

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.