

CHAPTER III.

BEHOLD me now at Deptford on the river Thames, at no long distance from the Tower of London. I have arrived and am installed with my debonair kinsman, the Lord Netherby. My first interview with his lordship was short and satisfactory.

"Mercy of Heaven!" he exclaimed, upon seeing me. "Are you Dame Shadwell's long-shanks, the moral and virtuous Herbert she writes of?"

"If my mother so wrote of me, I am," said I; "at any rate I am Herbert Shadwell."

"Two yards and a hand's length," he continued reflectively, and then, "Ho, there, Ingleby! Fetch John Bevis quickly—by Heaven's blue, I wager you'll top him by a good inch."

John Bevis came, another Devonshire man, his speech sounding delightful to me among these strangers. A huge fellow, older and heavier than I, but when we stood back to back it appeared that I was taller by two inches.

This discovery seemed to fill his lordship with the greatest delight. "John, John, thou art fallen from thy high estate," he exclaimed; "this fellow is thy master; I think her Grace herself has none to top him. What of thy muscles, Herbert; thou art younger than this Bevis, and I think lighter, but thy shoulders are well; try a throw with him."

I tried a throw, but, being less practised than Bevis, was overcome after a long tussle. I may here say that at the next encounter, having practised well meanwhile, I was winner.

"For a novice you did right well," said his lordship; "when you write to your mother you shall tell her that I am pleased to have you of my household."

This was satisfactory enough, and quite as much as I had any right to expect. Nevertheless, I hoped for more. I desired occupation which would bring me into touch with Amy; at any rate, into sight and hearing of her. One word of the few which I had hitherto exchanged with my lord gave me some hope in this respect. This was his joyful exclamation that he believed I should overtop the tallest of her Grace's men-at-arms. If so, thought I, and the Queen were to observe me one day, it might be that she

would offer me employment, seeing that there appeared to be a kind of rivalry in the matter of men-at-arms and the length of their lower limbs.

His lordship spoke to me of this very question but a day or two after my arrival.

"It may happen that her Grace will want thee if she hears that I have a bigger man than any of hers," he said. "I will make it worth thy while, lad, to remain of my household; therefore, when the Queen passes at any time stoop or bend thy knee, or stand upon lower ground."

"Nay, my lord, I promise nothing of the kind," I laughed. "If her Grace wants me, she shall have me."

"You speak like a fool," he said angrily; "her Grace's service is full of pitfalls: one day she dispenses favours, the next you may find yourself in the Tower or even at the block; she is not to be trusted. Here you may live a placid life of ease and security."

"I prefer movement and enterprise, even with risk," said I. "Of cabbage life I have lived enough at home."

"As you will," he said; "but remember that if testimony to thy worth be asked of me I shall

have none to give, knowing nothing of thee, and can but repeat what thy own kinswoman Amy Romalyn passed on to me before ever I saw thee."

"And what was that?" I asked, blushing scarlet.

"She said thou wert an awkward long-shanked fool," he laughed, "and indeed when I said but now that I know nothing of thee I spoke wrongly, for I have already learned this much: that she spoke correctly in dubbing thee fool."

"A man may be a fool with maids," I said awkwardly, "and yet be a man with the best. As for my service, it shall be given where I please. I do not expect to be offered service by her Grace, but if I were I should in any case have my long legs to thank, and my head-piece would do no more to recommend me than it did when I entered your lordship's service."

"Less," he laughed, "for I shall verily assure the Queen that so empty a cranium as this of thine never yet crowned a sufficiently lengthy body. Moreover, be sure that the fair Amy would so laugh thee to scorn at Court, in order to rid herself of thy presence, which it seems is

distasteful to her, that life would soon become unbearable."

"Fool as I am," I said, flushing again to my great discomfort and chagrin, "I know this much of maids: that they sometimes do not mean all they say."

"Well, well, we will not take trouble by the forelock. It may be that her Grace will not look at thee, or that looking she will disapprove; meanwhile I am well pleased to have thee of my household, headpiece and all." His lordship laughed and departed, leaving me a little wiser than he found me in the wisdom of the world; for in spite of my empty cranium I was quite able to discern at least this much: that he was anxious to retain my services and afraid lest her Grace should take me from him!

But here was I two days and more in London and as yet my eyes had not seen that which I suppose, if I am to be honest, I should confess that I came to see—Amy's face. Amy was one of those in constant attendance upon her Grace—so much I knew long ago, while still far away in Devonshire. How to obtain sight of her and speech with her?

I inquired of one of my companions in his lordship's service how I might hope to catch a

glimpse of our royal lady, Queen Bess, whom I had never seen; was there any place in which she made a practice of appearing for the delight of her people?

"There is nothing easier," said Beaumont, my friend. "Her Grace loves nothing better than to be rowed up and down Thames in her barge. Can you ply an oar?"

I told him that for all the years of my life, excepting perhaps some six at the commencement of it, I had been used to both rowing and sailing by river and sea.

"Then take a skiff," said he, "and float with the tide between this and Westminster this very afternoon, and if her Grace does not beatify you with a sight of her face it will be because you are blind or have fallen asleep."

I took the hint, and in doing so—as it happened—paved the way for a very foolish escapade, which caused much delight and amusement to others, but much heart-burning to myself.

I lay in my skiff close to Blackfriars, hoping that it might shortly please her Grace to take her pastime upon the water, when I heard shouting and cheering from the Westminster direction, and sat up to see what the noise might

signify. Then I saw what must surely, I thought, be the Queen's barge, and laying my oars upon the stream to keep my boat steady, I stood up in order to command the best view.

In company with the gorgeous barge which I concluded to be that of her Grace, or, rather, following it at a respectful distance, came two other barges, grand also, though much less so than the gorgeous leader; one of them, I observed, floated upon the right of the Queen's barge, the other upon the left, though both were well astern of her.

"Thou'rt in luck, Herbert, for once," thought I; for it was plain to see that coming upon their present course, the three barges would pass close to me, one of the attendant pair probably gliding on the outside of my skiff.

My head was full of Amy and the desire to make sure of seeing her, otherwise perhaps it would have occurred to me that I was acting somewhat over boldly in remaining thus in the direct line of the Queen's route; but no such qualms of conscience assailed me, and I stood gazing on until the procession had come so close that I was able to distinguish faces.

Upon the deck of her great barge, under a canopy or awning of silk and gold, reclined or

lay the Queen herself, laughing and talking with those who stood about her. But no eyes had I for her Grace. After the first glance in the Queen's direction I gazed at her no more, but searched busily among her companions and attendants for a face a thousand times more beautiful and more queenly according to my ideas.

There she was—oh, how splendid in her Court apparel!—there was not one, I instantly concluded, among all that gay and courtly assemblage that could for one moment compare with beautiful proud Amy Romalyn. I watched her talk and laugh with some fair damsel standing by her, and I saw her flush scarlet suddenly, as her companion evidently attracted her attention to me and she caught sight of me.

But I had no opportunity to watch what secondary effect the sight might have had upon her, for at that moment I heard, first, shouts from the attendant barge following on the left in the Queen's wake, and then, sharply and clearly, her Grace's own voice:—

"That long unmannerly fool in the skiff will be run down in a moment".

I looked, and surely enough the attendant barge bore down almost straight upon me, the

procession having suddenly turned in-shore towards the house of some great personage which was, I suppose, the object of the present pilgrimage. The next instant two of the oars of the barge struck and upturned my own, and I found myself in the water.

Having no desire to be buffeted by the oars of the barge, I dived immediately, deep enough for safety, rising to the surface a minute later when the great clumsy craft had passed onward or shoreward. But I rose to learn that every man and woman upon the Queen's barge—and I doubt not upon the other two as well, though I did not look at them—was laughing loudly at my discomfiture. I could see that her Grace herself laughed immoderately and swayed in her couch, as she spoke and pointed. I could not hear what was said, however, but only the general hubbub of mirth. I was making for shore when I saw all this; but since all three barges were now heading for a point which would be very close to the spot at which I must land, I immediately altered my intention and struck out for the opposite bank. The tide was now flowing, and I knew that I had undertaken such an enterprise as might deter the strongest of swimmers, yet I think I would have gone to

certain death rather than creep ashore, be-draggled, besoaked, in the face of laughter and derision such as would greet me on this side of the water.

I distinctly heard the shrill voice of the Queen, following the silence which for an instant killed the laughter, when my change of intention was observed.

"What is the fellow doing? See to it he be not drowned—some one," I did not catch the name.

A man in a skiff followed presently, but I had a good start, and raced him so that he overtook me only as I touched bottom, having been swept by the tide, up river and across, until almost opposite the palace of Westminster.