

CHAPTER IV

OLAF OFFERS HIS SWORD

The Emperor had gone, drunk; the ape had gone, dead; and its keeper had gone, weeping. Irene and I alone were left in that beautiful place with the wine-stained table on which stood the jar of poisoned figs and the bent golden cup lying on the marble floor.

She sat upon the couch, looking at me with a kind of amazement in her eyes, and I stood before her at attention, as does a soldier on duty.

"I wonder why he did not send for one of my servants to eat those figs--Stauracius, for instance," she mused, adding with a little laugh, "Well, if he had, there are some whom I could have spared better than that poor ape, which at times I used to feed. It was an honest creature, that ape; the only creature in the palace that would not rub its head in the dust before the Augusta. Ah! now I remember, it always hated Constantine, for when he was a child he used to tease it with a stick, getting beyond the length of its chain and striking it. But one day, as he passed too near, it caught him and buffeted him on the cheek and tore out some of his hair. He wanted to kill it then, but I forbade him. Yet he has never forgotten it, he who never does forget anything he hates, and that is why he sent for the poor beast."

"The Augusta will remember that the Augustus did not know that the figs were poisoned."

"The Augusta is sure that the Augustus knew well enough that those figs were poisoned, at any rate from the moment that I dashed one of them from your lips, Olaf. Well, I have made a bitterer enemy than before, that's all. They say that by Nature's rule mother and child must love each other, but it is a lie. I tell you it's a lie. From the time he was tiny I hated that boy, though not half as much as he has hated me. You are thinking to yourself that this is because our ambitions clash like meeting swords, and that from them spring these fires of hate. It is not so. The hate is native to our hearts, and will only end when one of us lies dead at the other's hand."

"Terrible words, Augusta."

"Yes, but true. Truth is always terrible--in Byzantium. Olaf, take those drugged fruits and set them in the drawer of yonder table; lock it and guard the key, lest they should poison other honest animals."

I obeyed and returned to my station.

She looked at me and said:

"I grow weary of the sight of you standing there like a statue of the Roman Mars, with your sword half hid beneath your cloak; and, what's

more, I hate this hall; it reeks of Constantine and his drink and lies. Oh! he's vile, and for my sins God has made me his mother, unless, indeed, he was changed at birth, as I've been told, though I could never prove it. Give me your hand and help me to rise. So, I thank you. Now follow me. We'll sit a while in my private chamber, where alone I can be happy, since the Emperor never comes there. Nay, talk not of duty; you have no guards to set or change to-night. Follow me; I have secret business of which I would talk with you."

So she went and I followed through doors that opened mysteriously at our approach and shut mysteriously behind us, till I found myself in a little room half-lighted only, that I had never seen before. It was a scented and a beautiful place, in one corner of which a white statue gleamed, that of a Venus kissing Cupid, who folded one wing about her head, and through the open window-place the moonlight shone and floated the murmur of the sea.

The double doors were shut, for aught I knew locked, and with her own hands Irene drew the curtains over them. Near the open window, to which there was no balcony, stood a couch.

"Sit yonder, Olaf," she said, "for here there is no ceremony; here we are but man and woman."

I obeyed, while she busied herself with the curtains. Then she came and sat herself down on the couch also, leaning against the end of it in

such a fashion that she could watch me in the moonlight.

"Olaf," she said, after she had looked at me a while, rather strangely, as I thought, for the colour came and went upon her face, which in that light seemed quite young again and wonderfully beautiful, "Olaf, you are a very brave man."

"There are hundreds in your service braver, Empress; cowards do not take to soldiering."

"I could tell you a different story, Olaf; but it was not of this kind of courage that I talked. It was of that which made you offer to eat the poisoned fig in place of Constantine. Why did you do so? It is true that, as things have happened, he'll remember it in your favour, for I'll say this of him, he never forgets one who has saved him from harm, any more than he forgets one who has harmed him. But if you had eaten you would have died, and then how could he have rewarded you?"

"Empress, when I took my oath of office I swore to protect both the Augustus and the Augusta, even with my life. I was fulfilling my oath, that is all."

"You are a strange man as well as a brave man to interpret oaths so strictly. If you will do as much as this for one who is nothing to you, and who has never paid you a gold piece, how much, I wonder, would you do for one whom you love."

"I could offer no more than my life for such a one, Empress, could I?"

"Someone told me--it may have been you, Olaf, or another--that once you did more, challenging a heathen god for the sake of one you loved, and defeating him. It was added that this was for a man, but that I do not believe. Doubtless it was for the sake of Iduna the Fair, of whom you have spoken to me, whom it seems you cannot forget although she was faithless to you. It is said that the best way to hold love is to be faithless to him who loves, and in truth I believe it," she added bitterly.

"You are mistaken, Empress. It was to be avenged on him for the life of Steinar, my foster-brother, which he had taken in sacrifice, that I dared Odin and hewed his holy statue to pieces with this sword; of Steinar, whom Iduna betrayed as she betrayed me, bringing one to death and the other to shame."

"At least, had it not been for this Iduna you would never have given battle to the great god of the North and thus brought his curse upon you. For, Olaf, those gods live; they are devils."

"Whether Odin is or is not, I do not fear his curse, Empress."

"Yet it will find you out before all is done, or so I think. Look you, pagan blood still runs in me, and, Christian though I am, I would not

dare one of the great gods of Greece and Rome. I'd leave that to the priests. Do you fear nothing, Olaf?"

"I think nothing at all, since I hewed off Odin's head and came away unscathed."

"Then you are a man to my liking, Olaf."

She paused, looking at me even more strangely than before, till I turned my eyes, indeed, and stared out at the sea, wishing that I were in it, or anywhere away from this lovely and imperious woman whom I was sworn to obey in all things.

"Olaf," she said presently, "you have served me well of late. Is there any reward that you would ask, and if so, what? Anything that I can give is yours, unless," she added hastily, "the gift will take you away from Constantinople and from--me."

"Yes, Augusta," I answered, still staring out at the sea. "In the prison yonder is an old bishop named Barnabas of Egypt, who was set upon by other bishops at the Council while you were away and wellnigh beaten to death. I ask that he may be freed and restored to his diocese with honour."

"Barnabas," she replied sharply. "I know the man. He is an Iconoclast, and therefore my enemy. Only this morning I signed an order that he

should be kept in confinement till he died, here or elsewhere. Still," she went on, "though I would sooner give you a province, have your gift, for I can refuse you nothing. Barnabas shall be freed and restored to his see with honour. I have said."

Now I began to thank her, but she stopped me, saying:

"Have done! Another time you can talk to me of heretics with whom you have made friends, but I, who hear enough of such, would have no more of them to-night."

So I grew silent and still stared out at the sea. Indeed, I was wondering in my mind whether I dared ask leave to depart, for I felt her eyes burning on me, and grew much afraid. Suddenly I heard a sound, a gentle sound of rustling silk, and in another instant I felt Irene's arms clasped about me and Irene's head laid upon my knee. Yes, she was kneeling before me, sobbing, and her proud head was resting on my knee. The diadem she wore had fallen from it, and her tresses, breaking loose, flowed to the ground, and lay there gleaming like gold in the moonlight.

She looked up, and her face was that of a weeping saint.

"Dost understand?" she whispered.

Now despair took me, which I knew full well would soon be followed by madness. Then came a thought.

"Yes," I said hoarsely. "I understand that you grieve over that matter of the Augustus and the poisoned figs, and would pray me to keep silence. Have no fear, my lips are sealed, but for his I cannot answer, though perhaps as he had drunk so much----"

"Fool!" she whispered. "Is it thus that an Empress pleads with her captain to keep silence?" Then she drew herself up, a wonderful look upon her face that had grown suddenly white, a fire in her upturned eyes, and for the second time kissed me upon the lips.

I took her in my arms and kissed her back. For an instant my mind swam. Then in my soul I cried for help, and strength came to me. Rising, I lifted her as though she were a child, and stood her on her feet. I said:

"Hearken, Empress, before destruction falls. I do understand now, though a moment ago I did not, who never thought it possible that the queen of the world could look with favour upon one so humble."

"Love takes no account of rank," she murmured, "and that kiss of yours upon my lips is more to me than the empire of the world."

"Yet hearken," I answered. "There is another wall between us which may not be climbed."

"Man, what is this wall? Is it named woman? Are you sworn to the memory of that Iduna, who is more fair than I? Or is it, perchance, her of the necklace?"

"Neither. Iduna is dead to me; she of the necklace is but a dream. The wall is that of your own faith. On this night seven days ago I was baptised a Christian."

"Well, what of it? This draws us nearer."

"Study the sayings of your sacred book, Empress, and you will find that it thrusts us apart."

Now she coloured to her hair, and a kind of madness took her.

"Am I to be preached to by you?" she asked.

"I preach to myself, Augusta, who need it greatly, not to you, who mayhap do not need it."

"Hating me as you do, why should you need it? You are the worst of hypocrites, who would veil your hate under a priest's robe."

"Have you no pity, Irene? When did I say that I hated you? Moreover, if I had hated you, should I----" and I ceased.

"I do not know what you would or would not have done," she answered coldly. "I think that Constantine is right, and that you must be what is called a saint; and, if so, saints are best in heaven, especially when they know too much on earth. Give me that sword of yours."

I drew the sword, saluted with it, and gave it to her.

"It is a heavy weapon," she said. "Whence came it?"

"From the same grave as the necklace, Augusta."

"Ah! the necklace that your dream-woman wore. Well, go to seek her in the land of dreams," and she lifted the sword.

"Your pardon, Augusta, but you are about to strike with the blunt edge, which may wound but will not kill."

She laughed a little, very nervously, and, turning the sword round in her hand, said:

"Truly, you are the strangest of men! Ah! I thank you, now I have it right. Do you understand, Olaf, I mean, Sir Saint, what sort of a story I must tell of you after I have struck? Do you understand that not only are you about to die, but that infamy will be poured upon your name and that your body will be dragged through the streets and thrown to the dogs with the city offal? Answer, I say, answer!"

"I understand that you must cause these things to be done for your own sake, Augusta, and I do not complain. Lies matter nothing to me, who journey to the Land of Truth, where there are some whom I would meet again. Be advised by me. Strike here, where the neck joins the shoulder, holding the sword slantwise, for there even a woman's blow will serve to sever the great artery."

"I cannot. Kill yourself, Olaf."

"A week ago I'd have fallen on the sword; but now, by the rule of our faith, in such a cause I may not. My blood must be upon your hands, for which I grieve, knowing that no other road is open to you. Augusta, if it is worth anything to you, take my full forgiveness for the deed, and with it my thanks for all the goodness you have shown to me, but most for your woman's favour. In after years, perhaps, when death draws near to you also, if ever you remember Olaf, your faithful servant, you will understand much it is not fitting that I should say. Give me one moment to make my peace with Heaven as to certain kisses. Then strike hard and swiftly, and, as you strike, scream for your guards and women. Your wit will do the rest."

She lifted the sword, while, after a moment's prayer, I bared my neck of the silk robe. Then she let it fall again, gasping, and said:

"Tell me first, for I am curious. Are you no man? Or have you forsworn

woman, as do the monks?"

"Not I, Augusta. Had I lived, some day I might have married, who would have wished to leave children behind me, since in our law marriage is allowed. Forget not your promise as to the Bishop Barnabas, who, I fear, will weep over this seeming fall of mine."

"So you would marry, would you?" she said, as one who speaks to herself; then thought awhile, and handed me back the sword.

"Olaf," she went on, "you have made me feel as I never felt before--ashamed, utterly ashamed, and though I learn to hate you, as it well may hap I shall, know that I shall always honour you."

Then she sank down upon the couch, and, hiding her face in her hands, wept bitterly.

It was at this moment that I went very near to loving Irene.

I think she must have felt something of what was passing in my mind, for suddenly she looked up and said: "Give me that jewel," and she pointed to the diadem on the floor, "and help me to order my hair; my hands shake."

"Nay," I said, as I gave her the crown. "Of that wine I drink no more. I dare not touch you; you grow too dear."

"For those words," she whispered, "go in safety, and remember that from Irene you have naught to fear, as I know well I have naught to fear from you, O Prince among men."

So presently I went.

On the following morning, as I sat in my office at the prison, setting all things in order for whoever should succeed me, Martina entered, as she had done before.

"How came you here unannounced?" I asked, when she was seated.

"By virtue of this," she answered, holding up her hand and showing on it a ring I knew. It was the signet of the Empress. I saluted the seal, saying:

"And for what purpose, Martina? To order me to bonds or death?"

"To bonds or death!" she exclaimed innocently. "What can our good Olaf have done worthy of such woes? Nay, I come to free one from bonds, and perhaps from death, namely, a certain heretic bishop who is named Barnabas. Here is the order for his release, signed by the Augusta's hand and sealed with her seal, under which he is at liberty to bide in

Constantinople while he will and to return to his bishopric in Egypt when it pleases him. Also, if he holds that any have harmed him, he may make complaint, and it shall be considered without delay."

I took the parchment, read it, and laid it on the table, saying:

"The commands of the Empress shall be done. Is there aught else, Martina?"

"Yes. To-morrow morning you will be relieved of your office, and another governor--Stauracius and Aetius are quarrelling as to his name--will take your place."

"And I?"

"You will resume your post as captain of the private guard, only with the rank of a full general of the army. But that I told you yesterday. It is now confirmed."

I said nothing, but a groan I could not choke broke from my lips.

"You do not seem as pleased as you might be, Olaf. Tell me, now, at what hour did you leave the palace last night? While waiting for my mistress to summon me I fell asleep in the vestibule of the ante-room, and when I awoke and went into that room I found there the gold-broidered silk robe you wore, cast upon the ground, and your armour gone."

"I know not what was the hour, Martina, and speak no more to me, I pray, of that accursed womanish robe."

"Which you treated but ill, Olaf, for it is spotted as though with blood."

"The Augustus spilt some wine over it."

"Aye, my mistress told me the story. Also that of how you would have eaten the poisoned fig, which you snatched from the lips of Constantine."

"And what else did your mistress tell you, Martina?"

"Not much, Olaf. She was in a very strange mood last night, and while I combed her hair, which, Olaf, was as tangled as though a man had handled it," and she looked at me till I coloured to the eyes, "and undid her diadem, that was set on it all awry, she spoke to me of marriage."

"Of marriage!" I gasped.

"Certainly--did I not speak the word with clearness?--of marriage."

"With whom, Martina?"

"Oh! grow not jealous before there is need, Olaf. She made no mention of the name of our future divine master, for whosoever can rule Irene, if such a one lives, will certainly rule us also. All she said was that she wished she could find some man to guide, guard and comfort her, who grew lonely amidst many troubles, and hoped for more sons than Constantine."

"What sort of a man, Martina? This Emperor Charlemagne, or some other king?"

"No. She vowed that she had seen enough of princes, who were murderers and liars, all of them; and that what she desired was one of good birth, no more, brave, honest, and not a fool. I asked her, too, what she would have him like to look upon."

"And what did she say to that, Martina?"

"Oh! she said that he must be tall, and under forty, fair-haired and bearded, since she loved not these shaven effeminates, who look half woman and half priest; one who had known war, and yet was no ruffler; a person of open mind, who had learnt and could learn more. Well, now that I think of it, by all the Saints!--yes, much such a man as you are, Olaf."

"Then she may find them in plenty," I said, with an uneasy laugh.

"Do you think so? Well, she did not, neither did I. Indeed, she pointed

out that this was her trouble. Among the great of the earth she knew no such man, and, if she sought lower, then would come jealousies and war."

"Indeed they would. Doubtless you showed her that this was so, Martina."

"Not at all, Olaf. I asked her of what use it was to be an Empress if she could not please her own heart in this matter of a husband, which is one important to a woman. I said also, as for such fears, that a secret marriage might be thought of, which is an honest business that could be declared when occasion came."

"And what did she answer to that, Martina?"

"She fell into high good humour, called me a faithful and a clever friend, gave me a handsome jewel, told me that she would have a mission for me on the morrow--doubtless that which I now fulfil, for I have heard of no other--said, notwithstanding all the trouble as to the Augustus and his threats, that she was sure she would sleep better than she had done for nights, kissed me on both cheeks, and flung herself upon her knees at her praying-stool, where I left her. But why are you looking so sad, Olaf?"

"Oh! I know not, save that I find life difficult, and full of pitfalls which it is hard to escape."

Martina rested her elbows on the table and her chin upon her little

hand, staring me full in the face with her quick eyes that pierced like nails.

"Olaf," she said, "your star shines bright above you. Keep your eyes fixed thereon and follow it, and never think about the pitfalls. It may lead you I know not where."

"To heaven, perhaps," I suggested.

"Well, you did not fear to go thither when you would have eaten the poisoned fig last night. To heaven, perchance, but by a royal road. Whatever you may think of some others, marriage is an honourable estate, my Christian friend, especially if a man marries well. And now good-bye; we shall meet again at the palace, whither you will repair to-morrow morning. Not before, since I am engaged in directing the furnishment of your new quarters in the right wing, and, though the workmen labour all night, they will not be finished until then. Good-bye, General Olaf. Your servant Martina salutes you and your star," and she curtsied before me until her knees almost touched the ground.