

CHAPTER III

MOTHER AND SON

The next vision of this Byzantine life of mine that rises before me is that of a great round building crowned with men clad in bishops' robes. At least they wore mitres, and each of them had a crooked pastoral staff which in most cases was carried by an attendant monk.

Some debate was in progress, or rather raging. Its subject seemed to be as to whether images should or should not be worshipped in churches. It was a furious thing, that debate. One party to it were called Iconoclasts, that was the party which did not like images, and I think the other party were called Orthodox, but of this I am not sure. So furious was it that I, the general and governor of the prison, had been commanded by those in authority to attend in order to prevent violence. The beginnings of what happened I do not remember. What I do remember is that the anti-Iconoclasts, the party to which the Empress Irene belonged, that was therefore the fashionable sect, being, as it seemed to me, worsted in argument, fell back on violence.

There followed a great tumult, in which the spectators took part, and the strange sight was seen of priests and their partisans, and even of bishops themselves, falling upon their adversaries and beating them with whatever weapon was to hand; yes, even with their pastoral staves. It was a wonderful thing to behold, these ministers of the Christ of peace

belabouring each other with pastoral staves!

The party that advocated the worship of images was the more numerous and had the greater number of adherents, and therefore those who thought otherwise were defeated. A few of them were dragged out into the street and killed by the mob which waited there, and more were wounded, notwithstanding all that I and the guards could do to protect them.

Among the Iconoclasts was a gentle-faced old man with a long beard, one of the bishops from Egypt, who was named Barnabas. He had said little in the debate, which lasted for several days, and when he spoke his words were full of charity and kindness. Still, the image faction hated him, and when the final tumult began some of them set upon him. Indeed, one brawny, dark-faced bishop--I think it was he of Antioch--rushed at Barnabas, and before I could thrust him back, broke a jewelled staff upon his head, while other priests tore his robe from neck to shoulder and spat in his face.

At last the riot was quelled; the dead were borne away, and orders came to me that I was to convey Barnabas to the State prison if he still lived, together with some others, of whom I remember nothing. So thither I took Barnabas, and there, with the help of the prison physician--he to whom I had given the poisoned figs and the dead monkey to be examined--I nursed him back to life and health.

His illness was long, for one of the blows which he had received crippled him, and during it we talked much together. He was a very

sweet-natured man and holy, a native of Britain, whose father or grandfather had been a Dane, and therefore there was a tie between us. In his youth he was a soldier. Having been taken prisoner in some war, he came to Italy, where he was ordained a priest at Rome. Afterwards he was sent as a missionary to Egypt, where he was appointed the head of a monastery, and in the end elected to a bishopric. But he had never forgotten the Danish tongue, which his parents taught him as a child, and so we were able to talk together in that language.

Now it would seem that since that night when the Cæsar Nicephorus strove to hang himself, I had obtained and studied a copy of the Christian Scriptures--how I do not know--and therefore was able to discuss these matters with Barnabas the bishop. Of our arguments I remember nothing, save that I pointed out to him that whereas the tree seemed to me to be very good, its fruits were vile beyond imagination, and I instanced the horrible tumult when he had been wounded almost to death, not by common men, but by the very leaders of the Christians.

He answered that these things must happen; that Christ Himself had said He came to bring not peace but a sword, and that only through war and struggle would the last truth be reached. The spirit was always good, he added, but the flesh was always vile. These deeds were those of the flesh, which passed away, but the spirit remained pure and immortal.

The end of it was that under the teaching of the holy Barnabas, saint and martyr (for afterwards he was murdered by the followers of the false

prophet, Mahomet), I became a Christian and a new man. Now at length I understood what grace it was that had given me courage to offer battle to the heathen god, Odin, and to smite him down. Now I saw also where shone the light which I had been seeking these many years. Aye, and I clasped that light to my bosom to be my lamp in life and death.

So a day came when my beloved master, Barnabas, who would allow no delay in this matter, baptised me in his cell with water taken from his drinking vessel, charging me to make public profession before the Church when opportunity should arise.

It was just at this time that Irene returned from the Baths, and I sent to her a written report of all that had happened at the prison since I had been appointed its governor. Also I prayed that if it were her will I might be relieved of my office, as it was one which did not please me.

A few days later, while I sat in my chamber at the prison writing a paper concerning a prisoner who had died, the porter at the gate announced that a messenger from the Augusta wished to see me. I bade him show in the messenger, and presently there entered no chamberlain or eunuch, but a woman wrapped in a dark cloak. When the man had gone and the door was shut, she threw off the cloak and I saw that my visitor was Martina, the favourite waiting-lady of the Empress. We greeted each other warmly, who were always friends, and I asked her tidings.

"My tidings are, Olaf, that the waters have suited the Augusta very

well. She has lost several pounds in weight and her skin is now like that of a young child."

"All health to the Augusta!" I said, laughing. "But you have not come here to tell me of the state of the royal skin. What next, Martina?"

"This, Olaf. The Empress has read your report with her own eyes, which is a rare thing for her to do. She said she wished to see whether or no you could write Greek. She is much pleased with the report, and told Stauracius in my presence that she had done well in choosing you for your office while she was absent from the city, since thereby she had saved the lives of the Cæsars and Nobilissimi, desiring as she does that these princes should be kept alive, at any rate for the present. She accedes also to your prayer, and will relieve you of your office as soon as a new governor can be chosen. You are to return to guard her person, but with your rank of general confirmed."

"That is all good news, Martina; so good that I wonder what sting is hidden in all this honey."

"That you will find out presently, Olaf. One I can warn you of, however--the sting of jealousy. Advancement such as yours draws eyes to you, not all of them in love."

I nodded and she went on:

"Meantime your star seems to shine very bright indeed. One might almost say that the Augusta worshipped it, at least she talks of you to me continually, and once or twice was in half a mind to send for you to the Baths. Indeed, had it not been for reasons of State connected with your prisoners I think she would have done so."

"Ah!" I said, "now I think I begin to feel another sting in the honey."

"Another sting in the honey! Nay, nay, you mean a divine perfume, an essence of added sweetness, a flavour of the flowers on Mount Ida. Why, Olaf, if I were your enemy, as I dare say I shall be some day, for often we learn to hate those whom we have--rather liked, your head and your shoulders might bid good-bye to each other for such words as those."

"Perhaps, Martina; and if they did I do not know that it would greatly matter--now."

"Not greatly matter, when you are driving at full gallop along Fortune's road to Fame's temple with an Empress for your charioteer! Are you blind or mad, Olaf, or both? And what do you mean by your 'now'? Olaf, something has happened to you since last we met. Have you fallen in love with some fair prisoner in this hateful place and been repulsed? Such a fool as you are might take refusal even from a captive in his own hands. At least you are different."

"Yes, Martina, something has happened to me. I have become a Christian."

"Oh! Olaf, now I see that you are not a fool, as I thought, but very clever. Why, only yesterday the Augusta said to me--it was after she had read that report of yours--that if you were but a Christian she would be minded to lift you high indeed. But as you remained the most obstinate of heathens she did not see how it could be done without causing great trouble."

"Now I wish one could be a Christian within and remain a pagan without," I answered grimly; "though alas! that may not be. Martina, do you not understand that it was for no such reasons as these that I kissed the Cross; that in so doing I sought not fortune, but to be its servant?"

"By the Saints! you'll be tonsured next, and ill enough it would suit you," she exclaimed. "Remember, if things grow too--difficult, you can always be tonsured, Olaf. Only then you will have to give up the hope of that lady who wears the other half of the necklace somewhere. I don't mean Irene's sham half, but the real one. Oh! stop blushing and stammering, I know the story, and all about Iduna the Fair also. An exalted person told it me, and so did you, although you were not aware that you had done so, for you are not one who can keep a secret to himself. May all the guardian angels help that necklace-lady if ever she should meet another lady whom I will not name. And now why do you talk so much? Are you learning to preach, or what? If you really do mean to become a monk, Olaf, there is another thing you must give up, and that is war, except of the kind which you saw at the Council the other day.

God above us! what a sight it would be to see you battering another bishop with a hook-shaped staff over a question of images or the Two Natures. I should be sorry for that bishop. But you haven't told me who converted you."

"Barnabas of Egypt," I said.

"Oh! I hoped that it had been a lady saint; the story would have been so much more interesting to the Court. Well, our imperial mistress does not like Barnabas, because he does not like images, and that may be a sting in her honey. But perhaps she will forgive him for your sake. You'll have to worship images."

"What do I care about images? It is the spirit that I seek, Martina, and all these things are nothing."

"You are thorough, as usual, Olaf, and jump farther than you can see. Well, be advised and say naught for or against images. As they have no meaning for you, what can it matter if they are or are not there? Leave them to the blind eyes and little minds. And now I must be gone, who can listen to your gossip no longer. Oh! I had forgotten my message. The Augusta commands that you shall wait on her this evening immediately after she has supped. Hear and obey!"

Having delivered this formal mandate, to neglect which meant imprisonment, or worse, she threw her cloak about her, and with a

wondering glance at my face, opened the door and went.

At the hour appointed, or, rather, somewhat before it, I attended at the private apartments of the palace. Evidently I was expected, for one of the chamberlains, on seeing me, bowed and bade me be seated, then left the ante-room. Presently the door opened again, and through it came Martina, clad in her white official robe.

"You are early, Olaf," she said, "like a lover who keeps a tryst. Well, it is always wise to meet good fortune half way. But why do you come clad in full armour? It is not the custom to wait thus upon the Empress at this hour when you are off duty."

"I thought that I was on duty, Martina."

"Then, as usual, you thought wrong. Take off that armour; she says that the sight of it always makes her feel cold after supper. I say take it off; or if you cannot, I will help you."

So the mail was removed, leaving me clad in my plain blue tunic and hose.

"Would you have me come before the Empress thus?" I asked.

By way of answer she clapped her hands and bade the eunuch who answered the signal to bring a certain robe. He went, and presently reappeared

with a wondrous garment of silk broidered with gold, such as nobles of high rank wore at festivals. This robe, which fitted as though it had been made for me, I put on, though I liked the look of it little. Martina would have had me even remove my sword, but I refused, saying:

"Except at the express order of the Empress, I and my sword are not parted."

"Well, she said nothing about the sword, Olaf, so let it be. All she said was that I must be careful that the robe matched the colour of the necklace you wear. She cannot bear colours which jar upon each other, especially by lamp-light."

"Am I a man," I asked angrily, "or a beast being decked for sacrifice?"

"Fie, Olaf, have you not yet forgotten your heathen talk? Remember, I pray you, that you are now a Christian in a Christian land."

"I thank you for reminding me of it," I replied; and that moment a chamberlain, entering hurriedly, commanded my presence.

"Good luck to you, Olaf," said Martina as I followed him. "Be sure to tell me the news later--or to-morrow."

Then the chamberlain led me, not into the audience hall, as I had expected, but to the private imperial dining chamber. Here, reclining

upon couches in the old Roman fashion, one on either side of a narrow table on which stood fruits and flagons of rich-hued Greek wine, were the two greatest people in the world, the Augusta Irene and the Augustus Constantine, her son.

She was wonderfully appalled in a low-cut garment of white silk, over which fell a mantle of the imperial purple, and I noted that on her dazzling bosom hung that necklace of emerald beetles separated by golden shells which she had caused to be copied from my own. On her fair hair that grew low upon her forehead and was parted in the middle, she wore a diadem of gold in which were set emeralds to match the beetles of the necklace. The Augustus was arrayed in the festal garments of a Cæsar, also covered with a purple cloak. He was a heavy-faced and somewhat stupid-looking youth, dark-haired, like his father and uncles, but having large, blue, and not unkindly eyes. From his flushed face I gathered that he had drunk well of the strong Greek wine, and from the sullen look about his mouth that, as was common, he had been quarrelling with his mother.

I stood at the end of the table and saluted first the Empress and then the Emperor.

"Who's this?" he asked, glancing at me.

"General Olaf, of my guard," she answered, "Governor of the State Prison. You remember, you wished me to send for him to settle the point

as to which we were arguing."

"Oh! yes. Well, General Olaf, of my mother's guard, have you not been told that you should salute the Augustus before the Augusta?"

"Sire," I answered humbly, "I have heard nothing of that matter, but in the land where I was bred I was taught that if a man and a woman were together I must always bow first to the woman and then to the man."

"Well said," exclaimed the Empress, clapping her hands; but the Emperor answered: "Doubtless your mother taught you that, not your father. Next time you enter the imperial chamber be pleased to forget the lesson and to remember that Emperors and Empresses are not men and women."

"Sire," I answered, "as you command I will remember that Emperors and Empresses are not men and women, but Emperors and Empresses."

At these words the Augustus began to scowl, but, changing his mind, laughed, as did his mother. He filled a gold cup with wine and pushed it towards me, saying:

"Drink to us, soldier, for after you have done so, our wits may be better matched."

I took the cup and holding it, said:

"I pledge your Imperial Majesties, who shine upon the world like twin stars in the sky. All hail to your Majesties!" and I drank, but not too deep.

"You are clever," growled the Augustus. "Well, keep the cup; you've earned it. Yet drain it first, man. You have scarce wet your lips. Do you fear that it is poisoned, as you say yonder fruits are?" And he pointed to a side-table, where stood a jar of glass in which were those very figs that had been sent to the princes in the prison.

"The cup you give is mine," interrupted Irene; "still, my servant is welcome to the gift. It shall be sent to your quarters, General."

"A soldier has no need of such gauds, your Majesties," I began, when Constantine, who, while we spoke, had swallowed another draught of the strong wine, broke in angrily:

"May I not give a cup of gold but you must claim it, I to whom the Empire and all its wealth belong?"

Snatching up the beaker he dashed it to the floor, spilling the wine, of which I, who wished to keep my head cool, was glad.

"Have done," he went on in his drunken rage. "Shall the Cæsars huckster over a piece of worked gold like Jews in a market? Give me those figs, man; I'll settle the matter of this poison."

I brought the jar of figs, and, bowing, set them down before him. That they were the same I knew, for the glass was labelled in my own writing and in that of the physician. He cut away the sealed parchment which was stretched over the mouth of the jar.

"Now hearken you, Olaf," he said. "It is true that I ordered fruit to be sent to that fool-Cæsar, my uncle, because the last time I saw him Nicephorus prayed me for it, and I was willing to do him a pleasure. But that I ordered the fruit to be poisoned, as my mother says, is a lie, and may God curse the tongue that spoke it. I will show you that it was a lie," and plunging his hand into the spirit of the jar, he drew out two of the figs. "Now," he went on, waving them about in a half-drunken fashion, "this General Olaf of yours says that these are the same figs which were sent to the Cæsar, I mean the blind priest, Father Nicephorus. Don't you, Olaf?"

"Yes, Sire," I answered, "they were placed in that bottle in my presence and sealed with my seal."

"Well, those figs were sent by me, and this Olaf tells us they are poisoned. I'll show him, and you too, mother, that they are not poisoned, for I will eat one of them."

Now I looked at the Augusta, but she sat silent, her arms folded on her white bosom, her handsome face turned as it were to stone.

Constantine lifted the fig towards his loose mouth. Again I looked at the Augusta. Still she sat there like a statue, and it came into my mind that it was her purpose to allow this wine-bemused man to eat the fig. Then I acted.

"Augustus," I said, "you must not touch that fruit," and stepping forward I took it from his hand.

He sprang to his feet and began to revile me.

"You watch-dog of the North!" he shouted. "Do you dare to say to the Emperor that he shall not do this or that? By all the images my mother worships I'll have you whipped through the Circus."

"That you will never do," I answered, for my free blood boiled at the insult. "I tell you, Sire," I went on, leaving out certain words which I meant to speak, "that the fig is poisoned."

"And I tell you that you lie, you heathen savage. See here! Either you eat that fig or I do, so that we may know who speaks the truth. If you won't, I will. Now obey, or, by Christ! to-morrow you shall be shorter by a head."

"The Augustus is pleased to threaten, which is unnecessary," I remarked.

"If I eat the fig, will the Augustus swear to leave the rest of them

uneaten?"

"Aye," he answered with a hiccough, "for then I shall know the truth, and for the truth I live, though," he added, "I haven't found it yet."

"And if I do not eat it, will the Augustus do so?"

"By the Holy Blood, yes. I'll eat a dozen of them. Am I one to be hectored by a woman and a barbarian? Eat, or I eat."

"Good, Sire. It is better that a barbarian should die than that the world should lose its glorious Emperor. I eat, and when you are as I soon shall be, as will happen even to an emperor, may my blood lie heavy on your soul, the blood which I give to save your life."

Then I lifted the fig to my lips.

Before ever it touched them, with a motion swift as that of a panther springing on its prey, Irene had leapt from her couch and dashed the fruit from my hand. She turned upon her son.

"What kind of a thing are you," she asked, "who would suffer a brave man to poison himself that he may save your worthless life? Oh! God, what have I done that I should have given birth to such a hound? Whoever poisoned them, these fruits are poisoned, as has been proved and can be proved again, yes, and shall be. I tell you that if Olaf had tasted one

of them by now he would have been dead or dying."

Constantine drank another cup of wine, which, oddly enough, seemed to sober him for the moment.

"I find all this strange," he said heavily. "You, my mother, would have suffered me to eat the fig which you declare is poisoned; a matter whereof you may know something. But when the General Olaf offers to eat it in my place, with your own royal hand you dash it from his lips, as he dashed it from mine. And there is another thing which is still more strange. This Olaf, who also says the figs are poisoned, offered to eat one of them if I promised I would not do so, which means, if he is right, that he offered to give his life for mine. Yet I have done nothing for him except call him hard names; and as he is your servant he has nothing to look for from me if I should win the fight with you at last. Now I have heard much talk of miracles, but this is the only one I have ever seen. Either Olaf is a liar, or he is a great man and a saint. He says, I am told, that the monkey which ate one of those figs died. Well, I never thought of it before, but there are more monkeys in the palace. Indeed, one lives on the terrace near by, for I fed it this afternoon. We'll put the matter to the proof and learn of what stuff this Olaf is really made."

On the table stood a silver bell, and as he spoke he struck it. A chamberlain entered and was ordered to bring in the monkey. He departed, and with incredible swiftness the beast and its keeper arrived. It was

a large animal of the baboon tribe, famous throughout the palace for its tricks. Indeed, on entering, at a word from the man who led it, it bowed to all of us.

"Give your beast these," said the Emperor, handing the keeper several of the figs.

The baboon took the fruits and, having sniffed at them, put them aside. Then the keeper fed it with some sweetmeats, which it caught and devoured, and presently, when its fears were allayed, threw it one of the figs, which it swallowed, doubtless thinking it a sweetmeat. A minute or two later it began to show signs of distress and shortly afterwards died in convulsions.

"Now," said Irene, "now do you believe, my son?"

"Yes," he answered, "I believe that there is a saint in Constantinople. Sir Saint, I salute you. You have saved my life and if it should come my way, by your brother saints! I'll save yours, although you are my mother's servant."

So speaking, he drank off yet another cup of wine and reeled from the room.

The keeper, at a sign from Irene, lifted up the body of the dead ape and also left the chamber, weeping as he went, for he had loved this beast.