

CHAPTER XXXIV.

My recovery was not of the most rapid, and even when at length I was able to get upon my feet and totter weakly from couch to window and back again, my strength so lagged behind the desire to be strong that I began to despair of ever seeing myself restored to full vigour.

During all this time Alexis Nagoy lived in the village. From time to time I saw him from the window, and Amy saw and spoke with him frequently, when, said she, he would forever prate of love and marriage. She should be baptised and confirmed into the Holy Orthodox Church and what not, to all of which things Amy said nothing, excepting that her charge grew daily in strength.

"Let him grow and afterwards escape where he will," said Alexis once; "and come thou with me this very day, my estate is but ten leagues distant." But Amy replied that she must first finish her task in nursing her kinsman to full strength; "and afterwards," said

she, "there is his consent to be obtained. Wouldst thou have a maiden marry without consent of her guardian?"

"Do not mock me, Amy!" he said angrily; "you mend this fellow only that he may be ripped again."

"Alas, poor Herbert!" Amy murmured. "Must his poor back suffer a second time?"

"I know not why I do not leave him to stew—that were mercy as much as he deserves—and carry thee away by force."

"Here is a conundrum, indeed! Is it because thou darest not, Nagoy?"

"Tempt me not to strike thee," said the boyar fiercely; "in this country women whose tongues wag are soon taught silence."

"Then I think I shall never be a boyar's wife," said Amy; "for the rest, do not strike me, Nagoy, nor attempt to take me by force, for thou shouldst find, firstly, that I am not without a sting of my own, and, secondly, that my kinsman Shadwell, though still weak and but half a man, is yet man enough for an Alexis Nagoy, provided that this Alexis Nagoy stand to him face to face, and thrust not from behind."

Nagoy raised his hand as though to strike,

but the blow did not fall and the fierce boyar departed.

"What wouldst thou have done if he had struck thee?" I asked Amy, when she repeated this conversation for my entertainment.

"He should never have struck me," said Amy. "If the Tsar refrained, surely a Nagoy might, who is to Cæsar as a barking dog to a tiger that watches to spring."

I know not the mind of this Alexis Nagoy, nor whether he had ever intended to await my restoration to health in order to put to the test his prowess with the sword against my own, or whether he had used this boast but as a stalking-horse, intending to obtain his real end by treacherous means while still I lay helpless. But this is certain: that he attempted neither to carry away the lady nor to rid himself by treachery of her helpless protector; but, after a month, and just as I began to practise myself in the use of my sword-arm in preparation for our meeting, he disappeared and returned no more.

Two weeks after this Amy and I left the village, having bought from the serfs, who by this time were to a man Amy's devoted friends, horses, and a telega or cart, for by this time

the roads were covered by a mixture of snow and mud, and the travelling was very wearisome, and not a little dangerous. We travelled by short stages, for I was not as yet at my full strength, and since we were not pursued, there was no need for particular haste, only, we agreed, we must by all means arrive in time for the first English vessel which should reach Archangel at the opening of navigation after the frost of winter.

But being constantly in Amy's company, a delight which must end or at least be shared by others when aboard ship, I regretted not one yard of the road, nor one hour of the month of days which our journey occupied. Amy was by this time the old Amy, or nearly so. She was the old Amy, yet with a difference. As full of spirit, as ready to mock, to ridicule, even to turn upon a man suddenly and at a word in scorn and anger, and yet softened, chastened, returning more easily to the gentler mood.

Both delight and pain were my portion: delight to be with Amy, to see her and hear her voice, to be in constant touch with her; pain that, though so near to her and she mostly so kind, so friendly, I could come no nearer, as it seemed, to her heart of hearts. Of like for me

she had plenty, and showed it without stint, but of love I could see no sign. Nay, if I showed by flattering word, or foolish bashful behaviour that I would hint, if I dared, of my great longing for something better than the good sisterly friendship which she gave me unsparingly, Amy's favour seemed to vanish, and she would speak shortly, angrily even, as in the days of old when even a sisterly liking for me was absent.

So that I almost despaired of that which was the great desire of my life—the gaining of Amy's heart of hearts for my own.

When within a day's journey of Archangel a surprising thing happened. We, jolting along slowly in our village cart, became suddenly aware that there overtook us two travelling carriages, each drawn by four horses abreast, cantering rapidly.

"Boyars, Amy," said I; "let us draw aside out of the way and allow them to pass. Huddle your face in your furs, lest these be some who have seen us at Court; I will do the same."

Thus, when the great people passed us, our faces were so well hidden in the wide fur collars of our shoobas that he would have been clever who should have recognised us.

When the two carriages had dashed past us as we sat in our humble vehicle half in the ditch and half out, "Didst thou get a sight of either of the two boyars, Amy?" said I. I had caught a glimpse of one dozing amid his furs, and the face—what I saw of it—was strangely familiar.

"I saw both," laughed Amy, "and knew both."

"Was one Peesemsky, our little envoy at the Queen's Court, with whom we came to Muscovy?"

"Peesemsky was certainly one. But didst thou not see the other? It was our good Muirhead, and both men slept like bears in winter."

So it proved when we reached Archangel next day, and I think there were never two men more astounded and amazed than were those two good fellows to see Amy and me still in the land of the living.

"By the mercy of God!" exclaimed Muirhead, as we appeared suddenly before him at the house which he and Peesemsky occupied together. "Do I see visions? This is not you, Shadwell, and Amy Romalyn, in the flesh? Why——"

"In the flesh certainly, and as certainly by the mercy of God," said I, and Amy laughed

and said that she warranted there had been much hard lying in Moscow anent our destruction. "Tell us that history, Muirhead, according to the version prepared specially for Cæsar's reading."

"The Tsar sent men to cut you both to pieces," began Muirhead, "and another, amending the order, whereby you, Shadwell, should have been destroyed and Amy brought back alive. The last messenger, said the Nagoy, arrived too late, for, after a great fight, both of you fell, Krimsky having slain Amy and Afanassy Nagoy ending Shadwell here, who first slew Krimsky, and also Belsky. Tell me now the true version."

This we did, and, our tale finished, Muirhead resumed his story, which was remarkable and tragic enough.

For it appeared that when the Tsar heard of Amy's death at Krimsky's hands, he fell into so terrible a passion of rage that none dared approach him for two days, unless compelled to do so. No man was safe in his presence. After these two days he grew quieter, but was sullen and thoughtful. After a week he sent for Maria Nagoy and bade her prepare for marriage, and fourteen days later the two were married. But

meanwhile the young Prince Ivan, the Cæsarevitch, wept and grew thin, and one day when the Tsar spoke with him, angrily bidding him bear himself in a manly fashion, as a prince should, young Ivan took heart of grace and stood to his terrible father, accusing him of many things, but chiefly of the murder of Amy. No man had ever before seen the Cæsarevitch in this mood nor had deemed him capable of it. Boris Godunof, who alone was present, declared to Muirhead that if the heavens had fallen he could not have been more amazed. The positions of these two were suddenly reversed, for the son stood and upbraided, calling Heaven to witness, while the father sat and wept and groaned, beseeching pardon of God for his sins, but especially for this one, of Amy's murder.

Then most abruptly the Tsar's mood changed. In the place of prayers and the sorrow of the sinner came suddenly a fit of ungovernable frenzy and rage, as a peal of deafening thunder will crash in the midst of the soft patter of quiet raindrops. Whether the Cæsarevitch—accusing his father of many things—had said some word which infuriated him Godunof cannot tell, but the wretched monarch suddenly rose to his feet and without warning committed the most horrible

of all the many crimes which have made his name a terror among all civilised people. With his dubina he struck his own son dead at his feet. This had happened a month ago.

At Muirhead's recital of this tragedy Amy sobbed as though her heart would break; her hand sought mine and pressed it tightly. When Muirhead had finished she bade me follow her where we should be unobserved; her eyes were full of tears.

"Herbert," she said, "until Muirhead told us this last tale of the Tsar's madness, for mad he is, I had not realised in full what it is thou hast done for me. Thou hast taken me out of hell itself, my best and dearest friend."

"If I have saved thee, thou hast also saved me," said I; "we are quits, Amy."

"Nay, even though I had saved thy life, what is death in comparison with the sufferings of hell on earth? To this I should have been condemned but for thee, dear Herbert; what shall I give thee in return, say, fear not to ask, there is no reward too great for such a service?"

Amy trembled and wept and clung to me. For a moment I was tempted to ask of her that which my soul desired above all earthly things—her love; but I refrained, for, thought I,

love cannot be given as a reward for services rendered; if love is love it must sow itself, fertilise itself, take root and grow, and blossom of and by itself; love that was born of gratitude would soon wither and perish!

Moreover, it would be but a base thing to accept from Amy in an hour of emotion and great agitation a gift which in calmer moments she would hesitate to bestow upon me. Therefore I controlled my longing to take her to my heart and claim hers, though the task was not an easy one.

"Nay, we are quits, Amy, as I say; thou art nothing in my debt," said I, disengaging her hands from my shoulders.

"Nay—speak—speak!" she cried; but I shook my head and said nothing, leaving the room rather than be tempted to ask of her what was not my own by right of conquest. Love in payment for service? God forbid!

Whereupon Amy, as I afterwards learned, and that from the best authority, sat down and set herself to laughing and crying by turns, calling me dreadful names the while, such as "honest fool; sheep; blindworm; most dear, most obstinate, most impenetrable blockhead"—and so forth.