

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

stood here, the table in that corner, the window was on the right of the door.

When I attempted to move my head there was pain in my shoulder, therefore I lay still and wondered, closing my eyes. Presently some one entered. This was an old peasant woman, who came, it seemed, to doctor me, for she removed the coverings over my shoulder, whence the pain had come, and applied herbs and ice, muttering something which I could not follow—spell or incantation, or what not. When she had finished I opened my eyes and allowed her to see that I was sensible.

The old woman crossed herself and bowed low to me. "The boyar has returned from death to life," she said, "glory be to God!"

"Amen," said I feebly; indeed, though I moved my lips I doubt whether any sound came.

"I will tell the boyarina," the hag continued and disappeared.

A few moments later there came the sound of quick feet without and there entered some one.

"Now who is the boyarina?" I asked myself languidly; "and what is the meaning of all this?"

Then Amy came to my couch-side, and laid a gentle cool hand upon my brow and spoke kind words, giving thanks to the Almighty that I was restored at last to consciousness. I lay still with closed eyes, for the sound of her voice and the touch of her hand were so exquisite to me that I feared to end them by making any movement.

"Am I in Heaven, Amy," I whispered at length, "or still on earth?"

"Nay, you live and shall live," said Amy, "please God. Do you suffer much pain?"

I opened my eyes now and gazed into hers. Amy's face was white and her eyes looked as though they had wept much. There was nothing of their usual haughty fire to be seen, but in its place a gentleness and pity which I had but rarely discerned there.

"Yes, there is pain in my shoulder, and I am very very weary," said I, and then, as she has since informed me, I yawned lustily and forthwith fell asleep.

When I awoke and opened my eyes Amy sat close to the couch. I now felt stronger. "Amy, tell me why I lie here—it is a peasant's hut, is it not? And how come you to be with me? Is this Moscow?"

"God forbid!" she exclaimed. "Do you then remember nothing?"

"I remember that Krapatkin is dead and that I am in hiding from the Tsar; dost thou hide also? And why have I fallen ill in this hut, for ill and weak I am?"

Then Amy reminded me little by little of all that had happened and which, for the time, I had entirely forgotten, though since that day the memory of every moment of our flight and of the battle at Krapatkin's house has returned to me doubly vivid. Up to the end of the fight she carried her tale and there ended for the day, for I yawned and grew weary—I who up to this hour had never known weariness—refusing to continue until to-morrow.

So, protesting, I saw Amy depart, and in her place returned old Marfa, the serf, the wise woman of the village, who doctored me and attended to my wants, and until next morning I, who had tasted of Heaven while Amy sat and talked to me, lay in darkness, a sick and discontented man of earth who waited impatiently for God's sun to shine once more upon his heart.

Amy came daily and sat by my side for many hours. From her I learned all that had passed since the moment of my overthrow.

"The sword of Alexis passed through your body," she told me, "and you fell, as I thought, dead. Then both the Nagoyes looked towards me, who had nothing but thy dagger, which I caught up, to defend myself withal. They looked upon me, and the elder laughed.

"What should that avail thee against our two swords?' he said.

"This,' said I, 'that if either of you advance one step towards me, it shall find its way to my heart; I swear it.'

"Do nothing rashly, Amy,' cried Alexis; 'we shall not come near thee.'

"The brothers consulted awhile in whispers, and while they talked two things happened: the one, I—stooping over thee—discerned, as I believed, a breathing; and the other that a horse galloped up to the very door and some one banged upon the panels demanding admittance. Alexis opened to him and there entered, panting and perspiring, a Strelitz soldier, who blinked and crossed himself as his eyes encountered the light and he saw the sight which was here revealed to him—for indeed the place resembled the shambles. The fellow handed Nagoy a paper. 'From the Tsar,' he gasped.

"Alexis read the writing and passed the paper to his brother.

"'The Tsar has changed his mind,' laughed the elder Nagoy; 'thou art to be spared, Amy Romalyn, and carried back to him.'

"'Fear nothing, Amy,' cried Alexis, 'thou shalt not be carried back.'

"'Fool!' said his brother, reproving him, 'beware! This Strelitz hath ears, like another.'

"Alexis turned upon the Strelitz. 'What said the Tsar to thee?' he asked fiercely.

"'I must overtake the Boyar Nagoy or die,' said the man; 'and since I failed to overtake thee, I am a dead man.'

"'Go without, I will speak to thee presently,' said Alexis, and the Strelitz departed.

"Then the brothers quarrelled over me, for Afanassy Nagoy said that the Tsar must be obeyed, and Alexis cursed the Tsar and his brother also.

"'I swear she shall not return to Moscow,' he said; and I cried out: 'That is true, Alexis, for all the Nagoyes in Muscovy shall never carry me alive to the Tsar.'

"'It is easy to say that the Strelitz arrived too late,' said Alexis. 'What if the Tsar's first commands were obeyed before the fellow came with

new instructions? Are we to blame that our horses outran his? Moreover, Maria will benefit, and, as thou knowest, I have sworn to possess this Anglichanka.'

"I allowed this boast to pass," said Amy, smiling upon me as I lay listening and fuming in helpless rage, "since I now knew that my brave Herbert still lived, which Alexis knew not. After this the brothers conferred in lower tones, so that I heard no more, but sat upon the steps between these men and thy body, lest they should learn that there was still breath in thee.

"Presently, their consultation being over, Alexis spoke:—

"'Amy,' said he, 'it is decided between us that we shall both return with our tale to the Tsar. This tale shall set forth that thou and thy kinsman are both dead, the later message of the Tsar sparing thee having gone astray. Thou shalt be left here in charge of the Strelitz soldier, who shall have his orders concerning thee. When I return I shall make further disposition for thy safety and happiness. Be sure that thou shalt be well and considerably treated and shalt learn to think kindly of me. Remember to my advantage that I have saved thee from the Tsar.'

"I will remember," said I.

"Thou shalt remain meanwhile not here, but in a village which lies a league from the great road, whither the Strelitz shall escort thee. Within a week, unless the Tsar has by that time ended me, I shall return."

"With that the brothers withdrew, and I presently heard the sound of a sledge upon the snow, which told of their departure in the carriage which had brought us two to this place.

"Then the Strelitz came, a good fellow, of whom I quickly made an excellent friend. By his help thou wert conveyed to a hand-sledge and so drawn easily and without jolting to this hut, where old Marfa, good soul, has by God's mercy wooed thee back to life."

"Marfa and thou, Amy, but chiefly thou," said I. "Even now, if I had not thy voice to hear and thy face to gaze upon, I should soon sink back into the pit."

"Nay," laughed Amy, "if thou speak thus foolishly it is time I left thee to sleep off thy foolishness. Moreover, let Marfa have her due."

"But stay, Amy, what of this Alexis—has he returned?" I asked.

"He is still absent; time enough for Alexis when I desire a husband," she laughed.

"Oh, that I were strong and well," said I, tears of weakness coming to my eyes; "a pretty protector am I, Amy, lying helpless here."

"Fret not," she said, "so shalt thou the sooner gain strength. As for Alexis, let him come; the very knowledge that thou art alive will so fright him that we shall soon be done with his presence."

"But what if he trade upon my weakness? How easily were I put aside, having not the strength of a mouse; and then what of thee? Who shall protect thee from him?"

"Why—why where is thy stout heart?" she laughed. "As for me, I feel able this day to deal with fifty Nagoyes. Rest in peace, Herbert, for see we have changed places; this time I shall be protector for both myself and thee!"

Two days later Alexis arrived in the village and came to seek Amy in the hut in which I lay, directed thereto by our good Strelitz, who discreetly, and by Amy's advice, said nothing of any sick man. As for ourselves, we had seen him ride past the window and were prepared for him.

"Greeting and all love to thee, my sweet

bride!" cried Alexis, entering the hut quickly and with arms extended to clasp Amy.

Then, suddenly, his eye fell upon my couch. Never shall I forget the change that came over the fellow's face as he started and stopped, as though frozen to the spot on which he stood.

"Diavol!" he muttered. His eyes travelled to Amy's face, and the first look of fear and rage changed into an expression of haggard anguish. "Was he then not slain?"

I spoke, laughing: "I have yet to thank thee, Alexis Nagoy, for a dig from behind; in our country the man who so fights is called 'coward' and even harder names".

Nagoy took no notice of my words.

"Amy, I have come to bear thee away," he said. "All is ready for our marriage."

"Excepting the bride," she laughed. "I am otherwise occupied at present, Nagoy; I have no leisure for marriage. My kinsman needs tending; he has been sick almost to death."

"I will wait," said Alexis, "a little while."

"It is useless, Nagoy," I cried. "Amy will have none of thee if thou wait from now to Doomsday."

"That shall lie between thee and me, Shadwell," said Alexis, turning upon me. "I could

fall upon thee now, if I would, and so the decision should be reached this instant; but——"

Alexis did not finish his sentence. His eyes sought Amy's face, and there read Heaven knows what things, but he continued after a moment:—

"Well, take time to recover strength. I will show her that Alexis Nagoy can deal as easily with a whole man as with a sick one."

"Next time there will be no thrusting from the back!" said I, foolishly fearful lest by this speech he should have gained Amy's approval; "remember that, Nagoy."

"There are many things that I shall remember when we meet," he replied; "meanwhile I shall abide in the village, lest, remembering more fearfully than I, thou recover too soon and depart in safety."

At this Amy laughed aloud. "Fear not, Nagoy, I will hold him to it; he shall not play the coward," she cried. But I, too furious to speak, could only mutter in my teeth that for these words Alexis should one day pay very dearly.

"Well, the sooner the better!" said he, and Amy laughed again as the fellow left us.