

THE KNIGHT of the SILVER STAR

A ROMANCE OF
DRUSENLAND

By PERCY BREBNER

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(Continued)

"Our friend Clinton may be the first to do so," said O'Ryan. "Being first is not always the place one would choose, but it's a position somebody must always occupy. Think you there is a rope handy long enough to reach from the top to the bottom of the wall?"

"I think I could find the rope."
"Very well. Now, is there a ring in the roof firm enough to fix this rope to—firm enough to bear the weight of a man?"

"Yes."
"Then we'll fix the rope in case of necessity."

"The sentry will see you."
"I have a better way," she said suddenly. "I have been washing clothes today. I will hang them to dry. I can fix the rope and let it be hidden under some of the clothes. Does your friend go tonight?"

"No."
Bridget left us.

"Why not tonight?" I asked.
"That road's the last resource," he answered. "It will be the most dangerous way you've ever traversed."

Way you got into this country was child's play to the road you'll take out of Yadasara if you have to use the rope. Patience; we're not caught yet. This knight who came today may be a friend. Before we act it will be well to know that he has not come from the princess with a message for us."

"I should know him."
"She may have to use strange messengers if she is surrounded by treachery."

"How was it the knight entered Yadasara so easily?" I asked.

"Since some about the princess are friends of the king some about the king may be friends of hers. Treachery was never yet one sided. Fill your tankard," he said, pushing me the wine.

Next morning early I took occasion to follow Bridget on to the roof. The sentry was on the wall, standing by a raised battlement, which formed a kind of sentry box. He was a man I knew something of, and he chaffed me for my devotion to Mistress Bridget. I laughed and asked him if he would change places with me.

"If I were sure the captain were on duty," he answered.

"And there's another you'd have to think of," said Bridget as she lifted some clothes to show me where the rope lay curled ready for use. It was deftly done, and I no longer questioned her good will toward me.

The wall rose only about six feet above the roof, and, casually asking permission of the sentry, I clambered up. I was anxious to measure the height of the wall with my eye to see what the ground immediately below was like and to look at the surrounding country.

"An impregnable city," I said.
"Yes," answered the sentry, "and this is one of the lowest parts of the wall."

I nodded him a farewell, hoping he would not be the sentry when the time came for me to go.

"Sharp eyes and wide ears, remember," said O'Ryan as I went to the palace.

The day passed slowly. The king's revels had been protracted to the early hours of morning, and I doubt not the generous wine had flowed freely.

It was late in the afternoon when the king came. He passed through the chamber in which I was stationed, leaning upon the arm of a friend and cracking some jokes with him as he went. Soon afterward the knight who caused me so much anxiety passed. Either he did not see me or else he had no message for me, for he went through the room looking neither to right nor left.

It was dark when I went off actual duty. The king not having retired, I was not at liberty to leave the palace, so made my way to the guard-room. A kind of cloister, open to the square, ran along outside the guard-room, and the night being warm, we gathered there, two or three together, to drink our wine.

Suddenly the tramp of men sounded in the square, and I saw O'Ryan at the head of his company. I was seated in such a position that he must have seen me, but he took no notice. It was an unusual thing for him to be there at all. I heard a captain of the guard ask him the reason.

"The king's orders," he answered shortly.

Then there was the flare of torches in the square, and the king came out, followed by several knights. I only noticed one particularly, the one who walked beside him, the strange knight who had come to the city yesterday. I saw the king whisper to him, and the knight's eyes wandered round the square in search of some one.

With my comrades I had risen to my feet and stood waiting.

The king did not look toward me, but the knight did and our eyes met. Then he turned to the king and spoke to him.

"Perhaps it is no sight for such eyes

as yours," I heard the king say. "Retire if you will."

The knight bowed and crossed the square toward one of the entrances to the palace. There he paused.

"There is a traitor among us. Guard the square well. We shall find a short way of dealing with him. It is easy to play the traitor, but he shall find it difficult to bear the punishment."

Escape seemed impossible, but that short method the king spoke of came as a tonic to me and gave me the courage of desperation. I saw O'Ryan with his company waiting for the king's command. I saw the knight still at the palace entrance regarding the scene as he might have watched an interesting comedy. Who was he? Surely it was he who had betrayed me.

There was a pause—a silence which seemed long. Then the king looked at me quickly, straight and without hesitation. He knew exactly the spot where I stood.

"Seize the traitor, Clinton!" and his arm shot out, pointing at me as he spoke.

It was no time to plead. My sword was in my hand in a moment, and I rushed to the open side of the square. It never occurred to me that I could save my life, but I might escape the fortress. I looked to see O'Ryan rush to fight his way out with me, but he did not do so. Instead he gave a word of command to his company and, leading them, roared as he came:

"For the king's honor! Seize the traitor!"

I was betrayed, indeed, and by the man I had trusted. I dashed onward. That the command to arrest me had come suddenly gave me the advantage for a moment. Those about me had no time to lay hands upon me. I was half across the space toward my only hope of escape before a man came within reach of my sword, and then I seemed to be surrounded.

"Take him alive!" I heard a voice cry. The devil who cried it was behind me. The devil was O'Ryan! Into the thick of my enemies I went, always a little space before me cleared by the swing of my weapon. Yet they closed in upon me. Hands behind attempted to hold me, but I shook them off.

They rushed in upon me on every side. I struck right and left with my sword. I struck out with my left arm. I struggled forward. My enemies fell back from me. Only one man seemed to stand between me and freedom. I cut him from my path and sprang over him as he fell.

"Take him alive!"

The cry was behind me. My enemies were behind me, and I rushed madly through the streets of the city. I did not know the city well, and to my dismay I soon discovered that I had traveled in a circle. Suddenly a man across the street beckoned to me. It was the strange knight. He led me into a narrow passage and through a door but a few moments before my pursuers rushed past. O'Ryan, it seemed, was the traitor, not the strange knight.

"I believed that it was you who had betrayed me. I have wronged you," I said.

"I have a message for you from a woman who loves you well," said the strange knight, "so well indeed that your heart is her only home, and thus she enters it."

The last words were blessed out as a swift blow struck me. I was saved from death by the mailed shirt I wore. I knew the strange knight now—Lady Aldrida!

She threw her arms around me and called to my pursuers. She staggered backward and fell. I escaped into the next street and soon found myself opposite O'Ryan's house.

There were lights within. Two or three torches were before the door, throwing grotesque shadows of men standing there, and in the street to the left and to the right were torches. The place was well watched.

I drew back into the passage down which I had come and considered my position. O'Ryan knew of the rope, and since he had turned traitor it was probably no longer in its place ready for use.

The more I weighed the possibilities so much the more did it seem to me that my only escape lay through the house opposite. There was another fact which hurried my decision. I heard the distant cries of other bands of enemies who had been scouring the city in search of me. If a desperate effort was to be made, now was the time to make it. I gripped my sword firmly, made certain that the dagger in my belt could be easily drawn and then, with a prayer for safety, dashed across the street.

The men before the door were taken by surprise, as I had calculated, but they recovered themselves more quickly than I had expected. I was not well within the doorway before the air was filled with shoutings and the darkness with rushing men.

"Take him alive! Take him alive!"

I dashed into the passage and sprang up the stairs, but I had little start in the race. My enemies were upon the steps behind me, and that I might not be struck in the back I was forced to turn upon them. It was a moment in which a man forgets the sacredness of human life. The first who sprang toward me fell back, with arms wide-spread, clutching at nothing in the air his soul leaping into the unseen ere his body lay still. A second fell toward me flat upon his face. A third spun round and then pitched head foremost into the crowd of shouting men below. Step by step I mounted backward, my face to the enemy, my sword red from point to hilt, the perspiration standing heavy upon my face and arm.

"What is all this?"
The voice behind me nearly took me off my guard.

"Out of the way, old woman!"

"Strike him down!"

"Her husband shall cudgel her presently."

Shouting, they rushed at me again. Bridget was behind me, but she did not come close enough to hinder my defense. I thought I heard her growl with satisfaction as my foremost foes reeled back down the steps. Still I retreated upward.

"The rope!" she whispered.

"Still there?"

"Yes."

She might be deceiving me, but her manner sounded honest. How was she still my friend when her husband was so vile a traitor to friendship?

CHAPTER XVII.

"TAKE him alive!" came the cry. Yes, weakness meant that.

"The roof. There is only the sentinel."

Bridget's words put new courage into me. I stayed another rush and then sprang backward. I was almost at the top of the stairs now.

"Let me pass."

I knew the voice. Sword in hand, O'Ryan pushed his way through the crowd below, jumped across the body of the last man who had fallen and came at me. Had a dash to the roof meant absolute safety at that moment I do not think I should have taken it. My greatest enemy in the world was before me. Revenge and death poised the scales equally. It was his life or mine now. Those below seemed to recognize the supreme moment. They did not follow, but gave the captain free fighting room. I had the advantage in position, but his arm was fresh. Engaging me swiftly, he pressed me sorely. My mad longing for revenge drew an oath from me as he parried my thrusts skillfully. I had never seen him handle his weapon so well before.

With his eyes fixed on mine he watched his opportunity. With a swift stroke he put my sword aside and sprang at me even to the step on which I was standing.

"For heaven's sake wound me, Ver-rall!" he whispered.

I had done so almost before the words were spoken, how badly I did not know. He fell back into the arms of his comrades so heavily that I thought death had ended our acquaintanceship. My sword slipped from my hand, but I drew my dagger and ran to the roof. Bridget stood in my way a moment, but I pushed her aside and was on the roof before my enemies had time to follow me.

I flung the curled rope over the wall and then jumped forward to meet my last enemy, the sentry. He was unprepared and knew not how desperate a man he had to deal with. He struck one blow at me and then—Ah, it was most awful work to do! The dagger passed in softly underneath his



"A SWIFT SLASH OF MY DAGGER CUT THE ROPE ABOVE MY HEAD."

arm, and he pitched from the wall like a log thrown out into space. My foes reached the roof as I grasped the rope and went over.

"A rope—cut it!"

"No! After him!" shouted a dozen voices in answer.

I had slipped down halfway, I suppose, when the words arrested me. A dozen could follow by the rope. I could fight against odds no longer. Only a dagger was in my hand, a useless weapon against odds. The rope above me swayed. My first adversary was already sliding toward me. I was prepared; he would not be—all the difference in a fall. I drew my limbs together and then, with a swift slash of my dagger, cut the rope above my head—and fell.

It was well for me that I landed on soft turf. I was cut and bruised, but escaped a worse fate. The man who followed me struck the ground with a sickening thud. He was not dead, but could not rise.

I reached the river and dropped my coat of mail and dagger into the water. I struck out, sore as I was. Soon I became conscious that I was being followed—at least I thought so. I felt a touch from a human hand. I saw a naked man close upon me. I grasped his throat and wrenched it. Then he sank. He was dead. I reached the shore prostrate and insensible.

A gray dawn was glimmering over the mountains of the east when consciousness returned to me. I remembered things slowly. I sat up, and then I remembered all that had happened

last night, for the same current that had brought me to land had later brought my ghastly companion. He lay at my feet at the edge of the water, his face upward, his open, sightless eyes staring at the gray sky.

The thought carried my mind to that other death—that death of creaking winches and toothed machinery—and the possibility that occurred to me made me look at the man more closely. His limbs seemed long and loose. One arm was evidently broken. Could it be a prisoner who had made a friend of the executioner and had died so easily? There was a blue mark round his neck where a rope had been. Had not Costa said that the weight tied to a corpse slipped sometimes? This man, too, had escaped from Yadasara, but by the way only dead men took.

I sprang to my feet. I was a fool to wait here, so close to that terrible fortress. It was light now. Safety for me lay only in the woods. My enemies might know the set of the currents in the river and seek for my body in this very spot. I bathed my arms and legs and then made quickly for the woods behind.

It was well that I was wise in time, for even as I entered the wood I saw a party of horsemen coming from the bridge. Some went along the river bank, while the others spread in twos and threes fanlike over the country. They did not intend me to escape. I plunged into the wood, keeping from trodden paths, and broke off a stout stick to help me to walk and to serve as a weapon in case of need. It would be a poor defense if I were once seen.

I came out from a thick piece of undergrowth on to a broad turf path and then drew quickly back again. Three soldiers had dismounted not two dozen yards away and were lying upon a bank.

From my leafy ambush I saw two other horsemen turn into the path.

"Not found yet?" called out one of the three I had first seen.

"No, and never will be," was the answer, and I recognized Costa. "I'd give a good deal to lay my hands upon him. I took a liking to him, and it's hard to know that one has loved a traitor."

"This traitor's a man at least," said one.

"I shouldn't have taken a liking to him if he hadn't been. I think he is dead."

"We ought to have found his body."

"The river has that," was the answer.

"It didn't keep the prisoner who died yesterday," said his companion. "He was lying on the bank, a sorry sight enough."

Presently all five mounted and rode slowly up the path, and I crept through the underwood again. Perhaps I should have been safer had I stopped where I was, but inaction was impossible. Besides, hunger and thirst were prompting me. A few berries might be found and a stream. I must have wandered far out of my way, for I came suddenly upon a small clearing. A hut built of stout logs was there, and before it was an old woman facing half a dozen horsemen.

"You've searched," she was saying. "There's not a hole where a man could lie concealed. What have I to do with your fighting?"

"You have seen no man pass this way today."

"No. I was within, and the door was shut."

"Mark you, dame, there is a man wandering in these woods, and he'll want food. Maybe he'll ask you for it. If you give it this but will be without an owner. Were he your son even you should not escape!"

"Maybe not, but I'd chance that and give him food if I—"

The horseman muttered a threatening oath, turned and left the old woman standing at her hut door. As soon as they were out of sight she shook her fist at them. The action made me wonder if I could trust her. Within the hut doubtless were food and drink, and both I sorely needed; perhaps, too, a corner where I could rest a little.

She stood at the door for a few moments and then came to the side of the hut to pick up a bundle of sticks. It was risky, but I was almost fainting for want of food.

Holding up my hand in warning, I stepped into the clearing. She saw me and let the sticks fall, but she did not utter a sound.

"They are for the king," I whispered.

"I am for the princess. Who is your son for?"

"The princess."

She beckoned me to follow her, and I entered the hut.

"You shall eat first and, if you will, tell me the tale afterward."

It was frugal fare she set before me, such a pottage that at other times my stomach might have turned against, but now enjoyable as the dainty feast of an epicure, and then I told her a garbled version of my story, true enough in particulars, but wanting in detail.

"You're a brave man," she said. "My son would have acted so, for he is a brave man too. Now let me look at your wounds. Living in the woods, we old women find strange herbs."

She could not have used me more tenderly had I been her son. In the midst of her work she stopped suddenly. She had quick ears.

"They are returning."

"Good mother, give me some weapon and my life shall stand between them and you."

"There is a better way," she answered. "Come with me."

She led me into a small back room and, pushing some faggots back from a corner, opened a trap.

"It's a well," she said, "but it's something more. Catch hold of the rope, hang at arm's length and your feet will feel a ledge. It is the door of a little

hiding place and safe enough, I warrant. Quick; they are at the door!"

She replaced the lid of the trap, and I heard her sweep the faggots over it as I swung myself into the hiding place, a fair sized kind of cellar under the hut. By the noise above I could hear that several men had entered. I could hear the murmur of their voices, but could catch no words. The hut was evidently carefully searched again, the trap was even opened, but the hole was so clearly a well that none suspected a hiding place.

For three days I lay hidden, chiefly in the well, but sometimes climbing into the hut when the woman thought it safe for me to do so. More than once the men paid surprise visits, once nearly catching me, and so well was the wood watched that even at night it was not safe for me to start.

On the fourth night I set out upon my journey. The king's men had withdrawn, convinced that I was not concealed in the wood. The woman told me which path I should take to reach the open country toward my destination, and she provided me with a short stick—the only weapon she had.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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