

## 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.