

CHAPTER IV.

THE man in the skiff hailed me as I waded out through the mud, angry and exhausted; he had hailed me more than once before, but I had taken no notice of him.

"Stop, in the Queen's name!" he said. "Are you mad? If you had your deserts you should be floating head down in the ooze; what a fool's trick was this to play, causing me to sweat after you from Blackfriars to Westminster. Stop, I tell you!"

I waited a moment to hear what he had to say.

"Get into your boat," he continued; "thou'rt to appear before the Queen, mercy knows why."

"What—I—appear before her Grace, mud-died and dripping? You speak like a fool, man."

"I speak what her Grace's own lips bade me to say; is not that enough for thee? Come, climb in; pity knows how I shall get my boat clean after thee!"

"It shall remain clean for me," said I. "If I swam the river in order to avoid becoming a laughing-stock, think you I shall submit to be carried back like a lamb to the slaughter? Make what excuses thou canst, I return not with thee." I began again to wade landwards through the shallows and mud.

"Stop, man alive; bethink you, this is no jesting matter; there are birchings and Lord knows what here both for thee and me! Dare not send me back empty-handed—what should I say; what excuse could I provide?"

"Any that pleases you; say I drowned before your eyes; they cannot see us from so far away; for the rest, I care not what excuse you make or whether you make none at all. I am wet and cold and will tarry no longer."

With which words I passed out of the river and up the bank and away, paying no further attention to his frantic and piteous expostulations and entreaties. It occurred to me presently as a mighty good jest that when the fellow should report my drowning, if he did so report it, Amy Romalyn would probably be present, and knowing—as only she knew—who the capsized one had been, would remain in the belief that she must mourn a kinsman deceased.

"When I play the ghost upon her presently," I thought, "it will be easy to discover whether she prefers me dead or living."

I was very angry with myself this day. I suppose no man likes to cut a foolish figure, least of all in the presence of the Queen and of one who, for him, outqueens every queen that ever wore crown.

"She will be the more angry with me now for coming to London to shame her with my awkwardness. Would I had stayed in Devonshire!" Thus I bewailed my ill-fortune as I strode, wet and draggled, homewards; and in the guard-room at my lord's that evening I was so contrary with my companions that twice I came to blows with fellows whose remarks did not please me. When matters came to fisticuffs with me I was in the habit of quickly bending them my way, for my long reach gave me advantage over my antagonists, and a single blow from my fist was generally as much as a man had stomach for.

A few days after this ill-omened enterprise upon the river I encountered Amy unexpectedly; for as I and my fellows exercised in the courtyard of our master's house, runners came to give warning that the Queen herself approached,

intending to pay a visit to my lord, as occasionally she was pleased to do.

We drew up at our best to receive her Grace, with whom came Amy and other ladies, when the very first thing my fair kinswoman must needs do was to fix startled eyes upon my face, to cry aloud, "Oh!" and to stagger backwards as though she would swoon in the arms of her nearest companion.

"Why, what ails the wench—has she seen a ghost?" cried the Queen, angry at the sudden delay. "What has frightened her?"

Fearing lest my blushes should reveal me as the culprit, I stepped forward. "May it please your Majesty's Grace," I blurted out, "I think it was I."

"What should have alarmed her in thee?" the Queen laughed, "the length of thy legs, or the joy-forsaken solemnity of thy countenance?"

"I am a drowned man, madam—that is, I am one that was thought to be drowned—she believed me to have been drowned, and sees me now alive."

The Queen laughed aloud.

"Thou art a merry rogue in spite of thy melancholy countenance," she said. "Stay, where have I seen thee?—what is thy name?"

"Herbert Shadwell. I stood in my skiff on Thursday last, and being intent upon what I saw I——"

"Mercy of Heaven, I remember! So you were that dreamer. Next time you will dream less and keep a better watch, which will save you a wet shirt. What made thee stand and stare like a stucky image till they came and ran thee down?"

"If I am to say truth," I faltered, "because my eyes were busy feasting upon a thing so beautiful that no other object could claim attention for the moment, she being present."

"Good!" said her Grace, flushing; "that is well said, though thy words are somewhat bold. Thou hast a promising courtier in thee. So the man lied, and thou wert not drowned. What made thee swim so far?"

"I could not face the laughter, I preferred the flood tide; the swimming was no hardship—I am used to it."

"Has the girl recovered?" the Queen now asked, looking round; and finding that Amy was restored to herself she gave the word to proceed. As her Grace was borne past me she bowed and smiled, her eye coasting over my figure the while. "That would be a hand-

some boy," I heard her say, "but for his long jawbone."

Amy glanced at me also for an instant, and I thought her expression betokened approval.

On returning through the courtyard half an hour later the Queen honoured me with a second smile. "We shall meet again, Mr. Longshanks," she said.

Amy did not look approvingly this time. On the contrary, she stared somewhat angrily at me, as though I had somehow offended. "It is useless to be moved by this," I told myself sighing; "for who shall explain the contradictory humours of a maiden? Not I, for one."

When my lord came forth presently he approached me. "Cousin Herbert Shadwell," he said, "it seems I found thee only to lose thee; thy last inch has gained thee what many will envy thee; the Queen has need of thy services."

It was true. Her Grace had thus highly honoured me, and at first acquaintance. Truly fortune favoured me well this day. Was it, I wondered, in truth the length of my limbs that had won her regard, or a certain phrase of compliment and flattery which she had taken to herself though intended for some one else?

Thus it happened that on the following day I found myself installed at the palace of the Queen. I was an officer of the guard, and would meet the ladies of the Court upon occasion. Destiny had played my cards exactly as I should have chosen, and I was well pleased.

Apparently Amy was not of my way of thinking, for at the first meeting I had with my cousin she made several remarks which went to show that she was little pleased with my successful hunting of her.

"I thanked Heaven you were upset with your boat on Thursday," she said, "for had I been obliged to confess kinship with so foolish a figure, I should have died of shame." And again: "I looked to see thee disclaim the flattery that her Grace took to herself. It would have tallied well with thy awkward manner to blurt out that thy words referred to another than herself. Hadst thou done so there would have been no employment at Court for thee. But destiny was against me, and thou must needs act out of thy usual awkward manner."

"Since we are now doomed to live so close to one another, cousin," I said, "it would be well to agree to dwell in peace and amity. I intend

to be thy knight at this Court, and if any one——"

"Oh, be assured, the Queen will allow you to be no one's knight but her own; no one that is a man must have eyes for any lady but herself; therefore I shall need no knight."

"Well, may-be it will comfort you from time to time to see a Devonshire face about the Court."

"What, even such a long one as thine? That will depend how often it wears the foolish goose-look that graces it at this moment."

"Such treatment of a faithful lover is enough to make any man's face lengthen," said I. "Will you never be kind, Amy?"

"When the leopard changes his spots," she laughed; "or the crows begin to speak English; or Master Herbert Shadwell becomes the possessor of a cheerful countenance. I could never be kind to a long jawbone."