THE KNIGHT OF THE SILVER STAR

A Romance Of Drussenland

By Percy Brebner

This romance of the lost kingdom of Drussenland is one of the most fascinating tales that has appeared since the days when Rider Haggard enthralled the public with "She" and "King Solomon's Mines." Read and you will follow a gallant hero of today into a realm where dwell strange people of the time of the crusades, a realm ruled by a beautiful princess, for whose love the Knight of the Silver Star battles with powerful enemies and participates in stirring adventures.

CHAPTER I.

THE sun dropped behind the snow capped mountains to the westward as at the summit of the road I came upon the village of Brayle.

I shifted my knapsack from my shoulder and, leaning upon my staff, stood contemplating one of the most glorious panoramas my eyes had ever rested upon. Behind me to the north, stretching away eastward and westward, the great mountain range lifted its frowning tops to heaven, and to the south and southwest, from whence I had come, the world fell down toward verdure and cultivation and lands watered by streams, which grew slowly and joined together into a river far away toward the horizon.

As evening came rapidly over the lower lands and a chill wind struck the mountain road I entered the village and went toward a long, low building which seemed likely to afford a resting place for the night. Four men were sitting at a rough table smoking and drinking. They were in eager if not an angry conversation, but stopped as I entered and looked at me in surprise. One of them seemed delighted at my advent, for he cried out excitedly:

"The proof! The proof! Look! Here is one of them!"

Another man, whom I rightly took to be the proprietor of the establishment, growled savagely at him to be silent and then rose and saluted me.

"You are a traveler, just an ordinary traveler?"

"Yes; oh, yes," I answered.

There was something in his tone which had the effect of taking the conceit out of one. I have never considered myself quite an ordinary traveler.

"You see, Mustapha!" he said in triumph.

The man addressed looked at me fixedly, but did not speak. He had sprung excitedly from his seat at my entrance.

"I want to stay here tonight," I went on. "Tomorrow I may go farther, or the next day, or it may be next week. It all depends what I find to interest me. There is a fine waterfall near Brayle, I have heard."

"Is it only for this you have come?" asked Mustapha, with some contempt.

"Yes," I answered, throwing down my knapsack and spreading out my hands to the blaze. "What else should I have come for?"

The disappointment in the man's face was quite comical, and his companions burst out laughing.

"Take no notice of what he says," laughed the landlord. "Mustapha is a dreamer. He sees armies along the mountain tops when others see only snow. He hears the ring of steel in every tinkling goat bell and the shout of war in the bark of every dog. A wonderful dreamer is Mustapha."

"I said nothing of armies; I said armed men," the dreamer returned sullenly.

"I am not armed," I observed.

"Many of the men I have seen are not armed," he returned, "but they are no ordinary travelers. They all go the same way—yonder."

His attitude was unconsciously dramatic as he stretched out his arm, pointing toward the mountains to the north.

"Where is yonder?" I asked, more for the sake of saying something than because I wanted to know.

"I only know the legend which everybody knows and which everybody laughs at, but I am wiser than everybody, because I don't laugh."

A roar of merriment greeted this assertion. I could not help joining in it.

"Let me eat first, and then we'll have the story. The story will wait, and my hunger is too ripe to keep."

Of necessity in this history I must talk of myself. I am the hero of it, and he's a poor hero indeed who isn't worth talking about. I was a wanderer by inclination, not of necessity, and, although not actually seeking adventure, I was not unwilling to enjoy some mild form of enterprise should such come my way, but I little thought of the strange experiences which lay before me. Few people even if they are interested will believe the story and will say of me, as was said of Mustapha, "He is a stupid dreamer." To these I can honestly confess that I should sometimes doubt the history myself had I not always before me one incontestable proof of the truth of it. For my personal appearance I stand over six feet, am broad shouldered and athletic, have fair hair and am clean shaven, and I believe there are less well favored men in the world than myself.

Brayle lies, if indeed there is still a village there, at the foot of one of the southern spurs of the great Caucasian range. It is an out of the way place which probably few tourists have discovered. It is enough to say that, while the slopes of the western range are clad in verdure, the central range, as it may be called, is arid, rocky and desolate. Of comparatively uniform height, the mountain tops rise majestically into the region of perpetual snow. There are, practically speaking, no passes, only here and there a goat track, dizzy enough to contemplate, of a mountaineer's zigzag path which leads nowhere in particular, and in the neighborhood of Brayle sheer rock rises perpendicularly from the mountain road which runs through the village. So to my story.

Supper finished and a brier pipe set going, I suggested another log on the fire, more wine—it was very thin wine and harmless—and Mustapha's tale. The man had drunk at my expense or I do not think he would have told the legend.

"It's little I know," he said. "Every one knows nearly as much, only they do not believe. Long ago, long before Brayle existed, somewhere near here there was a pass from this side of the mountains to a country beyond. There was constant intercourse between the people on this side of the mountains and that country, whose inhabitants, though different, were friendly. The men were strong and warlike and the women more than beautiful, far superior to ours, it is said, and the wealth of the country was enormous. In the king's treasury were stored gold and silver and precious stones, greater wealth than man could name. It was a pleasant country, too, warm and sunny, for the great mountains shut it in and sheltered it. They were a strong people and therefore dwelt in safety, a contented people and therefore happy. A day came when the pass was no more. It was a year of fierce storms, such as had not been known until that time nor have been since. Mountains split asunder and changed their shapes, and when the storms were over the pass was gone. The mountain walls of it had split and fallen in, shutting that fair land out of the world forever."

"The legend improves with every telling," said the landlord.

"And it's all a lie," said one of the other men contemptuously. "I've been lost a day and a night upon the mountains and know every inch of them that is to be known. It's all a tale. Mustapha is a stupid dreamer."

Mustapha watched me. My criticism was the only one he cared about. His companions' jeers he had heard often enough before.

"I thought it all a tale once," he said when I made no comment. "I know better now. There was until lately a wise woman in Brayle, and she told me that, though the pass was destroyed, there remained a secret entrance to this fair country through the mountains and that she had seen armed men going there. I did not believe it, and I laughed, but now I laugh no more. I have seen these strange men more than once."

"Where?" I asked.

"On the road you will take tomorrow if you travel to the east. I will show you the place."

"Very well; you shall show me tomorrow. We will start early, Mustapha," I said as I prepared to go to rest for the night.

"I shall wake at dawn," he answered.

"And you will return?" asked the landlord.

"We shall be back before sunset, ready for an excellent supper," I answered.

Back before sunset! I little knew how many sunsets would sink into night before I saw Brayle again.

It was a brilliant but cold morning when we entered the new country. On the way I chatted with Mustapha. Frequently I asked him about various places of which he had told me. I questioned him about the legend and of the strange men he had seen. He showed me the fall which he had previously described, where he had hid and where he had had adventures. We came to rough places, sharp turns and yawning declivities. Sometimes I had to crawl, and often I grew dizzy and sick. We reached what looked like a platform. Suddenly I heard Mustapha shriek. He tried to retrace his steps and failed. In trying to make my own footing secure I fell forward. I began sliding downward. To the left there was a straight, sharply defined black line and nothing beyond it, and there was the sound of rushing water. I succeeded in keeping myself from being drawn to the left, but I accelerated my speed. The way was hard and smooth, and I dashed down, going faster than the rolling mass before me. It was on a lower level than I was, and I got abreast of it as it came to the straight black line. Then—good God, it was horrible! As I passed it upon my straight course the ball gave a final bound and shot out over the black line into space, no longer the ball, but a man, arms and legs widespread.

"Mustapha!" I cried, and my cry rang out and echoed away into the silence of the night, but there was no answer.

A moment later I plunged into loose snow and came to rest. Half stunned, I lay quite still for awhile, and then I picked myself up, wondering if there were any help for Mustapha.

The sudden red glare of a torch flared up and dazzled me. I saw the gleam of it flash pointedly to my breast along a steel blade, and then a stentorian voice rang out:

"In the king's name, halt!"

Halt! It never occurred to me to do anything else. I was dazed and hardly able to stand. The challenge had brought others upon the scene, and half a dozen torches danced fiercely before my eyes. The sword was still pointed toward my breast, and I concluded that in coolness lay my only chance.

"IN THE KING'S NAME, HALT!"

"I am unarmed," I said.

"We don't cut courtesy so fine as that in this country—the blow first and the pardon begging afterward." He laughed as he lowered his sword. "Who are you, and how the devil did you get here?"

"Just slid," I answered. "A few moments ago I was on the mountains somewhere behind me."

"And, by St. Patrick, you're English, with a touch of Irish blood in you for choice."

"Pure English."

"Faith, and I'm sorry for that. You are plucky enough to be an Irishman."

I was too bewildered to be surprised at so strange a meeting. My only clear thought was that an Irishman with a drawn sword in a country known only in legend was probably a very different person from an ordinary Irishman on College Green. It would be wise to let him lead the conversation.

"You're my prisoner," he said. "Will you give me your word not to attempt to escape?"

"Certainly."

"My name is Dennis O'Ryan, Captain Dennis O'Ryan," he said, motioning me to follow him.

"A few moments ago I had a comrade, Captain O'Ryan. As we came down from the mountains he lost control of himself and was carried away yonder. I should like to look for him."

"You'll see him in the morning if your eyesight is good. He won't move. Was he a friend?"

"Yes, a new acquaintance, but danger made us friends."

"Well, Mr."—

"Verrall," I said.

"Well, Mr. Verrall, he's just a corpse now and not a good specimen of a corpse either. You will understand why tomorrow."

We went through a narrow cutting in the solid rock, the torches casting weird and fantastic shadows about us, and presently came to a natural cavern, high pitched and of considerable size. A fire was burning in the center, the smoke, after thickening the atmosphere, finding its way out through a cleft in the roof, and an iron pot was on the fire, a strong, meaty smell coming from it, which, being hungry, I did not find unpleasant.

The ground of the cave was of loose soil, and my companions threw themselves down round the fire. O'Ryan motioned me to do the same. It was the most primitive meal I had ever assisted at, but I have rarely enjoyed one so much.

They were a wild looking crew, not excepting Captain O'Ryan. They were powerful men, big limbed, with shaggy dark hair and mustaches, not ill looking and rather picturesque than otherwise. They wore somewhat tight nether garments and a rough, easy fitting leather shirt reaching nearly to the knees, but cut up at the thighs to give perfect freedom to the legs. Over this they wore a coat of mail, a compromise between plate and chain armor, and long boots of stiff hide, into the heels of which was fixed a spike about half an inch long. A low steel helmet fitting close on to the head completed their attire. For arms each man carried a long serviceable looking sword, which hung from a broad belt fastened loosely round the waist. Except that his armor was brighter and that he had a short feather at the side of his helmet, Captain O'Ryan did not differ from his comrades.

During the meal I was considerably surprised to find that I could understand my companions' conversation. O'Ryan when speaking to me spoke in English, or, rather, Irish, with a brogue, especially when he got excited, which I shall make no attempt to reproduce in these pages. When talking to his men he spoke in their language, which was the most curious conglomeration I have ever heard. It was apparently made up of several tongues, with a general groundwork of Norman-French. English, German and Italian were represented, and, although there were words here and there which I could attach no meaning to, being a good linguist, I could understand most of what was said, and if at first I was not so easily understood I soon managed to talk pretty freely.

The meal ended, O'Ryan kicked the fire into a blaze.

"The history of your strange coming among us should be interesting," he said.

CHAPTER II.

I TOLD him the simple truth, which I must confess sounded very much like a magnificent lie. O'Ryan looked surprised, and his companions whispered among themselves when I had finished.

"I'll take my oath I didn't come that way," the captain said.

"Which way, then?" I asked.

"I'd like to know. We certainly started up a mountain path, but before we had gone far they blindfolded us, and then we went down, where I can't say, but it was somewhere near to roaring water."

"And how long have you been here?"

"I don't know. Time is not of much consequence in this country."

"What did you come for?"

"Money," was his laconic answer.

"There must be a way out," I said.

"There ought to be since you found a way in. We'll talk of it tomorrow. Rest now, for we start early."

It was early morning when O'Ryan woke me.

"Come and look for your friend," he said.

I felt refreshed, but terribly stiff and bruised.

Sunlight was upon the mountain tops, the shadows of light, fleecy clouds crossing them swiftly. Before the cavern ran a broad, hard road, rough and snow caked, descending somewhat sharply to the right, ascending gradually to the left, and directly opposite was the way I had come last night. I stood looking at it in amazement. A glacier stretched up to the mountain opposite, a portion of it ending at the roadway against which the winds had piled loose snow, luckily for me, but part of it had cracked and sunk, turning to run beside the road for a few yards and then ending abruptly in what last night had appeared to me as a black line. Here the glacier was broken off, its support a straight wall of rock going down sheer for at least 500 feet. At the base roared a torrent which burst from the rock and lashed itself into foam over its rocky bed.

"If your comrade wasn't dead before he went over that, he was dead before he got to the bottom of it," said O'Ryan.

I looked down at the water tumbling among the rocks and saw a little black mass lying there motionless, save for the motion the swirling water gave it. It was impossible to say what it was, but I think it must have been Mustapha, for two spots suddenly rose from it, growing larger as they mounted toward us with heavy flight.

"Vultures!" said my companion.

Poor Mustapha! He had expected so much of tomorrow. God rest his soul! He had indeed found a new country.

It was still early when we started upon our journey. Two men were sent on in front and told to keep a sharp lookout; the others fell to the rear, and O'Ryan and I rode alone.

"What am I to expect at the end of this journey?" I asked presently.

"Faith, that's more than I can tell. It's every man for himself here, and you'll find your life pretty much what you make it."

"That sounds promising."

"Oh, there's plenty of promise. It's some of the fulfillment I'm waiting for. It's all very well to live back in the middle ages and feel like the hero of a boys' story book, but it wants paying for."

"Then the legend is true, or partly true?" I said.

"I don't know anything about the legend or how these people came here. Anyway, here they are and engaged in as pretty a piece of war as poor old Ireland has ever suffered from. There are two factions in the country, the king's party and the rebels, who are headed by a relation of his—Princess Daria. Those who fight for the princess fight chiefly for love of her, which is all very well in its way, but not attractive to the adventurer who hopes some day to go home and enjoy himself. The king, on the other hand, pays his soldiers, and, not having enough men in the country to fight his cause, he has got in a few foreigners to help them. I'm one of the foreigners. We have all been brought in secretly, and not a man jack of us knows his way out."

"Does the king pay well?"

"I think he would if he could, but his lack of the necessary troubles me," O'Ryan answered.

"Then how does he manage?"

"Much as they do at home—makes promises and pays for the accommodations. That's not a new trick. It was an old fashioned one in the days of ancient Babylon. The king, as a matter of fact, expects to find a treasure. We were looking for signs of it when you came. I expect the treasure is where the legendary part of the story comes in."

"You found nothing of it?"

"Not a cent. Still, my undertaking the mission means promotion when I return."

"And with a prisoner too."

"I would sooner have had a bit of the treasure to take back," he answered bluntly. "I don't deny that I shall try to make something for myself out of bringing you back."

"How will you explain my coming?" I asked.

It was well that I should know how to speak best for myself. To look after No. 1 seemed to be the creed of the country.

"I shall tell the truth," he continued. "There is no lie to equal it. I'm glad you're a big, healthy looking fellow. We don't take much notice of weaklings. As long as a man has a mighty arm the size of his brain doesn't matter."

The mountains on either side of us narrowed as we went on until we were presently passing through a defile that a few resolute men could have held against an army. I noticed that O'Ryan quickened his pace and became silent for a time.

The defile came to an end suddenly, and we came out on to a broad road which swept round the slopes of the lower hills. An exclamation of astonishment and admiration burst from my lips. Away from the road the hills, green clad and wooded, undulated to level country, which stretched away for miles. Green pastures, arable land, clusters of rough stone dwellings here and there, a river glinting in the sunlight and woody hollows made as fair a landscape as one could wish to see. Cattle were feeding below us, and I saw some women moving about the dwellings at the foot of the hill.

"Your first real glimpse of Drussenland," said O'Ryan.

"Is that how you call the country?"

"I didn't christen it, but that's the name of it."

"It is very beautiful," I said, "and doesn't look as if it were the seat of war."

"Things have been rather quiet lately, probably because there's a storm brewing. You see those women? Women do most of the work just now because all the men are under arms on one side or the other."

"And are unprotected women safe in such times?"

"Well, I won't go quite so far as to say that, but there is a rough sort of gallantry among us that compares fairly well with that of civilized nations when war is the order of the day."

"The legend says the women are beautiful."

"And, by St. Patrick, the legend's right so far! If I ever get back to Ireland there'll be moments when I shall wish myself here again, though the finest pair of eyes in the old country were looking at me. The women are all right and, luckily for most of us, cling to the man who can hold his own against other men."

"Is there no marriage?"

"Oh, yes, we get married after the law of the country, but it's not very binding here, so I suppose most of us will pose as bachelors when we get away, if we ever do. There's no breach of promise and there's no divorce, and if two men quarrel they just go to a quiet spot and hack away at each other until the affair is settled. The one who comes back takes possession of the lady or the money or whatever they have been fighting about."

"Primitive," I said. "I judge, captain, that you are comfortably settled?"

"Trust a son of the house of Michael O'Ryan of County Kerry for that. I've had to fight about her twice, and each time I've crawled home again. Possession is something—nine points of the law, as they say, but the tenth point is always in favor of the man who desires your property and handles a sword as well as or perhaps better than you do."

"Swords! Have you no firearms in this country?"

"There may be a stray revolver or two brought in by some of the foreigners, but they're not much use without ammunition, and that's not to be had in Drussenland."

At a turn of the road I saw again the snow clad peak which I had seen so often yesterday, looking far grander now than it did from the mountains. It rose almost abruptly from the low hills. I mentioned to my companion how I had been struck with it yesterday.

"It is called Khrym, which means the white knight, and it is supposed to rule the destinies of the Drussenlanders," he said.

"They worship it?"

"Not exactly, but it is a symbol of everything that is good and great. The religion is as curious a jumble as the language. I wonder how far our advance guard is ahead? I thought we should have overtaken them by this time."

PRINCESS DARIA.

"Do you expect to be attacked?" I asked.

"No, but we don't want to be too far apart. We are in the rebels' part of the country."

[TO BE CONTINUED.]