

The Knight of the Silver Star

A Romance of Drussenland

By PERCY BREENER

Copyright, 1907, by R. F. Fenno & Co.

CHAPTER XIX.

WITHIN two hours the camp was struck. The count and I met as the forces were about to move.

"I have only just heard of your return, Sir Verrail. I congratulate you."

I thanked him. "Is it by your advice that we move the camp tonight?" he asked.

"No. I had no idea such a movement was contemplated. You would have had a freer hand, count, had you not brought her highness upon this expedition."

"I made a mistake," he answered. "A grave one, count. You must have a care that it does not lead you to destruction."

"You speak in riddles, Sir Verrail. 'Not such deep ones but that you can read them,' I answered. 'Indeed, it is a warning that I give rather than a riddle I ask. Your friends may be many, Count Vasca, but you have many enemies too.'"

"One stands before me," he said quickly.

"It is well to know how we stand toward each other, Count Vasca. I always watch my enemies."

"And I always crush mine, Sir Verrail, sooner or later. You may yet regret that you have avowed yourself my enemy."

"I come but recently from Yadasara, count. I heard enough to make me glad that I am not your friend."

"You choose a coward's time to speak your insults—a time when it is impossible for me to punish you."

"The time will come, count."

"It shall come," he hissed.

He turned from me and disappeared in the darkness.

I was as far as ever from discovering how matured the count's plans were. I judged that the hurried moving of the camp did not suit his schemes altogether, but that it would



"IT SHALL COME."

have the effect of frustrating them I doubted. He would not have ventured upon such treachery had he not every prospect of success, and my hopes grew weaker as the main body and the right wing moved forward. If they were all traitors what hope was there? Sir Valen thoroughly trusted the left wing, and I was more inclined to think that he did so justly when I saw the pleasure of the men at the fact that the princess was to ride among them. They welcomed me too.

It was a difficult night march. Under ordinary circumstances it would have been a foolish one. The woods were thick and the paths through them narrow. The men were forced in places to struggle and push forward in twos and threes. We instructed the men that in case of attack they were to fall back and surround the princess. Her protection was to be their especial care. This arranged, Sir Valen took command, keeping as close to the main body as possible, while Jasar and I rode on either side of the princess. Jasar was mounted on a strong animal, and I saw a sword hit peep from under his cloak.

The stumbling of Jasar's horse startled me.

"Hear you anything besides the tramping of our men, Sir Verrail?" he asked.

"No. Where?"

"To our right. Listen!"

I pulled up my horse. So did Daria. I could hear the steady tramp of our own men around us, but there was another sound away to our right, a faint echoing tramp.

"An echo, I think."

And then, as if in contradiction, there came a clear sound, the jingle of harness, faint, but clear, as when in a company of horsemen several of the animals throw their heads up at the same time and shake their bridles.

We rode on again and, overtaking a knight, I told him to hurry forward and tell Sir Valen that I believed the enemy were marching with us through the woods. Presently the knight I had sent forward returned. Sir Valen had instructed the men to go slowly and to keep well together, and he wanted me to make sure that I had plenty of men behind me to repulse any attack which might be made in the rear. Leaving the princess in Jasar's charge, I rode back and got the rear portion of the left wing close up. With an effort I spoke gaily to the men, and I was convinced now that they were to be trusted. Then I rejoined Daria and Jasar.

"It would be well to send forward to the count and call a halt," I said. "We are approaching open country, and we cannot tell what awaits us there."

"Act as you think best," Daria answered.

I sent forward to Vasca. The troops halted immediately, and a few minutes afterward Vasca himself joined us.

"A perilous journey, your highness, but well accomplished," he said. "After a short halt shall we move forward and camp in the open? Our vanguard is now at the edge of the woods."

"The open country may bring us in sight of the enemy, Sir Vasca," she said.

"Your highness will remember that it was not my wish to advance tonight. I, too, think it probable that the enemy are before us."

"They have been marching with us all night, count," I said. "Their movements were so well timed with ours that they must have been watching the camp."

"That is unlikely. Still, if it is so, we are prepared to meet them, I trust."

"Quite prepared," I answered. "True men have no fear even if numbers are against them."

I left him with Daria, Jasar keeping watch upon him, and joined Valen.

"Is the trap set for us, think you?" I asked.

"I do not know. We may have got out of it in time."

"At last you believe in the trap, then?"

"I cannot understand such villainy," he answered. "Yet—"

"Why, yes, Verrail. Unwillingly I am bound to admit that I believe it."

"Pick me a dozen men," I said. "I am going to ride forward and see what is in store for us."

With my little company I went through the woods, keeping well away from the main body, but being careful not to go far enough to fall in with the enemy, who had kept pace with us through the night. In the gray dawn the enemy were taking up their position, ready to attack us as soon as we were in the open.

We went slowly and silently back. Life has an added charm when death stands near. The day had dawned, and, like myself, I doubt not that many of my companions wondered if they would see the close of it. Was there any way of insuring safety even for some of us? There was one way which held a prospect of success. I had thought of it before, but had put it aside as unpracticable and dangerous, yet now it seemed worthy of consideration. Why not make Count Vasca a prisoner? It could be done quickly and quietly if he were still with the princess. Should he cry out there were many ways of silencing him. It seemed to me that it would be a small crime to silence so great a scoundrel forever. It was dangerous and would bring matters to a head suddenly.

Daria might not agree to this seeming piece of treachery, so I determined to make him a prisoner first and explain to her afterward.

I put spurs into my horse, but I was too late. Vasca had left.

A messenger was dispatched at once. Safety seemed to lie in Vasca's capture, and here was my opportunity. I drew Valen aside for a moment.

"He must not return," I said.

"Is that the princess' order?"

"No. Make him a prisoner first, ask her permission afterward. It is no time to be courteous."

"It may be a false move," he said doubtfully.

"Possibly, but it may be salvation," I answered. "Players for high stakes, Sir Valen, have to risk much."

But again my plan failed. The count excused himself from coming. The enemy was moving in the open, he said, and he could not leave his command.

"Are our troops moving?" asked Daria.

"They were about to do so, your highness," the messenger answered.

"Go to the count and command him not to move until he has our instructions. A guard for us, gentlemen. Sir Valen, move the left wing slowly forward, but not out of the wood. Keep in touch with the main body."

She mounted her horse lightly, Jasar holding her stirrup. "Sir Verrail, gentlemen, follow us. We will fight this battle our way, not in Count Vasca's."

She would have inspired any man with courage. She put a better spirit into me.

"Have a care, dear one," I whispered as I rode beside her.

"Have a ready sword to defend me if necessary," she answered.

We rode up to the count even as the messenger was delivering his message.

"We sent for you, count," she said severely.

"Pardon, your highness, but I could not come."

"We sent for you," she repeated. "Have you yet to learn the virtue of obedience?"

"Your highness, I—"

"Disobedience is the mark of a rebel, Count Vasca. Look to it or we shall be in danger of misjudging you. Do you only now discover that the en-

emy are before us? You have a poor knowledge of this campaign, it seems. The main body will advance at once into the open. The woods sweep round to right and left in a semicircle. The enemy are hidden there awaiting us. Your mission is to draw them from their hiding place." Then, turning to a knight with us, she went on: "Go to the right wing and command them to advance through the woods and attack the enemy in the rear on that side. There are half-hearted warriors among us. We shall know how to deal with rebels. For Drussenland and for your princess, forward!"

I half expected the count to refuse, but he did not do so. Either he was uncertain of himself or the plans for success were so complete that the manner of attack was of little importance.

He gave a quick word of command, and as the troops moved we rode back and with the left wing set out to attack the enemy on that side.

There was a distant shout, and a flight of arrows fell among them.

"If a stray shaft should find a weak spot in Vasca's harness, all might be well yet," I said to Valen.

"He is not likely to run much risk," he answered.

"You are convinced now, then?"

"Yes, Verrail. It will go hard with us, I think, but at least we'll make history today. We shall have the enemy and the traitors before us, and we'll fight as we fought at the bridge. Traitors are mostly cowards, and they shall pay a dear reckoning."

Horsemen came from the woods on either side, and the battle in the open became general.

The princess halted. "Those men fight like fiends," she said. "The treachery is not so deeply rooted as you supposed, Sir Verrail."

"A few men's lives are nothing to the count who conceived the treachery," said Jasar.

"The greater the confusion yonder the more safety for us," I said to Valen.

"Our turn will come. We have only to wait," he answered.

With him I arranged what knights were to keep with the princess.

"She will want you with her," he said.

"When the time comes I ride side by side with you," I answered.

"I am glad," he returned.

We had not long to wait. From the woods opposite a large body of horsemen came slowly. I expected to see them charge into the thick of the fight, but instead they suddenly made a wide sweep and came toward us. Our archers sent one flight of arrows among them, and then we charged.

Powerful as the enemy before us were, they could not withstand our charge. We cut into them, sweeping them back in confusion. The same spirit was in us all. No quarter was asked for nor given, and many a rider, friend and foe, lay with limbs outstretched, his day's work and his life's work over. We turned and swept back again to the foot of the rising ground on which Daria stood with the company especially reserved to defend her. They greeted us with a cheer, and we shouted answer. It sounded like a cry of victory.

"They were driven back upon the main body, Sir Verrail. The face of the battle is changing."

Valen pointed with his sword. The fight which had begun fiercely was lessening. Our true enemies and our traitor friends were beginning to understand one another.

"We have shown them the men they have to reckon with," I answered.

Some show of fighting was still maintained in front of us, and our archers sent quick flights of arrows into the mass. They were all enemies there, though they would not have us think so yet. Then a mass of horsemen came toward us at a hand gallop.

"Does Vasca lead them?" I asked.

"I cannot see him," Valen answered. "You must live until later in the day to pay your debt to him."

"I shall live to do it," I answered as we charged again.

I felt that I spoke the truth.

It was a fiercer struggle than the first. Twice I was nearly thrown from my saddle, once, for a few moments, losing all consciousness of my surroundings and striking madly about me as a man might do in a nightmare. It was fortunate for me that my horse kept his legs. It was Valen's voice that brought me back to consciousness.

"Not too far, Verrail. They are surrounding us."

Mechanically almost I swung my horse round, and we began to fight our way back. Valen's warning opened my eyes to the danger, and the press of the enemy, who had closed in behind us as we had fought our way through the mass in front, told me that they had outmaneuvered us. Even now we were too late. There was a triumphant shout as another body of horsemen went by our struggling mass and rode straight for the rising ground. What could that little company do against such an overpowering enemy?

"For the princess!" I shouted, rising in my stirrups and swinging my sword with the renewed strength despair gave me. "Back to the princess, every one of us! We'll leave our bodies there, not here!"

"For the princess!" some one shouted, and we dashed forward.

It was no small body of horsemen that turned to prevent us cutting our way to our comrades, but at least five to one.

"For the princess!" we cried.

"For the king!" they shouted answer.

And from many it was a lying shout. This was only the beginning of their treason. They were bent on being as false to the king presently as they had already been to the princess.

Slide by slide Valen and I went, inch by inch fighting our way toward the rising ground, encouraging each

other, helping each other. How our companions fared I know not. Valen and I seemed to be alone in the midst of enemies. Still we went on step by step. There seemed no power strong enough to stop us. Success seemed certain when suddenly I was alone. A rush of horsemen parted us, and I saw my comrade carried away from me, hard beset. Still the fight was not lost. I shouted to him, and he heard me. I saw the horsemen nearest to him go down as he turned, fighting his way back to me, and I pressed my horse forward to meet him. And we succeeded. We did meet, but at what a cost! Even as I shouted in triumph a sword flashed above him and fell, splitting through his armor near the neck.

"The princess!" he cried once, loudly as in full health, and then he pitched forward from his saddle and lay almost under my horse's hoofs.

I cut under the man who struck the blow, and my horse stumbling, I came to the ground, falling across the bodies of my friend and my foe.

I was unhurt and sprang to my feet. A clear space was round me. With his sword in his hand Count Vasca looked at me. He did not ride at me at once, but he smiled.

"The time has come, Sir Verrail," he said.

It was his smile, not his words, which maddened me.

"Ah, good foe, man," I cried, "grant me but a little space to prove this man a coward and a liar, and on my oath I will throw down my sword and you can work your will upon me."

CHAPTER XX.

THEY might have given me leave, for Vasca had not too many friends, but the count gave them no time to answer. In a moment he was upon me, and his first blow split my harness at the shoulder. I knew that the wound was deep, for afterward it troubled me sorely; but, then, I hardly felt it. My whole ambition was to kill Vasca. That done it mattered not what happened. Even Daria was forgotten for the time. It was an unequal struggle. He was mounted and fresh, I on foot and weary. As he tried to ride me down I caught the horse's bridle and attempted to throw him back upon his

haunches. The count was too good a horseman to let me succeed in this, however. He knew his advantage and was not going to throw it away by having to meet me on foot.

"The time is nearing its end," he laughed. "I told you that I always crushed my enemies."

He dealt me a blow which staggered me as he spoke. The time was nearing its end. What could I do?

He followed me up as I staggered back, prepared to strike again.

I made a feint, then dodged his blow and sprang up at him, my foot upon his foot in the stirrup. My arms were round him. His horse plunged, and in an instant the count and I were on the ground. Now we were both swordless and helmetless. My fingers gripped his throat.

"The time has come!" I hissed as, still gripping his throat with one hand, I struck his head twice, thrice, with all my strength with the other.

I should have killed him. My fingers would never have relaxed until they had gripped life out of him, but it was not to be. Men rushed in to separate us. I was dragged from my victim and a few moments later was lying on my back, my arms bound to my side.

The count was not dead, but he was unconscious. They took him up, and a space was cleared for them to carry him to some spot where he could be attended to. And it was through this space that I saw the last incident of that terrible day—the end of the fight. The rising ground was before me, and its gallant company of defenders lay still upon the sides of it. As I looked the enemies' hands were laid upon the princess, and only one friend was beside her—Jasar. Foes surrounded her and dragged her from her horse. Seeing that all was lost, the priest might have considered that his life was still valuable to his mistress, that he might help her in her captivity. But the hands were laid round upon her, and that hurt him. His sword came down upon the nearest of her enemies, and for a minute he was dealing out death around him. They would not have killed a priest, possibly, but Jasar, save in raiment, was a priest no longer. As a warrior there was no quarter for him, and I saw him fall dead at

the feet of the woman he had loved and served so well.

It was the last thing I saw—the last episode of that day—for a blackness came between my eyes and the blue sky, and for me the day ended.

When I recovered consciousness we were within sight of Yadasara. I was lying upon a rough litter, which four men carried carefully, and the swinging motion was not unpleasant. My arms were no longer bound, and the wound in my shoulder, which throbbed considerably, had been carefully bandaged up.

I raised my head to look about me. "You're better, then?" said a man, coming to the side of the litter.

"Yes, it's hot, and I'm thirsty. May a prisoner drink?"

"Why, yes. We've been doing our best to keep you alive since yesterday."

"Since yesterday! A day and a night passed?"

He nodded.

"You know me?"

"You were in my company when you were in the king's guard."

"I remember. It is almost like being among friends."

"You'll hardly find it so yonder," and he waved his hand toward the city.

"I suppose not. Tell me, where is the princess?"

"In front."

"Well—safe?"

"She is well cared for; have no fear of that. You are both too precious to die for the want of a little attention."

"Could I speak to her?"

"No," he answered sharply.

"Not for the sake of old comradeship?"

"No; I cannot do it. I have no ill will toward you. I admire a worthy foe, and if I can do anything for you yourself I will, but I cannot do what you ask with regard to the princess."

"And Count Vasca?" I asked after a pause.

"Much as you are, getting better."

"That is bad news. I had hoped that the debt was paid."

"You did your best," he returned.

"Though we be jailer and prisoner, we have something in common, at any rate," he laughed.

"What is that?"

"We both regret that I did not succeed."

We crossed the river by the bridge of boats, and it was evident that many of the citizens had come out to meet us, for there was much shouting. My former comrade came to my side again.

"A conqueror could not command more interest than you," he said.

"That is poor consolation."

"I think I would be a great traitor rather than nothing," he answered.

"I am not even a great traitor," I said.

"I would not say so if I were you. It is easier to confess and have done with it. Better to die quickly than slowly in the fortress yonder. If I dared do it I would plunge my dagger into you now, and I should be doing you a kindness."

"You think so, friend, but I had rather live. I have been in worse straits than this. I may live to be in worse again."

"You will, and then you may find death too long in coming."

"Death and I seem to be old friends; we have walked so long together," I answered.

"You are a brave man, but a fool!" he said.

With help I walked across the palace yard between ranks of warriors and then was face to face with the king.

"So you come again to Yadasara," he said, a smile upon his lips.

I did not answer. My eyes were fixed on Daria, who stood a few yards from me, guarded by soldiers.

"And you bring a welcome companion this time. We thank you. You made many enemies by your escape, but it has served us better than if you had failed. There's little strength in you now. We must see that that is restored a little before we punish you for your treachery. It would be a poor recompense to see such a man die like a woman."

"Your highness shall not see that," I said.

"We have heard many a strong man boast as much," he answered. "We have good arguments against the boast. To the fortress with him, but treat him gently. He shall have a chance of proving his boast. You, madame, too, are weak, for all you stand so bravely. You shall have rest and gentle treatment for awhile. Then we shall find means to pay you for the lives of our subjects which your rebellion has caused. To the fortress with them both."

I was placed in the litter again and carried up to the fortress. They were very gentle with me, and, knowing what was in store for me, some of them may have pitied me.

The guard of the fortress received us, and with a considerable amount of formality I was handed over to my new jailers. I hardly noticed them, for my eyes were fixed upon a figure sitting in a porch within the gateway. The man sat limply, looked as though he were in pain, and I saw that his arm was in a rough sling. Hope was not dead. I had a friend in the fortress.

"O'Ryan!" I cried, a tone of joy in my voice doubtless.

He looked at me, but did not move. There was an exasperating chuckle at my ear, and I turned to face the Spaniard, Costa.

He was fatter and greater than ever, and he was tricked out in bright armor.

"You'll find that friendship dead," he said.

I glanced at O'Ryan. He had risen

from his seat, and from what I concluded that him in that de- stairs must have had thought.

"I will come and able presently when to your princess," Costa convenient this fortress is honored and stoops, in its place.

He laughed as he upon me. Presently loved by two men can work much which they proceeded finished in not uncomfortable bed, and three Costa sat down on a Three large mated silent until he dur on other

"You have a good day to move directly we were alone daily \$13.25, well lodged." pay \$2 cash

"As an animal fattened I answered.

He laughed.

"That is a good description. 'My position amuses you?'"

"Not yours so much as an's."

"Do you mean the princess?"

"Call her so if you will," answered. "Carrying herself queen—in armor, too; nothing miserable prisoner about her. An amuses me greatly."

"Is she lodged in the fortress?" asked as unconcernedly as possible.

"Yes, my friend. As chief of the fortress I have the honor to entertain you both. She is now clothed as a woman, and as a woman— Ah, she is better, much better. She has beauty enough to make fools of some men."

"Take care you are not one of them," I said.

"You are too good a warning," he answered. "See what the love of a woman has brought you to."

"Love!" I laughed. "Is that laid to my charge too?"

"Do you say you are not in love with this woman who calls herself a princess? Count Vasca spoke differently."

"Am I to be judged by what Count Vasca says of me?"

"There are other matters, many other matters, that I need not tell you of."

"And the punishment?"

"In good time. It will come."

"When I am strong enough to bear it?"

He nodded.

"The machinery and torture, then death and an exit from Yadasara that way," I pointed to the corner of the cell where the locked flagstone was.

"Yes," he said, rising, "but it may be easier than you think—it depends."

"Upon what?"

"The executioners?" I asked after a pause.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"It is always difficult to prophesy the fate of a beautiful woman," he answered. "But for you, my friend, let me advise—make friends with the executioners."

To be Continued

Women as Well as Men are Made Miserable by Kidney and Bladder Trouble.

Kidney trouble preys upon the mind, discourages and lessens ambition; beauty, vigor and cheerfulness soon disappear when the kidneys are out of order or diseased.