

CHAPTER V

IRENE'S PRAYER

Years had gone by, I know not how many, but only that much had happened in them. For a while Irene and young Constantine were joint rulers of the Empire. Then they quarrelled again, and Constantine, afraid of treachery, fled with his friends in a ship after an attempt had been made to seize his person. He purposed to join his legions in Asia, or so it was said, and make war upon his mother. But those friends of his upon the ship were traitors, who, fearing Irene's vengeance or perhaps his own, since she threatened to tell him all the truth concerning them, seized Constantine and delivered him up to Irene. She, the mother who bore him, caused him to be taken to the purple Porphyry Chamber in the palace, that chamber in which, as the first-born of an emperor, he saw the light, and there robbed him of light for ever.

Yes, Stauracius and his butchers blinded Constantine as I had been blinded. Only it was told that they drove their knives deeper so that he died. But others say that he lived on, a prisoner, unknown, unheeded, as those uncles of his whom he had blinded and who once were in my charge had lived, till in Greece the assassin's daggers found their hearts. If so, oh! what a fate was his.

Afterwards for five years Irene reigned alone in glory, while Stauracius, my god-father, and his brother eunuch, Aetius, strove

against each other to be first Minister of the Crown. Aetius won, and, not content with all he had, plotted that his relative Nicetas, who held the place of Captain of the Guard, which once I filled, should be named successor to the throne. Then at last the nobles rebelled, and, electing one of their number, Nicephorus, as emperor, seized Irene in her private house of Eleutherius, where she lay sick, and crowned Nicephorus in St. Sophia. Next day he visited Irene, when, fearing the worst and broken by illness, she bought a promise of safety by revealing to him all her hoarded treasure.

Thus fell Irene, the mighty Empress of the Eastern Empire!

Now during all these years Heliodore and I were left in peace at Lesbos. I was not deposed from my governorship of that isle, which prospered greatly under my rule. Even Irene's estates, which Constantine had given me, were not taken away. At the appointed times I remitted the tribute due, yes, and added to the sum, and received back the official acknowledgment signed by the Empress, and with it the official thanks. But with these never came either letter or message. Yet it is evident she knew that I was married, for to Heliodore did come a message, and with it a gift. The gift was that necklace and those other ornaments which Irene had caused to be made in an exact likeness of the string of golden shells separated by emerald beetles, one half of which I had taken from the grave of the Wanderer at Aar and the other half of which was worn by Heliodore.

So much of the gift. The message was that she who owned the necklace might wish to have the rest of the set. To it were added the words that a certain general had been wrong when he prophesied that the wearing of this necklace by any woman save one would bring ill fortune to the wearer, since from the day it hung about Irene's neck even that which seemed to be bad fortune had turned to good. Thus she had escaped "the most evil thing in the world, namely, another husband," and had become the first woman in the world.

These words, which were written on a piece of sheepskin, sealed up, and addressed to the Lady Heliodore, but unsigned, I thought of the most evil omen, since boastfulness always seems to be hateful to the Power that decrees our fates. So, indeed, they proved to be.

On a certain day in early summer--it was the anniversary of my marriage in Egypt--Heliodore and I had dined with but two guests. Those guests were Jodd, the great Northman, my lieutenant, and his wife, Martina, for within a year of our return to Lesbos Jodd and Martina had married. It comes back to me that there was trouble about the business, but that when Jodd gave out that either she must marry him or that he would sail back to his northern land, bidding good-bye to us all for ever, Martina gave way. I think that Heliodore managed the matter in some fashion of her own after the birth of our first-born son; how, I held it best never to inquire. At least, it was managed, and the marriage turned out well

enough in the end, although at first Martina was moody at times and somewhat sharp of tongue with Jodd. Then they had a baby which died, and this dead child drew them closer together than it might have done had it lived. At any rate, from that time forward Martina grew more gentle with Jodd, and when other children were born they seemed happy together.

Well, we four had dined, and it comes to me that our talk turned upon the Caliph Harun and his wonderful goodness to us, whom as Christians he was bound to despise and hate. Heliodore told me then for the first time how she was glad he had made it clear so soon that what she drank from the gold cup which now stood upon our table was no more than rose water.

So strong is the working of the mind that already she had begun to feel as though poison were numbing her heart and clouding her brain, and was sure that soon she would have fallen into the sleep which Harun had warned her would end in death.

"Had he been a true physician, he would have known that this might be so, and that such grim jests are very dangerous," I said. Then I added, for I did not wish to dwell longer upon a scene the memory of which was dreadful to me, although it had ended well,

"Tell us, Martina, is it true that those rich possessions of yours in Alexandria which the Caliph gave you are sold?"

"Yes, Olaf," she answered, "to a company of Greek merchants, and not

so ill. The contract was signed but yesterday. It was my wish that we should leave Lesbos and go to live in this place, as we might have done with safety under Harun's signed firman, but Jodd here refused."

"Aye," said Jodd in his big voice. "Am I one to dwell among Moslems and make money out of trade and gardens in however fine a house? Why, I should have been fighting with these prophet-worshippers within a month, and had my throat cut. Moreover, how could I bear to be separated from my general, and whatever she may think, how could Martina bear to lose sight of her god-son? Why, Olaf, I tell you that, although you are married and she is married, she still thinks twice as much of you as she does of me. Oh! blind man's dog once, blind man's dog always! Look not so angry, Martina. Why, I wonder, does the truth always make women angry?" and he burst into one of his great laughs.

At this moment Heliodore rose from the table and walked to the open window-place to speak to our children and Martina's, a merry company who were playing together in the garden. Here she stood a while studying the beautiful view of the bay beneath; then of a sudden called out,

"A ship! A ship sailing into the harbour, and it flies the Imperial standard."

"Then pray God she brings no bad news," I said, who feared that Imperial standard and felt that we had all been somewhat too happy of late. Moreover, I knew that no royal ship was looked for from Byzantium at

this time, and dreaded lest this one should bear letters from the new Emperor dismissing me from my office, or even worse tidings.

"What bad news should she bring?" growled Jodd. "Oh! I know what is in your mind, General, but if this upstart Nicephorus is wise, he'll leave you alone, since Lesbos does not want another governor, and will tell him so if there be need. Yes, it will take more than one ship of war, aye, and more than three, to set up another governor in Lesbos. Nay, rebuke me not, General, for I at least have sworn no oath of homage to this Nicephorus, nor have the other Northmen or the men of Lesbos."

"You are like a watchdog, Jodd, barking at you know not what, just because it is strange. Go now, I pray you, to the quay, and bring back to us news of this ship."

So he went, and for the next two hours or more I sat in my private room dictating letters to Heliodore on matters connected with the duties of my office. The work came to an end at last, and I was preparing to take my evening ride on a led mule when Martina entered the room.

"Do you ride with us to-night, Martina?" I asked, recognising her step.

"No, Olaf," she said quickly, "nor I think can you. Here are letters for you from Byzantium. Jodd has brought them from the ship."

"Where is Jodd?" I said.

"Without, in the company of the captain of the ship, some guards, and a prisoner."

"What prisoner?"

"Perchance the letters will tell you," she replied evasively. "Have I your command to open and read? They are marked 'Most Secret.'"

I nodded, since Martina often acted as my secretary in high matters, being from her training skilled in such things. So she broke the seals and read to myself and to Heliodore, who also was present in the room, as follows:

"To the Excellent Michael, a General of our armies and Governor of the Isle of Lesbos, Greetings from Nicephorus, by the will of God Emperor.

"Know, O Michael, that we, the Emperor, reposing especial faith in you our trusted servant, with these letters deliver into your keeping a certain prisoner of State. This prisoner is none other than Irene, who aforetime was Empress.

"Because of her many wickednesses in the sight of God and man we by the decree of the People, of the Army, of the Senate and of the high Officers of State amidst general rejoicing deposed the said Irene, widow of the Emperor Leo and mother of the late Emperor Constantine, and

placed ourselves upon the throne. The said Irene, at her own request, we consigned to the place called the Island of Princes, setting her in charge of certain holy monks. Whilst there, abusing our mercy and confidence, she set on foot plots to murder our Person and repossess herself of the throne.

"Now our Councillors with one voice urged that she should be put to death in punishment of her crimes, but we, being mindful of the teaching of our Lord and Saviour and of His saying that we should turn the other cheek to those who smite us, out of our gentle pity have taken another counsel.

"Learn now, most excellent Michael the Blind, who once were known as Olaf Red-Sword, that we hand over to your keeping the person of Irene, aforetime Empress, charging you to deal with her as she dealt with you and as she dealt also with the late Emperor Constantine, the son of her body, for thus shall her evil plottings be brought to naught."

"By God's Name, he means that I must blind her!" I exclaimed.

Making no answer, Martina went on with the letter----

"Should the said Irene survive her just punishment, we command you to make sufficient provision for her daily wants, but no more, and to charge the same against the sum due Us from the revenues of Lesbos. Should she die at once, or at any future time, give to her decent

private burial, and report to Us the circumstances of her death duly attested.

"Keep these Presents secret and do not act upon them until the ship which brings them and the prisoner to you has sailed for Byzantium, which it is ordered to do as soon as it has been revictualled. On your head be it to carry out these our commands, for which you shall answer with your life and those of your wife and children. This signed and sealed at our Court of Byzantium on the twelfth day of the sixth month of the first year of our reign, and countersigned by the high officers whose names appear beneath."

Such was this awful letter that, having read, Martina thrust into my hand as though she would be rid of it. Then followed a silence, which at length Martina broke.

"Your commands, Excellency," she said in a dry voice. "I understand that the--the--prisoner is in the ante-room in charge of the Captain Jodd."

"Then let her remain in the charge of the Captain Jodd," I exclaimed angrily, "and in your charge, Martina, who are accustomed to attending upon her, and know that you are both answerable for her safety with your lives. Send the captain of the ship to me and prepare a discharge for him. I will not see this woman till he has sailed, since until then I am

commanded to keep all secret. Send also the head officer of the guard."

Three days went by. The Imperial ship had sailed, taking with her my formal acknowledgment of the Emperor's letter, and the time had come when once more I must meet Irene face to face.

I sat in the audience chamber of my Great House, and there was present with me only Jodd, my lieutenant in office. Being blind, I dared not receive a desperate woman alone, fearing lest she might stab me or do herself some mischief. At the door of the chamber Jodd took her from the guards, whom he bade remain within call, and conducted her to where I sat. He told me afterwards that she was dressed as a nun, a white hood half hiding her still beautiful face and a silver crucifix hanging upon her breast.

As I heard her come I rose and bowed to her, and my first words to her were to pray her to be seated.

"Nay," she answered in that rich, well-remembered voice of hers, "a prisoner stands before the judge. I greet you, General Olaf, I pray your pardon--Michael--after long years of separation. You have changed but little, and I rejoice to see that your health is good and that the rank and prosperity which I gave have not been taken from you."

"I greet you, Madam," (almost had I said Augusta), I answered, then continued hurriedly: "Lady Irene, I have received certain commands concerning you from the Emperor Nicephorus which it is best that you should hear, so that you shall hold me quit of blame in aught that it may be my duty to inflict upon you. Read them, Captain Jodd. Nay, I forgot, you cannot. Give the copy of the letter to the Lady Irene; the original she can see afterwards if she wills."

So the paper was given to her by Jodd, and she read it aloud, weighing each word carefully.

"Oh, what a dog is this!" she said when it was finished. "Know, Olaf, that of my free will I surrendered the throne to him, yes, and all my private treasure, he swearing upon the Gospels that I should live in peace and honour till my life's end. And now he sends me to you to be blinded and then done to death, for that is what he means. Oh! may God avenge me upon him! May he become a byword and a scorn, and may his own end be even worse than that which he has prepared for me. May shame wrap his memory as in a garment, may his bones be dishonoured and his burying-place forgotten. Aye, and so it shall be."[*]

[*] The skull of this Nicephorus is said to have been used as a drinking cup by his victorious enemy, the King Krum.--
Editor.

She paused in her fearful curse, then said in a new voice, that voice in

which she was wont to plead,

"You will not blind me, Olaf. You'll not take from me my last blessing, the light of day. Think what it means----"

"The General Olaf should know well enough," interrupted Jodd, but I waved him to be silent, and answered,

"Tell me, Madam, how can I do otherwise? It seems to me that my life and that of my wife and children hang upon this deed. Moreover, why should I do otherwise now that by God's justice the wheel has come round at last?" I added, pointing to the hollows beneath my brows where the eyes once had been.

"Oh! Olaf," she said, "if I harmed you, you know well it was because I loved you."

"Then God send that no woman ever loves me in such a fashion," broke in Jodd.

"Olaf," she continued, taking no note of him, "once you went very near to loving me also, on that night when you would have eaten the poisoned figs to save my son, the Emperor. At least, you kissed me. If you forget, I cannot. Olaf, can you blind a woman whom you have kissed?"

"Kissing takes two, and I know that you blinded him," muttered Jodd,

"for I crucified the brutes you commanded to do the deed to which they confessed."

"Olaf, I admit that I treated you ill; I admit that I would have killed you; but, believe me, it was jealousy and naught but jealousy which drove me on. Almost as soon would I have killed myself; indeed, I thought of it."

"And there the matter ended," said Jodd. "It was Olaf who walked the Hall of the Pit, not you. We found him on the brink of the hole."

"Olaf, after I regained my power----"

"By blinding your own son," said Jodd, "for which you will have an account to settle one day."

"----I dealt well with you. Knowing that you had married my rival, for I kept myself informed of all you did, still I lifted no hand against you----"

"What good was a maimed man to you when you were courting the Emperor Charlemagne?" asked Jodd.

Now at last she turned on him, saying,

"Well is it for you, Barbarian, that if only for a while Fate has reft

power from my hands. Oh! this is the bitterest drop in all my cup, that I who for a score of years ruled the world must live to suffer the insults of such as you."

"Then why not die and have done?" asked the imperturbable Jodd. "Or, if you lack the courage, why not submit to the decree of the Emperor, as so many have submitted to your decree, instead of troubling the general here with prayers for mercy? It would serve as well."

"Jodd," I said, "I command you to be silent. This lady is in trouble; attack those in power, if you will, not those who have fallen."

"There speaks the man I loved," said Irene. "What perverse fate kept us apart, Olaf? Had you taken what I offered, by now you and I would have ruled the world."

"Perhaps, Madam; yet it is right I should say that I do not regret my choice, although because of it I can no longer--look upon the world."

"I know, I know! She of that accursed necklace, which I see you still wear, came between us and spoiled everything. Now I'm ruined for lack of you and you are nobody for lack of me, a soldier who will run his petty course and depart into the universal darkness, leaving never a name behind him. In the ages to be what man will take count of one of a score of governors of the little Isle of Lesbos, who might yet have held the earth in the hollow of his hand and shone a second Cæsar in its annals?"

Oh! what marplot of a devil rules our destinies? He who fashioned those golden shells upon your breast, or so I think. Well, well, it is so and cannot be altered. The Augusta of the Empire of the East must plead with the man who rejected her, for sight, or rather for her life. You understand, do you not, Olaf, that letter is a command to you to murder me?"

"Just such a command as you gave to those who blinded your son Constantine," muttered Jodd beneath his breath.

"That is what is meant. You are to murder me, and, Olaf, I'm not fit to die. Great place brings great temptations, and I admit that I have greatly sinned; I need time upon the earth to make my peace with Heaven, and if you slay my body now, you will slay my soul as well. Oh! be pitiful! Be pitiful! Olaf, you cannot kill the woman who has lain upon your breast, it is against nature. If you did such a thing you'd never sleep again; you would shudder yourself over the edge of the world! Being what you are, no pomp or power would ever pay you for the deed. Be true to your own high heart and spare me. See, I who for so long was the ruler of many kingdoms, kneel to you and pray you to spare me," and, casting herself down upon her knees, she laid her head upon my feet and wept.

All that scene comes back to me with a strange and terrible vividness, although I had no sight to aid me in its details, save the sight of my soul. I remember that the wonder and horror of it pierced me through and

through; the stab of the dagger in my eyes was not more sharp. There was I, Olaf, a mere gentleman of the North, seated in my chair of office, and there before me, her mighty head bowed upon my feet, knelt the Empress of the Earth pleading for her life. In truth all history could show few stranger scenes. What was I to do? If I yielded to her piteous prayers, it was probable that my own life and those of my wife and children would pay the price. Yet how could I clap my hands in their Eastern fashion and summon the executioners to pierce those streaming eyes of hers? "Rise, Augusta," I said, for in this extremity of her shame I gave her back her title, "and tell me, you who are accustomed to such matters, how I can spare you who deal with the lives of others as well as with my own?"

"I thank you for that name," she said as she struggled to her feet. "I've heard it shouted by tens of thousands in the circus and from the throats of armies, but never yet has it been half so sweet to me as now from lips that have no need to utter it. In times bygone I'd have paid you for this service with a province, but now Irene is so poor that, like some humble beggar-woman, she can but give her thanks. Still, repeat it no more, for next time it will sound bitter. What did you ask? How you could save me, was it not? Well, the thing seems simple. In all that letter from Nicephorus there is no direct command that you should blind me. The fellow says that you are to treat me as I treated you, and as I treated Constantine, the Emperor--because I must. Well, I imprisoned both of you. Imprison me and you fulfil the mandate. He says that if I die you are to report it, which shows that he does not mean

that I must die. Oh! the road of escape is easy, should you desire to travel it. If you do not so desire, then, Olaf, I pray you as a last favour not to hand me over to common men. I see that by your side still hangs that red sword of yours wherewith once I threatened you when you refused me at Byzantium. Draw it, Olaf, and this time I'll guide its edge across my throat. So you will please Nicephorus and win the rewards that Irene can no longer give. Baptised in her blood, what earthly glory is there to which you might not yet attain, you who had dared to lay hands upon the anointed flesh that even her worst foes have feared to touch lest God's sudden curse should strike them dead?"

So she went on pouring out words with the strange eloquence that she could command at times, till I grew bewildered. She who had lived in light and luxury, who had loved the vision of all bright and glorious things, was pleading for her sight to the man whom she had robbed of sight that he might never more behold the young beauty of her rival. She who had imagination to know the greatness of her sins was pleading to be spared the death she dared not face. She was pleading to me, who for years had been her faithful soldier, the captain of her own guard, sworn to protect her from the slightest ill, me upon whom, for a while, it had pleased her to lavish the wild passion of her imperial heart, who once had almost loved--who, indeed, had kissed her on the lips.

My orders were definite. I was commanded to blind this woman and to kill her in the blinding, which, in truth, I who had power of life and death, I who ruled over this island like a king by virtue of the royal

commission, could do without question asked. If I failed to fulfil those orders, I must be prepared to pay the price, as if I did fulfil them I might expect a high reward, probably the governorship of some great province of the Empire. This was no common prisoner. She was the ex-Empress, a mighty woman to whom tens of thousands or perhaps millions still looked for help and leadership. It was necessary to those who had seized her place and power that she should be rendered incapable of rule. It was desirable to them that she should die. Yet so delicately were the scales poised between them and the adherents of Irene, among whom were numbered all the great princes of the Church, that they themselves did not dare to inflict mutilation or death upon her. They feared lest it should be followed by a storm of wrath that would shake Nicephorus from his throne and involve them in his ruin.

So they sent her to me, the governor of a distant dependency, the man whom they knew she had wickedly wronged, being certain that her tongue, which it was said could turn the hearts of all men, would never soften mine. Then afterwards they would declare that the warrant was a forgery, that I had but wreaked a private vengeance upon an ancient foe, and, to still the scandal, degrade me from my governorship--into some place of greater power and profit.

Oh! while Irene pleaded before me and, heedless of the presence of Jodd, even cast her arms about me and laid her head upon my breast, all these things passed through my mind. In its scales I weighed the matter out, and the beam rose against me, for I knew well that if I spared Irene I

condemned myself and those who were more to me than myself, my wife, my children, and all the Northmen who clung to me, and who would not see me die without blow struck. I understood it all, and, understanding, of a sudden made up my mind--to spare Irene. Come what might, I would be no butcher; I would follow my heart whithersoever it might lead me.

"Cease, Madam," I said. "I have decided. Jodd, bid the messenger summon hither Heliodore and Martina, my wife and yours."

"Oh!" exclaimed Irene, "if these women are to be called in counsel on my case all is finished, seeing that both of them love you and are my enemies. Moreover, I have some pride left. To you I could plead, but not to them, though they blind me with their bodkins after they have stabbed me with their tongues. Excellency, a last boon! Call in your guard and kill me."

"Madam, I said that I had decided, and all the women in the world will not change my mind in this way or in that. Jodd, do my bidding."

Jodd struck a bell, once only, which was the signal for the messenger. He came and received his orders. Then followed a pause, since Heliodore and Martina were in a place close by and must be sent for. During this time Irene began to talk to me of sundry general matters. She compared the view that might be seen from this house in Lesbos to that from the terrace of her palace on the Bosphorus, and described its differences to me. She asked me as to the Caliph Harun-al-Rashid, whom she understood

I had seen, inquiring as to the estimate I had formed of his character. Lastly, with a laugh, she dwelt upon the strange vicissitudes of life.

"Look at me," she said. "I began my days as the daughter of a Greek gentleman, with no dower save my wit and beauty. Then I rose to be a ruler of the world, and knew all that it has to give of pomp and power. Nations trembled at my nod; at my smile men grew great; at my frown they faded into nothingness. Save you, Olaf, none ever really conquered me, until I fell in the appointed hour. And now! Of this splendour there is left but a nun's robe; of this countless wealth but one silver crucifix; of this power--naught."

So she spoke on, still not knowing to what decision I had come; whether she were to be blinded or to live or die. To myself I thought it was a proof of her greatness that she could thus turn her mind to such things while Fate hovered over her, its hand upon a sword. But it may be that she thought thus to impress me and to enmesh me in memories which would tie my hands, or even from the character of my answers to draw some augury of her doom.

The women came at length. Heliodore entered first, and to her Irene bowed.

"Greeting, Lady of Egypt," she said. "Ah! had you taken my counsel in the past, that title might have been yours in very truth, and there you and your husband could have founded a new line of kings independent of

the Empire which totters to its fall."

"I remember no such counsel, Madam," said Heliodore. "It seems to me that the course I took was right and one pleasing to God, since it has given me my husband for myself, although, it is true, wickedly robbed of his eyes."

"For yourself! Can you say so while Martina is always at his side?" she asked in a musing voice. "Well, it may be, for in this world strange things happen."

She paused, and I heard both Heliodore and Jodd move as though in anger, for her bitter shaft had gone home. Then she went on softly,

"Lady, may I tell you that, in my judgment, your beauty is even greater than it was, though it is true it has grown from bud to flower. Few bear their years and a mother's burdens so lightly in these hot lands."

Heliodore did not answer, for at that moment Martina entered. Seeing Irene for the first time, she forgot everything that had passed and curtsied to her in the old fashion, murmuring the familiar words,

"Thy servant greets thee, Augusta."

"Nay, use not that title, Martina, to one who has done with the world and its vanities. Call me 'Mother' if you will, for that is the only

name of honour by which those of my religious order may be known. In truth, as your mother in God, I welcome you and bless you, from my heart forgiving you those ills which you have worked against me, being, as I know well, driven by a love that is greater than any woman bears to woman. But that eating fire of passion scorned is the heritage of both of us, and of it we will talk afterwards. I must not waste the time of the General Olaf, whom destiny, in return for many griefs, has appointed to be my jailer. Oh! Olaf," she added with a little laugh, "some foresight of the future must have taught me to train you for the post. Let us then be silent, ladies, and listen to the judgment which this jailer of mine is about to pass upon me. Do you know it is no less than whether these eyes of mine, which you were wont to praise, Martina, which in his lighter moments even this stern Olaf was wont to praise, should be torn from beneath my brow, and if so, whether it should be done in such a fashion that I die of the deed? That and no less is the matter which his lips must settle. Now speak, Excellency."

"Madam," I said slowly, "to the best of my wit I have considered the letter sent to me under the seal and sign of the Emperor Nicephorus. Although it might be so interpreted by some, I cannot find in that letter any direct command that I should cause you to be blinded, but only one that I should keep you under strict guard, giving you such things as are necessary to your sustenance. This then I shall do, and by the first ship make report of my action to the Emperor at Byzantium."

Now, when she heard these words, at length the proud spirit of Irene

broke.

"God reward you, for I cannot, Olaf," she cried. "God reward you, saint among men, who can pay back cruel injuries with the gentlest mercy."

So saying, she burst into tears and fell senseless to the ground.

Martina ran to aid her, but Heliodore turned to me and said in her tender voice,

"This is worthy of you, Olaf, and I would not have you do otherwise. Yet, husband, I fear that this pity of yours has signed the death-warrant of us all."

So it proved to be, though, as it chanced, that warrant was never executed. I made my report to Byzantium, and in course of time the answer came in a letter from the Emperor. This letter coldly approved of my act in set and formal phrases. It added that the truth had been conveyed publicly to those slanderers of the Emperor who announced that he had caused Irene to be first blinded and then put to death in Lesbos, whereby their evil tongues had been silenced.

Then came this pregnant sentence:

"We command you, with your wife and children and your lieutenant, the Captain Jodd, with his wife and children, to lay down your offices and report yourselves with all speed to Us at our Court of Byzantium, that we may confer with you on certain matters. If it is not convenient to you, or you can find no fitting ship in which to sail at once, know that within a month of your receipt of this letter our fleet will call at Lesbos and bring you and the others herein mentioned to our Presence."

"That is a death sentence," said Martina, when she had finished reading out this passage. "I have seen several such sent in my day, when I was Irene's confidential lady. It is the common form. We shall never reach Byzantium, Olaf, or, if we do, we shall never leave it more."

I nodded, for I knew that this was so. Then, at some whispered word from Martina, Heliodore spoke.

"Husband," she said, "foreseeing this issue, Martina, Jodd, and most of the Northmen and I have made a plan which we now submit to you, praying that for our sakes, if not for yours, you will not thrust it aside.

We have bought two good ships, armed them and furnished them with all things needful. Moreover, during the past two months we have sold much of our property, turning it into gold. This is our plan--that we pretend to obey the order of the Emperor, but instead of heading for Byzantium, sail away north to the land in which you were born, where, having rank and possessions, you may still become a mighty chief. If we go at once we shall miss the Imperial fleet, and I think that none will follow us."

Now I bowed my head for a while and thought. Then I lifted it and said,

"So let it be. No other road is open."

For my own sake I would not have stirred an inch. I would have gone to the Court of the Emperor at Byzantium and there argued out the thing in a gambler's spirit, prepared to win or prepared to lose. There at least I should have had all the image-worshippers who adored Irene, that is, the full half of the Empire, upon my side, and if I perished, I should perish as a saint. But a wife and children are the most terrible gifts of God, if the most blessed, for they turn our hearts to water. So, for the first time in my life, I grew afraid, and, for their sakes, fled.

As might be expected, having Martina's brains, Heliodore's love, and the Northmen's loyalty at the back of it, our plan went well. A letter was sent to the Emperor saying that we would await the arrival of the fleet to obey his commands, having some private matters to arrange before we left Lesbos. Then, on a certain evening, we embarked on two great ships, about four hundred souls in all.

Before we went I bade farewell to Irene. She was seated outside the house that had been given to her, employed in spinning, for it was her fancy to earn the bread she ate by the labour of her hands. Round her were playing Jodd's children and my own, whom, in order to escape suspicion, we had sent thither till the time came for us to embark,

since the people of Lesbos only knew of our scheme by rumour.

"Whither do you go, Olaf?" she asked.

"Back to the North, whence I came, Madam," I answered, "to save the lives of these," and I waved my hand towards the children. "If I bide here all must die. We have been sent for to Byzantium, as I think you were wont to send for officers who had ceased to please you."

"I understand, Olaf; moreover, I know it is I who have brought this trouble upon you because you spared me, whom it was meant that you should kill. Also I know, through friends of mine, that henceforth, for reasons of policy, my little end of life is safe, and perhaps with it my sight. All this I owe to you, though now at times I regret that I asked the boon. From the lot of an Empress to that of a spinning-wife is a great change, and one which I find it hard to bear. Still, I have my peace to make with God, and towards that peace I strive. Yet will you not take me with you, Olaf? I should like to found a nunnery in that cold North of yours."

"No, Augusta. I have done my best by you, and now you must guard yourself. We part for ever. I go hence to finish where I began. My birthplace calls me."

"For ever is a long word, Olaf. Are you sure that we part for ever? Perchance we shall meet again in death or in other lives. Such, at

least, was the belief of some of the wisest of my people before we became Christian, and mayhap the Christians do not know everything, since the world had learnt much before they came. I hope that it may be so, Olaf, for I owe you a great debt and would repay it to you full measure, pressed down and running over. Farewell. Take with you the blessing of a sinful and a broken heart," and, rising, she kissed me on the brow.

Here ends the story of this life of mine as Olaf Red-Sword, since of it I can recover no more. The darkness drops. Of what befell me and the others after my parting with Irene I know nothing or very little. Doubtless we sailed away north, and, I think, came safely to Aar, since I have faint visions of Iduna the Fair grown old, but still unwed, for the stain of Steinar's blood, as it were, still marked her brow in all men's eyes; and even of Freydisa, white-haired and noble-looking. How did we meet and how did we separate at last, I wonder? And what were the fates of Heliodore and of our children; of Martina and of Jodd? Also, was the prophecy of Odin, spoken through the lips of Freydisa in the temple at Aar, that he and his fellow gods, or demons, would prevail against my flesh and that of those who clung to me, fulfilled at last in the fires of martyrdom for the Faith, as his promise of my happiness was fulfilled?

I cannot tell. I cannot tell. Darkness entombs us all and history is

dumb.

At Aar there are many graves! Standing among them, not so long ago, much of this history came back to me.