

"Ha! may-be he will not be so brave on his own account as thou art for him!" said Ivan. "Ho, there! let this long Englishman be summoned at once; we shall see what he will say. Stay thou also," he added, addressing Amy over his shoulder. The Tsar was not in good humour, even though he had laughed aloud more than once.

## CHAPTER XV.

THUS it happened that as I walked in the square of the Kremlin, before the wooden palace of the Cæsar, hoping, as I hoped daily, to catch a sight of Amy, there came hastening up to me two boyars: one was that young Alexis Nagoy who had been my travelling companion, the other a youth by name Kamarof.

"Why," cried the latter, "this is good luck indeed; one would suppose that you had heard beforehand that your presence would be desired at this hour."

"Or that you had come in hope of seeing some one who would walk here," added Nagoy, with a laugh. Nagoy had seen me once walking in Amy's company, and had then come to I know not what conclusions, for at the time he had frowned darkly.

I turned my back upon Nagoy and addressed myself to Kamarof.

"If any one desires to see me, here I am," I said.



"No less a personage than the Tsar, my friend," Kamarof replied. "He has sent us to find you, and we supposed——"

"The Tsar?" repeated I, flushing. "What should the Tsar want with me?"

"By the Saints, that you shall soon know," he laughed. "He desires that of thee, which, if it were I, he might desire long before the thing desired were consented to."

"Will he bid me pack and go?" I asked weakly; "there are no ships!"

"Holy Apostles—no; on the contrary, he will have thee stay; he will give thee preferment, an appointment——"

"For life," added Nagoy; "be sure thou shalt never want another."

All this filled my heart with apprehension, which, however, I took care to keep well within bounds. I would not betray my feelings to this Nagoy, whom by this time I greatly disliked, and he me.

"Good!" I said; "if it is an appointment, that is of all things the most desired by me. I am ready to go before his Grace."

"If you are wise," said Kamarof, as we walked towards the palace, "do not accept the offer which his Highness will now make to you."

"Kamarof, you are a fool!" Nagoy interrupted; but I took no notice.

"Is it honourable?" I asked.

"Oh, it is honourable enough; this is a recognised Court appointment, and is always given to men of the boyar rank."

"When they have offended," added Nagoy.

But by this time we were in the anteroom to the audience-chamber. Kamarof opened the door, and we entered.

There sat the Cæsar, looking flushed; he was in the midst of a conversation with Amy, who looked no less excited than he—she who was rarely moved to the display of any kind of emotion. She smiled kindly at me.

"Ha! here is the very man," cried Ivan, fastening his keen cruel eyes upon me. "Well, thou long one, give grateful thanks to this lady, thy cousin: she has entreated of me to offer thee employment, and she has prevailed."

I glanced at Amy, who shook her head. The Tsar's quick eyes saw it.

"Nay, it is true. Why shakest thou thy head, minx?" he frowned. "It is true; and lo! the first appointment that has fallen vacant I offer to thee."



"Tsar, I am grateful," I said, for his Grace paused.

"Good! Go, then, and take up thy duties without delay, for thy predecessor in this office is indisposed and already in the hands of the physician."

I saw several boyars look at one another and exchange smiles.

"Go, some one, and introduce their new Tsar to his subjects," said Ivan; and Nagoy and others laughed aloud. I began to grow angry.

"At least, let me be first informed, Tsar, of the nature of my duties," I said, "that I may judge whether I should accept the position or refuse it."

"Oh, oh! refuse the Tsar's preferment!" said Ivan. "Tell him, Amy Romalyn, what is this appointment that thou hast secured for thy friend."

"Herbert," said Amy, speaking rapidly and in English, "thou hast, it appears, gravely offended the Tsar by remaining in the country. Do not accept this appointment; it is not serious preferment, but is given because of its danger to those of whom the Tsar would rid himself."

"Danger!" I interrupted. "You should

know, Amy, that I would love it none the less for that?"

"This is danger of an unfamiliar kind. The Tsar keeps a pack of great dogs whose blood, it is said, is mixed with the blood of wolves. He would appoint thee custodian of these savage brutes."

"What! He would make me a dog-groom to clean the kennels for him and feed his hounds?" I cried angrily, and turned towards the Tsar in order to reject with I know not what scornful words his offer; but Amy spoke.

"As for that," she said, "the appointment is honourable. There are servants, accustomed to the dogs, to whom is entrusted the menial work of the kennels. The appointment of custodian is nominally a sinecure, but actually, as I am told, dangerous; for, though the custodian has no duties among the hounds, yet he is expected by the Tsar to become, if he can, familiar with the brutes, and to enter the kennels, and go among them when his Grace honours them with his presence. It is a point of honour to go among the hounds from the first without fear, and many have fallen victims. All this was told me by the women of the terem before it was known the Tsar would give thee this post.



I have seen the hounds, which are as savage as their super-master himself."

"I care nothing for such dangers," I laughed, light-hearted enough to have heard the worst and to find it but a trifling matter after all. "I never found a dog yet that was not quickly my friend."

"These are different, being half wolves. Think well before——"

"Come!" cried the Tsar at this point. "Is the long man so dense? Understands he not yet? Must there be so much talking? We weary of waiting."

"Wait no longer, Tsar," I said. "I accept thy preferment, and with gratitude."

"Ha!" he cried, sending a quick glance at Amy; "is it so? That is well; thy eloquence shall be remembered, Amy Romalyn."

"I counselled him to refuse," said Amy.

"What!—and he rejected thy counsel? Remember it, then, to his disadvantage, minx. Go, now, to thy terem; and thou, Shad—what is thy strange English name?—Shadwell, go among thy new subjects. In two weeks, if they have not yet eaten thy long body, I shall come and see what manner of Tsar I have placed over his people."

This pack of hounds, in whose veins, men said, a strain of wolf blood had been originally introduced, and was still occasionally renewed—had already existed for half a hundred years. Heaven alone knows why they were kept by the Kings of Muscovy, unless, indeed, it were for no better end than this—to tear in pieces those who should so greatly offend the Cæsar that no other fate would be dreadful enough for them; and, further, in order that on minor offenders, such as I, might be bestowed their custody, to tame, if I could, or to be fallen upon and torn to shreds for the Tsar's sport whenever it should please him to judge of my custodianship. I had heard rumours of their existence, and had been told, though I scarcely believed it even of this tiger-like creature now occupying the throne of the Cæsars, that Ivan had many times caused to be thrown among these savage beasts the wretched victims of some momentary paroxysm of that devilish rage which oftentimes overmastered his reasonable will and self-control. The first of his victims had been no less a personage than his own Regent, a great boyar, by name Shuisky. This man, if any, deserved his fate, for by every means and in every way he had ill-treated the child-Tsar, encouraging, for his



own ends, the evil in him, quenching every spark of good that showed, until his pupil, being ripe, at the age of fourteen, for any and every devilry that occurred to him, suddenly turned upon this Beelzebub of Regents, asserted his kingly authority, and bade his attendants seize the wretched Shuiskey and cast him among the wolf-dogs, by whom he was, in an instant, torn in pieces and devoured, the first of many victims.

So then these great beasts were the subjects over whom I was now to reign, as his Grace mockingly expressed it, their Tsar!

"Well," thought I, "thanks be to God, I shall be a better Cæsar to these brutes than he is to his human subjects, and may-be—if God wills—I shall in time gain the hearts of my people, which Ivan will assuredly never do with his."

The Tsar had bidden Nagoy and Kamarof escort me to the place where the wolf-dogs had their kennels, and under their guidance I made my first visit to my charges. Their habitation was not far from the palace, and within the Kremlin walls.

"You were not wise to accept," said Kamarof gravely, as we walked towards the kennels; "you know not what you have undertaken."

"That shall be seen," I laughed.

"Go not among them during these two weeks," said Nagoy, "or the Tsar will be disappointed of a favourite pastime."

"Which is?" I asked.

"To see his new custodian rescued, alive or dead, by Kiril and Stepan, from the jaws of the beasts. It is an entertaining spectacle—I have seen it many times."

"Come then in a fortnight and you shall see a new thing," said I, angry and inclined to be foolishly boastful.

"I will give thee a rouble for every yard of cloth thou bringest intact out of the kennel that day," he laughed.

"That is a pedlar's wager," I said. "Let it be this, rather—that for every wound I receive thou shalt give me one buffet, and if I receive none, I shall give thee three buffets, or as many as thou canst stand up to."

"That is a fool's wager," he said, flushing; "I will not brawl."

"Then, when the time comes, we will invent some better way, Nagoy," I said, gazing full in his eyes, so that he winced. "But we will be even one way or another."