

CHAPTER V

AVE POST SECULA

It comes back to me that on the following day my successor in the governorship of the jail, who he was I know not now, arrived, and that to him in due form I handed over my offices and duties. Before I did so, however, I made it my care to release Barnabas, I think on the previous evening. In his cell I read the Augusta's warrant to the old bishop.

"How was it obtained, son," he asked, "for, know, that having so many enemies on this small matter of image worship, I expected to die in this place? Now it seems that I am free, and may even return to my charge in Egypt."

"The Empress granted it to me as a favour, Father," I answered. "I told her that you were from the North, like myself."

He studied me with his shrewd blue eyes, and said:

"It seems strange to me that so great and unusual a boon should be granted for such a reason, seeing that better men than I am have suffered banishment and worse woes for less cause than I have given. What did you pay the Empress for this favour, son Olaf?"

"Nothing, Father."

"Is it so? Olaf, a dream has come to me about you, and in that dream I saw you walk through a great fire and emerge unscathed, save for the singeing of your lips and hair."

"Perhaps they were singed, Father. Otherwise, I am unburned, though what will happen to me in the future I do not know, for my dangers seem great."

"In my dream you triumphed over all of them, Olaf, and also met with some reward even in this life, though now I know not what it was. Yes, and triumph you shall, my son in Christ. Fear nothing, even when the storm-clouds sweep about your head and the lightnings blind your eyes. I say, fear nothing, for you have friends whom you cannot see. I ask no more even under the seal of confession, since there are secrets which it is not well to learn. Who knows, I might go mad, or torture might draw from me words I would not speak. Therefore, keep your own counsel, son, and confess to God alone."

"What will you do now, Father?" I asked. "Return to Egypt?"

"Nay, not yet awhile. It comes to me that I must bide here for a space, which under this pardon I have liberty to do, but to what end I cannot say. Later on I shall return, if God so wills. I go to dwell with good folk who are known to me, and from time to time will let you hear where I may be found, if you should need my help or counsel."

Then I led him to the gates, and, having given him a witnessed copy of his warrant of release, bade him farewell for that time, making it known to the guards and certain priests who lingered there that any who molested him must answer for it to the Augusta.

Thus we parted.

Having handed over the keys of the prison, I walked to the palace unattended, being minded to take up my duties there unnoticed. But this was not to be. As I entered the palace gate a sentry called out something, and a messenger, who seemed to be in waiting, departed at full speed. Then the sentry, saluting, told me that his orders were that I must stand awhile, he knew not why. Presently I discovered, for across the square within the gates marched a full general's guard, whereof the officer also saluted, and prayed me to come with him. I went, wondering if I was to be given in charge, and by him, surrounded with this pompous guard, was led to my new quarters, which were more splendid than I could have dreamed. Here the guard left me, and presently other officers appeared, some of them old comrades of my own, asking for orders, of which, of course, I had none to give. Also, within an hour, I was summoned to a council of generals to discuss some matter of a war in which the Empire was engaged. By such means as these it was conveyed to me that I had become a great man, or, at any rate, one in the way of growing great.

That afternoon, when, according to my old custom, I was making my round of the guards, I met the Augusta upon the main terrace, surrounded by a number of ministers and courtiers. I saluted and would have passed on, but she bade one of her eunuchs call me to her. So I came and stood before her.

"We greet you, General Olaf," she said. "Where have you been all this long while? Oh! I remember. At the State prison, as its governor, of which office you are now relieved at your own request. Well, the palace welcomes you again, for when you are here all within know themselves safe."

Thus she spoke, her great eyes searching my face the while, then bowed her head in token of dismissal. I saluted again, and began to step backwards, according to the rule, whereon she motioned to me to stand. Then she began to make a laugh of me to the painted throng about her.

"Say, nobles and ladies," she said, "did any of you ever see such a man? We address him as best we may--and we have reason to believe that he understands our language--yet not one word does he vouchsafe to us in answer. There he stands, like a soldier cut in iron who moves by springs, with never an 'I thank you' or a 'Good day' on his lips.

Doubtless he would reprove us all, who, he holds, talk too much, being, as we all have heard, a man of stern morality, who has no tenderness for human foibles. By the way, General Olaf, a rumour has reached us that you have forsaken doubt, and become a Christian. Is this true?"

"It is true, Augusta."

"Then if as a Pagan you were a man of iron, what will you be as a Christian, we wonder? One hard as diamond, no less. Yet we are glad of this tidings, as all good servants of the Church must be, since henceforth our friendship will be closer and we value you. General, you must be received publicly into the bosom of the Faith; it will be an encouragement to others to follow your example. Perhaps, as you have served us so well in many wars and as an officer of our guard, we ourselves will be your god-mother. The matter shall be considered by us. What have you to answer to it?"

"Nothing," I replied, "save that when the Augusta has considered of the matter, I will consider of my answer."

At this the courtiers tittered, and, instead of growing angry, as I thought she might, Irene burst out laughing.

"Truly we were wrong," she said, "to provoke you to open your mouth, General, for when you do so, like that red sword you wear, your tongue is sharp, if somewhat heavy. Tell us, General, are your new quarters to your taste, and before you reply know that we inspected them ourselves, and, having a liking for such tasks, attended to their furnishment. 'Tis done, you will see, in the Northern style, which we think somewhat cold and heavy--like your sword and tongue."

"If the Augusta asks me," I said, "the quarters are too fine for a single soldier. The two rooms where I dwelt before were sufficient."

"A single soldier! Well, that is a fault which can be remedied. You should marry, General Olaf."

"When I find any woman who wishes to marry me and whom I wish to marry, I will obey the Augusta's commands."

"So be it, General, only remember that first we must approve the lady. Venture not, General, to share those new quarters of yours with any lady whom we do not approve."

Then, followed by the Court, she turned and walked away, and I went about my business, wondering what was the meaning of all this guarded and half-bitter talk.

The next event that returns to me clearly is that of my public acceptance as a Christian in the great Cathedral of St. Sophia, which must have taken place not very long after this meeting upon the terrace. I know that by every means in my power I had striven, though without avail, to escape this ceremony, pointing out that I could be publicly received into the body of the Church at any chapel where there was a priest and a congregation of a dozen humble folk. But this the Empress would not allow. The reason she gave was her desire that my conversion

should be proclaimed throughout the city, that other Pagans, of whom there were thousands, might follow my example. Yet I think she had another which she did not avow. It was that I might be made known in public as a man of importance whom it pleased her to honour.

On the morning of this rite, Martina came to acquaint me with its details, and told me that the Empress would be present at the cathedral in state, making her progress thither in her golden chariot, drawn by the famed milk-white steeds. I, it seemed, was to ride after the chariot in my general's uniform, which was splendid enough, followed by a company of guards, and surrounded by chanting priests. The Patriarch himself, no less a person, was to receive me and some other converts, and the cathedral would be filled with all the great ones of Constantinople.

I asked whether Irene intended to be my god-mother, as she had threatened.

"Not so," replied Martina. "On that point she has changed her mind."

"So much the better," I said. "But why?"

"There is a canon of the Church, Olaf, which forbids intermarriage between a god-parent and his or her god-child," she replied dryly.

"Whether this canon has come to the Augusta's memory or not, I cannot say. It may be so."

"Who, then, is to be my god-mother?" I asked hurriedly, leaving the problem of Irene's motives undiscussed.

"I am, by the written Imperial decree delivered to me not an hour ago."

"You, Martina, you who are younger than myself by many years?"

"Yes, I. The Augusta has just explained to me that as we seem to be such very good friends, and to talk together so much alone, doubtless, she supposed, upon matters of religion, there could be no person more suitable than such a good Christian as myself to fill that holy office."

"What do you mean, Martina?" I asked bluntly.

"I mean, Olaf," she replied, turning away her head, and speaking in a strained voice, "that, where you are concerned, the Augusta of late has done me the honour to be somewhat jealous of me. Well, of a god-mother no one need be jealous. The Augusta is a clever woman, Olaf."

"I do not quite understand," I said. "Why should the Augusta be jealous of you?"

"There is no reason at all, Olaf, except that, as it happens, she is jealous of every woman who comes near to you, and she knows that we are intimate and that you trust me--well, more, perhaps, than you trust her.

Oh! I assure you that of late you have not spoken to any woman under fifty unnoted and unreported. Many eyes watch you, Olaf."

"Then they might find better employment. But tell me outright, Martina, what is the meaning of all this?"

"Surely even a wooden-headed Northman can guess, Olaf?"

She glanced round her to make sure that we were alone in the great apartment of my quarters and that the doors were shut, then went on, almost in a whisper, "My mistress is wondering whether or no she will marry again, and, if so, whether she will choose a certain somewhat over-virtuous Christian soldier as a second husband. As yet she has not made up her mind. Moreover, even if she had, nothing could be done at present or until the question of the struggle between her and her son for power is settled in this way or in that. Therefore, at worst, or at best, that soldier has yet a while of single life left to him, say a month or two."

"Then during that month or two perhaps he would be wise to travel," I suggested.

"Perhaps, if he were a fool who would run away from fortune, and if he could get leave of absence, which in his case is impossible; to attempt such a journey without it would mean his death. No, if he is wise, that soldier will bide where he is and await events, possessing his soul in

patience, as a good Christian should do. Now, as your god-mother, I must instruct you in this service. Look not so troubled; it is really most simple. You know Stauracius, the eunuch, is to be your god-father, which is very fortunate for you, since, although he looks on you with doubt and jealousy, to blind or murder his own god-son would cause too much scandal even in Constantinople. As a special mark of grace, also, the Bishop Barnabas, of Egypt, will be allowed to assist in the ceremony, because it was he who snatched your soul from the burning. Moreover, since the Sacrament is to be administered afterwards, he has been commanded to attend here to receive your confession in the chapel of the palace, and within an hour. You know that this day being the Feast of St. Michael and All Angels, you will be received in the name of Michael, a high one well fitted to a warlike saint, though I think that I shall still call you Olaf. So farewell, my god-son to be, until we meet at the cathedral, where I shall shine in the reflected light of all your virtues."

Then she sighed, laughed a little, and glided away.

In due course a priest of the chapel came to summon me there, saying that the Bishop Barnabas awaited me. I went and made my confession, though in truth I had little to tell him that he did not already know. Afterwards the good old man, who by now was quite recovered from his hurts and imprisonment, accompanied me to my quarters, where we ate together. He told me that before he attended in the chapel he had been received by the Empress, who had spoken to him very kindly, making

light of their difference of opinion as to images and with her own mouth confirmed him in his bishopric, even hinting at his possible promotion.

"This, my son," he added, "I am well aware I owe to your good offices."

I asked him if he would return at once to Upper Egypt, where he had his bishopric.

"No, my son," he answered, "not yet awhile. The truth is that there have arrived here the chief man in my diocese, and his daughter. He is a descendant of the old Pharaohs of the Egyptians who lives near the second cataract of the Nile, almost on the borders of Ethiopia, whither the accursed children of Mahomet have not yet forced their way. He is still a great man among the Egyptians, who look upon him as their lawful prince. His mission here is to try to plan a new war upon the followers of the Prophet, who, he holds, might be assailed by the Empire at the mouths of the Nile, while he attacked them with his Egyptians from the south."

Now I grew interested, who had always grieved over the loss of Egypt to the Empire, and asked what was this prince's name.

"Magas, my son, and his daughter is named Heliodore. Ah! she is such a woman as I would see you wed, beautiful indeed, and good and true as she is beautiful, with a high spirit also, such as befits her ancient blood.

Mayhap you will note her in the cathedral. Nay, I forgot, not there, but

afterwards in this palace, since it is the command of the Empress, to whom I have been speaking of their matters, that these two should come to dwell here for a while. After that I hope we shall all return to Egypt together, though Magas, being on a secret mission, does not travel under his own name, but as a merchant."

Suddenly he paused, and began to stare at my throat.

"Is aught wrong with my armour, Father?" I asked.

"No, son. I was looking at that trinket which you wear. Of course I have noted it before, but never closely. It is strange, very strange!"

"What is strange, Father?"

"Only that I have seen another like it."

"I dare say you have," I answered, laughing, "for when I would not give this to the Augusta, it pleased her to have it copied."

"No, no; I mean in Egypt, and, what is more, a story hung to the jewel."

"On whom? Where? What story?" I asked eagerly.

"Oh! I cannot stay to tell you now. Moreover, your mind should be fixed upon immortal crowns, and not on earthly necklaces. I must be gone; nay,

stay me not, I am already late. Do you get you to your knees and pray till your god-parents come to fetch you."

Then, in spite of all I could do to keep him, he went, muttering:

"Strange! Exceeding strange!" and leaving me quite unfit for prayer.

An hour later I was riding through the streets of the mighty city, clad in shining armour. As the season was that of October, in which the Feast of St. Michael falls, we wore cloaks, although, the day being warm, they were little needed. Mine was of some fine white stuff, with a red cross broidered on the right shoulder. Stauracius, the eunuch and great minister, who had been ordered to act as my god-father, rode alongside of me on a mule, because he dared not mount a horse, sweating beneath his thick robe of office, and, as I heard from time to time, cursing me, his god-son, and all this ceremony beneath his breath. On my other hand was my god-mother, Martina, riding an Arab mare, which she did well enough, having been brought up to horsemanship on the plains of Greece. Her mood was varied, for now she laughed at the humour of the scene, and now she was sad almost to tears.

The streets were lined with thousands of the pleasure-loving people of the city, who had come out to see the show of the Empress going in state to the cathedral. They were gathered even on the flat house-tops and in the entrances to the public buildings and open places. But the glory

of the sight was centred, not about me, with my escort of guards and chanting priests, but in Irene's self. Preceded and followed by glittering regiments of soldiers, she drove in her famous golden chariot, drawn by eight milk-white steeds, each of which was led by a bejewelled noble. Her dress was splendid and covered with sparkling gems, and on her yellow hair she wore a crown. As she went the multitudes shouted their welcome, and she bowed to right and left in answer to the shouts. Now and again, however, bands of armed men, clad in a dress of a peculiar colour, emerged from side streets and hooted, crying:

"Where is the Augustus? Give us the Augustus. We will not be ruled by a woman and her eunuchs!"

These men were of the party of Constantine, and set on by him. Once, indeed, there was a tumult, for some of them tried to bar the road, till they were driven away, leaving a few dead or wounded behind them. But still the crowds shouted and the Empress bowed as though nothing had happened, and thus by a somewhat winding route, we came to St. Sophia.

The Augusta entered, and presently I and those with me followed her into the wonderful cathedral. I see it now, not in particular, but as a whole, with its endless columns, its aisles and apses, and its glittering mosaics shining through the holy gloom, across which shot bars of light from the high window-places. All the great place was full of the noblest in the city, rank upon rank of them, come thither to see

the Empress in her glory at the great Feast of St. Michael, which year by year she attended thus.

At the altar waited the Patriarch in his splendid robes, attended by many bishops and priests, among them Barnabas of Egypt. The service began, I and some other converts standing together near to the altar rail. The details of it do not return to me. Sweet voices sang, censers gave forth their incense, banners waved, and images of the saints, standing everywhere, smiled upon us fixedly. Some of us were baptised, and some who had already been baptised were received publicly into the fellowship of the Church, I among them. My god-father, Stauracius, a deacon prompting him, and my god-mother, Martina, spoke certain words on my behalf, and I also spoke certain words which I had learned.

The splendid Patriarch, a sour-faced man with a slight squint, gave me his especial blessing. The Bishop Barnabas, upon whom, as I noted, the Patriarch was always careful to turn his back, offered up a prayer. My god-father and god-mother embraced me, Stauracius smacking the air at a distance, for which I was grateful, and Martina touching me gently with her lips upon the brow. The Empress smiled upon me and, as I passed her, patted me on the shoulder. Then the Sacrament was celebrated, whereof the Empress partook first; next we converts, with our god-parents, and afterwards a number of the congregation.

It was over at last. The Augusta and her attendants marched down the cathedral towards the great western doors, priests followed, and, among

them, we converts, whom the people applauded openly.

Looking to right and left of me, for I was weary of keeping my gaze fixed upon the floor, presently I caught sight of a face whilst as yet it was far away. It seemed to draw me, I knew not why. The face was that of a woman. She stood by an old and stately-looking man with a white beard, the last of a line of worshippers next to the aisle along which the procession passed, and I saw that she was young and fair.

Down the long, resounding aisle the procession marched slowly. Now I was nearer to the face, and perceived that it was lovely as some rich-hued flower. The large eyes were dark and soft as a deer's. The complexion, too, was somewhat dark, as though the sun had kissed it. The lips were red and curving, and about them played a little smile that was full of mystery as the eyes were full of thought and tenderness. The figure was delicate and rounded, but not so very tall. All these things and others I noted, yet it was not by them that I was drawn and held, but rather because I knew this lady.

She was the woman of whom, years ago, I had dreamed on the night on which I broke into the Wanderer's tomb at Aar!

Never for one moment did I doubt me of this truth. I was sure. I was sure. It did not even need, while she turned to whisper something to her companion, that the cloak she wore should open a little, revealing on her breast a necklace of emerald beetles separated by inlaid shells of

pale and ancient gold.

She was watching the procession with interest, yet somewhat idly, when she caught sight of me, whom, from where she stood, she could scarcely have seen before. Of a sudden her face grew doubtful and troubled, like to that of one who has just received some hurt. She saw the ornament about my neck. She turned pale and had she not gripped the arm of the man beside her, would, I think, have fallen. Then her eyes caught mine, and Fate had us in its net.

She leaned forward, gazing, gazing, all her soul in those dark eyes, and I, too, gazed and gazed. The great cathedral vanished with its glittering crowds, the sound of chanting and of feet that marched died from my ears. In place of these I saw a mighty columned temple and two stone figures, taller than pines, seated on a plain, and through the moonlit silence heard a sweet voice murmuring:

"Farewell. For this life, farewell!"

Now we were near to each other, now I was passing her, I who might not stay. My hand brushed hers, and oh! it was as though I had drunk a cup of wine. A spirit entered into me and, bending, I whispered in her ear, speaking in the Latin tongue, since Greek, which all knew, I did not dare to use, "Ave post secula!" Greeting after the ages!

I saw her bosom heave; yes, and heard her whisper back:

"Ave!"

So she knew me also.