

CHAPTER XIX.

SAID Muirhead to me, returning to his lodging from the Court one evening: "Truly our fair friend has her hands full of suitors, and she will prove herself wise indeed if she convert none of them into enemies!"

"And which is the favoured one to-day?" I asked, laughing.

"I am not sure," said Muirhead, "for according to her known method, known to thee and to me (though, thanks be to Providence, I am no suitor), she has for each one sweet word for ten bitter ones; but I should say that she is kinder to young Alexis Nagoy than to any other, though, mark you, there is more scorn than kindness even for the most favoured."

"If it be Nagoy," said I, relieved, "the favour is for a purpose."

"I think you are right," Muirhead laughed, "and that the purpose is to deceive the fair Maria."

"And who comes next in favour?" I asked;

but Muirhead shook his head and refused to give an opinion. "How can I," he said, "when first it is the heart of Amy Romalyn, that mysterious citadel, which is besieged, and secondly when the besiegers are, among others, the Cæsar, the Cæsarevitch, and that marvel of a boyar the Knyaz (prince) Krapatkin, who dares with mysterious impunity to play lion to Ivan's tiger. That he remains alive is the greatest mystery."

A little later, neither of us having spoken for a minute or two, Muirhead added: "Were I in love with Amy, which—again I thank heaven—I am not, I should not be very jealous of this Krapatkin, even though at times it seems that he is, perhaps, the most favoured by her fancy".

"Then why not jealous of him?" I asked, surprised and somewhat curious, for indeed I was not in the position suggested by Muirhead's words, being jealous enough of all men that might see and hear Amy when they would, but especially, perhaps, of Krapatkin.

"Because I think he is not long for this world," he laughed. "I believe that, by favour of his Tsar, he will shortly leave it for a better."

"As for that," I said, "I do not see that Krapatkin lies in greater danger than any other

who should offend his most clement Majesty at any moment—even Amy herself, when her time comes. And that it will come and must come before we are all clear of the tiger's claws is what troubles me most of all."

"Yes, that is true," said Muirhead gravely, adding nothing to my comfort by his grim look and the silence which followed it.

But things happened at the palace of which good Muirhead knew nothing, and as some of these matters have since become known to me through other sources, I will here narrate them in their order.

The position at this time, as I take it, was this:—

His Grace lay undecided between Maria Nagoy and Amy, inclining to Amy, save for two reasons. Of these, the one was that he was unwilling to go back upon the boastful message which he had sent to her Grace our Queen, that he would marry whom he would and not any substitute she might choose to send him in place of his chosen bride, which had been the Lady Mary Hastings.

And the second reason was that he was uncertain whether he most liked or hated the girl, for which uncertainty there was a sub-reason

which he himself knew not or perhaps preferred to ignore—namely, that he was afraid of Amy, in whom he recognised a will as strong as his own.

The Cæsarevitch—well, his position with regard to Amy is easily stated. He sighed for her, as the child sighs for the dainty placed by his parent out of reach, and of which his mother has said: "It is not for thee, touch it not, or chastisement will follow".

As for Alexis Nagoy, he—like his two brothers—had begun by hating Amy as his sister's rival, and therefore his own; for in Russia the brothers-in-law of the Cæsar play a great part, receiving the best positions at Court and in the government of the realm. But gradually the admiration which Amy's person and character seemed to provoke in men, as naturally as the perfume of a flower must give pleasure to all who inhale it, had begun to overmaster the unworthier sentiment, and our good Alexis was in a fair way to lose his heart, though as yet he dare not acknowledge it to himself, far less to his brothers or to Maria. From Amy, indeed, his feelings were not hidden, though he had said no word of them. But where is the woman who recog-

nises not the subtle indications of love even in the making—it may be, long before the victim himself is aware of his infection?

Lastly there was Krapatkin—this marvellous boyar who dared to play lion in the very lair of the tiger. Now Krapatkin was doomed to be drawn to Amy by every fibre of his estate, corporal and mental. His fearless, independent, joyous temperament saw instantly in this maiden its natural complement. From the first moment in which he beheld the fire in her eyes as she gave the Cæsar word for his word and smart for his sting, Krapatkin recognised that he had met the woman who, or none, must satisfy his needs. He had not believed that the woman existed whom he could ever look upon as a desirable companion or friend, or that he should ever desire to mate, in the sense of taking a wife according to the laws and limitations of the Greek Church—a woman to be considered and treated as an equal, or near it. He had laughed at the idea of such companionship, making coarse jests when the matter was spoken of by his friends, who bade him see that the blood of Rurik which ran in his veins descended by legitimate channels into the veins of his children.

“Thou art the only woman, Amy Romalyn,” he told her within a week of his return from Siberia, “upon whom I have looked more deeply than my eyes can see.”

“That is a riddle which I cannot read,” she said.

“They call me a lion,” he said, “and in thee I recognise a lion-cub. May-be we will mate together one day.”

“Oh!” laughed Amy, “the Muscovish lions woo too quickly for me. Knowest thou not, Master Muscovish Lion, to what end I came to this barbarous land?”

“To mate with a tiger, it is said,” replied Krapatkin; “but be sure he shall not have thee, nor thou him!”

“Be not so sure, Master Lion, for indeed thou knowest even less of this matter than I myself, who am very ignorant of all that lies in the future!”

“Why, there are some things one may know. Of these, one that I know full well is this: that thou and he will never be mated, and that for many reasons, of which one—he is afraid of thee and thou of him!”

“Not I!” began Amy hotly, but Krapatkin continued masterfully:—

"As free and without the bars of his cage thou fearest him no more than I; but to be set in his cage with him, from which cage there is no escape, mark you, of this you would be afraid. If not, I would say to thee, *be afraid.*"

Amy laughed. "And what of the tiger, who is also, by favour of thy wisdom, afraid of me, as I am of him?"

"If I tell thee, thou wilt take offence with me!"

"Tell on; art thou not a lion full grown, and I but a lion-cub, and that a poor female one?"

"Well, then, I say that he will in the end reject thee and take Maria Nagoy, who is a calf to thy lion, and this because he is afraid of thy tongue and of thy good spirit which underlies it. The Tsar, mark you, is a tyrant and a cruel beast, and therefore a coward. He does not love where he fears. He will end by hating thee, take my word for this!"

"And what of thyself? Art thou not afraid that he will end by hating thee also?"

"He hates me already. More than once he would have rid himself of me—what of the dogs but yesterday? That was not the only time. But he fears me more than he hates me, and he knows well that he must beware of me,

for I am rich, of the blood of Rurik, and there are hundreds of boyars who hate him, as they hate the devil, and would range with me against him if I but gave the word. Moreover, I have done him good service, adding kingdoms and khanates to his sceptre in Siberia. I have no fear for myself, rather let him beware!"

"Well, and what of all this?" said Amy, impressed by the strength of this great boyar, and by his splendid courage and self-reliance—the one man in Muscovy who was not afraid of the Cæsar. "What have I to do with all this?"

"Much. The Cæsar will not have thee, nor in any case should I allow him to have thee. Neither wilt thou have him, because——"

"Because," Amy interrupted, laughing merrily, "because it is not thy will that I should be the Cæsar's wife, is it not so, O master of the world we live in, and master of the wills of men and women?"

"Ah, yes, mock me!" said Krapatkin, flushing a little, but gazing with no less admiration upon the mocking maiden; "but may-be there is truth in your jest, little lion-cub, and more of it than you think for!"

"Nay, Mr. Very-sure," said Amy, "be sure of

yet one more thing—there are other wills, even in Muscovy, besides thy own, ay, and other wisdom, besides this rigmarole of Tsars who would but dare not, and of maidens who stand and tremble at the doors of the tiger's cage. I end as I began, that I know little of what shall be, and thou, Master Lion, knowest less."

"At any rate," he laughed, "the present is our own, and there are matters of which a man may be sure, even though he be mocked for posing as a very little prophet!"

"Say on," said Amy, "if there be more wisdom to come!"

"My wisdom shall end with one certain thing," said Krapatkin, making as though he would clasp the girl in his great arms, "that my heart grows very soft towards thee."

But Amy moved quickly out of his reach. "If that is so," she called back as she danced down the corridor, "do not let the Cæsar know it or he will beat thee with his dubina!"

CHAPTER XX.

ON a day about this time two very angry women met in the terem and quarrelled. Of these one was Maria Nagoy, the other Amy Romalyn. It is certain that Maria had just cause for resentment, for by this time, but for the Tsar's sudden desire for a foreign bride, she would already have sat by his side as Tsaritsa for several months. A second time her hopes had been dashed by Amy's rapid growth in the favour of Cæsar and her own consequent decline as an object of interest to him.

Just at the present time it had come to this: that for three days, no less, Amy had been summoned each afternoon to play at chess or to have ordinary audience with his Grace, and she not once.

Thus it was that when Amy returned on the third of these days of disappointment and anger, she was greeted by Maria, who was usually silent in her resentment, preferring to nourish her hatred and generate her schemes of ultimate