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The Knight of the Silver Star

A Romance of Drussenland By PERCY BRENNER

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CHAPTER XVII (Cont'd.)

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 fagots 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



"QUICK! THEY ARE AT THE DOOR."

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 The king's men had withdrawn, convinced that I was not concealed in the wood.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 dagger, the only weapon she had. I was in the princess's country, but I shunned habitations and avoided a village as the plague. I went carefully day and night, keeping to the woods as much as possible, choosing to make a roundabout journey rather than go direct with the chance of being seen.

Synopsis of Canadian North-West Land Regulations

Any person who is the sole head of a family, or any male over 18 years old, may homestead a quarter section of available Dominion land in Manitoba, Saskatchewan or Alberta. The applicant must appear in person at the Dominion Lands Agency or Sub-agency for the district. Entry by proxy may be made at any agency, on certain conditions by father, mother, son, daughter, brother or sister of intending homesteader.

Duties.—Six months' residence upon and cultivation of the land in each of three years. A homesteader may live within nine miles of his homestead on a farm of at least 80 acres solely owned and occupied by him or by his father, mother, son, daughter, brother or sister.

In certain districts a homesteader in good standing may pre-empt a quarter-section alongside this homestead. Price \$3.00 per acre. Duties.—Must reside upon the homestead or pre-emption six months in each of six years from date of homestead entry (including the time required to earn homestead patent) and cultivate fifty acres extra.

A homesteader who has exhausted his homestead right and cannot obtain a pre-emption may enter for a purchased homestead in certain districts. Price \$3.00 per acre. Duties.—Must reside six months in each of three years, cultivate fifty acres and erect a house worth \$300.00.

W. W. CORY, Deputy of the Minister of the Interior.

N.B.—Unauthorized publication of this advertisement will not be paid for.

It was on the sixth or perhaps the seventh day, for I took little heed of the passing of time, that I heard my goal. To gain the private door by which I escaped and by which I intended to return I had to cross in front of the camp and climb the opposite hill spur. No sentry disturbed me. Only a light breeze and there was visible something had happened. If a large part of her army had deserted, which would explain why the king's troops had wandered unchallenged over the country, the sooner the princess and I set out to find the exit from Drussenland the better.

I found the secret door and opened it. With my dagger in my hand I groped my way along the dark passages, not certain of my direction. There was not a sound. The palace seemed deserted, and my heart failed me. At last I came to the corridor in which the princess's rooms were. There was no light in it, not a sound. I stood still and listened. Not a sound—a little sound, the slight creak of armor. Friend or foe, he was too near the princess for me to wish to avoid him. So I went forward, taking no further care to step lightly.

"Who goes?" "A friend." "That name may stand for a foe now," he answered. I heard him strike a door with his sword. It was the princess's door, and at his summons two men came out bearing torches. "Verrall!" one exclaimed. "You come too late, I fear." "Too late." "The princess is gone." "Gone! Where?" "Toward Yadasara." "To her death!" I cried, and I put out my arm to the wall to support myself.

CHAPTER XVIII

HE had out his arm for me to lean upon. Doubtless I looked a sorry figure, earth stained and ragged; but almost brusquely I pushed my arm aside. This was no time to give way to fatigue or despair. It was the time to act and to act quickly. "My watch is over," said the knight. "I waited only for you. You look spent, Sir Verrall. I will send for food and wine."

One of the soldiers left us; the other led us into the princess's apartments. He knocked out his torch and remained in the ante-room. The knight and I passed into the chamber I knew so well.

"Tell me all," I entreated. "You had promised to go in three days, and when it was found that you had departed secretly reaction came in favor of the priests and of Vasca. At the street corners men talked treachery. To Sir Valen and others whom she trusted the princess told the reason and the manner of your going. It was wise to be secret, doubtless, but it gave great occasion to your enemies. The princess threatened to treat those who murmured with the greatest severity. No one could stay her. You were in danger, she said, and that was an all sufficient reason for her going."

"Did Vasca persuade her to set out for Yadasara?" "At first, no." "Ah! The time was not ripe." "She liked not his advice," he went on. "I remember her words, for she spoke angrily: 'It would not be unpleasant to you, Count, if the knight should never ride into our gates again. You were ever his enemy!' He bore her resentment well. It was a hard accusation. Early yesterday the forces moved toward Yadasara. I tried to prevent her, fearing treachery. Count Vasca is in command."

"She made her peace with him?" "Rather, Sir Verrall, he made his peace with her. Two nights ago a man of Yadasara brought captive into the camp declared that you were in great danger, that it was known you were a spy and that you were likely to meet a quick reckoning—might even already have done so."

"A foul plot," I said between my teeth. "I marked the princess as he spoke," he went on. "Her face had no color in it, and the red of her lips turned gray. A light grey in her eyes that I had never seen there before nor in the eyes of any woman, a light as that along the edge of a sword drawn for vengeance—there was no mercy in it. When she spoke it was another voice than hers, hard as a man's in passion."

"And Vasca?" "He applauded her prompt action. Now that we know the danger to him who is risking his life for Drussenland what private rivalry there has been between us is past, is nothing, is forgotten. With your highness I cry, 'To arms!' The princess gave him her hand, and the color came back into her cheek. So the count made his peace. All night the town rang with preparation. Men, arms, and women, too, shouted jubilantly: 'To arms! On toward Yadasara!' The day dawned leaden gray, with a swish of fine rain, yet a gleam of sunlight shone as the princess came from the palace. She rode a warrior in complete steel, and a shout rang loud and high at her coming. I warrant the sight of her turned many a traitor into a loyal subject."

"Heaven grant it so! But there is the foulest treachery afoot, Sir Knight. That captive was no captive, but a messenger proclaiming to the count that the time was ripe." "We feared treachery, Sir Verrall, but we were powerless except to follow the princess. Of those who swore to protect her, I alone am here. It was Vasca who suggested that I should wait for you."

"Who is with you that you can trust?"

"A dozen men. Here are food and wine, you need them," said the knight. "Tell me how deep is the treachery." "So deep that death grips bands with me when I accused the count, and you, my dear one, doubt me."

"No, Clinton, do not say that; but surely you may misjudge the count. Since you are here the reason for this expedition is gone, but your presence is reason enough why I cannot return. There is no happiness before us. Only by conquest can I hope to make the Drussenlanders respect you. Courage, my knight. The blood is up to my ears here, my veins for me to fear. We shall not fall. In Yadasara did you find the key of Drussenland?"

"No." "We may have to seek it together." "Would that we could start the quest tonight." "We have not failed yet," she answered. "I will send for Sir Valen once." She gave her orders sharply. It was wonderful how easily she became the princess.

"If there is danger we will at least be ready for it," she said. Sir Valen came, and Jasar was admitted to the conference at my suggestion. "You know what Sir Verrall has said to Valen when he had heard the companies he could trust. I think his anxiety for our safety runs his judgment, but if it is so it is a fault well founded in loyalty, must be prepared. Sir Valen will at once see that these companies are drawn together. They will form one wing of our advancing army, which you and Sir Verrall will command. It will be for you to protect your person. See to our command once."

Sir Valen bowed and left the tent. "Jasar, send a messenger to the count and bid him come to us. See. Can he know that Sir Verrall has returned?" "No, your highness." "Then send to him. Say nothing, Sir Verrall."

"What are you going to do?" I asked when Jasar had left us. "I am taking your advice and preparing for danger. Are you not satisfied?" "It would be well to treat the count carefully."

"I wish to give him instructions that is all. You shall hear them in here." She lifted the canvas that covered a small apartment of the tent, and went in. "You are not to show yourself. Remember, I command, and then she laughed. "But I love too."

Vasca came not too quickly upon his bidding, and drawing the canvas a little aside, I could see him. "Sir Vasca, we like not the place of this camp."

"It is well hidden from the enemy." "And too inclosed for action should the enemy find it," she returned promptly. "I have already given my reasons for choosing it."

"And after thinking over them I find them bad ones. We have a cunning enemy to deal with. When we manage we will change the disposal of our forces somewhat, else we may fall into a trap in these woods, which surround us. You will place certain companies in the center as a main body and three out two wings to protect us on either hand. You will hold command of the main body and place the knight you deem most fitted in command of the right wing. We have already instructed Sir Valen to gather certain companies to form the left wing."

"I would that your highness had first consulted with me." "We have our own wishes to consult. Our presence here means that we are in command."

"Who commands the left wing?" he asked. "Sir Valen and Sir Verrall." "Sir Verrall!" "Did you not know he had returned tonight? His knowledge will be of great moment to us."

"I was not told of his coming. His escape makes this expedition unsafe, your highness." "Before us lies the capital, count. There is no turning back." "I rejoice to hear you say that," he answered. "The second! I could well believe him."

"You understand how the troops will move?" "He bowed. "Then strike the camp. It is to be done silently. We march tonight."

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 Verrall. 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 Verrall." "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. Always watch my enemies." "And I always crush mine, Sir Verrall, sooner or later. You may yet re-

even as he has those of some of the most loyal knights. That messenger who came to you came with a lie upon his lips. Sir Valen almost quarrelled with me when I accused the count, and you, my dear one, doubt me."

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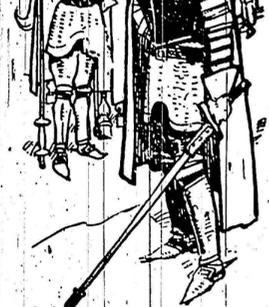
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gret that you have avowed yourself my enemy." "I come but recently from Yadasara, count. I heard enough to make me glad that I am not your friend."

"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 smiled. 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 thoughtfully trusted the left wing, and I was more inclined to think that he did so justly when I saw the princess was to ride among them. They welcomed me not.

It was a dull, cold 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 by a strong animal, and I saw a sword left peep from under his cloak. The stumbling of Jasar's horse started me. "I heard you anything besides the tramping of our men, Sir Verrall?" he asked.

"No. Where?" "To our right. Listen!" I pulled up my horse. So did Daria hers.

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 flutche 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 heads. "That cannot be an echo."

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 angrily 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. "Trust me, have no fear even if numbers are against them."

(To be continued.)