

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.