

CHAPTER X

OLAF GIVES JUDGMENT

As Martina finished speaking I heard the sound of tramping guards and of a woman's dress upon the pavement. Then a voice, that of Irene, spoke, and though her words were quiet I caught in them the tremble of smothered rage.

"Be pleased to tell me, Captain Jodd," she said, "what is happening in my palace, and why I, the Empress, am haled from my apartment hither by soldiers under your command?"

"Lady," answered Jodd, "you are mistaken. Yesterday you were an empress, to-day you are--well, whatever your son, the Emperor, chooses to name you. As to what has been and is happening in this palace, I scarcely know where to begin the tale. First of all your general and chamberlain Olaf--in case you should not recognise him, I mean that blind man who stands yonder--was being tricked to death by certain servants of yours who called themselves judges, and who stated that they were acting by your orders."

"Confront me with them," said Irene, "that I may prove to you that they lie."

"Certainly. Ho! you, bring the lady Irene here. Now hold her over that

hole. Nay, struggle not, lady, lest you should slip from their hands. Look down steadily, and you will see by the light that flows in from the cave beneath, certain heaps lying on the rocks round which the rising waters seethe. There are your judges whom you say you wish to meet. If you desire to ask them any questions, we can satisfy your will. Nay, why should you turn pale at the mere sight of the place that you thought good enough to be the bed of a faithful soldier of your own, one high in your service, whom it has pleased you to blind? Why did it please you to blind him, Lady?"

"Who are you that dare to ask me questions?" she replied, gathering up her courage.

"I'll tell you, Lady. Now that the General Olaf yonder is blinded I am the officer in command of the Northmen, who, until you tried to murder the said General Olaf a while ago, were your faithful guard. I am also, as it chanced, the officer in command of this palace, which we took this morning by assault and by arrangement with most of your Greek soldiers, having learned from your confidential lady, Martina, of the vile deed you were about to work on the General Olaf."

"So it was you who betrayed me, Martina," gasped Irene; "and I had you in my power. Oh! I had you in my power!"

"I did not betray you, Augusta. I saved my god-son yonder from torture and butchery, as by my oath I was bound to do," answered Martina.

"Have done with this talk of betrayals," went on Jodd, "for who can betray a devil? Now, Lady, with your State quarrels we have nothing to do. You can settle them presently with your son, that is, if you still live. But with this matter of Olaf we have much to do, and we will settle that at once. The first part of the business we all know, so let us get to the next. By whose order were you blinded, General Olaf?"

"By that of the Augusta," I answered.

"For what reason, General Olaf?"

"For one that I will not state," I answered.

"Good. You were blinded by the Augusta for a reason you will not state, but which is well known to all of us. Now, we have a law in the North which says that an eye should be given for an eye and a life for a life. Would it not then be right, comrades, that this woman should be blinded also?"

"What!" screamed Irene, "blinded! I blinded! I, the Empress!"

"Tell me, Lady, are the eyes of one who was an Empress different from other eyes? Why should you complain of that darkness into which you were so ready to plunge one better than yourself. Still, Olaf shall judge.

Is it your will, General, that we blind this woman who put out your eyes

and afterwards tried to murder you?"

Now, I felt that all in that place were watching me and hanging on the words that I should speak, so intently that they never heard others entering it, as I did. For a while I paused, for why should not Irene suffer a little of that agony of suspense which she had inflicted upon me and others?

Then I said, "See what I have lost, friends, through no grave fault of my own. I was in the way of greatness. I was a soldier whom you trusted and liked well, one of unstained honour and of unstained name. Also I loved a woman, by whom I was beloved and whom I hoped to make my wife. And now what am I? My trade is gone, for how can a maimed man lead in war, or even do the meanest service of the camp? The rest of my days, should any be granted to me, must be spent in darkness blacker than that of midnight. I must live on charity. When the little store I have is spent, for I have taken no bribe and heaped up no riches, how can I earn a living? The woman whom I love has been carried away, after this Empress tried thrice to murder her. Whether I shall ever find her again in this world I know not, for she has gone to a far country that is full of enemies to Christian men. Nor do I know whether she would be willing to take one who is blind and beggared for a husband, though I think this may be so."

"Shame on her if she does not," muttered Martina as I paused.

"Well, friends, that is my case," I went on; "let the Augusta deny it if she can."

"Speak, Lady. Do you deny it?" said Jodd.

"I do not deny that this man was blinded by my order in payment of crimes for which he might well have suffered death," answered Irene.

"But I do deny that I commanded him to be trapped in yonder pit. If those dead men said so, then they lied."

"And if the lady Martina says so, what then?" asked Jodd.

"Then she lies also," answered the Empress sullenly.

"Be it so," replied Jodd. "Yet it is strange that, acting on this lie of the lady Martina's, we found the General Olaf upon the very edge of yonder hole; yes, with not the breadth of a barleycorn between him and death. Now, General, both parties have been heard and you shall pass sentence. If you say that yonder woman is to be blinded, this moment she looks her last upon the light. If you say that she is to die, this moment she bids farewell to life."

Again I thought a while. It came into my mind that Irene, who had fallen from power, might rise once more and bring fresh evil upon Heliodore. Now she was in my hand, but if I opened that hand and let her free----!

Someone moved towards me, and I heard Irene's voice whispering in my ear.

"Olaf," she said, "if I sinned against you it was because I loved you. Would you be avenged upon one who has burned her soul with so much evil because she loved too well? Oh! if so, you are no longer Olaf. For Christ's sake have pity on me, since I am not fit to meet Him. Give me time to repent. Nay! hear me out! Let not those men drag me away as they threaten to do. I am fallen now, but who knows, I may grow great again; indeed, I think I shall. Then, Olaf, may my soul shrivel everlastingly in hell if I try to harm you or the Egyptian more--Jesus be my witness that I ask no lesser doom upon my head. Keep the men back, Martina, for what I swear to him and the Egyptian I swear to you as well. Moreover, Olaf, I have great wealth. You spoke of poverty; it shall be far from you. Martina knows where my gold is hid, and she still holds my keys. Let her take it. I say leave me alone, but one word more. If ever it is in my power I'll forget everything and advance you all to great honour. Your brain is not blinded, Olaf; you can still rule. I swear, I swear, I swear upon the Holy Blood! Ah! now drag me away if you will. I have spoken."

"Then perchance, Lady, you will allow Olaf to speak, since we, who have much to do, must finish this business quickly, before the Emperor comes with the Armenians," said Jodd.

"Captain Jodd and his comrades," I said, "the Empress Irene has been

pleased to make certain solemn vows to me which perchance some of you may have overheard. At least, God heard them, and whether she keeps them or no is a matter between her and the God in Whom we both believe. Therefore I set these vows aside; they draw me neither one way nor the other. Now, you have made me judge in my own matter and have promised to abide by my judgment, which you will do. Hear it, then, and let it be remembered. For long I have been the Augusta's officer, and of late her general and chamberlain. As such I have bound myself by great oaths to protect her from harm in all cases, and those oaths heretofore I have kept, when I might have broken them and not been blamed by men. Whatever has chanced, it seems that she is still Empress and I am still her officer, seeing that my sword has been returned to me, although it is true she sent it that I might use it on myself. It pleased the Empress to put out my eyes. Under our soldier's law the monarch who rules the Empire has a right to put out the eyes of an officer who has lifted sword against her forces, or even to kill him. Whether this is done justly or unjustly again is a matter between that monarch and God above, to Whom answer must be made at last. Therefore it would seem that I have no right to pronounce any sentence against the Augusta Irene, and whatever may have been my private wrongs, I pronounce none. Yet, as I am still your general until another is named, I order you to free the Augusta Irene and to work no vengeance on her person for aught that may have befallen me at her hands, were her deeds just or unjust."

When I had finished speaking, in the silence that followed I heard Irene utter something that was half a sob and half a gasp of wonderment. Then

above the murmuring of the Northmen, to whom this rede was strange, rose the great voice of Jodd.

"General Olaf," he said, "while you were talking it came into my mind that one of those knife points which pierced your eyes had pricked the brain behind them. But when you had finished talking it came into my mind that you are a great man who, putting aside your private rights and wrongs and the glory of revenge which lay to your hand, have taught us soldiers a lesson in duty which I, at least, never shall forget.

General, if, as I trust, we are together in the future as in the past, I shall ask you to instruct me in this Christian faith of yours, which can make a man not only forgive but hide his forgiveness under the mask of duty, for that, as we know well, is what you have done. General, your order shall be obeyed. Be she Empress or nothing, this lady's person is safe from us. More, we will protect her to the best of our power, as you did in the Battle of the Garden. Yet I tell her to her face that had it not been for those orders, had you, for example, said that you left judgment to us, she who has spoilt such a man should have died a death of shame."

I heard a sound as of a woman throwing herself upon her knees before me. I heard Irene's voice whisper through her tears,

"Olaf, Olaf, for the second time in my life you make me feel ashamed. Oh! if only you could have loved me! Then I should have grown good like you."

There was a stir of feet and another voice spoke, a voice that should have been clear and youthful, but sounded as though it were thick with wine. It did not need Martina's whisper to tell me that it was that of Constantine.

"Greeting, friends," he said, and at once there came a rattle of saluting swords and an answering cry of

"Greeting, Augustus!"

"You struck before the time," went on the thick, boyish voice. "Yet as things seem to have gone rather well for us, I cannot blame you, especially as I see that you hold fast her who has usurped my birthright."

Now I heard Irene turn with a swift and furious movement.

"Your birthright, boy," she cried. "What birthright have you save that which my body gave?"

"I thought that my father had more to do with this matter of imperial right than the Grecian girl whom it pleased him to marry for her fair face," answered Constantine insolently, adding: "Learn your station, mother. Learn that you are but the lamp which once held the holy oil, and that lamps can be shattered."

"Aye," she answered, "and oil can be spilt for the dogs to lap, if their gorge does not rise at such rancid stuff. The holy oil forsooth! Nay, the sour dregs of wine jars, the outscourings of the stews, the filth of the stables, of such is the holy oil that burns in Constantine, the drunkard and the liar."

It would seem that before this torrent of coarse invective Constantine quailed, who at heart always feared his mother, and I think never more so than when he appeared to triumph over her. Or perhaps he scorned to answer it. At least, addressing Jodd, he said,

"Captain, I and my officers, standing yonder unseen, have heard something of what passed in this place. By what warrant do you and your company take upon yourselves to pass judgment upon this mother of mine? That is the Emperor's right."

"By the warrant of capture, Augustus," answered Jodd. "We Northmen took the palace and opened the gates to you and your Armenians. Also we took her who ruled in the palace, with whom we had a private score to settle that has to do with our general who stands yonder, blinded. Well, it is settled in his own fashion, and now we do not yield up this woman, our prisoner, save on your royal promise that no harm shall come to her in body. As for the rest, it is your business. Make a cook-maid of her if you will, only then I think her tongue would clear the kitchen. But swear to keep her sound in life and limb till hell calls her, since

otherwise we must add her to our company, which will make no man merrier."

"No," answered Constantine, "in a week she would corrupt you every one and breed a war. Well," he added with a boisterous laugh, "I'm master now at last, and I'll swear by any saint that you may name, or all of them, no harm shall come to this Empress whose rule is done, and who, being without friends, need not be feared. Still, lest she should spawn more mischief or murder, she must be kept close till we and our councillors decide where she shall dwell in future. Ho! guards, take my royal father's widow to the dower-palace, and there watch her well. If she escapes, you shall die beneath the rods. Away with the snake before it begins to hiss again."

"I'll hiss no more," said Irene, as the soldiers formed up round her, "yet, perchance, Constantine, you may live to find that the snake still has strength to strike and poison in its fangs, you and others. Do you come with me, Martina?"

"Nay, Lady, since here stands one whom God and you together have given me to guard. For his sake I would keep my life in me," and she touched me on the shoulder.

"That whelp who is called my son spoke truly when he said that the fallen have no friends," exclaimed Irene. "Well, you should thank me, Martina, who made Olaf blind, since, being without eyes, he cannot see

how ugly is your face. In his darkness he may perchance mistake you for the beautiful Egyptian, Heliodore, as I know you who love him madly would have him do."

With this vile taunt she went.

"I think I'm crazed," said the Emperor, as the doors swung to behind her. "I should have struck that snake while the stick is in my hand. I tell you I fear her fangs. Why, if she could, she'd make me as that poor man is, blind, or even butcher me. Well, she's my mother, and I've sworn, so there's an end. Now, you Olaf, you are that same captain, are you not, who dashed the poisoned fig from my lips that this tender mother of mine would have let me eat when I was in liquor; yes, and would have swallowed it yourself to save me from my folly?"

"I am that man, Augustus."

"Aye, you are that man, and one of whom all the city has been talking. They say, so poor is your taste, that you turned your back upon the favours of an Empress because of some young girl you dared to love. They say also that she paid you back with a dagger in the eyes, she who was ready to set you in my place."

"Rumour has many tongues, Augustus," I answered. "At least I fell from the Empress's favour, and she rewarded me as she held that I deserved."

"So it seems. Christ! what a dreadful pit is that. Is this another of her gifts? Nay, answer not; I heard the tale. Well, Olaf, you saved my life and your Northmen have set me on the throne, since without them we could scarcely have won the palace. Now, what payment would you have?"

"Leave to go hence, Augustus," I answered.

"A small boon that you might have taken without asking, if you can find a dog to lead you, like other blind wretches. And you, Captain Jodd, and your men, what do you ask?"

"Such donation as it may please the Augustus to bestow, and after that permission to follow wherever our General Olaf goes, since he is our care. Here we have made so many enemies that we cannot sleep at night."

"The Empress of the World falls from her throne," mused Constantine, "and not even a waiting-maid attends her to her prison. But a blinded captain finds a regiment to escort him hence in love and honour, as though he were a new-crowned king. Truly Fortune is a jester. If ever Fate should rob me of my eyes, I wonder, when I had nothing more to give them, if three hundred faithful swords would follow me to ruin and to exile?"

Thus he thought aloud. Afterwards he, Jodd and some others, Martina among them, went aside, leaving me seated on a bench. Presently they returned, and Constantine said,

"General Olaf, I and your companions have taken counsel. Listen. But to-day messengers have come from Lesbos, whom we met outside the gates. It seems that the governor there is dead, and that the accursed Moslems threaten to storm the isle as soon as summer comes and add it to their empire. Our Christian subjects there pray that a new governor may be appointed, one who knows war, and that with him may be sent troops sufficient to repel the prophet-worshippers, who, not having many ships, cannot attack in great force. Now, Captain Jodd thinks this task will be to the liking of the Northmen, and though you are blind, I think that you would serve me well as governor of Lesbos. Is it your pleasure to accept this office?"

"Aye, with thankfulness, Augustus," I answered. "Only, after the Moslems are beaten back, if it pleases God that it should so befall, I ask leave of absence for a while, since there is one for whom I must search."

"I grant it, who name Captain Jodd your deputy. Stay, there's one more thing. In Lesbos my mother has large vineyards and estates. As part payment of her debt these shall be conveyed to you. Nay, no thanks; it is I who owe them. Whatever his faults, Constantine is not ungrateful. Moreover, enough time has been spent upon this matter. What say you, Officer? That the Armenians are marshalled and that you have Stauracius safe? Good! I come to lead them. Then to the Hippodrome to be proclaimed."