

The Greek Empress

The Midwife

In the glow of a golden candelabra there was a woman lying – far too young for the bearded one I thought – resting on cushions and covered with a blanket shimmering in all colours. Beside her crouched a maid with a newborn in her arms. I sighed with relief. The child was asleep; it was very small, but with rosy cheeks. The maid nodded when I asked: it was a girl. „The fourth“, she said.

A stirring on the bed drew my attention from the child to the mother. Her face was twisted in pain, the blanket quivered. „The contractions will not stop, the child’s maid moaned.

Straightaway I saw it was not the afterbirth that contorted the body of the woman who had just delivered. I knelt down and felt the belly.

„There are two, I explained. And the second child had not turned. Its head was exactly under the heart of the mother.

„You have to help me, I whispered to the woman and pushed the blanket back. I was struck by the familiar smell, the linen was drenched with blood. What would the bearded one say if the second child was stillborn, if the young woman died? Her black hair was wet from sweating.

„Could it be a boy? she asked while I helped her to sit up and squatted between her legs.

„Only God knows, I muttered.

What happened then is lost in feverish flickering of my memory. I had heard that a child could be turned in the mother’s body but I cannot remember what I did. I washed my hands and arms in the hot water they brought me and rubbed the ointment up to my elbows. The woman made no sound. I saw her fingers clawing into the blanket. Trota, my teacher, said that the woman too is born in childbirth that it is then when her nature is revealed. As delicate as the body of the woman delivering was, as strong was her will and she was not afraid. At last the clear fluid gushed on the bloodstained linen, the contractions got stronger, a small head appeared, a wrinkled face. It screamed, it was alive: it was a boy.

In each birth there is a glimmer of God’s creation, it remains as incomprehensible as death, and the beginning of a life always fills us with hope and confidence. But never before had the birth of a child kindled so much joy. Tears were running down the scarred cheeks of bearded Jacob waiting in front of the tent, the men cheered as did the entire country.

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Today it seems to me that years before the birth in the forest when I heard the foreign name for the first time I sensed that this woman was going to change my life. But as I sat in the carriage with the two newborn, the child’s maid, I didn’t know more about her than anybody else: that she was a princess brought from the East to marry the son of our emperor. At that time Otto the Great was still alive and it was said that he had decided in his wisdom to reunite in one bloodline the empire divided for centuries. He negotiated with the emperors of Constantinople and despite their duplicity he succeeded in getting a bride for his son. Not everybody approved. When it emerged that the princess given to our emperor was not a daughter but only a niece of the ruler of the East some demanded to have the foreigner sent back. But Otto the Great kept her, gave her to his son in matrimony and presented her with possessions for her own use.

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Theophanu

Shortly after midday the last flakes float to the ground, the white ridges of the mountains appear and the cloud covers the sky above. The snow scrunches under the shoes of Thea and Otto medius when they climb the slope behind the camp. There are no trees growing here, it is too cold, too dry. „You talked to him about me? Thea is outraged. „He worries about you, Otto medius defends himself, „and about Adelheid. „I thought he was on my side. „She is his mother, Otto medius argues. „I thought you were on my side. Thea becomes even more incensed. „He is my friend; and he is the emperor. In Otto’s voice too there is anger. Thea trudges on her eyes fixed on the snow-crueted precipice in front of her. „I will not stay more than three days in Pavia, she concedes defiantly after a while. „Konrad of Burgundy and Maiolus of Cluny have everything

prepared. „I know, she counters impatiently. „The emperor will speak in your name as well. You don't have to do anything. Otto tries to calm her. „I can speak for myself, Thea snarls at him. In silence they climb higher. „Forgive me, she says a little out of breath when after some time they reach a ledge. „Since Maria died – „Maria? „My daughter, the twin sister of Otto minimus, Thea explains irritated again. „I apologise. Otto looks at her. „Since Maria died, she starts again but cannot continue. Otto medius cast a glances at the camp down below, they can still be seen from there. „Since Maria died? he asks tucking his hands into his sleeves. „Her death does not leave me. It bears down on every thought, on everything I'm doing. Sometimes when I wake up in the morning I realize that I have forgotten it and guilt grips me. „Nobody is guilty, Otto interrupts her. „I lost my mother when I was a child, my family when I left Constantinople, the old emperor who was like a father to me and my first child before it was born. Otto remembers Thea's first pregnancy and the miscarriage very well. „But nothing has affected me as much as Maria's death, Thea continues. Otto remains silent. „She was part of me. Thea's voice breaks. „She is still part of you, Ottos says softly. „She lives in you and you live for her.

Thea lets her tears run down her cheeks while they climb on. The slope is so steep they have to hold on to the rocks. The sun is pressing through the clouds and makes the snow on the ridges glisten. „Do you remember the time we camped at the lake? Thea suddenly asks. In the summer after her wedding in Rome the imperial court crossed the Alps to the North. Following a difficult but quick ascent her father-in-law ordered a day of rest and they set up camp on an alpine meadow between two lakes. „Never before had I seen such a blue, Thea remembers. „The air is clearer up here, Otto medius explains. „You promised to show me the everlasting ice when we returned, she says without looking at him. Otto medius does not answer. Thea thrusts her hand into his.

The edges of the rocks against which Thea is leaning press into her back; it feels like a caress. The desire in her body has turned into a hum. The clouds have cleared, the blue of the sky is as deep as the blue of the lake that time. Thea closes her eyes and wishes she could hold it under her lids. „We have to go back, Otto says without loosening his embrace. „You will show me the everlasting ice the next time, Thea says her eyes still closed and for a moment he presses her against him. While they straighten their clothes they leave the cover of the rock protecting them from sight. Otto's features suddenly harden. Thea also is looking at the camp on top of the pass. In one of the tents lies her husband in another her son. „I will ask Adelheid for forgiveness, she declares while they descend the slope side by side. „I will prostrate myself before her, if need be. (Pages 54 - 57)

Otto

Capo Colonna, 13th of July 982

The spearheads glisten like the water. It looks as if the sea has swept the enemy ashore and there seem to be ever more of them. Otto and his men reached the hill fort of Cotrone before the emir and took it. From there they advanced towards the Saracens who had taken up position on a cape south of the city. From his lookout Otto surveys his troops on the ridges around: Konrad, Richar, Berchthold, Otto, Bezelin – the air stirs above their heads. Otto can feel the excitement on his skin. With a little jolt he raises his arm for the attack. Infinitely slowly the platoons start to move and glide down the slopes. Lances, helmets, swords; the Saracens do not move. The air is filled with screams; in Otto there is dead silence. He remembers one morning in the forest of Memleben. He had traced a hind to cull on a clearing. At the last moment she raised her head and instead of hitting her neck he hit her shoulder. She vanished into the bushes. A moment later he heard the news of his father's death. Up to this day Otto sees the bleeding animal stumbling through the undergrowth, dying, her mouth foaming. A swarm of arrows buzzes through the air, the Saracens do not move, the imperial soldiers are but a few steps away from them. There is the face of his son, the round cheeks, his fair hair. The certitude hits Otto like a blow: he will not see him again. A muffled howl rises from the plain and Otto needs a moment to realize that it come from human throats. A swell has taken hold of the spears of the enemies, the ranks thin out, break apart. At the interior of the Arabic host a circle is forming. There, at the beginning of the battle Otto made out the emir on his gold armoured white horse. A shout emerges from the howl. These are his people. „Qasim is dead! Otto sucks in the dusty air. „God in heaven ... he starts and his voice trembles with delight.

With a scrutinizing eye Otto medius trots between the soldiers. Their faces are covered with sweat, some help the wounded, others examine the weapons the Saracens left on the battlefield, sabres, spear heads, some pasted with blood. One tries to restrain a magnificent black stallion, but the animal rears up again and again. There is a smell of burnt leather. On the ridge Otto harnesses his horse beside the emperor. „We have hardly lost a man, he reports. „They took flight like rabbits. The bearded Jacob grins. „In all truth, Otto medius confesses, „I did not expect it to be so easy. The emperor says nothing. „Do you know whose lance it was that struck the emir? Hildibold, who was only lured from the army camp by the news of victory, inquires. „It was an arrow, Otto medius explains. „One of Manso’s archers hit him in the throat. „The Greek claims it was God’s warning. Bernward has joined them with Johannes Philagathos. The cheeks of the notary glow from the excitement of the battle. Johannes sits precariously on his horse. Otto looks into his face. „God’s warning? For a moment he sees the hind. „To keep to the path you have chosen, Bernward begins but Philagathos interrupts him: „To rescue Italy from the pagans and merge it with your empire. How quickly the monk learned to speak German. „This is the Lord’s will. Praised be the Lord. The men cross themselves. Otto medius examines the position of the sun. „It’s only midday. We can dismantle the camp and be back in the hill fort before nightfall. „In spite of God’s warning? the emperor snarls at him. Otto medius flinches. His mouth begins to form a grin but the expression of the emperor remains rigid. „We will keep to the path we have chosen, he declares solemnly. „Where to? The emir is dead his men are gone. Look around. Otto medius points at the ravaged plain. On the beach a few stray Arabs can be seen carrying casualties collecting the belongings of their fallen. The dead Abu al-Qasim was taken by this guard to a boat and rowed out to sea. The portly men in their colourful capes reminded the emperor of Thea’s astrologer and he wondered if they were all cut down. „We will go south until we are sure that the pagans have left our land and even the last village knows who is their emperor. „Romanorum imperator augustus,, say Johannes Philagathos muted, and Bernward repeats it aloud. „But that can take weeks, months, Otto medius argues, „in this vast area. He points at the slopes along the coast covered in brown thicket. „And our scouts said the emir’s army was larger. He had archers, cornets – „We go south, the emperor shouts at him. „But – „This is the order of the Roman emperor. His voice cracks. „I will make sure, that your camp is dismantled and follow you in due course, Otto medius declares with a little bow and turns his horse.

(Pages 100 – 104)

Adelheid

Pavia, at the beginning of April 984

„Archbishop Willigis writes you should stay in Italy. Thea takes the letter from Hildibold. „There. She hands it to Mathilde who is just entering the chancery room. For days they have been working on the preparations for their return. A slight blush colours the face of the abbess while she is reading. „What does it mean? Thea asks impatiently. „Well, Mathilde hesitates, „ it is too early. „But Willigis writes that many of the princes left Quedlinburg because they did not want to break the oath they made to my son in Aachen. The Franks and the Saxons who are behind us have joined ranks, Konrad of Swabia is on our side, Hezilo as well, the Liutpolding, to whom we gave the duchy of Bavaria in Verona. And Otto of Worms, Thea thinks, without saying it, trying to push his grey shock of hair out of her memory. „What is Willigis waiting for? „The princes will want a strong ruler. Mathilde twists the letter in her hands. „Not a child? Thea asks. Mathilde doesn’t answer. „Not a woman? Thea goes on. Hildibold squints. „Not a foreigner. she concludes. „If you and my mother... The enemy nearby, Thea turns away. „Without my mother Abalbero would not have succeeded in persuading Lothar to acknowledge Otto as king, Mathilde says softly. Thea goes to the window. „She intervened also with Karl of Lorraine for your son, the sister-in-law continues behind her. „And the Italians still think of her as their ruler. The trees in the garden are covered with a green bloom; spring has arrived. „My mother has already done more for her grandson than ever she did for her son. Thea sees Irene leaving the kitchen with Tilda. The two are arguing, the face of the child is torn in anger. „And she has taken you in, Mathilde adds. Tilda stamps her foot. „If you together ... Irene leaves the child standing and walks on. Tilda shakes her head a little then she runs after Irene. Thea sighs; her daughter really resembles her.

Standing at the door Thea looks at her hand and for a moment she feels unable to knock. „Yes!

The voice answering sounds brittle. Her mother-in-law kneels in front of an image of the holy virgin. Thea observes the bent back of the praying woman, the bony shoulder blades under the habit, the grey strand of hair sticking in a crease of the neck. After a while Adelheid crosses herself and starts to hoist herself onto the chair beside her. Thea is drawn to help her at first but she refrains. With an angry moan Adelheid lowers herself onto the chair pulling at her habit. Only then does she raise her head and look at Thea. „I. That is the wrong word. Thea clears her throat, she does not want to talk about herself. „My son and I, she starts again. Adelheid stares at her. Her eyes are paler than they used to be. „We are greatly indebted to you for what you have done for us since the death of my husband, your son. Adelheid’s mouth twitches impatiently. With a little start Thea kneels down and grasps the hem of the habit. „We ask for your blessing, she keeps the head down, „and for your support. Thea seems to feel the coarse cloth she holds on her tongue. „Your support, she repeats. Again there is an angry moan. Thea wishes Otto were there; he would have helped her. „ So that together we can move against the guardian of my son –„ She is interrupted by a knock at the door and in the next moment one of Adelheids ladies-in-waiting stand beside her. Thea pulls herself up and to her surprise the woman hands the letter she carries to her and not to her mother-in-law. Thea recognised Bernward’s writing. He was sent to Magdeburg to report from there and as his uncle Folkmar supports red Heinrich he has already found out a few things. Thea hesitates, reads again. „He has Ada! She drops the letter. „Heinrich has taken Ada from Quedlinburg and brought her to the castle of one-eyed Ekbert. The mother-in-law does not move. „Adelheid, my daughter, your grand-daughter, in the hands of this scoundrel who was incarcerated with Heinrich at Utrecht. Thea’s voice breaks. Slowly the old empress gets up and gives orders in a low voice. Thea does not listen. She sees her daughter in a dark dungeon. The lady-in-waiting leaves. Shortly after, Hildibold appears and a little later Mathilde, the abbess of Quedlinburg, white with fury.

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Mathilde

„Arise, prisoner from the shackles, escape from the enemy. With a laugh Irene lifts the four year old. Thea catches her son and sets him in the saddle in front of her. The child shouts for joy, the mare rears up and careers away. The other horses funnel out of the opened gate and chase after it. Irene takes the turquoise blue shawl from her head, folds it and puts it in her bag. While she walks back through the reeds she hears the shouts of the sentinels having discovered the empty paddock. The horses will disperse in the wetlands. When Irene reaches the hill of Rara Mathilde’s carriage stand in front of the old royal palatinate.

„And? Irene storms into the room. Thea and Mathilde sit on the bed laughing. „Yes! Both women nod. „The child? „Healthy and happy, Mathilde declares. „But smelling like a dog, Thea adds. „Line brought him to the wash house straightaway. „And the duke? asks Irene. Mathilde burst into laughter. „The duke. She rolls her eyes. „Well, the duke was delighted indeed about my unexpected visitation, as he called it. You should have seen his tent. To the last corner it was filled with plunder, tankards, bowls, chandeliers, processional swords he must have stolen somewhere. And on the floor there were so many rugs on top of each other one could hardly walk. He himself wore a blue cape this time, embroidered with golden rhombuses making you dizzy, over a red tunic and green stockings held up with golden leather straps; and on his head – in spite of the heat – he had a bonnet from which ermine tails dangled. The women giggle. „He offered me a chair, a kind of a cushioned throne he seems to carry along on all his journeys and when we were alone he started to hop around like a magpie, pouring mead for me, so sweet his tongue stuck to the palate, praising my beauty, my prudence, my dressmakers. „And you?, Thea asks. „What did you say? „Nothing. I let him talk and tried to evade his wet breath. The longer I could hold him off, I thought, the more time you would have. And I had seen the curious soldiers in front of the tent; they would not return in haste to their duties. Only when Heinrich bent over me to remove a gadfly, he claimed, was entangled in my silky shimmering hair, I jumped up, in fright of the gadfly of course, Mathilde winks, „and in doing so I pushed over my cup of mead that I had placed on the armrest of the chair. „And then? Thea and Irene are all attention. „It was really very clumsy of me. Because the duke was standing so close the mead dripped over his tunic. Well, over the lower part of his tunic – about here. Mathilde points at her lap. „Of course I apologised profusely, Mathilde continues when the three women have recovered from their laughter. „I begged him to send for hot water to wash out the stain. But the duke would not have it. While I

started to report how we had gathered in Pavia after the death of my brother and agreed with Willigis to ask him to hand over little Otto to us for his education, he rubbed the stain with a woollen cloth. But it only got worse, the white fluff stuck to it. Another fit of laughter hits the women. „In short, Mathilde tries to pull herself together, „when someone shouted the horses were loose, the duke abandoned me and ran out of the tent. Nobody prevented me from getting into my carriage and returning. The women are content and say nothing. „Thank you, says Thea after a while. „It was a pleasure. Mathilde laughs. „Thank you, both of you. There is a clatter of hooves in the courtyard. Irene is at the window at once: „The duke! Thea and Mathilde exchange glances. „That was quick, the abbess says.

(Pages 187-189)

The Astrologer

With silken purring the lioness soothed the rivals and they did what the Basileia pleased as if it were their own desire. Surely the unanimity would not last, the women of Gandersheim were too eager to be subject to the empire directly and when bishop Osdag died but a few months later some were talking about poison. The canonesses would try again to shed the bands of the See and there would not always be such a suave mediator. On this afternoon however, the archbishop of Mainz and the bishop of Hildesheim sat peacefully side by side and everybody was delighted with the new canoness who would secure the royal patronage for the convent as long as she lived. Of Otto's three sisters Sophia was closest to him. Although up to now they had hardly met they understood each other without reservation and when I saw them together I sometimes asked myself if the king had found his twin again, such was the resemblance of the siblings in their appearance. In their nature however, they were a mirror of their parents, the girl like her mother born in the sign of Leo, strong and brave, the boy if not a Capricorn like his father yet a Cancer, more prickly and less placid but as on guard with his nippers as the horned goat fish. Sophia would not content herself to sing in the choir of the convent in memory of the deceased and walk in procession through the town. And Otto was strong enough to listen to her counsel and heed it. Together they would be invincible and the Basilea saw that as well. The autumn sun shining quite unexpectedly on Gandersheim on this day must have reminded the empress of the mild Italian winters as she decided to take leave at once after the ordination although many things were not yet arranged. Instead of travelling to Rome with her son she left him in Willigis' custody and Bernward's care. She would marshal the Italian allies, smooth the path for the third Otto to be crowned emperor, the chancellor informed the princes and they praised her foresight. I knew well that her journey had another purpose as well. But this road she had to travel alone. I could not join her and mercifully she dismissed me. My body was weak from exertion and age it would not have suffered being dragged once more over the Alps and my heart would not have endured smelling again the fragrance of the land where I was once so happy. Therefore I returned with the court to Mainz, where the governor and deputy of the Basileia was building his mighty dome and where the Jews received with their goods also news from Italy to remain close to my mistress in this way at last. Autumn coloured the forests in gold and purple as it only does here in the West and I knew I was seeing it for the last time.

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Born in the sign of Leo Theophanu the niece of the emperor of Constantinople had left her home to rule at the side of the younger Otto, the second, over the kingdom of the Franks. Against all defamation she succeeded – not entirely without my doing. Then I, Stephanos the astrologer, was the only one to escort her from the East to here. „The Greek empress the Franks called her with respect and contempt as well and she remained a foreigner. But under the orb of Ursa Major she knew how to blend inheritance with experience for the benefit of the empire and she paid the price of her success without bitterness. Happiness is but a moment but what we lose in one form we will regain in another, and time, they say here, leads us in a spiral on a new course back to the same place again and again.

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