

CHAPTER VII

VICTORY OR VALHALLA!

A minute later I heard a rustle as of branches being moved by people thrusting their way through them. A choked voice commanded,

"Take him living or dead."

Armed men appeared about us, four of them, and one cried "Yield!"

I sprang up and drew the Wanderer's sword.

"Who orders the General Michael to yield in his own command?" I asked.

"I do," answered the man. "Yield or die!"

Now, thinking that these were robbers or murderers hired by some enemy, I sprang at him, nor was that battle long, for at my first stroke he fell dead. Then the other three set on me. But I wore mail beneath my doublet, as Irene had bade me do, and their swords glanced. Moreover, the old northern rage entered into me, and these easterners were no match for my skill and strength. First one and then another of them went down, whereon the third fled away, taking with him a grizzly wound behind, for I struck him as he fled.

"Now it seems there is an end of that," I gasped to Heliodore, who was crouched upon the seat. "Come, let me take you to your father and summon my guards, ere we meet more of these murderers."

As I spoke a cloaked and hooded woman glided from the shelter of the trees behind and stood before us. She threw back the hood from her head and the moonlight fell upon her face. It was that of the Empress, but oh! so changed by jealous rage that I should scarce have known her. The large eyes seemed to flash fire, the cheeks were white, save where they had been touched with paint, the lips trembled. Twice she tried to speak and failed, but at the third effort words came.

"Nay, all is but begun," she said in a voice that was full of hate.

"Know that I have heard your every word. So, traitor, you would tell my secrets to this Egyptian slut and then murder my own servants," and she pointed to the dead and wounded men. "Well, you shall pay for it, both of you, that I swear."

"Is it murder, Augusta," I asked, saluting, "when four assail one man, and, thinking them assassins, he fights for his life and wins the fray?"

"What are four such curs against you? I should have brought a dozen. Yet it was at me you struck. Whate'er they did I ordered them to do."

"Had I known it, Augusta, I would never have drawn sword, who am your officer and obedient to the end."

"Nay, you'd stab me with your tongue, not with your sword," she answered with something like a sob. "You say you are my obedient officer. Well, now we will see. Smite me that bold-faced baggage dead, or smite me dead, I care not which, then fall upon your sword."

"The first I cannot do, Augusta, for it would be murder against one who has done no wrong, and I will not stain my soul with murder."

"Done no wrong! Has she not mocked me, my years, my widowhood, yes, and even my hair, in the pride of her--her youth, me, the Empress of the World?"

Now Heliodore spoke for the first time.

"And has not the Empress of the World called a poor maid of blood as noble as her own by shameful names?" she asked.

"For the second," I went on before Irene could answer, "I cannot do that either, for it would be foul treason as well as murder to lift my sword against your anointed Majesty. But as for the third, as is my duty, that I will do--or rather suffer your servants to do--if it pleases you to repeat the order later when you are calm."

"What!" cried Heliodore, "would you go and leave me here? Then, Olaf, by the gods my forefathers worshipped for ten thousand years, and by

the gods I worship, I'll find a means to follow you within an hour. Oh! Empress of the World, there is another world you do not rule, and there we'll call you to account."

Now Irene stared at Heliodore, and Heliodore stared back at her, and the sight was very strange.

"At least you have spirit, girl. But think not that shall save you, for there's no room for both of us on earth."

"If I go it may prove wide enough, Augusta," I broke in.

"Nay, you shall not go, Olaf, at least not yet. My orders are that you do not fall upon your sword. As for this Egyptian witch, well, presently my people will be here; then we will see."

Now I drew Heliodore to the trunk of the great tree which stood near by and set myself in front of her.

"What are you about to do?" asked the Empress.

"I am about to fight your eastern curs until I fall, for no northern man will lift a sword against me, even on your orders, Augusta. When I am down, this lady must play her own part as God shall guide her."

"Have no fear, Olaf," Heliodore said gently, "I wear a dagger."

Scarcely had she spoken when there was a sound of many feet. The man whom I had wounded had run shouting towards the palace, rousing the soldiers, both those on watch and those in their quarters. Now these began to arrive and to gather in the glade before the clump of trees, for some guards who had heard the clash of arms guided them to the place. They were of all races and sundry regiments, Greeks, Byzantines, Bulgars, Armenians, so-called Romans, and with them a number of Britons and northern men.

Seeing the Empress and, near by, myself standing with drawn sword against the tree sheltering the lady Heliodore, also on the ground those whom I had cut down, they halted. One of their officers asked what they must do.

"Kill me that man who has slain my servants, or stay--take him living," screamed the Augusta.

Now among those who had gathered was a certain lieutenant of my own, a blue-eyed, flaxen-haired Norwegian giant of the name of Jodd. This man loved me like a brother, I believe because once it had been my fortune to save his life. Also often I had proved his friend when he was in trouble, for in those days Jodd got drunk at times, and when he was drunk lost money which he could not pay.

Now, when he saw my case, I noted that this Jodd, who, if sober, was no

fool at all, although he seemed so slow and stupid, whispered something to a comrade who was with him, whereon the man turned and fled away like an arrow. From the direction in which he went I guessed at once that he was running to the barracks close at hand, where were stationed quite three hundred Northmen, all of whom were under my command.

The soldiers prepared to obey the Augusta's orders, as they were bound to do. They drew their swords and a number of them advanced towards me slowly. Then it was that Jodd, with a few Northmen, moved between them and me, and, saluting the Empress, said in his bad Greek,

"Your pardon, Augusta, but why are we asked to kill our own general?"

"Obey my orders, fellow," she answered.

"Your pardon, Augusta," said the stolid Jodd, "but before we kill our own general, whom you commanded us to obey in all things, we would know why we must kill him. It is a custom of our country that no man shall be killed until he has been heard. General Olaf," and drawing his short sword for the first time, he saluted me in form, "be pleased to explain to us why you are to be killed or taken prisoner."

Now a tumult arose, and a eunuch in the background shouted to the soldiers to obey the Empress's orders, whereon again some of them began to advance.

"If no answer is given to my question," went on Jodd in his slow, bull-like voice, "I fear that others must be killed besides the General Olaf. Ho! Northmen. To me, Northmen! Ho! Britons, to me, Britons! Ho! Saxons, to me, Saxons! Ho! all who are not accursed Greeks. To me all who are not accursed Greeks!"

Now at each cry of Jodd's men leapt forward from the gathering crowd, and, to the number of fifty or more in all, marshalled themselves behind him, those of each nation standing shoulder to shoulder in little groups before me.

"Is my question to be answered?" asked Jodd. "Because, if not, although we be but one against ten, I think that ere the General Olaf is cut down or taken there will be good fighting this night."

Then I spoke, saying,

"Captain Jodd, and comrades, I will answer your question, and if I speak wrongly let the Augusta correct me. This is the trouble. The lady Heliodore here is my affianced wife. We were speaking together in this garden as the affianced do. The Empress, who, unseen by us, was hidden behind those trees, overheard our talk, which, for reasons best known to herself, for in it there was naught of treason or any matter of the State, made her so angry that she set her servants on to kill me. Thinking them murderers or robbers, I defended myself, and there they lie, save one, who fled away wounded. Then the Empress appeared and

ordered me to kill the lady Heliodore. Comrades, look on her whom the Empress ordered me to kill, and say whether, were she your affianced, you would kill her even to please the Empress," and, stepping to one side, I showed them Heliodore in all her loveliness standing against the tree, the drawn dagger in her hand.

Now from those that Jodd had summoned there went up a roar of "No," while even the rest were silent. Irene sprang forward and cried,

"Are my orders to be canvassed and debated? Obey! Cut this man down or take him living, I care not which, and with him all who cling to him, or to-morrow you hang, every one of you."

Now the soldiers who had gathered also began to form up under their officers, for they saw that before them was war and death. By this time they were many, and as the alarm spread minute by minute more arrived.

"Yield or we attack," said he who had taken command of them.

"I do not think that we yield," answered Jodd; and just then there came a sound of men running in ordered companies from the direction of the Northmen's barracks were Jodd's messenger had told his tale.

"I am sure that we do not yield," continued Jodd, and suddenly raised the wild northern war-cry, "Valhalla, Valhalla! Victory or Valhalla!"

Instantly from three hundred throats, above the sound of the running feet that drew ever nearer, came the answering shout of "Valhalla, Valhalla! Victory or Valhalla!" Then out of the gloom up dashed the Northmen.

Now other shouts arose of "Olaf! Olaf! Olaf! Where is our General Olaf? Where is Red-Sword?"

"Here, comrades!" roared Jodd, and up they came those fierce, bearded men, glad with the lust of battle, and ranged themselves by companies before us. Again the great voice of Jodd was heard, calling,

"Empress, do you give us Olaf and his girl and swear by your Christ that no harm shall come to them? Or must we take them for ourselves?"

"Never!" she cried back. "The only thing I give to you is death. On to these rebels, soldiers!"

Now, seeing what must come, I strove to speak, but Jodd shouted again,

"Be silent, Olaf. For this hour you are not our general; you are a prisoner whom it pleases us to rescue. Ring him round, Northmen, ring him round. Bring the Empress, too; she will serve as hostage."

Now some of them drew behind us. Then they began to advance, taking us along with them, and I, who was skilled in war, saw their purpose. They

were drawing out into the open glade, where they could see to fight, and where their flanks would be protected by a stream of water on the one hand and a dense belt of trees on the other.

In her rage the Empress threw herself upon the ground, but two great fellows lifted her up by the arms and thrust her along with us. Marching thus, we reached the point that they had chosen, for the Greeks were in confusion and not ready to attack. There we halted, just on the crest of a little rise of ground.

"Augusta," I said, "in the name of God, I pray you to give way. These Northmen hate your Byzantines, and will take this chance to pay off their scores. Moreover, they love me, and will die to a man ere they see me harmed, and then how shall I protect you in the fray?"

She only glared at me and made no answer.

The attack began. By this time fifteen hundred or so of the Imperial troops had collected, and against them stood, perhaps, four hundred men in all, so that the odds were great. Still, they had no horsemen or archers, and our position was very good, also we were Northmen and they were Grecian scum.

On came the Byzantines, screaming "Irene! Irene!" in a formation of companies ranged one behind the other, for their object was to break in our centre by their weight. Jodd saw, and gave some orders; very good

orders, I thought them. Then he sheathed his short-sword, seized the great battle-axe which was his favourite weapon, and placed himself in front of our triple line that waited in dead silence.

Up the slope surged the charge, and on the crest of it the battle met. At first the weight of the Greeks pressed us back, but, oh! they went down before the Northmen's steel like corn before the sickle, and soon that rush was stayed. Breast to breast they hewed and thrust, and so fearful was the fray that Irene, forgetting her rage, clung to me to protect her.

The fight hung doubtful. As in a dream, I watched the giant Jodd cut down a gorgeous captain, the axe shearing through his golden armour as though it were but silk. I watched a comrade of my own fall beneath a spear-thrust. I gazed at the face of Heliodore, who stared wide-eyed at the red scene, and at the white-lipped Irene, who was clinging to my arm. Now we were being pressed back again, we who at this point had at most two hundred men, some of whom were down, to bear the onslaught of twice that number, and, do what I would, my fingers strayed to my sword-hilt.

Our triple line bent in like a bow and began to break. The scales of war hung on the turn, when, from the dense belt of trees upon our left, suddenly rose the cry of "Valhalla! Valhalla! Victory or Valhalla!" for which I, who had overheard Jodd's orders, was waiting. These were his orders--that half of the Northmen should creep down behind the belt

of trees in their dense shadow, and thus outflank the foe.

Forth they sprang by companies of fifty, the moonlight gleaming on their mail, and there, three hundred yards away, a new battle was begun. Now the Greeks in front of us, fearing for their rear, wavered a moment and fell back, perhaps, ten paces. I saw the opportunity and could bear no more, who before all things was a soldier.

Shouting to some of our wounded to watch the women, I drew my sword and leapt forward.

"I come, Northmen!" I cried, and was greeted with a roar of:

"Olaf Red-Sword! Follow Olaf Red-Sword!" for so the soldiers named me.

"Steady, Northmen! Shoulder to shoulder, Northmen!" I cried back. "Now at them! Charge! Valhalla! Victory or Valhalla!"

Down the slope they went before our rush. In thirty paces they were but a huddled mob, on which our swords played like lightnings. We rolled them back on to their supports, and those supports, outflanked, began to flee. We swept through and through them. We slew them by hundreds, we trod them beneath our victorious feet, and--oh! in that battle a strange thing happened to me. I thought I saw my dead brother Ragnar fighting at my side; aye, and I thought I heard him cry to me, in that lost, remembered voice:

"The old blood runs in you yet, you Christian man! Oh! you fight well, you Christian man. We of Valhalla give you greetings, Olaf Red-Sword. Valhalla! Valhalla! Victory or Valhalla!"

It was done. Some were fled, but more were dead, for, once at grips, the Northman showed no mercy to the Greek. Back we came, those who were left of us, for many, perhaps a hundred, were not, and formed a ring round the women and the wounded.

"Well done, Olaf," said Heliodore; but Irene only looked at me with a kind of wonder in her eyes.

Now the leaders of the Northmen began to talk among themselves, but although from time to time they glanced at me, they did not ask me to join in their talk. Presently Jodd came forward and said in his slow voice:

"Olaf Red-Sword, we love you, who have always loved us, your comrades, as we have shown you to-night. You have led us well, Olaf, and, considering our small numbers, we have just won a victory of which we are proud. But our necks are in the noose, as yours is, and we think that in this case our best course is to be bold. Therefore, we name you Cæsar. Having defeated the Greeks, we propose now to take the palace and to talk with the regiments without, many of whom are disloyal and shout for Constantine, whom after all they hate only a little less than they

do Irene yonder. We know not what will be the end of the matter and do not greatly care, who set our fortunes upon a throw of the dice, but we think there is a good chance of victory. Do you accept, and will you throw in your sword with ours?"

"How can I," I answered, "when there stands the Empress, whose bread I have eaten and to whom I have sworn fealty?"

"An Empress, it seems, who desires to slay you over some matter that has to do with a woman. Olaf, the daggers of her assassins have cut this thread of fealty. Moreover, as it chances she is in our power, and as we cannot make our crime against her blacker than it is, we propose to rid you and ourselves of this Empress, who is our enemy, and who for her great wickedness well deserves to die. Such is our offer, to take or to leave, as time is short. Should you refuse it, we abandon you to your fate, and go to make our terms with Constantine, who also hates this Empress and even now is plotting her downfall."

As he spoke I saw certain men draw near to Irene for a purpose which I could guess, and stepped between her and them.

"The Augusta is my mistress," I said, "and although I attacked some of her troops but now, and she has wronged me much, still I defend her to the last."

"Little use in that, Olaf, seeing that you are but one and we are many,"

answered Jodd. "Come, will you be Cæsar, or will you not?"

Now Irene crept up behind me and whispered in my ear.

"Accept," she said. "It pleases me well. Be Cæsar as my husband. So you will save my life and my throne, of which I vow to you an equal share. With the help of your Northmen and the legions I command and who cling to me, we can defeat Constantine and rule the world together. This petty fray is nothing. What matters it if some lives have been lost in a palace tumult? The world lies in your grasp; take it, Olaf, and, with it, me."

I heard and understood. Now had come the great moment of my life. Something told me that on the one hand were majesty and empire; on the other much pain and sorrow yet with these a certain holy joy and peace. It was the latter that I chose, as doubtless Fate or God had decreed that I should do.

"I thank you, Augusta," I said, "but, while I can protect her, I will not seize a throne over the body of one who has been kind to me, nor will I buy it at the price you offer. There stands my predestined wife, and I can marry no other woman."

Now Irene turned to Heliodore, and said in a swift, low voice:

"Do you understand this matter, lady? Let us have done with jealousies

and be plain, for the lives of all of us hang upon threads that, for some, must break within a day or two, and with them those of a thousand, thousand others. Aye, the destiny of the world is at stake. You say you love this man, whom I will tell you I love also. Well, if you win him, and he lives, which he scarce can hope to do, he gets your kisses in whatever corner of the earth will shelter him and you. If I win him, the empire of the earth is his. Moreover, girl," she added with meaning, "empresses are not always jealous; sometimes even they can look the other way. There would be high place for you within our Court, and, who knows? Your turn might come at length. Also your father's plans would be forwarded to the last pound of gold in our treasury and the last soldier in our service. Within five years, mayhap, he might rule Egypt as our Governor. What say you?"

Heliodore looked at the Empress with that strange, slow smile of hers. Then she looked at me, and answered:

"I say what Olaf says. There are two empires in the case. One, which you can give, Augusta, is of the world; the other, which I can give him here, is only a woman's heart, yet, as I think, of another eternal world that you do not know. I say what Olaf says. Let Olaf speak, Augusta."

"Empress," I said slowly, "again I thank you, but it may not be. My fate lies here," and I laid my hand upon the heart of Heliodore.

"You are mistaken, Olaf," answered the Empress, in a cold and quiet

voice, but seemingly without anger; "your fate lies there," and she pointed to the ground, then added, "Believe me, I am sorry, for you are a man of whom any woman might be proud--yes, even an empress. I have always thought it, and I thought it again just now when I saw you lead that charge against those curs in armour," and she pointed towards the bodies of the Greeks. "So, it is finished, as perchance I am. If I must die, let it be on your sword, Olaf."

"Your answer, Olaf Red-Sword!" called Jodd. "You have talked enough."

"Your answer! Yes, your answer!" the Northmen echoed.

"The Empress has offered to share her crown with me, Jodd, but, friends, it cannot be, because of this lady to whom I am affianced."

"Marry them both," shouted a rude voice, but Jodd replied:

"Then that is soon settled. Out of our path, Olaf, and look the other way. When you turn your head again there will be no Empress to trouble you, except one of your own choosing."

On hearing these words, and seeing the swords draw near, Irene clutched hold of me, for always she feared death above everything.

"You will not see me butchered?" she gasped.

"Not while I live," I answered. "Hearken, friends. I am the general of the Augusta's guard, and if she dies, for honour's sake I must die first. Strike, then, if you will, but through my body."

"Tear her away!" called a voice.

"Comrades," I went on, "be not so mad. To-night we have done that which has earned us death, but while the Empress lives you have a hostage in your hands with whom you can buy pardon. As a lump of clay what worth is she to you? Hark! The regiments from the city!"

As I spoke, from the direction of the palace came a sound of many voices and of the tread of five thousand feet.

"True enough," said Jodd, with composure. "They are on us, and now it is too late to storm the palace. Olaf, like many another man, you have lost your chance of glory for a woman, or, who knows, perhaps you've won it. Well, comrades, as I take it you are not minded to fly and be hunted down like rats, only one thing remains--to die in a fashion they will remember in Byzantium. Olaf, you'd best mind the women; I will take command. Ring round, comrades, ring round! 'Tis a good place for it. Set the wounded in the middle. Keep that Empress living for the present, but when all is done, kill her. We'll be her escort to the gates of hell, for there she's bound if ever woman was."

Then, without murmur or complaint, almost in silence, indeed, they

formed Odin's Ring, that triple circle of the Northmen doomed to die; the terrible circle that on many a battlefield has been hidden at last beneath the heap of fallen foes.

The regiments moved up; there were three of them of full strength. Irene stared about her, seeking some loophole of escape, and finding none. Heliodore and I talked together in low tones, making our tryst beyond the grave. The regiments halted within fifty paces of us. They liked not the look of Odin's Ring, and the ground over which they had marched and the fugitives with whom they had spoken told them that many of them looked their last upon the moon.

Some mounted generals rode towards us and asked who was in command of the Northmen. When they learned that it was Jodd, they invited him to a parley. The end of it was that Jodd and two others stepped twenty paces from our ranks, and met a councillor--it was Stauracius--and two of the generals in the open, where no treachery could well be practised, especially as Stauracius was not a man of war. Here they talked together for a long while. Then Jodd and his companions returned, and Jodd said, so that all might hear him:

"Hearken. These are the terms offered: That we return to our barracks in peace, bearing our weapons. That nothing be laid to our charge under any law, military or civil, by the State or private persons, for this night's slaying and tumult, and that in guarantee thereof twelve hostages of high rank, upon whose names we have agreed, be given into

our keeping. That we retain our separate stations in the service of the Empire, or have leave to quit that service within three months, with the gratuity of a quarter's pay, and go where we will unmolested. But that, in return for these boons, we surrender the person of the Empress unharmed, and with her that of the General Olaf, to whom a fair trial is promised before a military court. That with her own voice the Augusta shall confirm all these undertakings before she leaves our ranks. Such is the offer, comrades."

"And if we refuse it, what?" asked a voice.

"This: That we shall be ringed round, and either starved out or shot down by archers. Or, if we try to escape, that we shall be overwhelmed by numbers, and any of us who chance to be taken living shall be hanged, sound and wounded together."

Now the leaders of the Northmen consulted. Irene watched them for awhile, then turned to me and asked,

"What will they do, Olaf?"

"I cannot say, Augusta," I answered, "but I think that they will offer to surrender you and not myself, since they may doubt them of that fair trial which is promised to me."

"Which means," she said, "that, whether I live or die, all these brave

men will be sacrificed to you, Olaf, who, after all, must perish with them, as will this Egyptian. Are you prepared to accept that blood-offering, Olaf? If so, you must have changed from the man I loved."

"No, Augusta," I answered, "I am not prepared. Rather would I trust myself into your power, Augusta."

The conference of the officers had come to an end. Their leader advanced and said,

"We accept the terms, except as to the matter of Olaf Red-Sword. The Empress may go free, but Olaf Red-Sword, our general whom we love, we will not surrender. First will we die."

"Good!" said Jodd. "I looked for such words from you."

Then he marched out, with his companions, and again met Stauracius and the two generals of the Greeks. After they had talked a little while he returned and said,

"Those two officers, being men, would have agreed, but Stauracius, the eunuch, who seems in command, will not agree. He says that Olaf Red-Sword must be surrendered with the Empress. We answered that in this case soon there would be no Empress to surrender except one ready for burial. He replied that was as God might decree; either both must be

surrendered or both be held."

"Do you know why the dog said that?" whispered Irene to me. "It was because those Northmen have let slip the offer I made to you but now, and he is jealous of you, and fears you may take his power. Well, if I live, one day he shall pay for this who cares so little for my life."

So she spoke, but I made no answer. Instead, I turned to Heliodore, saying,

"You see how matters stand, beloved. Either I must surrender myself, or all these brave men must perish, and we with them. For myself, I am ready to die, but I am not willing that you and they should die. Also, if I yield, I can do no worse than die, whereas perchance after all things will take another turn. Now what say you?"

"I say, follow your heart, Olaf," she replied steadily. "Honour comes first of all. The rest is with God. Wherever you go there I soon shall be."

"I thank you," I answered; "your mind is mine."

Then I stepped forward and said,

"Comrades, it is my turn to throw in this great game. I have heard and considered all, and I think it best that I should be surrendered, with

the Augusta, to the Greeks."

"We will not surrender you," they shouted.

"Comrades, I am still your general, and my order is that you surrender me. Also, I have other orders to give to you. That you guard this lady Heliodore to the last, and that, while one of you remains alive, she shall be to you as though she were that man's daughter, or mother, or sister, to help and protect as best he may in every circumstance, seen or unforeseen. Further, that with her you guard her father, the noble Egyptian Magas. Will you promise this to me?"

"Aye!" they roared in answer.

"You hear them, Heliodore," I said. "Know that henceforth you are one of a large family, and, however great your enemies, that you will never lack a friend. Comrades," I went on, "this is my second order, and perchance the last that I shall ever give to you. Unless you hear that I am evilly treated in the palace yonder, stay quiet. But if that tidings should reach you, then all oaths are broken. Do what you can and will."

"Aye!" they roared again.

Afterwards what happened? It comes back to me but dimly. I think they

swore the Empress on the Blood of Christ that I should go unharmed. I think I embraced Heliodore before them all, and gave her into their keeping. I think I whispered into the ear of Jodd to seek out the Bishop Barnabas, and pray him to get her and her father away to Egypt without delay--yes, even by force, if it were needful. Then I think I left their lines, and that, as I went, leading the Augusta by the hand, they gave to me the general's salute. That I turned and saluted them in answer ere I yielded myself into the power of my god-father, Stauracius, who greeted me with a false and sickly smile.