

CHAPTER VI.

FOR Lady Mary Hastings one fine morn burst into the presence of her Grace, upon whom were in attendance Amy Romalyn and others; her face was flushed, her eyes wet with tears, her hands a-tremble, her knees so shaken that she could scarce support herself, but must needs collapse into a chair, and that before the Queen herself, who loves not such liberties from her ladies. She frowned.

"Mercy of Heaven! what means this, cousin?" exclaimed her Grace. "Art thou already the wife of Cæsar? Shall I stand while you sit? Marry, I think I have yet a little period of precedence over your Highness!"

Mary Hastings jumped up. "Pardon, madam," she said, sobbing still, and holding both hands to her breast. "I am faint and frightened. Oh, madam, have mercy; suffer me not to go, a living sacrifice among barbarians in Muscovy land; were his throne the highest in Europe I would not share it with this Ivan; oh, tell me,

sweet Queen and cousin, that I may renounce the honour offered me."

"Well, by the Holy Truth," exclaimed Elizabeth, "what an odd fish is this! Yesterday thy nose was high in air by reason that thou shouldst be a Cæsar's wife and sit as high as I, and to-day—do I hear rightly?—thou wilt not, after all, be the wife of Cæsar?"

"Oh, madam, by your favour I cannot. I have heard that this day which has turned my heart to milk-pap. This Cæsar, this Ivan, says Muirhead, who knows him right well, though not actually a madman is savage mad when the fit is upon him; he has already married six wives, and of these——"

Elizabeth flushed; the picture, I doubt not, recalled that of another royal personage, husband of many wives, of whom her own mother had been one. She frowned, but said nothing. Mary Hastings continued:—

"Of these, says Muirhead, several have died somewhat mysteriously. 'If thou goest to that barbarous Court as the bride of the Cæsar,' says he, 'thou must take thy life in thy hands; as for happiness, bid farewell of it before thou leavest these shores; as for the women of Ivan's Court, the nearer they be to

the Cæsar, the further goes happiness from them.’”

“Oh,” her Grace interrupted hotly, “this fool—what call you him?—Muirhead—has doubtless favoured thee with his fancy; he would have thee for himself; he is a cunning rogue, but——”

“Madam, he is married, and has left a live wife in Muscovy; he swears by all his gods that his tale is true, and that he came on purpose to warn. In Muscovy there is no civilisation, says he, no protection for the innocent, no appeal from barbarity, no comforts such as a lady of position is used to in our own favoured land; and, to crown all, this Cæsar, or Tsar, as Muirhead calls him, carries the power of life and death in his own very hands, riding above and beyond the law; he has many times stricken dead in an instant one of those who stand about his throne; even for his Queen there is no security.”

“Marry, this is a fine tale!” laughed Elizabeth. “This Muirhead of thine, I perceive, is no mean artist in matters of the imagination; he has fooled thee, piling horrors and dangers upon the foundation of that eccentricity which we have long known and recognised as an attribute

of our brother the Cæsar. Do not believe him, child—he has fooled thee; or rather,” she added, as a new idea occurred to her, “send him hither, and we shall see if he dare tell me the same tale.”

Then Muirhead came—a sturdy, bold man, handsome withal, accustomed to courts and princes, and no whit abashed in the presence of the Queen.

“What is this child’s tale of bogies wherewith thou hast frightened my kinswoman, sirrah?” asked the Queen haughtily, though her eye wandered with approval over Muirhead’s square sturdy form and determined handsome countenance. “What is thy object in desiring to deter the chosen bride of Cæsar?”

“I have told her simple truth, Majesty,” he replied, “in doing which I have been urged by no motive save that of justice. It is right that her ladyship should know as much as I, wholly disinterested as I am, can tell her of the bridegroom awaiting her in Muscovy. That land is very far away, may-be further than is realised by your Grace. The Tsar is one day an angel and the next a devil; no man can tell which way his mind will work from hour to hour. If he should fall in love at sight with her ladyship,

which to tell truth is likely enough, well and good, and her happiness is assured until——” Muirhead paused.

“Until——” repeated the Queen.

“Until the Tsar wearies of her, if under favour I may suggest so improbable a matter,” he continued, with a courteous bow in Mary’s direction. “His nature, madam, is cruel and unstable. I have undertaken a four months’ journey, leaving wife and children, in order that Lady Mary Hastings might not come unwarned.”

“She shall judge for herself,” said the Queen. “How say’st thou, Mary? I shall not influence thee to go or remain—is it yea or nay? Consider well; take time; it is not good to decide in hot blood.”

Mary Hastings threw herself at the feet of the Queen. “Madam, I have half feared it from the first,” she said, sobbing, “now I feel that if I go I die; I am happy here, let me remain; fear has suddenly slain ambition; rather safety and thy regard and protection than the highest seat in Muscovy; rather happiness as plain Mary Hastings than death in life as the bride of a Cæsar.”

“Good!” said the Queen, somewhat affected.

“Stay then, cousin. Heaven forfend I should drive thee forth. She shall not go, Muirhead; thou hast done well to warn us. The envoy of his Grace must somehow explain; nay, I will send an ambassador of my own, who shall make adequate excuses, or inadequate ones—what care I? We are not the Cæsar’s subjects; let him rage if he will.”

“He will rage, Majesty,” said Muirhead, smiling grimly. “I doubt not that the Muscovish envoy will lose honour and may-be life. If I may be permitted to suggest it, send, I would say, the sturdiest of thy men for ambassador, for verily he will not lie upon a bed of roses.”

Then an extraordinary and unforeseen thing happened.

Amy Romalyn suddenly stood forward and spoke:—

“May it please your Grace,” she said, “if, as appears to me, this Northern Cæsar would be content so long as any kinswoman of thy own were sent him to wife, I too—though unworthy—am distantly related to the throne. It seems a pity and an injustice that the Muscovish envoy should lose his head for no fault of his own. If it should please your Majesty to

send me in place of Mary Hastings, I am ready to go."

A silence fell upon the Court—the silence of deep unutterable surprise and amazement. In the midst of it Amy began to speak once more.

"This good gentleman, Muirhead, has dared much in order to warn thy kinswoman; it might be that he too would suffer if the Cæsar's envoy were to return empty-handed. This were an ill return for his kindness and courage."

"For the love of Heaven stop—give us pause!" exclaimed her Grace, half laughing, half bewildered. "What mean you, chit? That you would sit in Mary's place as bride of the Cæsar?"

"Oh, I promise to marry no one I have not seen," said Amy, "but I am willing to visit the Tsar's Court, and if I see no cause to——"

"Dear saints of light, hearken to her! But it is not for thee to choose, fool!" exclaimed the Queen, now laughing loudly. "If once thou showest thy callow face at his Court, be sure it is his Grace that shall say thee yea or nay, not thou him."

"I mean, madam," said Amy, blushing a little, but no whit disconcerted, "that if I like not him, I shall take care his Grace has little reason

to like me. And if we like not one another, home come I with the envoy of thy Grace!"

"Nay, marry him, marry him!" cried Elizabeth, laughing heartily, and evidently pleased by this new development of matters. "What said I of thee but yesterday?—that only if thou marry the devil himself shalt thou wed one who may keep thee in order; to-day I alter the phrase thus—the devil or the Cæsar! What say'st thou to this, Muirhead?"

Muirhead gazed at Amy with amusement, though there was doubt and fear to be seen underlying the mirth. "Better this one than that," he said, indicating with his chin the still trembling Mary Hastings. "But either one at her own risk and peril."

And then and there it was arranged, as Amy had so impetuously suggested, that she should take Mary Hastings' place, as kinswoman to the Queen, and as such a candidate for the Cæsar's throne. There were many who blamed her Grace for so easily lending countenance to so mad a freak; but others remembered that once, a year or two back, this same King Ivan, being displeased with a letter sent to him by her Grace, had suddenly confiscated all the goods and ships of English merchants within his ports

of the White Sea and had revoked the monopoly accorded to England in matters of trade. This quarrel had been arranged, and now again the trade had increased and grown valuable; and it was well known that Elizabeth, being far-sighted and very wise, desired not to risk again so great a disaster for her merchants. Therefore it was that her Grace was glad of the opportunity thus offered by Amy's foolishness of avoiding, if possible, a further difficulty with his Muscovish Grace.

Here was an upheaval in my little world. When first told of Amy's intention I would not believe it, and cursed the teller for a foolish jester. But the thing became the talk of the Court, and I had no choice but to believe that for some reason of her own—Heaven knew what!—who but Heaven should understand the mind of Amy?—she had truly and indeed taken this amazing step and intended to go forward in the matter.

CHAPTER VII.

AMY's decision was, it may be believed, a withering blow to my happiness. What meant she by it? Was it an outbreak of the devilry that was for ever riot in her nature; a desire to see the world; an evidence that she wearied of her eventless life at the Court of Elizabeth?

That she desired or intended to marry this Muscovish king I never for a moment contemplated.

But at any rate I had been left out of the reckoning, and any lingering hope or half-belief that my existence was of moment to her I was obliged now to abandon. Truly I was nothing to her, and less than nothing.

I rallied her that very afternoon upon her decision.

"Any one might see that her Grace was in a quandary," she replied. "She had promised this Muscovy Cæsar a bride who should be her kinswoman, and Mary Hastings failed her.