greece and sell here and at Rome. I wished to marry him, but my mother, a far-seeing woman, said that such beauty as mine—though less than that of your Iduna the Fair, Olaf—was worth money or rank. So they sent away my merchant of fruits, who married the daughter of another merchant of fruits and throve very well in business. He came to see me some years ago, fat as a tub, his face scored all over with the marks of the spotted sickness, and we talked about old times. I gave him a concession to import dried fruits into Byzantium—that is what he came to see me for—and now he's dead. Well, my mother was right, for afterwards this poor beauty of mine took the fancy of the late Emperor, and, being very pious, he married me. So the

Greek girl, by the will of God, became Augusta and the first woman in the world."

"By the will of God?" I repeated.

"Aye, I suppose so, or else all is raw chance. At least, I, who to-day might have been bargaining over dried fruits, as I should have done had I won my will, am—what you know. Look at this robe," and she spread her glittering dress before me. "Hark to the tramp of those guards before my door. Why, you are their captain. Go into the antechambers, and see the ambassadors waiting there in the hope of a word with the Ruler of the Earth! Look at my legions mustered on the drilling-grounds, and understand how great the Grecian girl has grown by virtue of the face which is less beauteous than that of—Iduna the Fair!"

"I understand all this, Augusta," I answered. "Yet it would seem that you are not happy. Did you not tell me just now that you could not find a friend and that you had begotten a fool?"

"Happy, Olaf? Why, I am wretched, so wretched that often I think the hell of which the priests preach is here on earth, and that I dwell in its hottest fires. Unless love hides it, what happiness is there in this life of ours, which must end in blackest death?"

"Love has its miseries also, Augusta. That I know, for once I loved."

"Aye, but then the love was not true, for this is the greatest curse of all—to love and not to be beloved. For the sake of a perfect love, if it could be won—why, I'd sacrifice even my ambition."

"Then you must keep your ambition, Augusta, since in this world you'll find nothing perfect."

"Olaf, I'm not so sure. Thoughts have come to me. Olaf, I told you that I have no friend in all this glittering Court. Will you be my friend?"

"I am your honest servant, Augusta, and I think that such a one is the best of friends."

"That's so; and yet no man can be true friend to a woman unless he is—more than friend. Nature has writ it so."

"I do not understand," I answered.

"You mean that you will not understand, and perhaps you are wise. Why do you stare at that pavement? There's a story written on

it. The old goddess of my people, Aphrodite, loved a certain Adonis—so runs the fable—but he loved not her, and thought only of his sports. Look, she woos him there, and he rejects her, and in her rage she stabs him."

"Not so," I answered. "Of the end of the story I know nothing, but, if she had meant to kill him, the dagger would be in her right hand, not in her left."

"That's true, Olaf; and in the end it was Fate which killed him, not the goddess whom he had scorned. And yet, Olaf, it is not wise to scorn goddesses. Oh! of what do I talk? You'll befriend me, will you not?"

"Aye, Augusta, to the last drop of my blood, as is my duty. Do I not take your pay?"

"Then thus I seal our friendship and here's an earnest of the pay," Irene said slowly, and, bending forward, she kissed me on the lips.

At this moment the doors of the chamber were thrown open. Through them, preceded by heralds, that at once drew back again, entered the great minister Stauracius, a fat, oily-faced man with a cunning eye, who announced in a high, thin voice,

"The ambassadors of the Persians wait upon you, Augusta, as you appointed at this hour."

CHAPTER II
THE BLIND CÆSAR

Irene turned upon the eunuch as a she-lion turns upon some hunter that disturbs it from its prey. Noting the anger in her eyes, he fell back and prostrated himself. Thereupon she spoke to me as though his entry had interrupted her words.

"Those are the orders, Captain Olaf. See that you forget none of them. Even if this proud eunuch, who dares to appear before me unannounced, bids you to do so, I shall hold you to account. To-day I leave the city for a while for the Baths whither I am sent. You must not accompany me because of the duty I have laid upon you here. When I return, be sure I'll summon you," and, knowing that Stauracius could not see her from where he lay, for a moment she let her splendid eyes meet my own. In them there was a message I could not mistake.

"The Augusta shall be obeyed," I answered, saluting. "May the Augusta return in health and glory and more beautiful than——"

"Iduna the Fair!" she broke in. "Captain, you are dismissed."

Again I saluted, retreating from the presence backwards and staying to bow at each third step, as was the custom. The process was somewhat long, and as I reached the door I heard her say to Stauracius,

"Hearken, you dog. If ever you dare to break in upon me thus again, you shall lose two things—your office and your head. What! May I not give secret orders to my trusted officer and not be spied upon by you? Now, cease your grovellings and lead in these Persians, as you have been bribed to do."

Passing through the silk-clad, bejewelled Persians who waited in an antechamber with their slaves and gifts, I gained the great terrace of the palace which looked upon the sea. Here I found Martina leaning on the parapet.

"Have you more of the Augusta's pearls about you, Olaf?" she asked mockingly, speaking over her shoulder.

"Not I, Martina," I answered, halting beside her.

"Indeed. I could have sworn otherwise, for they are perfumed, and I seemed to catch their odour. When did you begin to use the royal scent upon that yellow beard of yours, Olaf? If any of us women did so, it would mean blows and exile; but perchance a captain of the guard may be forgiven."

"I use no scents, girl, as you know well. Yet it is true that these rooms reek of them, and they cling to armour."

"Yes, and still more to hair. Well, what gift had my mistress for you to-day?"

"A commission to guard certain prisoners, Martina."

"Ah! Have you read it yet? When you do, I think you'll find that it names you Governor of the jail, which is a high office, carrying much pay and place. You are in good favour, Olaf, and I hope that when you come to greatness you will not forget Martina. It was I who put it into a certain mind to give you this commission as the only man that could be trusted in the Court."

"I do not forget a friend, Martina," I answered.

"That is your reputation, Olaf. Oh! what a road is opening to your feet. Yet I doubt you'll not walk it, being too honest; or, if you do, that it will lead you—not to glory, but a grave."

"Mayhap, Martina, and to speak truth, a grave is the only quiet place in Constantinople. Mayhap, too, it hides the only real glory."

"That's what we Christians say. It would be strange if you, who are not a Christian, alone should believe and keep the saying. Oh!" She went on with passion, "we are but shams and liars, whom God must hate. Well, I go to make ready for this journey to the Baths."

"How long do you stay there?" I asked.

"The course of waters takes a month. Less than that time does not serve to clear the Augusta's skin and restore her shape to the lines of youth which it begins to need, though doubtless you do not think so. You were named to come as her officer of the Person; but, Olaf, this other business rose up of a new governor for the jail in which the Cæsars and *Nobilissimi* are confined. I saw a chance for you in it, who, although you have served all these years, have had no real advancement, and mentioned your name, at which the Augusta leapt. To tell the truth, Olaf, I was not sure that you would wish to be captain of the guard at the Baths. Was I right or was I wrong?"

"I think you were right, Martina. Baths are idle places where folk drift into trouble, and I follow duty. Martina—may I say it to you?—you are a good woman and a kind. I pray that those gods of yours whom you worship may bless you."

"You pray in vain, Olaf, for that they will never do. Indeed, I think that they have cursed me."

Then suddenly she burst into tears, and, turning, went away.

I, too, went away somewhat bewildered, for much had happened to me that morning which I found it hard to understand. Why had the Augusta kissed me? I took it that this was some kind of imperial jest. It was known that I kept aloof from women, and she may have desired to see what I should do when an Augusta kissed me, and then to make a mock of me. I had heard that she had done as much with others.

Well, let that be, since Stauracius, who always feared lest a new favourite should slip between him and power, had settled the matter for me, for which I blessed Stauracius, although at the moment, being but a man, I had cursed him. And now why did Martina—the little, dark Martina with the kind face and the watchful, beady eyes, like to those of a robin in our northern lands—speak as she had done, and then burst into tears?

A doubt struck me, but I, who was never vain, pushed it aside. I did not understand, and of what use was it to try to interpret the meaning of the moods of women? My business was war, or, at the moment, the service that has to do with war, not women. Wars had brought me to the rank I held, though, strangely enough, of those wars I can recall nothing now; they have vanished from my vision. To wars also I looked to advance me in the future, who was no courtier, but a soldier, whom circumstances had brought to Court. Well, thanks to Martina, as she said, or to some caprice of the Empress, I had a new commission that was of more worth to me than her random kisses, and I would go to read it.

Read it I did in the little private room upon the palace wall which was mine as captain of the Augusta's guard, though, being written in Greek, I found this difficult. Martina had spoken truly. I was made the Governor of the State prison, with all authority, including that of life and death should emergency arise. Moreover, this governorship

gave me the rank of a general, with a general's pay, also such pickings as I chose to take. In short, from captain of the guard, suddenly I had become a great man in Constantinople, one with whom even Stauracius and others like him would have to reckon, especially as his signature appeared upon the commission beneath that of the Empress.

Whilst I was wondering what I should do next, a trumpet blew upon the ramparts, and a Northman of my company entered, saluted and said that I was summoned. I went out, and there before me stood a dazzling band that bowed humbly to me, whom yesterday they would have passed without notice. Their captain, a smooth-faced Greek, came forward, and, addressing me as "General," said the imperial orders were that he was to escort me to the State jail.

"For what purpose?" I asked, since it came to my mind that Irene might have changed her fancy and issued another kind of commission.

"As its General and Governor, Illustrious," he replied.

"Then I will lead," I answered, "do you follow behind me."

Thus that vision ends.

In the next I see myself dwelling in some stately apartments that formed the antechambers to the great prison. This prison, which was situated not far from the Forum of Constantine, covered a large area of ground, which included a garden where the prisoners were allowed to walk. It was surrounded by a double wall, with an outer and an inner moat, the outer dry, and the inner filled with water. There were double gates also, and by them guard-towers. Moreover, I see a little yard, with posts in it, where prisoners were scourged, and a small and horrible room, furnished with a kind of wooden bed, to which they were bound for the punishment of the putting out of their eyes and the slitting of their tongues. In front of this room was a block where those condemned to death were sometimes executed.

There were many prisoners, not common felons, but people who had been taken for reasons of State or sometimes of religion. Perhaps in all they numbered a hundred men, and with them a few women, who had a quarter to themselves. Besides the jailers,

three-score guards were stationed there night and day, and of all of these I was in command.

Before I had held my office three days I found that Irene had appointed me to it with good reason. It happened thus. The most of the prisoners were allowed to receive presents of food and other things sent to them by their friends. All these presents were supposed to be inspected by the officer in charge of the prison. This rule, which had been much neglected, I enforced again, with the result that I made some strange discoveries.

Thus, on the third day, there came a magnificent offering of figs for the Cæsars and *Nobilissimi*, the brothers-in-law of Irene and the uncles of the young Emperor Constantine, her son. These figs were being carried past me formally, when something about the appearance of one of them excited my suspicion. I took it and offered it to the jailer who carried the basket. He looked frightened, shook his head, and said,

"General, I touch no fruit."

"Indeed," I answered. "That is strange, since I thought that I saw you eating of it yesterday."

"Aye, General," he replied; "the truth is that I ate too much."

Making no answer, I went to the window, and threw the fig to a long-tailed, tame monkey which was chained to a post in the yard without. It caught it and ate greedily.

"Do not go away, friend," I said to the jailer, who was trying to depart while my back was turned. "I have questions that I would ask you."

So I spoke to him about other matters, and all the while watched the monkey.

Soon I saw that it was ill at ease. It began to tear at its stomach and to whimper like a child. Then it foamed at the mouth, was seized with convulsions, and within a quarter of an hour by the water-clock was dead.

"It would seem that those figs are poisoned, friend," I said, "and therefore it is fortunate for you that you ate too much fruit yesterday. Now, man, what do you know of this matter?"

"Nothing, sir," he answered, falling on his knees. "I swear to you by Christ, nothing. Only I doubted. The fruits were brought by a

woman whom I thought that once I had seen in the household of the Augustus Constantine, and I knew——" and he paused.

"Well, what did you know, man? It would be best to tell me quickly, who have power here."

"I knew, sir, what all the world knows, that Constantine would be rid of his uncles, whom he fears, though they are maimed. No more, I swear it, no more."

"Perhaps before the Augusta returns you may remember something more," I said. "Therefore, I will not judge your case at present. Ho! guard, come hither."

As he heard the soldiers stirring without in answer to my summons, the man, who was unarmed, looked about his desperately; then he sprang at the fruit, and, seizing a fig, strove to thrust it into his mouth. But I was too quick for him, and within a few seconds the soldiers had him fast.

"Shut this man in a safe dungeon," I said. "Treat and feed him well, but search him. See also that he does himself no harm and that none speak with him. Then forget all this business."

"What charge must be entered in the book, General?" asked the officer, saluting.

"A charge of stealing figs that belonged to the Cæsar Nicephorus and his royal brethren," I answered, and looked through the window.

He followed my glance, saw the poor monkey lying dead, and started.

"All shall be done," he said, and the man was led away.

When he had gone, I sent for the physician of the jail, whom I knew to be trustworthy, since I had appointed him myself. Without telling him anything, I bade him examine and preserve the figs, and also dissect the body of the monkey to discover why it died.

He bowed and went away with the fruit. A while later he returned, and showed me an open fig. In the heart of it was a pinch of white powder.

"What is it?" I asked.

"The deadliest poison that is known, General. See, the stalk has been drawn out, the powder blown in through a straw, and then the stalk replaced."

"Ah!" I said, "that is clever, but not quite clever enough. They have mixed the stalks. I noted that the purple fig had the stalk of a green fig, and that is why I tried it on the monkey."

"You observe well, General."

"Yes, Physician, I observe. I learned that when, as a lad, I hunted game in the far North. Also I learned to keep silent, since noise frightens game. Do you as much."

"Have no fear," he answered; and went about his business with the dead monkey.

When he had gone I thought a while. Then I rose, and went to the chapel of the prison, or, rather, to a place whence I could see those in the chapel without being seen. This chapel was situated in a gloomy crypt, lighted only with oil lamps that hung from the massive pillars and arches. The day was the Sabbath of the Christians, and when I entered the little secret hollow in the walls, the sacrament was being administered to certain of the prisoners.

Truly it was a sad sight, for the ministering priest was none other than the Cæsar Nicephorus, the eldest of the Emperor's uncles, who had been first ordained in order that he might be unfit to sit upon the throne, and afterwards blinded, as I have told. He was a tall, pale man, with an uncertain mouth and a little pointed chin, apparently between forty and fifty years of age, and his face was made dreadful by two red hollows where the eyes should have been. Yet, notwithstanding this disfigurement, and his tonsured crown, and the broidered priest's robes which hung upon him awkwardly, as he stumbled through the words of his office, to this poor victim there still seemed to cling some air of royal birth and bearing. Being blind, he could not see to administer the Element, and therefore his hand was guided by one of his imperial brethren, who also had been made a priest. The tongue of this priest had been slit, but now and again he gibbered some direction into the ear of Nicephorus. By the altar, watching all, sat a stern-faced monk, the confessor of the Cæsars and of the *Nobilissimi*, who was put there to spy upon them.

I followed the rite to its end, observing these unhappy prisoners seeking from the mystery of their faith the only consolation that remained to them. Many of them were men innocent of any crime, save that of adherence to some fallen cause, political or religious;

victims were they, not sinners, to be released by death alone. I remember that, as the meaning of the scene came home to me, I recalled the words of Irene, who had said that she believed this world to be a hell, and found weight in them. At length, able to bear no more, I left my hiding-place and went into the garden behind the chapel. Here, at least, were natural things. Here flowers, tended by the prisoners, bloomed as they might have done in some less accursed spot. Here the free birds sang and nested in the trees, for what to them were the high surrounding walls?

I sat myself down upon a seat in the shade. Presently, as I had expected, Nicephorus, the priest-Cæsar, and his four brethren came into the garden. Two of them led the blind man by the hand, and the other two clung close to him, for all these unfortunates loved each other dearly. The four with the split tongues gabbled in his ears. Now and again, when he could catch or guess at the meaning of a word, he answered the speaker gently; or the others, seeing that he had not understood them aright, painfully tried to explain the error. Oh! it was a piteous thing to see and hear. My gorge rose against the young brute of an Emperor and his councillors who, for ambition's sake, had wrought this horrible crime. Little did I know then that ere long their fate would be his own, and that a mother's hand would deal it out to him.

They caught sight of me seated beneath the tree, and chattered like startled starlings, till at length Nicephorus understood.

"What say you, dear brothers?" he asked, "that the new governor of the prison is seated yonder? Well, why should we fear him? He has been here but a little while, yet he has shown himself very kind to us. Moreover, he is a man of the North, no treacherous Greek, and the men of the North are brave and upright. Once, when I was a free prince, I had some of them in my service, and I loved them well. Our nephew, the Emperor, offered a large sum to a Northman to blind or murder me, but he would not do it, and was dismissed from the service of the Empire because he spoke his mind and prayed his heathen gods to bring a like fate upon Constantine himself. Lead me to this governor; I would talk with him."

So they brought Nicephorus to me, though doubtfully, and when he was near I rose from my seat and saluted him. Thereon they all

gabbled again with their split tongues, till at length he understood and flushed with pleasure.

"General Olaf," he said to me, "I thank you for your courtesy to a poor prisoner, forgotten by God and cruelly oppressed by man. General Olaf, the promise is of little worth, but, if ever it should be in my power, I will remember this kindness, which pleases me more than did the shouting of the legions in the short day of my prosperity."

"Sir," I answered, "whatever happens I shall remember your words, which are more to me than any honours kings can bestow. Now, sir, I will ask your royal brethren to fall back, as I wish to speak with you."

Nicephorus made a sign with his hand, and the four half-dumb men, all of whom resembled him strangely, especially in the weakness of their mouths and chins, obeyed. Bowing to me in a stately fashion, they withdrew, leaving us alone.

"Sir," I said, "I would warn you that you have enemies whom you may not suspect, for my duty here wherewith I was charged by the Augusta is not to oppress but to protect you and your imperial brothers."

Then I told him the story of the poisoned figs.

When he had heard it, the tears welled from his hollow eyes and ran down his pale cheeks.

"Constantine, my brother Leo's son, has done this," he said, "for never will he rest until all of us are in the grave."

"He is cruel because he fears you, O Nicephorus, and it is said that your ambition has given him cause to fear."

"Once, General, that was true," the prince replied. "Once, foolishly, I did aspire to rule; but it is long ago. Now they have made a priest of me, and I seek peace only. Can I and my brethren help it if, mutilated though we are, some still wish to use us against the Emperor? I tell you that Irene herself is at the back of them. She would set us on high that afterwards she may throw us down and crush us."

"I am her servant, Prince, and may not listen to such talk, who know only that she seeks to protect you from your enemies, and for that reason has placed me here, it seems not in vain. If you would

continue to live, I warn you and your brethren to fly from plots and to be careful of what you eat and drink."

"I do not desire to live, General," he answered. "Oh! that I might die. Would that I might die."

"Death is not difficult to find, Prince," I replied, and left him.

These may seem hard words, but, be it remembered, I was no Christian then, but a heathen man. To see one who had been great and fallen from his greatness, one whom Fortune had deserted utterly, whining at Fate like a fretful child, and yet afraid to seek his freedom, moved me to contempt as well as to pity. Therefore, I spoke the words.

Yet all the rest of that day they weighed upon my mind, for I knew well how I should have interpreted them were I in this poor Cæsar's place. So heavily did they weigh that, during the following night, an impulse drew me from my bed and caused me to visit the cells in which these princes were imprisoned. Four of them were dark and silent, but in that of Nicephorus burned a light. I listened at the door, and through the key-place heard that the prisoner within was praying, and sobbing as he prayed.

Then I went away; but when I reached the end of the long passage something drew me back again. It was as though a hand I could not see were guiding me. I returned to the door of the cell, and now through it heard choking sounds. Quickly I shot the bolts and unlocked it with my master-key. This was what I saw within:

To a bar of the window-place was fastened such a rope as monks wear for a girdle; at the end of the rope was a noose, and in that noose the head of Nicephorus. There he hung, struggling. His hands had gripped the rope above his head, for though he had sought Death, at the last he tried to escape him. Of such stuff was Nicephorus made. Yet it was too late, or would have been, for as I entered the place his hands slipped from the thin cord, which tightened round his throat, choking him.

My sword was at my side. Drawing it, with a blow I cut the rope and caught him in my arms. Already he was swooning, but I poured water over his face, and, as his neck remained unbroken, he recovered his breath and senses.

"What play is this, Prince?" I asked.

"One that you taught me, General," he answered painfully. "You said that death could be found. I went to seek him, but at the last I feared. Oh! I tell you that when I thrust away that stool, my blind eyes were opened, and I saw the fires of hell and the hands of devils grasping at my soul to plunge it into them. Blessings be on you who have saved me from those fires," and seizing my hand he kissed it.

"Do not thank me," I said, "but thank the God you worship, for I think that He must have put it into my mind to visit you to-night. Now swear to me by that God that you will attempt such a deed no more, for if you will not swear then you must be fettered."

Then he swore so fervently by his Christ that I was sure he would never break the oath. After he had sworn I told him how I could not rest because of the strange fears which oppressed me.

"Oh!" he said, "without doubt it was God who sent His angel to you that I might be saved from the most dreadful of all sins. Without doubt it was God, Who knows you, although you do not know Him."

After this he fell upon his knees, and, having untied the cut rope from the window bars, I left him.

Now I tell this story because it has to do with my own, for it was these words of the Prince that first turned me to the study of the Christian Faith. Indeed, had they never been spoken, I believe that I should have lived and died a heathen man. Hitherto I had judged of that Faith by the works of those who practised it in Constantinople, and found it wanting. Now, however, I was sure that some Power from above us had guided me to the chamber of Nicephorus in time to save his life, me, who, had he died, in a sense would have been guilty of his blood. For had he not been driven to the deed by my bitter, mocking words? It may be said that this would have mattered little; that he might as well have died by his own hand as be taken to Athens, there to perish with his brethren, whether naturally or by murder I do not know. But who can judge of such secret things? Without doubt the sufferings of Nicephorus had a purpose, as have all our sufferings. He was kept alive for reasons known to his Maker though not to man.

Here I will add that of this unhappy Cæsar and his brethren I remember little more. Dimly I seem to recollect that during my period of office some attack was made upon the prison by those who

would have put the prince to death, but that I discovered the plot through the jailer who had introduced the poisoned figs, and defeated it with ease, thereby gaining much credit with Irene and her ministers. If so, of this plot history says nothing. All it tells of these princes is that afterwards a mob haled them to the Cathedral of St. Sophia and there proclaimed Nicephorus emperor. But they were taken again, and at last shipped to Athens, where they vanished from the sight of men.

God rest their tortured souls, for they were more sinned against than sinning.

CHAPTER III
MOTHER AND SON

The next vision of this Byzantine life of mine that rises before me is that of a great round building crowned with men clad in bishops' robes. At least they wore mitres, and each of them had a crooked pastoral staff which in most cases was carried by an attendant monk.

Some debate was in progress, or rather raging. Its subject seemed to be as to whether images should or should not be worshipped in churches. It was a furious thing, that debate. One party to it were called Iconoclasts, that was the party which did not like images, and I think the other party were called Orthodox, but of this I am not sure. So furious was it that I, the general and governor of the prison, had been commanded by those in authority to attend in order to prevent violence. The beginnings of what happened I do not remember. What I do remember is that the anti-Iconoclasts, the party to which the Empress Irene belonged, that was therefore the fashionable sect, being, as it seemed to me, worsted in argument, fell back on violence.

There followed a great tumult, in which the spectators took part, and the strange sight was seen of priests and their partisans, and even of bishops themselves, falling upon their adversaries and beating them with whatever weapon was to hand; yes, even with their pastoral staves. It was a wonderful thing to behold, these ministers of the Christ of peace belabouring each other with pastoral staves!

The party that advocated the worship of images was the more numerous and had the greater number of adherents, and therefore those who thought otherwise were defeated. A few of them were dragged out into the street and killed by the mob which waited there, and more were wounded, notwithstanding all that I and the guards could do to protect them. Among the Iconoclasts was a gentle-faced old man with a long beard, one of the bishops from Egypt, who was named Barnabas. He had said little in the debate, which lasted for several days, and when he spoke his words were full of charity and kindness. Still, the image faction hated him, and when the final tumult began some of them set upon him. Indeed, one brawny,

dark-faced bishop—I think it was he of Antioch—rushed at Barnabas, and before I could thrust him back, broke a jewelled staff upon his head, while other priests tore his robe from neck to shoulder and spat in his face.

At last the riot was quelled; the dead were borne away, and orders came to me that I was to convey Barnabas to the State prison if he still lived, together with some others, of whom I remember nothing. So thither I took Barnabas, and there, with the help of the prison physician—he to whom I had given the poisoned figs and the dead monkey to be examined—I nursed him back to life and health.

His illness was long, for one of the blows which he had received crippled him, and during it we talked much together. He was a very sweet-natured man and holy, a native of Britain, whose father or grandfather had been a Dane, and therefore there was a tie between us. In his youth he was a soldier. Having been taken prisoner in some war, he came to Italy, where he was ordained a priest at Rome. Afterwards he was sent as a missionary to Egypt, where he was appointed the head of a monastery, and in the end elected to a bishopric. But he had never forgotten the Danish tongue, which his parents taught him as a child, and so we were able to talk together in that language.

Now it would seem that since that night when the Cæsar Nicephorus strove to hang himself, I had obtained and studied a copy of the Christian Scriptures—how I do not know—and therefore was able to discuss these matters with Barnabas the bishop. Of our arguments I remember nothing, save that I pointed out to him that whereas the tree seemed to me to be very good, its fruits were vile beyond imagination, and I instanced the horrible tumult when he had been wounded almost to death, not by common men, but by the very leaders of the Christians.

He answered that these things must happen; that Christ Himself had said He came to bring not peace but a sword, and that only through war and struggle would the last truth be reached. The spirit was always good, he added, but the flesh was always vile. These deeds were those of the flesh, which passed away, but the spirit remained pure and immortal.

The end of it was that under the teaching of the holy Barnabas, saint and martyr (for afterwards he was murdered by the followers of

the false prophet, Mahomet), I became a Christian and a new man. Now at length I understood what grace it was that had given me courage to offer battle to the heathen god, Odin, and to smite him down. Now I saw also where shone the light which I had been seeking these many years. Aye, and I clasped that light to my bosom to be my lamp in life and death.

So a day came when my beloved master, Barnabas, who would allow no delay in this matter, baptised me in his cell with water taken from his drinking vessel, charging me to make public profession before the Church when opportunity should arise.

It was just at this time that Irene returned from the Baths, and I sent to her a written report of all that had happened at the prison since I had been appointed its governor. Also I prayed that if it were her will I might be relieved of my office, as it was one which did not please me.

A few days later, while I sat in my chamber at the prison writing a paper concerning a prisoner who had died, the porter at the gate announced that a messenger from the Augusta wished to see me. I bade him show in the messenger, and presently there entered no chamberlain or eunuch, but a woman wrapped in a dark cloak. When the man had gone and the door was shut, she threw off the cloak and I saw that my visitor was Martina, the favourite waiting-lady of the Empress. We greeted each other warmly, who were always friends, and I asked her tidings.

"My tidings are, Olaf, that the waters have suited the Augusta very well. She has lost several pounds in weight and her skin is now like that of a young child."

"All health to the Augusta!" I said, laughing. "But you have not come here to tell me of the state of the royal skin. What next, Martina?"

"This, Olaf. The Empress has read your report with her own eyes, which is a rare thing for her to do. She said she wished to see whether or no you could write Greek. She is much pleased with the report, and told Stauracius in my presence that she had done well in choosing you for your office while she was absent from the city, since thereby she had saved the lives of the Cæsars and *Nobilissimi*, desiring as she does that these princes should be kept alive, at any

rate for the present. She accedes also to your prayer, and will relieve you of your office as soon as a new governor can be chosen. You are to return to guard her person, but with your rank of general confirmed."

"That is all good news, Martina; so good that I wonder what sting is hidden in all this honey."

"That you will find out presently, Olaf. One I can warn you of, however—the sting of jealousy. Advancement such as yours draws eyes to you, not all of them in love."

I nodded and she went on:

"Meantime your star seems to shine very bright indeed. One might almost say that the Augusta worshipped it, at least she talks of you to me continually, and once or twice was in half a mind to send for you to the Baths. Indeed, had it not been for reasons of State connected with your prisoners I think she would have done so."

"Ah!" I said, "now I think I begin to feel another sting in the honey."

"Another sting in the honey! Nay, nay, you mean a divine perfume, an essence of added sweetness, a flavour of the flowers on Mount Ida. Why, Olaf, if I were your enemy, as I dare say I shall be some day, for often we learn to hate those whom we have—rather liked, your head and your shoulders might bid good-bye to each other for such words as those."

"Perhaps, Martina; and if they did I do not know that it would greatly matter—now."

"Not greatly matter, when you are driving at full gallop along Fortune's road to Fame's temple with an Empress for your charioteer! Are you blind or mad, Olaf, or both? And what do you mean by your 'now'? Olaf, something has happened to you since last we met. Have you fallen in love with some fair prisoner in this hateful place and been repulsed? Such a fool as you are might take refusal even from a captive in his own hands. At least you are different."

"Yes, Martina, something has happened to me. I have become a Christian."

"Oh! Olaf, now I see that you are not a fool, as I thought, but very clever. Why, only yesterday the Augusta said to me—it was after she

had read that report of yours—that if you were but a Christian she would be minded to lift you high indeed. But as you remained the most obstinate of heathens she did not see how it could be done without causing great trouble."

"Now I wish one could be a Christian within and remain a pagan without," I answered grimly; "though alas! that may not be. Martina, do you not understand that it was for no such reasons as these that I kissed the Cross; that in so doing I sought not fortune, but to be its servant?"

"By the Saints! you'll be tonsured next, and ill enough it would suit you," she exclaimed. "Remember, if things grow too—difficult, you can always be tonsured, Olaf. Only then you will have to give up the hope of that lady who wears the other half of the necklace somewhere. I don't mean Irene's sham half, but the real one. Oh! stop blushing and stammering, I know the story, and all about Iduna the Fair also. An exalted person told it me, and so did you, although you were not aware that you had done so, for you are not one who can keep a secret to himself. May all the guardian angels help that necklace-lady if ever she should meet another lady whom I will not name. And now why do you talk so much? Are you learning to preach, or what? If you really do mean to become a monk, Olaf, there is another thing you must give up, and that is war, except of the kind which you saw at the Council the other day. God above us! what a sight it would be to see you battering another bishop with a hook-shaped staff over a question of images or the Two Natures. I should be sorry for that bishop. But you haven't told me who converted you."

"Barnabas of Egypt," I said.

"Oh! I hoped that it had been a lady saint; the story would have been so much more interesting to the Court. Well, our imperial mistress does not like Barnabas, because he does not like images, and that may be a sting in *her* honey. But perhaps she will forgive him for your sake. You'll have to worship images."

"What do I care about images? It is the spirit that I seek, Martina, and all these things are nothing."

"You are thorough, as usual, Olaf, and jump farther than you can see. Well, be advised and say naught for or against images. As they

have no meaning for you, what can it matter if they are or are not there? Leave them to the blind eyes and little minds. And now I must be gone, who can listen to your gossip no longer. Oh! I had forgotten my message. The Augusta commands that you shall wait on her this evening immediately after she has supped. Hear and obey!"

Having delivered this formal mandate, to neglect which meant imprisonment, or worse, she threw her cloak about her, and with a wondering glance at my face, opened the door and went.

At the hour appointed, or, rather, somewhat before it, I attended at the private apartments of the palace. Evidently I was expected, for one of the chamberlains, on seeing me, bowed and bade me be seated, then left the ante-room. Presently the door opened again, and through it came Martina, clad in her white official robe.

"You are early, Olaf," she said, "like a lover who keeps a tryst. Well, it is always wise to meet good fortune half way. But why do you come clad in full armour? It is not the custom to wait thus upon the Empress at this hour when you are off duty."

"I thought that I was on duty, Martina."

"Then, as usual, you thought wrong. Take off that armour; she says that the sight of it always makes her feel cold after supper. I say take it off; or if you cannot, I will help you."

So the mail was removed, leaving me clad in my plain blue tunic and hose.

"Would you have me come before the Empress thus?" I asked.

By way of answer she clapped her hands and bade the eunuch who answered the signal to bring a certain robe. He went, and presently reappeared with a wondrous garment of silk broidered with gold, such as nobles of high rank wore at festivals. This robe, which fitted as though it had been made for me, I put on, though I liked the look of it little. Martina would have had me even remove my sword, but I refused, saying:

"Except at the express order of the Empress, I and my sword are not parted."

"Well, she said nothing about the sword, Olaf, so let it be. All she said was that I must be careful that the robe matched the colour of the necklace you wear. She cannot bear colours which jar upon each other, especially by lamp-light."

“Am I a man,” I asked angrily, “or a beast being decked for sacrifice?”

“Fie, Olaf, have you not yet forgotten your heathen talk? Remember, I pray you, that you are now a Christian in a Christian land.”

“I thank you for reminding me of it,” I replied; and that moment a chamberlain, entering hurriedly, commanded my presence.

“Good luck to you, Olaf,” said Martina as I followed him. “Be sure to tell me the news later—or to-morrow.”

Then the chamberlain led me, not into the audience hall, as I had expected, but to the private imperial dining chamber. Here, reclining upon couches in the old Roman fashion, one on either side of a narrow table on which stood fruits and flagons of rich-hued Greek wine, were the two greatest people in the world, the Augusta Irene and the Augustus Constantine, her son.

She was wonderfully apparelled in a low-cut garment of white silk, over which fell a mantle of the imperial purple, and I noted that on her dazzling bosom hung that necklace of emerald beetles separated by golden shells which she had caused to be copied from my own. On her fair hair that grew low upon her forehead and was parted in the middle, she wore a diadem of gold in which were set emeralds to match the beetles of the necklace. The Augustus was arrayed in the festal garments of a Cæsar, also covered with a purple cloak. He was a heavy-faced and somewhat stupid-looking youth, dark-haired, like his father and uncles, but having large, blue, and not unkindly eyes. From his flushed face I gathered that he had drunk well of the strong Greek wine, and from the sullen look about his mouth that, as was common, he had been quarrelling with his mother.

I stood at the end of the table and saluted first the Empress and then the Emperor.

“Who’s this?” he asked, glancing at me.

“General Olaf, of my guard,” she answered, “Governor of the State Prison. You remember, you wished me to send for him to settle the point as to which we were arguing.”

“Oh! yes. Well, General Olaf, of my mother’s guard, have you not been told that you should salute the Augustus before the Augusta?”

“Sire,” I answered humbly, “I have heard nothing of that matter, but in the land where I was bred I was taught that if a man and a woman were together I must always bow first to the woman and then to the man.”

“Well said,” exclaimed the Empress, clapping her hands; but the Emperor answered: “Doubtless your mother taught you that, not your father. Next time you enter the imperial chamber be pleased to forget the lesson and to remember that Emperors and Empresses are not men and women.”

“Sire,” I answered, “as you command I will remember that Emperors and Empresses are not men and women, but Emperors and Empresses.”

At these words the Augustus began to scowl, but, changing his mind, laughed, as did his mother. He filled a gold cup with wine and pushed it towards me, saying:

“Drink to us, soldier, for after you have done so, our wits may be better matched.”

I took the cup and holding it, said:

“I pledge your Imperial Majesties, who shine upon the world like twin stars in the sky. All hail to your Majesties!” and I drank, but not too deep.

“You are clever,” growled the Augustus. “Well, keep the cup; you’ve earned it. Yet drain it first, man. You have scarce wet your lips. Do you fear that it is poisoned, as you say yonder fruits are?” And he pointed to a side-table, where stood a jar of glass in which were those very figs that had been sent to the princes in the prison.

“The cup you give is mine,” interrupted Irene; “still, my servant is welcome to the gift. It shall be sent to your quarters, General.”

“A soldier has no need of such gauds, your Majesties,” I began, when Constantine, who, while we spoke, had swallowed another draught of the strong wine, broke in angrily:

“May I not give a cup of gold but you must claim it, I to whom the Empire and all its wealth belong?”

Snatching up the beaker he dashed it to the floor, spilling the wine, of which I, who wished to keep my head cool, was glad.

"Have done," he went on in his drunken rage. "Shall the Cæsars huckster over a piece of worked gold like Jews in a market? Give me those figs, man; I'll settle the matter of this poison."

I brought the jar of figs, and, bowing, set them down before him. That they were the same I knew, for the glass was labelled in my own writing and in that of the physician. He cut away the sealed parchment which was stretched over the mouth of the jar.

"Now hearken you, Olaf," he said. "It is true that I ordered fruit to be sent to that fool-Cæsar, my uncle, because the last time I saw him Nicephorus prayed me for it, and I was willing to do him a pleasure. But that I ordered the fruit to be poisoned, as my mother says, is a lie, and may God curse the tongue that spoke it. I will show you that it was a lie," and plunging his hand into the spirit in the jar, he drew out two of the figs. "Now," he went on, waving them about in a half-drunken fashion, "this General Olaf of yours says that these are the same figs which were sent to the Cæsar, I mean the blind priest, Father Nicephorus. Don't you, Olaf?"

"Yes, Sire," I answered, "they were placed in that bottle in my presence and sealed with my seal."

"Well, those figs were sent by me, and this Olaf tells us they are poisoned. I'll show him, and you too, mother, that they are *not* poisoned, for I will eat one of them."

Now I looked at the Augusta, but she sat silent, her arms folded on her white bosom, her handsome face turned as it were to stone.

Constantine lifted the fig towards his loose mouth. Again I looked at the Augusta. Still she sat there like a statue, and it came into my mind that it was her purpose to allow this wine-bemused man to eat the fig. Then I acted.

"Augustus," I said, "you must not touch that fruit," and stepping forward I took it from his hand.

He sprang to his feet and began to revile me.

"You watch-dog of the North!" he shouted. "Do you dare to say to the Emperor that he shall not do this or that? By all the images my mother worships I'll have you whipped through the Circus."

"That you will never do," I answered, for my free blood boiled at the insult. "I tell you, Sire," I went on, leaving out certain words which I meant to speak, "that the fig is poisoned."

"And I tell you that you lie, you heathen savage. See here! Either you eat that fig or I do, so that we may know who speaks the truth. If you won't, I will. Now obey, or, by Christ! to-morrow you shall be shorter by a head."

"The Augustus is pleased to threaten, which is unnecessary," I remarked. "If I eat the fig, will the Augustus swear to leave the rest of them uneaten?"

"Aye," he answered with a hiccough, "for then I shall know the truth, and for the truth I live, though," he added, "I haven't found it yet."

"And if I do not eat it, will the Augustus do so?"

"By the Holy Blood, yes. I'll eat a dozen of them. Am I one to be hectored by a woman and a barbarian? Eat, or I eat."

"Good, Sire. It is better that a barbarian should die than that the world should lose its glorious Emperor. I eat, and when you are as I soon shall be, as will happen even to an emperor, may my blood lie heavy on your soul, the blood which I give to save your life."

Then I lifted the fig to my lips.

Before ever it touched them, with a motion swift as that of a panther springing on its prey, Irene had leapt from her couch and dashed the fruit from my hand. She turned upon her son.

"What kind of a thing are you," she asked, "who would suffer a brave man to poison himself that he may save your worthless life? Oh! God, what have I done that I should have given birth to such a hound? Whoever poisoned them, these fruits are poisoned, as has been proved and can be proved again, yes, and shall be. I tell you that if Olaf had tasted one of them by now he would have been dead or dying."

Constantine drank another cup of wine, which, oddly enough, seemed to sober him for the moment.

"I find all this strange," he said heavily. "You, my mother, would have suffered me to eat the fig which you declare is poisoned; a matter whereof you may know something. But when the General Olaf offers to eat it in my place, with your own royal hand you dash it from his lips, as he dashed it from mine. And there is another thing which is still more strange. This Olaf, who also says the figs are poisoned, offered to eat one of them if I promised I would not do so,

which means, if he is right, that he offered to give his life for mine. Yet I have done nothing for him except call him hard names; and as he is your servant he has nothing to look for from me if I should win the fight with you at last. Now I have heard much talk of miracles, but this is the only one I have ever seen. Either Olaf is a liar, or he is a great man and a saint. He says, I am told, that the monkey which ate one of those figs died. Well, I never thought of it before, but there are more monkeys in the palace. Indeed, one lives on the terrace near by, for I fed it this afternoon. We'll put the matter to the proof and learn of what stuff this Olaf is really made."

On the table stood a silver bell, and as he spoke he struck it. A chamberlain entered and was ordered to bring in the monkey. He departed, and with incredible swiftness the beast and its keeper arrived. It was a large animal of the baboon tribe, famous throughout the palace for its tricks. Indeed, on entering, at a word from the man who led it, it bowed to all of us.

"Give your beast these," said the Emperor, handing the keeper several of the figs.

The baboon took the fruits and, having sniffed at them, put them aside. Then the keeper fed it with some sweetmeats, which it caught and devoured, and presently, when its fears were allayed, threw it one of the figs, which it swallowed, doubtless thinking it a sweetmeat. A minute or two later it began to show signs of distress and shortly afterwards died in convulsions.

"Now," said Irene, "now do you believe, my son?"

"Yes," he answered, "I believe that there is a saint in Constantinople. Sir Saint, I salute you. You have saved my life and if it should come my way, by your brother saints! I'll save yours, although you are my mother's servant."

So speaking, he drank off yet another cup of wine and reeled from the room.

The keeper, at a sign from Irene, lifted up the body of the dead ape and also left the chamber, weeping as he went, for he had loved this beast.

CHAPTER IV
OLAF OFFERS HIS SWORD

The Emperor had gone, drunk; the ape had gone, dead; and its keeper had gone, weeping. Irene and I alone were left in that beautiful place with the wine-stained table on which stood the jar of poisoned figs and the bent golden cup lying on the marble floor.

She sat upon the couch, looking at me with a kind of amazement in her eyes, and I stood before her at attention, as does a soldier on duty.

"I wonder why he did not send for one of my servants to eat those figs—Stauracius, for instance," she mused, adding with a little laugh, "Well, if he had, there are some whom I could have spared better than that poor ape, which at times I used to feed. It was an honest creature, that ape; the only creature in the palace that would not rub its head in the dust before the Augusta. Ah! now I remember, it always hated Constantine, for when he was a child he used to tease it with a stick, getting beyond the length of its chain and striking it. But one day, as he passed too near, it caught him and buffeted him on the cheek and tore out some of his hair. He wanted to kill it then, but I forbade him. Yet he has never forgotten it, he who never does forget anything he hates, and that is why he sent for the poor beast."

"The Augusta will remember that the Augustus did not know that the figs were poisoned."

"The Augusta is sure that the Augustus knew well enough that those figs were poisoned, at any rate from the moment that I dashed one of them from your lips, Olaf. Well, I have made a bitterer enemy than before, that's all. They say that by Nature's rule mother and child must love each other, but it is a lie. I tell you it's a lie. From the time he was tiny I hated that boy, though not half as much as he has hated me. You are thinking to yourself that this is because our ambitions clash like meeting swords, and that from them spring these fires of hate. It is not so. The hate is native to our hearts, and will only end when one of us lies dead at the other's hand."

"Terrible words, Augusta."

"Yes, but true. Truth is always terrible—in Byzantium. Olaf, take those drugged fruits and set them in the drawer of yonder table; lock it and guard the key, lest they should poison other honest animals."

I obeyed and returned to my station.

She looked at me and said:

"I grow weary of the sight of you standing there like a statue of the Roman Mars, with your sword half hid beneath your cloak; and, what's more, I hate this hall; it reeks of Constantine and his drink and lies. Oh! he's vile, and for my sins God has made me his mother, unless, indeed, he was changed at birth, as I've been told, though I could never prove it. Give me your hand and help me to rise. So, I thank you. Now follow me. We'll sit a while in my private chamber, where alone I can be happy, since the Emperor never comes there. Nay, talk not of duty; you have no guards to set or change to-night. Follow me; I have secret business of which I would talk with you."

So she went and I followed through doors that opened mysteriously at our approach and shut mysteriously behind us, till I found myself in a little room half-lighted only, that I had never seen before. It was a scented and a beautiful place, in one corner of which a white statue gleamed, that of a Venus kissing Cupid, who folded one wing about her head, and through the open window-place the moonlight shone and floated the murmur of the sea.

The double doors were shut, for aught I knew locked, and with her own hands Irene drew the curtains over them. Near the open window, to which there was no balcony, stood a couch.

"Sit yonder, Olaf," she said, "for here there is no ceremony; here we are but man and woman."

I obeyed, while she busied herself with the curtains. Then she came and sat herself down on the couch also, leaning against the end of it in such a fashion that she could watch me in the moonlight.

"Olaf," she said, after she had looked at me a while, rather strangely, as I thought, for the colour came and went upon her face, which in that light seemed quite young again and wonderfully beautiful, "Olaf, you are a very brave man."

"There are hundreds in your service braver, Empress; cowards do not take to soldiering."

"I could tell you a different story, Olaf; but it was not of this kind of courage that I talked. It was of that which made you offer to eat the poisoned fig in place of Constantine. Why did you do so? It is true that, as things have happened, he'll remember it in your favour, for I'll say this of him, he never forgets one who has saved him from harm, any more than he forgets one who has harmed him. But if you had eaten you would have died, and then how could he have rewarded you?"

"Empress, when I took my oath of office I swore to protect both the Augustus and the Augusta, even with my life. I was fulfilling my oath, that is all."

"You are a strange man as well as a brave man to interpret oaths so strictly. If you will do as much as this for one who is nothing to you, and who has never paid you a gold piece, how much, I wonder, would you do for one whom you love."

"I could offer no more than my life for such a one, Empress, could I?"

"Someone told me—it may have been you, Olaf, or another—that once you did more, challenging a heathen god for the sake of one you loved, and defeating him. It was added that this was for a man, but that I do not believe. Doubtless it was for the sake of Iduna the Fair, of whom you have spoken to me, whom it seems you cannot forget although she was faithless to you. It is said that the best way to hold love is to be faithless to him who loves, and in truth I believe it," she added bitterly.

"You are mistaken, Empress. It was to be avenged on him for the life of Steinar, my foster-brother, which he had taken in sacrifice, that I dared Odin and hewed his holy statue to pieces with this sword; of Steinar, whom Iduna betrayed as she betrayed me, bringing one to death and the other to shame."

"At least, had it not been for this Iduna you would never have given battle to the great god of the North and thus brought his curse upon you. For, Olaf, those gods live; they are devils."

"Whether Odin is or is not, I do not fear his curse, Empress."

"Yet it will find you out before all is done, or so I think. Look you, pagan blood still runs in me, and, Christian though I am, I would not

dare one of the great gods of Greece and Rome. I'd leave that to the priests. Do you fear nothing, Olaf?"

"I think nothing at all, since I hewed off Odin's head and came away unscathed."

"Then you are a man to my liking, Olaf."

She paused, looking at me even more strangely than before, till I turned my eyes, indeed, and stared out at the sea, wishing that I were in it, or anywhere away from this lovely and imperious woman whom I was sworn to obey in all things.

"Olaf," she said presently, "you have served me well of late. Is there any reward that you would ask, and if so, what? Anything that I can give is yours, unless," she added hastily, "the gift will take you away from Constantinople and from—me."

"Yes, Augusta," I answered, still staring out at the sea. "In the prison yonder is an old bishop named Barnabas of Egypt, who was set upon by other bishops at the Council while you were away and wellnigh beaten to death. I ask that he may be freed and restored to his diocese with honour."

"Barnabas," she replied sharply. "I know the man. He is an Iconoclast, and therefore my enemy. Only this morning I signed an order that he should be kept in confinement till he died, here or elsewhere. Still," she went on, "though I would sooner give you a province, have your gift, for I can refuse you nothing. Barnabas shall be freed and restored to his see with honour. I have said."

Now I began to thank her, but she stopped me, saying:

"Have done! Another time you can talk to me of heretics with whom you have made friends, but I, who hear enough of such, would have no more of them to-night."

So I grew silent and still stared out at the sea. Indeed, I was wondering in my mind whether I dared ask leave to depart, for I felt her eyes burning on me, and grew much afraid. Suddenly I heard a sound, a gentle sound of rustling silk, and in another instant I felt Irene's arms clasped about me and Irene's head laid upon my knee. Yes, she was kneeling before me, sobbing, and her proud head was resting on my knee. The diadem she wore had fallen from it, and her tresses, breaking loose, flowed to the ground, and lay there gleaming like gold in the moonlight.

She looked up, and her face was that of a weeping saint.

"Dost understand?" she whispered.

Now despair took me, which I knew full well would soon be followed by madness. Then came a thought.

"Yes," I said hoarsely. "I understand that you grieve over that matter of the Augustus and the poisoned figs, and would pray me to keep silence. Have no fear, my lips are sealed, but for his I cannot answer, though perhaps as he had drunk so much——"

"Fool!" she whispered. "Is it thus that an Empress pleads with her captain to keep silence?" Then she drew herself up, a wonderful look upon her face that had grown suddenly white, a fire in her upturned eyes, and for the second time kissed me upon the lips.

I took her in my arms and kissed her back. For an instant my mind swam. Then in my soul I cried for help, and strength came to me. Rising, I lifted her as though she were a child, and stood her on her feet. I said:

"Hearken, Empress, before destruction falls. I do understand now, though a moment ago I did not, who never thought it possible that the queen of the world could look with favour upon one so humble."

"Love takes no account of rank," she murmured, "and that kiss of yours upon my lips is more to me than the empire of the world."

"Yet hearken," I answered. "There is another wall between us which may not be climbed."

"Man, what is this wall? Is it named woman? Are you sworn to the memory of that Iduna, who is more fair than I? Or is it, perchance, her of the necklace?"

"Neither. Iduna is dead to me; she of the necklace is but a dream. The wall is that of your own faith. On this night seven days ago I was baptised a Christian."

"Well, what of it? This draws us nearer."

"Study the sayings of your sacred book, Empress, and you will find that it thrusts us apart."

Now she coloured to her hair, and a kind of madness took her.

"Am I to be preached to by you?" she asked.

"I preach to myself, Augusta, who need it greatly, not to you, who mayhap do not need it."

"Hating me as you do, why should you need it? You are the worst of hypocrites, who would veil your hate under a priest's robe."

"Have you no pity, Irene? When did I say that I hated you? Moreover, if I had hated you, should I——" and I ceased.

"I do not know what you would or would not have done," she answered coldly. "I think that Constantine is right, and that you must be what is called a saint; and, if so, saints are best in heaven, especially when they know too much on earth. Give me that sword of yours."

I drew the sword, saluted with it, and gave it to her.

"It is a heavy weapon," she said. "Whence came it?"

"From the same grave as the necklace, Augusta."

"Ah! the necklace that your dream-woman wore. Well, go to seek her in the land of dreams," and she lifted the sword.

"Your pardon, Augusta, but you are about to strike with the blunt edge, which may wound but will not kill."

She laughed a little, very nervously, and, turning the sword round in her hand, said:

"Truly, you are the strangest of men! Ah! I thank you, now I have it right. Do you understand, Olaf, I mean, Sir Saint, what sort of a story I must tell of you after I have struck? Do you understand that not only are you about to die, but that infamy will be poured upon your name and that your body will be dragged through the streets and thrown to the dogs with the city offal? Answer, I say, answer!"

"I understand that you must cause these things to be done for your own sake, Augusta, and I do not complain. Lies matter nothing to me, who journey to the Land of Truth, where there are some whom I would meet again. Be advised by me. Strike here, where the neck joins the shoulder, holding the sword slantwise, for there even a woman's blow will serve to sever the great artery."

"I cannot. Kill yourself, Olaf."

"A week ago I'd have fallen on the sword; but now, by the rule of our faith, in such a cause I may not. My blood must be upon your hands, for which I grieve, knowing that no other road is open to you. Augusta, if it is worth anything to you, take my full forgiveness for the deed, and with it my thanks for all the goodness you have shown to me, but most for your woman's favour. In after years, perhaps,

when death draws near to you also, if ever you remember Olaf, your faithful servant, you will understand much it is not fitting that I should say. Give me one moment to make my peace with Heaven as to certain kisses. Then strike hard and swiftly, and, as you strike, scream for your guards and women. Your wit will do the rest."

She lifted the sword, while, after a moment's prayer, I bared my neck of the silk robe. Then she let it fall again, gasping, and said:

"Tell me first, for I am curious. Are you no man? Or have you forsworn woman, as do the monks?"

"Not I, Augusta. Had I lived, some day I might have married, who would have wished to leave children behind me, since in our law marriage is allowed. Forget not your promise as to the Bishop Barnabas, who, I fear, will weep over this seeming fall of mine."

"So you would marry, would you?" she said, as one who speaks to herself; then thought awhile, and handed me back the sword.

"Olaf," she went on, "you have made me feel as I never felt before—ashamed, utterly ashamed, and though I learn to hate you, as it well may hap I shall, know that I shall always honour you."

Then she sank down upon the couch, and, hiding her face in her hands, wept bitterly.

It was at this moment that I went very near to loving Irene.

I think she must have felt something of what was passing in my mind, for suddenly she looked up and said: "Give me that jewel," and she pointed to the diadem on the floor, "and help me to order my hair; my hands shake."

"Nay," I said, as I gave her the crown. "Of that wine I drink no more. I dare not touch you; you grow too dear."

"For those words," she whispered, "go in safety, and remember that from Irene you have naught to fear, as I know well I have naught to fear from you, O Prince among men."

So presently I went.

On the following morning, as I sat in my office at the prison, setting all things in order for whoever should succeed me, Martina entered, as she had done before.

"How came you here unannounced?" I asked, when she was seated.

"By virtue of this," she answered, holding up her hand and showing on it a ring I knew. It was the signet of the Empress. I saluted the seal, saying:

"And for what purpose, Martina? To order me to bonds or death?"

"To bonds or death!" she exclaimed innocently. "What can our good Olaf have done worthy of such woes? Nay, I come to free one from bonds, and perhaps from death, namely, a certain heretic bishop who is named Barnabas. Here is the order for his release, signed by the Augusta's hand and sealed with her seal, under which he is at liberty to bide in Constantinople while he will and to return to his bishopric in Egypt when it pleases him. Also, if he holds that any have harmed him, he may make complaint, and it shall be considered without delay."

I took the parchment, read it, and laid it on the table, saying:

"The commands of the Empress shall be done. Is there aught else, Martina?"

"Yes. To-morrow morning you will be relieved of your office, and another governor—Stauracius and Aetius are quarrelling as to his name—will take your place."

"And I?"

"You will resume your post as captain of the private guard, only with the rank of a full general of the army. But that I told you yesterday. It is now confirmed."

I said nothing, but a groan I could not choke broke from my lips.

"You do not seem as pleased as you might be, Olaf. Tell me, now, at what hour did you leave the palace last night? While waiting for my mistress to summon me I fell asleep in the vestibule of the ante-room, and when I awoke and went into that room I found there the gold-broidered silk robe you wore, cast upon the ground, and your armour gone."

"I know not what was the hour, Martina, and speak no more to me, I pray, of that accursed womanish robe."

"Which you treated but ill, Olaf, for it is spotted as though with blood."

"The Augustus spilt some wine over it."

"Aye, my mistress told me the story. Also that of how you would have eaten the poisoned fig, which you snatched from the lips of Constantine."

"And what else did your mistress tell you, Martina?"

"Not much, Olaf. She was in a very strange mood last night, and while I combed her hair, which, Olaf, was as tangled as though a man had handled it," and she looked at me till I coloured to the eyes, "and undid her diadem, that was set on it all awry, she spoke to me of marriage."

"Of marriage!" I gasped.

"Certainly—did I not speak the word with clearness?—of marriage."

"With whom, Martina?"

"Oh! grow not jealous before there is need, Olaf. She made no mention of the name of our future divine master, for whosoever can rule Irene, if such a one lives, will certainly rule us also. All she said was that she wished she could find some man to guide, guard and comfort her, who grew lonely amidst many troubles, and hoped for more sons than Constantine."

"What sort of a man, Martina? This Emperor Charlemagne, or some other king?"

"No. She vowed that she had seen enough of princes, who were murderers and liars, all of them; and that what she desired was one of good birth, no more, brave, honest, and not a fool. I asked her, too, what she would have him like to look upon."

"And what did she say to that, Martina?"

"Oh! she said that he must be tall, and under forty, fair-haired and bearded, since she loved not these shaven effeminates, who look half woman and half priest; one who had known war, and yet was no ruffler; a person of open mind, who had learnt and could learn more. Well, now that I think of it, by all the Saints!—yes, much such a man as *you* are, Olaf."

"Then she may find them in plenty," I said, with an uneasy laugh.

"Do you think so? Well, she did not, neither did I. Indeed, she pointed out that this was her trouble. Among the great of the earth she knew no such man, and, if she sought lower, then would come jealousies and war."

"Indeed they would. Doubtless you showed her that this was so, Martina."

"Not at all, Olaf. I asked her of what use it was to be an Empress if she could not please her own heart in this matter of a husband, which is one important to a woman. I said also, as for such fears, that a secret marriage might be thought of, which is an honest business that could be declared when occasion came."

"And what did she answer to that, Martina?"

"She fell into high good humour, called me a faithful and a clever friend, gave me a handsome jewel, told me that she would have a mission for me on the morrow—doubtless that which I now fulfil, for I have heard of no other—said, notwithstanding all the trouble as to the Augustus and his threats, that she was sure she would sleep better than she had done for nights, kissed me on both cheeks, and flung herself upon her knees at her praying-stool, where I left her. But why are you looking so sad, Olaf?"

"Oh! I know not, save that I find life difficult, and full of pitfalls which it is hard to escape."

Martina rested her elbows on the table and her chin upon her little hand, staring me full in the face with her quick eyes that pierced like nails.

"Olaf," she said, "your star shines bright above you. Keep your eyes fixed thereon and follow it, and never think about the pitfalls. It may lead you I know not where."

"To heaven, perhaps," I suggested.

"Well, you did not fear to go thither when you would have eaten the poisoned fig last night. To heaven, perchance, but by a royal road. Whatever you may think of some others, marriage is an honourable estate, my Christian friend, especially if a man marries well. And now good-bye; we shall meet again at the palace, whither you will repair to-morrow morning. Not before, since I am engaged in directing the furnishment of your new quarters in the right wing, and, though the workmen labour all night, they will not be finished until then. Good-bye, General Olaf. Your servant Martina salutes you and your star," and she curtsied before me until her knees almost touched the ground.

CHAPTER V
AVE POST SECULA

It comes back to me that on the following day my successor in the governorship of the jail, who he was I know not now, arrived, and that to him in due form I handed over my offices and duties. Before I did so, however, I made it my care to release Barnabas, I think on the previous evening. In his cell I read the Augusta's warrant to the old bishop.

"How was it obtained, son," he asked, "for, know, that having so many enemies on this small matter of image worship, I expected to die in this place? Now it seems that I am free, and may even return to my charge in Egypt."

"The Empress granted it to me as a favour, Father," I answered. "I told her that you were from the North, like myself."

He studied me with his shrewd blue eyes, and said:

"It seems strange to me that so great and unusual a boon should be granted for such a reason, seeing that better men than I am have suffered banishment and worse woes for less cause than I have given. What did you pay the Empress for this favour, son Olaf?"

"Nothing, Father."

"Is it so? Olaf, a dream has come to me about you, and in that dream I saw you walk through a great fire and emerge unscathed, save for the singeing of your lips and hair."

"Perhaps they were singed, Father. Otherwise, I am unburned, though what will happen to me in the future I do not know, for my dangers seem great."

"In my dream you triumphed over all of them, Olaf, and also met with some reward even in this life, though now I know not what it was. Yes, and triumph you shall, my son in Christ. Fear nothing, even when the storm-clouds sweep about your head and the lightnings blind your eyes. I say, fear nothing, for you have friends whom you cannot see. I ask no more even under the seal of confession, since there are secrets which it is not well to learn. Who knows, I might go mad, or torture might draw from me words I

would not speak. Therefore, keep your own counsel, son, and confess to God alone."

"What will you do now, Father?" I asked. "Return to Egypt?"

"Nay, not yet awhile. It comes to me that I must bide here for a space, which under this pardon I have liberty to do, but to what end I cannot say. Later on I shall return, if God so wills. I go to dwell with good folk who are known to me, and from time to time will let you hear where I may be found, if you should need my help or counsel."

Then I led him to the gates, and, having given him a witnessed copy of his warrant of release, bade him farewell for that time, making it known to the guards and certain priests who lingered there that any who molested him must answer for it to the Augusta.

Thus we parted.

Having handed over the keys of the prison, I walked to the palace unattended, being minded to take up my duties there unnoticed. But this was not to be. As I entered the palace gate a sentry called out something, and a messenger, who seemed to be in waiting, departed at full speed. Then the sentry, saluting, told me that his orders were that I must stand awhile, he knew not why. Presently I discovered, for across the square within the gates marched a full general's guard, whereof the officer also saluted, and prayed me to come with him. I went, wondering if I was to be given in charge, and by him, surrounded with this pompous guard, was led to my new quarters, which were more splendid than I could have dreamed. Here the guard left me, and presently other officers appeared, some of them old comrades of my own, asking for orders, of which, of course, I had none to give. Also, within an hour, I was summoned to a council of generals to discuss some matter of a war in which the Empire was engaged. By such means as these it was conveyed to me that I had become a great man, or, at any rate, one in the way of growing great.

That afternoon, when, according to my old custom, I was making my round of the guards, I met the Augusta upon the main terrace, surrounded by a number of ministers and courtiers. I saluted and would have passed on, but she bade one of her eunuchs call me to her. So I came and stood before her.

"We greet you, General Olaf," she said. "Where have you been all this long while? Oh! I remember. At the State prison, as its governor,

of which office you are now relieved at your own request. Well, the palace welcomes you again, for when you are here all within know themselves safe."

Thus she spoke, her great eyes searching my face the while, then bowed her head in token of dismissal. I saluted again, and began to step backwards, according to the rule, whereon she motioned to me to stand. Then she began to make a laugh of me to the painted throng about her.

"Say, nobles and ladies," she said, "did any of you ever see such a man? We address him as best we may—and we have reason to believe that he understands our language—yet not one word does he vouchsafe to us in answer. There he stands, like a soldier cut in iron who moves by springs, with never an 'I thank you' or a 'Good day' on his lips. Doubtless he would reprove us all, who, he holds, talk too much, being, as we all have heard, a man of stern morality, who has no tenderness for human foibles. By the way, General Olaf, a rumour has reached us that you have forsaken doubt, and become a Christian. Is this true?"

"It is true, Augusta."

"Then if as a Pagan you were a man of iron, what will you be as a Christian, we wonder? One hard as diamond, no less. Yet we are glad of this tidings, as all good servants of the Church must be, since henceforth our friendship will be closer and we value you. General, you must be received publicly into the bosom of the Faith; it will be an encouragement to others to follow your example. Perhaps, as you have served us so well in many wars and as an officer of our guard, we ourselves will be your god-mother. The matter shall be considered by us. What have you to answer to it?"

"Nothing," I replied, "save that when the Augusta has considered of the matter, I will consider of my answer."

At this the courtiers tittered, and, instead of growing angry, as I thought she might, Irene burst out laughing.

"Truly we were wrong," she said, "to provoke you to open your mouth, General, for when you do so, like that red sword you wear, your tongue is sharp, if somewhat heavy. Tell us, General, are your new quarters to your taste, and before you reply know that we inspected them ourselves, and, having a liking for such tasks,

attended to their furnishment. 'Tis done, you will see, in the Northern style, which we think somewhat cold and heavy—like your sword and tongue."

"If the Augusta asks me," I said, "the quarters are too fine for a single soldier. The two rooms where I dwelt before were sufficient."

"A single soldier! Well, that is a fault which can be remedied. You should marry, General Olaf."

"When I find any woman who wishes to marry me and whom I wish to marry, I will obey the Augusta's commands."

"So be it, General, only remember that first we must approve the lady. Venture not, General, to share those new quarters of yours with any lady whom we do not approve."

Then, followed by the Court, she turned and walked away, and I went about my business, wondering what was the meaning of all this guarded and half-bitter talk.

The next event that returns to me clearly is that of my public acceptance as a Christian in the great Cathedral of St. Sophia, which must have taken place not very long after this meeting upon the terrace. I know that by every means in my power I had striven, though without avail, to escape this ceremony, pointing out that I could be publicly received into the body of the Church at any chapel where there was a priest and a congregation of a dozen humble folk. But this the Empress would not allow. The reason she gave was her desire that my conversion should be proclaimed throughout the city, that other Pagans, of whom there were thousands, might follow my example. Yet I think she had another which she did not avow. It was that I might be made known in public as a man of importance whom it pleased her to honour.

On the morning of this rite, Martina came to acquaint me with its details, and told me that the Empress would be present at the cathedral in state, making her progress thither in her golden chariot, drawn by the famed milk-white steeds. I, it seemed, was to ride after the chariot in my general's uniform, which was splendid enough, followed by a company of guards, and surrounded by chanting priests. The Patriarch himself, no less a person, was to receive me and some other converts, and the cathedral would be filled with all the great ones of Constantinople.

I asked whether Irene intended to be my god-mother, as she had threatened.

"Not so," replied Martina. "On that point she has changed her mind."

"So much the better," I said. "But why?"

"There is a canon of the Church, Olaf, which forbids intermarriage between a god-parent and his or her god-child," she replied dryly. "Whether this canon has come to the Augusta's memory or not, I cannot say. It may be so."

"Who, then, is to be my god-mother?" I asked hurriedly, leaving the problem of Irene's motives undiscussed.

"I am, by the written Imperial decree delivered to me not an hour ago."

"You, Martina, you who are younger than myself by many years?"

"Yes, I. The Augusta has just explained to me that as we seem to be such very good friends, and to talk together so much alone, doubtless, she supposed, upon matters of religion, there could be no person more suitable than such a good Christian as myself to fill that holy office."

"What do you mean, Martina?" I asked bluntly.

"I mean, Olaf," she replied, turning away her head, and speaking in a strained voice, "that, where you are concerned, the Augusta of late has done me the honour to be somewhat jealous of me. Well, of a god-mother no one need be jealous. The Augusta is a clever woman, Olaf."

"I do not quite understand," I said. "Why should the Augusta be jealous of you?"

"There is no reason at all, Olaf, except that, as it happens, she is jealous of every woman who comes near to you, and she knows that we are intimate and that you trust me—well, more, perhaps, than you trust her. Oh! I assure you that of late you have not spoken to any woman under fifty unnoted and unreported. Many eyes watch you, Olaf."

"Then they might find better employment. But tell me outright, Martina, what is the meaning of all this?"

"Surely even a wooden-headed Northman can guess, Olaf?"

She glanced round her to make sure that we were alone in the great apartment of my quarters and that the doors were shut, then went on, almost in a whisper, "My mistress is wondering whether or no she will marry again, and, if so, whether she will choose a certain somewhat over-virtuous Christian soldier as a second husband. As yet she has not made up her mind. Moreover, even if she had, nothing could be done at present or until the question of the struggle between her and her son for power is settled in this way or in that. Therefore, at worst, or at best, that soldier has yet a while of single life left to him, say a month or two."

"Then during that month or two perhaps he would be wise to travel," I suggested.

"Perhaps, if he were a fool who would run away from fortune, and if he could get leave of absence, which in his case is impossible; to attempt such a journey without it would mean his death. No, if he is wise, that soldier will bide where he is and await events, possessing his soul in patience, as a good Christian should do. Now, as your god-mother, I must instruct you in this service. Look not so troubled; it is really most simple. You know Stauracius, the eunuch, is to be your god-father, which is very fortunate for you, since, although he looks on you with doubt and jealousy, to blind or murder his own god-son would cause too much scandal even in Constantinople. As a special mark of grace, also, the Bishop Barnabas, of Egypt, will be allowed to assist in the ceremony, because it was he who snatched your soul from the burning. Moreover, since the Sacrament is to be administered afterwards, he has been commanded to attend here to receive your confession in the chapel of the palace, and within an hour. You know that this day being the Feast of St. Michael and All Angels, you will be received in the name of Michael, a high one well fitted to a warlike saint, though I think that I shall still call you Olaf. So farewell, my god-son to be, until we meet at the cathedral, where I shall shine in the reflected light of all your virtues."

Then she sighed, laughed a little, and glided away.

In due course a priest of the chapel came to summon me there, saying that the Bishop Barnabas awaited me. I went and made my confession, though in truth I had little to tell him that he did not already know. Afterwards the good old man, who by now was quite

recovered from his hurts and imprisonment, accompanied me to my quarters, where we ate together. He told me that before he attended in the chapel he had been received by the Empress, who had spoken to him very kindly, making light of their difference of opinion as to images and with her own mouth confirmed him in his bishopric, even hinting at his possible promotion.

"This, my son," he added, "I am well aware I owe to your good offices."

I asked him if he would return at once to Upper Egypt, where he had his bishopric.

"No, my son," he answered, "not yet awhile. The truth is that there have arrived here the chief man in my diocese, and his daughter. He is a descendant of the old Pharaohs of the Egyptians who lives near the second cataract of the Nile, almost on the borders of Ethiopia, whither the accursed children of Mahomet have not yet forced their way. He is still a great man among the Egyptians, who look upon him as their lawful prince. His mission here is to try to plan a new war upon the followers of the Prophet, who, he holds, might be assailed by the Empire at the mouths of the Nile, while he attacked them with his Egyptians from the south."

Now I grew interested, who had always grieved over the loss of Egypt to the Empire, and asked what was this prince's name.

"Magas, my son, and his daughter is named Heliodore. Ah! she is such a woman as I would see you wed, beautiful indeed, and good and true as she is beautiful, with a high spirit also, such as befits her ancient blood. Mayhap you will note her in the cathedral. Nay, I forgot, not there, but afterwards in this palace, since it is the command of the Empress, to whom I have been speaking of their matters, that these two should come to dwell here for a while. After that I hope we shall all return to Egypt together, though Magas, being on a secret mission, does not travel under his own name, but as a merchant."

Suddenly he paused, and began to stare at my throat.

"Is aught wrong with my armour, Father?" I asked.

"No, son. I was looking at that trinket which you wear. Of course I have noted it before, but never closely. It is strange, very strange!"

"What is strange, Father?"

"Only that I have seen another like it."

"I dare say you have," I answered, laughing, "for when I would not give this to the Augusta, it pleased her to have it copied."

"No, no; I mean in Egypt, and, what is more, a story hung to the jewel."

"On whom? Where? What story?" I asked eagerly.

"Oh! I cannot stay to tell you now. Moreover, your mind should be fixed upon immortal crowns, and not on earthly necklaces. I must be gone; nay, stay me not, I am already late. Do you get you to your knees and pray till your god-parents come to fetch you."

Then, in spite of all I could do to keep him, he went, muttering: "Strange! Exceeding strange!" and leaving me quite unfit for prayer.

An hour later I was riding through the streets of the mighty city, clad in shining armour. As the season was that of October, in which the Feast of St. Michael falls, we wore cloaks, although, the day being warm, they were little needed. Mine was of some fine white stuff, with a red cross broidered on the right shoulder. Stauracius, the eunuch and great minister, who had been ordered to act as my god-father, rode alongside of me on a mule, because he dared not mount a horse, sweating beneath his thick robe of office, and, as I heard from time to time, cursing me, his god-son, and all this ceremony beneath his breath. On my other hand was my god-mother, Martina, riding an Arab mare, which she did well enough, having been brought up to horsemanship on the plains of Greece. Her mood was varied, for now she laughed at the humour of the scene, and now she was sad almost to tears.

The streets were lined with thousands of the pleasure-loving people of the city, who had come out to see the show of the Empress going in state to the cathedral. They were gathered even on the flat house-tops and in the entrances to the public buildings and open places. But the glory of the sight was centred, not about me, with my escort of guards and chanting priests, but in Irene's self. Preceded and followed by glittering regiments of soldiers, she drove in her famous golden chariot, drawn by eight milk-white steeds, each of which was led by a bejewelled noble. Her dress was splendid and covered with sparkling gems, and on her yellow hair she wore a crown. As she went the multitudes shouted their welcome, and she

bowed to right and left in answer to the shouts. Now and again, however, bands of armed men, clad in a dress of a peculiar colour, emerged from side streets and hooted, crying:

"Where is the Augustus? Give us the Augustus. We will not be ruled by a woman and her eunuchs!"

These men were of the party of Constantine, and set on by him. Once, indeed, there was a tumult, for some of them tried to bar the road, till they were driven away, leaving a few dead or wounded behind them. But still the crowds shouted and the Empress bowed as though nothing had happened, and thus by a somewhat winding route, we came to St. Sophia.

The Augusta entered, and presently I and those with me followed her into the wonderful cathedral. I see it now, not in particular, but as a whole, with its endless columns, its aisles and apses, and its glittering mosaics shining through the holy gloom, across which shot bars of light from the high window-places. All the great place was full of the noblest in the city, rank upon rank of them, come thither to see the Empress in her glory at the great Feast of St. Michael, which year by year she attended thus.

At the altar waited the Patriarch in his splendid robes, attended by many bishops and priests, among them Barnabas of Egypt. The service began, I and some other converts standing together near to the altar rail. The details of it do not return to me. Sweet voices sang, censers gave forth their incense, banners waved, and images of the saints, standing everywhere, smiled upon us fixedly. Some of us were baptised, and some who had already been baptised were received publicly into the fellowship of the Church, I among them. My god-father, Stauracius, a deacon prompting him, and my god-mother, Martina, spoke certain words on my behalf, and I also spoke certain words which I had learned.

The splendid Patriarch, a sour-faced man with a slight squint, gave me his especial blessing. The Bishop Barnabas, upon whom, as I noted, the Patriarch was always careful to turn his back, offered up a prayer. My god-father and god-mother embraced me, Stauracius smacking the air at a distance, for which I was grateful, and Martina touching me gently with her lips upon the brow. The Empress smiled upon me and, as I passed her, patted me on the shoulder. Then the Sacrament was celebrated, whereof the Empress partook first; next

we converts, with our god-parents, and afterwards a number of the congregation.

It was over at last. The Augusta and her attendants marched down the cathedral towards the great western doors, priests followed, and, among them, we converts, whom the people applauded openly.

Looking to right and left of me, for I was weary of keeping my gaze fixed upon the floor, presently I caught sight of a face whilst as yet it was far away. It seemed to draw me, I knew not why. The face was that of a woman. She stood by an old and stately-looking man with a white beard, the last of a line of worshippers next to the aisle along which the procession passed, and I saw that she was young and fair.

Down the long, resounding aisle the procession marched slowly. Now I was nearer to the face, and perceived that it was lovely as some rich-hued flower. The large eyes were dark and soft as a deer's. The complexion, too, was somewhat dark, as though the sun had kissed it. The lips were red and curving, and about them played a little smile that was full of mystery as the eyes were full of thought and tenderness. The figure was delicate and rounded, but not so very tall. All these things and others I noted, yet it was not by them that I was drawn and held, but rather because I *knew this lady*.

She was the woman of whom, years ago, I had dreamed on the night on which I broke into the Wanderer's tomb at Aar!

Never for one moment did I doubt me of this truth. I was sure. I was sure. It did not even need, while she turned to whisper something to her companion, that the cloak she wore should open a little, revealing on her breast a necklace of emerald beetles separated by inlaid shells of pale and ancient gold.

She was watching the procession with interest, yet somewhat idly, when she caught sight of me, whom, from where she stood, she could scarcely have seen before. Of a sudden her face grew doubtful and troubled, like to that of one who has just received some hurt. She saw the ornament about my neck. She turned pale and had she not gripped the arm of the man beside her, would, I think, have fallen. Then her eyes caught mine, and Fate had us in its net.

She leaned forward, gazing, gazing, all her soul in those dark eyes, and I, too, gazed and gazed. The great cathedral vanished with its glittering crowds, the sound of chanting and of feet that marched

died from my ears. In place of these I saw a mighty columned temple and two stone figures, taller than pines, seated on a plain, and through the moonlit silence heard a sweet voice murmuring:

"Farewell. For this life, farewell!"

Now we were near to each other, now I was passing her, I who might not stay. My hand brushed hers, and oh! it was as though I had drunk a cup of wine. A spirit entered into me and, bending, I whispered in her ear, speaking in the Latin tongue, since Greek, which all knew, I did not dare to use, "*Ave post secula!*" Greeting after the ages!

I saw her bosom heave; yes, and heard her whisper back:

"*Ave!*"

So she knew me also.

CHAPTER VI
HELIODORE

That night there was feasting at the palace, and I, Olaf, now known as Michael, as a convert was one of the chief guests, so that for me there was no escape. I sat very silent, so silent that the Augusta frowned, though she was too far off to speak to me. The banquet came to an end at last and before midnight I was free to go, still without word from the Empress, who withdrew herself, as I thought in an ill-humour.

I sought my bed, but in it knew little of sleep. I had found her for whom during all the long years I had been searching, though I did not understand that I was searching. After the ages I had found her and she had found me. Her eyes said it, and, unless I dreamed, her sweet voice said it also.

Who was she? Doubtless that Heliodore, daughter of Magas, the prince of whom the Bishop Barnabas had spoken to me. Oh! now I understood what he meant when he spoke of another necklace like to that I wore, and yet would explain nothing. It lay upon the breast of Heliodore, Heliodore who was such a one as he wished that I might wed. Well, certainly I wished it too; but, alas! how could I wed, who was in Irene's power, a toy for her to play with or to break? And how would it fare with any woman whom it was known that I wished to wed? I must be secret until she was gone from Constantinople, and in this way or in that I could follow her. I, who had ever been open-minded, must learn to keep my own counsel.

Now, too, I remembered how Barnabas had said the Augusta commanded that this Prince Magas and his daughter should come to the palace as her guests. Well, the place was vast, a town in itself, and likely enough I should not see them there. Yet I longed to see one of them as never I had longed for anything before. I was sure, also, that no fears could keep us apart, even though I knew the road before me to be full of dangers and of trials, knew that I went with my life in my hand, the life of which I had been quite careless, but that now had become so dear to me. For did not the world hold another to whom it belonged?

The night passed away. I rose and went about my morning duties. Scarcely were these finished when a messenger summoned me to the presence of the Augusta. I followed him with a sinking heart, certain that those woes which I had foreseen were about to begin. Also, now there was no woman in the whole world whom I less wished to see than Irene, Empress of the Earth.

I was led to the small audience chamber, whereof I have already spoken, that on the floor of which was the mosaic of the goddess Venus making pretence to kill her lover. There I found the Augusta seated in a chair of State, the minister Stauracius, my god-father, who glowered at me as I entered, some secretaries, and Martina, my god-mother, who was the lady in attendance.

I saluted the Empress, who bowed graciously and said:

"General Olaf—nay, I forgot, General Michael, your god-father Stauracius has something to say which I trust will please you as much as it does him and me. Speak, Stauracius."

"Beloved god-son," began Stauracius, in a voice of sullen rage, "it has pleased the Augusta to appoint you——"

"On the prayer and advice of me, Stauracius," interrupted the Empress.

"——On the prayer and advice of me, Stauracius," repeated the eunuch like a talking bird, "to be one of her chamberlains and Master of the Palace, at a salary of" (I forget the sum, but it was a great one) "with all the power and perquisites to that office pertaining, in reward of the services which you have rendered to her and the Empire. Thank the Empress for her gracious favour."

"Nay," interrupted Irene again, "thank your beloved god-father Stauracius, who has given me no peace until I offered you this preferment which has suddenly become vacant, Stauracius alone knows why, for I do not. Oh! you were wise, Olaf—I mean Michael—to choose Stauracius for a god-father, though I warn him," she added archly, "that in his natural love he must not push you forward too fast lest others should begin to show that jealousy which is a stranger to his noble nature. Come hither, Michael, and kiss my hand upon your appointment."

So I advanced and, kneeling, kissed the Augusta's hand, according to custom on such occasions, noting, as doubtless Stauracius did

also, that she pressed it hard enough against my lips. Then I rose and said:

"I thank the Augusta——"

"And my god-father Stauracius," she interrupted.

"——And my god-father Stauracius," I echoed, "for her and his goodness towards me. Yet with humility I venture to say that I am a soldier who knows nothing whatsoever of the duties of a chamberlain and of a Master of the Palace, and, therefore, I beg that someone else more competent may be chosen to fill these high offices."

On hearing these words Stauracius stared at me with his round and owl-like eyes. Never before had he known an officer in Constantinople who wished to decline power and more pay. Scarcely, indeed, could he believe his ears. But the Augusta only laughed.

"Baptism has not changed you, Olaf," she said, "who ever were simple, as I believe your duties will be. At any rate, your god-father and god-mother will instruct you in them—especially your god-mother. So no more of such foolish talk. Stauracius, you may be gone to attend to the affairs of which we have been speaking, as I see you burn to do, and take those secretaries with you, for the scratching of their pens sets my teeth on edge. Bide here a moment, General, for as Master of the Palace it will be your duty to receive certain guests to-day of whom I wish to speak with you. Bide you also, Martina, that you may remember my words in case this unpractised officer should forget them."

Stauracius and his secretaries bowed themselves out, leaving the three of us alone.

"Now, Olaf, or Michael—which do you wish to be called?"

"It is more easy for a man to alter his nature than his name," I answered.

"Have you altered your nature? If so, your manners remain much what they were. Well, then, be Olaf in private and Michael in public, for often an alias is convenient enough. Hark! I would read you a lesson. As the wise King Solomon said, 'Everything has its place and time.' It is good to repent you of your sins and to think about your soul, but I pray you do so no more at my feasts, especially when they

are given in your honour. Last night you sat at the board like a mummy at an Egyptian banquet. Had your skull stood on it, filled with wine, it could scarce have looked grimmer than did your face. Be more cheerful, I pray you, or I will have you tonsured and promoted to be a bishop, like that old heretic Barnabas of whom you are so fond. Ah! you smile at last, and I am glad to see it. Now hearken again. This afternoon there comes to the palace a certain old Egyptian named Magas, whom I place in your especial charge, and with him his wife—at least, I think she is his wife."

"Nay, Mistress, his daughter," interrupted Martina.

"Oh! his daughter," said the Augusta suspiciously. "I did not know she was his daughter. What is she like, Martina?"

"I have not seen her, Empress, but someone said that she is a black-looking woman, such as the Nile breeds."

"Is it so? Then I charge you, Olaf, keep her far from me, for I love not these ugly black women, whose woolly hair always smells of grease. Yes, I give you leave to court her, if you will, since thereby you may learn some secrets," and she laughed merrily.

I bowed, saying that I would obey the Augusta's orders to the best of my power, and she went on:

"Olaf, I would discover the truth concerning this Magas and his schemes, which as a soldier you are well fitted to find out. It seems he has a plan for the recovery of Egypt out of the hands of the followers of that accursed false prophet whose soul dwells with Satan. Now, I would win back Egypt, if I may, and thereby add glory to my name and the Empire. Hear all that he proposes, study it well, and make report to me. Afterwards I will see him alone, who for the present will send him a letter by the hand of Martina here bidding him open all his heart to you. For a week or more I shall have no time to spend upon this Magas, who must give myself to business upon which hangs my power and perchance my life."

These words she spoke heavily, then fell into a fit of brooding. Rousing herself, she went on:

"Did you note yesterday, Olaf, if you had any mind left for the things of earth, that as I drove in state through the streets many met me with sullen silence, while others cursed me openly and shouted,

'Where is the Augustus?' 'Give us Constantine. We will have no woman's rule.'"

"I saw and heard something of these things, Augusta; also that certain of the soldiers on guard in the city had a mutinous air."

"Aye, but what you did not see and hear was that a plot had been laid to murder me in the cathedral. I got wind of it in time and if you were still governor of yonder prison you'd know where the murderers are to-day. Yet they're but tools; it is their captains whom I want. Well, torture may make them speak; Stauracius has gone to see to it. Oh! the strife is fierce and doubtful. I walk blindfold along a precipice. Above are Fortune's heights, and beneath black ruin. Perhaps you'd be wise to get you to Constantine, Olaf, and become his man, as many are doing, since he'd be glad of you. No need to shake your head, for that's not your way; you are no hound to bite the hand that feeds you, like these street-bred dogs. Would that I could keep you nearer to me, where hour by hour you might help me with your counsel and your quiet strength. But it may not be—as yet. I raise you as high as I dare, but it must be done step by step, for even now some grow jealous. Take heed to what you eat, Olaf. See that your guards are Northmen, and beneath your doublet wear mail, especially at night. Moreover, unless I send for you, do not come near me too often, and, when we meet, be my humble servant, like others; aye, learn to crawl and kiss the ground. Above all, keep secret as the grave.

"Now," she went on after a pause, during which I stood silent, "what is there more? Oh! with your new offices, you'll retain that of captain of my guard, for I would be well watched during these next few weeks. Follow up the matter of the Egyptian; you may find advancement in it. Perchance one day you will be the general I send against the Moslems—if I can spare you. On all this matter be secret also, for once rumour buzzes over it that peach rots. The Egyptian and his swarthy girl come to the palace to-day, when he will receive my letter. Meet him and see them well housed, though not too near me; Martina will help you. Now be gone and leave me to my battles."

So I went, and she watched me to the door with eyes that were full of tenderness.

Again there is a blank in my memory, or my vision. I suppose that Magas and his daughter Heliodore arrived at the palace on the day of

my interview with Irene, of which I have told. I suppose that I welcomed them and conducted them to the guest house that had been made ready for them in the gardens. Doubtless, I listened eagerly to the first words which Heliodore spoke to me, save that one in the cathedral, the word of greeting. Doubtless, I asked her many things, and she gave me many answers. But of all this nothing remains.

What comes back to me is a picture of the Egyptian prince, Magas, and myself seated at some meal in a chamber overlooking the moonlit palace garden. We were alone, and this noble, white-bearded man, hook-nosed and hawk-eyed, was telling me of the troubles of his countrymen, the Christian Copts of Egypt.

"Look on me, sir," he said. "As I could prove to you, were it worth while, and as many could bear witness, for the records have been kept, I am a descendant in the true line from the ancient Pharaohs of my country. Moreover, my daughter, through her Grecian mother, is sprung from the Ptolemies. Our race is Christian, and has been for these three hundred years, although it was among the last to be converted. Yet, noble as we are, we suffer every wrong at the hands of the Moslems. Our goods and lands are doubly taxed, and, if we should go into the towns of Lower Egypt, we must wear garments on which the Cross is broidered as a badge of shame. Yet, where I live—near to the first cataract of the Nile, and not so very far from the city of old Thebes—the Prophet-worshippers have no real power. I am still the true ruler of that district, as the Bishop Barnabas will tell you, and at any moment, were my standard to be lifted, I could call three thousand Coptic spears to fight for Christ and Egypt. Moreover, if money were forthcoming, the hosts of Nubia could be raised, and together we might sweep down on the Moslems like the Nile in flood, and drive them back to Alexandria."

Then he went on to set out his plans, which in sum were that a Roman fleet and army should appear at the mouths of the Nile to besiege and capture Alexandria, and, with his help, massacre or drive out every Moslem in Egypt. The scheme, which he set forth with much detail, seemed feasible enough, and when I had mastered its particulars I promised to report it to the Empress, and afterwards to speak with him further.

I left the chamber, and presently stood in the garden. Although it was autumn time, the night in this mild climate was very warm and pleasant, and the moonlight threw black shadows of the trees across the paths. Under one of these trees, an ancient, green-leaved oak, the largest of a little grove, I saw a woman sitting. Perchance I knew who she was, perchance I had come thither to meet her, I cannot say. At least, this was not our first meeting by many, for as I came she rose, lifting her flower-like face towards my own, and next moment was in my arms.

When we had kissed our full, we began to talk, seated hand in hand beneath the oak.

"What have you been doing this day, beloved?" she asked.

"Much what I do every day, Heliodore. I have attended to my duties, which are threefold, as Chamberlain, as Master of the Palace, and as Captain of the Guard. Also, for a little while, I saw the Augusta, to whom I had to report various matters. The interview was brief, since a rumour had reached her that the Armenian regiments refuse to take the oath of fidelity to her alone, as she has commanded should be done, and demand that the name of the Emperor, her son, should be coupled with hers, as before. This report disturbed her much, so that she had little time for other business."

"Did you speak of my father's matter, Olaf?"

"Aye, shortly. She listened, and asked whether I were sure that I had got the truth from him. She added that I had best test it by what I could win from you by any arts that a man may use. For, Heliodore, because of something that my god-mother, Martina, said to her, it is fixed in her mind that you are black-skinned and very ugly. Therefore, the Augusta, who does not like any man about her to care for other women, thinks I may make love to you with safety. So I prayed for leave from my duties on the guard this evening that I might sup with your father in the guest-house, and see what I could learn from one or both of you."

"Love makes you clever, Olaf. But hearken. I do not believe that the Empress thinks me black and ugly any longer. As it chanced while I walked in the inner garden this afternoon, where you said I might go when I wished to be quite alone, dreaming of our love and you, I looked up and saw an imperial woman of middle age, who was

gorgeous as a peacock, watching me from a little distance. I went on my way, pretending to see no one, and heard the lady say:

"'Has all this trouble driven me mad, Martina, or did I behold a woman beautiful as one of the nymphs of my people's fables wandering yonder among those bushes?'

"I repeat her very words, Olaf, not because they are true—for, remember, she saw me at a distance and against a background of rocks and autumn flowers—but because they were her words, which I think you ought to hear, with those that followed them."

"Irene has said many false things in her life," I said, smiling, "but by all the Saints these were not among them."

Then we embraced again, and after that was finished Heliodore, her head resting on my shoulder, continued her story:

"'What was she like, Mistress?' asked the lady Martina, for by this time I had passed behind some little trees. 'I have seen no one who is beautiful in this garden except yourself.'

"'She was clad in a clinging white robe, Martina, that left her arms and bosom bare'—being alone, Olaf, I wore my Egyptian dress beneath my cloak, which I had laid down because of the heat of the sun. 'She was not so very tall, yet rounded and most graceful. Her eyes seemed large and dark, Martina, like her hair; her face was tinted like a rich-hued rose. Oh! were I a man she seemed such a one as I should love, who, like all my people, have ever worshipped beauty. Yet, what did I say, that she put me in mind of a nymph of Greece. Nay, that was not so. It was of a goddess of Old Egypt that she put me in mind, for on her face was the dreaming smile which I have seen on that of a statue of mother Isis whom the Egyptians worshipped. Moreover, she wore just such a headdress as I have noted upon those statues.'

"Now the lady Martina answered: 'Surely, you must have dreamed, Mistress. The only Egyptian woman in the palace is the daughter of the old Coptic noble, Magas, who is in Olaf's charge, and though I am told that she is not so ugly as I heard at first, Olaf has never said to me that she was like a goddess. What you saw was doubtless some image of Fortune conjured up by your mind. This I take to be the best of omens, who in these doubtful days grow superstitious.'

"'Would Olaf tell one woman that another was like a goddess, Martina, even though she to whom he spoke was his god-mother and a dozen years younger than himself? Come,' she added, 'and let us see if we can find this Egyptian.'

"Then," Heliodore went on, "not knowing what to do, I stood still there against the rockwork and the flowers till presently, round the bushes, appeared the splendid lady and Martina."

Now when I, Olaf, heard all this, I groaned and said:

"Oh! Heliodore, it was the Augusta herself."

"Yes, it was the Augusta, as I learned presently. Well, they came, and I curtsied to them.

"'Are you the daughter of Magas, the Egyptian?' asked the lady, eyeing me from head to foot.

"'Yes, Madam,' I answered. 'I am Heliodore, the daughter of Magas. I pray that I have done no wrong in walking in this garden, but the General Olaf, the Master of the Palace, gave me leave to come here.'

"'And did the General Olaf, whom we know as Michael, give you that necklace which you wear, also, O Daughter of Magas? Nay, you must needs answer me, for I am the Augusta.'

"Now I curtsied again, and said:

"'Not so, O Augusta; the necklace is from Old Egypt, and was found upon the body of a royal lady in a tomb. I have worn it for many years.'

"'Indeed, and that which the General Michael wears came also from a tomb.'

"'Yes, he told me so, Augusta,' I said.

"'It would seem that the two must once have been one, Daughter of Magas?'

"'It may be so, Augusta; I do not know.'

"Now the Empress looked about her, and the lady Martina, dropping behind, began to fan herself.

"'Are you married, girl?' she asked.

"'No,' I answered.

"'Are you affianced?'

"Now I hesitated a little, then answered 'No' again.

"'You seem to be somewhat doubtful on the point. Farewell for this while. When you walk abroad in our garden, which is open to you, be pleased to array yourself in the dress of our country, and not in that of a courtesan of Egypt.'"

"What did you answer to that saying?" I asked.

"That which was not wise, I fear, Olaf, for my temper stirred me. I answered: 'Madam, I thank you for your permission to walk in your garden. If ever I should do so again as your guest, be sure that I will not wear garments which, before Byzantium was a village, were sacred to the gods of my country and those of my ancestors the Queens of Egypt.'"

"And then?" I asked.

"The Empress answered: 'Well spoken! Such would have been my own words had I been in your place. Moreover, they are true, and the robe becomes you well. Yet presume not too far, girl, seeing that Byzantium is no longer a village, and Egypt has some fanatic Moslem for a Pharaoh, who thinks little of your ancient blood.'

"So I bowed and went, and as I walked away heard the Empress rating the lady Martina about I know not what, save that your name came into the matter, and my own. Why does this Empress talk so much about you, Olaf, seeing that she has many officers who are higher in her service, and why was she so moved about this matter of the necklace of golden shells?"

"Heliodore," I answered, "I must tell now what I have hidden from you. The Augusta has been pleased—why, I cannot say, but chiefly, I suppose, because of late years it has been my fancy to keep myself apart from women, which is rare in this land—to show me certain favour. I gather, even, that, whether she means it or means it not, she has thought of me as a husband."

"Oh!" interrupted Heliodore, starting away from me, "now I understand everything. And, pray, have you thought as a wife of her, who has been a widow these ten years and has a son of twenty?"

"God above us alone knows what I have or have not thought, but it is certain that at present I think of her only as one who has been most kind to me, but who is more to be feared than my worst foe, if I have any."

"Hush!" she said, raising her finger. "I fancied I heard someone stir behind us."

"Fear nothing," I answered. "We are alone here, for I set guards of my own company around the place, with command to admit no one, and my order runs against all save the Empress in person."

"Then we are safe, Olaf, since this damp would disarrange her hair, which, I noted, is curled with irons, not by Nature, like my own. Oh! Olaf, Olaf, how wonderful is the fate that has brought us together. I say that when I saw you yonder in the cathedral for the first time since I was born, I knew you again, as you knew me. That is why, when you whispered to me, 'Greeting after the ages,' I gave you back your welcome. I know nothing of the past. If we lived and loved before, that tale is lost to me. But there's your dream and there's the necklace. When I was a child, Olaf, it was taken from the embalmed body of some royal woman, who, by tradition, was of my own race, yes, and by records of which my father can tell you, for he is among the last who can still read the writing of the old Egyptians. Moreover, she was very like me, Olaf, for I remember her well as she lay in her coffin, preserved by arts which the Egyptians had. She was young, not much older than I am to-day, and her story tells that she died in giving birth to a son, who grew up a strong and vigorous man, and although he was but half royal, founded a new dynasty in Egypt and became my forefather. This necklace lay upon her breast, and beneath it a writing on papyrus, which said that when the half of it which was lost should be joined again to that half, then those who had worn them would meet once more as mortals. Now the two halves of the necklace have met, and *we* have met as God decreed, and it is one and we are one for ever and for ever, let every Empress of the earth do what they will to part us."

"Aye," I answered, embracing her again, "we are one for ever and for ever, though perchance for a while we may be separated from time to time."

CHAPTER VII
VICTORY OR VALHALLA!

A minute later I heard a rustle as of branches being moved by people thrusting their way through them. A choked voice commanded,

"Take him living or dead."

Armed men appeared about us, four of them, and one cried "Yield!"

I sprang up and drew the Wanderer's sword.

"Who orders the General Michael to yield in his own command?" I asked.

"I do," answered the man. "Yield or die!"

Now, thinking that these were robbers or murderers hired by some enemy, I sprang at him, nor was that battle long, for at my first stroke he fell dead. Then the other three set on me. But I wore mail beneath my doublet, as Irene had bade me do, and their swords glanced. Moreover, the old northern rage entered into me, and these easterners were no match for my skill and strength. First one and then another of them went down, whereon the third fled away, taking with him a grizzly wound behind, for I struck him as he fled.

"Now it seems there is an end of that," I gasped to Heliodore, who was crouched upon the seat. "Come, let me take you to your father and summon my guards, ere we meet more of these murderers."

As I spoke a cloaked and hooded woman glided from the shelter of the trees behind and stood before us. She threw back the hood from her head and the moonlight fell upon her face. It was that of the Empress, but oh! so changed by jealous rage that I should scarce have known her. The large eyes seemed to flash fire, the cheeks were white, save where they had been touched with paint, the lips trembled. Twice she tried to speak and failed, but at the third effort words came.

"Nay, all is but begun," she said in a voice that was full of hate. "Know that I have heard your every word. So, traitor, you would tell my secrets to this Egyptian slut and then murder my own servants," and she pointed to the dead and wounded men. "Well, you shall pay for it, both of you, that I swear."

"Is it murder, Augusta," I asked, saluting, "when four assail one man, and, thinking them assassins, he fights for his life and wins the fray?"

"What are four such curs against you? I should have brought a dozen. Yet it was at me you struck. Whate'er they did I ordered them to do."

"Had I known it, Augusta, I would never have drawn sword, who am your officer and obedient to the end."

"Nay, you'd stab me with your tongue, not with your sword," she answered with something like a sob. "You say you are my obedient officer. Well, now we will see. Smite me that bold-faced baggage dead, or smite *me* dead, I care not which, then fall upon your sword."

"The first I cannot do, Augusta, for it would be murder against one who has done no wrong, and I will not stain my soul with murder."

"Done no wrong! Has she not mocked me, my years, my widowhood, yes, and even my hair, in the pride of her—her youth, me, the Empress of the World?"

Now Heliodore spoke for the first time.

"And has not the Empress of the World called a poor maid of blood as noble as her own by shameful names?" she asked.

"For the second," I went on before Irene could answer, "I cannot do that either, for it would be foul treason as well as murder to lift my sword against your anointed Majesty. But as for the third, as is my duty, that I will do—or rather suffer your servants to do—if it pleases you to repeat the order later when you are calm."

"What!" cried Heliodore, "would you go and leave me here? Then, Olaf, by the gods my forefathers worshipped for ten thousand years, and by the gods I worship, I'll find a means to follow you within an hour. Oh! Empress of the World, there is another world you do not rule, and there we'll call you to account."

Now Irene stared at Heliodore, and Heliodore stared back at her, and the sight was very strange.

"At least you have spirit, girl. But think not that shall save you, for there's no room for both of us on earth."

"If I go it may prove wide enough, Augusta," I broke in.

"Nay, you shall not go, Olaf, at least not yet. My orders are that you do *not* fall upon your sword. As for this Egyptian witch, well, presently my people will be here; then we will see."

Now I drew Heliodore to the trunk of the great tree which stood near by and set myself in front of her.

"What are you about to do?" asked the Empress.

"I am about to fight your eastern curs until I fall, for no northern man will lift a sword against me, even on your orders, Augusta. When I am down, this lady must play her own part as God shall guide her."

"Have no fear, Olaf," Heliodore said gently, "I wear a dagger."

Scarcely had she spoken when there was a sound of many feet. The man whom I had wounded had run shouting towards the palace, rousing the soldiers, both those on watch and those in their quarters. Now these began to arrive and to gather in the glade before the clump of trees, for some guards who had heard the clash of arms guided them to the place. They were of all races and sundry regiments, Greeks, Byzantines, Bulgars, Armenians, so-called Romans, and with them a number of Britons and northern men.

Seeing the Empress and, near by, myself standing with drawn sword against the tree sheltering the lady Heliodore, also on the ground those whom I had cut down, they halted. One of their officers asked what they must do.

"Kill me that man who has slain my servants, or stay—take him living," screamed the Augusta.

Now among those who had gathered was a certain lieutenant of my own, a blue-eyed, flaxen-haired Norwegian giant of the name of Jodd. This man loved me like a brother, I believe because once it had been my fortune to save his life. Also often I had proved his friend when he was in trouble, for in those days Jodd got drunk at times, and when he was drunk lost money which he could not pay.

Now, when he saw my case, I noted that this Jodd, who, if sober, was no fool at all, although he seemed so slow and stupid, whispered something to a comrade who was with him, whereon the man turned and fled away like an arrow. From the direction in which he went I guessed at once that he was running to the barracks close at hand,

where were stationed quite three hundred Northmen, all of whom were under my command.

The soldiers prepared to obey the Augusta's orders, as they were bound to do. They drew their swords and a number of them advanced towards me slowly. Then it was that Jodd, with a few Northmen, moved between them and me, and, saluting the Empress, said in his bad Greek,

"Your pardon, Augusta, but why are we asked to kill our own general?"

"Obey my orders, fellow," she answered.

"Your pardon, Augusta," said the stolid Jodd, "but before we kill our own general, whom you commanded us to obey in all things, we would know why we must kill him. It is a custom of our country that no man shall be killed until he has been heard. General Olaf," and drawing his short sword for the first time, he saluted me in form, "be pleased to explain to us why you are to be killed or taken prisoner."

Now a tumult arose, and a eunuch in the background shouted to the soldiers to obey the Empress's orders, whereon again some of them began to advance.

"If no answer is given to my question," went on Jodd in his slow, bull-like voice, "I fear that others must be killed besides the General Olaf. Ho! Northmen. To me, Northmen! Ho! Britons, to me, Britons! Ho! Saxons, to me, Saxons! Ho! all who are not accursed Greeks. To me all who are not accursed Greeks!"

Now at each cry of Jodd's men leapt forward from the gathering crowd, and, to the number of fifty or more in all, marshalled themselves behind him, those of each nation standing shoulder to shoulder in little groups before me.

"Is my question to be answered?" asked Jodd. "Because, if not, although we be but one against ten, I think that ere the General Olaf is cut down or taken there will be good fighting this night."

Then I spoke, saying,

"Captain Jodd, and comrades, I will answer your question, and if I speak wrongly let the Augusta correct me. This is the trouble. The lady Heliodore here is my affianced wife. We were speaking together in this garden as the affianced do. The Empress, who, unseen by us, was hidden behind those trees, overheard our talk, which, for

reasons best known to herself, for in it there was naught of treason or any matter of the State, made her so angry that she set her servants on to kill me. Thinking them murderers or robbers, I defended myself, and there they lie, save one, who fled away wounded. Then the Empress appeared and ordered me to kill the lady Heliodore. Comrades, look on her whom the Empress ordered me to kill, and say whether, were she your affianced, you would kill her even to please the Empress," and, stepping to one side, I showed them Heliodore in all her loveliness standing against the tree, the drawn dagger in her hand.

Now from those that Jodd had summoned there went up a roar of "*No*," while even the rest were silent. Irene sprang forward and cried,

"Are my orders to be canvassed and debated? Obey! Cut this man down or take him living, I care not which, and with him all who cling to him, or to-morrow you hang, every one of you."

Now the soldiers who had gathered also began to form up under their officers, for they saw that before them was war and death. By this time they were many, and as the alarm spread minute by minute more arrived.

"Yield or we attack," said he who had taken command of them.

"I do not think that we yield," answered Jodd; and just then there came a sound of men running in ordered companies from the direction of the Northmen's barracks where Jodd's messenger had told his tale.

"I am *sure* that we do not yield," continued Jodd, and suddenly raised the wild northern war-cry, "*Valhalla, Valhalla! Victory or Valhalla!*"

Instantly from three hundred throats, above the sound of the running feet that drew ever nearer, came the answering shout of "*Valhalla, Valhalla! Victory or Valhalla!*" Then out of the gloom up dashed the Northmen.

Now other shouts arose of "Olaf! Olaf! Olaf! Where is our General Olaf? Where is Red-Sword?"

"Here, comrades!" roared Jodd, and up they came those fierce, bearded men, glad with the lust of battle, and ranged themselves by companies before us. Again the great voice of Jodd was heard, calling,

“Empress, do you give us Olaf and his girl and swear by your Christ that no harm shall come to them? Or must we take them for ourselves?”

“Never!” she cried back. “The only thing I give to you is death. On to these rebels, soldiers!”

Now, seeing what must come, I strove to speak, but Jodd shouted again,

“Be silent, Olaf. For this hour you are not our general; you are a prisoner whom it pleases us to rescue. Ring him round, Northmen, ring him round. Bring the Empress, too; she will serve as hostage.”

Now some of them drew behind us. Then they began to advance, taking us along with them, and I, who was skilled in war, saw their purpose. They were drawing out into the open glade, where they could see to fight, and where their flanks would be protected by a stream of water on the one hand and a dense belt of trees on the other.

In her rage the Empress threw herself upon the ground, but two great fellows lifted her up by the arms and thrust her along with us. Marching thus, we reached the point that they had chosen, for the Greeks were in confusion and not ready to attack. There we halted, just on the crest of a little rise of ground.

“Augusta,” I said, “in the name of God, I pray you to give way. These Northmen hate your Byzantines, and will take this chance to pay off their scores. Moreover, they love me, and will die to a man ere they see me harmed, and then how shall I protect you in the fray?”

She only glared at me and made no answer.

The attack began. By this time fifteen hundred or so of the Imperial troops had collected, and against them stood, perhaps, four hundred men in all, so that the odds were great. Still, they had no horsemen or archers, and our position was very good, also we were Northmen and they were Grecian scum.

On came the Byzantines, screaming “Irene! Irene!” in a formation of companies ranged one behind the other, for their object was to break in our centre by their weight. Jodd saw, and gave some orders; very good orders, I thought them. Then he sheathed his short-sword,

seized the great battle-axe which was his favourite weapon, and placed himself in front of our triple line that waited in dead silence.

Up the slope surged the charge, and on the crest of it the battle met. At first the weight of the Greeks pressed us back, but, oh! they went down before the Northmen's steel like corn before the sickle, and soon that rush was stayed. Breast to breast they hewed and thrust, and so fearful was the fray that Irene, forgetting her rage, clung to me to protect her.

The fight hung doubtful. As in a dream, I watched the giant Jodd cut down a gorgeous captain, the axe shearing through his golden armour as though it were but silk. I watched a comrade of my own fall beneath a spear-thrust. I gazed at the face of Heliodore, who stared wide-eyed at the red scene, and at the white-lipped Irene, who was clinging to my arm. Now we were being pressed back again, we who at this point had at most two hundred men, some of whom were down, to bear the onslaught of twice that number, and, do what I would, my fingers strayed to my sword-hilt.

Our triple line bent in like a bow and began to break. The scales of war hung on the turn, when, from the dense belt of trees upon our left, suddenly rose the cry of "*Valhalla! Valhalla! Victory or Valhalla!*" for which I, who had overheard Jodd's orders, was waiting. These were his orders—that half of the Northmen should creep down behind the belt of trees in their dense shadow, and thus outflank the foe.

Forth they sprang by companies of fifty, the moonlight gleaming on their mail, and there, three hundred yards away, a new battle was begun. Now the Greeks in front of us, fearing for their rear, wavered a moment and fell back, perhaps, ten paces. I saw the opportunity and could bear no more, who before all things was a soldier.

Shouting to some of our wounded to watch the women, I drew my sword and leapt forward.

"I come, Northmen!" I cried, and was greeted with a roar of:

"Olaf Red-Sword! Follow Olaf Red-Sword!" for so the soldiers named me.

"Steady, Northmen! Shoulder to shoulder, Northmen!" I cried back. "Now at them! Charge! *Valhalla! Victory or Valhalla!*"

Down the slope they went before our rush. In thirty paces they were but a huddled mob, on which our swords played like lightnings. We rolled them back on to their supports, and those supports, outflanked, began to flee. We swept through and through them. We slew them by hundreds, we trod them beneath our victorious feet, and—oh! in that battle a strange thing happened to me. I thought I saw my dead brother Ragnar fighting at my side; aye, and I thought I heard him cry to me, in that lost, remembered voice:

"The old blood runs in you yet, you Christian man! Oh! you fight well, you Christian man. We of Valhalla give you greetings, Olaf Red-Sword. *Valhalla! Valhalla! Victory or Valhalla!*"

It was done. Some were fled, but more were dead, for, once at grips, the Northman showed no mercy to the Greek. Back we came, those who were left of us, for many, perhaps a hundred, were not, and formed a ring round the women and the wounded.

"Well done, Olaf," said Heliodore; but Irene only looked at me with a kind of wonder in her eyes.

Now the leaders of the Northmen began to talk among themselves, but although from time to time they glanced at me, they did not ask me to join in their talk. Presently Jodd came forward and said in his slow voice:

"Olaf Red-Sword, we love you, who have always loved us, your comrades, as we have shown you to-night. You have led us well, Olaf, and, considering our small numbers, we have just won a victory of which we are proud. But our necks are in the noose, as yours is, and we think that in this case our best course is to be bold. Therefore, we name you Cæsar. Having defeated the Greeks, we propose now to take the palace and to talk with the regiments without, many of whom are disloyal and shout for Constantine, whom after all they hate only a little less than they do Irene yonder. We know not what will be the end of the matter and do not greatly care, who set our fortunes upon a throw of the dice, but we think there is a good chance of victory. Do you accept, and will you throw in your sword with ours?"

"How can I," I answered, "when there stands the Empress, whose bread I have eaten and to whom I have sworn fealty?"

"An Empress, it seems, who desires to slay you over some matter that has to do with a woman. Olaf, the daggers of her assassins have cut this thread of fealty. Moreover, as it chances she is in our power, and as we cannot make our crime against her blacker than it is, we propose to rid you and ourselves of this Empress, who is our enemy, and who for her great wickedness well deserves to die. Such is our offer, to take or to leave, as time is short. Should you refuse it, we abandon you to your fate, and go to make our terms with Constantine, who also hates this Empress and even now is plotting her downfall."

As he spoke I saw certain men draw near to Irene for a purpose which I could guess, and stepped between her and them.

"The Augusta is my mistress," I said, "and although I attacked some of her troops but now, and she has wronged me much, still I defend her to the last."

"Little use in that, Olaf, seeing that you are but one and we are many," answered Jodd. "Come, will you be Cæsar, or will you not?"

Now Irene crept up behind me and whispered in my ear.

"Accept," she said. "It pleases me well. Be Cæsar as my husband. So you will save my life and my throne, of which I vow to you an equal share. With the help of your Northmen and the legions I command and who cling to me, we can defeat Constantine and rule the world together. This petty fray is nothing. What matters it if some lives have been lost in a palace tumult? The world lies in your grasp; take it, Olaf, and, with it, *me*."

I heard and understood. Now had come the great moment of my life. Something told me that on the one hand were majesty and empire; on the other much pain and sorrow yet with these a certain holy joy and peace. It was the latter that I chose, as doubtless Fate or God had decreed that I should do.

"I thank you, Augusta," I said, "but, while I can protect her, I will not seize a throne over the body of one who has been kind to me, nor will I buy it at the price you offer. There stands my predestined wife, and I can marry no other woman."

Now Irene turned to Heliodore, and said in a swift, low voice:

"Do you understand this matter, lady? Let us have done with jealousies and be plain, for the lives of all of us hang upon threads

that, for some, must break within a day or two, and with them those of a thousand, thousand others. Aye, the destiny of the world is at stake. You say you love this man, whom I will tell you I love also. Well, if *you* win him, and he lives, which he scarce can hope to do, he gets your kisses in whatever corner of the earth will shelter him and you. If *I* win him, the empire of the earth is his. Moreover, girl," she added with meaning, "empresses are not always jealous; sometimes even they can look the other way. There would be high place for you within our Court, and, who knows? Your turn might come at length. Also your father's plans would be forwarded to the last pound of gold in our treasury and the last soldier in our service. Within five years, mayhap, he might rule Egypt as our Governor. What say you?"

Heliodore looked at the Empress with that strange, slow smile of hers. Then she looked at me, and answered:

"I say what Olaf says. There are two empires in the case. One, which you can give, Augusta, is of the world; the other, which I can give him here, is only a woman's heart, yet, as I think, of another eternal world that you do not know. I say what Olaf says. Let Olaf speak, Augusta."

"Empress," I said slowly, "again I thank you, but it may not be. My fate lies here," and I laid my hand upon the heart of Heliodore.

"You are mistaken, Olaf," answered the Empress, in a cold and quiet voice, but seemingly without anger; "your fate lies there," and she pointed to the ground, then added, "Believe me, I am sorry, for you are a man of whom any woman might be proud—yes, even an empress. I have always thought it, and I thought it again just now when I saw you lead that charge against those curs in armour," and she pointed towards the bodies of the Greeks. "So, it is finished, as perchance I am. If I must die, let it be on your sword, Olaf."

"Your answer, Olaf Red-Sword!" called Jodd. "You have talked enough."

"Your answer! Yes, your answer!" the Northmen echoed.

"The Empress has offered to share her crown with me, Jodd, but, friends, it cannot be, because of this lady to whom I am affianced."

"Marry them both," shouted a rude voice, but Jodd replied:

"Then that is soon settled. Out of our path, Olaf, and look the other way. When you turn your head again there will be no Empress to trouble you, except one of your own choosing."

On hearing these words, and seeing the swords draw near, Irene clutched hold of me, for always she feared death above everything.

"You will not see me butchered?" she gasped.

"Not while I live," I answered. "Hearken, friends. I am the general of the Augusta's guard, and if she dies, for honour's sake I must die first. Strike, then, if you will, but through my body."

"Tear her away!" called a voice.

"Comrades," I went on, "be not so mad. To-night we have done that which has earned us death, but while the Empress lives you have a hostage in your hands with whom you can buy pardon. As a lump of clay what worth is she to you? Hark! The regiments from the city!"

As I spoke, from the direction of the palace came a sound of many voices and of the tread of five thousand feet.

"True enough," said Jodd, with composure. "They are on us, and now it is too late to storm the palace. Olaf, like many another man, you have lost your chance of glory for a woman, or, who knows, perhaps you've won it. Well, comrades, as I take it you are not minded to fly and be hunted down like rats, only one thing remains—to die in a fashion they will remember in Byzantium. Olaf, you'd best mind the women; I will take command. Ring round, comrades, ring round! 'Tis a good place for it. Set the wounded in the middle. Keep that Empress living for the present, but when all is done, kill her. We'll be her escort to the gates of hell, for there she's bound if ever woman was."

Then, without murmur or complaint, almost in silence, indeed, they formed Odin's Ring, that triple circle of the Northmen doomed to die; the terrible circle that on many a battlefield has been hidden at last beneath the heap of fallen foes.

The regiments moved up; there were three of them of full strength. Irene stared about her, seeking some loophole of escape, and finding none. Heliodore and I talked together in low tones, making our tryst beyond the grave. The regiments halted within fifty paces of us. They liked not the look of Odin's Ring, and the ground

over which they had marched and the fugitives with whom they had spoken told them that many of them looked their last upon the moon.

Some mounted generals rode towards us and asked who was in command of the Northmen. When they learned that it was Jodd, they invited him to a parley. The end of it was that Jodd and two others stepped twenty paces from our ranks, and met a councillor—it was Stauracius—and two of the generals in the open, where no treachery could well be practised, especially as Stauracius was not a man of war. Here they talked together for a long while. Then Jodd and his companions returned, and Jodd said, so that all might hear him:

"Hearken. These are the terms offered: That we return to our barracks in peace, bearing our weapons. That nothing be laid to our charge under any law, military or civil, by the State or private persons, for this night's slaying and tumult, and that in guarantee thereof twelve hostages of high rank, upon whose names we have agreed, be given into our keeping. That we retain our separate stations in the service of the Empire, or have leave to quit that service within three months, with the gratuity of a quarter's pay, and go where we will unmolested. But that, in return for these boons, we surrender the person of the Empress unharmed, and with her that of the General Olaf, to whom a fair trial is promised before a military court. That with her own voice the Augusta shall confirm all these undertakings before she leaves our ranks. Such is the offer, comrades."

"And if we refuse it, what?" asked a voice.

"This: That we shall be ringed round, and either starved out or shot down by archers. Or, if we try to escape, that we shall be overwhelmed by numbers, and any of us who chance to be taken living shall be hanged, sound and wounded together."

Now the leaders of the Northmen consulted. Irene watched them for awhile, then turned to me and asked,

"What will they do, Olaf?"

"I cannot say, Augusta," I answered, "but I think that they will offer to surrender you and not myself, since they may doubt them of that fair trial which is promised to me."

“Which means,” she said, “that, whether I live or die, all these brave men will be sacrificed to you, Olaf, who, after all, must perish with them, as will this Egyptian. Are you prepared to accept that blood-offering, Olaf? If so, you must have changed from the man I loved.”

“No, Augusta,” I answered, “I am not prepared. Rather would I trust myself into your power, Augusta.”

The conference of the officers had come to an end. Their leader advanced and said,

“We accept the terms, except as to the matter of Olaf Red-Sword. The Empress may go free, but Olaf Red-Sword, our general whom we love, we will not surrender. First will we die.”

“Good!” said Jodd. “I looked for such words from you.”

Then he marched out, with his companions, and again met Stauracius and the two generals of the Greeks. After they had talked a little while he returned and said,

“Those two officers, being men, would have agreed, but Stauracius, the eunuch, who seems in command, will not agree. He says that Olaf Red-Sword must be surrendered with the Empress. We answered that in this case soon there would be no Empress to surrender except one ready for burial. He replied that was as God might decree; either both must be surrendered or both be held.”

“Do you know why the dog said that?” whispered Irene to me. “It was because those Northmen have let slip the offer I made to you but now, and he is jealous of you, and fears you may take his power. Well, if I live, one day he shall pay for this who cares so little for my life.”

So she spoke, but I made no answer. Instead, I turned to Heliodore, saying,

“You see how matters stand, beloved. Either I must surrender myself, or all these brave men must perish, and we with them. For myself, I am ready to die, but I am not willing that you and they should die. Also, if I yield, I can do no worse than die, whereas perchance after all things will take another turn. Now what say you?”

“I say, follow your heart, Olaf,” she replied steadily. “Honour comes first of all. The rest is with God. Wherever you go there I soon shall be.”

"I thank you," I answered; "your mind is mine."

Then I stepped forward and said,

"Comrades, it is my turn to throw in this great game. I have heard and considered all, and I think it best that I should be surrendered, with the Augusta, to the Greeks."

"We will not surrender you," they shouted.

"Comrades, I am still your general, and my order is that you surrender me. Also, I have other orders to give to you. That you guard this lady Heliodore to the last, and that, while one of you remains alive, she shall be to you as though she were that man's daughter, or mother, or sister, to help and protect as best he may in every circumstance, seen or unforeseen. Further, that with her you guard her father, the noble Egyptian Magas. Will you promise this to me?"

"Aye!" they roared in answer.

"You hear them, Heliodore," I said. "Know that henceforth you are one of a large family, and, however great your enemies, that you will never lack a friend. Comrades," I went on, "this is my second order, and perchance the last that I shall ever give to you. Unless you hear that I am evilly treated in the palace yonder, stay quiet. But if that tidings should reach you, then all oaths are broken. Do what you can and will."

"Aye!" they roared again.

Afterwards what happened? It comes back to me but dimly. I think they swore the Empress on the Blood of Christ that I should go unharmed. I think I embraced Heliodore before them all, and gave her into their keeping. I think I whispered into the ear of Jodd to seek out the Bishop Barnabas, and pray him to get her and her father away to Egypt without delay—yes, even by force, if it were needful. Then I think I left their lines, and that, as I went, leading the Augusta by the hand, they gave to me the general's salute. That I turned and saluted them in answer ere I yielded myself into the power of my god-father, Stauracius, who greeted me with a false and sickly smile.

CHAPTER VIII
THE TRIAL OF OLAF

I know not what time went by before I was put upon my trial, but that trial I can still see as clearly as though it were happening before my eyes. It took place in a long, low room of the vast palace buildings that was lighted only by window-places set high up in the wall. These walls were frescoed, and at the end of the room above the seat of the judges was a rude picture in bright colours of the condemnation of Christ by Pilate. Pilate, I remember, was represented with a black face, to signify his wickedness I suppose, and in the air above him hung a red-eyed imp shaped like a bat who gripped his robe with one claw and whispered into his ear.

There were seven judges, he who presided being a law-officer, and the other six captains of different grades, chosen mostly from among the survivors of those troops whom the Northmen had defeated on the night of the battle in the palace gardens. As this was a military trial, I was allowed no advocate to defend me, nor indeed did I ask for any. The Court, however, was open and crowded with spectators, among whom I saw most of the great officers of the palace, Stauracius with them; also some ladies, one of whom was Martina, my god-mother. The back of the long room was packed with soldiers and others, not all of whom were my enemies.

Into this place I was brought, guarded by four negroes, great fellows armed with swords whom I knew to be chosen out of the number of the executioners of the palace and the city. Indeed, one of them had served under me when I was governor of the State prison, and been dismissed by me because of some cruelty which he had practised.

Noting all these things and the pity in Martina's eyes, I knew that I was already doomed, but as I had expected nothing else this did not trouble me over much.

I stood before the judges, and they stared at me.

"Why do you not salute us, fellow?" asked one of them, a mincing Greek captain whom I had seen running like a hare upon the night of the fray.

“Because, Captain, I am of senior rank to any whom I see before me, and as yet uncondemned. Therefore, if salutes are in the question, it is you who should salute me.”

At this speech they stared at me still harder than before, but among the soldiers at the end of the hall there arose something like a murmur of applause.

“Waste no time in listening to his insolence,” said the president of the Court. “Clerk, set out the case.”

Then a black-robed man who sat beneath the judges rose and read the charge to me from a parchment. It was brief and to the effect that I, Michael, formerly known as Olaf or Olaf Red-Sword, a Northman in the service of the Empress Irene, a general in her armies, a chamberlain and Master of the Palace, had conspired against the Empress, had killed her servants, had detained her person, threatening to murder her; had made war upon her troops and slain some hundreds of them by the help of other Northmen, and wounded many more.

I was asked what I pleaded to this charge, and replied,

“I am not guilty.”

Then witnesses were called. The first of these was the fourth man whom Irene had set upon me, who alone escaped with a wound behind. This fellow, having been carried into court, for he could not walk, leaned over a bar, for he could not sit down, and told his story. When he had finished I was allowed to examine him.

“Why did the Empress order you and your companions to attack me?” I asked.

“I think because she saw you kiss the Egyptian lady, General,” at which answer many laughed.

“You tried to kill me, did you not?”

“Yes, General, for the Empress ordered us so to do.”

“Then what happened?”

“You killed or cut down three of us one after the other, General, being too skilful and strong for us. As I turned to fly, me you wounded here,” and, dragging himself round with difficulty, he showed how my sword had fallen on a part where no soldier should receive a wound. At this sight those in the Court laughed again.

"Did I provoke you in any way before you attacked me?"

"No, indeed, General. It was the Empress you provoked by kissing the beautiful Egyptian lady. At least, I think so, since every time you kissed each other she seemed to become more mad, and at last ordered us to kill both of you."

Now the laughter grew very loud, for even the Court officers could no longer restrain themselves, and the ladies hid their faces in their hands and tittered.

"Away with that fool!" shouted the president of the Court, and the poor fellow was hustled out. What became of him afterwards I do not know, though I can guess.

Now appeared witness after witness who told of the fray which I have described already, though for the most part they tried to put another colour on the matter. Of many of these men I asked no questions. Indeed, growing weary of their tales, I said at length to the judges,

"Sirs, what need is there for all this evidence, seeing that among you I perceive three gallant officers whom I saw running before the Northmen that night, when with some four hundred swords we routed about two thousand of you? You yourselves, therefore, are the best witnesses of what befell. Moreover, I acknowledge that, being moved by the sight of war, in the end I led the charge against you, before which charge some died and many fled, you among them."

Now these captains glowered at me and the president said,

"The prisoner is right. What need is there of more evidence?"

"I think much, sir," I answered, "since but one side of the story has been heard. Now I will call witnesses, of whom the first should be the Augusta, if she is willing to appear and tell you what happened within the circle of the Northmen on that night."

"Call the Augusta!" gasped the president. "Perchance, prisoner Michael, you will wish next to call God Himself on your behalf?"

"That, sir," I answered, "I have already done and do. Moreover," I added slowly, "of this I am sure, that in a time to come, although it be not to-morrow or the next day, you and everyone who has to do with this case will find that I have not called Him in vain."

At these words for a few moments a solemn silence fell upon the Court. It was as though they had gone home to the heart of everyone

who was present there. Also I saw the curtains that draped a gallery high up in the wall shake a little. It came into my mind that Irene herself was hidden behind those curtains, as afterwards I learned was the case, and that she had made some movement which caused them to tremble.

"Well," said the president, after this pause, "as God does not appear to be your witness, and as you have no other, seeing that you cannot give evidence yourself under the law, we will now proceed to judgment."

"Who says that the General Olaf, Olaf Red-Sword, has no witness?" exclaimed a deep voice at the end of the hall. "I am here to be his witness."

"Who speaks?" asked the president. "Let him come forward."

There was a disturbance at the end of the hall, and through the crowd that he seemed to throw before him to right and left appeared the mighty form of Jodd. He was clad in full armour and bore his famous battle-axe in his hand.

"One whom some of you know well enough, as others of your company who will never know anything again have done in the past. One named Jodd, the Northman, second in command of the guard to the General Olaf," he answered, and marched to the spot where witnesses were accustomed to stand.

"Take away that barbarian's axe," exclaimed an officer who sat among the judges.

"Aye," said Jodd, "come hither, mannikin, and take it away if you can. I promise you that along with it something else shall be taken away, to wit your fool's head. Who are you that would dare to disarm an officer of the Imperial Guard?"

After this there was no more talk of removing Jodd's axe, and he proceeded to give his evidence, which, as it only detailed what has been written already, need not be repeated. What effect it produced upon the judges, I cannot say, but that it moved those present in the Court was clear enough.

"Have you done?" asked the president at length when the story was finished.

"Not altogether," said Jodd. "Olaf Red-Sword was promised an open trial, and that he has, since otherwise I and some friends of

mine could not be in this Court to tell the truth, where perhaps the truth has seldom been heard before. Also he was promised a fair trial, and that he has not, seeing that the most of his judges are men with whom he fought the other day and who only escaped his sword by flight. To-morrow I propose to ask the people of Byzantium whether it is right that a man should be tried by his conquered enemies. Now I perceive that you will find a verdict of 'guilty' against Olaf Red-Sword, and perhaps condemn him to death. Well, find what verdict you will and pass what sentence you will, but do not dare to attempt to execute that sentence."

"Dare! Dare!" shouted the president. "Who are you, man, who would dictate to a Court appointed by the Empress what it shall or shall not do? Be careful lest we pass sentence on you as well as on your fellow-traitor. Remember where you stand, and that if I lift my finger you will be taken and bound."

"Aye, lawyer, I remember this and other things. For instance, that I have the safe-conduct of the Empress under an oath sworn on the Cross of the Christ she worships. For instance, also, that I have three hundred comrades waiting my safe return."

"Three hundred!" snarled the president. "The Empress has three thousand within these walls who will soon make an end of your three hundred."

"I have been told, lawyer," answered Jodd, "that once there lived another monarch, one called Xerxes, who thought that he would make an end of a certain three hundred Greeks, when Greeks were different from what you are to-day, at a place called Thermopylæ. He made an end of them, but they cost him more than he cared to pay, and now it is those Greeks who live for ever and Xerxes who is dead. But that's not all; since that fray the other night we Northmen have found friends. Have you heard of the Armenian legions, President, those who favour Constantine? Well, kill Olaf Red-Sword, or kill me, Jodd, and you have to deal first with the Northmen and next with the Armenian legions. Now here I am waiting to be taken by any who can pass this axe."

At these words a great silence fell upon the Court. Jodd glared about him, and, seeing that none ventured to draw near, stepped from the witness-place, advanced to where I was, gave me the full

salute of ceremony, then marched away to the back of the Court, the crowd opening a path for him.

When he had gone the judges began to consult together, and, as I expected, very soon agreed upon their verdict. The president said, or rather gabbled,

"Prisoner, we find you guilty. Have you any reason to offer why sentence of death should not be passed upon you?"

"Sir," I answered, "I am not here to plead for my life, which already I have risked a score of times in the service of your people. Yet I would say this. On the night of the outbreak I was set on, four to one, for no crime, as you have heard, and did but protect myself. Afterwards, when I was about to be slain, the Northmen, my comrades, protected me unasked; then I did my best to save the life of the Empress, and, in fact, succeeded. My only offence is that when the great charge took place and your regiments were defeated, remembering only that I was a soldier, I led that charge. If this is a crime worthy of death, I am ready to die. Yet I hold that both God and man will give more honour to me the criminal than to you the judges, and to those who before ever you sat in this Court instructed you, whom I know to be but tools, as to the verdict that you should give."

The applause which my words called forth from those gathered at the end of the Court died away. In the midst of a great silence the president, who, like his companions, I could see well, was growing somewhat fearful, read the sentence in a low voice from a parchment. After setting out the order by which the Court was constituted and other matters, it ran:

"We condemn you, Michael, otherwise called Olaf or Olaf Red-Sword, to death. This sentence will be executed with or without torture at such time and in such manner as it may please the Augusta to decree."

Now the voice of Jodd was heard crying through the gathering gloom, for night was near:

"What sort of judgment is this that the judges bring already written down into the Court? Hearken you, lawyer, and you street-curs, his companions, who call yourselves soldiers. If Olaf Red-Sword dies, those hostages whom we hold die also. If he is

tortured, those hostages will be tortured also. Moreover, ere long we will sack this fine place, and what has befallen Olaf shall befall you also, you false judges, neither less nor more. Remember it, all you who shall have charge of Olaf in his bonds, and, if she be within hearing, let the Augusta Irene remember it also, lest another time there should be no Olaf to save her life."

Now I could see that the judges were terrified. Hastily, with white faces, they consulted together as to whether they should order Jodd to be seized. Presently I heard the president say to his companions:

"Nay, best let him go. If he is touched, our hostages will die. Moreover, doubtless Constantine and the Armenians are at the back of him, or he would not dare to speak thus. Would that we were clear of this business which has been thrust upon us."

Then he called aloud, "Let the prisoner be removed."

Down the long Court I was marched, only now guards, who had been called in, went in front of and behind me, and with them the four executioners by whom I was surrounded.

"Farewell, god-mother," I whispered to Martina as I passed.

"Nay, not farewell," she whispered back, looking up at me with eyes that were full of tears, though what she meant I did not know.

At the end of the Court, where those who dared to sympathise with me openly were gathered, rough voices called blessings on me and rough hands patted me on the shoulder. To one of these men whose voice I recognised in the gloom I turned to speak a word. Thereon the black executioner who was between us, he whom I had dismissed from the jail for cruelty, struck me on the mouth with the back of his hand. Next instant I heard a sound that reminded me of the growl the white bear gave when it gripped Steinar. Two arms shot out and caught that black savage by the head. There was a noise as of something breaking, and down went the man—a corpse.

Then they hurried me away, for now it was not only the judges who were afraid.

It comes to me that for some days, three or four, I sat in my cell at the palace, for here I was kept because, as I learned afterwards, it was feared that if I were removed to that State prison of which I had been governor, some attempt would be made to rescue me.

This cell was one of several situated beneath that broad terrace which looked out on to the sea, where Irene had first questioned me as to the shell necklace and, against my prayer, had set it upon her own breast. It had a little barred window, out of which I could watch the sea, and through this window came the sound of sentries tramping overhead and of the voice of the officer who, at stated hours, arrived to turn out the guard, as for some years it had been my duty to do.

I wondered who that officer might be, and wondered also how many of such men since Byzantium became the capital of the Empire had filled his office and mine, and what had become of them all. As I knew, if that terrace had been able to speak, it could have told many bloody histories, whereof doubtless mine would be another. Doubtless, too, there were more to follow until the end came, whatever that might be.

In that strait place I reflected on many things. All my youth came back to me. I marvelled what had happened at Aar since I left it such long years ago. Once or twice rumours had reached me from men in my company, who were Danish-born, that Iduna was a great lady there and still unmarried. But of Freydisa I had heard nothing. Probably she was dead, and, if so, I felt sure that her fierce and faithful spirit must be near me now, as that of Ragnar had seemed to be in the Battle of the Garden.

How strange it was that after all my vision had been fulfilled and it had been my lot to meet her of whom I had dreamed, wearing that necklace of which I had found one-half upon the Wanderer in his grave-mound. Were I and the Wanderer the same spirit, I asked of myself, and she of the dream and Heliodore the same woman?

Who could tell? At least this was sure, from the moment that first we saw one another we knew we belonged each to each for the present and the future. Therefore, as it was with these we had to do, the past might sleep and all its secrets.

Now we had met but to be parted again by death, which seemed hard indeed. Yet since we *had* met, for my part Fate had my forgiveness for I knew that we should meet again. I looked back on what I had done and left undone, and could not blame myself overmuch. True, it would have been wiser if I had stayed by Irene and Heliodore, and not led that charge against the Greeks. Only

then, as a soldier, I should never have forgiven myself, for how could I stand still while my comrades fought for me? No, no, I was glad I had led the charge and led it well, though my life must pay its price. Nor was this so. I must die, not because I had lifted sword against Irene's troops, but for the sin of loving Heliodore.

After all, what was life as we knew it? A passing breath! Well, as the body breathes many million times between the cradle and the grave, so I believed the soul must breathe out its countless lives, each ending in a form of death. And beyond these, what? I did not know, yet my new-found faith gave me much comfort.

In such meditations and in sleep I passed my hours, waiting always until the door of my cell should open and through it appear, not the jailer with my food, which I noted was plentiful and delicate, but the executioners or mayhap the tormentors.

At length it did open, somewhat late at night, just as I was about to lay myself down to rest, and through it came a veiled woman. I bowed and motioned to my visitor to be seated on the stool that was in the cell, then waited in silence. Presently she threw off her veil, and in the light of the lamp showed that I stood before the Empress Irene.

"Olaf," she said hoarsely, "I am come here to save you from yourself, if it may be so. I was hidden in yonder Court, and heard all that passed at your trial."

"I guessed as much, Augusta," I said, "but what of it?"

"For one thing, this: The coward and fool, who now is dead—of his wounds—who gave evidence as to the killing of the three other cowards by you, has caused my name to become a mock throughout Constantinople. Aye, the vilest make songs upon me in the streets, such songs as I cannot repeat."

"I am grieved, Augusta," I said.

"It is I who should grieve, not you, who are told of as a man who grew weary of the love of an Empress, and cast her off as though she were a tavern wench. That is the first matter. The second is that under the finding of the Court of Justice——"

"Oh! Augusta," I interrupted, "why stain your lips with those words 'of justice'!"

"——Under the finding of the Court," she went on, "your fate is left in my hands. I may kill you or torment your body. Or I may spare you and raise your head higher than any other in the Empire, aye, and adorn it with a crown."

"Doubtless you may do any of these things, Augusta, but which of them do you wish to do?"

"Olaf, notwithstanding all that has gone, I would still do the last. I speak to you no more of love or tenderness, nor do I pretend that this is for your sake alone. It is for mine also. My name is smirched, and only marriage can cover up the stain upon it. Moreover, I am beset by troubles and by dangers. Those accursed Northmen, who love you so well and who fight, not like men but like devils, are in league with the Armenian legions and with Constantine. My generals and my troops fall away from me. If it were assailed, I am not sure that I could hold this palace, strong though it be. There's but one man who can make me safe again, and that man is yourself. The Northmen will do your bidding, and with you in command of them I fear no attack. You have the honesty, the wit and the soldier's skill and courage. You must command, or none. Only this time it must not be as Irene's lover, for that is what they name you, but as her husband. A priest is waiting within call, and one of high degree. Within an hour, Olaf, you may be my consort, and within a year the Emperor of the World. Oh!" she went on with passion, "cannot you forgive what seem to be my sins when you remember that they were wrought for love of you?"

"Augusta," I said, "I have small ambition; I am not minded to be an emperor. But hearken. Put aside this thought of marriage with one so far beneath you, and let me marry her whom I have chosen, and who has chosen me. Then once more I'll take command of the Northmen and defend you and your cause to the last drop of my blood."

Her face hardened.

"It may not be," she said, "not only for those reasons I have told you, but for another which I grieve to have to tell. Heliodore, daughter of Magas the Egyptian, is dead.'

"Dead!" I gasped. "Dead!"

"Aye, Olaf, dead. You did not see, and she, being a brave woman, hid it from you, but one of those spears that were flung in the fight struck her in the side. For a while the wound went well. But two days ago it mortified; last night she died and this morning I myself saw her buried with honour."

"How did you see her buried, you who are not welcome among the Northmen?" I asked.

"By my order, as her blood was high, she was laid in the palace graveyard, Olaf."

"Did she leave me no word or token, Augusta? She swore to me that if she died she would send to me the other half of that necklace which I wear."

"I have heard of none," said Irene, "but you will know, Olaf, that I have other business to attend to just now than such death-bed gossip. These things do not come to my ears."

I looked at Irene and Irene looked at me.

"Augusta," I said, "I do not believe your story. No spear wounded Heliodore while I was near her, and when I was not near her your Greeks were too far away for any spears to be thrown. Indeed, unless you stabbed her secretly, she was not wounded, and I am sure that, however much you have hated her, this you would not have dared to do for your own life's sake. Augusta, for your own purposes you are trying to deceive me. I will not marry you. Do your worst. You have lied to me about the woman whom I love, and though I forgive you all the rest, this I do not forgive. You know well that Heliodore still lives beneath the sun."

"If so," answered the Empress, "you have looked your last upon the sun and—her. Never again shall you behold the beauty of Heliodore. Have you aught to say? There is still time."

"Nothing, Augusta, at present, except this. Of late I have learned to believe in a God. I summon you to meet me before that God. There we will argue out our case and abide His judgment. If there is no God there will be no judgment, and I salute you, Empress, who triumph. If, as I believe and as you say you believe, there is a God, think whom *you* will be called upon to salute when that God has heard the truth. Meanwhile I repeat that Heliodore the Egyptian still lives beneath the sun."

Irene rose from the stool on which she sat and thought a moment. I gazed through the bars of the window-place in my cell out at the night above. A young moon was floating in the sky, and near to it hung a star. A little passing cloud with a dented edge drifted over the star and the lower horn of the moon. It went by, and they shone out again upon the background of the blue heavens. Also an owl flitted across the window-place of my cell. It had a mouse in its beak, and the shadow of it and of the writhing mouse for a moment lay upon Irene's breast, for I turned my head and saw them. It came into my mind that here was an allegory. Irene was the night-hawk, and I was the writhing mouse that fed its appetite. Doubtless it was decreed that the owl must be and the mouse must be, but beyond them both, hidden in those blue heavens, stood that Justice which we call God.

These were the last things that I saw in this life of mine, and therefore I remember them well, or rather, almost the last. The very last of which I took note was Irene's face. It had grown like to that of a devil. The great eyes in it stared out between the puffed and purple eyelids. The painted cheeks had sunk in and were pallid beneath and round the paint. The teeth showed in two white lines, the chin worked. She was no longer a beautiful woman, she was a fiend.

Irene knocked thrice upon the door. Bolts were thrown back, and men entered.

"Blind him!" she said.

CHAPTER IX
THE HALL OF THE PIT

The days and the nights went by, but which was day and which was night I knew not, save for the visits of the jailers with my meals—I who was blind, I who should never see the light again. At first I suffered much, but by degrees the pain died away. Also a physician came to tend my hurts, a skilful man. Soon I discovered, however, that he had another object. He pitied my state, so much, indeed, he said, that he offered to supply me with a drug that, if I were willing to take it, would make an end of me painlessly. Now I understood at once that Irene desired my death, and, fearing to cause it, set the means of self-murder within my reach.

I thanked the man and begged him to give me the drug, which he did, whereon I hid it away in my garments. When it was seen that I still lived although I had asked for the medicine, I think that Irene believed this was because it had failed to work, or that such a means of death did not please me. So she found another. One evening when a jailer brought my supper he pressed something heavy into my hand, which I felt to be a sword.

"What weapon is this?" I asked, "and why do you give it to me?"

"It is your own sword," answered the man, "which I was commanded to return to you. I know no more."

Then he went away, leaving the sword with me.

I drew the familiar blade from its sheath, the red blade that the Wanderer had worn, and touching its keen edge with my fingers, wept from my blinded eyes to think that never again could I hold it aloft in war or see the light flash from it as I smote. Yes, I wept in my weakness, till I remembered that I had no longer any wish to be the death of men. So I sheathed the good sword and hid it beneath my mattress lest some jailer should steal it, which, as I could not see him, he might do easily. Also I desired to put away temptation.

I think that this hour after the bringing of the sword, which stirred up so many memories, was the most fearful of all my hours, so fearful that, had it been prolonged, death would have come to me of its own accord. I had sunk to misery's lowest deep, who did not know

that even then its tide was turning, who could not dream of all the blessed years that lay before me, the years of love and of such peaceful joy as even the blind may win.

That night Martina came—Martina, who was Hope's harbinger. I heard the door of my prison open and close softly, and sat still, wondering whether the murderers had entered at last, wondering, too, whether I should snatch the sword and strike blindly till I fell. Next I heard another sound, that of a woman weeping; yes, and felt my hand lifted and pressed to a woman's lips, which kissed it again and yet again. A thought struck me, and I began to draw it back. A soft voice spoke between its sobs.

"Have no fear, Olaf. I am Martina. Oh, now I understand why yonder tigress sent me on that distant mission."

"How did you come here, Martina?" I asked.

"I still have the signet, Olaf, which Irene, who begins to mistrust me, forgets. Only this morning I learned the truth on my return to the palace; yet I have not been idle. Within an hour Jodd and the Northmen knew it also. Within three they had blinded every hostage whom they held, aye, and caught two of the brutes who did the deed on you, and crucified them upon their barrack walls."

"Oh! Martina," I broke in, "I did not desire that others who are innocent should share my woes."

"Nor did I, Olaf; but these Northmen are ill to play with. Moreover, in a sense it was needful. You do not know what I have learned—that to-morrow Irene proposed to slit your tongue also because you can tell too much, and afterwards to cut off your right hand lest you, who are learned, should write down what you know. I told the Northmen—never mind how. They sent a herald, a Greek whom they had captured, and, covering him with arrows, made him call out that if your tongue was slit they would know of it and slit the tongues of all the hostages also, and that if your hand was cut off they could cut off their hands, and take another vengeance which for the present they keep secret."

"At least they are faithful," I said. "But, oh! tell me, Martina, what of Heliodore?"

“This,” she whispered into my ear. “Heliodore and her father sailed an hour after sunset and are now safe upon the sea, bound for Egypt.”

“Then I was right! When Irene told me she was dead she lied.”

“Aye, if she said that she lied, though thrice she has striven to murder her, I have no time to tell you how, but was always baffled by those who watched. Yet she might have succeeded at last, so, although Heliodore fought against it, it was best that she should go. Those who are parted may meet again; but how can we meet one who is dead until we too are dead?”

“How did she go?”

“Smuggled from the city disguised as a boy attending on a priest, and that priest her father shorn of his beard and tonsured. The Bishop Barnabas passed them out in his following.”

“Then blessings on the Bishop Barnabas,” I said.

“Aye, blessings on him, since without his help it could never have been done. The secret agents at the port stared hard at those two, although the good bishop vouched for them and gave their names and offices. Still, when they saw some rough-looking fellows dressed like sailors approach, playing with the handles of their knives, the agents thought well to ask no more questions. Moreover, now that the ship has sailed, for their own sakes they’ll swear that no such priest and boy went aboard of her. So your Heliodore is away unharmed, as is her father, though his mission has come to naught. Still, his life is left in him, for which he may be thankful, who on such a business should have brought no woman. If he had come alone, Olaf, your eyes would have been left to you, and set by now upon the orb of empire that your hand had grasped.”

“Yet I am glad that he did not come alone, Martina.”

“Truly you have a high and faithful heart, and that woman should be honoured whom you love. What is the secret? There must be more in it than the mere desire for a woman’s beauty, though I know that at times this can make men mad. In such a business the soul must play its part.”

“I think so, Martina. Indeed, I believe so, since otherwise we suffer much in vain. Now tell me, how and when do I die?”

“I hope you will not die at all, Olaf. Certain plans are laid which even here I dare not whisper. To-morrow I hear they will lead you again before the judges, who, by Irene’s clemency, will change your sentence to one of banishment, with secret orders to kill you on the voyage. But you will never make that voyage. Other schemes are afoot; you’ll learn of them afterwards.”

“Yet, Martina, if you know these plots the Augusta knows them also, since you and she are one.”

“When those dagger points were thrust into your eyes, Olaf, they cut the thread that bound us, and now Irene and I are more far apart than hell and heaven. I tell you that for your sake I hate her and work her downfall. Am I not your god-mother, Olaf?”

Then again she kissed my hand and presently was gone.

On the following morning, as I supposed it to be, my jailers came and said to me that I must appear before the judges to hear some revision of my sentence. They dressed me in my soldier’s gear, and even allowed me to gird my sword about me, knowing, doubtless, that, save to himself, a blind man could do no mischief with a sword. Then they led me I know not whither by passages which turned now here, now there. At length we entered some place, for doors were closed behind us.

“This is the Hall of Judgment,” said one of them, “but the judges have not yet come. It is a great room and bare. There is nothing in it against which you can hurt yourself. Therefore, if it pleases you after being cramped so long in that narrow cell, you may walk to and fro, keeping your hands in front of you so that you will know when you touch the further wall and must turn.”

I thanked them and, glad enough to avail myself of this grace for my limbs were stiff with want of exercise, began to walk joyfully. I thought that the room must be one of those numberless apartments which opened on to the terrace, since distinctly I could hear the wash of the sea coming from far beneath, doubtless through the open window-places.

Forward I stepped boldly, but at a certain point in my march this curious thing happened. A hand seemed to seize my own and draw me to the left. Wondering, I followed the guidance of the hand, which presently left hold of mine. Thereon I continued my march,

and as I did so, thought that I heard another sound, like to that of a suppressed murmur of human voices. Twenty steps more and I reached the end of the chamber, for my outstretched fingers touched its marble wall. I turned and marched back, and lo! at the twentieth step that hand took mine again and led me to the right, whereon once more the murmur of voices reached me.

Thrice this happened, and every time the murmur grew more loud. Indeed, I thought I heard one say,

"The man's not blind at all," and another, "Some spirit guides him."

As I made my fourth journey I caught the sound of a distant tumult, the shouts of war, the screams of agony, and above them all the well-remembered cry of "*Valhalla! Valhalla! Victory or Valhalla!*"

I halted where I was and felt the blood rush into my wasted cheeks. The Northmen, my Northmen, were in the palace! It was at this that Martina had hinted. Yet in so vast a place what chance was there that they would ever find me, and how, being blind, could I find them? Well, at least my voice was left to me, and I would lift it.

So with all my strength I cried aloud, "Olaf Red-Sword is here! To Olaf, men of the North!"

Thrice I cried. I heard folk running, not to me, but from me, doubtless those whose whispers had reached my ears.

I thought of trying to follow them, but the soft and gentle hand, which was like to that of a woman, once more clasped mine and held me where I was, suffering me to move no single inch. So there I stood, even after the hand had loosed me again, for it seemed to me that there was something most strange in this business.

Presently another sound arose, the sound of the Northmen pouring towards the hall, for feet clanged louder and louder down the marble corridors. More, they had met those who were running from the hall, for now these fled back before them. They were in the hall, for a cry of horror, mingled with rage, broke from their lips.

"'Tis Olaf," said one, "Olaf blinded, and, by Thor, see where he stands!"

Then Jodd's voice roared out,

"Move not, Olaf; move not, or you die."

Another voice, that of Martina, broke in, “Silence, you fool, or you’ll frighten him and make him fall. Silence all, and leave him to me!”

Then quiet fell upon the place; it seemed that even the pursued grew quiet, and I heard the rustle of a woman’s dress drawing towards me. Next instant a soft hand took my own, just such a hand as not long ago had seemed to guide and hold me, and Martina’s voice said,

“Follow where I lead, Olaf.”

So I followed eight or ten paces. Then Martina threw her arms about me and burst into wild laughter. Someone caught her away; next moment two hair-clad lips kissed me on the brow and the mighty voice of Jodd shouted,

“Thanks be to all the gods, dwell they in the north or in the south! We have saved you! Know you where you stood, Olaf? On the brink of a pit, the very brink, and beneath is a fall of a hundred feet to where the waters of the Bosphorus wash among the rocks. Oh! understand this pretty Grecian game. They, good Christian folk, would not have your blood upon their souls, and therefore they caused you to walk to your own death. Well, they shall be dosed with the draught they brewed.

“Bring them hither, comrades, bring them one by one, these devils who could sit to watch a blind man walk to his doom to make their sport. Ah! whom have we here? Why, by Thor! ’tis the lawyer knave, he who was president of the court that tried you, and was angry because you did not salute him. Well, lawyer, the wheel has gone round. We Northmen are in possession of the palace and the Armenian legions are gathered at its gates and do but wait for Constantine the Emperor to enter and take the empire and its crown. They’ll be here anon, lawyer, but you understand, having a certain life to save, for word had been brought to us of your pretty doings, that we were forced to strike before the signal, and struck not in vain. Now we’ll fill in the tedious time with a trial of our own. See here, I am president of the court, seated in this fine chair, and these six to right and left are my companion judges, while you seven who were judges are now prisoners. You know the crime with which you are charged, so there’s no need to set it out. Your defence, lawyer, and be swift with it.”

“Oh! sir,” said the man in a trembling voice, “what we did to the General Olaf we were ordered to do by one who may not be named.”

“You’d best find the name, lawyer, for were it that of a god we Northmen would hear it.”

“Well, then, by the Augusta herself. She wished the death of the noble Michael, or Olaf, but having become superstitious about the matter, would not have his blood directly on her hands. Therefore she bethought her of this plan. He was ordered to be brought into the place you see, which is known as the Hall of the Pit, that in old days was used by certain bloody-minded emperors to rid them of their enemies. The central pavement swings upon a hinge. At a touch it opens, and he who has thought it sound and walked thereon, when darkness comes is lost, since he falls upon the rocks far below, and at high tide the water takes him.”

“Yes, yes, we understand the game, lawyer, for there yawns the open pit. But have you aught more to say?”

“Nothing, sir, nothing, save that we only did what we were driven to do. Moreover, no harm has come of it, since whenever the noble general came to the edge of the opened pit, although he was blind, he halted and went off to right or left as though someone drew him out of danger.”

“Well, then, cruel and unjust judges, who could gather to mock at the murder of a blinded man that you had trapped to his doom——”

“Sir,” broke in one of them, “it was not we who tried to trap him; it was those jailers who stand there. They told the general that he might exercise himself by walking up and down the hall.”

“Is that true, Olaf?” asked Jodd.

“Yes,” I answered, “it is true that the two jailers who brought me here did tell me this, though whether those men are present I cannot say.”

“Very good,” said Jodd. “Add them to the other prisoners, who by their own showing heard them set the snare and did not warn the victim. Now, murderers all, this is the sentence of the court upon you: That you salute the General Olaf and confess your wickedness to him.”

So they saluted me, kneeling, and kissing my feet, and one and all made confession of their crime.

"Enough," I said, "I pardon them who are but tools. Pray to God that He may do as much."

"You may pardon here, Olaf," said Jodd, "and your God may pardon hereafter, but we, the Northmen, do not pardon. Blindfold those men and bind their arms. Now," went on Jodd after a pause, "their turn has come to show us sport. Run, friends, run, for swords are behind you. Can you not feel them?"

The rest may be guessed. Within a few minutes the seven judges and the two jailers had vanished from the world. No hand came to save *them* from the cruel rocks and the waters that seethed a hundred feet below that dreadful chamber.

This fantastic, savage vengeance was a thing dreadful to hear; what it must have been to see I can only guess. I know that I wished I might have fled from it and that I pleaded with Jodd for mercy on these men. But neither he nor his companions would listen to me.

"What mercy had they on you?" he cried. "Let them drink from their own cup."

"Let them drink from their own cup!" roared his companions, and then broke into a roar of laughter as one of the false judges, feeling space before him, leapt, leapt short, and with a shriek departed for ever.

It was over. I heard someone enter the hall and whisper in Jodd's ear; heard his answer also.

"Let her be brought hither," he said. "For the rest, bid the captains hold Stauracius and the others fast. If there is any sign of stir against us, cut their throats, advising them that this will be done should they allow trouble to arise. Do not fire the palace unless I give the word, for it would be a pity to burn so fine a building. It is those who dwell in it who should be burned; but doubtless Constantine will see to that. Collect the richest of the booty, that which is most portable, and let it be carried to our quarters in the baggage carts. See that these things are done quickly, before the Armenians get their hands into the bag. I'll be with you soon; but if the Emperor Constantine should arrive first, tell him that all has gone well, better than he hoped, indeed, and pray him to come hither, where we may take counsel."

The messenger went. Jodd and some of the Northmen began to consult together, and Martina led me aside.

"Tell me what has chanced, Martina," I asked, "for I am bewildered."

"A revolution, that is all, Olaf. Jodd and the Northmen are the point of the spear, its handle is Constantine, and the hands that hold it are the Armenians. It has been very well done. Some of the guards who remained were bribed, others frightened away. Only a few fought, and of them the Northmen made short work. Irene and her ministers were fooled. They thought the blow would not fall for a week or more, if at all, since the Empress believed that she had appeased Constantine by her promises. I'll tell you more later."

"How did you find me, Martina, and in time?"

"Oh! Olaf, it is a terrible story. Almost I swoon again to think of it. It was thus: Irene discovered that I had visited you in your cell; she grew suspicious of me. This morning I was seized and ordered to surrender the signet; but first I had heard that they planned your death to-day, not a sentence of banishment and murder afar off, as I told you. My last act before I was taken was to dispatch a trusted messenger to Jodd and the Northmen, telling them that if they would save you alive they must strike at once, and not to-night, as had been arranged. Within thirty seconds after he had left my side the eunuchs had me and took me to my chamber, where they barred me in. A while later the Augusta came raging like a lioness. She accused me of treachery, and when I denied it struck me in the face. Look, here are the marks of the jewels on her hands. Oh, alas! what said I? You cannot see. She had learned that the lady Heliodore had escaped her, and that I had some hand in her escape. She vowed that I, your god-mother, was your lover, and as this is a crime against the Church, promised me that after other sufferings I should be burned alive in the Hippodrome before all the people. Lastly she said this, 'Know that your Olaf of whom you are so fond dies within an hour and thus: He will be taken to the Hall of the Pit and there given leave to walk till the judges come. Being blind, you may guess where he will walk. Before this door is unlocked again I tell you he'll be but a heap of splintered bones. Aye, you may start and weep; but save your tears for yourself,' and she called me a foul name. 'I have got you fast at length, you night-prowling cat, and God Himself cannot give you strength to stretch out your hand and guide this accursed Olaf from the edge of the Pit of Death.'

"'God alone knows what He can do, Augusta,' I answered, for the words seemed to be put into my lips.

"Then she cursed and struck me again, and so left me barred in my chamber.

"When she had gone I flung myself upon my knees and prayed to God to save you, Olaf, since I was helpless; prayed as I had never prayed before. Praying thus, I think that I fell into a swoon, for my agony was more than I could bear, and in the swoon I dreamed. I dreamed that I stood in this place, where till now I have never been before. I saw the judges, the jailers, and a few others watching from that gallery. I saw you walk along the hall towards the great open pit. Then I seemed to glide to you and take your hand and guide you round the pit. And, Olaf, this happened thrice. Afterwards came a tumult while you were on the very edge of the pit and I held you, not suffering you to stir. Then in rushed the Northmen and I with them. Yes, standing there with you upon the edge of the pit, I saw myself and the Northmen rush into the hall."

"Martina," I whispered, "a hand that seemed to be a woman's did guide me thrice round the edge of the pit, and did hold me almost until you and the Northmen rushed in."

"Oh! God is great!" she gasped. "God is very great, and to Him I give thanks. But hearken to the end of the tale. I awoke from my swoon and heard noise without, and above it the Northmen's cry of victory. They had scaled the palace walls or broken in the gates—as yet I know not which—they were on the terrace driving the Greek guards before them. I ran to the window-place and there below me saw Jodd. I screamed till he heard me.

"'Save me if you would save Olaf,' I cried. 'I am prisoned here.'

"They brought one of their scaling ladders and drew me through the window. I told them all I knew. They caught a palace eunuch and beat him till he promised to lead us to this hall. He led, but in the labyrinth of passages fell down senseless, for they had struck him too hard. We knew not which way to turn, till suddenly we heard your voice and ran towards it.

"That is all the story, Olaf."

CHAPTER X
OLAF GIVES JUDGMENT

As Martina finished speaking I heard the sound of tramping guards and of a woman's dress upon the pavement. Then a voice, that of Irene, spoke, and though her words were quiet I caught in them the tremble of smothered rage.

"Be pleased to tell me, Captain Jodd," she said, "what is happening in my palace, and why I, the Empress, am haled from my apartment hither by soldiers under your command?"

"Lady," answered Jodd, "you are mistaken. Yesterday you were an empress, to-day you are—well, whatever your son, the Emperor, chooses to name you. As to what has been and is happening in this palace, I scarcely know where to begin the tale. First of all your general and chamberlain Olaf—in case you should not recognise him, I mean that blind man who stands yonder—was being tricked to death by certain servants of yours who called themselves judges, and who stated that they were acting by your orders."

"Confront me with them," said Irene, "that I may prove to you that they lie."

"Certainly. Ho! you, bring the lady Irene here. Now hold her over that hole. Nay, struggle not, lady, lest you should slip from their hands. Look down steadily, and you will see by the light that flows in from the cave beneath, certain heaps lying on the rocks round which the rising waters seethe. There are your judges whom you say you wish to meet. If you desire to ask them any questions, we can satisfy your will. Nay, why should you turn pale at the mere sight of the place that you thought good enough to be the bed of a faithful soldier of your own, one high in your service, whom it has pleased you to blind? Why did it please you to blind him, Lady?"

"Who are you that dare to ask me questions?" she replied, gathering up her courage.

"I'll tell you, Lady. Now that the General Olaf yonder is blinded I am the officer in command of the Northmen, who, until you tried to murder the said General Olaf a while ago, were your faithful guard. I am also, as it chances, the officer in command of this palace, which

we took this morning by assault and by arrangement with most of your Greek soldiers, having learned from your confidential lady, Martina, of the vile deed you were about to work on the General Olaf."

"So it was you who betrayed me, Martina," gasped Irene; "and I had you in my power. Oh! I had you in my power!"

"I did not betray you, Augusta. I saved my god-son yonder from torture and butchery, as by my oath I was bound to do," answered Martina.

"Have done with this talk of betrayals," went on Jodd, "for who can betray a devil? Now, Lady, with your State quarrels we have nothing to do. You can settle them presently with your son, that is, if you still live. But with this matter of Olaf we have much to do, and we will settle that at once. The first part of the business we all know, so let us get to the next. By whose order were you blinded, General Olaf?"

"By that of the Augusta," I answered.

"For what reason, General Olaf?"

"For one that I will not state," I answered.

"Good. You were blinded by the Augusta for a reason you will not state, but which is well known to all of us. Now, we have a law in the North which says that an eye should be given for an eye and a life for a life. Would it not then be right, comrades, that this woman should be blinded also?"

"What!" screamed Irene, "blinded! I blinded! I, the Empress!"

"Tell me, Lady, are the eyes of one who was an Empress different from other eyes? Why should you complain of that darkness into which you were so ready to plunge one better than yourself. Still, Olaf shall judge. Is it your will, General, that we blind this woman who put out your eyes and afterwards tried to murder you?"

Now, I felt that all in that place were watching me and hanging on the words that I should speak, so intently that they never heard others entering it, as I did. For a while I paused, for why should not Irene suffer a little of that agony of suspense which she had inflicted upon me and others?

Then I said, "See what I have lost, friends, through no grave fault of my own. I was in the way of greatness. I was a soldier whom you

trusted and liked well, one of unstained honour and of unstained name. Also I loved a woman, by whom I was beloved and whom I hoped to make my wife. And now what am I? My trade is gone, for how can a maimed man lead in war, or even do the meanest service of the camp? The rest of my days, should any be granted to me, must be spent in darkness blacker than that of midnight. I must live on charity. When the little store I have is spent, for I have taken no bribe and heaped up no riches, how can I earn a living? The woman whom I love has been carried away, after this Empress tried thrice to murder her. Whether I shall ever find her again in this world I know not, for she has gone to a far country that is full of enemies to Christian men. Nor do I know whether she would be willing to take one who is blind and beggared for a husband, though I think this may be so."

"Shame on her if she does not," muttered Martina as I paused.

"Well, friends, that is my case," I went on; "let the Augusta deny it if she can."

"Speak, Lady. Do you deny it?" said Jodd.

"I do not deny that this man was blinded by my order in payment of crimes for which he might well have suffered death," answered Irene. "But I do deny that I commanded him to be trapped in yonder pit. If those dead men said so, then they lied."

"And if the lady Martina says so, what then?" asked Jodd.

"Then she lies also," answered the Empress sullenly.

"Be it so," replied Jodd. "Yet it is strange that, acting on this lie of the lady Martina's, we found the General Olaf upon the very edge of yonder hole; yes, with not the breadth of a barleycorn between him and death. Now, General, both parties have been heard and you shall pass sentence. If you say that yonder woman is to be blinded, this moment she looks her last upon the light. If you say that she is to die, this moment she bids farewell to life."

Again I thought a while. It came into my mind that Irene, who had fallen from power, might rise once more and bring fresh evil upon Heliodore. Now she was in my hand, but if I opened that hand and let her free——!

Someone moved towards me, and I heard Irene's voice whispering in my ear.

"Olaf," she said, "if I sinned against you it was because I loved you. Would you be avenged upon one who has burned her soul with so much evil because she loved too well? Oh! if so, you are no longer Olaf. For Christ's sake have pity on me, since I am not fit to meet Him. Give me time to repent. Nay! hear me out! Let not those men drag me away as they threaten to do. I am fallen now, but who knows, I may grow great again; indeed, I think I shall. Then, Olaf, may my soul shrivel everlastingly in hell if I try to harm you or the Egyptian more—Jesus be my witness that I ask no lesser doom upon my head. Keep the men back, Martina, for what I swear to him and the Egyptian I swear to you as well. Moreover, Olaf, I have great wealth. You spoke of poverty; it shall be far from you. Martina knows where my gold is hid, and she still holds my keys. Let her take it. I say leave me alone, but one word more. If ever it is in my power I'll forget everything and advance you all to great honour. Your brain is not blinded, Olaf; you can still rule. I swear, I swear, I swear upon the Holy Blood! Ah! now drag me away if you will. I have spoken."

"Then perchance, Lady, you will allow Olaf to speak, since we, who have much to do, must finish this business quickly, before the Emperor comes with the Armenians," said Jodd.

"Captain Jodd and his comrades," I said, "the Empress Irene has been pleased to make certain solemn vows to me which perchance some of you may have overheard. At least, God heard them, and whether she keeps them or no is a matter between her and the God in Whom we both believe. Therefore I set these vows aside; they draw me neither one way nor the other. Now, you have made me judge in my own matter and have promised to abide by my judgment, which you will do. Hear it, then, and let it be remembered. For long I have been the Augusta's officer, and of late her general and chamberlain. As such I have bound myself by great oaths to protect her from harm in all cases, and those oaths heretofore I have kept, when I might have broken them and not been blamed by men. Whatever has chanced, it seems that she is still Empress and I am still her officer, seeing that my sword has been returned to me, although it is true she sent it that I might use it on myself. It pleased the Empress to put out my eyes. Under our soldier's law the monarch who rules the Empire has a right to put out the eyes of an officer who has lifted sword against her forces, or

even to kill him. Whether this is done justly or unjustly again is a matter between that monarch and God above, to Whom answer must be made at last. Therefore it would seem that I have no right to pronounce any sentence against the Augusta Irene, and whatever may have been my private wrongs, I pronounce none. Yet, as I am still your general until another is named, I order you to free the Augusta Irene and to work no vengeance on her person for aught that may have befallen me at her hands, were her deeds just or unjust."

When I had finished speaking, in the silence that followed I heard Irene utter something that was half a sob and half a gasp of wonderment. Then above the murmuring of the Northmen, to whom this rede was strange, rose the great voice of Jodd.

"General Olaf," he said, "while you were talking it came into my mind that one of those knife points which pierced your eyes had pricked the brain behind them. But when you had finished talking it came into my mind that you are a great man who, putting aside your private rights and wrongs and the glory of revenge which lay to your hand, have taught us soldiers a lesson in duty which I, at least, never shall forget. General, if, as I trust, we are together in the future as in the past, I shall ask you to instruct me in this Christian faith of yours, which can make a man not only forgive but hide his forgiveness under the mask of duty, for that, as we know well, is what you have done. General, your order shall be obeyed. Be she Empress or nothing, this lady's person is safe from us. More, we will protect her to the best of our power, as you did in the Battle of the Garden. Yet I tell her to her face that had it not been for those orders, had you, for example, said that you left judgment to us, she who has spoilt such a man should have died a death of shame."

I heard a sound as of a woman throwing herself upon her knees before me. I heard Irene's voice whisper through her tears,

"Olaf, Olaf, for the second time in my life you make me feel ashamed. Oh! if only you could have loved me! Then I should have grown good like you."

There was a stir of feet and another voice spoke, a voice that should have been clear and youthful, but sounded as though it were thick with wine. It did not need Martina's whisper to tell me that it was that of Constantine.

"Greeting, friends," he said, and at once there came a rattle of saluting swords and an answering cry of

"Greeting, Augustus!"

"You struck before the time," went on the thick, boyish voice. "Yet as things seem to have gone rather well for us, I cannot blame you, especially as I see that you hold fast her who has usurped my birthright."

Now I heard Irene turn with a swift and furious movement.

"Your birthright, boy," she cried. "What birthright have you save that which my body gave?"

"I thought that my father had more to do with this matter of imperial right than the Grecian girl whom it pleased him to marry for her fair face," answered Constantine insolently, adding: "Learn your station, mother. Learn that you are but the lamp which once held the holy oil, and that lamps can be shattered."

"Aye," she answered, "and oil can be spilt for the dogs to lap, if their gorge does not rise at such rancid stuff. The holy oil forsooth! Nay, the sour dregs of wine jars, the outscourings of the stews, the filth of the stables, of such is the holy oil that burns in Constantine, the drunkard and the liar."

It would seem that before this torrent of coarse invective Constantine quailed, who at heart always feared his mother, and I think never more so than when he appeared to triumph over her. Or perhaps he scorned to answer it. At least, addressing Jodd, he said,

"Captain, I and my officers, standing yonder unseen, have heard something of what passed in this place. By what warrant do you and your company take upon yourselves to pass judgment upon this mother of mine? That is the Emperor's right."

"By the warrant of capture, Augustus," answered Jodd. "We Northmen took the palace and opened the gates to you and your Armenians. Also we took her who ruled in the palace, with whom we had a private score to settle that has to do with our general who stands yonder, blinded. Well, it is settled in his own fashion, and now we do not yield up this woman, our prisoner, save on your royal promise that no harm shall come to her in body. As for the rest, it is your business. Make a cook-maid of her if you will, only then I think her tongue would clear the kitchen. But swear to keep her sound in

life and limb till hell calls her, since otherwise we must add her to our company, which will make no man merrier."

"No," answered Constantine, "in a week she would corrupt you every one and breed a war. Well," he added with a boisterous laugh, "I'm master now at last, and I'll swear by any saint that you may name, or all of them, no harm shall come to this Empress whose rule is done, and who, being without friends, need not be feared. Still, lest she should spawn more mischief or murder, she must be kept close till we and our councillors decide where she shall dwell in future. Ho! guards, take my royal father's widow to the dower-palace, and there watch her well. If she escapes, you shall die beneath the rods. Away with the snake before it begins to hiss again."

"I'll hiss no more," said Irene, as the soldiers formed up round her, "yet, perchance, Constantine, you may live to find that the snake still has strength to strike and poison in its fangs, you and others. Do you come with me, Martina?"

"Nay, Lady, since here stands one whom God and you together have given me to guard. For his sake I would keep my life in me," and she touched me on the shoulder.

"That whelp who is called my son spoke truly when he said that the fallen have no friends," exclaimed Irene. "Well, you should thank me, Martina, who made Olaf blind, since, being without eyes, he cannot see how ugly is your face. In his darkness he may perchance mistake you for the beauteous Egyptian, Heliodore, as I know you who love him madly would have him do."

With this vile taunt she went.

"I think I'm crazed," said the Emperor, as the doors swung to behind her. "I should have struck that snake while the stick is in my hand. I tell you I fear her fangs. Why, if she could, she'd make me as that poor man is, blind, or even butcher me. Well, she's my mother, and I've sworn, so there's an end. Now, you Olaf, you are that same captain, are you not, who dashed the poisoned fig from my lips that this tender mother of mine would have let me eat when I was in liquor; yes, and would have swallowed it yourself to save me from my folly?"

"I am that man, Augustus."

"Aye, you are that man, and one of whom all the city has been talking. They say, so poor is your taste, that you turned your back upon the favours of an Empress because of some young girl you dared to love. They say also that she paid you back with a dagger in the eyes, she who was ready to set you in my place."

"Rumour has many tongues, Augustus," I answered. "At least I fell from the Empress's favour, and she rewarded me as she held that I deserved."

"So it seems. Christ! what a dreadful pit is that. Is this another of her gifts? Nay, answer not; I heard the tale. Well, Olaf, you saved my life and your Northmen have set me on the throne, since without them we could scarcely have won the palace. Now, what payment would you have?"

"Leave to go hence, Augustus," I answered.

"A small boon that you might have taken without asking, if you can find a dog to lead you, like other blind wretches. And you, Captain Jodd, and your men, what do you ask?"

"Such donation as it may please the Augustus to bestow, and after that permission to follow wherever our General Olaf goes, since he is our care. Here we have made so many enemies that we cannot sleep at night."

"The Empress of the World falls from her throne," mused Constantine, "and not even a waiting-maid attends her to her prison. But a blinded captain finds a regiment to escort him hence in love and honour, as though he were a new-crowned king. Truly Fortune is a jester. If ever Fate should rob me of my eyes, I wonder, when I had nothing more to give them, if three hundred faithful swords would follow me to ruin and to exile?"

Thus he thought aloud. Afterwards he, Jodd and some others, Martina among them, went aside, leaving me seated on a bench. Presently they returned, and Constantine said,

"General Olaf, I and your companions have taken counsel. Listen. But to-day messengers have come from Lesbos, whom we met outside the gates. It seems that the governor there is dead, and that the accursed Moslems threaten to storm the isle as soon as summer comes and add it to their empire. Our Christian subjects there pray that a new governor may be appointed, one who knows war, and that

with him may be sent troops sufficient to repel the prophet-worshippers, who, not having many ships, cannot attack in great force. Now, Captain Jodd thinks this task will be to the liking of the Northmen, and though you are blind, I think that you would serve me well as governor of Lesbos. Is it your pleasure to accept this office?"

"Aye, with thankfulness, Augustus," I answered. "Only, after the Moslems are beaten back, if it pleases God that it should so befall, I ask leave of absence for a while, since there is one for whom I must search."

"I grant it, who name Captain Jodd your deputy. Stay, there's one more thing. In Lesbos my mother has large vineyards and estates. As part payment of her debt these shall be conveyed to you. Nay, no thanks; it is I who owe them. Whatever his faults, Constantine is not ungrateful. Moreover, enough time has been spent upon this matter. What say you, Officer? That the Armenians are marshalled and that you have Stauracius safe? Good! I come to lead them. Then to the Hippodrome to be proclaimed."

BOOK III
EGYPT

CHAPTER I
TIDINGS FROM EGYPT

That curtain of oblivion without rent or seam sinks again upon the visions of this past of mine. It falls, as it were, on the last of the scenes in the dreadful chamber of the pit, to rise once more far from Byzantium.

I am blind and can see nothing, for the power which enables me to disinter what lies buried beneath the weight and wreck of so many ages tells me no more than those things that once my senses knew. What I did not hear then I do not hear now; what I did not see then I do not see now. Thus it comes about that of Lesbos itself, of the shape of its mountains or the colour of its seas I can tell nothing more than I was told, because my sight never dwelt on them in any life that I can remember.

It was evening. The heat of the sun had passed and the night breeze blew through the wide, cool chamber in which I sat with Martina, whom the soldiers, in their rude fashion, called "Olaf's Brown Dog." For brown was her colouring, and she led me from place to place as dogs are trained to lead blind men. Yet against her the roughest of them never said an evil word; not from fear, but because they knew that none could be said.

Martina was talking, she who always loved to talk, if not of one thing, then of another.

"God-son," she said, "although you are a great grumbler, I tell you that in my judgment you were born under a lucky star, or saint, call it which you will. For instance, when you were walking up and down that Hall of the Pit in the palace at Constantinople, which I always dream of now if I sup too late——"

"And your spirit, or double, or whatever you call it, was kindly leading me round the edge of the death-trap," I interrupted.

"——and my spirit, or double, making itself useful for once, was doing what you say, well, who would have thought that before so very long you would be the governor, much beloved, of the rich and prosperous island of Lesbos; still the commander, much beloved, of troops, many of them your own countrymen, and, although you are blind, the Imperial general who has dealt the Moslems one of the worst defeats they have suffered for a long while."

"Jodd and the others did that," I answered. "I only sat here and made the plans."

"Jodd!" she exclaimed with contempt. "Jodd has no more head for plans than a doorpost! Although it is true," she added with a softening of the voice, "that he is a good man to lean on at a pinch, and a very terrible fighter; also one who can keep such brain as God gave him cool in the hour of terror, as Irene knows well enough. Yet it was you, Olaf, not even I, but you, who remembered that the Northmen are seafolk born, and turned all those trading vessels into war-galleys and hid them in the little bays with a few of your people in command of each. It was you who suffered the Moslem fleet to sail unmolested into the Mitylene harbours, pretending and giving notice that the only defence would be by land. Then, after they were at anchor and beginning to disembark, it was you who fell on them at the dawn and sank and slew till none remained save those of their army who were taken prisoners or spared for ransom. Yes, and you commanded our ships in person; and at night who is a better captain than a blind man? Oh! you did well, very well; and you are rich with Irene's lands, and sit here in comfort and in honour, with the best of health save for your blindness, and I repeat that you were born under a lucky star—or saint."

"Not altogether so, Martina," I answered with a sigh.

"Ah!" she replied, "man can never be content. As usual, you are thinking of that Egyptian, I mean of the lady Heliodore, of whom, of course, it is quite right that you should think. Well, it is true that we have heard nothing of her. Still, that does not mean that we may not hear. Perhaps Jodd has learned something from those prisoners. Hark! he comes."

As she spoke I heard the guards salute without and Jodd's heavy step at the door of the chamber.

"Greeting, General," he said presently. "I bring you good news. The messengers to the Sultan Harun have returned with the ransom. Also this Caliph sends a writing signed by himself and his ministers, in which he swears by God and His Prophet that in consideration of our giving up our prisoners, among whom, it seems, are some great men, neither he nor his successors will attempt any new attack upon Lesbos for thirty years. The interpreter will read it to you to-morrow, and you can send your answering letters with the prisoners."

"Seeing that these heathen are so many and we are so few, we could scarcely look for better terms," I said, "as I hope they will think at Constantinople. At least the prisoners shall sail when all is in order. Now for another matter. Have you inquired as to the Bishop Barnabas and the Egyptian Prince Magas and his daughter?"

"Aye, General, this very day. I found that among the prisoners were three of the commoner sort who have served in Egypt and left that land not three months ago. Of these men two have never heard of the bishop or the others. The third, however, who was wounded in the fight, had some tidings."

"What tidings, Jodd?"

"None that are good, General. The bishop, he says, was killed by Moslems a while ago, or so he had been told."

"God rest him. But the others, Jodd, what of the others?"

"This. It seems that the Copt, as he called him, Magas, returned from a long journey, as we know he did, and raised an insurrection somewhere in the south of Egypt, far up the Nile. An expedition was sent against him, under one Musa, the Governor of Egypt, and there was much fighting, in which this prisoner took part. The end of it was that the Copts who fought with Magas were conquered with slaughter, Magas himself was slain, for he would not fly, and his daughter, the lady Heliodore, was taken prisoner with some other Coptic women."

"And then?" I gasped.

"Then, General, she was brought before the Emir Musa, who, noting her beauty, proposed to make her his slave. At her prayer, however, being, as the prisoner said, a merciful man, he gave her a week to mourn her father before she entered his harem. Still, the worst," he went on hurriedly, "did not happen. Before that week was

done, as the Moslem force was marching down the Nile, she stabbed the eunuch who was in charge of her and escaped."

"I thank God," I said. "But, Jodd, how is the man sure that she was Heliodore?"

"Thus: All knew her to be the daughter of Magas, one whom the Egyptians held in honour. Moreover, among the Moslem soldiers she was named 'the Lady of the Shells,' because of a certain necklace she wore, which you will remember."

"What more?" I asked.

"Only that the Emir Musa was very angry at her loss and because of it caused certain soldiers to be beaten on the feet. Moreover, he halted his army and offered a reward for her. For two days they hunted, even searching some tombs where it was thought she might have hidden, but there found nothing but the dead. Then the Emir returned down the Nile, and that is the end of the story."

"Send this prisoner to me at once, Jodd, with an interpreter. I would question him myself."

"I fear he is not fit to come, General."

"Then I will go to him. Lead me, Martina."

"If so, you must go far, General, for he died an hour ago, and his companions are making him ready for burial."

"Jodd," I said angrily, "those men have been in our hands for weeks. How comes it that you did not discover these things before? You had my orders."

"Because, General, until they knew that they were to go free none of these prisoners would tell us anything. However closely they were questioned, they said that it was against their oath, and that first they would die. A long while ago I asked this very man of Egypt, and he vowed that he had never been there."

"Be comforted, Olaf," broke in Martina, "for what more could he have told you?"

"Nothing, perchance," I answered; "yet I should have gained many days of time. Know that I go to Egypt to search for Heliodore."

"Be comforted again," said Martina. "This you could not have done until the peace was signed; it would have been against your oath and duty."

"That is so," I answered heavily.

"Olaf," said Martina to me that night after Jodd had left us, "you say that you will go to Egypt. How will you go? Will the blind Christian general of the Empire, who has just dealt so great a defeat to the mighty Caliph of the East, be welcome in Egypt? Above all, will he be welcomed by the Emir Musa, who rules there, when it is known that he comes to seek a woman who has escaped from that Emir's harem? Why, within an hour he'd offer you the choice between death and the Koran. Olaf, this thing is madness."

"It may be, Martina. Still, I go to seek Heliodore."

"If Heliodore still lives you will not help her by dying, and if she is dead time will be little to her and she can wait for you a while."

"Yet I go, Martina."

"You, being blind, go to Egypt to seek one whom those who rule there have searched for in vain. So be it. But how will you go? It cannot be as an open enemy, since then you would need a fleet and ten thousand swords to back you, which you have not. To take a few brave men, unless they were Moslems, which is impossible, would be but to give them to death. How do you go, Olaf?"

"I do not know, Martina. Your brain is more nimble than mine; think, think, and tell me."

I heard Martina rise and walk up and down the room for a long time. At length she returned and sat herself by me again.

"Olaf," she said, "you always had a taste for music. You have told me that as a boy in your northern home you used to play upon the harp and sing songs to it of your own making, and now, since you have been blind, you have practised at this art till you are its master. Also, my voice is good; indeed, it is my only gift. It was my voice that first brought me to Irene's notice, when I was but the daughter of a poor Greek gentleman who had been her father's friend and therefore was given a small place about the Court. Of late we have sung many songs together, have we not, certain of them in that northern tongue, of which you have taught me something?"

"Yes, Martina; but what of it?"

"You are dull, Olaf. I have heard that these Easterns love music, especially if it be of a sort they do not know. Why, therefore, should not a blind man and his daughter—no, his orphaned niece—earn an

honest living as travelling musicians in Egypt? These Prophet worshippers, I am told, think it a great sin to harm one who is maimed—a poor northern trader in amber who has been robbed by Christian thieves. Rendered sightless also that he might not be able to swear to them before the judges, and now, with his sister's child, winning his bread as best he may. Like you, Olaf, I have skill in languages, and even know enough of Arabic to beg in it, for my mother, who was a Syrian, taught it to me as a child, and since we have been here I have practised. What say you?"

"I say that we might travel as safely thus as in any other way. Yet, Martina, how can I ask you to tie such a burden on your back?"

"Oh! no need to ask, Olaf, since Fate bound it there when it made me your—god-mother. Where you go I needs must go also, until you are married," she added with a laugh. "Afterwards, perhaps, you will need me no more. Well, there's a plan, for what it is worth, and now we'll sleep on it, hoping to find a better. Pray to St. Michael to-night, Olaf."

As it chanced, St. Michael gave me no light, so the end of it was that I determined to play this part of a blind harper. In those days there was a trade between Lesbos and Egypt in cedar wood, wool, wine for the Copts, for the Moslems drank none, and other goods. Peace having been declared between the island and the Caliph, a small vessel was laden with such merchandise at my cost, and a Greek of Lesbos, Menas by name, put in command of it as the owner, with a crew of sailors whom I could trust to the death.

To these men, who were Christians, I told my business, swearing them to secrecy by the most holy of all oaths. But, alas! as I shall show, although I could trust these sailors when they were masters of themselves, I could not trust them, or, rather, one of them, when wine was his master. In our northern land we had a saying that "Ale is another man," and now its truth was to be proved to me, not for the first time.

When all was ready I made known my plans to Jodd alone, in whose hands I left a writing to say what must be done if I returned no more. To the other officers and the soldiers I said only that I proposed to make a journey in this trading ship disguised as a merchant, both for my health's sake and to discover for myself the

state of the surrounding countries, and especially of the Christians in Egypt.

When he had heard all, Jodd, although he was a hopeful-minded man, grew sad over this journey, which I could see he thought would be my last.

"I expected no less," he said; "and yet, General, I trusted that your saint might keep your feet on some safer path. Doubtless this lady Heliodore is dead, or fled, or wed; at least, you will never find her."

"Still, I must search for her, Jodd."

"You are a blind man. How can you search?"

Then an idea came to him, and he added,

"Listen, General. I and the rest of us swore to protect the lady Heliodore and to be as her father or her brothers. Do you bide here. I will go to search for her, either with a vessel full of armed men, or alone, disguised."

Now I laughed outright and asked,

"What disguise is there that would hide the giant Jodd, whose fame the Moslem spies have spread throughout the East? Why, on the darkest night your voice would betray you to all within a hundred paces. And what use would one shipload of armed men be against the forces of the Emir of Egypt? No, no, Jodd, whatever the danger I must go and I alone. If I am killed, or do not return within eight months, I have named you to be Governor of Lesbos, as already you have been named my deputy by Constantine, which appointment will probably be confirmed."

"I do not want to be Governor of Lesbos," said Jodd. "Moreover, Olaf," he added slowly, "a blind beggar must have his dog to lead him, his brown dog. You cannot go alone, Olaf. Those dangers of which you speak must be shared by another."

"That is so, and it troubles me much. Indeed, it is in my mind to seek some other guide, for I think this one would be safest here in your charge. You must reason with her, Jodd. One can ask too much, even of a god-mother."

"Of a god-mother! Why not say of a grandmother? By Thor! Olaf, you are blind indeed. Still, I'll try. Hush! here she comes to say that our supper is ready."

At our meal several others were present, besides the serving folk, and the talk was general. After it was done I had an interview with some officers. These left, and I sat myself down upon a cushioned couch, and, being tired, there fell asleep, till I was awakened, or, rather, half awakened by voices talking in the garden without. They were those of Jodd and Martina, and Martina was saying,

"Cease your words. I and no one else will go on this Egyptian quest with Olaf. If we die, as I dare say we shall, what does it matter? At least he shall not die alone."

"And if the quest should fail, Martina? I mean if he should not find the lady Heliodore and you should happen both to return safe, what then?"

"Why, then—nothing, except that as it has been, so it will be. I shall continue to play my part, as is my duty and my wish. Do you not remember that I am Olaf's god-mother?"

"Yes, I remember. Still, I have heard somewhere that the Christian Church never ties a knot which it cannot unloose—for a proper fee, and for my part I do not know why a man should not marry one of different blood because she has been named his god-mother before a stone vessel by a man in a broidered robe. You say I do not understand such matters. Perhaps, so let them be. But, Martina, let us suppose that this strange search were to succeed, and Olaf has a way of succeeding where others would fail. For instance, who else could have escaped alive out of the hand of Irene and become governor of Lesbos, and, being blind, yet have planned a great victory? Well, supposing that by the help of gods or men—or women—he should find this beautiful Heliodore, unwed and still willing, and that they should marry. What then, Martina?"

"Then, Captain Jodd," she answered slowly, "if you are yet of the same mind we may talk again. Only remember that I ask no promises and make none."

"So you go to Egypt with Olaf?"

"Aye, certainly, unless I should die first, and perhaps even then. You do not understand? Oh! of course you do not understand, nor can I stop to explain to you. Captain Jodd, I am going to Egypt with a certain blind beggar, whose name I forget at the moment, but who is

my uncle, where no doubt I shall see many strange things. If ever I come back I will tell you about them, and, meanwhile, good night."

CHAPTER II
THE STATUES BY THE NILE

The first thing that I remember of this journey to Egypt is that I was sitting in the warm morning sunshine on the deck of our little trading vessel, that went by the name of the heathen goddess, Diana. We were in the port of Alexandria. Martina, who now went by the name of Hilda, stood by my side describing to me the great city that lay before us.

She told me of the famous Pharos still rising from its rock, although in it the warning light no longer burned, for since the Moslems took Egypt they had let it die, as some said because they feared lest it should guide a Christian fleet to attack them. She described also the splendid palaces that the Greeks had built, many of them now empty or burned out, the Christian churches, the mosques, the broad streets and the grass-grown quays.

As we were thus engaged, she talking and I listening and asking questions, she said,

"The boat is coming with the Saracen officers of the port, who must inspect and pass the ship before she is allowed to discharge her cargo. Now, Olaf, remember that henceforth you are called Hodur." (I had taken this name after that of the blind god of the northern peoples.) "Play your part well, and, above all, be humble. If you are reviled, or even struck, show no anger, and be sure to keep that red sword of yours close hidden beneath your robe. If you do these things we shall be safe, for I tell you that we are well disguised."

The boat came alongside and I heard men climbing the ship's ladder. Then someone kicked me. It was our captain, Menas, who also had his part to play.

"Out of the road, you blind beggar," he said. "The noble officers of the Caliph board our ship, and you block their path."

"Touch not one whom God has afflicted," said a grave voice, speaking in bad Greek. "It is easy for us to walk round the man. But who is he, captain, and why does he come to Egypt? By their looks he and the woman with him might well have seen happier days."

"I know not, lord," answered the captain, "who, after they paid their passage money, took no more note of them. Still they play and sing well, and served to keep the sailors in good humour when we were becalmed."

"Sir," I broke in, "I am a Northman named Hodur, and this woman is my niece. I was a trader in amber, but thieves robbed me and my companions of all we had as we journeyed to Byzantium. Me, who was the leader of our band, they held to ransom, blinding me lest I should be able to swear to them again, but the others they killed. This is the only child of my sister, who married a Greek, and now we get our living by our skill in music."

"Truly you Christians love each other well," said the officer. "Accept the Koran and you will not be treated thus. But why do you come to Egypt?"

"Sir, we heard that it is a rich land where the people love music, and have come hoping to earn some money here that we may put by to live on. Send us not away, sir; we have a little offering to make. Niece Hilda, where is the gold piece I gave you? Offer it to this lord."

"Nay, nay," said the officer. "Shall I take bread out of the mouth of the poor? Clerk," he added in Arabic to a man who was with him, "make out a writing giving leave to these two to land and to ply their business anywhere in Egypt without question or hindrance, and bring it to me to seal. Farewell, musicians. I fear you will find money scarce in Egypt, for the land has been stricken with a famine. Yet go and prosper in the name of God, and may He turn your hearts to the true faith."

Thus it came about that through the good mind of this Moslem, whose name, as I learned when we met again, was Yusuf, our feet were lifted over many stumbling-blocks. Thus it seems that by virtue of his office he had power to prevent the entry into the land of such folk as we seemed to be, which power, if they were Christians, was almost always put in force. Yet because he had seen the captain appear to illtreat me, or because, being a soldier himself, he guessed that I was of the same trade, whatever tale it might please me to tell, this rule was not enforced. Moreover, the writing which he gave me enabled me to go where we wished in Egypt without let or hindrance. Whenever we were stopped or threatened, which happened to us several times, it was enough if we presented it to the nearest person

in authority who could read, after which we were allowed to pass upon our way unhindered.

Before we left the ship I had a last conversation with the captain, Menas, telling him that he was to lie in the harbour, always pretending that he waited for some cargo not yet forthcoming, such as unharvested corn, or whatever was convenient, until we appeared again. If after a certain while we did not appear, then he was to make a trading journey to neighbouring ports and return to Alexandria. These artifices he must continue to practise until orders to the contrary reached him under my own hand, or until he had sure evidence that we were dead. All this the man promised that he would do.

"Yes," said Martina, who was with me, "you promise, Captain, and we believe you, but the question is, can you answer for the others? For instance, for the sailor Cosmas there, who, I see, is already drunken and talking loudly about many things."

"Henceforth, lady, Cosmas shall drink water only. When not in his cups he is an honest fellow, and I do answer for him."

Yet, alas! as the end showed, Cosmas was not to be answered for by anyone.

We went ashore and took up our abode in a certain house, where we were safe. Whether the Christian owners of that house did or did not know who we were, I am not certain. At any rate, through them we were introduced at night into the palace of Politian, the Melchite Patriarch of Alexandria. He was a stern-faced, black-bearded man of honest heart but narrow views, of whom the Bishop Barnabas had often spoken to me as his closest friend. To this Politian I told all under the seal of our Faith, asking his aid in my quest. When I had finished my tale he thought a while. Then he said,

"You are a bold man, General Olaf; so bold that I think God must be leading you to His own ends. Now, you have heard aright. Barnabas, my beloved brother and your father in Christ, has been taken hence. He was murdered by some fanatic Moslems soon after his return from Byzantium. Also it is true that the Prince Magas was killed in war by the Emir Musa, and that the lady Heliodore escaped out of his clutches. What became of her afterwards no man knows, but for my part I believe that she is dead."

"And I believe that she is alive," I answered, "and therefore I go to seek her."

"Seek and ye shall find," mused the Patriarch; "at least, I hope so, though my advice to you is to bide here and send others to seek."

"That I will not do," I answered again.

"Then go, and God be with you. I'll warn certain of the faithful of your coming, so that you may not lack a friend at need. When you return, if you should ever return, come to me, for I have more influence with these Moslems than most, and may be able to serve you. I can say no more, and it is not safe that you should tarry here too long. Stay, I forget. There are two things you should know. The first is that the Emir Musa, he who seized the lady Heliodore, is about to be deposed. I have the news from the Caliph Harun himself, for with him I am on friendly terms because of a service I did him through my skill in medicine. The second is that Irene has beguiled Constantine, or bewitched him, I know not which. At least, by his own proclamation once more she rules the Empire jointly with himself, and that I think will be his death warrant, and perhaps yours also."

"Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof," I said. "Now if I live I shall learn whether any oaths are sacred to Irene, as will Constantine."

Then we parted.

Leaving Alexandria, we wandered first to the town of Misra, which stood near to the mighty pyramids, beneath whose shadow we slept one night in an empty tomb. Thence by slow marches we made our way up the banks of the Nile, earning our daily bread by the exercise of our art. Once or twice we were stopped as spies, but always released again when I produced the writing that the officer Yusuf had given me upon the ship. For the rest, none molested us in a land where wandering beggars were so common. Of money it is true we earned little, but as we had gold in plenty sewn into our garments this did not matter. Food was all we needed, and that, as I have said, was never lacking.

So we went on our strange journey, day by day learning more of the tongues spoken in Egypt, and especially of Arabic, which the Moslems used. Whither did we journey? We know not for certain.

What I sought to find were those two huge statues of which I had dreamed at Aar on the night of the robbing of the Wanderer's tomb. We heard that there were such figures of stone, which were said to sing at daybreak, and that they sat upon a plain on the western bank of the Nile, near to the ruins of the great city of Thebes, now but a village, called by the Arabs El-Uksor, or "the Palaces." So far as we could discover, it was in the neighbourhood of this city that Heliodore had escaped from Musa, and there, if anywhere, I hoped to gain tidings of her fate. Also something within my heart drew me to those images of forgotten gods or men.

At length, two months or more after we left Alexandria, from the deck of the boat in which we had hired a passage for the last hundred miles of our journey, Martina saw to the east the ruins of Thebes. To the west she saw other ruins, and seated in front of them *two mighty figures of stone*.

"This is the place," she said, and my heart leapt at her words. "Now let us land and follow our fortune."

So when the boat was tied up at sunset, to the west bank of the river, as it happened, we bade farewell to the owner and went ashore.

"Whither now?" asked Martina.

"To the figures of stone," I answered.

So she led me through fields in which the corn was growing, to the edge of the desert, meeting no man all the way. Then for a mile or more we tramped through sand, till at length, late at night, Martina halted.

"We stand beneath the statues," she said, "and they are awesome to look on; mighty, seated kings, higher than a tall tree."

"What lies behind them?" I asked.

"The ruins of a great temple."

"Lead me to that temple."

So we passed through a gateway into a court, and there we halted.

"Now tell me what you see," I said.

"We stand in what has been a hall of many columns," she answered, "but the most of them are broken. At our feet is a pool in which there is a little water. Before us lies the plain on which the

statues sit, stretching some miles to the Nile, that is fringed with palms. Across the broad Nile are the ruins of old Thebes. Behind us are more ruins and a line of rugged hills of stone, and in them, a little to the north, the mouth of a valley. The scene is very beautiful beneath the moon, but very sad and desolate."

"It is the place that I saw in my dream many years ago at Aar," I said.

"It may be," she answered, "but if so it must have changed, since, save for a jackal creeping among the columns and a dog that barks in some distant village, I neither see nor hear a living thing. What now, Olaf?"

"Now we will eat and sleep," I said. "Perhaps light will come to us in our sleep."

So we ate of the food we had brought with us, and afterwards lay down to rest in a little chamber, painted round with gods, that Martina found in the ruins of the temple.

During that night no dreams came to me, nor did anything happen to disturb us, even in this old temple, of which the very paving-stones were worn through by the feet of the dead.

Before the dawn Martina led me back to the colossal statues, and we waited there, hoping that we should hear them sing, as tradition said they did when the sun rose. Yet the sun came up as it had done from the beginning of the world, and struck upon those giant effigies as it had done for some two thousand years, or so I was told, and they remained quite silent. I do not think that ever I grieved more over my blindness than on this day, when I must depend upon Martina to tell me of the glory of that sunrise over the Egyptian desert and those mighty ruins reared by the hands of forgotten men.

Well, the sun rose, and, since the statues would not speak, I took my harp and played upon it, and Martina sang a wild Eastern song to my playing. It seemed that our music was heard. At any rate, a few folk going out to labour came to see by whom it was caused, and finding only two wandering musicians, presently went away again. Still, one remained, a woman, Coptic by her dress, with whom I heard Martina talk. She asked who we were and why we had come to such a place, whereon Martina repeated to her the story which we had told a hundred times. The woman answered that we should earn

little money in those parts, as the famine had been sore there owing to the low Nile of the previous season. Until the crops were ripe again, which in the case of most of them would not be for some weeks, even food, she added, must be scarce, though few were left to eat it, since the Moslems had killed out most of those who dwelt in that district of Upper Egypt.

Martina replied that she knew this was so, and therefore we had proposed either to travel on to Nubia or to return north. Still, as I, her blind uncle, was not well, we had landed from a boat hoping that we might find some place where we could rest for a week or two until I grew stronger.

"Yet," she continued meaningly, "being poor Christian folk we know not where to look for such a place, since Cross worshippers are not welcome among those who follow the Prophet."

Now, when the woman heard that we were Christians her voice changed. "I also am a Christian," she said; "but give me the sign."

So we made the sign of the Cross on our breasts, which a Moslem will die rather than do.

"My husband and I," went on the woman, "live yonder at the village of Kurna, which is situated near to the mouth of the valley that is called Biban-el-Meluk, or Gate of the Kings, for there the monarchs of old days, who were the forefathers or rulers of us Copts, lie buried. It is but a very small village, for the Moslems have killed most of us in a war that was raised a while ago between them and our hereditary prince, Magas. Yet my husband and I have a good house there, and, being poor, shall be glad to give you food and shelter if you can pay us something."

The end of it was that after some chaffering, for we dared not show that we had much money, a bargain was struck between us and this good woman, who was named Palka. Having paid her a week's charges in advance, she led us to the village of Kurna, which was nearly an hour's walk away, and here made us known to her husband, a middle-aged man named Marcus, who took little note of anything save his farming.

This he carried on upon a patch of fertile ground that was irrigated by a spring which flowed from the mountains; also he had other lands near to the Nile, where he grew corn and fodder for his

beasts. In his house, that once had been part of some great stone building of the ancients, and still remained far larger than he could use, for this pair had no children, we were given two good rooms. Here we dwelt in comfort, since, notwithstanding the scarcity of the times, Marcus was richer than he seemed and lived well. As for the village of Kurna, its people all told did not amount to more than thirty souls, Christians every one of them, who were visited from time to time by a Coptic priest from some distant monastery in the mountains.

By degrees we grew friendly with Palka, a pleasant, bustling woman of good birth, who loved to hear of the outside world. Moreover, she was very shrewd, and soon began to suspect that we were more than mere wandering players.

Pretending to be weak and ill, I did not go out much, but followed her about the house while she was working, talking to her on many matters.

Thus I led up to the subject of Prince Magas and his rebellion, and learned that he had been killed at a place about fifty miles south from Kurna. Then I asked if it were true that his daughter had been killed with him.

"What do you know of the lady Heliodore?" she asked sharply.

"Only that my niece, who for a while was a servant in the palace at Byzantium before she was driven away with others after the Empress fell, saw her there. Indeed, it was her business to wait upon her and her father the Prince. Therefore, she is interested in her fate."

"It seems that you are more interested than your niece, who has never spoken a word to me concerning her," answered Palka. "Well, since you are a man, I should not have thought this strange, had you not been blind, for they say she was the most beautiful woman in Egypt. As for her fate, you must ask God, since none know it. When the army of Musa was encamped yonder by the Nile my husband, Marcus, who had taken two donkey-loads of forage for sale to the camp and was returning by moonlight, saw her run past him, a red knife in her hand, her face set towards the Gateway of the Kings. After that he saw her no more, nor did anyone else, although they hunted long enough, even in the tombs, which the Moslems, like our people, fear to visit. Doubtless she fell or threw herself into some

hole in the rocks; or perhaps the wild beasts ate her. Better so than that a child of the old Pharaohs should become the woman of an infidel."

"Yes," I answered, "better so. But why do folk fear to visit those tombs of which you speak, Palka?"

"Why? Because they are haunted, that is all, and even the bravest dread the sight of a ghost. How could they be otherwise than haunted, seeing that yonder valley is sown with the mighty dead like a field with corn?"

"Yet the dead sleep quietly enough, Palka."

"Aye, the common dead, Hodur; but not these kings and queens and princes, who, being gods of a kind, cannot die. It is said that they hold their revels yonder at night with songs and wild laughter, and that those who look upon them come to an evil end within a year. Whether this be so I cannot say, since for many years none have dared to visit that place at night. Yet that they eat I know well enough."

"How do you know, Palka?"

"For a good reason. With the others in this village I supply the offerings of their food. The story runs that once the great building, of which this house is a part, was a college of heathen priests whose duty it was to make offerings to the dead in the royal tombs. When the Christians came, those priests were driven away, but we of Kurna who live in their house still make the offerings. If we did not, misfortune would overtake us, as indeed has always happened if they were forgotten or neglected. It is the rent that we pay to the ghosts of the kings. Twice a week we pay it, setting food and milk and water upon a certain stone near to the mouth of the valley."

"Then what happens, Palka?"

"Nothing, except that the offering is taken."

"By beggar folk, or perchance by wild creatures!"

"Would beggar folk dare to enter that place of death?" she answered with contempt. "Or would wild beasts take the food and pile the dishes neatly together and replace the flat stones on the mouths of the jars of milk and water, as a housewife might? Oh! do not laugh. Of late this has always been done, as I who often fetch the vessels know well."

"Have you ever seen these ghosts, Palka?"

"Yes, once I saw one of them. It was about two months ago that I passed the mouth of the valley after moonrise, for I had been kept out late searching for a kid which was lost. Thinking that it might be in the valley, I peered up it. As I was looking, from round a great rock glided a ghost. She stood still, with the moonlight shining on her, and gazed towards the Nile. I, too, stood still in the shadow, thirty or forty paces away. Then she threw up her arms as though in despair, turned and vanished."

"She!" I said, then checked myself and asked indifferently: "Well, what was the fashion of this ghost?"

"So far as I could see that of a young and beautiful woman, wearing such clothes as we find upon the ancient dead, only wrapped more loosely about her."

"Had she aught upon her head, Palka?"

"Yes, a band of gold or a crown set upon her hair, and about her neck what seemed to be a necklace of green and gold, for the moonlight flashed upon it. It was much such a necklace as you wear beneath your robe, Hodur."

"And pray how do you know what I wear, Palka?" I asked.

"By means of what you lack, poor man, the eyes in my head. One night when you were asleep I had need to pass through your chamber to reach another beyond. You had thrown off your outer garment because of the heat, and I saw the necklace. Also I saw a great red sword lying by your side and noted on your bare breast sundry scars, such as hunters and soldiers come by. All of these things, Hodur, I thought strange, seeing that I know you to be nothing but a poor blind beggar who gains his bread by his skill upon the harp."

"There are beggars who were not always beggars, Palka," I said slowly.

"Quite so, Hodur, and there are great men and rich who sometimes appear to be beggars, and—many other things. Still, have no fear that we shall steal your necklace or talk about the red sword or the gold with which your niece Hilda weights her garments. Poor girl, she has all the ways of a fine lady, one who has known Courts, as I think you said was the case. It must be sad for her to have fallen so

low. Still, have no fear, Hodur," and she took my hand and pressed it in a certain secret fashion which was practised among the persecuted Christians in the East when they would reveal themselves to each other. Then she went away laughing.

As for me, I sought Martina, who had been sleeping through the heat, and told her everything.

"Well," she said when I had finished, "you should give thanks to God, Olaf, since without doubt this ghost is the lady Heliodore. So should Jodd," I heard her add beneath her breath, for in my blindness my ears had grown very quick.

CHAPTER III
THE VALLEY OF THE DEAD KINGS

Martina and I had made a plan. Palka, after much coaxing, took us with her one evening when she went to place the accustomed offerings in the Valley of the Dead. Indeed, at first she refused outright to allow us to accompany her, because, she said, only those who were born in the village of Kurna had made such offerings since the days when the Pharaohs ruled, and that if strangers shared in this duty it might bring misfortune. We answered, however, that if so the misfortune would fall on us, the intruders. Also we pointed out that the jars of water and milk were heavy, and, as it happened, there was no one from the hamlet to help to carry them this night. Having weighed these facts, Palka changed her mind.

"Well," she said, "it is true that I grow fat, and after labouring all day at this and that have no desire to bear burdens like an ass. So come if you will, and if you die or evil spirits carry you away, do not add yourselves to the number of the ghosts, of whom there are too many hereabouts, and blame me afterwards."

"On the contrary," I said, "we will make you our heirs," and I laid a bag containing some pieces of money upon the table.

Palka, who was a saving woman, took the money, for I heard it rattle in her hand, hung the jars about my shoulders, and gave Martina the meat and corn in a basket. The flat cakes, however, she carried herself on a wooden trencher, because, as she said, she feared lest we should break them and anger the ghosts, who liked their food to be well served. So we started, and presently entered the mouth of that awful valley which, Martina told me, looked as though it had been riven through the mountain by lightning strokes and then blasted with a curse.

Up this dry and desolate place, which, she said, was bordered on either side by walls of grey and jagged rock, we walked in silence. Only I noted that the dog which had followed us from the house clung close to our heels and now and again whimpered uneasily.

"The beast sees what we cannot see," whispered Palka in explanation.

At last we halted, and I set down the jars at her bidding upon a flat rock which she called the Table of Offerings.

"See!" she exclaimed to Martina, "those that were placed here three days ago are all emptied and neatly piled together by the ghosts. I told Hodur that they did this, but he would not believe me. Now let us pack them up in the baskets and begone, for the sun sets and the moon rises within the half of an hour. I would not be here in the dark for ten pieces of pure gold."

"Then go swiftly, Palka," I said, "for we bide here this night."

"Are you mad?" she asked.

"Not at all," I answered. "A wise man once told me that if one who is blind can but come face to face with a spirit, he sees it and thereby regains his sight. If you would know the truth, that is why I have wandered so far from my own country to find some land where ghosts may be met."

"Now I am sure that you are mad," exclaimed Palka. "Come, Hilda, and leave this fool to make trial of his cure for blindness."

"Nay," answered Martina, "I must stay with my uncle, although I am very much afraid. If I did not, he would beat me afterwards."

"Beat you! Hodur beat a woman! Oh! you are both mad. Or perhaps you are ghosts also. I have thought it once or twice, who at least am sure that you are other than you seem. Holy Jesus! this place grows dark, and I tell you it is full of dead kings. May the Saints guard you; at the least, you'll keep high company at your death. Farewell; whate'er befalls, blame me not who warned you," and she departed at a run, the empty vessels rattling on her back and the dog yapping behind her.

When she had gone the silence grew deep.

"Now, Martina," I whispered, "find some place where we may hide whence you can see this Table of Offerings."

She led me to where a fallen rock lay within a few paces, and behind it we sat ourselves down in such a position that Martina could watch the Table of Offerings by the light of the moon.

Here we waited for a long while; it may have been two hours, or three, or four. At least I knew that, although I could see nothing, the solemnity of that place sank into my soul. I felt as though the dead were moving about me in the silence. I think it was the same with

Martina, for although the night was very hot in that stifling, airless valley, she shivered at my side. At last I felt her start and heard her whisper:

"I see a figure. It creeps from the shadow of the cliff towards the Table of Offerings."

"What is it like?" I asked.

"It is a woman's figure draped in white cloths; she looks about her; she takes up the offerings and places them in a basket she carries. It is a woman—no ghost—for she drinks from one of the jars. Oh! now the moonlight shines upon her face; it is *that of Heliodore!*"

I heard and could restrain myself no longer. Leaping up, I ran towards where I knew the Table of Offerings to be. I tried to speak, but my voice choked in my throat. The woman saw or heard me coming through the shadows. At least, uttering a low cry, she fled away, for I caught the sound of her feet on the rocks and sand. Then I tripped over a stone and fell down.

In a moment Martina was at my side.

"Truly you are foolish, Olaf," she said. "Did you think that the lady Heliodore would know you at night, changed as you are and in this garb, that you must rush at her like an angry bull? Now she has gone, and perchance we shall never find her more. Why did you not speak to her?"

"Because my voice choked within me. Oh! blame me not, Martina. If you knew what it is to love as I do and after so many fears and sorrows——"

"I trust that I should know also how to control my love," broke in Martina sharply. "Come, waste no more time in talk. Let us search."

Then she took me by the hand and led me to where she had last seen Heliodore.

"She has vanished away," she said, "here is nothing but rock."

"It cannot be," I answered. "Oh! that I had my eyes again, if for an hour, I who was the best tracker in Jutland. See if no stone has been stirred, Martina. The sand will be damper where it has lain."

She left me, and presently returned.

"I have found something," she said. "When Heliodore fled she still held her basket, which from the look of it was last used by the

Pharaohs. At least, one of the cakes has fallen from or through it. Come."

She led me to the cliff, and up it to perhaps twice the height of a man, then round a projecting rock.

"Here is a hole," she said, "such as jackals might make. Perchance it leads into one of the old tombs whereof the mouth is sealed. It was on the edge of the hole that I found the cake, therefore doubtless Heliodore went down it. Now, what shall we do?"

"Follow, I think. Where is it?"

"Nay, I go first. Give me your hand, Olaf, and lie upon your breast."

I did so, and presently felt the weight of Martina swinging on my arm.

"Leave go," she said faintly, like one who is afraid.

I obeyed, though with doubt, and heard her feet strike upon some floor.

"Thanks be the saints, all is well," she said. "For aught I knew this hole might have been as deep as that in the Chamber of the Pit. Let yourself down it, feet first, and drop. 'Tis but shallow."

I did so, and found myself beside Martina.

"Now, in the darkness you are the better guide," she whispered. "Lead on, I'll follow, holding to your robe."

So I crept forward warily and safely, as the blind can do, till presently she exclaimed,

"Halt, here is light again. I think that the roof of the tomb, for by the paintings on the walls such it must be, has fallen in. It seems to be a kind of central chamber, out of which run great galleries that slope downwards and are full of bats. Ah! one of them is caught in my hair. Olaf, I will go no farther. I fear bats more than ghosts, or anything in the world."

Now, I considered a while till a thought struck me. On my back was my beggar's harp. I unslung it and swept its chords, and wild and sad they sounded in that solemn place. Then I began to sing an old song that twice or thrice I had sung with Heliodore in Byzantium. This song told of a lover seeking his mistress. It was for two voices, since in the song the mistress answered verse for verse.

Here are those of the lines that I remember, or, rather, the spirit of them rendered into English. I sang the first verse and waited.

"Dear maid of mine,
I bid my strings
Beat on thy shrine
With music's wings.
Palace or cell
A shrine I see,
If there thou dwell
And answer me."

There was no answer, so I sang the second verse and once more waited.

"On thy love's fire
My passion breathes,
Wind of Desire
Thy incense wreathes.
Greeting! To thee,
Or soon or late,
I, bond or free,
Am dedicate."

And from somewhere far away in the recesses of that great cave came the answering strophe.

"O Love sublime
And undismayed,
No touch of Time
Upon thee laid.
Take that is thine;
Ended the quest!
I seek *my* shrine
Upon *thy* breast."

Then I laid down the harp.

At last a voice, the voice of Heliodore speaking whence I knew not, asked,

"Do the dead sing, or is it a living man? And if so, how is that man named?"

"A living man," I replied, "and he is named Olaf, son of Thorvald, or otherwise Michael. That name was given him in the cathedral at

Byzantium, where first his eyes fell on a certain Heliodore, daughter of Magas the Egyptian, whom now he seeks."

I heard the sound of footsteps creeping towards me and Heliodore's voice say,

"Let me see your face, you who name yourself Olaf, for know that in these haunted tombs ghosts and visions and mocking voices play strange tricks. Why do you hide your face, you who call yourself Olaf?"

"Because the eyes are gone from it, Heliodore. Irene robbed it of the eyes from jealousy of you, swearing that never more should they behold your beauty. Perchance you would not wish to come too near to an eyeless man wrapped in a beggar's robe."

She looked—I felt her look. She sobbed—I heard her sob, and then her arms were about me and her lips were pressed upon my own.

So at length came joy such as I cannot tell; the joy of lost love found again.

A while went by, how long I know not, and at last I said,

"Where is Martina? It is time we left this place."

"Martina!" she exclaimed. "Do you mean Irene's lady, and is she here? If so, how comes she to be travelling with you, Olaf?"

"As the best friend man ever had, Heliodore; as one who clung to him in his ruin and saved him from a cruel death; as one who has risked her life to help him in his desperate search, and without whom that search had failed."

"Then may God reward her, Olaf, for I did not know there were such women in the world. Lady Martina! Where are you, lady Martina?"

Thrice she cried the words, and at the third time an answer came from the shadows at a distance.

"I am here," said Martina's voice with a little yawn. "I was weary and have slept while you two greeted each other. Well met at last, lady Heliodore. See, I have brought you back your Olaf, blind it is true, but otherwise lacking nothing of health and strength and station."

Then Heliodore ran to her and kissed first her hand and next her lips. In after days she told me that for those of one who had been

sleeping the eyes of Martina seemed to be strangely wet and red. But if this were so her voice trembled not at all.

"Truly you two should give thanks to God," she said, "Who has brought you together again in so wondrous a fashion, as I do on your behalf from the bottom of my heart. Yet you are still hemmed round by dangers many and great. What now, Olaf? Will you become a ghost also and dwell here in the tomb with Heliodore; and if so, what tale shall I tell to Palka and the rest?"

"Not so," I answered. "I think it will be best that we should return to Kurna. Heliodore must play her part as the spirit of a queen till we can hire some boat and escape with her down the Nile."

"Never," she cried, "I cannot, I cannot. Having come together we must separate no more. Oh! Olaf, you do not know what a life has been mine during all these dreadful months. When I escaped from Musa by stabbing the eunuch who was in charge of me, for which hideous deed may I be forgiven," and I felt her shudder at my side, "I fled I knew not whither till I found myself in this valley, where I hid till the night was gone. Then at daybreak I peeped out from the mouth of the valley and saw the Moslems searching for me, but as yet a long way off. Also now I knew this valley. It was that to which my father had brought me as a child when he came to search for the burying-place of his ancestor, the Pharaoh, which records he had read told him was here. I remembered everything: where the tomb should be, how we had entered it through a hole, how we had found the mummy of a royal lady, whose face was covered with a gilded mask, and on her breast the necklace which I wear.

"I ran along the valley, searching the left side of it with my eyes, till I saw a flat stone which I knew again. It was called the Table of Offerings. I was sure that the hole by which we had entered the tomb was quite near to this stone and a little above it, in the face of the cliff. I climbed; I found what seemed to be the hole, though of this I could not be certain. I crept down it till it came to an end, and then, in my terror, hung by my hands and dropped into the darkness, not knowing whither I fell, or caring over much if I were killed. As it chanced it was but a little way, and, finding myself unhurt, I crawled along the cavern till I reached this place where there is light, for here the roof of the cave has fallen in. While I crouched amid the rocks I heard the voices of the soldiers above me, heard their officer also

bidding them bring ropes and torches. To the left of where you stand there is a sloping passage that runs down to the great central chamber where sleeps some mighty king, and out of this passage open other chambers. Into the first of these the light of the morning sun struggles feebly. I entered it, seeking somewhere to hide myself, and saw a painted coffin lying on the floor near to the marble sarcophagus from which it had been dragged. It was that in which we had found the body of my ancestress; but since then thieves had been in this place. We had left the coffin in the sarcophagus and the mummy in the coffin, and replaced their lids. Now the mummy lay on the floor, half unwrapped and broken in two beneath the breast. Moreover, the face, which I remembered as being so like my own, was gone to dust, so that there remained of it nothing but a skull, to which hung tresses of long black hair, as, indeed, you may see for yourself.

"By the side of the body was the gilded mask, with black and staring eyes, and the painted breast-piece of stiff linen, neither of which the thieves had found worth stealing.

"I looked and a thought came to me. Lifting the mummy, I thrust it into the sarcophagus, all of it save the gilded mask and the painted breast-piece of stiff linen. Then I laid myself down in the coffin, of which the lid, still lying crosswise, hid me to the waist, and drew the gilded mask and painted breast-piece over my head and bosom. Scarcely was it done when the soldiers entered. By now the reflected sunlight had faded from the place, leaving it in deep shadow; but some of the men held burning torches made from splinters of old coffins, that were full of pitch.

"'Feet have passed here; I saw the marks of them in the dust,' said the officer. 'She may have hidden in this place. Search! Search! It will go hard with us if we return to Musa to tell him that he has lost his toy.'

"They looked into the sarcophagus and saw the broken mummy. Indeed, one of them lifted it, unwillingly enough, and let it fall again, saying grimly,

"'Musa would scarce care for this companion, though in her day she may have been fair enough.'

"Then they came to the coffin.

"'Here's another,' exclaimed the soldier, 'and one with a gold face. Allah! how its eyes stare.'

"'Pull it out,' said the officer.

"'Let that be your task,' answered the man. 'I'll defile myself with no more corpses.'

"The officer came and looked. 'What a haunted hole is this, full of the ghosts of idol worshippers, or so I think,' he said. 'Those eyes stare curses at us. Well, the Christian maid is not here. On, before the torches fail.'

"Then they went, leaving me; the painted linen creaked upon my breast as I breathed again.

"'Till nightfall I lay in that coffin, fearing lest they should return; and I tell you, Olaf, that strange dreams came to me there, for I think I swooned or slept in that narrow bed. Yes, dreams of the past, which you shall hear one day, if we live, for they seem to have to do with you and me. Aye, I thought that the dead woman in the sarcophagus at my side awoke and told them to me. At length I rose and crept back to this place where we stand, for here I could see the friendly light, and being outworn, laid me down and slept.

"At the first break of day I crawled from the tomb, followed that same road by which I had entered, though I found it hard to climb up through the entrance hole.

"No living thing was to be seen in the valley, except a great night bird flitting to its haunt. I was parched with thirst, and knowing that in this dry place I soon must perish, I glided from rock to rock towards the mouth of the valley, thinking to find some other grave or cranny where I might lie hid till night came again and I could descend to the plain and drink. But, Olaf, before I had gone many steps I discovered fresh food, milk and water laid upon a rock, and though I feared lest they might be poisoned, ate and drank of them. When I knew that they were wholesome I thought that some friend must have set them there to satisfy my wants, though I knew not who the friend could be. Afterwards I learned that this food was an offering to the ghosts of the dead. Among our forefathers in forgotten generations it was, I know, the custom to make such offerings, since in their blindness they believed that the spirts of their beloved needed sustenance as their bodies once had done.

Doubtless the memory of the rite still survives; at least, to this day the offerings are made. Indeed, when it was found that they were not made in vain, more and more of them were brought, so that I have lacked nothing.

"Here then I have dwelt for many moons among the dust of men departed, only now and again wandering out at night. Once or twice folk have seen me when I ventured to the plains, and I have been tempted to speak to them and ask their help. But always they fled away, believing me to be the ghost of some bygone queen. Indeed, to speak truth, Olaf, this companionship with spirits, for spirits do dwell in these tombs—I have seen them, I tell you I have seen them—has so worked upon my soul that at times I feel as though I were already of their company. Moreover, I knew that I could not live long. The loneliness was sucking up my life as the dry sand sucks water. Had you not come, Olaf, within some few days or weeks I should have died."

Now I spoke for the first time, saying,

"And did you wish to die, Heliodore?"

"No. Before the war between Musa and my father, Magas, news came to us from Byzantium that Irene had killed you. All believed it save I, who did not believe."

"Why not, Heliodore?"

"Because I could not feel that you were dead. Therefore I fought for my life, who otherwise, after we were conquered and ruined and my father was slain fighting nobly, should have stabbed, not that eunuch, but myself. Then later, in this tomb, I came to know that you were not dead. The other lost ones I could feel about me from time to time, but you never, you who would have been the first to seek me when my soul was open to such whisperings. So I lived on when all else would have died, because hope burned in me like a lamp unquenchable. And at last you came! Oh! at last you came!"

CHAPTER IV
THE CALIPH HARUN

Here there is an absolute blank in my story. One of those walls of oblivion of which I have spoken seems to be built across its path. It is as though a stream had plunged suddenly from some bright valley into the bosom of a mountain side and there vanished from the ken of man. What happened in the tomb after Heliodore had ended her tale; whether we departed thence together or left her there a while; how we escaped from Kurna, and by what good fortune or artifice we came safely to Alexandria, I know not. As to all these matters my vision fails me utterly. So far as I am concerned, they are buried beneath the dust of time. I know as little of them as I know of where and how I slept between my life as Olaf and this present life of mine; that is, nothing at all. Yet in this way or in that the stream did win through the mountain, since beyond all grows clear again.

Once more I stood upon the deck of the *Diana* in the harbour of Alexandria. With me were Martina and Heliodore. Heliodore's face was stained and she was dressed as a boy, such a harlequin lad as singers and mountebanks often take in their company. The ship was ready to start and the wind served. Yet we could not sail because of the lack of some permission. A Moslem galley patrolled the harbour and threatened to sink us if we dared to weigh without this paper. The mate had gone ashore with a bribe. We waited and waited. At length the captain, Menas, who stood by me, whispered into my ear,

"Be calm; he comes; all is well."

Then I heard the mate shout: "I have the writing under seal," and Menas gave the order to cast off the ropes that held the ship to the quay. One of the sailors came up and reported to Menas that their companion, Cosmas, was missing. It seemed that he had slipped ashore without leave and had not returned.

"There let him bide," said Menas, with an oath. "Doubtless the hog lies drunk in some den. When he awakes he may tell what tale he pleases and find his own way back to Lesbos. Cast off, cast off! I say."

At this moment that same Cosmas appeared. I could not see him, but I could hear him plainly enough. Evidently he had become

involved in some brawl, for an angry woman and others were demanding money of him and he was shouting back drunken threats. A man struck him and the woman got him by the beard. Then his reason left him altogether.

"Am I, a Christian, to be treated thus by you heathen dogs?" he screamed. "Oh, you think I am dirt beneath your feet. I have friends, I tell you I have friends. You know not whom I serve. I say that I am a soldier of Olaf the Northman, Olaf the Blind, Olaf Red-Sword, he who made you prophet-worshippers sing so small at Mitylene, as he will do again ere long."

"Indeed, friend," said a quiet voice. It was that of the Moslem captain, Yusuf, he who befriended us when we arrived at Alexandria, who had been watching all this scene. "Then you serve a great general, as some of us have cause to know. Tell me, where is he now, for I hear that he has left Lesbos?"

"Where is he? Why, aboard yonder ship, of course. Oh! he has fooled you finely. Another time you'll search beggar's rags more closely."

"Cast off! Cast off!" roared Menas.

"Nay," said the officer, "cast not off. Soldiers, drive away those men. I must have words with the captain of this ship. Come, bring that drunken fellow with you."

"Now all is finished," I said.

"Yes," answered Heliodore, "all is finished. After we have endured so much it is hard. Well, at least death remains to us."

"Hold your hand," exclaimed Martina. "God still lives and can save us yet."

Black bitterness took hold of me. In some few days I had hoped to reach Lesbos, and there be wed to Heliodore. And now! And now!

"Cut the ropes, Menas," I cried, "and out with the oars. We'll risk the galley. You, Martina, set me at the mouth of the gangway and tell me when to strike. Though I be blind I may yet hold them back till we clear the quay."

She obeyed, and I drew the red sword from beneath my rags. Then, amidst the confusion which followed, I heard the grave voice of Yusuf speaking to me.

"Sir," he said, "for your own sake I pray you put up that sword, which we think is one whereof tales have been told. To fight is useless, for I have bowmen who can shoot you down and spears that can outreach you. General Olaf, a brave man should know when to surrender, especially if he be blind."

"Aye, sir," I answered, "and a brave man should know when to die."

"Why should you die, General?" went on the voice. "I do not know that for a Christian to visit Egypt disguised as a beggar will be held a crime worthy of death, unless indeed you came hither to spy out the land."

"Can the blind spy?" asked Martina indignantly.

"Who can say, Lady? But certainly it seems that *your* eyes are bright and quick enough. Also there is another matter. A while ago, when this ship came to Alexandria, I signed a paper giving leave to a certain eyeless musician and his niece to ply their trade in Egypt. Then there were two of you; now I behold a third. Who is that comely lad with a stained face that stands beside you?"

Heliodore began some story, saying that she was the orphan son of I forget whom, and while she told it certain of the Moslems slipped past me.

"Truly you should do well in the singing trade," interrupted the officer with a laugh, "seeing that for a boy your voice is wondrous sweet. Are you quite sure that you remember your sex aright? Well, it can easily be proved. Bare that lad's bosom, soldiers. Nay, 'tis needless; snatch off that head-dress."

A man obeyed, and Heliodore's beautiful black hair, which I would not suffer her to cut, fell tumbling to her knees.

"Let me be," she said. "I admit that I am a woman."

"That is generous of you, Lady," the officer answered in the midst of the laughter which followed. "Now will you add to your goodness by telling me your name? You refuse? Then shall I help you? In the late Coptic war it was my happy fortune twice to see a certain noble maiden, the daughter of Magas the Prince, whom the Emir Musa afterwards took for himself, but who fled from him. Tell me, Lady, have you a twin sister?"

"Cease your mockings, sir," said Heliodore despairingly. "I am she you seek."

"'Tis Musa seeks you, not I, Lady."

"Then, sir, he seeks in vain, for know that ere he finds I die. Oh! sir, I know you have a noble heart; be pitiful and let us go. I'll tell you all the truth. Olaf Red-Sword yonder and I have long been affianced. Blind though he is, he sought me through great dangers, aye, and found me. Would you part us at the last? In the name of the God we both worship, and of your mother, I pray you let us go."

"By the Prophet, that I would do, Lady, only then I fear me that I should let my head go from its shoulders also. There are too many in this secret for it to bide there long if I did as you desire. Nay, you must to the Emir, all three of you—not Musa, but to his rival, Obaidallah, who loves him little, and by the decree of the Caliph once again rules Egypt. Be sure that in a matter between you and Musa you will meet with justice from Obaidallah. Come now, fearing nothing, to where we may find you all garments more befitting to your station than those mummer's robes."

So a guard was formed round us, and we went. As my feet touched the quay I heard a sound of angry voices, followed by groans and a splash in the water.

"What is that?" I asked of Yusuf.

"I think, General, that your servants from the *Diana* have settled some account that they had with the drunken dog who was so good as to bark out your name to me. But, with your leave, I will not look to make sure."

"God pardon him! As yet I cannot," I muttered, and marched on.

We stood, whether on that day or another I do not know, in some hall of judgment. Martina whispered to me that a small, dark man was seated in the chair of state, and about him priests and others. This was the Emir Obaidallah. Musa, that had been Emir, who, she said, was fat and sullen, was there also, and whenever his glance fell upon Heliodore I felt her shiver at my side. So was the Patriarch Politian who pleaded our cause. The case was long, so long that, being courteous as ever, they gave us cushions to sit on, also, in an interval, food and sherbet.

Musa claimed Heliodore as his slave. An officer who prosecuted claimed that Allah having given me, their enemy and a well-known general who had done them much damage, into their hands, I should be put to death. Politian answered on behalf of all of us, saying that we had harmed no man. He added that as there was a truce between the Christians and the Moslems, I could not be made to suffer the penalties of war in a time of peace, who had come to Egypt but to seek a maid to whom I was affianced. Moreover, that even if it were so, the murder of prisoners was not one of those penalties.

The Emir listened to all but said little. At length, however, he asked whether we were willing to become Moslems, since if so he thought that we might go free. We answered that we were not willing.

"Then it would seem," he said, "that the lady Heliodore, having been taken in war, must be treated as a prisoner of war, the only question being to whom she belongs."

Now Musa interrupted angrily, shouting out that as to this there was no doubt, since she belonged to him, who had captured her during his tenure of office.

The Emir thought a while, and we waited trembling. At last he gave judgment, saying:

"The General Olaf the Blind, who in Byzantium was known as Olaf Red-Sword or as Michael, and who while in the service of the Empress Irene often made war against the followers of the Prophet, but who afterwards lost his eyes at the hands of this same evil woman, is a man of whom all the world has heard. Particularly have we Moslems heard of him, seeing that as governor of Lesbos in recent days he inflicted a great defeat upon our navy, slaying many thousands and taking others prisoner. But as it chances God, Who bides His time to work justice, set a bait for him in the shape of a fair woman. On this bait he has been hooked, notwithstanding all his skill and cunning, and delivered into our hands, having come into Egypt disguised as a beggar in order to seek out that woman. Still, as he is so famous a man, and as at present there is a truce between us and the Empire of the East, which truce raises certain doubtful points of high policy, I decree that his case be remitted to the Caliph Harun-al-Rashid, my master, and that he be conveyed to Baghdad there to await judgment. With him will go the woman whom he

alleges to be his niece, but who, as we are informed, was one of the waiting-ladies of the Empress Irene. Against her there is nothing to be said save that she may be a Byzantine spy.

"Now I come to the matter of the lady Heliodore, who is reported to be the wife or the lover or the affianced of this General Olaf, a question of which God alone knows the truth. This lady Heliodore is a person of high descent and ancient race. She is the only child of the late Prince Magas, who claimed to have the blood of the old Pharaohs in his veins, and who within this year was defeated and slain by my predecessor in office, the Emir Musa. The said Emir, having captured the lady Heliodore, purposed to place her in his harem, as he had a right to do, seeing that she refused the blessings of the Faith. As it chanced, however, she escaped from him, as it is told by stabbing the eunuch in charge of her. At least it is certain that this eunuch was found dead, though by whom he was killed is *not* certain. Now that she has been taken again, the lord Musa claims the woman as his spoil and demands that I should hand her over to him. Yet it seems to me that if she is the spoil of anyone, she belongs to the Emir governing Egypt at the date of her recapture. It was only by virtue of his office as Emir, and not by gift, purchase, or marriage contract, that the lord Musa came into possession of her, which possession was voided by her flight before she was added to his household and he acquired any natural rights over her in accordance with our law. Now for my part, I, as Emir, make no claim to this woman, holding it a hateful thing before God to force one into my household who has no wish to dwell there, especially when I know her to be married or affianced to another man. Still, as here also are involved high questions of law, I command that the lady Heliodore, daughter of the late Prince Magas, shall also be conveyed with all courtesy and honour to the Caliph Harun at Baghdad, there to abide his judgment of her case. The matter is finished. Let the officers concerned carry out my decree and answer for the safety of these prisoners with their lives."

"The matter is not finished," shouted the ex-Emir Musa. "You, Obaidallah, have uttered this false judgment because your heart is black towards me whom you have displaced."

"Then appeal against it," said Obaidallah, "but know that if you attempt to lay hands upon this lady, my orders are that you be cut

down as an enemy to the law. Patriarch of the Christians, you sail for Baghdad to visit the Caliph at his request in a ship that he has sent for you. Into your hands I give these prisoners under guard, knowing that you will deal well with them, who are of your false faith. To you also who have the Caliph's ear, Allah knows why, I will entrust letters making true report of all this matter. Let proper provision be made for the comfort of the General Olaf and of those with him. Musa, may your greetings at the Court of Baghdad be such as you deserve; meanwhile cease to trouble me."

At the door of that hall I was separated from Heliodore and Martina and led to some house or prison, where I was given a large room with servants to wait upon me. Here I slept that night, and on the morrow asked when we sailed for Beirut on our way to Baghdad. The chief of the servants answered that he did not know. During that day I was visited by Yusuf, the officer who had captured us on board the *Diana*. He also told me that he did not know when we sailed, but certainly it would not be for some days. Further, he said that I need have no fear for the lady Heliodore and Martina, as they were well treated in some other place. Then he led me into a great garden, where he said I was at liberty to walk whenever I pleased.

Thus began perhaps the most dreadful time of waiting and suspense in all this life of mine, seeing that it was the longest. Every few days the officer Yusuf would visit me and talk of many matters, for we became friends. Only of Heliodore and Martina he could or would tell me nothing, nor of when we were to set out on our journey to Baghdad. I asked to be allowed to speak with the Patriarch Politian, but he answered that this was impossible, as he had been called away from Alexandria for a little while. Nor could I have audience with the Emir Obaidallah, for he too had been called away.

Now my heart was filled with terrors, for I feared lest in this way or in that Heliodore had fallen into the hands of the accursed Musa. I prayed Yusuf to tell me the truth of the matter, whereon he swore by the Prophet that she was safe, but would say no more. Nor did this comfort me much, since for aught I knew he might mean she was safe in death. I was aware, further, that the Moslems held it no crime to deceive an infidel. Week was added to week, and still I languished in this rich prison. The best of garments and food were brought to me; I was even given wine. Kind hands tended me and led me from

place to place. I lacked nothing except freedom and the truth. Doubt and fear preyed upon my heart till at length I fell ill and scarcely cared to walk in the garden. One day when Yusuf visited me I told him that he would not need to come many more times, since I felt that I was going to die.

"Do not die," he answered, "since then perchance you will find you have done so in vain," and he left me.

On the following evening he returned and told me that he had brought a physician to see me, a certain Mahommed, who was standing before me. Although I had no hope from any physician, I prayed this Mahommed to be seated, whereon Yusuf left us, closing the door behind him.

"Be pleased to set out your case, General Olaf," said Mahommed in a grave, quiet voice, "for know that I am sent by the Caliph himself to minister to you."

"How can that be, seeing that he is in Baghdad?" I answered. Still, I told him my ailments.

When I had finished he said:

"I perceive that you suffer more from your mind than from your body. Be so good, now, as to repeat to me the tale of your life, of which I have already heard something. Tell me especially of those parts of it which have to do with the lady Heliodore, daughter of Magas, of your blinding by Irene for her sake, and of your discovery of her in Egypt, where you sought her disguised as a beggar."

"Why should I tell you all my story, sir?"

"That I may know how to heal you of your sickness. Also, General Olaf, I will be frank with you. I am more than a mere physician; I have certain powers under the Caliph's seal, and it will be wise on your part to open all your heart to me."

Now I reflected that there could be little harm in repeating to this strange doctor what so many already knew. So I told him everything, and the tale was long.

"Wondrous! Most wondrous!" said the grave-voiced physician when I had finished. "Yet to me the strangest part of your history is that played therein by the lady Martina. Had she been your lover, now, one might have understood—perhaps," and he paused.

"Sir Physician," I answered, "the lady Martina has been and is no more than my friend."

"Ah! Now I see new virtues in your religion, since we Moslems do not find such friends among those women who are neither our mothers nor our sisters. Evidently the Christian faith must have power to change the nature of women, which I thought to be impossible. Well, General Olaf, I will consider of your case, and I may tell you that I have good hopes of finding a medicine by which it can be cured, all save your sight, which in this world God Himself cannot give back to you. Now I have a favour to ask. I see that in this room of yours there is a curtain hiding the bed of the servant who sleeps with you. I desire to see another patient here, and that this patient should not see you. Of your goodness will you sit upon the bed behind that curtain, and will you swear to me on your honour as a soldier that whatever you may hear you will in no way reveal yourself?"

"Surely, that is if it is nothing which will bring disgrace upon my head or name."

"It will be nothing to bring disgrace on your head or name, General Olaf, though perhaps it may bring some sorrow to your heart. As yet I cannot say."

"My heart is too full of sorrow to hold more," I answered.

Then he led me down to the guard's bed, on which I sat myself down, being strangely interested in this play. He drew the curtain in front of me, and I heard him return to the centre of the room and clap his hands. Someone entered, saying,

"High Lord, your will?"

"Silence!" he exclaimed, and began to whisper orders, while I wondered what kind of a physician this might be who was addressed as "High Lord."

The servant went, and, after a while of waiting that seemed long, once more the door was opened, and I heard the sweep of a woman's dress upon the carpet.

"Be seated, Lady," said the grave voice of the physician, "for I have words to say to you."

"Sir, I obey," answered another voice, at the sound of which my heart stood still. It was that of Heliodore.

"Lady," went on the physician, "as my robe will tell you, I am a doctor of medicine. Also, as it chances, I am something more, namely, an envoy appointed by the Caliph Harun-al-Rashid, having full powers to deal with your case. Here are my credentials if you care to read them," and I heard a crackling as of parchment being unfolded.

"Sir," answered Heliodore, "I will read the letters later. For the present I accept your word. Only I would ask one question, if it pleases you to answer. Why have not I and the General Olaf been conveyed to the presence of the Caliph himself, as was commanded by the Emir Obaidallah?"

"Lady, because it was not convenient to the Caliph to receive you, since as it chances at present he is moving from place to place upon the business of the State. Therefore, as you will find in the writing, he has appointed me to deal with your matter. Now, Lady, the Caliph and I his servant know all your story from lips which even you would trust. You are betrothed to a certain enemy of his, a Northman named Olaf Red-Sword or Michael, who was blinded by the Empress Irene for some offence against her, but was afterwards appointed by her son Constantine to be governor of the Isle of Lesbos. This Olaf, by the will of God, inflicted a heavy defeat upon the forces of the Caliph which he had sent to take Lesbos. Then, by the goodness of God, he wandered to Egypt in search of you, with the result that both of you were taken prisoner. Lady, it will be clear to you that, having this wild hawk Olaf in his hands, the Caliph would scarcely let him go again to prey upon the Moslems, though whether he will kill him or make of him a slave as yet I do not know. Nay, hear me out before you speak. The Caliph has been told of your wondrous beauty, and as I see even less than the truth. Also he has heard of the high spirit which you showed in the Coptic rising, when your father, the Prince Magas, was slain, and of how you escaped out of the hand of the Emir Musa the Fat, and were not afraid to dwell for months alone in the tombs of the ancient dead. Now the Caliph, being moved in his heart by your sad plight and all that he has heard concerning you, commands me to make you an offer.

"The offer is that you should come to his Court, and there be instructed for a while by his learned men in the truths of religion. Then, if it pleases you to adopt Islam, he will take you as one of his

wives, and if it does not please you, will add you to his harem, since it is not lawful for him to marry a woman who remains a Christian. In either case he will make on you a settlement of property to the value of that which belonged to your father, the Prince Magas. Reflect well before you answer. Your choice lies between the memory of a blind man, whom I think you will never see again, and the high place of one of the wives of the greatest sovereign of the earth."

"Sir, before I answer I would put a question to you. Why do you say 'the memory of a blind man'?"

"Because, Lady, a rumour has reached me which I desired to hold back from you, but which now you force me to repeat. It is that this General Olaf has in truth already passed the gate of death."

"Then, sir," she answered, with a little sob, "it behoves me to follow him through that gate."

"That will happen when it pleases God. Meanwhile, what is your answer?"

"Sir, my answer is that I, a poor Christian prisoner, a victim of war and fate, thank the Caliph Harun-al-Rashid for the honours and the benefits he would shower on me, and with humility decline them."

"So be it, Lady. The Caliph is not a man who would wish to force your inclination. Still, this being so, I am charged to say he bids you remember that you were taken prisoner in war by the Emir Musa. He holds that, subject to his own prior right, which he waives, you are the property of the Emir Musa under a just interpretation of the law. Yet he would be merciful as God is merciful, and therefore he gives you the choice of three things. The first of these is that you adopt Islam with a faithful heart and go free."

"That I refuse, as I have refused it before," said Heliodore.

"The second is," he continued, "that you enter the harem of the Emir Musa."

"That I refuse also."

"And the third and last is that, having thrust aside his mercy, you suffer the common fate of a captured Christian who persists in error, and die."

"That I accept," said Heliodore.

"You accept death. In the splendour of your youth and beauty, you accept death," he said, with a note of wonder in his voice. "Truly, you

are great-hearted, and the Caliph will grieve when he learns his loss, as I do now. Yet I have my orders, for which my head must answer. Lady, if you die, it must be here and now. Do you still choose death?"

"Yes," she said in a low voice.

"Behold this cup," he went on, "and this draught which I pour into it," and I heard the sound of liquid flowing. "Presently I shall ask you to drink of it, and then, after a little while, say the half of an hour, you will fall asleep, to wake in whatever world God has appointed to the idol worshippers of the Cross. You will suffer no pain and no fear; indeed, maybe the draught will bring you joy."

"Then give it me," said Heliodore faintly. "I will drink at once and have done."

Then it was that I came out from behind my curtain and groped my way towards them.

"Sir Physician, or Sir Envoy of the Caliph Harun," I said; but for the moment went no further, since, with a low cry, Heliodore cast herself upon my breast and stopped my lips with hers.

"Hush till I have spoken," I whispered, placing my arm about her; then continued. "I swore to you just now that I would not reveal myself unless I heard aught which would bring disgrace on my head or name. To stand still behind yonder curtain while my betrothed is poisoned at your hands would bring disgrace upon my head and name so black that not all the seas of all the world could wash it away. Say, Physician, does yonder cup hold enough of death for both of us?"

"Yes, General Olaf, and if you choose to share it I think the Caliph will be glad, since he loves not the killing of brave men. Only it must be now and without more words. You can talk for a little afterwards before the sleep takes you."

"So be it," I said. "Since I must die, as I heard you decree but now, it is no crime to die thus, or at least I'll risk it who have one to guard upon that road. Drink, beloved, a little less than half since I am the stronger. Then give me the cup."

"Husband, I pledge you," she said, and drank, thrusting the cup into my hand.

I, too, lifted it to my lips. Lo! it was empty.

"Oh! most cruel of thieves," I cried, "you have stolen all."

"Aye," she answered. "Shall I see you swallow poison before my eyes? I die, but perchance God may save you yet."

"Not so, Heliodore," I cried again, and, turning, began to grope my way to the window-place, which I knew was far from the ground, since I had no weapon that would serve my turn.

In an instant, as I thrust the lattice open, I felt two strong arms cast about me and heard the physician exclaim,

"Come, Lady, help me with this madman, lest he do himself a mischief."

She seized me also, and we struggled together all three of us. The doors burst open, and I was dragged back into the centre of the room.

"Olaf Red-Sword, the blind General of the Christians," said the physician in a new voice, one that was full of majesty and command, "I who speak to you am no doctor of medicine and no envoy. I am Harun-al-Rashid, Caliph of the Faithful. Is it not so, my servants?"

"It is so, Caliph," pealed the answer from many throats.

"Hearken, then, to the decree of Harun-al-Rashid. Learn both of you that all which has passed between us was but a play that I have played to test the love and faithfulness of you twain. Lady Heliodore, be at ease. You have drunk nothing save water distilled with roses, and no sleep shall fall on you save that which Nature brings to happiness. Lady, I tell you that, having seen what I have seen and heard what I have heard, rather would I stand in the place of that blind man to-night than be Sovereign of the East. Truly, I knew not that love such as yours was to be met with in the world. I say that when I saw you drain the cup in a last poor struggle to drive back the death that threatened this Olaf my own heart went out in love for you. Yet have no fear, since my love is of a kind that would not rob you of your love, but rather would bring it to a rich and glorious blossom in the sunshine of my favour. Wondrous is the tale of the wooing of you twain and happy shall be its end. General Olaf, you conquered me in war and dealt with those of my servants who fell into your hands according to the nobleness of your heart. Shall I, then, be outdone in generosity by one whom a while ago I should have named a Christian dog? Not so! Let the high priest of the Christians, Politian, be brought hither. He stands without, and with

him the lady named Martina, who was the Empress Irene's waiting-woman."

The messengers went and there followed a silence. There are times when the heart is too full for words; at least, Heliodore and I found nothing to say to each other. We only clasped each other's hand and waited.

At length the door opened, and I heard the eager, bustling step of Politian, also another gliding step, which I knew for that of Martina. She came to me, she kissed me on the brow, and whispered into my ear,

"So all is well at last, as I knew it would be; and now, Olaf—and now, Olaf, you are about to be married. Yes, at once, and—I wish you joy."

Her words were simple enough, yet they kindled in my heart a light by which it saw many things.

"Martina," I said, "if I have lived to reach this hour, under God it is through you. Martina, they say that each of us has a guardian angel in heaven, and if that be so, mine has come to earth. Yet in heaven alone shall I learn to thank her as I ought."

Then suddenly Martina was sobbing on my breast; after which I remember only that Heliodore helped me to wipe away her tears, while in the background I heard the Caliph say to himself in his deep voice,

"Wondrous! Wondrous! By Allah! these Christians are a strange folk. How far wiser is our law, for then he could have married both of them, and all three would have been happy. Truly he who decreed that it should be so knew the heart of man and woman and was a prophet sent by God. Nay, answer me not, friend Politian, since on matters of religion we have agreed that we will never argue. Do your office according to your unholy rites, and I and my servants will watch, praying that the Evil One may be absent from the service. Oh! silence, silence! Have I not said that we will not argue on subjects of religion? To your business, man."

So Politian drew us together to the other end of the chamber, and there wed us as best he might, with Martina for witness and the solemn Moslems for congregation.

When it was over, Harun commanded my wife to lead me before him.

"Here is a marriage gift for you, General Olaf," he said; "one, I think, that you will value more than any other," and he handed me something sharp and heavy.

I felt it, hilt and blade, and knew it for the Wanderer's sword, yes, my own red sword from which I took my name, that the Commander of the Faithful now restored to me, and with it my place and freedom. I took it, and, saying no word, with that same sword gave to him the triple salute due to a sovereign.

Instantly I heard Harun's scimitar, the scimitar that was famous throughout the East, rattle as it left its scabbard, as did the scimitars of all those who attended on him, and knew that there was being returned to me the salute which a sovereign gives to a general in high command. Then the Caliph spoke again.

"A wedding gift to you, Lady Heliodore, child of an ancient and mighty race, and new-made wife of a gallant man. For the second time to-night take this cup of gold, but let that which lies within it adorn your breast in memory of Harun. Queens of old have worn those jewels, but never have they hung above a nobler heart."

Heliodore took the cup, and in her trembling hand I heard the priceless gems that filled it clink against its sides. Once more the Caliph spoke.

"A gift for you also, Lady Martina. Take this ring from my hand and place it on your own. It seems a small thing, does it not? Yet something lies within its circle. In this city I saw to-day a very beauteous house built by one of your Grecian folk, and behind it lands that a swift horse could scarcely circle twice within an hour, most fruitful lands fed by the waters. That house and those lands are yours, together with rule over all who dwell upon them. There you may live content with whomever you may please, even if he be a Christian, free of tax or tribute, provided only that neither you nor he shall plot against my power. Now, to all three of you farewell, perchance for ever, unless some of us should meet again in war. General Olaf, your ship lies in the harbour; use it when you will. I pray that you will think kindly of Harun-al-Rashid, as he does of you,

Olaf Red-Sword. Come, let us leave these two. Lady Martina, I pray you to be my guest this night."

So they all went, leaving Heliodore and myself alone in the great room, yes, alone at last and safe.

CHAPTER V
IRENE'S PRAYER

Years had gone by, I know not how many, but only that much had happened in them. For a while Irene and young Constantine were joint rulers of the Empire. Then they quarrelled again, and Constantine, afraid of treachery, fled with his friends in a ship after an attempt had been made to seize his person. He purposed to join his legions in Asia, or so it was said, and make war upon his mother. But those friends of his upon the ship were traitors, who, fearing Irene's vengeance or perhaps his own, since she threatened to tell him all the truth concerning them, seized Constantine and delivered him up to Irene. She, the mother who bore him, caused him to be taken to the purple Porphyry Chamber in the palace, that chamber in which, as the first-born of an emperor, he saw the light, and there robbed him of light for ever.

Yes, Stauracius and his butchers blinded Constantine as I had been blinded. Only it was told that they drove their knives deeper so that he died. But others say that he lived on, a prisoner, unknown, unheeded, as those uncles of his whom *he* had blinded and who once were in my charge had lived, till in Greece the assassin's daggers found their hearts. If so, oh! what a fate was his.

Afterwards for five years Irene reigned alone in glory, while Stauracius, my god-father, and his brother eunuch, Aetius, strove against each other to be first Minister of the Crown. Aetius won, and, not content with all he had, plotted that his relative Nicetas, who held the place of Captain of the Guard, which once I filled, should be named successor to the throne. Then at last the nobles rebelled, and, electing one of their number, Nicephorus, as emperor, seized Irene in her private house of Eleutherius, where she lay sick, and crowned Nicephorus in St. Sophia. Next day he visited Irene, when, fearing the worst and broken by illness, she bought a promise of safety by revealing to him all her hoarded treasure.

Thus fell Irene, the mighty Empress of the Eastern Empire!

Now during all these years Heliodore and I were left in peace at Lesbos. I was not deposed from my governorship of that isle, which

prospered greatly under my rule. Even Irene's estates, which Constantine had given me, were not taken away. At the appointed times I remitted the tribute due, yes, and added to the sum, and received back the official acknowledgment signed by the Empress, and with it the official thanks. But with these never came either letter or message. Yet it is evident she knew that I was married, for to Heliodore did come a message, and with it a gift. The gift was that necklace and those other ornaments which Irene had caused to be made in an exact likeness of the string of golden shells separated by emerald beetles, one half of which I had taken from the grave of the Wanderer at Aar and the other half of which was worn by Heliodore.

So much of the gift. The message was that she who owned the necklace might wish to have the rest of the set. To it were added the words that a certain general had been wrong when he prophesied that the wearing of this necklace by any woman save one would bring ill fortune to the wearer, since from the day it hung about Irene's neck even that which seemed to be bad fortune had turned to good. Thus she had escaped "the most evil thing in the world, namely, another husband," and had become the first woman in the world.

These words, which were written on a piece of sheepskin, sealed up, and addressed to the Lady Heliodore, but unsigned, I thought of the most evil omen, since boastfulness always seems to be hateful to the Power that decrees our fates. So, indeed, they proved to be.

On a certain day in early summer—it was the anniversary of my marriage in Egypt—Heliodore and I had dined with but two guests. Those guests were Jodd, the great Northman, my lieutenant, and his wife, Martina, for within a year of our return to Lesbos Jodd and Martina had married. It comes back to me that there was trouble about the business, but that when Jodd gave out that either she must marry him or that he would sail back to his northern land, bidding good-bye to us all for ever, Martina gave way. I think that Heliodore managed the matter in some fashion of her own after the birth of our first-born son; how, I held it best never to inquire. At least, it was managed, and the marriage turned out well enough in the end, although at first Martina was moody at times and somewhat sharp of tongue with Jodd. Then they had a baby which died, and this dead child drew them closer together than it might have done had it lived. At any rate, from that time forward Martina grew more gentle with

Jodd, and when other children were born they seemed happy together.

Well, we four had dined, and it comes to me that our talk turned upon the Caliph Harun and his wonderful goodness to us, whom as Christians he was bound to despise and hate. Heliodore told me then for the first time how she was glad he had made it clear so soon that what she drank from the gold cup which now stood upon our table was no more than rose water.

So strong is the working of the mind that already she had begun to feel as though poison were numbing her heart and clouding her brain, and was sure that soon she would have fallen into the sleep which Harun had warned her would end in death.

"Had he been a true physician, he would have known that this might be so, and that such grim jests are very dangerous," I said. Then I added, for I did not wish to dwell longer upon a scene the memory of which was dreadful to me, although it had ended well,

"Tell us, Martina, is it true that those rich possessions of yours in Alexandria which the Caliph gave you are sold?"

"Yes, Olaf," she answered, "to a company of Greek merchants, and not so ill. The contract was signed but yesterday. It was my wish that we should leave Lesbos and go to live in this place, as we might have done with safety under Harun's signed *firman*, but Jodd here refused."

"Aye," said Jodd in his big voice. "Am I one to dwell among Moslems and make money out of trade and gardens in however fine a house? Why, I should have been fighting with these prophet-worshippers within a month, and had my throat cut. Moreover, how could I bear to be separated from my general, and whatever she may think, how could Martina bear to lose sight of her god-son? Why, Olaf, I tell you that, although you are married and she is married, she still thinks twice as much of you as she does of me. Oh! blind man's dog once, blind man's dog always! Look not so angry, Martina. Why, I wonder, does the truth always make women angry?" and he burst into one of his great laughs.

At this moment Heliodore rose from the table and walked to the open window-place to speak to our children and Martina's, a merry company who were playing together in the garden. Here she stood a

while studying the beautiful view of the bay beneath; then of a sudden called out,

"A ship! A ship sailing into the harbour, and it flies the Imperial standard."

"Then pray God she brings no bad news," I said, who feared that Imperial standard and felt that we had all been somewhat too happy of late. Moreover, I knew that no royal ship was looked for from Byzantium at this time, and dreaded lest this one should bear letters from the new Emperor dismissing me from my office, or even worse tidings.

"What bad news should she bring?" growled Jodd. "Oh! I know what is in your mind, General, but if this upstart Nicephorus is wise, he'll leave you alone, since Lesbos does not want another governor, and will tell him so if there be need. Yes, it will take more than one ship of war, aye, and more than three, to set up another governor in Lesbos. Nay, rebuke me not, General, for I at least have sworn no oath of homage to this Nicephorus, nor have the other Northmen or the men of Lesbos."

"You are like a watchdog, Jodd, barking at you know not what, just because it is strange. Go now, I pray you, to the quay, and bring back to us news of this ship."

So he went, and for the next two hours or more I sat in my private room dictating letters to Heliodore on matters connected with the duties of my office. The work came to an end at last, and I was preparing to take my evening ride on a led mule when Martina entered the room.

"Do you ride with us to-night, Martina?" I asked, recognising her step.

"No, Olaf," she said quickly, "nor I think can you. Here are letters for you from Byzantium. Jodd has brought them from the ship."

"Where is Jodd?" I said.

"Without, in the company of the captain of the ship, some guards, and a prisoner."

"What prisoner?"

"Perchance the letters will tell you," she replied evasively. "Have I your command to open and read? They are marked 'Most Secret.'"

I nodded, since Martina often acted as my secretary in high matters, being from her training skilled in such things. So she broke the seals and read to myself and to Heliodore, who also was present in the room, as follows:

"'To the Excellent Michael, a General of our armies and Governor of the Isle of Lesbos, Greetings from Nicephorus, by the will of God Emperor.

"'Know, O Michael, that we, the Emperor, reposing especial faith in you our trusted servant, with these letters deliver into your keeping a certain prisoner of State. This prisoner is none other than Irene, who aforetime was Empress.

"'Because of her many wickednesses in the sight of God and man we by the decree of the People, of the Army, of the Senate and of the high Officers of State amidst general rejoicing deposed the said Irene, widow of the Emperor Leo and mother of the late Emperor Constantine, and placed ourselves upon the throne. The said Irene, at her own request, we consigned to the place called the Island of Princes, setting her in charge of certain holy monks. Whilst there, abusing our mercy and confidence, she set on foot plots to murder our Person and repossess herself of the throne.

"'Now our Councillors with one voice urged that she should be put to death in punishment of her crimes, but we, being mindful of the teaching of our Lord and Saviour and of His saying that we should turn the other cheek to those who smite us, out of our gentle pity have taken another counsel.

"'Learn now, most excellent Michael the Blind, who once were known as Olaf Red-Sword, that we hand over to your keeping the person of Irene, aforetime Empress, charging you to deal with her as she dealt with you and as she dealt also with the late Emperor Constantine, the son of her body, for thus shall her evil plottings be brought to naught.'"

"By God's Name, he means that I must blind her!" I exclaimed.

Making no answer, Martina went on with the letter——

"'Should the said Irene survive her just punishment, we command you to make sufficient provision for her daily wants, but no more, and to charge the same against the sum due Us from the revenues of Lesbos. Should she die at once, or at any future time, give to her

decent private burial, and report to Us the circumstances of her death duly attested.

"'Keep these Presents secret and do not act upon them until the ship which brings them and the prisoner to you has sailed for Byzantium, which it is ordered to do as soon as it has been revictualled. On your head be it to carry out these our commands, for which you shall answer with your life and those of your wife and children. This signed and sealed at our Court of Byzantium on the twelfth day of the sixth month of the first year of our reign, and countersigned by the high officers whose names appear beneath.'"

Such was this awful letter that, having read, Martina thrust into my hand as though she would be rid of it. Then followed a silence, which at length Martina broke.

"Your commands, Excellency," she said in a dry voice. "I understand that the—the—prisoner is in the ante-room in charge of the Captain Jodd."

"Then let her remain in the charge of the Captain Jodd," I exclaimed angrily, "and in your charge, Martina, who are accustomed to attending upon her, and know that you are both answerable for her safety with your lives. Send the captain of the ship to me and prepare a discharge for him. I will not see this woman till he has sailed, since until then I am commanded to keep all secret. Send also the head officer of the guard."

Three days went by. The Imperial ship had sailed, taking with her my formal acknowledgment of the Emperor's letter, and the time had come when once more I must meet Irene face to face.

I sat in the audience chamber of my Great House, and there was present with me only Jodd, my lieutenant in office. Being blind, I dared not receive a desperate woman alone, fearing lest she might stab me or do herself some mischief. At the door of the chamber Jodd took her from the guards, whom he bade remain within call, and conducted her to where I sat. He told me afterwards that she was dressed as a nun, a white hood half hiding her still beautiful face and a silver crucifix hanging upon her breast.

As I heard her come I rose and bowed to her, and my first words to her were to pray her to be seated.

“Nay,” she answered in that rich, well-remembered voice of hers, “a prisoner stands before the judge. I greet you, General Olaf, I pray your pardon—Michael—after long years of separation. You have changed but little, and I rejoice to see that your health is good and that the rank and prosperity which I gave have not been taken from you.”

“I greet you, Madam,” (almost had I said Augusta), I answered, then continued hurriedly: “Lady Irene, I have received certain commands concerning you from the Emperor Nicephorus which it is best that you should hear, so that you shall hold me quit of blame in aught that it may be my duty to inflict upon you. Read them, Captain Jodd. Nay, I forgot, you cannot. Give the copy of the letter to the Lady Irene; the original she can see afterwards if she wills.”

So the paper was given to her by Jodd, and she read it aloud, weighing each word carefully.

“Oh, what a dog is this!” she said when it was finished. “Know, Olaf, that of my free will I surrendered the throne to him, yes, and all my private treasure, he swearing upon the Gospels that I should live in peace and honour till my life’s end. And now he sends me to you to be blinded and then done to death, for that is what he means. Oh! may God avenge me upon him! May he become a byword and a scorn, and may his own end be even worse than that which he has prepared for me. May shame wrap his memory as in a garment, may his bones be dishonoured and his burying-place forgotten. Aye, and so it shall be.”[*]

[*] The skull of this Nicephorus is said to have been used as a drinking cup by his victorious enemy, the King Krum.— Editor.

She paused in her fearful curse, then said in a new voice, that voice in which she was wont to plead,

“You will not blind me, Olaf. You’ll not take from me my last blessing, the light of day. Think what it means——”

“The General Olaf should know well enough,” interrupted Jodd, but I waved him to be silent, and answered,

“Tell me, Madam, how can I do otherwise? It seems to me that my life and that of my wife and children hang upon this deed. Moreover, why should I do otherwise now that by God’s justice the wheel has

come round at last?" I added, pointing to the hollows beneath my brows where the eyes once had been.

"Oh! Olaf," she said, "if I harmed you, you know well it was because I loved you."

"Then God send that no woman ever loves me in such a fashion," broke in Jodd.

"Olaf," she continued, taking no note of him, "once you went very near to loving me also, on that night when you would have eaten the poisoned figs to save my son, the Emperor. At least, you kissed me. If you forget, I cannot. Olaf, can you blind a woman whom you have kissed?"

"Kissing takes two, and I know that you blinded him," muttered Jodd, "for I crucified the brutes you commanded to do the deed to which they confessed."

"Olaf, I admit that I treated you ill; I admit that I would have killed you; but, believe me, it was jealousy and naught but jealousy which drove me on. Almost as soon would I have killed myself; indeed, I thought of it."

"And there the matter ended," said Jodd. "It was Olaf who walked the Hall of the Pit, not you. We found him on the brink of the hole."

"Olaf, after I regained my power——"

"By blinding your own son," said Jodd, "for which you will have an account to settle one day."

"——I dealt well with you. Knowing that you had married my rival, for I kept myself informed of all you did, still I lifted no hand against you——"

"What good was a maimed man to you when you were courting the Emperor Charlemagne?" asked Jodd.

Now at last she turned on him, saying,

"Well is it for you, Barbarian, that if only for a while Fate has reft power from my hands. Oh! this is the bitterest drop in all my cup, that I who for a score of years ruled the world must live to suffer the insults of such as you."

"Then why not die and have done?" asked the imperturbable Jodd. "Or, if you lack the courage, why not submit to the decree of the Emperor, as so many have submitted to your decree, instead of

troubling the general here with prayers for mercy? It would serve as well."

"Jodd," I said, "I command you to be silent. This lady is in trouble; attack those in power, if you will, not those who have fallen."

"There speaks the man I loved," said Irene. "What perverse fate kept us apart, Olaf? Had you taken what I offered, by now you and I would have ruled the world."

"Perhaps, Madam; yet it is right I should say that I do not regret my choice, although because of it I can no longer—look upon the world."

"I know, I know! She of that accursed necklace, which I see you still wear, came between us and spoiled everything. Now I'm ruined for lack of you and you are nobody for lack of me, a soldier who will run his petty course and depart into the universal darkness, leaving never a name behind him. In the ages to be what man will take count of one of a score of governors of the little Isle of Lesbos, who might yet have held the earth in the hollow of his hand and shone a second Cæsar in its annals? Oh! what marplot of a devil rules our destinies? He who fashioned those golden shells upon your breast, or so I think. Well, well, it is so and cannot be altered. The Augusta of the Empire of the East must plead with the man who rejected her, for sight, or rather for her life. You understand, do you not, Olaf, that letter is a command to you to murder me?"

"Just such a command as you gave to those who blinded your son Constantine," muttered Jodd beneath his breath.

"That is what is meant. You are to murder me, and, Olaf, I'm not fit to die. Great place brings great temptations, and I admit that I have greatly sinned; I need time upon the earth to make my peace with Heaven, and if you slay my body now, you will slay my soul as well. Oh! be pitiful! Be pitiful! Olaf, you cannot kill the woman who has lain upon your breast, it is against nature. If you did such a thing you'd never sleep again; you would shudder yourself over the edge of the world! Being what you are, no pomp or power would ever pay you for the deed. Be true to your own high heart and spare me. See, I who for so long was the ruler of many kingdoms, kneel to you and pray you to spare me," and, casting herself down upon her knees, she laid her head upon my feet and wept.

All that scene comes back to me with a strange and terrible vividness, although I had no sight to aid me in its details, save the sight of my soul. I remember that the wonder and horror of it pierced me through and through; the stab of the dagger in my eyes was not more sharp. There was I, Olaf, a mere gentleman of the North, seated in my chair of office, and there before me, her mighty head bowed upon my feet, knelt the Empress of the Earth pleading for her life. In truth all history could show few stranger scenes. What was I to do? If I yielded to her piteous prayers, it was probable that my own life and those of my wife and children would pay the price. Yet how could I clap my hands in their Eastern fashion and summon the executioners to pierce those streaming eyes of hers? "Rise, Augusta," I said, for in this extremity of her shame I gave her back her title, "and tell me, you who are accustomed to such matters, how I can spare you who deal with the lives of others as well as with my own?"

"I thank you for that name," she said as she struggled to her feet. "I've heard it shouted by tens of thousands in the circus and from the throats of armies, but never yet has it been half so sweet to me as now from lips that have no need to utter it. In times bygone I'd have paid you for this service with a province, but now Irene is so poor that, like some humble beggar-woman, she can but give her thanks. Still, repeat it no more, for next time it will sound bitter. What did you ask? How you could save me, was it not? Well, the thing seems simple. In all that letter from Nicephorus there is no direct command that you should blind me. The fellow says that you are to treat me as I treated you, and as I treated Constantine, the Emperor—because I must. Well, I imprisoned both of you. Imprison me and you fulfil the mandate. He says that if I die you are to report it, which shows that he does not mean that I *must* die. Oh! the road of escape is easy, should you desire to travel it. If you do not so desire, then, Olaf, I pray you as a last favour not to hand me over to common men. I see that by your side still hangs that red sword of yours wherewith once I threatened you when you refused me at Byzantium. Draw it, Olaf, and this time I'll guide its edge across my throat. So you will please Nicephorus and win the rewards that Irene can no longer give. Baptised in her blood, what earthly glory is there to which you might not yet attain, you who had dared to lay hands

upon the anointed flesh that even her worst foes have feared to touch lest God's sudden curse should strike them dead?"

So she went on pouring out words with the strange eloquence that she could command at times, till I grew bewildered. She who had lived in light and luxury, who had loved the vision of all bright and glorious things, was pleading for her sight to the man whom she had robbed of sight that he might never more behold the young beauty of her rival. She who had imagination to know the greatness of her sins was pleading to be spared the death she dared not face. She was pleading to me, who for years had been her faithful soldier, the captain of her own guard, sworn to protect her from the slightest ill, me upon whom, for a while, it had pleased her to lavish the wild passion of her imperial heart, who once had almost loved—who, indeed, had kissed her on the lips.

My orders were definite. I was commanded to blind this woman and to kill her in the blinding, which, in truth, I who had power of life and death, I who ruled over this island like a king by virtue of the royal commission, could do without question asked. If I *failed* to fulfil those orders, I must be prepared to pay the price, as if I did fulfil them I might expect a high reward, probably the governorship of some great province of the Empire. This was no common prisoner. She was the ex-Empress, a mighty woman to whom tens of thousands or perhaps millions still looked for help and leadership. It was necessary to those who had seized her place and power that she should be rendered incapable of rule. It was desirable to them that she should die. Yet so delicately were the scales poised between them and the adherents of Irene, among whom were numbered all the great princes of the Church, that they themselves did not dare to inflict mutilation or death upon her. They feared lest it should be followed by a storm of wrath that would shake Nicephorus from his throne and involve them in his ruin.

So they sent her to me, the governor of a distant dependency, the man whom they knew she had wickedly wronged, being certain that her tongue, which it was said could turn the hearts of all men, would never soften mine. Then afterwards they would declare that the warrant was a forgery, that I had but wreaked a private vengeance upon an ancient foe, and, to still the scandal, degrade me from my governorship—into some place of greater power and profit.

Oh! while Irene pleaded before me and, heedless of the presence of Jodd, even cast her arms about me and laid her head upon my breast, all these things passed through my mind. In its scales I weighed the matter out, and the beam rose against me, for I knew well that if I spared Irene I condemned myself and those who were more to me than myself, my wife, my children, and all the Northmen who clung to me, and who would not see me die without blow struck. I understood it all, and, understanding, of a sudden made up my mind—to spare Irene. Come what might, I would be no butcher; I would follow my heart whithersoever it might lead me.

"Cease, Madam," I said. "I have decided. Jodd, bid the messenger summon hither Heliodore and Martina, my wife and yours."

"Oh!" exclaimed Irene, "if these women are to be called in counsel on my case all is finished, seeing that both of them love you and are my enemies. Moreover, I have some pride left. To you I could plead, but not to them, though they blind me with their bodkins after they have stabbed me with their tongues. Excellency, a last boon! Call in your guard and kill me."

"Madam, I said that I had decided, and all the women in the world will not change my mind in this way or in that. Jodd, do my bidding."

Jodd struck a bell, once only, which was the signal for the messenger. He came and received his orders. Then followed a pause, since Heliodore and Martina were in a place close by and must be sent for. During this time Irene began to talk to me of sundry general matters. She compared the view that might be seen from this house in Lesbos to that from the terrace of her palace on the Bosphorus, and described its differences to me. She asked me as to the Caliph Harun-al-Rashid, whom she understood I had seen, inquiring as to the estimate I had formed of his character. Lastly, with a laugh, she dwelt upon the strange vicissitudes of life.

"Look at me," she said. "I began my days as the daughter of a Greek gentleman, with no dower save my wit and beauty. Then I rose to be a ruler of the world, and knew all that it has to give of pomp and power. Nations trembled at my nod; at my smile men grew great; at my frown they faded into nothingness. Save you, Olaf, none ever really conquered me, until I fell in the appointed hour. And

now! Of this splendour there is left but a nun's robe; of this countless wealth but one silver crucifix; of this power—naught."

So she spoke on, still not knowing to what decision I had come; whether she were to be blinded or to live or die. To myself I thought it was a proof of her greatness that she could thus turn her mind to such things while Fate hovered over her, its hand upon a sword. But it may be that she thought thus to impress me and to enmesh me in memories which would tie my hands, or even from the character of my answers to draw some augury of her doom.

The women came at length. Heliodore entered first, and to her Irene bowed.

"Greeting, Lady of Egypt," she said. "Ah! had you taken my counsel in the past, that title might have been yours in very truth, and there you and your husband could have founded a new line of kings independent of the Empire which totters to its fall."

"I remember no such counsel, Madam," said Heliodore. "It seems to me that the course I took was right and one pleasing to God, since it has given me my husband for myself, although, it is true, wickedly robbed of his eyes."

"For yourself! Can you say so while Martina is always at his side?" she asked in a musing voice. "Well, it may be, for in this world strange things happen."

She paused, and I heard both Heliodore and Jodd move as though in anger, for her bitter shaft had gone home. Then she went on softly,

"Lady, may I tell you that, in my judgment, your beauty is even greater than it was, though it is true it has grown from bud to flower. Few bear their years and a mother's burdens so lightly in these hot lands."

Heliodore did not answer, for at that moment Martina entered. Seeing Irene for the first time, she forgot everything that had passed and curtseyed to her in the old fashion, murmuring the familiar words,

"Thy servant greets thee, Augusta."

"Nay, use not that title, Martina, to one who has done with the world and its vanities. Call me 'Mother' if you will, for that is the only name of honour by which those of my religious order may be known.

In truth, as your mother in God, I welcome you and bless you, from my heart forgiving you those ills which you have worked against me, being, as I know well, driven by a love that is greater than any woman bears to woman. But that eating fire of passion scorned is the heritage of both of us, and of it we will talk afterwards. I must not waste the time of the General Olaf, whom destiny, in return for many griefs, has appointed to be my jailer. Oh! Olaf," she added with a little laugh, "some foresight of the future must have taught me to train you for the post. Let us then be silent, ladies, and listen to the judgment which this jailer of mine is about to pass upon me. Do you know it is no less than whether these eyes of mine, which you were wont to praise, Martina, which in his lighter moments even this stern Olaf was wont to praise, should be torn from beneath my brow, and if so, whether it should be done in such a fashion that I die of the deed? That and no less is the matter which his lips must settle. Now speak, Excellency."

"Madam," I said slowly, "to the best of my wit I have considered the letter sent to me under the seal and sign of the Emperor Nicephorus. Although it might be so interpreted by some, I cannot find in that letter any direct command that I should cause you to be blinded, but only one that I should keep you under strict guard, giving you such things as are necessary to your sustenance. This then I shall do, and by the first ship make report of my action to the Emperor at Byzantium."

Now, when she heard these words, at length the proud spirit of Irene broke.

"God reward you, for I cannot, Olaf," she cried. "God reward you, saint among men, who can pay back cruel injuries with the gentlest mercy."

So saying, she burst into tears and fell senseless to the ground.

Martina ran to aid her, but Heliodore turned to me and said in her tender voice,

"This is worthy of you, Olaf, and I would not have you do otherwise. Yet, husband, I fear that this pity of yours has signed the death-warrant of us all."

So it proved to be, though, as it chanced, that warrant was never executed. I made my report to Byzantium, and in course of time the

answer came in a letter from the Emperor. This letter coldly approved of my act in set and formal phrases. It added that the truth had been conveyed publicly to those slanderers of the Emperor who announced that he had caused Irene to be first blinded and then put to death in Lesbos, whereby their evil tongues had been silenced.

Then came this pregnant sentence:

"We command you, with your wife and children and your lieutenant, the Captain Jodd, with his wife and children, to lay down your offices and report yourselves with all speed to Us at our Court of Byzantium, that we may confer with you on certain matters. If it is not convenient to you, or you can find no fitting ship in which to sail at once, know that within a month of your receipt of this letter our fleet will call at Lesbos and bring you and the others herein mentioned to our Presence."

"That is a death sentence," said Martina, when she had finished reading out this passage. "I have seen several such sent in my day, when I was Irene's confidential lady. It is the common form. We shall never reach Byzantium, Olaf, or, if we do, we shall never leave it more."

I nodded, for I knew that this was so. Then, at some whispered word from Martina, Heliodore spoke.

"Husband," she said, "foreseeing this issue, Martina, Jodd, and most of the Northmen and I have made a plan which we now submit to you, praying that for our sakes, if not for yours, you will not thrust it aside. We have bought two good ships, armed them and furnished them with all things needful. Moreover, during the past two months we have sold much of our property, turning it into gold. This is our plan—that we pretend to obey the order of the Emperor, but instead of heading for Byzantium, sail away north to the land in which you were born, where, having rank and possessions, you may still become a mighty chief. If we go at once we shall miss the Imperial fleet, and I think that none will follow us."

Now I bowed my head for a while and thought. Then I lifted it and said,

"So let it be. No other road is open."

For my own sake I would not have stirred an inch. I would have gone to the Court of the Emperor at Byzantium and there argued out

the thing in a gambler's spirit, prepared to win or prepared to lose. There at least I should have had all the image-worshippers who adored Irene, that is, the full half of the Empire, upon my side, and if I perished, I should perish as a saint. But a wife and children are the most terrible gifts of God, if the most blessed, for they turn our hearts to water. So, for the first time in my life, I grew afraid, and, for their sakes, fled.

As might be expected, having Martina's brains, Heliodore's love, and the Northmen's loyalty at the back of it, our plan went well. A letter was sent to the Emperor saying that we would await the arrival of the fleet to obey his commands, having some private matters to arrange before we left Lesbos. Then, on a certain evening, we embarked on two great ships, about four hundred souls in all.

Before we went I bade farewell to Irene. She was seated outside the house that had been given to her, employed in spinning, for it was her fancy to earn the bread she ate by the labour of her hands. Round her were playing Jodd's children and my own, whom, in order to escape suspicion, we had sent thither till the time came for us to embark, since the people of Lesbos only knew of our scheme by rumour.

"Whither do you go, Olaf?" she asked.

"Back to the North, whence I came, Madam," I answered, "to save the lives of these," and I waved my hand towards the children. "If I bide here all must die. We have been sent for to Byzantium, as I think *you* were wont to send for officers who had ceased to please you."

"I understand, Olaf; moreover, I know it is I who have brought this trouble upon you because you spared me, whom it was meant that you should kill. Also I know, through friends of mine, that henceforth, for reasons of policy, my little end of life is safe, and perhaps with it my sight. All this I owe to you, though now at times I regret that I asked the boon. From the lot of an Empress to that of a spinning-wife is a great change, and one which I find it hard to bear. Still, I have my peace to make with God, and towards that peace I strive. Yet will you not take me with you, Olaf? I should like to found a nunnery in that cold North of yours."

"No, Augusta. I have done my best by you, and now you must guard yourself. We part for ever. I go hence to finish where I began. My birthplace calls me."

"For ever is a long word, Olaf. Are you sure that we part for ever? Perchance we shall meet again in death or in other lives. Such, at least, was the belief of some of the wisest of my people before we became Christian, and mayhap the Christians do not know everything, since the world had learnt much before they came. I hope that it may be so, Olaf, for I owe you a great debt and would repay it to you full measure, pressed down and running over. Farewell. Take with you the blessing of a sinful and a broken heart," and, rising, she kissed me on the brow.

Here ends the story of this life of mine as Olaf Red-Sword, since of it I can recover no more. The darkness drops. Of what befell me and the others after my parting with Irene I know nothing or very little. Doubtless we sailed away north, and, I think, came safely to Aar, since I have faint visions of Iduna the Fair grown old, but still unwed, for the stain of Steinar's blood, as it were, still marked her brow in all men's eyes; and even of Freydisa, white-haired and noble-looking. How did we meet and how did we separate at last, I wonder? And what were the fates of Heliodore and of our children; of Martina and of Jodd? Also, was the prophecy of Odin, spoken through the lips of Freydisa in the temple at Aar, that he and his fellow gods, or demons, would prevail against my flesh and that of those who clung to me, fulfilled at last in the fires of martyrdom for the Faith, as his promise of my happiness was fulfilled?

I cannot tell. I cannot tell. Darkness entombs us all and history is dumb.

At Aar there are many graves! Standing among them, not so long ago, much of this history came back to me.

THE END

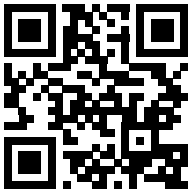
The Wanderer's Necklace

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