



THE RED VIRGIN

By G. FREDERICK TURNER

CHAPTER XXIV.—(Continued.)

SHE bowed her head, down, down till she kissed his feet. He winced, but said nothing. Then she rose.

"Ask," she said, sinking into a chair.

"Why do you like me?" he asked.

"I do not like you—I adore you."

"Please let me put my questions my own way. Why, if you prefer it, do you think you adore me?"

"Why does a mother love her child, or the nun her crucifix? Why does the Red Virgin love her master? Because she is what she is, and he is what he is."

"And what is he?" he persisted.

"I will tell you. He is a great strong man who can carry another big man with one arm as if he were bearing a child. He is a fearless man who can go into the most dangerous quarters without a qualm, moving among the most reckless men as if they were dogs who feared his lash. He is a man who can fight without frenzy or savagery, but with infinite resource and indomitable courage. He can smile in the very face of death. He is a man set above other men, as a lion is set above jackals, or a prince above slaves."

"All this is very flattering—but totally untrue, at any rate as far as your reasons for having any sentimental feelings towards myself."

"You do not know yourself," she cried.

"No one knows himself," he retorted; "that is the beginning and the end of all philosophy. Still less do you know yourself. You think you love me, and you think you love me because I am strong and brave. You have met plenty of strong and brave men and have not loved them. Such affection as you have for me is based on less vulgar attributes. You like me, really, because in the 'Persian Vaults' I spared my enemy, because to-night I succoured a stricken man. In a word, I carried into practice certain Christian principles which are often preached but seldom acted upon. All that was noble in you responded to actions which perhaps had in them something of nobility. Admiration springing from such sources cannot manifest itself in amorous adoration. I have won your respect; I am proud of it. Come, Red Virgin, let me pay you the highest honour in my power, and ask you to work with me in a cause which I believe to be just and noble, the maintenance of the House of Karl in this unhappy and divided land."

The Red Virgin rose from her seat. Twice she tried to speak, and twice she failed. She stretched out both her arms, as if the gesture could take the place of the unspoken words and express thoughts either too complex for speech or too elemental for language.

A third time her lips quivered in motion, and remained dumb.

Then, catching at her throat, she staggered from the room.

CHAPTER XXV.

Meyer Militant.

WHEN Saunders quitted the Freiherr's dining-room the Arch-duke uttered one of those resounding and meaningless oaths for which he was famous. He was more than angry—he was bitterly disappointed. There is nothing so annoying to an unscrupulous man as to be hampered by other people's scruples. He swore again, and then again.

"Can I offer you a glass of wine, Arch-duke?" asked the Freiherr, not without sarcasm.

"You can offer me twenty," was the rude retort, "but I should not take them."

"Is it my wine or myself that you

object to?" demanded the Freiherr stiffly.

"I object to neither, but I have no time to waste. You have let that cursed Engländer go, and in five minutes your house will be surrounded by Meyer's soldiers or Drechsler's police."

"Do you think so?"

"Of course I think so. We are not playing puss-in-the-corner or kiss-in-the-ring. A state of things exists indistinguishable from open war. I have struck, and the other side must strike. As they have practically all the resources of the State on their side, I propose to avoid their counter-stroke."

"And I," said the Freiherr, "propose to meet it."

The Arch-duke made a gesture of despair. "And be crushed?" he demanded.

"If necessary. I am not in the habit of running away."

"But, man alive!" protested Cyril, "we cannot keep an army at bay."

The Freiherr shrugged his shoulders. "That was not the creed of my ancestors," he retorted.

The Arch-duke's patience, or what was left of it, evaporated into thin air.

"Your confounded ancestor," he cried, "defied the laws of war and common sense. I admit he succeeded, but against Turks armed with scimitars and other weapons of barbarism. We are pitted against the cleverest brains in Europe directing disciplined forces armed with weapons of precision. To stay here is to play the hero and fail. To fly is to remain free to choose our own battlefield."

"Where may that be?"

"Wolfsnaden!"

"I understood the road was blocked."

"THERE are other roads," cried the Arch-duke. "We can travel along the Western Road to Kleindorf. From thence we can train to Schlusli and from Schlusli we can sleigh to Wolfsnaden. Twelve hours' hard travelling will take us there, and we must start at once."

"With Karl?" asked the Freiherr.

"With Karl and the Queen Mother. We must retain our hostages. Nothing succeeds like success. They will set up a form of government here; we must set up another there. Their edicts will be signed by a Social democrat, ours by a king."

"An uncrowned king!" commented the Freiherr.

"Crowned or uncrowned," retorted the Arch-duke, "he is the only tangible royalty in Grimland. His person is worth more to us than a dozen regiments. Are you coming?"

"I am not sure."

"Not sure! Was there ever—"

The Freiherr's butler interrupted the Arch-duke's frantic expostulation.

"There is someone knocking at the door, my lord," said the servant.

"Then open and see who it is," said the Freiherr.

"Do nothing of the sort," interrupted Cyril hurriedly. "Look out of a window and see who it is who knocks."

The butler looked for confirmation of this order to his master.

"Do as His highness bids," said the Freiherr coldly.

The sound of the knocking was audible enough now in the dining-room, and Cyril's countenance took on an even fiercer expression. A moment later the man-servant returned.

"Soldier, my lord," he said.

"How many?" demanded Cyril.

"About half a dozen on the doorstep, Highness; about two hundred in the street."

"Gott in Himmel! We must fly,"

cried Cyril excitedly. "Come, Lacherberg; come, Freiherr; the back door—"

"Is no doubt as well thronged as my front door," sneered the Freiherr.

"We must risk it. Come!" shrieked the Arch-duke.

"I do not propose to bolt out of my own house like a rat," said the Freiherr calmly, "and if I did I should prefer to make my exit by the roof."

"The roof, yes," cried Cyril. "Not a moment is to be lost. Come!"

"As I said," remarked the Freiherr, "I have a prejudice against running away, but you are at liberty to act as you please. If you think discretion the better part of valour, my butler will conduct you to the attic and indicate the trap-door. It is quite possible that—"

But Cyril waited for no further instructions. Seizing the Freiherr's servant by the arm he hustled him out of the room, closely followed by Major von Lacherberg and the others. The Freiherr alone remained seated, sipping his wine, and listening to the incessant blows thundered on his portal.

In a minute there was a terrific crash that told of solid joinery yielding to importunate violence.

He calmly lit another cigarette, and the hand that held the lighted match was as steady as even the Freiherr of Kraag could desire.

A moment later General Meyer, attended by three officers, a corporal, and a couple of privates, entered the dining-room.

The General saluted.

The Freiherr barely acknowledged his presence, and blew out a thin cloud of smoke.

"I regret any injury I may have done to your front door," began General Meyer, who was pale despite his recent exertions, "but there was some delay in answering the bell."

"My butler was attending to the needs of some gentlemen." There was an unpleasant emphasis on the last word.

"And so neglected the requirements of the King's soldiers!" rejoined Meyer. "You are scarcely in touch with the latest developments. The Rathsherren ceased to administer the realm at five o'clock this evening."

"What do you mean?"

"There was a decree issued at that hour and to that effect by the Prime Minister."

"I am afraid Herr Drechsler's decrees are of little interest," sneered the Freiherr. "They possess neither the validity of law, nor the rudiments of grammar."

"LET me hasten to reassure you on the latter point," said Meyer dryly; "I dictated the exact terms of the pronunciamiento myself."

"Even so, its legality is not bettered."

"I venture to differ, Freiherr. When the representative of the popular will is supported by the representative of the national forces the term 'legality' becomes superfluous."

"Might is not right, General."

"It so nearly approximates it in the present circumstances that it would be highly unwise to draw any nice distinctions."

"Nevertheless I draw them," maintained the Freiherr.

"Then I have the honour to inform your lordship that you are my prisoner."

"What!"

"I have been commissioned to arrest all members of the Rathsherren who do not subscribe to the new Order-in-Council. So far we have sounded about half a dozen—and they are all in the Strafeburg."

"Infamous!" exclaimed the Freiherr.



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