

PART I

Chapter I - A RUNAWAY HORSE

All Lustadt was in an uproar. The mad king had escaped. Little knots of excited men stood upon the street corners listening to each latest rumor concerning this most absorbing occurrence. Before the palace a great crowd surged to and fro, awaiting they knew not what.

For ten years no man of them had set eyes upon the face of the boy-king who had been hastened to the grim castle of Blentz upon the death of the old king, his father.

There had been murmurings then when the lad's uncle, Peter of Blentz, had announced to the people of Lutha the sudden mental affliction which had fallen upon his nephew, and more murmurings for a time after the announcement that Peter of Blentz had been appointed Regent during the lifetime of the young King Leopold, "or until God, in His infinite mercy, shall see fit to restore to us in full mental vigor our beloved monarch."

But ten years is a long time. The boy-king had become but a vague memory to the subjects who could recall him at all.

There were many, of course, in the capital city, Lustadt, who still retained a mental picture of the handsome boy who had ridden out nearly every morning from the palace gates beside the tall, martial figure of the old king, his father, for a canter across the broad plain which lies at the foot of the mountain town of Lustadt; but even these had long since given up hope that their young king would ever ascend his throne, or even that they should see him alive again.

Peter of Blentz had not proved a good or kind ruler. Taxes had doubled during his regency. Executives and judiciary, following the example of their chief, had become tyrannical and corrupt. For ten years there had been small joy in Lutha.

There had been whispered rumors off and on that the young king was dead these many years, but not even in whispers did the men of Lutha dare voice the name of him whom they believed had caused his death. For lesser things they had seen their friends and neighbors thrown into the hitherto long-unused dungeons of the royal castle.

And now came the rumor that Leopold of Lutha had escaped the Castle of Blentz and was roaming somewhere in the wild mountains or ravines upon the opposite side of the plain of Lustadt.

Peter of Blentz was filled with rage and, possibly, fear as well.

"I tell you, Coblich," he cried, addressing his dark-visaged minister of war, "there's more than coincidence in this matter. Someone has betrayed us. That he should have escaped upon the very eve of the arrival at Blentz of the new physician is most suspicious. None but you, Coblich, had knowledge of the part that Dr. Stein was destined to play in this matter," concluded Prince Peter pointedly.

Coblich looked the Regent full in the eye.

"Your highness wrongs not only my loyalty, but my intelligence," he said quietly, "by even so much as intimating that I have any guilty knowledge of Leopold's escape. With Leopold upon the throne of Lutha, where, think you, my prince, would old Coblich be?"

Peter smiled.

"You are right, Coblich," he said. "I know that you would not be such a fool; but whom, then, have we to thank?"

"The walls have ears, prince," replied Coblich, "and we have not always been as careful as we should in discussing the matter. Something may have come to the ears of old Von der Tann. I don't for a moment doubt but that he has his spies among the palace servants, or even the guard. You know the old fox has always made it a point to curry favor with the common soldiers. When he was minister of war he treated them better than he did his officers."

"It seems strange, Coblich, that so shrewd a man as you should have been unable to discover some irregularity in the political life of Prince Ludwig von der Tann before now," said the prince querulously. "He is the greatest menace to our peace and sovereignty. With Von der Tann out of the way there would be none powerful enough to question our right to the throne of Lutha--after poor Leopold passes away."

"You forget that Leopold has escaped," suggested Coblich, "and that there is no immediate prospect of his passing away."

"He must be retaken at once, Coblich!" cried Prince Peter of Blentz. "He is a dangerous maniac, and we must make this fact plain to the people--this and a

thorough description of him. A handsome reward for his safe return to Blentz might not be out of the way, Coblich."

"It shall be done, your highness," replied Coblich. "And about Von der Tann? You have never spoken to me quite so--ah--er--pointedly before. He hunts a great deal in the Old Forest. It might be possible--in fact, it has happened, before--there are many accidents in hunting, are there not, your highness?"

"There are, Coblich," replied the prince, "and if Leopold is able he will make straight for the Tann, so that there may be two hunting together in a day or so, Coblich."

"I understand, your highness," replied the minister. "With your permission, I shall go at once and dispatch troops to search the forest for Leopold. Captain Maenck will command them."

"Good, Coblich! Maenck is a most intelligent and loyal officer. We must reward him well. A baronetcy, at least, if he handles this matter well," said Peter. "It might not be a bad plan to hint at as much to him, Coblich."

And so it happened that shortly thereafter Captain Ernst Maenck, in command of a troop of the Royal Horse Guards of Lutha, set out toward the Old Forest, which lies beyond the mountains that are visible upon the other side of the plain stretching out before Lustadt. At the same time other troopers rode in many directions along the highways and byways of Lutha, tacking placards upon trees and fence posts and beside the doors of every little rural post office.

The placard told of the escape of the mad king, offering a large reward for his safe return to Blentz.

It was the last paragraph especially which caused a young man, the following day in the little hamlet of Tafelberg, to whistle as he carefully read it over.

"I am glad that I am not the mad king of Lutha," he said as he paid the storekeeper for the gasoline he had just purchased and stepped into the gray roadster for whose greedy maw it was destined.

"Why, mein Herr?" asked the man.

"This notice practically gives immunity to whoever shoots down the king," replied the traveler. "Worse still, it gives such an account of the maniacal ferocity of the fugitive as to warrant anyone in shooting him on sight."

As the young man spoke the storekeeper had examined his face closely for the first time. A shrewd look came into the man's ordinarily stolid countenance. He leaned forward quite close to the other's ear.

"We of Lutha," he whispered, "love our 'mad king'--no reward could be offered that would tempt us to betray him. Even in self-protection we would not kill him, we of the mountains who remember him as a boy and loved his father and his grandfather, before him.

"But there are the scum of the low country in the army these days, who would do anything for money, and it is these that the king must guard against. I could not help but note that mein Herr spoke too perfect German for a foreigner. Were I in mein Herr's place, I should speak mostly the English, and, too, I should shave off the 'full, reddish-brown beard.'"

Whereupon the storekeeper turned hastily back into his shop, leaving Barney Custer of Beatrice, Nebraska, U.S.A., to wonder if all the inhabitants of Lutha were afflicted with a mental disorder similar to that of the unfortunate ruler.

"I don't wonder," soliloquized the young man, "that he advised me to shave off this ridiculous crop of alfalfa. Hang election bets, anyway; if things had gone half right I shouldn't have had to wear this badge of idiocy. And to think that it's got to be for a whole month longer! A year's a mighty long while at best, but a year in company with a full set of red whiskers is an eternity."

The road out of Tafelberg wound upward among tall trees toward the pass that would lead him across the next valley on his way to the Old Forest, where he hoped to find some excellent shooting. All his life Barney had promised himself that some day he should visit his mother's native land, and now that he was here he found it as wild and beautiful as she had said it would be.

Neither his mother nor his father had ever returned to the little country since the day, thirty years before, that the big American had literally stolen his bride away, escaping across the border but a scant half-hour ahead of the pursuing troop of Luthanian cavalry. Barney had often wondered why it was that neither of them would ever speak of those days, or of the early life of his mother, Victoria Rubinroth, though of the beauties of her native land Mrs. Custer never tired of talking.

Barney Custer was thinking of these things as his machine wound up the picturesque road. Just before him was a long, heavy grade, and as he took it with open muffler the chugging of his motor drowned the sound of pounding hoof beats rapidly approaching behind him.

It was not until he topped the grade that he heard anything unusual, and at the same instant a girl on horseback tore past him. The speed of the animal would have been enough to have told him that it was beyond the control of its frail rider, even without the added testimony of the broken bit that dangled beneath the tensely outstretched chin.

Foam flecked the beast's neck and shoulders. It was evident that the horse had been running for some distance, yet its speed was still that of the thoroughly frightened runaway.

The road at the point where the animal had passed Custer was cut from the hillside. At the left an embankment rose steeply to a height of ten or fifteen feet. On the right there was a drop of a hundred feet or more into a wooded ravine. Ahead, the road apparently ran quite straight and smooth for a considerable distance.

Barney Custer knew that so long as the road ran straight the girl might be safe enough, for she was evidently an excellent horsewoman; but he also knew that if there should be a sharp turn to the left ahead, the horse in his blind fright would in all probability dash headlong into the ravine below him.

There was but a single thing that the man might attempt if he were to save the girl from the almost certain death which seemed in store for her, since he knew that sooner or later the road would turn, as all mountain roads do. The chances that he must take, if he failed, could only hasten the girl's end. There was no alternative except to sit supinely by and see the fear-crazed horse carry its rider into eternity, and Barney Custer was not the sort for that role.

Scarcely had the beast come abreast of him than his foot leaped to the accelerator. Like a frightened deer the gray roadster sprang forward in pursuit. The road was narrow. Two machines could not have passed upon it. Barney took the outside that he might hold the horse away from the dangerous ravine.

At the sound of the whirring thing behind him the animal cast an affrighted glance in its direction, and with a little squeal of terror redoubled its frantic efforts to escape. The girl, too, looked back over her shoulder. Her face was very white, but her eyes were steady and brave.

Barney Custer smiled up at her in encouragement, and the girl smiled back at him.

"She's sure a game one," thought Barney.

Now she was calling to him. At first he could not catch her words above the pounding of the horse's hoofs and the noise of his motor. Presently he understood.

"Stop!" she cried. "Stop or you will be killed. The road turns to the left just ahead. You'll go into the ravine at that speed."

The front wheel of the roadster was at the horse's right flank. Barney stepped upon the accelerator a little harder. There was barely room between the horse and the edge of the road for the four wheels of the roadster, and Barney must be very careful not to touch the horse. The thought of that and what it would mean to the girl sent a cold shudder through Barney Custer's athletic frame.

The man cast a glance to his right. His machine drove from the left side, and he could not see the road at all over the right hand door. The sight of tree tops waving beneath him was all that was visible. Just ahead the road's edge rushed swiftly beneath the right-hand fender, the wheels on that side must have been on the very verge of the embankment.

Now he was abreast the girl. Just ahead he could see where the road disappeared around a corner of the bluff at the dangerous curve the girl had warned him against.

Custer leaned far out over the side of his car. The lunging of the horse in his stride, and the swaying of the leaping car carried him first close to the girl and then away again. With his right hand he held the car between the frantic horse and the edge of the embankment. His left hand, outstretched, was almost at the girl's waist. The turn was just before them.

"Jump!" cried Barney.

The girl fell backward from her mount, turning to grasp Custer's arm as it closed about her. At the same instant Barney closed the throttle, and threw all the weight of his body upon the foot brake.

The gray roadster swerved toward the embankment as the hind wheels skidded on the loose surface gravel. They were at the turn. The horse was just abreast the bumper. There was one chance in a thousand of making the turn were the running beast out of the way. There was still a chance if he turned ahead of them. If he did not turn--Barney hated to think of what must follow.

But it was all over in a second. The horse bolted straight ahead. Barney swerved the roadster to the turn. It caught the animal full in the side. There was a sickening lurch as the hind wheels slid over the embankment, and then the man

shoved the girl from the running board to the road, and horse, man and roadster went over into the ravine.

A moment before a tall young man with a reddish-brown beard had stood at the turn of the road listening intently to the sound of the hurrying hoof beats and the purring of the racing motor car approaching from the distance. In his eyes lurked the look of the hunted. For a moment he stood in evident indecision, but just before the runaway horse and the pursuing machine came into view he slipped over the edge of the road to slink into the underbrush far down toward the bottom of the ravine.

When Barney pushed the girl from the running board she fell heavily to the road, rolling over several times, but in an instant she scrambled to her feet, hardly the worse for the tumble other than a few scratches.

Quickly she ran to the edge of the embankment, a look of immense relief coming to her soft, brown eyes as she saw her rescuer scrambling up the precipitous side of the ravine toward her.

"You are not killed?" she cried in German. "It is a miracle!"

"Not even bruised," reassured Barney. "But you? You must have had a nasty fall."

"I am not hurt at all," she replied. "But for you I should be lying dead, or terribly maimed down there at the bottom of that awful ravine at this very moment. It's awful." She drew her shoulders upward in a little shudder of horror. "But how did you escape? Even now I can scarce believe it possible."

"I'm quite sure I don't know how I did escape," said Barney, clambering over the rim of the road to her side. "That I had nothing to do with it I am positive. It was just luck. I simply dropped out onto that bush down there."

They were standing side by side, now peering down into the ravine where the car was visible, bottom side up against a tree, near the base of the declivity. The horse's head could be seen protruding from beneath the wreckage.

"I'd better go down and put him out of his misery," said Barney, "if he is not already dead."

"I think he is quite dead," said the girl. "I have not seen him move."

Just then a little puff of smoke arose from the machine, followed by a tongue of yellow flame. Barney had already started toward the horse.

"Please don't go," begged the girl. "I am sure that he is quite dead, and it wouldn't be safe for you down there now. The gasoline tank may explode any minute."

Barney stopped.

"Yes, he is dead all right," he said, "but all my belongings are down there. My guns, six-shooters and all my ammunition. And," he added ruefully, "I've heard so much about the brigands that infest these mountains."

The girl laughed.

"Those stories are really exaggerated," she said. "I was born in Lutha, and except for a few months each year have always lived here, and though I ride much I have never seen a brigand. You need not be afraid."

Barney Custer looked up at her quickly, and then he grinned. His only fear had been that he would not meet brigands, for Mr. Bernard Custer, Jr., was young and the spirit of Romance and Adventure breathed strong within him.

"Why do you smile?" asked the girl.

"At our dilemma," evaded Barney. "Have you paused to consider our situation?"

The girl smiled, too.

"It is most unconventional," she said. "On foot and alone in the mountains, far from home, and we do not even know each other's name."

"Pardon me," cried Barney, bowing low. "Permit me to introduce myself. I am," and then to the spirits of Romance and Adventure was added a third, the spirit of Deviltry, "I am the mad king of Lutha."