

CHAPTER XVI.

I SOON made friends with Kiril and Stepan, the two men who alone—as Kamarof had told me—were able to manage my “subjects”. I gave them money “on my appointment,” which at once secured me their favour. We discoursed of hounds in general, I telling them tales—mostly invented for the occasion—of many savage beasts I had known in my own country.

“It is easy to gain the friendship of a dog,” said I, “if one knows.” The two men looked at one another and grinned.

“These are different,” one said. “They are savage, like the devil.”

“But with you they are friendly?”

“That also is different.”

“What you have done, may not another do?” I asked. “It is kindness that wins a dog, that and firmness.”

Kiril looked at me with approval; he took off his greasy cap and rubbed his towzled yellow hair reflectively.

“If you know that, you know much,” he said. “Most of our Dog-Tsars, as the custodians are called by him—by the big one—go like fools with whips and sticks. Well, what would you have?” Kiril spat thoughtfully and glanced at Stepan, who spat also.

“So long as we are among them with you, you shall be safe,” he said; “but when the Tsar comes he will expect you to enter without us, and then——” Kiril paused.

“That will be in a fortnight,” I said, laughing; “perhaps I shall be ready.”

Kiril gazed at me with approval. “God knows!” he said; “bigness and strength will not save a man!”

Then I made a compact with these good fellows, who promised to assist me in my scheme for asserting the fullest authority over my new people.

The hounds were at this hour shut up within the wooden shed which was their sleeping and living place. Without it was an arena, surrounded by a wooden palisade six feet in height, the floor of the arena being of sand, well trodden down. Into this space access from the shed was gained by a large gate, at the foot of which was a small aperture protected by a sliding door,

by which one hound at a time might be admitted into the arena—an arrangement which suited me admirably, for I would make friends with the animals, one by one.

Nevertheless, I went in among them all on the first day at feeding-time, Kiril being with me, and though most of the savage creatures growled and gathered themselves as though to spring upon me, a word from Kiril served to stave off their evil intentions, one of them even consenting to make friends with me, when it was well fed, and submitting, with but a few growls of protest, to be patted and stroked by my hand. By the end of the interview that great hound followed me about the arena, no more savage than any lap-dog.

On the second day I would have furthered my acquaintance with my subjects by receiving them in audience, one by one, standing in the arena and admitting them into my presence; but Kiril, who had taken a fancy to me, perhaps because I seemed to understand his beloved charges better than most who came, this good Kiril begged me to be less venturesome for at least this one more day. Therefore audience was granted, one by one, to my subjects in the presence of the Court—that is, Kiril. Each

dog went to him to be caressed, and most of them refused to approach me at all or to pay me any greater courtesy than to growl savagely when I would be friendly, though in the end a few consented to receive my advances. As for my friend of yesterday, he knew me at once, and showed no signs of hostility. Then on the third day came my first real reception. Would my subjects receive me as befitted loyal and peaceful lieges, or tolerate my Tsarship (for tolerate it they should) with black looks and even with open acts of war?

The faithful and much-fearing Kiril would have stood at the palisade, in order that the sight of his face looking over might deter such of the brutes as would show resistance to my friendly advances—resistance of fang and of claw!

But I bade the good fellow stand down and go away to his own home, for in this matter I would have no interference, and away he went, kind soul, with tears in his eyes and prayers upon his lips, crossing himself and addressing himself to his patron saint on my behalf.

Then began my reception, and, truly, never did new-elected Tsar pass through so troublous an hour among his courtiers as did I with my

new subjects. It was feeding-time, and I had divided the dogs' rations into twelve portions, for my lieges numbered a round dozen, and these portions I kept separated in a large bag or wallet which Kiril lent to me. I would admit them one by one, and, when they would be moderately friendly, feed them, but not until each had deserved his food should he taste of it.

Of those twelve great beasts about half the pack were now inclined to friendliness, a pair or so would neither be conciliated nor yet show actual hostility, and four declared open war. These flew at me, each one in his turn, as soon as he had been admitted into my presence, but did little harm, since I was ready and had gripped him as quickly as he me, catching him by the throat and half strangling him, in order that from the first he might know that he had met his master.

When I had loosed him, after this treatment, I would pat the brute and speak kindly, when, if he showed signs of submission and friendliness, he had his share of food; if not, he starved.

Two hounds returned to the attack on recovering breath rather than realise that I would be master, and these two, having received a

second dose of the physic which should presently save them, starved for the nonce. This treatment excited the other hounds, so that for a moment or two I was in peril of a general attack, in which case I must have vaulted, if I could, over the palisade and escaped that way; but by calling to them with authority, in the tone and words of Kiril and Stepan, I contrived to quell the excitement.

Afterwards, having finished with each dog, and having established friendly relations with a good half, I came safely forth, to the joy of good Kiril, who, I think, had not expected to see me alive.

"It is wonderful, and if I saw not that you understand the nature of dogs, I should say you were a sorcerer. Ah!—you bleed here—stay, there also—you have not escaped scatheless!"

I had in all four bites: two upon my hands, one in the left forearm, and the last, if I remember, upon the shoulder, but none of them was serious; and after Kiril had treated them with hot pitch, with which he liberally anointed each bleeding wound, I had little further trouble with them.

On the following day I pursued the same tactics, and with increased success. A few of

the dogs now began to show signs of affection for me; one that had begun with open war, having rushed upon me yesterday and received punishment for his sins, was to-day the most loyal of all my subjects and actually attacked a comrade, one of the two incorrigibles who flew at me.

Let me give this honourable liege his name—it was *Lyef*, or Lion—and a lion he proved himself, in my cause, not once but many times.

By the end of the fortnight I was a popular Tsar among my new subjects, all of whom save one or two were now as devoted to me as they had ever been to Kiril and Stepan, their attendants. Of the two incorrigibles, one, *Boorya*, never failed to growl savagely at my approach, though he no longer dared show more active enmity; but snarl and show his teeth he would and did until the end of my Tsarship. The other, *Grom*, or Thunder, when I came near, would raise his upper lip, display his great fangs, and creep away from me until he had placed all his companions between himself and my feared but unloved presence.

During all these two weeks I saw nothing of Amy, for there was no longer admittance for me to the palace. Nevertheless, I heard

from Muirhead, with whom I lodged in the Sloboda, the foreign quarter, of all that passed at Court, where many things had happened which filled me with apprehension, so that I went with a heavy heart, excepting when among my own four-footed subjects, whose society was by this time dear to me and most interesting.

For Muirhead reported that Amy was constantly in the Tsar's society; that the Tsar (and his son no less, as all might see) was much attracted by her beauty and spirit, while Amy herself—whether flattered, or content that it should be so, or in pure mischievous satisfaction to have tamed so well her tiger—showed no aversion to the society of the Cæsar and of his heir, but played at chess with Ivan, and sat at his board, and in every way showed, or at least appeared to desire to show, that she neither feared nor disliked the society of the Terrible One.

“Heaven knows how it will end; will she marry the Tsar, think you?” asked Muirhead.

And I replied heartily, “God forbid! That is not the fear, Muirhead; the fear is that he will certainly desire it of her and she will certainly refuse. She has vowed to tame the Tiger of Muscovy, and tame him she will or

has already done so—ay, and she will have all to see that she has tamed him. Then when the time comes to escape from his fangs, she will find that, after all, he is not yet fully tamed, no, nor ever shall be!”

“If that be so, it is a terrible danger!” said Muirhead. “Yet one may see clearly it is useless to warn her that she treads on perilous ground, for peril is to her soul as food to the starving man; she thrives upon and rejoices in it.”

“It is not so much love of danger as love of mischief,” said I, “and the obstinacy of a beautiful woman, who will show all men that she must have her way.”

“You, too, are in danger,” said Muirhead; “for if, as you tell me, you have mastered those savage beasts, do you suppose that the Tsar will be pleased or that he will forgive you?”

“Marry,” said I, “if he places me among the brutes, surely he will not blame me for making them my friends, if I can.”

“Oh, be sure he will blame you!” said Muirhead, laughing. “Why, think you, are you there but to be torn to pieces? He would be rid of you!”

“Why?” I asked, though I knew the Tsar’s reason well enough, for he understood—none better—that in me Amy had a protector who would stay at nothing in her cause.

Muirhead shrugged his shoulders. “That is Cæsar’s business,” he said. “Only see to thyself that he has not his will of thee.”

Punctual to a day, the Tsar sent word, after fourteen days, that he would come and see for himself how I did with my Tsarship.