

BOOK III

EGYPT

CHAPTER I

TIDINGS FROM EGYPT

That curtain of oblivion without rent or seam sinks again upon the visions of this past of mine. It falls, as it were, on the last of the scenes in the dreadful chamber of the pit, to rise once more far from Byzantium.

I am blind and can see nothing, for the power which enables me to disinter what lies buried beneath the weight and wreck of so many ages tells me no more than those things that once my senses knew. What I did not hear then I do not hear now; what I did not see then I do not see now. Thus it comes about that of Lesbos itself, of the shape of its mountains or the colour of its seas I can tell nothing more than I was told, because my sight never dwelt on them in any life that I can remember.

It was evening. The heat of the sun had passed and the night breeze blew through the wide, cool chamber in which I sat with Martina, whom the soldiers, in their rude fashion, called "Olaf's Brown Dog." For brown was her colouring, and she led me from place to place as dogs are trained to lead blind men. Yet against her the roughest of them never said an evil word; not from fear, but because they knew that none could be said.

Martina was talking, she who always loved to talk, if not of one thing, then of another.

"God-son," she said, "although you are a great grumbler, I tell you that in my judgment you were born under a lucky star, or saint, call it which you will. For instance, when you were walking up and down that Hall of the Pit in the palace at Constantinople, which I always dream of now if I sup too late----"

"And your spirit, or double, or whatever you call it, was kindly leading me round the edge of the death-trap," I interrupted.

"----and my spirit, or double, making itself useful for once, was doing what you say, well, who would have thought that before so very long you would be the governor, much beloved, of the rich and prosperous island of Lesbos; still the commander, much beloved, of troops, many of them your own countrymen, and, although you are blind, the Imperial general who has dealt the Moslems one of the worst defeats they have suffered

for a long while."

"Jodd and the others did that," I answered. "I only sat here and made the plans."

"Jodd!" she exclaimed with contempt. "Jodd has no more head for plans than a doorpost! Although it is true," she added with a softening of the voice, "that he is a good man to lean on at a pinch, and a very terrible fighter; also one who can keep such brain as God gave him cool in the hour of terror, as Irene knows well enough. Yet it was you, Olaf, not even I, but you, who remembered that the Northmen are seafolk born, and turned all those trading vessels into war-galleys and hid them in the little bays with a few of your people in command of each. It was you who suffered the Moslem fleet to sail unmolested into the Mitylene harbours, pretending and giving notice that the only defence would be by land. Then, after they were at anchor and beginning to disembark, it was you who fell on them at the dawn and sank and slew till none remained save those of their army who were taken prisoners or spared for ransom. Yes, and you commanded our ships in person; and at night who is a better captain than a blind man? Oh! you did well, very well; and you are rich with Irene's lands, and sit here in comfort and in honour, with the best of health save for your blindness, and I repeat that you were born under a lucky star--or saint."

"Not altogether so, Martina," I answered with a sigh.

"Ah!" she replied, "man can never be content. As usual, you are thinking of that Egyptian, I mean of the lady Heliodore, of whom, of course, it is quite right that you should think. Well, it is true that we have heard nothing of her. Still, that does not mean that we may not hear. Perhaps Jodd has learned something from those prisoners. Hark! he comes."

As she spoke I heard the guards salute without and Jodd's heavy step at the door of the chamber.

"Greeting, General," he said presently. "I bring you good news. The messengers to the Sultan Harun have returned with the ransom. Also this Caliph sends a writing signed by himself and his ministers, in which he swears by God and His Prophet that in consideration of our giving up our prisoners, among whom, it seems, are some great men, neither he nor his successors will attempt any new attack upon Lesbos for thirty years. The interpreter will read it to you to-morrow, and you can send your answering letters with the prisoners."

"Seeing that these heathen are so many and we are so few, we could scarcely look for better terms," I said, "as I hope they will think at Constantinople. At least the prisoners shall sail when all is in order. Now for another matter. Have you inquired as to the Bishop Barnabas and the Egyptian Prince Magas and his daughter?"

"Aye, General, this very day. I found that among the prisoners were

three of the commoner sort who have served in Egypt and left that land not three months ago. Of these men two have never heard of the bishop or the others. The third, however, who was wounded in the fight, had some tidings."

"What tidings, Jodd?"

"None that are good, General. The bishop, he says, was killed by Moslems a while ago, or so he had been told."

"God rest him. But the others, Jodd, what of the others?"

"This. It seems that the Copt, as he called him, Magas, returned from a long journey, as we know he did, and raised an insurrection somewhere in the south of Egypt, far up the Nile. An expedition was sent against him, under one Musa, the Governor of Egypt, and there was much fighting, in which this prisoner took part. The end of it was that the Copts who fought with Magas were conquered with slaughter, Magas himself was slain, for he would not fly, and his daughter, the lady Heliodore, was taken prisoner with some other Coptic women."

"And then?" I gasped.

"Then, General, she was brought before the Emir Musa, who, noting her beauty, proposed to make her his slave. At her prayer, however, being, as the prisoner said, a merciful man, he gave her a week to mourn her

father before she entered his harem. Still, the worst," he went on hurriedly, "did not happen. Before that week was done, as the Moslem force was marching down the Nile, she stabbed the eunuch who was in charge of her and escaped."

"I thank God," I said. "But, Jodd, how is the man sure that she was Heliodore?"

"Thus: All knew her to be the daughter of Magas, one whom the Egyptians held in honour. Moreover, among the Moslem soldiers she was named 'the Lady of the Shells,' because of a certain necklace she wore, which you will remember."

"What more?" I asked.

"Only that the Emir Musa was very angry at her loss and because of it caused certain soldiers to be beaten on the feet. Moreover, he halted his army and offered a reward for her. For two days they hunted, even searching some tombs where it was thought she might have hidden, but there found nothing but the dead. Then the Emir returned down the Nile, and that is the end of the story."

"Send this prisoner to me at once, Jodd, with an interpreter. I would question him myself."

"I fear he is not fit to come, General."

"Then I will go to him. Lead me, Martina."

"If so, you must go far, General, for he died an hour ago, and his companions are making him ready for burial."

"Jodd," I said angrily, "those men have been in our hands for weeks. How comes it that you did not discover these things before? You had my orders."

"Because, General, until they knew that they were to go free none of these prisoners would tell us anything. However closely they were questioned, they said that it was against their oath, and that first they would die. A long while ago I asked this very man of Egypt, and he vowed that he had never been there."

"Be comforted, Olaf," broke in Martina, "for what more could he have told you?"

"Nothing, perchance," I answered; "yet I should have gained many days of time. Know that I go to Egypt to search for Heliodore."

"Be comforted again," said Martina. "This you could not have done until the peace was signed; it would have been against your oath and duty."

"That is so," I answered heavily.

"Olaf," said Martina to me that night after Jodd had left us, "you say that you will go to Egypt. How will you go? Will the blind Christian general of the Empire, who has just dealt so great a defeat to the mighty Caliph of the East, be welcome in Egypt? Above all, will he be welcomed by the Emir Musa, who rules there, when it is known that he comes to seek a woman who has escaped from that Emir's harem? Why, within an hour he'd offer you the choice between death and the Koran. Olaf, this thing is madness."

"It may be, Martina. Still, I go to seek Heliodore."

"If Heliodore still lives you will not help her by dying, and if she is dead time will be little to her and she can wait for you a while."

"Yet I go, Martina."

"You, being blind, go to Egypt to seek one whom those who rule there have searched for in vain. So be it. But how will you go? It cannot be as an open enemy, since then you would need a fleet and ten thousand swords to back you, which you have not. To take a few brave men, unless they were Moslems, which is impossible, would be but to give them to death. How do you go, Olaf?"

"I do not know, Martina. Your brain is more nimble than mine; think, think, and tell me."

I heard Martina rise and walk up and down the room for a long time. At length she returned and sat herself by me again.

"Olaf," she said, "you always had a taste for music. You have told me that as a boy in your northern home you used to play upon the harp and sing songs to it of your own making, and now, since you have been blind, you have practised at this art till you are its master. Also, my voice is good; indeed, it is my only gift. It was my voice that first brought me to Irene's notice, when I was but the daughter of a poor Greek gentleman who had been her father's friend and therefore was given a small place about the Court. Of late we have sung many songs together, have we not, certain of them in that northern tongue, of which you have taught me something?"

"Yes, Martina; but what of it?"

"You are dull, Olaf. I have heard that these Easterns love music, especially if it be of a sort they do not know. Why, therefore, should not a blind man and his daughter--no, his orphaned niece--earn an honest living as travelling musicians in Egypt? These Prophet worshippers, I am told, think it a great sin to harm one who is maimed--a poor northern trader in amber who has been robbed by Christian thieves. Rendered sightless also that he might not be able to swear to them before the

judges, and now, with his sister's child, winning his bread as best he may. Like you, Olaf, I have skill in languages, and even know enough of Arabic to beg in it, for my mother, who was a Syrian, taught it to me as a child, and since we have been here I have practised. What say you?"

"I say that we might travel as safely thus as in any other way. Yet, Martina, how can I ask you to tie such a burden on your back?"

"Oh! no need to ask, Olaf, since Fate bound it there when it made me your--god-mother. Where you go I needs must go also, until you are married," she added with a laugh. "Afterwards, perhaps, you will need me no more. Well, there's a plan, for what it is worth, and now we'll sleep on it, hoping to find a better. Pray to St. Michael to-night, Olaf."

As it chanced, St. Michael gave me no light, so the end of it was that I determined to play this part of a blind harper. In those days there was a trade between Lesbos and Egypt in cedar wood, wool, wine for the Copts, for the Moslems drank none, and other goods. Peace having been declared between the island and the Caliph, a small vessel was laden with such merchandise at my cost, and a Greek of Lesbos, Menas by name, put in command of it as the owner, with a crew of sailors whom I could trust to the death.

To these men, who were Christians, I told my business, swearing them to secrecy by the most holy of all oaths. But, alas! as I shall show, although I could trust these sailors when they were masters of

themselves, I could not trust them, or, rather, one of them, when wine was his master. In our northern land we had a saying that "Ale is another man," and now its truth was to be proved to me, not for the first time.

When all was ready I made known my plans to Jodd alone, in whose hands I left a writing to say what must be done if I returned no more. To the other officers and the soldiers I said only that I proposed to make a journey in this trading ship disguised as a merchant, both for my health's sake and to discover for myself the state of the surrounding countries, and especially of the Christians in Egypt.

When he had heard all, Jodd, although he was a hopeful-minded man, grew sad over this journey, which I could see he thought would be my last.

"I expected no less," he said; "and yet, General, I trusted that your saint might keep your feet on some safer path. Doubtless this lady Heliodore is dead, or fled, or wed; at least, you will never find her."

"Still, I must search for her, Jodd."

"You are a blind man. How can you search?"

Then an idea came to him, and he added,

"Listen, General. I and the rest of us swore to protect the lady

Heliodore and to be as her father or her brothers. Do you bide here. I will go to search for her, either with a vessel full of armed men, or alone, disguised."

Now I laughed outright and asked,

"What disguise is there that would hide the giant Jodd, whose fame the Moslem spies have spread throughout the East? Why, on the darkest night your voice would betray you to all within a hundred paces. And what use would one shipload of armed men be against the forces of the Emir of Egypt? No, no, Jodd, whatever the danger I must go and I alone. If I am killed, or do not return within eight months, I have named you to be Governor of Lesbos, as already you have been named my deputy by Constantine, which appointment will probably be confirmed."

"I do not want to be Governor of Lesbos," said Jodd. "Moreover, Olaf," he added slowly, "a blind beggar must have his dog to lead him, his brown dog. You cannot go alone, Olaf. Those dangers of which you speak must be shared by another."

"That is so, and it troubles me much. Indeed, it is in my mind to seek some other guide, for I think this one would be safest here in your charge. You must reason with her, Jodd. One can ask too much, even of a god-mother."

"Of a god-mother! Why not say of a grandmother? By Thor! Olaf, you are

blind indeed. Still, I'll try. Hush! here she comes to say that our supper is ready."

At our meal several others were present, besides the serving folk, and the talk was general. After it was done I had an interview with some officers. These left, and I sat myself down upon a cushioned couch, and, being tired, there fell asleep, till I was awakened, or, rather, half awakened by voices talking in the garden without. They were those of Jodd and Martina, and Martina was saying,

"Cease your words. I and no one else will go on this Egyptian quest with Olaf. If we die, as I dare say we shall, what does it matter? At least he shall not die alone."

"And if the quest should fail, Martina? I mean if he should not find the lady Heliodore and you should happen both to return safe, what then?"

"Why, then--nothing, except that as it has been, so it will be. I shall continue to play my part, as is my duty and my wish. Do you not remember that I am Olaf's god-mother?"

"Yes, I remember. Still, I have heard somewhere that the Christian Church never ties a knot which it cannot unloose--for a proper fee, and for my part I do not know why a man should not marry one of different blood because she has been named his god-mother before a stone vessel by a man in a brodered robe. You say I do not understand such matters.

Perhaps, so let them be. But, Martina, let us suppose that this strange search were to succeed, and Olaf has a way of succeeding where others would fail. For instance, who else could have escaped alive out of the hand of Irene and become governor of Lesbos, and, being blind, yet have planned a great victory? Well, supposing that by the help of gods or men--or women--he should find this beautiful Heliodore, unwed and still willing, and that they should marry. What then, Martina?"

"Then, Captain Jodd," she answered slowly, "if you are yet of the same mind we may talk again. Only remember that I ask no promises and make none."

"So you go to Egypt with Olaf?"

"Aye, certainly, unless I should die first, and perhaps even then. You do not understand? Oh! of course you do not understand, nor can I stop to explain to you. Captain Jodd, I am going to Egypt with a certain blind beggar, whose name I forget at the moment, but who is my uncle, where no doubt I shall see many strange things. If ever I come back I will tell you about them, and, meanwhile, good night."