

## 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 truth-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 brodered 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."