

INNOCENT BLOOD

A TALE OF THE STOCKHOLM BLOODBATH

By Anna Durand

My name is Jösse Viktorsson, I like to describe myself as a jovial, nonchalant, and handsome Swedish fellow of scarcely twenty-three years – this is my story.

So there I was standing with a heated brow over a lifeless body – that of a bishop. Without the slightest nervousness I quietly wiped the blood off my sword and looked up at the other bishop that was being forced forward by the conquering Danish soldiers.

Bishop Vincent of Strängnäs was pulled roughly down beneath my black, double-edged sword. With deliberate calculation I raised it.

Vincent struggled and in a loud, but calm voice he exclaimed, “King Christian, you have lied to us, and have committed treason against all of Sweden! But know, King Christian, that God will avenge this injustice! ‘O Lord God, to whom vengeance belongeth; O God, to whom vengeance belongeth, shew thy –” and with one swift blow the life was snapped out of the hapless bishop.

I quivered under the curse and shrewdly stole a glance at King Christian II of Denmark who sat on his throne in flawless serenity and luxury, coolly watching my proceedings. Just months ago he had conquered all of Sweden and just days ago his coronation had taken place. At those times he had sworn to forgive all those who had fought against him in Sweden – but that was only on paper, King Christian had far more thrilling plans than those of peace...

In one fell swoop King Christian imagined that he could exterminate all his enemies – *all* the anti-unionists.

The evening of this event, November 8th 1520 I walked stealthily towards the building in which we executioners normally met, to teach those who replaced old retired executioners or to divide the work and announce relevant news.

Slowly I tried the handle to a door of the building which stood a little way from the palace, and entered. Toward the left of the room there was a small round table at which sat one man in the same uniform as me. He was powerfully built and full of muscle with creepy, cattish blue eyes.

On the right wall there were many swords of different shapes and sizes, which were pretty much just for decoration and rarely used – we all having swords which hung around our waists. The left wall was commemorated to a lot of people who had fallen by our sword or axe. Portraits of all sorts of tolerably well-known people hung in various levels of dustiness on that wall.

The back, besides having another door, had several shelves to the left of the door, on which the axes rested, and on the right there hung dishcloths; by them was a sink filled with water.

The man at the table was my leader, Jörgen Homuth.

I leaned heavily against the table, watching Jörgen hang up pictures on the wall of several of the nobles that had fallen under my sword earlier that day.

“I think we should write your name underneath,” Jörgen remarked, “you will be remembered for ever.”

“As the man who slew the very flower of Swedish nobility,” I returned bitterly. “It does no man honor.”

“Jösse, Jösse, be that on the King’s head.”

“No; God’s vengeance shall fallen upon *me*. Bishop Vincent—”

“I thought you did not believe in any God,” Jörgen interrupted. I slashed my sword through the water where I was cleaning it.

“How many was it?” I asked more calmly.

“Eighty-two.”

“And more tomorrow! Will it ever end?”

“Tomorrow it is only their servants and assistants, no great matter.”

“Innocent people, Jörgen!”

“No; they are not innocent, and if they were it is not on you but on those that condemn them that judgment falls – enough, Jösse!” he commanded sharply, as I was about to speak again.

November 9th arrived, I trembled at the horrible massacre that I was bidden to make – but I had no choice, I could only do as the King bade me.

For generations my fathers had worked as executioners, how could I quit? For years I had done my work faithfully, I found pleasure in it – as hard as that may be to imagine.

This day was similar to the one before it. My sword fell first upon the servants and then upon assistants and others.

A tall nine year-old boy walked firmly up to me and laid himself down. I grimaced as my sword drained the life out of little Lindarn Ribbing whose father I had beheaded the day before. I again raised my eyes to King Christian II and saw the horrid look of triumph plastered on it.

How could he do this? To extract revenge from babes!

How could *I* do it? My eyes fell to the floor; I dared not raise them again. Was not I as bad as he?

But if I did not do this, another man would, and perhaps, they would not do it with one rapid blow but cruelly – it was too likely. I had no choice.

I easily recognized tinny, six year-old Sten Ribbing as he marched up next. He looked sadly at his brother and then confidently into my eyes, which were the only visible part from beneath my hood, as he exclaimed, “Dear man, please don’t spoil my ’broidered collar as you spoiled my brother’s – mama will be so vexed!”

I flinched and dropped my eyes from his guiltless ones; *how* could I do this? But I had no choice, drawing my breath tautly I lifted my blade, for a fraction of a second I turned my eyes upon King Christian’s little victim.

It was too much.

My hand trembled.

Slowly my sword clashed to the ground.

In short – I fled.

Biting my lip, I glanced at the boy who was being thrust through by the remorseless and savage Danes.

Desperately I panted for breath and jumped in the back door of my house. I dashed into my room and threw off my hood and suit as quickly as I could, burning them in the fire.

I *could* not do it. *Could* not kill the boy who did not even fear death, I knew I was not safe. For, even though I was always undercover as an executioner, most people suspected who I really was – or more correctly, knew.

I leaned over the fire to warm myself and turn everything over in my mind; seeing constantly before my eyes the little boy and his trusting gaze.

Down the dark back ally streets of Stockholm I crept, until every muscle of my body was sore; then into a saggy old house I entered.

“Who’s there?” a gruff voice muttered.

“Jösse,” I whispered.

“Come in,” the man replied, ushering me into the inner room. “What is it?”

“I could not do it, Jörgen – I could not kill Sten Ribbing! Heaven help me!”

“*Jösse*,” exclaimed Jörgen in a voice of suppressed emotion, “Jösse, Jösse – then why – why did you come?” he wrung his hands.

I pointed to the cellar door beneath his feet. He gave me a look I understood too well – it was a look of despair – a look that told the uselessness of trying to hide.

As the cellar door opened and the Danish soldiers stepped through I ran nimbly into a tunnel. Desperately I sprinted into a pile of barrels, moving them aside quickly. I tore uselessly at the dirty wall.

My hazel eyes met those of the Danish captain as he stepped before me, smirking as widely as King Christian II had upon his complete defeat over his enemies.

Before the eyes of the world Jösse Viktorsson was made an example of by the relentless Christian. I lifted my sword; Jösse drew a line across his neck, closing his eyes for the last time upon this earth. He may be dead, but he will be remembered – there on the wall his picture shall always be.

--- *Jörgen Homuth*