

CHAPTER XVII.

EARLY in the morning of the day on which the Tsar would visit my little kingdom Kiril came to me with a warning.

"Be not surprised if the dogs are fiercer than usual to-day," he said.

"Why should they be so?" I asked him.

"By the Tsar's desire," he laughed. "It is his custom to arrange that it should so be on exhibition days; that is, when he comes to see how quickly a new custodian can be eaten up or rescued by Stepan and me."

"You speak foolishly, Kiril. How can even a Tsar determine that the dogs should be more savage at one time than another? Were they not fed yesterday?"

"Fed? Ay, and well fed, in the evening only, and then with such food as breeds excitement and devilry and hot blood in their veins!"

"What mean you?" I said. "Explain!"

"Last night a criminal was brought and thrown to them," replied Kiril, laughing; "a

thief or murderer, I know not which. To-day they are savage, as his Grace would have it. There is no fear for thee, for they love thee—all but Boorya and Grom. But it is as well to know beforehand."

Each week seemed to add something to my abhorrence for this Tiger of Muscovy, to my hatred of the man, and to my fears for Amy, who might at any hour fall into the hands of this monster of cruelty and wickedness!

I afterwards learned that Ivan the Tsar kept a record of all the men and women he had murdered, a list containing several thousand names, and that he actually prayed regularly in his churches for the souls of his victims.

Would my name be presently added to this grim catalogue—and Amy's?

Well, I would go down to history as a regicide rather than permit this tyrant to number Amy among his victims. What matter? Honest people yet unborn would honour my name as of a benefactor who had freed the earth of one who disgraced the name of humanity, Cæsar though he should call himself!

The hour arrived when the Tsar would visit the kennels. He came, with a small Court, Amy being among the number, and seats were

placed upon a raised platform without the palisade, so that the animals might be seen in safety and comfort.

"Hail, Tsar of the Dogs!" his Grace called to me, as I stood in the arena, awaiting his pleasure, with the two attendants, Kiril and Stepan. "May it please thee to let us see thy subjects—the entire community together? Let us see how they acclaim their sovereign?" The Tsar laughed and clapped his hands; he was in good spirits this day.

With the help of the attendants I threw open the great door of the kennel, behind which barked and howled the pack, excited and noisy. Out came the twelve great creatures, rushing, snarling, biting at one another, yelping as they fled forth. I had not yet seen them in so great a state of excitement. Several turned and growled at me. Boorya actually sprang upon me and closed his fangs upon my arm before I could clutch his throat. I strangled and threw him down, where he lay and gasped.

"Do not kill the dogs!" cried the Tsar angrily; "I will not have them killed."

"He is not dead, Tsar," I said. "See, he rises and slinks away!"

"Let those fellows depart," cried Ivan, indi-

cating Kiril and Stepan; "let us see what thy subjects will have to say to thee on thy merits as Tsar."

"See they do not by him," cried a man's voice which was strange to me, "as subjects have done before now by Tsars who have displeased them!" The man who made this bold speech laughed as he spoke. I looked up with surprise, and saw that this was a boyar, a big, strong-looking man, with a face that told of robust health, and an eye which looked out fearlessly upon the world.

"Silence, fool!" cried the Tsar furiously. I glanced at Amy, and saw that she looked approvingly at the stranger.

Meanwhile Kiril and Stepan withdrew.

To the Tsar's manifest surprise and chagrin the departure of these men made no difference in the conduct of the dogs, which fought and snarled with one another in vicious mood, but without taking notice of me.

"It is sorcery!" cried Ivan furiously. "Wert thou not a foreigner, thou long-legged wizard, and a kinsman of my sister the Queen of England, I should have thee burned for a sorcerer!"

"Fie, Tsar! wouldst thou have seen the dogs

eat him," said Amy, "that thou art so disappointed? Surely my cousin has displayed his fitness for the appointment which thou, in thy goodness, hast favoured him withal?"

"His Grace is disappointed of entertainment this day," cried the stranger boyar, laughing derisively. "What wouldst thou have had, Tsar, that thou hast not? Thou givest only black looks to this long man among the dogs instead of the applause he has merited. Well done, thou long fellow, thou hast fared bravely with these devilish beasts; the Tsar thought they should have eaten thee."

I listened astonished at the man's temerity, wondering all the while he spoke that the Tsar had not yet struck him dead.

"Seize him, some of you!" he now shrieked aloud to the attendants behind his chair; "seize him and throw him in!"

Very slowly and reluctantly the serving-men went about the enterprise set them by their master. They approached the stranger boyar as men would approach a wasp's nest when the wasps swarm around, angry to be disturbed.

"Lay hold upon me who dares!" he cried, drawing a sword and swinging it before him, but laughing the while.

The small Court that accompanied the Tsar this day rose in alarm and confusion, and stood rooted. The Tsar continued to shriek in his frenzy that the boyar be seized and cast to the dogs. At the uproar many of the animals grew excited, and bayed and sprang hither and thither, uncertain what should happen.

What with the swinging sword of the boyar and the fierce threats that poured from his lips upon any that should presume to lay finger upon him, no man dared approach close enough to touch him. "They cannot carry out thy commands!" he shouted derisively. "But thou shalt not be disappointed of thy pleasure, Tsar. See, I will go among thy devil-dogs of my own accord!"

With the word, this extraordinary person—madman, as I then supposed him, being ignorant of his identity—vaulted lightly over the palisade, sword in hand, and in one moment was among the raging animals below. In an instant, too, they were upon him, every dog of them, from the mildest to the fiercest, foaming, yelping, teeth-showing, snarling, springing, yet none daring to come within reach of that quickly waving sword.

So he kept them at bay for several minutes,

while the Tsar and his Court stood spellbound by the sight and tongue-tied.

"Is it enough, Tsar?" he laughed, presently; "or shall I attack as well as defend? Shall I slay a hound or two? It is easily done."

"Get back, man!" I cried, "and remember that only now thy danger begins."

"Not so," cried the boyar; and with incredible rapidity he turned and sprang upon the palisade, dropping his sword and climbing like a cat.

But, quick as he was, Grom and Boorya, the two savagest of my subjects, were quicker still, of whom the former gripped his arm, springing high to reach it, and hung there, while Boorya had him by the flesh of his left leg. Like a flash I, too, was upon him in the midst of maddened, howling, leaping dogs. I caught Grom by the throat and strangled him loose; while the boyar, bringing his right heel full upon Boorya's skull, forced him to let go also. The next instant he was over the palisade, but had turned already to see how I fared.

"Shout if thou needest help!" he cried.

"I need none," I replied, and indeed, though the whole pack raged and stormed at the palisade where he had climbed, none attacked me except-

ing the two incorrigibles Grom and Boorya, both of whom, recovering their breath, flung themselves upon me in fury. Boorya I caught by the throat and flung with all my strength upon the ground, where he lay stunned or dead. But Grom meanwhile had sprung and taken me by the shoulder, meeting his teeth in my flesh. I should have rid myself of him in a moment, but suddenly an ally appeared to my assistance—one of my own subjects, old Lyef, who flew like a fiend upon my aggressor and, dragging him to earth, was soon engaged in a tussle which ended in Grom's retreat, howling and limping, to the kennel.

Thus ended my exhibition day as Dog-Tsar, for the Court now departed, the Tsar furious and sullen, the rest speechless and subdued. Amy turned and waved her hand, smiling. Only the stranger remained. He leant over the palisade and bade me hand up his sword. "Thou art a man after my heart," he said. "Saw you ever such a Tsar in England as this of ours?"

"We have none such on our side the water!" I laughed. "Seeing that this is a madman, I know not how you dare so much with him!"

"He is a devil-man," said the boyar; "it is my way to be frank with him, but this time

I think I overstepped the limits of discretion. I know not how it will end; but in any case I shall remember that I owe to thy timely help my life, though I think the Tsar will not leave me long in possession. I am Prince Krapatkin, one who has baited the Tsar before now!"

"And has been in Siberia to atone for the same!" I laughed.

"Ah!—then you know me; well, you are a fine man; and your kinswoman is a splendid maiden," he added. "She is peerless; by the Saints, she is no more afraid of Ivan the Devil than I!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

AFTER this episode I thought to be deprived of my position as custodian of the Cæsar's wolf-dogs; and, indeed, though I had learned to love the great beasts well enough, yet if, thought I, his Grace maintains this pack of savage animals to no better purpose than for his own entertainment, that he may watch them tear to pieces those of his subjects who have offended him, I would prefer to have no more to do with them, for my very conscience' sake.

Yet no message of deprivation reached me and I remained custodian; lodging meanwhile with good Muirhead, from whom I heard all that happened at the Cæsar's Court.

"Do not abandon your position," he counselled me; "if for no better reason than that it may be given you to defeat, from time to time, the Tsar's devilish intentions, by preserving the life of some poor wretch who has been