

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

condemned to be food for your savage lieges, as, I am told, you saved Krapatkin."

"Mad Tsar and mad boyar!" I laughed. "This Krapatkin must be mad indeed to beard his master as he does, and also to have sprung into the arena among my dogs."

"He is not mad. The Tsar hates him, but spares him, knowing his value. Since Yermak died—who, you have heard, presented his Grace with the kingdom of Siberia—there is no one who has done more to maintain for his master this new acquisition. He has but now returned from among the Tsar's barbarous subjects in those parts, where he has conquered new lands, defeated rebellious khans and princes, discovered rich mines, and I know not what other services he has not performed for the Cæsar's advantage. Ivan is not so mad as in his moments of fury would appear. As Lord of Muscovy he does, on the whole, not so badly for his kingdom, which has vastly grown in his hands."

"Bah!" I said, "let him set matters in order nearer home!"

"And has this boyar, Prince Krapatkin, received no punishment for his behaviour of the other day?" I asked presently. "May he

come and go about the palace at his free will, as before, and does his Grace make no allusion to that which happened at the arena?"

"Krapatkin goes and comes as he pleases. He is not silent in the matter of the arena and the wound he there received, which was no light one. Each day he finds some new hearer to whom he recounts, in the Tsar's presence, how his Grace would have thrown his faithful servant among the devil-dogs, as he calls them, and how, to please the Tsar, he went among them and was all but killed. 'Thus the Cæsar rewards his lieges who have well served him!' he says, whereat the Tsar, according to his humour, bids him forget the anger of the moment, or frowns and commands silence, or—which he has done but once—aims a blow with his spiked oaken staff!"

By favour of Muirhead, too, I was able to communicate with Amy and to know of her well-being, which was to me an unspeakable comfort, for I might not enter the palace to see and hear for myself; also, at my great desire, conveyed to her by this same good Muirhead, Amy consented to meet me at his house, where from her own lips I might hear report of what had passed.

Amy smiled sweetly upon me when we met ; but it seemed that I was no more in favour now than before, nor yet was my mission as her protector.

"You see," she said, "it would have been wiser to return with Sir Jerome, for of what advantage to me is thy presence in Moscow, thou shut up with thy dogs and I with my Tiger? If my tiger should turn and rend me, as, it would seem, you feared and expected of him, of what avail my absent protector?" Amy laughed at her own pleasantry.

"As to that, there might be found some way to escape the Tiger's fangs," said I, "and in the escaping even such as I might prove of use!"

"Oh, sweet humility!" she laughed; "but, when he turns upon me, there can be no escaping. Tigers spring true upon their prey; he will not miss."

"It is a poor jest," I said. "Be not so sure of thy position, Amy; let him that thinketh he standeth take heed!"

"Why, thou art become a very preacher," she cried, still in laughing mood. "Preach not, Herbert, for thou knowest not how to fit a text; this of thine is a misfit, for, indeed, I claim not

to be secure in my position, which to be one must first have a position, and I have none."

"You are a candidate for the vacant seat upon the throne of the Cæsars," said I.

"Am I? That is the question!" she laughed.

"But are you?" I persisted.

"Nay," she said gravely, "I cannot answer. I think not; watch and wait, and see what will happen. As yet, they tell me, I have seen the Tiger only at his worst; soon there will come a period of mildness, when he will lie and purr, all softness and kindness and benevolence to each and every one who would come near to stroke him. I will first see him in this mood, though Heaven knows when he will be mollified now that Krapatkin has come to Court."

"Ah!" said I; "and is he friendly with thee, this madman?"

"He is no madman, but one of the finest of God's creatures," replied Amy; then, gazing full in my eyes, she added: "Shall I tell you the truth, Herbert? I admire this Krapatkin more than any man I have seen in Muscovy, and I answer thy question thus, that, yes, we are very friendly."

If Amy desired to see me wince, she had her desire, for wince I did, and that lustily.

"Oh, and what of his Grace?" I blurted. "If this great admiration is made patent for all to see, what has Cæsar to say of it?"

"I did not say that it is made patent for all to see," Amy retorted; "may not a maiden carry her dearest sentiments hidden in her heart of hearts for none to guess? It would be foolish to let the Tsar see, for as you—in your great wisdom—have already apprehended, he would quickly take measures to separate me from my——"

"Amy," I cried, "you jest—come, admit it!"

"Do I jest?" she smiled; "it may be, but it may also be that I am serious; nay, thou must protect me from this Prince Krapatkin, Herbert, for, indeed, I admire him vastly. Be sure, my friend, he is no more backward with me than with his master; that which he is impelled to say he says without ado. How should I, who love and adore courage and the manly independence, how should I not admire this man, who is the incarnation of all masterfulness and the manly virtues?"

"And of madness!" I added, laughing, though feeling little merriment. "Well, admire him as thou wilt and jest as thou wilt,

but beware that the Tsar take not thy jesting for truth."

"For his Grace is as slow to see a jest as thou thyself," she cried. "Is that what thou wouldst say? Yes, foolish, fearful Nurse Herbert, I will beware!"

Nevertheless, and though Amy mocked me for my lack of discernment in distinguishing jest from truth, the matter ended for me in utter uncertainty, for I knew not any more than at the beginning whether her admiration for this Krapatkin were serious or pretence. For in dealing with Amy I was ever helpless and incompetent, understanding little or nothing of her heart; loving, perhaps, so jealously that love blinded me.

And yet at this time, I asked myself, who should understand the heart of Amy, were he ever so clear-sighted? It might well be that she knew it not herself, but groped about in the dark for she knew not what, as blind as I or any.

"And how standest thou at present with the Tsar?" I asked her. "Does he summon thee constantly? And what of the Cæsarevitch?"

Amy laughed merrily.

"The Cæsarevitch," she said, "stares with

round eyes. Twice he has spoken to me in the corridor. Once he clutched my arm with his hand and pressed it. 'Amy Romalyn,' he said, 'you are the most beautiful of them all!' The second time he muttered: 'When my father dies, I——' But Boris Godunof, who was with him, laughed and pushed him forward. As for the Tsar," Amy continued, "he sees me every day, and also Maria Nagoy." Amy's eyes flashed as she said this, and the colour mounted in her face. I was not too blind to observe this.

"What—he would make a choice!" I said. "God grant he chooses rightly and wisely!"

"And how would that be, O most wise?" Amy asked haughtily, though she made a show of laughing.

"In the way that would save thee many dangers, by marrying one of his own Muscovish women; he is not fit to be husband of a civilised wife!"

"Save me many dangers, and cover me with much shame," she replied hotly. "What—this spying, tale-bearing Maria to be preferred before me? Is she so beautiful? Has she so much spirit? She has not enough, my friend, to answer the Tsar when he speaks; but pro-

strates herself and kisses the hem of his kaftan, and her eyes fill with tears of mock gratitude for his consideration in that he deigned to throw a word to a worm—ah! a worm she is, no more. If he married the creature, he would crush her in the first hour."

"Let him crush her," said I. "Better her than thee!"

"What; he is to prefer her to me? Thank you for the compliment, Herbert; be sure I shall use all my art to save myself so deep a disgrace and humiliation!"

"Amy, you are mad. To what end all this? Supposing that he should prefer thee—as of course he will if it is your firm purpose to rival this other—what then?"

"That is another matter," she replied, calming down at once. "I shall have tamed the Tiger."

"And entered into the zone of death and danger which surrounds him. Do you seriously believe, Amy, that you may reject such a suitor and live?"

"If we may not climb for fear of a fall, how shall we gather fruit?"

"But you climb to fall, not to gather fruit," I protested.

"Nay, I shall have fruit enough in having attained my desires. I will risk the falling."

"That fruit is the apple of discord. Be wise, Amy, and climb not after so dangerous and useless a prize!"

But Amy laughed, and began to tell me of the Nagoyes, Maria's brothers: how they glared and glowered at her; how they truckled and spoke servilely to the Tsar; how they daily brought to Maria dresses and gauds of every kind to deck her withal for the Cæsar's pleasure; and how, in spite of all jealousies and hatreds and malice, one of them had nevertheless fallen a victim to Amy's charms.

And so entertaining a tale did Amy tell me of her admirers at the Court—of Krapatkin and Nagoy and the Prince, and so forth, and of their jealousies and scowlings at one another behind the chair of Cæsar—that, for all my fears and anxieties, I was able to laugh heartily and to enjoy to the full her narrative.

Perhaps I discerned in a new sense the truth of the old saying "There is safety in numbers". It was as well that Amy should have friends about her, I myself being helpless to protect her in case of sudden need.

But would these lovers of Amy's prove them-

selves men enough to stand to the Tsar on her behalf in emergency?

Krapatkin would, at any rate, I concluded. And at the thought a spasm of foolish jealousy went cutting its way, like a sharp blade, to my heart; for had not Amy said that she admired this man more than any she had yet seen?