

CHAPTER IX

THE HALL OF THE PIT

The days and the nights went by, but which was day and which was night I knew not, save for the visits of the jailers with my meals--I who was blind, I who should never see the light again. At first I suffered much, but by degrees the pain died away. Also a physician came to tend my hurts, a skilful man. Soon I discovered, however, that he had another object. He pitied my state, so much, indeed, he said, that he offered to supply me with a drug that, if I were willing to take it, would make an end of me painlessly. Now I understood at once that Irene desired my death, and, fearing to cause it, set the means of self-murder within my reach.

I thanked the man and begged him to give me the drug, which he did, whereon I hid it away in my garments. When it was seen that I still lived although I had asked for the medicine, I think that Irene believed this was because it had failed to work, or that such a means of death did not please me. So she found another. One evening when a jailer brought my supper he pressed something heavy into my hand, which I felt to be a sword.

"What weapon is this?" I asked, "and why do you give it to me?"

"It is your own sword," answered the man, "which I was commanded to

return to you. I know no more."

Then he went away, leaving the sword with me.

I drew the familiar blade from its sheath, the red blade that the Wanderer had worn, and touching its keen edge with my fingers, wept from my blinded eyes to think that never again could I hold it aloft in war or see the light flash from it as I smote. Yes, I wept in my weakness, till I remembered that I had no longer any wish to be the death of men. So I sheathed the good sword and hid it beneath my mattress lest some jailer should steal it, which, as I could not see him, he might do easily. Also I desired to put away temptation.

I think that this hour after the bringing of the sword, which stirred up so many memories, was the most fearful of all my hours, so fearful that, had it been prolonged, death would have come to me of its own accord. I had sunk to misery's lowest deep, who did not know that even then its tide was turning, who could not dream of all the blessed years that lay before me, the years of love and of such peaceful joy as even the blind may win.

That night Martina came--Martina, who was Hope's harbinger. I heard the door of my prison open and close softly, and sat still, wondering whether the murderers had entered at last, wondering, too, whether I should snatch the sword and strike blindly till I fell. Next I heard another sound, that of a woman weeping; yes, and felt my hand lifted

and pressed to a woman's lips, which kissed it again and yet again. A thought struck me, and I began to draw it back. A soft voice spoke between its sobs.

"Have no fear, Olaf. I am Martina. Oh, now I understand why yonder tigress sent me on that distant mission."

"How did you come here, Martina?" I asked.

"I still have the signet, Olaf, which Irene, who begins to mistrust me, forgets. Only this morning I learned the truth on my return to the palace; yet I have not been idle. Within an hour Jodd and the Northmen knew it also. Within three they had blinded every hostage whom they held, aye, and caught two of the brutes who did the deed on you, and crucified them upon their barrack walls."

"Oh! Martina," I broke in, "I did not desire that others who are innocent should share my woes."

"Nor did I, Olaf; but these Northmen are ill to play with. Moreover, in a sense it was needful. You do not know what I have learned--that to-morrow Irene proposed to slit your tongue also because you can tell too much, and afterwards to cut off your right hand lest you, who are learned, should write down what you know. I told the Northmen--never mind how. They sent a herald, a Greek whom they had captured, and, covering him with arrows, made him call out that if your tongue was slit

they would know of it and slit the tongues of all the hostages also, and that if your hand was cut off they could cut off their hands, and take another vengeance which for the present they keep secret."

"At least they are faithful," I said. "But, oh! tell me, Martina, what of Heliodore?"

"This," she whispered into my ear. "Heliodore and her father sailed an hour after sunset and are now safe upon the sea, bound for Egypt."

"Then I was right! When Irene told me she was dead she lied."

"Aye, if she said that she lied, though thrice she has striven to murder her, I have no time to tell you how, but was always baffled by those who watched. Yet she might have succeeded at last, so, although Heliodore fought against it, it was best that she should go. Those who are parted may meet again; but how can we meet one who is dead until we too are dead?"

"How did she go?"

"Smuggled from the city disguised as a boy attending on a priest, and that priest her father shorn of his beard and tonsured. The Bishop Barnabas passed them out in his following."

"Then blessings on the Bishop Barnabas," I said.

"Aye, blessings on him, since without his help it could never have been done. The secret agents at the port stared hard at those two, although the good bishop vouched for them and gave their names and offices. Still, when they saw some rough-looking fellows dressed like sailors approach, playing with the handles of their knives, the agents thought well to ask no more questions. Moreover, now that the ship has sailed, for their own sakes they'll swear that no such priest and boy went aboard of her. So your Heliodore is away unharmed, as is her father, though his mission has come to naught. Still, his life is left in him, for which he may be thankful, who on such a business should have brought no woman. If he had come alone, Olaf, your eyes would have been left to you, and set by now upon the orb of empire that your hand had grasped."

"Yet I am glad that he did not come alone, Martina."

"Truly you have a high and faithful heart, and that woman should be honoured whom you love. What is the secret? There must be more in it than the mere desire for a woman's beauty, though I know that at times this can make men mad. In such a business the soul must play its part."

"I think so, Martina. Indeed, I believe so, since otherwise we suffer much in vain. Now tell me, how and when do I die?"

"I hope you will not die at all, Olaf. Certain plans are laid which even here I dare not whisper. To-morrow I hear they will lead you again

before the judges, who, by Irene's clemency, will change your sentence to one of banishment, with secret orders to kill you on the voyage. But you will never make that voyage. Other schemes are afoot; you'll learn of them afterwards."

"Yet, Martina, if you know these plots the Augusta knows them also, since you and she are one."

"When those dagger points were thrust into your eyes, Olaf, they cut the thread that bound us, and now Irene and I are more far apart than hell and heaven. I tell you that for your sake I hate her and work her downfall. Am I not your god-mother, Olaf?"

Then again she kissed my hand and presently was gone.

On the following morning, as I supposed it to be, my jailers came and said to me that I must appear before the judges to hear some revision of my sentence. They dressed me in my soldier's gear, and even allowed me to gird my sword about me, knowing, doubtless, that, save to himself, a blind man could do no mischief with a sword. Then they led me I know not whither by passages which turned now here, now there. At length we entered some place, for doors were closed behind us.

"This is the Hall of Judgment," said one of them, "but the judges

have not yet come. It is a great room and bare. There is nothing in it against which you can hurt yourself. Therefore, if it pleases you after being cramped so long in that narrow cell, you may walk to and fro, keeping your hands in front of you so that you will know when you touch the further wall and must turn."

I thanked them and, glad enough to avail myself of this grace for my limbs were stiff with want of exercise, began to walk joyfully. I thought that the room must be one of those numberless apartments which opened on to the terrace, since distinctly I could hear the wash of the sea coming from far beneath, doubtless through the open window-places.

Forward I stepped boldly, but at a certain point in my march this curious thing happened. A hand seemed to seize my own and draw me to the left. Wondering, I followed the guidance of the hand, which presently left hold of mine. Thereon I continued my march, and as I did so, thought that I heard another sound, like to that of a suppressed murmur of human voices. Twenty steps more and I reached the end of the chamber, for my outstretched fingers touched its marble wall. I turned and marched back, and lo! at the twentieth step that hand took mine again and led me to the right, whereon once more the murmur of voices reached me.

Thrice this happened, and every time the murmur grew more loud. Indeed, I thought I heard one say,

"The man's not blind at all," and another, "Some spirit guides him."

As I made my fourth journey I caught the sound of a distant tumult, the shouts of war, the screams of agony, and above them all the well-remembered cry of "Valhalla! Valhalla! Victory or Valhalla!"

I halted where I was and felt the blood rush into my wasted cheeks. The Northmen, my Northmen, were in the palace! It was at this that Martina had hinted. Yet in so vast a place what chance was there that they would ever find me, and how, being blind, could I find them? Well, at least my voice was left to me, and I would lift it.

So with all my strength I cried aloud, "Olaf Red-Sword is here! To Olaf, men of the North!"

Thrice I cried. I heard folk running, not to me, but from me, doubtless those whose whispers had reached my ears.

I thought of trying to follow them, but the soft and gentle hand, which was like to that of a woman, once more clasped mine and held me where I was, suffering me to move no single inch. So there I stood, even after the hand had loosed me again, for it seemed to me that there was something most strange in this business.

Presently another sound arose, the sound of the Northmen pouring towards the hall, for feet clanged louder and louder down the marble corridors.

More, they had met those who were running from the hall, for now these fled back before them. They were in the hall, for a cry of horror, mingled with rage, broke from their lips.

"'Tis Olaf," said one, "Olaf blinded, and, by Thor, see where he stands!"

Then Jodd's voice roared out,

"Move not, Olaf; move not, or you die."

Another voice, that of Martina, broke in, "Silence, you fool, or you'll frighten him and make him fall. Silence all, and leave him to me!"

Then quiet fell upon the place; it seemed that even the pursued grew quiet, and I heard the rustle of a woman's dress drawing towards me. Next instant a soft hand took my own, just such a hand as not long ago had seemed to guide and hold me, and Martina's voice said,

"Follow where I lead, Olaf."

So I followed eight or ten paces. Then Martina threw her arms about me and burst into wild laughter. Someone caught her away; next moment two hair-clad lips kissed me on the brow and the mighty voice of Jodd shouted,

"Thanks be to all the gods, dwell they in the north or in the south! We have saved you! Know you where you stood, Olaf? On the brink of a pit, the very brink, and beneath is a fall of a hundred feet to where the waters of the Bosphorus wash among the rocks. Oh! understand this pretty Grecian game. They, good Christian folk, would not have your blood upon their souls, and therefore they caused you to walk to your own death. Well, they shall be dosed with the draught they brewed.

"Bring them hither, comrades, bring them one by one, these devils who could sit to watch a blind man walk to his doom to make their sport. Ah! whom have we here? Why, by Thor! 'tis the lawyer knave, he who was president of the court that tried you, and was angry because you did not salute him. Well, lawyer, the wheel has gone round. We Northmen are in possession of the palace and the Armenian legions are gathered at its gates and do but wait for Constantine the Emperor to enter and take the empire and its crown. They'll be here anon, lawyer, but you understand, having a certain life to save, for word had been brought to us of your pretty doings, that we were forced to strike before the signal, and struck not in vain. Now we'll fill in the tedious time with a trial of our own. See here, I am president of the court, seated in this fine chair, and these six to right and left are my companion judges, while you seven who were judges are now prisoners. You know the crime with which you are charged, so there's no need to set it out. Your defence, lawyer, and be swift with it."

"Oh! sir," said the man in a trembling voice, "what we did to the

General Olaf we were ordered to do by one who may not be named."

"You'd best find the name, lawyer, for were it that of a god we Northmen would hear it."

"Well, then, by the Augusta herself. She wished the death of the noble Michael, or Olaf, but having become superstitious about the matter, would not have his blood directly on her hands. Therefore she bethought her of this plan. He was ordered to be brought into the place you see, which is known as the Hall of the Pit, that in old days was used by certain bloody-minded emperors to rid them of their enemies. The central pavement swings upon a hinge. At a touch it opens, and he who has thought it sound and walked thereon, when darkness comes is lost, since he falls upon the rocks far below, and at high tide the water takes him."

"Yes, yes, we understand the game, lawyer, for there yawns the open pit. But have you aught more to say?"

"Nothing, sir, nothing, save that we only did what we were driven to do. Moreover, no harm has come of it, since whenever the noble general came to the edge of the opened pit, although he was blind, he halted and went off to right or left as though someone drew him out of danger."

"Well, then, cruel and unjust judges, who could gather to mock at the murder of a blinded man that you had trapped to his doom----"

"Sir," broke in one of them, "it was not we who tried to trap him; it was those jailers who stand there. They told the general that he might exercise himself by walking up and down the hall."

"Is that true, Olaf?" asked Jodd.

"Yes," I answered, "it is true that the two jailers who brought me here did tell me this, though whether those men are present I cannot say."

"Very good," said Jodd. "Add them to the other prisoners, who by their own showing heard them set the snare and did not warn the victim. Now, murderers all, this is the sentence of the court upon you: That you salute the General Olaf and confess your wickedness to him."

So they saluted me, kneeling, and kissing my feet, and one and all made confession of their crime.

"Enough," I said, "I pardon them who are but tools. Pray to God that He may do as much."

"You may pardon here, Olaf," said Jodd, "and your God may pardon hereafter, but we, the Northmen, do not pardon. Blindfold those men and bind their arms. Now," went on Jodd after a pause, "their turn has come to show us sport. Run, friends, run, for swords are behind you. Can you not feel them?"

The rest may be guessed. Within a few minutes the seven judges and the two jailers had vanished from the world. No hand came to save them from the cruel rocks and the waters that seethed a hundred feet below that dreadful chamber.

This fantastic, savage vengeance was a thing dreadful to hear; what it must have been to see I can only guess. I know that I wished I might have fled from it and that I pleaded with Jodd for mercy on these men. But neither he nor his companions would listen to me.

"What mercy had they on you?" he cried. "Let them drink from their own cup."

"Let them drink from their own cup!" roared his companions, and then broke into a roar of laughter as one of the false judges, feeling space before him, leapt, leapt short, and with a shriek departed for ever.

It was over. I heard someone enter the hall and whisper in Jodd's ear; heard his answer also.

"Let her be brought hither," he said. "For the rest, bid the captains hold Stauracius and the others fast. If there is any sign of stir against us, cut their throats, advising them that this will be done

should they allow trouble to arise. Do not fire the palace unless I give the word, for it would be a pity to burn so fine a building. It is those who dwell in it who should be burned; but doubtless Constantine will see to that. Collect the richest of the booty, that which is most portable, and let it be carried to our quarters in the baggage carts. See that these things are done quickly, before the Armenians get their hands into the bag. I'll be with you soon; but if the Emperor Constantine should arrive first, tell him that all has gone well, better than he hoped, indeed, and pray him to come hither, where we may take counsel."

The messenger went. Jodd and some of the Northmen began to consult together, and Martina led me aside.

"Tell me what has chanced, Martina," I asked, "for I am bewildered."

"A revolution, that is all, Olaf. Jodd and the Northmen are the point of the spear, its handle is Constantine, and the hands that hold it are the Armenians. It has been very well done. Some of the guards who remained were bribed, others frightened away. Only a few fought, and of them the Northmen made short work. Irene and her ministers were fooled. They thought the blow would not fall for a week or more, if at all, since the Empress believed that she had appeased Constantine by her promises. I'll tell you more later."

"How did you find me, Martina, and in time?"

"Oh! Olaf, it is a terrible story. Almost I swoon again to think of it. It was thus: Irene discovered that I had visited you in your cell; she grew suspicious of me. This morning I was seized and ordered to surrender the signet; but first I had heard that they planned your death to-day, not a sentence of banishment and murder afar off, as I told you. My last act before I was taken was to dispatch a trusted messenger to Jodd and the Northmen, telling them that if they would save you alive they must strike at once, and not to-night, as had been arranged. Within thirty seconds after he had left my side the eunuchs had me and took me to my chamber, where they barred me in. A while later the Augusta came raging like a lioness. She accused me of treachery, and when I denied it struck me in the face. Look, here are the marks of the jewels on her hands. Oh, alas! what said I? You cannot see. She had learned that the lady Heliodore had escaped her, and that I had some hand in her escape. She vowed that I, your god-mother, was your lover, and as this is a crime against the Church, promised me that after other sufferings I should be burned alive in the Hippodrome before all the people. Lastly she said this, 'Know that your Olaf of whom you are so fond dies within an hour and thus: He will be taken to the Hall of the Pit and there given leave to walk till the judges come. Being blind, you may guess where he will walk. Before this door is unlocked again I tell you he'll be but a heap of splintered bones. Aye, you may start and weep; but save your tears for yourself,' and she called me a foul name. 'I have got you fast at length, you night-prowling cat, and God Himself cannot give you strength to stretch out your hand and guide this accursed Olaf from the edge of the Pit of Death.'

"'God alone knows what He can do, Augusta,' I answered, for the words seemed to be put into my lips.

"Then she cursed and struck me again, and so left me barred in my chamber.

"When she had gone I flung myself upon my knees and prayed to God to save you, Olaf, since I was helpless; prayed as I had never prayed before. Praying thus, I think that I fell into a swoon, for my agony was more than I could bear, and in the swoon I dreamed. I dreamed that I stood in this place, where till now I have never been before. I saw the judges, the jailers, and a few others watching from that gallery. I saw you walk along the hall towards the great open pit. Then I seemed to glide to you and take your hand and guide you round the pit. And, Olaf, this happened thrice. Afterwards came a tumult while you were on the very edge of the pit and I held you, not suffering you to stir. Then in rushed the Northmen and I with them. Yes, standing there with you upon the edge of the pit, I saw myself and the Northmen rush into the hall."

"Martina," I whispered, "a hand that seemed to be a woman's did guide me thrice round the edge of the pit, and did hold me almost until you and the Northmen rushed in."

"Oh! God is great!" she gasped. "God is very great, and to Him I give thanks. But hearken to the end of the tale. I awoke from my swoon and

heard noise without, and above it the Northmen's cry of victory. They had scaled the palace walls or broken in the gates--as yet I know not which--they were on the terrace driving the Greek guards before them. I ran to the window-place and there below me saw Jodd. I screamed till he heard me.

"Save me if you would save Olaf,' I cried. 'I am prisoned here.'

"They brought one of their scaling ladders and drew me through the window. I told them all I knew. They caught a palace eunuch and beat him till he promised to lead us to this hall. He led, but in the labyrinth of passages fell down senseless, for they had struck him too hard. We knew not which way to turn, till suddenly we heard your voice and ran towards it.

"That is all the story, Olaf."