

one to whom my heart was given, but that his name I would never reveal!"

"Thou shouldst have felt the dubina but that thou didst wake at the right moment," I laughed. "As for me, I should not care to withstand a dig from Cæsar's great staff, even in sleep."

"Even in sleep he would have spared me, I think," she said, laughing also.

"And who was this man whose name was used as a stalking-horse to attack the Tsar's jealousy?" I asked.

"A dream-man," she laughed, and said no more, relapsing into silence and thought until presently we dashed up to the gates which, the driver informed us over his shoulder, were the entrance to Slatky Ozer, the country seat of Krapatkin.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THIS was a great rambling wooden house, fashioned, like most of the Muscovish dachi, or country houses, in the form of a square main building in the centre, flanked by a wing on each side which came forward in a semicircle, like a man's outstretched arms, as though to embrace the approaching visitors. There were but few servants in the place, for Krapatkin's main establishment was in Moscow, and these few now went about their duties noisily lamenting the news of the boyar's death. They brought food and set it before us, sobbing and weeping, and spoke to us with the tears pouring down their cheeks.

I bade the good fellows prepare a sleeping chamber for Amy, and to produce and light every candle and lantern that the house possessed.

When these orders were executed I spoke to them and said: "Brothers, if you are wise you will now go to your homes in the village until the

morning, for we too, like your master, who has been killed as you know, lie under the Tsar's displeasure; we shall be pursued during the night for sure, and doubtless there will be fighting and bloodshed in which I do not ask you to join".

Right glad were the honest fellows to take the hint I gave them and their departure; there is no love of fighting in the blood of the Muscovish serfs, who prefer a peaceful life among their herds and in their cornfields.

Within five minutes of my warning Amy and I were alone in this great house.

"Now," said Amy, her eyes flashing, "we will prepare for battle."

"Nay," I protested, "retire thou and sleep, at least until our enemies arrive." But Amy would have none of my nurse-counsel, but would first help me in my preparations; afterwards, she said, she would rest awhile.

I chose my battlefield: it should be the stairs. These led in two flights, one from each side of the hall below to the wide corridor above, and since I could not defend both single-handed, one must be blocked; therefore I collected chests and what not, and piled them so that none could pass the barricade. Then I set lanterns and

candles about the hall at the lower portion of the stair upon that side which I should defend, but none above, in order that I might fight in darkness while my enemies should be plainly seen, which, I considered, would prove of no small advantage to me, for I should thus strike at substance, and they at shadow. Besides this, I should have room for arm play, being a-top of the stairs, but they should be cramped; thus one man might, with care and a fair share of good fortune, withstand a score night-long. As for arms, I had my own long rapier, and of course my dagger.

"And I have Muirhead's pistol," said Amy, her face aglow with the light of battle; "that shall be for the very last, in case we are worsted. If I could find a sword or an axe, I would see that none climbed this barricade to get behind thee."

"If thou must indeed be present," I said, "that were the best place for thee. Couldst thou kill a man, if need were?"

Amy made a face. "I hate blood," she replied; "but if one should threaten the life of my friend, I think I could strike with all my strength."

"So strike, if thou must strike at all, but if

God will I shall do all the striking; rather use thy eyes for me and thy voice in quickly discerning danger and in warning me in time."

"Yes, I would rather have it so," she said.

Then, all being prepared, Amy retired to rest, first compelling me to promise that she should be roused at the first note of danger.

As for me, I lay at the top of the stairs, wrapped in my shoooba, for it was very cold; my sword lay ready to hand beside me. I dozed, I think, for an hour or more.

Then I suddenly heard the sound of galloping hoofs, which came nearer. Voices shouted to one another. I sprang to my feet—the hour had come then. "God help us now!" I said aloud, turning to go and rouse Amy.

"Amen," said her voice close behind me, and I saw that she was already there and waiting.

"Now for a stout heart and a watchful eye," I said, "both of which thou hast, Amy, my dear."

"And now for a good sword and a long arm," she replied, "both of which are certainly thine; and for a man's fearless soul, which also thou hast if ever man had, Herbert, my dear."

"Thou used not to think highly of my man's courage," I laughed exultingly, for she had spoken with earnest emotion and my heart

swelled with joy at her praise. "Hast thou now changed in thy opinions?"

"I have learned many things here that I knew not before," she said softly. "If I die to-night, Herbert, and thou remainest alive, think not of me as——"

Amy's sentence was never finished, for at this moment there came the sound of quick steps without, followed by the clatter of boot and shoulder at the outer door, which flew instantly open, for we had not barred it—what would a moment's delay have availed us—and into the hall came thronging four men, blinking and dazed by the sudden bright light within.

I spoke their names aloud as they entered. "Afanassy Nagoy, Belsky, Krimsky, and Alexis Nagoy. Is that all, boyars?" I said. "You have undertaken more than the work of four men."

"A voice from the darkness," laughed the elder Nagoy. "Where are you, Shadwell, and where is the lady? Let us parley."

"Parley from there, then," I laughed. "There is death on the stairs."

"Thou art in a boastful mood," said Nagoy. "At any rate, hear what we have to say to thee."

"Well, say on," I cried. "Let us hear the oracle of Cæsar as interpreted by thee, Nagoy."

"The oracle of Cæsar is this," said Afanassy: "that if we four return before we shall have sliced thee in pieces we are to be sliced in thy stead. As for the maiden——"

"Yes, that is the main point," I laughed, "for of course I must be sliced, once the slicer is found."

"We have no death-feud against either thee or her," said Nagoy. "Why should we? I say this lest thou shouldst think that for my sister's ends we would shed the blood of this Amy Romalyn. The Tsar has commanded us to slay both her and thee, but——"

"But," cried Alexis Nagoy, taking up his brother's speech; "but, Amy, if thou art there, and if not, tell her Shadwell, her life is in her own hands; new happiness I promise her, love, all that a woman can desire. This devil Tsar, whom we both fear and hate, may easily be deceived. My brother and these boyars will return and report thy death and mine, but we shall not die; thou shalt live to be a happy wife, and we need not lie hid longer than the life of the Tsar, who fails already, as one may see."

I bade Amy reply. "Speak, Amy; what sayest thou?"

"That is a fair speech, Alexis Nagoy," she said; "and I thank thee for it, but I have had enough and to spare of Muscovy, and would return to my home. Moreover, what of my kinsman, Herbert Shadwell?"

"Let him escape," said Alexis, "where he will. The Tsar shall be persuaded that he fell beneath our swords."

"Do not refuse this offer without due thought, Amy," I whispered; "at any rate it is the offer of life."

Amy uttered an exclamation of anger, replying in English and in her old arbitrary manner, that if I desired to gain my life by selling her into slavery, so be it. This enraged me, and I called aloud to Alexis Nagoy that my kinswoman would have none of him, neither would I take my life at his gift. "She will return to her own people."

"That she shall never do, if I live," cried Nagoy back; "I swear it."

"Then thou art as good as dead, if it depend on thee!" I laughed.

The four boyars consulted awhile.

"At any rate we shall not kill thee, Amy,"

shouted Alexis ; " but when we have cut thy fool of a kinsman in pieces, thou must choose between the Tsar and me."

" Reply for me," said Amy, " but for God's sake let it be a man's answer!"

" Fight first and bargain afterwards," I called back, " if ye dare, boyars ; but I think you are better merchants than fighters."

Then suddenly the battle began without further warning, and I found myself attacked by two swords, Belsky's and the elder Nagoy's, who sprang up the stairs with marvellous agility and were upon me almost before I discerned their intention.

" Take up thy position, Amy," I shouted.

The two men cut and thrust at me for a moment or two, but the space was too narrow for both to fight freely, neither could they reach me from the position they took up.

" What, no nearer?" I cried, mocking them. " Will you not come a step or two steps higher? See, even I cannot reach!"

Belsky was a fierce and brave man ; he uttered a curse, and springing forward and two steps upward, lunged quickly at my chest ; Nagoy tried to follow, but his sword caught the balustrade. I easily parried Belsky's thrust,

and gave him the counter, which just pricked his arm.

" Let me come," cried Nagoy angrily, pushing past his companion, " when he parries, then strike, Belsky ; we play the fool."

Nagoy made two vicious thrusts, but hampered Belsky so that he could not strike when Nagoy shouted to him to do so. As he shouted the second time, Nagoy dropped his sword, which clattered down into the hall beneath, and his shout changed into a fierce curse, for the blood flowed from a deep gash in the right fore-arm.

As Nagoy went cursing downstairs Krimsky came rapidly upwards to take his place ; this was a small active man, quick in his movements and a good swordsman, as I soon perceived. Therefore upon Krimsky I concentrated my chief attack, feeling that in Belsky's awkward swordmanship there was little danger. The two men fought now in concert, Krimsky attacking while Belsky awaited his opportunity to thrust. Being a much smaller man than Nagoy, Krimsky allowed his companion more space for movement.

" Now for a great effort," thought I, and rushing suddenly upon Krimsky I buried my sword deep in his chest. But with the impetus

I tripped over his falling body and fell with him, just escaping Belsky's thrust as I slipped forward. Fortunately our falling bodies knocked Belsky from his footing, so that here were we three in a moment at the foot of the stairs, lying Heaven knows how intermingled, and the two Nagoys standing above us ready to strike. Up sprang Belsky and up sprang I simultaneously, but Krimsky was out of the fight, dead.

My sword was still in my hand, but broken in the fall; Belsky had lost his. As I sprang up Alexis and Afanassy both thrust at me. The sword of Alexis passed through the flesh of my left arm, but Afanassy, being now left-handed, missed me. Almost at the same moment Belsky found his sword and sprang back to the attack, but in an instant I had cleft his skull with my half sword and he fell.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

"HERBERT, beware! Alexis creeps behind thee," suddenly cried Amy from half-way down the stairs, for she hastened—God bless her brave heart!—to my assistance. With the words her pistol discharged its contents, and one moment later the sword of Alexis passed through the upper part of my chest, near the right shoulder, from back to front. I heard Amy's shriek as I fell, and for a day, or it may be two days, that agonised cry was the last thing of which I was conscious, for in falling I banged my head so sorely against the hilt of a sword lying upon the ground that the few wits therein contained took flight and left me helpless.

When I opened my eyes I lay in a room whose heat and odour reminded me of the hut of Kiril; where was I—what had happened? For a space I could remember nothing. I allowed my eyes to wander lazily from object to object—no, it was not Kiril's hut, for there the stove