

CHAPTER VI

HELIODORE

That night there was feasting at the palace, and I, Olaf, now known as Michael, as a convert was one of the chief guests, so that for me there was no escape. I sat very silent, so silent that the Augusta frowned, though she was too far off to speak to me. The banquet came to an end at last and before midnight I was free to go, still without word from the Empress, who withdrew herself, as I thought in an ill-humour.

I sought my bed, but in it knew little of sleep. I had found her for whom during all the long years I had been searching, though I did not understand that I was searching. After the ages I had found her and she had found me. Her eyes said it, and, unless I dreamed, her sweet voice said it also.

Who was she? Doubtless that Heliodore, daughter of Magas, the prince of whom the Bishop Barnabas had spoken to me. Oh! now I understood what he meant when he spoke of another necklace like to that I wore, and yet would explain nothing. It lay upon the breast of Heliodore, Heliodore who was such a one as he wished that I might wed. Well, certainly I wished it too; but, alas! how could I wed, who was in Irene's power, a toy for her to play with or to break? And how would it fare with any woman whom it was known that I wished to wed? I must be secret until she was gone from Constantinople, and in this way or in that I could

follow her. I, who had ever been open-minded, must learn to keep my own counsel.

Now, too, I remembered how Barnabas had said the Augusta commanded that this Prince Magas and his daughter should come to the palace as her guests. Well, the place was vast, a town in itself, and likely enough I should not see them there. Yet I longed to see one of them as never I had longed for anything before. I was sure, also, that no fears could keep us apart, even though I knew the road before me to be full of dangers and of trials, knew that I went with my life in my hand, the life of which I had been quite careless, but that now had become so dear to me. For did not the world hold another to whom it belonged?

The night passed away. I rose and went about my morning duties. Scarcely were these finished when a messenger summoned me to the presence of the Augusta. I followed him with a sinking heart, certain that those woes which I had foreseen were about to begin. Also, now there was no woman in the whole world whom I less wished to see than Irene, Empress of the Earth.

I was led to the small audience chamber, whereof I have already spoken, that on the floor of which was the mosaic of the goddess Venus making pretence to kill her lover. There I found the Augusta seated in a chair of State, the minister Stauracius, my god-father, who glowered at me as I entered, some secretaries, and Martina, my god-mother, who was the lady in attendance.

I saluted the Empress, who bowed graciously and said:

"General Olaf--nay, I forgot, General Michael, your god-father Stauracius has something to say which I trust will please you as much as it does him and me. Speak, Stauracius."

"Beloved god-son," began Stauracius, in a voice of sullen rage, "it has pleased the Augusta to appoint you----"

"On the prayer and advice of me, Stauracius," interrupted the Empress.

"----On the prayer and advice of me, Stauracius," repeated the eunuch like a talking bird, "to be one of her chamberlains and Master of the Palace, at a salary of" (I forget the sum, but it was a great one) "with all the power and perquisites to that office pertaining, in reward of the services which you have rendered to her and the Empire. Thank the Empress for her gracious favour."

"Nay," interrupted Irene again, "thank your beloved god-father Stauracius, who has given me no peace until I offered you this preferment which has suddenly become vacant, Stauracius alone knows why, for I do not. Oh! you were wise, Olaf--I mean Michael--to choose Stauracius for a god-father, though I warn him," she added archly, "that in his natural love he must not push you forward too fast lest others should begin to show that jealousy which is a stranger to his noble

nature. Come hither, Michael, and kiss my hand upon your appointment."

So I advanced and, kneeling, kissed the Augusta's hand, according to custom on such occasions, noting, as doubtless Stauracius did also, that she pressed it hard enough against my lips. Then I rose and said:

"I thank the Augusta----"

"And my god-father Stauracius," she interrupted.

"----And my god-father Stauracius," I echoed, "for her and his goodness towards me. Yet with humility I venture to say that I am a soldier who knows nothing whatsoever of the duties of a chamberlain and of a Master of the Palace, and, therefore, I beg that someone else more competent may be chosen to fill these high offices."

On hearing these words Stauracius stared at me with his round and owl-like eyes. Never before had he known an officer in Constantinople who wished to decline power and more pay. Scarcely, indeed, could he believe his ears. But the Augusta only laughed.

"Baptism has not changed you, Olaf," she said, "who ever were simple, as I believe your duties will be. At any rate, your god-father and god-mother will instruct you in them--especially your god-mother. So no more of such foolish talk. Stauracius, you may be gone to attend to the affairs of which we have been speaking, as I see you burn to do, and

take those secretaries with you, for the scratching of their pens sets my teeth on edge. Bide here a moment, General, for as Master of the Palace it will be your duty to receive certain guests to-day of whom I wish to speak with you. Bide you also, Martina, that you may remember my words in case this unpractised officer should forget them."

Stauracius and his secretaries bowed themselves out, leaving the three of us alone.

"Now, Olaf, or Michael--which do you wish to be called?"

"It is more easy for a man to alter his nature than his name," I answered.

"Have you altered your nature? If so, your manners remain much what they were. Well, then, be Olaf in private and Michael in public, for often an alias is convenient enough. Hark! I would read you a lesson. As the wise King Solomon said, 'Everything has its place and time.' It is good to repent you of your sins and to think about your soul, but I pray you do so no more at my feasts, especially when they are given in your honour. Last night you sat at the board like a mummy at an Egyptian banquet. Had your skull stood on it, filled with wine, it could scarce have looked grimmer than did your face. Be more cheerful, I pray you, or I will have you tonsured and promoted to be a bishop, like that old heretic Barnabas of whom you are so fond. Ah! you smile at last, and I am glad to see it. Now hearken again. This afternoon there comes to the palace a certain

old Egyptian named Magas, whom I place in your especial charge, and with him his wife--at least, I think she is his wife."

"Nay, Mistress, his daughter," interrupted Martina.

"Oh! his daughter," said the Augusta suspiciously. "I did not know she was his daughter. What is she like, Martina?"

"I have not seen her, Empress, but someone said that she is a black-looking woman, such as the Nile breeds."

"Is it so? Then I charge you, Olaf, keep her far from me, for I love not these ugly black women, whose woolly hair always smells of grease. Yes, I give you leave to court her, if you will, since thereby you may learn some secrets," and she laughed merrily.

I bowed, saying that I would obey the Augusta's orders to the best of my power, and she went on:

"Olaf, I would discover the truth concerning this Magas and his schemes, which as a soldier you are well fitted to find out. It seems he has a plan for the recovery of Egypt out of the hands of the followers of that accursed false prophet whose soul dwells with Satan. Now, I would win back Egypt, if I may, and thereby add glory to my name and the Empire. Hear all that he proposes, study it well, and make report to me. Afterwards I will see him alone, who for the present will send him a

letter by the hand of Martina here bidding him open all his heart to you. For a week or more I shall have no time to spend upon this Magas, who must give myself to business upon which hangs my power and perchance my life."

These words she spoke heavily, then fell into a fit of brooding. Rousing herself, she went on:

"Did you note yesterday, Olaf, if you had any mind left for the things of earth, that as I drove in state through the streets many met me with sullen silence, while others cursed me openly and shouted, 'Where is the Augustus?' 'Give us Constantine. We will have no woman's rule.'"

"I saw and heard something of these things, Augusta; also that certain of the soldiers on guard in the city had a mutinous air."

"Aye, but what you did not see and hear was that a plot had been laid to murder me in the cathedral. I got wind of it in time and if you were still governor of yonder prison you'd know where the murderers are to-day. Yet they're but tools; it is their captains whom I want. Well, torture may make them speak; Stauracius has gone to see to it. Oh! the strife is fierce and doubtful. I walk blindfold along a precipice. Above are Fortune's heights, and beneath black ruin. Perhaps you'd be wise to get you to Constantine, Olaf, and become his man, as many are doing, since he'd be glad of you. No need to shake your head, for that's not your way; you are no hound to bite the hand that feeds you, like these

street-bred dogs. Would that I could keep you nearer to me, where hour by hour you might help me with your counsel and your quiet strength. But it may not be--as yet. I raise you as high as I dare, but it must be done step by step, for even now some grow jealous. Take heed to what you eat, Olaf. See that your guards are Northmen, and beneath your doublet wear mail, especially at night. Moreover, unless I send for you, do not come near me too often, and, when we meet, be my humble servant, like others; aye, learn to crawl and kiss the ground. Above all, keep secret as the grave.

"Now," she went on after a pause, during which I stood silent, "what is there more? Oh! with your new offices, you'll retain that of captain of my guard, for I would be well watched during these next few weeks. Follow up the matter of the Egyptian; you may find advancement in it. Perchance one day you will be the general I send against the Moslems--if I can spare you. On all this matter be secret also, for once rumour buzzes over it that peach rots. The Egyptian and his swarthy girl come to the palace to-day, when he will receive my letter. Meet him and see them well housed, though not too near me; Martina will help you. Now be gone and leave me to my battles."

So I went, and she watched me to the door with eyes that were full of tenderness.

Again there is a blank in my memory, or my vision. I suppose that Magas and his daughter Heliodore arrived at the palace on the day of my interview with Irene, of which I have told. I suppose that I welcomed them and conducted them to the guest house that had been made ready for them in the gardens. Doubtless, I listened eagerly to the first words which Heliodore spoke to me, save that one in the cathedral, the word of greeting. Doubtless, I asked her many things, and she gave me many answers. But of all this nothing remains.

What comes back to me is a picture of the Egyptian prince, Magas, and myself seated at some meal in a chamber overlooking the moonlit palace garden. We were alone, and this noble, white-bearded man, hook-nosed and hawk-eyed, was telling me of the troubles of his countrymen, the Christian Copts of Egypt.

"Look on me, sir," he said. "As I could prove to you, were it worth while, and as many could bear witness, for the records have been kept, I am a descendant in the true line from the ancient Pharaohs of my country. Moreover, my daughter, through her Grecian mother, is sprung from the Ptolemies. Our race is Christian, and has been for these three hundred years, although it was among the last to be converted. Yet, noble as we are, we suffer every wrong at the hands of the Moslems. Our goods and lands are doubly taxed, and, if we should go into the towns of Lower Egypt, we must wear garments on which the Cross is broidered as a badge of shame. Yet, where I live--near to the first cataract of the Nile, and not so very far from the city of old Thebes--the

Prophet-worshippers have no real power. I am still the true ruler of that district, as the Bishop Barnabas will tell you, and at any moment, were my standard to be lifted, I could call three thousand Coptic spears to fight for Christ and Egypt. Moreover, if money were forthcoming, the hosts of Nubia could be raised, and together we might sweep down on the Moslems like the Nile in flood, and drive them back to Alexandria."

Then he went on to set out his plans, which in sum were that a Roman fleet and army should appear at the mouths of the Nile to besiege and capture Alexandria, and, with his help, massacre or drive out every Moslem in Egypt. The scheme, which he set forth with much detail, seemed feasible enough, and when I had mastered its particulars I promised to report it to the Empress, and afterwards to speak with him further.

I left the chamber, and presently stood in the garden. Although it was autumn time, the night in this mild climate was very warm and pleasant, and the moonlight threw black shadows of the trees across the paths. Under one of these trees, an ancient, green-leaved oak, the largest of a little grove, I saw a woman sitting. Perchance I knew who she was, perchance I had come thither to meet her, I cannot say. At least, this was not our first meeting by many, for as I came she rose, lifting her flower-like face towards my own, and next moment was in my arms.

When we had kissed our full, we began to talk, seated hand in hand beneath the oak.

"What have you been doing this day, beloved?" she asked.

"Much what I do every day, Heliodore. I have attended to my duties, which are threefold, as Chamberlain, as Master of the Palace, and as Captain of the Guard. Also, for a little while, I saw the Augusta, to whom I had to report various matters. The interview was brief, since a rumour had reached her that the Armenian regiments refuse to take the oath of fidelity to her alone, as she has commanded should be done, and demand that the name of the Emperor, her son, should be coupled with hers, as before. This report disturbed her much, so that she had little time for other business."

"Did you speak of my father's matter, Olaf?"

"Aye, shortly. She listened, and asked whether I were sure that I had got the truth from him. She added that I had best test it by what I could win from you by any arts that a man may use. For, Heliodore, because of something that my god-mother, Martina, said to her, it is fixed in her mind that you are black-skinned and very ugly. Therefore, the Augusta, who does not like any man about her to care for other women, thinks I may make love to you with safety. So I prayed for leave from my duties on the guard this evening that I might sup with your father in the guest-house, and see what I could learn from one or both of you."

"Love makes you clever, Olaf. But hearken. I do not believe that the

Empress thinks me black and ugly any longer. As it chanced while I walked in the inner garden this afternoon, where you said I might go when I wished to be quite alone, dreaming of our love and you, I looked up and saw an imperial woman of middle age, who was gorgeous as a peacock, watching me from a little distance. I went on my way, pretending to see no one, and heard the lady say:

"Has all this trouble driven me mad, Martina, or did I behold a woman beautiful as one of the nymphs of my people's fables wandering yonder among those bushes?"

"I repeat her very words, Olaf, not because they are true--for, remember, she saw me at a distance and against a background of rocks and autumn flowers--but because they were her words, which I think you ought to hear, with those that followed them."

"Irene has said many false things in her life," I said, smiling, "but by all the Saints these were not among them."

Then we embraced again, and after that was finished Heliodore, her head resting on my shoulder, continued her story:

"What was she like, Mistress?" asked the lady Martina, for by this time I had passed behind some little trees. 'I have seen no one who is beautiful in this garden except yourself.'

"She was clad in a clinging white robe, Martina, that left her arms and bosom bare'--being alone, Olaf, I wore my Egyptian dress beneath my cloak, which I had laid down because of the heat of the sun. 'She was not so very tall, yet rounded and most graceful. Her eyes seemed large and dark, Martina, like her hair; her face was tinted like a rich-hued rose. Oh! were I a man she seemed such a one as I should love, who, like all my people, have ever worshipped beauty. Yet, what did I say, that she put me in mind of a nymph of Greece. Nay, that was not so. It was of a goddess of Old Egypt that she put me in mind, for on her face was the dreaming smile which I have seen on that of a statue of mother Isis whom the Egyptians worshipped. Moreover, she wore just such a headdress as I have noted upon those statues.'

"Now the lady Martina answered: 'Surely, you must have dreamed, Mistress. The only Egyptian woman in the palace is the daughter of the old Coptic noble, Magas, who is in Olaf's charge, and though I am told that she is not so ugly as I heard at first, Olaf has never said to me that she was like a goddess. What you saw was doubtless some image of Fortune conjured up by your mind. This I take to be the best of omens, who in these doubtful days grow superstitious.'

"Would Olaf tell one woman that another was like a goddess, Martina, even though she to whom he spoke was his god-mother and a dozen years younger than himself? Come,' she added, 'and let us see if we can find this Egyptian.'

"Then," Heliodore went on, "not knowing what to do, I stood still there against the rockwork and the flowers till presently, round the bushes, appeared the splendid lady and Martina."

Now when I, Olaf, heard all this, I groaned and said:

"Oh! Heliodore, it was the Augusta herself."

"Yes, it was the Augusta, as I learned presently. Well, they came, and I curtsied to them.

"'Are you the daughter of Magas, the Egyptian?' asked the lady, eyeing me from head to foot.

"'Yes, Madam,' I answered. 'I am Heliodore, the daughter of Magas. I pray that I have done no wrong in walking in this garden, but the General Olaf, the Master of the Palace, gave me leave to come here.'

"'And did the General Olaf, whom we know as Michael, give you that necklace which you wear, also, O Daughter of Magas? Nay, you must needs answer me, for I am the Augusta.'

"Now I curtsied again, and said:

"'Not so, O Augusta; the necklace is from Old Egypt, and was found upon the body of a royal lady in a tomb. I have worn it for many years.'

"Indeed, and that which the General Michael wears came also from a tomb.'

"Yes, he told me so, Augusta,' I said.

"It would seem that the two must once have been one, Daughter of Magas?'

"It may be so, Augusta; I do not know.'

"Now the Empress looked about her, and the lady Martina, dropping behind, began to fan herself.

"Are you married, girl?' she asked.

"No,' I answered.

"Are you affianced?'

"Now I hesitated a little, then answered 'No' again.

"You seem to be somewhat doubtful on the point. Farewell for this while. When you walk abroad in our garden, which is open to you, be pleased to array yourself in the dress of our country, and not in that of a courtesan of Egypt."

"What did you answer to that saying?" I asked.

"That which was not wise, I fear, Olaf, for my temper stirred me.

I answered: 'Madam, I thank you for your permission to walk in your garden. If ever I should do so again as your guest, be sure that I will not wear garments which, before Byzantium was a village, were sacred to the gods of my country and those of my ancestors the Queens of Egypt.'"

"And then?" I asked.

"The Empress answered: 'Well spoken! Such would have been my own words had I been in your place. Moreover, they are true, and the robe becomes you well. Yet presume not too far, girl, seeing that Byzantium is no longer a village, and Egypt has some fanatic Moslem for a Pharaoh, who thinks little of your ancient blood.'

"So I bowed and went, and as I walked away heard the Empress rating the lady Martina about I know not what, save that your name came into the matter, and my own. Why does this Empress talk so much about you, Olaf, seeing that she has many officers who are higher in her service, and why was she so moved about this matter of the necklace of golden shells?"

"Heliodore," I answered, "I must tell now what I have hidden from you. The Augusta has been pleased--why, I cannot say, but chiefly, I suppose, because of late years it has been my fancy to keep myself apart from

women, which is rare in this land--to show me certain favour. I gather, even, that, whether she means it or means it not, she has thought of me as a husband."

"Oh!" interrupted Heliodore, starting away from me, "now I understand everything. And, pray, have you thought as a wife of her, who has been a widow these ten years and has a son of twenty?"

"God above us alone knows what I have or have not thought, but it is certain that at present I think of her only as one who has been most kind to me, but who is more to be feared than my worst foe, if I have any."

"Hush!" she said, raising her finger. "I fancied I heard someone stir behind us."

"Fear nothing," I answered. "We are alone here, for I set guards of my own company around the place, with command to admit no one, and my order runs against all save the Empress in person."

"Then we are safe, Olaf, since this damp would disarrange her hair, which, I noted, is curled with irons, not by Nature, like my own. Oh! Olaf, Olaf, how wonderful is the fate that has brought us together. I say that when I saw you yonder in the cathedral for the first time since I was born, I knew you again, as you knew me. That is why, when you whispered to me, 'Greeting after the ages,' I gave you back your

welcome. I know nothing of the past. If we lived and loved before, that tale is lost to me. But there's your dream and there's the necklace. When I was a child, Olaf, it was taken from the embalmed body of some royal woman, who, by tradition, was of my own race, yes, and by records of which my father can tell you, for he is among the last who can still read the writing of the old Egyptians. Moreover, she was very like me, Olaf, for I remember her well as she lay in her coffin, preserved by arts which the Egyptians had. She was young, not much older than I am to-day, and her story tells that she died in giving birth to a son, who grew up a strong and vigorous man, and although he was but half royal, founded a new dynasty in Egypt and became my forefather. This necklace lay upon her breast, and beneath it a writing on papyrus, which said that when the half of it which was lost should be joined again to that half, then those who had worn them would meet once more as mortals. Now the two halves of the necklace have met, and we have met as God decreed, and it is one and we are one for ever and for ever, let every Empress of the earth do what they will to part us."

"Aye," I answered, embracing her again, "we are one for ever and for ever, though perchance for a while we may be separated from time to time."