

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 fates 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 dented 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 dented 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."