

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.

She was vexed, for she had promised and would not go back upon her word. Therefore I, who do not fear Cæsar or devil, will take Mary's place; are you answered?"

"Oh, there is more behind than that!" I said fiercely, for I was angry and knew not yet what I should do for very misery to think of losing her.

"Explain," she said, "for if you know this, you are wiser than I."

"Ambition, may-be," I said. "God knows what; how should I know your mind? Do you know it yourself?"

Amy laughed. "If a ship can carry me to Muscovy a ship can carry me back," she said, "that is what I think. First I will see whether it will suit me to be a Queen, or Cæsaress, or what not; if the prospect pleases me not, I shall return with the Queen's envoy."

"Muscovy is not England; here you may come and go as you will; there you may come, but as for the going that will be at the will of the Cæsar."

"Bah!" she said. "I knew you would counsel thus, Mr. Shadowfearer."

"I fear no shadows," I replied hotly, "and well you know it. I fear that which is real

danger, and that not for myself but for thee. If I went with thee it would be different."

"Oh, we shall need several attendants," she said mockingly; "the envoy will require body-servants, perhaps a cook—what are thy qualifications?"

I replied angrily:—

"To see that little blind fools of maids, who know nothing and therefore fear nothing, run not their heads into the noose; such maids as have too early left their mother's apron-strings, who know not their best friends, who——"

"Oh, for pity cease thy clacking," she laughed. "I command thee to stay behind—is that plain? I will not be shamed by thy long face that all Muscovy will laugh at, as all London does, and the goose-look thou now wearest. Stay at home, I say; I have no need of a nurse."

"Whether I go or stay depends not at all upon thy will, but on my own," I snapped out, and so disappeared from her presence.

But by this time I was fully determined that she should not go without me for protector. My trouble was to obtain permission of her Grace, which permission might or might not be accorded, as the Queen's whim of the moment ordained.

I put the matter to the test at the first available moment. This was no easy matter, for I had scarcely yet spoken a dozen words to the Queen, and though receiving constant evidence of her favour in looks and smiles, I was frightened and awed when it came to speaking, being bitterly conscious that I made a fool of myself and that Amy watched and blushed for me. Standing on guard at the door of an anteroom, I dared to step forward and address her Grace as she passed into the Cabinet. I proffered my request, stammering, speaking so thickly that her Grace understood not what I would say.

"Good Lord! what ails the man?" she said; "speak up, what of Amy Romalyn?"

"She is my cousin," I faltered; "I am concerned that she should visit Muscovy without special protection; her mother——"

"What, and thou wouldst go with her as nurse?" the Queen laughed, though she looked annoyed as well. "That shall be as Amy decides; speak, Amy, wilt thou have this long-legged nurse to wipe thy eyes if the Cæsar slap thee?"

"God forbid!" said Amy, red as a peony; "I need him not. If there be need to baa to the Cæsar, I can baa for myself."

"Thou art answered," laughed her Grace, "though Lord only knows what she means. At any rate, as it seems, thy service is not desired." The Queen passed on with her companions, Amy avoiding my look.

I blushed and retired, more hurt than I cared to show, though no whit less determined to go with Amy, in spite of her unkindness.

That day the man Muirhead, he who was an officer of the Muscovy Cæsar, entered as I stood with others in our guard-room. I was angry and quarrelsome, and my companions were grouped at a distance from me, having found my temper at present intractable.

Muirhead asked which was he who had volunteered to journey with the envoy's party to Muscovy. I heard him, and flushed with shame, knowing that having heard of my petition he would also have heard of the reply of the Queen thereto, and of Amy's comment. But having been pointed out as the man concerned, I roused myself; rather quarrel than bear out the jest of Amy by looking sheepish.

"I am the man," said I, stepping forward; "and though my petition failed, think not I am thereby done with; if I desire to go, neither Queen nor devil shall prevent me."

"Is it so?" said Muirhead gravely, looking me over. "This lady, who is rash enough to fill the place of Lady Mary Hastings, in spite of my warnings, every word of which is true, this rash maiden is a kinswoman of yours?"

"That is so, and may account for her rudeness," I said. "We are in the habit of speaking as we please to one another, having played together as children; but——"

"That is a small matter," he replied, interrupting. "What is of vital importance is that she should be adequately watched and protected. Are you intent upon accompanying us? I warn you that your position, unless you enjoy the Queen's commission, would be full of danger; even under the *ægis* of her Grace, God knows whether you would escape Ivan's *dubina*."

"What is that?" I asked, laughing, for somehow the way to my desired end seemed to clear with this man's words.

"The iron-tipped and pointed staff which the Tsar for ever holds in his hands, to strike or impale withal all such as offend him. Be sure I have been threatened more times than one, and once slightly hurt. Do you observe that I limp a little when walking naturally, though in the presence I am able to pull myself together

and drag my feet equally? I have lost one toe, my friend, for which I have to thank the *dubina* of my gracious master the Cæsar, as you all love to call him."

"Good Lord!" I exclaimed. "And what of his wife? Would she too be in danger of sudden attack?"

"My friend," said Muirhead, "in the presence of my great master, eye and tongue must be continually upon the watch, even of those whom he loves the best or who have served him longest and most faithfully."

"By all the devils of hell!" I cried, pacing in fury hither and thither, "she shall not go without me to the Court of this demoniac!"

"Good!" he said; "if thou art so determined, the matter shall be arranged. Her Grace has chosen her envoy; it is Sir Jerome Bowes. I will bid Sir Jerome insist that he must have secretary or attendant, or call it what he please, under commission from her Grace, and for the post your name shall be submitted—Shadwell, I am told."

"Herbert Shadwell," said I; "for God's sake say beforehand nothing of what you will do; she—there is one who will influence the Queen against my appointment; she is proud

and independent, and—and foolishly averse to the idea of being watched over and protected; yet I have promised her mother, who is——”

“I see, I see.” Muirhead seemed to repress a smile which trembled upon his lips. “You are fulfilling a family obligation. Her mother should appreciate well your conduct, for before Heaven, young sir, you are undertaking a perilous charge. You do not flinch—I ask for the last time?”

“Sir,” I said, in assumed anger, for in truth my heart beat joyfully, and withal gratefully, in my bosom, “I am seldom asked to repeat an assurance; what I have said may stand.”

“Nay, I meant no offence,” he said, shaking me by the hand; “be sure that I am both surprised and delighted to have found one prepared to act in the capacity you have chosen for yourself.”

“See you get me the appointment,” I laughed, “and forgiveness shall be easy!”

When Muirhead had departed and I ran over in my mind the words he had spoken, I rejoiced for more reasons than one. I should now accompany Amy, whether she professed to approve or no—that was of course the chief matter. Next, I laughed and rejoiced that Sir

Jerome Bowes should have been appointed envoy. Truly her Majesty carried a wise and discriminating head upon her shoulders, unless, indeed, the appointment was made more by way of punishment than in honour, in order to rid herself for a while, and it might be for ever, of one of the few persons within her realm who dared to speak to her Grace without fear, without subterfuge, and without personal compliment or flattery such as her soul loved.

For this Sir Jerome was a Border knight of indomitable spirit, of rough, grim humour, of impregnable honesty and blunt straightforwardness; ready of hand and of rapier, stout of heart to a fault; for the independence of bearing engendered by his undaunted honesty and courage lent to his manners an uncouthness which did not enhance the favour enjoyed by him in the presence of princes. More than once he had gravely offended her Grace by giving with crude simplicity and directness his opinion upon her own conduct. It was said that he had even spent a certain period within the Tower in consequence of one of these errors in good manners; but having, to her Grace's lasting honour, been quickly forgiven and restored, he promptly showed, by repeating the offence at

the first opportunity, that in this respect he was past praying for.

It occurred to me now that, finding him incorrigible as a courtier, but recognising his merits, and especially his fitness for the present enterprise, she had in her wisdom at a stroke rid herself of an uncomfortable, though respected, individuality about the Court, and made an appointment for which could scarcely have been found a more suitable agent.

Indeed, the same could have been said of Sir Jerome if it should have been found necessary to despatch an envoy to the infernal regions, in order to defy there Lucifer himself and all his angels; for assuredly the sturdy knight would have accepted the mission with as much readiness as he displayed in undertaking the present embassy, having no room in his heart for any fear whatever, whether of Cæsars or of devils.

CHAPTER VIII.

Two days later, and a week before the sailing date of our good ship, the *Bona Esperanza*, the Queen, with her company, paused a moment as she passed the door at which I stood upon guard. My heart sank and my foolish face flushed; but seeing in an instant that Amy was not among the attendants of her Grace, I quickly recovered some of the spirit which had escaped at the first shock of the Queen's approach.

"So," she said, frowning a little, "thou art not satisfied with the Queen's service, and would quit it within a month of appointment. Thou must needs be nurse to thy cousin, whether she will have thee or no."

"Madam," I faltered, "her mother has written that——"

"Oh, Lord!" her Grace laughed, "the chit has left her mother's nest; it is *I* that stand *in loco parentis*. Amy has assured me with tears that she needs no protector. Be sure you shall have many black looks."