

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE TRIAL OF OLAF

I know not what time went by before I was put upon my trial, but that trial I can still see as clearly as though it were happening before my eyes. It took place in a long, low room of the vast palace buildings that was lighted only by window-places set high up in the wall. These walls were frescoed, and at the end of the room above the seat of the judges was a rude picture in bright colours of the condemnation of Christ by Pilate. Pilate, I remember, was represented with a black face, to signify his wickedness I suppose, and in the air above him hung a red-eyed imp shaped like a bat who gripped his robe with one claw and whispered into his ear.

There were seven judges, he who presided being a law-officer, and the other six captains of different grades, chosen mostly from among the survivors of those troops whom the Northmen had defeated on the night of the battle in the palace gardens. As this was a military trial, I was allowed no advocate to defend me, nor indeed did I ask for any. The Court, however, was open and crowded with spectators, among whom I saw most of the great officers of the palace, Stauracius with them; also some ladies, one of whom was Martina, my god-mother. The back of the long room was packed with soldiers and others, not all of whom were my enemies.

Into this place I was brought, guarded by four negroes, great fellows armed with swords whom I knew to be chosen out of the number of the executioners of the palace and the city. Indeed, one of them had served under me when I was governor of the State prison, and been dismissed by me because of some cruelty which he had practised.

Noting all these things and the pity in Martina's eyes, I knew that I was already doomed, but as I had expected nothing else this did not trouble me over much.

I stood before the judges, and they stared at me.

"Why do you not salute us, fellow?" asked one of them, a mincing Greek captain whom I had seen running like a hare upon the night of the fray.

"Because, Captain, I am of senior rank to any whom I see before me, and as yet uncondemned. Therefore, if salutes are in the question, it is you who should salute me."

At this speech they stared at me still harder than before, but among the soldiers at the end of the hall there arose something like a murmur of applause.

"Waste no time in listening to his insolence," said the president of the Court. "Clerk, set out the case."

Then a black-robed man who sat beneath the judges rose and read the charge to me from a parchment. It was brief and to the effect that I, Michael, formerly known as Olaf or Olaf Red-Sword, a Northman in the service of the Empress Irene, a general in her armies, a chamberlain and Master of the Palace, had conspired against the Empress, had killed her servants, had detained her person, threatening to murder her; had made war upon her troops and slain some hundreds of them by the help of other Northmen, and wounded many more.

I was asked what I pleaded to this charge, and replied,

"I am not guilty."

Then witnesses were called. The first of these was the fourth man whom Irene had set upon me, who alone escaped with a wound behind. This fellow, having been carried into court, for he could not walk, leaned over a bar, for he could not sit down, and told his story. When he had finished I was allowed to examine him.

"Why did the Empress order you and your companions to attack me?" I asked.

"I think because she saw you kiss the Egyptian lady, General," at which answer many laughed.

"You tried to kill me, did you not?"

"Yes, General, for the Empress ordered us so to do."

"Then what happened?"

"You killed or cut down three of us one after the other, General, being too skilful and strong for us. As I turned to fly, me you wounded here," and, dragging himself round with difficulty, he showed how my sword had fallen on a part where no soldier should receive a wound. At this sight those in the Court laughed again.

"Did I provoke you in any way before you attacked me?"

"No, indeed, General. It was the Empress you provoked by kissing the beautiful Egyptian lady. At least, I think so, since every time you kissed each other she seemed to become more mad, and at last ordered us to kill both of you."

Now the laughter grew very loud, for even the Court officers could no longer restrain themselves, and the ladies hid their faces in their hands and tittered.

"Away with that fool!" shouted the president of the Court, and the poor fellow was hustled out. What became of him afterwards I do not know, though I can guess.

Now appeared witness after witness who told of the fray which I have described already, though for the most part they tried to put another colour on the matter. Of many of these men I asked no questions. Indeed, growing weary of their tales, I said at length to the judges,

"Sirs, what need is there for all this evidence, seeing that among you I perceive three gallant officers whom I saw running before the Northmen that night, when with some four hundred swords we routed about two thousand of you? You yourselves, therefore, are the best witnesses of what befell. Moreover, I acknowledge that, being moved by the sight of war, in the end I led the charge against you, before which charge some died and many fled, you among them."

Now these captains glowered at me and the president said,

"The prisoner is right. What need is there of more evidence?"

"I think much, sir," I answered, "since but one side of the story has been heard. Now I will call witnesses, of whom the first should be the Augusta, if she is willing to appear and tell you what happened within the circle of the Northmen on that night."

"Call the Augusta!" gasped the president. "Perchance, prisoner Michael, you will wish next to call God Himself on your behalf?"

"That, sir," I answered, "I have already done and do. Moreover," I added

slowly, "of this I am sure, that in a time to come, although it be not to-morrow or the next day, you and everyone who has to do with this case will find that I have not called Him in vain."

At these words for a few moments a solemn silence fell upon the Court. It was as though they had gone home to the heart of everyone who was present there. Also I saw the curtains that draped a gallery high up in the wall shake a little. It came into my mind that Irene herself was hidden behind those curtains, as afterwards I learned was the case, and that she had made some movement which caused them to tremble.

"Well," said the president, after this pause, "as God does not appear to be your witness, and as you have no other, seeing that you cannot give evidence yourself under the law, we will now proceed to judgment."

"Who says that the General Olaf, Olaf Red-Sword, has no witness?" exclaimed a deep voice at the end of the hall. "I am here to be his witness."

"Who speaks?" asked the president. "Let him come forward."

There was a disturbance at the end of the hall, and through the crowd that he seemed to throw before him to right and left appeared the mighty form of Jodd. He was clad in full armour and bore his famous battle-axe in his hand.

"One whom some of you know well enough, as others of your company who will never know anything again have done in the past. One named Jodd, the Northman, second in command of the guard to the General Olaf," he answered, and marched to the spot where witnesses were accustomed to stand.

"Take away that barbarian's axe," exclaimed an officer who sat among the judges.

"Aye," said Jodd, "come hither, mannikin, and take it away if you can. I promise you that along with it something else shall be taken away, to wit your fool's head. Who are you that would dare to disarm an officer of the Imperial Guard?"

After this there was no more talk of removing Jodd's axe, and he proceeded to give his evidence, which, as it only detailed what has been written already, need not be repeated. What effect it produced upon the judges, I cannot say, but that it moved those present in the Court was clear enough.

"Have you done?" asked the president at length when the story was finished.

"Not altogether," said Jodd. "Olaf Red-Sword was promised an open trial, and that he has, since otherwise I and some friends of mine could not be in this Court to tell the truth, where perhaps the truth has seldom been

heard before. Also he was promised a fair trial, and that he has not, seeing that the most of his judges are men with whom he fought the other day and who only escaped his sword by flight. To-morrow I propose to ask the people of Byzantium whether it is right that a man should be tried by his conquered enemies. Now I perceive that you will find a verdict of 'guilty' against Olaf Red-Sword, and perhaps condemn him to death. Well, find what verdict you will and pass what sentence you will, but do not dare to attempt to execute that sentence."

"Dare! Dare!" shouted the president. "Who are you, man, who would dictate to a Court appointed by the Empress what it shall or shall not do? Be careful lest we pass sentence on you as well as on your fellow-traitor. Remember where you stand, and that if I lift my finger you will be taken and bound."

"Aye, lawyer, I remember this and other things. For instance, that I have the safe-conduct of the Empress under an oath sworn on the Cross of the Christ she worships. For instance, also, that I have three hundred comrades waiting my safe return."

"Three hundred!" snarled the president. "The Empress has three thousand within these walls who will soon make an end of your three hundred."

"I have been told, lawyer," answered Jodd, "that once there lived another monarch, one called Xerxes, who thought that he would make an end of a certain three hundred Greeks, when Greeks were different from



what you are to-day, at a place called Thermopylæ. He made an end of them, but they cost him more than he cared to pay, and now it is those Greeks who live for ever and Xerxes who is dead. But that's not all; since that fray the other night we Northmen have found friends. Have you heard of the Armenian legions, President, those who favour Constantine? Well, kill Olaf Red-Sword, or kill me, Jodd, and you have to deal first with the Northmen and next with the Armenian legions. Now here I am waiting to be taken by any who can pass this axe."

At these words a great silence fell upon the Court. Jodd glared about him, and, seeing that none ventured to draw near, stepped from the witness-place, advanced to where I was, gave me the full salute of ceremony, then marched away to the back of the Court, the crowd opening a path for him.

When he had gone the judges began to consult together, and, as I expected, very soon agreed upon their verdict. The president said, or rather gabbled,

"Prisoner, we find you guilty. Have you any reason to offer why sentence of death should not be passed upon you?"

"Sir," I answered, "I am not here to plead for my life, which already I have risked a score of times in the service of your people. Yet I would say this. On the night of the outbreak I was set on, four to one, for no crime, as you have heard, and did but protect myself. Afterwards, when I

was about to be slain, the Northmen, my comrades, protected me unasked; then I did my best to save the life of the Empress, and, in fact, succeeded. My only offence is that when the great charge took place and your regiments were defeated, remembering only that I was a soldier, I led that charge. If this is a crime worthy of death, I am ready to die. Yet I hold that both God and man will give more honour to me the criminal than to you the judges, and to those who before ever you sat in this Court instructed you, whom I know to be but tools, as to the verdict that you should give."

The applause which my words called forth from those gathered at the end of the Court died away. In the midst of a great silence the president, who, like his companions, I could see well, was growing somewhat fearful, read the sentence in a low voice from a parchment. After setting out the order by which the Court was constituted and other matters, it ran:

"We condemn you, Michael, otherwise called Olaf or Olaf Red-Sword, to death. This sentence will be executed with or without torture at such time and in such manner as it may please the Augusta to decree."

Now the voice of Jodd was heard crying through the gathering gloom, for night was near:

"What sort of judgment is this that the judges bring already written down into the Court? Hearken you, lawyer, and you street-curs, his

companions, who call yourselves soldiers. If Olaf Red-Sword dies, those hostages whom we hold die also. If he is tortured, those hostages will be tortured also. Moreover, ere long we will sack this fine place, and what has befallen Olaf shall befall you also, you false judges, neither less nor more. Remember it, all you who shall have charge of Olaf in his bonds, and, if she be within hearing, let the Augusta Irene remember it also, lest another time there should be no Olaf to save her life."

Now I could see that the judges were terrified. Hastily, with white faces, they consulted together as to whether they should order Jodd to be seized. Presently I heard the president say to his companions:

"Nay, best let him go. If he is touched, our hostages will die. Moreover, doubtless Constantine and the Armenians are at the back of him, or he would not dare to speak thus. Would that we were clear of this business which has been thrust upon us."

Then he called aloud, "Let the prisoner be removed."

Down the long Court I was marched, only now guards, who had been called in, went in front of and behind me, and with them the four executioners by whom I was surrounded.

"Farewell, god-mother," I whispered to Martina as I passed.

"Nay, not farewell," she whispered back, looking up at me with eyes that

were full of tears, though what she meant I did not know.

At the end of the Court, where those who dared to sympathise with me openly were gathered, rough voices called blessings on me and rough hands patted me on the shoulder. To one of these men whose voice I recognised in the gloom I turned to speak a word. Thereon the black executioner who was between us, he whom I had dismissed from the jail for cruelty, struck me on the mouth with the back of his hand. Next instant I heard a sound that reminded me of the growl the white bear gave when it gripped Steinar. Two arms shot out and caught that black savage by the head. There was a noise as of something breaking, and down went the man--a corpse.

Then they hurried me away, for now it was not only the judges who were afraid.

It comes to me that for some days, three or four, I sat in my cell at the palace, for here I was kept because, as I learned afterwards, it was feared that if I were removed to that State prison of which I had been governor, some attempt would be made to rescue me.

This cell was one of several situated beneath that broad terrace which looked out on to the sea, where Irene had first questioned me as to the shell necklace and, against my prayer, had set it upon her own breast.

It had a little barred window, out of which I could watch the sea, and through this window came the sound of sentries tramping overhead and of the voice of the officer who, at stated hours, arrived to turn out the guard, as for some years it had been my duty to do.

I wondered who that officer might be, and wondered also how many of such men since Byzantium became the capital of the Empire had filled his office and mine, and what had become of them all. As I knew, if that terrace had been able to speak, it could have told many bloody histories, whereof doubtless mine would be another. Doubtless, too, there were more to follow until the end came, whatever that might be.

In that strait place I reflected on many things. All my youth came back to me. I marvelled what had happened at Aar since I left it such long years ago. Once or twice rumours had reached me from men in my company, who were Danish-born, that Iduna was a great lady there and still unmarried. But of Freydisa I had heard nothing. Probably she was dead, and, if so, I felt sure that her fierce and faithful spirit must be near me now, as that of Ragnar had seemed to be in the Battle of the Garden.

How strange it was that after all my vision had been fulfilled and it had been my lot to meet her of whom I had dreamed, wearing that necklace of which I had found one-half upon the Wanderer in his grave-mound. Were I and the Wanderer the same spirit, I asked of myself, and she of the dream and Heliodore the same woman?

Who could tell? At least this was sure, from the moment that first we saw one another we knew we belonged each to each for the present and the future. Therefore, as it was with these we had to do, the past might sleep and all its secrets.

Now we had met but to be parted again by death, which seemed hard indeed. Yet since we had met, for my part Fate had my forgiveness for I knew that we should meet again. I looked back on what I had done and left undone, and could not blame myself overmuch. True, it would have been wiser if I had stayed by Irene and Heliodore, and not led that charge against the Greeks. Only then, as a soldier, I should never have forgiven myself, for how could I stand still while my comrades fought for me? No, no, I was glad I had led the charge and led it well, though my life must pay its price. Nor was this so. I must die, not because I had lifted sword against Irene's troops, but for the sin of loving Heliodore.

After all, what was life as we knew it? A passing breath! Well, as the body breathes many million times between the cradle and the grave, so I believed the soul must breathe out its countless lives, each ending in a form of death. And beyond these, what? I did not know, yet my new-found faith gave me much comfort.

In such meditations and in sleep I passed my hours, waiting always until the door of my cell should open and through it appear, not the jailer with my food, which I noted was plentiful and delicate, but the

executioners or mayhap the tormentors.

At length it did open, somewhat late at night, just as I was about to lay myself down to rest, and through it came a veiled woman. I bowed and motioned to my visitor to be seated on the stool that was in the cell, then waited in silence. Presently she threw off her veil, and in the light of the lamp showed that I stood before the Empress Irene.

"Olaf," she said hoarsely, "I am come here to save you from yourself, if it may be so. I was hidden in yonder Court, and heard all that passed at your trial."

"I guessed as much, Augusta," I said, "but what of it?"

"For one thing, this: The coward and fool, who now is dead--of his wounds--who gave evidence as to the killing of the three other cowards by you, has caused my name to become a mock throughout Constantinople. Aye, the vilest make songs upon me in the streets, such songs as I cannot repeat."

"I am grieved, Augusta," I said.

"It is I who should grieve, not you, who are told of as a man who grew weary of the love of an Empress, and cast her off as though she were a tavern wench. That is the first matter. The second is that under the finding of the Court of Justice----"

"Oh! Augusta," I interrupted, "why stain your lips with those words 'of justice!'"

"----Under the finding of the Court," she went on, "your fate is left in my hands. I may kill you or torment your body. Or I may spare you and raise your head higher than any other in the Empire, aye, and adorn it with a crown."

"Doubtless you may do any of these things, Augusta, but which of them do you wish to do?"

"Olaf, notwithstanding all that has gone, I would still do the last. I speak to you no more of love or tenderness, nor do I pretend that this is for your sake alone. It is for mine also. My name is smirched, and only marriage can cover up the stain upon it. Moreover, I am beset by troubles and by dangers. Those accursed Northmen, who love you so well and who fight, not like men but like devils, are in league with the Armenian legions and with Constantine. My generals and my troops fall away from me. If it were assailed, I am not sure that I could hold this palace, strong though it be. There's but one man who can make me safe again, and that man is yourself. The Northmen will do your bidding, and with you in command of them I fear no attack. You have the honesty, the wit and the soldier's skill and courage. You must command, or none. Only this time it must not be as Irene's lover, for that is what they name you, but as her husband. A priest is waiting within call, and one of



high degree. Within an hour, Olaf, you may be my consort, and within a year the Emperor of the World. Oh!" she went on with passion, "cannot you forgive what seem to be my sins when you remember that they were wrought for love of you?"

"Augusta," I said, "I have small ambition; I am not minded to be an emperor. But hearken. Put aside this thought of marriage with one so far beneath you, and let me marry her whom I have chosen, and who has chosen me. Then once more I'll take command of the Northmen and defend you and your cause to the last drop of my blood."

Her face hardened.

"It may not be," she said, "not only for those reasons I have told you, but for another which I grieve to have to tell. Heliodore, daughter of Magas the Egyptian, is dead.'

"Dead!" I gasped. "Dead!"

"Aye, Olaf, dead. You did not see, and she, being a brave woman, hid it from you, but one of those spears that were flung in the fight struck her in the side. For a while the wound went well. But two days ago it mortified; last night she died and this morning I myself saw her buried with honour."

"How did you see her buried, you who are not welcome among the

Northmen?" I asked.

"By my order, as her blood was high, she was laid in the palace graveyard, Olaf."

"Did she leave me no word or token, Augusta? She swore to me that if she died she would send to me the other half of that necklace which I wear."

"I have heard of none," said Irene, "but you will know, Olaf, that I have other business to attend to just now than such death-bed gossip. These things do not come to my ears."

I looked at Irene and Irene looked at me.

"Augusta," I said, "I do not believe your story. No spear wounded Heliodore while I was near her, and when I was not near her your Greeks were too far away for any spears to be thrown. Indeed, unless you stabbed her secretly, she was not wounded, and I am sure that, however much you have hated her, this you would not have dared to do for your own life's sake. Augusta, for your own purposes you are trying to deceive me. I will not marry you. Do your worst. You have lied to me about the woman whom I love, and though I forgive you all the rest, this I do not forgive. You know well that Heliodore still lives beneath the sun."

"If so," answered the Empress, "you have looked your last upon the sun

and--her. Never again shall you behold the beauty of Heliodore. Have you aught to say? There is still time."

"Nothing, Augusta, at present, except this. Of late I have learned to believe in a God. I summon you to meet me before that God. There we will argue out our case and abide His judgment. If there is no God there will be no judgment, and I salute you, Empress, who triumph. If, as I believe and as you say you believe, there is a God, think whom you will be called upon to salute when that God has heard the truth. Meanwhile I repeat that Heliodore the Egyptian still lives beneath the sun."

Irene rose from the stool on which she sat and thought a moment. I gazed through the bars of the window-place in my cell out at the night above. A young moon was floating in the sky, and near to it hung a star. A little passing cloud with a dented edge drifted over the star and the lower horn of the moon. It went by, and they shone out again upon the background of the blue heavens. Also an owl flitted across the window-place of my cell. It had a mouse in its beak, and the shadow of it and of the writhing mouse for a moment lay upon Irene's breast, for I turned my head and saw them. It came into my mind that here was an allegory. Irene was the night-hawk, and I was the writhing mouse that fed its appetite. Doubtless it was decreed that the owl must be and the mouse must be, but beyond them both, hidden in those blue heavens, stood that Justice which we call God.

These were the last things that I saw in this life of mine, and

therefore I remember them well, or rather, almost the last. The very last of which I took note was Irene's face. It had grown like to that of a devil. The great eyes in it stared out between the puffed and purple eyelids. The painted cheeks had sunk in and were pallid beneath and round the paint. The teeth showed in two white lines, the chin worked. She was no longer a beautiful woman, she was a fiend.

Irene knocked thrice upon the door. Bolts were thrown back, and men entered.

"Blind him!" she said.