

not the king himself smile and feel more pleased at heart, when Thomas Seymour, that young, bold, and spirited hero, stands by his side?"

"You are right!" said Catharine, whose heart every one of these enthusiastic words lacerated like the stab of a dagger—"yes, you are right. He is worthy of being loved by you—and you could hit upon no better choice. It was only the first surprise that made me see things otherwise than they are. Thomas Seymour is the brother of a queen: why then should he not also be the husband of a royal princess?"

With a bashful blush, Elizabeth hid her smiling face in Catharine's bosom. She did not see with what an expression of alarm and agony the queen observed her; how her lips were convulsively compressed, and her cheeks covered with a death-like pallor.

"And he?" asked she, in a low tone. "Does Thomas Seymour love you?"

Elizabeth raised her head and looked at the questioner in amazement. "How!" said she. "Is it possible, then, to love, if you are not loved?"

"You are right," sighed Catharine. "One must be very humble and silly to be able to do that."

"My God! how pale you are, queen!" cried Elizabeth, who just now noticed Catharine's pale face. "Your features are distorted; your lips tremble. My God! what does this mean?"

"It is nothing!" said Catharine, with a smile full of agony. "The excitement and alarm of to-day have exhausted my strength. That is all. Besides, a new grief threatens us, of which you as yet know nothing. The king is ill. A sudden dizziness seized him, and made him fall almost lifeless at my side. I came to bring you the king's message; now duty calls me to my husband's sickbed. Farewell, Elizabeth."

She waved a good-by to her with her hand, and with hurried step left the room. She summoned up courage to

conceal the agonies of her soul, and to pass proud and stately through the halls. To the courtiers bowing before her, she would still be the queen, and no one should suspect what agony was torturing her within like flames of fire. But at last arrived at her boudoir—at last sure of being overheard and observed by no one—she was no longer the queen, but only the agonized, passionate woman.

She sank on her knees, and cried, with a heart-rending wail of anguish: "My God, my God, grant that I may become mad, so that I may no longer know that he has forsaken me!"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE CATASTROPHE.

AFTER days of secret torture and hidden tears, after nights of sobbing anguish and wailing sorrow, Catharine had at last attained to inward peace; she had at last taken a firm and decisive resolution.

The king was sick unto death; and however much she had suffered and endured from him, still he was her husband; and she would not stand by his deathbed as a perjured and deceitful woman; she would not be constrained to cast down her eyes before the failing gaze of the dying king. She would renounce her love—that love, which, however, had been as pure and chaste as a maiden's prayer—that love, which was as unapproachably distant as the blush of morn, and yet had stood above her so vast and brilliant, and had irradiated the gloomy pathway of her life with celestial light.

She would make the greatest of sacrifices; she would give her lover to another. Elizabeth loved him. Catharine would not investigate and thoroughly examine the

point, whether Thomas Seymour returned her love, and whether the oath he had taken to her, the queen, was really nothing more than a fancy of the brain, or a falsehood. No, she did not believe it; she did not believe that Thomas Seymour was capable of treachery, of double-dealing. But Elizabeth loved him; and she was young and beautiful, and a great future lay before her. Catharine loved Thomas Seymour strongly enough not to want to deprive him of this future, but gladly to present herself a sacrifice to the happiness of her lover. What was she—the woman matured in grief and suffering—in comparison with this youthful and fresh blossom, Elizabeth? What had she to offer her beloved further than a life of retirement, of love, and of quiet happiness? When once the king is dead and sets her free, Edward the Sixth ascends the throne; and Catharine then is nothing more than the forgotten and disregarded widow of a king; while Elizabeth, the king's sister, may perhaps bring a crown as her dower to him whom she loves.

Thomas Seymour was ambitious. Catharine knew that. A day might come when he would repent of having chosen the widow of a king instead of the heiress to a throne.

Catharine would anticipate that day. She would of her own free-will resign her lover to Princess Elizabeth. She had by a struggle brought her mind to this sacrifice; she had pressed her hands firmly on her heart, so as not to hear how it wailed and wept.

She went to Elizabeth, and said to her with a sweet smile: "To-day I will bring your lover to you, princess. The king has fulfilled his promise. He has to-day with his last dying strength signed this act, which gives you liberty to choose your husband, not from the ranks of princes alone, but to follow your own heart in your choice. I will give this act to your lover, and assure him of my assistance and aid. The king is suffering very much to-day, and his consciousness fails more and more. But be cer-

tain, if he is in a condition to hear me, I will spend all my powers of persuasion in inclining him to your wish, and in moving him to give his consent to your marriage with Earl Sudley. I now go to receive the earl. So tarry in your room, princess, for Seymour will soon come to bring you the act."

Whilst she thus spoke, it seemed to her as though her heart were pierced by red-hot daggers; as though a two-edged sword were cleaving her breast. But Catharine had a strong and courageous soul. She had sworn to herself to endure this torture to the end; and she endured it. No writhing of her lips, no sigh, no outcry, betrayed the pain that she was suffering. And if, indeed, her cheeks were pale, and her eye dim, they were so because she had spent nights watching by her husband's sick-bed, and because she was mourning for the dying king.

She had the heroism to embrace tenderly this young maiden to whom she was just going to present her love as a sacrifice, and to listen with a smile to the enthusiastic words of gratitude, of rapture and expectant happiness which Elizabeth addressed to her.

With tearless eyes and firm step she returned to her own apartments; and her voice did not at all tremble, as she bade the chamberlain in attendance to summon to her the master of horse, Earl Sudley. Only she had a feeling as though her heart was broken and crushed; and quite softly, quite humbly, she whispered: "I shall die when he is gone. But so long as he is here, I will live; and he shall not have a suspicion of what I suffer!"

And while Catharine suffered so dreadfully, Elizabeth was jubilant with delight and rapture; for at last she stood at the goal of her wishes, and this very day she was to become the betrothed of her lover. Oh, how slow and sluggish crept those minutes along! How many eternities had she still to wait before he would come—he, her lover, and soon her husband! Was he already with the queen? Could she expect him already? She stood as if

spellbound at the window, and looked down into the courtyard. Through that great gateway over there he must come; through that door yonder he must go, in order to reach the queen's apartments.

She uttered an exclamation, and a glowing blush flitted across her face. There, there, he was. Yonder drew up his equipage; his gold-laced lackeys opened the door and he alighted. How handsome he was, and how magnificent to look upon! How noble and proud his tall figure! How regularly beautiful his fresh, youthful face! How saucy the haughty smile about his mouth; and how his eyes flamed and flashed and shone in wantonness and youthful happiness. His look glanced for a moment at Elizabeth's window. He saluted her, and then entered the door leading to the wing of the palace of Whitehall occupied by the queen. Elizabeth's heart beat so violently that she felt almost suffocated. Now he must have reached the great staircase—now he was above it—now he was entering the queen's apartments—he traverses the first, the second, the third chamber. In the fourth Catharine was waiting for him.

Elizabeth would have given a year of her life to hear what Catharine would say to him, and what reply he would make to the surprising intelligence—a year of her life to be able to see his rapture, his astonishment, and his delight. He was so handsome when he smiled, so bewitching when his eyes blazed with love and pleasure.

Elizabeth was a young, impulsive child. She had a feeling as if she must suffocate in the agony of expectation; her heart leaped into her mouth; her breath was stifled in her breast, she was so impatient for happiness.

"Oh, if he does not come soon I shall die!" murmured she. "Oh, if I could only at least see him, or only hear him!" All at once she stopped; her eyes flashed up, and a bewitching smile flitted across her features. "Yes," said she, "I will see him, and I will hear him. I can do it, and I will do it. I have the key which the queen gave

me, and which opens the door that separates my rooms from hers. With that key I may reach her bed-chamber, and next to the bed-chamber is her boudoir, in which, without doubt, she will receive the earl. I will enter quite softly, and, hiding myself behind the hanging which separates the bed-chamber from the boudoir, I shall be able to see him, and hear everything that he says!"

She laughed out loud and merrily, like a child, and sprang for the key, which lay on her writing-table. Like a trophy of victory she swung it high above her on her hand and cried, "I will see him!" Then light, joyful, and with beaming eye, she left the room.

She had conjectured rightly. Catharine received the earl in her boudoir. She sat on the divan standing opposite the door which led into the reception-room. That door was open, and so Catharine had a perfect view of the whole of that large space. She could see the earl as he traversed it. She could once more enjoy, with a rapture painfully sweet, his proud beauty, and let her looks rest on him with love and adoration. But at length he crossed the threshold of the boudoir; and now there was an end of her happiness, of her sweet dream, and of her hopes and her rapture. She was nothing more than the queen, the wife of a dying king; no longer Earl Seymour's beloved, no longer his future and his happiness.

She had courage to greet him with a smile; and her voice did not tremble when she bade him shut the door leading into the hall, and drop the hanging. He did so, gazing at her with looks of surprise. He did not comprehend that she dared give him an interview; for the king was still alive, and even with his tongue faltering in death he might destroy them both.

Why did she not wait till the morrow? On the morrow the king might be already dead; and then they could see each other without constraint and without danger. Then was she his, and naught could longer stand in the way between them and happiness. Now, when the king

was near his death—now he loved her only—he loved but Catharine. His ambition had decided his heart. Death had become the judge over Seymour's double affection and divided heart, and with King Henry's death Elizabeth's star had also paled.

Catharine was the widow of a king; and without doubt this tender husband had appointed his young and adored wife Regent during the minority of the Prince of Wales. Catharine then would have still five years of unlimited sway, of royal authority and sovereign power. If Catharine were his wife, then would he, Thomas Seymour, share this power; and the purple robes of royalty, which rested on her shoulders, would cover him also; and he would help her bear that crown which doubtless might sometimes press heavily on her tender brow. He would, in reality, be the regent, and Catharine would be so only in name. She, the Queen of England, and he, king of this queen. What a proud, intoxicating thought was that! And what plans, what hopes might not be twined with it! Five years of sway—was not that a time long enough to undermine the throne of the royal boy and to sap his authority? Who could conjecture whether the people, once accustomed to the regency of the queen, might not prefer to remain under her sceptre, instead of committing themselves to this feeble youth? The people must be constrained so to think, and to make Catharine, Thomas Seymour's wife, their reigning queen.

The king was sick unto death, and Catharine was, without doubt, the regent—perchance some day the sovereign queen.

Princess Elizabeth was only a poor princess, entirely without a prospect of the throne; for before her came Catharine, came Edward, and finally Mary, Elizabeth's eldest sister. Elizabeth had not the least prospect of the throne, and Catharine the nearest and best founded.

Thomas Seymour pondered this as he traversed the apartments of the queen; and when he entered her pres-

ence, he had convinced himself that he loved the queen only, and that it was she alone whom he had always loved.

Elizabeth was forgotten and despised. She had no prospect of the throne—why, then, should he love her?

The queen, as we have said, ordered him to shut the door of the boudoir and to drop the hanging. At the same moment that he did this, the hanging of the opposite door, leading into the sleeping apartment, moved—perhaps only the draught of the closing door had done it. Neither the queen nor Seymour noticed it. They were both too much occupied with themselves. They saw not how the hanging again and again gently shook and trembled. They saw not how it was gently opened a little in the middle; nor did they see the sparkling eyes which suddenly peeped through the opening in the hanging; nor suspected they that it was the Princess Elizabeth who had stepped behind the curtain, the better to see and hear what was taking place in the boudoir.

The queen had arisen and advanced a few steps to meet the earl. As she now stood before him—as their eyes met, she felt her courage sink and her heart fail.

She was compelled to look down at the floor to prevent him from seeing the tears which involuntarily came into her eyes. With a silent salutation she offered him her hand. Thomas Seymour pressed it impulsively to his lips, and looked with passionate tenderness into her face. She struggled to collect all her strength, that her heart might not betray itself. With a hurried movement she withdrew her hand from him, and took from the table a roll of paper containing the new act of succession signed by the king.

"My lord," said she, "I have called you hither, because I would like to intrust a commission to you. I beg you to carry this parchment to the Princess Elizabeth, and be pleased to deliver it to her. But before you do that, I will make you acquainted with its contents. This parchment contains a new law relative to the succession, which

has already received the sanction of the king. By virtue of this, the royal princesses are no longer under the necessity of uniting themselves with a husband who is a sovereign prince, if they wish to preserve their hereditary claim on the throne unimpaired. The king gives the princesses the right to follow their own hearts; and their claim to the succession is not to suffer thereby, if the husband chosen is neither a king nor a prince. That, my lord, is the contents of this parchment which you are to carry to the princess, and without doubt you will thank me for making you the messenger of these glad tidings."

"And why," asked he, in astonishment—"why does your majesty believe that this intelligence should fill me with special thankfulness?"

She collected all her powers; she prayed to her own heart for strength and self-control.

"Because the princess has made me the confidante of her love, and because I am consequently aware of the tender tie which binds you to her," said she, gently; and she felt that all the blood had fled from her cheeks.

The earl looked into her face in mute astonishment. Then his inquiring and searching glance swept all around the room.

"We are overheard, then?" asked he, in a low voice. "We are not alone?"

"We are alone," said Catharine, aloud. "Nobody can hear us, and God alone is witness of our conversation."

Elizabeth, who stood behind the hanging, felt her cheeks glow with shame, and she began to repent what she had done. But she was nevertheless, as it were, spell-bound to that spot. It was certainly mean and unworthy of a princess to eavesdrop, but she was at that time but a young girl who loved, and who wanted to observe her lover. So she stayed; she laid her hand on her anxiously-throbbing heart, and murmured to herself: "What will he say? What means this anxious dread that comes over me?"

"Well," said Thomas Seymour, in an entirely altered

tone, "if we are alone, then this mask which hides my face may fall; then the cuirass which binds my heart may be loosened. Hail, Catharine, my star and my hope! No one, you say, hears us, save God alone; and God knows our love, and He knows with what longing, and what ecstasy, I have sighed for this hour—for this hour, which at length again unites me to you. My God, it is an eternity since I have seen you, Catharine; and my heart thirsted for you as a famishing man for a refreshing draught. Catharine, my beloved, blessed be you, that you have at last called me to you!"

He opened his arms for her, but she repulsed him sharply. "You are mistaken in the name, earl," said she, bitterly. "You say Catharine, and mean Elizabeth! It is the princess that you love; to Elizabeth belongs your heart, and she has devoted her heart to you. Oh, earl, I will favor this love, and be certain I will not cease from prayer and supplication till I have inclined the king to your wishes, till he has given his consent to your marriage with the Princess Elizabeth."

Thomas Seymour laughed. "This is a masquerade, Catharine; and you still wear a mask over your beautiful and charming face. Oh, away with that mask, queen! I want to behold you as you are. I want to see again your own beautiful self; I want to see the woman who belongs to me, and who has sworn to be mine, and who has, with a thousand sacred oaths, vowed to love me, to be true to me, and to follow me as her husband and her lord. Or how, Catharine! Can you have forgotten your oath? Can you have become untrue to your own heart? Do you want to cast me away, and throw me, like a ball of which you are tired, to another?"

"Oh," said she, quite unconsciously, "I—I can never forget and never be untrue."

"Well, then, my Catharine, the bride and wife of my future, what then are you speaking to me of Elizabeth?—of this little princess, who sighs for love as the flower-bud

for the sun, and takes the first man whom she finds in her way for the sun after which she pines? What care we for Elizabeth, my Catharine? And what have we to do with that child in this hour of long-wished-for reunion?"

"Oh, he calls me a child!" murmured Elizabeth. "I am nothing but a child to him!" And she pressed her hands on her mouth in order to repress her cry of anger and anguish, and to prevent them from hearing her teeth, which were chattering as though she were in a chill.

With irresistible force Thomas Seymour drew Catharine into his arms. "Avoid me no longer," said he, in tender entreaty. "The hour has come which is finally to determine our destiny! The king is at the point of death, and my Catharine will at length be free—free to follow her own heart. At this hour I remind you of your oath! Do you remember still that day when you referred me to this hour? Do you still know, Catharine, how you vowed to be my wife and to receive me as the lord of your future? Oh, my beloved, that crown which weighed down your head will soon be taken away. Now I yet stand before you as your subject, but in a few hours it will be your lord and your husband that stands before you; and he will ask: 'Catharine, my wife, have you kept with me the faith you swore to me? Have you been guiltless of perjury in respect of your vows and your love? Have you preserved my honor, which is your honor also, clear from every spot; and can you, free from guilt, look me in the eye?'"

He gazed at her with proud, flashing eyes, and before his commanding look her firmness and her pride melted away like ice before the sunshine. Again he was the master, whose right it was to rule her heart; and she again the lowly handmaid, whose sweetest happiness it was to submit and bow to the will of her lover.

"I can look you frankly in the eye," murmured she, "and no guilt burdens my conscience. I have loved naught but you, and my God only dwells near you in my heart."

Wholly overcome, wholly intoxicated with happiness, she leaned her head upon his shoulder, and as he clasped her in his arms, as he covered with kisses her now unre-sisting lips, she felt only that she loved him unutterably, and that there was no happiness for her except with him.

It was a sweet dream, a moment of most exquisite ecstasy. But it was only a moment. A hand was laid violently on her shoulder, a hoarse angry voice called her name; and as she looked up, she encountered the wild glance of Elizabeth, who stood before her with deathly pale cheeks, with trembling lips, with expanded nostrils, and eyes darting flashes of wrath and hatred.

"This, then, is the friendly service which you swore to me?" said she, gnashing her teeth. "Did you steal into my confidence, and with scoffing mouth spy out the secrets of my heart, in order to go away and betray them to your paramour? That you might in his arms ridicule this pitiable maiden, who allowed herself for the moment to be betrayed by her heart, and took a felon for an honorable man! Woe, woe to you, Catharine, for I tell you I will have no compassion on the adulteress, who mocks at me, and betrays my father!"

She was raving; completely beside herself with anger, she dashed away the hand which Catharine laid on her shoulder, and sprang back from the touch of her enemy like an irritated lioness.

Her father's blood fumed and raged within her, and, a true daughter of Henry the Eighth, she concealed in her heart only bloodthirsty and revengeful thoughts.

She cast on Thomas Seymour a look of dark wrath, and a contemptuous smile played about her lips. "My lord," said she, "you have called me a child who allows herself to be easily deceived, because she longs so much for the sun and for happiness. You are right: I was a child; and I was foolish enough to take a miserable liar for a nobleman, who was worthy of the proud fortune of being loved

by a king's daughter. Yes, you are right; that was a childish dream. Thanks to you, I have now awoke from it; and you have matured the child into a woman, who laughs at the folly of her youth, and despises to-day what she adored yesterday. I have nothing to do with you; and you are even too insignificant and too contemptible for my anger. But I tell you, you have played a hazardous game, and you will lose. You courted a queen and a princess, and you will gain neither of them: not the one, for she despises you; not the other, for she ascends the scaffold!"

With a wild laugh she was hurrying to the door, but Catharine with a strong hand held her back and compelled her to remain. "What are you going to do?" asked she, with perfect calmness and composure.

"What am I going to do?" asked Elizabeth, her eyes flashing like those of a lioness. "You ask me what I will do? I will go to my father, and tell him what I have here witnessed! He will listen to me; and his tongue will still have strength enough to pronounce your sentence of death! Oh, my mother died on the scaffold, and yet she was innocent. We will see, forsooth, whether you will escape the scaffold—you, who are guilty!"

"Well, then, go to your father," said Catharine; "go and accuse me. But first you shall hear me. This man whom I loved, I wanted to renounce, in order to give him to you. By the confession of your love, you had crushed my happiness and my future. But I was not angry with you. I understood you heart, for Thomas Seymour is worthy of being loved. But you are right; for the king's wife it was a sinful love, however innocent and pure I may have been. On that account I wanted to renounce it; on that account I wanted, on the first confession from you, to silently sacrifice myself. You yourself have now made it an impossibility. Go, then, and accuse us to your father, and fear not that I will belie my heart. Now, that the crisis has come, it shall find me prepared; and on the

scaffold I will still account myself blest, for Thomas Seymour loves me!"

"Ay, he loves you, Catharine!" cried he, completely overcome and enchanted by her noble, majestic bearing. "He loves you so warmly and ardently, that death with you seems to him an enviable lot; and he would not exchange it for any throne nor for any crown."

And as he thus spoke, he put his arms around Catharine's neck, and impetuously drew her to his heart.

Elizabeth uttered a fierce scream, and sprang to the door. But what noise was that which all at once drew nigh; which suddenly, like a wild billow, came roaring on, and filled the anterooms and the halls? What were these affrighted, shrieking voices calling? What were they screaming to the queen, and the physicians, and the priest?

Elizabeth stopped amazed, and listened. Thomas Seymour and Catharine, arm linked in arm, stood near her. They scarcely heard what was taking place; they looked at each other and smiled, and dreamed of love and death and an eternity of happiness.

Now the door flew open; there was seen John Heywood's pale face; there were the maids of honor and the court officials. And all shrieked and all wailed: "The king is dying! He is struck with apoplexy! The king is at the point of death!"

"The king calls you! The king desires to die in the arms of his wife!" said John Heywood, and, as he quietly pushed Elizabeth aside and away from the door as she was pressing violently forward, he added: "The king will see nobody but his wife and the priest; and he has authorized me to call the queen!"

He opened the door; and through the lines of weeping and wailing court officials and servants, Catharine moved on, to go to the death-bed of her royal husband.