

CHAPTER V.

My service under her Grace was a short one, ending in a manner unforeseen and indeed incredible, had it been foreseen and foretold. The end came by reason of no disfavour on her Grace's part, indeed, for, if I may say so without vanity, the Queen regarded me throughout with special favour, smiling upon me when I found myself in her presence in a manner which was reserved, I was told, for those towards whom she cherished particular regard. I, in my foolishness, was wont to consider that I was indebted for this favour either to the length of my limbs, which had been the ostensible means by which the good fortune of my present position had been obtained for me, or to the good looks with which—in spite of Amy's dis-flattery—I believed myself to be at least more than indifferently endowed; but alas! there came a day when, finding Amy in her best mood—that is, one in which she was willing to converse rationally and with moderate friendli-

ness—I took heart of grace, and in exuberance of good spirits for this cause and that, actually spoke of my unmistakable favour in the eyes of the Queen. Upon hearing this, Amy first broke into uncontrollable laughter, and then, having thus reduced me to a condition in which vanity had no place, for it had fled then and there within the deepest sanctuary of my inner being, she proceeded to explain to me why and only why her Grace looked with favour upon me.

“The Queen,” said Amy, “though not a young woman, and, Heaven be witness, no beauty, is nevertheless as vain as—as thou art. Do you remember a certain foolish reply you made to her Grace when she asked you why you stood dreaming upon one leg in your skiff while the barge ran you down? and how, fortunately for you, she accepted that foolish word as flattery intended for herself?—well, that was the beginning.”

“Go on,” said I, blushing and feeling—as ever in Amy's presence—more sheep than man; “go on, Amy, thou never hast a kind or courteous word for me, and never didst have.”

“Well, and the rest is that goose-look thou wearest continually upon thy long face when I am present. It is the expression by which

you are pleased to consider that your passion is most effectively testified. Now, it is in her Majesty's nature to regard every indication of love that is betrayed in her presence as intended for herself, the unconscious or irrepressible tribute of manly hearts to the adorable qualities of mind and body which she believes to be hers in perpetuity."

"At any rate, she is kind and amiable," I said angrily. "And as for the mistake she has made, it is very pardonable; for who would suppose that any man could be so foolish as to sigh for a thing like thee, all unkindness and scorn and heartless mirth and laughter for those who honestly——"

"Tut-tut!" she interrupted me. "Mar not the beginning of thy speech, which had spirit, by ending it with whining and complaining and the drawing out of thy long jawbone. Be assured it is as I say with her Grace; build not upon her favour, which stands upon a false base. Nevertheless, if you wish to continue in her favour, such as it is, beware of foolishly opening her eyes; let her remain blind!"

Amy laughed and withdrew herself from my side; and I, furious because of the revelation she had made to me, and which I was wise

enough to recognise for truth, unpalatable though it were, I went among my companions of my own sex and quickly quarrelled with two, one after the other, upon I know not what pretext, coming to blows in each case, and receiving—to cool my heated blood—a buffet upon the nose which caused the blood to flow very freely. Doubtless at my then age, and in my then mood, I found all this comforting and perhaps satisfying.

But as for the sudden end of my service at the Court of her Grace, it came about very unexpectedly, and as the result of matters which no one could have foreseen as likely to lead to such things as presently befel.

There arrived news of an ambassador or envoy from the Court of Muscovy. Once before, some twenty years since, such an envoy had visited England, accompanying Sir Richard Chancellor, who had travelled to that distant country in search of trade, and had brought home with him, after disastrous seafaring which lasted four months, the said envoy from the Duke or King of Muscovy. At that time a great reception had been given to the strangers by the merchants and traders of London, who met them as they came southwards from Scot-

land, on whose rough shores inhospitable winds had driven their ships. From that day to this her Grace our Queen had been in constant communication with his Muscovish Dukeship, with whom she had effected an exclusive trade treaty. But the fellowship of these two widely distant monarchs did not end in treaties for the benefit of the merchants. The Russian Duke, or Cæsar, as it was stated he presumed to style himself, which title is spelt by the Muscovites Tsar, was named John, or as they write it, Ivan, and to judge by the communications which had passed, as was well known to all, between his Court and our own, he must have been a monarch of peculiar and unusual character. He had suggested to her Grace many quaint things, and among the rest came a veiled proposal of marriage (which had caused great delight both to her Grace and to those about her); and, further, proposals for a secret alliance, by which this Muscovish Cæsar might at any time, if in danger of his life from his own people, claim refuge and sanctuary within her Grace's dominions, in return for a similar privilege to be accorded our great Elizabeth in case we English should show sign of rising against her.

I know not which of these two suggestions provided for our good Queen the more exquisite delight.

To the second she had replied that, standing in no danger from her people, with whom she lived upon terms of mutual love and regard which nothing could ever mar, she dwelt in no need of sanctuary; but that if his Tsarish Grace should at any time find himself in danger, by all means let him take ship and seek sanctuary in this land, where respectful welcome should ever await him.

As for the first proposal—rather hinted at than openly expressed—her Grace returned an answer which bore unexpected fruit. I have sometimes thought that what was then written by the Queen was done thoughtlessly or in that spirit of elfish mischief—if one may use such a term in speaking of the great ones of the earth—which was sometimes employed by her Grace in communication with her Muscovish ally, in the hope of begetting thereby such future merriment as his unexpected replies and suggestions almost always occasioned; for Elizabeth replied, I know not whether by written word or spoken message, that though for herself she preferred to wear unchanged to the end the white robes

of maidenhood, yet there were at her Court certain ladies claiming kinship with the throne—and especially one whom she named and described—who she believed would consider favourably any matrimonial suggestion which it might please his Muscovish Cæsarship to condescend to put forward.

The name of the lady mentioned by her Grace—whether with her consent or without it I know not, though I fancy the matter was known beforehand to the person chiefly concerned—was Lady Mary Hastings, daughter of the Earl of Huntingdon, and cousin of the Queen.

Whether Elizabeth expected that anything would come of this message, who can tell? But now, suddenly, there arrived at the Court, unexpectedly and armed with definite and startling instructions, a new envoy from the Court of Ivan, the Cæsar of Muscovy.

He came, he said, to fetch the Lady Mary Hastings, or—as he called her—Lady Marie Hesteenks, whom his master had chosen as his bride.

This communication was made in full Court, and was translated by one Muirhead, an adventurous Scotsman, who had visited the Court

of Muscovy ten years before in search of military occupation and glory. This soldier, now a general of the Cæsar's army, and in much favour at that Court, had accompanied the envoy in order to act as interpreter, and also, as presently appeared, with other well-defined purposes—one of which was to offer private information to the desired bride of the Cæsar in certain matters connected with his Cæsarship of which she must perforce be at present in ignorance; but of this later.

"Well, cousin," said her Grace, after the reading of the communication and the translating by Muirhead of the same, "what sayest thou? This concerns thee more than myself."

"I am ready, madam," said Mary Hastings, most unexpectedly, and so readily that one could scarcely think the matter had been sprung upon her as a new and unconsidered suggestion. "I accept humbly, though unworthy, the great honour offered me by the condescension of his Grace of Muscovy; I am ready to obey the will of his Grace in this matter, if, indeed, your Grace accord me permission so to do."

"As to that," said Elizabeth, "I have nothing against it. Your ladyship will grace the throne of this northern Cæsar—a throne which stands,

I am told, no less high than my own. Let this be known to his honour, Mr. Interpreter."

When Lady Mary's answer and the speech of her Grace were made known to the envoy of the Muscovish Court, he knelt in his gorgeous velvets and sables at the feet of Mary Hastings, greeting her by the name of Tsaritsa, or wife of the Cæsar, afterwards saluting her Grace our Queen, though, as it seemed, with less intensity of reverence. This did not escape the notice of Elizabeth, who observed it with a frowning face.

Thus was Mary Hastings suddenly and unexpectedly betrothed, standing before the gaping Court as a being exalted, in a moment, high above all heads save one, and heiress to an immense and bewildering destiny of greatness which no one present could measure, by reason of the absolute ignorance of all as to every matter connected with the person of Cæsar himself, the nature of the people over whom he reigned, or the size and wealth of the country which was known vaguely in our England as "Muscovy".

There was but one in the audience chamber, if we count not the envoy himself and his

Muscovish suite, who knew anything whatever of these matters, and that was Muirhead.

What he knew he told not at once, but withheld until such time as he should deem auspicious for certain revelations reserved for the private ear of Lady Mary herself.

It was a week later, and the preparations for Mary's departure were in full swing, when the bomb fell whose bursting was destined to dissipate many dreams and to create new situations for some who had least expected to be disturbed where they had taken root.